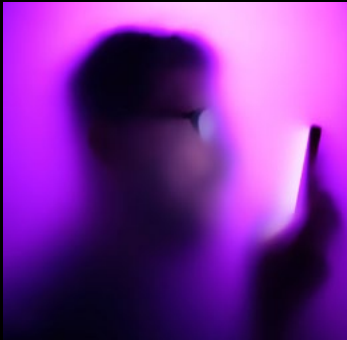


Casino 2.0: Where does iGaming go from here?

Consumer taste – and even how people interact with entertainment – is changing rapidly. Online casino gaming must adapt to match

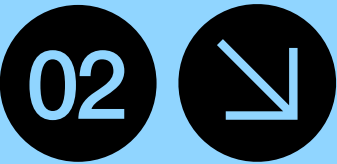


IGAMING [PLATFORM] FOR CHAMPIONS



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An evolution not a revolution:

How stakeholders are reshaping and rethinking the online casino experience



Wider societal changes abetted by advancing technology mean consumer tastes have evolved. Online casino gaming companies must now move to respond.

It may not be a full revolution taking place in online casino games. But an evolution is certainly underway.

There has been no massive sudden revolutionary change in the sector. But there has been a slow drift in consumer tastes and methods of interaction with iGaming to which companies in the sector must respond.

The change began with the advent of the smartphone. Such an event may seem a long time ago in some regards. But it remains ongoing across the globe, with increasing smartphone adoption connecting more and more people to the internet for the first time and radically changing how consumers interact with online casino products.

And the societal changes brought about by the advent of smartphones in countries where adoption is further in the past are also still echoing today – creating a need for those involved in iGaming to adapt or face being left behind.

ENTERTAINMENT TAKES CENTRE STAGE

In this changing space, entertainment takes the driving seat ahead of monetary reward. The risk and excitement of wagering still play an essential role of course. But now consumers want a degree of entertainment that can compete with other major options that are equally accessible.

From streaming platforms to mobile app games to social media, competing forms of entertainment have never been easier to access. As a result, casino gaming now finds itself not only more accessible than ever, but also facing a broader range of competitors fighting for users' time.

How they use this time is also changing as a result of smartphones. No longer are people carving out and setting aside blocks of time for specific activities such as iGaming. Instead, they are increasingly engaging with such entertainment in smaller blocks of downtime – say waiting for a bus or sitting on the toilet – or they are looking for entertainment they can consume simultaneously with other content, such as gaming while watching a movie.

This means providers must adapt offerings to meet new challenges. Games cannot rely solely on things like discounts or promises of massive winnings to succeed in a crowded and increasingly competitive market. Games will need a quick hook to get people invested and keep them interested. They will need a relatively gentle learning curve to avoid putting new users off.

Innovations like gamification, personalisation and interaction – particularly community interaction – will become increasingly central to future casino game design. But it is important to note that things like interaction can be a two-edged

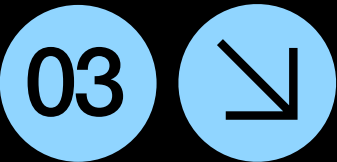
sword. Some players will see them as a distraction from the main event and something to be avoided while others crave greater interactive or community aspects within games.

Crash games are a good example of recent game development making use of these innovations. They take a simple gambling concept and add a degree of gamification, personalisation and interaction. This is then combined with other new attracting innovations like giving players an illusion of transparency and control.

THE NEXT PHASE OF INNOVATION

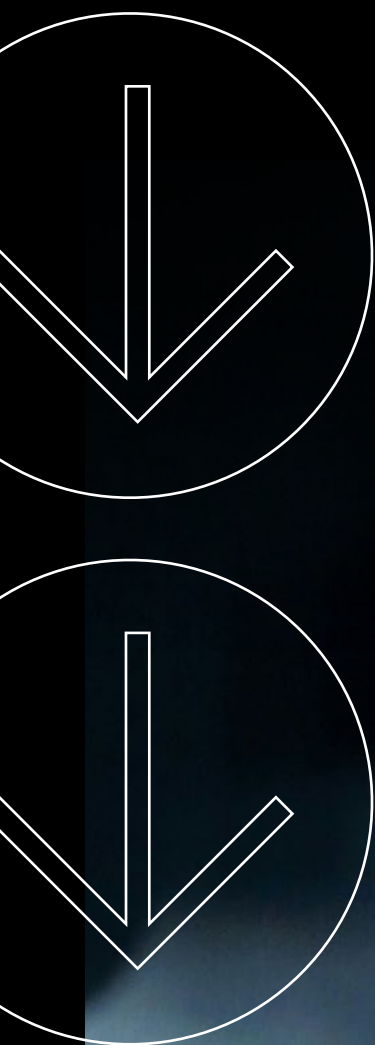
But it is unlikely the next big online casino game will come from the crash game genre. Growth appears to have plateaued as crash games find their niche. Instead, attention should turn to other emerging content areas or existing content areas that could be significantly refreshed through these innovations.

One thing is clear: the next wave of innovation will not be developed in a silo. All genres of online casino games must learn from other categories – even those outside of casino games – in order to be successful. New technologies such as AI and machine learning will help with this sort of development, though it is unlikely other emerging technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality or wearables will have much of an impact. These elements, and more, are explored in greater detail throughout this report.



The world at your fingertips:

How online casino is changing to meet new consumer tastes, habits and philosophies



Accessing potential users has never been easier, but keeping their attention has never been harder.

It is becoming increasingly easier to connect with potential players and increasingly harder to hold onto their attention in the brave new world of online gaming.

The ubiquity of mobile phones and other internet-connected devices means accessing a casino or other betting game is only a fingertip away for much of the world's population. But familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then certainly a degree of banality.

According to Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at online gambling company, LeoVegas, “When something is always at your fingertips, it’s no longer that valuable to focus on it.”

This means consumers are increasingly treating online casino-related gaming like any other form of entertainment. This is useful in democratising access and breaking down some social taboos that remain around it. But it is also increasing the breadth of competition for consumers’ time and leading to greater fragmentation of attention.

COMPETING FOR ATTENTION

Online casino entertainment must now emphasise the entertainment aspect and compete with every other form of entertainment vying for a piece of consumers’ time. “As we continue to

evolve, most of the expectations from users will not actually come from within the industry itself but actually from other entertainment sources,” says Ciappara.

This has multiple implications and Ciappara likens it to the difference between watching a film in the cinema and consuming that same content at home through Netflix. For example, when someone chooses to watch a film at the cinema, they have made a deliberate decision to commit their time to an activity.

This sort of pre-meditated decision is more akin to the act of going to a physical casino or, in some ways, accessing casino-related entertainment through a PC browser where more deliberation and thought have gone into the choice and there are fewer alternatives attempting to persuade them away.

“If someone goes on their phone, they’re constantly getting bombarded with different distractions. We’re basically competing for what I call someone’s ‘disposable entertainment time,’” says Ciappara. “So we need to make sure our product is entertaining enough that a user chooses to actually play on our product versus watching a YouTube video, or going on Netflix or playing an app store game.”



“When they go into the game, they need a hook. If you don’t have this hook, if you don’t have this mechanic which will catch the player, grab their attention and don’t let them go, as a content provider you will not survive”

**Lusine Khudaverdyan,
GR8_TECH**

Similarly, the psychology of being able to pause or rewind a streaming film, means a person knows they can be distracted or engage in simultaneous activities in a way that would not be possible at the cinema.

The same applies to the next evolution of online casino games. Providers will need to have an array of games that can function when a user’s attention is split or frequently distracted in a way they previously may not have taken into consideration even as recently as the early years of online gaming.

“If we watch a movie in the cinema and I start blabbing halfway through, you cannot stand up and ask them to rewind. You can do that on Netflix,” says Ciappara. “It’s a very minor change. But, psychologically, it’s got a huge impact.”

In fact, according to Ciappara, LeoVegas has found players have started to be interested in games with very low levels of user interaction and, somewhat ironically, simultaneously games with significantly higher-than-normal levels of user interaction. The dichotomy is due to different motivations – one wants something they can do simultaneously with something else while the other wants a short, sharp action-packed game that can fill a few spare minutes, he adds.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

This means that as online casino continues to evolve, it is important for providers to have a wide array of games available that can cater to multiple different entertainment requirements – much like Netflix. But like the content provider, simply dumping a mess of

titles in front of the consumer is no longer enough. Users increasingly expect a degree of personalisation and customisation.

AI can help with this process, according to Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH, a provider of betting and gambling software.

“Player attention is changing,” she says. “You have players who expect something really fast, who go into the lobby and expect to already see something relevant to them.”

Also like a good Netflix series, casino iGaming titles need a quick hook to draw people in shortly after starting. “When they go into the game, they need a hook. If you don’t have this hook, if you don’t have this mechanic which will catch the player, grab their attention and don’t let them go, as a content provider you will not survive,” Khudaverdyan says.

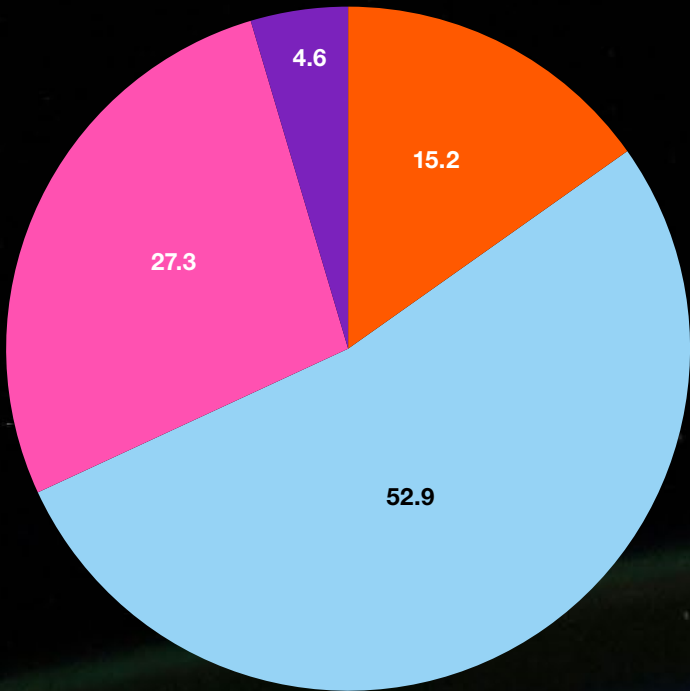
Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft, a casino games provider, says he has observed a similar trend growing and dictating how the next evolution of online casino iGaming would go. He also drew a comparison to other forms of entertainment.

“I think it was Ben Affleck saying that now, when they’re making movies, they make movies in a way that in the first five minutes, something should happen to hook the audience. Because everyone is on their phone just scrolling. And if it’s a slow start then they’re just not interested in the movie anymore and they’re going to switch their attention to something different,” he explains.

The most common gamification mechanics

The most popular gamification mechanics show how operators can motivate players while optimising bonus budgets.

