Settlers of Catan Strategy and Tactics Guide

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As a general note, this guide attempts to stay away from sweeping generalizations of what strategy or tactic is "best". There is seldom a best strategy or tactic (such as "always build a city if x happens, or a settlement if y happens"). Instead, I try to represent each concept as a series of choices to be made, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Settlers has too many factors (many beyond your control) to come up with some sort of formula to win in every situation. Instead, you need to be flexible and adapt as the game progresses. Don't be afraid to try out new strategies, as you may need them someday.

This guide assumes you have only the Kosmos (German version) or Mayfair (US version) Basic set. Many discussions also refer to elements of the 5-6 Player Expansion set, and the Kosmos Seefahrers / Mayfair Seafarers expansion set (referred to as "Seefahrers" in this guide). These two expansions, while adding some new game elements and rules, do not substantially change the overall game mechanics. Later editions will address the Stadt and Ritter Expansion in a separate section, as it in essence creates a new game.

Overall Strategies

Your choice of strategies will influence your initial setup and overall game play. The separation of strategies below is a bit artificial, but useful to understand the concepts behind them. In practice, players will use a combination of these strategies.

The Ore-Grain Strategy
This seems to be the most popular strategy, at least in the basic game. This strategy attempts to get a lot of ore and grain early in the game, in order to produce cities as quickly as possible. You should focus more on ore than grain, as you will need three ores to build a city, versus two grains (and in the basic game, there is usually less ore available then grain, as there are only three ore hexes compared to four grain hexes).

This strategy is often so powerful because the first cities you produce will probably be on your initial settlements, which should have high production values. Other people going for settlements right off will probably be left with lower production-value intersections. (Chuck Messenger)
This strategy lends itself to getting the largest army, as after you build your cities you will have lots of ore and grain left over to buy cards, of which the majority will be knights. For a game that needs ten victory points (like the basic game), four cities and the largest army means a win.

In general, the more congested the board, the harder this strategy becomes. Other players (especially wood-brick players, as described below) will have a greater expansion potential as they can pump out roads and settlements faster, thereby blocking off your expansion. All too often a player at the endgame will find themselves with the maximum of four cities and zero settlements for eight victory points, and not being able to get another two settlements (and corresponding victory points) because they are boxed in. In the basic game this is not as much of a dilemma as you can get another two points with the largest army or by victory point cards; in games where you need more victory points this can be more problematic. When playing with (or against) this strategy, you must keep in mind its greatest weakness is this lack of expansion potential.

The Ore-Grain Strategy can be good for Seefahrers, as it is harder to get boxed in (simply build to an island). Getting an ore or grain port is great for this strategy, as after you build four cities you won't have as much a need for these resources, and it can make the endgame a lot easier.

Remember that by building cities, you are concentrating production in fewer locations. As you are putting more of your eggs in fewer baskets, make sure you don't leave any vulnerable. As pointed out by someone else later in this guide, make sure that you don't place your cities at an intersection with one good number and two bad numbers, or the robber can make your very expensive city worthless. This will be much less of a problem to players who are concentrating on (many) settlements rather than on (fewer) cities. For this same reason, those variants that use multiple robbers/pirates can hurt people who concentrate on cities more.

Near the end of the game you will be the constant target of the robber, as ore and grain become valuable to the other players. You need to have been saving knights so that you can get the robber off your production units. Also, since you have cities, your production spaces will naturally look like better places for the others to put the robber.

**The Wood-Brick Strategy**

This is a strategy to get a lot of wood and brick early in the game, in order to build settlements and roads fast.

A wood/brick port is very useful in this strategy, as finding a way to get ore/grain will be important to build cities for the middle to end game.

Lots of people think this strategy is less effective on a small or congested board, as you need room to grow. Actually, it can be more effective, as your increased road building capability gives you the advantage in reaching those limited number of expansion spots first. An ore-grain player's worst nightmare is playing on a congested board with one or two wood-brick players.

This strategy naturally lends itself to getting the longest road.

For this strategy, it is very important that you build new settlements around open grain and ore hexes, or you will have a very difficult time trying to build cities later on in the game (which can be crucial for a win).

Optionally, with your increased settlement production, you can build on a number of ports to get ore and wheat. (Mike Schneider)

With your increased road building capability, you should build your roads to cut off other player's expansion. This can help in denying Ore/Grain players from acquiring enough building sites they need to win the game. (Greg Aleknevicus) This leads into the next variant, which takes this to more of an extreme:

The "Road Boy" variant works to build roads fast in order to block off other players' expansion. This strategy concentrates on building roads first, rather than on production. Only when you are done blocking people off do you work on getting enough victory points to win the game. This requires a lot of wood and brick, so your first cities should be on these, rather than ore. Trade aggressively for wood and brick, before it's
obvious you might be a threat. (Mike Schneider) This is an interesting variant in that it violates my general philosophy of building up production first. It could work better on smaller boards with less people, so you don't miss blocking anyone. In addition, it might not work well in many Seefahrers scenarios, as people could just build to islands.

