

5

Sid Meier's Civilization

Realism

PETER KRAPP

Abstract: In a simulation game like *Sid Meier's Civilization* that spans centuries of game time, Peter Krapp contends that the series realism is not anchored in a sense of historical accuracy but, instead, offers a playful exploration through abstract representations of what leads to the rise and fall of empires.

When games are consumed as entertainment offering unprecedented flights of the imagination, when a widely used game engine is called Unreal, when big developers sell interactive software that indulges in all manner of fantasy and escapism, what role could there possibly be for realism in gaming? Should gamers expect a series such as *Sid Meier's Civilization* (1991–today) to be realistic, and if so, what exactly does that mean? How much does this change over time so that what may have been accepted as “realistic” years ago perhaps does not pass muster today? Games across genres have laid claim to certain kinds of realism: whether in offering action that reflects recent news headlines or in depicting the skills of star athletes, the handling of exotic cars, the ballistics of weapons, the gyrations of planes, the finer points of military tactics, or the machinations of global economics. The interactions afforded by sports games, driving games, or strategy games may be fanciful, but attention to detail, to *verisimilitude*, is often a prominent feature of a game. Yet that kind of recognizable detail is just one possible meaning of realism. If we have come to accept that games are an art form, a media discourse, a social platform, then it pays to consider the full spectrum of how we use the term *realism* before checking how a particular game or game franchise—such as the *Civilization* franchise—negotiates that spectrum.

To call something “realistic” implies that there is also some way to relate to the world without those representational strategies. Realism aims for a practical

or pragmatic naturalism—an appearance of representing our ordinary realm of observation in a literal, naturalistic, authentic manner. This fidelity to real life, to convey an accurate representation without recourse to idealization, abstraction or stylistic condensation, may not be an achievable goal, but game designers continue to strive for verisimilitude by crafting ever-more lifelike visual worlds and, in the case of strategy games, creating simulations that model predictive systems.

Civilization is a turn-based strategy game franchise that has sold more than 33 million copies since its inception in 1991. As conceived by Sid Meier, it is not only one of the most successful series in game history; it also deeply influenced other games and game genres. Designed first for MS-DOS, then the Commodore Amiga 500/600 and Atari ST, Apple and Microsoft Windows systems, and finally Nintendo platforms, the game's simulation balances infrastructure, research, economic income, culture, and military might. The sequel *Sid Meier's Civilization II* was published in 1996 by Sid Meier's company Microprose for computers as well as the PlayStation console. Activision acquired the rights to publish a title called *Civilization: Call to Power* in 1999. In 2001, Meier's new company Firaxis published *Sid Meier's Civilization III* for Apple and Microsoft Windows systems. Between 2003 and 2005 the franchise rights went to Atari, and since then the rights to the title have been with 2K Games. *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* was released in 2005, and five years later the fifth installment appeared. In October 2014, *Sid Meier's Civilization: Beyond Earth* was published, followed by *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* in October 2016. Although the game visuals, multiplayer gameplay, and player communities evolved over time, the player's basic task remains the same: guide your chosen people from the early Stone Age through human history to the present day and into the future by colonizing new lands and new planets. Players start with one village in 4000 BC, pick a leader for their virtual nation, and aim to conquer the world. The chosen leader is not inserted into the game as the player's avatar. Instead, the game gifts players with a godlike perspective, providing an intradiegetic point of action. The isometric perspective of the main screen is a world map with menu systems of actions that invite players to build, engage in diplomacy, foster science and the arts, and take steps to make their area of influence bigger, stronger, and richer.

This map can depict a realistic version of Earth or a fictitious world; the option *not* to resemble Earth is available, but either way, the various rhomboid (later hexagonal, as of *Sid Meier's Civilization V*) plots of sea, forest, desert, hills, and so on always touch at the edges, making it possible to circumnavigate the game world as a cylindrical playscape. However, *Civilization* is not merely a battle map—it is a map-in-time, a spatiotemporal model, bringing narrative tools to mapmaking. On this map, the story unfolds as players make decisions (see Figure 5.1). For a new village, for instance, the player picks whether to go with a settler, a scout, or



FIGURE 5.1 Agriculture, industry, and military units populate the map in *Sid Meier's Civilization*.

a warrior, and each unit selected will have value, changing the balance between expansion and preservation, offense and defense. Cumulatively, these decisions add up to the success or failure of one's strategy.

