

Untitled - July 18, 2025

Speaker Welcome to pick Up and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step out for a walk, and deliver an episode to you while I stroll around. I'm Brendan Riley. Well, greetings listeners. It's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago and I'm out walking around talking about board games. I was looking through my episodes that I've done recently and realized it's been a long time. A long time since I've done a 400 Back episode. I was thinking, I call them look back, but "look back" I also used to describe the episodes where I look at a year and tell you the best games from that year. But there's another segment that I've done a few times. I haven't done it much this year, but where I look 400 episodes ago on the podcast and I talk about what I talked about then and I started to say, has my opinion changed? What do I think of that episode? So looking 400 episodes back from this one, that would put me at episode 363, because this is episode 763. And so I thought I would talk about that in episode 363, which was released on September 3rd, 2021, which really speaks to the good effort I am making to keep on pace here. I'm on episode 763 and it's only July. So I'm really on top of the game. In fact, I may need to slow down a little bit or I'm going to hit episode 800 well before the end of the year. Somebody said to me, like, do you really need each season to be 100 episodes and fit in the calendar year? Yes, yes I do. So anyway, in episode 363, here's the episode description. Brendan shares his thoughts about games that use tracks for progression. Join us, won't you? I think it was just called tracks. In that episode, I talked in sort of neutral ways about Harry Potter, House Cup competition and Russian railroads. I talked in positive terms about Orléans, Coimbra Trismegistus and the lost ruins of Arnak and I talked in somewhat negative terms about Newton and Lorenzo IL Magnifico. In the case of both Newton and Lorenzo IL Magnifico, I identified that I found those games less satisfying, not as I viewed it from here, because the theme was not exciting or not engaging, but rather because I said I couldn't get my hand, my brain to wrap around the tracks. And I wondered if that's because I was taught the game rather than reading the rulebook, which is an interesting thing to reflect, and something I have talked about a bit in here, in this, in this podcast since then, about the idea that, you know, if I'm taught the game, if I don't read the rulebook, I engage with the game differently and it's harder to hold it in my head or make it click. I don't think I did a good job of identifying other, other ways that games with tracks succeed or fail, so I thought I would add to this conversation today and amplify it a bit. So I want to start with when I was looking this up on Board Game Geek, that Site puts tech trees and track progress in the same as the same mechanism, which is really interesting to me because I don't feel like they are the same mechanism. Like if you think of the way that Orléans uses tracks, every time you buy one of the workers, you go up on the track related to that worker, and sometimes you'll get a bonus depending where you are on that track. And there are some tracks where you're scoring multiplier as part of the track versus a game like Beyond the Sun, where there's this big tech tree, and as you move up the tech tree, you get access to different technologies. That feels like different things to me, and I wouldn't put them in the same category, although I don't know how I would articulate the difference very specifically. So I want to say generally here I'm excluding tech trees as what I'm thinking about when I talk about games of tracks. So for example, Brass Birmingham is marked as a game with a tech tree because as you build those buildings, you get access to different buildings. You have different technologies, but it's not considered a

game with tracks to me. That being said, there is the income track and the points track, but I feel like that is not the crucial element of the game managing your movement on those tracks. And that's the part where the game doesn't fit for me. As opposed to Lost Ruins of Arnak, which is a deck builder and a worker placement game and a tracks game. But crucially, there's only one track in the Lost Ruins of Arnak. You have the one track that you're keeping track of, which is the research track, but that track is crucial for winning the game. You have to be managing your work on that track. I don't think you can win the game if you don't move on that track at all. I suppose it's possible, but I suspect it's not. I don't think there's enough other stuff in the game to let you win. If you never move on the research track at least a few times just to get the extra the research assistants, like if you don't get those, you're just losing so many actions or so many potential things you can do that I think it's pretty hard to succeed. Okay, so I thought I would talk about tech, uh, tracks and track games in a in a little different way. So I said, I'm not counting the tech tree as a track, but I would be. I am willing to count the track as a counter or the track as you thing. You move up where you get bonuses as you move up it. One of the slippery places to start there for the track. You move up but get bonuses is revive. So in revive there is this tech board in the middle machines I think they're called. And you have three counters a green one, a grey one, a yellow one. And as you move up those counters you gain points or you gain access to different machines. So there's an argument. This seems like a tech tree, but I would suggest it's not. And there's a couple reasons for that. One is sometimes you move up and you don't get anything. So I think there is something to be said for if it's a track, if moving it up, it doesn't always give you a bonus. It gives you access to better bonuses later. But sometimes you just move it up because you're moving it up. I also think there's a big piece of it. If you get to choose the thing that goes that you get access to as a bonus, that doesn't feel like a tech tree to me. To me, it feels like a tech tree. If you're unlocking technologies and those technologies are visible from the beginning and kind of set in place like Beyond the Sun is an interesting example of that. When you unlock a when you advance your technology, you get to pick one of two technologies to open up. Um, but I think you draw them, actually. Yeah, I don't know, I feel like the maybe because every time you move up, you're unlocking technology. So it's all about these technologies, which then give you access to more things. There might be technologies beyond the sun that just give you points, but that doesn't feel like a track to me. Revive is an interesting example because in Revive, you certainly do have the machine tracks that I've told you about, but then you also have the worker tracks that are represented, and you spend books and you place your little people, and as you place your people, you you open up technologies as well. I don't think of those as tracks. Is it as simple as you have a piece that you move up on this track? That's what makes it a track versus you're putting things out or removing things, then that's not a track, you're just opening up other stuff that seems like a dumb line to draw in the sand. And probably why, uh, Geoff Engelstein and Isaac Shalev in their board Game Mechanisms book. It's probably why they don't draw that line that way, why they put tech trees and tracks in the same boat. But for me, they're different. Okay, so I've dithered enough. So I want to point out three ways that I have been enjoying additional ways that I've been enjoying games that are not we're not represented by the previous discussion. Oh, there's like a helicopter. I can hear a helicopter flying over. I wonder what it's doing. All right. The first example I want to mention here is a track that is also a track that is a counter. So there are a number of games I've played, two in

