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The Discourse of Player Safety in the Forge Diaspora, 2003-2013

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Abstract

The idea of *player safety* – a concern for the psychological well-being of the people who play role-playing games on the part of those who design and run those games – has within the past several years emerged as a rubric for a whole host of pre-game, in-game, and post-game procedures intended to address that concern, particularly in larp but in tabletop RPGs as well. However, considerations of player safety sometimes produce skeptical responses on the part of those who fear, for instance, that player safety mechanisms will somehow dilute the experience or stifle their creativity. Examining the dynamics of conversations produced by these countervailing concerns can provide insight into the nature of RPG participation. A full understanding of these dynamics, however, will benefit from an investigation of the historical underpinnings of the discourse of player safety. To that end, this essay explores conversations around safety-related discourse within the online sphere known as the “Forge Diaspora.”

The Forge was an online discussion site for tabletop RPG design, publication, and play that was active in the first decade of the twenty-first century, serving to champion creator-owned “indie RPGs” and game design innovation during that period. In addition, it inspired a panoply of blogs and forums where further discussion took place. Among the considerations related to player safety discussed within the Forge Diaspora were the tools Ron Edwards called Lines and Veils and Meguey Baker’s complementary principles of Nobody Gets Hurt and I Will Not Abandon You. This essay uses techniques of rhetorical analysis to reconstruct frameworks of narrative and argumentation about these and related ideas with the goal of providing historical context for contemporaneous conversations about player safety.

Keywords: Player safety, Forge Diaspora, rhetorical approach

要約

「プレイヤーの安全性」という考え方、つまりロールプレイングゲームをプレイする人々の心理的な幸福に対するゲームをデザイン・主催する側の懸念は、過去数年の間に、LARPだけでなくテーブル・トーク RPGにおいても、この懸念に対処することを目的としたゲーム前、ゲーム中、ゲーム後の手順の基準として浮上してきた。しかし、プレイヤーの安全性を考慮すると、例えば、プレイヤーの安全性のための手法が何らかの形で経験を希薄にしたり、創造性を抑制したりするのではないかと心配する人たちの間で懐疑的な反応が生まれることがある。このような相反する懸念が生み出す会話のダイナミクスを調べることで、RPGへの参加の本質についての洞察を得ることができる。しかし、これらのダイナミクスを完全に理解するには、プレイヤーの安全性に関する言説の歴史的背景を調査することが有益である。そのために、本稿は「フォージ・ディアスポラ」として知られるオンライン圏での安全関連の言説を中心とした会話を分析する。

「The Forge (フォージ, 加熱炉)」は、テーブル・トーク RPG のデザイン、出版、プレイのためのオンラインディスカッションサイトで、21世紀の最初の10年間に活発に活動し、その間にクリエイターが所有する「インディーRPG」とゲームデザインの革新を擁護する役割を果たした。さらに、それがきっかけとなり、多くのブログやフォーラムでさらなる議論が行われた。「Forge Diaspora (フォージ・ディアスポラ, 四散したフォージ関係者間)」で議論されたプレイヤーの安全性に関する考察の中には、Ron Edwards が「Line and Veil (ラインとベール)」と呼んだ手法や、Meguey Baker の「Nobody Gets Hurt (誰も傷つかない)」と「I Will Not Abandon You (あなたを見捨てない)」という補完原則があった。本稿では、修辞学的分析のテクニックを用いて、これらと関連するアイデアについての物語と論証の枠組みを再構築し、プレイヤーの安全性についての現在の言説に歴史的な文脈を提供することを目的としている。

キーワード: プレイヤー安全性, フォージ・ディアスポラ, 修辞的アプローチ

1. Introduction

The idea of *player safety* – a concern for the psychological well-being of the people who play role-playing games on the part of those who design and run those games – has recently emerged as a rubric for a whole host of pre-game, in-game, and

post-game procedures intended to address that concern, particularly in larp but in tabletop RPGs as well (e.g., Järvelä and Meland 2017; Koljonen 2016; Reynolds and Germain 2019; Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2019; Sheldon 2018; Stavropoulos 2013; Table Tools 2019; see also Bowman and Lieberoth 2018, 255–6; for a more general introduction to role-



playing games, see Deterding and Zagal 2018). The discourse surrounding the idea of player safety in RPGs, like that of trigger warnings, safe spaces, and consent in the broader public sphere, is contentious, perhaps surprisingly so, and so understanding the shape of that discourse can help illuminate a broad swath of contemporary culture. However, paying attention only to current debates has the effect of masking how relevant ideas have developed over time. Thus, a more complete understanding of the discourse of player safety within the RPG hobby requires examining its historical underpinnings. One such line of historical development can be examined via tracing out some of the conversations that took place within the “Forge diaspora,” a TRPG community active in the early years of the twenty-first century. This paper adopts a rhetorically informed discourse-analytic perspective to conduct such an examination.

2. Discourse as Cultural System-Level Elaboration

In calling the conversations surrounding player safety a “discourse,” I am relying on Teun van Dijk’s description of the concept as involving language use to communicate beliefs in social interaction (van Dijk 1996, 2). At the rhetorical level, van Dijk notes, discourse analytic approaches are interested in the “persuasiveness” of utterances – or, more precisely, the structures of persuasion within utterances (van Dijk 1996, 12; but see also Gill and Whedbee 1996, 157). This calls attention to the extent to which those utterances are more or less skilled communicative performances in which speakers employ “the strategic dimensions of interaction and language use” – more poetically, “the calculus of face and the geometries of figuration” – to achieve discursive aims (White 2008, 19).

