

# Punishment Systems: What's the Boundary?

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GAM200: Critical Game Studies

Week 8 Assignment 8.1

## Part 1: Punishment Synapsis

To me, a punishment doesn't have to be something that ruin the fun. I feel as though a good punishment is something that teaches the player that their action has consequences. Humans learn the best from mistakes; a mistake allows a person to gain knowledge in what the best course of action is to take in order to solve a problem. If a player succeeded on everything so easily, the game could be seen as lacking one of the defining features of fun, which is challenge. Without challenge to allow the player to learn and practice something, the player has no real opportunity to be "Wrong" aside from purposely being bad.

Many games use "death" as an obvious and simplistic way of communicating that you did something wrong, but usually death is just the RESULT of a punishment, not necessarily the mistake in of itself. True punishments can be seen as a lot more simple: the spikes on the ground hurt you when you touch them. The player's mistake is touching the spikes and the result is taking damage. One could even argue that if the player took enough damage to die from the spikes, then the death is a result from not learning from the punishment previously seen.

Bad punishment, to me, is something that makes them same stop being fun. Obviously this is incredibly subjective, but if an over-all percentage of the desired community believes punishment is too harsh or ruins the fun, then perhaps it's true. However, making bad actions/death meaningless accomplishes nothing. If the player has no consequences for actions, then they can simply do whatever they want (unless that's the point, but I feel there's no real satisfaction for winning a fight or challenge you had 0% chance to lose in). The more effort it takes to get to a goal, the more satisfying it feels. IF it means being punished a few times to learn and understand what the player did wrong, then by all means...

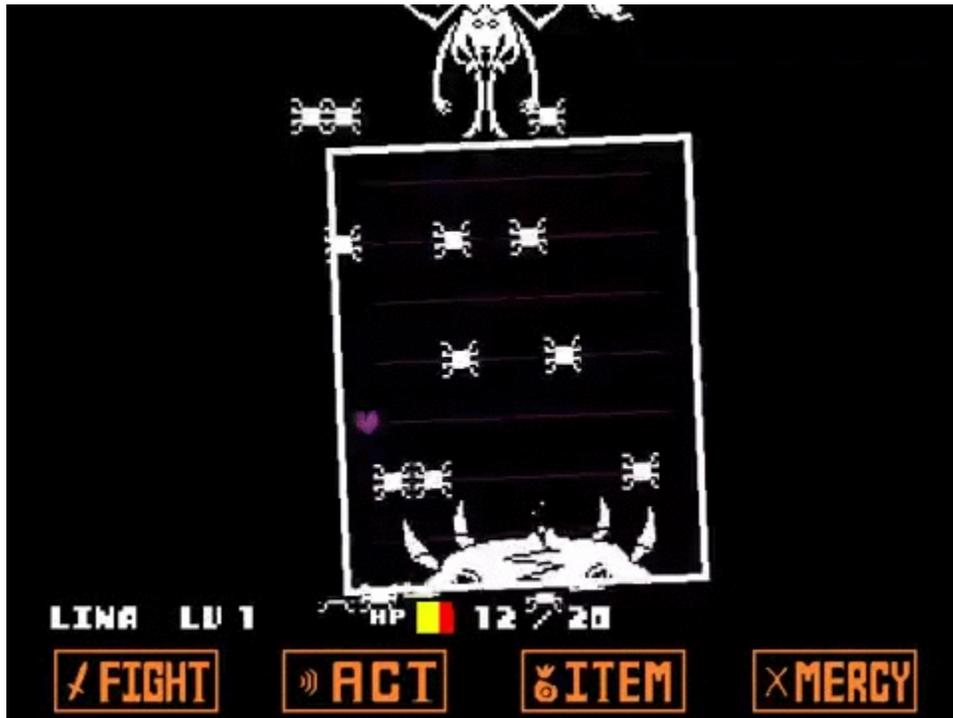
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## Part 2: Example Punishments in Games

One of your favorite games of all time



## 1: Damage



The concept seems rather simple doesn't it? If the player's character/thing (in the case of Undertale, your soul) is touched by an enemy, bullet, or otherwise harmful object, the player gets hurt. This is one of those bread and butter punishments for any game that uses health or combat without being a "one shot you die" scenario. Undertale takes this a step further and makes taking damage normally the player's fault with bullet hell/avoidance style functions.

Other times, the damage is meant as a joke, like...

(SPOILER)

Mettaton's first arrival. The robot forces the player into a pop-quiz where answering wrong hurts the player.

