

Conflict in Game Design

Name: _____

Conflict: The Essence of a Game

Adolescents know what conflict is, especially during fights with friends, family, or teachers. Conflict can make you angry or irritated or unhappy. Sometimes, conflict can be thrilling or even fun, but it always means at least two people are in opposition over opposing desires. Yet, conflict is essential to the development of a great board game. Why is this?

A very good definition of conflict is the “**mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands**” (Merriam Webster Dictionary). In other words, **you want something, and someone else wants it too**. Or, **you want to do something, and someone else gets in your way**. Even when physical items are involved (“That’s my donut.” “No, it’s mine!”), conflict is essentially a mental struggle. The owner of the donut is the one who ultimately out-smarted the other prospective owner in some way.

In literature, conflict is essential to the telling of a really good story, no matter if it nonfiction or fiction. Conflict takes place along what is called the dramatic arc and is often modeled as such:

The **exposition** is the background information like setting, characters, and the initial problem that drives all plot elements forward. The **rising action** is escalation of the problem through heightened or spiraling tensions between the protagonist, antagonist and other supporting characters. Eventually, events **climax** where the characters reach a point where fortunes change dramatically, for better or worse. The **falling action** sees the conflict unraveling for the main characters, eventually resulting in the **resolution**, which is where the conflict is finally released and normality is again achieved.

Professor Michael Grinfeld of the University of Missouri Columbia's School of Journalism presents it conflict in a somewhat familiar form.

Consider this familiar nursery rhyme:

Mary Had a Little Lamb

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow.
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go.

Plenty of exposition, some rising action, and a conflict of the most gentle sort. Oh no! Mary's lamb is following her! Whatever will we do???!!!!

However, if you look at the same nursery rhyme through a different lens, one focused on amping up the conflict, the reader feels quite differently.

Mary Had a Little Lamb

Mary had a little lamb, (*rising action*)
Her father shot it dead. (*climax*)
Now it goes to school with her (*falling action*)
Between two hunks of bread. (*resolution*)

While this retelling of the classic nursery rhyme is a bit harsh, the point is clearly made that the entire dramatic arc can be told in quick order. Each step is clearly presented. More than that, however, is the emotional response that a reader can have upon reading it. The once gentle rhyme is now shocking, brutal even, and results in a dark and final place. One could also consider the ending rather mundane and commonplace, in

some ways, because any person who eats meat could be Mary, too.

So by creating a visceral conflict, Mary Had a Little Lamb can generate far more interest than ever before. Without conflict, the story of Mary Had a Little Lamb is nice, and comforting, but not compelling. This version relies on the twist of shock and brutality to make an impression. When the reader (or game player) becomes mentally and emotionally invested in the subject at hand, they are more willing to see the story (or game) to its eventual conclusion. And the resolution, perhaps not what one wanted, nevertheless is complete.

Conflict in Game Design

In its very essence, a board game is about conflict. Players have incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands. Usually, some type of limited resource or option is the source of the conflict, but not always. The game board itself models the conflict using physical resources that players can interact with, manipulate, and maneuver to achieve the desired, stated goals. Understanding conflict is key to understanding game design, because, without conflict, there is no game.

Conflict presents itself in different ways in a game. First, on a macro level, the whole game is about a type of conflict. Since the inherent nature of games is a struggle over resources, conflict meaningfully gives games a purpose and goals. The game can present a war or battle, or even something seemingly silly and frivolous like rabbits trying to eat lettuce. The large-scale conflict that the game presents must be engaging and stimulate a player's need to be excited about the game's theme and objectives. Good game design presents large-scale conflict that is engaging and fun for players.

On a smaller, more micro level, each player endures conflict on each turn. Conflict may present itself in the choices that players make that may advance their own game or hinder another player's chances. Good game design makes the conflict meaningful and manageable on each turn—players know what their options are and can make decisions about those choices. Each turn may mean a different set of choices to be made, depending on board and resource configuration, but players should be equipped to make choices in response.

So how to make it meaningful?

The Stages of Conflict

Conflict can be explored through another lens, one often used by political scientists in studying conflict at the state, international, and global levels.

