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GAM(BL)ING: Commodification of Leisure in the Digital Era

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From "consum'actor"¹ to "consum'player" Luxury brands, games and gam(bl)ing trend

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Abstract:

The transformation of the “consumer society” into a “participation society” has given rise to the “consum'actor” profile (Aubrun, 2013), in the leisure world, the “consum'actor” has degenerated into a “consum'player.”

In a context of gamification (Deterding et al., 2011; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011), several brands have opted for playful strategies that combining games with consumption. More and more elitist luxury brands have turned to the gaming world in search of a geek generation that is more present on gaming platforms and applications than in retail spaces.

On the one hand, games bearing the image of luxury brands have been created such as the B Bounce game (from the Burberry brand) and the Endless Runner game (from the Louis Vuitton brand) (Luxury journal, 2019).

On the other hand, luxury brands have entered the gaming world through partnerships with free games such as the partnership: Longchamp/Pokemon Go, Gucci/Tennis Clash, Givenchy Beauty/Animal Crossing. (Luxury Journal, 2020). With this in mind, luxury brands are part of an alternative to the commodification of partner games. These partnerships therefore invite us to question how they contribute to marketing strategies of free games in a lucrative industry.

Our presentation will focus on this gam(bl)ing trend which introduces luxury brands to the universe of free games. A reflection will elaborate on the transformation of luxury brands into a marketing strategy for these games.

¹ The concept of "consum'actor" (Maillet, 2007)

The ‘gambification’ of life or the extension to the field of gambling between ordinary and obsessive passion

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Abstract:

Defined today as the act of importing certain ludic principles coming from gambling as part of a device or a gambling practice without money, the concept of "gambification" could more broadly apply to the set of socio-technical devices (such as online gambling) or industrial processes (such as advertising) that aim to make the practice of gambling possible in places where it is not yet accessible. We attempt to analyze the effects of this process by expanding the field of gambling through a presentation centered on how it directly affects more or less the lives of its participants, either by encouraging them to play, or by preventing them from stopping. By first relying on statistical data produced by France and Belgium, we will observe the concomitant effects that the development of the gambling offer (most notably online) has on their increase in spending and on the massification/trivialization of their practice, which then becomes an “ordinary passion” for a large part of the population but can also take the form of an “obsessive passion” amongst some of the most vulnerable players. For those who practice gambling as an ordinary passion, we will focus in particular on the case of amateur poker players whom we met as part of a field survey carried out in France between 2006 and 2011. By analyzing the life stories of these players, we will see how they can, at the same time, use a limited space in their lives to their practice of the game – that of a hobby like any other – but also can immerse themselves in it to the point of making it a sort of metaphor for their daily life. For those who experience gambling as an obsessive passion, we will turn to the members of a group of Anonymous Gamblers that we followed during another field survey conducted between 2018 and 2019 in Belgium. Through the study of their stories and their exchanges within the group, we discovered that they perceive this extension of the field of gambling as a permanent temptation resulting in an invasion of their lives where they feel entirely helpless.

How can we use video games to discuss gambling with teenagers and young adults?

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Abstract:

The purpose of the presentation is to share our experience in the field of problem gambling prevention.

We have set up a workshop for individuals between 12 and 25 years old, in which we stimulate teenagers and young adults in thinking critically about their screen usage and video games. The objective of this workshop is to discuss video games, but also discuss the gambling habits behind these games.

Concretely, in 2020, we organised this workshop 30 times, reaching more than 200 individuals. The typical process of the workshop is as follows: at the beginning, a game time is planned for the participants and the educators, then an open discussion takes place. This gives the participants a new perspective on the games they are used to playing. At the end of this one-and-a-half-hour workshop, participants can make more mindful choices about how they use games and how they can stop playing sooner.

In addition to the mechanisms related to screen usage, the industry also highlights several tools designed to motivate gamers in spending more money. During the workshops that were given this year on this subject, the discussion systematically turned to online casinos as well as sports betting. Educators often discovered the presence of gamblers amongst the gamers, of which they were unaware of.