■ Quests ■ Stickers ■ Achievements ■ Tournaments



Source: GR8_TECH

MORE THAN MONEY

The casino industry needs to undertake the same principles when looking at the next iteration of online casino games. The possibility of financial gain and financial risk still differentiates casino games from most other forms of entertainment. But the gap is closing.

New providers in areas such as trading are increasingly creating offerings that move closer to the experience provided by iGaming. And, vice versa, iGaming must start to emphasise the overall entertainment experience as much as the financial potential.

“It’s not just money generated. Players don’t just come to play and win. They come for entertainment as well a lot of the time,” says Khudaverdyan.

This will have a far-reaching impact – touching everything from game development to things like promotion, risk assessment, demographics and how the industry will choose to embrace other new emerging technologies.

04



Changes in taste and time:

How consumers are evolving and iGaming is innovating to match



New innovations are helping online casino gaming match new consumer expectations.



“When we were on desktop, we used to have one large Mars bar. And, over time, as we went to our mobiles, that has become the Mars Mini. So now we have five of them a day rather than having one. But we lie to ourselves about how many calories we are actually consuming”

**Matthias Ciappara,
LeoVegas**

Variety is the spice of life and, apparently, the key to success in content innovation, according to a group of online casino gaming experts.

Changes in society brought about by broader technological advancements, such as the growing global ubiquity of the mobile phone, have forced online casino game providers to change tack. The next generation of online casino games must better adapt to a world where users primarily have split attention, more limited bouts of time to spend on single forms of entertainment, and a wider variety of increasingly similar competing entertainment options.

This is not only due to advancing technology lowering the barriers of entry for companies interested in getting involved in the casino iGaming space. It is also due to other forms of entertainment increasing their use of gamification, meaning iGaming must respond by increasing its entertainment value.

The next generation of games will be defined by increased entertainment value alongside the chance to win big. Games that solely focus on the monetary reward aspect, at the expense of the actual entertainment value to be gained from playing the game, will lose out in an increasingly crowded entertainment space filled with consumers less willing to dedicate large blocks of time solely to one pursuit.

SMALLER MOMENTS, BIGGER EXPECTATIONS

Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at online gambling company LeoVegas, likened the change to moving from eating one candy bar a day to eating five “fun sized” candy bars a day. Previously, consumers would have to undertake one action that tied them to an activity for a set amount of time. That could be going to a physical casino

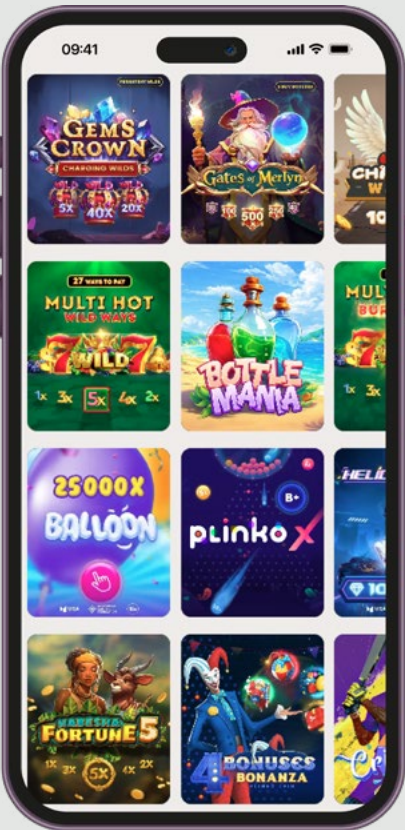
location, or it could have been logging onto a single iGaming site through a desktop setup.

That approach has passed, and most users will now access their iGaming options through a variety of handheld devices like mobile phones or tablets. This lowers the barrier to entry by making casino games more accessible. But it also raises vulnerability by increasing the number and variety of other entertainment options.

“How players play, what kinds of devices they use will always have a huge impact on what the player expects from us,” he says. “When we were on desktop, we used to have one large Mars bar. And, over time, as we went to our mobiles, that has become the Mars Mini. So now we have five of them a day rather than having one. But we lie to ourselves about how many calories we are actually consuming. So our main objective is how to produce a product that the players actually want to engage with because it’s exciting and interesting to them.”

This has led to the emergence of new types of content with new features including greater gamification, higher levels of personalisation and – perhaps most importantly – community features that lead to greater levels of interaction, according to Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft, a casino games provider.

“Players still want to have the experience of winning and the feeling of being a winner. That’s not going to go away. It’s been there since humans have been on this planet,” he says. “But these new types of games are emerging to compete with more than just the gambling sector. They are just another form of entertainment in many ways and have to compete with every other form of entertainment from streaming platforms to mobile games and betting adjacent activities such as crypto or certain stock apps.”



THE RISE OF INTERACTION

An excellent example of this new content innovation is the crash games genre, he adds. These take the core concept of the thrill of winning and the risk of betting but add in further gamification as well as interactive features.

The proliferation of crash games can, in no small part, be attributed to the interactive features of titles such as Aviator, according to Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH, a provider of betting and gambling software.

Innovative features such as “rain”, which occasionally drops free bets into the general chat, create an atmosphere where even if a player is not actively placing a

bet, they are still part of the gameplay, she says. “It creates this kind of vibe that even if you’re not placing a bet, you’re there in the chat. You can see other players interacting and everything and this was a very key feature.”

The social interaction feature is important and is something that was already present in live casino, with players being able to chat with the dealer. But integrating it into other games has produced good results.

There are also other examples of games picking up innovations from other titles. For instance, an already high-performing game like Gates of Olympus added features more common to live casino games and ended up making a product more similar to game show offerings.

“You can see that providers are adapting to [changing circumstances] and you can feel that players need something more interactive,” Khudaverdyan explains. “This is why game shows perform better than some other genres. Players come in multiple times for entertainment. And game shows are really entertaining. It’s not just a dealer sitting and dealing cards that a player bets on. That’s not enough anymore. You need some kind of interaction.”

This is why so many games now feature chats and even smaller chats for players to share in the wins, she says, adding, “The social element is really important for players.” These elements tend to be more important for newer players who are open to experimenting with new types of games.

“For them it needs to be more fun. It’s not just about the mechanics or design or familiarity. It’s about the entertainment part, which is important to keep.”

But there is an important caveat noted by both Khudaverdyan and Ciappara. Not all players want interaction all the time. Longstanding players, for instance, often find interactive elements a distraction.

“Experienced players will have their favourite game and these additional interactions will be an annoyance for them. They’ll say: ‘I know why I came here. I came to play with Bonanza, so just let me play. Don’t distract me.’ They have specific preferences for what they like,” she says.

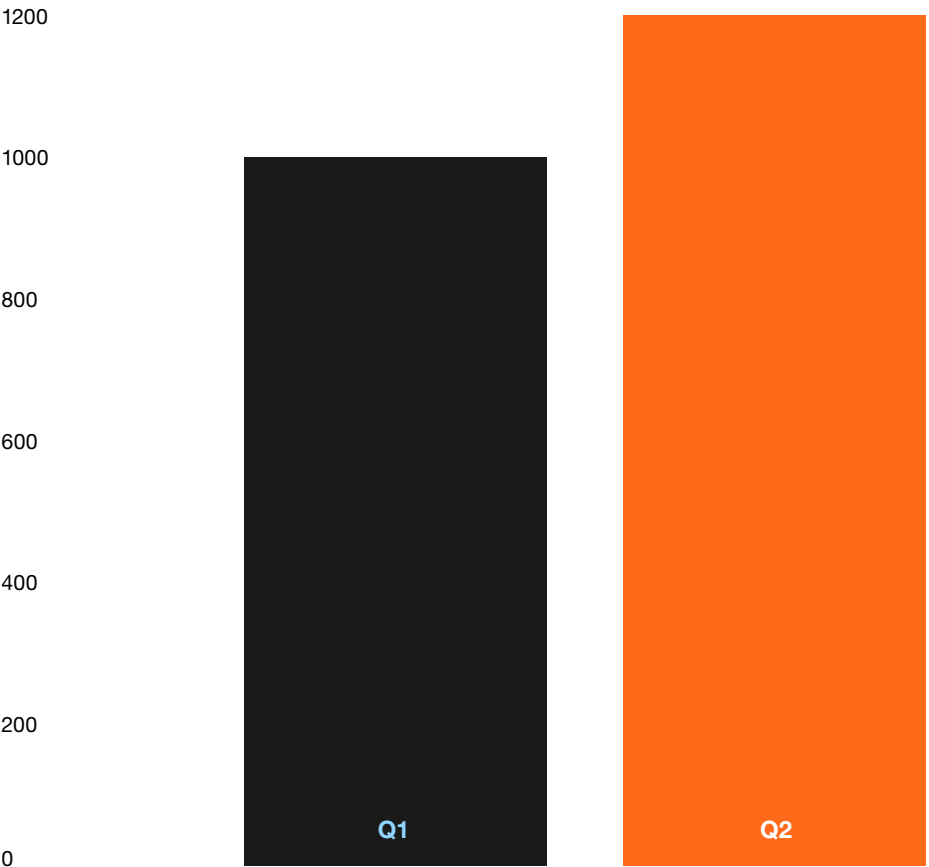
Ciappara, too, notes growing differences in desired levels of interactivity for emerging online casino games. In essence, players are gravitating either towards games with high levels of interaction or they are choosing from the opposite end and looking for mostly passive options.

“We have, on one side, people that are looking for a lot more interaction where they want to feel in control of the whole game. Then, on the other side, we’re seeing a large increase in passive games. And I think neither of them are mutually exclusive,” he says.

The disparity is due to a dichotomy in use. Those that want to see more interaction are often looking for a short sharp piece of action to fill a gap such as waiting for the bus or sitting on the toilet. But others are looking for something to do while consuming a second form of entertainment, such as playing a game while also watching a movie. This is a great illustration of how people’s relationships with casino games is evolving in the face of changing societal and technological factors, and how providers must respond and adapt in their offerings, he adds.

➔ CONTENT PIPELINES ARE ACCELERATING

The average number of casino titles released reached 300 per month on average in the first quarter of 2026, before rising to 400 in the second.



Source: GR8_TECH

INNOVATION THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION

The dual increase at either end of the interaction curve would suggest that games in the middle are losing out. Things like slots, which have a combination of interactive and passive elements could be thought to be among them. However, that is not necessarily the case.

Developers of slots games are learning from other formats and genres in order to add in new innovations and wrinkles. For example, 99 Royale from G.Games is creating a multiplayer slot experience. “It’s one of the most exciting things I’ve seen in a while. Specifically, because it is adding more interaction to the content,” says Ciappara.

Other innovations are also emerging and starting to drive differentiation in online casino games. One example, again illustrated by crash games, is providing players with a greater feeling of transparency and control, says Khudaverdyan.

As opposed to slots, where a player just spins and the game effectively decides where it lands, crash games allow players to choose when to withdraw. Similarly, crash games show the multiplier changing, giving the player an element of transparency, she adds.

“We all know how the industry works. We all know the mechanics under each game. So, we all know there are fixed returns. But this gives an idea of control to the player and players want to have more control over the outcome,” she says. “Of course, this is imaginary control. But this is why crash games boomed in comparison to things like slots where it’s not an option to stop the reels at any time.”

