1

Enter the Magic Circle

On a stale Florida day at the end of March, my family languished in a hospital waiting room, staring intensely at nothing in particular. We'd waited in the haze of the hospital's lobby for several hours before being led up to the dimly lit waiting room. Eventually, we would be taken to my grandfather's bed. He was in the late stages of pancreatic cancer, and we had come to say good-bye.

The waiting room was a grim, foreboding space, covered in old magazines and dull, browned tile. The television sandwiched into a corner of the ceiling was set to a *Vanderpump Rules* marathon, airing all of the drama leading up to a reality TV wedding. We could have chatted about nothing to fill the time, but a pair of women were rooted in chairs, silently perusing their copies of *People*; as painful as our situation was, we didn't want to disturb other people in a similarly fragile state. And besides, there's not much you can say, sitting around waiting for death. So my brother, sister, and I did the only thing we could think of: we took a big, red cardboard box out of a tote bag, sidled up to the table at the center of the waiting room, and started setting up a game of *Catan*.

The three of us had been playing the game originally known as *Settlers of Catan* obsessively for over a year by this point, so we had all of the steps down cold, like a pit crew mechanically getting their car ready for a race. We fit together the skeleton of the board—six pieces of coast that create the outline of the island of Catan, filled in by hexagons representing the island's various resources. We knew the cost of building roads, settlements, and cities—the elements of your civilization. We knew the uses and abuses of each of the game's development cards. We even knew the particular circumstances under which it makes sense to trade resources: when one of us wanted to swap a lumber card for an ore, we would simply point or gesture without needing to speak. Save for the intermittent rolling of dice and the incidental wooden plunk of a road or settlement, there was no sound.

No games are *good* for waiting to say your final good-bye to a dying relative, but all things considered, *Catan* isn't a bad one. You can play without talking, if you need to—in theory, a game could play out entirely in silence, letting the dice and each player's

individual choices guide the outcome. This also means *Catan* isn't overly competitive, unless you want it to be. The players can largely ignore each other if they so choose, instead focusing on their own strategies, whether that's building up cities and settlements or pursuing the floating Longest Road and Largest Army cards. More than anything, the *Catan* system is accommodating, which might partially explain why it's one of the most popular board games in the world, with more than eighteen million copies sold since its publication in 1995.

Catan's flexibility is part of why it's a sort of ambassador for Eurogames, a popular genre of board game built on the principle that, broadly speaking, games should be more about creating a shared experience of *play* than about the singular pursuit of victory that characterizes the classics of the American dining room table. Players in Eurogames are rarely eliminated before the end of a game the way they are in *Monopoly*; there's more strategy required to win than in the functionally random *Candyland*; and players are encouraged to focus more on trading and accumulating resources rather than crushing their opponents as in *Battleship* or *Stratego*.

Well-designed Eurogames, and *Catan* in particular, are perfect cushions for your time: complex enough that they can command the bulk of your attention, preventing you from thinking about other, less pleasant things, but not so complicated that they cause a mental short circuit. They're bearable in painful situations—this particular game of *Catan* functioned much the same way the *People* magazines did for the other women in the waiting room.

This quality also means that these games are very fun to play while drunk: my first game of *Catan* was with a few members of my college fraternity, who insisted that I would, in fact, have a good time trying to build across this abstracted, fictional island. It helped that I was not exactly sober at the time.

In getting me to hunch over the board, laid out on a dirty glass table in front of a busted pleather couch, my friends were overcoming considerable internal resistance. My first encounter with *Catan* was about two years earlier, when a pair of high school students thinking of applying to my college decided to play *Catan* on their overnight visit to campus. For some reason, they had chosen to play this weird-sounding game instead of joining me at a party in another fraternity's basement where everyone had to pay for drinks and put in a concerted effort to rip their shoes off the permanently sticky basement floor while weaving through an equally permanent haze of cigarette smoke. As an eighteen-year-old prospective philosophy major who had already planned out a senior thesis about the intersection of neo-Kantian and neo-Aristotel-

ian ethics, it seems safe to say I was on pretty solid footing when I mocked the two teens for being nerds.

