



# GAMBLING GUIDE FOR GAMERS

Published: June 2019<sup>1</sup>

Recently there is a lot of talk in the media about the “gablification of gaming” and the blurring of lines between gambling and gaming. Concerns have been raised about the danger to young gamers in particular, who could develop an unhealthy relationship with gambling as a result. As the demographic for gaming is young and very tech-savvy it can be a daunting task for parents to keep up with all the new terminology and technology in this area. In this article we explain the ways that your child could be exposed to gambling concepts and conditioned to gamble in later life through

- “Family friendly” gaming apps
- Social casino games
- Loot boxes
- Pay to win gaming
- In-game gambling challenges
- Skin gambling
- Betting on esports
- Twitch gambling streams

At the end of this article we provide advice on how to talk to young gamers about gambling. Educating them about the myths and risks of gambling is important if they are to develop a healthy relationship with gambling as adults and it falls to parents to handle this as there is no state education provided.

## “Family friendly” gaming apps

From a young age children spend time playing games on phones and tablets. Some of the games young children are attracted to can appear quite harmless at first glance because they feature candy, pets, and fairytale or cartoon creatures. These games can actually be filled with gambling functionality and in app purchases, including loot boxes which are discussed in a separate section.

If you are looking at game descriptions then be aware that if the primary theme of the app is not gambling then it is not usually placed in the casino category. It could be described as a puzzle game, number matching game, or casual game but still use common games of chance like bingo, slots, roulette, dice, coin tosses etc. in game to progress. If you read the game reviews the word *addictive* is frequently used by reviewers for games of this type. These games can normalise gambling for younger children.

---

<sup>1</sup> The information contained is accurate at the time of publishing in June 2019 but changes to games, platforms and policies are always occurring in this fast moving sector.



Across is an image from *Pirate Master: Coin Raid Island Battle Adventure* which features slots as a means to make progress through the game. Other examples include: *Fortune Heroes: Coin Slot City* (slots), *Slingo* (bingo, slots), *King Boom - Pirate Island Adventure* (roulette), *Coin Trip* (slots), *Bingo Story* (fairy tale bingo game), *Smash Island-Coin Winner* (roulette) and so many more.

The age ratings assigned to apps are not always accurate or even consistent across stores because Google and Apple have different approaches when setting age ratings<sup>2</sup>. Google has been criticised for relying too heavily on the PEGI system and doing insufficient manual checks on the content of apps before adding them to the Play Store.

Under the PEGI system games of chance that exactly replicate real world gambling but do not allow for monetary betting are allocated an age rating of PEGI 12. But apps that feature modified games of chance can get a rating of PEGI 3 or 7. Apple use their own age rating system in the App Store and apps that feature a lot of gambling functionality are listed as 12+, alongside a description that they contain “Frequent/Intense Simulated Gambling”. However there are some apps given a 4+ rating that do feature modified slots and spins with virtual coin rewards.



There are also many mobile apps that include randomised mystery items, more commonly referred to as loot boxes, for purchase. These loot boxes are called various, child friendly names in different games, e.g. treasure chests, fortune cookies, orbs, etc., but the concept remains the same. Loot box spending has been strongly linked to gambling and is illegal in some European countries (there is more information on this topic in the section on loot boxes). The mere presence

of loot boxes in an app however does not lead to a higher age rating. For example, *Nintendo's Animal Crossing Pocket Camp*, pictured across, features loot boxes called “fortune cookies” but is listed as a family friendly app. This app is rated PEGI 3 in the Play Store and has an age rating of 4+ in the App Store.

Research tells us that children who are introduced to gambling concepts by age 12 are four times more likely to develop a problematic relationship with gambling as adults.<sup>3</sup> Children under

