

Ticket To Ride: A Board Game System Analysis

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Ticket to Ride, the self-proclaimed “Cross-Country Train Objective Game,” is a turn-based board game in which two to five players compete against each other to expand the reach of their individual railways across the continental United States.

The game is enveloped in a compelling backstory that announces itself at the very top of the game rulebook. According to this story, five adventurous friends had gathered on October 2, 1900— the 28th anniversary of Phileas Fogg’s legendary circumnavigation of the globe in Jules Verne’s novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*. This group of friends, attending university together at the time, wagered a bottle of claret to the first of their group who could travel to Paris’s famed Café Procope. This became a tradition amongst the group— every year, on the anniversary of Fogg’s fictional journey, the friends gathered again to introduce a new bet. Each time, the journey was more elaborate and the stakes higher. Now, they have promised a pot of \$1 Million to the competitor who travels by rail to the most cities in North America in just 7 days. Therefore, the “present day” of the game is set on the anniversary of this group’s original wager, which itself is set on the anniversary of Fogg’s journey. This is where the backstory ends and the board game starts— with game players taking on this competitive quest to win the ultimate prize.

To set up the game, each player chooses a color that will represent their trains as they connect railways in routes between different major American cities. Different routes have different colors and different lengths. The Train Car cards, 110 in total, have different colors that represent the different types of railroad cars found in a traditional freight train (a cosmetic masking of traditional card “suits”) while the lengths of track vary from one to seven train car-lengths. In order to claim a connection between two cities, players must collect a set of identically suited Train Car cards that that equals the length of track spaces. When this is done, players can then turn in their set of cards and place their dimensional train car markers on the board, all of which are in the same distinctive color that represents the player, thereby “claiming” that route as theirs.

For example, a player who has collected three red train car cards can claim a connection that has three red track spaces between it. Several connections between cities on the board have two parallel routes, allowing two players to share the connection, while others have a nondescript grey coloring allowing for players to claim the route by playing a set of any same-colored train car card. Routes with longer lengths have logarithmic point values; that is, the longer the route, the more points are rewarded in an exponential fashion. This adds an early element of strategy to the game, as some players will choose to pass on early point multipliers in order to get single-point connections that are distributed around the game board in the hopes that this will help

them later in the game.

All players also draw three Destination Ticket cards and must keep at least two. These cards, which are kept secret until the final scoring round at the end of the game, each have different pairings of cities around the country that reward players with bonus points if successfully connected by uninterrupted rail. It is a wise choice for the game pieces of each player to each have a distinct, uniform color— this way, a cursory glance at the game board allows players to see which competitors have webs of train routes in different geographic areas, and get a general sense of which player is in the lead at any point in the game.

However, one of the biggest design insufficiencies in *Ticket to Ride* is the overlap of colors and cars as design qualities between different elements of the game system. For example, one connection might require four blue train car cards. Once a player accumulates these cards, he or she then places his individual train car pieces on the track sections that compose this particular connection. However, there is no correlation between a player's Train Car pieces and the Train Car cards, and there is also no correlation between a player's chosen color and the color of the connection route. Therefore, a player might redeem four green Train Car cards to claim a route, but then place four blue train car game pieces on that route because blue is his or her player color. The shared vocabulary of train cars and colors between both cards and player pieces creates confusion amongst players who are learning the game for the first time.

The core gameplay is turn-based, with each player making one of three different types of moves in a clockwise motion around the game board. The first option is to draw two Train Car cards. With 110 total Train Car cards split between the eight “suits” and a ninth “wildcard” suit that can be used as any color, players must draw cards until they have enough to claim a corresponding route. This also takes up an entire turn, and claiming a route is the second of three things that a player can do on his or her turn. The first option is about collecting resources, while the second one is about earning points. While points are required to win the game, points can only be earned by redeeming accrued resources, so a good strategic balance of these first two options is in large part the core strategic emphasis of the game.

