Virtual nation building: The (re)construction of national histories in Sid Meier's Civilization VI.

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Res.MA. Thesis

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Virtual nation building: The (re)construction of national histories in *Sid Meier's Civilization VI.*

To my parents, Arne and Pilar, my sister, Irene, and my psychologist, Ángela. Without their help and support, this text would have forever remained unfinished.

Contents

Introduction

December 4th 2017 was probably not one of the best days to be a social media manager at video game development company Firaxis. The company was about to release a new expansion to the latest instalment of its flagship franchise, the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series of historical strategy games.[1] As it is quite standard in the video games industry before a release, Firaxis was trying to build up expectations to the release through a series of videos that showcased the new features that the new *Rise and Fall* expansion would add to the game—which included new systems for players to interact with, as well as new playable factions. However, on December 4th the release of one of such videos elicited a series of extremely negative reactions. The video received an extreme amount of dislikes in Youtube, vastly surpassing the meager number of likes it had; to the point where social media managers of Firaxis decided to make it invisible on the platform so it could no longer be interacted with. This reaction was followed with a 'review bombing' campaign (i.e. an organized attempt at lowering the score of a game in websites used by consumers to decide on their purchases by massively giving it negative reviews).[2] It would not be an understatement to say that a great amount of the reactions to the release of this video were outright hostile. But how could it be that a mere preview of new content for a video game created generated such a backlash? Why was the overview of one of the new playable factions— the science-focused Korean civilization led by queen Seondeok— received with such animosity?

What is particularly interesting about this case is that the source of the complaints was not— as had happened in other cases— related in any way to the gameplay. Players were not complaining about the addition of Korea being detrimental to the game or underwhelming in any way. The main reason behind this response was instead the choice of Seondeok— a queen that ruled over Silla, one of the three kingdoms that existed in the Korean peninsula prior to its unification, between 632 and 647 C.E.— as the leader of the Korean civilization. The comments were extremely dismissive of Seondeok, calling her incompetent, a traitor, hated by its people, and thus undeserving of

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[1] I will often refer to the games of the series solely as *Civilization* for the sake of brevity, but the complete title of each the franchise's instalment is preceded by the name of the series' original creator.
Jelani James, "Koreans Unhappy With Who's Leading Them In Civilization 6." *Attack of the Fanboy*, December 6, 2017. https://attackofthefanboy.com/news/civilization-6-korea-queen-seondeok/ ; Rachael Krishna, "The New "Civilization" Game Has Caused Controversy Over The Inclusion Of A Historic Korean Queen," BuzzFeed News, 18 December 2017. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/krishrach/koreans-are-angry-at-civilization-game-for-apparently.

representing the Korean nation as its leader.[3] The amount of sexist remarks with regard to Seondeok in particular, and female rulers in general that were present in the comments was staggering. The backlash towards the announcement of Korea was motivated by the game's representation of the Korean nation and its history. The polemic then spilled over into the popular forum site Reddit, where its r/civ subforum— dedicated to discussions about the franchise— started crawling with posts arguing for and against the choice of Seondeok and what that choice meant when representing the Korean nation. [4] While some argued that Seondeok was indeed a good choice and that its detractors were informed by heavily biased accounts of her reign by 16th and 17th century Confucian scholars that did not believe women should be rulers; others argued that Sejong the Great— the ruler credited with introducing the Korean alphabet and the leader of Korea in the previous instalment of *Civilization*— would have been a much better fit for the role. These rather heated discussions were ultimately about the nature of the Korean nation, with each side using what it saw as elements of its nation's past to illustrate their arguments. A debate that one might have expected to take place in an early twentieth century café was instead taking place across different websites by players of a video game.

This last sentence is by no means a dismissal of this polemic; *Civilization* has a reach that the great majority of academic publications about history can only dream of. This video game franchise— which allows players to control a certain civilization and its leader and direct the development and expansion of said civilization from the Neolithic until the near future in a quest to reach global hegemony— has sold millions of copies.[5] Moreover, *Civilization V* and *Civilization VI* feature routinely among the most played games at any given time.[6] Seeing how such a widely disseminated cultural product that uses themes of history and historical accuracy as crucial selling points is able to generate

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[3] "Civilization VI: Rise and Fall – First Look: Korea [International]," Korean civilization trailer, Sid Meier's Civilization, Youtube, accessed July 7,2023
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxLZ6Fe8vjY&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization
[4] "r/civ," Reddit, Accessed July 9, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/civ/ .
[5] *Civilization V* has sold around 8 million copies, and *Civilization VI* 5.5 million. Recently, Firaxis estimated that the total number of hours played across the entire *Civilization* franchise had reached one billion. Dean Takahashi, "Civilization: 25 Years, 33M Copies Sold, 1 Billion Hours Played, and 66 Versions," *VentureBeat* (blog), 18 February 2016. https://venturebeat.com/business/civilization-25-years-66-versions-33m-copies-sold-1-billion-hours-played/; Concurrent player numbers obtained through "Top Games by current players," Steamcharts, accessed 22, August, 2022 https://steamcharts.com/ .
[6] This was ascertained using Steam Charts, a website that tracks concurrent player number on Steam, the biggest PC gaming platform by a landslide (roughly 50% of the PC game purchases take place within its marketplace) in real time. Even several years after their release, *Civilization* games routinely make it to the top games played at any given point in time. *Civilization* fluctuates within the lower end of the top 20, whereas *Civilization V* usually fluctuates around the 70th place. This is six years after the release of *Civilization VI* and ten years after the release of *Civilization V*. For a more detailed overview of player numbers for each game over time please refer to "Sid Meier's Civilization V - Steam Charts". Accessed 7 July 2023.
https://steamcharts.com/app/8930#All; "Sid Meier's Civilization VI - Steam Charts". Accessed 7 July 2023.
https://steamcharts.com/app/289070#All.

such heated debates around historical representation poses a wide variety of questions. What is the role of the game itself in the polemic? What are the values and beliefs that are shaping these discussions? How do discussions of these kind take place in these platforms? There is certainly a lot to unpack from this situation, but in order to provide a comprehensive explanation to phenomena such as the discussion around Seondeok it is important to first understand how scholars have studied historical representation in popular culture as whole and in video games and within *Civilization* in particular; as well as the crucial role of national identity in such representations and the reactions to them.

The Past in Popular Culture: The State of the Art

Representations of the past have become immensely prevalent in popular culture, and a myriad of cultural products— from movies to souvenirs— appeal to specific understandings of historical events and become quite successful precisely because of it. As a response, the last few decades have seen historians and other scholars increasingly taking to the study of contemporary depictions of the past. The growing popularization and valorization of the fields of public history and cultural memory studies— probably the most tangible result of this trend— has shown that popular culture plays a crucial role in (re)constructing how societies perceive the past. An intergenerational study of several families of the United States went as far as arguing that what it defined as the 'cultural curriculum' of history— understood as the collection of shared popular culture that speaks about the past for a group of people— had a similar or bigger impact in people's perception of history than the 'official' version of the past taught in schools.[7]

Public history and cultural memory studies have often diverged in their approaches and have also featured relatively little dialogue. However, it could be argued that their field of study and main concerns overlap in a significant number of places. While they may define and approach their subject matter in slightly different ways, both public history and cultural memory studies are primarily concerned by how societies and the people within them make up their understandings of the past. Scholars working on both fields agree that learning about the past and engaging with it is an immensely attractive prospect for many people— even though academic history is rarely the preferred method to do so.[8] Moreover, Given this overlap and the fact that each field brings to the

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[7] Wineburg et al., "Common Belief and the Cultural Curriculum," 69-71.
[8] Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011); Astrid Erll, and Ann Rigney. *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009); Astrid Erll, Ansgar

table a perspective that the other can lack, combining the insights of scholars from both sides would arguably be quite productive to understand how history is represented in popular culture.

Both Public History and Cultural Memory Studies— by means of Jerome de Groot's works on what he calls popular history in the case of the former and through Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney's research on mediated memory in the latter— have explored several questions surrounding of historical representation in contemporary popular culture.[9] These works explicitly attempted to disprove previous arguments expressed by several prominent historians such as David Lowenthal and Patrick Joyce, which posed that studying 'historical products' (i.e. contemporary cultural products that used historical representation as an appeal to consumers) cannot yield anything of value. Lowenthal argued that that such products merely try to 'appear historical' instead of aspiring to historical veracity, and therefore should not be taken seriously; Joyce on the other hand sees in them an attempt of mass market capitalism to strip history of its critical potential that must be combated.[10] However, they are by no means alone in sharing these positions. More subtly, even authors that study memory and public history do include elements of their arguments into their analysis. For example, Pierre Nora —one of the most celebrated scholars of memory— establishes a strong distinction between history in memory. Although the author who coined the term 'lieux de memoire' certainly does not believe the study of memory to be a futile exercise, he does certainly privilege (academic) history over memory. According to Nora, History surpasses memory in that it is objective and impartial, whereas memory is the use of the past by interested parties. It is necessarily partial and ideological.[11] Nora sees the sprawl of historical narratives in society as a triumph of memory over history, and in doing so echoes the arguments of Lowenthal and Joyce. The study of memory should therefore aim to 'debunk' these false memories and help historians disseminate the 'real' account of events.

What underpins the opposition of memory and history shared by all these authors is a strongly idealized conception of academic history. These historians might not practice their own craft with this conception of the discipline in mind, and much of their opposition to engage with these popular

Nünning, and Sara B. Young, *Cultural Memory Studies an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin ; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008);Jerome De Groot, *Public and Popular History* (London [etc.]: Routledge, 2012); Ludmila Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London : New York: Arnold ; etc ; Oxford University Press, 2000). Rosenzweig, Roy, and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. Columbia University Press, 1998; Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, Dan Porat, and Ariel Duncan,"Common Belief and the Cultural Curriculum: An Intergenerational Study of Historical Consciousness," *American Educational Research Journal* 44, no. 1 (2007): 40–76.

[9] Erll, *Memory in Culture*; Erll and Rigney, *Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009); De Groot, *Consuming History*; De Groot, *Public and Popular History*.

[10] Patrick Joyce, "The Gift of the Past: Towards a Critical History," in *Manifestos for History*, eds. Alun Munslow, Keith Jenkins, and Sue Morgan (London [etc.]: Routledge, 2007), 88–97; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[11] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7-24.

representations of history is probably more rooted in a nostalgia for an idealized past of the historical discipline than it is in a disdain for non-academic representations of the past. However, this does not take away from the fact that this disposition towards popular representations of the past is immensely counterproductive. Moreover, when these critics contrast memory with history in such binary and oppositional terms, they are implicitly sketching out a portrayal of history that is arguably closer to nineteenth century historicism than it is to how many contemporary historians perceive their discipline. For even many historians have willingly renounced many of their claims to objectivity and impartiality.

It has been shown quite convincingly that there are a myriad of factors that make history's claims to objectivity and impartiality questionable at best. From the form of the historical narrative, the colonial history of the discipline and its tendency to take the European history for granted; or its very particular and by no means only possible way of understanding historical time to name a few examples, many arguments from different perspectives have shown that a Rankean or Rankean-like understanding of history is no more than a mirage.[12] In this light, contrasting an objective history with a subjective memory would basically mean ignoring decades of developments in historiographical theory and practice. Scholars of memory and public history that draw from these more critical understandings of history-writing to inform their understanding of memory have devised other ways of understanding memory. Instead of contraposing history against memory, these approaches largely conceive of history as a very particular and specialized form of remembering.[13] This understanding of the relation of history and memory does not invalidate the knowledge produced by historians, and provides the baseline for a framework that sees the value of understanding widely disseminated representations of the past.

When it comes to understanding the discussions surrounding *Civilization*, the perspective of public history provides a good theoretical basis to argue that these are understandings of the past that should be taken seriously. Discussions such as the one on Seondeok can help scholars understand

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[12] Berber Bevernage and Chris Lorenz, "Breaking up time–negotiating the borders between present, past and future," *Storia della Storiografia* 63, no.1 (2013): 31-50; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N. J., [etc.]: Princeton University Press, 2000); Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore; London: JHU Press, 1990).

[13] Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); De Groot, *Consuming History,* 1-6; Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 22-45; Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 138.; Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) 43–59; De Groot; Marek Tamm, "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies". *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013): 463-465

some of the values and beliefs surrounding discussions about the past outside their 'ivory tower' in somewhat equal terms. Cultural Memory Studies on the other hand, provides a wide array of theoretical tools to understand the ways in which the cultural artifact that is at the center of these discussions represents the past— as well as a framework to understand which factors shape these representations. Especially relevant to my analysis is the work of Astrid Erll on the mediality of cultural memory. According to Erll, cultural memory is always mediated and "each of these media has its specific way of remembering and will leave its trace on the memory it creates".[14] Even if two different artifacts— say, a novel and a video game— are remembering the same thing, they will do so in different ways. Following this logic, it could be argued that video games have their own way of remembering, and that the affordances and constraints of the medium will inevitably shape any form cultural memory that is embedded in it.

