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Report

### Gaming the Nation. A Research Report

Kathrin Trattner

#### **Abstract**

A research report on the postdoctoral project *Gaming the Nation*.

**Keywords:** Nation, Identity, History, gamevironments, Strategy Games, Online Forums

**To cite this article:** Trattner, K., 2023. Gaming the Nation. A Research Report. *gamevironments* 18, 75-91. Available at <a href="https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/">https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/</a>.

What is the difference between a nation and a state? Was Barbarossa German? Are the Cree an actual nation? These are not questions from a history class, but from internet forum conversations about a highly popular video game series. As these discussions indicate, video games can serve as interesting spaces for reflection on the concept of the nation, its role in history, and questions of national identity. These discussions and negotiations are of central interest to the project *Gaming the Nation*, a three-year postdoctoral project funded by the University of Bremen (2022-2025). The project seeks to investigate how gamers discuss and negotiate the concept of the nation in relation to video games and whether or how their own constructions of national identity (in intersection with other social categorizations) impact these negotiations.

So far, video games constitute a particularly under-investigated field in this regard (van der Merwe 2021, 138) – a research gap the research project *Gaming the Nation* 

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aims to address. To do so, it focuses on one game series in particular: *Sid Meier's Civilization* (1991, 1996, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2016). This genre-formative turn-based strategy game series is not only one of the most successful video game series of all time, but also one of the most vividly discussed in scholarly discourse concerning representations of the nation and nationalism, especially in relation to historical processes and developments. Overall, the project is guided by the following research questions:

How do Civilization players perceive and negotiate

- a) the concept of the nation in relation to the games and their content?
- b) the representations of individual playable civilizations in terms of nations within the games?
- c) the portrayal of history and historical relations (e.g., expansionism, colonialism, imperialism) these representations are tied into within the games?

In the following, the project *Gaming the Nation* will be briefly outlined in some of its central theoretical and methodological concerns. I will start by providing an overview of some of the theoretical cornerstones of the project, especially concerning its underlying understanding of the concept of the nation on the one hand and of video games and gaming on the other. This is followed by a brief look at previous scholarly discussions of the *Civilization* series in relation to questions of the nation, identity, and history to identify key tendencies therein as well as research gaps the project hence seeks to address. In the next section, I will introduce my research material as well as the methods applied in analyzing it. The report, then, concludes by providing a brief outlook.

### **Theoretical Background**

To start, it is necessary to make a few theoretical clarifications. The first question that arises is: What are we actually talking about when we talk about the nation? As Hobsbawm (2012, 10) contends, nations are "dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people." Popular modernist theories of the nation, such as Anderson's (1990) imagined communities or Gellner's (1994) reflections on nations and nationalism, are primarily concerned with the "from above" Hobswbawm (2012, 10) refers to, as they are interested in the (naturalized) constructedness of the nation through the course of large-scale historical processes as well as the consequences thereof throughout history. Yet, to put it bluntly with Brubaker et al. (2006, 7), "that ethnicity and nationhood are constructed is a commonplace; how they are constructed is seldom specified in detail." It is the latter that, according to Hobsbawm, requires an additional perspective from below. A useful way to address this is the concept of everyday nation (Thompson 2001, Brubaker et al. 2006, Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), which "explores how the nation resonates in different ways among a diverse population" (Antonsich 2020, 1234). It is "a relational, processual, and dynamic understanding" (Brubaker et al., 2006, 10) of the nation. Furthermore, according to Brubaker (2004, 116) the concept implies a perspectival shift, making "the category 'nation' the object of the analysis, rather than use it as a tool of analysis." Hence, what actors themselves consider the nation to be and how (or whether) they ascribe meaning to this concept in perhaps very different ways according to their own social contexts and identity formations is of central interest. I argue that the concept of the everyday nation is, therefore, particularly useful for encompassing how gamers ascribe meaning to the nation in the context of their gaming experiences (and beyond). Furthermore, when it comes to questions of national identity, the concept of

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everyday nation raises awareness of intersections with other social categories, such as race, class, gender, or religion. After all, as Hobsbawm (2012, 11) explains, national identification "is always combined with identifications of another kind, even when it is felt to be superior to them."

