

# 11 Theses and an Anti-Auth Board Game

# Authoritarian

## The Theses

1. In a disenchanted era of relentless work and worry, the lure of reactionary conspiracy theories is driven by the promise of meaning and community.
2. Capitalism's advocates claim it provides humanity's first and only level playing field. But most people feel trapped in a ruthless game they have no hope of winning.
3. In the condescending view of the dominant intelligentsia, the conspiracist is a lonely crank, bordering on psychotic. But conspiracists often build worlds that foster pleasure, collective fun, and connection. Their worldbuilding is a dangerous form of play.
4. The powers-that-be tell us education is the key to remedying conspiracism; but hegemonic education is part of the problem giving rise to conspiracism in the first place.

5. **Corruption and collusion have always been part of capitalism's systemic contradictions. It is foolish to deny this. But to simply imagine capitalism as one big conspiracy is dangerous, misleading, and intoxicating.**
6. **If conspiracy fantasies are the "poor person's cognitive mapping" in the disorienting totality of capitalism, then the role of intellectuals cannot be merely to provide more accurate maps. It must be to convoke experiences of radical map-making.**
7. **Liberal critiques of conspiracies admit that inequality breeds resentment, which in turn fuels disinformation. But capitalism is also inherently alienating and its enclosure of the human desire for play drives us towards dangerous conspiratorial play.**
8. **Mainstream commentators bemoan the "falling rate of reason" in what they see as a world beset by irrationality. But they refuse to recognize this is symptomatic of an irrational profit-driven system, where reason is constantly instrumentalised.**
9. **In a disenchanted world, the far-right has weaponised conspiracy theories in order to destroy the thing we call reality and to open new theatres of violent play and revanchist re-enchantment.**
10. **Our work as counter-conspiracists, who believe a better world is possible, must include seizing the means of enchantment.**
11. **So far, critics have only tried to debunk the worlds of conspiracies; the point, however, is to game them.**

## Enter Clue-Anon: Gaming authoritarianism

Clue-Anon is an anti-authoritarian board game for up to four players. We developed it at a time when more and more digital and tabletop games were being released with the aim to teach players that conspiracism is dangerous. In contrast, our game recognizes that conspiracism is often attractive because it is playful and creative, and because it harnesses people's scepticism and critical thinking, albeit towards nefarious ends. The game is inspired by the rise of the Q-Anon conspiracy fantasy, which repackages heinous anti-Semitic myths to suggest a vast global conspiracy to abduct and torture children. Clue-Anon reflects, in particular, on the game-like nature of this fantasy, in which believers/players use digital media to create conspiracist communities that manifest in the offline world – sometimes violently. The game asks players to take on the role of media manipulators, who each have something to gain from spreading the conspiracy: the social media corporations are eager to make money; the megalomaniacal YouTube grifter wants followers; the troll armies are just in it for the laughs; true believers want to grow their cult; and only the independent journalist seems to want to learn the truth. By imagining themselves in these roles and strategising accordingly, players learn that conspiracies can be fun, but that they are also the product of intentional manipulation.

The following scenario is a fictional composite of real playtesting experiences. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, we have not been recording player responses during playtest sessions but we have been, rather, relying on fieldnotes and participant-observation.

Sam, Des, Vish and Moos sit down to play Clue-Anon. They are confronted with an enigmatic board. In each match, the players must try to discover which three parties are engaged in a nefarious conspiracy – in this case, say “who unleashed the global pandemic?” During each game, the same nine cards representing nine conspirators (which include the Military Industrial Complex, Aliens, Satanists, the Deep State) are dealt: the three “real conspirators” are hidden underneath the board; the six that remain are placed face-down on spaces on top of the board. The players will not find out until the end of the game (after six turns) who the three “real conspirators” are. How will they find out? On the surface, the objective of the game is fairly simple: players must take turns spending in-game resources (money and followers) to uncover the six face-down suspect cards on top of the board, in order to deduce who the remaining three “real conspirators” beneath the board are. But things are a little more complex!