Sid Meier has said that, to him, games are a series of interesting choices.¹ Consequently, the story of a game such as *Civilization* is not embedded; rather, simulation games lend themselves to emergent narratives as they draw on a complex system of interrelated variables. Events in the game are propitiated by the complexity of the intersecting game systems and often not necessarily in ways that were anticipated by the game's developers.

After completing *Railroad Tycoon* in 1990, Meier and his team decided to tackle something more audacious. When Meier and Bruce Shelley appeared at the 2017 Game Developers Conference to reflect on their first *Civilization* game, they pointed out how the new title commingled elements from *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989), the British PC war game *Empire* (Walter Bright, 1977), and a board game named *Civilization*.² Drawing on children's books rather than history and strategy references, the developers foregrounded humor and a lighthearted portrayal of political leadership. It is hardly realistic to pit nations against each other whose leaders are not even from the same century—Genghis Khan and Caesar, Napoleon and Cleopatra—but in opting for a turn-based game, rather than the flow of a real-time simulator, Meier had a hit on his hands. Evidently, players care less about “real life” scenarios or locations and more so about the affordances of this type of

strategy game. Indeed, what *Civilization* models is not so much historical accuracy but sociological and anthropological processes.³ The franchise became highly successful once the second iteration allowed user-created modifications, or “mods” (see James Newman’s chapter in this collection for more on user-generated content). From the second installment onward, *Civilization* also dropped reams of demographic data and other statistics provided in the initial version of the game.

Turn-based strategy and simulation games are less invested in photorealistic graphics and surround sound that are crucial for the immersive first-person perspective of racing and shooting games. This genre also depends less on a suite of customizable choices that role-playing games make a central pillar of the second-person perspective. Instead, simulation and strategy games have dealt in abstraction—in a detached third-person perspective. Just as Chaturanga, chess, or the Prussian and English board and floor games of the nineteenth century served as training tools for strategic thinking, the planning games of the first half of the twentieth century featured controls and feedback.⁴ From wargaming to flight simulators, and from radar screens to immersive graphic interfaces, the history of game technology shows how cybernetic feedback lends itself to training models. Obviously, simulation can be a useful tool for closed mechanical systems; for complex open systems, simulation can be a pretty good tool for introducing beginners to dynamic system behavior and a way to explore options or test the validity of assumptions. This has made simulation games a powerful training tool for policy advisors, military officers, and aspiring rulers.

The introduction of computing black-boxed a lot of the military and business tradition of the strategy game, but the 1960s saw a resurgence of the elements that characterized simulation gaming before World War I. Here it is noteworthy that *Civilization* features strategy consultants. These advisers will speak to you, but their avatars are limited to a few syllables of gibberish—“villum follum” and “roboro”—which pales in comparison to the effort that went into creating complex, realistic languages for the television series *Star Trek* or *Game of Thrones*. Yet scenario planning or management simulations necessarily limit their real-time data input to avoid losing definition; most simulators are particularly focused and do not scale while a global model using data mining and artificial intelligence to make large-scale, messy situations tractable risks black-boxing parameters.

By the same token, and despite ongoing efforts to make its systems more dynamic to reflect the historical vagaries of ruling civilizations, there remains room for interpreting *Civilization* games as dystopian critiques of our lived experience, as counterfactual history, as make-believe untethered from basic economic, technological, and cultural tenets, even as sheer willful abstraction. One may be tempted to pursue the historical verifiability of a strategy game portraying human history through reductive mechanics, with reference to the stipulation of a settled

