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‘BOARD GAME OF OUR TIME’: SETTLERS OF CATAN

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Settler colonialism and board games share a long history. A *Washington Post* review of the game here under review noted that ‘[w]e think of Monopoly as a game celebrating capitalism, but it actually evolved out of the Landlord’s Game, patented in 1903 to promote a high tax on property owners proposed by economist Henry George’. It concluded that, in view of its capacity to incorporate technological and environmental concerns, Settlers of Catan should indeed be considered the ‘board game of our time’.¹ Noting that the game had been an absolute success (it was translated in 30 languages, and over 15 million games sold), the *Washington Post* did not focus, however, on *why* a game about settlers should be the game of our time. Perhaps it is because, currently lacking answers to solve a crippling overproduction crisis and assorted economic problems, we dream of places where we would start anew, unburdened with debts. That is, after all, what alternative worlds are about. Henry George, on the other hand, was about settlement, closer settlement to be precise, and his land tax was meant to finally enable it while doing away with its opposite, speculation.² Anyhow, as settler colonial phenomena are primarily about the reproduction of one social body in place of another, it is not surprising that settler colonialism should be especially suitable for games that manage to capture and represent the proliferation of particular sociopolitical entities through time.

The Settlers (*Die Siedler*), for example, is an extremely successful real-time strategy computer game series that fits in with this description. The initial version was released in 1993, but there have been 9 versions since (the last one was released in 2010). Its original concept was indeed revolutionary; it comprehensively transformed strategic gaming, and crucially influenced the development of this specific branch of the gaming industry. While The Settlers is premised on the notion that all ‘civilisation’, since the beginning of time, is about settlement, and promotes a notion of civilisation that is both urban centred and hierarchical. The game is actually about imperial expansion. Different civilisations expand until there is no longer room to do so without invading each other, then they perform the ‘clash of civilisations’ that Samuel P. Huntington described in the mid 1990s.³ Ultimately, the strongest ends up replacing the weaker ones, a prospect that resonates indeed with the way Lenin described imperialism. This format, however, does not accurately reflect settler

¹ Blake Eskin, ‘Like Monopoly in the Depression, Settlers of Catan is the board game of our time’, *The Washington Post*, 21/11/10.

² Henry George’s most successful treatise was *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth*, New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979 [1879].

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996. Did Huntington play Sid Meier’s Civilization (which was released in 1991)? Should we listen to scholars whose vision of global history is that of a turn-based strategy video game? See also Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, New York, Penguin Press, 2011.

colonialism as a distinct type of colonial formation, a set of sociopolitical phenomena premised on what historian James Belich has defined as the ‘settler revolution’ (the notion that the settler periphery will constitute a separate polity that is better than and alternative to the colonising core).⁴ In *The Settlers* there is always an imperial centre, conquering additional provinces increases its power.

Developed by Klaus Teuber and first published in 1995, *Settlers of Catan* is based on a concept that better conforms with the hierarchical inversion performed by the settler revolution (various expansions, a card game, and children, online, dice, video and travel versions followed; this review focuses on the basic 1995 board game). The game is about establishing self-supporting colonies, but the narrative does not begin from the dawn of civilisation – settlers arrive with ready-made skills and technologies. The players are primarily concerned with trading and/or accessing resources to develop permanent settlements and enable their reproduction. In *Settlers of Catan*, however, the competing entities expand until there is no longer room to do so without trading with each other. That players are not eliminated but lose through failure to reproduce should be emphasised. Reproducing a long lasting cluster of ideas associated with the notion of ‘peaceful’ empires of liberty (an idea that is obviously unrelated to what actually happens in reality), the game is thus premised on the notion that different settlers (unlike imperialists, one presumes) don’t fight each other. Victory points are based on reproducing and on establishing military or communication infrastructure. They are about producing, using William Cronon’s expression, the ‘changes in the land’ that transform a particular setting into a locale as similar as possible to the original that the settlers have left behind.⁵ Without its contradictions: the image that is reproduced on the game’s and this issue’s cover insists on reproduction (note the familial unit), on the absence of strife and on obviously introduced agricultural practices, what in the language of settler colonialism is usually referred to as ‘quiet possession’ and ‘improvements’. (How do they manage to prevent sheep from entering the cultivated fields without fences, a crucial element of all settler expansions, remains a mystery).⁶

