

SIX TYPES OF CONFLICT

by

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&

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John: So, we'll get back to *Whiplash* at the end of the episode, but let's get into this topic of conflict because you in our sort of pre-notes listed sort of seven forms of conflict which I thought were really, really smart. So, do you want to start talking us through them?

Craig: Sure. Yeah. Actually, only six. So, we're already in conflict. [laughs] This is — somebody brought this up on Twitter and we hear conflict all the time. Studio executives love to ask for more conflict, but they're maybe sometimes not sure why. And sometimes I think people who aren't writers miss the presence of conflict because they're only looking for a certain kind.

But I think there are six kinds. This is what I came up with. There may be more.

The first kind is the simplest, an argument.

This is a physical fight or verbal argument. And we all know that conflict when we see it. That is not, however, the most common conflict. Nor is it often the most effective or impactful conflict in drama.

John: So, the little skit we were trying to do at the start of the episode, that's an example of this kind of argument. Even if it's like passive-aggressive, the sort of way I would naturally sort of be in my conflict, that is — you can tell that it's happening there. It's really clear. It's in the moment. There is a disagreement and people are expressing their contrary opinions in that moment.

Craig: Yeah. They're fighting. Right? We have one word for both punching each other in the face and yelling at each other. They're fighting.

The second kind of conflict is struggle against circumstance.

This could be as simple as I've locked my keys in the car, or I'm freezing and I need to get warm. Man versus nature. Man versus object. Man getting laid off by corporation.

John: Absolutely. So, in the scene version of that, what you talk about, like a man getting locked out of his car, locked out of his house, that's a scene. But then, of course, we can scale this up to the entire movie. So, you have [Cast Away](#). You have these big things about a man against a nature. It scales both directions.

Craig: Correct. And you'll see that in most movies, even if there is one dominating kind of conflict like struggle against circumstance in *Cast Away*, they will find ways to then work in these other interesting sorts of conflicts, even to the point where you can see a conflict coming between Tom Hanks and a volleyball. It's very smart.

John: Yes.

Craig:

The third kind of conflict is an internal conflict. And I'll call that unfulfilled desire.

Essentially I want something that I do not have. How can I get it?

John: The scene version of this is the girl across the bar that he's trying to get to and he cannot achieve that thing. But the inner conflict is usually driving more a movie level kind of issue. There is a goal in life that somebody has, hopefully is articulated clearly to us, the thing he or she wants. And that is a thing that he cannot achieve.

Craig: And that conflict will drive all sorts of stuff. I mean, [Rocky](#), you know, is about wanting something, unfulfilled desire. [Rudy](#). A lot of sports movies are about this unfulfilled desire, believing that there is more in you. We'll see this, certainly a ton of this, in *Whiplash*. This is sort of the — *Whiplash* really is about two kinds of conflicts: argument and unfulfilled desire.

John: The last thing I want to say about this kind of unfulfilled desire is going back to the Chuck Palahniuk conversation from last week, if that unfulfilled desire is an internal motivation, it's the writer's job to find a way to externalize. To find ways to have our characters take action, but lets us understand what's going on inside their head. It's the writer's job to find the words that the characters can say to articulate what is actually happening inside and to create situations that are little blocks along the way that lets them get closer to or further away from that goal.

Craig: A hundred percent. The worst thing you can do when you have an internal conflict is to have somebody explain it as if the audience is their therapist. Incredibly boring. But I always love that scene in [The King of Comedy](#) where you see Rupert Pupkin in his basement and he's set up a fake audience and he is performing as the host of his talk show. What an amazing way to get across this unfulfilled desire, you know.

And then in the middle of it he's yelling at his mother because she's calling down to him about eating dinner. But you get it. You get the depth of his need and his want. And he's already at conflict with the world.

John: I'm a hundred percent in agreement with you that we need to avoid that sort of sitting on a therapist's couch and expressing your inner thoughts and desires. It's almost always death.

Where that can be really helpful though is, again, that writing that happens off the page. And it may be very useful for writers who if you're struggling to figure out, like to get inside a character, write that scene that's never going to be in your movie, but write that thing where they are actually articulating their inner desire, because that way at least you have sense — you have something that you can hold onto to know what it is that the character is going for.

Someone who is writing a musical, those are the moments that are going to become the songs.

Craig: The songs, right.

John: Characters sing their inner wants in ways that is incredibly useful in musicals. They don't tend to express them the same ways in movies.

Craig: That's right. And partly because we understand when a character is singing that we are — particularly when they're singing solo, they're alone on stage, that we are hearing their inner thoughts. They're not talking out loud to nobody. That would make them schizophrenic. So, we're hearing what's in their mind. What's interesting about conflict is that we often don't understand the nature of our own inner conflict. So, early on in a movie what a character says they want may not really be what they ultimately want. They don't yet have the bravery or insight to express what they truly want. So, at the end they may sing a different song about — or they may say a different thing about what they truly want.

And that makes sense because that's when the conflict is resolved.

John: Yes. And the best of those songs, while the character is singing their inner thoughts, there's a transformation and a change happening over the course of it. So, there is a realization that is happening while they're singing their song. And expressing it to themselves, they actually have an insight and understanding.

