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Safety Tools for Simulations, Role-Playing, and Games...

*by John Stavropoulos*

PermanentLink: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>

## The Latest

We've learned a lot about the X-Card since this original document was published. Till we have time to update this entire doc, we will share the latest here. This section will also serve as an up to date short review of what the X-Card is and how to use it.

**Want to use the X-Card in your published game?** You can! The X-Card is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0) License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/). Simply credit John Stavropoulos and link to this document here: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>

**The X-Card is** an optional tool (created by John Stavropoulos) that allows anyone in your game (including you) to edit out any content anyone is uncomfortable with as you play. Since most RPGs are improvisational and we won't know what will happen till it happens, it's possible the game will go in a direction people don't want. An X-Card is a simple tool to fix problems as they arise.

**To use, at the start of your game, simply say:**

*“I’d like your help. Your help to make this game fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way…* **[ draw X on an index card ]** *…just lift this card up, or simply tap it* **[ place card at the center of the table ]**. *You don’t have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded. And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I’m the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you! Please help make this game fun for everyone. Thank you!"*

**Notes (see next page):**

* The X-Card speech above can be more useful that the X-Card itself. It makes it clear that we are all in this together, will help each other, and that the group of people playing are more important than the game.
* Use the X-Card early, even on yourself, to lead by example, and model the behavior.
* The X-Card does not have to be a tool of last resort. The less special it feels, the more you use it, the more likely someone will use it when it really is badly needed.
* The X-Card is not a replacement for conversation. If you prefer to talk about an issue that comes up instead of using the X-Card, please do. Just because the X-Card is available does not mean it has to be used. But when it is used, respect the person who uses it and don't ask why or start a conversation about the issue. The X-Card is optional.
* The X-Card is a safety net, but not everyone will feel comfortable using it in all situations. If a player had a problem with the game and wants to talk to you about it afterward… please listen. It it not okay to say "but you didn't use the X-Card" as a defense. Don't use the X-Card offensively. Listen and talk it out.
* If you aren't sure what was X-Carded, call for a break and talk with the person in private.
* Don't use the X-Card as an excuse to push boundaries. It's not a Safe Word.
* Some GMs (usually those who haven't used the X-Card) fear that the X-Card will limit their creativity. Many GMs who use the X-Card find the opposite is true. Since the GM doesn't have to be a magical mind reader, it frees up their energy to focus on other elements of GMing.
* The X-Card is not an excuse to try to get back to the game as soon as possible. People matter more than the game. If you need to take a break, take a break.
* While we have referenced triggers in the past (and reference triggers in the rest of this document), we have moved away from using the term. There is a lot of misunderstanding over what a trigger is or isn't. Additionally X-Cards can be useful even in situations unrelated to triggers and PTSD.

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## What is it?

It’s a card with an X on it that participants in a Simulation or Role-Playing Game can use to edit out anything that makes them uncomfortable with no explanations needed.

It was originally developed to make gaming with strangers fun, inclusive, and safe.

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## Why use it?

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Safety.

It gives everyone an easy out. An exit strategy. An easy way to say no without (or with less) peer pressure. It means no one will question you for saying no. With no uncomfortable explanations needed.

The X-card creates a specific mood at the table. It says “We’re here together. If you need to stop, we’ll stop. The people playing are more important than the game we are playing.”

Maybe specific content makes you uncomfortable. Maybe you just want to say no and are tired of explaining yourself all the time. Maybe you aren't a persuasive or extroverted person. Maybe you don't want to be reminded of a previous painful experience. Maybe you feel dwelling on a specific topic is wasting valuable gaming time. Maybe certain topics trigger past trauma which would make it so that you can no longer play.

And just having the X-Card present increases the group's heightened awareness of everyone's risks and responsibilities. Even if the X-Card is never used, it still is a potent tool for getting everyone to think about each other first, and the game second. It puts the focus on the fact that this is a social **group activity**.

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## How do you introduce it in a game?

*“I’d like your help.”*

*“Your help to make this game fun for everyone.”*

*“If anything in the game makes anyone uncomfortable…”*

**[ draw an X on an index card ]**

*“…just lift this card up, or simply tap it."*

*“You don’t have to explain why.”*

*“It doesn't matter why.”*

*”When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded."*

*”And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately."*

*“I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together…”*

*“…and usually I’m the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you!"*

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## Why do you use that introduction?

