



# The Talk of the Town: Community Perspectives on Loot Boxes

*Joseph Macey and Mila Bujić*

*You know what the problem is?*

*We gamers don't have a lobby, unlike the gaming industry.*

*There is no representation of our interests.*

*Blizzard Entertainment Forums*

## INTRODUCTION

Video games are something of a lightning rod for controversy, since their inception they have been proposed as the cause of a range of societal problems including violent behavior, problematic gambling behavior, obesity, and social isolation (see Bensley and van Eenwyk 2001; Gupta and Derevensky 1996; Vandewater et al. 2004; Colwell and Kato 2003). Given that almost all new technologies and media have at first been received cautiously, if not subject to outright hostility, by mainstream society, such concerns are to be expected. However, the presence of the “technopanic” (Marwick 2008) narrative in discussions concerning video games is

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J. Macey (✉) • M. Bujić  
Gamification Group, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland  
e-mail: [joseph.macey@tuni.fi](mailto:joseph.macey@tuni.fi); [mila.bujic@tuni.fi](mailto:mila.bujic@tuni.fi)

particularly enduring. A potential explanation being that video games are often at the forefront of technological development, characterized by innovation, experimentation, and the creation of new interactional relationships.

Innovation in video games is not restricted to the games or hardware but is present in all facets of gaming from the social practices surrounding games to the business models employed by the industry. The most significant developments of recent years have been the move from “games as a product” to “games as a service” (GaaS) (Sotamaa and Karppi 2010), and the increasing prevalence of monetization strategies first pioneered in free-to-play (F2P), or “freemium”, games (Alha et al. 2014). These models originated in those of utilitarian software (Seufert 2013; Turner et al. 2003) and proliferated alongside the rise of the Internet, which enabled a more direct interaction between the consumer and the service, as opposed to a one-time purchase of a product. GaaS moves away from the traditional single-point-of-purchase to the continuous revenue approach, focusing on the continued development and release of new content in order to secure both ongoing player engagement with the game and to drive monetization. Consequently, GaaS relies on a large and active playing community which serves both as a source of revenue and of data used to develop subsequent updates, including adjustments to monetization strategies. Although only a small proportion of users, or “whales”, usually accounts for at least half of the revenue (Tomić 2018), social factors also seem to significantly influence how often and much users spend on an otherwise F2P product (Shi et al. 2015). Both GaaS and, to a lesser degree, monetization practices associated with F2P also serve the ongoing drive toward a “platformization” of digital economies (Kenny and Zysman 2016), evident in both the video game industry directly (Zanescu et al. 2020, 2021) and in associated sectors such as streaming (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020).

Perhaps the most (in)famous of these monetization strategies is the loot box, an in-game item which has become ubiquitous in recent years, appearing in F2P games and premium games alike. Indeed, loot boxes have proved to be such a successful means of monetization that they have enabled many notable games to abandon traditional models and adopt the F2P model, for example, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO), *Rocket League*, and *Eve Online* (Hornshaw 2016; Torbet 2018; Swiatek 2020). Loot boxes are a means of distributing in-game rewards to players via random number generation and come in many forms: they can be distributed

to players for free, purchased with in-game currencies, or with real-world currencies. The items from loot boxes can be strictly cosmetic, with no direct effect on the game, they can be in-game resources, or even in-game currency used to buy specific items. Some loot boxes provide items which can be traded with other players or sold via online marketplaces for real-world currency, while others provide items which are linked to player accounts and cannot be traded or transferred (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019; Macey and Hamari 2019).

Loot boxes have proved to be a controversial addition to games, with concerns being raised over their similarity to gambling products such as scratch-cards or slot machines (Gong and Rodda 2020); they have been subject to numerous investigations by regulators and, in some countries, are the subject of specific legislation (Macey and Hamari 2019). Indeed, loot boxes are emblematic of the ongoing convergence between gaming and gambling (Macey and Hamari 2020; Johnson and Brock 2020), a trend which is also visible in the wider video game ecosystem, for example in esports (Macey et al. 2021); additional content such as battle-passes (Zanescu et al. 2020); and in streaming services such as Twitch (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020). The issue of loot boxes first came to the attention of mainstream news media, and subsequently regulators, after the 2017 release of the game *Battlefront 2* (*BF2*) provoked a significant backlash from the gaming community. The particular way in which loot boxes were implemented was criticized for promoting “pay-to-win”, or purchasing in-game items that provide an advantage when playing (Zendle et al. 2020). This is particularly problematic in multiplayer games as those not making purchases can effectively be prevented from progressing regardless of their in-game skills. The publisher, Electronic Arts (EA), was forced to make numerous changes to the implementation of loot boxes in *BF2* after a sustained campaign by players (Perks 2019). It is important to note, however, that not all multiplayer games include P2W mechanics, for example, *Overwatch* loot boxes do not include items which directly provide in-game advantages to players.

