

## **Fury at Facebook online casinos: Social network is 'tempting young to gamble' with new betting games**

- **Critics say the deal with gaming group 888 will create 'tomorrow's generation of problem gamblers'**
- **Users will be able to place bets of up to £500 on Las Vegas-style slot machines**
- **Experts warn the deal could cause 'the floodgates to open' as more gaming companies utilise social network sites**

By Peter Campbell, City Correspondent

Facebook has been accused of creating 'tomorrow's generation of problem gamblers' by rolling out real money casino games.

Under a lucrative deal with online gaming company 888, the social networking giant will offer Las Vegas-style slot machines and games such as roulette and blackjack.

The move heralds a major expansion of its gambling sites.

Gamers will be able to place up to £500 on bets using a credit or debit card with promises of jackpots worth tens of thousands of pounds.

These will only be available in the UK, where gaming laws are more relaxed than in the US. Both Facebook and 888 insist they have safeguards to prevent minors from accessing the games.

These include checking the credit card details used against both their Facebook profile and the electoral register. But there is nothing to stop children logging on to parents' accounts and using card details already stored on the family computer. Already, Facebook users as young as 13 can use virtual slot machines on the website to win 'credits' – which have no monetary value.

But as soon as they turn 18, millions of children who use the social networking site will be bombarded with adverts for real money gambling games.

Facebook has three million UK users aged between 13 and 17. But a further one million are thought to be under 13 and pretending to be older.

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Any of these could already be playing the 'free' slot and bingo games – which critics say form gambling habits because they simulate the thrill of hitting the jackpot.

More than a million people are already signed up to play 888's free bingo game Bingo Island – although not all of these are UK based. They have to pay for online credits to play, but cannot win any real money back.

Yesterday 888 launched its first real money bingo application, with promises to roll out casino games. Critics fear many will be attracted to the new games to try to win money back, after experiencing the unrealistic odds offered on the free versions.

'You win virtually every time you play one of the free games,' said Mark Griffiths, professor of gambling studies at Nottingham Trent University.

'Research has shown again and again that one of the biggest factors in developing problem gambling is playing free games online first. These children and teenagers today are the problem gamblers of tomorrow.'

He warned the deal with 888 could cause 'the floodgates to open' as gambling companies dive into the social media frenzy to make money. It is thought Facebook will take a 30 per cent cut of all bets placed.

In August, Facebook launched its first 'real money' gambling game with Bingo Friendly, which offers bingo and slot machines. But the deal, done with Gamesys Group, is relatively small compared with the potential influx of gambling giants who could queue up to join Facebook if the venture proves to be profitable.

Itai Frieberger, chief operating officer of 888, said: 'Our Facebook play for fun offerings have found a significant audience, and we are very excited by the opportunity real money gaming on Facebook provides.' He said the company would prevent users who are under 18 on Facebook from even seeing the games.

A spokesman for Facebook said Bingo Friendly players are subject to 'strict account acceptance controls verifying their identity, and that they are over 18 and located in the UK.' Gambling will not be promoted to Facebook members registered as under 18, it added.