7.2 Characteristic: Conceit/Motif

When we speak of a game’s conceit, we take conceit in the sense of an extended metaphor. Some games are purely abstract, such as go, Tetris, or poker, but most nonsports games are at least metaphorically “about” something. Games with a conceit might have a very light one, in the sense that chess is vaguely about medieval warfare, or they might have a more elaborate conceit, in the way that Starcraft is about science fiction warfare or Tomb Raider is about swashbuckling archeology. If the game also tries to model its (possibly imaginary) conceit, it is to some degree a simulation: PanzerBlitz surely qualifies, Tomb Raider probably doesn’t, but Counter-Strike probably does. In any case, a game’s conceit can provide a great deal of motivation and explanation for the action: imagine, for example, how much less compelling Clue would be as a purely abstract boardgame.
Many games (e.g., almost all computer role-playing games) have stories, which are a special kind of conceit. We don’t use the word story to refer to conceits in general, though, because chess and Monopoly don’t have stories, but they do have conceits. Conceit for us carries a similar meaning to what is often called “motif” or “theme.”

Sometimes people talk about the “intellectual property” of a game, meaning something similar to what we mean by conceit. We’ll only use the term intellectual property when the conceit is something licensed or licensable—that is, something ownable. So a Star Wars RTS has Star Wars as its IP, but chess does not have an IP—its conceit, medieval warfare, is in the public domain. Note that even a game not in the public domain can have a conceit that is public, and thus not “IP” in the sense that we use the term. For example, the game Squad Leader is not in the public domain, but we consider it a game whose conceit is not intellectual property, because World War II (which is Squad Leader’s conceit) is in the public domain—you can’t own World War II or license it out (although you could license the Squad Leader name itself).
Sports, and many older boardgames and card games, have no real conceits. But from around 1900 on, most deliberately designed games have had conceits. There have been a few exceptions, such as Scrabble, Pente, many party games, Othello, Sorry, and Uno (note, however, that many of these are repackagings of classic games). But there are far more games that do have conceits. Some examples, just to name a few at random, include Clue, Doom, Risk, Battleship, Starcraft, and the various Final Fantasy games. One of the early examples of a conceit that was added on top of an existing game mechanic (in this case, the race boardgame) was the Royal Game of Goose, which dates back to the sixteenth century. Today most games have conceits added to them—sometimes in a manner that is tightly integrated with the game mechanics, but sometimes simply to give the game more flavor.

The same game can come in different versions, one with a conceit and one without. For example, Uno has no conceit, but Doctor Who Uno does.

In some cases, particularly with sports, an abstract game almost becomes its own conceit or even its own IP. Think of baseball, say: the rules are public domain, and the game has no conceit in that it is not a specific representation of something else in the way chess is a representation of medieval battle. But there is a whole world around professional baseball: history, legends, heroes, customs, and so on. And in fact Major League Baseball itself is owned, and people can and do license it. Similar comments apply to most popular sports, and to a few other games like poker as well (to some extent, they apply to almost any game that’s played professionally, such as chess, Magic, or Starcraft). Perhaps the right way to think of this phenomenon is as an IP for the metagame more than for the game itself.

Note that very generic conceits, ones that are in the public domain or at least are well known to the players, provide a lot of information about how to play the game. For example, in Magic, you know to expect that a dragon is more powerful than an ogre, which in turn is more powerful than a goblin; you have a rough idea what to expect from a card named Fireball or Lightning Bolt; if a card is named “Sword of X” or “Shield of Y” you’ll know it somehow helps attack or defense respectively. Similarly for chess: you know that the king is the most important piece, followed by the queen, and that the pawns are least important (the middle pieces are vague, though, and you may be surprised by the weakness of the king). If you create a unique, nonstandard IP for your game, you have the advantage of something that’s easier to own from a legal standpoint, but it will be harder for people to understand how to play your game, even if the mechanics are no more difficult: this is what makes Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri, for example, harder to wrap your head around than Civilization II. In particular, abstract games (those with no conceit at all, such as tic-tac-toe) need to have very simple rules—playing a purely abstract game with the complexity of Civilization II or World of Warcraft would be all but impossible. One way to view all this is as an example of standards—conceits provide standards that help players know what to expect, but the information is coming from the real world (or well-known fantasy worlds) rather than from the world of game rules.

At an extreme, there are simulations: games that have a conceit and attempt to model it very closely. The more rules that are in the game not for pure gameplay reasons but because “that’s how it works in real life,” the more the game is a simulation. In Uno, there are no rules that model “real life”; in Civilization or World of Warcraft there are quite a few; in Squad Leader there are an enormous number. Full simulations tend to be very complex, and thus tend to have fairly small audiences. But games that are partially simulations are much more common. For games that are not in any way a
simulation, worries about realism are not an issue—no one complains that Uno is “not realistic,” because it is not trying to be. But once a game begins to simulate reality, the issue of how far to go in that direction rears its head. Partial simulations often have issues revolving around the compromises between “realism” (modeling the world they simulate) and optimizing the fun of the gameplay. Different players will have different ideas of where the game should fall. For example, different editions of Dungeons & Dragons have been more or less focused on simulation, and versions that have made D&D more like an abstract game have sometimes been met with dismay by those who want the game to be more of a simulation of a fantasy world.