Loot boxes have been subject to specific legislation in several countries; however, the regulatory approaches are inconsistent and dependent upon local interpretations of what constitutes gambling and of the function and value of virtual items contained within loot boxes (Macey and Hamari 2019). Belgium, for example, has ruled that any loot box which can be purchased with real-world currencies is considered gambling (The Belgian Gaming Commission 2018), whereas the Netherlands considers those

whose contents can be directly exchanged for real-world currencies as gambling (Netherlands Gaming Authority 2018). Due to differences in how loot boxes are employed (e.g., *CS:GO* vs. *Overwatch*) these interpretations lead to some types constituting gambling in one country, but not the other.

To date, academic treatments of loot boxes have assessed the legal implications of loot boxes, their psychological impact, and the potential associations with problematic gambling behaviors (Abarbanel 2018; Li et al. 2019; Zendle and Cairns 2018). Despite these varied approaches, a significant perspective is notably absent from the discussion, that of the players. Their inclusion is relevant for several reasons, the most pertinent of which derives from the contemporary dominance of the GaaS model (Sotamaa and Karppi 2010). The move from a goods-dominant model to a service-dominant model has resulted in a cooperative process of value creation (Huotari and Hamari 2012), one in which consumer perspectives and experiences take on more significance due to the ongoing relationship required to make it a viable approach. The significance, and potential influence, of the playing community was clearly demonstrated in the response to the release of *BF2*, highlighted earlier. In order to produce an appropriate response to the question of whether or not loot boxes constitute gambling and what is their place in contemporary games ecosystem, the expert analyses must be complemented with consumer voices. Adopting such an approach also serves to engage consumers in the wider debate and, therefore, increases the likelihood of reaching solutions which are acceptable and/or comprehensible to all stakeholders. This is particularly important in regard to games such as *Overwatch* which, as described above, are judged differently by different regulators.

This chapter utilizes content analysis (Bengtsson 2016) to investigate discussions of gambling in *Overwatch* fan communities, regarding the specific topic of loot boxes. As such, this work is guided by the following research question: *what attitudes and opinions are expressed by the Overwatch community regarding loot boxes?*

## METHOD

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected during September 2020, both from the official *Blizzard Entertainment* Internet forums and from various *Reddit* communities.

Although discussions likely exist on other forums (e.g., social media, news portals), we have limited our data collection to the community's core meeting places, denoted by the communities being defined by games or, specifically, *Overwatch*. However, such searches should not be understood as definitive and encompassing all possible discussions on the topic, but due to their themes are likely the focal points for similar discussions. As such, they are sufficiently reliable to provide insights into the community's attitudes. Given the aim of the research, it was decided that posts reacting to the decisions of the Belgian legislators would form the basis of the data collection. The search was conducted based on the keywords *Overwatch*, *loot boxes*, and *Belgium*. The inclusion criteria assumed only that the discussion thread topic related to loot boxes in *Overwatch*. The majority of comments were made in explicit reference to loot boxes in *Overwatch*; however, in some cases it was unclear if the comments related specifically to *Overwatch* or to loot boxes and games in general. In cases where the intent of the poster was not clear, it was decided that they be retained in the analysis, but that they would be included in a dedicated theme: The effects of loot boxes on games in general—T3. As such, all themes relate specifically to the context of loot boxes in *Overwatch*, except T3, as outlined. Throughout the process, we have followed the guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK for ethical research. According to the same guidelines, no specific ethical approval was needed.

Our primary aim was to ensure the representation of players' voices, as such particular attention was devoted to finding voices of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ and people of color. After the first stage, we had collected data from the official Blizzard Entertainment forum, r/Overwatch, and r/GamerGhazi.<sup>1</sup>

In order to ensure representation of diverse voices, we decided upon a second round of data collection, in this round, the eligibility criteria were relaxed to include any discussion about the impact of loot boxes on games and gaming. After amending the eligibility criteria, posts from a further four forums (r/DisabledGamers, r/girlgamers, r/gaymers, and r/SRSGaming<sup>2</sup>) were added to the dataset. However, of the discussion groups identified, r/POCGaming, r/LesbianGamers, r/AutisticGaming, r/BlackGamerGirls, and r/AgainstGamerGate were found to contain no relevant data. Table 11.1, below, details the final sources which provided data and the total number of individual comments from each source.

