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Adolescent gambling via social networking sites: A brief overview

In two previous issue of *Education and Health*, I have examined various issues surrounding the psychosocial impact of social networking among adolescents (i.e., Griffiths & Kuss, 2011; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011a). Most parents and teachers will be only too aware that the online social networking phenomenon has spread rapidly in the UK. However, one social networking activity that has only recently come into focus is gambling via social networking sites. Although the playing of gambling games for points (e.g., poker) have been popular for a number of years (Griffiths, 2010; Griffiths & Parke, 2010), a number of gaming operators are now using *Facebook* as a platform in which to offer gambling for real money (Griffiths, 2013). In August 2012, *Facebook* hosted a gambling game (*Bingo Friendzy* developed by *Gamesys*) that allowed users to win jackpots up to £50,000 of real money.

In the UK, there are 31 million registered users of *Facebook* who are over 18 years of age (Griffiths, 2013). According to a market research study by *Experian Hitwise*, UK visitors have an average *Facebook* session time of 22 minutes. The study also revealed that a quarter of those visiting *Facebook* visit other entertainment website such as games and music, immediately after leaving the website (most of whom are adolescents and young adults). This shows gambling companies that there is a good market size to access and that users could be quite receptive to gambling on the site.

Bingo Friendzy (at present only available in the UK) is now being followed by other gambling games including slot machine apps and sports betting. I was one of many who voiced concerns in the national press when *Bingo Friendzy* was launched. My main concern was that the game itself features cartoon characters similar to *Moshi Monsters*.

Having studied youth gambling and written two books (i.e., Griffiths 1995; 2002), I don't believe gambling games should feature anything that might encourage children or adolescents to gamble. Although players have to be aged 18 years to play *Bingo Friendzy*, research has shown that adolescents regularly bypass the minimum age limits to have a *Facebook* profile simply by giving false information and/or with the help of their parents (Griffiths & Kuss, 2011; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011a; 2011b).

Social games

I and some of my colleagues have argued previously that many social games played on social networking sites have gambling-like elements – even if no money is involved (Griffiths, Derevensky & Parke, 2011; Griffiths, Parke & Derevensky, 2012; King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010). Even when games don't involve money (such as playing poker for points on *Facebook*), they introduce youth to the principles and excitement of gambling (Griffiths & Parke, 2010). On first look, playing games like *Farmville*, may not seem to have much connection to activities like gambling but the psychology behind such activities are very similar (Griffiths, 2010). Companies like *Zynga* have been accused of leveraging the mechanics of gambling to build their gaming empire. One of the key psychological ingredients in both gambling (such as playing a slot machine) and social gaming is the use of operant conditioning and random reinforcement schedules. Basically, random reinforcement schedules in games relate to the unpredictability of winning and/or getting other types of intermittent rewards (Parke & Griffiths, 2007).

Getting rewards every time someone gambles or plays a game leads to people becoming bored

quickly. However, small unpredictable rewards leads to highly engaged and repetitive behaviour for those playing such games. In a minority of cases, this may lead to addiction to the game (Parke & Griffiths, 2010). Both gambling operators and social gaming developers can use intermittent and unpredictable rewards to get repeat custom.

Psychosocial impact

The psychosocial impact of this new leisure activity has only just begun to be investigated by academic researchers in the gaming field. Social networking sites have the potential to normalise gambling behaviours as part of the consumption patterns of a non-gambling leisure activity, and may change social understandings of the role of gambling among young people (Griffiths & Parke, 2010). There is no money changing hands but teenagers – as noted above – are learning the mechanics of gambling and there are serious questions about whether gambling with virtual money encourages positive attitudes towards gambling in people (and young people particularly). For instance, does gambling with virtual money lead to an increased prevalence of actual gambling? Research carried out by Forrest, McHale and Parke (2009) demonstrated that one of the risk factors for problem gambling among adolescents was the playing of the 'play for free' gambling games on the Internet (games that are widespread on *Facebook* and other social networking sites).

It has been argued, based on the available empirical literature, that it may be important to distinguish between the different types of money-free gambling being made available – namely social networking modes (on social networking sites) and 'demo' or 'free play' modes (on internet gambling websites). Initial considerations suggest that these may be different both in nature and in impact. For example, as Downs (2008) has argued, players gambling in social networking modes may experience a different type and level of reinforcement than those gambling in 'demo' mode on an internet gambling site. On some social networking sites, the accumulation of 'play money' or 'points' may have implications for buying virtual goods or services or being eligible for certain privileges. This may increase the value and meaning of the gambling event to the individual.

