

# It all starts with a name

## Mapping the terms used by researchers to describe gambling-like elements in digital games

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Gambling-like elements in videogames have been raising much scholarly attention. A wide range of disciplines have begun studying hybrid products and practices between gaming and gambling: media and advertising studies, game studies, psychology, legal research, design, pedagogy, prevention studies, etc. In addition to this disciplinary diversity, researchers' orientations vary on a spectrum ranging from a focus on (especially young) consumers' protection against potentially harmful content and gambling addiction (for example Drummond, & Sauer 2018) to a rather descriptive approach seeing "gamblification" (Brock, & Johnson 2021) or "gamble-play" (Albarran-Torres 2018) as a shift within game culture.

While this conceptual broadness testifies to the numerous cultural, economic and behavioral implications of gambling-like design in videogames, the diversity of perspectives and discourses makes the field of research fuzzy and hard to grasp. It yields, for example, uncertainties about which phenomena must be considered and which ones excluded when we speak about products situated at the blurring demarcation lines between different types of media, and between gaming and gambling in particular (Brock, & Johnson 2021: 3—4). Following Gainsbury et al., we believe that "one of the current limitations in the field is a lack of consistent *terminology* used by researchers, policymakers and regulators, the gambling and gaming industries, treatment providers and consumers" (2015: 198, our emphasis).

The issue of naming and defining "gambling-like" (King, Delfabbro, & Griffith, 2010) elements is central, because coining a name or definition (or choosing among

already existing ones) often implies making an explicit or implicit stand about whether such gambling-like design is societally acceptable, and which sociopolitical treatment they deserve (see Albarran-Torres 2018: 41). Moreover, the process of naming intersects with numerous other dynamics that influence the treatment and understanding of gambling-like elements in digital games: local and cultural variation in their expression, for example, are easily overlooked because of unequal access to publication or language and visibility biases. Some better-known examples of this diversity, such as the concept of “gacha” in Japan (Koeder, Tanaka, & Mitomo 2018), let us expect that local dynamics play an important role in shaping practices and their societal acceptance. We also expect differences in topic treatment between research fields, as well as between industry-financed and publicly (or independently) funded research, especially in a field traversed by so many conflicting interests (cultural, economic, medical and legal).

## METHOD

To unravel this complexity and illuminate the discursive power of the concepts used to refer to gambling-like elements in digital games, we will conduct a terminology mapping survey among gaming and gambling scholarly specialists. Our study consists of three parts: (1) a literature review, (2) the identification of relevant experts, and (3) a survey.

1. As a first step, cross-disciplinary literature review (see list in annex) was conducted to identify the terms used by specialists to name gambling-like elements in videogames. This resulted in a list of 313 word or word groups, which was subsequently narrowed down to 32 relevant expressions (through grouping similar terms and eliminating too narrow designations).
2. As part of our future steps, we will run a systematic database research on the concomitant use of the terms “gaming” and “gambling”. The sampling strategy is threefold. First, we rely on strategic sampling criteria for the inclusion of meaningful experts, including continent and language, private vs. public research, research field as determined by the journal, and researchers’ seniority level. Second, convenience sample criteria also play a role as we had to limit ourselves to scholars having at least a passive understanding of English, and whose research is indexed in the databases which we search. Third, we will proceed by phased snowballing sampling (adapted from Christopoulos 2009) to identify additional experts and potential clusters among our experts’ sample.
3. Finally, we will then send an electronic Qualtrics survey to each expert by e-mail, containing questions about phenomena mixing gaming and gambling, and based on the expressions gathered through prior research.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Our questionnaire (in English) will contain:

- a naming task confronting gaming and gambling specialists with visual and textual examples of phenomena mixing gaming and gambling
  - example of phrasing: *Please take some time to observe the following screenshot that will show a situation or a product displaying characteristics of both gaming and gambling*

activities.

*Which word or expression would you use to name it?*

*Do you use alternative names for it? If so, please mention them.*

*Are you aware of words or expressions which other researchers use to name it? If so, please mention them.*

- open questions inviting our respondents to add names and words that they link with phenomena at the intersection of gaming and gambling
  - Example: *In the previous question, you have been shown elements that revolve around digital games elements that have one or more features, connotations or dynamics akin or close to gambling. If you agree, can you explain that a bit further? Which other feelings, opinions, expressions do come to your mind when this topic is evoked?*
- a familiarity task presenting a list of expressions (from our literature review) and asking how familiar they are to respondents
  - Example: *Now we would like to present you a list of words or expressions related to such elements that can be situated at the convergence of gaming and gambling. For each item we will question the extent to which you are familiar with them.*
    - *Word 1 + Likert-scale from “very unfamiliar” to “very familiar”*
- a definition task about concepts from the literature review
  - Example: *Define in your own words the following concepts. Note that there is no correct or wrong answer, all we want to know is your personal definitions or description.*
- an open question asking if participants thought of other terms related to gaming and gambling while filling the survey, especially in languages other than English
  - Example: *This survey concerned elements at the intersection between gaming and gambling. Now that you have filled in the survey, are there other words, expressions or concepts that you have not mentioned before and wish to add? We are, for example, interested in words used in other languages than English or references to non-Western cultural entertainment products.*
- a question relating to the experts' attitude (from “very negative” to “very positive” and open ‘why’ answer) towards the phenomena described in the survey
  - Example: *In general, how would you consider your attitude towards products mixing gaming and gambling?*
    - *Slider from “very negative” to “very positive”*
    - *Why so?*

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

After collecting the results, we will analyze them qualitatively (through inductive, computer-assisted category-building for the analysis of textual material, and visual semiotics for the comparison between visual prompts and namings), and map the global, local and peer-group related trends in the naming, definition and assessment of gambling-like elements. Conclusively, we aim to highlight the conceptual gaps within the scientific community, as well as paths towards more interdisciplinary and

interculturally cross-comprehension in research on gambling-like elements in videogames.

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