

THE GRAND NARRATIVES OF VIDEO GAMES: SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION

Abstract. *Sid Meier's Civilization is a popcultural artefact, good to think cultural differences, science and economy, giving us valuable insights in the Western cosmological system, which has relied on (post-)imperial, (post-)colonial and utterly ethnocentric political (and other) traditions at least since the Enlightenment. An anthropologically informed critique of Civilization, inspired by cultural relativism and post-colonial studies, is presented in the text, leading to very problematic conclusions as to what kind of messages the game conveys. The game reinforces enlightened ideals that celebrate reason and logic, presents the notion of progress as universal and unilineal, and portrays others as savages.*

Keywords. *Sid Meier's Civilization, colonialism, imperialism, scientific progress, ethnocentrism.*

Introduction

*Sid Meier's Civilization*¹ is one of the most famous and successful computer games of all time. It was first published in 1991, importantly influencing a whole generation of gamers, history geeks, as well as future managers, gurus, and leaders. Playing *Civilization* is about establishing, protecting, developing, and expanding one's empire. Before the game even begins, the player must choose which people they want to lead, and, as we shall demonstrate later, this selection already has some consequences in terms of the game's unfolding. The main premise of all versions of *Civilization* may be summarized as follows: the player's task is to build an advanced empire through colonization, imperialism, and domination, combined with development of complex social, scientific and technological systems.

Civilization is a popcultural artefact with which it is possible to think many aspects of Western societies, such as cultural differences, science and economy. By analysing this video game in the context of aforementioned concepts one can get unique insights in the Western cosmological system.

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¹ We will be using abbreviated names for particular versions of the game, such as *Civ I* for the original *Civilization*, *Civ II* for *Civilization II*, etc., whereas the general name *Civilization* will be used for the entire *Sid Meier's Civilization* series.

which has relied on (post-)imperial, (post-)colonial and utterly ethnocentric political (and other) traditions at least since the Enlightenment. In this article, an anthropologically informed critique of *Civilization*, inspired by cultural relativism and post-colonial studies, is presented, leading to very awkward conclusions as to what kind of messages the game conveys. It is apparent that the majority of Westerners still “tame” their thought (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) in accordance with enlightened ideals that celebrate reason and logic. The game reinforces this view as it portrays others as savages, presents the notion of progress as universal and unilinear, and interprets society in terms of the difference between organic and mechanical solidarity (Durkheim, 1997, orig. 1893).

However, *Civilization* is, in spite of the fact that its game mechanics is based on a simplified and outdated model of understanding human affairs, or perhaps precisely because of that fact, a game worth spending time on. The game is superbly detailed, engaging, and sophisticated, and as long as the player can distance themselves from its ideological foolishness, they are in for a treat.

Gameplay and winning

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Although originally developed for DOS, its sequels and expansions have since been revised, developed, and released on numerous platforms. The latest version of *Civilization* was released in 2013 as an expansion of *Civilization V* under the title *Civilization V: Brave New World*. Rumour has it that *Civilization VI* will be released in 2015.² *Civilization* is a turn-based strategy game, which means that it is played in individual moves or turns. Each turn consists of several different tasks, such as moving military and civilian units (soldiers, workers, diplomats, caravans, etc.), modifying city parameters (what is being built, how wealth is spread, whether to focus on production, growth or science, etc.) as well as making decisions about your civilization as a whole (for example, modifying taxes in early versions of the game, adopting policies, ideologies, and founding religions in the later versions ...). One also needs to make crucial decisions about their interactions with other civilizations (diplomacy, trade, alliances, military conflicts, etc.). After the player ends their turn, the computer and/or other players make all the necessary choices for their own civilizations. Such turn-based approach to computer games was adopted from traditional gameplay of board games. Thus, *Civilization*, alongside other similar strategies, is an example of computer appropriation of classic board games. Indeed, before

² The key versions of the game were published as follows: *Civilization* (1991), *Civilization II* (1996), *Civilization III* (2001), *Civilization IV* (2005), *Civilization V* (2010).

Sid Meier's Civilization there had been a board game called *Civilization*, but as the computer game proved so immensely successful, the board game was consequently rebranded as *Sid Meier's Civilization*.

