Forest City Comicon 2019- Too Many RPGs Audio | Safety Toolkit Convention Panel

**Lauren Bryant-Monk**: Hello, and welcome to ***Too Many RPGs***, normally a show about RPG shows. I’m Lauren.

**Ethan Hudgens**: And I’m Ethan. Today, we’re listening to a convention panel that Lauren and expert-emeritus, Kienna, were on. It’s on a topic that is incredibly important to the tabletop RPG community, so they thought we should try to share to as many people as possible.

**Lauren**: Yeah, so, the first weekend in June, Kienna and I did a panel called ***Beyond the X Card*** about using safety tools in tabletop RPGs at Forest City Comicon in London, Ontario. That was my local convention, where I actually started playing tabletop roleplaying games, not for the first time, but after a very, very long hiatus. And, as I’ve been involved in the community, it’s been really exciting to see it grow and move towards safety tools.

I’m not able to be as involved as I used to be, so I haven’t been there to kind of start the conversations, but when I came back a couple years ago for an event, it was really cool to just all of a sudden see somebody put an X-Card on our table for us to use. And then the next year at the convention, they had a sheet on all of the gaming tables with an X-Card and also explaining the Open Door policy and I got really excited because I am a nerd and I’m really passionate and excited about safety and support tools in tabletop gaming.

And so this year, I called Kienna, who is also very passionate about safety tools and spreading them among the community, about doing a panel specifically for this community that I started in, that had just started to use safety tools. And from the chatter I heard in the past couple years, people didn’t really understand what it was for or how to use them effectively. And so what I wanted to do with this panel was introduce them to more safety tools because one of the important things about safety tools is that there’s no one tool that works for everybody. So just giving people more options.

And also talking about something that we don’t really talk about a lot, or we’re starting to talk about more in the discussion of safety tools, is how to foster an environment and a sense comfort at the table so that people feel like they are able to use safety tools at all. Because sometimes, especially in convention situations, there may be a situation where somebody is uncomfortable but feels like playing an X-Card or using a safety tool would make things worse, and we wanted to avoid that. And so that’s kind of what we focused the panel on.

And in conjunction with this, we released the ***Tabletop RPG Safety Toolkit***. That’s been going around Twitter, so if you’re on Twitter, you might have seen that.

**Ethan**: You can find it at [bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/114jRmhzBpdqkAlhmveis0nmW73qkAZCj).

**Lauren**: Yes! And that includes a revamped version of what Kienna had released as the ***Tabletop RPG Streaming Safety Toolkit Quick Reference Guide***, I think was what it was called. But this time, it was not just focused on streaming, it was focused on all tabletop experiences as well as some X, N, and O-Cards.

And just, we are trying to compile as many safety tools as we can into one place. You know, because the quick reference guide can only be so many pages, we wanted to throw in some of the safety tools that maybe didn’t get into the quick reference guide but were still important. We just wanted to have a centralized place because there aren’t a lot of centralized spaces for things like safety tools in the gaming community yet. So we just wanted to just have a place where you could find everything all in one place.

So without further ado, here is ***Beyond the X-Card***!

**Lauren**: Hello! Welcome to ***Beyond the X-Card: An Exploration of Safety Tools in Tabletop Roleplaying Games***. My name is Lauren Bryant-Monk.

**Kienna Shaw**: I’m Kienna Shaw.

**Lauren**: We are both Tabletop RPG streamers and game designers and scholars, I guess?

**Kienna**: Yeah, we spend a lot of time playing games and thinking about them and researching them and looking at how to make the space a better place for everybody. Yeah, so we have a big expertise in safety tools. We help to advocate for them in both offline and online play and making sure that people are having fun.

**Lauren**: Yeah! So as this came up as we were waiting: what exactly are safety tools? Are they, you know, the safety goggles you wear as you’re rolling your dice in case they get in your eye? That’s not what they are.

**Kienna**: I hope that you’re not rolling your dice that hard.

**Lauren**: Although you gotta be careful with those metal dice, they are sharp.

**Kienna**: They are sharp.

**Lauren**: So, from the quick reference guide, essentially sometimes games will have content or situations where a player at the table feels stressed out, unsafe, or some subject matter has come up that makes them feel uncomfortable, or just lessens their ability to have fun. And safety tools are a way for players and GMs to communicate with each other before, during, and after the game to make sure everyone is feeling safe, everyone is having fun. And if somebody needs support, there are the tools to have support.

Sometimes safety tools will be called ‘support tools’ because it kind of goes beyond just emotional safety. Because sometimes there’s content that isn’t necessarily emotionally triggering, but it just might make you really, really sad. And if you’re having a bad day to begin with, if something really sad happens in the game, that can have a really bad effect on you. And so the tools are there to kind of help support you through that and figure out exactly what you need to be able to have a good time.

**Kienna**: Yeah, and the idea is that these are not meant to censor games. There’s a lot of misinterpretation. It’s like “Oh, we can’t have any of these violence or whatever else,” it’s like no, it’s saying “Here are the boundaries of the people at the table and we’re going to respect them and make sure that, no matter what’s happening to the characters, you as the player outside of the game, are still having fun and are still engaging with the content,” and are still being like “Yes I’m enjoying playing this game,” because why play a game if you’re not having fun or having some form of satisfaction out of the experience?

