

# 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](http://strategystation.com), unannounced browser-based MMO)

Who decides what a game is  
about?

Not just player vs. designer

(although it's the player, btw)

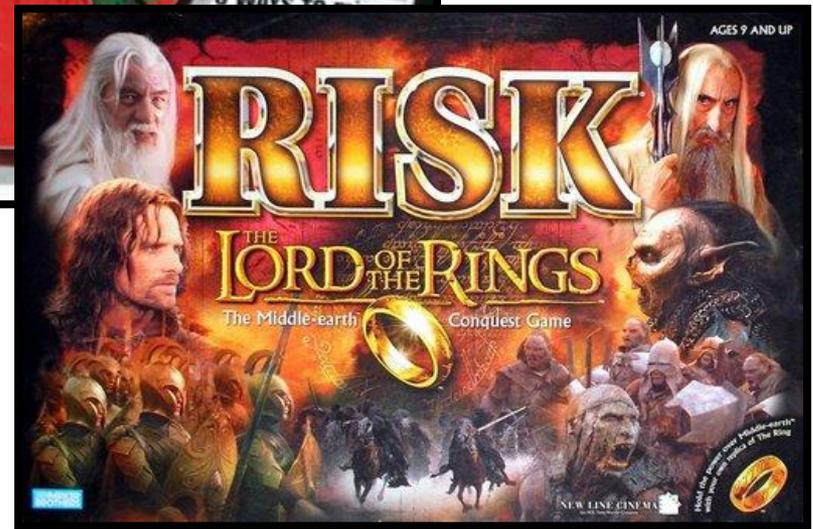
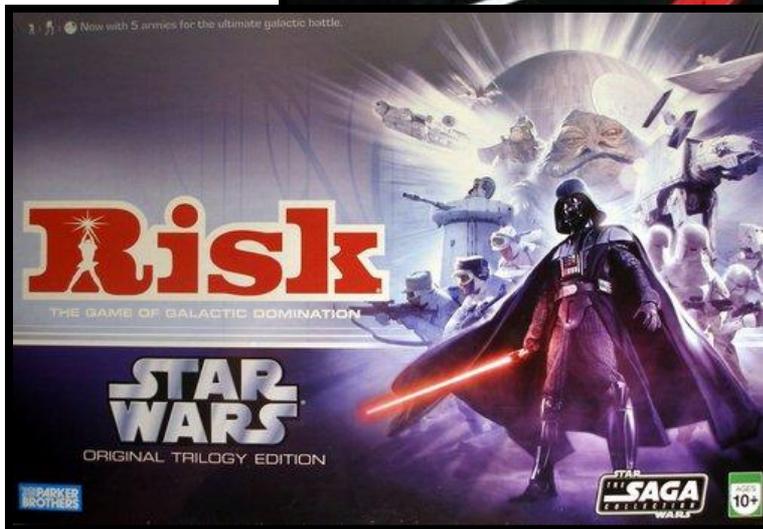
# Theme vs. Mechanics

(which one defines a game?)

# Mechanics



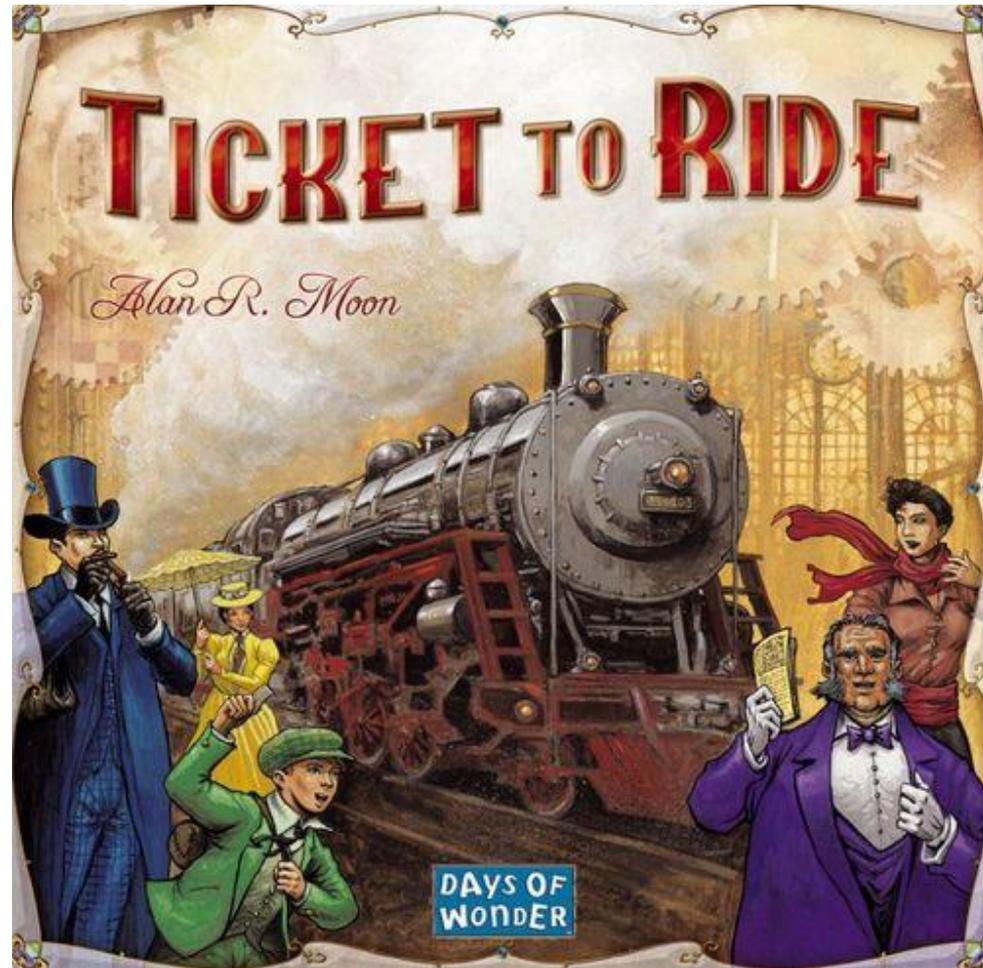
# Theme



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



# ***Ticket to Ride***



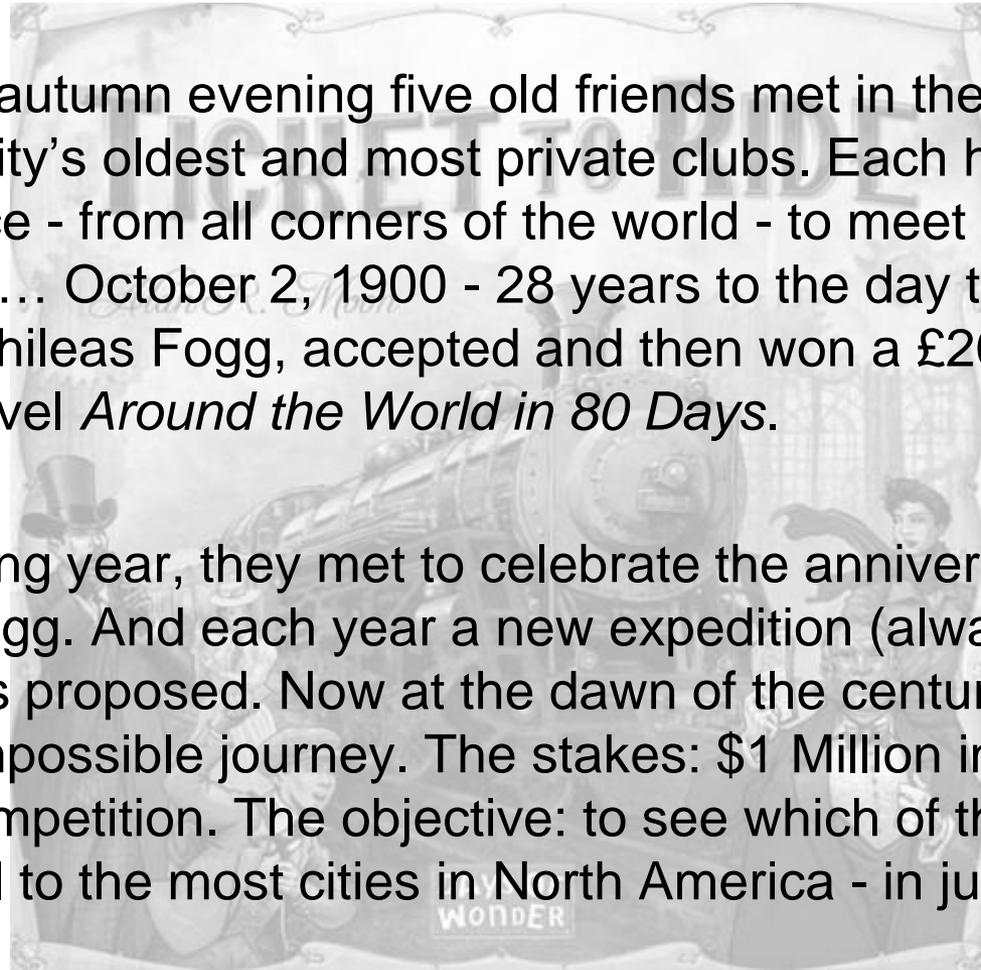
# ***Ticket to Ride: Mechanics***



# ***Ticket to Ride: Theme***

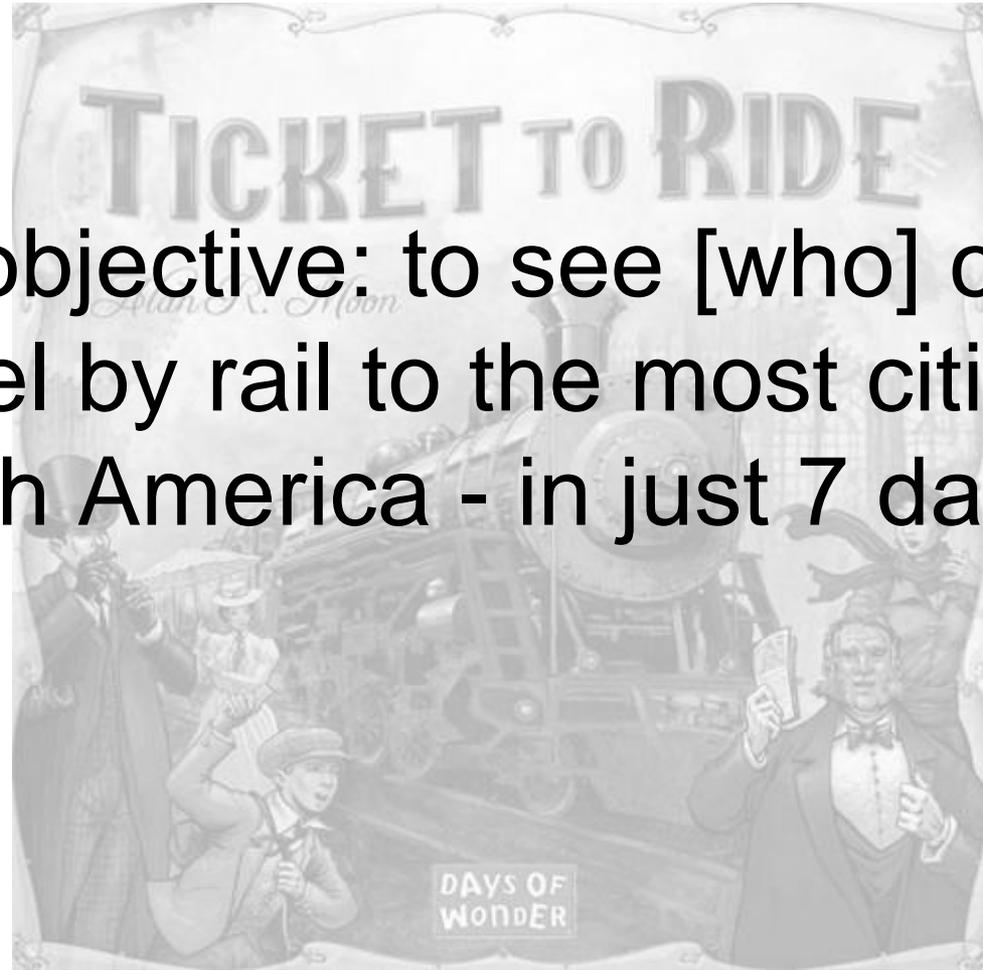
“On a blustery autumn evening five old friends met in the backroom of one of the city’s oldest and most private clubs. Each had traveled a long distance - from all corners of the world - to meet on this very specific day... October 2, 1900 - 28 years to the day that the London eccentric, Phileas Fogg, 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.”



