Beyond Consent: Care Ethics in Horror Role-Playing Games

Abstract: This essay examines the ethical and psychological complexities within horror role-playing games (HRPGs), like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, through the lens of Maurice Hamington's (2024) care ethics framework. It highlights the paradox of consent in settings where participants confront deep psychological fears and unknown traumas—described as 'unknown un-knowns' (Luft and Ingham 1955) —that may emerge during gameplay. This exploration is contextualized within a broader dis-cussion of the limitations of consent-based models (West 2010, Torner 2013), suggesting that they may not sufficiently address the full spectrum of player experiences and needs. By integrating theories from recent RPG studies (Bowman 2022, Stenros and Bowman 2018) and care ethics, the essay argues for a more nuanced approach that is grounded in Hamington's triadic frame-work of humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action. This approach promises a more ethical and empathetic engagement in RPG settings, ultimately aiming to enhance player safety and satisfaction by fostering a deeper understanding and respect for the relational dynamics at play.

Keywords: care ethics, consent, shadow work, game masters, tabletop role-playing games, safety, horror genre

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Horror role-playing games (HRPGs), like Vampire: The Dark Ages (1996) immerse players in narratives that explore the macabre and supernatural. These games leverage the thrill of fear and the allure of the unknown by allowing players to confront fantastic horrors in a controlled environment. Their appeal lies in the tension between safety and risk, as players navigate through narratives filled with suspense and danger, providing a unique blend of excitement and psychological engagement. In such settings, edgeplay—a term borrowed from more physically oriented games—becomes a critical concept. It refers to the exploration of psychological bound-aries through scenarios that might evoke intense emotional responses. By testing the limits of what players can handle, Player-Characters (PCs) and Gamemasters (GM) alike gain valuable self-knowledge and insights into human behavior, but this enhanced immersion and introspection increases the psychological risks of play. Unknown or repressed traumas may be uncovered during play and while consent practices may decrease the likelihood of this occurring and other safety tools can ameliorate these traumas when they arise, we can never prevent or prepare for the truly unexpected, or what Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham called unknown un-knowns (1955).

Indeed, the recent Jungian psychologies of RPGs that present RPGs as a form of shadow work (Beltrán 2012 & 2013, Bowman 2012, Spencer 2023) imply that these episodes are not only inevitable, but potentially transformative, if they occur within a proper environment or container of mutual trust and support which allows the player to experience and process the traumas revealed through play (Baird and Bowman 2022). Of course, the reality of the shadow, the subconscious realm of unknown unknown traumas and gifts, reveals the limitations of consent-based safety approaches: how can participants (PCs & GMs) give informed consent in advance when they might accidentally stumble onto unknown traumas lurking in their shadows?

Ultimately, this article does not suggest that consent-based safety practices be abandoned, but rather that they be understood within the broader perspective of care ethics. While informed consent should remain an important criterion for any ethical transaction, negotiation, activity, or relationship, ethicists have acknowl-edged its complexities and limitations (West 2010). Likewise, care ethics has been recommended as a normative theory with the means of supplementing the epistemological and ethical limitations of informed consent (Torner 2013) by grounding ethical relationships in ongoing processes of concern and care. Therefore, this article aspires to integrate several sources from RPG theory (Bowman 2022, Stenros and Bowman 2018) into the recent work of Maurice Hamington, specifically his triadic framework of good care as arising from the interplay of humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action (2024). Furthermore, consent-based practices and care ethics will be compared by applying them to common themes in games like Vampire: The Dark Ages chronicle that can accidentally trigger players' unrevealed and possibly unknown trauma. Even when informed consent is achieved and safety tools are used, unknown traumas can be discovered which can make players feel unsafe in the gaming environment.

Consent-based practices and care ethics can be compared by imagining scenarios in which the Gam-emaster (GM) of a Vampire: The Dark Ages chronicle introduces themes of romance with political intrigue, supernatural conflict, manipulation, betrayal, and psychological introspection. Prior to the game, the GM may work to establish safety protocols including consent discussions, safety tools, and post-session debriefings to en-sure player well-being, while also setting the expectation that vampire characters can be diabolical and untrust-

worthy. However, even with such safeguards in place, the sensitivity of the topics can trigger players or cause them to lose trust or feel antipathy with others in the group, possibly due to bleed (Montola 2010; Bowman 2013; Leonard and Thurman 2018). Such situations underscore the complexities of managing emotional boundaries in RPGs and suggest that conventional consent models may be insufficient for addressing the deep emotional impacts of such narratives, highlighting the importance of incorporating care ethics into game frameworks to better support emotional and psychological well-being in games with intense, long-term engagements.