The Card Builder Strategy
This strategy is similar to the Ore/Grain Strategy, as it involves getting Ore/Grain hexes and building two cities fast. Then, cranking out development cards. This player will get an inordinate number of Knight cards, allowing them to keep the robber off their hexes and get other resources by stealing from other players. Often, victory point cards will come up. At some point in the game, try for a third settlement or city. The largest army is practically guaranteed. (Chuck Messenger). Note that this strategy may not work very well in higher victory point games, or those Seefahrers scenarios where extra victory points are awarded for getting to islands.

The Balance Strategy
This strategy strives for a balance in all five resources. Settlements can be built relatively quickly, and the player is less likely to be boxed in. Also, this strategy leads people to become more self-sufficient, and less likely to require trading. (Chuck Messenger) A 3:1 port could be very useful here.

This strategy is what a lot of players strive for in the initial setup. This is a powerful way to begin the game if you can do it, as it is easy to be flexible and change to another strategy later on.

The Rare Resource Strategy
A friend let me know I was missing this one in a previous version of this guide, and AllenDoum mentioned it as well in the first edition of the guide but I put it in setup section rather than the overall strategy section, which was a mistake:

Examine the board to see which commodity will be the hardest to get, and consider putting one of your settlements on the best tile for that commodity. A supply of a rare commodity may be more important than an extra 2/36 chance of a sheep. (AllenDoum)

Basically, this strategy is about identifying the rarest resources, and making sure you have access to them. There are two types of rare: rare in overall production (due to bad numbers being on them), and rare in position availability (fewer number of hexes have the resource, like ore and brick in the basic game, which only has three hexes each instead of four hexes like wool, grain, and wood). In many cases both will happen, such as when ore and brick have bad numbers on them in the basic game.

This strategy is not a monopoly: you don't necessarily want to be the only person on these hexes (as seen in the Monopoly strategy below, this may not be such a good idea). You just want to make sure you have them. This could be taken to the extreme, for example a player who goes for ore and brick, because they are the two rarest, but is more commonly used along with another strategy. This strategy can work well with a Cartel strategy, described below.

The crux of this strategy is realizing that you will pay dearly for rare resources later on in the game, and so you should plan ahead by getting them early. A reduced overall production value early in the game to get those rare resources is usually more than offset by not making 3:1 or 4:1 trades later in the game to get them.

The Common Resource Strategy
Every game usually has a very common resource, that no one in particular wants. This is usually wool, as it is often the odd man out. The Wood-Brick players and Ore-Grain players (the two most popular strategies) will only be trying for wool if it is convenient. A friend of mine sometimes likes to go after wool hexes, and calls it the "Sheep-O-Matic" strategy. Since both Ore-Grain and Wood-Brick strategies need wool, he can often trade somewhat easily. He goes for a wool port (the Sheep-O-Matic) to get cards he can't trade for. He does best by combining this strategy with the Card Builder strategy. This would probably work well in Seefahrers, where everyone needs wool for sails. This strategy doesn't necessarily require wool, just any common resource that no one seems to want. You really need the port though, or you can kiss the game goodbye. This is similar to the Cartel strategy, described below.

The Monopoly and Cartel Strategies
These are strategies to gain either exclusive control (monopoly)
or shared control (cartel) of a particular resource, usually ore or brick as they have the fewest number of hexes in the basic game (three, versus four of all the others).

First, the Monopoly variant, to gain more or less exclusive control. It is usually attempted by trying to control all of the good hexes (usually just one) of a resource by yourself. It seldom works. The major problem with this strategy is that the robber almost always sits on the monopolized hex. As you are the only person on that particular hex, the robber will stay there until YOU get it off (or a seven is rolled), unlike shared hexes. Also unlike shared hexes, every player EXCEPT YOU considers that hex to be fair robber placement territory, especially since they want a chance to grab that monopolized resource from your hand.

A potentially better way to try the monopoly strategy is to let other players surround the best hex of that resource, and to go for the two less marginal ones (in the case of ore and brick). Then try to place the robber on the good hex throughout the game. This has the advantage of being able to place your initial settlements away from the rest of the crowd. You will need a lot of lot of knights, to get the robber off of you, and onto the best hex. (Mike Schneider). This would be good combined with the Card Builder strategy (to get the knights), especially if you are trying to monopolize ore or wheat.

If someone in your group has the nerve to try a monopoly, it will become apparent very soon, probably in the initial setup. You can use this to your advantage by remembering that ports have just become more valuable real estate, and by using the monopoly player as a lighting rod for other players aggression instead of you (and drawing people's attention off of your own designs.)

