

## CHAPTER 5

# Cultivating Safer Transformational Communities

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## 5.1 Introduction

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In this chapter, we will deepen into the specifics of running transformative role-playing games in terms of both physical and psychological safety. We strongly recommend reviewing Chapter 5 in *Transformative Role-playing Game Design* (2024) before reading this chapter, which lays the foundations for psychological and inclusion practices during the design phase, as well as implementation before, during, and after play. We discuss different philosophies of safety in role-playing game design, as well as ways in which to structure safety teams, integrate safety mechanics, and include sensitive content responsibly.

This chapter will expand upon these concepts and discuss some logistical considerations when implementing for various target groups and contexts. We will also discuss matters of physical safety, which become increasingly important as you scale up your design. While we make a distinction between physical and psychological safety, in practice they are often connected. For our purposes, *physical safety* refers to attending to the physical needs of the body, such as warmth, food, sleep, and protection. *Psychological safety* refers to needs related to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Safety design and implementation involves making plans for effectively and compassionately responding to situations in which players no longer feel safe or experience psychological harm.

Importantly, this chapter should be considered the beginning of a conversation around safety you should have with your team -- or with yourself, if implementing alone -- rather than the final answer. Safety culture is ever evolving as we learn more about the needs of the human psyche more generally, as well as more specifically as it manifests in unique individual contexts. Members of each organizing team will likely have their own preferences and even philosophies about safety. Whatever strategies you choose to implement, we recommend all organizers at least being on the same page and understanding the planned process in case of a crisis, including who will receive information, who has the responsibility to take action, and what range of actions might be taken. This process is important not only to provide solidarity among team members, but also to avoid fracturing among an already stressed organizing group and make sure safety guides are enforced consistently.

## 5.2 What is a safer transformational community?

When running transformative games, we are creating conditions within which players can grow and thrive. Those conditions have as much to do with the community surrounding play as the game itself -- sometimes more. From this perspective, community design can be understood as a form of social engineering for good (Stark 2014a), in which we consciously cultivate healthier communities (Leonard 2018) with better conflict transformation skills (Murphy 2018) to improve experiences of trust and connection (Wood 2021). Such communities can be cultivated in international or local settings (for suggestions for the latter, see Høyer 2026). While such notions may seem idyllic and may not always match people's experience in RPG communities (Bowman 2013), we still think working toward these ideals can be central to the transformational process. Therefore, we understand such work as requiring tending and fostering to help maintain and deepen feelings of psychological safety (Stavropoulos 2022).

As discussed in length in *TRGD*, a role-playing space -- or any space -- can never be entirely "safe." Safety is a perception that varies from person to person; some participants feel more safe with extensive codes of conduct, safety mechanics, and emotional processing, whereas others may experience heightened vigilance and feel less safe taking risks. Furthermore, at any point, a person may experience a physical safety issue, such as consuming food containing allergens or getting hit too hard by a foam sword, or a psychological safety issue, such as emotional activation or triggering based on emergent role-play. Thus, we aim toward *safer spaces of acceptable risk*, acknowledging that people need to perceive themselves as safe enough to feel brave and play, but that risks are always present and some risks are acceptable to take (see e.g., Rikard and Villarreal 2023).

Thus, risks should always be assessed, mitigated, and addressed whenever possible (Sinking Ship 2020; Losilla 2024; Roda Martínez 2025), acknowledging that some risks are not possible to address ahead of time or impossible to address at all. Factors to consider during risk assessment processes include the *severity* of harm an incident related to the risk could cause your participants, and the *likelihood* the incident will occur (Sinking Ship 2020; Losilla 2024). From this process, you can determine which risks are worth taking. Alternatively, your risk assessment may reveal that other risks are not worth taking or that your implementation plan is untenable in its current form. Establishing these things early in the process is better than finding out the hard way onsite during the implementation of your game.

While safety needs to be considered for all role-playing games, transformational spaces hold particular risks. Change is not always experienced as pleasant or comfortable. It often involves confronting aspects of ourselves and others that we may have been avoiding, rejecting, or disowning, e.g., unconscious parts of the personal or collective *shadow* (Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2024). Change involves moving from one state to another, including emerging from states of relative stasis, which can be destabilizing, acknowledging ways in which we have held ourselves back, e.g.,

limiting beliefs (Bowman and Hugaas 2021), or have been restricted or oppressed by existing social structures (Baird 2021; Kemper 2017, 2018a, 2020; Tanenbaum 2022). Thus, change involves confronting resistance, including our own identities resisting transformation (Illeris 2009). This psychological resistance may even have a physiological component, e.g., wanting to remain in states of homeostasis or return to them as soon as possible.

Furthermore, if the group conditions do not provide sufficient *containment* for these messy processes to occur, the experience of unsupported change can be harmful to participants, e.g., if they feel their needs for support are not met by the facilitators and the group. Again, while safety cannot be assured for all participants under any conditions, we can implement these games in ways that support processes of transformation and reinforce well-being. While transformation can and often does happen in spaces that are not held as *transformational containers* (Bowman and Hugaas 2021, following Bion 2013 and Winnicott 1960), we consider it a matter not only of practical importance but also an ethical obligation to aim towards building such spaces for participants.

Such spaces are important not only to support the play process, but are also powerful in their own rights as environments in which people feel socially supported in validating expressing themselves more authentically than is often possible in daily life, e.g., as transformational communities (Bowman and Baird 2022). As we have discussed in Chapter 2, many of the populations who can benefit from transformative play are psychologically and/or physically vulnerable, and some may never have felt safe expressing themselves deeply before in groups. Transformational spaces often allow for processing of deeply personal content, especially in debriefing, as well as setting intentions for transformative goals that require integration after play. People who have engaged in transformative play with one another have a shared context that is by its nature unique, as every game session and group is different, and we ourselves are different as we evolve through time. Therefore, we aim toward the cultivation of secure containment around play that facilitates support structures and even friendships that begin before play and persist long after play has concluded.

Importantly, such containers need not be and cannot be perfect; players need to experience them as *secure enough* (Winnicott 1960), meaning that they will not feel completely dropped by the community and will experience sufficient support if a rupture occurs. However, organizers need to acknowledge when support needs exceed the capabilities of the container and have strategies for directing players to additional support when necessary, e.g., to caretakers, mental health professionals, or others who can provide more extensive assistance. Thus, designing a risk-aware transformational container also means understanding its limits and planning for contingencies outside of it. Furthermore, many leisure and even educational spaces either do not consider these potential issues or think they are outside the purview of their responsibility; thus, any work on your part to create a web of support for players and organizers will likely be helpful and appreciated.

Ultimately, cultivating a transformational community inherently means asserting that people are more important than games (Brown 2016b; Koljonen 2020), which is shorthand to mean that we will do our best to care for one another if a rupture in the container occurs (see also Baker 2006).

## 5.3 Physical risks in implementation

This chapter will focus primarily on psychological risks, but examples of physical risks are discussed throughout the book, especially in Chapter 4 and sprinkled throughout this chapter.

It is important to understand that your own physical capacity and comfort is not necessarily equal to all your players (Kessock 2018). For example, if you are running a workshop, be mindful that not everybody is capable of sitting on the floor, not even for a few minutes. Even in relatively less physical play, because all players have bodies, organizers need to consider many facets of their physical experience. For example, players in tabletop games likely need a place to sit, place their items, and an environment ideally free from interruptions, distractions, or potential danger. If the game is longer than an hour, they will likely need access to food and drinks, whether you provide it for them or they bring it themselves. If playing outdoors, they may need sunscreen, bug spray, skin covering, warm clothes, sturdy shoes, or various other considerations. If they have serious allergies, they may need access to an epipen or antihistamine medications. If physical combat, climbing, walking, running, or other forms of physical play are involved, players could potentially trip or injure one another.

In case of any kind of physical play, we encourage you to have participants perform a proper warmup before the game starts with focus on dynamic movements and stretching. Dynamic physical warmups can significantly reduce the risk of injury and if physical combat is present, regardless of whether the combat is character vs. character (CvC, sometimes called PvP) or character vs. environment (CvE or PvE). For warmups, the players should play some cooperative games such as:

- *Ninja*: A game played in pairs where players take turn trying to step on each others shadow
- *Bow Battle* aka *Tails*: A game played either in pairs or a group where each participant has a ribbon attached to their back / waist. The objective is to snatch the opposing player's ribbon while protecting your own. Helps with hand-eye coordination, balance, strength, speed calibration, and keeping distance as well as movement in space with opposition.

Such games help your players get ready for physical combat and avoid injuries as well as injuring others.

If weapons are part of the game, allowing players to familiarize themselves with these before the game is recommended. They will gain a sense of their weight, speed, and what the weapons can do, even if only on a basic level. This process will go a long way towards improving the game experience. As they do this, we recommend explaining safety guidelines to them.

Note that some players may not be able to access parts of a specific venue at all, or it may be quite dangerous for them to do so, e.g., if the stairs are uneven or unsteady (Kessock 2017). If a serious injury occurs, depending on your location's legal context, you may be held liable for their injuries, especially if no one can provide First Aid or drive your player to the hospital.

In other words, the more physical factors you include in your implementation plan, the more complications you should plan to potentially arise as part of your risk assessment.

## 5.4 Psychological risks in implementation

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 of *TRGD*, examples of risk can include emotional flooding, when a participant is cognitively incapable of processing further information due to psychological overwhelm (Leonard and Thurman 2018); dysregulation, when a participant's psychological well-being falls out of balance, which can lead to distress or difficulties effectively interacting with others; activation and/or triggering, when a situation activates a survival response in a person, e.g., fighting, flight, freezing, or fawning (Brown 2014); or harm.

Other issues can arise related to conflict within the group (Bowman 2013), e.g., schisms in role-playing communities, issues arising from intimate and/or romantic relationships; creative agenda disputes, i.e., when participants have different styles of play they most enjoy; power struggles between players and facilitators; underprocessed bleed-in and bleed-out; insufficient inclusion and/or accessibility; crisis states; and sensitive content.

While such issues can emerge in any type of game, including games played with no intention of encouraging players to leave their comfort zone (Bowman and Hugaas 2025), the more you add confounding factors, the more you expose your participants to risk. Some factors to consider include:

1. Time spent in-game
2. Number of play sessions
3. Emotional intensity of play
4. Sensitivity of content
5. Competitive in-game dynamics
6. Physical demands of the play experience
7. Time spent processing the experience

A one-hour nano-game may not seem high-risk in this situation, but if you add emotional intensity and sensitive content, then offer no debriefing afterward, your risk increases. If your game is highly physically demanding, including many stressful combat situations and sleep deprivation, you are pushing the body out of homeostasis, which can increase the intensity and potential to experience bleed-out (Leonard and

Thurman 2018; Hugaas 2025). If your campaign game has many sessions of competitive play without processing the emotions arising off-game as a group, you may be increasing the risk of off-game conflicts erupting (Bowman 2013).

Assessing and attempting to mitigate these risks might be overwhelming, but we believe the transformative power of role-playing can make the risks worth taking. For example, you can still invite strong emotions exhausting your players in a combat larp with sleep deprivation, while also clearly signaling how they can meet their own needs or providing spaces of support, e.g., options for off-game sleeping, including offsite if needed, a safety room attended by a team member, and options to debrief after the game experience, including in the days or weeks following the event. Similarly, in-game competition is possible to play responsibly if the players establish and maintain trust through off-game calibration. Thus, our intention is not to discourage you from taking risks, but rather planning for situations in which risks might occur and finding ways to ameliorate them to reestablish feelings of safety.

## a) Post-game emotional reactions

A simple way to help cultivate a safer transformational container around play is to raise awareness and normalize emotional responses not only during, but especially after play. Many players may come from social, cultural, or subcultural contexts in which naming, expressing, and discussing emotions are discouraged. While the game may provide sufficient alibi to express emotion as their character, they may feel confused by or ashamed of their feelings off-game. Such inhibitions can be addressed by creating a container in which discussing feelings is part of the process; experiencing strong emotions is encouraged; and continuing to have strong post-game emotional reactions is normalized.

Practically speaking, you can cultivate such an environment before, during, and after play. Before play, you can post trigger warnings (Brown 2014), content advisories, ingredients lists, or parameters (Wood 2022) on the website, on social media, and/or in email communication to players. You can also host workshops or Session 0s in which you agree upon content. You can avoid situations of secrecy and promote transparency of design and implementation (Torner 2013b), and coach any facilitators to maintain these principles as well. For example, if you tell your players they will only experience jump scares or combat in certain parts of the campsite through *zoning* (Bowman 2017); you are allowing them to opt-in to their level of surprise and physical intensity. You are also signaling that other kinds of play are valid; that players are not “missing out” if they avoid pushing beyond their own boundaries. Finally, you can emphasize that everyone involved is responsible for helping one another and working with sensitive content in an ethical manner (Kessock 2014b).

We also recommend reminding them that role-playing games can be surprisingly emotional and how to receive support if needed directly before the game, such as in a safety workshop, and also after the game before they leave the site. Posting links of popular articles that aim to help players understand these reactions can also be helpful,

e.g., bleed (Bowman 2015; Mersmann et al. 2018) or post-larp depression (sometimes called blues) (Bowman and Torner 2014). Keep in mind such reactions can also happen in convention, festival, or conference settings, even with relatively low amounts of actual role-play (Nilsen 2015), a phenomenon known as *drop*. If we consider that experiencing connection with like-minded others within a community is already an *expansive* experience, then add the emotional intensity of role-playing, then we should expect the reaction of *contraction* to possibly occur. Contraction is not a failing or weakness of the individual in question, but rather a natural process as we attempt to return back to homeostasis (Hugaas 2025). In fact, contraction can often show us the places within ourselves that need further transformative processing or healing, which can be a gift in the long-term, even if painful in the short-term (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

Also important to acknowledge to your players before and after the game is that a lack of strong emotions is also normal. In communities that privilege strong experiences and process them after play, failing to have powerful emotional reactions after the game can feel alienating to players (Pedersen 2017). While we strongly recommend holding a debrief of some sort in transformative play, you can also structure your debrief questions to be applicable to many types of experiences, including not only questions about powerful emotions, but also questions more geared toward intellectual engagement. We discuss the emotional, intellectual, and educational processing in more detail in Chapters 2 of *TRGD* and Chapters 1 and 2 of this textbook.