In times of deep mediatization (Hepp 2020), everyday understandings and negotiations of categories such as *nation* are significantly shaped by and take place in relation to different types of media, such as video games. This brings me to a second theoretical clarification: that of the project's underlying understanding of video games – or rather, video gaming. I make this distinction to emphasize that studying video games implies looking at more than the medial artifacts themselves. As Ensslin (2012, 5-6) explains, "there is more to the meaning of video games than just the game itself and its specific textual make-up. What is equally important is the way in which games draw on and relate to other texts and discourses surrounding them." The concept of *gamevironments* is a useful way of approaching this discursive multitude. Gamevironments refers to "a theoretical and analytical frame based on the actor-centered approach, which puts the environment into research focus" (Radde-Antweiler 2018b, 209, cf. also Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). This does not mean that video games themselves as medial artifacts with their specific multimodality and procedurality are no longer of interest. As Radde-Antweiler (2018b, 210) points out: "The real added value of the concept gamevironments is [...] that it propagates more than just a combination of or the addition of two – considered separate – fields. Rather, it opts for a shifting perspective: namely from media-centered to actor-centered research." In the case of the research project introduced here, taking *gamevironments* as a sensitizing concept means not focusing solely on how the nation is represented within the analyzed games (which has been investigated at length, cf. the next section), but, instead, on how these

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representations are interpreted and negotiated in multiple ways by the people who engage with them – first and foremost, gamers. In this way, these negotiations, particularly in conjunction with the recipients' own constructions of national identity, can be analyzed as instances of everyday nationhood.

#### **Previous Research**

One of the main reasons for choosing the *Civilization* franchise as an example lies in its enduring popularity, not only in terms of number of players. There are few other video game series that have attracted as much scholarly attention over the years as the Civilization series has. With six main installments released between 1991 and 2016 and near-countless add-ons, it is a game series with a particularly rich history that can be considered formative and style-setting for the entire genre of turn-based strategy games. In terms of gameplay, all Civilization games from the first installment onwards follow the same basic structure: from the macro-perspective, the player guides a civilization through history from the beginnings of mankind until the age of space exploration. It is a, if not the, classic 4X-game (Emrich 1993, 92), referring to its core gameplay principles: eXplore (the terrain), eXpand (your empire), eXploit (the resources), and eXterminate (your opponents). Which civilizations the player can choose from in this endeavor varies throughout the different installments and addons. However, what they all have in common is that they are modeled after actual, sometimes historical, nation-states or cultures. It is therefore unsurprising that Civilization is among the most-discussed video games when it comes to investigations of the nation and/in gaming, particularly in relation to history. After all, the player quite literally takes on the role of a nation as it progresses throughout history. Reviewing the vast body of literature that has been steadily growing for around 30 years now, it is salient that the majority of research on the Civilization

series generally takes a media-centered perspective. This also applies to the body of literature discussed here concerned with the nation and/in *Civilization*. While representations of the nation and history are frequently discussed in research on the *Civilization* series, the players' reception and negotiation of such representations have not yet been systematically explored on an empirical level. This is a crucial research gap the project *Gaming the Nation* seeks to address. In the following, central theses from previous research on the *Civilization* series will be presented, focusing on discussions of the nation and nationalism in the game series on the one hand and views of players and their (possible) engagement with these representations on the other.

