

STORY MACHINES

WHY YOU PLAY GAMES INSTEAD OF READING BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

- TODAY, I'LL BE TALKING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN **GAMES** AND **STORIES**
- STORIES ARE **ROUTINELY** PRIVILEGED **ABOVE** GAMES
 - PEOPLE TALK ABOUT STORIES **FOR** GAMES
 - UNLIKE GAMES, LITERATURE AND DRAMA HAVE BEEN STUDIED FOR **HUNDREDS** OF YEARS
- I PERSONALLY PREFER TO PRIVILEGE **GAMES** ABOVE **STORIES**
- THIS IS BECAUSE GAMES ARE **MACHINES** FOR **GENERATING** STORIES

HP BOOM

- HERE'S THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT EXPLODING



STORY

- WHAT **IS** A STORY?
- "A STORY IS A NARRATIVE OF EVENTS ARRANGED IN THEIR TIME SEQUENCE"
 - E. M. FORSTER, *ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL*
- SO:
 - **EVENTS** HAPPEN
 - SOME OF THESE ARE **SELECTED** AND PRESENTED IN THE ORDER THEY WILL BE **READ** (IF NOT OCCURRED)
 - THE WAY THEY ARE **TOLD** IS A **NARRATIVE**
 - THE RESULT IS A **STORY**

PLOT

- A **PLOT** IS **NOT** THE SAME THING AS A STORY
- PLOTS ARE **PREDEFINED** AND INCLUDE **CAUSALITY**
 - AN EVENT HAPPENS **BECAUSE** A SITUATION, EVENT OR SERIES OF EVENTS **PRECEDED** IT
- EXAMPLE: HERE IS A **TWO-EVENT** STORY:
 - I ATE A BAR OF CHOCOLATE. I WAS SICK.
- DID THE CHOCOLATE **MAKE** ME SICK OR CHEER ME UP BECAUSE I WAS **ALREADY** SICK?
 - OR “THAT’S TWO THINGS OFF MY BUCKET LIST”?

PLOT AND STORY

- MUCH OF THE **ENJOYMENT** FROM A STORY COMES FROM **RECONSTRUCTING** ITS PLOT
 - FIGURING OUT THE **CAUSAL LINKS** CONNECTING **KEY** EVENTS
- THIS ISN'T **ALWAYS** THE CASE, OF COURSE
 - I LIKE CHEKHOV'S SHORT STORIES BECAUSE OF HIS **CHARACTERS**, NOT ANY DISCERNIBLE PLOT
- HOWEVER, REALISING WHAT **CAUSED** WHAT AND WHAT **WILL** CAUSE WHAT IS AT THE **HEART** OF WHAT MAKES A STORY COMPELLING

