Playing for Fun or Gambling for Money?  
A Qualitative Longitudinal Study of Simulated Gambling among Young Danes

Søren Kristiansen, PhD  
Aalborg University

Research Assistants: Maria Camilla Trabjerg & Anders Malling

Funding: The Danish Council for Independent Research – Social Science
Sources

• Preliminary and unpublished results of a qualitative longitudinal study of simulated gambling behavior among young Danes. Analysis ongoing.

Observations and background

• Simulated gambling is a fast growing gambling industry, concerns of early age gambling involvement (Dickins & Thomas, 2016).

• Relatively large proportions of young people with online gambling experience have played free demo games. (Griffiths & Wood, 2007).

• Past involvement in simulated digital gambling is associated with higher risk of pathological gambling (King, Delfabbro, Kaptsis, & Zwaans, 2014).
Observations and background

• In SG, young people may practice and learn the principles of real gambling and have positive experiences without the risk of losing money – disconnection between action and consequence (Griffiths, 2013).

• Reports of transition from simulated to monetary gambling (Gupta, Derevensky, & Wohl, 2013)

• Limited amount of research examining the links between young people’s participation in simulated online gambling and other forms of gambling (and gambling problems), especially the pathways and directions of the relationship.
Study objectives

• Provide qualitative information about the motivations and experiences of simulated gambling behaviors among young people.
• Build qualitative understanding of behavior change over time (factors and processes involved in changes in simulated gambling).

Definition of simulated gambling used: Games that has gambling characteristics except the opportunity to wager real money.
Data

• Interview data from a qualitative longitudinal study of gambling behaviors among young Danes aged 12-20 years.

• Participants with gambling experience recruited via school-survey.

• Three waves of interviews with a 12 month frequency from 2011 to 2014.
Interviews

- Duration: 35-60 minutes.
- Interview themes: Initial gambling experiences, present gambling involvement, self-perceived gambling abilities, friends and social networks.
- Audio-taped, transcriptions managed and analyzed using Nvivo-software.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-economic classification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I=higher SES, V= lower SES)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gambling group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem gambler</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk gambler</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social gambler</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Danish gambling environment

• 2002: Internet gambling legalized.
• 2012: Controlled liberalization: Marketing and operation of foreign and private gambling providers in Denmark (license model).
• Most popular gambling activities among young people: scratch cards, gambling machines and Lotto/sport betting games.
• Overall expenditure on gambling (2015): 0.9% of private consumption.
Types of SG and media

• Most popular activity: Texas Hold’em poker.
• Most popular media: Social Media (Facebook), websites: Y8 and Take-Two.
Simulated gamblers in sample

- 25 of 48 participants with experience of SG.
- Mostly males (23 of 38 males, 2 of 10 females).
- No significant differences in SOGS RA-score between participants with SG-experience compared to participants with no SG-experience.
Motivation and experience: Relieve boredom

“I’ve played poker on Facebook from time to time in my class at school. But it’s not something I do at home. It’s mainly at school during boring classes. It’ll pop up in Facebook Messenger: ‘Fancy a game of poker?’ and five or six of us from the class will join a virtual table.” (Male, 17, T2)

***

“Some of the guys in our class played it a lot during lessons and I thought, ‘Hmm, maybe I should give it a go?’” (Female, 16, T2)
Motivations and experience: Digitally facilitated sociality

• The social aspect was a highly significant part of the overall experience; participants usually play with friends and acquaintances – not alone or with unknown opponents.
• Connections with others embedded in “screen-to-screen” relationships with no need for physical co-presence (use of chat function to comment on other’s moves, see their reactions, talk tactics)

“It’s like you can see who’s online, who plays the game and who doesn’t. So you spot that him and him and him are playing and you see if you can’t get everybody at the same table for a game together.” (Male, 15, T1)
Motivations and experience: Learning rules of the game

• Terminology
• Game rules
• Strategy

**Interviewer:** Where did you learn about the big blind and small blind?

**Participant:** Via Facebook poker [...] you can lose as much as you like on there without any comebacks, it’s pretty cool. (Male, 15, T3)
...and building risk-awareness

“[…] I don’t believe you can win. And suddenly you’ve lost the lot. I think its part of the system, that they’ve made it that way” (Male 17, T1).

• Critical attitude.
• Understanding of game designs, winning chances.
Motivations and experience: Competition and social prestige

“I just HAD to be on Facebook every day and play cos I was determined not to be the worst [player]. I just had to do it every day, and in the end I almost couldn’t stop [...] I had to play to be the best.” (Male, 15, T1)

***

“ [...] if there’s one thing I really get into when it comes to poker, it’s the online rankings. I can see where my name is on it and how good I am and I get a real buzz out of that – out of the prestige. I want to be one of the best. That’s definitely part of the draw for me.” (Male, 20, T3)
Commercial gambling behavior change over time: General finding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progression</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-linear</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Change was the norm. Stability was rare.
- The majority were moving in and out of gambling, their involvement constantly changing, with intensified or reduced gambling involvement depending on changes in social groups, interests, money, availability and opportunities to gamble.
- Even consistent high-frequent gamblers behavior were highly dynamic in the sense that they changed the way they played or shifted from one preferred game to another.
Behavior change over time – two preliminary groups

• Opportunistic group/group in transition.
• Migration group.
Opportunistic group/group in transition

• Changing forms of behavior with shifts in levels of involvement and simulated gambling activities. No simple, linear, one-directional movement from SG to commercial gambling.

• The most important driver for change in simulated gambling behavior was significant change in social relations/environment (change of school, new neighborhood, new girl/boy friend)

• Changes in social environment stimulate engagement in simulated gambling or reduce it.
Migration group

• Experiences with simulated gambling at $T_1$, while almost no report of SG at $T_2$ and $T_3$.
• Change of gambling motives: From entertainment/fun to more focus on winning money.
• Simulated gambling seem to boost confidence in luck and gambling skills. Beliefs that gaming skills can be transferred to and helpful in commercial gambling.

“It looked like fun so I started playing poker on Facebook, Texas Hold’em and the likes and built up a pile of virtual money. That’s one of the reasons I thought I’d be good at poker, cos I won several million on Facebook.”

• Early big wins in commercial gambling
• Poker players
Key points

- Beginning SG is facilitated by social media and social networks.
- Learning involves game-rules, practicing skills and realizing how hard it is to win (scepticism).
- Behavior change: Complex and dynamic pattern – as simulated gambling involvements change over time (key driver: social environment).
  - For some (primarily poker players), SG may represent a step on the way to commercial gambling.
  - For others, SG appears to be an adjunctive activity (occasional entertainment).
Implications (preliminary)

• Simulated gambling among young people may be considered a form of behavior that emerges from and changes with combinations of a variety of social and technological factors.

• More longitudinal studies are needed in order to build a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the complexities of transitions, meanings and motivations involved in SG and commercial gambling.
Limitations

• Small sample unlikely to be representative of Danish youth and young adults - findings cannot be generalized beyond the studied sample.

• Limited time-frame

• No clear differentiation between types of SG.
Thank you!