**Table 11.1** Sources of data and the corresponding number of retrieved comments

<i>Source</i>	<i>No. of comments</i>
Blizzard Forums	
<i>Overwatch</i> : General Discussion	154
Reddit	
r/Overwatch	1100
r/DisabledGamers	3
r/GamerGhazi	47
r/girlgamers	30
r/gaymers	21
r/SRSGaming	43
Total:	1398

### *Data Analysis*

All data were analyzed by both authors using content analysis; we adopted an inductive category development approach in order to mitigate preconceptions and to ensure comprehensive representation of the community's attitudes (Mayring 2004). Therefore, no previous theory or literature was used to guide the pen-and-paper coding process through forming pre-determined concepts for analysis. However, the authors' positions as both players and games researchers and not *tabula rasa* should be acknowledged. In that vein, although the coding was open, authors themselves have experience and previous knowledge on loot boxes and the related issues, with one having a slightly positive attitude toward them, and the other slightly negative.

Both authors independently conducted the three phases of analysis (decontextualization, recontextualization, and categorization; Bengtsson 2016) with the only pre-determined aspect being the categorization of negative, positive, and neutral comments and incorporating only comments which demonstrated explicit opinions, so as to reduce bias that would be introduced by researchers' interpretation of vague statements. The results were then matched, compared, and discussed in order to establish comprehensive and reliable identification of codes. At this stage, two distinct approaches to organizing codes into themes emerged: (a) a hierarchical structure, incorporating the main topic, such as the relationship of loot boxes and gambling, and any relevant sub-themes; and (b) a series of dichotomous pairs describing the broader discussion positions, such as whether parents or companies should monitor and regulate minors'

interactions with loot boxes. Following a discussion, we adopted method (a) as it was felt that it had a stronger direct link to the research question, and was more easily communicable to the intended audience. However, the coding scheme was informed by method (b) as opposing opinions were not coded as distinct themes, for example, the theme “loot boxes in *Overwatch*” contained both positive and negative views, in preference to creating two sub-themes: “loot boxes in *Overwatch* are bad” and “loot boxes in *Overwatch* are good”.

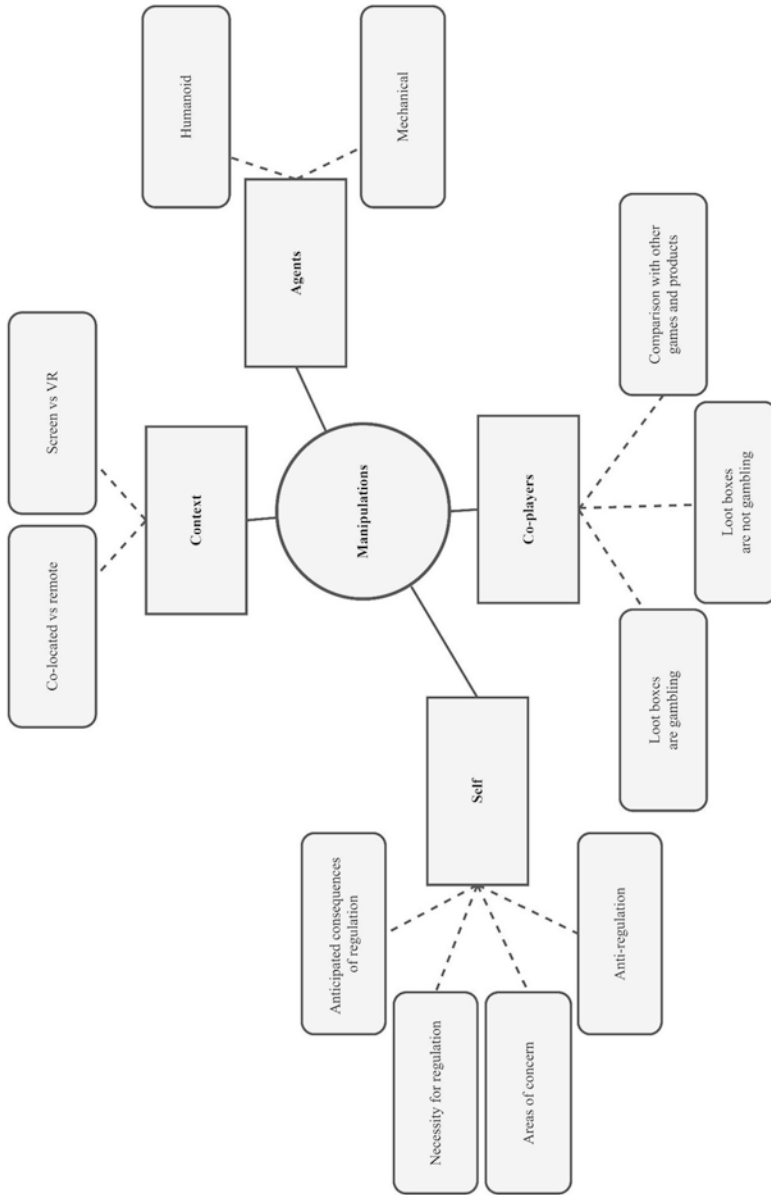
Although all of the posts from the selected discussion threads were included in the dataset, a significant portion, over 50%, was discarded during coding because their content was either duplicates of earlier posts or not deemed relevant to the main topic of this study. Furthermore, individual usernames were not tracked, and each comment was analyzed as an independent item.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found that all comments posted across a range of discussion forums could be classified according to one of seven main themes. These themes were consistent no matter whether the comment expressed positive, negative, or neutral opinions. However, some small differences were observed in relation to the sub-themes present in the discussion. For example, only those who expressed a negative opinion about loot boxes referred to earlier business models and game design practices when considering the effect of loot boxes on games. A full list of themes and sub-themes is provided in Image 11.1 with example quotes following theme descriptions throughout the text. Usernames have been omitted in order to protect the users’ privacy.