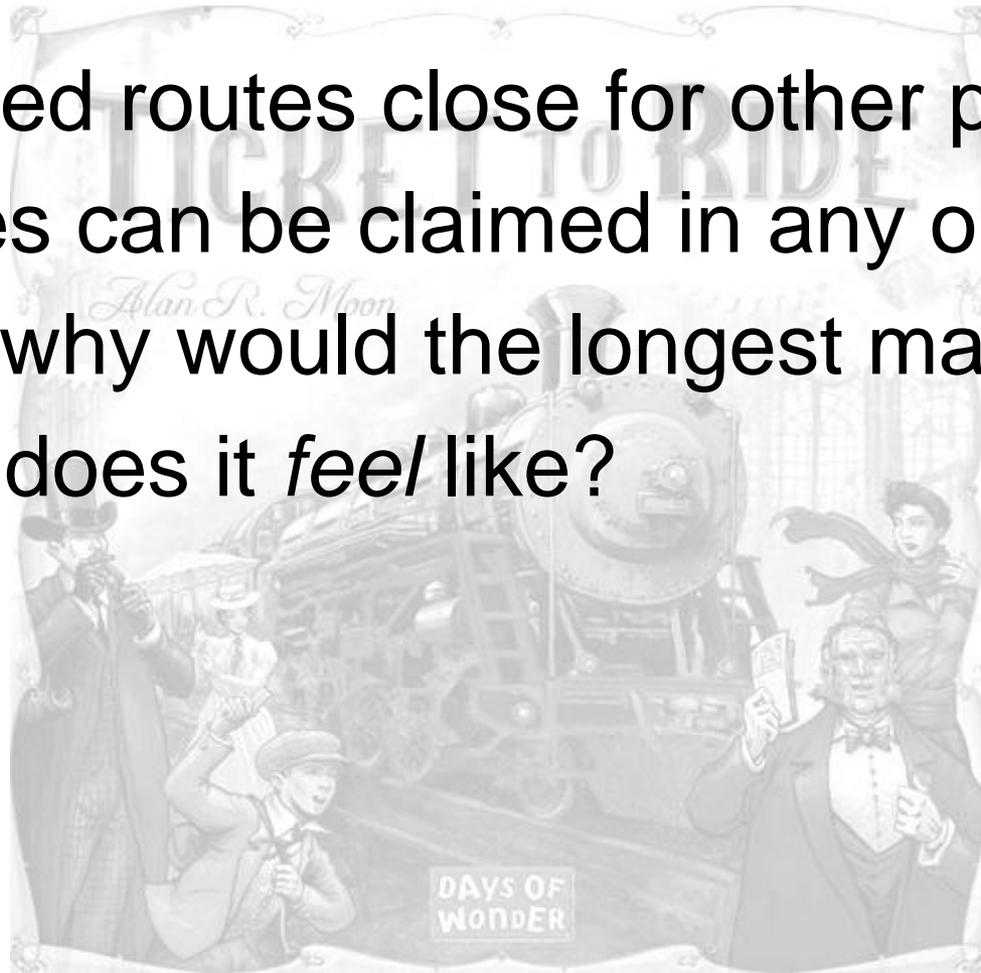
# ***Ticket to Ride: Theme***

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

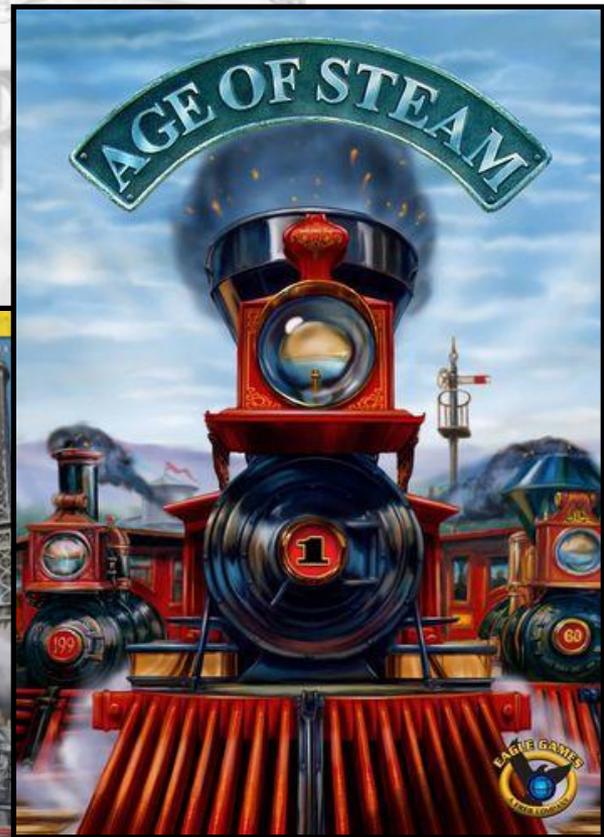
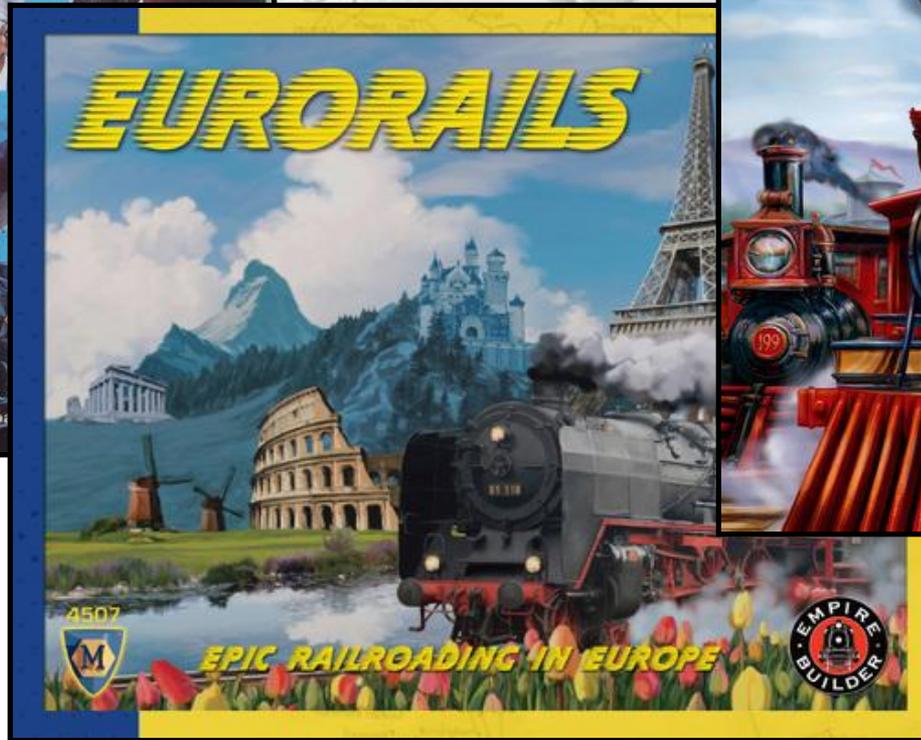
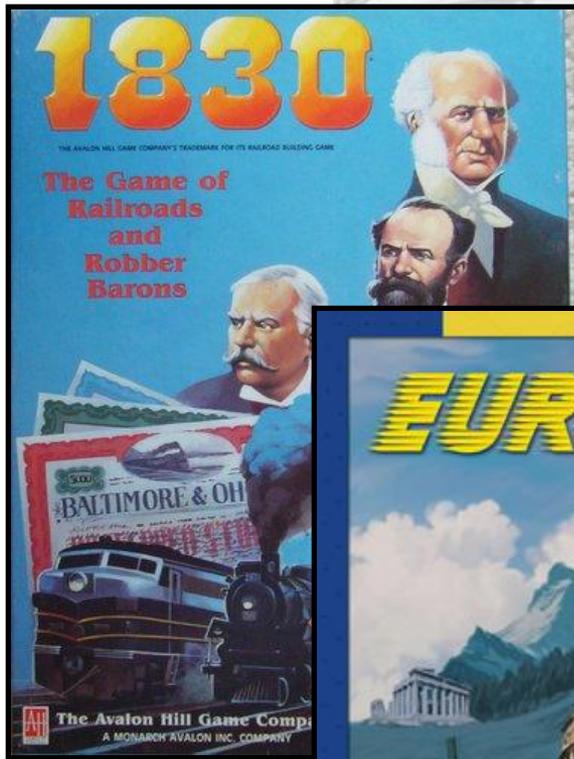


# Theme vs. Mechanics

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



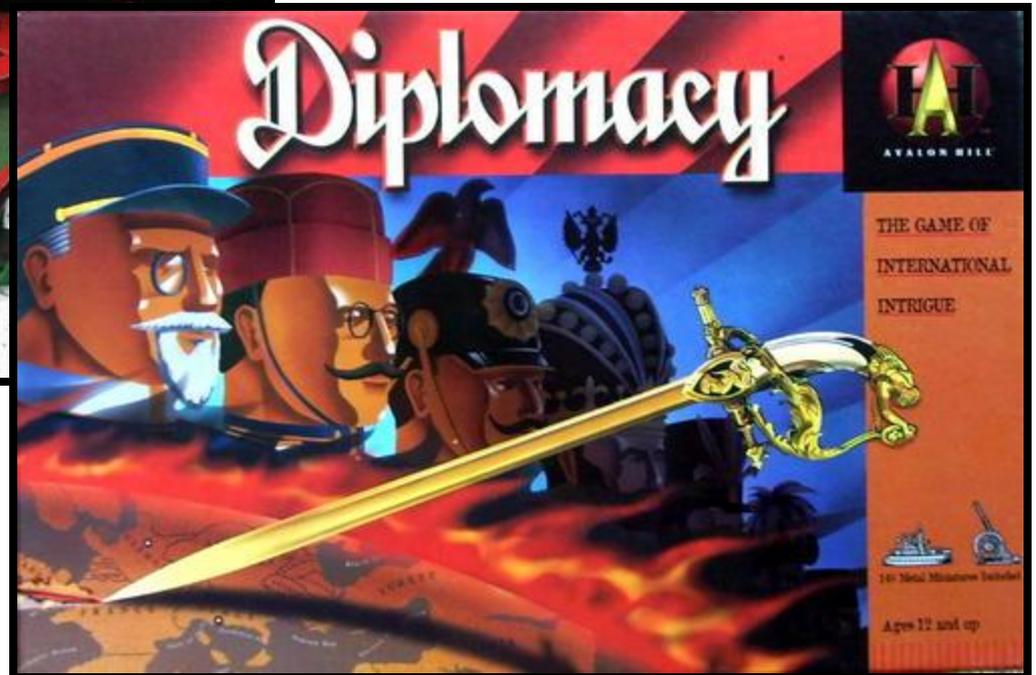
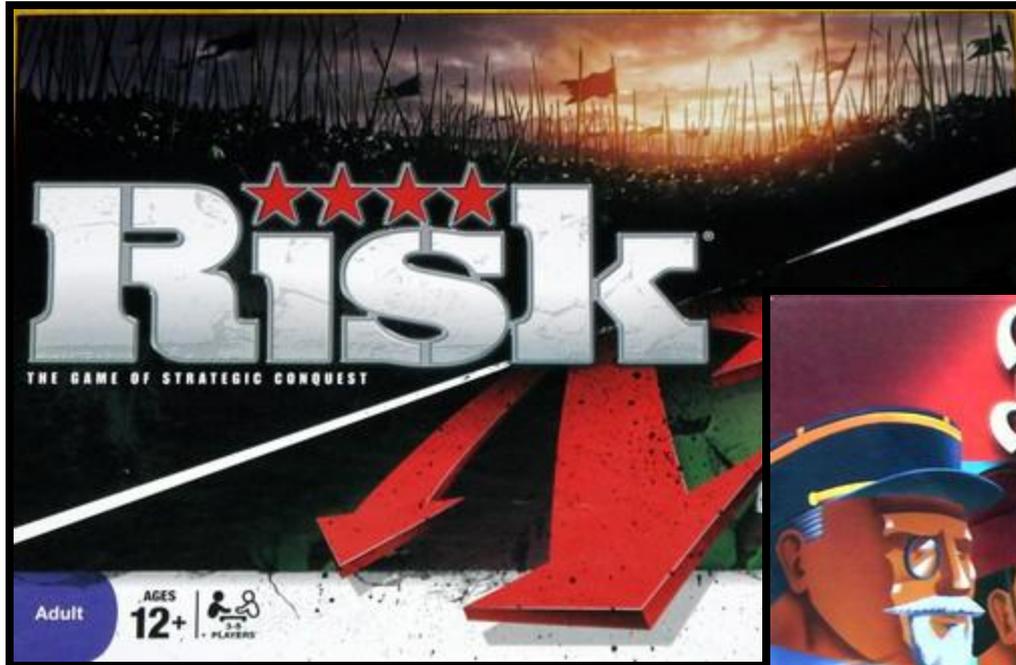
# What does it *feel* like?



Who decides what a game is  
about?

A game's mechanics give it  
meaning

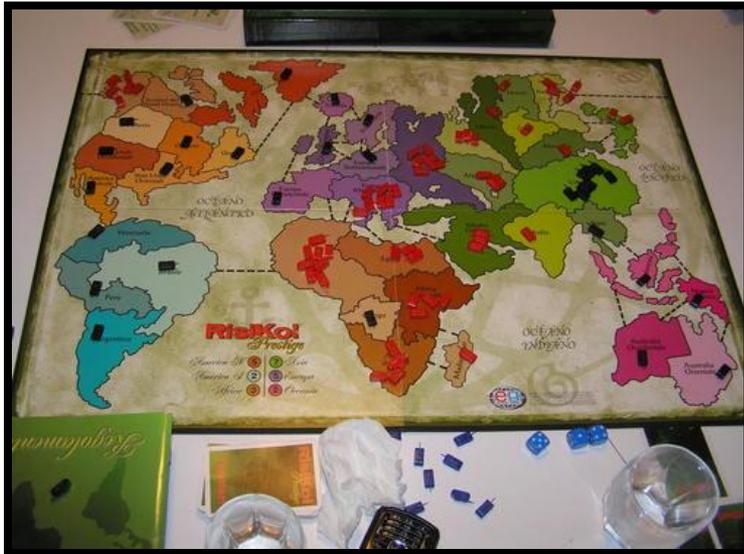
# *Risk vs. Diplomacy*



# Similar Mechanics...

## *Risk*

- World Conquest
- Territorial Control
- Army Tokens



## *Diplomacy*

- World Conquest
- Territorial Control
- Army Tokens



# ...Different Mechanics

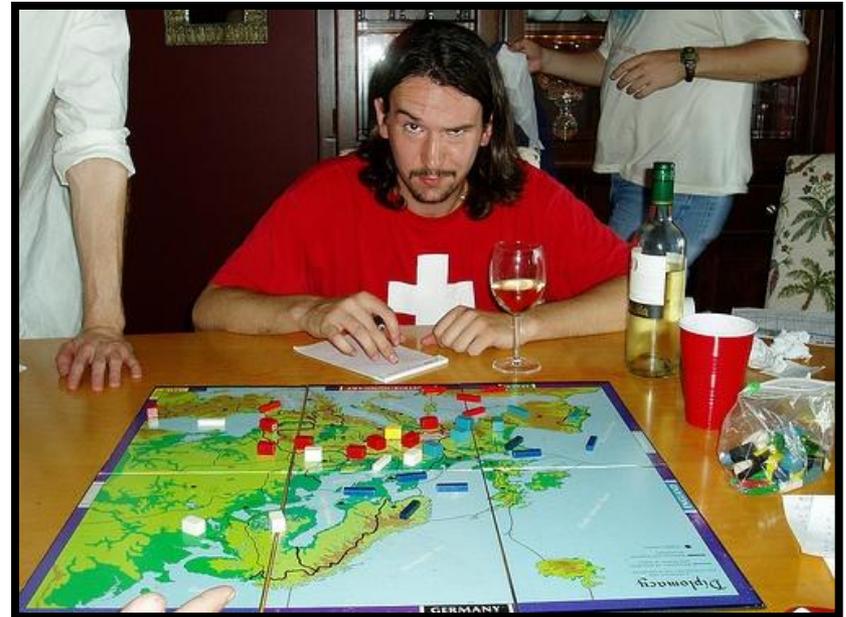
## *Risk*

- *Sequential Turns*



## *Diplomacy*

- *Simultaneous Turns*



# ...Different Mechanics

## *Risk*

- *Probabilistic Combat*



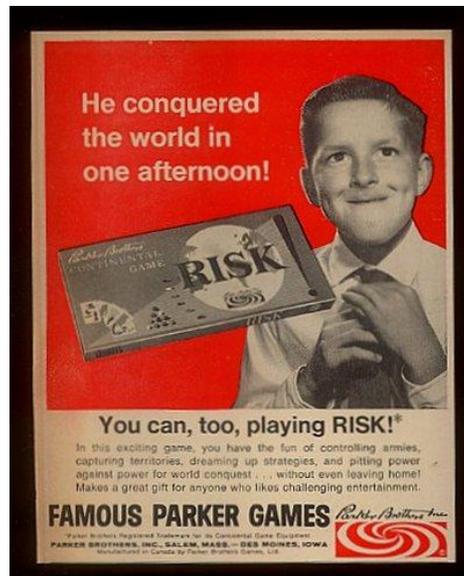
## *Diplomacy*

- *Deterministic Combat*



# Mechanics give Meaning

*Risk...*



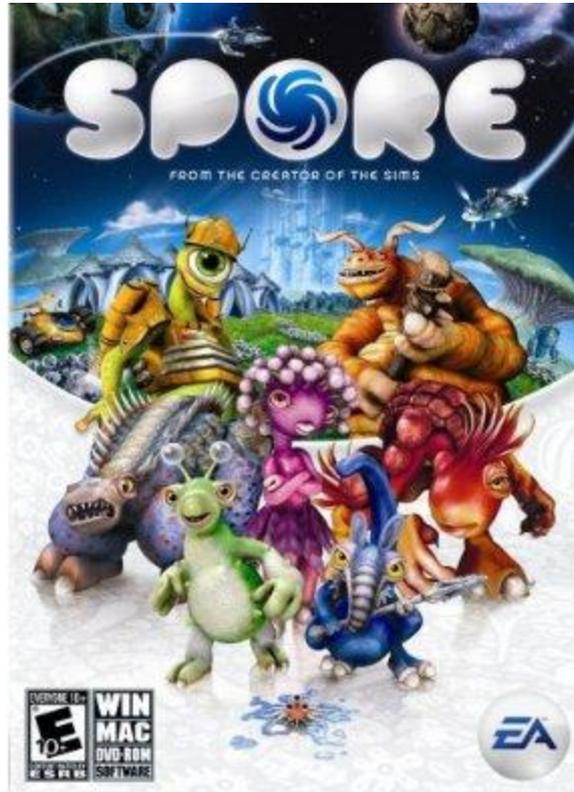
...is about Risk!

