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**DATE**

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**DURATION**

48m 51s

**6 SPEAKERS**

Non Breaking Space

Nick Capodice

Hannah McCarthy

Archival

Tory Brown

Cole Wehrle

**START OF TRANSCRIPT****[00:00:01] Non Breaking Space**

First of all, thank you. All over there at the table. This is a game that is obviously near and dear to my heart, and I like to just sort of be able to see other people, one learn it, see them, react to it and take in. I'm not sure if you have any background or any information about the Bronx prior to this, but I think that you hopefully will walk away with at least the interest and curiosity about like, oh, okay,

**[00:00:25] Nick Capodice**

This is NB. NB stands for Non-breaking space. Who is explaining their new board game, Cross Bronx Expressway? If you've heard of.

**[00:00:33] Non Breaking Space**

The Cross Bronx Expressway, I apologize because you more than likely spent about an hour in traffic.

**[00:00:40] Nick Capodice**

I'd heard, or rather I'd seen on discord that NB was demoing this game at the MIT Game Lab in Cambridge. It was at an event I desperately wanted to go to called Games Against Oppression, and the MIT Game Lab generously let me come in and see it in action.

**[00:01:01] Non Breaking Space**

The first way that everybody can lose the game is if the city goes bankrupt. And the way this.

**[00:01:06] Nick Capodice**

And if you're curious what a game about city planning. Robert Moses eminent domain in the South Bronx from 1940 to 2000. Looks like. Just you wait and be, by the way, is anonymous. And to give full disclosure, this is an episode about board games and civics and game designers and a whole bunch of stuff. But I got to say, NBI is a friend of mine. Hanna's too. We've played games with them in person on the internet. We talk about games all the time. So who are we and what are we doing here today? People who have listened to our show for a long time know a little bit about us personally. The things we're obsessed with.

**[00:01:50] Nick Capodice**

The dolls we had as a child. Our favorite musicals. that Hannah played the cello and I the harmonica. But if you met a friend of mine on the street and you were like, hey, what's that Nick guy all about? Eventually, after the Shakespeare and the Michael Caine impressions and the books about con artists, eventually board games would come up. But we're not like a memoir show. You're probably asking, what are board games doing in a civics 101 episode? Well, stick with me. Call me a Pollyanna. Call me a big hearted galoot with stars in his eyes. But after months of madness, utter madness in the world of civics and politics, sometimes I feel that maybe, just maybe, board games could save us all. Or maybe that's too much. You're listening to Civics 101. I'm Nick Capodice.

**[00:02:52] Hannah McCarthy**

I'm Hannah McCarthy

**[00:02:54] Nick Capodice**

And today we are talking about civics in board games. Where are you at, by the way? Where are you recording this?

**[00:03:00] Hannah McCarthy**

Um, right now I am sitting in my childhood bedroom at my parents house in Braintree, Massachusetts.

**[00:03:08] Nick Capodice**

Usually we record these things in studios, but today we decided to sort of do it wherever we were. I'm in my kitchen, which is why maybe it's a little bouncy. It's going to be a miracle if no leaf blower comes in like in this neighborhood.

**[00:03:19] Hannah McCarthy**

It'll be a miracle if the cat doesn't knock at the door. She does this funny thing where she just kind of, like, slams into it. She's like.

**[00:03:27] Nick Capodice**

All right, just to kick it off, Hannah, everybody's thinking it. I'm just saying it. We both love board games. So first you tell me, why do you like games so much? Like, what do they do for you?

**[00:03:43] Hannah McCarthy**

I think it's so it's a number of things. I think if I have to be really deeply honest with myself, um, I'm someone who's a little bit hyperactive And playing a board game feels like something is matching my energy. The degree to which not all board games, but the degree to which it asks me to use parts of my brain that I don't always light up for a long time. Nick, I don't know if you remember when you and I would play board games. I might have been a little bit of a sore loser.

**[00:04:16] Nick Capodice**

You were such a sore loser. Yeah, it would, like, end the night.

**[00:04:21] Hannah McCarthy**

And I had never interrogated that part of myself. And over years and years and years of playing board games, I learned how to lose, which I think is vital to civil discourse. Like, you have to know how to lose, and you also have to know how to handle sudden shifts in the conversation with grace and dynamism. And I think board games taught me that.

**[00:04:48] Nick Capodice**

I have a bunch of reasons. As you know, I think everybody in the world should play games. And I'm going to tell everybody my deepest private reason at the end of the episode. But for a Civics 101 lens, I'm going to give the morality play reason.

**[00:05:05] Hannah McCarthy**

A morality play reason.

**[00:05:07] Nick Capodice**

Morality play reason. You know what? Morality plays are, right?