The game starts 4000 B.C. The player is placed on a darkened map, which can be factual or fictional. Initially, the player is given control over one or two crude military units, who carry spears and wear underpants, as well as a unit of settlers. These units can be moved around on the map, revealing strategic and luxury resources, types of terrain, etc. Irrespective of the fact whether the world map is realistic or not, in the first phases of the game the player only reveals it as they move their units around, discovering and colonizing the planet. During the course of the game the player moves around the map, exploring new land, settling and cultivating it, building roads and improvements, meeting other civilizations, and establishing trade routes.

However, before one can really proceed with the game itself, they must first expend their settler unit and found a city. Having at least one city is a prerequisite for building military units and improvements, for developing science, economy, and culture, as well as for the growth of civilization. There is quite simply no possibility of scientific development, should one want to lead a nomadic lifestyle. In order to begin building a civilization, which will “stand the test of time” as goes one of the game’s catchphrases, one must first settle down.

This is the first in a series of excellent illustrations of the sociocultural evolutionist understanding of social development, which is usually seen as divided in phases, such as savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Morgan, 1964, orig. 1877). Although already debunked nearly a century ago by anthropologists (Boas, 1940), the idea of social evolutionism probably still represents the prevailing Western interpretation of cultures and the differences amongst them. After all, it is the very premise in which one can quite effortlessly find theoretical support for the grandiose ethnocentric feelings of superiority over others, which unfortunately still define contemporary Western identities.

In *Civilization*, once the player has founded their first city, they inevitably find themselves on a one-way road toward technological progress, which predictably transforms the society and gradually makes it more “civilized”. Although the player is usually given some “basic” knowledge in the beginning of the game (such as the alphabet or pottery), they are forced to settle in order for the game to unfold further.

The player’s main goal in *Civilization* is to build the most powerful, cultural and technologically advanced civilization. Different tactics can be employed in order to achieve this, but one thing is certain: one must be anything but humble if they want their civilization to flourish. Yet again, the end justifies the means: for most *Civilization* players, destroying other

civilizations is an integral part of the fun. Should one want to subvert such understanding of fun and lead a non-violent empire, they will find this to be near-impossible; “it would be extremely challenging to make it all the way through the game without a single battle.” (Schut, 2007: 221) One must work very hard to maintain good relations with other leaders, but the player can still be (and most often is) drawn into conflict either by spying activities, extortion or even sneak attacks by evil neighbours ... “It is quite conceivable ... that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite democratically ... that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof.” (Arendt, 1979: 299)

Furthermore, even the subjugation of one's own people is presented as rather inevitable, for the first couple of thousands of years at least. In the early versions of *Civilization*, the first sociocultural reality that the player inevitably and rather explicitly encounters is despotism. The player is not represented as a tyrant, rather, this choice is justified with utterly utilitarian motives: it is easy to accumulate money from people who are not allowed to demand anything. One illustrative 19th century explanation comes to mind: “Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.” (Mill, 2009: 20, orig. 1869)

As already mentioned, the game begins 4000 years B.C. and ends (in *Civ I* and *Civ II*) either when every other civilization has been extinguished or when the player successfully colonizes space. If the player does not succeed in either of these two quests, the game ends on its own in the year 2050 A.D. In later versions of the game several other kinds of victory (more “civilized” ones) are possible. In *Civ III*, *Civ IV* and *Civ V*, beside genocide and victorious space race, the game can be won in any of the following manners: domination (the player controls over 2/3 of the world and its population), cultural victory (the player's civilization is so culturally superior that other civilizations look up to it and want to be part of it) and diplomatic victory (the player must be elected to become the leader of the world). The latter is perhaps the hardest method, as it requires the utmost careful approach to the entire 6000 years of play, strict honouring of trade deals and military alliances as well as enormous humility.

