

Workshopping Intimacy

A live-action role-playing game inspired tool for sex education

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What is this about?

This tool is inspired by techniques developed by live-action role-playing game (*larp*) designers and practitioners (called *larpers*) to enforce emotional and physical safety [1][2]. These techniques were themselves largely influenced by BDSM practice, enforcing safety and consent. According to the dedicated Wiki for Nordic Larp, a tradition of games born in the Nordic countries, larp “*refers to a type of interactive game or storytelling in which the players assume a role and act as a character within the set fiction*” [3]: one of the most important characteristics of larp, which differentiates it from other games, is the strong physicality of it. Indeed, players interact with the environment and with other players with their bodies: because of that, safety and calibration techniques were created to make sure that players don’t get harmed, in a physical or emotional way, during the course of a game. The technique this Intimacy Workshop draws from is the **red-to-green scale**, a technique used to determine the level of acceptable intensity of in-game interactions.

The Intimacy Workshop is primarily intended as a real-life tool to sustain a culture of sex-positivity and consent through sex education and mutual care.

It is aimed primarily at sex-ed and mental health practitioners, teenagers willing to take

a safe start on their sex life, and people of all ages and genders in need for safer, more positive sex experiences. It can be performed between potential or actual partners, friends, or any persons willing to freely and consensually engage in the experience. It is designed towards safer sex experiences, thus eroticism isn’t the main focus of this tool, although building and reacting to desire is a key feature of the design: however, it can be used and adapted safely as part of erotic play. It could also be adapted back to larp, if the design of a game would allow it.

“Sex-positivity is the belief that consensual sexual expression is both healthy and important in contributing to a safe and inclusive [...] climate. Sex-positivity is grounded in comprehensive sex education, exploring and deconstructing gender norms, and promoting body-positivity and self-love. It fosters safe spaces in which different identities and sexual expressions are valued and bodily autonomy is paramount.” [4]

Although it is designed for two participants, it can be extended to more consenting participants. The pronoun used in the examples is “*she*” for both participants, but this tool can be used regardless of the gender of the participants.

Table of contents

What is this about?	1
Table of contents	2
Eroticizing Consent	4
The technique	5
Preparation	5
The color scale	7
The stages	9
Touch	9
Kiss	10
The debriefing	10
The scale	12
The stages	13
The workshop	13
References	14
About larp	14
About consent	14
About safe sex	14

Eroticizing Consent

In the past few years, there has been a lot of talk about the so-called “grey area”. The grey area is a term used to describe sexual encounters in which consent wasn’t explicitly given, but are perceived as as likely to have been consensual as to not have been consensual [5]. **In fact, the notion of grey area is a product of rape culture. It protects the perpetrators and minimizes the abuse by creating a hierarchy of sexual assault.** According to the Marshall University’s Women’s Center,

“Rape Culture is an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. Rape culture is perpetuated through the use of misogynistic language, the objectification of women’s bodies, and the glamorization of sexual violence, thereby creating a society that disregards women’s rights and safety.” [6]

On the contrary, consent culture emphasizes that only explicit consent can ensure that a situation is consensual. **Only “yes” means “yes”.** For example, a law adopted in Sweden in 2018 states that **sex must always be voluntary, and that sex without consent is now legally considered rape** [7]. This law is a step towards consent culture.

“Consent culture is a culture in which asking for consent is normalized and condoned in popular culture. It is respecting the person’s response even if it isn’t the response you had hoped for. We will live in a consent culture when we no longer objectify people and we value them as human beings. Consent culture is believing that you and your partner(s) have the right over your own bodily autonomies and understanding that each of you know what is best for yourselves.” [8]

Consent culture is not only about sex: it’s about respecting one’s and other people’s choices and limits. To explain what consent is, Emmeline May coined the metaphor of offering someone a cup of tea: if she refuses or is unsure, then the person who made the tea should not be upset, nor force her to drink tea. Consent is simple as that [9].

The Intimacy Workshop is an attempt at showing that the “clear area” is sexy as hell. To prove wrong the people who claim there can be no sexual or romantic encounter without a dose of uncertainty and abuse. To get rid of the Sleeping Beauty. To enforce that consent is boring only to those without imagination, and that consensual sex can be erotically and emotionally fulfilling for everyone, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, and age (as long as it is legal). Consent Culture builds on trust, respect, sex and body-positivity: and since someone can only take so many steps, the Intimacy Workshop is designed to make people aware of their own needs, limits, and rhythm, and to help them communicate with others about them.

