

The board game “puerto rico” begins after everyone around the table receives a mat printed with the **verdant** interior of the game’s namesake island. Players are cast as European tycoons who have trekked across the Atlantic at the height of the Age of Exploration. “In 1493 Christopher Columbus discovered the easternmost island of the Great Antilles,” read the back of the game box that once sat on my living-room shelf. “About 50 years later, Puerto Rico began to really blossom.” To win, one must “achieve the greatest prosperity and highest respect.” In practice, that means the mechanics of “Puerto Rico” are centered around cultivation, exploitation, and **plunder**. Each turn, a player takes a role—the “settler,” the “builder,” the “trader,” the “craftsman,” the “captain,” and so on—and tries to slowly transform their tropical enclave into a tidy, 16th-century imperial settlement. Perhaps they uproot the wilds and replace them with tobacco pastures or corn **acreage**, or maybe they outfit the rocky reefs with fishing wharfs and harbors, in order to ship those goods back across the ocean. All of this is possible only with the help of a resource that the game calls “colonists,” —represented by small, brown discs in the game’s first edition, which was published by Rio Grande Games and is available in major retailers—who arrive by ship and are sent by players to work on their plantations.

So that’s “Puerto Rico,” the game. In Puerto Rico, the real place, the Spanish empire started **enslaving** the **indigenous** Taíno people shortly after Columbus arrived on the island during his second voyage, in 1493. The first African slaves arrived in 1517. By 1560, the total population of **captives** numbered about 15,000, and in 1560, plantation holders started branding slaves’ foreheads with hot irons in order to **adjudicate** any potential kidnapping cases. It’s all a little **uncanny** when you set down a brown “colonist” marker, but the original instruction manual for “Puerto Rico” offers no commentary on the terror of human displacement that it echoes. The game’s animating principle—as much as it has one—is that this island was empty and **dormant** until the West arrived, bringing with it a golden age. And yet, “Puerto Rico” is still considered to be one of the greatest board games of all time. For more than five years after its initial release in 2002, Rio Grande’s game was ranked No. 1 by the aggregator BoardGameGeek, and critics praised its clever mechanisms and depth of strategy. (Currently, it sits at No. 29.) “Puerto Rico” has been played digitally 1.8 million times on the website Board Game Arena since 2011, and BoardGameGeek users have reviewed it more than 60,000 times. “Puerto Rico” is part of a wave of modern, strategy-heavy board games that earn high praise while asking players to **reenact** human history’s **grimmest** episodes. “Macao,” from 2009, is set in Portuguese Macau, where settlers are slowly **gobbling** up city blocks; “Vasco da Gama,” from the same year, whitewashes the explorer’s many murderous crimes; “Mombasa,” from 2015, puts players at the **helm** of an Imperial British East Africa Company stand-in. In 2004’s “Goa,” competitors transform themselves into Portuguese merchants at the height of the **ravenous** Indian spice trade. (“Goa” is currently ranked 187 overall on BoardGameGeek.) “**Archipelago**,” from 2012, asks participants to **conquer** an unnamed indigenous community as efficiently as possible; players “need to be careful of the natives,” announces the BoardGameGeek summary. “If they make them too unhappy or if too many of them are unoccupied, they could revolt and declare independence. Then everyone will lose!”

Boutique board games have been around for years, but in the mid-2000s, as “Catan”—which was formerly called “Settlers of Catan,” and which also employs a colonist mechanism, this time in a fictional place—**permeated** the culture, people started **latching** on to a hobby most commonly associated with the fringes of **nerd**dom. These games are far more involved than the Parker Brothers catalog, and their designers ask players to embrace complicated rule sets and deep critical thinking; players will rarely do something as simple as just rolling a die and moving a pawn. For a seemingly narrow market, it keeps growing: In 2020, the research firm Euromonitor International noted that the “games and puzzles” market had **eclipsed** \$11 billion. But recently, players have started asking more **incisive** questions about their hobby—questions that reach beyond design elegance or component quality, that get at the nature of games as political objects and whether they should be held to the same standards that we demand from our other entertainment. One of the longest active threads on the BoardGameGeek forums for “Puerto Rico” discusses the game’s **sanguine** perspective on colonialism. (“Puerto Rico is the only game I ever turned down even a single trial play of, because of a literal curl of my lip in distaste as I was being taught the game,” one user writes.) Earlier this year, the board-game YouTube channel No Rolls Barred uploaded something of a mea culpa for having recommended “Puerto Rico” as one of its favorite strategy games. In 2019, the war-gaming giant GMT canceled a game called “Scramble for Africa” after mounting objections from its customers. But why did anyone look at that concept and think it was a good idea? Why did game designers ever fall in love with colonial fantasy anyway?

“I think the main reason is purely **practical**,” says Bruno Faidutti, a veteran game designer who wrote an essay on colonial themes in board games back in 2014. For one, a two-dimensional piece of cardboard lends itself to a limited number of mechanisms, and a map is one of them. “If all of the [pieces] are on the map from the beginning, it’s a war,” he says. “If every player starts with one or two, as in ‘Catan,’ it’s expansion, development, colonization.” Board games also rely on broad, generalized tropes to get their point across quickly. “And colonial clichés, especially in Europe, where the modern board games started in the ’90s, are widespread,” Faidutti says. “The choice for a board-game designer is not between cliché and depth or accuracy; it is between good and bad clichés, or old and new clichés.”