This workshop showed the importance of developing critical thinking in teenagers and young adults in relation to the industries. Additionally, the fact that even if teenagers and young adults rarely discusses a subject, such as gambling, this does not signify that are not affected by that subject.

Streaming Slots: The Under-Regulation of Gambling Content on Youtube

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Abstract:

The highest share of revenue derived from problem gamblers in Québec comes from slot machines (82.4%) and video lottery terminals (76.3%). Slot machines are recognized as a particularly risky form of gambling. However, there is a form of slot machine consumption that seems to have largely escaped the notice of regulators and scholars: the streaming of slot machine play on YouTube. In this presentation, we will present the results of our qualitative study of 21 slot machine videos. Our study examines how these videos elude YouTube's regulation of user-generated content (UGC) that features gambling. YouTube's parent company Google strictly regulates gambling advertisement on its platforms, but these rules are not applied to UGC featuring gambling. There are entire channels dedicated to gamblers filming themselves playing slot machines inside of casinos while narrating their gameplay. These videos are often monetized and are not age restricted. Using thematic analysis, we examined the motivations to create and watch slot machine videos. We explored the instructional component of these videos and whether they mislead viewers about the odds of winning on slot machines. We also considered slot machine videos as sources of entertainment in the context of YouTube's media ecology by comparing them to another genre of narrated gameplay: video game walkthroughs. Both types of video transform play, an activity that is usually defined as unproductive, into a revenue-generating occupation. Ultimately, this project considers the potential for slot machine videos to promote gambling activities to their viewers and suggests that the production and consumption of gambling related UGC should be included in policies on responsible gambling.

Permadeath, Edgework, and Platform Capitalism

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Abstract:

This presentation examines how gamers describe their experiences of playing games in permadeath mode, where the death of their character effectively ends their game. These experiences will be theorized through the conceptual lens of edgework, noting some of its limitations as well as how it can be adapted to develop an understanding of permadeath play, and a critique of games user research literature. Edgework, defined by Stephen Lyng as when individuals engage in voluntary risk-taking as a form of boundary negotiation to gain emotional rewards, assumed risk to be tied to one's physical reality; the risk in edgework was physical, or pertained to one's material existence. But as our worlds move further online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the boundaries between physical and virtual reality find themselves blurred, and thus what is defined as dangerous or risky is as well. Through an analysis of screenshots, strategy guides and Reddit forum posts regarding some of the themes found in the turn-based tactics video game XCOM 2, I propose a critique of edgework both from the macro sociological theories of risk as well as from the psychological perceptions of risk prevalent in games user research literature. I suggest that what is deemed and perceived as being risky from the part of the gamer is the meaningfulness associated with the gaming experience, and not the type of risk at play. But, as games are constructed by game designers and game researchers to be maximally meaningful for players, this raises questions pertaining to the thin and ambiguous line between making meaningful versus addictive games, and whether edgework in the context of intense video game experiences can truly be deemed to be voluntary risk-taking threading the boundaries between order and chaos, or life and death.

Social representations of responsibility in gambling among young adult gamers: controlling oneself, avoiding addiction and having fun.

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Abstract:

The responsible gambling approach is the subject of an important debate in the scientific community due to its tendency to individualize responsibility by focusing specifically on the responsibility of the gamer for the problems associated with gambling. Although the gamer – as well as their responsibility – is at the center of the responsible gaming discourse, their voice and perspectives remain absent. This study aims to remedy this gap in knowledge by documenting the social representations of the concept of responsibility maintained by the gamers themselves. How does the gamer perceive the concept of responsibility? Do gamers have an understanding of responsibility centered on the individual or are they capable of distinguishing their own responsibility from that of other actors?