And while discourse analyses of role-playing tend to focus on language use in the game session itself, rather than on the hobbyist discourse about role-playing (White 2018, 339–40), the question that drives most rhetorical approaches to discourse analysis is simply who is arguing what, to whom and how? Rhetoricians employ analytic apparatus derived from the classical tradition of Greco-Roman oratory or more modern philosophies of language (see Hauser 2002) as well as methods standing in dialogue with other communication-theoretic traditions (Craig 1999). In communication theorist Robert T. Craig’s view, rhetoric is a “practical art of discourse” that theorizes problems of communication as involving some “social exigency requiring collective deliberation and judgment” (Craig 1999, 153).

Safety concerns can obviously be seen as an application within the sphere of role-playing games of a larger contemporaneous social exigency –

particularly visible within higher education – about safe spaces, trigger warnings, and consent (Graybill 2017; Laguardia, Michalsen, and Rider-Milkovich 2017; Palfrey and Iburguen 2017). But to some extent they must also be seen as the articulation of an internal or field-specific ideational space whose specific configuration is affected by what social theorist Margaret Archer calls the “elaboration” of a cultural (ideational) system. This elaboration is enacted by groups and individuals interacting at the socio-cultural (agent) level; the effect is to reshape ideas and their logical interrelationships even as those ideas motivate actors in the social scene (Archer 1996, 227).

An example of this within the socio-cultural sphere of role-playing games may lie in the Nordic larp community’s articulation of *bleed* as an epiphenomenon of play (Bowman 2015; see also Bowman and Lieberoth 2018, 254, and Bowman and Schrier 2018, 405–6). Bleed is the term used to describe when players experience emotional or psychological consequences from fictional in-game events; it was identified by the Nordic role-playing game design collective known as Vi åker Jeep as a tool to achieve a certain richness or depth of experience within their games. Because “jeepform” games were often intended to “influence players’ actions or to achieve higher purposes in the premise” (Vi Åker Jeep 2011) – more precisely, to enable “artistically meaningful role-playing” through “painful but rewarding aesthetic experiences” (Montola and Holopainen 2012, 13) – they were deliberately designed to foment a kind of “double consciousness” in which the “alibi” or “protective frame” of play was weakened enough that players, while still holding on to the idea that *this is just a game*, were nonetheless induced to experience satisfyingly powerful but potentially negative emotions (Montola 2010, 2). Note that this is not exactly what Gary Alan Fine, in his seminal ethnography of tabletop role-players, referred to as “overinvolvement” in the character (Fine 1983, 217–22)), though it seems related.

The culmination of the design impulse toward bleed may have been a 2011 Nordic larp called *Kapo* (see Raasted 2012), which used larp techniques first developed to represent romance and intimacy to create the dehumanizing social dynamics of a concentration camp in a quasi-fascist near-future Denmark. At a subsequent meeting of the Nordic larp community, a debate was held over what was referred to as “the Great Player Safety Controversy,” between critics of the game and its designers (Koljonen et al. 2012). One observer implies that the panelists agreed that debriefing sessions must “fit the larp they are designed for as well as the players who played it” (Brown 2018), but a more general awareness of player safety within the Nordic larp community seems to have been a

consequence as well. Thus, by 2017, in a retrospective volume at least two of the community members reminiscing about their early larp experiences somewhat abashedly recall the deficient safety mechanisms of those earlier days (Gräslund 2017; Raaum 2017), and one wag satirizes the community's concern for safety by imagining the NASA-inspired protocols that would be put in place for a 2037 larp in the vacuum of Phobos (Amherst 2017). More seriously, one writer, even as she says that designers should “promptly and ruthlessly suppress any rule not actively reinforcing the game themes” to protect player immersion adds a parenthetical qualification that she regards as self-evident: “Safety rules not included, *obviously*,” she says (Henry 2017, 88, emphasis mine).

The advocacy of player safety techniques sometimes produces skeptical responses on the part of those who fear, for instance, that player safety mechanisms will somehow stifle their creativity or dilute the experience. This may be part of Strand's (2017) criticism of Järvelä and Meland's (2017) discussion of debriefing in larp, accusing them of “taking the matter [...] too seriously and [...] underestimating the capability of players to take care of their own emotions and needs” (117). However, as Järvelä and Meland note, Strand is sensitive to the obligation to provide emotional support for larp participants, particularly those in antagonist roles such as guards, villains, and monsters, and for organizers.

In the face of reticence or even resistance to employ player safety tools, it is helpful to understand what is at stake for those involved in the discussion. The exigency is thus amenable to being understood through the rhetorical lens of *stasis theory*, which is interested in how countervailing positions produce *issues* or points of contention that are the problems or questions that those positions must address (Hauser 2002, 130–3). Stasis theory “offers a hierarchical scheme for identifying the core point of contention within a debate and, consequently, the selection of strategic responses” (Marsh 2018, 169). Classical rhetoricians saw stasis theory as applying mainly to legal or juridical matters, but recent rhetorical scholarship asserts that stasis theory applies to “general, recurring issues that can appear in any dialogic process of interpreting a text as people attempt to coordinate their varying interpretations” (Camper 2018, 9).