The designers of the board games mentioned in this article seem particularly taken by a certain kind of imagery: rugged landscapes, heroic pioneers. They are also part of an industry that has been **overwhelmingly** white and male. “It’s a case of romanticised ideas that are familiar from other media, such as adventure novels or films,” says Lukas Boch, a research assistant at the University of Münster, in Germany, who is writing his doctoral **dissertation** on historical depictions in board games. “The authors simply lacked (and sometimes still lack) a sense of the inconceivable cruelty associated with colonisation, which makes it a very sensitive topic for many people,” explains Boch, who answered my questions via email with the input from his research colleagues Max Rose, Toni Janosch Krause, and Barbara Sterzenbach. “The crimes committed during colonialism were known in the 2000s. However, those who considered the topic important were not represented in the board game community at that time.”

“Puerto Rico” is not designed as a history lesson, nor does it intend to authentically mimic colonial expansion. Instead, many modern board games use their art and thematic trappings as decoration for the core puzzle, a way to look pretty on the shelf. If you stripped away the imperial motifs of “Puerto Rico,” the game would still play just fine, in the same way that “Catan” could function regardless of what resources you were trading with your tablemates. (There’s a reason that game has been adapted from its original medieval setting to both *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones*.) The glorification of colonialism in these games, then, appears to be **superficial**, born of convenience and ignorance—not a reflection of deeply held philosophy—which makes their problems too easy to ignore. I remember my first game of “Puerto Rico,” in 2016. My group was taken aback by the insensitivity of the theme, but we submerged ourselves into the game’s mechanics and puzzles. By the end, the only thing we were focused on was the point tally, without thinking about Puerto Rico, the island, much at all. But just like the colonialist settings these games mimic, “Puerto Rico” and its **ilk** make us active participants—and that’s a responsibility every designer, and player, needs to take seriously. “The special thing about games, and tabletop games in particular,” writes Eric Thurm in his book, *Avidly Reads Board Games*, “is the way they actively train you to think from within their rules. Other forms of art do this too, but in a more roundabout way that requires a certain sensitivity and willingness to be taken in by the television show you’re watching or the book you’re reading,” Thurm writes. “With games, it’s a **prerequisite** to entry. If you don’t think the way the game wants you to think at least a little bit, you’re not really playing the game at all.”

As the board-game hobby has ballooned in size over a relatively short amount of time, it has seen a shock of diversity to its player base. Maybe it is simply **enduring** growing pains similar to those of so many other pop mediums—the video-game sector in particular—as they exit their relative nooks and crannies to introduce themselves to the vast divergence of human experience. “The board-game scene is becoming increasingly globalized,” Boch says. “Games that were originally produced only for certain markets are now marketed worldwide, and suddenly games like ‘Puerto Rico’ are played by people who themselves come from that country; so it is unsurprising that it creates resistance.” That tension has opened the door for a different kind of game. R. Eric Reuss’s “Spirit Island,” from 2017, is one of the few flat-out anti-colonial games on the market. In it, everyone around the table takes control of a **primordial** deity who is **languishing** on a fictional island that is under siege by European settlers. Those intruders chop down the jungles and foul up the wetlands, as the spirits mount an offensive to drive them off the shorelines. Reuss told me that he has no use for the **plausible** deniability of *it’s just a game*. He has an answer to a question I posed earlier: Anything a designer commits to cardboard can be political, whether it’s intended or not. “I think there’s a growing understanding that using historic colonialism in a sanitized fashion—omitting all of its wrongs—has its own problems,” Reuss said. “Even though you’re not depicting torture, rape, massacre, enslavement, and genocide in your game, you’re promoting a false narrative about colonialism, which covers up all of those terrible things.”

Alexander Pfister, the Austrian behind the aforementioned “Mombasa” and 2019’s “Maracaibo,” has consistently acknowledged the implicit cruelty of his games’ settings. (“Chartered companies were associations formed for the purpose of exploration, trade and colonization, which links them **inextricably** to a very dark chapter in human history: global colonialism,” reads the beginning of the instruction manual for “Mombasa.”) But Pfister says that he is now giving “Mombasa” a to-the-studs renovation. When the game enters the market again in the indeterminate future, it will no longer carry art,

terminology, or set dressing associated with 18th-century European expansion. Those days, he says, are over. “‘Mombasa’ made gamers think about this awful history. But nowadays, I wouldn’t use this theme anymore. That’s the reason for a complete re-theme.’ It’s good that the community, including me, became more sensible,” he says. “We want our hobby to be inclusive.”

This year, “Maracaibo” will receive an expansion called “The Uprising.” Players are cast as indigenous people under colonial **bondage**, who will work together to liberate the cities of their island from foreign rule. “In the cooperative scenario, they win when all locations are free,” Pfister says. And last year, after Ravensburger acquired the English rights to “Puerto Rico” from Rio Grande, the game was released with slight tweaks—those brown discs are now purple, and the rule book now includes a disclaimer encouraging players to educate themselves on colonialism and the “harm that it caused around the world.” When I reached the publisher for comment, a representative told me that in 2022, it will release a “re-imagined version of the game globally, created in partnership with a culturally diverse and representative team.” This time, they said, it’ll be “set in post-independence Puerto Rico, and it won’t include themes of colonialism.”