Lets break it down line by line...

**1. *“I’d like your help.”***

A lot of times we don’t get what we want in life because we don’t ask for it.

This also makes it clear that it’s not all on me.

**2. *“Your help to make this game fun for everyone.”***

State the goal, set expectations. Make it clear it’s not about individuals but the group.

**3. *“If anything in the game makes anyone uncomfortable…”***

I switch from saying “you” to “anyone” and “we” below to reinforce it’s about the group’s needs. I say “anything” so it’s not limited or specific because I don’t want to prejudge what people find uncomfortable because it’s subjective and I’m not here to judge.

**4. *“…just simply lift this card up or simply tap it.”***

It’s so easy! I will then actually lift the card to make it clear physically how easy it is.

**5. *“You don’t have to explain why.”***

Explaining is bad because it’s extra effort, a higher barrier to accomplish your goal, and it can feel like being put on trial. Plus explanations means more time not playing.

**6. *“It doesn't matter why.”***

No judgement. No questioning.

**7. *”When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded…”***

Repeat what they need to do “lift the card” and emphasize how it is simple and fast.

**8. *”And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately."***

If the X-Card isn't enough and someone needs help, their needs are more important than the game.

**9. *“I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together…”***

It does sound funny to most people so I prefer to acknowledge what most people are thinking than let it go unsaid. Saying it out loud takes away its stigma and says “I understand” + “but trust me”.

**10. *“…and usually I’m the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you!"***

It’s not just about them, it’s also about me. We’re in this together. The rules apply to everyone. And it takes the edge off a potential serious topic by ending with humor. I will usually X-Card myself early on in the game. Say I describe a gory fight, I might say out loud, “whoa John, relax there” and lift the X-Card on myself to show everyone it’s no big deal to use.

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## What's most important about the X-Card?

The X-Card talk is more important than the X-Card itself.

Some play RPGs because, "RPGs are like video games except you can do anything limited by your imagination."

But that's not true, RPGs are a group activity, not a solo one. If the group isn't into randomly killing everything and anything, including murdering prostitutes, ala a more open version of Grand Theft Auto... it is going to be a socially dysfunctional experience.

My friend Martha, who is a psychiatrist, said, "RPGs are limited by the tolerance of the people you play with."

The X-Card talk is a good way to communicate... this is not a solo activity. The people here matter more than the game we are playing. **Help us make this fun for everyone.**

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## What's second most important about the X-Card?

When you X-Card something, no explanation is needed.

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## What things have you seen X-Carded?

I've seen the X-Card used easily 60-100+ times (I play a lot of games with a lot of people all over the world). Examples:

* I described an NPC smoking. A player was trying to quit and felt uncomfortable.
* We played a modern realistic horror game. Someone introduced funny elves.
* I described plane turbulence. This triggered a player and luckily I stopped asap (we had to stop the game as well) and we did what we could to help the person in question.

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## Why not use Lines instead?

Lines and Veils are generally excellent techniques developed by Ron Edwards: <http://goo.gl/6xh6Fb>

So why don't I use them? First, they might be the right tools for you so I encourage you to click the above link to find out more. Second, despite having had problems with Lines and Veils, there would likely be no X-Card if there were no Lines and Veils so I respect these tools and Ron's work.

On many occasions I've seen the people who draw a line across certain content are the very people who bring that content into the game. By talking about it, they are thinking about it. And sometimes even talking about certain topics could cause someone to trigger themselves. We had one game where we asked everyone what they don't want in the game and they mentioned something creepy dealing with clowns and snakes. It sets a strange tone before you've even started playing.

We don't know what might come up in a game till we play. While you could technically draw a Line in the middle of play, I've found without something like the X-Card talk, the safety of using the tool without explanations, and an easy way to diminish the social pressure of using a Line… many people might feel uncomfortable using it. Which can even happen with the X-Card which has an even lower barrier to entry.