If such conflicts cannot be entirely prevented, how should they be managed? The reflexive response is to attribute such situations to a lack of communication between the GM and players, suggesting that safety tools are designed to address these issues when they arise. In this view, safety incidents are considered an epistemological failure, where informed consent was not adequately established. This could mean that either players did not express their boundaries clearly, or the GM's intentions were not sufficiently communicated. However, this raises a fundamental question: how can a player articulate their boundaries if one of their reasons for engaging in a high-risk role-playing game (HRPG) is to explore and discover these limits? Similarly, how does a GM establish informed consent when the narrative requires elements like deception, manipulation, and betrayal, which inherently involve the GM having more information than the players? Moreover, how can safety tools be effectively implemented when neither the GM nor the players are fully aware of the game's potential impact as it unfolds?

Several scholars have provided specific tools or insights for these situations. For example, Sarah Lynne Bowman (2017) applauds the shift in larp communities toward consent-based play to promote emotional and physical safety. She advocates for collaborative agreements and safety tools that foster trust and inclusiveness, while countering criticisms that these practices disrupt immersion or traditional rule systems. Likewise, Joyana Kemper (2017) insists that players from marginalized backgrounds can use larp to achieve personal healing and empowerment through emancipatory bleed and she uses her experience at a Regency-era larp to demonstrate how to safely explore themes of race, class, and gender. Meanwhile, Sergio Losilla (2024) has adapted formal risk management concepts to larp by emphasizing the importance of balancing daring play with safety through rules, trust-building, and care strategies to manage the inevitable emotional risks associated with intense role-play. Finally, Oliver Nøglebæk (2023) suggests several strategies for successful romantic role-play in larp by emphasizing the importance of Context, Consent, Communication, and Chemistry to ensure that romantic narratives are meaningful, safe, and integrated into the broader game, while also cautioning against blending in-game and out-of-game relationships to maintain community integrity.

However, most of these approaches represent the current consent-based paradigm in gaming which presumes that this type of episode is due to a failure to establish informed consent. Therefore, the standard solution is to reconsider how expectations and information are communicated throughout the game. In "Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games" (2013) Evan Torner redefines the relationship between knowledge and consent in terms of transparency and safety in RPGs. Torner begins by defining transparency as the clarity with which game mechanics, player expectations, and narrative elements are communicated among all participants. Transparency not only aids in the smooth execution of the game but also helps in building trust among players. This is particularly important in RPGs where the narrative can evolve in unexpected ways and where players often take on roles that significantly differ from their own personalities or moral views.

Indeed, Torner discusses two specific types of transparency in RPGs. Transparency of expectations is "the clear framing of what can and cannot be introduced into a role-playing session," thus it allows "players to make informed decisions about what play might look like" (15). These frames help the troupe to develop their horizon of expectation, or the types of experiences that they can reasonably expect to occur or not to occur. Most of this transparency occurs explicitly pre-play, most likely during Session Zero, when the GM pitches the game, and all participants establish their boundaries. However, Torner suggests that some of these expectations are assumed informally by the setting and genre of the game, for example "When someone runs a session of Call of Cthulhu for me, I have enough genre cues at my disposal to know that my player-character is very likely to die" (15).

By contrast, transparency of information is the "minimal plot or game elements unknown to the players and GM alike" (15). Most RPGs require some degree of surprise and the unexpected to build drama. For example, exploring a dragon's lair with an ancient map can still be thrilling because the PCs can reasonably expect that the dragon has modified her lair in the centuries since the map was drawn. Thus, a GM is expected to keep some secrets about setting and adventure and PCs are encouraged to surprise the GM and the table with novel actions and solutions. However, some secrets may be disruptive and violate the participants' right to transparency of expectations. For example, if the GM decides that a PC is secretly the villain of a campaign (or to use Torner's phrase "Surprise—you're Hitler!"), then they are guilty of asserting "the moral authority of the designer by violating both transparencies" because "players' expectations may not include emotions felt by

information withheld until a later date, and this violation is intended to prompt a perhaps-undesired moment of moral self-reflection" (16). It should be noted that Torner is not saying that such surprises should not occur, but it should be disclosed that a twist will occur even if the details, the information, of the twist will be kept secret. For example, a PC could declare during Session Zero that they want their character to betray the party at some point during play and if all participants consent to allowing this twist it would be ethical. Likewise, the PC would be allowed to keep secret the most important information regarding this twist, i.e. when, how, and why they will betray their companions.