While playing *Civilization* one must adhere to the distinctively Western view of the world, which favours technological development and sees technologically less advanced cultures as inferior. In fact, comparing cultures within *Civilization* leads to the same outdated verdicts as those made by pioneers of anthropology in the 19th century, Tylor and Morgan. Analysis is still based on ideas like hierarchical evaluation of cultures, seeing cultures as going through different eras or stages, and interpreting such evolution as unilinear (always from primitive to civilized) as well as universal (all cultures go

through the same sequences). (Morgan, 1964) Although theoretical thought has radically changed since the 19th century, perhaps most profoundly with post-colonial studies (see Said, 1977), the aforementioned evolutionism still dominates the Western view of the world, albeit in a much more refined, politically correct, “civilized” manner. Old terms like imperialism and colonialism have been replaced with new ones, such as globalization and humanitarianism. The same goes for science: “It is true that Western science now reigns supreme all over the globe; however, the reason was not insight in its ‘inherent rationality’ but power play (the colonizing nations imposed their ways of living) and the need for weapons: Western science so far has created the most efficient instruments of death.” (Feyerabend, 1993: 3)

Tech(nology) tree

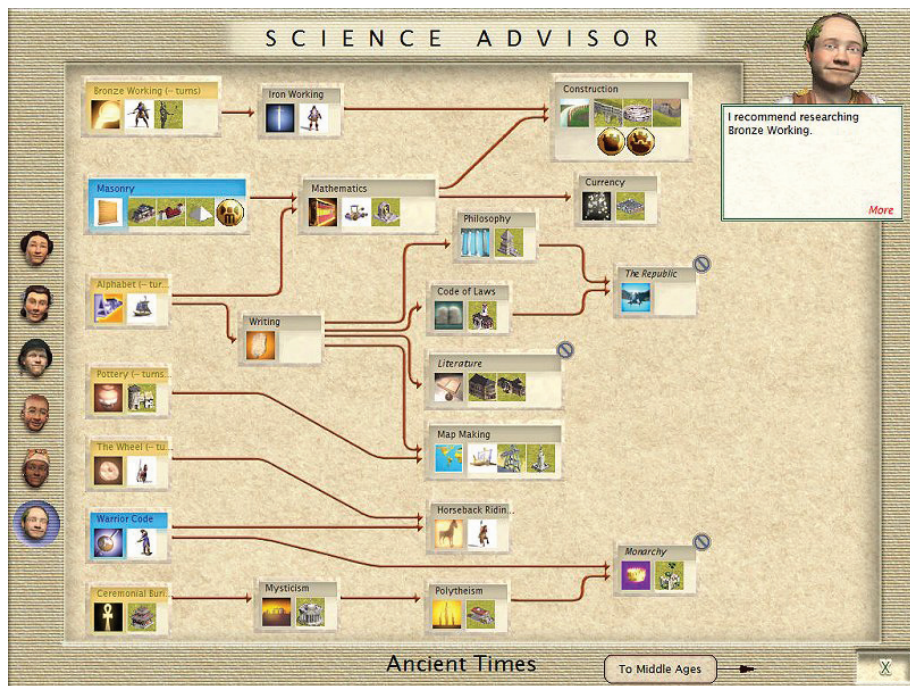
As already explained, the first task of the *Civilization* player is to found the capital city. Having to settle in order to be able to advance is obvious evidence of the game’s ethnocentrism as well as fear of transient, migrating, nomadic individuals and/or communities. To be capable of building military units, improvements and infrastructure, and, most curiously, beginning scientific and technological research, the player is required to “progress” beyond the nomadic stage. Once that is *settled*, one of the first decisions to be made is about the focus of scientific research.

One of the most fascinating features of *Civilization* is the so-called tech tree, a predefined and fixed outline of scientific progress in the game. The tech tree is an outline of research possibilities at any given moment during the course of the game. Scientific research is interpreted as progressive and gradual, and technology “develops according to a tree structure, where learning one technology opens up the possibility of learning more advanced related technologies.” (Schut, 2007: 224) For example, it is impossible to start researching nuclear fission in early stages of the game, as scientists must first learn the alphabet, mathematics, etc. Religion is understood analogously: it is not possible for a civilization to comprehend monotheism without first going through polytheism or another more rudimentary, simple and hence primordial religious form.

Unambiguously, the ideological premises on which *Civilization* is based are rooted in the Enlightenment. In *Civilization*, cultures are seen as always progressing from very simple towards more complex social organization, economic system, religion, etc., in short, from “primitive” to “civilized” stages. The tech tree in *Civilization* clearly promotes one of the most resilient grand narratives, i.e. that of linear sociocultural progress. History is seen as objective sequence of events. Such a view may be seen as ridiculous in the context of serious contemporary thought, especially after post-modernism

and post-colonial studies, but not so much in the common-sense everyday thought. There, it is perpetuated through media discourses and popular culture, video games being an increasingly influential artefact of the latter.