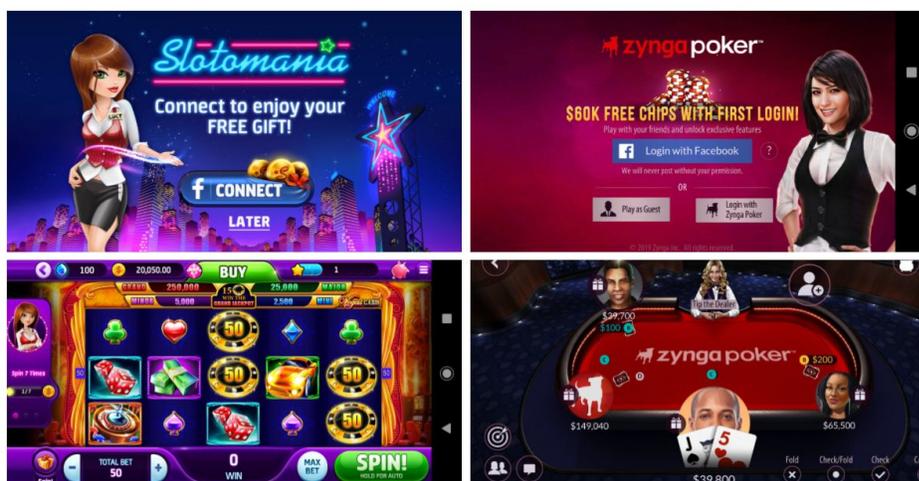
<sup>2</sup> Google have been working to make its Play Store more child friendly of late, introducing new policies that will come into effect from September 2019. This includes the publication of loot boxes odds, safety warnings, limits on advertising in games aimed at children and the need to follow stricter rules in the “Designed for Family” categories. This should bring Google’s policies closer to Apple’s but parental discretion is still the best approach.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately there is no published research in Ireland that deals with this younger age group or covers gambling within games. As a result research from the UK, and sometimes from the US, Australia, Canada or other European countries is referenced. This particular figure comes from America.

12 are not ready to hear about the realities of gambling so the best approach is to avoid apps with gambling concepts altogether for young children. Rather than rely solely on the age ratings or descriptions indicated in store, we recommend that parents play the apps themselves to ensure that there are no gambling elements before letting their young children play them. This is also the best way to ascertain what kind of advertising your child will encounter in-app and if loot boxes are a vital part of the game. While promotions from gambling companies are not meant to appear in apps of this kind there are instances when this happens<sup>4</sup>. If you do allow your young child to buy loot boxes you should closely monitor their spend. It may seem small at first because individual items are often sold for very small amounts but your child may later chose to purchase well advertised bundles or packs of items. It has been proven that if a child makes high levels of in-app purchases they are at greater risk of experiencing gambling related harm later in life.

## Social Casino Games

The convergence between the worlds of gaming and gambling is never more apparent than with Social Casino Games (SCGs). These games closely simulate monetary gambling games, such as slots, poker, blackjack, lotto, and bingo, but use virtual currency in place of real money when placing bets and earning winnings. They can be played via online casino apps or on social media platforms, the most popular source being Facebook. Zynga, Slotomania, DoubleDown Casino and BigFish are among the biggest social gaming operators, most of which are either owned by or have close affiliations with traditional casino operators. You can play these games by yourself, with your friends or with strangers online and can track your progress via leaderboards. SCGs are free-to-play and use in-app purchases to generate large revenues. Given that real money betting is not taking place and SCGs do not ever pay out cash winnings they are not classified as gambling and are therefore largely unregulated.



Screenshots from Zynga Poker and Slotomania

<sup>4</sup> For example, in June 2019 the UK Advertising Standards Authority stepped in to ban promotions from 4 gambling operators that appeared in the Looney Tunes World of Mayhem app, which is rated PEGI 7.

There are clear age restrictions on land casinos and monetary gambling websites but SCGs provide ready access to young gamers because they can be played by anyone with an Internet connection. The apps are listed in store as PEGI 12 or 12+ and most social media platforms have a 13+ age policy.

Social Casino Games are free-to-play so there is no monetary barrier to begin. Gamers will not ever be able to cash in on their winnings but they do spend real money on in-app purchases, which are the main source of revenue for the games. Once initial credits are exhausted gamers will be able to extend or improve play by purchasing credits, virtual currencies, cosmetic and functional items.

SCGs provide a training ground for young gamers to become familiar with the rules of gambling, providing an easy transition into monetary gambling for some. For example, when you install Zynga there are practise rounds that teach you the rules of Texas Hold'em before you start playing. Promotions for other games, some that enable monetary gambling, are regularly provided. The games also recreate the emotions that engage real world gamblers: - the thrill of wins and losses, the anticipation and unpredictability of outcomes, and so on.

As SCGs are not regulated the hooks used to engage and monetise players can be even more aggressive than in monetary gambling. For example, they are designed mathematically to let newer players level up more quickly than they would in monetary gambling games encouraging them to stick with the game. The use of a leaderboard encourages competition and continued play. They seem to be designed to allow for rapid progress towards the top to prevent the player being disheartened. To enable this it seems likely that some players on the leaderboard are actually bots. Daily and timed offers and bonuses are provided to encourage the player to make gaming part of their daily routine and to keep them playing once online. SCGs are designed with a high success rate so young gamers get a false sense of their skill level and their chance of winning if they begin gambling with real money.