### *Monetization of Loot Boxes: T1*

The first theme lies at the very heart of the debate, with proponents of loot boxes contending that the revenue generated by sales funds ongoing game development and that their purchase is a matter of personal choice. Indeed, some explicitly stated that they chose to make purchases as a way of providing revenue to companies who make F2P games. This finding provides further evidence for the emerging importance of donations as a motivation for purchasing virtual items, in particular those which are non-functional, or cosmetic (Alha et al. 2018; Marder et al. 2019).



**Image 11.1** Themes and sub-themes found in *Overwatch* community's discussions on loot boxes

*You don't have to pay for anything you don't want to, I simply use my earner in game coins to buy anything I want.*  
*r/overwatch*

Conversely, critics argue that the profits from loot boxes more than account for development costs and that they are, in fact, excessive. Furthermore, they highlight the ways in which loot boxes exploit psychological triggers and prey on vulnerable populations as a means of driving sales.

*I personally have had a lot of problems around loot boxes due to my OCD.*  
*r/disabledgamers*

This debate demonstrates the importance of access to accurate and reliable information, both regarding the profitability, or otherwise, of loot boxes and the degree to which games employ potentially exploitative practices. For example, recent work has highlighted the development of software which uses player data to search social media in order to present purchasable content which is more appealing to an individual (King and Delfabbro 2019). Interestingly, academic research was referred to fleetingly by some critics but not by proponents of loot boxes.

In order to allow consumers to make informed decisions about games, and about the monetization practices they employ, transparency must be improved. The issue of transparency, in particular the need to provide easily accessible and accurate information to players, is reminiscent of one of the key concepts of responsible gambling frameworks (Blaszczynski et al. 2011). Indeed, the approach of responsible gambling is one which incorporates various perspectives, including consumer protection and harm minimization, which would help address the concerns of critics without impinging upon the areas valued by those who favor loot boxes. However, the efficacy of various responsible gambling strategies, for example limit-setting or pop-up messaging, is unclear and has been found to vary between different groups, for example when grouped by age (Ladouceur et al. 2017; Gainsbury et al. 2018). As such, dedicated research is required in order to identify the most effective strategy, or strategies, to utilize in a community of video game players, particularly considering the influence of community on purchase intention (Hsieh and Tseng 2018).

### *Contents of Loot Boxes: T2*

The codes classified under this theme referred to the virtual items accessed through opening loot boxes, rather than the method of delivery. Particular attention was paid to the utility, or lack thereof, of the virtual items.

*At the end of the day, again, it's purely cosmetic and has no effect on gameplay, so who actually cares.  
r/overwatch*

Indeed, even those who did not view loot boxes positively often couched their opinion in terms of the desirability of the virtual items themselves, with limited references to the loot box as a distribution mechanic. Instead, the discussion is framed in reference to the ways loot boxes and their contents impact the players' experiences of the game, and even constitute a part of the gameplay experience. This perspective is one in which the value of the items themselves is constituted in terms of experiential value, rather than purely functional terms. However, this may be a result particular to players of *Overwatch*, or other games of the genre, as the value players ascribe to virtual items has been found to differ between game types (Ho and Wu 2012).

In situations where the virtual items directly affect gameplay, providing a competitive advantage, players are united in opposition. This final finding is in line with prior research in which games perceived to be pay-to-win were found to be the least well-regarded by players (Hamari and Keronen 2017; Alha et al. 2018).