*Diplomacy...*

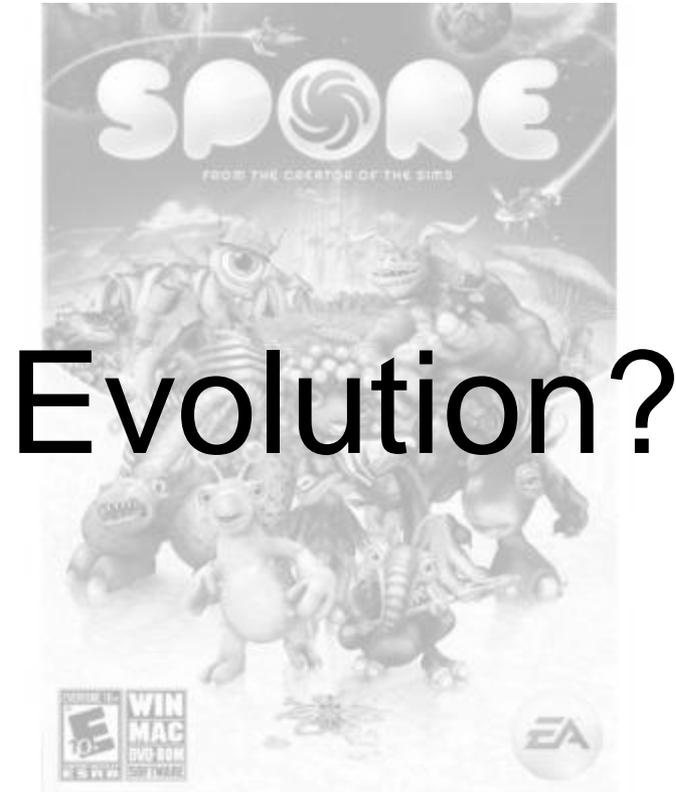


...is about Diplomacy!

# What is *Spore* about?



What is ***Spore*** about?



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

Svnd1



Twilight Stagfron

Cecil\_090



LOL WUT

Mootacoo



Jesus H Christ

Slartibartfast38



Bach Strad Trump

Kylerman20



Alto Saxophone

Kylerman20



Your The MASTER

tacobob1



Cerebrilith

Bernini



I DID IT!!!!!!

Remypas



French Horn

Kylerman20



Bard

MaxWal1993



Basic Yamaha Tru

Kylerman20



Barack Obama

MaxisCactus



Dioers

MaxWal1993



Dracontyr

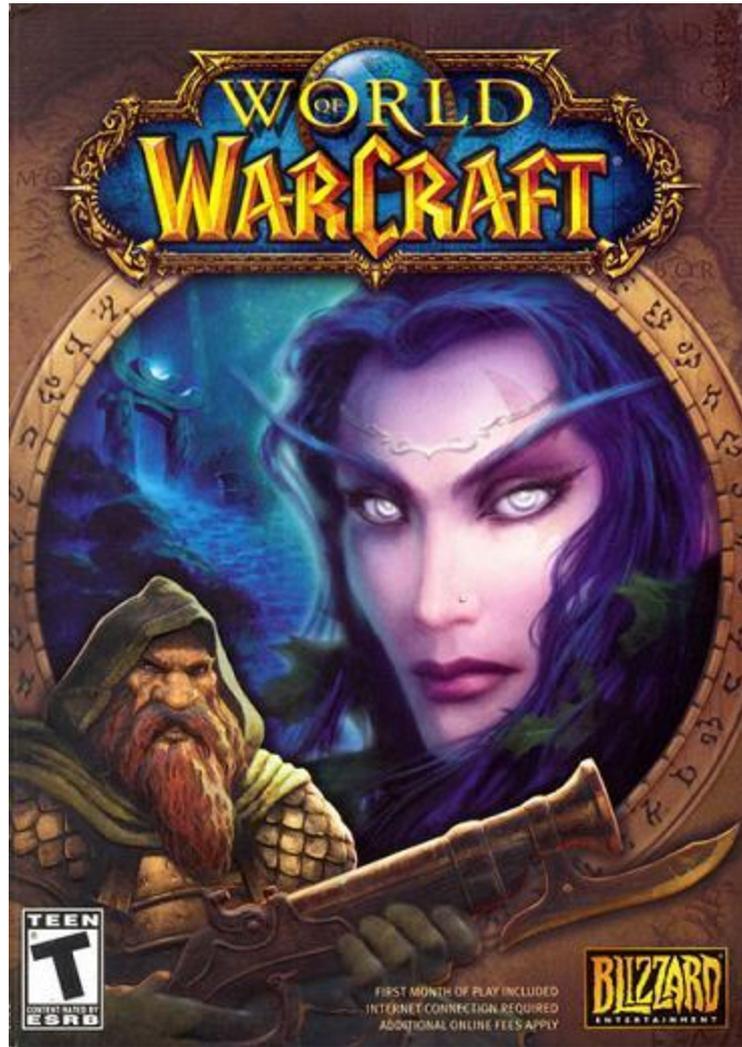
Nethellus



What is ***Spore*** about?

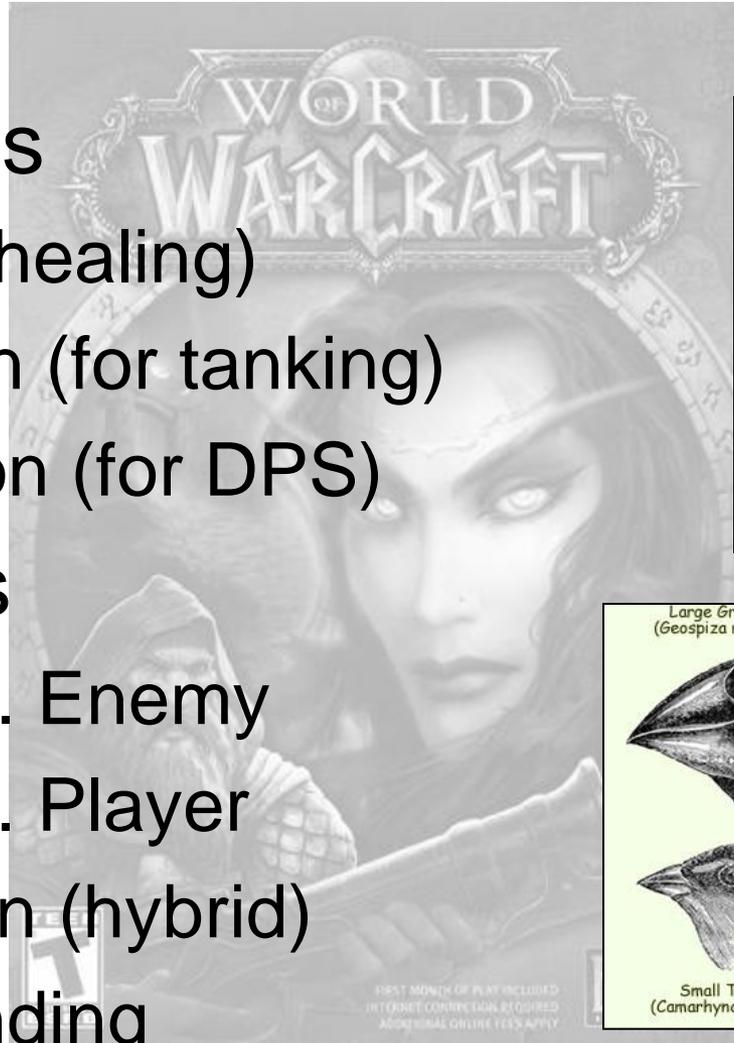


Is there a game about  
evolution?



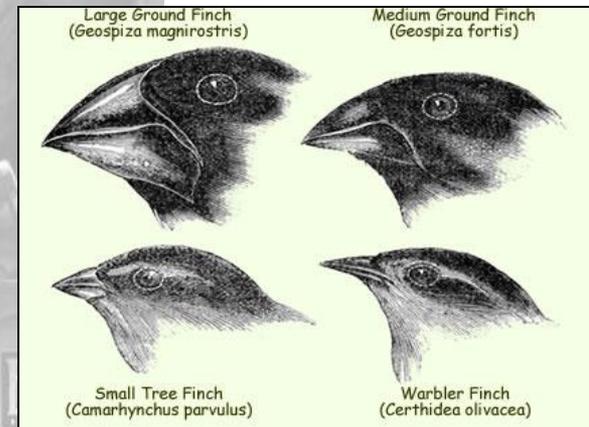
# WoW: Paladin Natural Selection

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



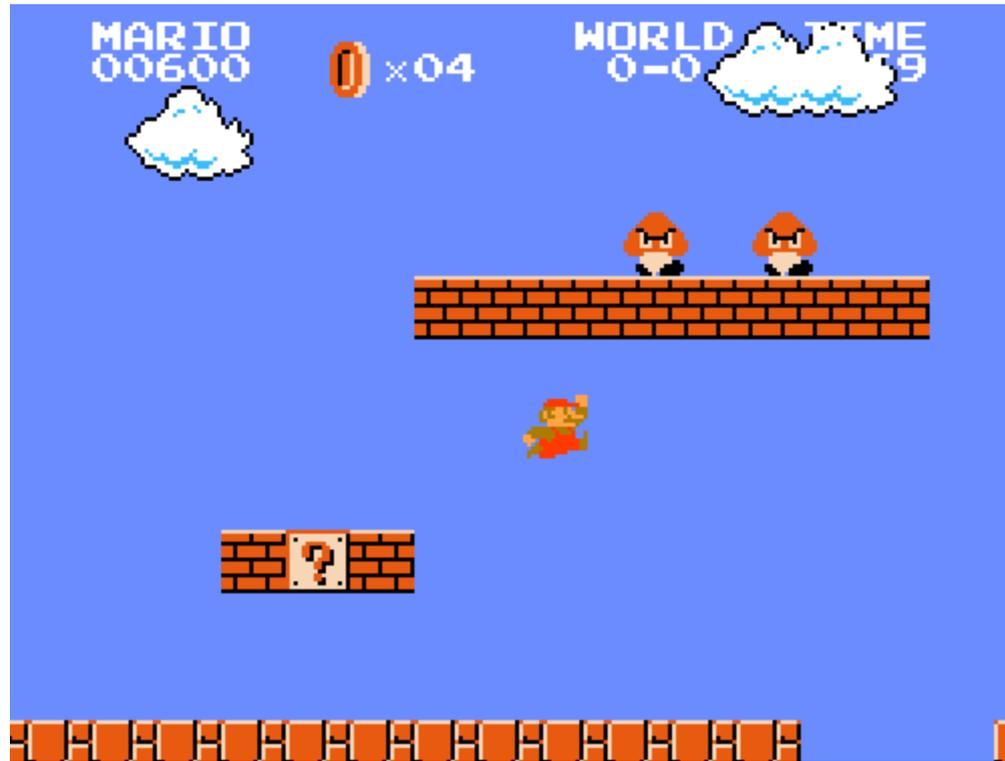
**Contents** [\[hide\]](#)

- 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...