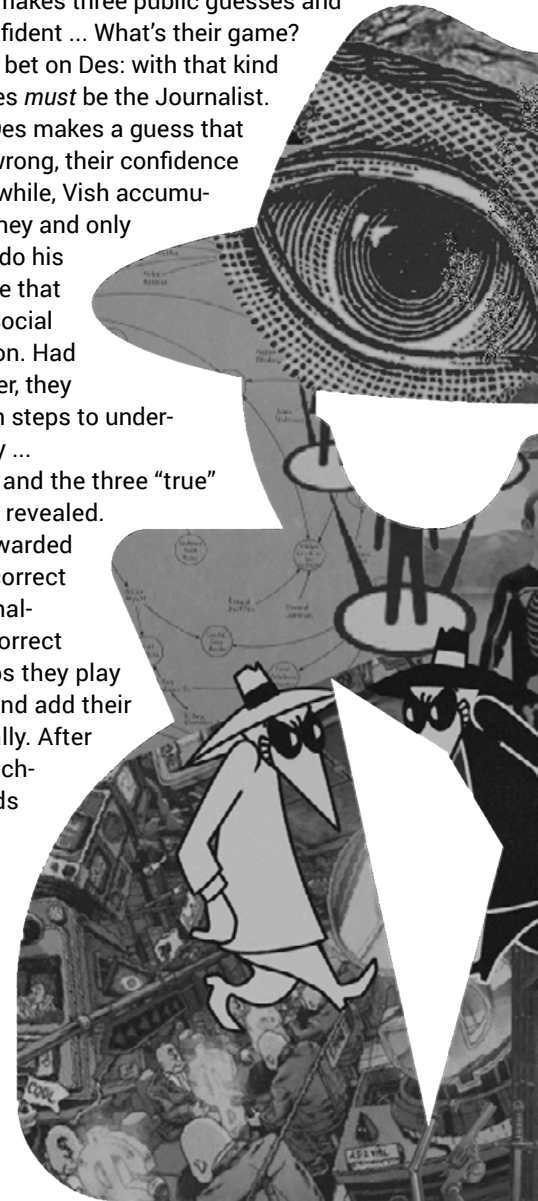
Players start the game by drawing character cards, which they keep secret. These characters have special objectives beyond correctly guessing the conspiracy. Sam draws the Independent Journalist character: she will get a bonus if the other players guess the real conspirators. By contrast, Des draws the True Believers character: their goal is to accumulate as many followers as possible. Meanwhile, Vish draws the Social Media Corporation character: he will be trying to make as much money as he can. And Moos is playing the Intelligence Agent, whose job is to try to guess everyone else's secret character. All of them pretend to be an Independent Journalist: everyone wants to convince

their opponents that they only care about the truth. They only reveal their characters at the end of the game. If the other players guess their identity, they lose points.

At the beginning of the game, each player receives resource tokens representing one dollar and one follower; they will receive this pair of tokens again with each turn. During the first few rounds, players use their resources to take a look at the six conspirators on top of the board, noting who *is not* part of the “real” conspiracy on private pieces of paper. Each round, an event card is revealed, changing the flow of the game and introducing more elements of chance. For example, players can sell their followers’ data to make money, or gain followers from a celebrity endorsement. The event cards represent real-life events that might occur in the trajectory of a conspiracy theory rising to prominence.

It soon becomes clear to all the players that they do not have enough resources (money and followers) to look at all the six face-down conspirator cards in the six rounds of the game. How can they get more resources? They must lie. In the second round, even before it is possible to know who the three hidden “real conspirators” are, Vish places a token face up in front of him, announcing he believes the Evil Corporation is one of the three conspirators. Is he lying? Is he guessing? At the end of the game, if Vish’s guess is correct, he will earn points; if he is wrong, he will lose them. Maybe he will change his guess before the end of the match. Or maybe he holds the True Believers card, and his special power is that he does not lose points for wrong guesses... The other players are left to wonder: should they follow suit and also guess that the Evil Corporation is in on the conspiracy? Regardless, with every turn from now until the end of the game, Vish is going to receive extra money and followers as a reward for making his guess public, which he can use to look at more conspirator cards.

