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# Designing Binge-Worthy Courses: Pandemic Pleasures and COVID-19 Consequences

*Noam Ebner\* and Elayne E. Greenberg*

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*Teachers of conflict, negotiation, and alternative dispute resolution who have transitioned their in-person courses to synchronous video conferencing are posed with significant pedagogical challenges. How will they stoke their students' curiosity and maintain their students' interest? How will students find the motivation and energy necessary to engage in nonstop videoconferences, day in and day out? How are they to maintain the high cognitive function required for our courses in the face of Zoom fatigue and reduced social interaction? In light of these challenges, we explored another activity that students (and their teachers) not only engage in, but can't pull themselves away from. Drawing on the literature examining psychological and neuroscientific aspects of binge-watching television shows, we propose an innovative approach to designing courses our students will want to binge-learn.*

A problem is a chance for you to do your best.

– Duke Ellington

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\*Corresponding author: Noam Ebner, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Creighton University, 2500 California Pl., Omaha, NE 68171, USA.

**Noam Ebner** is a professor of negotiation and conflict resolution in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Creighton University. His e-mail address is NoamEbner@Creighton.edu.

**Elayne E. Greenberg** is Professor of Legal Practice, Assistant Dean of Dispute Resolution Programs, and Faculty Director of the Hugh L. Carey Center for Dispute Resolution at the School of Law, St. John's University. Her e-mail address is Greenbee@StJohns.edu.

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## Introduction

Phew! When the world was compelled to shelter in place in early 2020 to defend against the spread of COVID-19, educators teaching negotiation, conflict, and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) nimbly moved their intensive, synchronous courses online. After adapting to the requisite technology for delivering their classes remotely, educators generously shared with each other pedagogical interventions designed to help students sustain attention during hours of online classes. Students were mostly appreciative of the efforts their teachers made to ensure the quality of their remote learning experience.

Having risen to the urgency of the moment, negotiation, conflict, and ADR educators are beginning to settle into a different normal. Most universities in the United States, and many around the world, plan for remote, or hybrid learning in the fall semester of 2020 and perhaps beyond. Even after the COVID-19 crisis passes, we anticipate that all educators, including those in our field, will be required to conduct some of their teaching online or, at the very least, to be *able* to do so in a pinch. Moving ahead, we will need more than just technological acumen to teach our courses and more than just discrete, attention-getting interventions to sustain student engagement, particularly so long as the synchronous class-meeting model continues to hold sway. While spring 2020's rapidly transitioned courses were adequate for the moment, few teachers would deem them an excellent model for remote teaching. Moreover, our students will begin to expect more from our remote teaching than basic technological competence and discrete interventions. What else can we do?

This paper offers one possible answer. In the midst of the pandemic, we noted two recurring, albeit seemingly unrelated, conversational themes when we engaged with our sheltered-in-place family, friends, students, and colleagues. *How are you managing Zoom fatigue? Which shows are you binge-watching?* The juxtaposition of these two phenomena got us thinking about their diametrically opposed effects.

Endless videoconferencing left us fatigued, wanting nothing more than to close our laptops and get into bed for a nap. Our students, spending hours upon hours in back-to-back videoconference-based classes, surely felt the same. And yet, despite both students' and educators' screen-related exhaustion, many of us were unable to tear ourselves away from viewing episode after episode of certain shows on the screen even when our clocks showed 3:00 am. Why?

This prompted us to examine the interrelationship between Zoom fatigue and television binge-watching. First we wondered, what are the motivating factors that sustain binge-watching, and how might those

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factors be used to mitigate students' classroom Zoom fatigue? Over the course of our exploration we realized that these motivating factors could not completely eliminate the causes of Zoom fatigue, but they could supplement students' energy and mitigate fatigue. We then recognized that we were delving into engagement mechanisms with the potential to go far beyond assisting students to stay awake. Our aspirations rose as our exploration broadened, leading us to ask: What are the factors that keep us binge-watching, and how can we use them to transform our classes into events that—like a gripping miniseries—students will not want to end?

We offer here a theoretical approach and a practical blueprint for developing courses in negotiation, conflict resolution, and ADR that will capture students' attention, stoke their curiosity, and motivate them to return for more. This approach extrapolates lessons from research exploring the fundamental characteristics of binge-worthy shows, the neuroscience of binge-watching, the psychology of motivation in general, and the motivational elements of negotiation pedagogy. While we focus on this approach's application to conflict courses, its theoretical underpinnings are not discipline-specific and it could be applied across a wide range of other areas, from doctrinal courses in law school to foreign-language classes.

This discussion proceeds in four parts. Part One highlights the research that grounds our recommendations. In Part Two, we apply the lessons extrapolated from this research to formulate a four-component approach. In Part Three, we raise the consequential learning benefits of this approach such as addressing racism, gender discrimination, and ageism. Part Four contains suggestions for implementing our approach. We conclude our paper with a challenge to our readers.

## **Part One: Overview of the Research**

### ***Pandemic Phenomenon #1: The Science of Zoom Fatigue***

By June of 2020, as this paper is being written, most readers have likely experienced the physical and mental exhaustion that results from spending extended time videoconferencing, whether teaching courses, participating in webinars, attending office or faculty meetings, convening family events, or maintaining personal connections. This physical and mental exhaustion has been dubbed “Zoom fatigue” (Schade 2020) based on the Zoom<sup>®</sup> videoconferencing platform that saw widespread adoption during the quarantine periods, but it applies to videoconferencing in general. While it is easy to view Zoom fatigue as an expression of general malaise stemming from a dissatisfaction with remote communication and a desire to return to normal life, this is a misperception. Zoom fatigue is real and has multiple causes (Fosslien and Duffy 2020).

