

Theme is Not Meaning

Soren Johnson
Designer/Programmer, EA2D
soren.johnson@gmail.com
www.designer-notes.com
www.twitter.com/SorenJohnson

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)

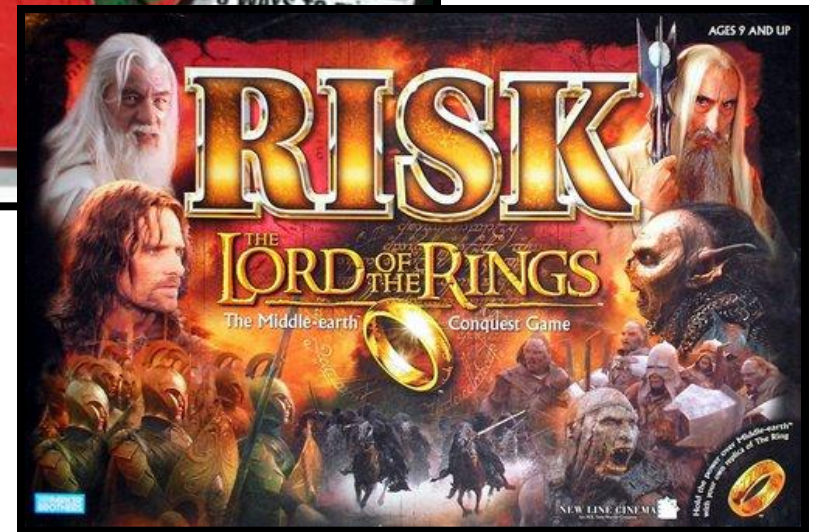
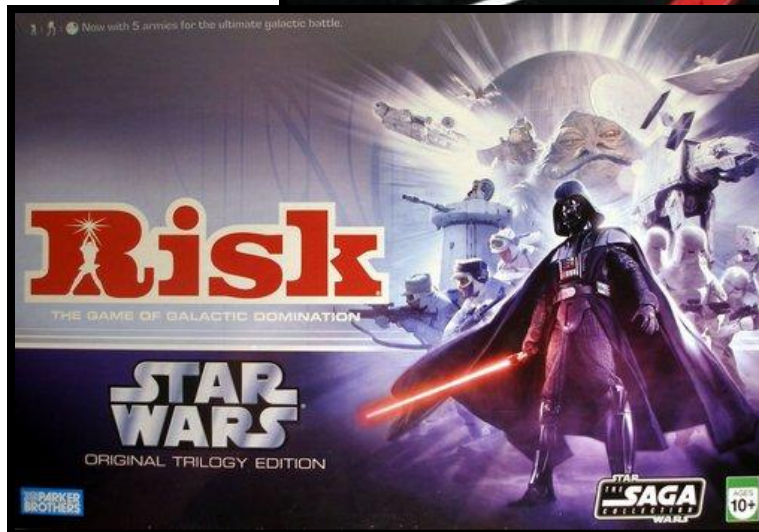
Theme vs. Mechanics

(which one defines a game?)

Mechanics



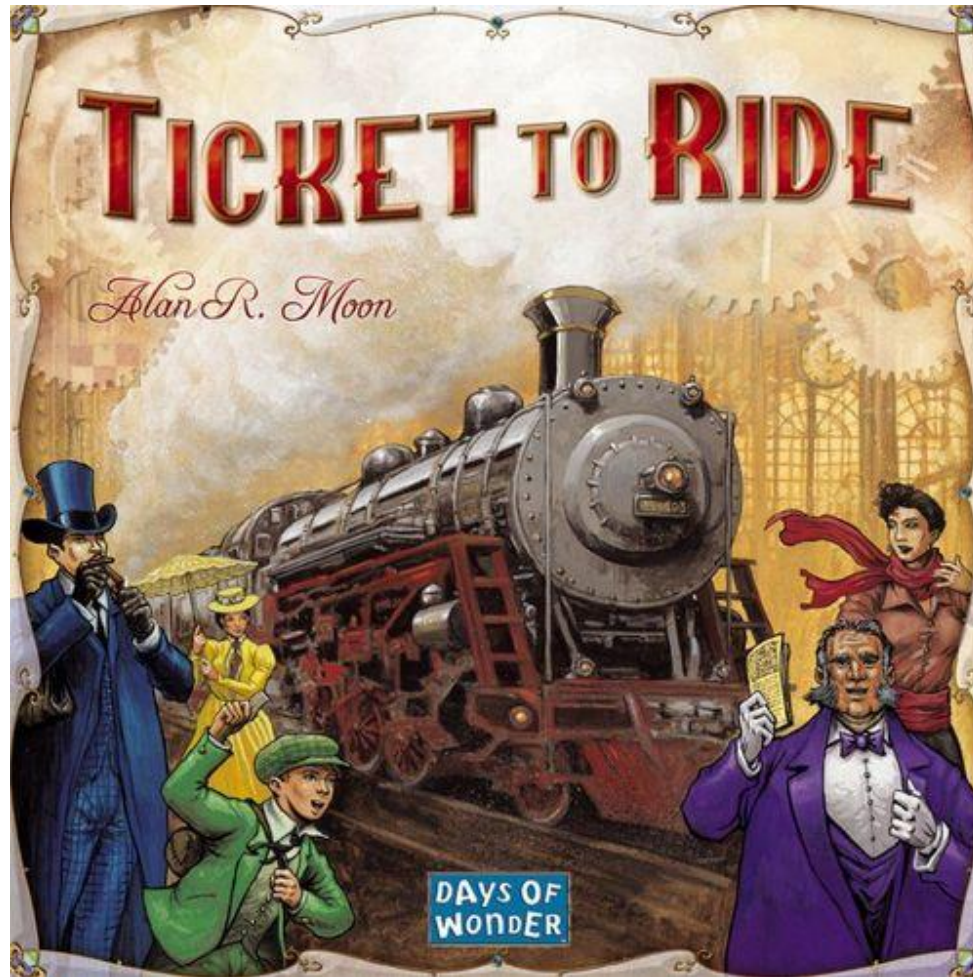
Theme



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



Ticket to Ride



Ticket to Ride: Mechanics



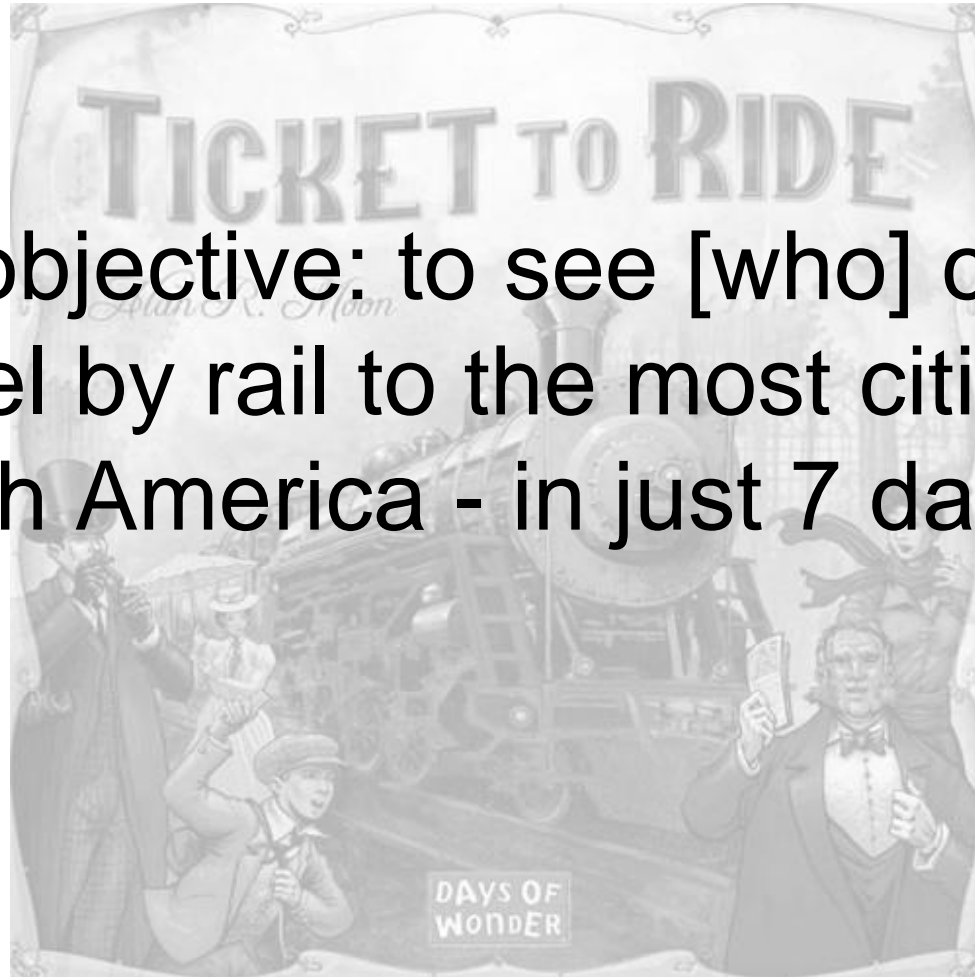
Ticket to Ride: Theme

“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.”

