How to Run Safer, Accessible, and Inclusive Game Conventions

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Short URL: http://tinyurl.com/run-safer-cons or http://tinyurl.com/safercons

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What is This?

"How can we help make game conventions safer?"

This is a question people often ask me. Why me? I've helped organize over 30 live gaming events for 1,000s or people which has given me plenty of opportunity to experiment with what works and what doesn't (depending on your goals and audience).

I then realized I'm creating a bottleneck for this information. I want this information to be accessible and give you more tools and options to choose from when designing your own game convention experiences. So I searched for the various answers I've given and compiled them here.

How To Use
This document is not in any specific order. Check out the above Table of Contents. Browse, pick, and choose what is useful to you.

Disclaimer
These are not rules. These are simply suggestions based on extensive personal experience co-running events. What will work for you depends on your specific circumstances, goals, audience, challenges, and needs. This isn't a self-help guide to discovering the One True Way to do something. Find what works best for your needs. One size does not fit all.

Additionally this is not a complete document with all the answers. There is key information that I would like to add one day but that I don't have much experience with. For example, childcare. Where possible I'm restricting the information shared here to topics I have direct experience with.

My Bias
All of the events I've run have been in the United States of America. Culture matters. There are specific cultural considerations and biases that likely influence many of these ideas. What makes sense here may not make sense somewhere else. That doesn't mean we can't learn from each other or that certain ideas aren't potentially broadly relevant. But I want to own these biases and be clear about them so you can better decide what makes sense for you and your events.

Additionally, some of this advice is specific to Tabletop RPGs. For example, while X-Cards can be useful for certain Tabletop RPGs, they are much less useful for LARP.

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Expectations

Be Clear: What is this? Who it is for? Who it is not for?

Set clear expectations for your events so people can opt out if it isn't something they want to play. I've found people want to know:
• competitive vs. cooperative
• rules taught (and if so, how long) or you need to know the rules before playing
• how random
• how strategic
• how long
• how many players
• silly or serious

And when someone sits down to game, go over this again! Even if you posted it. Many people don't read so don't assume they even know what they are sitting down to play. Go over it again. Let people know if this is not the game for them, no problem, they don't have to play, they still have time to find something else, and we would rather they play something they are excited to play than suffer something that isn't a good match for them.

What if this game could be anything, for example Silly or Serious?

I'd advise either picking one and set that expectations or come together with the group and pick tones and/or boundaries together. I've personally found, especially at game conventions, that if we let things like tone just organically evolve, people may contradict, feel uncomfortable, and often not say anything about their discomfort because they don't want to be seen as inflexible. I've seen many GMs hold up "figure it out as we play" flexibility as a virtue but it my extensive experience I've personally found this to be more a problem than a benefit. That said, it is possible that a game could go in a different direction that what you expected in problematic or amazing ways. Be aware and either refocus the game or go with it. If you are unsure what to do, be transparent and talk with everyone involved. And especially be aware that even though a game may have a silly tone, it can still end up having unexpected serious or challenging content.

Safety

Safe Space - Safe for Who?

A Safe Space is NOT Safe for everyone.
Is it Safe for Jerks? Racists? Homophobes?

It is Safe for those who like the rules and environment we are trying to create.
If someone disrespects or tries to break that environment, we will tell them to leave.
A Safe Space is NOT Safe for everyone.

Safe Space vs. Safer Space
There is debate whether Safe Spaces should be called Safe or Saf**er** Spaces.Generally Safe Space is seemingly a widely recognized phrase and thus has value in quickly communicating what a space is. That said, it is important to remember that we can't make a space 100% safe 100% of the time but we can do everything we can to make it safer.

Safe Space may also create a sense of entitlement. "You advertised Safe, I expect 100% Safe!" We don't live in a safe world but we can try to help each other have a better chance of making something safer for as many of us as possible. We can do our best but there are no absolute guarantees. That said, it's up to you which phrase you prefer: Safer Space or Safe Space. Both have pros and cons.