Torner concludes the essay by asserting that the incorporation of "Transparency of expectations and information shifts power over to the players, but it also shifts responsibility onto them as well" (17). Thus, this disclosure is necessary for the participants to be informed so that an equitable social contract necessary for ethical play can be developed and to which the participants can freely consent. Torner rightly states "Transparency seems like a good place to start," but transparency is not a good place to finish (17). Reflecting on the prior hypothetical scenario, it can be observed that transparency regarding expectations and information might initially be established and renegotiated throughout a role-playing game, with consistent use of safety tools to manage emotional spill-over. Yet, despite these precautions, crises can still arise, leading to emotional distress, players leaving games, and the potential dissolution of friendships.

Why might a game experience a breakdown? According to Torner's transparency model, a player might choose to leave a game if their expectations, informed by clear pre-game disclosures about potential betrayal and the nature of the game's relationships, were not met. This could be interpreted as a breach of the informed consent they provided. However, it is conceivable that the game could inadvertently activate undisclosed or unrecognized traumas, leaving a player feeling unsafe and prompting them to discontinue participation. A player cannot disclose what they do not know and even though the GM was transparent about the possibility of betrayal they cannot simulate betrayal of a character in-game if they disclose the details of a specific betrayal to the player out-of-game. Thus, instead of attributing the breakdown solely to a failure in communication, it would be more productive to explore the deeper reasons why players act out and decide to leave. The problem is not epistemological, but psychosocial, therefore the game broke down not due to unsuccessfully negotiating informed consent among players, but because successfully ameliorating emotional bleed requires a resilient culture of care among players.

In their essay "Transgressive Role-Play" (2018), Jaakko Stenros and Sarah Lynne Bowman apply the labeling theory of deviance which assumes the "symbolic interactionist idea of the social construction of deviance" and suggest that "transgressions are usually rendered understandable when seen from the point of view of the alleged deviant" (412-413). They also warn that "play is not safe in itself, even when fully consensual" (413). This suggests that they too see certain limitations to the consent-based play paradigm. Next, they provide a thorough catalog of the different types of transgression and their motivations, some deliberately disruptive to accidental. While immersion is always encouraged, many theorists argue that a player "should manifest disinvolved involvement (Deterding 2015)," or putting enough effort into the game to show you care about it, but avoiding excessive "emotional commitment to the dramatic events or characters depicted" (418). Indeed, Gary Allen Fine (1983) refers to this behavior as overinvolvement which warns that "too much investment in a game or character may cause a psychological imbalance in the player that negatively impacts their life." Likewise, Faltin Karlsen (2013) uses the term excessive playing as a more modest label since there can be degrees of excessive play from being occasionally disruptive when excited to the "psychological imbalances" mentioned by Fine.

If we assume players can become overinvolved in the game and engage in excessive play. They might develop strong narrative expectations, and when these expectations are not fulfilled, feel betrayed by the GM and group, not by the in-game characters. When viewed from a consent-model, the PC would bear full responsibility for their overinvolvement because the expectations and information were transparent, thus it was their responsibility to either control their involvement, to communicate their bleed to the group so that safety tools could intervene, or to cordially resign from the game. Consequently, no wrongdoing should be attributed to either the GM or the group. However, this conclusion does not alleviate any lingering guilt due to not recognizing and addressing the signs of a player in distress, nor does it offer guidance for handling similar situations in the future. Caring for players, especially when they are also friends, requires a deeper, ongoing responsibility that extends beyond the boundaries established by consent alone.

Indeed, these limitations to consent have been well articulated by ethicists for several decades, particularly with regards to law and sexual harassment. In "Sex, Law, and Consent," Robin West explains how a consent-based paradigm tends to legitimize all consensual sex, exempting it from legal and moral scrutiny, which she suggests can obscure potential harms even when consent is given. West critiques the liberal emphasis on deregulating consensual sex, regardless of the context or the nature of the act. This approach, she argues, often

dismisses the complex dynamics and potential harms involved in consensual encounters, particularly when it involves power imbalances or exploitation. The article critiques this stance from various feminist and queer theoretical perspectives, which suggest that the liberal focus on consent may inadequately address the ways in which societal pressures and inequalities influence sexual interactions. These theorists suggest that the liberal emphasis on consent fails to capture the complex socio-economic and cultural forces that shape and sometimes constrain individuals' sexual autonomy, thus calling for a broader, more inclusive approach that considers the underlying contexts in which consent is given or withheld.