The Stages of Conflict

1. Initiation
 1. The initial set of competing desires, needs, or wants that opposing forces discover become the subject of competition
2. Escalation
 1. Events occur between the two sides where tensions heighten on both sides
3. Stalemate
 1. Both sides continue a path of mutual attack, defense, and destruction, each aiming for vanquishment of their enemy, until the costs become too great.
4. De-escalation
 1. Through negotiation and/or leadership change, the two sides back away from the conflict as it unravels.

5. Resolution

1. Open hostility has ceased and a new normality is found, though both sides may appear quite different than they appeared before.

Note: Intractable conflicts are those where the players are still in escalation and will never end unless tipped over into stalemate. Often, countries will avoid reaching stalemate to prevent excessive bloodshed, but that means that the smaller acts of struggle and tension continue indefinitely.

So how does this relate to game design? Let's reframe each step.

1. Initiation

1. Players assume the role of competitors, acting out a struggle over resources (or other competing desires), using a board and pieces to model that struggle.

2. Escalation

1. Players play the game, and improve their standings by taking positive steps to advance their position and at times negative steps to prohibit others' advancement.

3. Stalemate

1. Players reach a point where the game end nears, and players must make the final choices to stake their position within the game.

4. De-escalation

1. Final turns are made with each player ultimately striving for a win.

5. Resolution

1. Points are counted, a winner is declared, everyone cleans up nicely, and everyone starts asking what the next game will be. (And so on.)

For each of these categories, it is important to understand that they NEED to occur. Otherwise, games can have an unclear focus, aren't very competitive, never reach a critical point or a satisfying conclusion.

Thinking About the Experience...

Euro-style board games are all about creating an experience for players. As such, what type of experience do you want to create?

Types of Games:

Abstract Strategy

Action/Dexterity

Adventure

Bluffing

Card Game

Children's Game

Cooperation/Partnerships

Deduction

Dice

Economic/Resource management

Educational

Electronic

Expansion for Base Game

Exploration

Knowledge testing

Maze

Memory-based

Miniatures

Negotiation/bargaining

Print & Play

Puzzle

Race Games (Dragon Riders, Formula De);

Strategy (Stratego);

War/Battle (Chess, checkers);

Theme Development

Machines can be divided into two components: structure and function.

In strategy games, the mechanics define how a game actually plays (its function) and the theme is the subject matter (its structure).

For example, in the game Monopoly, the mechanics of the game include rolling dice and moving around the board (roll and move) and auctioning property cards (auction and bidding?). The theme, however, is about being a landlord, buying property, improving it, and renting it out, all in Atlantic City, New Jersey (in its basic American form).

Themes provide a structure that players can use to understand and remember the rules of a game. In the case of Monopoly, the player takes on the role of a landlord, deciding whether or not to invest in a property, hoping that it will more than make back its cost in later rent. The player goes to jail for a period of time, which understandably undermines performing a landlord's duties. Rent must be paid when the player spends time on other people's properties. All of this helps the underlying rules of the game make sense.

Themes can also help many players enjoy the game itself more, deriving pleasure from it: the idea of pirates sailing the Caribbean might be more exciting than the idea of moving wood blocks on a board from one circle to another.

Some games have no theme, and are referred to as abstract games. There are many examples like Scrabble, checkers, and Jenga. Some players don't care for purely abstract games, preferring the fun of the theme, while others prefer the "pure" gameplay of abstracts.

Common Themes in Board Games

Highlight the themes you like. Write down others as you think of them.

Keep in mind that game companies are always looking for NEW themes, but an amazing game can and will emerge from these existing themes IF the game offers a

new variation or twist.

General Gaming Themes

Adventure

Animals: Land, Sea

Bluffing/Humor/Memory

City Building

Computer/Internet

Crime, Mafia, Murder

Deduction/Mystery

Economic

Environment/Ecology

Exploration: Sea, Space

Fantasy/Legends/Sci Fi/Myths

Farming

Horror/Haunted House/Zombies Industry/Manufacturing

Maze

Medicine/Science

Negotiation

Ninjas/Pirates

Politics

Racing

Spies/Secret Agents

Territory Building/Acquisition

Trains/Transportation

Robots, Ants, Monkeys

Historical Periods

Prehistoric civiliation

Ancient Civilization—Greek, Roman, Chinese, Japanese, Central American, South American, African, Australian, Middle Eastern

