



Assessment of the measures introduced to fight the risks of online gaming addiction

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► Update on the increase in addicted players one year after the opening of the market

According to specialists, a “high-risk” online gambler is one who presents a psychological profile that exposes them to excessive or addictive behaviour. In France, the most commonly quoted figure concerning addiction to terrestrial gaming is 650 000 people.

In order to assess the impact of online gaming on the increase in the number of addicted players, *a large-scale epidemiological study would have to be put in place, to precisely establish the number of problem players or addicts generated specifically by the opening of the online gaming market.* Until a study on the theme of online gaming that includes contributions from addiction specialists is initiated, it will not be possible to know for sure what the risks of online gaming in France are.

Without a study, the only data that we have today are testimonials from anti-addiction associations on the one hand, and large-scale studies carried out in England on the other, which are already 5 years old.

Eric Bouhana, Chairman of the Addictel association, told me that he had observed an increase in the number of addicted players on illegal websites a few years before the opening of the market, but that he had not seen any increase since the legalisation of online gaming in France in June 2010.

The trend of low growth in addiction is corroborated by the English studies: the Harvard Medical School study of a sample of 40 000 players shows that 1% of online players have addiction problems, and the “Prevalence study” observed that the number of addicted online players has not changed over a period of 5 years. On the other hand, it would appear that in countries where there are fewer terrestrial gaming opportunities than Great Britain and France, such as Italy and Spain, the impact of online gaming on addiction is greater.

All these studies highlight a significant migration of addicted terrestrial players towards online gaming.

► Addiction criteria in terrestrial and online gambling

According to specialists, the main criteria that define the dangerousness of online gaming in terms of the risk of addiction, whether terrestrial or online, are as follows:

- Availability of the game in space and time
- How easy the game is (speed of implementation)
- Speed of decision-making
- Immediate availability of the result
- A very short time between betting and the result
- The possibility of trying one’s luck again straightaway.

The more a game has of these criteria, the more it exposes players to the dangers linked to the risk of addiction. However, according to specialists we should consider this in context, as the addicted player does not necessarily choose the game that has the most criteria, but rather the one that subjectively suits them best.



► Specific risks of addiction in online gaming

The specific risks of online gaming are linked to:

- The characteristics of the internet medium
- The addictive nature of the games and bets that are allowed on the internet in France.
- **The criteria put forward with regard to the dangerousness of the internet are:**
 - **The permanent availability of access to games on the internet:** online games are available 24 hours a day, which promotes compulsive playing and playing time. The risk of this proximity must be weighed up against the density of the casino network and the tens of millions of PMU and FDJ sales outlets.
 - **Playing alone in a virtual environment:** it would appear that young people are the most vulnerable, as is the case with online video gaming.
- **The intrinsically addictive nature of forms of online gaming and betting which are allowed in France:**

Once again, only one study carried out with the help of addictology specialists is able to define the addictive nature of the games allowed in France. We must also take account of the fact that betting on sports and horse racing and poker do not involve the same number of players, and that *the higher the number of players, the greater the risk is*. It would nonetheless appear that, due to its specific nature, *poker presents the highest risk of addiction*.

► Young players are the most vulnerable

Online gaming dependency can affect all age groups, but specialists consider that young players are the most vulnerable. The reason given is their desire for independence from their family, which sometimes leads them to adopt high-risk behaviours. For example, with poker, some young people lack maturity and think that they can get rich quick like the poker stars, putting themselves at serious risk.

Young people are also the most exposed to the risk of addiction on illegal websites where they can play games which are banned in France, and the risk of trying to win more money by playing the most dangerous but potentially the most lucrative games, with the benefit of a higher rate of return to the player: 95% for 85% in France.

We should bear in mind that illegal websites have no age limit and offer no protection against addiction.