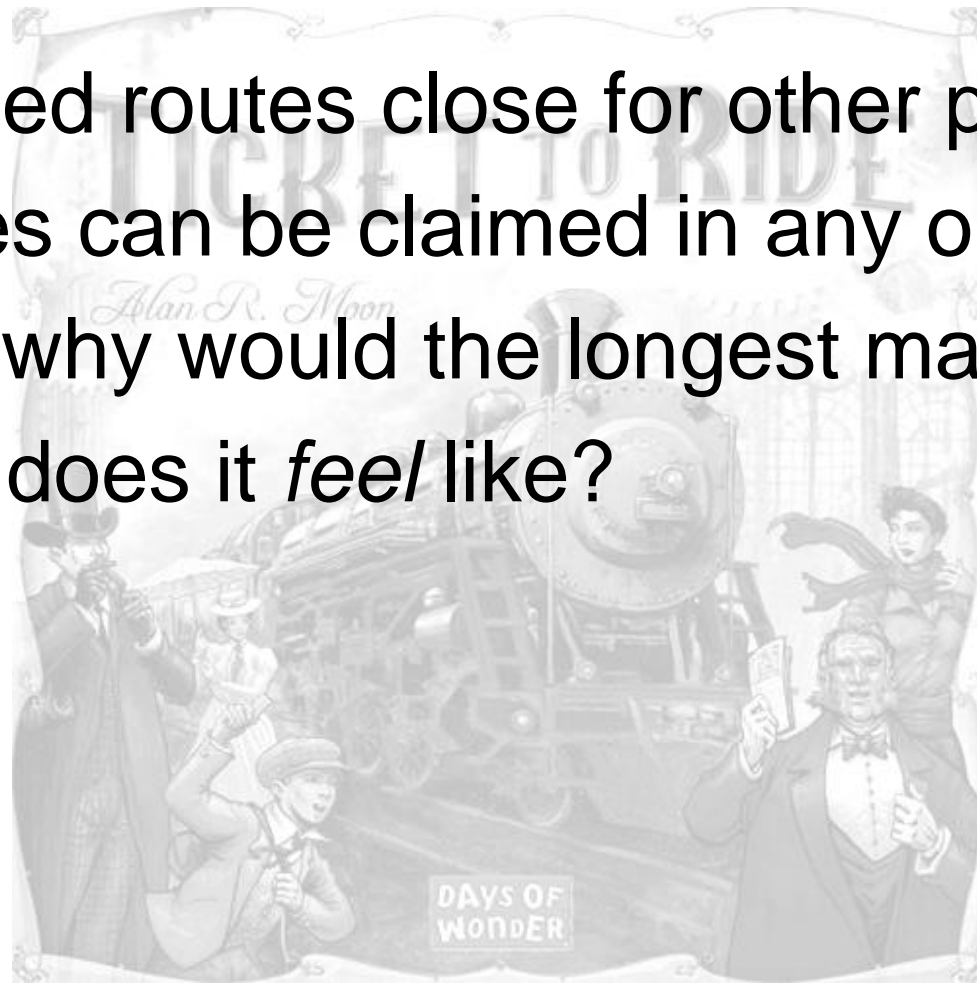
Ticket to Ride: Theme

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

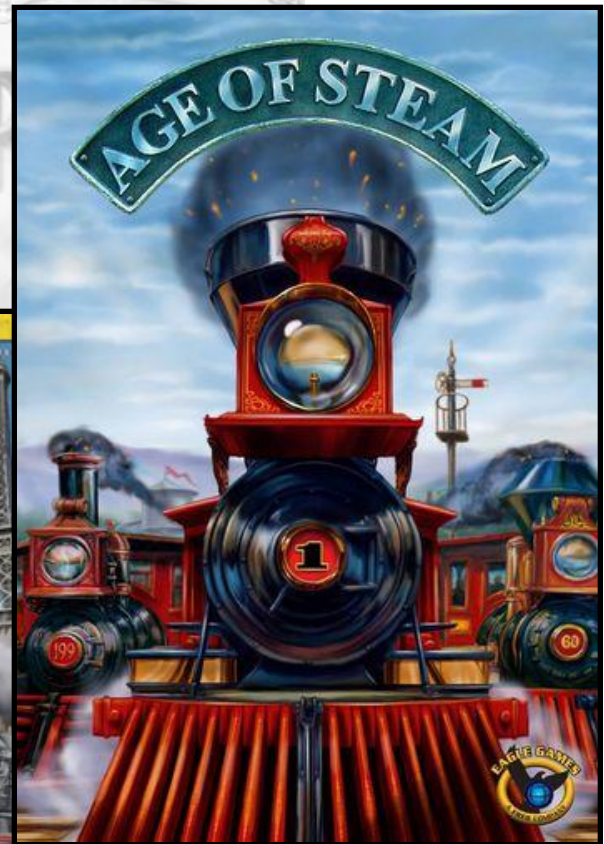
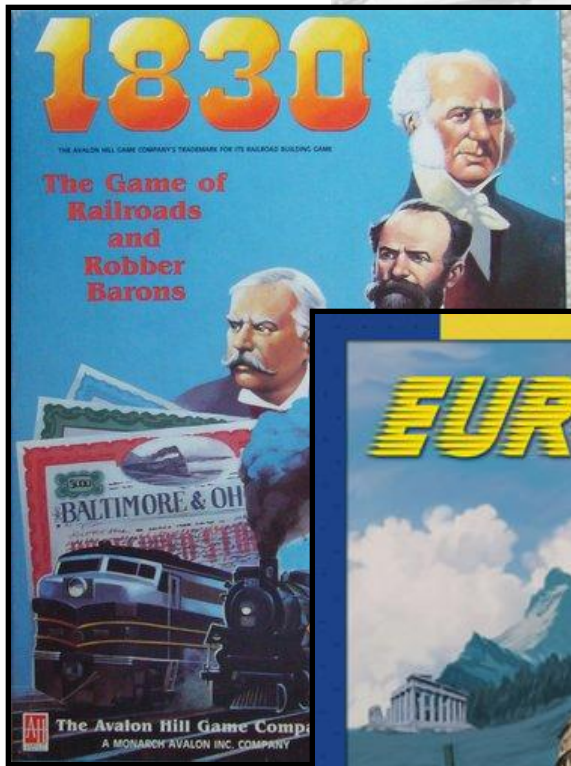


Theme vs. Mechanics

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



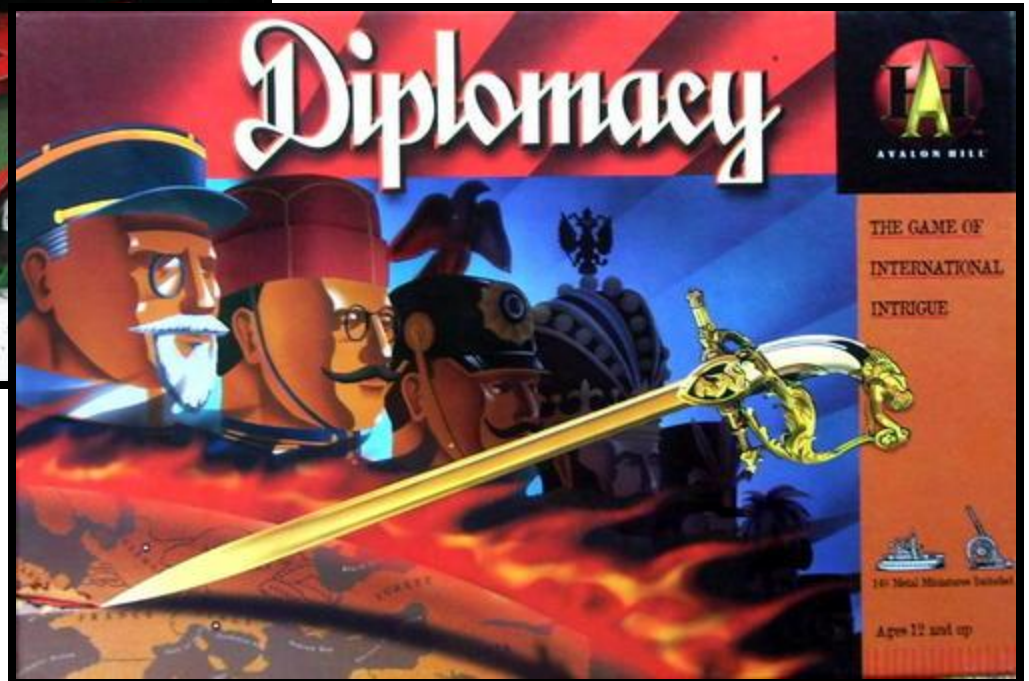
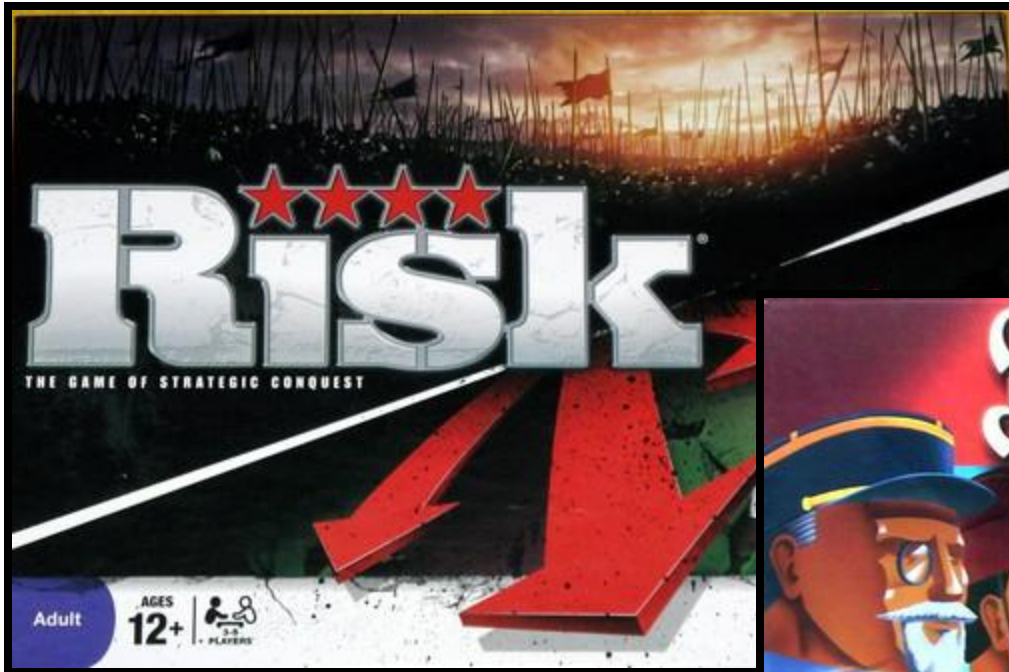
What does it *feel*/ like?



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

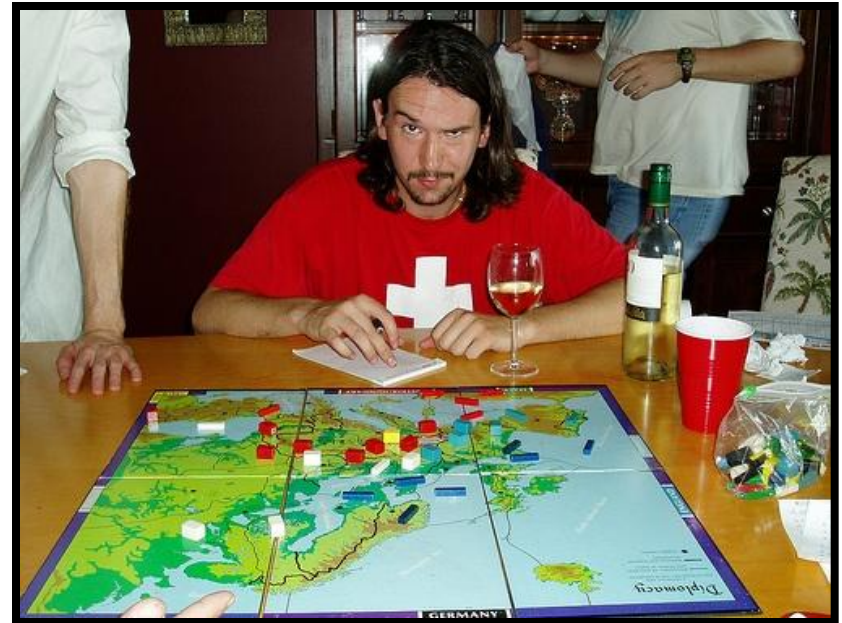
Risk

- *Sequential Turns*



Diplomacy

- *Simultaneous Turns*



...Different Mechanics

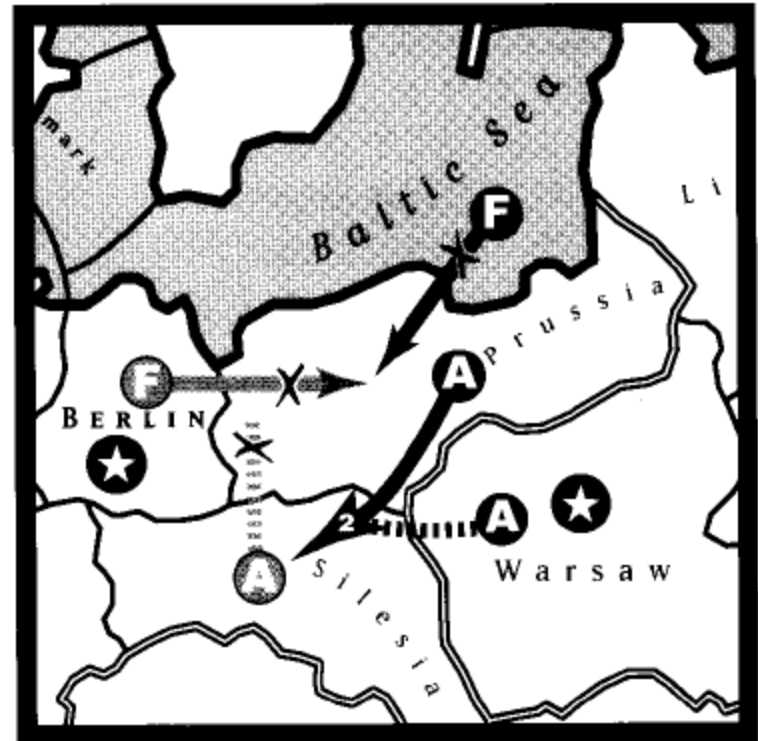
Risk

- *Probabilistic Combat*



Diplomacy

- *Deterministic Combat*



Mechanics give Meaning

Risk...



...is about Risk!

Diplomacy...

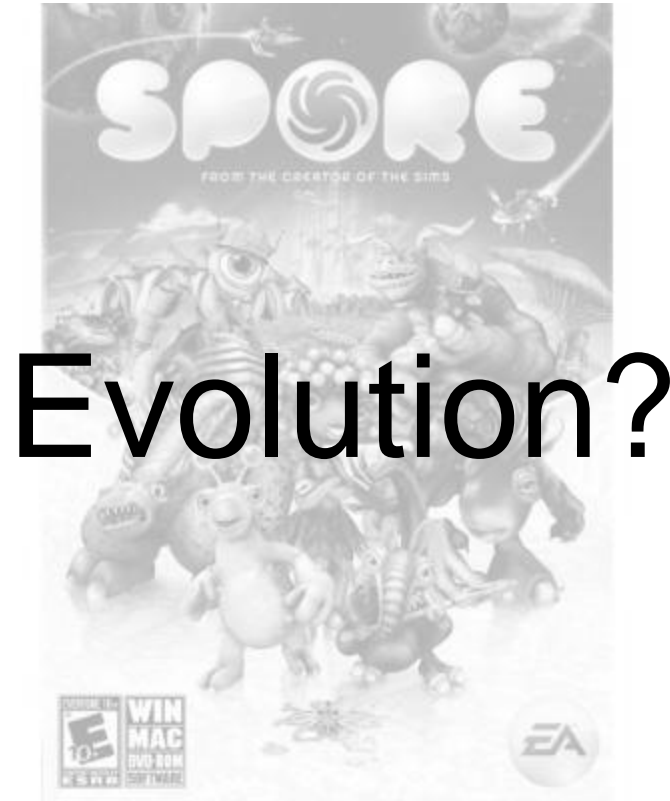


...is about Diplomacy!