The game happens in an island/continent, confirming a ‘saltwater’ vision of settler colonialism. This is not about expanding a motherland, but about expanding a headland in a new setting. While settlements, cities, and infrastructure eventually cover the land, only wasteland and untapped resources are there at the beginning (the beginning of the game coincides with the ‘zero’ point in time of settler arrival). In Lockean fashion, acquiring is about getting there – player can only access resources adjacent to their settlements – and mixing labour with them. The island/continent is thus *terra nullius*, finally a ‘new’ land that is as empty as it should be, different from the new lands that real settlers usually encounter, which are actually filled with the prior claims of indigenous peoples. Resources are acquired by specific land types under each player’s control. If you get there first, you can access them.

⁴ See James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, especially pp. 145-176.

⁵ See William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, New York: Hill And Wang, 1983.

⁶ See Allan Greer, ‘Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America’, *American Historical Review*, 117, 2, 2012, pp. 365-386.

Different land types are randomly located, but, crucially, resources are limited and this puts a structural limit on possible development. Only through trade one can compensate these limits on endogenous reproduction. Resources can be traded, but this is no mercantilist colonial trade – it is not the metropole that gains, but a new settlement that is bent on its reproduction/diversification. The game proceeds as players spend resources (brick, lumber, wool, grain, and ore) to buy developments.

As mentioned, there are no indigenous peoples in the game, but there are ‘robbers’, and one wonders whether these robbers aren’t actually indigenous (that they could is not impossible, even if they were the ones robbing indigenous owners of their lands and livelihoods, settlers often saw indigenous peoples as ‘robbers’). Is it by chance that they should be represented by black pieces (even if in 2007 they were recast as grey)? Either way, even if the presence of indigenous peoples is simply disavowed, this absence is significant: after all, settlers are serial and systematic disavowers of indigenous peoples. The ‘robbers’ role is to disrupt settlement by preventing the efficient extraction of resources. They are moved-on through military means towards the periphery of settlement; like indigenous peoples in exclusivist settler frontiers, they are inherently incompatible with settlement and development. Their role is primarily to disappear.

So, *Settlers of Catan* is really about settler colonialism, a particular system of relationships designed to reproduce social bodies in putatively ‘empty’ locations, where colonists ‘come to stay’ and are not particularly interested in subjugating and exploiting others but intend to replace them instead.⁷ But, again, why should this be the ‘board game of our time’? Beyond the already mentioned crisis, I would like to suggest another possible answer. On the one hand, despite the obvious end of the pioneering age, settler colonialism is still foundational – we live in the world that the age of settlement has created, and settler colonialism still provides many of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson called the ‘metaphors we live by’.⁸ On the other, we are now collectively facing what Australian based researcher Tony Fry has aptly referred to as the ‘age of unsettlement’.⁹ The world as we know it, we know it in our guts, is going to change. To speak in terms *Settlers of Catan*’s buffs would understand, it is as if the hexagons of the board were about to be reshuffled, and if a new version of the game, one where scoring points is going to be much more difficult, was about to be released. Monopoly and getting rich were bound to be appealing in an age of chronically depressed economics, *Risk* was about thinking about a multipolar world during Cold War bipolar times, it seems fitting that the real prospect of the ‘age of unsettlement’ should produce a board

⁷ Coming ‘to stay’, is Patrick Wolfe’s definition of settler colonialism. See Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, London, Cassell, 1999, p. 2.

⁸ George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980].

⁹ Tony Fry, ‘Urban Futures in the Age of Unsettlement’, *Futures*, 43, 2011, pp. 432-439. ‘Having perhaps 10% of the global population as refugees, together with large numbers of ‘internally displaced persons’ (IDPs), combined with the climate-forced relocation of many towns and cities, means that it is possible that the “twelve thousand year epoch of human settlement” will come to an end and be replaced by an age of unsettlement, he notes (p. 434). It is significant that the solution he has in mind is in many ways similar to the solution that was generally proposed during the age of settlement: ‘moving cities’, an inevitable consequence of the unsettlement produced by climate change, would require ‘the transportability socio-cultural relations, economy and structures over-riding current investments in place’ (p. 437). This, after all, is exactly what settler colonialism was about during what Canadian historian John C. Weaver called the ‘Great Land Rush’: building new worlds elsewhere, including new polities, in ways that reproduce the ones left behind. See John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003.

game about a time when coming to stay was much more straight forward.