There was an infamous game where a female player, as part of a Lines conversation, said up front, "I don't want non-consensual sex in this game" (it was a comedy game dealing with silly topics where no one imagined non-consensual sex would come up)... and then the same player proceeded to attempt to sexually assault a fictional character in the game! What she meant was, "I don't want my character to experience non-consensual sex".

People often say one thing and do another. They may not know what they want or the reasons behind their actions. Or much simpler, they don't know what they don't want till they see it. That all said, if you know your game may include content that may make someone uncomfortable, it's best to let everyone know before they decide they want to play.

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## What if you don't know what was X-Carded?

Call for a break and have the person running the game or a close friend speak privately with the person who used the X-Card. In general, we tell people that no explanations are needed, but if they want to share, they are welcome to. It's their choice.

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## Triggers can be anything!

A person can be in a terrible car accident where they lose loved ones and cars may **NOT** trigger them... instead, snow triggers them (the accident happened while it was snowing).

It's nearly impossible to know what will trigger someone. Examples of common triggers include:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Abortion  Addiction  Aimlessness  Animal abuse  Authority figures  Being alone  Bigotry  Blood  Bodily fluids  Bullying  Car accidents  Chaos  Child abuse  Childbirth  Children  Choking  Clowns  Commitment  Competition  Corpses  Crowded Spaces  Darkness  Dating  Dentists  Disease  Dogs | Drowning  Drugs  Eating in front of others  Failing  Falling  Feet  Fire  Flying  Germs  Heights  Homophobia  Injuries  Isolation  Kidnapping  Loss of control  Mobs  Natural Disasters  Nazis  Needles  Old people abuse  Pain  Performance  Plane crashes  Poverty  Pregnancy  Pressure | Public Places  Public restrooms  Racism  Rape  Reading aloud  Religion  Scarification  Sex  Sexism  Sharp objects  Slime  Small Spaces  Smoking  Snakes  Specific smells  Spiders  Suicide  Swearing  Terrorist Attacks  Touching  Torture  Uncertainty  Violence  Vomit  War  Yelling |

In Simulations and Role-playing Games, often the participants create fictional content... in real time... by playing it.

It's incredibly difficult to predict what might happen. Many common triggers could show up. So what do you do? That's another reason we use an X-Card. We don't have to guess. We don't have to read people's minds.

That said, I do think it is useful to list broad categories like Violence, Gore, Sex and so on before participants decide to play your game.

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## Does using it for more than Triggers diminish it?

People commonly believe that by using the X-Card to edit both content that may trigger someone and simply content that makes people uncomfortable or simply doesn't fit with the game... that it might diminish the power of using the X-Card when there is an emergency rather than a small misstep.

We've found the opposite to be true.

By using the X-Card frequently, you demystify it. You normalize it. It becomes second nature. Thus increasing the chances it will actually be used when it is needed.

The more you use it, the better.

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## Does the X-Card limit our creativity?

Some people hate the idea of playing with an X-Card because they fear it could crush their creativity. People who run games can especially feel threatened, especially if they have specific stories in mind.

But gaming is about interaction. It's about choices. And it's about the people playing together. No one person's feelings are more important than anyone elses.

And often the opposite happens.

By knowing people can easily flag and edit any potentially problematic content, you can be even braver with your choices. You can spend less time trying to read people (we aren't mind readers) and more time being creative.

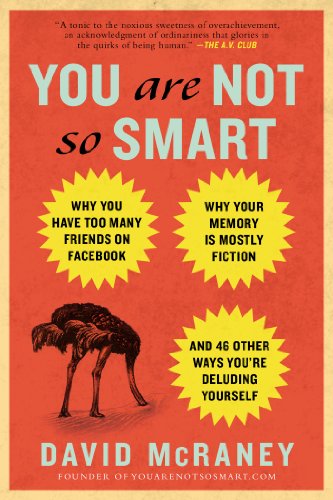
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## Isn't this just common sense?

If it's common sense to you, then the X-Card might not be for you. Totally cool. I don't use it all the time myself.

But generally speaking, what people often think is common sense is not. I highly recommend...