X-Card

What is the X-Card?
Lots of info here: http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg

Where the X-Card is Great
The X-Card talk is more useful that the X-Card itself.
It's about setting clear expectations (the people playing are more important than the game and we all need to come together to make this a good experience for everyone involved).

The X-Card is also GREAT for modeling behavior.

Some people want to treat things like the X-Card as tools of last resort, like something sacred, but that can lead to increased chances of failure. I will use the X-Card often… even on myself as fast as possible… to model the behavior I want from others and to demystify it and make it feel like no big deal.

Where the X-Card may Fail
Sometimes a person will bring the X-Card to the table with good intentions but they themselves are very flexible to what kind of behavior is ok at the table. Then you might get a table which is mostly ok with certain behavior that makes one of the players very uncomfortable. The X-Card is great when it's about correcting a few instances of miscommunication or getting away from material that is relatively hurtful to those playing. But when the majority of the group wants to play a certain way and one person doesn't… then the person who feels uncomfortable may start

to weigh their options… what is more comfortable? Leaving? Bearing the behavior? Or outing themselves as the minority every time they use the X-Card? This is a tricky situation.

It is important to note that tools like the X-Card are not a replacement for conversation. We encourage you to discuss issues and work together to find solutions where appropriate. And just because an X-Card is on the table doesn't mean you can't discuss issues or have to use it. It is only an option. But if someone does use the X-Card and doesn't want to discuss their discomfort, please respect their wishes.

"But You didn't use the X-Card"

Sometimes you realize something bothered you about a game after the game is over. Just because an X-Card was on the table does not mean you can't discuss problematic after the game. *"But you didn't use the X-Card"* isn't a valid criticism for shutting down conversations. Listen to your fellow player's concerns.

Safety in LARP

While X-Cards can be useful for Tabletop RPGs, they can be impractical for other types of games including LARPs. For safe words and other safety techniques specific to LARP, I recommend this resource:

- Safewords: http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Safewords

- A Primer on Safety in RPGs: http://leavingmundania.com/2014/02/27/primer-safety-in-roleplaying-games/

Aggressive Behavior

Micro-Aggression vs. Outright-Aggression

Outright-Aggression can be reasonably easy (or easier) to deal with. One person says an obvious racist word. Someone says, hey, that's not cool. If they do it again, you tell them to leave.

But what about Micro-Aggression?

Constant subtle sexist remarks hidden inside humor with just enough of a plausible out that they can claim innocence and might make you feel bad for even saying anything. This is why it isn't enough to say WHAT NOT TO DO, it can also be helpful to state WHAT TO DO or what environment you want which strict rules of what not to do may not capture.

This is why having a Code of Conduct AND an Anti-Harassment Policy can be very useful (or combine the two). Say what not to do AND what TO DO.

Design Your Event

Write Rules

List the common behaviors you see you don't want.
Think about the people who have been problematic.
List what makes them problematic.
Think about the people who are awesome.
List what makes them awesome.
Write rules from these lists.
Alternatively, don't call these RULES, call them NORMS. In other words, expected behavior and not limits to be tested.

Don't be Afraid to Scare People Away

A lot of this, especially the rules we publish, and the code of conduct we advertise… are both marketing and ANTI-marketing. How? They sets clear expectations of who may or may not enjoy your event. If the idea of an X-Card is important to you (and it may not be, which is cool) but advertising its use would keep people who don't like that sort of tool away… then you both win. By being up front, you minimize people going into an event thinking it is one thing but is actually another. That is neither a good or bad thing. It's not about objective values of judgement. It's a question of compatibility and giving people enough information to opt in or out.

