What is a Megagame?

A framework for understanding Social Simulation Games

Dave Boundy 8 May 2026

Background

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 rarely 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"!

You have to understand that my background is in complex systems and organisation, so naturally I approach this sort of question from that angle. I believe that this has produced something useful but I'd love to hear from others who have a different viewpoint.

Does it matter?

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(!) and interestingly, it may explain why defining Megagames has proved so difficult.

The problem with defining Megagames

Attempts to define Megagames tend to fail in a predictable way. A definition is proposed. A counterexample 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.

Examples

In this article, there are a number of places where I need to refer to examples to illustrate the point. I have used 3 games. I chose the 3 because they are mine: either I am the only author or one of the authors and have permission from the others to publish. The examples are:

- ***Washington Conference:*** a totally political game about the Washington Disarmament conference of 1921/22

- ***Price of Victory (aka Muck and Bullets)***: an almost totally operational game about the 1916 Somme campaign in France.
- ***Two Brush Strokes:*** a mixed operational/political game about the Nanking decade in China.

Social Simulation Games

Megagames can be understood as part of a wider class of games, which I will call **Social Simulation Games (SSGs)**. To be fair, the LLM that I used to assist with developing these ideas came up with that name (which is frightening, considering that it looks awfully like creativity: I like the name, it's appropriate and can be found nowhere else).

Figure 1

A Social Simulation Game has:

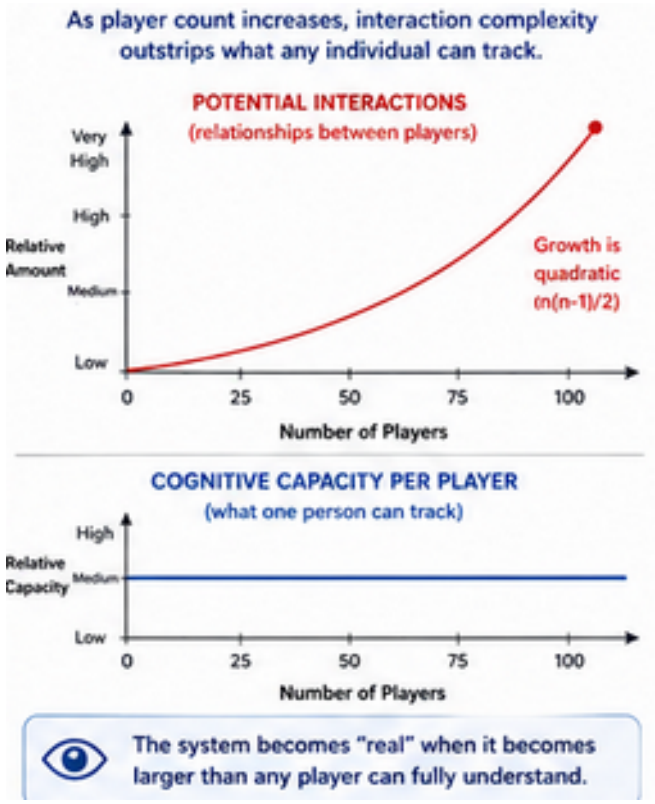
- a persistent world or system
- players occupying distinct roles within that system
- system changes driven primarily by player interaction
- outcomes arising from the internal logic of the system
- objectives and achievement derived from the system and not imposed by some external arbitrary measure, 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.