(END SPOILER)

Damage is a very effective method of punishment, as nobody (normally) wants to die and redo segments of a game. IT also teaches the player what they shouldn't touch, and what helps. In a game that may not use color as much, this can be important. This lesson is easily conveyed in Undertale within the very first encounter.

## 2: Words of Warning/Insult

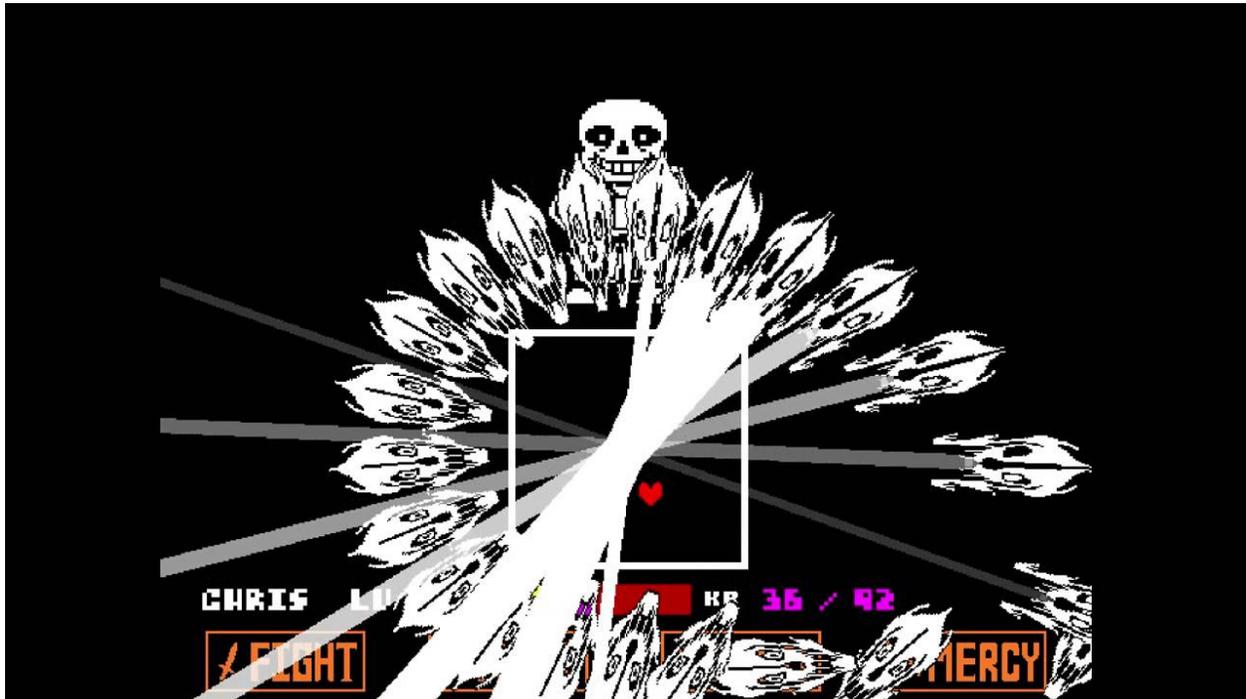


This is the same image used for “mistakes” in the reward assignment for a reason. Rewards and punishments sometimes go side by side, and in Undertale, can often be a warning. In this ideal, a punishment doesn’t even have to be mechanical based, but a character insulting you or belittling you with harsh words to provoke some kind of emotional response. It’s a type of punishment meant to make the player feel something, kind of how we punish children or friends with words when they do something wrong. This is probably some of the most remembered kinds of punishments, as they are often quoted even outside of the game/media.

After all, “You’re going to have a bad time...”

Any punishment that doesn’t directly harm gameplay, but actually adds to the experience is a good one to me. Words are powerful, and sometimes can be intimidating. If used right, it’ll be a lot more punishing than a simple death, especially if the game actually follows those words later on if the player hasn’t understood the lesson yet.

### 3: Difficulty/Surprise Challenges



Sometimes, a player choice or mistake can lead to the game getting progressively harder. Not necessarily ruining the fun of the game, but rather making it more of a challenge for the player to taste that sweet grasp of victory. IF the player does something wrong, or something they shouldn't have done (at least story wise), perhaps the game can evolve to provide the player with reason to not actually do that, such as fighting bosses and enemies that weren't meant to be fought. OF course, this can also be seen as a reward for people who love a challenge, or want to see every inch of the game as possible.

