Safety and Community Container Setting

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5.1 Introduction

As we have discussed in previous chapters, psychological and physical safety are important to consider throughout the game design process. This chapter will elaborate on these points with an emphasis on ways to establish and maintain psychological safety in the role-playing transformative container (Bion 2013; Bowman and Hugaas 2021). The safety discourse has expanded considerably in the last fifteen years or so, with a marked increase in discussion and awareness around particular techniques in larp, freeform, and tabletop. Compilations now exist that are freely accessible and commonly used and featuring known tools and consent strategies, e.g., the Consent in Gaming checklist discussed in this chapter (Reynolds and Germain 2019), the TTRPG Safety Toolkit Guide (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2021), and others. Such tools are also making their way into mainstream traditional games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*' *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (Wizards of the Coast 2021) and *Dystopia Rising* (Most Improbable LLC n.d.). In short, the wisdom contained within this document has been accumulated over the decades from many designers in larp, tabletop, and freeform. We recommend reading the citations for more about the origins of certain practices.

With the exception of accessibility, considerations around physical safety will be reserved for our next book, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, although they should also be considered throughout a game design project.

5.2 Conflicts within role-playing communities

Before discussing safety in depth, we will mention the stakes. When players feel unsafe, unheard, or unappreciated in communities, such feelings can lead to conflict. Just as in other aspects of life, conflicts emerge within role-playing communities on a regular basis (see Chapter 6 for an exploration of conflict). When we discuss conflict *surrounding* role-playing communities, we refer to issues that arise when players feel their needs are not getting met in some important way. Note that this use of the term conflict does not refer to conflicts embedded within the game fiction explicitly, for example, rivalries between in-game factions, but such conflicts may influence off-game dynamics. Bowman (2013) discusses many examples of conflicts reported within role-playing communities including:

1. Schisms in role-playing communities when players take sides and form off-game factions;

2. Issues with online communication;

3. Issues arising from intimate and/or romantic relationships;

4. Creative agenda disputes, i.e., when participants have different styles of play they most enjoy;

5. Power struggles between players and facilitators; and

6. Bleed-in and bleed-out that has not been processed sufficiently (see Chapter 2).

This chapter will add additional sources of conflict to this list, including issues related to:

1. Inclusion;

2. Accessibility;

3. Crisis states; and

4. Sensitive content.

Some of these conflicts are internal within the psychology of individual participants, whereas others arise from the ways in which players, facilitators, and designers interact interpersonally. We will explore several of these issues in Chapter 6 as well.

Conflicts should not be viewed as always negative, as they can make us aware of areas where support, learning, growth, and even healing are needed. However, when conflicts are not addressed in a satisfactory fashion, participants may begin to feel unsafe or unwelcome within the community. Alternatively, when psychological safety is established and maintained within a group, players sometimes report feeling safer and more included than elsewhere in society. Thus, psychological safety is essential for the development of a transformational container (Bion 2013): a holding environment (Winnicott 1960) within which players feel safe taking risks. Such spaces establish alibi for players to feel safe behaving in ways that might draw social scrutiny or even feel impossible otherwise.

Note that while nano-games are relatively short, conflicts related to these topics can still emerge. Awareness of these risks is important for you to carefully consider when making design choices.

5.3 Setting the container

As we have discussed in previous chapters, role-playing games are ritual spaces. Rituals have a beginning, middle, and end and have specific framing practices that guide participants into the liminal space and out of it (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1995). In transformative game design, we consider ways to onboard the players into the experience, such as through workshops, as well as guiding them through practices of processing and integration after the experience, such as through debriefing.

These framing phases are also crucial times for establishing and maintaining psychological safety. In order for participants to surrender to the experience of inhabiting different identities within fictional worlds, they need to have sufficient trust in the group to decrease the vigilance our minds often have in social situations. Humans are social creatures and as such, we are often tracking how we are being perceived by others, whether consciously or unconsciously. Whether aware of it or not, many of us are often assessing whether we will be included in a group or ostracized from it, as acceptance into a community is often directly tied to survival and thriving in life. Evidence of disapproval or judgment from others will increase vigilance, whereas signals of acceptance and approval can increase feelings of group belonging and trust.

Important to note is that safety in this sense is a *perception* rather than a fact. Just because someone feels unsafe in a situation does not mean there is, in fact, danger. Alternatively, a person can surrender completely to the role-playing experience and feel safe and then end up feeling unsafe over time due to others' behaviors. Furthermore, contrary to the notion of "safe space," we adhere to the notion that no activities can ever claim to be fully safe. As Johanna Koljonen (2016b) puts it, "Larp isn't dangerous, but life is."

Thus, we prefer the term *safer space* to indicate that the community held within the transformational container actively takes steps to prioritize psychological safety as a primary value and practice. We can help others feel safe by making clear these priorities throughout the ritual process, for example, including safety mechanics in a workshop or holding a structured debrief in which players are encouraged to process their emotions without judgment from the group. Inherent to safer space is an understanding that risk is always present.

5.4 Philosophies of safety

Many philosophies of safety within the discourse surrounding role-playing communities exist (Bowman and Hugaas 2023, in press for 2025). While the nuances of these discourses are beyond the scope of this textbook, we will mention some of the tensions inherent to role-playing and the themes in the discourse surrounding them. Some groups prefer "a cult of hardcore" approach in which players are implied to consent to a certain degree of emotional intensity or actions taken on their character simply by signing up to participate (Bowman 2017). Other groups prefer to create *safer spaces*, as we described before. On the other hand, some people contrast safer spaces with *brave spaces,* meaning that safety is important, but if the safety of others is too strongly emphasized, players may not dare to take risks (Friedner 2020).

Others still advocate for different language when discussing these topics, for example, using the term "support" instead of "safety," or for a *risk assessment and mitigation* approach. Risk assessment and mitigation accepts that certain risks are potentially part of the RPG experience and may even be more generalizable to wider human experience. This approach thoroughly evaluates all possible risks and ranks

them according to severity and likelihood, which determines how the designers and facilitators will prioritize their responses (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Losilla 2024). Possible responses can include removing the risk completely; adding, modifying, or removing aspects of the original plan; or guiding participants in how to behave to best mitigate the risk. Instead of claiming to create a safe space or brave space, which some might interpret as dismissive of actual risk, for example, to marginalized people, some groups prefer to frame safety activities as establishing *spaces of acceptable risk* (Rikard and Villarreal 2023). Related to these topics is the degree to which safety is the responsibility of the individual players, the play group, the organizers, the designers, or the community as a whole (Kessock 2014; Bowman and Hugaas 2023), as explored later in this chapter.

While each of these stances has merit in certain circumstances, ultimately, we advocate for a *risk aware design* that establishes and maintains *safer spaces*. We believe the term "safety" is important to include, as it is the inherent human need connected to the stakes in these situations. In our view, safer spaces empower bravery and the distinction is a false dichotomy. Because we are often dealing with potentially deeply personal or socially fraught content when working with transformation, a certain degree of risk is always present. Risks can include:

1. *Emotional flooding,* when a participant is cognitively incapable of processing further information due to psychological overwhelm (Leonard and Thurman 2018);

2. *Dysregulation*, when a participant's psychological well-being falls out of balance, which can lead to distress or difficulties effectively interacting with others;

3. *Activation and/or triggering*, when a situation activates a survival response in a person, e.g., fighting, flight, freezing, or fawning. This activation may or may not be the result of the triggering of previous trauma (Brown 2014), as we can get activated in any situation in which our basic human needs feel threatened (Glasser 1998);

4. *Harm*, when a person or a situation inflicts harm on another person. Whether the harm is purposeful (Brown 2017a) or accidental (Friedner 2020), our view is that the transformational container should meaningfully and appropriately respond to harm, providing support to the highest degree possible. Such support may be in the form of consequences for the person who inflicted harm, actions of care for the person who has been harmed, and/or referring the person who has been harmed to appropriate care structures outside of the group, e.g., counseling services and crisis hotlines.

Thus, in risk aware design for safer spaces, we consider the possible ramifications of certain conditions of play and design structures around the container to help address them, which we will discuss at length in this chapter.

a) Zones of safety, challenge, and risk

Certain types of play are inherently more risky than others. Risk is not necessarily always negative, as in some cases, risk may be necessary to achieve the intended transformational impacts, e.g., the risk to try something new in front of a group. On the other hand, if a person experiences any of the risks listed before, for example, emotional flooding, they may have difficulty engaging with play at all. Not only is such a response undesirable in that it likely will cause distress for the player, but it can often interfere with reflection and processing, which as we have discussed are critical for transformative processes. That being said, some designs rely on emotional flooding as part of the experience, for example, to build empathy for others experiencing such circumstances as enacted in the game, which we would consider high-risk design meant to facilitate *brink play* (Poremba 2007).

Each person has different limits, and one's limits might even change throughout one gaming session. Furthermore, a game experience may radically shift in tone, intensity, and content throughout play, whether designed as such or not. We consider these factors that contribute to risk to greater and lesser degrees. We frame risk as a spectrum, separating low risk from medium risk and high risk play in the following section (Bowman and Hugaas 2023). We will focus primarily on this conceptualization as a tool for design, although these categories are also useful in considering where a particular player falls in terms of preferences and their different psychological experiences they might have over time in a game.[5]

Zone 1 (Green): Comfort Zone

Some role-playing game experiences exist primarily within a player's comfort zone. Such games may include light themes, inconsequential narratives, familiar character types, or otherwise "entertaining" play. Such game experiences still involve some degree of risk and reward and can be highly engaging for certain players, e.g., the risk of playing at all, the risk of social interaction, the risk of public silliness, or the risk of harm to one's character. However, no game can guarantee a Green Zone experience, as players can sometimes become highly activated even in games with light material—perhaps even more so if certain content or interactions take them by surprise. What feels playful for one person may feel threatening to another, especially if coming from a background of marginalization (Trammell 2023). Furthermore, if you design for a Green Zone experience, all players in the group must try to adhere to maintaining the same intensity and tone, otherwise the play may suddenly feel unsafe. Calibration and preparing for sudden rapid escalations through emergent play can help prepare players for these occurrences.