The third option for a turn allows players to draw three additional Destination Tickets, and they are forced to keep at least one of the three. These Destination Ticket cards are the most interesting element of game design in *Ticket to Ride* for two reasons. Firstly, they are the only element of gameplay that employs a risk/reward strategic decision on the part of the player. They can help just as much as they can hurt, due to the fact that every destination left unfulfilled will subtract points from the player who fails to complete the connection. Secondly, they represent the key element of information and strategy that each player withholds from each other. The Destination Tickets, while not required to win the game, drive most players to expand their train routes in certain directions towards certain cities, and these individual motivations are never revealed to other players throughout the course of the entire game.

During a preliminary gameplay experience with *Ticket to Ride*, the first two

options were used almost exclusively by all players, with only a few of the players venturing into the risk/reward element of the Destination Ticket draw, and when they did so it was towards the end of the game.

Although concealed by an immersive overlay of train routes and cars, *Ticket to Ride*'s primary mechanic revolves around the well-worn goal of collecting sets of a similar suit that is used in many older card games. The only difference is that these sets are used to place their Train Car game pieces. Each player starts with 45 Train Car pieces, and the game ends when any one player's supply of cars dwindles down to two or less. This is the "End Game" scenario, at which point each player tabulates his or her total score and reveals whether or not he or she successfully has completed the destination links indicated on the Destination Ticket cards that he or she has retained. The Destination Ticket cards each have a different point value based on their level of difficulty, and are added or subtracted from the total score based on whether or not a player achieved the goal.

One of the more interesting game rules is one of the most subtle, as it only comes into play once, and it happens right as the game begins. As the rulebook states, "The player who is the most experienced traveler goes first." Rather than deciding who goes first by a randomizing element like dice, this simple rule forces all participants into an social ice-breaking conversation about some of their past travels and adventures, and each new group of players ultimately comes to a consensus on who is the most world-travelled. In this moment, the gameplay most successfully evokes the narrative intended by the initial story synopsis of several colleagues sitting around a table and engaging in a friendly match of social one-upmanship.

Unfortunately, this is where the social element of the game begins and ends. There is little or no verbal interaction between players during each move, other than for each player to "announce" what he or she is doing on any given turn. Most of the time, players' eyes are directed at the game board, not at each other. In this way, *Ticket to Ride* is an individual game masquerading as a group activity— each player focuses on his or her own goals, trying to collect the most and the longest sets of rail cars as possible while also trying to connect the cities specified in their destination cards. Because the larger goals of the other players (i.e. which cities they are trying to connect) are withheld throughout the game, the game has a minimal defensive strategic element, as players tend to focus more on the speed with which they can achieve their own goals instead of blocking the actions of others.

This could possibly be fixed with a simple alteration to the resources system in *Ticket to Ride*. Introducing a free-market trading system, like that used in *Settlers of Catan* or *I'm The Boss*, brings an element of negotiation strategy and, more importantly, social interaction to every player on every turn. By attempting to trade different Train Car cards with other players during your turn, players run the risk of helping other competitors more than they are helping themselves, all the while revealing part of their intended long-term strategy. This dynamic is not just more compelling from a strategic point, but also socially engages all players all the time rather than having all other

players wait idly by for their turn to come.

A unique element of *Ticket to Ride* is the way that the single game has expanded to include a collection of accessories and modifications as a result of its own success since its release in 2004. Additional geographical maps and board expansions have proliferated since the game's popularity has soared, but for the most part these maps have retained the same core gameplay system mechanics. However, several expansions and modifications have altered the game with different destinations, rule sets, and even new rule elements altogether.