scientific consensus on how technology, economics, diplomacy, warfare, culture, and so on lead humans from the Stone Age to the space age. Or one may opt instead to see lost opportunities and unheralded advances in human history that are not captured in their subtlety and consequence by the necessary abstractions and simplifications of the game. Even if we treat a given game as a tool to remind ourselves of critical perspectives on how we got here, that does not prevent us from recognizing the game as caught up in ideological representations and distortions of all the basic mechanisms that make it playable. Although few would judge *Civilization* by the rule book of socialist realism (glorifying depictions of communist values), many critics identify its design as capitalist realism (glorifying neoliberal market domination). If we understand “socialist realism” as officially sanctioned art (above all in visual arts but also in music and literature) in the Soviet Union and other socialist states between the 1920s and 1960s, the motivation was to foster arts that affirm a direct effect on the human organism. This discursive formation rejects futurism and other socialist movements, emphasizing instead a life circumscribed by the communitarian ethos of planned states. In turn, if we understand “capitalist realism” as the predominant form of approved arts in the United States and other capitalist states since the 1950s, the motivation is to treat all forms of human expression as commodities. This discursive formation describes the ideological and aesthetic dominance of corporate culture in the West, a life dominated by private consumption as exhorted by advertising and competitive sales. What these two opposed ideological formations have in common is that they assert realism as a bulwark against critique—they assert the fundamental validity of ideology over dissent. Each lay claim to a faithful objective mirror of our collective human truth. In short, although realism was a period style, it remains a perennial motive in literature, art, film, and games. Arguably, in *Civilization* a pronounced US-centric view of the world and its politics is on display.⁵

To take a concrete example of the limits of this particular strategy game, consider an aspect of strategy that has become an ideological battleground: weather and climate. Military historians argue that Napoleon’s incursion into Russia was defeated, in large part, by a harsh winter that affected supply lines more than anticipated; similar claims are made about the Russian defense in World War II. Strategically speaking, the absence of meteorological complexity weakens the realism of *Civilization* as a simulation. Weather models constitute a formidable challenge to computing even today—modeling the fluid dynamics and systemic interactions for three to five days has become relatively dependable, but longer-term forecasts remain problematic.⁶ Nonetheless, a complex game like *Civilization* ought to be able to include weather, along with terrain and diplomacy and technology and finance, into its calculus. *Civilization* does not thematize the Anthropocene, does not invite gamers to contemplate environmental catastrophe

in the race for technological supremacy, and does not account for what happens to the losing side; indeed, what “counts” is that a player can achieve a military–scientific–diplomatic victory, regardless of how that win condition is reached. The roots of the turn-based strategy game, however, lie in simulations that model far more realistic interactions.

One can see what constitutes realism in any such game by checking its blind spots or omissions—here, for instance, weather and climate. This is why Jesse Ausubel's role in redefining the planning game is so intriguing. An influential environmental scientist, Jesse Ausubel was an organizer of the first United Nations World Climate Conference, in 1979 in Geneva, which substantially heightened the profile of global warming issues on scientific and political agendas. In 1980, he built a board game and two computer games about carbon dioxide emissions and global warming. Ausubel's book *Cities and their Vital Systems* found its way to the young Will Wright, who made extensive use of it for his 1989 release of *SimCity*, for which Ausubel also served as a beta tester.⁷ Although unfairly ignored in game studies, this distinguished science advisor can rightfully be seen as the progenitor of what is now often called “serious gaming.”⁸ *Ice Core Quest*, for instance, developed by Carleton University as a modification of *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare, 2002), offers quests to explore Antarctica and global warming. A game called *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea: Captain Nemo* (Mzone Studio, 2009) uses National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data to illustrate Captain Nemo's last refuge in Antarctica. A strategy game called *Last Hope Antarctica* requires the player to build a new base and manage its resources. The games *Penguin Adventure* (Konami, 1986) and *Antarctic Adventure* (Konami, 1983) require players to navigate a penguin around the perimeter of the continent along crudely mapped paths. A game developed by a Canadian team working on a cyber-cartographic atlas of Antarctica allows players to playfully explore with joysticks or keyboard controls the life of penguins, the landscape of the continent, and the conceptual dimensions structuring the atlas itself. Is all of this just armchair tourism or a step toward planetary consciousness? None of these serious games is more realistic than *Civilization* in terms of visual and sonic fidelity, but they at least attempt to account for historical changes in weather and climate. Even a training simulation as abstract as Buckminster Fuller's *World Game* (or “OS Earth”) had more real-time data and complexity than did the technically advanced *Civilization* games.⁹

