

Safety and Calibration Design Tools and Their Uses

OK Check-In, Lookdown, Pronoun Correction

Maury Elizabeth Brown

Abstract

Safety & Calibration techniques are important design tools that help diverse players access your larp and create stories together. This article offers three Safety & Calibration Tools that have been in use since June 2016 and are now used internationally in a variety of larps, conventions, and even in some workplace and social situations. This article will examine the origins, practicality, and benefits of the OK Check-In, the Lookdown, and the Pronoun Correction tools. These tools can be adapted for various contexts, and are useful and flexible elements for larp or convention organization or design.

Introduction

Safety & Calibration techniques are important design tools that help diverse players access your larp and create stories together. They are fundamental to building Cultures of Care and Trust, which are essential for encouraging community members to take the risks and vulnerabilities inherent in role-play. Care and Trust allow players to be open to the epiphanies and intense emotions that lead to transformative experiences.

While Safety & Calibration techniques are an essential design consideration, no single set of tools works for every larp, nor should any tool be used in a larp without consideration for its unique design goals and community norms. This is the fundamental principle of *bespoke design*, where every larp design should be customized for its players and the experience you want to provide.

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Careful implementation of Safety & Calibration techniques allows designers to accommodate a diverse player group and establish a baseline Culture of Care and Trust that then allows each participant to exercise their own autonomy and boundaries.

The Culture of Care and Trust through Safety & Calibration Tools

Overall, Safety & Calibration tools help create Cultures of Care and Trust by overtly signifying that participants take priority over the event. They model the expectations for how community members should behave toward one another. Safety and calibration mechanics actualize formerly implicit norms and empower players to make their own choices about what to participate in. Because they provide a method for quick player-player calibration, their use leads to more satisfying and safer role-play. A participant who feels safe, seen, and acknowledged feels more trust toward other participants and more willingness to engage in the shared experience.

Safety & Calibration techniques (Koljonen 2016) allow participants to advocate for their own self-care by setting the expectation that one should speak up about one's needs, lowering the burden of asking for help from others. They also establish an expectation for how players will treat each other in the community — with respect, compassion, and recognition. For example, encouraging players to check-in on each other and commit to using correct pronouns demonstrates care for other players. These tools flatten the community hierarchy and help new, inexperienced, or unconnected players feel less isolated and unsupported, making it easier for them to become a part of the group. They help prevent participants from becoming emotionally overwhelmed and encourage others to aid those who require support. As a result, they help players feel safer and more connected.

This article offers three Safety & Calibration Tools that have been in use since June 2016 and are now used internationally in a variety of larps, conventions, and even in some workplace and social situations. This article will examine the origins, practicality, and benefits of the OK Check-In, the Lookdown, and the Pronoun Correction tools. These tools can be adapted for various contexts, and are useful and flexible elements for larp or convention organization or design.

The OK Check-In Safety Tool

Origin: Early iterations: 2010–2015 in various US larps. Current standardized mechanic: 2016, Maury Brown for *New World Magischola* (Brown & Morrow,

2016), as part of system of safety mechanics designed by Maury Brown, Sarah Lynne Bowman, and Harrison Greene.

Using the OK gesture to check with a fellow participant emerged spontaneously in several US larp groups between 2010-2015. In this early format, a player made the OK symbol at chest height to see if a fellow player was all right. The Player would return the OK sign if all was well. It was particularly used in boffer combat after a tough hit, and among subgroups within a larp community who were looking out for each other. Some larps that included this early version include *Melodramatic Mysteries* organized by Aaron Vanek and Kirsten Hageleit, larps organized around 2010 by Rob McDiarmid, and boffer larps in the New England area.

The difference between these early iterations of the OK Check-In and the mechanic presented here and being adopted in many larps is four-fold: 1) this mechanic is systematized as a formal game and community rule, modeled and expected of all participants; 2) it has been standardized with a three-tier response that requires active reflection; 3) it includes specific responses that players should use when they receive the “not okay” response; and 4) it is created purposefully to promote a culture of care and inclusion. The name of the tool evokes the skill check nomenclature of tabletop gaming, of “checking” and also “checking in”: the informal usage (typically in the US) meaning to briefly talk with someone to determine progress or obtain new information.

