Philosophies of Psychological Safety in Analog Role-playing Game Discourses

Abstract: This discourse analysis outlines various philosophies of psychological safety in tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), freeform, and live action role-playing games (larp). The corpus of literature related to RPGs includes 79 popular and 26 scholarly sources, including published presentations, interviews, articles, chapters, and books. The sources are primarily informed by the Nordic Larp discourse (Stenros 2014) and adjacent communities, but the corpus also includes texts related to indie and traditional tabletop RPGs, indicating communication and shared practices between these communities in recent years. The article emphasizes play groups, designers, and theorists who value the psychological safety of the participant group over rules, consequences, narrative concerns, individual play experiences, and personal immersion. Based on years embedded within these discourses and engaged in safety work for larps, the authors highlight several main themes related to psychological safety, including the complexity of safety; safety as a perception rather than a fact; safer vs. brave spaces; safety vs. support vs. risk mitigation; and safety and transformation. The article also presents differing philosophies on where responsibility should lie for safety: with the individual player, the play group, the organizer, the designer, or the community as a whole. The authors present these philosophies in their own model, Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk, which includes play that falls within one' comfort zone (low-risk), occurs in one's growth edges (medium-risk), and pushes toward one's hard limits (high-risk). The article concludes with some examples of consequences of vague or inadequate safety structures in RPGs.

Keywords: safety, risk management, risk assessment, zone of proximal development, role-playing games, consent, calibration, responsibility

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the discourse around psychological safety in analog role-playing games (RPGs) has increased over the past several years (Mochocki 2020), so too have different philosophies emerged on how best to establish and maintain a perception of safety in participants. By philosophy, we mean "a theory underlying or regarding a sphere of activity or thought" (Merriam-Webster 2024a); in this case, we aim to uncover the theoretical precepts that underlie discussions and procedures around safety in RPG communities, whether implicit or explicit. Our use of the term "safety" is pragmatic; to our knowledge, it is the most commonly used placeholder term to refer to strategies for addressing or mitigating psychological harm in these groups.

Based upon an analysis of key texts within the popular and academic discourse and our own ethnographic experiences as participant-observers within these discourses, this article will outline some of the key philosophies to provide a broad overview of themes and perspectives. The corpus of literature related to RPGs includes 79 popular and 26 scholarly sources, including published presentations, interviews, articles, chapters, and books. For brevity's sake, we reserve detailed examples for later work and instead focus here on overall themes.

While the texts surveyed primarily arise from Nordic larp (Stenros 2014) and adjacent communities, we will also connect these themes to concepts and practices within indie tabletop scenes that have now become common in traditional RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). Similarly, practices originating within more "experimental" larp scenes have crossed over to more traditional larps, e.g., Nordic-inspired safety practices in White Wolf's Mind's Eye Theatre publications (Bowman 2017b; Brown and Koljonen 2017); safety team implementation at the German larp *Drachenfest* based on articles on Nordiclarp.org (Weber, Donker, and Heinrich 2020); and safety strategies such as calibration (Most Improbable LLC n.d.) and the the Okay Check-In adopted at traditional boffer larps such as *Dystopia Rising* (Dystopia Rising New York). Therefore, such discourses should be understood as informing one another, with much more crossover and communication occurring recently than in previous years.

Notably, these discussions align with recent more widespread conversations around consent -- e.g., the #MeToo movement -- which have recently eclipsed the level of subcultures and entered the mainstream through viral online phenomena. These discussions have enhanced understanding and language around consent. The urgency of the #MeToo movement can be seen as escalating the need for such discussions with the understanding that issues around predatory behavior and sexual assault demand the immediate attention of the community and should not be overlooked or readily dismissed (Nilsdotter 2014; Brown 2017a; Hosmer 2017;

Ritchee 2017; Algayres 2018; Harder 2021). Such safety conversations are also present in related groups such as BDSM/kink, a subculture that has notably informed RPG design within the Nordic larp discourse and beyond (Harviainen 2011; Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020; Grasmo and Stenros 2022). While this article acknowledges these wider trends, we will limit our scope to discussions within RPG communities and academic circles.

This article features a discourse analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 2022) briefly covering the following key framing concepts: safety as complex; psychological safety as a perception rather than a fact; safer vs. brave spaces (Friedner 2019); safety vs. consent vs. calibration (Brown 2016; Bowman 2017a; Koljonen 2020); safety vs. support vs. risk mitigation (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Murphy 2023; Rikard and Villarreal 2023; Losilla 2024); and safety's relationship to transformative play (Baird 2021; Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Furthermore, the authors will present a theoretical model for understanding psychological "zones" of safety, challenge, and risk with regard to play experience, player choice, and design practices.

The article will emphasize debates around responsibility for safety with regard to both content and interaction, e.g., the degree to which responsibility lies with the individual players, the play group, the organizers, or designers (Kessock 2014b, c). The authors' starting point for this discussion is the baseline of "good faith." We place this term in quotation marks because it has been notoriously complicated to define (see e.g., Santoni's 2010 revision of Sartre). "Good faith" can also be difficult to locate in a person's intention; consciously, someone may not have the intention to cause harm, but less conscious thoughts or urges may prevail in the moment, e.g., desires. Here we adopt a common sense definition of "good faith," i.e., wanting to foster good will in a community, and thus not intending to harm, abuse, or neglect others. Of course, different philosophies exist regarding what "good faith" looks like in the context of role-playing practice, with some players adopting a rather legalistic notion of what counts as transgression and others having a wider definition that assumes good faith even when harm repeatedly is enacted by the same individual. Importantly, even when a player operates with "good faith" without overtly malicious intentions, their impact can still be experienced as harmful, as commonly stated in the phrase, "Intention does not equal impact." (For a general discussion, see Rikard and Villarreal 2023).

As a delimitation, this article does not focus on outright predatory, abusive, or neglectful behavior on the part of bad actors, except insofar as these behaviors can inform safety practices, e.g., the practice of flagging, in which players are asked to inform the organizers about concerns about other players for safety reasons (see below). Predatory behavior deserves an article in its own right and is beyond the scope of this discussion; we recommend reading other sources in the discourse for more information (see e.g., Nilsdotter 2014; Brown 2017a; Hosmer 2017; Ritchee 2017; Algayres 2018; Harder 2021; and Pohjola 2021).

Notably, similar work analyzing safety discourses has been conducted recently by two scholars in the field, both of which favoring an historical approach. White (2020) examined discussions around safety in the Forge indie tabletop community from 2003-2013, highlighting specific concepts emerging from these debates, as we will discuss below. Alternatively, Mochocki (2020) focuses on the "Nordic-American" larp discourse from 2010-2016, highlighting trends associated with three main periods. The first is circa 2010, when the emphasis was on relying on safe words, embracing risk, and placing responsibility on the recipient of an action to state their boundaries, i.e., on the individual player. The second is circa 2014, when the emphasis shifted to encouraging players to check-in with each other, mitigate risks, and share responsibility. The third is 2016 and beyond, when the emphasis shifted to off-game calibration discussions, consent-based play, "avoiding all risks," and the responsibility placed on the initiator of an action (Mochocki 2020), i.e., a member of the play group.

