

Edging the Max Win: Loot Box Practices of Popular Live Streamers

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Keywords

Loot boxes, live streaming, Counter-Strike 2, skins, gamble-play

INTRODUCTION

On February 25, 2026, New York's attorney general Letitia James sued Valve Corporation (Valve) for 'illegally promoting gambling through video games popular with children and teenagers' (James 2026, para. 1), emphasising how the loot box system – where players pay for a chance, represented through a spinning carousel on screen, to receive a rare virtual cosmetic item – in games such as *Counter-Strike 2* (Valve 2023) and *Dota 2* (Valve 2013) resembled those of slot machines. Of the games named, *Counter-Strike 2* was positioned as especially notorious because of the sheer value of its loot box system, with some cosmetic items priced in the hundreds of thousands and a rare few in the millions (SteamAnalyst 2026). Valve introduced a change to *Counter-Strike 2*'s loot box system a month later (CS2 2026), forcing players in Germany to use the new 'X-ray Scanner' feature to reveal the item they would receive from the loot box before opening it. These recent events come in the wake of a rapidly growing body of research highlighting both the presence of loot box systems in video game monetisation (Hong 2019; Zendle, Meyer, and Ballou 2020) and its relationship with the problematic consequences of gambling, or problem gambling (Gibson et al. 2022; Zendle and Cairns 2018; Brooks and Clark 2019). Furthermore, the game's historic ties with practices such as betting cosmetics on match outcomes (Holden and Ehrlich 2017; Greer et al. 2019; Abarbanel and Johnson 2019) reveal how, despite attempts at regulation and increased awareness of risks, gambling remains core to the game's culture. Attempts to address these trends must therefore also understand how gambling has become normalised in gaming cultures.

This paper draws on an ongoing ethnographic project examining the use of humour by live streamers and their communities on the live streaming platform Twitch to argue that the cultural practices established by live streamers significantly contribute to the treatment of gambling as a form of play. The project involves three hundred hours of observation across ten popular live streamer case studies. The ten live streamers were selected from an original group of sixty observed live streamers based on the types of jokes used within the communities; tools such as Twitch's 'Browse' feature and TwitchTracker were used to select live select live streamers that had established communities (viewer counts in the thousands to tens of thousands, see (Conde and Casais 2023) across different types of content. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of this data revealed that, when engaging in loot box mechanisms, live streamers foregrounded experiences of community and dramatic narratives over the monetary consequences of their gambling. These practices aligned with gamble-play

mechanisms – features that emphasise experiences of fun over monetary gain – that have been increasingly incorporated across media and games, regardless of whether they have been explicitly marketed as ‘gambling’ (Ross and Nieborg 2021; Zaucha and Agur 2025; Albarrán-Torres 2018). They demonstrated the extent to which these mechanisms, originating as design features, had become normalised as cultural practice; furthermore, these live streamers evidenced how these practices might be intertwined with existing game cultures, establishing a frictionless pipeline from playing games as a social experience to engaging in gambling and potentially problem gambling also as a social experience.

To demonstrate how live streamers might enshrine gamble-play as a cultural practice in addition to a design mechanism, I present one specific case study, the *Counter-Strike 2* live streamer ohnePixel. With a seven-day average of over a hundred thousand live stream viewers at the time of writing (TwitchTracker n.d.), ohnePixel regularly engages with not only the game’s loot box system, but also its similar, gambling-esque ‘trade-up’ (Demirkol 2025) and ‘terminal’ (Mnmzzz 2025) systems. Throughout this content, ohnePixel establishes specific rituals that dramaticise his own gambling for comedic effect. When combined with how this content is integrated into his own gameplay and commentary on competitive tournaments, ohnePixel evidences how the blurring of gambling and play is enacted on a cultural, as well as technological, scale. That ohnePixel is known primarily as a *Counter-Strike 2* live streamer provides additional nuance to existing research studying gambling-specific live streamers (Hughes et al. 2025; Koncz et al. 2023), revealing an overlooked area where gambling might be normalised under the broader umbrella of play-based entertainment. Such a trend coincides with gambling’s entanglement with physical, product-based consumerism, such as in blind boxes (Xiao 2022), suggesting that the merging of play and gambling across culture is allowing for the unfettered proliferation of problematic gambling mechanisms. Although play’s exploitation by corporations has been previously explored on a broader scale (Sicart 2026), this paper provides an account of how this process is enacted within specific community contexts while also demonstrating how such an approach can elucidate why gambling mechanisms continue to persevere in spite of regulatory efforts.

BIO

Geoffrey Lee is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney’s Department of Media and Communications and member of the Sydney Games and Play Lab. His thesis will explore the use of humour by live streamers and their communities on Twitch, with research interests more broadly in the intersection of live streaming, platform studies, and gaming cultures.

FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (project identifier 2024/HE001163) on March 3, 2025, with a later amendment approved on May 20, 2025.

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