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5   The following subsections on the Zones are largely excerpted from Bowman and Hugaas (in press for 2025).

Zone 2 (Yellow): Growth Edges and Zone of Proximal Development

Players often describe risky in-game situations as providing powerful moments of catharsis, insight, and even personal transformation. From this perspective, some players may wish to lean into riskier play as a means to step out of their comfort zone and explore within their *growth edges*. A growth edge is not the same as a hard limit. Here, it refers to the psychological space in which individuals can experience identities and behaviors outside of their normative socially prescribed roles in ways that make them uncomfortable in a constructive rather than overwhelming way.

From a Vygotskian educational psychology perspective, the growth edge can be considered within the *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky 1978). Importantly, this concept refers to the area within which a person feels safe enough to explore in order to learn while supported by the scaffolding of another person or structure. This external person may simply be watching the participant learn—e.g., a teacher overseeing a class doing individual tasks—or they may be actively supporting the learning process, e.g., a teacher giving a student hints to help them accomplish the most challenging part of the task. The classroom structure and the activities within it provide containment for the activity. In this way, the game designers, organizers, and co-players can be said to offer scaffolding for players seeking to learn about themselves and the world around them during play (see e.g., Brown 2017b).

Zone 3 (Red): Brink Play

Finally, some play is experienced outside of the growth edge in a place approaching or exceeding one's *hard limits*. A hard limit refers to a boundary that a person is normally not willing to cross for any reason because it feels unsafe or undesirable. Some players enjoy brink play, which for Poremba (2017) blurs the boundary between game and not-game through forbidden play. Brink play dances on the line of "too much" in some particular way, e.g., when boundaries are seriously transgressed. "Too much" in this case might refer to physical sensations, such as pain or eroticism; or emotional intensity, such as in-game romance or abuse. What is "too much" will vary from player to player and moment to moment, but some participants prefer this sort of edgy play to safer play within the comfort zone or growth edge (see e.g., Nilsen 2012).

The riskiness inherent to such play can provide an adrenaline rush or other forms of emotional flooding that are experienced as pleasurable and sometimes "positive[ly] negative" (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010). While such experiences can be unpleasant or even disturbing in games and yet highly valuable learning experiences, causing *positive discomfort* (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018). In this case, Red Zone experiences can be high risk, but also high reward for players consenting to take part in them. Furthermore, some players may not perceive themselves to have a hard line, or may feel highly tolerant toward brink play, making it easier for them to engage in such scenes than for others. Thus, our intention is not to emphasize low risk play as more preferable when considering frameworks for growth, but rather to emphasize that higher risk means a higher possibility for the sorts of unintended consequences mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Importantly, while a game's design can establish certain parameters for content, it is inadvisable to push someone to explore a topic if they are not ready and willing to do so, e.g., advising a player to experience triggering content as a form of "exposure therapy," especially since leisure role-play does not take place in an therapeutic setting. Only each individual player can know what their growth edges or acceptable brinks are at any given moment and whether they feel safe and willing to explore them.

What complicates matters further is that often, we are not fully aware of our own limitations ahead of time, and may only discover them when harm has occurred. Such harm can happen in any zone, although Red Zone experiences are more likely to incur risk. While this issue is not fully solvable in role-playing games, integrating safety mechanics and related practices can help players articulate when a boundary has transgressed; ideally, they can then request to receive care from others or feel able to disengage from play as needed.

Thus, we can conceive role-playing experiences as existing along a continuum based upon level of risk (see Figure 1).
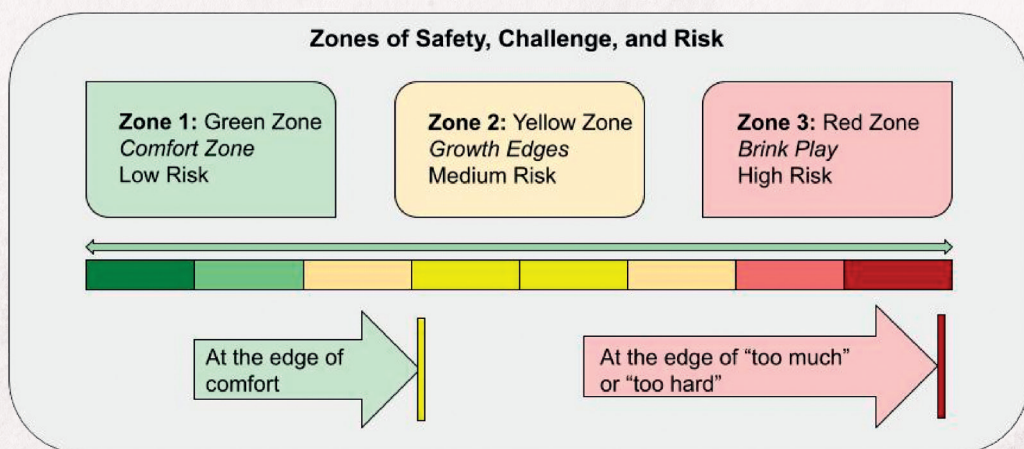

Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk

Zone 1: Green Zone
Comfort Zone
Low Risk

Zone 2: Yellow Zone
Growth Edges
Medium Risk

Zone 3: Red Zone
Brink Play
High Risk

At the edge of comfort

At the edge of "too much" or "too hard"

Figure 1: Bowman and Hugaas' (in press for 2025) model of Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk. Green Zone (Zone 1) play is in one's comfort zone and low risk. Yellow Zone (Zone 2) play is on one's growth edges, which transitions from the edge of comfort, and is medium risk. Red Zone (Zone 3) is brink play (Poremba 2007), and is high risk at the edge of "too much."

Note that even if you design for a specific Zone, they will be different for each individual player and circumstance. Easy, comfort zone play for one person may feel incredibly risky for another person. Furthermore, a player's zones may change over time and may depend upon who their co-players are. What might feel high risk (Zone 3) at the start of the larp might become a growth edge by the end (Zone 2) or be less challenging when playing with a trusted friend. Alternatively, a player may realize half-way through a game that content they may have been willing to experience initially now feels higher risk. In other words, one's growth edges might expand or shrink over

time as a result of experience. Furthermore, some players may never want to engage in brink play or explore their growth edges. The more your design enables players to communicate their needs with one another and calibrate, the easier players will likely find it to course correct before and during the game.

The purpose of this theory is not to prescribe what players or designers should be aiming to create, but rather to describe certain psychological states as they pertain to perceptions of safety and discuss design implications for each. For example, some designers or organizers will engage in *zoning* (Bowman 2018), physically demarcating spaces within the location for green, yellow, or red zone play, defining what types of activities are allowed within each. Zoning is also possible in tabletop, such as the facilitator bringing a player into a private room for an intense scene, or different breakout rooms in video conferencing or Discord established for certain kinds of play.

In addition to physical space, these zones of psychological safety are understandable as taking place within several contexts:

- **Individual experience**: Each player's subjective experience falls somewhere along the spectrum at any given time. Thus, zones can be highly different from player to player and from moment to moment. Also, players may have different triggers or topics that cause activation, making it difficult to plan content in advance for all safety situations.

- **Interpersonal play**, in which two players create a Zone together through calibration, e.g., agreeing to tone down physical aggression so that one player's experience does not exceed Zone 2, or deciding to play a relaxing friendship dynamic to remain in Zone 1.

- **Group play,** in which a group of three or more players calibrate to a certain Zone through calibration, e.g., deciding the baseline limit of sexual touch within the group will be kissing to remain in a particular player's Zone 2, or deciding all sexual activity is permissible, even if such play is within Zone 3 for some individuals.

- **Entire game,** in which the designers or organizers decide the types of play, content, and/or hard limits for the game, e.g., "This game will not feature sexual or violent content" in order to remain in most people's Zone 2, or "This game will push players to their physical and emotional extremes" in order to encourage Zone 3 play.

In the example provided before, calibration between players is considered here primarily with regard to safety and risk. In other words, players should calibrate (or agree not to calibrate) based upon their desired level of risk and intensity. However, players can calibrate for many other reasons, for example, to seek out more interesting and stimulating play outside of the context of safety (Koljonen 2019, 2020). Furthermore, we are considering calibration here as only one of many tools that can contribute to feelings of safety and mutuality, as we will describe in the next sections.

Now that we have explored some of the theories surrounding psychological safety, we will focus more concretely on strategies for design in terms of the structure of the games themselves; the needs of the populations they serve; the settings in which they take place and subsequent expectations of care; and the content within the games.

5.5 Core components of safety

Role-playing games can be intensely enjoyable, cathartic, and even liberating (Kemper 2017, 2018a, 2020), but at the same time, they can be mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically exhausting (Leonard and Thurman 2018). They can lead to intimacy and vulnerable exposure of parts of the self that are normally hidden or protected, as during play, vigilance is relaxed and playfulness is activated. They can also lead players to push past points of resistance due to the perception of safety, "fictional" identities, and circumstances. Moreover, they are experienced as both "fictional" and "real" by the brain at the same time (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Järvelä 2019; Leonard and Thurman 2018).

As a result, players in role-playing games may neglect their physical or emotional needs due to their investment in the role-playing experience. They may also feel more safe than they actually are, and/or open themselves up to predation, harassment, or other forms of boundary-pushing behaviors from other participants, e.g, by "missing stairs" in a community who are harmful but who's behaviour the group excuses (Brown 2017a). Moreover, they may experience trauma triggers and other forms of activation that they find overwhelming or distressing (Brown 2014). Lastly, they may experience microaggressions, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism or other harmful stereotypes (Holkar 2016; Garcia 2017; Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2021; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021), as the alibi of the game can permit certain kinds of behavior that would otherwise be unacceptable (Deterding 2017).