How to Perform the OK Check-In

Like its use in SCUBA, the OK Check-In is a “demand-response signal,” meaning that the other person needs to give a response; the lack of a response indicates trouble or distress. Since some physical role-play is extremely convincing, this is a useful tool to separate role-play from reality in situations such as acting out drunkenness, a physical injury, or a seizure. The technique is used when a person notices another person who appears distressed, sad, upset, lonely, etc. Person 1 may be unsure whether Person 2 needs assistance, or whether their distress is role-play or real. Person 1 uses the Check-In to determine if assistance is needed and to show that they care about the other person’s well-being.

The technique itself is a call and response comprised of the discreet gesture of establishing eye-contact and directing the “OK” symbol toward another player. The gesture asks the question: “Are you okay?” The other player then considers how they are doing, and responds in one of three ways: thumbs

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up, thumbs down, or a wavy flat hand. Thumbs-up means “Doing fine, no need for follow-up;” Thumbs-down means “I am not okay.” Wavy Flat hand means “I am not sure.” If the response is anything other than a thumbs-up (i.e. no response, thumbs-down, or wavy hand), Person 1 responds by dropping character and offering assistance in the preferred method for the specific larp/event, e.g. “Can I take you to the off-game room?” An important part of this technique is that the individual event must make known what the person should do in the case of a negative response. For further explanation of the mechanic, see “Creating Cultures of Trust through Safety & Calibration Mechanics¹,” the Imagine Nation description², and Johanna Koljonen’s “Toolkit: The OK Check-In³.”

Larp issues this tool addresses / How it is Useful

1. Knowing whether a co-player is role-playing or in distress (physically or emotionally).
2. Alleviating anxiety and uncertainty about whether a fellow player needs help.
3. Deliberating about whether to interrupt a person if you are concerned.
4. Clarifying whether someone is/was feeling alienated, upset, or in need.
5. Alleviating the anxiety of not knowing if something applies to a player or their character.
6. Modeling a go-to script to help players connect in times of need.
7. Contributing to actual safety as players who are hurt emotionally or physically are quickly attended to.
8. Crowdsourcing and dispersing emotional care and safety (especially useful in larger larps).
9. Requiring players to periodically self-assess their own needs and well-being.

1. <https://nordiclarp.org/2016/09/09/creating-culture-trust-safety-calibration-larp-mechanics/>

2. <http://www.imagenationcollective.com/okcheckin/>

3. <https://participationsafety.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/toolkit-the-ok-check-in/>

10. Reducing incidences of players becoming overwhelmed as they reflect and self-monitor.

Updates and Adaptations of the Mechanic

Enthusiastic Thumbs-Up: This adaptation was created by Johanna Koljonen to use at *End of the Line* (Pedersen, Pettersson, & Ericsson 2016) in New Orleans. Proactively using the thumbs-up sign during a scene became a subtle calibration tool that could be flashed to another player, indicating that the player is not only comfortable with, but enjoying the intensity level of the scene. Akin to the calibration mechanic “Harder”, the enthusiastic thumbs-up tells a co-player they can intensify the scene without requiring a verbal utterance.

Proactive OK. This adaptation resulted from a player wanting to pre-empt a check-in. A player who recognizes that their behavior or demeanor may cause concern for fellow players proactively flashes the “thumbs-up” signal to indicate they do not need assistance.

Proactive Not-OK/Thumbs Down. Some players began using thumbs-down as a nonverbal way to ask for assistance, rather than waiting for another player to check-in with them. Some people have difficulty articulating when they are angered or upset, especially those who are neurodiverse.

Concerns

These gestures are not universal across the world, and if you are using them in a larp context, you will need to consider your audience. It is perfectly fine to state that you are aware the symbol is offensive in some places, but that in the context of your larp, it will mean something different. For example, the “OK” symbol is offensive in Brazil, Germany, Russia, and other countries around the world, because it is used to depict a private bodily orifice. In Australia, Greece, or the Middle East, the thumbs-up gesture means essentially “Up yours!” or “Sit on this!” and is considered offensive.

Graceful Exits and Calibration using “Lookdown”

The “Lookdown” technique is a “bow-out” mechanic that allows a participant to disengage, leave a scene, or indicate a lack of interest in interaction. Adding the tool to your game increases player comfort with choosing what scenes they want to be a part of. In turn, this helps players calibrate the type and intensity level of play they desire.

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The Lookdown gives players an alibi to leave a scene without requiring an in-game or off-game explanation. Most importantly, the technique gives players a way to set a boundary and take care of themselves without making a disturbance, interrupting a scene, or requiring that others get involved. This tool empowers players to choose their own experiences, and makes opt-in/opt-out design more tangible.

