

# The Convergence of Gaming and Gambling Research: What Can We Learn from Each Other?

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the long-policed boundaries of games is their distinction from gambling: In modern Western societies, gambling figures as an adult, risky, even immoral and potentially ruinous Other to gaming (Reith, 1999; Humphreys, 2010; Vimes & Linders, 2016). This distinction between gaming and gambling is being reproduced not only in law and everyday practice, but also in scholarship. For although both game studies and gambling studies can point to long (and partially shared) prehistories, from Goffman (1961, 1967) to Caillois (2001/1961) and beyond, they today form distinct fields that rarely exchange personnel, citations, data, theory, or methods: Even the most cursory reading shows that authors publishing in the *Journal of Gambling Studies*, *International Gambling Studies*, *Critical Gambling Studies*, or *Journal of Gambling Issues* are barely aware of authors publishing in *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*, *Entertainment Computing*, or *ToDiGRA* – and vice versa. Where gambling studies recruits scholars with medical, criminological, epidemiological, or legal backgrounds, game studies mobilize media and cultural studies, media psychology, media history, design, or human-computer interaction. Anthropologists like Natasha Dow Schüll (2012) or Thomas M. Malaby (2003) mark the exception that proves the rule. This disconnect is all the more regrettable as both fields tackle many similar if not identical topics: the design and appeal of uncertainty (Linnet et al., 2013; Costykian, 2013) and its link to immersion or flow (Cairns, Cox & Nordin, 2014; Schüll, 2012); ‘dark’ or ‘disordered’ forms of play (Mortensen, Brown, & Linderroth, 2015; Aarseth et al., 2017; Shaffer & Martin, 2010); the morality of monetization forms (Black & Ramsay, 2003; Neely, 2019); or the analysis of particular game elements and their motivational appeal (Wood et al., 2004; Deterding et al., 2011).

In recent years, researchers and the media observe a *convergence of gaming and gambling* (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010; Zendle & Bowden-Jones, 2019; Gainsbury, 2019): On the one hand, we find video gaming phenomena like simulated gambling games, loot drops, loot boxes, or cryptocurrency games which share several features with gambling (Karlsen, 2013; Scholten et al., 2019; Nielsen & Grabarczyk, 2019). On the other, we see the rise of skill-based games with attached financial bets and payouts, such as Esports betting, daily fantasy sports, or skill-based gambling offered by casinos and online sites to appeal to younger audiences (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Wardle, 2019; Delfabbro, King & Gainsbury, 2019). These convergent phenomena not only raise concerns that they may pose gambling-like risks of harm or serve as a normalizing ‘gateway drug’ to gambling ‘proper.’ They also provide a particularly opportune historical moment for the convergence of gaming and gambling *research*. Gaming-gambling convergence, we believe, poses a valuable boundary object (Leigh Star, 2010) to start a dialogue between game and gambling researchers, probing where and how we may benefit from each other’s insights.

## PANEL CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

To initiate this dialogue, this panel assembles scholars from gaming and gambling research that have variously crossed the two fields or dealt with gaming-gambling convergence. Each panelist will use previous or ongoing research to reflect on lessons learned from engaging with the objects and literatures of the other side, and highlight opportunities and needs for future knowledge exchange. Panelist presentations will be bookended by a brief introduction and longer structured discussion teasing out takeaways and pointers for the DiGRA community.

The panel will be opened by Sebastian Deterding. His talk ‘Stop asking, “Is it gambling?”’ traces the parallel attempts of gambling and gaming research to isolate the ‘active ingredients’ of games under the banners of psycho-structural elements and game design elements. Provided they overcome their shared weaknesses, Deterding argues, these research strands promise a more productive and joint framework for research and