For example, West argues that even consensual sexual encounters can entail significant harms when they are shaped by unequal social and power structures that go unnoticed under the liberal paradigm. This includes situations where individuals consent to sex due to socio-economic pressures, cultural expectations, or power imbalances within relationships, which can distort the voluntariness of their consent. For instance, consent given under conditions of economic dependency or societal coercion does not necessarily equate to autonomy or genuine desire. Thus, West advocates for a more complex legal and ethical approach that recognizes these layers and addresses the subtle ways in which power dynamics and social contexts influence and sometimes undermine truly autonomous sexual decision-making. This approach would challenge the prevailing normative assumptions about consent and push for legal reforms that better protect individuals from the hidden coercive pressures that shape their sexual lives.

Applying Robin West's critique to Evan Torner's discussion on RPG transparency and safety highlights similar challenges within role-playing games that parallel those found in broader social interactions. West's insights into the limitations of a consent-based paradigm expose how even with clear consent, individuals may still face unanticipated consequences or harms due to power dynamics or cultural pressures that are not readily apparent. Torner's model still presumes that all players equally recognize and can articulate their boundaries and anticipate how they will react to game developments. This presumption can be problematic, as it mirrors the liberal oversight of how structural inequalities or personal vulnerabilities could affect a player's experience. For instance, a player might agree to a narrative twist, believing they are prepared, yet find themselves emotionally overwhelmed if the in-game dynamics shift their perceived role or expose them to unexpected psychological stress. Furthermore, in the case of relationship plotlines, the types of trauma that can be triggered might arise from the player having an attachment style (Kirschner 2020; Bockarova 2019) that prevents them from directly and explicitly communicating their boundaries and feelings. Likewise, the traditional GM-PC relationship is a power hierarchy and consequently the PC's communication will be inhibited by their perception of the power-dynamic (Spivak 1988). Thus, West's argument suggests that something more than consent is needed for sex, or by extension RPGs, to be safe and ethical. An ethics of care is required.

In Revolutionary Care: Commitment and Ethos (2024), Maurice Hamington presents a model of care ethics that is easily applicable to RPGs. Care ethics prioritizes interpersonal relationships and contextual morality over abstract norms, like consent. Deeply influenced by feminist theory and integrating insights from diverse cultural perspectives, care ethics challenges traditional moral philosophies that often overlook the relational dynamics central to ethical living. Although the conventional origin of care ethics is the early works by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings in the 1980s, its ideas were prefigured in the philosophical traditions of thinkers like Hume, Dewey, and Addams, and were contemporaneously explored by Latinx feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones (29). Care ethicists emphasize the importance of personal connections and the recognition of individuals beyond categorical identities, like GM or PC. Additionally, the alignment of care ethics with indigenous and non-Western moral systems highlights its universal applicability and challenges its novelty, suggesting it is a return to a more integrated ethical practice.

Hamington insists that good care involves humility, understanding, and responsiveness, which are crucial for addressing human needs. Care is not a fixed set of duties, but a responsive practice that evolves through continual learning and adaptation to relational contexts. This view posits care as a skill developed through engagement in diverse caring activities, where the caregiver's attentiveness and commitment to the well-being of others are paramount (36-42). RPGs certainly qualify as a care activity because they require building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, where GMs and PCs engage in a responsive practice that prioritizes the emotional and narrative well-being of each participant. This dynamic interaction within RPGs requires continuous adaptation and attentiveness to the evolving needs and contexts of all players, reflecting Hamington's emphasis on care as a skill developed through engaged, relational practice.

