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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 constellated 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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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.

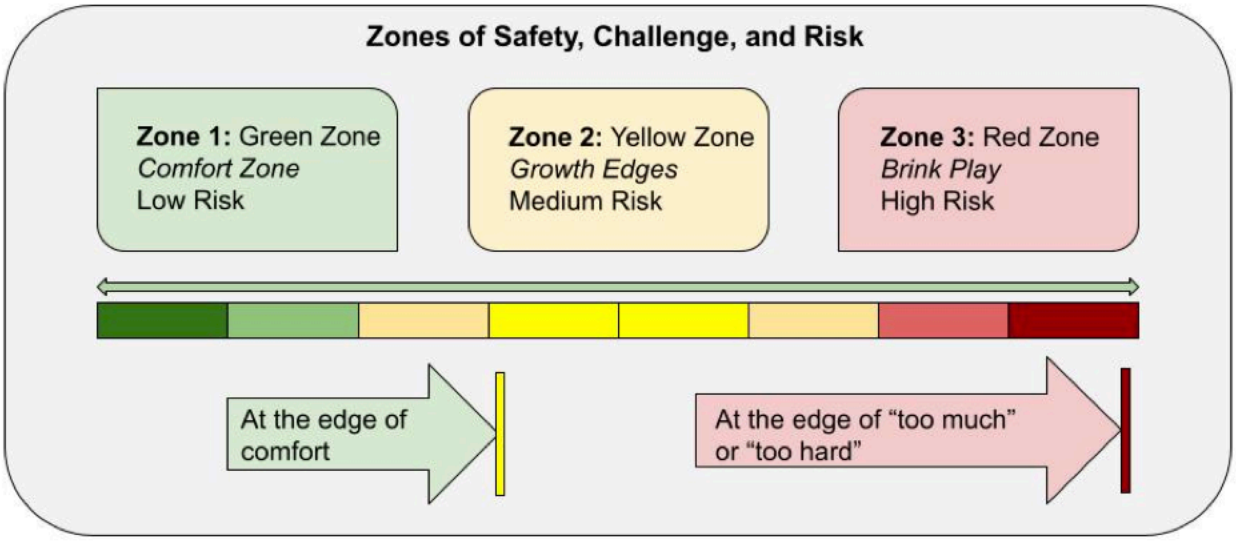

Figure 1: The author's model of Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk. Green Zone (Zone 1) play is in one's comfort zone and low risk. Yellow Zone (Zone 2) play is on one's growth edges, which transitions from the edge of comfort, and is medium risk. Red Zone (Zone 3) is brink play (Poremba 2007), and 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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Uninformed Consent in TTRPGs: Communicating Expectations to Avoid Nightmare Game Master Horror Stories

Abstract: This article offers a qualitative analysis of social media such as Reddit, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube regarding the abuse of power by a dungeonmaster (DM) in tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) gameplay. It uses NVivo to analyze stories documenting "nightmare dungeonmasters" (NDMs) in order to better understand what players mean by that term. The data is coded for themes such as power, abuse, boundaries, and consent. The first half of the article deploys critical discourse analysis regarding passive/informed consent and the violation/maintenance of social boundaries at the TTRPG table. The second half of the article aligns the stories related in the first half with safety tools that are seen as applicable for avoiding NDM behaviors and their correspondingly negative gaming experiences. Tools are sourced both from this primary research and also from a literature review. The spirit of ethical research within the gaming community serves its reader by supplying them with a better understanding of NDM phenomena, as well as safety tools that can be employed on behalf of player boundaries.

Keywords: game master, tabletop role-playing games, consent, safety, boundaries, violation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dominant discourse within tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) community often provides a lot of stories, advice, and criticism surrounding the role of the Game Masters (GMs) to help them run their games at home (Chaterjee et al. 2017; Mandall et al. 2013). Despite this abundance of GM-focused media content, and the numerous papers written on the role and best practices of the GM (Axner 2012; Bisogno 2022; Connell 2023; Bowman 2013; Dashiell 2022; Edwards 2001; Fine 2002; Lasley 2020; Yamamoto 2021; St. Jacques and Tobin 2020; White et al. 2022), horror stories of players dealing with Nightmare GMs (NGMs) are prevalent within the TTRPG community. These stories range from GMs forcing their players into scenarios to fit their desired narrative to GMs violating the boundaries that were previously set by the players. Acknowledging the uniqueness of each story, it is evident the GMs and the players often differ in terms of their set expectations (White et al. 2022, 53), thereby making it difficult for the group to provide informed consent for the game.

Establishing expectations before play is not a new concept in the TTRPG community but it is often limited to broad considerations of personal triggers and boundaries with inconsistent usage of safety tools, like the X card or a session 0 checklist (Reynolds and Germain 2019, 3-4). So, when observing how the safety and agency of the players are balanced by their GM, alongside group objectives for play or larger narrative structures, it becomes evident from the persistence of NGM stories, how we communicate our expectations amongst each other has not been given enough attention. Concerning as it may be, the consent we provide to our fellow players to take part in an improvised performance with them is often uninformed because the expectation for the anticipated play varies drastically from person to person.

Consent and the considerations we have for the consent of TTRPG players is the gap this issue of the International Journal of Roleplaying seeks to fill. As such, our capacity to provide informed consent in our roleplaying experience requires further consideration as well. To this end, I posit the consent we provide to our fellow players when taking part in TTRPGs can only be considered informed when the GM and the players adequately harmonize and understand their separate expectations for the game. As will be illustrated in the stories I present, all too often we fall into the assumption everyone is on the same page and this assumption opens TTRPG players up to NGM scenarios. As such, greater consideration needs to be given to how we harmonize the group's collective expectations.

In this article, I show the present necessity for the TTRPG community to acquire greater understanding of how to set expectations in advance. To do this, I perform a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2020) as part of a discourse analysis on 303 Reddit stories regarding NGM power abuse and their (mis)management of TTRPG players. I first observe Foucauldian discursive formations within the subreddit communities I

gathered these stories from to show an understanding of what sharing NGM stories provides.

I then apply interactional sociolinguistics to help distinguish the boundaries between a malicious NGM and a well-intentioned NGM. Using the work done in interactional sociolinguistics, I exemplify instances where expectations of the players were thwarted by the GM's rigid adherence to their understanding of the role. This will provide my claims with substance when considering GM versus player expectations. Afterwards, I expand on these perspectives and present the multiple issues that arise inhibiting the GM and the players from understanding each others' expectations for the game. Drawing on William J. White et al., and Steven Dashiell, I make it transparent how the role of the GM is perceived by the GM and players alike. Then, I conclude with an overview of pre-game considerations for garnering an understanding of the group's expectations. This will include a theoretical onboarding process and trial run for GMs.

1.1 Disclaimer

This article is not meant as a call-out of gamemaster (GM) behavior. I take a neutral standpoint centering responsibility for understanding the group's collective expectations and synergy evenly on everyone involved in the game. To differentiate the GM role from other players, I will refer to the GM as the GM and everyone who is considered a player, not in the GM role, as the players. When I refer to everyone at the table, I will call them the group.

Additionally, I understand ethical considerations must be made in how scholars allow for the information they gather online, like account names, quotes, and story links, to be made public in their academic work. In these cases, there is usually cause for concern that the information provided might come back to harm the original posters. However, considering the common practices online Reddit communities have in anonymizing the information they give, like changing the names of key characters, telling it as something that happened to a friend of theirs, or purposefully using throwaway accounts to post anonymously, I do not deem it necessary to avoid citing and quoting the sources as they are publicly available.

Finally, I acknowledge I cannot be certain all of these stories involve the players using safety tools as only a few commented on doing so.

2. TRAITS OF A BAD GM

When fans of TTRPGs think of what a GM should be, we imagine them in a more active role (Bisogno 2022, 75). This is a set expectation everyone in the TTRPG scene has for the role of the GM (75), to be more involved in the game than a computer would be. Eccentric personalities, like Matthew Mercer or Brenna Lee Mulligan, often come to mind when we consider the ideal GM. Imagining a passive GM suggests an individual who is apathetic and provides no greater detail or imagination than what the game module provides them. GMs do not just statically run the world and react to everything the players do. They are tasked with keeping the pacing of the adventure, setting and maintaining the tone of the game, teaching new players the rules, providing consequences to the players' decisions, socially including all players, delivering the story beats and narrative outcomes, creating a comfortable environment, doing voices for the non-player characters (NPCs), and painting vivid ideas of the setting for the players (Bisogno 2022, 74). These expectations cannnot be done passively, requiring much time and effort from GM. As such, the GM's role is expected to be an active one.

GMs, like the players, also understand they are expected to be in an active role (White et al. 2022). How they approach this call to action varies based on a range of predispositions such as demographics, experiences, personal tastes, synergy with the players, and political affiliations. Such aspects of their lives impact their creative agenda for the game and play heavily into what actions they think are acceptable in their role. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for there to be a lot of assumptions on the GM's part that might lead to them acting as an NGM.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's conception of discursive formations, rules and practices governing a specific group's production of knowledge (2002, 34-43), I observed their creation of, and occurrences within, the subreddits. The Redditors who posted on these sites were using them for the freedom of expression they would be granted on Reddit. More specifically, they were using these subreddits as a media site to voice the injustice they experienced from the power their NGMs abused. In doing so, they collectively created a communal judgment of qualifiers for what makes an NGM.

Within the subreddits, it is commonly accepted that an NGM is a GM who turns the play of whatever respective TTRPG, they are running into a stressful or emotionally painful ordeal for the players, which the players have not consented to nor desired. After reading and analyzing the Reddit stories, on the topic of NGMs,

I compiled a list of common actions and themes, see next section, surrounding NGM activity from discursive formations qualifying them as such.

Initially, I separated these stories into four categories of the creative agenda (Bowman 2013, 12). These are narrativism, simulationism, gamism, and immersionism. The intention was for these categories to help isolate different realms of the creative agenda where we find the NGM at odds with the players. NGMs in the realm of narrativism are at odds with the players over narrative disputes. With gamism, they are having rule disputes. With simulationism, they are employing contentious worldbuilding and having disputes over consistency. While with immerisionism, they are having social disputes that place tension on immersion (Bowman 2013, 12-15).

Regarding conflict in narrativism, NGMs tend to spotlight their ideas for the story they are creating, such as favouring non-player over their players' characters, and actively seeking to kill off player characters. For conflict in gamism, NGMs adhere to the rules so strictly it stunts player agency and creativity, and break the rules at their leisure to disadvantage the players. For conflict in simulationism, NGMs often recreate sexist, racist, ableist, or religious propaganda in their campaigns, often under the guise of maintaining their ideas of realism. Finally, for conflict in immersionism, horror stories include instances of NGMs becoming heavily intoxicated at the table; flirting with or making sexual advances on players they have real-world feelings of attraction for; punishing players they dislike for bigoted or personal reasons; bullying or belittling players; and triggering the players with themes in-game.

While most of these are inexcusable, it is often assumed all these acts are done out of malicious intent on the NGMs part. However, based on my review of the Reddit stories, I put forward the notion that not all NGMs adhere to this toxic image. For instance, a potential causality in many NGM stories was a recurring pattern linking NGM activities to miscommunications within the group.

For the purposes and scope of this essay, I found it most appropriate to highlight my findings regarding narrativism. I observed that group expectations for their story are often the most contentious for NGMs who do not mean harm to the players. As such, we can observe here examples of NGMs who made mistakes so we can learn how to best mediate them for the future.

3. NGM HORROR STORIES ANALYSIS

To begin the review process, I scoured through hundreds of NGM stories on Reddit and copied each one to a Word document that laid out their issues with the NGM in an extensive enough manner to be a proper story. The subreddits these stories were sourced from include: r/AmItheAsshole, r/DungeonsAndDragons, r/DnD, r/rpg, r/rpghorrorstories, r/dndhorrorstories, and r/CritCrab. The stories I included for this analysis involved any stories where the NGM turns the play experience into a stressful or emotionally painful ordeal for the players, in a manner the players have not consented to nor desired. Understanding this was a broad criterion for inclusion I also excluded stories based on other criteria.

I excluded stories based on three lacking areas I deemed vital for me to get comprehensive information out of an experience with an NGM. I first excluded stories with a word count less than 100, so I could ensure enough context would be given to get a proper understanding of the Redditor's experience with the NGM.

I then excluded stories where the Redditor indicated they disliked the GM for reasons unrelated to the game. Some Redditors indicated they subscribed to problematic ideology, either through referencing the NGM in a bigoted manner or using problematic terminology in their description of people. For example, one story was titled "What could there be more worst than a Simp DM?" (BunnySar 2021) indicating problematic ideology as the term "Simp" is used by the incel community to insult men who are nice to women and treat them respectfully. In these instances, I felt the need to contest their claim, as the issues they had with the NGM seemed more to come from the problematic ethos the Redditor presented themselves with rather than any actual fault on the part of the GM.

Finally, I excluded stories lacking relevance to the NGM stories they claimed to be. In these stories, it seemed more like the player was upset with the outcome of the game rather than the GMing style. An example of this would be the posts "AITA for buying our Dungeon Master new minis for Dungeons and Dragons?" (dungeonsandminis 2019) and "AITA For Inadvertently Driving Off My Dungeon Master?" (TheGreatMightyFool 2023) where the Redditors were inquiring if they were in the right or the wrong about a conflict with their DM. It seemed unanimous in the comments the Redditors were being toxic, immature, and not communicating their expectations to the DM. There were about fifteen such Reddit posts and they were dismissed by the subreddit community, where it was pointed out the GM was not an NGM, the player was the problem. After the stories were compiled, I uploaded them to NVivo14 to begin the coding process.

I applied a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. Being familiar with the language used in these NGM stories, I had some pre-set terms and categories in mind, these being the controlling GMs, unclearly communicated boundaries, and vindictive NGMs. I used these ideas to deductively code a starting point for organizing the stories as I saw their pre-defined categories. I then immersed myself in them and realized several considerations I had yet to make could be used to further organize my categories in subcategories. These being: the concepts of railroading, Mary Sues, and joining games as a stranger. I used these to further inductively code the stories into the areas of the creative agenda I thought they fit best.

For example, I thematically coded NGM stories into the area of narrativism based on if the story involved the players having issues with the way the NGM was handling the narrative while using terms like railroad and Mary Sue to identify such stories. I coded stories as gamism based on if there was contention with the GM changing the game in unfair ways or breaking the rules. I coded stories as simulationism if the NGM was inconsistent in the information they gave the players about the world or had instances of contentious world-building, like sexism and racism. While I coded stories as immerisionism when in-game elements were negatively influenced by out-of-game social dynamics. Afterwards, I organized my codes to see the connection between the different themes. Though, as I mentioned for the scope of this essay, it is most appropriate to highlight my findings regarding narrativism.

A Word Frequency Query acquired the keywords used in these stories that indicated certain themes. The keywords used are often regarded as terms for literary criticism, or at least derived from terms for literary criticism, but are used by the subreddit communities in the context of a TTRPG story to implicate the NGM's power in influencing the story unfavorably both in and outside of the game mechanics. As such, I found it best to use them in creating themes for different instances of NGM activity. For instance, DMPC, DMNPC, Mary Sue, Gary Stu, and self-insert are all words that can be searched to observe when a NGM has created a character in the campaign who is taking the spotlight away from the players. Approaching these stories from the position of interactional sociolinguistics, a subfield of anthropological linguistics concerned with language's role in constructing and sustaining cultural practices (Günthner 2008, 53–76), we can see how these terms are all derived from the literary analysis term of "Mary Sue" as a character, resembling the author or favoured by the author, inserted into the story. It was this present use of terms derived from and for literary analysis within the subreddits that prompted me to use my narrativism category as a basis for this article.

Other search terms I used deductively included, online, internet, stranger, and found, as they can be searched for to examine parts of the stories indicating the player and the NGM did not know each other ahead of time. This approach exemplifies common themes within NGM Reddit stories and gives a good indication of how often these occurrences are a contributing factor to an NGM story.

Based on my review of the Reddit stories, there are a few exceptions to the commonly assumed image of a toxic NGM. While there does appear to be countless stories of NGMs being petty towards the players, violating their boundaries, and going out of their way to emotionally harm them, a considerable number of NGM stories boil down to a difference of creative agenda and an NGM who is statically adhering to their expectations for how they run the game despite concerns brought up by their players. Here, I do not intend to excuse such behavior, rather I show disparities between these instances where an NGM story could have been avoided by communicating expectations from all parties involved more thoroughly.

Now, I draw on the information I synthesized regarding the type of NGM interactions that occur based on diverging expectations for the players. I address different aspects of the creative agenda and instances where the NGM acts in a manner showing a contrast between their creative agenda and that of the players, making it a nightmare scenario. I first observe instances of poorly communicated expectations. I then examine concerns on both the NGM's and the player's part for fear the players might be ruining the game. I conclude this section by considering different themes of a controlling NGM that did not overlap with malicious intention.

Over the course of my analysis, I found 76 NGM stories explicitly indicated the expectations of the GM and players had not been properly communicated and varied greatly. A typical example of broad communication of expectations: "After a few weeks of prep-time for the DM to write the first session and general storyline, we finally met up for a session 0. We rolled our stats, introduced our characters and got the general gist of the lands we be playing in." (Rubber_ducky25 2020). While differing expectations are almost always a staple theme for an NGM story, as the players should not be expecting it to be a nightmare scenario, the fact the stories indicate points of contention surrounding poor communication of expectations reflects a greater need for the GM and players to synchronize their expectations for the play they are giving consent to.

There were two categories of voiced concern I investigated regarding the NGM stories. The first was concern on the NGM's part their players would be ruining the game. The second was the concern on the players part that they themselves would be ruining the game. In 19 of the stories, it was explicitly mentioned the NGM vo-

calized concern their players were ruining the game while in 24 stories it was mentioned the players themselves were concerned they might be ruining the game by bringing up issues with the NGM, whether they chose to do so or not. A couple of examples of the players feeling the social pressure deterring them from voicing concerns: "I just kept trucking along because I cared about the DM and did not want to hurt his feelings" (b3llamor3lla 2022); "About 30 minutes later I felt kind of bad. Not for the DM but for the other players who I probably ruined their game" (ryanxwonbin 2020); "I wasn't enjoying it, but nobody else at the table brought up any issues with it, and I didn't want to be the one ruining other people's fun, so I just shut my mouth and went along with it" (MarionberrySouth6010 2022).

It should be noted in most NGM stories the game becomes a nightmare scenario quickly and damages the relationship between the NGM and the players well before the narrator has a chance to consider bringing the issue up to the NGM. So, from this limited perspective, we can observe the hesitation in the player based on the implicit social expectations of the table.

Furthermore, it will be helpful to give a tally of the remaining themes. There were 132 stories where the players indicated the NGM was controlling, either through unfair limitations, DMPCs, or railroading; a practice that forces the players to go down a certain storyline as chosen by the GM. The following numbers don't add up to the 132 stories due to partial intersection of the observed themes. Within the 132 stories, there were an overlapping 73 instances of the NGM imposing an unfair limitation, 82 instances of the NGM using DMPCs, and 68 instances of railroading. 21 instances included both DMPCs and railroading. While 74 of these instances included notes of conduct that indicated malicious or problematic intent on the NGMs part, the other 58 instances indicated the controlling behaviour was not planned to intentionally upset the players.

There are some instances where amends were made from non-malicious mistakes on the NGMs part: "… unlike a majority of posts on here we are still all friends, nobody's feelings got hurt, and we all can talk to each other..." (Minigiant2709 2020); and "We apologized and owned up to the different things we did wrong. He invited me back into the campaign with open arms and we are doing our best to make amends" ("Toxic DM or is it me?" 2022). Additionally, there was explicit mention of unintentional instance of NGM being controlling "…the DM felt that we really needed a healer, so he gave the party 'a literal heal-bot' (his words, not mine). This turned out to be a warforged cleric character, who became a bit of a DMNPC for a while there. Though it wasn't the DMs intention, it was clear that is what she turned into." (_Thespian_ 2021).

This evidence suggests, despite no harmful intentions, the NGM scenarios came about from group members expectations being in contention with one another, partially due to a lack of communication. In following section, I provide greater detail on the types of expectations players and GMs alike have for the role of the GM. I continue drawing from my NGM story analysis to indicate where greater consideration needs to be taken regarding the collective expectations of the group.

