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# Safe Hearts

*A guide to boundaries and vulnerability in Monsterhearts.*

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# Introduction

Monsterhearts does not approach its subject matter gently. It is a game about being both human and inhuman, about dysfunction, abuse, shame, isolation, queerness, violence, and occasionally transcendence. Sometimes, playing the game feels scary and potentially unsafe - maybe when a vampire becomes a dangerous sexual predator, or when an innocent person is about to die. Since roleplaying involves improvising, we don't always know ahead of time what to brace ourselves for. Safe Hearts is an attempt at supporting you through those fraught moments, making sure that you feel safe even as the game shifts into unsafe territory.

This guide talks about the people you have responsibility to in your narration, and what is included in those responsibilities. It offers some approaches for setting boundaries and re-evaluating them as you play. It suggests why you might want to introduce subject matter that leaves you feeling vulnerable, and the risks that are inherent in such a decision. While a game of Monsterhearts can be really rewarding, especially one that explores our vulnerabilities and holds a mirror up to us as players, it can also overwhelm or go sideways. And so this guide talks about how to handle those possibilities: checking in, taking breaks, calling upon each other for support, and taking care of one another. Finally, it ends with a reflection of what we might do with these pregnant, complicated experiences once we've played through them.

***Note** - this guide invokes some serious language. It talks about boundaries, vulnerability, feeling safe or unsafe, triggers, and responsibilities. If you're reading this as a new player or potential player, breathe! It's probably not as heavy an experience as this guide makes it out to be. What I'm addressing here is how to support each other in making sure you have the experience you're after when you sit down to play.*



# Responsibility

Words have a lot of power. In a game like Monsterhearts, your words have the power to cause harm, and to either reinforce or deconstruct the ideas we hold true about the world. When you play a story game, your words carry with them three circles of responsibility. The innermost circle is a responsibility to yourself. It's important that you feel safe, that you set boundaries, and that you continue to check in with whether you're feeling okay. The middle circle is a responsibility to the other people at the table (and others in the room). It's important that you listen to their boundaries, assess their reactions, and collaborate to create something awesome together. The outermost circle is a responsibility to the people you are portraying, both the fictional characters and the people who inspired them. It's important to remember that all people have agency, strength, and complexity, even if we can't see it clearly from wherever we're standing. It's our responsibility to find the agency, strength, and complexity that exist within our characters, and to demonstrate it to everyone else at the table.

These are our responsibilities: to ourselves, to the others at the table, and to the people we're portraying. We're going to make mistakes along the way. Being responsible doesn't require an absence of mistakes. It does involve a sincere recognition of our mistakes, though, and an attempt at remedying them. This can even be part of why we play Monsterhearts - to test the waters, exploring human urges and fears, to make mistakes and learn from them. To safely explore that sort of terrain, we must be responsible and not callous.



# Setting Boundaries

Exploring problematic terrain is part of what makes Monsterhearts compelling and valuable. But in order to do that exploration, we need to know where our boundaries are. The tricky thing is that we're constantly learning about our own boundaries. They change and evolve in response to what we need to feel safe and what we want to experience in a given moment.

It can be really helpful to talk about boundaries upfront, before starting the first scene of the game. You can begin by thinking about the kind of story that Monsterhearts tells - stories about puberty, changing bodies, teenage desperation, victimhood, body horror, and monstrosity. If there are elements of that kind of story that you find particularly triggering or upsetting, you can ask to leave them off the table. Think also about the individual skins that each player is considering playing. Skins tend to revolve around certain patterns of dysfunction or crisis. The Vampire revolves around consent issues and emotional denial, while The Ghoul revolves around addiction and erratic violence. Each skin brings a different set of problematic content to the table. If a skin is all about an issue you find triggering or upsetting, one strategy is to ask that it be left off the table. Another is to talk to the player considering the skin, and let them know where your boundaries are in terms of those issues, and let them make a choice about whether they are prepared to play that skin while supporting those boundaries. A third option is that if you feel concerned about a particular Skin, you can opt to play it yourself, ensuring that it is handled in a way you find honest and acceptable.

Boundaries let your fellow players know what story elements you don't want to approach, but it can be really helpful to state the inverse as well: what types of problematic content you're specifically interested in exploring through play. If you're playing a transgender Mortal in a remote town, it can be helpful for your players to specifically state things like, "My character would

probably face a lot of ostracism and abuse for being openly trans in a community like this. I'm interested in exploring her reaction to that kind of treatment. You're all invited to push those buttons pretty hard."