Balance Positive vs. Negative

If you go to a restaurant that says "No Spitting", immediately many people think, "wow, I guess someone spit here". Sometimes our rules paint us as being a place full of problems. Not the best marketing! So mix up the positives and negatives. If you can, start with positives and end with positives. Or make it positive by making clear how proactive we are in helping improve problematic situations. Emphasize that problems can happen but we are prepared to act fast. Also if people love spitting in your restaurant, maybe it's best to own that than pretend it isn't happening. It's negative to be perceived as hiding the truth or covering things up. Honesty and admitting mistakes and stating how you will change are all potentially positive things.

Alternatively you can say, "everyone at the restaurant is entitled to a clean, hygienic environment" and most people will nod their heads in agreement and rules like "no spitting" are implied by this.

To make the Rule Documents feel more personal and connect with people directly, you can include a personal greetings from the host to the attendees. Something to identify that these are not simply a list of rules with no context, but a conversation between everyone at the con about

how to make it a better place. Here's an example from Big Bad Con:
http://www.bigbadcon.com/code-of-conduct/

Policy Visibility

Rules, Policies, Codes of Conduct are only as good as they are accessible. This is why rules hidden inside GM textbooks that most will rarely see are much less valuable than rules printed on our character sheets. So we post our Rules on every single gaming table… right in the middle!

Get Feedback

Have a clear anonymous way to get feedback from participants, especially those who are having issues. Encourage them to state what the problems might be and why.

Dealing with Problematic People

Are they actually Problematic?

In my experiences, which may be different than yours, many people who seem to act problematically may not be doing so on purpose. Often the problem isn't about any specific individual but miscommunication and failure to set expectations of what we are doing, who this is for, who this is not for, what behavior is ok, and what behavior is not ok. It might simply be a mismatch of goals and a misunderstanding of what the game or event is.

Often when we take a break to clarify what a game or event is or isn't, the seemingly problematic person will stop or opt out of the event.

That said, sometimes people are purposefully problematic and we discuss here what you can do about it (see **How to Ask People to Leave**).

Or someone might be problematic without intending to do so. Maybe their actions for example are internalized sexism or racism from their larger culture that they don't consciously realize how they are hurting other people. In these cases see **Expectations**, **X-Card**, and **How To Tell Someone They Sound Racist**.

Empowering Organizers

Go over all this with your organizers, volunteers, and people who run games. Make them feel valuable. Make them valuable! Empower them! Listen to them! Train them!

It's not enough to just have rules. Roleplay out the situations with everyone involved. Model the behaviors you want. Help people feel prepared. I say feel because you may know what to do,

but if you aren't also emotionally prepared you may hesitate. Practice and repetition helps. We're roleplayers! Roleplay!

Tolerating One Person May Mean Ostracizing Five Others

Organizers sometimes worry or feel bad calling out a person for problematic behavior. People who have been ostracized themselves may feel bad about ostracizing others (or simply want to avoid conflict). But do the math... if I am at a table with six players… and one is being problematic… by not stopping that one person… we may inadvertently and unintentionally ostracize 5 other people. To be clear, their behavior is NOT our fault. This isn't about blame but simply trying to make the best out of a difficult situation.

How To Ask People to Leave

Train your staff on what to do when problems arise. For example, I will let the staff or game organizers know they are empowered to take certain actions, what those actions are, and how to enact them. If they don't feel comfortable, then we tell them clearly who they can go to for help. But when they do take action, we instruct them on certain key behaviors. For example:

- Call for a break.
- Talk to the person away from the table (so they feel less defensive) but still in public (so they feel safer).
- Don't assume they are being a jerk on purpose.
- Don't make it personal.
- Assume it may be a miscommunication or a clash of goals/styles.
- Say, "I noticed X is happening and I wanted to talk to you about it away from everyone else. Is everything ok? Is there something I can do to help? Are you having fun?"
- If it becomes clear that it is NOT a miscommunication, then point to the code of conduct or rules posted everywhere and ask them to stop doing that specific thing or if they want, they can leave.
- If they want another chance, don't just tell them what not to do, recommend alternative things they could do that would best fit with the group and event.