NARRATIVE

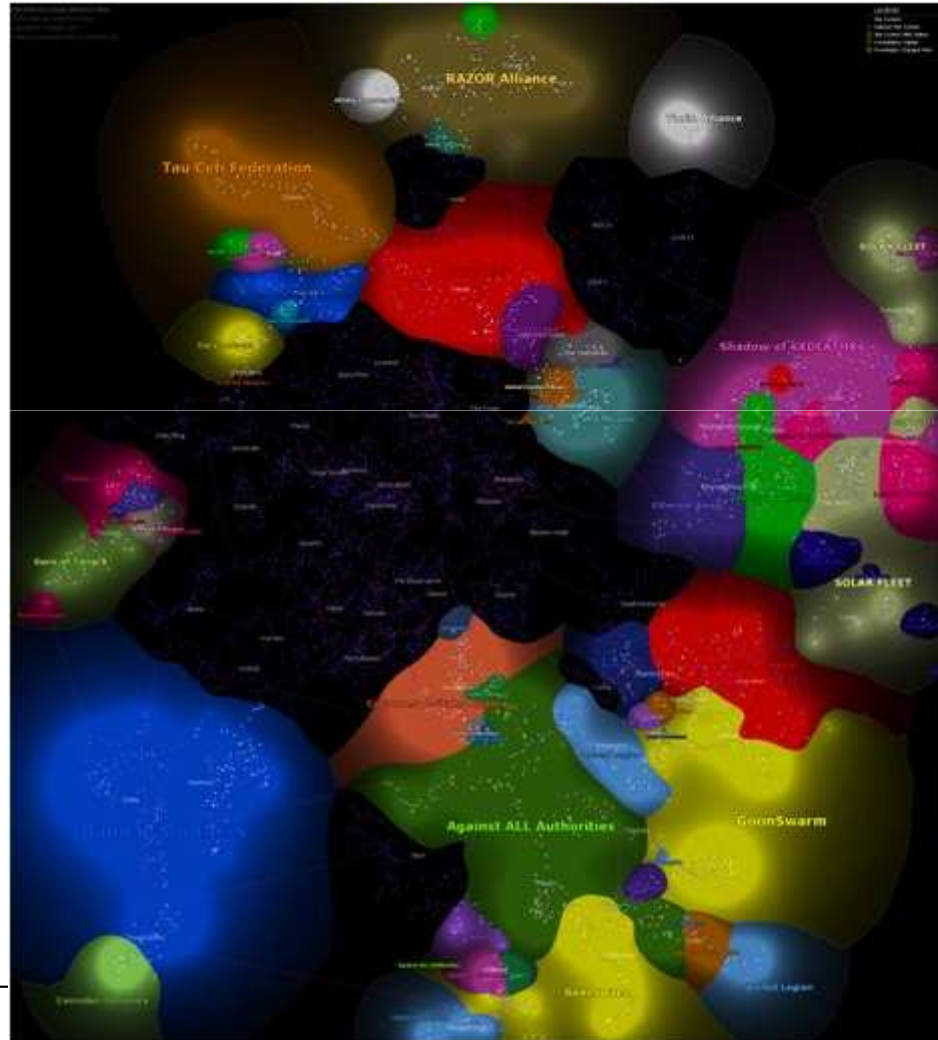
- A NARRATIVE IS THE **TELLING** OF A STORY
 - CONVEYING THE **PLOT** THROUGH THE **DEVICE** OF THE STORY
- IT USUALLY MEANS THE STORY AS A **WHOLE**
 - AT WORDS-ON-A-PAGE LEVEL, IT'S **DISCOURSE**
- **BACKSTORY** IS THE **RETELLING** OF EVENTS THAT **PRECEDED** THE STORY'S EVENTS
- IT'S USUALLY ONLY FELT **INDIRECTLY**
 - THE CHARITY WORKER DOES GOOD TO ATONE FOR HER TIME IN PRISON FOR CREDIT CARD FRAUD

HISTORY

- **HISTORY** IS THE **RETELLING** OF A SERIES OF CAUSALLY-CONNECTED **PAST** EVENTS
 - **UNCAUSALLY**-CONNECTED ONES ARE **RECORDS**
- FOR NON-FICTIONAL EVENTS THERE IS **NO** PLOT CREATED BY A GOD-LIKE **AUTHOR**, BUT THE **CHARACTERS** CAN STILL HAVE PLOTS
 - THE **GUNPOWDER PLOT**
- **HISTORIANS** LOOK AT **RECORDS** TO EXPLAIN AND INTERPRET THEIR **CAUSALITY**
 - BUT THESE CHAINS OF EVENTS **AREN'T** PLOTTED

