UNSETTLING CATAN

DETACHED DESIGN IN EUROGAMES

J. REY LEE

UNSETTLING CATAN

TABLETOP GAMES

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Unsettling Catan: Detached Design in Eurogames
J. Rey Lee

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J. Rey Lee

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I’d expressly designed Catan to be a peaceful game in which participants didn’t fight, but instead traded and cooperated with each other; a game in which every player, even if they lost, could retain their dignity and be proud of the little empire they had created.

—Klaus Teuber, *My Journey to Catan* (258–59)

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Credits

I dedicate this book to everyone who has met me at the table, especially soon-to-be four generations of formidable gaming women: Edwina, Laila, Suha, Randa, Regina, Soraya, and Inara. Thank you for showing me what it means to play.

I also dedicate this to the memory of the gentle innovator Klaus Teuber. Thank you for also showing me what it means to play.

And, because writing is a cooperative game, special thanks to everyone who developed this odd little project.

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Note to the Reader

This new book series on Tabletop Games has the ambitious goal of advancing gaming scholarship while speaking to a broader gaming audience. So, here are a few notes that might help readers navigate this book:

- This book uses gaming and academic lingo to connect its ideas to ongoing conversations. It also uses some vocabulary I developed to talk about boardgames as media. Because specialized language can sometimes get confusing, all key terms are explained in the *glossary* at the end of the book.
- This book has over 250 *endnotes* that mostly cite or discuss other academic sources. Readers should feel free to ignore these notes unless they have special interest in pausing to pursue one of these side quests.
- Although there are themes that run throughout this book, the chapters are meant as topical *case studies* that can be read singly or out of order.

Above all, although this book raises some hard conversations, it's offered in a playful spirit. It's meant to stimulate reflection

rather than advance arguments, inspire speculation rather than spark debates, and explore questions rather than settle issues. So, please make the following ideas your own—explore them, adapt them, play with them. And have fun!

Introduction
Unsettling Eurogames

Catan[1] is many things, but it's certainly no *Monopoly*.

At least, that's what the mainstream US media argued when it began to notice the unprecedented success of this German boardgame[2] about settling a colorful hexagonal island. *Wired* demanded the comparison in an article provocatively titled "Monopoly Killer: Perfect German Board Game Redefines Genre." The article argued that *Catan* was "changing the American idea of what a board game can be"[3] away from cutthroat games like *Monopoly* toward a more peaceful and positive style of gaming. The reviewer even described *Catan* as an ethical revolution, quoting boardgamegeek.com cofounder Derk Solko: "If I could wave a magic wand and replace all the copies of Monopoly out there with [*Catan*], I truly think the world would be a better place."[4]

Echoing these moral sentiments, a *Washington Post* opinion piece recommended *Catan* over *Monopoly* as a game that "teaches new ways of thinking."[5] Similarly, *The Atlantic* lauded *Catan* as rewarding cooperation, unlike other games "that quickly descend into cutthroat competitiveness."[6] In short,

Catan burst onto the US American[7] gaming scene to an ethically charged refrain: *Catan* has special moral value because it's no *Monopoly*.

Such sentiments have even made their way into *Catan*'s brand identity. As designer Klaus Teuber's son Guido writes, "As a brand, Catan reflects and transports values and morals that we are proud to work with every day. In its very essence, we believe that Catan stands for fairness, openness, tolerance, exploration and community."[8] With such lofty ideals, *Catan* shows that a fun family game can stand for many things.

It turns out that the media was right to herald *Catan* as a revolution in boardgaming—and not just because it sold over 40 million copies[9] since its release in 1995 (more than modern hobby megahits *Ticket to Ride*, *Pandemic*, *Carcassonne*, *Codenames*, and *Dominion* combined[10]). *Catan* has set an unprecedented legacy for modern game design. Many things boardgamers now take for granted were pioneered or popularized by *Catan*, including gameplay elements like Resource Management and shared die rolls as well as production elements like listing designers' names on box covers, using pictorial rulebooks, and releasing expansions.[11] And perhaps *Catan*'s most lasting legacy is that it's widely regarded as the central catalytic event in the worldwide popularization of *eurogames*, an influential genre of strategic boardgames that has become a cornerstone of hobby gaming.[12]

And, as this book shall explore, the media was equally right to describe this revolution in ethical terms—although largely not in the idealistic ways they argued. Although *Catan* feels

more peaceful than *Monopoly*, it hasn't made boardgames more moral. If anything, the ideological legacy that eurogames have built on *Catan*'s foundation aims to be blandly *amoral*. One might say that eurogames have largely settled into a *detached design* philosophy that cultivates peaceful feelings by abstracting play away from its rich cultural significance, making conflicts feel peaceful, imperialism feel rational, and cultural values feel neutral.

So, presenting *Catan* as more moral than *Monopoly* is far too simplistic. *Catan* and *Monopoly* both raise interesting ethical questions, but neither game is "good" or "bad" in any straightforward sense. Rather than engaging in pointless debates over the morality of these games, I find it much more interesting to embrace the beautiful disquietude that games like *Catan* can evoke. So, rather than telling a blandly optimistic story of *Catan*'s history or popularity, *Unsettling Catan* explores the surprisingly complicated ethical terrain underlying *Catan*'s revolutionary design.

As the first step on this journey, this introduction reflects on what it means to *take play seriously*, recounts some of the cultural forces that paved *the road to Catan*, describes how the eurogame tradition evolved as it walked *the road from Catan*, and explores why it's worth *unsettling detached design* in eurogames. So, while this chapter tells an old story of how *Catan* helped shape what eurogames have become, it also takes *Catan* seriously as an ongoing provocation for reimagining what boardgames can yet become. After all, sometimes looking back is the only way to move forward.

Taking Play Seriously

It may seem odd to take play seriously. After all, isn't *Catan* "just a game"? Absolutely, yes. Games don't raise life-or-death issues like real-world settlement does. Play thrives by suspending or subverting seriousness. As sociologist Thomas Henricks notes, "it is not play's spirit to leave people in misery. Rather, play converts negative feelings into positive ones by providing opportunities for people to extricate themselves from simulated distress and damage."[13] Similarly, as Teuber eloquently puts it,

> In real life, mistakes often haunt you for a lifetime. In the small world of a game, I can try out new paths, make mistakes or even have bad luck without fear of consequences for my real life. This sensation of feeling tension like in real life and being able to relax at the same time is one reason why I like to play.[14]

In other words, play matters because it both is and isn't real. Play is a beautiful interplay between reality and imagination, tension and relaxation, seriousness and unseriousness. Even silly or abstract boardgames are worth taking seriously precisely because they're "just games," which means they provide uniquely playful experiences.

With boardgames, there's rarely a moral to the story—in fact, there's rarely a story at all.[15] But that doesn't mean boardgames are meaningless or neutral. As Teuber argues, "games can also convey messages in a subtle and hidden way."[16] Boardgames are meaningful precisely because they

play, don't tell.[17] They evoke profoundly dynamic experiences no message can match. Boardgames always mean more than they say. Without making statements or arguing positions,[18] boardgames put values into play.[19]

Consider the value-laden language that Teuber uses to describe his inspiration for *Catan*. As quoted in this book's epigraph, Teuber claims to have "expressly designed *Catan* to be a peaceful game in which participants didn't fight, but instead traded and cooperated with each other; a game in which every player, even if they lost, could retain their dignity and be proud of the little empire they had created."[20] Without offering a single moral argument, *Catan* creates a world where I can explore ideals of peace, cooperation, dignity, and . . . empire?

It might seem a bit perverse to single out this offhand reference to a "little empire," but empire-building is undeniably at the heart of *Catan* (Fig. 1). Although *Catan* doesn't directly speak to *empire*,[21] a game entirely oriented around settlement can't help putting the idea of empire into play. Games like *Catan* are doubly meaningful because they actively play out cultural ideas, ideals, and practices.[22] Even though these games don't actively moralize, they put cultural values into play. And that's worth taking seriously.

Whereas any art can offer social commentary, games have distinctive ways of asking players to *play out* cultural ideas and ideals. Unlike most other media, boardgames are especially reliant on players acting in scripted[23] ways to make the games function as designed. To play a game is to actively enact its rules and pursue its goals. In this way, boardgames are studies in *complicity*.[24] By requiring players to enforce game rules,

Figure 1. A close-up view of four little empires vying to settle the isle of Catan. Since the strategic experience of playing *Catan* revolves around expansion, the game is a playful exercise in empire-building.

they invite players to play out any cultural values these rules imply. To play *Monopoly* is to play out capitalism. To play *Catan* is to play out settlement.

At the same time, boardgames always give players freedom to *play with* the values they otherwise *play out*. Players can always transcend or transform[25] the structures they move within. After all, play can be thought of as “free movement within a more rigid structure.”[26] Without needing a moral to their stories, games always create opportunities for questioning the values they put into play. So, taking play seriously doesn’t mean abandoning playfulness. It means owning the agency players have to playfully question the structures they move within.

In the end, although boardgames always mean more than they say, taking them seriously means getting more say in what they mean.

The Road to *Catan*

As with any art form, taking boardgames seriously requires first exploring their cultural context. So, this section briefly recounts a cultural history of eurogames to show how broader cultural values—especially anti-war sentiments—fueled the evolution of the *peaceful-feeling* eurogame.

But what even is a *eurogame*? I often see eurogames defined by laundry lists[27] of common traits like prioritizing strategic gameplay over theme and eschewing luck, direct conflict, and player elimination. But rather than establishing an absolute definition, such characteristics might be better understood as telling an implied story about the values that drove the emergence of eurogames. Reading between the lines, many of these stereotypical traits position eurogames as a reaction *against* prior combat-heavy genres.

As gaming historian Stewart Woods tells the story, hobby gaming before *Catan* was dominated by three combat-heavy genres: *wargames* like Avalon Hill's military simulations (beginning in the 1950s but seeing its heyday in the '60s and '70s), *role-playing games* like *Dungeons & Dragons* (beginning in the '70s), and *collectible card games* like *Magic: The Gathering* (beginning only a few years before *Catan*). Teuber paints a vivid picture of this culture when he describes his first experience walking into a hobby game store and noticing how

"Many of the colorful boxes bore English names and looked quite belligerent."[28]

Such overt militantism didn't fit the zeitgeist of the German gaming scene, as Teuber elaborates: "Cosims [conflict simulations] were widespread in the English-speaking world at the time. Since the games dealt with war, hardly any were being developed in Germany, which was still traumatized by the Second World War."[29] These games were in the wrong place at the wrong time in a then-divided Germany, making Germany in the '80s and '90s the right place at the right time to innovate a new, seemingly more peaceful game genre. So, *Catan* may be no *Monopoly*, but it's more historically appropriate to say that it's no *RISK*.

So, when *Catan* entered the scene a few years after the reunification of Germany, *Catan*'s "spirit of optimism"[30] likely resonated with the deep hope for peace of a culture still grappling with the political and social fallout of an unprecedented war. As Woods describes, cultural and regulatory pressures against war themes combined with a lack of German mass-market staples like *Monopoly* to inspire German designers to create the decidedly, almost aggressively peaceful eurogame genre. More family-friendly than prior hobby game genres, early peaceful-feeling eurogames combined accessible gameplay with "culturally acceptable themes."[31] In a market saturated with warlike games, eurogames arose celebrating peaceful feelings.

Ironically, many early eurogames cultivated peaceful feelings while maintaining surprisingly warlike gameplay. Like *Catan*, popular early eurogames *El Grande* in 1995 and *Carcas-*

sonne in 2000 pioneered new ways of making their cutthroat territorial battles feel peaceful.[32] In the case of *Catan*, less than a quarter of German respondents and less than a third of US respondents to Sybille Aminzadah's surveys assessed *Catan*'s "prevailing mood" as "aggressive."[33] Conversely, a surprisingly strong majority of players *perceive Catan* as "peaceful" or "neutral."

Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."[34] But for these early eurogames, peace isn't even the absence of tension—it's a way of covering up tension. One might say the road to *Catan* was paved with peaceful intentions but ultimately led to seeking peace in tensions. So, eurogames coalesced as a genre preoccupied with reframing its competitive and thematic tensions as peaceful, a preoccupation that continues to guide *the road from Catan*.

The Road from *Catan*

In the decades following *Catan*, eurogames[35] slowly settled into a recognizable style that continues to wrap strategic gameplay in peaceful feelings. And so, what began as a way of unsettling one set of norms has now established new norms that are worth questioning. In particular, it's become normal for peaceful-feeling eurogames to reject outright war only to embrace softer forms of economic or cultural imperialism.

So, although eurogames emerged as a well-meaning reaction against warlike game genres, they haven't quite managed to destabilize the imperialist entanglements of a tradi-

tion where "In the history of board games over the last two hundred years, Europe's mindset of colonialism likely had the greatest influence."[36] Arguably the first influx of mass-market boardgames were 18th-century map games explicitly designed as colonial teaching tools.[37] And still today, "Eurogames have borrowed heavily from the imagery, language, situations, and power dynamics of European colonialist thinking."[38]

A watershed moment in establishing this trend was *Puerto Rico*, an overtly colonial game that was the #1 ranked game among the expansive boardgamegeek.com community for over five years following its release in 2002. Whereas *Catan* maintained its peace by leaning more toward ahistorical abstraction, *Puerto Rico* became controversial[39] for simultaneously sanitizing and distorting colonial history. Infamously, *Puerto Rico* erased the history of slave labor while making players' plantations worked by euphemistic "colonists" represented by brown wooden discs. Despite the criticism, *Puerto Rico*'s success showed that eurogames could evoke peaceful feelings within historically imperialist settings.

As eurogames continued to refine this approach in the 2010s, they entered what might be described as the heyday of historical, indirectly imperialist[40] eurogames. So, to explore how the pursuit of peaceful feelings enabled this surprising direction, this study periodically compares *Catan* to a selection of six influential[41] eurogames that exemplify[42] this era: *A Feast for Odin*, *The Castles of Burgundy*, *Concordia*, *Lisboa*, *Lorenzo il Magnifico*, and *Maracaibo* (Fig. 2). While these exemplars often vary significantly from *Catan* and each other, together

Figure 2. Six popular historical eurogames from the 2010s exemplifying *Catan*'s ideological legacy. The covers' aesthetics evoke historical settings while emphasizing peaceful themes like trade, exploration, architecture, and even feasting.

they map significant contours that shape eurogames' distinctive style.

Whereas *Catan* aimed to be evocative and exciting, this later generation of eurogames has developed a reputation for being dry, beige, and unthematic. "Dry" and "beige" are perhaps fair, but "unthematic" is wildly off-base. All of these games have more fleshed-out worlds than *Catan*. They all tell players a clear story about what they're trying to do and why. They all tie their mechanisms into these stories. So, the rhet-

oric of eurogames as unthematic makes most sense as a value judgment that themes don't or shouldn't matter. It's a call to *detachment*.

I call this distinctive style *detached design* because eurogames often attempt to cultivate peaceful feelings by actively repressing aspects of the thematic experiences they actually evoke. Detached designs give me permission to enjoy eurogame mechanisms unburdened by conflicted feelings—they avoid controversy not by resolving any underlying issues but by encouraging players to ignore them. They give only to take away. They intentionally limit what boardgames can be.

If anything, eurogames' reputation for being "unthematic" only shows how deeply detachment has been normalized in eurogame design and culture. And this makes it especially difficult to speak to the complicated ethics of eurogames, which play out cultural values while creating a sense of banal,[43] detached, amoral play that denies invoking those values in the first place. One might say that the cultural value that most strongly defines peaceful-feeling eurogames is detachment itself.

So, although imperialism can be a worrying trend, it's not what defines contemporary eurogames: detachment is. Actually, overt imperialism is now waning in eurogames. Arguably catalyzed by *Wingspan* in 2019, many recent eurogame hits (including *Dune: Imperium*,[44] *Lost Ruins of Arnak*, and *On Mars* in 2020, *Ark Nova* in 2021, *Flamecraft* and *Revive* in 2022, and *Earth* in 2023) have notably departed from these historically-themed eurogames (at least on the surface). While I enjoy this trend, I doubt it represents a significant break from detached design. Detached design may actually be driving this trend as

eurogames retreat still further from controversial topics to find their peaceful feelings.

Sometimes, the more things change the more they stay the same. Although eurogames have evolved an astonishing amount in just a few decades, many of these innovations merely entrench detached design. So, *Catan* will remain relevant as long as peaceful-feeling eurogames continue to play out detached dynamics. Retracing the road from *Catan* helps map how eurogames got where they are. And, in so doing, it reveals places where the road could have gone in a different direction.

Unsettling Detached Design

To summarize, *Catan* helped pioneer a tradition of peaceful-feeling eurogames that has since fallen into a habit of *detached design* that ultimately limits what boardgames can be. In other words, where *Catan* once innovated, contemporary eurogames have now *settled*.

All too often, contemporary eurogames resign themselves to the powerful inertial force of *settlement*, a conservative force that rationalizes uncritical play, making players feel comfortable with what they play out. As the many uses of the word indicate, *to be settled* means *to feel comfortable*, *to preclude further discussion* ("the matter is settled"), *to be made quiet and orderly* ("settle down"), and *to be colonized*. In these four senses, settlement resists change by repressing uncomfortable, critical, provocative, and decolonial forces. Because it fears anything unsettling, settled thinking can only ever reinforce a status quo.

To illustrate this settled thinking, let's consider how popular eurogames *Mombasa* and *Maracaibo* ask players to uncritically play out colonialism. Tellingly, the very first thing players encounter in the *Mombasa* rulebook is this call to detachment:

> Although Mombasa is loosely set within this time frame, it is not a historical simulation. It is a strategy game with an economic focus that roughly refers to historical categories and places them in a fictional setting. The exploitation of the African continent and its people is not explicitly depicted within the game play.[45]

Beyond the simple falsehood that *Mombasa* doesn't represent exploitation, the more interesting implication here is that putting historical violence "in a fictional setting" empties it of meaning. On the contrary, historical fictions and fantasies are quite meaningful. Arguably, in a society where we often forget our actual histories, how we imagine our past may matter even more. It means something for a game to ask players to play out colonialism—doubly so when it also invites players to imagine such play as neutral.

Whereas *Mombasa* misrepresents itself as neutral, *Maracaibo* admits that it isn't neutral while still inviting players to uncritically play out colonialism. Illustrating this, the last thing players encounter in the *Maracaibo* rulebook is a "comment from the author and publisher" that reads:

> Unfortunately, mistreating indigenous peoples, the slave trade, and other horrors were the order of the day. In this game, we

> are entering this world in an 'abstract' way, using only certain aspects of history, and therefore end up with a romanticized and narrow view.[46]

Although I appreciate that this disclaimer is self-aware enough to admit the problem, it's odd that it treats "entering this world in an 'abstract' way" as a foregone conclusion. It instructs players to adopt the very perspective it critiques. So, both disclaimers are actually calls to detachment.[47] As rulebook instructions, they implicitly tell players not to think or feel. They essentially give me an ultimatum: turn off part of yourself or don't play.

Although the point of these disclaimers is to help players enjoy clever strategic gameplay without feeling burdened by a heavy, sorrowful mood, it's worth questioning what happens when a game asks me to be unthinking and unfeeling. Detachment is itself an ideological stance. And it's one that resonates with historical colonialism. As game designer Bruno Faidutti notes, "simplifying and objectifying the past" is "part of the same frame of mind" as "simplifying, objectifying and even colonizing the rest of the world."[48] Detachment easily rationalizes complicity—if not in actual colonialism, at the very least in the mindsets that sustain it.

Against this, *Unsettling Catan* embraces a posture of *unsettlement*, a continual questioning of play that dwells in uncomfortable, critical, provocative, and decolonial spaces to discover transformative possibilities. Where settlement breeds detachment, unsettlement inspires attachment. Where settlement doubles down on complicity, unsettlement trans-

forms complicity into critique. Where settlement rationalizes a status quo, unsettlement frees play from the prisons it builds itself.

While it might seem odd to willingly seek unsettlement, unsettlement can intensify rather than kill joy.[49] Questioning is very much in the spirit of playfulness. After all, play is no stranger to tension. Boardgames often derive joy from tensions like the exhilarating angst of anticipating how rivals might stymie my plans, the satisfying crunch of making strategic decisions, or the delightful interplay of improvised banter. Collisions between intersecting wills, choices, and ideas make play playful. So, although unsettlement risks evoking mixed feelings, these feelings make boardgames meaningful, playful, and even fun.

Turn Structure

Unsettling Catan aims to unsettle both the settled tradition of the peaceful-feeling eurogame and the philosophy of detached design that is its primary defense mechanism. It unsettles how detached designs often stifle exploratory, questioning play. In other words, it questions what boardgames ask players to *play out* to empower players to more meaningfully engage what they *play with*.

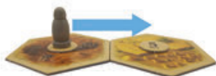
To this end, this book performs a series of case studies that unsettle cultural entanglements implicit in each step in *Catan*'s setup and turn structure (Fig. 3). Rather than offering a comprehensive history, the following chapters trace the flow of a game of *Catan* from unboxing to scoring as follows:

1. “How to Play” explores how to analyze boardgames. This methodological chapter introduces the key concepts of *glimpse* and *glance*, *gameworld* and *frameworld*, and *resonance* and *dissonance*.
2. “Placing Hexes” explores how setting up *Catan*’s modular board expresses territorial mindsets that raise questions about colonial and capitalist attitudes toward land.
3. “Rolling the Dice” explores how dice rolling in *Catan* raises questions about how eurogames reframe randomness to resonate with rationalist attitudes toward controlling fate.
4. “Robbing and Trading” explores how *Catan*’s robbing, blocking, and trading raise questions about how player interaction resonates with cultural attitudes that portray economic competition as peaceful.
5. “Collecting Resources” explores how resource management in *Catan* raises questions about how economies instrumentalize land and labor.
6. “Building and Scoring” explores how empire-building and engine-building in *Catan* raise questions about culturally capitalist attitudes that idealize construction and competition.
7. Finally, “Variants” explores how variations on existing games can reframe existing designs and reveal new play possibilities.

These case studies aim to unsettle *Catan*’s legacy of detached design without arguing that peaceful-feeling eurogames are “bad” or proposing any design solutions. Instead, this book

ROLL DICE

At the start of your turn, roll two dice.



MOVE ROBBER

On a roll of 7, move the robber.

COLLECT RESOURCES

Otherwise, rolled hexes produce resources.

TRADE

You may trade resources with other players.

BUILD

You may spend resources to build buildings.

Figure 3. A diagram of *Catan*'s turn structure, which the chapters in this book largely follow with the addition of setup steps not depicted. Chapter 4 presents Robbing and Trading as complementary forms of player interaction.

simply serves as a critical provocation to reflect on the more open-ended paths that *Catan* initially walked. It has no ambitions beyond simply exploring the open questions and fluid dynamics that arise from boardgames' distinctively playful art.

Play Log

I've been immensely privileged to have spent most of my adult life walking the road that *Catan* has paved. *Catan*'s spirit of innovation continues to inspire eurogames to discover new play possibilities that have genuinely enriched my life. Through *Catan*, I've experienced Teuber's profound sentiment that "In the course of a game, you can also learn more about yourself[50] and sometimes wonder about your own feelings and reactions."[51] This is *Catan*'s legacy, and I will always be grateful to Teuber for this.

At the same time, I've also watched eurogames settle into unhealthy rhythms of detachment. This too is *Catan*'s legacy. Although *Catan* ventured forth with a pioneering spirit, the path it forged has since become a well-traveled thoroughfare that eurogames have now settled along. After all, any new road can be worn into a rut. And breaking new ground can lay a foundation for settlement.

I actually feel quite at home in many of the places peaceful-feeling eurogames have settled, but I don't want to live here forever. Now that I've seen eurogames do great things, I'm starting to feel that wanderlust that pulls me back to the path. I want to rekindle the excitement I felt when *Catan* dazzled me with playful possibilities I'd never felt before.

Looking back, the magic of *Catan* wasn't actually its peaceful feelings—it was its pioneering and playful spirit. In retrospect, *Catan* never felt consistently peaceful. Ironically, this game of settlement captivated me by being unsettling—*Catan* inspired me to rethink what I thought I knew about boardgames and opened my eyes to new ways to play.

So, wherever eurogames have been and wherever they're going, I strongly believe we will always need to unsettle *any* new trend they might possibly discover. As an ongoing, constantly evolving tradition, eurogames will always need to unsettle and reinvent themselves. As Teuber wisely reminds us, "*roads were made for journeys, not destinations*."[52] Play, too, is a journey rather than a destination. The spirit of play is movement, not stasis. Play keeps calling me back to the path.

As reflections for the path, this book must avoid drawing any simplistic moral lines. That would just be more settled thinking. I'm certainly not calling out *Catan* (or any game or designer) for being "bad." As someone who has crossed many of the lines I might draw, I don't have the moral high ground to judge individual playstyles as "good" or "bad." There are times when it's appropriate to hold games accountable, but this isn't one of them. This is a time for questions rather than answers. Rather than charting a single path, I leave it to other wayfarers to discover new paths I can't yet imagine.

I realize that simply by questioning eurogames' peaceful feelings, I may come across as a "spoilsport" or a "killjoy" rather than a peacemaker. But I very much hope not. As much as I'm tempted to keep the peace that eurogames have forged, sometimes the only way to become a true peace*maker* is to

unsettle a peace that has reached its limitations. Sometimes it takes hard questions to shake up settled thinking and spark creative speculation. So, although my reflections are often critical, I offer them as a labor of love.

In the end, *Unsettling Catan* doesn't have all the answers. It doesn't propose any solutions. It doesn't settle any issues. Unsettlement isn't so easily satisfied—it questions everything, including itself. Like play itself, unsettlement always leads me back to the longest road—the one I'm still walking.

CHAPTER 1

How to Play

Sitting down to play a boardgame is deceptively simple: slide the game off the shelf, take a seat at the table, open the box, set up the game, and play. But each of these simple steps reveals something profound about what it means to truly *play* boardgames as dynamic worlds where I can do things like trade, build, and settle.

When I slide *Catan* off the shelf, the brightly colored box with its evocative sunset art hints at the world of romanticized settlement within. When I take my seat at the table, I enter into a shared social world with rivals I can trade and compete with. When I set up *Catan*'s modular island, I shape the contours of a world we will strive to settle. In short, every aspect of a boardgame helps me somehow imagine, co-create, enter into, or move within a game's world.

This world is material, tactile, and visual. It's also uniquely participatory and playful. When I play *Catan*, I don't merely pretend to settle an imaginary island. Whereas I can only dream of islands in poetry, *Catan* allows me to legitimately do things with and within its cardboard island. The joy of boardgaming lies in exploring these real yet gamelike worlds. And the art of boardgaming lies in building such worlds.

Sitting down to play a game means entering into a world shaped by these dynamics. And it means actively participating in these dynamics. Boardgames invite players to co-create their meaningfulness to a remarkable degree. After all, games are all about interesting choices.[1] So, understanding these dynamics helps unsettle what boardgames ask us to play out so that we can have more agency in deciding how to play.

To establish a critical foundation for boardgame analysis, this chapter introduces several interconnected concepts for understanding how boardgames build shared worlds. After all, "To play is to make a world, through objects, with others, for others, and for us."[2] Briefly, the *glimpse* and the *glance* evoke the two interconnected play realities of the *gameworld* and *frameworld*. And the collision between these worlds can evoke feelings of *resonance* and *dissonance* that make boardgaming a distinctively profound play experience.

Just as some gamers prefer to skip lengthy rules explanations and dive straight into the game, readers more interested in *Catan* than methods for boardgame analysis may wish to skip this preparatory chapter and jump to the next, referencing key terms in the glossary as needed. But for those who wish to press on, understanding how to play a boardgame begins with the merest *glimpse*.

The Glimpse

Somewhere along the way, I learned to play *Catan* as a game where I imagine myself trading resources rather than just exchanging colored cards, building buildings rather than

merely placing wooden tokens, and settling an island rather than simply scoring Victory Points. I've learned not only to solve *Catan*'s strategic puzzle but also to experience its world. Countless ephemeral yet evocative *glimpses* invite me into a world where I can trade, build, and settle.

This rich, holistic play experience is made possible by the *glimpse*. As objects of play, boardgames don't invite sustained visual attention. Unlike the prolonged, direct, immersive gazes[3] of film, boardgames invite players' eyes to flit around as they play. When I look down to glimpse a boardgame (Fig. 5), it's as if I look through its assorted cardboard bits to imagine an entire *gameworld*—a real yet fictional[4] play space that I can enter into and move within.

With each passing glimpse, I take in visual details that provide momentary windows into more expansive worlds. Precisely because they never paint a complete picture, glimpses spark a game of make-believe[5] that pulls me into a gameworld. Glimpses don't just add window-dressing to abstract, mechanical gameplay. Instead, they help build worlds and *thematize* gameplay as movement in those worlds. By inviting players to actively co-create the worlds they move in, glimpses add richness and depth to what I do in a game.

So, what does this look like? From the moment I first set eyes on *Catan*'s iconic sunset cover (Fig. 4), this first glimpse already had me world-building. Appropriately, the sun never sets on the island of Catan,[6] which perpetually basks in the warm glow of an immense sunset hovering eternally on the horizon behind a few frozen wisps of cloud. As Teuber describes, this sunset inspires a longing to explore *Cat-*

an's evocative world: "a large, yellow sun rose, embedded in a warm red sunset, above the black silhouette of a small settlement. It was the simplicity of the almost minimalist illustration that caught the eye of the beholder and piqued their curiosity, perhaps paired with a hint of longing."[7] So, although they say not to judge a book by its cover, paratextual[8] cover art[9] offers the first and sometimes most extensive visual glimpse of a boardgame's fictional world.

Every aspect of a game's design can provide an evocative glimpse of its larger world. After the cover invites me to imagine a world, the game board invites me to map it, and hundreds of additional thematizing fragments further develop this picture: descriptive language in rulebooks, names for game elements, the shape of game components, the symbolic language of game iconography, card titles, flavor text, and even the overall vibe of a game's graphic design become meaningful pieces of a larger world-building puzzle.

