



Rad Yeo – Presenter and video game critic

Introduction

In a digital world where gaming has become a central part of childhood, understanding the hidden gambling mechanics behind popular titles is more important than ever.

To support families, carers, and grandparents navigating this evolving landscape, we spoke with Angharad ‘Rad’ Yeo—an experienced media professional and games commentator with deep insights into how young people interact with games.

Drawing on years of observation and experience, Rad shares practical advice and thoughtful reflections on gambling-like features in games, such as loot boxes. This Q&A draws directly from that conversation, offering guidance to help adults support the young gamers in their lives with empathy, curiosity, and confidence.

Interview

Q: What are ‘gambling-like mechanics’?

Gambling-like mechanics refer to game features that simulate aspects of gambling. These can include mini-games with slot machines or roulette, but more recently the attention has been on 'loot boxes' - digital blind boxes that offer random chance-based rewards, often paid for with real money. While these features have existed for decades, their integration with real-world spending has increased significantly since around 2013.

Q: What is a loot box?

A loot box is a digital mystery box that players can open to receive in-game items. Players often pay real money without knowing exactly what they'll receive. The appeal lies in the surprise element—similar to a lucky dip or foil pack of collectible cards. Some items may be rare or exclusive, adding to the excitement.

Q: What’s the difference between game rewards and gambling?

Games often use flashing lights and sound effects to reward players. It's something we seem to inherently respond to, and is a technique used heavily by slot machines, so some people find the similarities alarming. But those elements alone don't make it gambling, and they tend to be low risk as the scope of impact is very limited. However, when real-world money is involved, the scope of impact vastly expands. This often takes the form of purchasing in-game currency with real-world money, which can then be spent on loot boxes. When the game design encourages repeat spending for a chance at a specific uncontrollable outcome it starts to mimic gambling more closely. It's important to draw this distinction, as different risk levels should elicit different responses.

Q: How do children respond to these mechanics?

Younger children often show more emotional distress when they don't get the item they wanted, as they may not fully understand probability. Older kids tend to see loot boxes as a fun way to support a game they enjoy, but some may still become overly focused or emotionally invested in the outcomes.



Q: What long-term impacts might these features have?

If normalised without guidance, gambling-like mechanics could shape how young people understand risk, reward, and spending. But with open conversation and parental support, gaming can also be a safe space to explore and learn about these dynamics.

Q: How can parents spot if something's going wrong emotionally?

When I work with kids, I often look for behaviours that are out of the norm—like fixation, repeated frustration, or difficulty letting go. Kids have big emotions, and that's normal - they need help digesting the feelings and regulating. It may be time to check in on what part of the game triggered that.

I'll then have a conversation with them to explore why they're feeling that way.

Q: How can parents better understand the games their child is playing?

The most important thing you can do is learn what your child is playing and what motivates them. Just ask: 'What are you playing? Show me how it works.' Kids love to share - particularly young kids - and this can lead to meaningful conversations. For older kids who may be less enthusiastic about showing you, try looking up the game on YouTube, or even having a play yourself! The Australian Classification website is also a useful starting point to get a sense if there's content you're concerned about, and consider asking your child how that kind of content arises in the game and how it makes them feel. Even a few minutes of research can make a big difference.

Q: How can parents make sure their approach is consistent?

Learn the mechanics behind games so you can apply the same logic you use elsewhere. For instance, if you forbid loot boxes but allow lucky dip prizes at the fair, that sends mixed signals. Understanding the similarities helps build consistency, which kids need to feel secure.

Q: How can parents explain to their child why they're worried about these features?

One analogy that works well is to imagine your child as a young sapling. Too much harsh sun can harm a sapling, even though a full-grown tree would be fine. In the same way, children may not yet have the emotional maturity to handle certain experiences. It's not about banning fun—it's about making sure they grow strong first.

In the same way, children may not yet have the emotional maturity to handle certain experiences - like disappointment and adequate risk assessment. It's not about banning fun - it's about making sure they grow strong first. Demonising something they enjoy can make them feel you just don't "get it", and cause them to hide it from you.

If you're worried about your children spending money on loot boxes, treat digital spending like any other financial conversation. Even if you don't value digital items, your child might. You can use this as an opportunity to talk about budgeting, self-regulation, and decision-making.

And when you're having a conversation, curiosity is key. Ask your child to show you what they're playing and explain it. Avoid leading with fear or criticism. Respect builds trust, and trust leads to open conversations. Let them be the expert—ask what they like about the game, who they play with, what a loot box is.



Q: Is there a way to use gaming experiences as learning moments?

Absolutely. Games can help kids explore risk, patience, and even disappointment in a controlled environment. Use in-game situations to talk about choices, emotions, and values—just like you would with sport or friendships.

Q: For parents that don't play games, how can they stay involved?

You don't need to be an expert. Treat games like any other hobby or sport your child is into. If they were joining a soccer team, you'd learn about safety, gear, and expectations. Games deserve that same attention—because they're today's social spaces.

Q: What could the industry do better to support parents?

One helpful step would be for games—especially those with large child audiences—to offer 2–3 pages on their websites that explain the game clearly from a parent's perspective. That includes what the game is, what the in-game purchases are, and how they work. It would make it much easier for parents to understand what they're dealing with without having to dig through confusing content or rely on second-hand advice.

Final thought:

Gaming is today's playground. Just because they're at home doesn't mean they're safe. The emotional highs and lows they experience in games are real. So, treat their digital lives as seriously as their physical ones.

And remember: just showing up with curiosity, openness, and a willingness to learn goes a long way.



Angharad 'Rad' Yeo is an award-winning Australian television and radio presenter, podcaster, and video game critic. She hosted ABC's esports-first show *Good Game Well Played* before featuring on *Good Game Spawn Point*, *Weekends*, and tech-focused podcasts like *Queens of the Drone Age*, *Game for Anything*, and *How Games Play Us*.

Visit www.classification.gov.au/NewGameRatings for more information and resources for parents and carers.