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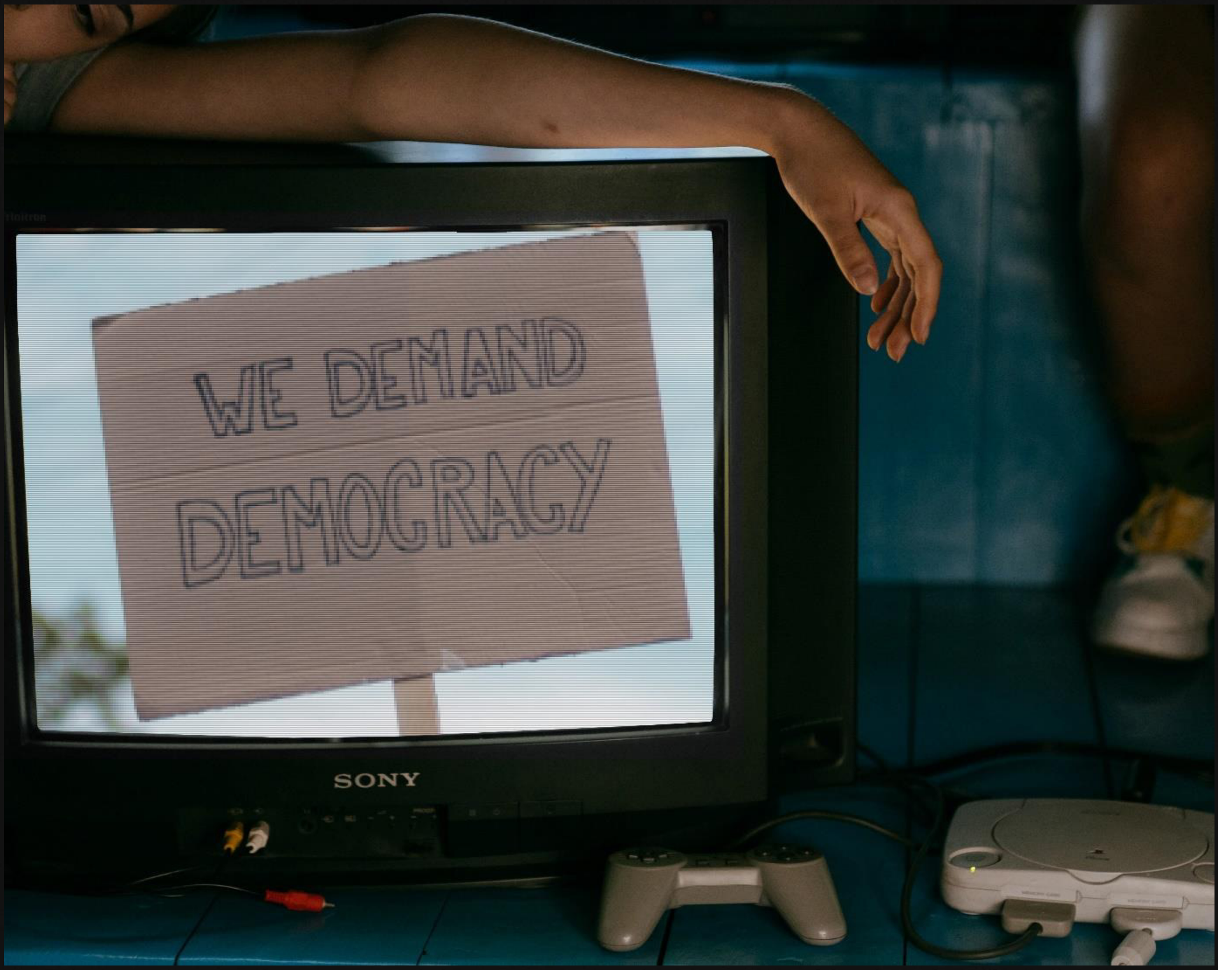
WE DEMAND
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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann

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The Face of Authority through *Sid Meier's Civilization* Series

Ruth García Martín, Begoña Cadiñanos Martínez and Pablo Martín Domínguez

Abstract

The turn-based strategy videogame genre tends to emphasize the military elements in detriment of other aspects. That is not the case in *Sid Meier's Civilization* series (1991-2016). Players are welcomed to focus on other aspects of society such as science, culture, diplomacy and economy, to the point of becoming a viable path to endgame victory themselves, though far more difficult. Narratively speaking, *Civilization* allows the player to explore different human societies across the species' history. In this paper, we want to place our focus on the authoritarian options the game provides and how they operate under a clear 19th Century cultural evolutionary framework. Civilizations are measured in different stages according to their development allowing choices such as type of government, technological advance or religion. The series shows the adoption of a functionalist thought pattern as authoritarian options do not carry a penalty worse than more liberal or progressive ones. While in the first installments of the game there was a clear bias towards liberal democracy and open society, that bias has been consistently blurred in more recent installments (now currently in the sixth game of the series) showing a certain degree of amorality in the exercise of power, thus giving us a window to analyze the changes in the power discourse.