**[00:05:10] Hannah McCarthy**

Uh, yeah. I was a theater kid, Nick. Morality plays where, like, I think 15th century or something. And, um, it's the, like, devil and the angel on the shoulder. And these are these plays that, like, personify the virtues and the vices. And you've got someone who, like, follows this arc of, like, you know, being dragged down by the vices and giving over to the vices. But then there's it's usually a redemption story as well. Like eventually, like, even if someone commits avarice, in the end they will choose like charity, right?

**[00:05:42] Nick Capodice**

Yeah. Like the sins themselves would come up to you like avarice or wrath or lust would be like, you should do this. And then the angels are like, no, but I bring all this up, Hannah, because there's a book I once read called *Morality Play* by Barry Unsworth. And here's a 30 second summary of this book. And I think about this every day. So there's a troupe of actors and they're touring medieval England and they're doing morality plays, and they visit a town where a murder just happened. Now, a person had already been found guilty of a murder. This person was arrested. And the theater troupe, to make a little extra money, can't really get the butts on the seats. They decide to do a staged production of the murder. So when they're rehearsing, though, because they were playing the characters involved in the murder, they realize something. And what they realized was that it wasn't possible.

**[00:06:36] Hannah McCarthy**

Wait, like what wasn't possible?

**[00:06:40] Nick Capodice**

Any of it! The person that the town arrested couldn't have done it. None of it added up. They were wearing the wrong clothes for the season. They couldn't have held the knife in the hand. They said they did. The police arrested the wrong person. And here's the point. When you inhabit someone else, when you pretend to be doing something, you have a far different understanding of it than if you just like, read a book about it.

**[00:07:05] Hannah McCarthy**

So it sounds like you're saying that when you're playing a game, because we are talking about games here. And, you know, maybe for our show, playing a game that explores some sort of civic process, um, it maybe unlocks a new understanding of that process because you're actually participating in something. This is my big civics thing, Nick. It's like you don't get lead laws unless the president's dog dies from eating lead. Like you have to experience something to feel empathy and to understand it.

**[00:07:35] Nick Capodice**

Absolutely Hannah. Students do simulation all the time. Student council, model UN, driving simulators. The CIA does this too. The Army does this

**[00:07:47] Archival**

What's called a warfighter exercise. It is the first part of the brigade's annual training period and it involves.

**[00:07:53] Hannah McCarthy**

Yeah. So I've heard of war games. Right. And I've been like, what are they actually doing? Like, Nick, do you know what kinds of games the CIA uses to train agents?

**[00:08:04] Nick Capodice**

Yeah, they use a bunch of, uh, one is called kingpin the hunt for El Chapo, the creator of this game, Volko Ruhnke. He is a CIA intelligence educator who said, quote, it is to train analysts who might work with law enforcement and other partners around the world to find a well armed, well defended, well protected bad guy. End quote. Now this guy Volko Ruhnke, he makes lots of games that non CIA agent people love. You know, I have run games on my shelves and I didn't know he was with the CIA. And likewise the Army has a massive colossal board game. It's one they run every two years. It's called warfighter exercise. I don't think they refer to it as a game though. But what they do is they test out combat operatives in different world arenas.

**[00:08:57] Hannah McCarthy**

But you're not really a war games person, right? Like you don't you don't really play a lot of war games.

**[00:09:02] Nick Capodice**

Yeah I would not really play war fighter exercise. I don't have interest in playing at war. Hannah. Even when I play civilization, I'm like, let's just be nice to everyone and develop our sciences.

**[00:09:16] Hannah McCarthy**

I always went the religious victory route, which probably I don't know if that's because I was raised Catholic or what, but I wouldn't say that was let's be nice to everybody.

**[00:09:27] Nick Capodice**

So today I'm going to share three games with our listeners. Hannah. Now, these are not reviews of these games. There's too many other places that do that. I'm just going to give a brief explanation of what they are and what they teach us about politics. Three games that explore three different civics topics, because there are games like that out there nowadays.

**[00:09:47] Tory Brown**

It is not just risk and monopoly anymore. Thank goodness.

**[00:09:53] Nick Capodice**

This is Tory Brown. She is the designer of the board game Votes for Women.

**[00:09:58] Tory Brown**

So Votes for Women is a board game I designed about the American woman suffrage movement and the ratification of the 19th amendment. It is primarily when you play it. You look at a map, you draw cards, you're trying to build power in states, and you are playing back and forth. Suffrage versus opposition to recreate the time period from 1848 to 1920, when our American woman suffrage movement was successful in ratifying the 19th amendment.

**[00:10:27] Hannah McCarthy**

Okay, so some people play like the actual suffrage movement, people who are fighting for a woman's right to vote, and then others play the opposition to that.

**[00:10:38] Nick Capodice**

Yeah. Would you be willing to play as opposition?

**[00:10:42] Hannah McCarthy**

Um, know thine enemy, right?

**[00:10:47] Nick Capodice**

And the reason Tory wanted a player at the table to play opposition is because opposition was real and is real.