Taking all these points into consideration, from a risk-aware perspective, the question is not what to do *if* but *when* participants have experiences of feeling overwhelmed or unsafe. If treated with proper seriousness and care, safety issues, when they arise, can be learning experiences for everyone involved. If treated badly, however, they can cause lasting damage to individual lives as well as to the health of the community. Preparation on the part of the designers, facilitators, and player group can help, including actions that can be taken before, during, and after the game, as we will see in more detail later. Simply normalizing the discussion of safety can help participants feel safer (Pedersen 2015), and it is crucial never to forget that players are more important than games (Brown 2016; Koljonen 2020).

As we have discussed before, role-playing games can be transformative, especially when players perceive themselves as safe. Transformation should thus emphasize choosing to change, or learning how to navigate a change that is inevitable in one's life. Ultimately, we should be able to choose the degree to which we face our own points of resistance. Undergoing processes of transition or transformation should always be

consensual. We may not always be aware of the transformation processes as they are happening, but we should always be able to calibrate with others and self-advocate as needed. A healthy role-playing community fosters safety, calibration, communication, and self-advocacy, while at the same time it discourages peer pressure on people to push past their boundaries. Instead, it invites people to explore their edges for growth (or brink zones if enthusiastic consent is granted).

Importantly, *informed consent* is not always possible in games that feature spontaneous improvised co-creativity, as the topics and behaviors that arise are unpredictable. Therefore, designers cannot fully disclose all contents of a role-playing game. However, they can perform a risk assessment and disclose themes they know are embedded in the design or are likely to arise. Thus, strategies for communication and negotiation before, during, and after should be considered as part of the design's safety strategy. Such strategies can be pre-established, like many of the tools we will present in this chapter, or designed in a bespoke way based on the aesthetics and needs of the specific game. Either way, it is advisable to consider how easy any given tool is to use at the moment, especially if a person is already activated or overwhelmed. Having too many tools can overwhelm players, leading to cognitive overload and lack of retention. However, too few tools can also lead to ambiguous situations in which consent might feel murky.

In your nano-games, we recommend choosing one strategy before, during, and after the game to practice integrating safety techniques and playtest how they work when possible. The following sections will cover the broad principles of safety design. Consider if and how each principle might be translated to the nano-game format. For example, instead of a safety team, perhaps your nano-game requires only one support person who also serves in the role of the facilitator. In that case, the facilitator must understand when to stop doing one task and perform the other, such as checking in on a player who appears emotionally overwhelmed.

a) Before the game

Here are some strategies for establishing structures for play and safety before the game starts:

i) Security measures

1) Safety team

The safety team should be established before a game is promoted or played. It could consist of one person (like a facilitator), or a team of people (like in a large-scale larp); in a larp, ideally, the safety team is separate from the main organizing team, but in smaller games such as tabletop, tasks might overlap. It is recommended to try to find diverse safety team members who are enthusiastic volunteers (Brown 2017b, 2017e), as well as distinguishing between safety team members and other organizers who should remain focused on logistical tasks (Berthold 2024). In some therapeutic practices, for

example, a game might feature two facilitators: one responsible for game mastering the story, mechanics, and other details, while the other is responsible for monitoring the emotional state of the players and providing therapeutic processing as needed. Ideally, safety team members are involved throughout the process of design and implementation, not just during the game (Berthold 2024), emphasizing that safety is important to consider at every stage.

When possible, safety teams should include team members from diverse backgrounds, including marginalized groups, as some players may feel more comfortable sharing emotional difficulties with them. Safety team members may have various levels of responsibility, which should be detailed in an *internal procedures document*. These may include some or all of the following:

- Upholding the *code of conduct*, which establishes consequences for unacceptable behavior;
- monitoring play activities;
- receiving reports from players;
- addressing conflicts that erupt in real time;
- helping players in states of crisis, overwhelm, or bleed;
- meeting to discuss details of reports and decide on actions; and
- enacting consequences or boundaries.

2) Player screening through flagging

Some games and conventions provide a way for players to report behavior by another participant they find concerning, or ask not to play closely to that person. For example, the safety team may have an email address for community members to send reports, or the organizers may send out the list of players asking if anyone has safety concerns about individuals who have signed up. This process is called flagging.

The flagging systems used by organizers vary and evolve over time. Imprecise flagging systems can lead to ambiguities as to the nature of the report about the person's behavior (Brown and Teerlahti 2024), e.g., preferring not to play closely with one's ex is not the same as flagging them for abuse or sexual misconduct. We recommend the specific procedure proposed by Laura Wood and Mo Holkar (2024), which includes the following flagging options:

- **Red flag:** "I believe that this person is unsafe to larp with." This may include behaviors such as bullying, harassment, or abuse.
- **Orange flag:** "I'm unable to attend if this person is participating." This option may be chosen if someone is unable to attend an event where another person is participating, for personal reasons and not for reasons of safety.

- **Yellow flag**: "I don't want to play in a close relationship with this person." This option may be chosen if someone is unable to play closely with another participant for personal reasons and not for reasons of safety.

- **Request not to play closely with a specific person:** This applies to cases of people who often play closely together, or are real-life partners, or want to explore play with different participants, etc.

In this practice, people are not obliged to explain the reasons why they flag someone, and the flagged person is not informed about who flagged them. Red-flagged people are excluded due to safety concerns. For interpersonal issues not related to general safety, depending on the severity of the dispute, one or other person will self-exclude or the participants will be cast apart if possible and practical. Note that while it can be challenging to cast people in such a way that they have little interaction in a larger larp, this becomes almost impossible in tabletop and smaller freeform games. Also, some games have space constraints, or do not feature casting, such as larps in which players make their own characters. Therefore the interactions are more difficult to control and exclusion may be a better option, if not ideal.

Ultimately, inclusion practices should not mean "inclusive of everyone." Some behaviors should not be allowed, particularly when they have the potential to cause additional harm or make players feel unsafe in the group. Moreover, some participants come from vulnerable populations, and it is important to consider how to make gaming spaces safer for them especially (Brown 2017a).

3) Code of Conduct

As mentioned before, we recommend establishing a code of conduct, which details unacceptable behavior, particularly with regard to discrimination, harassment, or abuse. The code can be based on examples from other communities (with credit), but should at the same time be specific to the needs of your community. It should establish clear boundaries of what behavior is not acceptable, and also specify what actions may be taken if such behavior takes place. It is generally best to leave some flexibility here and operate on a case-by-case basis, while it is also important to follow up if a report is made and take it seriously. Additionally, you can include a list of encouraged behaviors that you would like to see in the community, as a way to share values. For an example, see the Living Games Code of Conduct (Living Games Conference 2018a).

4) Internal Procedures document

We also recommend creating an internal procedures document. (see e.g., Living Games Conference 2018b). If someone breaks the code of conduct, this document details for organizers what steps should be taken and by whom. This document should also include clear steps for the safety team to follow in the event of a crisis, including who will receive reports, who has access to them, how the safety team will be informed during the event, who makes decisions regarding a report, etc. Ideally, it also contains instructions on what to say (and not say), how to hold one's body, and indications of one's responsibility when in crisis situations.

We also recommend including links and phone numbers for contacting trained professionals for additional support if needed, such as counselors, crisis hotlines, etc. Calling the police should be the last course of action as engagement with police officers and the legal system can lead to deeper traumatization; however, in cases where a crime has been committed, it may be unavoidable and even legally required. It is advisable that you know the local laws for various situations, for example, what your responsibilities are if a crime is committed on your watch, what the legal limit for intoxication is, including in situations of sexual consent, etc. While such topics may seem beyond the scope of running a game, as an event organizer, you have certain responsibilities that are important to consider.

Furthermore, not all moments of crisis are a result of the behaviors of others. As mentioned before, a player may become triggered by certain content, emotionally dysregulated, for example, due to lack of sleep or food, or simply overwhelmed by the amount of content or intensity of the game. In many cases, simply providing care and a space to share one's feelings can help de-escalate the situation, e.g., in an *off-game safety room*. When appropriate, the safety team member can also offer advice for how to re-engage in the game scenario if desired by the player (Bowman et al. 2017).

Importantly, the safety team is not responsible for therapeutic processing, nor is the game itself the proper space for such intensive work unless there is a specific client-professional relationship established with the safety team member, e.g., in therapeutic role-playing games. However, it is advisable for safety team members to improve their basic skill set for crisis management if possible, e.g., taking a course in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA).

5) Online interaction

When cultivating community especially around transformative play, we recommend monitoring and moderating online spaces you create related to your game and related environments. Facebook groups, Discord channels, etc. can be great places for consent and calibration conversations to occur. They can also provide opportunities for players to find co-players who would like to engage in specific types of play. At the same time, however, they can become spaces of escalated conflicts between community members. We recommend having enough flexibility in your code of conduct to enable you to take action on behavior that occurs outside of your purview, for example, incidents of stalking or harassment elsewhere on social media.

6) Safety mechanics, calibration tools, and other protocols

Safety mechanics, calibration tools, and other protocols (Koljonen 2020) should be featured prominently on your website and included in player's handbooks if applicable (see Chapter 2), or otherwise disclosed to potential players. Openly establishing such practices before sign-up can help establish the safety culture of the game, indicating that safety will be taken seriously within the group, and signaling especially to vulnerable populations that their needs will be considered (Pedersen 2015). However, do not assume players have read or memorized any information before the game. Make

sure you reinforce safety throughout play, not just in the beginning. Modeling safety mechanics during play can be helpful, for example, when facilitating or playing a non-player character (NPC).

7) Workshops

As discussed in our model, workshops and debriefing are important components to transformative game design. Include a section in your workshops on safety, introducing mechanics, the safety team, the location of the off-game room, and other protocols. Ask participants to practice safety mechanics in the workshop; they are much more likely to use them with embodied practice. Give participants the opportunity and tools to negotiate consent, especially for violence, sex and/or sexuality, romance, phobias, or other types of situations. When possible, provide time and space for players to calibrate as a group, so that participants can get their needs met and self-advocate.

Some players assume that safety mechanics or protocols will inhibit play. For some, this may be true, but in our experience, the vast majority of the time, these protocols allow participants to feel safer taking risks (Brown 2016). Most importantly, spending time in workshops on safety emphasizes that safety is valued in this community (Pedersen 2015).