How To Tell Someone They Sound Racist

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0Ti-gkJiXc

Legal

Know your legal and contractual responsibilities

What are the laws in your state/country/province/area? What are the rules as defined by any contracts you may have signed with your insurance or the space you are renting? All of this is hyper specific to your specific circumstances. Research and become knowledgeable. Maybe

your specific details require that if your event is of a certain size you need security or permits or staff with specific types of training. Find out and fulfill your obligations.

What if someone is accused of allegedly committing a crime?
Specifically situations where another human being is allegedly victimized as part of that crime... but nothing has been proved (yet)?

1. I assume the victim is telling the truth and try to get them whatever help they ask for (call people or organizations for them, escort them to safe place of their choosing, get them food and water, listen to them, be kind).

2. I assume the alleged is innocent until proven guilty (within limits, see below). Which means while I will treat the victim as they are telling the truth and help them, I won't treat the alleged as if they committed a crime when they haven't been proven guilty. But I WILL NEVER treat the victim like a liar AT ALL.

3. The above seemingly contradict. But it's the fairest thing I've seen done in these situations.

4. I keep my biases in check. It can be easier to assume guilt or innocence when those assumptions also match your pre-existing biases. This isn't about me. This isn't about what I believe. I will check my biases. One way to do this is to get different people involved, especially people who are different from you (gender, sex, race, class, age) to keep each other's biases in check where possible.

5. Where legally and ethically possible, record everything you can. Keep accurate records of what is happening. Have witnesses. Have multiple recorded accounts. Try to be as objective as possible.

6. Even if you can't prove that someone allegedly did or did not do something, keep records. Let your organizers and staff know what is happening. Keep an eye out for patterns. Record everything. Even if you can't prove someone did X specific thing, if you find that they keep causing problems or make people repeatedly feel uncomfortable, that alone may be something you may want to address as soon as possible. Often private events will have a rule that says you can remove anyone from an event for any reason. If someone is making people feel uncomfortable, consider exercising that right.

Alcohol

Is alcohol allowed at your event? Are there any rules governing the use of alcohol?

Harassment
Some accusations of harassment at conventions sometimes happen outside or around the convention (rather than in the convention itself, although that also happens) and are sometimes connected with abuse of alcohol. It's often not alcohol itself that is the problem but people's behavior around alcohol.

Safety
Additionally some people feel unsafe around those drinking heavily. Some events that allow alcohol also provide alcohol free areas. While others may feel unwelcome if no alcohol is allowed. Many people come from cultures where drinking at events is normal and it's strange not to allow alcohol.

Clear Rules
No matter what you decide, have a clear alcohol policy so people know what is or is not allowed so they can opt in or out. Also note, there is a big difference between responsibly drinking and drunkenness or inappropriate behavior. Even if you allow alcohol, you can have rules against specific behaviors associated with alcohol. It's often drunken behavior that you specifically want to target or avoid.

Policies

Why are Anti-Harassment Policies Important?
There are people who believe Anti-Harassment policies are a waste of time.
Why? Some examples include:

1. This is all common sense.

2. The local laws already cover many of these situations.

3. You are scaring people away with too much negativity.

There are many more examples but let me address these as they are common:

1. Common sense isn't as common as believed. And often people don't actually agree on what the sense that is supposed to be common actually is. Statements like "simply don't be dick" aren't very useful as often people who are being problematic don't realize what they are doing is problematic to begin with. Many of the solutions in this document are about clear communication. Instead of making assumptions and blindly hoping for the best… figure out what you want, what you don't want… and tell people that. Even better, make accepting these terms a requirement of entry making it even clearer what this is or isn't so people who don't agree can opt out. Additionally, the way you want to run your

event may not be how others want to run theirs. Maybe what you want goes beyond common sense or even conflicts with common sense (after all, plenty of sexism and racism is common). Be clear.