Difficulty can be seen as a unique, yet interesting punishment, as the player could have a flow and understanding of how things works until they do something wrong. It can be as simple as a single mechanic change to entirely forced fights that wouldn't be there otherwise. Undertale does a great job of...pushing players to the brink of giving up unless they are DETERMINED enough to take the results of their actions...

#### 4: A Scare



Maybe the player did something wrong and expected a punishment within the game, but not always is this the case. Some games have features that cause punishments outside of the game itself. No, this image is intentionally black, there's nothing wrong with the post or link. But maybe the player doesn't know that, and suddenly their choice is met with the game crashing or the screen going blank, only for the reload to display something else other than the opening screen. There are very few games that employ this kind of tactic, from game controllers being unresponsive to purposely powering down the console to simulate the world ending.

There was an interesting article I read once that essentially posed a game that punished a player by refusing to be launched for an entire 24 hours after dying. This is that kind of punishment, though not quite as harsh. There is a fine line.

This punishment works very well...if the player understands what happened. These kinds of punishments can easily be misunderstood as an error and disgruntle them far more than it could/should have.

## 5: Missing Pieces



Sometimes actions have consequences that are easily blown away, while other times those consequences are never let go. In Undertale, every action has a reaction within the game. Sometimes those reactions aren't good, but sometimes they're just... missing. If a player plays through the game, and the perhaps plays a second time, killing a character, they'll never show up again. Unlike most tropes where the character spouts an "I'll be back!" line, they're forever gone in this game. Every dialogue scene, every action they would have committed is forever erased from that play-through, sometimes even spanning more than just one. It's an incredibly powerful message, making the player feel as though their actions aren't just simplistic and ignored by the world, but matter. This includes the bad ones.

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Game that was recently played:



1: Over-spending



Do I spend the money I have to purchase that power, or should I save it for something better? This is the challenge and conundrum that appears in a lot of games that feature any kind of resource management. A single wrong decision can easily lock the player out of the other

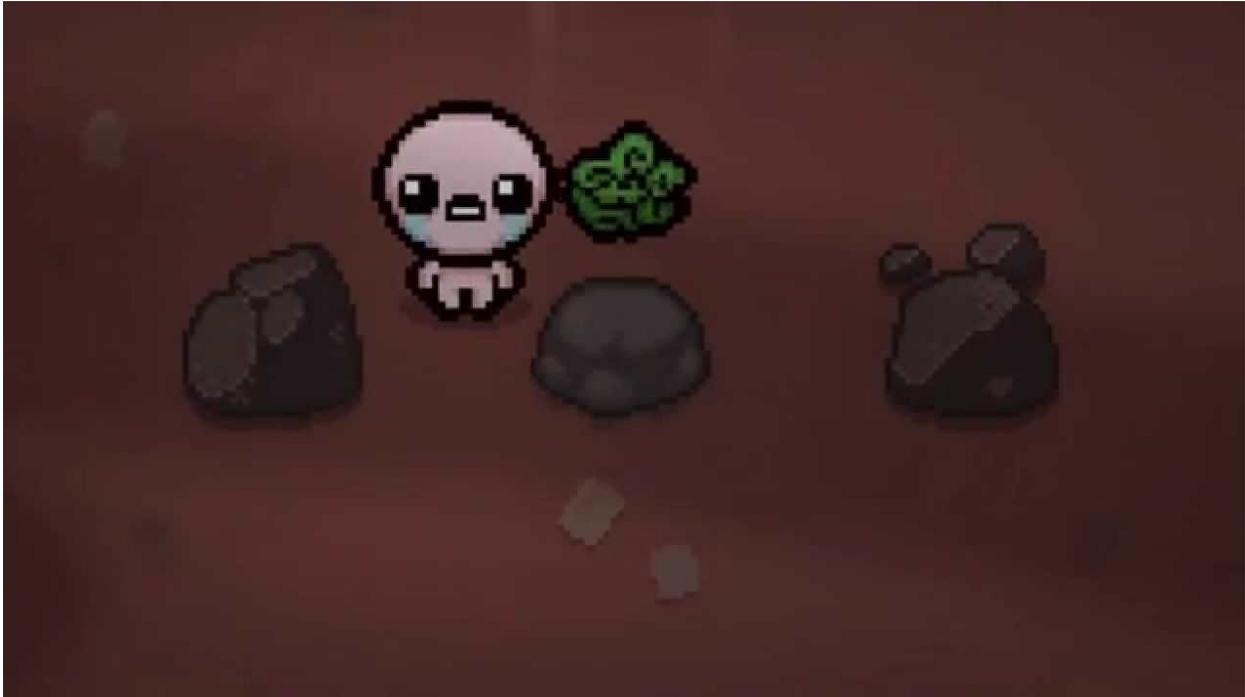
option, or at least force the player to grind for it if they want it that badly. In TBoI:R, however, grinding isn't always an option. If the player is greedy and constantly purchases anything they want, they may find themselves out of resources when they need to buy something to stay alive. It's a very simple punishment even apparent in real life. Spent all your money on snacks? I guess you aren't going to the movie theater with your friends tomorrow then. It's essentially what makes this kind of punishment very inherit, but incredibly powerful, as it teaches the player soothing they can take outside of the game: Resource management.