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One factor contributing to Zoom fatigue is the dissonance between our sense of “showing up” somewhere and not physically showing up (Miller 2020). Additionally, our natural patterns of self-positioning and nonverbal engagement have been developed to accommodate in-person communication. Communicating over videoconferencing alters these patterns, setting a part of us on edge, anxious or alert. Consider how keeping your eyes on a group in “gallery view” during a videoconference meeting differs from looking around a room during an in-person meeting. Another example is how we are wired for discomfort with another’s enlarged face; when we see someone sitting very close to the video camera we experience that person as being, literally, “in our face” (Miller 2020).

From a cognitive standpoint, videoconferences force us to focus differently, and more intently, than we do in comparable co-located interactions. Our constant gaze toward the camera to show that we’re paying attention is an artificial behavior that does not reward us with the reciprocal benefits of in-person eye contact, and consequently drains us of energy. Beyond that, videoconferencing requires the brain to constantly overcome different types of confusion and disruption. As a “rich” medium, videoconferencing conveys many of the nonverbal cues and elements of in-person communication—such as facial expressions, pace of speech, tone of voice, body positioning, and gestures—that lend meaning, nuance, and context to messages. Its richness, however, is also the source of our dissonance. Even though videoconferencing closely resembles in-person communication, it is deceptively different. The range of nonverbal cues conveyed by the medium is more limited than in a face-to-face setting, owing to our partial view of our counterpart. Yet, instinctively, and mistakenly, we infer meaning as if we enjoy full intake of these cues (Ebner 2017a). Our brains, aware of the limited cues at some level, are on overdrive as we try to reconcile the dissonance in our minds and create a unified image of the other (Robert 2020). Inevitable glitches, such as visual delays and auditory freezing, also cause cognitive dissonance. Many of these glitches are so minute that we do not consciously notice them. However, our brains are hard at work paving over them, contributing to our fatigue.

Fatigue results not only from our efforts to stay focused, attentive, and on task during videoconference sessions, but also from other activities we tend to do during these sessions. We respond to e-mails or texts, scan drafts of papers we are writing, or read the headlines. This increases the attentional efforts we will ultimately need to make to participate in the conversation. Additionally, such multitasking comes with energy, focus, and time costs of its own. These are garnished, perhaps unsurprisingly, with stress (Mark, Gudith, and Klocke 2008).<sup>1</sup> Of course,

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in these homebound times, other forms of unplanned yet unavoidable multitasking might involve managing interruptions from children, a spouse, or a pet as you (try to) participate in a videoconference meeting (Fosslien and Duffy 2020).

Sound exhausting? It is, literally. Now, consider the additive effects of participating in three or four ninety-minute videoconference sessions, scheduled back-to-back. This is the very experience our students will go through as their courses, transitioned to videoconference format, continue according to their traditionally planned schedules.

There are two common categories of recommendations that are suggested to combat Zoom fatigue. One line of recommendations suggests that participants initiate technological and physical adaptations to reduce their own discomfort. These might include building in downtime between videoconferences, occasionally turning the camera off, or physically turning to look away from the computer. The goal here is to provide respite from maintaining constant attention, a constant screenward gaze, and a constantly attentive look on your face (Fosslien and Duffy 2020).

The second set of recommendations involves discrete pedagogical strategies to help keep students engaged with the class, the teacher, and each other. Some conflict and negotiation educators recommend strategies that are particularly suited to the teaching and learning patterns of the field (see, e.g., AALS Section of Dispute Resolution Executive Board 2020). For example, asking your students to go on a two-minute scavenger hunt to find an item that gives them comfort will provide a welcome break from staring at the screen. It will also help students identify those elements that make them feel comfortable and consider how, as negotiators, they can apply that knowledge to make negotiation participants feel more comfortable in online or in-person negotiations.

Both categories of recommendations, however, can be only marginally helpful in relieving some of the immediate discomfort of Zoom fatigue. Their impact is limited in the moment, and unlikely to mitigate the longer-term fatigue experienced by students participating in several long videoconference sessions, day in, day out, over the course of a fourteen-week semester. Moreover, even if these strategies succeed in preventing utter energy depletion, they don't motivate students to engage enthusiastically in their intensive, synchronous online courses. A more effective intervention is needed.

We now turn to explore another screen-focused activity that causes participants none of the side effects videoconferencing does. Quite the opposite, in fact; participants find it hard to tear themselves away from the TV when binge-watching their favorite show.

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## ***Pandemic Phenomenon #2: The Science of Binge-Watching***

Although there is no consensus on how to define binge-watching (see Shim and Kim 2018; Merikivi et al. 2019; Starosta, Izydorczyk, and Lizinczyk 2019), you know it when you're doing it. Generally speaking, the term connotes watching multiple episodes of a television series in a single sitting. Some consider viewing as few as two episodes back-to-back as binge-watching; others believe the requirement for binge-watching is met only when someone watches for a specific number of consecutive hours.

Having been videoconferenced into oblivion as well as having been drawn into endless hours of binge-watching during the lockdown, each with their accompanying energetic and motivational effects, we thought to ourselves, "Voila!" The motivation driving enthusiastic audiences to binge-watch TV programs is *exactly* the type of motivation we hope to engender in students taking our courses. If we could inspire our students to be as motivated in our courses as they are when they are binge-watching, we could not only counter the effects of Zoom fatigue but could even generate real enthusiasm in the online learning process.

What motivates us to binge-watch? Research from the field of neuroscience shows that viewers binge-watch for both utilitarian and hedonistic reasons (see Shim and Kim 2018; Merikivi et al. 2019; Starosta, Izydorczyk, and Lizinczyk 2019). Utilitarian reasons include a desire for efficiency ("I want to get through this program" or "I want to watch a program I know I like, rather than looking for a different one") and a desire for autonomy ("I watch what I like, rather than following some network's programming schedule"). Hedonistic motivations include a desire for enjoyment ("I look forward to watching this show") and expressions of fandom ("She's my idol! I dream of taking the world by storm like her!").

Not all individuals are equally susceptible to binge-watching. People with high levels of sensation-seeking behavior and high levels of cognition are more likely to binge-watch because of the intense excitement and problem-solving skills that it stimulates in them (Shim and Kim 2018).

