

Passenger or Builder? *Ticket to Ride* Analysed with Schell's Tetrad

Sam Huffer, 25 August 2017

Ticket to Ride (Days of Wonder, 2004) is a game that attempts to blend its mechanics and aesthetics to reinforce its story to create a fun, combining several parts of Schell's elemental tetrad (Schell, 2008) to create an engaging play experience. Though its aesthetics and mechanics do reinforce its story and promote an enjoyable experience, they can convey a very different impression of *Ticket to Ride*'s story if one neglects to read it beforehand.

A lot of *Ticket to Ride*'s visuals match well with its background story. Its name and the pervasive train imagery on the small, ticket-like cards and the box are very indicative of and reinforce the concept that you are travelling around America on trains. The map that is the game board interpellates (Althusser, 1970) players as looking at a railway map at a station, choosing where to go next, enhancing players' ability to up-key into the character key (Conway & Trevillian, 2015). This is reinforced by the game's mechanics-story interplay. Its agonistic (Caillois, 2006) nature mirrors its competitive story, the spending of ticket-like cards reflecting how travellers would use up tickets when moving between cities. The player's inability to do multiple things each turn reflects people's inability to ride on a train, buy tickets, and pick routes simultaneously due to practical constraints.

However, unless players had read the story section in the rulebook or on the box beforehand, none of this might occur to them. The game might make a very different impression, making them think they were *building* railway routes rather than *travelling* on them, a potentially ilinx-inducing discovery that would stun a Vorthos (Rosewater, 2007, 2015) when they're informed that they were up-keying into the wrong character key (Conway & Trevillian, 2015). Though the imagery of train cars and the ticket-like cards make more sense for travellers than builders, they did not adequately convey it. Indeed, the board's map can be perceived as laying out train routes to be built rather than travelled. Perhaps swapping the train car imagery for more ticket-like imagery on the cards could have made this less of an issue.

Many of the mechanics would be much more fitting for building railway routes than riding on them, giving an erroneous representation of the character key (Conway & Trevillian, 2015). The need for many cards to claim a route, for example, does not fit as well with merely travelling. To go somewhere by train might not usually require multiple tickets, just the one. The accumulation and spending of multiple cards would however simulate very well a builder or construction firm's need to gather resources that would then be spent on a single train route, with more resources being needed for longer routes. The limitations on how many players can use a given route also fit better for construction than travelling. If one is travelling by train, there's enough space for multiple players to travel the same route, whether deliberately or accidentally. But when one is building train tracks, the number that need to be built between two cities, and therefore the number of available jobs to be awarded, is limited.

Overall, regardless of any failure of *Ticket to Ride*'s aesthetics and mechanics to convey the story, it's still a fun, engaging social play experience. Emotionally similar to *Carcassonne*'s (Z-Man Games, 2000), it expands its magic circle (Huizinga, 1938) in a way that appeals to the socialiser (Bartle, 1996) subset of Timmy/Tammy players (Rosewater, 2006) who would not care much about the story mismatch anyway. They would just enjoy it and have fun regardless, perhaps by playing into their stereotypical (Rosewater, 2002, 2006) preference for big impact, hyper-ludic-esque (Conway, 2014) gameplay and claiming all the biggest routes.

Essay References

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