

## Facebook 'creating a generation of gambling addicts because of site's Las Vegas style games'

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Facebook has been accused of turning youngsters into gambling addicts with an explosion of Las Vegas-style casino games on the social networking site.

Children are using 'virtual coins' to simulate the thrill of hitting the jackpot with slot machine and roulette games on their home computers and mobile phones.

There are now hundreds of virtual slot machine and poker games on Facebook, including Jackpotjoy, Slotomania and DoubleDownCasino.



Virtual slot machine: Jackpotjoy, a gambling online site connected to Facebook

Zynga, which accounts for 12 per cent of all Facebook's revenues due to its popular games such as FarmVille, launched Zynga Slots in the UK last month.

But addiction experts have warned the games encourage teenagers to think gambling is harmless fun.

Facebook has three million UK users aged between 13, the lower age limit for registration, and 17.

But a further one million are estimated to be under 13 and pretending to be older.

Dr Carolyn Downs, of the University of Salford, was alerted to the danger when her 13-year-old daughter became upset at losing virtual money on the game Fluff Friends.

She said: 'It's well-established that the younger the children start gambling, the more likely it is they will become habitual gamblers and also problem gamblers.

'It's a long-term, life-long risk. What we're doing is setting up these kids to be problem gamblers as they go through life.'

The legal age for gambling in Britain is 18.



Facebook generation: Anyone over 13 with an e-mail address can join the social-networking site and it now has three million UK users aged between 13 and 17

But the makers of social games have avoided regulation by the Gambling Commission because gambling is defined as being able to win and lose money.

Although the gambling games are free, users are encouraged to spend money if they want to keep gambling or increase jackpots.

Facebook takes around a 30 per cent cut of all virtual credits sold. Real money gambling is said to be a major future strategy for the networking site as it looks to generate new revenue streams.

The company was valued at £66billion for its stock market flotation in May but doubts over future growth saw £18.2billion vanish from that figure within two weeks.

Although Facebook made a profit of £640million from its revenue of £2.4billion in 2011 the vast majority of that profit – 82 per cent – came from targeted advertising.

However its income would increase significantly if it awarded gaming licences to providers such as Jackpotjoy, which claims 1.7million users for its virtual slot games.

## **LAS VEGAS IN THE BEDROOM**

**WITHIN** minutes of signing up to Facebook, users are bombarded with invitations to join hundreds of social games.

They range from Zynga Poker, which boasts 32million users, to DoubleDown Casino with 4.9million players, and Jackpotjoy, with 1.5million.

Games can be accessed instantly on a laptop or mobile phone.

When a Daily Mail reporter posed as a 13-year-old to

try the games, he won a virtual \$350 (£225) on his first spin with Lucky Slots and \$40 (£25) on his second. A message was then displayed encouraging him to invite friends to play.

Buying credits is worryingly easy. DoubleDown Casino allows players to buy up to £130 of credits with a card or PayPal.

More worryingly, most games allow players to buy smaller amounts of credits via their mobile phones.

Facebook bosses are understood to have met with around 20 gaming companies – including 888 which claims 650,000 monthly users for its Bingo Island game – over the possibility of gaming licences.

British-based company Betable is already in talks with US game developers about providing real money gambling on popular Facebook games such as FarmVille.

The charity GamCare wants the Gambling Commission to investigate social gaming.

Policy and development director Mandy Barrie said: ‘This is a really rapidly-moving area. We need to think through very carefully any risks that it presents particularly for young people.

‘There is a link between early exposure to gambling and developing a problem in adulthood.’

The Gambling Act 2005 was drafted before the rise of social gaming.

But the Gambling Commission is ‘monitoring developments’ with regard to virtual gaming which it believes to be ‘at the perimeter of current legislation’.

A Facebook spokesman said: ‘In addition to complying with local law, all applications on Facebook are required to operate within the bounds of our developer guidelines.’