In the theory of knowledge, realism is a general theory of scientifically established facts, assuming that the world is independent of our knowledge-gathering activities, which not only produce assumptions and predictions but get us closer to the real nature of things; realism, in short, harkens back to an ancient struggle between common sense and abstract thought. Clearly playing a simulation game

will require some of both. However, as players quickly discover, while playing games such as *Civilization* may rely on a balanced mix of theory-crafting and commonsense approaches, the same does not hold for designing such games. The design of game mechanics, of competing strategies, and of win conditions illustrates that games always pivot on abstractions. This is why game players not only play as *Civilization* guides them to but soon also explore the limits of the game design. Designing the game so that a “cultural victory” is possible (which in *Civilization* means accumulating architectural, religious, and artistic achievements) likewise requires a theory of culture that allows for this to become a game mechanic, whereby some cultural achievements are somehow superior to others and thus provide more “civic inspiration” or attract more tourism. Designing the game so that scientific progress follows certain steps implies a linear theory of science. Designing the game so that trade routes are advantageous or disadvantageous discloses a tacit theory of markets and their function over historical periods. Needless to say, these aspects of *Civilization* do not strike every scholar of trade and economics, of science and culture, as valid or historically realistic.

Perhaps nobody approaches a game in the *Civilization* franchise with the expectation that it would render true descriptions of observable aspects of our world, yet players nonetheless notice and discuss problems with how *Civilization* models social, political, economic, and cultural interactions. That *Civilization* games pivot around an ideologically reductive model of technology and conflict seems not to have lessened the popularity of the franchise. If the game has remained enjoyable despite its realism limitations, it is at least partly because players are not naïve consumers. Players recognize that even so-called entertainment software is imbued with values and ideologies, but within the range of interactions afforded, players find pleasure in discovering a game’s underlying assumptions. Perhaps those players seek ever more control over possible worlds, even to the point of simulating utopian and fantastic emergent interactions.

NOTES

- 1 As quoted in Andrew Rollings and Dave Morris, *Game Architecture and Design* (Scottsdale AZ: Coriolis, 2000), 38.
- 2 Meier and Shelley were able to strike a deal with venerable British board game company Avalon Hill for the use of the *Civilization* name and certain elements of their board game title.
- 3 William Uricchio, “Simulation, History, and Computer Games,” in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT 2005), 327–338.
- 4 Chaturanga is an ancient Indian strategy game developed around the sixth century CE. It was adopted in Persia a century later and eventually developed into the form of chess brought to late-medieval Europe.

- 5 Kacper Poblocki, "Becoming-State: The Bio-Cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization," *Focal—European Journal of Anthropology* no. 39 (2002): 163–172.
- 6 Gabriele Gramelsberger, "Story Telling with Code—Archaeology of Climate Modeling," *TeamEthno Online* (February 2006): 77–84.
- 7 Jesse H. Ausubel and Robert Herman, eds., *Cities and their Vital Systems: Infrastructure Past, Present, and Future* (Washington DC: National Academies Press 1988).
- 8 Jennifer Robinson and Jesse H. Ausubel, "A Game Framework for Scenario Generation for the CO₂ Issue," *Simulation and Games* 14, no. 3 (1983): 317–344
- 9 *World Game*, also known as *World Peace Game*, was an analog educational simulation created by Buckminster Fuller as a counterpoint to popular tabletop war games. Players work cooperatively to solve global problems in a manner that benefits the most people with the least ecological damage or loss of life. In 1993, a computer-based version of the game was released by the nonprofit World Game Institute, and in 2001 the game was acquired by OS Earth, Inc. and since has been published as OS Earth Global Simulation Workshop, www.worldgame.com.

FURTHER READING

- Dorr, Simon. "Strategy." In *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, 275–281. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Friedman, Ted. "Civilization and its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space." In *On a Silver Platter: CD-Roms and the Promises of a New Technology*, edited by Greg M. Smith, 132–150. New York: NYU Press, 1999.
- Galloway, Alexander. "Social Realism in Gaming." *Game Studies—The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 4, no. 1 (November 2004), <http://gamestudies.org/>.
- Pias, Claus. *Computer Game Worlds*. Chicago: Diaphanes, 2017.