

iGB

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The Game Safety Institute aims to bring a more holistic approach to player safety. This means the industry can accept responsibility for its products and actions by understanding their true impact on the player. The real change here is looking at the product aspect of risk, rather than assuming the player is the risky part. What's not to love?

The responsible gambling side of the industry has grown in recent years, with many companies springing up devoted to analysis and prevention, or with an alternative way of looking at the issue.

Despite many excellent people doing great work in the space, it's questionable whether any progress has been made for players regarding effective intervention.

Enter Sarah Ramanauskas and Simo Dragicevic. Ramanauskas is well-known in the industry through years of work with the likes of Gambling Integrity, BetKnowmore and The Howard League. Dragicevic is perhaps best known for his time at Playtech, after founding BetBuddy. Their combined skills and a side-step from the norm in terms of approach looks like a very promising route to successful, long-term player care.

The pair's new project, the [Game Safety Institute](#) (GSI) is aiming to incorporate all aspects of the player experience to produce a multilayered picture of the combined causes of harm to individuals. It's an ambitious, exciting project, but does the industry really need another RG-focused business? Ramanauskas says yes, because their approach is both novel and valid. But what is it?



SIMO DRAGICEVIC AND SARAH RAMANAUSKAS, CO-FOUNDERS OF THE GAME SAFETY INSTITUTE

“The Game Safety Institute is a starting point for any operator that wants to understand how to make the gambling products available to their consumers safer to play with, more entertaining, more useful and in line with their customer needs,” she says.

“We have brought together a whole load of research insight, a lot of which Simo has contributed to and started to flip the story from ‘We’ve got some products that people want to play’ to, ‘We’ve got people who want to play, what are the safest products to give them?’”

The key here seems to be a shift of focus. Where historically the onus has been on the player to opt out, or choose the tools to look after themselves, GSI is looking to incorporate safety mechanisms at all points and levels of interaction in a way that the player will not even be aware of.

Ahead of the game

“If we think about consumer protection and regulation, most of the focus has been around the player,” explains Dragicevic. “And understanding the player, from a variety of perspectives, is really key from a regulatory perspective.

“Take the UK, where there’s been a lot of focus on responsible gambling tools, making those more efficient and better. With Gamstop you can self-exclude through one point across all online operators; there is the land-based equivalent in SENSE.

“What you’re seeing is this real tightening of the regulations around the player and it will reach a point where there’s only so much you can do.”

Dragicevic adds that other elements come into play here – such as the environment, the product and whether the player suffers from harmful gambling behaviour.

So where does an idea like the GSI come from?

“We met for lunch – fish and chips – and both agreed that product safety is where the next big thing will be,” says Dragicevic. “We’re probably a bit ahead of the game with this, but we can see it coming quite quickly.”

Being ahead of the game, however, can be both a blessing and curse. It means the pair have to establish the idea and prove it can work without killing a business and also to explain it.

But it’s also an opportunity to create the standards by which everything subsequent is measured and that’s a golden opportunity. So what’s the starting point for such a new concept?

“We started off by sending out a survey to some of our favourite lottery and casino operators around the world asking about product risk and product safety: is this important to you?,” Dragicevic continues. “What do you think? What are you using at the moment to decide whether or not your products are safe? Most of them came back and said ‘this is a really important topic, we don’t think we’re necessarily doing it terribly well’.

“We then worked on establishing our ground rules, something that means that we are a centre of excellence, creating the brand that people will come to when they want to think about product safety. And so the Game Safety Institute was born.”

Game type

Think about roulette in its many forms. The basics of the game are the same across many platforms, but the potential harms for a player change radically from game to game.

In a casino, you have people around you, a dealer trained (in theory) to be looking out for problem behaviours and a limited number of spins per minute; a live dealer platform might have more frequent spins, but none of the social safeties that come with in-person interaction.

A fixed-odds betting terminal is another animal entirely, with much faster spin rates; a mechanical roulette would likely be in a casino, but might not be monitored... You get the idea. And that's just one game.

But it does bring to mind the question, how does the GSI define "unsafe" within a gambling environment?

"When you think about products, the risk element is really what defines gambling," Dragicevic elaborates. "If you take the risk element away, then it's not gambling and it takes away a huge part of the experience. Having that element of risk in the product is really important."

The GSI team say they're developing an assessment framework to look at game design, marketing and player education in order to give an operator a chance to assess elements of risk and their impact. It's about helping operators look at product risk and safety from a strategic perspective and to find out how the different elements interact – positively and negatively.

They're also working on a product intelligence platform. With slots, for example, this would mean suppliers can upload game metadata, mechanics and maths. This would allow an assessment of these ingredients and to segment into different game and playing types.

An holistic approach

It's the combination of these approaches that promises to be so potent and to look at games, players, delivery methods and more in a way that has simply not been possible before. Operators will be able to build sustainable player relationships with insight into the real factors of risk for the individual. And it's the longer relationship that is much more valuable – after all, keeping a player is much cheaper than acquiring one.

It also means that the traditional method of delivering RG is redundant: responsible gambling messaging will not be needed because everything will be built into the entire experience with this holistic, multi-layered approach.

GSI IS DEVELOPING AN ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK THAT WILL FOCUS ON GAME DESIGN, MARKETING AND PLAYER EDUCATION

"We don't see responsible gambling as being a separate thing outside of the player experience, which is what it is at the moment," says Ramanauskas. "You come onto a site and there's some deposit limits, or there's some loss limits but that's not actually part of your playing experience. It's four clicks away, on a different page that's got sombre words on it about problem gambling.

"It's about understanding when you get a new customer onto your site, what do they want to do? Why are they there? That's what the gambling industry should be doing with safer gambling. It's about baking it into the product."

Dragicevic concurs.

“Responsible gambling should be invisible,” he notes. “You shouldn’t have to think about it. Policies should be in place that mean it’s not about squeezing every last drop from that player and these policies should not be over-ridden by other aspects of the business.

“It shouldn’t be ‘oh, use the deposit limits. It’s all on you to set your deposit limit.’ It should be more nuanced.”

Revenue risk?

Of course, the risk for operators is that if they act responsibly, they run the very real risk of losing valuable players to competitors. Then there’s the quarterly dividend, which is so often the driver behind short-term decision-making.

But Ramanauskas also points out that the people working behind the scenes are also extremely important.

“Yes, one group of stakeholders are the shareholders – but another key group are your staff,” she says. “There’s one particular operator who has finally had their licence taken away in the UK and I looked on Glassdoor at their employee reviews; they were appalling. There was one that said something like, ‘I go home at night knowing that I have made immoral decisions and I’m doing the wrong thing’.

“If the gambling industry wants to attract and retain really good staff, they need to show that they are doing the right thing by their players. If your employees feel that they are being forced to make the wrong decisions, to make moral choices when they’re trying to persuade players to spend more than they can afford, then you will have very high staff turnover and dissatisfied employees – and you won’t be able to attract the best talent.”

The responsible path is a win-win across the board, it seems.

Source: <https://igamingbusiness.com/social-responsibility/csr/a-holistic-approach-safer-gambling/>