

**Research project on video gaming and gambling among children and young people in Denmark (UK abstract)**

The research project conducts qualitative interviews and sets up focus groups with 107 children and young people (10-19 years). The project focuses on the young people's experiences with and attitudes towards online video gaming and gambling-related elements in the games. At the time of the interviews and focus groups, the interviewees attended either *folkeskole* (primary and lower secondary school for 6- to 16-year-olds) or upper-secondary school. In addition to the 107 young interviewees, five young adults (18-29 years) with a history of gambling-related problems participated in individual interviews focusing on their experiences with gaming and gambling.

Today, young people as well as adults play online games on computers, gaming consoles, tablets and iPhones on an everyday basis. Children and young people play at home in their rooms, at Esport-clubs, youth clubs, recreation centres and kindergartens, and they play at school. They play after school, in the evenings, at night, sometimes in the morning and while commuting to and from school or other activities. Often, they play in solitary, sometimes they play with parents or other family member, but most of the time they play with friends or friends' friends.

Several online games allow gamers to spend money while gaming. Often, in-game purchases comprise chances that resemble traditional gambling. Thus, for today's children and young people (in 2020) being confronted with micro transactions resembling gambling has become part of everyday life.

As central to today's online gaming, gambling-related elements have become part of the young gamers' everyday life. Children and young people often fancy the gambling-related elements because they are fun to open and because winning a desired object calls for social appraisals. Often, children and young people purchase and open the gambling-related elements together with friends because their online activities are significant and important to their everyday lives.

The research project's main objective is to study the significance for the young gamers of a potential convergence between everyday life, online gaming and frequent access to gambling-related elements. Methodologically, the main objective is to study this objective through interviews and focus groups with children and young people with different online gaming experiences. The research project thus applies a user perspective to investigate what online gaming involving gambling-related elements and other microtransactions mean to children and young people.

We have interviewed and conducted focus groups with children and young people from all over Denmark (Lolland-Falster, Funen, Jutland and Zealand) and from rural areas, provincial towns, metropolises and suburbs. Applying semi-structured and open-ended interviewing techniques, we have asked the interviewees about their experiences with and attitudes towards things like gaming, gambling-related elements, gaming cultures, gaming marketing, everyday life, friends, relatives, financial position and well-being. In addition to the data generation with children and young gamers, we also interviewed five young adults who at the time of the interviews had had problems related to gaming and gambling, which included illicit drug use, uncontrolled expenditure and dissatisfaction with school and parents. These interviews provide a retrospective perspective on the risk of developing gaming and gambling-related problems.

The research project uses a sociological perspective which acknowledges that gaming is part of children and young people's everyday lives, rather than constituting an external threat to their everyday lives. Gaming is part of their reality. At the same time, the sociological perspective recognises that gaming

can take on various forms, involve different norms and social codes and have various consequences for young people. Age, maturity, social background, parental support etc. are important factors in enabling young people to participate in online gaming and to address gambling-related elements and online expenditure with confidence.

### **Large variation in gaming time and games**

Today, the number of online game choices is enormous. Though the project finds gendered differences and differences between ages, both females and males and all ages make up a large variety in games, types of games, gaming modes, hardware and gaming time.

The interviews show, for example, that girls play online games, too, but often use tablets or smartphones whereas boys often use computers or gaming consoles. Girls also tend to play games that are less competitive (albeit not entirely without elements of competition) than boys. Girls favour games like HayDay, Episode, Sims and Minecraft that also allow gamers to perform micro transactions – sometimes with a distinct gambling character. Boys tend to favour games with a strong element of competition that often require teaming up with other gamers. Winning matches in games like CS:GO, League of Legends and FIFA yields different types of in-game currencies that can strengthen the stats of one's gaming characters or change the look of one's characters. In-game currencies can also be used as stakes in gambling-related elements such as card parcks. Though the games appear different and demand different skills, they fundamentally use the same framework to motivate gamers to spend time and money.