First of all, it is important to note that how the nation as a principle of social organization is represented throughout history in the game series is seldom the explicit focus of research (for exceptions, see Donecker 2014, Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022). Rather, questions of the nation (and nationalism) in relation to the Civilization series are mostly addressed in the context of analyses of representations of history, colonialism, or imperialism (Friedman 1998, Bembeneck 2013, Ford 2016, Carpenter 2021). Overall, according to the reviewed literature, the nation in the *Civilization* series is portrayed as a) homogenous (Friedman 1998, Donecker 2014, Carpenter 2021, Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022), b) primordial (Donecker 2014, Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022), c) essentialist (Chen 2003, Donecker 2014), and d) indicative of nationalist sentiments (Friedman 1998, Donecker 2014, Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022). This means that, according to the literature, in *Civilization*, there is only heterogeneity beyond, but not within the nation, which, in itself, is always homogenous (a). As Carpenter (2021, 44) points out, there is no hybridity, diaspora, migration, or multiplicity of identities. Furthermore, the nation is portrayed as a ubiquitous primordial form of human organization (b). The player starts a game in 4000 BC with a particular nation

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that remains the same throughout all of history. It not only remains the same in terms of its name, emblem, and leader, but also concerning its traits and characteristics (c). Bijsterveld Muñoz (2022, 8), hence, speaks of "an essential nature to the nations being played." Building on these arguments, the game series is frequently attributed nationalist undertones (d). As Friedman (1998, 134) points out, "its ideological assumptions rest on the familiar ground of nationalism and imperialism."

To summarize, in the *Civilization* series, the idea of the nation as a primordial form of human existence bound to specific traits is reinforced through the games' gameplay structure and embedded in a teleological conception of history (Donecker 2014, 113), thereby legitimizing nationalist boundaries (Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022, 12) and Eurocentric, imperialist understandings of identity and nationhood. As this summary indicates, the games' rules and the agency they afford to the player are often the focus of investigations of the *Civilization* series. Ideological messages such as the ones described above are, hence, mostly analyzed as being embedded in the games' rules. For instance, Bijsterveld Muñoz (2022, 6-8) argues that the essentialist nature of nations is embedded in the games' rule systems since the introduction of the trait system, attributing certain traits to certain civilizations. But what does this mean for the respective authors' understanding of the relation between game and gamer?

In many ways, it implies that if players want to win the game, they have to tacitly accept ideological assumptions apparently inherent to the games' rule system. In the example above, one could argue that if the player wants to win the game, they have to play according to their chosen civilization's characteristics, e.g., expansionist as England, or spiritual as India, and, hence, accept the nation's essentialist nature. This assumption that players' experiences of the game and attitudes towards its representations and ideological underpinnings are predetermined by how the games'

rules are constructed (Douglas 2002, Kapell 2002, Galloway 2006, Voorhees 2009, Bembeneck 2013, Mir and Owens 2013, Carpenter 2021, Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022) is a frequent one in the media-centered literature on *Civilization*. This also implies a supposed relative homogeneity of players. This reductive view of players' engagement with what is represented in the *Civilization* games has, however, also been criticized by several authors, acknowledging the possibility of players critically negotiating the games' content (Carr 2007, Reichert 2008, Owens 2011, Ghys 2012, Chapman 2013, Ford 2016, Zamaróczy 2016, Apperley 2018). Encompassing these negotiations on the one hand and asking whether or how those relate to players' own national identities require shifting the perspective beyond game-immanent analyses of rule-systems and, instead, taking an actor-centered approach.

#### **Research Material and Methods**

Since game-immanent representations of the nation in relation to history have already been analyzed in the academic literature on the *Civilization* franchise, the project *Gaming the Nation* draws upon the current state of research as described above in this regard. The project's central objective is, then, to encompass how players perceive and discuss these representations and whether or how these negotiations relate to their own constructions of national identity. The project's focus is on German *Civilization* players. Not least due to its history, Germany has been researched extensively regarding constructions of national identity and nationalism from various scholarly perspectives, yet not explicitly with regard to the potential role of video gaming within the context of deep mediatization. The research material is comprised of two main parts: forum discussions on the one hand and interviews on the other. As a methodological framework, qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz (2016) is chosen.