While we disagree with some of Mochocki's analysis, we do agree that key shifts in the discourse have occurred over time (and continue to occur). However, as active participants in these discussions, we see the discourse as far more fraught, the discussions less linear, and the voices more plural than presented in Mochocki's work. While the articles he discusses assert certain principles, they do not in any way reflect all design and organization practice at the time, nor do they reflect the public response to such articles, which was often contentious. Also, in none of these articles will you find the sentiment "avoid all risks" to our knowledge, but rather practices to minimize harm and maximize the benefits of consensual play. Regardless, we find Mochocki's future forecasting an accurate portrayal of the current state of the larp safety discourse and practice surrounding it (as of 2024):

> Various larp circles [will choose] such configurations of safety mechanics that best reflect their creative vision and safety rhetorics. They will be (as they are) running the gamut from "radical immersionism" to "radical safetyism," with inevitable disputes and conflicts. There will be larps opting for maximum safety like *New World Magischola* (2016), developing ever-expanding codes of conduct, protocols, best practices, and trained counselors,and aiming to normalise their safety culture worldwide. And there will be larps that consciously adopt a higher risk-level and accordingly reduce safety infrastructure, like Kto ty? 2 (2018), whose only mechanic was safe words. (Mochocki 2020, 195)

The following article details the philosophies underpinning these various approaches as we see them, providing theoretical language to map out the range of perspectives.

1.1 Safety, Risk, and Harm

Play often creates situations in which risk is present and boundaries require negotiation in some manner. Risk is defined as "exposure to the chance of injury or loss" (Merriam-Webster 2024b), which in our analysis refers not only to physical consequences, but also to the potential for psychological distress as a form of injury and loss of the perception safety as a threat to feelings of belonging. Risks can include (qtd. from Bowman et al. 2024):

1. *Emotional flooding*, when a participant is cognitively incapable of processing further information due to being psychologically overwhelmed (Leonard and Thurman 2018);
2. *Dysregulation*, when a participant's psychological well-being falls out of balance, which sometimes leads to distress or difficulties effectively interacting with others;
3. *Activation and/or triggering*, when a situation activates a survival response in a person, e.g., fighting, flight, freezing, or fawning. This activation may or may not be the result of the triggering of previous trauma (Brown 2014), as our nervous system can become activated in any situation in which our basic human needs (Glasser 1998) feel threatened; and
4. *Harm*, when a person or a situation inflicts harm on another person, whether the harm is purposeful (Brown 2017a) or accidental (Freidner 2020).

As risk is often desirable in play (Apter 1992; Poremba 2007), especially in Nordic larp and related communities that often design larps based on challenging themes and difficult experiences, (Montola and Holopainen 2012), we do not view risk as negative, but rather inherent to the form. Furthermore, "positive negative" experiences can be unpleasant or even disturbing in games and yet highly valuable learning experiences (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010), causing *positive discomfort* (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018), such as increased perspective-taking and empathy for others. However, some role-play can cause harm to participants, e.g., in-game bullying behaviors (Stenros 2015; Trammell 2023) justified as "only play," cultural appropriation (Kessock 2014a; Mendez Hodes 2020), or stereotypical representations of marginalized perspectives the players do not share (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021), sometimes called *identity* (Nakamura 1995), *misery*, or *dark tourism*.

This article will not address at length the tensions regarding the relative value of risky play (and to whom). Instead, we take a practical approach that assumes players will likely engage in some degree of risk and thus require ethical safety practices, whether minimal or extensive. Thus, the discourses we examine focus on the implicit or explicit negotiations of safety within role-playing groups that enable players to feel secure enough to engage in the content at all or to walk away from the experience feeling that safety within the container was maintained (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). The article will conclude with some consequences of vague or inadequate safety structures, including the potential for harm or neglect; how status might impact one's comfort with self-advocacy in RPG communities (Algayres 2019a); as well issues around survivor bias (Lockwood 2021) in communities' perceptions of the effectiveness of their own safety practices.

While this article will emphasize analog RPGs, notably, the majority of these philosophies are expressed and disseminated in digital environments, including articles, comment sections, social media discussions, magazine articles, and other digital artifacts. Furthermore, analog RPG communities communicate mostly online in the digital age, and much tabletop and larp also takes place online in new hybrid forms. Thus, advances in safety in analog play are paradoxically linked with online engagement in which player communities become more aware of key concepts from online environments, e.g., safety tools, calibration, consent practices, facilitation recommendations.

Furthermore, discussion of larger social movements involved in discussions of safety and consent will be elided -- e.g., #MeToo, trigger warnings, diversity, equity, and inclusion, etc. -- as the emphasis is on these specific RPG subcultures. However, suffice it to say that consent has become an important topic in the zeitgeist in recent years, to the extent that many democratic societies can be said to be experiencing an awakening of sorts around boundaries, autonomy, and communication, e.g., the growing use of intimacy coordinators in filmmaking for erotic scenes (Villareal 2021).

These discourses are particularly important in that they interrogate issues of power in interpersonal dynamics, particularly for marginalized groups who have often been subject to verbal and physical oppression: forms of violence that can be direct, structural, or cultural (Galtung 1969; 1990), or symbolic (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). To assert bodily and emotional autonomy in these contexts is, in many cases, a radical act, and one that is still contentious in many societies. However, what we consider reactionary responses to safety culture also

dominate the discourse, e.g., research studies aiming to prove that trigger warnings cause harm in academic environments (see e.g., Jones, Bellet, and McNally 2020; cf. Bowman 2020), rhetoric that justifies exposing students to potentially triggering material without informing them rather than engaging in trauma-informed practices of pedagogy. While we find studies such as these problematic both methodologically and epistemologically, a thorough critique of such views and the evidence claiming to support them are beyond the scope of this study.

Instead, this article will emphasize discourses favoring progressive attitudes toward RPG safety, i.e., play groups, designers, and theorists who value the psychological safety of the participant group over rules, consequences, and individual play experiences (see e.g., Koljonen 2020; White 2020). By progressive, we refer here to the ideological aspiration to co-create societies that improve peace and justice for all people within them, not just some. Although more individualistic, legalistic, or mechanistic views of safety and consent are certainly prevalent in these discourses, such beliefs are beyond the scope of this work (cf. alternative views expressed in debates in White 2020). In other words, the interlocutors within this discourse all believe that consent and safety for all participants are important, see e.g., "Players are more important than larps" (Koljonen 2020), but have different views around how to establish and maintain them.

Finally, while the article will cite various publications relevant to the topic, it takes a bird's eye view of these concepts rather than integrating in-depth quotes in the interests of length. Similarly, the article will not dive into overarching theories of good faith, the psychology of risk in play (see e.g., Apter 1992; Montola 2010), or other relevant concepts. While such a theoretical framework is indeed valuable, we reserve it for later work.