Intense emotions can also arise during play if the participant does not feel the game is going well for them, e.g., due to a lack of agency, rejection, disappointment, or the ending (Dahlberg 2015). Games often invite a level of involvement that can feel like much has been invested without reciprocation. Such emotions can intensify to the point the player might never try role-playing again. While such conclusions should be accepted by organizers, often the player needs reassurance, support, and/or a way to reconnect with the group. Safety team members should be prepared for these reactions and have strategies in mind for providing care under such circumstances.

## b) Abuse and neglect

While up until this point we have been discussing situations in which all parties in the role-playing are operating with good faith, unfortunately sometimes harmful behaviors can occur. We should not assume these behaviors happen more often in role-playing communities than in the world at large; indeed, some participants may have the experience of never before feeling as safe as they do within their role-play group. However, role-playing does involve decreasing our psychological vigilance enough to be able to surrender into the role-playing experience, meaning that we place ourselves in psychologically and sometimes physically vulnerable states when playing. Unfortunately, this vulnerability means that when harm occurs in such communities, it can sometimes be even more painful than in the outside world when vigilance is often higher.

Importantly, while intentional predation can occur, usually only a small fraction of players -- if any -- within a community have the conscious and express intention to prey upon others. When such predation occurs, it can be shocking, especially when predatory behaviors are associated with otherwise accepted or even beloved members of the community, including community leaders. Some players will refuse to acknowledge such members are capable of this behavior, making it risky for the harmed players to come forward and share their story. Others will make excuses for this behavior, minimizing its harm, e.g., the commonly used *missing stair* metaphor (see e.g., Brown 2017), in which people tell newcomers to “avoid the missing stair” in a staircase rather than addressing the rupture in containment directly. Others still will refuse to believe that any harm happens in their community. All of these reactions are defense mechanisms that attempt to avoid the psychological disruption of reconciling what group members thought to be true. In a way, these members are attempting to maintain their own psychological safety, which can often feel compromised when trust has been betrayed, even toward someone else. Unfortunately, these mechanisms often mean that lower status members or newcomers to a community are sometimes less likely to have their experiences taken seriously. We will discuss ways to address harassment later in this chapter.

In most cases, harm is not fully conscious or intentional, which does not mean it does not impact the person in question. As mentioned before, emotionally intense play often means us stepping out of our comfort zone and behaving in ways as our characters that we would normally never do. It also means that we are in a more vulnerable state, so actions can impact us more strongly. From this perspective, impact is actually desirable -- we want games to impact us, especially in transformative ways, and sometimes that means playing with aspects of human behavior that we might otherwise condemn or reject (Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2024). For example, we might scream at someone or insult them in-game, and unintentionally trigger them. These things should be considered relatively normal and hopefully addressed through proper safety structures (see later in this chapter for examples).

However, when players habitually use play to enact such behaviors on other player’s characters, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, especially without obtaining off-game consent or calibration, such play can feel violating for the player (Femia 2025). For example, in a horror game, perhaps it “makes sense” within the genre for a facilitator to narrate a scene of sexual violence toward a character, but without consent practices, the player may feel disempowered and harm may occur. (Importantly, harm can also occur even if enthusiastic consent is obtained, but we do not classify such harm as abuse). Abusive behaviors in-game can sometimes spillover into off-game dynamics, such as members of an in-group within a game bullying lower status members off-game as well, or players deceiving each other off-game to gain the trust of their co-players and preserve their in-game secrets. Whether these behaviors are a form of unconscious bleed (Bowman 2013) or a more conscious act is less important than acknowledging that they can cause harm and addressing that harm as a community.

Another form of harm that is often less visible is psychological and/or physical neglect. Neglect involves failing to meet the needs of other people in ways that constitute gross incompetence or irresponsibility. Of course, not everyone's needs can be met all the time; that is part of the human condition. However, wilfully disregarding the needs of others, especially in a dismissive and repetitive fashion, can be understood to constitute neglect. An example might be playing an intense romance with a co-player involving physical intimacy, then refusing to talk to them after the game to process feelings. Such things happen in daily life in the dating world, but they are even more confusing when a fictional relationship is perceived as "not real" or dissolves after the game is over without aftercare (Friedner 2020; Norwood and Villarreal 2026).

Furthermore, due to the power differentials, organizers have a strong responsibility to try to meet their players' basic needs, especially needs for sustenance and other aspects of physical safety. The need for communication is also quite important. Sometimes, this communication can be delegated, especially in larger teams. For example, if you are great at working with logistical planning but have difficulties reliably responding to emails, we recommend delegating that responsibility to organizers who are willing to be consistently responsive, such as safety team members. Again, experiencing a breach of trust while in a vulnerable state can cause harm and the perception of safety must be not only established, but also maintained and/or reestablished if a rupture occurs.

At the same time, as mentioned before, for situations in which a player's needs exceed the capabilities of the organizers, we recommend learning ways to set gentle boundaries and direct their request toward parties that can provide care. For example, a player's need for communication should not override an organizer's need for sleep unless the situation is an emergency, in which case contingencies should be in place to help address the issue, e.g., alerting the medic team, on-call mental health professional, crisis hotline, ambulance, or in extreme cases, the police.

For accounts of problematic behavior from organizers, see Ballou (2020), Harder (2021), and Pohjola (2021).

## i) Engaging with police

Sometimes, the organizers may have no choice but to call the police, such as in the case of physical assault leading to serious injury. Furthermore, in some jurisdictions, failing to call the police about a potentially-criminal incident may itself be a criminal act. Finally, if you or any of your staff feel endangered, e.g., by physically aggressive posturing, calling the police for backup may be a wise decision.

However, note that we strongly recommend avoiding calling the police in most other situations; unless a crime has been committed and the participant in question agrees to answer questions, police intervention may do more harm than good. Keep in mind many players from vulnerable backgrounds may feel highly uncomfortable with police officers and not perceive such authorities as allies, e.g., due to sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, or other forms of past discrimination. Engaging with

the police or the legal system can sometimes cause retraumatization and prolong experiences of harm, and many situations can be handled within the community without involving external authorities.

### c) Community toxicity and dysfunctional group dynamics

More insidious issues that can cause problems within role-playing communities are toxicity and other forms of dysfunctional group dynamics (see e.g., Anderson and Nielsen 2018; Boccamazzo 2023). While such behaviors are unfortunately common in human social groups as a whole, they are especially challenging in role-playing groups that otherwise meet people's needs for self-expression, creativity, and social connection.

Toxicity refers to situations in which the overall persistent state of the community is one of excessive criticism and polarization between factions or individuals within the group. Of course, sometimes critique is necessary and even beneficial for a group to grow, but excessive criticism can lead others to feel unappreciated, rejected, or even bullied. When a norm is established in the group of excessive rules lawyering (Dashiell 2017, 2020), criticism, gossiping, or other forms of fracturing and factionalizing, those behaviors become the default mode of engagement for some players and cause others to want to disengage from the community entirely.

Communities can become challenged by other forms of dysfunctional group dynamics as well. While dynamics such as the Drama Triangle may be rewarding to play in-game, in which characters embody a disempowered web shifting between Persecuter, Rescuer, and Victim (Karpman 2014), such dynamics within off-game communities can quickly exacerbate conflicts. If the group has *hierarchical status and power structures*, many players will likely feel disenfranchised, and may even feel uncomfortable advocating for themselves, e.g., with safety mechanics (see e.g., Algayres 2019b). In other words, you can have structures in place for players to communicate their needs, but if they do not feel safe doing so or feel their needs will be ignored in favor of higher status players, that can cause major problems.

Such power structures can also bleed-out from in-game social dynamics, for example people holding positions in the court in a fantasy game also being treated as high-status off-game. Indeed, sometimes these positions actually require a certain degree of responsibility, e.g., holding up the structure of the game by running important scenes, being involved in the governance outside of the game (see e.g., Budai and Hammock 2014). Players are sometimes only considered for such positions if they have already established themselves as strong role-players, have excellent costuming, fighting, or leadership skills, or are otherwise known by the organizers. Such power structures may be off-game, for example organizers and their friends often have higher social status than newcomers to a community. These issues can be exacerbated if organizers are thought to be showing favoritism toward some players over others, e.g., by providing them with exciting side-plots over others, or if organizers choose to date players, especially if they are much younger, e.g., *grooming* (Harder 2021).

Importantly, power and status are not inherently bad things. Indeed, they are inherent to social structures, and failing to understand them or acknowledge their influence can often lead to these problems, e.g., assuming everyone is considered equal and feels included, simply because you hold those values and assert them to your players. Power dynamics are often present that are completely outside of our control due to off-game societal oppression, such as racism. For example, an off-hand racist comment made by a character in a historical game might make a person of color wonder if they are actually accepted as part of the group off-game or may raise alarm bells of harassment. Humans are highly attuned to their placement within a social group and can be sensitive in situations in which they fear ostracization, even if the people with status have no intention of being exclusionary.

Other forms of dysfunctional dynamics can arise in any community but are especially complex with the added layers of role-playing. For example, online communication is often challenging in many social situations, but can be even more difficult when adding online role-playing; potential confusion between in-game and off-game behaviors; lack of off-game calibration; or “ghosting” in a discussion. Even the time commitment required for online engagement before a larp can cause stress for players who have more responsibilities. Furthermore, online discussions about the game often require moderation or may become toxic and inflammatory, so consider how much online engagement you wish to encourage or discourage.

Interpersonal relationships of many kinds can become complex, for example experiencing bleed-in of one’s aggression toward one’s sibling affecting their in-game social dynamics as characters. As mentioned before, sexually or romantically intimate relationships can affect groups in general, but are especially complicated in role-playing communities (Bowman 2013). Some players may not want to play romance or sexuality outside of their off-game relationships or experience jealousy bleeding-in to the game and out into off-game dynamics. Unexpected *limerence* can occur, in which a player experiences feelings for a co-player after role-playing a relationship with them, which can cause emotional or relational complications off-game (Harder 2018). Furthermore, breakups can disrupt the community, e.g., an in-game couple in a campaign play who are central to the cohesion of the group breaking up off-game; co-organizers having a messy divorce and the players feeling pressured to take sides.

Furthermore, casting practices regarding gender and sexuality can be quite complex and sometimes unintentionally exclusionary (Oinonen 2025). As examples, casting players who are asexual or aromantic being to enact characters who engage in sexual and/or romantic behaviors can cause issues (Wood and D 2021), as can only offering heteronormative relationship roles (Paisley 2015) or cis-gendered characters when players have queer identities (Strenros and Sihvonen 2019; England 2021). While designing gender-neutral characters can help, in practice some queer folks may feel that their identity and history are not considered, erased, or otherwise not possible to express (Saitta and Svegaard 2019). Furthermore, if a member of the group misgenders someone or is dismissive of their sexual identities in-game, such an experience can feel painful and marginalizing. Lack of calibration and/or agreements about what behaviors are permissible in-game can often exacerbate these issues.

Importantly, playing romance and sexuality can be incredibly powerful and even transformative for some players; thus, you may want to include such content, e.g., when working with a queer target group or as a part of a sex education intervention (Grasmo 2025). However, in other cases, such play may distract from your transformative goals or be inappropriate for the target group, e.g., with adolescents learning problem solving skills in an educational environment. Also, playing dysfunctional relationship dynamics within games can often provide important insights about off-game patterns of behavior for players, especially when de-roling and emotional processing is emphasized (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022).

On the other hand, placing content aside, RPG communities can be transformative for players from queer backgrounds if their practices are inclusive (Greywood 2026). Additionally, feeling safe enough to explore or express one's queerness through a game can embolden players to feel safer doing so in other contexts (Baird 2021; Baird and Bowman 2022; Femia 2023; Sottile 2024).

#### d) Bleedhunting, cultures of hardcore, and emotional flooding

Along these lines, we must acknowledge that while emotional intensity holds risk, it is precisely that risk that is appealing to some players. For example, the thrill of combat, taking calculated risks, and potential to lose one's character may fuel interest in playing tabletop games like in OSR *Dungeons & Dragons* groups, or participating in battle larps in which permanent character death is possible. Sometimes, players seek out objectively physically or psychologically challenging experiences in order to experience strong emotions, such as in the Nordic larp movement and adjacent communities, which experiences that Markus Montola dubbed *Type 2 fun*: not fun in the moment, but rewarding in hindsight (Nordic Larp Wiki 2023; Hoekendijk 2026). While such larps often have activist intentions or are meant to promote prosocial democratic ideals off-game, the in-game experience is often one of oppression, violence, or other forms of suffering (Johansson et al. 2026; Waern et al. 2026). Some players seek out these experiences precisely due to the strong bleed that can affect them not only during but immediately after the game, which has been termed *bleedhunting* (Nilsen 2012). An example of seeking out oppression in-game is a phenomenon dubbed the *torture queue* by Juhana Pettersson (2023), in which players steer their characters toward scenes with villains, sometimes literally wait in line to be oppressed in-game.

As a result, some communities valorize high intensity experiences with few safety structures surrounding them, which has been termed the *cult of hardcore* (see e.g., Bowman 2017), although is more precisely described as a culture rather than a cult. If safety culture emphasizes that players are more important than games, a culture of hardcore prioritizes intensely emotional play experiences over open discussions of consent and calibration; often, players within such groups assert that consent discussions or safety mechanics interfere with their immersion into the game. In these cases, radical individual expression is considered of primary importance. In other cases, the emphasis may be on maintaining the aesthetic consistency of the game in terms of structure, genre, message, or theme.

While such games can be organized responsibly, they can also lead to a form of peer pressure. A common statement within such groups is that players who experience psychological difficulties in such environments should either manage it themselves or leave the community. While sometimes it may be true that a player is not a good fit for a specific game experience, such assertions can be an aggressive form of boundary policing, similar to hazing, i.e., if a player wants to be part of the group, they must be able to handle extreme experiences without complaint.