3. The X-Card as Cipher

It is exactly this kind of interpretive process that is implicated in the occasionally heated discussions about a TRPG player safety mechanism promulgated by New York City-based community

organizer John Stavropoulos and known as the “X-Card” (Stavropoulos 2013).¹ “I created the X-Card,” John told me, “primarily because of feedback we received from survey information from the attendees of our in-person events” at various gaming conventions, where people would sign up to play TRPG scenarios with others who might be total strangers to them. One of the reasons for creating it, he explained, was to address perceived “power differentials between the players and the DM/GM [that is, the Dungeon Master or Game Master: the person running a scenario for a group of players]” (Stavropoulos 2020, personal correspondence). The questions were manifold:

Who was allowed to raise issues? Who decides which issues are resolved and how? What are the processes and procedures? Who is allowed to say and do what? In many of our experiences, even if a player voiced a concern, ultimately it was up to the DM/GM's discretion to decide how seriously to take those concerns. And sometimes they were ignored. (Stavropoulos 2020, personal correspondence)

The instructions for employing the card advised GMs to explain to their players at the beginning of the game, that if anything was said in play that made someone uncomfortable, that person can lift, tap, or point to an index card with an X drawn on it – the X-Card – that would be in the center of the table. That person didn't need to provide any explanation; the offending material would simply be edited out of the game. “I know it sounds funny,” the recommended X-Card script for GMs went, “but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I'm the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you! Please help make this game fun for everyone” (Stavropoulos 2013).

Rhetorician Martin Camper identifies six “interpretive stases” that serve as the grounds for arguments over texts: (1) ambiguity in the text itself, (2) questions of “definition” or textual scope, (3) “letter versus spirit” or authorial intention, (4) “conflicting passages” or internal contradiction, (5) “assimilation” or application of the text to instances, and (6) “jurisdiction” or the legitimacy of an interpretation (Camper 2018, 9).

The stasis of assimilation – more precisely, “a question concerning what unstated meaning or application can be inferred from the text” (Camper

¹ See the “Safety and Calibration Cards” (安全確保 & キャリブレーションカード) provided at the end of this issue in Japanese (or the English original at <https://dtwelves.com>) as an example of a practical implementation of the X-Card or the *lines and veils* mechanics discussed below.

2018, 9) – arises in discussions about the X-Card. “I began to wonder,” wrote one redditor in a role-playing sub-reddit, “if and when we adopt this at the table, does it stop possible meaningful discussion?” (Phlegmthedragon 2017). In a different space, another blogger wrote, “I have some concerns that the X-Card system would remove uncomfortable decisions and experiences from the game” (Ravencrowking 2016). Another redditor on a *Dungeons & Dragons* subreddit in 2016 regarded it as sufficient to post a link to Stavropoulos’s online document about the X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013), under the heading “The Most Absurd Thing I Have Ever Seen,” without further comment (“The Most Absurd Thing,” 2016). An act of ridicule of this kind relies for its force on an assumption of shared values and expectations so broad that not even the abbreviated syllogistic form of the enthymeme is needed; an indexical act of pointing is enough (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1973, 205–207). These online interlocutors are thus not claiming that the text – an X-Card in the center of the table – is ambiguous; rather, they are saying that it more or less obviously implies curtailing the range of normal activity at the table. This is supported by the elaboration offered in the thread by someone, perhaps the anonymized original poster, who chimed in, “Making all tabletop players out to be children like this is just insulting” (“The Most Absurd Thing,” 2016).

And while some assimilation-related complaints about the X-Card point to its *insufficiency* as emotional or social protection (2097 2014; 2097 2019), generally underlying this concern for how safety tools might impinge upon the creative and expressive freedom of other players, particularly the GM, is the sense that the desire to use them in play is selfishly or immaturely motivated. One redditor in the “Most Absurd Thing” thread, for example, posting under the handle *Lightning Ace*, argues that, “Just because you’re offended doesn’t mean you’re right. A more than adequate reason why this idea is absurd.” Similarly, poster *Blue_Ryder* is unimpressed. “I’m sorry but I’m not here to coddle you,” they say, “I’m here to run a game.” In *Blue_Ryder*’s opinion, the user of the X-Card “has become addicted to the sympathy that their tragedy generates. They are in love with playing their ‘X-Card’ and getting their way [...] I didn’t spend time creating a dungeon [...] just so you could derail the entire experience with your selfish need to have the world cater to you” (“The Most Absurd Thing,” 2016).

In contrast, defenders of the X-Card in the thread pointed to a legitimate need for safety mechanisms, challenging the critics on the jurisdictional grounds that they are misinterpreting the intent of the X-Card. “Systems like this can be extremely useful,” concluded one commenter after

describing how his group adopted some simple techniques to help a player with PTSD from childhood trauma successfully participate in the game, because “some people have legitimate trauma in their past and all of the mental health issues that go along with it” (Tanwynwv, in “The Most Absurd Thing,” 2016). Another poster offered the example of getting anxious in crowds. “That does not mean I want you to leave out any crowds from your entire campaign,” they explained. “It means I don’t want to hear a detailed description of how I’m being pushed and pressured from every side, and how hot and damp it is between all these people” (Viper459, in “The Most Absurd Thing,” 2016).

Such comments seemed to shift the stasis toward one of definition, returning to the theme of maturity by suggesting that talking to other players and explaining one’s discomfort – “talk to the group” was a recurring motif – were more grown-up strategies than the X-Card’s no-questions-asked method, and regarding the length of Stavropoulos’s explanations of the X-Card to be risible, echoing Strand’s (2017) complaint about taking things too seriously.