1.2 Positionality and Reflexivity

The authors of this article are authors within these safety discourses and members of the communities surrounding them, i.e., Nordic larp and adjacent communities, indie RPGs, and others (see e.g., Hugaas and Bowman 2019; Bowman and Hugaas 2019, 2021). As such, we are not unbiased; on the contrary, our work should be viewed within the lens of participant-observer ethnography in that not only have we been deeply embedded in the theoretical discussions surrounding safety in games, but also have many years of experience performing safety work at larps and consulting on safety for various digital and analog RPG projects. Thus, while this paper aims to present each philosophy fairly, we will assert our own views at times in this paper when relevant to the analysis. We will signal such assertions with statements like "We believe…" in order to signpost them clearly.

Our overall goal in this work is to acknowledge the complexity of psychological safety and highlight the various philosophies present in discussions surrounding RPGs, rather than to strongly argue our own point of view or assert the importance of one topic over another. Thus, this work is intended to provide an overview of the landscape of these views that is mainly a descriptive synthesis, including our model of risk-taking in RPGs. Our aim with this overview is to establish the current state-of-the-art to support ongoing theorization and design around psychological safety.

2. SAFETY IS COMPLEX

When first approaching the topic of the importance of psychological safety when designing, facilitating, and playing role-playing games, some generalizations are necessary. Examples include:

- "Players are more important than games."
- "We should try to avoid triggering people, but if a trigger happens, we should have safety structures to help support them."
- "Safety mechanics help players feel safer to engage."
- "Consent is simple. Yes means yes. No means no."

While these statements are generally true, exceptions are always present. Players may have psychological needs that are not able to be met by the community, e.g., the need for aid from a mental health professional. Some triggering situations might actually lead to empowering situations for players provided they receive the support they need to work through them. Safety mechanics may make some players feel less safe, e.g., if they are afraid to act at all for fear of causing harm. Consent is especially complex. Some people are socialized to say "yes," when they mean "no," for example. Other players may prefer not to have others check for consent before acting, even if such a practice means higher risk. Higher status players may feel more comfortable using safety techniques than lower ones, even unconsciously, as they have more influence within the community and more people to support them (Algayres 2019a).

Thus, we believe it important to acknowledge that safety is complex. Groups can have baseline principles such as those mentioned above with the understanding that edge cases will always exist and no one principle extends to everyone. However, in our view, edge cases do not negate the need for certain safety principles, but rather require more nuance and specificity when considering how to proceed.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AS A PERCEPTION RATHER THAN A FACT

Safety is a universal human need, along with freedom, fun, belonging, and power (Glasser 1998). As such, safety can sometimes be necessary for the other needs to be met, for example needing to feel safe in order to have fun or feel free enough to take risks. However, a perceived lack of safety can also interfere with getting the other needs met, for example not being able to experience empowerment due to feeling unsafe. Thus, discussing safety is a charged topic and may provoke triggers or other forms of activation; everyone involved in the discourse is often arguing in favor of one or more of their human needs, and may perceive another person's need for safety as threatening to theirs or as an obstacle to meeting their other needs. A common example is players feeling like their creative freedom is threatened by the existence of safety mechanics, or a player asserting their safety needs in the moment (White 2020).

Some groups may think that if they engage in certain safety practices, they no longer need to be concerned about safety. In truth, psychological safety is a perception, meaning that it exists to greater or lesser degrees in each person based on their unique subjectivity. Some individuals may never feel truly safe in a group setting. Others feel safe as a default. Some feel safer if certain policies are in place, such as safety mechanics, off-game consent negotiations, codes of conduct, etc. Others feel less safe when such guidelines are explicit, meaning that practices that make a game more accessible for some players make it less accessible for others. Furthermore, no space can be made totally safe, hence the use of safer spaces to refer to environments where safety culture is explicitly emphasized.

Psychological safety is conditional, can shift over time, and requires maintenance. Some players may feel safe for an entire game because a safety mechanic has been introduced in a workshop, whether it is used during the game or not, simply because issues of safety have been placed in the foreground and stated as important (Pedersen 2015). Others will only feel safe if that mechanic has been used during play and they have witnessed others respect it. Some players might feel less safe when they first begin a game then they do after three days of close play after trust has been established. Thus, psychological safety shifts, which makes it particularly difficult to find "one size fits all" approaches.

When players feel safe, their vigilance tends to decrease, meaning the warning systems that keep many of us alert and on guard in social situations. These systems are natural and purposeful, as they intended to keep us safe. However, they can be detrimental to full participation in a game if they make it difficult for a player to feel comfortable taking risks or fully embodying their character (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Thus, a certain lowering of vigilance can be helpful, which is one of the functions of alibi (Montola 2010), which allows us permission to behave in-character in ways that might otherwise draw scrutiny, censure, or prove otherwise embarrassing (Deterding 2018).

However, if a player suddenly feels unsafe after decreasing their vigilance, they may experience harm. Such harm can be difficult to repair in the moment, especially if it connects to previous experiences of harm, e.g., marginalization, trauma. Reestablishing safety requires maintenance of the container of play to create a secure enough (Winnicott 1960) structure for repair to occur (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Different philosophies exist on how to approach such ruptures, as we will discuss below.

Ruptures can be frightening on many levels. For the person experiencing the loss of safety, they can feel isolated, exposed, vulnerable, and even betrayed. For the person who behaved in a way that caused the rupture, they may be afraid to be branded "unsafe," or experience guilt, shame, and confusion. Importantly, such ruptures may or may not be the result of actually unsafe behavior. For example, in a larp where yelling is clearly labeled as an "ingredient" in the themes of the game (Lauzon 2017), a person getting triggered by yelling does not necessarily mean the other players caused them harm. However, it can mean the triggered player is experiencing overwhelm, cognitive dysfunction, and anxiety, which can make it difficult to continue to play, much less feel safe doing so (Brown 2014).

In general, these complexities around safety are not entirely solvable, especially when different players have different safety needs. However, if groups continue to learn, discuss, and grow in our understanding, they can try to be explicit about:

- The philosophy of the game designers and facilitators regarding safety practices, ideally using established language;

- The practices the group will commit to doing in terms of establishing and maintaining safety, e.g., engaging in consent negotiations before introducing risky content; and
- The practices the group will not commit to doing in terms of establishing and maintaining safety, e.g., no breaking game immersion for off-game negotiations.

Such explicit specificity helps establish a robust *social contract* within which play can exist that feels supportive of players (Baker 2006; Montola 2012; Kessock 2014b, 2014c).

4. ZONES OF SAFETY, CHALLENGE, AND RISK

Different philosophies exist regarding safety, challenge, and risk.[1] One argument states that while safety can allow players to feel comfortable engaging, too much comfort might make it difficult for players to remain engaged, as they may become bored or timid. Thus, a certain degree of challenge is often considered necessary for engagement, i.e., a balance between risk and reward, triumphing over adversity -- or *fiero* as Jane McGonigal (2011) describes it. Challenge in this sense may refer to cognitive, game-like challenges such as displays of skill or strategy, or may refer to venturing away from one's comfort zone to various degrees.