They were right to blow off the party. I don't remember much of that night in the basement, but, faded as I was, I still remember my first game of *Catan*. Or, at least, I remember how it made me feel: my initial confusion, followed by the slow sensation of starting to understand how to speak a new language, followed by the sort of pleasant frustration that comes with getting your ass kicked in an exciting new game, followed by a commitment to playing again and again until I won. When I learned about the Longest Road, a mechanic in which the player with the longest contiguous set of roads nets two victory points, I seized on it as somehow crucial to success and feverishly spent my first six or seven games trying to acquire it, to the detriment of literally every other part of the game. (It took me a while to realize an important fact that might be useful for new players: Longest Road is a tactic for fools. It can easily be disrupted or stolen by someone else, while the resource production of cities can be reinvested in development cards while making it easier to do everything else. Trust me.)

I lost that first game very badly but discovered that a fire had been lit somewhere in the lower-left part of my skull, and not just by the frat house's accordion gravity bong. I simply could not stop playing *Catan*, I told myself, at least not until I'd won a game. I stumbled around in the dark both literally and figuratively for several games, slowly trying to grasp how the rules fit together. Eventually everything started to snap into place—in a flash, the small wooden buildings that initially seemed like chunky versions of *Monopoly* houses and hotels became settlements and cities, habitation that I had carved out from the raw materials of the island and that I could then use to produce sheep, wheat, ore, lumber, and brick, which I needed to build even more settlements and cities and, after some time, to win the game. When I moved the robber piece, I wasn't just taking a card from one of the other players; I was cutting off an entire area of the island, where their villagers would otherwise be hard at work. My goal of ten, abstracted victory points was a clear horizon, but charting a straightforward course there was anything but easy. After a few weeks of failed attempts, I finally won a game. (To the best of my recollection, by *not* pursuing Longest Road.) I was hooked.

In the seemingly endless stretch of *Catan* games I played over the next two years, I would insist on everything being just right: a dim room, lit by a lantern my roommates had bought online (also while drunk); music that wasn't necessarily Howard

Shore's score for the *Lord of the Rings* movies but that wasn't *not* Howard Shore's score for the *Lord of the Rings* movies; a shaky, single-game story that expanded to contain all of the quirks of resource distribution and building. (Did you build a settlement in the middle of my road, cutting off my path to build more? Think of the children!) One of the people in the fraternity moved out of the house, leaving behind a copy of the official *Settlers of Catan* novel, which he was then too embarrassed to claim. I promptly stole it and made a habit of reading a paragraph out loud in the middle of every game of *Catan* I played without knowing anything else about the plot or setting. The book, which I gathered was about a bunch of characters with names like "Candamir" and "Osmond" complaining about traveling up and down a mountain while dramatically expressing that they were also wary of witches, felt like the apotheosis of using the game to tell a story, albeit a bit too seriously.

Playing *Catan* in a darkened room under perfectly replicated conditions is a very silly habit, but it's representative of a huge piece of what draws us into board games: the story. Not the story of the game itself, necessarily—*Catan* isn't *Dungeons & Dragons*, and no one goes into a play session hoping to fall under the spell of an engrossing narrative. But you *do* participate in *making* the story every time you sit down to play the game, even if it's just the events of that individual session. Each time you prepare a game of *Monopoly*, you and everyone else in the room are consciously deciding to enter into an abstracted real estate market, where only one person will emerge victorious with all of the money. Constantly negotiating what is actually happening within the game is just one part of allowing the rules of the game to fully enmesh you; even at the same time that you put a red block on a *Catan* board, you're *also* building a settlement. It's an engrossing experience, alluding to what the pioneering cultural historian Johan Huizinga referred to as the "magic circle," a concept has been taken up by games designers and scholars for years and used to delineate the distinction between a game and the rest of one's life.

<center>***</center>

As products, board games are thriving. The amount of money Americans, in particular, spend on board games has skyrocketed in recent years, and global board game sales have started to approach $10 billion. But that doesn't mean board games are always taken seriously. No one bats an eye at books aimed at mass audiences analyzing film, television, and, increasingly, video games, but it feels absurd to imagine a newspaper hiring an in-house board game or tabletop game critic to think about the

ongoing evolution of the medium. What is there to learn from the bad luck of landing in *Monopoly* jail or the zing of tweezers touching metal in *Operation* anyway? It's only so much cardboard and plastic. There's quite a lot to learn, as it turns out: board games have been used as teaching tools since their inception.