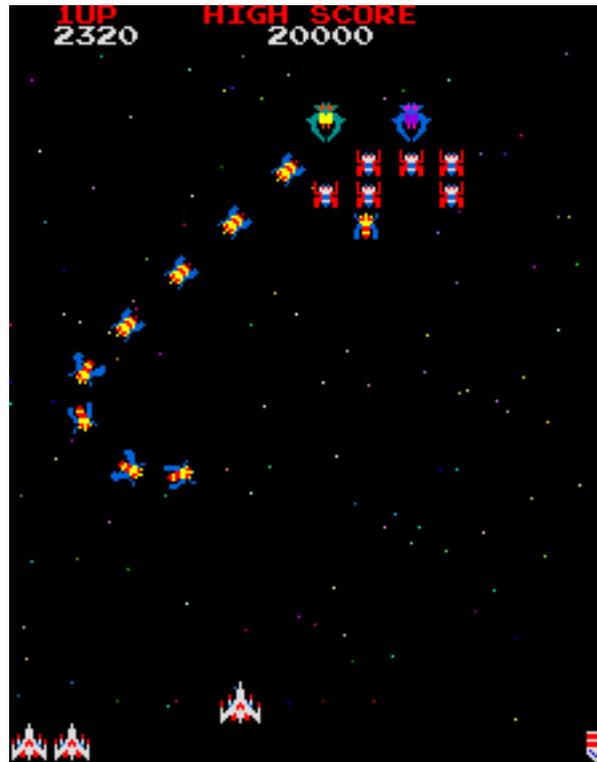
**Cover, not Aliens**

***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?

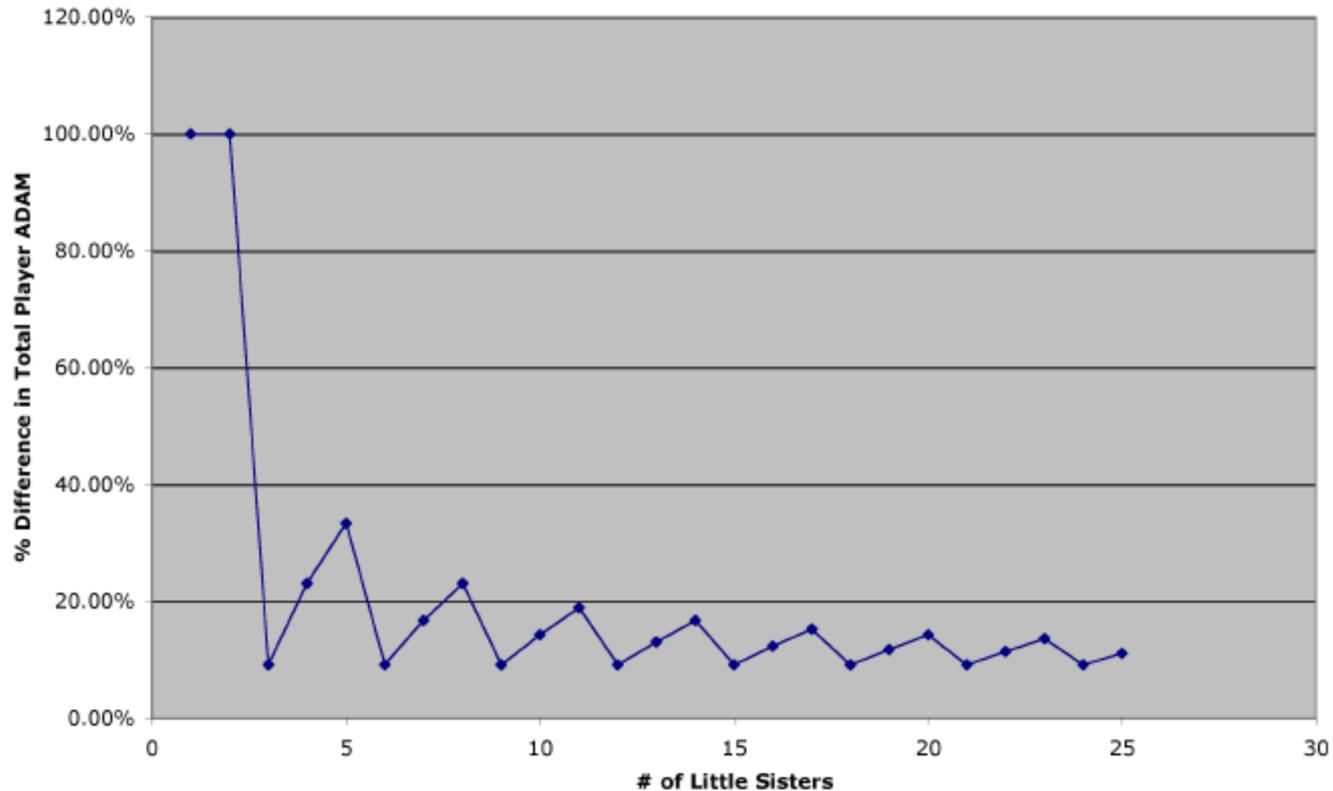


# Ethics: Rescue or Harvest?



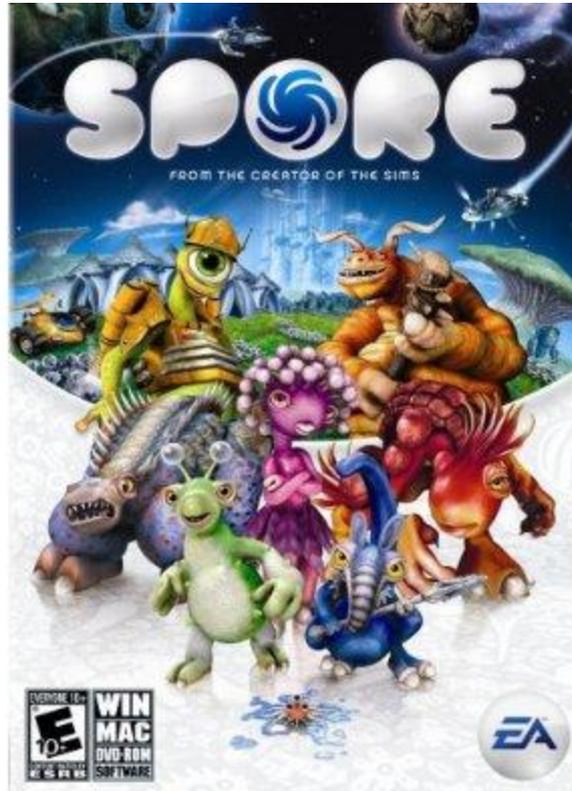
# Not according to the game mechanics...

Rescuing versus Harvesting Little Sisters



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

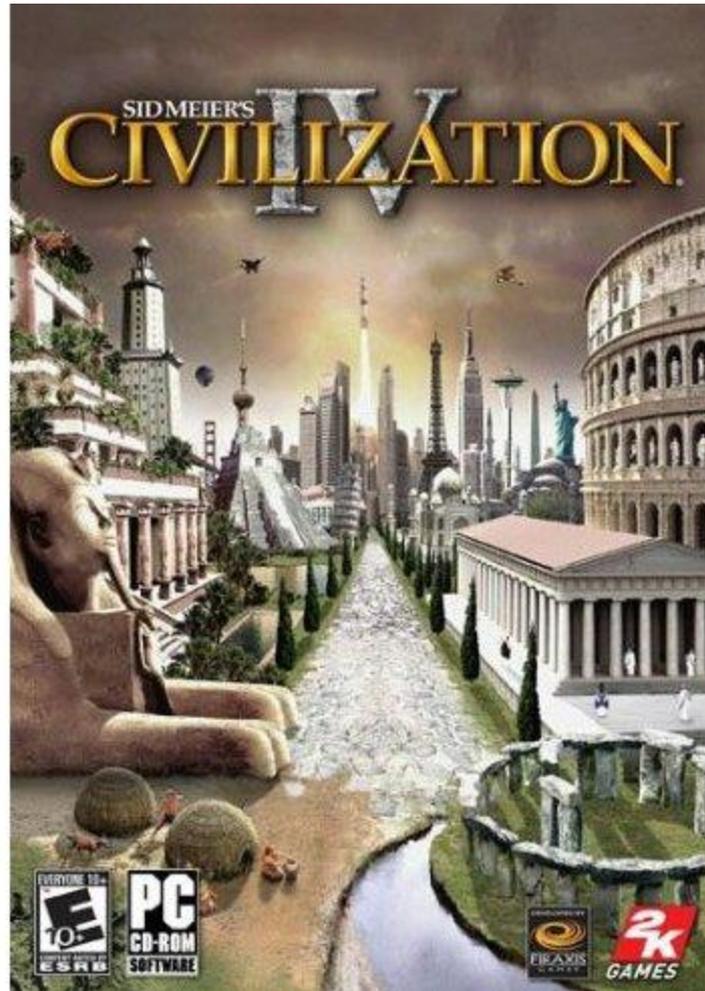


# Internal Running Joke...

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...



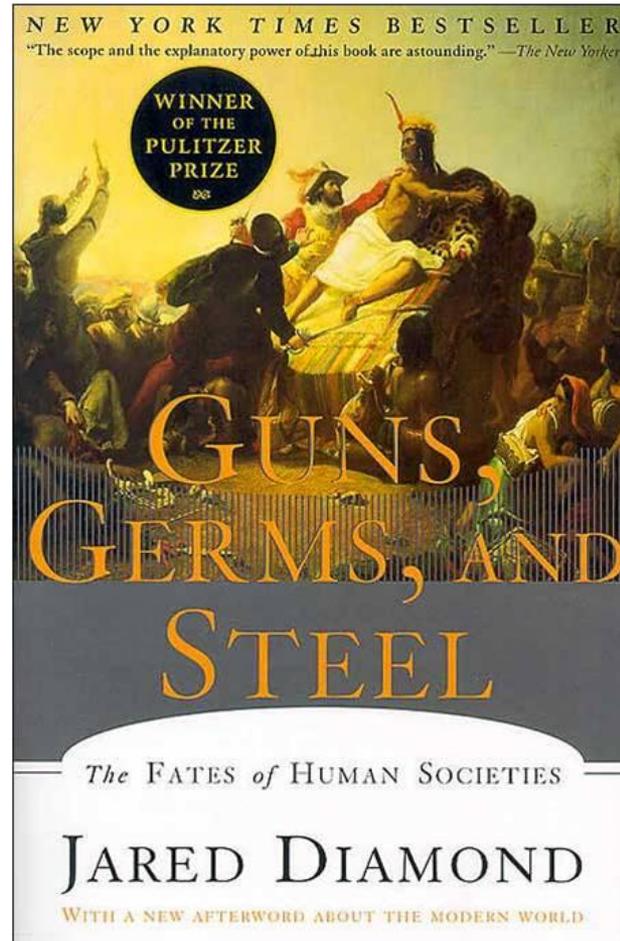
***Civilization*** is not  
scholarship...



...but can games be scholarship?

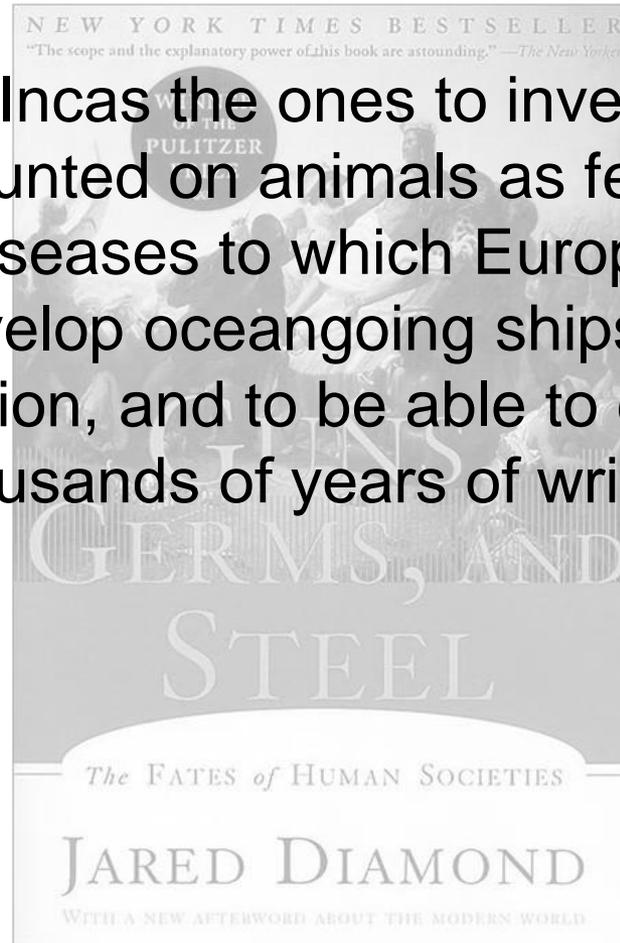


# What I wanted as a game...



# 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?”



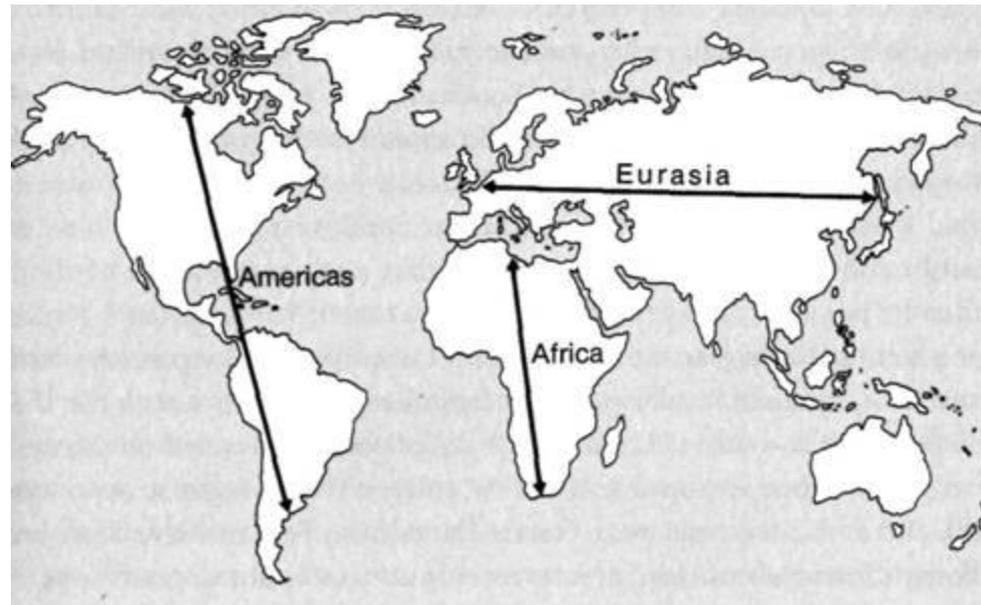
# Incan Starting Location...



