

“It's a real con”: Parent Attitudes Toward Children’s Game Spending

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INTRODUCTION

Mainstream discussions about children’s digital play are dominated by concerned parents, media panic and cautious policymakers, and there is a tendency to pathologise children and the media they engage with, ultimately politicising childhood play (Carter et al. 2020; Grimes, 2021). Concerns around children’s digital play often focus on excessive screentime (Cover, 2006), ‘addiction’ (Carter et al. 2020; Mavoa et al. 2017) and gambling (Kristiansen & Severin 2020; Zendle et al. 2019). Increasingly, game monetisation is at the forefront of this debate, with game developers frequently derided as predatory and manipulating naive child users into spending money (Four Corners 2021; Latham 2023).

In response to these parental concerns, children’s digital play is increasingly being regulated. There are global regulatory shifts mandating “safety by design”, such as the UK’s *2023 Online Safety Act* and the proposed *Kids Online Safety Act* in the US which impose a duty of care on online service providers, such as digital game developers and platforms, to ensure that their services do not harm children. However, other emerging regulatory approaches – such as Australia’s 2024 social media ban (which bans users under the age of 16 from social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) – threaten to constrain children’s digital play entirely (e.g. see calls to ban Roblox for U16 in Australia, Thomas-Sam, 2024). The contested landscape of game monetisation is thus central territory for understanding and protecting children’s digital gameworlds (Giddings, 2016).

We argue that in order for researchers to intervene in these debates, a deeper understanding of parental concerns and attitudes are critical. Media panics are rarely entirely made up: as Buckingham and Jensen note, “there has to be a core of plausibility if the panic is to be believed and win support” (p. 418). This can quickly be located in how many freemium games rely on excessive spending from a small percentage of players (Zendle et al. 2023), but not all spending on games is harmful or problematic. Our work thus builds upon prior studies of parental attitudes toward children’s gameplay (e.g. Mavoa et al. 2017) by focusing on parental attitudes toward

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microtransactions, which have transformed the financial character of children's digital play.

In this presentation, we will present the results from semi-structured interviews with 18 parents and 22 children (14 male, 7 female, 1 non-binary aged 7-13) across 16 families in Melbourne, Australia. The interviews with parents explored parental attitudes towards game monetisation, and their approaches toward navigating their child's in-game spending. Most of these children (17/22) were regularly playing Roblox, reflecting how in August 2024, 42% of Roblox's 380 million global users were under the age of 13 (Ball 2024).

We found parents' attitudes toward their children's in-game spending aligned with common media panic tropes (Leick, 2018) and popular discourse around gambling and addiction. There was a sense among parents that game developers are "unethical" or "villains" whose goal is to manipulate children into spending money. Alongside the use of algorithms and deceptive virtual currencies, in-game spending features such as lootboxes were of particular concern to parents, which were believed to to normalise gambling by child users (for which there is emerging evidence; Wardle & Zendle, 2021). However, we also found that family conflict centrally emerged around conflicting attitudes towards the 'value' of digital items, a concern not rooted in children's experiences of harm. Some parents felt that they did not understand the appeal of purchasing in-game items, explaining that digital items feel less "real" than physical items and are a "waste of money". These perceptions of value were further influenced by parents' cost of living concerns, with one parent explaining, "It all adds up." In contrast, children offered sophisticated rationale for the 'value' to them of these purchases, often pointing toward social and self-esteem benefits.

These findings advance our understanding of the concerns and conflicts that are driving the global media panic about digital game monetisation. While addressing concerns around harmful in-game spending features such as lootboxes, virtual currencies and "dark design" patterns (Zagal et al. 2013) is vital, this should not be led by parental anxieties but based on children's actual experiences playing games. In order to best support children's digital play, future research and policy interventions should not conflate parental concerns regarding gambling features and deceptive mechanics (for which there is a basis for genuine concern, see Wardle & Zendle, 2021; Grimes et. al. 2023; Mills et al. 2024; Hardwick et al. 2025) with misunderstandings by parents of the social and cultural value to children of in-game purchases. Doing so will maximize opportunities for children's digital play while also minimizing harms.

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