A good recent example is Emily Blunt's song at the very end of *[Into the Woods](#)*. She has the song "Moments in the Woods" where she actually has all these brilliant insights about sort of what it is that she wants and wanted to have the prince, and have the baker, and have it all. Or at least have the memory of what it was like to have it all. And that's a great thing that musicals can do that's actually very hard to do in a straight movie.

Craig: Absolutely true. Yeah, it's fun to watch somebody start to sing about one thing and then watch it turn into an "I want" song. Or start to sing an "I want" song and it starts to turn into an "I already have" song. It is fascinating. That's what you get from that internal rhythm that you don't get really from movies.

John: Right.

Craig: Okay. That's our third type of conflict.

**Here's the fourth kind: avoiding a negative outcome.
That is I need to figure out how to do something,
but I have to do it in a way that doesn't get me hurt.**

So, a very simple kind of example of this conflict is I have to break up with this person. I just don't want to hurt his feelings. That's conflict.

John: Yeah. It is absolutely. And this is the kind of conflict that you often see in comedies overall. If you think of any situation comedy, it's generally one character is trying to do something without the other characters around them knowing that they're trying to do that. And so it's classically the I ended up on a date with two girls at once and I'm running between the two things. You're trying to avoid something embarrassing happening to yourself and you are creating — you're making the situation worse by trying to just — if you just ripped off the Band-Aid everything would be okay.

Craig: Right.

John: But instead you are dragging it out and you are causing pain by trying to avoid it.

Craig: That's right. I mean, sitcoms are always very instructive because they are the most basic of these things. That's where you get the line, "I should have just been honest. I should have been honest with you from the start, but I was just afraid that you would be so upset."

What's that great, there's like a classic '70s sitcom thing where someone leaves their pet with a neighbor and then the pet gets out immediately. That's classic avoiding a negative outcome.

John: Yes.

Your next one was confusion.

Craig: Confusion. Right. So, this is an interesting kind of conflict that happens when it's different than struggle against circumstance. This is a lack of information. Essentially you are at conflict with the world around you because you don't understand anything. Where am I? What's going on? It doesn't last long, but you can see that in a movie like [The Matrix](#) for instance where the conflict that we're experiencing between Mr. Anderson and the world is one of confusion.

John: Definitely. And also you can see it in movies like [The Bourne Identity](#) where he literally has no idea who he is. You can see it in movies where people are sort of dropped into foreign lands and they have just no sense of like understanding the rules of the world around them. So, the fish out of water movies are often cases where there's just fundamental confusion and you don't know which side is up.

Craig: And you will see this in comedies also quite a bit. *Private Benjamin*, she's confused. You know, she's clearly having arguments and she's clearly struggling against circumstance, but there is also just that terrible feeling of confusion and being lost in the world around you.

**And then lastly, dilemma.
Very simple kind of conflict we all know.
You have to make a choice.
The problem is all the choices are bad.**

John: Mm-hmm.

Craig: And that's a great conflict. Everybody likes that one.

John: *Sophie's Choice*, of course, notoriously. But really, I mean, any situation between like this guy or that guy. Or Stanford or this? Or do I break up with this person so I can have the opportunity for this person. These are sort of fundamental dilemmas and they feel familiar because we all experience them in real life.

The challenge is a dilemma is hard to sustain over the course of a movie. Dilemma can be like a crisis point, but if you keep your character floating in that in between for two hours, that's probably going to be a frustrating movie.

Craig: Yeah. We like it when Hamlet waffles for awhile. We don't want just nothing but waffling. You're absolutely right. Some of these are better suited to moments. Confusion, for instance, cannot last the whole movie. If it does, everyone will be also in conflict and be angry.

And there are filmmakers out there who seem to delight in placing the audience in positions of confusion. Perhaps confusion masquerading as art? But ultimately the movies that I like the most are the movies that are both brilliant and not permanently confusing.

John: Agreed.

Craig: But, yeah, dilemma and confusion are best used in small doses, for my taste at least.

John:

**So, for our next section, let's talk about
how conflict works within a scene.**

Because as we read through scripts, a lot of times I will find a scene that says like, well, there is interesting dialogue here, it's either funny or smart words are being said, and yet the scene is fundamentally not working. And when the scene is fundamentally not working, one of the most obvious problems I can sort of point to is that there is no conflict.

And sometimes you'll read a scene where literally all the characters in the scene agree on what's going on. There's no sort of threat to anything. It's just a bunch of people talking. And when that happens that's probably not going to be the most successful scene.

So, let's talk about some ways you can sustain conflict within a scene. And so I had a bunch of bullet points here and we'll see which ones work and which ones stick.

So, first I want to say is you have to understand what each character wants. Yes, you want to know what they want in the movie overall, but literally what is their purpose for being in that scene? What does the individual character hope to get out of this moment? And if you can't articulate that, then maybe you need to stop and do some more thinking, or may need to look at are these the right characters for the scene. Is this the right scene for these characters?

Craig: No question. We all know that hackneyed phrase, what's my motivation? And that's a specifically tuned thing for actors. But for writers, what we have to constantly be asking about our characters is what do they want, because I'm telling a camera to be on them. And everybody in the audience understands inherently that the camera doesn't need to be on them. The camera could be anywhere at any point. I've chosen it to be here. Why?