While hardcore experiences can be transformative, our model emphasizes off-game safety as critical to preserving the transformational container, ideally for all players, not just some. However, you should be aware that some of your players may come from a hardcore play culture or may be resistant to safety structures. Be prepared to defend the values of your organization, whatever they are. We recommend practicing responses to criticisms one way or another; while we want to avoid completely shutting down any legitimate critiques, we find it most helpful to be able to explain the rationale behind specific safety mechanics, structures, or philosophies.

Importantly, significant risks are involved when a person experiences emotional flooding, i.e., when their executive functioning becomes temporarily impaired during overwhelming emotional experiences (Gottman 1993). While this state can be desirable and pleasurable for some players, it can also lead to situations in which players are not able to fully advocate for themselves, making consent practices challenging. While some designs allow for such *red zone* play, e.g., having minimal safety mechanics during play and strong trust-building practices before play, we recommend a more measured approach (Bowman et al. 2024b). When people experience emotional flooding, their bodies may unconsciously respond to the fictional situation as if it was a real threat. They may *freeze*, unable to say no or even check-in with themselves to see if they consent to such actions. Alternatively, they may *flee* and find a place to isolate. They may *fight*, becoming physically or emotionally aggressive outside of the bounds of the game. Most insidiously perhaps, they can *fawn*, behaving in an accommodating way in order to appease the person in question.

Freezing and fawning are particularly difficult to distinguish from fully consensual situations. Some safety systems require the participant to actively self-advocate, such as saying a specific safety mechanic or even noticing when a boundary has been crossed, which is not always possible in a freeze state. In such systems, if a person does not state their boundaries, they are assumed to be passively consenting to whatever is happening. For this reason, other safety systems place responsibility on each player to check in with one another when enacting sensitive content or if any ambiguities arise regarding consent. Fawning is especially difficult to discern from enthusiastic consent, especially if the behaviors look similar. One way to consider the difference is that with enthusiastic consent, a player feels empowered and able to openly ask for what they want or positively reinforce behavior they want to encourage. Alternatively, fawning is a coping strategy arising from a place of disempowerment meant to disarm potential threats from others through reassuring or flattering behaviors. Similarly, a player

having a fight or flight response during a game could be mistaken for good role-play in certain contexts. Thus, we suggest a trauma-informed perspective when considering your safety implementation practices.

Notably, some players enjoy playing in high intensity situations in which such mechanisms are activated. For example, in a horror game, experiencing one's survival instincts kick in might be thrilling precisely because of the bleed effect from character to player. Some people find such experiences transformative, especially if experienced in a trusting environment. Regardless of the genre, our definition of a safer transformational container focuses less on pushing people into brink play and more on staying within one's growth edge rather than exceeding it (see Chapter 5 in *TRGD* for more on zones of safety, challenge, and risk).

## e) Burnout, overinvolvement, and problematic gaming

Another risk that can sometimes emerge in any community in which players feel highly devoted is burnout. Burnout occurs when a person pushes past their capacity for engagement repeatedly, which can commonly happen in creative, expressive, or community-centered activities. In a state of burnout, a person may have emotional or even cognitive or physical difficulties performing certain tasks they used to complete with more ease. Burnout is sometimes paired with physical exhaustion, depression symptoms, extreme angst, or anxiety around performing such tasks.

Burnout can happen for organizers (Holkar 2022; Bailly 2023; Friman 2024), but also for participants. When we experience *harmonious passion*, we are able to engage in the activity in a way that is conducive to our psychological well-being (Vallerand and Houlfort 2003). Unfortunately, sometimes *obsessive passion* can emerge, in which we continue to engage in the activity even when our capacities are depleted, which can have long-term effects (Lavigne, Forest, and Crevier-Braud 2011). Furthermore, when tied to activities we usually enjoy that are strongly connected to our identities, and/or performed in communities important to us, we may not realize when we slip over into obsessive passion.

Other factors described in this chapter can contribute to burnout; such as difficulties with online communication; interpersonal strife, unmanaged bleed; experiences of betrayal or lack of trust; feelings of exclusion; issues of harassment; and/or extended bouts of community toxicity. The added emotional weight of these experiences can overwhelm the mind, making engagement more arduous and costly. Such situations are rife for resentments to form and calcify, as well as for people to overgive in a desire to “fix” the situation, i.e., performing the disempowered role of the Rescuer in the Drama Triangle (Karpman 2014).

While *overinvolvement* (Fine 1983) in any social group or activity can lead to psychological challenges, we also refrain from using the term addiction as it has a specific meaning in terms of physiological symptoms. Role-players sometimes exhibit behaviors associated with *problematic gaming* (Griffiths et al. 2015); although

perhaps more common in video games that incentivize continuous play, problematic gaming refers to engagement that interferes with one's life in ways that cause them psychological distress or interfere with their daily responsibilities. While what counts as problematic gaming is up for debate, in general, we do not recommend organizing games that incentivize consistent participation without clearly established periods of de-roling, de-briefing, and returning to daily life. Some organizers of campaigns, for example, forbid role-playing between game sessions. Similarly, the purpose of a transformative game should focus on the impacts on life outside of the game. While the game itself is a powerful experience, a transformative process should emphasize integration practices after the game session (Bowman et al 2024a).

Consider how many game sessions are truly needed to achieve gains in your players' transformative goals. If continued socialization and creativity are your goals, one approach would be to offer a transition period in which you close the container of your specific game, perhaps giving a participant the chance to facilitate, then encourage your group to create and run games on their own with one another based on the same principles.

## f) Legal risks

Each context also has legal risks to consider (see e.g., Karlsson 2016). If you are running an event in a rented location, you may need to purchase event insurance. Depending on the country, you could be liable for any injuries that occur during the event. In the United States, for example, some people create a small for-profit Limited Liability Company (LLC) that can absorb costs from lawsuits, but you may still be held liable if criminal neglect is established by the court. You might also be liable for anything illegal that happens, including under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Murdock 2018). Consent issues are not only an ethical issue within your community, but potentially a legal one too; having sex with an intoxicated person or someone under the age of consent may have legal consequences in that country, so we recommend educating yourself, your safety team, and your players about the local law, ideally in a Code of Conduct. You may decide that permitting alcohol and other substances is more trouble than it is worth, as the more inebriated they are, the less easy players may find it to emotionally regulate and read signals from others that their behavior is crossing a line. For more information about the risks involved with alcohol at role-playing events, see Holkar (2017).

Other legal issues sometimes arise, such as the police investigating due to what they perceive to be strange behavior or loud noises. This can happen, for example, when playing outside in a public park. Make sure you have at least one point person who has the job to explain calmly what you are doing to the police. We do not advise having your players do this, especially if they are immersed into their characters and/or inebriated. Ideally, you can reassure the police the play is just a theatrical performance or simulation and they will understand without further investigation (Minor 2014). Similarly, you may get questions from other authorities, e.g., school administrators, if they have not been properly onboarded (see Chapter 2).

Related to this: thoroughly consider issues of noise when deciding on a location for your game, as such interruptions or threats from neighbors may be more trouble than the site is worth. Similarly, if you are playing in a public or semi-public space, expect to have onlookers try to interact with your group. They may ask players to explain what they are doing or, worse, may see unusual behaviors as an invitation and attempt to participate or act aggressively in a way that feels unsafe and/or non-consensual. Again, you may want to give an organizer the responsibility to explain what is happening.

Furthermore, in role-playing scenes, onlookers might misinterpret our playful behavior toward one another involving escalated conflicts as threatening, which could lead to police being called, or, in serious cases, criminal charges issued against organizers or players. Carefully consider what behaviors you are encouraging if you are asking your players to enact their characters in public space, e.g., brandishing weapons onlookers might mistake as real. Make sure you are prepared to provide reassurance that everyone is safe and consenting. Thus, we strongly recommend playing in fully private spaces whenever possible.

## 5.5 Safety in specific contexts

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As we will discuss throughout this chapter, safety practices will likely need to shift depending on your implementation plan, your target group, the logistics of your location, and other relevant aspects of your context. Here we make some general comments about safety considerations in our three forms of transformative role-playing games: transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational.

### a) Transformative leisure

Transformative leisure games in some ways have the most lenient requirements. One need not be a trained mental health professional nor educator. Players have less overall expectations of care and continued support throughout their transformative experience, although notably, expectations will vary from player to player, with some expecting more scaffolding and support than others. While some role-playing communities have developed loose ethical guidelines or safety recommendations, these recommendations are not codified into expected professional practice (cf. Atwater and Rowland 2018). Thus, ostensibly, such organizing should incur less time commitment from you or adherence to strict regulations.

However, these ambiguities can sometimes work as a disadvantage for leisure organizing. Organizers may struggle to set boundaries with themselves between work and leisure time (Pettersson 2021). Players may be unsure what expectations of care they should have after an emotionally charged experience. Set clear boundaries with yourself and your players about what the container will and will not contain. Make sure players understand the difference between a transformative leisure experience and a therapeutic container. Direct them to therapeutic or crisis management resources if necessary.

## b) Therapeutic

On this note, as a reminder, therapeutic role-playing games are facilitated by or work in collaboration with mental health professionals or paraprofessionals. As discussed in *TRGD*, other risks are important to note when working with groups with mental health challenges. These include:

- Having a lack of training in working with a specific target group;
- Working with players with delusional tendencies;
- Having difficulties maintaining confidentiality and privacy within the group; and
- Including group members with incompatible personalities or mental health challenges.

Importantly, neither emotional flooding nor burnout is related to the moral panic of “losing touch with reality” exemplified in films like *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), in which the main character becomes so overinvolved (Fine 1983) in role-playing he cannot distinguish fact from fiction. While our emotions can overwhelm our executive function and our body can respond to events as if they are real, we still understand the difference between the social reality outside of play and the fictional parts of the game.

This point is important when discussing role-playing, as such beliefs from outsiders have resulted in stigma historically, especially in the United States (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015), but also in other countries like Sweden (Müller 2011). If a person demonstrates inability to distinguish fiction from reality, they are in a state of psychosis called delusional tendencies that requires immediate psychological care. Early research claimed that role-playing games were not recommended for such clients as they can supposedly reinforce delusional tendencies (Blackmon 1994). However, more recent research demonstrates the potential of therapeutic role-playing combined with digital representations to help schizophrenic clients who hear malignant voices self-advocate while the therapist role-plays the voice (Leff et al. 2013; Craig et al. 2018; Kleeman 2024). That being said, role-playing games may be inadvisable for clients with recent traumatic experiences, acute psychological distress, certain conditions, and/or significant cognitive impairment; clients who are actively suicidal or violent; or who have acute psychotic symptoms (Ezhumalai et al. 2018; Novotney 2019).

## c) Educational

As discussed in Chapter 2 and in *TRGD*, educational role-playing games can take place in informal, nonformal, and formal contexts. Just as with therapeutic settings, these spaces often have specific expectations: the teacher is meant to guide students through an educational experience. Formal education usually takes place in a classroom setting or another space codified as educational and may even have legal and financial agreements attached to it, e.g., a teacher agrees to instruct a group of students for a certain amount of money, resulting in some sort of educational

credential. Nonformal education is usually a bit looser in terms of commitment, such as experiences in museums, community centers, afterschool programs, or other spaces. Informal learning experiences can happen in leisure environments as well, but have specific educational goals attached to them, e.g., learning a craft or exploring a historical period.

In our model, educational role-playing games require a specific type of framing that emphasizes the learning objectives of a curriculum, whether state-mandated or developed by the instructor. Generally, this means participants should receive information before and/or after the game about the educational content and the game activities should tie directly to these goals. However, in many cases, it also means that teachers have a legal responsibility to provide care for students and monitor them, especially when working with minors. It can also mean that teachers have an ethical responsibility to consider what content is appropriate for students at what age and developmental level. They may be held accountable for their choices from administrators or parents. Therefore, informed consent is incredibly important when possible, detailing the planned activities for these stakeholders and explaining any content ahead of time when possible. It may be legally necessary, for example, for parents to sign a consent form and students to sign a similar assent form. When conducting research, you will likely need to seek ethical approval to work with minors (see Chapter 7). While this may feel restrictive, it can forestall potential problems down the road and provide some accountability for your practice.

## d) Other contexts

### i) Pervasive play

Role-playing games are often held in private, contained spaces, in part to avoid disruptions from onlookers, but also because risks can increase when playing out in the world, i.e., *pervasive play*. First, ethically speaking, people in the external world do not know you are role-playing, so unless you disclose this fact to them, you are effectively deceiving them (Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009). They may be compelled to help your character -- or harm them, more worryingly -- based on a faulty premise. Second, your behavior might be concerning to them, e.g., getting into a heated argument in a public space or threatening violence.

Deeply consider whether or not pervasive play is appropriate to your game setting and what potential harm could come to your participants, external people, or yourself if something goes wrong. Consider what alibi (Deterding 2018) you are providing your players with the game's affordances provided by the setting (Gibson 2015; Lampo 2015). For example, students role-playing experts at an art gallery in *Mantles in the Museum* (Cox and Lewis n.d.; Cox and Lewis 2023; Cox 2025) are unlikely to be highly disruptive, since discussing art is what people normally do in those spaces. However, if you make one of the characters an alcoholic who has been sleeping with another character's wife and characters end up in a drunken fistfight, you have seeded elements

that may end up in a police visit. Consider what authorities you need permission from and proactively discuss your project with those individuals, for example the museum's manager.

## ii) Travel and remote locations

Another consideration is the risks involved with traveling to and from your event. While of course we cannot be responsible for all aspects of our participant's lives, consider what responsibilities you may have in terms of travel. Is your site difficult to visit without your help? Will you help coordinate travel to the site, and if so, what are the associated costs? Is there a possibility an emergency might happen while on site and a player needs to be taken to the hospital or fly back home? Do you have a vehicle and driver available to facilitate this? If a player ends up stranded somewhere on the way to your event, what will you do? When working with underage people, for example on the way to larp at a field trip site, what permissions and insurance do you need to take them there and play on that site?