regulation than the currently prevalent question ‘Is X gambling?’ He is followed by Heather Wardle’s talk ‘Power, exploitation and extraction’, in which she unpacks some of the underlying drivers of public concern about gambling-like mechanics in games. She suggests that these drivers could be understood as changes in the social processes governing our perceptions of play, and corporations role in them. Next, Torill Mortensen will explore ‘Moneygaming from the eyes of the gamer.’ In analysing the Nordic model of moneygaming and its state regulation, exemplified by Norsk Tipping, she discusses how game scholarship can support understanding, developing and also regulating gambling. In ‘Gamblers do gambling,’ Joseph Macey examines how different elements of contemporary gaming culture manifest in emergent gambling media, while cognitive frames regarding gambling differ between gamers and gamblers. Then, David Zendle will talk about ‘Soft power and the perception of trustworthiness in video gaming and gambling research’. He will discuss how gambling researchers engage with industry bodies during their research, and the effects that this involvement has on the perceived trustworthiness of research outputs. He will then describe similar processes at work in the video game research community, and suggest practical ways that we can avoid the perception of bias or corruption when involving industry in our work. Faltin Karlsen will close with ‘From slot machines to snapchat,’ broadening the discussion from gambling and games to the increasing skepticism about how digital media manipulate users through luring design techniques. Karlsen will discuss what values and norms are engaged when people use or turn away from technology they find invading.

## BIOGRAPHIES

Sebastian Deterding is a Reader in Digital Creativity at the University of York. He is co-editor of *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (2015), *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach* (2018), and founder of the Gamification Research Network. His research and practice in gamification, game design, and interaction design focus wellbeing-driven experience design: how particular design features and methods can afford engaging experiences that are ethically responsible and support human flourishing.

Torill Elvira Mortensen is Associate Professor at the IT University of Copenhagen. She was on the board of Norsk Tipping from 2011 – 2015, appointed by the Norwegian Minister of Culture on strength of her game research. Mortensen has studied games since 1997, has been a member of the DiGRA board, and has served as program chair for two DiGRA conferences (2018 and 2019). She has recently published *The Paradox of Transgression* with Kristine Jørgensen (2020), and studies games and player practices through ethnography, textual analysis and online participation in discussions and play, currently focusing on the emotional aspect of player experiences.

Faltin Karlsen is professor of media studies at Kristiania University College. He conducts research on media users, computer games and game culture with special attention to public discourses about media effects and questions concerning media violence, problem gaming and people opting out of digital media. He has co-edited (with Kristine Jørgensen) the anthology *Transgression in Games and Play* (2018) and has written the book *A World of Excesses: Online Games and Excessive Playing* (2013). He is currently member of the project Digitox, which conducts research on disconnection and ambivalence towards digital media.

Joseph Macey is a Doctoral Researcher at the Gamification Group, Tampere University, whose work focuses on the phenomenon of video game-related gambling, his wider research interests include problematic media consumption, cognitive biases of media users, esports, digital economies and virtual items. He has been a regular advisor to the Finnish Gambling Administration (Arpajaishallinto), and has been an

invited Keynote Speaker at the Gambling Regulators of Europe Forum 2018 and at the pre-conference seminar of the 2019 Nordic Society Foundation for Information about Problem Gambling Conference. He has presented at national charitable organizations, while also speaking at seminars for teachers, social workers and other education professionals.

Heather Wardle, based at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, is a Wellcome Humanities and Social Science Research Fellow looking at youth gambling behavior and its relationship with technological change. She is a specialist in researching gambling behavior and policy and is interested in the intersection between gambling and games, and young people's perceptions of this. She is Deputy Chair of the Advisory Board on Safer Gambling, providing policy advice on gambling to the UK government.

David Zendle is an expert on the convergence of video games and gambling, and is the lead author of several key references on the topic of loot boxes. Dr. Zendle has provided oral testimony to a variety of government investigations into video game effects, including the FTC public workshop on loot boxes in the USA; the Australian Senate Inquiry into chance-based microtransactions; and the recent UK DCMS Select Committee Inquiry into Immersive and Addictive Technologies. His research was extensively cited in the findings of this inquiry, which recommended the regulation of loot boxes as a form of gambling. He continues to actively contribute to discussions regarding video game policy across the globe.

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