CLASH AT CLASH OF REALITIES

When I was asked to put together a talk for the Clash of Realities conference, I wanted to do something that did justice to the idea of a "clash." So I gave myself this design problem: put together a session that could serve as a forum for discussion and debate across disciplinary lines. In other words, I didn't just want to *talk* about realities clashing, but I wanted to try and see if I could actually get some real clashing to happen.

This short essay outlines what I did to engineer a clash of ideas onstage. The procedures I used can easily be ported to other conference contexts - please feel free to use this approach for your own events!

1. Raw Material

Just putting people in front of an audience and giving them discussion topics wasn't going to be enough – in my experience as a game designer, creativity emerges out of constraints. I wanted to design a procedure that would help structure and focus the conversation.

Taking the online conference proceedings as my raw material, I extracted all of the interesting nouns and noun phrases that I could find. For example, from this talk abstract by game scholar Emma Wikowski:

> **Smack talk, teamwork, and playing for keeps: weighing in on some bodies that matter in the serious pursuit of E-sports**
>
> The past 5 years have seen eSports explode into legacy sport spaces and conversations: traditional sports celebrities are investing in established franchises, major eSports competitions draw six-figure prize pools and reach millions of viewers, and sports media broadcasting has gotten on board with ESPN even launching an online vertical dedicated to eSports. These recent headlines are fascinating marks on the history of eSports. Such sway from legacy sports, tied to ongoing community support, and the staging of eSports will certainly come to affect how we— the fans—can engage with competitive computer gameplay/players. But just as importantly, a deeper consideration of how players and teams do professional play is brought on by such growth. This talk will address the changing eSports ecosystem from the perspective of players and the liveliness of their practice – how they play, how they think of performance, and what it means for them to play to win.

I extracted the following (highlighted above):

> *smack talk*
> *teamwork*
> *playing for keeps*
> *bodies that matter*

traditional sports celebrities
millions of viewers
sports media broadcasting
ESPN
the history of eSports
ongoing community support
competitive computer gameplay
professional play
the changing eSports ecosystem
the perspective of players

While that list is fairly coherent (because it is all coming from the same paragraph), taking text from the dozens of different conference presentations resulted in a wild linguistic mix that was somehow also a core sample of the ideas and interests of the conference itself. Here's a random list:

our leisure time
a dynamic system
unsuspecting tourists
friendships and social support
fans
cultural heritage
(digital) rights
capitalist production
the crazy idea that we can all get along
otherness
complex logical thinking
time
a mummified goat
learning environments
narrative
single-player games
crowdfunded open development
Guy Debord and the Situationists
the LEGO Star Wars series of videogames
an emotional experience

As I curated these words, one important constraint was to only use text verbatim - exactly as it had been presented in the online program. I gathered several hundred phrases and hand-wrote each of them onto a blank white card.

2. Blanks to Fill

To serve as vessels for this salad of signifiers, I came up with several statements that could take advantage of the card content, riffing off of the main themes of the conference itself. For example:

Nostalgia.

> *When we were children, we always wanted _____.*
> *But then why as adults do we end up thinking we need _____?*

You can imagine the possibilities:

> *When we were children, we always wanted **friendships and social support**.*
> *But then why as adults do we end up thinking we need **single-player games**?*

> *When we were children, we always wanted **an emotional experience**.*
> *But then why as adults do we end up thinking we need **Guy Debord and the Situationists**?*

My other prepared questions included the following, all of which I created as slides to be projected onstage.

> *Change the game.*
> *What do we all hate about games? _____.*
> *What can we do about it? _____.*

> *People.*
> *Like it or not, humans are drawn to _____.*
> *That's why we need more games that can engage with _____.*

> *Living in the future.*
> *The future is already here. Just look at _____.*
> *Games can adapt by relying on _____.*

In putting these Mad Libs-style blanks together, my main goal was to make sure that everything could fit together grammatically. I was building a modular system of linguistic units – and LEGO bricks just don't work if you can't actually stack them together.

But I had other discursive strategies as well. I wanted some of the questions to point directly towards the topics of the conference. And I wanted other questions to use the extracted words to take us into new terrain. The two parts of each question usually create some kind of opposition or contrast. But it was left ambiguous if the discussion was about something positive or negative.