**[00:10:56] Tory Brown**

Opposition was a real nuanced effort to stop social progress. And we know that those forces sort of never really went away. And I think to learn about our history and help us think about our present so that we can get engaged in a better future for us all. People have been extraordinarily resistant. Some some people have been extraordinarily resistant to playing opposition, which I think really took me by surprise. Board gaming, and specifically war gaming folks play as Nazis. Folks play as the Confederacy. They play all sorts of unsavory or distasteful sides. But folks who have no problem playing as the as a Confederate really been resistant to the idea of playing as opposition. And when we talk about it, when they post, when I'm able to sort of have a conversation, people say it just feels really personal, that they know their mom, their wife, that women in their lives, it feels that it drains some of the fun out of the activity to play in opposition.

**[00:12:02] Nick Capodice**

Just as an interesting side note to anyone out there who says this is all dusty history and it's in the past and we're over it. Women have the vote. Facebook banned ads for the Kickstarter of this game because it dealt with a quote unquote sensitive social issue.

**[00:12:17] Hannah McCarthy**

Because it dealt with like, racism or what I don't understand.

**[00:12:23] Nick Capodice**

I don't actually understand either. I think just advocating to get women the right to vote was enough to be like, oh, not right now. We're in sort of a tough political time. Mhm.

**[00:12:32] Hannah McCarthy**

Okay. Have you played Votes for Women?

**[00:12:35] Nick Capodice**

I have not, not in person because in spite of banned ads it is sold out and it's in a reprint right now. So I've just played it online and can I just say real quick it is gorgeous, Hannah. The art on the cards and on the board. It comes from a massive archive of primary sources like leaflets, newspapers, cartoons, photographs, etc. not.

**[00:12:57] Tory Brown**

Every historical board gamer is gifted with such great primary sourcing, but a big reason I think the game is so beautiful is the graphic designer that I worked with Bridget and Delicado, and it meant a lot to me as a woman to be able to work with another woman on this project. And she created this, this overall visual style, a motif that sort of harkens to the scrapbooks of the era.

**[00:13:23] Hannah McCarthy**

All right. So what are you doing in this game? Like, what's what's the game play? What's the mechanic?

**[00:13:27] Nick Capodice**

You are moving around the country trying to foster or quash support for women's suffrage. So you play cards to campaign in states, to organize, to lobby, to trigger events. It is six turns in total, and it takes about an hour or so.

**[00:13:44] Hannah McCarthy**

To your whole morality play idea here. Nick, what does Tory want? Players to leave the game understanding in a different way? What what sort of change does Tori hope happens?

**[00:13:57] Tory Brown**

The idea for the game is that movements are magic and that it took 70 years. Untold number of people, and a lot of hard work to ensure that women across America were full citizens of this country. There's still a lot of work on, you know, on voting rights and on who gets to be full counted Americans.

**[00:14:23] Nick Capodice**

This game truly makes you feel the difficulty in getting an amendment ratified. It makes you understand different coalitions.

**[00:14:32] Hannah McCarthy**

I do wonder because, you know, we made two episodes on the 19th amendment. I, I fell down the rabbit hole on this world of suffragists in America. And many of the women in this movement, especially the most powerful women in this movement, were racist. They used horrible language. Um, there were some leaders who claimed that white women should get the vote before black men, and they criticized the 15th amendment. Does Tori address that in this game?

**[00:15:01] Nick Capodice**

She does.

**[00:15:02] Tory Brown**

It is ultimately like the crux of the game. You cannot ignore the issue of race. It is a part of American history at every turn, right? It's not like some college professors at Berkeley in 1992 just decided to, like, invent woke language right? In the newspaper. They're talking about white supremacy in 1910. This is the language of our history, and this is language that we need to deal with and understand has not just been invented as some kind of divisive topic. This is like the thread of our American history.

**[00:15:37] Nick Capodice**

Votes for Women 60 minutes. Not difficult to learn. Super fun. You learn a whole lot, not just about history, but like Tori said, the power of movements. All right, break time. Get some pretzels and fill the tumbler. Two more games and maybe an excess of inside baseball when we get back.

**[00:15:56] Hannah McCarthy**

Where did that term come from, Nick? Inside baseball.

**[00:15:59] Nick Capodice**

So it comes from the 1890s. And the inside in this expression means like inside the park. At this time, people thought baseball was like hitting dingers, like hitting home runs. But if you play an inside baseball, you're not focusing on that. You're focusing on getting people on base through walks and bunts and clever plays and all that. It's not as fun, maybe for the crowd to watch, but you're really working the system instead of just like slamming dingers over the fence. Well, if you are a fan of inside or outside baseball, and by baseball I mean civics, and you want the 101 from 200 episodes in book form, check out the one that Hannah and I wrote. It's called A User's Guide to Democracy How America Works, and you can get it wherever.

**[00:16:42] Hannah McCarthy**

We're back.