The Intimacy Workshop

The Intimacy Workshop aims to voice, and to ask for, consent. It is not specifically designed towards sexual activity, and the completion of its stages does not signify consent to engage in sexual relation. Instead, it is designed to create intimacy, through mutual care, trust, and safety. If sex should follow the Intimacy Workshop, it should be explicitly asked and the answer should be an enthusiastic “yes”. The communication mechanics used through the workshop could nonetheless be used if the partners find it comfortable: however, those mechanics can only be used with people who performed the workshop. In general, it is preferable to use non-equivocal, explicit sentences such as “Do you want it?” “Can I do that to you?” “Are you comfortable with that?”, etc. The answers expressing consent are such: “Yes!”, “Of course”, “I do”, an enthusiastic nod... but are never: “Maybe”, “I don’t know”, or silence. In fact, “Maybe”, “I don’t know”, “I’m not sure”, etc. must be understood as “no”. Of course, “no” means “no”.

The technique

The Intimacy Workshop implies moving through stages of physical intimacy, **previously decided and discussed between the partners**. It is essential that no specific outcome should be decided prior to making the workshops: indeed, **it is always okay to opt out, and proceeding through all stages is not required**. The Intimacy Workshop could last any amount of time, from a few minutes to several hours: it is okay to interrupt it at any point. Whenever a partner decides to interrupt the workshop, the other partner should immediately stop all physical contact and ask whether she is okay, how is she doing, and provide any support that she needs. A glass of water and a blanket could for example be safe comforting methods. Her partner may also ask if she needs a friendly hug, to be left alone for a moment, to take a shower, etc. Be specific in what you’re offering, cause the person might feel disoriented, but be careful not to overwhelm her.

Through this workshop, as through sex or any other intimate encounter, the partners are especially vulnerable to each other: that is why it is crucial that all partners feel entitled to express if they feel any sort of discomfort or distress without fearing to be judged. In fact, no-one can judge anyone, because everybody is equally vulnerable and responsible for the others’ safety and comfort.

Preparation

The partners should be placed in a safe, comfortable environment, where they can be alone for a long moment without being disturbed. For example, a quiet bedroom, with a bit of music, soft light and a water pitcher, could be a comfortable environment. Condoms, dental dams, water or silicone-based lubricants and latex (or silicone, in case of allergy to latex) gloves should also be readily available, in the event people decide to have sex [10]. It is often easier to engage in intimate conversations or actions when the light is out; however, not seeing her partner can make one unaware of certain clues, such as stiffness, avoiding eye contact, or facial tension, which can indicate discomfort and reveal the need to check with the person if she’s okay. Indeed, it is not always easy to speak up: although this workshop is meant to make it easy to do so, it is also necessary to learn how to read the unspoken clues the partners may be giving.

Before the workshops, the partners review the different stages carefully. They may write their own stages, adapt the ones described here, or stick to those. They focus on the upper part of the body, avoiding the genital region: indeed, this is a workshop about intimacy, not sex. Furthermore, including the genital region in the workshop could create pressure to engage in sex. That is why this design advises not to include the genital region in the Intimacy Workshop: additionally, although we have included the chest, we advise the partners to carefully think about including the breasts or not. Indeed, genitals, breasts, and buttocks are the most common areas associated with sexual encounter, sexual assault and harassment: they can be extra sensitive for some people, and thus require extra care. Hair can also be a sensitive region, as especially for people with long hair or beard, having them touched can be strongly connoted as a (sometimes unwanted) flirting approach.

