

MIND'S EYE THEATRE

Immersion
Secrets





Mind's Eye Theatre: Immersion Secrets

World of Darkness: Berlin
Preview Edition



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Credits

By Night Studios

Jason Carl, Elissa Ayadi, Ric Connely, Bob Ellis,
Jeffrey Fowler

Producer

Jason Carl

Developers

Jason Andrew, Jennifer Childs

Lead Editor

Jen "Loopy" Smith

By Night Studios Development Team

Jason Andrew, Jason Carl, Jennifer Childs, April Douglas,
Jeffrey Fowler, and Jimmy Reckitt

Contributing Essayists (Preview Edition)

Sarah Lynne Bowman, Maury Brown, Jessica Karels, and
Johanna Koljonen

Book Design and Layout

Nick Riley

Benedictions, Dedications, and Appreciations

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Berlin Teaser Introduction

The foundation of live-action roleplaying is a healthy community where players feel welcomed and supported. Safety and trust are vital components of that solid foundation. Players should feel they can immerse themselves in their characters and the setting deeply enough for to allow the stories to touch them, and to invest in the experience safely. **Mind's Eye Theatre: Immersion Secrets** is a new anthology of essays on this theme, written by members of the World of Darkness LARP community and the **By Night Studios** development team. It offers methods and techniques for encouraging player immersion and safety at **Mind's Eye Theatre** LARP events, though these tools and guidelines are applicable to any LARP experience.

We are sharing three of these essays with you here at **World of Darkness Berlin** as a special preview, to thank you for sharing this convention weekend with us. The full version of **MET: Immersion Secrets** contains a total of 15 essays; the planned publication date is June 2017.

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OK Check-In Technique

By Maury Brown and Johanna Koljonen

Live-action Roleplaying (LARP) games around the world are becoming far more immersive, often asking players to delve into subjects that ask them to stretch their limits of comfort and put themselves in the mindsets of characters who are undergoing tortuous conditions—whether of mind, body or soul. **In Mind's Eye Theatre (MET): Vampire The Masquerade** and **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** games, the characters are frequently monsters, subjecting themselves and others to their inhumane natures. Knowing this, how do Storytellers and players assess each other to ensure that the experience, while immersive, does not damage the player or the game?

The *OK Check-In technique* is a safety procedure gaining traction in LARP communities, including the MET community. It provides a formalized way for participants to discreetly check in with each other during roleplay to ensure their fellow players are doing well, even if their characters are visibly suffering. This proactive mechanic encourages all players to share responsibility for each other's well-being, and it facilitates player-to-player communication without causing long pauses in roleplay.

Players in distress are often too overwhelmed, embarrassed, or afraid to risk reaching to another player. These same players may also think their fellow participants are able to sense when their difficulty is real, rather than a part of gameplay. Even when it is entirely clear from the situation that a character's emotions or pain belong inside the fiction, players who experience powerful roleplay together may want to check in with each other during and after a scene. The OK Check-In method allows these players to easily communicate, even when upset, so much so that the inability to answer should be viewed as a sign of a possible real-life emergency.

In many MET systems, it is possible to step out-of-character for a few seconds and ask if another player is okay. However, that's not true in all games, and it's not always encouraged, as it breaks the flow of the story. The OK Check-In provides a means to assess an intense situation without interrupting the game. If the other player is okay, the person asking will be relieved of worry and will know they can continue their current line of roleplay. If another player does need the check in to help ensure comfort, the person asking will have the opportunity to remove the uncomfortable player from a tricky situation and create a safe LARP environment to explore darker themes.

The Function of the OK Check-In

The OK Check-In performs several functions in a game's safety culture:

- It demonstrates that the game adheres to the fundamental concept that players are separate from characters, that humans are more important than games, and that humans all deserve to not suffer if it can be avoided.
- It shows commitment to building a game culture that does not make players miserable, and it may even transform a dysfunctional game into one that's healthy. The more important dark themes are to your game, the more design effort you should put into separating the emotional and physical experiences of the characters from that of the players.
- It provides players who desire to tell intense and dark stories a means to calibrate their experiences with each other. While the primary reason for checking in is to make sure another player is not injured, in shock, heartbroken, or triggered by prior trauma, it also reassures the person who asked. It ensures everyone can be as comfortable as possible and focus on the game, without creating harmful situations.
- It encourages self-care. Commonly, humans sometimes aren't great at taking stock of their situation when they are roleplaying in a heightened state of emotions. When one player asks others if they are okay, everyone is forced to ask themselves the same question in order to answer. If the answer is not a resounding yes, then everyone should take a moment to consider the current situation and their feelings about it.
- It enables intense and immersive roleplay. When everyone is comfortable with their level of emotional and physical involvement in the game, they are able to focus their attention on roleplay.

The Missing Player

While some LARPS are incredibly flexible and can adjust their direction immediately after a participant's departure, players and Storytellers in other MET LARPs may feel as though this absence interrupts the game. Preparing for this possibility before game begins, and having a comfortable exit for the player prepared in advance, is a necessity. If we

want to tell dark stories, we need to create a community of players who trust each other. A person is more important than a story, and if a distressed player is always treated with dignity, the collective playerbase can rest easy in the knowledge that they, too, will be cared for if the need arises.

Using the OK Check-In Technique

When Storytellers opt to begin employing the OK Check-In technique, the most important design choice they need to make is how the procedure will best work in their games. Variations of this technique may be used in order to ensure everyone is able to use it when needed. However, in all variations, this mechanic will only work if it is actively encouraged and practiced before a LARP session begins.