# vs. the World



# Major Axes of the Continents



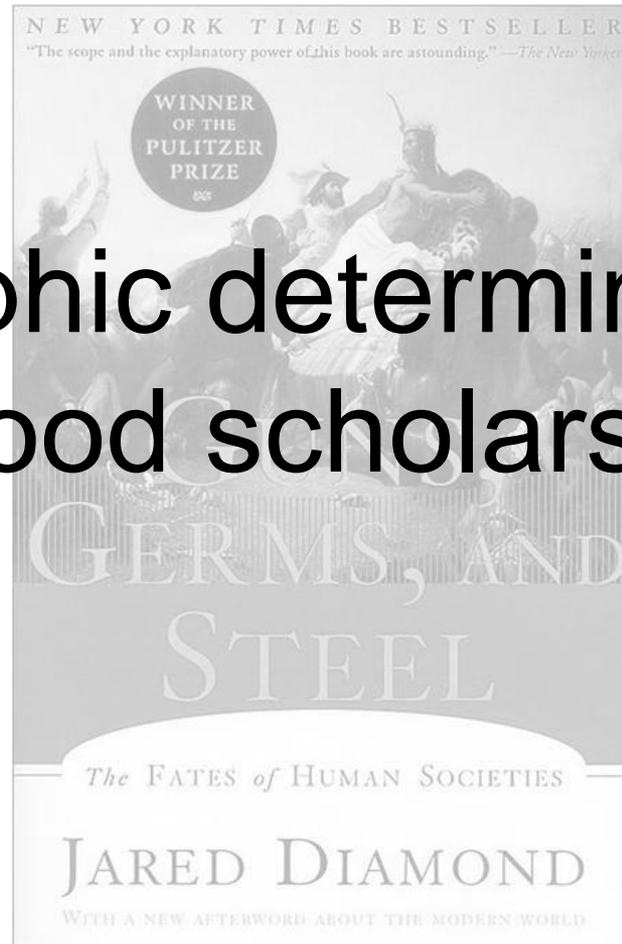
# Origin of Domesticated Animals

<i>Species</i>	<i>Date (B.C.)</i>	<i>Place</i>
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

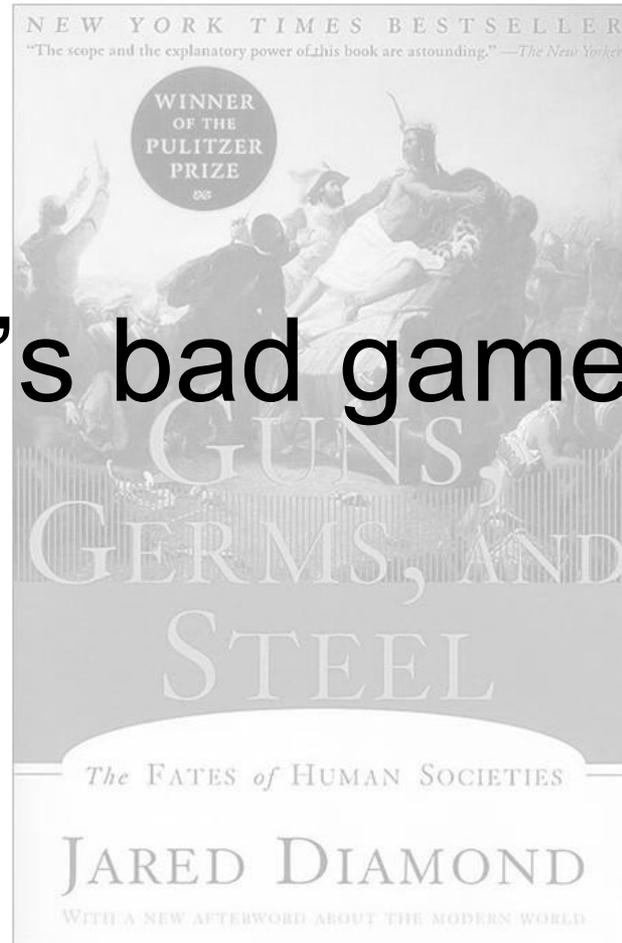
# The Incans are doomed



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?

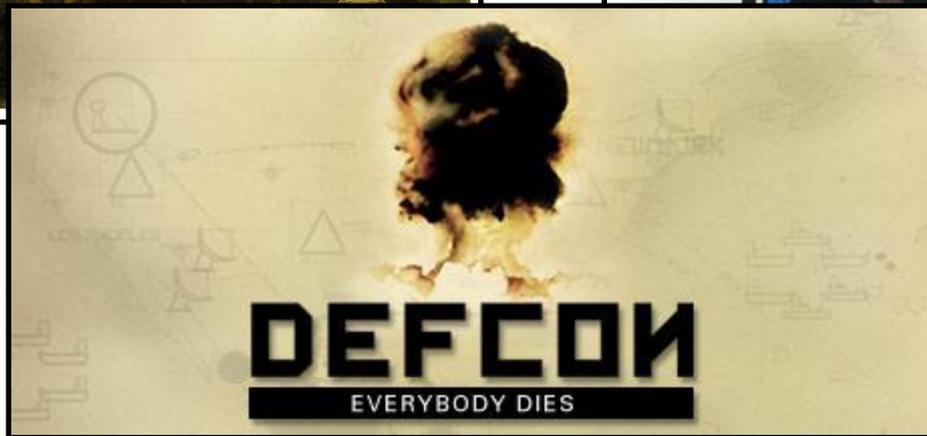
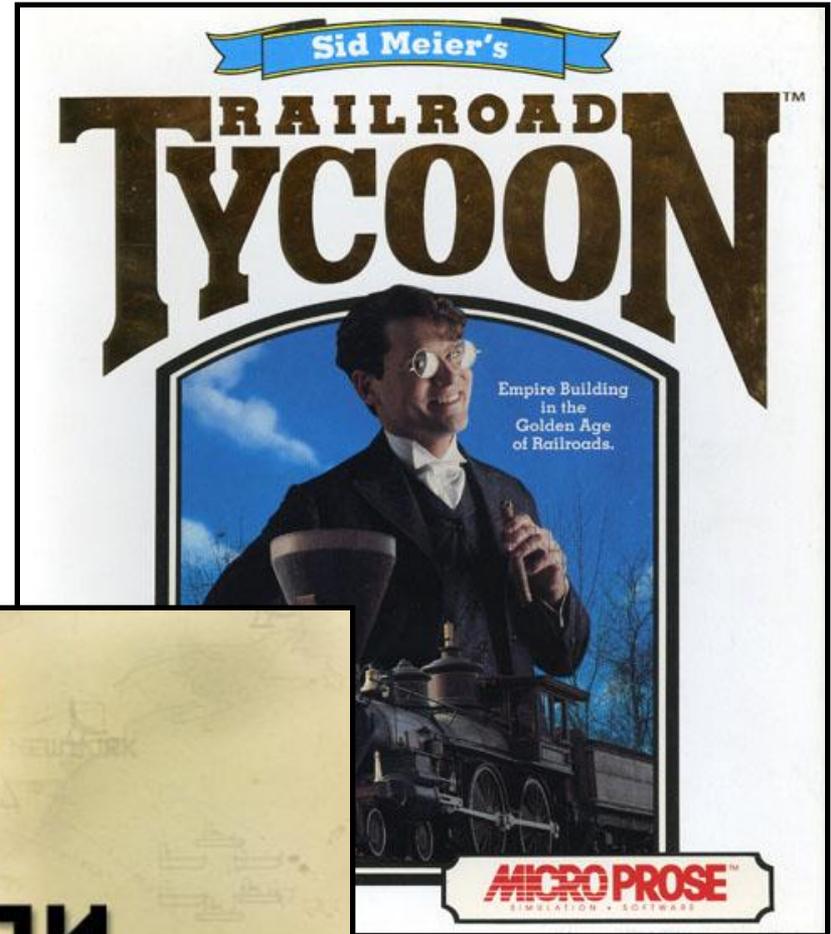
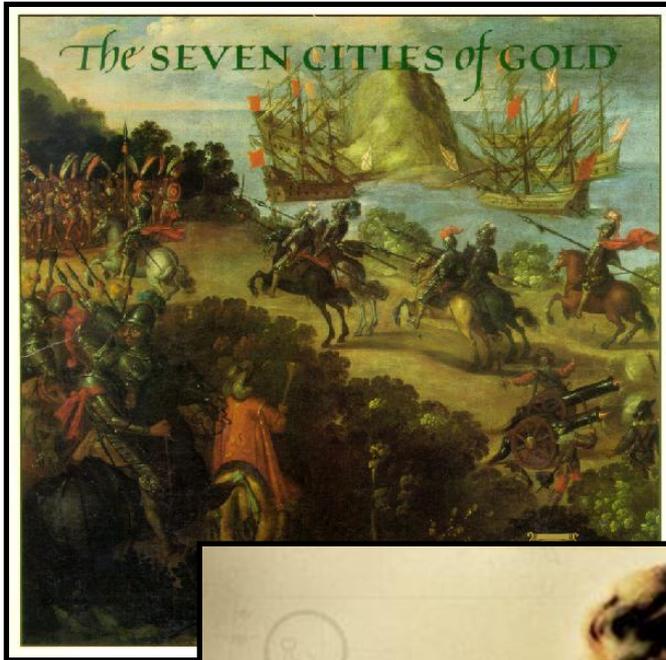




Maybe not?

(but similar story for other media)

Instead, play a life...



# Oxford Mercer

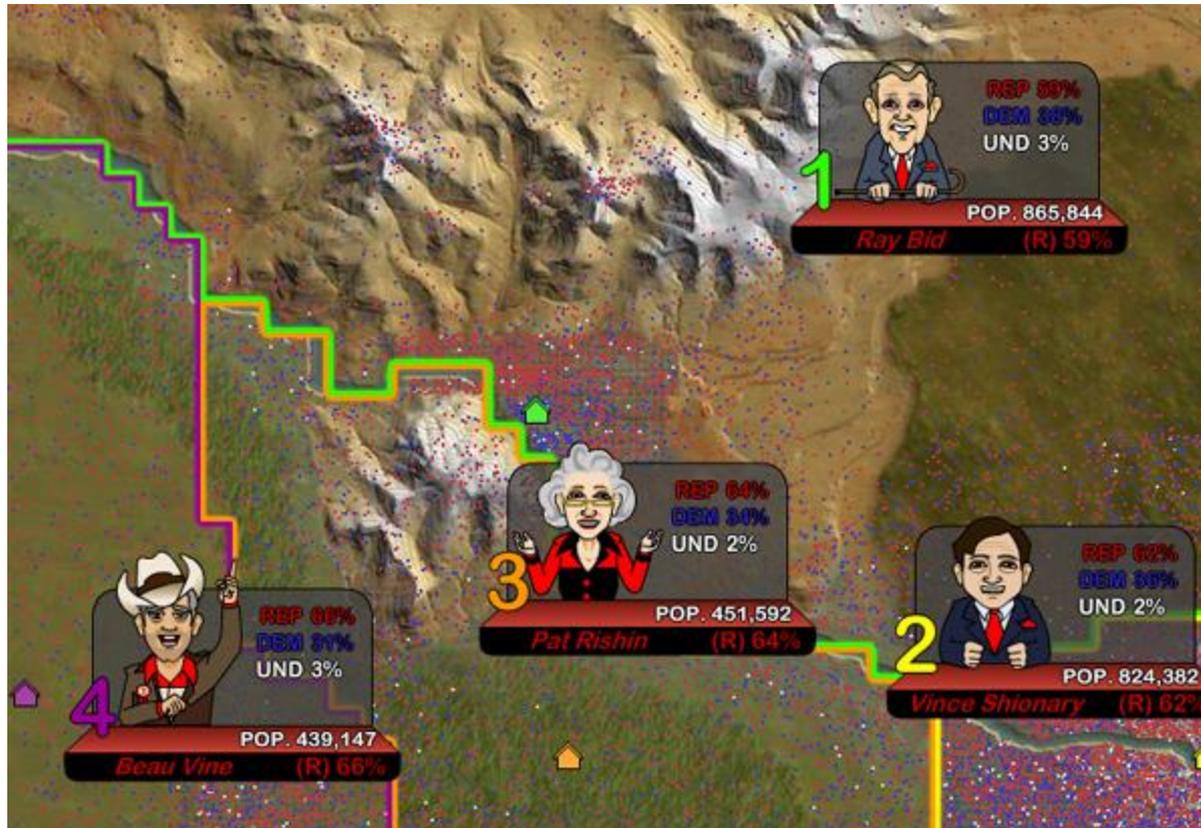
William Davis's Shop				
Finances	Purchases	Shop	Stock	New Turn
Retail Profits: <b>7.13.0</b>		Credit Interest: <b>0.0.0</b>		Old Wealth:
Wholesale Profits: <b>0.0.0</b>		Irrecoverable Credit: <b>0.0.0</b>		<b>33.15.11</b>
Stock Value: <b>-4.13.0</b>		Loans Interest: <b>0.0.0</b>		Change:
Rent Profits: <b>0.0.0</b>		Irrecoverable Loans: <b>0.0.0</b>		<b>-6.3.6</b>
Rent Costs: <b>-2.5.0</b>		Debt Interest: <b>-1.17.2</b>		New Wealth:
Property Repairs: <b>0.0.0</b>		Personal Expenses: <b>-2.8.9</b>		<b>27.12.5</b>
Property Value: <b>0.0.0</b>		Personal Goods: <b>0.2.5</b>		
Quarterage: <b>0.0.0</b>		Taxes: <b>0.0.0</b>		
Wages: <b>-2.15.0</b>		Other: <b>0.0.0</b>		
<b>Personnel</b>		<b>Family</b>		<b>Shop Records</b>
<b>Linens</b>		<b>Haberdashery</b>		<b>Credit</b>
13	↓ 2.11.0	0	↑ 6.15.0	Current: 12%
	0.12.0			
Price	3.3.0	Price		
<b>Woolens</b>		<b>Garments</b>		<b>History</b>
4	↑ 3.16.0	0	↑ 14.11.0	Last Season: <b>33.15.11</b>
	0.17.0			Last Year: -
Price	4.13.0	Price		5 Years Ago: -
		<b>Provisions</b>		S T A T U S
		4	↓ 1.14.0	
			0.6.0	
		Price	2.0.0	
Autumn 1660	Credit: 2.3.6	Cash: 37.13.9	Debts: -85.0.8	
	Assets: 0.0.0	Stock: 62.11.0	Goods: 10.4.10	Wealth: 27.12.5

# ***Oxford Mercer***

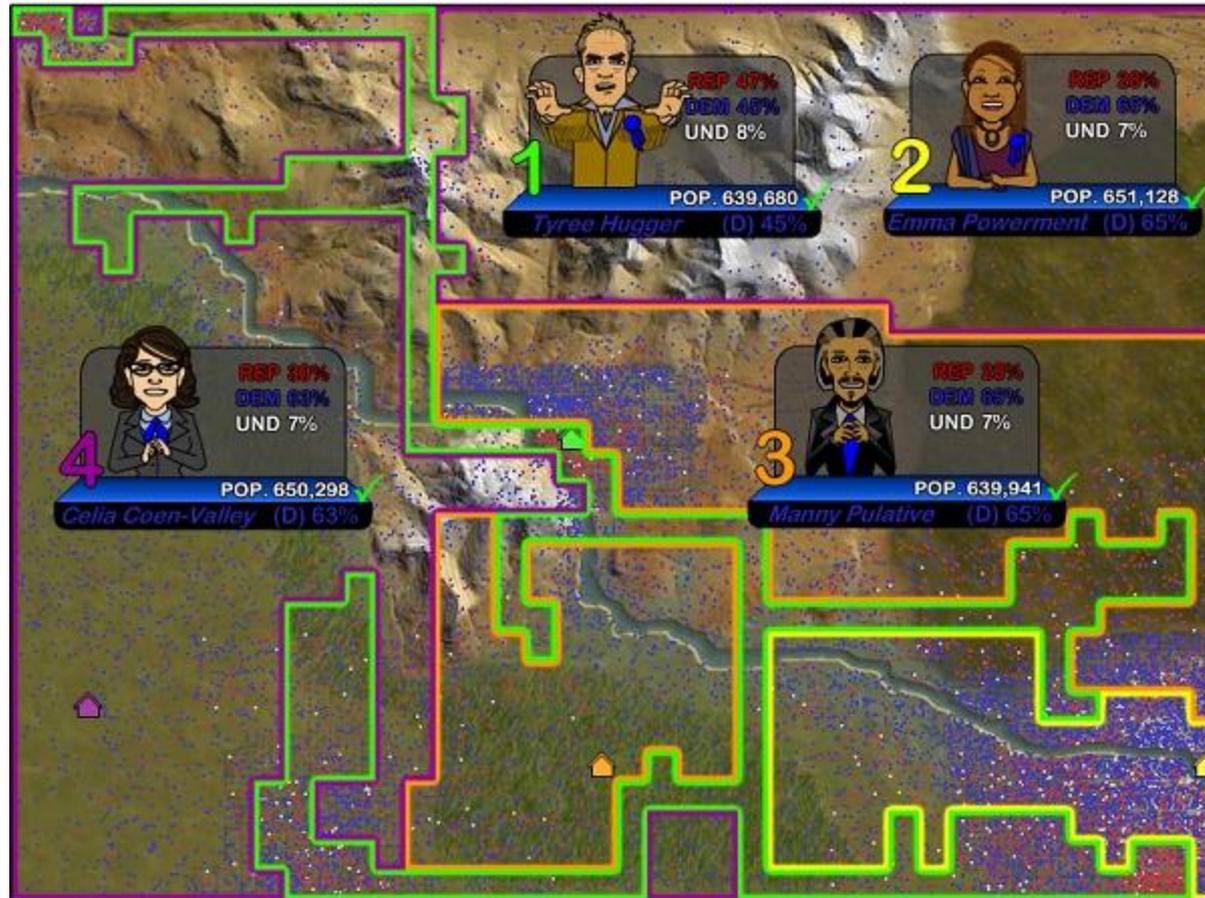
***OM*'s theme: Be a 17<sup>th</sup>-century  
English shopkeeper**