However, many memorable events are not remembered solely on one medium, they are mostly represented across a wide variety of media, and these representations are connected and interact with each other over time. In Erll's words:

"Memorable events are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media: In newspaper articles, photography, diaries, historiography, novels ,films, etc. What is known about a war, a revolution, or any other event which has been turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the "actual events," but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in a media culture."[15]

For example Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* was inspired by a historical novel recounting the Normandy Landings and, in turn, the movie's cultural impact made almost every action video game based on the Second World War mimic a considerable part of the movie's cinematography in the levels inspired on the Normandy landings.[16] In light of Erll's work, it becomes pivotal to take into account both the specificities of the medium and the wider media landscape when analyzing any artifact of memory. This is especially true when it comes to a medium like video games— which has rules that function in a particularly different manner to that of other mainstream media and which— as a relatively new medium— draws extensively from other past representations of the world to configure its own.

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[14] Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Ansgar Nünning, Astrid Erll, and Sara B. Young (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 389

[15] "Mediality of Cultural Memory,"392

[16] Alberto Venegas, *Pasado Interactivo*, 146-147

Additionally, given that in both public history and cultural memory studies there calls for studies that either focus on the reception/interpretation of memory artifacts or use of methodologies that incorporate this dimension in some way into the analysis, making sense of how *Civilization VI* players interact with the representation of the past put forward by the game they play could help further scholarly understanding of the question of how people receive and (re)interpret cultural memory.[17] However, public history and cultural memory studies are not the only two fields that concern themselves with contemporary perceptions of history. The field of nationalism studies has seen the production of several crucial works on this very topic. As Ann Rigney already pointed out, the importance of the past in nationalist narratives makes it so that the works of scholars of nationalism and that of scholars of memory— as well as arguably that of public historians— complement each other quite well.[18]When one takes into account fact that the study of nationalism in popular culture and everyday life has experienced very similar developments to those in public history and cultural memory studies— namely, an increased interest in audience reception and (re)interpretation— this mutually beneficial dialogue becomes even more necessary.[19] What is more, given the prevalence of nationalism in *Civilization*'s representation of the past, it would be a terrible omission not to take into account the insights of scholars of nationalism when analyzing this game.

Scholars working in nationalism studies have for long turned their attention towards popular culture and everyday life so as to better understand the process by which national identities legitimize and reproduce themselves. Following the publication of Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism*, the topic of how more mundane elements can contribute substantially to the creation and consolidation of national identities became a constant in the nationalism studies literature— and it has remained that way during the last decades.[20] One of the crucial ways in which popular culture reinforces nationalism is by (re)constructing and disseminating historical narratives that cast the nation as the main

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[17] Erll, "Mediality of Cultural Memory," 396–97; David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory" *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (1996): 15-16; James B Gardner and Paula Hamilton, "The Past and Future of Public History". In *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–22.

[18] Ann Rigney, "Remembrance as Remaking: Memories of the Nation Revisited," *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 2 (2018): 240–57.

[19] Edensor, *National Identity*, 16-20; Michael Skey, "The Mediation of Nationhood: Communicating the World as a World of Nations," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 1–20.

[20] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, (London [etc.]: Sage, 1995); Helen Andersson "Recontextualizing Swedish Nationalism for Commercial Purposes: A Multimodal Analysis of a Milk Marketing Event," *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no. 5 (20 October 2019): 583–603; Jon E. Fox, "The Edges of the Nation: A Research Agenda for Uncovering the Taken-for-Granted Foundations of Everyday Nationhood," *Nations and Nationalism* 23, no. 1 (2017): 26–47; Rhys Jones and Peter Merriman, "Hot, Banal and Everyday Nationalism: Bilingual Road Signs in Wales," Political Geography 28, no. 3 (2009): 164–73; Eric Storm, "The Nationalisation of the Domestic Sphere," *Nations and Nationalism* 23, no. 1 (2017): 173–93.

character.[21]This is, as I will show, certainly the case of *Civilization*. But there is one part of *Civilization*'s nationalist messages that arguably make it stand out in comparison to most of the works studied by scholars of nationalism in popular culture. While some people might expect this sort of banal nationalism to happen in national media— and indeed most of the case studies that study banal nationalism focus on one nation in particular— *Civilization* is marketed globally and contains nationalist messages that appeal to many national identities, not just to one. How can one make sense of artifacts featuring this kind of nationalist messaging?

In understanding these artifacts, what Michael Skey has called 'the mediation of nationhood' and Koichi Iwabuchi the spread of 'banal inter-nationalism' play a crucial role. Both scholars agree that the construction of a perception of the globalized world as divided into nations plays an important role in the legitimization of every nation in particular.[22] Contemporary understandings of the nation, these authors argue, are shaped by the constant exposure to a multitude of essentialized national 'others' in the form of national foods, tourism, media, etc.. Skey and Iwabuchi's understanding of the relation between nationalism and globalization— which sees global inter-national flows as a crucial part of the construction of national identity in the contemporary world— provide a suitable framework to make sense of the nationalist elements in *Civilization*.

It was In fact a discussion of the question of audience reception within Skey's article on the mediation of nationhood that provided a methodology that is best suited for the player discussions surrounding *Civilization VI*. In this discussion Skey lists what he believes to be the main advantages and drawbacks of focusing on production and reception when studying nationalist narratives in the media— although his reasoning is arguably applicable to any inquiry into how people relate to cultural artifacts.[23] Skey posits that, while works that focus on how these artifacts are produced have the capacity to show the power of established power structures to create 'common sense' of societies worldwide, they are often ill equipped to answer the question of reception. The crucial question— which has also been posed by both scholars of memory and public historians elsewhere— is the following: how can anyone be sure that these messages— perfectly decoded and analyzed as they are by these production-focused analyses— are actually being interpreted that way by the people who receive them? Moreover, what about people's agency to resist and reinterpret these messages?

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[21] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2002).

[22] Skey, "The Mediation of Nationhood," 6-7; Koichi Iwabuchi, "Against Banal Inter-Nationalism". *Asian Journal of Social Science* 41, no. 5 (29 January 2014): 437–52.

[23] Skey, "The Mediation of Nationhood"; Mirca Madianou, *Mediating the Nation: News, Audiences and the Politics of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2012).

From the attempts to answer such questions arise the studies which instead focus on these previously overlooked blind spots. In order to do so, these inquiries instead put their focus on the audience, and on the ways in which particular groups of people have understood and (re)interpreted particular messages. In nationalism studies, for example, authors using the so called 'everyday nationalism' approach have convincingly shown that the reception of nationalist messages is neither homogenous nor uncritical, and that people's subjectivity and context play a big role in how they relate to nationalist discourses.[24] For example, Martin Van Ginderachter's inquiries into how people relate to national identity in the context of workers in nineteenth century Gent showed that, although certain elements of a Flemish identity were taken for granted, national identity was largely absent in aspects parts of the life of these workers. 'Flemishness' as a relevant social category only came to the forefront in very specific situations, such as clashes with the French speaking workers or bosses.[25] Investigations using an everyday nationalism approach show the importance of nuancing top-down analysis which implicitly assume audiences to be much less critical than what empirical studies have shown them to be. However, such approaches bring with them their own set of problems. They tend to underestimate the structural constraints that individual agency is often subjected to, and they often downplay the agency of various social groups and collectives within society.[26] While both approaches certainly have undeniable strong suits, they fail to account for factors that play significant roles in the dynamics they are trying to analyze. It would seem, therefore, that neither a production-focused analysis nor a reception-focused one will ever be able to provide a truly overarching picture.

But what if the two approaches were combined? Mirca Madianou has proposed what she calls a mediation approach, which tries to understand "the everyday performance of identities in relation to different contexts and the role particular media forms might have in their articulation".[27] This allows for a sort of 'middle ground' that seeks to combine the insights of both production and reception focused analyses and minimize their blind spots. This perspective requires a combination of sources: On one hand material related to cultural production and on the other sources that allow insights into how people interact with the final cultural products. Such a hybrid methodology can hardly claim to be devoid of blind spots, and it will tend to be slightly more skewed towards either production or

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[24] Maarten Van Ginderachter "How to Gauge Banal Nationalism and National Indifference in the Past: Proletarian Tweets in Belgium's Belle époque." Nations and Nationalism 24, no. 3 (2018): 579–93; Alexander Dhoest, "Do we really use soaps to construct our identities? Everyday nationalism in television fiction," in *The Nation on Screen: Discourses of the National on Global Television*, eds. Enric Castelló and Alexander Dhoest (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 79-96.

[25] Van Ginderachter, "Proletarian Tweets," 590-591.

[26] Marco Antonsich and Jonathan Hearn, "Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for the Study of Banal and Everyday Nationalism". *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 3 (2018): 595-597; Skey, "Mediation of Nationhood," 1-3.

[27] Madianou, *Mediating the* Nation, 138.

reception depending on the available sources. Nonetheless, it constitutes an attempt to bridge the gap between two already insightful perspectives, and arguably allow for more nuanced analyses of the relation between media and its consumers. Additionally, because of its capacity to swing back and forth between the realms of production and reception, a mediation approach allows for more nuanced analyses of situations in which the lines between the producer and receiver are much blurred. As this tends to happen with videogames, this makes a mediation approach especially suitable.

I will use this mediation approach to analyze the varied ways in which players of *Civilization VI* perceive the past— with a focus on the implications these perceptions have on national identity. This will involve a double pronged approach: first a hermeneutic analysis of the source material that would ascertain the ways in which *Civilization VI* portrays the past and then a study of the game's reception and (re)interpretation by its players. Analyses of both kinds have already been conducted under the umbrella of the nascent discipline of Historical Game Studies, which was born with the intention of studying historical representation in games.[28] Yet, until now these analyses have never been conducted in tandem and with the explicit aim that one complements the other. Scholars working within Historical Game Studies argue that games have unique ways to represent the past, and have developed a myriad of analytical and methodological tools to analyze the representation of the past within the medium. Many of these approaches draw, albeit in various degrees, from works within Game Studies that see a game's structure of rules as a crucial part of how it manages to represent reality. According to scholars such as Ian Bogost or Gonzalo Frasca, rule-based systems— such as video-games, board games, or computer simulators— as a medium have a privileged capability for making claims about "how real-world processes do, could, or should work".[29] A large part of the reason why rule-based systems excel at modelling processes is the unique level of interactivity they feature. Every medium arguably contains a degree of interactivity, even if readers of literature or film viewers have traditionally been considered mere receivers of content. Yet, although those engaging with such media are not devoid of agency in the process of meaning making, the kind of interactivity and agency that rule-based systems allow for is qualitatively different. Not even by allotting as much agency to readers as the more reader focused theories of meaning making— such as reader-response theory—

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[28] Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, "Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?" *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 358–71.

[29] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 57; Gonzalo Frasca "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P Wolf and Perron Bernard (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 221–36.

could one compare the agency of a reader in making meaning of a text with the degree of free experimentation within the parameters of, say, a plane simulator or video games.[30]

However, this experimentation is never 'fully free', it only creates the illusion of this being the case. Every simulation is ultimately bound by the rules of the system. For example, the system of rules that constitute a plane simulator is the main device that shapes the way the system represent the process of flying a plane. This makes it the determining element in limiting and shaping the results of anyone's interaction with this system (e.g. by regulating whether the user's actions will lead to a crash or a successful flight). In the case of a plane simulator, the structure of rules is designed with the aim of reflecting certain the rules of aerodynamics with varying degrees of accuracy— which means there is a rather broad consensus on what these rules are and little conflict over how this process should be represented. However, what happens when the process that a video-game is modelling is the effects of war on the political organization of a state, the influence of taxation upon a society's economic development or, in the case of *Civilization*, the history of the last 6000 years? In such cases, the way the systems of rules of a game is designed can serve to make the case for a wide array of values and beliefs. For example, Nina B. Huntenman and Matthew Thomas Payne have extensively documented the rather explicit ways in which the rules of America's Army— a widely played game commissioned by the U.S. Department of Defence— serve to create a good image of the U.S. military and to legitimize the U.S. foreign policy.[31] It is not by chance that players of America's Army have to strictly follow rules of engagement and that they are immediately discharged— and therefore lose the game— when causing a civilian casualty. These rules are built into the system with the aim of making particular claims about how the U.S. military operates.[32] Moreover, because these arguments are 'discovered' through player experimentation instead of being explicitly mentioned, this leaves very little trace of the work of the author(s) that designed the system of rules.[33] This means that, in the case of historical representation in games, a game can for example make claims about how certain historical processes

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[30] Eric Zimmerman, "Narrative, Interactivity, Play and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline," in *First person: new media as story, performance, and game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2004), 154–64; Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class? Authority of Interpretive Communities" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory Criticism,* eds. Vicent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Josh McGowan, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Jeffrey J. Williams(New York, NY [etc.]: Norton, 2018),1898-1909; Robert Houghton "World, Structure and Play: A Framework for Games as Historical Research Outputs, Tools, and Processes," *Práticas Da História Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past* 7 (2018): 17-21.

