The Eurogame as Heterotopia

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In a 1967 lecture, Michel Foucault stated:

> *In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface…*

He then offered this counterpoint:

> *Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.*[1]

For Foucault, this synthesis of the real ("where I am") and the utopian unreal ("where I am not") constitutes a "heterotopia". And in this essay I will argue that German-style boardgames (or "eurogames") offer heterotopias similar to the mirror Foucault uses as an example; they are a sites of constituting ourselves by way of what we see (or do not see) in their virtual spaces. In so doing, I will present cases of enthusiasts seeing and not seeing thematic content in eurogames, scholars seeing and not seeing this, as well as my own way of seeing the game *The Castles of Burgundy* through an animal rights lens.

The Mirror Test

Existing commentary on eurogames is most often written by enthusiasts and rarely by scholars, though academic interest seems to be on the rise. What we will see is that, though all can agree that thematic abstraction is a hallmark of eurogames, there is dissent among both enthusiasts and scholars about what to do in the face of that abstraction.

In the only extant monograph on the genre so far, Stewart Woods provides a history of eurogames that concludes that their thematic abstraction—while distinctive—is not of great interest.[2] This postulation of eurogames' effective *lack* of theme is demonstrably aligned with the widespread enthusiast

1. Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5 (1984): pp. 46-49.

perspective that theme is often a negligible quality of games (even outside of wholly abstract games like *Blokus)*. For example, popular board game reviewer Tom Vasel said of the eurogame *Vasco da Gama*, "Don't come into this looking for any kind of theme."[3] But—far more so than with many eurogames—*Vasco da Gama* is very plainly about something real: its namesake is a particular historical figure and the gameplay embodies this person's biography in non-trivial ways. Yet Vasel forbids us from looking for theme in this game, insisting that there is nothing there.

Conversely, Will Robinson describes *Vasco da Gama* in far more situated terms, noting that the game's abstraction erases the violence of the game's thematic referent. Robinson looks at the virtuality of the game and subsequently directs his attention to the reality of the history depicted. He writes:

> *Taking violent histories and turning them into resource management/ worker-placement games for family audiences creates an ideological fairy tale.* Vasco da Gama *reinforces a clean and unproblematic interpretation of the Portuguese empire with each play.*[4]

Indeed, the question of "what is being abstracted out" is vital, particularly when the theme is so specifically historical and that history's violence undermines the supposedly non-violent interactions that characterize the genre. Ultimately, in Robinson's critique of *Vasco da Gama*, it's tempting to liken it to a Foucauldian mirror test at which Vasel fails by not seeing the reality of Vasco da Gama's real actions via *Vasco da Gama*'s unreality.

But eurogames are often *not* specifically grounded in history, and their aesthetic potential cannot be exhausted by treating their abstraction with either dismissal (Woods, Vasel) or suspicion (Robinson). Yes, for many players a game's theme will be secondary to its mechanics (however artificial this distinction may be), and Robinson's specific suspicion of *Vasco da Gama* is indisputably warranted. But what Robinson is performing is not just a postcolonial reading of the game, but a demonstration that the general ambiguity of eurogames' meaning allows players of these games to adopt diverse perspectives on how to view these games' themes. We've already seen

2. Stewart Woods. Eurogames: The Design, Culture, and Play of Modern European Boardgames. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.

3. Tom Vasel. "Vasco Da Gama Review." YouTube. The Dice Tower, 5 Apr. 2010. Web. www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFLYxGIPu0Y.

4. Will Robinson. "Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames." Analog Game Studies 1.5 (December 2014). analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames.

some range of views between Vasel and Robinson, but we can see it even more by looking to other games.

The Unsettled Meaning of Catan

The Settlers of Catan, arguably the best-known eurogame, offers additional support to this idea. In the past few years, *Settlers of Catan* has proven to be such a groundbreaking phenomenon that mainstream news outlets could not ignore its popularity or—to a culture raised on *Monopoly*—its unfamiliar design.

To an even greater extent than what we saw with *Vasco da Gama* between the views of Robinson and Vasel, we can see the diversity of perspectives on *Settlers of Catan*'s thematic qualities in various publications' accounts of the game's explosive rise to fame. On one hand, an article in *The Atlantic* has one fan arguing for "its mass-culture appeal stemming from the game's 'lack of strong setting or theme'"[5] and the aforementioned Vasel makes no mention of theme in his own review of *Settlers of Catan* either.[6] However, a *Wired* article reports that an economics professor uses the game "to teach his four children how free markets work"[7] and the *Wall Street Journal* reported on how Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are drawn to the game because playing it is "like running a start-up."[8] Clearly this game—despite its "lack of strong setting or theme"—is encountered as meaning *something*, something *specifically* relevant to the players' real lives in a thematic way.