▶ Analysis of the protective measures introduced by the legislator

• The French legislator has introduced the most extensive set of protective measures in the world:

Firstly, we can be glad of the law on the opening of the online gaming market initiated by Senator Trucy, the aim of which was to ensure that the 2 million web users who played on illegal websites could benefit from measures to fight the risk of addiction. These measures are as follows:

- ▶ Prohibition of certain games of an addictive nature
- ▶ Measures to fight illegal websites: blocking websites and financial transactions, fines and limiting advertising.
- ▶ Limiting rates of return (sum paid to the player)
- ▶ A cap on wagers and the amount added to the player's account.
- ▶ Automatic payment of winnings to an account after a certain sum has been reached
- ▶ Indication of the time spent and losses incurred
- ▶ Possibility of self-exclusion
- ▶ Donating a sum capped at 10 million Euros to the National Institute of Prevention and Health Education, to deal with the problem of addiction.

▶ Assessment of the measures introduced by the legislator

A large proportion of the two million online players who visited illegal websites switched to the French offer and can therefore now benefit from protection against the risks of addiction.

Regarding improvements to these measures, the recent parliamentary report, led in particular by *Jean François Lamour*, recommends *strengthening the self-exclusion mechanisms*.

Yet the underlying problem persists. It lies in the fact that measures to ban certain games, or types of online games, under the pretext of addiction, *lead hundreds of thousands of players to play these games on illegal websites, because blocking these illegal websites is practically impossible*.

▶ The problem of illegal websites

When drafting the law, the legislator took the position that it was possible to block illegal websites, and that measures to ban certain addictive games would have their effects. As I stated in a study on illegal websites. no country in the world, not even the United States, has managed to block them.

The number of illegal websites today is 25 000, according to a reliable source, and dozens more are created every day. For sports betting alone, the Chairman of the International Olympic Committee has just declared that bets totalling 100 billion Euros are placed on illegal websites.

Hence, banning certain types of game or betting in France leads several hundreds of thousands of players to visit illegal websites with no protection against the risks of addiction or the risk of fraud.



▶ **Prohibition of certain addictive online games**

Certain games, or types of game, which have been excluded by the legislator, effectively presented extremely high risks of addiction, such as spread betting, where it is not possible to measure future losses. On the other hand, *the prohibitions applying to online games which are allowed on the terrestrial network are less stringent*. Yet by virtue of the precautionary principle, banning them was laudable. However, as I indicated, banning these games leads players to expose themselves to the risks of addiction on illegal websites. *Hence, in order to bring these players back to the French offer, and thus enable them to benefit from protective measures against addiction, should we not review the prohibition measures that endanger the thousands of players, especially younger ones?*

▶ **Some criteria for identifying and preventing the symptoms of addiction**

First and foremost, we need to be aware of the danger of certain game characteristics, be they terrestrial or online games: speed of implementation, decision-making, immediate availability of the result, a very short time between implementation and the result, and the possibility of trying one's luck again straightaway.

Here are some symptoms of high-risk behaviour:

- Preference for playing alone
- Inability to define the amounts of money bet
- Refusal to reveal the amounts won or lost
- Borrowing money for gambling from family, friends or banks
- High level of frustration if the person is unable to play
- Betting winnings again instead of collecting them
- Changes in behaviour when playing, in particular becoming more aggressive
- Dependency on other addictions, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, video games, etc.
- An excessive amount of time spent playing online

▶ **Does the real fight against addiction not involve strengthening protective measures in the area of terrestrial gambling?**

The 1.2 million active players of online video games which are allowed in France benefit from the most comprehensive set of protective measures in the world.

Regarding terrestrial gaming, even if “responsible gaming” measures have been strengthened for terrestrial casinos, they are much less stringent than the protective measures for online gaming.

If we really want to significantly limit the risks of addiction in France, which affect around 650 000 people, would it not be preferable to strengthen protective measures against terrestrial casinos, for the 30 million players who visit casinos, the 8 million who bet on horse racing, and the 9 million FDJ players?