

Safety Cards

A tool for safer gaming

by

Bez Bezson



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Intro

RPGs involve a lot of improvisation. Because of this, sometimes things can go in unplanned directions.

People are complicated things. Sometimes they have something that they're not happy dealing with, even in a fictional context.

These two factors can sometimes combine to cause what should be a fun activity to turn into something decidedly unfun. Maybe things go too far, and the game gets derailed. Perhaps someone suffers in silence, not wanting to spoil things for the others.

These cards are a tool to help prevent things that players and GMs are unhappy with from occurring in games. They are for empowering the players and GM to speak up about those issues.

These cards are inspired by X-Card by John Stavropoulos <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg> and Script Change by Brie Beau Sheldon <https://briebeau.itch.io/script-change>.

General Advice

Before playing with these tools, you should take the time to explain how they work to everyone else. This explanation is probably as important as the cards themselves, as it tells people that their concerns will be respected, and makes them aware that it's okay to speak up.

It's a good idea to use the cards yourself, ideally quite early on. Also, encourage the players to use them. While the cards are not meant to replace conversation, they are also not intended to be a last resort. The less 'special' the cards seem, the more likely players (and the GM) are to use them, and the less likely they are to suffer in silence.

The Cards

There are four card-faces: a red 'X', a green 'O', a 'pause' symbol, and a question mark.

The 'X' Card

The 'X' card is for whenever something comes up that you are not comfortable with, whether it comes up in game or outside the gameplay.



It doesn't matter what that thing is, if you are uncomfortable with having it in the game, you should 'X' card it.

As soon as someone uses the 'X' card, the group should work to resolve the situation. Typically, this will be rewinding a little and ret-conning away the offending act, theme, or topic. Other techniques, such as cutting to another scene, may also be useful if it's not so much that the offending thing exists in-game, but that it's happening 'on-camera'.

The 'O' Card

The 'O' card means that everything is 'okay'. It is for showing that while you might be acting upset, it's only in character and you (the player) are comfortable with what's happening in the game.



The 'Pause' Card

The 'pause' card is for when things haven't yet crossed into something you're uncomfortable with, but might do. By using this card, you can pause the game to give yourself a chance to voice your concerns or query where people are taking things.



You can also use this card if you need to stop things and take a breather, for example, if you don't want to veto something with the 'X' card, but you would like a short break from it.

The 'Query' Card

The 'query' card is for asking someone if they're okay without interrupting the flow of the game. If you know something is getting close to or possibly crossing, someone else's boundaries, you can show them this card to non-verbally check they are okay.



If they show you the 'O' card, then they're okay. If they show you the 'X' card, then they're not okay, and the problem needs resolving. They can also use their 'pause' card here.

The 'query' card should not be the only time the other cards get used, but it can act as a useful prompt when you think someone might either have forgotten about the cards or is unsure about using them.

Communication

If you use one of these cards, you may get asked to clarify what you're using it for.

You don't have to go into details, but by telling people what the issue is, they'll be better able to avoid it in future.

If you're not okay with talking about it in front of everyone, maybe you can speak privately with the GM or even one of the players who you trust to be sympathetic.

If you're uncomfortable with giving any details, then say that; it's still a good idea to tell people what the problematic thing is, but you don't have to tell people anything you don't want to.

Despite this, the important thing here is that if you're not comfortable with something, you can tell people that.

You don't have to say why.

It doesn't matter why.

The important thing is that you don't want that in the game.

So if someone 'X' cards something, or 'pauses' because of something, they don't owe you any explanation beyond "I'm not comfortable with this".

It is never okay to say "but you didn't use the 'X' card" as a defence for pushing someone's buttons. The cards are a 'safety net', not a 'safe word'. If someone does want to use the cards to test their own boundaries that's fine, but it's their call, not yours.

If you think someone is uncomfortable with something, always back off from it unless they specifically use the 'O' card. Check they're actively using the 'O' card, and not that it's still out from earlier on.

Integral Themes

Sometimes, a game may centre on a theme.

Ordinarily, facing a load of giant spiders would be a perfectly reasonable thing to 'X' card, if you have a phobia of spiders. However, if the campaign you're playing in is 'Spider Queen of the Aracnotypes', then it's going to be difficult for that to happen without spiders.

If you think that something integral to the campaign, adventure, etc. is something that might be likely to make people uncomfortable, then it's likely worth saying so when pitching it.

In fact, it's probably a good idea to mention anything that you could see some people objecting to in your pitch for the game.

Hopefully, by mentioning it beforehand, you'll avoid people playing in the game if that theme would be a problem for them. If someone does turn up who is uncomfortable with one of these elements, you can politely point out that they were warned about it, and maybe this isn't the game for them.

I would recommend against doing this with anything that isn't a vital part of the planned game/campaign/whatever, though. Also, at no point should you make the player feel it's 'their fault' that they are uncomfortable with that thing.

Summary

The principles behind these cards can be summed up as follows:

1. Your first duty is to ensure you are safe.
2. Your next most important duty is to make sure the other participants (both players and GM) are safe.
3. Your final duty is to make sure all participants have fun (including, but not limited to you).

Make sure everyone knows about the cards and is encouraged to view them as a normal part of the game, not something to avoid using unless necessary.

While gaming is great, people are more important. Respect your fellow participants, and look out for them.



I hope that you find these cards useful for your gaming.

While I don't think there are any topics or content that are always 'off-limits' and should 'never ever' be a part of RPGs, there are definitely some topics that shouldn't be used without knowing for sure that everybody involved is comfortable with their inclusion.

Using this system of rules and cards can hopefully avoid any horrible situations arising and make sure that everyone has a good time.

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