

# Catan Discovers the Rails

"Oh no, not another SETTLERS game!" "But this time it's about building railroad tracks and transporting goods." "Oh no, not another railroad game!" "We play what's on the table!"

Sometimes a reviewer has to exert all his powers of persuasion if he wants to try out a new game – "new" being relative. On the one hand, the publication of expansions, additions and variants keeps the interest in a game alive, but, on the other hand, generates a certain feeling of surfeit. This does not only apply to SETTLERS OF CATAN; it applies to CARCASSONNE and the like as well. Even the relatively fresh DOMINION suffers from signs of wear already.

In the U.S., SETTLERS OF CATAN is distributed by Mayfair. This company made its mark in the past with numerous railroad games – to be precise, predominantly with railroad games. With SETTLERS OF AMERICA, both product lines have come together. A small wonder that it took that long to happen.

At the outset, you already know quite well what settlers do, also in America. On your turn, you roll the dice to determine which hex spaces produce resources. Lumber, ore and grain exist in this game also. But in the pasture, there are cattle instead of sheep. And bricks had to make way for coal. If you go away empty-handed during the distribution of resources, you receive – not customary in CATAN at all – one gold coin as compensation. Of course, the inevitable robber appears as well, here, in accordance with the scenario, called the "outlaw."

Then, in the action phase, there are new things to discover. In this context, let's have a look at the thematic background: We are at the beginning of the 19th century. The American settlers are heading west. The map board shows the U.S. with today's boundaries, divided into CATAN hexes. Most of

them have the number you have to roll to get resources imprinted on them; some, though, in the eastern U.S. are covered with variable number markers. Some in the west remain empty for now. In the east, there are also spaces, called "sites," on which we build our starting cities right in the beginning – three for each player. In contrast to the original CATAN, we cannot found a city on every intersection (there are no settlements); the positions are pre-printed, so we don't have to think about the distance rule.

## I Breeding covered wagons

We can use our resources to generate settlers. They come into play in the form of little covered wagons, are placed in our cities and then can move on along the paths by using grain – not very far in most cases, because they often have just a short lifespan: If they end their move on an empty city-site, they found a city (and this without using any resources).

And where are the trains? First of all, they require rails; we know these from the basic game, where they are called roads, though. In the SETTLERS OF AMERICA, they come as pairs of tracks. The railroad network needs to start in one of our cities, but – in contrast to other railroad games – doesn't have to be connected;

that means that I can begin a new network in any of my cities. Of course, building tracks also costs resources. To make it attractive to build in the infinite expanse of the west, we receive a bonus track here and then if we equip certain sections with tracks.

Once the tracks have been laid out, the trains can come into operation. Their movement costs are as high as the ones for the covered wagons, but they need coal instead of grain. And they don't go from intersection to intersection but from track to track, thus moving between the intersections and the cities. If they touch upon another player's city, they may deliver a goods cube there. This brings us to another game element that I consider very cleverly thought out and that I like a lot.

The cities that every player can build – little wooden houses – are standing on a kind of turntable in a circle on the gameboard. One goods cube is lying next to each house. Only when I have founded a new city with a settler and taken the house off the turntable does the goods cube become available and I can transport it with my train – but only to a city that has already been founded by another player, and only if goods haven't been delivered there before by anybody else.

Goods cubes are victory points; the player who has delivered all his cubes is the winner. The dilemma is, I can't win if I haven't founded all my cities on the gameboard. With each city, however, I





give my opponents another opportunity to get rid of their goods and get closer to victory themselves. This has been worked out very neatly. And by the way, nobody has to waste time counting victory points.

### I Gold!

Nicely thought out also are the consequences of the conquest of the west. As mentioned above, some spaces in the east of the U.S. are initially covered with number markers. In contrast, some spaces in the west remain empty. If then a city is founded at the edge of such a space, the number marker that is furthest east is removed and put here. This way, cities in the east lose their resources during the course of the game – without becoming completely desolate, though.

I haven't mentioned the development cards yet. They are also adapted to the historical ambience, of course, and provide all kinds of advantages.



But let's go back to the original CATAN one more time. I must admit that today, after 15 years, it doesn't make it to my game table any more. Nevertheless, I could take much pleasure in the SETTLERS OF AMERICA. Why? For one thing, the permanent shortage of resources has been ameliorated by gold. And not only do you get a coin if you go away empty-handed during the distribution of resources – if a city-site (no matter if it is built-up or not) is connected to another city, each track builder involved gets gold as well. Coastal cities also give their founding fathers gold. And if other players' trains use my tracks, I get gold as well – unfortunately just a lump sum and not for each section of the tracks. This gold enables me to acquire missing resources, and compensates for a lack of luck time and again when the resource production is determined through the roll of the dice.

However, I have to ramp down my enthusiasm a bit – enthusiasm I hope you've sensed up to this point. And this for several reasons. The most severe one is: With four players, the game works perfectly – there is no idle time, the game develops quickly, there are enough cities that you can deliver to, everything is well-balanced. But it's quite the opposite with three players: First, three cities of a non-existing fourth player are standing around in the area, pretty much not involved. Second, the three active players have to found more cities and deliver more goods cubes, and that drags on; the missing fourth player makes his absence felt unpleasantly. Do yourself a favor and never play with three.

The second reason is the game materials. Even if the wood-lovers faction is elated that no plastic has been used for this game: The materials don't make a harmonious overall impression. The wooden locomotives have to be placed next to the tracks because they don't fit on them. And if, say, two locomotives are standing next to the same track and a covered wagon is waiting in the neighboring city at the same time, it gets very unwieldy. A somewhat sloppy job was also done in terms of the overview cards that each player gets; just compare them with the overviews that were printed on the gameboard; on the cards, the last item was simply left off. *KMW/sbw*



Title:	<b>Settlers of America</b>
Publisher:	<b>Mayfair Games</b>
Designer:	<b>Klaus Teuber</b>
Artist:	<b>M. Zug, H. Lieske et al</b>
Players:	<b>3-4 (for three: ↘)</b>
Age:	<b>about 12 and up</b>
Duration:	<b>about 120 minutes</b>
Price:	<b>about 40 €</b>
Reviewer	Playing appeal
<b>KMW</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Matthias Hardel</b> .....	<b>8</b>