***OM*'s meaning: Be a 17<sup>th</sup>-century  
English shopkeeper**

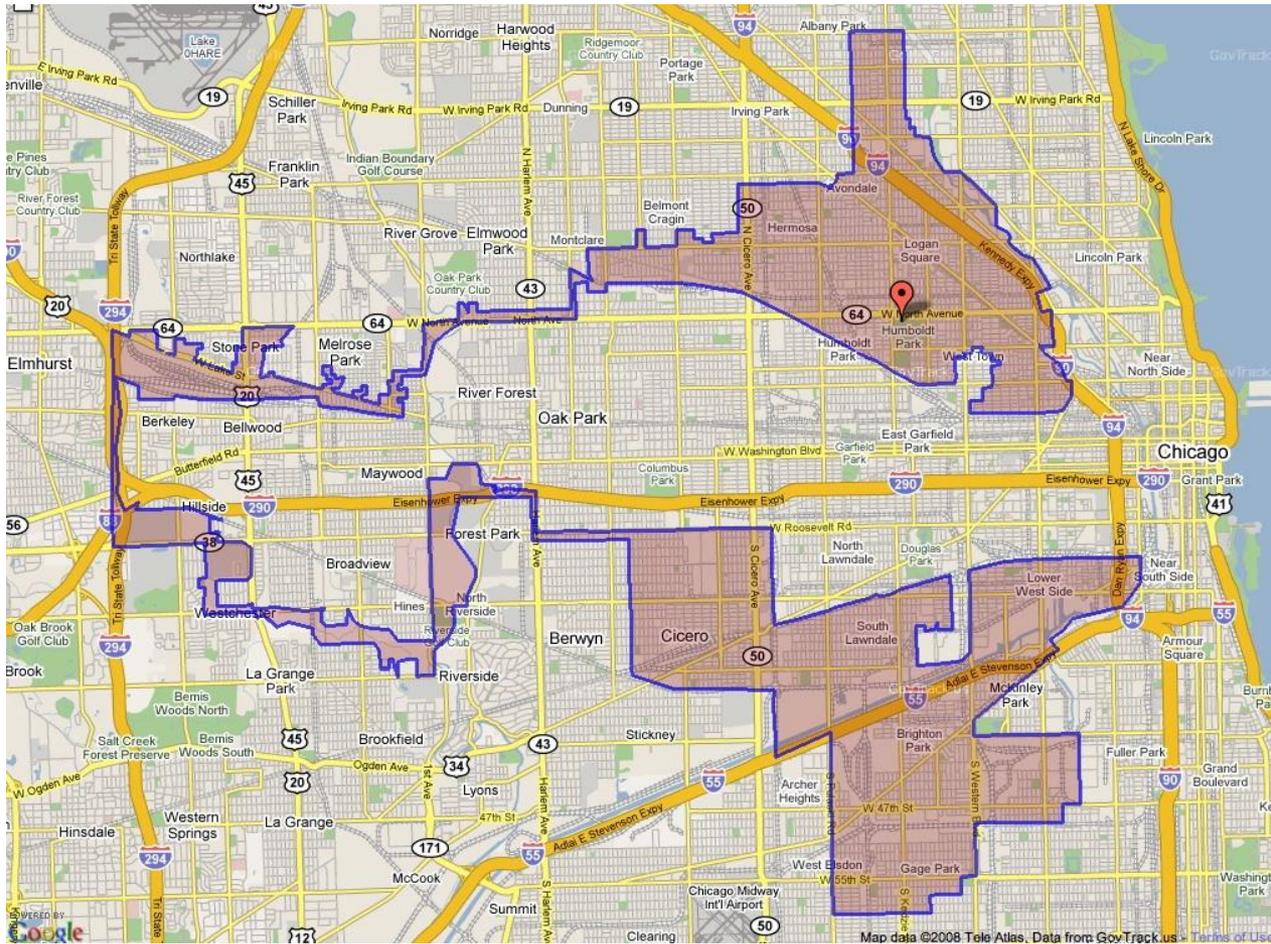
# The Redistricting Game



# 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



The Magic Touch  
 Manager: [stblaine](#)  
[Edit Team Info](#)  
[Edit Lineup](#) | [Add Players](#) | [Drop Players](#) | [Propose Trade](#) | [Players to Watch](#)

Lineup: [Wed, Sep 29](#) | [Thu, Sep 30](#) | [Fri, Oct 1](#) | [Sat, Oct 2](#) | [Sun, Oct 3](#)

Stats | Splits | Opponents | Ranks

Today | Last Week | Last Month | Season | 2003 Season | 2002 Season

Pos	Player	Opp	Status	W/AB	AB	R	H	HR	RBI	SB	BB	K	AVG
C	<a href="#">J. Varitek</a> (Bos - C)			137/463	463	67	137	18	73	10	62	126	.296
1B	<a href="#">A. Pujols</a> (StL - 1B,LF)			196/592	592	133	196	46	123	5	84	52	.331
2B	<a href="#">J. Kent</a> (Hou - 2B)			156/540	540	96	156	27	107	7	49	96	.289
3B	<a href="#">C. Blaise</a> (Cle - 1B,3B)			159/587	587	93	159	28	88	5	68	139	.271
SS	<a href="#">J. Rollins</a> (Phi - SS)			190/657	657	119	190	14	73	30	57	73	.289
OF	<a href="#">M. Alou</a> (ChC - LF)			176/601	601	106	176	39	106	3	68	80	.293
OF	<a href="#">B. Abreu</a> (Phi - RP)			173/574	574	118	173	30	105	40	127	116	.301
OF	<a href="#">J. Damon</a> (Bos - CF)			189/621	621	123	189	20	94	19	76	71	.304
Util	<a href="#">J. Rodriguez</a> (Det - C)			176/527	527	72	176	19	86	7	41	91	.334
BN	<a href="#">J. Guillen</a> (Ana - LF,RF)			166/565	565	88	166	27	104	5	37	92	.294

Pos	Pitcher	Opp	Status	IP	W	L	CG	SHO	SV	ER	BB	K	ERA
SP	<a href="#">J. Schmidt</a> (SF - SP)			225.0	18	7	4	3	0	80	77	251	3.20
SP	<a href="#">D. Wells</a> (SD - SP)			195.2	12	8	0	0	0	81	20	101	3.73
RP	<a href="#">J. Smoltz</a> (Atl - RP)			81.2	0	1	0	0	44	25	13	85	2.76
RP	<a href="#">J. Julia</a> (Bal - RP)			69.0	2	5	0	0	22	35	39	70	4.57
P	<a href="#">S. Shields</a> (Ana - SP,RP)			105.1	8	2	0	0	4	39	40	109	3.33
P	<a href="#">T. Lincecum</a> (Tor - SP)			197.1	12	10	2	1	0	99	89	168	4.06
P	<a href="#">L. Thompson</a> (Atl - SP)			198.1	14	8	0	0	0	82	52	133	3.72
BN	<a href="#">M. Mussina</a> (NYY - SP)			164.2	12	9	1	0	0	84	40	132	4.59
BN	<a href="#">M. Bushnell</a> (CWS - SP)			245.1	16	10	4	1	0	106	51	165	3.89
BN	<a href="#">J. Suppan</a> (StL - SP)			188.0	16	9	0	0	0	87	65	110	4.16
BN	<a href="#">B. Lawrence</a> (SD - SP)			203.0	15	14	2	1	0	93	55	121	4.12



Cardiff City  
 3rd in English Championship  
 Mark Linnane  
 Sun, 10.7.2005 9:00

Players - Condition | View | Tactics | Positions (4-4-2) | View

Pkd	Inf	Name	Con
-	Lea	Stuart Fleetwood	65%
-	Emp	Daniel Gabbidon	68%
-	Emp	Cameron Jerome	67%
-	Emp	Toni Koskela	66%
-	Emp	Richard Langley	70%
-	Emp	Joe Ledley	65%
-	Emp	Alan Lee	67%
-	Emp	Martyn Margetson	66%
-	Emp	Ryan Morgan	68%
-	Emp	Paul Parry	68%
-	Lea	Danny Parslow	68%
-	Emp	Peter Thorne	69%
-	Emp	Tony Warner	69%
-	Emp	Rhys Weston	68%
-	Emp	Darren Williams	68%

Sections | Select Position | Swap Player | View Profile | Jump To Pitch | Actions

<http://www.frogland.net>

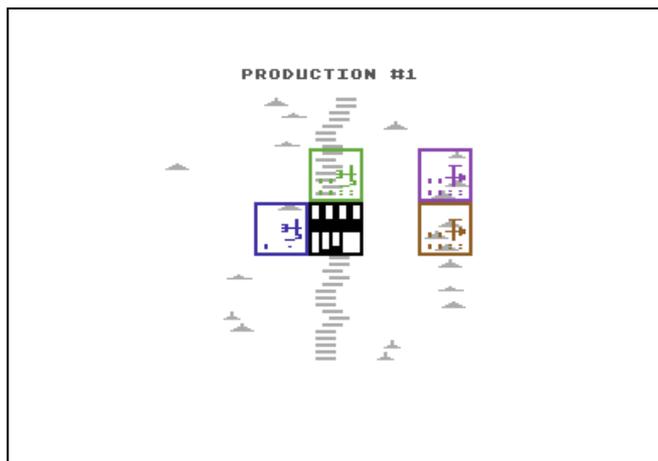
# Management Games



# Tactile Games



# Dan Buntent



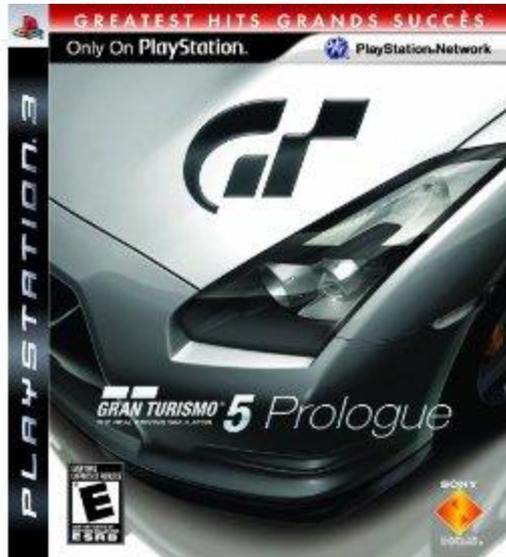
*M.U.L.E.* (1983)

*Seven Cities of Gold* (1984)

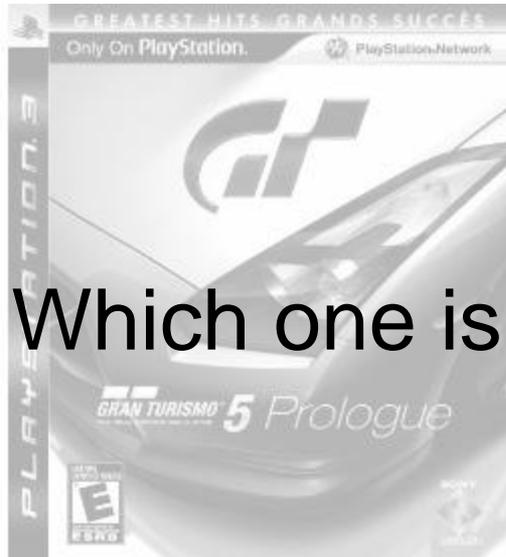
Realism is not the key

(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?





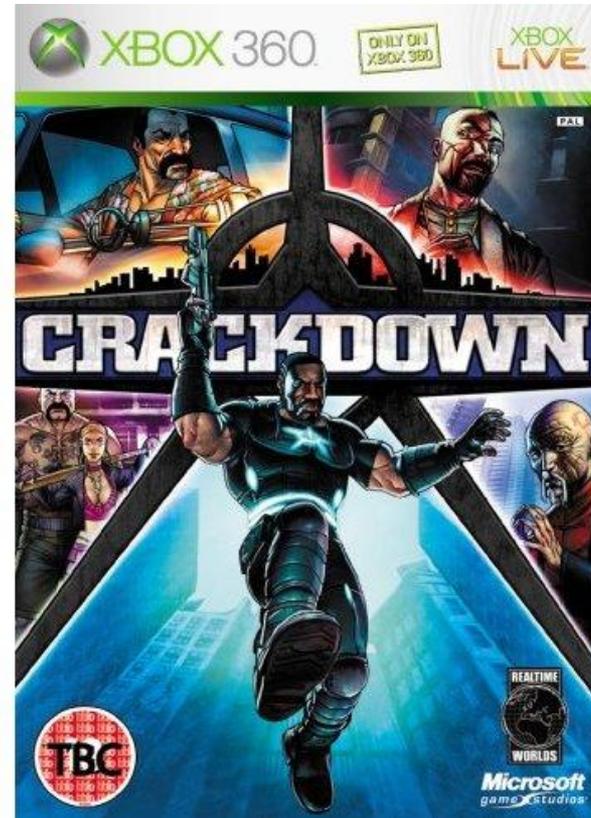
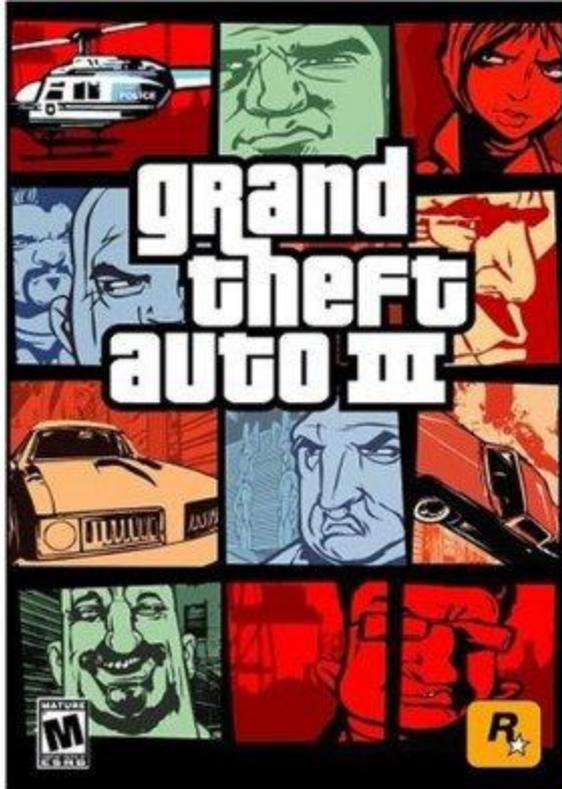
To me, this is racing...