4. EXPECTATIONS OF THE GM

In these NGM stories, there are instances where expectations were not communicated well. Due to this oversight, the players did not have the best idea of what they were consenting to. In one instance, a group of players came together for the purpose of the NGM playing out a fantasy novel he was writing (ThrowawayfanficDM 2023). This was not made apparent until several sessions in and by then the players felt cheated and railroaded through a story of the NGM's creation. This example is a larger consideration of narrativism and somewhat existential to the campaign. This manner of miscommunication can also happen on a micro level and be considered to overlap with contention in simulationism.

Here I posit a hypothetical for this manner of micro miscommunication. If a GM were to proactively ask a player what they would like to avoid during play and the player simply says depictions of gore, neither the GM nor the player have a good idea of what they are consenting to, as each topic is a spectrum (Reynolds and Germain 2019, 3-4). The GM might be a big fan of horror movies, and the player is sickened by the thought of blood. So, what constitutes gore for the other person is extremely different from what they both imagine it to be. Later in the game, a description of a villain attacking the player's character might involve the GM saying how their arrow pierces through the character's arm and blood trickles down their sleeve. The player then feels ill and betrayed by the GM as they had voiced their expectations. However, the GM didn't think their description included gore, given their predisposition, and may believe the player is upset they took damage. This begins causing tension within the group.

Misunderstandings like this are common occurrences in NGM stories, as shown by 76 occurrences of poorly communicated expectations. Miscommunication of what to expect, regarding setting, theme, commitment, and performance, result in a lack of unified understanding of what each player wants from the game and is detrimental to the longevity and enjoyment of play. In one instance, "All Aboard The Dragon Age Railroad,"

after the NGM had made several attempts to challenge the morality of the Redditor's character, the player decided to begin roleplay their character immorally. This,

> …at first pleased the DM, but did not please them when I started having my character stop resisting the demon all together and make a powerful blood pact with it. The DM expected my "good guy" PC to continue fruitlessly resisting temptation and not agree to a deal which would make my character extremely broken and OP by allowing them to use Blood Magic (essentially mind control). ("All Aboard The Dragon Age Railroad" 2019)

It was only communicated afterwards that the NGM had certain expectations in mind for the player's character progression, though it should have been made explicit on the NGM's part so the player could consent to play their character this way.

Much like the earlier gore hypothetical, issues that arise from this might be avoided by including some upfront examples about what the GM and players consider to be their expectations for roleplay. This would help them understand each others' expectations explicitly before any harm occurs. However, when the GM and player are unfamiliar with one another, they might not think to have a deeper conversation and just state some basic boundaries. So, even if safety tools are used, if they are used without explicit intention, greater conversation, or consideration, then boundaries become vague and assumed. The lack of understanding for each others' expectations made it difficult for the Redditors to provide informed consent and the group did not make the effort to acquire a better understanding than what they assumed to be universal.

Misunderstandings are not limited to boundaries surrounding themes but includes each of the above-mentioned items involve the GM being an active contributor: pacing the adventure; setting and maintaining the tone; teaching new players the rules; providing consequences to the players decisions; socially including all players; delivering the story beats and narrative outcomes; creating a comfortable environment; doing voices for the non-player characters; and painting a vivid idea of the setting for the players. New TTRPG players are not going to know how many aspects of running the game goes into being a GM or how the GM's role works in general. For example, one Reddit story involves the player being upset with the Dungeon Master for intentionally putting them in combat with monsters that were a much more difficult challenge for them than they could reasonably survive (Senior-Meat-5671 2023). It also did not help they were in a flooding room. The Redditor makes note of how there was "No way to escape, no way to talk ourselves out of it, I lost 2 rounds trying to open a door that wouldn't, and we got TPKed like that. I was frustrated because she'd DMed before, and played dnd for years, so she was supposed to know how CR worked and how dungeons worked…" We can see that there is also a deviation in our collective expectations for the game resulting from a lack of fluency in the games' mechanics, not solely on the part of the players but also on the part of the GM.

In many other NGM stories, the players do not initially know the NGM, as they have either not played with them as GM before or the game is what brought them into similar social circles. There are two examples of this that would be good to introduce and substantiate this concern. The first story involves a couple who join a D&D campaign where "Everyone brought on was a stranger to DM and to on another…" ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover…" 2021). They decided to join because they wanted to take part in a Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) campaign to overcome their social isolation during Covid. Everyone in the group takes the proper safety precautions as they note "We go through content warnings and such before we start the game. We discuss how to navigate toeing boundaries, crossing boundaries, etc. Everyone's pretty cool with most things" (2021). Things seem to be going well until the NGM invites their friend to play with the group, which everyone was initially okay with. From there the sessions grow increasingly less fun as the NGM heavily favours their friend, allowing them to get away with bullying the other players in character, and prioritizes their roleplay opportunities over the rest of the group. This story ends with the NGM's friend quitting the game and villainizing the Redditor to the group.

The second story involves a stranger recruiting people, including the Redditor, from their discord server to play in a game they were the DM for (tom04cz 2023). The Redditor starts off the story by saying they were "a completely fresh player at the time, looking blindly for a game, DM reached out for me and i jum[p]ed at the chance." Amongst other in-game issues between the players that stood out, the DM included,

> …a questgiver NPC who basical[l]y enslaved us and sent us on a wild goose chase…, saddled us sith a half shark, half man NPC which had the personality of a toddler and a penchant for injuring the party and ruining any chance of subtlety…, then enslaved us harder with shock collars, blamed the party constantly for circumstances evidently not under their control and also turned out tobe invincible… (2023)

This story ends with the DM expressing he didn't have time for the group because he was the DM in another group he was playing with and cancelled the campaign shortly after. This specific example helps to illustrate the inability new players have to provide informed consent for their roleplay experiences as the Redditor also mentioned the "DM was also very lenient in letting us players make the most wack of characters. In hindsight i realise that was not good for someone as new as me, but at the time i relished it" (2023). In a similar manner, new players might approach the game just like a video game they have played except, while TTRPGs can be quickly committed to, they are not as easy to turn off. So, when they have already committed to the game, by convening with the group; making their character; coordinating schedules for weekly games; and starting the sessions, they often find themselves locked in a social contract they can't escape, lest they upset the rest of the group.

In the previous examples, we can observe how the NGMs are stunting the creative approaches characters are taking to the game through roleplay or narrative choices by either favouring certain players' experiences over others' or imposing their personal characters on the party. In part this could be a result of the expectations placed on the GM by the GM. It is common for GMs to hold themselves to the impossible standards they have seen online. Again, Matt Mercer and Brennan Lee Mulligan exemplify their GMing styles and GMs are comparing themselves to the point where the "Mercer effect" has been coined as a term describing a GM who strives too hard to replicate Matt Mercer's GMing prowess.

We might relate this to amateur writers comparing themselves to Stephen King. In "Controlling DM writes Fan-fiction about my D&D Character and Copies my Campaign." the Redditor notes how, when their NGM Jack was transitioning from a writer to a DM, "…the main problem [he] seemed to keep bumping into was that he wanted to have full control over his story. Whenever we did something that didn't align with his perfect world, he would throw a small fit over it and stop his sessions early so he could think of how to fix his plot" (ThrowawayfanficDM 2023). This shows that the failure to meet the expectations the GM sets for themselves often compels them to double down on their intention to run their perfect game.

In turn, we also get NGMs who are holding themselves to an impossible standard and ruining the game for the players because they are rigidly adhering to the rules, or their playstyle, or the story they want to tell so their genius will be recognized. White et al. (2022), note,

> The balancing of all of these expectations and interactions seems to be the way to achieve the sense of wonder that arguably 'all games should aim for, and too few achieve'…The GM, in striving to offer hard but fair challenges to the players when playing as adversary, must resist the temptation to be provoked into 'unrestrained hostility'… that will quickly lead to the characters' destruction or otherwise hinder campaign development. Simultaneously, in pursuing a cooperative style of play, the GM must avoid demanding the excess of conformity that will rob the game of suspense, action, and excitement. Additionally, a GM seeking to flesh out the campaign world may 'attempt to enforce their predetermined concepts of plot and character development on players' and in doing so at the last extreme be unmasked as a 'failed novelist'… (2020, 53)

So, when the group has these expectations for how a GM is supposed to run the game (Dashiell 2022, 6), they can vary widely making informed consent impossible for everyone to provide unless their understanding of their own and each other's expectations synchronize. Oftentimes, GMs can feel judged or as though they have failed themselves or the players by not being capable of meeting the group's expectations. Maybe the players could not distinguish the GMs character voices. Or maybe the players were expecting there to be faster paced combat and the GM is moving too slowly. These can be things the GM is putting earnest effort into but the amount of talent they have for performance, or their executive dysfunctions can be putting a hard limitation on what they can provide the game.

These concerns are not the GMs fault, but they are still factors affecting the play experience for the group. In these cases, if the players require a certain level of competence with performance, pacing, etc., they might try to handle considerations for GMs similarly to considerations for a position being hired for.

5. COMMUNICATION FOR INFORMED CONSENT

As bleak as that idea may sound, it is all too often the case, as some of the examples I showed exemplified, that players jump at the chance to play a TTRPG simply because GMs are in short supply, and they don't want to run the game themselves ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover…" 2021; tom04cz 2023). While the full context of the social relations was not always provided, 133 of the NGM stories explicitly mentioned their NGM was either a stranger or casual acquaintance who they provided the position of GM to.

In many of these NGM scenarios, the Redditors expressed how they were desperate to play a game and later regretted playing with people they did not know ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover…" 2021; tom04cz 2023). If we equate this to hiring someone in a workplace like lifeguards, paramedics, or teachers then anyone who expressed interest in the job, as unqualified as they might be, would be granted the power and authority to perform it. This immediate commitment on the players part often easily leads to an NGM scenario. As such, when TTRPG players consider who to pick as their GM, it is best to handle it as a candidacy rather than an immediate commitment on both sides. I provide several suggestions: a selection process, where potential GMs are given explicit expectations in advance; clarifying questions, with scenario-based considerations observing a more involved conversation on expectations with examples; and a session 0 trial run.

6. SELECTION PROCESS

The first consideration is to have any initial expectations for the GM to be made explicit. As I mentioned previously, 76 of the NGM stories I examined gave some broad considerations for what the setting, theme, commitment, and performance expectations would be like, but only seven discussed considerations of safety for the players and only three talked about the use of safety tools. While players are becoming more familiar with the considerations for triggers that need to be made during session 0, as it has become a popular practice of late (Reynolds and Germain 2019), new players and players who are self-proclaimed as "desperate" to be part of a game often overlook the nuance of the assumed expectations of the group. As such, the GM selection process needs to have expectations foregrounded.

A personalized list of wants and things to avoid should be made by each of the players and brought up in detail to the potential GM. This should also be the time when the GM puts forward their expectations to the players to ensure they also have a good understanding of what they are signing on to. However, this becomes challenging with players who are less familiar with the game. If a player is new to the TTRPG scene they might not have any experience with the bleed effect, which is a staple and often desired experience within the community (Bowman 2013, 20). The bleed effect is when the players' real life emotional states, opinions, and relationships begin to influence their characters' in-game actions and vice versa (16). As such, they don't yet know what they don't consent to.

New players, and players who don't take the authenticity of their experience into account, risk giving their in-game boundaries and real life triggers a lack of consideration (16-21). After all, the assumption is if it is "just a game" then people should all know the implied nuances of each trigger. Juhana Pettersson makes a point in noting that once we understand what we, "can and can't do, want and don't want to do, it becomes easier to have good [roleplay] experiences and to co-create them with others…For the purposes of developing [this] understanding, [roleplay] experience needs to be paired with reflection and analysis" (2020). Unfortunately, new players will not have developed this understanding of themselves due to their inexperience with roleplay while even experienced players will not have developed this understanding about themselves if they have not reflected on or analyzed their roleplay experience.

Therefore, the expectations put forward by new players need to be drawn from their real-life experience with triggers, made explicit, agreed upon, and adhered to (Kemper et al. 2020), so as to accommodate any potential lack of self-understanding. The expectations of the role of GM, in particular, need to be put upfront to ensure everyone, including the GM, is on board. A longer conversation about the nuances of our triggers and accommodation needs would potentially benefit to this selection process. To do this, time for further clarifying questions needs to be accommodated.

7. CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

When we don't know what we don't consent to, due to our lack of self-understanding, a generic Session 0 checklist will be confusing or overwhelming. It's pertinent to include more explicit considerations and questions concerning broad and specific aspects of the game. Just because everyone has the same idea of what they want out of the game and what their boundaries are does not mean the GM is a good fit for the group.

As Pettersson explains, "I have severe dietary restrictions caused by illness. I know them very well but that knowledge only helps me if the organizers of the larp are willing to accommodate my issues. If not, no amount of self-knowledge will help me play that larp" (2020). Asking for proof of the GM's ability to accommodate accessibility requirement should be the norm. Players should be getting field notes of their previous experience GMing. This might look like the GMs providing examples of how they could accommodate certain needs or providing stories from their previous experience as a GM to ad merit to their accommodation claims. Another way of suss-

ing these considerations out can take the form of asking the GMs hypotheticals from our mechanical and social expectations to gauge their synergy with the players.

We might see in this line of questioning inquiries on how the GM would react to players doing certain actions. For instance, in the game of D&D there is a spell called Revivify which can be used to bring a dead character back to life. There is another spell called Counterspell where a mage can see another person trying to cast a spell as negate the effects of it. A simple enough question to ask would be: "If a player, as their character, casts Revivify on their dead comrade, would you have a non-player character cast Counterspell on them to have the comrade stay dead?" While this spell interaction is a mechanical part of the game, it is typically considered taboo for the GM to enact. Part of this is due to the vulnerable situation the players find themselves in where they would need to use a spell to revive a dead ally. The other part of this is because magic users in the game only get one spell per turn so by using Counterspell on a spell they cast their turn ends abruptly. So, in the first scenario, the GM is actively choosing to make a dead character stay dead. While in the second scenario, an overuse of Counterspell calls the point of the players' spell preparations and their safety into question during later encounters. While this act is considered taboo, there are those GMs who would still do it as it gives the game a sense of realism. For example, in the Reddit story "The DM literally countered half the party," as the name suggests the NGM "spammed counter spells and made half the party useless in a boss fight" (KefkaSircus 2019). This was not a fun game for the players involved. Some GMs might argue that if they don't have scenarios like this then they might feel like they are taking it easy on the players or not portraying evil characters in their game authentically. Getting the GMs answer to this question and then clarifying their reasoning will help you to decide if this is the kind of scenario you want to experience as a player, or if this is the kind of scenario the GM wants to allow.

Another question that might be asked is: "Would you allow non-player characters to steal items from the players' character?" This action might be seen as annoying and provokes paranoia on the players' part towards the GM. Whether this is something the group wants to make room for or ban entirely should be a consensus decision. An example of this proving to allow for an NGM scenario, "DM Ruins Campaign With His Disgusting Mary Sue DMPC Out of Spite," wherein the Redditor notes how the DMPC, played by the NGM, was causing trouble by steling "whatever magic item, land, weapons,… etc that he wanted" (Dr_Frog_MD 2023). Due to the NGM protecting this character from every problem he would have encountered, the DMPC faced no consequences in-game for his actions. So, we can reason how asking simple questions like this ahead of time can aid in seeing if the GM is right for us or if they are not a good fit for the group.

From this story, we can also observe how the GM is not immune to the bleed effect, as shown by the need to ensure his favourite character always gets his way. So, it stands to reason, the way GMs say they will conduct themselves might differ from how they react to things the players do in-game when they are under pressure. My final suggestion for synchronizing expectations of the GM role is a trial run of the game where everyone can get experience playing together.

8. SESSION 0 TRIAL RUN

One theme each of the NGM stories, which provided such context outside of one-shots, had in common was the commitment the players made to take part in a long-term campaign, intending to span months, at the first opportunity they had. This might be in-part because GMs are in short supply and most people who are trying to put a game together require commitment, as commitment of time and energy is the only way a long-term game can happen. However, there was only one example I came across where the players had their GM run a one-shot for them to see if they were a good fit. Despite it still turning into an NGM scenario, the idea has merit.

Having the GM run a one-shot to test their capacity to perform the role of the GM and adhere to the set expectations of the group, should be another norm. This would give the players a chance to get comfortable with the GM and the way they conduct their game and the GM to become familiar with the players and how they act in character. At the end of the trial run, if anyone is unsatisfied with the game, if there are any red flags, or the group members don't feel like they can commit their time to a long session, then anyone is free to leave without a social contract binding them to continue a long-term campaign. To do otherwise may lead to experiences where, even if the GM is not an NGM, it might still feel like the players have committed to something too soon and now they are forced to participate as per their social contract, much like as we saw in MarionberrySouth6010's Reddit story (2022).

9. CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have shown the necessity for establishing expectations more explicitly on both the players and the GMs part. Drawing from the Reddit stories about NGMs, I showed that lack of clear communi-

cation remains as a problem we need to address for the future of TTRPGs, and the nuances of different kinds of NGMs. While I also went into detail with the nuances to be considered in our expectations for the role of the GM, everything leads to considerations for normalizing a more detailed GM selection process. This was all to show how we, the TTRPG community, might avoid NGM scenarios while giving power back to the group regarding stringent and confining social expectations.

Future work can look at bringing our understandings together more efficiently. The examples for the GM selection process I provided are rudimentary and require greater consideration for specific questions to ask, and early warning signs to look for during play, for the safety of the players. However, these ethical considerations may not be limited to the TTRPG community.

In many aspects of society, be it work, hobbies, social gatherings, we find ourselves locked in social contracts with power distributed between ourselves without always questioning why it is being done that way or considering who we are providing our consent to while engaging with them. Other avenues the academic community might expand on these initial inquiries might ask questions like: What expectations do we take for granted everyday, in relatively similar contexts like online gaming or digital interactions, that we just assume to be common sense? How might we design tools for online or in-person social planning that avoids nightmare scenarios with someone like the organizer? What might the Mercer effect look like in other contexts? Where might we find solutions to other areas of uninformed consent? Given how game spaces so often reflect reality, I propose we use game studies as a foothold for understanding the idea of consent in other social relations.

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Assigning Expert Authority to the Dominant Player in Role-Playing Games

Abstract: This paper investigates how a dominant player is socially assigned authority that legitimizes behaviours of gamesplaining and rule lawyering: it delves into how authority is distributed and validated between players and examines how social norms and implicit consent play a part in both the validation of authority and the normalization of exercises of power. The research introduces a synthesized framework derived from theoretical analysis of the social process of assigning and consolidating "expert authority" (Haugaard 2018 & 2021) to the dominant player in the context of playing tabletop role-playing games.

Keywords: social power, authority, implicit consent, gamesplaining, glorification of knowledge, rules lawyering, tabletop role-playing games, game master, game cultures, player behaviors

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates how a dominant player is assigned the social role of "expert authority" (Haugaard 2018, 2021) in the context of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Cook 1974) Research has demonstrated that popular Western gaming culture glorifies a player who displays ttechnical knowledge and traits of hegemonic or nerd masculinity, resulting in the parameters of the game being often determined by the dominant — white male — player (Dashiell 2020; Gray 2018; Taylor and Voorhees 2018; Trammell 2018; Vossen 2018). That glorification, according to Dashiell (2017, 2018, 2020, 2022), affords a player who displays "more knowledge" with the social acceptance to engage in gamesplaining and rule lawyering. I expand on the work of Dashiell to reveal how authority is distributed between players under the established belief that the more knowledgeable person is entitled to command or advise others. In doing so, I discuss how social norms and implicit consent play a part in both the normalization of exercises of power and the consolidation of authority. I examine authority through the lens of knowledge but acknowledge the significant influence of identity factors such as race, gender, and sexuality on authority. I am concerned primarily with the dynamics of authority because it will impact our studies of how consent shows up (or not) in analog gaming.

I posit that the dominant player gains and affirms its authority cyclically in a complex social process that can be deconstructed into four steps: Distribution, Reinforcement, Affirmation and Validation. (Fig.1) I propose a framework[1] that synthesizes that process. To do so, I use a speculative approach to dissect and discuss the four steps[2] that come into play at the game table. A theoretical analysis is done to address the nuances between the concepts of power, domination, and authority, and to put Haugaard's theory of authority (2002, 2012, 2018, 2021) in conversation with the work of Dashiell. One hypothetical moment of play is used to illustrate and clarify the theoretical concepts.