The Cartel variant. Basically, this is a strategy to share control of a particular resource in order to reduce the problem of the robber in a monopoly, but to make sure that you are the dominant player in that cartel. In this variant it is only necessary to control most of the resource. For example, if you control two out of the three settlement locations on a good hex of a rare resource. The other player will work just as hard to keep the robber away, but will only collect half as much. This is most common on a good ore hex. Another way this can be done is by having majority access to several hexes for a commodity for which you have a port. The other players can't keep the robber on all of them, and will probably just keep it on your prime hex. Sheep and wheat are most typical of this kind of cartel, because they are not the commodities that people usually target during initial placement. (Mike Schneider) Note that this is very similar to the Common Resource Strategy.

Similar to the Monopoly variant, you will need a lot of knights to keep the robber away, and preferably on your opponents most productive hexes, or on a resource your opponent has a port for (so they can't trade easily for your resource). In this way, if you find yourself in total control you can make really good trades. Depending on your group, you can make 3:1 trades if people are desperate, and even turn these down if you are ahead, and force them to make 4:1 bank trades. (Mike Schneider)

The Straight Numerical Advantage Strategy

This strategy really tries to maximize production, without concentrating on any particular resource. Just get as much of anything. You may need to trade a lot, because you could end up with a strange mix. This works better in games with more people (more people to trade with). A 3:1 port is probably essential, if you have a varied mix of resources.

I put this in because some people use it, but this is not really a strategy. A good strategy is a plan to let you get the particular combination of resources you need to get certain victory points, which this does not do. This could be good in the initial setup as a short-term plan, before you figure out what other strategy you will need to win.

Initial Setup

The initial setup should take into account a number of factors. Note that a lot of the information below is also applicable whenever a new settlement is built.

1) Production Value.

Before you place settlements, figure out how much the intersection will produce. First, a refresher on the number
distribution of two six-sided dice, for those of you unfamiliar with the bell curve. Below is the number of times (out of 36) that a particular number shows up:

Number on die / chance number comes up out of 36:

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So if you have a settlement on a 3/5/10 intersection, the chance that it will produce something that turn will be 2/36 (the chance a three will be rolled) + 4/36 (the chance for the five) + 3/36 (the chance for the ten), or 9 out of 36 in total. The ranking for this intersection, then, is 9. Any intersection can be ranked on just production value from zero (the edge of a desert on the water) to 15 (the intersection of three hexes having an 8 or a 6). Note that an intersection ranked 14 or 15 is not supposed to happen in the basic game (as an 8 or 6 hex should not occur next to each other), so the effective range is zero to 13. The intersection with the highest rank should get you more resources.

On some newer Mayfair versions of the game (3rd edition - colonial art), the number tiles have from one to five little circles on them, giving you the odds out of 36 that number will be rolled. Just add them up to get the rank.

Don't have the new Mayfair edition, but want an easy way to remember how to rank an intersection? For each number tile surrounding the intersection, figure out the difference between that number and seven. Add them up, and subtract the total from 18.

The rank of the intersections on which you place your first settlements is (in my opinion) the most important factor to consider in the initial setup. The other factors below should be considered only after figuring out how much they will decrease your overall production value, and if it is worth it.

2) Strategy you will use.

Of course, a straight production value is less useful (maybe a LOT less useful) if you are not getting the combination of resources you need.

3) Six and eight hexes.

Don't just automatically place on a six or an eight hex because it has the highest production value, or because those chits are marked in red. Just because that particular hex has a good production value does not mean the overall intersection does too. Look at the rankings for all the good intersections. If two intersections both have the same ranking (for example a 6/10/4 intersection and a 5/9/4 intersection, both ranked at 11), consider the one without the six or eight.

Why? Sixes and eight's can be big liabilities. First, the robber is particularly drawn to sixes and eight's, no surprise here. Second, as sixes and eight's attract more people, it will be more crowded and harder to expand around them. Third, if a hex around one of your intersections without the six or eight draws the robber, it will do less damage, as it will have to be put on a hex with lesser production capability. In general, sixes and eight's are best for people who plan to draw a lot of cards, so you can have some knights ready to move the robber off.

A settlement with an intersection with one good number and two bad numbers will be practically useless when the robber is placed on the good number. (Isaac Kuo)

4) Placement of settlements around a hex (or how to attract the robber).

A big decision is where to place a second settlement on a hex. If there is only one settlement already on a hex, you usually have a choice: build at the opposite corner (blocking the hex off from any future settlement), or build two away from the first settlement, leaving a third location open on that hex. What you decide is a major factor on whether the robber visits you or not.
Blocking off a hex could be an advantage if you can restrict that resource to other players (this can be a substantial advantage on a rare resource, or a resource that everyone needs for their particular strategy). A disadvantage is that you decrease your own expansion potential. Potentially a bigger disadvantage is that you will appear to create a monopoly, and draw the robber (see problems with this in the Overall Strategies section above). Because of the problem of the robber showing up more on a hex in your sole control, if you block off a hex you should seriously consider doing it only on hexes where another player has the first settlement.

