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Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework

Planning a Penalty and Reporting System

ADL Center for Technology & Society

In a world riddled with cyberhate, online harassment and misuses of technology, the Center for Technology & Society (CTS) serves as a resource to tech platforms and develops proactive solutions. Launched in 2017 and headquartered in Silicon Valley, CTS aims for global impacts and applications in an increasingly borderless space.

It is a force for innovation, producing cutting-edge research to enable online civility, protect vulnerable populations, support digital citizenship and engage youth. CTS builds on ADL's experience over more than a century building a world without hate and supplies the tools to make that a possibility both online and offline.

Fair Play Alliance

The Fair Play Alliance is a global coalition of gaming professionals and companies committed to developing quality games. We provide a forum for gaming professionals and companies to work together to develop and share best practices in encouraging healthy communities and awesome player interactions in online gaming.

We envision a world where games are free of harassment, discrimination, and abuse, and where players can express themselves through play.

Where to Learn More

Please visit our resource hub for more resources:

fairplayalliance.org/resources

For developers, by developers. The FPA is an industry-lead alliance here to help. Visit www.fairplayalliance.org if you would like to access any of our resources, or reach out to info@fairplayalliance.org for support from any of our resident experts in player dynamics or to learn more about how you can help.

**Disruption and Harms in
Online Gaming Framework**

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Note: Penalty and reporting systems are considered a best practice, but they are insufficient on their own. Healthy communities are a combination of encouraging prosocial conduct through design and careful consideration of how you nudge players to behave. We will cover both aspects in greater detail in future resources.

CAUTION: In the absence of a P&R system, players may attempt to take matters into their own hands, reaching out directly to channels that are ill-prepared to support them. If you don't have the means to assess reports, players will have little recourse and you may be unable to support them.

Penalty and reporting (P&R) systems are complex and require careful planning in their design, implementation, launch and support as a live service. Knowing what to look out for ensures there are no surprises and helps a studio make informed decisions on introducing a new P&R system for existing titles.

Unlike many aspects of making games, P&R systems require a higher degree of due diligence. Failure to do so compromises the efficacy of your endeavors and the health of your player base. Even something as straightforward as a ban for severe misconduct carries many consequences, in some cases increasing the risk that a banned player will create a new account and harass new, vulnerable players.

This guide reviews what to think about when creating your penalty and reporting system.

Introduction to Penalty and Reporting Systems

P&R systems help players understand expectations of conduct, communicate values beyond the studio, and establish trust with players.

P&R systems have three components:

Policy. Rules of conduct that define what you expect from players. Your policies should set guidelines for how the staff manages the rules and how they behave in-game.

Procedure. Formal courses of action to manage policy infractions, launch new behavior-related features, and communicate about transgressions to those affected. These procedures should be developed amid regional considerations, such as legal and government expectations, and informed by social norms that are culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate.

Product. The features and systems you integrate to enforce policy and support studio procedures. They comprise reporting systems, tools to assess conduct and enact penalties, metrics for measurement and tracking, and systems for providing feedback to players.

Product Planning

Studios should consider the following process to align on a P&R plan no later than pre-production.

Step 1: Assess your game.

Read the FPA's guide to assessing a game's behavior landscape. Take time to consider what you want to prevent. Also, do you want to thwart individuals or bots from creating accounts? If so, require some level of verification, such as a verified email address, before players can activate an account.

Step 2: Generate a player code of conduct.

A Code of Conduct defines what is acceptable behavior and what good citizenry looks like in your play space. It captures the spirit of intended play. Establishing a robust Code of Conduct is not the final step before launch, but a foundational element in designing games with healthier environments. It's important to think of your company vision and values, behavior landscape, and game analysis to prioritize the types of behavior named in your Code of Conduct. The more specific the Code of Conduct, the more effective it is.

Frame the Code of Conduct using the language of the game and its players to make it relatable. It should be clear and accessible, but it doesn't need to be dry—the goal is for players to abide by the Code to the best of their ability. Include examples. Consider ways to support it throughout the game experience, from when players first learn the game to those who become your biggest advocates. Look for ways to lift up the examples of great conduct in-game and beyond.

Note: Plan to write several drafts of your Code of Conduct, first aligning on the core values and then refining the language. Treat your Code of Conduct like any feature—be thoughtful about presentation and accessibility so it will resonate with players.

Note: Sometimes, you cannot address conduct using penalties but through other means. Systems for encouragement, peer review, or instilling a sense of shared responsibility so players speak out against those not upholding the game's spirit can work, too.

Note: There are several excellent third-party assessment and moderation tools available. If you plan on using such a service, be sure to engage early and ensure the cost and features are appropriate for your needs.

Note: Waiting too long to address behavior, or assuming early audiences are indicative of behavior at scale, can be a mistake. Behavior problems can arise at any scale, and get significantly harder to address later as habits build.

Step 3: List problematic behaviors.

Using the Code of Conduct as a foundation, spend time to identify the types of disruptive or potentially disruptive behaviors you may see (or are seeing in the case of a live game). Rank these by severity. It is not likely you'll address all issues, so it is essential to prioritize.

Step 4: Determine feasibility of detecting disruptive behavior.

Before you take action against any behavior, first confirm it happened. For each disruptive behavior you list from step 3, assess how feasible it will be to detect it during launch. Discuss whether you will build any assessment systems or integrate third-party tools, implement human review, or combine both. Also, factor in any logistical, regional or legal requirements, such as compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or the cost of storage if you need to retain evidence for a report of problematic conduct. In the case of a new game, this step should be completed no later than pre-production to prioritize any supporting work.