Crash games are also an excellent example of simple innovation through gamification. Elements of gamification are important. But it is even more important to make sure users are engaging with the products properly and understand what they are getting, says Ciappara.

It again ties in with the idea that players require immediate hooks and entertainment. The learning curve has to be short because many players will not have the time or inclination to grapple with a steep one, he adds. This also applies the other way, with players turned off by gamification added solely as a window dressing to an existing game.

“Gamification is another kit, another kind of tool in the tool shed to make a great experience. But it needs to be part of a holistic aspect of how you look at the overall player experience – not just tacking on something for the sake of it,” he says.

“I think if you always keep the customer front and centre, making sure we’re giving them more entertainment value for the money they spend with us, I think that needs to be the underlying philosophy of everything we do.”

Part of this will only be learned through a degree of experimentation. Providers are not going to automatically know the best way to apply new content innovations or concepts picked up from other games or even other entertainment genres. There will be trial and error, with failures as well as successes along the way. But the key thing is to continue to try and innovate and not be afraid to try new things that may fail, he says.

“I think, over time, we will see providers creating greater varieties of different content. Some will work, some won’t. That’s just the nature of the business. But with more competition, we will see more creativity and more innovation coming out, which – ultimately – is better for users,” Ciappara adds.

Altogether, there needs to be a greater variety of new offerings becoming available all the time. This enables providers both to experiment while allowing for the odd failure and to cater to a widening array of player motivations, interests and desired features.

“This is why we need a massive repository with a wide variety of content,” he says. “I think an issue I sometimes see in the industry is they expect a one-size-fits-all approach will work. But people are different. And it’s not just that we’re different as individuals. But we’re even different at various times of the day and disparate times of the year.”

For example, someone could have recently watched a TV show like House of the Dragon. Suddenly they may be looking for a game that is a bit more mythical in terms of content.

“Players’ preferences will vary dramatically, and we need to be able to adapt to their desires. Because ultimately people are fluid. Their behaviour changes from day to day and their interests evolve over time,” he adds. “So, I think it’s essential to make sure whatever we’re building is able to be adaptable with different users in order to fit what they expect in different times.”



05 ↘

Crash games have run their course:

Why developers say to look elsewhere for the next big hit



PvP games and other new emerging product categories might provide the industry with its next big hit title. But there is also a chance a game from a revamped existing category will become the next success.



“While technology is a key enabler, it is ultimately the human element that defines the experience”

Marat Koss, Playtech

The last big hit in online casino games came from the crash game genre. But the next hit is going to come from another genre. The question is: which one?

Crash games were the first to show the industry that alternative game types could perform and demonstrate massive demand, according to Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft, a crash games provider.

Over the course of five years, the genre exploded, and all developers started copying the winning titles until there were more than 500 different crash games available on the iGaming market. But that period has come to an end.

“I would say I have not seen any material innovation. Or any kind of additional innovation on top of what the initial crash games already created,” Gotsadze says. “So in the last five years most of the industry has been stuck copying the popular ones. But I think that has come to an end. People have seen there is not much additional value in creating so many copycats.”

BEYOND CRASH GAMES

That begs the question of what comes next. Gotsadze is of the opinion that innovation will go beyond crash games to areas like non-slot RNG (random number generation) games, with this genre gaining global popularity.

Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH, agrees that crash games have somewhat had their day as the groundbreaking online casino game genre. There were interesting innovations and concepts such as Chicken Road. But the momentum is petering out. The aggressive early growth has faded to stability, she says. “It’s found its niche. It was an experiment and it’s now found its level.”

For her money, the new hit is likely to emerge from PvP games. These provide

many of the content innovations that fit nicely into the evolving demands of consumers with significantly wider entertainment options and – partly as a result of that breadth of options – less time to dedicate to learning or playing any new game.

For one, PvP scores highly on interactivity. PvP titles are also similar to traditional gaming concepts, flattening the learning curve for players and providing a sense of familiarity to multiple types of potential players. For example, some are similar to traditional gaming concepts, appealing to those with experience of existing titles, while others are closer to things like shooting-style games that might appeal to newcomers migrating from more traditional RPG-style shooter games, she says.

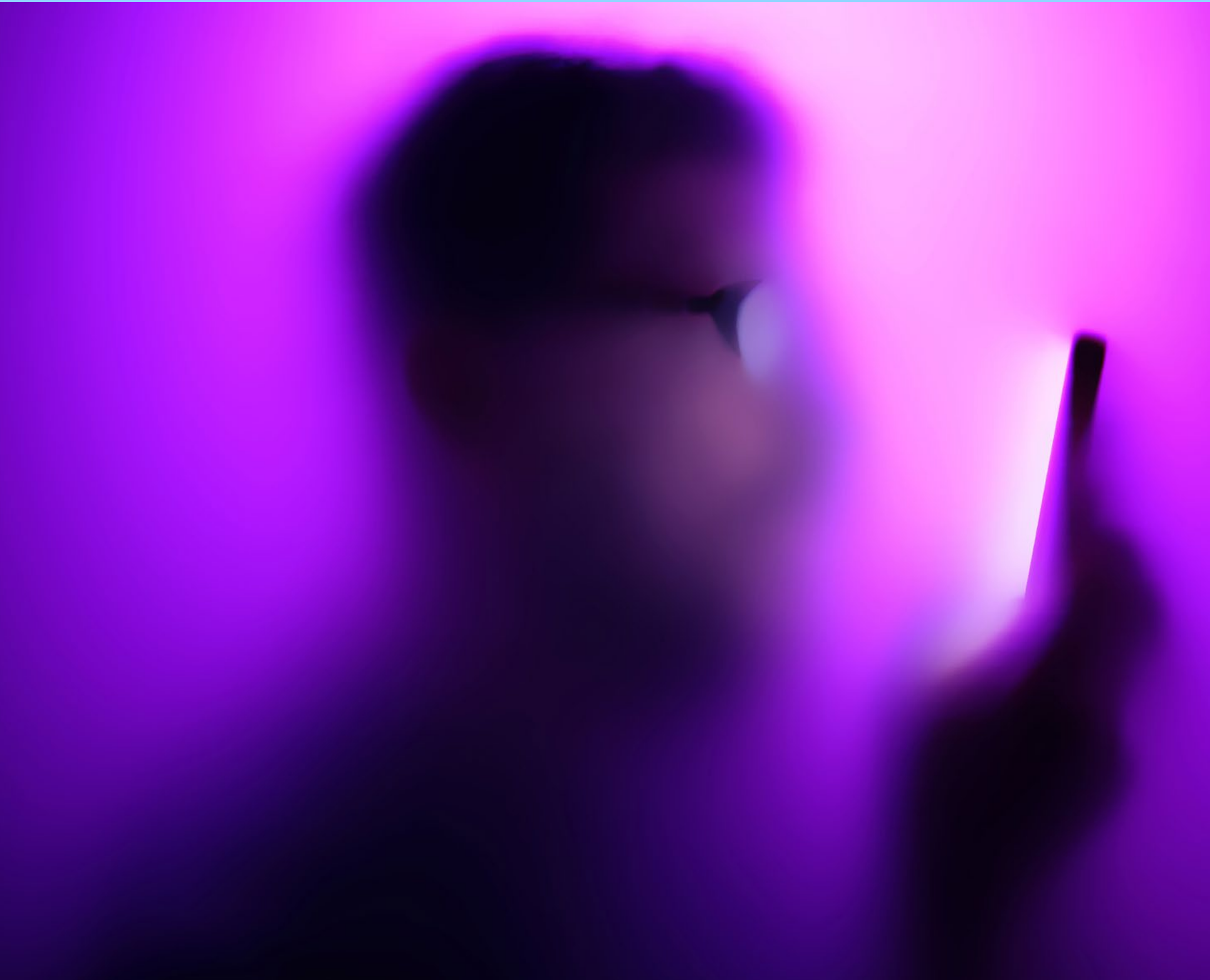
However, there are potential drawbacks. For instance, PvP games tend to be slower compared with traditional games as time is spent waiting for an opponent. This could mean they occupy only a niche rather than achieving broad appeal among casino gamers. But they do offer the interactive elements and the additional entertainment beyond the wagering aspect, she says.

“It’s too early to say how it will perform. But a lot of providers are experimenting with it,” she adds. “It can take a bit more time to navigate through the game. It’s more fun. But it’s slower.”

REINVENTING LIVE CASINO

It could also be that the next hit comes from an existing, established genre. One possible candidate for that is live casino, according to other experts. Live casino already has some advantages that will appeal to consumers as tastes continue to evolve, driven by ongoing changes to wider society and technology.

For one, it is highly interactive already, says Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at online gambling company LeoVegas. Live casino



incorporates passive viewership and chat interactions the same way as has been previously highlighted in crash games. It can remove an element of loneliness that can be a part of other single-player online casino game experiences.

“This is why we see the same drive in other genres – for example more community bets in sportsbook and more streaming for other games,” Ciappara adds. “It’s more of an entertainment even though it’s not the entertainment product itself. You can see what other players are doing. You could see if someone has won. It makes it a bit more fun because you don’t feel alone.”

But, at the same time, the anonymous online element can also work to overcome taboos around gambling that remain in many cultures and parts of the world, Ciappara says. There is, however, an element of the staid about current live casino offerings. That is why the next big hit – if it comes from live casino – will likely include further innovations or twists on top of existing elements, according to Gotsadze. Companies are already developing dual live and digital approaches to live casino classics like roulette. This could take the form of added CGI effects or virtual environments in the games, or simply the addition of digital wheels instead of solely physical ones.

“Technology will enable game providers to innovate more and broaden the borders of what is possible,” he adds. “It’s an enhancement. We will see the human element there with the human presenter. But the background could be computer generated. And I think it enhances the experience quite a bit while AI or other future technological developments could enhance it even more.”

A HUMAN TOUCH

For example, new products such as live dealer are evolving beyond streamed table games into entertainment-led offerings underpinned by gambling mechanics, says Playtech’s Chief Interactive Gaming Officer Marat Koss.

Live dealer’s core strength is its combination of advanced technology with authentic human interaction, which create experiences closer to live entertainment than traditional online gaming. Rather than simply digitising casino games, Koss says the opportunity for the industry lies in developing live, social and continuously evolving formats.

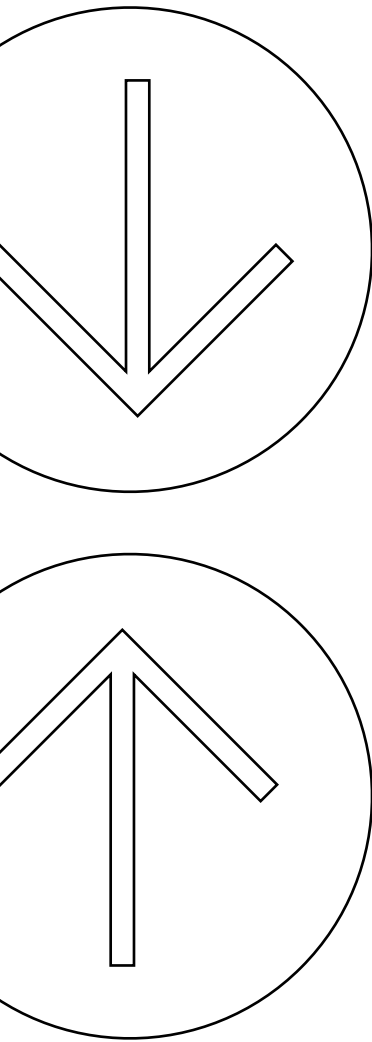
“While technology is a key enabler, it is ultimately the human element that defines the experience,” he explains. “The interaction with players, the role of live chat and the distinct personality each presenter brings are what make the product engaging and prevent it from becoming routine.”