Many viewers are drawn to binge-watch a show because of its unusually compelling storytelling power. Two overarching and interrelated themes appear throughout the binge-watching research on viewer motivation (see, e.g., Netflix, Inc. 2013; Lewis 2014; Page 2017). First, viewers are drawn into watching a particular show if they find its narrative complex, rich, and engaging. Second, viewers are drawn to characters that for some reason they can emotionally relate to—some characters

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may have traits viewers wish they possessed; others may represent viewers' darker sides. Still other characters may closely resemble viewers, offering them a reaffirming glimpse of how to navigate through life and master its challenges. Others may be dramatically different from anything viewers had ever imagined, disturbing them to the degree that they can't turn away from the characters any more than they could avoid picking at a scab.

The neuroscience research on motivation deepens our understanding of why viewers binge-watch. Motivation is comprised of three components: autonomy, value consistency, and competence (Yuhas 2012). First, we need to feel that we are in control and are making our own decisions rather than being directed; this feeling of autonomy motivates us. Second, we feel motivated when the task at hand is consistent with our values and beliefs. Thus, a civil rights activist will likely be more motivated writing about prison reform than hedge funds. Third, we are likely to be more motivated if we have a sense of competence that comes from believing we are accomplishing something. For example, athletes who practice and see the results of their efforts may develop a sense of competence, which may motivate them to practice even more. However, those who feel their abilities are innate may be less motivated to train hard because they do not believe training yields results.

The research distinguishes between two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic (see, e.g., Ryan and Deci 2000; Baranes, Oudeyer, and Gottlieb 2014). Intrinsic motivation comes from within, as when a child seeks to improve her jump shot in order to be a better basketball player. Extrinsic motivation is based on an expectation of external rewards, such as when the child's parent has promised her a dollar for every shot she makes. Focusing on intrinsic motivation, one study (Baranes, Oudeyer, and Gottlieb 2014) analyzed adults who were instructed to play video games without any specific goals or rewards. The factors that contributed to their intrinsic motivation were the difficulty and novelty of the tasks and the number of choices before them. Participants in the study independently organized their game engagement by proceeding from easy to hard tasks and by repeating completed tasks to gain competence for more novel tasks.

Many of our students take our classes because of external drivers such as grades or degree requirements, rather than an intrinsic motivation to learn and improve. Fret not. Educators can structure their students' learning in ways that facilitate students' internalization and integration of extrinsically motivated tasks (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Curiosity is another factor in binge-watching (Braver et al. 2014). A driver of motivation, curiosity creates a dynamic loop between learning

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and retention (Oudeyer, Gottlieb, and Lopes 2016). Curiosity prompts learning and information retention; learning and retaining new information generates curiosity. Tasks that are novel, have varying levels of complexity, and allow for prediction error result in greater information retention. Importantly, individuals have different preferences for which activities pique their curiosity (Baranes, Oudeyer, and Gottlieb 2014).

Researchers in neurocinematics, an emerging specialty of neuroscience studying the brain's reaction to film and television, have found that viewers' reactions to film scenes change depending on the degree of filmmaking structure (Hasson et al. 2008). In structured clips, such as those constructed by renowned filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, the lighting, composition, and framing of the scene are intentionally designed to evoke a universal reaction such as apprehension. Unstructured film scenes, in contrast, are more realistic, without an obvious mood or tone, such as a scene of a nondescript park. For film directors, the value of an unstructured scene is that it allows individual viewers to process the experience based on their own interpretation, rather than being directed to a predetermined reaction. It is the use of both types of scenes in just the right balance that generates optimal conditions for binge-watching: a high degree of cognitive processing by viewers combined with a willingness on their part to let the developing plot sweep them away.

Services such as Netflix have integrated this research in their program development and platform design to encourage viewers not only to *watch* shows, but to *binge-watch* them. In terms of program development, the careful mix of structured and unstructured scenes is coupled with curiosity-enhancing elements such as intriguing character tweaks; "how are they going to get out of this one?" scenes that engage viewers in hypothetical problem-solving on the characters' behalf; and cliff-hanger episodes and season endings. These motivational elements are enhanced through platform design. Viewers can search for shows based on their individual preferences, granting them autonomy to choose. They are nudged toward certain shows based on features of others they have watched previously, but not in a coercive or limiting manner. In contrast to traditional TV programming, all episodes of a show, or at least entire seasons, are available simultaneously. Netflix's "autoplay" feature releases viewers from the onus of clicking "next episode" in order to binge, and its "skip intro" function allows binge-watchers to continue from one episode to the next without disturbing the rhythm of the show, or delaying the resolution of a cliff-hanger ending (Pitre 2019).

In the next part, we explain how educators can integrate the neuroscience research related to Zoom fatigue and binge-watching into developing binge-worthy negotiation and conflict courses.



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## Part Two: Making Your Course Binge-worthy

### *Overview*

Television shows, like films and theatrical productions, can often be perceived as stories in which actors engage, with varying degrees of success, in conflict resolution. In a way, television shows are unintentional conflict resolution courses. The motivation that leads people to binge-watch captivating television shows is exactly the motivation we wish to engender in our students.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the perfect binge-worthy series existed that directly and precisely included all the central issues we address in our courses? While we're in the realm of wishes, it would be even more wonderful if these issues appeared in the optimal order for learning about them. However, to the best of our knowledge, no such series, movie, or other pop-culture artifact offers such a comprehensive spectrum of content.

In our view, that is a good thing, as it allows us, in envisioning, designing, and carrying out our negotiation courses, to avoid mistaking show-and-talk for bingeing. As described below, our blueprint for designing negotiation courses goes far beyond the tried-and-true method of showing an individual scene or two from a show or movie, or even an entire movie, in order to teach one or more points.