[31] Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B Huntemann, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

[32] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 75-76.

[33] Elliott, 27-28; Bogost *Persuasive Games*, 28-31

functioned and allow players to 'uncover' these arguments while obscuring the intervention of the people making these claims.

The *Civilization* franchise has been a preferred case study for Historical Game Studies scholars trying to explain how this very process functions .[34] As a result that many of the crucial elements that underpin the game's view of history— from its assumption of continuous teleological progress in history to its reliance on imperialist motifs and frameworks— have been studied thoroughly.[35] However, the representation and use of national identities, and the role that nations are attributed within historical processes has been mostly glossed over. The work of Stefan Donecker was the first attempt to showcase how nationalism is portrayed in civilizations, showing how— in portraying all playable civilizations as homogenous and monolithic and timeless entities— the franchise was perpetuating a problematic understanding of nation states and their role in history. [36] However, he did not go into the specifics on how the game puts forward these motifs through its rules. Furthermore, Donecker's article work focused on older instalments of a franchise in which the role of nationalism has done nothing but grow, meaning that important gameplay elements that premiered in more recent games have not received much attention.

A way to address both of these gaps in the research would be an inquiry into the latest instalment of the game— *Civilization VI*— that pays special attention to the representation of national identities. This would additionally provide a necessary baseline to understand the discussions such as that involving Seondeok, since such interactions necessarily revolve around *Civilization* as source material. However, in line with the concerns already highlighted by scholars in public history, cultural memory studies, and nationalism studies, several scholars working on *Civilization* have problematized the critiques of their colleagues. In a medium as the video game, how can one know whether players

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[34] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014); Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann, *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript) 2020; Andrew B. R. Elliott, "Simulations and Simulacra: History in Video Games,". *Práticas Da História Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, no. 5 (2017): 11–41. Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Routledge, 2016).

[35] Kacper Poblocki, "Becoming-State. Bio-Cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization". *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, no. 39 (2002): 163–77; Mathew Wilhelm Kapell, "Civilization and Its Discontents: American Monomythic Structure as Historical Simulacrum". *Popular Culture Review* 13, no. 2 (2002): 129–36. Mercè Oliva Rota, Fermín Ciaurriz Velasco, and Reinald Besalú Casademont, ""Más grande, más rápido, mejor": la representación de la Historia universal en Civilization IV," Comunicación 1 (7): 62-79; Adam Chapman, "Affording History: Civilization and the Ecological Approach," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2013) 61-73;

[36] Donecker, "The Civilization Series between Primordialist Nationalism and Subversive Parody," 105–22. Andrés Bijsterveld Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games: An Analysis of How Civilization V Represents the Past," *Nations and Nationalism* 28, no. 4 (2022): 1311–1325.

take the representations of the game into account when conducting their playthroughs? Scholars have pointed out that, in a medium where the possibility of winning and losing exists, players simply will not care about the game's attempts at representation and simply try to choose the most optimal path to victory.[37] Other authors do not go as far as denying the possibility of meaningful representation in videogames, but express understandable concerns about player agency being overlooked.[38] Much like in Public History and Cultural Memory Studies, questions of agency and (re)interpretation have led historical game studies scholars to become increasingly interested in the in-game practices of players and the values and beliefs that shape them.

But how can one analyze a player's response to a game's message? Scholars have come up with a variety of answers to this question, ranging from an ethnographic observation of actual gameplay to the use of different of surveys that measure proxy elements that provide indications of how players interact with a game and which values shape these interactions.[39] *Civilization*'s nature as a game that features rather long playthroughs that often take place throughout several days, and that cannot be interrupted without much detriment make the former possibility somewhat difficult given the scope and means of this investigation. Luckily, there is a wide variety of reliable proxies that can provide valuable information on both how players react to the game's representation of history and how player's preconceived notions about history affect their in-game actions. I will particularly focus on two of them: Youtube Gameplays and Reddit posts.

Gameplays are a useful source because of several reasons. They are some of the most consumed game-related content and they provide archetypes of engagement for players to then enact in a game. By this I mean that the way in which big content creators engage with the game in these recorded play sessions provides the viewers with ideal-type ways to interact with the game. This is especially the case when it comes to both the new players— who are on the look for gameplays that show them how to play the game— and experienced players— who are on the look for fresh new ways to interact with the game. For example, if a content creator like PotatoMcWhiskey, the biggest *Civilization* youtuber, showcases a particular way of playing (e.g. play with England on a map with a lot of islands and create a maritime empire) people might be more inclined to play in that way or a

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[37] David Myers, "Bombs, Barbarians and Backstories: Meaning-making within Sid Meier's Civilization," in *'Civilization'. Virtual History, Real Fantasies*, ed. Matteo Bittanti (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 2005) 165-183.

[38] Diane Carr, "The Trouble with Civilization," in *Videogame, Player, Text*, eds. Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 222–36; Elliott, "History in Video Games," 16-17; Jeremy Antley, "Going Beyond the Textual in History" *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2012).

[39] Angus A. A. Mol, "Toying with History: Counterplay, Counterfactuals, and the Control of the Past" in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, eds. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2020), 237–58; John Majewski, "What Do Players Learn from Videogames? Historical Analysis and Sid Meier's Civilization," *The Public Historian* 43, no. 1 (1 February 2021): 62–81.

similar one. Taking this into account, one can use the gameplays for some of the more popular *Civilization* content creators— by number of subscribers— in order to discern which modes of engagement with the game these content creators propose to their audience.

When it comes to Reddit posts I will focus on the main site in which matter pertaining to be franchise are discussed, the r/civ subforum.[40] Additionally, within this corpus I will particularly focus on the polemic surrounding the release of Seondeok during December 2017. More specifically, I will survey the posts and comments on the topic that were posted between December 5th —when Seondeok was released— and the end of the month— when the number of posts on the topic mostly went significantly down after the company took action to address some of the players' grievances. The reason for this is that, as John E. Fox has argued before, instances where taken for granted assumptions or practices are breached provide researchers with instances in which these taken for granted notions— about the game, history, and nationalism— are articulated much more explicitly.[41]

One might rightly point out that this choice of sources is somewhat skewed towards particularly loyal fans of the saga, given that it is more dedicated players who tend to watch content related to the game and participate recurrently in online discussions about it. This is admittedly an important tradeoff since it does make it more difficult to ascertain how more casual players interact with the images of history put forward by *Civilization*. At the same time, this selection of sources does have the advantage of focusing on those who have engaged more extensively with the game's content. Nonetheless, this focus— with its advantages and blindspots— needs to be made clear.

A similar approach was already used in John Majewski's work, in which he focused on how a group of players was able to look at the game's historical representation with a more critical eye whilst still being able to enjoy it. Majewski showed that, although this group was a minority within the game's Reddit community, one can indeed find critical engagements with *Civilization*'s representation of history. However, despite the fact that this form of engagement is interesting in its own right, little has been written about the way in which a bigger portion of the players understand and interact with *Civilization*'s representation of history. This is the role this thesis intends to fulfil. I intend to show that— although long time players may not take many of the elements of the representation of the past they play through completely seriously— there are many cases in which certain elements of that representation that are either interiorized or confirmed through play. The rules of these games are built on certain meta-historical assumptions— such as particular views on the role that nation(states)

[40] Reddit, "r/civ."
[41] Fox, "The Edges of the Nation," 31-33

have played in history or the world— that can deeply shape someone's overall understanding of the past. Contrary to other elements of a game's historical representation, these deeper assumptions about 'how history functions' appear to be much more persuasive to players. Although it is important to take into account that neither the gameplays nor the posts can be taken as a specular reflection of player practices— and both can be considered a performance for an audience in several ways— these proxies can provide a clear picture of how players (re)interpret the messages conveyed to them. The positive or negative reactions to certain utterances about the past and how it is re-enacted in the game can provide important clues about the values and beliefs that shape the players' in-game practices. So too, can the reaction to historical game mechanics in gameplay videos provide clues about a player's wider perception of the past. This is especially true when it comes to more confrontational contexts, such as the debates around Seondeok. Analyzing these different proxies will allow to sketch out some the crucial factors that shape how these players construct their understanding of the past in relation to the game.

Which elements of *Civilization*'s portrayal of the past are taken up? Which are rejected or resignified? What are the elements that shape said interpretations, and why do they tend to feature national identity in such a prominent position? How do particular subjectivities shape the act of play by, for example, players deciding to play as 'their' nation and trying to enact concrete historical outcomes? These are the kind are the questions that this thesis intends to sketch out an answer for. Ultimately, these diatribes can all be boiled down to one question: What role does *Civilization VI* play in the (re)construction of its players' perception of the past and national identity?

Chapter Outline

In order to provide an answer to these questions, I will use a combined analysis of the conditions of production and reception of these video games that will provide a more overarching picture than a sole focus on any of the former. First, I will discuss the production side of the equation. In this side of the analysis I will first historicize the way in which *Civilization* represents the past, providing a brief account of the franchise's history and showing the ways in which nationalism has increasingly become the main feature of how the franchise's historical narrative. Then, I will make sense of the specific ways in which *Civilization VI* portrays nation-states, national identity, and the role of nation states in history and our contemporary world. After having established the ways in which *Civilization VI* portrays history and nationalism I will move on to discuss the ways in which its players interact with

these messages. This will first involve a discussion of how game's incentivize players to play in certain ways, followed by a survey to that will try to ascertain the extent to which players actually follow these incentives. However, because practices do not necessarily correlate with beliefs, I will use the case of the Seondeok polemic to show the ways in which the game plays a role in mediating discussions about history and nationalism in its players. Finally, I will discuss the way in which— rather than needing to be convinced by the game in any way— many players might actually be using the game as a space to articulate their national identities.

Civilization's Portrayal of the Nation and its Past.

The different ways a recipient can interpret a message are enormously varied. Yet they ultimately remain constrained by the content of the message itself. In the case that concerns this thesis, what this means is that in order to understand the interpretations of history and national identity that people might draw from *Civilization*, it is first necessary to understand how this videogame franchise has portrayed these themes throughout its lifespan. Given that *Civilization* is one of the longest spanning franchises in video games— 26 years between its first release (1990) and its last (2016)— this becomes especially important. Although every instalment of the franchise has brought with it a new change in how *Civilization* was played, there are some common elements that have been maintained throughout the those two and a half decades. In order to understand the game's current portrayal of history, it is important to understand which elements— old and new— have played a role in giving it its current form. This chapter will therefore provide a brief overview of how *Civilization*'s portrayal of the past has evolved, while paying particular attention to the ways the franchise has characterized nation-states and their role in history. In doing so, it will map out the ways in which nationalism has progressively gained importance within the franchise representation of the past. Finally it will analyze the way the last instalment of the game, *Civilization VI* represents history and the role of nations within it.

A Brief History of *Sid Meier's Civilization*

Although *Sid Meier's Civilization* was probably the most successful video game of its kind at the time, it was neither the first nor the only game in the historical strategy genre. Sid Meier, the lead designer of the first game and one of the founders of the company that published and developed it, drew from the already quite rich world of strategy board games for inspiration. His main coworker in the project, Bruce Shelley, was a former board game creator at Avalon Hill and Meier even defined the first *Civilization* saying:

> "It was kind of like *Risk* brought to life on the computer."[42]

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[42] Benj Edwards, "The History of Civilization," *Game Developer*, July 18, 2007, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/the-history-of-civilization.

More complex board games such as Avalon Hill's *1830: The Game of Railroads and Robber Barons* and the homonymous *Civilization*— as well as early strategy video games such as *Empire*— are also among the games that influenced the nascent franchise.[43] Despite being one of the first games that went slightly beyond a one-dimensional historical representation that was often focused on warfare, *Sid Meier's Civilization* was not produced in a vacuum. The influence of these earlier titles can certainly be perceived in some of the ways the game portrays history. For example, *Civilization*'s focus on military competition and conflict can certainly be at least partially explained by the influences that shaped its first instalment.