The Lookdown enacts a model of continuous consent for players. A player may consent to a scene that they regret or their consent may change as a result of emergent play. The Lookdown provides a tool to exercise that change of consent, no questions asked. It also allows players to more quickly get off-game to tend to their needs (vs. trying to find a good opening to make an announced exit), and it helps players take care of themselves by signalling that they do not want to be stopped by others. Finally, Lookdown ensures a player will not receive any in-game repercussions due to an off-game reason, more clearly separating player and character.

Origin: The “Lookdown” technique was invented in spring 2016 in a bar in Oslo, Norway during a conversation between Johanna Koljonen and Trine Lise Lindahl, who suggested the gesture. At the Living Games Conference in May 2016, Koljonen mentioned the technique in her keynote. The Lookdown was piloted in *New World Magischola* in June 2016 and has since been picked up by other games, including *End of the Line*, where it was known as See No Evil.

How to Perform the Lookdown

The Lookdown is a Calibration Technique for exiting a scene or conversation without causing disruption. It consists of placing one’s open hand across one’s forehead, as if shading one’s eyes from the sun, then stepping back and walking away. An important part of the technique that makes it a safety and calibration tool is how other players react when someone uses the Lookdown. Since it is used by the player for off-game reasons to exit a scene, there should be no questions asked, no explanation needed or demanded, and no consequences given — in-game or off — for using the tool. This helps the player feel that their needs and choices are valid and valued, and allows them to choose their level of experience and engagement.

To perform the Lookdown: Person 1 shields their eyes and walks away. Person 2 (and all other people in the scene or immediate area) ignore Person 1’s exit and continue as usual.

Larp issues this tool addresses / How it is useful:

1. Player realization that the topic or scene isn't going in the direction they want and they want or need to opt-out safely.
2. When making up a reason to exit a scene is too difficult (e.g. because the player is too distressed or triggered) or would be too disruptive (e.g. would break up the flow of the scene and point the attention to the person attempting to leave).
3. Exercising self-care when a sudden trauma trigger overwhelms or distresses a player.
4. When a player's biological or personal needs require them to leave, but the player doesn't want to explain or disclose them.
5. Moving from one place to another without being stopped by another player; quickly signals that a player does not wish to be interacted with.
6. When staying in or "pushing through" a scene makes a player uncomfortable, and increases the risk of becoming overwhelmed or distressed.
7. Alleviating feelings of anxiety or FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) for wanting to make a different choice but not knowing how to extricate oneself from a scene or space.
8. Preventing feeling trapped in a situation, scene, or space.
9. Assisting neurodiverse players, who more often than neurotypical players have difficulty voicing plausible reasons to leave a scene.
10. Signaling the difference between a character leaving a scene (which invites commentary from other characters) and a player leaving a scene (which should go unnoticed).

Pronoun Markers and Pronoun Correction

Pronouns matter. A continually misgendered player experiences immersion breaks in their role-play at best and gender dysphoria at worst. Assuming pronouns for a player or a character can lead to trouble. To avoid pronoun assumption, the triggering effects of misgendering, and the sometimes difficult process of correcting a misused pronoun, the pronoun markers and correction

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mechanics were developed. They have been in use in certain larps and communities since 2016.

Origin: Created in 2016 for *New World Magischola* by Maury Brown, Sarah Lynne Bowman, and Harrison Greene, with help from Sara Williamson and Liz Gorinsky, co-authors of the larp *See Me Now*, which explores queer identities. Brodie Atwater contributed to later workshop adaptations.

Pronouns on Display: Two Methods

There are two main procedures regarding using pronouns on name badges at larps or conventions. The first approach displays pronouns on all name badges as an expectation or norm; and the second allows participants to add their pronouns to their badges (or wear a separate badge or patch) if they choose. In both cases, players determine their own pronouns, and upon seeing the displayed pronoun, other members of the community are expected to make every effort to refer to each person by the pronoun they have displayed. Read more about how the two methods work in “Larp Tools: Pronoun Markers and Correction Mechanics⁴.”