# Why *Mario Kart*?

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

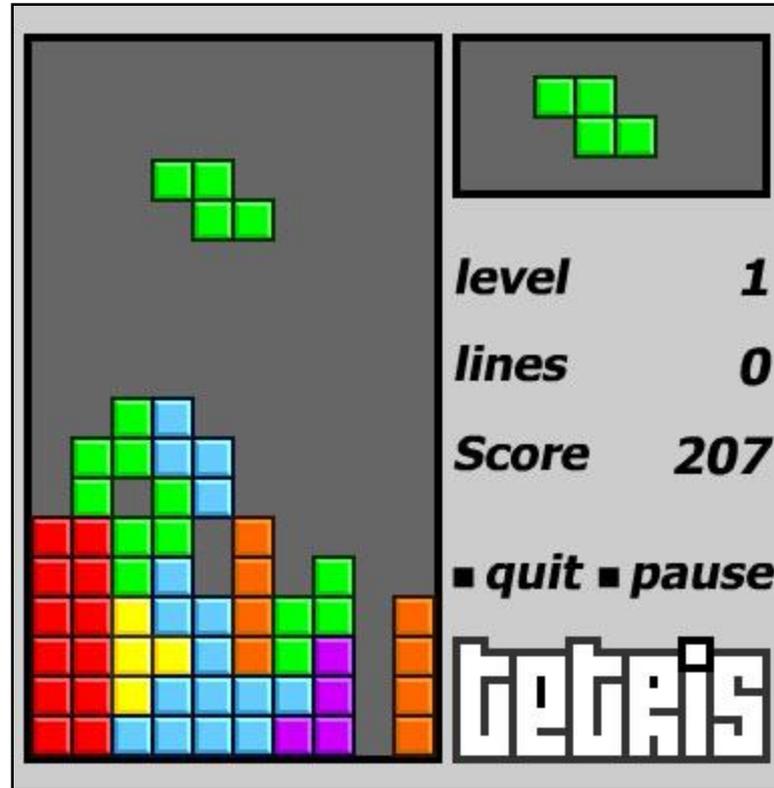
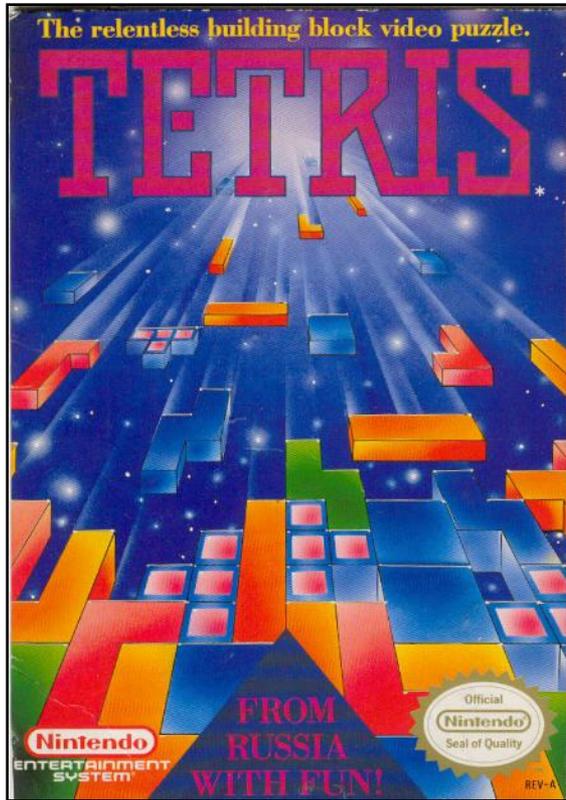
# Theme Matters



# 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



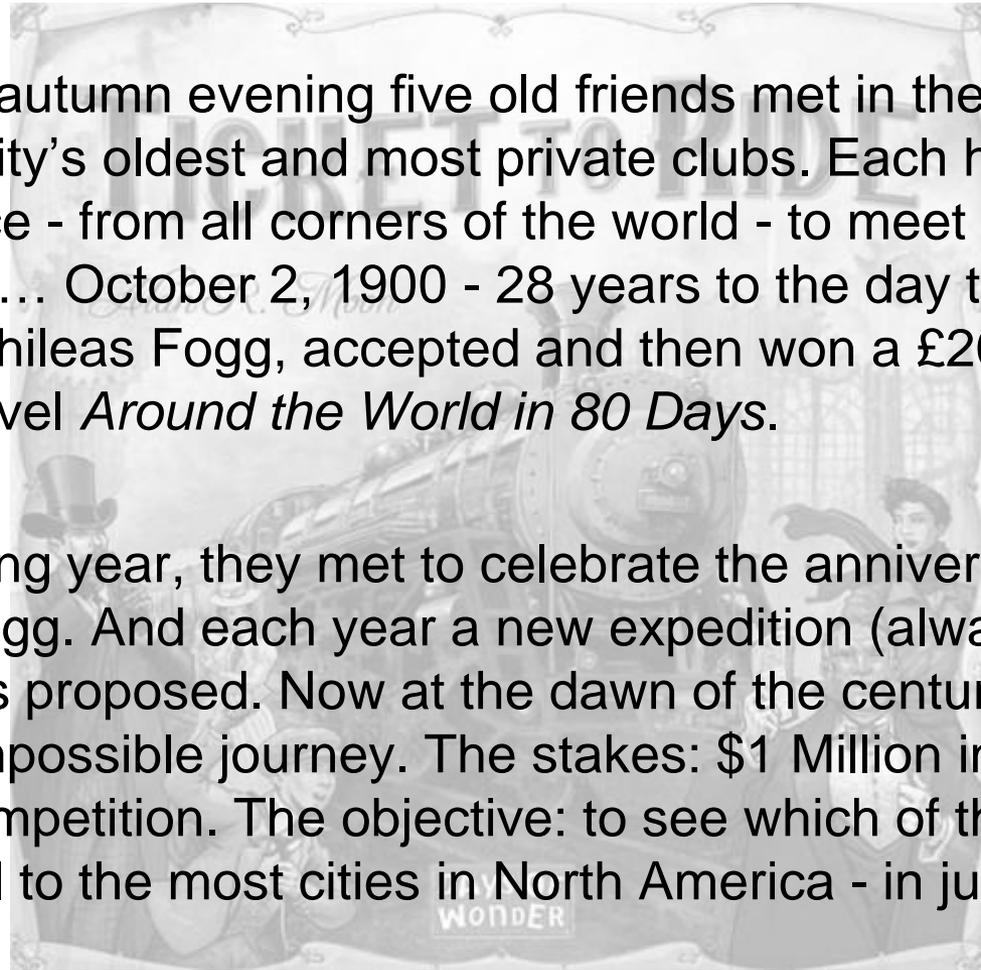
# What about *Train*?



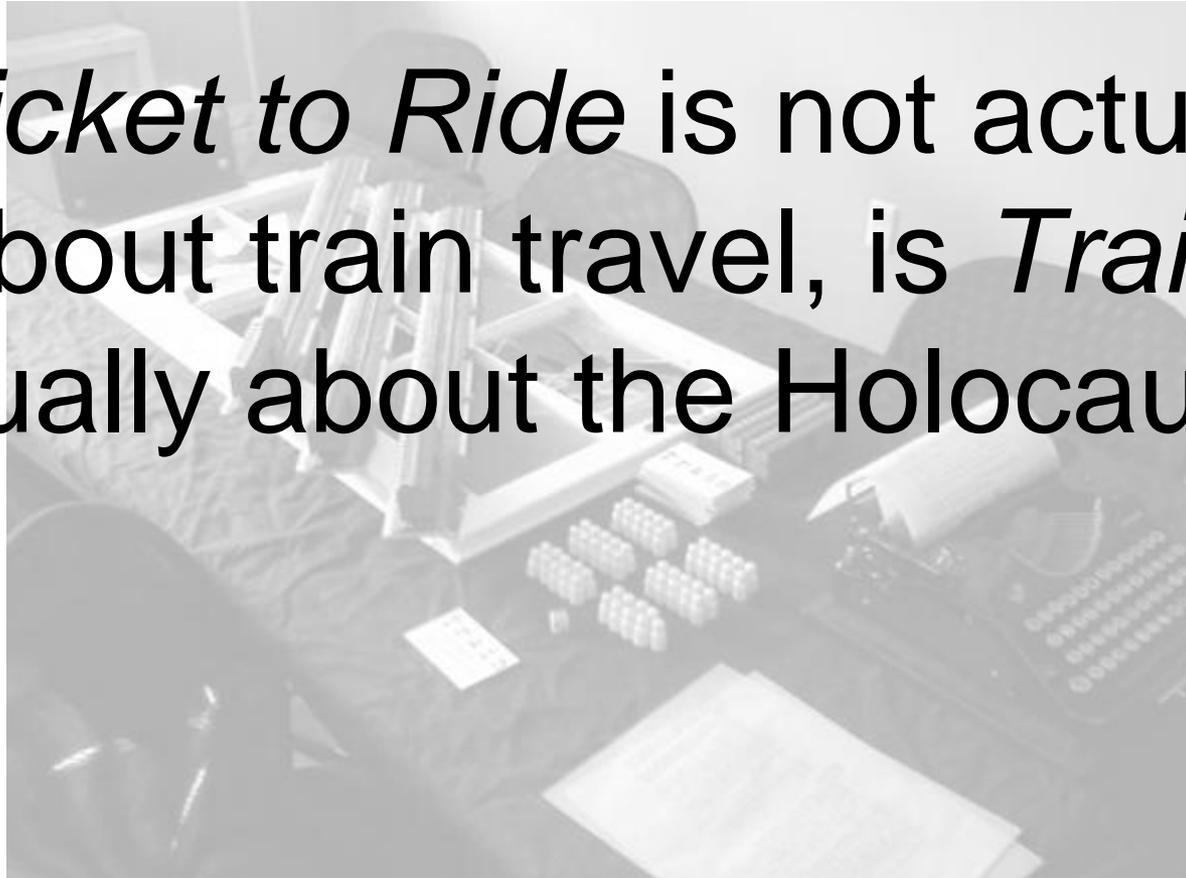
# ***Ticket to Ride: Theme***

“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?



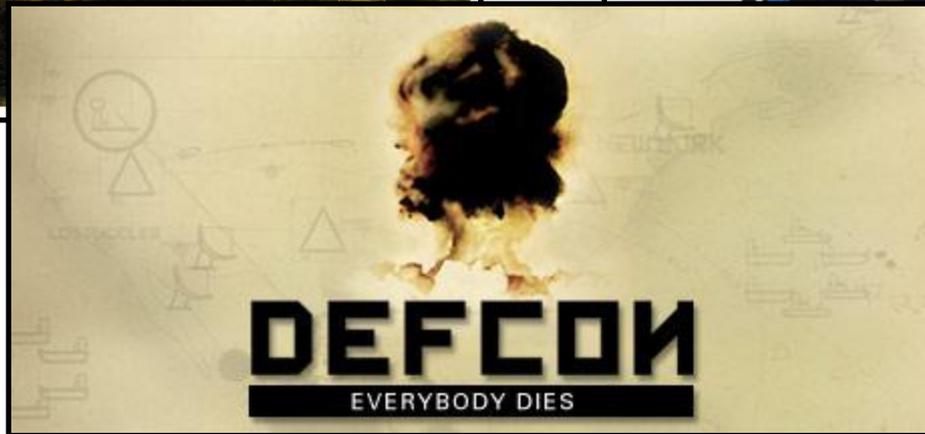
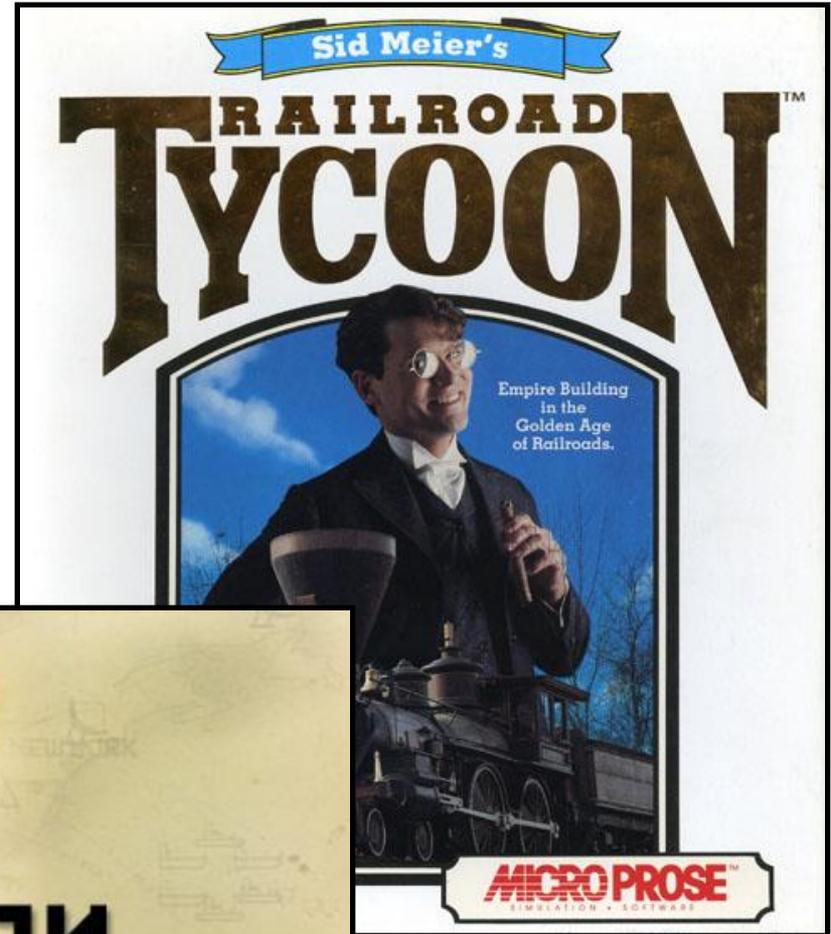
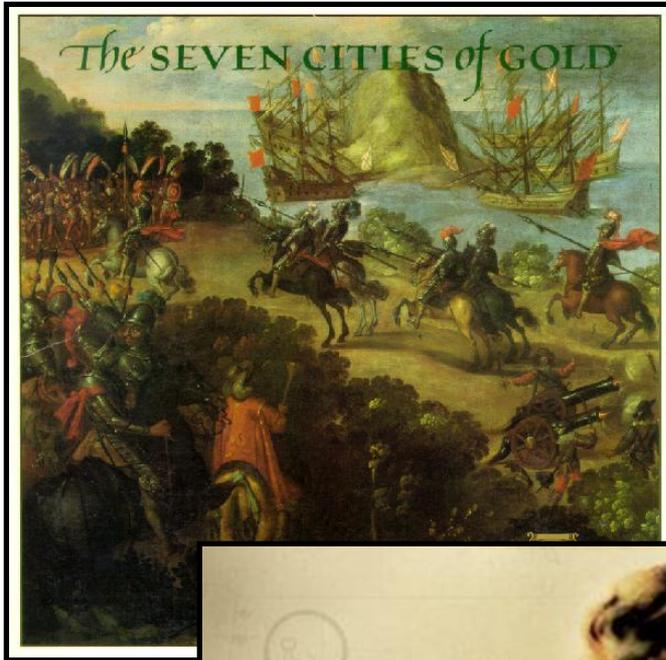
# Calabouço Tétrico



Can we make a game actually  
about the Holocaust?