Here is an example of Slotomania's "social" functionality. The social aspect of playing online appeals to teens who can easily message their friends to join a game and allows them to "share" their big wins online with their followers or stream their play. Streaming of SCG play is also popular on Twitch (discussed in the section Twitch Gambling Streams).

Research studies from Canada<sup>5</sup> and Australia<sup>6</sup> have reported a significant association exists between SCG play, monetary gambling and problem gambling among adolescents. According to the UK Gambling Commission more than one in 10 kids aged 11-16 follow gambling companies on social media and they are three times more likely to spend money on gambling. This unregulated SCG market, worth a reported \$5.2bn in 2018, is still growing at a fast rate and it is being promoted aggressively to social media users: 59% of 11- to 16-year-olds in the UK have seen gambling advertisements on social media so parents beware.

Ideally teenagers should be kept away from these highly addictive games. If they do play them then it is very important to set clear spending limits and restrict time spent playing. Research shows that teens who make in-app purchases in SCGs are 3-4 times more likely to begin gambling with money. It is also important to dispel any misconceptions they might have about their skills and abilities for monetary gambling based on their SCG play.

### **Loot boxes**

Loot boxes are items offered for purchase in video games that contain mystery or randomised content. They could contain any in-game merchandise such as virtual currency, weapons, specialised gear, characters, or “skins” that are used to alter the appearance of an in-game item like a character or weapon. Gamers will be very familiar with the concept due to their widespread use in mobile apps and some of the popular console and PC games today<sup>7</sup>. Depending on the game loot boxes may be referred to by a different name, e.g. crates in Counter Strike:Global Offensive (CS:GO) and PUBG, packs in FIFA, keys in Rocket League, loot boxes in Overwatch, alpha packs in Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Siege, fortune cookies in Animal Crossing, orbs in Fire Emblem Heroes and so on. Figures from the UK Gambling Commission for 2018 show that 31% of young people, aged 11-16, have accessed loot boxes in a video game or app.

Loot boxes are considered to be a “game of chance” within video games because when you make your purchase you do not know what items are contained or if those items will improve your chance of success in the game. There are valid concerns that loot boxes act as a gateway to problem gambling. Children experience the same emotions when they purchase these mystery items, that gamblers do:- reward anticipation, highs and lows depending on the contents received, spending more and more in the hope that they will get a better outcome. e.g. a rare skin or character/weapon they need. Like many gamblers they mistakenly believe their luck will have to change if they keep spending or that they have already spent so much that they have to try to recoup their losses. It requires no player skill to access a loot box and the outcome is random so

---

<sup>5</sup> Study published in *BMC Public Health*, conducted by The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Canada, <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-018-6069-2>

<sup>6</sup> Study of social gaming habits in young children, conducted by School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5264407/>

<sup>7</sup> FIFA, PlayerUnknown Battlegrounds (PUBG), Dota 2, Overwatch, Counter Strike:Global Offensive (CS:GO), Halo, League of Legends, Heroes of the Storm and Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Siege all feature loot boxes. Fortnite also includes loot boxes in its Save the World mode but Epic games changed the mechanics of their Loot Llamas in 2019 making them transparent to remove the mystery element of the purchase. Many mobile apps, some with low age ratings, e.g. Nintendo’s Animal Crossing and Fire Emblem Heroes, include loot boxes also.

they function similarly to scratch cards, roulette or slot machines in many ways. A number of published studies<sup>8</sup> have shown that there is a significant link between loot box spending and gambling problems.



*Loot box pricing in the game Overwatch*

The presence of loot boxes in mobile apps does not push up the age rating with many games having a PEGI 3 or 12 in the Play Store or 4+ or 12+ in the AppStore. Since 2018 Apple require that mobile apps publish the “odds” of receiving certain types of items in loot boxes. Google have announced a similar policy that will take effect from September 2019.

There is additional concern for some PC games, e.g. CS:GO, Dota 2, PUBG, which allow for items received from loot boxes to be transferred outside the game. These items then become a virtual currency themselves because they can be traded, used to gamble on unregulated skin gambling websites (see section on skin gambling for more information) or exchanged for real money on cash for skins sites.

In 2018 the Irish Government, along with authorities from 15 other countries, signed an international declaration expressing concern about gambling in video games. But to date only Belgium and the Netherlands have taken the necessary steps to make the sale of loot boxes in games illegal. As a result of Belgium’s new laws games manufacturers such as Blizzard, Valve, Take-Two, and EA Games have modified their games for the Belgian market and Nintendo has chosen to remove some games altogether rather than modify the games. The Netherlands banned the sale of loot boxes in games only if the items contained can be transferred outside the game to trade or sell.