**Lauren**: Yeah, Kienna brought a really good point of the term “boundaries.” And that’s what safety tools or support tools are. It’s just a fancy word for the boundaries that you set at the table with your players, in the same way that we have personal boundaries, that, maybe you just don’t go up and hug a stranger when you meet them for the first time because you don’t know if they’re comfortable, you say “Hey, can I shake your hand,” or “Hey, do you like hugs?” and then the person will respond. That is a kind of physical, social support tool to figure out how comfortable people are with personal contact before you kind of just go and hug people without their content.

**Kienna**: And we see boundaries set in content all the time, with ratings on games or on movies. You know what you’re going into on a kind of expectation, of like “Okay, PG-13. I know that there’s not going to be incredibly gory violence.” And if that’s something I’m not into, cool, I know PG-13’s safe, and maybe an R-rating, not so much. It’s kind of just a way of establishing or formalizing communication, and formalizing that yes, this is a place where we can easily discuss and make sure that everyone understands and respects our personal boundaries.

**Lauren**: So yeah. The biggest question, we talked about “why?” Why are we using safety tools? And it’s because the people who are playing the game are more important than the game itself. Yes. Absolutely. Because so when we’re talking about these tabletop roleplaying games, often they’re very long, sweeping narratives. A game like D&D, you will often have a DM who has spent hours probably crafting this story, and players who spend hours creating these characters that are really important to them and have arcs that they want to take them on, and sometimes the story can get away from the players and things that will happen that are important and make sense for the characters or for the story, might make the players feel uncomfortable. And that’s not okay. So safety tools are a way of saying “Okay. We can tell a really good story, but we have to all be on board with this story. And we’re mot allowed to make anybody uncomfortable for the sake of the story.” Because without the players, there’s no game.

**Kienna**: Yes, and people are people, and you want to respect people. You have to say “Yeah, we have the story, but the people, again, make the game.” There’s people that are part of it and they’re the most important element because if you’re the DM or a Game Master with a game and no players, you’re just an author.

**Lauren**: You’re just writing a book.

**Kienna**: You’re just writing a book at that point. There’s that whole element.

**Lauren**: And so even if, in a situation you don’t need to use a safety tool, and a lot of the times, like any kind of safety tool, like a lifejacket or safety goggles in carpentry, you hope we don’t need to use them but they’re there just in case. And so by even making them available and talking about the fact that they are available, it signals to your players that you care about them more than you care about your story, more than you care about the game, and you care about their safety as people.

**Kienna**: I mean, it’s one of those things of like, think of it like a circus act, like a trapeze act. You always have the safety net there, you hope to god you’ll never have to use it and hope that everything plays off, but in case something happens, I’d rather the safety net be there than not and have to clean up the mess afterwards. And so that’s kind of what this is, and so having that discussion about whether you need safety tools at the table is actually a form of safety communication. It’s a way of saying “Yes, we all are on board and okay with not having to use these formalized tools,” and that’s totally fine. Because sometimes you’re very comfortable with your group and that’s not something that you feel like you need. But having that discussion is probably the most important idea of like “I care about you, I want to make sure you’re find throughout this game. We have open communication and that’s great and we’ll be fine.”

**Lauren**: and it’s also very important for situations like today, if you’ve been upstairs to the gaming lounge, a lot of times, you’re playing D&D—it’s all D&D up there this year—you’re playing D&D with maybe people you’ve never met before and you don’t know what they’re like, you don’t know if they had a really bad day yesterday, or you know…

**Kienna**: Or if they have a personal boundary. You have no idea and so these can help establish those and get them out onto the table, and you can address them appropriately.

**Lauren**: Because everybody has different backgrounds and different cultures about what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable. And for the most part, you know, it’s all okay, but we’re creating in outside life but at the table we’re creating this social contract and so what may seem like common sense to you might be totally not common sense to somebody else.

**Kienna**: So that idea of common sense is not universal. And so by having tools or by having that process of communication helps to make sure everyone’s on the same table, on the same page so that way we don’t have instances of miscommunication or instances of accidental crossing of boundaries that you had no idea was a boundary but now you’ve crossed it and have to deal with the fall out versus you know, preventing it in the first place.

**Lauren**: Besides people thinking that safety tools are censorship tools, which we’ve already explained that we aren’t, the other thing that I will often hear is that “Oh I’ve been playing with this group for years, I know them really well, I don’t need to use a safety tool at this table.” But what’s really interesting about playing with people for so long is that you develop that sense of trust and so you’re more willing to push boundaries with story and explore content that might be uncomfortable because you trust them, because you know them, because you feel safe with them. And so having that extra layer of control over “Okay maybe this is too much for me,” or “I need to step back,” is really even more important when you’re playing with your friends than when you’re playing with total strangers, because the content that you’re going to explore with total strangers, for example romantic content, if you’re coming to a table where you’ve never met anybody before, you might not decide to start flirting with another player character. But if you’re playing with your friends that you’ve known for years then you think, “Okay maybe if our characters fall in love, that would be a really good story.” And that introduces a whole new level, potentially a whole new dynamic, in the relationship, like the friendship. And so having tools to check in and make sure everybody is okay is more important in that sense.

**Kienna**: And also there’s that idea of expectation when you’ve been playing with the same group for a very, very long time, sometimes there’s this kind of “I don’t want to budge the status quo, I don’t want to bother.” It’s just a formal usage of communication or conversation. It’s just a short form of “I need to take a break. I need to talk about this right now.”

**Lauren**: And so we avoid the “Everybody else was having fun so I didn’t say anything,” which you never want to do.

**Kienna**: Because then you’re putting your own emotional, mental wellbeing back, which is never a great thing because you want to make sure that you’re having fun.

