

Microtransactions can move popular online games closer to online gambling

Many popular online games include the option of paying small fees (microtransactions) to access additional features or content that enhance the player's experience. An editorial published today by *Addiction* argues that some online games use in-game purchasing systems that disguise or withhold the long-term cost of microtransactions until the player is already financially and psychologically committed. Such purchasing systems push free-to-play online gaming closer to gambling and may present financial risks for vulnerable players.

The authors focus on a monetization scheme called the 'loot box', an in-game reward system in which players can repetitively buy a random selection of virtual items. Players hoping to win a particular item may end up repeatedly buying loot boxes at significant personal expense. The authors argue that because loot boxes require no player skill and have a randomly determined outcome or prize, they function similarly to gambling slot machines.

The authors call loot boxes and similar schemes 'predatory monetization' because they encourage repeated spending using tactics that may involve limited disclosure of the product, unavoidable solicitations, and manipulation of reward outcomes to encourage purchasing behaviours over skilful play. The authors point out that some of the top-earning game publishers have registered patents for microtransaction systems that incentivise the player to spend money (1,2) but there are few regulations or consumer protections associated with these systems.

The editorial appears in the wake of the World Health Organization's announcement on 18 June that it plans for the first time to include 'gaming disorder' in its diagnostic manual, the International Classification of Diseases.

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For editors:

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