All play requires some degree of risk. As mentioned above, people are often in a state of social vigilance, as aberrant behavior outside of the norm may incur social costs (Goffman 1959; Deterding 2018). Thus, when participants decide to play, they are taking a risk that others will consider them a "bad player," "doing it wrong," or will somehow punish them for transgressive behavior. Furthermore, they must trust others in that the more risks they take, the container will be able to support them so they will feel secure enough to engage (Bion 1959; Winnicott 1960; Riesenberg-Malcolm 2009; Bowman and Baird 2021). This trust requires a certain amount of vulnerability, as play often asks people to bring forward parts of themselves or humanity that are not often revealed, or behave in ways that contradict how they see themselves.

Furthermore, for individuals with psychological sensitivities such as social anxiety (Algayres 2019b), post-traumatic stress disorder (Brown 2014), depression, and other types of neurodiversity (Dolk, Haldén, Isen, and Peregrin 2021), the risk of harm may increase with greater vulnerability. These risks are also made exponentially more likely by physical stress on the body, i.e., lack of nutrition or sleep; overstimulation (Leonard and Thurman 2018). Such risks may be temporary, such as a short dip of depression after a larp (Bowman and Torner 2014) or long-term emotional impacts, i.e. falling in love with a co-player due to emotionally intense relationship play (Harder 2018).

The following model provides a spectrum approach between more comfortable and riskier play, using both numbers and colors to indicate the level of risk, with Zone 1 (Green) referring to one's comfort zone, Zone 2 (Yellow) referring to one's growth edges, and Zone 3 (Red) referring to high-risk brink play. These zones can be used to describe a design strategy, e.g., aiming for a specific Zone for players, with the understanding that individual players differ in terms of boundaries. They can be literal zones in the larp (Bowman 2018), in which specific types of play are allowed or forbidden. They can also refer to a player's individual state at any given time, or their play preferences. These zones are not to be confused with the Stoplight safety mechanics, which use Red, Yellow, and Green as ways to signal to players to stop their action entirely, proceed more carefully, or continue with enthusiastic consent.

4.1 Zone 1 (Green): Comfort Zone

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

1 Section 4 on Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk has been reproduced from (Bowman et al. 2024) with permission from the editors.

preparing players for sudden rapid escalations that can occur through emergent play, when players improvise and the story evolves in its own direction (Bowman 2018; Torner 2024).

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

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

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

4.3 Zone 3 (Red): Brink Play

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

The riskiness inherent to such play can provide an adrenaline rush or other forms of emotional flooding that are experienced as pleasurable and sometimes "positively negative" (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010; Montola and Holopainen 2012). While such experiences can be unpleasant or even disturbing in games and yet highly valuable learning experiences, causing positive discomfort (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018). In this case, Red Zone experiences can be high risk, but also high reward for players consenting to take part in them. Furthermore, some players may not perceive themselves to have a hard line, or may feel highly tolerant toward brink play, making it easier for them to engage in such scenes than for others. Thus, our intention is not to emphasize low risk play as more preferable when considering frameworks for growth, but rather to emphasize that higher risk means a higher possibility for the sorts of unintended consequences mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

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

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

Note that even if you design for a specific Zone, they will be different for each individual player and circumstance. Easy, comfort zone play for one person may feel incredibly risky for another person. Furthermore, a player's zones may change over time and may depend upon who their co-players are. What might feel high risk (Zone 3) at the start of the larp might become a growth edge by the end (Zone 2) or be less challenging when playing a trusted friend. Alternatively, a player may realize half-way through a game that content they may have been willing to experience initially now feels higher risk. In other words, one's growth edges might expand or shrink over time as a result of experience. Furthermore, some players may never want to engage in brink play or explore their growth edges.

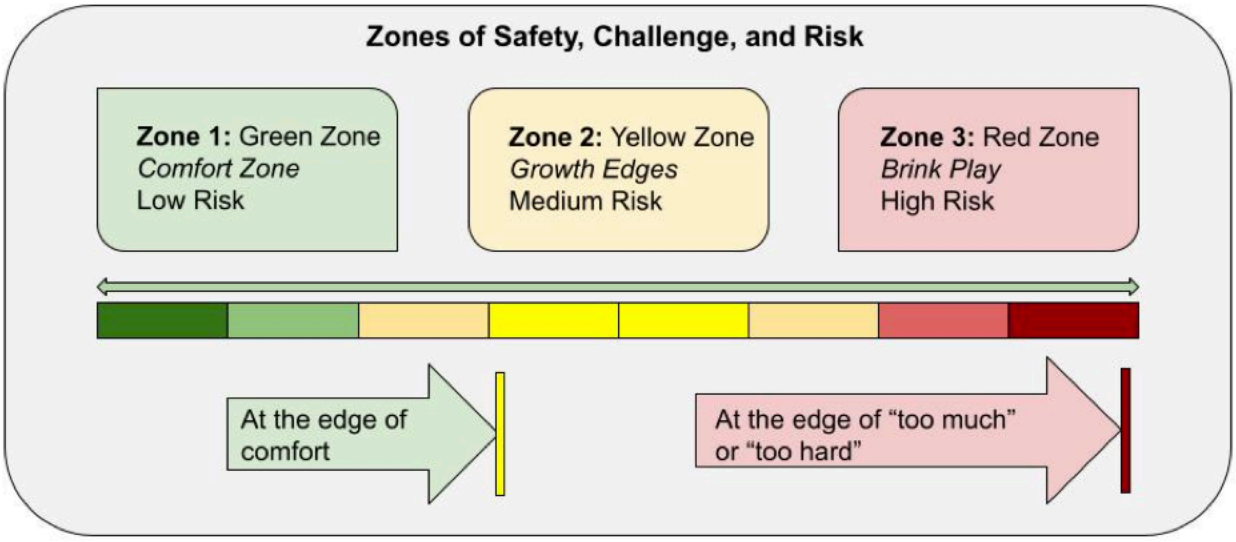

Figure 1: The author's model of Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk. Green Zone (Zone 1) play is in one's comfort zone and low risk. Yellow Zone (Zone 2) play is on one's growth edges, which transitions from the edge of comfort, and is medium risk. Red Zone (Zone 3) is brink play (Poremba 2007), and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

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

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

- **Individual experience:** Each player's subjective experience falls somewhere along the spectrum at any given time. Thus, zones can be highly different from player to player and from moment to moment. Also, players may have different triggers or topics that cause activation, making it difficult to plan content in advance for all safety situations.
- **Interpersonal play,** in which two players create a Zone together through calibration, e.g., agreeing to tone down physical aggression so that one player's experience does not exceed Zone 2, or deciding to play a relaxing friendship dynamic to remain in Zone 1.
- **Group play**, in which a group of three or more players calibrate to a certain Zone through calibration, e.g., deciding the baseline limit of sexual touch within the group will be kissing to remain in a particular player's Zone 2, or deciding all sexual activity is permissible, even if such play is within Zone 3 for some individuals.
- **Entire game**, in which the designers or organizers decide the types of play, content, and/or hard limits for the game, e.g., "This game will not feature sexual or violent content" in order to remain in most people's Zone 2, or "This game will push players to their physical and emotional extremes" in order to encourage Zone 3 play.