Will they be out in the wilderness with no phone signal and, if so, what will you do if they need medical assistance? Is the terrain easy to navigate or potentially dangerous? Where is the closest hospital? Consider what you might do if a natural disaster occurs, which have become increasingly common in recent years. While your options might be limited, planning for contingencies is wise.

## 5.6 Safer play

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Implementation of safer play is already discussed in length in Chapter 5 in *TRGD*, including the many strategies that exist for setting the container before, during, and after the game that aim to establish a perception of safety among your player base. Such practices help establish mutual consent and serve as a form of scaffolding for transformative experiences (Haarman 2026). The following section will aim to deepen this discussion with a focus on details about implementation rather than reiterating what we have said before, so please refer to that chapter before reading further here.

### a) Safety team logistics and responsibilities

As mentioned in *TRGD*, we highly recommend having a safety team for your game. We recognize that, in many cases, the game can only have one facilitator for practical reasons. In such games, in which the facilitator is also the organizer, one person has the responsibility not only of maintaining the structure of the game, but also tending to the emotional needs of the players. Note that game facilitation is often quite different from emotional care and may be difficult to shift between. If a player is overwhelmed or in crisis, either that player's needs will go unmet because the facilitator is focused on the game, or the game tends to break down to assist the player.

In the first case, the player may leave the space, which in some cases is helpful, but in other cases may be risky, e.g., if outside the game is crowded public space and the person has nowhere private to be. For this reason, we recommend having a safety

team member available either on call or in-person to provide support. You may be able to rely on existing resources for this support, e.g., mental health professionals in your same clinic, safety team members at a convention willing to be available, or school counselors. Furthermore, when possible (i.e., not in highly mandatory situations), we recommend using The Door is Always Open technique, which assures players they may opt-out and leave the room for any reason, but also requests they check in with the organizer later if possible to give an update on the player's status. In some cases, such as elevated states of anger, it may be preferable for the player to leave the space until they feel calm enough to engage.

In the second case, depending on the agreements of the game, the facilitator may be able to help the player process their character's feelings in-game, e.g., when the character is experiencing something emotionally overwhelming the player. In other cases, switching to off-game processing is preferable. If the group container supports such processing, it might be a beneficial experience for everyone involved, as the group can help provide support. However, in some cases, the facilitator may need to bring the player somewhere private. We recommend giving the other players something to do in-game when possible, e.g., keep role-playing, plan tactics. Alternatively, you can allow them to engage in emotional processing while you leave about their experiences so far.

However, if having more than one safety team member is possible, we highly recommend it. For example, therapeutic tabletop facilitators will sometimes have one facilitator focused on running the game, with another present for emotional processing. Note that not everyone present needs to be a mental health professional in this case if working in tandem with external mental health professionals, for example, who will provide emotional care later. However, we do recommend that safety team members have basic training, e.g., in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). You can also guide your team through crisis management role-playing scenarios related to role-playing game-related situations in preparation for events (Steele, Hart, Stavropoulos, and Bowman 2016). In other situations, several mental health professionals may be helping one or two clients at a time.

In larger games such as larps, we recommend having a separate safety team from organizers with logistical and facilitation duties. Running larps can be quite stressful and involve many logistical details during run-time. Ideally, the safety team is not responsible for such details and instead focuses entirely on holding space for players who need support. If you have in-game safety team members, e.g., facilitators who have a character and are known in-game and off-game to be support staff, make sure these players are not highly involved in the plot of the game or necessary for key scenes (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017; Atwater and Rowland 2018).

Such facilitators can sometimes help the player process their emotional reactions through the character to keep them involved in the game, e.g., in cases of confusion, overwhelm, bleed, or anxiety about game-related matters. In other cases, the facilitator may choose or be asked to take the player off-game to discuss, which we recommend doing in a quiet, ideally empty room, such as space designated explicitly as a safety

room. Notably, in many cases, players simply need a little downtime, support, and help strategizing how to reenter the game in a fulfilling way. However, in more serious situations of acute crisis or harassment, safety team members should be trained in how to respond, e.g., through clear guidelines for steps to take (and not to take) detailed in an Internal Procedures document (see e.g., Living Games 2018b). We will discuss these situations in more depth later in this section.

Also, at least one safety team member should be on staff off-game during the official waking hours of the game. This member may wait in the safety room, or be somewhere else easy for players to find, as waiting can feel isolating and safety work can sometimes be a solitary and alienating experience already (see e.g., Berthold 2024). One strategy is to leave a walkie talkie or phone number in the safety room, then direct players to alert the safety team member if they are somewhere else on site. Additionally, the safety room should be shown to players during the initial tour of the site along with explicit instructions on how to contact team members in case of a crisis.

Having more than one off-game safety team member can not only provide camaraderie, but also can help with specific situations, e.g., if the team member has a conflict of interest in a specific situation or does not feel able to engage for their own well-being. Also, in high intensity games, more than one player may need care at the same time. In some cases, organizers will also keep on retainer an neutral external safety team member, i.e., a mental health professional or mediator uninvolved with the community and therefore not prone to conflicts of interest. Safety team members can also have different roles, e.g., having distinct personnel for handling safety reports/safeguarding, emotional well-being/welfare, accessibility needs, and illness or trauma responses (Fraser 2026).

Whenever possible, your safety team should include people from diverse backgrounds, considering factors such as culture, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, neurodiversity, language, and other factors. While this principle is not always viable to implement, remember that people within your play group may not feel comfortable approaching the safety team if they do not think their perspective will be taken seriously. Including team members especially from marginalized backgrounds can be helpful, which can include abuse, neglect, and/or trauma survivors, e.g., adults who had Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). The flipside of this practice is that such members have their own sensitivities that could get activated in these situations and may often take on responsibilities of emotional care due to a feeling of concern for others based on their own experience. Make sure you are considering how to care for the safety team as well, including shifts in which members are off-duty, as well as procedures for how to handle a specific situation in which one member cannot be involved in the decision making due to a conflict of interest or emotional overwhelm.

Along these lines, safety is not only the purview of the safety team or the organizers. In transformative play especially, players should also feel some responsibility of caring for each other to the best of their abilities. As in situations where a safety team member may need additional external support in a psychological

emergency, e.g., from a crisis line, players also need to gauge how much care they can provide before guiding their co-player to a safety team member. In spaces where everyone takes responsibility for one another, many situations can deescalate rather quickly, e.g., if someone feels overwhelmed and another player can take them briefly off-game and/or offer a hug.

Also, while safety team members may in some cases need to mediate disputes between players, be clear about what kinds of situations you will handle versus are outside of your purview. For example, you might decide to make clear that interpersonal disputes that do not include clear Code of Conduct violations are beyond the scope of your responsibility. Some players may think a safety team member is a mental health professional available to have impromptu sessions and process deeply personal content. In therapeutic games, a safety team member may indeed also have counseling experience, but they are there in this case primarily for crisis management, not in-depth counseling.

Also, safety team members are usually not also responsible for medical emergencies. We recommend calling these folks “medics” or making a distinction between physical safety and emotional safety team members.

For an example of large-scale safety team implementation in the German larp *Drachenfest* (*Drachenfest ug Haftungsbeschränkt 2002 -*), see Weber, Donker, and Heinrich (2020).

## b) Codes of Conduct and Internal Procedures documents

As discussed in *TRGD*, a Code of Conduct refers to a document that states expectations of participants for proper behavior and explicitly states what improper behavior looks like. In extreme cases, improper behavior is usually qualified as harassment, physical, sexual, or emotional violence. Harassment is usually detailed to include specific situations, such as racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, ageism, and others (see e.g., Living Games 2018a). It can also include sexual encounters with an inebriated person, stalking, taking unwanted photographs, or other behaviors. Some Codes of Conduct also include Guidelines for Encouraged Behavior, i.e., what constitutes behaving well, not just improper behavior.

Importantly, a Code of Conduct should detail the actions an organizing team might take if they receive a report of improper behavior. A Code of Conduct is not only useless if not enforced, but can cause players to feel ultimately less safe at your game. The Code will usually have an email address for the safety team, who receives such reports. Ideally, you will list all the people who will have access to these reports and a statement. While we agree in general with the “believe the victim” ethos, we recommend avoiding blanket statements like “We have a 0 tolerance policy” and instead taking each report on a case-by-case basis, as the response is unfortunately rarely clear cut. Rather we recommend providing a range of actions you might take, such as: watching the situation; issuing a warning to the participant; asking the

participant to avoid being in the same space as another person; asking the participant not to drink or make sexual advances at the event; removing the person from the event temporarily or permanently; banning them from future events; or notifying the authorities. Many people are anxious about Codes of Conduct because they assume the worst possible outcome will occur. A safety team has a responsibility to make sure any actions taken a) do not do harm to the person issuing the report, insofar as that is possible; and b) are reasonable based on the nature of the situation in question.

However, you should assess what your legal capabilities to enforce such a Code are in your given situation. Running events in established public organizations, for example, may mean you are constricted by their legal rules and cannot actually promise to remove someone from an event. In such cases, your organizing team may not have the authority to make the decision and rather the report should be handed to a specific person in the university hierarchy. Sadly, in many cases, these organizations are limited in terms of their ability to enforce such policies, or the time constraints make a swift decision impossible, e.g., if a committee needs to meet within the university to discuss, which could take weeks or months. On the other hand, if you are running a private event, in some countries, you have the ability to remove a person for any reason and do not actually need the Code of Conduct at all (although we recommend following one whenever possible). In other countries, people cannot be removed even from private events, so make sure to check the local laws when drafting your Code of Conduct.

Similarly, avoid making promises you may not be able to keep regarding confidentiality. While we recommend confidentiality when possible, in practice it is often difficult to maintain in more serious situations. For example, some people making a report want no action taken because they fear retaliation, but in the case of a serious crime, action may need to be taken regardless. Also, it often does not protect community members moving forward if only one person knows about the report; in some cases, you may want to warn organizers within your game or in other games. We discuss this issue in more detail in the next section.

In terms of run-time procedures, we recommend creating an Internal Procedures document for safety teams, but also even if you plan to run an event by yourself. In crisis situations, it can be challenging to remember what to do (and what not to do). An Internal Procedures document details what members of the team should do if someone makes a report, including who should (and should not) be notified, who makes a decision, how to appropriately provide care for the person reporting, including recommendations for what to say (and what not say). The Living Games Internal Procedures document (2018b) also gives guidelines for how to hold one's body, i.e., non-verbal communication, as well as what procedures to follow if the situation exceeds the level of care the safety team can provide, such as referring the individual to a crisis line or counseling services in the area. It should have a list of important emergency numbers for specific situations. We recommend making sure the safety team has this document with them at all times during run-time or know where to find it easily, e.g., a printed copy in the safety room or downloaded directly to their phone. This practice is especially important if your site has weak Internet service or you have limited access to electricity, such as in the case of outdoor games.

### c) Vetting, intake, and flagging

For transformative games especially, we recommend having some sort of vetting process for your players. In some cases, you may have no choice, such as being assigned a specific classroom of students who are all required to take part in that activity. Indeed, in this case, your job may very well be to keep them in the room in some way, whether they are engaged in the role-play or not. However, in many cases, organizers can make clear choices about who to include and exclude. Sadly, while in an ideal world, all games will be suitable for all players and inclusion rather than exclusion should be our default goal, dynamics can be strongly affected if the players chosen are not a good fit for the group for various reasons.

Mental health professionals often have an intake process, in which they discuss with potential clients why they are seeking assistance, what challenges they are facing, and what therapeutic goals they are seeking to accomplish. During this process, the mental health professional assesses the client's current state of well-being, as well as if they are likely a good fit to work with the client themselves. Planning group therapeutic interventions like tabletop role-playing game groups makes this process more complex, as the mental health professional must also assess whether or not the clients have complimentary needs and diagnoses. For example, including a player with a narcissistic personality disorder into a therapeutic group focused on teamwork and empathy might be a good learning experience, but their behavior might also derail the goals of the game. Similarly, placing a client with a recent history of enacting violence on others in the same group with a domestic abuse survivor may not be the right fit. Indeed, the more sensitive the situation in terms of trauma or symptoms, the more care should be taken in vetting for group fit.

In some cases, during the intake process or after one or more sessions, the mental health professional may decide the specific client is not suitable for group work at that stage in their process (or ever). In cases like these, the mental health professional may be required ethically and legally to provide a final one-on-one session with the client, which can be used to help process the situation and explain why removal occurred with an emphasis on the client's well-being.

In many cases, the vetting takes place by an external party, e.g., a prison warden selecting participants for a role-playing game intervention based on good behavior or a school superintendent selecting special needs students for the group. In these cases, the facilitators should mention to these authorities any behavior issues during the game that they cannot handle as a group and are causes for alarm, e.g., violent, sexually harassing, or other highly disruptive behaviors.

While mental health professionals have some of the most strict requirements in terms of providing emotional care for clients and avoiding placing them in harmful dynamics, these principles can also be used in other situations. When running non-formal educational interventions, some organizations require an application process including both written and verbal interview components. In such situations, the

selection process may focus not only on safety aspects, but also more minor issues, such as the applicant's experience level, qualifications, or level of competency in the language(s) used during play.

Another strategy now common in role-playing game communities is *flagging*, although organizers sometimes disagree on the most ethical way to implement it (cf., Brown and Teerilahti 2024; Wood and Holkar 2024). Flagging is a process in which the organizers send potential attendees a list with all potential participants and ask for flags from the player group. These flags specify whether a person is a safety risk, whether a person cannot play if that player attends, or whether they would simply prefer not to play with that person. While any organizer can send out a flagging list, we recommend the safety team be trained in how to handle flagging sensitively and handle communication with participants about the flags. When possible, sensitive information should be kept contained based on your Code of Conduct, e.g., the entire player group or organizing team does not need to know a flagging process happened, unless the issue, for example, involved a convicted crime.

