Safety & Calibration Tools in Larps

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Reasons to Approach Safety & Calibration

- The core of role-playing is trust – enabling new types of stories & larps
- Not all larp communities have words and concepts for things like bleed & calibration (not all even have out-of-character social interactions)
- A wish to make more larps playable for more players

Alibi requires a community of trust.

Community members trust each other when they feel **safe**, **empowered**, **cared for**.

Communities of trust are designed.

Physical safety and emotional safety

- Often designers consider physical safety
  - How do we handle sword-fighting so no one gets hurt
  - What kind of lighting do we use to ensure people can adequately see while keeping the proper mood?
  - What do we do if someone gets a cut, breaks a bone, or hits their head?
- Emotional safety is often overlooked or even derided
  - "Why can't you separate the game from reality?"
  - "It wasn't me, it was my character."
  - "You're a special snowflake."
  - "If you can't take it, then you shouldn't play."
  - "If you're that fragile, you need more serious help."
- Being safe and feeling safe are not the same.

You don't get to tell someone they are safe.
If they don't feel safe, they are not safe.

You feeling safe does not mean that everyone else feels -- or *should feel* -- safe too.

Safety is **relative** and **personal**

- Not all players have equal access to power
  - **Design**: character skills, mechanics
  - **Player**: abilities, experience, bodies, social capital
  - **Norms**: In-game or out-of game, dominant power structure
- Not all players have equal life experience
  - Trauma
  - Medical needs
  - Comfort zones
  - Values and morals

Consider a new definition of safety

- A place and/or state of mind necessary for someone to feel that they can open up, be vulnerable, take risks, and be supported and cared for as they do.
- A place and/or state of mind where they can trust others to behave responsibly and to have a shared sense of responsibility for others and the shared space.
- A place and/or state of mind that allows individual autonomy, mechanisms for individual needs to be met, and compassion for other individuals in concert.

Designing for Safety

- **Define the play ethos** -- in game docs, handbook, Code of Conduct
- **Monitor Emergent Play** -- "herd competence" of expectations; storytellers, boots on the ground
- **Casting Decisions** -- who you put in power matters
- **Manage the Transitions** -- pre-game, post-game, online
- **Mechanics** -- techniques that are created, taught, expected to be used, and used to allow people to opt in to their comfort level, and opt out when that is breached.

What are Safety and Calibration Mechanics

Safety

- Tools in place to monitor and respond to players' physical and emotional safety. Both to protect from harm (keep safe) **and** to engender trust (feel safe).

Calibration

- Koljonen: "Calibration means the many explicit and implicit ways that players have to negotiate playstyle, play intensity and sometimes things like genre."
- Tools that allow a player to dial up or dial down an experience, to fine-tune it to maximum performance and effect.

Bespoke System

These are not the only techniques.
These are some techniques that may be useful.

Safety & Calibration Techniques should always consider your own community and design goals

Safety Mechanics

Designing for Safety

- Transparency of content
- Transparency of player list
- Sanctuary space set aside and available
- Culture of care

Human beings[1] are more important than larps.

Self care comes first.

1. **Players, participants, organizers, helpers.**

OK Check-In

Player 1 flashes the "OK" symbol, with the thumb and index finger touching in an "o" and the other three fingers extended upward, to another player and establishes eye contact.

This gesture means "Are you okay?"

(We learned this gesture is offensive in Italy.
So adapting it to your larp culture is important.)

OK Check-In

Player 2 responds one of three ways:

Thumbs-up: "Doing fine, no need for follow-up."

Thumbs-down: "I am not okay." Player 1 responds by asking if the player needs to go to the off-game room, sanctuary, see counselor.

Wavering flat hand: "I am not sure." Player 1 responds as if thumbs down.

This works because the meaning is easily understood, it is quick, unobtrusive, and reassuring.