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

5. SAFER VS. BRAVE SPACES

A common debate within these discussions establishes a dichotomy between "safer spaces" vs. "brave spaces" (Friedner 2019; Cazeneuve 2020). One argument states that if a group focuses on trying to emphasize making the activity as safe as possible, it can inhibit players from taking risks, i.e. behaving bravely. In terms of the Zones, this concept would translate to the larp being established in such a way that players only feel encouraged to explore their comfort zones, whatever that means to them, and not dare to venture into exploring their growth edges, much less their brinks. This discourse reflects conversations in other communities, e.g., in social justice (Arao and Clemens 2013) and BDSM/kink groups.

However, safer space discourses insist that players must first feel safe in order to take risks in a responsible fashion. For example, simply including a safety mechanic such as the Okay Check-In in a game might lead to braver play, as players know psychological safety will be taken seriously (Pedersen 2015; Koljonen 2020), even if the mechanic is never used. Furthermore, more safer space discourses also assert that no experiences can be truly safe, as risk is often present, hence the term safer. As such, unfortunately, we believe that the arguments regarding these distinctions can become muddy and the dichotomy can seem false, as the two groups are essentially arguing for the same thing: enough safety to feel brave and take risks. Furthermore, as members of the discourse, we are concerned about a brave space discourse leading to less shared responsibility among the group and thus a container that is more easily ruptured or is less secure.

The objections in brave space arguments often focus upon specifics that have led authors to feel less brave, and thus center around practicalities, e.g., less safety mechanics vs. more; removing sensitive content vs. working with it in play; players who have experienced harm protected from further contact from the person in question vs. the two players being encouraged to try to work things out in conversation (Freidner 2020). As in the last example, brave space discourses often emphasize the messiness of human interaction and the freedom to make mistakes and still feel held by the container.

However, the terms "brave vs. safe" are less useful from our perspective than concrete discussions around the practicalities around fostering such a space. For example, consider a workshop that has three exercises in which players practice saying no, negotiating consent, and setting boundaries, but features no exercises in which they practice saying yes, asking for the play they desire, and successfully agreeing upon a satisfying course of action. In this case, some players may feel perfectly safe taking risks, whereas others may feel safe, but not brave, as their concern for crossing the boundaries of others inhibits their perception of choice.

This inhibition can become an issue for players, especially in terms of increasing vigilance as described above. If players are unable to surrender to the experience, they may have trouble emotionally or intellectually engaging with the game. On the other hand, if safety structures are not established and practiced, other players may not feel safe engaging at all. While such differences are not possible to fully resolve, in the above example, one approach could be to include workshops on both safe -- e.g, "how to say no" or "how to deescalate" -- and brave play, e.g. "how to say yes" or "how to invite greater intensity."

5.1 Brave Spaces, Fear of Ostracization, and Flagging

From our perspective, inherent to anxieties expressed in brave space discourses is a fear of transgressing and becoming ostracized by the community or labeled a bad player (Friedner 2020). As belonging and safety are both universal human needs (Glasser 1998), such fears are understandable. Examples of such ostracization occur in *flagging* processes, in which players are asked to flag players with whom they do not wish to play with for various reasons, which often leads to flagged players being disallowed from engaging in various ways ranging from the safety team issuing a restriction on who they can and cannot play with or explicitly banning them from the game completely. Players may also "not win the lottery," meaning they were not selected for casting for unknown reasons.

Flagging processes vary. Imprecise flagging processes conflate players who engage in good faith with offenders, e.g., the same flag meaning "I dislike this person"; "I don't want to play closely with this person, but they are otherwise a safe player"; "I cannot attend if this person is present; and "this person has caused harm" (Brown and Teerilahti 2024). In these situations, concerns around flagging emphasize how, for example, a person may receive a flag because their ex-partner does not wish to play closely with them or they are "socially awkward," which may get conflated with being a safety risk. More sophisticated flagging processes distinguish between these situations, e.g. yellow, orange, and red flags to indicate levels of discomfort with the player in question (Wood and Holkar 2024).

The debates around flagging are examples of the muddiness of the brave space discourse. For example, proponents of brave space often advocate for less safety rules as they may feel inhibiting for the player, causing

them to worry about causing harm or facing unwarranted ostracization. In the case of flagging, for example, proponents of brave space might assert that players should learn how to be around people who make them uncomfortable for various reasons, i.e. take responsibility for their own emotional reactions.

However, from our perspective, when the risk of real harm is present, the safety rule itself is not the issue, but rather the tension between players as *engines of desire* (Pettersson 2021b) wanting to get their deepest wishes fulfilled (Nephew 2006; Sottile 2024) vs. the need for the perception of safety in the community for all participants. Thus, the practicalities of safety practices become objects around which players in the discourse try to negotiate such tensions, which are not easily solvable by binary dichotomies such as safer vs. brave spaces.
Furthermore, the brave space discourse, which has emerged since 2013, can lead to marginalized participants needing to further educate people with privilege in order to preserve their sense of safety and ability to make mistakes, adding additional labor (Zheng 2016) or having to hide evidence of any harm that transpired in the name of keeping a space "brave" for privileged participants, especially if no actions have been taken to assume responsibility for what transpires (Arao and Clemens 2013).

As described by White (2020), this dichotomy is similar to discourses within the Forge indie RPG community. In his *Sex and Sorcery* supplement, Ron Edwards (2003) developed lines and veils. A line refers to agreeing upon a line the group will not cross regarding certain content, e.g., sexual abuse; this tool is similar to the X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013), although its existence has caused consternation in at least one high profile member of the Forge (White 2020). A veil refers to content still occurring in the game, but fading to black and thus remaining non-explicit.

Later, a similar dichotomy to safe vs. brave space arose from a forum conversation between Emily Care Boss and Meguey Baker in which Baker (2006) coined two terms: "I will not abandon you" (IWNAY) vs. "No one gets hurt" (NGH) (White 2020). "I will not abandon you" is similar to the brave space in that it involves "pushing buttons" and potential crossing lines through game content, with an emphasis on collective care within the group while such topics are explored and "played through" (Baker 2006). Ostensibly, this approach does not assume the player is seriously triggered and thus unable to play through the scene (Brown 2014). "No one gets hurt," on the other hand, is more similar to the safe space in the emphasis on drawing lines and not crossing them (Baker 2006).

In our model, an "IWNAY" game or player focuses on red and yellow zone play, whereas a NGH game or player focuses on yellow and green zone play. Again, both approaches require a level of responsibility among members of the group for maintaining psychological safety; "I will not abandon you" is not the same as "Toughen up, it's just a game." We will discuss responsibility in more length later in this article.
Thus, the concept of creating a brave space may seem more appealing and less restrictive, but may have unintended consequences if not scaffolded well. Of course, such issues can arrive in so-called "safe spaces" without similar practices around facilitation and responsibility, as the perception of safety can be seen as an illusion (Rikard and Villarreal 2023). As a result of these issues, Rikard and Villarreal (2023) have thus proposed a third category, *spaces of acceptable risk*, which adopts a *risk mitigation* perspective to performance spaces, including larp. The next section will discuss risk mitigation in more depth.

