



Civilization VI and its Discontents: Review of Sid Meier's *Civilization VI* (2016)

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In the argot of gaming, *Civilization* is a turn-based strategy game, in which the player has the task of managing an emergent civilization in a zero-sum world where only one civilization may truly rule all. The player does this by founding cities, developing science and technology, and producing units of commerce, culture, and war. Each game in the twenty-five-year-old franchise, with the latest being *Civilization VI* (released in October 2016), refines the underlying model only somewhat, adding in new dynamics (for example, religion and culture), and either eliminating or modifying others.

*Civilization VI* and its predecessors are games that purport to model history. That is to say, they are imbued with a historicist ethos: one's scrawny settlers begin on an undeveloped, "uncivilized" continent, with limited resources and capabilities, and broadly, over the course of thousands of in-game years, expand to eliminate "barbarians," develop modern science and technology, create vast empires, and, nearly inevitably, snuff out or assimilate other civilizations.

Many analytical frames familiar to historians contribute to in-game dynamics. For example, religious beliefs imbue civilizations with various properties (for example, "Work Ethic" increases economic productivity, while "Tithe" brings in extra gold); choices of government can open up other possibilities (a "Merchant Republic" increases the number of trade routes, while "Fascism" increases one's military capabilities). The main driver of civilizational "progress" is science and technology, which is encompassed by a vast "technology tree" of branching possibilities, fueled by an amount of "research points" generated by the civilization (which can be increased, predictably, by building universities, despite the fact that research universities are a rather new development over the scale of history traversed). Cities are the engines of creation in *Civilization*, as they generate a certain amount of "productivity" per turn which can be used to build institutions, infrastructure, or individual "units" that contribute to economic activity (e.g., a "worker" can build farms and mines), but more often are engines of war (e.g., archers in early eras, tanks and battleships in later ones).

There are five modes of victory in the latest game, and they give a sense of the historical imagination implicit in its design. Domination Victory involves capturing the capitals of other civilizations (in my head this is the "Hitler Victory"). Religion is an in-game mechanic, and can be spread to other civilizations by means of priests and Inquisitors. If one's religion becomes adopted by every other civilization, one wins a Religious Victory ("Sharia Victory,"

perhaps). Culture is an in-game currency of sorts, and if one manages to sufficiently spread one's culture to other nations, and attract the largest amount of tourists, one can win a Cultural Victory ("Disney Victory"?). For those who find all of those options unappealing, there is also a Science Victory, which involves building a space ship and flying to Mars (I think of it as a "Musk Victory"; it is not clear why flying to Mars makes one a civilizational "winner"). Even in an extremely long game, no single player may manage to accomplish any of these possibilities, so there are also points and one can win a fairly uninspiring victory this way. In a previous edition of the game, it was possible to get a United Nations to elect one's nation to a King of the World sort of position, but any option to win democratically or diplomatically was removed from the most recent edition, along with the United Nations itself.

Who or what is the agent in *Civilization* meant to be? Human players are represented by a historical avatar of the country one chooses (Queen Victoria for England; Gandhi for India; Gilgamesh for Sumeria), but one wields more power than any particular historical figure (legendary or not). Players simultaneously micro-manage the production quotas of individual cities, the tenets of religions, and the prosecutions of wars, all over the course of multiple millennia. One can adopt Fascism or Democracy with equal ease, and it has only the effect of changing a few settings. One can, incredibly, choose what scientific discoveries will be developed by the civilization, a level of control that would have made J.D. Bernal weep with joy. One is not, clearly, meant to model any human being, and yet one also lacks the power of a true god (at least, if one is a god, one is a god located very much in the details who concerns himself whether a city has a zoo or an aqueduct).

After some thought, I have, I believe, identified who the player really is: Hegel's *Geist* of the age, guiding civilization through history along strictly teleological lines towards whatever kind of outcome (victory) one thinks is appropriate, one mouse click at a time.