Try not to place both settlements around a single good producing spot. Besides probably reducing expansion capability, this makes that spot a prime target for the robber. (Isaac Kuo)

The alternative is to place a second settlement two vertices away from the first, thus leaving a third location for a settlement open on that hex. You should figure out which one is applicable to your strategy. For example, if you are going for an Ore/Grain strategy, you probably won't be the one to get that third position on the hex, if your neighbor is a Wood/Clay player and can pump out a settlement faster, and so maybe you should just block it off. However, if there won't even be a race to the third spot, you might want to save it for yourself. You may not want to get three of your own settlements around a single hex, otherwise it may become the robber's home.

If there are two different players already on a hex, and a third position is open, seriously consider building there. It is very hard for the robber to stay on a hex with three players who all want him off. And fewer players will place a robber there in the first place.

5) Other players.
If you place first and put your first settlement on that great eight Ore hex, don't depend on that six Wheat hex being available when you place your second settlement. When going first, your strategy might have to be more flexible as everyone will be placing all the rest of their settlements before you. In this case, you may not be able to figure out your strategy until you actually place your second settlement. (Isaac Kuo corrected me on this one)

Just like in the stock market, there are big advantages in being a contrarian. For example, I love being in a game where everyone but me is playing an ore-grain or card builder strategy: I get my pick of wood and brick hexes at the beginning for my wood/brick strategy, I can outrun them to good production spots by building roads faster, and I have an easy job of getting the longest road. They are all competing for second.

Other players also determine your expansion capability. Make sure you are not cut off from future ports or other resources you might need, or from being able to expand. (Isaac Kuo) This is especially important on crowded boards. Watch out placing next to other players or groups of players, especially Wood-Brick players, who could expand and block you off. Note if you are a Wood-Brick player yourself, it might not be such a bad idea to place next to the Ore-Grain players.

Don't sacrifice higher value spots just because someone else is already there. As stated above, it can be very useful to be on the same hex (especially higher-value hexes) as someone else (or even two other people), as it will be much harder for the robber to stay on those hexes.

Don't place your initial settlements just to screw other players. I read one guide where the author said the first settlement is for optimizing production, and the second to hurt other players (grabbing a port s/he needs, etc.). Remember, your goal is not to have a particular player lose, it is to have you win. You are not going to win by sacrificing your production to hurt someone else. Maybe the other person(s) you target will lose too, but you will fall on the sword to get it done, and probably wind up letting a third person win (who presumably focused on a placement for optimal production in the beginning and was ahead of you both). If you can place a settlement and screw someone at the same time, then great, go for it. A much better strategy is to convince someone else to screw the first player. This is not to say you shouldn't work against other players, but don't start the race with a broken leg (note to self: enough with the metaphors already).

6) Distribution of numbers.
Two hexes each with a five will produce the same number of resources on the average as two hexes with a four and a six. However, the distribution will be different. Settlements on a
smaller selection of numbers mean that you will get a lot of resources clumped together, while settlements on a larger selection of numbers means that you will get resources spread out more. Both have their advantages and disadvantages.

The same number on two resources that are commonly used together (for example, wood and clay) can be very useful, as they can immediately be used and less port trading will be required (Isaac Kuo).

However, having a lot of production centers on the same numbers means that some turns you will get a lot of resources, and it is more likely you will be stuck with over seven cards when a seven is rolled (or over ten cards in a 5-6 player game, if you use that rule).

Also, consider placing your settlements/cities on numbers so production matches your ports. For example, if you use a 2:1 port, having two settlements or two cities on a hex for that resource will allow you to trade more easily. This also means that if you have a 2:1 port for a resource, you don't necessarily need a settlement and a city on the same hex as you will produce three of that resource (unless you need one of that resource itself). (David Grabiner)

7) Road Placement.
Decide to where you want to build. New people playing the game usually place their roads towards high value hexes, and then kick themselves because they are taken before they get there, and as it is usually so crowded around high value hexes they have no where else to go and they wind up building in the opposite direction. If you want to be more sure, build towards the sea, and ports. Not too many people start there, you will need a port, and you may be able to pick up a settlement or two on the way.

If you want to risk building inland, then you need to do the homework: figure out how many settlements are left to be placed and if you were the other people, where would you put them. Take your time in the initial setup, there are no time limits. If you don't want to go through this trouble (and other people saying "come on and place already"), build out. This may not be possible if you are placing first.

Remember, Wood-Brick people will build faster. Take into account your road-building capability, and of others near you. If you are Wood-Brick and an in a good position to build inwards (you have supply of wood and brick, and your turn placement is optimal), utilize your strength.