The results that will be presented come from material collected during 30 qualitative interviews carried out with young adult gamers aged between 18 and 30 years of age. More precisely, the findings are from a spontaneous evocation exercise carried out during these interviews. They reveal that the social representations of responsibility held by gamers fall into five categories: self-control, knowledge of the rules and informed decision-making, pleasure, avoiding addiction and prevention of gambling-related harm. All of these categories can be considered rooted in an individual accountability perspective. Moreover, these results are discussed in light of the process of constructing social representations of responsibility in the responsible gaming approach as well as in the neoliberal context.

Self-esteem in adolescents practicing problematic Internet use with a preference for video games or social media: preliminary data

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Abstract:

The aim of this post is to expose and interpret empirical data suggesting differences in the level of self-esteem among adolescents with problematic Internet use (PIU) who have a preference for video games (PIU-VG) and those with a preference for social media (PIU-SM). The presentation of this preliminary data will allow for a better understanding and reflection on the potential impacts of applications (or “apps”) on the self-esteem of problematic users.

The data was collected during the winter of 2018 as part of the HORS-PISTE research project of the RBC Centre at the University of Sherbrooke. Variables of interest were measured using the Internet Addiction Test, the Rosenberg Index and a new scale measuring the number of hours allocated to specific applications.

The analyses carried out are therefore secondary analyses of data. Participants were divided into three groups based on their IAT scores and the number of hours spent on the apps: without PIU, PIU-SM, and PIU-VG. An ANOVA test was performed to analyze the differences between the groups concerning the level of self-esteem.

The three groups differ significantly in self-esteem [$\omega^2(2,2880)=128.04, p<.000$]. Participants without PIU reported significantly higher self-esteem scores than participants in the PIU-SM and PIU-VG groups. In addition, participants in the PIU-VG group reported significantly higher scores compared to those in the PIU-SM group.

By providing opportunities for achievements, online games could be used to temporarily elevate the fragile self-esteem of adolescents with PIU-VG. Social media does not appear to offer similar opportunities that could explain why PIU-SM teenagers report lower esteem levels. The hypothesis of social comparisons could also be used to interpret the low esteem levels in this group.

The characteristics of these two applications could affect the self-esteem levels of problematic users. Therefore, these results encourage the prioritization of the study of structural components of applications. It should be noted that the self-esteem of adolescents with PIU-SM is of great concern. It is therefore essential to address this critical issue when intervening with this population.

Use of lootboxes in the light of Polish legal regulations

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Abstract:

The purpose of the presentation is to analyze the Polish gambling regulations (Act on Gambling of 2009) in relation to the specificity of lootboxes. In most European countries, as in Poland, lootboxes are not considered a type of gambling, therefore access to them is not regulated in any way, which means that you can use them without age restrictions. Legal definitions of gambling vary in detail from country to country, but also include some fixed elements such as the requirement that a player acquires the loot box with money or something of monetary value. Belgium and the Netherlands, however, interpret the definition of gambling differently, assuming that the reward that can be obtained from a gambling activity does not necessarily have to be of monetary value which allows lootboxes to be considered gambling games. Summarizing the issues related to Polish legal regulations relating to loot boxes, it can be stated that the Act on gambling contains provisions that largely define the use of this form of games. Namely: 1) organizing a game on the Internet; 2) the presence of awards (in the case of loot boxes, an award in kind of a virtual nature); 3) the presence of chance determining the outcome; 4) necessity to purchase participation in the game (loot box as a proof of participation in a game of chance); 5) purchase of product or services that enable free participation in a game of chance (in this case, opening a loot box); 6) award in kind in the form of the possibility of extending the game, without having to pay for it; 7) the absence of a cash prize or award, but the presence of randomness and the organization of the game in accordance with the rules of the slot machine game.

High School eSports: Who are the young eAthletes?

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Abstract:

Context: Electronic sports (ES), commonly called eSports, consists of the competitive practice of video games (VG), coordinated by different leagues or tournaments. This emerging practice has experienced a rapid expansion in recent years to become a popular activity for young people. Since 2018, in order to get their students to continue with their studies, high schools have been offering ES after-school or sports-study programs. While VG practice have been a matter for concern, little information is available about the characteristics of youths who participate in ES within a school program.

