

More disclosure on 'loot box' odds planned by game console makers

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Video games which use "loot boxes" to keep its users engaged will need to disclose the odds of winning the digital prizes under a new industry policy

Kings of the video game console world plan to require games hawking "loot boxes" to tell players how likely they are to get prized booty.

Console makers Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft are targeting next year for implementation of the new policy, which will apply to console and Windows PC games, trade group Entertainment Software Association (ESA) said on Wednesday.

Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony are "committing to new platform policies that will require paid loot boxes in games developed for their platforms to disclose information on the relative rarity or probability of obtaining randomized virtual items," according to the ESA.

The new policy, whose timing was not specified, adds more transparency to the animated pirate chests with digital prizes that are popular with young gamers. It will be required on Xbox, PlayStation and Switch console games.

A controversy dating back more than a year centers on prompting players to chance money on loot boxes that hold unknown assortments of in-game goods such as digital weapons, powerful abilities or rare items.

An Electronic Arts "Star Wars" video game drew fire in late 2017 for its take on the loot box feature, which critics argued essentially allowed money instead of skill to determine who wins.

Previously, game makers had been careful to require players to rely on skills for weapons or abilities that could help beat challenges or adversaries.

But the spin EA put on "loot boxes" in the game was skewered by gamers as violating the credo of fair play and likened by some critics to gambling aimed at an audience that included children.

The ESA at the time defended loot boxes against accusations that paying for a chance at getting a coveted digital item amounted to gambling.

The association's game rating board last year added an "in-game purchases" disclosure to packaging of video games that allow players to buy digital content.

It also encouraged use of parental controls that call for passwords to be entered to make in-game purchases.

The ESA said on Wednesday that some members already disclose how probable it is to get precious in-game items from loot boxes and that many other major publishers will begin doing likewise by the end of next year.

Psyonix, a studio owned by Epic Games, announced this week that by the end of this year it will no longer offer loot boxes in its Rocket League title involving soccer played with super-fast cars.

More than 165 million people in the US play video games, and the number continues to grow, according to the ESA.

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