Ideally, the person who flags should have some assurances that the information will only be revealed to certain team members. However, if you cannot assure that, make it clear in your Code of Conduct, e.g., “While our general policy is to keep information confidential between safety team members, please be advised that in serious situations, we may need to contact the authorities or share information with other organizers.” In serious cases, information may need to be shared between organizers in different groups, e.g., if a player has been banned for harassment, but is likely to sign up for a game run by another organization. However, keep in mind that sharing such information, especially on a list that is shared with multiple people, can have legal risks, e.g., of defamation suits if the person flagged feels substantially harmed.

We discuss specific strategies for flagging in *TRGD*, as well as some of the concerns around the process, as debates are ongoing about specific flagging practices and their potential to cause harm to participants, e.g., if someone is flagged simply because they are disliked or awkward to role-play with, leading to exclusion. Our recommendation for flagging is to be as specific as possible about what each flag is intended to communicate, e.g., if someone can be a bit rude, they are probably not a red-flag safety risk, in which case a yellow-flag indicating the player would prefer not to play closely with them would be more appropriate.

We also recommend not having a blanket policy on flagging, meaning “if someone gets a red flag, they don't get into the game, no questions asked.” Instead, flagging should initiate a conversation with the player who raised the flag, asking for clarification as delicately as possible. It may be the case that the red flag was issued for behavior that does not actually constitute a violation of the Code of Conduct, e.g., cheating on one's partner, stealing from a game organization, or “ghosting” someone after a sexual encounter. Also asking what the player is actually wanting to happen, rather than assuming. In some cases, they may not want you to take any action at all, but are asking for an accommodation, e.g., can we find a way for me to avoid this

person. Depending on your logistical situation, the answer may unfortunately be no. If you have a 10 person game in one room, it may be impossible to keep two players separated. Letting the player know this ahead of time allows them the option of opting out in less serious situations, e.g., a recent breakup making being in the same room with the person painful. However, serious red flag situations will likely trigger your harassment process as described in your Internal Procedures, e.g., initiating a safety report on the incident(s) in question.

We recommend allowing flagging at all stages of the process, not just when the participant list is announced. A common strategy is to have an email address that only safety team members can access where players can send in concerns or reports of Code of Conduct violations before, during, or after the game. If you are not available during run-time to check email, give participants onsite a way to contact the safety team, as described in the previous section.

Importantly, you need to decide as an organization if you are willing to take action on incidents that did not happen under your purview, e.g., at your event, on your social media groups. If a player stalks another player outside of a gaming context, do you have a responsibility to evaluate whether they are a good fit for your larp? Some organizers believe such situations fall outside of their purview. However, we recommend an approach that seriously evaluates a) whether this behavior shows a pattern with multiple similar events; b) the severity of the behavior, even if it happened only once; and c) whether or not the behavior could happen at your event/affect the players in question.

Another important decision is how you will communicate a flag to the flagged person. Do they simply not get a space in the game? Do you tell them why they were flagged? Do you communicate with them over email, a video call, or in person? Each of these approaches has pros and cons. Remember that you also open yourself and others to potential harassment if you engage too directly with the details of the situation. A cleaner solution may simply be to not offer the player a space, or to simply say you think they may not be a good fit for the group for other reasons. The latter approach will likely provoke additional questions that you should be prepared to answer honestly while protecting the confidentiality of the involved parties as much as possible.

Finally, keep in mind that your role as an organizer is not to be a detective and determine all the facts of a situation, nor are you a judge and jury to decide if the person is legally guilty. Your job is to keep the players at your job as safe as possible, which sometimes means making hard calls without clarity on the truth of the situation. We recommend considering who the most vulnerable people in your game who have not caused harm are and what their needs might be when making these difficult decisions. While many of us are highly empathetic and believe in inclusion and rehabilitation for individuals who transgress, such rehabilitation is often outside the scope of the community's responsibility and may actually place members at risk if unsuccessful. Worse, you may be unintentionally signalling to your players that the needs of someone who has transgressed another's players boundaries is more

important than the needs of the person who was harmed or other vulnerable members of the community. Remember there are many ways to provide care to people that are less risky, i.e., choosing to independently help the person who transgressed outside of the context of the game. However, keep in mind your own boundaries and the limits on your own energy as well. We will discuss this latter point in more detail in the section on organizer safety.

#### d) Safety work and harm

We have spent a good deal of space discussing vetting, intake, and flagging, because this topic is one of the most important to consider as an organizer concerned with safety. Unfortunately, any decision you make may cause harm to one or more parties. If you fail to respond to a potential safety concern and someone is subsequently harmed in connection to your event, you will likely be held responsible. Your players may feel betrayed, which will no doubt not only run counter to your transformative goals, but also threatens the integrity of your container moving forward. Such situations can sometimes be escalated, e.g., players declaring public boycotts of your events or factions taking sides publicly on social media.

Sadly, such situations can also occur if you do take action and members of the group do not agree with your decision, often based on limited or incorrect information, or on strong loyalties to the accused. In such circumstances, in order to protect the accuser, you usually should not counter or correct inaccurate assertions, nor provide clarifying details, especially if you have sworn confidentiality when receiving the report. Such work can often feel like a lose-lose situation, with the safety team blamed for behaviors they did not initiate, but are somehow expected to adjudicate, often with limited facts or contradictory accounts. We wish all events were free of harassment and harm, but unfortunately, these situations must be addressed for responsible organizing. We wish we had easy answers for you, but hopefully this section has given you some food for thought in how you might design your safety implementation procedures.

We will discuss anti-harassment movements and responses to serious violations later in this chapter.

### 5.7 Pre-game communication and workshops

As discussed in *TRGD* and in other places in this textbook, considering pre-game communication is an essential part of your implementation strategy, especially when considering safety. Players should know what they can expect from the play experience and what will be expected of them (Koljonen 2016a). Such communication can happen informally, but we recommend having a centralized location where all information can be found, such as a cloud drive or a published website.

This information should include several factors from a safety perspective:

- a) **Game structure:** Are there safety workshops and debriefs that the players should attend? Are they required as part of the experience or optional?
- b) **Safety mechanics:** Which safety mechanics, if any, will your game use? Provide these ahead of time so players can familiarize themselves with them. For a list of examples, see Chapter 5 of *TRGD*.
- c) **Calibration:** How will players calibrate with one another? Are they expected to contact the co-players ahead of time and negotiate boundaries? Will time be provided in the workshop to calibrate? Are they expected to calibrate during run-time as well, e.g., through discreet off-game conversations?
- d) **Limits:** What topics or themes are not part of this game? How can players negotiate limits on content, if at all, before or during the game?
- e) **Trigger warnings, content advisories, ingredients lists, or other parameters:** Are certain sensitive themes embedded in the design or likely to arise? What sorts of physical actions will be required of players? You should find a way to communicate these from the outset. Provide a list using the term of your choice of themes they will likely not be able to avoid if they play this game, allowing them to opt-in or opt-out accordingly.
- f) **Session 0 or other gatherings:** Will you provide a pre-game planning event such as a Session 0 in which people can negotiate content or calibrate boundaries? Will players fill out the *Consent in Gaming* (Reynolds and Germain 2019) checklist or a similar tool with one another, indicating content they do and do not want in the game? If you provide a live info session, will you record it to make sure people who cannot attend can catch up?
- g) **Pre-play:** Are players encouraged to communicate, discuss backstory, and make plans for their character relations before the game? Are they encouraged to engage in pre-game role-play? Or should they avoid such play? Will you moderate or otherwise adjudicate such play, e.g., if you have conflict resolution mechanics in your game? If so, you may be permitting a practice that you lack the time to enforce. Remember that while pre-play can be exciting, some players have more time for it than others, and it can lead to bleed occurring even before the actual event (see e.g., Svanevik and Brind 2016). If you have very specific activities planned, you may want to discourage pre-play, as players may arrive at the game with an unrealistic expectation about the game experience or hack your game to take it in an undesirable direction.

## 5.8 During the game

Many safety and calibration tools exist, as we discuss at length in *TRGD*. Please refer to Chapter 5 for details. Here, we will discuss some of the factors to consider when choosing safety tools based on your implementation plan. Many designers adopt safety techniques they have read about or experienced elsewhere or design new ones without testing them. Understanding the general principle behind the technique is important, e.g., is it meant to be able to communicate non-verbally if someone is too triggered to talk? Is it meant to discreetly signal to others without breaking the silence in a nonverbal game or interrupting conversation?

Here, we offer some considerations based upon the purpose of safety and calibration techniques that you can then apply to specific tools based on your implementation plan and the constraints of your location. Central to all of these practices is that self care (Dalstål 2016) and community care are of primary importance.

### a) Opting-out

Is it possible to opt-out of your game? If so, to what degree? Can a participant simply watch, can they leave, or should they engage in an alternative activity? Be careful about assuring participants can opt-out in situations that are mandatory. Furthermore, consider how opting-out will affect the game design and other player's experience. If opting-out is possible, but will dramatically negatively impact others, the player may feel pressured to continue regardless.

For example, in *dyadic play* (Bowman 2024; Wind 2025), the majority of the play experience is tied to a specific co-player, even when playing in an ensemble. The structure of the game often depends upon that dyadic principle. Therefore, opting-out of dyadic play will actually be quite disruptive. Consider backup plans in situations like this. Do you have another member of the organizing team who can step in and fill this role? Can you restructure the relations on the fly, e.g., asking one of the dyads to become a triad? If a player has a lot of in-game responsibility, such as running major rituals, classes, or other scenes, how will you replace them or restructure the game if they opt-out? Can anyone step into those roles or do they require a specific skillset to make the game run smoothly?

In short, just as role-playing requires a sort of mental flexibility, so does redesigning on the fly, so considering these contingencies ahead of time is wise.

### b) Removing content

Can players remove content during the game or in the workshops? If so, how will you ensure all participants know that content is removed? Or will the content only be removed for the people in the immediate vicinity? This issue is especially problematic in larger games. For example, if your in-game workshop involves removing slips of paper with sensitive content on them, like domestic violence, but not everyone

has seen the slip was removed, they may accidentally bring in that content through emergent play. In some cases, removing content may not be possible, in which case, those themes should be clear at signup and reiterated during workshops. For example, if nudity and/or overt sexuality is an important component to the game, such things should be stated clearly up front.

Again, we recommend providing players options for what to do if they feel overwhelmed by content in the moment, such as leaving a scene, tapping out of a physical encounter (Koljonen 2016b), or approaching a safety team member. Another approach is to allow players the option to “fade to back” or “veil” the scene instead of playing the content out explicitly (Edwards 2003). Additionally, consider how contained the theme is. If the content is only part of one character’s backstory out of one hundred players and will be unlikely to get played out, you can indicate to players that the content is present but limited in this way. You can also make sure not to cast players in characters connected to that backstory. This practice is far more challenging in smaller games like tabletop.

What happens if content is removed that someone feels is strongly important to their experience to play? This situation can be tricky. One option is to have zones (Bowman 2018), in which certain types of play are permitted to occur but are not visible to the rest of the players, e.g., a tabletop facilitator bringing a player into a side room for a scene or players taking each other to a meta room or black box to play the content after obtaining consent.

### c) Verbal, nonverbal, and physical signals

Many safety mechanics require signaling to other players in a special way, indicating that off-game, the player is making a request or answering a query (see Chapter 5 of *TRGD*). If these signals are verbal, make sure your environment is conducive to clear verbal communication. If you are playing in a loud party atmosphere with a DJ, a role-played conversation may be difficult enough without being able to parse a verbal signal. Similarly, if your game requires nonverbal methods of communication, like eye contact, the ability to see the movements of one’s body, or tapping-out such signals might be challenging in chaotic environments such as a night-time combat scene in the woods or when the person is restrained (Koljonen 2020). Physical signals such as colored ribbons or stickers on someone’s badge might be difficult to discern, e.g., for someone with low sight or color-blindness. While it is difficult to fully account for every situation, consider a backup plan, such as permitting players to initiate an off-game discussion or using a combination of verbal and non-verbal signals. Finally, if a player has the option to use a safeword or gesture of some sort, e.g., to pause or cut the game, make sure you clarify to the group whether the entire group must cut or the players in the immediate surroundings. Some signals might be important for cutting the game entirely, such as “Medic!” with a fist up in a medical emergency, whereas a small group cutting a scene may not require everyone to stop play.

## d) Safety and calibration discussions during play

Some games forbid off-game discussions during the run-time of a game, i.e., always remaining “in-character.” While this playstyle is valid, we believe off-game discussions safety and calibration during play can be quite important. Our boundaries may change from the beginning of the game to the end. An in-game dynamic may not be working for us and may need adjusting for the game to run more smoothly. A specific behavior may be triggering. We may change our minds about how we would like to advance the narrative. Being able to discuss these things discretely with co-players can sometimes make the difference between a positive and negative play experience. On the extreme end, failing to calibrate can sometimes mean boundary violations, players feeling pressured to ignore their own boundaries, and/or experiences of harassment. Thus, learning how to discuss consent with co-players is paramount and organizers can create structures to teach these skills (Mutsaers 2019; Kok and Mutsaers 2026).

From a practical perspective, how can players best have off-game discussions in the space you have selected for the event? If running a tabletop game at a convention, perhaps you instruct them to pass notes to each other. If all players are engaged in a scene with all players in a single room, perhaps you indicate that whispering in each other’s ear is an off-game calibration signal. If you have multiple rooms and leaving for a side conversation will not interrupt an important group scene, you can direct players to find a quiet place to calibrate.

## e) Safety rooms

For many games, we recommend having a safety room where players can go off-game to decompress from noise or overstimulation. In some situations, you may not have this option, for example, when playing in a classroom setting where students are not permitted to roam the halls unintended, or when you have only one small room to run a tabletop game.

However, if you have the possibility to feature a safety room, you should consider several factors. Is the room easily accessible from the play space or isolated? Have the players been shown where the safety room is? Is the safety room being used for other purposes, e.g., prop storage, off-game player chatter, or logistics planning? If so, we do not recommend calling it a safety room but instead calling it an off-game room or logistics room. While some players might feel better after spending some time in the logistics room, others might need more privacy or less stimulation, e.g., it might be uncomfortable to cry in front of the organizing team.