Objective: This presentation aims to describe the profile of young eAthletes in schools in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, their hobbies, their VG practices and the possible consequences.

Methods: Seventy eAthlete students from secondary four and five who were enrolled in an after-school ES program were recruited to complete questionnaires about their hobbies, Internet use, and VG habits.

Results: The sample was composed almost entirely of boys (95.7%). Each week, they spent an average of 10 hours on offline entertainment, 19 hours playing VGs, and 15 hours doing other online activities. Thus, the total screen time of the eAthletes is 48.47 hours. In addition, 17.1% of participants had a passion for VGs, while 31.4% of the sample appeared to have a problematic use of VGs. The harms resulting from participant's VG practices primarily affected their employment and education as well as their sleep. According to the participants, the benefits identified were more social, psychological and with their motivation in general.

Conclusion: This presentation represents the first portrait of youth who play ES in an after-school program in a school setting. Knowledge of their everyday lives and play patterns will help to inform and regulate ES in school settings.

Development of a Detection System for Problematic Online Gambling in Quebec

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Abstract:

Spurred by recent advances in internet connectivity and mobile computing, and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of people are participating in online gambling. This presents new opportunities for the field of Responsible Gambling (RG). The requirement of online gamblers to maintain unique user accounts enables gambling operators to deliver targeted interventions that may improve the efficacy of specific RG initiatives. However, the tenability of targeted interventions requires accurate identification of users experiencing gambling-related harms.

We invited users of the Loto Quebec gambling platform (N = 10,839; formerly espacejeux.com) to complete the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) online. Participants who completed the survey (n = 9,145) agreed to release additional data about themselves, their financial transactions, and their betting activities on the site. The dataset was randomly divided into training (80%) and testing (20%) groups. Machine learning algorithms were then trained to identify individuals experiencing moderate (PGSI 5+), and severe (PGSI 8+) gambling problems.

Our PGSI 5+ and 8+ models showed exemplary overall performance in classifying our testing data, accounting for 84.2% and 82.5% of the total area under the receiver operating characteristic curves, respectively. Follow-up analyses indicated that the optimal solutions for these models correctly classified 81.7% of people who reported at least moderate gambling problems, and 81.9% of people who reported severe gambling problems. In doing so, these models also correctly identified 74.4% and 72.2% of people with PGSI scores less than 5 and 8. The most important factors in these models included participants' age, various aspects of their betting behaviour, and whether or not they exhibited behavioural signs of loss chasing.

These results provide strong evidence for the use of machine learning algorithms in the identification of at-risk users of online gambling platforms. They identify several potential behavioural markers of online gambling harm; some novel and some supported by existing evidence. Crucially, models such as these could improve online gambling platforms by enabling them to curtail the number of promotions and advertisements delivered to individuals experiencing gambling-related harm.

Observing Change in Sports Gambling Behaviour During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Sports betting is one of the most popular forms of gambling in Canada; recent prevalence estimates indicate that 7.9% of Canadian adults endorsed gambling on sports in the past year. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic led to the temporary closure of most major sports leagues worldwide beginning in March of 2020. These sudden closures created a dramatic decrease in the availability of sports betting in the early stages of the pandemic, followed by a subsequent increase as most sports leagues returned during the summer. These changes in the availability of sports gambling provide a rare opportunity to conduct a natural experiment. Using a retrospective self-report measure of gambling behaviours, we conducted a study with N = 51 past-year sports gamblers investigating how their gambling behaviours changed over the course of the pandemic. We predicted that we would observe an initial decrease in gambling behaviours from pre-pandemic baseline levels to the early stages of the pandemic in May when the availability of sports gambling was heavily restricted, followed by an increase in gambling behaviours from May to August, in accordance with the reemergence of live sporting events. Our general pattern of results supported our hypotheses, though gambling behaviours did not completely return to baseline levels. We discuss the implications of our findings for public health policy.