8) Session 0

Session 0 is a method in tabletop that players can use to establish the social contract before play. Session 0s are especially common in campaign play that takes place over multiple sessions. During Session 0, players can establish the tone, mood, and themes of the game, as well as negotiate boundaries and consent. They can create Yes lists for the content players would love to include, and No lists for the content players want to veto (Reynolds and Germain 2019). They can also use it to agree upon the creative agendas of the game (Kim 1997; Edwards 2001), for example, the degree to which combat and leveling will be emphasized versus a compelling storyline. Lastly, they can discuss safety mechanics, and get to know one another off-game before immersing into their characters.

Session 0 should be conducted completely off-game (and signaled as such). If a gaming group turns out to have incompatible goals or values—no problem. It is better to know that before the start than after significant investments of time, energy, or money have been made. If you are running a one-shot nano-game and do not have time to hold a Session 0, consider which of these strategies you could integrate in a short workshop.

9) Consent in Gaming by Monte Cook Games

Consent in Gaming by Monte Cook Games (Reynolds and Germain 2019) consolidates many of the best practices in tabletop role-playing games into a short, freely available document. It provides an RPG Consent Checklist with Stoplight colors for each theme:

- Green for enthusiastic consent,

- Yellow for "may be okay under certain circumstances," or

- Red for "hard line, do not include"

It also includes sections for content related to horror; relationships; social and cultural issues; mental and physical health; and blank spaces for players to fill in. The answers need no justification, but the player can request support from the GM if they would like to discuss anything further.

Note that while we mention Consent in Gaming, many other great toolkits have been created along these lines, as this area is growing rapidly, especially in tabletop communities. We recommend doing your own research to see what is currently in use and best for your context.

10) Trigger warnings, content advisories, and ingredients lists

We recommend disclosing sensitive content ahead of time, e.g., explicit violence, sexuality, phobias, etc). Disclosing may take the form of:

- Trigger warnings,

- Content advisories, or

- Ingredients lists.

Some players object to the term *trigger warning*, as it lumps together trauma triggers (Brown 2014) with other kinds of activating material. *Content advisory* is more general, but has a connotation of warning nonetheless. *Ingredients lists* present sensitive content as more of a feature than a warning, which might attract certain players while repelling others. Either way, *signposting* your game can help with expectation management among players (Koljonen 2016a).

These forms of disclosure can be applied to the entire game or just for specific scenes or characters. They can be listed on websites, in player's handbooks, in Session 0s, or before a specific session or scene. The purpose of these disclosures is to help players opt-in or opt-out of specific content. If the activity is part of mandatory participation, e.g., in an educational or therapeutic setting, we recommend offering alternative assignments or activities with similar goals.

As mentioned regarding informed consent, predicting all possible activating content is impossible. For example, trauma triggers may not be known to the participant ahead of time and may not be entirely clear in the moment. A player might feel okay with engaging with the content before the larp, but have different boundaries throughout the larp experience. Therefore, having other safety mechanisms in place can help empower players to have more control over their own experience, such as the X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013) and the Lookdown (Koljonen 2016c), as we will explain in the next section.

b) During the game

Safety mechanics are off-game ways to signal to the players and facilitators safety needs in the moment. Related to safety mechanics are calibration meta-techniques, which are ways for players to signal their desires for play to one another during the game. Some theorists prefer to distinguish calibration from safety (see e.g., Koljonen 2020), as calibrating intensity or content with another player may be a matter of preference rather than a safety concern. However, practically speaking, the two often overlap. Therefore, we will include examples of both here.

Some common safety mechanics include:

- **The Door is Always Open:** Players can leave at any time without explanation, although it is kind if they check in with the facilitator later to make sure they are okay.

- **X-Card:** The X-Card means, "Please remove this content" (Stavropoulos 2013). In tabletop, the X-Card may be represented by a card on the table with an X drawn on it. Players can point at the card and say, "X Card: spiders" or whatever content they want to be removed, no questions asked. The X-Card can be used before the game when planning, as well as after the game. In larp, placing one's arms in an X and saying "X-card" or "X-arms" can be a clear visual alternative.

- **Luxton Technique:** For some trauma survivors, the X-Card is supportive of their needs to not have to discuss trauma triggers or other activating content with co-players. However, for others, the implication that players must remain silent about their triggers is reminiscent of previous experiences, e.g., feeling silenced by abusers. Therefore, some groups with high trust use the Luxton Technique (Lee 2017 qtd. in Sheldon 2019), in which the group agrees to process trauma off-game if it arises during play.

- **Okay Check-in:** The Okay Check-in is a way for participants to ask off-game if the other person needs a break or support (Brown 2016). A signal is used to check-in, such as making an "O" with one's hand, which is a nonverbal way to ask, "Are you okay?" The player may answer using thumbs up, down, or flat hand/so-so. Depending on their answer, a follow-up question may be, "Do you need help?" or "Would you like to walk outside with me?"

- Hand signals are useful, as players may have difficulties being verbal when they are activated. The hand signals are also discreet and do not usually interrupt the scene going on around the players in question. However, when overwhelmed, some players may forget the responses. As an alternative, some groups will simply use the term, "Off-game" and then verbalize the check-in to the other person. No safety tool is perfect, but having some means of communicating is important, emphasizing that it is normal in this community to check on one another and prioritize safety.

- **Lines and Veils:** Arising from tabletop (Edwards 2003), a *line* means "Do not include this content" (similar to the X-card). A *veil* means, "You can include this content, but fade to black in scenes if it arises."

- **Lookdown:** The Lookdown means, "Please don't interact with me or my character now" (Koljonen 2016c, developed with Trine Lise Lindahl). In larp, the Lookdown is signaled by holding a hand over one's eyes. The player may choose to leave the scene while still holding their hand over their eyes, or may stay in the scene. Either way, no one should approach the character and the players should improvise a way to graciously avoid discussing this character or their actions. In online environments, one might grey out one's visual representation of character or turn off one's camera to signal "not available." In this case, follow-up is not desired. This mechanic is sometimes called Bow Out, or "See No Evil" (Koljonen 2016c).

- **Tap out:** Tapping-out is a nonverbal cue that involves tapping "your co-player's arm or another convenient part of their body twice, and repeat this action as many times and as hard [within reason] as you need to get their attention. (Typically, once and quite softly is enough)." (Koljonen 2016d).

- **Script Change:** Script Change is a set of tools that allow players to start, pause, resume, rewind, fast forward a scene, etc (Sheldon 2023). For example, these tools can be helpful if play feels overwhelming and the player needs a break, or if a player wants to move to the next scene rather than experiencing the gory details of a violent combat sequence.

- **Stoplight:** A common tool is stoplight. Like with a spotlight, the players can indicate *red* for stop, *yellow* for slow down/caution, and *green* for enthusiastic consent. These terms can be said verbally, or placed on a badge where the player can point.

- **Ribbons, buttons, or other markings:** Signaling systems on the body can include wearing ribbons, buttons, or other markings indicating what types of play are acceptable or off-limits. Examples of this can be a headband indicating a non-combat character, a ribbon indicating interest in romantic play, a button saying, "Please no hugs," etc. These methods are handy because they allow players to know what sort of play or contact to avoid. At the same time, flexibility can be helpful, i.e., being able to change one's mind during the course of play. For example, if players have three ribbons for Stoplight (red, yellow, green), they can indicate what sorts of play they are comfortable with at the moment by changing the ribbon. Such markings can also help signal which pronouns the player would like others to use (Brown 2017d). However, keep in mind that color codes may create an accessibility issue; not only in cases of people with color blindness, or visual impairment, but also in cases of low-light conditions or darkness.

- **Consent negotiations:** Negotiating consent allows players to ascertain if participants are interested in playing certain content with that particular player, e.g., romance, sexuality, aggression, etc (Bowman 2017). Negotiation techniques can be formally taught during workshops, such as a consent negotiation script. Alternatively, they can be more informally discussed off-game between players, or during the game starting with the phrase "Off-game" before the discussion ensues. The important part is to make sure all involved players agree, and no one feels pressured.

- **Monologue:** This meta-technique is often used for story purposes (Jeepen 2007; Boss and Holter 2013), but can also be used as a means of calibrating and bringing players into a scene. Asking a player to monologue means they should answer out loud, "What is your character thinking right now?" Players and/or facilitators can ask for a monologue in certain games. Monologues are often good for helping players who are shy, reticent, or experiencing strong emotions to verbalize/participate. Information can also be shared that gives others an indication of what might be interesting to play upon, even if the information is technically conveyed out-of-character. Such a practice can be a good way to help players feel included, including those from marginalized backgrounds who may not be as used to taking up social space.

- **Spotlight:** A similar practice is Spotlight, which can be used to bring quiet players into a scene or making sure players get roughly the same amount of time for expressing their character, e.g., in a tabletop game. Saying "spotlight" as if shining a spotlight on another player means, "What is your character wanting to do now?" This could be initiated by a game master or a player. Spotlight can also be insinuated rather than said out loud, for example, if a game master or player shifts attention in the group toward a particular player.

- **Act breaks:** Act breaks are built into the game and provide a short or long pause in between scenes or longer periods of play. Built-in and workshopped calibration discussions during Act breaks can help participants identify where they would like play to go so that they can *steer* toward the kind of play each other wants (Montola, Stenros, Saitta 2015).

- **Escalation techniques:** Escalation techniques invite players into more intense play. This can practically include phrases like "*harder*" i.e., "I can handle more intensity," or thematic code phrases everyone knows is an off-game signal to escalate, i.e., "It would be *horrible* if you continued to yell at me…" The player can then escalate, choose not to respond, or respond with a de-escalation technique.