But the theme does not emerge solely from the game itself. It is the reality of the economics professor's perspective that allows for his ascription of the free market model to the game. Perhaps more strikingly, *Catan* is quite obviously not explicitly about "running a start-up", but because of its unreal abstraction and the real predispositions of the aforementioned executives, it is entirely reasonable for them to read it as being "like running a start-up".

While Robinson accurately indicts *Vasco da Gama* as promoting "an ideological fairy tale" in the context of real history, we can see that in titles

5. Scott Keyes. "Settlers of Catan: How a German Board Game Went Mainstream." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 07 June 2011. theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/06/settlers-of-catan-how-a-german-board-game-went-mainstream/239919.

6. Tom Vasel. "Settlers of Catan." YouTube. The Dice Tower, 20 Apr. 2009. youtube.com/watch?v=lTV03kCoDIw.

7. Andrew Curry. "Monopoly Killer: Perfect German Board Game Redefines Genre." Wired. Conde Nast Digital, 23 Mar. 2009. wired.com/2009/03/mf-settlers/.

8. Pui-Wing Tam. "An Old-School Board Game Goes Viral Among Silicon Valley's Techie Crowd." Wall Street Journal, updated 17 Dec. 2009. wsj.com/articles/SB126092289275692825.

like *Settlers of Catan,* that are less strictly grounded in real events, there exist fewer egregiously incomplete abstractions. This in turn enables us to see our own personal histories and ideologies—say, business experience or macroeconomic theory—filling in the gaps left by the abstraction of the genre.

Farm Sanctuaries of Burgundy

For games to achieve what we've come to expect from art, they need to have specific, personal resonance in the details of how we experience them. To further illustrate how eurogames, in their abstraction, may allow for this resonance, I offer an example of how I have personally come to appreciate *The Castles of Burgundy* (another eurogame). Here I show how eurogames can act as a heterotopic space, reflecting back the identities, ambitions, and dreams of their players through their polysemic components and mechanics.

First, I've selected some quotes from reviews of the game that were posted to the *Board Game Geek* website, a popular destination for boardgaming enthusiasts. These selections illustrate how the game's theme is often (but not always) assessed:

> *…a Euro game with pasted theme. Nothing special here, it's just you are bla bla bla, controlling bla bla bla, competing with other player in bla bla bla, to get the highest points by the end of the game to win it.*[9]

And, reminiscent of Vasel's injunction regarding *Vasco da Gama*:

> *If someone is looking for a thematic experience, do not look to The Castles of Burgundy.*[10]

Yet a large part of the pleasure I derive from *Castles of Burgundy* is precisely an aesthetic pleasure tied to my thematic experience with the game. The abstracted representational aspects of the game (including the game's rules) appeal to me in a particular way, and the only explanation for my severe dissention with the above reviewers and many others is personal difference. Indeed, I do look for a thematic experience with *Castles of Burgundy* and I find a satisfying one. It is this experience which I will now relate.

9. "[Review] Castles of Feld." Board Game Geek. boardgamegeek.com/thread/1144258/review-castles-feld.

10. "The Gamer Nerd Review: The Castles of Burgundy." Board Game Geek. boardgamegeek.com/thread/1045641/gamer-nerd-review-castles-burgundy.

First, a description of the game: in *Castles of Burgundy*, players develop various features of their 15th-century French estates by placing tiles on personal game boards, while also managing a number of resources such as money and goods. While this premise offers some quasi-historical grounding, any specific historicity is arguably lost in the abstraction of its gameplay, unlike in the precisely (though selectively) grounded *Vasco da Gama*. It is more like *Settlers of Catan* in this way.

Abstractions abound in *Castles of Burgundy*: the goods are simply represented by nondescript crates and bags, and "workers" available to players are simply used to affect the result of a die roll by one pip. The tiles that players may place in their estates are as follows: special "knowledge" tiles which change rules slightly for the player, castle tiles (each identical), ship tiles (each identical), mines (each identical), various buildings, and—of particular interest in this essay—various types of livestock.

The functions of these different tiles tend to be quite abstract, but the livestock tiles are of particular interest to me as an ethical vegan, someone who eschews the use of all animal products and byproducts because I do not consider animals to be ours to exploit. Given this perspective, I would predictably be invested in the details of how animals are represented and how I interact with them as a player.