### 2 & 3: Greed/Gambling



Sometimes the rewards for an action are a gamble. Not always is the item or money the player seeks incredibly apparent or necessarily available. The biggest difference between random chance and gambling is that the player knows they can fail. In TBoI:R, there is a room known as the spike room. Running over the spikes hurts the player for a heart of health, but has the CHANCE to drop a random chest containing pickups, money, or items. IT is up to the player to risk their health in order to seek gain. This isn't needed to complete the game at all, which sort of ties into #1, Greed. If the player risks it and doesn't get a reward, their punishment for putting their life on a gamble is the loss of it. This punishment is often overlooked but is very well done, as it places the consequences directly onto the player's actions, rather than it being the game's hardcode or random chance. There was no skill involved, the player simply made a bad decision.

#### 4: Testing the Waters/Experimentation



There's many moments in games where the player can test something to see if it does something spectacular. This is usually done because of a lack of knowledge. Not always does experimentation always go well, or an item end up being "spectacular". Sometimes the player comes across something unknown and tries it, only to realize that it doesn't work with the character and is more of a curse than a boon. For many players who experiment with item combinations in TBoL:R, this can happen quite often. It sort of ties into the risk/reward gameplay, but ultimately is the actions of the player that causes the run to fall apart. Even if they fail and have to start over, the player is then rewarded with knowledge on what not to do next time.

#### 5: Damage (repeated, essentially the same as Undertale)

## Overly Difficult: Darkwood



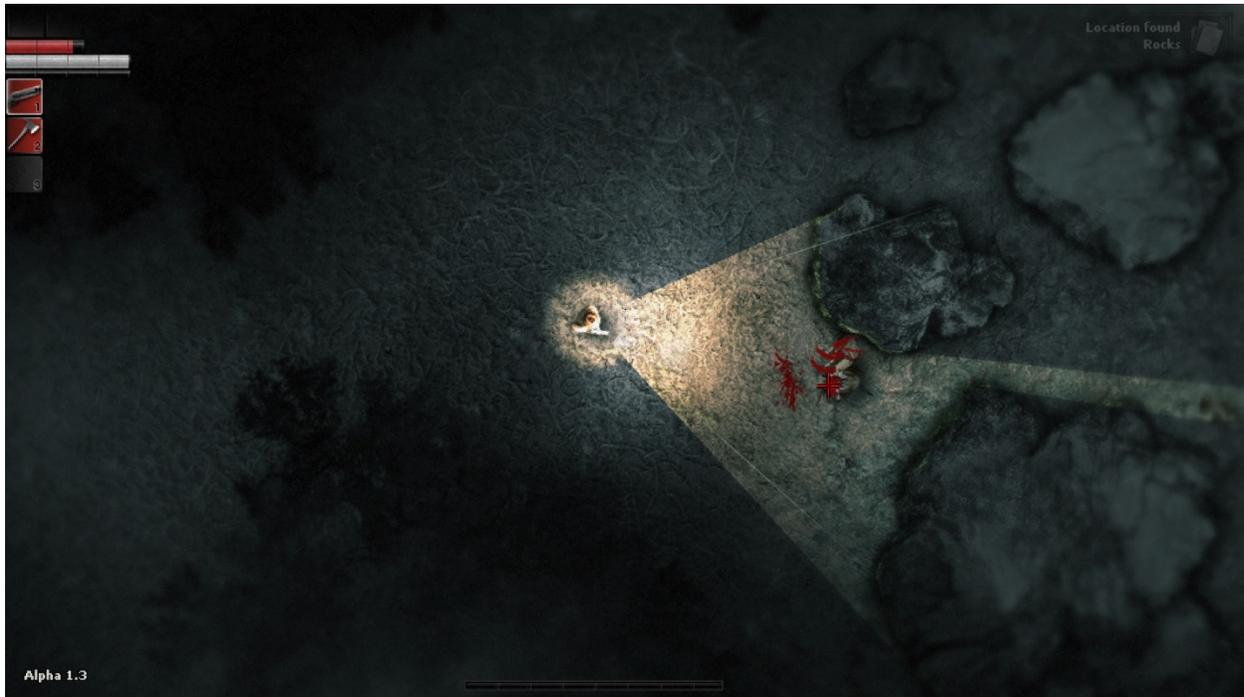
### 1 & 2: Stay in the light & Resource Management