The beauty of boardgaming lies not only in its aesthetics but also in how its aesthetics help create engaging worlds. After all, despite its stunning sunset, the island of Catan is small, flat, and suspiciously geometrical. It's hardly a viable tourist spot. At the same time, the flat cardboard map feels like so much more. More than a bundle of components and mechanisms, *Catan* illustrates and thematizes its mechanisms to produce an entire world of play with a distinctive allure no real island can match. Catan is a world where I can trade, build, and settle.

So, while a single glimpse might seem insignificant, the cumulative effect of countless glimpses can completely trans-

DIE
SIEDLER
VON CATAN

Ein Spiel von
Klaus Teuber

franckh

Spiele-Galerie

form a gameplay experience. By aestheticizing and thematizing gameplay, glimpses enrich holistic play experiences that transcend and transform abstract game mechanisms. Consequently, the humble glimpse helps make the boardgame medium into an evocative world-building art and a meaningful form of cultural expression.

But glimpses alone can't capture the rich experience of entering into and moving in these more-than-fictional worlds. And so, glimpses work together with the *glance* to help players navigate the complex interplay between two worlds that defines boardgaming.

The Glance

When I take a seat at the table, I don't simply fall into a gameworld like Alice falling through the looking glass. Whereas more immersive media like novels and films encourage people to "lose themselves" in the story, boardgames maintain a feeling of being outside looking in. That's why my most vivid memories of *Catan* take me back to my college dorm lounge, where we gathered around a low wooden table to banter and barter. People and place were as central to my experience as anything "inside" the so-called "magic circle"[10] of the game. After all, "To play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of

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Figure 4 (facing). The original German cover lauded by Teuber (top, image courtesy of Nygllhuw Morris) and the current 5th edition cover (bottom). In addition to rebranding the game around the word "Catan" instead of "Settlers," the newer edition replaces the more ethereal silhouette with a detailed Medieval scene of resource-bearing travelers on a winding road to a distant settlement.

understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others."[11]

Unlike most media, letting the eye wander is a deeply profound aspect of the boardgaming experience. As I play, my vision roams upward and downward, inward and outward. My wandering eye flits between two interconnected worlds, taking in the gameworld at a glimpse and the frameworld at a *glance*. In other words, my immersive glimpses into a real yet fictional gameworld are balanced by contextualizing glances into a quite real *frameworld*, the material[12] and social realities that *frame*[13] the play experience.

When I glance upward, I take in everything outside the game that frames the experience. Because I cue to my environment, playing *Catan* feels very different at a tournament, meetup, or family gathering. This environment includes not only visible material realities[14] but also invisible cultural dynamics. It's not just architecture that makes tournaments and family gatherings feel different. Because games are culture, my upward glance at least subconsciously perceives that I'm playing from within a culture where settlement is always at play—not only because I'm living on settled land[15] but also because I grew up in an environment abounding in settlement myths, histories, stories, imagery, policies, economics, rhetoric, metaphors, controversies, sentiments, and values.

Even solo[16] games can offer these meaningful upward glances, but the multiplayer games discussed in this study especially emphasize the physical presence of other embodied players[17] within a shared social space (Fig. 5). As members of the aptly named *tabletop* gaming family, multiplayer

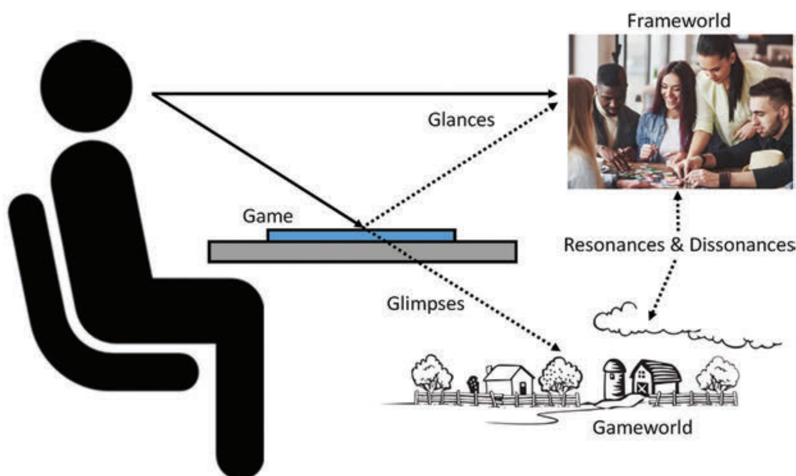

Figure 5. Diagram of the *glimpse* and *glance*, which together construct boardgaming as a unique visual medium. The *glimpse* invites players to imagine a *gameworld, while the glance* invites players to situate their play within the space of a *frameworld*. The interplay of gameworld and frameworld creates opportunities for *resonance* and *dissonance*.

boardgames spatialize sociality by literally offering players a seat at the table, a humble domestic space evoking family, fellowship, and belonging. So, glancing upward means breaking immersion in the gameworld to instead immerse in gaming as a shared social activity. It reminds me that I'm co-creating an experience with others who influence if not outright resist what I'm trying to do.

One might expect the downward glance[18] to suspend the social awareness of the upward glance and offer an escapist retreat into the gameworld. But immersion into the gameworld is actually the domain of the *glimpse*. Rather than escape sociality, the downward glance brings frameworld dynamics

into the gameworld. Even when an introverted, head-down strategist like myself is literally and figuratively inclined to direct their glance downward, they discover that gameplay *is* a form of social interaction.

When I glance downward, I perceive the island as a contested space, an arena for competitive social interaction. As my glance traces potential avenues for settlement, I constantly consider how my actions will interact with other players' prior and anticipated moves. In other words, to play a boardgame is to project agency into a shared gameworld. Gameworlds are more than fictions—they're sites of real social encounters. It's not for nothing that the ancient game of *Go* is sometimes called a *conversation of hands*.[19] So, when I glance down at a game, my vision figuratively *glances off* the game (Fig. 5) as if it were a mirror that reflects social dynamics from a wholly new angle.

In the end, the glance's two angles of vision ultimately arrive at the same point: *both* the upward and downward glance bring frameworld dynamics into play. This creates a complex vision in which every look can take in multiple facets of meaning. Together, the movements of the glimpse and glance show how boardgaming is *two* intertwined social activities simultaneously playing out in the two intertwined realities of gameworld and frameworld.

When I take a seat at the table, I position myself to navigate these two worlds. And I position myself to navigate these worlds *with others*. Because boardgames typically build worlds for collective meaning-making,[20] they have uniquely compli-

cated social significance. After all, my rivals also bring their own takes on the frameworld to the table. So, my outward-looking glances always have the potential to pull me outside myself to meet diverse playstyles, personalities, and perspectives.[21] At the risk of mixing metaphors, my wandering vision invites me into a symphony.

When they meet at the table, players synthesize multiple voices into a shared symphony that reverberates through the two intertwined worlds of gameworld and frameworld. This means boardgaming is built on profoundly variable experiences that can blend harmoniously or clash discordantly. When their overlapping worlds synergize, boardgames produce feelings of *resonance*. When they clash, they produce feelings of *dissonance*. And how boardgames attempt to manage these sometimes-conflicting feelings says a lot about their art.

Resonance

Resonance is a significant concept in game design[22] that I borrow to describe how meaning-making reverberates across multiple facets of holistic boardgame experiences. After all, the word's acoustical meaning speaks to how sounds can amplify, prolong, or enhance each other. Using a similar metaphor of harmony, Teuber describes how "the harmony between a game's subject matter and its processes has always been very important to me. If this harmony exists, an inviting atmosphere is created in which players feel that they really experience a game's back story and are involved in it."[23] Res-

onances often arise from good world-building—they make gameworlds feel more alive by saturating my moves with frameworld significance.

There are many facets to the holistic and multidimensional experience of resonance. In this study, I'm most interested in *ideological resonance*, a phenomenon that occurs when harmony between gameworld and frameworld amplifies, prolongs, or enhances cultural ideas or ideals—in other words, when a game's implicit worldview synergizes with real-world ideologies. Ideological resonance is central to understanding boardgaming because it shows how boardgames can play out cultural values without explicitly arguing for anything. For instance, without even directly representing colonialism, *Catan* creates a resonant world that can't help but put colonialism into play. That's just what happens when you paint a vivid picture of settlement in a world where settlement has been entangled with colonialism for so long.

Such implicit resonances can even be more poignant than explicit commentaries because they permeate the emotional fabric of a playful world. So, it's telling that Teuber designed *Catan* not to present a historical argument but to capture an elusive *feeling*:

> In my—admittedly quite romantic—imagination, feelings of the purity of nature, the rewards of a natural life and the spirit of optimism for a better future joined hands. They combined into a wish in the back of my mind: to be touched by at least a hint of these feelings as a settler in a game.[24]

This isn't just a fond recollection—Teuber's romantic imagination is infused into the game itself. *Catan* truly does offer me an opportunity "to be touched by" these feelings. And although these design goals are emotional rather than ideological, emotional experiences are a primary way games create ideological resonances. After all, romanticizing settlement certainly isn't a neutral stance.[25] And feeling nothing toward settlement isn't neutral either—detachment is an ideology too. So, everything boardgames ask players to feel (and not feel) resonates throughout the play experience.

But while resonance is never neutral, its meanings aren't completely fixed. Different players, groups, and moments create different vibes that can produce different resonances. Instead of striking a single note, everything boardgames put into play reverberates throughout the frameworld, creating a multipart symphony.

Emotional resonances are especially mercurial, whereas ideological resonances gain more stability from the fixed aspects of the game design and the slower-moving evolution of frameworld culture. So, although ideological resonances have enough of a shared foundation to be named and described, it's worth noting that emotional resonances shape how ideological resonances are experienced. That's why players have such genuinely varied feelings about *Catan*. And it's why some may even experience supposed resonances as its disharmonious counterpart *dissonance*.

Dissonance

Despite being sometimes hard to take, moments of strident, discordant world-building also contribute something special to boardgaming. Dissonances certainly stand out. Since resonance in boardgames is so often a quiet affair—a humble yet profound feeling of harmony—sharply discordant moments of *dissonance*[26] are striking and significant. More than the mere absence of resonance, dissonance actively disrupts and distorts resonance. In a way, dissonance haunts detached design as its shadow self. As disharmonious and jarring collisions between gameworld and frameworld, dissonances evoke stridently conflicted feelings that shake up settled play experiences.

As a game design tool, dissonance can help boardgames ratchet up their emotional intensity and expand their emotional palette beyond their stereotypically narrow range from lighthearted fun to dry strategy. For instance, although I'm skeptical about the critical potential of such games, many provocative party games like *Cards Against Humanity* use dissonance to play at the "guilty pleasure" of breaking social taboos. Far more rare are ethically provocative dissonant designs like the wartime survival game *This War of Mine*, which challenges players to make excruciatingly conflicted decisions that probe the experiential mismatch between surviving a dystopic gameworld while playing in a safe frameworld. So, although dissonance can feel unpleasant, awkward, or offensive, it can also be creative, captivating, and revolutionary. Restoring conflictedness to play unleashes its emotional impact and critical potential.

And for precisely these reasons, it shouldn't be surprising that detached design doesn't like dissonance. This is doubly true for *ideological dissonance*, the feeling of having a game's implicit worldview stridently conflict with frameworld values.[27] Ideological dissonance often evokes powerful ethical feelings, and most eurogames avoid powerful ethical feelings like the plague—actually, much more than the plague, which is the setting for several successful eurogames and is referenced in *Rivals for Catan*.

That's not to say ideological dissonance doesn't happen in eurogames. Eurogames are rife with paradoxical ideals like non-colonial settlement or non-violent conquest that could easily provoke ideological dissonance. But the whole point of detached design is to ensure players never *feel* this. Conflicted feelings just don't fit the ideal of the peaceful-feeling eurogame. That's why detached designs rarely actively encourage dissonance—even to counteract unwanted resonances. Instead, they try to water down resonances until they fade into abstraction.

In a way, detached designs are right to fear dissonance. As a critical tool, dissonance has special potential for unsettling detached design. After all, dissonance is particularly good at revealing the shadowy sides of play. As Aaron Trammell argues, play can be dangerous,[28] disturbing, or even cruel.[29] Some play "is not voluntary for those who are objectified through it."[30] So, it's sometimes appropriate to have conflicted feelings toward play. By exposing these darker aspects of play, dissonance can help pave the way for rethinking and repairing play. Although "Embracing the painful as well as the plea-

surable" may not sound fun, it's "what makes Black radical aesthetics so poignant."[31] Similarly, playful dissonance can reveal the profound emotional depth in playful dissidence.

Dissonance probably won't and arguably shouldn't ever be the dominant impulse in boardgaming. But it's still needed to expand games' emotional range—especially when detached designs dampen emotions to sweep their ethical contradictions under the rug. Whereas detached design only limits what boardgames can be, dissonance can provoke much-needed speculation on novel approaches for how to play.

Play Log

When I take a seat at the table to unbox and play a boardgame, I take in countless fragmentary *glimpses* of an imagined world. I *glance* around and experience the incomparable feeling of slipping silently between two interconnected worlds. And I sometimes experience feelings of *resonance* and *dissonance* that intensify the meaningfulness of this holistic play experience.

But often I don't. In my experience, I'm much more likely to have profoundly resonant and dissonant experiences with novels and television shows than boardgames (especially eurogames). To be fair, all media have things they're best suited for. But looking to boardgames for resonance isn't like looking to them for poetic or cinematic flourishes. As experiential worlds, boardgames are perfectly suited for evocative world-building. So, although I'm the kind of person who would usually rather lower my expectations than be disappointed,

thinking about the beautiful nuances of these cardboard worlds makes me greedy to see what they could become.

I sometimes hear seasoned eurogamers say—usually with some pride—that they only focus on gameplay and consider theme irrelevant (or merely instrumental[32]). When so many eurogames cultivate detachment, I can see why. In some ways, being good at detachment makes me an exemplary eurogamer. After all, that's how plenty of eurogames ask me to play them.

So, I certainly know the feeling. I repeatedly reach for eurogames over more evocative media because I love their gameplay that much. I resign myself to a lot for this experience—there's just something about the beautiful systematicity of these carefully crafted gameworlds that make the cares of the overwhelming everyday world melt away.

But that doesn't mean it's unilaterally good to buy into these mindsets. Because detachment is so often bundled with all the things I love about eurogames, I'm tempted to associate detachment with those things. But correlation isn't causation. I can't actually name anything I truly love about eurogames that's clearly improved by detachment. Although I'm more excited by gameplay than theme, an ill-conceived theme hardly enhances gameplay. And although I sometimes need a little escapism, detachment represses rather than truly escapes real-world concerns.

As someone who already tends toward detachment in too many areas of my life, I don't find detachment truly restorative. As much as I'm tempted by it as a coping mechanism, detachment takes a psychological toll without offering emo-

tional release or regeneration. Detachment makes game-worlds too bland to be cathartic. And it makes me too disengaged to be playful. It makes play less healing by dampening all the glimpses, glances, resonances, and dissonances that actually contain boardgaming's healing potential.

And if detachment isn't restorative, it isn't reparative either. Disengaging from complicated ethical issues can actively hinder true peacemaking. After all, disengagement avoids conflict without mending broken relationships. In contrast, unsettlement opens up possibilities for more restorative and reparative play by asking me to think and feel more. It challenges me to more meaningfully engage others. Unsettlement simply makes my play more playful—more life-giving, transformative, and fun.

CHAPTER 2

Placing Hexes

Like most islands, Catan is born from seismic activity. Every game, a new island emerges from a series of tectonic shifts in which players slide together loose landmasses to "Create Catan."[1]

The procedural yet profound act of physically shaping this cardboard topography is how I first fell in love with *Catan*. I can't recall whether it was the novelty, the variability, or the primal pleasure in creating order out of chaos, but the first time I saw the island come together I was hooked. This was a world I wanted to dive into.

But one doesn't simply dive into the world of a boardgame. Instead, when I slide off the lid of a boardgame, I reveal a collection of components that in no way resembles a world. Only as I methodically sort out and set up boards and bits does a world slowly come into focus. Piece by piece, locations to explore, resources to acquire, buildings to build, and other delightful possibilities reveal themselves. Only then does a new world lie before me; I'm ready to play.

So, this act of physical world-building plays a crucial role in establishing the world of the game. After all, how a boardgame literally *views* its world helps establish its implicit *worldview*. In

Catan, placing hexes sets up a visual paradigm that defines its very world in terms of settlement. Even when *Catan* attempts to detach from overt colonialism, it materially embodies a territorial mindset that can resonate with or even romanticize settler colonial worldviews. *Catan* puts settlement into play.

To explore this playful dynamic, this chapter traces *Catan*'s *colonial complications* through how players *view* the world, *lay out* land tiles, and *claim* territory—all while attempting to *keep the peace*.

Colonial Complications

Colonialism in *Catan* is complicated. As a territorial game with a settlement theme, *Catan* is very much a game about empire.[2] In fact, a romanticized vision of Viking history[3] inspired Teuber to create *Catan* as a game initially titled *Colonization*. At the same time, Teuber recalls changing that title because he wanted to distance his prototype from such overtly colonial overtones:

> . . . it became clear to us that *Colonization* was just a working title. I had never been happy with that title because it preceded colonialism, which many peoples suffered and still suffer today. There may not have been any indigenous people on my island for players to conquer and displace; however, the name could have given this impression.[4]

In addition to being touchingly empathetic, Teuber's concern shows a profound understanding of how boardgames always

mean more than they say. Like any art, boardgames always risk implying more than what the artist intended. Games like *Catan* can resonate with colonialism without advocating for or even explicitly representing it. After all, “settler colonialism is a structure, not an event.”[5] And boardgames can easily resonate with a structure without mentioning any historical event. That’s why colonialism has become a common thread in academic, media, and design discussions of *Catan*.[6] So, in its own quiet, peaceful way, the specter of historical colonialism lurks behind *Catan*’s romanticized vision of settlement.

This doesn’t mean that *Catan* is a colonialist game to be avoided or censured. Teuber’s efforts to decolonize his settlement game surely count for something. As a longtime *Catan* player, I have no interest in dissuading people from playing and loving *Catan*. And I have no interest in asking simplistic, polarizing questions like “Is *Catan* pro-colonialism?” Such all-or-nothing questions only attempt to settle the issue. They demand simplistic answers that make it impossible to see colonialism in *Catan* for what it is: *complicated*.

Instead, this study seeks to *unsettle* the issues. After all, the message of *Catan* is neither straightforwardly colonial nor anti-colonial. Actually, it’s not even a message. Rather than having simple meanings, boardgames *make* meaning through play. So, *Catan* plays out and plays with colonialist ideas in dynamic ways. Indeed “postcolonial playgrounds” like *Catan* can “offer the perfect means to play with and make sense of how colonial spatial practices have shaped contemporary culture.”[7] There is both peril and potential here.

So, instead of asking whether *Catan* is secretly colonial-

ist, this study explores how *Catan* puts colonialism into play. To do this, it traces multiple, sometimes contradictory ways *Catan* plays out or plays with colonialist ideas. And it aims to unsettle the unspoken implications of *Catan*'s romantic vision of settlement—not to label *Catan* as good or bad, but to show how it can raise meaningful questions about colonialism. In the end, although colonialism complicates *Catan*, *Catan* offers special possibilities for complicating colonialism.

It's impossible to settle the issue of colonialism in *Catan* because *Catan* simultaneously denies colonial realities while evoking colonial fantasies. Again, it's complicated. So, it's worth unsettling both *Catan*'s unintended colonialist resonances and its attempts to detach from them. Actually, the latter may be more significant. After all, detachment permeates *Catan*'s *world view* as one of its primary colonial resonances.

World Views

All maps simplify the worlds they represent. As I have written elsewhere,[8] game maps illustrate *world views*, ways of seeing and thereby understanding the world. And these world views assume or imply cultural worldviews. Without representing colonialism, territorial map boards can easily resonate with colonialism when "Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element."[9] In this way, *Catan*'s distinctive map board represents territorial expansion in abstract and peaceful ways.

Catan's board is so iconic it's easy to forget how oddly it visualizes its island. Rather than depicting a coherent land-

scape, *Catan* leaves its seams showing. Its disjointed land tiles form an unnaturally geometric grid of color-coded hexagons that tend toward abstraction, fusing the rigid geometries of abstract strategy games (like *Chess* and *Go*) with the color-coded mapping of territorial games (like *RISK* and *Small World*).[10]

To be fair, visual abstraction does make games easier to parse. Even so, artistic decisions have meaning. It's no accident that eurogames since *Catan* have developed an aesthetic of bland (and often beige) abstraction. By constantly reminding me that I'm playing a game built from mechanical systems, this aesthetic supports a detached mindset that helps me feel less complicit in what I'm playing out.

At the same time, *Catan*'s lands aren't merely abstract. Instead, these lands provide glimpses of a world whose very nature is settlement. Thematically, two of *Catan*'s five land types—Pastures and Fields—imply human agriculture. Even its supposed wildernesses feature glimpses of settlement by depicting mineshafts, laborers, and cultivated fields that emphasize "working" the land (Fig 6). From the moment *Catan*'s tectonic plates slide together, its lands are already in the process of being settled. Catan is born neither empty nor wild.

Ironically, *Catan*'s depicted inhabitation makes it easier for me to imagine it as empty. Although Catan isn't actually empty, it's devoid of any Indigenous peoples[11] that might complicate my settlement. And although avoiding representing Indigenous peoples "may seem less egregious" than portraying them negatively, "erasure through abstraction always sides with power and is as old as colonialist board games themselves."[12]

So, both the presence of settlers and the absence of Indigenous peoples reinforce the notion that Catan exists to be settled. By building settlement into the very fabric of its world, *Catan* makes settlement feel natural. As if I'm fulfilling its "Manifest Destiny," I find it hard to have qualms about settling a world clearly created for that very purpose.

Following this legacy, all my eurogame exemplars visually represent their lands as designed to be settled. *Concordia* and *Maracaibo* have map boards that depict networks of travel routes connecting occupiable cities. *A Feast for Odin* and *The Castles of Burgundy* provide individual player boards that depict abstracted, geometric, and conspicuously empty swaths of land designed to be filled with tiles. *Lorenzo il Magnifico* does something similar for its tableau of Province cards. And *Lisboa* prints bonus icons on building locations to further incentivize building there. Rather than painting immersive pictures of natural landscapes, these games visually present their worlds as abstract *data visualizations* that reinforce what players are striving to accomplish in those worlds. In particular, these games all visually cultivate an eye toward settlement.

Adding to this, these data visualizations are typically given aesthetic touches that cultivate peaceful feelings around what the games ask players to do. For instance, the best way I can describe the feeling *Catan*'s lands give me is *pastoral*. After all, *pastoral* names a cultivated peace (the word derives from Latin roots meaning "shepherd").[13] As with its sunset cover, there's a quiet beauty in *Catan*'s gentle yet vibrant colors. Soft, beige borders enclose even its craggiest mountains, blending potentially disharmonious terrain into a single harmonious land-

Figure 6. Setting up the modular *Catan* board using the recommended setup in which each hexagonal terrain tile is randomly placed. Placing hexes in this way gives glimpses of the land that literally forms the foundation for settling Catan. Note that the Wheat and Brick hexes in the front depict supposedly “empty” land already in the process of being settled and having its resources extracted (see also the “Collecting Resources” chapter). Wood hexes tend to have the least human presence and the Desert has none at all.

scape. *Catan*’s map tames its wildernesses, creating a pastoral world in which peace is forged by settlement.

Although visual design lies on the surface, these glimpses mean that I can’t look toward the gameworld without being reminded that these worlds exist to be settled. After all, visual world views imply worldviews. They give me the *lay of the land*.

The Lay of the Land

Before I make a single move in *Catan*, I get the lay of the land by literally laying the land. Through the simple yet profound

setup step of placing hexes (Fig. 6), I don't just passively absorb *Catan*'s world view—I actively build it. And this act of simultaneously creating and discovering the land complicates how I imagine settling Catan.

Although I'm no game designer, I help create Catan every time I assemble its cardboard island. And although the process itself is highly mechanical, it can have ideological resonances. Materially creating the land can encourage me to feel a sense of ownership over it. After all, psychological studies show that people tend to value things more when they help construct them (a phenomenon known as the IKEA effect[14]).

This human tendency is innocuous on its own. Co-creation is part of the charm of boardgaming, especially compared with less interactive media. But feelings of ownership complicate settlement in games. Questions of ownership clearly lie at the heart of colonialism. And, in a roundabout way, so do questions of creation. Creation narratives have been historically misused to rationalize colonialism, as when the doctrine of Manifest Destiny[15] treated occupied land as divinely ordained to be conquered.

Catan's element of discovery further complicates this picture. When I create the standard[16] randomized island, each flip[17] makes me feel like I'm discovering part of the island. And since discovery undermines feelings of creation, it might seem like it would also lessen my feeling of ownership. Yet, there's a reason that "Of all the roles players take on in European colonialism games, none is more glamorously mythologized than the explorer."[18] Whereas the more exploratory eurogame *Lost Ruins of Arnak* piques interest in discovering a mysterious

world, *Catan* treats exploration merely as a preparatory step for expansion (like most 4X games). After all, discovering land has been commonly associated with naming and claiming it, as when historical colonialism used the so-called Doctrine of Discovery to rationalize claiming occupied land.[19]

So, creation and discovery are much more compatible than they may appear. They work together to make placing hexes into a world-building experience. Because I randomly draw each hex I place, discovery becomes part of creating these *procedurally generated worlds*. Whereas videogames have computers create their procedurally-generated worlds, I personally perform the algorithmic operations that create Catan by combining randomized elements according to predetermined rules. And while this can feel mundane and mechanical, asking players to perform procedures[20] is part of the art of boardgaming.

These procedurally generated worlds are at once unique and generic, a combination that helps *Catan* detach from these ideological resonances. Because "the board changes each game,"[21] each randomized island is essentially unique. And although a unique island could theoretically resemble historically colonized lands, *Catan*'s islands feel more hypothetical than historical. This feeling is only enhanced by *Catan*'s generic aesthetic. Although it's vaguely European and Medieval, *Catan*'s generic landscapes feel disconnected from historical space and time.[22] *Catan*'s ahistorical aesthetic aims to resemble many places but represent none in order to detach from real-world colonial histories.

In all these ways, *Catan*'s ahistorical aesthetic perfectly captures the paradox of detached design—the desire to deny

the very things it evokes. But while detachment might seem to avoid colonial entanglements, it only makes *Catan*'s picture of settlement more utopian. After all, the word "utopia" literally means "no place."[23] As Bruno Faidutti puts it, "Catan is colonization as we dream it, or as we would have liked it to be, colonization of a terra nullius,[24] a new world which looks just like the old one and is void of alien presence."[25] In other words, *Catan* plays out a utopian fantasy that real-world colonialism could only dream of: settling uninhabited land that actively calls out to be settled—or, more precisely, *claimed*.

Moral Claims

Catan is a game of *claiming* rather than *conquering*. This is an important distinction. To "claim" means to "demand by virtue of right or authority"[26] whereas to "conquer" means to take "by force of arms."[27] Claiming is taking by right and conquering is taking by might. But this line can blur in a world where "might makes right." How *Catan* plays with claiming land is one way it resonates with colonial thinking that historically rationalized conquest by reframing it as claiming.

From its opening move, *Catan* is a land grab. Before gameplay even begins, players draft starting locations in a clear act of land claiming. And as play unfolds, players scramble to expand their territory by claiming more land. This land grab is hardly lawless and chaotic. Instead, in *Catan*, claiming land is rule-governed and therefore lawful—much like historical settler colonialism, which often provided systematic legal[28] frameworks for claiming land.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues that the US was essentially built on frameworks for claiming land, being "founded as the first constitutional capitalist state and an empire on conquered land."[29] And land claims continued to shape the US as a settler colonial state: "As industrialization quickened, land as a commodity—'real estate'—remained the basis of the US economy and capital accumulation."[30] An entire economic, legal, and social system can be built on claiming land.

Catan plays out territorial expansion in a similarly settler colonial way. This worldview is even built into the map itself. In *Catan*, land is never an open, empty expanse. Instead, the land resembles a colonial map always already divvied up into geometrical, claimable plots—an aesthetic also reminiscent of the US invention of a "plat system of privatizing land into marketable units."[31] Consequently, *Catan*'s opening draft resonates with a paper colonization in which players claim legal rights to land before settling it. Here, ownership rationalizes occupation.

Historically, occupation could also legalize ownership. According to the Homestead Act of 1862, any US citizen who worked land for five years could legally claim it. Similarly, the primary way that I claim more territory in *Catan* is simply by settling it. Again, *Catan* frames this as legalistic claiming: the rule that players can't build in adjacent spots implies that when players build somewhere they're retroactively granted legal rights to the entire surrounding area.

To be fair, *Catan* doesn't directly represent the darker side of homesteading.[32] Instead, it paints a romantic picture of settlement completely devoid of war or violence. By having players settle the intersections between hexes, *Catan* visually

obscures its plat system in ways that undermine the feeling of land ownership. No clear lines represent the borders of my territory. And when multiple players can collect resources from the same hex, I'm even tempted to think of the land as a *commons*[33] that provides shared public benefit.

At the same time, *Catan*'s core mechanical structures resonate with settler colonial legal structures. The lands can't function as commons when access to shared resource reserves can be individually claimed and owned. The game itself functions as the settler colonial infrastructure that assigns legal and moral rights to settle the land. So, although *Catan* avoids depicting the reality of colonial violence, it's worth unsettling how *Catan* implicitly plays out a deeply colonial fantasy of claiming land as a legal and moral right.