### **The sociality of online gaming**

Online gaming has a strong social dimension, which is based both in the game designs and in the social network of the gamers. Basically, to decide to spend time on online gaming allows one to participate in social life, and some games necessitates gamers to team up in order to play.

The research project finds several similarities between sociality in the physical world and online sociality. Social hierarchies, individual competences, uniform language etc. structure the social interaction of online communication just as they do in the physical world. Rather than conceiving social interaction as divided between physical and online contexts, the research project thus concludes that children and young people's online communication expands their communicative world. They do not experience online sociality as a threat against their social lives but as part of their social lives. Most of the participating children and young people share friends both online and in their physical world.

Some of the participating children and young people, however, appreciate to momentary unwind from existing social forms when gaming. They do not seek large social communities while gaming. These children and young people often choose to play games with minimal social qualifications and without needing to perform socially while gaming. This somewhat secluded sociality is prudent to young people who experience some kind of anxiety when interacting socially.

Hence, the research project finds that online sociality expands the social space of children and young people by allowing them to share even more time together, meeting friends and friends' friends, acquiring new relationships both before, during and after gaming.

### **Gaming motivations and expenditures**

Fundamentally, online gaming depends on gamers' decisions to game. However, motivations vary between games and types of games. While many young gamers are motivated by the social potential of certain games and spend a lot of their gaming time with friends and acquaintances other gamers prefer spend their gaming time to avoid following particular social rules and expectations. Even though the vast majority of the participating children and young people either primarily or partly find gaming motivation in the social communities related to particular games, some individuals tend to use online gaming as a way to cope with the humdrum of everyday life.

Similarly, several interviewees accentuate the competitive element of some games as a very important motivating factor, while other interviewees emphasise relaxation (and compare gaming to watching a movie or TV series to relax). Competition comes in many forms and plays a significant part in many of the most popular games (such as CS:GO, League of Legends, Fortnite and FIFA). But other games that do not appear to be driven by the competitive modes of the gamers also embed elements of competition. Thus, both children and young people explain that they are also motivated to play games like HayDay and World of Warcraft by, for instance, fast levelling or winning rare items. Overall, the research project finds that elements of competition work as strong drivers for gaming motivation and for deciding to carry out microtransactions, as microtransactions often make levelling faster or improve the performance of game characters.

Finally, the research project highlights that some children and young people argue that online gaming allows them to continue working with their creativity and mindfulness, for example when designing and constructing virtual cities, maintaining virtual farms or other facilities, developing game characters and finding "social" positions for the characters in online communities. Furthermore, children and young gamers often find this type of creativity relaxing and reassuring, including when playing on tablets and smartphones.

### **Risks of gaming**

Online gaming implies expanded possibilities to do things that may incur risks. For instance, unbalanced time consumption that is not approved by parents or authorities (including teachers) often leads to conflict. Conflicts may infer sanctions and prolonged relational complications. While accepting that gaming can sometimes cause problems, many interviewees warned against forbidding children and young people to game because, according to the interviewees, this would turn gaming into a more secluded activity.

The sociality of online gaming can also be related to inappropriate utterances and foul language (so-called "hate-speech" and "toxic community"). Even though this problem did not seem to affect the interviewees significantly, they did argue that some communities accept high-ranking gamers' bullying of less experienced gamers and that female gamers tend to be more exposed to verbal harassment than male gamers. However, based on the interviews and focus groups the project finds that both children and young people tend to handle this risk without too much trouble. The youngest interviewees, who most likely are those least equipped to handle bullying and verbal harassment, accept that people sometimes say things differently when communicating online than in real life-situations. The older interviewees tend to find communities that match their own social and communicative preferences and will leave groups if, for example, they do not approve of the language.

