

From Gambling to Gam(bl)ing: Population-Level Evidence of Changing Play Cultures in Finland

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INTRODUCTION

Research on the convergence of gambling and digital gaming has largely focused on specific gambling-like products, such as loot boxes (Zendle & Bowden-Jones 2019), skin gambling (Macey & Hamari 2019), and social casino games (Gainsbury et al. 2016), and on their associations with gambling-related harm and problematic gaming (Derevensky & Griffiths 2019; King et al. 2015; Siste et al. 2025). Recent reviews have also emphasized the need for more longitudinal evidence and broader conceptual approaches to understand how gambling and gaming are becoming intertwined (Kim & King 2020; Siste et al. 2025; Hing et al. 2025). However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to whether the convergence between gambling and gaming is accompanied by wider changes in population-level participation patterns and gaming cultures.

This paper argues that the Finnish case suggests a broader transformation than merely the emergence of gambling-like mechanics in digital games. Over the last decade, Finland has witnessed a significant shift in the centre of gravity of monetized play. Traditional gambling participation has declined, digital gaming has become increasingly widespread, and new forms of gambling-like digital play have simultaneously become normalized (Kinnunen et al. 2018; Kinnunen et al. 2024). Rather than examining gambling and gaming as separate activities with increasingly blurred boundaries, we suggest that they should be understood as interconnected forms of monetized play characterized by fluid boundaries between currencies, risks, rewards, and meanings.

The analysis draws on the Finnish Player Barometer studies; nationally representative surveys conducted regularly between 2009 and 2024 (see Kinnunen et al. 2024). The surveys cover participation in digital games, gambling, esports, social casino games, loot box purchasing, and monetary spending on digital gaming among other things. The Finnish data reveal a remarkable long-term trend. Prior to 2015, gambling participation was more prevalent than digital gaming participation. In 2015, the prevalence of these activities reached near parity: 75.9% of Finns aged 10–75 had gambled at least occasionally, while 75.0% had played digital games. After this turning point, digital gaming overtook gambling and the gap has widened steadily. By 2024, 81.1% of Finns played digital games at least occasionally, whereas only 64.0% participated in gambling (Kinnunen et al. 2024).

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At the same time, monetized forms of digital play have become increasingly common (Kinnunen 2020). In Finland, 8.0% of the population report spending money on loot boxes and 5.8% report playing social casino games. The prevalence of loot box spending already exceeds participation in some traditional forms of gambling, such as horse race betting (6.3%) (Kinnunen et al. 2024). Although traditional lotteries, sports betting, and casino-style gambling remain more common overall, these findings suggest that gambling-like forms of digital play are no longer marginal phenomena but have become part of mainstream gaming culture.

From the perspective of cultural game studies and interpretivist gambling studies, these developments cannot be understood solely through prevalence estimates or by asking whether particular products meet legal definitions of gambling. Games and gambling are socio-cultural practices embedded in changing technological, economic, and regulatory contexts. The meanings attached to money, currencies, rewards, and risk are also changing (Kinnunen 2026). Digital games increasingly employ multiple currencies, microtransactions, random reward mechanisms, and virtual goods that possess both symbolic and, in some cases, monetary value (Luton 2013; Wardle 2019; Kinnunen 2020). Consequently, distinctions between “real money,” “play money,” and “in-game currencies” have become increasingly difficult to maintain analytically (Kinnunen et al. 2016; Kinnunen 2026).

The Finnish evidence therefore points towards a broader reorganization of play cultures. The issue is not simply that gambling mechanics have entered digital games or that the boundaries between gambling and gaming are becoming blurred. Rather, the relative importance of different forms of monetized play appears to be changing at the population level. The centre of gravity of participation has shifted from traditional gambling towards digital gaming environments that increasingly incorporate gambling-like practices and monetization strategies.

This finding has important implications for research, regulation, and harm prevention. Existing policy frameworks often treat gambling and digital gaming as separate domains governed by different conceptual, regulatory, and institutional arrangements. However, emerging international research increasingly recognizes that gambling-like gaming and gaming-like gambling form a rapidly evolving ecosystem that may expose players to novel forms of risk and harm (Siste et al. 2025; Hing et al. 2025; Mattinen et al. 2025). The Finnish case suggests that understanding these developments requires moving beyond individual products, such as loot boxes, and towards analyses of broader cultural transformations in monetized play.

By combining long-term population-level evidence with perspectives from cultural game studies and gambling studies, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on gaming-gambling, or gam(bl)ing, convergence by demonstrating that changes in participation patterns themselves deserve greater theoretical and policy attention. Finland may offer an early indication of how gaming cultures evolve when traditional gambling declines while digital gaming and gambling-like forms of monetized play become increasingly central features of everyday play.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIO

Jani Kinnunen (PhD, MSocSci) is a researcher in Tampere University, Finland. His research has focused on blurring lines between gambling and digital gaming and how money and other game-related currencies influence players' experiences.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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