Chess, along with many other popular games, was originally a war simulation, used both as a way to spend an afternoon and as a tool for developing strategies on the battlefield. The game now commonly called *Chutes and Ladders* began its life in India over two thousand years ago as a sort of illustration of karma, with each snake and ladder representing a vice or virtue. The original *Checkered Game of Life*, the game published in 1860 by Milton Bradley that eventually became the household staple *Life*, used a similar approach to modeling right conduct, asking players to aim to land on values like perseverance and industry while avoiding the pitfalls of idleness and gambling. It was one of many successful games from the Victorian era, when publishers could begin to mass-produce their offerings—the beginning of board games as we know them today.

Most early board games were simple race games: boards where players rolled the dice and moved along a prescribed track, following orders on any given space, until they reached the end. (Many popular board games today have yet to go beyond this mechanic, or rule structure.) Passing through these scenes while subject to the whims of fate was, in theory, enough to mold young minds to any end game designers had in mind, whether civic virtue, workplace efficiency, or education about exciting new technologies. Or, at least, the world's board game manufacturers managed to convince large numbers of parents this was the case.

McLoughlin Brothers, for years one of America's biggest board game manufacturers, promised that its 1895 *Game of Mail, Express, or Accommodation* would "impart to the players a considerable amount of geographical and statistical information, and convey a vivid idea of the variety and extent of our country's productions." Manufacturer J. W. Spear & Sons' early 1900s game *International Mail: An Instructive Game* proclaimed, "the usefulness of such a game as this is obvious." McLoughlin Brothers described its *North Pole* (1897) game as the children's equivalent of a "cinematograph lecture," delivered by a real Arctic explorer. Play required moving between spaces depicting episodes of ice fishing, setting up camp, and dog sledding. How else were North American youth to learn about conditions in the tundra?

Of course, this wasn't all that early board games taught children. The cover of another McLoughlin Brothers game published around the turn of the century, *The Funny*

Game of Hit or Miss, depicts a caricatured black boy with curled hair pulling away in surprise as he is whacked in the face with a ball. In the game, players spun a teetotum (a sort of top that replaced dice for gambling-averse parents) and moved across the red-and-black checkered board to see if they would "hit" or "miss." "To hit," the rules told players, "is to stop on a Negro head."

To play a board game about a given subject is to be told that it's worth spending a lot of time thinking about the topic, even if it's something as silly as anthropomorphic gumdrops. (I still remember the names of every character in *Candyland*.) For something to be the subject of a game, it must be a subject of *play*, something that can (and, at least in the eyes of the designer, should) be treated with a light touch—whether that's the candy machinations of Lord Licorice, owning *Monopoly*'s Boardwalk, or repeatedly smacking a black child in the head. Board games help define what we consider broadly acceptable, both for children who have them in the house and for hobbyist adults.

Certainly, that's been the case for most of my life. As a child in the 1990s, I played a healthy amount of family board games: *Life*, *Stratego*, the occasional game of *Scrabble*. Mostly, I used them as platforms to fantasize and daydream about other things—especially *Road to the White House*, a 1992 game that modeled the process for running a presidential campaign and included way too much paper money in the box, which I would stare at while imagining what it might be like to work in politics as an adult. I spent a lot of time looking at *Road to the White House* but very little time actually playing it. (As best I can recall, even as an eight-year-old, I had a lot of difficulty convincing my friends to play complicated board games.) Eventually, I developed cooler interests, like fantasy novels and anime, and left board games by the wayside for most of my adolescence. But once *Catan* got its hooks in me, I was a goner: by the time I graduated from college in 2014, I had returned to board games with a vengeance. I include this brief history not because I think it's especially important that I used to play *Stratego* but because the way I've been shaped by games reflects, in part, the way other people are shaped by games—and the reasons games are worth considering and reading in the first place.

***

A year into my *Catan* phase, large portions of my life were built around the game. I used games as an excuse to suggest plans (hey, maybe we should go on a road trip to Milwaukee?), as a setting to talk through problems in a social circle (two friends in

a social group who were dating had broken up, and we needed to figure out how to make things less awkward for everyone), and even as a way of feeling out potential romantic prospects (I'm ashamed to admit this worked several times). Just before my twenty-first birthday, my then-girlfriend lured me to a surprise party with the prospect of playing *Catan*. Greeted by most of my friends, a beautiful afternoon, and a healthy selection of drinks, I deadpanned, "Does this mean we're not settling?"