6. SAFETY VS. SUPPORT VS. RISK MITIGATION

In our experience in these discussions over the years, we have noticed that some interlocutors in the discourse object to the term "safety" itself, considering it a misnomer for what, for example, safety team members actually do. Also, as mentioned above, since no space can ever be considered completely safe, some community members find it misleading, as it can be perceived to place responsibility on the group for a safety that cannot be secured. We have heard the term *support* floated instead. The concept of support is similar to Winnicott's (1960) notion of a *secure-enough* holding environment; infants do not require a perfect caregiver, but do only one they perceive to be holding them securely enough. Similarly, the container (Bion 1959; Riesenberg-Malcolm 2009) of role-playing communities are not able to protect all members from all risks, but rather to be perceived as secure-enough to support participants to engage in play (Hugaas and Bowman 2019).

Other members of the discourse prefer terms like risk mitigation and risk management when conceptualizing and discussing issues related to safety. Arising from safety practices in other domains such as airplane manufacturing (Losilla 2024; Sinking Ships Creations 2020), this philosophy emphasizes all the possible hazards -- or sources of direct harm -- that could occur, assessing them with regard to their likelihood and severity to cause harm (Losilla 2024). Harm is defined as something we do not wish to happen, which leads to consequences, which can range from "damage to reputation, loss of friendship, or even boredom" (Losilla 2024). Consequences are often weighed with relation to how difficult recovery from the harm will be. Likelihood is usually

quantified on a scale when assessments take place, e.g. on a Likert scale from improbable to frequent. Mitigation refers to trying to reduce likelihood, severity, or both, which can occur through removing the hazard if possible; adding, removing, or modifying aspects of the original plan; or informing participants in an active way (Losilla 2024; for examples in educational RPGs, see Roda Martínez 2025).

Different strategies exist with regard to practice (cf. Murphy 2023), but the general idea is to attempt to mitigate these hazards to the degree possible before play even occurs. For example, the larp company Sinking Ship Creations (2020) has compiled freely accessible materials and policies with regard to risk mitigation, describing an ACT process: assessing the risk, taking control of the hazards to the extent possible, and taking action to mitigate. Part of the assessment process is the "Taxi Cab Standard," in which hazards are assessed based on the question, "Is this riskier than a cab ride to our event?" They promise to notify players before the event if the answer is "yes" with regard to potential hazards occuring within the larp (Sinking Ship Creations 2020). Controls in this case can, for example, take the form of rules prohibiting or limiting certain risky behavior (Losilla 2024). Important to this process also is deciding whether or not the risk is worth accepting at all, a question which often does not have easy answers (Losilla 2024). Also important is the establishment and maintenance of trust, both cognitive and instinctive (Losilla 2024). Transparency about potential hazards during the sign-up process and workshopping safety techniques can help build trust, but so can taking action to mitigate hazards as they arise during the play process. Avenues of care and responsiveness are emphasized as central to maintaining trust (Losilla 2024).

From our perspective, some issues can arise regarding risk mitigation language, even if unintentional. First, much of the risk mitigation discourse uses examples of physical safety, as those are often emphasized within other fields, and they are easier to quantify in many cases than psychological safety (Losilla 2024), e.g., "It takes X amount of months for a broken arm to heal." However, as most of the RPG safety discourses emphasize psychological safety, using physical safety examples can feel reductionist.

Secondly, the risk assessment process of ranking types of harm according to severity and frequency might lead to an intellectualization or distancing from types of psychological harm. For example, while it might be unlikely that a player experiences a traumatic moment in a larp, that does not mean the hazard should not be prioritized. Similarly, just because certain risks exist out in the world, for example when taking a taxi cab, does not mean they are not worth addressing with participants if they are also present within a gaming space. Furthermore, risks are often inherently individualized; the risk of taking a taxi is far greater for vulnerable populations, for example, than for people from privileged backgrounds. Therefore, no "one size fits all" approach can help assess specific risks. Generalizing certain experiences as "unlikely" can actually feel minimizing for people who perceive these situations as high risk.

Finally, in positioning risk mitigation as an alternative to language around safety, proponents may unintentionally communicate that previous safety practices are inherently flawed and thus unnecessary to continue. For example, if a safety tool is presented as having a risk involved if people misunderstand its signals and therefore "failing," that might have the (likely unwanted) effect of leading people to think the tool is not useful at all and thus remove it. As safety is complex, difficult, and work-intensive defense mechanisms can arise regarding it, with some organizers preferring to use safety structures to simplify their workload. In other cases, as adding too many safety techniques might increase cognitive load for participants and become ineffective, some organizers prefer a more minimal approach. In our view, if a safety tool or technique is removed, a plan must be in place to address whatever hazard it was meant to address.

Thus, adopting a risk mitigation approach should lead to more work on the part of organizers, not less. Carefully cataloging and ranking all possible hazards present in one's event are extensive processes. Furthermore, neither brave space nor risk mitigation approaches are replacements for previously useful safety measures. As Rikard and Villarreal (2023) assert:

> The call to action inherent in the origins of "safe space" terminology was meant to inspire each of us to actually take action. So, remember that if something cannot physically be done, it can't be accomplished. Can you get up and do a "safe space"? No. However, there are lots of doable actions that can be set in place to achieve the aspiration. Setting up clear communications around expectations and risks is doable, and one step towards achieving the aspiration of establishing "safe" or "brave" spaces by creating spaces of acceptable risk. We identify an intention—a safe[r] space—and select tactics upon which we can act to achieve said intention (13).

The following sections will discuss examples of actions that organizers can take to foster safety, as well as explore the question of responsibility.

7. SAFETY AND TRANSFORMATION

We have argued that a certain degree of safety should be established when designing for transformative impacts (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Bowman et al. in press), e.g., when designing to encourage experiences of growth, learning, personal and social development. The goal of such experiences is to have *breakthroughs*, in which aspects of one's self that were previously stuck are able to move and grow, e.g., one's capacity for intimacy, one's worldview, one's understanding of a particular socio-political situation, etc. However, we acknowledge that transformative impacts can happen outside of contexts that feel safe, for example a person feeling greater empowerment after choosing to leave a game in which they felt unsafe, or experiences of trigger leading to important insights and empowerment. The point here is that designers and organizers can be judicious in their design choices to encourage the type of safety they hope to foster by explicitly including practices that encourage play within the particular Zones and, more importantly, explaining such design choices to the players, i.e.:

- "We will use the Okay Check-In mechanic to assist if someone is feeling emotionally flooded and less able to play (intervening in Zone 3 to encourage Zone 1 or 2)" or
- "We will not have a debrief, as this game is intended to be light and emotionally relaxed (encouraging Zone 1)"; or
- "We will use only escalation and deescalation mechanics in play, with the goal of players escalating as much as possible into brink play (Zone 3)."