Game shows highlight the potential of this approach, becoming an important driver of engagement. Koss adds that live dealer is not limited to any single style or mechanic, with possibilities ranging from big wheels and colour-based games to marble mechanics, ball machines and fully digital experiences.

Whatever genre produces the next big game, it is likely that it will have been developed with innovations and features learned from other genres and games rather than in isolation. “When we look at things with a black-and-white mentality, I think we miss opportunities right in front of us,” Ciappara says. “I think the more that we’re able to see why users are engaging with one product more than the other, the more we’ll see all genres grow together.



Shifting online casino demographics are a response to shifting tech



Players of online casino games are increasingly global, generally younger and constantly changing.

Changing demographics for online casino 2.0 are inherently tied to technology. Not only have new technologies such as the proliferation of smartphones changed iGaming access – significantly broadening demographics as a result – but exposure to older tech will also determine much about future demographic shifts.

It is important not to forget that although smartphones have been ubiquitous in many countries for quite a few years, that is not the case everywhere in the world. Increasing smartphone access means the global demographics of interest to the online casino sector are rapidly evolving.

This can particularly be seen in African countries where smartphone use is exploding and, consequently, connecting

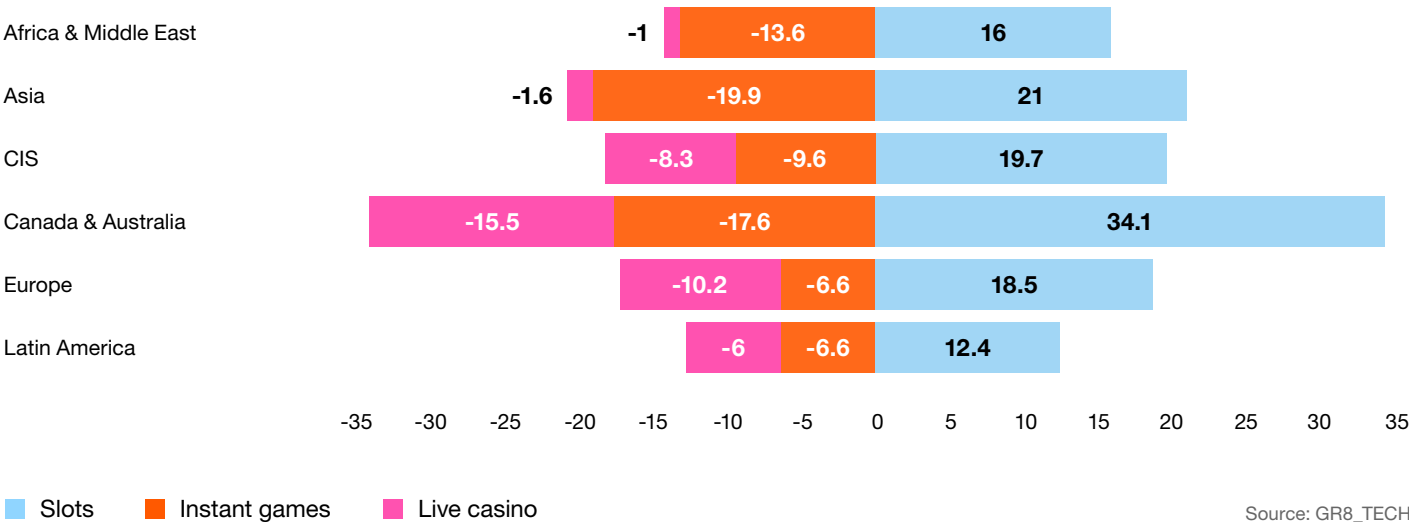
millions of people who previously had no internet access. This is driving overall demographics younger, as African countries tend to have younger populations overall, according to Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft.

This contributes to online casino demographics trending younger – particularly in comparison with the age profile of physical casino goers. But it is important not to draw too broad generalisations, he adds.

A MORE GRANULAR APPROACH
Widening global access and interest in online casino gaming means those in the sector need to take a more granular approach to demographic analysis, according to Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH.

Older players are more slots-heavy; younger players are more diversified

Positive values show where older players over-index; negative values show where younger players over-index. Values are percentage-point gaps, Dec 2025 – May 2026



Source: GR8_TECH



“You need your approaches to grow along with demographics and adapt to them. Because if you exclude this demographic now, after 10 years, they’re going to be the new target demographic and you will not know what to do with this player”

Lusine Khudaverdyan,
GR8_TECH

For example, some providers previously grouped all players originating from Asian countries together into a single category. But this is the wrong approach to take and will grow increasingly costly if companies fail to reassess.

“These are really different demographics. There are major differences between the Korean player, the South East Asian player and the Indian player,” Khudaverdyan says.

This need to take a more granular approach to demographics as technology continues to shift the characteristics of the average player also applies to age. Khudaverdyan broadly agrees that online demographics are trending younger.

But that masks multiple differences at a more micro level. For example, “VIP” and experienced online casino player

demographics are broadly holding steady or actually increasing in age – going against the general trend of online gaming going younger, she says. This means companies need to take different approaches when considering the groups.

“These are your more traditional casino players. They know what they want. And then you have the other segment who is exploring things. This is not the segment who is traditionally a casino player. Maybe they’re a gamer. Maybe they’re a trader,” she adds.

“To keep these segments, you need to give them personalised approaches. You can’t just use the same methods or give them the same bonuses. Your regular segment, they know what the bonuses and games are. They’re good. You just need to retain them. But for new players,

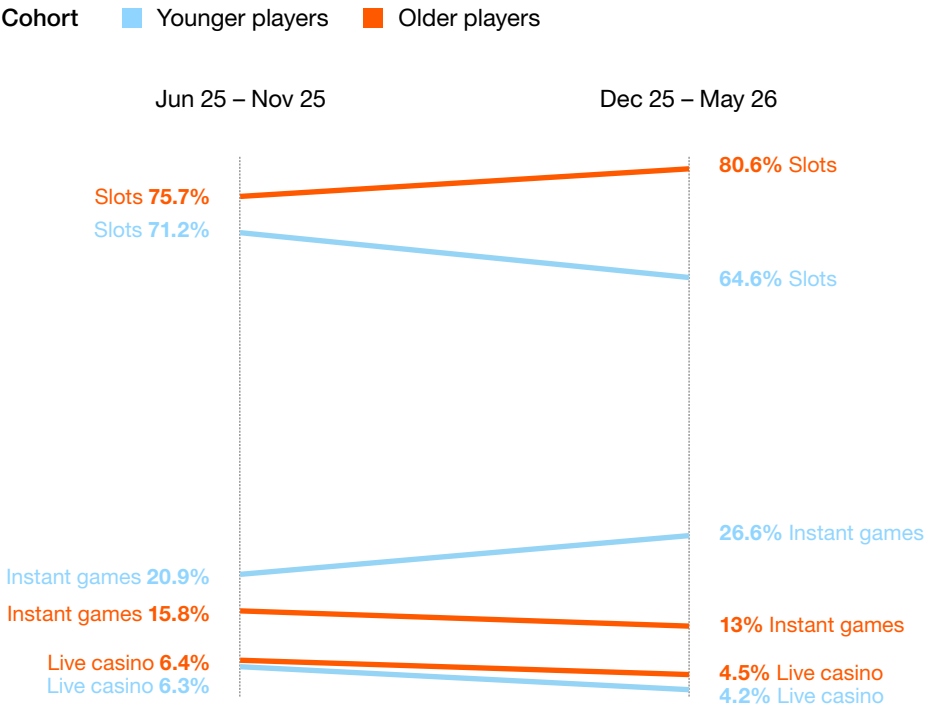
you need to understand why they’ve started playing, say, crash games.”

DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS
Age is also an important factor when examining how to approach, attract and retain different demographics. Gambling activity in general is shifting online. As more people engage with casino gaming globally, many are experiencing online casino games without having had any exposure to their physical counterparts. This is radically changing preferences and approaches – particularly when combined with the fact that many will have had wide exposure to other forms of entertainment such as mobile games, video games or social networks, says Gotsadze.

This means that, for example, a newcomer to online gaming may have a desire to get results quicker, based on the

Africa & Middle East casino preferences

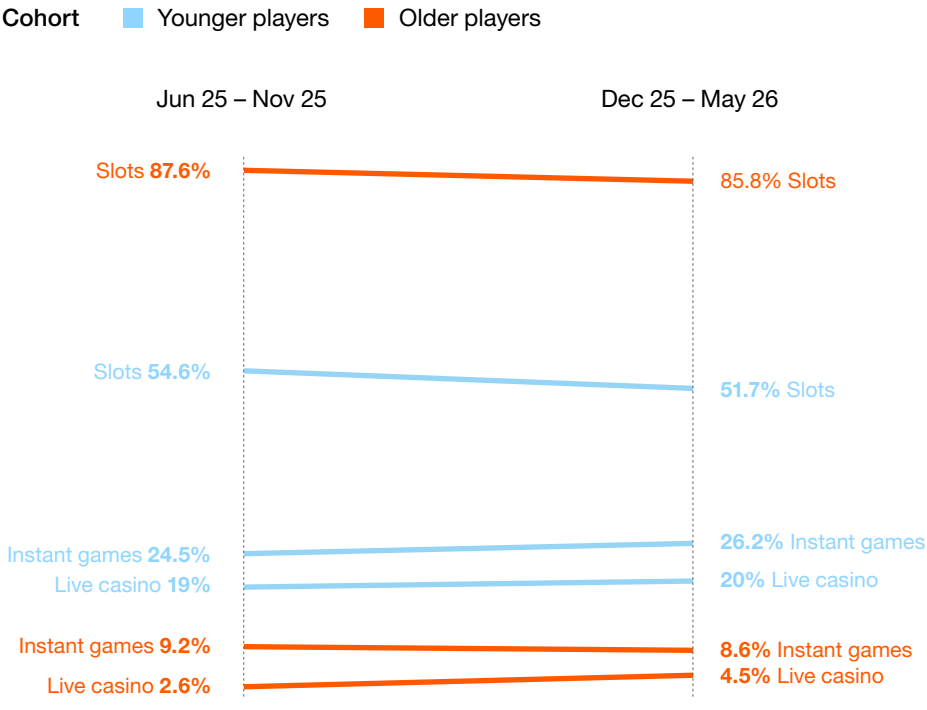
Younger players shift towards instant games; older players become more slots-heavy



Source: GR8_TECH

Canada & Australia casino preferences

Older players are strongly slots-focused while younger players are more diversified



Source: GR8_TECH

games they played before coming into casino gaming, compared with a 50-year-old whose first interactions with gambling were in a casino of slots hall, he adds.

