Theme is Not Meaning

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Who am I?

- ***Civilization 3*** : Co-Designer, Programmer (2001)
- ***Planets*** : Lead Designer, Programmer (Unreleased)
- ***Civilization 4*** : Project Lead, Lead Designer, Programmer (2005)
- ***Spore*** : Lead Gameplay Programmer (2008)
- ***Game Developer*** : Columnist (“Design of the Times”)
- **EA2D**: Lead Designer/Programmer (strategystation.com, unannounced browser-based MMO)

Who decides what a game is about?

Not just player vs. designer

(although it’s the player, btw)

Theme vs. Mechanics

(which one defines a game?)

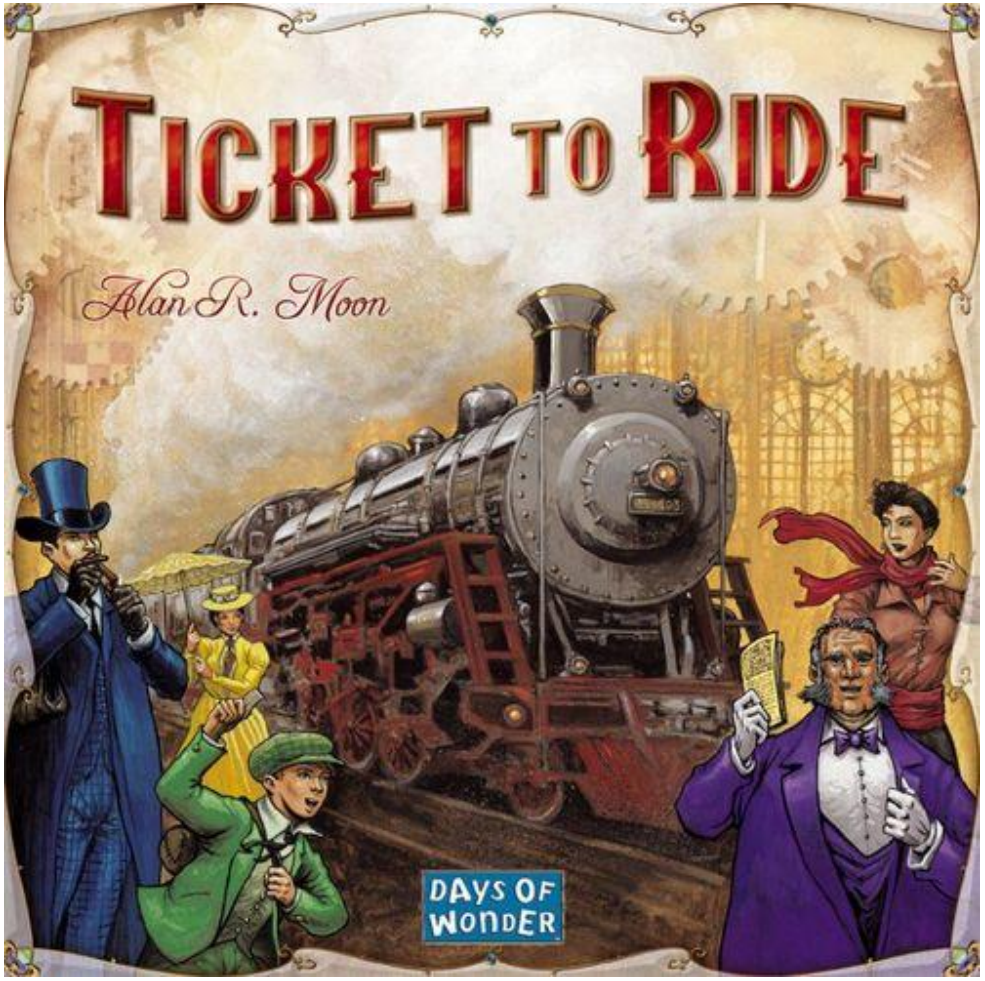
Mechanics

Theme

RISK
THE GAME OF STRATEGIC CONQUEST
Risk
THE GAME OF GALACTIC DOMINATION
STAR WARS
ORIGINAL TRILOGY EDITION
PARKER BROTHERS
AGES 9 AND UP
RISK
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
The Middle-earth Conquest Game

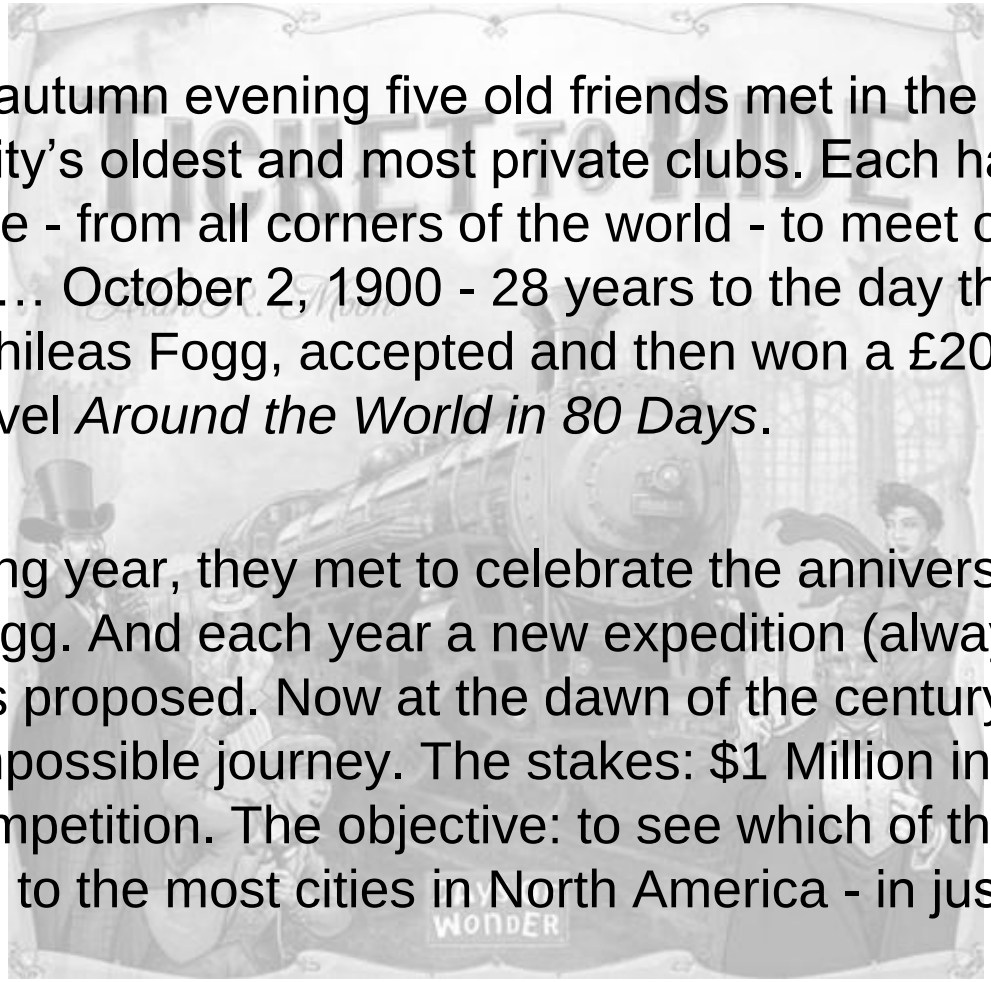
What's ***WarCraft***'s descendant? ***StarCraft*** or ***WoW***?

Ticket to Ride



Ticket to Ride: Mechanics

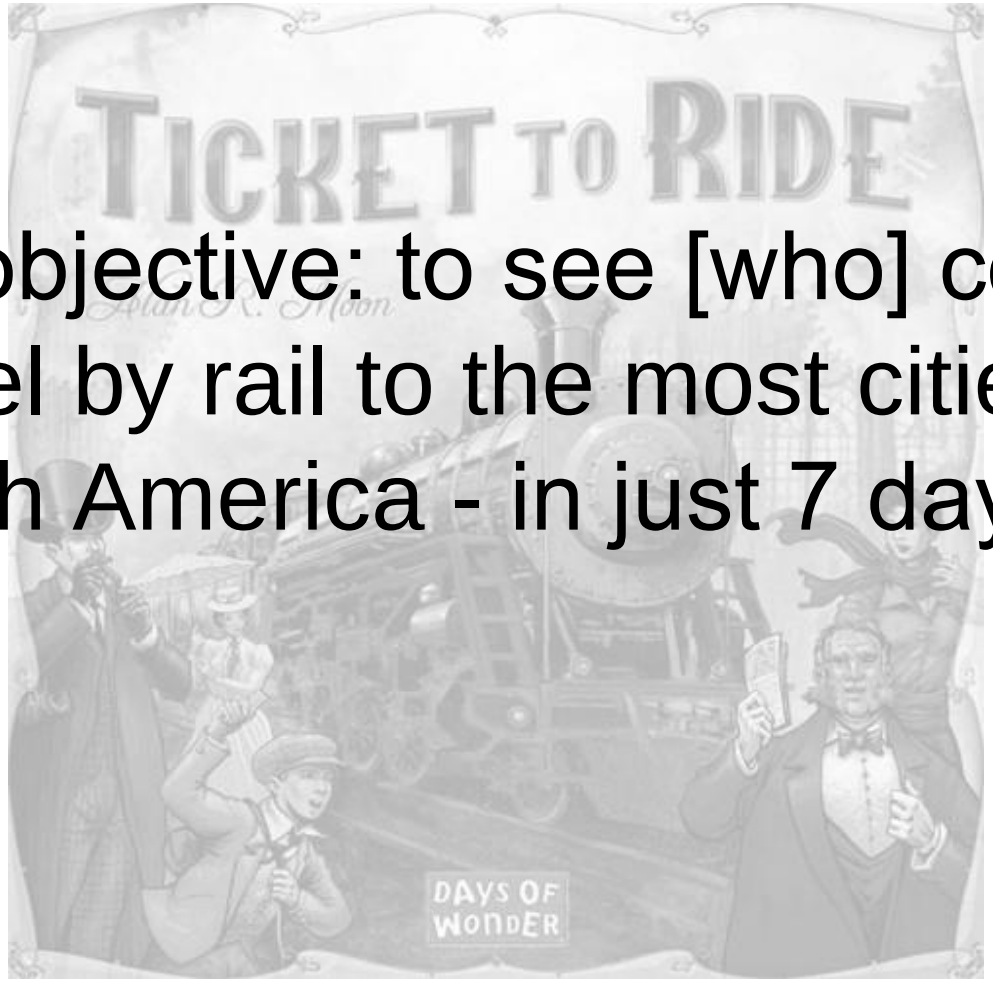
Ticket to Ride: Theme



"On a blustery autumn evening five old friends met in the backroom of one of the city's oldest and most private clubs. Each had traveled a long distance - from all corners of the world - to meet on this very specific day… October 2, 1900 - 28 years to the day that the London eccentric, Phileas Fogg, accepted and then won a £20,000 bet that he could travel *Around the World in 80 Days*.

Each succeeding year, they met to celebrate the anniversary and pay tribute to Fogg. And each year a new expedition (always more difficult) was proposed. Now at the dawn of the century it was time for a new impossible journey. The stakes: $1 Million in a winner-takes-all competition. The objective: to see which of them could travel by rail to the most cities in North America - in just 7 days."

