

conflict

Conflict makes challenge personal. It's one thing to be challenged by a cliff waiting to be climbed, or a puzzle waiting to be solved, but it's entirely another thing to go up against a real live opponent. A simple challenge just sits there waiting for you to come; you can ignore it or tackle it at your leisure. But a challenge coming from a human being is of entirely another order—you can't just sit there thinking about it. You accept the challenge or you slink away.

Conflict is the stressor that reveals character and ability. Challenge without conflict is entirely predictable; when you go mano a mano with a crossword puzzle, you know exactly what you're getting into. But when you enter into a conflict with an active agent, you no longer enjoy the initiative; that other person could come at you from any direction, challenging you in ways that you might not have anticipated. Conflict enlivens and animates challenge; without conflict, challenge is limp and passive. Narrative operates under the same constraint; conflict puts the protagonist under stress, forcing choices that reveal character.

Mars, Venus, and Conflict

Some game designers, laden with more testosterone than experience, maintain that women can't handle conflict or are afraid of it. Female conflict over issues that are vital to female interests can be just as ferocious as male conflicts, but they differ in two respects. First, women don't go around with a chip on their shoulders, seeking out conflict as men are wont to do. Second, women don't play out their conflicts in the same dimensions that men do. Where men rely heavily on physical forms of conflict, women tend toward social conflict.

The two sex's attitudes toward each other in this respect are illuminating. In matters of conflict, men regard women as sneaky and deceitful. Men wonder why women can't just come out in the open, look you in the eye, and punch you in the nose. They conveniently overlook the fact that a woman using such an approach is almost certain to be worsted in a fistfight. Women, by contrast, view men as primitive louts when it comes to conflict. They wonder why men hit first and ask questions later. The fact that hierarchies are central to male identity is lost on most women. Understanding these differences is crucial to designing games that appeal to women.

Dimensions of Conflict

We humans have evolved a myriad of dimensions of conflict. After all, if you can't beat your opponent in an existing dimension, why not make up a new dimension in which you can beat him? Thus human creativity has been bent toward the development of all kinds of conflict, and designers now have only to pick over this feast to find one dimension capable of providing interesting possibilities.

Games,
like stories,
require
conflict to
have any
life.

Physical

This is the oldest and most fundamental dimension of conflict. Bash the other guy on the head, kick him in the butt, or punch him in the nose. People have been resolving their disputes in this fashion since, well, before they were human. Early on, we humans applied our tool-making skills to the problem and invented “the weapon”—a big stick or a rock—and we’ve been improving it ever since.

We should differentiate between physical conflict as a means of establishing dominance and physical conflict as a means of eliminating others. Sometimes the use of physical force is only a means of intimidating a rival, and so can take more symbolic means. A gorilla pounding his chest makes a deep resonant sound indicating the volume of his torso, and by implication, the magnitude of his upper body strength. An animal’s growl serves a similar function. Baring the teeth is another example of demonstrating physical prowess prior to actual physical conflict. Humans pound the table with their fists, shout, or grind their teeth as demonstrations of physical strength. And if simple demonstrations are insufficient to intimidate a rival, the actual application of physical force tends to concentrate on the area that combines the greatest emotional impact with the least actual injury: the face.

Physical conflict “to the death” is another matter entirely. In animal behavior, deadly conflict is rarely mixed with dominance conflict; typically, dominance conflict is applied to members of one’s own species, where deadly conflict is applied to other species. The only exceptions I can think of are wolves and humans.

Verbal

Language is another of our uniquely human inventions, and we can only guess how early in linguistic history the first insult appeared—but there’s little doubt that it preceded, say, the first love poem. Linguistic conflict normally takes several different forms. The first is the “insult battle,” in

which two rivals compete to see who can produce the most humiliating insult. Another verbal conflict is the "boasting battle," in which the two combatants attempt to outdo each other in exaggerated tales of physical prowess.

While such battles are usually executed with some jocularly, serious insults play a large and varied role in human conflict. We have a colorful menu of simple one-shot imprecations. Then there are the escalatory sequences: "You talking to ME?" "Smile when you say that, pardner!" "You wanna make something of it?" More interesting are the more sophisticated forms of insult, such as the left-handed compliment: "Dear, you are so daring to show up wearing last year's fashions!" Or the crypto-insult, using terminology that the victim cannot fathom: "You look charmingly coprophilous today, my dear!"