### *The Effects of Loot Boxes on Games in General: T3*

The perceived influence of loot boxes on the gaming experience extended beyond the virtual items they provide. First, the experience of opening loot boxes was viewed positively, while the use of a random number generator (RNG) to allocate rewards was thought to be fair to all. Such a view illustrates one of the primary social functions of gambling as an activity, that it is a mechanism which compensates for unequal access to resources by ensuring that all participants are dependent upon chance rather than any other determining factor (Abt et al. 1984).

Second, loot boxes were found to affect the in-game experience as the random distribution of cosmetic skins supported a more diverse aesthetic during play, ensuring that not all players were using the most recent, or

“best” skins. Finally, in regard to positive effects, there was particularly strong support for the idea that the inclusion of loot boxes obtained through in-game activities creates an active and coherent player base; content available via direct purchase was given as an example of how monetization can cause rifts and elitism within a gaming community.

*For many people, the community interaction is an important part of the game.  
For those people, cosmetics do without a doubt affect gameplay.  
r/overwatch*

Conversely, the ubiquity of loot boxes was thought to have damaged the community by normalizing the presence of exploitative monetization mechanics, a position supported by existing research (Gainsbury et al. 2015; King and Delfabbro 2019; King and Delfabbro 2020). Indeed, many expressed the view that games were no longer designed with the aim of providing an enjoyable experience for players but, instead, to extract as much revenue as possible:

*When freemium elements are involved, you don't play the game ... it plays you.  
r/girlgamers*

A distinct sub-theme we identified was the comparison between contemporary games, characterized as employing either GaaS or F2P as a business model, and older games which utilized the traditional, product-based business model. The latter approach, according to some, provides better value for money, more meaningful play experiences, and reward skilled play. Such comments echo a narrative which runs throughout the wider playing community: the qualitative comparison of “real” games and gaming to “lesser” practices which include, but are not limited to, casual gaming, a preference for browser-based games or social network games, and pay-to-win practices. These perspectives are connected to wider issues of gatekeeping and the idealized meritocracy of gaming (Paul 2018; Alha 2020).

#### *The Implementation of Loot Boxes in Overwatch: T4*

Shifting the focus from the effects of loot boxes away from games in general, the discussion is somewhat simpler, being a comparison between the perceived benefits and detriments of the way in which loot boxes are

implemented within *Overwatch*. Those of the former position argued that *Overwatch* should be exempt from regulation, with the most regularly observed justifications for this position being: loot boxes ensure all content can be accessed by all players, eventually; *Overwatch* provides players with free loot boxes and, therefore, there is no requirement to purchase them; that it prevents pay-to-win; and that in-game currency can be earned, allowing players to make purchases without using real-world currency. Finally, the single most common reason for defending the presence of loot boxes in *Overwatch* is that the system is not as bad as in some other games, in particular games such as *CS:GO*, or *Battlefront 2*.

*Overwatch system (random lootboxes, but only cosmetics) is the least cancerous among the most profitable ones, so I'm good with it.*  
r/overwatch.

Those players who did not support loot boxes tended to discuss the *Overwatch* system in more concrete, less relativistic terms.

*Having the least stinky shit in the crap heap does not suddenly make their shit a chunk of gold.*  
r/overwatch

As such, they critiqued both the publisher, Blizzard Entertainment, for obscuring the inherently exploitative nature of loot boxes, and those players who continued to support their inclusion in the game:

### ***Loot Boxes and Gambling: T5***

When comparing the implementation of loot boxes in *Overwatch* with that of other games, such as *CS:GO*, the rhetoric we observed largely mirrored that of the wider debate about loot boxes and gaming (T3) observed within the data. Proponents of loot boxes arguing that: they cannot be gambling as they are marketed as providing a set of random items; that they cannot be exchanged for real-world currency; and that they always provide the player with something, a position adopted by the Entertainment Software Rating Board. In opposition, critics argue that the combination of financial outlay and chance-based rewards is enough to classify loot boxes as constituting a form of gambling. As such, the debate within the *Overwatch* playing community mirrored that within both academia and

regulatory authorities (Martinelli 2017; Holden and Ehrlich 2017; Macey and Hamari 2019). In addition, direct parallels were drawn between the potential consequences of opening loot boxes and participation in gambling, with one comment highlighting the existence of research which addressed this specific issue. Although the comment did not include further details, there is an ever-growing body of work which has found associations between paid loot box opening and behavior which is indicative of problematic gambling (e.g., Macey and Hamari 2019; Zendle and Cairns 2018).