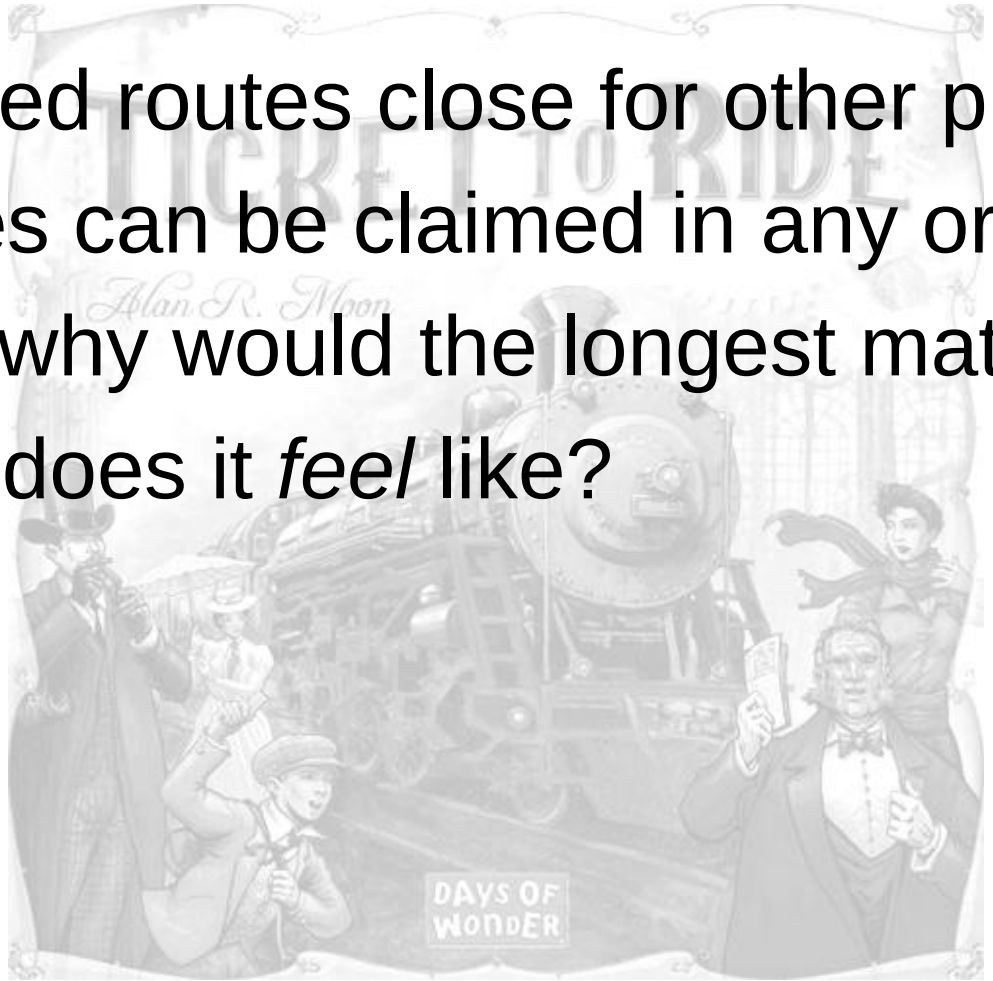
Ticket to Ride: Theme



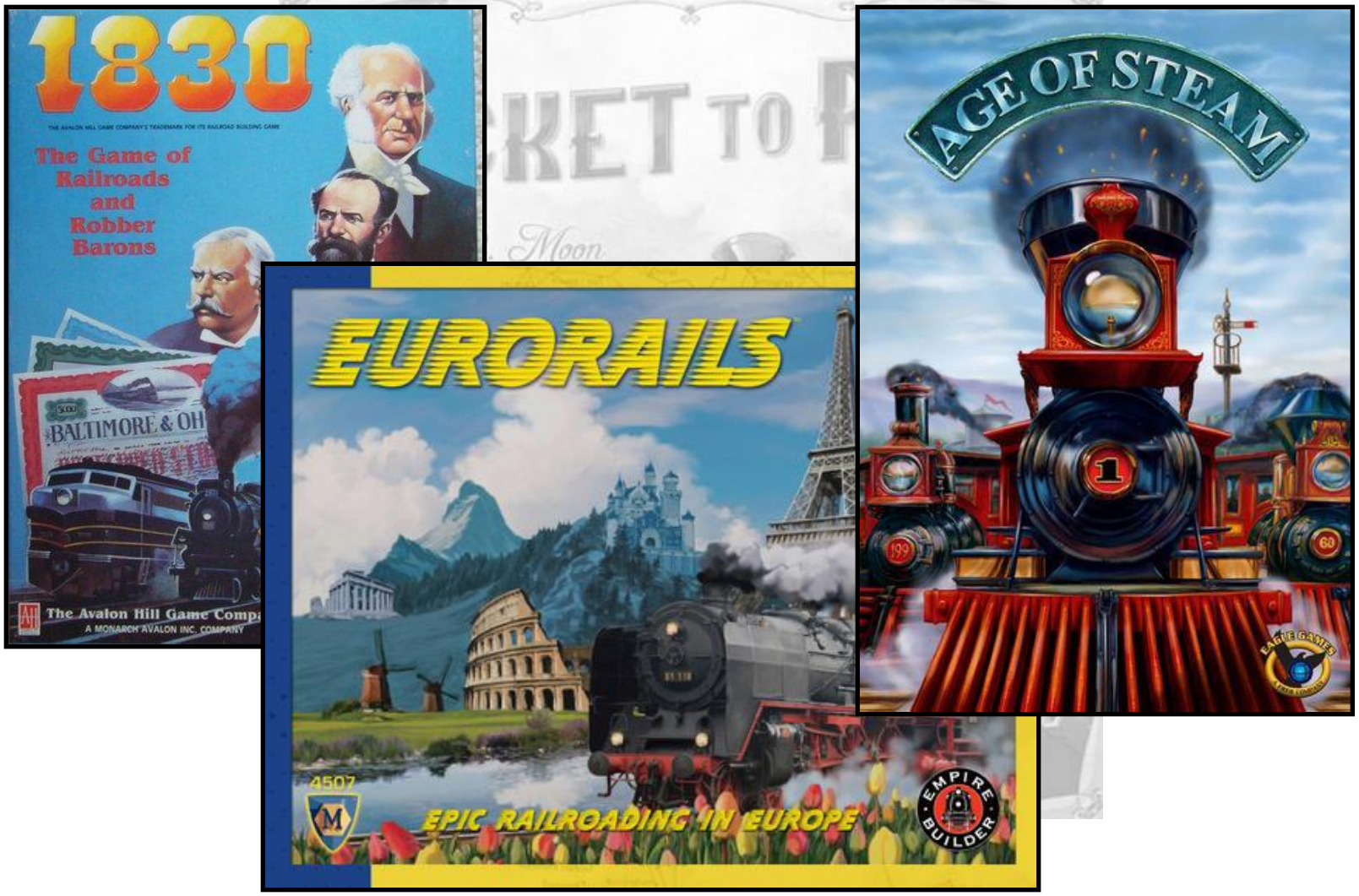
"The objective: to see [who] could travel by rail to the most cities in North America - in just 7 days."

Theme vs. Mechanics

- Claimed routes close for other players?
- Routes can be claimed in any order?
- Then why would the longest matter?
- What does it *feel* like?



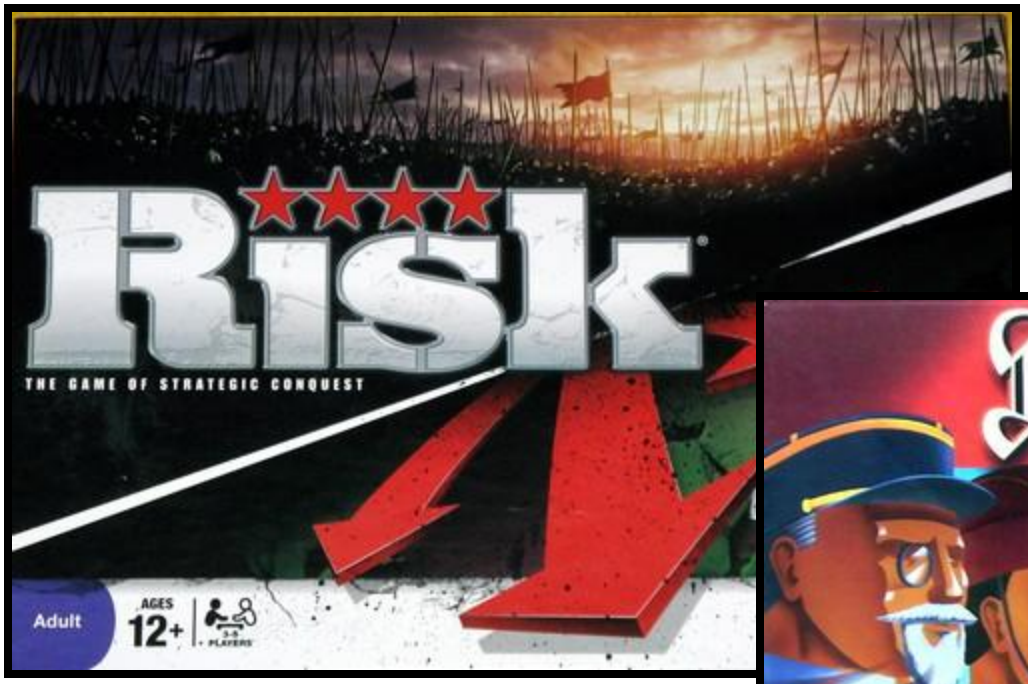
What does it *feel* like?

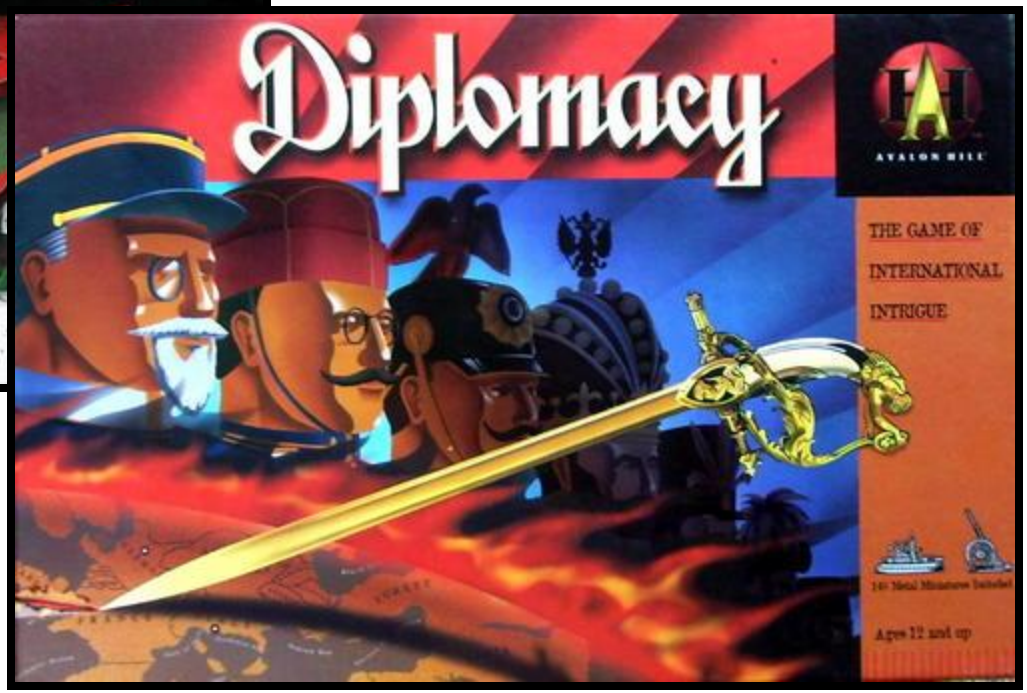


Who decides what a game is about?

A game’s mechanics give it meaning

Risk vs. *Diplomacy*





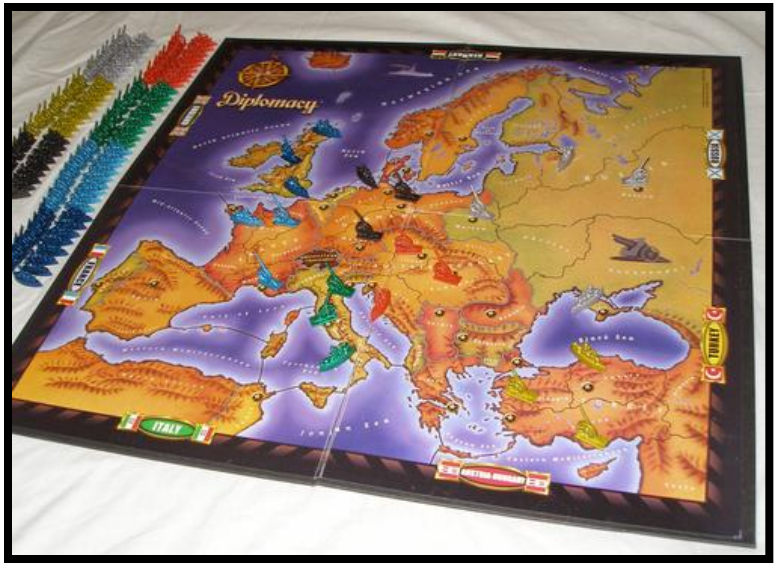
Similar Mechanics…

Risk

- World Conquest
- Territorial Control
- Army Tokens

Diplomacy

- World Conquest
- Territorial Control
- Army Tokens



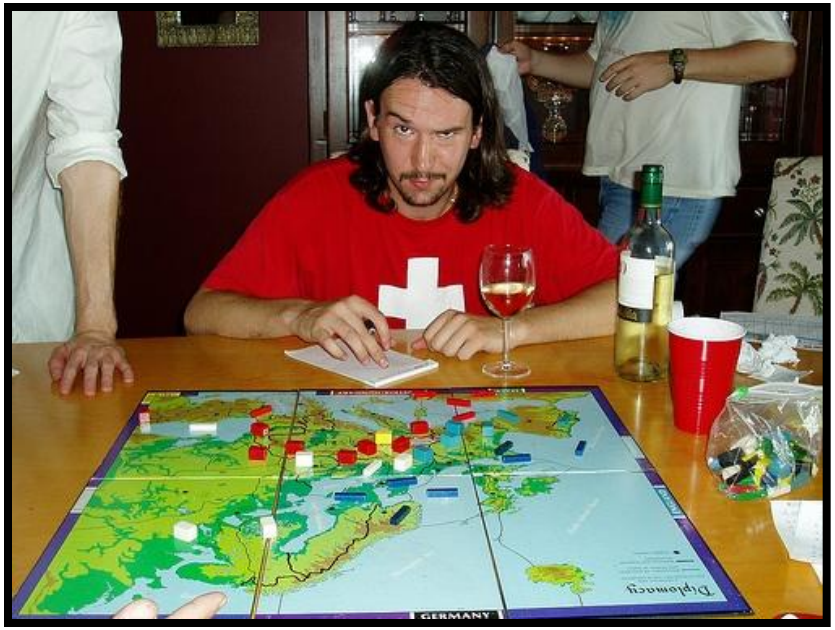
…Different Mechanics

Risk

- *Sequential* Turns

Diplomacy

- *Simultaneous* Turns



…Different Mechanics

Risk

- *Probabilistic* Combat

Diplomacy

- *Deterministic* Combat

Mechanics give Meaning

Risk…

…is about Risk!