Does your safety room have harsh, bright or soft, diffuse lighting? Is there comfortable furniture, pillows, and/or blankets to rest on? Are the textures cold, rough, soft, or warm? You may consider adding some quiet immersive activities, such as headphones with soothing music or the option to choose one’s own music, coloring books, or journaling supplies.

Sometimes, the safety room may have multiple people in it, such as a safety team member helping a player process their experience and experience and someone else in the room quietly coloring. This practice should be fine if everyone in the room feels comfortable with it, so check in. However, if you are receiving a report about a breach of the Code of Conduct, you should ask the reporter whether they want total privacy or not. Many will not feel comfortable disclosing details when others are present. Others may be hesitant but go along with others being there, so use your best judgment about the right course of action to best assist and protect the player.

In practice, the vast amount of players who come to the safety room likely are overwhelmed or confused about where to take the direction of their play. While these emotional responses can be intense in their own right, we distinguish them from safety reports or acute crisis situations. Therefore, you might consider having another space if possible, such as the off-game logistics room or a separate *consultation room*, signaling to players these responses are normal and having specific staff assigned to them.

## 5.9 After the game

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In *TRGD*, we discuss several post-game practices to help players transition back to life and process their experience. Again, here we will discuss the general principles behind these practices from a safety perspective, as well as considerations when implementing them in your specific game circumstance.

### a) De-roling

When players are engaged in their character, they are experiencing the alibi of play (Deterding 2018). They may have performed actions as their character that they find embarrassing, confusing, or even repugnant. They may fear the judgment of others and, indeed, others may be judging them, especially if they are confused whether or not in-game aggression was meant to be harmful out-of-game (Bowman 2013). They may have a hard time emotionally when transitioning from the game world to daily life for various reasons, such as challenging life circumstances to which they must return.

De-roling is a ritualized practice that allows participants to signal to the group (and to themselves) they are shifting psychologically from one state to another (Setola 2026). For some people, this shift might be immediate, especially if they are skilled at compartmentalizing feelings and experiences. For others, it may take days or even weeks to fully de-role. The ritual is not a signal that de-roling is complete, but rather initiates the process, indicating also that we should now consider the actions performed and things said as originating from the player, not the character. Small ritual actions can help with this process, such as shifting one's tone of voice, removing one's character badge or clothing and placing it in the circle, or putting on one's daily glasses.

Players can verbalize the shift, such as going around the circle saying, "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..." Similarly, players can switch to referring

to the actions of other players during the game as attributed to their character, e.g., instead of “when you yelled at me...” saying “when your character yelled at my character”; instead of “I hated you so much,” saying “my character hated yours so much.” However, speaking in the third person can be challenging for some players if they have not fully de-rolled or if they experience their memories vividly from a first-person perspective. It also takes cognitive effort that might be challenging if the players are tired or emotionally overwhelmed.

You may also ask players to go around the circle sharing one thing about their character they wish to leave behind, and one they wish to keep, a common practice in role-playing circles. However, in transformative play in which the goal is to integrate some of the experience or the insights gained into daily life, this practice is also highly potent as a longer debrief, so consider where you might want to place it.

Some de-rolling practices involve interacting as players directly after the game, especially with other players with whom the person played closely. For example, one practice is to list three things that are different about the character and their player. While this practice is helpful for de-rolling and reinforcing alibi, if it is the only interaction players have with each other after an intense play experience, it may not leave space for important off-game conversations. Again, since we are working with transformative play, a hard shift compartmentalizing character to player may actually interfere with the process, with alibi becoming more of a hindrance than an aid (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Consider practices that might make the process more gradual or gentle, easing the player out of the character rather than taking it away quickly.

## b) Debriefing

When players are leaving a game experience, they often feel compelled to *narrativize*, speaking about their experience as a linear narrative and a memory. While this process can be helpful both as a form of de-rolling and also, paradoxically, as a form of nostalgia for a time now past, it can shift the tone to humorous or excited storytelling, which can skip over the deeper and more vulnerable parts of the processing needed for integration. In other words, it serves as a method of distancing oneself from the events and the character, while also reframing the narrative into an amusing anecdote. It can also feel highly alienating for players who are not yet ready to distance themselves or need to process more complicated emotions. Such narrativizing is often unmoderated, meaning the players who feel most comfortable engaging often storytell more readily.

Before narrativizing can take hold, we strongly recommend debriefing. As discussed in depth in TRGD, debriefing can take many forms, including *structured*, *semi-structured*, and *unstructured*. It can also be verbal or embodied in some way, both of which can be helpful; in this chapter, we focus on verbal debriefing. Because we recommend working with specific emotional, intellectual, and/or educational processing questions tied to specific learning objectives, we recommend a structured

debrief. In this format, each player is given the same amount of time to speak on a topic without interruption, conversation, or crosstalk from others. This practice is especially important for individuals who are feeling confused, overwhelmed, sad, or angry to have space to express these more complicated emotions. It also makes space for players who are shy or more introverted to express themselves without having to compete for conversation space. Importantly, debriefs should focus on the player's individual experience, rather than accusations or blame toward other players for actions their characters took.

Debriefs can take place in small, medium, or large groups. By “large group,” we refer here to debriefs that occur with the whole play group, which may not be feasible in many implementation situations, or may take too much time. One helpful practice is having a mixture of small or medium group debriefs with more personal questions focused on personal experience and emotional processing, then bringing everyone back to the large group for more intellectual or educational processing. In this way, the debriefing makes space for the more emotional content to be processed first, clearing the way for intellectualization gradually.

You may choose to break the players into small groups based upon their closest co-players, or randomize these groups. Debriefing with the participants one played closest with has the advantage of many shared points of reference and, possibly, established trust and intimacy. On the other hand, if the player needs to process something upsetting or confusing that happened between these close relations, they may feel less inhibited when discussing with randomized players. Similarly, one recommended practice is to assign *debrief buddies* after a long-form larp who are expected to check in on each other in the coming days or weeks, especially in games with intense or sensitive content. Having a debrief buddy who is familiar with the game, but was not part of the character's inner circle, might be highly beneficial as a more objective sounding board.

Sometimes, logistics require that debriefs be shorter, but we do not recommend removing them completely, as that can often interrupt the transformative process. From our perspective, if your game lacks time for an immediate debrief with all players, you should likely redesign your implementation plan. For example, some long-form games remain in-character until the very last minute, then cleanup happens and players are expected to leave the site. In other cases, the game breaks late in the evening, and players are asked to choose between the optional debrief and the afterparty, potentially missing the opportunity to interact with people they played close with if they choose the debrief. Other models allow for a late-night afterparty when the game ends, then provide a debrief in the morning. In each of these cases, the design is encouraging a hard shift out of the character and back into one's daily social persona, whether to focus on logistics or socializing.

Importantly, not all players feel comfortable or ready to debrief directly after a game. As with all activities, ideally you can allow players to opt-out in these cases, with the overall expectation that debriefing is a necessary part of the game experience.

However, logistically consider how this might be possible. If the player cannot leave the room, can they do an activity such as journaling, drawing, or listening to headphones in the same room but away from the group? If they leave the space, are they expected to check back in with the facilitator later? Can they sit in the debriefing circle and listen, but pass when asked to speak? Sometimes, just being in the space can be helpful and feel inclusive, even for players unready to share.

Similarly, consider what the best approach is to conducting the debrief. A common strategy is to hand out a debriefing script to other organizers or players who volunteer to lead the process with their group. Another common practice is to break up into separate rooms. Unfortunately, unless all facilitators are briefed and trained in debriefing, they may go off-script, not moderate effectively, or focus overly on sharing their own experience. For large games, we recommend choosing the debrief leaders carefully, emphasizing leaders with skills in emotional intelligence, empathy, and holding space for others.

Another useful practice when running smaller groups in a large room is to have only one debrief facilitator who keeps time and announces each question with a microphone if necessary. This facilitator either assigns small group facilitators from the organizing team or takes one volunteer from each group responsible for maintaining the structure. The small group facilitator raises their hand to indicate their group is done. When all groups are done or time runs out for that round of questions, the facilitator moves on. If a group finishes early, they are permitted to talk quietly among themselves but should avoid narrativizing too heavily to maintain the serious tone.

You will also need to consider which practices are best for your specific target group. For example, young children will likely have a difficult time staying still and talking for long amounts of time. In this case, you might consider designing a mixture of embodied and verbal debrief, such as making a physical action while saying a short phrase describing their experience. You will also need to consider time constraints. Structured debriefs longer than an hour may cause players to lose focus or get antsy. One option is to allow players to leave after the first forty-five minutes, but hold space for others who want to debrief longer. Alternatively, you can set up additional debriefs in the days and even weeks following the event for players who might need it, or ask one or more players to volunteer to run the debrief without you present if they are willing to do so.

### c) Post-game processing and integration

In Chapter 2 of *TRGD*, we discuss several examples of practices to help integrate the game experience after play, arranged in the following overall categories: creative expression, emotional processing, returning to daily life, interpersonal processing, and community building (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). Here, we will focus more on why a variety of practices might be necessary.

Individual needs vary in terms of alone time, conversation, sleep, and connection within the community. While our model values verbal processing through formalized debriefing practices, especially when aiming for specific transformative goals, we understand that individuals prefer processing in different ways after a game. Some may need to discuss all the events that happened with one another for days. Others may need to journal or compose their experience or epilogue in a creative writing exercise. Some may need to paint, draw, design games, or engage in other creative outputs. Others simply want to be around other people from the game, connect with community members outside of the game, or touch base with the role-playing community as a whole, whether online or in person. Some analyze the game design, write documentation pieces, or compose academic work based on the experience. Others need to reconnect with the life they had before the game, grounding back into familiar patterns of daily routines. Some may need to engage in another immersive activity, like watch several episodes of a television show, go to the gym to work out, or sleep for many hours. In some cases, relationship dynamics might need to be renegotiated, for example if a player discovered something important about their gender or sexuality during play or developed feelings for a co-player outside of their relationship.

All of these practices could be considered part of the transformative process if the focus remains on one's transformative goals, whether those established by the game design or goals they have for themselves. In other words, players should seek to distill important insights, consider next steps, and take action on goals. From our perspective, transformation is both a prolonged and sustained state of change, but also can involve short- and long-term processes of change that require effort to keep going (Bowman et al. 2024a). For example, if someone makes a work of art based on their journey and hangs it in their house, they have turned something ephemeral and temporary into a lasting piece of material reality called *ephemera* (Kemper 2017, 2020; Cox 2018), ideally one that is infused with the insights they took away from the game. Whenever they walk by, they have the potential to recall and reflect upon where they are now in their transformative journey.

Finally, as mentioned before, some players may have little emotional reaction at all, easily returning back to work or school without a sense of disruption. However, we do recommend that even in these cases, the players attempt to identify ways to distill meaning from the experience. If they cannot, they can focus on their transformative goals and what some helpful next steps might be, regardless of the game experience they had.

#### d) Availability and communication with players

You can also foster a transformational container surrounding your event by carefully considering how you represent yourself in the community and the types of interactions you have with its members. One important factor you should include in your implementation plan is the degree of access the players will have to you. If you are a single facilitator, you will likely need to do most organizing tasks unless volunteers

offer to help. You will be expected to have a considerable amount of *face time* with your participants, which is not always possible when you have many other tasks to complete. Erving Goffman (1955) describes *positive face*, a stance we adopt toward others that invites interaction. He contrasts positive face with *autonomous face*, which is usually present when we are hard at work at a consuming task (as described in Cahn and Abigail 2014). We switch between these two stances throughout any given work day, especially if we work with people, and organizing events is no different. Considering organizing and even playing role-playing games can involve labor (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016; Torner 2019), be careful not to overload yourself with too many tasks if you need to also be present for your players. If you are embroiled in duties requiring autonomous face, you may be unable to provide the positive face needed to reassure your players and help them feel safe; indeed, they may interpret your behavior as not having time for them or caring about their needs.

This principle is not only important to help players meet basic social needs within a group of inclusion and support, but especially critical when considering safety. Having a separate safety team who is not responsible for run-time logistics makes it more likely that a distressed player will have the team member's undivided attention. Similarly, having a separate effective and available communication team can help players feel welcome at your event and alleviate any anxieties they may have related to props, costumes, travel, social cohesion, or other factors. Massi Hannula (2015) reminds organizers to “remember” the player, presenting clear and thorough communication on the website that anticipates player questions before they arrive. Such communication should especially highlight any accessibility or dietary concerns that the organizers can or cannot accommodate (Butzen 2024a, 2024b; Livesey-Stephens and Gundersen 2024).

In location-based larps with months of build-up, these anxieties can be especially high. Even for experienced players, role-playing means stepping into the unknown on a fundamental level, and many people within these communities report having intense social anxiety (see e.g., Algayres 2019a). While successful experiences in role-playing can help alleviate this anxiety especially over time (see e.g., Varrette 2023), you should anticipate that players will experience high sensitivity before, during, and after the event. Some may even experience anxiety attacks or social phobias. One way that you can help is by trying to be as calm as possible yourself, which can help them feel safer and regulate their nervous system, e.g., making sure everything is in place when your players arrive (Pettersson 2025). On the other hand, authors of this chapter have had personal experience with being too overloaded with logistical tasks as organizers and players feeling less safe as a result of interactions that feel abrupt, which unfortunately can prompt feelings of insignificance or rejection for players who are in a vulnerable state.

Your approach to communication in online spaces is also important to consider. Failing to answer emails in a reasonable amount of time can be perceived as ghosting or neglect. If you have rules around communication, such as “only over email rather than social media,” make those clear. In games that require interaction with facilitators

between sessions, e.g., to handle game mechanics or narrative factors, we recommend setting clear boundaries around when and how this facilitation. Players can become highly emotionally invested in the game, especially if competitive elements are present (Bowman 2013). In ongoing campaigns, for example, perhaps players can send in one “downtime” action between sessions, but are not allowed to chat with facilitators. This practice may sound harsh, but setting clear boundaries with players can often help them feel more safe, because they know where the container begins and ends.