**You Are Not So Smart**

<http://www.amazon.com/You-Are-Not-So-Smart/dp/1592407366>

No tool, X-Card included, will remove all risk. Spontaneity is risky and risk is exciting. It's one of the many reasons these games are so enjoyable. But to be clear, along with "isn't this common sense" people often say, "aren't these just social problems, not gaming problems?" And they are right! This comes up in Simulations and Role-playing Games because they are highly social and spontaneous activities. Life is risk. But one of the benefits of system is the ability to modify behavior to achieve specific goals. And the X-Card is another system, an optional system, to help manage risk where appropriate.

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## Does the X-Card make a game 100% safe?

X-Cards is not 100% effective. But neither is it 0% effective.

An X-Card doesn't mean we stop having to be mindful of others. It's just one more tool in your toolbox if it makes sense for you, your group, and your game. If it's used as "now we have this so we don't have to worry about hurting others anymore", that can be very problematic.

I think another part of safety that is key is setting expectations and communicating clearly. If you know your game will involve excessive gore and sexual assault, it is important to state that up front so people have the info they need to opt in or out of your game.

Recently a friend brought up that Veils make them feel unsafe. This was the first time I encountered this, but I'm glad I listened, as they had important things to say. For them, techniques like the Veil or even the X-Card sound like a way to prioritize "keeping the game moving" rather than "attending to the needs of the person who's been triggered. In some extreme cases, when someone is triggered, it is already too late. Then it's not about editing, it's about helping people.

People are more important than games and the X-Card shouldn't be used to "get past" issues as much as to keep issues for escalating (when possible).

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## Does it create unintended behavior?

The X-Card sometimes leads to more intense play. People know they have a communication tool if things go too far, so they may feel more comfortable going farther than they normally would. We've rarely seen this happen in actual play but it's a possibility so we feel it's important to note it just in case.

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## Do shy people use the X-Card?

This is a question often asked.

We've seen people who are shy use the X-Card but some people may need extra encouragement.

I find less confident players will put their finger on the X-Card instead of picking it up. Having how we interact with the X-Card be flexible is paramount. Do what is easiest for those participating. One size does not fit all. Customize for your group. System matters. But people matter more..

One thing I do, to help with empowerment, is to demystify. I will use the X-Card on myself. In rare occasions I will ask a friend to use it on me. And I will often move the X-Card closer to less confident players.

One thing I've sometime done as well... take a break in the middle. Ask players to privately write down 1 thing they want in the game, 1 thing they want more, and 1 thing they don't want.

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## Does the X-Card work outside the US?

As with most things, it depends. I've seen the X-Card used in the UK, Germany, Canada, and Spain. But the world is a big place with many different people, needs, and cultures. One size does not fit all. Use the tool that is best for you and let us know what that is in case it's also useful for others!

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## What is the O-Card?

The **O-Card** is an X-Card with an **X** on one side and an **O** on the other!

The O-Card was invented by Kira Scott so that players who want **more** of specific content can tap the **O** instead of the **X** to tell the other players, "more of this!"

Read more about the O-Card here:

<http://www.gamingaswomen.com/posts/2013/01/finding-my-o-with-the-x-card/>

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## Who created the X-Card?

John Stavropoulos

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## Contact:

john@jstav.com

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## Links:

X-Card - How To - Part 1:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTlxi9O0o9w>

X-Card - How To - Part 2:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYrOzBP0YY4>

What is the X-Card and the X-Card talk:

<http://www.blubrry.com/tjigencon/1496878/this-just-in-from-clyde-an-interview-with-john-stavropoulos-of-nerdnyc/>

X-Card interview: <http://media.blubrry.com/tjigencon/thisjustinfromgencon.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/TJI-Clyde-John-Stav-Interview-Final.mp3>

Questions about the X-Card:

<http://story-games.com/forums/discussion/18533/using-the-x-card/>

Emotions & Safety:

<http://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=339>

How the X-Card makes a game safer even if you don't have to use it:<http://www.gamingaswomen.com/posts/2013/01/finding-my-o-with-the-x-card/>

X-Cards are X-cellent:

<http://www.thoughtcrimegames.net/x-cards-are-x-cellent/>

Rob Donoghue on X-Cards:

<https://plus.google.com/104915224203075819082/posts/4J3vxwAvhpS>

Blog Posts:

<http://geekthis.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-x-card.html>

Link to this document:

<http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>