- **De-escalation techniques:** De-escalation techniques are used to instruct other players to tone down the intensity. These can include phrases like "*softer*," i.e., "Please speak more softly/slowly/less aggressively"; "*brake*",

i.e., "Let's put the brakes on this scene"; or thematic code phrases, i.e., "I miss the *safety* of my home village…" For an example of an escalation/ de-escalation mechanic bespoke to the theme of the game, see the use of *rotten* and *pure* in Participation Design Agency's *Inside Hamlet* (Participation Design Agency 2015, 2017, 2018; see Lane 2018). Note that one drawback of such phrases is that co-players may not detect the signal when integrated into the flow of role-play. This drawback can be a problem particularly when one player misses another's cue to de-escalate.

- **Techniques to pause or stop play:** Finally, some techniques pause or stop the play altogether, for example, "*cut*," i.e., "Let's stop the scene for now." Anyone can call cut for any reason, and the play stops. There may or may not be a discussion about why, and the play may or may not be resumed afterwards, depending on the needs of the players.

c) After the game

Techniques after the game can help players transition from the play experience to life again and process their experiences. The two major phases we strongly recommend including after any transformative role-playing game are *de-roling* and debriefing.

i) De-roling

Common in acting circles (Arts Wellbeing Collective 2019) and psychodrama, de-roling activities are rituals that mark the shift back to the daily frame of life and identity (Brown 2018). They can include removing the character's costume, props, or name tag. They may also include each player stating something like "I was Hathor, I am now Linda," and/or re-framing their perspective to the third person by saying "Hathor did X…" rather than "I did X…" Often they also include sharing one thing they would like to take with them about the session and one thing they would like to leave behind.

ii) Debriefing

As discussed in Chapter 2, common in simulation and other forms of educational role-playing (Crookall 2010, 2014), debriefing offers space to verbally process emotions and experiences with the play group in a serious manner, whether structured or unstructured (Fatland 2013; Stark 2013; Bowman 2014).

Structured debriefing is moderated by a facilitator or a member of the group. Structured debriefs allow the players to take turns answering the same question, moderated such that each player has roughly the same amount of time to speak, with the option to pass or opt-out available. Crosstalk, when players try to engage with each other or comments they made, is discouraged, similar to how the Morenos asked psychodrama participants in the post-play *sharing* phase to focus on their own experience, otherwise the therapeutic value of group process is missed (Moreno, Zerka, Blomkvist, and Ruetzel 2000).

Unstructured debriefing does not have the same restrictions. While not all players feel the need for a debrief or are ready to discuss a game experience immediately after play, in transformative game design, we recommend always having a debrief as part of the experience. Debriefing in our model is not only included for safety reasons, but as a means to process the experience and distill takeaways, leading to a greater probability of knowledge transfer (Crookall 2014).

iii) Narrativizing

When players freely tell stories about the play experience, usually in a more light-hearted or humorous tone, some communities call this practice *war storying* (Brown 2018). This practice can help with de-roling and community building, but not always with deeper processing. Note that the term war story itself can be insensitive, especially when players have experienced war themselves recently or in places where war is ongoing (Kasper and Leipoldt 2016). Therefore, we recommend the term *narrativizing*, which is more neutral.

Narrativizing can be important in creating distance between the player and the fiction and character. As with debriefing (Montola 2010), narrativizing can help mitigate negative experiences of *bleed* (Bowman 2015), for example, if a person still feels antipathy toward another player for actions their character took in-game (Bowman 2013; Leonard and Thurman 2018).

iv) Post-game processing and integration

As discussed in previous Chapter 2 and 4, many other forms of post-game processing and integration are possible. We remind you of them here because engaging in post-game activities can also be important for safety and emotional well-being (Brown 2018). Forms of processing and integration activities (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) include: creative expression, emotional processing, returning to daily life, interpersonal processing, and community building (see Chapter 2).

In terms of safety, aftercare (Friedner 2020) is another important factor to consider during the integration phase. Providing support and care for participants after a game can be especially important when players have engaged in in-game antagonism or oppression, but is also kind to offer for anyone in the community if time and energy allows. It is important to take into consideration that some players struggle with post-larp blues or depression (Bowman and Torner 2014), including after RPG conventions or conferences in which role-playing may or may not be present (Nilsen 2015); others may simply find returning to life disorienting or lonely.

d) Community

Safety should be considered beyond the game itself in order to cultivate transformational communities. Unfortunately, issues of conflict and harassment can negatively impact community dynamics. While such interactions are not always the designer or facilitator's responsibility strictly speaking if they fall outside the purview

of the game event, we believe that holding containers for transformation requires fostering a community of play surrounding the event that is conducive to growth in which toxicity is minimized. Here are recommendations to consider implementing when holding a transformational container:

i) Presence in the community

It is important to consciously moderate specific player spaces, e.g., official forums, Discord, blogs. For expectation management, organizers should also be clear which spaces are not moderated, e.g., player-run discussion groups for particular factions in the game. Regardless of the moderation level, we recommend having some flexibility worked into your Code of Conduct in case you want to take action regarding behavior in unofficial spaces, e.g., issuing a ban on a player's attendance at a game after they participated in harassing behavior on social media.

There should be clear and transparent communication about the designer and/ or organizer's ambitions in terms of their goals for the game, the themes present, as well as their limitations, especially up front at sign-up (Torner 2013; Koljonen 2016a). Compassionate, inclusive values should be placed at the center of all communication, especially when sharing limitations, e.g., areas of accessibility that the organizers cannot accommodate.

Similarly, designers' values should be written down as part of the player's handbook, and communicated clearly to players from the start, e.g., anti-racism and inclusion. These practices signal to marginalized players that you will endeavor to help them feel safe in the space. In practice, as we have discussed earlier, safety is a perception that must be established, maintained, and, if necessary repaired in order for the community members to feel comfortable engaging. You must never promise a safe space, but rather make clear how you will work to create a safer one, e.g., having members of the safety team from marginalized groups when possible.

We recommend the Code of Conduct, including guidelines for encouraged behavior, to be a document that players actively accept and even sign to make it more likely players will read them. These documents should be open to change based on feedback and experience as the community unfolds over time. Breaching the code needs to lead to actual consequences, which the safety team should evaluate on a case-by-case basis rather than trying to apply a generalized rule to all situations, as safety situations can be complex in practice. Possible consequences should be outlined clearly in the code. Although you may endeavor to enact such consequences justly and fairly, be aware that pushback may still occur.

ii) Educating players and facilitators

Educating players can help elevate the skills and the knowledge of the group. This practice may include tips and tricks about role-playing in general, sharing articles, or teaching terms that give players the tools to talk about their experiences, e.g., bleed, alibi, etc. Educating players should reinforce the values of the game, inclusivity, and prosocial behavior.

You may also choose to establish some form of facilitator "school" or other training opportunities. Examples include educating facilitators in prosocial and inclusive ways to run games, understanding power imbalances and dynamics, methods for how to spotlight each player with equity at the forefront. You can use role-playing itself as a tool to practice difficult scenarios that might arise when facilitating a game, considering how to respond based on the code of conduct and internal procedures (see e.g., Steele, Hart, Stavropoulos, and Bowman 2016). Facilitators should obtain certificates relevant to addressing physical and emotional certificates when possible.

iii) Cultural sensitivity

When possible, diversity in the team should be transparent and foregrounded. It is advised to hire cultural consultants and sensitivity readers and make recommended changes when dealing with sensitive themes (Kemper 2018; Leonard 2021; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Furthermore, working towards diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and cross-cultural competency for organizers and players are important goals. Training can even occur through role-playing practices themselves (Schreiber 2022; ROCKET 2024). Such work is never "done," as team members and players can always learn more. While challenging, a commitment to DEI requires a degree of humility and openness to listen, learn, and adapt.

5.6 Safety for specific populations

In Chapter 2, we provided an overview of some of the populations that transformative role-playing games have been designed to reach. Here, we will highlight a few important ones that have special safety concerns, but keep in mind that the needs of any population must be considered carefully in design.

a) Children and intergenerational play

Children cannot consent the same way that adults can because they cannot fully grasp the implications of their consent, even if we explain it to them in age-appropriate language and in as much detail as possible. Therefore, we need to design with safety in mind.

- **Caregivers:** When it comes to children, it's good practice to involve and inform caregivers as much as possible. Explain the activity you are going to do with their children in a way they will understand, and allow them to ask questions before they consent for their children to participate. You may even ask them to sign an *assent form*, which is necessary, for example, in some ethical procedures or for legal reasons.

- **Transparency:** Transparency is one of the most important safety measures because it enhances trust and safety between facilitators and caregivers. It means that whatever happens, good or bad, we report back to the caregivers in an honest and transparent manner, making sure that they are equally aware of achievements and mishaps.

- **Facilitators:** It is highly suggested that the facilitators have experience working with children in formal, non-formal, or informal educational settings.This ensures that the facilitators will have structured knowledge of how to interact with a group of kids; how to monitor the dynamics within the team; how to help them regulate emotions and conflicts that might arise; and how to communicate properly with caregivers and upper administration (if relevant).

- **Facilitator to children ratio** must be well thought out, to ensure meaningful engagement with each player, but also to ensure that someone is always available to deal with a potential crisis.

- **Age gap:** When it comes to children, it is best that the age difference between them is not vast, as each age group will engage in play differently and have distinct needs.

- **Content:** Keep the content age-appropriate, without coddling or hiding the truth from children. Keep them curious, keep them asking, and tackle topics while always considering the age of the children you are designing for.

- **Immersion:** Children tend to have a natural inclination toward immersive role-play, as most can easily engage in imaginary play. It is a good idea to clear distinctions between the role-playing world and the real world. This can be done in many different ways, such as having a clear start and end point of the game; using costumes; using differentiated characters; including de-roling activities such as removing their costumes while saying: "I was *character name,* and I am now *real name*"; model fictional distancing behavior by talking about things that differ between you and your character, etc.

