

## *Civilization* and History: Ludological Frame vs. Historical Context

One of the longest-running videogame series is *Civilization*, one of the earliest representations of the 4X ("eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate") subgenre. Players assume leadership of one of a wide range of societies. In the most recent version, one could choose to play as Trajan, leader of the Romans, or Pericles, leader of the Greeks. Games begin in 4000 BCE and continue into the near future. Games end when one of a range of conditions is met: for example, either the player's civ is defeated, conquer the world, win through cultural influence, or perhaps be the first civilization to successfully reach Alpha Centauri.

*Civilization* uses historical touchpoints to frame its gameplay. The basic building blocks, of the game draw on technological developments that facilitated the growth of human societies. Students in Western Civilization courses generally learn that human civilization arose from the development of cities; as the audience here knows, the word civilization is derived from the Latin *civis*, citizen, who lives in a *civitas*, city. Technological developments open up new options for players to develop the cities of their own civilization. Pottery, for example, enables the player to construct a granary in any one of his or her cities, and the granary generally ensures a basic level of survivability. So far, so good. Each iteration of the game adds features that attempt to replicate broad forces of change. More recently, game mechanics include religion and culture. Games of this genre always include war as a mechanic. Each civilization has a special unit that reflects its history. So Rome, and only Rome, can build a Legion, while every other civilization builds a weaker equivalent, the Swordsman.

Yet the overall impression is of the stripping away of historical context, particularly chronology: Pericles leads the Greeks (not Athens) from the beginning to the very end of the game. The player can ignore the traits the game designers assigned to Pericles at any time, such

as the cultural bonus he receives for allying with city-states. And the Delian League feature ignores the important imperializing aspect of Athenian influence. The compressed geography of the game increases the threat to cities by enemies, and, intentionally or not, can set cities of the same civilization into destructive competition, as city growth typically depends on the occupation of additional territory. If default settings are chosen, the world is randomly created, and player rivals are randomly selected. Pericles might be threatened by Teddy Roosevelt of the Americans, or Gilgamesh of Sumeria – Gilgamesh, likely simply a legend, and Sumeria, a region, never a politically unified state, even during the Ur III period. Another feature of all iterations, Wonders of the World, which provide unique benefits, are not restricted to the civilization where it originally existed. So if Peter the Great of Russia builds Plato's Academy, Pericles of Greece is flat out of luck.

At stake is the tension between narrative and play. History for historians depends on chronology and context. We present set cases and ask students to analyze them based on interpretations in secondary material as well as, of course, primary sources. Earlier discussions of *Civ* have suggested that its value lies in the player's strategic choices, not in the accuracy of the story. That players may learn broad reasons for historical change may be the case, but also underlines, as others have noted, that algorithms as well as frames of gameplay are crucial (Apperley, 2013; Friedman, 1999). The question remains as to their efficacy in conveying understanding (Peterson, et al., 2013). Do students in history courses perceive these games as useful to their studies? Or do they see *Civ* as irrelevant to their studies? Continuing the discussion, I will examine in depth the Greek and Roman civilizations and leaders in *Civilization* 6, and assess their effectiveness in reinforcing student understanding, based on input provided by students in courses I teach.

## Bibliography:

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