Contrasting Player Conflicts in Digital Games and Board Games.

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When one thinks about games the images of conquest and domination enter into the mind. This is true because games revolve around conflict, whether they are violent or otherwise. However conflicts in games can evolve differently based on how the players must interact with one another. Is every player in the game against one another? Are there chances in the game for players to team up legally or illegally? Does the game require players to work together at certain times? These questions bring up complex concepts surrounding conflicts that can be related to the research area of conflict theory.

Conflict theory is the study of how humans begin, maintain and end conflicts (Aureli & Waal, 2000; Bartos & Wehr, 2002; Weeks 1992). This research field draws on many areas surrounding human sciences including sociology and economics, just to name a few. The author's previous work has looked into ways of utilizing conflict theory for digital games (Medler (1), 2008). Additionally, this work has looked at the concept of mediation and neutrality; how game mechanics treat players impartially in a digital game and affect a game's conflict (Medler (2), 2008). However, when one begins to discuss conflicts found in digital games, human conflicts must compete against: artificial intelligence, a detachment from the other human (Ducheneaut et al., 2006) and static rule sets that are strictly adhered to by the game's programming (Bogost, 2007). Yet, these factors do not occur when a board game is played.

Board games allow multiple human players to take part in a game's conflict without the need for digital components. Without any digital components board games a) are often simpler to play (in computational terms), b) allow for face-to-face conflict dynamics, and c) allow the game's rules to be altered. These factors produce different conflict situations compared to digital games.

Using the author's previous research in combining games with conflict theory, and discussing how mediation plays a role in games, this paper will discuss the differences between conflicts found in board games and digital games. Discovering these differences have come about as part of the Digital Tabletop Research Group (a joint effort between Georgia Tech and Michigan State) and include:

1. Board games promote irrational play. Information can be quickly aggregated in board games and presented to the players. This allows players to change strategies quickly

because board games allow players to survey the entire game-space before making a decision. However, aggregating information can also cause players to make quick irrational decisions, for instance when faced with situations of grief play (Consalvo, 2007) or where a player is about to lose the game.

2. Board games offer tacit experiences. Players of board games often know one another. This means that not only can conflicts arise from the game's mechanics but also tacit conflicts can emerge between players that have had a history together. These types of conflicts contrast against the anonymous conflicts that are found in digital games.

3. Board game rules can be broken. Since a board game does not have a computer to monitor the game's rules players can produce 'house rules'. These rules, in essence, create emergent gameplay on top of the board game's existing rule-set. Additionally, the act of table talk is rampant in board games (where players are not hindered to discuss playing strategies or even what strategies they will use next) which can also affect the game's outcome, regardless of the rules. Digital games often try to hinder table talk by limiting contact between competing players.

4. Board games are indifferent towards the players. Game mechanics can fall along a spectrum of impartiality (Medler (2), 2008) where they may act very indifferent towards players or the mechanics may try to balance the relationships between the players (where weaker players are given help). Board games tend to lack the mechanics that will help balance the game because a) board games are smaller games that are balanced at the beginning, and b) chance is often involved, making it harder for strong players to pull ahead.

Reviewing these differences between board games and digital games, this paper will explore how conflict theory and mediation play a role in these two game mediums. The affordances and limitations that face-to-face board games offer, when compared to digital games, will be discussed along with how information presentation and the game's medium each play a role in a game's conflicts. Discussing and exploring these differences may lead to a better understanding of how digital game conflicts can take advantage of realistic face-to-face conflicts.

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