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Author

Blackburn, Brandon

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BOOK REVIEW: *UNSETTLING CATAN: DETACHED DESIGN IN EUROGAMES*

Brandon Blackburn

Abstract

A review of *Unsettling Catan: Detached Design in Eurogames*, which argues why eurogames like *Settlers of Catan* might help players to imagine new, critical ways of challenging simplistic narratives of settled peace and to challenge systems like capitalism and settler colonialism.

Keywords

book review, board games, Eurogames, Catan, design, mechanics, politics, peace, capitalism, settler colonialism

J. Rey Lee, *Unsettling Catan: Detached Design in Eurogames*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2025. 218 pages, Paperback, ISBN: 9780472039982

Unsettling Catan: Detached Design in Eurogames by J. Rey Lee investigates the complex and often paradoxical resonances between the abstracted design ethos of eurogames and the political subject matter they traffic in through close analysis of Klaus Teuber's *Catan* (2015).¹ The term "eurogame" refers to a loose genre of board games that prioritize what Lee calls "peaceful-feeling" actions, such as resource management and spatial control, over the overt combat of wargames like Avalon Hill's *Blitzkrieg* (1965) or *Afrika Korps* (1964), which simulate historical military engagements.² While *Catan*'s gameplay requires players to participate in settler colonist actions like resource extraction and industrialization, they are not named as such in the game. To preserve peaceful feelings, eurogames detach in-game actions like building, settling, and even stealing from the social and environmental consequences they would incur in the material world.³ One does not need to till soil to

¹ The entire *Catan* property is quite expansive. There are several editions of *Catan*, originally *Settlers of Catan* (German: *Die Siedler von Catan*) (1995), in multiple languages, as well as several expansions. When I write "*Catan*," I mean the 2015 edition, as it is the one Lee references most consistently throughout his book. Other editions or expansions will be denoted with parenthetical dates as necessary.

² Jonathan Rey Lee, *Unsettling Catan: Detached Design in Eurogames* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025), 7-8.

³ Lee, 7-9.

gain wheat or consider laborer safety to build settlements in *Catan*—these objects just appear magically whenever the required conditions are met. This book shows why eurogames are effective in creating spaces of play that privilege comfortable, non-critical social encounters.

At first glance, it might appear that Lee's attention to mechanics over-simplifies eurogames' implementations of settler colonialist and global capitalist logics, portraying these violent, complex, and expansive systems as repeatable, predictable, and victimless turn-based actions. On the contrary, however, *Unsettling Catan* sits in the uneasy and often contradictory emotions that come from bringing to the fore systems that are designed to run in the background. Lee names and analyzes the discrete in-game mechanics that resonate most with these complex global socio-political systems. In addressing these resonances, he offers his reader a way to unearth the conservative complacency underlying the design ethos of simplicity, intuition, and peaceful feelings in eurogames. He argues furthermore that this prioritization of comfort over critique is directly *indicative* of capitalism and settler-colonialism's influence and ubiquity in mainstream hobbyist culture.

For this review, I organize the book's seven chapters into three rough sections, each of which addresses a different level of abstraction in eurogame design. The first section, the introduction and chapters 1–2, discusses the material components of the game (e.g. hexes and cards), as well as the foundations of basic gameplay and board game scholarship. The second section, chapters 3–5, discusses in-game actions and explains how the social dynamics typical in a game like *Catan* complicate the presumption of peaceful, apolitical play. While the first two sections focus on dynamics that arise within a singular play session of *Catan*, the final section, chapters 6–7, looks beyond the singular play session to consider what happens once the artificial parameters defined by a game of *Catan* dissolve. It demonstrates how games inspired by *Catan*, like *Mombasa* (2015), and *Catan*'s own official expansions like *Catan Scenarios: Oil Springs* (2011) push the envelope on how designers, players, and academics might use eurogames themselves to challenge detached design.

In the introduction and chapters 1–2, Lee introduces the term “detached design,” a rhetorical inclination of eurogames to present gameworlds that are vibrant and engaging but wholly detached from discernible sociopolitical stakes.⁴ Settler colonialism, resource extraction, and military proliferation are all foundational mechanics in *Catan*, but intentional design intercedes to make them feel peaceful to players. Take, for instance, a Mountain hex in *Catan*. Detached design is what allows players to focus, not on how the miners printed on the hex will be paid for their work, but instead on how Ore the space will produce. A player unable to do so, who instead spent the game focusing on the miners' working conditions, would not focus on maximum Ore production and likely would not have a comfortable play session. In other words, detached design works to minimize the friction



Figure 1: The book cover of *Unsettling Catan: Detached Design in Eurogames*.