Civilization* was one of the founders of the so-called 4X genre of strategy video games. This name comes from the 4 key actions players conduct in 4X games, namely eXploring, eXpanding, eXploiting, and eXterminating. Although *Civilization*'s systems of rules in the game have varied in each instalment of the franchise, there are some core elements that remained unchanged since the franchise's first release. In every game the player starts out with a certain civilization around the Neolithic and is given control over its development until the recent future. Players are put in a position of perfect internal control and information, meaning that they are able to gain information and control over every lever of power within their realm, from the movement of every single military unit to the economic priorities of the state (De Zamaróczy, 2017: 62-7 4; Friedman, 1999: 135).[44] Players are then given 6000 years— 500 turns in the game— to use this information and control to make decisions over where to explore and expand, how exploit their conquered/colonized lands, and who to exterminate.

But how exactly are these actions performed by the players and what are the limitations and possibilities they face? Much like many other video games in the strategy genre, *Civilization* games can be boiled down to a complex optimization problem. The core agency of the players lies in their capacity to allocate the resources available to them into the most optimal outputs at any given time. Should they build a barracks, a theatre or a harbor? Should they research horse riding or sailing? All of these options have advantages and drawbacks (e.g. military power vs. economic development) and need to be chosen based on context. For example player might need to develop their economy but be under threat of an expansionist neighbor, whereas the absence of military threats might encourage a different allocation of resources. As the game progresses, players get access to an increasing number

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[43] Edwards, "The History of Civilization,"; For an in-depth analysis of the historical representation in some of the games that inspired *Civilization*, refer to Jason Begy, "Board Games and the Construction of Cultural Memory," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 7–8 (1 November 2017): 718–38.

[44] Nicolas De Zamaróczy, "'Are We What We Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Computer Games," *International Studies Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (1 May 2017): 162-167; Ted Friedman, "Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space," in O*n a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*, ed. Greg M. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 135.

of resources, creating a constant feedback loop where players are challenged to manage an increasingly bigger and varied amount of inputs to create the most optimal combination of outputs. Since there are multiple strategies that can lead to success there is more than *one* optimal way of allocating resources. Moreover, given that the game world's geography is generated at random, any of such strategies needs to adapt to the world generated in every new game. The combination of different possible strategies that need to adapt to a randomized environment with the franchise's progressive addition of new ways to win the game (e.g. cultural, diplomatic, or religious victories) contributes to make each game feel different and allows players to play in many different ways.

However, there are certain constant elements that directly relate to *Civilization*'s understanding of history. The 4X genre in general and *Civilization* in particular heavily draw from geopolitics, particularly the kind of deterministic theories that were prominent in the discipline's inception in the late nineteenth century. This is not surprising when one considers the way in which the ideas of authors such as Harfold Mackinder or Friedrich Ratzel— which attributed a crucial importance to geography in shaping history— made a considerable comeback in a United States that had become the sole remaining superpower at the end of the Cold War.[45] The game's main objective is mapping, controlling, and exploiting as much imaginary space as possible. The main drive for conflict is the competition for the diverse resources that enable economic development and military prowess, be it iron in the early stages of the game or uranium in the later portions of a playthrough. In line with this line of geopolitical theory, the first *Civilization* portrayed geography as the main or even sole driver behind historical development and political conflict. There are two key abilities necessary to be proficient in *Civilization*— or any 4X game for that matter: the first is arguably the capacity to formulate long term plans for expansion and development that take into account the geography of the randomly generated map the player has appeared in, the second is the capacity to know which allocation of resources would make it possible to enact that plan and execute it optimally. Space in *Civilizations* serves to be controlled and fought over, and every other resource available to players does not serve any other purpose than to fuel this drive.[46]

Additionally, although it would be fair to say that the importance of military matters has somewhat diminished with the introduction of new systems for players to interact with, the military aspect of the game has always been crucial. It is true that newer instalments of the franchise have seen the addition of new systems to interact with— such as the inclusion of faith and culture in the game or the addition of a 'World Congress'— as well as new forms of achieving victory revolving

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[45] Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire*: *The Legacy of Harfold Mackinder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-14

[46] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 106-109

around these new systems in the religious, cultural, and diplomatic victories that were introduced over the third, fourth and fifth instalments of the franchise. However, it is important to emphasize that— despite these efforts to add new approaches to the player— the core gameplay of *Civilization* franchise still relies on a focus on war and conflict that does not differ so much from the games that inspired its first instalment. Even its latest installment in *Civilization VI* was criticized in for its overreliance on the combat system to create interesting situations and game states for the players. In other words, despite the fact that with some tweaking of the advanced game settings it is possible to play in an entirely pacifist way, doing so resulted in a dreadfully boring game.[47] Most of the board games that inspired *Civilization* portrayed history in terms of a zero-sum game that is to be resolved through a conflict where the most skilled player prevails. *Civilization*'s representation of history may have become ever more sophisticated over the years, but it has never deviated from this core principle that informed the works that inspired it.[48]

The existence of such a conflict begs the question: what does it mean for *Civilization* to 'win' in History? After all, there is a myriad of ways in which one could define what such a 'victory' means. In the case of *Civilization*, what the game understands as 'winning history' is becoming exactly what the United States was perceived to be at the time Sid Meier was designing the first game of the series: a global hegemon.[49] In other words, the way to ultimately beat the game is to establish complete hegemony over every corner of the world. This representation of victory— clearly reflective of both the time the franchise was created and the branch of geopolitical theory that inspired its understanding of history— is not only limited to the 'violent' victory conditions but carries over to the non-military ways of winning the game. A cultural victory is achieved through the assimilation of the whole world into your culture— which implies the eradication of every other cultural form even if it happens through nonviolent means . The religious victory functions in the same way, only through religion instead of culture. And the diplomatic victory sees the hegemon being elected as world leader, with every other country ceding them their sovereignty. No matter what route the players choose in *Civilization*, the final aim in the game always is that of achieving near absolute power for their state— the achievement of total control over even the last spec of the virtual world in which the game takes

[47] Colin Campbell, Campbell, Colin. "The Pacifist's Guide to Civilization 6." *Polygon* (blog), November 1, 2016. https://www.polygon.com/features/2016/11/1/13482176/pacifists-guide-to-civilization-6
[48] Kapell, "Civilization and Its Discontents," 132-133
[49] Poblocki, "Bio-Cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization," 168; Angus Mol, Aris Politopoulos, and Csilla Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, "From the Stone Age to the Information Age: History and Heritage in Sid Meier's Civilization VI," *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 5, no. 2 (2017): 214–19; Oliva Rota et al., "Historia universal en Civilization IV,"70-71

place. In order to win, all the possible options afforded to players at any given moment need to be evaluated in terms of how useful they are to get to that 'end of history'.[50]

Around this final aim of complete hegemony, *Civilization* builds an immensely teleological understanding of history. The passage of time is equated with progress or stagnation towards this final stage, with of course an obvious preference for the former. For *Civilization*, teleological progress is inseparable from any historical development, with technological advancement being a major force behind that progress.[51] As the game drags on, the player's capacity to extract and use resources exponentially grows thanks to technological advancement, and the player's achievement of victory ultimately depends on their capacity to magnify and accelerate this feedback loop of exponential growth as much as possible. Although this progress can add complexity and create new challenges for the player (e.g. the necessity to secure more types of strategic resources such as coal or uranium as the game advances into later stages), these are merely new 'puzzles' to be solved with an optimal allocation of resources instead of actual representations of some of the 'drawbacks' that the incessant march of progress can bring about. A perfect example of this is the mechanics of climate change and environmental factors added to *Civilization VI* in its *Gathering Storm* expansion. Although by adding elements such as floods or volcano eruptions into the gameplay the expansion does introduce refreshing elements in a notoriously anthropocentric representation of history, it is quite telling that *Gathering Storm*'s solution to literally 'solve' climate change is researching a particular set of technologies that— once researched— mitigate all the effects of the player's drive for exponential growth. A great part of *Civilization*'s appeal is its capacity to entice player attention with this constant and ever increasing growth. Even in games where players suffer setbacks (i.e. losing a war, being surpassed technologically or culturally by a rival), they get to see their yields constantly go up thanks to their actions. While this feedback loop has proven demonstrably entertaining for its players, it is concerning to say the least that such a widely disseminated cultural product portrays history as little more than an age-long competition between the different civilizations to achieve infinite and exponential growth with the aim of total domination.

How are these 'civilizations' portrayed within the game? They are ,ultimately, the sole protagonists of *Civilization*'s representation of history. While it is true other political entities such barbarians and city states exist in the game, neither of these can be controlled by players and their role is completely subordinate to that of civilizations. It therefore becomes crucial to ascertain the

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[50] It is quite curious that, although *Civilization* rules strongly relate to some of the arguments posited by both *The end of History and the last man* and *Clash of Civilizations*— and in fact could be probably used in a pedagogical setting to explain some of their main arguments— the release of the game's first instalment predates both publications.

[51] Oliva Rota et al. "Historia universal en Civilization IV," 69-70.

way in which these entities are represented in order to get an understanding of who the main characters in this narrative are. It is also important to take into account that the portrayal of civilizations has been far from uniform across its six instalments. Instead, it could be argued that one of most crucial ways in which *Civilization*'s developers have implemented innovations in the franchise over time has been an increase in both quantity and depth of the different features that differentiate civilizations in terms of how they play and how they are represented. There are a few common elements that have been used throughout the six games of *Civilization* to differentiate the different civilizations and establish their uniqueness. However— through the addition of new in-game systems— many of the releases of a new game within the franchise have come with an increase in the sophistication of the methods used to differentiate civilizations. As a result, the player experience when playing with different civilizations has become much more varied. In contrast with the variance present in *Civilization* 6, it could almost be said that *Civilization* 1's civilizations are almost interchangeable in terms of how they are played.

For heuristic purposes, this process of progressive differentiation can be divided in three different stages, each containing 2 of the franchise's instalments. With each stage, the amount of importance— in terms of both historical representation and gameplay— attributed to the differences between civilizations and the uniqueness of each civilization increases. The first two games featured only certain common elements that run through the entire franchise, which are the use of a leader, a flag, and unique units to differentiate civilizations. The leader is a historical figure attributed to the civilization that acts as its personification. It also takes the function of being the player's interlocutor during a diplomatic negotiation with a certain civilization. Leaders have often varied across different instalments, with for example both Isabella of Castille and Philip II having been leaders of the Spanish civilization in *Civilization* 5 and 6 respectively. Unique units are units that can only be fielded by the civilization and— barring a few exceptions— tend to replace an existing unit in the game that they outperform either by being more powerful or by having a special capability that the standard unit does not. The Spanish tercio, for example, replaces the pikeman, and the merchant of Venice replaces the Great Merchant. The tercio is more powerful than the pikeman and the merchant of Venice can buy territory, which the standard great merchant cannot do. These three elements, while establishing some semblance of differentiation, arguably did not shape civilizations so deeply as to affect the majority of player decisions. Instead, other elements such as the political system players chose where much more impactful in shaping gameplay than the choice of civilization was. The game's main message was instead a rather explicit preference for liberal democracy, which starkly outperformed

its counterparts regardless of the civilization that chose it.[52] Political organization was, according to the first *Civilization* games, the main determinant of the prosperity and power of civilizations across history; with western liberal democracy being the ideal and final state of affairs.

However, this primacy of politics was slowly diluted over time. The first significant way in which this happened was the addition of different archetypes— such as industrious, militaristic or civic— in *Civilization III*. Each civilization was attributed two of these archetypes, and the combination of these two archetypes was unique to it. Since archetypes would give certain bonuses (e.g. scientific civilizations being able to research technologies faster or militaristic civilization having a martial edge over their opponents), different civilizations would excel at different playstyles.[53] Playing with the industrious and expansionist United States would require a somewhat different strategy than if one played with the militaristic and religious Japanese civilization. The optimal strategies in the game revolve around making use of these advantages, since other civilizations will outpace the player in other areas due to their own combination of intrinsic bonuses. Whereas before what determined whether civilizations reached their 'final purpose' of total hegemony was their political system, the introduction of traits increasingly adds culture—understood in rather essentialist and monolithic terms— to the conversation. It also could not allow for any sort of historical change, as these traits are completely immutable. The Japanese appear in the Neolithic being religious and militaristic and that is simply all they ever will be for the following two millennia— a proposition that becomes outright surreal when one considers that in the game this is also the case for Germany and the United states. However, despite its many issues, the trait system still allowed for considerable commonalities between civilizations. Given that each civilization only has two traits, civilizations with one trait in common would feature significant overlap and therefore play much more similarly. In short, although the introduction trait system did start shifting the focus of the game's representation of history from (geo)politics into culture , it did not establish every civilization as unequivocally unique in terms of gameplay.[54]

That would change with the release of the last two games, which saw culture acquire an even more prominent position than before, to the point of arguably becoming *the* single most important

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[52] Poblocki, "Bio-Cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization,"165-166. Microprose, *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Microprose, 1991); Microprose, *Sid Meier's Civilization II* (Microprose, 1996).