Keywords: *Sid Meier's Civilization*, Authoritarianism, Colonialism, Cultural Evolutionary Model, Strategy Video Games, Social Imagination, Enlightenment, Historical Games, Theory or Progress, gamevironments

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Humans have imagined society and forms of alternative organization since they have existed. A good proof of this imagination lies in the most ancient forms of written mythology, where fabled golden ages set in the past imagined a world free of suffering, death, inequality and oppression. The dream of a better time, a kinder society projected to the future has been a constant for centuries as we can discover in the writings of the ancient Jewish prophets, Thomas More's *Utopia* (2017) and more recently, social scientists of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The advent of technology in the form of videogames offers a further step in that imagination process. Unlike literature, that only offers the capacity to imagine and discuss, videogames allow the chance to frame and experiment a vivid what-if the form of interactive and audio-visual representation on a screen. It is through videogames that social and political constructs can be vicariously experimented on (Bogost 2006, 2007, 2008). They can be labeled as a possibility space, a laboratory to experiment every day's world and in that simulated world allowing us players to evaluate and critically assess the represented issues (Bogost 2008, Flanagan 2009, Höglund 2014). However, videogames of any kind are still a cultural product far from neutral; they are bound to cultural limits of their creators. As Shapiro (2012, 53) explicitly says, videogames "tend to endorse prevailing power structures by helping to reproduce the beliefs and allegiances necessary for their uncontested functioning." Just as musicians improvise their art on patterns they already know, alternative societies and cultural developments base their rationale on already existing conditions and evolutions. Human imagination portrays the discourses we employ to rationalize cultural changes, the very *laws of society* as the base of potentially divergent outcomes if those *laws* change.

In this article, we will explore how authoritarian assumptions are often found in strategy games focused on the development of human societies and how this effectively leads to players taking the role of the Demiurge of the Platonic description in the *Timaeus* (1992) since the player's interaction is effectively that of a force of order imposed on an already existing creation. According to Wainwright (2020):

> “Plato introduced the concept of the demiurge (from the Greek demiourgos, meaning “artisan” or “craftsman”) in his Timaeus. Being perfectly good, the demiurge wishes to communicate his own goodness. Using the Forms as a model, he shapes the initial chaos into the best possible image of these eternal and immutable archetypes. The visible world is the result. The demiurge is the highest god and the best of causes. He is nonetheless limited. For the material he shapes isn't created by him and, because it is disorderly and indeterminate, partially resists his ordering. The demiurge is not ultimate, however, since his ontological and axiological status is lower than that of the Forms, especially the Form of the Good. Plato's concept of the demiurge thus isn't a counter example to the thesis that religious consciousness tends to construe ultimate reality as maximally perfect.”

We understand authoritarianism as the set of discourses that reinforce a social organization with a clearly defined hierarchy and power structure, enforced directly or indirectly by a set of institutions and values that aim to reproduce and maintain that power structure through time. For the sake of clarity, we will consider the classic definition of

> “Authoritarianism, principle of blind submission to authority, as opposed to individual freedom of thought and action. In government, authoritarianism denotes any political system that concentrates power in the hands of a leader or a small elite that is not constitutionally responsible to the body of the people. Authoritarian leaders often exercise power arbitrarily and without regard to existing bodies of law, and they usually cannot be replaced by citizens choosing freely among various competitors in elections. The freedom to create opposition political parties or other alternative political groupings with which to compete for power with the ruling group is either limited or nonexistent in authoritarian regimes.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2020)

Our interpretation arises from a series of game mechanics, the ruleset to be played, where those expectations placed on social changes and societal development can be clearly distinguished, as we will describe below. It is crucial to consider that, as we have seen, *Sid Meier’s Civilization* (1991-2019) is a long-lasting series of turn-based games that have always offered the chance to control the evolution, expansion and change through time for a human society. Each one of those societies has specific advantages over the rest. The player takes the place of a symbolic famous *great leader*, representatives of the civilization, with a unique ability and an agenda which affects how they interact with other player-leaders (human or AI controlled) and what options (military, economic, expansive, technological) they choose to concentrate on. The player takes the role of the culture´s Demiurge that projects its influence thought time. Ages and years pass, but the player´s presence stays.

These underlying assumptions form the main core of the logic behind the mechanics (the game’s rules and interactions between the player and the virtual world) of one of the most famous and best-known series of (strategic) videogames: *Sid Meier's Civilization*. These kinds of games offer a complex simulation of social change and evolution through time and simulate the interaction of economy, culture, warfare, technological change, and interaction of societies at large. It is an excellent example of how the geopolitical imaginary works in popular culture (Salter 2011) or how the Anthropocene operates (Condis 2015). Video games are a new historical narrative form (Galloway 2006, Chapman 2013). Realism, as a narrative and expressive form, is a central issue for these games, even more so in the case of historically themed videogames (Krapp 2019). Our interest is not so much realism in video games that are perceived as historic, like the *Civilization* franchise, but the fact that those games allow the players to “not only engage with a historical videogame but also the larger historical discourse to which it relates” (Chapman 2013, 316). We agree with Fogu (2009, 118) when he considers that *Civilization* franchise´s “procedural rhetoric makes this game a quintessential "machine for producing speculative and conditional" historical scenarios.”

This paper will explore the deep-seated assumptions of *Civilization*'s creators, Sid Meier, Soren Johnson, Brian Reynolds, as intrinsically linked to Western intellectual traditions, both scientific and literary. The *Civilization* franchise, following Bogost (2008) and Lammes (2008), becomes a space of possibilities and socio-spatial practices where legitimacy and sovereignty frames taken from Western ontopolitics are validated and reinforced. Games considered historical such as the *Civilizatio*n franchise can be employed as pedagogic tools to show different aspects of the past (Squire 2002; Kee et al. 2009; Owens, 2011; Chapman 2013; Condis 2015). As McCall (2018, 416) wrote, "[i]n a variety of ways, players are using the historical simulation game as a point of entry to play with the past."