> *Like it or not, humans are drawn to **formal analysis**.*
> *Like it or not, humans are drawn to **war**.*
> *Like it or not, humans are drawn to **the virtual spaces of videogames**.*
> *Like it or not, humans are drawn to **Pokémon Go**.*

> *That's why we need more games that can engage with **cinema**.*
> *That's why we need more games that can engage with **multiple planes of reality**.*
> *That's why we need more games that can engage with **our brains**.*
> *That's why we need more games that can engage with **life**.*

I did quick tests with the cards and the statements, refining the language and weeding out cards that just didn't play well. After several rounds of playtesting and editing, there seemed to be a lot of room for surprise, humor, and genuinely interesting combinations of ideas.

3. Structuring a Discussion

Here's how the process worked during the session.

1. **Pass out cards.** With the help of a few volunteers, each person in the audience was given a few random cards. I explained what I had done and what was about to happen.
2. **Form groups.** I asked the audience to turn their chairs around and form into groups of about 4-6 people. Smaller groups were combined and I encouraged people to get together with others they didn't know. Throughout the session I encouraged people to leave groups and form new ones, or trade cards between groups. Halfway through the session I gave each group additional cards in case they were getting tired of their original set.
3. **Select cards.** I would project the current fill-in-the-blank question. Each group had just a few minutes to share their cards and the best pair to fill in the blank. The discussion in each group was fast and furious.
4. **Come up on stage.** Then I asked each group to send a representative to the stage with the cards they had selected. Most sent someone every round, but it was OK if a group sat out. I also asked that each group send a different representative each time to maximize the number of voices that got heard.
5. **Discuss.** This was the heart of the session. Sitting onstage, people shared their cards, reading the entire statement and filling in the blanks with their group's selections. Usually they wanted to explain what the group had been thinking. My job was to keep the conversation moving and to bring out any interesting points of agreement or disagreement. When possible, I highlighted differences of opinion and asked people onstage or in the audience to comment on one side or the other.

Rinse and repeat. I had prepared more questions, but we got through 4 of them in about 45 minutes. In my role as circus ringmaster, I had to keep things moving quickly. But it was just as important to be flexible. Some groups sent multiple representatives, merged card phrases together, and even stole cards from others to make on-the-spot modifications. Being fast and loose with the rules let the participants be creative and really make the session their own.

4. Some Conclusions

Constraints work.
The process did function well. You can see from the photos that everyone really is engaged and enjoying themselves. The basic mechanism of the cards and blanks gave just enough structure for people to become very creative very quickly. The ideas that came out of the conversation were truly interesting and thought-provoking. And there were more than a few real clashes of genuine disagreement.

They could only blame themselves.
All of the card content was taken from the session descriptions. This meant that the discussions always reflected ideas that were somehow in the air of the event already – even when they were being

forcefully refuted! I couldn't be blamed for the discussions and arguments that emerged since they came from the speakers themselves.

Arguing can be fun.
I believe that disagreement is one of the best ways to explore ideas – when there is a productive debate, contrasts become clear and the audience can figure out their own position from the different points of view being presented. But it is hard to stage a real debate in a professional context – few people enjoy arguing and no one likes to make enemies. The abstraction of the cards and blanks and the group decision-making let people take very strong positions and disagree openly with each other. No one felt that their own personal ideas were ever under attack.

Room for many roles.
Some people couldn't be kept offstage. Others ran from group to group trading cards. Still others just preferred to watch. There were enough ways for people to interact so that they could find their own preferred role to play.

Shake up the system.
Perhaps my favorite aspect of the session was that people came up onstage that would never otherwise have had a chance to address the crowd. Students could lecture their professors; players could tell designers what they thought about design. By allowing anyone to come up on stage, the usual power dynamics of the conference were just a little bit undone.

Design for reuse.
As a classroom exercise or way to structure a conference session, I highly recommend this method of staging a "clash." It does take a bit of preparation but is well worth the effort. If you do try it out, let me know how it went!

Let go of the rules.
The whole session had a somewhat wild and unpredictable feeling, which was made possible by the fairly simple structure. Once people got comfortable with the system after the first round or two, they started bending and breaking it. As designers we too often try to get players to follow our rules exactly when what we should be doing are creating situations that result in unpredictable and meaningful play.

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