> *Billy (DM), Phil, Kim and Tom are playing a session of D&D. Before entering combat, Billy (DM) explains the rules, decides they will play without a grid, and sets the scene. Phil suggests a strategy the group should use to win according to each role's abilities. Tom plays first and takes a Search action. Phil stops Tom to suggest that all players work together to defeat the enemies, arguing that Tom, the Cleric, can cast stronger spells than other players and that starting with an attack is more logical. Tom hesitates because he wants to role-play his character even if it puts the group at risk. Kim is quiet. Phil argues by describing the actions the three of them could take in the next round. Kim nods in agreement with Phil. Tom concedes and takes his first turn accordingly. On Kim's turn, she wants to Move, Open a locked door while moving, and Attack. The DM rules that Kim will not be able to do both actions Unlock a door and Attack. Phil insists that, according to the rulebook, the Attack is allowed. The DM dismisses the argument. The game continues.*

1 The framework should facilitate one's understanding of the complex social process of how authority moves between players but should not function as a prescriptive recipe for analysis.

2 While discussed in isolation, the steps are, in reality, context-dependent and non-exclusive.

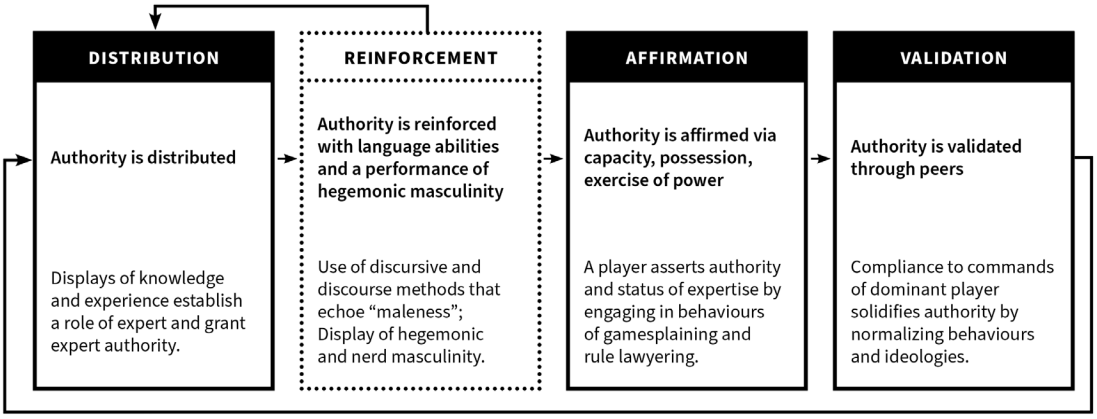

Figure 1: The implicit process of distributing, reinforcing, affirming, and validating expert authority.

2. DISTRIBUTION

Informed by Haugaard, authority is a power resource that is fluidly and implicitly distributed between agents and it enables and legitimizes the exercise of different forms of power. While authority enables command it also reveals relational structures of power, where an agent grants authority to another who shall have it, therefore giving them the authority to command. Alternatively, without authority, a person lacks the resources to do or to speak for themselves. As proposed by Searle (1996), the following formula defines authority:

> X counts as Y in circumstances C. The X (a person – Obama), counts as Y (authority – the President of the USA), in the circumstances C (Obama's inauguration, 20 January 2009). (quoted in Haugaard 2021, 155)

The formula reveals that a person's authority derives from and is delimited by people's belief in its legitimacy. The rationale for its legitimacy can be legal (based on regulations or laws), value and tradition-based (established beliefs and norms), or affective (devotion to a charismatic person). As explained by Haugaard, it is by law that the role of the elected president in the USA has authority. While the role of the President concerns organizational authority, there are social roles that are granted "everyday types of authority," such as "parent," "mother," "father," "male," "female," "speaker," and "expert" (2021, 161). It is through established beliefs that the social role of 'expert' is granted what Haugaard refers to as "expert authority." (Beard 2014 and 2017[2018]; Haugaard, 2018 and 2021) That belief carries weight at the game table. By definition, an expert is a person who has skills or comprehensive and authoritative knowledge in a particular area. Bureaucratic rules and procedures are often made by the expert (Cambridge Learner's Dictionary; Haugaard 2018). A player appears to possess knowledge in role-playing when they correct another player's terminology or vocabulary, self-select to answer questions or make a choice for the group, elaborate on a subject matter by using description, make direct statements for example regarding rules or procedures, and challenge someone or respond to someone's statement in the negative. In that sense, rule lawyering and gamesplaining are displays of knowledge (Hendrick 2003 and 2006; Dashiell 2020).

Building on this, it follows that a player who displays their technical knowledge and experience with the game gains the social role of "expert" and, with that, "expert authority" in the context of playing the game. This can be understood through Searle's formula:

> The X (a player), counts as Y (authority of the Expert player) in the circumstances C (the gaming episode).

A player takes the role of 'expert' when they come across as "more knowledgeable" about the game or give the impression of having more experience in gaming. An assertive display of knowledge occurs, for instance, when game rules are recited from memory, whereas a demonstration of experience happens by referencing past games. That said, the status of expertise is gained whether it is true or not that one has more knowledge than

others on that game or in gaming— to appear like you know what you are talking about and position yourself as confident is key to the process.

> *Phil conveys expertise when he uses his knowledge of the game world (D&D Classes) to explain his strategy. Then, he uses his knowledge of the rules of the game to describe step-by-step actions and prescribe strategies. That reveals he is familiar with the courses of action and obstacles the game affords or proscribes. He also refers to the rules of the rulebook by memory, which reiterates his knowledge and experience with the game.*

Once the Expert is recognized, authority is distributed by the culturally established belief that the more knowledgeable person should be granted authority.[3] Dashiell (2017) draws on Bourdieu's theory to explain that specialized knowledge is a form of capital and that authority is granted to the player showing possession of that capital. As the author explains, this is particularly evident, with rule lawyers whose use of memory reinforces their position as an expert in the game rules. Their confidence in their knowledge and abilities leads them to argue with anyone including the DM, which in turn conveys they possess an item of value — knowledge. This argument gains depth when considered alongside Haugaard's theory, which explains that the person who is framed into the role of the expert is given an authority that affords them the 'right' to exercise power over others. Importantly, the dominant player can (unwittingly or not) manipulate its status, as Haugaard (2018) indicates: "the social actor is in authority by pretending to be an authority" (23). When a rule lawyer attempts to enforce rules, they adopt the postures of both an expert, whose role is to make the rules, and of the game master, whose role is to enforce the rules. In doing so, the rule lawyer acts like an authority and therefore, if successful, becomes in authority.

3. REINFORCEMENT

In addition to knowledge, language and the performance of hegemonic masculinity contribute to the assignment and reinforcement of authority. Dashiell draws on linguistic and gender theories to argue that white male gamers who exhibit traits of hegemonic masculinity are often in a stronger position to win arguments. They use discursive methods that portray characteristics of maleness to stress the validity of their argument and gain social recognition. Dashiell suggests that successful rule lawyering not only requires knowledge and the desire to convey it but most importantly the knowledge of language and the ability to present it in a manner that convincingly demonstrates expertise. Scholarship on linguistic patterns has identified that masculine forms of discourse, such as arguing, interrupting, speaking loudly, listing facts, using sarcasm, and engaging in report talk, contribute to gaining capital. (Beard 2014 and 2017[2018]; Dashiell 2017; Coates 2003; James and Clark 1993; Kielsing 2008; Knussman 2000; Tannen 1990) Men who are socialized to engage in these behaviours often increase their level of respect or gain respect from other men, whereas such modes of interaction can be disruptive for those who are not socialized to use them. (Kiesling 2005) Historically, speaking in public has been an imprint of masculinity. Beard (2014 and 2017[2018]) explains that culturally throughout history, the male voice echoes authority and expertise, while the female voice is often associated with stupidity. Beard writes: "Public speech was a – if not the – defining attribute of maleness." (17) This aligns with Haugaard's (2018) argument that the 'speaker' who is the person deemed worthy of interaction constitutes an authority.

Given these arguments, it becomes evident that language proficiency and the performance of masculinity influence the perception of expertise. While linguistic capital and masculinity may hold authority independently of technical knowledge, this distinction highlights how Reinforcement of authority occurs when language and/or masculinity is employed (consciously or not) to bolster the Distribution of authority, based on who is perceived as possessing technical knowledge (without actually being the smartest).

4. AFFIRMATION

Once authority is distributed, it is affirmed through capacity, possession and exercise of power. Power is a social phenomenon understood within a sociocultural context and it is productive, creating subjects and organizing knowledge. (Foucault 1980) From classical to modern theories, there are various cross-disciplinary interpretations of the essence of power, but Avelino (2021) identifies three prevailing conceptions: power-to, power-over, and power-with. The first one studies power as a capacity to act and to transform outcomes (power-to). As Morriss ([1987]2002) points out, power originates from the Latin word 'to be able' and refers to capacities that manifest

3 We should also consider the possibility that a dominant player who displays traits of hegemonic masculinity might be perceived as charismatic which would help them gain implicit devotion.

in certain ways under specific circumstances. However, not all agents have equal capacities, where some have more influence or ability to mobilize and transform, resulting in an uneven distribution of power-to. The second conception of power focuses on power as a resource and is interested in the asymmetries between agents, where one has power over another (power-over). This echoes Giddens's characterization of power as being generated through structures of domination, a theory that illustrates the conception of asymmetries and dependencies between agents. (Giddens [1984]2002) As Avelino points out, power-to and power-over are not mutually exclusive, both reside in social contexts, and both can be possessed and exercised. As defined by Wartenberg (1988), the possession of power is characterized by the influence of agent A on agent B without having to exercise power, simply by the idea that agent A could take a course of action over agent B. An agent can possess the power or be the object of possession. The exercise of power happens when agent A takes a course of action that changes the field of possible actions[4] of agent B, resulting in controlling or influencing agent B's own course of action.

> *When Phil tells Tom he should play his turn by attacking instead of searching, Phil's action (to interfere) changes the circumstances within which Tom makes his choice and reduces the field of possible actions that Tom can do under that strategy. The act of interfering in Tom's game results in Phil controlling what Tom will do. In addition, the power that Phil possesses — the simple idea that Phil could interfere — could influence the choices and the actions that Tom makes at his turn.*

Power theories inform us that authority grants and legitimizes power: the expert has a greater capacity to influence the course of play by affirming authority through the possession and the exercise of power. First, authority grants the expert more power-to. An uneven distribution of power-to signals an asymmetrical relationship, where one player holds authority over another. Both the gamesplainer and rule lawyer possess greater power-to than other players due to their technical knowledge and ability to shape the course of play (to interrupt and win arguments). The dominant player acts confidently about knowing the rules of the game and the activity, thus marking their ability to play the game. As Sniderman (1999) argues, "our ability to participate in a particular game is dependent on our knowledge of many "rules" which no one has ever spelled out to us" (482). When the "expert" "spells out" the recorded and unrecorded rules of the game, they affirm their role as "expert"— as rule maker, their status of expertise and their expert authority. Second, authority legitimizes power which in turn affirms authority. Gamesplaining and rule lawyering are exercises of power. When unsolicited and benefiting the dominant player, gamesplaining exemplifies power-over. In that event, the gamesplainer showcases their power-to through the act of gamesplaining, as it reveals their capacities—knowledge and discursive abilities—which enable them to influence the game by putting their power into action, over the benefits of others. That said, gamesplaining and rule lawyering are often disguised as exercises of power-with, perceived as interventions done in favour of the group.

As indicated by Avelino (2021) and Abizadeh (2021), power-with is a third conception that occurs when power is not solely attributed to agent A or B (power-over) but to both, and when they can come together to enhance or strengthen the collective power toward similar or different goals. Power-with is not free of asymmetries and independent from power-over, since both agents can possess and exercise power but not necessarily with the same capacity. Power-with is also not necessarily independent of power-over and/or domination. In some occurrences, power-over is disguised as power-with, when a dominant agent who exercises power makes resistance dissolve by taming and hiding conflicts behind what appears as a consensual process, and for example, leading a group to believe the power is shared among them even though a dominant agent influences the others' courses of actions.

> *When Phil suggests a strategy for the group, it gives the impression that this is a collective choice favouring the collective good. There is an appearance of exercising power with the group (as opposed to against the group) since other players must decide if they accept the commanded strategy. There is also the illusion that Phil's intervention helps everyone when it is most likely advancing his preferred way of playing, over the preferences of others.*

It is important to note that power-over is not always an exercise of domination. To Pansardi (2013 and 2016), domination entails a "particular kind of relation that may be potentially – but not necessarily actually – harmful" to subjects (2016, 92). A relationship can have a high degree of dependence but no relation of domination. A highly dependent relationship can involve a relation of domination but not be harmful to the subject, as in the cases

4 Wartenberg uses the term "action-environment," a more complex concept than explained here. I use "field of actions" for synthesis purposes.

of parenting. Dormant power (possessed but not exercised) can dominate, and one can be vulnerable to domination without being the subject of domination, as in the case of a parent-kid relationship (McCammon 2018). What Dashiell calls "domination through knowledge", I argue is not inherently domination. A player who holds the status of expert de facto holds a position of dominance over those who do not. That posture of domination creates an asymmetric relationship that enables them to exercise power over others, such that they can dictate the group's strategies and rules. That said, their interventions are not inherent exercises of domination because they are not all morally bad nor harmful to the subjects. They could be in a position of domination while exercising power-with, for example when a player asks the expert player for help in deciding strategies.

> *When Phil imposes strategies on Kim and Tom, he is restraining their field of action. Phil who has a position of dominance (who is dominant) exercises power that might be helpful if giving Kim and Tom, let's say, a sense of direction, and most importantly it might be desirable if they want (and consent to) someone limiting their capacity. In that situation, Phil's exercise of power would not be domination because it is not harmful or morally bad.*

Social norms play a part in the normalization of exercises of power and, in turn, in the affirmation of authority. A norm-dependent domination theory affirms that domination is exercised by agent A over agent B through ideologies: the dominant agent does not operate merely because they can exercise power, but also because the social norm dictates their right to do so under their dominant posture (Haugaard 2021; McCammon 2018). I posit that authority functions similarly to domination: its affirmation is supported by social norms as the position of authority enables a socially implicit right to exercise different forms of power. The expert exercises power (all forms considered) because one is socially expected, accepted or tolerated to inform the decisions of the group. In other words, social norms dictate who is entitled to authority and normatively justify the use of power or, at times, of domination. Social norms are unwritten and implicit rules that bring people to conform. According to Unicef[5] (2021), behaviour will be practiced and driven by norms because a person will think other people do it, others will approve of them doing it and sanction them if they do not.

> *When Phil reveals a set of actions he thinks Tom should do, he burdens Tom by forcing him to decide whether he will actually follow the commanded course of action. While Phil might think he is providing a "suggestion" and merely "offering" an idea, Tom might perceive it as a command. Phil might also think his interruption is legitimate if it benefits his desired outcome for the game without considering what outcomes other players desire.*

Haugaard (2021) elaborates: when a social role is performed according to expectations, the person is likely to succeed at social integration and gain trust, which in turn validates one's role of authority, and so on. Then, a person with authority has power over others and can use that authority for collective benefits, in which cases unevenly distributed authority can be useful, and power is not necessarily a "bad thing." A parent is exercising power over a kid but that is not defacto harmful. Alternatively, they can abuse their authority to use their power to their sole advantage. In the former situation, the subjects increase their trust in the more powerful agent, while the latter situation breaks the trust between agents. (157) My investigation indicates that the desire to gain trust and social acceptance might be a factor of motivation for the expert to perform as socially expected. Thus, social norms lead the so-called expert player to believe that they are doing the "right thing" for the group when they engage in behaviours of gamesplaining or rule lawyering. The rule lawyer may be unaware of the power imbalance they hold and may perceive their actions as an exercise of power-with.

In *Consent in Gaming* (Reynolds and Germain 2019) one given recommendation for making sure that players have consented to topics at play is this: "it's not up for debate" when a player is not consenting. They write: "It's inappropriate … to pressure, persuade, bribe, or influence someone to change their mind about a consent topic" (4). However, unrecorded rules (Sniderman 1999) determine what intervention is "inappropriate," resulting in varying standards among different individuals of how to respect consent in role-playing. Power theory informs us that the rule lawyer often acts in concert with the group and under the belief that their intervention helps maintain the activity. When agent A pressures agent B to play by their rules, agent A believes their way of playing is Truth, such is the result of the legitimization of authority. Therefore, the rule lawyer does not think they are being inappropriate to B, but rather helping B play as one should. The rule lawyer does not wait for consent to operate.

5 I chose UNICEF as a reference because its definition is grounded in fieldwork on the impact of social norms on people's well-being. I think that applied social research that focuses on safety can benefit game studies.

5. VALIDATION

Lastly, the authority is validated (continuously distributed or re-distributed) through peer recognition, when other agents consent or comply without consent, with the commands of the dominant player. Research confirms that consolidation of authority lies in the compliance of subject agents.[6] As a result of the legitimization of authority, an agent with less power will accept the dominant agent's command "as a valid norm" that justifies one's actions (Weber 1922 and 1978; Abizadeh 2021) Those who are deemed (or deem themselves) non-experts engage in behaviours that support said expert, for example, by agreeing with them (Tannen 1990). Then, one's scope of authority (exercised or possessed power) is "obeyed by" others. However, the command requires a certain "voluntary submission," an interest in obeying due to practical motives (survival) or to the belief in its legitimacy (Haugaard 2018) When peers give recognition to the hegemonic player it normalizes and consolidates the cycle of dominance (Dashiell 2020).

> *Phil imposes his strategy on the group, defending it as being for the group and towards the assumed shared goal of winning combat. Phil exercises power despite the resistance of Tom or Billy (who argues or resists), and with Kim's assistance (who nods or stays quiet). Eventually, Tom concedes to Phil, but regardless of the group's assistance towards Phil's power, it does not mean that all three players want to take the same actions, use the same strategies, and share the same goal of why they are playing the game. In that sense, Phil exercises some degree of power-despite-resistance (from Tom), with-assistance (from Kim).*

A nuanced conception of power is presented by Abizadeh (2021), who proposes a distinction between power-over-with-assistance and power-over-despite-resistance. In some occasions, an agent exercises power-over without the presence of resistance or with others' assistance (support). This is what Abizadeh calls power-with-assistance. On other occasions, both agents exercise power but the outcomes favour agent A over agent B, despite the resistance of agent B. Resistance is not always overcome and power can still be possessed or exercised. This is what Abizadeh calls "power-despite-resistance." This distinction allows us to further understand the non-exclusivity between power-over and power-with and shows that assistance is not always intentional. A relation of assistance is recognized when agent A supports agent B in its exercise of power. It can be to act in concert with the dominant agent, to omit or to abstain and it can be unintentional and done without awareness. The dominant agent can use coercion or persuasion to convince a person to assist. Social status and security are some of the many factors that can influence one agent to assist another. For example, the authority that possesses the expert can persuade a player to abstain from challenging the rule lawyer. Abizadeh clarifies that acquiescence is not the same as giving consent, although not protesting is sufficient assistance. In that sense, an agent who assists another may or not share strategies, goals, and knowledge. On the contrary, resistance requires an agent to protest such that one must not do what is asked of them. The act of resistance creates a barrier to the capacity to effect outcome (power-to) and to the exercise of power (power-over/with).

That reveals, in parts, how implicit consent plays a part in both the normalization of exercises of power and the validation of authority. Actual consent is irrelevant to the validation of authority because only the perception of consent matters. When a less powerful agent voluntarily submits to the command of the dominant agent even without explicit consent, that compliance echoes peer support and can be perceived as implied consent: recognition solidifies authority and authority legitimizes power. Through this cycle, the gain of recognition and the status of authority feed one another, then help the dominant player win the argument, which turns one's perspective into the "normal" or the socially expected way of doing things. What was once one person's preferred way of playing becomes an expected way of playing that all should abide by. The cycle continues.