Diplomacy…

…is about Diplomacy!

What is ***Spore*** about?

What is ***Spore*** about?

Evolution?

Browse | Search

All Creations | Most Popular | Submit

Showing 1-20 of 4,200 Most Popular Creations

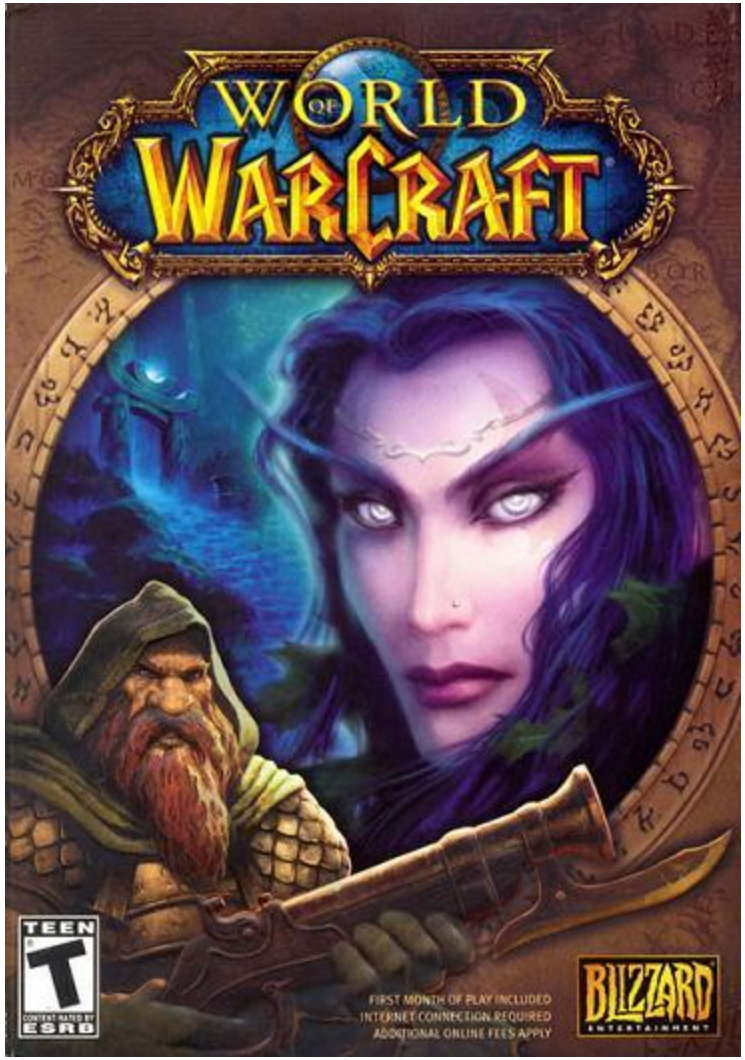
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ...

Charles Darwin	Twilight Stagfron	LOL WUT	Jesus H Christ	Bach Strad Trump
Svndl	Cecil_090	Mootacoo	Slartibartfast38	Kylerman20
Alto Saxophone	**Your The MASTER**	**Cerebrilith**	**I DID IT!!!!!!**	**French Horn**
Kylerman20	tacobob1	Bernini	Remypas	Kylerman20
Bard	**Basic Yamaha Tru**	**Barack Obama**	**Dioers**	**Dracontyr**
MaxWal1993	Kylerman20	MaxisCactus	MaxWal1993	Nethellus

What is ***Spore*** about?

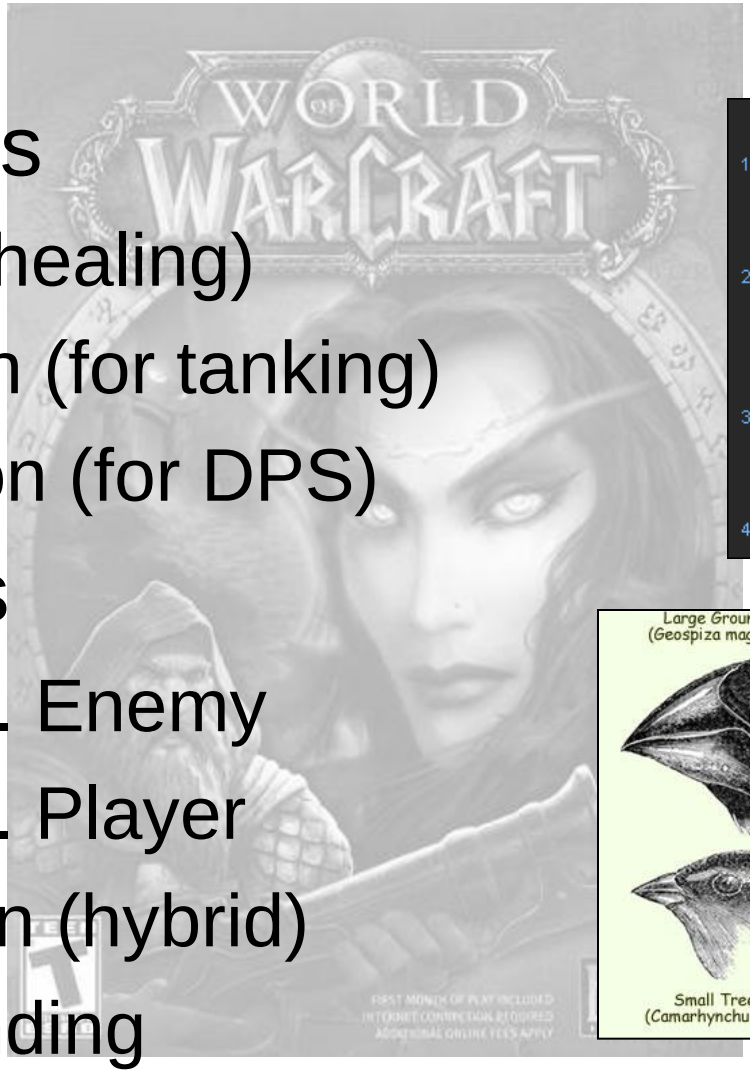
Creativity!

Is there a game about evolution?


WORLD OF WARCRAFT
TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
FIRST MONTH OF PLAY INCLUDED
INTERNET CONNECTION REQUIRED
ADDITIONAL ONLINE FEES APPLY
BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

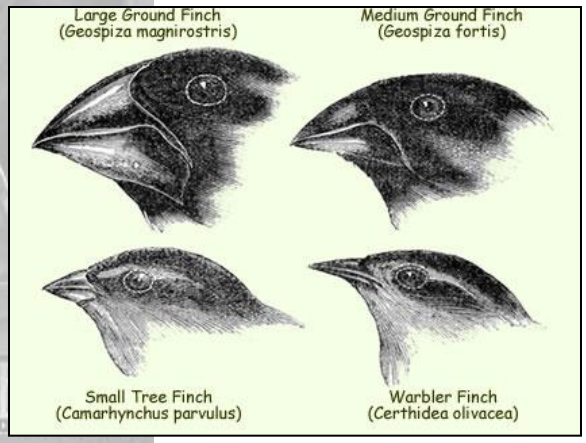
WoW: Paladin Natural Selection

- Main Builds
  - Holy (for healing)
  - Protection (for tanking)
  - Retribution (for DPS)
- Sub Builds
  - Player vs. Enemy
  - Player vs. Player
  - Shockadin (hybrid)
  - AOE Grinding



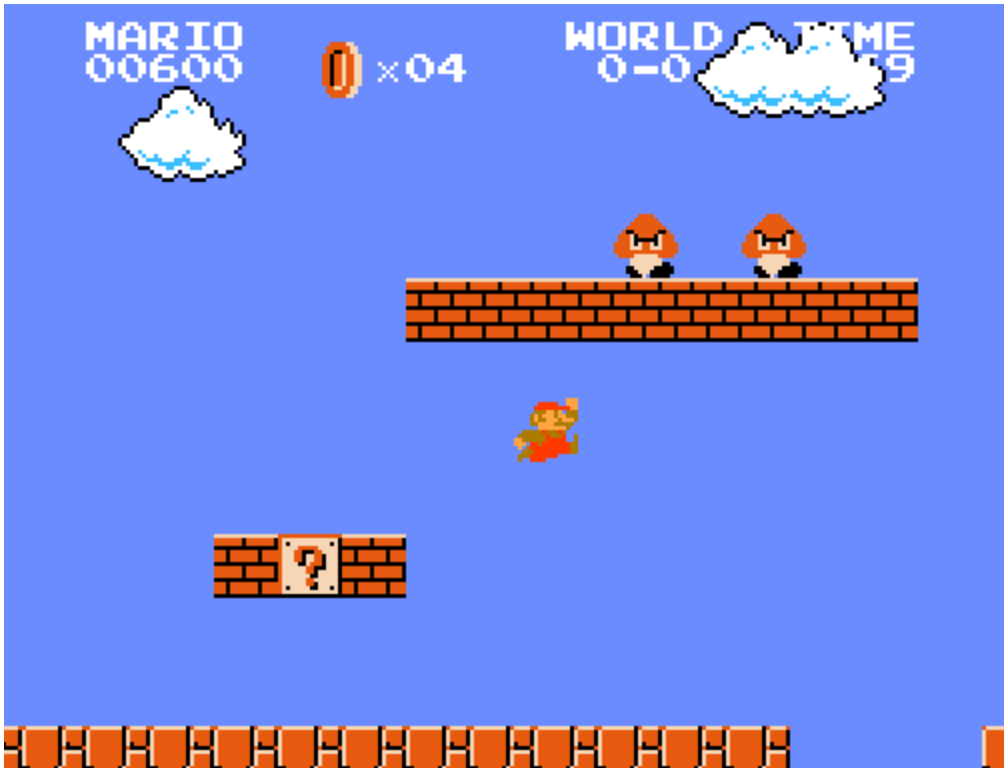
Contents [hide]

1 Holy
1.1 PvE Healing Build
1.2 PvP Healing Build
1.3 Shockadin Build
2 Protection
2.1 PvE Tanking Build
2.2 PvP Protection Build
2.3 AOE/Grinding builds
2.4 Leveling as Protection
3 Retribution
3.1 PvE Retribution Build
3.2 PvP Retribution Build
3.3 Leveling as Retribution
4 See also



A game’s mechanics give it meaning

Super Mario Bros. is about…



Timing, not Plumbers

Peggle is about…

Chaos Theory, not Unicorns

Battlefield 2 is about…

Teamwork, not Modern Combat

Left 4 Dead is about…

Teamwork, not Zombies

X-Com is about…

Limited Information, not Aliens

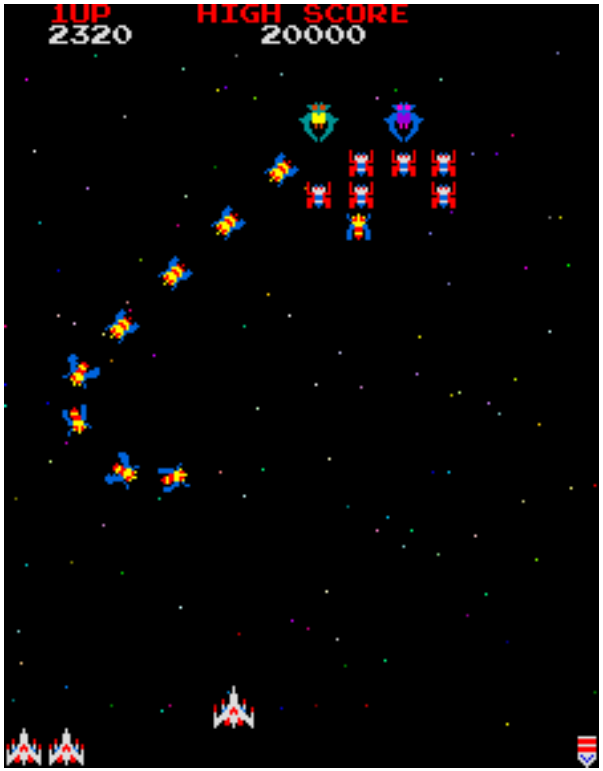
Gears of War is about…

Cover, not Aliens

StarCraft is about…

Assymetry, not Aliens

Galaga is about…



Pattern Matching, not Aliens

Why are so many games alien-themed?