If you will have online spaces where players can communicate between sessions, make sure you have a moderation policy in place. If you do not plan to moderate, make that clear to participants so they understand their own responsibility to self-moderate. We still recommend monitoring these spaces and being receptive to any comments about escalated conflicts or inappropriate behaviors. If you want the ability to take action on safety concerns in online spaces, make that clear to your players in your Code of Conduct.

For more insights into safety practices in games, see Brown (2016a), Koljonen (2020), and Wind (2026).

## 5.10 Safer community container setting

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### a) Capacity building for players, designers, and organizers

Role-playing is often an intensely social activity that requires communication on at least two levels: between players and between characters. As we have discussed, it often incentivizes actions and risk-taking that we would normally not do in daily life, including socially transgressive behaviors (Deterding 2018; Stenros and Bowman 2024). Many people who join role-playing games are still working on their prosocial interaction and emotion regulation skills. All of us in our own way are still developing skills in diversity, equity, and inclusion and that work never ends. For more on diversity, equity, and inclusion in RPGs, see Burton, Trammell, and Jones (2024).

Consent culture is a relatively new development in many societies (see e.g., Brown 2016a, 2017a). While social codes may have been present in the past that indicated consent or lack of consent, many of us are still learning how to have constructive and open discussions about consent, including within the role-playing game discourse (see e.g., the articles in Haarman et al. eds. 2026). Similarly, many people are unaware or still learning best practices for trauma-informed. Due to all of these factors, the risk of interactions pushing boundaries, upsetting players, or even causing harm is relatively high.

On the other hand, because players and organizers are becoming more aware of these risks and developing more tools for communicating, role-playing communities can paradoxically feel safer than other social environments for many players, hence their potential as transformational containers. One way to continue to make the container more robust is to provide *capacity building* resources for players, designers,

and organizers. These resources can take the form of written information, such as blog posts, popular articles, or academic papers from community members about ways to improve safety and inclusion within communities. You can also consider ways to encourage people to participate in training, whether provided by you or other authoritative sources, e.g., Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training for crisis management. You can develop and encourage others in your community to develop supportive communication methods, such as those employed by mental health professionals (Diakolambrianou 2021). Examples include nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2015), social justice mediation (Social Justice Mediation Institute n.d.), and other conflict transformation skills (Taraghi, Bowman, and Khosrospour 2022; Schreiber, Hugaas, and Bowman 2025). An important facet of such communication is cultural sensitivity, which can be challenging in intercultural environments, but also in smaller groups with players from different backgrounds and life circumstances, especially groups that have status discrepancies or players who have experienced varying degrees of marginalization. Resources to support developing skills in cultural sensitivity are recommended, including hiring external cultural consultants and sensitivity readers (see e.g., Kemper 2018; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021; see e.g., Mendez Hodes 2019).

## b) Organizer safety

While we have focused almost entirely on care for players in this chapter, organizer safety has become an important topic of discussion in recent years (Lindve 2019;. As discussed earlier with harmonious vs. obsessive passion (Vallerand and Houliort 2003; Lavigne, Forest, and Crevier-Braud 2011), organizers may throw themselves completely into a project, spending exorbitant amounts of time on details that have relatively low impact on players. If a project is not managed efficiently, organizers may struggle to limit themselves to one aspect of the project or have difficulty distinguishing their time as work or play, i.e., the *infinite hours* model of organizing larps (Pettersson 2015). Some organizers may fail to delegate to other organizers, placing a tremendous amount of pressure on themselves to make the project succeed, and potentially putting their health at risk (see e.g., Deutsch 2025).

With such a level of commitment combined with exhaustion, it can be challenging or even debilitating for some organizers to receive negative feedback. For this reason, many larp organizations, for example, request that players refrain from sending them feedback for at least a week until they have recovered from the event, and instead focus on sharing personal stories about their experience, e.g., the Week of Stories. As we discussed before, narrativizing the play experience can be highly pleasurable and help players remember the positive things about the event, as they too may feel emotionally and physically exhausted directly afterward. However, some players feel this process is silencing and that sharing critiques is important especially when the memories are fresh (B. 2024). One compromise is to send out a feedback form right away in which players can discuss their experience, but state clearly that organizers will not read it for another week or so (Montero 2021). Feedback forms also do not hold the same

expectations of a direct response in the same way an email or social media post does. Another option could be to have players email, but avoid opening and replying until enough time has passed for recovery.

However, as mentioned above, when occasional critiques turn into consistent criticism, gossip becomes common, or other issues occur within groups that can increase toxicity, organizers are often placed in a tough position (see e.g., Stark 2014b, 2019). They may feel they cannot make public statements without inflaming the situation no matter how compassionately they phrase their comments or apologies. Such situations can lead to feelings of deep grief, shame, and resentment, which can compound with the exhaustion of overwork, leading to burnout (Holkar 2022; Bailly 2023; Friman 2024) or other mental health challenges.

When addressing safety in your implementation plan, make sure to consider some of the following strategies:

- a) **Redundancies:** Build redundancy if possible into your organizing team making sure another person is able to fill a role if necessary.
- b) **Delegation:** If some organizers tend to take on excessive amounts of responsibility, find ways to help them delegate less critical or difficult tasks to other team members. Make sure their unique capabilities are used most optimally in the project.
- c) **Reduce complexity:** Some creators tend to overdesign, especially when they get excited by ideas or plots. Similarly, larp implementation teams may overdesign the logistical elements, such as sets, props, special effects, or other features. Tabletop facilitators may overthink scenarios, preparing for every possible outcome rather than trusting in improvisation. While this creativity can be fun and fulfilling, it can also lead to increased complexity, which can become burdensome and even impossible to implement effectively. Again, return back to your transformative goals. Which aspects of this complexity can be reduced and still focus on your aims?
- d) **Boundaries:** Establish boundaries with your players and design team. For example, you can inform others when you will be available and unavailable throughout the week. You can limit communication to specific channels, such as email, Slack, or Discord, then mute notifications until you are able to engage again.
- e) **Emotional support structures:** Consider ways to build emotional support structures into the team. Just as players may need debrief buddies, it might be a good idea to distribute organizer care responsibilities to certain members of the group. Some organizers may need someone else to answer messages for a while, whereas others may need to process their feelings, and others still may need to co-work over Zoom to make sure they meet deadlines for putting together the budget. Learning how to identify, communicate, and make requests about one's needs is an important life skill, and especially important for emotionally intense practices like designing and implementing role-playing games.

### c) Facilitator and NPC safety

You should also carefully consider the ways in which the alibi of play might cause harm or discomfort for facilitators. Non-player characters (Stenros 2013) and supporting characters (Fido-Fairfax 2024) can sometimes be viewed as not “as real” or as “fully human” as player-characters when viewing interactions through a game lens. On the mild end, they can be viewed as plot-delivery vehicles, i.e., to pump for information, or resources to be used, i.e., to throw in front of danger first as a shield to protect the player-characters. In more serious situations, especially in games featuring combat, sexual coercion, and other forms of aggression, their physical and emotional safety may be at risk. Such situations can often be highly arousing on an emotional level that may make it more difficult for players to use clear judgment in the moment, e.g., players experiencing a surge of adrenaline and hitting too hard with a boffer sword; making sexualized threats without negotiating consent first. Such risks are also present on the facilitator end, especially when the power dynamics are highly imbalanced in the group.

You are responsible for setting the safety norms of the group. If your game allows for physical combat, you can provide workshops on how to engage in combat in lower-risk ways, e.g., escalating slowly and cinematically; using the lightest touch with boffer weapons. You can provide norms for how to communicate with one another, whether nonverbally, verbally, or both, if a boundary is transgressed. If you are aiming for a more hardcore playstyle, make that very clear ahead of time to set expectations appropriately (Koljonen 2016a). You may need to remind your players during workshops to be especially careful with non-player character safety and set clear boundaries for what is and is not acceptable. You should also carefully consider facilitator safety after the game. If facilitators were responsible for running scenes with sensitive content, we recommend making sure they are able to debrief as well, e.g., engaging in villainous, sociopathic, violent, or otherwise antisocial behavior. Such debriefs can take place among the organizing team alongside the player debrief at a different time from it, but are often better to keep separate. Without such debriefs, facilitators may be left with troubling feelings or cognitive dissonance around behaviors they were expected to enact as a service to the game.

### d) Anti-harassment movements

Over the past two decades, anti-harassment movements have become more widespread, especially with the advent of social media. Such movements often feature personal accounts of physical, emotional, and/or sexual violence, e.g., the #MeToo movement. In some cases, these accounts are only intended to ask for support from community members; in others, the accuser will reveal the name of the accused, a person who allegedly violated either the accuser themselves or a third party. The term “allegedly” is often used in situations in which no legal ruling has been made proving the harassment occurred in the eyes of the law. In reality, the vast majority of violations never go reported and many fail to provide enough evidence to support a legal decision

in favor of the accused, as their testimony is often not enough. Furthermore, when engaging with police and lawmakers, survivors are sometimes subjected to humiliating and/or retraumatizing experiences, having to reveal themselves emotionally to public scrutiny and sometimes physically to doctors. If the case is not proven legally, they may be sued for defamation of character, especially if the accusation has the potential to harm the accused's professional reputation. Defamation cases can be emotionally and financially devastating for survivors, often compromising their own ability to be successful in the world afterward.

While false accusations certainly occur, they are highly uncommon; some statistics assert that false accusations make up less than 10% of cases (Weiser 2017). While this statistic includes accusations when evidence has been fabricated and proven false, indicating malicious intent, it can also include situations deemed “unfounded,” such as the accused believing they were assaulted, but a lack of forensic evidence being found to support the account beyond reasonable doubt. While any percentage of false accusations is unacceptable, particularly involving malicious intent, the vast majority of the time, accusers are telling the truth from their perspective. Often, survivors are not believed, especially if they are from marginalized backgrounds and accusing someone of high social status and privilege. Even if their account is believed, the details of their personal experience may become matters of semi-public or public debate, as community members deliberate on whether the described behavior actually constitutes a violation. While sometimes financial gain or custody battles may be at stake, in many cases the risk involved in coming forward with an accusation is exceptionally high. For this reason, the common default in consent-based communities is to “believe the victim,” as members often do not have enough information to make a conclusive assessment of the situation. Informal *whisper networks* are often developed, in which community members share names and accounts with one another without an official legal accusation.

Even in situations that never involve the legal system, the risk of social ostracization is high for both the accuser and the accused in such situations, which can be emotionally debilitating. Humans have a deeply ingrained need to receive support and acceptance from our community. Humiliation, rejection, public publishment, or ostracization can cause great harm not only to the individuals involved, but also to the entire community, especially when such matters become public and members feel compelled to take sides. When these situations happen in public debates, for example, retraumatization of survivors of other violations within the community can occur, e.g., when watching previously trusted members of the community make excuses for the accused, disbelieve the victim, or minimize their experience. For example, in situations of statutory rape or other forms of grooming, in which older and more established members of the community engage in romantic or sexual behavior toward younger and/or more vulnerable members (Edman 2015; Harder 2021), opinions may be divided among members whether or not such behavior constitutes a violation, especially in communities that encourage sex positivity. On the other hand, when community members realize a trusted person is capable of causing great harm, especially if the

harm is deemed intentional, it can cause a crisis of trust and intense grief for each individual in their own lives, as is often apparent on social media when a beloved figure in popular culture is accused. Sadly, when violations happen, they can be traumatic not only for the people involved in the incident, but also everyone around them.

Unfortunately, such dynamics are often present in role-playing game communities and are not entirely avoidable when implementing role-playing games. Anti-harassment movements have also occurred within role-playing communities (see e.g., Nilsdotter 2014; Brown 2016; Algayres 2018). Safety violations are receiving greater attention in livestreaming role-playing, e.g., when *Far Verona*'s Adam Koebel as a facilitator narratively described a scene involving sexual assault toward a player-character without negotiating consent or introducing safety mechanics (Hall 2020). If you are lucky, you will never have to deal with a safety violation of this nature, e.g., if you have the same group of players over a long period of time who have established and maintained trustworthy conduct. Even in such optimal conditions, responsible organizing involves making a risk assessment and a plan for such situations, planning *as if they will occur* rather than assuming they probably will not. Unfortunately, people with predatory tendencies are often drawn to relatively permissive social spaces such as alternative and playful communities because transgressive behavior may be more tolerated. Planning how to handle such situations ahead of time can not only help your participants feel more safe, but hopefully will alleviate some of your own fear. As mentioned above, typical plans include safety teams, Codes of Conduct, and Internal Procedures documents.

While a thorough analysis of approaches to handling violations is beyond the scope of this chapter, importantly, different philosophies exist with regard to how the community should orient itself toward the accused (see e.g., Cazeneuve 2020). Some organizing teams absolve themselves of all responsibility for handling violations between players, an approach we do not recommend. Such inaction not only can lead to further violations due to lack of consequences, but also can backfire within the community, leading members to distrust you or require some sort of public apology or accountability for perceived neglect. In extreme cases, the community may split or dissolve into *schisms* (Bowman 2013) over such inaction.

Some communities simply forgive the person and ask them not to engage in the behavior again, which unfortunately can often lead to further transgressions in this community or others (Brown 2017b), e.g., if the individual in question is not skilled at consent practices or has predatory intentions. On the other end of the spectrum, some teams have a *zero tolerance policy*, in which any accusation immediately results in removal of the accused from the event and/or community. Such approaches are often indelicate and do not take into account the nuances of interpersonal dynamics, which is why we advocate for a *case-by-case* approach and a range of possible consequences rather than baseline ostracization.

Some communities engage in *restorative justice* and/or *reformatory justice* approaches, which vary in terms of format. Generally, these formats focus on ways to rehabilitate and reintegrate the accused into the community, e.g., through dialogue with the harmed person (Restorative Justice Council 2016); accountability procedures; and/or requiring the person attend therapy or anger management classes. A similar approach is *transformative justice*, in which moves beyond the interpersonal to understand and address the root causes of harm in the community, such as systemic injustice (S. 2020).