Once I graduated from college, I moved from Chicago to New York, where, needing to start over with a new set of friends, I spent months futilely trying to lay the groundwork for a regular *Catan* league, complete with matching monogrammed bowling shirts. This would, in theory, be a regularly structured, regimented way of interacting with other people and forming long-term social bonds (read: avoiding loneliness in a newish city). It didn't work, but I *did* cement a few friendships by playing one-off games. *Catan*'s game pieces became a cardboard foundation for my relationships, and I was not alone.

As it is for many enthusiasts, *Catan* was my on-ramp for modern hobby board games—the sort that most people tend to think of as overly complex, confusing, and in the province of nerds. (Many hobby games are Eurogames, but not all. "Hobby games" refers to games played primarily by adults who devote their time to gaming as a hobby, rather than any particular genre or rule set. Hobby games are, in turn, just one segment of tabletop games: all games that one traditionally plays on a table with physical components, whether that involves a board, cards, or other items.) As a relatively easy-to-play game that still *sounds* ridiculously complicated, *Catan* has often served as a stand-in for the larger popularity of those games. In a 2013 episode of *Parks & Recreation*, Adam Scott's nerdy character, Ben Wyatt, insists on playing *Catan* at his bachelor party. (Mayfair, the company that publishes *Catan*, built a board for *The Cones of Dunshire*, the intentionally convoluted and obtuse game Ben creates in a later episode.) A crowdfunded short film called *Lord of Catan* depicts the breakdown of a couple's marriage, played by nerd-favorite actors Fran Kranz and Amy Acker. *Catan* has appeared multiple times on *The Big Bang Theory*.

Catan is so popular that it's even spilled over into areas of culture where you wouldn't expect to find board games. In 2012, the Green Bay Packers football team, led by its offensive line, became deadly serious about *Catan*. After players started to talk about the team's love of *Catan* on sports radio, football fans in Wisconsin flooded hobby stores demanding copies of the game. Eventually, the *Wall Street Journal* published a profile about the team's *Catan* habit—games were so competitive that when a

player left the room to finish grilling dinner for the other players, he refused to accept the eventual result of the game. (He did not win.)

As a piece of culture, *Catan* is essentially a crossover hit, finding purchase with audiences possessing different levels of board game experience and expertise like a massively popular space-opera film or highly specific house song that finds mainstream success. Its flexibility and complexity separate *Catan* from most American family games, which tend to take the form of chance-based races, miniature tactical simulations, and trivia contests. In this case, *Catan*'s crossover potential operates within any given game session. When you sit down to play, you might bridge the gap between different gaming communities and possibly even between dissimilar members of your family, actively inviting the two or three other players to join you in the magic circle.

Though the concept had been floating around for some time, designers Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen took up the "magic circle" in their 2003 book *Rules of Play*, where it is broadly used to delineate between a game and the rest of life. But after years of debate, Zimmerman had to clarify his meaning and take the concept of the magic circle down a peg in a 2012 online essay about a fictional "magic circle jerk." (Apparently a person enamored with the structural implications of the magic circle and not a euphemism for an academic conference.) Here, Zimmerman condenses the useful part of what to understand about the magic circle as a lens for thinking about games: "when a game is being played, new meanings are generated." The magic circle is the boundary within which everyone's behavior becomes, if not governed by the rules of whatever game everyone has agreed to play, then at least influenced by it—within the magic circle, you aren't just your *D&D* character or Colonel Mustard, you're also trying to think the way the game wants you to think, to act the way the game wants you to act.

But of course, there isn't a one-to-one correlation between game rules and how they influence players. Unlike a video game that frequently has a set way for you to play through it and lives as code, board games require other people, and they only exist when you choose to play them. Games take on different characters in different contexts, with the same set of rules conforming themselves to a smoky party or a family dining room. This power that a board game has—the way it invites you to interact with it, to become what it wants you to become—is the central thing I'm interested in when I play games and when I think about them. It's the main thing I want to explore here. And, obviously, it's why my family loves *Catan*.

***

In January 2016, after much prompting on my end, my brother, sister, and I played our first game of *Catan* together. My initial *Catan* obsession had cooled a bit, but I really wanted to find a game to play with them. The three of us had just become adult siblings—one day we struggled to find things to talk about, the next our relationships became comfortable and close in a way that has barely changed since. (I'm technically an adult man, but I spend a lot of time hiding with my sister in her room talking about *Charmed* when we're supposed to be downstairs mingling at family events.) More accessible than most of the other games I was into at the time, *Catan* was a natural choice; it helped that, as a seasoned veteran, I steamrolled everyone in our first game. Or, at least, that's my recollection. My sister claims she actually won our first game— but whom are you going to believe?