Without light, things get terrible and much worse. More monsters come out that can kill you, and yet you constantly need to find resources to keep your lights on, both held and not. The biggest problem is that to get resources you have to expend them, and there's so very few of everything that it becomes a task of "what order do I do things or I die". While the actual

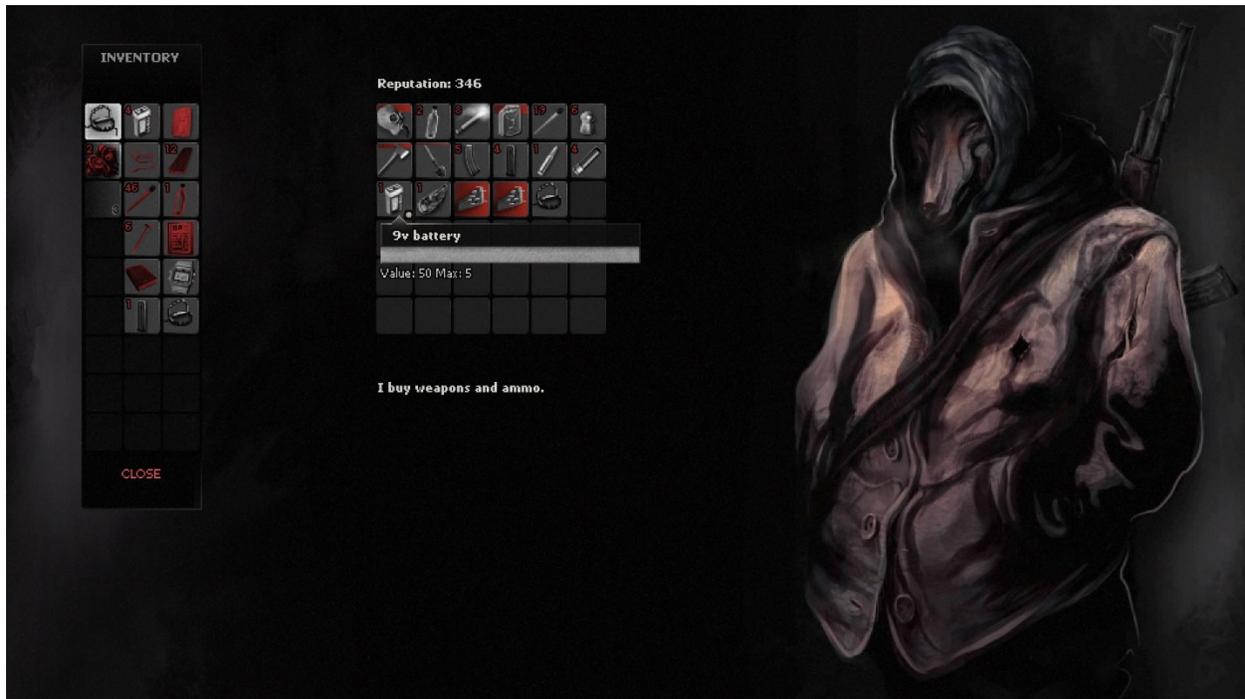
punishment process may not be bad, it's how strict and linear feeling it can be enforced. Player choice often isn't the reason why punishment in this respect occurs, but pure luck and randomness. Due to the resources being needed for many game events that are mandatory, the player has to specifically focus on reinforcing their home with the right boundaries. Even with that, it can still punish you based upon randomly generated encounters that ignore your barricades.

### 3: Running versus fighting



Some enemies in the game are too powerful to be fought. Regardless of your weapon they don't fall, and just get back up. The game never actually warns you of this, but death is permanent. The punishment for fighting what cannot be beaten seems a bit overdone simply because the game never informs you of this ideal. Running is the best option, but if the player doesn't understand that, then they are injured badly, or worse off, the play-through ends.

## 5: Only One Way



As mentioned before, there is only a true path to reach the end of the game. Unfortunately, there are many choices, but only one correct path. Taking any of the other choices will end the game early without a completed path, essentially punishing the player by holding back the entire storyline and ending the player's life outside of their control. While it does give new knowledge and a lesson learned, it forces the player to restart the entire game with new randomness and redo their choice.