Designing a competitive game whose goal is to mitigate or resolve interpersonal conflict may seem like an oxymoron. But in our card game, Conflict Management 101, we try and do just that. In this analysis essay of our game design choices and play testing experiences, we will cover the theoretical impetus for our game, the rationale behind the mechanics of the game, and the playtesting involved during the game’s development. Theoretically, our game draws from both play therapy and communication research vis-a-vis the sub-category of conflict management. Mechanically, it is a party game with hand management, simultaneous action selection, storytelling, and voting/judging. The iterative process with playtesting and revision is ongoing.

Conflict Management Theory
Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of the communication process. The study of conflict management is considered important because conflicts arise consistently between individuals, and conflict management skills are essential for all types of social relationships (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998). Current trends in examining conflict and communication focus on the dynamics of cooperation vs. competition and whether those involved in conflict can receive benefit without harming others (Halevy, Borgstein, & Sagiev, 2008; Velez et al., 2014; McDaniel, McKinney, & Kimsey, 2017). A 2012 study showed that individuals exhibit behavior that corresponds with collaborative and cooperative conflict styles more often in face-to-face communication than in computer-mediated communication (Meluch & Walter, 2012).

Many examinations into conflict management and resolution base their work in the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Instrument (TKCMI), introduced by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann in 1974. The five primary conflict styles they identify are accommodating, avoiding, competing, collaborating, and compromising (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Since the development of the TKCMI, other inventories have been developed, with some expanding upon previous conflict research (Rahim, 1983) and others specifying constraints for specific professions (Austin, Gregory, & Martin, 2009). Conflict styles have been examined in conjunction with a variety of factors, including organizational communication (Gross & Guerrero, 2000), political orientation (Shirky, 2011), and gender roles (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002). We are particularly interested in how games can be used to develop skills to help resolve conflicts.

Games and Conflict
Games almost always involve conflict, because games typically (but not always) require a winner and/or a loser, or in the case of co-operative games the conflict arises via player versus game. Thus, conflicts and challenges emerge in gaming as rules or conditions keep players from obtaining their goal too easily. This has been true from the oldest complete board game, for which
at least partial rules were found. Played as early as 3000-2600 BCE, the Royal Game of Ur is a two-player race game (The British Museum, 2017 and Botermans, 2008). Our earliest electronic games were also two player: Tennis for Two and Spacewar!. A two-person game with a single winner can be compared to an irreconcilable conflict (Rapoport, 1974). In these types of games, two players are competing in a similar playing field with problems given, trying to find a solution that will benefit themselves the most. Games of this type are irreconcilable conflicts because a single player is the winner in the majority of circumstances and restrictions make players interact with one another to reach a similar goal (Rapoport, 1974).

Games, specifically video games, are also a point of conflict in that many people argue that they increase violent, aggressive, and antisocial behavior in players (Anderson et al., 2008; Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Putnam, 2000). However, results of research are inconsistent with this argument. Some studies have shown that games can actually decrease aggression and increase prosocial behavior, even if the game has violent elements. If a game holds prosocial communication mechanics there is a decreased accessibility to antisocial behavior and reduced hostility (Greitmeyer & Osswald, 2009). A 2016 study utilized local cooperative games to examine communication behavior between players and showed increased communication competence and adaptability in players (Barr, 2016). When players are participating in a game cooperatively, it can increase helping behavior in group conflict and reduce aggression with outgroup members (Velez et al., 2014). Group members also focus more on benefitting the ingroup and ingroup cooperation more than outgroup competition, even if the ability to damage the competition is available at no extra cost (Halevy, Borgstein, & Sagiv, 2008). We modeled prosocial behaviors in our game not by it being a co-operative game, but through the element of storytelling.

Games frame conflict and use it in different ways; thus, it has been proposed that games are heuristic devices that create new forms of thinking in players (Schlenker & Bonoma, 1978). Games illustrate how individuals manipulate one another to achieve their own ends (Berne, 1964). Board games create conflict between players with sometimes little to no story content or characterization, while computer and video games can use more developed narrative properties to create conflict situations (Lindley, 2002). Games have been used multiple times to showcase conflict management and communication with goals to teach conflict dynamics to children (Cheong et al., 2015), organizational conflict resolution (Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009), and group participation for individuals (Squire, 2011). A 2017 study at the University of Montana, Missoula, saw an instructor change the structure of an upper-level communication and conflict class from an online-only, lecture-based class to a hybrid class that used gameplay as a means of teaching conflict theory. At the end of the course, students reported higher engagement and interest in the material, and the instructor reported higher motivation and satisfaction in teaching (Yoshimura, 2017).