The Demiurge in Digital Form: Re-living the Myths of Order

As we advance in our introduction, in the *Civilization* series, the player takes the effective role of the Demiurge of the Platonic and Greek tradition. The player thus, does not create the world. It exists at game start even though unexplored just like the expanding interactions allowed to the player with that world and its inhabitants. The possibilities are not endless, and thus, the advancement process works under a frame of *Aletheia* ("truth" in Greek, but in the sense of discovery and unveiling). The choices taken along the way can shape the environment, both human and natural, drastically, but not insert any new, non-existing possibility. The interaction of the player is effectively that of a force of order, not a force of creation.

Why is this ideological paradigm so prevalent? The creators of Civilization come from a Western cultural background. From that cultural background, the choice of underlying assumptions about how societies develop and are sustained follows both a practical approach, (a conception of the world that can be translated well into game´s rules) and a well-known and liked paradigm (linear progress towards a better world). Western modernity is deeply based upon the assumption of rationality. Causes for natural and social phenomena can be described, known, predicted and replicated. However, the rise of modernity also creates its sceptics, those who point out at the impossibility to know with perfect certainty.

Darwin is perhaps the best critic of the representation of the human history the *Civilization* franchise offers, a representation that draws deeply from Enlightenment. He considered the environment and chance as the crucial factors to understand changes. The variety of life emerges from the different adaptations to environments from the different species. This notion contradicts the assumption that changes are are unilineal and teleological: for Darwin there is no endgame, no finish line, changes work by themselves or a species face extinction. This conception of life offers a non-finalist, non-predefined model that hardly suits a representation of unchained control.

Social critics, both conservative and reactionary, or progressive and revolutionary point out the limited capacity of forecasting the effects of social change Taking Hume's reasoning to doubt the link between cause and effect as less than evident (Hume 1993); they offer a principle of uncertainty where social changes do not necessarily lead to the expected outcomes. Those changes can, in fact, can provide the tools for a monstrous outcome as Adorno and Horkheimer (2007) considered showing that successful genocide lies at the heart of modernity and is made possible by its very conditions.

Strategy games draw their enjoyment from control and predictability that is slightly randomized. Pure chaos stands in stark contrast to this logic. Civilization offers a secularized version of the work of the Demiurge. Strategy games such as *Populus* (1989) place the player on the place of a literal god, whose task is increasing the amount of worshipers while destroying other deity’s worshipers. To archive that objective, the player employs divine interventions that dramatically change the game map. Civilization does not rely on acts of creation or defiance of the natural order but on the path to design the development of a part of humanity along common possibilities open to everyone. For a logical and well-rounded simulation of order and social engineering, the inclusion of ideas that assume the world and humanity as *unfinished work* that does not exclude the rise of ex novo elements (an act of creation in mythological terms) is a direct challenge to that power.

The success of Civilization lies in its capacity to provide the player with a simulation with deep resonances in the human psyche. Even if just for a virtual world, the player becomes the forces behind the forces described in genres such as History or Myth: the player becomes the invisible Adam Smith´s hand of the market, Hegel´s Weltgeist, Marx´s class conflict or Aristotle´s Unmoved Mover. The Player´s actions on the virtual world become not an exploration of the past from a visitor´s perspective, but an act of re-telling. As Claude Lévi-Strauss understands Freud's recast of the myth of Prometheus (1983), the psychoanalyst does not really provide an interpretation of the myth as an outside watcher, but offers another version of Prometheus´ myth itself. Civilization´s player does not look at the past to understand it; the interaction is aimed at re-creating the past. It is a manipulation of the forces of creation that may lead to similar or divergent outcomes to the ones in the real world.

Sid Meier's Civilization: A Complex Simulation

The ideological frames presented above seemingly operate smoothly in *Civilization* because they are implicitly based on Western cultural biases. More specifically, *Civilization* franchise´s task is, according to Poblocki (2002, 172) “giving every civilization a chance to become the USA.” In fact, those very frames may work as virtual extensions of the player's own understanding of what needs to be done to become a hegemonic power. As we considered previously, *Civilization* franchise is offered the chance to control the evolution, expansion and change through time for a human society. The first choice for a player is a historical civilization from around the world. *Civilization I* is the only game where the choice is purely cosmetic. From *Civilization II* onwards, each different culture offers a set of bonuses on different areas of gameplay. Some cultures like Rome or the Vikings provide bonus in warfare while others such as India provide bonuses on construction speed. As we see, the choice on culture has evolved from pure aesthetics to a conscious chose of gameplay style according to player´s interests.

Victory conditions have changed over time. The most classic are a complete military domination or becoming the first civilization to send a colony spaceship to Alpha Centauri system. Interestingly enough, the name of this star is also the title in another Sid Meier´s game, *Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri* (1999). Its mechanics are very similar to *Civilization,* but this time, the player competes for the colonial domination of a planet in the star system of Alpha Centauri. In a sense, this game is a sci/fi continuation of *Civilization*.

Total conquest has become the de facto strategy because difficulty in Civilization series works with increasing bonus and help to AI adversaries. Thus, under the same level of development in technology and resources, the AI gets better yields, so the best way to counter this advantage is by denying it those resources, hence, conquest. This drastic approach works better if the player adopts an authoritarian government, because those are the forms of government most supportive of military conquest. Even though we focus our analysis on the second installment (perhaps the most revolutionary and influential of the series), it is worth considering that it has seen a long evolution until the present day. The analyzed authoritarian behavior has slowly become more balanced by penalties that actually feel and work as such.

The most important change in *Civilization II* (1996) came from the minimization of luck in military conflict. In the very first game, it was possible, though rare, that a Prehistoric unit could defeat a modern tank; *Civilization II* (1996) removed that possibility.