**[00:16:52] Hannah McCarthy**

We're talking about board games and civics. All right, Nick, you said there were three games, right? So give me number two.

**[00:16:58] Nick Capodice**

All right. Game number two is one that we have played Hannah. We're going to talk about the company.

**[00:17:05] Hannah McCarthy**

Mhm. I know what you're talking about here.

**[00:17:07] Nick Capodice**

Tax laws nepotism. It's John company picky spouses fancy houses play John company.

**[00:17:14] Hannah McCarthy**

If you continue along these lines I will have to take a little break and, uh, work on my Elaine Stritch. So let's just let's get moving here.

**[00:17:23] Nick Capodice**

And John company, you fail a roll if you roll a five, and then you can sing rolling a five. The game is John Company.

**[00:17:34] Cole Wehrle**

John Company is a business game, but it is unlike other business games because in John Company there is only one business. It's a game about a state sponsored monopoly.

**[00:17:43] Nick Capodice**

This is Cole Wehrle of Wehrlegig Games and Leder Games. He is the designer of John Company. The state sponsored monopoly, by the way, is the British East India Company, nicknamed John Company, which accounted for half of the world's trade in the late 1700s.

**[00:18:01] Hannah McCarthy**

And I think it's very important to mention here that the actions of John Company probably accounted for. I don't know the percentage, but a whole lot of, uh, nefarious and evil and bad actions.

**[00:18:13] Nick Capodice**

Yeah, it did, Hannah. And I swear I'm gonna get to that.

**[00:18:16] Cole Wehrle**

And in this game, the work of that one business is divided among several players. So in this game, you are running a business together and apart, and you will sometimes find yourself having to work with your rivals within the company. And sometimes you will find yourself having to work against them. And the result is it produces a business that behaves very idiosyncratically, and this is the perfect timbre to use to describe the rise and fall of the British East India Company, which is a state sponsored charter, and the game tracks its history from 1710 till its collapse in 1857.

**[00:18:48] Nick Capodice**

As of this moment, I have not yet played a game that accurately depicts the machinations of US government, what it is like to bargain and trade and pass a budget and enact legislation. If that game does exist and I just don't know about it, please email me. But John Company is, in my experience, the closest thing to that. So who are you? You are the heads of families who are trying to get rich and powerful, and you get rich and powerful. By running a budget, you are collectively spending money to hire armies to elect each other to positions of power within the company. You build trade offices in India. You install your kid as the governor of Bombay. You bribe the Prime Minister to pass laws that lower the taxes on your shipyards. There are a thousand other things you do, but what's it all for? All the looting and the hoarding and the nepotism. What's it all for? It's for a nice rich house in the country with lots of windows. And you can live in it when you retire.

**[00:19:51] Hannah McCarthy**

And I suppose you could also look at the American political system in that way.

**[00:19:57] Cole Wehrle**

There are connections between the United States and the East India Company, the Boston Tea Party. The tea dumped was East India Company tea. The United States flag looks a lot like the same flag that was used by the British East India Company.

**[00:20:11] Nick Capodice**

I have written about this in a few newsletters, but real quick I encourage everyone out there right now just look up a picture of the East India Company's flag from 1707. Just do it and I guarantee you will let out a gasp or like at least a mm.

**[00:20:28] Hannah McCarthy**

Mm because it's pretty much the American flag.



**[00:20:30] Nick Capodice**

It's pretty much the American flag. Yeah.

**[00:20:32] Cole Wehrle**

And it's important to note that in the late 18th century, the East India Company, while despised in certain circles, was admired. In others. It was a modern corporation with a very low overhead and tremendous profitability. It was run by kind of, quote unquote, enlightened principles. And some of those principles involved profit. And so, you see, when you start looking in the framework of the East India Company, overlaps in terms there are presidencies in India, they're managed by presidents. It's an executive system. So there are these little bits of overlap where it seems like if you know the same framers of the Constitution when they're at the convention, if they would have been reading the British newspapers, they would have been reading about the East India Company and the regulatory regime. And certainly I feel like some of those ideas have found their seat in our own system of governance.

**[00:21:22] Hannah McCarthy**

You know what I kind of love about this? Because I am a cynical person, but I think cynicism is healthy and important for understanding. And, um, you know, we think of our framers as these intellectuals who were diving deeply into the histories of Athens and Rome and the writings of all of these philosophers and interest in the enlightenment. And, you know, they're thinking, how are we going to run this great monarch free experiment? And then at the same time, they're also looking at this unbelievably successful and wealthy and nefarious British corporation and saying, you know, maybe, maybe, uh, they got some things right. Yeah.

**[00:22:06] Nick Capodice**

Like a little bit of. Yes. And they're, you know, England was a monarchy. I mean, we don't want to do it like that, but I mean, look at these guys. They elect officers for terms of varying length. They vote on stuff democratically. As a company. They're rich as can be. I mean, that's kind of an interesting model, isn't it? I was going to say Rich Roosevelt, but they know Roosevelt back then.