Why are so many games alien-themed?

(easy to map mechanics onto)

For example…

Civilization

- Barbarians
- Spies
- Wonders

Alpha Centauri

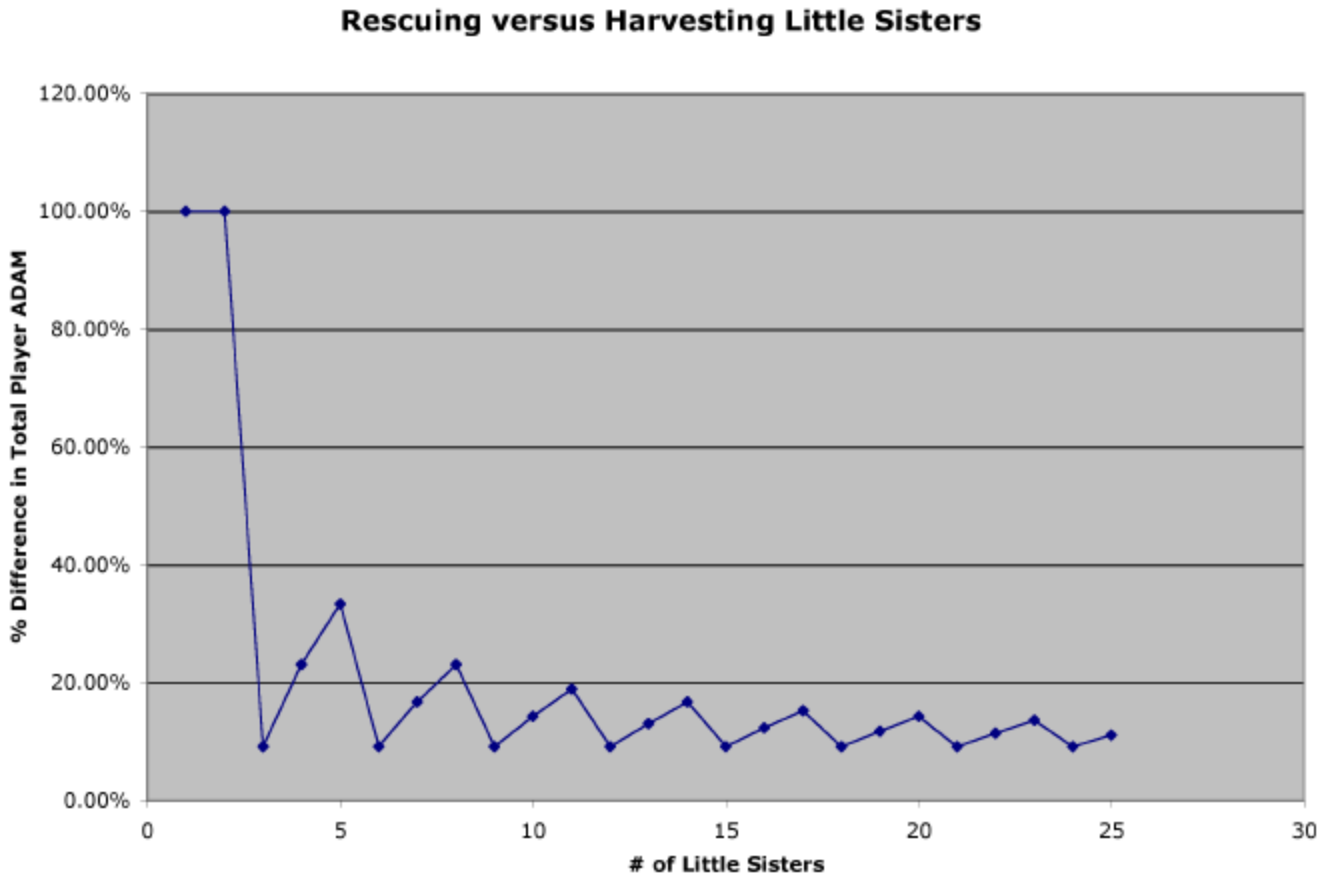
- Mind Worms
- Probe Teams
- Secret Projects

What happens when a game’s mechanics doesn’t match its theme?

What is ***Bioshock*** about?

Ethics: Rescue or Harvest?

Not according to the game mechanics…

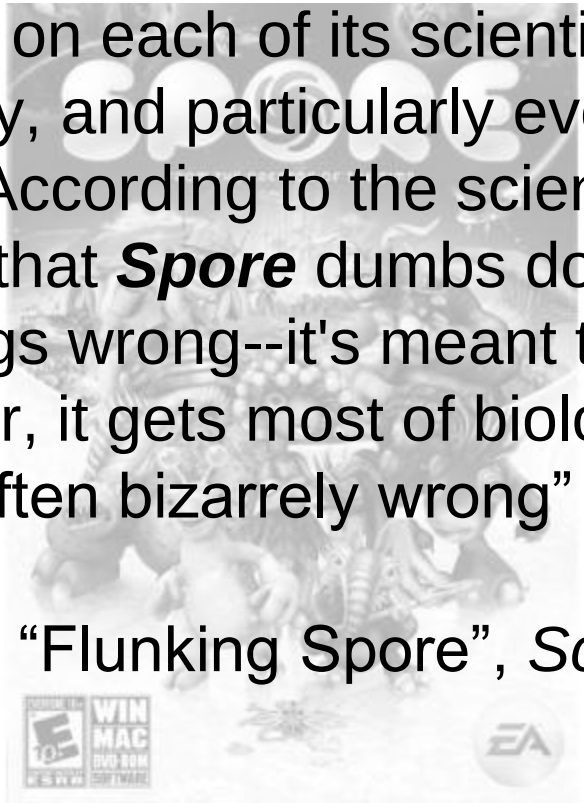


Who decides what a game is about?

What about ***Spore***?

“I've been playing ***Spore*** with a team of scientists, grading the game on each of its scientific themes. When it comes to biology, and particularly evolution, ***Spore*** failed miserably. According to the scientists, the problem isn't just that ***Spore*** dumbs down the science or gets a few things wrong--it's meant to be a game, after all--but rather, it gets most of biology badly, needlessly, and often bizarrely wrong”

- John Bohannon, “Flunking Spore”, *Science* (Oct. ‘08)



Spore's Problem

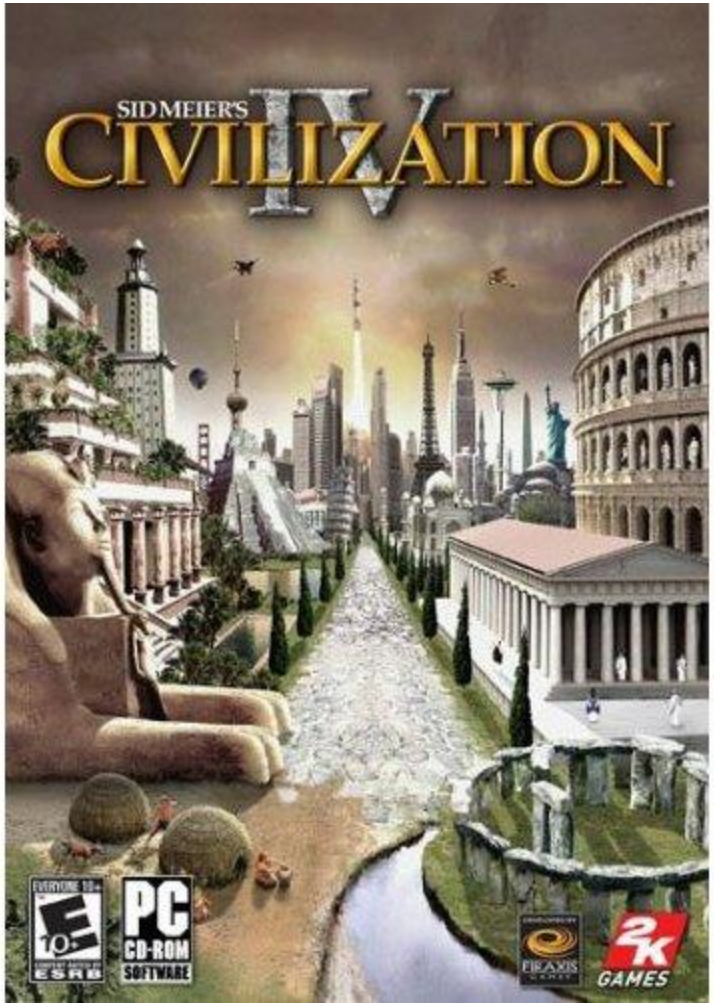
Spore's theme: Evolution

Spore's meaning: Creativity

Internal Running Joke…

Is ***Spore*** about Intelligent Design?

What about ***Civilization***?



Civilization's Problem

Civ's theme: World History

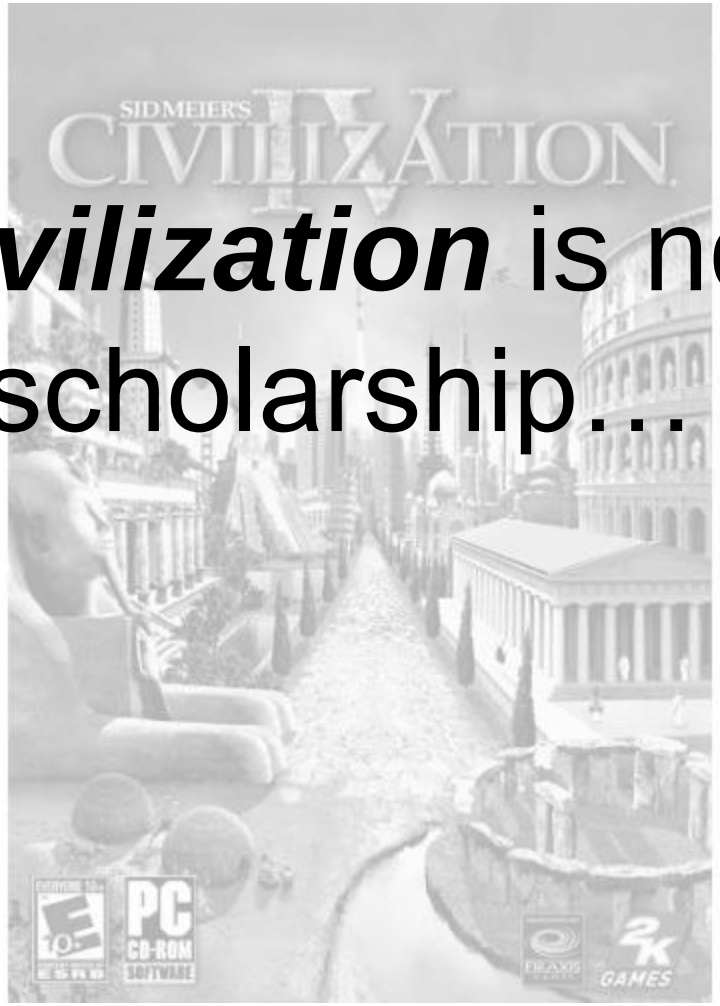
Civ's meaning: Be God-King

The Agency Problem

- Consequences must be fair and clear
- Top-down decision making only
- Eternal China Syndrome
- The “Revolution” button