Civilization II (1996) is the second installment of the series. It offered a qualitative leap for strategy games. Unlike similar themed games at the time, such as *Populous* (1989) and *Populous II* (1992) or *Age of Empires I-III* (1997-2005), *Civilization II* (1996) improved on tried and tested mechanics offering a more complex game where military domination was only one of the several forms of archiving victory. The other drastic change in the concept of *Civilization II* (1996) lies in it forcing the player-chosen civilization to evolve, change and develop over time: for a specific civilization to archive the ultimate victory, it needs to change and develop; a concept the game links to the technological advance of this civilization. The player starts the game as a nomadic tribe around 4000 BC and from there, progresses throughout the different conventional Western ages (prehistory, ancient, medieval, modern and present time) by means of advancing their technological capacity. Technological capacity does not only mean the discovery of materials to create more complex tools and machines, but also unlock more complex forms of government, economic frameworks, more profitable trade of more effective diplomacy. As we see, this approach mirrors the stage progress described by Thomsen, Keller, Lubbock, Morgan, and other proponents of social evolution based on incremental stages of technological and social organization models.

Controlling development in *the Civilization* franchise offers the capacity to design the political and economic orientation as well as well-being (in the form of religion, health, and overall happiness) of a society along with its military might. This holistic approach immediately influenced games such as *Pharaoh* (1999). Unlike older pure wargames centered around battles or military campaigns, Civilization forced the player to attend technological development, economic expansion and control of civil unrest, not just military expansion. The key aspect in contrast with war-games is the level of detail: Civilization incorporates an important level of abstraction and simplification of each aspect in order to offer the player a balanced approach. It is possible to pay extra attention to an aforementioned interaction of the game, but none of those aspects can be completely pushed aside in order to run a successful game. Thus, logistic management turned crucial, both inwards and outwards. Technology offers in this context new possible mechanics and increases the capacity of all those fields (more and better military units, more production, increases in total population, larger cities, etc.) eventually leading to radical social changes (eras) that are portrayed with a change on the aesthetics of the cities and advisors. That incremental progress offers a victorious outcome giving us a landmark: become the first society to send its members to space and colonize a planet.

Where do we see a favorable view of authoritarianism in this mixture of systems and game rules? Theoretically, victory can be achieved without fighting a single war in the entire game nor enacting forms of social organization where tight control and repression are the norm.

Every form of social organization offers advantages and disadvantages (*Civilization II* allows monarchy, republic, fascism, democracy, communism and fundamentalism); however, clearly authoritarian governments have advantages even in their disadvantages. Those governments score extra on the military aspect while also having a lowered diplomatic score. The game itself offers the advice to simply conquer the weaker neighbors effectively opting to toss aside any form of diplomatic or trade interaction. Population happiness increased on more open forms of government (particularly democracy) and led to a higher productivity but in exchange for a risk of potential discontent (and even riots). A more oppressed population granted a very low risk of unrest, even during prolonged wars or economic scarcity, thus offering yet another incentive for aggressive conquest. Diplomacy offered the exchange of technologies but often the player's culture easily outpaced the rivals. In the end, this simulation is based on mathematical models and player's actions typically allows for pushing those models to its limits. However, the setting of those numbers is also a human creation where we can see a strong favor towards aggressive developments. That model of expansion and domain is not at all alien, but deeply embedded in Western thought, from its Greek cradle, the generalization under the notion of Universal Empire with Rome and, more recently, the ideas of the Enlightenment and modernity that ultimately justify the overtaking of *lower cultures* in the name of *higher cultures*.

Among experienced *Civilization II* (1996) players, there is a tried and true method to achieve a quick and effective victory. The first step is the adoption of fundamentalism as a form of government as it eliminates the internal dissent mechanics. It lacks the benefits of production from a democratic form of government but those are less important in game terms than stability. The next step is unrestrained nuclear warfare. This situation has led to very peculiar dynamics as we can see in a Huffington Post article (Rundle 2012). Lycerius, the screen name of a player, had been playing Civilization II for a real-world time of a decade. Over the course of that decade, only three powers remain in game competing for the remaining resources in the game. During the course of 1700 in-game years, the Celts, Vikings and Americans have waged a nuclear war that has melt the ice caps three times, destroyed every arable land, reduced the global population to sparse cities without any improvements because the choice between building a granary (the most basic city building that improves population growth) detracts from building a tank (one of the best land units) to keep the war moving. Lycerius mentioned that he tried to keep a democratic government, but game mechanics forced him to adopt a communist system in order to keep social unrest low. The player asked on *Reddit* for suggestions on how to get out this Orwell´s 1984 environment (Rundle 2012). One of the most striking recommendations pointed at the adoption of fundamentalism as the form of government to run his virtual government.

Even though the name fundamentalism leads us to think of a regime where religious authority is not questioned and inspires social organization, surprisingly, in game terms, this regime does not hinder intellectual or technological advance at all. Due to that element, what we see is a form of Enlightened Despotism in which the population has no voice or relevance, as the state assumes that population to be underage. Thus, the role of the state is to provide the welfare, order and happiness the population is unable to achieve and even fathom by themselves.

From *Civilization III* (2001) onwards, there has been an attempt to reduce the impact of military power, thus reducing the importance of game mechanics that favor authoritarian solutions. The goal to offer the player more diplomatic or *soft power* options has been strengthened with every installment, but in truth, military might is still the quickest and most effective way to achieve victory. The way to mitigate this tendency in more recent game installments is to force a deeper economic system that forces the player to control certain resources on the game map (horses to create cavalry units, iron for strong ancient units, oil to build tanks and planes…) and an upkeep mechanic (the larger the standing military force, the more expensive it is to keep it operational) that hinders a gameplay exclusively focused on military might.