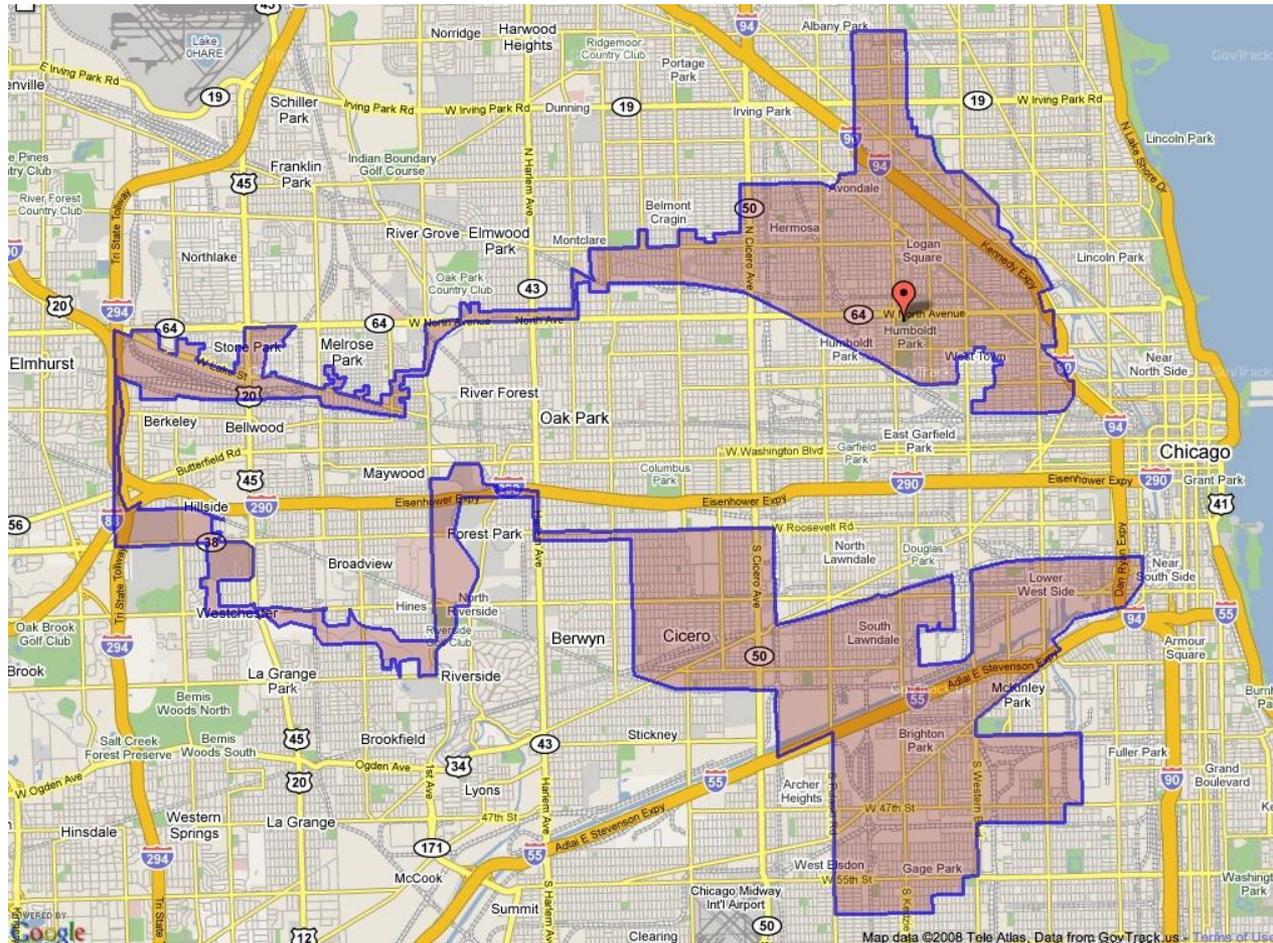
Remember, play a life...



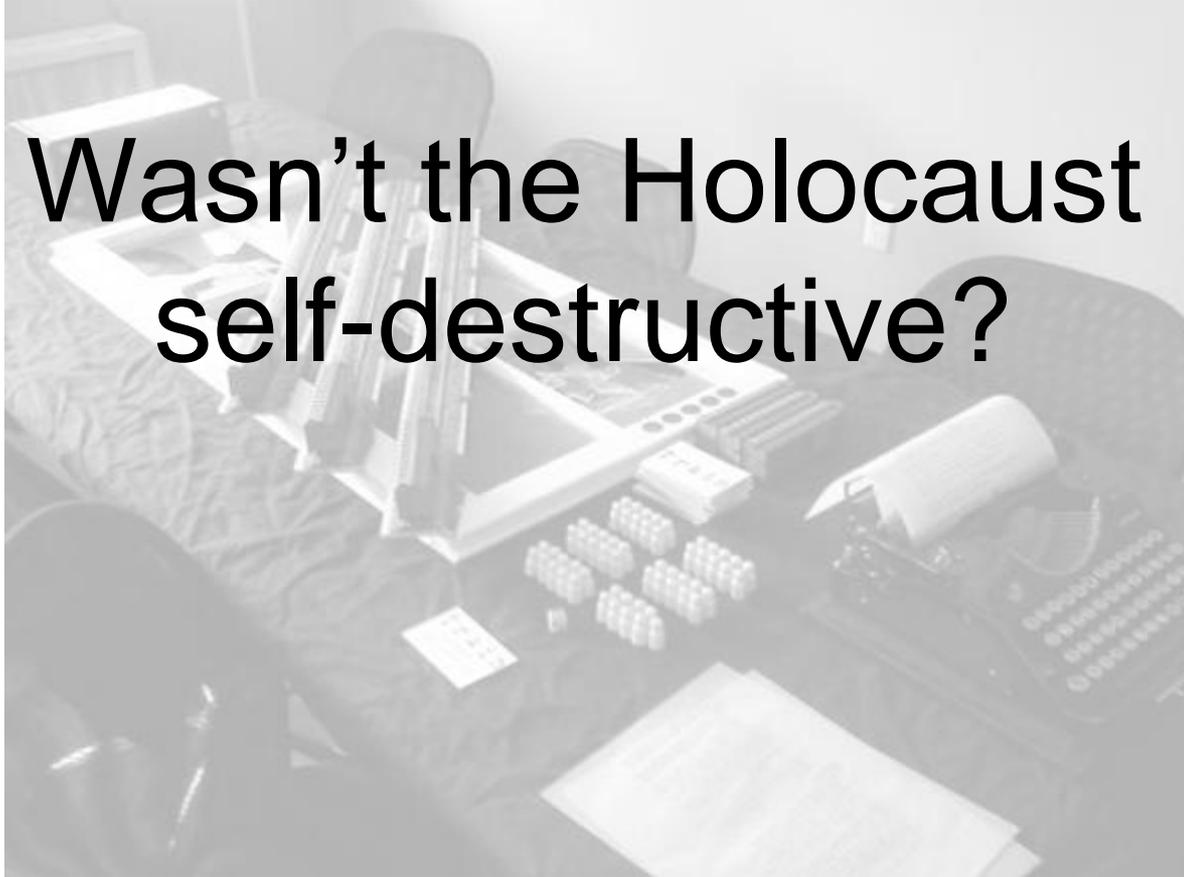
If we “play a life”  
can we play evil?

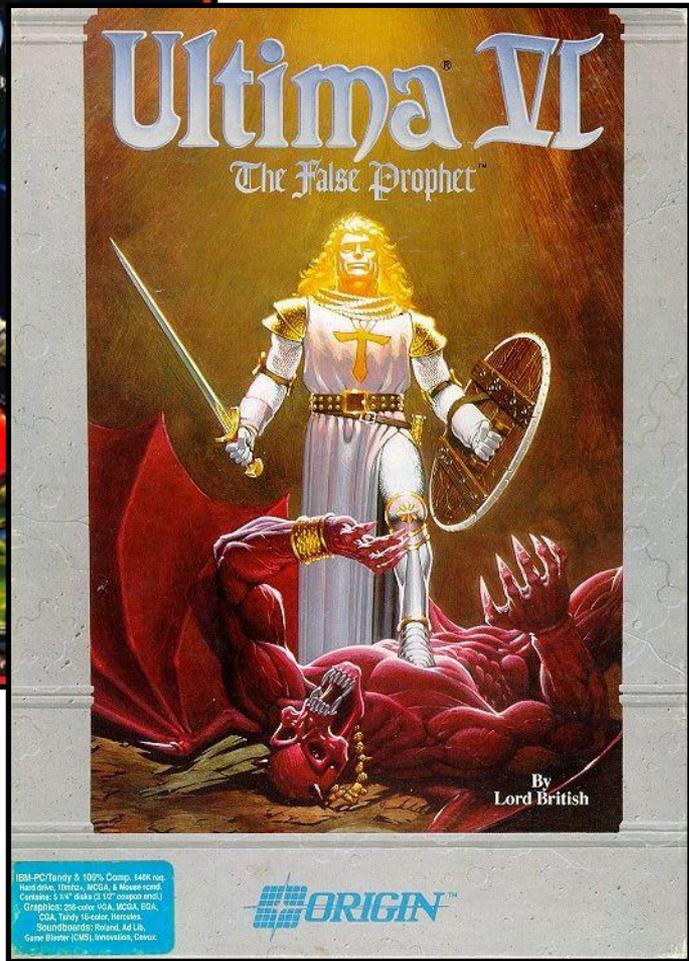
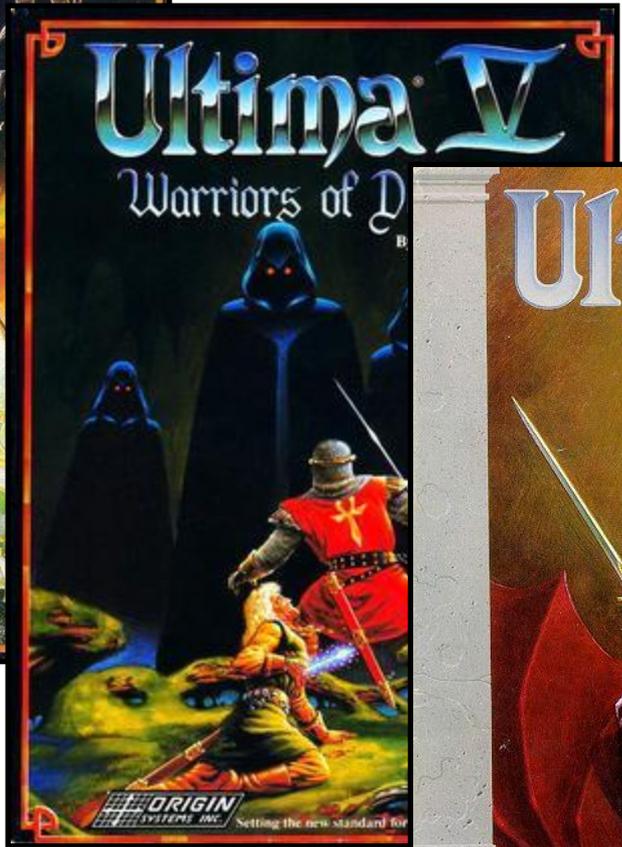
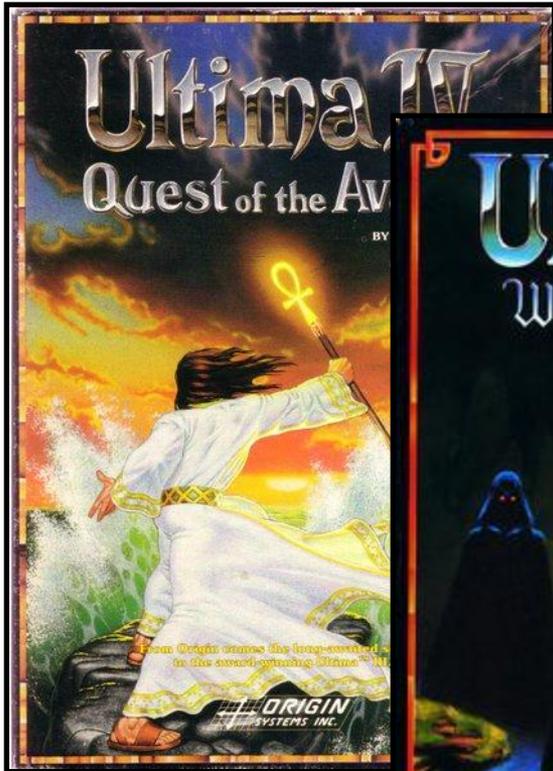


# Gerrymandering is evil



**Wasn't the Holocaust  
self-destructive?**





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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