**Lauren**: It should be all equal levels of enjoyment. Nobody’s fun takes precedence over the other one’s. It’s called ***Beyond the X-Card*** because the X-Card is generally what people consider to be a safety tool and it’s the one they use upstairs. There’s the X-Card and the open door policy. But there’s quite a lot more, so Kienna why don’t you kind of walk us though? Kienna wrote this beautiful safety toolkit reference guide that you have. Why don’t you walk us through the different kinds of tools?

**Kienna**: Yeah, so the idea is that a safety tool, like any form of tool, works for certain situations but not all. So we have the X-Card, which you’ve seen in the gaming lounge, which works very well for one specific kind of need, but not for all. And so the idea is that you want to have a toolkit and you want to have them all in your pocket so when you go into a game or a new group, or even an existing game that hasn’t has safety tools yet, so you can be like “Here are the different things that we could possibly use, let’s find the one that works for us best.”

So I created a quick reference guide because there is no centralized resource to kind of talk about all these tools. So I broke it down into a whole bunch of different things. We kind of covered the What are safety tools, and why we need to use them. But we also have, I’ve also broken down into different phases of the game. So the before the game, during the game, after game, because there are different safety tools for each thing and they all perform different purposes and stuff like that.

To do a very quick rundown, a lot of it is just underlining that this is a form of communication: a form of talking with your players, with your GM, with everyone else at the table and to discuss these types of safety things. And so at the very beginning of the game, before the game even begins, you have to sit down and you have to have a conversation about what you want out of this game. For example we could both go, I could say “I want to do a high-fantasy romance game,” and Lauren could go “No, I don’t want to do that.”

**Lauren**: I would never say that, but theoretically…

**Kienna**: But then we’d have to set that expectation and we could discuss “Okay, what do you want out of the game, what do I want out of the game, can we make it all work together?” And sometimes you can’t make it all work together and maybe you shouldn’t play this one singular game together when you have conflicting ideas of what you want out of it.

**Lauren**: Especially when you’re playing a game like Dungeons & Dragons which, you know, you’re all playing D&D but one D&D game can look totally different. *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* and *Curse of Strahd* are so wildly different that sometimes you don’t even think that they’re the same game. You talk about the three pillars: does somebody what a game where you just fight a lot of monsters, where they go through and they kill all the things and they are the big heroes, or does somebody want a game that has a lot more social intrigue and where you’re talking to every NPC?

And if you have a player that wants to talk to every NPC and a player who wants to kill every NPC, you’re going to have problems. So session zeroes are really good time to kind of say “All right, on a scale of Talk to every NPC to Kill every NPC, where do you fit and are we all on the same page?”

**Kienna**: Or can we all work together even if we have conflicting goals within that? And then, so there’s a few tools that work within this and to talk about setting the boundaries like we discussed. So Lines and Veils are a great way to discuss, “Here are my hard limits and my soft limits on content.” So my Lines, or my hard limits, are things I do not want at all to appear in the game. For example some Lines for me, I do not want homophobia in my game. As a queer person, I’m like, I’d rather not deal with homophobia in the game world when I also have to deal with it in the real world. That’s a hard line for me. And everyone’s like “Okay, homophobia doesn’t exist.”

**Lauren**: Nobody is homophobic, there is no homophobia, it’s not a concept.

**Kienna**: It’s not a concept. Versus, a Veil, which is something like, it can appear in the game, but not in great detail, it’s not highlighted, it’s like happening in the background. Another example for me is like eye trauma. Someone can get hit in the eye, that’s fine. Please don’t describe the whole gory detail to me, I would not like to hear that. That’s a soft limit for me, that’s a Veil. We can put that behind a curtain. It happened, now we’re just going to shove that off to the side.

**Lauren**: And there are some Lines and Veils that are kind of standard things you don’t want, or things that are going to be standard for everything. I have a list of things that always go behind Lines or always go behind Veils. But then sometimes for different games you might want to explore, for example *Good Society*, which is a Jane Austen-inspired roleplaying game, one of the things that they suggest and they actually have the Lines and Veils codified in their rules as the collaboration phase. And one of the things they talk about besides what do we want to see, what do we not want to see in the game is okay, maybe you don’t want to deal with the agricultural revolution. Which was going on at the same time historically as all of this stuff. But maybe we just don’t want to deal with that in our story about Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet. So that goes behind a Line. But may be we can talk about the financial problems that have been caused by the agricultural revolution, but we’re not going to suddenly start talking about trains and farming equipment.

**Kienna**: So that’s a use of Lines and Veils. And there are other tools, like the script change ratings. Which is like we talked about how PG-13, R-ratings on videos and on video games and all that stuff is a form of boundary-setting and expectation-setting. And you can apply that to your games too. You can say, this is probably going to be a PG-13 game and then that way you can also discuss what kind of level of gore or violence or sexual content we want in there, or how much we want to lean into certain things is a good way to discuss what you do and don’t want to see.

It’s just another way of setting those boundaries and making sure that everyone knows at the table, so that way it’s not just the GM having to deal with this, it’s every other player also taking on the responsibility of care. And oftentimes people maybe not be comfortable saying it out loud at the table, but then there are ways of doing it, like making anonymous Google Documents that people can add in their Lines and Veils and the whole group references to it later, so people just put in everything and now we all know that these are boundaries. These are the do-wants and don’t wants. And we can all easily discuss that and make sure we’re respecting them.

