

Talk to Me

Talk to Me is a two-player sandbox mini-larp during which the characters get through a crisis by talking without seeing each other. It allows to play out a variety of situations and character relationships, defined through workshops. During the game, the players talk through a door, or using voice-only digital communication.

For example:

- two siblings had an argument, one of them is hurt and locks themselves in their room. The other feels bad and apologizes through the door.
- a volunteer medic tries to help and support a person stuck under a collapsed building before the rescue team arrives.
- people from neighbouring houses nervously chat through the thin basement walls, anxiously expecting bombs to shake the ground again.
- somebody is stuck in an elevator and a passing neighbour stays to keep them company and reassure them.
- an anxious child at a summer camp hid in a closet to keep away from other kids. An educator gently tries to understand their issues and make them feel safe to come out.
- two prisoners in solitary detention whisper through a crack in the wall.

Goals

Though the atmosphere will change drastically from setting to setting, the purpose of the game is to bring people closer together and to allow them to get through a crisis by showing support, whether mutual or from a person not in need to a person in need. Conflict may occur, but only to be addressed and resolved in a respectful way. *Talk to Me* is a “feel-better” game that emphasizes on good communication, mutual attention and care – even in the darkest times.

Structure

Workshops and preparation can be made using videochat, although the game itself is voice-only.

Safewords

It can be hard to express that something is bothering us, making us feel uneasy, anxious, or even unsafe. Although being able to do so within regular communication is a valuable skill, sometimes

safewords can come in handy. Safewords are codes players can use to express an out-of-game uneasiness. They can be used during preparation and debriefing as well as during the game.

Different game cultures usually have their own safewords, so players should feel free to pick other safewords they feel more comfortable with, but here is an example:

- “*Cut.*” The scene stops entirely, and the players go off-game. Their co-player immediately checks in with the one who used the safeword to discuss what’s wrong and what can be done. The person who used the safeword may offer to resume the game afterwards, or stop it entirely.
- “*Brake.*” By using “Brake”, a player indicates they need the game to pace down a bit. When it is used, the other player should rephrase what they just said, calm down if they were acting angry, or take back what was said, etc.
- Optionally, “*Go.*” can be used to indicate the co-player they want to increase intensity, *i.e.* when having an argument.

Calibration

First, players voice their expectations, desires, and needs towards the game.

The whole setting, story, and relationships are entirely hand-sewn by the players: it is all the more important to express fully and clearly anything that might bother them or, on the contrary, that they want to explore. They should not hesitate voicing very specific things. Here are a few tips to guide the discussion:

- How close a relationship do they want to play? Lovers, friends, complete strangers?
- Which emotions are they looking for? Anxiety, distress, feeling supported and cared for?
- What kind of atmosphere are they seeking? Are they looking for a rather mundane crisis, such as an argument among family, or a more extreme event, such as a natural disaster or a car crash?
- What caused the crisis? Is this a random, unexpected event, or did one of them cause it, or is it the escalation of something that already existed?

Example:

“I want to explore the helplessness of being stuck somewhere with no way to make it out on my own, and finding unexpected support from a stranger.

– I’m not comfortable playing a full support character. I think I need some relationship elements to make it work, build up some kind of reciprocity.

– Maybe we could be classmates then? Like, not in a close relationship, but maybe I helped you with homework or something?

– Could do! Say you got locked in a car, maybe, or the elevator or something. Maybe having a panic attack and I try to help you through it?”

Characters

After they defined the situation they'd be playing in, players give their character an age, name, or other element that feels relevant to identify them.

They also individually decide on two or three adjectives to outline their character's behaviour and psychology. After that, players ask each other questions about their character, to help flesh them out. Questions may concern:

- Occupations and social environment;
- Emotions: worries, desires, dreams...;
- Potential traumas and triggers that may come at play within the situation;
- Events and daily life preceding the situation;
- etc.

If the characters know each other, players collectively define their relationship. If they don't, they each imagine – together or for themselves – a person closer to them which the other character reminds them of (a cousin, a former classmate, a childhood friend...).

Game start

The scene starts at a given moment: a character slams the door, or calls for help from where they're stuck, etc. Players clearly define what moment that is, and who should start the interaction.

Before going in-game, each player briefly narrates what just happened to their character, their thoughts and feelings, etc. It's essentially an inner monologue: the other character isn't aware of it, though the player is.

"I left work early today, cause I had an argument with a colleague again and staying just did me no good. I didn't go straight home, and even strayed a bit, thoughtlessly wandering through different parts of the city. I felt preoccupied and restless. I really have no clue how I came to enter this church, let alone sit in the confessional. I'm not even religious. But whatever: there probably isn't anyone behind this curtain anyway."

Music could help start the game. Here are two ways:

- Each player delivers a prologue, a brief narration about what just happened, what they felt, etc. on their character's perspective. They each play a piece of music to go with their prologue, and when it ends, the other player delivers their prologue. When both prologues (and songs) are over, the game starts.
- Players deliver prologues, then play a piece of music to let themselves sink into character. The game starts as agreed when the music ends.

Ending

The ending is not decided in advance, but the players collaborate to making the situation better. The game ends when one of the players announces the resolution of the situation, or, if their character is in no position to do so, asks if the situation is being resolved. This way, both players can initiate the ending.

“Has the rescue team arrived yet?”

– I can see their car parking right around the corner!”

“I’m ready to come out now.”

Debriefing

When the game ends, players meet in the same room again or turn on their camera if relevant. It is possible to take a small break before debriefing if needed.

Debriefing aims to unfold feelings and thoughts that might have risen during the game and facilitate de-roling. It can be formal (following questions suggested below) or informal. If at least one player would rather go with the formal debriefing, it must be preferred.

Formal or not, players must remember to leave the other person speak without interrupting them, express things from one’s point of view (no accusation or judgement), and be respectful and mindful of each other. If it seems impossible to debrief without conflict, they should take a break, part, and call on a third party to facilitate discussion at another time.

Suggested debrief questions:

- How do you feel? Is there something you need right now?
- Are you happy with where the game took us? Did your character feel better at the end?
- How did you feel towards your character? What would you like to keep with you? What do you leave behind?
- Is there something, or a moment in particular, you would like to share about the game?
- Do you want to add something?

Each player may answer all questions at once, or take turns for each question.

Contact

Did you play this game? I’d be happy to hear your feedback!

Please write me at: axelle@larpinprogress.com (English or French)

Best,

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