**[00:22:27] Hannah McCarthy**

All right. But we still haven't gotten to the fact that the British East India Company did really bad stuff. And, you know, when I was playing John Company, I'm in this moment trying to figure out how to make as much money as possible in Punjab. And, you know, while I'm doing it, it's like, can I prevent a truly justifiable revolution from happening? Uh, and I just had this feeling of like, I should not be playing at this. I shouldn't I shouldn't be gamifying this.

**[00:23:00] Nick Capodice**

I absolutely agree, and that discomfort is deliberate. You should wonder that every second.

**[00:23:09] Cole Wehrle**

So the rulebook of John Company is bookended by two short essays. One of them is an introduction to the game, which ends with a note that the game is going to deal with subjects of imperialism and empire, and not that's not going to be suitable for all groups and all interests. So before you turn the page, you know, I want people to be aware that there's a monster at the end of the book. Um, and it's going to be up to a player's judgment if they want to go out hunting for that monster, because the East India Company, for most people who know anything about it, know it to be quite a venal and evil institution. Um, this is a company that was responsible for more than one famine, the deaths of millions of people, depending on how those numbers are tabulated. Um, the emergence of the of the British Empire in the 19th century. It's got a bad rap sheet, and yet it was populated by humans like you and me, by people who were often well-intentioned. And when I was a teacher, I often found students had a tendency to sort the past into categories of good and evil, to pass a lot of judgment, and to have difficulty imagining themselves and the kinds of positions of their historic counterparts. And of course, as is said often, you know, the past is another country. It's a totally strange place, but games are a way of bridging that divide. They are, you know, engines of sympathy, as one critic had said. And there are ways of transporting players. And I wanted to present players with the kind of banal reality of those big imperial frameworks. I want them to see how everyday people, when working in concert, can throw a bunch of small and even good decisions and aggregate produce something quite awful.

**[00:25:03] Nick Capodice**

Like Tory said earlier, Hannah, there are games where you play as Nazis, there are games where you play as the Confederacy. But in my experience, those games don't make you wrestle with the notion of why you're doing what you're doing. You're just trying to, you know, like win this war or win this battle. Put those tanks over there and those troops over there and bang, I win in John company, though on one side you're staring at this massive map of India, and then on the other side, you're looking at these quaint English countryside estates you are forced to reckon with the reason why you're doing what you're doing. And the game sort of like even mocks any attempt you make to distance yourself from the ramifications of your actions. Like, are you really going to say, well, it wasn't me who colonized anything, I'm just the director of shipping. I just deal with fishing boats. I didn't try to create an empire.

**[00:25:53] Hannah McCarthy**

It makes me think of that fairly well-known expression of Hannah Arendt's used to describe Nazi Germany. You know, she called it the banality of evil. Um, essentially, there's true evil in the world, and it is also facilitated by administration and bureaucracy, and evil is parceled out among so many people, so many tiny little actions, responsibility and a sense of what you're actually engaging in becomes diluted and compartmentalized.

**[00:26:28] Nick Capodice**

I don't think you could have put that a better way, Hannah. There is so much more I want to say about John Company, about window taxes and empire and playing with that line between historical reality and fiction. But I'm just going to end with this. Before I played John Company, I knew next to nothing about the British East India Company, and since playing it, I have bought two books. I've listened to 20 podcast episodes about it. I'm obsessed now. Is it fun? I don't know. Hannah, do you think it's fun?

**[00:27:04] Hannah McCarthy**

No I don't. I play a lot of games that I love, that I don't consider fun, but I love them deeply.

**[00:27:14] Nick Capodice**

You know people say things that get like, put on their Wikipedia page and they last forever. And I don't know if Cole Worley wants this to be on his tombstone, but he has said publicly he is, quote, not interested in whether or not a game is fun, end quote. So John Company may be a game for you might not be a game for you. But however you feel, I promise you this, even if you don't have a good time playing it, which I really hope you do, you will come away knowing something and feeling something completely new. All right.

**[00:27:54] Hannah McCarthy**

All right. Two games down, one to go. Um, is this last one the one that I'm really jealous that you got to play and I didn't? Yeah. All right, tell me about Cross Bronx Expressway.

**[00:28:08] Nick Capodice**

So far, we've got a game that teaches us about the suffrage movement. And we've got a game that teaches us about the intermingling of politics and corporation and empire in the late 18th century. But our third and final game is it is about the stuff, Hannah, that you and I talk about on every single Civics 101 episode. It is about how the government, its people, i.e. Americans and businesses all pull and tug on each other to answer this question what are we doing? What do we do as a government? Who do we help? Who do we hurt? How do we do it? Who gets the money? So to learn about it, I called up Non-breaking space and I called and be up. When we in America and civics in general was just like having a week. You know, we've.

