What is a Megagame?

A new framework (Social Simulation Games)

Dave Boundy 9 June 2026

Introduction

I can imagine the reaction to the title of this piece.

Some will be interested. They will know nothing about Megagames, or will have encountered them and be curious about what makes them distinctive.

Others, particularly those who have been around Megagames for some time, may be more sceptical. The question has been asked many times and never really answered satisfactorily.

And finally, there are those who will say that the question does not matter - that it is enough simply to design and play games and enjoy them. Let's refer to this group as the cynical "old lags"!

It is certainly possible to design and play games without defining them. However, definition can be useful. Understanding a system often reveals its limits. Once those limits are visible, it becomes possible to ask how they might be extended or altered. At the very least, it is worth understanding what we are doing. Besides, it scratches an itch in my brain(!).

The problem with defining Megagames

Attempts to define Megagames tend to fail in a predictable way. A definition is proposed. A counterexample using an existing Megagame is produced. The definition is abandoned. In practice, the working definition often becomes:

> *A Megagame is whatever existing Megagame designers recognise as a Megagame.*

This is recursive and not very useful. To move beyond this, I believe that it is necessary to step back and consider a broader class of games.

Social Simulation Games

Megagames can be understood as part of a wider class of games, which I will call **Social Simulation Games (SSGs)**.

A Social Simulation Game has:

- a persistent world or system,
- players occupying distinct roles within that system,
- system changes driven primarily by player interaction,
- outcomes arising from the internal logic of the system,
- objectives and achievement derived from the system and not imposed by some external arbitrary measure, such as victory points,
- sufficient complexity that no player can understand the whole system

Here, “system” refers not merely to rules, but to the total interacting structure formed by players, mechanics, information and facilitation.

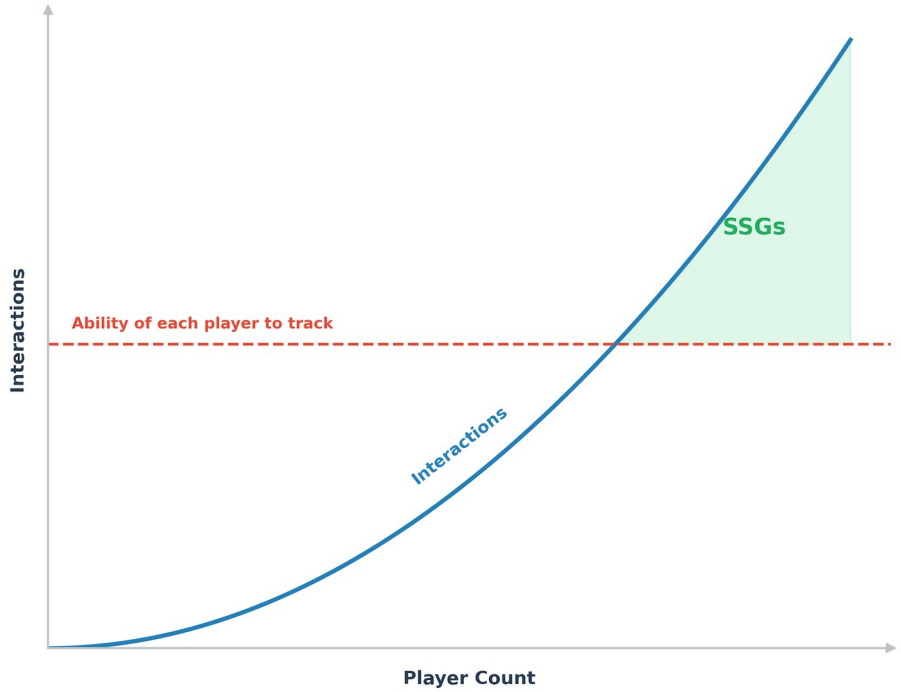
I will refer to this loss of complete understanding as “opacity”. Opacity is not confusion. It is the condition where the system is too large for any one participant to fully track, while still remaining coherent enough for meaningful action.

This class could include Megagames, LARPs, crisis games, committee games and many other types of simulation – some of which I’ll never have heard of and some of which may not yet have been invented.