Following suit, almost all the players make public guesses and are raking in the resources – but not Sam. Does that mean she is the Independent Journalist? Or maybe she is just bluffing ... Meanwhile, Des makes three public guesses and seems really confident ... What’s their game? Moos decides to bet on Des: with that kind of confidence, Des *must* be the Journalist. But then, when Des makes a guess that Moos knows is wrong, their confidence is shaken. Meanwhile, Vish accumulates tons of money and only late in the game do his opponents realize that he must be the Social Media Corporation. Had they known earlier, they might have taken steps to undermine his strategy ... The match ends and the three “true” conspirators are revealed. Each player is awarded points for their correct guesses and penalized for their incorrect guesses. Perhaps they play another match and add their points to their tally. After two or three matches, the game ends and the players finally reveal their secret characters and gain (or lose) extra points, depending on their bonuses: Sam, the Independent Journalist, gets extra points for every time the other players correctly guessed the real conspiracy ... Vish, the Social Media Corporation, gets extra points for his huge stash of money.



## What do players think?

After the game, the four friends talk it over. Sam enjoyed playing the Independent Journalist and reflects on how hard it was to convince the other players she was genuine, as Des and Moos were also falsely claiming to be the Journalist. Des was initially frustrated because they realized they would never be able to gather enough resources or have enough time in a game to look at

all six face-down suspects, and thus accurately deduce the three “true” conspirators: they tend to like games where the path to victory is clear. But after a round or two they got into the hoaxing and really sunk their teeth into the Government Agent character.

It reminded them of stories they had heard from their grandmother about growing up in an authoritarian state, where the government purposely spun conspiracy theories in order to defame opponents and distract people from their own nefarious activities. Vish reflected that the character of the YouTube Grifter was the most important, because it revealed how monetized social media platforms

actively encourage the conspiracism that starts as entertainment but quickly descends into paranoia – or worse.

Sam thinks the game is useful because it teaches people to be sceptical and think critically about who is promoting conspiratorial narratives and why. But Moos reflects that the game teaches a dangerous lesson: that all conspiracy theories are equally baseless and that anyone who engages in promoting them is crazy and/or manipulative. What about the conspiracies we *know* to be true – such as those typical to capitalism, where powerful people meet in secret to maintain and extend their power? The game might be at danger of reinforcing a kind of liberal cynical distance that presumes the official narratives purported by the media and politicians are genuine, and that all conspiracy theorizing is pathological.

Could they play it with their families or friends who are in the grips of conspiracy fantasies? The question evokes nervous laughter. Yeah, says Des. My brother spent all his time during the lockdown rabbit-holing into weird conspiracy theories on YouTube – but he got there through his love of games, so maybe this would be a way to start a conversation. Moos feels his family, who are refugees, would find it too confusing: they would definitely get the concepts, but the rules are a bit too complex and too clunky. Sam is going to bring the game to her next board-game nights with her friends, who work together in a feminist collective. She wonders if the game could be adapted to help them think about how to combat the anti-feminist and anti-trans conspiracy theories they encounter. Vish wants to see if he can play it with teenagers in the community centre where he volunteers, who often come to him with wacky conspiracy fantasies which they mostly think of as jokes, but that sometimes lead to obsessions.

THREE OF NINE  
CONSPIRATOR CARDS  
ARE HIDDEN UNTIL  
THE END OF THE  
MATCH

THE OTHER  
SIX CAN  
BE SEEN  
IN KEPTEN FOR  
RESOURCES (MOVIE  
FOLLOWERS)