**[00:29:00] Hannah McCarthy**

Been having a lot of those lately.

**[00:29:01] Non Breaking Space**

I'm good man, I'm good. I'm just sort of like dealing with the day to day of 2024, you know, it's just, you know, like this can be on the podcast. Man, I told you, you got me right now. This is what you got, right? Like, um, it's a hard time in the world right now. And just the day to day, I think if you're not reflecting on the harshness that you see around you on a day to day, then you probably should be.

**[00:29:27] Nick Capodice**

But anyways, here's what the game is about.



**[00:29:29] Non Breaking Space**

So at a high level, Cross-bronx Expressway presents the history of the South Bronx from 1940 to 2000, and I could probably stop the description at that, at which point you say, either you know what that is or you have no idea what that is, and say, cool. Like if you know what that is, though, it's a pretty like I think of it as a template for urban development in the late 20th century and its impacts on, um, sort of the in this microcosm of that impact on a global scale in terms of how we've sort of done, um, as human beings. And so looking at that period, the game sort of allows you to understand some of the decisions that were made and the impacts of those decisions from a socio economic perspective.

**[00:30:25] Nick Capodice**

Hannah you know how we always say that local politics is more important than federal politics, like it impacts our life. More specifically, I do.

**[00:30:33] Hannah McCarthy**

And we also say that because the role that you can play in state and local politics, I think is more significant, right? I mean, like when it comes down to it, politics is people, even though we sometimes pretend it's not. And, uh, if you can talk to people, you can do more. So that's why we say it. But it is, you know, hard to pay all that much attention to such things when, you know, as we are less than 100 days before a presidential election, you know, it can be a little bit hard to pay attention to. I don't know what your comptroller is doing.

**[00:31:09] Nick Capodice**

Well, this game is a distillation of hyper local politics.

**[00:31:14] Non Breaking Space**

And so what's the South Bronx represents? You know, New York City is five boroughs Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island and the Bronx. I said that in the wrong order. And my Bronx people know that. I do know the right order, but I just wanted the Bronx to be last. Um, but, um, the the history of the South Bronx is really interesting in the structure of that broader city, because they're sort of migratory patterns that have happened in New York that revolve around the space of residential spaces in the city. You can go back and look at the whole history of immigration in New York, and there's this cycle of different immigrant populations moving to different locations in New York and sort of relocating their communities as the city itself sort of evolved.

**[00:32:00] Hannah McCarthy**

All right. So what happens in this game?

**[00:32:03] Nick Capodice**

Whenever I teach a game to people, and I think I learned this from the brilliant lads of the board game review website. Shut up and sit down. When you teach a game, you should start with these eight words. Who are we and what are we doing? In cross Bronx, a game for three players and it's got to be three players. Exactly. You each play as one of three factions.

**[00:32:27] Non Breaking Space**

So there's three factions. The first faction is the public faction, which represents sort of the government entities, both at multiple levels, at the borough level, at the city level, at the state level, and going all the way up to the federal level. There are implications that all of those for what's happening in the Bronx. And so the public player is sort of representative of that. And then you have the private, which is really about private businesses that are in the area and not necessarily always like big corporate entities that we think of today. But they're like even like small, um, business entities from people that live just outside of the Bronx. And I do want to make that delineation of that. The private is considered those people that own businesses in the Bronx that live outside of the Bronx, um, or our investment. Investing in. So there's also the bankers and all those things that are putting money into this area but do not reside within it. And then the community is the last faction is really all of those people that are within. And it includes the businesses like the small business owners, the people that own their own buildings, things like that are included in this community faction, um, that is representative of all of the different diversity that happens of people in the South Bronx.

**[00:33:41] Hannah McCarthy**

All right. So one player is the government, one player is businesses outside of the neighborhood, and one player is the actual community in the South Bronx.

**[00:33:52] Nick Capodice**

Exactly. And I'm not going to explain all the rules today, but basically what you're doing is you're building infrastructure and organizations to help people out and or to help you out. So you've got people in the neighborhoods which are these unpainted wooden cubes.

**[00:34:08] Non Breaking Space**

And then there are these little pink cubes, and the little pink cubes are called vulnerabilities, and they represent the vulnerabilities that exist within the communities. The map is split into the seven districts of the South Bronx, and in each of those districts, you can have a number of an amount of infrastructure that can then house the population. So you're putting the wooden cubes, the natural wooden cubes onto these tiles that represent the infrastructure that's in those districts. And so when there are then little small pink cubes inside of those districts, it means that within that community there are some vulnerabilities that are being dealt with. And this is just like common things that, you know, like, do you have the resources to get your kid to school every day? Are you living hand to mouth to just be able to buy, to pay the rent or even things like, um, do you have transportation to get to work every day? You know, those types of things are the vulnerabilities where if you don't have them, they can trip the that part of the community up into patterns that just downward spiral.