Figure 2



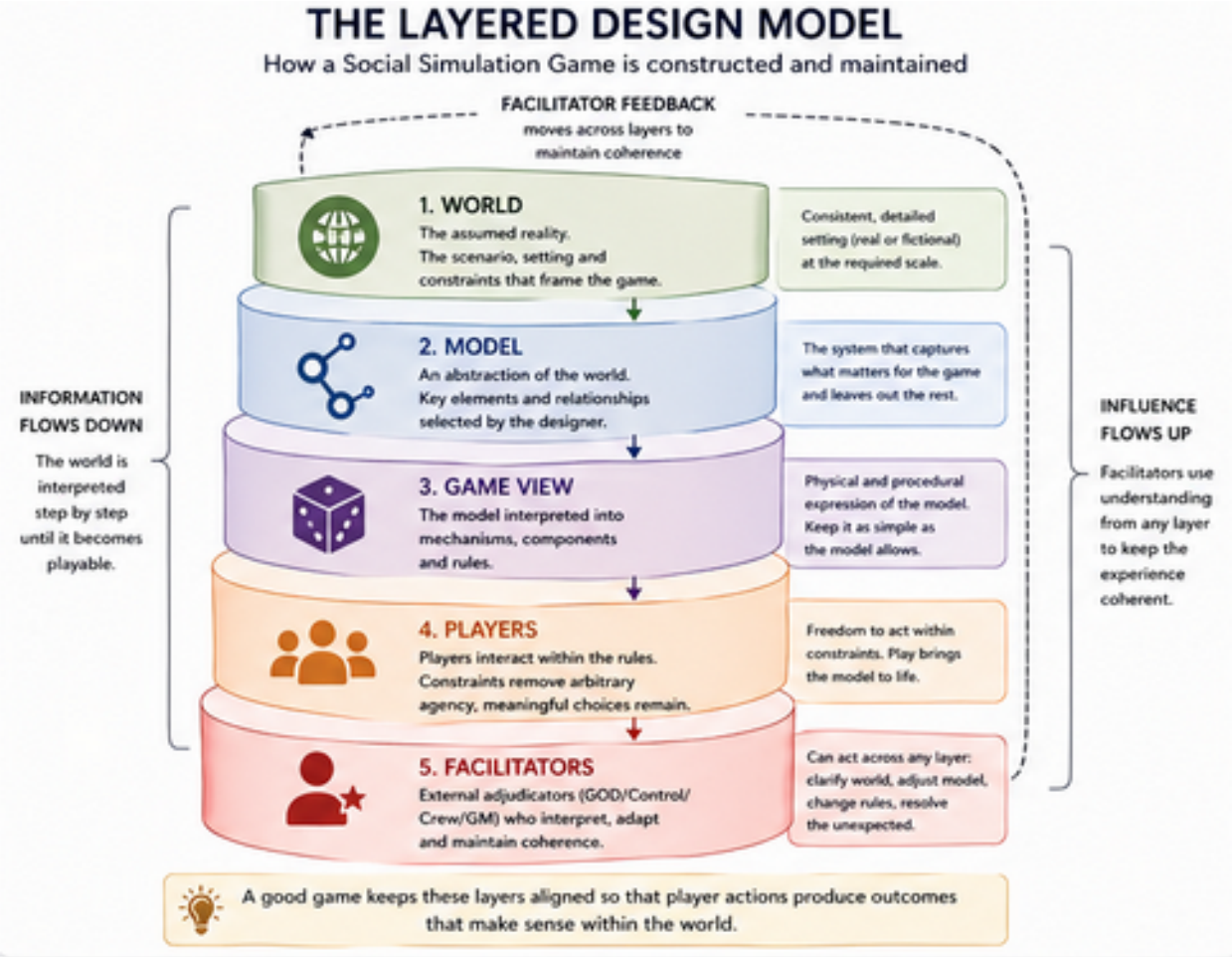
so, to restate:

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

How these games are constructed

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

Figure 3



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

Facilitators

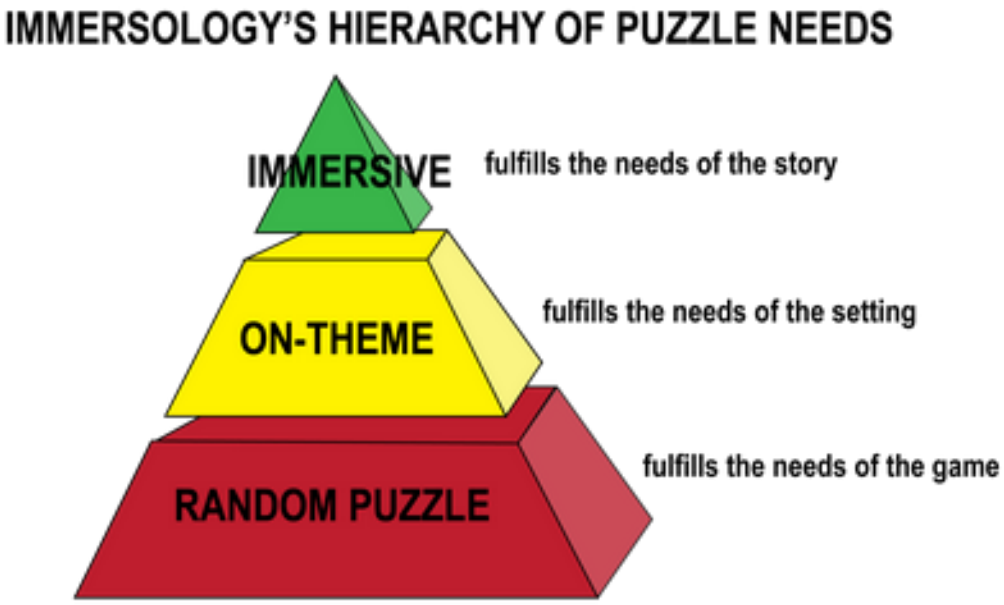
Control, Facilitators, Moderators, GMs or umpires (just some of the names given to the facilitation role) operate across layers, maintaining coherence. They have authority to act on the game view in response to Players (wishing to operate in a way not anticipated by the rules) or in response to identifying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

A second dimension concerns how players experience the game. I read a piece about this from the curiously named “Immersology” group [https://www.immersology.com/on-theme-vs-immersive/] and their diagram is helpful:

Figure 4



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. Where they feel and act as though they are in the simulated world. This is associated with, but is not the same as “being immersed” when that means “being engrossed”.

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.

Looking at the figure:

- **Puzzle** – solving a system: what people might refer to as a “pure” game. A jigsaw is a puzzle. Some that are called “board games” are puzzles if they don’t even have a theme.
- **Theme** – solving it within a setting. Many board games give a theme for the game, but the game generally has little to link it to a world view. Many escape rooms are of this type:

solving a puzzle about signal flags might be thematic for a sailing ship escape room, but I doubt it has anything much to do with reality

- **Immersion** – acting as if the system is the world. The players stop trying to maximise their result as much as they react in the way they would if they were actually in the world.

So immersion here means:

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

This depends on alignment between world, model and game. In this sense, immersion may not be the goal of SSGs so much as one of the mechanisms by which they function. Players who react primarily in terms of the game world rather than the game rules help maintain coherence between the layers of the system.

I had started my thinking by being aligned with the "Immersology" view: that immersion is the aim of Megagames in particular, and SSGs in general.

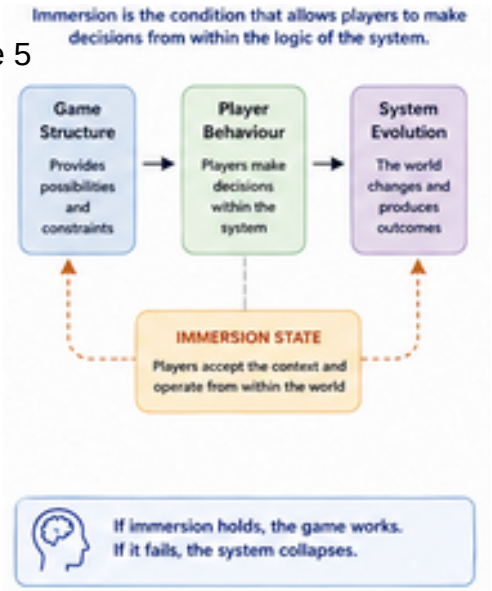


Figure 5

It does appear to me, however, that immersion is part of the logic of the system: a requirement for players to act as if they are their roles in system terms. There is maybe a separate discussion about when and if this leads to an emotional immersion: where players emotions are determined by their reactions within and their reactions to the system. I am fairly sure that the answer is that a good game leads to emotional immersion as I have experienced that myself and observed it when some players were excluded from a meeting, when some players "died" in the game and when a player released a tactical nuclear weapon in a taut political and military situation.

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:

- Player-heavy systems (political games, LARPs)
- System-heavy games (operational simulations)
- 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.