2. On a purely practical level, different states, provinces, and countries have different laws. Many conventions have people traveling to them from all over the world. What is true legally where you come from may not be true here. That isn't a value judgement, simply a practical concern. I prefer to be as accessible and upfront as possible to avoid potential problems before they happen. Rules and laws are as much about punishing specific behavior as they are about influencing behavior before it happens. But if you don't know what the rules and laws are, then they won't be effective at influencing behavior. They could still be useful in punishing behavior after the fact, but then the damage has already been done. Plus a lot of harassment that happens at various conventions can be hard to prove. Additionally, I find it personally unfair to put most of the responsibility on the people who have been hurt to take action after they've been hurt. I'd rather do everything I reasonably can to enact preventative measures. And we know preventive measures work. Simply look at home security. Homes that have signs that advertise their security systems are known to greatly lower the likelihood that a criminal will rob that house. Communication matters.

3. Regarding scaring people away with too much negativity, see **Balancing Positive vs. Negative** above.

Reacting Negatively to The Name

We've seen people react negatively to policies called **Anti-Harassment** but positively to the same exact policies but renamed **Community Standards**. Something to consider.

Example Anti-Harassment Policy

Here is what we posted to every gaming table at Gen Con 2013 (Games on Demand):

HAVE AN EMERGENCY?
• Call 911, then contact event security at [NUMBER]

NEED HELP?
• Talk to your GM or the Host at the front registration desk.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY:
• All Gen Con rules are still in effect.
• In order to keep GAMES ON DEMAND a safe and successful event, attendees must assume some additional responsibility. When you play with us, you hereby agree to the stuff below.

YOU WILL BE ASKED TO LEAVE WITHOUT WARNING OR REFUND IF YOU:
• Harass anyone - physically, verbally, emotionally or any other way
• Behave in an aggressive, argumentative, racist, sexist, and/or homophobic way
• Mess with other people's stuff

• Take pictures of anyone without permission (we have a staff photographer you may see)

YOU WILL BE CONSIDERED AWESOME AND VERY WELCOME IF YOU:
• Don't act like a jerk
• Share the spotlight and help others have fun
• Embrace a game's theme and tone
• Step away from the table if you need to use your phone or eat
• Don't use "it's what my character would do" as an excuse
• Don't use "it's just a joke" as an excuse
• Call out cheating, rules lawyering and other fun-killing behavior
• Clean up after yourself and help us keep the space tidy

LIABILITY:
• GAMES ON DEMAND organizers, volunteers, and sponsors will not be held liable for any damage to or loss of personal items, and any personal injury that transpires during or on the premises of this event.
• The aforementioned parties will not be held liable for punitive, incidental, consequential or special damages whether or not such damages could have been foreseen and/or prevented.

Alternative Example Policies:
Indie Plus Community Standards:http://goo.gl/8hDKNu

Accessibility

The Accessibility Challenge
We understand that many gaming conventions are severely limited by finances, facilities, and volunteer staff and often barely have enough resources to make the bare minimum even happen. So many conventions don't even consider accessibility. But for many attendees accessibility is not a bonus but a necessity. We are not asking for or expecting the impossible, only that everyone really do what they can. And while you may not be able to make every aspect of your convention accessible, there are easy steps most people can take.

At Minimum Offer or Make Available:
- Information (including limitations) of what is or is not accessible at your event
- Obstacle free spaces
- Large fonts and large sized print on any signs or important documents
- Optional opens spaces away from crowding and congestion
- Well lit areas
- Staff easily accessible to provide special assistance if needed

