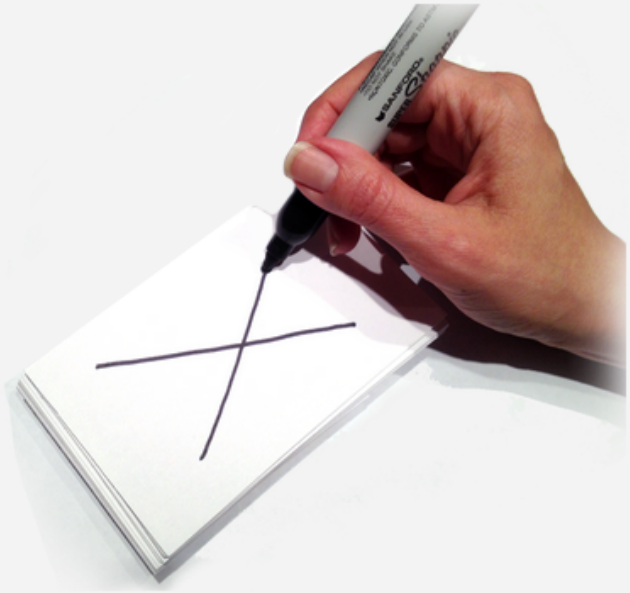
X-Card



Safety Tools for Simulations and Role-Playing Games

by John Stavropoulos

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LATEST UPDATES
We've learned a lot about the X-Card since this original document was published.
Read the latest information on how to use the X-Card here.

WHAT IS THE X-CARD?
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 THE X-CARD, 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 help take care of myself.* **[pause]** *Does everyone consent to using the X-Card?* **[pause]** *Or is there another tool you would rather use?* **[pause]** *Either way, the people playing here are more important than the game we're playing. Thank you for helping make this game fun for everyone!"*

LATEST UPDATES (see next page):

LATEST UPDATES

1. Ask players for enthusiastic consent to use the X-Card in your game. If players don't enthusiastically consent, ask them if they have a different tool they would prefer to use. If consent isn't possible for practical reasons, make it clear what tools you are using in advance.
2. The X-Card doesn't work for everyone. The TTRPG Safety Toolkit contains other tools that may better fit your needs.
3. The X-Card is specifically an opt out tool you can use while playing but that doesn't mean players have opted into everything else. We recommend that before playing, discuss the game's content and ask players for enthusiastic consent. Don't know how? See the excellent Consent in Gaming.
4. The X-Card introduction speech above can be more useful than 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.
5. Use the X-Card early, even on yourself, to lead by example, and model the behavior.
6. 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.
7. 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. The X-Card is optional.
8. 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.
9. Don't use the X-Card to push boundaries. It's not a Safe Word.
10. If you aren't sure what was X-Carded, call for a break and talk with the person in private.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. Use the X-Card for more than just triggers, so that you have more opportunities to practice, and don't unintentionally disclose a trigger you want kept private.r
14. One of the reasons the X-Card exists is because anything can be a trigger. Even fairly mundane things. Triggers are specific to each person's specific form of PTSD. My trauma around a horrible car accident isn't triggered by cars or accidents, but by specific types of snow storms. The X-Card itself could even be a trigger (anything can). For example, if someone has trauma related to gaslighting, the X-Card might remind them of trauma they experienced being told something that actually happened, never happened. This is why asking for enthusiastic consent before using the X-Card is important.
15. Consider upgrading the X-Card so that a person can also:
    - Flag: "I just want to note this is making me nervous."
    - Replace: "Instead of [content], I need it to be [content]."

CONTENTS

LATEST UPDATES

Want to use the X-Card in your game?

What is it?

Why use it?

How do you introduce it in a game?

Why do you use that introduction?

What's most important about the X-Card?

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

What things have you seen X-Carded?

Why not use Lines instead?

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

Triggers can be anything!

Using the X-Card for more than triggers?

Does the X-Card limit creativity?

Isn't this just common sense?

If we're using an X-Card, do I have to specifically use it?

What should I do if someone uses an X-Card?

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

Does the X-Card create unintended behavior?

What if someone feels anxious using the X-Card?

Does the X-Card work outside the U.S.?

Can I use different safety tools?

Can I use the X-Card with D&D?

Can I use the X-Card with online games?

What are common limitations of the X-Card?

Who created the X-Card?

Questions?

Where can I learn more?

- Other Safety Tools
- Online Play and Safety Tools
- YouTube Videos - How to Use the X-Card
- Limitations with the X-Card
- How to Use the X-Card
- Link to this Document

Want to use the X-Card in your game?