When a game is highly realistic, those who don’t like realism tend not to complain, but simply go elsewhere. As an extreme example of realism over gameplay, there are hex wargames that model one-sided historical battles in such a way that the forces that won historically are essentially guaranteed to destroy the opposing forces during the course of the game (the player controlling the losing side “wins” by staving off defeat for a longer time than would normally be expected). Such a game, with its built-in loss for one side, would be unsatisfying to many, but those who desire accurate simulation will accept the odd gameplay logic.

**Scale of Intensity for Conceits**

Conceits in a game can range from none at all, or a light conceit, all the way to full-blown simulation.

1. Purely abstract: tic-tac-toe, Scrabble, Othello, most sports, most classic card games
2. Theme only: Bejeweled, Candyland
3. Very light conceit: chess, fox & geese
4. Slight modeling of conceit: Battleship, Asteroids
5. Some modeling of conceit: Clue, Donkey Kong
6. Just barely a simulation: Monopoly, Diablo
7. Very light simulation: Starcraft, Quake
8. Simulation, but many sacrifices to gameplay: World of Warcraft
9. Simulation, minimal “unrealistic” elements: Counterstrike, Civilization
10. Full-on simulation (attempt to maximize modeling): Squad Leader

**Licensed Games**

Many boardgames and computer games have for their conceit an intellectual property that they have licensed from someone else. This is a modern phenomenon and thus is not found in classic games (in their original forms) or sports. A game that uses a license has the advantage that it can get started more quickly—it comes with a built-in potential audience. However, when the licensed property dies, so does the game. Also, the game is unlikely to be successful with people who do not care for the IP; people rarely buy a Babylon 5 boardgame if they don’t like Babylon 5 (although they might buy a generic merchant trading game or an Egyptian-themed boardgame just because they like boardgames, even though they don’t care for mercantilism or Egyptology).

As an example, in 1965 Milton Bradley released a card game based on the TV show and movie
Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea. It was based on Crazy Eights. It’s long since forgotten. Six years later, another game based on Crazy Eights was released, but it did not have a license, or indeed any conceit at all. It was called simply Uno. The two games were not identical, and it would be wrong to assume that the difference in licensing was the only cause of the differences in the two games’ fortunes. But although being nonlicensed is by no means a sufficient cause for achieving classic status, it is close to a necessary one.

So using an existing license usually means gaining some initial success at the cost of breadth of appeal and potential for longevity. If you’re the first to market with a new and exciting kind of game (e.g., you’ve invented the first-person shooter or the trading card game), you might want to avoid licensing and have a fairly generic conceit (which might evolve into a real IP over time, as with Warcraft). If the market is already crowded with games like yours, you might want to license a popular IP to help you stand out. However, even in a crowded market one can sometimes be successful with a nonlicensed game and perhaps have a long-run hit; licensed games will almost never be long-run hits.\(^\text{11}\)

Note that if a conceit gives a great deal of added value to the consumer, to the point of being one of the main reasons for buying the game, that conceit is almost always a licensed IP. Being able to interact with that IP is one of the rewards for playing the game. You buy a Battlestar Galactica game because it’s about Battlestar Galactica. You don’t buy Fallout because of the Fallout IP; even with a very powerful property like Warcraft, not many people are buying it for the Warcraft IP (they might be buying it because of the Warcraft name, which they feel represents quality, but that’s a different matter).\(^\text{12}\)

In general, games are not the best format in which to get people to like a new IP—something else had to get you to like Battlestar Galactica before you bought the boardgame. Books, movies, and television are all much better, probably because they are better at telling stories, and stories are what make people love IPs.

Licensed games are often not very high-quality,\(^\text{13}\) perhaps because goodness is not why people buy those games, so why spend money making them that good? There are of course exceptions—for example, there are several good Star Wars computer games. Perhaps the reason is that the Star Wars license is worth so much money, and costs so much money, that you can afford to spend some cash making the game good as well; perhaps it’s because there are enough other Star Wars games out there that you have to compete; or perhaps it’s because the Star Wars license is long-lasting enough that you can hope to have your game last longer, so that making it a good game is a better investment.