The discussion also reflected another issue which is a common feature of discussions about loot boxes—the perceived similarity between loot boxes and other game-like or playful products that provide random items, such as Kinder Eggs and Collectible Card Games (CCGs). The argument, presented by many, including Executives at EA, the publisher of *BF2*, and the *FIFA* series among others, is that loot boxes simply utilize “surprise mechanics” in the same way as many other, unregulated, products (Madigan 2019). While many players offered reasons why loot boxes can be distinguished from such products, there was a near-universal acceptance that this issue should be explored in detail given the apparent similarities between the various products.

*Spending real money for a random chance at getting something good is generally considered gambling, although if you push it too far then a Kinder Surprise is gambling, so you can't be too religious about this definition.*  
r/overwatch

What is apparent, however, is that the legal definition of gambling currently employed by many regulators<sup>3</sup> causes a significant amount of confusion as, in wider society, the terms of reference are notably broader and incorporate more general instances of risky behavior (see Abarbanel 2018). The situation is further complicated by the increasing presence of virtual items which can be purchased, but whose usage is restricted to specific, game-based, contexts and the fact that these items are not owned by the players, but are instead licensed for use by the publishers (Corbett 2019).

### *Loot Boxes and Regulation: T6*

Given the nature of this research, it is unsurprising that T6 contains the most sub-themes and distinct issues raised by players. In addition to the specific features discussed under T4, those opposing regulation of loot

boxes did so on the basis that: they are not actually a problem; they are not addictive; the risks are obvious and well-understood by all; there are worse things than loot boxes; and, that as only a small percentage of people are affected by gambling problems, regulation ruins the game for the majority. Indeed, the notion that problems are the fault of individuals was an especially strong narrative, with players explaining problematic consumption to either a lack of self-control or of proper parenting. Such views have previously been found to exist in other studies of games employing F2P business models, and which include in-game items such as loot boxes (Alha et al. 2018). This is more than likely connected to the beliefs, also expressed by players, that governments should not regulate games in any circumstances, and that individuals should be allowed to spend their money as they wish.

*Don't penalise the normal majority for the lack of self-control of a tiny minority.  
r/overwatch*

Another particularly dominant opinion was that regulation was the result of a politicized narrative, that expressing concern about loot boxes was “fashionable”, and that attempts to regulate can be attributed to a lack of understanding on the part of regulators:

*so, clueless politicians make bullshit laws about things that don't matter because they think that will make them popular, and target things that don't even fit their bullshit description because they're popular, while ignoring others that fit a hell of a lot more but are less popular. And the players are the ones getting screwed.  
r/overwatch*

As previously, this attitude is indicative of an outlook in which games are under attack from outsiders, from those who are opposed to gaming by adopting such a position, individuals are acting as gatekeepers to the world of games and gaming (Alha 2020). Furthermore, this supposed lack of understanding, or even concern, on the part of regulators may be a source of a second sub-theme which views regulation negatively: the idea that regulation will harm both games and players. There appears to be a common belief that removing loot boxes from games will actually disadvantage players financially as alternative systems will raise the price of virtual items to levels which exceed the current costs of obtaining via opening

loot boxes, whether paid or earned through in-game activities. The adoption of a consumer-centered framework, one similar to responsible gambling initiatives, would be a viable means to ensure that such concerns are addressed (Blaszczynski et al. 2011; King and Delfabbro 2019). Indeed, some claim that it is the skins themselves which encourage addictive behaviors, not the delivery mechanism, and that simply removing loot boxes will not address the underlying problem, yet prior research has demonstrated that such a view is not grounded in reality (Zendle and Cairns 2018).

Once again, those players who were critical of loot boxes approached the issue of regulation from a perspective which stressed social responsibility over individual perspectives. Particular attention was given to the fact that regulation is needed to protect those who are most vulnerable, such as children, and that parents cannot always keep up with developments in gaming and, as such, may not even know what loot boxes are. Indeed, one comment explicitly stated that current practices are skewed toward companies as players lack representation. However, it must be remembered that any attempts to introduce legislation framed solely in terms of protecting a single group, for example children, would likely disproportionately affect other groups and, therefore, a balanced approach is required (Abarbanel 2018). Comments expressing support for regulation were confident that other authorities would soon legislate against gambling in games and that such approaches would drive companies to develop fairer monetization practices. It is interesting to note that both sides of the debate expressed the opinion that the attention being paid to loot boxes is the direct result of EA's misjudged approach to monetization by employing *pay-to-win* loot boxes or, more succinctly, their "greed". By implementing a system which essentially required players to purchase loot boxes in order to unlock a wealth of major characters, and by conferring in-game advantages unavailable to those who chose not to pay, EA violated the principle of fairness so important to players (Alha et al. 2018; Karhulahti and Kimppa 2018).

