

Report on ITL Grant “The Pedagogy of Board Games as Primary Sources and Simulations” (2016)

Participants: Eunice Blavascunas, Rachel George, Lee Keene

---

**Did recipients complete what they set out to complete?**

The proposed goals of this project were:

1. Teaching students to create research questions from objects and images. *Detailed below.*
2. Using experiential learning as an instrument to reinforce lessons on cultural impacts across time and space. *Playing as part of a class created a connection to the course readings and made the understanding of cultural contexts more concrete.*
3. Bringing broad perspectives to discussions outside of Whitman that deal with the state of the human condition, whether within the local community, the nation, or in global affairs using the vocabulary of popular games. *Enthusiasm about “gaming” leads students to want to play outside of class which inevitably leads to informal (yet complex) discussions with parents, friends, and partners independently of the course.*

**What are the products of their efforts in terms of content, format, and public dissemination?**

Products from this grant include:

1. Creation of an in-class analysis exercise using Candyland and Queue to develop “Research Questions” in Gender Studies 490 and Anthro 490.
2. Library exhibit on the power of gaming and ways they can be incorporated into research projects.
3. Presentation on “Collaboration, Information Literacy Frameworks, and Games as Primary Sources” at the Information Literacy Advisory Group of Oregon annual conference.
4. Revised syllabi for several courses.
5. A working bibliography of scholarship on games, culture, and pedagogy.
6. A developing research interest for Lee Keene in the representation of war in tabletop games spanning the US Civil War, The Cold War, The Global War on Terror, and the Arab Spring.
7. Faculty Forum or CTL talk in the future to share with faculty ways games can be integrated into courses.
8. Blogs/reflections/discussions, excerpts included below.

## **Do any of these have potential long term positive effects on the curriculum or academic program more generally?**

A broader understanding of primary sources will continue to improve senior theses in Anthropology.

But more specifically, students came to understand that the original intention of games is to teach, which reinscribes their role in culture. They don't learn "the lesson" playing the games, however that immersive experience makes for creative social spaces that encourage a sense of empathy via role playing. Lessons transmitted via game playing carry the analytical ideas to family and friends outside of Whitman. Games challenge and require multilayer thinking and analysis. These diversions lead our students to uncover subtle lessons about the human condition.

We also found that having some students play, while others observe, and then switching roles, created an opportunity to learn very basic ethnography. The games become a way to introduce the methodology of "participant observation".

## **How many courses were directly involved or indirectly impacted by the grant?**

As of Spring 2017, four courses have integrated a game. They include:

Evolution in Anthropology 101 *Becoming Human: An Introduction to Anthropology*

Queue in Anthropology 313 *Communism, Socialism, and the Environment*

Queue in Anthropology 206 *Anthropology and Europe*

Catan in Environmental Studies 120 *Introduction to Environmental Studies*

Codenames in Anthropology 317 *Language and Culture (scheduled for 2018)*

## **Did the project enhance the quality of learning experiences offered to students?**

Learning experiences were made more contextual when students reconsidered implications of their actions in game. Connections to readings and discussions challenged them to revise and complicate their perspectives on the environment and controlled economies in communist Eastern Europe.

## **What evidence do you have that demonstrates impact on student learning (if applicable)?**

Here we excerpt several sections from blog reflections that illustrated especially interesting analyses. In each instance, students were given a series of prompts to start a discussion of themes and ideas. These examples ground anthropological insights in recognizable examples:

### ***QUEUE - Student 1***

*“Near the end of the game, we had a sudden realization that there weren’t going to be any more deliveries to the kiosk, even though we still needed one more card. This was an epiphany for me because it helped me to clearly understand how the frequent shortages occurred in socialist economies, and how those shortages must’ve made people feel. It made me glad that this was just a simple simulation of what it would be like to live in 1980’s Poland, and definitely helped me to understand how frustrating an experience it would be to wait in line for hours and not receive the basic necessities your government has assured will be available to you. Overall, the game was fun, challenging, and thought provoking, and provided an easily accessible forum for some of the topics we’ve been reading about and discussing in class.”*