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

Syndl

**Twilight Stagfron**

Cecil_090

**LOL WUT**

Mootacoo

**Jesus H Christ**

Startibartfast38

**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**

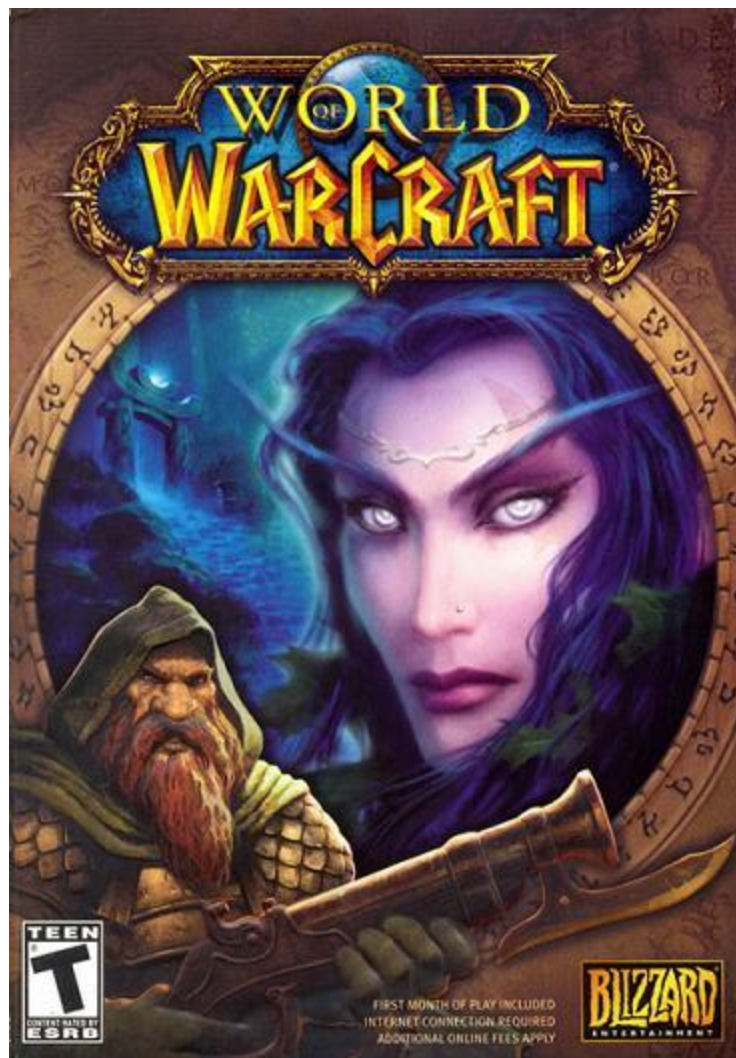
Nethellus



What is *Spore* about?



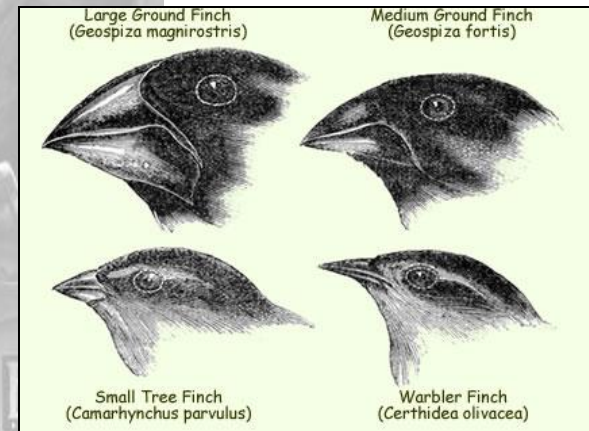
Is there a game about
evolution?



WoW: Paladin Natural Selection

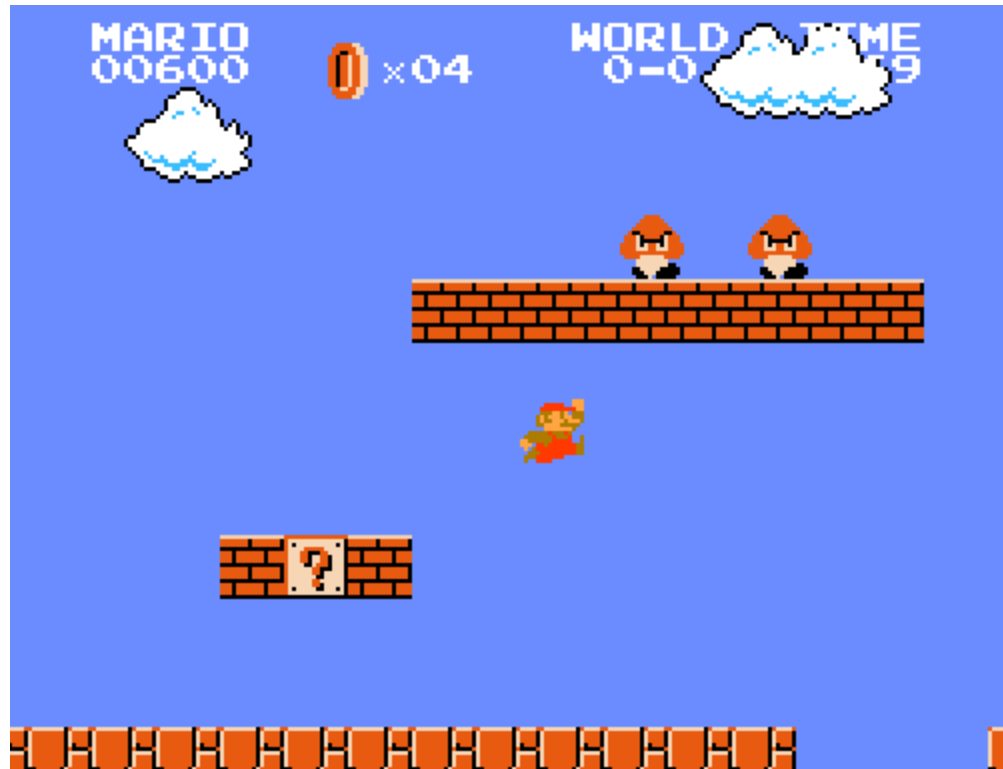
- Main Builds
 - Holy (for healing)
 - Protection (for tanking)
 - Retribution (for DPS)
- Sub Builds
 - Player vs. Enemy
 - Player vs. Player
 - Shockadin (hybrid)
 - AOE Grinding

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...



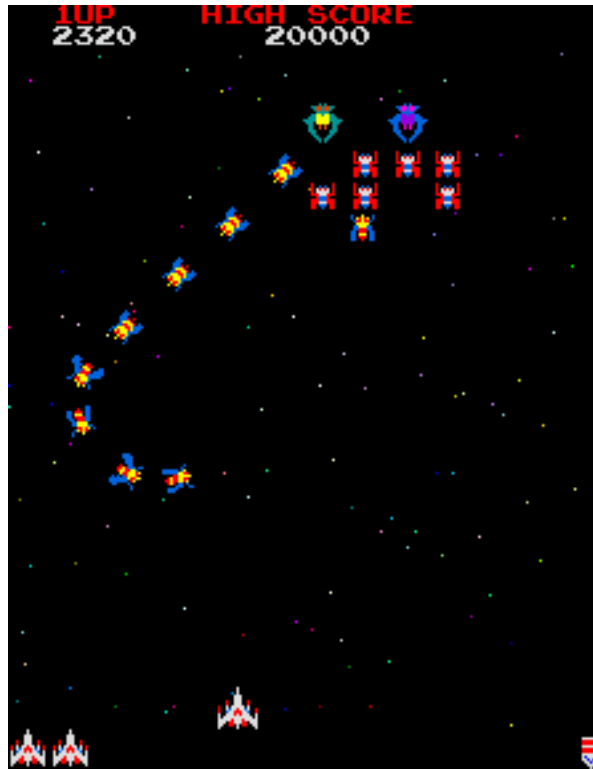
Cover, not Aliens

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?

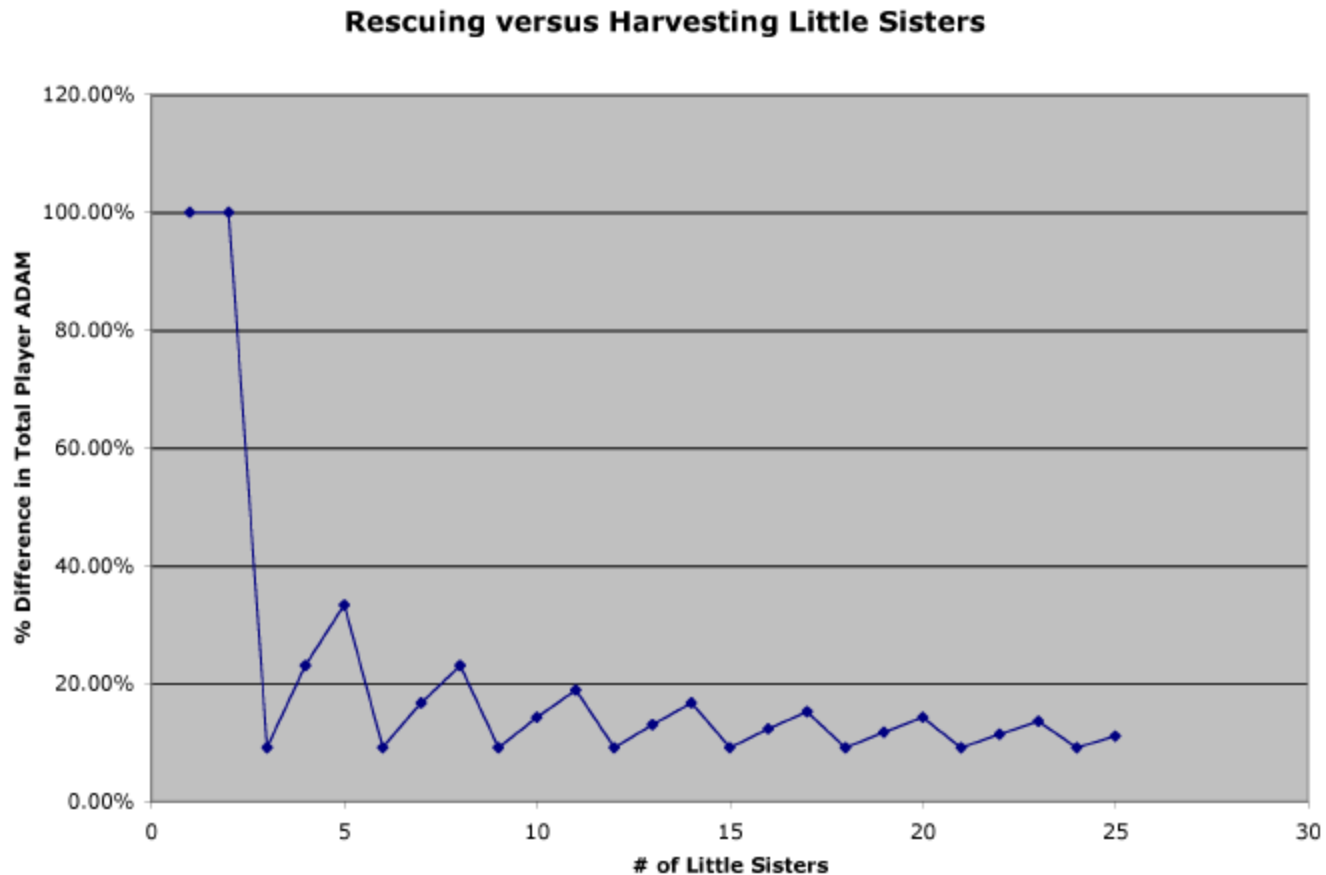
What is ***Bioshock*** about?



Ethics: Rescue or Harvest?



Not according to the game mechanics...