Early America

American West & Settlement

Medieval

Renaissance

Present-day foreign cultures

Wars

Revolutionary, Civil War
Modern Warfare
Native American War
WWI, WW2, WW3
Vietnam, Korean War

Specific People

Alexander the Great
Genghis Khan
Napoleon

Popular Interests

Celebrities/Fashion
Food
Holidays/Religious
Music/Movies/TV/Radio
Novel, Comic book-based Sports/Recreation/Dance
Travel/Culture

Brainstorming Ideas For Your Game

Step One: Inductive Brainstorming

Select a theme from the list on the previous page (or select your own). Generate as large a list of possible smaller ideas, concepts, or elements that are associated with the larger theme. Build on your ideas. There are no wrong answers; the emphasis is on quantity, not quality.

Try one of the strategies below to help you get started.

Blue Sky: Generate as many possibilities, unlimited by time or any other constraint

Slow Boil: Pick a topic, learn as much as you can about the topic and ideas will grow from there

Aesthetics: What emotional response do you want from your players?

Think of ideas that will create that response

Step Two: Take a Break

After you have generated as many ideas as possible, take a break from what you've done.

Let the ideas stew in your mind. After a while, come back to your list. You'll add new ideas or expand upon older ideas. From this garden, your board game flower will grow.

Brainstorm Here!

Write Your Ideas Down Below!

Theme Research

Now that you have identified the theme of your game, you will need to research the theme carefully. For example, if you wanted to make a game about coal mining, some research might show you that the biggest dangers are methane gas and coal dust. Additional research might show what safety measures can be taken to avert these hazards, and the cost to implement them. How could you incorporate these elements into your game?

Research your theme and write down 20 elements that are specific to your theme that you would possibly like to include in your game. Print out any information you deem helpful and store it in your folder for future reference.

From Theme to Game

All games should involve choices between two or more disparate elements. The theme helps determine what these elements are. Since the game models the theme, it should simplify the theme into a series of choices. (Simplify is the key word here—game designers should not be so concerned with “realism” that their games become unplayable.)

What elements of your theme are important?

How do these elements represent conflict?

How do you model this conflict in a way that forces players to make choices?

How will the actions taken by one player affect the choices available to other players?

Theme Development Rubric

Student	I	E
Knowledge Development The student....		
Uses appropriate sources to gather information		
Analyzes, evaluates, and/or synthesizes information		
Expands knowledge with new learning		
Organizes and sequences information		
Thinking Skills The student shows gains in the following...		
Creative thinking: Generates and elaborates on a a large number of original ideas in many different directions		
Decision-making: the ability to prioritize and make well-informed decisions		
Intrapersonal Skills The student...		
Demonstrates daily self-discipline in using classtime wisely		
Follows directions		
Technology Usage		
Demonstrates proper use of technology resources		
Follows district technology protocols		
Independence Level		
Independently (4) With a Prompt (3) With Teacher Assistance (2) With Reliance on Teacher Assistance (1) Not Applicable (N/A)	I	E
Expectation Level		
Far Exceeds Expectations (4) Exceeds Expectations (3) Meets Expectations (2) Does Not Meet	I	E

TOTAL _____ OF 20

AVERAGE _____ OF 4

In its very essence, a board game is about conflict, which can be defined as:

- ★ The mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands (Merriam Webster)
 - You want something, and someone else wants it too.
 - Or, you want to do something, and someone else gets in the way.

Conflict presents itself in different ways in a game. The game board itself models the conflict using physical resources that players can interact with, manipulate, and maneuver to achieve the desired, stated goals. Understanding conflict is key to understanding game design, because, without conflict, there is no game.

At the “big picture” level, the whole game should present EXTERNAL conflict, a simulated problem with opposing sides that all players must face. The game can present a war or battle, or even something seemingly silly and frivolous like rabbits trying to eat lettuce. The large-scale conflict that a game presents must fit the theme logically and encourage players to interact enthusiastically in addressing the conflict as they play.

List three games you played in class, and explain the large-scale, external conflict in each:

1.

2.

3.

On a smaller level, each player endures INTERNAL conflict on each turn. Players have incompatible or opposing needs, drives, and/or wishes. Conflict may present itself in the choices that players make that may advance their own game or hinder another player's chances. Good game design makes the conflict meaningful and manageable on each turn—players know what their options are and can make decisions about those choices. Each turn may mean a different set of choices to be made, depending on board and resource configuration, but players should be equipped to make choices in response. Satisfactory resolution of the conflict should coincide with the end of the game.