And it has to be because those people either want something or are about to become in conflict. One of the fun things about characters that don't want something is when they're sitting there and they're perfectly happy and then you destroy their moment, you have the movie crash into it. And now they want something.

John: Absolutely. They want that tranquility back and they cannot get it.

Craig: Right. The opening of *Sexy Beast* is a perfect example of this. You know, Ray Winstone is just floating in his pool, happy as can be, and then crash, here comes a boulder. You want that, you know.

But sometimes you want to start with the scene where it opens up where somebody really, really wants something. And if you can't have somebody want something at some point in your scene, that's not a scene.

John: Yeah, that's not a scene. The next thing I'll point to is if you've ever taken improv class, one of the first things you learn, probably your first day, is yes and. **You're supposed to accept what's been given to you and build on it and hand it back. And that next person, your scene partner, says yes and, and keeps going with it.**

The real scenes are more likely going to be the opposite of that. They're going to be but. The characters are going to come into — they're going to challenge each other. And so hopefully in

challenging each other the information that you want to get out will come out much more naturally.

So, sometimes you'll read scenes that are just exposition factories, where basically like we're going to talk though all the details of this case or whatever. And sometimes in procedurals you just have to swallow your pride and that's just the way it's going to have to work. But more likely you're going to be able to get that information out or

get that sense of how we're going to get to the next scene through conflict and through confrontation.

So, someone says something and another character challenges, "But...blah, blah, blah, blah." "Yes, however...blah, blah, blah, blah."

The ability to sort of push back against the other characters in the scene is much more likely to get you to a good place than just agreeing all the time.

Craig: Absolutely. **And you can use some of these conflict cue cards here if you're struggling if you have a Harry the Explainer, if you need an info dump, and sometimes you do. Having the person listening, have them be confused. Have them be struggling against circumstance. Someone is talking and they're trying to escape while the person is talking.**

You know what I mean? There's always ways to avoid just the people talking.

John: That's a great example. And I like that you go back to these initial sort of six points about what is conflict, because in that explainer scene you could actually be explaining the dilemma. Basically the person, the explainer, could like lay out these are the two options and they're both terrible. That is a way to sort of create conflict through the action of the scene. And that's going to probably be awesome.

Craig: Yeah.

John: So, look for that.

Next thing I'll point to is the struggle for the steering wheel and that usually one character is driving the scene, but sometimes they can be wrestling over who is sort of in control of the scene, this conversation, this moment, where they're going to go to next.

And that struggle for the steering wheel is real. That happens in real life. And it can happen in your scene.

Obviously, if you're writing a movie with a central character, that central character should be driving most of the scenes, but that doesn't mean that you can't have other strong characters come in there and sort of express their desire for control of that moment.

Craig: Yeah. And you'll see this primarily in two-handers. It's funny, I never really thought of it with that phrase struggle for the steering wheel, but that's pretty much what's going on in [*Identity Thief*](#) for the whole movie.

John: That's literally steering wheel.

Craig: I mean, I don't think there's ever a technical struggle for the steering wheel, but the two of them are just in complete — it's really a battle for control. And that's what's going on the whole time. Yes.

John:

Sort of a corollary to the knowing what each character wants, but making sure that it's clear to the characters and to the audience the if/then of the scene.

So, if this circumstance happens, then the outcome is going to be this.

And so sometimes I've come into a scene where I don't really know what's at stake. I don't know what the goal of the scene is. I don't know what the goal of this conversation is. And so making it clear to the audience and clear to the characters in the scene what it is they're trying to do and then what the outcome is that they're hoping for.

Every time that you are in a conversation in real life, you have a sense of like these are the kinds of things that could be happening next. And you need to have the same sense for your own characters. And hopefully the characters in a scene don't all have the same sense of where they're going to go to, otherwise they could just skip forward all those steps and be at that place.

Craig: This very thing, this make clear the if/then is why a lot of first-time writers screw up. Because they get worried about — for whatever reason, I feel like they're primarily worried about trying to write naturalistic dialogue. Everybody is in a panic about writing dialogue that sounds normal. But all of our normal dialogue throughout the day is not if/then. It's just this. You know? We're just going to talk about lunch.

And they don't understand that

**movies are about those days or weeks
in someone's life that define their life.**

It's the craziest days or weeks in a human being's life. So, everything is far more important. This is all staked up, you know.

And so when you are in a situation where there are high stakes, then every moment should have an if/then. Every moment. Because you are constantly moving toward your goal and away from pain or mistakenly towards pain and away from your goal. There is no relax-y stuff, you know. People draw all the wrong lessons.

John: Very much related to that is to really be mindful of where you're coming into a scene and where you're exiting a scene. Because in real life, conflicts will rise up and then they will diminish. And so if you wait long enough, every conflict is going to taper off and everything is going to get back to normal. **But your job as the writer is to figure out, well, how do I get out of that scene before all the conflict has resolved. How do I think about coming into a scene where the conflict is already there?**

And so by figuring out where you can first turn on the camera in that scene and where you can exit the scene, that's going to get you to the heart of your conflict.