Khudaverdyan has observed the same trends. “Newer players generally want games that are easier to play. They don’t want to have to go into the complexities of the logic of how do slots work? How is the RTP [return to player], multipliers, volatility? They don’t want to go into all of this. This is why they prefer, say, crash games. Because it is faster. You get the results faster and you seemingly have control over it This is what a new player just exploring the online casino segment is looking for.”

But what applies now will not apply in the future. Stakeholders in online casino gaming cannot afford to get stuck taking the same approach to the same demographic time and time again. Similarly, they cannot simply target favoured demographics or ignore those that they are finding it difficult to connect with, appeal to or generally attract.

“You need your approaches to grow along with demographics and adapt to them. Because if you exclude this demographic now, after 10 years, they’re going to be the new target demographic and you will not know what to do with this player,” says Khudaverdyan. “So you have to be open to accept these players as well even though the return on investment in terms of traffic acquisition

would not now be that high. If you look after them, in the long run, they will be your regular casino player. And you never know, maybe they’ll be super high rollers in the future!”

This is because, someone in the 30-40 age bracket today and someone in that same demographic in five or ten years’ time will have been exposed to completely different technologies and forms of entertainments growing up, explains Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at LeoVegas.

“Their expectations are going to be entirely different. If you were brought up on Cartoon Network and PlayStation One, you’ll have completely different expectations than if you were brought

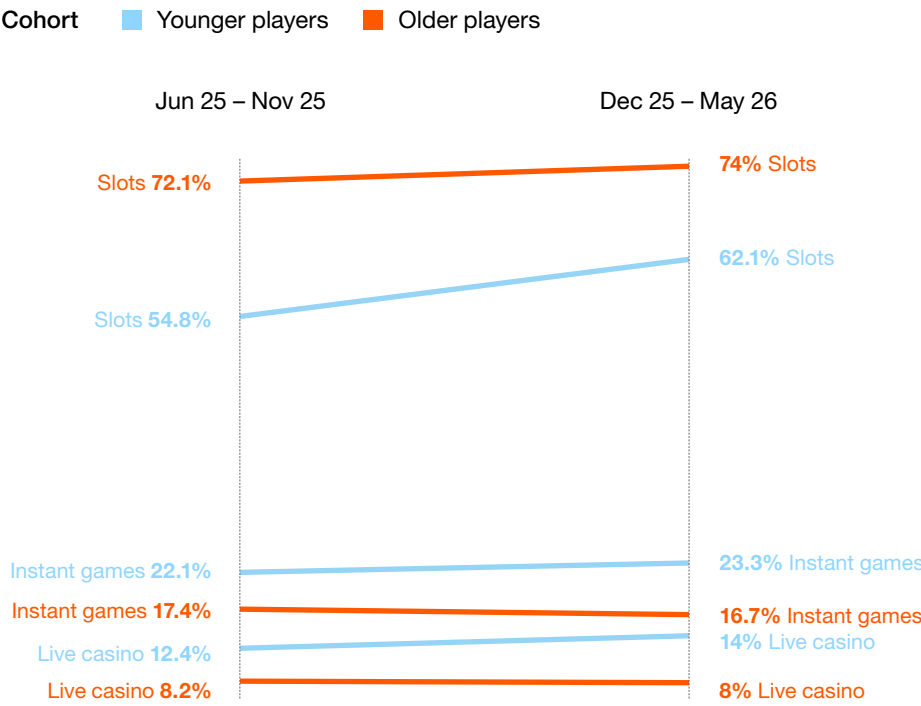
up on Nintendo Switch and YouTube,” he says.

For example, previously products with higher activity – like blackjack – were favoured by demographics such as the 25-34 age bracket. But the people that made up that bracket are ageing into the next one. Their tastes may change as they get older. But those coming in to take their place will certainly have different preferences, he says.

“Different ages will have been exposed to different products and different entertainment mediums. So, this means their expectations are going to be different,” he added. “If you played more Candy Crush, if you played more of some other different games, you’ll have different expectations.”

Latin America casino preferences

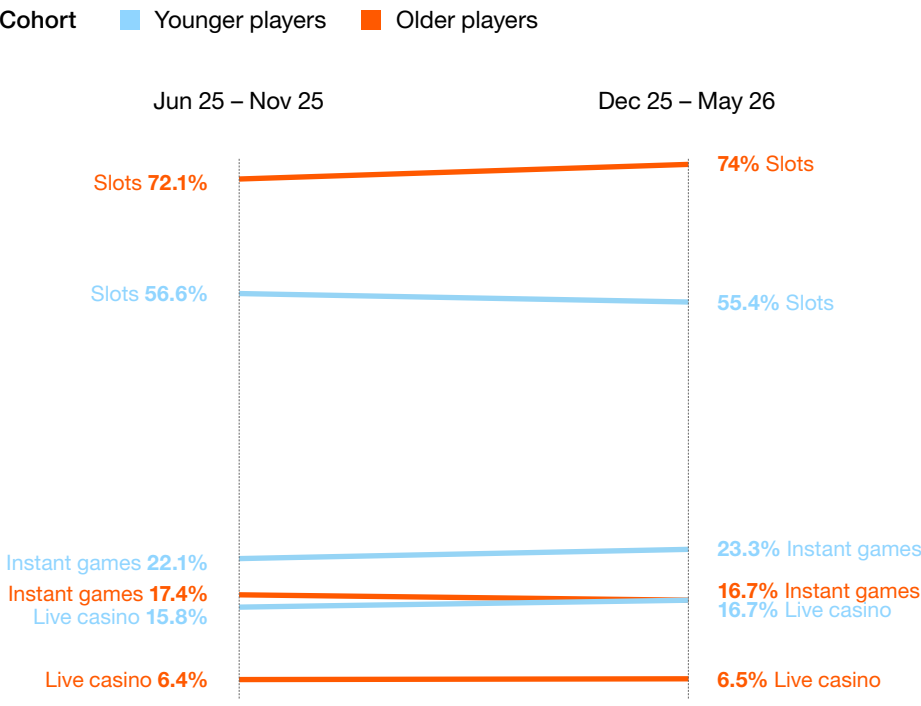
Both older and younger players are increasingly turning to slots



Source: GR8_TECH

Europe casino preferences

Younger players are more balanced; older players remain more slots-focused



Source: GR8_TECH

BEYOND AGE DEMOGRAPHICS

Other demographic markers that can be related to age, but do not necessarily have to follow the same divisions, will also play a role. For example, financial demographics and technological affinity will play a part in the ongoing evolution of the end user.

Younger players will broadly have less disposable income than older players. But this is not going to be a straight linear trend. Younger players without families will often have more disposable income than older counterparts with children. This means how people interact with online gaming products is highly dependent on where they are in life, says Ciappara.

Overall, current uncertainty around the prices of necessities such as petrol also creates greater competition for disposable income, leaving entertainment with a smaller slice of the overall pie. “If there’s going to be more uncertainty this will obviously impact on how people look at entertainment,” he adds.

Meanwhile, levels of technological affinity will also have an impact on how end users will evolve going forward. For example, users who tend to be more engaged with technology are likely to have greater experience with alternative online entertainment options such as prediction markets, crypto and stock trading. It will also likely affect their social media preferences and what they derive from those platforms.

Things like prediction markets are seeing incredible growth and will have a massive impact on online gambling, says Ciappara. Such platforms – where users can effectively place wagers on pretty much any outcome, often with a peer-to-peer element – have, in many ways, rebranded what gambling is and broken down taboos around the activity, he adds.

But, at the same time, there is a significant lack of player protection in prediction markets. “I saw it compared to bottomless brunch recently, which I liked,” says Ciappara. “If you went and advertised an event as a way to get drunk in the morning, people would perceive it in a certain way. But if you frame it as ‘bottomless brunch’, it changes the

perception of people. That’s what’s happened with prediction markets. The adoption has changed because of the framing that has been created is different.”

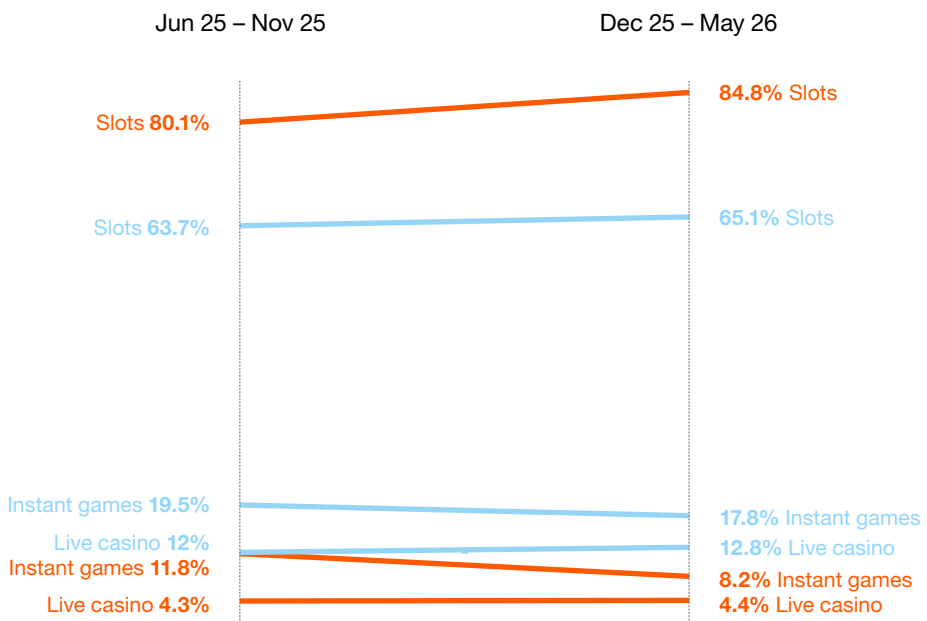
But the same care needs to be applied and more focus needs to be placed on responsible gambling, as people perceive it as either less risky or not gambling at all. And that has a knock-on effect for online casino gaming, he says.