8) Connecting Settlements.
If you are going for the longest road, you will need to connect your initial settlements eventually. If you are not going for the longest road, don't worry about it. It is usually more advantageous to wait to connect your settlements, if you possibly can. In either case, it is optimal to point your first roads at two different future settlement locations, so you can beat other people there. Note if you play it safe and point both towards your third settlement location, thinking you only need one more road to connect them, you will be one road behind for your fourth settlement. If you connect your two settlements, you will be two roads behind for your fourth settlement.

It is much harder to get blocked in when your settlements are in two vastly different locations. This is especially important for Ore-Grain people, who may have to wait a bit until they can build roads.

Early Game

1) Grow!
How fast you grow is exponential, not linear. In a linear growth mode, you would receive (on the average) the same amount of resources each turn. In Settler's, "investing" production to build more production centers (settlements and cities) leads to an exponential growth rate. It's how compound interest works, and why if you invest a little early on in the game you can get a huge advantage later. Even a small numerical advantage in production in the beginning of the game can result in an inordinately large production compared to other players later in the game. (Note that the rate of exponential growth decreases as the game progresses, as the "best" intersections are settled or converted to cities, leaving only the lower-value intersections remaining for new production centers. Even though the rate of exponential growth decreases, this growth is still exponential and should be taken into account.) You have probably noticed where in a lot of games the leader(s) move out farther and
farther ahead, and those behind can't seem to catch up. This is why.

I would argue this is the MOST important concept of the game. It is a major factor (arguably the most important factor) in the initial setup, and also determines what your first few turns look like. Simply put, BUILD PRODUCTION CENTERS in the first few turns, and build them in areas that are relatively high in production value. You do not want to be caught behind another player in the exponential growth race.

In the early game, don't bother with constructing the longest road, building the largest army, exploring unknown hexes in Seefahrers scenarios, etc. Your main goal at the beginning should be to increase production. (Note that if building production centers cannot be done in your turn, it may be advantageous to buy cards, build roads for future use, start exploring, etc., just to keep the robber away from an ever-increasing hand. However, this should be treated as a fallback plan.)

For example, consider the player who wants to go to a single-hex island early in the game, to get the extra victory points. In one Seefahrers scenario it costs three ships to get to a single-hex island, and then you need to build a settlement that only borders on that one hex. That is a total card cost of ten (six for the three ships, and four for the settlement). Let's see, say the hex produces on a ten, that is once every 12 turns. That means you will get back your investment in 120 turns. Not a good idea early in the game. The moral is keep your eye on production the first few turns.

2) Contrary to popular belief, the numbers thrown on the dice do not "even out" over the course of the game (well maybe literally, but not in their effect). Numbers coming up early in the game are much more important than later in the game, due to the exponential growth rate. That resource you get early on, if invested into more production, will result in even more resources. This means the robber is also more important early in the game. If the robber lands on someone early in the game, its effect can be far worse than later; it takes not only that particular resource, but robs that player of all the future resources it would have led to if invested.

3) "Clumping" of numbers.
Numbers on the dice always seem to clump together at times, and never seem to be rolled at other times. A famous example of clumping in real life (and how we perceive it) can be demonstrated by convincing two of your friends to perform a little experiment. Have one toss a coin 100 times and write down the results. Have the other write up a "random" assortment of 100 heads and tails that they came up with in their head. Don't let them tell you which person used which method, instead tell them you will figure it out. Ninety-five percent of the time, the person flipping the coin will generate a series of seven or more heads or tails in a row. You almost never see this in the list the other person makes up, as they invariably think that seven or more in a row will never happen. (This works even better in large groups of people, like beginning statistics classes :)

In terms of what to expect in the game, similar clumping of production numbers will occur. Just like the person making up the heads/tails, this will seem extremely unlikely (or really bad/good luck), but it isn't; what seems to be really strange clumping is in fact quite common. You usually only remember clumping if it is really bad for you (or someone whines a lot about it), but watch your next few games carefully. It will happen in practically every one. If this clumping works against you in the early game, you can really be screwed, because you can fall way behind in the exponential growth race.

You have to assume weird clumping will happen, and plan for it. Consider spreading out your production centers in the early game onto different numbers so this has less of a chance of happening to you. Personally, I don't pay too much attention to this myself as I think other factors are usually more important, but others swear by it. I think it would be more important if you are playing a strategy that emphasizes cities (i.e. the ore-grain strategy), as you will have less production centers (and by extension, be located next to fewer production numbers) to begin with, and therefore are at a greater risk from clumping.
End Game

1) Count.
Get into the habit of counting other players' victory points every turn, and figuring out how they will probably act to get what they need to win. This may seem obvious, but most people do not do it.