Finally, even those who view loot boxes critically discussed their concerns about regulation. However, while they felt that regulation would be beneficial, the lack of a consistent approach was seen to undermine the process. Indeed, potential problems were not simply the result of different interpretations of what constitutes gambling, but also due to varied interpretations of the value of virtual items; issues addressed in prior research (Martinelli 2017; Holden and Ehrlich 2017; Macey and Hamari 2019).

Concern was also expressed that game companies would find ways to circumvent legislation as they have done in other jurisdictions, for example, China.

### *Alternatives to Loot Boxes: T7*

Numerous references were made to both other games and the ways in which their monetization systems affected the players' experiences. Those who expressed positive opinions about loot boxes were, unsurprisingly, skeptical about possible alternatives with criticism aimed at direct purchase and downloadable content in particular.

*be careful what you wish for, as any scheme that replaced lootboxes will probably be worse. Money talks.  
r/overwatch*

Perhaps the single most common concern about direct purchase is that companies will introduce pricing structures which do not provide value for money, resulting in increased expenditure on the part of players. Some even commented that direct purchase would “disadvantage” those who want to collect virtual items as they would be unable to obtain them through gameplay. In the same way that loot boxes were thought to enhance the game experience and to benefit the community, direct purchase was presented as being a detrimental influence: causing splits within the community among those who had paid for access to different content, such as maps, and those who had not. Once again, this perspective references both the potentially democratizing nature of randomly distributed resources (see T1) and, somewhat counter-intuitively, the tendency to value a meritocratic approach where any in-game benefits must be “earned” through in-game achievements (Alha 2020). Finally, there was a clear sentiment that if loot boxes are removed from games, companies will develop new means to monetize games which are, in some way, worse for players. What is most apparent from these comments, is that many viewed the situation in terms best described as “either/or”, and did not raise the possibility of dual systems.

In comparison, those who view loot boxes negatively discussed a greater range of alternatives, including more dynamic systems incorporating different solutions to serve different types of players. In contrast to the opinions expressed above, direct purchase was held up as the fairest, most

consumer-friendly method of accessing cosmetic items in the game; however, other proposals included season passes, earning in-game credits, random rewards earned through completing in-game objectives, and in-game progression by completing set challenges. It is notable that many of these alternatives were also felt to improve the game experience, promote an active player base, and reward skilled play. A clearly expressed concern was that, if required to remove loot boxes, companies would introduce systems which are even more exploitative. It is interesting that individuals raised examples of different means by which in-game items could be obtained from a purely functional perspective, but did not raise the potential for other forms of oversight based on the principles of responsible gambling, such as personal limit-setting or pop-up messages encouraging breaks in play (e.g., King and Delfabbro 2019).

### META-PERSPECTIVES

During the coding process, we noticed several perspectives which cut across many, if not all, of the themes and sub-themes we identified. Given that they were seen to influence differing contexts and opinions, we felt that they did not constitute distinct themes but, instead, offered a means of interpreting attitudes toward a specific theme or sub-theme.

The first of these can be considered to be a political outlook, as responses could be placed on a spectrum between individual and social responsibility, whether on the part of individuals, parents, companies, or governments. Such a viewpoint was particularly evident in T1 and T6, although its influence extended to other discussions. Second, almost all themes were seen to be influenced by the perceived power dynamics between players and game developers; specifically, the (in)ability of the community to effect meaningful change, for example through economic activity (i.e., boycotts) or direct representation. Finally, we observed the apparently universal condemnation of pay-to-win mechanics, a perspective which highlights both the integrity of the game and the play experience. With this in mind, it is important to develop both monetization methods and regulatory approaches which do not compromise or unduly influence the way in which players interact with the game.

Similar to these underlying perspectives, the themes which emerged can also be directly connected to several discussions and theoretical perspectives addressed in existing research, notably: meritocracy/gatekeeping (Paul 2018; Alha 2020); F2P/ethical game design discussions (King and

Delfabbro 2019; Perks 2019; Alha 2020); responsible gambling/consumer protection (Blaszczynski et al. 2011; Abarbanel 2018); and the conceptualization of value in respect to virtual items (Ho and Wu 2012; Hamari and Keronen 2017; Marder et al. 2019).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The most obvious, and significant, limitation of this study concerns the nature of the data that was gathered; written comments were taken from historic discussions on forums which were open to all. Accordingly, it was impossible to assess any variations in tone in individual comments, such as sarcasm. As such, all comments were judged at face value. Furthermore, no demographic or other contextual information relating to individuals was provided, meaning that we cannot guarantee all those who posted are players of *Overwatch* despite their membership of community forums. We propose that this study serves as the basis for an ongoing investigation, with the use of qualitative interviews, in particular, facilitating an exploration of players' attitudes and opinions.