**Lauren**: And Script Change is really nice because it’s a really nice shorthand. You might not really know because sometimes things come up you might not be able to anticipate exactly. For example, you might not necessarily think oh I don’t want sexual content in my game because you might not think of a game having sexual content, but then—

**Kienna**: --and then suddenly it’s happening—

**Lauren**: -- and you’re like no, this is a G-rated game. And then all the smooches are like Mickey Mouse pulling off his hat and kissing behind the hat, you know, you just kind of make allusions to it, but we don’t need to hear about it. So if you don’t know exactly what you do and you don’t want, saying Hey I want a G-rated game, hey I want a PG-13 kind of game, can help you give a basis to go off on.

**Kienna**: The same with Lines and Veils or the Script Change Rating or any other discussion that you have about it. It’s not a one-time thing. It can be a continually developing discussion because sometimes things will come up later on and you’re like “Oh, I didn’t realize I was uncomfortable with this thing but now I do and I would like to add it to the document, please and thank you.” Yeah there’s this understanding that this is not like a static set of boundaries because that’s not how people work.

We’re not like these are our boundaries and they never change whatsoever. That’s not jhow we work as people so we have to reflect that within our tools and within our games as well.

**Lauren**: Especially in a few years and things you might have been okay within the past are all of a sudden not okay, or things you weren’t okay, you are maybe more open to.

**Kienna**: So that covers stuff before the game. And during the game, we’re going to get into the X-Card because this is ***Beyond the X-Card***, but I think we should probably explain what the X-Card is first. So there’s this series of tools called the X and the O-Cards. And these are check-in tools during the game. So when things happen in the game, we can say this is not okay, this is eh getting into tricky territory, and this is okay. So the X-Card essentially whenever it’s used, and that could be easily just like I think tap it on the table if you feel like at any point if you’re uncomfortable with what’s happening and you would like it to stop, please. And this can be either triggering material, or “I didn’t like what I said there,” with a lot of tabletop games, you’re improvising, and I may say a thing, like my character does a thing, and wait that doesn’t feel right, I would like to X that please. And when we X it out, we’re going to stop, we’re going to check in to make sure how people are feeling and we rewind and change it.

**Lauren**: And that’s kind of the biggest misconception about the X-Card. People will think it is for stuff that is psychologically triggering and often people think about trauma and PTSD and it’s certainly there to be used for that, but if you only use the X-Card for the most extreme situations, it gets scary to use, and sometimes that’s not the best. If a person is triggered, that’s not the best way to deal with their being triggered. But sometimes someone says something and they’re like “Oh that’s really mean, my character actually wouldn’t say something that mean, I’m going to retract that.”

Or, I played a game once, where we met a dog, a stray dog, and I was really excited. It was really cute and then it was all of a sudden it was discovered that this stray dog’s owner had passed away and it was really sad. And I was like I don’t want the dog to be sad, I’m going to X-Card the fact that the owner has passed away. And it’s just a stray and it’s a happy dog, and that’s totally just as valid.

But also the important thing with the X-Card, is that it’s no questions asked. You don’t need to explain why you’re X’ing something. It just is. You just say “Hey I don’t want this content in the game,” and nobody argues about it, nobody asks you why, unless it’s to clarify what exactly it is you don’t want.

**Kienna**: This goes for all the safety tools: you don’t need to expose yourself even more. If you’re feeling already vulnerable or hurt, it should not be on you then, to unload all that onto other people. That’s unfair. The idea with most of these safety tools is that you can explain and you can help to clarify, but there’s no expectation for you to. So that’s the X-Card.

And then there’s the N-Card. Which is the “We’re approaching an X or approaching a Veil, and I would like to slow down, check in.” And then we can either say “Okay, we’re gonna rewind and change it, or we’re just gonna put it off to the side.” So the way the X-Card kind of works as a Line and the N-Card works usually as a Veil. “This is a new Veil, that’s going off to the side. It happened, we’re not going to detail about it.”

And then the O-Card, which is a fairly new one, is just as interesting because this is the “I may look like I’m really upset because of what’s happening in the game, but I’m actually okay with what’s happening. Please hurt me more.” I mean, sometimes that’s how it is.

**Lauren**: Sometimes that’s how it is. So for example, when you watch like a romantic movie or a sad movie, and you start crying because you’re so affected by the sad movie, and people say “Are you okay? Do we need to turn off the movie?” And you’re like “No, I love it, it’s fine, I’m just really, really just feeling—” you know? And that’s what the O-Card is for. If you’re at the table and something’s happening and you’re crying your eyes out, and people go “Do we need to stop?” Because sometimes you’re crying and you need to stop. But this time, you’re crying and you don’t need to stop. You’re just really into your character. Or you’re like me and you’re crying to roleplay, you’re crying on command. So I use the O-Card for that specific thing.

**Kienna**: It’s just a reassurance of “Yes thank you for caring about me, I’m okay.” And again, it’s a check-in tool, and a combination of all three of those that help to make sure that people are doing okay.

**Lauren**: What’s nice about having these cards and just having them is that, with the exception of the N-Card because that does require a conversation, the X-Card and the O-Card don’t necessarily require a conversation. When I use the O-Card, I will often just kind of hold it up while I’m going and it doesn’t stop or break the roleplay or the flow, but people just know “Oh okay, she has her O-Card up, she’s fine, we can continue on with this scene.”