[53] Donecker, "The Civilization Series between Primordialist Nationalism and Subversive Parody,"106-107, Kenneth Chen, "Civilization and Its Disk Contents," *Radical Society: Review of Culture and Politics* 30, no. 2 (1 July 2003): 101-102; Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN [etc.]: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 97-99.

[54] Firaxis. *Sid Meier's Civilization III*. Take-Two Interactive, 2001; Firaxis. *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*. Take-Two Interactive, 2005.

factor in how the game represents historical developments. What made this shift possible was a great increase in the differences between how every different civilization is optimally played. This happened due to three major changes that took place over the last two games. The first two were the introduction of unique bonuses and what is called a 'starting bias' for every civilization. In a departure from the trait system, the developers introduced bonuses that were completely unique to every civilization— meaning that winning necessitates a strategy that takes advantages of the bonuses that only the player's civilization possesses. Civilizations might still be inclined towards certain aspects of the game such as scientific research, cultural production or military might. However, the way each civilization gains that intrinsic advantage that allows it to excel over their counterparts is exclusive to it. This system created a new issue: many of these bonuses necessitated certain kinds of terrain to function, but given that the map was created at random by the game's algorithm the player's possibility to thrive was conditioned on them being lucky enough to start the game close to that particular type of terrain (e.g. seafaring England starting the game close to a coastline instead of the interior of a vast continent). In order to avoid frustration and increase fairness, the algorithm that generates the game's virtual geography was tweaked so that, within this randomly generated world, every civilization would always appear next to the kind of terrain that suited its bonuses . Although for some these changes might seem minor, the introduction of unique bonuses and the starting bias arguably turned around the principles that had underpinned the game's understanding of history since its inception. A franchise that has always portrayed geopolitics as the main driver of history had suddenly subordinated geography to culture. Appearing next to a desert, previously a rather undesirable start, was suddenly the ideal scenario for anyone playing as Arabia or Morocco. The icy tundra, an equally undesirable place to settle for most, had become an optimal place to start as Russia. Not only that, anyone playing the two latest instalments of *Civilization* could always expect Morocco to start close to a desert and Russia close to tundra. While the game still portrays the competition for resources as a significant driver for the expansion of states and the conflicts between them, geography now can only be valued in terms of whether a particular civilization's bonuses can take advantage of it.[55]

This 'dethronement' of geopolitics and the rise of culture as the crucial element underpinning *Civilization*'s representation of history culminates with the last change made to the game's core rules: the addition of districts. With *Civilization* VI, the latest instalment of the franchise, came the addition of a 'city planning' aspect to the game where players would for example be rewarded for putting their industrial quarters next to mines or rivers, or their commercial quarters next to ports. In doing this,

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[55] Bijsterveld Muñoz, "National identity in historical video games," 1319-1320.

the game added a new layer of complexity to the puzzle that is organizing the game space to maximize output. This in itself could signal a return to the importance of geography in the game, since the optimal organization of space became more important with the addition of districts. However, this possibility is completely denied by giving each civilization unique bonuses related to how these districts are placed. Every civilization also gained unique ways to organize space (e.g. unique districts) that often play a crucial role in their optimal development. As a result, the optimal placement of districts— now a crucial part of organizing space in the game— is conditional on the civilizations picked. The Japanese, for example, want their districts the be clumped together because they gain extra yields when districts are adjacent to each other; but the Koreans require their unique science district, the Seowon, to be completely isolated in order for it to gain its bonuses. While it is certainly interesting for a game to explore varied forms of social organization, by tying the rationale behind them to culture the game furthers its already essentialist portrayal of culture. Following this rationale, the reason why the productivity of a city might increase when it is highly concentrated within a small space is not the economy of scale or particular institutions, but rather that its inhabitants are Japanese and only their culture could make an arrangement like that work.

If two players were to start a game, one playing with Scythia and the other with France, them attempting to play using the same strategies would necessarily result in a complete failure for one of them. The reason for this is that the optimal playstyles for these civilizations could not be further away from each other. Scythia is a civilization completely based on military prowess and early conquest. Because of its intrinsic bonuses and unique unit the player controlling it gets a big military edge over its neighbors at the beginning of the game. Barring a very unequal engagement, Scythia's horse archers will sweep away their foes, enabling players controlling this civilization to expand rapidly and even completely take over a nearby rival civilization. However, because of how Scythia's bonus is programmed into the game— as a flat number that cannot match the exponential growth that takes place everywhere else in the game— this military edge is short-lived.[56] Scythian horse archers become obsolete as the game goes on, and its previously unrivaled military bonus starts to matter less and less. This forces a player controlling Scythia to be extremely aggressive to compensate for the progressive 'decadence' that will take place later. Only by conquering swathes of territory and

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[56] At the beginning of the game the numbers coded into the rules used are small (e.g. a fight between units of 12 and 15 combat strength or a yield of 3 units of food in a city). In a situation like that, a flat bonus of 5 combat strength or 2 extra food will always be much more impactful than a 10% or 20% bonus to combat strength or food. However, as the game progresses these numbers associated with all the variables in the game grow exponentially, and at that point percentage based bonuses start to outpace flat ones. By the time players are producing science by the hundreds— or even thousands— a 20% bonus is much more impactful than 10 extra science. This contrast between how flat and percentage based bonuses function is a common way to balance the pacing of games across many genres in video games.

resources through military force at the beginning of the game do they stand a chance against the kind of civilizations that become stronger— not weaker— over time.

France on the other hand, functions in a completely different way and thus requires a completely different strategy to win. France only really starts enjoying its unique bonuses at the beginning of the medieval age, meaning that until then it suffers from a disadvantage in comparison to the likes of Scythia. However, from then on France is able to build Wonders (i.e. unique special buildings that require a great amount of resources to construct but provide considerable bonuses in return) from the Medieval, Rennaisance, and Industrial Eras at a significantly lower cost. Not only that, the French also enjoy a considerable bonus to the tourism generated by these wonders. Given that winning a cultural victory requires generating enormous amounts of tourism, this allows players controlling France who managed to stabilize through the earlier parts of the game to use these bonuses to eventually generate enough tourism to outpace the competition and win a cultural victory. A player controlling Scythia that tried to 'hunker down' and strategize for a late cultural victory would fail as miserably as a player controlling France that decides to attempt a strategy of early military expansion. Scythia is simply 'better at conquering' and the French are simply 'better at culture'. It must be noted that not all civilizations are as starkly opposed as France and Scythia, and one could argue that some civilizations— such as the Mongols and Scythia, or France and England— do feature playstyles that look more alike. However, even civilizations whose optimal strategies steer players towards certain paths (e.g. early expansion for Scythia and the Mongols) require players to play differently. While the example of France and Scythia might be among the ones where a player's option diverge the most— therefore making it a good illustration of this dynamic— this process by which the civilization chosen by the player plays a determinant role in shaping what the possible and optimal strategies are takes places regardless of which civilization players choose.[57]

National Identity in *Civilization VI*

While this progressive differentiation between civilizations certainly reflects a problematic understanding of culture because of the monolithic, immutable and essentialist ways in which culture is understood in *Civilization*, with the information provided up until these point a reader might be left wondering: How are these positions necessarily related to nationalism? The game's title and the use of 'civilization' to name the different factions players can control could even be seen as a specific attempt elude a label closer to nationalism— why should its representation of history be considered nationalist then? There are several important reasons to argue that— despite what it might seem at

[57] Bijsterveld Muñoz, "National identity in historical video games," 1318-1319.

first glance— the use of civilization is very often just a placeholder for nation state. For starters, there is the fact that a great majority of the existing civilizations in the game directly evoke contemporary nation states. England, France, the United States, and Germany have been playable factions in every single instalment of a game that starts its timeline at the dawn of the Neolithic Era. From *Civilization III* onwards, the franchise has increasingly used many of the signifiers that have been traditionally attached to nation states to represent civilizations— such as a national flag or clearly defined national borders. Additionally, every civilization is also treated as a completely monolithic and homogenous whole, which certainly echoes nationalist portrayals of the nation. There are no intra-state differences, and inhabitants can only belong to one nation. [58] In fact, when a player conquers a city from another civilization, 'pacifying' (i.e. rendering it productive and reducing unhappiness) it always involves 'converting' its citizens into their own nationality. *Civilization* as a franchise has faced fair accusations of cultural essentialism since its very inception, but it is important to emphasize that— with every new game— this cultural essentialism has become increasingly nationalist in nature.

One might argue that many other civilizations within the game instead reference more ancient polities that are far from nation-states, as is the case with the Aztecs, the Greeks or the Romans. However, although it is true that a fair amount of the playable factions in *Civilization* do not necessarily reference a nation state, the game treats the civilizations that reference these polities as nation states nonetheless. The Aztec and Roman empires are completely detached from their historical context and they are portrayed as completely centralized polities with a completely homogenous culture and a population that is entirely "Roman" or "Aztec". It is also quite telling that a majority of the names used for cities of these more ancient polities are situated within the contemporary borders of nation-states that claim the legacy of these polities for themselves– as is the case for Roman Empire and contemporary Italy for example. But even in cases where such identifications with contemporary nation-states might be more diffuse, civilizations are still portrayed as age-old completely homogenous entities whose essence remains completely immutable throughout thousands of years. *Civilization* arguably treats these historical entities in the same way the most fervent of nationalists would speak of the nation-states he feels allegiance to. In doing so, it leaves itself very little room to confront the argument that the civilization moniker is little more than a placeholder for what the game is really referencing: nation states. What this effectively means is that all the essentialist portrayals of culture that have been discussed until now are better analyzed by considering that this is a kind of essentialism that is firmly rooted in national imaginaries.

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[58] Donecker, "The Civilization Series between Primordialist Nationalism and Subversive Parody,"110-113.

It could even be said that historical time is portrayed through a nationalist lens by the game. The distinction between civilizations between 'early game' (i.e. civilizations that are at their strongest at the beginning of the game, like Scythia), 'mid game', (civilizations that gain their biggest edge over others in the middle stages of a game), and 'late game' (civilizations whose moment of strength comes close to the end, such as France) is also quite telling of how the game's structure of rules reproduces the structure of nationalist history-writing. These sort of divisions between early, mid, and late game factions are fairly common across the strategy genre and beyond, and their purpose across the medium has been that of offering different approaches to the game and diversifying the number of possible strategies. However the problem in this case is the way in which these differentiations are applied to a game with a historical setting. When put through this light, the national essence that a civilization's intrinsic bonuses signifies become mediated through a historical time that gives every civilization a particular moment in the game where they are at their most powerful— a 'golden age' of sorts. Unsurprisingly, the times in which such golden ages happen for every civilization align almost perfectly with nationalist imaginaries over the world. This restricts the possibility for deviation from national histories even more, since optimal strategies rely on not only re-enacting national tropes but also re-enacting them at the exact time of the perceived 'golden age' of the nation-states they are playing as. It is not only that players controlling Spain have to colonize other continents and use religion if they want to win, they have to do so during the Renaissance in order to get the most of it. Almost every facet of playing the game has essentially been subordinated to a nation centric portrayal of the past.

However, there is one important objection— or rather, an alternative analysis of the development of the franchise over the last few years— that one might weigh against the notion that nationalism has been growing in importance within *Civilization*'s representation of history. That would be the argument that it is personalism and the notion of 'Great Man history' that has instead been on the rise over the last few years in the game's representation of history. This argument would see the increasing importance of the unique bonuses in the game as a feature of increased personalism— rather than nationalism— in *Civilization*'s representation of history. Given that every civilization has its own leader and its unique bonuses tend to relate to the time period in which the leader in question lived, this position does make some relevant points. If Philip II leads Spain and its unique bonuses are related to the colonization of other continents and religion; are these bonuses related to the collective memory of Philip II's or to Spanish nationalism? Moreover, the release of *Civilization VI* saw the addition of more than one leader for several civilizations and made it so playing with different leaders meaningfully affects how you play. This was achieved by making some advantages unique to the civilization and others unique to the leader. For example, playing as Greece is not the same when you

play with Athenian leader Pericles as when you play with Spartan queen Gorgo? Although it is true that any player controlling the Greeks will find his strategy to be geared towards generating great amounts of culture, the way in which one might go about this varies considerably depending on whether one plays with Pericles or Gorgo. This happens because, although these two leaders share the unique bonuses of the Greek civilization, they also have their own unique 'leader bonuses'. Pericles' gains a bonus to culture by being the suzerain of city states, meaning that he will try to play a more diplomatic game. Gorgo, on the other hand, gains culture by defeating enemy units and will therefore devote many more resource to military matters. Through the addition of leader bonuses, the game managed to incentivize different kinds of playstyles within the game civilization, which does complicate the picture where solely the nation shapes the strategies available to players. Because of this growing importance of leaders in how the game is played, the influence of great man history in the game's understanding of the past needs to be discussed.