2) Don't be a target.
Hide points to near the end if possible (do you really want the longest road with five segments, and being ahead in points that early on?). Or wait to put out that last knight if you can.

Ports

1) They're essential.
You will probably need a port to win the game, or a lotta luck. Some strategies are better served with a 3:1 port, while others by a specific resource port. Make sure you know how you will get them. Don't stress too much over ports early on, they are usually more important in the mid- and endgame (unless a resource is particularly rare). But don't get blocked from reaching one, either.

2) Don't compare apples & oranges
Note that many players think that 3:1 ports are inferior to 2:1 ports. This isn't true. Different ports are good for different situations. Think about which kind you need. People who advocate one kind over another often just play with one particular strategy. For example, 2:1 ore and grain ports seem to be particularly popular, as players using the ore-grain or card-builder strategies really need them later on in the game.

You may not want a 2:1 port if you just have one source for that resource, even if it is a good source. It will draw the robber. Conversely, watch for other people in which this happens when considering where to place the robber.

3) Count the cost.
A popular strategy is to go for a port on the first turn, which means you are on an intersection with only two hexes that produce, at most. It had better be worth it, because it is going to have to offset the increased production of someone who placed two inland settlements, with a higher total production value. Sometimes ports are just screaming to have a settlement placed on them at the initial setup (for example, an intersection with an ore port on an eight ore hex). Expect the robber to show up at hexes like these.

4) Rare is good.
If a particular resource looks like it's going to be extremely rare, it may be worthwhile to start off with a port, especially if you're the last player and can coordinate a good combination of spots.

Even if you don't start off with a port, you may want to place one of your initial settlements near a port to get it later. If you know what kind of port your strategy or initial setup needs (like a particular 2:1 port, or a 3:1 port because you expect to have a lot of varied resources), then try to place near that particular port. However, be prepared to change your strategy. Also, examine what kind of ports other people are near, this may give you additional clues about their strategies.

5) Easy is good.
Remember, as ports are on water hexes, it is a lot easier to block them off or reserve them - just build a road to the port area, and sometimes all you need is one more road on the other side to block that particular port off.

Largest Army / Longest Road

1) One of them is essential.
You need either the largest army, longest road, or a lotta luck to win. While you should probably not start building them right away, you should figure out early in the game which one you are eventually going to shoot for, and how you will do it.

The size of the board and number of players could influence your decision. For example, it could take a different strategy to
get the longest road on a crowded board, compared to a wide-open board. On a wide-open board, the player who can pump out the most roads can probably will get it, meaning it probably easier playing with a wood-brick strategy.

On a crowded board, the number of hex sides is the determining factor, and the player who can get to those faster will probably get it. The nod could still go to the wood-brick player here, as they can usually get to areas faster, but other factors might be more important in this situation, such as the starting location. However, this doesn't mean that the longest road is "harder" to get on a crowded board; after all, only one person can get it on any board. It just takes a different approach.

2) Be a contrarian.
Note that the longest road and largest army are worth more if the other players aren't trying for them. The more roads/knights that you have to buy, the worse the investment. (AllenDoum) This could be more of a factor in determining which one to go for than the type of board and number of players. This means it might actually be preferable to go for the one that you normally would not, if there is going to be a lot of competition (for example, longest road when you are playing an Ore/Grain strategy).

3) If going for the longest road, don't make too many "side trips" with your roads.
You only have 15 in the basic game. Remember, if you are the first person to get a road 15 in length, it cannot be taken away from you (unless someone splits it, as shown below).

This is much less important in Seafarers, when the longest road could theoretically be 30 long (it includes ships). This also means that getting the longest road in a Seafarers scenario can be much more costly if a race develops, a factor to consider when deciding between getting the Longest Road or Largest Army.

4) Doing the splits can make you uncomfortable.
Remember if an opponent builds a settlement in the middle of your road network, your routes are split in two for purposes of determining longest trade route. (Matt Gardner) Also remember that no one can split your ship lines.

5) Triangulate.
If you know you are not going for longest road, then building settlements off triangle forks saves you having to build two roads for each settlement, and instead allows to you build three roads (instead of four) to get to two settlements.

Development Cards

1) Victory points are great when you get them, but are not to be counted on at the endgame.
There are seven victory point cards in a 36-card deck in the original (first and second edition) Mayfair version, which means you are drawing an average of five (at a cost of 15 production cards!) to get a point, and ten (30 cards!) to get two. It is much easier to get two points with far less than 30 production cards the old-fashioned way: build something. It gets worse with the Kosmos or later Mayfair versions (five victory point cards), diluting the mix even further.

2) Don't use knights too early.
Save them if you can to keep the robber off of your hexes (play BEFORE you roll the dice in this case). However, don't get caught with too many development cards, as you can only play one per turn. This is especially important if going for the largest army -- get those knights out before the endgame.