And this sense of teleology is what makes the game so problematic and tedious from a historical point of view. It is a game whose idea of history is technological determinist at its core (for all of the other mechanics, the technological tree is the one that decides who lives and who dies), and you, the *Geist*, are always the one who determines which technological "paths" are pursued. All technological paths ultimately converge, but in the meantime the difference in paths chosen by the players will determine who first invents gunpowder, or long-range navigation, or airplanes. Not all technologies lead to new military units or to military upgrades, but many do, especially towards the "modern" end of the technological "tree." The teleological and deterministic nature is explicit: there is no mystery about

which technologies lead to what outcomes, and the player can literally click on a future technology (say, “nuclear weapons”) and automatically have the next twenty research breakthroughs queued up in the most expeditious order.

Some of these path dependencies, no doubt for gameplay purposes, are historically dubious. One invents “bureaucracy” well after agriculture and irrigation. Thermonuclear weapons can come only after the invention of lasers, whereas in reality these were entirely separate (working lasers were not developed for nearly a decade after the first thermonuclear weapons were set off). There are clear issues of “balance” associated with technologies like real-life nuclear weapons: they are, to use the jargon of gamers, “overpowered.” Real nuclear weapons make for poor gameplay. And for the record, history itself was not that fun of a game for most players, either.

There are also almost no *individuals* in the *Civilization* games. There are the aforementioned avatars of other nations, such as Gandhi, who represents India no matter what time period or what policies it pursues (and the Gandhi in the *Civilization* series is an aggressive, destructive warlord, the remnant of a bug in an early edition of the series that has been maintained for its humorous diversion from reality), but all other people are abstracted as numbers and occasionally as sources of demands (the city inhabitants have no capacity for self-governance and are utterly helpless for even the most mundane decisions without the player’s intervention). Starting with *Civilization V*, there have been “Great” individuals (Great Engineers, Great Scientists, Great Admirals, etc.), who appear if a civilization reaches sufficient cultural and economic conditions. These individuals, however, serve only a limited purpose: in most cases, they are “spent” (sacrificed, it seems) to create a cultural artifact that benefits the civilization in some way. In other cases, they simply hang around and give minor bonuses to nearby units (e.g., a Great General helps any other warriors he or she is around). So much for the Great Man theory of history.

*Civilization VI* undoubtedly has a veneer of history — every civilization has a unique “military unit” that the in-game “Civlopedia” describes in detail (with varying degrees of historical accuracy), and one is treated to a

great deal of pomp about one’s civilizational goals — but the veneer is derived from a 19th-century conception of how history works. As such its value for actual education is, I suspect, very limited. Perhaps a player would leave such a game with a few details about the limitations of a rock slinger versus an archer, but they’d also likely pick up an outdated, deeply flawed model for thinking about historical change. Of course, there are those who would dismiss such concerns as pedantic (“it’s only a game!”) but if *Civilization* is going to drape itself in the appearance of history, it becomes a target for historical criticism (a criticism no one would be tempted to heap onto, say, *World of Warcraft*).

Science, technology, and war are at the core of *Civilization VI*. War isn’t hell in this game, but it is tedious, slow, and expensive. This is perhaps an improvement over previous versions in the series, where war was more of a romp, but it makes for a dull run of things. A full game can take hours and hours of play, and victory is tremendously unsatisfying, an act of slow attrition of one’s enemies, whose avatars complain all the way.

And for this reviewer, this was the really bothersome part about *Civilization VI*: it is, well, *boring*. Not in the “history can be boring (if you do it wrong)” sort of way, but in the boredom that might come with actually being the *Geist* of history: micromanaging a thousand little decisions, not trusting your wards to actually enact your driving ambitions, because they are completely without driving forces of their own. This particular *Geist* got tired of telling each and every city what it ought to be up to (show some initiative, people!), and a new game mechanic added to *Civilization VI* designating “zones” for commerce, industry, and so forth (which, if properly placed, confer bonuses) just adds insult to injury.

Modeling historical dynamics (however problematically) in a gaming setting seems like it would open up new possibilities for counter-factual imaginaries and tantalizing new ‘what-ifs’ of history. It might conversely open up new avenues for exploring the complex ways in which actual civilizations developed, interacted, and evolved. In fact, though, the game is a reminder of how tedious civilization would actually be without individual agency, contingency, and variety.