We became obsessed with *Catan*, playing it any time all three of us were in the same place. At first, our parents were excited that the three of us were spending so much time together, but as our dedication to fitting in more and more games grew (our record is five in a day, fifteen in a weekend), our mother began to greet the sight of the board with an exasperated sigh. And it didn't help that my sister was in high school and ostensibly should have been doing her homework or something. It didn't matter. As our competition intensified, there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. All three of us independently downloaded the *Catan* mobile app and played obsessively against the game's AI (with the same vaguely Germanic names as the characters from the novel), trying to hone our skills to the point where we'd be primed and ready to strike at a moment's notice. We've refused to leave the kitchen for the better part of a day. We've sneaked away on family vacations, ignoring scheduled activities in order to play with a little plastic travel set. We now have a running spreadsheet tracking who has won each game and with what number of victory points—and though we have yet to produce any significant findings from these games, the important thing is having all of the data, just in case.

I won most of our earlier, prespreadsheet games. Now my brother, who is much more tactically minded than I am, takes home most of the victories. Still, part of the reason we keep playing is that anybody could win any given game. *Catan* can be complex enough to encourage quantitative gamers—for example, my brother, who studied economics in college and is by far the most consistent competitor in our family. But it can be calm enough to encourage healthy table talk and to allow players to come from behind and win suddenly—for example, my sister, who frequently wins

games after seeming to be far behind the rest of us. And it can allow you to be socially devious, to win by getting under the skin of other players—for example, me. If you ask my brother and sister, they'll say I often complain about being targeted in a game and incessantly try to convince them that I'm losing, only to sneak ahead and win the game in the last stretch. I have no idea how I got this reputation.

Catan's success is partly about the mechanics, but it's also about the story and setting: the narrative you're creating every time you sit down to play. What is *Catan* actually about? What story were my brother, sister, and I telling five times in one day, besides the story that, as my sister likes to remind us, "Sammy is the best at everything"? Three or four fledgling empires expand across the pristine, newfound island of Catan, competing to establish themselves as the first to claim dominance. That description doesn't do justice to why *Catan* is compelling, but I think that's part of the point: a game becomes compelling because the *players* make it that way. In this case, the skeleton of the *Catan* rules is just strong enough for any given game to hold whatever the players hang onto it.

The power of that narrative comes from the players, but it also comes from *Catan*'s creator, the German game designer Klaus Teuber. A former dental technician, Teuber had originally planned a series of several games exploring early colonization on a grand time line before scrapping the expansive, sprawling project and condensing everything down into *Catan*'s smooth, streamlined engine. Teuber's lifelong love of Viking civilization influenced not just the initial incarnation of *Catan* but also the entire conglomerate that *Catan* has evolved into—the merchandise, the tournaments, and even the book. (Rebecca Gable, the writer of the *Catan* novel, is a historical novelist by trade.)

In practice, the most visible vestige of *Catan*'s origins—and the one that players are most likely to interact with and be influenced by—is the robber, the only native of Catan to appear in the game and the only actual character not under the control of the players. When someone rolls a seven or plays a knight card, they get to move the robber (which blocks off a new space on the board) and take a resource card from another player. Originally a piece of black wood, the piece was eventually changed into a nondescript gray blob, more of a placeholder for the robber of your imagination than anything else.

In Teuber's telling, as laid out in a blog post on the official *Catan* website, that blob is actually three separate people: a group of hapless bandits who are forced to move between the different hexagons by the players in an existentially agonizing, unending

series of involuntary migrations. This is the story *Catan* tells itself and one that, apparently, is supposed to be funny. It's a story that, unsurprisingly, has a lot in common with the story of colonization—people in power telling themselves that their actions don't have *real* consequences, because everything they're doing is a sort of game affecting people who aren't really people, only pawns. What other way is there to win?

At 2014's GenCon, North America's largest tabletop-gaming convention, the game designer Bruno Faidutti gave a largely improvised, tongue-in-cheek lecture titled "Postcolonial Catan," holding a funhouse mirror up to the game's narrative. Taking this apparently frivolous idea—that *Catan*'s abstracted island plays out the narrative of colonialism—Faidutti drew on his own history in the industry, a healthy sense of humor, and Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism*, which analyzes the history of Western depictions of colonized peoples, to diagnose a chronic condition in board game design, perhaps produced by an emphasis on the mechanics and rules needed to balance the way players act on a game, rather than the ways the game acts on the players. In the lecture (later transformed into a mildly inflammatory online essay), Faidutti asks gamers to consider another thing that is, ostensibly, happening on the board: the natives of Catan are being steamrolled.