Such an approach would also offer a prospective means of investigating our finding that attitudes toward loot boxes appear to be affected by political outlook, an insight which offers several intriguing possibilities for future research.

A further limitation is that the eligibility criteria required that comments explicitly addressed the issue of loot boxes, rather than gambling in general, resulting in a small number of potentially informative posts not being included in the analysis as they took the form of generalized or abstracted commentaries, for example on the nature of gambling. The most notable of these related to the way in which virtual items provide value to players and, therefore, transcend definitions of gambling which are anchored in real-world currencies or financial instruments. Pursuing further exploration of this issue is, therefore, a necessary direction for future research.

Finally, due authors' personal limitations, only discussions in the English language were considered for this study. Future studies should consider expanding their data collection to non-English sources, thereby improving the inclusiveness of community voices and enabling extensive research into cross-cultural perspectives of loot boxes, gambling, and games.

## CONCLUSION

Despite increasing academic attention being paid to the ongoing convergence between video games and gambling, consumer perspectives have so far received little attention. Given that the dominant business models in the contemporary games industry are focused on promoting long-term player engagement (GaaS) and extensive player bases (F2P), the significance of players as stakeholders has increased accordingly. This research, therefore, aimed to complement existing research into the gambification of video games by examining posts in a range of player-centered discussion forums in order to understand attitudes toward loot boxes within the *Overwatch* community.

Analysis of comments from six distinct discussion forums revealed seven main themes with a further 14 sub-themes identified, see Image 11.1. A number of implications, both practical and theoretical, arose out of this work. First, in respect to practical issues, attempts to regulate both loot boxes specifically, and the wider gambification of video games more generally, would benefit from adopting frameworks similar to responsible gambling initiatives in order to address the issue. Indeed, it may be worth considering any attempt at regulation from the perspective of consumer protection rather than from legislation framed solely in the context of gambling. Second, monetization strategies adopted by game companies directly impact upon the consumer experience of playing games, as such careful consideration is required in order that the chosen strategy does not negatively impact players. Similarly, no matter players' opinions on loot boxes specifically, the presence of "pay-to-win" mechanics is perceived to be highly problematic, destroying the balance of a game. This is particularly relevant in competitive multiplayer games, such as *Overwatch*, which are popular esports titles. Finally, the approach adopted by both regulators and legislators requires more effective communication regarding the rationale behind their adopted strategy in order that regulators can demonstrate that they are not anti-game or anti-gamer. As a consequence, decisions are more likely to be understood and accepted by the gaming community, rather than being perceived as diktats from an uninformed and uninterested authority. Active and targeted communication strategies on the part of authorities are likely to result in improved interactions between regulators and consumers.

In respect to theoretical issues, this study provides further evidence that some players choose to make in-game purchases as a means of showing

their support for the game developers (e.g., Theme 1), thereby adding to the existing knowledge concerning motivations which drive digital purchase intentions. In addition, perhaps the most significant implication derives from our findings regarding how players conceptualize the value of virtual items in many ways, both in material and experiential affordances. Established legal definitions of gambling frame the concept of value in predominantly monetary terms<sup>4</sup>; however, the increasing convergence of gaming and gambling, and the growing prevalence of digital currencies, virtual items, and hybrid gambling activities, means that such definitions require revision.

A final issue of note is that every attempt was made to ensure that voices of marginalized groups were included in the discussion; however, no difference was observed in the themes governing discussion in the different communities. Furthermore, no distinct sentiment (positive, negative, neutral) was associated with any specific community. From this, our analysis of the data suggests that personal experiences of loot boxes are not determined by factors such as race, gender, or sexuality.

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## NOTES

1. r/GamerGhazi presents its purpose as where “diversity and geek culture collide”.
2. r/SRSGaming presents its purpose as “a place to post cool and interesting pictures, videos, articles, and other things about games and gaming. Pretend it’s like r/gaming except not shit and awful.”
3. While legal definitions of gambling vary between jurisdictions, the potential prize is predominantly quantified in terms of real-world money, or “money’s worth”. See Macey and Hamari (2019) for an overview of the legal situation regarding loot boxes.
4. A notable exception is that of the Isle of Man whose regulators include virtual items in their definition of “money, or money’s worth” (Isle of Man Gambling Supervision Commission 2019).

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