Picture 1: TECH TREE IN CIV III



Later versions of *Civilization* promote the same evolutionist logic. In fact, they even develop it further by introducing its own version of a model of evolutionary stages: in *Civilization*, research is divided into the following *eras*: ancient, classical, medieval, renaissance, industrial, modern, atomic, and information. Schut (2007) explains that it is common for computer and video games to predominantly represent very “systematic unfolding of time and causality.” (224) History is interpreted as evolving within a primary and sequential logic, broken down into episodes, which are defined by technological and economic developments. (Ibid).³ Interestingly enough, in *Civilization*, if the player is fortunate enough to be the first civilization to dis-

³ Furthermore, Schut argues that linear development of time is “not a strict requirement of the medium.” 2005: 225) It appears as if the (in)famous McLuhan’s postulate The medium is the message may no longer be valid, because, “although programming used to be sequential and procedural, today object-oriented programming, hypertext, and other digital tools easily allow for associative or nonlinear creations. What this means is that history could be presented more as a network and less as a unidirectional

cover gunpowder, they can practically stop trying as they have most likely already won the game. The barbarians and savages, armed with spears and crossbows, are of course helpless against musketeers and pikemen, which is a fine illustration of how “games typically present history as a matter of aggressive power.” (Ibid.: 222) However, as Voorhes (2009: 265) notes, the actual Chinese discovery of gunpowder had little, if any at all, influence over the world’s major methods of warfare during the next centuries (even during the next millennium). The Chinese did not suddenly become a global superpower after inventing gunpowder nor have they become a self-proclaimed moral authority because of that discovery, abruptly embarking on a mission to “save the world” and “help others” by subjugating them and appropriating their natural resources.

Civilization’s tech tree represents an absurdly simplified relationship between abstract scientific, philosophical, religious, and cultural ideas, as well as their pragmatic use and applicability. The process of technological development as it is presented in the game, however, is more than just a product of the clearly Western-centric scheme of cultural development, it is also a planned and predicted effect of the game mechanics, “structured to elicit thoughtful, strategic play.” (Ibid.: 265)

Another fascinating feature of *Civilization’s* tech tree is the fact that the player can at any time pause to consider the “big picture” of their scientific endeavours. By consulting the big picture, the player is always informed as to what the consequences of researching particular technology will be. The player can find out which military units they will be able to build, how they will be able to improve their cities, work their land, etc., when they finish their next research goal. The player can also gain insight into how technologies are interdependent by being able to see how technologies rely on each other, for example, they can see that if they research alphabet, they will later be able to develop writing.

This is an epistemological interpretation of research that ascribes an a priori social function to the production of knowledge (Ibid.: 266) whilst completely removing the element of surprise, even magic, from research. From an anthropological point of view it would perhaps be easier to argue that surprise is in fact a rather defining element of research. *Civilization* implies a prerequisite which is inherent only to the Western enlightened scientific reasoning – “the truth” is absolute and knowable, there is a single explanatory model of the universe, hence science can be proved for laws of predictability.⁴ In *Civilization*, scientific research is always undertaken in a

timeline.” (Ibid.) In short, the medium is quite capable of producing much more subversive messages than the massively consumed reinforcements of ideology, which pollute mainstream culture.

⁴ Very much like Šterk claims: “Modern science, according to the Enlightenment scientists, can, and definitely will, in the final analysis provide for a unified theory of everything, a single explanatory model

strategic manner and the consequences of the player's decisions are always known in advance. For example, when the player reaches industrial era they are well aware that the enhanced production will have a bad impact on the environment. Nothing is random.⁵ Except for the barbarians, of course.