We have the opportunity, as teachers, to be the producers, directors, and design architects of our courses. This allows us to apply the insights from neuroscience research to create learning experiences in which students go beyond the show-viewing experience, and even beyond the typical binge-watching experience—both of which might engage or even enthrall them while still rendering them somewhat passive. In this part we explain how by engaging students in various roles, including as viewers, actors, scriptwriters, consultants, and character developers, we can not only harness the traditional experiential pedagogy for teaching negotiation and conflict, but enhance it by applying the research on binge-watching to develop binge-worthy courses in which students are active learners. We explain the four components of binge-worthy courses: an engaging narrative and opening hook; relatable characters; contexts in which the characters engage in conflict, negotiation, and conflict resolution; and learning activities that enact the story in your course. Then, we explain how these four components are a dynamic interaction rather than sequential steps. Teachers can begin to conceptualize their binge-worthy course by starting with any of the four components. Finally, we suggest how you can create additional opportunities for students to binge on your engaging course.

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### ***Formulate the Narrative Hook***

To create a binge-worthy course, you need to first reformulate your “theory of the course” and any accompanying course descriptions into a rich, engaging narrative that will pique your students’ interest. The binge-watching research indicates that rich, complex narratives engage viewers. In a negotiation or conflict course, such a narrative might serve as a “hook” that builds on the course’s practical relevance. How might you create a course description that entertains, engages, and also describes the learning objectives of your course? Award-winning creativity is not required. A good starting point is to review engaging descriptions of television shows. One instructive example is the description of the 2011 show *Fairly Legal*, a two-season show about a mediator. Even though the authors were not fans of the show, the following description illustrates our point about effective narratives:

Frustrated with the legal system while working as a lawyer at her family’s San Francisco firm, Kate Reed decides to stop practicing law and start a new career—as a mediator. Kate’s understanding of people, knowledge of the legal system and wry sense of humor make her a natural fit for resolving disputes. But not so much with disputes in her own life. Kate’s resourceful assistant, Leonardo, helps her focus on work and avoid problems in her personal life, such as with her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Justin. But personal challenges and the unconventional cases on her docket will test her newly minted mediation skills.<sup>2</sup>

How much more engaging is this description than the traditional description of a mediation course?

The process of developing such an appetite-whetting narrative is different, too, from the usual way teachers develop a course. Traditionally, teachers develop a course by first conceptualizing their “theory of the course,” an overarching goal that incorporates the course’s educational objectives. They then use their theory of the course to detail what the course is about, identify its overarching and discrete learning objectives, and extol the benefits to course participants. This theory of the course then appears in school course bulletins and in the course syllabus. “*This course will educate students about the fundamentals of mediation*” or “*In this course, students will learn about the menu of dispute resolution processes available to help resolve clients’ disputes.*” Wholly accurate and yet, snooze! Although these descriptions correctly reflect the learning goals of the course, they miss an opportunity to excite and engage potential students beginning with their very first encounter with the course.

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A good starting point for redesigning your course description is to ask yourself a series of questions about your students and their expectations. *From your students' perspective, why are they taking your course? How do students expect to benefit from what they learn in your course? In what contexts will students use what they learn?* The answers to these questions will guide you in formulating an engaging and relatable narrative. For example, if law students are taking the course to learn to be lawyers skilled at negotiation, you might develop a narrative centering on attorneys in a law firm who negotiate in their professional practice and in their personal life. If social work students are taking a course on conflict resolution, the course narrative might center around employees in a state or municipal social services department; or around four friends who each chose a different professional tack in practicing social work in the private and public sectors and who engage with each other and with clients as they navigate relationships, bureaucracies, and hierarchies.

The next step is to weave the answers to those questions into a *draft* of a short, course narrative nutshelling an engaging story in which students can see themselves at the center. This may require a style of writing that you are not accustomed to. You might get ideas for formulating a course narrative by reading the narrative descriptions of your favorite binge-worthy shows, whether those shows are set in your professional field or not. Remember that at this stage you are only writing a rough draft. You can refine details such as the number of characters and their names after you have addressed the other three components of creating a binge-worthy course: creating characters, creating contexts, and designing learning activities for enactment.

For example, the narrative for a negotiation class for nurses might begin: *Join Nurse Al and Dr. Betty as they negotiate to save their patients' lives and their own. It's a matter of life and death.* In another example, a narrative for a binge-worthy ADR advocacy class might be: *At the Bar: Fledgling lawyers support each other through professional and personal hazings as they strive to become respected members of the legal profession. Join these young lawyers through trials, tribulations, and get-togethers at their after-work pub as they struggle to figure out the best ways to survive and thrive.* The narrative of the course for social workers might be *MSW 747: Social Work and Conflict: Four friends completed their degree program in social work and set off down very different professional paths having made a pact to meet in five years. We join these friends four years down the line as they navigate conflict in their professional and personal lives, and accompany them for the year leading up to their reunion.*

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The finalized narrative is not simply an advertising gimmick, aimed to pack students into a classroom where you will teach them the same old material in the same old way. Rather, it reflects an engaging and effective approach to teaching students the knowledge and skills they require. Or, to put it the other way around, you must design a course that is every bit as appealing, engaging, and exciting as your narrative. You do so through developing the other three components, as described below.

### ***Develop the Characters***

Once you have formulated the narrative, who are the central characters that populate the narrative? These might include any of the characters featured in the course narrative—the “stars” of the show, so to speak, but also other characters with whom the stars will significantly interact. The binge-watching research reminds us that viewers are drawn in by those characters with whom they relate, positively or negatively. Similarly, the main characters in your binge-worthy course should be relatable for your students. These characters are archetypes of those individuals who, in the context of the narrative, will apply the skills taught in your course in a real-life setting; they are representatives of, or proxies for, how course participants expect to apply their course knowledge in the real world. For example, in a negotiation class for nurses, the narrative might focus on a bustling hospital environment, or a particular floor. The central characters may be a nurse, a hospital administrator, and a doctor. In an ADR advocacy course for law students, the narrative might focus on two law firms in the same building, and the central characters may be associates and partners from each firm.<sup>3</sup>

The characters create a rich and safe environment for student engagement and learning. In the ADR advocacy course, you may decide to cast four lawyers at the center of your narrative, each with different experiences, conflict styles, negotiation skills, and personal backgrounds. They are, at least in a general sense, prototypes of the lawyers with whom your students will be negotiating in the future. Students may empathize with those characters more like themselves, while be challenged by those characters less like them. Alternatively, students may learn from a character who has skills and traits to which they aspire. Whatever their identification with the characters, students can engage with them in a safe, low-risk learning experience that deepens the understanding that comes from this type of perspective-taking and increases the mastery of skills.