To restate:

- at some point, no player can understand the whole system
- below that point the system is largely transparent and players can track what is going on
- above that point players operate on partial information so that indirect effects dominate and the system becomes realistically hard to predict

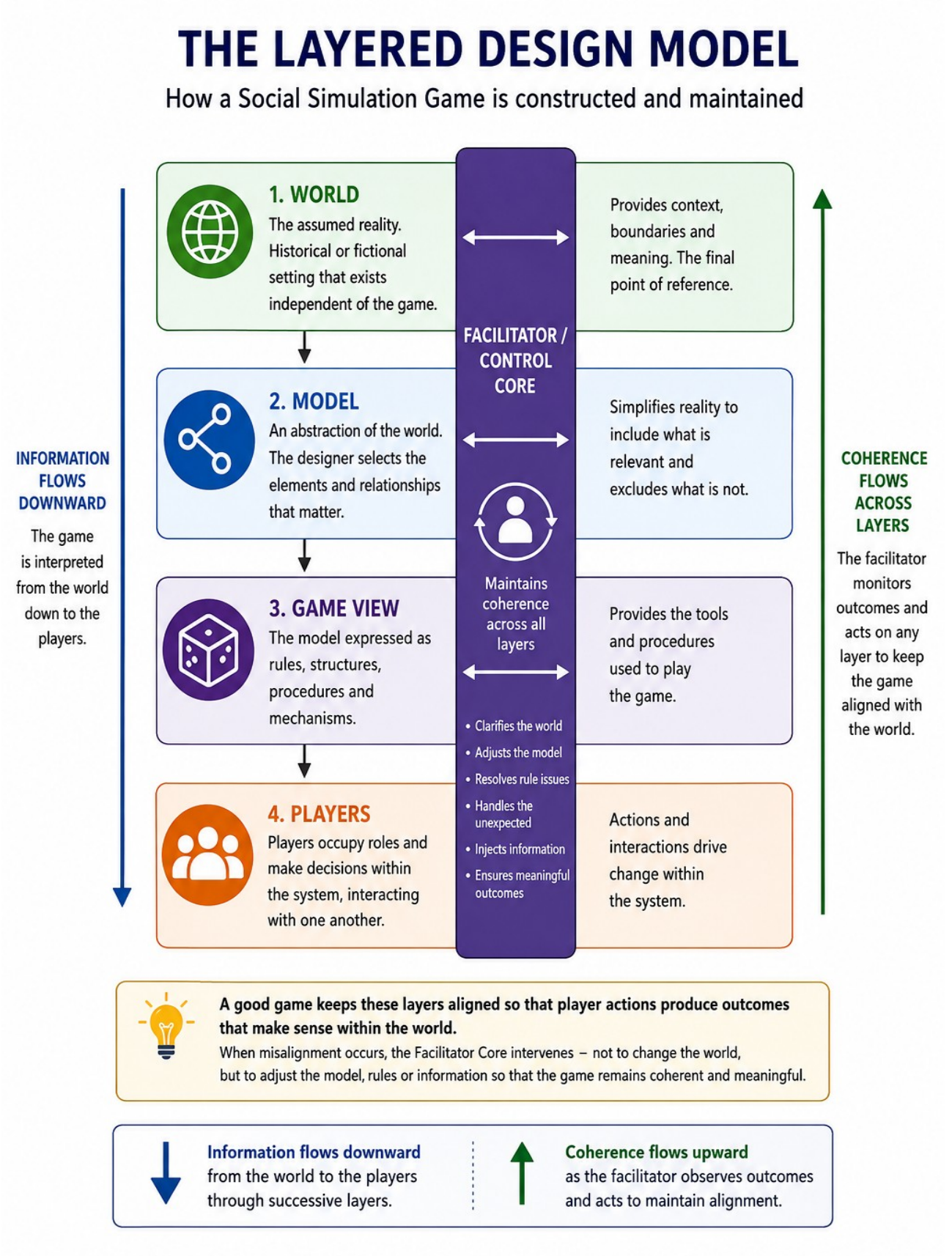
The point here is that, as player count increases, the number of potential interactions increase dramatically so that eventually no individual player can track everything.



The system appears “real” when it becomes larger than any player can understand

How these games are constructed

To understand how SSGs work, it is useful to think of them as constructed in layers.



World

The assumed reality. This may be historical or fictional, but it must be internally consistent. In SSGs, it is the final point of reference. So-called “wizard wheezes” (a term that used to be pejorative until about 10 years ago) in SSGs may break all other layers, but must not break this layer without breaking the entire game.

Model

An abstraction of the world. The designer selects the elements that matter to the designer – a choice that defines what type of game they are designing and their relationships.

Game view

The model expressed as rules, structures and procedures. The classic mechanisms that seem to define games.

Players

Players act within the system, making decisions under constraint. They are important components of the system. They simulate the experience of making decisions inside complex worlds under conditions of incomplete understanding.

Facilitators

Control, Facilitators, Moderators, GMs or umpires (just some of the names given to the facilitation role) operate across layers, maintaining coherence. They have authority to act on the game view in response to Players (wishing to operate in a way not anticipated by the rules) or in response to identifying an issue with the Game View or the Model.

