Editorial
Special Issue on Consent in Analog Role-Playing Games

WELCOME TO ISSUE 16 OF THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ROLE-PLAYING!

In this special issue, we explore special topics related to safety and consent in role-playing communities. Formal definitions of play (e.g., Huizinga 1938, Caillois 1961) highlight its voluntary character and its constitution in the choices made by players within the structures of a game. A fundamental connotation among the ambiguities of "play" (Sutton-Smith 1997) is that it is, at root, harmless. There is even a motto among some European live-action role-play (larp) communities that larp is safer than everyday life (Grasmo 2015). But role-play experiences do not always honor both player agency and preference, and safety in play is never fully guaranteed (Trammell 2023). While safety tools, manuals, consent sheets, and debrief scripts are becoming more mainstream in role-playing games, the underlying question of whether they can actually limit possible harm remains unanswered. When risk itself lies at the core of gaming and role-play experiences, we must question even the possibility of real safety in these experiences and whether or not players and participants understand what experiences to which they consent.

All games involve some form of uncertainty, potential loss, or the need to make decisions with imperfect information (Caillois 1961; Costikyan 2013). This element of risk contributes to the challenge, excitement, and engagement that games offer. Strategic uncertainty, through the actions of other players or through mechanized randomness, is a hallmark of many traditional games. In tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), as Torner (2014) argues, "uncertainties in games affect what both the designers and players can expect from play, and how knowledge of and about the game might be co-constructed." Whether the risk of a negative outcome is due to a dice roll in a TTRPG, the consequence of poor choices around in-game resources allocation, or a fellow larp participant withholding important information about their motives, the element of risk often drives the action and engagement with role-playing games. Additionally, the choice to participate in these games at all still bears a level of risk. Role-playing experiences especially often involve social interactions that can carry risks related to reputation, social status, and emotional investment (Elias, Garfield, Gutschera, & Lam, 2012). Even solo games involve the investment of personal time and energy and the risk that this investment will not yield a satisfactory, enjoyable, or worthwhile outcome.

In addition, many players come to role-playing experiences, especially larp, seeking growth and transformation through risk (Baird 2021). They want to pursue places of discomfort and tension within the container of the game to explore or play with self conceptions of identity, capacity, and desires. Positive-negative experiences are often seen as undesirable, especially in role-playing, but many players actively seek them out (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola and Holopainen 2012). Although the container of the game is separate enough from their real life to mitigate some of the dangers in their exploration, they are still seeking risk and ambiguity. This echoes the developmental and educational theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978) who claimed learners had to be willing to move into zones of proximal development (ZPD), where their own capabilities would ultimately fall short of the task at hand. While Vgotsky calls for the presence of a skilled other to support and model new ways of proceeding to the learner, they are ultimately in capability free fall as their own skills fail them and they have to adapt. In this issue, Bowman and Hugaas' (2024) model of zones of safety, challenge, and risk highlights zones of challenges as invoking Vgotsky's ZPD, in which area for growth is not synonymous with a hard limit or line.

Complicating safety and consent further is the ways in which conceptions of safety are deeply personal. Reynolds and Germain's (2019) "Consent in Gaming" text claims that "You decide

what is safe for you." This personal understanding of safety is nuanced by Bowman and Hugaas (2025) who argue safety should be understood more as personal perception than fact. This muddles the promise that safety tools can seem to offer, as one player may not consent to what another player desires to feel safe in a game. Standard TTRPG safety practices often revolve around the X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013), in which players point to a card with an "X" written on it during moments of discomfort, and Lines and Veils (Edwards 2005), in which participants discuss in advance the kinds of content they would prefer not to see in the game, or would like faded to black. However, the Luxton Technique, a method of open discussion about traumatic material as it arises in play, was developed in part due to a player who was triggered by the usage of the X-Card and Lines and Veils safety tools themselves and would not play at tables that used them (Lee 2017). Lee felt that the "no questions asked" aspect of the X-Card replicated systems of gaslighting and silencing often imposed by abusers. When safety tools can procedurally cancel each other out, are they actually useful? Can a gamemaster or larp runner truly make a game "all things to all people," especially given that it is predicated on improvisation and player reactivity?