The same sort of effect can be seen through other near-gambling online products such as crypto and new apps that enable people to effectively place bets on whether stocks will rise or fall without actually trading those stocks, says Gotsadze. The people most likely

CIS casino preferences

Slots are dominant across older and younger cohorts, though there is more diversified play in the youthful demographic

Cohort ■ Younger players ■ Older players

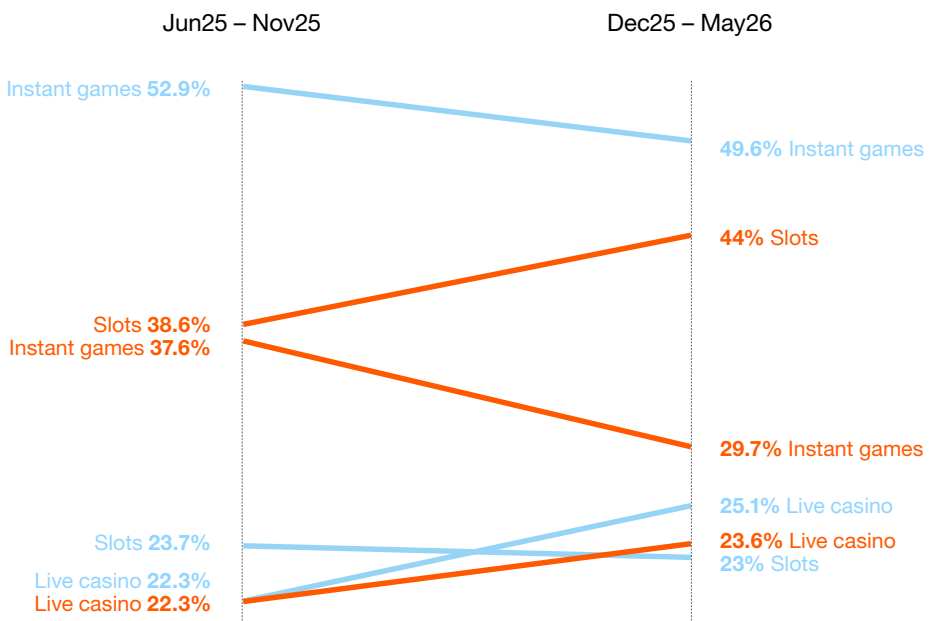


Source: GR8_TECH

Asia casino preferences

Instant games more popular among younger players as older consumers embrace slots

Cohort ■ Younger players ■ Older players



Source: GR8_TECH

to move into actual casino games from these sorts of activities are likely to be more technologically savvy.

“It plays on the same innate need to be a winner,” he continues. “We’re competing for attention with these platforms in many ways. So, what we need to do is provide an experience for the end user to come into our ecosystem, make a payment to play our games and stay.”

These demographic factors will play just as important a part in player retention as they do in player acquisition, says Khudaverdyan. Broadly, newer players will be more open to trying new games and experimenting. A long-time traditional casino game player is unlikely to want to try new PvP-type games. But if providers do not integrate new types of games, such as PvP, and show interest in new demographics, they will struggle with player retention further down the line.

“This is something which could shape the future of iGaming,” she adds. “Maybe in the future we’ll see live casino declining even more. And for example, crash and PvP becoming the next mainstay trend of online casino.”

Providers that have not adapted and trialled these new types of games will then be at a major disadvantage.

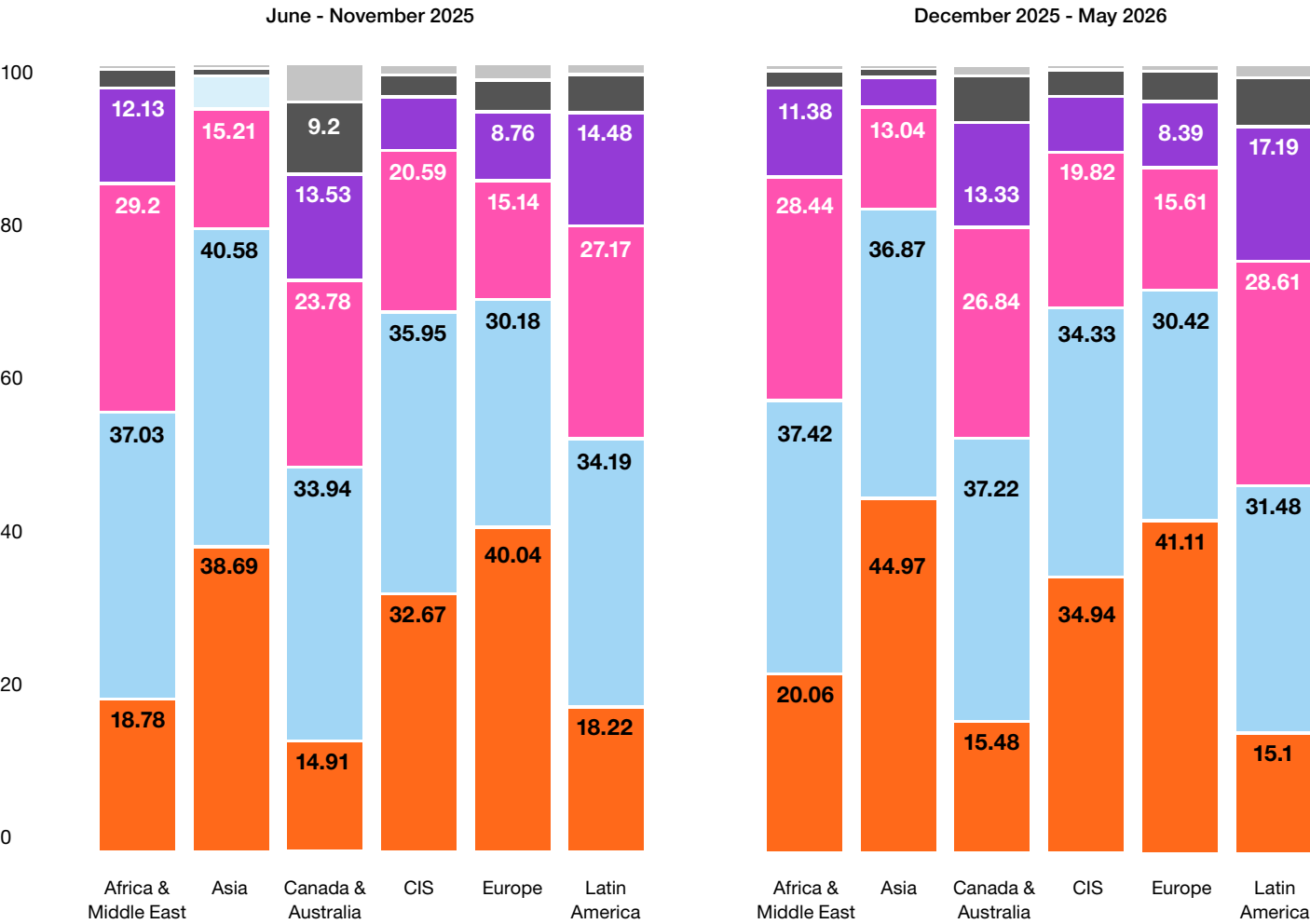
“We see a more mature demographic for live casino. But after 10 years with this demographic, will they still play? And, if not, who will play instead of them and what will they be playing in its place? If you want to be ahead of these trends, you need to be open to integrating new things, experimenting with new mechanics, and trying new types of games. And the only way you can do that is to try to integrate it and listen to the markets.”



Gambling is a young person’s game

Percentage of players by age demographic

18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 66-99

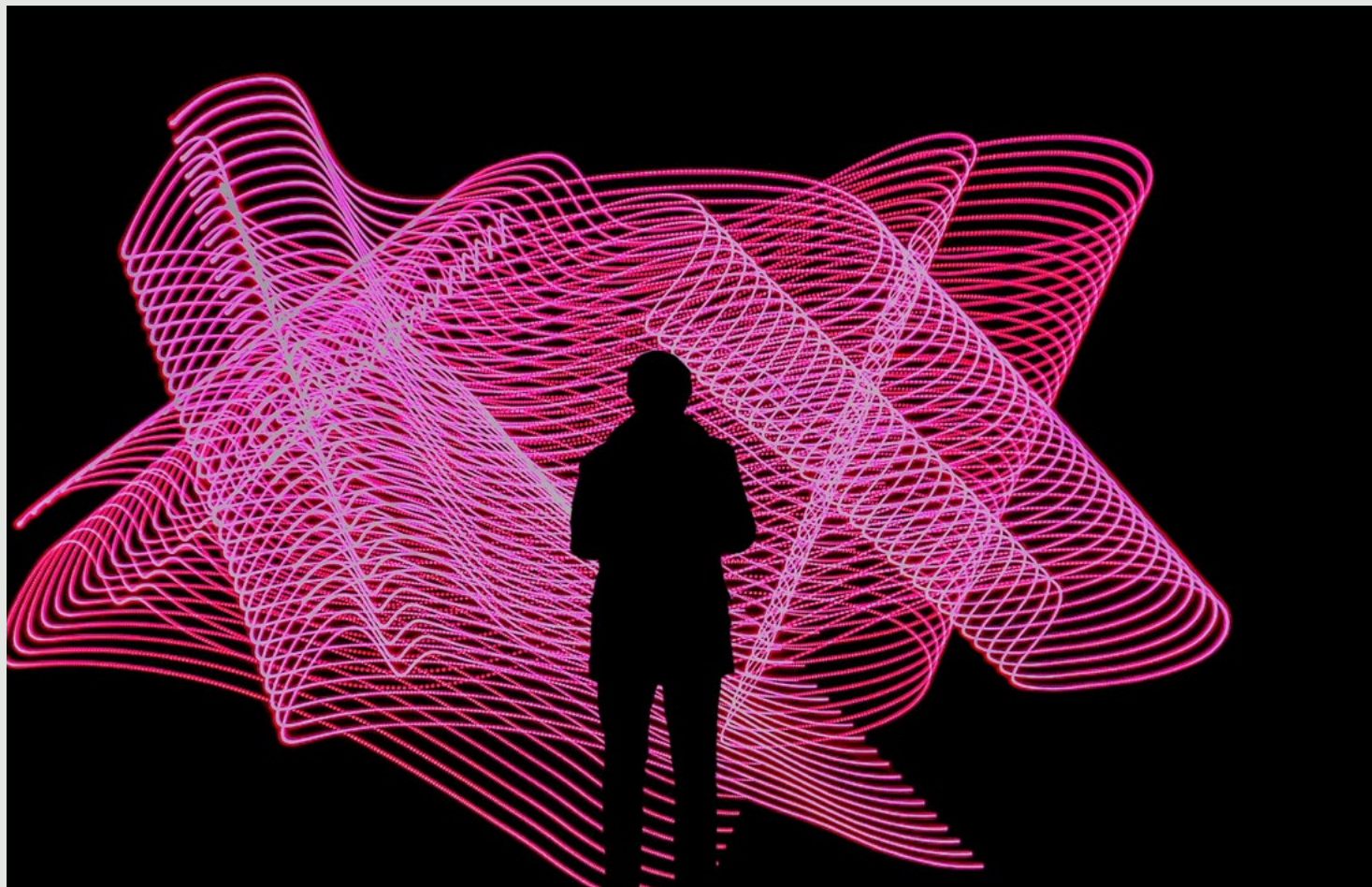


Source: GR8_TECH



AI and the art of game development:

How machine learning is changing the online casino industry



“AI will lower the barriers of entry for competition, which will drive innovation, which is good. And at the same time, the analysis aspects of AI will also help people to improve the quality of products”

**Guga Gotsadze,
SmartSoft**

AI is lowering entry barriers to game development – increasing competition and driving innovation.

The biggest impact AI and machine learning will have on the future of online casino games is in the development process, experts predict.

After games have been developed, AI will also help with areas involving large amounts of data that need to be processed. This includes things like providing personalisation to users, managing player relationships, bonus campaigns, risk analysis and responsible gambling.