Catan transforms a colonial fantasy into a gameplay reality. In *Catan*, claiming not only *feels* right and natural but *is* right and natural. After all, the world itself is designed to play out territorial expansion. More precisely, the world is designed to play out an ideal of non-colonial settlement in which territorial expansion feels peaceful and nonviolent. I can easily detach from feeling like a conqueror because no part of the world offers any resistance—and colonialism without resistance hardly feels like colonialism at all.

In this way, *Catan* resonates with how homesteading also allowed individual settlers to detach from feelings of moral responsibility. The colonial government accepted the moral burden of colonialism, drawing homesteaders in with the promise of a better life so they could feel like they were claiming rather than conquering land.

So, homesteading and *Catan* alike depend on providing moral claims that make settlement feel like a mere economic opportunity. But in the end, *Catan* realizes a utopian fantasy that historical colonialism never could. It can make expansion feel genuinely peaceful. And yet, in an odd reversal, peaceful-feeling eurogames like *Catan* are often surprisingly reluctant to *keep the peace*.

Keeping the Peace

Although it's worth unsettling even peaceful ways of claiming land, it's especially worth unsettling how *Catan* militarizes its supposedly peaceful settlement.[34] *Catan*'s utopian, ahistorical vision of settlement didn't need to include soldiers or weapons, but it does. And this isn't just window dressing—military might is part of how *Catan* imagines keeping the peace.

Catan doesn't merely include passing references to soldiers—it gives them special preeminence. Of all the settlers of Catan, Knights (Fig. 7) are by far the most important. Knights not only provide useful abilities, they're the only characters with any gameplay function whatsoever. Actually, they're the only characters that aren't just flavor art. Knights cards make up more than half of the Development Card deck and have the largest character art. In contrast, laborers can be barely glimpsed despite the central role one would expect them to play in a world so fixated on resource production. In a world eerily devoid of actual settlers, the otherwise faceless Knights become the face of my little empire.

Thematically, militarizing settlement makes me feel like

Figure 7. Although *Catan* and all six of my eurogame exemplars maintain peaceful feelings by avoiding centralizing war, all but one of these games feature notable glimpses of military power that suggest that economic expansion necessitates military might. Weapons are treated as treasures in *Maracaibo* and *A Feast for Odin* (bottom-right). *The Castles of Burgundy* includes constructable fortifications (bottom-left). In *Catan*, sword- and flag-bearing Knights (center-right) or gun-wielding Soldiers (center-left) allow players to vie over the Largest Army card. In *A Feast for Odin*, players can collect and spend Weapon cards (top-left) while taking actions like Raiding and Pillaging. In *Lorenzo il Magnifico*, players can spend Military Points to fulfill warlike Venture cards such as “The Crusades” (top-right). And in *Maracaibo*, players use combat tokens (bottom-center) to help colonial powers take ownership of the Caribbean.

I'm building a little empire. After all, "the association of games with the military and empire has a long history."[35] While land can be settled by random strangers, settlers with an army become something more. The army helps me imagine[36] my settlements as a united front. The army literally bears the banner that unites disparate settlers into a fledgling empire. So, *Catan*'s armies transform its romantic vision of settlement into a romantic vision of clashing empires.

Certainly, *Catan* doesn't glorify war or violence. Knights never kill or attack other players. Instead, Knights serve as a defensive force, driving away the Robber so that resource production can proceed unhindered. In other words, Knights keep peace by warding off outside threats. In this way, *Catan* imagines militarization as a necessary antidote to criminalized violence, an idea that resonates with contemporary rhetoric around militarized peacekeeping (like calling the UN military forces "Peacekeepers" or calling the US a "global police force"). And while every government needs some sort of peacekeeping, it's worth questioning what happens when a game like *Catan* militarizes supposedly peaceful settlement.

It's also worth noting that *Catan*'s peacekeeping isn't purely defensive. *Catan*'s armies actually do trigger offensive actions. Playing a Knight card allows me to move the Robber onto a rival's territory and steal one of their resources. This "peacekeeping" is hardly peaceful. It's certainly not peace*making*. So, although war is absent from *Catan*, it's worth unsettling the kinds of peace that imperialism keeps—a peace that protects and rationalizes expansion.

Despite arising as a reaction against war and wargames, it's

not for nothing that peaceful-feeling eurogames are so often enamored with military power. Like *Catan*, five of my six eurogame exemplars militarize otherwise economic or cultural contests. Like *Catan*, none of these games allow players to wage war against each other. Instead, these games follow *Catan*'s ideological legacy by embracing paradoxical ideals of militarized peace or bloodless conquest. They imagine worlds that idealize military power while detaching from feelings of violence. They cultivate peaceful feelings of unconflicted conflict.

This happens in two primary ways. Three of these games resonate with *Catan*'s defensive peacekeeping ideal by implying that military power protects peaceful territorial expansion. *The Castles of Burgundy* allows players to develop independent estates that include fortifications like Castles and Guardhouses. Set in the heavily militarized peace of the Pax Romana, *Concordia* describes itself as a "peaceful strategy game of economic development" while having its territorial expansion conducted by "Colonists" depicted as Roman Soldiers. And *Lorenzo il Magnifico* allows players to acquire Province cards for free so long as they have the requisite military strength to defend a protectorate of a given size. In these cases, military might is imagined as enabling and protecting peaceful growth of players' little empires.

And three of these games—*A Feast for Odin*, *Maracaibo*, and again *Lorenzo il Magnifico*—sanitize overtly violent historical conquests like Viking pillages, colonizing the Caribbean, and the Crusades. And yet these games don't show much more violence than *Catan* does. Given their subject matter, one might say these games are "perhaps not violent enough," to borrow

a critique of a similarly sanitized videogame from *Games of Empire*.[37] None of these games offer a single glimpse of violence or their victims. None depict resistance.[38] By representing "war without mutilation or post-traumatic stress disorder"[39] and "war without moral dilemmas,"[40] these games ultimately imply that "war is peace."[41]

Instead of graphic depictions, all three of these games represent violence as economic transactions where players spend military power like currency. Scattered glimpses of military power (Fig. 7) are the only thing that visually marks these thematically violent actions as different from any other economic transactions. And that's precisely the point. Like *Catan*, these games reject gratuitous violence while taking for granted that building little empires requires exerting military power.

So, even though peaceful-feeling eurogames arose as a deliberate departure from wargaming, their shift toward economic and cultural arenas is often haunted by the specter of militarization. And this should raise questions about treating economic and cultural imperialism as peaceful. After all, the peace that empires tend to keep is at best uneasy.

Play Log

Colonialism in eurogames is complicated, and I honestly don't know how to feel about it. As an emotionally detached person with a strong critical eye, colonialism in games makes me feel like my vision is blurring and sharpening at the same time. I simultaneously can and can't unsee the issue. And it doesn't

help that as a person of color who has mostly experienced privilege I already identify with both colonized and colonizer. So, I suppose what I really feel is *conflicted*.

Because I don't know how I feel, I don't want to tell anyone how they *should* feel. Manufacturing feelings is tricky and probably not all that beneficial. As someone too prone to detachment, I find feeling, naming, and processing my feelings plenty hard enough. Although I have an instinctual impulse to settle my conflicted feelings, I must admit that there can be surprising beauty in even unsettling play.

Although these mixed feelings could give anyone a headache, I sometimes think there's a strange kind of clarity in dwelling in the betwixt and between. So, as much as I'm tempted to take a stand here, I don't want to moralize or attempt to settle the "issue" of colonialism in games. I just want to take it seriously.

On the one hand, I believe boardgames have unique potential for critically playing with colonialism.[42] Although I have been deeply moved by postcolonial literature that exploded my assumptions and kindled my empathy, I've never questioned my own complicity so deeply as when playing boardgames. So, I wouldn't want boardgames to simply avoid the issue.[43]

On the other hand, playing out colonialism is always risky—no matter how well-crafted or well-intentioned the game. Just because I personally hold grace for playful experiments doesn't mean I should ignore or excuse how these complications might make others feel. Even if the games themselves were better, maintaining colonialism as a eurogame staple could already be enough to make gaming less welcoming.[44]

Again, I'm conflicted. And I'm fine with that. It feels appropriate to have mixed feelings about colonialism in eurogames. After all, it's a complicated issue that no single approach can ever "solve." So, I honestly can't say what the path forward should look like. All I can definitively say is that detachment doesn't solve any of the issues it's designed to avoid. Simply avoiding the issue isn't so simple when subtle colonial mindsets have already settled into the eurogaming tradition. And meaningfully addressing the issue is even more complicated.

Uncertain footing often tempts me to settle. When I'm on shaky ground, I have an instinct to maintain balance and restore stability. I want to play it safe. I retreat from mixed feelings. But sometimes the only way to regain balance on uncertain footing is to take a step forward. Sometimes, shaky ground is a sign that I shouldn't settle here. After all, it's unwise to build my house on the sand. But even though I know this, I often need a tectonic shift to unsettle me enough to actually embark on a new path.

Fortunately, *Catan* is born of seismic activity. And if seismic activity is good for anything, it's shaking things up and breaking new ground.

CHAPTER 3

Rolling the Dice

God doesn't play dice, but minor spirits sometimes do. As one ghost explains, "I'm responsible for the strokes of luck. I can set the course of your future. I'm unfortunately not infallible, though, and I'll admit that sometimes I have to roll the dice. I'm not God, after all, only a ghost."[1]

This particular dice-rolling ghost is a central character in Klaus Teuber's memoir *My Journey to Catan*, where it helps Teuber anthropomorphize the circumstances that seem to have conspired to lead him to develop *Catan*. In so doing, this ghost embodies—or, rather, disembodies—a profound cultural yearning to seek and sometimes find meaning in *chance*.

Teuber often describes games and life in similarly fatalistic terms. Teuber explains that his designs always aim to create a "feeling of excitement" that "includes elements of chance or luck, which always present new challenges so that the game's outcome cannot be predicted." And Teuber explicitly connects this feeling to ordinary life, adding that "The future isn't predictable in real life, either. Fate always plays along and creates coincidences and twists that shake up plans and call for a reorientation. It's not always nice, but it makes life exciting."[2]

Teuber is certainly not alone in imagining life as a game of chance. Games of chance arguably arose from cultural beliefs (and fears) surrounding humanity's perilous dependence on fate. For instance, the ancient Egyptian game *Senet* (possibly the oldest surviving boardgame) uses dice rolling to represent the fraught passage into the afterlife. An ancient Indian game designed to illustrate Hindu concepts of spiritual enlightenment and karmic destiny[3] lives on as the children's game *Snakes and Ladders* after having been appropriated during the British occupation of India.

And although fatalistic play is as old as boardgames themselves, it's not just ancient history. Many modern games derive joy from throwing oneself on the mercy of fate. Entire genres like Push-Your-Luck, Betting, and Roll-and-Write games center this exhilarating feeling. Similarly, Roll-to-Resolve mechanisms (making strategic decisions then rolling dice to determine their success or failure) add fatalistic pleasure to more complex hobby genres like tabletop RPGs, wargames, and Ameritrash[4] boardgames.

The impulse to play with fate is so strong that sociologist Roger Caillois named *chance*—or *alea*, a fatalistic "negation of the will, a surrender to destiny"[5]—as one of the four fundamental categories of play. But although *Catan* and other dice-driven eurogames owe much to this ancient and modern legacy, they tend to reimagine chance in significantly less fatalistic ways. Instead, eurogames tap into a longstanding Western tradition that idolizes rational thinking as empowering humankind to wrest control of their destiny away from fate.

Drawing on these cultural values, what rationalist eurogames mitigate isn't fate itself but rather *fatalism*, the resigned attitude that fate ultimately controls one's destiny. This sentiment clearly informs Teuber's design philosophy, as he explains: "*Catan* possesses a balanced luck factor. By 'balanced,' I mean the possibility of actively counteracting bad luck of the dice, being able to moderate it and not be at the mercy of it."[6] Rather than eliminating randomness, eurogames often aim to give players feelings of power over their fate, operating as if "the idea that the outcome of a game might be determined by factors that the players cannot control is anathema."[7]

To accomplish this, rationalist eurogames tend to create gameplay based on *seizing chances*, the culturally capitalist virtue of quick-thinking people decisively profiting from the opportunities that chance throws their way. In other words, eurogames often strive to feel more like games of skill than games of chance—not by eliminating chance, but by making a game of skill out of seizing chances. And while contemporary eurogames typically seize chances differently than *Catan*, *Catan*'s ideological legacy of *rationalizing*, *de-valuing*, *reacting to*, and *collectivizing* fate creates a precedent for eurogames to reimagine player agency as a triumph over fate.

Rationalizing Fate

Knowledge may be power, but no amount of statistical knowledge gives players genuine power over die rolls. What statistical knowledge offers instead is the predictive power to transform a chancy gamble into an educated guess—and nothing captures

the paradox of making a rational science of randomness quite like an educated guess. *Catan rationalizes fate* by framing chance as probabilistic, predictable, and ultimately tamable.

Dice rolling in *Catan* is simple: roll two dice then produce on all hexes that match the rolled sum (or move the Robber if the sum is 7). But rolling *two* dice completely transforms how players play probabilities. Whereas rolling a single die yields a flat, uninteresting probability curve, summing two dice creates a much more interesting bell curve in which the middle values (closer to 7) are most likely to be rolled while the edge values (2 and 12) are least likely. So, although *Catan* isn't a gambling game, it's all about playing probabilities.

For all its simplicity, *Catan* strives to make these probabilities crystal-clear through intuitive data visualizations. When most boardgames use their glimpses for thematic immersion, *Catan* invests more effort in visually depicting general mathematical knowledge than visually demarcating territory. While buildings occupy the unmarked seams between tiles, number tokens (Fig. 8) corresponding to the possible die rolls are given the prominent central positions. These tokens emphasize probabilities in three ways: higher probability hexes are numbered in larger and bolder fonts, the highest probability hexes (6 and 8) are further emphasized by striking red text, and a series of pips beneath each number symbolize how many times one would expect to roll that value in 36 rolls.

While it's easy to take such simple visual representations for granted, the way *Catan* builds statistical knowledge into its visual *world view* encourages players to adopt a rationalist worldview. Functioning as a visual strategy guide that encour-

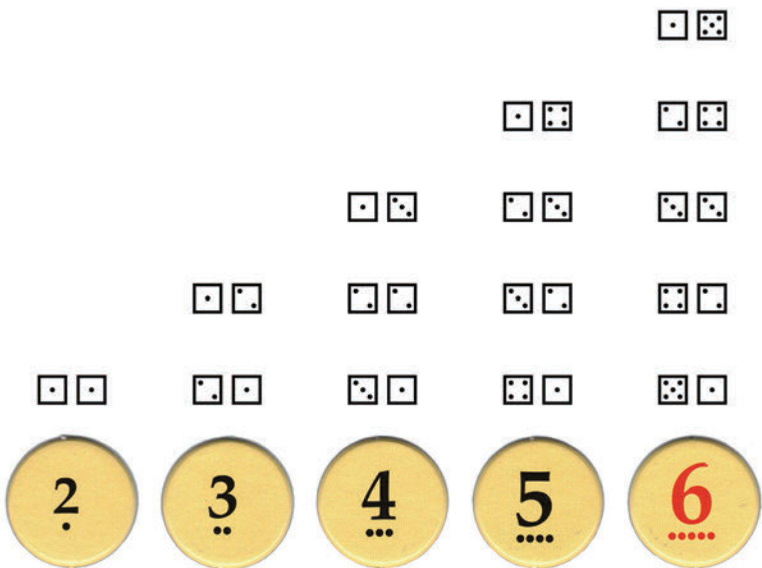

Figure 8. In *Catan*, each land hex bears a number token (shown above) that states the die value on which that hex produces resources. These tokens visually represent the relative probabilities of rolling these values by increasing the font size with the highest probability hexes in red. The pips under the numbers represent the probabilities with a 2 having a 1/36 chance of being rolled and a 6 having a 5/36 chance. *Catan* has no 7 tokens because that's the value for moving the Robber. The 8–12 tokens look like the above with the probabilities in descending order to complete the bell curve.

ages players to play probabilities, this statistical information demystifies chance, making it feel less fatalistic and more predictable. Presenting randomness as predictable allows players to focus more on strategically playing probabilities than throwing themselves on the mercy of fate. Rationalizing fate frames the highly luck-dependent *Catan* as a game of skill, a competition to seize chances.

This adds another dimension to the land claiming discussed in the "Placing Hexes" chapter. Although homesteading divvied up land into equal-sized parcels, land claims were hardly created equal. Like in *Catan*, the natural variability of the land meant that some plots were more valuable than others. Add this to a first-come-first-served principle for land claims, and what initially looks like equal land distribution incites a highly competitive land rush, a scramble to seize the best chances.

To win this game, players must be *calculating*—both in the mathematical sense of crunching numbers and in the emotional sense of adopting a coldly rational attitude toward optimizing investments. Winning at *Catan* requires the cultural capitalist mindset of "constantly calculating potential gains, losses, and risks" and "thinking about how this or that decision might or might not give us a competitive edge over the rest of the field."[8] And the probabilistic nature of such calculations encourages adopting a "speculative" mindset that "must always be betting on an unknowable future."[9]

Playing probabilities is ultimately about trying to control the uncontrollable. A more superstitious person might say this only tempts fate. At the very least, rationalizing fate doesn't actually tame fate—it tempers fatalism. It gives me rational tools that help me feel like I can still steer my ship against a capricious current. This tension is a major part of what makes *Catan* fun, but this feeling of control is so tenuous that contemporary eurogames rarely replicate *Catan*'s strong reliance on probability. Instead, they further *de-value fate*.

De-Valuing Fate

Whereas rationalism often gives a sense of control, fatalism embraces uncontrollable swings between good and bad fortunes. Fatalistic dice games represent these swings with the numerical values on the dice. After all, counting is perfectly suited for making value-laden comparisons: *higher* and *lower* are easily mapped onto *better* and *worse*. So, most stereotypical dice games follow this intuitive formula: higher rolls yield better results. But not *Catan*. To maintain its rationalist disposition, *Catan* resists fatalism by *de-valuing* its die rolls—that is, disrupting the fatalistic connection between higher and better.

In *Catan*, some rolls are more *likely*, but no roll is inherently *better*. Instead, the value of a roll is always circumstantial: I just want to roll whatever numbers happen to produce what I want. Similarly, my eurogame exemplar *The Castles of Burgundy* disrupts any connection between quantitative and qualitative value. I only want to roll a 6 when I want to perform an action that happens to be labeled with a 6. Rolling a 2 is better when I want to take a tile in the #2 Depot, build on a #2 hex, or sell a #2 Goods tile (Fig. 9). In both games, I actively root for certain numbers, but not because they're intrinsically better. These games de-value fate by undermining its central *value* system.

To de-value fate still further, both games play with the standard number line. *Catan* does this by replacing the number line with the bell curve. In *Catan*, there's no significance to two numbers being adjacent to each other. Instead, the most similar numbers are those with the same probabilities on the

Figure 9. Examples of de-valued die rolling in *The Castles of Burgundy*. This game de-values fate by making it entirely circumstantial what dice values are most beneficial. This example shows situations where I want to roll a 2 to perform the depicted actions: claiming a building tile from the #2 Depot (top right), placing a building on a #2 building space (bottom left), or selling a #2 goods tile (bottom right).

opposite side of the bell curve (so, 2 is more similar to 12 than to 3). Whereas *Catan* shifts attention away from counting and toward probabilities, *The Castles of Burgundy* literally de-values numbers by disrupting counting itself. *The Castles of Burgundy* replaces the number line with a number loop in which 6 and 1 are adjacent. So, in addition to higher numbers not being inherently better than lower numbers, they're not inherently *higher* either.

These design elements undermine fatalism by embracing rationalist sensibilities that de-value chance. Although chance still matters, these gameworlds contradict fatalism's tendency to produce moral narratives where fate favors the happy few. Instead, de-valuing fate makes chance feel abstract, neutral, and impersonal. And this helps me imagine that I *make* (rather than *find*) my fortune, making chance feel like an element in a game of skill where I'm empowered to *react to fate*.

Reacting to Fate

> "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."
>
> "Play the hand you're dealt."

These snippets of popular wisdom reflect an odd combination of fatalism (you can't change what life gives you) and empowerment (but you can control how you react) that captures how eurogames encourage players to view randomness: accept your lot and react with skillful play. Rather than dialing down randomness, eurogames often combat fatalism by dialing *up* player agency. These games make fate feel like a beginning rather than an end. They empower players to *react to* fate, seizing chances rather than being at their mercy.

In game design terms, eurogames typically do this by shifting from *output* to *input randomness*, essentially reversing the order of precedence between strategy and fate. Instead of rolling *to* resolve an action, eurogames often have players roll and *then* resolve actions. Rolling to see if I successfully collect

resources in *Catan* or hit an enemy in an RPG is known as *output randomness*[10] because the uncertainty lies in the outcome. I might be successful, or I might not. In contrast, spending resources in *Catan* or playing a hand of randomly drawn cards is known as *input randomness* because the uncertainty lies in what I will be given to work with, but once the random input is resolved I know exactly what I'm able to do. So, shifting from output to input randomness gives me the power to react to fate.

This feeling of empowerment shapes the eurogame experience. *Catan* and all six of my eurogame exemplars rely heavily on input randomness and barely at all on output randomness. Indeed, this design philosophy is so prevalent that Stewart Woods argues that "the perception of control brought about by shifting the chronology and structure of random elements can be seen as a defining trait of the genre."[11]

The *perception* of control is key to reframing chance as less fatalistic. Although input randomness isn't any less random (or impactful) than output randomness, it tends to give a greater sense of agency. Whereas fatalism views fate as exerting power over hapless individuals, input randomness makes chance feel more rational and controllable. It makes me feel like I have the power to seize chances and ultimately control my destiny. And it makes games feel more like games of skill than of chance.

Within this rationalist framework, fatalism becomes reduced to something like a scapegoat for reasoning away any potential failures. As Teuber notes, "there are no losers in *Catan*; there are only those who are unlucky."[12] Game designer Richard Garfield echoes this sentiment, noting that luck can

protect player's egos through a psychological double standard that I know all too well: I can feel validated in my skill when winning and curse my unjust fate when losing.[13]

As if they heard my frustrations, contemporary eurogames often dramatically increase my ability to control my destiny, sometimes even empowering me to manipulate the results of rolled dice. Although Dice Manipulation—which appears in all my eurogame exemplars that include dice—doesn't make dice rolling any less random, giving me more options for how to use random inputs makes my play feel more skillful than random.

By empowering players to react to fate, eurogames can transform "playing the hand you're dealt" from an expression of fatalistic resignation into a celebration of human agency. They essentially play out an existentialist power fantasy. And they play out a culturally capitalist power fantasy that "asks us to be self-enclosed individuals in charge of our own fates through competition" even though "individuals alone cannot control their fates in a global, complex, capitalist society, no matter how well they compete."[14]

Of course, "with great power comes great responsibility." So, it turns out that this power fantasy ultimately encourages players to feel personally responsible for how fate treats them. And ironically, this feeling of personal responsibility is only enhanced when eurogames *collectivize fate*.

Collectivizing Fate

Although *Catan* makes responsibility feel personal, it simultaneously collectivizes fate by making all players share die rolls.

In *Catan*, resource-generating die rolls produce for *every* player with buildings adjacent to the rolled land hexes. It doesn't matter who rolled the dice. These shared die rolls *collectivize* fate by making chance target the world instead of particular players. But this doesn't encourage the collectivist[15] thinking that the mainstream media praised *Catan* for. Ironically, collectivizing fate supports individualism by making competition feel meritocratic.

Catan's shared die rolls are perhaps its greatest mechanical legacy, having shaped the popular Roll-and-Write genre, which is all about players making different choices with the same inputs. This mechanism has also become popular in dice-driven eurogames, including my eurogame exemplar *Lorenzo il Magnifico* and several other titles from its Italian design circle. These games often use dice to create variable setups that players then react to, creating competitive arenas based on shared input randomness.

Shared die rolls may be so popular because they're an elegant and intuitive way to maintain competitive balance with random elements. Sharing random elements can reduce the chance that randomness will tip the scales in one player's direction. But beyond mathematical balancing, collectivizing fate simply makes games *feel* more balanced. It's a lot easier to feel like luck is out to get me when I have my own independent rolls. When I share rolls with others, it feels more like luck is just a neutral feature of the world. Sharing die rolls can make players feel like they're in the same boat.

This is how *Catan* resists fatalism and embraces a meritocratic worldview: it gives everyone the same chances so that it

feels like success is more due to skill. As Littler puts it, "Meritocracy firstly refers to a social system which is based around the idea that individuals are responsible for working hard to activate their talent and thus one in which the majority will arrive at social positions for which they are suitable and appropriately rewarded."[16] Meritocracy presents society itself as a game where the best player wins.

But for this to be true, the competitive arena must be a "level playing field."[17] So, while meritocracy is an inherently individualist ideology, it also rests on a *collectivist* assumption of fairness: that all players have "equal opportunity" to seize chances. Of course, this isn't true of any real-world societies. And it's not true of *Catan* either, despite Guido Teuber's claim that "We also hear that the game promotes the idea of equal opportunity. After all, every player starts with the same thing: two settlements and two roads."[18] In fact, *Catan*'s settlements aren't created equal and can absolutely swing outcomes, especially when combined with swingy dice rolls.

Yet, the power of the level playing field depends less on being true than on people believing in it. Believing in a level playing field makes me *feel* personally responsible for winning or losing, even when these results are partially beyond my control.[19] Instead of cursing my fate, I often kick myself for my poor choices. Similarly, cultural capitalism's emphasis on "personal responsibility simultaneously obscures and intensifies existing inequalities,"[20] making its "harsh world of competition appear good and just."[21] Meritocratic thinking sustains capitalism by shifting responsibility from the system onto individuals.

Even when I do curse my fate, I tend to bemoan my *individual* bad luck. I usually look to decisive moments of individual skill or chance to explain divergent outcomes. A winner may have made good choices or had good luck whereas a loser may have made bad choices or had bad luck. So, the irony of collectivizing fate is that it supports individualistic thinking. It makes me think of my fate as a "player problem" rather than a "game problem." Again, we're all in the same boat.

But it's worth noting that both boats and playing fields can be tilted. Just because something is shared doesn't mean that it's level. In the end, *Catan* isn't a land of equal opportunity. Fate always tilts the scales. And even if this volatility makes *Catan* fun, it's worth unsettling how collectivizing fate ultimately promotes meritocratic and individualist thinking.

Play Log

As I've settled in as a gamer, I've become less patient with luck in eurogames and have increasingly sought out games that give me more control over my fate. When writing this, I was initially tempted to begin, "As I've matured as a gamer . . ." Upon further reflection, I want to unsettle my initial tendency to view my desire to control my destiny as a sign of *maturity*. That's precisely the kind of thinking that makes people believe that growing up means abandoning playfulness.

More disturbingly, that's also the kind of thinking that has historically rationalized imperialism. Deep cultural beliefs in the colonizer's wisdom and the colonized's childishness created a superiority complex used to justify violently paternalis-

tic relationships. Far from being objective, rationality is a tool that can be used to *rationalize* a lot of questionable things.

These are sobering reflections, but the takeaway isn't that we need to abandon rationality. Quite the opposite: we may need rationality more than ever. After all, irrationality can be a weapon, too. So, I very much value how boardgames offer so much potential for playing with meaningful ideas, including the ideas and ideologies built into their very systems. I love boardgames because deep down I love playing with ideas more than just about anything.

And I've learned to love them even more because play can simultaneously unsettle rationalism. After all, play has a way of transcending or transgressing its own structures. I often strive to master a game system only to be swept away by a play experience. I even wrote this book as an intellectual exercise only to have these unplanned play logs evoke surprising emotions. Although cynicism can teach me to expect the unexpected, play can teach a chaos-averse planner like myself to delight in the unexpected.

I sometimes wonder whether true wisdom lies in being able to unsettle my ingrained and even hubristic tendencies to idealize rationalism. Unsettlement makes me question whether I love feeling smart merely because I love feeling powerful. Again, play has a way of transcending or transgressing its own power fantasies. As much as I seek control in my life, there's a special joy in relinquishing control that can make me more open to the world and to others.

So, I've come to believe that being human includes some deep compulsion to peer into whatever mysteries lie beyond

rationality. Regardless of one's spiritual inclinations (or tendency to converse with fate-shaping ghosts), play allows joyfully flirting with our human inability to control the world. Good play is humanizing. So, while an all-knowing God doesn't need to play dice, this simple human might.

CHAPTER 4

Robbing and Trading

As the back of its box proudly proclaims, *Catan* has "been called the 'Perfect Social Game.'" And while "perfect" is subjective, *Catan* certainly feels like the work of a designer who declares "I favor games that are suitable as a medium for a lively, sociable togetherness and in which I can experience both the game itself and each of my fellow players to the fullness of their personality."[1]

This is a beautiful sentiment but not exactly a peaceful one—after all, other people make my life immeasurably better, but not necessarily simpler or calmer. Similarly, player interactions can make games more fun, but not necessarily more peaceful. Instead, interactions like Robbing and Trading bring playful yet messy dynamics that may unsettle peaceful-feeling eurogames.

There's no question that Robbing and Trading feel markedly different—one forcibly takes while the other voluntarily exchanges. Nothing exemplifies Teuber's idealism about *Catan* quite like trading. Teuber himself implies that what makes *Catan* "a peaceful game" is that "participants didn't fight, but instead traded and cooperated with each other."[2] This is a remarkable statement, not least because trading doesn't actu-

ally make *Catan* cooperative. Trading is just another competitive arena in *Catan*. So, the way trading can genuinely infuse competition with cooperative sentiments says something profound about how boardgames come alive as playful social activities.