> *A successful game keeps these layers aligned so that outcomes make sense within the world.*

Player experience: immersion

Another aspect concerns how players experience the game. The word “immersion” means different things, depending on the context, and that can cause confusion. In this piece, I am interested in “immersion” as the state where people suspend disbelief.

It is important not to confuse immersion with how the game processes complexity. A game may be highly immersive while relying heavily on systems or Control, and conversely a highly player-driven game may still feel abstract.

The processing model described later concerns how the game functions structurally. Immersion is a separate dimension concerning how players experience that structure, so immersion here means:

> *Players react in terms of the game world rather than the game itself.*

For a Social Simulation Game to function effectively, the game system must encourage immersion. By this, I mean that the mechanics, procedures, information structures and adjudication processes

must be sufficient that players can reasonably interpret events in terms of that world rather than in terms of the game machinery.

In this sense, immersion becomes more than a desirable feature. It becomes a functional requirement. If players cannot relate the behaviour of the game system to the behaviour of the world, they cease to make decisions as actors within that world and instead begin optimising against the mechanics themselves then the whole game system breaks down

It seems to me that immersion is part of the logic of the system: a requirement for players to act as if they are their roles. Without immersion, however the system achieves it, the game breaks down and becomes something else. Summarising, I believe that a requirement of an SSG is that

> *participants understand outcomes as arising naturally from the simulated world.*

I shall explore immersion more in a later article.

Game View: Turns

SSGs that operated in real-time would quickly become incoherent. The opposite is true of sequenced actions: the nature of reality is rarely properly sequential, so a “take turns” style of play has a high risk of breaking immersion. At some stage, someone will go “I will change my action because of what that player has done”. Turns in an SSG are required and they should be simultaneous.

Where complexity is processed

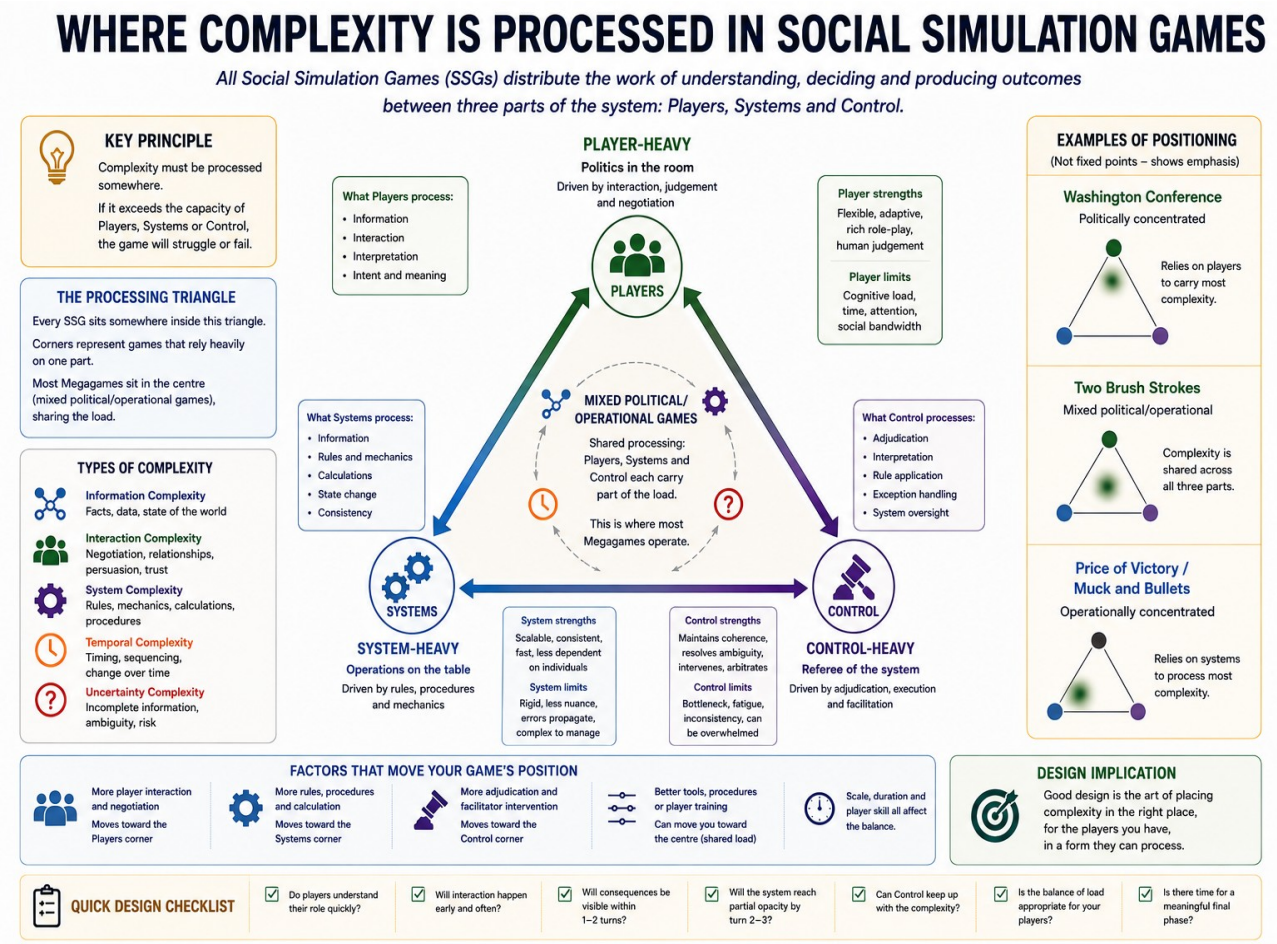
A central idea is that:

> *Complexity must be contained and processed somewhere.*

Often this means that complexity is hidden from players. In SSGs, it is processed by:

- **Players** (understanding, interaction)
- **Systems** (rules, mechanics)
- **Control** (adjudication, execution)

This suggests that different games distribute the burden of handling complexity in different ways. This can be represented as a triangle with corners for player-heavy, system-heavy and Control-heavy games. Mixed political/operational systems (most Megagames) sit in the centre, sharing the burden. Players cause and manage complexity through personal interactions, the game systems manage it through the rules and Control manage it through informed interventions.



This diagram summarises how SSGs handle complexity and gives examples from my own games (see Annex A)

Failure

Failure occurs when complexity is placed where it cannot be handled.

Common cases include:

- **Player overload** – too much interaction or information
- **System overload** – too many rules or calculations
- **Control overload** – too much adjudication required
- **Loss of coherence** – misalignment of layers
- **Invisible consequences** – players cannot see effects
- **Excessive opacity** – system too complex
- **Over-constraint** – too rigid
- **Under-constraint** – too loose

Good design is the art of placing complexity in the right place, for the players you have, in a form they can process.

Why Megagames are large

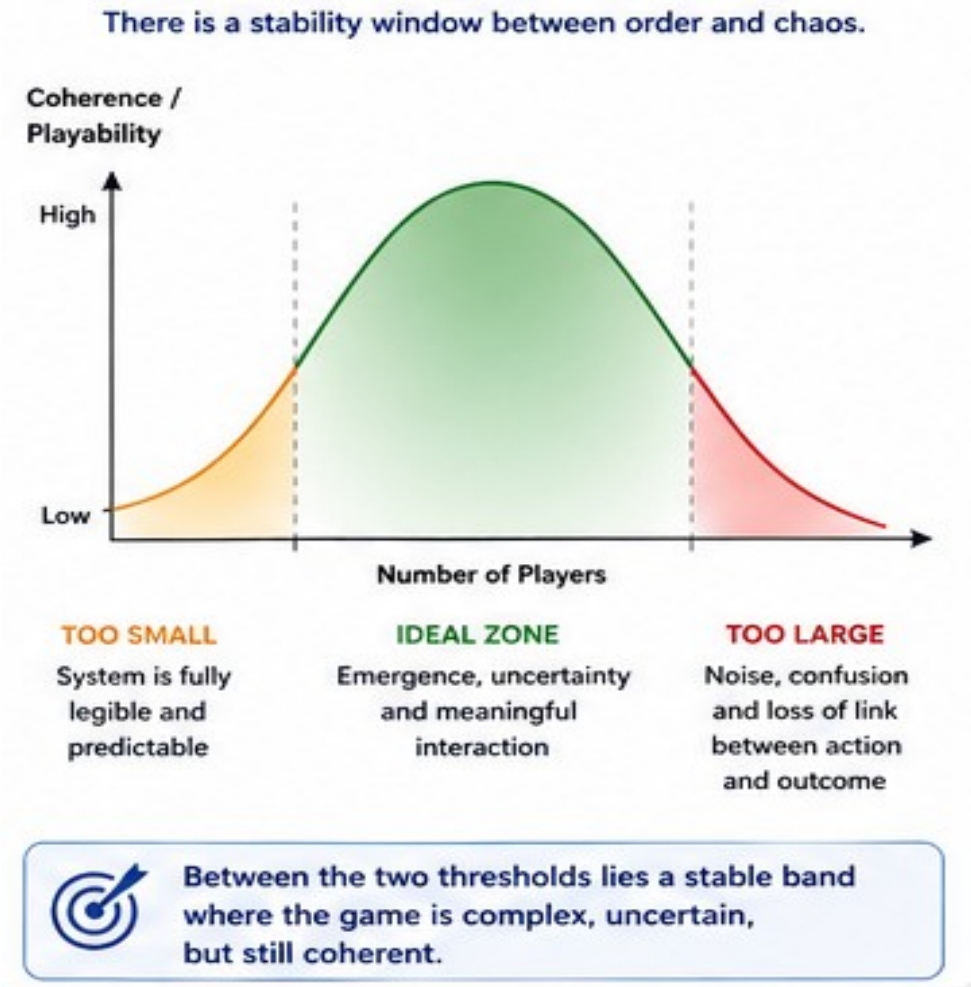
Megagames are often described as “large games”. This is true, but may confuse cause and effect. As player numbers increase, interactions increase rapidly but individual understanding does not.