Catan is participating in a common gaming narrative. The "age of exploration" readily lends itself to common ways of thinking about games, positing the player as general or king of an army of forces totally at their control—an approach brought over from classic war-gaming, a genre in which the point of the game isn't to have fun or engage in play as much as it is to accurately reproduce the conditions of a historical battle. (The most complex war games frequently attempt to capture details ranging from the altitude of specific terrain to the foods soldiers ate to the make and model of their guns.) But this goes beyond the European colonization period—other games use the iconography of ancient Egypt, Edo-era Japan, and even Hawaiian civilization to add "color" (both literally and figuratively) to a game, even when it has nothing to do with what the game is actually about. In other words, you could create a few abstract game rules, spin a wheel of lazy settings, and start selling your product.

As I've become more interested in games and learned more about their history, I've gotten the sense that debates within the community tend to take on the same character over and over again. Many longtime gamers get into the hobby because they respond to the system of a game—the way the rules structure your interactions with other people, the way they encourage you to marvel at the feat of mathematical construction, and, often, the way they replicate previously existing things like a battle or

a particular sort of market. On the other hand, newer players and those less embedded in the hobby frequently respond to novelty, largely in the form of narrative—and, accordingly, everything from the introduction of *Magic: The Gathering* to *Dungeons & Dragons* has caused loud debates among game designers and enthusiasts.

For years, these debates caused tension within gaming, only for the upstart to rapidly become assimilated into the establishment. An essay by the designer Rick Loomis, published in a 2000 anthology titled *Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, tracked several cycles' worth of conflict in an attempt to identify the phenomenon; apparently early arguments were so intense that war-gamers used to derisively refer to board gamers as "cardboard pushers" who were "debasing the hobby." The same thing played out again with the introduction of fantasy role-playing, prompting many board gamers to show up at conventions wearing shirts with slogans attacking *Dungeons & Dragons*. Eventually, *everybody* teamed up on the newfound success of *Magic*, which had the gall to be a *card* game.

I bring this up mostly to set up the day when, half asleep and trying to fit my mouth around an entire mug of coffee, I listened to Faidutti discussing "postcolonial *Catan*" in conversation with one of the hosts of the popular board game podcast *Ludology*. Though the host made an effort to engage with what Faidutti was saying, I almost spit out my coffee in shock that he had never really even considered the idea that colonialism—or, less academically, centuries of human suffering—was an ever-present part of the foundations of the games he designed and played and that he had never really considered the possibility that it might be a good idea to try to interrogate why that was and how it could be fixed. You can't really blame gamers for, as the host put it, "not wanting to think about subjugating people to score points." But then again, neither did the people doing the initial subjugation. Some gamers do not have the opportunity to ignore what the host referred to as "the native issue."

***

What would it look like to tell a healthier story, to understand how fundamental these tropes are to board games and push back against them? In 2017, Greater Than Games published the designer R. Eric Reuss's *Spirit Island*, an attempt at a colonial revenge fantasy in which players take on the roles of the nature spirits on a mostly pristine island. Invaders—colonial powers, pointedly represented by white plastic conquistador figurines—have attempted to take over the island, stripping the land for resources and blighting it in the process, unsettling the natural harmony. You, the

spirits, have to wipe them out while working together with the native humans to protect the island from further damage.

In creating *Spirit Island*, Reuss was responding to and attempting to "reverse" the trend of strategy games that uncritically posit players as colonizing forces leading European fleets. In one section of the rule book, Reuss writes, "I wonder how ticked off the locals are about this new colony of foreigners. Well, we'll never know because this game has *entirely abstracted away* the people who already lived there. *That's* rude." Putting aside the effect of referring to colonization as "rude," it's a noble impulse and one that wound up being highly rewarding in game form.

While Reuss cites several other Eurogames as partial inspirations for *Spirit Island*, it's impossible not to look at the board—a seemingly untouched island divided into several types of territories, bordered by ocean—the cities and towns that make up the invaders' homes, and the box's description of the game as a "settler destruction strategy game" and not see it as, at least in part, responding to *Catan*. Depending on how you pronounce it, "Dahan," the name for the native people of the island, sounds awfully like "Catan." Reuss claims this was a coincidence, but that doesn't really matter. It's still there for the players, if they want to find it.