A particularly effective form of verbal conflict is narrative assault, in which the attacker tells a fascinating story to a spellbound audience—but the story contains elements inimical to the interests of the storyteller's opponent. A perfect example of such verbal conflict is provided by the famous Apple Macintosh "1984" commercial, in which a youthful female athlete smashes a symbol of oppression and dehumanization. Apple's target was the IBM PC, which had established dominance in the market. The beauty of the approach is that it permits no effective response. What was IBM to do, broadcast a commercial with a dictator hunting down and capturing the Macintosh woman?

The insulting joke is perhaps the most cruelly effective form of verbal assault. There is nothing more humiliating than to be laughed at, and the fury this kindles in the victim paralyzes his ability to prepare a riposte in kind.

Political

In this form of conflict, the combatants seek to recruit allies and undermine their opponent's social alliances. The most common term for such behavior is "back-stabbing," but in truth a great many behaviors are

encompassed herein. Something so simple as a friendly conversation with a third party can be carried out with malevolent political intent, even if the conversation itself is friendly and pleasant. Once again, humans have developed an impressive array of such behaviors: bad-mouthing, insinuation, questioning another's credentials, framing the victim for some crime he did not commit, falsely informing the victim's allies that he has betrayed them, and so on.

Economic

A rarer medium of conflict is the economic arena. If you can't punch your adversary, insult him, or discredit him, perhaps you can financially ruin him. This is of course the primary form of conflict in business environments, but it can also be extended to other arenas. Smuggle some rotten meat into your enemy's food products, and you can ruin him financially.

Directness of Conflict

Conflict can be prosecuted with varying degrees of directness. The most direct conflict places the two combatants face to face at arm's length; whether they are punching each other or insulting each other, their conflict is about as direct as it can get. But conflict need not be so simple; recourse to indirection can often yield more interesting possibilities.

The simplest step here is to increase the physical distance between the two combatants. Guns do this admirably well; but there are plenty of so-called "indirect weapons" that project an explosive to a distant location. I still recall the great satisfaction I felt while playing **Doom**, sending a rocket into a distant target. The bad guys were just a few moving pixels. The rocket approached, exploded, and the pixels were motionless. Ah, success...no muss, no fuss.

Even more indirection is achieved when the combatants cannot see each other. The attacker tosses a grenade through a window and then imagines the consternation of his victims as they realize what is about

to happen. But why stop there? What if the attacker sets a time bomb and then escapes to a distant location, checking his watch to confirm the bomb's detonation? Such conflict may be less direct than watching your victim's blood splatter all over you, but it can be equally satisfying to pursue. An even greater degree of indirection can be attained with a booby trap; as the attacker, you don't know when or whom you'll nail with your evil device, but you are still applying lethal force.

Another form of indirection can be implemented through agents. Instead of shooting the bad guy yourself, the player provides strategic control of an agent who makes the tactical decisions about whom to shoot and when. In effect, the player commands an army of robots who fight under his generalship.

The highest degree of this form of indirectness arises when the player's identity is distributed among several agents. The best example of this kind of indirection is Jim Dunnigan's brilliant design, **Russian Civil War**, which was described in Chapter 2, "Some Milestone Games."

There is also indirectness of approach to consider. Sure, you can directly kill the enemy, but what if you shoot the rope holding the big weight under which he is standing? Frederick the Great of Prussia executed such indirectness of approach better than any general in history. In one campaign, he maneuvered his army down one road, which threatened his enemy's supply lines, so the enemy repositioned himself to a safer location. Frederick again marched to the side, again placing his enemy in a vulnerable location. This process continued for several months until the enemy found himself trapped in an impossible situation, at which point the enemy surrendered. Frederick had won a campaign without firing a shot.

Indirectness of approach need not be confined to spatial dimensions. The German submarine campaign during World War II was an indirect approach to defeating England's armies by starving them of supplies. The USA has done much the same thing to Iraq since 1990 by establishing a trade embargo that strangles Iraq's economy, thereby crippling

its military potential while also, in what is known as “collateral damage,” starving its population. Since around the year 2000, the USA has gone on the financial offensive against terrorists, freezing their bank accounts and thereby incapacitating them; the USA’s ability to intercept their telecommunications has enervated them. These are all supremely indirect approaches in a vicious war.

Note that, in general, indirect approaches tend to be less violent. They are also more subtle and often take longer to achieve their goals. Those hotheads who wanted to “nuke Osama” in the fall of 2001 would certainly have been gratified by the immediate demonstration of power and the big explosions, and they would have succeeded in rearranging the rocks on various Afghan mountainsides, but in practice, pulling the teeth of the Al-Qaeda network has required years of slow, patient effort and is still not completed.