It seems clear that games manufacturers will not remove loot boxes from games unless forced to do so by legislation because they are simply too lucrative. Many “free” games use loot boxes and other in-app purchases as their primary source of income and these microtransactions are so embedded in some games that they are virtually unplayable without them.

---

<sup>8</sup> One recently published article that references two such studies:- [“Loot boxes are again linked to problem gambling: Results of a replication study”](#), authored by David Zendle and Paul Cairns. Published March 7, 2019.

In spite of growing evidence linking loot boxes with problem gambling they are not classified as gambling today in Ireland so there is no restriction on the sale of loot boxes within games. We recommend that parents closely monitor the loot box purchases their children make and educate them about gambling realities, especially if they appear to be showing signs of compulsive purchasing.

### “Pay to win” games

There are concerns about games played by children that feature “pay-to-win” purchases that could lead to compulsive behaviours. In these games players are regularly prompted to purchase items that would allow them to progress through a game faster than they could through normal gameplay. Frequent ads encourage them to spend more money than they often intended or can afford and the use of credit cards and sometimes virtual currencies can make it difficult for a child to track their purchases. The game is no longer about skill or experience but purchasing power.

This year the US is considering a bill, “The Protecting Children from Abusive Games Act”, which calls for a complete ban on loot boxes in games and all games with pay-to-win features. There will be significant resistance to this bill from the games industry because microtransaction in games are really lucrative.



Many games manufacturers use a freemium revenue model, i.e. games are free to play and revenue is sourced through in-app purchases. Take the example of King’s “free” mobile app, Candy Crush, which is rated PEGI 3. In 2018 players spent \$4.2 million per day on in-app purchases such as extra lives, extra moves, colour bombs, lollipop hammers, and gold bars, earning King Games \$1.5 billion.

Other games do charge an upfront fee for use but the majority of their revenue comes from in-app purchases. Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V) is a prime example - it is the highest earning console game of all time and contains frequent promotions for in-app purchases of cars, clothes, etc. in its online mode. A significant portion of its revenue comes from in-app purchases.

The mere availability and aggressive advertising of in-app purchases does not push up the age rating for games but children who make high levels of in-app purchases are at higher risk of experiencing gambling related harm as adults. Ireland has not indicated a stance on “pay to win” gaming to date.

## Gambling challenges within games

Most teenagers begin playing 18+ rated games before the age of 18. Some popular console and PC games feature gambling challenges or mini casino games within the larger game. This includes The Witcher 3, Final Fantasy VIII, Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2), Watchdogs, and Fallout New Vegas. Rockstar Games' have also indicated their intention to add a casino to the online mode of the highest grossing console of all time, Grand Theft Auto V (GTA).



It is not known yet what the casino feature of GTA Online will look like but in the multiplayer mode of Rockstar Games' RDR2 the player can gamble frequently on poker and blackjack in saloons during missions and one heist mission actually takes place on a boat casino. There are instructions provided to the player on the rules of these card games and how to bet on them using in game currency.

These games are of course rated for an older audience but in reality they are played by teens of all ages. Children can develop the mistaken belief that they are better players than they actually are and see monetary gambling as an easy way to make money. If your child is playing over 18s games you should speak to them about gambling myths and how their in-game honed gambling skills will not transition well to monetary gambling.

## Skin gambling

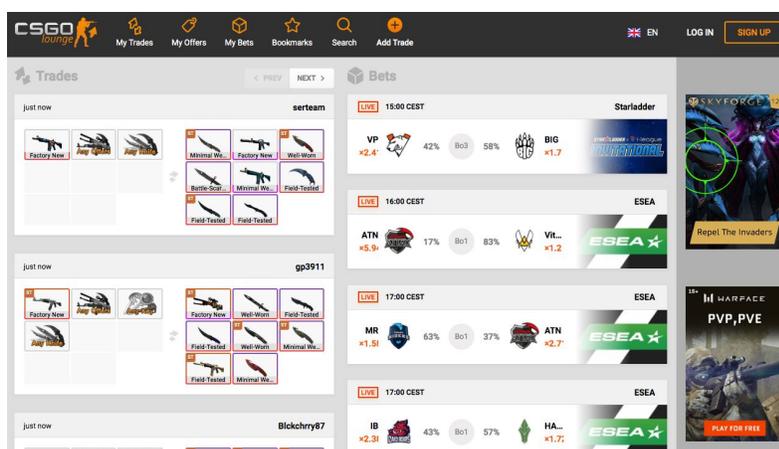
Skin gambling is gambling using virtual items, commonly referred to as “skins” instead of real money. A skin is an in-game cosmetic item used to change the appearance of a character, weapon or piece of equipment. They can be obtained through gameplay or purchased in-game through loot boxes. Gambling with skins has provided a way for underage gamblers to gamble on esports events and other games of chance with unlicensed and unregulated operators.