Consider how the learning objectives of your course will help determine the distinguishable characteristics of the characters you create. For example, teaching a negotiation course, you wish students to

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explore how negotiating behavior is shaped by the meeting of two or more individuals with different conflict styles, negotiation styles, negotiation experience, age, gender, race, culture, motivations for negotiating, and more. By creating characters embodying different mixes of these variables, you provide students with a richer learning experience. Thus, your cast of characters in a negotiation class might include a fifty-five-year-old African American woman with a cooperative conflict style who is a partner in a big law firm, a twenty-seven year old Caucasian man who is a recent law graduate with an avoidant conflict style working in a public interest firm, and a forty-year-old Asian American man with a direct conflict style working as an associate in a boutique law firm.

Other characters must also be developed in addition to the leads. Those characters' interactions with the leads develop the leads' characters and expand the show's range. The lead roles will encounter ancillary characters in a variety of settings, which will be determined by your decisions on the *next* component, contexts.

Once you have determined the contexts of interactions, you can then decide whether the people with whom the lead roles engage are recurring or one-off characters. Consider how in shows about nurses or lawyers, patients and clients often change from episode to episode. This allows the shows' creators to introduce quirky characters and creative circumstances while maintaining a consistent, overarching context. Sometimes these characters only appear for an episode or two. Other characters, such as the nurse's spouse or the lawyer's drinking buddy, appear multiple times, allowing for more relational development and for introducing other contexts.

### ***Create the Contexts***

The third component of a binge-worthy course is the range of scenes that together will form a rich and engaging narrative. Every TV show comprises sequences of scenes in which characters and complexity develop. In negotiation and conflict course design, each scene takes the form of a context in which the characters help students master the learning objectives of your course. The context connects the narrative and the characters to create a complex story in which course participants can sequentially acquire and master requisite skills. Remember, the research we've reviewed indicates that students will be more curious about the substance of your course and more motivated to learn if the learning tasks are of increasing complexity and encourage mastery of the skills taught. Furthermore, as we learned from the neurocinematic researchers, an important aspect of creating contexts is deciding whether or not to tightly define the context. Teachers can shape the reactions of course participants if the context is tightly defined or allow for a variety of reactions if the context is defined

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more loosely. Keeping in mind specific content points they wish to cover combined with the motivational aspects of engaging with ambiguity and individual meaning-making, teachers can create a balance in which students explore not only areas or issues that teachers deem necessary but others that are important to individual students.

The contexts are the specific settings in which the characters interact with one another, the reasons for those interactions, and the needs, interests, resources, and relationships at stake. For example, a lead character, a nurse, needs to free up his weekend to go away with his spouse, with whom he is experiencing marital stress. He negotiates with a colleague, a nurse on his floor and an occasional recurring character, to cover his weekend duty shift. The two have a history of occasional reciprocation on such matters. The last time they did so, however, a miscommunication between them led to a rift. In a different context, the nurse and his spouse plan the weekend getaway together, with very different ideas of where they will go and what they will do. In a third context, the nurse and his spouse negotiate with a vendor at a tourist attraction over the price of a pair of sunglasses. This is an example of embedding contexts along a narrative timeline.

Each of these contexts is designed to engage students with different elements of conflict and negotiation, and of course, they could be revised in order to provide varying, and increasing, levels of complexity. For example, instead of the one-issue bargaining over price with the sunglass vendor, the narrative could have the nurse bargaining over the price of a getaway cabin with its owner, negotiating with his colleague to cover his shift, and then, engaging with his spouse over weekend goals and activities as well as deeper relational issues after the nurse fails to consult his spouse before renting the cabin. As students transfer between these contexts, they are not parachuted into a one-shot setting in an artificial manner. Rather, as they continue to engage with the characters in different contexts, they have the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the characters' histories and their negotiation patterns, which then shape the characters' actions and choices.

In law school settings, professors might create contexts in which students advocate for a client and contexts in which they advocate for themselves, in order to teach them how to differentiate between the two. For example, in one context, an associate might represent a client in a contract negotiation. In another, the associate might face an ethical conundrum when the client's counterpart calls to ask for advice. In a third, the associate is discussing her potential partnership in the firm with another lead character, a senior partner in the firm. In a fourth, the senior partner may represent a newspaper in a contentious mediation of a libel lawsuit where the plaintiff is represented by a high-conflict

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type attorney who is either a one-shot, recurring, or lead character. In a fifth, the associate, dejected or uplifted by her partnership prospects, negotiates the purchase of a new apartment together with her spouse. Together, these plot lines demonstrate how the results of negotiation in one context can blend with surrounding facts to form a later conflict or negotiation context, thus enhancing students' sense of verisimilitude as well as the narrative's sense of continuity. How to create this flow from one context into another depends, of course, on the forms in which each context is enacted.

We now turn to the fourth component of a binge-worthy course: the learning exercises for enactment.