The part of the scene you really want is generally that hot spot, that flare right in the very middle of it.

Craig: Yeah, exactly. If you're going to let a conflict peter out, it better be for comedy sake, because it's a lie. It's a misdirect. Otherwise, absolutely; nobody wants to watch people make up over and over and over throughout the course of a movie. We need conflict. We must have it.

John: Next point.

If your characters are not in conflict, then the external conflict better be really apparent and sort of right in their face.

And so if your characters are getting along fine, then the thing that they're facing should be right there. And so like literally the lion should be right in front of them.

If there's like a lion in the distance, or there's a roar you hear in the distance, well, your characters in our present scene should still be bickering or fighting with each other. It's only when that thing is right of you, then you can sort of drop the conflict right between those two characters that we're looking at.

Craig: Yeah. And you might say, well, why? If there are two people and a lion is far away, why are they arguing about who is going to have to take care of the lion? Why can't they just work it

out like friends? And the answer is because they're bad people. I hate to put it that way, but characters in movies should be bad people. I don't mean bad like evil, I mean bad like they're not finished.

John: Yeah. They shouldn't be perfect.

Craig: Right. They're not idealized. They are messes who are struggling with something that will be overcome by the end of the movie. But because it is by definition not the end of the movie at this point, they have these flaws. And the tragic flaw of any of these characters is going to manifest itself through conflict that should otherwise probably be avoided.

I mean, look, let's go back to *The Matrix* because it's such a basic fairy tale. The whole point of *The Matrix* is you're the one, you have to believe. When you start believing you're the one, you'll be the one. Well, his tragic flaw is that he doesn't believe. His tragic flaw is that he is incapable of faith in self.

Well, if he doesn't have that tragic flaw, they come to him and the guy says you're the one and he goes, "Great." And then the next scene he does it. And we're good.

John: Yeah.

Craig: And then they have a party on the ship. You know, the conflict is driven entirely by the fact that he's not finished baking. So, that's why your characters must be arguing with each other, even if you like them both about who is going to handle the tiger. I've changed it to a tiger.

John: Tigers and lions. They both work really well. You can mate them together, you get a liger. It's all good.

Craig: The liger.

John: A liger. I thought we'd take a little exercise and just pick a really banal sort of normal scene and think about ways that you can actually create conflict within the scene.

Craig: Okay.

John: All right. **The scenario I want to propose is a man and his wife are getting ready to go to a dinner party. And so let's have them be in their Manhattan apartment and they are getting ready to go to this dinner party. And so what are some natures of the conflict that we could find between these two characters?**

Craig: Well, you've got, let's start with the obvious ones. They're having marital problems and the woman that the wife suspects the man is cheating with is going to be at the party or hosting the party. The man wants to go to the party, the woman doesn't, and he suspects she doesn't want to go because she's anorexic and she doesn't want to have to eat. And it's a dinner party.

They don't want to go to the party because the people that are hosting it have four kids. They don't have any kids and they're trying to have kids and this is depressing. I mean, that's the conflict of you want to give one of them that problem and the other one who also has the

problem but is trying to get the other one out of the problem, they don't want to go to the party because the husband has just quit drinking, but she knows that he hasn't really quit drinking. And this party is a great way for him to kind of sneak a few.

They don't want to go to the party because — I'm trying to think of something — I'm actually trying to think of something in the apartment now, like an avoidance of pain kind of thing. But, anyway, yeah, I can go on all day.

John: So, I think it's their cat is sick and it's a question of like do you leave the cat. Is the cat going to be okay? Or do you go to the party because it's just a cat. The cat is going to be fine. We don't trust the new doorman. The doorman has been really weird. We think there's something shady going on.

But, again, if both of them have that opinion, then that's not conflict. It needs to be one of the characters having that opinion in the other person saying like, no, no, you're a crazy person.

Craig: Right.

John: And I think you're a crazy person because you really don't want to go to this party because you're having an affair with the wife. There should be a second level to it, not just I disagree.

Craig: Yeah. You want one of them — I mean, a lot of arguments basically come down to you're not being honest. So, if the deal is she's saying I don't want to go to this party, I don't like those people. And he's saying, um, I think you don't want to go to the party because it's a dinner party and you know you're going to have to eat in front of people and you're not eating.

John: Yes.

Craig: And she says, "That's not true. That's not true." Now, we're having a good argument. And it ain't about the party.

John: It ain't about the party at all. I'd like to stress, though, conflict isn't always an argument. So, conflict can be little things about sort of like he's trying to get her to wear a more tasteful dress, but doesn't want to actually say anything about it. So, it can be a completely silent scene where he keeps trying to do other little things, or he's talking about like, "Boy, it's getting cold out," and just trying to get her to dress a different way.

So, there are lots of ways you can have a conflict in a scene without needing to get to words spoken or punches thrown.

Craig: Absolutely. So, that would be a good example of avoiding a negative outcome. There is also unfulfilled desire. This guy is excited about going to this party because it's a social group that he really wants to be involved in and he asks her to go with him and she says absolutely. So, he runs and he takes a shower and he comes out and she's passed out asleep. What do you do now?

John: Dare you wake up your wife?