> *Phil interferes with Tom's game without his request (without consent). Phil suggests an outcome for Tom that he disagrees with (resistance). Rather than accepting Tom's response and respecting Tom's boundary (lack of consent), Phil argues to persuade Tom to achieve his desired outcome. Although Tom does not give*

6 There are a series of factors which will bring agents to validate another's authority, yet social integration seems to be central to compliance. Research on social norms shows that a person who does not adhere to a social norm expects to get punished by being socially excluded and to get rewarded by gaining social acceptance when they do adhere. (Unicef, 2021, 1) As observed by Hughes (1983 and 1995), if the social norm dictates that cheating is not welcome at the game table, then a player who gets caught cheating might be socially punished by being asked to leave the game or not get invited to play the next time around. In that sense, fear of social punishment or desire for social reward might motivate a person to validate the commands of the authoritarian player.

explicit verbal consent, he ultimately does what Phil suggests. (assistance) Kim first remains quiet and then nods in agreement. Her silence serves as a form of abstention that indirectly supports Phil (assistance). Phil might interpret the lack of resistance as implied consent. Then, Kim's nodding indicates explicit but not enthusiastic consent (assistance). Later on, when the DM dismisses Phil's desired outcome (resistance), the DM resist Phil's exercise of power and Phil's capacity to influence the outcome (resistance of power-to).

6. THE ROLE OF THE DM

Montola (2009) offers a perspective on power distribution in gaming by proposing a three-part categorization of decisive power in role-playing. The author explains that players often implicitly consent to give a game master the Exogenous authority to reconcile what he calls "conflict" in a process of "closure" (30). Montola affirms that closure involves all participants by giving them a "similar amount" of decisive Exogenous power (32). While this holds in theory, it proves false in practice, as seen when Montola's argument is examined in light of Dashiell's statement. A larger amount of Exogenous power is granted to a participant who uses hegemonic masculine discourses and comes across as knowledgeable. As Dashiell writes: "all players treat one another equally, but this courtesy tends to privilege the loudest voices in the room as opposed to the smartest" (2017, 1). By design, a DM holds the authority and is expected to define the game's parameters, enforce rules, and intervene when players deviate. The authority of the DM is established by the rules of the game whereas the authority of the rule lawyer is a "social role" maintained through norms. Both exemplify the Exogenous power of the participant on the game, from outside the game. Both authority figures can coexist simultaneously. While the *D&D* rulebooks inform us that the authority of the DM should prevail above players' and advise against the interference of rule lawyers (Wizards of the Coast 2014,) scholarship in rule lawyering has documented more than one occurrence when rule lawyers will interfere despite the presence of the DM. (Attanasio 2020; Heinz 2018; Berman 2011) Authority theory suggests that expert authority is often dominant over other authority figures due to the fetishization of rules and that it may be a "social fact" that the majority of a group believes expert authority is legitimate (Haugaard 2018).

Comparatively, we can infer that it is the group that decides when the authority of the DM is subordinate to the authority of the expert player. In some cases, the DM may seek assistance in determining or enforcing the rules, thereby creating an opportunity for rule lawyering. This suggests two important points: first, the DM is foremost a person also subject to the culturally established belief that individuals exhibiting certain characteristics possess expertise that entitles them to authority; second, rule lawyering may be desirable, at times. However, rule lawyering can also occur independently of whether the DM has solicited help. In that situation, the DM has the authority to veto a rule lawyer's argument and curb their command. That said, the DM does not subtract the power possessed by the rule lawyer, and as a result, cannot entirely stop a player from exercising that power.

7. CONCLUSION

Deconstructing the process of authority allows us to understand in what ways the glorification of expertise and the social role of authority that is tied to expertise carry weight at the game table: when less powerful players accept the advice or commands of a dominant player, they implicitly consent to the authority that upholds the dominant agent: compliance, even without explicit consent, gives implicit permission to impose one player's own rules and strategies. Consequently, authority reinforces a tabletop role-playing culture that normatively consolidates expert authority to the hegemonic player perceived as possessing more game knowledge and legitimizes hegemonic behaviours often exercised by white males. Scholars and designers are concerned with how to defuse exercises of power like rule lawyering and gamesplaining. While game mechanics and social tactics may help mitigate these power dynamics during gameplay, they do not fundamentally change the prevailing culture that allows such practices to persist. Recognizing who holds authority reveals that rule lawyers and gamesplainers operate with the legitimacy of that authority. This understanding highlights how we unconsciously and unwittingly support these behaviours, often with implicit consent or yet, without consent but without resistance.

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Beyond Consent: Care Ethics in Horror Role-Playing Games

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The RPG Self: Bleed, Constellation, and Consent

Abstract: This article is a philosophical exploration of the intersection between the deep narratives of tabletop RPGs and the notions of bleed and consent. This synoptic view integrates the theories of Carl Jung into a broader theory of self that expects the conscious meta-cognition of patterns within RPG play. It revisits bleed as a bi-directional process, its types, and properties (Beltrán 2012, Kemper 2017, Hugaas 2019, Hugaas 2024). Then, the article explores and extends the Jungian approach to RPGs (Bowman 2012, 2017, Beltrán 2012, 2013, Diakolambrianou & Bowman 2023), broadening the theoretical framework of bleed studies and consent-based gaming. The advantage of Jung's theory lies in its aptitude to combine inner psychic manifestations with symbols, images, and feelings (Stevens 2002). The archetypes, the universal figures of supra-personal character that organize feeling-toned complexes, are key concepts (Stein 1998). Wrought in our dreams and mythology (Jung 2014), they set up the playground for our symbol-forming capacities (Stevens 2002).

The article proposes two new concepts to study individuation, archetypal engagement, and bleed in RPGs: constellation and the RPG Self. Finally, it discusses insights for studying bleed in Game Directors and, employing ideas from archetypal psychology (Adams 2002, Hillman 2004, Paris 2008), it explores future perspectives on devising safe strategies for consent-based gaming via the conscious recognition of archetypal images and mythic narratives born within the RPG Self.

Keywords: depth psychology, role-playing games, identity, archetypes, individuation, constellations, consent

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1. INTRODUCTION

Game worlds in role-playing games (RPGs) possess deepness, i.e., they result from a collaborative creation process beyond the single participant (Wolfendale & Franklin 2012). The story shapes and unfolds unexpectedly, gaining an organic, autonomous, and symbolic character (Bastarrachea Magnani 2020, 2023). RPGs are more than make-believe fiction, triggering authentic emotional responses to events and things happening in the magic circle and producing a unique aesthetic experience (Ehrett & Worth 2012).

We find *bleed* among the consequences of RPGs, a phenomenon corresponding to those moments experienced by participants, where content, either emotional, procedural or cognitive, flows between persons and characters and viceversa (Bowman 2013, 2015; Hugaas 2019). Although difficult to define (Montolla 2010), bleed is recognized by the thinning of the distinction between the different figures in which an RPG participant unfolds (Waskul 2002, Waskul & Lust 2004). Because it is spontaneous and unconscious, there are many open questions about its relationship to consciousness, either to exploit it for the RPG experience (Montolla 2010, Montolla, et al. 2015, Kemper 2020) or to alleviate its adverse effects (Fine 1983, Harder 2018).

Unconscious processes such bleed introduce a challenge for consent in gaming, i.e., the collective agreement of what is safe and what is not when playing (Reynolds & Germain 2019), as the rich unfolding of the participants implies a multilayer array of consequences in either the fictional, imaginary, and everyday worlds. Because one aims to create safe gaming environments to immerse oneself in (JARPS Editors 2020), a better understanding of those layers and how content flows through them seems timely.

Here, I revisit bleed as a bi-directional process, its types, and properties (Beltrán 2012, Kemper 2017, Hugaas 2019, Hugaas 2024). Then, I explore and extend the Jungian approach to RPGs (Bowman 2012, 2017, Beltrán 2012, 2013, Diakolambrianou & Bowman 2023), broadening the theoretical framework of bleed studies and consent-based gaming. The advantage of Jung's theory lies in its aptitude to combine inner psychic manifestations with symbols, images, and feelings (Stevens 2002). Here, the archetypes, the universal figures of supra-personal character that organize feeling-toned complexes are key concepts (Stein 1998). Wrought in our dreams and mythology (Jung 2014), they set up the playground for our symbol-forming capacities (Stevens 2002).

I propose two new concepts to study individuation, archetypal engagement, and bleed in RPGs: *constellation* and the *RPG Self*. Jung's constellation is the process by which archetypes manifest structurally and concretely in the psyche, thus forming the Self and identity (Jung 1981). It implies a simultaneous activation of specific archetype mixes, leading to a cluster of self-referenced complexes and spontaneous clusters of images (fantasies and dreams) (von Heydwolff 2000). The RPG Self is an extended description of the Jungian Self constituted of three parts: the collective unconscious that makes archetypal engagement possible; the personal Self, which supports the everyday personality; and an interpersonal Self that feeds from the content of all the participants of an RPG session.

The deepness in RPG's game worlds would result from the interconnected evocation of archetype clusters; characters are understood as co-constellations, i.e., symbolical personifications alive, meaningful, and affectively charged; and bleed as a natural process coming from the context-based flow of meaning that results from interacting constellations. Finally, I discuss some insights for studying bleed in Game Directors and, employing ideas from archetypal psychology (Adams 2002, Hillman 2004, Paris 2008), I explore future perspectives on devising safe strategies for consent-based gaming via the conscious recognition of archetypal images and mythic narratives born within the RPG Self.

Role-playing games (RPGs) constitute a co-created, improvised, and spontaneous shared reality simultaneously enacted and experienced (Bowman 2012). A central distinctive trait is their *deepness*, i.e., the collaborative process creating them goes beyond the single participants taking part in the activity (Wolfendale & Franklin 2012). The story shapes itself and unfolds unexpectedly, gaining an organic, autonomous, and symbolic character (Bastarrachea-Magnani, 2020). Therefore, RPGs become more than just make-believe fiction (Ehrett & Worth 2012), producing a unique aesthetic experience, and triggering authentic emotional responses to events and things happening within and beyond the magic circle, i.e., the barrier between the game and everyday worlds (Huizinga 1949, Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Among the consequences of RPG's deepness, we find bleed phenomena (Boos 2007), i.e., those moments experienced by participants, where "their real life feelings, thoughts, and physical states spill over into their characters and viceversa" (Bowman 2015). Even for psychology, the concept has been challenging to define (Montolla 2010). Still, it is recognized by the thinning of the distinction between the different figures in which a person is divided inside and outside the RPG's magic circle. Because bleed is a spontaneous and unconscious phenomenon, many open questions exist about its relationship to consciousness.

Bleed phenomena represent a challenge for consent in gaming, i.e., the collective and sustained agreement between game participants about what is safe and what is not when playing (Reynolds & Germain 2019), which also makes explicit the limits on what can or cannot happen in the narrative, including character development and interpersonal dynamics (Zambrano 2019, Gage 2023, Writing Games 2024). Consent has become a central issue in gaming because one aims to create safe environments in which to immerse oneself (JARPS Editors 2020). However, it is difficult to define and set up, as often it is reduced to a static verbal yes/no contract that is insufficient as "a "simple "yes" consent can be given out of fear, out of exhaustion, or because one feels that it is what they are "supposed" to do" (Voseen 2018, 217) or considered self-evident instead of assuming it is an evolving process (Voseen 2018). Instead, consent in gaming is characterized by the function it serves, keeping the voluntary, enjoyable, and safe character of playing. A key feature of playing games is their deliberate and free character (Huizinga 1949, Caillois 2001). It could include activities requiring compromise, including learning rules, research, and preparation, but all of them serve to shape the freedom of play. Accordingly, playing becomes an intimate space where, if the boundaries are unclear, it may render us vulnerable. For E. Voseen, a signature of consent breaking is the bursting of the magic circle, "The bursting of the magic circle is the moment which makes game play worthless to the player. That moment is based entirely on a player's own perception of the shared magic circle" (Voseen 2018, 210). There are explicit harmful practices that break it, like breaches of a prearranged social contract, harassment, offensive attitudes and stereotypes, discrimination, or handling recklessly psychologically damaging topics, but others might be subtle. Several mechanisms for consent in RPGs have been proposed, depending on whether one deals with anticipated or spontaneous situations during play or desires anonymity. Preparation tools include the so-called session zero (Walles 2020), which helps to set up the information and tone of the game or campaign, and checklists (consent forms) that help to negotiate topics that should be avoided or screened. Others are employed based on open communication that allows players to indicate freely and safely their boundaries, triggers, and expectations, such as pausing mechanisms, script changes, consent cards (such as the X card), and safe words (Stavropoulos 2013, Big Bad Con 2016). A better understanding of how content flows between layers of complex games such as RPGs where the magic circle is semipermeable (Bastarrachea-Magnani 2023), and gaming spans beyond the single game session is required.

My research on bleed is motivated by my personal experience as a Game Director participating in long-term tabletop campaigns. To produce a rich game world with diverse nuances for players to explore, I enact a plethora of non-player characters and other personifications. The intense and continuous character of my performance produced bleed in me. Also, I noticed bleed from the players and that their problems—which I was not wholly aware of—permeated the story and their character's development. However, at that moment, I didn't possess the conceptual resources to acknowledge these phenomena or manage them. It was years later, when debriefing those campaigns, that I made it intelligible and recognized the potential negative impact in my life that, as Game Director, I could have produced inadvertently. These experiences convinced me that setting up the magic circle as a mere social contract is not enough to guarantee consent: more things are at play, primarily

unconscious. RPG deepness begs for a reformulation of what we understand as playing together. RPGs allow us not only to question and reinvent social structures but also to experiment with our identities (Huugas 2022) and transform us on a deep level, but this process occurs collectively. Hence, "we must accept that eventually, players will bring challenging content from their imagination into the design and play of games" (Bowmann 2022, 10). Precisely, bleed entails a spillover of content between players mediated by the game world and their characters. This content may destabilize us, given the vulnerable state we have when shifting identities in play (Diakolambrianou & Bowman, 2023), via the enactment of personal fantasies and repressed content (Beltran 2013, Brown & Morrow 2015, Bowman 2017b, 2022) or unacknowledged bleed (Bowmann 2013, 2022).

In this contribution, I address these issues by extending the current Jungian approach to RPGs from a philosophical perspective, employing the concept of *archetypal constellation* to the emergence of characters and proposing the new concept of the *RPG Self*. The spontaneous and unconscious character of bleed suggests that a Jungian framework might help unveil the relevant mechanisms behind it. The deep psychology of Carl Gustav Jung is familiar to RPG studies. Mainly, it has been employed before to propose a basic framework to study immersion (Bowmann 2012), active imagination (Bowman 2017a), archetypal engagement, and ego bleed in larp (Beltrán 2012) to explore psychological repression in subcultures (Beltran 2013), and the engagement of repressed materials via shadow work (Beltran 2013; Bowman 2022, Diakolambrianou & Bowman 2023). The advantage of Jung's theory lies in combining inner psychic manifestations with symbols, images, and feelings (Stevens 2002). Furthermore, his concept of the collective unconscious opens up connections to metaphysics, religion, and spirituality via symbolic channels. I propose four objectives: 1) to make further progress in Jungian approaches to RPGs by positing the notion of *constellation* as key to understanding the onset and enactment of archetypal images, character emergence in RPGs, and bleed 2) to develop the notion of an *RPG-Self* that combines a *transpersonal* and an *interpersonal* Selves and helps to account for non-explicit avenues for consent. 3) to push forward the idea that consent in RPGs should consider the *collective ownership* of characters. 4) to set up elements that help to expand the current framework of bleed theory to include the Game Director dimension.

2. THE CONCEPT OF BLEED

Although bleed is connected to strong or significant situations experienced by the player, it is suggested it might always occur as part of the identity transformation within the gaming experience (Hugaas 2024, Diakolambrianou & Bowman 2023). In the first instance, it is recognized by the thinning of the distinction between persona and character, so the person's subjectivity becomes influenced by the character and vice versa (Montola 2010). As a process, bleed possesses both direction and pathways through which it manifests. First, it is a bi-directional process. This means the experience flow between characters and persona can go both ways (Bowman 2015, Bowman & Lieberoth 2018). *Bleed-in* is the term used to denote when states in the persona affect the character. Instead, *bleed-out* indicates that states triggered by the occurrences of the fictitious (fantastic) world happening to the character are migrating to the persona. Second, bleed occurs in different ways, depending on the experience that is being transferred. These pathways are often deployed superimposed. However, three major types have been recognized, thus defining types of bleed. Hugaas (2019) has proposed they are *emotional*, *procedural*, and *memetic*. Emotional bleed consists of spilling emotional experiences (Waern 2010); procedural bleed corresponds to the transference of physical states, from weariness to gestures; and memetic bleed entails the flow of cultural units and knowledge, including the aptitude for learning. Proponents have also suggested more specific channels, such as transferring personality features or ego bleed (Beltrán 2012), emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017), and design bleed (Toft & Harrer 2020). Moreover, a framework in which the pathways are distinguished between basic and high-level bleed components but integrated into one, *identity bleed*, has been recently put forward (Hugaas 2024). Ego bleed is significant here, as it would be "a process by which fragments of personality are passed both ways between players and their characters with both immediate and long-term outcomes" (Beltran 2012, 95). In other words, ego bleed aims to describe the effect of mythic archetypal engagement on personality and the mid- and long-term effects of bleed (Beltran 2012).

Furthermore, bleed has two central features I would like to draw attention to: it is primarily spontaneous and unconscious (Bowman 2015). Generally speaking, bleed is a problem of the unconscious, thus, in part, uncontrollable. For some, it can be a powerful experience. "Whether or not participants intend to play for bleed, the impact of bleed experiences can become intense for some individuals" (Bowman 2015). When we say it is spontaneous, it not only means that it depends on the subject and game situation but also that its intensity is variable up to the point that it could be recognizable even with similar conditions. It does not happen only when one shifts in or out of character; it may happen anytime during a session. Moreover, it is unclear why it could occur more frequently in some individuals while others never experience it (Hugaas 2019). Some processes have

been explored that could lead to strong bleed out (Leonard & Thurman 2018) and it has been proposed there is a bleed perception threshold that depends on the pathway and subject (Hugaas 2024).

Hence, the role of consciousness in bleed is still under debate. On the one hand, becoming aware of bleed could reduce or dissolve the effect (Hugaas 2019). On the other, it is clear that a degree of conscious control plays an essential role in managing it either by shielding us from unwelcome effects or by inducing and intensifying it. Consciousness is anyways significant when facing bleed consequences, which can be considered negative or positive depending on the situation. Adverse effects may include the generation of perturbation of the persona's personalities and their relationships in the everyday world (Beltrán 2013), from feelings of exclusion and antagonisms between players in everyday life to extreme situations such as *overinvolvement* (Fine 1983) or *limerence* (Harder 2018). Here, several techniques are intended to manage bleed, including in-game signaling, de-roleing, or debriefing (Bowman 2015). Instead, the positive effects of bleed-in are related to engineering effects in-game space to increase, for example, immersion and the RPG experience itself (Nilsen 2012). Such is the case of *steering* (Montola 2010, Montola, et al. 2015) and *wyrding* the self (Kemper 2020). Positive effects related to bleed-out are associated with fostering learning. Regarding the conscious driving of bleed, there is a connection to the *alibi*, i.e., the set of elements that allows players to accept the situations inside the game space happening to their characters without compromising their personas and the accountability of their actions (Montola & Holopainen 2012, Bowman 2015, Deterding 2017). The alibi might be considered a defense mechanism (Bowman & Hugaas 2021) triggered in response to the liminal game space. Then, "the stronger the alibi, the weaker the bleed" (Bowman 2015), given that it might interfere with key processes for individuation (Bowmann 2022). But if controllable, it can be viewed "as a way to loosen the rigidity of an individual's need for self-continuity, or as a way to lower their identity defense" (Hugaas 2024, 6), opening avenues for identity transformation (Bowman 2022). The matter is an open issue since alibis seem to be distributed over the conscious and the unconscious. Thus, studying how the Self configurates in response to an RPG session is relevant.

3. JUNGIAN ARCHETYPES AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

The advantage of Jung's theoretical approach lies in its ability to combine inner psychic manifestations with symbols, images, and feelings (Stevens 2002). Notably, the collective unconscious is a paradigm of a self-sustained, objective, deep inner (non-external) space that contains all repressed, forgotten, and primordial contents (Jung 2014a). Next, I will sketch the central aspects of Jung's theory of the psyche to set up the framework of what I call the transpersonal Self in RPGs. In particular, the focus will be on archetypes and constellations.