- Options for people with special needs to skip lines

If Possible Offer or Make Available:
- Wheelchair accessible spaces, tables, and entrances
- Accessible bathrooms
- Gender-neutral bathrooms
- Optional scent-free and quiet spaces
- Lower financial barriers for marginalized participants
- Accessible public transportation between spaces
- ADA-compliant hotels
- Hotel rooms with lowered door handles and light switches
- Wheelchair accessible showers
- Elevators with tactile and/or Braille buttons at wheelchair height
- Minimal travel between disabled parking spaces and key event spaces
- Step railings
- Staff with disability awareness training
- Registration where participants indicate accessibility, dietary requirements or allergies
- Information on local emergency services
- Sign language interpretation for important verbal presentations
- Closed-captioned TVs
- Areas free of fluorescent lighting, strobe lighting, and black lights
- Wheelchair accessible space that is not on the outskirts of your event
- Any extra time necessary to move from one event to another
- Dog Runs for guide dogs
- Alternative emergency devices such as visual alarms
- An available Text Telephone.
- Text available in alternative formats (Braille, large print, electronic speech to text formats)
- Spaces with minimal background noise

Childcare

Something We Don't Know Enough About
Childcare is something we've had potential participants ask for and indicated was the single most important factor in determining their ability to attend an event. This is also something that we have no experience with unlike the other topics discussed in this document. We feel it is important to only talk about topics with which we have experience and this is something we are looking into. As we know more, and as we build experience, we will add information to this document. In the meantime we want to be as upfront and honest as possible about what we do and don't know.

Reasons we've been Unable to Provide Childcare
The major reasons we've been unable to provide childcare at our events is a lack of resources which is highly dependent on where you live and your local laws and requirements. In NYC you may need special insurance policies that might require spaces with window guards, security, permits, staff trained in childcare and CPR, emergency medical supplies, and much more. In other locations the requirements may be easier or more affordable to access. This is something that if we do, we want to make sure we do absolutely correct with all requirements met and with staff that can provide the services to make childcare a safe option for our attendees. That all said, we know other events that do provide childcare and we will try to reach out to them to see if they have any advice.

Inclusivity

Credit
The options below are primarily paraphrased from Kira Magrann's excellent essay:
- http://www.gamingaswomen.com/posts/2013/05/gender-inclusiveness-at-gaming-events

What Does Diverse People Mean?
It depends on your specific organization, culture, and circumstances. Do you equally hire, feature, and empower people of all genders? What about people of a variety of ages, races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, economic status, social status, and educational status? What about LGBTQ people? What about people with disabilities?

Tactics for Inclusiveness
- Recruit and hire diverse people in your organization.
- Give them power, responsibility, and credit
- Spotlight them. Do not hide them. Feature diverse people in your art, signage, promotions, on your leadership teams, and in your outward facing teams dealing with the world. Make them visible.
- Hire diverse AND skilled people. Do not just hire for diversity.
- Do not just give diverse people agency over topics of diversity. Give them visibility, power, responsibility, and credit in a wide variety of meaningful and important areas in your organization. Do not simply hire a token diverse person and relegate them to only token topics dealing only with diversity. Do not use diverse people as a form of marketing.
- Reach out to diverse people in your community and personally invite them.
- Having trouble finding people? Recruit diverse people from adjacent communities.

- Welcome new people and offer games that are accessible to new players.
- Having trouble finding people with experience? Offer to mentor new people.
- Reduce or eliminate antagonism toward diverse elements in your games. Don't just offer straight white male characters as options to play in games. Don't just feature art that's exclusively white male characters. Don't just include diverse people as stereotypes or simply tools with no agency to further the stories of the non-diverse main characters.
- Play games that are actively and intentionally more inclusive.
- Play games that are created by diverse people.
- Intervene when you see bad behavior even when it's not directed at you.
- Focus on community building. Dinners, picnics, get-togethers outside of gaming events.
- Reduce financial barriers for less financially privileged people.
- Have an anti-harassment policy that is visible, enforced, and have all the organizers understand how it works.
- Don't erase our differences. There is an understandable temptation that by erasing differences you are increasing inclusivity. But when you erase differences, people tend to make assumptions. People tend to default to whatever is the default in the status. In the United States, when you erase, many people assume the default of white straight male. Don't erase differences.
- Treat everyone fairly and equally despite differences. Don't exotify differences.