**Kienna**: So kind of a spin off of that or an adaptation by Brie Beau Sheldon is more of the script change. We talked about script change ratings and now there are actual script change tools, which are good check-in tools. Which, again, factor in the movie thing. So you can rewind. I say: “I don’t like what happened, can we rewind please?” we all talk about what content we want to rewind and where we want to go back to and then we resume play. There’s the fast forward, which is “I’d like to skip ahead.” And this can be both for the content or for pacing. Like, “this is taking forever, I don’t want to roleplay out eight hours of sleeping.” We’re gonna fast forward here.

**Lauren**: Or like, I really don’t want to do a shopping montage right now, can we just spend our gold and then tell you what we bought without having to roleplay finding a person and haggling through all of that? Let’s just skip to the other part.

**Kienna**: Let’s just fast forward through it. And then there’s the pause, which is a break. “I need to call a pause, can we take—” that could be anything, that could be need to talk about something, I need to take this call, I need to go have a bio break, either way a pause is usually just pressing pause on a video. Just like “Done!” Okay we need to have a breather and that’s totally valid. And then you have the resume, which means we continue playing, usually after discussing or doing whatever else you needed to do at the time.

It’s not on the quick reference guide, on this version, but it is on the new version, which is the Luxton Technique. The Luxton Technique is interesting because there’s no physical cards, there’s no actual “tools,” but it’s the idea that if something is hurting a player or making them feel unsafe, they get total control over how the content goes next. And that can be expressed as a want or desire, so something like if we’re getting into content that makes me very uncomfortable in terms of I don’t know, we’ll say eye trauma because I brought that up as an example earlier. So if we’re really getting into an eye trauma thing and people we’ve already discussed that with know this is a boundary of mine, or this is something that is possibly traumatising for me or triggering, they give control over to me as to how the scene goes in terms of its content.

So I get control and say “Okay, they manage to bandage it up and it’s all going to be on the mend,” and that’s how it goes. And again there is no need to explain, there is no need for me to say “I don’t like this because xyz.” There’s respect and understanding that this is a boundary of mine and by giving control over to the person who is affected by it, they can then explore that content safely, in a way that they feel in control because that’s a whole bunch of the trauma thing, or safety thing, is feeling like you’re out of control, so you’re giving control back over to them.

**Lauren**: Yeah, because once a person is traumatized, deleting the content or pretending that never happened is actually worse. Especially if they’re already triggered. So the Luxton Technique is a different approach to saying “Ok this is happened, so what can we do to make sure that this isn’t going to cause further harm.”

**Kienna**: It’s the idea of control and respecting boundaries that works. And then, the open door, and breaks, and you’ll see them in the gaming lounge upstairs. It’s the idea of, if I need to leave, I can leave without being judged. This can be for any reason; again, it could be a bathroom break, it could be I need to take a phone call, or it just could be I’m not jiving with this group. And this happens a lot in convention games where you’re playing with strangers and you’re like “Oh, I’m realizing that I don’t get along with these people for xyz reasons.” Instead of making myself miserable and staying for the whole three hours, I’m just going to get up and go. And the open door says “Yes, it’s an open door, we’re not locking you in here, you can leave if you need to for whatever reason.

And with breaks, it’s generally a good idea to have built-in breaks.

**Lauren**: Take breaks!

**Kienna**: Because not only for the general, I need water, I need to do this, but also to process things. Something has happened in the game and if you just jeep going, sometimes your brain just needs a moment to take in what has happened and go “Okay, now we’re good.”

**Lauren**: Like if you’re crying all of a sudden and yoy’re like “Okay, I’ve been crying so much and now it’s getting hard for me to breathe, I need to stop, I need to wash my face, I need to… whatever.” This is a big thing in the streaming community—

**Kienna**: --because we’re putting on a performance for other people watching.

**Lauren**: Yeah, and it can be bad for numbers to take breaks because then they’ll say “Oh, this person’s not streaming, they’re taking a break, I’m gonna leave.” And so a lot of times channels won’t have breaks, but then you’re not giving your players or yourself a chance to chill and go to the bathroom or grab some water, or whatever. And what’s nice about having pre-set breaks so that way nobody misses out on the action. Nobody has to hold it in so they find out what happens. They go okay, we’re gonna take a break, I’m gonna run and grab some water because my throat is dying and I’ve been talking for an hour straight.”

**Kienna**: So that covers during the game. And after the game is just as important. Essentially, especially with tabletop roleplaying games, where you’re playing the part of a character and you’re kind of embodying them, there’s a thing called ‘bleed,’ when emotions and whatever else from the game can bleed into your everyday life outside the game. So if my character was feeling sad, it’s sometimes hard to separate my character’s sadness from my own sadness, and then I’ll feel sad after the game.

**Lauren**: This happens a lot with character death, because especially if you’ve been playing a character a really long time or playing with a character a really long time, and you’re really into it and that character dies, they were just a shared hallucination you were having with your friends, but it feels real, you know? And so you can mourn that character. And it’s actually pretty normal to mourn a character that has died. And so if you try and just push it aside and say, “Oh it’s just the game, oh it’s not real,” that’s really bad. And so these safety tools are very important to kind of mitigate and prevent.

**Kienna**: And for example, conflict, in game could carry over to out of game. Say my character had a fight with Lauren’s character for example, all the time.

Lauren: Always!

**Kienna**: We always make characters that hate each other.

**Lauren**: We’re never friends!

**Kienna**: But if we don’t deal with bleed properly, then that feeling of animosity could bleed into our actual friendship and our actual relationship and negatively impact it that way. So there’s a lot of different safety tools and ways to kind of decompress and talk through those feelings. That is important to make sure that bleed, which is totally normal and very natural, doesn’t affect your out-of-game life.