MATCH  
SCENARIO

A GAME  
CONS  
ARE F

BOARD

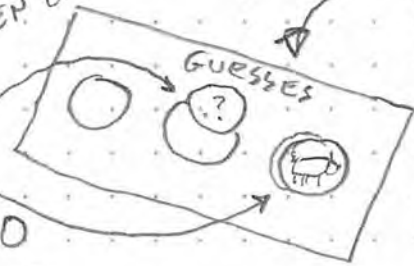
GLOBAL  
PANDEMIC

RULES

COST  
TO  
LOOK AT  
FACE OF  
CARD

TO GAIN RESOURCES  
PLAYERS MUST PUBLICLY  
PROCLAIM THEIR CONSPIRACY  
THEORY, EVEN BEFORE HAVING  
ENOUGH INFO

NINE TOKENS  
REPRESENT  
NINE POTENTIAL  
CONSPIRATORS



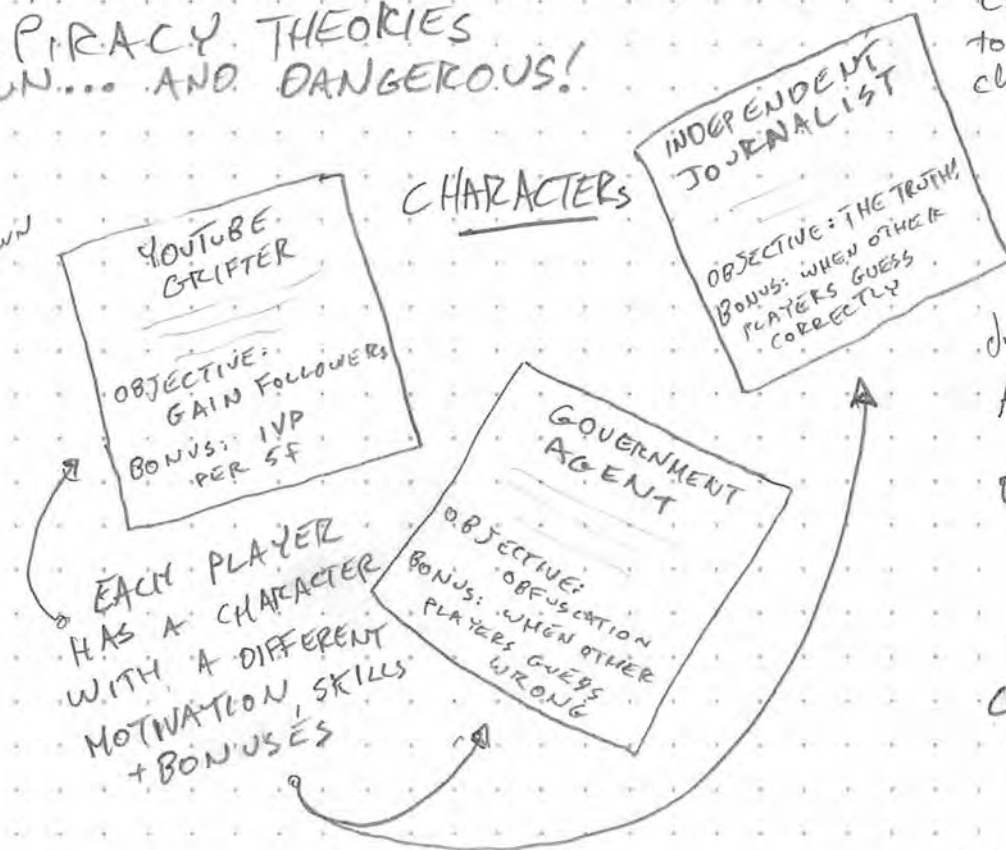
PLAYER  
RESOURCE

RESO

FOLLOWERS  
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## ABOUT WHY PIRACY THEORIES ... AND DANGEROUS!



A GAME is made up of several MATCHES during which a player plays the same CHARACTER and tries to win according to that character's particular qualities + bonuses. Each match has a certain number of ROUNDS where all players take a TURN during which they can:

- A: Collect INCOME (MONEY + FOLLOWERS)
- B: Spend that income
  - ① either paying to look at a CONSPIRATOR card or
  - ② Making a GUESS
- C: PLAYING AN EVENT CARD from their hand or discarding and drawing new cards.

At the end of the GAME points are scored and a winner is determined.

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## EVENT CARDS

