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Catanarchy Critical Introduction

“Games teach about systems in ways that no other medium can.” - Will Wright

1. The Name of the Game

CAT[Ⓐ]NARCHY™

“Collaborate, Reallocate, and Topple the State!” | “Work as a Collective or Struggle Alone”

Catanarchy takes the incredibly successful and effective game mechanics of the original Settlers of Catan, and reconfigures them in a manner that promotes players to engage in horizontal cooperation and mutual aid (rather than the imperialist land-acquisition that the original game centers). This allows Catanarchy to implement all of the elements of world-building and collective engagement with the environment that the original Catan employs, and shift the suggested worldview towards one that seeks to use these towards uplifting the many, rather than few. Centered around the birth of an antagonistic, centralized state on the island, players must combat the planned expansion of the empire. Thus, the collection of communities, acting as separate communities with a collective spirit, must fight to confine the spreading roots of empire, keep each other afloat, and maintain the wellbeing of the Island of Catan.

Although there is a clear goal of outlasting and outmatching the state, the processes through which the collective organizes themselves and their mutual support may be different every time, based on available resources, numbers of players, and attitudes of players. This allows Catanarchy to serve as an introduction into the tenets of anarchist organizing and mutual aid, while also understanding the subjective, situated, and community-specific nature of mutual aid.

2. The Aim of the Game

a. Learning potential:

The purpose of Catanarchy is to use resource-based collaboration under conflict to teach the tenets of anarchist organizing and mutual aid and their role under a state that works contrary to one and one’s community’s wellbeing.

b. Theoretical influences:

The nature of games and board games both as isolated worlds, and as cultural education in how we engage with worlds gives game creators a responsibility to encourage outlooks that promote care and support. As a proponent of mutual aid, an anarchist, an abolitionist, an anti-colonialist, *and* as someone who deeply appreciated the mechanics of *Settlers of Catan*, I wanted to bring this view of responsible game creation to a board game that I believe fails to meet these criteria. In particular, this stemmed from my introducing the game to my family, around the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, when mutual aid organizations were suddenly becoming central to the survival of Americans. I first engaged with this idea as a way to introduce them to the tenets of mutual aid and anarchist organizing.

Games allow for removed engagement and play with systems while protecting against any harmful consequences of affecting them in real life. This provides players with opportunities to learn and engage with systems without risk. In Kurt Squire's *Video Games and Learning* he explores the manner in which, to quote Will Wright, "Games teach about systems in ways that no other medium can." Squire uses games like *Sid Meier's Pirates!* And *SimCity* to demonstrate how, "games already operate as a medium for learning whether or not we design educational games," with these games educating players about historical nautical systems or contemporary urban ones, respectively (Squire, 4). It is in this sense that the original *Settlers of Catan* teaches settler-colonialism, and why I believe *Catanarchy* can serve to educate players on systems based around solidarity and mutual aid. Indeed, Squire believe that in playing games, yes "players learn the basic facts of their games... but, more important, they learn the emergent properties of the game as a system," (Squire, 15).

Games therefore inherently teach us how to engage with these systems through their preconceived rules, notions, and worldviews. Particularly when it comes to elements of narrative and framing, board games' role with respect to the cultures they were birthed by is one that must not be understated. This, again, is why I see *Catan* as not just educating on, but inherently promoting and reproducing these settler-colonial logics. Paul Booth's *Board Games and Media* begins with an exploration of an SNL board game parody, looking into how "*board games have important things to communicate about our culture (sic)*" (Booth, 2). Booth cites Alex Andriess comparing board games to religion and music, in how they both "have existed since before history began, and... they are creations in which we cannot help but reveal our desires,

prejudices, and fears” (Booth, 14). Board games don’t just instruct in terms of how systems operate, but they teach the lens through which to view the system as well. In this sense, *Catanarchy*, as opposed to *Catan*, seeks to promote systems of mutual support as natural reactions to an outside threat, rather than encouraging settler-colonial thinking for personal gain.