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The Civilization franchise is, as mentioned, one of the most successful video game franchises of all time. It is especially popular in Germany, as can be seen when looking at the Civilization Webring Forum (n.d.), the largest German-speaking forum focused on discussions relating to the franchise. The forum has been online since the early 2000s and contains more than 9 million posts in over 100,000 threads by around 23,600 contributors. To analyze how players talk about the nation in relation to the game series, a structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2016, 97-121) is conducted using discussions on the Civilization Webring Forum. For this, a deductiveinductive approach was chosen. A small number of initial codes was deduced from the reviewed literature in combination with the research questions. Hence, the initial deductive codes relate to the reviewed literature's theses on constructions of the nation and history within the games and assumptions concerning player attitudes towards these constructions. These deductive codes are gradually supplemented by inductive codes derived directly from the analyzed forum discussions. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for a comparison of the previously-discussed results of media-centered literature on the topic with the player's actual communication about it.

In terms of sampling, it was, first of all, important to gain an understanding of the structure of the investigated forum, as it contains a very large number of threads and postings, not all of which are equally relevant to the topic of research. For instance, sub-forums dealing with technical questions, specific gameplay strategies, video games other than *Civilization*, and off-topic sections were excluded from the sample. This left the general discussion sections for the game series' main six main installments, wherein most discussions related to representations of the nation and history are contained. These sub-forums were then searched for the term *nation* and

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all threads that showed a connection to the project's research questions were included in the sample. As a first step, the main aim is to assess how players use the term *nation* in relation to the games to then encompass how they ascribe meaning to it in different ways and whether or how their discussions of the nation in relation to the game series are connected to their own constructions of national identity. Following Kuckartz (2016, 102-111), all of the material is coded in two stages and then evaluated. At this stage, the second round of coding is in process.

To gain a deeper understanding of players' negotiations of the concept of the nation in relation to the game series, interviews with players will be conducted as a second big step of the project. Interviewees will be recruited via the Civilization Webring Forum. The current plan is to conduct a total of 12 in-depth interviews. The interviews will be conducted following the method of gaming elicitation (Radde-Antweiler 2018a). Gaming elicitation builds upon the method of photo elicitation (Harper 2002) and uses material from video games "to trigger narrative argumentation by the interviewees" (Radde-Antweiler 2018a, 33). As Radde-Antweiler (2018a, 33) elaborates: "With the help of gaming material (such as videos of the gameplay), gaming elicitation activates narrative storytelling within the respective interview and thus induces narrative knowledge." The interviews will, then, be evaluated through a qualitative content analysis. To conclude, the results of both steps – the forum analysis and the interviews – will be brought together and compared to the results of the reviewed media-centered literature.

#### Outlook

Understanding the nation in terms of everyday nationhood requires an approach that investigates how actors perceive and discuss the concept of the nation in the context

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of their everyday lives. Video games are a crucial part of our highly mediatized everyday realities and, hence, become one of the many arenas in which ideas and constructions of identity are negotiated. The Civilization franchise provides a fruitful example for exploring this intersection. The project Gaming the Nation aims at extending the already-large corpus of scholarly literature on the game series through an actor-centered perspective. Thereby, it also seeks to contribute to research on the nation, identity, and video gaming more generally – a field that is still widely underresearched and unsystematized. Another field which would be interesting to include in this area of research is user-created game content in terms of modding. Civilization has a very active modding scene and it would be interesting to observe how the nation as an actor is made playable in these gamer-created scenarios and whether its procedural and representational renderings differ from those of the main series or simply reproduce it, for instance. For follow-up projects, furthermore, it would be interesting to go beyond Germany as an area of research on the one hand and Civilization as an example on the other and use the insights from Gaming the Nation to conduct wider, transnational comparative analyses of how gamers discuss and negotiate the concept of the nation in relation to their gaming experiences.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The project *Gaming the Nation. An Intersectional Investigation of Nation, Identity, and Video Gaming* is funded by the Central Research Development Fund (ZF) of the University of Bremen (Grant Number ZF04A/2023/FB9/Trattner\_Kathrin).