Rivals for CATAN

Part 4 – History of CATAN and Illustration

March 9, 2010

In my fourth blog post, I originally wanted to present the Introductory Game. However, it will still take some more time to finish all cards of the Introductory Game, and Michael Menzel sent me an interesting report on the development of the card "City." So I spontaneously decided to dedicate my fourth blog post to the history of Catan and the card illustrations influenced by this history.

The Fictitious History of Catan

When I developed the Card Game in 1995, I didn't think much about the illustrations. Sure, the game was meant to have a medieval setting, and the card titles were already chosen. But there weren't any further specifications for Franz Vohwinkel, the illustrator of the old Card Game.

Now it's 15 years later, and many things have happened since. So I outlined the course of the history of Catan.

Except for its large active volcano and occasional earthquakes, Catan was paradise for the settlers. Fertile fields and pastures, an abundance of building materials, and ore deposits in the mountains allowed the settlements to prosper. A hundred years later, the two settlements had spawned many settlements on the plains and in the valleys of the island.

The island in the Atlantic Ocean was big enough for everyone; therefore, despite religious differences between the devotees of Odin in the north and the Christians in the south, almost no conflicts occurred. This period of the first Catanians is the topic of the Introductory Game. The cities do not have expansions yet, and the buildings look similar

to the houses that the Catanians' forebears used to build in their Nordic home country. There weren't any knights either – only heroines and heroes.

If Catan were a large island in the area of today's Azores (the Azores were not discovered until 1427), chances would not have been too bad for other seafarers to reach the island. And indeed, in 960 the Viking prince Carl Gabelbart lands with a large fleet on the shores of Catan. Carl didn't actually want to sail to Catan but was on a Viking journey heading south; however, a storm set in and carried his longships filled with warriors off course, far to the west.

Carl is impressed by Catan's beauty and fertility and decides to conquer the island and become its ruler. But first it is necessary to boost his men's morale and satisfy their most important need: women.

One can imagine that this need led to conflict with the Catanians. Therefore, cards such as Carl Gabelbart, Traitor, Arsonist, Feud, and Riots characterize the Theme Set "Times of Turmoil." After the Carl Gabelbart episode is over, the Catanians rebuild their destroyed farms and villages. The brisk shipping traffic between the north and the south is an expression of the reinvigorated trade, and after a couple of years the horrors of Carl's attack are a thing of the past. Now the era of gold begins, which is reflected in the Theme Set of the same name.

In subsequent sets such as "The Era of Progress" or "The Era of the Merchant Princes," Catan has contact with continental Europe. On the one hand, the new relations are beneficial for Catan's development, but on the other hand, they also entail the danger of being attacked by gold-hungry barbarians who are quite similar to the Spanish conquistadores. The history of Catan ends at the beginning of the 16th century. Whether or not it ends with the island being conquered by Spanish soldiers of fortune – that is something we ourselves decide in each game of "Cities & Knights" or in the subsequent Theme Game "The Era of the Barbarians."

Catanian Architecture

Well, I don't want to delve further into the fictitious history of Catan. Ultimately, I wanted to show that the history of Catan – divided into eras – is reflected in the Theme Games. And this brings me back to the artwork, because it is meant to visually bring Catan's fictitious historical background to life. While the buildings of the settlements are still simple and follow the Viking or Nordic architecture, it can be assumed that a unique architecture arose in the cities that later developed on Catan. How could such an architecture have looked like? I got together with

Rathaus

Michael Menzel, and we conjointly developed the basics of a Catanian architecture. We opted for some Gothic mixed with typically Viking elements such as gable crosses or dragon heads and roof constructions that reminded of longships or also of Nordic stave churches. On the not yet finished card at the right (the text box will look different) you can see the mix of the different stylistic elements. The hexagon typical for Catan also found a place at the front of the town hall.

Catanian Fog

The Card game actually isn't a card game. It's basically a game with cards that are placed side by side on the table – meaning that it is more a tile-based game with the characteristics of a strategy game. Placing the cards on the table creates a settlement structure. We wanted this structure to result in a harmonious whole or, respectively, to convey the impression of a continuous landscape. Therefore, each card motif appears out of the fog. The cards are the relevant segments of a principality. In reality, there may be large distances between the cards. However, since we are not interested in the areas between the cards they disappear in the fog.