Jung's program attempts to describe the psyche and its dynamics. The Jungian M. Stein claims, "I think of it as a three-dimensional map that shows the levels of the psyche as well as the dynamic interrelations among them" (1998, 8). His theory is affect-based, as feelings are the centers for organizing psychic components (Kalsched 1996). "The essential basis of our personality is affectivity. Thought and action are, as it were, only symptoms of affectivity" (Jung 1982, CW 3 78, 57). What we call the Self is not identical to the Ego or persona. The Self is a tapestry of all the different features of subjectivity, both the conscious and unconscious (what we and others see, and we don't, respectively). Instead, the Ego is only the front—or most external part—of the Self and its locus. It is an actualization of the Self and, thus, that part of our personality at the center of the consciousness (Stevens 2022). The unconscious is where all the repressed and forgotten contents gather (Jung 2014a). It can be divided into two layers, the personal and the transpersonal, and integrated into three parts: the ego and the personal unconscious (together constituting the personal Self), and the collective unconscious accounting for the transpersonal Self (Beltran 2012).

The personal unconscious contains psychic contents that disappeared from the immediate consciousness because they were either forgotten or repressed (Jung 2014a). It includes a set of personality patterns that depend on each individual acquisition, named feeling-toned complexes (Jung 2014a). Complexes are autonomous groups of representations or emotional images that serve as "the basic building blocks of the personal psyche" (Beltran 2013, 97). They are affects that bring out a "tone" organizing sensations, ideas, memories, concepts, etc., and are thought of as a psychic analog to molecules (Jung 1982). Strong experiences are accompanied by strong affects and complexes allow them to cluster around. However, a personality's concrete history requires that the Self transverses to a more primordial and transcendental level (Stevens 2002). There, complexes group together around universal figures of supra-personal character that lie more profoundly in the unconscious (Beltran 2013). The collective unconscious is the deepest stratum containing those primordial structures that serve as conditions of possibility for the human experience as such, thus being transcendentally shared by subjects. It does not come from personal experience, but it is innate, and "identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in everyone of us" (Jung 2014a, CW 9 3, 4). In this sense, it is

shared among humans, being "an impersonal psyche common to all men, even though it expresses itself through a personal consciousness. When anyone breathes, his breathing is not a phenomenon to be interpreted personally" (Jung 2014b, CW 9 314, 186).

The contents encoded in the collective unconscious are called archetypes. They are "more or less invariant universal fantasies and patterns of behavior" (Stein 1998) and present themselves without mediation, for example, in our dreams and fantasies or wrought in mythology (Jung, 2014a), setting up the playground for our symbol-forming capacities (Stevens 2002). One would say that the complexes are the matter of psychic contents, as a personal shell, while the archetypes are their form, as a transpersonal core (Kalsched 1996). Archetypes are archaic (originary) and possess a psychoid (quasi-psychic) character, i.e., not representable (Jung 2010). Rather than being ideas, we can think of them as universal instinctive patterns that organize the unconscious psychic process in the personal Self (Jung 2010). Hence, archetypes-as-such are not empirical by themselves but only, in a sense, the deposits of all our ancestral (and future) human experiences. They work as a priori categories of the psyche, much in the Kantian sense (Kant 1999, Bishop 1996). As conditions of possibility for human life, archetypes reach "not only upwards to the spiritual heights of religion, art, and metaphysics but also down into the dark realms of organic and inorganic matter" (Stevens 2002, 34). As a result, archetypes are not universal images (representations) but universal propensities to have specific experiences and create certain images (Papadopoulos 2006; McGrath 2012). "We must, however, constantly bear in mind that what we mean by "archetype" is in itself irrepresentable, but has effects which make visualizations of it possible, namely, the archetypal images and ideas" (Jung 1975c, CW 8 417, 278). Therefore, despite them going beyond historicity, we are used to representing them via stereotypical (archetypical) images, such as the Trickster, the Great Mother, the Shadow, etc. (Rensma 2009).

However, one should not forget that unlike Kantian a priori representations devoid of sensuous content (Jung 1963), archetypes are not mere formal figures but "a living, empirical entity, charged not only with meaningfulness but also with feeling" and "a piece of life, a living system of reactions and aptitudes" (Stevens 2002, 44). "To the extent that the archetypes intervene in the shaping of conscious content by regulating, modifying, and motivating them, they act like instincts" (Jung 1975d, CW 8 404, 266). They have the task of crystallizing experiences in terms of complexes, furnishing the imprint of subsequent experiences (Samuels 1986), and providing meaningful representations for our psychic dynamics with which we can interact. To achieve this end, Jung regarded them as bipolar structures. "One pole of the archetype represents instinct and related affects rooted in the body; the other pole is represented by a form-giving spiritual component made up of images produced by the mind. The psyche exists between these two opposites and represents a "third" factor combining instinct/affect and spirit into unconscious fantasies that create meaning" (Kalsched 1996, 92). The archetype allows the inner and outer world, allowing for context-based responses, so "the image represents the meaning of the instinct" (Jung 1975d, CW 8 398, 262). The closest metaphysical objects are probably F. W. J. Schelling's primordial thoughts (Urgedaken), universal figures that, in the form of the gods of mythology, take root in art and poetry, forcing themselves into existence and developing by the rules of fantasy within the German philosopher's psycho-ontological interpretation of mythology (Schelling 1999, McGarth 2012). Finally, they can also be considered biological entities subject to natural selection and, thus, evolution (Stevens 2002). In a way, we inherited them so they could be traced back to primordial times in an evolutionary sense. Still, there are no vestiges but biological necessities, and current avenues investigate their psychobiological origin (Vedor 2023), either in the brain architecture (Major 2021) or in the genetic background (Major 2021) as biological programs.

4. TRANSPERSONAL, INTRAPERSONAL, AND RPG SELVES

Personal experience translates to the activation and development of archetypal potential dormant in the deep layers of personality. Individuation is the process of integrating the Self as an Ego (Stevens 2002). It is a natural activity where the Self conforms as an individual by making all the Selves into a whole personality that recognizes itself as such (Bowman 2012, Beltrán 2012). The Ego is not fixed, but it is created every time new experiences arise to be integrated. Consequently, we always have the potential for personal growth and change. During individuation, people empirically engage with archetypes, then "The Ego experiences itself as an individual in this moment -separate, somehow, from the archetypal entities with whom it has interacted, and yet altered through the experience of interaction itself. Jung dubs this process individuation, the sudden awareness of the Ego, as distinct from the archetypes" (Bowman 2012). In this way, we would say that our psyche's personal history is not merely determined causally but emerges from both historical events occurring to us and the collective history of the whole species, encoded in the archetypes (Stevens 2002). I will call the archetypal level, where the Self gets in touch with its supra-personal dimension, the transpersonal Self. Hence, the engagement with the archetypes is the point of contact between the personal and transpersonal Selves.

Let's go back to RPGs. When one considers the interplay of the individuation process and how RPGs participate in forming the Self, noteworthy imagination plays a central role. Imagination is a productive faculty that entails synthetic power, so it can combine different contents, even contradictory ones, and integrate them into new ones. For Jung, active imagination and free association are means of individuation (Beltran 2012). Active imagination creates a free space for the ego to relax, allowing the unconscious to participate in the integration process (Beltran 2013). Bowman adds, "Active imagination involves the relaxation or temporary suspension of the primary ego in order to delve into deeper levels of consciousness." (Bowman 2012). At those moments, the growth potential is unleashed. This is particularly important for Jung's psychotherapy, as the Ego could be nurtured by symbols extracted and arising from the collective unconscious that, being impossible to get sick, could heal and restore the psyche (Stevens 2002, 39). Active imagination is also connected to immersion (Bowman 2012). As W. Beltran explains, "the archetypes embedded in one's own personal psychic landscape make them useful for unpacking the ongoing process of interaction between players and their characters." (2012, 91). Evidently, RPGs offer a playground to intensify the unconscious processes relevant to the imagination. So, it seems bleed is deeply intertwined with these capacities. However, to account for the deepness of RPGs and the interactive and collaborative narrative insufflating life to them, we need to go beyond the transpersonal Self, i.e., to create a new category. The reason is that the imagination participating in RPGs is not merely individual but collective, shared.

A central question to this work is: where do RPG characters come from? A short answer would be that they are partly conscious, partly unconscious, a mosaic of elements of the Self, gathered by the imagination. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is more complex once we consider the RPG's deepness. Even though personas could initially drive their characters during character creation, they live in a co-created world. Once characters develop, they become simultaneously fed from the collective experiences of all the people involved in the game, either Game Directors or players. They do not come just from the action of a single participant but from a mutual ground. In other words, RPGs occur in the shared imaginary world where the story unfolds. Thus, to set up a framework for bleed and consent in RPGs, we must make a second distinction between players and their Self when interacting with the co-created narrative that composes RPGs. One of the challenges in RPGs is that meaning emerges outside of a traditional derivative conceptual way from premises to conclusions. Instead, their deepness results from a rhizomatic unfolding that gets across complex levels of the personal Self, intersubjectivity, and the world itself (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). I will call the Ego that emerges and is integrated within the co-created space as the interpersonal Self.

How is this interpersonal Self composed? To separate the different figures in which a persona interacts with the world built in RPG, as Egos, I employ D. Waskul's formalism (2002, Waskul and Lust 2004). The RPG participant is divided into three figures (Selves) acting in different worlds: the person playing, the player, and the character. The person is the figure that inhabits everyday life, or that belongs to the real world. The player is the figure the Self takes when participating in the ludic activity. It belongs to the imaginary world, the space resulting from the co-created interactive narrative. Lastly, the character is the figure that lives by the fictional or fantastic world, i.e., the scenario that follows its own rules and possesses its internal coherence, natural or supernatural. The person is the anchor in the ordinary world, while the player enters the magical circle of the RPG session (gaming world). From there, the character explores, develops, and thrives within the fantastic world. Nevertheless, the separation is never completed: "Role-playing games obligate participants to occupy a liminal role located in the boundaries of persona, player, and person" (Waskul & Lust 2004). There is a continuous overlap of the three worlds and their figures. One piece of evidence for this is the existence and necessity of meta-game. A clear separation is not as strict as R. Caillois would demand of every game (Caillois 2001), and the magic circle seems semi-permeable (Salen & Zimmerman 2003; Bastarrachea-Magnani 2023). Summarizing it, the created world in RPGs lives in three different "logical spaces": the ordinary, everyday world; the imaginary, transient, or liminal world; and the fantastic, supernatural, extraordinary world, where the dominant figure is the persona, the player and the character, respectively. Notice that neither the character nor the player comes from a single Self (persona) but emerges within the interpersonal Self from a shared (overlapped) individuation process considering all the Selves (participants) taking a role in the RPG. Here, we observe that bleed becomes not a singularity but part of the individuation process of figures as a result of shifting between Egos in the interpersonal Self.

Likewise, the way these figures traverse these worlds is not unique. Jonaya Kemper's proposal to apply Simon Brind's ideas to larp seems relevant here (Brind 2017). Kemper distinguishes between the plot, the story, and the narrative. The plot would be the plan or script in the mind of players and Game Directors (GD); the story is how the events unfold for the figures in the actual play; the narrative is how the events are put together once the game session has occurred (Kemper 2020). In other words, they constitute three temporal moments linking

the real, imaginary, and fantastic worlds concerning the actual play, i.e., before, during, and after. The Self is integrated and re-integrated during game sessions due to the interaction with the other Selves and their own figures (other participants of the RPG, the GDs, or even the fictive blocks present in the game session). Thus, the interpersonal Self emerges from the propagation of the personal Self back and forth between the Ego and the character as an emergent phenomenon resulting from the Selves in action. The three different worlds (Waskul's) and three different accounts (Kemper's) set up a complementary framework to investigate the distance between the player, persona, and character (Diakolambrianou & Bowman 2023). I believe these dynamics play a key role in bleed phenomena and must be considered when addressing consent, e.g., regarding Shadow work. Bowman points out that "players and facilitators can shape their preparation before games, the play experience itself, and post-game processing with the intention of working with the personal and/or collective Shadow" (2022, 8). Consent-based play requires considering those moments beyond the single game session.

Once we have established the different figures composing the interpersonal Self, we define the RPG Self as the Ego that emerges in the transient domain shaped by the confluence between the transpersonal and the interpersonal Selves. It feeds on the psychic content of the persona playing and their engagement with the collective unconscious, as well as from all the figures participating in the interpersonal Self. Here, M. Buber's idea of the I-Thou (2018) comes in handy in the sense that the existence of the interhuman existence realm, such as the RPG Self, rises only in endeavors when one relates the otherness with our whole being (Gordon 2002). To explain the emergence of characters in the RPG Self, I will discuss the concept of constellation next.

5. ARCHETYPE CONSTELLATION

Constellation is a concept that Jung mentions continuously in his works but rarely defines. In short, it denotes the activation (Jung 1976) or actualization of the archetypes (Papadopoulos 2006). It constitutes the "symbolic law" dictating their dynamics before manifesting at the level of the personal consciousness, i.e., as a patterns of behavior (complexes). Constellation would then be the (symbolic) process by which archetypes can manifest structurally but concretely in the psyche (Jung 1982), thus forming the Self. The word is formed by the Latin root Stella (star), the prefix con- which means coming together, and the suffix -ation, which points to an action, process, or state. In other words, it means the process of joining/joined stars. Here, of course, the stars play the symbolic role of being the archetypes, a wink to stargazing and astrology applied to the inner self.

In his 1905 text, The Psychological Diagnosis of Evidence, where Jung studied word associations, he explained that "(…) the complex has the effect that the subject does not react by arbitrary random connections of words but derives most of his reactions from the complex. The influence of the complex on thinking and behaviour is called a constellation. The reactions of our subject are thus constellated by a complex" (Jung 1981a, CW 2 733, 321). Also, in A Review of the Complex Theory, the Swiss psychologist details that

> This term simply expresses the fact that the outward situation releases a psychic process in which certain contents gather together and prepare for action. When we say that a person is "constellated," we mean that he has taken up a position from which he can be expected to react in a quite definite way. But the constellation is an automatic process that happens involuntarily and which no one can stop of his own accord. The constellated contents are definite complexes possessing their own specific energy." (Jung 1975a, CW 8 198, 132)

Constellation could be conscious (active), half-conscious, or unconscious; however, for associations, it is primarily a non-conscious process (Jung 1981b). One should notice that, as a process, the concept has two meanings in Jungian terms (von Heydwolff 2000). The first one is the triggering of a complex by external causes, which manifests in the thinking and acting as a disturbed state of consciousness influenced by the archetypes behind those complexes (Jung 1981a, 1975a). Here, I am focused on the second one, i.e., the process with which the archetypes are clustered unconsciously and spontaneously in the form of images (fantasies and dreams). Constellation allows one to become conscious of something really new or keep aware of unsolvable conflicts (von Heydwolff 2000).

The central feature of a constellation is it comprises a simultaneous activation of a specific mix of archetypes leading to a set of complexes. In other words, archetypes are neither activated alone nor actualized as a whole, so they cluster to manifest as living possibilities in thought and action, "mostly, archetypes affect individuals and groups not in isolation but in clusters/networks/constellations" (Papadopoulos 2006, 32). Otherwise, the psyche will be overloaded. According to Stevens (2002), Jung:

> ...came to the conclusion that elements capable of constellating an archetype activated not just the corresponding portions of the archetype but the total archetypal system. The system, once activated, then seeks encounter with associated elements other than those which brought about the original activation. This hypothesis is entirely in line with Jung's overall concept of a Self which seeks its own completion in the individuation process. (Stevens 2002, 143)

The field concept from quantum physics would be analogous to a constellation, as contents in the collective unconscious appear ordered, just as particles arrange in the presence of a magnetic, electric, or any field and are dressed by them; hence, what "makes sense" for the conscious mind is in harmony with the preconscious constellation (von Franz 1964).

As the bring birth of archetypal images, constellation is a specific way in which we refer to the individuation process: archetypes aggregate when actualized, as no single group is a priori predominant. Hence, a constellation entails two parts: first, the clustering of the archetypes, and next, the cluster of the empirical, personal manifestation, or the complexes. Jung explains, "In my studies of the phenomena of association I have shown that there are certain constellations of psychic elements grouped round feeling-toned contents, which I have called "complexes." (Jung 1975b, CW 8 18, 25). So, constellations, as clusters of archetypes, are definite and help to actualize complexes, creating a complex-constellation duplex. "Yet human beings differ immensely in the strength of their emotions. In accordance with the intensity of their emotions people's thinking and behaviour are constellated by their complexes, and so are their associations" (Jung 1981a, CW 2 737, 322). There are as many constellations as contexts we face. "The grip that the archetypal constellation would have on an individual creates a new context, a shift, a new unique pattern that shapes and, indeed, patterns one's understanding of oneself, one's relationships with others, and one's very sense of identity" (Papadopoulos 2006, 37). A constellation works as a based affective network of archetypical meaning. In this sense, I would call archetypes pleiotropic, i.e., they participate in more than one effect.

I consider the constellation concept richer for the description of RPGs than that of individuation alone because the first refers directly to a simultaneous instantiation of several archetypes, creating a self-reference mental space that, even though it does not have an extension, as in the traditional physical space, allows for the positioning of the archetypes concerning each other by limiting themselves, through their mutual constellation (Stevens 2002).

6. CONSTELLATION ENGAGEMENT

A major thesis in RPG studies is that the rise of larp, TTRPGs, and almost all forms of RPGs in general, is a result of a postmodern need for myth, ritual, and archetypal engagement in Western society, getting a closer involvement with the archetypes. (Beltran 2012). Indeed, one challenge for RPG Studies is understanding these processes and their consequences (Bowman 2012). I propose a symbolic approach is adequate to discern the archetypal dimension in RPGs (Bastarrachea-Magnani 2023). Symbols are representations capable of embodying inexhaustible content (the signified) and transferring vitality via each embodiment (the signifiers). The psychoid character of archetypes is manifested via the two possible exegeses of the symbol, rituals, and myths. "Archetypes are models that appear repeatedly in mythological figures and images across cultures and throughout the human experience" (Beltran 2012, 90). As symbolic devices, RPGs are ritual and mythic phenomena (dramatic liminal action and everlasting narratives) (Bastarrachea-Magnani 2023) that operate through symbolic experiences. The central thesis of archetype engagement in RPGs is that "Enacting characters supersedes the limits of player's everyday roles so that they may engage more directly with the archetypes by relaxing their own egos" (Beltrán 2012, 91). As I propose below, this effect is possible thanks to the symbolic amplification in the RPG Self via constellated experiences.

As mentioned, the constellation process creates a self-referenced psychic space that does not require an a priori hierarchy, neither rational nor affective. The complex-constellation duplex gives birth to an image as an embodiment of an activated group of archetypes linked together and capable of attaining the symbolic level, thus becoming profoundly meaningful to us. Complexes become images of a symbolic, personified affect, i.e., they have a universal tendency "to image themselves in dreams and other fantasy material as animate beings (persons) in dynamic interaction with the ego. The psyche's natural symbol-forming function (if adequately constellated by "good enough" parental care automatically personifies affects in the form of recognizable images" (Kalsched 1996, 90). This personification is context-based, as the actualization of archetypes is a complex and rich phenomenon in which the combination salience of cultural, historical elements, and personal situations contribute to the onset of the final constellation for that situation (Stevens 2002). In other words, archetype en-

gagement leads to constellation engagement, and the individuation process gives place to creating constellations of meaning, where all images created, characters, and objects in a cosmos (ordered world) possess coexistent (simultaneous) meaningful relations.

This idea of a constellated cosmos of meaningful, personified images can be enriched by considering archetypal psychology (Hillman 1970), an evolution of Jung's theory, developed by later Jungians such as J. Hillman, G. Paris, and M. V. Adams, where the study of psychic experiences and their processes shifts from the archetypes to their phenomenal manifestations, precisely, the imaginal landscape and culture, including fantasy, symbolic images and the narratives triggered by them (Hillman 2004, Paris 2008). This is a departure from the Kantian character of archetypes (Hillman 2004, Bishop 1996), defining them not as underlying structures but as symbolic constructs (Adams 2004). Images become central to constructing reality, knowledge, and the psyche, turning into an irreducible datum for archetypal psychology. In agreement with the notion of constellation I am proposing, all images can become archetypical, i.e., they can gain both "intentional force (Jung's "instinct") and the mythical field of personifications (Hilman's "Gods")" (Hillman 2004, 25), ascending to the symbolic domain (Hillman 1978), where they turn tautegoric (Bastarrachea-Magnani 2023). Adams (2004) goes further to propose a fantasy principle, where fantasy is no longer associated with an unsatisfied life, something that must be cured or corrected to conform to an externally defined reality (Freud) but is seen as a wish fulfillment, a vital principle, natural to everyone, including happy persons. This approach aims to increase the consciousness about fantasies and images in interpreting our experiences, as they don't require translation as mere interpretations but an effort to make conscious of what they mean in themselves (Adams 2004). "The function of reality is adaptation; the function of irreality is liberation from that very adaptation" (Adams 2004, 7).