Pronouns

- Pronouns matter.
- Character pronouns are not always the same as player pronouns.
- Some people use games as a way to test out gender identities or deal with gender questions.
- Misgendering hurts.
- Discussing this engenders trust and establishes care.

| Nominative (subject)	Objective (object)	Possessive Determiner
She	Her	Her
They	Them	Their
Ze/Sie	Hir	Hir
Ze/Sie	Zir	Zir
Ze/Sie	Zim	Zir
Xe	Xem	Xyr
E	Em	Eir
Ey	Em	Eir
Thon	Thon	Thons
Per	Per	Pers

Pronouns

- Players self-choose pronouns for themselves and character
- Pronouns are written on name tags for player and character
  - Large enough font to be seen readily at conversation distance
- Default pronoun is they unless otherwise noted.
- Pronoun correction mechanic

Mordecai Adler

He/him/his

Maison DuBois   Artificer

Pronoun Correction

1. Player 1 accidentally uses the incorrect pronoun to refer to someone.
2. Player 2 says the word "Pronouns" and shows the P hand signal, derived from the British sign language symbol for the letter P. If the player does not have both hands available, they can just use the verbal cue "Pronouns."
3. Player 2 follows the verbal cue and hand signal with the correct pronoun for Player 1 to use.
4. Player 1 says "Thank you" for the reminder. Play or conversation resumes
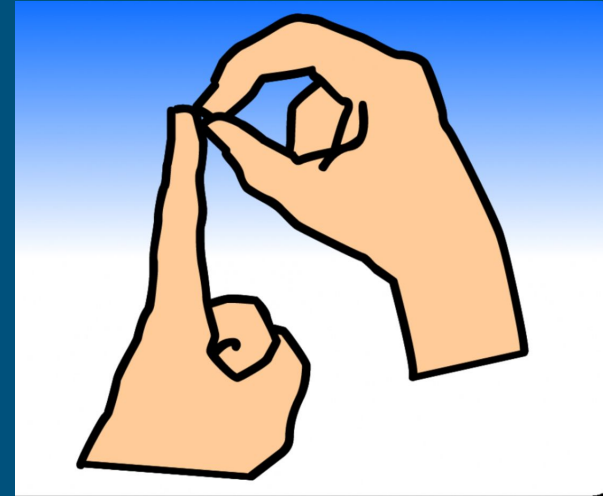
e.g. "Pronouns: they."

Calibration Mechanics

Cut

1. Player 1 calls "cut."
2. Player 2 (or all players within hearing) immediately stop all roleplay.
3. Player 2 checks in with Player 1, focusing on their needs. No one asks for an explanation for why cut was called nor makes any comment whatsoever.
4. Player 1 makes decision to either exit the scene, return to the scene at a lower intensity, or go to the safe-space.
5. Play resumes among remaining players.

Immediate stop to all play.
Take step back and wait.
Inviolable.

Largo -- "Go slow", "Dial it down," "Back off"

Procedure:

1. Player 1 calls "largo"
2. Player 2 (or all players within hearing) take a step back, then lower the volume, or otherwise lower the intensity of the scene. No one asks for an explanation or comments. Stepping back is visual confirmation that "largo" was heard and understood.
3. Play continues at lessened intensity. It can continue uninterrupted, although an "OK Check-In" may be used to determine if newly calibrated play meets Player 1's needs.
4. Player 1 may decide to use another calibration technique if the results of largo are insufficient for their needs.

Look down

Procedure:
1. Player 1 shields their eyes and walks away
2. Player 2 (and all other players) continue play as usual.

Used to exit a room or scene for any reason. Other players ignore the exit.

Can be used to enter a scene if you don't want it to be acknowledged that you are arriving late.

Aromantic Indicator

- Red (or bright pink) sticker on the nametag.
- Full opt-out of romantic play
- Friendship and companionship welcome
- No flirting, no asking on dates, no sexual advances
- Acknowledges a-rom and ace players
- Also monogamous players who are uncomfortable with that kind of play or do not wish to have to continually say no.
- Respected without question
- No attention drawn to it.

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Proactive Thumbs Down

- Without being asked, player indicates "I am not okay" or "That was not okay."
- Cues an off-game discussion of what player needs.

Enthusiastic or Double Thumbs Up

- In an intense situation, when you are enjoying it, don't want it to stop, or even want it to be ratcheted up, use the two-thumbs up
  - Can be a response to a Check-In
  - Can be proactive
- Indicates being on-board, appreciative
- Indicates willingness to go further
  - E.g. get louder, prolong scene, get more intense

"Off-game"

- NOT to signal that you are not "in-play"
- Used to pause roleplay briefly to check in with the player before proceeding.
- Lean toward the other player slowly
- Say "Off game--" followed by
  - Clarification
  - Consent negotiation

Going off-game for a moment does NOT break the game, break the immersion, or ruin play.