Civilization III (2001) and more recent games of the series offer new victory conditions such as controlling the United Nations (diplomatic victory), becoming the civilization with the largest cultural score (culture victory) or being the cradle of a religion that becomes the single one practiced in the entire globe (religion victory). However, total conquest is still the most straightforward path to victory even in these remodeled sequels because difficulty scaling works exactly as we showed before in Civilization II.

Civilization III (2001) emphasizes that dependency by encouraging trade. It focuses a part of the material advancement on the control of resources and areas of influence, diplomacy and culture as the elements to *contain* rival civilizations while the player can gear up a strong military. In this game, it becomes possible to annex settlements close to the border if the cultural score is overwhelmingly higher, thus imitating the processes of acculturation. Culture also becomes a commodity in this installment, as the older certain buildings become (including obsolete wonders of the world) the larger are their capacities to generate revenue due to tourism. Under a fundamentalist government, all those elements get an important impact reduction in terms of score. In a sense, those mechanics assume the existence of a happy and thriving bourgeois population as the game seems to relate happiness and social cohesion with not just material wealth, but culture that is measured for its capacity to supply money.

Diplomacy offers interesting changes, too. The emergence of the United Nations and their deepened mechanics provide a higher score for civilizations with less personalist forms of government. International pressure towards democratization becomes a real threat to authoritarian governments; however, it is also perfectly possible that said authoritarian government could endure the pressure by pure economic and military might.

Those are the most relevant changes in terms of general gameplay, but they are not the only ones that show the tendency of turning soft power as not so soft: conquering a city can be archived with military or with cultural score. *Civilization IV* (2005), for example, included the impact of religion as a power mechanic both internally and externally. It also allowed to set the level of freedom enjoyed by the population and increased the role of the international community in the form of the United Nations, a mechanic that granted the chance of a diplomatic victory if all the other competing civilizations recognized the player as the General Secretary of the UN. To achieve this victory, peace, steady trade, technological exchange and the avoidance of war and aggressive expansion against other civilization's borders are the tools to build a good diplomatic standing.

Civilization V (2010) changed on of the core components in the rules present since the very first *Civilization* game. While the turn-based passage of time remains the same, the board for the game, divided in squares from the very first and following games changed to hexagons. Along with the changes in unit movement management, the game does not allow, unlike previous installments, to pile up units in the same space, thus forcing the player to spread further and smaller concentration. It also allowed the artificial intelligence of the game to openly lie in its information about foreign cultures and their intentions.

Even though in the most recent *Civilization*, the sixth installment, military conquest is still a central, very developed mechanic, soft power does not take a too clear second place. This influence is visualized in the game through the graph formed on border areas between civilizations. Those areas show reciprocal influence nodes between the cities of that graph. From *Civilization III* (2001) to the present day, territorial power has evolved from pure conquest and physical control to a *social territory* where the process of influence, acculturation and potentially annexation may occur over time. Thus, conflict seems to have shifted from a total clash between societies to conflict over territory articulated on different venues.

Even though, as we have seen, the evolution of the series has implemented soft power mechanics, the balance remains unsolved. Authoritarianism is a perfectly valid strategy and it is relatively easy to embark on a merciless campaign of subjugation and conquest, it is simply harder to plan and takes longer than in older games.

Civilization franchise seems to permanently try to archive a balance between the elements of soft and hard power. Perhaps the best description of this tension can be understood by Freud's description of the forces underneath social structures. *Civilization* tries to balance the creative forces (Eros) and destructive forces (Thanatos) never fully capable of achieving a state of equilibrium. Decades of games and addons have shifted the balance of one and the other mirroring the unstable model proposed by Freud (2002). As argued by Poblocki (2002, 168), the biopolitical imperialism in *Civilization* franchise

> “suggests that present-day superiority of the West lies in personal abilities of its leaders and citizens who produce more under democracy than under, say, despotism, and that the backwardness of the Rest lies in their individual and collective inferiority. This is the story that we already know very well.”

How the Strategy Genre Fits in Ludic Categories

Videogames are, in the end, cultural commodities. Even art games that are not primarily meant to obtain the largest possible profit margin, try to at least recoup production costs. This trait is shared by any other form of traditional or modern entertainment. Conveniently, football manufacturers aim at providing a product, same as board game creators or card deck printers. What makes videogames different from analog games? Sales. At the present time, the videogame industry, according to Wijman (2020), will generate revenues of $159.3 billion in 2020. According to Forbes, the cinema industry has made $100 billion in 2019 (Escandon 2020). With such numbers, it can be argued that videogames as an entertainment form are far more capillary than cinema.

At the current time, physical copies of the game in CD or DVD format are not even necessary. With digital download services, any player with internet access and the adequate hardware can play no matter where or who as long as the infrastructure is responsive. That sense of global appeal is a crucial component on any developer's mind and as such, taken in consideration during the creation process of the game. In the *Civilization*´s series games, the estimated sales are 33 million copies sold (Nunneley 2016). These figures show that games are even more relevant today that they have ever been. Their massive presence and success show that, even if indirectly, they have the capacity to shape the perceptions of reality as much if not more than any other form of mass media.

The pioneers, in the analysis of games and playing, Huizinga in 1938 (2016) and Caillois in 1955 (2001), worked long before the existence of videogames themselves. For them, games involved activities that were performed with a board on a table, with a deck of cards or with the body itself (as in sports). Little they could know about screens, silica and glowing screens. However, their insights may help us understanding why videogames have become so popular and engaging, because their studies try to define how an activity becomes fun and what and how that fun is regulated.