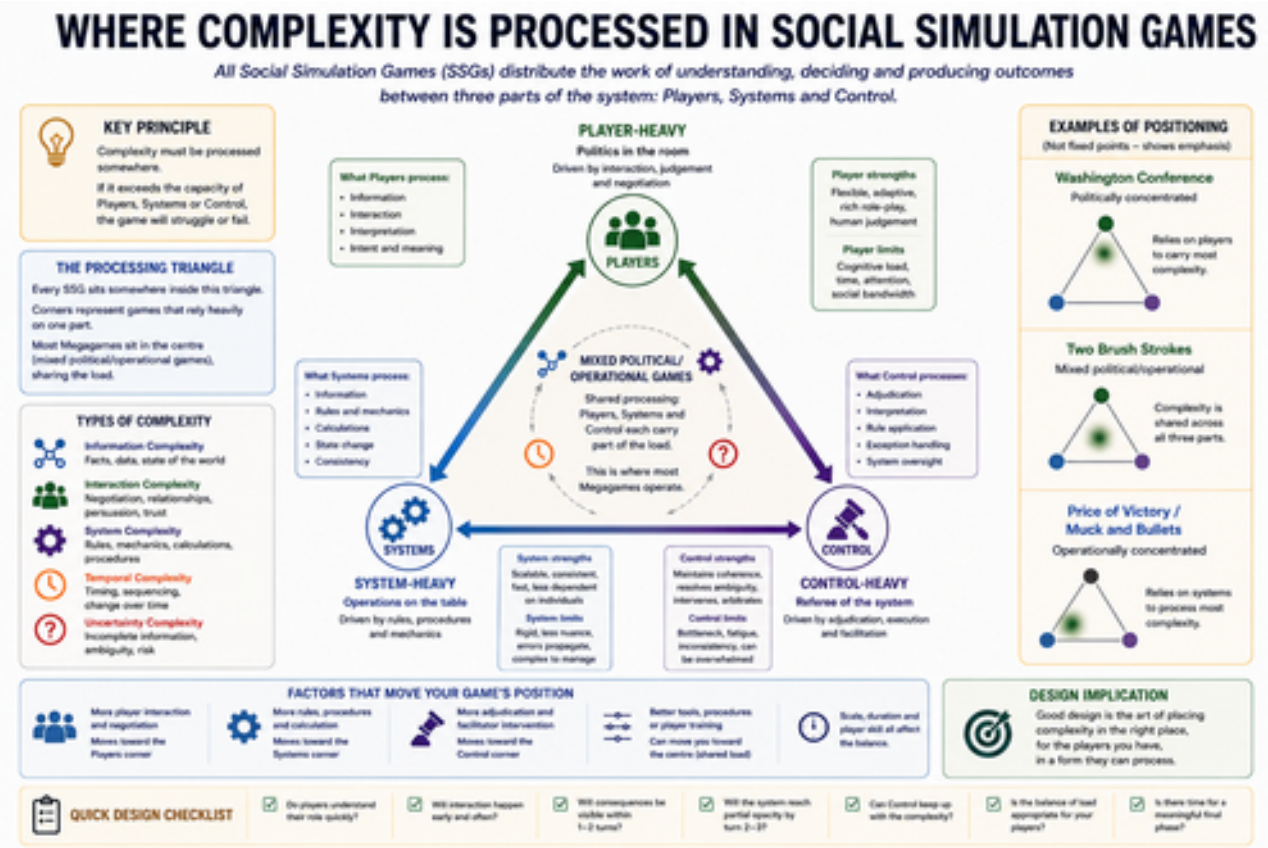


Figure 6: This diagram summarises how SSGs handle complexity and gives examples from my games. LARPs would be placed between Players and Control.

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
- 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.

