From Games to Gambling

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Salvation exists in the form of a screen; hope, as a luck of the draw. In a world full of endless demons and stresses, who could blame someone for retreating into an otherworldly escape? Who could blame someone for spending a few dollars to achieve their wildest dreams? Except, just like the terrifying reality, virtual dreams get more and more expensive. Suddenly, it is impossible to scrape by on luck alone — one must buy the way to paradise. It is too much. Many hesitate, but they have come so far: they have invested their lifeblood into this private respite. To them, it is worth saving no matter the cost. Thus, people pay-to-pay, infected by the gacha parasite. Gacha games, which exploded in popularity in the fall of 2020 with the release of Genshin Impact, hinge on luck and microtransactions to make a profit. Players either gamble for numerous rewards, or pay to win. Combined with an epidemic of internet addiction, gacha games have since 1997 lured millions of vulnerable players into an endless cycle of extortion. To increase playtime and profit, numerous games have employed ulterior strategies to hook more players. Although evidence is lacking regarding a corporation's intent to cause a gambling addiction within its users, gacha games prey on users prone to gambling addiction, establish an emotional dependency between game and user, and exploit these vulnerable users to extort money, leading to dangerous behaviours associated with gambling addiction.

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1 Internet Gambling Disorder(IGD)

In order to maximize profits, corporations target people most susceptible to the gacha gambling scheme. The most vulnerable demographic, therefore, are people with Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD), a psychological disorder that causes people to turn towards the internet as an escape from their daily lives and therefore cannot wrench free from the screen's grasp. This addiction makes these users the prime target of gacha games, as significant correlations connect those with IGD and Gambling Addiction (GD)[2]. For example, McBride and Derevensky's study proves that gamblers are "more likely to purchase microtransactions," and gamers are more likely to develop gambling addictions[2]. Corporations, therefore, can exploit the dangerous connection between gamers and gambling to drive their users to begin gambling. While Barrita et al. concede that data surrounding gacha games is insufficient due to gacha games' relatively new popularity, connections between microtransactions and gambling still exist, and are even magnified by gacha's inherent gambling qualities[2]. In addition, both problem gamers and gamblers exhibit the same patterns of impulsivity, reward sensitivity, and need for instant gratification[1], cementing the link between the two demographics and increasing gamers' vulnerability through drawing upon these patterns. For example, psychologists Michela Balconi and Roberta Finocchiaro proved an increased response to stimuli regarding gambling within video games, especially for rewards[1]. People with IGD have impaired self-control and cannot self-regulate their playing or gambling due to an "inability to control the impulsive response"[1]. In conclusion, people with IGD physically cannot stop themselves from playing, which makes them easier to exploit, especially since IGD has been linked to problematic gambling. By manipulating this increased response, corporations can induce their users to both play and pay more.

The inherent interconnection between the internet and gambling further lures players into addiction, as the internet has facilitated the spread of online gambling. For example, Brosowski et al. lament that the lack of restrictions on the internet exposes young people, the most vulnerable demographic, to both gambling-related issues and internet addiction[3]. For example, 32% of teenagers gambled electronically, and 20% gambled through video games[3]. The high overlap between children, people with addiction, and gambling allows companies to easily prey on these demographics. Following the integration between the internet and gambling, the gaming and gambling industries are be-

coming "increasingly harder to distinguish from one another"[2]. For example, casinos and gambling simulators have become staples of the gaming world with disastrous consequences: "consumption of... simulated internet gambling... represents a significant predictor [of gambling]"[3]. Simulated gambling leads to two-thirds of young users transitioning to actual gambling[3], which Barrita et al. corroborate with a study stating over 20% of simulated gamblers become real gamblers[3]. Corporations easily invite users to begin gambling in earnest through simulations. Furthermore, this sinister graduation to real purchases has terrifying impacts on the young victims, with many gambling away their life savings. For instance, one woman spent $400,000 on Big Fish Casino alone[2]. Furthermore, people with IGD both spend large amounts of money on microtransactions and "report more problems associated with gambling,"[2] proving that it is easier to prey on people with IGD. The two are inexplicably linked, as there exists a "strong mutual association between IGD and GD"[2]. This interconnection allows gacha games to systematically prey on those most vulnerable due to their addiction-inducing measures.