3) Watch out buying too many development cards early.
If you draw a victory point card (or two) at the beginning, it can really hurt your future development chances, as they don't produce. However, the rest of the cards CAN produce for you (at least indirectly). (Aaron D. Fuegi).

4) Save that Road Building card to the end if you can, if you are going for the longest road.
It can be a great surprise when you play it on the last turn. It is also great to use at the beginning, to save the four resource cards and pump up that exponential growth rate a bit.

5) If you can't build anything, consider buying a card if you can.
You will lower your card count and keep the robber away. Also, it is a great way to "store" resources for use later.

How much is a development card worth on the average, just in resource cards? If you assume that a knight card is worth one (from getting one resource from a player), road building is worth four, monopolies are worth three (this just evens the card out, of course you could get a few more or a few less), and discovery is worth two, then each development card is worth 1.3 cards in the (first and second edition) Mayfair deck. [Conductors note: this is true in the Kosmos/3rd edition Mayfair deck as well.] That is for a cost of three. Of course, that doesn't count victory cards, getting the largest army, etc. If you play a resource card at an optimal time, it can be worth a LOT more to you.

6) It is hard to get the robber off of you without Knights.
Remember, a seven comes up only once every six turns on the average.

7) Know the odds.
Your chance of drawing a particular type of card is as follows, in 36-card combined Basic/5-6 Player Expansion set (this is also the same as the first or second edition Mayfair Basic deck):

- Knight: 56%
- Victory point: 19%
- Discovery: 8%
- Monopoly: 8%
- Road Building: 8%

Meaning, your chance of drawing any specific card, other than a knight, is pretty low. [Conductors note: the percentage chance is the same in a 25 card Basic Kosmos/Mayfair 3rd edition deck.]

Trading

People seem pretty split on trading. It seems that some will only trade kicking and screaming, as they see big problems with helping other players. Others don't seem to mind, as long as they make sure to look out for number one. I have always tried to trade as much as I can in the early game, primarily out of one big fear -- if I don't trade with Player X, Player X is going to trade with Player Y. In this case, Player X and Player Y will have a better distribution of resource cards (and hence will build more) than me. This is especially bad if X or Y is an adjacent and direct competitor with me for future resources. If you don't trade with X, someone else will. This leads me to take the position that trading is necessary, and instead to focus on the question of how to make the trade as advantageous to you (and as disadvantageous to others) as possible, as long as it is going to happen anyway.

The benefits from trading are not always equally distributed. I would take the position that they seldom are. So how does one make sure they are distributed more in your favor than the other person?

1) Try to trade as close to your turn as possible, and preferably on your turn.
Why? If you trade on your turn, you will have a much greater chance of using that card you just got.

For example, you need one more grain to make your city, so you trade a wool to someone for a grain. Trading on your turn means you KNOW where that grain is going -- to your city. However, the other person does not know they are actually going to use that wool on their turn. They might be trying for a settlement, and when their turn comes around do not have a clay. Or maybe the robber stole a card. Or a monopoly card was played. Or they wound up producing a wool themselves on that 12 they didn't think they would roll. In any case, when their turn comes around, they may or may not be using that wool for something. If they don't use that wool, that trade was a bust for them, and you were the one who got the greater benefit from that trade.

The farther from your turn you make a trade, the greater the chance that something will happen that will make that card you got worthless, or of losing the card entirely. And that means the other person probably got more benefit out of that trade than you.
If the person who plays the turn ahead of you is trying to make a trade with you, try to wait until your turn instead, if you can. They will have to wait another turn to produce what they wanted. Of course, if they really want to they will trade 4 to 1 or through a port, and then you are stuck...

To stop a trade, you can always promise the player who turn it ISN'T that you will trade with them when their turn comes around, by arguing how they will benefit from this and how the player whose turn it is will be hurt, by the reasoning above.

2) Conversely, try to trade with others who are farther away from their turn, all other things being equal.
Of course, you don't have much of a choice if it is not your turn, as you have to trade with the person whose turn it is.

Comments 1 and 2 are probably a lot less useful for those of you who play with the Kosmos or (later edition) Mayfair 5-6 player build rules, where anyone can build on any turn.

3) Trade with people who are losing, or are no threat to you.
This is a no-brainer.

4) Trade early on as much as possible.
You don't want to fall behind on that exponential growth race.

I once played a game in which another player made a four-to-one trade with the bank early in the game, rather than trade one-to-one with me. I thought she was nuts, but then I was a little biased. However, in order for me not to have the benefit, she fell on the sword herself. I made a two-to-one port trade to get that resource instead, and was therefore two cards ahead of her. The real winners were the other two players. Losing this many production cards this early on did not help her growth rate at all, and I wound up winning in a very close battle that she might have very well won instead.

