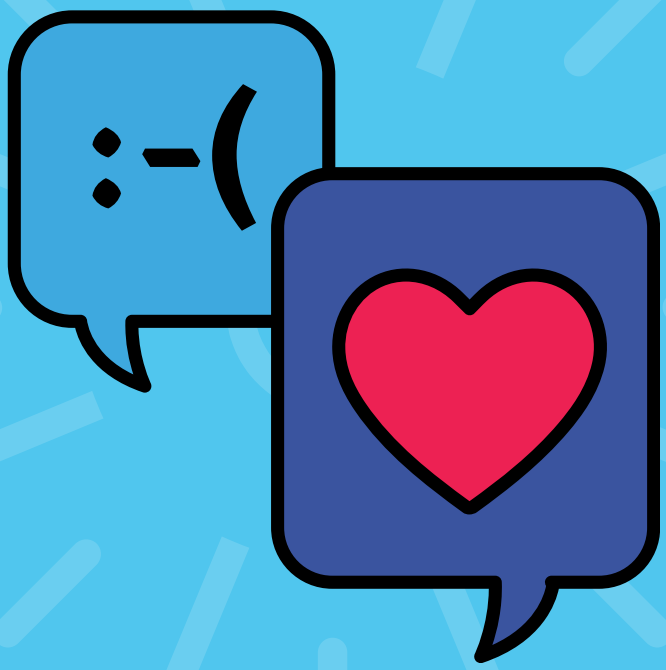
# CONTENTR

## CONTENT MODERATION BY DESIGN (CMBD) GAME TEACHER'S GUIDE 2026




UNIVERISTY OF MARYLAND COLLEGE OF INFORMATION STUDIES, ETHICS AND VALUES IN DESIGN LAB

# WELCOME

CONTENTR was initially designed and tested in 2020/2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the examples reference content moderation and political issues at the time. However, recent classroom use suggests that the game remains engaging and that students can navigate the dated references and draw parallels to similar content they encounter today.

This 2026 version of CONTENTR includes updated cards that are easier to cut and read, a slide deck to facilitate in-classroom or independent play, and a teacher guide for additional insights and advice.

# GAME PURPOSE

By playing the role of both a startup social media platform's trust & safety team and a content moderator, participants can begin to experience some of the challenges associated with moderating user-generated content online in a way that balances values such as free expression and community safety (Lenhart et al., 2024).

CONTENTR is a collaborative game for 2+ players. We have found teams of 3 work best, but groups of other sizes can still play.

We have facilitated this game in courses related to ethical technology design, media studies, internet policy, and law.

# PREPARATION

The game is organized into three cycles based on categories of controversial content (Cycle 1: sexually explicit content & Illegal Activity, Cycle 2: Self Harm & Graphic Content, Cycle 3: Harassment, Hate Speech & Quality Contributions). Each cycle takes approximately 40 minutes to play and has four rounds. Determine which cycles you would like your class to play.

The game can end after any round. If your class skips Cycle 1, have students decide whether they want a bot task force before beginning the game. Additionally, keep in mind that the Event cards for Cycle 3 reference cards from earlier in the game. If the students only play Cycle 3, they can ignore points associated with cards from earlier cycles.

In addition to these instructions, you have been provided a slide deck that you can present to your class or provide to students to play outside of class. The slides contain the detailed gameplay instructions.

You will also need to print and cut (or direct your students to print and cut) the required game cards.

- Page 1- 2 includes the reference cards and pre-cycle cards, which are needed for all variations of gameplay
- Page 3-7 includes the cards for Cycle 1
- Page 8-12 includes the cards for Cycle 2
- Page 13-17 includes the cards for Cycle 3

# MATERIALS

Each team needs:

- Cards (print and cut the cycles you need as described above)
- Flat surface
- 3 Sticky notes or small pieces of paper and an ink pen for nuance cards (see Slide 8)
- A scorecard (available on the EViD website)

# PRESENT SLIDE DECK

The accompanying slide deck is available as Google Slides on the Ethics and Values in Design (EViD) website.

**SLIDE 1:** Read the game story.

**SLIDE 2:** Read the content warning. This is an opportunity to teach John Stavropoulos' X-card, which is a helpful tool for students who play games as a hobby.