Examining conversations produced by these countervailing concerns can arguably provide insight into the nature of RPG participation. For example, the assumption by most posters that play takes place within stable, pre-existing groups versus John’s orientation as an event organizer towards ensuring a positive experience in convention-based play emerges as an important distinction in understanding the issue. More importantly, the polemical and even philippic contexts in which the X-Card is invoked, where it seems to stand for something that the speaker rejects, warrant closer examination. An unsettling incident related by convention organizer Kate Bullock on her blog illustrates this:

This year, one of the D&D DMs got angry with us for letting two dirty characters (characters who weren’t legally levelled) sit down at his table [...] The DM argued with us, citing a variety of reasons from “they’ll all die” to “it won’t be fun for them” for why these players shouldn’t play. When we had answers for his points, he stormed away, and then came back with a ripped-up x-card and slammed it down in front of me in front of con attendees. He was close to me. He was in my face. It felt and was threatening, aggressive, and violent (Bullock 2017).

A similar incident connects these dynamics to the discourse of player safety within the Forge diaspora. “At Gen Con’s Games on Demand,” John Stavropoulos remembered, referring to a scheduled event taking place at a very popular North American

gaming convention, “I had a prominent member of the Forge come up to me and tear an X-Card up in front of me and say, ‘We don’t use these around here’” (Stavropoulos 2020, pers. corresp.).

4. Concepts of Player Safety in the Forge Diaspora

A complete history of the Forge has yet to appear, though summaries exist; the most complete to date is probably White (2015), and a longer examination is forthcoming (White 2020). Now archived at www.indierpgs.com, the Forge was an online discussion site for tabletop RPG design, publication, and play that was in active use during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Until it was closed to new posts by its founders in 2012, it served to champion creator-owned “indie RPGs” and game design innovation. After an initial surge of conceptual discussion and design experimentation on the forum itself from 2000 to 2004, during what was sometimes called the Forge’s “Spring phase” (Edwards 2010), it inspired a panoply of blogs and forums where further discussion took place, sometimes known collectively as the “Forge diaspora” (Walton 2005). Thus a “prominent member of the Forge” could be anyone who posted there frequently and so was regarded as an authoritative presence.

And while the term “player safety” was not part of the Forge lexicon during the Summer phase of 2004 to 2007, the height of the Forge diaspora, a concern for how TRPG designers and players should manage intense or intimate emotional play was concomitant with interest in the sort of thematic or “premise-addressing” play (Edwards 2003a) that was a focus of discussion for many Forge habitués. This sort of “Narrativist” play, in other words, raised some of the same considerations as the more psychologically intense Nordic larp designs did.

Among the places where emotionally intense play was discussed within this community were different conversations surrounding (a) the tools that Ron Edwards called *drawing the line* and *drawing the veil*, and (b) Meguey Baker’s complementary principles of *Nobody Gets Hurt* (NGH) and *I Will Not Abandon You* (IWNAY). The following sections outline the general shape of these conversations before attempting to connect them back to the contemporary TRPG discourse of player safety via the lens of stasis theory. As Meguey Baker pointed out to me during a discussion of her work, “This is an ongoing, dynamic conversation. These are not finished problems; these are not hard and fast ‘that’s the solution’ and we can dust our hands off on it [...] The history is by no means finished” (Meguey Baker, personal correspondence).

5. Lines and Veils

Introduced by Ron Edwards in a supplement to his game *Sorcerer* (Edwards 2001) called *Sex and Sorcery* (Edwards 2003b), *lines and veils* are related techniques for enabling players to exercise some degree of control over the kinds of content that enter the fiction of the game, and the way that content is represented in the ongoing conversation of play. In a lexicon of Forge terminology, Edwards defined the *Line* as referring to “techniques which reinforce the limits for content that is not permitted to be included in the Explorative content of play, for a particular group,” and the *Veil* as “techniques for describing events without providing specific imagery or details.” These technical-seeming definitions may obscure what is at stake when these techniques are employed; it is worth revisiting Edwards’s original discussion.

Before publishing *Sex and Sorcery*, Edwards had already described *Sorcerer* as an intense, “R-rated” game in which players told stories about “dangerous magical acts that have explosive personal consequences” in order to metaphorically explore the “utterly realistic, utterly relevant moral question, ‘*What will you do to get what you want?*’” (Edwards 2001, 10). The *Sex and Sorcery* supplement took as its brief the goals of “explicitly addressing the real-people social context of play, up to and including sensitive personal issues” as well as providing “a vocabulary for handling among-player issues of graphic content” (Edwards 2003b, 6).

Even though *Sorcerer* was about imaginary “dysfunctional relationships,” Edwards observed, playing the game involved real people, whose real social relationships provided the context for “what the characters do” in the fiction. Those real social dynamics, he suggested, might be characterized by dysfunctional drama, aimed at emotional abuse of fellow players, or with a defensive denial that any real social interactions are involved in role-playing. Alternately, they might be functional, providing an additional “charge” to the creative interaction, and adding value to the story that it produces for them. “How can role-playing move into such [emotionally intense and sexually explicit] content,” Edwards asked, “without the play itself becoming dysfunctional?” (9-11).

Since the only monitors of the content of play were the players themselves, Edwards reasoned, they would have to be source of any limits or boundaries on that content. He defined two sorts of limits: *drawing lines* to define what is and isn’t permitted to occur in the fiction at all, and *drawing veils* to obscure specific details of the fiction. For functional groups, Edwards observes, “there’s not much more to say than ‘The most sensitive person draws the line’” (13-14).