For a game to be called a game, it needs rules and norms. Huizinga (2016 (1938)) pointed at rules, freely accepted, as the crucial element that makes playing an act of civilization, perhaps the very first act of civilization. Civilization for Huizinga includes all those human creations beyond its pure biological functions. For games to be games rules have to be freely accepted; in the case of videogames this is even more explicit as acquiring them requires a process of purchasing with all the economic regulations implied (even bypassing them, piracy, carries the legal language of broken laws). Videogames sometimes offer users the possibility to change the rules under which they operate; such modifications are known in the gaming community as mods. Mods follow the contractual nature show by Huizinga, and logically, cheating exists among videogames precisely because they are construct with implicit and explicit rules. To understand strategy videogames, *Civilization* franchise in this case, we need to focus on what forces inspire those rules by which the game operates, but also how they contribute to what Huizinga considered at the very start of his work *Homo Ludens* as a crucial component of playing: fun (2016, 3).

Strategy games by virtue of their nature offer a simulation of human reality. It is important to mark that this is the case even when strategy does not deal directly with human entities, as the simulation follows the patterns humans employ to understand such phenomena. This would be the case of the classic *Sim Earth* (1990), a strategy game that simulates the geological and biological changes in the planet with the human categories applied to its periods.

Usually, board games place their focus on a single aspect with detail or several with less detail. If a simulation is extremely detailed in its military aspect, the economic side is streamlined; if diplomacy and negotiation is the central element of the simulation, further conflict coming from agreement or disagreement is streamlined. There are exceptions to this trend, and board games such as World in Flames shine in its complexity, but the tradeoff is how time consuming it may become (a single game can easily run for years). Computers and its increasing capacity for operations have the chance to reverse this logic: a videogame can offer a vast array of mechanics that simulate very different aspects at the same time. With the adequate hardware, the only limit is the capacity of the player to account for all those aspects at the same time. As de Zamaróczy (2016) has argued, historical strategy video games are excellent venues to explore assumptions about science, economy, law and their connection with the field of International Relations.

The *Civilization* series offers an excellent example of this progression as the first installments provided a relatively simple focus on economic expansion that led to diplomatic and military conflict geared towards becoming the most powerful culture on planet Earth, from Prehistory to the Space Age. Further iterations of the series did not break the model. In fact, they increased the sophistication of both growth and conflict offering new venues for and more refined interactions between the player and the virtual world. On every game, the economic simulation grew more complex, warfare that waged in more ways (as it simulated bombings from air and sea, war at sea, espionage…) and diplomacy that allowed for more interactions with other factions increased the player´s sense of control and increased possibilities for play and experimentation. However, the initial premise of expansion and conflict remains a constant. It is possible to argue that this emphasis on conflict is central, because it provides a challenge for the players. In the virtual military struggle, they can compete against the artificial intelligence opponents or other players and display skill and mastery of the ruleset implicit in Huizinga's understating of games.

Civilization: Another Turn on Enlightenment´s *Progress*

As we have just seen, the Civilization games provide the player the challenge to become the dominant civilization across the ages. In that very concept, ages, we can track a classic Western understanding of social change: sociocultural evolution. Sociocultural evolution that human societies develop on stages. Those stages are clearly defined by technological levels (Stone, Copper, Bronze, Iron), form of social organization (horde, tribe, state) or presence or absence of written documents. This interpretation of cultural change is universal and can be applied to any culture of the world at any time. Thus, the British of United Kingdom would be labeled as a higher and civilized culture in the XIX century while the Maori of the Pacific Islands would be considered backwards as they did not organize under a state, did not manufacture steel or kept written records systematically.

In Civilization, by the end of the game, the visual confirmation of success and advancement looks like an iconic American-style liberal democracy. The in-game cities show a skyline, the population icons show Western-dressed humans, wealth and consumption show social success (money accumulation is the first indicator of a well-run game). Linear advancement in technology and a clear specialization of work offer clear technocratic traits and a market economy as the ultimately desired outcome for a civilization (Poblocki 2002, Henthorne 2003).

In game terms, civilizations are just slightly different, and those differences represent clear stereotypes (Chinese or Indian as very hard working and productive, Romans as conquerors, Greeks as bright innovators …); but in terms of potential and development, the evolution is exactly the same for everyone. This mechanics offers a certain balance between competitors and thus, offering very similar chances to achieve the final victory in the game. The reasons to adopt the evolutionary understanding, particularly a very 19th century understanding of it, may seem paradoxical in late modernity but it provides two crucial benefits: a solid body of intellectual traditions and an easy model to translate into a set of mathematical instructions. At the very core, any strategy videogame is a highly stylized worksheet, so like every worksheet it needs a set of values and operations. The adapted concept of sociocultural evolution provides the machine with information on what to look for and register and what to disregard.

XIX century academics such as Herbert Spencer (2013), Lewis Henry Morgan (2018) and Edward Taylor (2011) are the main proponents of this form of evolution in stages. Even critics of their work such as Émile Durkheim (1995), and Karl Marx (1993) did not deny the very notion of stages. Instead, they problematized the nature and changes of those stages. While Durkheim look to so called primitives with a certain respect as he found their social institutions akin to those of Europe in the past, Marx saw colonialism as the driving force of modernization for societies that were in development stages even worse that European capitalism. The models of savagery, barbarism, and civilization from Morgan; primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism from Marx and Durkheim's organic and mechanic societies offer a picture of stages that provide an aesthetic and mechanical canvass relatively easy to implement in the form of a videogame. *Civilization* shows those changes in game by providing archetypical images depending on era of the aspect of urban areas, music, attire of advisors and expanding possibilities. As Pobłocki (2002, 164) argued:

> "Civilization is the first bold attempt to simulate the whole of human history in computer software. Ambitious as it sounds, the game nevertheless does not go beyond reproducing models of social change well known, and extensively criticized, in twentieth-century social science."