Keywords: sports gambling, COVID-19, availability hypothesis

Impact of Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) in the commodification of the Gaming Industry

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Abstract:

Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are a unique cryptographic token that represents something original and singular which cannot be mutually interchanged like traditional cryptocurrency. As it is not interchangeable, the original owner has absolute power over the token and can easily monetize it as they see fit. Until now, the companies who designing games have held most of the money, ownership and power in the gaming industry and dictated the prices and availability of their product. But NFTs give that rare opportunity where any individuals can own any gaming moments, collectible items and other desirable assets within any game. NFTs can be bought, sold or even auctioned off for any amount of money the market deems suitable. In the future, it is expected to be transferrable within games too. This study finds that, while NFTs as a valid monetization process is still in its infancy, it shows a lot of promise. While the concept of NFTs is hard to grasp for many people but when done right, its future can be as bright as the most profitable modern cryptocurrency but with more secure ownership and trading. This form of token not only gives any user the power of ownership to their own gameplay or digital gaming purchases but also provides an unprecedented opportunity to create tangible assets out of intangible moments or things. NFTs can transform games out of the virtual world and corporate ownership to individual property and personal tokens of interest.

Keywords: Non-fungible tokens (NFTs), cryptocurrency, commodification of gaming

Loot Boxes in Video Games: A Scoping Review of Associated Sociodemographic and Psychological Characteristics

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Abstract:

Over the past five years, there has been a drastic increase in the revenue generated by the video game industry, with movements towards next generation gaming platforms, increased interest in esports, and the continued integration of microtransactions in video games. With the inclusion of gaming disorder in the International Classification of Diseases – Eleventh Edition (World Health Organization, 2019) as the second officially recognized behavioral addiction outside of gambling disorder and the increasing degree of digital convergence of gambling and gaming mechanics (Abarbanel, 2018), a substantial amount of research has investigated the addictive features of video games and their impact on individuals playing video games. One particular feature of interest in video games is loot boxes, an in-game consumable item which gives the player a chance to receive a random virtual reward of differing value (ranging from cosmetic features that do not influence gameplay, to equipment that accelerates one's progress in the game). Loot boxes can generally be acquired through regular gameplay, yet can also be purchased for money through microtransactions. The purpose of this review is to broadly summarize and review the current literature on the sociodemographic and psychological characteristics associated with loot box purchasing within video games. Seven databases were utilized for the search (PsychINFO, Medline, Sociological Abstracts, Scopus, Electronics & Communications Abstracts, Technology Collection, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index) and articles were selected if they include a primary measure of loot box purchasing and statistical investigations of their association with gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, country of origin, and various psychological/psychopathological characteristics. Results indicate that studies investigating loot box purchases were predominantly conducted through online surveys of video gamers. Loot boxes were purchased primarily by males, with individuals ranging from adolescence to adulthood and little research investigating ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Moreover, loot box purchases were associated with symptoms of problem video gaming and problem gambling, psychological distress, gambling-related cognitions, and various motivations (e.g., fun/excitement, gameplay advantages, appearance reasons). These results will be discussed while outlining clear implications related to research, prevention, and intervention.

The reciprocal effects of Pay-to-Win gaming and gambling: Results from a representative sample

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Abstract:

The presentation aims to communicate novel study results about the similarities of Pay-to-Win gaming and gambling. Pay-to-Win gaming describes a common type of video game design in which players can pay to advance in the game. The frequency and value of payments is unlimited, and payments are linked to players' competitiveness or progress in the game, which can potentially facilitate problematic behavioral patterns, similar to those known from gambling. Our analyses focus on assessing similarities and differences between Pay-to-Win and different forms of gambling. Based on a survey among 46,136 German adult internet users, this study presents the demographic and socio-economic profile of (1) Pay-to-Win gamers who make purchases in such games, (2) heavy users who conduct daily payments, and (3) gamers who are also gamblers. Motives for making payments were assessed and participation, frequency and spending in gambling by Pay-to-Win gamers are presented. To assess the similarity of Pay-to-Win gaming and gambling, we tested whether Pay-to-Win participation, frequency of payments and problematic gaming behavior are predictors for gambling and cross-tested the opposite effects of gambling on Pay-to-Win. We find that Pay-to-Win gamers are a distinct consumer group with considerable attraction to gambling. High engagement and problematic behavior in one game form affects (over)involvement in the other. Common ground for Pay-to-Win gaming and gambling is the facilitation of recurring payments.