Barbarians and other Others

As the player of *Civilization* moves their units around the map during the game, they sometimes encounter mysterious places, which are called "goody huts" (in earlier versions of the game) or "ancient ruins" (in later versions). As the player transports their units to such territories, one of the following scenarios unfolds: they may be given money, they may be awarded with scientific progress, they might encounter friendly people who join their civilization, etc., or ... they might suddenly find themselves in a trap. Sometimes, hostile troops, throughout the *Civilization* series represented with the colour red, appear. In *Civilization*, these nomadic tribes possess no land and they are rather bluntly called "barbarians". Douglas (in Voorhes, 2009: 269) articulates a fascinating paradox: the barbarians' spatial position is always outside the borders of any of the civilizations, in an uncharted territory. This uncharted territory is thus at the same time empty (it is not within empires' borders, it is not influenced by civilizations' culture, it is, in short, *available for colonization*) and full (it is populated by savages). The savages are always unpredictable. Sometimes they turn out to be aggressive, sometimes submissive, and sometimes they are not even there anymore by the time the player gets their unit to their position. It is in their *nature* to *surprise* the player. Through this paradox, *Civilization* represents an embodiment of the Western fantasy of expansion into the wilderness and the missions of "civilizing" and "democratization" of other societies. The savages that live outside of "proper" civilizations are a perfect example of Rousseau's *noble savage*, they are the original natives, full of surprises, but also utterly incapable of technological progress.

Which brings us to another paradox, particularly characteristic of the early versions of *Civilization*: every once in a while in the early stages of the game, the savages will provide the player with scientific development.

of the ordered universe – in short, explain how things truly are." (2013, 851) *But she surmises: "It all reads like a fairy-tale for the obvious reason – because it is a fairy tale. Albeit scientific, it is still evolutionary, Enlightenment (science)fiction."* (Ibid.)

⁵ *Such representation of research stands in stark contrast to methodological standards and the ethics of anthropological research. It is, however, a somewhat fair representation of contemporary commodification of science, its dependence on insecure (politically or otherwise motivated) funding, the focus on tangible results and applicability, etc. Just like in Civilization, in contemporary academia, too, there is no more need or desire for the unpredictable, aesthetic or – god forbid! – humorous entanglements.*

In this context, the game subverts its own distinctively Eurocentric view on natives, and hints at characteristically anthropological conclusion: the natives may be worth listening to. This is a position informed by cultural relativism (Boas, 1940), which claimed that culture is by no means something absolute and that “our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes.” (Boas, 1887: 589) Undoubtedly, there are other features of *Civilization* that seem affirmative in terms of cultural relativism, however, the game is generally very problematic in those terms, which is perhaps best exemplified in its name – *Civilization*. Not Civilizations, *Civilization*: the imitable Western civilization, paving the path for the rest of the world, as a loyal descendant of the enlightened celebration of reason. There is one direction, one possible sequence of events, and one single idea of progress, the very idea of a universal, unilineal progress. Only one path leads to civilization and the player following that path is in fact re-enacting the Western phantasms of history, culture and science. Although it is possible to play the game leading a variety of different civilizations, such as the Japanese, Americans, Zulus or Russians, it is always the peculiar Western logic that must be followed. If the player wishes to win *Civilization*, they must become what the contemporary West pretends that it actually is.⁶

Playing *Civilization*, it is impossible to avoid others; foreign civilizations, city states and savages. The player usually first encounters exotic military units, workers and trade caravans, which normally leads to the discovery of distant cities and city states. After meeting other civilizations and city states, it is possible to establish various diplomatic, military and economic agreements, politely ignore one’s neighbours or, of course, attack them. Although attacking other civilizations makes it impossible to trade with surplus goods, resources and technologies, it also leads to expansion of the player’s territory. In *Civilization*, it is perhaps easier to conquer the land, cities, and resources, than to strike a fair deal with other leaders. The notion that militaristic strategy is much more (cost-)efficient than the pacifist one in dealing with others is blatantly ideological, yet eerily familiar. It is possible to observe similar justifications of military invasions, characteristic particularly of the U.S. foreign policy, throughout popular culture, and they all deliver the same simple lesson: strangers are not to be trusted.⁷ In this sense,

⁶ Once the player chooses which civilization they want to lead, they become one of the actual historically important leaders. For example, if the player chooses to be French, they can be Napoleon, Babylonians have Hammurabi, Egyptians Ramses II, should anyone want to be Greek, they can be Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar if the player wishes to lead Romans, Mongolians have Dzhingis Khan, and the Germans have, well, Bismarck. Several versions of *Civilization* include Stalin as the Russian leader, for example, but Hitler is completely omitted from *Civilization*’s phantasmatic version of history, which is, again, symptomatic.

⁷ In his now classical study Said (1977) extensively demonstrated this point on the case of the Arabo-Islamic Oriental Other; for the deconstruction of orientalist ideology on the case of the Assassins in relation to Bartol’s Alamut and its influence on American post-9/11 pop-culture see also: Komel (2012: 355-358).