1. A NONIDEAL ETHIC OF SAFETY AND CONSENT IN ROLE-PLAYING

As these questions continue to emerge, conversations around safety and consent in broader role-play and game studies would be served by pursuing a nonideal theory of consent and safety. Influenced by the work of philosopher Quill Kukla (2021) on around sex and intimacy, a nonideal approach to safety and consent recognizes that the concept of full autonomy of a human person is ultimately an unachievable idea in a real world with power imbalances, held identities, and shifting contexts. Kukla says, "Our capacities are finite and vulnerable, and we are all caught up in complex situations that limit and shape our ability to act and to grasp our own possibilities and their significance" (2021, 271). When our own agency is dependent on context and impacted by vulnerabilities, thinking of safety along a binary as simply something someone does or does not have risks turning it into an abstraction, rather than a felt experience.

Players often articulate that undertaking risk is worth being able to play. In this issue, Femia (2025) analyzes the Reddit posts of players describing "Nightmare Game Masters" and categorizes these behaviors and their impact on players. The posts show that many players who tolerated nightmare gamemasters pointed to the fact that they were so desperate to play, they were willing to endure behavior they hated. Their own desire to play and experience tabletop gaming, compounded with (perceived) limited access to multiple gaming opportunities, led them to willingly participate in campaigns they may not have felt fully safe in. Femia argues that this context means gamemasters are all the more responsible for being transparent around how they run their games and determining player expectations of them, claiming the burden falls on them to help ensure a sort of informed consent. However, the question of whether the players' agency in these games was actually truncated still lingers. Locating the onus of responsibility for safety solely on the game masters also ignores and undercuts the agency of the players. They wanted to play and the context encouraged them to settle with less than positive. Unanswered is whether or not players would have preferred to have never played at all.

At the same time, a nonideal approach to safety and consent also encourages better examination and reflection of the ways power is claimed, distributed, and affirmed in role-playing experiences. Drawing on Dashiell's (2020) work, in this issue, Tremblay (2025) assesses how authority is claimed in tabletop role-playing games, highlighting that players exhibiting "rules lawyer" or "gamesplaining" behavior, in which a player emphasizes written rules over the spirit of the rules, often gain rules expertise simply through the confidence in their own claims. Other players validate their claims to expertise and then power and authority is redistributed back to them. On closer examination, many rules lawyers believe they are supporting the other players at the table, better enhancing their play and improving the game for everyone. Tremblay cautions that unquestioned authority and expertise in other players often leads to a feedback loop in which players are implicitly consenting to the behav-

iors and agendas of the dominant players. Yet this questioning of authority in the name of scrutinizing power distribution at the table could lead another player to claim this disempowering environment as unsafe.

Safety and consent are ultimately the result of players and game runners acting *with agency*. Kukla (2021) argues that agentic activity cannot be pinpointed solely to one instance. Safety cannot be guaranteed by the implementation of a single tool nor does consent given in one minute indicate it will exist in the next. Agency, a fundamental design component of games, is part of an ongoing balance of relationships of the person to their partner, the person to the broader world, and the person to themselves, which is commonly explored also regarding sexual relationships (Nguyen 2020). In this issue, Spencer (2025) advocates for an implementation of a care ethic in role-play experiences. This care ethic emphasizes ongoing relationships and is not delimited to establishing boundaries *before* play and what cannot be done in a game, which echoes these claims regarding agency. Care ethics, according to Spencer, calls for all participants in all roles to be concerned with one another's experience. Players check in on game masters around burnout even as game masters seek to ensure in-game material does not trigger a character based on out-of-game experiences. Utilizing a care ethics framework around safety and consent is similarly nonideal in its recognition that participants and game runners cannot fully understand and control the entire context of the gaming experience. What happens after a role-playing experience and how the relationship is supported is just as important as what occurs during it. Similar to Kukla's (2021) description of ethical sexual partners, care-ethic gamerunners and participants would focus on consented to activities, but also "respect and respond to one another as centers of desire, purpose, identity, and action, working to enable and support one another's agency, and avoiding undercutting it," (Kukla 2021, 273).

Kukla (2021) also points out that exploring and discovering new spaces of enjoyment are also essential elements of flourishing. In this issue, Bastarrachea Magnani's (2025) work on bleed and sense of self uses a Jungian framework to understand how archetypes can influence participants. The article discusses how players create a transpersonal self that is both rooted in the individual's conscious and unconscious desires *and* the collective roles and meanings archetypes bring with them into characters. These external aspects are also held alongside the player's sense of self, creating an RPG identity that may allow them to explore and better understand themselves by tapping into the collective unconscious through meaning rich Jungian constellations. Bastarrachea Magnani says, "Figures and characters are Egos emerging in the magic circle of RPG and present[ing] themselves constelled and can be seen as personified, enriched complexes in the RPG Self," (2024 pg###). Players can go beyond their own limited frameworks and still experience personal expansion through these familiar archetypes.