Craig: Right.

John: Or maybe she doesn't want to go, and therefore she poisons him.

Craig: Well, then there's also that!

John: Yeah, but I mean, it doesn't have to be like fatal, fatal poisoning, but it could be some sort of minor poisoning. Sort of the [Wedding Crashers](#) eye drops thing. The Bradley Cooper, how he was taking in *Wedding Crashers*.

Craig: That's exactly right. It could also be, you know, in comedy like your liger example, two people have the same goal, they're just arguing over who is going to do what and how. These people — this may be the most exciting thing. They're finally going to go to this party where the two of them are going to get in with this group that they want to be in. And they go to the door and they're snowed in. And now they're trying to climb out of windows and crawl through a doggie door and things aren't working.

You know, that's conflict. Struggle.

John: Yeah, exactly, a struggle. It's man against nature.

Craig: Man against nature.

John: But ultimately it's not just man against nature. It's their unfulfilled desire. There's an internal motivation and an external motivation which is what's good about a scene.

Craig: Have you ever seen the [Warwick Davis Show with Ricky Gervais](#)?

John: Yeah. It's like *Small Thing* or —

Craig: Yeah, it's a bad pun title. But there's an amazing scene where Liam Neeson comes in, because he's working on a comedy. Have you ever seen this?

John: No. It sounds great.

Craig: Oh, you're in for a treat. He comes in and he says to Stephen Merchant and Ricky Gervais, "I'm interested in doing comedy. I'm funny. Let's do some improvisation."

And so they do some improvisation and Warwick comes up with the ideas. He says to Liam, okay, you're a green grocer and to Ricky Gervais and you're a customer with a complaint. And so Ricky Gervais goes, "Uh, yes, hello. Uh, I'd like to lodge a complaint."

[laughs] And Liam Neeson says, "We're closed."

John: [laughs]

Craig: It's the best improv answer in history.

John: Shut it down.

Craig: We're closed. Yeah, and he keeps insisting that his characters have full blown AIDS. And everyone gets super uncomfortable and they're like it's not that funny. Anyway, we'll throw a link on. It's one of my favorite things.

John: But I think it's great that you bring up Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant shows because [The Office](#) is a great example of conflict that doesn't go to argument. It's making people really uncomfortable through the actions that they're taking. And where you get uncomfortable, but yet you're not able to articulate why you're uncomfortable because that just makes the situation worse. And so they are great examples of conflict.

That's why I find the [British Office](#) kind of so hard to watch because I just cringe so much that I want to like crawl into the couch.

Craig: Yeah, definitely at times is tough, but I loved it because there are these moments, particularly when they didn't seem constructed to make you squirm, which they would occasionally do with Ricky Gervais' character, but there was a great moment where Tim has started this new dalliance with this office girl. He's flirting with her. He's obviously in love with Dawn, but she's got a boyfriend. So, there's this new office girl and he's kind of chumming it up with her and the two of them are by his desk watching as the best character ever on the British office was the IT guy, god, so great.

And the IT guy is being such a jerk. And Tim says some classic Tim snotty comment about him. And the girl giggles. And the IT guy looks at the two of them and then looks at Tim and says, "So you've gone off Dawn then."

John: Ugh.

Craig: And Tim is just — it's like a slap to the face. And then he just says, "Shut up. Shut up." And it's so real. And that's terrific conflict. Oh, I love that. You know, pulling someone's scab off publicly like that out of nowhere, just like a — ooh, it was great.

John: It was great. So, I'm going to circle back to what you were talking about with *The Matrix* because I think that was a great example of if Neo had just accepted his fate from the start, like, oh, I'm the chosen one? Okay, great. Well, let me do this thing. And the movie would have been ten minutes long.

And I want to talk about that in context of like how do you sustain conflict over the whole course of a movie, because there have times where I've read scripts that I've really enjoyed the writing, but I felt like, okay, on page 50 we're done. Everything that needed to happen sort of happened. So, okay... I guess we have another 50 pages to read through, but I don't know why we're reading through these things.

So, let's talk about some ways that you sustain conflict over the length of your movie.

Craig: Sure.

John: First off is the question: are you resolving the central conflict too early? If there's a thing that the character wants, are you giving them what they want too early? That's sort of an obvious

thing and you're not going to find that all that often. Like usually people have a sense like, oh, you know, I need to actually wait until near the end of the movie for the person to win the championship boxing prize.

But as [Lindsay Doran](#) often points out is that the real nature of victory in these kind of movies usually is not winning the championship match, it's resolving that conflict with your wife. It is the achieving this inner vision for who you need to be in your life. And if that happens too early, that's not going to be a good experience to sit through the rest of the movie.

Craig: Yeah. And you can really see this with biopics because biopics are stuck with facts. And when you see a bad one, you're watching somebody kind of go overcome their conflict and then now they're famous and stuff. And then you can feel the movie trying to manufacture conflict and struggling to do so or manufacturing the same kind of conflict over and over.

That's why one of my favorite biopics is [What's Love Got to Do With It](#) because it's got this incredible conflict going through it that changes and builds and crescendos and finally is resolved. And that's what we want. You know, that's why in biopics in particular you can see how the external successes are meaningless. That's the whole point. Oh, all you thought it was just fun and games and fame, but look what was really going on. We like that sort of thing.