The partners should also discuss what they already know they don't feel comfortable with. For example, a person could be okay with brushing hair, but not okay with a direct contact of a flat hand atop her head; another participant could be especially sensitive to tickling, and her partner would need to avoid brushing some body parts; some could not stand the contact of nails; etc. It is important to discuss these things, as they could lead to discomfort and unease during the workshop; if the partners are in tune from the beginning, things will go even more smoothly and in the most comfortable and relaxed way as possible. **It is possible to proceed through the stages at the same time (both partners touch each other), or one by one:** indeed, it may be more comfortable to only be at the giving or receiving end for a start, as this way, there is no pressure about "robbing" one's partner from her experience. Of course, ideally, such feeling that interrupting the workshop could cause disappointment on one's partner should not take place, since the Intimacy Workshop is also a tool to help voice one's own limits: however, we don't live in an ideal world, and such precaution may be needed. If you decide to take turns, you may of course start the workshop again simultaneously when you feel comfortable doing so!

In all social encounters, all the more intimate encounters, communication is key. To make discussing these topics easier, partners could write down what feels okay for them, then share with each other. If something is not okay for one partner, it should be done by neither of the partners.

Example: Linn and Anna privately write down their limits. Linn writes that touching, caressing and brushing is okay, but massaging is not. Anna is okay with massaging, touching and caressing, but brushing is not. During the workshop, massaging and brushing should both be banned.

When all partners feel ready and have expressed so, they should sit face to face, for example cross-legged on the bed. They should be dressed up, but wearing short sleeves, as skin-to-skin contact is part of building physical intimacy. The partners should not remove or lift up each other's clothes: however, uncovering more skin can be decided by each partner prior to the workshop, or during it using explicit communication. **Everything should be voiced, discussed, and communicated about.** When they are comfortably seated, one of the partner may launch the workshop using the color scale.

"Blue?"

- Blue."

The color scale

Communication about intimate things can be hard. It is often difficult to ask for explicit consent, and when asked, even more difficult to answer. Refusing is probably the most difficult part, since one can feel some pressure towards acting according to her partner's desire. To minimize shame, discomfort, and communication issue, the Intimacy Workshop uses a simple color scale. You may talk during the workshop, as it is always nice to express how one feels: in fact, reinforcing the color scale by asking more direct consent questions, or describing one's experience on the moment, is very healthy and safe. If you would rather stay silent, however, that is also fine, as the color scale is the only communication that the partners have to use: it may be the only verbal communication during the workshop. The color scale is quite simple and intuitive: before detailing it, however, we should insist that **consent is compulsory**, and that both partners should follow the rules (both the scale and the steps) with utter care.

Do not assume, ask; do not expect, tell; do not push; do not pressure; do not do anything that you don't want to do. The consent coin is two-sided: it's about not going against the other person's desire, but it is also about not going against one's own desire. Indeed, **there are many situations where one could feel unsure about something but not tell it, thus letting her partner think that she's okay; it could lead to harmful situations.** Instead, if you are not sure, say "I am not sure", "I don't know", "Wait": this way, the other person knows how you feel, and can react accordingly. Using the color scale, you could simply say: "yellow". **It is also important to remember that if one did everything right, asking her partner how she feels and regularly checking on her consent, she should not**

feel guilty if her partner overstepped herself and her limits. Instead, the person should care, offer to assist, support, and help the person to communicate better. It is not your fault, but you shouldn't blame your partner either: instead, you should try to make things right with her.

Keep in mind that it is also okay to laugh. Indeed, laugh is a normal reaction to slight discomfort, and can express both positive and negative nervousness: if your partner laughs, ask her if she's alright, using the code "green?" as we will explain below. If you laugh, feel free to state "green" on your own to reassure your partner, if this is a positive laugh. Laughing is fine, it is pleasant, and it does good: although laughing during sex is disregarded as something offensive or insensitive, it is actually a great way to bound and to release stress. Consequently, laughing during the Intimacy Workshop can be seen as a very positive thing, and should not be a source of shame or guilt.

You may also feel the need to yawn. Indeed, releasing the tension through tenderness and trust may trigger yawning as an automatic response. Yawning doesn't mean one is bored; it simply means that her body is relaxing. If in doubt, simply ask "yellow?" or "do you wish to continue?". If she answers "green" or "yes", then it is likely that she is merely relaxing. If she answers otherwise, then it is perfectly fine: end the workshop, and proceed to debriefing.