⁴ Lee, 11–12.

between a player's pre-existing worldviews and the values needed to effectively navigate a play session.

Through his analysis of *Catan's* material components, however, Lee shows that the design choices that allow for apolitical detachment from are not arbitrary. On the contrary, *Catan's* core mechanics deliberately obscure the colonialist projects required to produce them. For example, *Catan's* Knight cards, which depict armored soldiers, allow players to steal resources from one another. Despite lauding peaceful cooperation as an inspiration for *Catan's* design, Teuber explicitly rewards player investment into military force.⁵ Moreover, *Catan* even has a Largest Army achievement, which awards victory points for the player who amasses the highest number of knight cards. Yet, while the game's portrayal of militarism seems to directly contradict the peaceful world *Catan* advertises, it resonates strongly with imperialist rhetoric that presents uses of military force as acts of peacekeeping. As Lee argues, *Catan's* version of peace is "a peace that protects and rationalizes expansion."⁶

In chapters 3–5, Lee discusses the player interactions that *Catan's* gameplay mechanics privilege. He shows how aspects of the detached design conspire to make theft feel righteous, and chance feel agentive. Critically, he does not argue that these design choices are merely analogous to the processes by which capitalism and colonialism make extraction, manipulation and theft feel banal to the people who benefit from them—they are literally the same mechanics. For example, in *Catan* dice rolls affect all players, not just the player who rolled. This design choice seems on the surface to promote communal thinking because players' fortunes are all affected by the same randomized rolls of the dice. However, the collective dice roll is not as egalitarian as it might seem. After all, *Catan* is a game, not just of owning resources, but of controlling the potential to produce them. A player might express power by holding a lot of Brick resource cards in-hand, but it is more advantageous for them to control spaces that produce Bricks while preventing opponents from doing the same. Even though everyone shares evenly in the dice roll, the allocations of resources that result from that dice roll will rarely be equal.

Furthermore, Lee argues that the collective dice roll promotes the capitalist notion that everyone has equal opportunity in a capitalist society. If a player is winning, sharing the collective dice roll helps them feel like they are succeeding because they are cleverly making the best of their fortune, not because of unequal distribution of resources. On the flipside, if a player is losing, the randomness of the dice roll helps them feel like they are simply unlucky, not disenfranchised. While capitalists rarely roll literal dice, global economic systems use the identical rhetoric of equal opportunity to exert control and extend influence on populations of people. Like the collective dice roll, equal opportunity implies success comes solely from aptitude, not privilege. This rhetoric, both in *Catan* and in global economic systems, "promotes meritocratic and individualist thinking" because it supports the feeling that always everyone has equal access to opportunity, even though the mechanics that drive capitalism ensure that access to opportunity is always controlled.⁷

Chapters 6–7 are the most speculative of the book. Here Lee shows how the same mechanics that make capitalist economics and settler colonialism seem intuitive, neutral, or righteous might be mobilized toward more critical game design. In *Catan*, the readiness of the land for extraction is not allegorical at all—the resources in the hexes of the different biomes of *Catan* were literally designed to endlessly produce. There is no decentering the human possible here—the natural world of *Catan* is

⁵ Lee, 5.

⁶ Lee, 53.

⁷ Lee, 71.

not just made *for* but is wholly fabricated by human hands. Nonetheless, Lee urges the reader to envision microcosms of play like *Catan* that unsettle their audiences. How might these gameworlds help us to imagine new critical ways of challenging simplistic narratives of settled peace? How might they help us work to dispel the complacency systems like capitalism and settler colonialism require to function?

Readable, punchy, compelling, and at times poetically autobiographical, *Unsettling Catan* is a critical deconstruction of the eurogame genre. Lee shows how the designed mechanics of eurogames like *Catan* give valence to the excuse of apoliticism, all without belaboring the true but nonetheless nonspecific assertion that all games are political. It would be helpful for a student who is perhaps familiar with games but unfamiliar with the academic discourse around them, for a researcher looking for concrete examples to support more abstracted social critique, for a creative looking to contextualize critical design choices, or for an academic looking to explain to a loved one once and for all what in the hell it is they do for a living. While the book would certainly be at home in an undergraduate classroom or introductory graduate seminar, it is written for anyone who has ever been accused of looking too closely or feeling too deeply when they are just playing a game.



Brandon Blackburn (he/him) is a 4th-year doctoral candidate in Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine. His research examines intimacy with and within the fractures of rigid structures of play. By looking at depictions of monstrosity and affects of horror through the lenses of race and queerness in playable media, he seeks to articulate both resonances and slippages between players and the games they play. His work has been published in *TOPIA* and *Amherst College Press*.