At some point the system becomes larger than any individual player can understand.

This produces uncertainty, indirect effects and emergent behaviour, so this is when the game begins to feel “real” and is a precondition of a Megagame.

There are limits of course:

- too small allows the players to understand the whole system: the game becomes predictable
- too large means that players lose sight of the effects of their actions: the game becomes chaotic and incoherent



Between these lies a stable region which is complex enough to be uncertain, but coherent enough to act within. Megagames should occupy this “Goldilocks” region.

My experience suggests that the ideal zone is somewhere between 30 and 70 players. Games are, of course, not balanced in absolute terms, but relative to the player group so you must understand the player group’s ability. My assessment of 30 to 70 is linked to my understanding of our player group and the games we run.

Operations and politics in Megagames

Generally, we say “operations” when referring to military activity in Megagames. This can, of course, be translated into any mechanical action (virus spread as an example), but can be seen to be qualitatively different to politics, which is about personal interactions – negotiations, diplomacy, actions to signal intent (“I need a victory to help my negotiations” as an example). Most Megagames have a mixture of both and games vary in how they resolve actions.

Scaling

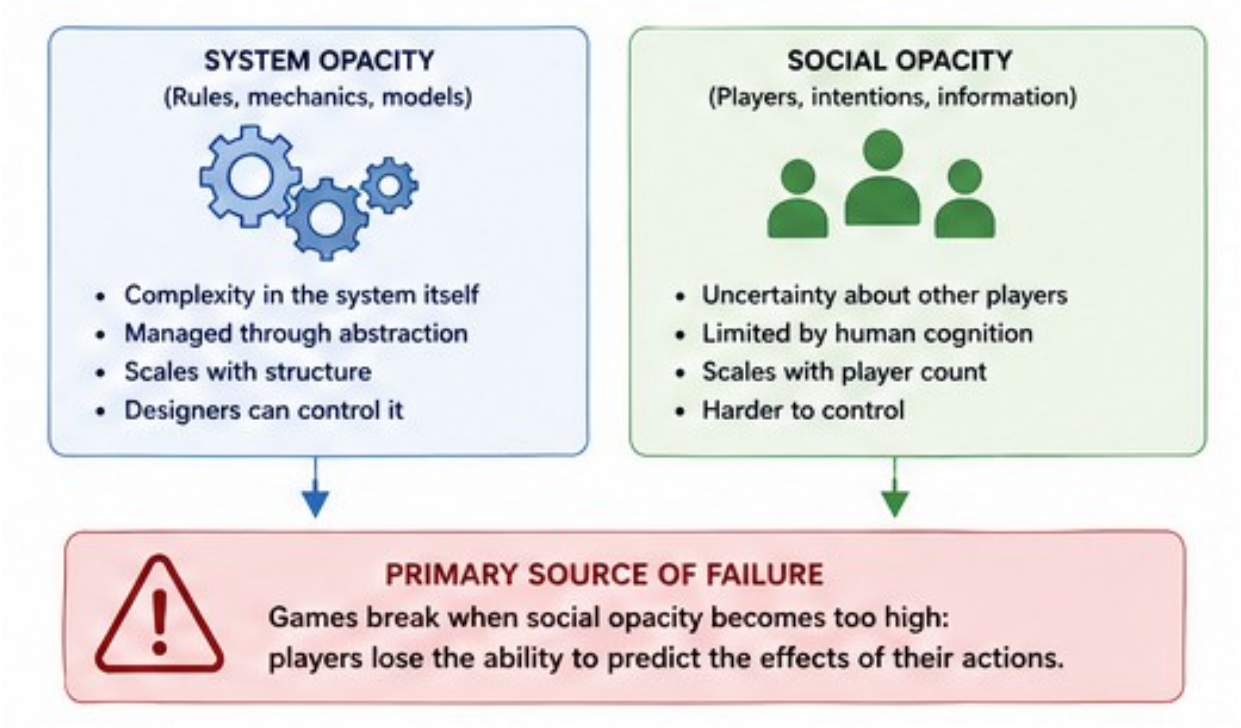
Operations are rule-driven, structured and therefore scalable

Politics are interaction-driven, negotiated and therefore more difficult to scale

Because systems scale more easily than interaction, operational Megagames can be larger.