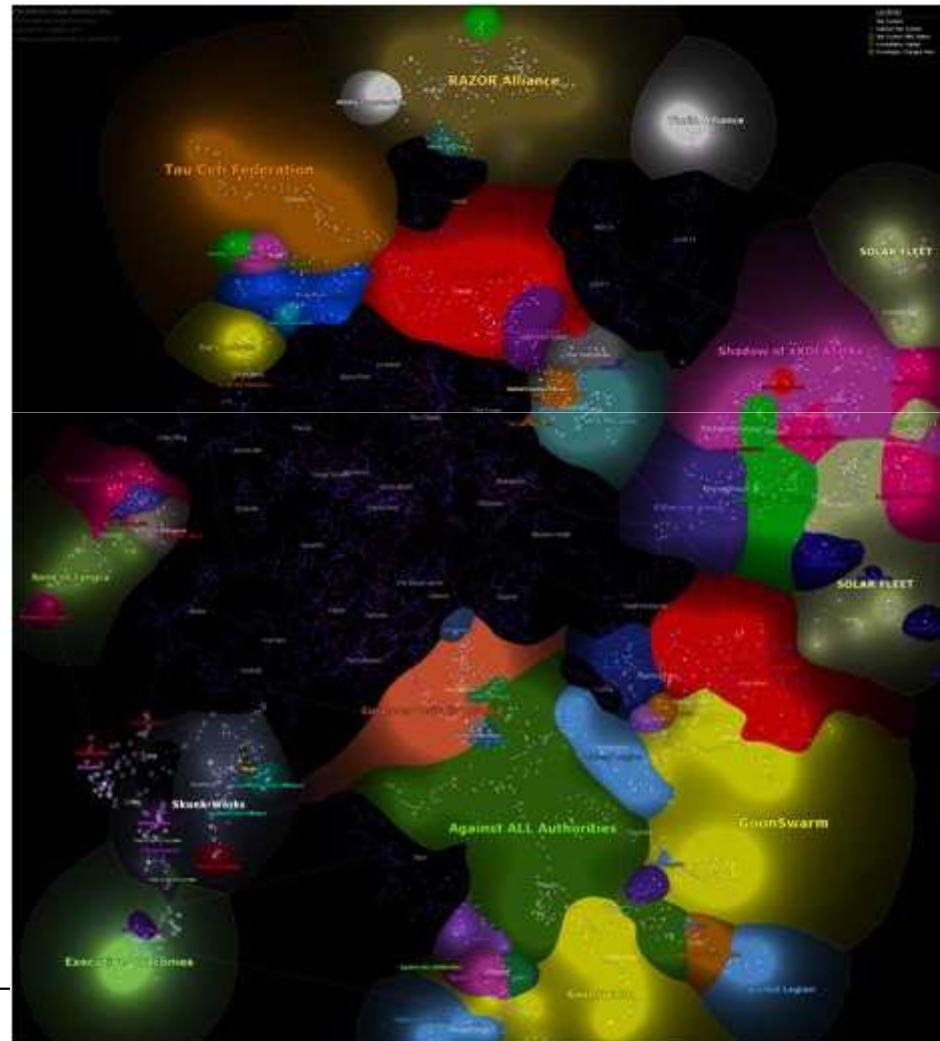
EVE ONLINE

- 4TH FEBRUARY, 2009:



EVE ONLINE

- 5TH FEBRUARY, 2009:



FOR GAMES

- WE HAVE **FIVE** TERMS DEFINED HERE:
 - STORY
 - PLOT
 - NARRATIVE (AND DISCOURSE)
 - BACKSTORY
 - HISTORY
- LET'S APPLY THESE TO **GAMES**
- A **STORY** IS A LINEAR RETELLING OF EVENTS
 - NOT NECESSARILY THE **SAME** FOR **EACH** PLAYER
 - NOR FOR THE SAME PLAYER EACH **REPLAYING**

PLOT

- A PLOT IS A POSSIBLY **NONLINEAR** SERIES OF EVENTS PREDETERMINED BY THE DESIGNERS
- IT INTRODUCES **SOME** SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
- THAT SAID, **MOST** EVENTS COME FROM INTERACTING WITH THE **GAME SYSTEM**
- THESE **ARE** PREDEFINED, IN THAT THE GAME SYSTEM EMBODIES ALL EVENTS THAT **CAN** OCCUR
- BUT THEY'RE **NOT** PREDEFINED **AS EVENTS**
 - THEY'RE PREDEFINED AS A **SYSTEM** FOR **GENERATING** EVENTS

NARRATIVE

- FOR GAME DESIGNERS, **NARRATIVE** USUALLY MEANS THE WAY THE **PLOTTED** EVENTS UNFOLD FOR THE PLAYER
- IS **DOESN'T** MEAN THE WAY THE EVENTS THAT ARISE FROM THE **GAME SYSTEM** UNFOLD
 - THEY CALL THAT **GAMEPLAY**
- **DISCOURSE** IN GAMES MEANS:
 - QUEST STEPS, PLOT POINTS, QUICK TIME EVENTS, ...
 - MECHANICS, GAME LOOP, CORE GAMEPLAY, ...
- WELL, IT WOULD IF DESIGNERS USED THE TERM...