Examples of small-scale internal conflict (on player turns) in game: _____

1.

- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Mapping a Game's Conflict

Name: _____

Often in Language Arts, the plot of books' storylines are analyzed to determine the key elements that propell a story forward. We can do the same thing to analyze a board game, and this can help to shape the overall "plot" of your designed game.



Explain how each step of the plot diagram above can be used to explain a game's plot in general terms and then explain a specific game's plot.

	Board Games in General	Specific Game:
Exposition: the beginning, characters and setting are established, conflict is introduced.		
Rising Action a series of events lead up to the conflict, excitement and tension build		
Climax The turning point of the story, the moment of highest interest and emotion. The reader wonders what is going to happen next.		
Falling Action the winding up of the story. Events and complications begin to resolve and the result of		

actions of the main characters are seen		
Resolution the end of a story and ends with either a happy or a tragic ending.		

Conflict in Games We've Played

Name: _____

Think about the games you've played in class. Choose three of them, and explain how large-scale conflict was represented in each game as a whole and small-scale conflict was present during players' turns.

Write the game name on the line, and explain how the game presents conflict on the whole and small-scale on players' turns.

1. _____

Conflict in the game as a whole (external):

Conflict on each player's turn (internal):

2. _____

Conflict in the game as a whole (external):

Conflict on each player's turn (internal):

3. _____

Conflict in the game as a whole (external):

Conflict on each player's turn (internal):

Conflict in Game Design

Name: _____

In its very essence, a board game is about conflict, which can be defined as:

- ★ The mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands (Merriam Webster)
 - You want something, and someone else wants it too.
 - Or, you want to do something, and someone else gets in the way.

Conflict presents itself in different ways in a game. The game board itself models the conflict using physical resources that players can interact with, manipulate, and maneuver to achieve the desired, stated goals. Understanding conflict is key to understanding game design, because, without conflict, there is no game.

At the “big picture” level, the whole game should present EXTERNAL conflict, a simulated problem with opposing sides that all players must face. The game can present a war or battle, or even something seemingly silly and frivolous like rabbits trying to eat lettuce. The large-scale conflict that a game presents must fit the theme logically and encourage players to interact enthusiastically in addressing the conflict as they play.

List three games you played in class, and explain the large-scale, external conflict in each:

1.

2.

3.

On a smaller level, each player endures INTERNAL conflict on each turn. Players have incompatible or opposing needs, drives, and/or wishes. Conflict may present itself in the choices that players make that may advance their own game or hinder another player's chances. Good game design makes the conflict meaningful and manageable on each turn—players know what their options are and can make decisions about those choices. Each turn may mean a different set of choices to be made, depending on board and resource configuration, but players should be equipped to make choices in response. Satisfactory resolution of the conflict should coincide with the end of the game.

Examples of small-scale internal conflict (on player turns) in game: _____

1.

2.

3.

4.

Mapping a Game's Conflict

Name: _____

Often in Language Arts, the plot of books' storylines are analyzed to determine the key elements that propell a story forward. We can do the same thing to analyze a board game, and this can help to shape the overall "plot" of your designed game.



Explain how each step of the plot diagram above can be used to explain a game's plot in general terms and then explain a specific game's plot.

	Board Games in General	Specific Game:
Exposition: the beginning, characters and setting are established, conflict is introduced.		
Rising Action a series of events lead up to the conflict, excitement and tension build		
Climax The turning point of the story, the moment of highest interest and emotion. The reader wonders what is going to happen next.		
Falling Action the winding up of the story. Events and complications begin to resolve and the result of actions of the main characters are seen		

Resolution the end of a story and ends with either a happy or a tragic ending.		

Conflict in Games We've Played

Name: _____

Think about the games you've played in class. Choose three of them, and explain how large-scale conflict was represented in each game as a whole and small-scale conflict was present during players' turns.

Write the game name on the line, and explain how the game presents conflict on the whole and small-scale on players' turns.

1. _____

Conflict in the game as a whole (external):

Conflict on each player's turn (internal):

2. _____

Conflict in the game as a whole (external):

Conflict on each player's turn (internal):

3. _____

Conflict in the game as a whole (external):

Conflict on each player's turn (internal):