While my approach is not detached from the Kantian perspective of Jung's archetypes, I consider an important contribution of archetypal psychology that images reaching an archetypal level become personified features symbolically alive (Adams 2004). Whether we talk about the clustering of archetypes (Jung's analytic psychology) or at the level of the meaningful networks of images (archetypal psychology), what matters is the impact of constellations over our lives while we play an RPG. I think of RPG characters as constellations capable of an "affective presence" (Armstrong 1971) shared at the table. Jung says an image "is a speaking figure at all, then say what you have to say to that figure and listen to what he or she has to say" (1973, 460). As archetypal images, they are alive, i.e., they become "animated like an animal (…) and like a person whom one loves, fears, delights in, is inhibited by, and so forth" (Hillman 2004, 25).

We see how the idea of the RPG Self helps conceptualize why RPGs are excellent territories for fostering archetypal (constellation) engagement. Within the RPG Self, we can play with a larger and richer space of affect-based personifications (Ego-figures). During the RPG session, our Self expands beyond the collective unconscious via the transpersonal Self, which then flows through the interpersonal space (person-player-character) toward the same collective unconscious, but now based on the Self of the other persons playing. The experience is thus intensified (amplified) via the interplay between the personal and the collective unconscious and through the interaction with the interpersonal Self and "other transpersonal Selves." Figures and characters are Egos emerging in the magic circle of RPG present themselves constellated and can be seen as personified, enriched complexes in the RPG Self. In this framework, Game Worlds result from the interconnected evocation of archetype clusters, a set of constellated character personalities of both the players and Game Directors. In summary, characters are co-constellations that may emerge as symbolic images full of the life-enhancing power from the archetypes. I conjecture their constellated character grants them persistence in their psyche even beyond the game session.

Here, RPGs' ritual features are central because they offer a liminal space where we engage with non-typical roles (Beltran, 2012). It is the liminal space that makes it possible to create alibis and feel safe enough to relax, expand the self, and engage with constellations. Bowman elaborates on this idea: "Because of the protective frame of the magic circle, the temporary loss of identity and assumption of a new role is understood and accepted. Therefore, even within liminal experiences, the participants feel a sense of safety when altering their identity and performing unusual acts" (2012, 52). Moreover, Beltrán claims that "Larp gives players access to roles they would not have the ability to occupy in everyday life, thus stimulating the development of their own internal archetypes. Instead of remaining defined and fenced in by a narrow identity, the psyche has a chance to examine experiences in other climes of mental and emotional space, allowing for an opportunity for expansion of the self" (2012, 91). In this relaxed state, the interaction between clusters of constellated, self-referenced archetypes appears as shared characters and situations fostering an inter-individuation, explaining the organic character of the RPG narrative and its deepness. Here, Stevens' claim is appropriate: "Without some acknowledgment of the devil within us, individuation cannot proceed: coming to terms with one's own evil is the first and indispensable stage in conscious realization of the Self." (2022, 277).

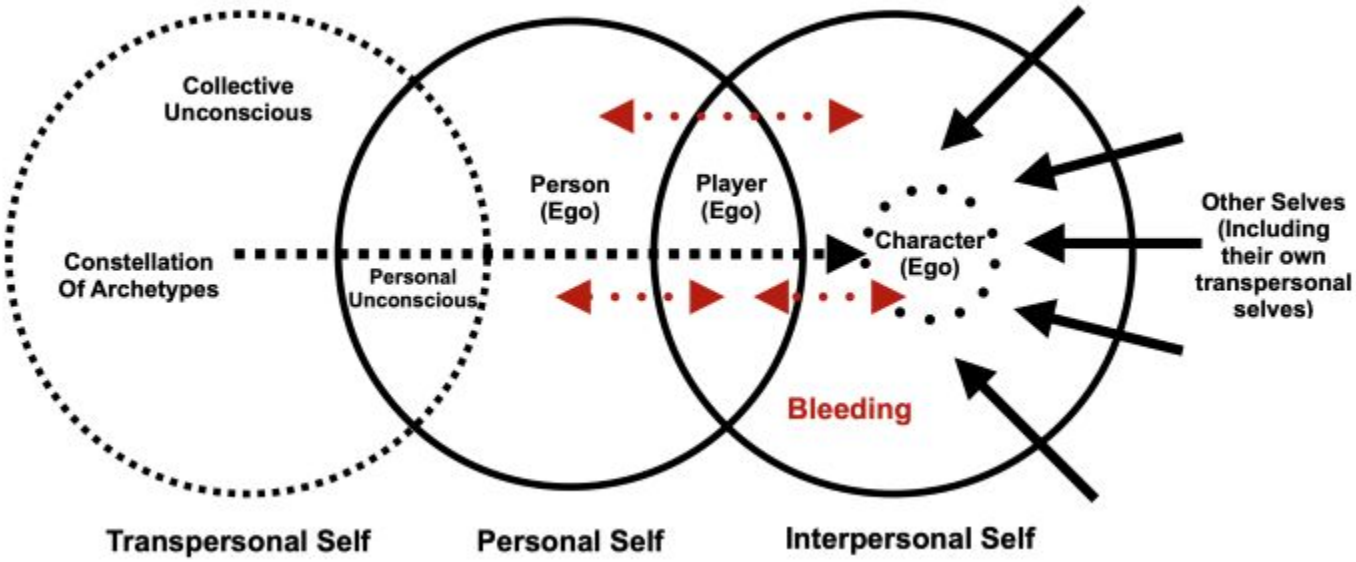

Figure 1: Author's diagram of bleed and different selves

Now, we can understand bleed within the constellation context. Ego bleed, as the thinning of the person-character frontier, can be explained as a requirement of the agile management between the Egos (constellations) in the RPG Self that players exhibit (Leonard & Thurman 2018), from person to player, person to character, character to player, etc. In general, bleed would occur because, once the constellations enter into play, the transitional process between those figures in the interpersonal Self is potentiated through archetypal engagement. There is no isolated figure; all of them are subsumed within a constellated network of feeling and meaning that pours into us and the others. How bleed and its threshold manifest depends on the constellation. In the figure below, a pictorial schema summarizes the proposal of the parts of the RPG Self, the constellation, and the bleed process.

7. MYTHIC NARRATIVES AND CONSENT

Given that mythic narratives are a by-product of the constellation and the testimony we interact with, it is important to consider them in a constellation-based framework for consent in RPGs. Mythology is one piece of evidence that prompted Jung to propose the idea of universal structures within the psyche (Stevens 2002). Personal experience becomes transpersonal thanks to a self-amplification process of the complex via a mythology that spiritualizes and aggrandizes their personifications (Kalsched 1996, 89). Mythic stories become the narrative link between existence and meaning and the link itself, helping to actualize our potentiality. In The Structure of the Psyche, Jung sets up the connection between constellation and mythology by asserting that,

> The whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious. We can see this most clearly if we look at the heavenly constellations, whose originally chaotic forms were organized through the projection of images. This explains the influence of the stars as asserted by astrologers. These influences are nothing but unconscious, introspective perceptions of the activity of the collective unconscious. Just as the constellations were projected into the heavens, similar figures were projected into legends and fairytales or upon historical persons. We can therefore study the collective unconscious in two ways, either in mythology or in the analysis of the individual. (1975c, CW 8 325, 205)

As the German philosopher Schelling pointed out, we do not make myths, but they make us: "Since mythology is nothing other than the archetypal world itself and the initial universal intuition of the universe" (Schelling 1989, 52). Whether we create myths or not, "our engagement with them is meaningful and important" (Beltran 2012). Myths are necessary as a source of legitimacy and vitality of life and reason. Getting in touch with myths allows us to draw vitality from the archetypal source. As Stevens points out, "they awaken in us a sense of participation in the mysterium tremendum et fascinans which pervades the relationship between the cosmos and the Self" (2002, 41). Ultimately, every story we tell is infused with emotions and interpretations, and our identity is created from the mythic complicatio of old and new stories (Paris 2008).

The mythic character of RPGs offers novel opportunities for easing the incorporation of constellations into everyday life. Precisely, when RPG characters and adventures reach a mythic level, this is reflected in their imprint on our memories as a testimony to a numinous, powerful experience (Stevens, 2002). The archetypal, dormant potential flourishes and allows the re-creation of our Egos by integrating mythical gaming experiences. The constellation organically forms a personified affective "other," which is not a mere reflection of the personal Ego but nourished from all the complexity of Selves in play, allowing us to gain contrast and transform ourselves. Thought as symbolic devices, RPGs transform us both consciously and unconsciously; their ritual features provide permanence to their mythical ones and the later meaning to the first. Hence, they grant us ways to modify, expand, and enrich our inner and outer Selves. "The symbols linked with each stage are constellated by the rituals culturally ordained as appropriate to that stage, and through the medium of a rite of passage provide a safe and reliable means for further development" (Stevens 2002, 196). Precisely, one function of rituals and myths is to alleviate the weight of rapid events in our lives that produce significant change and are common between people sharing a spatio-temporal, historical, and cultural framework. Hugaas points out that "the simulated events to which we subject ourselves will most likely be substantially more dramatic than any we will ever experience in our modern lives" (2019). The freedom in RPGs offers archetypes the chance to be consciously represented in personal mythical images or tropes, including legends, heroes, gods, and characters, without depleting their manifestation, as they are symbolic and thus alive, persistent, and reliable.

Because the affect-based power of mythic narratives emerging in RPGs is spontaneous, it should be considered for consent-based gaming. According to G. Paris (2008), identity transformation via individuation has two avenues: reinterpreting the mythic narrative in which an experience is ciphered but keeping the same archetype behind it or changing the archetypes and creating a new myth. Paris explains, "Freedom begins with how one interprets that situation, creates a version of the story, and angles the plot with a certain archetypal inflection" (2008, 2). As a means of fictionalization, RPGs grant us a playground to change the scripts of our everyday lives, hence, the archetypes and myths driving us. This includes unearthing hidden and destructive mythic narratives (Paris 2008), performing Shadow work (Beltrán 2013), but also, the converse: that a powerful mythic narrative infused with our spontaneous bleed and that of the other participants creates a robust constellated network of meaning that leads to harmful effects.

Archetypal psychology hints at a cue to deal with this: conscious gaming. As we have seen, this theory "invites us to pay attention to the distance or the proximity between the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves as well as the stories others relate about us or to us" (Paris 2008, 6). Thus, for practicing consent in RPGs, the three epistemological tenants of archetypal psychology, when considered as an imaginology, are helpful (Adams 2004). Explication (making the image's essence explicit), amplification (contrasting and comparing the image with cultural sources), and active imagination taken as "a deliberate induction of fantasy by the patient (…)" that "(…) entails both observation of the images and participation with them" (Adams 2004,15). Jung explains "You must step into the fantasy yourself and compel the figures to give you an answer. Only in this way is the unconscious integrated with consciousness by means of a dialectical procedure, a dialogue between yourself and the unconscious figures. Whatever happens in the fantasy must happen to you" (1973, 561). Acknowledging that RPGs are interactive playgrounds for active imagination and that we can exercise a dialogue with the co-constellations (shared personifications) opens up a pathway toward safe play. Also, here, it is relevant to notice that Jung's approach has been criticized because, in the search for the transcendentality of the collective unconscious, he more or less overlooked the fact there is psychic energy inspired by cultural, historical, and geographical strains (Brewster 2017). Hence, I recognize the emphasis of archetypal psychology on the context-based constellation of the archetypes or "objective level," i.e., that the personification of affects is not only self-referenced in the inner world as constellations but must be referenced to objects in the external reality (Adams 2004). In Modern societies, racial and gender identities are charged with social trauma. For example, regarding the archetypal nature of African American culture, F. Brewster notices that "Understanding that racism as a possible archetypal energy is always present in the therapy room is a helpful beginning. This establishes a degree of honesty upon which trust can be built" (2017, 10). This is particularly important for consent at the table, as this kind of energy varies depending on the society. For example, the tension between Prehispanic and Hispanic heritage in Postcolonial Mexico has always been in play, impregnating all the figures in the RPG sessions in the games I have participated in, either as a player or Game Director.

8. SOME INSIGHTS ON THE GAME DIRECTOR'S BLEED

I would also draw attention to the role of Game Directors in this context. According to Zagal and Deterding: "One special player – called the referee, game master, judge, dungeon master, or something similar – is the arbi-

ter and manager of the game. The referee enforces the rules of the game, and enacts the fictional world by telling the players what their characters perceive and what the non-player characters (NPCs) do" (2018, 27). May it be a referee, an arbiter, an authority, a holder of the ruling, a procedural guide, a storyteller, a demiurge, or just another player, the Game Director faces the tasks of planning, improvising, and keeping the fun and the coherence of the narrative. This is very challenging because GDs face the "implicit promise of TRPGs that a player can at least try to do anything" (White et al. 2022, 46). The GD features are tied to their interactions with the players. For example, White et al. characterize the figure in terms of two polarities (2022). First, the monologic versus dialogic, where the GDs regard players as a more passive or active audience, respectively; second, the adversary versus non-adversary, where the GMs are responsible for posing challenges to the players (thus, a figure of a planner) against that of one who is there to entertain the players, proper of recent times (White et al. 2022). In any case, the figure of the GD has not been as thoroughly investigated as the players (Torner 2008). Understanding the psychic and symbolic processes of Game Directing is central, not only because "being a Dungeon Master presents itself as a rather challenging interactional practice requiring no small degree of group communication skill and leadership ability" (White et al. 2022, 47) but also due to the common thought that a human GD has an advantage over other media thanks to "their capacity to read the emotions and desires of their fellow players and adapt to them," despite "they are also often limited by their previous preparation for a session and their capacity to convincingly improvise new material" (Jara & Torner 2018, 276).

This sets up a phenomenological difference that must be considered when discussing bleed for GDs for which no study has been done to date, as well as its implications for consent. While RPG players tend to stay in a single character, GDs shift between several personalities (such as Non-Player Characters or NPCs, landscapes, and other strange personalities). They tend to overlap those figures to build and sustain the imaginary and fictitious worlds where the players and characters unfold and, more significantly, where the Egos relax. They lead the becoming of the plot into a story. Moreover, while NPCs can be mere narrative resources, they can develop well-defined personalities and emotional charges after repeated interaction with player characters (and other NPCs). These personalities could go back and forth between sessions for months or even years. It seems GDs somehow learn empirically how to control bleed-in and bleed-out and polish this ability with practice. In any case, GDs should have a mechanism of bleed management and steering for themselves. Otherwise, it would be impossible to handle multiple characters simultaneously. So, while bleed might be more or less intense in players, in GDs, bleed management is necessary and would become more natural to them with practice.

Here, constellation and the RPG Self concepts help develop an initial framework for studying GD bleed. I propose that GDs exploit constellations to draw specific figures and worlds and save mental and emotional resources. Once an archetype cluster is evoked, all the personalities the GDs handle can be interconnected a posteriori, i.e., during and after sessions. The constellation of meaning supporting the fantasy world directed by the GD eases the psychic effort to maintain it. Constellation is particularly relevant for GD bleed because it comprises a self-limited process not immediately overflowed by external triggers and allows for the simultaneous manifestation of figures and, most importantly, sub-personalities. However, at this stage, an empirical study becomes necessary. We would need to determine quantitatively (statistically) what kind of bleed happens the most in GDs (either emotional, procedural, memetic, etc.), how these features change between larp and TTRPG or other forms of RPG, what are the short and long-term effects that GDs recognize, and how they steer it.

9. CAVEATS AND CONCLUSIONS: CONSENT FOR AN RPG SELF

The proposed framework allows the translation of the deepness of RPGs in terms of the autonomy each constellation gains. When a constellation comes to life, personified, it demands an interaction as an organic entity. Infused from the vital content of the archetypes is an emergent phenomenon expressed symbolically, i.e., in ritual and mythical spaces. The network of meaning sustaining itself via the participation of the interpersonal Selves (each persona, player, and character) is reflected in the story's symbolic character. Then, once the game session is finished, all the aspects are redistributed and separated, returning to the transformed, personal Self.

Where do characters go once the game session ends, though? As mentioned before, unlike other games, there is a sort of character permanence, i.e., part of the interpersonal Self remains somehow open. Otherwise, one would be prevented from recovering or recreating the "same" Player Character (PC) or Non-Player Character (NPC). What is true is that the borders of the RPG Self are not fixed, not at the level of the inner, transpersonal, or the outer, interpersonal worlds. Hence, bleed seems not a matter of solely the interplay of persona and character but an intensification of an intersubjective (constellated) process resulting from all the participants of the table or scenario feeding characters. Namely, insofar as bleed is subjectively acknowledged, it is also a collective phenomenon nourished by the spillover of all the participants and figures in the gameplay. Bleed-in and bleed-out

would then be ciphered in the spontaneous integration and disintegration of constellations, and the degree of control, such as steering, might be related to how conscious we can be about the specific constellations in play.

My aim is to draw attention to the development of a consent-based way of playing RPGs that takes into account that characters, as co-constellations, do not wholly belong to a single person or player but evolve thanks to the input of all the figures participating in the RPG Self, so there is a shared responsibility of them. It is not my character but our characters. Consent is not only about communicating discomfort during play but also developing safety tools to deal with the persisting vulnerability resulting from the intense exchange of personal and transpersonal content, as in bleed phenomena in the liminal space and beyond it, in the mythic domain extending and binding game sessions among each other. Personified complexes could disturb the Ego as they gain autonomy, which becomes problematic if the Ego is individuated in a shared open space. Of course, not all game sessions are so intense to grant this autonomy. Still, it will depend on the subjective psychic gauge of each participant, their historical and geographical context, and the resources that shape the narrative and gameplay (props, miniatures, maps, etc.). Nevertheless, we should remember that "To the psyche, a negative meaning is apparently preferable to no meaning at all; a negative fantasy better than no fantasy whatsoever" (Kalsched 1996, 95). From the Jungian standpoint, a Self can become a survival Self, i.e., an archaic self-defense and self-splitting "form taken by the Self when its otherwise individuating energies have been diverted to an earlier development task, i.e., assuring the individual's survival" (Kalsched 1996, 97). In the face of a threat, the archetype splits its duality, offering a dislocated fantasy to represent the ordeal, and this image can gain control over our lives.

Thus, first we need to calibrate mechanics to assess the affect tolerance of players before, in between, and during game sessions. This is no simple task, considering one cannot identify the breaching of consent by simply looking at the bursting of the magic circle anymore. Unlike video games with "unlimited" storage for characters, personified complexes brought from session to session may produce weariness to players and Game Directors alike. Second, we need to develop awareness, i.e., practicing a conscious play that trains fantasy to identify the constellations in play, their amplification, and the network of meaning that has developed and remains after the game session. Consent-based playing should consider not only for healthy playing but also for its potential to enhance our capacity for fantasy and transformation. "When functioning healthy, the polarities inherent within the archetype are mediated by the symbolic process which enriches and energizes a flexible ego" (Kalsched 1996, 92). Hence, developing techniques that balance mental and emotional energies and infuse the Egos without overwhelming them may help to improve character enactment so "they can be used intentionally as a vehicle to develop more authentic, empowered, individuated, balanced, and integrated self-concepts in daily life." (Bowman 2022, 3). Critical consent-based gaming can help to pair bleed phenomena and self-reflection, as well as uncover and potentiate new configurations of the Selves. (Diakolambrianou & Bowman 2023). In the end, players and GDs who lead the ordeal should be careful that characters might spontaneously become transformation images (Adams 2004), inadvertently transforming us and others at the table. Consent entails an active engagement with the safety of our peers. In this sense, RPGs require image work (Hillman, 2004), as it will poetically integrate characters and their symbolic appreciation with the cultural background and its cultural, historical, and geographical affective energies in our everyday lives. Additionally, actively engaging with image work could lead to novel avenues of role-play that exploit conscious constellations.