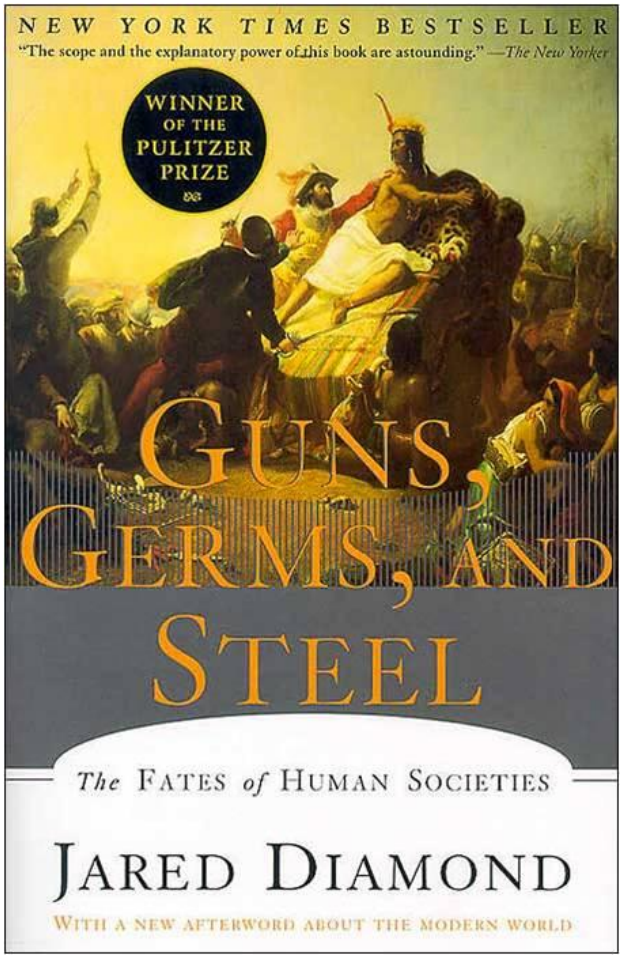
Wanted a ‘Revolution’ Button…

Civilization is not scholarship…



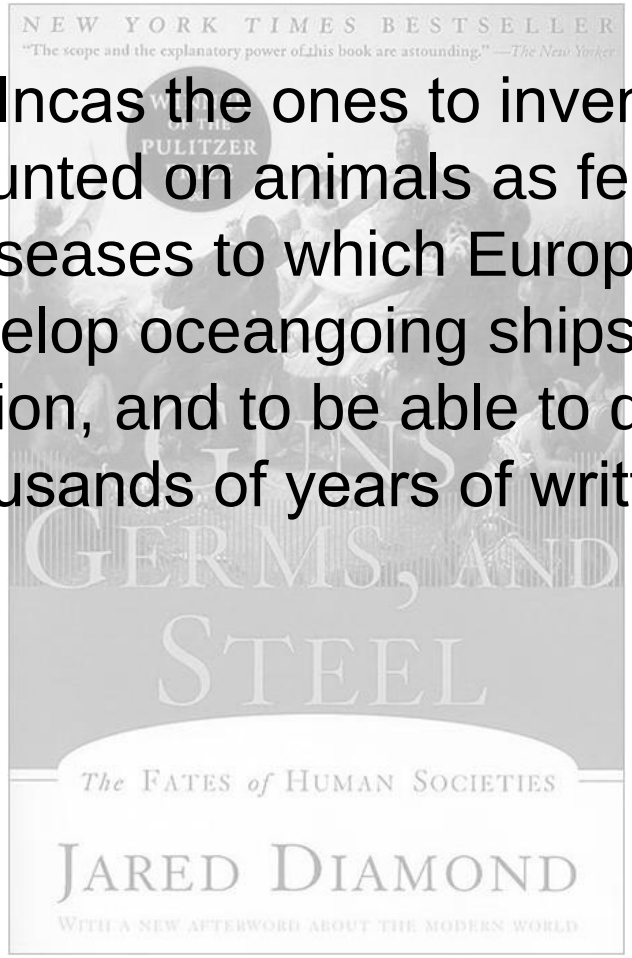
…but can games be scholarship?

What I wanted as a game…



The Incan Question

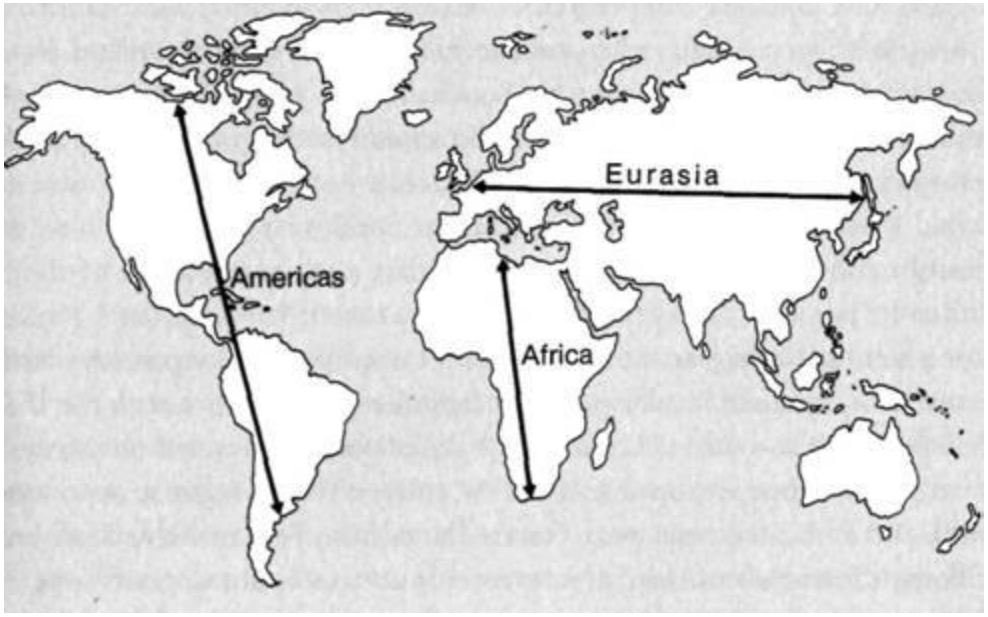
“Why weren't the Incas the ones to invent guns and steel swords, to be mounted on animals as fearsome as horses, to bear diseases to which European lacked resistance, to develop oceangoing ships and advanced political organization, and to be able to draw on the experience of thousands of years of written history?”



Incan Starting Location…

vs. the World

Major Axes of the Continents

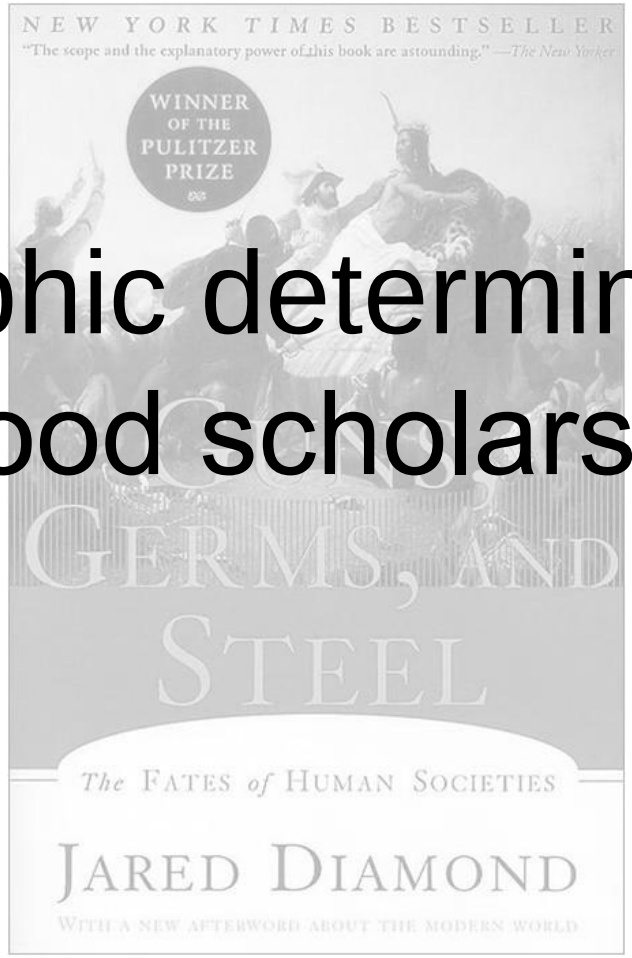


Origin of Domesticated Animals

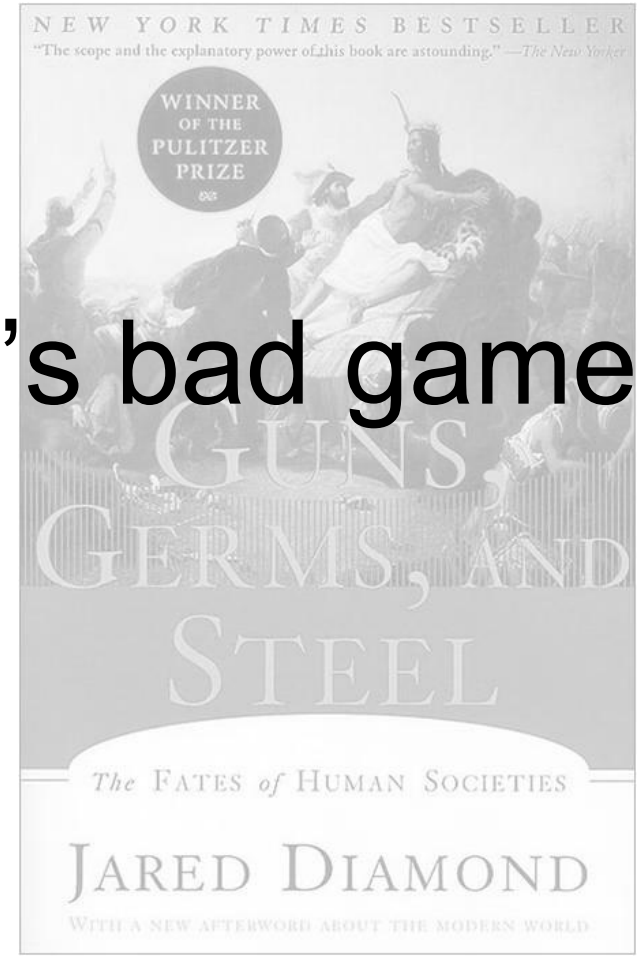
Species	*Date (B.C.)*	*Place*
Dog	10,000	Southwest Asia, China, North America
Sheep	8,000	Southwest Asia
Goat	8,000	Southwest Asia
Pig	8,000	China, Southwest Asia
Cow	6,000	Southwest Asia, India, North Africa
Horse	4,000	Ukraine
Donkey	4,000	Egypt
Water buffalo	4,000	China
Llama / alpaca	3,500	Andes
Bactrian camel	2,500	Central Asia
Arabian camel	2,500	Arabia

The Incans are doomed

Geographic determinism may be good scholarship…



…but it’s bad game design!



Can ***Civilization***'s mechanics match its theme?

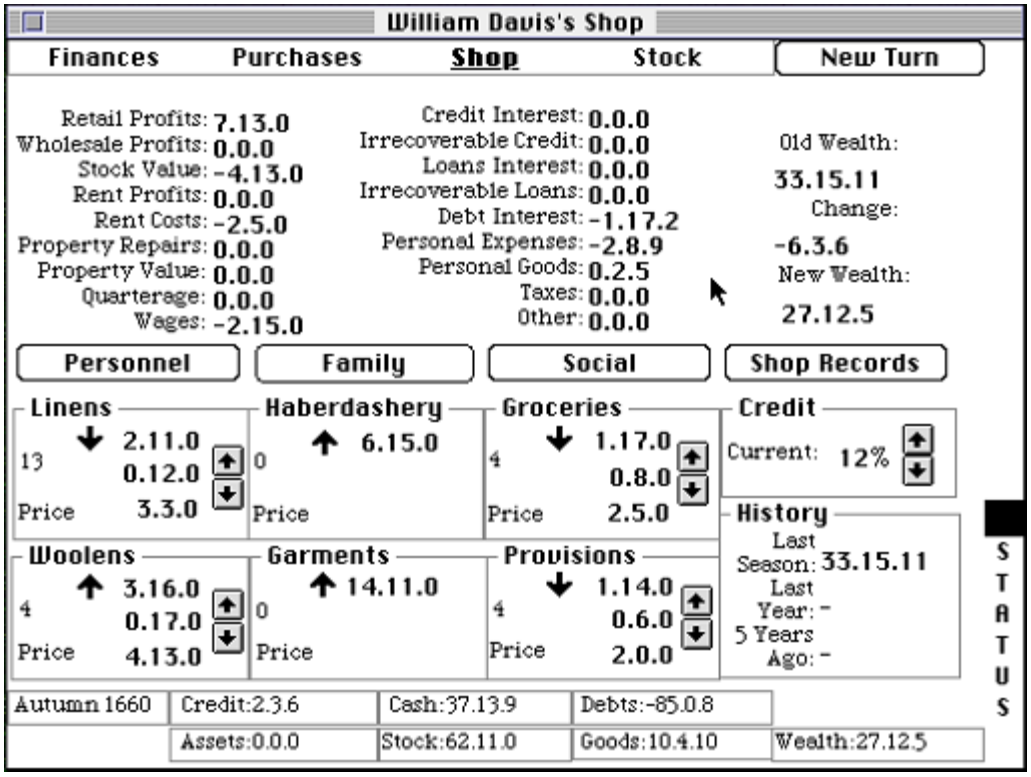
Can we make a game that is fun *and* about world history in a meaningful way?

Maybe not?