Intensity of Conflict

Conflict is carried out with varying degrees of intensity. It’s easiest to think of conflict resolution as a process that requires a given amount of conflict. That conflict can be concentrated into a short time, in which case the conflict is intense, or it can be spread out over a longer time, in which case it is less intense. This distinction directly bears on the design of your game. Intense conflict necessitates a short game; a longer game requires less intensity. Many designers fail to grasp this simple concept; they create games of long-duration intensity. The monsters just keep coming, the killing is non-stop, and the player is exhausted when the game finally ends. While less experienced players revel in such intensity, it is in general not a good idea, as I will explain in the next section. A well-paced game design will rely on more indirect, less intense forms of conflict if it is to last a long time.

Violence

We are now in a position to address one of the most vexing problems facing the computer games industry: violence in games. The industry's response to the accusations leveled against it (that computer games are too violent) has disappointed me. For the most part, people in the industry circle the wagons and deny the problem. They denigrate their accusers, wrap themselves in the First Amendment, and close their minds to all arguments. This saddens me because all this ruckus is so avoidable. Game designers cling to violence only because they cannot imagine other forms of conflict.

Consider violence in terms of the three elements I have just presented: dimension, directness, and intensity. Violence is the most intense, direct, physical form of conflict. What strikes me is the industry's obsession with the most extreme manifestations of these elements. Conflict in many games is about as physical as it can get; recall **Mortal Kombat's** crowning moment, when the player has overcome his opponent, and the words "Finish him!" appear on the screen, at which point the player rips out his opponent's head and spine. Directness is another overdone element; why do so many games put the player in close proximity to his opponents? Why do violent games so rarely place the violent act outside the view of the player? And of course, the kill-or-be-killed approach of many games is far and away the most intense expression of conflict. As the character Quark once said on the television show *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, "Why do we have to kill so many? Couldn't we just wound some?" Not in many games, apparently.

Thus, violence in games represents the most extreme form of conflict: gorily physical, utterly direct, and maximally intense. My objection to this is not so much moral as aesthetic: Do we have to use a bludgeon when we design? Violence in games is like Wagner played for 18 hours with the bass turned up. It's like chocolate cereal in chocolate milk with

chocolate sprinkles and chocolate fudge on top. It's like a newsgroup correspondent whose vocabulary is dominated by "fuck," "shit," and "crap." It's overdone. It's so much of the same thing that it's distasteful.

Intensity and the Evolution of Taste

There is a good reason for all this intensity: It's a kid thing. The world that children inhabit bubbles with the most amazing things, and kids snarf up all that excitement with gusto. They want to experience life to its fullest, and so they push everything to its limit.

Consider candy, for example. Candy is fun food. What makes candy so special among foods? I think that it's because candy is intensely pleasurable. Have you ever noticed just how intense an experience candy provides? It doesn't taste merely good; candy makes your tongue jump up and shout with joy. Now, there are other intense gustatory experiences—chili peppers, for example. But they are not intensely pleasurable. A chili pepper makes your tongue scream, not laugh. Of course, because it's such an intense experience, candy must be taken in small doses. You don't eat an entire meal of candy, just a small piece.

When I was a child, I loved candy. It was my favorite food. But as I grew older, I became bored with the taste of candy. I wanted more subtlety and more variety in my eating experiences. By the time I was a teenager, my tastes had matured to favor such sophisticated foods as hamburgers, pizza, and hot dogs. As I grew older, my quest for subtlety and variety led me to try Chinese food, different breads, barbecue sauces, Italian food, cheeses, salads—all manner of foods.

The aggregate efforts of millions of people pursuing similar courses has spawned a huge gustatory universe populated with a staggering variety of culinary delights: Thai food, peanut butter, wines, T-bone steaks, Béarnaise sauce, blackened foods, caviar, dill bread, and on and on. And one small subset of this universe is the world of candy, characterized by several traits: It is fun, intensely pleasurable food, best taken in small doses, and primarily appreciated by children.

Cartoons

Now consider cartoons. Cartoons are the most fun form of video. Sure, I enjoy many forms of video, but cartoons make me laugh more. What makes cartoons so much fun? I think that it has to do with the fact that they are so intensely pleasurable. Look at the colors in a cartoon: all bright, loud colors—no soft pastels or delicate shades here. Or consider the pace of a cartoon. Everything happens at breakneck speed.