particular, I want to bring up Foundations of Rome and Nucleum that represent the use tracks, but the track is like a counter representing the things that you have. Of the games that I talked about before. Orléans and Coimbra both fit in this category, and Orléans, the track is a counter of how many of the different workers. Each track is a counter of how many different workers you've added. Of course, the gray track is reflects different, something different. But generally the idea of the track representing your counter is interesting. In Coimbra, the track doesn't just count how many people you have, although the people you take is a big factor in moving the track. There are other things that move it as well, so there's like a combination. The games. The game that I wanted to mention, the two additional games I wanted to mention that Feel This Way are Foundations of Rome and Nucleome. In Nucleum as I talked about, there are three tracks. There is the track of worker income. There's the track of money income and the track of points income. And as that track rises up, you get more money, people or points each time you do your reset action. So the way that the game reflects that income is kind of a track. As you move that and you can move those things up in a variety of ways, they don't just count, although it's sort of the counter that indicates your tech, your income, and sort of more importantly, it doesn't. Oh my gosh, the helicopters flying really low over my town, which is maybe why it's getting louder as I'm walking over, I could see it and it's so low that some of the trees in my view here have blocked it. I don't know what's going on with this helicopter, but it's very low. So the counter in Nucleum or the tracks in Nucleum. Count your income. And there are, but there are ways to raise them up. There are a variety of ways to raise them up so they do feel more like tracks. By contrast, Foundations of Rome is directly a counter. It reflects how many of the different kinds of resources you have on the board. And each round, or each age or whatever it is you the number of resources you have on the board reflects what you get or your position on different elements, so it becomes a player comparison aspect. So those are the two games that have tracks that feel like counters, where moving up the tracks doesn't get you anything inherently at the time you're moving up them, but it does gain you stuff later. So definitely worth thinking about. And, uh, I like Nucleum a lot. I talked about that in the in another episode recently. I don't like Foundations of Rome as much, but I think it's really interesting. I do like it enough to play it, and I would play it happily with other people, but I feel like it's a game that should be more family friendly. But it's really aggressive and I don't. I'm not a big fan of super aggressive games, so that is Foundations of Rome. Next up are games with tracks where the theme fails. Uh, and what I mean by this is where the tracks are a crucial part of the game, but they don't really, to me, convey anything about the playing of the game. Oh, and the tracks as counters. I think Sorcerer City is sort of as well. No, it's not because you don't go up the the tracks literally just count what you have and then they go away. They reset each round. So never mind for Sorcerer City there. So there are a couple of games that I've played recently where the tracks idea reflects important elements of gameplay, often unlocks stuff, but doesn't Actually convey meaning to me in a narrative sense. For example, in Planet Unknown, when you place tiles out, often those tiles allow you to advance the tracks related to the tiles that you've placed. As you advance those tracks, you will get spiffs and bonuses. But as I've played this game, I have yet to feel like those tracks reflect any narrative thing. Like, I don't know what the different colored tracks. It's possible that the rulebook names them. It tells us this means something, but I've yet to have it feel like it means something for it to reflect the experience of playing it, or reflect the story being told. By exploring this unknown planet. So