Much research about teaching conflict management deals with gamification in the workplace. Mary Scannell, an author and corporate trainer, published The Big Book of Conflict Resolution Games: Quick, Effective Activities to Improve Communication, Trust and Collaboration in 2010, an informational textbook and workbook designed for workplace managers
to employ at their jobs. These games do not teach the intricacies of conflict’s components and its management; rather, the book has exercises to solve workplace conflict and make tense work environments less stressful. Other authors in conflict management also stipulate a workplace specificity when describing their games and exercises (Schäfer, Stauber, & Bokan, 2004; Yannakakis et al., 2010; Tolias et al., 2015; Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation, 2017).

**Conflict Management 101 Game Summary**

Basing our game on the previous literature, we set out to design a conflict resolution game geared not toward the corporate workplace but instead for college students. Our game, *Conflict Management 101*, was developed initially using rock-paper-scissors and simultaneous action selection style mechanics, with the core concept being the Thomas-Kilmann conflict styles (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). We then revised our game to focus more on its party game roots with voting/judging and hand management rules. The game is comprised of two decks: one with conflict resolution style cards and the other with conflict-inducing situations. Each player chooses a conflict resolution card to use for the situation and plays their card face down; then, all players reveal their cards simultaneously and the round judge decides the winner after descriptions for each scenario’s resolution have been explained. After a certain number of rounds, a player is declared the winner based on the total rounds won.

**The Iterative Process**

*Initial Version Revisions.* After an initial playtesting session with students in our university’s Game Studies and Design program, the game underwent several revisions based on player feedback. In its initial version the game was comprised of two decks: one of conflict resolution style cards and the other of conflict-inducing situations with a set of win conditions for each situation. This win condition was one of the five types of conflict resolution styles. Players chose a conflict resolution style to use for the round’s situation and played their card face down; then, all players revealed their cards simultaneously and followed the situation card’s win conditions (accommodating beats forcing, forcing beating avoidant, and so on). Players drew from the deck to replenish their maximum hand size, meaning their playable options were randomized.

Overall, feedback from initial playtesters was positive and informative to aid in the future direction for the game. None of the college student playtesters had heard of the TKCMI but most were interested to learn more about it after playtesting. During initial playtesting we found that players evaded choosing the “avoiding” or “forcing” options available on the cards. The most common criticism of the game was its gameplay: playtesters commented on its similarity to rock-paper-scissors and stressed how little inference was made on the player. When asked how they would recommend fixing this issue, the most common response was to remove the win conditions on conflict situation cards and instead to assign a judge to each round who would determine the winner. This was then implemented in the alpha rules.

*Alpha Version Revisions.* In the alpha version, the editors from *OneShot* playtested the game and provided feedback. They appreciated the mix of scenarios, especially the blend of an implied “you” at fault with instances with the open ended fault. They understood our target
demographic was a university setting, and valued that audience, but felt the topic was important to people both in college and out of college. Therefore, for the beta version we changed the name of the game from its original generic Conflict Management 101 to Conflict Management 101: University Edition. This helped distinguish what type of conflict scenario cards are present in the game.

The early versions of the game included no graphical or visual design elements, only black text on each card. However, this is not atypical for games in this genre, much like the stark aesthetics of Cards Against Humanity or Apples to Apples. For the beta version, we standardized the cards and added more consistency and graphical appeal with colored boarders for the Conflict Resolution Style deck. Visually, we modified the resolution cards so that each of the seven player decks have a hand of conflict resolution cards that are bordered with their player color. This makes it easier to determine who played which style.

Additionally, in the alpha version, we only had the five traditional conflict resolution styles. In addressing conflict, it is important to not only try and mitigate a situation, but also identify actions that heighten the tension. In order to model this, and add more humor, we added an “Escalate” card after renaming the cards all to be strong active verbs. For the beta version, each player begins with a hand of six cards: avoid, force, compromise, collaborate, accommodate, and escalate. This focus on strong verbs makes each action more easily relatable and escalate adds a reactionary card to the mix.

Also, in order to force players to not repeatedly select the same conflict resolution style, we modified the rules so that a player’s hand must be exhausted before they can retrieve their cards. Therefore, each player has to play each conflict resolution style (minus escalate) at least once before replaying a style. This increased the storytelling mechanic of the game since players must describe how the conflict will be resolved based on their card played. It also encourages them to try new styles of resolution, forcing them to venture out of their comfort zone.

