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Insurrection is Not a Game

Play, Resistance, and Designing the Game "Bloc by Bloc"

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What is an anarchist game? Is it a game that promotes anarchist values? A game that depicts anarchist activities? A game that subverts and destabilizes power structures? What can gaming theory teach anarchists—and what can anarchists teach through games? To explore these and other questions, we conducted the following interview with TL, game designer and artist of *Bloc by Bloc: The Insurrection Game.*

Why do you think creative activity is important for anarchists?

Creative resistance is one of the essential elements of a thriving anarchist movement. Play and imagination allow for the kind of experimentation that can reveal cracks in the systems of control. Anarchists need to be able to imagine other worlds and other forms of life in order to position their activities in opposition to this one. When creativity is allowed to flourish in anarchist spaces, it's easier to neutralize stifling and toxic modes of social organization.

Is *Bloc by Bloc* just a form of entertainment? Or are there other dimensions to the project and what you hope it will accomplish in the world?

Bloc by Bloc is a tabletop game that simulates the urban rebellions that we have seen in cities around the world over the past 10 or 15 years. The goal of this project is to produce a fun and educational gaming experience. I don't want to pretend this is anything more than that. That's one of the reasons the graphics in *Bloc by Bloc* are playful, reminiscent of colorful cartoons. It's important that we don't take the project too seriously or overstate its political impact. That would be misleading and

The question of what an anarchist game could look like is very interesting. Maybe *Bloc by Bloc* is a step in this direction. But a truly anarchist game would likely take place in the everyday terrain of our lives. It would craft a magic circle that empowers the participants to subvert real forms of control and domination. And it would be easily replicable, even for those with limited resources. Maybe anarchists and other social antagonists already play games of this sort all the time without specifically referring to them as games?

My hope is that this project can be part of a much larger creative process that utilizes play and imagination to unleash our collective potential to fight back and reshape the world.

disrespectful to everyone who has been out there in the streets in real struggles that have real consequences.

But games can be powerful tools for exploring complex ideas. That's one of the main reasons I continue to work in this medium.

When we play games, we create stories out of the interaction between players, game mechanics, and components. The best games craft rich and emergent stories that change each time we play them. These stories mirror archetypical narratives that we find throughout society. This is why games can feel so meaningful: they create a temporary space in which we can safely explore the stories that define our lives. This space is referred to as "the magic circle."

Bloc by Bloc creates a magic circle in which players can explore stories of contemporary revolt and resistance. It's a response and a challenge to the ubiquitous narratives of colonization, industrialization, statecraft, authoritarian hero-worship, and chauvinist violence that dominate much of tabletop gaming—and digital gaming even more so. In this way, it can be understood as an anarchist intervention in the world of gaming.

Does *Bloc by Bloc* have antecedents? What were your points of reference when you were designing it?

A group of us first started brainstorming ideas for an insurrection board game in the summer of 2010. None of us were experienced gamers; we had very little to draw on in terms of antecedents. Our points of reference were the struggles and insurrections we had been following very closely. The uprising initiated by a teachers strike in Oaxaca, Mexico during the

second half of 2006 had a major impact on these early conversations that would eventually shape the contours of what we now call *Bloc by Bloc.* The youth revolt that spread across all of Greece following the police murder of the young anarchist Alexis Grigoropolous in the Exarcheia neighborhood of Athens in December 2008 was another point of inspiration. Here in Oakland, the protests and riots in response to a white police officer killing a young Black man named Oscar Grant in January 2009 gave us firsthand experience with some of the ways these moments can unfold.

Based on these recent historical events, we stitched together the general framework for the game. We knew that all the players would need to be factions of the insurrection and that the game would somehow play the role of the state. We also decided that the game would be a race against time until the military or some kind of federal force intervened to reestablish order. And finally, we came up with a list of actions that players should be able to take: barricading, looting, occupying, and clashing with police. This laid the foundation for the game; all of these ideas are central to *Bloc by Bloc* 8 years later. Probably due to our limited knowledge of game mechanics and theories of gaming, we didn't get very far in the actual game development process back in 2010. "The Insurrection Game," as we called it at the time, sat on the shelf for years. It wasn't until after another round of even larger uprisings around the world between 2011 and 2014 in places like Cairo, Istanbul, and Ferguson that I felt motivated to circle back to the project. I studied some contemporary tabletop games like *Settlers of Catan, Pandemic, Forbidden Desert,* and *Dead of*

bring with them the potential for severe repression and reactionary backlash. So it's important to not romanticize these moments of conflict and to understand their consequences.

It's also important not to fetishize the violence involved in these uprisings. Destruction and popular expropriation are necessary parts of sustained insurrection. But the success of these uprisings is not determined by their ability to destroy or kill. Urban insurrection is most effective when it transforms social relationships across a whole city and repurposes urban space. We can see this most clearly when an insurrection is an expression of everyday resistance and organizing. This creates the social fabric from which an insurrection can draw the power to reshape entire cities and societies.

Is this an anarchist game?

I think that's debatable. *Bloc by Bloc* is a game for gamers more than it is a game for anarchists. We've always wanted this project to stand on its own as a game that people can enjoy even if they're unfamiliar with or uneasy about the theme. As I said before, it's an intervention in the world of gaming in that it challenges the usual narratives of oppression and exploitation.

