



Rivals for CATAN

Part 2 – Expanding the Card Game

January 29, 2010

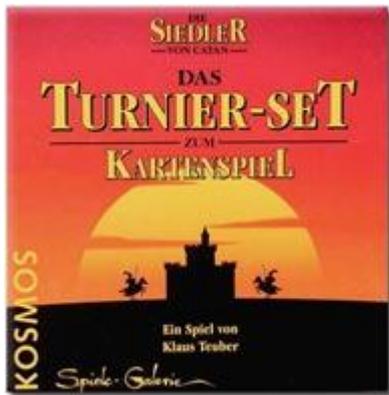
In 1997, the “Tournament Set for the Card Game” was published as the first Card Game expansion. My inspiration for this expansion came from “Magic, the Gathering,” during the mid-nineties a cult game in Germany. Although the rules of the two games are totally different, they do have one thing in common: both games can be expanded by means of new cards.

I liked the concept of Magic, where each player assembles his own deck from a selection of cards to compete against his opponent. I adopted this concept for the Tournament Set I wanted to develop especially for ambitious gamers: the players no longer replenish their hand with cards from shared stacks but from their own stacks, which they assemble from the cards of the Basic Game and the cards of the Tournament Set before the actual game begins.

Now, with one’s own card stacks, it was much more effective to pursue a certain strategy. However, each player needed a Basic Game and a Tournament Set to ensure a satisfactory selection of cards for the respective strategy.

I didn’t adopt Magic’s trading card concept. A player who – in Magic and in all other trading card games that came after it – wants to get new cards must buy so-called “booster packs,” which are small expansions containing randomly integrated cards. These small expansions include more common and less common cards. If a player wants less common cards, that is, good cards, he has no choice but to purchase some booster packs to get those cards.

Of course, a lot of money can be made with a trading card game, but I thought that the concept didn't go well with Catan, and I also was a little afraid that I would be compelled to continuously invent more cards to fill the small booster packs with new cards.



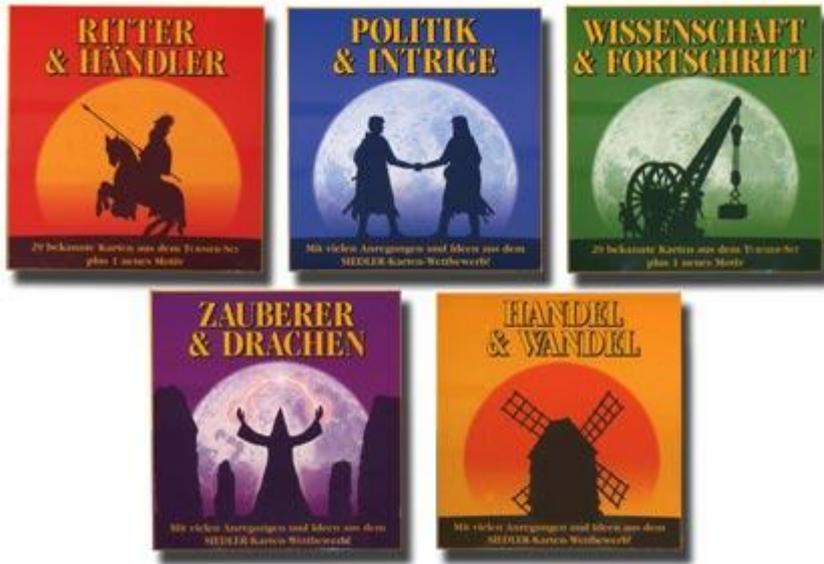
The Tournament Set for the Card Game

Therefore, the Catan Card Game did not become a trading card game. The tournament fun didn't come cheap, though – after all, each player needed his own Basic Game and his own Tournament Set. Although a corresponding note in big letters was showing on the back of the Tournament Set box, many buyers overlooked it and were understandably disappointed that the Tournament Set in combination with their Basic Game wasn't enough.

Dissatisfied gamers are an anathema to every game author, and the publisher Kosmos wasn't happy about the complaints arriving every day either. Therefore, I came up with a variant that allowed playing the Tournament Set with only one Basic Game: the expanded Basic Game was born. Already in the second edition, this variant was integrated into the rules of the Tournament Set. A third edition was not published because the Tournament Set paved the way for individual Theme Sets.

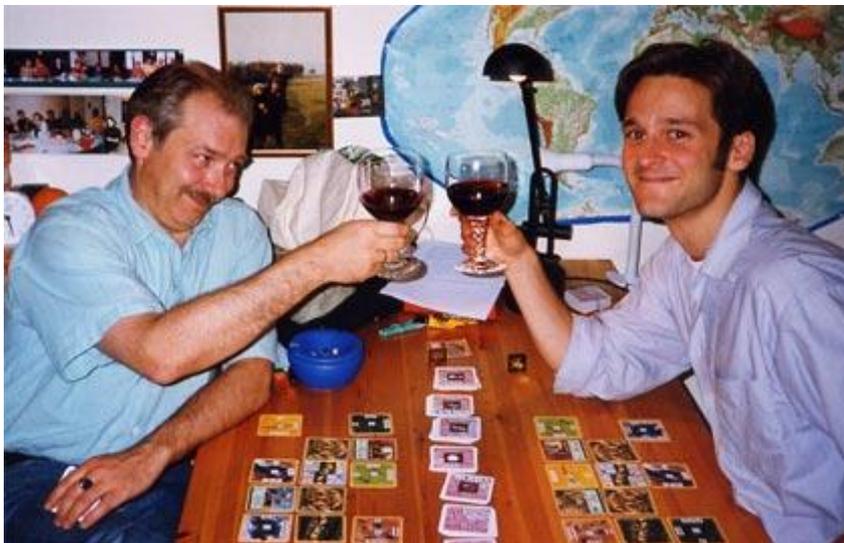
With each Theme Set, an expanded Basic Game – that is, a Basic Game with additional, theme-related cards – was possible. At the same time, each Theme Set offered ambitious Tournament Game players the possibility to use additional cards for developing new strategies or decks.