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**

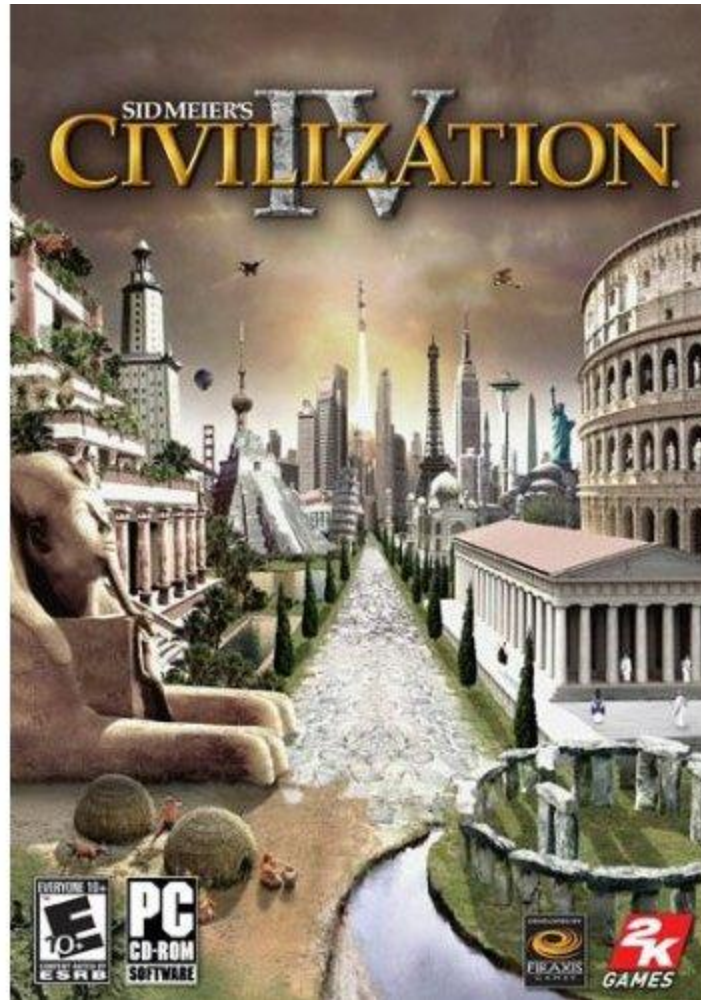


Internal Running Joke...

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...



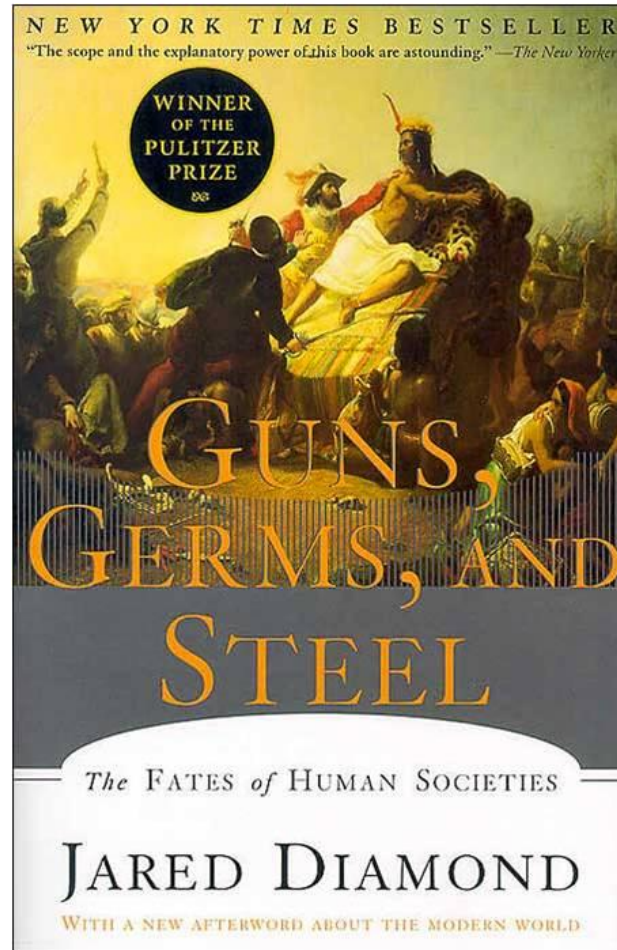
Civilization is not
scholarship...



...but can games be scholarship?

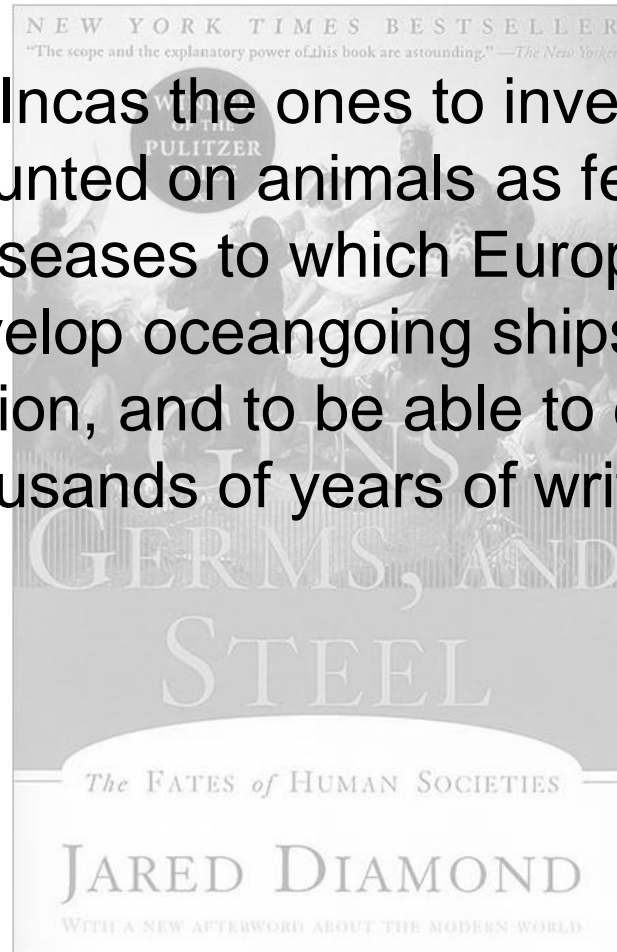


What I wanted as a game...



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?”



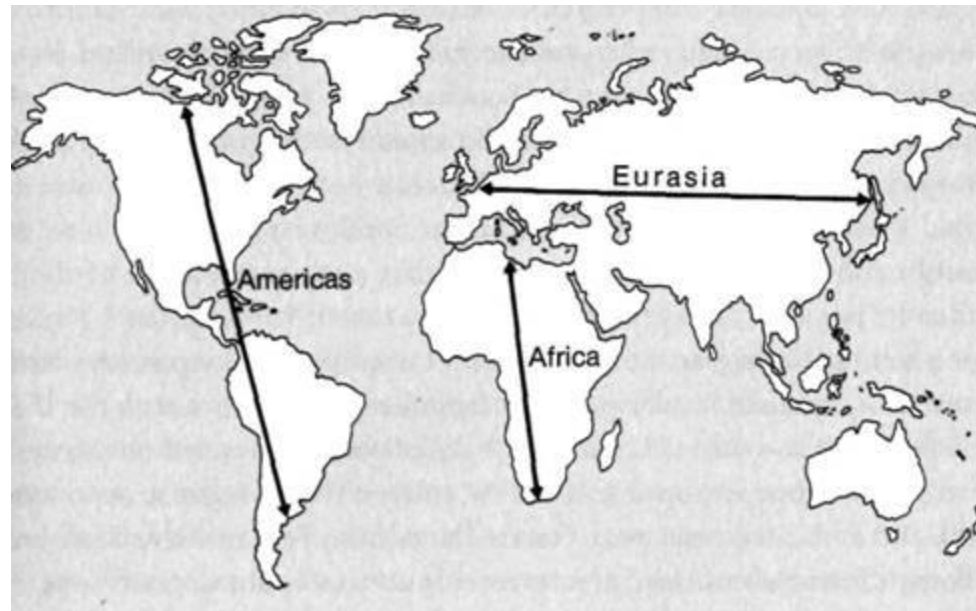
Incan Starting Location...



vs. the World



Major Axes of the Continents



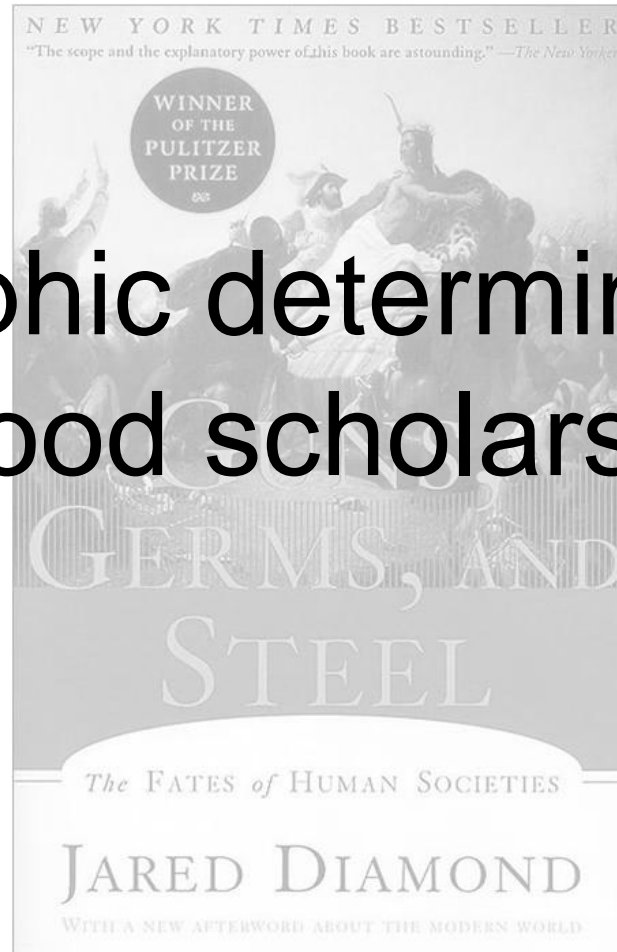
Origin of Domesticated Animals

<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

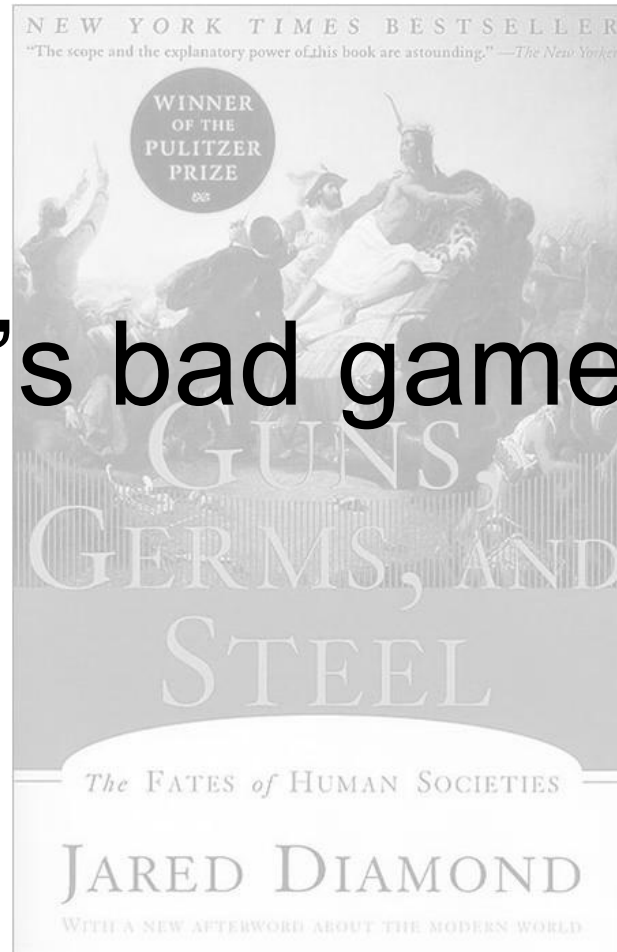
The Incans are doomed



Geographic determinism may
be good scholarship...



...but it's bad game design!