At the same time, nothing troubles Teuber's sincerely hopeful vision of *Catan* as a "peaceful game" quite like this simple fact: *Catan* can be mean as heck. Just ask the Green Bay Packers, who became known for holding *Catan* games so cutthroat that even professional NFL players were sometimes taken aback.[3] And nothing exemplifies *Catan*'s meanness quite like the Robber, an agent of misfortune who steals resources and whose mere presence renders land unproductive. This often-maligned figure especially troubles *Catan*'s peaceful social dynamic by encouraging players to rob and block *each other*. By disrupting gameworld production and frameworld collaboration, the Robber complicates *Catan*'s ideal of peaceful settlement.

But although it's tempting to think of *Catan*'s "prevailing mood" as a tug-of-war between "aggressive" robbing and "peaceful" trading,[4] these seemingly contradictory dynamics aren't actually opposed. *Catan* isn't straightforwardly peaceful or aggressive. It doesn't even simply alternate between these poles. Instead, *Catan* attempts to cultivate a peaceful-feeling social dynamic that weaves both positive and negative player interactions into a uniquely complicated play experience.

This chapter questions how culturally capitalist thinking can infuse player interaction. It does this by exploring how *Catan* frames its negative player interactions of *robbing* and

blocking and its positive player interaction of *trading*. It then explores the *balancing acts* that integrate these interactions into a broader competitive social dynamic.

Robbing

Regardless of how individual players feel about it, robbing can be a tough sell for peaceful-feeling eurogames that tend to base their fun on competing "fairly" rather than behaving "badly." Yet, this social dynamic is interesting precisely because of how it can unsettle eurogames' idealized peacefulness.

It's telling that robbing is typically classified as "Take That," notoriously direct and sudden negative player interactions named for something one might playfully shout in a rival's face as they unleash a surprise attack. Whereas most mechanisms bear blandly functional names, "Take That" groups a variety of gameplay effects under a shared *feeling*. And how eurogames imagine this feeling of gleefully derailing a rival's carefully laid plans says a lot about their value systems.

Take That is polarizing because it brings playful meanness into social gameplay, complicating peaceful and fair rivalry. Such meanness is chaotic but not evil—it can sometimes even strengthen social bonds. While it's not quite my cup of tea, there can be genuine pleasure in this dynamic—even for the recipient, who may laughingly accept their lumps while eagerly awaiting an opportunity to turn the tables. But *Catan* struggles to reconcile its meanness with its peaceful ideals. So, robbing comes to define *Catan*'s peculiar vision of peace—a paradoxical ideal of unconflicted conflict.

Catan uses the Robber as a sort of emotional scapegoat that players can displace negative emotional energy onto instead of onto each other. The Robber is clearly designed to play the villain. Mechanically, the Robber makes robbing mandatory, giving players plausible deniability for performing negative actions. Visually, this nameless and faceless pawn has just enough personality to be easily vilified while remaining shadowy enough to function as a vaguely threatening other. Thematically, the Robber operates like an underworld contractor who does the dirty work for rival empires so they can sabotage each other while seemingly keeping their hands clean.

Tellingly, the back of the box verbally scapegoats the Robber as it warns: "But beware! Someone might cut off your road or buy a monopoly. And you never know when the wily robber might steal some of your precious gains!" By making the Robber the subject of a separate warning, this wording characterizes the Robber as an autonomous agent rather than what it actually is—an agent of the players. Indeed, although the game itself doesn't imply this, Teuber describes the Robber more as a victim of the players: "The truth is that the robber is a harmless fellow who is merely taken advantage of by the players, for the sake of their own benefit."[5] So, although Teuber personally humanized the Robber by creating a bumbling trio of robbers with caricaturish sculpts and a short comic strip, the game scapegoats the Robber to help keep the very peace it seemingly disturbs.

In this way, *Catan*'s Take That simultaneously intensifies its rivalries and frames them as friendly. In this friendly rivalry, outright war is faux pas while illicit theft remains "fair

game" or "good fun."[6] Certainly, friendly rivalries are especially meaningful for boardgames, which thrive as social activities when they forge special bonds of kinship through competition. At the same time, these friendly rivalries put a positive spin on colonialism. Indeed, historical colonialism was often framed as a friendly rivalry as colonial powers diplomatically divided potential colonies so they could focus their energies on colonization rather than fighting each other.[7]

It's also telling that friendly rivalries didn't apply to colonial subjects, who were seen instead as sinister others. In this context, scapegoating the Robber risks eliciting further colonial resonances. In addition to absorbing unwanted negative energy, scapegoating the Robber helps players detach from perceiving their empire-building as theft. It's much easier to feel like the good guy when the bad guy is trying to stop you, which is probably why historical "settlers often saw indigenous peoples as 'robbers.'"[8] And it's harder for me to feel like a robber myself when I'm still stinging from being the victim of robbery. So, although the newer neutral gray Robber isn't obviously Indigenous, criminalizing resistance always makes settlement feel lawful or even righteous.

But scapegoating, criminalizing, and othering the Robber isn't the only way *Catan* helps players detach from the negative emotions of robbing. Using a different approach to achieve similar ends, *Catan* frames its other notable instance of Take That as impersonal and economic. *Catan*'s most confrontational Development Card allows a player to name a resource and take all of them from other players. Despite enabling simple theft, this Take That card is entitled "Monopoly" as if it

represented some sort of clever economic maneuver. But what matters here isn't the thematic contradiction, but how *Catan* attempts to make an aggressive move feel peaceful by framing it as economic. Peace is preserved only as far as this theft resonates with culturally capitalist attitudes that perceive business as impersonal and therefore neutral.

In the end, *Catan* might help players detach from negative feelings or it might not. To me, *Catan* still feels mean as heck. To be fair, it's tricky to put a peaceful veneer on negative player interaction. But whether or not it's successful, the most meaningful thing the Robber attempts to steal is my conflicted feelings. Detachment robs robbing of its emotional impact.

Blocking

Although the Robber both steals and blocks, its blocking is too entangled with robbing to be truly distinct from Take That. Instead, *Catan*'s most iconic blocking experience is territorial: when I build in any location, I block that location as well as all adjacent locations (Fig. 10). This makes settling Catan a first-come-first-served land grab whose core tension comes from *blocking*, preventing rivals from doing something by doing it first. In other words, the essence of blocking is *helping oneself*, the single-minded pursuit of individual self-interest that's arguably cultural capitalism's most cherished virtue.[9] When competition is seen as the foundation of a good society, self-interest (helping myself) justifies taking ("I'll just help myself").[10]

Although robbing and blocking are both technically "negative" player interactions, they feel quite different. Whereas

Figure 10. Territorial blocking in *Catan*. In this example, the Red player is completely blocked in and can't place a new Settlement anywhere. They can't place in the spot to the right because there's a rule preventing building adjacent to another building, and they can't reach the available building spot on the left (although Blue could).

Take That aims to directly harm my rivals, blocking only indirectly harms others while aiming to help myself. Whereas robbing means taking from others, blocking means taking what's up for grabs. That's probably why blocking has become so accepted as neutral that some gamers don't even consider it *interactive*.[11] Rather than treating blocking as negative, peaceful-feeling eurogames use blocking to add interactive tension while maintaining neutrality. After all, blocking is really just a side effect of claiming and claiming feels more peaceful than conquering (see the "Placing Hexes" chapter).

Another way of looking at the difference between robbing and blocking lies in their legality[12]—whereas robbing is crim-

inalized because it violates capitalist law and order, blocking feels fair because it conforms to the rules of capitalist competition. And capitalism defines fairness by legality rather than equality. So, blocking helps peaceful-feeling eurogames feel fair only because they've already adopted a culturally capitalist worldview.

So, it's worth unsettling how these culturally capitalist mindsets rationalize detachment in eurogames. In the decades since *Catan*, eurogames have normalized blocking as a way of making negative interaction feel impersonal and businesslike. After all, cultural capitalism makes a virtue of detachment—I'm a better capitalist when I help myself without worrying about the consequences. And cultural capitalism values competitors who have "no hard feelings." After all, "it's nothing personal." "It's just business." "It's just a game." As these cliches attest, detached design makes competition feel impersonal so that winners and losers alike will be at peace with contested outcomes. In fact, these cliches are just ways of telling people they shouldn't be bothered by my actions, even when they harm others: "I'll just help myself—*don't mind if I do*."

With its capacity to make competition feel peaceful, it's perhaps unsurprising that blocking has become the most commonly accepted form of player interaction in eurogames. Ironically, *Catan*'s ideological legacy lives on in how later eurogames have detached from its territorial blocking only to embrace more economic forms of blocking. For instance, whereas *Catan* abandoned its Viking inspirations to feel more peaceful,[13] *A Feast for Odin* feels surprisingly peaceful for a game that openly embraces Viking violence. It creates peace

from violence both by emphasizing blocking's indirect interactions and thematizing these contests as merely economic.

Whereas settlement in *Catan* is a tense territorial battle, settlement in *A Feast for Odin* is a relaxing puzzle of laying tiles[14] on uncontestable personal player boards (*The Castles of Burgundy* also does this). Like *Catan*, players need not worry their little empires will be directly attacked. Unlike *Catan*, players also need not worry that their little empires will be blocked. So, settlement actually feels more peaceful. Instead, *A Feast for Odin* shifts its competitive tension onto a central action board where players place workers to claim hotly-contested economic opportunities. Although it can be as cutthroat as anything in *Catan*, this Worker Placement mitigates the game's violent theming by feeling less like conquering and more like claiming.

It's especially telling how *A Feast for Odin* attempts to rationalize Viking conquest by thematizing it as economically motivated. Describing the Vikings as "more than just pirates," the rulebook argues that these "explorers and founders of states" only raided "due to their unfortunate agricultural situation."[15] Extending this line of thinking, the rulebook also states that players win by "collecting goods to achieve a financially secure position in society."[16] Although this feels a bit like revisionist history,[17] the question isn't whether this is historically accurate. What's interesting here is how this rationalization relies on economic motivations being felt as inherently peaceful. The game invokes scarcity to make players comfortable with raiding and pillaging I need to feed my people, so I'll just help myself.

It's certainly rare that eurogames make such explicit historical arguments, especially to rationalize violence. That's because they don't need to. The whole point of detached design is to make play feel so neutral it doesn't need moral justification. Again, the most meaningful thing that detached design blocks is hard feelings.

Trading

While detached design often attempts to mitigate the emotional weight of negative player interactions, it would be hard for eurogames to feel peaceful if they didn't also lean into some positive feelings. And while building is arguably the most common source of positivity in eurogames (see the "Building and Scoring" chapter), *Catan*'s positivity begins with *trading*.[18]

Teuber himself locates *Catan*'s peacefulness in trade when he describes designing "*Catan* to be a peaceful game in which participants didn't fight, but instead traded and cooperated with each other."[19] In this vein, *The Atlantic* reported that *Catan*'s "trades are almost always mutually beneficial," making the game a positive experience that "rewards cooperation as much (if not more) as confrontation." After all, the primary rule for trading resources in *Catan* is that both players agree to the exchange. In other words, trading can make *Catan*'s cutthroat competition feel cooperative—just as it does for cultural capitalism.

As a culturally capitalist ideal, *free trade*[20] evokes romanticized visions of competition promoting a common good—both

by stimulating market growth and by cultivating a peace in which more "civilized" trade wars replace actual wars. Trade helps put a positive spin on things. As Flanagan and Jakobsson point out, "trade" has historically functioned as a euphemism for colonial exploitation.[21] And as Wilson points out, Clinton's trade-friendly NAFTA policies "represented a new, seemingly more progressive political horizon" for cultural capitalism that seemed "cosmopolitan and claimed to be inclusive."[22] Again, trading can make competition feel cooperative.

This feeling is especially poignant since trading is one of the most thematic mechanisms in boardgaming. Players negotiate in the gameworld by literally negotiating in the frameworld. They trade in the gameworld by literally trading game components in the frameworld. With trading, art imitates life and life imitates art. This makes boardgames perfectly poised to play out culturally capitalist ideals, which already imagine their ideal society as a game, a fair and balanced competitive arena where winners prove their mettle and competition is an end in itself.

So, nothing makes competition feel cooperative quite like games, which make competitions into fun social experiences. Winning may be competitive, but *playing* is essentially cooperative. And trading only enhances the cooperative aspects of competitive play. As a form of positive player interaction, trading can seem to create win-win situations, making it easy to imagine that competition serves the common good.

Even so, it's telling that people often talk about trades in terms of "winners" and "losers." Unlike cooperative games that genuinely align players' interests, competitive negotia-

tion games complicate the ideal of positive player interaction by making sure that interests only ever partially align. There is no such thing as a truly “win-win” exchange in any game that only one player can win. I’m often loath to make even mutually beneficial trades because the competitive structure disincentivizes me from helping my rivals. As much as I want to help myself, I typically only trade when I’m sure I’m getting the better deal, which means I don’t trade all that much. In the end, trading can be fun, but it can’t make competition truly cooperative.

So, while one might expect eurogames to walk fine lines to navigate negative player interactions, eurogames also walk surprisingly fine lines to manage the emotional resonances of *positive* player interactions. Although it’s technically positive, I find that trading often evokes mixed rather than unilaterally positive feelings. I appreciate that *Catan*’s trading provides a social dynamic that’s waning in contemporary eurogames. But in the end, this paradoxical ideal of cooperative competition falls apart. As it turns out, maintaining peaceful feelings through any form of player interaction requires delicate *balancing acts*.

Balancing Acts

As noted in the opening of this book, mainstream US media repeatedly praised *Catan* for being more cooperative and less cutthroat than *Monopoly*. But is this really true? Both games have trading. And *Catan*’s versions of robbing and blocking are arguably meaner because they can be personally targeted at

other players. So, why does *Monopoly* feel meaner and *Catan* feel more peaceful to me?

One explanation is that *Monopoly* and *Catan* adopt dramatically different competitive models. Whereas *Monopoly* leverages player interaction to eliminate competition, *Catan* leverages player interaction to preserve competition. Like real-world monopolies, the point of *Monopoly* is to eliminate competition. *Monopoly* encourages players to gleefully bankrupt their rivals and then literally ends when no further interaction is possible.

Against this, peaceful-feeling eurogames aim to keep competition alive. Ironically, this means that while *Monopoly* plays out what's unfair about capitalism, *Catan* plays out a meritocratic ideal that makes capitalism feel fair.[23] So, *Catan* can feel more peaceful because it paints a rosier picture of capitalism.

Catan asks players to perform the peaceful-feeling *balancing act* of continually restoring the game's unstable equilibrium. Describing his design philosophy, Teuber advises that players should use "social interaction"[24] to mitigate the game's inherent luck factor. For instance, Teuber writes that one function of the Robber is to make it so "trailing players can together outmaneuver a leading player."[25] Because *Catan* is essentially a race to 10 Victory Points, collaborating to stymie a player on the brink of victory is often the only way trailing players have a chance of winning—essentially, the rest of the pack is motivated to prolong the game while waiting for the winds of fate to change.

This can work from a design standpoint, but it's tricky to leave something as important as competitive balance to the

whims of the players. This either risks allowing the game to occasionally go off the rails or pressuring players to follow a strongly prescribed negative playscript. My options narrow when I'm forced to choose what hurts the leader over what helps me. The issue with this isn't so much that it's mean, but that it reduces player choice and agency. And that's less playful and arguably less fun than Catan's normal game flow.

Gamers often describe such situations as kingmaking[26] because trailing players can arbitrarily decide which rival will win without really benefiting themselves. Ultimately, kingmaking situations can be awkward from every angle: I don't enjoy being the trailing player forced to target the leader without any real hope of winning, I don't enjoy being the winning player who has my imminent victory stymied, and I don't even enjoy being the eventual winner who feels my win was more arbitrary than earned. To me, kingmaking sucks the joy out of competition. It feels like an unfair way to promote fairness.

And I know I'm not alone in this. *Catan*'s social interactions are famously messy. Tellingly, its most familiar frustrations often find humorous expression in memes (Fig. 11) that cleverly illustrate the exasperation, angst, and even rage that these balancing acts can engender. This peaceful-feeling eurogame isn't always known for being peaceful. Ultimately, player-driven balancing acts can be fun, but they're often so messy that most contemporary eurogames avoid relying on them.

One might think that eurogames would instead find balance by curbing leading players or boosting trailing ones, but they usually don't. After all, catch-up mechanisms resonate

Figure 11. This meme by catan.championship on Instagram illustrates the so-called runaway leader problem by presenting the leading player as Jack Sparrow frantically trying to escape a horde of enemies.

with governmental regulations that curb capitalist excesses, and cultural capitalism takes a dim view of such regulations. Instead, most contemporary eurogames offer more finely balanced systems with fewer kingmaking opportunities. They become more meritocratic by becoming less interactive.

Less interactive competitions feel more meritocratic because they're more individualist. When I can no longer blame my loss on kingmaking, I can only blame myself. And the more I blame myself, the less I see the system as unfair. By making runaway leaders feel like a "player problem" rather than a "game problem," *Catan* resonates with how cultural capitalism rationalizes itself by shifting moral responsibility from the system to individuals. After all, meritocratic thinking similarly treats economic success and failure as a "player problem." Imagining society as a game makes it seem only fair that life has its winners and losers.

Ironically, by making its economy feel more peaceful, *Catan* can put a more positive spin on capitalism than *Monopoly*. Similarly, by attempting to make their economies feel more peaceful still, many contemporary eurogames put even more positive spins on capitalism than *Catan*. Such games subtly adopt a culturally capitalist vision of peace—not as the absence of conflict, but as perpetual conflict that feels peaceful only because it plays out within balanced economic arenas.

Play Log

Eurogames often provide exactly the social dynamic I'm looking for—light interaction with no hard feelings. Like many

“care bear”[27] gamers, I’m actively conflict-avoidant in games—not because I’m a particularly nice person, but because I’m quite uncomfortable with even playful social tension. In a sense, I both love and fear playing with others. It’s more than a little ironic how badly I want the people I love to play games with me only to largely ignore them after they agree. As someone who often detaches from overwhelming social situations, I want to unsettle my tendency to play in ways that promote isolation over intimacy.

So, as much as I seek comfortable social dynamics in games, this vision of peace is a double-edged sword. Boardgames have genuinely improved my relationships by smoothing out social situations I’d otherwise find overwhelming. But this only works if I don’t get too comfortable playing from a detached, individualist mindset. I need games to provide safe spaces from which I can engage, but I recognize that I’m easily tempted to use this safety as an excuse to disengage. Sometimes I want my interactions on the table to catalyze my interactions around the table. Sometimes I need playful attachment more than detachment.

After all, settling in isn’t the best way to build intimate relationships. Although they don’t need to be uncomfortably confrontational, genuinely social games can’t fear playful tension. Being willing to wade into messy dynamics is the only way to meet others where they’re at. As Teuber puts it, “Those who play often learn more about their fellow players than after hours of talks. Masks tend to fall away when people take on a role in a game.”[28] I certainly agree, especially when games help me unsettle my own masks and push me toward others.

After all, intimacy requires vulnerability. And vulnerability should be at least a little unsettling. That's just what it looks like when relationships actively stretch me.

But this doesn't just happen automatically. It's always an effort for me to step outside myself and move toward others. It's even harder when games also encourage detachment. So, if I want to become a more sociable player, I need to stop hiding in the emotional boltholes detached designs give me. This means questioning settled assumptions like misconstruing interaction as "mean" and non-interaction as "peaceful" or misconstruing robbing as negative, blocking as neutral, and trading as positive.

Ironically, although these attitudes are supposed to insulate me from negative social experiences, decades of playing games have shown me that they really don't. I've learned that non-interactive play can feel more lonely than peaceful and that blocking and trading can stir up as many hard feelings as robbing. So, I wonder whether buying into the impossible eurogame ideal of unconflicted conflict might only make me fear playful tensions.

In the end, choosing to be feeling rather than unfeeling opens me up to more relational play and more playful relationships.

CHAPTER 5

Collecting Resources

I find collecting resources one of the most visceral simple pleasures in boardgaming—there's just something I love about the uniquely tactile experience of accumulating game bits.[1] And beyond this immediate gratification, I especially enjoy how eurogames provide the delayed gratification of *managing resources* by optimizing their acquisition and use.

Resource management is central to *Catan*, a world whose lifeblood is the resource. Every possible action in *Catan* requires resources, the central currency that drives the game's action economy. In *Catan*, my holdings determine what I can do; if my resources are depleted my turn is simply over.

Resource management also underlies how most eurogames build worlds. Many eurogames define how players can interact with and within their gameworlds by how resources circulate. Like in *Catan*, resources often fuel the mechanical systems that allow players to do things in eurogames. Resources make eurogames go. So, it shouldn't be surprising that resource circulation often reveals a great deal about a game's implicit worldviews.

Resource management eurogames often resonate with culturally capitalist ideologies that instrumentalize land

and labor by treating them as natural and human resources. Peaceful-feeling eurogames not only can make instrumentalization feel natural, but they can also encode instrumentalization into natural law by creating gameworlds where land and labor exist for the sole purpose of being used. Certainly, even the most vigorous activist would be hard-pressed to claim that cardboard lands and wooden laborers have any intrinsic rights. Even so, it's worth unsettling how boardgames can resonate with ideologies often used to rationalize the instrumentalization of actual land and labor.

This chapter considers how managing natural and human resources can play out culturally capitalist ideals. It begins by exploring how eurogames instrumentalize land by building worlds where *mining* resources leads to *economizing* and *alchemizing* them. It then considers how the detached ways eurogames *imply* and *represent* labor can rationalize *managing* labor.

Mining Resources

To play any boardgame is to enter into a world. And to play many boardgames is to strive to make those worlds *mine*. From *Go* to *RISK* to *Catan*, territorial games define my relationship to the world as one of occupation and ownership. In such games, land exists to be conquered. By contrast, *Catan* and most resource management eurogames define my relationship to the world as extractive and economic. In such games, land exists to be *mined*.

Many eurogames—including *Catan* and half of my eurog-

ame exemplars—explicitly thematize resource generation as mining. But mining in eurogames goes well beyond theme. In *Catan*, Wheat and Sheep resources are generated as if they were mined just like Brick and Ore. In *Lisboa*, so-called "Stores" somehow generate goods from nothing while an entirely different mechanism allows players to sell these goods for money. And even when they don't thematize resource generation as mining, nature-themed eurogames[2] like *Wingspan* and *Earth* often allow "natural" resources like berries and soil to be collected and spent like commodities. Beyond theme, the underlying structure of resource-management eurogames often resonates with mining.

So, resource-management eurogames often resonate with deeply *anthropocentric* (human-centered) worldviews that imagine the natural world as having value only for human consumption. Such thinking is based on "a false divide between humans and nature"[3] that makes it easy to rationalize conquering and subsequently exploiting land. This is why Chloé Germaine describes "mastery of terrain"[4] as a notable feature within "the broadly anthropocentric medium of play."[5] Such anthropocentric thinking is often taken for granted, but it's worth unsettling because it reinforces the territorial logic of colonialism and the extractive logic of capitalism. Rather than encourage caring about lands for their own sake, games like *Catan* make it easy for me to focus on making the land and its resources mine.

Both visually and mechanically, eurogames often imagine land in terms of resource production. In *Catan*, being a Forest means absolutely nothing beyond being able to produce

Wood. And *Catan*'s visual aesthetic emphasizes this. *Catan*'s tile illustrations zoom in so far that they appear as largely homogenous areas. These landscapes are essentially iconographic, using the distinctive color and texture of each terrain type as a visual signifier for the type of resources they produce (Fig. 12). Ultimately, this aestheticized worldview represents land as a mere resource reserve.

Another consequence of this zoomed-in aesthetic is that *Catan* abridges significant swaths of landscape. In *Catan*, the only land deemed worthy of depiction is land primed for extraction. Although *Catan* is supposedly all about settlement, it depicts no inhabitable land whatsoever.[6] Instead, *Catan* relegates human settlement to the fuzzy beige borders on the fault lines between hexes. By emphasizing resource production instead of inhabitation, *Catan*'s lands themselves offer a worldview in which economic productivity is everything. *Catan* clearly shows that its lands are designed to be mined.

Building on this legacy, my eurogame exemplars mostly depict land according to anthropocentric world views. The land hexes in *The Castles of Burgundy* and provinces in *Concordia* extend *Catan*'s detached aesthetic by being even less distinctly textured and more strongly color-coded. *A Feast for Odin*'s islands are even more abstract geometric grids whose only representational features are a sliver of coastline and the occasional game icon. *Lisboa* only represents already urbanized land, which is visually presented through aestheticized and abstracted architectural drawings. *Lorenzo il Magnifico* gives little snippets of landscape art framed by a row of windows on the player board, creating an odd effect in which a

Figure 12. An excerpt from the *Catan* 5th edition rulebook illustrating how land is defined in terms of resource production. This image shows color-coded lands spawning matching resources.

single hallway can have adjacent windows that look out onto entirely different provinces.

The only one of my eurogame exemplars that offers any reasonably extended natural scenery is *Maracaibo*, whose vibrant Caribbean map shows significant topographical features of its islands. Yet, this topography is a mere aesthetic backdrop that contributes nothing to gameplay. Mechanically, "exploration" in *Maracaibo* means moving a meeple along a track to collect rewards like money, combat points, and influence with colonial powers. Such "exploration" looks more like exploiting the land than discovering it.

In this and similar ways, many eurogames create worlds where land isn't an environment to explore and inhabit but rather a reserve to be extracted. Such games encourage me to look at the world to see how I can make it mine or what I can mine from it. I mine so I can subsequently *economize resources*.

Economizing Resources

Instrumentalizing land as a mere source of resources supports instrumentalizing resources as mere sources of economic value. So, the strategic puzzle of economizing resources in eurogames generally depends on *economizing* resources in a deeper sense: divorcing resources from natural *ecologies* to transform them into currencies capable of sustaining game *economies*.

Economic thinking puts the "management" in "resource management." After all, although the words "ecology" and "economy" share the same Greek root, "ecology" names the *study* of inhabitation,[7] while "economy" names the *management* of inhabitation.[8] Without mentioning money, *Catan* gets me to think economically as I manage resources. Like most resource management eurogames, *Catan* replaces ecological with economic thinking—more precisely, it creates a world whose ecology is designed to fuel its economy.

This movement from ecology to economy shapes eurogames' core value systems. Eurogames often replace *intrinsic* value with *instrumental* value. Eurogame resources rarely have any use or value on their own. In *Catan*, unused resources are worth nothing whatsoever. And while some eurogames award

fractional Victory Points for leftover resources, I've yet to see hoarding unused resources be a winning strategy. Instead, eurogames often value resources according to their circulation within economic transactions. *Catan* gives its resources *exchange value*[9] by allowing resources to be traded with other players or the bank. Some eurogames (including *Concordia* and *Lisboa*) give resources *monetary value* by allowing them to be bought and/or sold for money. Either way, these games economize their resources by giving them economic rather than ecological value.

Strictly speaking, the way *Catan* economizes its resources isn't necessarily capitalist. Both thematically and mechanically, *Catan* evokes a world of pre-capitalist barter. Even so, there's a capitalist tinge to how *Catan*'s resource circulation sustains economic growth. In *Catan*, the point of collecting resources is never to consume them for everyday necessities—instead, resources are meant to be reinvested in economic infrastructure. They are merely means of growing *capital*. Resources are designed to be *spent* rather than *used*. In other words, what these instrumentalized resources resemble most is the one perpetually growing resource that sustains capitalist economies: *money*.[10]

To be fair, money isn't always the be-all and end-all for eurogames. *Catan* doesn't even have money. And none of my eurogame exemplars[11] crown the player with the most cash as the winner, a notable break from influential economic games like *Monopoly*, *Acquire*, and *1830*.[12] But although eurogames aren't always obsessed with money, they rarely escape monetary thinking. That's just what happens when eurogames

treat resources as currencies to be spent developing economic infrastructure.

Without simulating actual capitalist economies, these games create worlds whose natural laws support capitalist thinking—worlds whose ecologies actively adapt themselves for human economies. In so doing, these games realize one of anthropocentrism's most utopian fantasies: that extractive capitalism is both natural and sustainable.

By making spent resources return to the reserve, eurogames create unnaturally replenishing resource reserves where extraction doesn't lead to depletion.[13] Beyond simply ignoring environmental costs, this game mechanism represents all resources as renewable. It actively represents mining as ecological. This realizes an anthropocentric fantasy that rationalizes capitalist and sometimes colonial[14] exploitation. Who would feel bad about mining a world whose very ecosystem is designed to generate infinitely replenishing resources?

Interestingly, the *Catan* universe has several of the vanishingly rare exceptions to this utopian picture. There are at least three *Catan* scenarios[15] where resource depletion becomes meaningful. These scenarios still economize their resources, but they show that ecological consciousness can exist alongside extractive economies. But what interests me most about these variants isn't that they demonstrate ecological consciousness, but that they require rethinking *Catan*'s central resource economy.

Although such ecological variants are relatively obscure in the *Catan* universe and almost nonexistent among mainstream eurogames, they demonstrate that there are always

ideological stakes in how eurogames build their worlds. Generally, the trend in detached eurogame design is to create natural ecologies that uncritically sustain extractive economies. The mechanical systems that drive eurogame economies play out vividly utopian anthropocentric fantasies through how they economize otherwise natural resources. And this movement from ecology to economy takes on an especially anthropocentric twist with the arcane way eurogames *alchemize resources*.

Alchemizing Resources

Although eurogames are rarely thematized as alchemy, alchemical metaphors[16] help me envision how eurogame resource economies often rest on a peculiarly capitalist power fantasy. It's easy to take for granted the odd ways resources can be "spent" in eurogames as if all materials were merely different forms of currency. Yet, I find it interesting to take these oddities seriously. As with the alchemical fantasy of spinning worthless chaff into gold, I see an alchemical fantasy in how eurogames denature natural resources only to transmute them into things with unnaturally transformed and increased value.