Skins were first popularised through the game Counter-Strike:Global Offensive (CS:GO), released in 2012 by Valve Corporation, which is one of the biggest games in the world of esports (professional gaming). Valve also created the Steam platform through which PC games and in-game content, including skins, are purchased and traded. Through the Steam Community Marketplace skins can be bought, sold, or exchanged for real or virtual currency by players. Skins are in effect another virtual currency as they can be assigned a real money value based on this trading.

Very importantly Valve provide an API to the Steam platform through which third party sites are able to access a player's steam account. As a result of this functionality skin betting websites emerged that allow steam account holders to transfer their skins and use them to bet on esports or casino style games offered on these third party websites. This form of gambling quickly became popular among esports enthusiasts who are happy to stay immersed in a virtual world where they can place bets on the outcomes of esports events using items like gut knives or

StatTrack AK-47 in place of cash. The growth and size of the skin betting market highlighted for mainstream gambling operators how lucrative esports gambling could be, which is discussed more in the section on esports betting.

Skin gambling websites are unlicensed and unregulated and offer a way for underage gamblers to bet on esports and other games of chance due to insufficient age checks. The casino style games on these websites are appealing to children because they are very simple and high frequency, e.g. slots, roulette and coin tosses, allowing bets to be placed as often as every 30 seconds on randomly occurring events. The operators may also be untrustworthy, designing games unfairly and even stealing skins or valuing them incorrectly. It is difficult for gamblers to understand their losses clearly when betting with a gun or a knife rather than a real world currency.



*CSGO Lounge - just one example of a skin betting website*

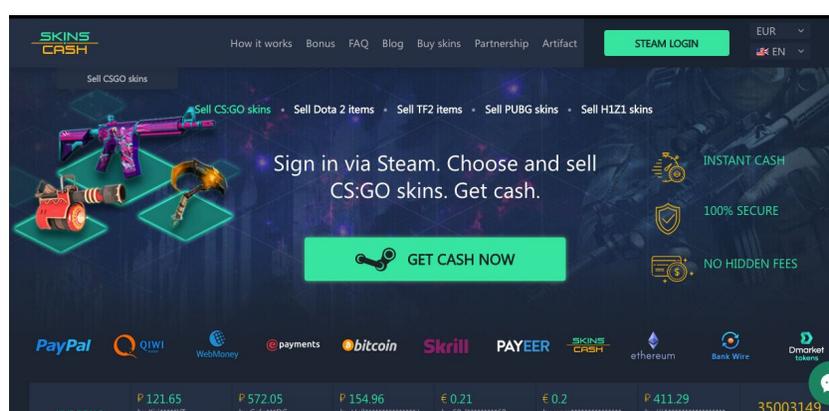
The growth of skin gambling slowed down considerably some years ago when Valve and Government gambling regulators intervened to close unlicensed sites down. In response to growing concerns about underage and unlicensed gambling Valve issued cease and desist orders to a number of prominent skin gambling sites that used its items to bet on casino style games. In these letters Valve stated that Steam accounts are not meant to be used for commercial gains. However the practice continues today, for esports betting in particular, and Valve continues to facilitate it while earning transaction fees for trades of virtual items carried out on its Steam marketplace.

Gambling regulators in different jurisdictions still need to regularly intervene to block skin gambling from unlicensed operators. For example, the Danish gambling regulator, working with ISPs, ordered that a total of 25 illegal gambling sites be blocked earlier this year; 15 of those were skin betting sites. This is an area that requires constant monitoring and will need to be considered by the proposed Irish gambling authority once it is established. In spite of government intervention the market continues to grow with Juniper Research<sup>9</sup> suggesting that

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.juniperresearch.com/press/press-releases/loot-boxes-and-skins-gambling>

the total global consumer spend on loot boxes and skin gambling will reach \$50 billion by 2022, up from under \$30 billion in 2018.

Today skin gambling still provides an easy way for those under the legal age to gamble online. If you have access to a Steam account then you can gamble using CS:GO, Dota 2, Team Fortress, or PUBG skins. Anyone with an email address who is willing to tick a box to confirm an age of 13 or over can open a Steam account. Parents may believe they are tracking their children's activity through their actions on Steam but in reality they could be logging into other sites using the same account details and gambling using their skins. The potential to win/lose actual money is real as skins can be converted to cash through third party sites, e.g. Skins.Cash and Skinwallet.