The following illustration shows that the placed cards – by means of the fog, the depiction of the buildings in isometric perspective and the approximately identical size of all buildings – convey the impression of a continuous settlement structure. The "6″ on the regions is only a placeholder, and the transparent text boxes on the Foundry, the Abbey, and the Garrison are still missing.

Development of the Catanian City

How is a card developed? How does the illustrator proceed? I'm sure these are questions that you, dear reader, are also interested in. Who could be more qualified to satisfy our curiosity than the illustrator himself? I'm pleased that Michael Menzel has agreed to show us, in the following, the individual steps in the development of the card "City" and to comment on it.

Dear settlers,

I'm pleased to be able to write some brief explanations for you regarding the development of the city of "Die Fürsten von Catan" (The Princes of Catan).

For my work, I use Photoshop and a graphics tablet. Photoshop allows painting in various layers. The term "layer" will be used a couple of times in the following text. You can imagine those layers as various sheets of tracing paper stacked on top of each other.

In the first sketch, I'm trying to "find" the right shapes. This can be done with a pencil on paper or digitally, as I did here. I gradually approach the right shape of the houses, so to speak.
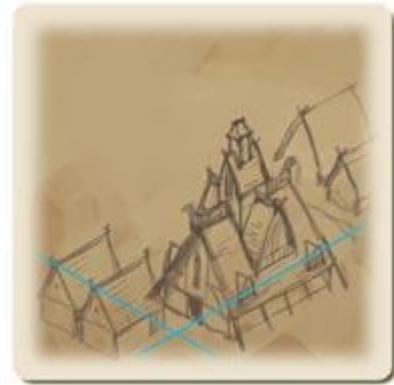
All buildings of the Card Game are drawn at the same angle. There is no foreshortening, meaning that the buildings in the foreground are of the same size as the ones in the background.
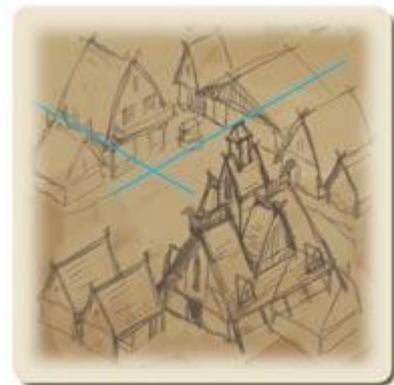
This "Iso" perspective can often be seen in the area of computer games. That way, all cards visually fit together when placed side by side. During the course of the game, the cards thus become a large continuous landscape. To be able to always keep the same orientation, I draw the angle on a separate layer (light blue). This serves me as a reference during illustration.

As soon as the drawing is good enough, I apply colors in an approximate fashion. At this point, sharp contrasts shouldn't be used yet. The result is a "swampy patchwork of colors." In Photoshop, it is possible to paint on a layer below the sketch and, thus, to not paint over the lines of the sketch.

From now on, I also consider the position of the light source. It is important to always maintain the same illumination and make sure that the shadows are always cast in the same fashion, so that afterwards the impression of a large landscape can be created.

Now the finishing touches can be added. At this moment, I zoom in closely and model the right contours out of the "swampy patchwork of colors." Now I add hard shadows and highlights. This process is very akin to painting. Here, computer, program, and graphics tablet are simply new tools for painting.

Afterwards, the color contrast is increased in Photoshop and matched with other, already existing regions and buildings.

Then I add small human figures to the city. These "miniature people" are not just for decoration. I think that they are the ingredient that makes the city a city. They give it sounds and liveliness. Finally, I draw the flags. They add wind and movement to the picture and nice splashes of color that make the picture more enjoyable.

The entire process takes between 3 and 6 hours, depending on the motif's richness of detail.

Michael Menzel

Thank you, dear Michael Menzel!

In my next blog post, I will present all the cards of the Introductory Game "The First Catanians."

Klaus Teuber

CATAN