Characters dash about frenetically, never giving the viewer a second to catch his breath. And there's nothing subtle about danger in cartoons. Characters are assailed by falling safes, flocks of flying knives, sizzling sticks of dynamite, and falls from cosmic heights.

Herein lies some of the pleasurable aspect of cartoons, for the characters are never seriously hurt by all this mayhem. Explosions merely blacken their faces. Falls from great heights produce body-shaped craters from which the character emerges, to wobble away unhurt. The impact of a falling safe flattens the character, who peels himself up from the ground to reinflate his body as if it were a balloon. This disjunction between terrible danger and lack of serious harm is a pleasurable release; it is fun.

The intensity of cartoons requires them to be short, only a few minutes' duration. This point is exemplified by the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, which started with a magnificent cartoon lasting all of three and a half minutes. Then the cartoon transformed into a movie: The bright colors softened, the pace slowed down to that of real life, and the intensity dropped down to a level that could be sustained for two hours.

When I was a kid, cartoons were my favorite form of video. I'd watch them all day long, if I could. But as I grew older, I became bored with the sameness of cartoons. I longed for characters who were more than cute little animals. I wanted some conflict that was resolved with more subtlety than a mallet-blow to the head. I wanted more variety and more subtlety in my video. So I began to watch more sophisticated programs,

programs like *Gilligan's Island* and *Lost in Space*. And later still, I started watching even more serious video, so that now my viewing habits include movies like *When Harry Met Sally*, *Out of Africa*, and *Koyaanisqatsi*.

Most of us followed an analogous path, and now our combined tastes have created a huge universe of video pleasures, including comedies, how-to shows, mysteries, game shows, pornographic movies, talk shows, action-adventure movies, soap operas, kiddie shows, and many more forms of video. Cartoons comprise a small subset of this gigantic universe, distinguishable by the fact that they are fun, intensely pleasurable, best taken in small doses, and primarily appreciated by children.

Comics

Consider comics. (For the purposes of this discussion, I shall exclude from consideration the serious comics of recent years, such as *Maus*. Instead, I shall consider only the mainstream comics.) Comics are fun; I get a kick out of reading them. Comics are fun because they are intensely pleasurable. Look at the drawing style in the comics: bold, clean lines, with no hint of subtlety. The colors are bright and pure. The characters, conflicts, and events in the comics are always intense. Good guys are as good as they come; bad guys are ugly, deformed, and truly evil. The good guys always win; that's one of the things that makes comics fun.

Comics always come in small doses, largely because their intensity cannot be maintained over a long time. Their first audience is children. When I was a kid, I used to read comics all the time. After a while, though, I grew bored with the sameness of comics. I wanted more variety, more subtlety in my reading. So I began to read more mature fare: Jules Verne and Mark Twain. Later I graduated to Thoreau, Hemingway, and Shakespeare. Now I read Toynbee, Braudel, and von Clausewitz.

Each of us has pursued a similar evolution, starting with comics and proceeding to more subtle literature. Jointly, our courses have spawned a gigantic universe of literature, with newsmagazines and science books, cookbooks and sci-fi novels, the *National Enquirer* and *Playboy*, dictionaries, car repair books, economics textbooks, devotional literature, and even this book. And way over in one corner of this universe is a tiny subset of literature known as comics, unique in that they are fun, intensely pleasurable, best taken in small doses, and especially appreciated by children.

Videogames

These considerations explain the obsession with violence that saturates videogames. Violence is the most intense, direct, and physical form of conflict available; therefore, kids want to experience it. And it's intensely pleasurable, because the kid expects to kill off all the bad guys and win the game. Videogames are in the same league with candy, cartoons, and comic books...and they appeal to precisely the same audience.

What's different is that they are not part of a vast universe of computational delights, teeming with diversions appealing to a wide array of tastes. Our player is an astronaut floating alone in a vast, dark universe with no stars, no galaxies, nothing. Where are the games to appeal to his more mature tastes? Where are the games that are analogous to Caesar salads, nightly news, or bodice-ripper novels? Where are the bagel-and-cream-cheese games, the Archie Bunker games, the Jacqueline Susanne games? Where are the games about a boy and his dog or the prostitute with a heart of gold?

The reason for this emptiness, I think, has to do with the nativity of computer games. The other three pleasures all existed in forms quite separate from the kiddie-forms; indeed, the kiddie-corners of their universes were not explored until well after the main areas of the universe had been developed. We were eating nuts and berries long before we