So, you definitely don't want to make the mistake of the bad biopic. You don't want to reward your character too soon. You want to hold back —

**there should be really one reward. And if that —
that has to land essentially ten pages before
the movie ends. I don't know how else to do it.**

John: That sounds so formulaic, but it's absolutely so true. And

**the success of writing is finding ways to get to that
place so when that moment comes it feels like
a tremendous reward that you didn't quite see coming
that way. That it's still a surprise to you.**

Craig: Right.

John: And that you may not even as an audience quite recognize what it is that you wanted them to achieve, but then they achieve it and like that's fantastic. Or, they don't achieve it and that's tragic. Yet, that is the point of how you're constructing your movie.

Craig: Yeah. In [Up](#), Carl wants to make good on his promise and take the house and land it on the place where his dead wife wanted to be. And in the end he's changed that, as we knew he would, and he finally lets the house go. And when he lets the house go, we understand — maybe

there's five minutes left? I don't know, maybe eight or nine. I don't know how much we can bear.

But the point is if that in your creation is coming at the minute 30 mark, you have a short film. Just know you've got ten minutes after that thing. That's it. And then stop.

John: It has to be done. Next thing I want to point out is sometimes you're hitting the same note too many times.

So, you're trying so sustain the conflict, but if you're just sustaining the conflict by having the same argument again, or having the same fight again, then you've lost us.

Because we need to see each time we revisit that conflict, revisit that theme, it needs to be different. There needs to be a change that has happened.

So, if the same characters are having the same argument on page 80 as they did on page 20, that's not going to be successful.

Craig: Agreed. And, again, *What's Love Got to Do With It* is a good example of this because the actual nature of domestic violence is incredibly repetitive. A man beats up a woman. The police come. She doesn't press charges. They go away. A man beats up the woman. And this happens over and over and over and over and over.

Well, tragic, but not movie tragic. The problem is, and it's terrible to say that in narrative form what happens is we become numb to it. We become numb to narrative repetition. So, what that movie does so well is it changes the nature of the abuse subtly but almost every single time. Whether it's I'm going to say something to you, I'm going to be cruel to you, or I'm going to control you. Now I hit you once. Now I'm on drugs and I'm out of control. Now I hit you a lot.

Now the problem is now you're having an argument with somebody else about why you don't want to leave him. Now you're having an argument with him about him cheating. We're starting to change the arrows, you know. You really can't do the same fight over and over and over. You'll start to feel very, very bored,

unless you have a simple adventure movie where, like martial arts movies oftentimes really are just a video game of increasingly difficult battles until you face the boss, and that's okay.

I mean, that's what people are going for. But even in those there should be some sort of internal conflict.

John: Yeah. Generally in those cases those conflict, there will be like dance numbers that are like a different kind of dance number, so each of those fights is a little bit different, so it feels like you have made forward progress.

[There's a video I'll link to that takes a look at *Snowcatcher*, *Snowpiercer*, sorry, *Snowpiercer*.](#)

[Foxcatcher/Snowpiercer](#).

Craig: I want to see *Snowcatcher*.

John: Yeah. It's basically the guy who can just snowball. He does such a great job. But then his snowball catching coach is like really creepy.

Craig: Right.

John: It's pretty great. And it's post-apocalyptic, too.

Craig: Of course.

John: In [Snowpiercer](#), there's a video that shows left or right, which is the fundamental dilemma of the movie. But essentially that movie is completely linear. It literally goes from the left side of the train to the right side of the train, from the back to the front. And so it could have that quality of just being a grind, like fight, after fight, after fight, and yet it's able to make each of them different and actually change how Chris Evans' character is facing each of these battles because he's questioning his own choices along the way.

Craig: That's right. Each successive conflict point should change the character. It doesn't have to change them for better, it doesn't have to change them necessarily for the worse. Sometimes it just changes them sideways. Sometimes they just learn information. But it's always about character.

And you have to remember through all of these conflicts that the people watching the movie without knowing it are constantly doing this computation of connecting the character's conflict and tragedy to their own. Constantly.

So, we're coming up on our discussion of *Whiplash*. Very few people are jazz drummers. I don't know how many there are left. But —

John: There are probably more screenwriters than there are jazz drummers.

Craig: There are probably more screenwriters than jazz drummers. But that's okay. We can all do the computational math to connect it to the analogs in our life.

John: Yeah. So, going back to this idea of sustaining conflict across the nature of the movie, you pointed to this in your last discussion here is that you're looking for ways that these conflicts are changing the characters and basically how do you make it worse for your hero.

And so there are certain tropes that I sort of fall back on, but they're meaningful. And to me it's burning down the house. How are you making it so it's impossible for them to go back to the way they were before. How do you make it so it's impossible for them to get back to a place of safety?

How can you have characters betray each other or betray their own visions? How can you pull characters away from the other characters that they love? You're looking for ways to make things worse so that the conflict actually increases and doesn't get resolved too early in your story.