Alchemical fantasies begin by seeking to transcend the inherent limitations of matter. Although eurogame resources may visually resemble real-world materials, that's usually where the resemblances end. Eurogames rarely give resources any properties that would impact their mechanical function. Wood in *Catan* isn't wood-like in any way. Whereas a stone

and wood house should have different properties, *Catan*'s ore-crafted Cities are functionally equivalent to a pair of wood-crafted Settlements. Following this legacy, how buildings function in eurogames rarely[17] shows even the slightest trace of what they're built from. So, eurogames essentially denature nature by treating seemingly "natural" resources as merely abstract, empty signifiers. They achieve the alchemical dream of making matter not really matter.

Instead of contributing any intrinsic properties, resources in eurogames only exist to be consumed as ingredients within alchemical transmutations. Again, such resources are *spent* rather than *used*. Wheat and Sheep in *Catan*, Invertebrates in *Wingspan*, and Clerics in *Lords of Waterdeep* are all treated roughly the same way: they're collected in stockpiles and spent to pay for costs. It doesn't matter that Wheat and Sheep are hardly viable building materials, that food sources aren't currency for purchasing species, or that adventuring parties aren't human sacrifices. It doesn't matter because these fungible resources are designed to vanish without a trace—they simply disappear back into the reserve and are replaced with something wholly different:[18] Wheat and Sheep are transmuted into Settlements, Invertebrates are transmuted into birds, and Clerics are transmuted into completed Quests.

The point here isn't to catch eurogames in a thematic inconsistency. The point is that when I play these games, I collect resources not with a mindset of using their natural properties but with a mindset of collecting sets of ingredients whose only value is to fulfill recipes.[19] Then, when I have what I need, I simply trade the ingredients in for what I want. In

other words, eurogames skip the crucial parts of the process where ingredients are combined or components are assembled. The effect of this is that eurogames represent Recipe Fulfillment as a mysterious black box, an unexplained alchemical equation (Fig. 13) that transforms specified inputs into specified outputs as if by magic. That's boardgame alchemy: seemingly arcane formulas that allow me to transmute denatured resources into radically transformed game objects.

These transformations become even more alchemical when they also unnaturally accrue value. Whereas natural laws force chemical equations to be balanced, alchemical transmutations can yield more than is put into them. For instance, *Concordia* gifts me bonus money every time I buy or sell goods at otherwise fixed rates. And whereas *Catan*'s Maritime Trades are fixed at unfavorable rates, most resource "conversions" in eurogames literally add value to the equation. For instance, a pair of conversions in *Lorenzo il Magnifico* can give me more than I started with (Fig. 13). Such transmutations are acts of creation as much as transformation.

Such alchemical fantasies ultimately reinforce capitalist fantasies. After all, these transactions are typically thematized as economic. The economic nature of these transactions doesn't make them any less alchemical—it's not for nothing that ancient alchemy was so obsessed with creating gold. And it's telling that modern virtual economies look a bit alchemical in how currencies can unnaturally compound value. Although transmuting chaff into gold remains a fantasy, it's a fantasy that resonates with the capitalist dream of wealth begetting wealth.

Figure 13. Various notations for alchemical processes in boardgames. *Catan* (center) represents these transmutations as simple equivalencies between resources and buildings whereas *Concordia* (right) and *Lorenzo il Magnifico* (left) use directional arrows more reminiscent of chemical equations. Note how chaining these two buildings in *Lorenzo il Magnifico* could allow a single Wood to be transmuted into two Wood and two Stone.

resources are collected by laborers "working the land,"[22] which may be why the only resource needed for both Settlements and Cities is the staple crop Wheat.

Similarly, labor explains how alchemical transmutations compound value in many eurogames. It makes sense that a Carpenter's Shop and Marketplace would work together to allow a player to convert a single Wood into two Wood and two Stone in *Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Fig. 13). The implied labor of the craftsman and merchant are the missing ingredients behind this seemingly magical increase in value. So, although labor is merely implied in these cases, its unspoken presence makes these worlds more coherent.

At the same time, it matters that these laborers are merely implied. Absence risks erasure. And as much sense as implied labor may make, it can easily be taken for granted because it doesn't make its presence felt. If a game doesn't explicitly show me how labor fits in, I'm not going to stop and try to deduce it in the middle of a game. That's why I'd feel strange saying "my citizenry harvests one Wheat" when playing *Catan*. I find it much more natural to say that my *buildings* produce resources or even that *I* produce them. I easily displace the role of absent laborers onto whatever is actually present. In other words, detached designs sometimes create worlds where labor is essential to what I'm doing but where labor need never be seen or thought about. It might as well be alchemy.

So, obscuring labor is one way eurogames can offer tantalizing alchemical fantasies. Without suggesting that resource conversions *are* literally magical, eurogames can make them

As economic fantasies, most eurogames aren't designed for literally roleplaying as alchemists.[20] They don't need to be. Instead, their alchemical fantasies derive from their unnaturally utopic economies. In the end, the point of mining, economizing, and alchemizing resources is to allow me to enjoy the exhilarating rush of resource management fueling ever-increasing profits. So, such games resonate with anthropocentric power fantasies of human economies triumphing over natural ecologies—a fantasy that can't help but *imply labor*.

Implying Labor

Although boardgame resource conversions can feel alchemical, resource alchemy can usually be thematically explained away by invoking implied labor. After all, labor has always provided a way of transforming and adding value without resorting to magic. A skilled craftsman can turn wood into gold simply by making sellable goods from it. So, although alchemical metaphors speak to the excessive and unnatural ways eurogames transmute extracted resources, it's also meaningful to explore how eurogames thematize such transformations by implying labor.[21]

It's labor that extracts value from land, but labor is almost entirely unrepresented in *Catan*. Aside from occasional glimpses of laborers sprinkled throughout its game art, *Catan* doesn't thematize any of its core mechanisms or components as involving labor. And yet, settling Catan only makes sense in terms of labor. Neither lands nor buildings spontaneously generate resources. The more plausible explanation is that

feel magical by simply obscuring the very ordinary way labor adds value. This reflects a common condition in modern industrial societies where ordinary consumers often have little awareness of the labor that goes into products that "magically" appear before them. There are good reasons that both eurogames and industrial societies often leave the labor question unspoken: their relationship to labor is almost as extractive as their relationship to land.

Although *Catan* avoids explicitly representing laborers, avoiding the labor question is ultimately just another sign of detached design. And, as it turns out, this legacy of detached design only finds new expression in contemporary eurogames that more directly *represent labor*.

Representing Labor

While laborers are largely implicit in *Catan*, all six of my eurogame exemplars thematically and artistically depict labor. But while this gives labor more attention, the way laborers are represented often only reduces them to *human resources*—fungible,[23] instrumentalized units of labor that exist to be owned and managed by players.[24]

By far the most famous way of representing laborers in eurogames is the worker *meeple*, a style of simple wooden figure that became ubiquitous after *Carcassonne* in 2000. Interestingly, meeples (Fig. 14) very much resemble *Catan*'s wooden building pieces in size, material, and general aesthetic: these small, featureless beings are only vaguely humanoid in shape. This aesthetic essentially adds a slight representational flavor

Figure 14. Representations of laborers in eurogames including a *Carcassonne* meeple (left), meeples from five of my six eurogame exemplars (center), and worker tokens from *The Castles of Burgundy* (right). Note that the later eurogames adopt a similar aesthetic but tend to be a little less cartoonish and a little more historically specific. Even such simple silhouettes allude to historically specific headgear: skipping *Carcassonne*, these include an oblong Viking helmet (the horns are a popular misconception), a plumed Roman helmet, a powdered wig, a Renaissance-era beret, and a simple sailor's cap.

to otherwise abstract and functional game pieces—I find meeples quite cute, but not especially humanizing.

Eurogames certainly aren't the first games to radically simplify humanoid figures. Meeples not only resemble *Catan*'s buildings but also *Chess* pawns. Like pawns, meeples often represent figures with lower class status. Like pawns, meeples often have the most generic, simplified representations. Like pawns, meeples often come in groups of identical pieces. Like pawns, meeples exist to be manipulated—it's not for nothing that the word "pawn" means "a person used by others for their own purposes"[25] and the boardgaming colloquialism "meeple" was coined by boardgamer Alison Hansel as shorthand for "my people."[26] In other words, pawns and meeples both represent laborers as faceless masses, making it easy to imagine them as resources to be managed rather than people to be empathized with.

Of course, meeples are playing pieces so they need to be relatively small and abstract. Still, whatever the motivation for meeple design, it does nothing to humanize the laborers they represent. In this regard, one would expect card-driven boardgames to fare better. Cards can offer far more detailed and potentially empathetic glimpses than pawns or meeples. But this isn't always the case. *Catan*'s only character-centric Development Card—the Knight—is relatively impersonal. While not quite faceless, the illustrated faces on these cards are merely half a centimeter tall (on cards whose artwork takes up half their 8 cm height) and repeat the same few illustrations multiple times. And the faces on *Catan*'s other development cards are even more featureless, with most characters standing less than a centimeter tall (for full bodies, not just faces) and/or facing away from the viewer.

Two of my eurogame exemplars—*A Feast for Odin* and *Concordia*—even have cards representing characters with no illustrations whatsoever. The three with illustrations all have more personality than *Catan*, but not by much. *Lorenzo il Magnifico* features caricature art whose faces still only top out at about a centimeter. *Maracaibo*'s faces are more realistic and are typically around one-and-a-half centimeters. The most detailed by far are *Lisboa*'s two-and-a-half centimeter portraits, but they only depict nobles. All these games place their faceless meeples in the lowest class positions, reserving their character cards for more "skilled" laborers like artisans, governors, and Cardinals.

So, these games simultaneously humanize and dehumanize their laborers. I can glimpse some humanity even in face-

less meeples and smallish illustrations. *Maracaibo* even goes further in naming and providing a narrative backstory for some of its characters. At the same time, all these games fall short of genuine empathy by abstracting away the humanity of their laborers. They treat their laborers as mere human resources—it's especially telling that the component list for *Lorenzo il Magnifico* groups Servant meeples together with Wood and Stone under the category of "wooden resources."[27]

In the end, these games humanize their laborers just enough to add character to the gameworld yet not enough to raise interesting ethical questions about how they *manage labor*.

Managing Labor

Resource management eurogames are all about the pleasure of managing things. While themes vary, eurogames almost always have me play as some sort of manager. *Catan* explicitly asks me to "guide your settlers to victory."[28] And in all my eurogame exemplars, I manage some sort of little empire striving to grow its power, profit, or prestige. Management is how eurogames typically imagine my participation in their worlds. Eurogames often captivate me with a managerial power fantasy, the joy of expanding my little empire by optimizing labor as a human resource.

To make management feel peaceful, detached eurogame designs must dampen these implicit power fantasies by operating at an emotional remove. In a way, everything eurogames do to denature natural resources or dehumanize human resources ultimately serves *managerial detachment*, a mindset

that allows managers to emotionally detach from what they manage so they can prioritize efficiency and profit. These games make it easy for me to be unfeeling toward the very things that feed my little empire's growth. This helps me fully feel the joy of expanding my little empire unburdened by consideration of how such empires accrue power. These games aren't unthematic—they're thematized to idealize managerial detachment. So, while nobody would ever argue that wooden workers in cardboard worlds deserve human rights, it's worth unsettling how managerial detachment becomes woven into the eurogame imagination.

Ironically, my power in such games is rooted in powerlessness. The joy of boardgames is being able to do things in their created worlds, yet neither *Catan* nor any of my eurogame exemplars give the player any power to act in these worlds directly. None of these games even have player characters. They give me no physical avatar in the gameworld. Instead, these games treat me as a disembodied presence who can only act in the gameworld by managing proxy labor. Human resources are the most important thing to manage in many resource management games. My very identity and agency in these worlds rests on being able to use others.[29]

The best-known way of managing labor in eurogames is the hugely popular[30] Worker Placement mechanism. In Worker Placement games like *A Feast for Odin* and *Lorenzo il Magnifico*, players assign workers to different locations to perform the designated actions of those spaces. This overtly managerial play is reinforced by the physical act of placing workers (or moving them, as in *Maracaibo*'s rondel system[31]). As I survey

my opportunities from above through the downward glance, I perform actions by physically *manipulating* (literally "handling" from the Latin root "manus" meaning "hand")[32] worker meeples to work on my behalf. Both physically and mechanically, Worker Placement is an inherently managerial form of gameplay.

Although many Worker Placement games use language like "hiring" or "recruiting" workers, these games almost always treat workers as human resources owned by the player. Even when the surface theme suggests otherwise, there are many ways Worker Placement games imply possession rather than standard employment. Eurogames that allow players to hire new workers often make "hiring" a one-time cost, which mechanically resembles purchasing a good more than paying recurring wages. And while some eurogames do give workers basic biological needs like needing food or rest, vanishingly few[33] give workers any autonomy or desires.

Sometimes, the dehumanization of workers even goes as far as allowing players to literally *spend* workers as if they were consumable resources. Indeed, half of my eurogame exemplars have this mechanism. This feels especially tragic when a game like *Maracaibo* allows figures to be spent[34] in combat. But making workers consumable is dehumanizing regardless of theme. It's hard to dispose of workers without implying that they're merely human resources.

Although cards don't always represent laborers as obviously as Worker meeples, the card-driven games *Concordia* and *Lisboa* thematize their card plays as managing labor. *Concordia*'s Personality Cards explicitly represent officials like "Pre-

fect" and "Consul" who perform actions on the player's behalf. Similarly, although *Lisboa*'s action cards are thematized as historical events, they all allow players to influence powerful nobles to perform actions on the player's behalf. So, although the laborers in both games are of relatively high social status, they exist entirely as proxy labor to be manipulated and managed by players.

Although these mechanisms vary widely, they all support managerial play in which a disembodied player remains perpetually outside the gameworld, making moves by manipulating the labor of docile[35] workers. So, although these games represent significant mechanical departures from *Catan*, they continue to extend its implicit mindset of managerial detachment.

Play Log

I could confess that my boardgame consumption helps fuel an industry that can exploit land and labor, but this study is a meditation on games as culture, so I want to reflect instead on the mindsets I adopt when playing these games. After all, my mindsets make me complicit in capitalism as much as my consumption does.

Truth be told, I find managerial detachment quite comfortable. I love feeling smart and efficient. And I love stepping outside a situation to see the big picture. As more of a thinker than a feeler, I find it easier to treat the messy sides of life as abstract problems to solve rather than opportunities for empathy. In my weaker moments, I intellectualize as a way of

actively retreating from human connection. That's why I feel so at home in strategic, non-empathic play. I feel comfortable here, but this isn't where I want to settle. As much as I love to escape into mechanically rich eurogame worlds, I question whether that joy really requires emotional detachment. I can't see any reason play—even eurogaming's favorite flavor of strategic, mechanical gameplay—necessitates detachment.

What necessitates detachment isn't play itself; it's the commonplace eurogame premise of accumulating power by exploiting land and labor. So, I also want to unsettle how easily I resonate with the anthropocentric power fantasies[36] that draw me into antagonistic and exploitative relationships with land and labor. Playing eurogames makes me aware that even for a modern capitalist subject I'm not especially attuned to nature or sensitive to the plight of workers. It makes me consider how a lack of empathy can actually undermine my abstract ethical commitments.

To be fair, eurogames certainly didn't cause my detachment. Boardgames didn't force me to buy into cultural capitalism's toxic rationalizations. But detached designs do invite me to become unfeeling toward what I manage, ultimately dehumanizing my play. And this means that even if eurogames didn't create the problem, they rely on these tendencies. By definition, detached designs don't cultivate attachment. They don't pique my interest in the outside world. They don't even pique interest in their bland, uninspired gameworlds. So, even when it isn't some major ethical concern, detachment simply makes cardboard worlds feel flat.

But cardboard doesn't have to feel quite so two-dimen-

sional. Boardgames are perfectly poised to play out ecological[37] and empathetic relationships with land and labor. Without being didactic, boardgames can be a beautifully evocative world-building medium that can just as easily cultivate attachment as detachment. If eurogame ecologies and economies were anywhere near as compelling as worlds as they are as mechanical systems, it would be hard not to get attached. Whereas detachment dampens empathy, getting attached reminds me that my best self is always co-created. And playful co-creation can be even more fun than the visceral satisfaction of collecting resources.

CHAPTER 6

Building and Scoring

Winning isn't everything. As Teuber explains, "a game can be satisfying and spread joy—even if you don't win," an insight he compares to the Confucian saying, "*roads were made for journeys, not destinations*."[1] This is wise but ironic since roads in *Catan* aren't made for journeys but for infrastructural development. Indeed, among the many joys of eurogames, perhaps the most foundational is the joy of *building*.

As Flanagan and Jakobsson recount, "tellers of the 'Eurogame story' insist that Germany invented games about building things, rather than annihilating opponents."[2] Teuber says as much when he describes *Catan* as "a game in which every player, even if they lost, could retain their dignity and be proud of the little empire they had created."[3] And Teuber's family agrees. Teuber's son Benjamin told CNN that "The beauty of *Catan* is that in the end you still have constructed something. So, in a way, everybody wins."[4] And Teuber's wife Claudia recalls having so much fun "Being able to build a few little houses and a long road with them" that "I just wanted to keep trading and building."[5] While I imagine the Teubers also

enjoy winning, the message is clear: winning isn't everything, but building might be.

Although there's something deeply human about finding joy in creation, cultural values are at play when infrastructural development is idealized as a means of social progress.[6] Building not only *feels* good but can be imagined as *inherently* good. Throughout my life, I've been captivated by the dream of making the world a better place by building things. Chasing that feeling is a big part of why I studied engineering, why I write, and why I love eurogames. I'm just completely taken with the idea that building can create a common good that can make everybody win.

But while infrastructure can contribute many good things, infrastructure is also how empires are built.[7] Architectures—be they playful or social—are never neutral. And the rhetoric of a common good can rationalize how infrastructure is used to consolidate power. Similarly, peaceful-feeling eurogames often leverage optimism around building to help players detach from the darker sides of empire-building. So, it's often worth asking *what* we are building and *why*. It's worth unsettling the value systems implicit in playful construction.

How a society or boardgame imagines construction says a lot about what kind of world it wants to build. So, this chapter explores how construction answers *what's the point* of eurogames, how these games play out *empire-building* in ways that imagine *construction as constructive*, and how they play out *engine-building* in ways that imagine *competition as constructive*.

What's the Point?

What's the point of playing a boardgame? Is it playing just to play or playing to win? Building or scoring? Although these priorities often seem contradictory, they complement each other well. As acclaimed game designer Reiner Knizia puts it, "When playing a game, the goal is to win, but it is the goal that is important, not the winning."[8] In other words, although winning isn't everything, winning provides goals that shape what it means to play. The journey may matter more than the destination, but the destination steers the journey.

Regardless of what I think the point of playing a boardgame should be, I play games by treating their goals as the point. And scoring is how that point gets translated into, well, *points*. Scoring points may not be the *only* point of playing boardgames, yet this reward system thoroughly *gamifies*[9] play. Mechanically, Victory Points constitute the quantitative value system of boardgames. Thematically, Victory Points also articulate an implicit qualitative value system. By rewarding "good" play and punishing "bad" play, these value systems make play purposeful and arguably even moralistic. Scoring tells me what it takes to succeed in a gameworld. Scoring might not always be *why* I play, but it always tells me *how* to play.

So, it's especially telling that eurogames so often tie point-scoring to constructing buildings. In *Catan*, buildings are the most reliable way of scoring points. It's possible to win by only constructing buildings and practically impossible to win without constructing any. In addition, most of the non-building points in *Catan* are still thematized as infrastructure

development. All five of the point-generating Development Cards—Library, Market, Chapel, Great Hall, and University (Fig. 15)—represent architectural constructions. And the Longest Road rewards infrastructure by giving points for road construction. The only non-infrastructural points are from the Largest Army, which isn't thematized as construction despite arguably implying military infrastructure. Value in the world of *Catan* clearly lies in infrastructure.

Following this legacy, many eurogames significantly reward infrastructural development. Constructing buildings is a significant pathway to points in all my eurogame exemplars and is the main goal in several. And the two exemplars with the least emphasis on thematically constructing buildings have other central mechanisms with an infrastructural character. In *Maracaibo*, I upgrade my ship and "set up a network of minions and informants"[10] to build up my capacity for seafaring. In *A Feast for Odin*, I place polyomino goods tiles to fill in income-generating territory and expand my economic infrastructure. Even though it's not always buildings, I'm always building something.

So, what's the point of playing these games? Whether I play to win or just to play, I make moves in a world whose primary source of value lies in infrastructure. These games make building—and often *empire-building*—the point.

Empire-Building

Although it's somewhat paradoxical for the point of many peaceful-feeling eurogames to be empire-building, there's just

Figure 15. Construction-themed Development Cards in *Catan*, including the Road Building card and three cards that award Victory Points for thematically constructing specialized buildings that enrich a player's little empire.

something viscerally satisfying about building little empires. Empire-building provides an unparalleled sense of accomplishment. I'd even say that my strongest emotional attachment in *Catan* is toward my little empire.

And why wouldn't it be? After all, my little empire of roads and buildings is the only thing that materially marks my presence and participation in the gameworld. Just like big empires, my little empire spans past, present, and future. Looking back, I feel pride in this monument to my play. In the moment, I feel a sense of presence in how my current empire shapes my interactions. And looking forward, I feel engrossed in imagining possibilities for how my empire might grow and expand. My little empire is my legacy, my avatar, and my purpose. How could I not get attached?

Ironically, this attachment often feeds detachment. By leveraging the sentimentality and idealism associated with building, peaceful-feeling eurogames can make empire-building feel less imperialist. Whereas many of the detached design strategies discussed in this book ultimately evoke mixed feelings, positivity is often more compelling than a double negative. Detachment is most effective when I'm not actively trying to repress certain feelings but am instead swept away by an attachment to some other feeling.

In this way, eurogames don't need to convince me that imperialism is good or even neutral.[11] Instead, they need only excite me with the prospect of building a little empire so that these issues fade into the background. As long as what I'm doing feels positive, I don't particularly care if the setting has vaguely imperialist entanglements. My attention

has been successfully redirected. Without advocating for or even directly representing colonialism, *Catan* makes me feel at home in a world entirely centered on empire-building. It makes empire-building feel peaceful and even pastoral.

Following this ideological legacy, many eurogames work to make empire-building feel peaceful. Tellingly, none of my eurogame exemplars ask me to play as big-E Empires conquering large-scale territories. Instead, they all ask me to carve out a little empire by pursuing smaller-scale power, prestige, or profit.

For instance, *The Castles of Burgundy*, *Lorenzo il Magnifico*, and *Lisboa* all frame building little empires as a means of upward mobility, asking me to play as nobility trying to rise in social prestige by expanding my holdings. This reduced scope narrows my vision: focusing on my upward mobility makes me less inclined to question the broader power structures I'm attempting to climb in. As meritocratic thinking often does, this frames "getting ahead" as amoral or even moral. *Concordia* says as much when it positions empire-building as a literal virtue: its Victory Points represent the favor of Gods who reward mere mortals for demonstrating things like "the virtue of city building" and "the virtue of colonization."[12] So, all these games resonate with culturally capitalist ways of imagining upward mobility as a sign of self-worth and superiority.

This move of reframing expanding little empires as neutral becomes especially concerning when used to detach from more overt imperialism. As discussed in the "Robbing and Trading" chapter, *A Feast for Odin* attempts to reframe Viking conquest as merely a means of feeding impoverished popula-

tions. Similarly, *Maracaibo* asks me to actively "fight under a nation's flag" while simultaneously emphasizing my neutrality: I'm never truly aligned with any colonial powers but am simply aiming to "obtain fame and fortune" and "be remembered as the greatest seafarer."[13] The violence is there, but these games just feel like upward mobility again.

Misrepresenting historical violence is an issue for empire-building eurogames, but it's hardly the only issue. After all, it's too easy to only critique empires for the violent means they use to achieve their political ends without also questioning those ends. Similarly, it's too easy to only critique peaceful-feeling eurogames for including violence without also questioning their underlying value systems. When many empire-building eurogames essentially offer infrastructural power fantasies, it's worth unsettling how we play at building little empires.

Ultimately, empire-building does more than contribute a satisfying sense of progression to gameplay. This sense of progression feeds into an ideal of infrastructure development as social progress that helps thematize empire-building as an individual and social good. It treats *construction as constructive*.

Construction as Constructive

Benjamin Teuber's claim that "in a way, everyone wins" simply because "in the end you still have constructed something"[14] is equally audacious and insightful. It's no small feat to make losers feel like winners, but construction does seem to have a special power to generate positive feelings. Construction simply feels good: it's fun to do and it produces tangible fruits

I can take pride in. But construction not only feels experientially good, it also feels *morally* good. So, eurogames can make everyone feel like winners by embracing a culturally capitalist ideal of infrastructure development as contributing to a common good. They make construction feel *constructive* and sometimes even *altruistic*.

While detached design often aims to make players unfeeling toward what they're doing, embracing positivity, optimism, and a utopian imagination may be a more potent way of achieving the same effect. It's not for nothing that *Catan*'s tagline "Trade, Build, Settle" foregrounds its two most positive-feeling aspects. *Catan*'s romantic vision of settlement especially depends on building feeling good. After all, building is how *Catan* imagines settlement: it's the stated thematic purpose of the game, the main driver of its gameplay, and its primary way of scoring points. *Catan* associates settlement with building rather than conquest, making its empire-building feel like peaceful progress in which settlers merely bring "development" as they "tame the remote but rich isle of Catan."[15] Such building not only feels good—it feels *constructive* within *Catan*'s romantic picture of settlement as a common good.

Building on this ideological legacy, many eurogames go further and present empire-building as *altruistic*. It can feel not only good but also noble to build things in eurogames. As a refinement on detached design, peaceful-feeling eurogames sometimes use altruistic feelings to put a more positive spin on softer forms of economic and cultural power that are already perceived as constructive.

Among my eurogame exemplars, the game that most clearly presents construction as altruistic is *Lisboa*, a game about reconstructing a city after a series of natural disasters (Fig. 16). If building a city already feels constructive, rebuilding a ruined city can easily feel altruistic. A decadently artistic eurogame with thematically positive vibes, *Lisboa* also features copious positive player interactions that mechanically illustrate how players contribute to a common good. Pretty much everything I can build in *Lisboa*—Stores, Public Buildings, and Ships—potentially benefits other players. Although only one player wins, all players can feel good accumulating prestige for doing things that revitalize Lisboa's economy.

Yet, *Lisboa* doesn't represent even the questionable altruism of the *noblesse oblige*. Lacking any intimation of moral responsibility, *Lisboa* is really about nobles funding reconstruction efforts for personal gain. Everything I can do to supposedly benefit society directly benefits me: I build Stores that gain me points and resources, build Public Buildings that "drive traffic"[16] into my Stores, and build Ships that score when used by any player. I even collect the Rubble I clear to build buildings to score points and expand my Warehouse. I'm always helping myself.

Interestingly, these seemingly magnanimous nobles gain prestige from their self-interested endeavors as if their behavior were genuinely altruistic. As the rulebook puts it, players "build Lisboa anew in order to gain Influence, and the most important thing of all: Wigs" (a symbol of social status).[17] Thematically, awarding Victory Points (Wigs) rather than money

Figure 16. A close-up of the Downtown map section of the *Lisboa* gameboard. The *Catan*-style buildings represent players' Stores located on the main streets of Lisbon. The tiles with architectural drawings represent Public Buildings that increase the VP value of the Stores in their rows or columns. The cubes represent Rubble that players collect whenever they build. The overall effect is that as these building spots are filled in over the course of the game, the board increasingly resembles a color-coded territorial map where players compete over majorities for building the most on each road.

for constructing Stores obscures the profit motive and makes my self-interested behavior feel altruistic, as if earned prestige was a just reward for genuine social contributions.

Certainly, construction can *be* constructive. All societies need infrastructure. Rebuilding a devastated city and revitalizing a collapsed economy can contribute to a common good. But building isn't only or inherently good. After all, empires are built as much as they're won. Empires build constantly, but they don't build altruistically. One of the main things their infrastructures are designed to hold up is systems of power. In this way, *Lisboa* is all about solidifying my power within the new city I help rebuild. So, it's worth unsettling how peaceful-feeling eurogames can paint simplistically rosy pictures of empire-building as altruistic. In the end, idealizing construction as constructive easily rationalizes empire-building.

But empire-building doesn't stop there. Actually, empire-building never stops anywhere. Because it treats construction as an end-in-itself, empire always has an insatiable desire for expansion. So, winning isn't everything in part because empire-building isn't so easily satisfied. Even when I win at *Catan*, my little empire never feels truly complete. Whereas *Monopoly* ends when no further play is possible, *Catan* arbitrarily ends while there are still moves to be made, pieces to be played, resources to gather, and lands to claim.

So, in *Catan* and many eurogames, empire-building is intimately tied to a burgeoning cycle of growth known as *engine-building*.

Engine-Building

Beyond its visceral satisfaction, empire-building unlocks my favorite aspect of eurogame design: *engine-building*. Appropriately adopting an industrial metaphor, *engine-building* names a feedback loop in which players invest resources in developing an infrastructure that improves their means of acquiring more resources. Eurogames often make constructing buildings part of a snowballing economic engine capable of fueling its own growth, making me feel like my little empire is truly growing and developing. I find this immensely captivating, but it's worth unsettling how this optimistic model of growth resonates with capitalism's tendency to promote wealth inequality.[18]

Because it snowballs, engine-building creates inherently unstable equilibriums that can easily unbalance a game. In game design terms, *Catan* is susceptible to the so-called *runaway leader problem*, in which players who've already pulled ahead are more likely to pull further ahead, while players who've already fallen behind are more likely to stay behind. This is often what happens when games like *Catan* link scoring and engine-building. In *Catan*, a player with 4 points worth of buildings is 40% of the way to victory and has 4 resource-generating opportunities per roll. A player with 8 points worth of buildings is not only twice as close to victory but also has twice the resource-generating opportunities.[19] In other words, the rich get richer. Them that has, gets.