You can!

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

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 help make gaming with strangers fun, inclusive, and safe.

That said, what is fun, inclusive, and safe for different people is likely different. Don't assume, ask them what would help make this the best experience possible.

Why use it?

It can give everyone an easy out. An exit strategy. An easy way to say no without (or with less) peer pressure. Ideally, it means no one will question you for saying no. With no uncomfortable explanations needed, unless you want to discuss it.

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 your boundaries all the time. Maybe you aren't a persuasive or loud person. Maybe you don't want to be reminded of a previous painful experience. Maybe certain topics trigger past trauma which would make it so that you can no longer play.

Just having the X-Card present can increase 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**.

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 help take care of myself."

"Does everyone consent to using the X-Card?"

"Or is there another tool you would rather use?"

"Either way, the people playing here are more important than the game we're playing."

"Thank you for helping make this game fun for everyone!"

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.”***

You can explain why if you want to, but you don't have to. You don't have to debate your experiences and needs.

6. ***“It doesn't matter why.”***

No judgment. No questioning a person's boundaries.

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 help take care of myself."***

It’s not just about them, it’s also about me. We’re in this together. And it can take the edge off a potential serious topic. 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.

11. ***"Does everyone consent to using the X-Card?"***

Ask players for enthusiastic consent to use the X-Card in your game.

12. *"Or is there another tool you would rather use?"*

If players don't enthusiastically consent, ask them if they have a different tool they would prefer to use. The X-Card doesn't work for everyone. The TTRPG Safety Toolkit contains other tools that may better fit your needs.

Additionally, the X-Card is specifically an opt out tool you can use while playing but that doesn't mean players have opted into everything else. We recommend that before playing, discuss the game's content and ask players for enthusiastic consent. Don't know how? See the excellent Consent in Gaming.

13. *"Either way, the people playing here are more important than the game we're playing."*

Make it clear that ultimately the game comes second, people come first.

14. *"Thank you for helping make this game fun for everyone!"*

Reinforce that making the game a positive experience for everyone isn't just up to the game facilitator. Ideally, be enthusiastic and grateful for any help.

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 full service sex workers, ala a more open version of Grand Theft Auto... it is going to be a socially dysfunctional experience.

RPGs are limited by the tolerance and agreement of the group 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.**

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

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

If a person wants, they can explain if they want to.
But they shouldn't be pressured to do so or debated out of their boundaries.

What things have you seen X-Carded?

I've seen the X-Card used easily hundreds of times (I play 1,000s 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 and acted out plane turbulence. This started to activate a player and they were worried that a past trauma might be triggered. Luckily I stopped asap (we had to stop the game as well) and we did what we could to help the person in question.

Why not use Lines instead?

You can use both!

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

So why don't I personally 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 challenges 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, people can 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 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 to play.

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.

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:

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 any potentially sensitive topics before participants decide to play your game.

Using the X-Card for more than triggers?

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.

Generally, we've found the opposite to be true in our experience.

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 potentially better.

Does the X-Card limit 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 else's.

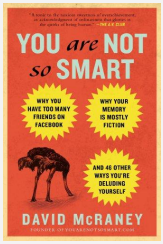
And often the opposite happens.

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.

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.

If we're using an X-Card, do I have to specifically use it?

No.

Do whatever works for you. If you would rather explain or talk through issues in the game, that is completely ok and up to you.

Regardless of what you decide for yourself, when someone else uses an X-Card, please respect their boundaries.

What should I do if someone uses an X-Card?

Thank them for setting a boundary and making the game experience better for them.

Do what you reasonably can to respect their boundaries.

If you have trouble remembering what was X-Card, privately write it down for yourself.

If you make a mistake, quickly apologize, and adapt accordingly.

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

X-Cards is not 100% effective. But neither is it typically 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 from escalating (when possible).

One of the reasons the X-Card exists is because anything can be a trigger. Even fairly mundane things. Triggers are specific to each person's specific form of PTSD. My trauma around a horrible car accident isn't triggered by cars or accidents, but by specific types of snow storms. The X-Card itself could even be a trigger (anything can). For example, if someone has trauma related to gaslighting, the X-Card might remind them of trauma they experienced being told something that actually happened, never happened. This is why asking for enthusiastic consent before using the X-Card is important.

Does the X-Card 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.

What if someone feels anxious using the X-Card?

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. On 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 sometimes 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.

Does the X-Card work outside the U.S.?