At the Forge, however, the inviolability of a line drawn by players was open to debate. In a discussion about player-versus-player conflict in a game, one frequent poster told another, “Players should be aware of where other players’ lines are and if they choose to push past them (and I’m not saying it’s wrong in all cases to push other players past their comfort zone [...] though it certainly can be), it should be acknowledged that I the player am violating your taboo area and not try to hide behind the character,” adding that the “frivolous” enactment of taboo topics – such as a casual announcement by “the guy who after his unit clears the village declares he’s raping the women” – was to be strongly avoided (Valamir in Kim 2003). The original poster, for his part, found this addendum somewhat troubling. “Your statement implies that the topic of the story is previously agreed upon, i.e., a rape has no meaning other than shock value if it isn’t pre-decided as the ‘point’ of the game. This is completely alien to my usual approach to play [...] If a heinous crime occurs, then it likely will become the point of the game” (Kim 2003). The seriousness of the subject matter, in other words, would compel attention. For both posters, to be sure, crossing a line was meaningful: to Valamir, as an exercise of player agency; to John Kim, as a measure of thematic significance.

At stake when lines are drawn are thus matters of agency and responsibility, but “drawing veils is more subtle,” Edwards (2003b, 12) says. He explains that a host of questions emerge when, for example, two characters have sex that is not veiled but is instead explicitly described by the players involved. How do the existing relationships at the table affect the way the scene is described? What is the effect of their participation on the relationships among the people involved in that explicit description, and to what extent does gender and its interaction shape that effect? And how might their participation in the role-played sexual encounter affect their relationships with others, present or otherwise? He concludes that it is generally *safer* to draw the veil over sexual situations between characters (14), but notes that leaving descriptions unveiled may in some cases produce “genuine catharsis” and appreciative responses from the players involved.

An appreciation of this tension – between emotional safety on the one hand and the potential for cathartic experience on the other – informs Emily Care Boss’s two-person romance game *Breaking the Ice* (2005), in which players take on characters who are unlike themselves but like the other player – typically, men play female characters and vice versa. “I’ve got an idea that the players choose a movie rating to set the limits of the game,” she said during an impromptu playtest of the game while taking a long-distance car ride with Vincent

Baker, according to his report (Lumpley 2004). Vincent was taken with the dramatic potential of the characters they’d created: “She’s a virgin with a broken leg; he’s got power tools and a restraining order against him. They date!” But he was leery about actually role-playing their dates together.

“So we could play this out at PG?” I say. With obvious relief, I’m sure.

“PG?” she says. “With all the sex and domestic violence? Are you on crack?”

“We could,” I say. “I mean, we could.”

“It’d be a fucking after-school special, Vincent. You suck.”

Owie. “. . . PG-13? PG-13 please? No way I’d play this an R. Way too scary.”

She rolls her eyes and doesn’t press me. Which sure, I suck, that’s okay, but whew.

So I dunno, I don’t think I have a conclusion to draw. Lines and veils. Just imagine me there in the car, turning over and over this woman’s anxiety about sex and love and loneliness and dating. I don’t even say anything, it seems so intense to me (Lumpley 2004).

For Boss, Vincent’s “strong reaction to just imagining the character he created” felt “very rewarding” to her, but she was surprised at the extent to which other posters in the thread expressed an inability to play characters of a different gender, which had almost immediately become the main thrust of the ensuing conversation. Edwards then gently tweaked those other posters, interjecting, “Um, they’re going to do it, aren’t they? Aren’t they? I mean, y’all were just about to deal with that, and wham, we start this bogus discussion about cross-gender play . . . Talk about sublimation!” (Ron Edwards, in Lumpley 2004)). Subsequent posters turned their attention to asking Baker about his experience of the game, to which he replied, “Building rules that provoke us into digging in instead of backing away is what Em’s challenge is, I’d say. Left to freeform, I’d scramble away like a scared money, our characters’d have a polite first date with no spark, no second date, and I’d be relieved, but nobody’d pay to watch that flick. I’m totally counting on the rules to get me through my avoid-y suckitude.” But in response to Edwards’s question about whether or not the fictional couple would have sex, Boss replied, “Sure, s’long as it fits yer social contract” (Emily Care Boss, in Lumpley 2004) – a term of art at the Forge referring to the relationships within a given role-playing group, “including emotional connections, logistic arrangements, and expectations” (Edwards 2004).

Boss went on, “That’s actually what I’d envisioned the rating being about, primarily. You know, ‘G’ they hold hands, ‘PG’ they kiss, ‘PG-13’ heavy petting and so on. Trust between the players is a huge issue in this game, so as I’m working on it I’m paying attention to the ways that the steps of the game can function to help create safe-space and easy transitions for the players” (Emily Care Boss in Lumpley 2004). In summarizing the idea of lines and veils recently, Edwards equated movie ratings with the idea of “drawing the veil” (Edwards 2019). And while some other posters continued to express discomfort with the idea of sharing intimate details on the one hand or retreating to cheap stereotypes of the other, still others were as puzzled as Boss by that discomfort. “I’m having trouble imagining the danger that y’all are feeling from this,” commented Christopher Weeks. “I mean, aren’t we *supposed* to sometimes really feel something when we play these games?” One of those posters took issue with the idea that difficulty had to do with *danger*; instead, he suggested, it had to do with cost: “Something which discloses personal details just in order to play a game, is more cost than the product/game is worth IMO. To me it doesn’t dignify those details” (Callan S. in Lumpley 2004).

Other conversations at the Forge drew upon the language of lines and veils as well. In a discussion about a game in playtest where “you play insane cultists in a small town, trying to summon your God and avoid discovery by investigators,” the designer wondered “what strategic choices do I want players to make in this game, and how exactly do you encourage role-playing?” (Hix 2007). A subsequent poster invoked the term “lines and veils” and explained, “I think it’s probably pretty important to establish some lines about what’s acceptable in the game, and what’s not, in terms of ‘evil’ behavior in-game [...] I’d suggest that establishing ahead of time what the limit of depravity is will tend to discourage exploring that line” (Simon C in Hix 2007). The original poster replied, “On reflection, it’s not that I want depravity to be the goal of playing [this game]; it’s that leaving it up to the judgment of the players as to whether things were about to go too far provided a fascinating moment in the game” (Hix 2007).