***Choose the Learning Exercises for Enactment—Action!***

You have formulated the narrative, developed the characters, created the contexts. Next, which learning exercises will you use to unfold your binge-worthy course? At the end of the day, you are a negotiation and conflict teacher, not a film director. Short of producing a film or a binge-worthy TV series that enacts the previous three components (though we are not ruling this out!) how do you bring your binge-worthy course into your classroom? In other words, now that you have all these ideas, how are students going to binge on them? The story is enacted in the course through learning activities; hypotheticals, problems, and simulations are some familiar options. In this section, we will discuss these and suggest others. The more often these activities occur throughout the course, the deeper the course is interwoven with the narrative, at once utilizing and strengthening student engagement. Here are some possible methods of enactment:

*Introductions.* As part of the course introduction, teachers might introduce the overall storyline and its use as a recurring component of the class. Professors might also consider introducing the characters after students introduce themselves to the rest of the class.

*Clarifying examples.* In class, we often use short stories, both real and made-up, to illustrate concepts. We might recount a car purchase to exemplify the notion of the best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA); or a salary negotiation to illustrate the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA), anchoring, or objective criteria. To teach about conflict escalation, we might draw on the Camp David Accords to demonstrate interest-based bargaining, or a real-life incident that just happened to us on the way to class.

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*Class vignettes/hypotheticals.* Teachers routinely generate class discussion by presenting students with a discrete set of facts and asking them what they would do or how they might assess the situation. To conduct this same activity in your binge-worthy course, you might ask students to discuss a scenario based on the narrative you developed, the characters you created, and the contexts you are presenting. For example, in the law school course discussed above, you might ask students to imagine that one of the characters, a partner in a big law firm, is considering striking out on her own, and is trying to covertly headhunt another character, a small-firm associate, to join her venture. Flesh out some of the details of her actions or offer and challenge students: *How would you act in that situation? How do you think each of the characters should act in this situation? How would you advise one of the characters to act if they were in the role of some other character in the narrative? How would the combination of their very different conflict styles affect the interaction? What issues of professional and personal culture might arise in the negotiation?* What a rich opportunity for students to practice perspective-taking, empathy, and ethical behavior!

*Simulations.* Teachers can design simulations that organically fit in with, develop, and strengthen their narratives. In these simulations, students could negotiate in role as any character in the narrative, including ancillary characters that are recurring and one-shot. The “background information” in this simulation is, therefore, not limited to the specific information sheet they receive. Rather, it incorporates all they know about the characters and their story thus far. Students’ actions and decisions in the role play are informed not only by “how would I act in such a situation?” but also by “how would this character act in the situation, with this counterpart?” Participating in the simulation, students become actors in the course narrative, identify with it, and drive it forward.

This does not necessarily require teachers to dedicate the time and energy necessary to write entire new sets of simulations for their course. It may be that many of their existing simulations can be tweaked in order to fit into the storyline. For example, if the teacher usually assigns students a car or home purchase negotiation to practice positional bargaining skills, they can use the same simulation, only tweaking it so that one or more of the parties are characters in the narrative. Instead of assigning students a new set of background facts relevant only to this situation, the teacher can tell students that the car buyer in the negotiation is Terry, one of the four social workers in the example given above. Moreover, the teacher could create four different buyer roles simply by assigning a quarter of the buyers to negotiate as Terry, a quarter to negotiate as another social worker, and so on. With nearly no effort, the



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teacher has thus incorporated his or her simulation into the narrative and has provided the bases for comparative analysis.

Moreover, depending on the course framework, teachers might not need to tweak their simulations at all. In law school negotiation and mediation classes, professors commonly have one student play a lawyer representing Client X, another student play a lawyer representing Client Y, and a third play an attorney-mediator helping them to work things out. However, if the law professor wishes to incorporate our newly suggested design, she can do so with little effort by reassigning these students to three of the central attorney characters in the course narrative. In this new design paradigm, the teacher might give students representing Client X or Client Y the same background and confidential information about the case and their clients that they always have provided. The difference, however, is that the students are reminded that they are not parachuting into a mediation situation without context. Rather, they are each playing the role of one of the lead characters, lawyers who bring to this meeting all of the experience, characteristics, and background that have developed thus far in the course narrative. As such, they participate in the mediation doubly “in role.” The mediator, a one-shot character in the narrative, or perhaps a recurring character, will find herself mediating between two lawyers with a great deal of backstory that is unfamiliar to the mediator. The mediator will then need to navigate those waters effectively and constructively.

Of course, simulations conducted in different groups will end with different outcomes, which can affect the unfolding narrative. Teachers can decide, after conducting the simulation, whether to regroup the class around a shared resolution to the situation that then becomes part of the story, or continue with branching storylines. Teachers should consider allowing students to choose the character they want to play in a simulation, perhaps playing different roles throughout the course. By doing so, students’ autonomy, a core component of motivation, is reinforced.

*Assignments.* All assignments in the course can be designed to enact the narrative. In fact, by embedding class assignments in the narrative’s universe, teachers are utilizing opportunities to strengthen the narrative’s impact. One of the authors posed quiz questions referencing characters from an ongoing narrative, and asked students to formulate strategies for overcoming potential impasses between characters. Other possible activities are asking students to write a reflective journal from a particular character’s perspective or to prepare a counseling memorandum for one of the characters ahead of an upcoming mediation.

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*Choose your own adventure.* You might create original course material in which students are empowered to make decisions for protagonists in the narrative and forced to deal with the outcomes of that decision. Harnessing the power of curiosity, students can even explore what the outcomes of different decisions, even bad decisions, might be. Known as branched learning, such a “choose your own adventure” style activity might be created in different formats such as text-on-paper, interaction-with-screen, or video. Such exercises allow students to investigate a corner of the narrative *together* with one of the characters, enhancing identification with the narrative and taking the character’s perspective with regards to the subject matter.<sup>4</sup>

These are only examples of the range of learning exercises that may be used to enact the narrative. As you go through the course, you can also conduct improvisational or *ad hoc* enactment. Any time you mention the story, refer to a character, or ask students to consider a character’s perspective on a particular issue, you are strengthening and deepening the weight, draw, and impact of the narrative in the course.