So there’s stuff like an aftercare—making sure you’re taking care of yourself afterwards. Like, making sure you’re getting enough sleep, you’re eating and drinking enough, you’re doing things that de-stress you, that make you feel happy, if that’s looking at pictures of puppies—that always works for me—being like “Okay, I’m processing through these emotions and getting that safety,” but also making sure you’re doing it as a group as well and making sure that you’re addressing these feelings and validating those feelings amongst each other. You’re okay for having these feelings. Because sometimes you feel dumb for having these feelings.

**Lauren**: Especially if you have to go back into your regular world where the other people don’t play tabletop roleplaying games and they’re like “What is that D&D thing, is it that thing I saw in the *Big Bang Theory*?” and they don’t understand, and you’re like, “My friend died!” they’re like “Why, I’m sorry?” So having the other people who understand exactly why you’re so upset. And being there together for each other outside of the game.

**Kienna**: The idea and the hope is that you’re friends with the other people at the table to some extent. Even if you’re not very close friends, at least people who care about each other in some capacity. And so being able to express that via aftercare and discussions helps a lot. And then beyond that, there’s the debriefing: the idea of talking about what has happened in the game and saying “Okay, how do we continue to make this a good experience for everybody?” and so there’s a couple of tools there: Stars and Wishes, Highlight Reel and Wrap Session, which are pretty similar.

So Stars and Wishes highlight what we really like--so that’s the Stars-- and that can be a roleplaying moment, that could be a cool “I got to punch the bad guy in the face, yay me!” or “I really liked that conversation between these two other characters.” That’s a Star, a great thing that happened.

**Lauren**: “And I want to see more of that.”

**Kienna**: And I want to see more of that. And then the Wish is “I would like to see more of this in the future.” And that could be, like, “I would like to have the group together as a group more because we keep splitting the party.” Or “I’d like to try to establish a relationship with this NPC.” And it could be any level of within-game, out-of-game, just expressed as “I’d like to see more of this.”

**Lauren**: Or like, “I want to go to Yartar next because that’s important for my backstory.” That’s a Wish. It doesn’t mean it’s necessarily going to happen, but it does put it out on the table as something that I want. And that’s something that we can all work together as a group.

**Kienna**: And then Highlight Reel and Wrap Session are very similar in that way. You have your Highlight Reel, which is like the great, cool things that happened in the session. And then the Wrap Session, which is the “Okay, now let’s sit down and is there anything we need to discuss in terms of, perhaps there was an X-Card played, or an N-Card played, and we need to discuss that even further than what we did earlier before.”

**Lauren**: What worked, what didn’t work.

**Kienna**: Or like, “Hey I didn’t feel so great during this time,” because , you know, again, sometimes people don’t feel comfortable using an X-Card during the game or a script change tool during the actual moment. But in the Wrap Session you can all address any of those issues and try to put it into forward-facing, action-facing feedback.

**Lauren**: And that’s the important thing about especially the X-Card, is that the X-Card can be used retroactively. Because sometimes things will happen and you’re so in the moment and you don’t realise that they’re upsetting to you. But as you’re going through the debriefing process, you’re like “Okay wait no that didn’t feel good. We should not do this next time. Now this is a line that I have. So can we retcon this moment because I’m not really interested in having my character explore that?”

**Kienna**: And again it’s just the idea of we’re creating boundaries. And these boundaries are always changing and we’re respecting them because we care about the other people.

And yeah, and then with the rest of the guide, there’s a new version of it that I made that I finished making last night I think that is published out now.

**Lauren**: At this link: [bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/114jRmhzBpdqkAlhmveis0nmW73qkAZCj).

**Kienna**: And a whole bunch of other sources, and acknowledgements, and all that stuff to continue exploring because these are all very basic. And what we just talked about was a very basic summary of very detailed work that all these amazing people have put into it.

**Lauren**: Because the thing is that there is no one tool that is--just like there’s no Sonic Screwdriver in real life. And even the Sonic Screwdriver doesn’t work on wood. There’s no one tool that can be used for everything in every situation. So people have come up with a whole bunch of other tools. We’ve really just scratched the surface, but some of these links, like for the Support Tools Compilation by rpgnatalie, and a lot of these sources and stuff on the page will open your world up to a whole bunch of other tools. And you can find ones that fit your table the best.

Because this is kind of the last thing. Safety tools are all great in theory, but you have to make sure that you’re putting them in practice and that you’re putting them in practice effectively. And to do that, you need to have a conversation about what tools you need to use, or what tools work for you. Some people don’t like using the X-Card, and so they say “I don’t want to use the X-Card, can we use this other tool? Can we use the Luxton Technique, or can we use Script Change, or something else?” But you won’t be able to use the tools at all if your players don’t trust each other. And so before you can even consider using the tools, you have to make sure that you’re fostering this culture of collaboration and trust at the table.

Because it’s great if you have the X-Card there on the table and everyone can reach it and touch it, but if you’re playing with a bunch of strangers, or if you’re the only woman or the only person of colour at the table, that can make you feel really uncomfortable. And you can be too uncomfortable to use the tool. Then the tool is not working. And so to do this, I mean, it’s a lot of times about being a good friend, being a good person, especially if you’re talking about a long-term group. It’s caring about the person for reasons other than “Oh you play jimmy the Barbarian and he’s our only tank and it’s really, really important that you keep playing or else there’s gonna be a TPK next session.”