Certainly, this runaway leader scenario isn't a "problem" for everyone. It may frustrate competitive players who relish

tight finishes or social players who find that it creates awkward dynamics. But what about players like me who primarily care about the gameplay experience of building a little empire? Don't we still experience the same joy, as the Teubers suggest? Technically yes, but not in equal measure. While such players can still enjoy their play, trailing players in *Catan* get fewer resources, fewer building opportunities, and generally do less during a game. They get less play out of each play. In other words, the rich also get richer experiences. Them that has, gets to play more.

So, playing for the sake of play doesn't actually free me from playing to win. In *Catan*, playing to play *demands* playing to win. Winning isn't everything, but having a better engine makes playing scads more fun. To me, this is what makes engine-building so exhilarating: playing well not only increases my chance of victory but also creates increasingly interesting decisions. Beyond the visceral satisfaction of watching my empire grow, I experience the conceptual pleasure of tinkering with an increasingly complex infrastructure of my own development. Again, play begets play.

This is precisely how engine-building resonates with modern capitalism, which is essentially a real-world engine-building game in which "The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production."[20] Capitalism has its own runaway leader problem: it's designed to help the rich get richer and to make the rich more significant players in society. Capitalism is also a game where wanting to play means playing to win.

So, although engine-building eurogames typically offer

more level playing fields than actual capitalist societies, they're not actually designed to stay level. Their goal is to start equal but end unequal. Like capitalism, engine-building is a means of separating winners from losers. Indeed, the way carrying a snowballing engine from round to round promotes victory resonates with how inherited wealth promotes economic inequality in capitalist systems. As Jo Littler argues, "it is not merely a coincidence that a pronounced lack of social mobility and the continual importance of inherited wealth . . . co-exist with the common idea that we live in a meritocratic age."[21] The idea of a level playing field rationalizes inequality more than it promotes equality.

In the end, engine-building does more than make construction feel constructive. Engine-building also rationalizes empire-building by making *competition* itself feel *constructive*.

Competition as Constructive

Making everyone feel like a winner can be an uphill battle. After all, competition itself undermines feelings of a common good, especially when it produces a runaway leader. While cooperative games can genuinely align players around a common good, competitive games are designed to pit players against each other. When players are separated into winners and losers, I find it easy to think of my good as inherently opposed to everyone else's. In *Catan*, I'm less happy to get a single Wood when you get six. I take less pride in constructing my little empire when I glance down to see it surrounded by big empires.

But while it might seem counterintuitive, eurogames treat competition as *enhancing* the feeling of contributing to a common good. Indeed, many eurogames implicitly draw on the culturally capitalist ideal "that puts competition at the center of social life."[22] This view imagines "the market is, or ideally should be, the basis for *all* of society."[23] So, cultural capitalism does more than merely rationalize competition—it often idealizes competition as its greatest good.

In some ways, boardgames are perfect for playing out this ideal of competition as inherently constructive. After all, boardgames have been making competition fun for millennia. However, making competition *fun* is quite different from framing competition as *constructive*. Indeed, wargames or Take That games can feel pleasurably *destructive*. Even an overtly capitalist game like *Monopoly* might not idealize competition. After all, like real-world monopolies, *Monopoly* is all about eliminating competition (which is what economist Ralph Anspach designed *Anti-Monopoly* to illustrate). Boardgames can be competitive without idealizing competition as a fundamental social good.

In contrast, *Catan*'s ideological legacy treats competition as a social good. My rivals might not be rooting for me to succeed, but their presence still enriches and enlivens the world. While rivals can certainly frustrate my plans in *Catan*, competition over finite building spots makes my choices feel more meaningful. Indeed, the possibility of rivals stymying my plans intensifies my pride in my accomplishments by making them feel more hard-won.

And this is more than mere sentimentality: *Catan*'s world is actively designed such that any players' expansion stimulates the overall economy. Whereas a wargame might present my gain as your loss, *Catan* frames my gain as contributing to the greater good of Catan itself. *Catan* taps into culturally capitalist ideals of competition contributing to a common good, both in the practical sense of stimulating the economy and in the moral sense of bringing out the "best" in competitors who must prove their worth by becoming "winners."

This ideological legacy is particularly noticeable in the deceptively cutthroat *Lisboa*. Like *Catan*, *Lisboa* features tense territorial battles over prized building spots and endgame-scoring majorities. And these competitions can feel productive or even peaceful because the most contested battleground in *Lisboa* is precisely its most thematically constructive element: rebuilding a ruined city. In a culturally capitalist way, *Lisboa* imagines that a competitive spirit underlies altruism. Self-interest rather than goodwill is imagined as the central motivating force behind the common good. And this common good is imagined as inherently competitive—the only altruism *Lisboa* imagines is revitalizing a capitalist economy.

Competition in eurogames goes well beyond making empire-building and engine-building fun. Instead, competition is often idealized according to a culturally capitalist social principle that makes empire-building and engine-building into common goods. In other words, eurogames often implicitly build worlds where winning isn't everything, but competition is.

Play Log

Even though I quickly abandoned my Engineering major, I never abandoned my dreams of building things. That's why I write, among other things. I truly feel more human, more myself when I create. There may be a deep spiritual truth here, but there's also a culturally capitalist trap that tempts me to measure my self-worth by my production, to quantify (or "score") my social contributions. So, unsettling building and scoring creates an almost existential crisis for me.

Similarly, it can create an existential crisis for eurogames. Building and scoring are so central to how eurogames function that it can feel like questioning them leaves nowhere left to stand. Unsettling building is difficult when that's the aspect that often gives eurogames their purpose. And unsettling scoring is almost unfathomable when it's what measures my success in accomplishing these purposes.

Fortunately, unsettling building and scoring doesn't require abandoning them. It only requires questioning them and putting them in proper perspective. Winning isn't everything. Neither is building. Yet, it's all too easy to lose perspective. In life, I easily fall prey to a productivity-driven mindset that measures my value by my success and my success by my production. And even though I value building over scoring, eurogames often pull me into similarly productivity-driven mindsets.

A bit of tunnel vision in games is perhaps no big deal, but it's not like I need my play to draw me any further into detached or culturally capitalist mindsets than I already am.

And that's precisely what happens when I uncritically assign positive moral value to empire-building and engine-building in eurogames. I fixate on the feel-good eurogame reward systems of building and scoring so much that I lose sight of the other meaningful aspects of play—its beauty, its sociality, its playfulness.

But the beauty of play is that it doesn't need to be constructive. Rather than framing construction and competition as constructive, play could just as easily frame them as joys. Perhaps unsettling building and scoring is the only way to reclaim their playful spirit—to reclaim playful construction as joy in creation and playful competition as joy in interacting with others.

After all, when we reclaim these playful impulses, everybody wins.

CHAPTER 7

Variants

Catan is many things, but it has inspired far more.

Catan helped catalyze a genuine revolution in boardgaming, leaving a complicated and varied legacy. In the few decades since *Catan*, boardgaming has evolved at an unprecedented rate, especially for a medium that has been around longer than recorded history. *Catan* has already changed and is still "changing the American idea of what a board game can be."[1]

At the same time, *Catan*'s *ideological* legacy is nowhere near as dynamic. Despite not being a particularly settled design, *Catan*'s ideological legacy has often settled into questionably stagnant habits, including a culture of detachment that generates peaceful feelings by making boardgames less meaningful. In retrospect, eurogames seem to have adopted two legacies from *Catan*: one unsettled and one settled, one provocative and one repressed, one enlivening and one deadening.

Although I've critiqued *Catan*'s romanticized worldviews throughout this book, I'm much less concerned with *Catan* itself and more about this legacy of settled design. As much as I love eurogames' mechanical innovations, I believe that detachment severely limits what eurogames can be and become. This study unsettles *Catan* in the hope that reclaim-

ing its spirit of innovation will help us reimagine what boardgames can be. After all, speculation unlocks variation.

So, in lieu of a conclusion, this final "Variants" chapter takes *a second glance* at how *settled* and *unsettled variants* can offer new provocations for reflecting on boardgaming.

A Second Glance

Catan is many things. In fact, *Catan* is many games.

As I write, the *Catan* website lists four substantive expansions and over a dozen smaller scenarios to modify the base game. There are another dozen spinoff *Catan* games that rework the core formula in various ways. This only scratches the surface of the *Catan* universe by including its main active product lines. All told, boardgamegeek.com lists well over a hundred separate entries for *Catan* products. And while some of these variants are slight (playmats, single-sheet rulesets, or alternate editions), there's no question that the *Catan* universe is vast and varied.

These variants deserve a second *glance*. When *Catan*'s many permutations vary almost every aspect of the game, seemingly small changes can profoundly transform its ideological resonances.[2] But variants deserve a second glance because they riff on existing designs in ways that invite meaningful comparisons. Variants reframe the glance by integrating prior gameworld experiences into the frameworld context for new gameworld experiences. Merely by existing, variants show how every design decision could have been otherwise. Variants defamiliarize familiar games and invite reflections and

speculations that have special potential for unsettling seemingly settled designs.

By provoking these double takes, variants provide a pressing reminder that no game is ever really a single thing. After all, boardgames are inherently variable as possibility spaces that generate divergent outcomes from different player choices. And boardgames draw on frameworld contexts that are even more varied than the games themselves. Even if they lack the published variants and variable setups of *Catan*, there's a sense in which any game could claim like *Catan* that "No two games are the same!"[3]

So, boardgames will always feel different to different people. Their meanings can and should vary. But whereas a settled mindset resists variation, an unsettled mindset embraces variation to dwell in the multiplicity, adaptability, and dynamism that characterize play. Embracing variation makes me wary about drawing absolute conclusions about boardgame experiences. Even *settled variants* have the potential to encourage me to do double takes that both shed light on what was there all along and help me imagine how things could be otherwise.

Settled Variants

Of course, variants don't guarantee transformative experiences. As one might expect when building on beloved formulas, many variants merely offer variations on a theme. One might call variants that repeat or expand existing ideological resonances *settled* variants because their variations ultimately

produce more of the same. But even when these variants offer little that's revolutionary, they still deserve a second glance for offering new insight into dynamics that were at play all along.

Since *Catan* has become nostalgic for many people, it's not surprising it would have many settled variants. And it's not surprising that many of these vary game mechanisms in ways that only reinforce or refine the ideological resonances of their base games. For instance, when the *Seafarers* expansion (Fig. 17) adds the discovery of unknown territories to *Catan*, this variant only expands the game's colonial resonances by evoking the so-called "Age of Discovery."

As a more extreme example, *Catan Histories: Settlers of America*[4] invites players to play out the settler colonialist doctrine of Manifest Destiny that *Catan* carefully avoids. Like *Catan*, this game visually depicts its lands as empty—an erasure of Indigenous life that's much more questionable given the game's explicitly historical setting. The rulebook even offers historical notes that seem to rationalize this erasure by inaccurately claiming that American settlers "generally ignored native peoples"[5] and describing those who resisted as "hostile natives."[6] So, these settled variants actually make it easier to see the colonialist resonances that were already at play in *Catan*.

While variants like these double down on detachment to "settle" issues, settled variants sometimes "settle" issues by simply retreating from them. For instance, *Catan* and *Mombasa*'s follow-up games *Catan: Starfarers* and *Skymines* detach still further by retreating into the vast empty expanse of space itself.

KLAUS TEUBER'S
CATAN
EXPANSION
SEAFARERS

KLAUS & BENJAMIN TEUBER
CATAN
SCENARIO
CROP TRUST
CROP TRUST
SECURING OUR FOOD, FOREVER

It's not hard to see why these games would opt for a strategic retreat. After all, simply having fewer games that evoke colonialism may already make boardgaming more inclusive. If retreating into space is what it takes, so be it. Settled designs make perfect sense in a leisure market that doesn't demand that games be deep meditations. Uncontroversial designs are easier to get to the table and are safer bets for publishers. I understand wanting all the fun without any of the baggage. But settlement always comes at a cost.

The well-meaning desire to unilaterally settle controversies can encourage an avoidant or escapist tendency to make games more comfortable by making them less meaningful. At the very least, such designs are missed opportunities. For instance, *Catan: Starfarers* encourages players to "befriend alien civilizations" while exploring and settling space, a change that Teuber states was made to counter xenophobia.[7] Adding positive encounters with Indigenous peoples to *Catan*'s settlement narrative is certainly meaningful, but less so in a game whose escapist tendencies further remove it from real-world colonialism. Like *Seafarers*, *Starfarers* emphasizes exploration[8] with a title that evokes wandering and a cover

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Figure 17 (facing). Sunset cover art from two *Catan* variants that paint different pictures of settlement. The *Seafarers* expansion and *Crop Trust* scenario covers both create an ethereal feeling by pairing their sunsets with unnaturally blue skies that reflect water and ice, respectively. The more settled *Seafarers* variant intensifies excitement toward discovering new territory through a sense of movement as explorers battle toward shore amid choppy seas. In contrast, the more unsettled *Crop Trust* variant paints a sobering picture of labor necessary to ward existing society against potential famine by reversing the movement with workers laboriously carrying supplies toward the futuristic-looking crop bank that juts out from a still, icy winter. Images courtesy of Nygllhuw Morris.

that depicts travel but not settlement. It even replaces "Build" and "Settle" in *Catan*'s tagline with "Explore" and "Discover." In these ways, this settled variant is ultimately more ahistorical and escapist than the original, a change that makes its genuine ethical interventions less pointed. Avoiding issues means missing an opportunity to speak positively into them.

In addition, avoiding issues doesn't actually "settle" a thing. While outer space seems like a perfect place to escape historical entanglements, leaving the planet doesn't mean escaping imperialism. It's telling that so many space games are themed around colonization (including the popular 4X genre and eurogames like *Starfarers*, *Skymines*, and *Terraforming Mars*[9]). As a game about "mining the Moon" and "spreading outposts,"[10] *Skymines* attempts to "settle" the issues with *Mombasa*'s colonization of Africa by replacing its historical colonialism with science-fictional colonization. But this game escapes the historical without actually escaping the colonial. One might say that *Skymines* returns to *Catan*'s ahistorical settlement fantasies. Merely visually reskinning a game designed to play out imperialism is going to retain implicit imperialist tendencies, especially since the visual and mechanical resemblances[11] to its famed predecessor are so strong. So, settled approaches may avoid *explicit* imperialist entanglements in ways that ultimately reinforce *implicit* ones.

Ironically, settlement tends to preserve whatever issues it hopes to detach from. After all, settled thinking is inherently conservative, tending to reinforce, replicate, or rationalize the status quo. No matter how much I personally appreciate these less controversial reimaginings, I've come to believe it's worth

unsettling *any* settled design philosophy. When detached designs attempt to settle rather than explore issues, they only close off their potential for making meaningful and compelling game experiences. Holding too tightly to a particular vision of peaceful feelings only limits what boardgames can be and become, which is why it's sometimes worth balancing settled designs with occasional *unsettled variants*.

Unsettled Variants

Whereas settled variants tend to double down on detachment to produce comfort, unsettled variants usually make the opposite tradeoff: they evoke mixed feelings to create deeper, more resonant experiences. Whereas *Starfarers* and *Skymines* attempt to settle issues by leaving them (and the planet) behind, unsettled variants refuse to dodge issues, as when *Catan*'s *Oil Springs* and *Crop Trust* scenarios unsettle how it plays out industrial capitalism or *Maracaibo*'s *The Uprising* expansion unsettles how it plays out colonialism. In grappling with messy issues, both variants especially promote unsettlement by offering players hard choices where they formerly had none.

Catan's *Oil Springs* and *Crop Trust* (Fig. 17) scenarios both offer unsettling reflections on how industrial capitalism risks catastrophically harming our environment. Created in tandem with relevant social organizations, these scenarios have explicitly educational and activist purposes. Yet, whereas some educational games merely provide rote information without critical thinking, these unsettled variants use striking mechanical innovations to profoundly disturb *Catan*'s

underlying capitalist system. Both variants depict resource depletion and reward players for removing resources from the capitalist economy. And both variants introduce semi-cooperative elements in which the game can end catastrophically if players fail to properly steward their environment.

Such thematic elements make these variants more sobering and reflective, but these variants also promote unsettled thinking by refusing to force players into environmentalist behavior. These variants retain enough of *Catan*'s economy to create meaningful social and ethical dilemmas. Both scenarios create situations when individual self-interest conflicts with environmentalist behavior. In *Crop Trust*, more environmentalist players are incentivized to actively precipitate a food shortage if they have already contributed the most to the Crop Trust (their less environmentalist rivals are incentivized to forgo collecting resources to prevent this). Similarly, *Oil Springs* is more deeply capitalist than base *Catan*, accelerating *Catan*'s runaway leader problem (see the "Building and Scoring" chapter) and strengthening the alchemical nature of its resource conversions (see the "Collecting Resources" chapter). At the same time, *Oil Springs* paints a more dystopian picture of capitalism by exposing its underlying unfairness.[12] So, both unsettled variants evoke mixed feelings that encourage players to think and feel more about what they're playing out.

Similarly, *The Uprising* (Fig. 18) offers several ways of challenging the colonial entanglements *Maracaibo* plays out. Although I prefer the more settled cooperative variant, *The Uprising*'s competitive variants arguably prompt more critical reflection by *retaining* players' ability to fight for colonial powers alongside its

new anti-colonial options. Whereas the base game gives players no choice but to aid colonial powers, *The Uprising* gives players weighty choices whose ethical overtones are harder to detach from. In so doing, *The Uprising* challenges the base game's implication that I can ever be a truly neutral party in the colonial struggle. Without making the gameworld any less colonialist, this variant unsettles its own colonialist resonances and invites me to reflect on my complicity within empire.

Rather than being scripted to simplistically reward anti-capitalist or anti-colonial choices, these unsettled variants legitimately tempt players to make ethical compromises in pursuit of victory. This means that regardless of what paths players ultimately choose, these games create opportunities for players to reflect on their choices and unsettle their own play. After all, the point of unsettled design isn't to force players to play out more seemingly ethical choices but rather to make players think more about what they're playing out.

This doesn't mean that unsettled designs are above critique. Nor should they be; good art invites critique. So, these unsettled variants shouldn't be understood as demonstrating the *right* way to do things. For instance, one issue with *The Uprising* is that it paints colonialism as an individual moral choice in ways that risk misrepresenting coloniality's systemic nature.[13] Another issue is that simply by continuing to exist as a beloved game with obvious colonial trappings, even its more nuanced variants can feel less inclusive to players who're justly sensitive to playing out colonialism. Unsettlement too has its price, and it's appropriate to feel uneasy about a meaning-making strategy based on generating unease.

10
NATIVE
2

6
12
DOGO
ADVISOR
2

13
19
VICE ADMIRAL
2

6
12
LUYSA
SHIP BUILDER
2

13
GLORIOUS
CONQUEST
+1
4
Place any one Ownership Marker in
a free Village and move up to the
next Noble Rank with this Nation

3
UPHEAVAL I
1
JENNIFER SCHLICKBERND
7
U
Return a removed ownership marker
to the influence track and take 7

Unsettlement isn't always better than settlement. However, unsettlement rebalances a tradition that has become far too settled into detached design. Unsettled designs like *Oil Springs* and *The Uprising* are astonishingly rare. And although settled designs will likely remain the norm, occasional unsettlement can reveal new possibilities for what boardgames can be and become.

Play Log

I love variability in gaming. I love exploring fresh worlds of possibility in every play. And I love when new variations change my ideas of what a boardgame can be. So, as much as I usually love to have the last word, I very much hope my reflections aren't the last word on anything. After all, unsettlement never aims to settle issues. It remains open to variation. In this spirit, this study offers an invitation to reflection rather than a call to revolution. I'd rather it inspired people to discover their own paths than paved a wide road toward a new settlement.

Although I've logged some of my own journey, I offer no

Figure 18 (facing). Three comparisons of cards from *Maracaibo* (left) and *The Uprising* expansion (right) that illustrate the stylistic shift in this variant. *Maracaibo* exoticizes its few generic "native" characters and instead centers colonial figures like the gun-toting Vice Admiral who figures prominently on the game box. In contrast, *The Uprising* adds several named Indigenous leaders and resistance fighters who are represented more positively and given prominent roles in the narrative campaign. *Maracaibo* also uncritically glorifies conquest through cards like "Glorious Conquest" that mechanically reward players for promoting colonial ownership by awarding VP for having influence with different nations (note the cube-placing and banner-moving iconography). In contrast, *The Uprising* celebrates resistance by rewarding players for removing colonial ownership markers (the depicted Upheaval card is also a nod to pioneering Black female game designer Jennifer Schlickbernd).

roadmap for anyone else's. After all, the joy is in the discovery. For anyone who wants to unsettle their play, I offer encouragement rather than a roadmap. Unsettlement should transform play, but it's impossible to predict and presumptuous to prescribe exactly how. For myself, unsettlement has deepened my relationship with gaming and changed how I buy, display, teach, play, experience, imagine, and discuss games—but never in completely straightforward ways. So, if anyone isn't keen on taking their play quite this seriously, I get it. I can't say I'm always in the mood myself. After all, the point of boardgaming is to place meaningful choices in the players' hands. It's your move.

But although I want to hold open space for individuals to discover their own paths, I still believe in collectively unsettling the paths we walk together. If play were merely private, I'd just call this a matter of taste and leave it at that. But play isn't private. Play is interactive. Play is social. Play creates culture. Boardgames have set me on a journey toward and with others. So, I hope you won't mind if, here at the end, I speak to the boardgaming community as a "we."

As those who play games into being, we have surprising power to shape what boardgames can be and become. Whereas some industries have become so monolithic that it can seem like the only way to bring change is outright resistance, boardgaming is still very much a community-centered industry. More than for most media, community discourse sets the tone for how boardgames are designed, marketed, and played. Community values influence and incentivize how the industry directs its creative energies. And playgroups have

surprising agency to shape how communities experience play. We forge our paths together.

Above all, what we need to do is normalize unsettled conversations on boardgames. This might seem like setting the bar pretty low, but in my opinion, it's quite high. Cultivating a healthy climate for hard conversations is a pipe dream in many spaces, but it's a must for any thriving community. And it takes a community to discover paths that exceed any individual's limited imagination (including my own). So, although this isn't a call to revolution, normalizing unsettlement may be the only way to revolutionize game design while building more loving communities.

Hard conversations help clear the path of the brambles that impede growth and innovation. Right now, that blockage is detachment itself. Detachment inhibits better game design. After all, its core principle is to limit what boardgames can be by actively suppressing their emotional and ideological resonances. Detachment also inhibits healthy community formation. After all, detachment is inherently unwelcoming because it discourages people from bringing their full selves to the table. In both these ways, detachment only reinforces a status quo that has historically privileged certain cultural values and identities[14] and led to gatekeeping.[15] There's no easy solution for such settled attitudes—only unsettlement can clear this path.

Once the path is cleared, hard conversations help navigate new paths toward better games and more loving communities. I don't offer any specific game design solutions here because I don't need to. Any community willing to have hard conversa-

tions will become a fertile creative culture from which innovative designs will inevitably emerge. Change the culture and better games will follow. Similarly, I don't offer a blueprint for increasing diversity in gaming because any community willing to have hard conversations will be immediately more welcoming. Change the culture and people will come.

In the end, unsettlement questions where boardgaming has been to set us on a journey to imagine what boardgaming can still yet become. In this spirit of wandering, I leave us with words for the road, a traveling blessing: as we discover and shape the path together, may we have fun, play well, and never settle.

Glossary

Note: Italicized terms refer to other glossary entries.

4X: A genre of warlike strategy games named for four central gameplay mandates that all tie into imperialism: eXplore, eXploit, eXpand, and eXterminate. This genre has not historically mixed with *eurogames*, although recent years have seen a few hybrids that incorporate elements from both traditions.

Abstract: As an adjective, “abstract” can refer to less representational art, including boardgames where *themes* are minimal or nonexistent. As a verb, “to abstract something” can refer to the process of removing, separating, or detaching something from its context to consider it more objectively. I use this term in both these senses, which are more related than they may seem. I explore how abstraction is both a tool and a goal for *detached design* to make questionable gameplay feel neutral.

Alchemy: A process of transmuting resources into something else through an unnatural exchange that transforms and increases value. Although they are often *thematized* as construction or trade, I use the metaphor of alchemy to

name how transactions in *resource management eurogames* often function in unnatural ways. In particular, I explore how eurogames often alchemize resources by ignoring their natural, ecological properties and instead treating them as *abstract*, economic currencies. Rather than being actually magical, alchemical fantasies in boardgames reflect the *utopian* thinking of real-world *anthropocentric* or *capitalist power fantasies*.

Anthropocentrism: A human-centered *power fantasy* that ascribes inherent value only to humans, viewing the rest of the world as meant for human exploitation. Often used to *rationalize* industrial *capitalism* and dispel environmental concerns.

Blocking: A form of negative *player interaction* where one player prevents another player from doing something by doing it first. Because blocking is seen as fair under *cultural capitalism*, it's a common way for *peaceful-feeling eurogames* (especially *Worker Placement* games) to maintain competitive tension without disturbing their peaceful feelings.

Boardgame: I use the single word "boardgame" instead of the more standard two-word phrase "board game" to name boardgaming as a *medium*. Phrases tend to have a descriptive feeling that makes "board game" sound like "a game with a board." But boardgaming has evolved to the point where the hobby and the medium aren't defined by boards. Even *Catan* challenges the traditional concept of a game board. So, I prefer a single word that sounds more like a name than a description. Similarly, I use

"*eurogame*" to name a genre that's not identical to "games from Europe" (like *Detective: A Modern Crime Boardgame*), "wargame" to name a genre that's not identical to "games about war" (like *This War of Mine*), and "videogame" to name a medium that's not identical to "games that use video" (like *Scene It*).

Boardgamegeek.com: I occasionally reference this comprehensive boardgaming website for insight into the popularity or reception of games. This includes referencing the BGG Top 100 rankings, which uses a proprietary formula to rank popular boardgames based on user input (likely based on Average User Rating with some dummy ratings added in to prevent small samples from dominating the rankings). Although this site is easily the central online hub for English-language boardgamers, there are plenty of limitations with using it to gauge broader boardgaming culture. Even assuming that the rankings or other statistics accurately reflect the user base, a few million users represent a very small (and self-selected) slice of the boardgaming community. So, the value of using this site is less that it's a perfect representation of the larger community but rather that its public presence magnifies the sentiments of this smaller community. My sense is that *boardgamegeek* self-selects less for regular *Catan* players and more for dedicated eurogamers who tend to prefer more recent and more complex releases (which is likely why *Catan* is outside the Top 500 despite being the most owned game in the database).

Capitalism: An economic system based on private owner-

ship and free market competition and sustained by the ideologies of *cultural capitalism*. Most boardgames are too *abstract* to effectively model complex capitalist systems, but *eurogames* have many ways of resonating with *utopian* capitalist principles.

Catan: As a title, the italicized "*Catan*" refers to the published game. I also use the non-italicized "Catan" to name *Catan*'s *gameworld*, especially the fictional island where the game is set. In this study, I primarily refer to the current 5th edition, but there are many other editions and versions (I also include images from the original German edition and an earlier English edition).

Claiming: Taking something I have a legal or moral right to possess. Territorial expansion in *Catan* and Worker Placement in other *eurogames* operate by claiming. Although the point of claiming is to be more ethical than conquering, this study questions what *rationalizes* land claiming in games.

Colonialism: The practice of occupying, settling, or exploiting foreign lands and exerting power over their peoples as well as all the ideological assumptions that *rationalize* these practices. Although historical colonialism was incredibly violent, colonialism can also play out as seemingly "peaceful" economic exploitation or cultural dominance. Although I often refer to colonialism more generally, this study primarily refers to *settler colonialism*, the form most closely approximated by *Catan*.

Competition: Competitive gameplay is the central play mode of most of the games discussed in this study. It contrasts

with cooperative and *solo* gameplay, both of which situate the player(s) against the game itself. Competition is also a central ideal for *cultural capitalism*, which is why many *eurogames* evoke *ideological resonances* between their game structure and *capitalism*.

Complicity: Indirectly helping to make something happen (by assisting a person or supporting a system). "Complicity" usually has the negative connotation of abetting something illegal or unethical, but all boardgames make players complicit in making the game happen—not only by playing the game, but also by doing all the mundane procedures necessary to set up, manage, and score the game. Because boardgames make players complicit in their systems, they have a distinctive way of inviting players to adopt or *play out* their implicit *ideologies*.

Cultural Capitalism: A set of cultural assumptions and values that props up capitalist societies. Although I use "cultural capitalism" more broadly, one of its most commonly theorized contemporary forms is neoliberalism, a value system that treats competition as a basis of human society. Some of the culturally capitalist perspectives I explore in this study include *anthropocentrism*, *managerial detachment*, and *meritocracy*.

Detachment/Detached Design: I use "detachment" to name a *settled* mindset of treating the meaningful things a player *plays out* in a game as amoral, neutral, irrelevant, or otherwise meaningless. Detachment dampens many of the aspects that make boardgames meaningful, including their *resonances* and *dissonances*. I also use "detached

design" to name a game design philosophy that aims to cultivate detachment. Although *Catan* isn't a consistently detached design, this study traces how its experiments with detachment have left a lasting *ideological* legacy on contemporary *eurogames*, whose *peaceful feelings* often depend on detachment. I tend to use "detachment" to name unhealthy ways of avoiding or repressing feelings. I don't use "detachment" to name healthy ways of cultivating restorative escape or critical distance (similarly, some spiritual traditions identify the virtue of holding loosely to worldly things as "nonattachment" rather than "detachment").

Dissonance: An experience of discordant or clashing meanings often produced by disharmonious *resonances*. "Ideological dissonance" specifically names when this clash is between a game's worldview and other cultural worldviews. This experience depends on both subjective and contextual elements, but some game designs can still tend to provoke dissonance more than others. For instance, a game whose central premise rests on a glaring *thematic* inconsistency would be more likely to provoke dissonance. Yet, such tendencies can also be mitigated by *detached designs* that actively work to suppress ideological dissonances (as when *eurogames* attempt to make overtly *colonial* themes feel *abstract*).