The color scale ranges from **BLUE**, to **GREEN**, to **YELLOW**, to **RED**. Blue indicates consent to proceed to the next stage; green, comfort in the present stage; yellow, the need to get back to the previous stage; red stops the workshop entirely. **"No answer" means RED.**

“BLUE”

“Blue?” is the question one asks to proceed to the next stage. **One should never ask “blue?” before making sure the current situation is okay, using “green?”.** It should not be the same partner asking “blue?” each time, but instead, partners should alternate, in order to make sure nobody is pressuring anyone. It is possible to agree to take turns in asking before or during the workshop, if it feels easier. **No answer means RED.** After interrupting the workshop, proceed to debriefing in any case: debriefing allows for mutual and self-care, understanding, and can defuse negative feelings such as unease, shame, or self-loathing.

Example: Linn and Anna are at stage 4, “touching neck and back”. Linn feels really comfortable, and ready to go further. “Green?” she asks. “Green,” answers Anna with a shy smile. “Blue?” asks Linn again, after a short moment. “Blue,” agrees Anna. They move on to stage 5.

“GREEN”

“Green” means that the situation is comfortable. It should also be used as a question, to make sure the partner is also comfortable. **No answer means RED.**

Example: Linn and Anna are at stage 1, “touching hands”. “Green?” asks Anna. “Green,” answers Linn, thus indicating that the interaction is perfectly okay.

“YELLOW”

“Yellow” means that the present interaction is uncomfortable, and that the person would rather go back to the previous stage. **“Yellow” doesn’t interrupt the workshop, it simply slows it down:** if she feels comfortable going again, the person who used this color can offer to try to go to the next stage again, using “Blue?” as a question and waiting for her partner to answer using the same color. **“Yellow” should be used at least once in every session no matter what, to make it comfortable to use.** “Yellow?” can also be used as a question, if one feels her partner is uncomfortable. If the answer is “yellow”, they go back to the previous stage. If the answer is “green”, they keep on with the current stage. **No answer means RED.**

Example: As they go to stage 4, “touch neck and back”, Anna feels herself going a bit stiff at Linn leaning towards her to be able to touch her neck. She says “yellow”, and both she and Linn go back to stage 3, “touching chest”. Linn asks: “green?” “green,” says Anna. After some time, she feels ready to continue. “Blue?” she asks; “blue,” agrees Linn.

“RED”

“Red” means that the interaction is not comfortable at all. Any partner can use it at any moment to stop the workshop: the other partner then immediately ceases physical contact and asks “are you okay? What can I do for you?”. It is not necessary to apologize, as both partners used the color scale thoroughly. If one partner uses “red”, it may be that she misjudged her own limits, is feeling otherwise unwell, or simply doesn’t feel in the mood to pursue. **It is perfectly okay to use “red”.** After checking on the person who said “red”, making sure she has everything she needs and feels

better, the partners may choose to resume the workshop or to start again. **The person who said “red” should always be the one offering to resume.**

Example: Anna and Linn have proceeded to stage 4, “touching neck and back”. Linn asks: “green?” “green,” Anna answers. “Blue?” she continues, after a while. “Blue,” says Linn. They then proceed to stage 5, “touching face”. As Linn feels Anna’s hand on her cheek, however, she feels immediate discomfort. “Red,” she says. Anna pulls back her hand immediately and asks in a soft tone: “Are you okay?”. Linn shakes her head. “Can I get you a glass of water?” asks Anna. Her partner nods. “Just ask me if you need anything,” says Anna, handing Linn a glass of water and a jacket to keep her warm. After some time, Linn manages to explain to Anna how she felt, and offers to play video games instead.

The stages

The stages are distributed in two series: the first only involves touching with one’s hands, while the second involves the mouth. **The first may imply touching, caressing, massaging, brushing with one’s fingers and nails, but doesn’t imply grabbing, clawing, or doing otherwise restrictive gesture, or one that can leave traces.** In any case, all specific gestures should be discussed between the participants beforehand.

The second one is thus more prone to generate strong sexual tension, and can be seen as more directly erotic: the partners could agree beforehand to only complete the first series, or to take a break between the two series. They also can “Blue” the way to the second series through the workshop.

Some body parts can make it difficult to maintain balance while reaching them, or to act in concert: the partners may then, if they feel more comfortable doing so, verbally agree to “take turns” touching the other, or ask to shift positions. Adjusting one’s position for comfort is obviously okay, but when it involves her partner, it could be safer and more practical to ask. It is also possible than some other regions of the body may be touched by accident during the workshop, for example the thighs if the partners are sitting cross-legged. It may be discussed in advance, as if one participant doesn’t want even accidental contact on some body parts, her partner should be extra careful.