**[00:35:17] Nick Capodice**

However you can house vulnerabilities in your infrastructure. Your faction can mitigate vulnerabilities. And you know it might not be in your organization's best interest to do so. You're taking care of lots of other stuff. You're trying to make money. You're trying to make sure New York City doesn't go broke and you don't go broke. But if you don't take care of them, things can go pretty badly pretty quickly.

**[00:35:39] Non Breaking Space**

If these vulnerabilities grow in each of the districts to large, where there are unhoused or vulnerabilities that are not housed in infrastructure, there comes the census phase at the end of the decade, and during the census phase, there is a quota. And the quota basically represents the city having to sort of deal and contend with how things are as a whole and quotas being a big method that was utilized, and how these vulnerabilities then end up in the corrections facilities of Rikers Island on the map.

**[00:36:14] Nick Capodice**

And events happen based on the decades you choose to play things like redlining, suburbanization, blackouts, presidents and presidential hopefuls visiting the Bronx.

**[00:36:26] Archival**

Concern, the Republican nominee traveled to the South Bronx. Is there more. Jobs coming through the Bronx for us? I am going to try as hard as I can. All I can tell you is that I'm going to try to bring that about, and not with the kind of a promise that Carter made.

**[00:36:44] Hannah McCarthy**

Did NB give you essentially, you know, a thesis statement for this game?

**[00:36:50] Nick Capodice**

He did, and he gave it to me in one word, modernity.

**[00:36:54] Non Breaking Space**

You get to this point in New York's history where the wave of modernity is just too big to fail. And that's sort of like, I think that's one of those concepts that's hard to think of, like, what does that mean? The wave of modernity is too big to fail. And this is like at the juncture of the rise of interstate highways. And the New York State Thruway is coming through. Cars are becoming bigger and bigger and more important, but also the transportation of things through automotive vehicles is becoming more important. So the highways are getting bigger and all of that. And New York City represents this hub of activity for the East Coast and indeed for the for the globe.

**[00:37:33] Archival**

We need this marvelous superhighway to end traffic jams like this, to take trucks out of our cities and put an end to this.

**[00:37:42] Non Breaking Space**

And so all of this traffic has to converge in New York in some way.

**[00:37:49] Archival**

Here. Thruway Authority Chairman B.D. Ptolemy discusses the 535 mile superhighway system with Robert Moses, guiding genius of our cities, parkway system and city construction coordinator. New York City is the focal point in this system.

**[00:38:03] Nick Capodice**

Now, this history of the Bronx and the game starts before World War two. Lots of projects had started before that, but when the war hits, the budget is frozen. So you have a neighborhood that is full of stalled infrastructure.

**[00:38:17] Non Breaking Space**

So nobody can spend any money. So they're not doing any of these projects until after the war. And then there's all of these people right front and center, ready to sort of go and say, hey, we've got the plans ready, let's get this going. Let's get this thing in action. We're already 4 or 5 years behind because of this war. Let's go. And so that happens, which is the, again, the inevitability of this wave of modernity comes and the pattern of utilizing the movement of immigrants to different locations to sort of build up their sort of or even more specifically, to sort of climb their way up the social status ladder, basically is in the way and it's in the way, in the same way that the physical location of the South Bronx is in the way of where all of these highways are going to converge and come together to be able to draw this traffic through the city. And that is what the game of the South Bronx Expressway is about. One of the reasons that I made this game is because of the love that I really have for the Bronx as a whole, as it's really about like community and hard working community, like people just like getting up to go to work and do their job and want to come back home and feel like home. And that's what people have been forever. Just striving to do is just be able to have that life, to do their work and come back and feel home.

**[00:39:57] Nick Capodice**

Non-breaking space. Cross Bronx Expressway. Now, by the way, NB did a ton of archival research for this game. He even wrote a history book to go along with it like it goes in the box of the game. I promise you again, you're going to learn something new.

**[00:40:12] Hannah McCarthy**

All right, so I know we've covered the three games here, Nick, but if we may, I would like to go back to something that we talked about at the beginning of the episode. You know, there are so many games out there. Um, they go by a lot of terms. There are Euro games, worker placement, deck builders, dungeon crawlers, and a seemingly infinite number of war games. Right? Move in tanks on hexes. And there just seem to be far, far fewer games that explore, for example, civics concepts. Which honestly, that's a little bit odd to me because politics politicking is a game, right? It might be one of the most gamey things we human beings do. Um, Voting. Negotiating. Achieving policy. Campaigning. Right. Why? So many, like, very war specific games and so few about politics.