All players must practice the gestures and words multiple times before play begins, or they risk not being able to recall them in times of distress or discomfort. In addition, establish a safe word that halts all roleplaying. This practice makes for a good pre-game icebreaking technique.

While practicing these procedures may feel silly, no LARP safety mechanic should be spoken about in a campy way, especially during its introduction. They are not optional. They are not uncool. Undermining them also undermines the trust between your players.

The Technique

The OK Check-In technique typically follows these steps:

1. Player 1 flashes the “OK” symbol with her hand—with her thumb and index finger touching in an “o” shape and the other three fingers extended upward—to another player and establishes eye contact. This gesture means, “Are you okay?”
2. Player 2 responds to the signal in one of three ways:
 - With a thumbs-up hand gesture, which means, “Doing fine. No need for follow-up.”
 - With a thumbs-down gesture, which means, “I am not okay.” Player 1 should respond by taking the player aside and saying the agreed-upon statements (see below).
 - With a flat hand gesture, which means, “I am not sure.” Player 1 should still respond by taking the player aside and saying the agreed-upon response (see below).

Creating Safe Spaces

Each LARP game should appoint a person who assists players who indicate that they are not “doing fine.” In addition, the game community should codify the appropriate responses to the thumbs-down and flat-hand gestures. Storytellers should also ensure all players know who their assigned check-in person is. Players should also be aware of the appropriate responses to the gestures, so the full responsibility of dealing with a difficult situation does not fall solely on the shoulders of someone who may lack the experience or skills to assist a player who indicates they are not okay.

For example, in the U.S. magical college LARP *New World Magischola*, a player will take the distressed person to a counselor—a member of the staff tasked with the emotional safety of participants. At the Nordic LARP *End of the Line*, the recommended script is, “Can I walk you to the off-game room?” This space acts as a sanctuary, staffed by an organizer skilled with listening. In both of these situations, the staff member is also empowered to take action if another player causes distress, whether intentionally or unintentionally, or otherwise inflicting harm on others.

If your game does not have the manpower to assign a dedicated staff member to these situations, it may make sense to recruit players and provide them additional training to assist in such instances. Also consider taking distressed players to a Storyteller. However, if a Storyteller is involved in the upsetting situation, providing an option between the staff member or an assigned player allows the distressed person to make a safe choice, whether based on gender or other considerations.

Designated Safe Area

In almost any space, it should be possible to offer at least a few chairs in a corner or an adjoining room that are designated as out-of-character spaces, intended for players who need a moment to gather their thoughts. Then, the player who offered the OK Check-In gesture, or an appropriate staff member, can offer to walk the person to the out-of-character space and ask to sit with them. Allowing players to step out of character while still seeing events unfold encourages self-care and provides the staff with important visual cues regarding the intensity of the story. Organizers can also check this area to verify if anyone needs additional support.

During this process, it is important to establish that no one should pressure the distressed person to talk about the reasons why they needed time. While wanting to help is natural, this dialogue may increase the anxiety the person may be feeling. If there is no immediate problem to solve

or urgent medical situation, then allow the person to speak on their own time. Distressed players do not have to justify their lack of comfort. Assistants can communicate that they are willing to listen, but they should also offer other choices, like finding the person's friends or a Storyteller.

In situations where a player is unresponsive or incoherent when the check-in is performed, this situation should be treated as a medical emergency. Furthermore, while small injuries like a paper cut can be handled by taking a person to the safe space, other injuries may also require emergency treatment. The game should be immediately stopped for all players using a previously established safe phrase, such as "Stop the LARP: medical emergency."

The Flat-Hand Option

Some players believe that the flat-hand signal is redundant and unneeded, since it triggers the same response as a "thumbs-down" signal. The three-tiered response is designed to remove difficulties presented by socialization—particularly among women or other marginalized groups—and help them seek assistance. Too many people "power through" and state they are fine, so as not to appear weak or subject themselves to retaliation. The flat-hand option allows people to show their mindset in difficult scenes, without having to make the self-determination that they are "not that bad."

Additional Variations of the OK Check-In Technique

The OK Check-in technique can potentially be used in alternate ways, often naturally evolving out of the basic system. These additional gestures should not be used alone—they should be introduced in addition to the basic system.

- *Proactive Thumbs-Up*: Players can make a proactive "thumbs-up" gesture to other players as they enter a scene, letting others know they are OK and don't need additional check-ins. This gesture is especially useful in larger games where heated situations may already exist.
- *Proactive Thumbs-Down*: Players may give the "thumbs-down" gesture unprompted, indicating to another player that they need assistance out-of-character. The recipient should respond with the agreed-upon script and take them to a safe area.
- *Enthusiastic Thumbs-Up*: Player can use a "double-thumbs-up" gesture or a huge smile and thumbs-up to indicate "Yes, please, more of this." This gesture can be used discreetly in the middle of a scene to escalate it at the consent of the other player or to

show appreciation.

- *Thumbs-Down to the Photographer*: Players who do not wish to be photographed in a particular scene can give the "thumbs-down" gesture, instructing a photographer to exit the area.

Conclusion

Both **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** and **MET: Werewolf The Apocalypse** games are ripe with opportunities to explore dark themes with dramatic consequences. The subjects can be exhilarating for characters, but also can cause players distress as they confront volatile emotional topics. The OK Check-in method provides an easy and structured way to take the pulse of a situation and show players that their environment is a safe and nurturing place to examine these topics.