Based on all of these changes, we revised the rules for the beta version, both visually and contextually. Plus, we added examples of storytelling in a round.

Deleted Implementations

One addition we cut was the proposed inclusion of award cards. We thought these could be used to create comradery and positive feedback. Players could assign one or more of these awards to stories at their discretion. They included awards such as “Most Realistic,” “Most Humorous,” and “Most Heartwarming.” But it created difficulty in hand management since the player had so many cards to hold, as well as difficulty to scoring.

Future Iterations and Expansions

For the next version, we are going to change the function and repercussions of the Escalate card. Currently, the escalate card makes it so one player is unable to win that round. But in a future iteration, we will playtest that the person that plays the Escalate card must add to the story they are interrupting and enliven the situation. The original player may then play an additional conflict
resolution style card from their hand in order to de-escalate the scenario. If they are able to successfully de-escalate the situation, then they may be selected by the judge as the winner of the round. If they are not able to successfully de-escalate, the judge will decide the best storyteller from the round.

We also need to clarify in the rules that it is acceptable for players to play the same conflict resolution style card. And, we are considering adding icons to illustrate the conflict resolution styles.

After polishing the University Edition, we hope to move forward expanding on our game in the future by creating Conflict Management 101: Workplace Edition followed by Conflict Management 101: Family Edition expansions. The scenarios in each of these will be targeted to those specific audiences. Players could easily mix editions, as the rules for each would be identical.
References


Appendix A: Alpha Rules

Conflict Management 101

Lead Designer: Mollie Boynton
Designer: Cathlena Martin
Graphic Designer: Benton Tyler

According to Ken Thomas and Ralph Killman, there are five major conflict styles used in interpersonal conflict management. These styles are:

- Avoiding conflict altogether
- Forcing the situation until you get your way
- Trying to compromise on the situation
- Working to collaborate with everyone involved in the conflict
- Accommodating to others involved and letting them have their way

As humans, we go through conflicts almost every day with the people in our lives, even in ways we don’t initially realize. This game takes inspiration from Thomas and Killman’s rating of conflict styles and establishes them as ways to win each round. How many conflicts can you resolve in your favor?

PLAYERS
- 4 - 7

CONTENTS
- 125 cards of resolution styles
  - 25 each of avoidant, forcing, compromising, collaborating, and accommodating conflict resolution styles
- 35 cards of conflict situations

SETUP
- Shuffle the conflict situations deck and place it in the center of the playing area.
- Shuffle the resolution styles deck and deal hands to each player. Place the resolution style deck next to the conflict situation deck.
- 4-5 players: 5-card hand
- 6 players: 4-card hand
- 7 players: 3-card hand
- The oldest player starts as the dealer and judge of the first round.

TURN ORDER
- The dealer flips over a situation card and reads the situation aloud. The dealer is this round’s judge.
- Each player places a resolution style card in front of them facedown. All players, except for the judge, must play a resolution style card each round.
• When each player has chosen a card and played it face down, all players reveal their choice simultaneously. Starting to the judge’s left, players then give a short (30 seconds to a minute) explanation of how they would use that conflict style to resolve the conflict. *The judge may keep time, but we encourage a more relaxed approach to promote free and creative storytelling.
• The judge chooses the winner based on the resolution style and explanation chosen.
• The winner is given the conflict situation card to signify that they have won that round.
• Each player draws back to their original hand size.
• The player to the left is the next Judge and starts the next round by drawing a situation card.

WINNING
• A game ends when players have won a certain number of rounds based on the number of players.
  o 4 players: 6 wins
  o 5 players: 5 wins
  o 6 players: 4 wins
  o 7 players: 3 wins
Appendix B: Beta Rules

Conflict Management 101: University Edition
A storytelling party game for four to seven players

Designers: Mollie Boynton
            Cathlena Martin
            Benton Tyler

As humans, we endure conflicts nearly every day with people in our lives, sometimes in ways we may not initially realize. Games themselves are usually built on an element of conflict.

According to Ken Thomas and Ralph Killman, there are five major conflict styles used in interpersonal conflict management. These styles are:

1. Avoiding conflict altogether
2. Forcing the situation until you get your way
3. Working to collaborate with everyone involved in the conflict
4. Accommodating to others involved and letting them have their way
5. Trying to compromise on the situation

This game takes inspiration from Thomas and Killman’s rating of conflict styles and adds an explosive element via a reactionary card: Escalate
6. Escalating a situation raises the stakes, potentially increasing the seriousness of the situation, and cancels out someone else’s conflict resolution style.