that's kind of where I'm where I'm going when I say the tracks don't do anything for me thematically. Planet unknown is very much a tracks on tracks game, and I think it reflects back to Russian railroads and my commentary about Russian railroads, which was that I, I think the game is pretty interesting, but the plot is nonsensical. Like, it's just the you're just moving up the tracks and getting bonuses. And I think it's weird, like the theme doesn't fit at all or it feels like it doesn't. And that's kind of where I fit with Planet Unknown. Now, Planet Unknown does have the planet where you are placing these polyomino figure tokens, and those Polyomino tokens then have a real effect on gameplay, and it does feel like you're exploring things. So that part works very well. Oh my gosh, there is so much noise right now. And I avoided walking down the streets with garbage cans. The moment I turn onto a street that has garbage cans out, who else turns onto the street? A garbage truck. So I'm gonna have to pause for a moment. The other game where theme really fails for me. And I feel bad about this because I like the game. I do like it is Tapestry like. I think Tapestry is a really interesting game. I enjoy playing it. I enjoy the way it looks on the table. I feel like what's happening in Tapestry just isn't interesting as a narrative, like the way that you advance your board state is to move up these tracks, and then the tracks give you bonuses which allow you to do stuff. Now, you know, there is the central area where you're exploring. There is your kind of city where you're building these buildings. So there are interesting things on the board happening, but it just doesn't feel like narrative to me to it. Like I move up one on the science track and then I have access to this bonus. Um, there are plenty of thematic things in the game that should help me feel that way, but the core action doesn't feel like I'm telling a story, except generically. My people are better at science or my people are better at war. And that part's hard to get over as I think about even something like mosaic feels much more narrative to me because as I build those, as I get those cards, it feels like I am adding to the story of my civilization in a way that it doesn't feel that way for Tapestry. This might just be I haven't played Tapestry enough. If I played it more, I would come to understand that story better. Uh, but for now, that's where I am with Tapestry. Places where I think the theme succeeds. Where the tech trees do feel like they're adding for me, I guess revive is interesting. I put revive on here, where you're advancing that technology and then you're getting better at doing things. I mean, Revive and Tapestry are very similar from a thematic perspective. They both have this shared board. They both have these tech trees. They both have actions you're taking that nominally have narrative purpose but not deeply. And that do not really affect do not really tell a story very well. So maybe I need to put revive into the category where the theme fails. I think I do, now that I had marked it as theme succeeds because it's a game I really like, as opposed to tapestry, which I think is fine, but maybe I'm, I'm changing my changing my view right here. Another game where the the tracks fail narratively is revive because moving up on the green track, the gray track, the yellow track, they all feel basically the same. Although yellow is more about food, gray is more about gears, green is more about books. So there is a narrative through line there, but it doesn't really tell. Like you feel like you're telling a story. The machines you get don't provide narrative juice. It's a lot like tapestry in that way, which made me suggest I should go back to tapestry and try it again, because if I like revived so much, why don't I like tapestry so much? Mm. Interesting thought. Um, the two games where I think the tracks do do a lot for me. They do work. Our Praga caput Regni and Messina 1347. Praga, I have mentioned before on the podcast as a stealth tracks game. When you look at it, it looks like there's all this

different stuff you're doing and there are two tracks very visible, but there's actually five tracks in the game. And you just move on them in different ways. There's the research track, the university track. Both of those have very clear track approaches. There's those are the hunger wall in the cathedral, both of which have important score multiplying effects and bonuses if you manage them carefully. But they are tracks as you move up them. And then there is the King's Road, which is a track that runs through the middle of the board that doesn't feel like a track because it's a road, but very much it is. Every time you move up, you're going to get a bonus. If you move up with an egg, you get an extra bonus. And pretty much every time I play the game, I try to do well on that track. I love the Kings Road track. I don't know why. I probably should try playing a game where I never move on that track and see if I do better, because I use a lot of turns moving on that track. But ultimately it becomes a really interesting method for playing, is to do stuff all over the different tracks in Praga, and I guess the narrative elements feel different enough to me that it doesn't feel like moving on boring tracks the way that Russian railroads does. Similarly, Messina 1342 [1347] has this tech board which looks a lot like the revive one actually, except to activate the things, you have to put your people in those spaces. And this one, uh, is interesting to me because it is so variable and the movement on it, the benefits on the movement on it, come from the pieces you put in place more than the other elements. Um, it feels to me like reflecting a story of the people you're helping in your city. That's what I like about the tracks in Messina 1347 and why they feel different from those other games. Well, that brings me to the end of my walk today. Thanks for joining me on my walk. I hope that you enjoyed it. I'd love to hear your thoughts about the original episode on tracks or this revised new conversation about it. What are your favorite tracks on tracks games, and why do you like them? Do you think theme matters and how does theme show up in tracks on tracks games? Head over to BoardGameGeek guild 3269 and let me know your thoughts and thanks for joining me in my walk today. I hope that your next walk is as pleasant as mine was. Bye bye. Brought to you by Rattlebox Games.