*Skins.Cash is a site that allows steam account holders to sell their skins for real money*

The steps required to gamble with skins are really easy for young, tech-savvy gamers to navigate. At the time of writing this I took just a few minutes to create a Steam account, login to the website CSGO:Lounge and avail of the bonus coins provided to start betting. I was able to do this without providing any payment details or age verification that I was over 18. CSGO Lounge's terms of use make reference to the user reaching some "required age" and that parents will be held liable for actions taken on the site if the user has not reached this age but the "required age" is not actually specified.

There are no skin betting operators currently licensed to operate in the UK but in a survey published in 2018 by ParentZone 27% of UK children, aged 13-18, said that they had heard of skin gambling and 10% of children had gambled with skins.<sup>10</sup> Children surveyed commented that their parents were unaware of their gambling activity but some had lost as much as £1000 worth of skins that they had taken some time to amass. The UK Gambling Commission found that approximately 500,000 children in the UK, aged 11-16, had engaged in skins betting in 2018. The Irish Revenue Commissioners has also issued no licenses to skin gambling operators but multiple sites can easily be accessed although availability varies because they are frequently closed down temporarily or permanently.

<sup>10</sup> This figure comes from an Ipsos MORI survey carried out in the UK for Parent Zone in 2018.

There is an argument to be made that given the desire within the gaming community to bet with skins that this form of gambling should be legalised for overage gamblers and regulating the industry is necessary to protect underage gamblers. This is something Juniper Research called for after its investigation into the industry. However that can only occur if skin gambling and trading sites agree to apply for gambling licenses in the jurisdictions in which they operate and conform to gambling regulations. While they continue to operate outside the legal framework there will always be issues with age verification, payment, advertising, self-exclusion, money laundering etc. and there is no protection for users.

## **Esports betting**

Esports (or electronic sports) refer to multiplayer video games played competitively by professional gamers and watched by spectators. Depending on the game a professional gamer could be playing solo or as part of a team. Certain types of games lend themselves more to this kind of competition, such as first-person shooter, battle arena, strategy and sports games. The biggest titles today include Counter-Strike:Global Offensive (CS:GO), DOTA 2, League of Legends (LoL), Overwatch, Call of Duty, Halo, and FIFA. Fortnite may be added to that list this year as Epic Games have offered record breaking prize money of €30 million for their inaugural Fortnite World Cup in July. This may increase audience numbers for esports given the widespread name recognition of Fortnite.

Esports has exploded as a spectator sport in recent years and continues to grow more mainstream each year. By the end of 2019 it is expected to be a billion euro industry with a global audience of over 450 million viewers. While older generations may not understand it, watching competitive gaming is as appealing to younger age groups as watching more conventional sports. This younger demographic are happy to bypass older media forms and favour the streaming platforms, such as Twitch, most often used for viewing esports events. Mainstream broadcasters have also expanded into esports, offering their own leagues (Turner Broadcasting) or partnering to provide esports content on their networks (DisneyXD, ESPN2).

In the early days of esports betting on professional games quickly developed a bad reputation with unlicensed skin gambling operators, underage betting and match fixing scandals but much has been done to address toxicity within the sport in recent years. Today opportunities to gamble on esports include the aforementioned unlicensed skin gambling, social betting with peers, fantasy betting within fantasy esports leagues, and sportsbook betting.

Monetary betting on esports is estimated to reach nearly \$13 billion by 2020, giving esports a significant portion of the online betting market. There are dedicated esports betting sites, such as VIE.gg, Unikrn, GGBet, ArcaneBet, but today all the well established gambling operators, including Betway, Betfair, Bet365 and SkyBet, have included esports as part of their sportsbooks. The later group are licensed to operate here by the Revenue Commissioners.

Gambling on esports is treated by bookies in much the same way as gambling on more traditional sports offerings. Odds are offered on a large number of esports events, via the bookies websites and mobile apps. It is possible to bet on the overall winner of a esports tournament, such as betting on the MIBR team to win Dota 2's The International, or to bet on the winner of an individual match within a tournament. Bookies also offer live esports streams with in-game betting. For example, you could bet on which team will be the first to slay a dragon or to destroy a tower while watching a "League of Legends" match. Live streamed events with in-play betting presents risks for gamblers who may place a lot of bets in a short time period without properly considering the consequences.