Each of these design choices is valid and will serve certain players' needs. Communicating these choices ahead of time will help players manage expectations and figure out if the game is for them.

Zoning can also be established as physical spaces within a game to curtain off certain kinds of play and make them opt-in (Bowman 2018). Examples include having areas in larp corresponding to established content and expectations of tone, e.g.,:

- **Green Zone**: Light role-play, no violence or aggression allowed.
- **Yellow Zone:** Some violence allowed, no killing or torture, "stage fighting" with light physical touch.
- **Red Zone:** Explicit violence and rough physical play encouraged.

Zones can also occur in tabletop or online play, e.g. pulling a player into a different physical or virtual room for a scene, having breakout rooms in Zoom or Discord for different types of Play, etc.

Again, as all players' limits are different and can change over time, these zones do not assure a certain type of psychological experience or level of risk. A calm role-play scene in the Green Zone in which a person describes their tragic backstory involving the death of a parent can still potentially trigger a player by reminding them of their own loss and shift them into Zone 2 or Zone 3 (see Clapper 2016). Furthermore, such shifts can still involve powerful breakthroughs that the player later considers transformative.

Establishing the degree of challenge helps players better understand what is expected within certain scenes and games, as well as offering some reassurance that one's boundaries ostensibly will be respected. That being said, any guideline or tool can be used inappropriately or coercively by bad actors. Discussion of such inappropriate uses is beyond the scope of this current article.

8. SAFETY AND RESPONSIBILITY

As Mochocki (2020) notes, a common question regarding issues of psychological safety in role-playing games is: "Whose responsibility is it to maintain safety?" Different philosophies abound.

8.1 Individual Responsibility

Some people feel that the most important step is individual awareness of one's needs and self-care (Dalstål 2016), positing that players will be unable to self-advocate if they are not checking in with themselves. This philosophy may sound obvious, but actually such self-awareness can be difficult while role-playing. Firstly, one's character may have more flexible boundaries than the player does; deeply immersing into one's immortal desensitized *Vampire* character may mean not stopping to check-in with the player's own physical and emotional limits. Secondly, players often seek intense emotional experiences during play, even in Zone 1, in which they may forget to eat, sleep, take breaks, or monitor their own emotional limits. In other words, too much of a good thing is still

too much. Thirdly, some players will put the needs of others before their own, due to social conditioning or a sense of duty toward the game and co-players. This tendency might lead players to stay in scenes or situations for too long that are emotionally overwhelming or feel psychologically unsafe, i.e. playing abuse dynamics that are too realistic and experiencing trauma triggers. Thus, practicing self check-ins and self-advocating is crucial to any safety process.

This philosophy often leads to design and participation principles in which players are required to state their needs:

- **Verbally**, e.g., off-game calibration, Lines and Veils, Traffic Light, Script Change (Sheldon 2021), deescalation phrases, approaching the safety team for assistance;
- **Non-Verbally**, e.g. X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013), Lookdown (Koljonen 2020)
- **Physically**, e.g. leaving, "The Door is Always Open," "Vote with Your Two Feet"

In extreme versions, it expects players to manage their own off-game emotions and never be upset about things that happen in-game, e.g., "It's just a game," "Maybe this game isn't for you," "In-character does not equal out-of-character."

Another common phrase with regard to individual responsibility is, "Role-playing should not replace therapy" (Koljonen 2021). While this statement is likely true, it assumes that players have access to reliable and quality mental health care and that they should somehow be able to compartmentalize psychologically powerful experiences between "ones that are suitable for leisure play" and "ones that should be reserved for therapy." Realistically, as role-playing can be an emotional extreme sport, psychological challenges will emerge regardless of such edicts. The individual responsibility philosophy requires players to handle such responses on their own without involving others in the group in- or off-game.

8.2 Play Group Responsibility

The degree to which the group is responsible for psychological safety is an ongoing discussion. Inherent to the statement "players are more important than games" is group responsibility to care for one another when emotional challenges emerge (Brown 2016). Group responsibility can be fostered implicitly, e.g., social norms around offering care, or explicit, e.g., mechanics, calibration procedures, safety teams. Much of the safety discourse in the last decade has emphasized group responsibility along several dimensions, including:

- Inclusion with regard to queer identities, race/ethnicity (Cazeneuve 2020; Kemper 2018), ability (Kessock 2017), and class (Ford 2020)
- Responsible representation and avoiding stereotypes (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021)
- Consent negotiations (Brown 2016; Bowman 2017a; Reynolds and Germain 2019); etc.
- Debriefing (Fatland 2013; Stark 2013; Bowman 2014)
- Aftercare (Friedner 2020)

These topics are especially important when considering participants from various marginalized backgrounds who might be impacted negatively by various vectors of discrimination (Kemper 2018; Sihvonen and Stenros 2019; Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020).

Again, methods of showing concern for the psychological safety of others can be:

- **Verbal**, e.g., asking about a player's off-game wellbeing, processing emotional experiences with after the game through debriefing, helping a player find a way to re-engage with play after feeling overwhelmed;
- **Non-verbal**, e.g., using the Okay Check-In mechanic (Brown and Koljonen 2017); and
- **Physical**, e.g., bringing a player to the off-game safety room, offering snacks or physical comfort if desired, etc.

The philosophy behind such actions is that empathy, care, and support should supersede any aesthetic or game-based considerations. On one level, this philosophy may seem obvious, but these explicit practices have been developed to counteract traditional styles of play that focus overly on a culture of "hardcore," in which players are expected to experience the game at whatever level the group or game mechanics decide is normative. As role-playing is often an emotional extreme sport, gamers have developed social systems in order to address

issues of overwhelm and triggering, which in turn can help players feel more confident engaging in the group in the first place.

The flipside of this philosophy is that boundaries of care are not easily established. To what degree should players be expected to abandon their own needs and desires for play in order to tend to others? Such expectations can lead to resentments if care is not provided in a manner that players find sufficient, perhaps rightly so. However, this philosophy has led to many questions around ways to calibrate the group so that everyone gets their needs met, if such a thing is actually possible. Furthermore, questions arise around adequate psychological care. For example, should players be responsible for caretaking others if in a state of psychological distress? Or should such responsibility rest on the shoulders of the organizing team?

8.3 Organizer Responsibility

This philosophy puts the onus on organizers for providing adequate psychological care. The definition of adequate may differ from person to person, but at minimum, organizers should be willing to listen to feedback, iterate accordingly, and show concern for the feelings of players. Other practices include:

- Accessibility considerations (Isen 2019; Marsh and Dixon 2021);
- Off-game safety rooms;
- Safety teams, ideally with organizers familiar with Mental Health First Aid or other crisis management training (Brown 2017c; Weber, Donker, and Heinrich 2020) who remain off-game, or sometimes play a light role
- (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017; Atwater and Rowland 2018);
- Safety structures around the game, such as safety workshops, de-roling, and debriefing (Brown 2018);
- Safety mechanisms to use during the game, such as safe words and mechanisms for calibration, etc.