In a different thread, a poster points to a *hentai*-inspired TRPG and complains, “I don’t get why there’s this notion among most RPG fans and designers that there is just no such thing as ‘inappropriate’ within our medium. I mean, I’m not a fan of censorship, but I also think there’s a nice, solid line between doing something without censoring yourself and creating something that is just outright disgusting” (Grinning Moon 2008). Another poster replies mildly that he’d “never noticed that absolute libertinism was a special quality of roleplaying culture apart from the cultural

mainstream,” adding that the “the Sex & Sorcery supplement for Sorcerer is my go-to manual for how to deal with touchy subjects like violence, sex and politics in roleplaying. The terminology of lines and veils from the book has served me pretty well in understanding and managing ‘dangerous’ content in my gaming during the last couple of years. The core stance of that book, shared by yours truly, is that there are no inappropriate topics per se, there are only inappropriate ways of handling them and inappropriate people to share them with” (Eero Tuovinen in Grinning Moon 2008).

The concept of lines and veils thus clearly adds some nuance to discussions of how to handle sensitive TRPG content; however, an unanticipated consequence of the idea seems to have been the adoption of well-intentioned pre-game “lines and veils discussions” that critics saw as potential stifling to creative exploration in play. In a conversation on a forum associated with the Forge diaspora called *Story-Games*, a poster distinguishes between the idea of lines and veils and its implementation as a practice:

I LIKE Lines and Veils as a social concept to be aware and mindful of. What I don’t like is upfront, explicit discussion of Lines and Veils that a lot of post-Sex & Sorcery games advocate. The reason is because I don’t think people are very good at articulating their Lines. They have general ideas about “uncomfortable” material but what would actually constitute a violation of a personal line I don’t think anyone truly knows until after it happens.

So I’m of the opinion that upfront explicit Line talk doesn’t create Lines at all. It creates fictional TRENCHES. It guts whole swaths of what may actually be interesting and acceptable material in favor of “safe” territory. In order to avoid crossing a line you don’t even go anywhere NEAR it.

I think it’s more creatively productive if instead the group is **mindful** of lines and watches for social cues for when one has been crossed. That mindfulness includes a willingness to apologize, back up and go in a different direction (Jesse in WillH 2010).

By the early years of the 2010s, the term “lines and veils” had become part of a TRPG lexicon familiar to “veteran gamers” in online discussion albeit somewhat mysterious to newcomers (GamerJosh 2013; GamingAlly 2011). However, another set of Forge-related terms had by

and large vanished from the gamer vocabulary. We turn to these terms next.

6. I Will Not Abandon You/Nobody Gets Hurt

“*I will not abandon you,*” Meguey Baker (2006) wrote on the blog that she shared with Emily Care Boss, “does not equal *nobody gets hurt.*” She offered the terms as rubrics for different social expectations or agreements during play. I Will Not Abandon You (IWNAY) players expect to get their buttons pushed and to push other player’s buttons and “remain present and engaged and play through the issue.” Nobody Gets Hurt players “know where each other’s lines are, and we agree not to cross them.” Both, she adds, are “reciprocal systems,” and it is helpful “to be clear which kind of social contract is expected.” The terms are “about how we do or do not stay engaged with the emotions that we experience in gaming, which includes the real people at the table, not just the fiction,” Baker confirmed for another poster in a thread on the Story-Games forum discussing role-playing emotionally positive or uplifting themes a few years later (Meguey Baker in TomasHVM 2009). In our discussion, Meguey explained that her essay was a way of laying out her thoughts “about the conversations we were having around pain, really.” She told me:

The first and foremost thing that I wish I could go back in time and make more clear is that I Will Not Abandon You is a descriptive thing about how you *have played*, not a prescriptive thing where you go sit down at a table with strangers and say, “Let’s play I Will Not Abandon You.” Because that way lies *awfulness*. The potential for misuse and abuse there is so high if we sit down and say, okay, we’re going to have a social contract where we’re not going to abandon each other and I’m just going to poke on you until you bleed, and you’ve *agreed* to be here, so you can’t – no, no, no. It’s a descriptive thing, where you can look back and ask, how was that working? What were we doing at the table there that made that work? (Meguey Baker, personal correspondence)

By calling “I Will Not Abandon You” and “Nobody Gets Hurt” *reciprocal* elements of play, Meguey explained, she was trying to say that they operate in tandem. Play begins, she said, with the intention of nobody getting hurt. “That’s the original safety tool,” she told me, “noticing that your friends at the table are uncomfortable, and viewing your relationship with them as more important than the story, so being willing to stop the story and be like,

‘Oh, hold on, I’ve noticed something is not right. Can we – ?’” (Meguey Baker, personal correspondence). The term safety tool, she added, may be a little misleading. The point is not really to guarantee safety; it is to open and maintain lines of communication. *Safety tool* is a short-hand, she said, a term of convenience applied to mechanisms that are intended to facilitate communication, for checking in and shaping the conversation.