Purchases via microtransactions constitute the most significant risk for children and young people. At the same time, this risk is the most complex. Together with costs of hardware (that can be high) and

online subscriptions, microtransactions make up a substantial share of the expenses related to online gaming. Obviously, not all gamers perform microtransactions, and among those who do the project finds large differences both in the number and frequency of the transactions. At the same time, this risk causes the most frequent and probably most severe conflicts between gamers and parents, and among friends or other (unacquainted) gamers.

At an individual level, microtransactions require an awareness and reflectivity of the gamers, including a fundamental knowledge about money. Many interviewees appear to possess such an awareness and reflectivity, but the project also engaged with children who did not appear equipped to decide when to spend money and how much to spend while gaming. They did not reflect overly over desires and opportunities, or how to balance desires and opportunities. Sometimes they had ended up spending money with just a few clicks on their controller without realizing that they were spending real money that would be drawn from their (or their parents') bank account. Children risk spending money without understanding that they are doing so, which in turn may lead to conflicts and sanctions – and to shame and humiliation. This is a big problem in modern online gaming, and the research project finds that children risk lacking the protection and support that they are entitled to as minors. Practically, problems often occur when children and young people are allowed to purchase, for example, loot boxes and card packs merely by clicking on the controller rather than using a credit card and filling out a complex form. The project thus finds that the most important reason why young gamers make microtransactions lies in the way the games are designed, and that a lack of parental guidance increases this risk.

At a social level, microtransactions in the forms of loot boxes and card packs often relate to shared feelings of excitement and fun. To describe these shared feelings, the research project uses the term 'hype'. The young interviewees (including the youngest of the sample) also describe how they often watch video-bloggers (*vloggers*) live-stream card pack openings. Watching the sometimes famous vloggers is funny and it also shows young gamers what it is like to pack a very rare item or game character. Vloggers thus show young gamers what it is like to be very lucky (and famous). Interestingly, the hype of the young gamers when opening their own loot boxes and card packs often resembles the lively atmosphere set up by the vloggers.

Some of the young interviewees find that a social group can inflict a level of expectation pressure on children and young gamers to purchase microtransactions, and that sometimes this pressure makes them purchase loot boxes and card packs that they cannot afford. Social pressure may also apply to decisions to bet skins on third party web sites, which according to the interviewees who have experience with skin betting clearly resembles traditional gambling.

## **Conclusion**

The research project set out by acknowledging that contemporary online games often allow gamers to purchase microtransactions and that some of the microtransactions has a gambling-related character because their content is based on chance. The interviews and focus groups strongly support the assumption that online games contain gambling-related elements. Many interviewees relate loot boxes, card packs and skin betting to traditional gambling.

Microtransactions, including those with gambling-related character, only contain usable items; rare items are very valuable, standard items are of low value. For example, in FIFA and other sport games, card packs always contain a number of poor quality cards, not strong enough to strengthen one's

squad. Such seemingly worthless cards, however, can be traded on the games' transfer markets, thereby providing the gamers with extra in-game currencies.

The research project did not uncover any directly related risks of developing gambling addiction from these types of microtransactions. The research project, however, finds that the easy access to purchasing microtransactions with gambling-related elements can be very difficult to control for many children and young gamers, who risk spending more money than planned. The project also finds that uncontrolled use of gambling-related elements frequently leads to conflicts, especially between parents and children.

Microtransactions as well as in-game rewards or loot (such as skins) also relates to another type of gambling. Interviewees with high gaming experience described how rewards from special games can be betted on third party web sites. Some of the 107 interviewees had experience with skin betting and talked about periods dominated by gaming and skin betting.

Based on our interviewees, which we sampled from the general population and via many different contact forms, young people bet for two different reasons. 1) Skin betting adds an extra layer to gaming that appeals to some experienced gamers. 2) Skin betting also relates to young people with social challenges who are not necessarily related to online gaming culture. Skin betting may thus enhance existing risk behaviours and carry adverse consequences to socially vulnerable young people.