Safety practices can occur in various ways:

- Verbal, e.g., stating values and safety procedures on the game's website; communicating safety culture during workshops; providing clear instructions on how to ask for and receive care;
- Non-verbal, e.g., using the Okay Check-In during play; indicating friendliness and openness to feedback through body language;
- Physical, e.g., having a visible safety presence available such as a safety team member in the off-game room or available via phone or walkie talkie; offering care, food, and other physical support as needed; etc.

The shift toward organizer care has meant that player needs have become more foregrounded, sometimes ahead of aesthetics, creative vision, big plots, etc. Players who may not have felt comfortable at previous larps or even left sometimes feel safer returning, as a sort of humanistic Larp Renaissance is occurring in terms of content, themes, but also safety.

On the other hand, organizer safety can suffer immensely with an overemphasis on organizer responsibility, leading to trauma and burnout when organizers experience emotional and physical exhaustion (Stark 2014, 2016; Lindve 2019; Holkar 2022; Bailly 2023). Organizers often make games as passion projects for little money or even taking a loss, putting in "infinite hours" with no limits in sight (Pettersson 2021a). With this surge of interest in player safety and boundary setting, organizer safety often falls to the wayside. When safety workers are present, their labor, which usually takes place in the background, is often overlooked, leading some team members to feel exhausted and invisible (Berthold 2024). Meanwhile players can come to have a customer service mentality in which they expect to be entertained and have a perfect experience in what is essentially a co-creative activity. Thus, individual and group responsibility philosophies are sometimes positioned in opposition to organizer responsibility as a means to promote respect and sustainability in game communities.

8.4 Designer Responsibility

Finally, some philosophies of safety emphasize the need to consider it through every step of the design process. These practices are especially important when integrating sensitive content or cultural backgrounds outside of one's own, especially when embodying the stories of marginalized people, ideally in consultation with experts. Such practices include:

- Transparency of themes to allow participants some degree of informed consent (Torner 2013), e.g., with trigger warnings, content advisories, or ingredients lists (Lauzon 2017);
- Responsible representation and cultural consultation (Kangas 2015, 2017; Mendez Hodes 2019, 2020, 2022; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021);
- Integrating minority voices into the writing team (George 2021; Higgins 2022) and accurately portraying minority settings (Beltrán 2015);
- Other forms of ethical content management (Kessock 2014b, 2014c)

Designer responsibility as a philosophy also emphasizes how safety structures should be considered throughout game design, not only in organizing/implementation instructions, for example publishing consent checklists (Reynolds and Germain 2019) or detailed instructions on ways to engage with horror responsibly (Kim 2022), e.g., in *D&D Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* 2021) (Gorgone 2021; Hall 2021). When safety recommendations are built into the design of a game, they communicate to the players that safety should be a priority aside from any genre, setting, or aesthetic considerations. This shift is quite different from past role-playing games in which the materials were often created by people with privilege who may unconsciously be engaging in vilifying or exoticizing the Other (Said 1977). Such practices can make gaming spaces feel unsafe or even hostile for minorities, despite well-meaning efforts of inclusion.

The designer responsibility philosophy is quite difficult in that it asks creators to interrogate their work, their motivations for creating, and who their intended audience actually is. It leaves the door open for critique when works, genres, and design tools inevitably contain implicit biases, requiring a stance of decolonization (Kemper 2020) that can be difficult to adopt. Such critiques can lead creators to be afraid to produce anything or to become unhelpfully defensive; when these situations escalate, they can also lead to conflicts and schisms within gaming communities (Bowman 2013). However, as role-playing is such a powerful, embodied medium that can make stories personally relevant to people in ways other media cannot, many creators keenly feel this responsibility to produce games that are as inclusive of a plurality of players as possible.

8.5 Community as a Whole Responsibility

As role-playing is a co-creative medium, it seems natural to conclude that all parties within a gaming community are thus responsible for safety -- individuals, groups of players, organizers, and designers -- as some theorists have argued (see e.g., Kessock 2014b, 2014c). In this case, the immediate community in question may consist only of a small number of players present at the event, e.g., a single tabletop group, a small larp, or a faction within a larger larp, all players within a large larp. However, the community can also be said to encompass players outside that event, e.g., players on social media or at conventions who have not attended a specific larp or played the tabletop game in question, but engage in conversations relevant to these activities. As an example of the latter, a player may flag a participant in one group based on their behavior online or their actions at another larp, demonstrating how these smaller communities overlap.

Ultimately, safety is a hot button issue. People become easily activated when discussing it and when witnessing how messy it can become in practice. Therefore, it can be tempting to fall into one camp or another -- either accepting over-responsibility or deflecting responsibility onto another -- when the role-playing situation is vastly complex in actuality. Designer responsibility will fall flat if individual players rely on stereotypes in their portrayals. Group responsibility will fail if one player demands all the emotional resources of their co-players. Individual responsibility fails if a game system and/or organizing practice allows for abuse of power and unmitigated bleed (Bowman 2013, 2015). No easy answers exist on how best to balance the need for safety and the desire for exploration between these many interconnected parts.

9. CONSEQUENCES OF VAGUE OR INADEQUATE SAFETY STRUCTURES

Some players have never felt unsafe at a game or never heard of someone else feeling unsafe in their particular community. Common phrases abound such as, "We don't have those kinds of problems here" or "We solved those issues years ago." Such individuals may thus wonder, "Why should one bother with all this specificity around safety?" Status and social capital can impact the way safety is experienced in such groups, as players with more status are likely to have greater support systems in place to smooth over any rough patches with regard to safety. Status can also impact who feels able to use safety mechanics or introduce certain types of play (Algayres 2019a).

Other players have never felt completely safe at a game and have heard numerous accounts of safety issues within their own communities and others. From these perspectives, a more relevant question might be, "Why role-play at all?" Indeed many such individuals do leave these communities, feeling burned by a promise of inclusion and empowerment that was never fully realized. These voices are often not heard due to survivor bias (Lockwood 2021): in this case, the people who persist in an RPG group are able to shape the narrative of that group's story, while the perspectives of people who left because they felt unsafe often remain silent and unheard. Veterans of these communities and engage in this discourse are all survivors, often without realizing their privilege in this sense.

How a group decides to allocate the responsibility for safety will vary from community to community, but if the group takes safety seriously, vague or inadequate structures will not suffice.

10. CONCLUSION

Regardless of approach, the greater specificity a group can detail around expectations of responsibility and safety practices, the more players likely will feel safer in such groups. Such structures also require maintenance; lip service toward safety is not enough to create a secure enough container for play. It is our view that the higher the risk, the greater the need for a strong, secure container in which players feel supported when challenging themselves, but we know different philosophies exist. The important thing is that safety practices are maturely considered and communicated to players in a clear and timely fashion. Meanwhile, the conversations around safety philosophies will no doubt continue and evolve.

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