**[00:41:15] Cole Wehrle**

A great question. Why so much war in games? Uh, why why so much war? I mean, games are always a reflection of the culture that produces them. And so and in that way, one of the things that you see in the mid 20th century, with the rise of historical game publishers such as Avalon Hill, is a desire to make games which had often been a pedagogical, a child enterprise, a toy to make them seem more adult. And the way they did that is they made them into what was thought of as scientific war games. These were historical studies, and there was nothing more serious than the Battle of Gettysburg. And so they were a way for games to generate credibility. And then, of course, that itself became an ascetic. And there they were. It was reflecting back the, you know, a war movie from Hollywood. When you look at a lot of those Avalon Hill covers, what they are are redraws and scans and remixes, collages of movie posters. They're all kind of militaristic esthetic as ricocheting around our little, our little cultural box.

**[00:42:17] Nick Capodice**

You could also ask, why are there so many games about colonizing or settling somewhere and acquiring resources?

**[00:42:24] Tory Brown**

These games that, like the whole point is to colonize foreign lands and extract their wealth. Maybe we don't want to wait. We could make these these conversations. We could make these agreements among ourselves. And, you know, capitalism responds to these kinds of forces and agreements among communities where we'll see fewer of those games and hopefully more games that give you a little something more, whether that's history, whether that's decision space, whether that's the opportunity to be creative in a different kind of way, whether, right, like there's all of these different directions we can head when we allow ourselves to move forward in a way that recognizes each other's shared humanity. That allows for different preferences to flourish, but creates a sort of bottom line on what is acceptable, what is desirable, and what is important to have on our table and on our shelves.

**[00:43:20] Nick Capodice**

And to revisit something we talked about earlier. Why is fun the most important thing?

**[00:43:27] Non Breaking Space**

I mean, let's let's back up for a second. Like, I definitely enjoy games for fun. I think we've played some games where it's just like, yeah, let's just have some game for some fun. And there's a sense within the hobby at large that that's what games are, that games are fun, right? Um, they're escapist. They're ways that you can sort of say, let me take a break from my day to day and just do something that's, you know, Fun. This, that notion really being institutionalized within the hobby, like this is a notion within the hobby. I think at a high level, if you ask over 50%, and I think much more than 50% of the hobby, if you did a survey, it would be like, yeah, games are supposed to be fun. If it's not fun, it's not a game. Um, it's something else and not really what people are up for. And I think that notion itself is detrimental to what games can be. And so it is also framed what types of games get made and how they get made. And so when you ask this question in terms of like war games and why so much of gaming is from this perspective, it's really a question of, well, how can you simulate the fun? And just think, it.

**[00:44:55] Non Breaking Space**

Just take that for a second and think about like, well, how can we simulate the fun? Let's take a topic and how can we simulate the fun and fun in a war? Context ultimately boils down to some degree of propaganda. Like you can't escape that, and that is honestly a dis justice injustice to our broader humanity. Like it's a misrepresentation for our personal benefit over the collective benefit of addressing things more seriously is where I'm going to end up getting in trouble. Because like, I love playing games for fun. Like I was saying before, like that, like that's me. You know, I have a, like, dark and deep history with games, um, going back and in my later days I've sort of come around to this notion of like, yes, I can do that, but that's not the games that I want to make.

**[00:46:06] Hannah McCarthy**

Very last thing here. You promised that you would share your secret reason why you love games so much. So give it up.

**[00:46:16] Nick Capodice**

All right. I feel that games are a different language, and you can say things to people in that language that you don't in any other way. I used to have this music teacher who said that when I played the trumpet, that's a different language, and I'm speaking in that language and conveying things that my heart wants to, that I can't any other way. And games are that for me. So for a shared hour or 5 or 12, you are able to express joy, defeat, love, excitement, trickery, astonishment, everything and it is like a play. I subscribe to the notion that acting is just living under imaginary circumstances and a game is that too? It's an excuse to do that. And like in a play, you will discover things about your friends and yourself every minute. So go play a game.

**[00:47:16]**

So many thanks I have to give. If you like what the three designers I spoke with are putting down. Check out their other stuff. NB is working on a game called The Council about a city council. Can you believe it? Cole is about to publish something he made with Jo Kelly called Molly House. It is a game of queer joy and betrayal in 18th century London, and Fort Circle is working on one about the Supreme Court called the First Monday in October. Krys, you think I'm gonna forget you? Krys Bigosinski and Kate Sykes. Those are the two people responsible for letting me know about the interaction among the CIA and the Army and the military and board games. Thanks, guys. Also, I have to thank The Acceptables who make me love games and myself more and more each day, and especially MJ, who never uses real swords. This episode was made by me Nick Capodice with Hannah McCarthy. Big surprise. Our staff includes senior producer Christina Phillips and executive producer Rebecca Lavoie. Music. In this episode by Jesse Gallagher, Meyden, Scott Holmes, Blue Dot sessions, A bunch by Epidemic Sound and who loves you and who do you love? Chris Zabriskie.

**[00:48:27] Nick Capodice**

Hey, before I go, can I just say this when I say play a game? I don't just mean these intricate, wonderful, complex things. Play poker, play cribbage, play scrabble, play hearts, kid. They work well. Civics 101 is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