As with most things, it depends. I've seen the X-Card used in the UK, Ethiopia, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Greece, India, Japan, 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! That all being said, the X-Card doesn't even work for everyone in the U.S.! It depends. Don't assume, ask what would work best for everyone.

Can I use different safety tools?

Yes!

O-Card
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/114jRmhzBpdqkAlhmveis0nmW73qkAZCj
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 Magrann 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!"

TTRPG Safety Toolkit
https://t.co/gA6hV6VKqm
The ENnie winning TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a free resource collecting and making TTRPG safety/support tools easy to approach and use. Co-curated by @KiennaS and @jl_nicegirl.

Consent in Gaming
https://www.montecookgames.com/consent-in-gaming/
Whether it's body horror in a scary game, violence against children or animals in a fantasy world, flirty, romantic, or sexual relationships in any setting—or numerous other challenging scenarios—the line between fun and awkward, difficult, or downright unpleasant can be difficult to identify, and varies dramatically from player to player. Mature or controversial elements can and should be a part of many RPGs. But how do you know what topics to include or leave out of your games? How do you include potentially difficult elements while ensuring that nobody's game night is ruined? Consent in Gaming gives you the strategies you need to make sure everyone at the table has a great experience, even when the game goes in a challenging direction.

Can I use the X-Card with D&D?

Yes!

Sly Flourish
https://slyflourish.com/safety_tools.html
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjI-Dl0XJBU

Can I use the X-Card with online games?

Yes!

The Gauntlet: Using the X-Card for Online Play
https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com/tools-of-the-table.html

Implementing the X card in Roll20
https://technoskald.me/2018/12/26/implementing-the-x-card-in-roll20/

What are common limitations of the X-Card?

The following article does a fantastic job explaining challenges you may experience using the X-Card.

The Insufficiency of the X Card And Story Games Safety
https://www.gamedevblog.com/2019/11/the-insufficiency-of-the-x-card-and-story-games-safety.html

Who created the X-Card?

John Stavropoulos

Questions?

Email me at:
john@jstav.com

Where can I learn more?

Other Safety Tools

TTRPG Safety Toolkit
https://t.co/gA6hV6VKqm
The ENnie winning TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a free resource collecting and making TTRPG safety/support tools easy to approach and use. Co-curated by @KiennaS and @jl_nicegirl.

Consent in Gaming
https://www.montecookgames.com/consent-in-gaming/
Whether it's body horror in a scary game, violence against children or animals in a fantasy world, flirty, romantic, or sexual relationships in any setting—or numerous other challenging scenarios—the line between fun and awkward, difficult, or downright unpleasant can be difficult to identify, and varies dramatically from player to player. Mature or controversial elements can and should be a part of many RPGs. But how do you know what topics to include or leave out of your games? How do you include potentially difficult elements while ensuring that nobody's game night is ruined? Consent in Gaming gives you the strategies you need to make sure everyone at the table has a great experience, even when the game goes in a challenging direction.

Why I use a modified X Card for Tabletop RPG
https://medium.com/@aquarion/why-i-use-a-modified-x-card-for-tabletop-rpg-25e342be28c

D&D and Safety Tools

Sly Flourish
https://slyflourish.com/safety_tools.html
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjI-Dl0XJBU

Online Play and Safety Tools

The Gauntlet: Using the X-Card for Online Play
https://www.gauntlet-rpg.com/tools-of-the-table.html

Implementing the X card in Roll20
https://technoskald.me/2018/12/26/implementing-the-x-card-in-roll20/

YouTube Videos - How to Use the X-Card

What is the X-Card and how do you use it in a game?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6mscgiMO30

Guide to RPG Safety Tools
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFDbukm5zGI

Limitations with the X-Card

The Insufficiency of the X Card And Story Games Safety
https://www.gamedevblog.com/2019/11/the-insufficiency-of-the-x-card-and-story-games-safety.html

How to Use the X-Card

Geekdad
https://geekdad.com/2016/10/dd-for-young-dms-x-card/
For many veteran players, violence, gore, and the darkest of themes in RPGs are old hat. We know it's coming, we know we can overcome it, and it's often what drives us to adventure. But what if the details make your player uncomfortable? How do you know if you've gone too far with your table? Communication is what makes a story work. I'd like to introduce a tool to make your story phenomenal: The X-Card.

5 Reasons to Use The X-Card
https://www.highlevelgames.ca/blog/5-reasons-to-use-the-x-card

X-Cards W/Alex Roberts
https://gnomestew.com/x-cards-w-alex-roberts/

X-Card: Your Gaming Ring of Protection
https://geekinitiative.com/x-card-your-gaming-ring-of-protection/

Link to this Document

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