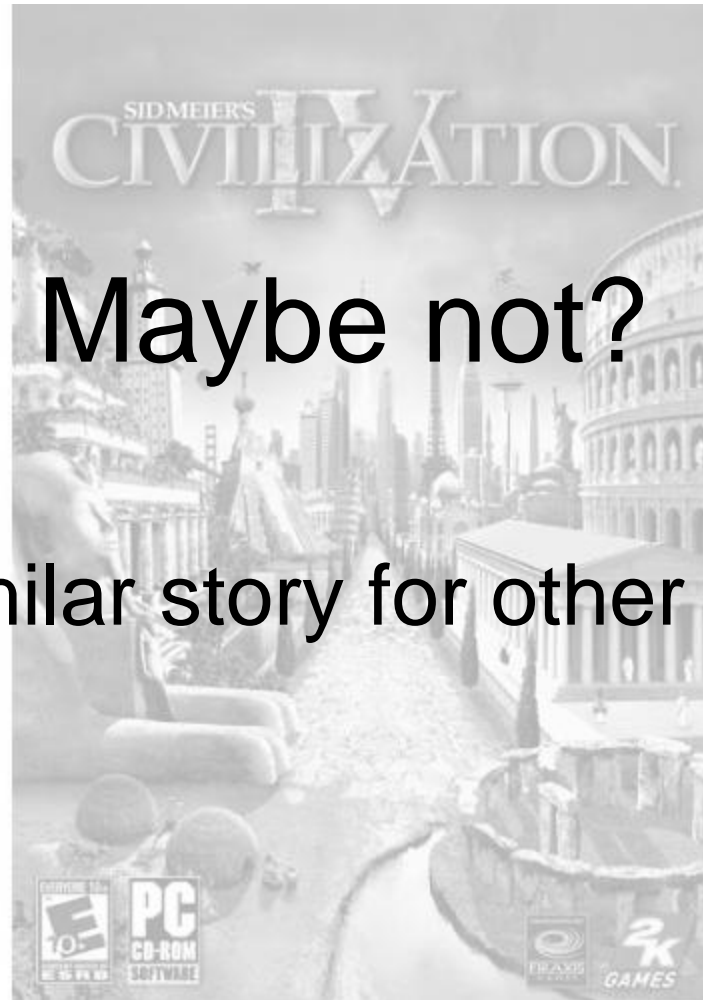


Can ***Civilization***'s mechanics
match its theme?



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

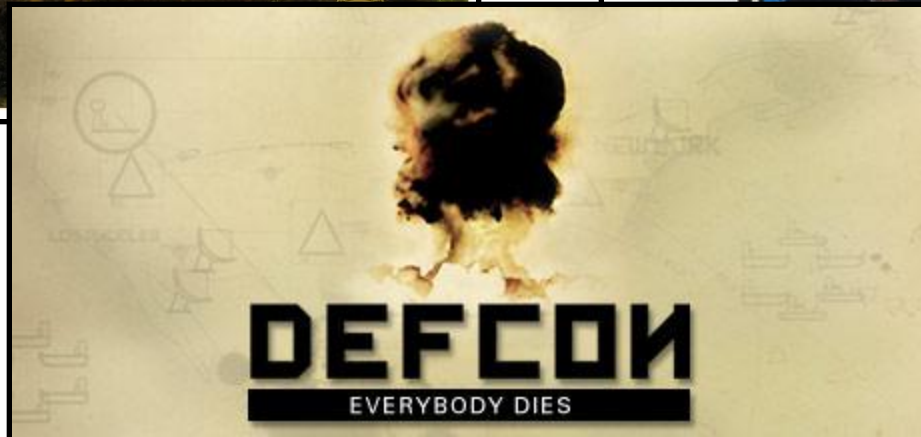
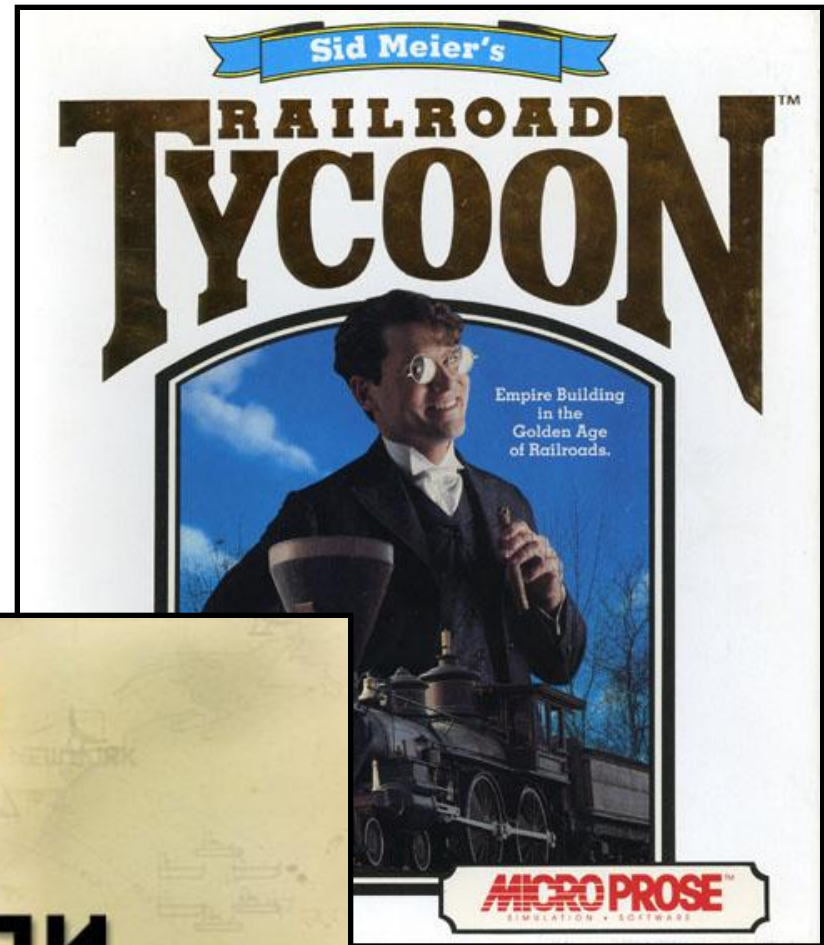
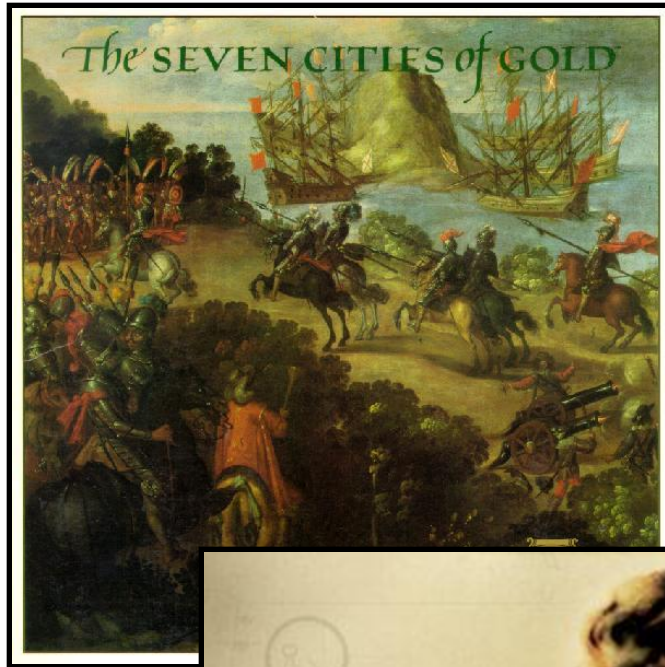




Maybe not?

(but similar story for other media)

Instead, play a life...



Oxford Mercer

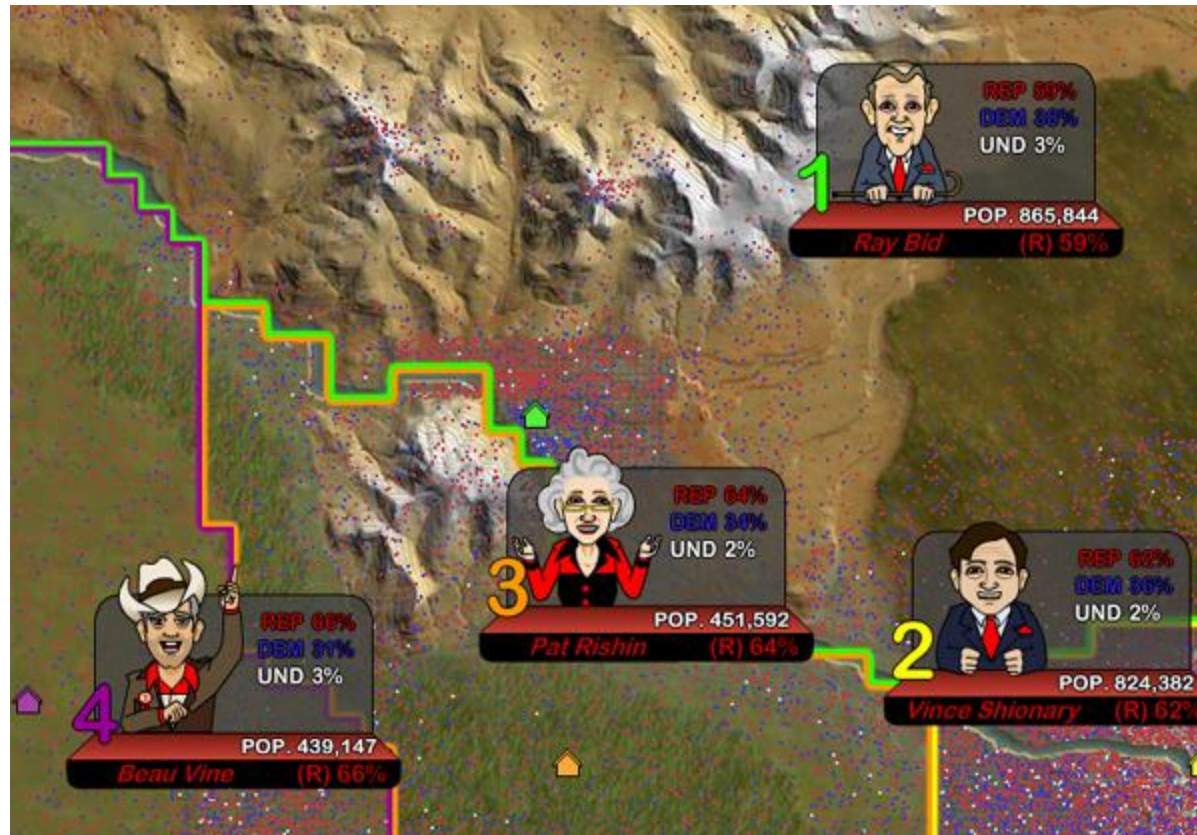
William Davis's Shop				
Finances	Purchases	Shop	Stock	New Turn
Retail Profits: 7.13.0		Credit Interest: 0.0.0		Old Wealth:
Wholesale Profits: 0.0.0		Irrecoverable Credit: 0.0.0		33.15.11
Stock Value: -4.13.0		Loans Interest: 0.0.0		Change:
Rent Profits: 0.0.0		Irrecoverable Loans: 0.0.0		-6.3.6
Rent Costs: -2.5.0		Debt Interest: -1.17.2		New Wealth:
Property Repairs: 0.0.0		Personal Expenses: -2.8.9		27.12.5
Property Value: 0.0.0		Personal Goods: 0.2.5		
Quarterage: 0.0.0		Taxes: 0.0.0		
Wages: -2.15.0		Other: 0.0.0		
Personnel	Family	Social	Shop Records	
Linens	Haberdashery	Groceries	Credit	
13 ↓ 2.11.0	0 ↑ 6.15.0	4 ↓ 1.17.0	Current: 12%	
0.12.0		0.8.0		
Price 3.3.0	Price	Price 2.5.0	History	
Woolens	Garments	Provisions	Last Season: 33.15.11	
4 ↑ 3.16.0	0 ↑ 14.11.0	4 ↓ 1.14.0	Last Year: -	
0.17.0		0.6.0	5 Years Ago: -	
Price 4.13.0	Price	Price 2.0.0		
Autumn 1660	Credit: 2.3.6	Cash: 37.13.9	Debts: -85.0.8	STATUS
	Assets: 0.0.0	Stock: 62.11.0	Goods: 10.4.10	
			Wealth: 27.12.5	