Those stages offer a clear sense of progression but that progression is framed under the logical assumptions of evolutionary theory. The unilineal version assumes that all societies have passed, are passing or will pass through the same stages, a concept present in the *Civilization* series in the form of eras starting in Civ III (there are four eras in Civ III, seven in Civ IV, eight in Civ V, and nine in Civ VI) that all in game civilizations reach and potentially surpass. Each era is determined by a technological level the player can reach in the tech tree.

Technology in *Civilization* encompasses both material and organizational knowledge. Surprisingly, in this regard the game mechanics are coherent with one of the most ardent critics of the very concept of linear progress. For Foucault (2002), knowledge and power cannot be separated. The player in Civilization researches as an extension of power. Knowledge, in the form of technologies, improves the key aspects of the culture played effectively granting the player access to more power, which manifests in better control of the game´s mechanics. Unlike in social-evolutionary theory, the goal is changes is not a further social complexity and refinement, but towards a more nuanced and complex use of power.

Even though in terms of game mechanics there is a clear forecast of the effects of a technology (allowing new military units, buildings, forms of government), all of them contribute to empower the player and expand her capabilities in one or several aspects. In Voorhees (2009) we can find an analysis of this scientific determinism and the influence of Cartesian thought in the first four titles of *Civilization's* series on how the player interaction with these games reifies a conception of himself or herself as a sovereign agent constituted of pure internality. Even though *Civilization* V and VI, as we have seen before, try to depart from this Western-centric representational scheme of cultural development, the final product is still work on a pattern of expansion and control just like all the previous installments of the series. The way knowledge is acquired is linear and progressive. This premise is evident looking at the technology tree and the functions of Civilopedia present in every single game. It shows military units (and their attack, defense and movement capabilities), buildings and the bonuses they grant to cities, and what new mechanics are enabled by each advance of the technology tree; this whole plan and timeline can be consulted way ahead of time, effectively allowing to plan a path from Prehistory to Space Age.

Part of this Western-centric paradigm also shows up in the underlying colonialist tones, distinguishing between civilized and barbaric peoples. Whereas other civilizations can be enemies, allies or indifferent to the player's civilization, barbarians can be only enemies or populations to be homogenized. For Douglas (2002,) the native inability to develop technology in the oldest games excludes them from playable civilizations; this exclusion is based on the inability to access the game’s technological development tree – a tree that, not surprisingly, is the same for every civilization. War against other civilizations has several connotations and penalties that do not apply to barbaric groups. There are only two options: assimilation or extermination. Assimilation is abstracted presenting the barbarians as generic primitive settlements that can grant bonuses such as extra units, a technological advance, money or exploration of the map. Extermination work by making some barbarian settlements as automatic enemies towards all civilizations. There is no possible relation of equals, no other civilization will complain (no matter their form of government) if the barbarians are attacked. Victory over barbarians is always considered in a positive light and rewarded as such with economic resources from plunder. The franchise adopts the assumption of colonial inevitability (Douglas 2002, Lammes 2010).

While the game attempts to represent the tensions of development over the environment, it streamlines the social tensions of different eras. Social unrest is a mechanic that in the first and second games can become completely crippling. Unrest can deny player´s control of cities or completely paralyzing their production. Social unrest was very prominent in CIV 1 and 2 – as have many other early features – however, after *Civilization III*, this mechanic has become far less prominent elements of the game. Discontent or happiness is tied to buildings, conquest, occupation (which can be equated to nationalism) and devastation. However, these mechanics portray poorly the conflicts inherent to the inequality of every society and offer a model that is reminiscent of the logic of Guy Debord's “Society of Spectacle” (Debord 2005). In very crude terms, luxury and entertainment have the capacity to soothe the inherent issues of any society with inequality (political, cultural or economic) or vital tensions with changes in social paradigms and change. These mechanics assume that social issues can be fixed throwing numbing wealth at the problem (a revival of the old Roman *Panem et Circenses*) or sending the troops to beat the unrest out of the population. This notion is particularly prominent in CIV V and VI, where high unrest (lack of amenities in CIV VI) spawns rebel units whose behavior is akin to aforementioned barbarians: discontent does not try force the player to change his behavior and form of leadership, it simply becomes a resource sink.

Civilization: Geography, Game Time-Space and Cultural Functions

Sybille Lammes proposes the notion of “Magic node” (2008, 264) as a way to iterate the video game environment with other social domains and the actual world. It confronts the autotelic conception of Huizinga's “*Game*” (2016), in the sense that game is not directly related to everyday life and by extension, the *Magic Circle* where the game takes place. Thus, video games are socio-spatial practices where game space and ordinary world collide forming the magic nodes of a social network. Game spaces conform meaning about space and at the same time, a ground where different spatial conceptions connect (Lammes 2008). In this sense, colonialism is one of spatial hegemonies – with employing colonial techniques like exploring, map-making, military maneuvering or trading – games like Civilization franchise, or other historical strategy games, translate into play. As Lammes (2010) argues

> “thus necessarily changing them into something more personal and subjective [...] players are endowed with a power of marking territories and empires and can thus create their own postcolonial stories by translating world histories into personal stories. Thus, colonial histories are mutated and altered and our colonial legacies are being tested, scrutinized and transformed.”