### **QUEUE - Student 2**

*“It felt strange to be participating in such a competitive atmosphere when the context of the game is a socialist/communist system of receiving goods. Typically – theoretically – I have associated socialism/communism with getting along (communism does stem from ‘communal’ after all), but this game represented the opposite. There were hardly any attempts to help each other.”*

*“No matter how competitive we were, it still seemed as though the system was working against us. Corruption, a lack of goods, and competition made it hard to succeed. At the end of the anecdote about broken eggs, Verdery has a quote that resonated with this sentiment: “Being immobilized for some meager return, during which time one could not do anything one might find rewarding, was the ultimate experience of impotence” (Verderey 56).”*

### **CATAN - Student 1**

*“I thought playing Settlers of Catan was an interesting microcosm for several of the concepts we have discussed in class -- Not only does the premise of the game imply that the land has value only when it is being developed and its natural resources extracted, the purported purpose of the players -- to settle the wilderness -- is a theme that we have touched on a little in this class.”*

*“I think that the choice of name change between editions was pretty significant. By rebranding the game as Catan, the game’s creators were making an important PR decision because as Isabel noted, the choice of the term “settlers” is inherently political. It seems to me that the once popular mystique of the settler who tames the wilderness -- and thus renders it more valuable -- was a powerful enough idea in our society to permeate even our board games, though that appears to be changing a little. The ideal of the “settler” is changing, and as the image of the brave frontiersman is tarnished by historical fact, it becomes less politically correct so celebrate them, hence the term settler slowly being expunged from Catan.”*

### **CATAN - Student 2**

*“One of the most visible ways in which Catan reflects European-settler values is the way in which progress is defined within the game. Player progress is synonymous to: obtaining the most resources, “owning” the most settlements, and building the most roads. Obtaining most*

*resources as an individual is a reflection of settler economics because resources translate to wealth which is used for personal gain through trade and utilization, “owning” the most settlements, cities, and city expansions also increases personal wealth, and building roads is a reflection of changing the landscape in order to facilitate an import/exchange of resources. This game isn’t just inspired by settler-colonialism it walks players through the steps of settling in a pristine environment rich in resources and ready for the taking. This is reminiscent of the colonial narrative we discussed on the first day that “The Americas were rich in natural resources and untouched by humans and populated with small communities (as opposed to large populations) which is why settlers had the right to use the resources.”*

**What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?**

The time commitment of integrating the games can be an impediment. Finding time outside of class to learn and play the game can be difficult, however the process of “slowing down” reinforces ideas. Learning and playing games forces the brain to work differently.

**Acquisitions**

[Games added to Penrose’s collection](#) for future use (organized by theme):

*Environmental Studies, Anthropology:* Settlers of Catan/Oil Springs, Land Rush.

*Biology, Environmental Studies, Anthropology:* Evolution/Climate Change.

*Politics, Anthropology, Economics, History:* Queue.

*Politics, Anthropology, History:* Labyrinth/Arab Spring.

*Anthropology, Languages and Literatures:* Codenames.

*History, Politics, Anthropology:* Ticket to Ride/India

Games on order (4/17). Each of these has a potential hook related to either linguistics, politics, economics, history, or interdisciplinary studies (potentially including Encounters).

- *Taboo* - Players take turns describing a word or phrase on a drawn card to their partner without using five common additional words or phrases also on the card.
- *Mombasa* - Players acquire shares of chartered companies based in Mombasa, Cape Town, Saint-Louis, and Cairo and propagate trading posts of these companies throughout the African continent in order to earn the most money.
- *Scythe* - A worker Placement/Economic Engine board game set in an alternate-history 1920s period. In *Scythe*, each player represents a character from one of five factions of Eastern Europa who are attempting to earn their fortune and claim their faction's stake in the land around the mysterious Factory.

- *Catan: Traders & Barbarians* - Barbarians are invading Catan and the players have to try to stop them with new knight pieces.
- *Through the Ages: A New Story of Civilization* - A civilization building game. Each player attempts to build the best civilization through careful resource management, discovering new technologies, electing the right leaders, building wonders and maintaining a strong military. The game takes place throughout the ages beginning in the age of antiquity and ending in the modern age.

The grant authors would like to thank the CTL Steering Committee for the opportunity to undertake this project. We very much appreciate the support and encouragement we receive from Whitman College as we explore new ways to engage in alternative forms of pedagogy.