The livestock tiles come in four species: cattle, pigs, sheep, and chickens. Each tile has only one species of animal on it, but the tiles vary in how many individual animals are shown. In the interest of providing an exhaustive account of how the game stipulates the function of these livestock tiles, I now provide the entire section from the rulebook (omitting only an example and a reference to said example):

> *Whenever a player adds an animal tile to his estate (which can occur up to 6 times), then he immediately receives victory points (and moves his playing piece on the victory point track forward). Each tile has between 2 and 4 animals on it and the player receives the corresponding number of victory points for them. Should the player already have animals of the* same *type in the pasture (= a region of connected light green spaces) that the new tile is being added to, then he scores all times with the* same *animal type* again *in* addition *to the newly-placed tile…*
>
> Important: *The animal tiles must be part of the same pasture but do not need to be immediately adjacent to the newly-placed animal tile. Tile with the same animal on them on* other *pastures are not scored.*

There is no explicit reason stated as to why these animals are on one's estate. Given the game's loosely historical setting and/or today's dominant attitudes towards these species, one could conceivably conclude that they are being raised to be milked, shorn, and slaughtered.

But those specific agricultural game mechanics are not present in this abstract game. When I play *Castles of Burgundy*, I stipulate that these animals are being rescued and protected from the very agricultural practices that dominate the relationships humans have with these nonhuman animals in reality.

Furthermore, the bonus points awarded when you unite animals with members of their own species is the only game mechanic related to these animals other than their initial scoring (which can itself be read as a reward for rescuing them from the market in which they are treated as resources to be consumed). The reason for this bonus is never stated, but one can interpret it as a recognition that these nonhuman animals are social beings, just as they are in reality. Due to this scoring scheme, the value of these animals literally exceeds the sum of their parts, which could actually provide evidence *against* a reading of *Castles of Burgundy* that considers these animals as valuable *only* for their body parts.

Given *Castles of Burgundy*'s abstraction (which is typical of the eurogame genre), these animals can be interpreted as companions, wards, ornaments, or consumable resources. Given my perspective, I see them as more like wards or perhaps companions. The game—like much great art, and like *Settlers of Catan* as described earlier—can function as a mirror: it shows me who I am in reality through the materiality of its unreality. In my case, I can clearly (and somewhat unexpectedly) see my real vegan convictions in the unreality of the game and its abstract and polysemic components.

My view of *Castles of Burgundy,* like Robinson's view of *Vasco da Gama,* is grounded in social critique. But the situation I find myself in when facing the abstraction of *Castles of Burgundy* allows me to fill in gaps and virtually "re-theme" the game—without any physical modifications or concrete house rules—according to my politics. Robinson's analysis of *Vasco da Gama* is similar in that it seeks to revise assumptions surrounding the game's theme, but it does not seem to be the case that *Vasco da Gama* would allow for a virtual revision of its theme. This does not mean that his or my perspective is better or worse, but rather that we each arrive at favorable or unfavorable judgments of a eurogame's use of abstraction, depending on how we relate to the particular abstraction at hand.[11]

11. Converse to my reading of the game, Tom Vasel, in his review of the game, says (while joking

Conclusion: Seeing Ourselves Where We Are

In Foucauldian terms, the heterotopic space of a eurogame—like the mirror—has us "reconstitute [ourselves] there where [we are]", whether we study Portuguese history, teach macroeconomics, run tech companies, or live a vegan lifestyle. The eurogame's specular abstraction can allow the player to look at themselves if they are willing to do so. With eurogames, if we can pass this Foucauldian mirror test, we can open up a realm of personal meaning previously ascribed primarily to more traditional art forms and more explicitly expressive digital games.

The aesthetic future of games cannot be limited to digital games, and eurogames offer some compelling clues as to how we might experience satisfying semantic play along with traditionally satisfying gameplay. I hope that this essay encourages players and designers of tabletop games to pay closer attention the thematic details they might discern in the games they play (or, rather, in themselves) and the diverse aesthetic potentials therein.

Rules for First Nations of Catan are included in the appendix of this volume.

about the game's title) that the game "has nothing to do with burgers", and he concludes that "the theme should be put through a meat grinder with extreme prejudice". He goes on to repeatedly call the theme "idiotic", never really grappling with it beyond the superficial fact of its setting. His verdict of the game, while positive, reflects the reality of his near-exclusive orientation towards mechanics with far less interest in thematic details. Tom Vasel. "Castles of Burgandy Review." YouTube. The Dice Tower, 27 Oct. 2011. youtube.com/watch?v=cQkAxU9I0wM.