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Maury Brown is the CEO of Learn Larp, LLC. She created the OK Check-In technique as described in this article and it was used for the first time with the four runs of her LARP, *New World Magischola*, in 2016.

Johanna Koljonen is the CEO of Participation Design Agency and consults with White Wolf. She is the co-producer of *End of the Line*, a LARP in the V:tM universe that introduced the OK Check-In technique at its New Orleans run 2016.

Koljonen and Brown have presented together and separately on safety and calibration inLARPs at various conferences and conventions worldwide.



Ritualizing the LARP Experience

By Sarah Lynne Bowman

Live-action roleplaying (LARP) is a ritualistic human activity involving co-creation and narrative enactment. Storytellers can more thoroughly ritualize the LARP experience in order to create a greater sense of communal trust and psychological safety before, during, and after play. For example, pre-game *workshops* help establish a more cohesive collaborative ensemble, enhance connections within the community, and help players learn how to prepare for intense play in a consensual manner. During play, *safety and calibration* mechanics allow players the ability to adjust scenes based upon their emotional needs. After play, *de-roleing* is a method of gently transitioning from the character back to the player, keeping the aspects that the player wishes to retain and leaving behind the less-desirable facets. Post-game *structured debriefing* is a method of discussing emotionally intense experiences in a serious and constructive manner, allowing players the opportunity to process any unresolved feelings. *Direct communication* and *out-of-character socializing* between LARP sessions facilitate a stronger interconnectedness between players, as they become better acquainted in the mundane social context. Ultimately, these activities work to create stronger, ritualized boundaries around the LARP experience in order to help players maintain friendships and transition from the game state back to daily life.

Intensity is an inherent aspect of LARP, as many players enjoy engaging with emotionally potent and challenging content. In *Mind's Eye Theatre* (MET) games, this content often involves exploring characters and story lines that defy social norms, express shadow aspects of one's personality, and touch upon taboo topics. While playing such content for extended periods of time can provide insight into the human experience through a metaphorical lens, this sort of play can also lead to a vulnerable state known as *bleed*, where emotions, thoughts, and relationship dynamics spill over from player to character and vice versa. While bleed itself is a neutral experience, some players view it as intensely cathartic, transformative, and instructive. Alternately, others may experience damage to their personal lives and communities as the result of unmanaged bleed. Therefore, ritualizing the LARP experience is particularly helpful in order to afford players the opportunity to process any bleed emotions that might arise.

Ritual, the Magic Circle, and Bleed

Ritual is an activity in which participants leave behind their usual social roles and inhabit a temporary, performative space as a group. LARP itself is a form of ritual. LARPers prepare to enter the ritual space through character planning, costuming, and other pre-game activities. Then, players enter what ritual theory calls a *liminal space*: a communal experience where social roles change and the rules of interaction are temporarily shifted. During the liminality of LARP, players adopt a new fictional reality according to the setting, rules, and norms of the play culture. After the end of the LARP, players return to their mundane social reality, discarding the roles of the liminal space, but not the memories. Many LARPers feel fundamentally changed by the peak experiences that occur in games. Rituals are most successful when all three phases of this process are clearly denoted and bounded. LARP is no exception.

In game studies, scholars often refer to the mental and physical space of games as the *magic circle*, where players temporarily adopt new rules of reality and identity. From a ritual perspective, the events that transpire within the magic circle occur during the liminal phase. In order to enter this magic circle and engage in the ritual activity, LARPers must adhere to a social contract of some sort, which is established during the pre-game preparation phase. In an MET LARP, this social contract may involve conventions about not touching others without explicit consent, when to remain in character, or how to use mechanics to moderate in-game disputes. The social contract contains rules that are both implicit and explicit and, therefore, can vary from group to group. The social contract facilitates liminality by establishing agreed-upon rules of engagement.

When engaged in liminal play through the lens of the character, the fictional reality allows participants some measure of freedom from responsibility for their in-character actions, which is called *alibi*. For instance, because the social contract for MET games often involves accepting that adult or "dark" content will emerge, LARPers often use the alibi of "in-character does not equal out-of-character" in order to distance their own actions from those taken during play. From the perspective of ritual theory, *alibi* is a way to delineate the difference between experiences that transpire within the liminal phase from those outside of it.

Unfortunately, the social contract of alibi is not always sufficient as a means to transition smoothly between these states. Players can experience bleed, where emotions from their characters spill over into their mundane lives and vice versa. *Bleed-in* occurs when aspects from the outside world affect in-game experiences, such as in-character romances developing due to out-of-character attractions, out-of-character disputes impacting in-character rivalries, and so on. Similarly, *bleed-out* happens when in-character emotions affect players out-of-character. Bleed is neither inherently positive nor negative, although players can perceive bleed as good or bad. For example, a player experiencing a sense of greater confidence after playing an influential role in a Vampire: The Masquerade LARP might consider such emotions “positive bleed.” Alternatively, a participant facing the dissolution of a friendship due to an in-character rivalry might consider this experience “negative bleed.”

Ultimately, bleed is often the reason why players engage in LARP. LARPer enjoy the emotions experienced while in a state of play, whether tragic, exhilarating, amusing, or solemn. In order for LARP to engage players, the game operates at a higher level of intensity than daily life, with many eventful moments occurring in a short amount of

time. Without some degree of bleed, players would likely feel bored.