Territory and its native inhabitants stand in a limbo situation until the player discovers and/or conquers them. As players, we learn quickly that colonialism is assumed either inevitable or highly likely and desirable, as natives left alone can form riding parties and attack our settlements without warning. Accurate portrayal of historical facts and the conditions that made them possible are not as important as recreating a process, perceived as epic, of discovery and conquest that leads to forging a civilization in the Western historical sense. As Fogu (2009, 103) points out:

> “video games have begun to detach the notion of history from its double reference to the past and to the real "what essentially happened"? that it had acquired at the end of the eighteenth century. Second, they also challenge the semiotic production of "historic events" that has characterized the construction of modern historical consciousness. Historical video games, in other words, replace representation with simulation and presence with virtuality, thereby marginalizing the oscillation of the modern historical imagination between historical facts and historic events, transcendence and immanence, representation and presence.”

In Friedman (1999), Douglas (2002), Galloway (2006), Lammes (2003, 2010) and Magnet (2006) we can find meticulous analyses of spatial dynamics and their implications in games before *Civilization* franchise and potentially applicable to strategy games influenced by the series, particularly after *Civilization VI* (2016). There is an obvious temporal logic (Pobłocki 2002; Uricchio 2005) by which the franchise’s imperialist impulse operates in addition to and in accord with the spatial logic. At game start, the world is covered in darkness and we cannot distinguish the whole map. As players initiate expansion, they explore and *discover* the world. Friedman defines this expansion as *spatial story* implying that it materializes ideology through the transformation of space. At the same time, players colonize that very space by founding and building cities that in turn, allow them to climb the technological tree, offering a sense of progress.

In this sense, the narration is not just expansionist – it assumes territory to be depopulated (even with the presence of natives) with a clear Western economic and extractivist approach – but linked to the globalization narrative. The most common victory conditions show the imperialist impulse on space-time logic implicit on the game rules and mechanics of the series. To conquer the world or reach space, the player needs time. Time is the cost of development and that development can only be increased by land grabbing that expands territory, population, resources and increases research output for the technology tree. The quickest method is by authoritarian measures. We agree with Salter (2011, 360) that in essence, games like *Civilization* reproduce some core geopolitical assumptions about territory, control, contiguity and conflict grouped in the concept *territorial trap* described by John Agnew (1994). The concept, according to Agnew (1994, 53), implies that

> “conventional thinking relies on three geographical assumptions: states as fixed units of sovereign space, the domestic/foreign polarity, and states as ‘containers’ of societies.”

In *Civilization* franchise, as in other strategy games, the dependences between different societies are poorly represented, thus offering a homogenous vision of a territory or empire. War is a matter of yes or no. Events such as frontier destabilization, political mingling of foreign powers (such as supporting an opposition group) are poorly represented, same for internal opposition to a conflict or organized sympathy for the enemy.

The notion of frontier in the sense of conquest of the American West and US imperialism is a crucial component of *Civilization* franchise concept of space. Douglas (2002) argues that those elements relate to the natives, “minor tribes.” Frontiers are, in this case, the border between civilization and barbarism, hence expansion is the logical push for the initiatory mission. The ‘‘cultural semiotic’’ (Voorhees 2009, 269) of the paradox of advancement – technological development as product of the continued work of a civilization across time, impossible to stop – naturalizes an understanding of progress as a fixed progression of already intelligible advances, a logic that excludes the aleatory. Progress in *Civilization* franchise shows, for the most part, a set of values inherent in the Enlightenment and this is particularly evident for the idea of mastery over nature. In advanced stages of the game, the capacity to drastically alter the environment is clear, as the landscape tiles that form the board can be switched to more suitable and profitable ones (clearing forests, flattening mountains or irrigating deserts). The reverse is the rise in pollution and even nuclear fallout, but even those issues can be reverted via cleaning and technology, further reinforcing the notion of a perfect human mastery over society and the environment.

The games of the *Civilization* series, like several strategy games such as those of the *Age of Empires* franchise (1997-2005), share a visual perspective determined by camera angles capable of zooming from the individual level to a bird's eye perspective. This perspective reinforces the player´s position as a deity or a demiurgic figure. Not in vain, this genre is also called *god games*. Unlike *Age of Empires* franchise that only deals with warfare and conquest, *Civilization* expands and elaborates many other aspects like culture or economy. That switch from perspective, capable of reaching both the global and the individual, offers the perspective of a deity. From that *god* perspective, the player becomes an all-encompassing presence that affects the world sometimes as a subtle hand like a merchant, sometimes as the iron fist of a conqueror.

Conclusions

The *Civilization* videogame´s series shows a Westernized vision of the history and development of the different human groups. To represent that development, the game's mechanics and rules reinforce Western constructs. In the end, the basic mathematic component of the game reinforces the often times heavy-handed realism of the simulation.

Civilization II (1996) in particular shows a clear favor towards the most authoritarian policies and in-game decisions, offering a vision of society and power clearly inspired by 19th century perspectives such as the obligation to spread advancement against barbarism through colonization and conflict against other civilizations perceived as inferior. That behavior is a paternalistic approach to the exercise of power. This choice has been mitigated in the following instalments giving more soft power approaches, but they cannot ultimately compete against an aggressive and militaristic gameplay; a paradox that illustrates the geopolitical attitudes of the US, which is ultimately the cultural background that created this videogame series. This origin is the cultural backdrop that the game series ultimately reflects, effectively turning the game series into a cultural artifact that continues the Roman notion of a global, single empire that encompasses all human life as the destiny of the human species.

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