However, to make *Catanarchy* function for play and not just education, I sought to not just adjust the preexisting mechanics of *Catan* but to manipulate and build upon them. This was, in part, as I felt a deep attachment to the concept of storytelling and narrative, particularly when dealing with concepts such as solidarity, and is a large part of the reason that I included the optional RPG mechanics, although players are more than able to supply their own narrative to a board game such as *Catanarchy*. Marco Arnaudo’s *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game* offers a variety of descriptors that I took into consideration in attempting to build narrative into my game. Although I felt my game mapped on quite well to the majority of his qualifiers for storytelling board games, two key ones stood out to me; Arnaudo suggests “The players control individual characters (the traditional focus of storytelling) rather than groups or abstract entities” and that “The players’ characters are unique, and differ from one another in some significant way.” Although I most certainly don’t disagree with the latter, the former I take issue with as conforming to the traditional Western individualistic lens on storytelling. However, particularly in the manner that I do think we are all unique, as individuals, as communities, I hoped to bring in specific and unique niches into my game, as players found their specific role within the island ecosystem. This resulted in my added Environmental Niches for either version and the greater Social Niches for the RPG format.

Ultimately, I believe that *Catanarchy* can be an incredible introduction to the tenets of anarchist organizing and mutual aid, whether in the context of new members joining an organization, to prepare for a teach-in, or in more personal situations.

3. The Ways of the Game

a. Game Goal:

Build an expansive network of mutually supportive communities that can outlast and outmatch the state’s presence on the Island of Catan.

b. Core Dynamics:

Collecting – the aim of the game is to construct systems of abundance with resources, however, the collection of development cards, especially VPs and Knights, is also key. **Construct** or build a network of settlements/cities, either to expand your relationship with the land or to stop the state short. **Collaboration** – particularly in the construction elements, as while individuals have autonomy over their own settlements, they must work together and balance the needs of their allies with personal goals; even if this doesn't mean literally weaving ur civilizations together, it does mean constructing systems and structures of mutual support. **Competition** (against the state or antagonistic players/npcs). Ultimately, the construction of an expansive network of mutually supportive communities (calculated, unfortunately, through territory acquisition) that can outlast and outmatch the state is the goal.

c. Game Mechanics:

Board Mechanics:

Each turn, the player rolls the die, and whatever number is rolled correlates to what resources and yielded for that turn. Any player with settlements (1:1) or cities (2:1 ratio of resources) on resources with said number may draw.

You can build roads or settlements (1pt), or replace a settlement with a city (2pts), or draw a development card with specific combinations of resources.

Road: lumber and Brick; Settlement: lumber, brick, wool, and wheat; City: two wheat, three stone; Development card: one wool, stone, and wheat.

Roads may only be built off of a player's *personal* settlements or roads, or, with *consent* from other relevant players, may expand upon a collective road that they are already connected to. Similarly, settlements may only be built on a road that you are connected to, and must be two intersections away from each other (or a city).

These two elements help encourage (without requiring or demanding) collaborative construction.

When a 7 is rolled, any player with 7+ resources (that is called out) loses half (rounded down) of their resources.

If 7 is rolled by the state, they may select one resource tile, flip over said number, taking one of said resource per unit on the tile every time said number is rolled (*Privatization*)

Players who have a tile flipped may take a second role, unrelated to resources, and if they roll a 7 they may choose a tile adjacent to them to return to the hands of the players (*Collectivization*)

This interaction can also occur by playing the “Knight” development card on your turn. If played by the state it is a conquest, if by a player a rebellion. Rebellions can affect any resource tile regardless of location.

If a player has more knights (3+) than the State they may not be conquered, and vice versa cannot be revolted against.

RPG Mechanics:

If you play the RPG version of Catanarchy, there will be five additional non-player communities at five of the nine ports with randomized personalities and loyalties.

If you decide to play the tabletop role-playing version, turn structure is altered slightly allowing each player to execute:

Trading of resources based on mobility

Defensive moves, one per turn unless otherwise specified

Building of infrastructure based on production

Social interaction

Each player is allowed to make one defensive move, and one trade OR social interaction ea/turn.

Each community will have their own social (isolationist, mercantile, nomadic, social, pantheistic) and environmental (mining, agricultural, maritime, pasture) niches which effect statistics and traits, and production specializations, respectively.

Statistics are as follows:

Defense, Mobility, Production, Intercommunal Status, Social Awareness

They affect situations of warfare, trade and movement, building, social interaction, and reading social interactions, respectively.

Each player may choose their social niches as they so please, and may divvy up 10 points across the five statistics, with each point adding +1 do a relevant dice role.

d. Game Elements:

Aesthetics (tabletop RPG / preexisting Catan board). Chance (dice). Competition, conflict, cooperation. Resources. Story/theme.