Hamington proposes a triadic model for the three phases or sub-skills that constitute care ethics as a relational practice. These phases need not occur sequentially, and they frequently overlap, thus the practitioner must learn to flex between each phase as demanded by the situation or relationship. Hamington begins with humble inquiry which emphasizes the necessity of understanding specific personal contexts and needs beyond

general caregiving protocols. By advocating for epistemic humility, Hamington suggests that caregivers must recognize the limits of their knowledge and actively engage with the cared-for to enhance the effectiveness of care. Most important, humble inquiry is not merely about accumulating information, but about deepening the relational connection through genuine understanding and empathy (33-36). The second phase is inclusive connection or the expectation that a caregiver should aspire to extend their empathic capacities beyond familiar relational boundaries. Hamington critiques narrow definitions of community and kinship that restrict the scope of care ethics and argues for a broader, more inclusive understanding of relationships. This expansive view is not only more democratic but also culturally sensitive (36-41). Finally, responsive action articulates the need for actions that genuinely address the needs of others, rather than imposing predetermined solutions. Effective care must adapt to the specific circumstances of individuals and communities, which requires flexibility that is often absent in more rigid ethical systems. This aspect of care ethics calls for a political engagement that ensures democratic participation in the determination of what constitutes appropriate and effective care (41-42).

Consent remains essential, but by placing it within the broader framework of care participants remember that consent must not only be informed, but ongoing. This approach challenges traditional views of consent as a one-time agreement, advocating instead for a model that recognizes the evolving nature of relationships and the continuous negotiation of boundaries and needs. Thus, Hamington's model of care ethics provides a more holistic framework for role-playing games than consent-based models by fostering a dynamic understanding of interpersonal relationships and moral responses that adapt to evolving situations and individual needs. By emphasizing relational practices over static agreements, this approach ensures a richer, more sensitive interaction that enhances the gaming experience, making it safer and more inclusive for all participants.

Furthermore, implicit commitments to care ethics already exist within RPG studies. In a presentation to the Popular Cultural Association, titled "Let's Play a Love Game," Sarah Lynne Bowman focuses on how understanding relationship dynamics is central to game design because conflict between characters in-game frequently bleeds into their players' out-of-game relationships. For example, designers, GMs, and PCs tend "to write characters pre-loaded with dysfunctional relationship dynamics, i.e. 'transactions' or 'games' intended to provide some sort of payoff." Thus, understanding different theories about relationships not only helps participants to create richer characters and stories, but this awareness transfers to the management of relationships among players as well as their characters. Although she never directly references care ethics, her emphasis on understanding relationships as well as her prior acknowledgment that there are limits to consent-based practices naturally lean towards a care-based approach to RPGs.

Crucial to her presentation were various psychological theories of intimacy, such as attachment theory (Ainsworth and Bell 1970, Bowlby 1983), transactional analysis (Berne 1964, Harris 2011), and drama triangles (Karpman 2007, Baird, et. al. 2022). According to attachment theory, our attachment to our primary caregivers as a child influences our attachment styles as adults. Psychologists have established five types of adult attachment: secure, anxious preoccupied, fearful avoidant, dismissive avoidant, and disorganized (Kirschner 2020, Bockarova 2019). Secure attachment means the adult trusts their needs will be met by their partner. Persons with an anxious preoccupied attachment style fear abandonment and need regular reassurance. People who are fearful avoidant fear being engulfed or smothered by their partners even though they desire intimacy. A dismissive avoidant person also fears engulfment but feels they do not need intimacy. Finally, a person with a disorganized attachment style inconsistently shifts among all the attachment styles, usually due to extreme trauma. Bowman argues that an advantage of playing RPGs is that they provide opportunities for people with insecure attachments to practice secure attachments ideally in a safe and lower-stakes environment. This practice occurs inside the game between characters, but also outside of the game between players. Likewise, the attachment style framework not only helps participants to create characters or to design plots; it also helps participants to manage interpersonal conflict between players.

Meanwhile, transactional analysis views dysfunctional relationships, or transactions, as games that people consciously or unconsciously play to meet their needs. Likewise, people shift through three ego states (adult, parent, and child) throughout the day, depending on how their needs are met. The adult self independently and effectively acts to meet their needs. The parent self may either be nurturing when it empowers others, or it may be criticizing when it coerces them. Finally, the child self expresses its needs by being playful, creative, and emotional. Like the parent self, the child self oscillates between being natural or free, as a child would behave in the presence of a nurturing parent, or it may express adaptive behavior such as rebelliousness, obedience, or pleasing, as a child would respond to a parental criticism. There is also an epistemological component in that the adult self usually has a more objective awareness of the situation whereas the child self is innocent or curious and the parental self may be caught in a presupposed interpretation of the situation. Most importantly, Bowman suggests that there is significant overlap between attachment theory and transactional analysis because they both

involve meeting our need for intimacy and are shaped by our childhood experiences.