Civilization is played like a race toward a particular state of affairs, representative of (a romanticized version of) contemporary Western reality. If the player is a typical, well-adjusted and properly socialized member of any Western culture, they will “intuitively” know what decisions to make during gameplay, especially while interacting with others.

Picture 2: STALIN, THE LEADER OF RUSSIANS, CIV I



In *Civilization*, other civilizations preferably have one thing in common: they all trail behind the player in terms of their population, level of expansion, culture, scientific research and military power. However, not every stranger that the player encounters in the game is the same. Every civilization that is represented in *Civilization*, has certain unique characteristics, such as exclusive military units (Japanese samurai, French musketeers, Egyptian chariots, American bombers, etc.), buildings, infrastructure or world wonders that only they are able to build. The particularities of these cultural differences have changed a lot throughout the *Civilization* series, but some of the more illustrative are perhaps the following: the Arabs make more profit from commerce and oil than others, Aztecs gain culture from sacrifice, the French are the most cultural of all, Germans are aggressive, Indians quickly increase their population and the more there are, the happier they are, Egyptians build world wonders faster than others, and

for the British *the sun never sets* as they have superior naval skills. From an anthropological perspective, these characteristics, peculiarities and cultural differences represent an effective and nicely wrapped package of Western stereotypes and preconceptions about other cultures on the one hand, and a narcissistic projection of Western magnificence on the other. The player of *Civilization*, fine-tuning every parameter of the game, in fact indulges in a “management simulation,” (Voorhees, 2009: 262) according to which every aspect of life can and must be fine-tuned and manipulated according to one’s best interests.

Conclusion

In *Civilization*, the player is kept occupied by having to meticulously manipulate world history. They are expected to do so in a particularly ethnocentric and chauvinist manner in order to be able to win. The game has been criticized for “imperialist impulses, as well as a vehicle for the implicit, ideologically loaded assumptions about what constitutes a civilization.” (Voorhees, 2009: 264), but it is its misrepresentation of world history that is most evident. The player of *Civilization* cannot but notice its deliberate and biased oversimplification of history. Perhaps through observing such an extreme example of pragmatic (ab)use of history they can also recognize that it is in fact inherent to history what its name has been telling us all along: “objective” history is always “his story”, it is a justification of subjugation, colonization, imperialism and capitalism, always serving the ones in power, who only have one goal, common to them all: to stay in power. The *Civilization* player finds themselves in a position, where the only successful strategy is an expansionist one, where world domination is a common(-sense) goal, and where science and technology are primarily used for military purposes. The game is imperialist, expansionist and colonialist in the cultural, military and geopolitical senses, as well as in the context of understanding nature and its resources.

Civilization’s gameplay is deeply dependent on the Western version and interpretation of world history, in which the concept of progress plays a central role. The game is replete with imperialist ideas. In order to win, the player must adhere to familiar principles, which make every winning civilization very similar to the contemporary U. S., irrespective of the player’s actual choice of civilization. Even if the player chooses to lead Mongols, Zulus or perhaps the Sioux, they must agree to the Western hegemonic discourse. As Magnet (2006) argues in her critique of the computer game *Tropico*, capitalist and ethnocentric assumptions are built into the virtual landscape of the game, into what she calls “gamescape”. Non-Western cultures are often seen as inefficient, whereas efficiency is interpreted as the main

measure of success, and *Civilization*, too, in effect naturalizes the Western opposition between “civilization” on the one side and “barbarism” and “savagery” on the other. It naturalizes the ideologically charged discourses of technological progress, subjugation of nature and the use of its resources, logocentrism, evolutionism and rationalism, presenting them as inevitable or even universally desirable.

Picture 3: SHAKA, THE LEADER OF THE ZULUS, CIV V.