At the baseline, that original safety tool is the most important, of “Are you okay? Because it seems like you’re not okay,” or, “Hold on, I’m not okay; can we talk about this for a minute?” [...] And then I Will Not Abandon You lets you pinpoint how you were operating, how we were really showing up for each other. Or it lets you pinpoint, “This is where you checked out, and I got hurt,” or “This is where you checked out, and I hurt you, and I’m sorry.” (Meguey Baker, personal correspondence)

But the conversation within the Forge diaspora seemed to regard IWNAY/NGH as a bifurcation that offered different angles on game design and play – an assimilative stasis that is arguably supported by the text. For example, in a thread at the Forge in 2006, the conversation turned to the connection between interpersonal social expectations among players and the game-mechanical procedures they used. This occurred after some discussion of the original poster’s questions about his desire to design a game that would help people understand the harm caused by the unproductive cultural pattern that surrounds sexual abuse. “I want to make a game will change my life,” Clyde Rhoer says, by allowing him to say something about his experience as a victim of childhood molestation and rape (Rhoer 2006). But “I can’t address the issue,” he explains, “without people going off on angry rages about murdering people, incredibly awkward silences, or Mr. or Mrs. Fix-It’s constantly worrying about my mental stability” (Rhoer 2006).

In reply, another poster observed that “there are two very different game-procedural approaches that will make a critical difference to how this plays.” The first approach gives individual players “overriding, brutal, arbitrary authority over [...] what their characters *want to do* and *start to do,*” while in the second the entire sequence of any character’s action, from their intention to act, through their initiation of that intention and carrying out the action to its completion, to any subsequent effect, is “subject to vetting of some kind, whether it’s negation, modification, or letting it lie [...] *All* actions are subject to drastic reinterpretations of the outcomes of Conflict Resolution [...] If you state

‘He kisses her,’ then eventually, the way the scene works out, it’s at least possible that he never even thought about or tried to kiss her” (Sydney Freedberg in Rhoer 2006). The first approach, Sydney said, by empowering individual players, supports an IWNAY social contract, while the second approach, by enabling other player to veto the input of other players, facilitates NGH as a play style. “You have a big choice ahead,” he concludes, “whether building some kind of safety cut-out into your game hurts or helps your ultimate objective.”

Nonetheless, by the middle of 2006, the terms were sufficiently familiar at the Forge that poster Ash Kreider, disturbed by the unsatisfyingly violent end of a campaign in which they had played, could maintain that “I Will Not Abandon You/Nobody Gets Hurt is for wusses” (Kreider 2006). In the thread, Kreider explains that they “mentioned during our [post-campaign] reflection conversation that I was disappointed in how things turned out because I had really hoped to avoid violence between the [player-characters], to which [another] player responded by saying why didn’t I mention that? Why didn’t I set a hard line? Why didn’t I make that part of the social contract?” Kreider’s answer illustrates the fear about prioritizing safety at the expense of creative exploration that runs through the discourse of player safety. “I could only respond,” they say, “that it felt like cheating. I was trying to leave myself open to what played out.” In contrast, they add, it was unfair that another player seemed very cavalier in her decision to incite conflict among the player-characters, operating from out-of-character rather than in-character assumptions. In the ensuing conversation, Kreider concedes that if that player had been “completely engaged,” then “I could have respected that even if I didn’t like where it went” (Kreider 2006). Another poster pushes back against Kreider’s dismissal of Meguey Baker’s terminology, saying “it really sounds like what you wanted was IWNAY play, and you weren’t getting the sort of emotional feedback and *presence* that sort of thing requires” (Bankuei, in Kreider 2006).

Reflecting on that thread recently, Ash told me, “I’m extremely uncomfortable with the stance I had on safety tools back in 2006 being characterized as my *only* stance on safety tools. Since that experience, I’ve since become a *huge* advocate for safety tools and have written pretty extensively about the need for improved cultures of safety” (Ash Kreider, personal correspondence). For example, in a 2019 blog post, Kreider observed that, “more crucial than even having the right tools [...] is having a genuine culture of safety that goes beyond paying lip service [...] This means taking emotional safety seriously and not denigrating players who need safety tools to engage with challenging content, or lionizing people who play ‘intensely’” (Kreider 2019).

This sort of self-consciously intense play seems to have become associated with the idea of “I Will Not Abandon You.” In a thread on the Story-Games forum in which the original poster (OP) asked for help understanding what IWNAY was (Jenskot 2011), a number of posters responded by pointing to one designer’s experience with their game *The Dreaming Crucible*, in which troubled adolescents underwent a hero-journey through a fey otherworld that was “designed to enable the kind of raw, vulnerable stories that provoke strong, even cathartic reactions in the participants” (Joli 2011a). “A statement like ‘I Will Not Abandon You’ is like a test of trust,” its designer explained on a blog post describing one particularly effective session of the game. “If you look someone in the eyes and say those words, and they shrug in return, it wasn’t meant to be. But if you speak it and they lean forward with that eager gleam, take heed – magic is about to happen” (Joli 2011a). In a separate thread, Joli discussed some of the risks, particularly to friendships and close relationships, posed by engaging in play involving sexual violence and abuse being inflicted upon the characters, without a high degree of trust and an explicit and transparent agreement among the players to explore such emotionally charged or fraught material together (Joli 2011b).