There are a few other ways that it differs from most games. We have attempted to manufacture the game in a relatively ethical fashion here in the US. The vast majority of games are manufactured in China to take advantage of cheaper labor. And all of the files one needs to create DIY printed copies of *Bloc by Bloc 2nd edition* will be released online for free, as we did with the first edition. But overall, *Bloc by Bloc* doesn't attempt to break out of the specific form set by the standards of contemporary tabletop gaming.

system full of emergent potential. It's possible to read into each of these mechanics and draw conclusions about real world insurrections. But at some point, remember, this is just a game! A PDF of the *Bloc by Bloc* 2nd edition rulebook is available online for anyone interested in taking a closer look at the game's mechanics.

How do your values shape how you approach game design? Is there an ideological dimension to this project?

I try very hard to avoid taking a dogmatic approach to this work. Games are a great way of letting people explore interconnected ideas and systems without being overly didactic. However, I'm sure it's apparent to everyone that this project is grounded in political ideas.

I would say that the game development process for *Bloc by Bloc* was guided by a specific ethical framework. A crucial part of that framework is that it centers those who struggle under capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and the state as the protagonists. I refer to these protagonists of resistance as "social antagonists." The *blocs* are those who organize themselves to rise up from below. This isn't a game that places the conquerors or the powerful at the center of the narrative.

Another important element of this framework is an understanding of the importance of social insurrection. If we take a moment to reflect on the past two decades, we see an impressive array of uprisings and rebellions around the world. Social insurrection is a defining feature of our time. It is a crucial form of resistance and joy in a diverse array of cities in these first decades of the 21st century. Insurrections sustain social movements and they have reshaped the political map. But they also

Winter, and I read up on theories and approaches to game design.

In early 2015, we began playtesting the first working prototypes of *Bloc by Bloc.* At first, the game was unplayable. But the iterative process was in motion.

Since then, I have learned more about the history of subversive and anti-authoritarian tabletop games out there in the world. *Suffragetto* is a game from 1909 that simulates women's suffrage protestors clashing with police. What we now know as the game *Monopoly* was originally a game called *The Landlord's Game* that critiqued real estate speculation and finance capitalism. *Class Struggle, Chicago Chicago,* and *Mai 68 Le jeu* are a few other titles from the 1970s and '80s that attempted to simulate popular uprisings. A few years ago, some Italian comrades created a game called *Riot* that features anarchists, autonomists, police, and nationalists fighting each other in the streets. It's interesting to note that most of these games assume that one player needs to take on the role of the police. This is something we knew from the very start we would not be including in the framework for *Bloc by Bloc.*

What are the advantages of the tabletop game format for telling these stories, as opposed to, say, a novel, a film, a video game, an oral history?

Creating *Bloc by Bloc* allowed us to explore social upheaval through the lens of systems thinking. A game is a great way to simulate the cybernetic forms of control exercised by institutionalized power. And it allows players to experiment with emergent forms of cooperative strategy to liberate themselves from these oppressive systems. There really isn't another medium

out there that enables this sort of emergent systems approach to telling these stories.

Another important way that tabletop games are great for telling these stories is that they are inherently social. There's something powerful about exploring the dynamics that shape social insurrections through discussion, play coordination, and conflict with others face to face around a table.

However, this format also comes with drawbacks. A game is itself a sort of cybernetic system made up of various positive and negative feedback loops. The necessity of creating a stable gaming system that functions as a fun game makes it impossible to fully simulate real world events, which are defined by their chaotic and ever-changing nature.

Tell us about some of the specific components and dynamics of the game, and how you crafted them to convey strategic lessons about real life.

One of the most important changes in the second edition of the game is an improved semi-cooperative mode. In *Bloc by Bloc,* each player has a secret agenda card. The majority of these cards are social agendas. Players with social agendas are in solidarity with each other and must work together to defeat the state and win the game cooperatively. However, there are also vanguardist and nihilist agenda cards. Players with these cards have to secretly undermine the social insurrection; they are playing to win the game alone.

It's possible to remove the vanguardist and nihilist cards and play the game in fully cooperative mode. This is probably the best way to play your first game; it's how most people chose to play the first edition. But that's not the experience we origi-

nally set out to create with *Bloc by Bloc.* A simulation of urban insurrection should include the internal tensions that one always experiences within social movements and uprisings. This semi-cooperative experience also creates a more dynamic play space that allows for deeper strategy. And it prevents the problematic behavior of alpha players who dictate what other players should do on their turns. This tends to happen in almost all fully cooperative games. Ironically, by introducing an element of uncertainty and suspicion among players, you protect their individual agency.

Another mechanic in the game that people are often surprised by is how movement works. Most games force you to move your pieces one space at a time or to count the number of spaces you are able to move. In *Bloc by Bloc,* movement is restricted by access, not distance. If there is an open pathway using roads, highways, and metro stations, you can move your blocs as far as you want with one action. Even the largest cities in the world can still be crossed in a few hours as long as the corridors of movement are open. As the game deploys police and they move throughout the city, this access becomes increasingly restricted. This is a reflection of how we are able to move within contemporary cities. Zones of exclusivity and institutional power are not protected from popular uprisings by their distance from those who have the potential to rise up. They are protected by security forces and systems of control that limit access and control space.

Just about every mechanic in *Bloc by Bloc* can be understood as the intersection between some kind of strategic lesson and the necessity of balancing the game to create a stable