Additionally, when considering the 'flow' and intention of individuals accessing such sites, it could be argued that individuals accessing money free gambling through social networking sites may be more likely to be induced or persuaded to play given that these website visitors' primary intention may have been social interaction (i.e., the primary function of the website) as opposed to those playing in 'demo' mode where gambling is the primary function of the website. A 2011 national gambling survey of British adolescents (n=2739; aged 11-16 years) by *Ipsos MORI* reported that around one in seven children (15%) played free or practice gambling games in the past week, and that the most popular form of practice gaming was through *Facebook*. One in ten children (11%) said they had played free games on social networking website *Facebook*. The report also noted:

> "There may be some value in tackling children's access to free online trial games. There is a clear link between playing free trial games on the internet and gambling for real money (online and offline). However, regulators will need to target a range of games and websites to monitor this effectively, as children report playing games on a wide variety of websites."

Exploiting psychological principles

I have already noted in previous writings (e.g., Griffiths, 2012) that observers have accused companies like *Zynga* of exploiting well-known psychological principles to increase their player base and to bring in new players from a demographic who may never have played games before (such as housewives looking after small children at home who might play poker or other quick play social games for 30 minutes while their child is asleep). However, that alone does not explain the success of *Zynga* games. Other features, such as stylish and appealing characters and graphics, and (what some might deem to be) aggressive viral marketing tactics, also appear to play an important part in the acquisition, development, and maintenance of social gaming behaviour (Griffiths, 2012).

I have also argued that introduction of in-game virtual goods and accessories (that people willingly pay real money for) was a psychological masterstroke (Griffiths, 2012). In this sense, it becomes more akin to gambling, as social gamers know that they are spending money as they play with little or no financial return. They are buying entertainment and the intrinsic play of the game itself is highly psychologically rewarding.

Why pay real money for virtual items?

The one question I am constantly asked (particularly by the media) in relation to social gaming is why people pay real money for virtual items in games like *Farmville* (or why people will pay real money to buy virtual money to play Zynga poker games). As someone who has studied slot machine players for over 25 years, the similarities are striking. Many of the hard core slots players I have interviewed claim they know they will lose every penny they have in the long run, and they are playing with money rather than for it (Griffiths, 2002). To me, this appears to be what social gamers do as well. Like slots players, they actually love the playing of the game itself. Money is the price of entry that they are willing to pay. Unlike those involved in social gaming, gamblers do at least have an outside chance of getting some of the money they have staked back. Therefore, allowing those who play social games the chance to actually get their money back (or gain more than they have staked) is why companies currently operating social games want to get into the pure gambling market. This extra dimension to social games could be a huge revenue generator (Griffiths, 2012).

Those in the social gaming business believe that their games tap into some of the fundamental drivers of human happiness and give people pleasure, friendship, and a sense of accomplishment. Nicole Lazzaro, who has been interviewed in the mass media about gaming psychology, claims there are four elemental keys that determine game success. These are:

(i)   Hard fun (i.e., players having to overcome difficult obstacles to progress in the game in pursuit of winning)

(ii)   Easy fun (i.e., players just enjoying the game even if they don't win)

(iii)   Altered states (i.e., players engaging in the game because it makes them feel good psychologically and changes their mood for the better)

(iv)   The people factor (i.e., players wanting to socially interact with others in the game).

Put in the most basic form, Lazarro says the most successful games "will engage players' curiosity, allow players to socialize with friends, challenge players to overcome obstacles to achieve goals and somehow relate to people's lives in a meaningful way".

Lines are beginning to blur

Over the past year, the rapid growth of social media gaming has come to the attention of Great Britain's Gambling Commission, particularly as the lines are beginning to blur between social gaming and gambling, and because online gambling operators and gambling software developers (e.g., *Bwin, Party Gaming, PlayTech*, etc.) are now positioning themselves for entry into the social gaming market, and vice-versa (e.g., *Zynga*). There have also been reports that virtual money can now be traded for real cash illegally. The Gambling Commission are particularly concerned about the lack of regulation where children and adolescents are concerned. This is also something I have written about extensively in the past few years in relation to gambling and video game convergence (e.g., Griffiths, 2008; 2011; King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010).

New types of social gaming and gambling-like experiences that people of all ages are now being exposed to and raises various moral, ethical, legal and social issues (Griffiths, 2013). Given that most of the issues highlighted here are somewhat anecdotal, more empirical research is needed in these new online activities as the line between social gaming, non-financial forms of gaming, and gambling are beginning to blur.

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