**SLIDE 3:** Describe the game cycles. Existing social media policies inform the categories of content, and the order is largely informed by the order of importance to a new start-up (i.e. a new startup would immediately need policies for illegal content).

Tell students which cycles they are playing.

The game can end after any cycle. But if your class skips Cycle 1, have students decide if they want a bot task force before beginning the game. Additionally, keep in mind that the Event cards for Cycle 3 reference cards from earlier in the game. If the students only play Cycle 3 they can ignore points associated with cards from earlier rounds.

**SLIDE 4:** Describe the game rounds at a high level, note the color scheme. You may decide to leave this slide displayed on the projector while your class plays.

**SLIDE 5:** Describe Investment Round.

Teams will get an investment at the beginning of each round. Each team should designate a CTO to manage the balance sheet.

**SLIDE 6:** Describe Policy Round.

Review the goals of CONTENTR's policy team (student's will have a role card they can reference throughout the game). Explain that during this round, the team will work together to sort the policy cards (blue) into Allow and Ban.

The Policy Cards are numbered for later reference but can be sorted in any order. However, the Policy Card labeled "growth" needs to be sorted last.

# PRESENT SLIDE DECK (CONT)

**SLIDE 7:** Describe Content Round.

Review the goals of the content moderators (students will have a card they can reference throughout the game). Explain that during this round, the team will work together to sort the content cards (grey) into Allow and Ban. The Policy Cards are numbered for later reference but can be sorted in any order.

**SLIDE 8:** Describe nuance cards.

Reminder: each team will need sticky notes and an ink pen.

Players do not have to add nuance to any policy. If they are happy with how the content cards were sorted, they can skip this step.

**SLIDE 9:** Describe Events Round.

The Event cards will describe how the choices students made in Rounds 2 and 3 will impact community safety (CS) points, free expression (FE) points, and the budget.

**SLIDE 10:** Present the basics of Section 230.

Throughout the game, it is common for students to ask "is this legal," or "can we even allow this?" The shield and sword reference card serves as a reminder that, outside the pre-cycle cards (slide 11), students are determining the values of CONTENTR.

**SLIDE 11:** Describe Pre-Cycle cards.

Note: the bullet points describe the federal laws most related to social media platform content moderation at a high level. You may want to provide students with reading assignments to accompany the simplified descriptions. Additionally, the pre-cycle cards do not include U.S. State laws related to social media.

# PRESENT SLIDE DECK (CONT)

**SLIDE 12:** Reminder about what type of platform CONTENTR is.

We have found that once participants begin sorting cards, they start to wonder what type of platform (interactive computer service) they are building. This note is a helpful reminder.

**SLIDE 13:** Provide students with an image of what their table will start to look like as gameplay progresses.

If playing multiple cycles: in between each cycle, keep cards under Allow and Ban by stacking the policy cards and content cards to make space on the table. Cycle 3 will reference decisions from Cycle 1 and Cycle 2.

# DISCUSSION

1) Take a look at your final score (both the FE/CS points and revenue). Do you feel like you "won"? Why? Why not?

2) How did your views of social media change after playing the game, if at all?

3) The game includes brief mentions of interventions such as a bot task force, algorithmic design, and labeling of misleading information. What other design choices or safety programs could your team have deployed? How would that have changed the content moderator's experience? The user's experience?

4) This game centered on U.S. policies and the perspectives of U.S. users and organizations. In what ways did content from outside the U.S. come into consideration?

5) The Event cards assumed some level of cause-and-effect between content moderation decisions and societal events. How fair were these assumptions? How should policymakers consider the relationship between media platforms and systemic impacts?

6) If you were a Member of Congress and wanted to incentivize *balanced* content moderation, what policy would you propose? How would your policy impact the content moderator's experience? The user's experience?

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# BACKGROUND

Social media content moderation practices vary from company to company, are inherently opaque and span well beyond simply allowing or banning content. This game is meant to give a taste of the challenges posed by hosting a site for user generated content but should in no way be interpreted as a comprehensive overview of trust and safety practices.

The categories of content and roles were informed by:

Block, Hans, et al. (2018).The Cleaners. (film)

Gillespie, T. (2018). Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media. Yale University Press.

Roberts, S. T. (2019). Behind the screen: Content moderation in the shadows of social media. Yale University Press.

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