BACKSTORY

- **BACKSTORY** COVERS THE EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE **BEFORE** THE PLAYER STARTED PLAYING
- ITS **USUALLY** AUTHORED, FIXED AND IS THE SAME FOR EACH REPLAYING OF THE GAME
 - NOT **NECESSARILY**, THOUGH...
- A **NEW** PLAYER TO *EVE ONLINE* WILL PERCEIVE ITS **HISTORICAL** CORPORATION WAR EVENTS AS **BACKSTORY** RELATIVE TO THEM
 - THESE PREDICATE AND CONTEXTUALISE THE FUTURE EVENTS THAT WILL ARISE AS THE PLAYER PLAYS

HISTORY

- FOR A LONG-TERM *EVE ONLINE* PLAYER, THOSE **SAME** EVENTS ARE **HISTORY**
 - THEY'RE THE PART OF THE PLAYER'S **ONGOING STORY** THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN **READ**
- THEY **ONLY** BECOME PART OF THE PLAYER'S STORY IN THE **RETELLING**
 - OTHERWISE, THEY'RE JUST **RECORDS** OF EVENTS
- WHEN PLAYERS SELECTIVELY **CHOOSE** WHICH EVENTS TO RELATE (TO THEMSELVES OR OTHERS), THIS INTERPRETED STORY IS THEIR **HISTORY**

STORY MATTERS

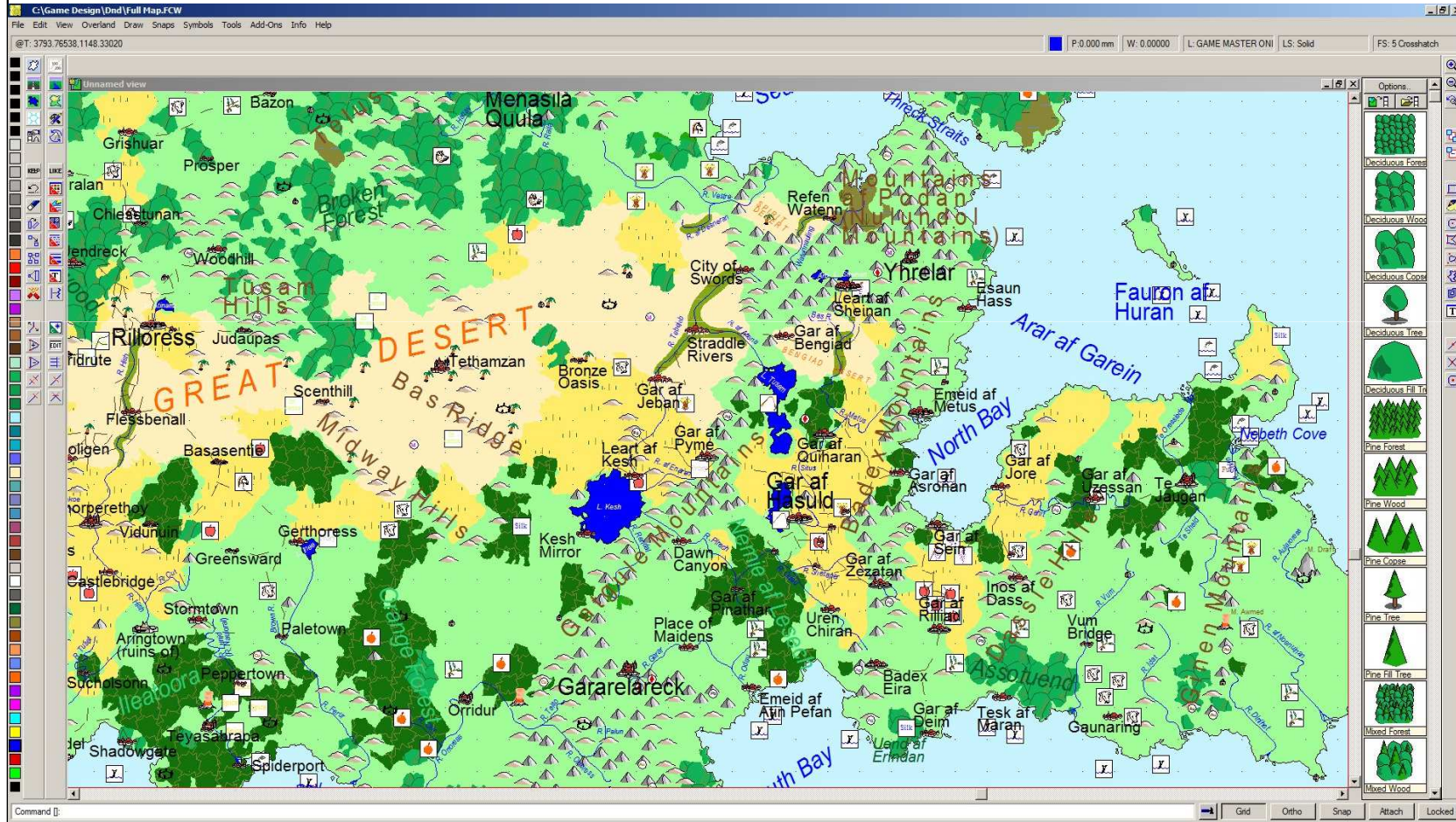
- THESE STORIES – THESE **HISTORIES** – ARE THE ONES THAT **MATTER** FOR GAMES
- IF YOU CAN'T **TELL** ANOTHER ATTENTIVE PLAYER WHAT **INTERESTING** THINGS HAPPENED, NO INTERESTING THINGS **DID** HAPPEN
- IF **THAT'S** THE CASE, WHY WERE YOU EVEN **PLAYING?!**
 - NO **DECISIONS** TO MAKE, NO **OBSTACLES** TO OVERCOME, NO **UNEXPECTED** SITUATIONS, NO **EMOTIONAL** OR HEART-STOPPING **MOMENTS**