But also in convention play where you’re playing just one-offs, it’s a bit harder because you might not be friends with the person and you can’t trust someone within a two-hour session. But you can do things to make the situation more welcoming and inclusive right at the beginning. Things like sharing your name, going around and saying “My name is Lauren, my pronouns are she/her I’m playing this character. What are you playing?” Or things like asking “Is there something you need from me?”

One time I was GMing and about halfway through a session, a player said to me “I’m actually deaf in this ear, can I change seats?” and of course it was fine, I want them to be able to hear, but because they didn’t know me that well, they didn’t want to rock the boat of changing seats. So what I could have done is say “Does anybody need anything from me specifically to make sure that we can hear? Do you need to sit in a particular place, do you need any kind of accessibility aids?” And just signalling that, even if people don’t need it, you care about them outside of just running the game.

**Kienna**: I care enough about you that they are an option and they are an option available to you so we can have that discussion.

**Lauren**: Yeah, and the other thing you can do to make people feel like it’s okay to use safety tools is to use them yourself. John Stavropoulos, who wrote the X-Card, he X-Cards himself really early in the game. Like, if he’s describing a really gory scene, he’s like “No, I’m gonna X that and make it a little bit less gory.” Because the less special the card feels, the more it will be used.

**Kienna**: And that goes for all the tools that we’ve discussed. It’s only useful in play. And if you’re the GM, you using them expresses that “Yeah, they’re perfectly fine to use, and I hope that you use them.”

**Lauren**: For example, like a Lines and Veils document, if online we use often a Google Doc because you can edit a Google Doc anonymously and nobody has to worry about recognizing each other’s handwriting, for example. Giving somebody a blank Google Doc is intimidating, but if you’ve already listed your lines and Veils there, then people will say “Okay, I can kind of get it.” Because there are some things that are givens for most people, you know, sexual content is either behind a line or behind a Veil, things like homophobia, violence against animals and children is one that I see a lot. And it might be common sense to you, but just putting it own will get people to think “Oh yeah, I didn’t think that might be something I’m not okay with, but I’m actually not okay with. What else might I be not okay with?”

**Kienna**: It just formalizes it, again, formalizes that communication.

**Lauren**: And the last thing you can do is, well not the last thing, but the last thing I’m gonna list right now, is the same style of player. And not everybody is an actor or a super great roleplayer. Some people are playing for the crunch or playing because they like the maps and minis, and some people are playing because they like to tell the stories and they end up at the table together and you have to kind of pay attention to the people around you and see “Oh this person looks really uncomfortable, maybe the next break I should check in and see if they’re okay.” Or “John has been talking a whole lot and Lucy hasn’t said anything this whole time. Maybe I can bring Lucy into this next scene to make sure that Lucy is still having a good time and that John isn’t monopolizing the whole situation.”

**Kienna**: It’s an extension of the responsibility of care. Not just to one player, but to everybody.

**Lauren**: Because the GM is a player too, right? And some systems spread that responsibility more than others, but especially in a game like Dungeons & Dragons, there is a literal wall between you and the players, but the responsibility of safety really shouldn’t just fall on the GM, it should fall on everybody else. And for me, when I play, if I’m ever even a little bit in doubt, I’ll stop, I’ll pause, I’ll check in to make sure that everybody’s okay, either privately or I’ll just stop the whole game. Because I would much rather stop the flow of play and make sure everybody’s comfortable and having a good time than have this really great scene and then find out that someone was feeling miserable later.

**Kienna**: Yeah so it’s the “I care about you, I care about our game, and we’re gonna make that work together.”

**Lauren**: Yeah. I care about you, I care about our game, but I care about you more. You’re the most important part of this situation, not your imaginary, shared hallucination, paper character sheet. I think that’s all we had planned to say. We have some X, N, and O-Cards at the front, and some at the back as well. If you want to grab for your table and your friends, they have the link to the safety toolkit. So what you’ll find if you click on that link is a Google Drive folder with a PDF of the copy that you have, these cards so that you can print them off on your own, and also a list of some of the resources that we talked about here, but also other resources that we couldn’t bring up because there are so many.

**Kienna**: There are so many. And the whole idea of this panel was really just to open up the conversation and to get a very introductory look into them because sometimes people just didn’t know about them. And it’s one of those things that, the more people know about them and have them available at the table, the better games and stories and experiences everyone can have.

**Lauren**: Does anyone have any questions about safety tools or specific situations, like “This went terrible, what could have we done?”

**Kienna**: I get a lot of that. I get a lot of “Help! What did I do wrong?” And learning how to use safety tools is a process, as is with anything. Learning how to use a hammer’s always going to be a process, you’re never going to hit the nail perfectly the first time. But through practice and a shared undersigning of how it works and the better practices of it, you can get better at it.

**Lauren**: I think we are actually at time. We’ve got three minutes. Does anybody have a question or anything? Yes!

**Audience Member #1**: Once in a game, we were running a game of Ravnica, our DM basically made these large, unruly changes to, not continuity, but changes basically forced upon the characters of which we were playing. I was wondering where that would fall in terms of—would that be a wrong move if…?

**Kienna**: It’s the social expectation, right? And it’s the entire group saying it’s okay. With any of these things, it’s never a one person does this and nobody else buys into it. The only reason these work is because everyone’s buying into it. So if there was a reason, if the DM had come and asked you about it, if they were like “Hey, is this okay?” that would be a different story. But if it was done without permission or discussion then, it’s not okay.