Impact of Advertising Campaigns Amongst Online Gamblers: Perceptions on the Role of Social Support

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Abstract:

Context: A small number of studies of problem gamblers have focused on how social environment and personality interact with gambling behavior. The aim of this research is to study how social support, personality dimensions, and advertising campaigns are associated with problem gambling amongst problem gamblers, moderate risk gamblers, and recreational gamblers in relation with online gambling (ie. sports and poker).

Methods: An online questionnaire was circulated during the first quarter of 2019 on social networks and on gambler forums. It addresses adults that have gambled at least once in the past 12 months. The questionnaire made it possible to identify the typology of gamblers through the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) (Ferris and Wynne, 2001), the availability and satisfaction of perceived social support through the Support Social Questionnaire 6 (SSQ6), the recollection of advertising slogans disseminated in France, as well as questions on gambling practices (when they started to gamble, method of gambling) and socio-demographic questions. The analyses were carried out using R. One hundred and nine participants responded, 45% of which were problem gamblers or at moderate risk.

Results: Problem gamblers and moderate risk gamblers were significantly more susceptible to gambling ads when compared to recreational gamblers. Social support was significantly lower for online gamblers than for offline gamblers, but no association was found between social support and type of gambler. Problem gamblers and moderate risk gamblers had lower levels of extraversion than recreational gamblers. Notably, when the onset of gambling is before the age of 18, participants were more likely to recall more gambling advertisements as adults.

Conclusion: We propose that future longitudinal research examine the characteristics of online gamblers, especially their access to social support so as to understand their low level of adequacy in comparison to the social support accessible to offline gamblers.

Keywords: social support, Big Five model, personality, gambling ads, online gambling

The role of skinbetting in the transformation of skins into a virtual currency

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Abstract:

Skinbetting is one way gaming and gambling is currently converging on the internet. It refers to online game-settings where players (including minors) can use skins as tokens in classic casino games such as Blackjack and Roulette instead of using ordinary money. This is possible because skins from highly profiled games such as CS:GO (Valve 2007) are traded between players at a scale where it becomes highly fungible and thus earns the status as ‘fiat money’ (See Lehdonvirta & Castronova 2014). As many other phenomena on the Internet skinbetting is considered ‘hard-to-regulate’. Yet it is quite literally a consequence of the Valve-owned Steam platform API or ‘application programming interface’. This API allows 3rd party developers to access the Steam community market, the key context of player-trading on the platform. In this way, the aspect of Steams API that lets 3rd party developers integrate player-trading in their business model also allows more shady economic practices to unfold, such as 3rd party sites offering non-registered gambling games to minors (Thorhauge and Nielsen, Forthcoming). On one hand this can be interpreted as an unfortunate ‘externality’ of Steam’s ‘secondary market strategy’. That is, by allowing player-trading in the first place and by giving 3rd party developers access to this market, Steam ‘unfortunately’ allows skinbetting on 3rd party sites as well. However, it can also be seen as a deliberate ‘secondary market strategy’ where skinbetting sites basically represents another less legitimate secondary market for skins. Finally, it can be seen as deliberate attempt at leveraging skins as a regular ‘gamer-currency’ with the many possible business prospects this may involve. In my presentation I will discuss the similarities and differences between Skins and Crypto-currencies and discuss whether skinbetting actually plays a role in the transformation of skins into a virtual currency.