Oxford Mercer

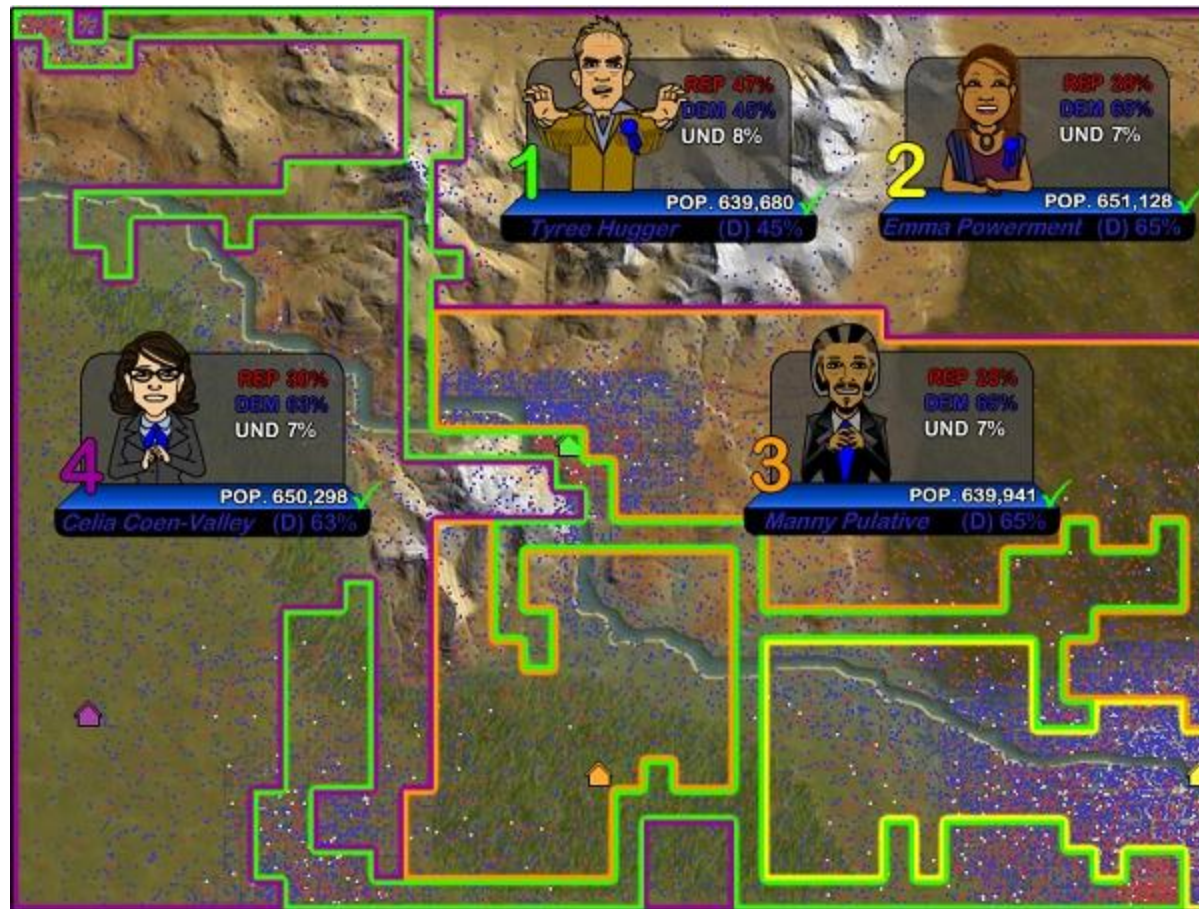
OM's theme: Be a 17th-century
English shopkeeper

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

The Redistricting Game



Virtual Gerrymandering



This map displays the geographical layout of Cook County, Illinois, with city boundaries delineated by blue lines. Major highways are shown in yellow, and local roads are in grey. A red pin marks a specific location in the West Town neighborhood, near the intersection of W 47th St and N Cicero Ave. The map includes labels for various cities and parks, as well as major roads like I-55, I-54, and I-94. The map is sourced from Google Maps, with data from 2008.

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: [brilliant](#)

[Edit Team Info](#)

The Magic Touch

[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	Opp	Status	W/L	AB	R	H	HR
C	J. Varitek (Box - C)		137/463	463	67	137	18
1B	A. Pujols (StL - 1B, LF)		196/592	592	133	196	46
2B	J. Kent (Hou - 2B)		156/540	540	96	156	27
3B	C. Blaise (Cle - 1B, 3B)		159/587	587	93	159	28
SS	J. Rollins (Phi - SS)		190/657	657	119	190	14
OF	M. Alou (ChC - LF)		176/601	601	106	176	39
OF	B. Abreu (Phi - RF)		173/574	574	118	173	30
OF	J. Damon (Box - CF)		189/621	621	123	189	20
Utl	I. Rodriguez (Det - C)		176/527	527	72	176	19
BN	J. Guillen (Ana - LF, RF)		166/565	565	88	166	27

Pos	Pitchers	Opp	Status	IP	W	L	CG	SHO	SV	ER	BB	K	ERA
SP	J. Schmidt (SF - SP)			225.0	18	7	4	3	0	80	77	251	3.20
SP	D. Wells (SD - SP)			195.2	12	8	0	0	0	81	20	101	3.73
RP	J. Smoltz (Atl - RP)			81.2	0	1	0	0	44	25	13	85	2.76
RP	J. Julio (Bal - RP)			69.0	2	5	0	0	22	35	39	70	4.57
P	S. Shields (Ana - SP, RP)			105.1	8	2	0	0	4	39	40	109	3.33
P	T. Lilly (Tor - SP)			197.1	12	10	2	1	0	99	89	168	4.06
P	J. Thompson (Atl - SP)			196.1	14	8	0	0	0	82	52	133	3.72
BN	M. Mussina (NYY - SP)			164.2	12	9	1	0	0	84	40	132	4.59
BN	M. Bushrio (CWS - SP)			245.1	16	10	4	1	0	106	51	165	3.89
BN	J. Sapan (StL - SP)			188.0	16	9	0	0	0	87	65	110	4.16
BN	B. Lawrence (SD - SP)			203.0	15	14	2	1	0	93	55	121	4.12



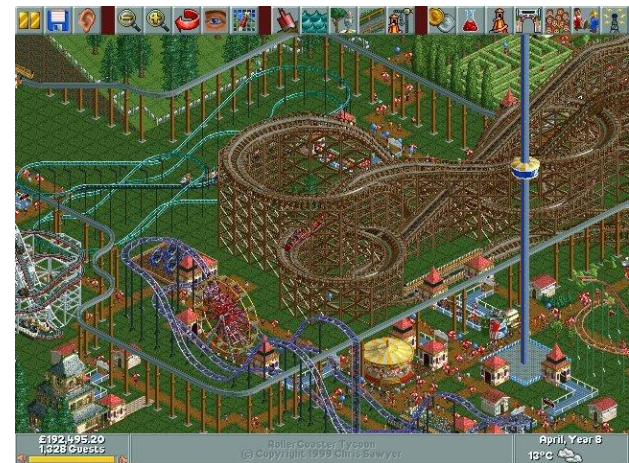
Cardiff City
3rd in English Championship
Mark Linnane
Sun, 10.7.2005 9:00

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.fragland.net>

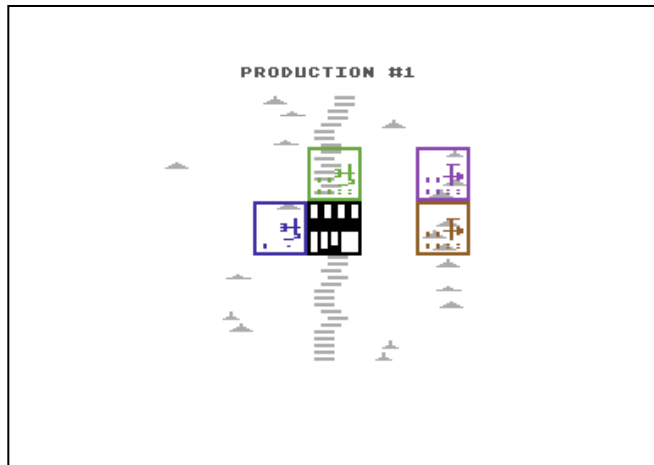
Management Games



Tactile Games



Dan Buntent



M.U.L.E. (1983)

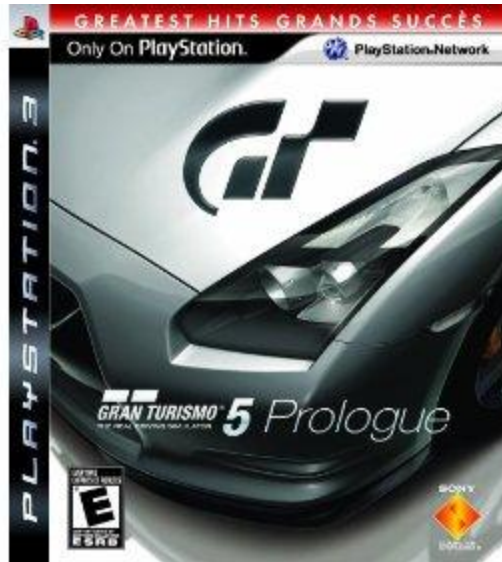


Seven Cities of Gold (1984)

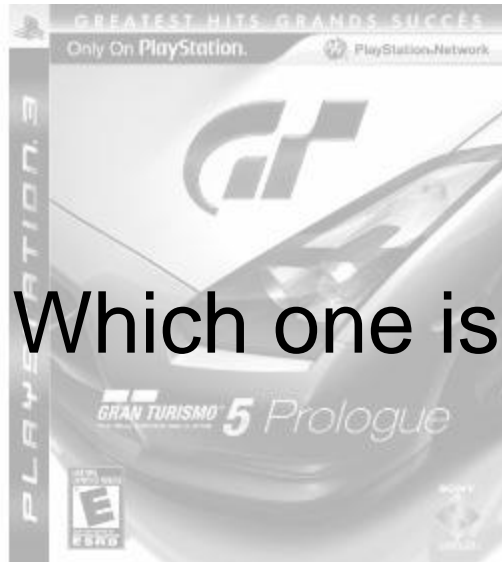
Realism is not the key

(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?





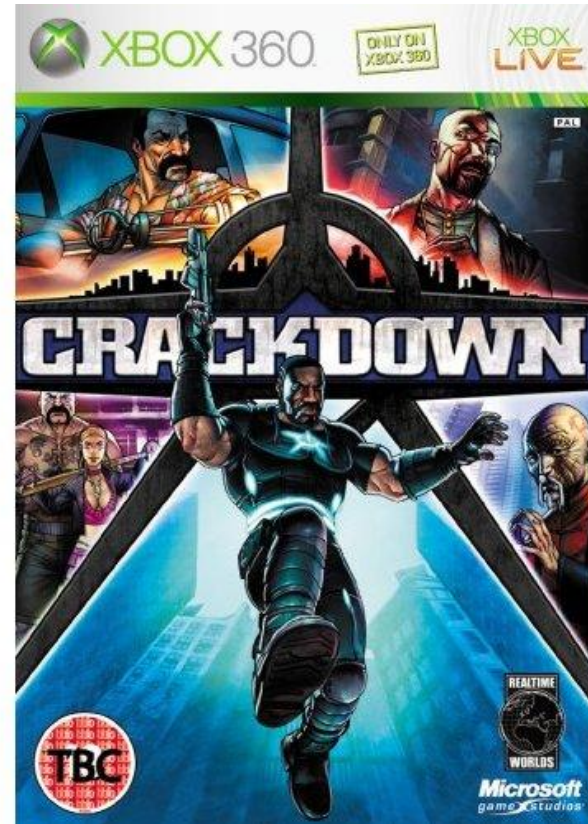
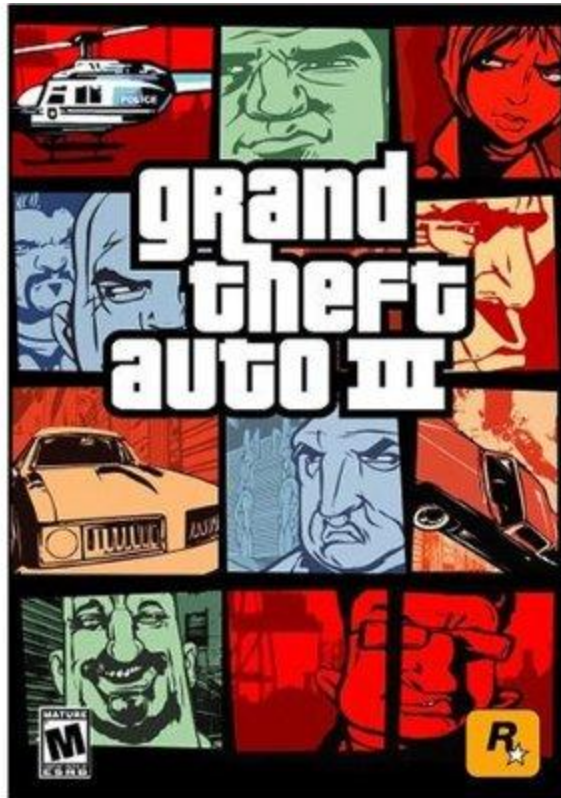
To me, this is racing...