This process preferably occurs when individuals have few, if any, internal or external limits on their agency. It also often happens by not allowing previous experiences or assumptions to limit their current actions and choices. In other words, players and participants often do not know what they do or do not like until they try it. One of the authors of this editorial can attest that while she would normally never have consented to harsh rejection or heartbreak in role-play, when the circumstances arose in the larp, she found it incredibly cathartic and ultimately positive. Playing in this space falls into Bowman and Hugaas' (2024) "red zone" where there is high risk, but also high reward through brink play and possibly intense learning experiences. Kukla (2021) names reliable exit conditions as essential in experimentation and Bowman and Hugaas are careful to articulate higher risk play's potential for unintended consequences; however, neither article denies the importance or worth of these less safe experiences.

2. SCAFFOLDING SAFETY

As futile as the pursuit may be, the desire for clear-cut lines, absolute articulations of consent, and foolproof practices to guarantee safety comes from a desire to build richer and healthier experiences and communities. A nonideal approach to safety will hopefully add depth to the conversations around consent and its complexity. However, the recognition that providing a consent checklist at the begin-

ning of a game cannot guarantee a positive experience should also not derail a commitment to these practices.

The image of scaffolding offers a helpful framework to approach safety and consent practices. Scaffolding refers to the loose structure erected around the edifice of a building as it is being constructed or repaired. It is attached to, but not a permanent part of the building. The scaffolding is meant to help ensure better quality construction, allow workers to navigate the building with more ease as they work, and prevent injuries and accidents for both those inside and outside of the work site. It is a non-permanent structure that takes its shape from the building, but is not a part of the original structure.

The term is a familiar one, especially to educators, as it was utilized by famed educators Nikolai Bernstein (1947) in the 1940's and popularized by Jerome Bruner (1970) in the 1960's to refer to staged and supported teaching and learning to support students in acquiring new skills (Shvarts and Bakker 2019). Within the field of role-play studies, Steven Dashiell explicitly called the communication of game mechanics athe field of role-play studies, Steven Dashiell explicitly called the communication of game mechanics a "scaffolding discourse" (Dashiell 2020). It serves an essential purpose in animating the action of the game along and the more it occurs, the more the game moves forward. Dashiell is also clear that scaffolding discourse is about conveying information "to" someone, not being in a communicative exchange with them. He compares it to the concept of report talk, established by Deborah Tannen, which stands in contrast to rapport talk (Dashiell 2020). Where rapport talk focuses on building connections between speakers, report talk seeks to convey information. Scaffolding discourse, like report talk, does not require justification. Dasheill notes that while it is often used to reaffirm male dominance at tables, it is still necessary to drive tabletop role-playing games forward.

Building off Dashiell's definition of scaffolding discourse and physical scaffolding's intended purpose in construction, scaffolds become a tractable metaphor for the function and limitations of trying to establish consent and safety in role-playing experiences. Scaffolds are put into place in order to facilitate the safe construction of a building. But their existence can no more ensure absolute prevention than their absence ensures accidents *will* occur. Buildings go up and are repaired without scaffolding and sometimes nothing dangerous happens. Conversely, one can have scaffolding up around a building and a multitude of issues on site. The use of safety tools before (and even during) a game and the establishment of consent cannot prevent the very human reactions to the experience of being someone or something else and interacting with others. Especially given that most larps and tabletop role-playing games prioritize conversation as a driving mechanic, no safety tool can fully shield players from each other and the impact of their choices and actions. Maury Brown's notion of "larp bouldering," which supports experience design "so that every player, no matter their ability, experience, style, and motivation can feel safe and find something engaging, challenging, and empowering in your larp," is in a similar vein.

To be effective, the scaffolding around a building needs to be well constructed itself and tailored to the building it surrounds. In the same way that one should be able to suss out the shape of a building from the scaffolding around it, an appropriate safety tool or consent check should match the nature of the game. *Bluebeard's Bride* (Beltrán, Kelly, and Richardson 2017) recommends spending significant time setting expectations about the tone and gameplay before beginning the game. The horror game *Eldritch Automata* (Francia and Muller 2024) includes psychological, body, and supernatural horror elements in the game concept, world, and mechanics. Its provided consent checklist is extensive and signals to the player the potential for topics around psychological trauma to manifest. The larp *Just A Little Lovin* (2011-; Groth, Grasmo, and Edland 2021), about the impact of HIV/AIDS on a New York community in the early 1980s, has a whole day of workshops prior to the run, incorporating material about playing with sensitivity and calibrating expectations with other players.