Empire-Building: I use "empire-building" to name how players expand and develop in-game holdings that represent player-controlled infrastructures within broader power structures. This can be represented in a variety of ways,

such as expanding networks across a *territorial* map (*Catan* and *Concordia*), *claiming* building spots (*Lisboa*), or filling in empty areas (*A Feast for Odin* and *The Castles of Burgundy*). It can also include more *abstract* and less spatial representations, such as the Tableau Building in *Lorenzo il Magnifico*.

Engine-Building: A snowball effect that occurs when the things a player does in a game make them better at doing those things in the future. This term can sometimes refer more narrowly to building an action or production chain that is "run" periodically throughout the game (as in *Lorenzo il Magnifico* or *Wingspan*). Engine-building sometimes feeds into the *runaway leader problem*.

Eurogames: A cultural tradition of boardgames that began in Germany around the 1980s and saw huge growth after the immense success of *Catan* in 1995. As this tradition has evolved, it has come to loosely name a genre of games that share a *peaceful-feeling* design philosophy, that usually privileges *resource management mechanisms* while deemphasizing luck and direct conflict. Contemporary eurogames are no longer equivalent to the early "Euro-style games" that preceded them and need not be European in origin.

Exemplar: To make my observations about the *eurogame* genre more concrete, I explore six eurogames that I believe exemplify the influential trend of historical eurogames from 2010 to 2020. These games are *A Feast for Odin*, *The Castles of Burgundy*, *Concordia*, *Lisboa*, *Lorenzo il Magnifico*, and *Maracaibo*. I personally selected these games

to fit four primary criteria: (1) they had to be well-known and highly-rated among eurogamers (as represented on boardgamegeek.com), (2) they had to be by different designers who were all known for having multiple successful eurogame designs, (3) they had to fit my subjective experience of what eurogames are typically like, and (4) they had to do something especially interesting to talk about. This use of exemplars is clearly not objective or statistically significant, but I often learn a lot about a cultural tradition by digging deeply into some of its most influential and exemplary expressions. That's why I've always had a personal preference for close reading over other approaches. Of course, every method has limitations. Because of its reliance on exemplars, nothing in this book should be read as a general statement about *all* (or even *most*) eurogames. The point of this study is to unsettle meaningful trends in eurogames rather than to quantify how common or problematic those trends are. In the end, it's always worth comparing or complementing this approach with other approaches.

Fantasy: Beyond the familiar Tolkienesque genre, boardgames are often fantasies because they create worlds that perfect or idealize the aspects of the *real* world they represent. This often takes the form of historical fantasies in which *eurogames* romanticize actual historical events or *ideologies*. Eurogames also often embed *power fantasies* within their broader *utopian* worldviews.

Frameworld: Everything outside a game that surrounds, contextualizes, and frames the play experience. This includes

the identities of the players, the physical and social context in which the game is played, and all cultural *ideologies* or values relevant to what the game portrays. It can also include non-immersive or "meta" aspects of the game experience that clearly depend on awareness of being outside a game. For instance, having a rules discussion during gameplay is a frameworld experience even though the whole point is to reference the gameworld. The frameworld is primarily accessed through the *glance*, which shapes the play experience by revealing how players constantly move inside and outside the so-called "magic circle" of the game. Together the frameworld and *gameworld* constitute boardgaming's unique form of doubled *world-building*.

Gameworld: The world created by a boardgame. Like novels or films, this world is always imagined and fictional. Unlike novels or films, this world is also *real*: to play a boardgame, players must project their agency into the gameworld to make actual moves in that world according to its rules. So, real yet fictional gameworlds constitute the space of play. In a sense, a gameworld is the part of the game I play with and within. The gameworld is primarily accessed through the *glimpse*, which synthesizes the fragmentary elements of a game's design into an immersive experience. Together the gameworld and *frameworld* constitute boardgaming's unique form of doubled *world-building*.

Glance: A look that suspends immersion to perceive the surrounding *frameworld*. The upward glance does this by

looking away from the game toward the literal surroundings (including other players). Less obviously, the downward glance also does this by looking at the game to see how outside considerations (including social dynamics or cultural ideas) play out in the game. I often use the movement of the glance as a metaphor for how boardgames *play out* and *play with* real-world concerns, creating opportunities for ideological *resonance* and *dissonance*.

Glimpse: A small artistic or *thematizing* touch that provides a momentary window into the immersive world of a boardgame. Unlike traditional forms of visual media like art or film, most boardgames provide many fragmentary glimpses instead of a complete picture. In this way, these glimpses invite players to construct their own impression of the *gameworld* while they play.

Ideology: Ways of thinking, worldviews, or value systems that shape how people perceive their worlds. In this study, I especially focus on ideologies that sustain social systems like *colonialism* and *capitalism*. Such ideologies don't need to be fully articulated theories or explicitly advocated political views. They can be subtle or unseen assumptions like the *meritocratic* ideal of a "level playing field" or the idea that developing infrastructure is a form of social progress.

Imperialism: Any practice of attempting to consolidate power within an empire (national, economic, or otherwise). In this study, imperialism usually refers to the parallel practices of *colonialism* and *capitalism*. I explore

how *eurogames* often avoid the more overtly violent or militaristic forms of imperialism while embracing softer forms of economic or cultural imperialism which use more palatable means to consolidate power.

Little Empire: I appropriate Teuber's phrase "little empire" to describe the empires I build in games, as opposed to real-world empires. This is similar to how H. G. Wells calls miniature wargaming "Little Wars" to describe how they playfully differ from actual wars. A little empire need not be thematically connected to imperialism but could include things like developing an estate in *The Castles of Burgundy* or building a network of Stores in *Lisboa*.

Managerial Detachment: A *power fantasy* of strategically managing labor to maximize results without needing to be overly concerned with the well-being of laborers. Often expressed through amoral language like "it's just business" or "it's nothing personal."

Mechanism: A rule-governed process or procedure that makes gameplay function. Every move a player can make in a game is defined by game mechanisms. Common mechanisms in *eurogames* include *Worker Placement* (placing workers to perform actions), Recipe/Contract Fulfillment (paying specific combinations of resources to complete goals on cards), and Variable Player Powers (giving each player a unique player ability).

Medium/Media: Typically, "media" are described as means of materially recording, expressing, and/or communicating ideas. Boardgames are media even if they don't transmit

explicit messages the way communications media do or tell stories the way books or films do. Instead, boardgames create material environments that mediate meaningful experiences through play.

Meeple: Small, stylized wooden figures popularized by *Carcassonne* and often used in *eurogames* (especially *Worker Placement* games). This term was coined by gamer Alison Hansel as a contraction of "my people."

Meritocracy: A theoretical social system that rewards individuals proportionally to their social contributions. The idea of meritocracy is often linked to the *culturally capitalist* myths of "equal opportunity" and a "level playing field."

Peaceful-Feeling Eurogame: I often call *eurogames* "peaceful-feeling" eurogames because I explore how one of the defining traits of eurogames is that they aim to cultivate peaceful feelings, regardless of whether they also embrace cutthroat gameplay or represent imperialist violence. In such cases, the feeling or perception of peacefulness is treated as more important than enacting genuine peace. This is why peaceful-feeling eurogames so often turn to *detached design*.

Player Interaction: Any aspect of gameplay that directly or indirectly impacts what rivals can do. Negative player interactions like robbing and *blocking* tend to hinder rival players while positive player interactions like trading tend to benefit them.

Play Out / Play With: I often explore how boardgames invite

players to "play out" implicit worldviews by uncritically following what the game is asking them to do. However, I believe boardgames always leave room for players to "play with" these worldviews by critically exploring and questioning what they might otherwise play out.

Playscript: Drawing on Robin Bernstein's discussions of toys and other children's media products as "scriptive things," I use "playscript" to name how boardgames give players clear but unspoken cues for how to play a game. Beyond requiring players to follow the rules, boardgames also give players goals and *thematic* frames that script how players are expected to play.

Power Fantasy: In fiction, this usually refers to the ability to imagine being powerful in some way readers or viewers typically aren't. Games can have this imaginative element, but they also literally empower players to act in their worlds. So, playing as a humble Medic in *Pandemic* might not seem like an obvious power fantasy until I realize that I can literally rid an entire city of disease with a single action. This book discusses many power fantasies, including *colonial* and *capitalist*, *anthropocentric* and *managerial*, and even the rationalist power fantasy of being able to control one's fate.

Rationalization: The process of appealing to seemingly objective standards to justify self-interested behavior. Rationalization is the dark side of rationalism, a longstanding sentiment in Western culture that values objectivity and rationality over emotions. Although rationality itself

is a good thing, it's easy to misuse rational or practical arguments to justify questionable behavior. In this way, *detachment* can rationalize questionable gameplay actions by making them feel *abstract*, neutral, or amoral.

Real/Reality: Although games certainly have fictional elements, *gameworlds* aren't flights of fancy—these worlds are "real" because they provide material spaces that players can genuinely enter into and move within through gameplay. I really do things when I play a game, even when these things aren't quite the same as what I do in my everyday life outside the game. So, following Jesper Juul, I call games both real *and* fictional. And to distinguish gameplay reality from outside reality, I often describe the latter as "actual" or "real-world."

Resonance: An experience of compounding or amplifying meaning due to the synergy between a *gameworld* and a *frameworld*. "Ideological resonance" more specifically names when this synergy is between a game's worldview and cultural worldviews. So, the concept of resonance is essential to the cultural critique of boardgames because it shows how boardgames can raise meaningful issues without offering any explicit commentary on those issues. Simply by resonating with real-world concerns, boardgames allow players to *play out* or *play with* ideas.

Resource Management: A style of gameplay common in *eurogames* where collecting and spending resources drives gameplay. This style of play tends to *resonate* with *capitalism* because it creates a central economy that drives actions. Resources in these games often represent

commodities, but they also often treat many other things (labor, time, influence, etc.) as commodities or currencies. *Detached designs* often deploy *managerial detachment* to make players feel comfortable managing resources that might otherwise evoke empathy.

Runaway Leader Problem: A game design term that refers to how a game excessively rewards a leading player, creating situations where the "runaway leader" becomes increasingly uncatchable. This tends to raise questions of fairness and game balance.

Settlement: A mindset of feeling comfortable or satisfied with uncritically *playing out* a game's implicit *playscripts*. Playing off the multiple definitions of the word "to settle," I define settlement as repressing uncomfortable, critical, provocative, and decolonial forces. In theory, any design philosophy can stagnate into settled thinking, like when fresh design trends become reiterated so much they become tedious and stale. But the way *eurogames* settle into *detached design* has a special connection to settlement because detachment itself promotes settled thinking by suppressing conflicted feelings. This is doubly so when detached design suppresses conflicted feelings toward settlement. So, although settled thinking isn't necessarily *colonial*, I deliberately use the multiple uses of this term to emphasize how settled thinking often *rationalizes* colonialism.

Settler Colonialism: A specific form of *colonialism* that is less about conquering territory and more about clearing land (often violently) so it can be settled. The settlement of the

Americas is particularly known for this. This is also the most relevant form of colonialism for *Catan*, a game about settling an uninhabited island.

Solo Gaming: An increasingly popular mode of playing games as a single player. Modern boardgames increasingly accommodate solo play and many games are designed as solo or solitaire experiences. This study almost exclusively focuses on multiplayer games where sociality is a key part of the experience. Solo games certainly merit their own analysis, which would differ in significant ways from the dynamics this study explores.

Take That: A gaming term for gameplay elements that directly harm other players, usually as a surprise. "Take That" usually names negative effects from in-game elements like cards (for instance, the Monopoly card in *Catan*) but not inherently confrontational *mechanisms* like combat systems in wargames. So, it's debatable whether Take That is technically even a game mechanism.

Territorial: I call games or gameplay "territorial" when they aim to *claim* or conquer land for the purpose of expanding *little empires*. In other words, land becomes territory when its ownership is contested as part of a larger power struggle. Although it's tempting to think of territorial mindsets as primarily the domain of wargames, eurogames (especially early eurogames) are often surprisingly territorial. It's also worth noting that "territory" was a common term under *settler colonialism* (most US States were initially designated as territories).

Theme/Thematization: How a game makes sense of what

players are doing in the *gameworld*. I sometimes call this "theme" to better fit with gamer parlance, but I sometimes also discuss how games actively "thematize" mechanisms. This verb form helps emphasize how thematization isn't a static thing (like a setting) distinct from mechanisms. Players certainly can *abstract* mechanisms away from their thematization, but this isn't the default experience. Instead, boardgames present their mechanisms as already thematized and it takes active mental work to abstract the two away from each other (although less so when *detached designs* actively promote such abstraction).

Unsettlement: A mindset and method of questioning what games ask players to *play out*, allowing players to instead critically *play with* these ideas. To do this, unsettlement practices openness to new experiences, welcoming the generative tensions, conflicted feelings, and provocative *dissonances* that make play transformative. This approach forms the central methodology of *Unsettling Catan*. As an individual practice, unsettlement can be a way of deepening engagement with boardgames, as the Play Logs at the end of each chapter attest. As a collective practice, unsettlement can be a way of revealing and resisting how *eurogames* have *settled* into a philosophy of *detached design*. I believe this collective intervention is especially needed because eurogames are unusually resistant to unsettlement. Although I understand why a gaming tradition would be reluctant to embrace unsettlement, unsettlement can be engaging and fun. People often appreciate

when art, stories, or even other forms of play (videogames, wargames, RPGs) provoke deep reflections or evoke complex emotions. So, although I'm not advocating unsettlement as the only mode games or gamers should occupy, this study promotes unsettlement to counterbalance a tradition that too often skews in the other direction.

Utopia: A place too perfect to exist in the actual world (the literal translation from the Greek is "no place"). Boardgames offer utopian *fantasies* by creating unrealistically perfect, optimistic, or romanticized worlds. Eurogames especially tend to create more utopian versions of *capitalist* systems by making them more *meritocratic* or more utopian versions of settlement by making it more *peaceful feeling*.

Variant: Any reworking of a game that provides an alternate way to experience or play it. Although gamers often reserve this term for alternate rulesets, I use "variants" more broadly to include expansions, revised editions, alternate artwork, component upgrades, etc. Variants can include both official and unofficial modifications, although this study only explores official variants.

Victory Points (VP): This is standard gaming parlance for how *eurogames* score gameplay. I explore how Victory Points provide both a quantitative value system (a way of measuring gameplay success) and a qualitative value system (a way of emphasizing what is considered good or valuable in a gameworld). Although *Catan* is a race to a fixed number of Victory Points, many eurogames have other endgame triggers and then tally VPs at the end to determine the winner.

Worker Placement: One of the most popular *mechanisms* in *eurogames*, Worker Placement is a system where players place “worker *meeples*” on physical spaces to perform the indicated actions, usually *blocking* other players from that action. Unlike many game mechanisms, Worker Placement implies a thematic connection to *capitalism* by being named after labor.

World-Building: The process of creating a fictional world through media. Because boardgames are participatory, interactive, and playful, they build worlds differently than most narrative *media* (novels, films, etc.). Boardgames invite players to co-create their worlds in both imaginative and material senses. They also do world-building across the two intertwined play *realities* of *gameworld* and *frameworld*.

World View: I use the two-word phrase “world view” to name how boardgames visually or materially *glimpse* their big picture gameworlds, especially through gameboards that map their overarching structure. This artistic framework is distinct from so-called worldviews, although I often emphasize how the former implies the latter.

Note on Game Editions

Many boardgames are published in multiple editions that can include revised rules, artwork, or components. Below are the dates and publishers for all the games that have direct quotes or images in this book. Dates referenced in the text are the original publication dates per boardgamegeek.com.

A Feast for Odin: 2017, Feuerland Spiele
The Castles of Burgundy: 2019, Alea
Carcassonne: 2009, Hans im Glück
Catan: 2015, Catan Studios 5th edition (also shown: the original 1995 Franckh German edition and the 1997 Mayfair English edition)
Concordia: 2020, PD-Verlag
John Company: 2022, Wehrlegig Games (Second Edition)
Lisboa: 2017, Eagle-Gryphon Games (Kickstarter Deluxe Edition)
Lorenzo il Magnifico: 2021, Cranio Creations (Second Edition)
Maracaibo: 2020, Game's Up
Mombasa: 2017, Eggertspiele
Skymines: 2022, Deep Print Games

Notes

Introduction

1. *The Settlers of Catan* was rebranded as *Catan* with its 5th edition in 2015. Unless stated otherwise, all references to *Catan* in this study refer to this edition.

2. Although "board game" is still more commonly used than "boardgame," I use the latter to name boardgaming as a unique tabletop medium that doesn't always have a traditional board. I do something similar with "eurogame," "wargame," and "videogame."

3. Wired, "Monopoly Killer," n.p.

4. Wired, "Monopoly Killer," n.p.

5. Eskin, "Why Settlers of Catan is the game for our era," n.p.

6. Keyes, "Settlers of Catan," n.p.

7. Although *Catan* is a German game with worldwide appeal, these reflections privilege a US American perspective because that's the gaming culture I participate in, and my personal gaming experiences very much inform my analyses. Because of this, it's worth noting that the purpose of this book isn't to speak *for* any particular culture (including my own) or say that all experiences are alike. Instead, the purpose is to reflect on *Catan* in ways that raise interesting questions, which I believe can be done even from a partial viewpoint.

8. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 295.

9. According to the *Catan* website in May 2023.

10. This makes *Catan* easily the best-selling modern hobby boardgame of all time. It's hard to get these figures fully synchronized, but according to one article (gamenightgods.com/top-selling-board-games/), *Catan* had 30 million sales while the other five games combined for only 22 million. As of June 2024, *Catan* was also the most owned and most rated game on hobbyist website boardgamegeek.com.

11. Teuber states that *Catan* was the first to do these latter two, although

he doesn't take personal credit for the rulebook. *My Journey to Catan*, 205 and 222.

12. In his survey of the boardgamegeek.com community, Paul Booth found that "Eurogame" was the most preferred game style. By my informal counts, eurogames typically make up about half of the boardgamegeek.com Top 100 games.

13. Henricks, *Play and the Human Condition*, 226.

14. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 65.

15. This isn't to say that boardgames lack narrative elements. Most boardgames have some sort of backstory that describes the game's setting. And many campaign games have extensive story elements, although it's notable that many of these narratives also function as backstory—material to read *between* games that isn't integrated into the play experience the way it can be for role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* or interactive fiction games like *Sleeping Gods* and *Legacy of Dragonholt*.

16. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 260.

17. A common slogan in creative writing is "show don't tell," a phrase that implies that good art is more expressive than didactic. This holds true for boardgames, although "playing" is further removed from "telling" than "showing" through word-pictures that are linguistically akin to "telling."

18. Boardgames certainly can function as what Ian Bogost calls *persuasive games* that use *procedural rhetoric* to make arguments. However, I find that most modern boardgames aren't best described as traditionally persuasive. With their emphasis on world-building, many boardgames are more likely to raise questions than to answer them. They put values into play. And although boardgames can never truly adopt a neutral perspective on these values, they can imply mindsets or worldviews without actively adopting a persuasive stance.

19. See Flanagan and Nissenbaum's *Values at Play in Digital Games*.

20. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 258–59.

21. I use a somewhat looser definition of empire here, but it often resonates with more specific notions of Empire. See *Games of Empire* for a more detailed theorization of Empire and how it applies to videogames.

22. As Mary Flanagan and Mikael Jakobsson note, "Games embody the values to which the surrounding society subscribes" and "have long acted as a form of enculturation—the process by which people learn the traditional dynamics, behaviors, language, and values of a given culture and assimilate norms, worldviews, practices, and beliefs." *Playing Oppression*, 19 and 24–25.

23. Games specify their rules of engagement by offering implicit and

explicit *playscripts* that cue players on how to perform their play. These playscripts broadly include the overarching goals that tell players what they're trying to do, the rules and mechanisms that specify what players can and can't do, the strategic considerations that influence what paths are best to pursue, and all the thematizing details that help players imagine what the above considerations represent. See any of Robin Bernstein's many works on toys as *scriptive things*.

24. Complicity doesn't require direct or intentional action. It can be as simple as tacitly internalizing and perpetuating ways of thinking that support certain power structures. As Julie Wilson points out, "hegemony posits that power is maintained through ongoing, ever-shifting cultural processes of winning the *consent* of the governed, that is, ordinary people like you and me." *Neoliberalism*, 22.

25. In *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart argues that play is *carnivalesque*, Mikhail Bakhtin's term for how literature can transgress dominant power structures by embracing chaos or absurdity. But although one might argue that all play has this potential, certain modes of play—including many eurogames—often resist the carnivalesque. It's also worth noting that it's questionable whether the carnivalesque genuinely subverts power structures or ultimately leaves them intact.

26. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 304.

27. Stewart Woods notes that, "Anecdotally speaking, eurogames tend to be accessible games that privilege the role of mechanics over theme in gameplay. They typically facilitate indirect rather than direct conflict, de-emphasize the role of chance, offer predictable playing times, and are usually of a high standard in terms of component quality and presentation." *Eurogames*, 79. Teuber, while understandably reluctant to classify his own games, writes "The common view holds that all 'Euro-style games' are relatively easy to learn; are sociable, interactive and thematic; and the element of luck is not too high. There are no open conflicts between players, and no player is kicked out of the game before the end of the game" *My Journey to Catan*, 167. And popular boardgaming website boardgamegeek.com lists indirect player conflict rather than combat, no player elimination, low luck, designers' names listed on box covers, attention paid to artwork and (usually wooden) components, definite themes that matter less than the game mechanisms, getting a lot of strategy out of few mechanisms, and multiple paths to victory. See boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/Eurogame

28. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 95.

29. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 96.

30. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 171.

31. Woods, *Eurogames*, 62.

32. *El Grande* introduced an influential new mechanism of Area Control/Majority that allowed players to vie for control of regions without needing combat mechanisms or war themes. Building on this foundation, *Carcassonne* adopted an even more pastoral theme and built more positive player interaction into its Area Control mechanisms by making it easy for players to share points for territory. Even so, both these games can be incredibly cutthroat and reward aggressive play.

33. Aminzadah, "The results of the 'Catan' surveys in Germany and the U.S.," 14.

34. According to one website at quoteinvestigator.com/2020/11/26/true-peace/#r+438619+1+1, King was echoing many other thinkers who expressed variations of this sentiment. The site also traces this particular version to a verbal conversation recorded in *A Martin Luther King Treasury*.

35. Although they clearly arise from this legacy, contemporary eurogames are different enough from earlier German games like *Catan* that some have argued they should be classified separately. Drawing on a post by Samo Oleami, Oliver Kiley separates German family games from eurogames in an impressive post on different game design schools at boardgamegeek.com/blogpost/27367/schools-design-and-their-core-priorities. I find this argument convincing in terms of overall play style. However, I group *Catan* with eurogames here because of how this family game established an ideological precedent for eurogames. Kiley discusses "pacific" or peaceful themes exclusively with respect to the German family games design school, but I explore how such peaceful feelings are also essential to the eurogame design philosophy.

36. Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 89.

37. See any of several works by Megan Norcia on this history.

38. Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 15.

39. *Puerto Rico*'s representation of colonialism was notable enough that it was reported in *The Atlantic* as the central example in an article entitled "The Board Games That Ask You to Reenact Colonialism."

40. Although all these games draw on *Catan*'s ideological legacy, *Catan* is hardly responsible for putting imperialism into games. This centuries-long history is outlined in *Playing Oppression* by Mary Flanagan and Mikael Jakobsson.

41. At the beginning of 2022, all these games were in the boardgamegeek.com Top 100 games and the designers of these six games accounted for a whopping 21 entries in the Top 100 list (a figure which is even more

impressive considering that this list encompasses all genres rather than just eurogames). At the beginning of 2024, *Lorenzo il Magnifico* fell barely outside the Top 100 and the other games were all in the Top 60. The designers still accounted for 19 Top 100 entries.

42. This selection is too small and non-random to be used for statistical analysis, but the point isn't to *quantify* any described trends. Instead, the point of using exemplars is to *illustrate* meaningful moments within the broader tradition that bear more thinking. There are exceptions and variance to every dynamic explored in this study. Yet, these are also not isolated cases. These exemplars reveal something about the zeitgeist of this era that I believe most eurogamers will recognize upon reflection.

43. This reference to "banality" alludes to Hannah Arendt's ethical reflections in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which considers how a Nazi bureaucrat was able to perpetuate extreme atrocities by uncritically playing a practical role in a bureaucracy. However, boardgame complicity differs significantly from such atrocities since boardgame players are complicit only in adopting a detached perspective in play. This does matter, but not in the same way as complicity in real atrocities. But even when banality doesn't excuse real atrocities, banality is worth unsettling as a dominant paradigm for play.

44. *Dune: Imperium* also speaks to another recent trend of so-called "hybrid" eurogames that reimagine explicit war themes and direct conflict mechanisms in a eurogame style. Other notable hybrids include *Blood Rage* and *Scythe*.

45. *Mombasa*, Rulebook, 1.

46. *Maracaibo*, Rulebook, 23.

47. It shouldn't be surprising that these disclaimers advocate detachment. After all, the point of a disclaimer is to *dis-claim* responsibility. Like the warning labels on any consumer product, these disclaimers warn players about the potential dangers of such play so that the creators won't be liable for any discomfort players may experience. Disclaimers and detachment are alike in offering avoidant or coping mechanisms that don't actually fix any issues they're supposed to settle.

48. Faidutti, "Postcolonial Catan," 27.

49. In several books and the *feministkilljoys* blog, Sara Ahmed reclaims the "killjoy" as a critical position of social resistance. Despite the connotations of the label, such critique can also reclaim joy. I've found that questioning games can actually make gaming more joyful, both by making play experiences more nuanced and interesting and by making gaming communities more inclusive and welcoming.

50. In this way, games can be described as "technologies of the self," a term that comes from Michel Foucault but has been applied to games by a number of scholars.

51. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 262.

52. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 40, emphasis in original.

Chapter 1

1. Videogame designer Sid Meier's famous description of games as a "series of interesting decisions" has become a popular catchphrase for game design.

2. Sicart, *Play Matters*, 17.

3. In film studies, the *gaze* is often used to describe how films direct the spectatorial eye. Unlike vision in boardgames, the gaze involves sustained, unwavering, absorbed visual attention. The filmic gaze isn't neutral. Laura Mulvey famously argued that film cultivated a *male gaze* that objectified female bodies for the visual consumption of an audience assumed to be heterosexual and male. Some boardgame art replicates this male gaze, but perhaps a more interesting parallel is when games align the downward glance with an inherently rationalist perspective that has been historically masculinized even if not sexualized. Queer theory has also explored alternatives to this filmic gaze and Nicholas de Villiers even proposed the *glance* as one such "queer way of looking" at brightlightsfilm.com/glancing-cruising-staring-queer-ways-looking/#.YqfU1i1h15g. The boardgame glance shares some of the mobility of this queer glance, but it's typically far less "furtive and precarious." Although I'm not using the term the way film theory does, more work can and should be done to trace gendered or queer positionalities that may be built into these ways of looking.

4. This point draws upon Jesper Juul's influential argument that "To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world" *Half-Real*, 1. While I rely on this argument, I don't adopt the term "half-real" because it unintentionally implies that game fictions somehow dilute the reality of the real rule-governed gameworlds. Yet games don't sacrifice any reality by being framed by fictions. Fictional worlds *thematize* rather than replace the reality of the game, adding another layer of meaningfulness to its created world. So, rather than calling gameworlds "half-real," I'd say that gameworlds are fully real while also being thematized by fictions. Because boardgames simultaneously operate in the gameworld and frameworld, they might be better described as *twice-real*.

5. Kendall Walton argues all representational art does this in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*.

6. Beyond offering the first glimpse of *Catan*'s world, the sunset has become arguably the core symbol of the *Catan* brand. Most subsequent *Catan* games riff on this sunset cover and a smaller sunset image is the Victory Point icon for the 5th edition. So, this frozen sunset covers the *Catan* universe much the way the sun was reputed to never set on the British Empire.

7. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 204.

8. Covers function as *paratexts*, a term coined by literary theorist Gerard Genette to describe how books use a host of "accompanying productions" including covers, titles, prefaces, epigraphs, notes, etc. to present themselves to readers. Such paratexts, Genette argued, are designed to shape reader experience in "the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it." *Paratexts*, 1 and 2. Beyond books, media scholar Jonathan Gray writes "paratexts condition our entrance to texts, telling us what to expect, and setting the terms of our 'faith' in subsequent transubstantiation." *Show Sold Separately*, 25. Rather than analyzing books or films in a vacuum, these scholars argue that paratexts matter because they help shape how we encounter and experience media.

9. Cover art is also a useful way to track representation, especially for eurogames that often don't feature characters in game. See Erin Ryan's famous comment that "You are more likely to see a sheep on the cover of a board game box than you are to see a group of women." "Gender Representation in Board Game Cover Art," n.p.

10. While more immersive media often direct the gaze so that viewers lose themselves *inside* created worlds (the ideal being fully immersive virtual reality), the glance plays inside and outside against each other. Since boardgames generally provide material environments too small to be physically inhabited by players, they instead physically situate players around the perimeter of the board. Players sit outside the game, glancing in and out of the play space. In this way, boardgames complicate the spatial metaphor of play as a "magic circle," a controversial notion (including significant feminist critiques from Mia Consalvo and others) from Johan Huizinga that paints a picture of play as a stepping out of the ordinary, everyday world and into an imaginative, creative play space.

11. Sicart, *Play Matters*, 1.

12. See *Material Game Studies* for more on how the material turn in theory has shaped boardgame studies.

13. This use of framing resembles sociologist Erving Goffman's theory

of frame analysis, which Gary Alan Fine applied to an analysis of sociality in role-playing games in *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*.