THEME PARK OR SANDBOX

- **NOVELS** PRESENT A SERIES OF PLOTTED CAUSAL EVENTS AS A STORY
- **GAMES CAN ALSO** PRESENT A SERIES OF PLOTTED CAUSAL EVENTS AS A STORY
- HOWEVER GAMES **ADDITIONALLY** PRESENT A SERIES OF **UNPLOTTED** CAUSAL EVENTS FROM WHICH PLAYERS **CREATE** STORIES
- IN MMO DESIGN TERMS, PLOT-HEAVY GAMES ARE **THEME PARKS** AND PLOT-LIGHT ONES ARE **SANDBOXES**

MAP

- HERE'S A CAMPAIGN CARTOGRAPHER MAP I MADE



PLOTLESS GAMES

- GAMES DON'T **HAVE** TO HAVE PLOTS
- **NO** ABSTRACT GAMES HAVE THEM, BECAUSE PLOTS REQUIRE A **FICTION** FOR THEIR CONTEXT
- ABSTRACT GAMES **DO** STILL CREATE STORY
 - ITS **IMPLICIT** IN THEIR MECHANICS
- REMEMBER THAT **AMAZING** GAME OF *TETRIS* WHEN YOU WERE CLOSE TO THE TOP AND JUST NEEDED **ONE** LONG BRICK THEN AT LAST IT CAME AND YOU COLLAPSED ALMOST THE WHOLE STACK?
 - THERE WAS NO **PLOT**, BUT WHAT A **STORY!**

WHY PLOTS?

- IF GAMES DON'T **NEED** PREDEFINED PLOTS, WHY **GIVE** THEM ANY?
 - ARE PLOTS SIMPLY A WAY TO MAKE A WORLD SEEM MORE **IMMERSIVE**?
- WELL, IT TURNS OUT THAT **SOME** PEOPLE ARE **BETTER** AT CREATING PLOTS THAN OTHERS
- THE EVENTS PLAYERS INITIATE **AREN'T** ALWAYS THE STUFF OF WHICH GOOD STORIES ARE MADE
- AUTHORS CAN PLOT **POWERFUL** EVENTS THAT DELIVER MORE SATISFACTORY **ENDINGS**

EXCEPT...