(but similar story for other media)

Instead, play a life…

Oxford Mercer

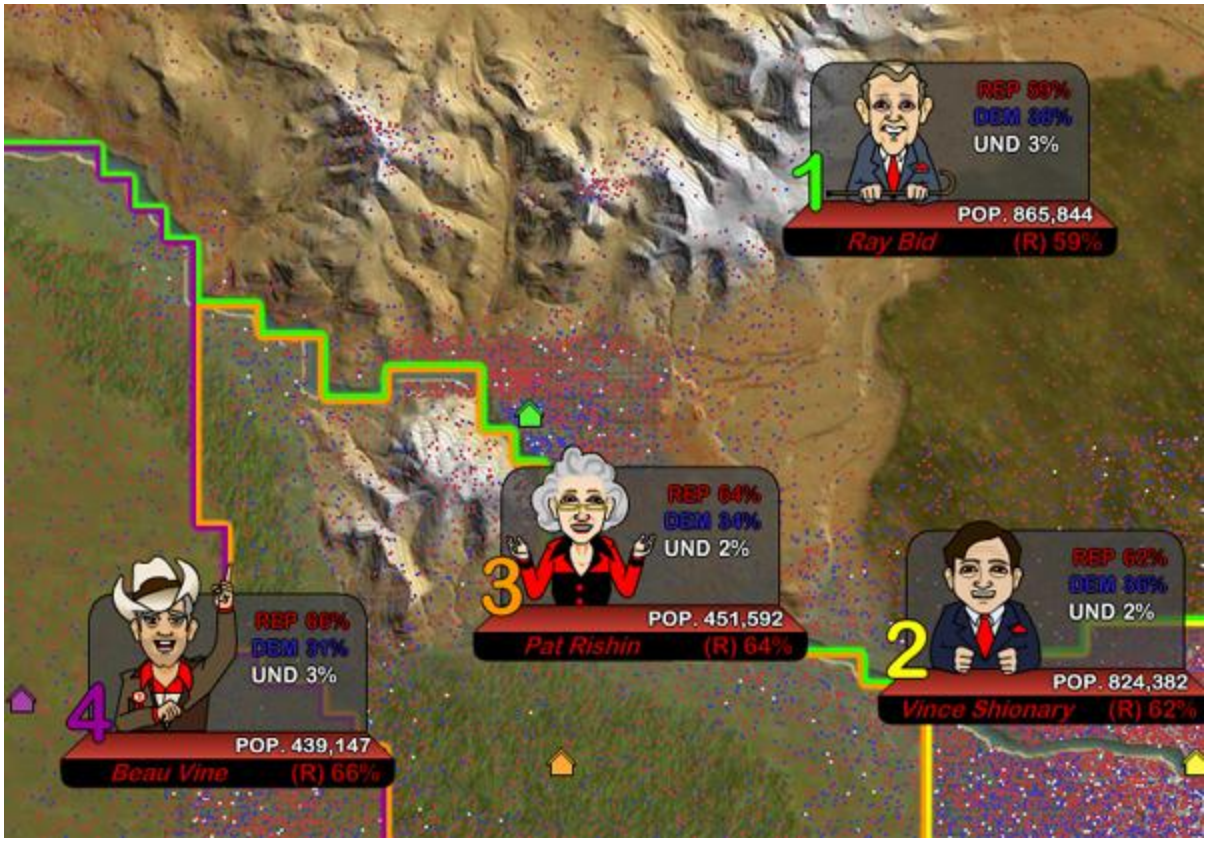


Oxford Mercer

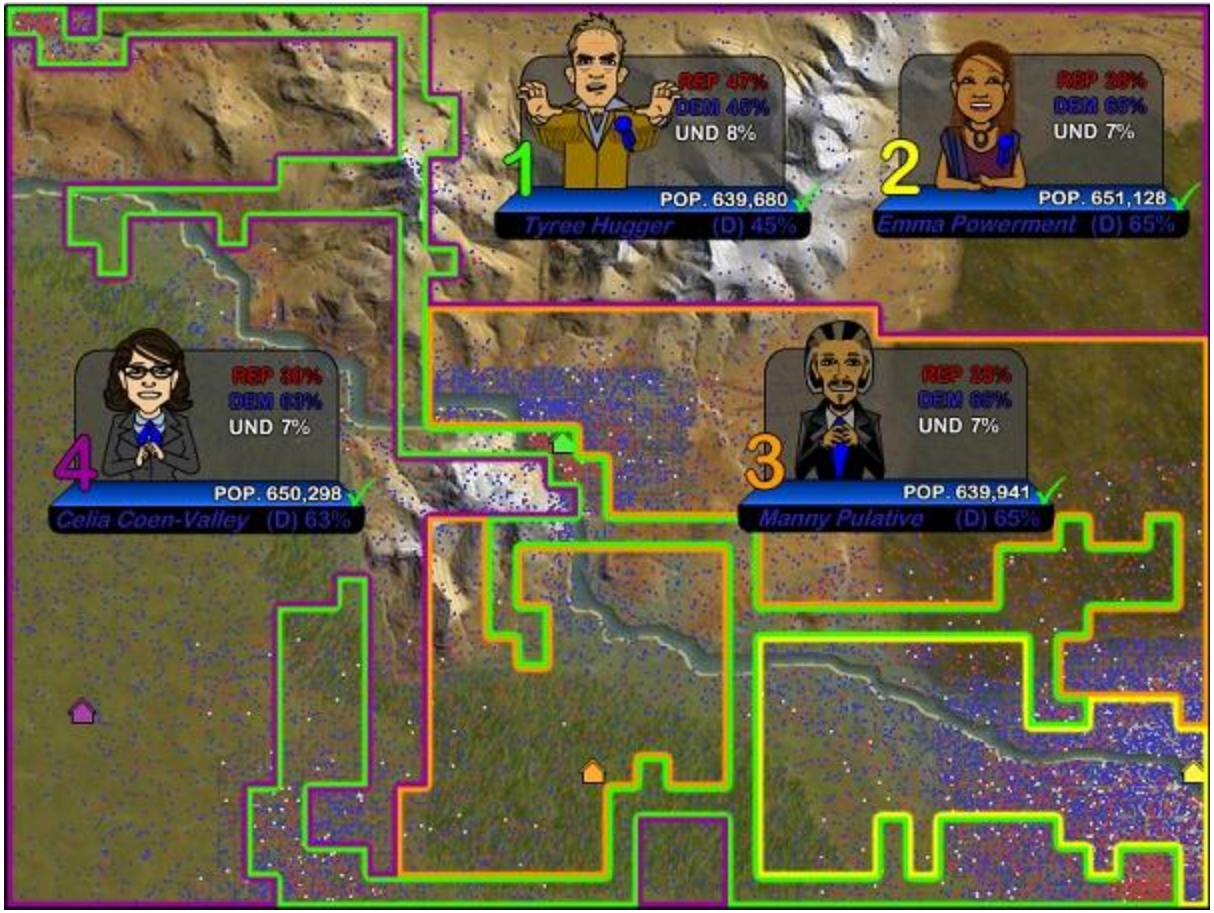
OM's theme: Be a 17th-century English shopkeeper

OM's meaning: Be a 17th-century English shopkeeper

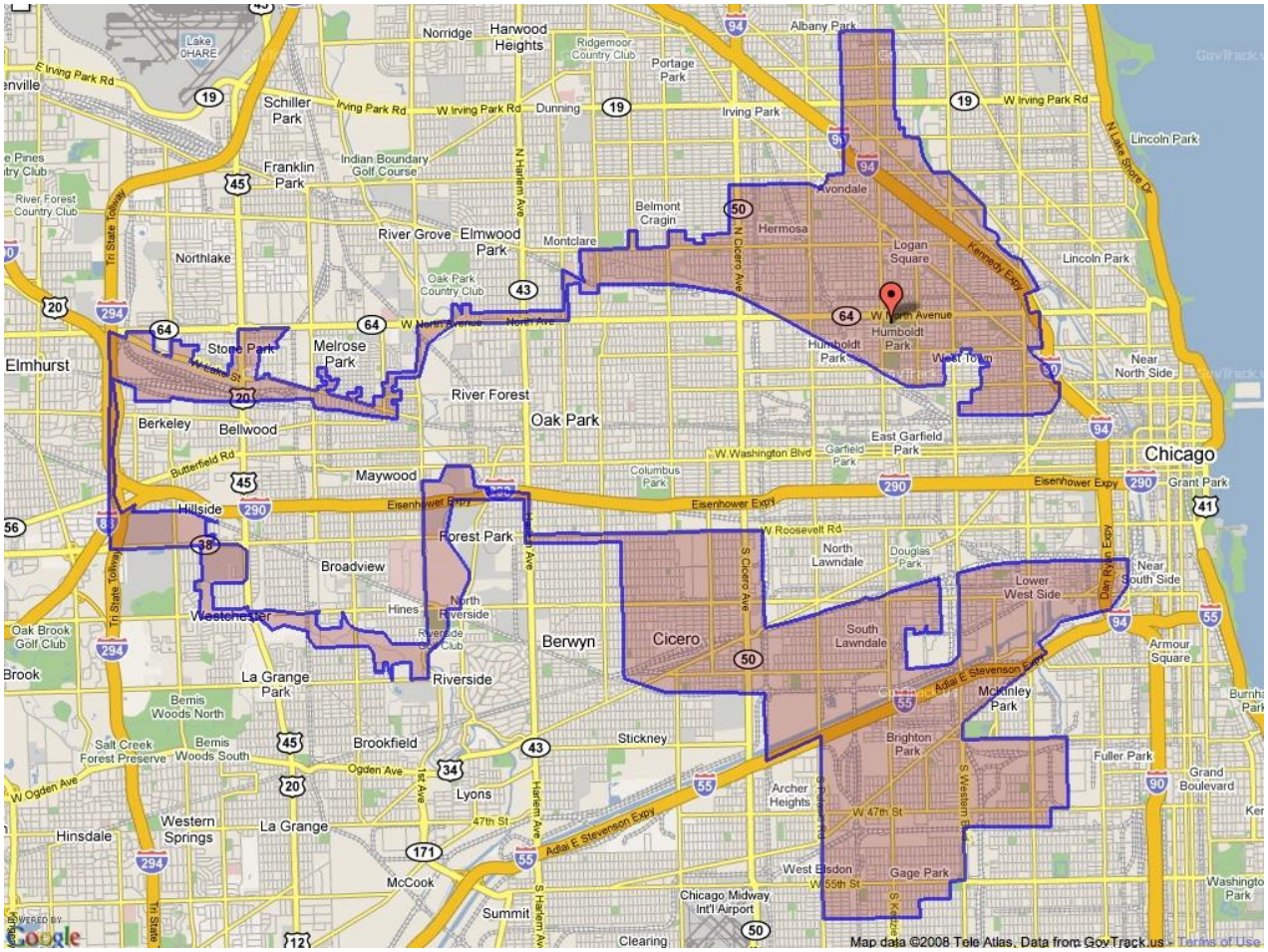
The Redistricting Game



Virtual Gerrymandering



Actual Gerrymandering



The Redistricting Game

TRG's theme: Gerrymander your party into power

TRG's meaning: Gerrymander your party into power

Art matters if the experience enlightens us

A game matters if the mechanics enlighten us

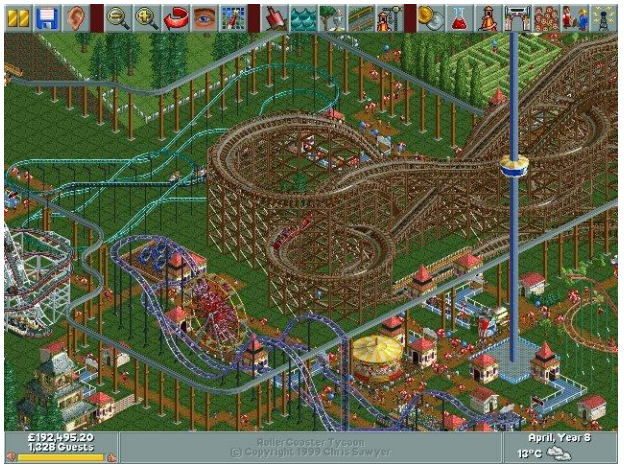
A game's *theme* only matters if the mechanics enlighten us about it

Mainstream successes?