At this stage, the framework sets up more questions than it answers. For example, how much introjection could play a role in constellating specific archetypal clusters in RPGs? What is the distance between the player, persona, and character that stimulates or reduces bleed? Beltran claims, "When a participant chronically plays over a long period, a certain level of ego bleed from the character to the player is inevitable; those traits that the player continually enacts as their character will eventually integrate at least partially into the player's understanding of self" (Beltrán 2012, 95). Is this process identical to that of players and GDs alike? How many NPCs can a GD run, and how is the number related to bleed? What are the distinctive traits of bleed-in and bleed-out for GDs? How is the bleed process connected to worldbuilding? Finally, is there any insight into how identity is built and evolves from studying when Game Directors are partitioned into multiple characters and bleed into them? Here, I restrict myself to bringing attention to the nuances of constellated playing and the rich scenario of the RPG Self to investigate personality shifts and identity transformation when we play RPGs, paving the way for further investigations, as well as to recall that "Developing fantasy means perfecting our humanity" (Jung 1977, 40).

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Consent Using Analog Role-Playing in the Classroom: Strategies for Safe and Engaging Learning Experiences

Abstract: This article explores the critical integration of analog role-playing games (RPGs) in educational settings, focusing on the intricate dynamics of consent and power, and culminates with a proposal based on risk management to deal with these dynamics. It highlights the significant focus on consent culture within RPG communities and the specific challenges this presents for educators employing RPGs as instructional tools. The study introduces a theoretical framework that adapts Goffman's frame analysis—person, player, and character—to the educational context to analyze power relationships and interactions among participants. It details a structured five-stage process for implementing RPGs in classrooms, designed to optimize educational outcomes while effectively managing consent issues. Additionally, the article discusses necessary context analysis for educators to facilitate practical application of risk management strategies in four steps, integrating established role-playing consent tools and scenarios to proactively address potential consent-related challenges. This comprehensive framework aims to empower educators to navigate the complexities of consent and power within RPGs, ensuring a safe and engaging learning environment for all participants.

Keywords: consent, analog role-playing games, best practices, risk management, educational innovation, game design, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

The perception of what consent is has changed according to society. One of the many examples of this transformation is the Spanish law about sexual consent approved in 2022, that changed the concept of consent from the "no means no" to the controversial "only yes is yes"; but also how the media and part of the population reacted to it.

Gaming in general, and RPGs more specifically, have been dealing with similar issues. The Japanese Journal of Analog Role-playing Game Studies editors (2020) summarized some of these concerns with the next questions:

> How to create a safe environment or culture for play? How to deal with missing stairs in play communities? How do I encourage difficult topics in play without triggering players, who may have encountered and suffered through the situation-to-be-played outside the sphere of play? How to allow players to calibrate such situations? How to support players who went beyond their emotional comfort level? How to enable a space for dealing with extreme play situations? (2020, 1e)

The word "safe" appears as a recurring word, including the creation of "safe spaces" especially for females, LGTBQ+ community and diverse cultures and ethnicities in opposition to the white-male-heteronormic dominance that dealt to certain behaviors (Williams et. al, 2018, 236-239). The specific process that entails role-playing implies "Concerns about psychological safety have thus led to the creation of tools and mechanisms to create safer spaces inside certain role-playing communities" (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018, 251).

RPG published books increasingly include tools and techniques for safety and consent. By writing the word "consent" in the published-books search of DnDBeyond, that contains all the published books of Wizards of the Coast of the Fifth Edition of Dungeons and Dragons, 35 results appear. Only 3 of them are related to the application tools or techniques of consent: a reference of deal with how player feels vs. how character feels, limits and consent in *Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden* (Perkins et al, 2020), Social Contract as a technique included into the section "Dungeon Master's Tools" in *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (Crawford et al, 2020), and player-to-player limits of consent in the section "Habits of Horror Heroes" for character creation in *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (Schneider et al, 2020). Other sections can be found in which safety tools appear. For example

the last book includes a section named "preparing horror" that includes some of them to be applied by the Dungeon Master. Considering Dungeons & Dragons the most representative TTRPGs in terms of age and success, it's an indicator on how much work still needs to be done, and how these tools tend to appear more often in terror/horror books, two of three in this search, when any other theme could benefit from these tools.

The learning environment also generates specific questions when analog RPGs are part of the teaching process: How do students react when something is mandatory? Is there a limit to let them opt out? How effective are rpg tools and mechanisms of consent when applied into the classroom? Can a "culture of safety" that reinforces "the protective framework of the magic circle" (Bowman and Lieberoth, 2018, 255) be generated with students, even when they play without the presence of the teacher? Do these tools interfere with the acquisition or development of skills? And, basically, what can a teacher do to preserve consent when RPGs are part of the class? For the sake of simplicity, this article will use the words teacher and student as their most general usage, including educators, facilitators, trainers, participants, etc.

This article takes a broad approach to analog role-playing game activities (RPGAs) in educational settings, addressing various forms—from educational larps and tabletop RPGs to more improvised role-play scenarios. We propose a general framework based on risk management techniques, designed to be adaptable across different types of RPGAs in classrooms. Recognizing that a comprehensive definition of consent would warrant its own in-depth treatment, we focus here on a practical approach, drawing on Consent in Gaming (Reynolds and Germain, 2019) to guide educators in creating a safer, more responsive environment. The article begins with an analysis of framing structures within RPGAs and the power dynamics they generate in classroom settings. From there, we outline a phased process to address consent-related risks, encompassing the planning, contextual analysis, and implementation of a simplified risk management method tailored to fit the unique needs of each role-playing activity.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociologically, "power has to do with the capacity or ability to shape people's actions" (Williams et al, 2018, 233). As a structure, a learning environment entails a teacher-student relationship similar to the relationship Game Master/referee-player. In fact, there is a tendency in researchers that prioritize giving the function of Game Master to the teachers, with arguments like "The authority of the game master educator cannot be denied but it is also essential in creating a collaborative gaming environment and guiding collective creativity" (Lasley 2022, 79) or "A teacher acting as a gamemaster already has the requisite skills to help students process what they are learning and give them appropriate feedback." (Youakim 2019, 15). The power of the teacher can be exerted in different ways, from grading the students to assuming the responsibility of their safety, both physical and emotional.

Fine (1983, 183-186) applied Goffman's frame analysis to roleplaying games generating three laminations that coexisted during the experience of the game: person, player and character. Mackay (2001, 56) included two more, raconteur and addresser, that are really interesting for a performance/artistic approach. This article will focus only on the three previously mentioned and we recommend the article "Playing with Leadership: A Multiple Case Study of Leadership Development Larps" (Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024, 150-151) especially for the part in which the authors apply a "layer analysis" using the case study methodology in four larps. One of the cases is the larp named *7Samurai*, in which 3-7 players enact peasants who must "save their village both from rebel bandits and a greedy emperor" with the purpose of training human resource to understand how to use this larp to "choose one of the candidates for the proposed job" (152).

> On the social layer, individuals might want to participate in this AC larp to get hired or to get familiar with the larpified AC process as an HR recruiter. On the game layer there is an undefined but existing win-state, so players might be competing with each other to be the "winner" in the eye of the assessors, thus getting hired. On the diegetic layer, the characters are Japanese peasants who must cooperate against external threats. (153)

From the perspective of the structures of power that appear in each layer in a classroom, it's interesting to check each lamination or layer to prevent problems related with consent:

- **Lamination person: T**he roles applied in terms of teacher-student or the different dynamic of power between students, like social leaders or even bullying. It's also quite interesting when students belong to the same company and they have a relationship of power with bosses and employees studying together.

- **Lamination player:** Roles defined by the type of participant that enacts the experience: player or GM in classic RPGs; total symmetry for GMless games; Player, Storyteller or NPC Player for LARPs based on Mind's Eye Theatre, etc. It can also be understood in terms of who is better with the rules of the game.
- **Lamination character:** Or the experience as it would be lived in the fictional world, with the character or characters that each participant controls, and the relationship of power that can be found in it: a character is socially or socially stronger than another one.

Understanding the different laminations, the structures of power, and how they permeate is very important for the teachers, especially when they need to prevent and react to consent-related issues that can appear during the class. As Williams et al indicate:

> In each lamination, individuals enact different role-identities as they define reality in terms of the relevant frame. The idea that these frames overlap as laminations demonstrates the complexity of role-play. Not only must "real world" friends be careful how they treat their "fantasy world" enemies, but a player who plays an adventure for a second time may need to ignore what they know is coming for the sake of their character or other party members" (2018, 231).

The relationship of power can create interesting contradictions within laminations. A person who is more powerful in one lamination can be completely powerless in another one, creating three possible comparisons of laminations:

- **Person vs. player:** A teacher, who has more power within the frame of person, can participate as a player in a game in which a student is a gamemaster, inverting the relationship of power within that lamination. This can create power conflicts during the game if the teacher exerts the power he or she has in person to deny a student's decision that would go against another student's consent.
- **Person vs. character laminations: I**n the *7Samurai* larp, one of the options include the teacher, using the term facilitator in the text, to be "a delivery servant" while students enact peasant pretending to be samurais (Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024, 153-154). Would students roleplay rudely with the servant knowing that the teacher is going to evaluate them?
- **Player vs. character laminations:** A participant that controls the mechanics of the game, as explained part of the player lamination, can optimize the gaming experience in ways that wouldn't represent the real level of power of his/her character compared with other characters.

All in all, from the perspective of consent, teachers should be aware of these dynamics to prevent and properly respond to situations that can arise in the class. The next section initiates a proposal for teachers to implement risk management techniques as a method that can be initially perceived as overwhelming and that generates a lot of paperwork. Mochocki warns about it indicating that "the teaching profession in Poland has relatively low social and financial status, with little appeal for energetic and innovative individuals" where passionate teachers "do not get discouraged by the "minor inconvenience" such as low salaries and ever-increasing paperwork" (2013, 58). We understand that this asseveration not only applies to Poland, so we suggest readers to apply one of the main principles of Project Management that is tailoring, which implies "the deliberate adaptation of the project management approach, governance, and processes to make them more suitable for the given environment and the work at hand." (Project Management Institute, 2021, 130). To do that, readers can apply it, modify it even removing parts when they apply it or simply use the proposal as an inspiration to question the things as they are written.

Paperwork is a controversial word, and this proposal is based on risk management techniques that can create a lot of it. One of the principles of the Agile Manifesto, key framework currently for many projects, is: "Working software over comprehensive documentation." This framework has been adapted to all types of projects, not only software, and could be adapted to this article as "working educational safe RPGs over comprehensive documentation". Similar to this approach, Losilla indicates that, related to larps in general and not specifically to the classroom, "the methods used in risk management (risk matrices being the primary example) help us very little here: they have been designed to leave a paper trail which can be used as evidence. They are too bureaucratic" (2024). On the other side of the spectrum, Sinking Ship Creations uses Risk Management "to reduce harm by identifying hazards that cause harm, assessing the risk they pose to participants, using controls to reduce that risk, and finally by communicating that risk to players so that they can make a risk-aware consent decision" (Hart 2024a), even sharing their already tailored Standard Risk Assessment "for the sake of transpar-

ency" (Hart 2024c).

In this article we try to reduce and adapt this paperwork but we don't eliminate it for several reasons: it's useful to create distance and thinking about it for people without experience, it helps to visualize things and prioritize actions (like which risks you are going to deal with first) and keeping track of it can improve next experiences when analyzing previous ones. Additionally, some teachers can consider generating paperwork to defend their projects both as proposals and inspections.

3. APPLICATION OF ANALOG RPGS IN THE CLASSROOM IN FIVE PHASES

Mackay explained the connection of ritual and role-playing games as performing arts (2001, 112). Bowman elaborated on this when she stated that "Role-playing, when understood as ritual, contains these same defining elements. Role-playing as a practice tends to be more free-form and improvisational than a traditional stage play, but still follows the same principles of liminality." (2010, 49). Being at the same time actor and spectator is another of the common grounds between rituals and playing RPGs (Hoover et al, 2018, 214). However, the most iconic element shared is the process of immersion. Huizinga stated that one of the things games do is creating a "temporary world" that he mentions as "magic" and that implies a "temporary abolition of the ordinary world" (1980, 10-12), and roleplaying embraces this process better than any other gaming experiences.

The transition to this "magic world" is one of the key elements at designing these activities. In larping, many pre and post debriefing is used for that, but tabletop role-playing games usually have their own ritualistic elements that can occur, not only during the session as Hoover et al mention (2018, 217). Torrebejano Osorio (2024, 127) indicates the three Van Gennep's stages of the ritual (separation or isolation from the community, transition or liminality and (re) incorporation to the community) associating liminality to change, not only social but also communal, what anthropologically implies that is a temporal disorder that enables a new paradigm.

The same concept can be applied to the activities in class. There is a process in which students separate from real life, live the experience of the activity, and then they make a transition to real life after acquiring skills or knowledge they can apply. Therefore, using analog roleplay as activity would entail a magic world (rpg) inside another magic world (class activity).

Considering all of the above, we propose a structure based on five phases. They can be understood as 5 phases with 2 of them subdivided into 2 of them: 1st part of the separation from the real world (as activity in class), 2nd part of the separation of real world (as rpg, while in the liminality of the activity), total liminality, 1st part of the reincorporation to the real world (as rpg, while still in the liminality of the activity) and 2nd part of the reincorporation to the real world (as activity):

1. **Previous instructions**. Ideally, it's the stage to explain to the students what it wants to be achieved with the roleplay activity. The dominant frame in this stage is person.
2. **Beginning the activity**. In this moment rules are explained and limits are created. It's usually the transition to the next two frames, although the dominant is still the player. We like to name it "crossing the threshold."
3. **Playing**. The three frameworks coexist in an uneven way. Depending on the type of experience, by design or how the players behave, one of them will be the dominant. The ordinary world and magic world coexist.
4. **Ending the activity**. Once the game is over, it's time to keep the energy that came from the magic world and make a transition until only the person lamination exists. At the beginning, the energies of the magic world can impregnate the reflection, so the important thing here is focusing on the feelings as soon as the roleplay has finished and the stories created in them.
5. **Final debrief**. Decontaminated from the magic world, students can be more rational at confronting the experience. Reflective/solo work can be useful too, sometimes before sharing with the other participants conclusions about what happened.

This temporal division makes it easier for the teacher to detect when risks related to lack of consent would arise, as well as when to include measures to prevent or mitigate them.

4. CONTEXT ANALYSIS OF ROLE-PLAY IN THE CLASSROOM

Understanding the broader context and main characteristics of a role-playing activity is essential to tailoring an effective teaching experience. As Hammer et al. (2018, p. 286) assert, "Creating the right circumstances for game-

based learning involves designing the learning experience as carefully as the games." Just as general labor risk assessments provide a foundational framework that must be adapted to specific tasks and roles, this article offers a flexible approach for implementing role-playing activities in the classroom, which educators can adjust to meet their unique needs and context. When planning for a specific game or activity, educators should apply this framework to address the distinct requirements of each role-playing experience. Tailoring, therefore, is essential, as it enables flexibility in mitigating risks specific to each activity, ensuring that safety and consent practices align with the structure and objectives of diverse RPGAs. This proposal includes analyzing several elements: the teacher's involvement, the number of participants, student-to-teacher ratio, purpose of the role-play, degree of mandatory participation, importance of grading, student profiles, teacher experience, the topic being taught, time constraints, game characteristics, and special considerations.

The first question to be asked is how much the teacher will participate in the activity which is related to how much power can be exerted to control the class to react to problems of consent and preserve safety, sometimes at the cost of the engagement of the students.

- **Absence:** The lowest participation of the teacher would be absence, letting the students do the activity by themselves. It does not mean that students won't report the experience later or participate in debates or debriefings, but during the activity the teacher won't be present.
- **Surveillance:** The next level would be surveillance. The teacher stays with the students but lets them do the activity on their own. Certain interaction is possible, especially to preserve consent and clarify things. Mochicki proposes this formula for teachers who "do not feel like roleplaying, they could still play a larp scenario as a game, with teacher out-of-game as organiser/facilitator" (2013, 59).
- **Equal:** Teachers can also be participants equal in role to all students or many of them. This can be the case for one student being the Game Master and the other students and the teacher players, or by using any game without GM. By sharing equality in the player lamination, it's easier for students to transit to the magic world, and it also gives the chance to respond to any issue related with consent.
- **Inferior:** Teachers can be participants inferior in role to all the students. By using games like Vincent and Meguey Baker's *The Last Adventure* (2022), the teacher can be the only player whilst students are the game masters.
- **Game Master or referee:** Finally, teachers can act as Game Master or referee. That's the level that includes more control on the class, making it easier to preserve consent, but it also can intimidate students at giving the teacher power on the two first laminations at the same time. That's the main proposal of Youakim in his honor capstone project because he considers that "Teacher and gamemaster are parallel roles; they both enable students/players to achieve by being guides" (2019, 15).

The second element to be considered is the number of participants and the ratio of students per teacher. Preparing a roleplay for a group of 120 students, a ratio that can be found in University classes in Spain, can drive the teacher to divide the group into subgroups, limit the type of roleplay that can be made or even deny him/her the possibility of gamemastering. Larps allow a higher number of participants than ttrpg, and that's one of the reasons why "The first officially documented application of larp methodology in educational processes was dated 1916–1918" (Harviainen et al. 2018, 101), long before the term larp was coined as it's nowadays understood. Preserving the consent in huge groups can be also challenging, and will constrain the design to make it achievable. For tabletop, Lasley recommends 4-6 players per session, with multiple groups if some students are prepared to DM and assume that role (2022, 83-84) whereas Youakim proposes as another solution "Asking students to meet outside of class" (2019, 22).

The purpose of role-play as an activity is another key element, and derives to certain questions and assumptions. Was it prepared for a complementary acquisition of skills, like usually happens with soft skills in other trainings? Is it going to be used as the main tool for the acquisition of key skills, like understanding a new concept? Or does it only pretend to entertain or relax the group, as a funny transition between hard work activities?

The next consideration is about the location of the activity within the mandatory vs. optional axis. It's a very controversial topic with authors like Heeter et al who defend that "When games become mandatory, they are less motivating and less engaging – qualities on which many educational games depend" (in Hammer et al 2018, 286). Even in non-mandatory exercises, there is a tendency to persuade students with incentives (Mochocki 2013, 64), which could be considered a violation of the principle of *Consent in gaming*: "It's not up for debate" (Reynolds and Germain, 2019, 4). That's an ethical concern that must be addressed with care, especially with

children, as Geneuss explained in the article about the STARS technique project they developed in Munich (2021, 122). This concept is written like an axis because there are several points in between. One activity can include complementary assignments for those who decide not to engage into it, for example, or the lack of participation could impact one assessment criteria, which leads to the next item.

Is it going to be a graded activity? Sometimes, the teacher doesn't have the chance to choose. Role playing activities can be the only way to grade the students, with the most obvious case of roleplaying games as the topic of the lesson, as it could be for training teachers and educators who need to participate in one of them to really understand the process for further use. On the other hand, the role-playing activity can be part of a course or training that has no evaluation but attendance control, or not even that because no certification is obtained. Nevertheless, if the teacher can decide to grade the activity, the decisions to be made entail not only in terms of designing how he/she is going to do it or the weight of that activity within all the other assessment criteria of the course, but also if another option is available for the students to acquire the skills and being graded if they decide not to participate.

The next thing would be understanding the student, starting with two elements that are so related that it's better to explain them together: their age and educational level. One of the reasons why there are more studies about role-playing games for children and teenagers than for adults is that "Role-play is a natural part of human development. This includes both pretend play by children and identity experimentation by adolescents." (Hammer et al, 2018, 287). Nonetheless, Bowman explained that "when role-playing takes place in so-called 'serious games,' popular and academic publications often celebrate its benefits'' (2010, 81). Maturity of students is complicated to be seized, whereas age is an easily quantifiable indicator, so that is a good starting point to prevent and adapt consent tools and techniques. Educational level works in the same way, not as a determinant but as an indicator of maturity, exposure to different training techniques and understanding of abstract concepts. However, the difference between the educational level of the teacher and students can also influence the perception of power. Other specificities related to students can be included in this point or in the last one: special situations.

The teacher must also ask a few questions about him/herself and other teachers, starting with the expertise they have in these types of activities. Mochocki highlights how larps don't demand as much from the teachers as applied theater (2013, 59) and he proposes print-and-play larps with "no costumes, props, room decoration or rehearsals" (73) as a way to fight laziness of students and teachers. When Cox mentions that "In Teaching Gramsci and Arendt at Wizard School (2016) Evan Torner uses his experience larping as a teacher of ethics at the New World Magischola college of magic to reflect on the invisible neo-liberal concepts that govern us and resist rebellion, particularly in a higher education setting" (2021) and he also clarifies that he's not only one of the editors of Analog Game Studies (and we could add that editor of this journal), but also that "Torner's preparation, play, and reflection in this piece share connection with his experiences as a scholar, gamer, teacher, and fan of music" (Cox 2021). Besides Cox talks about Torner's experience as a player, it creates a good point at one side of the spectrum of combining that expertise versus new teachers without experience in roleplay.