However, problems can occur when bleed is not managed well by a community. The ethos of the “in-character does not equal out-of-character” alibi often puts the onus on individual players to handle their own bleed. This statement implies that people who experience emotional difficulties due to events in a LARP are solely responsible for their reactions. While personal accountability is important to emphasize, viewing LARP as a ritual activity extends the responsibility to the group by reinforcing the collective, collaborative nature of the game.

Certain group behaviors can intensify the potential for long-term bleed. For example, many MET chronicle LARPer spend extended periods of time engaged in *if-game thinking*, where they contemplate actions that their characters may take between game sessions. The planning and deployment of downtime actions is an example of *if-game thinking*. LARPer also may enact scenes over email, chat programs, online forums, or in-person between sessions. While none of these behaviors are inherently problematic, they extend the magic circle for longer than a single game session. These activities also increase the amount of time that a player experiences *immersion* in

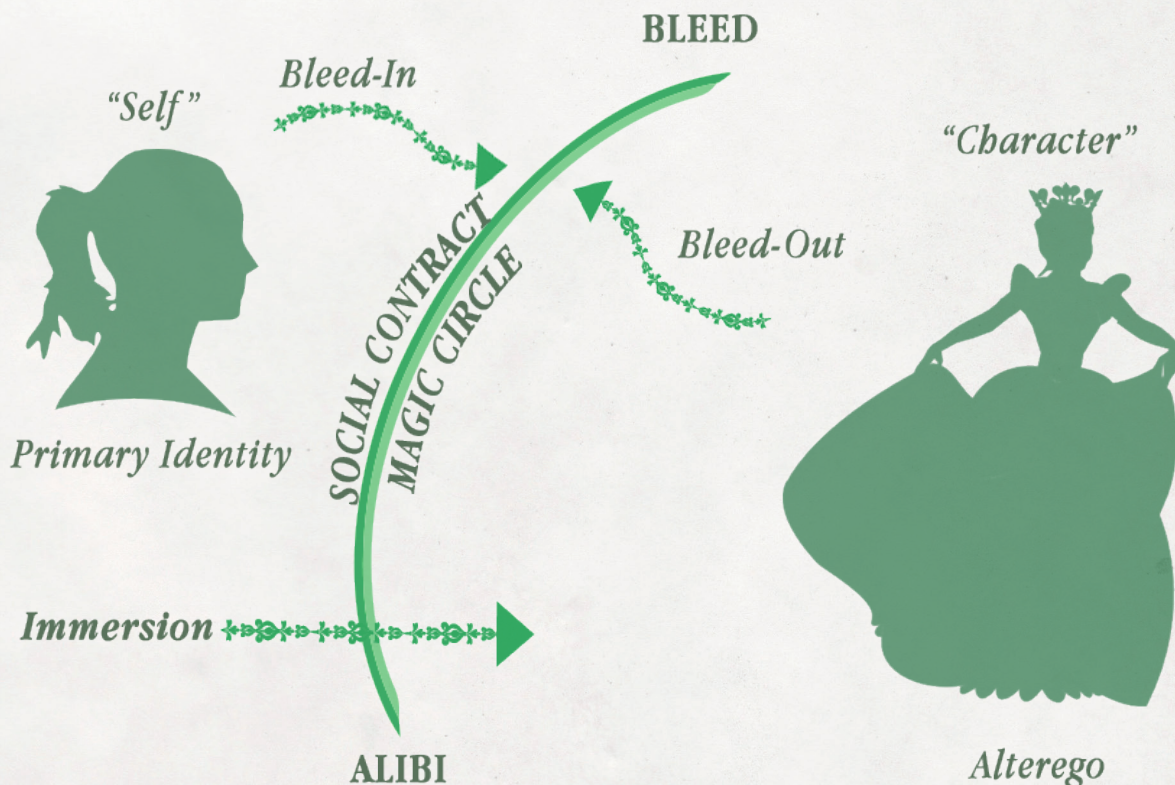


Figure 1: Diagram of the relationship between the social contract, magic circle, alibi, and bleed. Image by Mat Auryn.

the game world, whether through strategic planning or character enactment.

Through these actions, the ritual phases of preparation, liminality, and return become blurred and less distinct. While involvement between game sessions can feel invigorating, when players are consistently engaged in the fiction, they can also experience the more unpleasant aspects of bleed. Tensions in the community can increase, which may lead to groups splitting off and friendships dissolving. The potential for these problems to emerge intensifies the longer a player participates in a particular setting, MET chronicle, or character, as attachment to that particular fiction grows increasingly stronger. This attachment causes many players to prioritize protecting the game world and characters as important parts of their lived experience, rather than focusing upon maintaining the out-of-character harmony of the group.

Strengthening the Ritual Circle

Communities can minimize the complications that arise from bleed and other in-group conflicts by strengthening the ritual circle in a variety of ways. These methods can help players transition from the game to mundane life, as well as reinforce communal bonds. A few examples include:

1. *Workshops*: LARP groups can formalize the preparation phase through *workshopping*. Workshops are a way for players to get to know one another, explore their characters, practice mechanics, and build trust as a group. One helpful workshop strategy is *hot seat*, during which players interview someone's character and they answer accordingly. Hot seat is used in the workshops for *End of the Line*, the **Vampire: The Masquerade** LARP by Odyssé Participation Agency. Another workshop technique involves playing out freeform scenes as a group, including backstories, fantasies, nightmares, future possibilities, etc. This technique is formalized in the structure of *Convention of Thorns*, the White Wolf LARP by Dziobak LARP Studios.