It is also worth noting that, as games scale, they become harder to understand because, putting it simply, they become more complex, but there are two different types of complexity:

- system complexity (rules, mechanisms – the model and game levels)
- social complexity (the way other players react, their intentions and information)



Operational games tend to generate system opacity, while political games tend to generate social opacity.

Duration and Emergence in Megagames

Most Megagames last between six and eight hours. Shorter games are possible, but often feel unsatisfactory. This can be understood in terms of emergence.

At the start of a game, players are still learning the rules, the roles, the relationships and the structure of the system. Only after several cycles of interaction do indirect effects begin to dominate and the game becomes meaningfully opaque.

A Megagame therefore needs time to:

- accumulate complexity
- propagate consequences
- allow players to adapt to the evolving system

In practice, this generally requires several turns or interaction cycles. Duration is therefore not accidental. The game must have time to become itself. Short games will need simplicity in order to have the interaction cycles, but complexity is needed to achieve the Goldilocks area - a difficult balancing act.

Conclusions

Megagames are not defined by size, mechanics or theme. Scale is not the defining feature - it is a consequence of structure. They are best understood as: Social Simulation Games (SSG) in which complexity is distributed across players, systems and facilitators. To repeat the conclusions in the article:

- The current definition is unsatisfactory: *A Megagame is whatever existing Megagame designers recognise as a Megagame.*
- A Social Simulation Game has *world, roles, player interaction, outcomes from logical connections, meaningful objectives and sufficient complexity* to avoid any player understanding the whole.
- SSGs are constructed by defining the *world view, the model of that world, the game mechanisms, the player roles and the facilitator (Control) roles*
- *The complexity is handled by the system, the players and by the facilitators* – the mix depends on the design
- *Megagames should aim for a "Goldilocks zone"* where interactions produce complexity but not chaos.

Annex A goes through some Megagames to test the ideas in this article. My own games are prominent so don't feel worried about treading on toes: I have a strong belief in constructive criticism.

In Annex B, I have created a diagram which is derived from the ideas in this article to give an aid for Megagame Design.

Dave Boundy (dave@boundy.uk)

9 June 2026

Annex A: Worked examples

The framework proposed in this article should be capable of explaining existing games rather than merely describing them. To test this, I will apply it to three games that I know well. I have chosen my own designs because I can discuss them freely and have direct knowledge of the design decisions involved.

Washington Conference

Washington Conference is a political Megagame based on the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–22.

The World layer is the diplomatic environment of the early 1920s. The Model focuses on security concerns, naval expenditure, prestige and international diplomacy. The Game View is deliberately light, consisting primarily of meetings, negotiations and reporting structures.

Most complexity is processed by the players themselves. They must gather information, interpret intentions, build alliances and negotiate agreements. The formal systems are minimal and Control is rarely required to intervene. As a result, opacity is primarily social. Players struggle to understand what other delegations know, intend or are planning.

The game therefore sits close to the player corner of the complexity-processing triangle. It remains manageable because the player count is relatively modest, but it still generates significant uncertainty through interaction.

Two Brush Strokes

Two Brush Strokes is a game about China during the Nanking Decade.

The World layer is the fragmented political and military reality of China between 1928 and 1936. The Model selects those elements that matter to the period: warlord politics, economic development, foreign influence, military force and ideological conflict.

Unlike Washington Conference, complexity is shared between players and systems. Political negotiations are important, but military operations, economics and infrastructure development are represented by formal mechanisms. Control has a larger role because it must process logistics and maintain coherence between interacting systems.

Opacity therefore arises from two sources. Players face uncertainty about both the intentions of other factions and the state of the wider system. This combination of social and system opacity places the game near the centre of the complexity-processing triangle.

Price of Victory (Muck and Bullets)

Price of Victory is an operational game based on the Somme campaign of 1916.

The World layer is the Western Front. The Model focuses on logistics, command, artillery, movement and combat. The Game View contains extensive procedures governing military operations.

Most complexity is processed by the systems and by Control. Players make important decisions, but much of the effort involved in producing outcomes is embedded within the rules and adjudication processes. Social interaction exists but is not the primary driver of events.