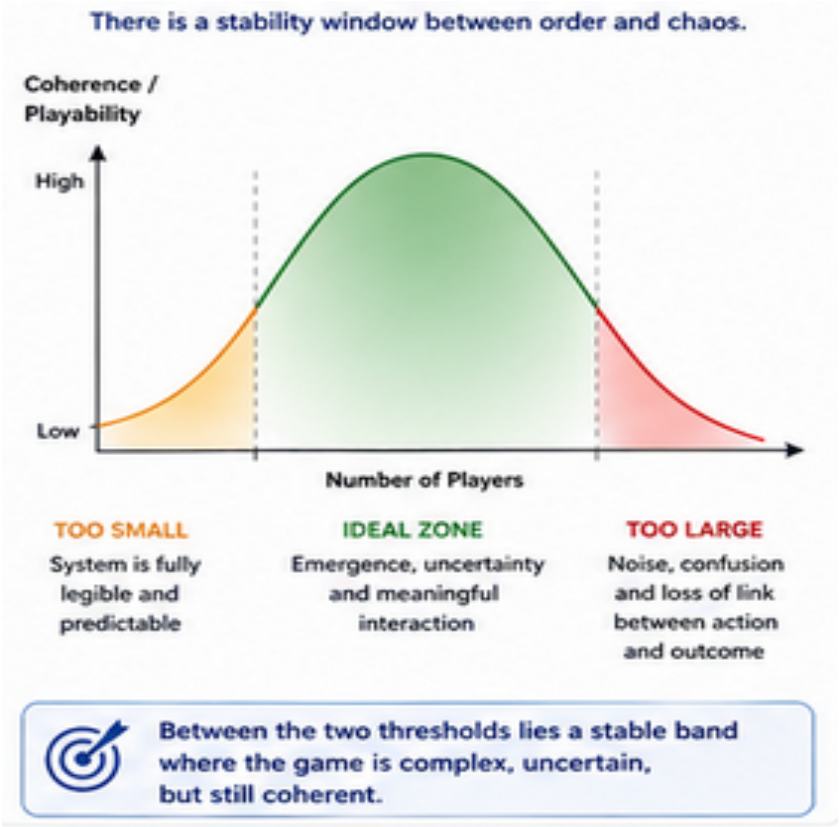
The Goldilocks zone

There are limits.

- too small allows the players to understand the whole system: the game becomes predictable
- being 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 region.

Figure 7

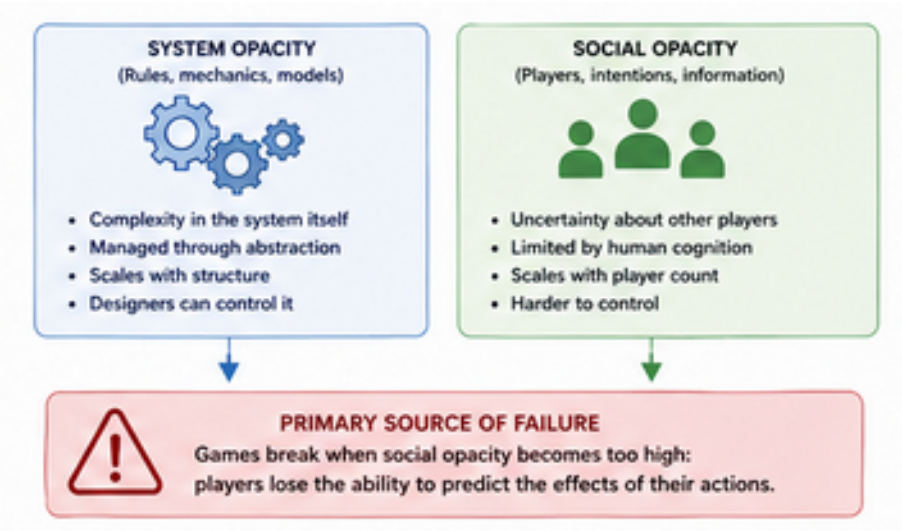


My experience suggests that the ideal zone is somewhere between 30 and 70 players. Games are, of course, not balanced in absolute terms, but relative to the player group so you must understand the player group's ability. My assessment of 30 to 70 is linked to my understanding of our player group and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

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)

Figure 8



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

Duration and Emergence

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.