Poole (2000) terms such games “god-games” and lists their two crucial characteristics. One important feature of god-games is that the city, civilization, or whichever variable the player needs to take care of during game-play, is seen as a virtual pet, a tamagotchi of sorts. The player emotionally invests in different aspects of the game, but if something goes wrong, they are able to quickly abandon the game, temporarily satisfying their desire as they start anew and the sky is once again the limit. The second characteristic of god-games is its playful nature in terms of understanding time. The concept of time is rather peculiar in turn-based strategies. For example, in-game time is not constant throughout the game, in the early stages of the game one turn advances the civilization for 50 years, whereas later that same one turn becomes only 5 or even a single year. Similarly, the actual time that the player needs to accomplish one turn can vary greatly – it can be a momentary press of “enter” when there is nothing that needs to be done, or it can take several hours if the player decides to fine-tune all the parameters of every one of their cities, examine all the military units, workers’ assignments, trade and diplomatic units, etc. Moreover, it is possible to

adjust taxes, make deals, diplomatic inquiries, give the population access to luxuries, concentrate the efforts on production, science, food, and/or, perchance even culture and education, which, just like we are used to, represent the ultimate obstacles to the neoliberal paradigm.

Perhaps the instant gratification and pleasure, derived from immediate effects of the player's decisions, is what draws them to *Civilization* despite its vulgar storyline. The player is given a feeling of power and control in the context of their own free time, when they are relaxed and can afford to behave in a nonchalant, casual and assertive manner. The game also quite openly addresses narcissistic traits by inviting one to play with reality, reinforcing the view that everything is just a game anyway (Lasch, 1991). Should one play well, their people will love them, build them palaces, and occasionally celebrate "We love the emperor day". However, if the player does not play well, if they follow a particularly non-Western philosophy⁸ or some random inspirations, they quickly encounter trouble: people become unhappy which decreases their productivity and endangers the player's financial situation. In *Civilization*, economic, environmental, and social crises are easily resolvable: all the player needs to do is return to the *right* path and everything is fine again. Should the player allow themselves more serious digressions, they have to pay a certain price in order to re-establish stability, for example build a stadium, import some silk and truffles, if necessary even increase some liberties. Despite the fact that similar strategies are also used for managing "real civilizations" when unhappy people need to be distracted, there is one important difference between the two settings: in *Civilization*, these strategies work. There is no danger of running out of anything as the world inevitably ends sometime around 2050 (depending on the version). Should our non-virtual geopolitical turns run out in a few decades as well, I am sure we too could afford more.

What is there to be said about the culture that has created and plays *Civilization* and especially about its "unsettling mutation of European colonialism, the notions of liberation, emancipation, and resistance [which] become gifts of 'civilisation', to be thankfully received by more 'primitive' cultures; peoples, races, who have failed to produce their own Montaigne or Marx" (Bonnett, 2000: 12)? Baudrillard claimed that "the world is a game," (1993: 46) and should that be the case, then *Civilization* is the world. It is much

⁸ Schut (2007: 221) even claims that playing this sort of games in a non-confrontational manner is a subversion of their purpose. Although it is possible to win *Civilization* by primarily building libraries and spreading one's territory through culture, it is practically impossible to successfully finish the game without a single battle. As for *Civilization*'s concept of "cultural influence", it should be noted that it is rather misleading. Anthropologists have long known that, as Barkin and Chen articulate it (*Ibid.*: 222): "Culture in reality is a complex, particular, multifaceted phenomenon" However, according to Schut (*Ibid.*), what we see here is merely "currency dressed up as culture points." (*Ibid.*)

more than merely a brilliant demonstration of the Western (mis)understanding of itself, other cultures and cultural differences; it is also an illustration of how we understand governance. The predominant perception of how contemporary Western nation state should be run is remarkably similar to how a game of *Civilization* actually looks: in order to move forward, one must tweak this, regulate that, build this, demolish that, deal with problems as they occur and not a moment earlier. Games are “more serious than life,” Baudrillard (1979: 133) remarked, and “the fundamental passion is that of the game.” (Baudrillard, 2005: 149) It is a cold passion, a transpolitical one, which aims to replace the earlier “hot passions of politics or the body.” (Coulter 2007: 361) A game is “a set of rules that give structure to playful activity,” (Schut, 2007: 219) effectively eliminating the playfulness. There is not much play left in games like *Civilization*, only individualism, strategy, progress, science and death. Instead, the potential for playfulness can be found in the most unusual of places: in the street. It is the crude corporeality of the public space, where progress of knowledge does not necessarily mean “killing of minds,” (Feyerabend, 1993: 4). Rather, knowledge is shared, politicized and joined in the battle “against ideologies that use the name of science for cultural murder.” (Ibid.: 5)

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