Just as scaffolding allows workers to adroitly and easily navigate a building site, well-chosen and implemented safety and consent practices can make facilitating role-playing experiences easier for game runners and other participants as well. They can gauge early on which players might need more support or direction. Consent checklists allow important information to be conveyed quickly and directly. Similar to scaffolding discourse, they also do not necessitate or typically require justifications.

Participants can tell game runners and others they do not want to be romanced and leave it at that. It provides the structure that helps allow considerate play to occur, but like a building scaffolding, must actually be used in an ongoing way.

Such structures are helpful especially in educational role-playing games. In this issue, Roda Martínez (2025) provides an example of how educators might scaffold a TTRPG for student safety. Roda Martínez recognizes the risk management at the heart of running TTRPGs in an educational setting, and relies on the instructors' strict sense of class and game structure to course-correct on any consent issues. Here, clarity and transparency help separate the student from the character, the teacher from the disciplinarian, and the teaching context from its overt power dynamics. Scaffolding a TTRPG, much like scaffolding a pedagogical subject, requires careful management of students' foreknowledge, expectations, and emergent risks as they turn up.

However, like the scaffolding discourse, most safety tools and consent exercises stop at conveying information. There is rarely a promise or guarantee of follow-up to harm in the same way the existence of a scaffold on a building does not tell you how injuries will be treated and how much follow up care will occur. As argued by a nonideal ethic of safety, the real work is done in the relational care and involvement of participants before, during, and after the experience. If a game master is not competent enough to steer the game action away from Lines players shared, the information turns out to be useless. Such situations can possibly even cause harm, e.g., if players feel violated when their requests are not honored, even if the game master had no ill intent. A post-larp debriefing conversation is unlikely to be effective if the one participant is uninterested in the experience of the others (Fatland 2013). Kukla argues that people best support the building of healthy consent and agency "not by leaving them alone, but by actively enabling them to be" (2021 p 284).

While scaffolding cannot assure that no accidents occur on site, its presence also acts as essential reassurance that some modicum of care is being taken. As in life, when a scaffold makes us feel confident to walk by a building under construction, safety and consent scaffolding in games can build player trust -- an essential element of creating the zones of safety, challenge, and risk. Like scaffolding discourse, we argue that role-play experiences are unlikely to create an experience of safety without it. Games without even a modicum of safety and consent scaffolding, can, like buildings under construction without scaffolding, run without any harm being done. But the absence of harm in both the unscaffolded building and game is likely the result of luck and circumstance. However, this absence of harm is not an experience of safety - it is just the absence of harm. Safety and consent scaffolding has to be present to help (hopefully) create safe environments.

There is no universal solution for safety and consent in role-playing experiences. But the absence of a one size fits all solution draws players and game runners back to the key relational elements that ground the games and role-play experiences. A nonideal approach to safety and consent scaffolding calls participants into ongoing conversation with others, encourages self-reflection, and examination of the context the game occurs in. It shifts the focus from doing the right thing to trying to continually be in right relationship with one's fellow participants.

Even the mention of safety and consent in TTRPGs in recent months has aroused great controversy online and offline., A revised edition of D&D, D&D Next, offering its own version of the X-card by way of players crossing their arms in an "X" at the moment they wish to halt or change role-play. We now tread the line between offering no guarantees of player safety and, conversely, insisting on the presence of not only safety tools, but a safety culture (Pedersen 2015) that supports players despite the failure of one or more tools in a session. TTRPG players should be afforded both spaces of community and introspection, so that they might form healthier relationships between themselves and their peers. It is at this crux that the articles of this special issue meet: consent culture ultimately stems from community norms. Designers and game facilitators play a decisive role in setting those norms. Together, role-players can be brave and explore treacherous, potentially harmful content, but only when they know that many hands are there to catch them if they fall.

– Susan Haarman
December 2024

A NOTE FROM THIS ISSUE'S LAYOUT DESIGNER

Issue 16 was slated to come out in December 2024, and I had lined up an arrangement in which I would use a small grant to pay for a copy editor *and* a layout designer, and it would turn out just fine.

Narrator: But it did not turn out fine.

Without getting into too many details, the events since November 6, 2024 have taken a very specific toll on those of us working in American higher education, and it is with these disruptions in mind that one ought to measure the eight-month production delay on the issue, which had otherwise been peer-reviewed and
copy-edited by the end of 2024. I want to give a special shoutout to my fellow editors Susan, Sarah, and Bill, who kept the torch lit for me even as I plunged into the darkness of *politics* and, well, Adobe InDesign. This special issue is dedicated to y'all.

-- Evan Torner
August 2025

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