- **Emotional Safety:** Children are not always in the same position to speak up and advocate for themselves as we would expect an adult to do. The facilitator's role is extremely important as they are responsible for the emotional safety of the group. They need to be able to understand when a child might be feeling unwell or uncomfortable and help them express themselves.

b) Youth work

Another common practice is working with youth outside of formal education settings, for example, in summer camps (Hoge 2013; Fein 2015, 2018; Fey et al. 2022), after-school programs (Bandhoesingh 2024), or community centers (Turner 2017a, 2017b). We consider these forms of youth work non-formal education, as they often still have specific learning goals and expectations, whether led by camp counselors, teachers, or community leaders. Role-playing games make excellent activities to engage people throughout the stages of development, but are particularly potent throughout the process of adolescence, as players at that age are exploring their

identities more generally (Bowman 2010; Hugaas 2024, based on work by Erikson 1968). Even when technically mandatory, for example, parents signing up students for the activity and requiring them to attend, working with these populations requires thorough consent practices with legal guardians. In addition, it requires gaining the assent of the participants themselves and establishing practices of opt-in and opt-out participation (Koljonen 2018) when possible.

Furthermore, you will want to consider the physical space in which these populations will be playing in terms of safety and accessibility design. A tabletop game played at a community center likely has different safety concerns than a week-long summer camp in the woods. We will discuss these topics in more depth in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

c) Therapeutic clients

Working with populations who struggle with mental health challenges has specific risks. While we detail some of these risks in this section, keep in mind this list is not exhaustive.

i) Risk 1: Lack of training

As Gutierrez (2017, 28) outlines, "Believing that because you come from a background in playing TRPGs, you can implement it therapeutically" is a risk. When using role-playing games with therapeutic clients, it is crucial and necessary to include at least one mental health professional both in the team of the designers as well as the team of the facilitators of the game. A trained clinician can play a significant role in designing and curating the game, with contributions deriving from theoretical models and practitioner-oriented approaches of mental health, emotional well-being and psychological processes; at the same time, during the implementation of the game, they will be essential in creating emotional safety and potentially providing emergency care if necessary.

Especially when the game is focused on specific mental health issues or participant groups, a profound scientific comprehension of these issues and/or populations is vital both for the game design and the implementation, in order to provide emotional safety for all the people involved (Connell, Kilmer and Kilmer 2020; Diakolambrianou 2021). This is also true for games designed for specific populations with mental health challenges that are not explicitly included in more extensive therapeutic treatment. For an excellent example of a design and implementation collaboration with a mental health practitioner, see Lehto (2024).

ii) Risk 2: Delusional tendencies

As we briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, it is considered risky to use role-playing games with people that have delusional tendencies (e.g., people with schizophrenia or psychotic conditions; Blackmon 1994). There is serious concern that an intervention involving role-playing games could have negative consequences with people who

find it difficult to determine the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and possibly further loosen their grip on reality (Gutierrez 2017). Therapists may deem RPGs contraindicated if the client cannot successfully pass a reality test.

However, it is important to also mention that other researchers argue that there are indeed potential benefits of some types of digital role-playing games for people with some forms of psychosis (Olivet et al. 2018), so not all types of psychosis are concerning in this case, although certainly violent thoughts or actions toward others would be another cause for concern depending on the client. Furthermore, recent experimental studies have successfully explored the practice of clients creating virtual representations of the voices they hear in a digital environment, then learning how to self-advocate while therapists' role-play the voices (Leff et al. 2013; Craig et al. 2018; Kleeman 2024). This technique is consistent with research and practices in the fields of drama therapy and psychodrama (Casson 2004; Gal 2020; Mortan Sevi et al. 2020) where fiction and dramatic techniques are used with people who hear voices and people with psychosis, in playful ways that make the suspension of their delusions possible and bring them closer to reconnection with themselves, their lived experience, and others (Gal, Leroy-Viemon, and Estellon 2020). Thus, role-playing games could be a helpful tool for clinicians with specialties working with clients with delusional tendencies in certain contexts.

iii) Risk 3: Incompatibility of group members

The dynamic of a group is a crucial factor of effectiveness as well as safety in group therapy, and there are many aspects to take into consideration in a screening process to select group members appropriately. A first step is to ensure there is not a high level of heterogeneity when it comes to the mental health issues that the group members face. However, not every person with similar mental health challenges will necessarily be an appropriate group candidate. Group readiness is another important element to take into account, as it can predict the risk of group dropout and/or poor therapeutic outcomes; there are tools one can use to assess it during the screening process, such as the Group Readiness Questionnaire (GRQ; Baker et al. 2013).

Moreover, it is crucial to consider the potential group inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the contraindications to group therapy; this can include people who have very recently experienced trauma or acute psychological distress, people with certain conditions and/or significant cognitive impairment, people who are actively suicidal or violent, as well as people with acute psychotic symptoms (Ezhumalai et al. 2018; Novotney 2019).

iv) Risk 4: Confidentiality and privacy

When implementing therapeutic role-playing games in a group context, establishing some commonly accepted rules at the very beginning is essential, like in any group therapy setting. Confidentiality as well as privacy issues should be central matters discussed within this framework. Anything disclosed within the group should be confidential, and confidentiality rules do not only apply to the group facilitator,

but also to the group members. At the same time, it must be made clear that privacy is respected within the group; no member is ever obliged to answer a question they do not want to answer, disclose anything they do not feel comfortable with sharing, or participate in any activity they do not wish to participate in (Breeskin 2011). Exceptions of confidentiality apply only to the group facilitator, and are defined and regulated by the code of ethical practice of their professional associations as well as their relevant national laws.

d) Neurodiversity

Role-playing games can be especially helpful interventions for neurodiverse players given the right circumstances, including autistic players (Fein 2015, 2018; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Atherton et al. 2024; Visuri 2024), players with ADHD (Enfield 2007), and PTSD (Sargent 2014; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021). Creating an inclusive and respectful environment is one of the most important factors to facilitate safety in games including individuals with neurodiversity. Specifically:

- **Expectations:** Set clear expectations of behavior, social rules, and communication.

- **Accommodations and flexibility:** Make sure you are prepared to accommodate the needs of an individual with neurodiversity within your group of players: they might need to fidget, get up and walk, take breaks and more. Being flexible enough to accommodate the needs of all the players is creating an inclusive environment of mutual trust and understanding.

- **Self-advocacy:** Empower your players with neurodiversity to advocate for themselves, to express their needs freely and speak up when they are feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable. Creating a non-judgmental, supportive and understanding environment is crucial to help players with neurodiversity feel safe within a group.

e) Disability

As discussed in Chapter 4, accessibility is a key consideration when making design choices and is especially important from a safety perspective. Some players experience temporary or permanent disabilities, which may be visible or invisible. Limitations from disabilities and other factors can make certain aspects of game experiences more challenging or impossible (Butzen 2024; Livesey-Stephens and Gundersen 2024). These disabilities might be visible or invisible. Providing accessible spaces for players of all abilities should be a primary goal when creating safer containers of play (Kessock 2017; Kim, Cook, and Foxworthy 2018). However, in those instances where environments or playstyles may provide obstacles to entry or are inaccessible in other ways, these should be clearly communicated to all involved before they attend any play event. Be thorough in your considerations of your entire space of play for physical, sensory, and

other access needs. There are resources to determine the relative accessibility of venues that can be sourced locally or from the venues themselves.

Sleeping arrangements should also be considered, as some players need specific accommodations: Do players have access to power outlets for breathing aids? Will they be expected to role-play throughout the night and/or get woken up for in-game reasons, e.g., for combat or a dramatic scene? Will they be able to sleep alone or must they share a room with others?

Also consider the accessibility of all the information that you will share with players, e.g., accessibility to websites, printed material, or any other communication. Try to review your materials with a screen reader to make sure information is conveyed accurately with as few complications as possible, such as long URLs or numbers, important images without alternative text descriptions, etc. Include in any communication with players before play a request for any specific needs they may have. Not that not all needs can be accommodated, so be clear in your communication before the event what elements you can and cannot accommodate.

A good practice is to hire an accessibility specialist to help you assess the needs players might have when engaging with design materials or playing the game itself. We will explore disability design in more detail in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

f) Queer identities

Being aware that cis- and hetero- normativity is all too often assumed in all aspects of society (including in games) is an important part of providing safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ players. Including options for players to express their gender and sexuality should be considered for most any play scenario. Designers may employ practices such as writing characters that are gender neutral, i.e., allowing players to choose the character's gender, which might be appropriate in certain settings. However, if the game is set in a culture and time period in which marginalization exists for queer people, failing to consider gender and/or sexuality in the design can have the unintended consequences of erasing the lived experiences of queer people (Saitta and Svegaard 2019).

On the other hand, games that overtly include topics related to disparity or oppression based on gender and sexuality need to be clearly communicated to players. Organizers must consider carefully whether or not to include these elements due to the potential bleed or distress they may incur (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2021). If a game has built-in oppression dynamics, be aware it creates alibi for play that can feel unsafe, regardless of the players' intention. Furthermore, consider what activities may occur in the game and any difficulties that might arise for queer players accordingly, e.g., some trans players may be uncomfortable with compulsory nudity (Saitta and Svegaard 2019). Such features, even if only potentially impacting players, should be signposted during sign-up. Again, hiring consultants with these backgrounds can assist in assessing and mitigating potential risks.

g) Incarcerated populations

Role-playing games are often a leisure activity for inmates, one that can notably prove to be cathartic and transformative for them (Blakinger 2023). Especially when conducted within a group therapy framework, games can benefit participants in numerous ways: improving institutional adjustment and interpersonal relations; reducing and managing anger, anxiety and depression; internalizing the locus of control, meaning players feel more in control of the events that happen to them and their own agency; raising self-esteem; developing motivation, empathy and problem-solving; as well as reducing the negative impact of imprisonment (McMahon 1997; Morgan and Flora 2002). However, there are some points to take into consideration concerning safety when organizing role-playing games in prisons, especially as an external consultant.

i) Risk 1: Prison regulations

Some correctional institutions prohibit the use of dice in order to combat gambling, or pencils as potential weapons, while some others prohibit role-playing games in general (de Kleer 2017). Needless to say, it is crucial to not put the inmates at risk of disciplinary action or harm by organizing anything that goes against the regulations.

ii) Risk 2: Group dynamics

As with therapeutic clients, compiling the right group is very important. In case you are not already working at the specific correctional institution, it may be advisable to collaborate with the prison staff and/or social workers for the screening process; they will likely be familiar with interpersonal dynamics and conflicts that may need to be worked around or avoided. They can probably also inform you about the potential mental health challenges of inmates that need to be taken into consideration. Lastly, they will likely have insight to help you determine potential exclusion criteria for the group, e.g., aggression or violent behavior; anger issues; substance abuse; recent solitary confinement; probation; or serious criminal record. All these factors may raise potential safety concerns; inmates with these characteristics may not necessarily put others at risk, but may be putting their own selves at risk by participating (O'Reilly 2011; McClain 2024).

iii) Risk 3: Confidentiality and privacy

Importantly, have the safety of the inmates in mind when choosing or designing the scenario, plots, and characters of the role-playing game, as well as during the debriefing activities. The participants should not be required to take part in activities or discussions that may in any way lead them to disclose information that is sensitive, on a personal or legal level, as the challenges to confidentiality and privacy can be very intense within an imprisonment setting (Tingué 2020). Consider what themes are most appropriate to play in that setting, avoiding ones that may unintentionally alarm non-players and authorities or make the players vulnerable to increased stigma.