Craig: And to use *The Matrix* as an example, this is what we're talking about I think is the genesis of one of the smartest choices in that movie. They didn't need the Oracle character. What they had was a screenwriting problem if you think about it. Laurence Fishburne, Morpheus, is saying I've been looking around. I'm really smart. I'm essentially the smartest person in the world based on what the movie is telling everyone. And I believe you are the one. I've been watching you. And I think you're the one.

Now, we have no idea why. Right? And the answer to that question why is because they don't know either. Nobody knows. It's just let's just take it as a given. He's watched him. He's smart. You're the one.

The problem then is, well, Keanu Reeves doesn't believe he's the one but I know he's the one, so I guess I've got to watch this jerk not believe what I already believe until he finally believes it. And that's brutal. That's just brutal. I'm way ahead of him.

Enter the Oracle character, a brilliant idea from the Wachowskis, who is going to confirm that this is the one. You know, Morpheus — it's just a little check to make sure. And she says, "You're not." Well, she actually doesn't say you're not. She says, "But you know what I'm already going to say."

And he says, "I'm not the one."

And she says, "Sorry. It's not all good news. Have a cookie." Great character. And that was really important. Because what that did was start us all running other computational math. And then it made the revelation later, she told you exactly what you needed to hear impactful.

And, by the way, that comes up in *Whiplash* as well.

John: It does. Absolutely. Before we get to *Whiplash*, I want to talk through one of my favorite movies of all time and sort of how it does conflict and how it sustains conflict over the course of the whole nature of the movie, which is of course my dearest most favorite movie which is [Aliens](#).

Craig: "Game over, man."

John: Oh, my god, it's just such an amazingly good movie.

Craig: "Why'd you put her in charge?"

John: So, if you look at within each and every scene there is terrific conflict. And Ripley is always in conflict with characters. Sometimes she's arguing. Sometimes she's disagreeing with what they're doing. Sometimes she just doesn't want to go on the mission at all.

Craig: Right.

John: And she's sort of forced into going on this mission. So, in every moment within each scene she is — if she's not driving the scene, she is your eyes on the scene and she is your way into the scene. And she is in conflict with everyone around her basically the entire movie.

But if you look at the movie macro overall, it does just a brilliant job of not ever letting her get out of conflict. And actually each point along the way she is getting herself more and more into more immediately dangerous physical conflict with either soldiers she's sent on the mission with or with a group of aliens, or the Alien Queen. The movie is so smartly constructed to make sure that the conflict is continuously escalating up through the very, very, very end.

Craig: Yeah. He, Cameron had this really — I don't know if this was, you know, quite this conscious, but he created this situation that was remarkably frustrating. Frustration is a great feeling to inspire —

John: Oh god.

Craig: She knows. She's the one person who has experienced this thing, these things. She knows and everybody else is being either arrogant or duplicitous. And it's incredibly frustrating to watch her continue to say this is bad and have nobody else really care, or think that it's not that bad. And then it's more frustrating when the truth emerges and all the arrogant people are now cowards, or at least one notably is a coward who is saying, "We got to go. We can't win."

And she's saying, "No, actually you can. I've done that before, too, but..." And now she has a kid.

So, the conflict of frustration is wonderful. It makes us angry. And anger is a terrific thing to inspire an audience as long as you can eventually release it with some kind of final triumph.

John: What Cameron was so smart about recognizing is that the audience had the same information as Ripley. And so we and Ripley both knew that the aliens were incredibly dangerous and this was an incredibly stupid idea to go on this rescue mission to this planet.

And he was able to let her articulate exactly what we're thinking. Like, no, no, don't go there. And yet we all had to go there together. And it was a very smart setup and a very smart change along the way, because we would make the same choices Ripley made, or at least we hope we would make the same choices as Ripley made to go to try to save Newt, to save the other soldiers, to do what she could.

Craig: Yeah. And, you know, also kind of brilliantly he understood, and I think Cameron has always understood this: that beyond all the hoopla of the effects, and the light, and the noise, and the monsters, we will always care about the person more than anything. And so we don't care about the monsters.

I bet so many directors saw [Alien](#) and thought, wow, it's about the monsters, man. And it's not. It's never about the monsters. We're the monsters. We're the problem. Whoa, dude.

John: Whoa dude. Just to delay *Whiplash* one more moment, as we were preparing our outline of notes for this thing, I started thinking back to my own movies and I wanted to quickly go through my movies and figure out which ones had conflict that sort of basically drove it, and which ones didn't so much.

And so my very first movie, [Go](#), it's a conflict factory. Everyone is in conflict at all times. Ronna wants to make this tiny drug deal happen. She sets off this series of events. Claire keeps trying to be the voice of reason and keeps getting ignored.

The second section, the four guys in Vegas, everyone of those guys is in conflict the entire time. And sometimes it's just bantery conflict, but then it gets much, much worse throughout the thing.

And in the final chapter, Adam and Zack, they seem to be at each other's throats. We're not sure why. We find out that they're a couple and that they've been sleeping with the same guy. So, that whole movie is a conflict thing.

But compare that to the [Charlie's Angels](#) movies and one of the real frustrations of the *Charlie's Angels* movies is the Angels kind of had to get along.

Craig: Right.