5) Remember, you can always trade for stuff besides cards, though it isn't binding.
How much is it worth to someone for you to build a road and block off a potential port of their immediate competitor? This is useful when you REALLY need a card or cards and have no cards to trade that the other person wants. And you can always trade wood and brick in unequal trades to the person whose turn it is, to stop someone from getting the longest road (or whatever) when you can't build there yourself.

6) Think of other players as 1:1 ports.

7) It isn't necessarily bad to trade two cards to someone for one you really need (2:1 trade), it just sounds that way.
You are saving cards as your only other options was presumably 3:1 at a port or 4:1 with the bank. If it was a 3:1 port, you are one ahead. As the other player gained one card too, they are also one ahead. You are both ahead in my book, and the real losers are the players who were not in on the deal.

You are probably trying to figure out the catch here. You are correct, there is one. The above only assumes the number of cards are important, not the type. The problem comes in if the other player was also planning to do a port or bank trade to get that resource you just gave them. That means they are not just one ahead, they might be two or three ahead. In a worst-case scenario they were going to need to do a bank trade at 4:1 for both of those resources you just gave them, meaning they are now SEVEN ahead (it cost them one card instead of eight).

It is up to you to figure out how many cards they are really saving. If you can appeal to their greed and give them two cards they don't really need, or that they could have traded 1:1 for themselves, then go for it. In general, try to do 2:1 trades with people who are behind, those will use those extra cards to screw someone else, those who were going to do a 1:1 trade with someone else to get those resources, those who were not going to need to do port or bank trades to get those resources, those whose turn it just was and therefore have to wait the longest (see 2 above) and have a good chance to get those resources you gave them anyway, those who already have a lot of cards and may attract the robber because of your trade, and of course those who are not just going to use those cards to hurt you. If
you do it right, it is a very powerful tactic. If you mess it up, it could come back to bite you.

In most cases, a generally good 2:1 trade with someone is if you give them two resources for which they have a 2:1 port. It's a great trade for them, and they often jump at it. They will trade them in to get one card. So now they wound up trading a card to you, for two cards, which they converted back into one in their port. It's the same as making a 1:1 trade with you for the resource they really wanted, which they might have made with someone else anyway. Or think of it as you "borrowing" their port for a turn. And you are still one ahead. Just make sure they actually will trade them in at their port, or you might have the same problem as above.

8) It's amazing how many people don't have any particular idea of what to build their next turn.

For those people who just react to what cards are in their hand in deciding what to build (instead of going out and getting what they need), you can force their strategy a bit. Want them to build a settlement instead of that road that is going to cut off your port? Make sure they get a grain and wool to go along with that brick and wood. Or make sure they draw cards instead of building those ships to that island you want.

9) Don't blindly follow trade embargoes on the person that is ahead.

Chances are, they were set up by a single person for a reason that will benefit them the most, or were set up too early. This is your opportunity to make some very good trades with people that no one else is trading with. I assume you will make sure they won't win because of that trade, although.

Robber / Pirate

1) As stated in many places above, try not to build around a hex in such a way that it will attract the robber.

2) Watch out where you put the robber.

You might need that resource, or suddenly create a shortage.

Consider putting it on a resource you already have a supply for, and don't have to trade for. And of course, on someone who is ahead, or someone who has a resource you need. If you put it on a hex with fewer number of people, or a person who does not have any extra development cards (no knights) it will stay there longer.

Consider putting it on a hex so that you are left as the sole or major producer of a commodity. (Greg Aleknevicus) See notes on the Monopoly / Cartel strategies above for more info on this.

3) This pirate’s most important function is to restrict ship building around its hex.

You can completely block off an island in this way. Your main goal should be to stop others from getting victory points on the islands, not to get the most number of cards that you can. The cards are gravy.

Credits

This guide is a compilation of many people's ideas. People's comments are included as separate paragraphs, with attribution (hopefully all of them). If the paragraph is un-attributed, I wrote it. That is not to say I came up with the idea; obviously I didn't invent the ore-grain strategy and other common ideas. If I have thoughts on other people's comments I add to the paragraph after the attribution. Using this method, you can email whoever came up with the appropriate idea to discuss it further. I don't know if any programs can find email addresses inside posts, so I played it safe. Remove the "DE" and "LETE" in each email address.

Please email me with your comments, other tips, criticisms, or request to be put on the mailing list for the next version at scotDEscot@pacleTEmbell.net. If you don't want your name and email included in later versions, let me know. Later versions will also be posted on rec.games.board.

For the next version, I really need info on the Stadt and Ritter, Cheops, and Alexander expansions.
Yeah, I know no one is going to remember all of this. But maybe certain bits will be useful.

This is for all experience levels. For those of you that think you don't need help on the basic stuff, you can probably skip a lot of this guide. But remember, Richard Feynman used to teach freshman physics because he said it was essential to go back to the basics every once in a while.

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