5.7 Crisis management

Regardless of how carefully and safely participants play with one another, designers should plan ahead in case of a crisis. A best practice is to prepare for "not if, but when" a crisis emerges. Again, this is not to say that role-playing or engaging in transformational processes are inherently dangerous, but rather to say that these practices are transformational due to their inherent potency. The very aspects that reach players on a deeper level—such as bleed, immersion, identity play, and interpersonal intimacy—can also activate protection mechanisms that surround the vulnerable parts of ourselves.

Furthermore, role-players often enjoy engaging in emotionally intense experiences for prolonged lengths of time. Because of the immersive nature of role-playing, players may forget to put attention into their own self-care (Dalstål 2016). Some role-playing environments encourage pushing the boundaries of comfort and safety, for example, by using sleep deprivation, hunger, or physical exhaustion as design strategies to increase emotional impact. These factors may not only affect the neurochemical responses of players in the moment, but also can intensify the subsequent *bleed-out* effects players might experience (Leonard and Thurman 2018). Returning to the concept of vigilance, when we are vigilant, our mind is alert, aware, and wary of danger. When we surrender within the transformational container, we afford a level of trust to our co-players, while also relinquishing a degree of vigilance, which might lead to us pushing past our physical or emotional boundaries.

When we do so while playing another character in a fictional world, we also have the potential to bypass a state of vigilance we described before called the *identity defense*. For example, one's character might stay up all night keeping watch because they identify as a protector in a dangerous world, pushing their boundaries in ways the player might not normally do. Again, we consider the bypassing of the identity defense in part one of the very practices that can lead to transformative learning (Illeris 2004), but it can also lead to identity confusion, emotional flooding, or post-event *drop*, in which a player experiences symptoms of depression or "the blues" after play (Bowman and Torner 2014).

Such responses should not be considered a failure state of the design, the game, or the player, as they are natural outcomes after an intense experience. Indeed, such responses can even indicate the very places within a person that need transformation, for example, experiencing an expansive feeling of bonding with other people within the gaming group, then feeling isolated when returning to daily life and becoming aware of how deeply one needs more regular social connection (Nilsen 2015). Having such experiences while shifting in- and out-of-character may even increase a player's emotional regulation capabilities (Leonard and Thurman 2018), making them more capable of experiencing a full range of emotions while feeling in control in the future. However, we believe that transformational containers can be strengthened with safety practice that prepare for such reactions should they occur, for example, having an off-

game space with a safety team member waiting in case emotional flooding occurs or scheduling debriefing calls three days after an intense larp experience to help players process it and support one another.

Unfortunately, however, harm can occur in communities, especially if a player in crisis feels unsafe and that perception of safety has not been reestablished by their co-players, the facilitators, or the group as a whole. Such harm can be unintentional or the result of predatory behavior, the latter of which, while usually only describes the actions of a small number of people, is an unfortunate reality facing many communities that can have tremendously negative impacts.

Ideally, safety team members have skills in crisis management, e.g., in a professional capacity as therapists or as volunteers crisis management training. As another form of training, crisis management strategies can even be role-played by facilitators before the event, as knowing theoretically how to deal with a conflict situation is very different from experiencing a fictional version of it (Steele, Hart, Stavropoulos, and Bowman 2016). Furthermore, designers should consider such practices not only in the context of supporting players, but also in caring for other designers and organizers who may experience states of crisis throughout the process, i.e., *organizer safety* (Stark 2014; Berthold 2024). Finally, keep in mind that safety team member work itself is often difficult and behind-the-scenes compared to more visible design and organizing work. We recommend reviewing Anita Berthold's (2024) work on the topic, and considering her recommendations for safety people, organizers, and players.

Finally, it is essential for safety team members to know when a crisis situation is beyond their capabilities and where to refer a participant for future support (Living Games Conference 2018b). Even if a safety team member is trained as a professional, unless they have an explicit therapist-client relationship with the player and have arrangements for deeper processing within therapeutic sessions, extensive work is likely beyond the scope of their capabilities in a crisis management situation. Thus, it is best to think of such interventions as ways to address an immediate need for care and support, reestablishing a feeling of safety, rather than therapy itself.

We will discuss these practices in greater detail in the *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

5.8 Sensitive content and representation

Some of the most transformative play can arise from scenarios that have emotionally complex, difficult, or even taboo topics. As Jonaya Kemper (2017, 2018a, 2020) describes in her *emancipatory bleed* concept, sometimes the most liberating forms of play arise from players directly confronting and possibly even conquering structures of oppression in games that challenge their daily lives. Examples include structural racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, colonialism, and other vectors of marginalization. However, engaging with such topics in play requires care and consent.

We will explore some examples of safety issues that can arise from play on sensitive topics in the following section. Chapter 6 will expand upon design considerations upon these topics in more detail, including recommendations for less harmful representations of specific communities (see also Mendez Hodes 2023; Burton, Trammell, and Jones 2024).

a) Politics and culture

Topics surrounding specific political beliefs, conflicts, or cultural practices that exist in humanity's past or present can be especially fraught, with multiple perspectives that are difficult to predict based on your player base. If your game is designed with a specific political aim in mind, such as raising awareness about a political conflict in which one side is particularly oppressed, keep in mind that your players may bring in different interpretations, beliefs, and experiences around the conflict. While a well-designed game might help challenge default assumptions, in some cases it might instead reinforce reactionary belief systems or provide alibi for players to enact stereotypical or otherwise offensive character behaviors. Whether intentional or not, such behavior can cause harm. Having clear guidelines in the workshop about how to play and not to play on specific topics can help, but remember player behavior is unpredictable.

Furthermore, your own knowledge of the specific theme or setting might be limited, which might incur critiques around cultural appropriation or similar issues (Kessock 2014a; Mendez Hodes 2020). Cultural consultation can help you determine whether a topic is feasible to design and play responsibly. Including members from that political conflict or culture throughout the design and implementation process is highly recommended.

b) Gender/sexuality

Topics relating to gender and sexuality are some of the most common and also personal/sensitive topics that are addressed in games, whether implicitly or explicitly. One could argue, these topics are likely to come up in every game, as gender/sexuality, like some of the other topics mentioned in this section, pervade our cultures on the most fundamental levels. There is no way to consider our own socio-cultural realities without them; designing genderless societies can be exceptionally challenging, as players may bring in norms from their own cultures or identities regardless.

It is important to develop an awareness that playing on gender norms and stereotyping may always be challenging to some players. Topics that are particularly sensitive are structural inequalities and the policing of gender or sexuality. These topics can incur in-game behaviors such as homophobia, transphobia, compulsory heterosexuality, or cis-centerism. While these topics can be included, it is important to consider exactly what function they play in your designs, what outcomes you are pursuing, and the potential unintended or negative consequences that might arise for players from marginalized sexualities and gender backgrounds (Holkar 2016; Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020; Saitta and Svegaard 2019).

Furthermore, in terms of safety, we must recognize that traditional role-playing communities have historically been spaces that rewarded a particular form of geek masculinity e.g., games based on fantasy stories about male heroism and "epic glory" (Martin et al. 2015; LeClaire 2020; Bowman 2024); discourses around games heavily focusing on rules lawyering and gamesplaining (Dashiell 2020). While women and other minorities have always been a part of these communities, they have often had to navigate the complicated relationship between the game, masculine power fantasies (Nephew 2006), and sexist tropes (Trammell 2014; Stang and Trammell 2020; Stang 2021). In some cases, players have been able to find empowerment in combat play, for example, women in specific chapters of boffer larps (Eddy 2024) such as *Dagorhir* (Dashiell 2023). However, in chapters of *Dagorhir* elsewhere in the United States, women have felt excluded, minimized and/or erased (Martin et al. 2015; LeClaire 2020). Similarly, when queer genders or sexualities in games are not present or represented in a tokenized manner, players can feel alienated or unwelcome in communities (Paisley 2015; Neko 2016). As with other issues of representation, one way to try to ameliorate these issues is to have women and/or queer folks in prominent leadership roles or playing high-status characters.

c) Race/ethnicity

Analog role-playing games and the communities that surround them have historically been overrepresented by White people, especially in countries such as the United States (see e.g., George 2014; Beltrán 2015). Because of this, people of color sometimes question whether or not role-playing communities are inclusive of their presence (Kemper 2018b), a question that can lead to avoiding engaging at all or being forced to experience in-game stereotypes and off-game racism. When players from marginalized groups enact characters with the same backgrounds, they often must experience prejudice in the game similar to their experiences in daily life, which Holkar (2016) calls the *fun tax*. Therefore, for many players from these backgrounds, playing in a game is not just a matter of having an enjoyable experience, but rather *steering for survival*, which Saitta, Kemper, and Koljonen (2020) describe as "trying to get through the game without being hurt more than they can afford, while hopefully getting some of the positive or healing things they'd hoped to find." If the themes of a game focus on oppression, scenes that might feel playful for people from a background of privilege can feel non-consensual or even torturous for people from marginalized races and identities (Trammell 2020).

