

What did players think about Belgium's 'ban' on loot boxes?

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INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract explores the 'limits' of legally permitted gameplay and game production in relation to gambling-like products within video games: specifically, how the Belgian 'ban' on paid loot boxes has affected players' gameplay experience.

Loot boxes are products in video games that players can buy with real-world money to obtain random rewards. Many have argued that loot boxes are conceptually and structurally similar to traditional gambling (Drummond and Sauer 2018; Schwidessen and Karius 2018). Loot box purchasing has been linked to problem gambling (Zendle and Cairns 2018): suggesting that companies are disproportionately profiting from vulnerable players experiencing gambling harms (Close et al. 2021). Many countries have considered or are currently considering regulating loot boxes. By enforcing pre-existing gambling law, Belgium became the first and presently only country in that world that has 'banned' all loot boxes that require the player to spend real-world money to engage and provide random rewards (Xiao 2023).

Loot box regulation, either by law or industry self-regulation, such as probability disclosure requirements, has generally been poorly complied with by companies (e.g. Xiao et al. 2021; Xiao, Henderson, and Newall 2021). Specifically in relation to the Belgian 'ban' on loot boxes, Xiao (2023) found that 82% of the 100 highest-grossing iPhone games on the Belgian Apple App Store were still relying on loot boxes to monetise in mid-2022. The Belgian gambling regulator has not effectively enforced the law due to a lack of funding and practical complexities with attempting to monitor over 1 million games on just the Apple App Store alone, as publicly admitted by the Belgian Minister of Justice (Ramboer 2022) following the publication of Xiao (2023).

However, analysing whether games continued to contain loot boxes is only one way of assessing the situation. In particular, Xiao (2023) did not consider how players interacted with the ban. Two unique games (*Governor of Poker 3 - Friends* (Youda Games & Azerion 2016) and *DRAGON BALL Z DOKKAN BATTLE* (Akatsuki & Bandai Namco Entertainment 2015)) were identified by Xiao (2023) as having taken technical measures to prevent Belgian players from purchasing loot boxes through an

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IP check, rather than being removed. Xiao (2023) found that players can easily circumvent such technical measures by using a VPN (Virtual Private Network) to change their IP address to be outside of Belgium. However, preliminary analysis of a few user reviews left by players on the Belgian Apple App Store pages for these two games suggested that some Belgian players *have* been effectively prevented from purchasing loot boxes and how their gameplay experience has been consequently affected. In relation to loot boxes offering gameplay advantages (see Brock and Johnson 2021), a restrictive approach to spending is likely to unbalance the playing field even further, particularly among competitive players and professional eSporters.

The two following research questions (RQ) are addressed:

RQ1: What are (Belgian) players' opinions regarding state regulation of loot boxes?

RQ2: How has the Belgian 'ban' on loot boxes affected Belgian players' gameplay experience of games affected by the ban?

METHOD

For the present study, all user reviews in all languages left on the Belgian Apple App Store for the two identified games since the official imposition of the Belgian ban in April 2018 were scraped on 26 September 2022 ($n = \sim 100$). These will be translated as needed and used to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) will be used to identify emergent themes relating to how players have experienced these two games in the unique Belgian regulatory and game production context.

To further bolster the present study's analysis, Reddit comments ($n = \sim 400$) relating to the Belgian ban following the publication of Xiao (2022) and viral media reporting thereof in over 50 outlets and 15 different languages (*e.g.*, GamesIndustry.biz, GameSpot, Kotaku, Eurogamer, Game Developer, NME) will be similarly analysed to gauge players' opinions on the regulation of loot boxes beyond Belgium. Specifically, ALL comments left on the following threads will be analysed:

- (i) the main thread discussing Xiao (2022) on Reddit (https://www.reddit.com/r/pcgaming/comments/whofi9/new_study_finds_belgiums_loot_box_ban_is_barely/);
- (ii) the main thread discussing how *Roblox* (2006, Roblox Corporation) has commenced a 'Roblox-led program' to get third-party user generated content containing loot boxes on its platform to comply with Belgian law through removal from the country (https://www.reddit.com/r/roblox/comments/xdkw3a/yo_wait_what_since_when_does_this_exist_why_would/); and
- (iii) the main thread discussing how *eFootball* (2022, Konami) apologised to Belgian players for selling loot boxes to them 'erroneously' (https://www.reddit.com/r/eFootball/comments/yno8rh/im_furious_i_have_been_playing_pesefootball_for/).

IMPLICATIONS

These datasets will provide natural, unprompted and ecologically valid data sourced directly from the fieldsite (Petrovskaya, Deterding, and Zendle 2022) and will shed light on players' opinions on the Belgian ban on loot boxes; its poor enforcement; and the possibility of circumventing, 'counterplaying' against (Meades 2015), or 'transgressively playing' the ban (Aarseth 2007).

The Belgian ban on loot boxes has been criticised for unfairly restricting adults from purchasing loot boxes because regulated traditional gambling is permitted for adults and yet loot boxes cannot be licensed under existing law and therefore are illegal *in all cases*. The present study considers how Belgian players felt and reacted when their video game play and spending were ‘limited.’ Beyond just the loot box context, insights will be provided for policymakers in Belgium and other countries as to whether certain restrictive measures in relation to video games (such as restrictions of gameplay time and in-game spending, as imposed by China in relation to underage players (Xiao 2022)) will be deemed acceptable by players. If many players do express negative opinions, then countries should consider potentially amending existing measures to make them less restrictive, and other countries should consider the counterarguments against imposing restrictive measures (despite their potential consumer protection benefits) and be willing to balance the interests of all stakeholders (players’ consumer protection needs and companies’ commercial interests) and perhaps be dissuaded from implementing them.

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