Briefly pausing play, not breaking it.

Consent Negotiations

Consent Negotiations

- Before as well as during a larp
- Take place between players
- Establish boundaries
- Establish permissions
- Create play
- Intensify drama
- Increase trust and safety

Consent Negotiations -- Potential Whens

- Romance or Sexuality
- Violence
- Shouting in people's faces
- Physical contact
- Bullying
- Feeding (in the case of vampire games)

Consent is fraught.
People are not trained in
how to ask for it, or give it.

Giving a script for consent helps people learn it and use it.

Consent Negotiations - Three Principles

- **"People are more important than larps."** The well-being of you as a person is more important than any character, scene or plot.
- **"It's not about you."** If someone does not want to play a certain scene or theme, they are not required to explain why. Their boundaries have nothing to do with you, so don't take them personally.
- **"Every new encounter requires negotiation."** People's boundaries may change over the course of the larp and that's fine. (see principle #2) Unless you know someone very well and have established boundaries, negotiate each new encounter to make sure both parties are on the same page *before continuing*.

Consent is continuous.

Consenting to play a larp does not equal consent to anything that happens in it.

Pre-game Consent Negotiations

- Face-to-face, phone, or chat discussions with people you already know.
- Face-to-face discussions with people in the pre-game workshops.
- Online chats and discussions for pre-game relationship building.
- Face-to-face informal discussions before game on.
- Pre-established boundaries with people you know very well. E.g. partners, long-term friends or community members.

This is not blanket consent. Consent negotiated before a game may change during it.

In-Game Consent Negotiations -- How

- Whenever something is different from what was previously negotiated or when you encounter a player whom you have never negotiated with, then:

- Player 1: Say: "Off-game: consent negotiation"
- Player 1: Take a step back to give space
- Player 1: Say: "How would you feel about X?"
- Player 2: Say either "No, thank you." OR "Yes, please."

Consent Negotiations -- "No, thank you."

- Player 1: Say: "How would you feel about X?"
- Player 2: "No, thank you."
- Player 1: "Thank you."
- Resume play taking the no and changing direction or end scene.
- Use other safety & calibration techniques to stop or slow down at any time.
- Do not:
  - Pressure
  - Ask again
  - Ask why
  - Apologize

Consent Negotiations -- "Yes, please."

- Player 1: Say: "How would you feel about X?"
- Player 2: "Yes, please."
- Player 1: "How would you like to play this?" Wait. Do not offer suggestions.
- Player 2: "I would be comfortable with _____" State something specific. "How do you feel about that?"
- Player 1: Responds with "Yes, please." or "No, thank you."
- Continue repeating How→ specific→ answer, until parameters are set.
- Roleplay within those boundaries.
- Repeat as needed when situation or boundaries change
- Use other safety & calibration techniques to stop or slow down at any time.

Debrief

Debrief is a safety technique

- Allows closure
- Reaffirms players are more important than larps.
- Clears the air
- Allows for appreciation
- Fosters community and shared experience
- Strengthens trust
- Establishes next steps (e.g. post-larp depression, bleed, larp-drop)

Other resources

Creating a Culture of Trust through Safety & Calibration Mechanics, Maury Brown, NordicLarp.org.

A Matter of Trust: Larp & Consent Culture, Sarah Lynne Bowman, NordicLarp.org.

Understanding Participation & Designing for Trust, Johanna Koljonen.

NWM: The OK Check-In Mechanic, Youtube.

Credits

These techniques as a system of Safety & Calibration Mechanics were developed by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Maury Brown, Harrison Greene and Johanna Koljonen, with inspiration from other meta-techniques in use in the Nordic and US larp communities.

As of February 2017, have been used by more than 850 people playing *New World Magischola* or *End of the Line*: New Orleans.

The OK Check-In is now in use in *Dystopia Rising* games in the United States. The Lookdown was added to *College of Wizardry* events, and the authors hope that the use of Safety & Calibration mechanics that are appropriate to your larp become part of your design.