Step 5: Craft a thorough launch plan.

Whether you do an alpha launch or a full launch, how you introduce your expectations and values will determine success. Communicate clearly about your values and expectations from the moment you are in front of players and have the means to uphold them when necessary. Work closely with player support to handle incoming tickets. Be aware that your launch's scale impacts your ability to accommodate behavior issues. Without any guidance, the average gaming community will default to disruptive behavior and dominant norms.



Studio-Operating Procedures

On top of coming up with your policy, procedures and any features or systems, you will also need to have strategies to support your staff and players. This section offers advice on keeping your studio running smoothly.

Player Engagement

Unlike other aspects of player support, behavior-related tickets can be challenging to address. Players may disagree with how you assess their behavior and feel that you are not doing enough as a company. They may ask questions that are hard to answer. When high-profile cases emerge, make statements that reflect your policy and values, not about the player, to set healthier norms.

The following are some action items to set up players and your player-support team for success.

Empower the team

Studios juggle creating a rapport with players, empowering their teams and operating consistently across their player bases. Unfortunately, there's no formula for what the right balance looks like, but you should regularly calibrate as a team.

Extensive one-on-one support is tough to scale effectively; you can spend too much time on individual players versus helping the larger player population. You run the risk of fatiguing your front-line support team. Suppose you only provide a rigid response form; in that case, players may likely feel that you are not listening, and you may miss an opportunity to learn more about their experiences. Your team may conclude they lack agency to help players. The right balance is a judgment call and worth revisiting as player and studio patterns develop.

It helps to establish protocols around the Code of Conduct to equip those engaging directly with players. Consider the following:

- Easy access to the player Code of Conduct
- Access to necessary tools and services, such as changing a player's name or temporarily suspending an account pending investigation
- A playbook for handling certain types of tickets and a path to get a second opinion when the next steps are unclear, or when the tools above are absent.

Create a playbook

A playbook can bring consistency to the support process while empowering your staff to help players. Any such process should be built on the values and goals that you have as a company, and echo the spirit of your Code of Conduct.

Defining steps in the path to escalation. Have a concrete process for dealing with potentially criminal behavior or threats of self-harm. What are the hotlines for the regions in which you operate? Can staff get help quickly when they need it? Is there a senior leader to whom they can reach out for guidance in an emergency? What is the process for contacting law enforcement?

Handling ambiguity. Decisions made in ambiguous situations become rules. Therefore, it is important to review emergency cases carefully. Be sure to communicate about your decisions and codify them.

Don't underestimate the toll

Scale. If your game attracts a large audience, there will be a spike in the number of behavior-related tickets. Do you feel equipped to handle the increased workload given the complexity of handling behavior-related issues? Passing judgment on behavior is more taxing than almost any other support request yet lumped together as part of day-to-day support.

Managing emotional fatigue and trauma. Exposure to negativity when dealing with behavior complaints and appeals can take its toll on your staff. Staff might see disturbing content or have troubling interactions with players. Even a single occurrence can be damaging. Do staff have appropriate access to counseling? Are you able to rotate roles to avoid prolonged exposure? Do you support paid time off? Are you aware of signs of desensitization?

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Note: Careful documentation may be legally required in some regions, especially those with restrictions on paid content. Be aware that team members with good intentions might wish to apply penalties as they encounter disruptive behavior. We recommend against this because it can cause inconsistency and reflect a power imbalance in favor of the developer. Instead, have effective reporting systems in place and prompt players to report the incident directly. If a player approaches you to penalize another player, encourage them to use the reporting system to ensure that any complaint goes through proper channels.

Consistency

Responsibility and accountability. Assign staff accountable for penalty systems. Be clear on who can issue, modify or revoke penalties. Changes made to systems or policies relating to penalties must go through appropriate channels to ensure that penalties are applied consistently, fairly and in compliance with all regional and legal requirements. Avoid the confusion of many small decisions made independently by staff by keeping the necessary people informed and implementing a cohesive, systematic approach to changes.

Remove inconsistency. Enforce your Code of Conduct or Terms of Service, regardless of a player's status. Keep clear track of penalties issued or modified and why.

Legal and regional concerns

Take explicit steps to understand the rules and customs in each region you operate. The country hosting your servers determines your legal obligations. Note that any regional customs might generate different expectations of acceptable behavior. For instance, in a country where shared ownership is the norm among family members, you may find enforcing a single user per account challenging. Understanding what is important to players in a region, and why you want to enforce your rules, can help meet everyone's needs. Be humble and accommodating when learning about new cultures and be aware of mismatches around values that prove difficult to resolve (a robust Code of Conduct helps add clarity).



Other Things to Note

It is not easy.

We are all in this together and no one expects perfection. Many of the situations you will encounter do not have a right or wrong solution. To the best of your ability, share your values and goals, stay humble and commit to working with players to follow your rules.

Manage expectations carefully.

Zero tolerance is not the same as 100% enforcement; finding and addressing behavior is hard. Not everything fits neatly into categories of “good” or “bad.” Be prepared to face ambiguity, and manage audience expectations. Do not be afraid to call shots, but do avoid problems that you cannot realistically solve. Remember, you are laying down the foundations to support players for as long as the game is live.

Convey positivity.

If you take a negative tone with players, you risk the community seeing and expecting more transgressive conduct. Model good behavior and reaffirm your expectations and values. Celebrate examples of healthy behavior, and do not highlight problematic players or influencers who contradict your values no matter their popularity. Help players understand there is a path to improvement.

Note: Do not be afraid to admit mistakes as long as they are presented with an authentic, actionable plan for improvement. Always be consistent with your Code of Conduct.

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