Sometimes an IP is deliberately designed to fit together with a game. This is fairly common for (nonlicensed) computer games, but less so for paper games. One notable group of exceptions includes a number of Japanese trading card games: Pokèmon, Yu-gi-o-h, and Duelmasters, for example.\(^\text{14}\) These games are also notable in that there is a game inside the IP itself, with the game the player plays being a mirror of the game the characters in the IP play. Done right, the presentation of the IP in various ways—books, comics, TV, various toys, and perhaps multiple games—can become powerfully reinforcing. Oddly enough, the dynamic here is not that different from the dynamic of sports, where a person who likes a sport might play, watch, and follow the “back-story” (personal lives of players, personalities of coaches, and so on), with all of these activities potentially supporting one another.

One tension between many licensed IPs and the games that use them is the so-called Batman
Characteristics of Games

If you have a game that uses the Batman IP, who gets to be Batman? Many strong IPs have just one or two main characters, and most have a relatively small number (which is what makes for good stories). Games, however, often call for more characters, and they may need more flexibility with those characters than the story allows. So making such a game involves some tough choices. If, in your Batman game, the user is not allowed to be Batman, it probably will not feel much like a Batman game. You might have Batman appear in cameos throughout the game, but then the player will not feel very important or heroic in comparison. On the other hand, if the player is Batman, you are pretty much locked into a single-player game (unless you want multiple Batmans running around), and if the game has its own storyline, it will be constrained to some degree (both by the licensor and by player expectations). These restrictions can all be fine for a platformer or a single-person FPS, but become very problematic for a paper RPG or an MMO. This is yet another example where a single-player game’s requirement to satisfy only one person at a time is a powerful advantage.

Story/Narrative

Story or narrative is often part of a game’s concept, but it does not have to be. Chess, for example, has a concept but no story. Story in games is a fairly new phenomenon, and almost exclusive to the computer world. Traditional boardgames and card games never have explicit stories, and newer ones very rarely do. Even computer games rarely if ever had stories in the early days (e.g., Space Wars, NetHack). Now almost all computer games have significant story elements, and the exceptions tend to be confined to certain genres, such as rhythm games, simulations (including sports), and puzzle games.

Although many computer games have stories, those games may take the story more or less seriously. At one extreme, Doom and Quake lead programmer John Carmack has said that “story in a game is like a story in a porn movie; it’s expected to be there, but it’s not that important.” And in Doom, this statement is arguably true—but the many fans of the Final Fantasy games, well known for their stories, would probably not agree with Carmack’s viewpoint. Some players who enjoy games like Doom gnash their teeth in frustration at the many cut scenes that games like Final Fantasy use to tell their stories, and yet there are players who enjoy both types of games. Even games like Doom or Diablo that have fairly minimal stories can get good value out of them, in terms of setting player expectations, helping to make mechanics more understandable, and providing some extra motivation for gameplay goals. Such basic stories, however, are a far cry from the ones that the best of the story-rich games create, stories that create truly memorable characters that players care about.

There are a few examples of story in noncomputer games, such as paper role-playing games, choose your own adventure books, and murder mystery games like How to Host a Murder. However, these are exceptions rather than the rule, and they are all fairly modern.

Why are detailed stories so rare in precomputer games? Part of the reason is that a simple conceit can provide much of the help a game needs, in terms of adding interest and flavor to a game and helping the player understand more complex rules. So story is not absolutely necessary. And before the computer, options for presenting story in a game were very limited: mostly pure text, which many players might not want to stop and read during the play of a game. Reading chapters of Le Morte d’Arthur between turns of chess, for example, would not make a very satisfactory game experience. Another factor is that story is hard to present in multiplayer games—whatever method is used to present it will require time, and some players will be more inclined to spend that time and others less so, leading to problems with downtime. Since single-player games were less common before
the computer era, that may have left less scope for story. Lastly, there is some difficulty in combining story and game generally.

There is a certain tension between some of the elements that make for a good game and those that make for a good story. Playing a game involves choices, and those choices can go in different directions; repeated plays of the game will be different. These different outcomes are all equally valid (or at least many of them are). But with a good story, the outcome will feel in some way inevitable—other alternative outcomes will not represent as good a story. And a good story can be read again and again, even though it is the same every time. If a game plays the same way every time that is usually not a good thing—games rely on uncertainty in outcome in order to work. When a strong story is included in a game, it can sometimes make the game less replayable—a game like Final Fantasy VII, with strong story elements, may be less appealing to play again (you know how the story will come out) than a game like Diablo that has a weaker story. All that said, the powerful visual and audio presentations possible in a computer game make presenting story very enticing. Many highly successful computer games rely heavily on story, and much academic work examining the role of story in computer games has been done.

Exercise 7.10: How does a game’s conceit affect the metagame?

Exercise 7.11: How does a licensed game affect the cost to the player in terms of time and money?

Exercise 7.12: Would you expect single-player or multiplayer games to have stronger conceits/motifs? (Hint: Think in terms of rewards.) What types of conceits might be best for multiplayer games?

Exercise 7.13: Name three games with the same basic conceit, but that use it in very different ways.

Exercise 7.14: Name five classic games without a conceit. Name five modern games without one. Which list was harder to come up with? Why?