The game therefore sits much closer to the system and Control corners of the triangle. It also requires a larger player count before the desired opacity emerges. At small scale the system is too transparent. At larger scale, however, players begin to lose the ability to understand the entire battlefield and must act on partial information.

LARPs and Megagames

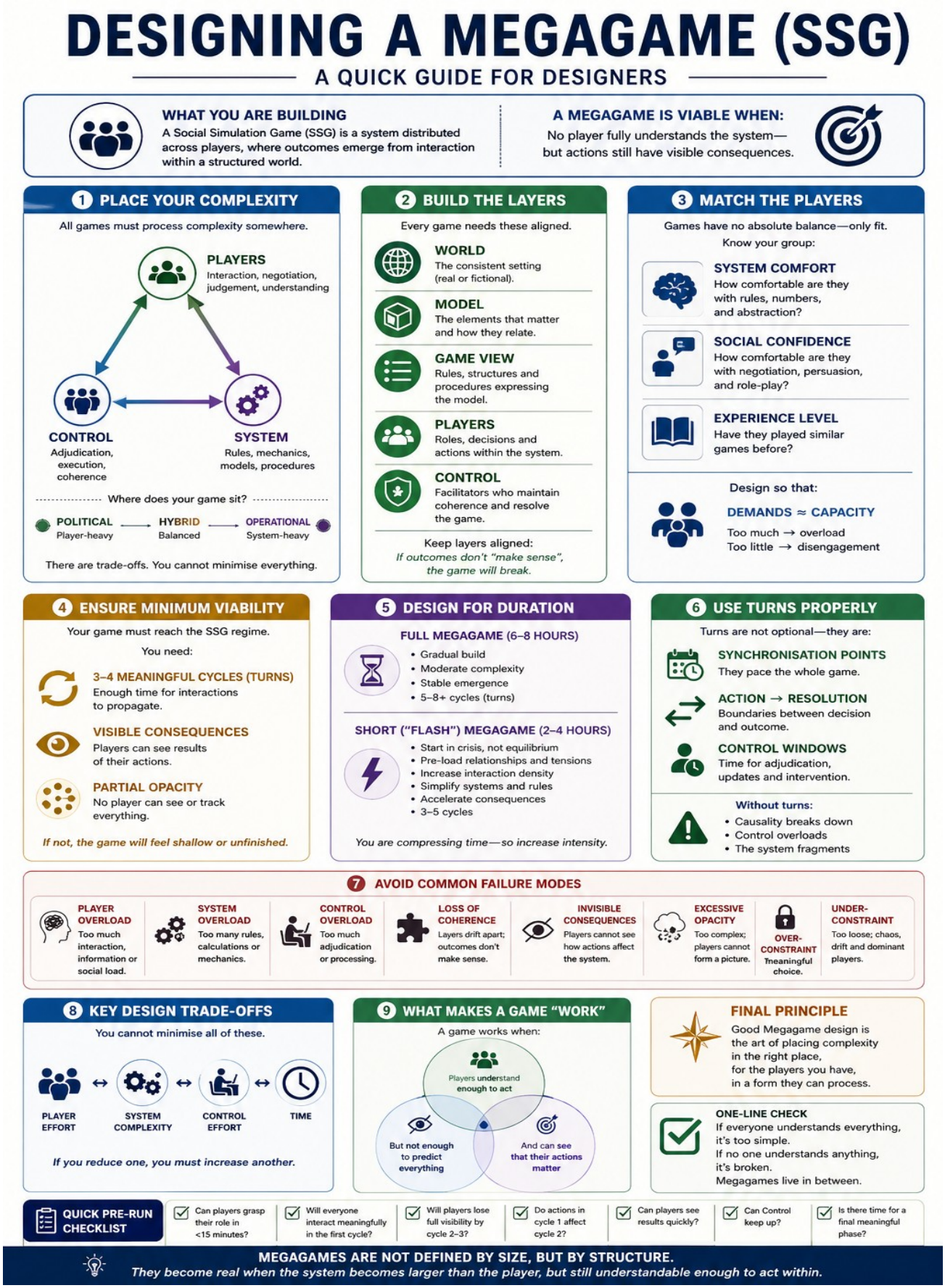
Both LARPs and Megagames can be understood as Social Simulation Games. The distinction is not absolute but one of emphasis.

LARPs tend to internalise the model within the players. The world is experienced primarily through character interaction and personal interpretation. Megagames tend to externalise more of the model into institutions, procedures and formal systems.

Washington Conference illustrates the overlap. It relies heavily on negotiation and role-play, yet players operate within defined institutions and formal processes. The game is not primarily about expressing a character. It is about participating in a larger political system.