AI will boost innovation by increasing competition through lowering barriers to entry. This will be its single most important contribution to the iGaming space, says Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft.

LOWERING THE BARRIERS

The use of AI lowers costs for developers in terms of testing and the decision-making process, Gotsadze adds. “With AI, you can do things much cheaper and with fewer people, so you can do more with the same amount of resources. It will lower the barriers of entry for competition, which will drive innovation, which is good. And at the same time, the analysis aspects of AI will also help people to improve the quality of products.”

AI will enable development teams to test more things out, agrees Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at LeoVegas. However, he does not think it necessarily means costing jobs at the development stage – merely shifting workload from data analysis and development to validation and creation.

“I think it’s more trying to adopt a philosophy of AI that it isn’t there to replace people. It’s a tool to allow us to do more than we ever had,” he says.

As part of that, development cannot happen in isolation. Anything AI produces must still be run through humans. Otherwise, it runs the risk of making sense for a machine but not actually working the way a human would typically expect a game to function.

“AI is advancing at an incredible rate. But it does still require human expertise to validate it,” he adds. “The end goal is always the user experience. Technology is a means to an end. But we have to remember that, ultimately, our main objective is delivering the best product and you need to keep that philosophy in mind.”

THE HUMAN TOUCH

There is also the issue of the “uncanny valley”. This relates more to design and presentation than gameplay but is just as important to overall product development. People can often tell when something has been designed with the help of AI. And there remains both a conscious and unconscious resistance to it.

This again requires a human-centric approach to moderate how things look, feel and then play.

“People can feel when something is computerised with AI. It becomes a bit annoying, I think, where it feels like – in some areas – nothing is developed or produced by an actual person,” Ciappara says. “Ultimately, whatever we’re delivering with these products the idea is this: Technology is always going to evolve. We’re going to have loads of our advancements in our lifetimes. But the main thing is that technology is an enabler. It’s not the end goal.”

So, there are drawbacks and caveats to keep in mind when developing games and products with the help of AI. There is also obviously potential for other harms to

result from it. But those potential negatives should not detract from the positives it could also potentially deliver.

Gotsadze likens it to any other major technological advancement that had a significant impact on society – for example social media. “They brought a lot of good stuff. But at the same time, a lot of negative and adverse effects. So, you always need to manage those,” he says.

Assuming any pitfalls can be successfully navigated, the question then becomes what happens with the larger number of games from the greater number of providers able to create titles with the aid of AI.

“We’re reducing the cost and barrier to entry for a developer and for a platform or operator,” says Ciappara. “It’s cheaper than ever to create a white-label product. And a decent one at that. So, I think the obvious question, from a market perspective, then becomes: How can you differentiate?”

He likens it to supermarkets. If all supermarkets in an area sell essentially the same products, what makes a consumer choose one over the other assuming convenience is removed from the equation? “A lot of the time, and in our industry, it’s always been who has the better offer. But I think this will shift over time to who can give the best experience,” he says.

However, if numerous providers and platforms can deliver a similar positive experience, what is the differentiator? This is not a new issue for the sector, with sameness having plagued the online casino industry for years. “I think then it becomes more of a competition of who can create something innovative and something that can actually separate them from the rest,” he added. “As we evolve, that becomes a much more important question for companies to answer.”

BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

It could be that AI provides an answer here too. AI and machine learning could produce a basic game with fun interactive gameplay and then use data analysis to provide a personalised skin over it for users – giving a measure of differentiation and personalisation to offerings.

This is already happening to a degree in terms of lobby presentation, says Ciappara. AI is analysing engagement mechanics to make sure suggestions are relevant to users.

“From a recommendation perspective – and segmentation – these models allow us to be able to understand our users a lot better than before and be able to tailor experiences a lot better,” says Ciappara.

Personalised lobbies have worked really well so far, says Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH. Personalisation and recommendations have even extended from lobbies into games themselves, she adds. “I’ve

seen multiple companies implementing mechanics where you have a sidebar that opens, and it will list games with similar mechanics or multipliers and so on. And this is all done through analytics and AI.”

Such technologically driven innovations can help to build a more relevant product. And relevance is key to retaining players. “Otherwise, you can spend a lot of money on traffic, but you won’t keep the player,” she adds.

Further areas where AI is starting to be implemented include customer relationship management (CRM) and bonus campaigns, where it has proven to be a real force multiplier. Though it is a relatively new adoption that is not yet widespread throughout the industry, she says.

“If you’re a manager, you create a bonus campaign and you want to choose the games that are most profitable for you,” Khudaverdyan explains. “AI can really analyse the data, take factors into account and say, ‘You’re creating a bonus for this provider, choose these games because they are marginally better for you.’

“You already know that just a generic welcome bonus will not work. And AI can help with analysing this data.”

But overall, AI remains at the starting line in many ways within the sector. Numerous companies are adopting it. But it still has significant potential to scale, says Khudaverdyan. “You need to start small. It’s an experiment, as everything related





“ People can feel when something is computerised with AI. It becomes a bit annoying, I think, where it feels like – in some areas – nothing is developed or produced by an actual person ”

Matthias Ciappara,
SmartSoft

to AI is initially an experiment. And then you see the results and you scale. But you need to be really intentional when you implement AI into something. You need to be ready to listen to players and see how they’re reacting to changes and then only make these kinds of data-driven decisions on how you want to scale AI,” she says.

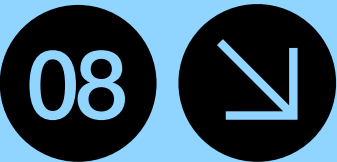
Making those data driven decisions is an issue right now for many companies. The amount of data is vast, and it can be very hard to analyse it solely with people, she explains. “You can have a big team of analysts to take on the data. But with the help of AI, it’s much faster.”

This is why the expansion of the use of AI into other areas could be significant for online casino. The initial implementation has been largely in market segmentation and risk management in order to identify patterns earlier.

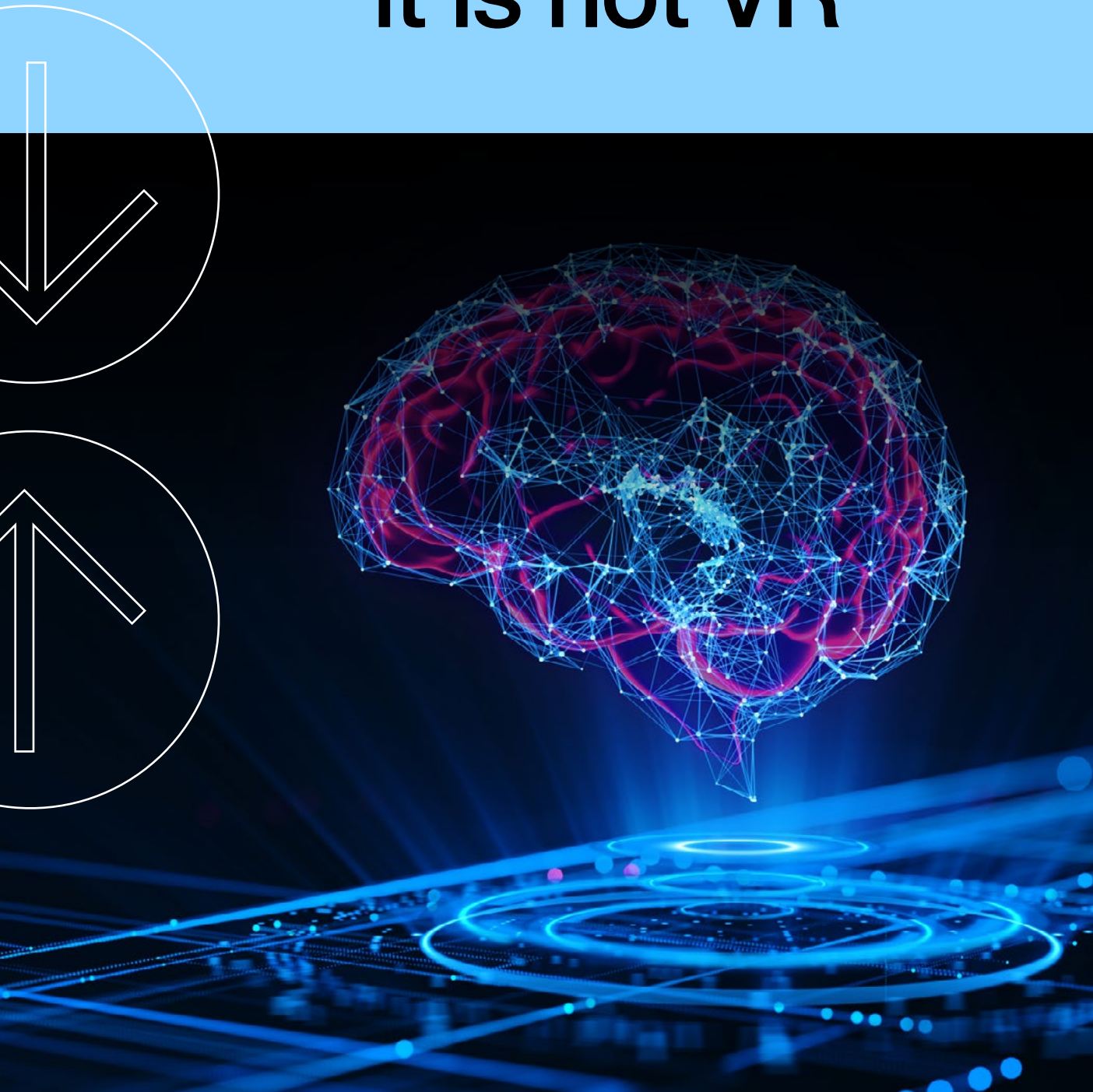
Though, again, it is important to remember that any AI implementation still requires a human element. AI can help in identifying early trends. But it still requires a human intuition to decide what to do or how to act on the identified patterns, she adds.

And it’s important to remember the impact AI can have on eliminating issues before they crop up as well as improving user experience. Pattern identification and spotting developing trends early is incredibly useful for responsible gambling, says Ciappara. It can be used to identify players starting to exhibit certain behaviours much earlier and course-correct automatically and at a significantly faster speed, he says.





The future is here, and it is not VR



Emerging technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality as well as new devices such as wearables have failed to live up to the initial hype and it is hard to see how they will have a significant impact on online casino gaming.

The emerging technology that will transform online casino gaming has yet to emerge – at least not in its final form.

Emerging tech such as virtual reality or augmented reality (VR/AR) as well as other innovations such as wearable tech have often been predicted to be the next big thing to drive forward casino iGaming. But none of them have lived up to the hype yet. And there are serious reasons why they may never do so.

THE VR PROBLEM

VR/AR has been the subject of significant hype for a number of years without ever taking off in a mainstream way, according to Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft. Things like Pokémon GO were a success. But other than that, the systems have not gained much mainstream traction and have fallen short of expectations. “We’ve been waiting a long time for VR or AR. But it hasn’t really materialised in a way that we anticipated,” he says.

Player adoption has been slow, and the industry would need to see market penetration of upwards of 60% for it to really be a viable mainstream strategy, he says. Instead, it remains very niche and specific to a particular demographic, adds Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at LeoVegas.