(where theme == mechanics)

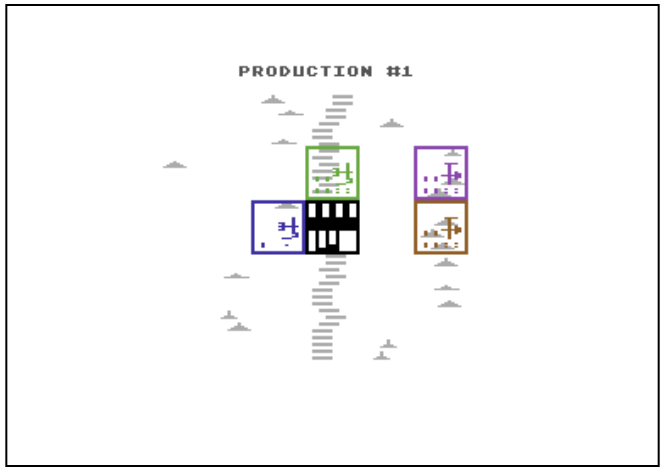
Sports Games

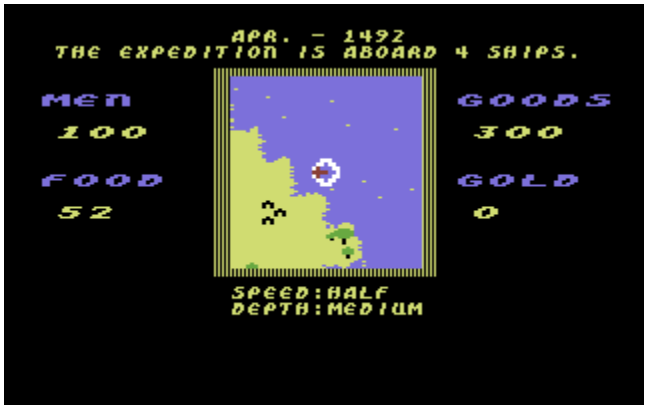
Management Games

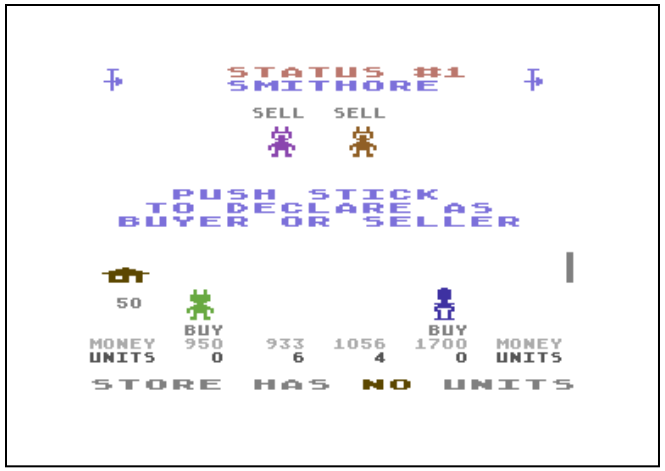


Tactile Games

Dan Bunten







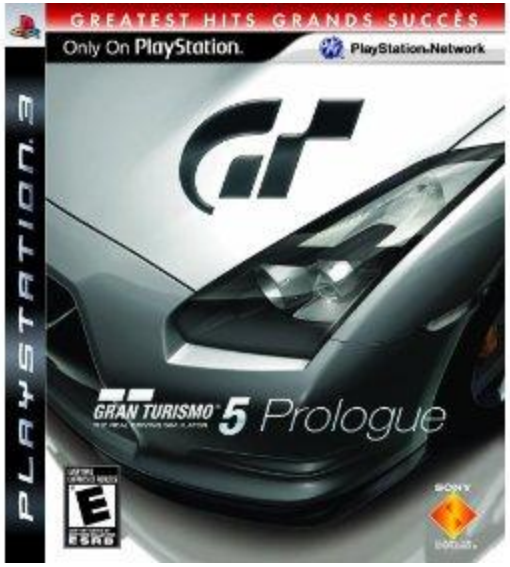
M.U.L.E. (1983)

Seven Cities of Gold (1984)

Realism is not the key

(although it can help…)

Gran Turismo vs. *Mario Kart*



Gran Turismo vs. ***Mario Kart***

Which one is more about racing?

Gran Turismo vs. *Mario Kart*

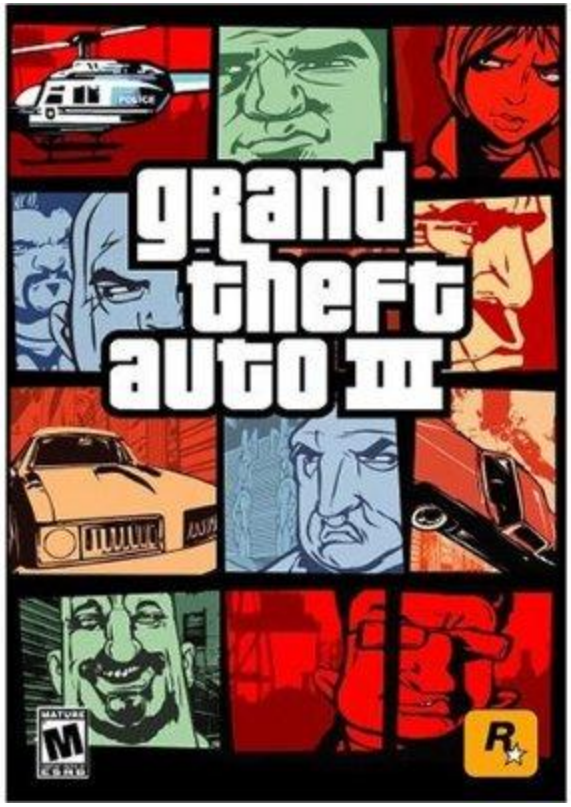
Which work is more about the Bombing of Guernica?

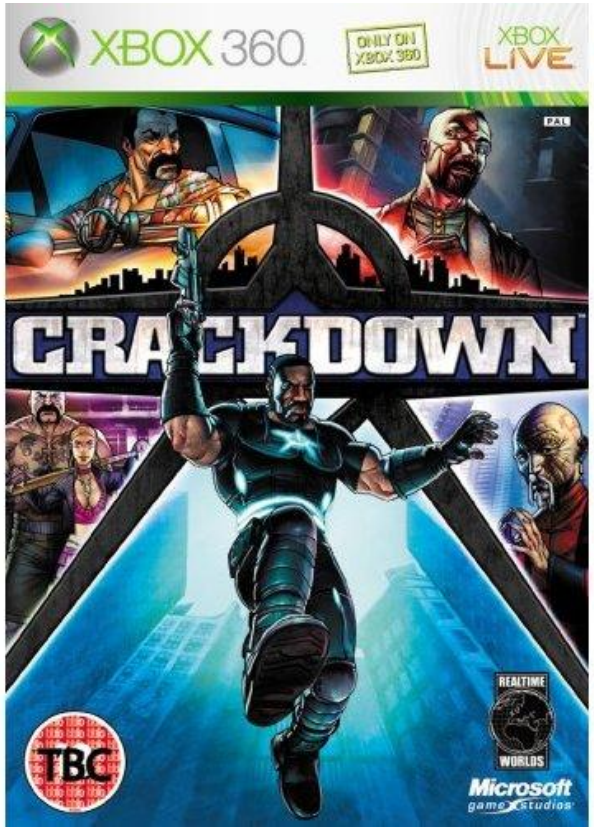
To me, this is racing…

Why ***Mario Kart***?

(because, for me, the mechanics gave the most meaning)

Theme Matters

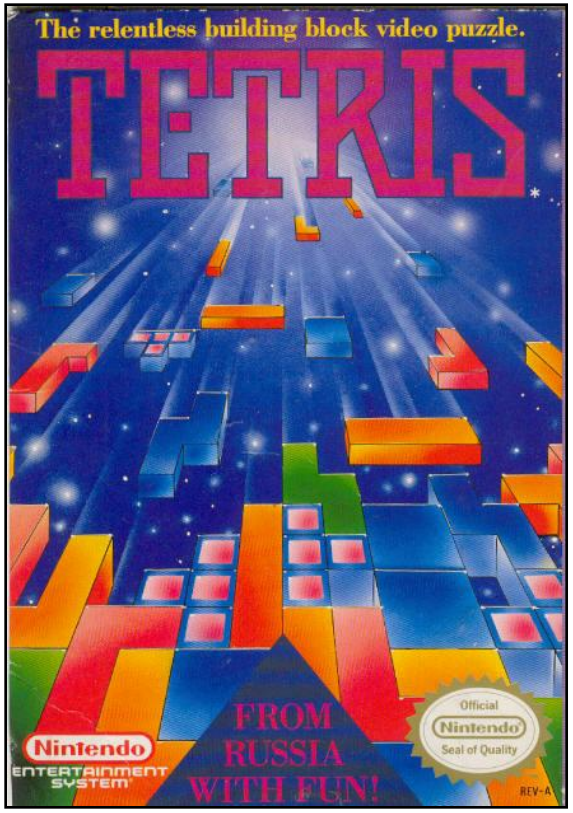


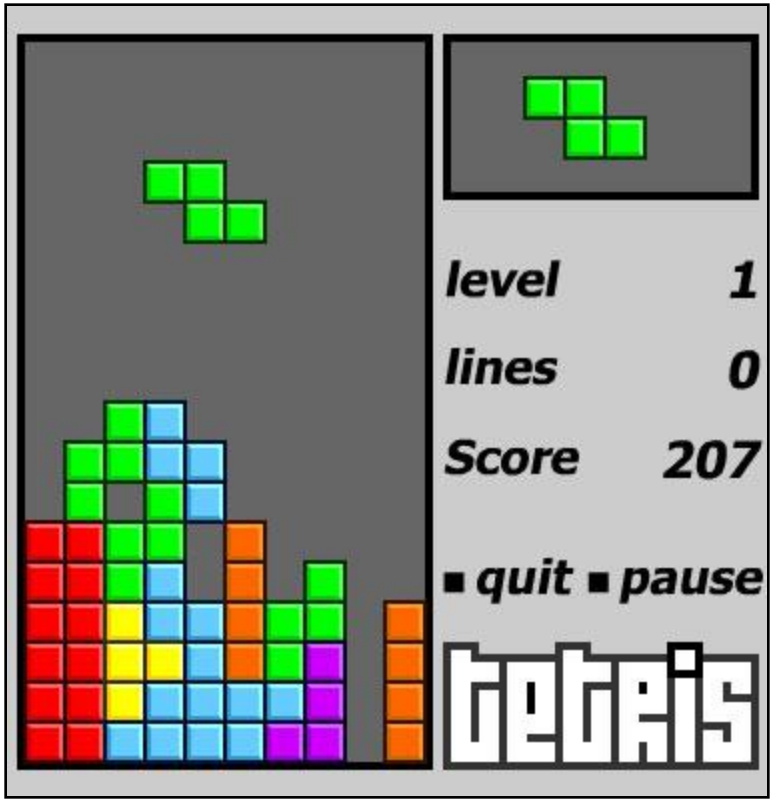


Theme Matters

“Let’s picture a game wherein there is a gas chamber shaped like a well. You the player are dropping innocent Jews down into the gas chamber, and they come in all shapes and sizes. As they fall to the bottom, they grab onto each other and try to form human pyramids to get to the top of the well. Should they manage to get out, the game is over and you lose. But if you pack them in tightly enough, the ones on the bottom succumb to the gas and die.”

- Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun*



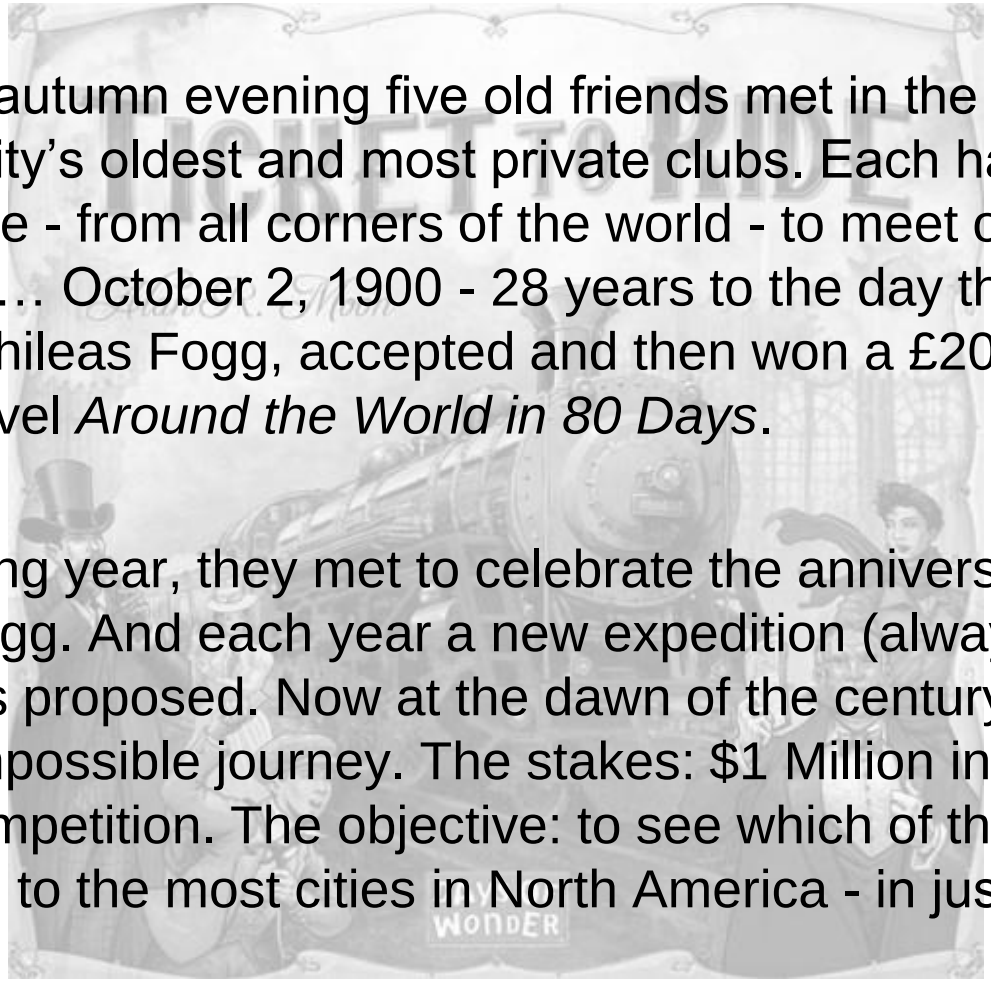


“I do not want to play this game. Do you? Yet it is Tetris. You could have well-proven, stellar game design mechanics applied towards a quite repugnant premise.”