This would at first glance seem to be confirming the hypothesis of a personalism argument, and it is indeed true that some of these leaders do lean a lot into playing out a particular fantasy associated with the memory of a historical figure. If one chooses Eleanor of Aquitaine for England for example, her gameplay leans significantly more into playing out a fantasy of pacific conquest related to the memory of Eleanor herself—and her role in the unification of the lands of Aquitaine and those belonging to the English crown through marriage— than it does into enacting any kind of tropes of English national history. Eleanor can even be played both with France and with England, further highlighting her detachment from the nationalism in the game. However— along with a few other outliers that follow this trend, such as the recently added Ludwig II for Germany— Eleanor of Aquitaine is arguably the most dramatic example of this happening in the game. In the case of Pericles and Gorgo, and for that matter for that of many other leaders, what is often being offered instead is more variety of 'national archetypes to play as'. There is not one single national narrative, and there are often competing notions of what the nation is, should be, or has been. These narratives tend to be anchored in particular timeframes, personalities, regions… that act as ideal-types example of the nation. In the case of Greece, the playstyles of Pericles and Gorgo reflect ideal images of Athens and Sparta as the 'essences' of the Greek nation— with each of these images reflecting a different kind of 'national character'. In the case of Athens what is often emphasized is its incipient democracy and cultural production, whereas in the case of Sparta it was its sharply hierarchical society and military prowess that was exalted instead. These images have been an important part of the portrayal Greek

nationalism from within and without, and Pericles and Gorgo each provide a way of playing that evokes that particular version of the Greek nation.[59]

It could be argued that the great majority of countries with multiple leaders feature this arrangement of offering 'different versions of the nation' through their leaders. By tying a majority of leaders to different 'national archetypes that strongly relate to nationalist imaginaries, the game turns these leaders into vessels and embodiments of these nationalist narratives. In this light, nationalism is a crucial part of how much of the leader system works in the game, even if the offer of nationalist narratives to enact through play has indeed become more varied. Although one should not entirely shun the influence of personalism— as there are indeed a few leaders which do lean more into a narrative focused solely on themselves as historical characters— it must be noted that many of these characters function as an embodiment of a certain image of 'their' nation. In turn, the rules that shape how each of these leaders are played are designed to enact that particular image. In this light, the leader system complements rather than undermines *Civilization VI*'s nationalist portrayal of the past. Personalism has indeed been also been rising as a part of *Civilization*'s representation of history, but has done so largely as complementary to the game's nation centric narrative. Because of this, nationalism must still be considered the main touchstone of the game's historical representation.

Having established that nationalism is the core part of *Civilization VI*'s portrayal of the past, a question remains. How exactly does the game portray nationalism and national identity? Some authors, have seen the treatment of identity in *Civilization* as fomenting certain forms of 'othering' through play.[60] However, this is undercut by the fact that the positions of 'self' and 'other' change with every game. While it is true that— as Bembeneck has argued— the game encourages the treatment of rival civilizations as an 'other', this framework becomes murkier when one considers multiple playthroughs. For example, a player might face the Romans as such an 'other' in one game to then decide to play the next game with the Roman civilization— thus making the Romans both the self and the other at the same time. This makes it rather difficult to use such a framework to analyze the identity dynamics in *Civilization* when going beyond one instance of play. Instead, I would argue that the portrayal of history *Civilization*'s structure of rules puts together constitutes a perfect example of what Michael Skey has called the 'mediation of the nation' and Koichi Iwabuchi 'inter-

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[59] Brian Vick, "Of Basques, Greeks, and Germans: Liberalism, Nationalism, and the Ancient Republican Tradition in the Thought of Wilhelm Von Humboldt," *Central European History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 665; Keith S. Brown and Yannis Hamilakis, *The Usable Past: Greek Metahistories* (The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2002), 7.
[60] Emily Joy Bembeneck, "Phantasms of Rome: Video Games and Cultural Identity," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2013), 77–90.

nationalism'.[61] The reason for this is that *Civilization* is a globally marketed cultural product that nonetheless has an unequivocally nationalist message— even if the way this nationalist message functions is different from more traditional nationalist narratives. *Civilization* is a nationalist game that does not really take sides in favor of one particular nation. Instead, it takes the side of the nation-state in a more abstract sense. Every civilization in the game has the possibility of winning the game when played according to its strengths. However, playing in this manner is the only possible way to win. The point of this sort of nationalist messaging is not to establish the kind of national supremacy that privileges one nation over the other, but rather the kind of national supremacy that privileges the nation-state as the sole valid, possible, and desirable form of human organization.[62] *Civilization* foments nationalism by dividing the world, the people that inhabit it, and the history of both in neat national portions. The structure of rules that drives how the game is played is completely based on accepting and reproducing the very same premises that underpin the legitimacy of nation-states across the globe.

By virtue of being the only factions the player can control, nation-states are the only relevant historical actors in *Civilization*'s representation of the past. They are also the only entities capable of generating the cycle of exponential growth that is used to signify progress, as well as the only form of social organization capable of enacting the hegemonic 'end of history' that the game understands as a victory. Additionally, by making player strategies so conditional on what civilization they are playing, *Civilization* attributes an enormous amount of importance to some form of 'national essence' in the historical narratives its games generate. The possibility of having different experiences, using different strategies to win, and experiencing diverse optimization challenges is only available by playing a different civilization every time. What this effectively means, is that the game essentially denies civilizations the possibility of excelling beyond the parcels of proficiency that the game has carved out for them in different domains. While earlier analyses of *Civilization* have accurately shown the importance of elements such as political organization and geopolitics in the game's representation of history, by the time of the release of *Civilization VI* all these elements have become immensely subordinated to the nation. While these factors might act as nuances— undercutting the importance of nationalism in the game's historical narrative— their subordination now bolsters the game's nationalist message. The addition of unique ways to expand and exploit the territory that are only available to one civilization make it so that the optimal organization of space is conditioned on the choice of civilization. The same happens with how the game represents the political organization of a

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[61] Skey, "The Mediation of Nationhood," 1–20; Koichi Iwabuchi, "Against Banal Inter-Nationalism". *Asian Journal of Social Science* 41, no. 5 (29 January 2014): 437–52.
[62] Bijsterveld Muñoz, "National Identity in Historical Video Games,"1323.

player's civilization— every optimal choice in this domain is conditioned on what the civilization already excels at.

The belief that different peoples are differently inclined towards democratic or autocratic government depending on their nationality— and that therefore the political organization of a state functions better when it adapts to its 'national character'— is by no means a new one. Neither are various narratives that have established a quasi-sacred bond between a nation and 'its nature' and have used this bond as a causal factor in establishing the national character and explaining certain historical developments. What *Civilization* takes in a lot of existing tropes about the past— present in literature, film, political discourse and, to some degree, historiography— and 'picks and chooses' from some of their elements to inspire a game's structure of rules. In other words, it remediates existing historical memory onto video games.[63] Some— especially those more familiar with recent historiographical literature— might be inclined to see such positions almost as relics of the recent past; narratives that have been 'overgrown' and no longer play a role in how societies and individuals make up their understanding of the past. But to do so would be ignoring the vast amount of popular representations of the past— among them, a videogame franchise with millions of copies sold— that portray history using such tropes.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, the *Civilization* franchise's development over the years has slowly but steadily steered its representation of history ever more towards a nation-centric understanding of history. While it would be reductive to say that there is no single other relevant element that plays a role in the historical narrative that players co-author with the game's system of rules, it is true that most of the other variables that have historically played a pivotal role in how the franchise's representation of history unfolds have— by means of the increasing importance of the choice of civilization in how the game is played— become subordinated to this nation-centric understanding of history. Whereas earlier instalments had privileged factors such as sociopolitical organization or geographical determinism as some of the crucial elements that shape historical developments, by the time *Civilization VI* the way in which both of these factors functioned was always conditional on which civilization the players where playing as. The ways in which the players' choice of civilization shapes the strategies available to them have greatly increased, and the differences between civilizations have increased in parallel. In terms of historical representation, this translates onto a game that not only sees nation states as the sole relevant actors but also portrays 'national essences' attributed to each of these nation-states

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[63] Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, remediation,* 1-5.

as some of the most important driving factors behind historical development. In doing so, it confirms and helps spread already existing biases around the world that represent nation-states as monolithic, timeless, and immutable.

Playing through History and Commenting it: Civilization players on YouTube and Reddit

Any analysis that only takes into account a game's rules will inevitably run into a couple significant blind spots. As several scholars have pointed out over the last two decades, any analysis purely focused on the systems of rules of a game will inevitably fall short because it discounts one of the two co-authors that craft the narrative created in any video game: the player.[64] There is, sadly, much less written about this side of the coin than there is about games and how they transmit their messages. This is to an extent expected. As it will probably become clear throughout this chapter, any study trying to make sense of player practices and/or of how these practices affect them is bound to encounter many more hurdles than a purely hermeneutic approach. At the same time, though, this scarcity only exacerbates the need for analyses that take this dimension into account. I may be right in arguing that *Civilization VI* does indeed convey an inter-nationalist representation of history. Notwithstanding, to assume that just because this is the case every single person that plays the game will mindlessly accept every single part of this message would be a rather reckless overreach. It is arguably equally important— or even more so— to understand people's engagement with games as it is making sense of the kind of messages these games convey put forward to their players. This chapter will attempt to address these questions. In order to do this it will focus on a wide variety of primary sources generated by *Civilization* players— from Reddit posts, to YouTube videos and gameplay guides— in order to ascertain how players play *Civilization VI* and how their beliefs affect and are affected by their engagement with the game. It will first address the question of whether players actually play in the ways outlined in the previous chapter, then showcase the ways in which these practices can shape and reinforce its players understanding of history. Finally, it will inquire into the opposite process, that in which a player's belief instead shapes their in-game actions.

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[64] Carr, "The Trouble with Civilization," 222–36; Elliott, "History in Video Games," 16-17; Antley, "Going Beyond the Textual in History."

It is true that some games give more freedom to their players than others. However, players always end up retaining considerable agency within the straightjacket that is the game's system of rules . Anyone with an internet connection can find almost endless instances of players subverting a game's systems of rules to engage with games in ways that were wholly unexpected by the game's designers. Some of the players of the famous first person shooter *Counter Strike* created a game in which instead of shooting, players had to race each other through obstacle courses that made use of some of an issue with the game's physics system that made the character models accelerate to really high speeds under specific circumstances.[65] The result was a way of playing that could not be further from the original structure of rules. There is even a long history of many popular games in the market were born out of such unexpected engagements with previous games.[66]

Aside from these 'out of the box' ways of interacting with a game there are also many instances in which for a wide variety of reasons players consciously 'play against' the system of rules. Players might take advantage of flaws how the game is programmed (bugs) in order to extract an advantage, or they might choose to forgo some of the advantages afforded by the game's rules in order to increase the challenge. Speedrunning (i.e. playing a game with the aim of beating it as fast as possible, often with the help of exploiting bugs) or No-hit runs (i.e. style of playing certain games in which players challenge themselves to not receive a single hit from any enemy until they beat the game, even when the game normally allows for much more leeway) are good examples of the out of the box engagements with a game's rules that generate important questions regarding the usefulness of any analysis of a game that focuses solely on its rules. Youtube content creator TheSpiffingBrit built a channel with more than three and a half million subscribers precisely by posting videos were he 'breaks' games by exploiting loopholes in the game's rules with a mostly comedic intent. For example, one of his videos playing *Civilization VI* showcase him exploiting a loophole in how a science bonus given by particular city state was designed to effectively gain infinite amounts of science in one turn. This made it possible for him to research almost all the technologies in the game's technology tree— from horseback riding to satellites and nuclear

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[65] 3kliksphilip, *The Story of Surf with Mariowned*, Youtube Video, 3 March, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qw3V7ohU3-U.