And there are other issues too. The price of the systems will continue to limit mainstream uptake. Meanwhile, the systems that are currently on the market are controlled by a select few companies that limit what can be done with them. “It’s not just difficulty in getting market adoption but also a difficulty in how the industry works in properly knowing that you’d be severely restricted,” Ciappara says. “You are completely at their mercy from that perspective.”

As a technology, VR/AR also runs counter to the trends being seen in online casino, he adds. Currently, iGaming is being led by tech to become more accessible, easier to access in small bursts of time and better able to agilely compete with other forms of mainstream entertainment.

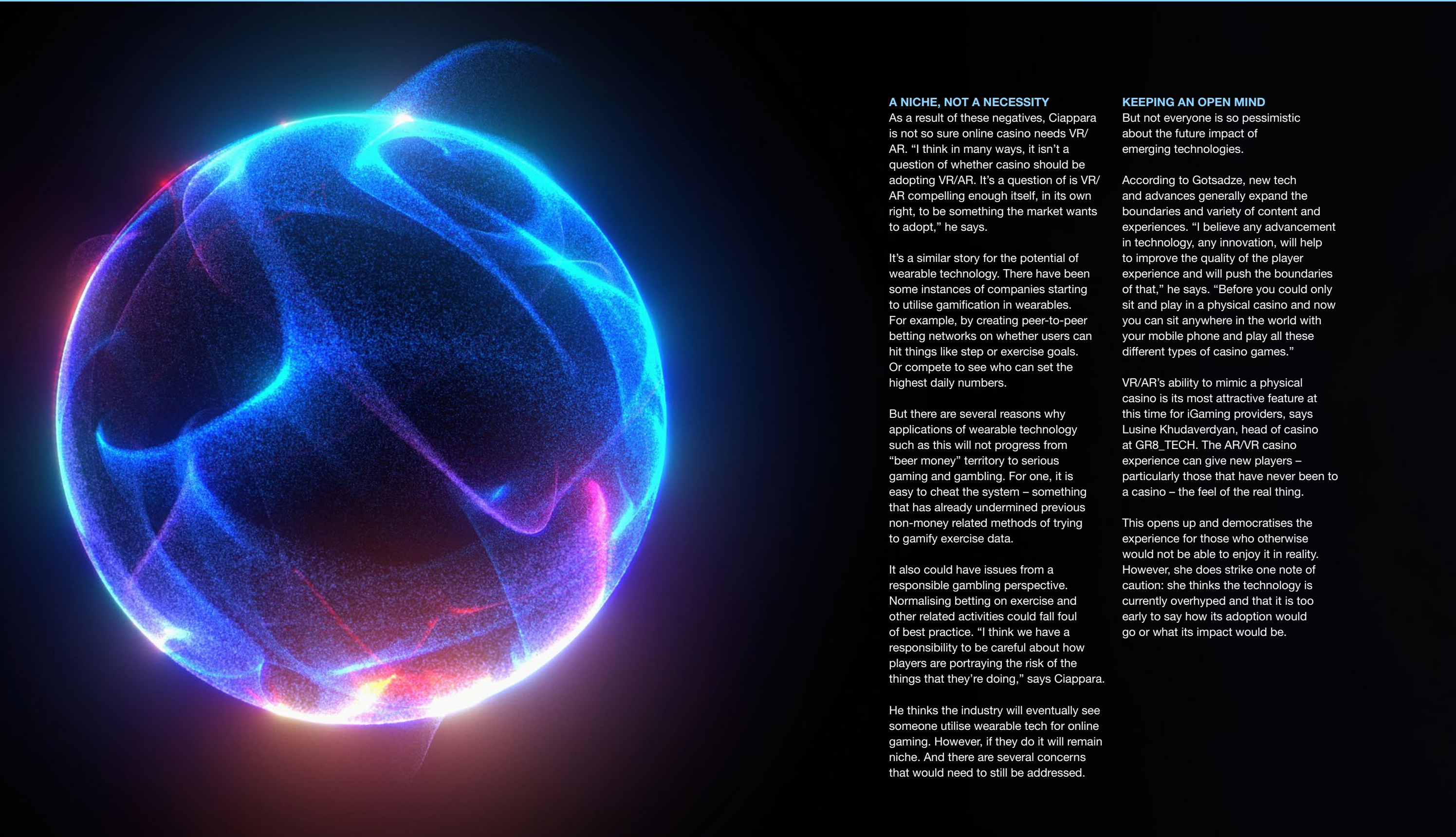
In many ways, VR/AR is a throwback to an earlier time, as users would have to carve out and set aside a block of time in which to use the technology rather than spontaneously picking up a device and having a go for a few minutes.

“You need to be in a specific mindset with a specific amount of time to be able to say, ‘I’m going to plug in and put my equipment on.’ You’re not going to be sitting on a bus, pulling out your VR gear and putting on a full headset,” he says.



“I think in many ways, it isn’t a question of whether casino should be adopting VR/AR. It’s a question of is VR/AR compelling enough itself, in its own right, to be something the market wants to adopt”

Matthias Ciappara, LeoVegas



A NICHE, NOT A NECESSITY

As a result of these negatives, Ciappara is not so sure online casino needs VR/AR. “I think in many ways, it isn’t a question of whether casino should be adopting VR/AR. It’s a question of is VR/AR compelling enough itself, in its own right, to be something the market wants to adopt,” he says.

It’s a similar story for the potential of wearable technology. There have been some instances of companies starting to utilise gamification in wearables. For example, by creating peer-to-peer betting networks on whether users can hit things like step or exercise goals. Or compete to see who can set the highest daily numbers.

But there are several reasons why applications of wearable technology such as this will not progress from “beer money” territory to serious gaming and gambling. For one, it is easy to cheat the system – something that has already undermined previous non-money related methods of trying to gamify exercise data.

It also could have issues from a responsible gambling perspective. Normalising betting on exercise and other related activities could fall foul of best practice. “I think we have a responsibility to be careful about how players are portraying the risk of the things that they’re doing,” says Ciappara.

He thinks the industry will eventually see someone utilise wearable tech for online gaming. However, if they do it will remain niche. And there are several concerns that would need to still be addressed.

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

But not everyone is so pessimistic about the future impact of emerging technologies.

According to Gotsadze, new tech and advances generally expand the boundaries and variety of content and experiences. “I believe any advancement in technology, any innovation, will help to improve the quality of the player experience and will push the boundaries of that,” he says. “Before you could only sit and play in a physical casino and now you can sit anywhere in the world with your mobile phone and play all these different types of casino games.”

VR/AR’s ability to mimic a physical casino is its most attractive feature at this time for iGaming providers, says Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH. The AR/VR casino experience can give new players – particularly those that have never been to a casino – the feel of the real thing.

This opens up and democratises the experience for those who otherwise would not be able to enjoy it in reality. However, she does strike one note of caution: she thinks the technology is currently overhyped and that it is too early to say how its adoption would go or what its impact would be.

09 ↘

Lessons to be learned:

Key takeaways from the evolution of online casino 2.0



Changing consumer tastes and demographics, driven by technological change, mean the next generation of online casino games must place greater emphasis on entertainment, personalisation and interaction, while also giving users a stronger sense of control and more tailored experiences.



“Not every hype or every new thing needs to be adapted to. But when it comes to content and new game mechanics, you need to adapt to the idea that it’s not just about the betting content. It’s about more entertainment. It’s about personalisation. It’s about a custom experience for each player”

**Lusine Khudaverdyan,
GR8_TECH**

The next big online casino game will not be a crash game, experts predict. Instead, the most likely bet is something from the PvP realm, with a game like 99 Royale from G.Games being a strong contender.

This is because a game like that offers many of the innovations that are tapping into changing consumer tastes in online casino gaming. These include a high degree of interaction, a community feeling, significant entertainment value without a steep learning curve, personalisation options, an illusion of transparency and control, and an intriguing use of gamification to build on an already established, familiar genre and create something new.

Such a game would likely follow the same design principles experts contributing to this report recommend readers take away from it. The idea is to learn from other categories – both within and outside online casino games – in order to create a new offering that follows the key technological trends that have risen to prominence in response to the advent of the smartphone.

Really, smartphones have changed everything for iGaming. That is why entertainment must now take centre stage and monetary incentives are no longer quite the top dog. It is also why some new technological responses to changing consumer tastes can be a double-edged sword – interaction being one example.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

There are going to be end users who want a high degree of interaction because they crave some form of community contact or because they want a short, sharp high activity game to fill a few spare minutes.

Then there are users who want almost no interaction because they are experienced casino gamers who know what games they like and how to play them.

They do not want nuisance interruptions disturbing their game flow. Alternatively, they may be users consuming multiple forms of entertainment at the same time who do not want a large amount of interaction that would draw too much attention away from whatever else they are doing.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TRENDS

It is important for providers to adapt to evolving consumer tastes, according to Lusine Khudaverdyan, head of casino at GR8_TECH. But if they have one key takeaway from these features, it is that they need to be discerning in what they adapt to and how they adapt.

“You need to choose what to adapt,” she says. “Not every hype or every new thing needs to be adapted to. But when it comes to content and new game mechanics, you need to adapt to the idea that it’s not just about the betting content. It’s about more entertainment. It’s about personalisation. It’s about a custom experience for each player.”

The industry is becoming more personalised and listening more to players. They are increasingly ready to explore and experiment with new things, she adds.

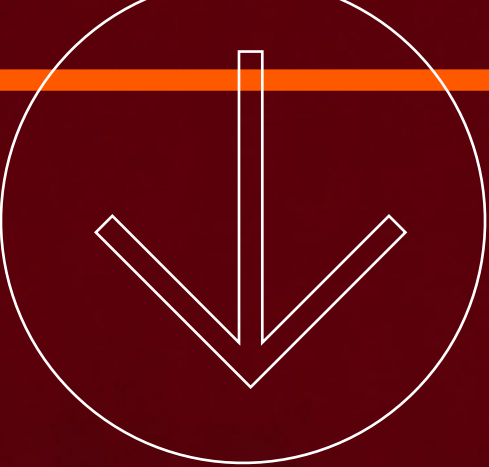
This is why providers will need to ensure a wide variety of games to cater for different player preferences. They will also need to maintain a large enough portfolio to continually evaluate which new titles are working and which are not – in almost a throw-it-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks approach.

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Doing so will become easier for providers as competition increases among developers due to the use of emerging technologies such as AI and machine learning. These innovations are rapidly lowering the barriers to entry created by cost for game developers. And as more developers look to get involved, competition – and therefore game innovation – will increase.

They may also create negatives. But this is to be expected with any major technological development, according to Guga Gotsadze, CEO of SmartSoft. His key takeaway is that any investment in technology is good overall, but not universally so. It will have negative effects that must be managed and mitigated.

As those effects are taken into consideration, those involved in iGaming should also focus on quality not quantity, according to Matthias Ciappara, head of product – gaming experience at LeoVegas. “I think the approach we have taken in the industry for some time – of pushing out quantity – is now ending. I think, over time, we will see a shift where quality starts becoming more important,” he says.



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