The following stages are merely propositions: the partners should always discuss them, rearrange them if necessary, or write them entirely the way they like.

Touch

Stage 1 - Touching hands

Sitting face to face, one of the partners asks: “blue?” or “Are you okay to start, blue?”. The partners can then hold, caress, brush each other’s hands... according to what was previously discussed between them.

Stage 2 - Touching arms

When stage 1 feels comfortable enough, as checked using the green color, partners may want to proceed to stage 2. One asks “blue?” to make sure of her partner’s consent, and they can then touch each other’s arms, from

the tip of the fingers to the shoulders.

Stage 3 - Touching chest

When stage 2 feels comfortable, the partners can agree to stage 3. Stage 3 implies touching the bust, the sides, the hips. Partners should discuss beforehand whether breasts and belly are included.

Stage 4 - Touching neck and back

If this stage doesn't come too early, it is because leaning forward to be able to touch the other partner's neck and back may imply

contact with different bodyparts, or otherwise closeness (much like a gentle hug). Partners with long hair should discuss beforehand if touching hair is okay or not (if it is not, tying them might feel more comfortable for both partners).

Stage 5 - Touching face

Stage 5 includes touching the face, cheeks, chin, and forehead, **not including the lips and mouth**. Partners should discuss beforehand if touching hair is okay or not.

Kiss

The regions are the same as previously. This time, however, the mouth is also involved: it means the partners must agree about **kissing, licking, biting, sucking**. It should not involve leaving any trace on the partner. It is also to be remembered that hickeys are dangerous, as they might create blood clots. Touching using hands as in the previous stages is allowed, as it would be awkward or difficult not doing so. Since kissing through the clothes can feel unpractical or unpleasant, the partners may agree to remove their shirts or tops.

Kissing can be extremely erotic, even more than touching, and requires a lot more of verbal communication. **The partners must not get carried away, and remember to always use the color scale**. Things might be getting sexy; make sure it is okay. Proceed through the stages. Verbalize clearly if you want this to move to a further sexual interaction. If so, use the protections that you carefully set aside before you started. **If no protection is available, do not engage in sexual activity, including anal or oral, even if you really, really want to.**

The debriefing

The workshop ends when one of the partner says "red", or when she gets bored and lets her hands down, or asks whether they should end the workshop, etc. It is strongly advised to proceed to debriefing, even though sexual tension has arised and the partners are willing to engage in consensual sex. **There should never be any questioning or arguing when a partner wants to stop the game. Consent is compulsory, and "no" means "no".**

After completing this workshop, or, if both partners agreed to it, after sex, it is important to proceed to debriefing the experience. Indeed, **the Intimacy Workshop can be a strong experience of mutual vulnerability: it is crucial to check on one's partner to ensure she is alright.** Common feelings after a very intimate experience with someone with whom one wasn't bounded before are **shame; guilt; avoidance; self-doubt; anxiety**. These feelings, however, can usually be deconstructed through honesty and trust. This is why the partners should ask each other a few questions, and carefully listen to what the other has to say, without interrupting her or emitting judgement. **It is not about justifying oneself or answering to the partner's feelings, it is about expressing how one feels.** Oftentimes, expressing a difficult feeling simply makes it go away. The

debriefing is an extremely vulnerable moment: reciprocal care and acknowledgement are needed. The partners answer all questions one after the other, without responding to what the other said. The one who interrupted the workshop should decide who gets to answer the questions first. Further discussion can take place afterwards. Other questions can also be imagined and asked if needed. The recommended questions for this workshop are:

Are you okay?

How did that make you feel?

How do you feel towards me right now?

Is there anything more you would like to say?

Is there anything I can do for you?

These are fairly difficult questions, and may take time to answer. You may be afraid of what the other will think, but remember: **she is afraid too**

As a pre-larp workshop

The Intimacy Workshop is a theoretical tool for sex education and building a culture of consent, designed based on pre-existing larp calibration techniques. The workshop presented below is a condensed version, re-adapted to larp context.