2 Corporate Weaponization of Loot Boxes

Corporations weaponize loot boxes (randomized rewards) to prey upon problematic gambling behaviors. Loot boxes' benefits have been well-documented: Activision has made over 14 billion dollars, over half its income, through microtransactions [5], and in the general gaming world, microtransactions account for "[4] out of every [5 dollars] made in the entire digital game market"[2]. Furthermore, microtransaction rates show both "positive associat[ion]" with increased playtimes and "[predict] future gambling engagement"[2]. Since microtransactions correlate to increased playtime and profit, companies prey upon the connections between GD and IGD to manipulate users into developing a gambling addiction. People, however, have caught onto the dangers of microtransactions. The subject of much controversy, loot boxes' "important structural and psychological similarities with gambling" has been the cause of much concern[4]. Because loot boxes are unlimited in supply and require no skill to obtain, critics argue that they "represent a unique form of unregulated gambling"[2]. In response, Belgium has already banned loot boxes due to the danger they pose[5] and Japan, one of the leading producers of gacha games, has debated banning them as well. Furthermore, loot boxes have been described as a "ripe breed-

ing ground for problem gambling" due to its connection to gambling, making them the perfect method of exploiting vulnerable users[4]. Loot boxes also have detrimental effects on gamers, as "higher spending rates on loot boxes is positively associated with problematic gaming and gambling engagement"[2]. Cairns and Zendle also picture the strong correlation between gambling and loot boxes, with no distinction between the spending of problem gamblers and causal gamblers[4]. Although Cairns and Zendle concede the study's nature may have influenced this statistic, the gacha scheme equally targets everyone. Since loot boxes increase profits, companies induce dangerous addictions through loot boxes to make money. This method works since loot boxes simulate gambling: rewarding these gambles with better weapons or characters allows corporations to reward "purchasing behaviors over skillful or strategic play" and make loot boxes essential[5]. Users, therefore, feel compelled to buy loot boxes to advance in the game, no matter how abysmal the rates are. For example, in Genshin Impact, the rare characters only have a 0.6% chance of dropping[6]. To further drive users into despair, the material used to roll for characters has a daily limit, which stops users from obtaining items for their adventure — unless they pay. Corporations lure users with a compelling free game, then increase the difficulty until it becomes impossible to win without paying. The games' design forces users into a gambling corner. Corporations encourage detrimental gaming and gambling habits through loot boxes, thus exacerbating both IGD and GD to make profits.

3 Other Targeting Strategies

Corporations utilize numerous strategies to extort as much profit as possible from their consumers. For example, Activision has "registered patents for micro-transaction systems that incentivize the player to spend money," indicating that it researches and designs methods to exploit their users[5]. One such method forces players' hands with "limited disclosure of the product"[5]. Limited time offers either force players to work ceaselessly to obtain them, or pay to bypass the struggle. Either way, the company profits with more engagement and more money. In addition, games implement "unavoidable solicitations"[5] through in-game advertisements, which psychologist and gambling addiction specialist prove increases problematic gambling[3]. The second method of exploitation is information symmetry exploitation, which takes advantage of the fact that

the game holds more knowledge than the players. For example, games utilize "knowledge of the player's game-related preferences" such as the player's previous spending habits and funds to "present offers predetermined to maximize the likelihood of eliciting player spending"[5]. Gacha games manipulate users into paying through studying playing habits and customizing offers to make them seem irresistible, proving that they seek to extort their users. Information symmetry exploitation exists even within the paying system, as games typically withhold the true cost until players are "financially and psychologically committed," further cementing gacha's intent to extort their users[5]. Overall, the games' design manipulates people into continued spending. The final extortion method is dynamic game balancing: predetermining the game's odds. Gacha games will adjust the chances of winning and losing according to the player's previous behavior to "discourage players from dropping out"[3], meaning that gacha games fine tune themselves to keep users playing, similar to the lack of impulse control in IGD. Genshin's pity system exemplifies dynamic game balancing: if a player does not obtain a rare item in their first nine attempts, they will be given one on the tenth[6]. The same principle applies to ultra rare items, with the guaranteed reward given on the 90th pull [6]. By enticing players to keep grinding in an eternal loop, this system takes advantage of the user's reward sensitivity and lack of impulse control, resulting in addiction. Unbalanced exploitation also lures users through skewed demo games which increase the chances of winning, infusing the player with a false ego so they will gamble more when playing the real game[3]. Furthermore, since people with IGD turn towards gacha games as a desperate escape, many feel compelled to spend more due to the sunk-cost fallacy: feeling like one cannot back out due to the amount of effort already invested[5]. Once one begins, the player cannot back out: a prime symptom of gambling addiction.

4 Conclusion

Many gamers have been sucked in, infected by the gacha parasite. They are addicted— the promise of more entices them. Just a few more dollars, a few more gambles, and paradise awaits; the promise of glory blinds gamers. They fail to realize the game manipulates them into always needing more. The game is designed to always make them need more. They will never get sick of it. They will never put it down. Is there any way to escape this never-ending

cycle? Luckily, there is a way: regulations. Regulations on microtransactions, specifically loot boxes, can be implemented to curb unsupervised gambling. If companies or gamers themselves establish guidelines, users will be more aware of the connection between gaming and gambling, and can steer clear of the gacha parasite.

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