

# SUCKER PUNCH

## *Game designers talk about their most influential fights*

By Justin Amirkhani

Photography by Filippo Venturi

There's a moment of clarity after you've been punched in the face. Your brain rattles and your soul shakes, and your reality shrinks to two things: you and your opponent.

A physical confrontation is one of the most intimate experiences you can have. You invade your opponent's space both physically and mentally, anticipating their every move while they're doing the same to you. This is the most common relationship a player has with his game world. Most videogames are designed to be confrontational. There's rarely an option to forgive and forget, or to make up over a cup of coffee. Players must learn to despise their digital foes, and it's up to game developers to pull us into that well of hate.

This is no easy task. Developers have a tough job making each fight feel natural and believable. Games where progress is the only reason to kill get tedious; conflict has to come from a real place.

As with all aspects of artistic expression, life experience is the best reference. Surely those game developers who create virtual conflict for a living know at least a little about the real thing.

### **Billy Thomson, creative director at Ruffian Games and former *Grand Theft Auto* designer**

The worst one I was in wasn't really a fight. At least, not a fair one, anyway. I was walking home with a friend from the pub when we were in our early 20s. Two older guys, late 20s, walked past. It was October, which is chilly in Scotland, but both of these guys had their shirts open, showing off fairly





impressive chest and stomach muscles. But still, I just thought, what a couple of cocks.

Anyway, turns out I was right. They started shouting at us and then came running at us. My mate wasn't a fighter, so he turned on his heels and took off. I stupidly stood there thinking that I could get out of it somehow. But within seconds I was on the ground with both of them kicking the shit out of

me, stomping on my head, kicking me in the back, constantly trying to get me to show my face. I can remember one of them kicking me in the back of the head while the other one stood on the other side, waiting for me to try to cover it so that he could get a chance at my face.

It only lasted about five minutes, but it was the first time I had lost a serious fight, and thankfully it's

as bad as it's ever got for me. My legs and arms were completely covered in bruises and scrapes. I also had a lot of lumps and bumps on my head, but incredibly I only had one mark on my face, so I managed to get away with my mum and dad not knowing.

Organized fights are horrible purely because you need to make a conscious decision to turn up and fight someone, which is a completely different experience than if a fight happens naturally. In that situation, you have no time to think about it. You just react, which avoids any feelings of trepidation. Before you know it you're already in, which makes it so much easier. There are no nerves that way; you just miss that completely and go straight to the anger and adrenaline.

The kinds of games that I've made in the past have had a level of violence and mortality that I never experienced in a street fight. The games I've made always have you killing or being killed, not simply beaten up. The emotions you're trying to summon are generally varying levels of tension, surprise, panic, excitement, triumph, and relief, with the occasional lull of calm—while avoiding the irritation, humiliation, and rage that one would experience in a brawl.

**Chris Hazard, president of Hazardous Software, developer of time-travel RTS *Achron***

I was in a grappling fight on a bus my freshman year of high school. I don't even remember what started it. Very few, if any, blows were exchanged, but it was an all-out "make the other person submit" battle between and over bus seats, and not friendly in the slightest.

We were the last two on the bus, and it lasted about five to 10 minutes. I was slightly taller than him, but he was a good wrestler (my high school had a renowned wrestling team). We were about evenly matched until we were almost at my house. I made a move to try to get away, but that's what did me in—he got me into an arm lock. The bus driver broke it up.

I never knew exactly why the grappling fight stayed a grappling fight and did not escalate to blows, but game theory can shed some light on this. I wasn't the primary aggressor, and his advantage

over me was wrestling experience. However, I had an advantage of strength over him. If he'd have punched me, it would have escalated the fight, [and] reduced his odds of winning. I didn't want to throw the first punch, because if he had a black eye and I didn't, I'd be the one in trouble.

This type of tit-for-tat style behavior could be seen in trench warfare in World War I, where both sides would bomb each other on regular intervals so they could each minimize their own losses. This type of behavior can also be seen in MMOs in many forms, such as the nuances surrounding PvP.

In the real world, you have virtually limitless options of what to say and do initially. The uncertainty surrounding the start of a fight is much like a well-designed survival horror game. I've narrowly averted a couple of fights by remaining calm and ignoring the aggressor, but that's not guaranteed to work. Sometimes you can anticipate the escalation, sometimes you can't.

This may sound odd, but the videogaming experience that most reminds me of real-world physical conflicts was my first RPG. I couldn't have been much older than six when I rented the first *Final Fantasy* game. I didn't have a concept of leveling up or battling monsters to collect money to buy better items. Instead, I headed right for Garland, the first boss, running from the monsters along the way to retain my health and items. It was a very difficult experience. My team of four strategically chosen classes valiantly expended all their items and spells, but my entire party died many times.

I finally beat Garland, with only a couple hit points left over, right before we had to return the rented cartridge.

A player needs to be in control during a game. At the same time, the player needs to be stressed in some way in which the player is not in control, whether it's time, precision, mental ability, or conflict from another player. Exciting gameplay usually stems from these experiences, especially when combined with endurance. To me, these combined attributes are an obvious set of choices in game design.

The vast uncertainty surrounding a physical conflict is another point I can't stress enough. Things

can happen very suddenly that can change the course of events, such as an unusual injury. In games, we need to make sure that the level is fun and that it feels right. Too much foreshadowing can make the plotline obvious, whereas too little loses the audience.

**Kellee Santiago, president and co-founder of thatgamecompany and producer of the blissfully peaceful *Flower***

I remember being in a physical fight when I was in fifth grade. My younger brother and I used to play with this brother and sister who lived a couple of houses down from us, and were staying with their grandmother for the summer. I don't remember why, but they were rougher than most of the kids we hung out with. One time we got into a fight over jumping on their trampoline or something stupid, and the sister scratched me, and I pulled her hair, and then my brother and I ran off.

It was so fast, but I remember the feeling of this primal anger unleashed inside of me. I was so embarrassed about what I did, and honestly, it probably wasn't even because I hurt her. It was because I knew I had lost control. Because I found out I was capable of losing control. And I didn't like what happened.

**Jenova Chen, co-founder of thatgamecompany and creative director of *Cloud*, *Flou*, *Flower*, and *Journey***

I had to fight somebody who was nearly twice the weight of me in a karate tournament during my undergrad. I had much better reflexes and skill than my opponent, and struck as hard as I could. If it had been a point-based match, I would have won on the number of successful strikes. But I was knocked down by my opponent in the end with only a few strikes. That fight made me realize that all the crazy kung-fu movies with one hero battling multiple giant body guards are totally nonsense.

In the mind it's not really a conflict; it happens in a very fast time frame. However, to the fighters, the memory of every move in the fight is like a *Matrix* movie. "How could I have missed that strike"—and the moment before you get hit always feels so slow.

The biggest lesson I learned from martial arts is that there's no winner from a fight. Even if you are dominating the match, your fist and leg still hurt from inflicting pain on others. That's why I enjoy competitive games a lot more. You create violence and don't feel pain from it. I like *Street Fighter* and *StarCraft*. I'm an avid *Defense of the Ancients* player.

However, life is about balancing your different emotional needs. If you play violent games all day, you would need something to counter it. Too many people are making good violent games. And they are really good at it. So, making something different gives us an opportunity to contribute more to our gamers. **KS**

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