Workshop play increases the transparency of the fiction, as players externalize aspects of their characters that might otherwise remain hidden. Although the surprise of revealing these aspects during game is diminished, the collaboration between players to create a shared storytelling experience is maximized. This collaborative style helps cement the group as an ensemble of players working together toward a common goal, rather than a collection of individuals with their own agendas and interests operating within the same game.

2. *Safety and Calibration Mechanics*: The liminal phase,

while exciting, can also become overwhelming, confusing, or frustrating. Instituting safety mechanics can help players feel more comfortable communicating their needs within the group. Examples include *cut*, which allows players to end a scene for any reason; *brake*, which enables players to decrease the intensity of a scene; the *OK check-in system*, where participants make sure their scene partners are emotionally capable of proceeding by using non-verbal communication: flashing the "okay" hand signal, then replying with thumbs-up, so-so, or thumbs-down; the *lookdown*, where a player can leave a scene without comment for any reason by placing their hand over their eyes and walking away; the *X-card*, where players can ask for a certain topic to be excluded from play for any reason; etc. These mechanics also serve as a form of calibration, allowing players to adjust the tone, intensity, and content of a scene in order to better align with the rest of the group.

3. *De-roleing*: One effective strategy for formalizing the return phase is *de-roleing*, where players ritualistically shed their character after the game session is done. Group de-roleing strategies include taking a piece of costuming and placing it in a circle; verbalizing what elements of the character the player would like to take with them and what characteristics they wish to leave behind; a player writing a letter to her character; introducing oneself with one's player name rather than her character's; and using the third person to describe character actions in post-game stories.
4. *Debriefing*: Additionally, LARP groups can formalize the return phase through structured and informal *debriefing*. Structured debriefing is a facilitated form of storytelling after a LARP, during which each participant is encouraged to share moments from the game that elicited strong emotions. Other players are discouraged from commenting or interrupting during this sharing process. The debrief practice tends to be serious in tone and focuses on emotional content, such as bleed. Debriefing is distinct from the *war story* practice, during which players enjoy telling informal narratives about the game, often in a humorous or excited tone. Both practices help participants process the experience and transition to mundane life, but debriefing makes space for players to discuss the more complex and confusing emotions that may arise from bleed. Game critiques are discouraged within debriefing spaces, as are accusations toward players due to their characters' actions.
5. *Direct Communication*: When problems arise due to bleed or other game-related conflicts, mature direct communication between players – whether moderated

or on an individual basis – can help tremendously. Some players harbor grudges or hurt feelings that can last months or even years due to unresolved tensions. Many of these tensions are resolvable through immediate and direct discussion between the parties involved, with an emphasis on empathy, kindness, and trust.

6. *Out-of-Character Socializing*: Many groups host informal social gatherings as a way for players to get to know one another outside of the game. These events can include charity drives, dinners, parties, or other meetups. Additionally, online discussion through social media or other forums can increase people's engagement with the community. The more people learn about one another's mundane social lives, the easier they can contextualize each other's in-character actions from a broader perspective. Additionally, out-of-character social activities allow space for informal debriefing, war story telling, and direct communication to take place.

While many other strategies exist, these practices can help reinforce the boundary between fictional events and mundane life.

Conclusion

By emphasizing the ritualistic nature of the experience and strengthening the magic circle, LARP groups can demonstrate that emotional responses such as bleed are a normal part of roleplaying. Furthermore, ritualized practices such as workshoping, safety mechanics, and debriefing make clear that individual and community health are more important than games. Ultimately, these techniques can help Storytellers establish more distinct boundaries around theirLARPs, creating a more cohesive and intense ritual experience.

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Sarah Lynne Bowman (Ph.D.) is a role-playing games scholar, designer, and organizer. McFarland Press published her dissertation in 2010 as *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. Bowman served as an editor for *The Wyrd Con Companion Book* from 2012-2015 and is a Coordinating Editor for the *International Journal of Role-playing*. She was the lead organizer for the Living Games Conference 2016 and helped coordinate the Role-playing and Simulation in Education Conference at Texas State University. Bowman has played and organized World of Darkness larps since 1998. In 2016, she helped design workshops for *End of the Line* in New Orleans and *Convention of Thorns* in Poland, as well as contributing character writing for *Enlightenment in Blood* in Berlin.

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Strategies for Improving Communication Between Players and Game Staff

By Jessica Karels

Imagine that you are looking at your social media account after taking the weekend for yourself. Between work and other obligations, you needed to unplug from the world for a few days. Your **Mind's Eye Theatre** (MET) chronicle's social media page alerts you to several new posts regarding your game, some of which tag you directly. As their Storyteller, you assume that your players have questions about when downtimes are due or need a rules clarification, so you look at the updates. Your players blindside you. One member of your MET game has accused another member of cheating. Some of the respondents question whether you were aware and complacent, since the accused is one of your friends. Others comment a few hours after the initial postings, speculating that your silence implied either guilt or a lack of caring. One of your players chimed in stating that you were likely away from your computer for the weekend, only to be dismissed by those who felt that you could—and should—have checked your social media account on your phone.

We have more tools than ever to keep in touch with our fellow **Mind's Eye Theatre** participants. At the same time, the public and near-instant nature of social media means that Storytellers are sometimes the last to learn about issues with their MET games unless they are plugged in 24-7. If we want to leverage these tools effectively, we need to have a plan in place to handle game-related incidents before they become a public relations crisis for your chronicle. This preparation includes empowering your players to share constructive feedback and having a process in place for addressing their concerns. Without such frameworks in place, by the time that we have the opportunity to respond, the damage to our community—and to our own enjoyment of running a MET game—is already done.