7. Reading the X-Card

Thus, even though conversations about ideas related to player safety began with the notion that players would employ techniques to manage game content, the degree to which a given game was positioned to engage with emotionally fraught content was frequently seen within the Forge diaspora as being connected to the game designer’s intent. This emerges explicitly in a conversation about the X-Card that took place shortly after the closure of the Forge discussion forums and the beginning of what is sometimes called the “post-Forge era” (see, e.g., Junebug 2020). This discussion took place in the comments on a public post initiated by Vincent Baker in 2013, on the now-defunct social media platform called Google Plus. “So everybody gets that John Stavropoulos’s X-Card mechanic is a hack to the games you play it with, right?” Vincent began. “I don’t need to explain that, do I? And everybody gets that when you design a game, either you already include game mechanics that provide an X-Card-like effect, or else you exclude them on purpose for the good of the game, right?” He concluded, “For any competently designed game, if the X-Card is a good idea, the game already has it covered.” This argument – which may be reformulated as an enthymeme, “Because competent game designers either deliberately incorporate or deliberately exclude emotional safety mechanisms, the X-card is either unnecessary or harmful to the

designer's intent" – is warranted by the Forge's definition of a game's system as the means by which players agree what is accepted into the fiction of a game session (Edwards 2004), a definition that Vincent had a hand in formulating (White 2020).

Some participants challenged Vincent at the definitional level, grappling with whether the X-card was operating at the level of system or the level of "social contract" – for the good of the game or the good of the people at the table. Others saw the issue as relating to jurisdiction, in the sense that they were leery of privileging the designer's intent over the needs and desires of the play group. Relatedly, the extent to which many or even most games were "competently designed" was raised as an explicit weakness in Vincent's argument. These challenges caused Baker to be more specific: "Everybody, please take me seriously," he said, "when I say that my concern is that the X-Card has a subtly provocative effect that may make a game less safe for everyone." This deductively warranted assimilative argument produced inductively generated counterarguments, as several participants described their positive experiences with the X-Card. In the thread, John Stavropoulos noted:

So far, all the negative examples of X-Card use we've seen have been theoretical. Probability wise, I imagine that there will be or has been some example of a real negative use (even if we don't know of one directly). That said, the number of positive examples is quite large, across a reasonable sample size, across multiple types of games, in multiple environments, and in multiple cultures.

Vincent then drew the thread to a close, thanking participants for their time and attention broadly and specific posters for their detailed contributions, including Stavropoulos and a few others. More recently, Vincent told me, "On the point of safety tools' compatibility with a competently-designed game, I've completely reversed my position." He explained, "My take now is that stand-alone safety tools that players can bring with them from game to game are valuable and important, providing safety that a game can't provide from within its own rules. Also, when you design a game, you can't depend on everyone who plays bringing with them the same safety tools, or any, so you should nevertheless be intentional about the consent and communication systems you build in directly" (Vincent Baker, personal correspondence).

And of course, even as the question of the value of safety tools becomes settled within particular communities of discourse, the stasis shifts to the relative merits of different approaches. For example, Meguey Baker, while acknowledging that "for some people, the X-Card is the best tool," told

me that for her, "the X-Card hooks directly into systems of silencing around abuse, where if you've grown up in a household where there is abuse, and your consistent message is, 'We do not talk about that; just act as though it didn't happen, and move on,' the X-Card – even talking about it to you now I can feel some heightened anxiety response." She discussed Sheldon's (2018) "Script Change" tool, which allows players to "rewind," "fast forward," "pause," as ways of drawing lines and veils as well as checking in with each other in play. "So Script Change is something that I promote everywhere," she concluded (Meguey Baker, personal correspondence).

8. Conclusion: The Stases of Player Safety

Responsibility for the emotional impact of TRPG play remains a concern for GMs, players, designers, and organizers of play experiences (Amebiontko 2019; BBC 2019) as well as for educators seeking to incorporate role-playing games in the classroom (Edwards 2019), and the value of tools for player safety is clear (Gault 2020). However, pockets of metastasizing toxicity within geek culture (Paul 2018; Woo 2018) may exacerbate leeriness toward player safety tools. John Stavropoulos noted that after 2014, with the rise of a notorious online campaign of aggrieved entitlement to a particular vision of "authentic" gamer identity (see Woo 2018, 176–7), "I started receiving threats from people for having made the X-Card. One person threatened to chop my hands off!" (John Stavropoulos, personal correspondence). However, it can be expected that this conversation will be shaped by developments in the larger public discourse around issues of safety, consent, and care in social life generally as well as in particular settings such as health care and education as well as interpersonal and sexual relationships.

To the extent that reasoned discourse and the consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech can have an effect in such conditions, it is important to understand the rhetorical structures within which that speech will operate. In general, within the discourse of player safety, specific arguments seem to form around assimilative, definitional, and jurisdictional stases. (1) The assimilative stasis forms around challenges to the idea that player safety tools enable or facilitate the fun and enjoyment of all players, with one line of argument concerned about the imposition of real constraints upon players' creativity, expressiveness, and mutuality of engagement, and another worried about the extent to which those tools might be deliberately abused or inadvertently misused in play to cheat, to spoil, or to provoke. The latter line of argument also encompasses attempts to evaluate the relative merits of different safety tool implementations. The most

convincing evidence on this issue in either form seems to be testimony from actual play. (2) The definitional stasis forms around the issue of what player safety mechanisms are, whether they operate at the “system” level of game mechanic or at the social level of interpersonal/communal agreement, convention, or contract. (3) The jurisdictional stasis is intertwined with the definitional one, and concerns itself with issues of authority, particularly those that emerge in convention play – which is situated in hierarchical albeit voluntary organizational settings – versus play at home in small group settings. In organized play, in other words, the issue sometimes becomes whether an individual’s dissent on the organization’s policy is legitimate or legitimately expressed.

Understanding the various histories of player safety discourses within different communities of play can thus be helpful as a technique of invention – that is, as a tool for coming up with arguments and their rebuttals – in current and future debates, discussions, and arguments about their development and use. The goal of this paper is to serve as a contribution to that larger understanding.

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