Why ***Mario Kart?***

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

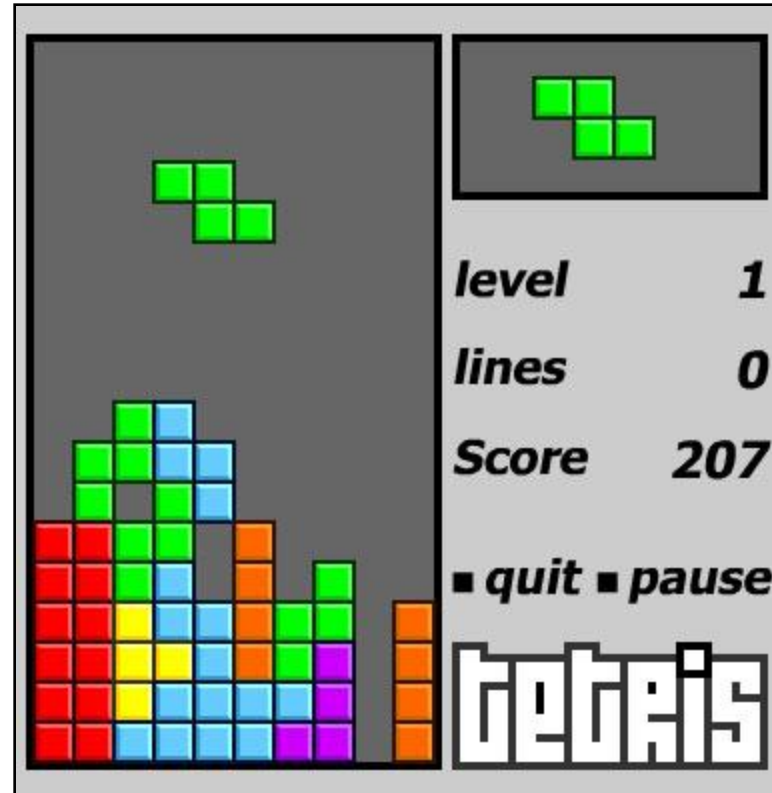
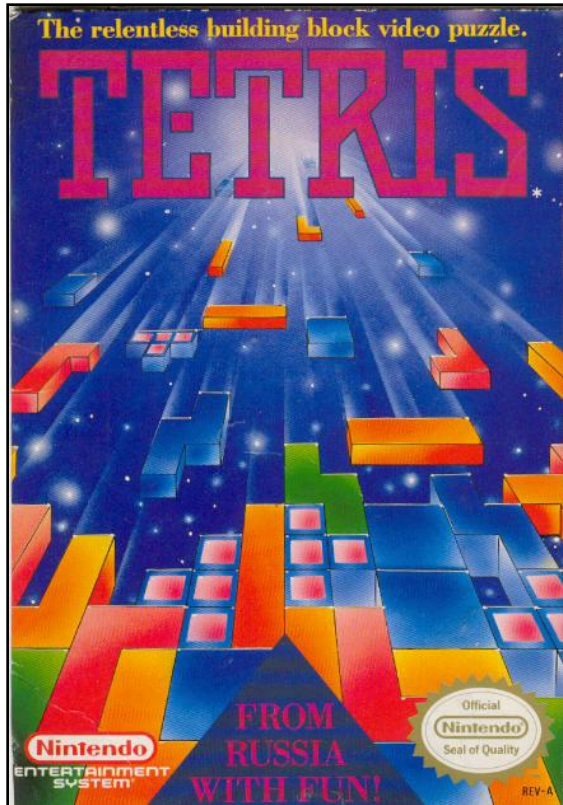
Theme Matters



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*?

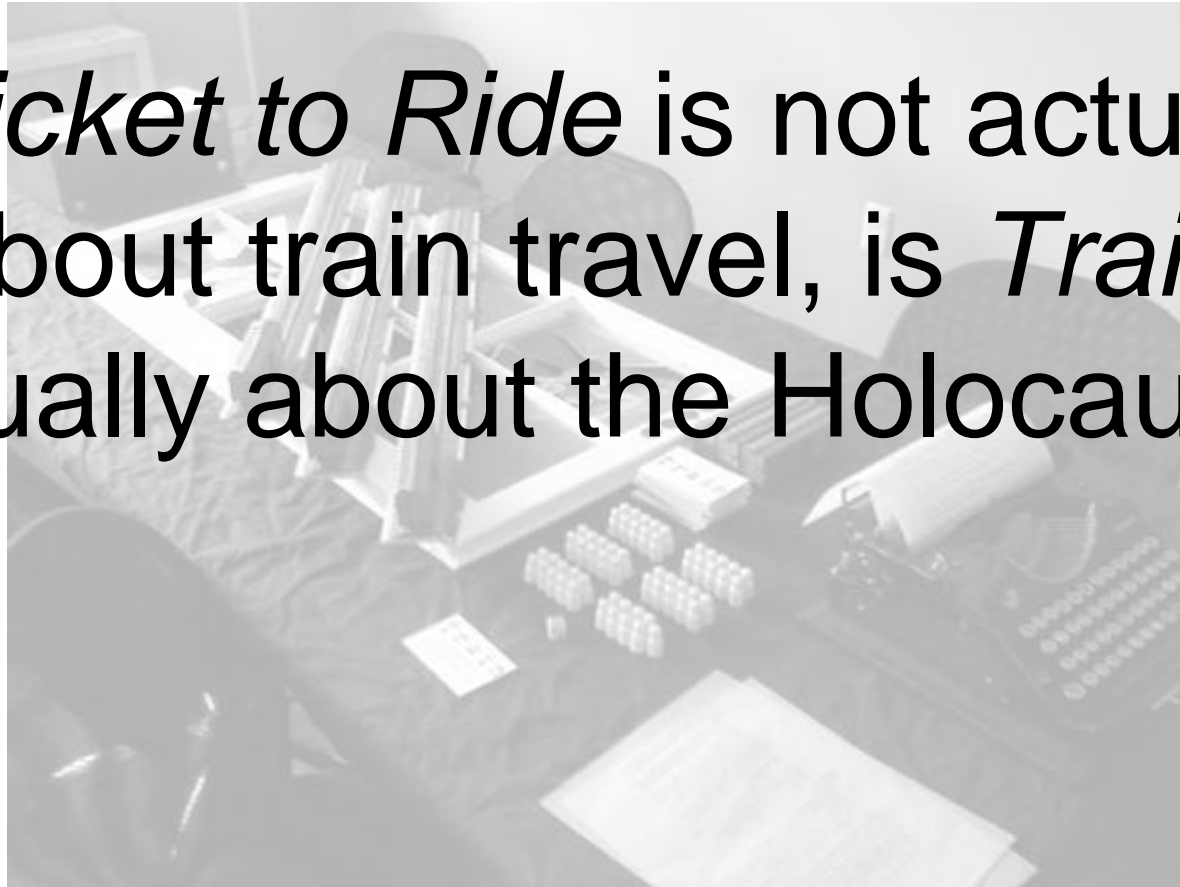


Ticket to Ride: Theme

“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?



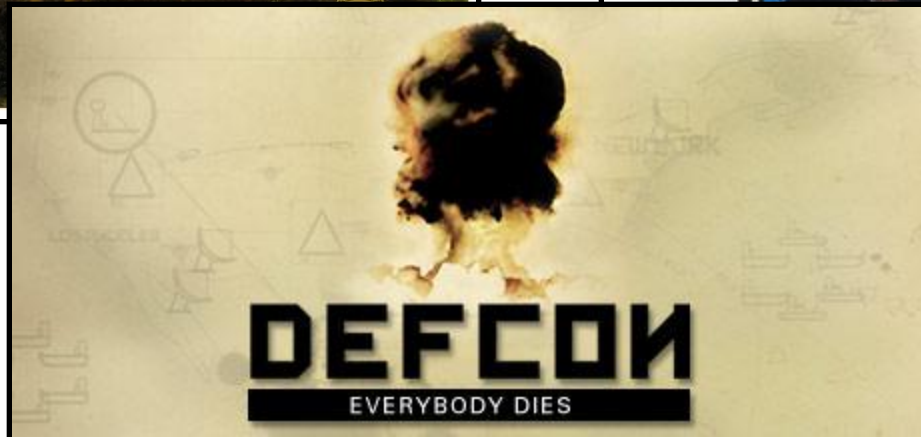
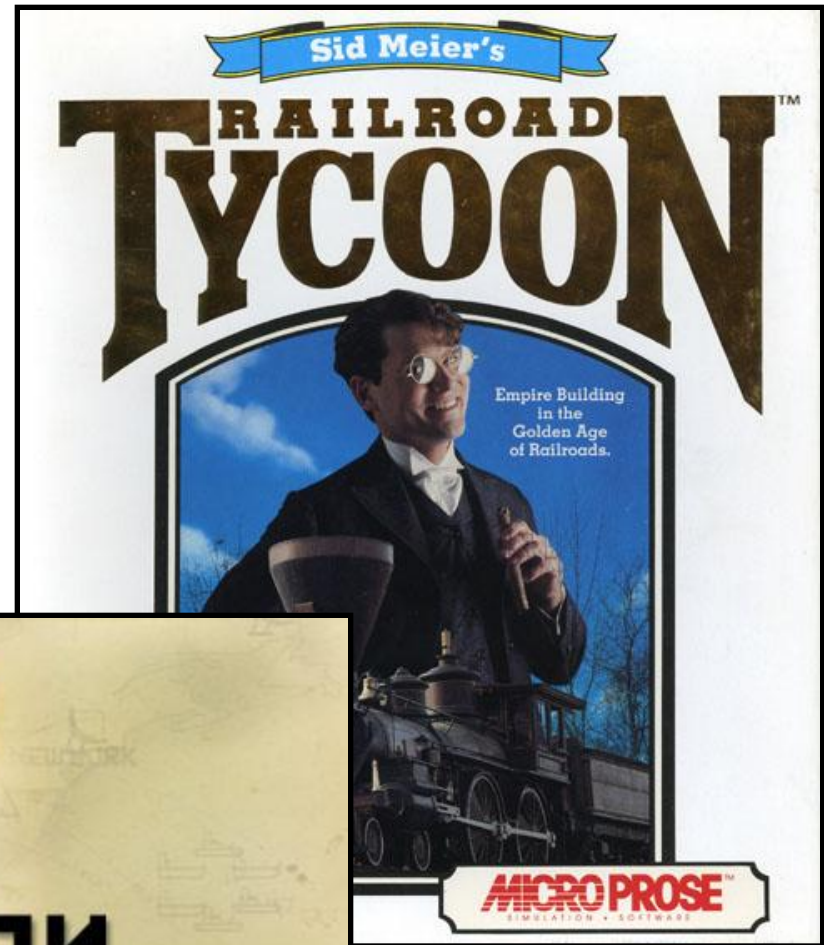
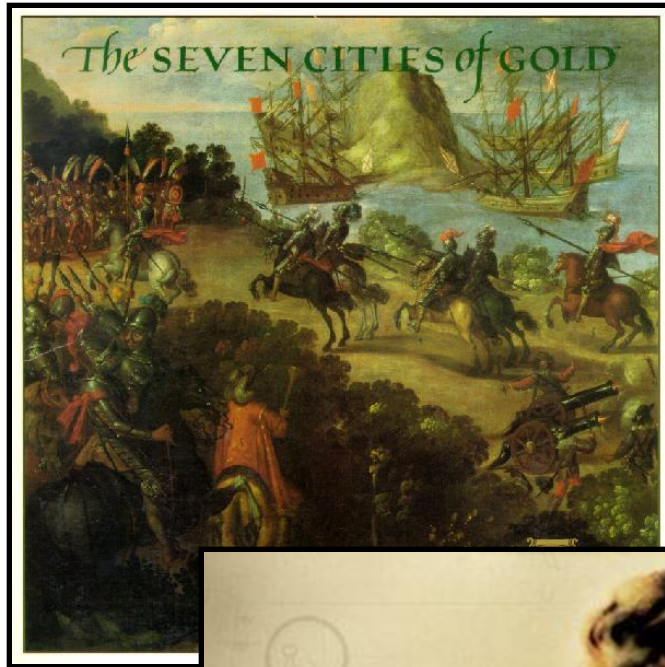
Calabouço Tétrico



Can we make a game actually
about the Holocaust?