The screenshot shows the Skybet mobile app interface for a DOTA2 match. The match is titled "Ninjas in Pyjamas v Aachen City Esports (Bo2)" and is part of the "StarLadder ImbaTV Minor" tournament, scheduled for Thursday, 23rd May 2019 at 17:00. The app displays three betting markets with their respective odds:

Match Up Winner 3 Way	
Ninjas in Pyjamas	4/9
Draw	2/1
Aachen City Esports	14/1

Best of 2 Correct Score	
Ninjas in Pyjamas 2-0	4/9
Draw 1-1	19/10
Aachen City Esports 2-0	14/1

Match Up Winner Handicap -0.5	
-------------------------------	--

*Skybet's offering on a DOTA2 match between esports teams*

With audience numbers on the increase betting companies are increasingly keen to improve their brand recognition through sponsorship of teams and tournaments or even to create their own esports events. Betway were the first of the traditional operators to offer betting on esports competitions and has done a lot to promote esports gambling through sponsorship. They sponsor events like ESL One, Intel Extreme Masters and the ESL Pro League, as well as some of the biggest teams in esports, including Ninjas In Pyjamas (NiP), BIG, Invictus, and Made in Brazil (MIBR).



Sponsorship like this is a great way to increase brand visibility with the younger esports demographic who favour streamed content and may miss betting ads on older forms of media. The Betway logo is prominently displayed on the team jerseys, as well as on hoarding at events

they sponsor. Just as in the traditional sports world spectators are loyal to their favourite teams and purchase their merchandise to show their support. The additional benefit for the traditional bookie is that while they may start out betting solely on esports, some account holders may also cross over to bet on other sports or games on the betting platform they use.

Esports Entertainment Group, the company behind the dedicated esports betting exchange platform, VIE.gg, has also just announced a multi-year partnership with esports organisation Dignitas. Under this deal VIE.gg will be promoted by Dignitas' Rocket League and female CS:GO teams, as well as Super Smash Bros. players, through jersey sponsorship and logo placements on social media and live streams. Dignitas' personalities and players will co-host betting-centric streams across a number of esports titles.

So be aware that when your children are watching esports events they will be exposed to gambling advertisements and sponsorships by gambling operators, as well as promotions by esports celebrities and influencers. This normalises the concept of gambling for children and makes it a natural progression once they reach the age of 18 to place a bet. In the meantime, because they associate gaming with placing a bet, they may begin to bet among their peers or even seek out illegal skin gambling sites where their age will not need to be verified. It is therefore important to speak to them about the risks of gambling if they are enjoying the world of esports as so many younger people are.

### **Twitch gambling streams**

Twitch is one of many live streaming platforms available today including YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, but Twitch is by far the most popular for gamers. The platform focuses on streaming of live and on demand gameplay of video games and esports events. It also contains gambling streams. Officially Twitch is for gamers age 13 and older and the site's terms of service say that anyone between 13 and 18 should use the platform with an adult. In reality it is not necessary to create an account in order to watch streams, but you can't participate in chats unless you log in using a twitch account or using a facebook account. To create an account on Twitch you just need to have an email address and supply a date of birth that places you over the age of 12. So there are lots of opportunities for gamers of all ages to use this site.

Many young gamers access gaming streams to pick up tips for the games they play but many more watch purely for entertainment. There are celebrities within the gaming world that have amassed a huge following on Twitch and YouTube.



The most popular currently is Fortnite legend Tyler "Ninja" Blevins, who has over 22 million subscribers to his YouTube channel and over 14 million to his Twitch channel with an average of 40,000+ viewers per week. "Ninja" has increased his following by playing with mainstream celebrities, including rappers Drake and Travis Scott and NFL player JuJu Smith-Schuster. His first match

with Drake broke records for the most viewed stream on Twitch in 2018; it was watched by 600,000 viewers at its peak. With so many young fans watching it was unfortunate that in play Drake bet Ninja \$5,000 on the outcome of the game. Influencers like Ninja and Drake can glamourise gambling and normalise the need to bet on esports. Additionally while professional streamers on these platforms talk primarily about video gaming, on occasion some make references to online gambling, including skin gambling sites. The live chat window could also contain gambling content as this is uncensored messaging by viewers.

Alongside streams for all the popular games like Fortnite, Dota 2, League of Legends, etc. there are also casino streams where gamblers live stream their play on gambling sites, including social casino games and at poker tournaments. The viewing figures listed against these streams are often surprisingly high, which places them on the popular categories list shown when you access the homepage of twitch.tv. At the time of writing this the category “Slots” appeared 19th on the list with 6.15k viewers and “Poker” was 25th with 4.05k viewers. Streams in English within the “Slots” and “Poker” categories display a warning message, *“The broadcaster indicated that the channel is intended for mature audiences”*, before prompting you to start watching. But streams in other languages often play automatically with no content warning. Very importantly these streams contain links to online gambling sites and advertisements for signup bonus offers, without any age gates in place. The UK gambling commission has been investigating Twitch after discovering that some of the gambling sites advertised are not even licensed in the UK. Unfortunately with an estimated 30,000+ channels on Twitch it makes it difficult for the platform provider to monitor all streaming content or the advertising on content channels so unlicensed betting operators could be advertised on the platform. According to Twitch streams are only allowed to show 30 minutes of gambling at a time to prevent channels being used solely as an advertising platform by online gambling sites.