How many conflicts can you resolve in your favor?

CONTENTS

- 42 Conflict Resolution Style cards (7 different colored decks, 6 cards per deck)
- 35 Conflict Situation cards

SETUP

1) Shuffle the Conflict Situation deck and place it face down in the center of the playing area.
2) Give each player a Conflict Resolution Style deck consisting of 6 cards of one color.
3) The oldest player starts as the judge of the first round.

TURN ORDER

1) The judge flips over a Conflict Situation card, reads the situation aloud, and judges the round.
2) Each player places a Conflict Resolution Style card in front of them facedown. All players, except for the judge, must play a Conflict Resolution Style card each round.
3) Once each player has chosen a card and played it face down, all players reveal their choice simultaneously.
4) Starting to the judge’s left, and moving clockwise, players give a short (less than one minute) explanation of how they would use that conflict resolution style to resolve the conflict. (We encourage creative storytelling.)
   Escalate: You may play an Escalate card during another player’s explanation.
5) The judge chooses the winner based on the Conflict Resolution Style card played and explanation.
6) The winner claims that round’s Conflict Situation card by placing it in front of them face down.
7) Each player retrieves the Conflict Resolution Style card they played that round and places it in their discard pile. They may not use that card again until they have exhausted their entire hand.
   NOTE: If a player has discarded their entire hand, except for the Escalate card, their discard pile becomes their player hand.
8) The player to the left of the current judge becomes the new judge and starts the next round by repeating Step 1 above.

ESCALATE RULES

At any point during another player’s explanation, you may play the Escalate card. This is a reactionary card that cancels out the previous Conflict Resolution Style card by increasing the situation’s tension. This means the player whose card Escalate was played on cannot win the round.
   Only one Escalate card may be played per turn.

EXAMPLE OF PLAY

Seven players (Anne, Bob, Christy, Damian, Ellie, and Jarrod) decide to play Conflict Management 101. Each player chooses a color and receives the corresponding deck of Conflict Resolution Style cards.

Since Jarrod is the oldest player, he will be the judge for the first round. The rest of the players are conveniently seated in alphabetical order around the left of Jarrod. Jarrod shuffles the Conflict Situation deck and draws a card: Where are we going to eat for dinner? Each player chooses a
**Conflict Resolution Style** card and plays it face down in the center of the table.

Starting to the Jarrod's left, Anne reveals her card. *Avoid.* Anne explains "I'm not even that hungry, I don’t know why we need to go eat right now."

Next, Bob reveals he played the *Force* card: "I want Chinese food! I've had a craving since yesterday and I am hungry. We are going to the Chinese Buffet!"

Christy reveals she played the *Collaborate* card: "I think we should take a vote. The only fair way to decide on where to eat is to let everyone have a say, and go with the majority's choice."

Now, Damian shows he played the *Accommodate* card: "I'm fine with Chinese food, I'll go along with whatever anyone else wants. I'm just hungry and want to go somewhere soon. Since Bob said Chinese, let's just go there."

Lastly it's Ellie's turn, and she plays the *Compromise* card: "Alright everyone, I think there's only one fair way to do this. Bob really wants Chinese food, Damian is hungry, and Anne doesn't even care. How about tonight we get Chinese food and tomorrow night we let someone else decide?"

Bob is worried Ellie's compromise will win, so during Ellie's explanation Bob interrupts with his *Escalate* card, adding to her story. Bob plays *Escalate* on her *Compromise* and says: "There doesn't need to be a compromise here. I said Chinese and that is where I am going. Whoever wants to eat with me, let's go. I'm leaving now." This negates Ellie's *Compromise* card. The judge cannot pick Ellie this round.

Having heard each player endeavor to resolve the situation, and unable to pick Ellie, Jarrod decides that Christy's attempt to *Collaborate* has won the round. Jarrod gives Christy the **Conflict Situation** card: *Where are we going to eat for dinner?* Christy puts the card in front of her, face down, indicating her victory. Moving to Jarrod's left, Anne is now the judge and the players begin the second round of play.

**WINNING**

The game ends when a player claims the required number of Conflict Situation cards, as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Players</th>
<th>Number of claimed cards required to win</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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