
Kluwer Mediation Blog

The Conflict Game

Andrea Maia (Mediar360 – Dispute Resolution) · Monday, November 8th, 2021

From time to time I write a post inspired by music, film or a TV series. Today, once again, is a post inspired by a TV series recently released: [Squid Game](#) – where the bottom line is about human greed and its behavior regarding their closest ally, where keeping oneself alive is a matter of choice: luck and risk are the keyset on Squid Game, a Netflix runaway hit.

It is a Korean drama-slash-horror series where battles royal are conducted via children's playground games. It debuted on September 17 and became an instant sensation, rocketing to the top of Netflix's most-viewed releases and generating a lot of memes across social media.

After barely three weeks on the platform, Squid Game has not only become the most popular Korean drama in Netflix's history, but it's on track to surpass Bridgerton as the most popular show in Netflix history.

In short, Squid Game tells the story of people who have huge debts – impossible to pay. They receive a mysterious proposal to participate in a sequence of games in which the winner receives a huge cash prize. The prize rises instantly when any participants die.

The other day I had a phone call with a colleague, [Eduardo Fontoura](#), a [Brazilian Dispute Consultant](#) who lives in Los Angeles, mediating cases and working daily in the conflict resolution area.

We had a chance to talk about the TV series, and it was an inspiration to write down this short full brainy ideas in a collaborative way, connecting Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro and California with their perspective into a successful TV series and a conflict resolution demands in Brazil.

We both agreed that Squid Game is a political science lesson about democracy and inequality, however the dynamic that called our attention was the fact that the participants didn't have a chance to understand the rules of the game. They were filled with terror once they discovered an unexpected kind of game: money or death.

On that matter, they were inserted into a zero sum game mindset. How can one change the rules of the game and make it a win-win game on a such hard environment?

In a massive social and income unequal group of participants, desperate people fight for money and life, forgetting that there is a way to stop the game and change the zero-sum results: if the majority agrees to stop the game. However, no winner no award.

ROUND ONE: GREEN LIGHT, RED LIGHT

So far none of participants know their lives were at risk. They are voluntarily participating in order to get a much more than what they need to get out of their miserable lives: millions to come. Greed and need are the main characters at this point, the most infamous and the most basic sentiments or feelings in a human being, the path to conflict and disagreements.

The total of 456 participants have the same chance in a big room, while they don't know the exact nature of the games they will face. After the first round, 255 perish and 201 returned to their dormitory filled with horror and disgrace.

Understanding they are not allowed to stop the game (rule 1), if one refuses they will be eliminated (rule 2), the only way to get out of the game is observing the third rule: games will end if the majority agrees.

There was a way to get out and the majority won by a vote of an old and sick fellow – with a brain tumor. At that point the social differences between the participants were solid and clear. Economically all of them were broken. Where is the key difference here: street experience or school knowledge?

The dynamic of the first game, Green Light, Red Light, shows that both were important to understand the game and get better results: emotional intelligence, and discernment to grasp the way to find a solution. There was plenty of competition and some cooperation. However, even the ones that were collaborating would have seen competition in the future. Dynamics that are in every negotiation table.

How can we break the cycle? Finishing the game. Why don't they finalize the game? Greed and Need.

There is a need to tie up loose ends to finish the cycle; otherwise, only one would end the game up alive: the same all or nothing mindset we have been witnessed in many rounds of mediation. People preferring to go together to the abyss – Stage 9 of [Glasl's Nine Stages Model of Conflict Escalation](#), rather than manage the conflict and learn about the escalation process and how to solve it.

In a real world, Eduardo and I have been witnessed many situations where a particular behavior escalates, growing to an unreasonable proportion, where it is very difficult to manage or come back to its original situation.

Actually, he pointed out that those behaviors look similar to a business or a relationship suicide during high end mediations. It's one of the most difficult situation to negotiate, a suicidal person with a behavior that is similar to a medieval cannonball: instead of surgical negotiation, prefer the strategical "blow all around".

The Brazilian Legal Procedure Code establish that mediation can happen anytime during a lawsuit process. However, we used to see plaintiffs and defendants coming to mediation rounds only after long years of battle and hundreds of thousands of reais (Brazilian currency) in Attorneys' and Court Fees.