What is at Stake?

Whether your players air their grievances through social media or at a local social event, they will cause the same consequences for your **Mind's Eye Theatre** chronicle, community, and ultimately your enjoyment of storytelling.

Misinformation is Spread

Very rarely does a player have a perfect understanding

of a game-related situation. This limited perspective is especially prevalent in **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** LARPs, where part of the focus is intrigue and misdirection.

Trust is Broken

Few players consider the out-of-game consequences of rumor-mongering. Players can come to distrust their Storytellers—and each other—when there is a perception of wrongdoing. Some players may opt to avoid pushing their characters' goals out of fear that they will be accused of cheating if they succeed.

Example: *In your **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** LARP, Natalie spent months' worth of downtimes in order for her character, Nicki the Nosferatu, to learn that Billie the Brujah is a Sabbat infiltrator. When the opportunity presented itself, those secrets were sold and brought to light, resulting in political fallout and Billie's execution. Infuriated, Brad (Billie's player) publicly accuses Natalie of metagaming, as he believes that there was no possible way for her character to find out about Billie's dark secret. Rumors spread about speculated personal reasons regarding why Natalie may have targeted Brad through his character. As a result, Natalie feels less inclined to have her character seek out information about other player-characters, fearing another negative out-of-character reaction.*

Risk of Staff Burnout Increases

Storytelling is supposed to be a rewarding task, allowing you collaborate with the players in your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game to create a shared story. When players focus on negative out-of-character aspects of game, that takes away time and energy from collective story-building. If the potential for players to air their grievances online on public venues exists, you essentially become “on call” for crisis management. Our community has lost many energetic Storytellers due to burn-out caused by social media negativity.

Example: *Your **Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse** chronicle just had a combat-heavy game session. Several players meet up afterwards at a local restaurant in order to socialize. During this time, some grieve for the characters that died, while others try to piece together why so much PC death occurred. Rather than consider that misinformation may*

have been relayed in-character in order to set up an ambush, the players speculate about whether or not the Storytellers intentionally targeted high-profile characters. As rumors and theories spread across the local MET game's community, the "Storyteller vs. player" mentality cements itself. This situation results in some of the Storytellers stepping down, as they do not feel they can build a shared story with their players second-guessing them.

Why "Go Talk to the Staff" Doesn't Always Work

The simplest response to this problem is to encourage players to speak with their Storytellers regarding grievances they may have about game. After all, it's the Storyteller's "job" to ensure that the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game is fair on an out-of-character level, right? While some players may feel comfortable voicing their concerns directly to their Storyteller, others shy away from doing so. There are many reasons that members of your MET game might not feel comfortable voicing their concerns. Here are a few key reasons:

They Fear Reprisal

Some players are concerned about the consequences of speaking up. They think that the Storyteller will take negative feedback personally and will target their characters. While this seems like an odd line of logic, some of your players may have experienced such reactions in other **Mind's Eye Theatre** games. If you are friends with the players in your MET chronicle, they may also fear that you will take their complaints personally, thus damaging your friendship.

They Don't Know What to Say

Sharing potentially negative feedback with someone can be an intimidating experience, especially when the person whom we are addressing is a friend or a person in a position of authority (or both!) Sometimes it feels easier to vent online or to a group of friends than to directly address someone who has the power to fix a situation.

Example: Michelle is a member of the previously mentioned **Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse** chronicle that had a combat-focused session. While she had fun at that game session (her character was able to do some cool things), she is disheartened by her fellow players' reactions. She asks some of them why they don't reach out to the Storytellers with their concerns. Some of the players admit to Michelle that they are friends with members of the Storytelling team and don't know how to directly express their frustration without having it

come across as a personal attack.

They Think that Their Concerns Will Be Ignored

Most players are reasonable enough to understand that not every piece of feedback will be acted upon. However, some participants refuse to speak up, because they feel that their thoughts and ideas will be dismissed outright. This preconception is also prevalent in cases where player concerns involve potential wrongdoing (cheating, harassment, etc.) by another member of the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game. Your players may fear that you will simply believe the accused instead of them or not see the problem as being severe enough to act upon. They see public outcries as a way of holding their Storytellers accountable—forcing them to react or face disgrace.

Example: Brad was a member of several **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** chronicles, some of which did not handle accusations of cheating seriously. When his character, Billie the Brujah, was outed as a Sabbat infiltrator, he had a hard time accepting that the discovery could have been made in-character. Brad is fairly certain that Natalie, the player of Nicki the Nosferatu, metagamed that information. Due to his past experiences, when accusations of cheating were ignored, he is hesitant to bring those concerns privately to the Storytellers. He thinks that by going to social media to accuse Natalie of cheating, he will be more successful at getting a response from the Storytelling staff.

As the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". You can take steps to empower your players to constructively share their ideas and concerns. While this preparation may not completely eliminate game-related negativity from social media, these tactics can reduce the potential for such outbursts. Most players want their MET live-action roleplaying (LARP) game to be fun, for their community to be healthy, and that members turn to social media as a last resort.

Creating a Safer Space

A safe space is an environment that allows your players to voice their concerns without judgment. They may be emotionally invested in the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game, and thus have strong feelings about what is going on and how they (and others) are being affected. Thus, a safe space must also allow players to be able to express those emotions without judgement or repercussions.

