

# ROCKET

A stylized teal rocket bird logo with a gradient from light to dark teal. The bird is in flight, with its wings spread wide and a long, flame-like tail. The background features abstract teal and gold wavy patterns.

Safety in Educational RPGs

An Erasmus+ Higher Education Cooperation Partnership  
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# Safety

What is psychological safety in RPGs?

- A felt sense that one can surrender to the experience without judgment from others (Bowman et al. 2024)
- A belief that one's facilitators and co-players will care for us if difficult emotions emerge

# Safety

What is psychological safety in RPGs?

- A **perception**, not a fact
  - Risk is inherent to any activity
  - Completely “safe spaces” do not exist, but we can make them **safer**
  - Enacting conflicts, even brief ones, poses inherent risks, especially when dealing with contents related to DEI
- **Our goal:** to create zones of acceptable risk (Rikard and Villarreal 2023) within learning contexts
- Safety must not only be established, but also maintained, with ruptures addressed meaningfully by facilitators

# Mandatory vs. voluntary

- RPGs as learning experiences can be run in both mandatory and voluntary settings
  - Museums, after-school activities, and community center spaces might be voluntary, meaning the students have signed up
    - This practice involves a certain degree of buy-in
  - Classrooms are often considered mandatory, especially in primary and secondary education
  - Even when the activity is optional, students may feel pressured to take part
    - Some pressure is inherent in all learning activities, as learning itself is difficult and consumes energy

# Mandatory vs. voluntary

- In ROCKET, we have the opt-out mechanic
  - Players can opt-out at any time by saying the words
  - They are not required to disclose why they are opting-out
  - If they are able to sit quietly and watch, observation can also be a potent learning space
  - However, if observers are resistant or disruptive, they may negatively impact the activity

# Mandatory vs. voluntary

Tips for creating more consensual mandatory learning environments (see e.g., Roda Martínez 2025):

- Use your best judgment when considering how to manage opting-out in the classroom
  - Consider whether or not you are breaking laws by permitting players to leave (e.g., truancy)
- Providing another space for players to go can be helpful, e.g., the main room away from the breakout room in Zoom
- Having one facilitator off-game willing to talk to a player who opts-out is also recommended
  - If possible, having a **mental health professional** waiting in the main room is even better, e.g., a school counselor
- We recommend providing an **alternative assignment** if your learning objectives can be achieved in other ways

# Bleed

**Bleed** refers to the spillover between aspects of the player's consciousness to the character and vice versa (Boss 2007). Examples include:

- Emotions (Montola 2010)
- Relationship dynamics (Bowman 2013)
- Physical states (Hugaas 2019)
- Ideologies, thoughts, and other mental constructs (Hugaas 2019)
- Personality traits (Beltrán 2012)
- Identity complexes (Hugaas 2024)

# Bleed

Even though we are playing short scenarios, bleed can occur – in fact, we hope it does!

- The goal of ROCKET scenarios are to give players an embodied experience of conflict
- The short scenes allow for shifting between character to player, followed by direct reflection through the debrief
- Players are practicing conflict transformation skills in states of heightened (fictional) conflict, hopefully in a space that feels safer than daily life
- Ideally, the player still experiences the character's emotions strongly enough that the scenario is difficult, but not **too** difficult

# Bleed

While bleed is neutral as a psychological phenomenon, some players may experience discomfort or negative emotions tied to bleed

- **Bleed processing and management** are two important processes for us to facilitate when possible (Bowman 2013)
- The processing can happen in the after-game debriefs, discussion posts, and journal entries
- Bleed management can occur when the player is able to notice and moderate intense bleed experiences
  - This takes time and is much easier with assistance and scaffolding
  - Learning how to help players work meaningfully with bleed – including how to manage it – is an important responsibility in facilitation

# Safety Techniques

In ROCKET, we have ways to communicate with each other on a meta level

- Some of these methods, called **safety techniques, tools, or mechanics** are meant to assist with psychological safety
  - **The Door is Always Open:** This principle reinforces that players can opt-out.
    - They can leave at any time, but encourage them to check back in with the facilitators to make sure they are okay
    - Players can verbally say, “Opt-out”
  - **Cut:** Can be used by facilitators to finish the scene, but also by players for any reason
    - Players should not need to explain why they cut. We trust they needed to do so

