

# Playtech Executives Cite 'Safer Gambling' Tools, Complications

"Safer gambling" may be as elusive a concept as "safer driving", complicating efforts to design machine learning systems to meet that goal, a computer science professor working with Playtech has said.

Regulators in the UK and elsewhere are pressing online gambling operators to identify players who are at risk of harm before the harm surfaces, perhaps in the form of financial, marital or employment problems.

But the idea of safer gambling involves a complex set of standards, judgements and opinions, said Artur d'Avila Garcez, a professor at City, University of London who is working with Playtech's BetBuddy on artificial intelligence projects.

He was speaking at a media briefing last week on the global supplier's efforts to collaborate with online gambling operators on the early identification of problem gamblers.

This includes the use of machine learning — an application of artificial intelligence meant to supply systems with the power to automatically learn and improve from experience without direct programming.

There is no silver bullet, no one person or concept that can identify a problem gambler, said Ian Ince, head of regulatory affairs and compliance at the Isle of Man-based online gambling software and services provider.

Comparisons to the vices of alcohol or tobacco may be misleading because "you can always tell when someone is smoking, you can always tell when someone is drinking", but you cannot tell by sight when someone is a problem gambler, he said.

Rules-based systems for detecting problematic gambling can be simplistic, focusing on extremes and generating false positives, said Simo Dragicevic, chief executive of BetBuddy.

Meanwhile, machine learning can be complex and could include hidden biases, he added.

Officials sometimes cite data on self-exclusions as measures of gambling harm to society, but such data can be deceiving as many gamblers may self-exclude because it is easier than closing an account, Dragicevic said.

The goal is to give operators data so they can decide whether, when or how to intervene, according to Playtech executives, or so that operators can nudge the player to safer behaviour with rewards.

The UK Gambling Commission is [keen on customer interaction](#) and has published guidance including tips such as training staff to spot harmful behaviour, using a range of indicators including cancelled withdrawals or changing deposit limits and monitoring of chat rooms.

"We expect you to be curious, and if you spot harmful behaviour, assume that the customer is at risk until you know otherwise," the commission wrote.

BetBuddy tracks 65 markers of harm, including time of play, number of bets, average loss per day and number of deposit increases within the last 90 days, Dragicevic said.

The BetBuddy systems, however, are bespoke, and only carried by a handful of Playtech's 140 clients, including the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp, Playtech's Italian SNAI brand and Sun Bets Casino, which is administered by Playtech.

Some in the industry claim that operators that use more responsible gambling techniques lose business to less scrupulous competitors.

Ince argued, however, that a responsible operator would be happy to learn who their "safe" customers are, so they can focus their marketing on them, rather than those who could be prone to harmful behaviour.

Operators could also wish to focus on education, as players could be given information on return to player and volatility, executives said.

The company [is testing](#) a chilli pepper rating system to suggest which games are high volatility, that is they pay out less often but with bigger jackpots, or low volatility, which means they pay more frequently with smaller size wins.

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