That said, there are a few things that a safe space is *not*. First, it is not a place where players can expect to be placated. They may have strong convictions about what course of action you should take as a Storyteller—you are in no way

obligated to comply. Second, it is not a place where the players' views are seen as infallible. They may not have all of the information about a situation. In some cases, information may need to be withheld from them, especially if it is plot-related. Third, a safe space does not give players permission to be abusive towards other members of the **Mind's Eye Theatre** game or the Storytelling staff. While it is okay for them to feel upset about issues within the MET chronicle, it is not okay for them to direct those feelings towards others in a harmful manner.

Consider these three options to support your players' need for a safer space:

Anonymous Feedback Form

Create an online form allowing a player to provide feedback to the Storytelling staff without needing to provide personal information. While this method addresses the concerns of players who fear retribution, it can also create challenges for the Storytelling staff. If players' input is unclear, there is no way to contact them for follow-up.

Player Representative

Some Mind's Eye Theatre chronicles have a player elected to this position; its purpose is to provide someone designated to approach the Storytelling staff about participant concerns. Sometimes the Player Representative acts as a mediator between the Storyteller and the players. Other times, it acts as a buffer, so that players can keep their feedback anonymous. It is important that whoever is elected into this role has the trust of both the Storytelling staff and the player base. In addition, the Player Representative needs to be able to maintain confidentiality of both the players and Storytellers, as the MET game's staff may share private information with them in order to provide context behind their decisions. Unless the Player Representatives set communication boundaries with the MET LARP community, they may find themselves constantly "on call" for various issues.

Example: *Michelle reaches out to the Storytellers of her Mind's Eye Theatre: Werewolf The Apocalypse chronicle to let them know about player concerns regarding their recent combat-focused session and the deaths of several high-profile characters. Surprisingly, this is the first time that the Storytelling team has heard about player concerns regarding their game. At the start of the next session, the Storytellers announce that they are creating a new position in the chronicle in order to encourage players to provide feedback to the Storytellers. After an election process, the player base chooses Michelle as their Player Representative. Players email her with concerns when they do not feel comfortable directly approaching the Storytellers, and she attends Storyteller staff meetings to ensure that those issues are addressed.*

Town Halls

There are situations where a **Mind's Eye Theatre** chronicle may benefit from everyone being able to sit down and voice their shared concerns. The purpose of a town hall is not to "name and shame" one's fellow players or staff, but rather to draw attention to visible problems with the MET game and collaborate on a solution. Work with your MET chronicle to identify a facilitator who can keep the conversations on-topic and a scribe who can take minutes. These assistants will allow you to be in the moment during a town hall and to focus on listening to your players.

Example: *Brad posted on social media about his frustrations with the local Minds Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade chronicle, specifically with how he believes that Storytellers don't address issues of cheating. He calls out Natalie, a fellow player, and accuses her of metagaming information that her character could not have obtained. Other players step forward, making similar accusations about fellow players. To respond to the building animosity, the Storytellers set up a town hall meeting for their players. At this meeting, they not only publicly state that the accusations of cheating have been investigated, but they also reiterate the themes of intrigue and misdirection that are inherent in a MET: Vampire The Masquerade LARP. Together, the Storytellers and players discuss how to document information that is discovered in-character so that future accusations of cheating and metagaming can be quickly addressed. Brad apologizes to Natalie for his initial reaction and promises to give his fellow players the benefit of the doubt.*

Framework for Feedback

Sometimes, players struggle to find words that convey their thoughts and feelings about a situation, especially when addressing someone in authority. "This game sucks" may seem easy to express, but it does not identify the problem or show how to potentially improve the situation. Your players may need help articulating their concerns and a desired outcome. Walk them through the following four questions:

What is the Problem?

Encourage your players to answer this question with direct observations. Guide them to use "I" based statements, such as "I heard," "I noticed," or "I saw."

Why is this a Problem?

This question prompts your players to share their perceptions and opinions about what they observed. ("I think/feel this is an issue because....")

What Might Happen if this Problem isn't Addressed?

Sometimes a player's concern isn't solely about what happened in the past, but what it might lead to in the future.

What Solution Would You Recommend, and Why?

Mind's Eye Theatre players tend to be problem-solvers, and your participants may come up with options that you might not have otherwise considered. Asking them "why" also encourages them to show how their proposed solution fixes the problem and mitigates the outcome they are concerned about.

Example 1: "I'm surprised that Billie the Brujah's dark secret was revealed at the last game session. At a party last week, Brad mentioned that his character's secret was so well hidden that no one could possibly find out! Natalie — Nicki the Nosferatu's player (the one who revealed the secret) — was also at the party, and Brad thinks that she overheard the conversation and metagamed that information. If she did, that's cheating and it will hurt our game in the long run. I think that the Storytellers should make sure that Natalie's character got the information legitimately and let the players know so that this rumor does not fester."

Example 2: "At our last game session, I saw the Storytellers high-fiving each other and seeming excited after the end of combat. While I understand that they may be excited about running a seamless mass combat using the **Mind's Eye Theatre** rules, I feel this is an issue, because it comes across as them congratulating themselves for killing off characters. My concern is that the players of the characters who died will feel like they were targeted by the Storytellers and may not come back to game. I think that the Storytellers should reach out to those players and check in to let them know that their feelings of loss are valid, and to work with those players to build new characters, so that they can come back to game."

Advice on Receiving Feedback

We devote a lot of time and energy into building our **Mind's Eye Theatre** games and communities. It can hurt when we find out that something has gone wrong. Here are some tips to receive feedback from your players in a productive way:

Treat Feedback as a Gift

You have been given the opportunity to fix a problem and improve your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game. Doing so will build trust with your players and show that you are responsive to their needs and concerns.