In terms of themes, as a result of racism embedded in Western culture, harmful tropes and essentialized ideas of race (Eddy, Samantha 2023) are often reproduced in role-playing games, e.g., the racist and sexist stereotypes inherent historically in the Drow species in *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), a matriarchal culture of dark-skinned elves who are "born evil"; normalized racism in *Call of Cthulhu* (Peterson 1981); and other "evil" representations, such as the Asian-appearing vampire Venger the Villain in the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon in the '80s (Chang 2024). Such tropes reproduce problematic themes traced to the source material, e.g., racism toward people of color in

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Mendez Hodes 2019a, 2019b) and the work of H.P. Lovecraft (Petersen 1981). They often place players of color in the difficult position of having to identify with the White characters in order to imagine themselves as heroes in the story (Chang 2022, 2024), or accept the negative stereotypes often projected onto non-White characters in these traditional games.

Examples such as dark elves become even more complicated when viewed through the lens of larp, as some communities have normalized the use of black body paint to simulate skin color, which many interpret as a form of blackface, a harmful stereotypical depiction of people of African descent. Because such representations are often deeply entrenched in a larp community, with players believing their engagement with these practices to be harmless, respectful, and/or earnest, defensiveness and protectiveness around the practice can arise (Dashiell 2022), as well as aggressive behavior toward people who raise concerns (Kemper 2018b). Such reactions can lead to people from marginalized races and ethnicities feeling even less included and unsafe in role-playing communities that feel exceptionally inclusive and safe to other players. This disparity of experience makes discussing racism within role-playing communities especially challenging and fraught.

From the perspective of safety and inclusion, designers should take care with the references they place in games, as well as the settings and themes they choose to enact. If you plan to design based on themes of oppression, whether drawn from actual history or an invention, strongly consider whether you are the best designer for this setting. While such themes can lead to moments of great insight for players, they can also cause harm if approached inappropriately.

Including cultural consultants, sensitivity readers, and designers from the backgrounds in question throughout the process can help address these issues (Kemper 2018; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021; Leonard 2021). However, importantly, people of color and other marginalized groups are not a monolith, meaning that a representation deemed acceptable by one person may be considered harmful by another, and both reactions are valid (Kemper, Holkar, Kim, Skjønsfjell Lakou, Jones, and Cheung 2018). We recommend having strong reasoning and informed, considered, and compassionate communication around your game if you choose to proceed with such themes. Be open to feedback and realize that the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion is never done; we always have more to learn.

Signaling that players from these backgrounds are welcome is not often enough to establish and maintain safety. Consider including players from diverse backgrounds on your design, organizing, and facilitation teams. As with all play, calibration and consent negotiations are critical, not just between a small group of players, but amongst everyone in the game. Some players may wish to explore marginalization similar to their own lives through play, whereas others may want to avoid it. A nimble design makes space for a range of different experiences. For example, the U.S. run of *Just a Little Lovin'* (2017) adapted the characters to reflect racial and ethnic backgrounds more explicitly as requested by players, as well as a Playing Difference workshop, which gave explicit instructions for how to opt-in or out of play on discrimination (Torner 2017), including using the black box as a private

zoned space for intense play on such topics. In this case, people of color were in prominent positions of leadership in the organizing team and within the larp, which can help people from similar backgrounds feel safer in such communities.

d) Neurodiversity

Addressing topics of neurodiversity, like so many of the topics in this section, has unfortunately often been handled poorly in wider media and culture. It is important for any game designer including themes related to neurodiversity to be aware of these stereotypical representations and consider consultation from experts if that theme is outside of their own experience. Furthermore, be mindful of the impact games that address these themes directly might have on people with neurodiversity.

When dealing with heavy themes, we need to be mindful of all players, but we might need to take our considerations one step further for players with neurodiversity. Some examples include:

- **Trigger Warnings, Content Advisories, or Ingredients Lists:** As discussed earlier, make sure you are very clear on the topics, using one of these three variants as an advance notice. Help players prepare for what to expect and give them the opportunity to decide ahead of time if they want to participate. If participation is mandatory, e.g., in a classroom setting, consider having an alternative assignment or similar activity that conveys the same content or achieves the same learning objectives.

- **Safety:** Emotional safety should be a priority for all players. To ensure players with neurodiversity feel safe, have a clear structure and set expectations while establishing an inclusive and understanding environment that empowers open communication and self-advocacy. Additionally, having mechanics and flexibility that allows players to opt out as needed, without judgment, is very useful.

- **Preparation:** Organize some sort of pre-game preparation, either in the form of an information pack or an actual session before the game, where you can explain the rules and safety mechanisms and also have a pre-game discussion about the sensitive topics they might encounter during play.

- **Facilitators:** While dealing with sensitive topics, many intense emotions might surface during play. It is always useful to have a facilitator responsible for emotional safety available to all players at any time of the game. At any point, players should be able to opt out and approach the safety team member, and talk with them as needed. It is preferred if said facilitator has a background in psychotherapy, so they can assist a player through a crisis if that becomes necessary.

Finally, while we will explore facilitation recommendations in more detail in the *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, tabletop (How to ADHD 2010) and larp communities have established concrete tips to make games more inclusive for players (Dolk, Haldén, Isen, and Peregrin 2021; Isen 2019) .

e) Disability

Like many of the topics discussed here, issues related to disability are often structurally excluded in many designs unintentionally. This does not necessarily pertain to the actual accessibility of your games as discussed before, but rather to representation through content that references, makes presumptions about issues related to disability, or even reveals ableist attitudes. This can occur through the simple exclusion of people with disabilities and disability-specific needs from characters and narrative design or through the reproduction of harmful stereotypes and tropes, some of which are so ubiquitous in many socio-cultural contexts as to have become implicit or unnoticed.

For example, in many games, characters are able by default and tend to be rather homogenous in terms of abilities. Furthermore, games that reference mental health facilities or use terminology related to mental health are quite prevalent in the more commercial sphere of design; sadly, these games often do so with little consideration of representing actual experience with mental health authentically or positively. Examples include "derangements" in earlier versions of World of Darkness games, "insanity" in *Call of Cthulhu*, and "conditions" and "madness" in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Jones 2018). These representations provide alibi for stereotypical or otherwise problematic role-playing from players, especially if they have little knowledge about mental health. The original Malkavian sourcebook for the *Vampire: the Masquerade* game describes the three "stages of Malkavian development" as: Fool, Maniac, Madman, Lunatic, then Fool again (Greenberg 1993). In other cases, disabilities are portrayed as superpowers for specific characters, e.g., "hearing voices that guide the players," such as the Malkavian Madness Network (Greenberg 1993).

Physical disabilities are also represented in problematic ways, for example, giving "extra points" to a character in World of Darkness for taking a disability as a "flaw" (Henry 2015). Players with disabilities often have to create a character that is able or write their disability into the character in order to play, and therefore feel compelled to reveal their differences in ability to the group. Games are rarely designed so that all characters have disabilities and thus represented as equal to one another.

It is important to educate oneself on the topic of disability, most especially when including ir explicitly in the narrative or characters in your designs. Be particularly mindful that certain disabilities are often invisible and thus discounted in common discourse even when disability is discussed (Kim, Cook, and Foxworthy 2018). For example, hidden disabilities like hearing loss, mental health issues, or chronic pain, are often forgotten or discounted when disability is considered. Be mindful also that the degree to which one can gain greater empathy by "walking in the shoes" of someone else by mimicking a disability has been broadly critiqued. We will explore in more detail the limits of perspective taking and empathy in Chapter 6.

f) Ethical content management

Finally, considerations around the ethics of including specific content are important throughout the design process. As mentioned before, one of the ways in which conflicts can emerge and even harm can occur is when a particular player or a group of players

find content upsetting, triggering, or objectionable. While aesthetic sensibilities can sometimes be a matter of perspective, for example, whether or not it is okay to play on certain topics such as enslavement or fascism, often issues arise because designers have not considered that such designs might upset people from affected marginalized groups, or individuals with the relevant backgrounds have not been consulted to assist on the design.

Individuals from marginalized groups may even view such play as *dark tourism*, in which one's identities or historical or intergenerational experiences of suffering become an experience of entertainment for people with relatively higher degrees of privilege in their leisure time (Nakamura 1995; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Even in situations where designers have done work with inclusion of key voices in the design and implementation process, some people will reject the idea of playing on certain content at all. One thing to consider is that people living through an experience of marginalization, oppression, or tragedy cannot simply "opt-out" of that experience, whereas players can. Even referring to an experience based on sensitive themes as "play" or a "game" may be inadvisable; designers have strayed away from these terms in larps such as *The Quota* (2018) about refugees (Brind 2020, 10) and *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-) about the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s (Torner 2018; see Groth, Grasmo, and Edland 2021 for full script).

As discussed before, some content cannot be predicted, which is why design tools that can help adjust content on the fly are advisable, for example, calibration between players, consent negotiations, and use of the X-Card to remove content (Stavropoulos 2013). Following Kessock (2014b), from our perspective, ethical content management like other aspects of safety is the responsibility of everyone within the transformative container: the individual players, the play group, the organizers, the designers, or the community as a whole. As designers, our job is to provide all participants with the tools necessary to advocate for their needs and be responsive to the needs of others.

The next chapter will discuss issues of ethical content management in more detail, for example, in ways to represent other cultures and marginalized groups respectfully and avoid appropriation.

5.9 Summary

Ultimately, the more we can create an inclusive environment in which people feel safe to creatively express themselves, the greater potential we have to create transformational containers for more people. This chapter has discussed various considerations around establishing and maintaining psychological safety before, during, and after a game. Despite the challenges that can arise, we acknowledge that some of the most potent role-playing experiences have themes related to conflict, politics, identity, culture, and so on. The next chapter will discuss these themes in more detail, as well as the ways these topics can influence the design, play, and discourses surrounding these games.

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