**Lauren**: Yeah, you’re within your rights to say “I’m not so comfortable about this.” Especially because D&D is this stereotype of the DM is the God of the universe and they can exact their will onto everybody. But like, no. They’re just another player, they’re just playing, not even with different rules. They’re just playing more characters.

**Kienna**: So if this is something that bothers you, it’s something to bring up to discuss. And to say “Hey, I would have appreciated a conversation, a heads-up. I was thinking about this thing.” and then hopefully if your DM is comfortable and open to discussion, looking at how to, if they want to do something very dominating over the characters, saying, “Hey can we all check in and make sure we’re okay with this” And you’re saying that to your fellow players as well, just to address that as a possible issue and something that you can say “I don’t want to do” in the future. Or, my wish is to have a discussion about this next time.

**Lauren**: Or, you know, if it’s messed up everything of if you’re really unhappy with it, you can maybe say “Hey, can we maybe—maybe not retcon the whole thing, but maybe change something about how it happened so that we can all feel comfortable about what’s going on?” because even though it’s the DM’s story, you’re the player and your decisions matter. Like we said earlier, they can just write a novel and have a really good time. But the reason they’re playing D&D is because they care about what you do. Or they should.

**Kienna**: Obviously it’s all different for each group, but communication is the key to that.

**Audience Member #2**: How do you guys deal with a DM that doesn’t handle criticism well? What is your advice on the next best steps? If you’ve gone to them and said “Hey, this decision you’ve made right now is great and it’s awesome, but in three months when we’re all higher level, this is actually going to affect us all mathematically, why did you do this now and maybe you could fix this so that everything balances back out?” Especially with them being all about party balance and tiering now on coming to the DM to reward extra XP for kill shots, and I’m like, Well that’s really cool now, but you’re also kind of unbalancing the game. Because if you have two of your party’s level 4 and the other half of the party’s level 5, now you’re working with different mathematics there.

**Kienna**: The ideal is that your DM is creating a space where you can feel safe to voice that criticism.

**Lauren**: Yeah, and that they care about the fact that you’re having fun and that you’re having a good time. And maybe that feels really good for the person who made the kill shot, but maybe there’s another way that you can reward that. Because XP is only one way of rewarding somebody in D&D. but if a DM, honestly, if a DM is not dealing with criticism and is making you feel like you’re not being heard, or making me feel like I’m not being heard, because I don’t want to project, but what I would do is that I have played games with DMs that I finish off the campaign if I feel comfortable doing that, but then I’m done. Because we live in the world of the internet. There are so many people you can play Dungeons & Dragons with, and there are so many people who want to play Dungeons & Dragons, that you can definitely find the table and the DM that’s gonna care about what you have to say.

**Kienna**: And then it’s all about trying to figure out the ways you feel safe enough approaching the topic if you still want to try to continue with this DM. Let’s say I’m not comfortable going one-on-one conversation, but maybe get a friend also at the table who also had these concerns to come with me and have this conversation. Or doing it in a space that is more public so you’re mot feeling that private one-on-one situation. It’s creating the environment that you feel safe in, if the DM themselves are not creating that space for you;

**Lauren**: And that’s where Stars and Wishes can be really helpful, or Wrap Scenes, where you can say “I’m the only one who hasn’t got a kill shot, I’m 3rd-level and everybody else is 5th-level, I feel really useless. My wish is that we can equalize this, or deal with this.” And then it’s in a group setting so people are less likely to feel attacked, and you’re less likely to feel like you’re making yourself vulnerable to just one person, especially if there has been a history of someone not taking criticism well.

**Kienna**: But at the end of the day, no D&D is better than D&D that makes you feel bad. Absolutely. And you should always take care of yourself as a person first. Because you are a real person. Your character, as much as you love them or that they may be a part of you, they’re not real.

**Lauren**: They’re not real, and you can port them to other campaigns. I know that’s really, really hard, but you can just do a hard reset. But if you really like that character and really like all the stuff that’s happening but you don’t like what the DM did with their story, you can just say “Okay, this character now is in this campaign and maybe has a little bit of a different backstory, but we’re gonna try again.”

**Kienna**: There’s definitely no shame in keeping your safety and your wellbeing a priority and making sure you’re having fun because that’s the whole point of having a game.

**Lauren**: It’s supposed to be a good time.

**Lauren**: Thank you to Kienna for working on the panel and toolkit with me, Forest City Comicon for hosting us, Ethan for editing the audio of this panel, Jeff for the music, and you. Thanks for listening!

**Ethan**: If you want to download the safety toolkit, you can find it at [bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/114jRmhzBpdqkAlhmveis0nmW73qkAZCj). You can find more of Kienna’s work at [@KiennaS](https://twitter.com/KiennaS) and Lauren’s [@jl\_nicegirl](https://twitter.com/jl_nicegirl). If you’d like to be a regular on our show where we talk to people about their favourite RPGs, or have a creator in mind that we should contact for future episodes, you can tweet us [@TooManyRPGs](https://twitter.com/TooManyRPGS).

**Lauren**: Or you can contact Ethan [@superrobotbear](https://twitter.com/superrobotbear). If you liked this episode, please leave us a review on your favourite pod catcher and recommend us to your friends. It really helps us to spread the show to new people.

**Ethan**: ***TooManyRPGs***: actually experts on things? Who would’ve guessed? I mean, we started this like, a year ago

**Lauren**: I guess we’ve learned some things.