- THAT'S **TRUE**, BUT IF YOU FOLLOW IT THROUGH THEN WHY BOTHER WITH **GAMES** AT ALL?
 - WHY PLAY A **GAME** WHEN YOU CAN READ A **BOOK** WRITTEN BY SOMEONE BETTER AT CREATING STORIES THAN YOU ARE?
- THE ANSWER IS THAT PEOPLE ARE **INDIVIDUALS**
- SOME THINGS ARE INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT TO **YOU** BUT **NOT** TO MOST OTHER PEOPLE
- GAMES ALLOW YOU TO CREATE **YOUR** STORY

EXPLANATION

- IN PLAYING A GAME, **YOU** CAN CAUSE EVENTS TO OCCUR THAT FOR **YOU** ARE SIGNIFICANT
 - OR COULD **LEAD** TO SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT
- YOU'RE LOOKING FOR **EXPERIENCES** TO USE AS **BUILDING BLOCKS** IN YOUR STORY
 - SOME YOU **IGNORE**, SOME YOU **HOLD ON** TO
- **OTHER** PEOPLE MIGHT THINK YOUR STORY IS GARBAGE, BUT IT'S NOT **FOR** THEM
- YOU'RE PLAYING THE GAME SO **YOU** HAVE FUN
 - FUN IS THAT WHICH **YOU'D** RELATE AS A STORY

FOR YOU

- GAMES **AS SYSTEMS** ALLOW PEOPLE TO EXPERIMENT IN CREATING **EVENTS**
- THEY CAN PICK FROM THIS EVENT **RECORD** THE EVENTS THAT ARE IMPORTANT **FOR THEM**
- THESE WILL LEAD TO **RETELLINGS** THAT ARE IMPORTANT **FOR THEM**
- A PLOT-DRIVEN GAME **CAN** DO THIS, BUT BY NECESSITY ITS MEANING HAS TO BE **GENERAL**
- **GAMES** ALLOW PLAYERS TO WEAVE **ALL** IN-GAME EVENTS INTO THEIR **OWN** STORIES

AUTOMATION

- YOU CAN WRITE GAME-PLAYING **PROGRAMS**
 - *CHESS, DRAUGHTS, ROGUE, ...*
- SUCH A PROGRAM WOULD GENERATE A SERIES OF EVENTS THAT MAKE **CAUSAL** SENSE
- THAT DOESN'T MAKE THOSE **STORIES** THOUGH
- WHEN **PLAYERS** PLAY, THEY STRIVE TO CAUSE EVENTS TO OCCUR **PURPOSEFULLY**
 - WHY **THAT** EVENT RATHER THAN SOME OTHER?
- IT **MUST** BE BECAUSE IT WAS SINGULARLY **IMPORTANT** TO THAT PARTICULAR PLAYER

CREATING STORIES

- WHEN I WAS ABOUT **12**, I INVENTED THIS ...
WELL, IT'S HARD TO **SAY** WHAT IT WAS
 - I CREATED A **MAP** OF A LOST CONTINENT
 - I POPULATED IT WITH ALL KINDS OF EXCITING AND **INTERESTING** THINGS
 - I INVENTED A CHARACTER, **DR TODDYSTONE**
 - I MOVED DR TODDYSTONE **THROUGH** THE LOST CONTINENT A **DAY** AT A TIME
 - I WROTE A **DIARY** OF HIS DAILY ADVENTURES
- I USED THE FRAMEWORK OF A ROLE-PLAYING **GAME** TO CREATE **STORY** – FOR **FUN!**

CREATING GAMES

- TODAY, I OCCASIONALLY USE GAMES TO CREATE **BACKSTORY** CONTEXT FOR **OTHER** GAMES
- FOR THE LAST BIG **D&D** CAMPAIGN I DESIGNED, I USED **CIVILISATION IV** (MULTI-PLAYER) TO CREATE THE FANTASY WORLD'S **HISTORY**
 - ELVES WERE THE BABYLONIANS, I SEEM TO RECALL
- I KNEW WHAT EVERY **UNIT** HAD DONE, WHAT **CITIES** THEY FOUNDED, WHEN **TEMPLES** WERE BUILT TO WHAT **GODS** – THE WORKS!
 - LIKE *DWARF FORTRESS*, BUT SANE

CONCLUSION

- PLAYING A GAME SPINS A SERIES OF **EVENTS**
- PLAYERS HAVE SOME **SAY** IN **WHICH** EVENTS
- THEY RETELL **SELECTED** EVENTS AS **STORIES**
- THEREFORE GAMES ARE **MACHINES** THAT PLAYERS USE FOR CREATING **STORIES**
- WHEN YOU **PLAY** A GAME, YOU **DIRECT** IT TOWARDS THE EVENTS BEST **FOR YOU**
- **EVERYONE** LIKES STORIES, BUT THEY LIKE THEIR **OWN** STORIES MOST OF ALL