At this juncture, Bowman applies these psychological frameworks to RPG design and play, and coincidentally uses Vampire: the Masquerade (1991) as an example. Unlike Dungeons & Dragons, VtM emphasizes intrigue and politics more than combat and exploration, thus the dynamics of the game focus more on relationships than other RPGs. With regards to transactional analysis, a major trope in VtM is the Prince's function as the criticizing parent of the PCs who are usually newly created vampires that either rebel against or adapt to this criticism. Likewise, the game uses the terms childe and sire to represent the relationship between a vampire and their creator. This relationship is rarely functional because vampires usually sire a childe for selfish reasons, including romantic ones at times, further complicating consent as a form of in-game grooming.

Bowman also discusses another framework from transactional analysis: the Drama Triangle (Karpman 2007). According to Bowman, the Drama Triangle emerges when a relationship becomes dysfunctional and is due to one or more of the participants feeling disempowered. Thus, they either become the perpetrator who attempts to exert control over others, the victim who feels helpless and unable to respond meaningfully to the situation, and the rescuer who attempts to intervene for the benefit of the other participants. Bowman reminds us how these roles perpetually appear in most RPGs since the usual dynamic is that the PCs are heroes (rescuers) who must save the innocent (victims) from a villain (perpetrator). There is nothing inherently wrong with replicating these triangles within a game, but they can be cliché and there are benefits to using this framework to reflect on game design and game play. For example, the best villains often perceive themselves to be rescuers or the all-too-common human tendency to view refugees, who are usually the victims of political violence, as invaders, i.e. perpetrating the overthrow of the dominant culture. The latter occurs frequently and uncritically in RPGs, such as when goblins or kobolds are displaced by stronger "monsters" and begin raiding human communities to survive.

Bowman concludes by sharing a variety of techniques that could be used in-or-out of game when these dysfunctional relationships occur. First, she recommends transforming drama triangles into an empowerment dynamic (Emerald 2016) by encouraging participants to adopt more empowered and constructive versions of the disempowered roles. The perpetrator becomes the challenger who contests unjust power. The rescuer becomes the coach who rather than solving the problems of the perpetrator or victim provides the insights, tools, and skills they need to initiate their own healing. Finally, the victim becomes the creator who uses their disempowerment as an opportunity to invent new strategies for overcoming the challenges that they face. Ultimately these new roles shift the triangle from being "anxiety-based and problem-focused" to "passion-based and outcome-focused."

Finally, she lists several integration practices that can be used to "facilitate reflection, processing, and [positive] transfer from the magic circle to daily life. Rather than listing specific practices she lists the major categories of practices that she and Kjell Hedgard Hugaas explain in detail in a previous article: creative expression, intellectual analysis, emotional processing, returning to daily life, interpersonal processing, and community building (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). These practices help participants to cope with both positive and negative bleed from the game and to triage any dysfunctional dynamics that are developing between participants. Indeed, in the previous article the authors provide even more resources, such as design goals for transformative impacts, a collection of safety tools widely used in Larps and other forms of RPGs, types of workshopping and debriefing activities that can occur pre-, mid-, or post-game, and guidelines for character design.

Applying Hamington's relational practices of care ethics to these psychological insights from Bowman and Hugaas provides a stronger philosophical framework for understanding RPG ethics and safety than those based solely on consent. Humble inquiry in RPGs GMs and PCs engaging deeply with each participant's unique background and expectations, fostering a gaming environment where personal contexts are respected and addressed, rather than merely applying general rules or scenarios. Inclusive connection encourages participants to expand their empathetic engagement beyond the game, recognizing the diverse backgrounds and experiences of each player which may affect their play style and interactions. This broader empathy could lead to more meaningful and supportive interactions within the game, strengthening communal bonds and fostering a supportive network that extends outside the RPG environment. Responsive action, then, involves adapting game play and interactions to meet the evolving emotional and narrative needs of all players. By implementing these practices, RPGs can transcend traditional game mechanics and evolve into dynamic, empathetic activities that prioritize the well-being and personal growth of all participants, mirroring Hamington's vision of care as a relational and responsive practice.