The Theme Sets appearing in October of 1998 were called Wizards and Dragons, Politics and Intrigue, Trade and Change, Science and Progress, and Knights and Merchants. They comprised the cards of the Tournament Set as well as new cards whose basic ideas people had sent to Kosmos in the context of an ideas competition.



The Theme Sets (1998)

This idea's competition developed into a giant project for me that kept me busy for almost nine months. Over a thousand letters came in, and some contained novel ideas. Now the task was to integrate those ideas with the already existent cards and my own ideas about the theme-related sets.



Testing isn't such a dry affair after all. - Testing the game with my older son Guido (1998)

When the prototypes of the new Theme Sets were ready, I mainly tested them within the circle of my family and with members of the Kosmos staff. At the time, I also received support from Brigitte and Wolfgang Ditt who tested the new sets and provided valuable tips and suggestions. As is the case with tests, shortcomings came to light. Cards were

rejected or modified and changed over to other Theme Sets. Then the testing, rejecting, and modifying continued, and later there was more testing...

When the Theme Sets finally were done, I heaved a sigh that probably could be heard beyond the walls of our house. I was relieved to have concluded the work, but I was also satisfied with the new Theme Sets and hoped the gamers would be too.

Since the Theme Sets sold very well, I assumed that people liked them. In 2001, the company USM published a PC version of the Card Game – including a small expansion called “Tournament Cards 2002” – and simultaneously created an Internet platform that enabled players to compete in the Tournament Game online. Every once in a while, I also played there and soon found out that some cards were actually too strong, while other cards were almost never used in a game.

Originally, I hadn’t planned on developing another expansion for the Card Game, but somehow I couldn’t stop thinking about the shortcomings regarding the interplay of the cards when playing in Tournament mode.



Barbarians & Traders (2003)

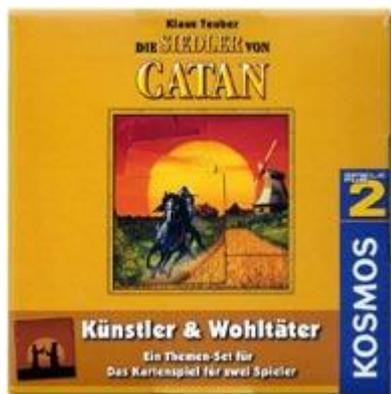
In 2003, therefore, the sixth Theme Set was published. It was called Barbarians and Traders. On the one hand, with the theme of this set I wanted to seize the idea from the Board Game expansion “Cities & Knights,” where the players jointly defend themselves against the invading barbarians. On the other hand, there were – as mentioned before – some cards in the old sets that allowed for overly powerful decks and other cards that were irrelevant. In combination with a minor reform of the old cards, the new Theme Set was meant to reduce the potential of overly strong deck strategies and strengthen the variety of strategic directions of decks.

After I had created the first prototype, I asked some experienced Tournament players I had met when playing on the Internet or at the Catan weekends in Bilstein, Germany, to

help me test the game. At this point – given the great variety of existing cards and their possible applications in the Tournament Game – I no longer thought myself capable of keeping track of all eventualities or recognizing all possible shortcomings of the cards.

After six months of intensive collaboration, my previous prototype had changed its appearance. The basic idea had survived, but some of my cards had been eliminated, and my fellow testers' card ideas had found their way into the set instead – an example of this being the Scribes Offices, a card the card gamer community can hardly do without nowadays. The testing team had become a development team.

In the meantime, the annual sales figures were declining considerably. Sebastian Rapp, meanwhile responsible for Catan at Kosmos, and I agreed that the Tournament Game was the culmination of the Card Game – but nevertheless reached only a relatively small number of gamers. Therefore, the next new set, titled “Artisans and Benefactors” and published in 2007, focused on the expanded Basic Game.



Artisans & Benefactors (2007)

For this set too, I presented a prototype whose central theme was the satisfaction of the subjects to the well-tried development team established in 2003. Once more, a very constructive development phase ensued. The end result was a set mainly suitable for gamers who found the Tournament Game too elaborate and time-consuming and who wanted an exciting expansion for their Basic Game, but it also contained cards that were interesting for Tournament players. The set actually received very good reviews, and many gamers rated it the best Theme Set for the expanded Basic Game.

However, the new Theme Set unfortunately couldn't stop the sales figures from declining. Unlike the Board Game, which year after year shows rather constant sales figures, the Card Game sales dropped considerably each year. It was foreseeable that Kosmos sooner or later would have to remove the Card Game from their game portfolio.

So, at the end of 2008, the question was what to do next. Two possibilities were discussed: either to let the Card Game die or to revive it.

I agreed with Kosmos that a revival shouldn't just concern the graphic art but should also include a revision of the game's content. The fact that it was more and more difficult for the Card Game to win friends surely had its reasons.

In my next blog post I will specify those reasons and describe my thought process that laid the ground for the revision of the Card Game.

Klaus Teuber

The logo for the board game Catan, featuring the word "CATAN" in a bold, serif font with a curved line arching over the letters "A" and "T".