Spirit Island is a cooperative game, which means the players aren't competing against each other. Instead, a deck of cards sets the invaders' actions in motion, and you win or lose as a group. (More on this later.) This change alters the character of play enormously, leading interaction with the rules to mostly take the form of collective conversations about the best way to push back against them—how to stop the invaders from building a new city, how to make sure they don't ravage the island's wetlands, how to strike enough fear into their hearts that they'll turn and flee.

Catan is the type of game that appears complicated at first but quickly reveals itself to be relatively simple. *Spirit Island* is . . . a little more intense. Like an arcane war game re-creating D-Day, there are all sorts of hidden or nested rules that pop up to ruin your game just when you think you're on top of the settlers. I didn't even finish playing my first game with some of the members of a weekly board game group I frequented in March 2018—partly because we foolishly and arrogantly thought we could learn how to play at a bar and partly because the spiraling nature of the invaders' attempts at conquering the island made it almost impossible for us to understand what was going on. After two or three turns, we packed the box away, and I took it home in shame. Eventually, two of my roommates and I began playing semifrequently, at least

once or twice a week, until we started to get a better handle on the rules and how to work together to subvert them.

According to the background in *Spirit Island*'s rule book, the Dahan were originally at odds with the spirits, eventually forming a literal contract to make sure that both parties were capable of living at peace—the sin of the invaders is not that they wanted to take the land, but that they didn't sign anything before doing so. This, in a sense, mirrors the arrangement that establishes the pretext for any shared game experience, in which all players decide on what they're about to do and enter into a sort of loose pact to obey the rules. When my siblings sit down to play a game of *Catan*, we're all in rough agreement about what it is we're going to do.

Still, for all of the evident care Reuss has taken to try to make the island feel like its own, original creation without appropriating or aping a preexisting culture or colonial struggle in the manner of the games Faidutti criticizes, the end result is a little toothless. It's harder to get a sense of what might be at stake if the people you're defending never existed in the first place, to say nothing of the magical spirits that (probably) didn't exist. At the end of the rule book section that finishes laying out all of the actual rules needed to play *Spirit Island*, Reuss dramatically asks, "Can you save the island?"—a question that invites you to ask what happens when the island *isn't* saved. The answer is something very similar to our own world, where colonial invaders *did* succeed at mostly wiping out and subduing native populations. We're already living in *Spirit Island*'s worst-case scenario, and part of what the game provides is the opportunity to methodically act out a fantasy of things going differently.

***

Whether it's *Catan*, *Spirit Island*, or *The Funny Game of Hit and Miss*, board games communicate ideas, just like any other piece of culture. And though board games are more popular than they have been in decades, the tools to think about the ideas they contain are unevenly distributed—the relatively closed-off world of academic game studies here, a review site or two there, largely operating from within the hobbyist perspective (i.e., people who are interested in and know a lot about board games talking to other people who are interested in and know a lot about board games). These types of conversations are absolutely important, and I've learned a lot from them. But criticism proves valuable in a number of different ways, and one of them is reaching laypeople, both as an act of recommendation (what should I buy?) and a way of getting them to think about art—and their own lives—in a different way. We're a ways

away from having the tools to think and write that way about board games, to listen to them on a broader scale.

A game like *Spirit Island* doesn't exactly speak to you—not directly, at least. The whole point of the medium is the way it sneaks into your play experience, the way that there isn't really a game when you're not playing, at least not in the same way there's a film when you're not watching it or an album when you're not listening to it. Instead, there's the space that's created by the rules and by the agreement everyone has made to abide by them, whether that's happening at a party, in a sticky living room, or on a dining room table. Board games are systems, scaffolds that we hang our experiences on, crucibles that form moments like sitting in a hospital waiting room, half watching *Vanderpump Rules*, running out the clock.

About two-thirds of the way through that game in the hospital, our parents came over and tapped us on the shoulder, signaling that it was time to go to our grandfather's hospital room. I'm not especially interested in talking about what happened in the room, other than to say that it was a numbing experience, of the sort that is so vivid you can remember all of the small details any time you try to remember it, even if you don't want to. But once we'd finished our too-brief moment of saying good-bye, our family went back to the waiting room. Everything was the same, everything was a little different. My brother, sister, and I sat down, looked at each other for a moment, and, without a word, started rolling the dice.