Would a deeper understanding of relationships within the framework of care ethics prevent crises? Possibly, although it is important to acknowledge that any form of play, especially edge play, carries inherent risks, and some outcomes cannot be entirely avoided. However, crises approached through the lens of care ethics

would be managed differently than those understood solely through the lens of consent. For instance, relying solely on verbal consent may not be sufficient. Although all parties may explicitly consent to certain content or scenarios, it is always possible that unspoken pressures influenced their decisions. In RPGs, as in life, relationships are inherently complex, and consent given under such circumstances may not always be fully free of pressure or expectations. Adopting a care ethics approach would involve a more nuanced form of inquiry, such as asking open-ended questions to better understand each participant's perspective on the narrative and their comfort levels. This could include private discussions to identify any relational concerns or past experiences that may be relevant to the subplot, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of each participant's boundaries and needs.

Likewise, a designer or GM might approach the inclusion of dysfunctional relationships in a game with greater caution, particularly when using these dynamics to create drama. In a hypothetical scenario, the manipulative actions of an NPC—who employed tactics such as gaslighting—could be unsettling and due to bleed lead to mistrust and heightened paranoia not only for a character, but also for a player. When these crises emerge that are best mitigated with a more intentional practice of responsive action. While the GM would routinely check-in with players at the end of each session, a more proactive approach would involve additional follow-up conversations away from the game table. This additional step could provide players with an opportunity to disclose any concerns or personal experiences that may mirror the narrative dynamics or allow other players to voice observations of changes in their fellow participant's behavior.

Furthermore, the most effective way to prevent such crises may be to foster strong, inclusive connections with each player and amongst the group. In the context of RPGs, this means cultivating friendships and shared interests outside of the game itself. While this approach can be more aspirational than practical, it highlights the need to be attentive to potential signs of burnout. If a GM experiences fatigue or feelings of disconnection from the group, it could indicate an underlying issue within the game dynamics. Taking breaks, switching roles, or engaging in other activities as a group outside the game can alleviate these pressures and prevent over-involvement. Establishing healthy friendships beyond the game environment helps minimize the risk of transgressive behavior stemming from fears of losing out-of-game relationships if a player decides to leave or is removed from the group.

Most importantly, consent can fail because participants may either be unaware, unwilling, or unable to share relevant traumas that can be triggered during play. Transparency of expectations and information is useful and crucial, but it is impossible for any person, let alone an entire troupe, to be completely transparent. There will always be unknown unknowns. Obviously, participants can commit to shorter, more casual games with clearly outlined expectations and content to minimize the likelihood of encountering the truly unknown. In these cases, which may be the majority, consent may be enough to ensure safe and ethical play. Consequently, participants would be responsible for their own communication failures or transgressive behavior. However, this does not invalidate the importance of a care ethos and the longer a group plays together the more likely they will bump into hidden traumas or encounter bleed-in to the game due to stressors away from the table. In these cases, the careful GM should see a player's transgressive behavior in-game or distress out-of-game as a sign that the player needs a more specialized level of care, not punishment or exile.

In conclusion, this essay underscores the inherent limitations of relying solely on consent-based models in horror role-playing games (HRPGs), where the psychological stakes can unpredictably evoke deep-seated traumas and emotional responses. The exploration of such games, like Vampire: The Dark Ages, often blurs the boundaries between player and character, demanding a dynamic and contextually aware approach to ethical gameplay. Maurice Hamington's care ethics, with its emphasis on humble inquiry, inclusive connection, and responsive action, provides a compelling alternative that aligns closely with the needs of HRPGs. This framework not only addresses the relational dynamics of gameplay but also adapts to the unique psychological landscapes of individual players, fostering a more supportive and engaging environment. The case study illustrates the potential for emotional fallout when reliance on traditional consent mechanisms fails to capture the complexities of player interactions and the unexpected emergence of personal trauma.

By implementing a care-based approach, GMs and players can create a more resilient and empathetic space that respects individual vulnerabilities and promotes deeper communal engagement. This shift from a static consent model to a dynamic care-oriented framework encourages ongoing dialogue, sensitivity to context, and a commitment to adaptively respond to the evolving emotional and narrative needs of all participants. Ultimately, integrating care ethics into RPGs enriches the gaming experience, enhancing safety and satisfaction by recognizing the profound impact of interpersonal relationships and the unpredictable nature of psychological exploration within these games. Such an approach not only mitigates the risks associated with deep emotional engagement but also elevates the moral and ethical standards of role-playing as a formative, communal activity.

Fortunately, this paper is not the first to insist upon the importance of care in the context of RPGs, which suggests that a paradigm shift from consent-based play to care-based play is already underway.

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