

<b>THE LOS ANGELES TIMES</b>	
<b>A Moral Maze - Part 1: The Switch</b>	

2075 CA

*How did Union Pacific decide which switch to throw?*

- 1 A thought experiment played out in real life when, in 2003, a runaway freight train headed for downtown Los Angeles. Union Pacific, the train company –the railroad company, as they say over there – faced a dilemma - should they divert the train away from the city to a less populated area?
- 2 The dilemma the train company faced was the dilemma in The Trolley Problem, also known as "The Switch." The train company decided to throw the switch and the train – full of timber – derailed and crashed into a residential area.
- 3 Los Angeles lived up to its name on 20 June 2003 - the City of Angels. 31 freight cars travelling at an estimated 95mph - and carrying a mass of timber - collided with people's homes in the City of Commerce in California. Miraculously, nobody was killed, despite the people who lived next to the railway line having no warning and only a few people suffered minor injuries.
- 4 The trauma of "a cross between an earthquake and a tornado as a cloud of white dust and rocks, mixed with tons of lumber that had been carried in the open freight cars, came crashing down" as it was described in the Los Angeles Times story [Runaway Train Jumps Tracks in Commerce](#) is almost impossible to imagine. People had to run for their lives. A man carried his pregnant sister and a father broke a window in his house to rescue his children - because the front door was blocked by debris. Three homes were destroyed, while five were damaged, as shown in the image in this article. It wasn't just the train carriages or the timber that was dangerous, as if that wasn't terrible enough, but live power lines and a broken gas main.
- 5 This runaway train incident was The Trolley Problem [also known as "The Switch" or "Bystander at the Switch"] playing out in real life. The Trolley Problem is often described as a thought experiment in ethics and psychology.

At its most simple, as described in its [Wikipedia article](#), it is a scenario in which a runaway tram – *trolley* - is heading for a fatal collision with five people. A bystander can intervene by diverting the vehicle to a different track by throwing a switch. If they do this, the vehicle will kill one person.

So, the choice is:

Do nothing, in which case the trolley will kill the five people on the main track; or

Pull the lever, diverting the trolley onto the side track where it will kill one person.

Which is the more ethical option?

Put more simply: What is the right thing to do?

- 6 Union Pacific clearly decided on 20 June 2003 in Los Angeles that the right thing to do was to *pull the switch* and divert the train.

But doing so was not simply a matter of diverting the train to a different destination.

Diverting the train meant there was a risk of the train derailing – and that is what happened.

It appears from the Los Angeles Times article, [Rail Yard Was Only Shot to Stop Runaway Train](#), that there may have been a better diversion for the train than the one the company decided on. The freight cars would probably still have derailed, but in an area that was far less populated.

Having diverted the train, shockingly, Union Pacific did not notify local authorities or the police about the runaway train. The [National Transportation Safety Board's Railroad Accident Brief](#) indicates that Union Pacific expected the train carriages to stop by themselves. They under-estimated the gradient of the track - and so, the speed.

- 7 The damage caused in Commerce City was well over two million dollars – but it could have been a lot higher. The Wikipedia article on [Union Pacific Railroad](#) includes a list of the company's accidents and other issues – such as environmental pollution – and two million dollars was a cheapie.

Despite this saving – in every sense - Union Pacific were not prepared to help the 150 Commerce City residents who were temporarily homeless, as reported by the Los Angeles Times in [Rail Yard Was Only Shot to Stop Runaway Train](#).

The people, that is, who were displaced and traumatised because the train company pulled the switch and diverted the train.

City officials had to take it upon themselves to pay for clothes and hotel accommodation for them, saying:

*"Union Pacific officials "just sat there and looked at each other when we talked about the need to put these people up."*

- 8 Preventing the train from reaching the downtown rail complex was Union Pacific's priority as reported by the Los Angeles Times in [Rail Yard Was Only Shot to Stop Runaway Train](#).

I can't help wondering, however – on what basis did they make the decision on *where* to send the train?

Could it have been, in part - financial cost?

Commerce City was an area populated by mainly lower-income residents. A litigation manager for Union Pacific said the company had agreed to reimburse the city for expenses and pay to rebuild houses.

So I should hope!

Union Pacific seemed unable or unwilling to answer pointed questions from Commerce City Council, such as:

Had they made an effort – knowing where the train was headed - to contact the city and the Los Angeles County Fire Department?

In an emergency, Union Pacific said, railroad officials typically attempted to contact all emergency personnel – but could not say whether anyone "had that opportunity."

The company also said that the decision to divert the speeding train was made by a railroad official - but *would not identify the person*.

I say this.

If you're going to sacrifice one group of people to save another, don't you need to be able to at least show how you reached that decision?

### **CONNECT'S Maxim and Oath**

Connect is only interested in finding and sharing the TRUTH.

In search of that TRUTH, we only pose questions – we have no answers.

By: Helen King

Source: Tetbury CONNECT: [Magazine](#)

- 4 [LINK](#): Los Angeles Times: Runaway Train Jumps Tracks in Commerce
- 5 [LINK](#): Wikipedia: The Trolley Problem
- 6 [LINK](#): Los Angeles Times: Rail Yard Was Only Shot to Stop Runaway Train
- 6 [LINK](#): National Transportation Safety Board: Railroad Accident Brief
- 7 [LINK](#): Wikipedia: Union Pacific Railroad

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