The Intimacy Workshop is, as its name implies, a workshop directed towards building a feeling of physical and emotional intimacy between the players. It consists in moving through stages of physical intimacy, previously decided and discussed on the basis provided here. It could last any amount of time, from a few minutes to a full hour: it is okay to interrupt it at any point, thus setting the limits for character-to-character interaction (mostly useful for the Prologue, as it is the only time the players will touch during the game). It makes use of **a color scale, ranging from BLUE to RED, to frame the interaction.**

The scale

The color scale ranges from BLUE, to GREEN, to YELLOW, to RED. BLUE indicates consent to proceed to the next stage; GREEN, comfort in the present stage; YELLOW, the need to get back to the previous stage; RED stops the workshop entirely. **“No answer” means RED.**

“BLUE?” is the question one asks to proceed to the next step. One should never ask “BLUE?” before making sure the current situation is okay, using “GREEN?”. It should not be the same player asking “BLUE?” each time, but instead, the players should alternate, in order to make sure nobody is pressuring anyone. It is possible to agree to take turns in asking before or during the workshop, if it feels easier. No answer means RED.

“GREEN” means that **the situation is comfortable.** It should also be used as a question, to make sure the partner is also comfortable. No answer means RED.

“YELLOW” means that the present interaction is uncomfortable, and that the person would rather **go back to the previous stage.** **“YELLOW” doesn’t interrupt the workshop, it simply slows it down: if they feel comfortable going again, the person who used this color can offer to try to go to the next stage again,** using “BLUE?” as a question and waiting for their co-player to answer using the same color. “YELLOW?” can also be used as a question, if one feels their co-player is uncomfortable. If the answer is “yellow”, they go back to the previous stage. If the answer is “green”, they keep on with the current stage. No answer means RED.

“RED” means that the interaction is not comfortable at all. Both players can use it at any moment to stop the workshop: **the other player then immediately ceases physical contact and asks “are you okay? What can I do for you?”.** It is perfectly okay to use “RED”. After checking on the person who said “RED”, making sure they have everything they need and feel better, the players may choose to resume the workshop or to start again. **The person who said “RED” should always be the one offering to resume.**

The stages

During this workshop, the players will move, at their own pace, from touching hands, to arms, to chest, to neck and back, to face. **The contact may consist in:** touching, caressing, massaging, brushing with one's fingers and nails, but doesn't imply grabbing, clawing, or doing otherwise restrictive gesture, or one that can leave traces. **In any case, players should discuss beforehand what kind of touching is acceptable. It is also important to discuss the stages and make sure everyone is okay with them.** Adjustments, such as barring certain specific regions from the workshops, may be needed.

Stage 1: Touching hands. Sitting face to face, one of the partners asks: "BLUE?" or "Are you okay to start, BLUE?". The partners can then hold, caress, brush each other's hands... according to what was previously discussed between them.

Stage 2: Touching arms. When stage 1 feels comfortable enough, as **checked using GREEN**, partners may want to proceed to stage 2. **One asks "BLUE?" to make sure their co-player consents**, and they can then touch each other's arms, from the tip of the fingers to the shoulders.

Stage 3: Touching chest. When stage 2 feels comfortable, the players can agree to stage 3. Stage 3 implies touching the bust, the sides, the hips. **Co-players should discuss beforehand whether breasts and belly, in particular, are included.**

Stage 4: Touching neck and back. If this stage doesn't come too early, it is because leaning forward to be able to touch the other player's neck and back may imply contact with different bodyparts, or otherwise closeness (much like a gentle hug). **Partners with long hair should discuss beforehand if touching hair is okay or not** (if it is not, tying them might feel more comfortable for both players).

Stage 5: Touching face. Stage 5 includes touching the face, cheeks, chin, and forehead. **Partners should discuss beforehand if touching hair, as well as the lips and mouth, is okay or not.**

The workshop

When both players feel ready and have expressed so, they should sit face to face, for example cross-legged on the bed. They should be dressed up, but wearing short sleeves, as skin-to-skin contact is part of building physical intimacy. When they are comfortably seated, one of the partner may launch the workshop using the color scale ("BLUE?" "BLUE").

If players complete the five stages and still don't feel like using "RED", they may simply use "BLUE?" again as a way to move to the next workshop or the break.

References

About larp

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