[66] Entire video game genres, such as the MOBA and the Battle Royale, were born completely out of unorthodox engagements with existing games that were eventually turned into a game of their own.

missiles— and win a scientific victory in 2160 BC..[67] Even though TheSpiffingBrit's approach to the game— which in most cases involves exploiting flaws in the game's programming— could hardly be further away from the paths to victory envisioned by the game's developer, his videos are immensely popular. The existence of all of these more 'unorthodox' forms of play— defined as counterplay by some scholars— is one of the reasons why purely hermeneutic analyses of games will always suffer from a perpetual blind spot. Even if one analyzes the meanings embedded onto a system of rules, how can one be sure that players are actually using the rules that way?

Moreover, even when players do in fact play according to the rules, there is no guarantee that they are actually interiorizing the message that the game's structure of rules is putting forward— they could just be trying to optimize a strategy within the rules without any regard for what these rules represent. For example, David Myers argued that— although the barbarian camps and tribal villages present in *Civilization* did indeed put forward a set of problematic notions related to the civilization vs. barbarism dichotomy— the players largely paid no mind to these narratives and saw them exclusively by what the structure of rules made them be in the game— which was a set of tiles where players could acquire certain bonuses.[68] In other words, rules can only bound players up to a point, and even when they do so the question remains of how players engage with the representations being put forward by the rules. A majority of scholars of culture that have attempted to measure and analyze people's engagement with cultural artifacts would most likely agree with the statement that this is a notoriously slippery topic to analyze. Because of this one should be skeptical of any work that claims to have perfect information on how great numbers of people engage with and think about any cultural form. Nonetheless, in this case there are several sources that can provide valuable insight into both how players play the game and how they think about its representation of the past. The reach of this sources will always be, by definition, partial. However, the insight they offer is arguably significant enough to make the findings that can be extracted from them relevant.

There are several sources from which one can ascertain that— although counterplay is by no means non-existent— a great degree of players see playing along national lines as a crucial part of the game. Almost all of the guides for both advanced and beginner players emphasize the importance of optimizing the intrinsic advantages of one's own civilization and have a section on which civilizations are ideal for a particular style of play. When searching for "Civilization VI guide"

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[67] The Spiffing Brit, "1 TURN SCIENCE VICTORY! Civ 6 Is A Perfectly Balanced Game With No Exploits - Infinite Science!!!", YouTube video, 27 November 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Sf2FZCkFVs; The TheSpiffing Brit, "NO CITY WIN ONLY CHALLENGE - CIV 6 Is A Perfectly Balanced Game WITH NO EXPLOITS Except Maori," YouTube video, 26 July 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CZEEvZqJC0.
[68] Myers, "Bombs, Barbarians and Backstories," 165-183.

on Google, all of the first five results lead to websites that have sizeable sections that highlight the importance of the civilization players choose.[69] A dive into the guides section of Steam— a video game distribution service in which almost 1 out of 2 PC game sales take place globally— also reveals a similar trend.[70] Not only that, there is also a wealth of content directed to help players find the ideal civilization for them and a great deal of guides that focus on the advantages, weaknesses, and optimal strategies of different civilizations. Difficulty is also considered, since some of the unique bonuses afforded to civilizations require more knowledge and mastery of the game to use optimally than others. Given this wealth of content, it is almost guaranteed that anyone searching online for tips on how to gain competence in *Civilization VI* will stumble upon recommendations on which civilizations to pick, why, and how to play with the chosen civilization.

However, what if—instead of googling for a guide— a player looking to learn the game searched for gameplays of the game on YouTube in order to learn how to play. This change in platform would make surprisingly little difference— seeing how most of the YouTube content produced for the game is often also neatly separated by civilizations. A quick search along the most prominent Civ content creators (counted by number of subscribers) shows how the civilization they play as in that particular video is almost always featured quite prominently.[71]Furthermore, a lot of these videos emphasize the importance of following strategies that fits the intrinsic advantages of the civilization that one is playing. This is done either through videos dedicated entirely to teaching players how to play the game with a particular civilization or through the ways in which content creators explain their choice of strategies to their viewers.[72] For example, in a video directed to explaining the basics of the

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[69] "Civilization 6 Leader List: Leader Agendas, Traits, Abilities and Unique Units," Eurogamer, accessed May 9, 2023, https://www.eurogamer.net/civilization-6-leader-list-agenda-trait-unit-4879; "Civ 6: Complete Guide,"Game Rant, accessed May 9, 2023, https://gamerant.com/civ-6-civilization-complete-guide-walkthrough-tips-tricks-beginners-leaders/; "Civilization VI: 10 Tips to Start Playing,"Civilization® VI – The Official Site, accessed May 10, 2023, https://civilization.com/news/entries/civilization-vi-10-tips-to-start-playing/; "How To Play Guide for Civ 6," Civilization VI Wiki, accessed May 10, 2023, https://civ6.fandom.com/wiki/How_To_Play_Guide_for_Civ_6; "Civ 6 Strategy Guide: Beginner Tips and Tutorials" PCGamesN, accessed May 9, 2023, 16, https://www.pcgamesn.com/civilization-vi/civilization-6-strategy-guide-starting-tips.

[70] "Sid Meier's Civilization 6: Guides," Steam, accessed May 9, 2023, https://steamcommunity.com/app/289070/guides/

[71]PotatoMcWhiskey, "Playlists," Youtube. Accessed 9 July, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/@PotatoMcWhiskey/playlists ; The Saxy Gamer, "Playlists," YouTube. Accessed 9 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/; TheCivLifeR, "Playlists," YouTube, Accessed 9 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/@TheCivLifeR/playlists.

[72] PotatoMcWhiskey, *Ramses Hit the JACKPOT with This Start Location - Civ 6 Ramses Egypt Leader Pass*, Youtube Video, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKdP8Cy5cPo; PotatoMcWhiskey, *Korea Is a Production POWERHOUSE - Civ 6 Sejong - Leader Pass*, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZA1DL1k7lvg; The Saxy Gamer, *Part 1 - Civilization VI: Gathering Storm as America*, Youtube Video, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de31rx-IjUY; TheCivLifeR. "How to Play Every Civ". Youtube Playlist, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC1lDgNHRT4977fhoMPKX1Dv8y1rOb3H4.

game, popular creator PotatoMcWhiskey explains that "the civilization's bonuses are gonna be like the primary factor in informing what your strategic top layer game plan is."[73] In another video, this time by TheSaxyGamer, the creator explains how his choice of expanding northward and not southward is strongly influenced by the United States' unique bonuses. Thanks to the Roosevelt Corollary— the unique bonus provided by one of its leaders, Teddy Roosevelt—the American civilization gains a combat bonus when fighting in its continent of origin. As TheSaxyGamer's capital was located close to juncture that separated two continents, he explains that expanding within the continent in which he would get this combat bonus is crucial at the beginning of the game.[74]

Additionally, because different civilizations are perceived to have different power levels within the game, many other videos 'rank' the different civilizations of the game according to criteria such as the top 5 science civilizations or best civilizations for beginners.[75] This content further reinforces the perceived distinctions between civilizations and spreads the notion that every civilization has a particular playstyle. Ultimately, it does not really matter what kind of content about the game players consume, the notion that each civilization ought to be played in specific ways is immensely prominent. Given that, watching gameplay videos and looking for guides are— apart from trial and error in the game itself— usually the ways in which people learn how to play a game, it is safe to assume that any player trying to overcome the system of challenge that is *Civilization* will eventually realize the necessity of enacting these national tropes in order to achieve their goal.

The tendency to play along nationalist lines can be further confirmed by surveying some of the online discussions about the game and realizing the amount of posts dedicated to discussing the benefits and drawbacks of picking various civilizations. One of the most prominent sites for these conversations is Reddit, a social media platform that has several dedicated subforums dedicated to the *Civilization* franchise. The biggest of these forums, r/civ, has 517280 members at the time of writing—which puts it in the top 1% of Reddit subforums in terms of size.[76] Within r/civ there are several type of posts that reveal that optimizing national bonuses is a common player practice. The most obvious one would be the so called 'tier lists'— tables where civilizations are ranked according

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[73] PotatoMcWhiskey, *Ep. 1 - Civ 6 Tutorial for Completely New Players - Scythia*, 2019, Youtube Video, 4:51-5:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78UTmyyniqA.

[74] The Saxy Gamer, *Gathering Storm as America*, 4:00-4:08

[75] The Saxy Gamer, *Top 3 Science Civs in Civilization VI!*, Youtube Video, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AxHJA_9luc; TheCivLifeR, *Top 5 Domination Leaders In Civilization 6*, Youtube Video, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7JjHuekb_E;

[76] Reddit, "R/civ."

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to their perceived absolute or relative power levels. These posts are quite ubiquitous, as well as the subject of lively discussion among players.[77]

Another more subtle indicator of how players engage with the civilizations in the game is the posts that use screenshots of a game as a way to gloat. This might be because they beat the game in a high difficulty setting, because they achieved a game-state that is particularly difficult to enact or for various other reasons. While not all of these kind of posts provide clues on how players engage with nations, a portion of them definitely do. This is because a considerable amount of these posts feature screenshots of a game in which a nation's intrinsic bonuses have been quite thoroughly optimized, meaning that players quite often equate bragging about their competence in the game with bragging about their capacity to optimize the intrinsic advantages that the civilization they control brings to the table.[78] In one such posts, which showcased a science victory with the Maya on the highest difficulty setting one user commented that they did not know how players managed to get their cities to be so populated, to which the author responded that one of the crucial reasons why they were able to achieve that was the Maya's intrinsic bonuses to farms, which provided more food and therefore allowed for more populous cities.[79] A great amount of posts implicitly or explicitly equate high levels of mastery of the game with an extensive knowledge of the civilization played and the capacity to use its intrinsic strengths in the most optimal way possible.

Taking this into account, only two possible scenarios come to mind in which a player might not enact the nationalist motifs that come with playing using one's civilization bonuses: The first one would be a player is consciously 'playing against the rules' as either an added challenge or a statement against the representation game's rules. The second— and probably more common— would be the case of a completely new video game player that is not yet familiar with the game's

[77] u/amoebasgonewild, "Definitive Tier List," Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 31 March 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/127zuo9/definitive_tier_list/; u/Dependent-Ad-425, "April 2021 Leader Tier List (Updated)," Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 30 April 2021, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/n1v48c/april_2021_leader_tier_list_updated/.

[78] u/1234okie1234, "Mongolian's Wet Dream,",Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 3 July 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/14pbjbk/mongolians_wet_dream/; u/arcee20, "Should Have Won by Now but Whatever Game. My Fastest Culture Victory so Far. Russia Is Just Too Good," Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 10 July 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/14vgqla/should_have_won_by_now_but_whatever_game_my/; u/PortalToHistory, "Just Passed the 250 000 Culture / Turn," Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 24 June 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/14i422p/just_passed_the_250_000_culture_turn/; u/TheEurasianSensation, "Update Post: Insane Tundra Canada Start," Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 1 July 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/14ntxzj/update_post_insane_tundra_canada_start/; u/TonyStarchTaterator, "Maya Tall 6 City Deity Science Victory. Details in Comments," Reddit Post, *R/Civ*, 23 March 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/11zihv3/maya_tall_6_city_deity_science_victory_details_in/.

[79] u/Kryptsm. "I'll Never Understand…," Reddit Comment, *R/Civ*, 23 March 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/11zihv3/maya_tall_6_city_deity_science_victory_details_in/jddf0do/; u/TonyStarchTaterator, "It's the Maya Mostly…," Reddit Comment, *R/Civ*, 23 March 2023, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/11zihv3/maya_tall_6_city_deity_science_victory_details_in/jddi1sc/.

rules and therefore does not follow them. In the rest of the cases, it appears that an overwhelming majority of players will make use of the tools afforded by the game's rules and enact the nationalist message that is presented to them— even if they most likely do so in varying degrees.

These findings go on to show that—although there is certainly a lot of truth in the criticisms of purely hermeneutic approaches to video games— this does not necessarily mean that a game's structure of rules does not matter. After all, rules define the paths towards conventional definitions of victory within the game. In other words, taking a game's rules into account is vital to achieve this victory state. Nobody really forces a Monopoly player to buy streets, or a Settlers of Catan player to expand into new squares— and players could just as well fiddle with Monopoly's rules to start a renter's strike. In the same vein, no *Civilization VI* player is being forced to enact the nationalist motifs that come from playing according to their civilization's strengths. Players do this because every game is a system of challenge at the same time it is a system of meaning. The game's system challenge weeds out a great deal of the theoretically possible options that are available (e.g. not buying streets in Monopoly) by rendering them useless at engaging with said challenge. The pressure to beat the system of challenge in turn steers players towards the more efficient strategies— which tend to be somewhat aligned with the designers' vision of how the game should be played.[80] As a result, even though players could theoretically completely ignore all of the elements that 'nationalize' *Civilization VI*'s representation of the past, most of the strategies that enable players to overcome the game's system of challenge require optimizing a civilization's innate capabilities and playing around them.

