

A revolt isn't a game unless it is

Insurrection is on the table

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2023

a review of

Bloc by Bloc: Uprising, The Insurrection Game 3rd edition (Out of Order Games)

Bloc by Bloc is a strategy game inspired by contemporary protest movements. Designed and self-published by Greg Loring-Albright and TL Simons from Out of Order Games, it uses the tabletop board game format to illustrate the impact of gentrification and the power of popular uprisings. As in the two previous editions, the goal is to liberate the city before the military arrives to reestablish order. In accordance with their anarchist ethics, low-cost upgrade kits are available for owners of the second edition, and the source files are free online.

Traditionally, board games are seen as apolitical. The expression “keep politics out of gaming” is frequently used by gamers. However, strategy games are often imperialistic in theme, featuring well-known military battles, colonization, or industrialization.

In a game like *Puerto Rico*, players take the role of colonial governors. Indigenous peoples are represented as resources or obstacles to their project of territorial expansion. There are a few games that feature riots, but they tend to assume that someone plays the role of the police. Who the protagonists and enemies are often make players uncomfortable. It's acceptable for American soldiers to kill terrorists while citizens fighting the police are a problem to more traditional gamers. In *Bloc by Bloc*, all players participate in an uprising.

The game takes place on a grid representing an unnamed city that is overloaded with the usual injustices such as an immigrant detention center, a private university and an overcrowded prison. Up to four players play allied groups (neighbors, prisoners, workers and students) represented by colorful wooden blocks, while the police are the white ones.

The first few moves of the game read like a beginner's guide to protesting. The groups have their own strongholds, but these are hidden in unfrequented corners. Each round is a night and has two phases, nighttime and sunrise. The nighttime is when groups take various actions around the city while police vans move around the city and attack at sunrise. The first night or two converge on public spaces. The police arrive, protesters erect barricades and gather equipment. Strategic decisions must be made by the protesters. Will medical kits and bottles for Molotov cocktails be looted from stores for immediate use or collected for mutual aid centers?

If you are familiar with the day-to-day practices of radical organizing, you know what takes up a lot of time: meetings! Players must send one or more of their blocks to meetings. New victory condition cards are drawn according to the number of blocks present at the meeting.

Having more cards to choose from is likely to give players an easier way to win. When the cops attack, they automatically defeat the protesters, unless the player has a useful tool, like umbrellas. The use of umbrellas, both as offensive and defensive devices, has gained in popularity among protesters from Portland to Hong Kong. Other popular tools among protesters, such as soup cans used as projectiles, have been added to the game. These mechanisms underline the fact that the battle is never equal. The cops are trained and equipped to easily beat up protesters.

Each district has a difficulty value determining the difficulty of liberating it. For example, liberating a district during the sunrise phase takes double the number of blocks. When a district is finally liberated, the card is turned over. The protesters organize a big party, and the board becomes more colorful as more autonomous zones appear.

Each group present gets a choice between A or B, like a choose-your-own-adventure. The anarchist author Margaret Killjoy created micro-fictions depicting the moments of tension and joy that occur on the street during an uprising. The “Comrade Cookout” card gives you the choice between bringing plates of hot food to a nearby occupation or turning your attention to staffing the grill.

Victory is achieved at sunrise if players have occupied enough of the designated districts. To win, players must work together to push the police back and defend liberated areas from further police incursions. However, a large white tank is counting down to the arrival of the military on the game board side.

The countdown starts with ten nights remaining but moves forward as the speed of the police morale passes from timid to deadly. Once the military show up, players lose. You can’t fight the army, but you can slow it down. If you win, your newly liberated districts are allowed to continue to exist.

There are two distinct game modes: cooperative and semi-cooperative. They offer radically different representations of how insurgencies work. In cooperative mode, resources and goals are shared while each group must accomplish its own objective. Agenda cards are used in the semi-cooperative variant for three and four players to consider how many historic uprisings have been sabotaged by ulterior motives.

The vanguard and the sectarian groups are there for themselves and can only win by themselves. They betray solidarity because their agendas aim to hijack the revolution for their own ends.

Despite the attention to detail, this game is not a manual for preparing an uprising. The environment is familiar to those who have participated in such events and can help players understand the jargon used in the street or in activist writings.

In an interview with Crimethinc for a previous edition, game co-designer Simons explicitly said, “The goal of this project is to produce a fun and educational gaming experience...It’s important that we don’t take the project too seriously or overstate its political impact. That would be misleading and disrespectful to everyone who has been out there in the streets in real struggles that have real consequences.”

This third edition will be the last, according to the designers. They managed to create a synthesis of the first two editions while adding new and deeper mechanics and strategies. Hence, the new subtitle, “Uprising” instead of “Insurrection” like the previous two.

Key actions are still based on modern uprisings: building barricades, confronting the police, occupying districts, looting shopping centers and creating mutual aid networks. Fun parts like spraying ACAB on walls and throwing Molotov cocktails at police cars are also present.

Anarchists need to be able to imagine another world. This game allows them to explore the dynamics that shape social uprisings with friends around a table. That said, it’s a game for gamers more than for anarchists. Don’t expect a Monopoly-like learn-on-the-fly level of play, as *Bloc by Bloc* offers a moderate level of complexity and is aimed at board game enthusiasts. If you are an anarchist who likes to play games, real ones in the street are much more rewarding, although this one at the table won’t disappoint you.

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Fifth Estate #413, Spring, 2023

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