Even in those moments, it is difficult to find the right path for parties to try and reach an

agreement. They maintain stubborn behavior and a fixed mindset, unwilling to find a solution. The opposite parties get away from any alternative for the best, and just find the worst way to go.

At this point there is an intersection between the TV series and real life behavior. We can perceive characters using non-violent communication – the same tool often used by mediators and negotiators, except without any result.

It is exactly what Friedrich Glasl taught us on his [nine stages model of conflict escalation](#). Right after they return to the first round of the game, Glasl's Stage 4 takes its place: coalitions. Small groups have formed amongst sympathizers, where there is confirmation of “our” way of thinking – the right way.

ROUND FIVE: GLASS STEPPING STONE BRIDGE

Fast forward, getting to the Round Five, annihilation was accepted by any of the players, there was no way back to the starting point. Coalitions had dissolved. Morality and ethics were at an all-time low.

This happens during a legal battle too. Parties that were together in the past are belligerent amongst themselves now, pulling themselves to the abyss. At this point the third part of the process is coming into play: lose-lose. The ‘If I won't win, you won't either’ mode seems suitable for the players.

Situations like that are common between business partners, divorce and family quarrels, where it can last for more than 6 or 7 years – in Brazil a lawsuit can last more than 10 years.

For instance, there was a case amongst the shareholders of one of the biggest steel mill companies in South America, Usiminas (worth US\$1.1B), that caused its stocks [go down from R\\$ 42,00 to R\\$ 4,00 each](#).

Another example which can illustrate how poorly people can manage emotions, ending up in what is called “self-help stage” – the last stage to reach a “solution,” which is in the shadow of the law. The so-called the “America's worst divorce,” [Elisabeth Anne Broderick's divorce](#) had

a tragic end when she committed murder of her ex-husband and his wife at the time, killing them both while they slept at home.

The scenario we are showing happened when player #212 sees the destruction of her opponent (who was her peer while ago, now her antagonist) going to the abyss on the Glassing Stone Bridge. Pretty much like in real life: a self-help resolving method.

The escalation model from [Friedrich Glasl](#) is in every kind of conflict and its stages can be easily recognized, deserving special attention in every conflict dynamic. Conflict resolution experts continue to learn it's going to happen one way or the other.

ROUND SIX: THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL (BUT NOT ALL THE TIME)

During the games it's possible to perceive patterns of human conflict escalating into destructive consequences with damages that can't be fixed, in the medium nor long term. People accept the lost, even being the winner – because the winner had losses too, not only casualties.

The anti-hero, player #456, went down a painful rough road, losing daughter and mother, friends, and having the feeling that in the end of the day, he lost more than every other participant. There was no joy.

The price he paid was overwhelming, crushing his morality and ethics – even for a man whose standards were under the acceptable line.

He had a chance to play a well-known game at the end, facing a battle for life against his old friend, a “successful businessman” that was living a lie in bankruptcy. Again we can appreciate how the system works to give advantage (and not giving the same weight) for different social classes.

The one who lived in the streets, playing and fooling in his childhood had an advantage against the one who spent most of his childhood in the school. In that moment the arena was in balance. The chances were fair for both, as anyone can get on a mediation room. However, the later has a chance to find a win-win process, while Squid Game was only zero-sum game.

Is that right? No.

Our anti-hero tried to validate the third rule. However, it was too late. There was one defeated on the floor. And the second rule was applied in a wrong way (Rule 2: The player who refuses to play will be eliminated). The #456 didn't finish and... his antagonist was considered disqualified – was that a previous rule or an interpretation from the executor?

The our now Hero didn't want to be a hero, didn't want to win like that... however, this is what happens when one gives up of the authority over one's destiny. Avoiding and managing conflict is the answer.

It's common to see social and economic differences playing a huge role in a conflict resolution process. However, the outcomes can be hard to believe and understand when ones give up of their power of decision.

It is exactly the same pattern of conflict resolution consultants use to see in their clients – sometimes there is nothing to do to get back from where they came. It's the human nature. We have to accept it.

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This entry was posted on Monday, November 8th, 2021 at 5:13 pm and is filed under [ADR](#), [Conflict](#), [Dispute Resolution](#), [Negotiation](#), [Social intelligence](#), [Uncategorized](#)

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