*How do you begin?* We’ve introduced these components in a sequential order for simplicity’s sake. Given that this is a creative process, some teachers might find it natural to begin with a different component, or develop the components in a different order. Wherever you begin, and whatever sequence you choose, it is important to note that work on each component can only be finalized when all of the narrative’s components are considered together.

A helpful metaphor might be that of putting up a shelf by means of securing its brackets to a wall with four screws. Tightening one screw first as firmly as you can, and then, moving on to the second to do the same, will result in a lopsided shelf. Rather, you should get the first screw in just enough to support some of the shelf’s weight, and then, do the same with each of the other screws in turn. Next, you return to the first screw and tighten it further, and do the same for each of the others. After a number of iterations, the screws have been fully tightened, and the shelf is firmly placed and perfectly balanced.

Returning to the components of binge-worthy courses, consider that a general narrative will enable you to ideate an initial cast of characters. While considering the contexts you wish them to engage in, however, you realize that you need additional characters to play smaller roles, or another lead character to provide a contrasting personality. You then might alter the general narrative somewhat, which might in turn lead you to sharpen the characteristics you wish to set in place for the lead characters. Teachers may find it helpful to conceptually cycle through the four components several times before choosing the best learning opportunities for a course.

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*From engagement to bingeing.* While we have drawn on insights from binge-watching, our aspirations have been to create a design for an engaging course in which students will be awake, alert, motivated, and active. At a minimum, we hope that the motivational effects of the proposed course design will serve to counteract the depleting effects of Zoom fatigue. We expect, however, that some teachers might crack the binge-watching code so well that their course goes beyond these aspirations. What if students actually desire to *binge* on our courses and to continue participating even after class is over? Courses that are set around live, real-time, weekly video-based meetings do not easily lend themselves to bingeing. Flawless as our class delivery might be, we have no “watch next episode” button our students can click on. How might we provide opportunities for more engagement?

Recalling the different features of streaming sites that facilitate bingeing, we realized that it would be best to build such opportunities into the course in terms of its structure, opportunities, and geography, as we detail below. Depending on whether teachers want students to engage in these opportunities because of their internal or external motivation, they will frame these opportunities with no credit attached or as optional assignments for extra credit. We suggest experimenting with students’ intrinsic motivations when seeking to engage them in their “binge” zone. Whatever the motivation, teachers can suggest further activities that students can conduct on their own time. For example, they can set up a discussion forum or a submission box for students to engage further with the narrative, or suggest that they keep a real or fictional diary of their negotiation interactions throughout each day, written from the perspective of one of the characters. Another possibility is in-role adventure learning—for example, negotiating something in the real world as a character in the narrative would do, something with real (low stake) consequences. (For more on adventure learning, see Coben, Honeyman, and Press (2010)).

### **Part Three: Consequential Learning Benefits**

The pedagogical benefits of developing this binge-worthy course design are many. First, the characters allow course participants to learn, in a safer way than traditional course role-playing, about working with different types of people and different types of personalities. In traditional skills courses, students have heightened sensitivity about how they will be judged by their peers. This course design, however, minimizes students’ vulnerability because they can learn through the safer world of the characters.

Second, as students take on the personae of different characters and engage with other types of characters, they will enhance their

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perspective-taking skills and learn to practice empathy. For example, students will have the opportunity to understand that a character that they have previously found offensive is actually a human being juggling competing interests. In another example, a character who was previously labeled “nice” may then be more accurately viewed as an inept negotiator who has yet to learn the importance of being assertive. Students’ familiarity with the overall narrative and characters’ backgrounds and traits enables them to “play” characters in a way that is more immersive and authentic than is possible in a typical classroom simulation. In our proposed course design, students experience and work with and through the predetermined variety of attitudes, personalities, and approaches the characters embody, an essential feature of the learning experience.

This safer perspective-taking experience also helps students feel empathy for the characters with which they engage. Students experience first-hand how empathy is a powerful dispute resolution resource to help engage the other in a negotiation (Greenberg 2016, 2017). As students experiment engaging with different personality types in different contexts, they are able to develop appropriate coping mechanisms for working with those personality types who have previously pushed their buttons.

Third, in those binge-worthy courses where educators develop diverse characters with respect to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, disability, and age, students have the opportunity to safely interact with these diverse characters. From these interactions, students can develop a heightened awareness of their preexisting biases, explicit and implicit (Frenkel and Stark 2015). Moreover, when students assume the roles of diverse characters, they have a safer opportunity to challenge and manage existing biases that others may have about the characters they are playing. Safe and insightful discussions can be conducted around stereotypes that manifest in the way students play different characters.

To bring issues of diversity and stereotypes to life, students playing lawyers in Elayne’s ADR advocacy class are tasked with selecting a mediator out of a pool of diverse applicants. Rarely do any of the students select the black mediator, even though she is highly qualified for the job. The ensuing conversation about racism in the selection of neutrals invites students, defended by their character’s persona, to consider how their own implicit biases might shape neutral selection. A classroom exercise that Noam has used shows how playing characters in immersive experiences allows students to experience, and then discuss, gender dynamics in a way that typical simulations do not allow for. In this exercise, the characters are organized into two negotiating teams. One team has two male characters while the other negotiating

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team has a male negotiator and a female negotiator. Some students are assigned to characters whose gender matches their own, but one is assigned to play a character of a different gender. All students play their characters, rather than changing the character's gender to match their own as they often do in typical classroom simulations. Imagine a male student playing the female negotiator. He is familiar with her personality and background, as developed throughout the course, so he has enough to latch onto as he gets in role. In the ensuing negotiation, all three male characters talk over the woman character. The student playing the female character has had an eye-opening experience that he can share with the class, and the debrief lessons about gender dynamics and negotiations focus on the characters' actions, rather than the actions of individual students.