A rare, out-of-print game expansion called the *Mystery Train Expansion* was distributed in physical copies in limited quantities, but is still available as a free download to print at home and integrate into a normal game set. In addition to several new destination routes, the *Mystery Train Expansion* introduces the new element of character cards. These five character cards (Station Agent, Tycoon, Engineer and Inspector) are mixed in with the Destination Ticket cards. They are drawn randomly as one of the three Destination Ticket cards during a player's turn, and each has special rules. For example, if drawn, an Engineer card allows a player to search the entire Destination Ticket deck to strategically select a desired destination. The other character cards provide various score bonuses at the end of the game if certain conditions are fulfilled. Most interestingly, the *Mystery Train Expansion* also includes a blank card for a group of players to create their own, "D-I-Y" character card. By creating a unique new rule and character, this item allows players to briefly step into the role of game designer, adding their own element of gameplay while also creating an interesting character that may or may not add to the backstory of the game itself.

A *Dice Expansion*, released in 2008, replaces the gameplay mechanic of drawing train car cards with a roll of five custom train car dice. This curious gameplay modification appears to replace a strategic element of the game with one of pure chance and probability. Another expansion includes new game elements of Warehouses and Depots for Train Car card storage.

Ticket to Ride has even been adapted into a card game, retaining many of the same basic rules of set collection and graphical design, but eliminating the board and Train Car pieces entirely. In many ways, this card game appears to be a prototyped version of the board game itself, despite the fact that it was "reverse-engineered" from the original board game edition. At best it could be called a slick adaptation of the game into another game medium, at worst it could be called a simple cosmetic design overlay on Rummy.

Another edition of the game addresses a perceived shortcoming in the original rule system, in which there is no deterrent to Train Car card hoarding. In the original version, players can continue to accrue cards and only play sets when they have them. To perhaps combat this lack of a balancing mechanic like that of *Settlers of Catan*'s "Robber," rule, a later edition of *Ticket to Ride* contains perhaps the most curious rule modification. The *Alvin & Dexter Monster Expansion* of the game includes alien and dinosaur game pieces that turn occupied cities into states of "chaos," affecting point

values of destination routes and at times taking away cards from players' hands. These two game pieces can only be moved off of that city as a player's only action of his or her turn, adding a fourth choice for a player's turn. But, like *Settlers of Catan*, this encourages the development of a unilateral game mechanic as one player pulls ahead of the rest of the pack and the others must team up strategically to keep him or her from winning the game. While this additional element advances the strategic intricacies of gameplay, it also collapses the already-fragile boundaries of cohesive story setup that Alan R. Moon had established with his original game design and narrative.

Stripping away all of the expansion packs and additional rules that came about by virtue of the game's global success, the core story setup as written by Moon is unfortunately disregarded as soon as the gameplay begins. Moon never indicates whether or not the "group of friends" that inspire *Ticket to Ride* are actually from the same fictional world of Jules Verne's story, or are simply paying homage to one of their favorite fictional characters. Perhaps they are members of the Central London Reform Club, an actual gentlemen's club that Verne fictionalized to create the initial wager that sent Fogg on his journey around the world.

The wager had a prize of \$1 Million in this winner-takes-all competition for whoever visits the most North American cities in seven days. In the actual gameplay, there is no prize or scoring incentive for the player who "visits" or connects the most cities. Additionally, there is no element of a game clock or hourglass to indicate any sense of a time limit as the narrative bet dictated. At the end of the game, play concludes with all players tallying their scores and determining the order in which they place. True, there is only one winner, but there is no element of reward where the other players must come together to crown the champion and give him or her a winner-take-all prize pot. These incongruities with the game's established story synopsis ultimately do not largely affect a player's enjoyment of the gameplay; however, it raises questions as to why a story overlay, or at least this particular story overlay, was necessary at all. Is the game meant to emulate the annual, self-imposed travel itineraries by this group of adventurers? Or is it a diversion that these adventurers would play around a table while they discussed their next challenge? In the end, the connection between the backstory and the gameplay seems tenuous at best.

If one were to discard the written narrative in the rulebook and extrapolate a backstory from the gameplay itself, it would likely be about competing rail barons racing to complete the transcontinental railroad and establishing the most comprehensive railroad network in the United States. Then, players could then assume the roles of different railways (i.e. the Southern Pacific, Northern Pacific, and Gould Transcontinental) each trying to spread the reach of their trains as fast and as far as they could.