Pronoun Correction Procedure

All players should assume that their co-players are making their best efforts to use the correct pronouns. All players should also know that the expectation of the community is that those who use the incorrect pronouns will be corrected, and that the responsibility for correcting is shared across the community. The overriding principle for the pronoun correction procedure is: “If you make a mistake and use the wrong pronoun in spite of your good intentions, the best response is to acknowledge the mistake, correct, and continue the conversation.” Over-apologizing and making a big deal out of the mistake derails role-play, making both the person who was misgendered and the person who did the misgendering uncomfortable. This situation can lead the person who was misgendered to feel compelled to reassure the player who made the mistake, which can heighten feelings of dysphoria or alienation. Thus, a simple “thank you” after a correction is considered preferred etiquette and is least anxiety-producing for everyone involved.

4. <https://nordiclarp.org/2017/12/01/larp-tools-pronoun-markers-correction-mechanics/>

If a misgendering occurs, participants are asked to use a quick, non-judgmental pronoun correction mechanic. This technique is used for both in-game and off-game interactions:

1. Person 1 uses the incorrect pronoun to refer to someone. The person who was misgendered can be the person you are speaking to or someone you are speaking about.
2. Person 2 notices the incorrect pronoun and says the word “Pronouns” and shows the P hand signal. This can be one of two signals: the British sign language symbol for the letter P (which requires two hands) or the American Sign Language symbol for P (right hand only). If the player does not have one or both hands available, or chooses to, they can simply use the verbal cue “Pronouns.”
3. Person 2 follows the verbal cue and/or hand signal with the correct pronoun Player 1 should use. e.g. “Pronouns. They.”
4. Person 1 repeats the correct pronoun and says “Thank you” for the reminder. Play or conversation resumes.

This procedure can be repeated as often as necessary if the misgendering continues. Sometimes, it is genuinely difficult to change one’s speech habits and use a different pronoun, especially when one is already under the cognitive load of role-play. A person may need several reminders. The expectation is that one is corrected each time, both to help someone pay attention to their language use, and to encourage not letting a misgendering pass without correction. In each case, the response is the same. The person correcting uses the mechanic and simply states the correct pronoun; the person being corrected acknowledges with “thank you.” Needing several reminders can be frustrating for everyone, but repetition is often needed as people learn new habits. If it appears that someone is intentionally misgendering or refusing to abide by stated pronouns, an organizer or member of the safety team should become involved.

What the Pronoun Correction Mechanic Does / How it is Useful:

1. Sends a clear message that your community is inclusive to people of all genders.
2. Formalizes how pronouns are handled in your community.

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3. Reduces the amount of misgendering that occurs for players and characters.
4. Gives a simple and quick correction procedure that is expected and minimally intrusive.
5. Opens community members' eyes to perspectives beyond a gender binary.
6. Teaches participants how to get better at recognizing and using different pronouns.
7. Helps trans and nonbinary participants feel more respected and safer.
8. Allows role-play to continue quickly after a correction, rather than allowing a conversation to derail into obsequies and discomfort.
9. Shares the responsibility for ensuring people are called by their proper pronouns to everyone in the community, not just those who use non-gender-binary pronouns.
10. Opens larps to multiple gender expressions.

Conclusion

Because there is a more mobile and international larp community attending games outside of local larp groups, these design tools and mechanics are cross-populating into other larp cultures more readily than before. In some cases, a critical mass of players can introduce a mechanic into a game that the designers or organizers did not officially add to their design. This can be both good and bad. It's good in that the players found the technique to be useful in solving one or more of the common larp issues it is intended to address and they want to add it to their game to experience those benefits. It can be bad if they do not have the support of the game organizers, who may view the mechanic with suspicion or even derision. Adding a mechanic informally can fracture a larping community into those who use or support it, and those who do not. This division can create community strife and call for a ruling from the organizers about whether to officially adopt the mechanic, which would change the playstyle and/or community norms.

No design tool is universal for every larp, and the same goes with safety and calibration techniques. Larp designers need to evaluate their design goals, their community, and their players to decide which tools will work well for them and that specific larp. A basis of a culture of care and trust is needed to a certain

extent for roleplay to happen and to be welcoming to a variety of players. Safety and Calibration tools help to establish that culture of care and trust, making for more meaningful and intense roleplay. No tool will be one hundred percent perfect one hundred percent of the time for one hundred percent of your players, but designers need to consider the good that the tools do on balance with the annoyance or resistance to change they may encounter. The OK Check-In, Lookdown, and Pronoun Correction tools are useful together or alone in many larp situations, especially ones that bring together diverse players. They are an important addition to a larp designer's toolbox and can be used when they help you solve the problems in your community or meet your design goals.

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