Calabouço Tétrico

What about *Train*?

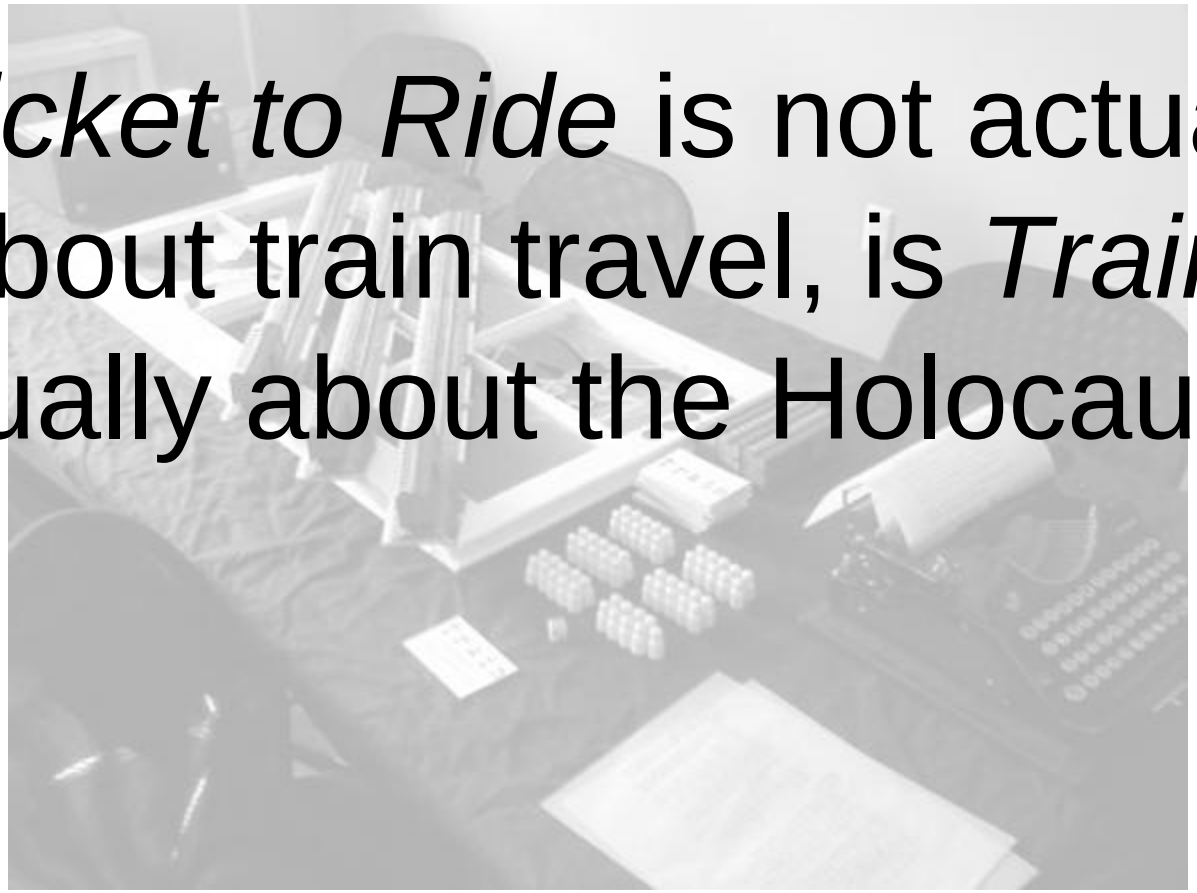
Ticket to Ride: Theme



"On a blustery autumn evening five old friends met in the backroom of one of the city's oldest and most private clubs. Each had traveled a long distance - from all corners of the world - to meet on this very specific day… October 2, 1900 - 28 years to the day that the London eccentric, Phileas Fogg, accepted and then won a £20,000 bet that he could travel *Around the World in 80 Days*.

Each succeeding year, they met to celebrate the anniversary and pay tribute to Fogg. And each year a new expedition (always more difficult) was proposed. Now at the dawn of the century it was time for a new impossible journey. The stakes: $1 Million in a winner-takes-all competition. The objective: to see which of them could travel by rail to the most cities in North America - in just 7 days."

If *Ticket to Ride* is not actually about train travel, is *Train* actually about the Holocaust?



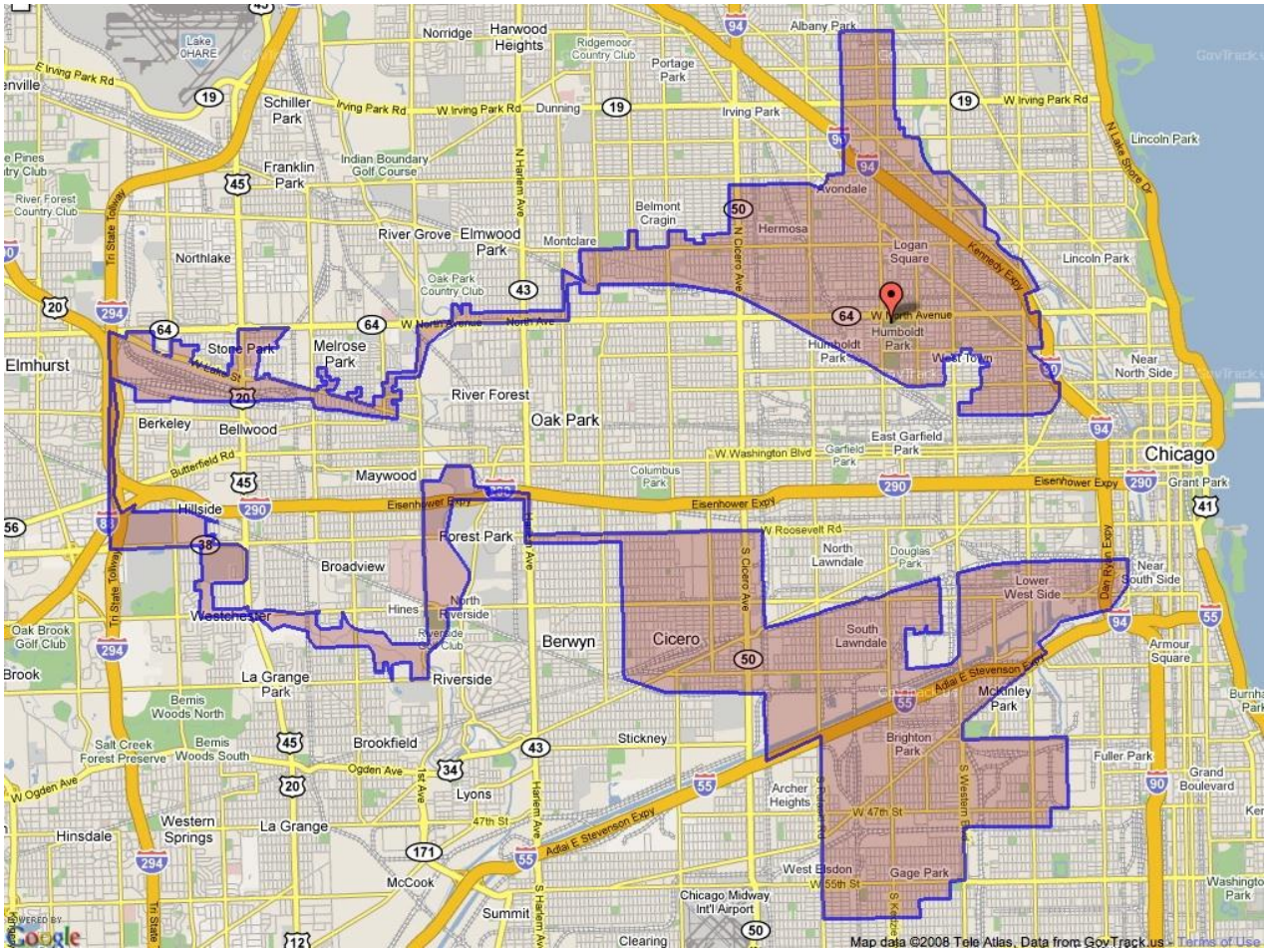
Calabouço Tétrico

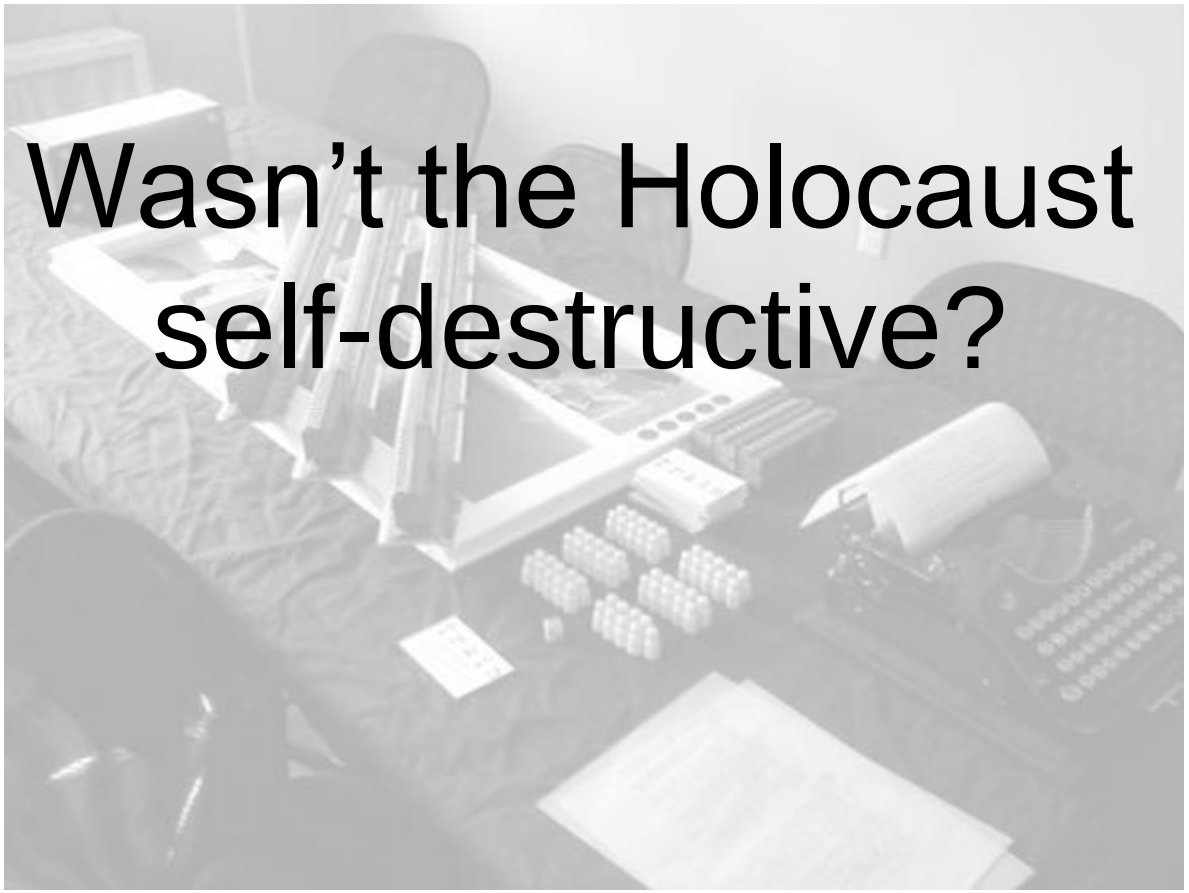
Can we make a game actually about the Holocaust?

Remember, play a life…

If we “play a life”
can we play evil?

Gerrymandering is evil




Wasn’t the Holocaust
self-destructive?

Ultima IV
Quest of the Av
ORIGIN SYSTEMS INC.
Ultima V
Warriors of D
ORIGIN SYSTEMS INC.
Ultima VI
The False Prophet
By
Lord British
ORIGIN

Can games actually be about something?

(Choosing a theme doesn’t make it so)

Mechanics must deliver on the theme’s promise

(Mechanics are meaning)

A game's *theme* matters if the mechanics enlighten us about it

Any questions?

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