Listen to Understand, Not to Respond

We can become emotionally attached to our creations, and sometimes we perceive a critique of the creation as a critique of ourselves. This feeling leads to a desire to defend ourselves and what we helped to create. If we listen to respond, then the person who is sharing feedback may become equally defensive. Focus on trying to better understand their point of view first before trying to determine a solution.

Remember that Their Emotions are Due to Personal Investment

Some of your players may feel hurt or angry about what is going on at the game. That does not mean that they are angry at you or feel that you hurt them. Acknowledge their passion and concern about your shared hobby.

Responding to the Community

You have educated your players on the ways that they can share feedback and given them a framework to do so constructively. Some may still not come forward, because they are concerned that their ideas will go into a digital "black hole." It is important to establish expectations with your players about when they can expect to receive a response, and through which channels you will communicate to them.

The First Contact

When a player reaches out to you, you ideally want to send an initial response within one to three days of that initial point of contact. The purpose of this message is to acknowledge receipt of their communication and to ask clarifying questions as needed. In some instances, you may be able to respond to your player's question or concern in a single response.

Keep your players informed about the expected response time for inquiry emails. Have this information posted in writing on your **Mind's Eye Theatre** game's website or in a monthly email with other game-related announcements. If you plan to be away from game-related stuff for an extended period of time, let your players know in advance or set up an "out of office" response for your Storyteller email account.

Follow-up Communications

You have multiple avenues through which to continue conversations with your players. If both of you are comfortable discussing the topic solely through email, by all means do so. Sometimes, one or both parties may find it easier to communicate verbally. In those cases, feel free

to discuss the matter over the phone, by video chat, or in person. Afterwards, send a summary email to the player to recount the discussion. This practice not only ensures that both parties are on the same page, but provides documentation to prevent any “he said / she said” down the road.

Documentation is Key

Our memories are not infallible. Sometimes they can be rather selective. Also, a **Mind’s Eye Theatre** chronicle may go through multiple Storytellers, and knowledge of past issues may help future Storytellers in managing the MET game.

There are a couple of options for documentation procedures, depending on the resources available to your **Mind’s Eye Theatre** game. At the very minimum, consider having a dedicated email account for the Storyteller role. This tool allows you to sort messages based on topic (and perhaps issue) so that your successors will have access to past messages. If you use Gmail for your Storyteller account, you can also create digital notes summarizing the various issues and responses. If your MET game has the resources, consider developing (or purchasing) a platform to better organize this information. There are many client relationship management tools on the market—ranging from free/open-source to subscription-based—that can help you log ongoing game-related concerns and your communications with your players.

Example: Your **Mind’s Eye Theatre** chronicle developed a communication plan in order to address player concerns. The Storytellers have a shared calendar where they list “office hours” for responding to player emails, as well as coordinating which team members attend specific community events like post-game meetups. If a player brings up an issue at an in-person event, the Storytellers are instructed to have the player email the team for documentation purposes. The shared Storyteller email account is organized so that issues pending resolution are highlighted and do not get lost in the shuffle. Your game’s Player Representative uses a case-tracking system in order to log player complaints and inquiries and track the outcomes in ways that can be researched later, if needed.

Public versus Private?

One of the reasons driving the player trend to air grievances on social media is that it forces transparency. Your players have an investment in your **Mind’s Eye Theatre** game and want to ensure that their concerns—and the concerns of their fellow participants—are acted upon. While this intention may be well meant, it can shift a MET game’s dynamic from being collaborative to accusatory, putting the burden on your MET game’s staff to prove that they are responsive.

Work with your players to determine what game-related issues should be brought forth to the entire MET chronicle, as well as what channels of communication should be used. Some MET chronicles send out an announcement email on a regular basis, while others limit announcements to a player assembly right before the start of game. There is no one right way to do this—figure out what works for your MET game and run with it.

Policy-related issues, such as rules changes, should be announced to your players, with written follow-up reminders in case someone missed the initial announcement. This practice gives players the opportunity to ask questions or give input both in person and online. The email reminder also serves to document when the rules changes were made and announced, in order to prevent the perception that rules were changed without player knowledge.

Disciplinary issues need not be made public to the whole **Mind’s Eye Theatre** game. Some chronicles announce disciplinary actions in order to show that problem behaviors will not be tolerated. Others choose not to, feeling that disciplined players do not need to be humiliated by making their punishments public. However, if someone brought forward an accusation of wrongdoing against another player, it is important to let them know when the investigation is completed as well as the outcome. This practice will assure them that their concerns were addressed and inform them if their own perceptions were wrong.

Concluding Thoughts

Our players are one of our best resources for identifying ways to help improve our **Mind’s Eye Theatre** LARPs. It is important for us to guide them to ways that they can constructively share their ideas or voice concerns. They can become our greatest detractors, but also our greatest advocates. If your players know that there are multiple ways to share feedback and that their voices will be heard, they are more likely to tell others within the MET game to use these tools.

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Jessica Karels has over 15 years of experience in developing and supporting gaming communities. She held a number of global administrative positions in *One World By Night* (Admissions, Marketing, and Head Coordinator) before founding *The Hidden Parlor* in late 2015. She uses her code-geek skills to make web applications to streamline the administrative side of networked games. There is no truth to the rumor that she’s really a dragon in human form, even though she has a hoard of shiny things and gamer books (including a signed copy of *The Shining Host* — the MET rules for **Changeling: the Dreaming**).