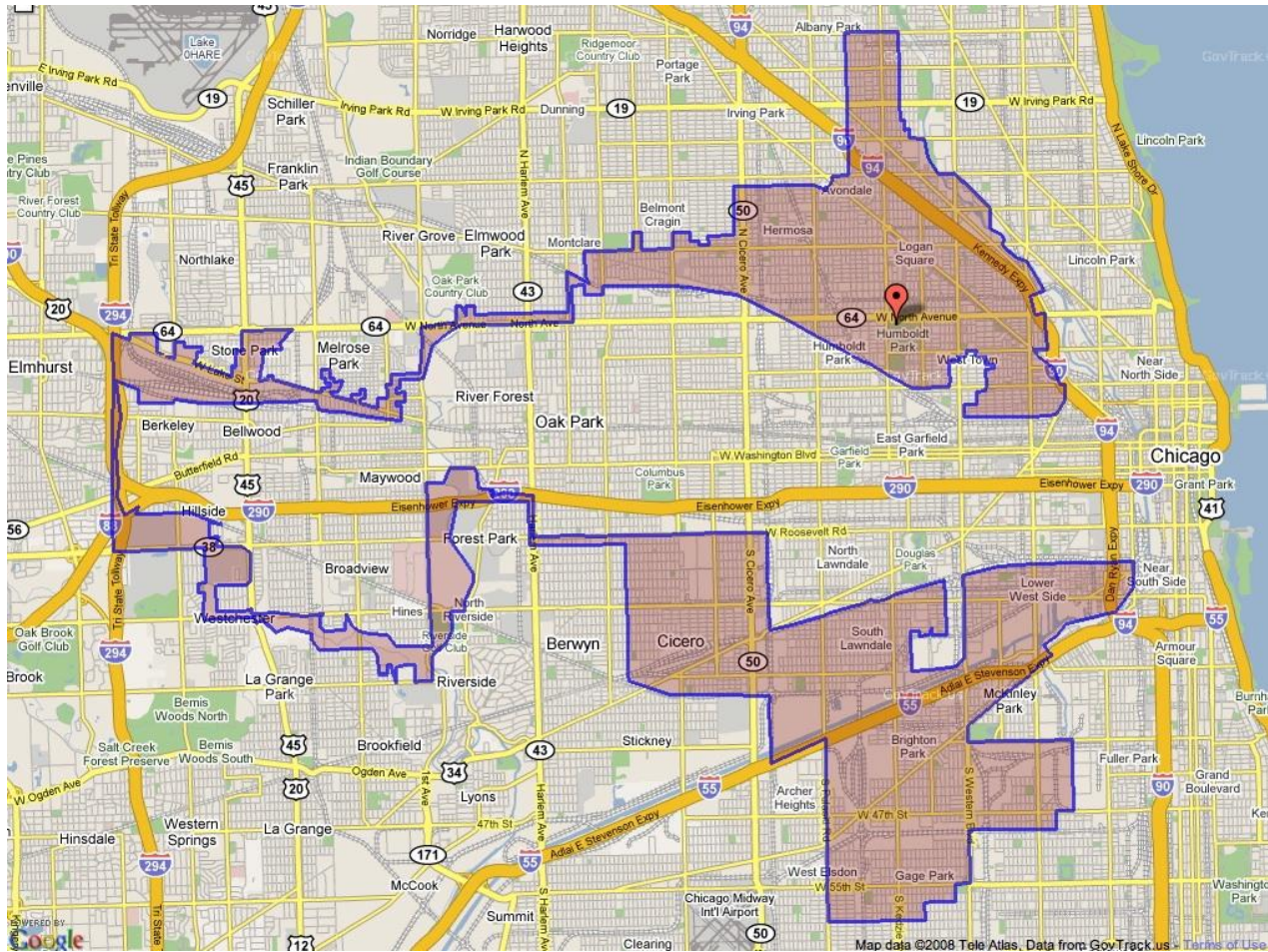
Remember, play a life...



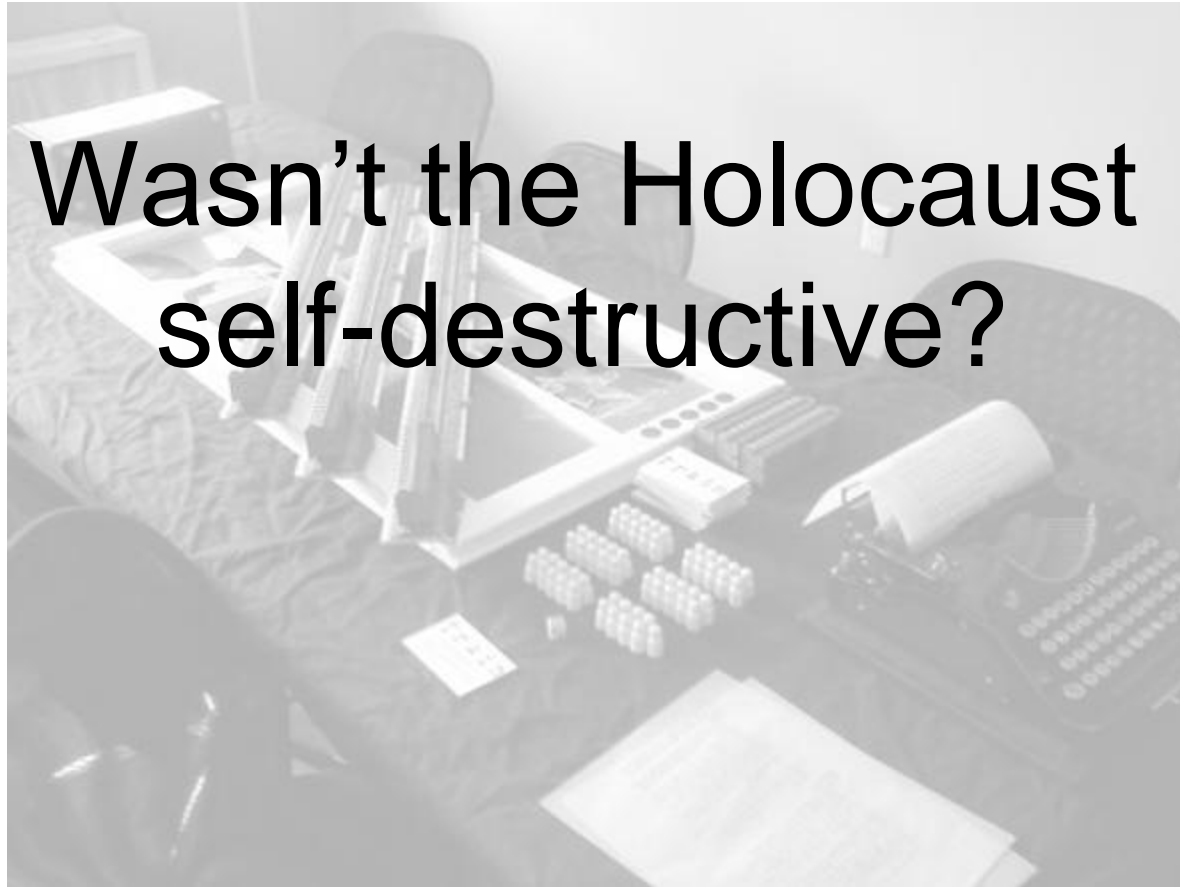
If we “play a life”
can we play evil?

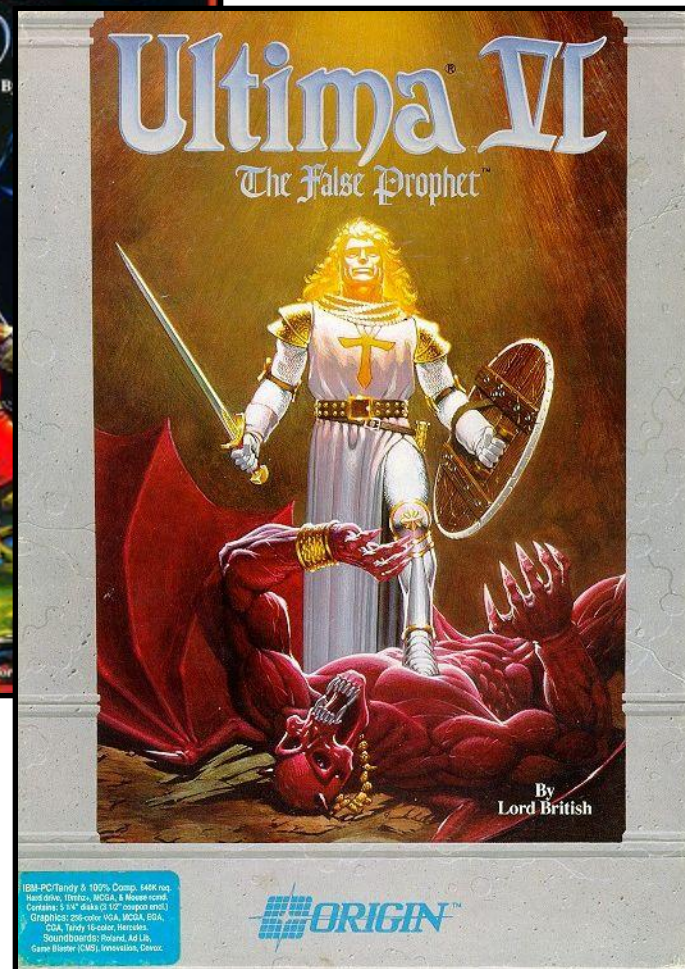
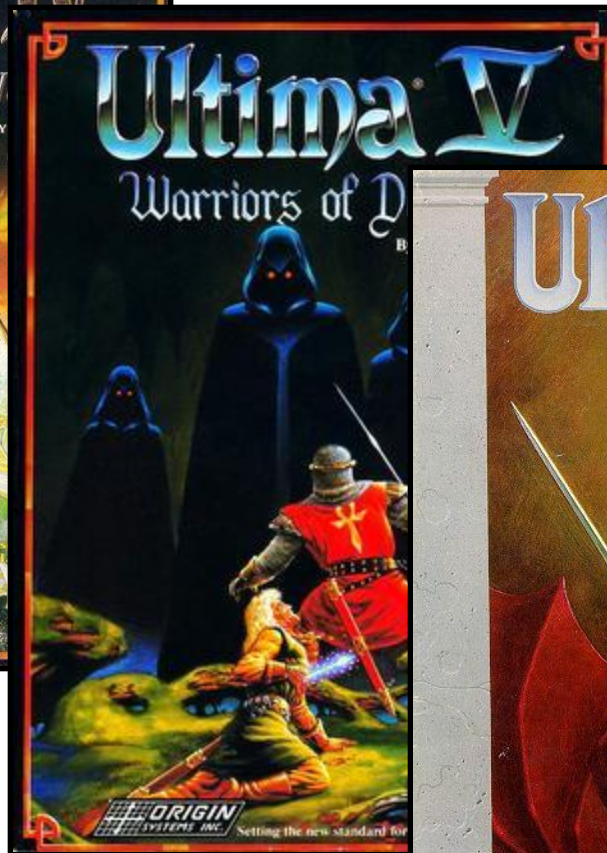
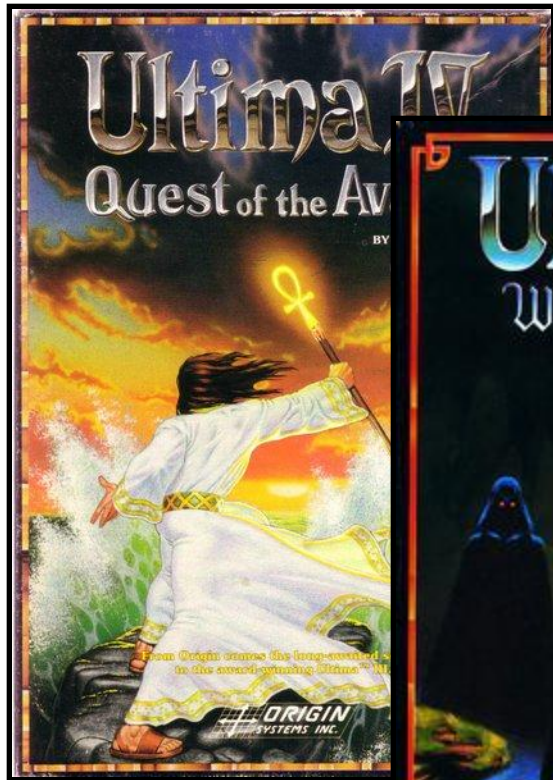


Gerrymandering is evil



**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?

Soren Johnson
Designer/Programmer, EA2D
soren.johnson@gmail.com
www.designer-notes.com
www.twitter.com/SorenJohnson