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Child's Play

*Young Players Can Be Gaming's Best Customers -- But
Who's Responsible For Underage Gambling Behind Closed Doors?*

In January a Louisiana judge railed against that state's 21-year-old gambling age limit:

"If a 20-year-old can enter the voting machine and turn the key to vote for the governor of the state, or have to crouch in a muddy, bloody, freezing foxhole and pull the trigger of his war weapon," the judge declared, "then he can insert a dollar and engage the mechanism of a video poker machine."

The words might be a little melodramatic – and the judge's decision is already on appeal - but the case frames an old dilemma that's taking on new dimensions.

The three years between 18 and 21 have long been a source of friction between lawmakers, lotteries and casinos. For regulators, the main issues are risk, responsibility and public interest: are 19-year-olds significantly more susceptible to addiction than their 21-year-old peers?

For gaming operators, the concern is the trade-off between real dollars and popularity points: is it worth sacrificing a significant group of gamers to appease the paternal attitudes of some regulators?

There is no definitive answer to either dilemma -- gaming age limits vary between jurisdictions depending on social, economic and political climates.

One trend we can confirm, is that youthful gamblers are active gamblers. According to a November poll conducted in Michigan, the most frequent gamblers in that state are aged 18-24, or 50-64. Other studies reflect the same results: younger patrons play more often and spend more money. Even when campaigning for gaming initiatives in a conservative environment, it's difficult to let that demographic goldmine fall by the wayside.

And what happens when the rules vary between different types of gambling? In Iowa, the Winnebago Indian tribe recently decided to drop the minimum gambling age from 21 to 18 even though state law forbids gambling before 21. The tribes cite their 1998 compact which – surprisingly enough – does not define the age limit for tribal gambling.

Now Iowa's riverboat operators are up in arms -- but there's virtually no recourse short of lowering the age bar for all types of gaming in the state.

To state the obvious, the issue of age should always be addressed in gaming legislation, both for current and future establishments.

But age controls on casino gambling and lotteries are only the traditional tip of a larger iceberg. With new forms of betting and a more sensitive political atmosphere, the opposition has latched onto the harms of *uncontrolled* youth gambling. The controversy is no longer just about who walks through casino doors, but also who is gambling behind closed doors.

Take Internet wagering, for example. One of the biggest objections against online betting is that anyone can play, anywhere, at any time. The home-alone kid with dad's credit card is a favorite poster child for the alleged evils of online casinos.

Moreover, anti-gamblers say teens are more likely to gamble online since they're more experienced with computers and online transactions. In its final report on the state of gambling in the U.S., the National Gaming Impact Study Commission made that leap of logic, warning of an explosion of juvenile betting on the Web.

The truth is, there's little evidence to support such charges, precisely because online gaming is such a private activity. A 1999 Gallup poll revealed some interesting results:

The majority of adults and teens polled by Gallup said they believe it's easy for adolescents to gamble online, and that the Internet has increased adolescent gambling. However, only 2% of teens aged 13-17 said they'd actually used the Internet to gamble in the past year. Compare that to the 23% of teens under 18 who said they'd played a video poker machine and 15% who'd purchased lottery tickets.

Moreover, Industry groups insist they're strongly committed to stomping out underage gambling -- after all, it is in their best interest to collect legitimate debts and stay out of court. Nearly every casino Web site features a disclaimer about underage betting. Realistically, the quality of age control will increase with the evolution of electronic payment and identification technology. The strongest argument on the side of cybercasinos is that there are more headlines about grown-ups defaulting on their credit card debts than kids sneaking online.

Perhaps a more legitimate concern is sports betting. In the same Gallup survey, 60% of teens approved of betting on professional sports compared to 41% of

adults. 18% of teens said they'd wagered on college sports in the past year; 27% said they'd put money on pro games.

Numbers like these are being used by anti-gamers to support a nationwide college sports gambling ban. The main thrust behind the proposal is to stop game-fixing scandals... but sponsors in Congress and anti-gaming groups say it would also help decrease betting by college students.

The trouble with that logic is that like Internet gaming, sports betting is often a very private activity. Young people bet on sports because they can do it informally, without the involvement of a third party like a professional bookmaker or casino, and without the risk of being caught. No law will ever reach into these small social betting circles.

Nor can casino officials or gaming regulators – which means the gambling industry shouldn't be held culpable for the casual games that have always gone on behind closed doors.

The final front on which young people are being drawn into the gaming battle moves back inside casinos, to the kids who might merely walk past slot machines on their way to casino daycare centers.

In a recent move, Station Casinos removed "child-luring" games from its Las Vegas floors. These include slot machines with Betty Boop and Three Stooges themes. Whether or not these characters are actually appealing – or even recognizable – to young players is unknown, but some Nevada lawmakers are seeking a ban on all cartoon-like gambling devices.

Regulators in that state recently rejected South Park and Candyland-like games, and are currently considering others with Addams Family and Pink Panther themes.

All of the bluster surrounding youth gambling lately might make one wish for the good old days, when the age limit posted on a casino door was the most controversial dimension of the subject.

In the coming months and years there will be more hand-wringing and doomsaying about youth gaming. Age will be used as a weapon against new and old forms of gambling, to indict gambling proponents as careless corruptors.

But it's important to remember that teens have always gambled on the social and legal periphery. While casino companies can ostensibly be blamed for minors who make their way through casino doors, they shouldn't automatically be put on the defensive against underage gaming charges.

As adults, it's our responsibility to encourage responsible gaming, contribute to youth gaming prevention programs and know the laws in our jurisdiction... but it's outside the bounds to expect the gaming industry to take responsibility for what teens and their parents do in the privacy of their own homes.

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