If your child is using Twitch be aware that there is little protection against their exposure to gambling and Twitch offers no parental controls that would enable you to block access to the gambling categories. We would advise that you talk to your child about the realities of gambling if they have unsupervised access to the platform.

## Talking to young gamers about gambling



While it is not possible to protect gamers from exposure to gambling you can educate them about the potential risks involved. Unlike substance abuse, awareness of gambling related harms is not part of the current SPHE curriculum taught in Irish schools. It falls to parents to explain the world of gambling to their children and highlight the risks involved.

When you start the conversation with your children about gambling it is going to help to use the terms and concepts from the gaming world that are outlined in this article. Here are some suggested conversation openers for older children:-

- Ask them to tell you or show you the ways they or their friends are gambling online. They may not even recognise that some of the concepts in their games are actually gambling concepts.
- If they are playing social casino games ask them about their emotions while playing and how much time and money they spend playing these games. Ask if they would like to play casino games for money online or go to a bricks and mortar casino.
- Ask if they feel pressure from peers to gamble socially on the outcome of their games when they play together online.
- Ask about their in game purchases and what they think of the mechanics of loot boxes. Do they feel pressure to make in-app purchases when they play and are they worried about their spending at times?
- Ask if they have come across advertising by betting companies online. This could be through pop up ads while streaming gaming content, through comments made by streamers they follow or during online chats, or through gambling sponsorship of teams or tournaments they follow.
- If they have a Steam account ask if they have logged on to sites other than the Steam Community Marketplace using their Steam account and what have they done there, i.e. have they gambled with skins on esports events or the quick gambling games offered on these sites. Have they ever sold skins for actual money?
- Ask if they have come across gambling streams on Twitch or possibly linked through to gambling sites via Twitch.tv. Do they ever watch online poker streams or slots and what do they think of them?

Once you have started the conversation you can talk to them about key gambling messages and dispel common myths they may have about gambling:

- Tell them that gambling is not an easy way to make money. Talk to your children about house advantage and the reality of gambling as an industry: it exists to make a profit. Tell them that even if they encounter early success, in the long run the house does always win.
- Explain to them the rules of probability:- the odds of winning do not change no matter how long you play or how much you may have lost. Advise them to set spending limits in advance and caution them against “chasing losses” and the myth that your luck is bound to change if you keep playing.
- If they are interested in esports betting let them know that it is a myth that familiarity with the game being played or the teams playing will improve your chances of winning. Chance always comes into play and talk to them about what influences winning.
- If they are playing social casino style games warn them that these games allow more wins than casino games involving money so their skill level and ability to win is not what they may believe it to be. Tell them about the tricks gambling operators use to get you to play (and pay) more over time.
- Talk to them about in-app spending on virtual items in games and its links to gambling. Agree spending limits on in-app purchases and on time spent playing.

- Tell them to be cautious about online gambling and advertising they will see. Explain to them how betting companies use free bets and special offers in emails or through social media ads to entice people to join up and ultimately spend more and more of their own money over time.
- Explain to them that gambling can be addictive. They will be more familiar with the concept of substance addiction but explain to them that gambling has the same effect on the brain as stimulant drugs. It causes a similar “rush” or “high” and overtime tolerance levels are increased and impulse control decreased. This causes the addict to gamble more and more without taking into account the risks involved.
- Highlight the cautionary stories of people who have become problem gamblers and that they come from all walks of life and all age groups. A number of books by gambling addicts are available, as well as YouTube videos of interviews with people who have struggled with gambling.
- Encourage them to look out for their friends and talk to their peers about the risks of gambling if they see them engaging in risky behaviours.
- Acknowledge that gambling can be a form of escape for people who are feeling lonely or isolated. Let them know who they can talk to if they need help.

If you already have concerns about your child’s gambling there is more advice and information available on our website, [www.problemgambling.ie](http://www.problemgambling.ie). This includes guidance on recognising the signs of problem gambling in teens and safeguards against gambling in your home, such as blocking access to betting sites. You can also follow us on Twitter (ProblemGamblingIE) or Facebook (Problem Gambling Ireland).