

## 7 On Your Side: Video game loot boxes face addiction allegations

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by Nathan Baca, ABC7

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POTOMAC, Md. (ABC7) — [The Game Gym](#) in Potomac calls itself a local club “eSports team and training center.”

7 On Your Side talked to gamers playing PC and console titles including “Overwatch” and “Super Smash Bros,” including 17 year old Benjamin Malek. He described what happens when he opens a video game “loot box.”

“It feels like what happens when you get a mobile game and you spin a slot machine: the flashing lights, the colors. It feels good to open. But - it shouldn't, because that can really hook some people in and it can be dangerous,” said Malek.

Loot boxes go by many names. On cell phone games they go by “microtransactions,” small charges that allow players an extra chance to beat a difficult level. On AAA online shooter games, loot boxes, unlock special weapons or characters. Some games label their loot boxes in creative ways, including “Fortnite’s” “loot llamas.”



7 On Your Side: Video game loot boxes face addiction allegations. (Photo: ABC7)

As father Jeff Katz checks his phone waiting for his son at The Game Lab, he sees loot boxes marketed to him, and to his young daughter.

"My daughter was playing a game called "The Smurfs." In order to get to different levels, it requires something called a smurfberry. My daughter one day went out and bought 3,000 smurfberries for \$56.

It goes deeper than smurfberries. There are online forums sounding more like drug rehab, supporting people to ["stop gaming."](#)

"They'd drop at least a \$1,000 just on gambling their money away, hoping to hit the jackpot," recalled Malek about his friend's experience with loot boxes.

7 On Your Side talked to one gamer wishing to remain anonymous who spent more than \$10,000 on loot boxes. He says his obsession for worthless virtual game items made him broke. He posted an [open letter](#) to game publishers asking them to show caution with loot boxes.

Market research firm [Juniper Research](#) credits loot boxes in expanding the video game market from \$117 billion this year to \$160 billion by 2022.

Josh Hafkin, owner and founder of The Game Gym, used to work at a major video game developer and described loot boxes, "It's the prize, it's the carrot. It's the reason we play. I was also part of the people who would run some of the email marketing, so if you didn't play the game for a little bit, we would send you an email and say, come on back, here's a free loot box."

Now, Hafkin coaches kids to learn responsible gaming and social skills, reversing the sales tactics he once used working with game developers. "Our whole goal was to keep the cycle of quest leads to loot leads to quest leads to loot and just keep that rolling."

7 On Your Side caught up with psychiatrist Clifford Sussman speaking to parents at [The Auburn School](#) in Chantilly, spreading the word about loot box addiction to parents.

When asked how loot boxes affected children's brains, Dr. Sussman responded,

***"Over time, you can become desensitized to constantly stimulating yourself. It certainly changes the reward pathway structure. Families are complaining about lots of money being spent on these games and on these loot boxes. Thousands of dollars being taken from their credit card. I see people dropping out of schools. I see people failing to launch. Living in their parent's basement playing video games."***

Sussman treats internet and video game addiction at his [NW Washington practice](#).

Seven countries, China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, Netherlands and Belgium have restricted or are considering limits on video game loot boxes.

US Senators Edward Markey (D-Mass.) and Maggie Hassan (D-NH) asked the [Federal Trade Commission to investigate](#) whether loot boxes should be regulated as gambling.

7 On Your Side took that question to the CEO of the Entertainment Software Association:

"Loot boxes are an optional thing in games, which you can earn or purchase. The difference being, there's a surprise element to what you get, but you always get something of value," said Acting President and CEO, Stanley Pierre-Louis.

While the [World Health Organization](#) considers internet gaming disorder an addiction, The American Psychiatric Association wants further study.

"The medical consensus has not formed around that kind of condition," replied Pierre-Louis. Our industry has the strongest self-regulatory system with respect to providing parents and consumers with information about video game content."

"I think the video game industry has run amuck, that they've been running this for too long without people asking these types of questions. I think it's good that the government is getting involved," added Katz.

Malek shared his opinion: "The government should step in to a certain degree to regulate as they do gambling, because obviously the gaming industry won't."