# Safety Techniques

- **Pause Check-in:** Players and facilitators can pause the scene to check-in with the players at any time.
  - If players are not able to respond verbally, in the online classroom, consider sending them a private message
  - If they need to process something, having a facilitator who can move them to a breakout room or chat privately can help
- **Softer:** Participants and facilitators can request other players to soften their play by saying “Softer.”
- **X-Card:** Players and facilitators can say or type “X” at any time to ask certain content to be removed or avoided. No questions asked (Stavropoulos 2013)
  - Example: “X for content around death”
  - Zoom has a built-in X emoji

# Safety Techniques

## Why are these techniques needed?

- Role-playing games are improvisational, meaning the players will generate new content spontaneously in the moment
- Doing so means some content or emotional intensity might take other players by surprise (Koljonen 2020)
- For example, players may lean on stereotypes or cultural appropriation, which can lead to players from diverse backgrounds feeling less safe or even harmed (Kessock 2015; Mendez Hodes 2020; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021).

# Safety Techniques

Why are these techniques needed?

- For this reason, we avoid designing ROCKET scenarios in such a way that student will likely play someone from a vastly different background
- Instead, we hope they will bring in aspects relevant to their own diverse experiences, or share about these in the debrief
- We do not pressure students to share anything they do not feel comfortable sharing

# Safety Techniques

In serious cases, the player may get emotionally activated or triggered

- Such states usually mean that higher-level functions, like reasoning, are not possible
  - The player may go into fight, flight, or fawn mode.
- While learning can occur from such experiences, the chances of them backfiring are high
- Ideally, safety techniques allow players to calibrate with one another before getting to that state, or address the situation if they do
- The presence of safety techniques signal care and concern for one another, even if they are never used (Pedersen 2015).

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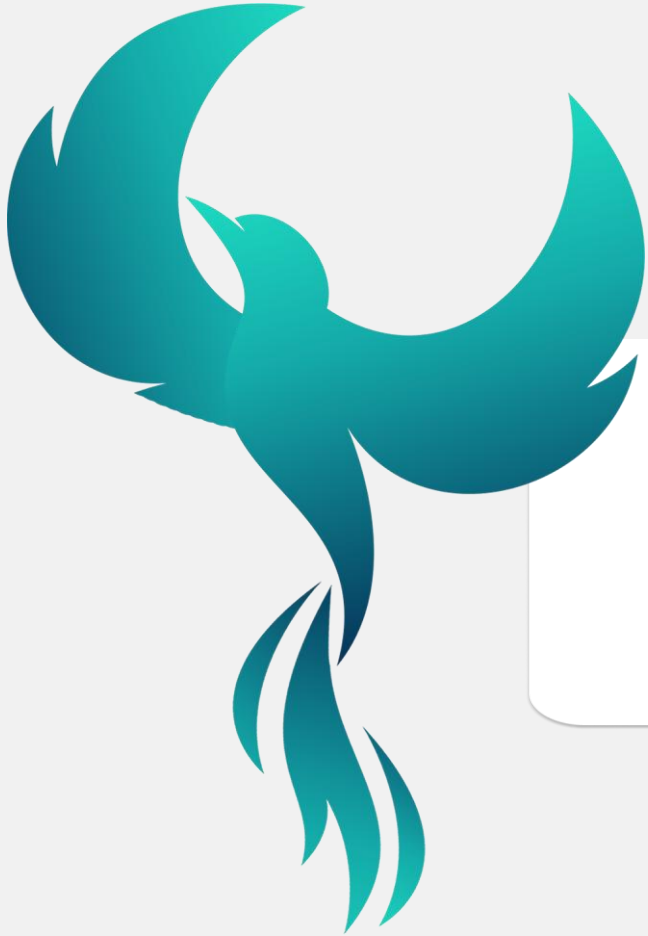
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# Thank you!

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