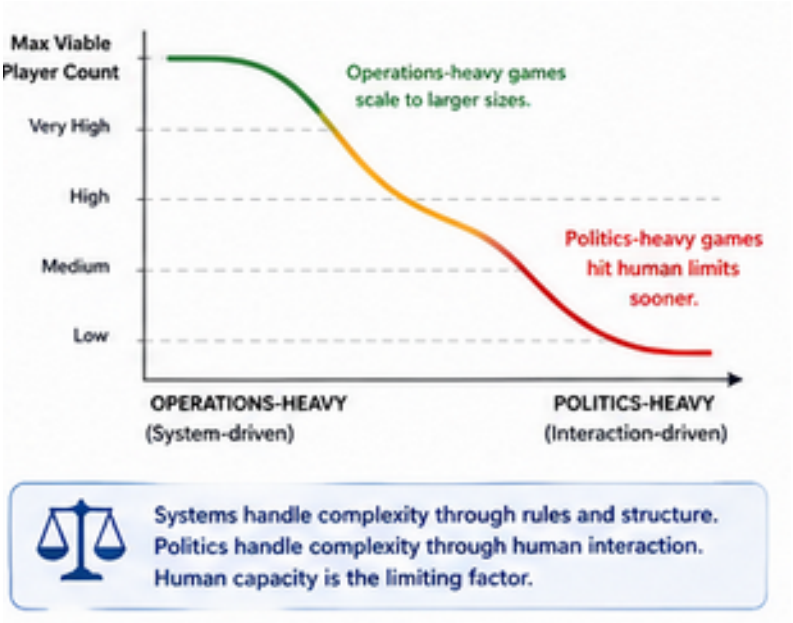
Operations and politics

Games vary in how they resolve actions:

- **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.

Figure 9



Worked examples

Washington Conference (political)

- the model is largely carried by players
- there are minimal mechanics
- there is a high reliance on briefing and interaction
- the Control load is low: it requires one or two Control
- because it becomes complex quickly, it is better at a small scale (40 players)

Two Brush Strokes (mixed political/operational)

- the model and complexity are shared between systems and players
- it has a balance between operations and politics
- it requires a moderate Control load, many being involved in straightforward logistics tasks
- it is stable at medium scale (50 players)

Price of Victory / Muck and Bullets (operational)

- the model is largely handled through rules and procedures
- there is a turn system and combat mechanics
- this requires a high Control load
- the game only really “comes to life” by having large numbers (initially designed for 120)

LARPs and Megagames

Both LARPs and Megagames are SSGs.

The difference is not absolute, but one of emphasis.

- LARPs tend to internalise the model within players
- Megagames tend to externalise it into systems and structures

Taking Washington Conference as an example, although it resembles LARP in its reliance on interaction, *Washington Conference* has formal roles and institutions, defined processes (meetings, reporting) and system-level behaviour beyond individual control so players operate within a system rather than solely embodying characters and there are system objectives (budgets, security).

I do not know as much as I would like about LARPs, but what this implies is that Megagames will be reliant on turns and LARPs will not. This is because turns act as:

- synchronisation points
- separation between action and resolution
- opportunities for Control to process the system

Turns convert a continuous system into a sequence of manageable states. Without turns:

- systems become asynchronous
- causality becomes unclear
- Control load increases

Turns therefore make a complex system manageable.

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

Writing This Article

I used a Large Language Model (LLM) to help me write this article by structuring my thoughts and challenging when there was a lack of consistency, but the ideas are mine (so unfortunately, I cannot blame anyone or anything else). In particular, the diagrams were largely drawn by that LLM. I also used the LLM to check across different fields of study whether these ideas were contradicted anywhere. The LLM gave a number of examples of support from other fields which it summarised as:

“Some of these ideas have parallels in other fields.

The notion that systems become difficult to understand as they grow relates to work in cognitive psychology on bounded decision-making.

The idea of a stable region between order and chaos echoes concepts from complexity theory.

The limits on interaction reflect well-known constraints on human social behaviour.

What appears less explicitly explored is how these ideas combine in the design and play of games.”

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 in which complexity is distributed across players, systems and facilitators. SSGs do not merely simulate worlds. They simulate the experience of making decisions inside complex worlds under conditions of incomplete understanding.

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

I do not imagine this framework is complete or final, but it has already proved useful to me both in analysing games and in thinking about designing them. I’d really welcome thoughts about this or, indeed, someone telling me that they’ve already thought these through and they’re rubbish! Nonetheless, I have produced a guide that works these ideas into practice:

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.

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:

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.