Stating boundaries before you start play isn't a replacement for continually evaluating your boundaries during play. Throughout play it's important to check in with yourself. Pay attention to how you're feeling about the contents of each scene. Does an event in the game leave you feeling panicked, trapped, hurt, or mistrustful? It may be time to express some new boundaries or request a new approach.

You've spent your whole life collecting tools and strategies for expressing boundaries and keeping yourself safe. Don't feel limited to using new tools and mechanics introduced at the gaming table. New tools introduced at the table exist to make communicating your boundaries easier, not to replace the self-care techniques you already know and use. The biggest strength of these tools, which might include The Veil or the X-Card (<http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>), is that they provide the group with a common language for dealing with player concerns.

Since Monsterhearts is a game that thrives on problematic relationships and perspectives, it can sometimes be tricky to know where to draw your lines. In this context, there's good discomfort and bad discomfort. Part of the allure of Monsterhearts is stumbling through that good discomfort - like one does with a well-crafted horror movie. But in order to do that, it becomes important to sort out which feelings of discomfort are exciting to explore, and which leave you feeling unsafe. It's up to you to determine how discomforted you want to feel, and where your boundaries lie.

You may find that boundaries shift during play. What began as an exciting and provocative topic might turn into an unsettling and undesired topic. Good discomfort can become bad discomfort. The inverse is true, too - what initially seemed scary or undesirable may become interesting and safe to explore.



# Breathing

When you play Monsterhearts, take breaks. Between scenes, give people thirty seconds to crack jokes and release some of their emotional tension. Throughout the session, at least once or twice, call for a water break where people actually get up and leave the table. When you finish a Season, actually follow the advice in the text and play a different game as a palette cleanser before deciding whether you will return to Monsterhearts.

Breaks give you room to breathe, to reflect upon how the contents of each scene made you feel, and to think more about the boundaries that you've expressed. If you are unsatisfied with the direction the story is moving in, breaks let you decide upon an approach or response - do you talk about it with the other players, play your character differently, or excuse yourself from the game? Maybe you realize that you need to say, "hey folks, that scene was really emotional and scary for me, but I'm glad it happened the way it did."

Take breaks, remember to breathe, remember to reflect.

# Recovering

Monsterhearts has the potential to leave people feeling unsafe and hurt. What should you do when this happens? Since you know yourself better than anyone else could, you are the ultimate authority on your own needs in that moment. This guide can offer strategies and suggestions, but none of it trumps your own intuition.

As mentioned earlier, you have three circles of responsibility: to yourself, to the other people at your table, and to the people you're portraying. The innermost circle is your first priority. Your safety comes first. Make sure you feel safe and that you are remedying any feelings

of hurt, and then move outward to taking care of your fellow players. Maybe you don't have the capacity to do more than take care of yourself in that moment. That's okay. Move outward as you are able.

Remember that you can ask people to pause. If you don't, people might keep rolling forward while you remain stuck in a past moment trying to sort out your feelings. Sometimes it'll be unclear what you need from a situation. Your needs are valid even if you don't yet know what they are, and asking people to pause momentarily can help you get more clarity. If you see others looking distressed, you can check in with them, or ask to pull something from the fiction on their behalf.

If you're playing in a convention environment, people might be reticent or unwilling to talk through your discomforts with you. Since you are your own first priority, you get to make a choice about whether you're prepared to keep playing, to call for a break, to ask for support, or to excuse yourself from the session.

There are lots of strategies for recovering a story when it crosses someone's boundaries, each tailored to a different set of needs. You can take a break and return after you've had a moment to digest the turn of events. You can keep something in the story but fade to black and move on to another scene rather than dwelling any longer. You can remove an element from the story, and ask its author to introduce a replacement instead. You can stop the game and have a bigger conversation about goals and boundaries. You can brainstorm additional solutions. Sometimes it will be obvious what strategy is needed, sometimes it'll take a bit more discussion to figure it out.



## Reasons to Play

There are a lot of reasons to explore problematic content in play. Most of them are situated at the table - telling stories about this stuff is engaging, rewarding, and exciting. But there's another reason, one that can take a little longer to hit home. When we play a game like this, we have the opportunity to live through some experiences second-hand. We see a glimpse of what it might be like to inhabit someone else's skin. It's a fiction, yes, but the more vulnerable and sincere we are when we play, the greater the likelihood that this fiction contains truth. We can better understand and challenge problematic ideas by playing through them.



## Thanks

Lillian Cohen-Moore wrote [the article](#) that made me realize this piece was necessary.

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Careful line-by-line provided by Jackson Tegu.

This piece will also be appearing in Jackson Tegu's forthcoming [What Big Teeth You Have](#).