As a final consequential learning benefit, students can shape more realistic outcomes and resolutions because the structure of the course helps them stay true to the course narrative. Many professors bemoan the fact that students in negotiation courses misinterpret a good outcome as one in which all participants remain friends. For some reason, many students fail to hear their professors repeat again and again that good outcomes include those resolutions that rightfully require people to go their separate ways. Similarly, we've all encountered students who accepted a bad deal rather than walk away, or chose a cooperative approach when dealing with an unethical counterpart, because they think that's what their teacher expects them to do. Our suggested structure for a binge-worthy course compels students to remain true to the narrative, even when the result is splitting up relationships, living with impasse, or applying varied negotiation and conflict approaches.

### **Part Four: Hasn't 2020 Been Hard Enough Already?**

Teachers might justly feel reticent to implement the course-design approach laid out in this paper given the amount of creativity and sheer labor involved in developing multiple characters, contexts, and enactment exercises in the framework of an overall narrative. This is particularly so at the present moment (mid-2020), given all the additional demands placed on their time, emotions, and cognition. We offer some suggestions for adopting the approach to design detailed in this paper while still sleeping nights.

#### ***New Course? New Design***

Some teachers might find it easier to implement this design method as they approach creating a new course, rather than using it to revise an existing course. We are no less susceptible to the effects of sunk costs than anyone else.

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### ***Consider Your Resources Up Front***

There is no single scale of investment that applies to implementing this course design. Rather, it's up to each teacher to decide how best to incorporate this proposed design paradigm in their courses to enhance student engagement. Some may wish to tweak some of their existing simulations in order to fit them into a storyline and/or adapt some existing course assignments to relate to the storyline, reducing the time and effort they dedicate to course preparation. Others might be motivated to create a new set of simulations. Teachers who are passionate about this approach to design might consider scripting, filming, and producing a series of film scenes.<sup>5</sup> Still others may prefer to write a novel or series of stories around a central narrative. All are possible ways to make our suggested design paradigm come alive in your courses.

### ***Take Incremental Steps***

No matter what approach you choose, don't try to do it all at once. After coming up with your narrative and cast of characters, you might decide that in your upcoming course you will feature them in a variety of enactments in only two weeks of your course. If, when you teach the course again, you create enactments for the next two weeks as well, you have applied the narrative-based course design approach to a significant portion of the course. So significant, that you might then dedicate a few hours of time in the middle of the course to arrange for the characters make guest appearances in later weeks, perhaps on a quiz or in an assignment.

### ***Share the Load***

Teachers don't need to bear the burdens of time and creativity on their own; in fact, it might be best if they don't. Engage your students in design activities. Involving students in designing simulations and other learning exercises (as compared to role-playing or conducting them) has been found to have unique efficacy for enhancing their learning and retention of negotiation concepts (Druckman and Ebner 2008, 2018). Such engagement by students also increases their understanding of connections *between* negotiation concepts, particularly if they are primed to consider this as they work on design (Druckman and Ebner 2013). Moreover, and particularly important in the context of creating binge-worthy courses, design activities increased students' satisfaction and enjoyment and their desire to engage in further similar tasks (Druckman and Ebner 2008). Teachers might choose to set the overall narrative themselves, and decide the central features of the contexts, but task students to design characters and specific enactment exercises while giving appropriate guidance.

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## Conclusion

We began this paper with a quote from Duke Ellington, a master of jazz improvisation, in which he reminds us of the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As with improvisation in jazz, the novel approach to course design proposed in this paper involves forging new paths and adapting as we go along.

We have each implemented discrete elements of this approach in our own teaching but prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we did not organize these components into a comprehensive structure for course design since our traditional classroom methods were more than sufficient for engaging students. It was only when the pandemic fundamentally challenged our ability to keep students engaged and enthused that we recognized we needed far more than another new simulation or another interesting exercise. Envious of the attention and enthusiasm certain television shows received in these turbulent times, we wondered what they had that we did not. We've shared the results of this exploration in this paper and suggested its ramifications for pedagogy.

This paper offers lessons learned from the research on binge-worthy television shows and applies them to course development in an intensive online format. Binge-worthy shows, like our conflict and negotiation skills courses, are lessons about conflict resolution in different settings. The suggestions here build on the skills educators already use such as simulation development and exercises in perspective-taking. What is distinctly different, however, is that the proposed course design invites teachers to be more intentional about the thematic course narrative, the characters, the contexts, and the sequencing in which students will learn negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

Concurrent with our writing, we've increased our implementation of these ideas in our own teaching and are using this approach to design courses for upcoming semesters. The blueprint we've offered in this paper is novel, experimental, and a work in progress. We invite others to experiment with our approach and catalyze its development.

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for development of the ideas expressed in this paper connecting motivation and pedagogy in the worlds of interactive media, games, and pop culture.

## NOTES

1. For further discussion of attention, focus, and multitasking in the realm of negotiation and teaching negotiation, see Ebner (2017b) and Newell (2014, 2017).

2. This description is displayed on streaming platforms, for example, <https://www.xfinity.com/stream/entity/5010792453033015112/info>.

3. Of course, teachers may create narrative settings somewhat further from home. If they are concerned that students' under or over-identification with the setting and the characters will lead to decreased learning, they might set the narrative in "pseudo-reality," a familiar setting with certain features changed just enough to prevent such identification issues from interfering with learning, and to allow positive identification issues to support it (Ebner and Efron 2005).

4. The connection between viewer autonomy, agency, curiosity, and engagement has not been lost on binge-designers. Netflix has created special episodes of two of its most popular shows (*Black Mirror* and *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*) in which viewers can decide on the protagonists' next moves, branching the story out at each decision point. This might indicate a future trend in binge-worthy shows worthy of replication in binge-worthy courses. For an example of a branched learning exercise in which students implement the method of negotiation introduced in Fisher, Ury, and Patton's (2011) *Getting to Yes* while playing the role of a character in the Star Wars universe, see (and play) Ebner and Beecher (2016).

5. For example, Orna Kopolovich has created a number of video clips for use in her negotiation courses in which an ongoing narrative plot centers on the negotiation and conflict interactions of three workers in a college cafeteria and their manager. See Kopolovich (forthcoming).

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