Such practices are usually easier with relatively minor violations, e.g., young people hitting too hard with boffer swords out of anger (see e.g., Dineen 2025). In more serious cases, while sometimes successful, such approaches can often decenter the experience of the survivor in question, as well as the legitimate concerns of others in the community who no longer feel safe. Therefore, any justice process needs to be survivor-centered and cannot involve pressure on the survivor to go along with the process, i.e., the survivor should proactively ask for such a procedure. Otherwise, these processes might lead to retraumatization, especially if the survivor's account of the incident is scrutinized, minimized, or dismissed by others in a public forum. Sadly, such behaviors can also cause secondary traumatization; when community members witness someone else's experience being diminished, it can trigger painful intrusive memories of such dismissive reactions from others in one's own history.

Whatever philosophy you adopt, you should make it clear to your participants in some way, e.g., through the procedures listed in your Code of Conduct. Allow them to opt-in to greater or lesser risk. Make clear to them what you will do with a harassment report regarding who will have access and the degree of confidentiality you can realistically promise. If you choose to take action, we recommend asking the person providing the report what they want to happen (or not happen). They may not want you to ban the person, for example, or even approach them. In serious cases, you may not be able to grant their wish, but try to be as collaborative as possible and make sure they are aware of the potential responses and your limits. Also, you and/or your safety team should familiarize themselves with the many resources available regarding these procedures developed within other intentional communities. You are not alone in figuring out how to handle these difficult situations.

Importantly, you should also reflect on your own power within a situation, as well as the relative power your organizing team has over players. Such reflection can help you avoid unintentionally misusing that power while handling incidents. This process can be quite challenging especially for organizers who have experienced harassment and/or marginalization in their own lives; they may not be able to perceive themselves as actually having power and influence, while their players might perceive this power differential more keenly. Furthermore, such reflection can be uncomfortable, especially if it leads to reconsidering past actions through the lens of an uneven power dynamic that the organizer perceived as negligible at the time.

Importantly, power is not a bad thing. Power over can be experienced as pleasurable and even transformative in consensual situations. Unfortunately, the situations we are describing involve exerting power over others without their consent. Such incidents can occur within games, e.g., portraying characters who transgress the boundaries of others (Bowman 2025) and failing to calibrate correctly, or off-game, e.g., maligning one's character without reason, bullying, shaming, or otherwise ostracizing community members, e.g., for not engaging in the game "correctly" (Bowman 2013). Ideally, your community also fosters other forms of power: the *power to* advocate on behalf of other members of the community (Pansardi and Bindi 2021); shared *power with* (Follett 1940) and between participants; and cultivating *power within* (Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010), often called agency or empowerment when discussing role-playing games.

## 5.11 Conflicts and implementing RPGs

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As explored in Chapter 5 and 6 of *TRGD*, conflicts are often present not only in the content of role-playing games, but also within the community itself. We recommend reading both chapters to better understand how conflicts emerge in both design and implementation situations. Here, we will briefly highlight some key issues that can arise and discuss how implementation teams sometimes address them.

### a) Class and capitalism

All of us labor within a capitalist system. Some of us have greater access to financial resources and time than others. Technically imagination is free, and thus role-playing games can be a relatively inexpensive form of engagement, e.g., running a weekend larp at a reasonably priced location (Dalstål 2026) or a tabletop game in one's home over the weekend. Many game resources are available online for free, while others may require a relatively minor cost compared with other forms of entertainment.

However, role-playing games can become cost- and time-prohibitive to many players under certain conditions (Torner 2013a). Games that span several days, weeks, or months, even with breaks in between, can be impossible for players to attend due to work and care responsibilities. Conventions, festivals, and conferences can be excellent places for players to try out games with relatively low preparation or time-commitment, but can often involve costly travel and accommodation. Similarly, while many larp organizers aim to make their events as inexpensive as possible, only seek to break even and sometimes even operate at a loss, material costs still exist in terms of props, costumes, scenography, travel, food, and securing the location. *Blockbuster larps* often have special locations that are desirable also as tourist destinations (Fatland and Montola 2015). These games are often inexpensive relative to a regular vacation, with meals and lodging wrapped into the overall price, yet the price can often be exorbitant for people from lower-income communities (Ford 2020) or countries, and lead to commodification of an otherwise co-creative grassroots activity (Seregina 2019; 2022).

Games with *pay-to-win* structures allow players to pay extra money for more experience points, higher status characters, special plots, better accommodations, or other benefits. Such payment can also be in the form of time commitment and some players have greater access to spare time than others. In campaigns of this nature, veteran players who have invested more money and time are often afforded greater status in the community. While such structures are not necessarily inherently problematic, these games often further disadvantage players who are already hampered by their financial circumstances and can reinforce feelings of social stigma, low status, and shame when players compare their in-game accomplishments or capabilities with one another. *Fear of missing out* (FOMO) and desire to experience belonging can sometimes motivate financially disadvantaged players to invest more time and money into a costly game than their budget allows. If you are aiming for empowerment as a goal, such structures can subvert your intentions.

Various approaches exist to address these disparities. Some organizers offer scholarships or subsidized tickets for students or other individuals with financial needs, offsetting the cost when more resourced players pay for higher cost tickets. Sometimes people who volunteer for the event have their costs waived, but effectively become members of the organizing team at that point, as they are expected to perform additional labor. Additionally, organizers can help facilitate carpooling or less expensive shared travel options like renting a bus. Other groups keep a “larp closet,” allowing members of the community to borrow costuming and props throughout the year. Some organizations even provide full costuming to all players as part of the ticket cost. Other organizers offer multiple types of events, giving community members both higher and lower cost options.

When implementing transformative games, the issue of cost is paramount to consider, especially when working with marginalized populations with fewer resources. You will likely need to be proactive in recruiting these populations, as they may not already have access to role-playing communities due to these factors. You will likely need to absorb many costs yourself or find external funding. Some aspects of your implementation plan may need revision. For example, you may have access to an incredible location, but if your participants have no way to get there, your plan is untenable. Similarly, if you have a 4 hour game, but your participants can only play for an hour, e.g., due to work or care responsibilities, then you will need to revise your plan to adjust to their constraints.

## b) Marginalized backgrounds and access needs

Access issues are also important to consider with regard to players from marginalized backgrounds, e.g., due to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, class, religion, spirituality, age, physical ability, neurodiversity, trauma, social status, appearance, and others. Many of us experience different constellations of these intersectional factors, which affect our experiences of belonging in various situations. As an example, a White queer player from an economically advantaged background

may feel comfortable navigating a scene about political machinations; however, the same player might feel deeply uncomfortable in a cis-heteronormative romance or sexuality plot (see e.g., Paisley 2015; Wood and D 2021; Neko 2016). We each bring our unique perspectives to games, which enrich them, but also can make social dynamics challenging, especially when working with sensitive content or designs that do not consider how intersectional factors might affect game play.

While recruitment of participants from marginalized backgrounds can help diversify your player base, If the majority of your players are from privileged backgrounds, players who experience marginalization may not be certain they are truly welcome at your event (see e.g., George 2014; Kemper 2025). They may not attend even if you signal values of inclusion in your public-facing materials. If they do attend, they may experience *microaggressions* from other players, such as in-game or off-game “jokes,” inappropriate questions, or exoticising or demeaning comments about their background. Such reactions may not be intentional, but instead reflect internalized norms from society that are exclusionary, e.g., toward trans people (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

Furthermore, game content or character enactments may minimize, erase, or represent their background stereotypically (Holkar 2016; Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020); appropriate their culture in a harmful way (Kessock 2014a; Mendez Hodes 2020); or reproduce colonial structures that have historically caused harm to their ancestors (Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020; Kemper 2020). As example, designers, facilitators, and players may:

- Adopt an accent from another culture in a way that offends people, especially if intended to be “amusing”;
- Wear sacred garments from other cultures that are inappropriate for someone outside of that spiritual tradition to wear;
- Adopt or ascribe to others cultural stereotypes that have been used to oppress people from that culture, e.g., “thieves, lazy, greedy, unintelligent, predatory, evil”;
- Reduce the character to one stereotypical facet of their culture without nuance or complexity; or
- Play out stereotypical storylines that reduce the experience of people from that group to one narrative trajectory, e.g., the tragic queer character.

Unfortunately, when we have limited information about another group, we can often rely on this information to draw upon our characterization as designers, but also facilitators and players. The more research and guidance we receive from knowledgeable people such as paid cultural consultants, the more likely we will represent characters with greater nuance and psychological complexity. For guidelines on how to represent people from other backgrounds responsibly, see James Mendez Hodes’ Representation Tier List (Mendez Hodes 2022), also featured in Chapter 6 of TRGD.

Other access issues include compulsory scenes; group scenes that involve nudity, for example, may feel liberating for some players (Edman and Greip 2024), but may trigger fears around safety and make play no longer possible, e.g., for trans players (Saitta and Svegaard 2019). Other costuming concerns can arise, for example, if your larp provides costumes that are not flexible enough to accommodate people with diverse body shapes.

Such experiences may feel like a *fun tax* players have to pay in order to get access to play (Holkar 2016) and they may feel like they need to develop skills in *steering for survival* in order to navigate these dynamics (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020). They may feel excluded if cliques from the privileged group do not explicitly invite them to activities, even if they are onboarded to the event. In other words, passive forms of inclusion are often not enough to help players feel safe to be vulnerable and trust one another.

Physical access needs may arise, e.g., for people with limited sight or mobility. Additionally, players may have conflicting access needs (Stavropoulos 2022). For example, one player from an oppressed racial or ethnic background may want to play on similar experiences of racism throughout the larp that they experience in daily life, whereas another person from the same background may want to avoid that content completely. One player with anxiety might feel more relaxed with music playing during a game, whereas another may not be able to interact at all due to the background noise. In your implementation plan, you will likely have situations in which not everyone can be accommodated. You will need to make tough decisions and communicate them clearly, some of which may end up happening at the event itself if you fail to plan for it.

However, you may be able to find solutions that are workable for everyone in the situation with some compromises, e.g., only having music in certain areas of the play space. Additionally, in some lucky circumstances, you may find solutions tailored toward one accessibility need that end up being better for everyone, such as greater transparency about the structure and time table of the game (Dolk, Haldén, Isen, Peregrin 2021) or choosing an accessible venue that ends up being physically safer for everyone to navigate and easier for the caterers to access.

Some materials exist providing advice for specific populations. For example, Lea Elias Isen (2019) and Elina Gouliou have translated a document originally in Danish from the Bifrost organization offering advice on making larps more accessible for autistic participants. Suggestions include:

1. “Offer detailed information before, during, and after the event. Many autistic people are challenged by situations that differ from their routine ...
2. Avoid harsh and/or flashing lights ...
3. Offer an option to visit the location before the larp starts ...
4. Offer a room with few stimuli ...
5. Allow support persons to attend for free ...

6. Accommodate dietary needs . . .
7. Be welcoming towards stimming . . .
8. Avoid irony and metaphors . . .
9. Offer alternative ways of communication . . . [and]
10. Be open to feedback.” (Isen 2019)

However, some recommendations may differ depending on the context. For example, Elizabeth Fein’s (2015; 2018) research on a larp camp for autistic youth discusses the importance of metaphor in helping participants express important aspects of their individual experience when structured with clear rules, so these principles may be contextually dependent. Given the range of needs for neurodiverse players, we recommend asking your players what adjustments will make your game more accessible to them. Try to design options that will allow your players to avoid parts of the game or opt-out of scenes that are likely to lead to sensory overload.

Finally, issues arising from language barriers can make games less accessible in global contexts, so attention to translation is also important to this discourse (Evans 2020).

### c) Research, team diversity, and consultation

Unfortunately, these dynamics are highly complicated and no easy fixes exist in games or in life for greater inclusion. Covering each circumstance in depth is beyond the scope of what we can provide here. However, in the references for both books, we have included many sources that will hopefully guide you into deeper consideration of factors that can foster greater inclusion and make your games more accessible, e.g., when running online analog RPGs (Marsh and Dixon 2021), or considering invisible disabilities (Kim, Cook, and Foxworthy 2018).

Additionally, when working with specific populations, we highly encourage you to review recent and credible research on the needs of your group, including resources that have been developed by or in collaboration with members of that group, i.e., the common phrase, “Nothing for us or about us without us.” As with safety teams, whenever possible, involve members on your organizing team from as many diverse backgrounds as possible to help flag potential issues before they arise. On the other hand, you should avoid placing marginalized players or organizers in a position to provide labor in educating others based on their background without compensation (Eddy, Samantha 2020). If the necessary backgrounds are not reflected in your team, hire cultural consultants, sensitivity readers, and accessibility specialists whenever possible (Kemper 2018b; Saitta and Svegaard 2019; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). You do not have to figure everything out on your own, but also you should feel some responsibility for educating yourself, which might include setting aside some budget. You can also find other ways to give back to the community you are representing (see e.g., Hymes and Seyalioglu 2018).

Importantly, remember that marginalized people are not a monolith (Kemper, Holkar, Kim, Skjønfsjell Lakou, Jones, and Cheung 2018; Erlandsson et al. 2022). None of us can speak for everyone else from the same or similar backgrounds. Similarly, just because we may have experienced oppression or stigma in one area of our lives does not mean we fully understand the experiences of people with different marginalizations. Their sociocultural conditions were likely distinct and their needs may be quite different as well.

## 5.12 Summary

This chapter discussed many of the risks inherent to implementing role-playing games in general and in transformational containers in particular. These risks include matters related to physical and psychological safety, as well as inclusion and accessibility. Where possible, we point toward approaches that can help address these risks, while acknowledging that extensive discussion of such approaches is beyond the scope of this textbook. Importantly, not all risks can be mitigated, hence deciding among your team what the degrees of acceptable risk will be.

We recognize that viewing these risks in such a condensed format can feel overwhelming. None of us are perfect as humans, nor can we solve the world's problems, as much as we would like to do so. We will make mistakes as organizers. The important thing is to be open to learning, adapting, and growing in service of cultivating safer, more exclusive transformational containers.

Our next chapter will transition to talking more theoretically about the player experience while role-playing so you can better understand what might motivate your players and how they might engage with your game on a deeper level. We will also discuss skills that players can develop to optimize their experience. This information is also important for facilitators, who are, after all, often players in their own right.

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