14. I consider digital implementations of boardgames distinct from physical boardgames because these apps are media of the gaze rather than the glance. App-assisted boardgames like *Mansions of Madness 2nd Edition* can still operate through the glance when the screen doesn't monopolize the gaze but instead adds an additional space to be glanced at.

15. This book was mostly written on land forcibly appropriated from the Coast Salish peoples. *Catan* itself doesn't share this history, but the point of the glance is that players co-create gameplay so their frameworld contexts are part of the play experience. The contexts or intentions of the designer may matter, but only as an additional layer of meaning that interacts with what players bring to the table.

16. Solo gaming is beyond the scope of this study but is well worth probing further. I find it interesting that many solo games actually simulate sociality by creating anthropomorphized AI adversaries. So-called "beat your own score" solo games sometimes even evoke one's past self as a kind of virtual antagonist. So, although some solo games do have a highly individualist player-vs-world mentality, it's far too simple to say that solo games lack sociality.

17. A comparison could be drawn here to the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, who often argued for the centrality of face-to-face encounters as grounds of ethical relationships.

18. Writing on "true" line-of-sight in the Warhammer miniatures game, Sam Tobin discusses how players bend low over the table to adopt a miniature-eye view that functions as an "act of perceptual and bodily empathy." "The Significance of True Line of Sight in Warhammer 40,000," 2. Most boardgames don't adopt this perspective (miniature games in general are more likely to be concerned with measurable analog space than boardgames, which typically represent space as digitally divided). Other games that disrupt the typical orientation of the seated glance include some party games, dexterity games, and escape-room-style puzzle games. These exceptions show that while the visual orientation of the seated position is still a norm for tabletop gaming, it's by no means absolute.

19. In Japanese, *Go* can be referred to as *shudan* (手談) or "hand talk" (see Nanako Kōji's "Over a Go Board, Two Hands Talking").

20. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* may be relevant here because it describes how individuals can internalize certain norms or values that are then expressed in particular contexts like games.

21. This isn't to discount the individual significance of boardgame play.

In addition to solo boardgaming, Miguel Sicart argues of play generally that "Play is a singularly individual experience—shared, yes, but meaningful only in the way it scaffolds an individual experience of the world." *Play Matters*, 18. But it's hard to separate individual experiences in interactive, shared environments. After all, my whole experience is shaped by my interactions with others. So, it's not that collectivity trumps individuality in boardgames, but rather that collectivity and individuality are deeply entangled.

22. Most notably, *Magic: The Gathering* designer Mark Rosewater has argued extensively for *resonance* as a design principle at magic.wizards.com/en/articles/archive/making-magic/resonate-spinning-2019-03-18. Rosewater defines resonance as "when you build a game component on top of information the audience is already familiar with," a technique that produces harmony between theme and mechanisms while simultaneously engaging players' existing knowledge and expectations to produce a more holistic experience.

23. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 138.

24. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 171.

25. In this vein, Walter Hixson argues that "Fantasy played an important role in the evolution of settler societies and the genocidal violence that accompanied them." *American Settler Colonialism*, 21.

26. Gil Hova and Geoff Engelstein discuss applying the concept of *ludonarrative dissonance* from videogame to boardgame design on the Ludology podcast (episode 190). Although this game design concept speaks more directly to dissonance between gameplay and how a game narratively frames its gameplay, ludonarrative dissonance can overlap with ideological dissonance in certain circumstances.

27. Interestingly, a game can evoke both ideological resonance and ideological dissonance—even at the same time. For instance, a game that strongly resonates with violent real-world ideologies like colonialism might simultaneously feel dissonant because it jars with the frameworld values of an anti-colonial game group. Indeed, this ideological push and pull is precisely why games may evoke *conflicted* feelings as opposed to unilaterally positive or negative ones.

28. Miguel Sicart writes that "Like any other form of being, play can be dangerous; it can be hurting, damaging, antisocial, corrupting." *Play Matters*, 2.

29. In *Repairing Play*, Aaron Trammell challenges historical game studies for overlooking non-voluntary aspects of play like torture and capture. But play can also perpetuate what Lauren Berlant calls *cruel optimism*, a

phenomenon where cherished hopes and dreams actually inhibit thriving. For instance, "idealizing power, competition, and opposition (to 'real life' and the rest of society) through games can create the dangerous feedback loop of cruel optimism." Cote and Mejeur, "Gamers, gender, and cruel optimism," 976.

30. Trammell, *Repairing Play*, 63.

31. Trammell, *Repairing Play*, 98.

32. This is more in game design circles, but the idea here is that theme isn't what games are designed to convey and may be "just a tool used to make the rules clearer." Faidutti, "Postcolonial Catan," 29.

Chapter 2

1. *Catan*, Rulebook, 2.

2. I call *Catan* a game *about* empire to differentiate it from games *of* Empire. I don't believe that eurogames are "paradigmatic media of Empire" as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue that videogames are. *Games of Empire*, xv. Eurogame development is less clearly tied to the military-industrial complex and boardgames don't play out virtuality in quite the same ways. In fact, I'm skeptical that eurogames cohere enough to be paradigmatic of any sharply defined political or economic system. Instead, I believe that eurogames tap into a variety of different vaguely capitalist sentiments that have historically supported many different visions of empire. So, rather than developing any central thesis, this study instead traces a recurring but not fully coherent pattern of imperialist resonances that run through eurogame design.

3. As quoted in the "How to Play" chapter, Teuber specifically names this as the inspiration for designing *Catan*. And although many later eurogames feel more abstract, designer Bruno Faidutti notes that "I think there's also something if not reactionary, at least romantic or backward looking in board games themes—much more than in video games themes." "Postcolonial Catan," 8.

4. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 199.

5. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants"*, 18.

6. These categories overlap somewhat, but here are a few notable examples of critiques of colonialism in *Catan* circulating in these spaces. Written interventions include the book *Playing Oppression*, several articles in *Analog Game Studies* (including critical articles by designers Cole Wehrle and Bruno Faidutti), *No Pun Included*'s discussion of colonialism, *The Atlantic* article "The Board Games That Ask You to Reenact Colonialism," and *The*

Daily Worker Placement article "Colonialism in and of Boardgames." Design interventions include Greg Loring-Albright's The *First Nations of Catan*, which aims to counter its colonialist "frontier myth," and Golboo Amani's *Unsettling Settlers: Intervention*, which aims "to interrupt the colonial narrative" in *Catan*. In my personal observation, discussions of colonialism aren't central to the popular perception of *Catan*, although they certainly exist.

7. Lammes, "Postcolonial Playgrounds," 1.

8. Lee, "Deterritorializing game boards."

9. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants"*, 20.

10. Lee, "Deterritorializing game boards."

11. Teuber and the back-of-the-box descriptions in some printings (including the forthcoming 2024 printing) emphasize that Catan is uninhabited. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 199.

12. Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 137.

13. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Pastoral," n.p.

14. See "The IKEA Effect" by Norton et al.

15. For more on this historical idea, see Mark Joy's *American Expansionism 1783–1860: A Manifest Destiny?*

16. The rulebook implies this is the standard setup by recommending the fixed setup only for "your first game" and explicitly arguing that "It is more fun to play with a variable game board." *Catan*, Rulebook, 2 and 3. Anecdotally, I also believe most *Catan* players prefer the variable setup. At the very least, *variability* featured prominently as a key to Catan's success in Sybille Aminzadah's survey of *Catan* players.

17. Tile Laying is a common exploration mechanism in games. And while *Catan*'s setup isn't typical Tile Laying, the similarity is strong enough to give me some sense of discovery in flipping randomized tiles. This is especially true in *Catan*'s *Seafarers* expansion, which explicitly thematizes tile flipping as discovery.

18. Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 114.

19. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants"*, 34.

20. Although it primarily discusses videogames, Ian Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* certainly applies here. Yet, I believe boardgames often take this idea much further than videogames. Players definitely perform procedures to play most videogames, but they don't necessarily feel procedural. Videogames tend to automate most of the more mundane bookkeeping operations so that player actions can focus on gameplay procedures like moving, shooting, making decisions, and so on. In contrast, boardgames require significant upkeep from the players. Boardgames ask

players not only to play, but to maintain the game system. So, they often feel more procedural. And this means that boardgame players are complicit in maintaining how the gameworld works in especially meaningful ways.

21. *Catan*, Rulebook, 3.

22. *Catan*'s timelessness is further illustrated in an odd verbal slip where Teuber describes the iconic sunset on the box cover as having *risen*: "a large, yellow sun rose, embedded in a warm red sunset." *My Journey to Catan*, 204.

23. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Utopia," n.p.

24. The *terra nullius* was a colonial tactic of reframing occupied land as "land belonging to no one." Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism*, 9.

25. Faidutti, "Postcolonial Catan," 6.

26. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Claim," n.p.

27. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Conquer," n.p.

28. This legality was, of course, determined by the laws of the colonizers and effectively allowed the colonial government to cede land "rights" to themselves (like the Doctrine of Discovery). Hence, colonial history is rife with legal inconsistencies like expansion being justified by treaties that are subsequently ignored when they become inconvenient.

29. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants"*, 11.

30. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants"*, 23.

31. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not "A Nation of Immigrants"*, 20.

32. The way I've described the system might make it sound like colonial violence entirely preceded homesteading, but homesteaders were often encouraged to use violence to physically "claim" land that was only theirs by virtue of paperwork.

33. Even though the idea of common land complicates capitalist systems of land ownership, it's not inherently anti-capitalist or anti-colonial. With respect to capitalism, a capitalist imperative to pursue individual self-interest leads to the so-called "tragedy of the commons," where individuals are motivated to deplete shared resources in ways that actually counter the common good. With respect to colonialism, colonial governments had to have already wrested authority over land from Indigenous societies in order to demarcate any land as "common." Governments could also implement legal requirements (like citizenship) for access to commons, making them "common" only for a few.

34. The notion of militarized peace relates to a "new context of war" where war is "*interminable*" and "*lacks boundaries*." Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 100, emphasis in original.

35. Mukherjee, "Playing Subaltern," 32.

36. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson traces how the concept of nationalism arose from a similar kind of imagination. Nationalism only occurs when something makes people imagine they're united as a community.

37. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 111.

38. At least, they show no resistance in the base games. The one notable exception is the *Uprising* expansion to *Maracaibo*, which is discussed in the "Variants" chapter.

39. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 112.

40. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 112.

41. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 113.

42. This parallels Sybille Lammes's argument about videogames in "Postcolonial Playgrounds."

43. Bruno Faidutti argues that from a European perspective, the polarizing way Americans talk about issues like colonialism only make it harder for designers and publishers to creatively tackle colonialism in games (he offers some examples from his personal experience in a blog post that was later published within "Postcolonial Catan"). As someone with a clearly American mindset, I have no way of personally evaluating this claim, but I very much hope this study doesn't contribute to this potential issue. It does seem to me that the criticisms his publishers received were overly simplistic and demonstrated settled thinking. So, I don't want this study to be misread as dissuading creative or artistic experimentation on controversial themes. Still, I worry that overextending Faidutti's argument risks the opposite problem of making it harder to vocalize respectful and needed critique. Once again, it's complicated.

44. As Flanagan and Jakobsson write, "We understand the underlying desire to create a safe and relaxing space for everyone around the table; but knowing that what was put at the center of the table is a never-ending parade of games glorifying and whitewashing colonialism, we have to acknowledge that politics were always present, and it was just that the politics presented—colonialist hegemony—were not being questioned." *Playing Oppression*, 152.

Chapter 3

1. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 22.
2. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 66.
3. A rough survey of this history reveals some uncertain origins and

varying spiritual beliefs, so there's certainly more nuance to these concepts than our modern American concept of karma would suggest. For a meditation that especially emphasizes the role of fatalism, see the blog post "Playing with Fate and Free Will" by Devdutt Pattanaik.

4. Although this name is somewhat dismissive, this is the primary term for an American style of game design often defined as the opposite of eurogames with splashy, pulpy themes and lots of randomness-driven drama.

5. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 18.

6. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 233.

7. Costikyan, "Boardgame Aesthetics," 180.

8. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 4.

9. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 65.

10. Geoff Engelstein discusses this distinction on the Ludology Podcast (GameTek Classic 183) and notes that the eurogame genre tended to shift from output to input randomness.

11. Woods, *Eurogames*, 113.

12. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 233.

13. Garfield, "Getting Lucky," 14.

14. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 4.

15. This isn't to say that cultural capitalism doesn't have collectivist elements. As Julie Wilson argues, contemporary neoliberal capitalism isn't strictly about deregulation. Instead, it imagines "an active, interventionist state" that actively maintains a marketplace which serves as "the basis for all of society." *Neoliberalism*, 27 and 2–3. Drawing on the collectivist thinking captured in the idiom that "a rising tide raises all ships," cultural capitalism reimagines collectivism as a way of promoting individualism.

16. Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, 8.

17. Jo Littler traces the rhetorical history of the level playing field as "it became popularised in the US in the 1980s in business discourse and adopted by Ronald Reagan as a means to argue for deregulation and 'free' trade" and continued to be expanded in later business management texts. Littler also notes how "The popular charge of the phrase is dependent on the popularity of sport," explicitly connecting this thinking to the cultural understanding of games. *Against Meritocracy*, 30 and 31

18. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 296.

19. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 52.

20. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 61.

21. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 100.

Chapter 4

1. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 99.

2. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 258–59.

3. Clark, "Green Bay's Board-Game Obsession."

4. Here, I borrow the terms from Sybille Aminzadah's *Catan* survey (discussed in the Introduction) although the original survey question was general rather than directly related to robbing or trading.

5. Teuber's "A Brief History of the Robbers of Catan" was taken down from catan.com but was reproduced by Nygllhuw Morris at catancollector.com/catan-news/175-the-robbers-of-catan

6. Of course, the prohibition against war only applies to friendly rivalries between competing empires. It wasn't applied to genocidal wars against Indigenous peoples. As Hixson notes, "American settler colonialism was a winner-takes-all proposition that demanded the removal of Indigenous peoples and the destruction of their cultures." *American Settler Colonialism*, 197.

7. Veracini, "Settlers of Catan," 132.

8. Veracini, "Settlers of Catan," 132.

9. The idea of rational self-interest as the driving force for capitalist economies goes back to Adam Smith's influential 1776 treatise *The Wealth of Nations*.

10. For an interesting historical moment that illustrates this developing sentiment, see the popularity of Samuel Smiles's 1859 *Self-Help*, which used stories of "great" men to illustrate how society needs people who actively help themselves instead of simply relying on others. Like some so-called "self-help" books today, this treatise celebrates individualist virtues in ways that rationalize individualist social systems. So, this Victorian view resonates in complicated ways with more contemporary culturally capitalist myths, such as bootstrapping and what I'm calling *helping myself*.

11. I often hear "interactive" used as synonymous with "direct conflict," especially within an odd gamer shorthand that uses "interactive" and "thematic" as slang for the so-called Ameritrash genre. I'm not one to say that slang can be right or wrong, but this usage is quite misleading. Eurogames are clearly not "non-interactive" or "unthematic." And describing them as such only plays into the rhetoric of detached design.

12. Blocking is certainly more legal than robbing in most societies. But blocking isn't any more legal than robbing in boardgames, which legalize both equally as part of their rulesets. Although players may experience dissonance when boardgames allow them to do things that are consid-

ered morally or legally illicit in everyday life, the only actual illegality in boardgames is cheating.

13. Teuber does make a similar historical argument noting that "Most of these people were farmers or shepherds who cultivated their fields and grazed their sheep" while "Only the wealthy farmers and princes who preferred looting or trading called themselves Vikings." At the same time, Teuber deliberately moved away from Viking theming in the published game to avoid evoking feelings of real-world colonialism. *My Journey to Catan*, 170–71 and 199.

14. As discussed in the "Placing Hexes" chapter, Tile Placement is commonly used as an exploration mechanism, subtly reframing this territorial expansion as territorial *exploration*.

15. *A Feast for Odin*, Rulebook, 1.

16. *A Feast for Odin*, Rulebook, 1.

17. As Hixson notes, "Historical distortion and denial are endemic to settler colonies. In order for the settler colony to establish a collective usable past, legitimating stories must be created and persistently affirmed as a means of naturalizing a new historical narrative." *American Settler Colonialism*, 11.

18. Trading in *Catan* is simple: on their turn, a player can engage in Domestic Trade by exchanging any number of resources with any rivals who accept their terms. Alternately, players can engage in Maritime Trade by exchanging resources with the reserve at an unfavorable 4:1 rate.

19. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 258.

20. The ideal of "free trade" was popularized by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. But although capitalist societies often promote free market principles within their economies, free trade with rival nations can be controversial. In *The "Conspiracy" of Free Trade*, Marc-William Palen traces a long historical struggle between free trade cosmopolitanism and economic nationalism. Here, I'm less interested in historical free trade policies and more in how games like *Catan* can leverage generalized sentiments around trade to help cultivate peaceful feelings.

21. Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 45.

22. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 41.

23. See also Jo Littler's *Against Meritocracy*.

24. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 234.

25. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 186.

26. For a design-focused discussion on kingmaking and its impact on player perceptions of fairness, see Cole Wehrle's talk "'King Me': A Defense

of King-Making in Board Game Design" archived at www.gdcvault.com/play/1025683/Board-Game-Design-Day-King

27. Richard Ham (a.k.a. Rahdo) is particularly well-known for vocally adopting a "care bear" position and advocating for game publishers to decrease negative interaction in eurogames, but this has become part of the broader gamer lexicon. Game designer Greg Costikyan sees this as more generally applicable to eurogame culture, writing that "By and large, Eurogamers find games that pit players too directly against one another disturbing; such games are 'nasty,' hurtful, games that cause harsh feelings. Instead, the ideal game is one in which people injure or aid each other only at the margins, where each is building toward a win, perhaps competing for resources but not stabbing each other in the back" (182).

28. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 261.

Chapter 5

1. The boardgames that most resonate with this mentality are often Set Collection games like *Dream Home* or *Sushi Go* that make collection inherently rather than instrumentally valuable. Set collection games make the things one collects primarily yield Victory Points rather than resources, actions, or abilities. As these examples demonstrate, such games are often explicitly thematized as consumerism.

2. Chloé Germaine explores "how 'nature' games both perpetuate and challenge the conceptual and imaginative failures of the climate crisis" (146) in an essay in *Material Game Studies*.

3. Germaine, "'Nature' games in a time of climate crisis," 150.

4. Germaine, "'Nature' games in a time of climate crisis," 153.

5. Germaine, "'Nature' games in a time of climate crisis," 144.

6. This omission is particularly telling when "The lived space of the peripheral and the invisible is easily ignored in the global all-pervading narratives of empire." Mukherjee, "Playing Subaltern," 47.

7. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Ecology," n.p.

8. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Economy," n.p.

9. This term comes from the work of Karl Marx and is distinct from monetary value since the way prices are set doesn't directly reflect how goods might be exchanged.

10. One of Marx's critiques of capitalism is that it inverts the proper relationship between money and commodities. Whereas one would like to think that commodities have value and money is just a convenient book-

keeping tool, Marx argues that capitalism encourages an M-C-M relationship in which money (investment capital) is used to produce commodities with the sole purpose of maximizing money (profits). Commodities become mere means for generating profits. While *Catan*'s economy does instrumentalize its resources in similar ways, it doesn't adopt the second half of the M-C-M relationship by being all about making money.

11. There is some form of currency in all my other eurogame exemplars, but *A Feast for Odin* is the only one to convert money into VP at a 1:1 rate. In all these games, it's better to invest money in other sources of Victory Points than to hoard it.

12. These latter two games were inspirations for eurogames as a whole and Teuber individually. Woods, *Eurogames*, 34–36. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 71 and 98.

13. Some eurogames take this further by specifying that resources aren't intended to be limited, so players can proxy more if they run out.

14. Flanagan and Jakobsson write "While unlimited resources may make for a nice fantasy world on the surface, the way that this model for game resources grew to be standard practice in modern board games like *Puerto Rico* (2002) is troubling, given how it evokes the ways that real-world colonial powers exploited colonial environments without any regard for the consequences" (147).

15. These scenarios are *Greater Catan* (where players are incentivized to settle outer islands because the central island spaces eventually stop producing), *Oil Springs* (where Oil consumption precipitates disasters that essentially blight other resource-producing hexes), and *Crop Trust* (where players are asked to bank seeds to secure future generations against crop shortages). The latter two of the scenarios are discussed further in the "Variants" chapter. The standalone *Catan* game *New Energies* doesn't focus on resource depletion, opting instead to have environmental hazards inhibit future resource production.

16. Here, I appropriate a generalized modern idea of alchemy as a convenient metaphor. This isn't a commentary on the views or practices of any historical alchemists.

17. The most notable exception is how the castle-defense eurogame *After the Empire* makes Stone Walls stronger than Wood walls.

18. The primary exception is eurogames like *San Juan* that treat cards as a resource for playing other cards. In such cases, what I spend isn't different in kind from what I get. Interestingly, these games rarely offer any coherent thematic explanation for these transactions.

19. Even though *Recipe Fulfillment* names a more specific mechanism as

an alternate name for Contract Fulfillment, resource costs in eurogames often require specific combinations of resources that function like recipes.

20. Ironically, the eurogame *Alchemists* is quite scientific in how it has players conduct experiments to deduce how ingredients combine. Its fantasy setting largely adds levity to a game that mechanically resonates with real-world science and academia.

21. According to Marx, labor not only can add value to things, but should be the primary factor in determining the value of a thing.

22. Again, this vision of labor connects with colonialism. As Flanagan and Jakobsson write, “Colonizers in games are framed as righteous workers who earn their place through hard work in a fictional meritocracy.” *Playing Oppression*, 17.

23. There is a much more nuanced discussion in Black Studies of how enslaved Black bodies become treated as fungible resources that shows how instrumentalizing labor has a racialized history that goes beyond simple capitalist exploitation. See Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* for an influential discussion of Black fungibility.

24. Treating humans as resources certainly includes extreme mistreatment and exploitation, but also includes a subtler mindset that runs throughout cultural capitalism. As Julie Wilson writes, “Undergirding this insistence on ignorant self-interest is the belief that humans are nothing more and nothing less than *human capital*. We are capital investments, financial instruments—always and everywhere economic actors, locked in competition with others for market resources and position. Indeed, neoliberal truth is animated by Social Darwinism. It’s all about survival of the fittest in the market.” *Neoliberalism*, 64, emphasis in original. In other words, cultural capitalism can encourage workers to think of *themselves* as resources to leverage toward upward mobility. This is also similar to Karl Marx’s notion of *alienation*.

25. Google.com Dictionary, “Pawn,” n.p.

26. The story of Alison Hansel’s coining of the term has circulated in a variety of boardgame circles, but is documented in a *Carcassonne* session report posted at boardgamegeek.com/thread/10053/session-report and elaborated at boardgamegeek.com/thread/1306102/article/18145161#18145161

27. While most eurogames don’t state it this clearly, many eurogames (including three of my exemplars) include wooden resources that share a similar aesthetic to worker meeples, making it easier to imagine labor as a human resource.

28. *Catan*, box.

29. A rough comparison could be drawn to the Hegelian concept of a *master-slave dialectic*, an elaborate metaphor where an individual seeks self-identity in mastery over others (which ultimately backfires because the master is then dependent on the slave in ways that trouble the independence that mastery was supposed to establish). Perhaps there's a similar paradox to boardgames, which offer power fantasies by making players dependent on the game elements they control.

30. Worker Placement games comprise roughly a quarter of the boardgamegeek.com Top 100 games (and a much higher percentage if one only counts eurogames) and was listed as the most popular mechanism in Paul Booth's survey of boardgamegeek.com users. *Board Games as Media*, 138.

31. An evolution of Worker Placement, the rondel system in *Maracaibo* allows me to select actions by moving my ship around a one-way loop of placement spots. Here, it's more ambiguous how my ship represents labor (the ship stands in for the crew), but the underlying manipulation is similar. However, *Maracaibo* also makes managing labor more explicit by allowing me to permanently place worker meeples on locations and subsequently perform unique actions by visiting those locations. Thematically, this makes my managerial oversight much more explicit and direct since my player character doesn't perform any of these actions but rather physically visits laborers to directly manage their labor.

32. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "Manipulate," n.p.

33. The notable exception is *Anno 1800*, where the player's primary objective is meeting the demands of their workforce.

34. The rulebook does specifically use the language of "returning" figures to the supply instead of "spending" them to dampen the implication that the figures are sacrificed in combat. However, this can feel euphemistic because the game doesn't provide any plausible alternative thematic explanation to counter the sacrificial implications of mechanically allowing players to boost their combat strength by "returning" their figures.

35. For cultural theorist Michel Foucault, empire consolidates *biopower* (akin to the concept of a human resource) by disciplining its population to become "docile bodies" receptive to acting in the interests of the dominant power. As one might expect, managing large numbers of actual people in this way is a complex social and ideological process. But boardgames need no special effort to produce docile bodies—docility is the default condition for laborers represented as inanimate game components. So, in many ways, the actuality of boardgames resonates with a state of perfect control that would be a utopian fantasy for empire.

36. In *Beyond Solitaire* episode 61, Jason Perez and Liz Davidson discuss the significance of the "boss fantasy" in eurogames.

37. Chloé Germaine explores how nature-themed games "might connect human players with other (both imagined and real) actors with whom we are interconnected and with whom we share the consequences of climate change" by drawing on boardgames' capacity to inspire "systemic thinking" and "perspectival shifts in scale." "'Nature' games in a time of climate crisis," 144, 151, and 160.

Chapter 6

1. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 40.

2. Flanagan and Jakobsson, 109.

3. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 259.

4. *CNN*, "Meet the Man Who Settled Catan," 2018, video, video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/meet-the-man-who-settled-catan

5. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 184.

6. Even in a polarized political climate where opposing parties seem unwilling to build bridges with each other, literally building bridges seems to be one of the few things people consistently agree on. In a *Gallup* article entitled "Infrastructure Action Should Be a No-Brainer," Frank Newport points out that infrastructure action tends to receive strong bipartisan support from both voters and politicians.

7. See Langdon Winner's "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" for a discussion of whether technologies can inherently incline toward different social formations.

8. Knizia, Reiner (@ReinerKnizia), "Remember: When playing a game, the goal is to win, but it is the goal that is important, not the winning . . . ," X, Nov. 5, 2011, twitter.com/ReinerKnizia/status/132697097714675713

9. The fact that play can be its own reward means that play does differ from the often-derided yet disturbingly effective process known as *gamification*, the designing of game-like reward systems to motivate non-play behavior. But it's not for nothing that gamification is named for games. Eurogames are carefully calibrated to engross players in optimizing Victory Points, which makes it easy for the extrinsic motivation of scoring points to overwhelm playfulness.

10. *Maracaibo*, Rulebook, 1.

11. As Hixson argues, settler colonialism "rationalized warfare and glossed over extreme violence by emphasizing the ultimate justification of the cause," such that colonialism was construed as "performing good

works" *American Settler Colonialism*, 199. Due to the unseriousness of play, boardgames need not go nearly this far, which is why clearly colonial eurogames like *Mombasa* and *Maracaibo* can disclaim the evils of colonialism in their rulebooks (see Introduction).

12. *Concordia*, Almanac.
13. *Maracaibo*, Rulebook, 1.
14. *CNN*, "Meet the Man Who Settled Catan."
15. *Catan*, box.
16. *Lisboa*, Rulebook, 8.
17. *Lisboa*, Rulebook, 3.
18. This is the central question of my article "Capitalism and Unfairness in *Catan: Oil Springs*."
19. This doesn't mean that they have twice the probability of generating resources because different hexes can have different probabilities. So, there are possible scenarios where the 8-point player has worse resource generation, but in practice this would be quite rare.
20. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 127.
21. Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, 2.
22. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 2.
23. Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, 2–3.

Chapter 7

1. *Wired*, "Monopoly Killer," n.p.
2. There's no such thing as a merely cosmetic change in a visual medium like boardgames, which use fragmentary glimpses to cue player imagination of the gameworld. So, it mattered when Catan changed its cover art, when it removed "The Settlers of" from its former title, and when some editions replaced its wooden components with plastic ones. Again, these subtle changes are meaningful because they reframe how players imagine and experience gameworlds and their ideological resonances.
3. *Catan*, box.
4. The entire *Catan Histories* series complicates the ahistorical feel of the original. In fact, Teuber describes how these variants were built upon the historical archetypes already implicit in the original: "Catan's terrain tiles forced me to reproduce with them the geography of countries or areas in our world. The archetypal game principle of harvest, trade, build as the engine that drove all cultures in human history and brought them to bloom presented itself to me as a great way to bring history to life in a game." *My Journey to Catan*, 267.

5. Rulebook, *Catan Histories: Settlers of America*, 10.

6. Rulebook, *Catan Histories: Settlers of America*, 13.

7. Teuber, *My Journey to Catan*, 260–61.

8. In addition to escaping historical entanglements, this science-fictional setting taps into a longstanding tradition of optimistic science fiction stories like *Star Trek* that often present alien encounters as opportunities for exploration and discovery.

9. Paul Booth traces colonization resonances across four Mars-themed games in *Board Games as Media*.

10. *Skymines*, Rulebook, 2.

11. Mirek Stolee critiqued these resemblances in a Generation Analog 2022 presentation that noted how the *Skymines* map continues to resemble Africa.

12. Lee, "Capitalism and Unfairness in *Catan: Oil Springs*."

13. Jason Perez makes this argument in the YouTube video that was later made private "Checking Slavery and Colonialism in Board Games."

14. Paul Booth found the middle-class, middle-aged white male demographic disproportionately represented in his survey of the boardgamegeek.com online community. *Board Games as Media*, 125. See also Tanya Pobuda's "Assessing Gender and Racial Representation in the Board Game Industry" for a more comprehensive statistical breakdown.

15. See Aaron Trammell's *The Privilege of Play* for an account of how modern hobby game culture emerged from a racialized history of geek culture (for a related discussion of speculative fiction fan cultures, see andré m. carrington's *Speculative Blackness*).

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