The specific topic of the formation or training is quite relevant too. The expectations at including analog roleplaying into a course of mathematics for teenagers is quite different than the ones into a workshop of new teaching methodologies. Mochocki for example defends that larp is more effective in social science and humanities than in math and science classes (2013, 60). It's also important to understand in which way the topic of the specific course is related to the whole training. For example, in the Universidad de Sevilla the subject Game Design and Ludonarrative is a mandatory subject for the students of Audiovisual Communication.

The next items are related to time: the length of the formation and in which moment the activity will be executed within the formation. Longer courses give time to the teacher to understand the social dynamics in the classroom, and as a result to create the proper mood and work on the creation of "safe space". And as it happens with the topic, these elements can be contextualized within the whole formation, because students don't behave in the same way if they just met than if they've been together for several years. Continuing with the same example of the subject of Game Design and Ludonarrative, it's taught as two classes a week for a whole semester of the fourth and last course of the degree.

Of course, another element to be deeply analyzed is the game itself, and the first question to be asked about it is: how much can it be modified? That's especially relevant because we can find during the analysis of the risks that to preserve consent we need to make modifications of the game. What's the level of agency of the game? The more control students have, the less control the teacher has to prevent problems of consent, but emergent narratives to "play to find out what happens" allow an exploratory mindset far from the designer/facilitator auteur mindset (Cox 2021).

Finally there are the special situations, or everything the teacher considers in the analysis that it's not covered in the previous items. They can be things as specific as teaching in prison for condemned students, whose

lack of attendance could be derived from a punishment, or as common as the presence of students with special learning necessities. The importance of these specificities can be better understood with the example of Sinking Ship Creators when they learned about "race and accessibility to people with physical disabilities" that "When white organizers without disabilities do talk about these topics, we often fail to include actionable plans, or worse, explain why we won't address the problem." (Hart 2024d).

5. METHOD TO DEAL WITH CONSENT BASED ON RISK MANAGEMENT

Project management has been frequently applied to teaching, and risk management specifically is being applied to larps (for further readings, we recommend the articles of Hart and Losilla that can be found in bibliography). The method we propose adapts risk management methods to treat the lack of consent as a risk. One of the tendencies in risk management is working with risk as threats and opportunities (Project Management Institute 2019, 7-8), because by modifying some situations the outcome can be even more positive than the original situation was. Besides this mindset can be also applied to the subject of this article, especially when with bleed as we are going to mention in the final part, we opt to not include it to simplify the process that can be already overwhelming for teachers with the lack of training in this topic.

Depending on the author, the Risk Management cycle can be divided in 7 (Project Management Institute 2019, 27-40), 5 (58-60), or even reduced to only 3 steps as Sergio Losilla applies them to larps (2024). The method we propose is based on:

1. Identify risks,
2. Analyze risks,
3. Respond to risks, and
4. Monitor risks.

5.1 Identify risks

This step basically consists of listing the possible risks that can happen. The best way of doing it is by combining research with deduction. We are going to include two or three examples to illustrate each part, including a suggestion of how to write the risk in the list.

Research will imply navigating into three types of sources: topic related literature, previous experiences and consulting experts. Many risks of consent are so obvious that could easily appear in all the sources, and that's also an indicator of how probable is that this risk appears, which will be an important item for the next stage. E.g., the basic lack of consent that is students not willing to participate in the activity even when it has already started; mentioned by Mochocki (2013, 64 and 71) among many others, previously experienced by the teacher and it's something that can be easily deduced.

Topic related literature can be consulted in general (by searching consent and roleplay) or specific ways (consent applied to the classroom or consent in the specific activity). For example:

- When reading the book *Consent in Gaming* (general approach), the quote "There may not be a reason why they're not consenting. They may not be able to explain why something bothers them. It just bothers them. That's okay. Even if they can't put it into words, it's valid that something creeps them out, makes them feel unsafe, or scares them. It's okay for people to listen to their feelings" (Reynolds and Germain, 3) leads the teacher to write in the list "a student wants but cannot explain why he/she doesn't give consent".
- In Geneuss' article of specific use of role-playing practices in schools, she indicates that "stepping out of the game without inhibiting the other participants' game had to be trained, not only explained. Despite the high amount of time needed, it helped students to remain in character and to feel safe and in command during the game" (2021, 123). The risk could be added into the list as "not giving enough time of training to feel safe and in command".

Previous experiences could include events lived by the teacher also as student, or participant in similar activities, but also the ones known by other professionals. That's why it's so important to keep track of them as it's explained in the last stage, monitor risks, and create documents that can be consulted.

In project management, risk registers of previous projects are usually accessible not only for the person who created them, but also to other project managers. They are repositories that can include information as "the

person responsible for managing the risk, probability, impact, risk score, planned risk responses, and other information used to get a high-level understanding of individual risks" (Project Management Institute, 2021, 185). Of course, these data should be written in a way they respect privacy and preserve ethics.

The already mentioned Sinking Ship Creator's Standard Risk Assessment (Hart 2024c) is a good example of the importance of creating a document that can be consulted, not only for the basic purpose of creating and executing a possible Risk Management Plan, but also to reflect about what has been already done and letting others to access it and learn from it. In the teaching environment, risk registers can be implemented informally, as personal or teams of teachers prepare and share them, or formally, as part of the teacher's department, general from the institution or a risk management department.

This is a key point to insist on tailoring the experience. Many teachers will opt to directly not doing it to reduce the paperwork and workload. Our personal recommendation is do it progressively: start with a personal risk register and, if you find it helpful, offer it to other teachers and then you will decide if you continue the process.

- Reviewing personal documents, the teacher includes the risk "bleed in: student uses one activity to continue a pre-detected bully behavior against another student".
- Checking reports of partners, the teacher writes in the list "bleed out: a student had a conflict in character with another student that continued as a personal conflict".

Consulting experts can be formal or informal, and an expert can be someone who had similar experiences but also people with the knowledge of specific elements related with the group.

- The International Office sends a report indicating that students from one country understand an expression as offensive, and the teacher writes in the list "student uses a word that is perceived as offensive to other cultures".
- Interacting through LinkedIn with a renown teacher who included larps in his/her classes appears the risk "stereotypical imitation of another accent offends a student".
- In a conversation with an experienced VTT Gamemaster, he/she shares how improvising the search and sharing reference pictures, one image made a player uncomfortable. The teacher turned it into the risk "reference media discomforts student".

Deduction would imply thinking in advance situations that could appear, and didn't appear in the research. A personal tip is to write the risks in present tense, that will help you to think almost as if you are there. It's important to have a methodology to do it, and this proposal uses the division in five phases included in the second chapter of this article considering that thinking linearly in the experience will facilitate the detection specially for inexperienced teachers:

- **Previous instructions**: In this part, a version of one of the most common risk can arise: "student's misconception of the activity makes him/her not wanting to participate in it", but also "student doesn't want to behave silly in front of the other ones" what could be derived from the lack of a safe environment.
- **Beginning the activity**: Continuing with another version of the opt out risk, "student changes his/her mind at the last moment and decides not to do the activity", which can be a big deal for the other members if the activity was for a specific number of players or even if other students prepared some work that implied interaction with that student.
- **Playing**: This stage should be analyzed more carefully than the other ones, because it has more nuances specific for every activity. And again, for the sake of tailoring, we recommend decomposing it in substeps specific from every activity. Typical elements like bleed (Bowman and Lieberoth, 2018, 249), unwanted sexual interactions between players or, besides the possible effect, reluctance of treating themes like "sexism, racism, and religious extremism in-character" on players because "they may become more inclusive towards others in their daily life, enhancing overall social cohesion" (Bowman, 2010) can appear in this point if they didn't do it earlier at the research. Some risks that could appear here are "the content of the activity will traumatize students" and "student doesn't feel comfortable being the center of attention."
- **Ending the activity**: "Student doesn't want to share publicly about the experience" is a common risk that appears here as it is "student expresses violently his/her feelings."

- **Final debrief**: As a continuation of the previous ones "student declines to share privately the concerns he/she has about the activity" and "student doesn't indicate all of his/her concerns," especially in graded activities, could be included here.

Finally, when the list is made, it should be contained in the number of items and writing style to make it appropriate to work with, depending on what the teacher needs. Too many items can be as unproductive as too few, with the possibilities of removing and merging risks. For example, depending on the activity, "student refuses to share about the experience" can be enough useful for some of them, whereas for others it would be better to divide them between "public share" and "private share" with the teacher.

5.2 Analyze risks

The general purpose of this stage is understanding the risks to prioritize them first and facilitate the next step: responding to each risk. Besides other characteristics can be included, like urgency or proximity (Project Management Institute. 2019, 139), this basic analysis will rely on the estimation of only two: probability (or likelihood) and impact (138).

Probability responds to how often the risk can appear, whereas impact to how severe repercussions will be if it appears. Even though the estimation can be linked to quantitative or qualitative elements (59) and each characteristic divided in five degrees, for the sake of simplicity we divided it in three degrees with a short explanation of each one of them (see Table 1).

Table 1: Explanation of Low, Medium and High applied to Probability and Impact.

	Low	Medium	High
Probability	If it happens it would clearly surprise the teacher.	It will happen in some activities.	It will happen at least once per activity.
Impact	It won't barely affect the student.	It will affect the student, but not in a meaningful way.	It will affect the student in a meaningful way.

These definitions are quite subjective, although nonetheless human behavior in Project Management is treated understanding this subjectivity and directly attached to the concept of complexity (Project Management Institute 2021, 51).

After assigning a level of probability and impact to each identified risk, the next step is to prioritize them. The Probability and Impact Matrix (Table 2) is a practical tool that allows educators to organize and assess risks visually by placing probability levels in the columns and impact levels in the rows, with the intersection determining each risk's overall priority level. While Losilla (2024) suggests that such matrices may have limitations in the flexible structure of larps, we find they can still provide essential support in classroom role-playing settings, particularly for educators unfamiliar with formal risk management. This matrix serves several key functions:

1. **Visual Framework**: For educators new to risk management, the matrix provides a structured, visual method for ranking risks, helping to reduce overwhelm and establish a clear order for addressing potential issues.
2. **Guidance on Risk Mitigation:** By identifying high-priority risks, the matrix enables teachers to target specific risks, either by reducing their probability, their impact, or both.
3. **Structured Response**: The matrix allows educators to work systematically, beginning with high-priority risks and progressing to lower ones. This aligns with Mochocki's (2013) point on limited time for educators, as they can address critical risks first and determine a stopping point that suits their needs, allowing them control over the process.
4. **Post-Activity Evaluation**: After the activity, teachers can use the matrix to compare their initial risk assessments with actual outcomes, supporting reflection and adjustment for future sessions. This iterative process improves educators' ability to assess and manage risks effectively over time.

Table 2: Probability and Impact Matrix.

Low		Probability		
		Medium	High	
Impact	High	Medium risk	High risk	Critical risk
	Medium	Low risk	Medium risk	High risk
	Low	Trivial risk	Low risk	Medium risk

Critical risks not only should be the first ones to be addressed, but also are good indicators for canceling the activity unless they are properly dealt with. *High risks* are very important too, and *medium risks* usually draw the line of really important to manage. *Low risks* matter too, and they shouldn't be completely ignored especially if the impact is still medium, but sometimes they are left behind because of urgent issues. The term of *trivial risk* is less and less used and many people treat them as low risks.

Here are some examples with risks already detected, understanding that especially the probability will vary depending on the course. That's why it's so important the context analysis:

- **The student doesn't want to participate:** High probability + Medium impact = High risk.
- **The student wants to tell the teacher why he/she doesn't want to participate but doesn't know how:** Low probability + Medium impact = Low risk.
- **The student uses the activity to bully another student:** Low probability + High impact = Medium risk.
- **The student doesn't feel comfortable being the center of attention:** High probability + Low impact = Medium risk.
- **The content of the activity traumatizes students:** High probability + High impact = Critical risk.
- **The student declines to share his/her concerns about the activity in the individual report:** Low probability + Low impact = Trivial risk.

5.3 Respond to risks

Starting with the critical risks, it's time to decide what to do with each one of them. Depending on the author, you can find different categories as a response to the risk. For example, Hart (2024a) indicates six categories of control risks at larps that are used in Sinking Ship Creations: elimination, design, equipment, training, regulation and information (2024?). Our proposal includes the next five ones:

- **Escalate** the risk. It implies raising it to some higher in the hierarchy than the teacher, which is a common response in the educational environment for extreme behaviors, including harassment, sending the student to the head of department or director.
- **Avoid** the risk. A common answer to critical risks that could lead to cancellation of the activity, as Losilla (2024) as a possibility for some larps.
- **Transfer** the risk. Every time some else needs to deal with the risk it would be considered to transfer it. When students do the activity without the presence of the teacher, the risk has been transferred to them.
- **Mitigate** the risk. Actions that reduce probability or impact developed or controlled by the teacher. As the most common and developed way to respond to consent risks, it will be expanded later in this chapter.
- **Accept** the risk. Basically, doing nothing. That decision can be made because there is no solution, the consequences of applying them are even worse or by prioritizing other risks there's no time to deal with that one (Project Management Institute. 2019, 36). One principle that Losilla (2024) indicates for larps that can be easily adapted to the classroom is "Do not hesitate to make participation compulsory, if absence would lead to risks that you cannot accept."

Once the choice is made, specific measures or tools can be applied. These measures can modify risks, especially but not only, in the case of mitigation, or generate new risks related or not with consent. And there is

always a chance to combine some of them. As an example of a specific consent risk that can be addressed in any of these ways, we are going to deal with the first one that appeared in the stage Identify Risk: students that don't want to participate.

- **Escalate** the risk, by taking it to a superior, who would decide if opt out is an available option for students and the consequences for them.
- **Avoid** the risk, by canceling the activity or letting students opt out.
- **Transfer** the risk, if the student presents a signed authorization of a qualified person (legal tutor, parent or even medical report).
- **Mitigate** the risk. Mochocki proposes 3 things that are clearly mitigations of this risk: create incentives "to willing enter the experience" (2013, 64), "if the in-game conflicted parties need to recruit supporters, then uninvolved players will be actively encouraged by peers to join in" (2013, 66) and tailor the design to the students by diminishing the importance of immersion, generating easy-to-relate characters and emphasizing task completion (2013, 71-72). Another option would be discouraging students to opt out by making them do another activity that is not as attractive as the game, like writing an essay. All of these things reduce the probability.
- **Accept** the risk. That would be the case of not giving the chance to opt out. That's usually the most common decision for courses and workshops whose main focus is the roleplay activity, e.g., Creating a course of how to use the larp *7Samurai* to train HR specialists to detect natural leaders among candidates for a job (Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024, 154) could entail that playing the larp is mandatory to all the participants.

In the case of mitigation, actions and techniques can be found in different sources: academic, para-academic, designers' or players' publications, learners' experiences, podcasts, encounters, etc. Teachers can also adapt similar experiences from topics like general gamification or other interactive activities. The Probability and Impact Matrix further supports this process by helping educators determine whether to address each risk by reducing its impact, its probability, or both, thereby providing a strategic approach to mitigation. At the same time, it enhances understanding of how a risk diminishes in priority as its impact or probability decreases.

As an example, the book *Educar Jugando: un reto para el siglo XXI* (translation: *Educate Playing: a Challenge for the XXI Century*; Blasco et al. 2019) includes a wide variety of contributions, from the para-academic "Utilizando juegos de mesa en la universidad. El caso de *Timeline* historia de la comunicación" (translation: "Using Board Games in the University: *Timeline* history of communication's case"; Gonzalo 2019) written by an academic author, to the teacher-designer section "Jugando a rol con científicos" (translation: "Playing RPGs with Scientifics", Sanz González 2019a) that starts with the general use of games to the creation of his published game book *Científicos: El juego de rol* (translation, *Scientifics: The Role-Playing Game*, Sanz González 2019b). In the same way, the already mentioned free publication RPG-oriented *Consent in Gaming* (Reynolds and Germain 2019) includes many tools, and you can find there a collection of links of additional resources where we recommend "The TTRPG Safety Toolkit" where you can find one of our favorite ones: Ron Edwards' lines and veils (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2021). The Nordic Larp Wiki also includes in "concepts" and "tools" sections specific situations and already tested tools quite useful to use with this method.

We propose to use the context analysis and then checking the different phases to locate the actions for the mitigation. Several actions could affect the same risks, reducing more and more the impact and/or the probability, and the same action can have effect on several risks. We include here a few examples of actions and their consequences in each phase:

- **Previous instructions**. In the case of tabletop roleplaying games, this is a good point to introduce Lines and Veils and similar tools. This technique consists of elaborate and shared with the participants lines or "content won't show up in the game at all" and veils while content that "might be in the game but not spotlighted or described in great detail" (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2021, 1) are veils. For some groups, it can generate a new risk of people mocking the person, and that's why it's so important preserving anonymity of the contributions by making the teacher generate the list after receiving the contributions, possibly including more lines and veils.
- **Beginning the activity**. The use of workshops for larps is something mentioned by many authors. When Losilla talks about the rules of consent he strongly recommends "practising them explicitly in a workshop before runtime, particularly in case of subtle diegetic mechanics, which may be easily missed" (2024).

- **Playing the activity**. And again, this stage is the key one. Some general principles are applied, like active listening to detect and react to issues as they appear, reducing the impact, which is also applied as a Game Master technique from many non-academic authors (Sesenra 2022, 14). Other actions could be using the X-Card so "the GM (or whoever is acting when the X-Card is activated) should either revise the current content to avoid the problem content or skip ahead so that the problem content is no longer present" Reynolds and Germain 2019, 6), including mandatory off-game after care after pre-designed abusive scenes (Losilla 2024).
- **Ending the activity**. Aftercare, also known as debrief or checking in, creates a space that "might involve mostly retelling favorite bits and planning for the future, both in and out of character. An intense game probably requires something more structured" (Reynolds and Germain 2019, 8). With this action, you can reduce the severity of the damage, therefore decreasing the impact.
- **Final debrief**. "Write an individual report" is an action itself that allows students to mention issues that they experienced during the activity and that they don't feel comfortable discussing in public. This action reduces the impact by expressing the concern and feeling listened to by the teacher.

It is also quite useful to re-check how the risk has changed after applying the modifications. If you take a critical risk and you modify it by reducing the probability to low, it becomes a medium risk.

5.4 Monitor risks

This final step implies "reevaluate the status of previously identified risks; to identify emergent, secondary, and residual risks; and to determine the effectiveness of the risk management processes" (Project Management Institute. 2019, 39).

As it was indicated in the Identify risks step, previous experiences will help further experiences. It can also enhance quantitative approaches to further analysis. One key element here is to process data in a safe and ethical way, especially for students. Institutions can have their own logs as reports to tutors or shared documents with other teachers, and some countries and public organizations publish their own guides (see e.g., Agencia Española de Protección de Datos 2018).

If a teacher decides to create his/her own log, it should be written coding terms and skipping names to respect students' privacy, even if the initial purpose is for personal use.

7. CONCLUSION

Future research could benefit from developing tailored consent frameworks for specific types of role-playing activities within educational settings, building upon the general approach proposed in this article. For instance, as Bowman (2018) has noted, educational larps often foster immersive and complex interactions that require unique risk management strategies to address player agency and emotional engagement. In contrast, tabletop RPGs might benefit from frameworks focused on structured consent tools, such as those outlined in *Consent in Gaming* by Reynolds and Germain (2019), which emphasizes setting boundaries and managing sensitive themes within moderated scenarios. Developing such specific models would enable even more precise applications of consent and safety practices, ensuring that each role-playing genre within educational contexts has a well-suited, research-backed framework to effectively support both educators and participants.

Role-playing activities applied in the classroom make teachers deal with many concerns related to consent. The triple framework that these activities generate create a complex dynamic of power that not only creates tricky interactions but also makes it harder to detect consent issues. It's important that teachers have their own method to deal with these situations, and the tools that have been created by the rpg community can be quite useful, properly understood and adapted. This article proposes a method based on risk management techniques that starts by dividing the activity in 5 phases, continues analyzing its context and finishes with a 4 steps process of dealing with the risks derived from lack of consent: identify, analyze, respond to and monitor them. This is not *the* method, but *a* method to be adapted by the teacher.

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