This suggests that the difference between LARPs and Megagames is not one of category but of where complexity is processed and how the model is represented.

Annex B


DESIGNING A MEGAGAME (SSG)
A QUICK GUIDE FOR DESIGNERS
WHAT YOU ARE BUILDING
A Social Simulation Game (SSG) is a system distributed across players, where outcomes emerge from interaction within a structured world.
A MEGAGAME IS VIABLE WHEN:
No player fully understands the system—but actions still have visible consequences.
1 PLACE YOUR COMPLEXITY
All games must process complexity somewhere.
PLAYERS
Interaction, negotiation, judgement, understanding
CONTROL
Adjudication, execution, coherence
SYSTEM
Rules, mechanics, models, procedures
Where does your game sit?
POLITICAL
Player-heavy
HYBRID
Balanced
OPERATIONAL
System-heavy
There are trade-offs. You cannot minimise everything.
2 BUILD THE LAYERS
Every game needs these aligned.
WORLD
The consistent setting (real or fictional).
MODEL
The elements that matter and how they relate.
GAME VIEW
Rules, structures and procedures expressing the model.
PLAYERS
Roles, decisions and actions within the system.
CONTROL
Facilitators who maintain coherence and resolve the game.
Keep layers aligned:
If outcomes don't "make sense", the game will break.
3 MATCH THE PLAYERS
Games have no absolute balance—only fit.
Know your group:
SYSTEM COMFORT
How comfortable are they with rules, numbers, and abstraction?
SOCIAL CONFIDENCE
How comfortable are they with negotiation, persuasion, and role-play?
EXPERIENCE LEVEL
Have they played similar games before?
Design so that:
DEMANDS ≈ CAPACITY
Too much → overload
Too little → disengagement
4 ENSURE MINIMUM VIABILITY
Your game must reach the SSG regime.
You need:
3–4 MEANINGFUL CYCLES (TURNS)
Enough time for interactions to propagate.
VISIBLE CONSEQUENCES
Players can see results of their actions.
PARTIAL OPACITY
No player can see or track everything.
If not, the game will feel shallow or unfinished.
5 DESIGN FOR DURATION
FULL MEGAGAME (6–8 HOURS)
• Gradual build
• Moderate complexity
• Stable emergence
• 5–8+ cycles (turns)
SHORT ("FLASH") MEGAGAME (2–4 HOURS)
• Start in crisis, not equilibrium
• Pre-load relationships and tensions
• Increase interaction density
• Simplify systems and rules
• Accelerate consequences
• 3–5 cycles
You are compressing time—so increase intensity.
6 USE TURNS PROPERLY
Turns are not optional—they are:
SYNCHRONISATION POINTS
They pace the whole game.
ACTION → RESOLUTION
Boundaries between decision and outcome.
CONTROL WINDOWS
Time for adjudication, updates and intervention.
Without turns:
• Causality breaks down
• Control overloads
• The system fragments
7 AVOID COMMON FAILURE MODES
PLAYER OVERLOAD
Too much interaction, information or social load.
SYSTEM OVERLOAD
Too many rules, calculations or mechanics.
CONTROL OVERLOAD
Too much adjudication or processing.
LOSS OF COHERENCE
Layers drift apart; outcomes don't make sense.
INVISIBLE CONSEQUENCES
Players cannot see how actions affect the system.
EXCESSIVE OPACITY
Too complex; players cannot form a picture.
OVER-CONSTRAINT
Meaningful choice.
UNDER-CONSTRAINT
Too loose; chaos, drift and dominant players.
8 KEY DESIGN TRADE-OFFS
You cannot minimise all of these.
PLAYER EFFORT
SYSTEM COMPLEXITY
CONTROL EFFORT
TIME
If you reduce one, you must increase another.
9 WHAT MAKES A GAME "WORK"
A game works when:
Players understand enough to act
But not enough to predict everything
And can see that their actions matter
FINAL PRINCIPLE
Good Megagame design is the art of placing complexity in the right place, for the players you have, in a form they can process.
ONE-LINE CHECK
If everyone understands everything, it's too simple.
If no one understands anything, it's broken.
Megagames live in between.
QUICK PRE-RUN CHECKLIST
Can players grasp their role in <15 minutes?
Will everyone interact meaningfully in the first cycle?
Will players lose full visibility by cycle 2–3?
Do actions in cycle 1 affect cycle 2?
Can players see results quickly?
Can Control keep up?
Is there time for a final meaningful phase?
MEGAGAMES ARE NOT DEFINED BY SIZE, BUT BY STRUCTURE.
They become real when the system becomes larger than the player, but still understandable enough to act within.