Rivals for CATAN

Part 3 – First Concept and Development

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During the second half of 2008, when the future of the Card Game seemed uncertain due to decreasing sales figures, I thought about what could be improved to lay the foundations to reposition the Card Game.

I often had given the Card Game as a present during the past years – primarily to couples who usually didn't play very often, and when they did, they played among themselves. The feedback I had received from the presentees gave me an idea where the problems were arising in the Card Game and where to begin in order to improve it. I arrived at the following conclusions:

1. **The game takes too long for beginners**
   The first games may easily take 2 hours. That way, the gaming night is basically over for many players, and a second round is rather unlikely. Even if the players have mastered the game, it still may take up to 90 minutes to finish it, which for some players is also too long.
   Objective: Shorten the duration of the game in general, and in particular for beginners.
2. **High complexity due to card variety**
   A player who plays the Card Game for the first time is confronted with a great number of cards whose function often is not understood until the second or third game.
   Objective: Beginners should initially be faced with less cards.
3. **Game slowdown**
   Many cards may not be played during the first third of the game. For instance, City Expansion Cards and most Action Cards may initially not be

used. This causes the flow of the game to slow down. A beginner who, for example, receives only red City Expansion Cards and non-playable Action Cards will feel less motivated to continue the game.

Objective: Beginners should be able to play all cards from the start, and all cards should be immediately usable.

4. **Potential to provoke irritation**

    There are some destructive cards such as Arsonist, The Black Knight, and Civil War that may lead to unpleasant surprises and irritation, especially in the first game, when players do not yet know how the cards interact.

    Objective: Beginners shouldn't have to deal with too strong "irritation cards."

5. **Extensive rule**

    Some rule details, such as the requirement for the trade advantage, are not intuitive. To receive the trade advantage, a player must have more Commerce Points and must also have built a city. Many players are not aware that a city is required.

    Some rules are not necessary, such as the rules of how to trade with one's opponent. In practice, experienced players do not trade with each other in the Card Game.

    Objective: Unnecessary rule details should be removed.

Each item of this list reduces the fun of playing the game already on the first try. To properly reform the Card Game, I had to find ways of designing it in a more beginner-friendly fashion – without taking away its appeal as a game. I knew that this wouldn't be an easy thing to do.

The basic idea for the first concept I developed was to offer, in one game box, a simple Introductory Game for beginners and three Theme Games for advanced players. I needed around 180 cards for this. When choosing the cards, at first I only considered the cards of the Basic Game and of the old Tournament Set.

The Introductory Game

For the Introductory Game, I selected Action Cards without requirements and omitted City Expansion Cards. That way, all cards could be played without restrictions from the very beginning.

I stocked the four Expansion Card stacks with 36 cards (versus 62 cards in the old Basic Game). Each stack, therefore, consisted of only 9 cards, which should be enough for beginners.

I decided the victory condition to be 7 victory points. I expected this to provide a substantial reduction in the duration of the game, and I was right on target. Subsequent tests revealed that the Introductory Game mostly took between 25 and 30 minutes.

After two or three Introductory Games, players should be sufficiently familiar with the basic cards and rules of the Card Game and thus be ready for the actual game with its larger number of cards and more victory points required for winning. However, the way I saw it now was that the "actual game" should no longer be one game but three games on equal footing that are clearly differentiated in terms of theme and strategy.

The Theme Games

And so the Theme Games took the place of the old Basic Game and the expanded Basic Games. I took the cards I hadn't used for the Introductory Game and some entirely new cards to put together three thematically different Theme Sets. At the current state of development, they were called "The Era of Gold," "The Era of Heroes," and "The Era of Progress."

When choosing the cards, I didn't include those that had proven unattractive in the old Card Game. I modified existing cards or also developed new ones to obtain a smoother game flow and strengthen the selected theme. For example, some mighty knights were scrapped.

I provided each Theme Set with 24 cards for the Expansion Card stacks and also with some Event Cards. Playing a Theme Game required the cards of the Introductory Game and the cards of the respective Theme Set. The supply of Expansion Cards and Action Cards for both players consisted of five card stacks. The three stacks with the cards of the Introductory Game as well as the two stacks with the cards of the respective Theme Set contained 12 cards each.

A Theme Game, therefore, had a total of 60 cards making up its Expansion Card stacks, 2 cards less than the old Basic Game (which contained 62 cards) and many cards less than the old expanded Basic Game (which contained 85 cards and more). These numbers are currently still unchanged.

The following tests showed that it mostly took between 45 and 60 minutes to finish a Theme Game. Even the more aggressive Theme Game "The Era of Heroes" often took no longer than one hour. This was owed to the fact that the cards were more target-oriented and that some accelerating game elements were also added while developing the game.

Development

I felt that I had reached my objectives, and at the end of 2008 I presented my concept to the publisher Kosmos. It was accepted, and so the course was set for repositioning the Card Game. Our American Catan partner Mayfair also liked the concept, meaning that the future of the Card Game could now be shaped for English-speaking countries too. I was happy that I could use my experience of the last 12 years to, in a way, redevelop the Card Game.

The relaunch was supposed to occur in two phases. The German publication of the Card Game under the title of "Die Fürsten von Catan" (The Princes of Catan) containing the Introductory Game and three Theme Sets was scheduled for fall 2010, and an expansion containing all other Theme Sets was planned for 2011.

Sebastian Rapp at Kosmos and I agreed that we should get some reinforcement for the editorial work. We asked Dr. Reiner Düren and Peter Gustav Bartschat – both of them experienced Card Game players from day one – if they wanted to join our team. I was very glad they agreed, because when people work together for an extended period of time, not only expertise is required – the chemistry between those involved must be right too.

So I crafted 7 prototypes based on my concept. Three of them I sent to my team members, one went to Michael Menzel, the illustrator who would create new illustrations for the Card Game, and Arnd Beenen and Sebastian Mellin each received another one. While Arnd was drawing up an adaptation of the game for the Catan Online World, it was Sebastian's task to program the game.

The year 2009 was all about development. Each time one of us had tested the game and written a test report, we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of individual cards in our forum. Some cards were modified, and some also were canceled and substituted by new ones. Afterwards, I sent the modified cards to my team members for more testing.

Maybe some of you will now ask themselves, "And what's happening with the Tournament Game?" Well, the Tournament Game wasn't our first preference during development, but we always kept an eye on it. It certainly is possible to play the Tournament Game with the cards of "The Princes of Catan." However, it is likely that the attractiveness of the game will fully reveal itself only after the expansion containing additional cards comes out in 2011.

Two princes in a test duel during the Catan Weekend 2009 in Bilstein, Germany (Photography by Roland Hülsmann)

During development, a new, alternative way to play the game emerged that may very well be regarded as a precursor of the Tournament Game. We have called it the "Duel of the Princes." More information on this alternative will follow in one of my next blog posts.

Meanwhile, we have finished development of the Card Game for now, and I have started with the concept for the expansion. Until April, Sebastian Mellin will have completed programming. Then we will have sufficient time to test "The Princes of Catan" online with a larger circle of people and to make some smaller modifications before the finalized cards go to press.

In my next blog post I'll present the cards and rules of the new Introductory Game, and I'll also show you some illustrations.

To begin with, I am presenting you, dear reader, the new road and settlement that in the future will provide the basic framework of the new Card Game. Please don't be surprised about the settlement without victory point. The victory point will definitely be added.

Klaus Teuber