John: They're supposed to be a team, they're supposed to be sisters. They weren't supposed to fight with each other. And so we had to create a lot of external conflict just so you wouldn't kind of notice that they were getting along so well.

That's one of the challenges of that kind of movie is if they're supposed to be a team that gets along great together, well, it's hard to have it introduced in a scene. Somebody else has to show up to like make there be a problem.

Craig: When they're not in conflict with each other, sometimes it's hard just to figure out who's supposed to talk next.

John: Absolutely true. I was reminded by Max Temkin who created Cards Against Humanity, one of the guys behind that, [he had this great blog post this last week](#) about how to watch [Star Trek: The Next Generation](#) in 40 hours. And so he basically gives you a viewing list to sort of go through the whole series and understand what made that series so great.

But he points out that Roddenberry did not want there to be any conflict between the characters at all.

Craig: That's right.

John: So those first few seasons, he didn't want the characters to disagree with each other unless they were possessed by some other force or something else. And so it became really hard to write those characters in scenes because they had to get along. They had to follow orders.

Craig: It's strange. I never really thought about it that way. I love that show. I watched every episode of that show. And it is true. You sort of began to see them all as vaguely people, but really more — you were waiting for them to fight someone.

John: Yeah. And so season three, like after Roddenberry was gone, it did change. And you started to see some conflicts between each other which were useful. It never sort of progressed as far as later science fiction shows would take it, but there was some real —

Craig: Yeah. Like Worf would get all grumpy.

John: Yeah. [laughs]

John: *Big Fish*. *Big Fish*, there's not a lot of conflict in the Edward flashback scenes. It's sort of his story. Because it is idealized. It is happy and wonderful. But the movie is structured around a central conflict between the father and the son. And my 15-year journey of making different versions of *Big Fish*, that's always been the hardest thing is how to have that conflict feel real and meaningful, and yet not have the son become completely unlikeable and not make the father so overbearing that you kind of want him to be dead.

Craig: Yeah.

John: And that is a fundamental challenge of that movie.

Craig: And that was certainly something that we went around and around on with Melissa's character on *Identify Thief*.

John: Oh, absolutely.

Craig: And, you know, Melissa and I and Jason all felt pretty strongly that the only way it was going to work was if we just took all of the safety belts off of her character and let her be awful. Just let her be awful. But, in the very first scene had to show, you know, it's like the planting the seed of redemption. You know, there's a difference — even Darth Vader, before we really get to see Darth Vader going bananas and being a jerk, Obi Wan says, "Darth Vader was a pupil of mine. He was great. But then he turned to the dark side."

And we go, okay, well there's a good guy in there somewhere.

John: Yeah.

Craig: So when he turns we think, yes, finally, he has returned. He's not turned, he's returned. When you have these awful characters, you need to set up the return fairly early on. Some sign that they were not just simply born psychopathic, otherwise we won't expect — we won't believe the return.

For me, all of my movies have conflict, because comedy is conflict. That's all it is.

John: Absolutely. So, looking at [The Hangover](#) sequels, that is a great and a bad situation in that some of their conflicts would inherently be resolved from the end of the first movie. And so you need to find ways to have those characters have new things, new buttons they can push in each other so that there's still a journey over the course of each second movies.

Craig: Yeah. In the second movie, part of the deal was that, you know, one of the first things that I said when I came on that movie to Todd was, because the original conception was that Stu was getting married and all the guys were going to go to his wedding and then something was going to go wrong.

And the first thing I said when I came on that movie is there is no way that Stu wants Alan at that wedding. In fact, he specifically does not want him at the wedding. We have to jam him with this guy. And that part of the problem is that this trauma that they survived in the first movie is the only thing Alan has. Alan wants to make it happen again. And that's the problem they're living with is that that character is stuck, whereas they theoretically have moved on. And so part of the fun of that question was, well, is there value. What's the value of Alan doing this to you again? And the answer for us was Stu, who is running away from Alan as hard as he can at the start of the movie, needs to realize that there's actually — Alan has uncovered something in him that is of value and is worthy of respect.

So, that was kind of the theory there. And in the third one, again, this time Alan was the protagonist and it was about him finally letting, stopping being stuck. You know, he begins the movie even more stuck than he's ever been, and then his father does, and he has to grow up. And he has to stop doing the same damn thing over and over again. And he does.

John: Yeah. So, I mean, those were structural decisions you had to make before the first word was written, is understanding this is the nature of the journey. This is the nature of how the conflict plays throughout. And then as you approach each scene, you're figuring out like what is each character trying to do in there and how do I keep these scenes crackling through conflict.

Craig: And the understanding the nature of the conflict helps you figure out what the scenes are supposed to be anyway. So, if I know that the problem — that Ed Helms character is essentially living in fear. He is traumatized and his priority now is security, and avoidance, you know, avoiding a negative outcome type conflict. I want then to put him in conflict with his father-in-law. I want his father-in-law to basically say, "You are mush. You're not a man. I don't understand you."

And in a way like Fletcher and Andrew in *Whiplash*, he is inspiring Stu — he ultimately inspires Stu through ridicule to man up. Man up!

John: That's a lesson we can always take from the creators of [South Park](#).

Craig: Got to man up!

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