

Time To Settle This With Catan: Audio Transcript

Rishika: Hi guys, I am Rishika, the producer of this week's episode of The Longest Rainy Sunday podcast. Today, we are going to talk about a board game called Settlers of Catan, which was released in 1995. According to an article in the Atlantic, it is one of the most popular games since Risk and Monopoly.

Catan is a model of capitalism, it is a game of strategy and negotiation, and teaches important lessons of empathy. It promotes interesting and different ways of thinking that are important even 25 years after being released, but it is also important to note that not all aspects of the game have aged well. Today, we talk about why it is relevant, but also outdated, how it promotes selfishness and also empathy, and how it is different to play in the pandemic.

Today, I am in conversation with Mudita and Pratyush. How was your experience playing this game online?

Pratyush- Although it is a board game, since we are socially distanced, we played this on an online emulator. Initially, we had some trouble figuring out how to play online as we had never tried playing it before. We even had to restart the game a couple of times because of technological issues. Eventually, we began playing, but every few minutes there was something else to figure out. We spent a good amount of time probing how to use the emulator. My preference still lies with the board game.

Mudita: Well, playing the game for the first time, I had immense fun. It could be because I was winning, or probably because I did not have anything to compare it to. According to me, the best part about the game was strategizing. Although, it really consumed a lot of me because there was a constant change in scenarios, and so you had to keep changing your strategy and game plan accordingly.

Rishika: Telescoping plays an important role in this game. You need to think about achieving the main goal, which is getting 10 victory points, but you also need to create several short term goals in every round to achieve that main goal and actually win. These could include trading resources to gain what you need, getting development cards, and making long roads. I remember, for almost three rounds I was only trying to get some wood to build a road, and that was my only goal for those rounds. However, the goals need to be flexible and you should be able to adjust them as you play the game. This is because you can't predict the course of the game, or which resources you will get as you play, and so you need to account for it.

Pratyush: So I think that knowing which resource is important at the moment of the game is an important part of strategizing. Initially, when the game starts, brick and wood are more important as you need to build roads and settlements, but later on hay and ore become important as you need to convert the settlements to cities. So, you need to keep all these things in mind while playing. You need to focus on your short term goals, but also pay attention to what your goals might be at a later stage, and prepare for those. It can get pretty confusing as there is a lot to keep track of, but I think that's what makes the game interesting.

Mudita- Telescoping and strategising, I feel, unconventionally prepares us for real life. The uncertainty in the game developed by each player's move requires us to be ready with several alternatives. Just like how we need to be prepared for anything that life throws at us. Also, you shouldn't have your heart stuck at anything to an extent that you can't think of anything else— your plans need to be flexible. For example, if you have your eyes fixed on a particular path where you wish to make your road, and somebody else uses it before, you should not get disappointed, and instead have alternatives in mind to move forward in the game.

Rishika: While playing, you need to understand the game plan of the opponents too. If they desperately need a resource which would get them a lot of points, you should probably not give that to them. We would weigh what we are gaining out of that deal vs what our opponents are gaining out of it. And usually we would go through with it only if we feel that we have a greater advantage. This is a good example of opportunity cost, an important principle of economics. We need to evaluate what we're gaining v/s what we're giving up, and if it is worth it or not.

Pratyush: Another economic lesson Catan teaches you, to quote an article in Reuters, is that "relationships are a commodity". Trading is a significant part of the game. Each player cannot get sufficient resources just by building settlements at different spots on the board— the resources are scarce. You need to rely on making deals with other players, and this becomes easy if you have good relationships with them. Sometimes, players even make temporary alliances with other players and promise to trade resources with each other as and when either of them needs it.

Mudita: Catan is a model of capitalism. There have been several other popular capitalist board games, including Monopoly, however they are usually not accurate representations of Capitalism at all. This is because the games have been created around the myth that 'Capitalism is fair'. In Monopoly, for example, each player has an equal footing in the beginning. They begin with the same amount of money, at the same position on the board, and without any pre-owned properties. Success depends only on what happens during the game. In real life, this is not how capitalism works.

Rishika: In a capitalist society, a lot of people have a natural advantage, or 'privilege', and this could be gender, race, family connections, to name a few. The role of these factors often cannot be ignored in the economic or financial success of certain companies or people. Everyone does not begin on an equal footing, and Catan recognises this. The distribution of resources in the beginning is not fair, and this can affect the outcome of the game.

Pratyush: The game requires players to be selfish and greedy, much like most successful business owners are expected to be in the real world. While playing, the most important thing for each player is being able to get their own way, without caring about the other players. Like Rishika said earlier, we won't even go through with a particular trade deal if we think that the other player is benefitting more than us, however badly we may want that resource. The aim of the game is not only to win, but also to make others lose.

Mudita: Unfortunately, there is a perception that you need to have a similar self-centred personality to be successful in any business in a capitalist society, like the one we live in today. In an article in Forbes, James Poulos says that Capitalism is believed to be “greed in action, an ideology of amassing more and better stuff for *me* and not for *you*, whoever *you* are.” Capitalism and greed, these two words have become almost synonymous.

Rishika: Adam Smith, the father of economics, in his most famous work ‘The Wealth of Nations’, also talks about capitalism being driven by self-interest. However, he is not the prophet of greed that many people have made him out to be. As an article in the Washington Post points out, “Smith makes clear that for capitalism to succeed, selfishness must be tempered by an equally powerful inclination toward cooperation, empathy and trust.” Although it doesn’t seem obvious, on some subliminal level, empathy is an important skill that Catan promotes as well, and hence supports the claim that empathy is an important factor for capitalism to thrive too.

Pratyush: While playing the game, you need to constantly put yourself in the shoes of the other players. If you were in their place, what would you do? This will help to better your own game plan, and also prepare yourself against what they might do in the later turns. This ability to put yourself in the place of others and understand their thinking, or empathy, is one of the most important skills to succeed in the game.

Mudita: For a game that was launched 25 years ago, there is a lot about it that is relevant today, and there’s a lot we can learn and apply to our everyday lives. Still, the fact that not every part of the game has aged well cannot be argued. The principle on which Catan is based is “Here’s some land. Build settlements and exploit resources,” and this is the mindset we need to use while playing. This has an obvious resemblance to Colonialism. Although this similarity was probably coincidental, and not intended by the makers of the game all those years ago, it cannot be overlooked in the political climate we live in today, in 2020.

Rishika: India is a country that remained under colonial rule until as recently as 75 years ago. So, for me, as an Indian, this hits home. In other parts of the world, Colonialism and Imperialism are unfortunate realities even today. Hence, the immense popularity of a game that, in some way, promotes colonialism, can have negative implications.

Pratyush: Catan touches upon a lot of important aspects of economics, as we discussed earlier. There’s a lot to be learnt from the game. However, after considering the theme of Colonialism, one can’t help but notice that the game is largely based on a 1995, ‘White’ Point of View of Economics, and How the world works.

Rishika: Thank you for listening, and hope you enjoyed this episode!