At the same time, achieving a high level of competence at the game requires an interiorization of a structure of rules that is making a series of claims about the world outside of the game— in the case of *Civilization*, about that world's history.[81] A player's interiorization of a game's structure of rules can then— to borrow Thomas Apperley's concept— 'resonate' with their local context, generating understandings of how particular processes function. If a game's structure of rules makes claims about "how things work"; then the concept of resonance would serve to describe a situation in which a player accepts the totality or a part of those claims and incorporates them into their own worldview.[82] Although it should not be mistaken with a blind acceptance of the messaging implicit in these rules, resonance is crucial to any inquiry into player engagement with games

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[80] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 40-41.
[81] Galloway, *Gaming*, 90-91.
[82] Apperley, *Gaming Rythms*, 22-23.

because it highlights a path through which player in-game practices can translate into values and beliefs.

For the purpose of Historical Game Studies analyses, Adam Chapman coined the term historical resonance, which describes the establishment of a link between a game's historical representation and the larger historical discourse, as the player understands it.[83] *Civilization VI*'s representation of history was not created in a vacuum, it relates to many historical tropes that— although frowned upon in certain academic circles— remain significantly influential in the public discourse about the past. Thinking of history predominantly in national terms, implicitly accepting teleological progression as an innate feature of history, allotting too much agency to states and leaders and little to ordinary people… Even lauded historians could be accused of at least one of these 'historiographical sins'; not to mention their prevalence in popular culture. However, historical video games like *Civilization VI* arguably stand out because of the unique ways in which they can help reinforce, disseminate, and hypothetically undermine these tropes. The reason why this is the case is the capacity of these rules to resonate with a player's particular understanding of the past. And because this process takes place through seemingly free experimentation within the game's structure of rules, it can have a powerful capacity to confirm pre-existing notions. This is especially true for the more meta-historical elements of the game's understanding of history.

It is difficult, though, to measure the degree to which players experience historical resonance when playing *Civilization VI*. Even if it possible to discern that players are indeed playing according to the nationalist tropes laid out by the game, the question remains: Are these tropes resonating with them? It becomes even trickier when one considers that the elements that players could be resonating with which constitute ways of thinking about history rather than historical facts. After all, players do not engage in lively historical theory debates online very often. Moreover, many of the notions put forward by the game— such as a teleological understanding of progress in history or a tendency to project nation states far back in time— are very present outside the game and arguably have a largely hegemonic status. Therefore, many of those players resonating with them will take them for granted rather than explicitly say them. How to measure historical resonance then? One possible tactic would be to tackle the issue similarly to how other scholars have looked into people's engagement with powerful ideologies that were largely taken for granted. John E. Fox's work on nationalism for example proposed the use of 'breaching' in order to find situations in which these taken for granted beliefs would come to light.[84] Breaching entails looking for situations in

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[83] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 36.
[84] Fox, "The Edges of the Nation," 31-33.

which taken for granted notions are not followed to then analyze the responses that these subversions elicit— for they are more likely to express out loud what is often just assumed. By looking at the 'edges' of the nation, the nation is more likely to explicitly reveal itself.

This same tactic could be applied to make potentially taken for granted nationalist discourses interiorized by civilization players come to the forefront. But where could one find these digital 'edges of the nation'? It could be argued that a good place to start would be to look for cases in which players experience historical dissonance instead of resonance. In other words, situations in which the historical narrative put forward by the game's structure of rules completely clashes with the player's understanding of the historical discourse— and in doing so generates rejection and a lack of immersion. A peak into situations in which a great number of players experience dissonance and express their motives would provide valuable insights into what makes them 'resonate'. Given that it is in the developers best interest to generate resonance in their players, it is not very common to see a game generating historical dissonance among a great number of its players. There is, however, one case that I discussed in the introduction of this thesis that arguably constitutes an instance of this happening: the backlash that was generated by the introduction of queen Seondeok of Korea and in the *Rise and Fall* expansion for *Civilization VI* in December 2017.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the incident concerning Seondeok saw a significant number of *Civilization* players attacking the choice of the Korean leader in rather virulent fashion. The videos for their release saw a massive amount of dislikes— to the point where the Firaxis social media team temporarily took down the Seondeok video— and the game was subjected to a review bombing campaign. Some of the most prominent comments to the Seondeok video read this choice of a "shitty leader" as an insult to Koreans, whereas others called for a boycott of the game because of this very insult.[85] When this polemic moved to Reddit, it generated a polemic that spanned over seven posts, 196 comments and roughly ten thousand up and down votes over roughly a month.[86]

How should this strong backlash by a part of the game's player base be understood? On one hand, it is true that there is an important component of sexism in why the choice of Seondeok was so violently attacked. One does not have to scroll down very far to find comments such as "no

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[85] jakesweet1000, December 5, 2017, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, "First Look: Korea"; nickzta, December 5, 2017, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, "First Look: Korea"

[86] Up and down votes are the way in which users who do not post or comment express their agreement or disagreement with a post or a comment. As the reader can see, this is often the main interaction that takes place in the site. It is unfortunately impossible to acquire an estimation of the people who read through the polemic but did not interact with the post, but it would likely at least be similar to that of the up and down votes, given that a big percentage of users in the site do not actively participate in it and just read through the posts.

female leader has been a good leader... they are good for having children and taking care of them".[87] Within the masculinized sphere of video games, this kind of backlash against any form of inclusion of women is sadly quite common.[88] Yet, I would argue that there is another significant component to these reactions. Because, while it is undeniable that sexism certainly plays a crucial role in fueling a backlash that was in many ways directed as much against the inclusion of women in the game as it was against the choice of Seondeok , plenty of other female leaders were released without generating a comparable response from the players. Queen Victoria leads England in the base game, and queen Wilhelmina of Orange and Ba Trieu were chosen to be released as the leaders of the Netherlands and Vietnam when these civilizations were released in expansions to the game. Granted, one can still sexist remarks also can be found criticizing these choices in the comments of the videos announcing the release of Wilhelmina and Ba Trieu. Nevertheless, the prominence of these kind of attacks is completely minuscule compared to the backlash that the choice Seondeok generated.

What could be separating these different historical figures that explain these different reactions? One significant difference is the role each of these historical figures play in their respective national imaginaries. While queens Victoria and Wilhelmina occupy a place of honor within the national pantheon and there is very little discussion about whether they should remain in that place; the same could not be said about Seondeok. Although the Korean queen is not close to being universally despised, they do not enjoy the same position as the leaders of England and The Netherlands. This probably makes her more vulnerable to these sort of attacks. Not only that, the memory of these characters and the historical moments they evoke are markedly different. Within English national imaginaries the Victorian era is almost unanimously remembered as the quintessential golden age, a time of prosperity and expansion. The image of the English nation evoked by Victoria is perfectly suited for *Civilization VI*— a game whose rules encourage this kind of portrayal in history. It is not a coincidence that historical figures that ruled over there stereotypical golden ages (Kublai Khan, Napoleon, Philip II) have made up much of leader roster of the franchise. In fact both of the most popular alternatives to Seondeok that her critics put forward— Sejong the Great and admiral Yi— fit this mold perfectly. It is simply easier for players playing a game about

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[87] macho coding, 5 December 2017, comment on "First Look: Korea."
[88] For more works on the topic, see Kristen Lucas and John L. Sherry, "Sex Differences in Video Game Play: A Communication-Based Explanation," *Communication Research* 31, no. 5 (1 October 2004): 499–523; Lotte Vermeulen and Jan Van Looy, '"I Play So I Am?" A Gender Study into Stereotype Perception and Genre Choice of Digital Game Players," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 60, no. 2 (2 April 2016): 286–304.

seeking total domination of the world to resonate with these kind of figures— and the images of the nation they embody— than it is with other characters.

One might be quick to point out that queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, who reigned during the Second World War and had to go into exile in England when Nazi Germany invaded, does not exactly fit this mold either. However, Wilhelmina's status within the Dutch national pantheon and the narratives of national resistance she evokes do not necessarily clash with the game's overall portrayal of history. While she does not fit the image of the typical leader chosen for the game, the way she is remembered is not likely to generate historical dissonance either. In contrast, Seondeok's memory has several elements that clash more considerably with what *Civilization* values. The queen of Silla does not really enjoy the near unanimous praise that queens Victoria and Wilhelmina do within nationalist narratives. Although traditional Korean historiography widely considers her reign the starting point of Korean unification, most of the credit for setting this process in motion has historically been attributed to the so-called 'two Kims'— Kim Ch'unch'u and Kim Yusin. These officials, one hailed for his diplomatic abilities and the other for his military prowess have been largely seen as the main forces behind the Korean unification, although it is important to note this characterization has questioned by recent scholarship. Seondeok was only recognized as a pious figure whose accomplishment were more related to the construction of religious temples and the patronage of the arts and sciences.[89]

This combination of Seondeok not having a prominent place in nationalist history and being remembered as a pious patron of the arts and sciences makes it so that she stands in rather stark contrast with what *Civilization*'s representation of history would consider a good leader. As mentioned in the analysis of the game, even though culture and science are indeed important in *Civilization VI*, they are framed as tools for domination and control; never as ends in themselves. In the game, the notion of sponsoring cultural or scientific endeavors that do not aid in the quest for hegemony is completely ridiculous. This tension between the memory of Seondeok and the game's portrayal of history makes it more likely that players experience historical dissonance. While the role of dissonance certainly does not entirely explain why the choice of Seondeok was so viscerally attacked by players, it does help make sense of why it was the choice of Seondeok specifically and not that of the many other female leaders in the game that elicited these reactions. The combination of having a prominent position within nationalist narratives and being remembered in a way that fits what the game's representation of history values is most likely what explains the great difference in

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[89] Kyun Moon Hwang, *A History Of Korea*, 10-18

reactions between the choice of Seondeok and that of the many other female leaders in the game.[90] In the words of one user:

"Honestly pretty sick of this, no one is angry the leaders the devs [developers] pick are female. People are angry because they go out of their way to pick lesser known female leaders SOLELY because they're female. Victoria for England? Fucking fantastic, probably one of the best choices possible. Tomyris for Scytha? Awesome! Played a big role in history. Gorgo? Really cool choice, 10x better than Alexander again. In fact, I've heard a lot of disdain that Peter was chosen for Russia and Philip was chosen for Spain over Catherine and Isabella. But... Seondeok? A fairly ineffective leader, when Sejong was a celebrated leader in Korea and a big deal in Korean history? Catherine de Medici? A fairly insignificant ITALIAN woman when there's Louis XIV, Napoleon, or hell, Charlemagne/Charles Martel? I've heard people from both sides on Wilhelmina, but I think the biggest complaint is her model is too fat, not that she's unfit as a leader. Ironically, I feel the devs are being unintentionally sexist by choosing leaders based mainly on their gender".[91]

While this comment certainly downplays the role of sexism in this dynamic— the line of argumentation it follows points to the reason why the inclusion of other similar leaders did not cause a similar stir. In the eyes of many of Seondeok's critics, it was already an affront that she was not a man. But the straw that broke the camel's back in this case, the ultimate reason why her choice as a leader elicited the amount of hostility it did, was that the way she is remembered frontally clashed with the game's portrayal of the past.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the two main points of contention in the online discussion— the ones that most starkly divide the defenders and detractors of the choice of Seondeok— are essentially how well she represents the Korean nation and how much of a 'good/great leader' she was in the terms set by *Civilization*. When it comes to the first point, it is clear from the beginning that the Korean nation is at the forefront of this discussion. Youtube comments criticizing her emphasized who much her choice was an affront to Koreans in particular. Another important grievance weighed against Seondeok was that her character model in the game did not 'look Korean', which a user tried to 'solve' through picture editing. This resulted in the most upvoted post when searching for Seondeok on reddit within the timeframe of this polemic: a

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[90] u/Jalocin. "Interesting Read. I …". Reddit Comment. *R/Civ*, 9 December 2017. www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7ilehy/the_real_reasons_that_queen_seondeok_is_okay_and/dqzxhvx/; u/castrovalva1, "I Just Want to State…", Reddit Comment. *R/Civ*, 12 December 2017, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7jb8od/civilization_vi_rise_and_fall_first_look/dr559iv/.

[91] u/brentonator. "Honestly Pretty Sick…", Reddit Comment, *r/Civ*, 26 December 2017. www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7m4oyd/salty_start/drrfv1h/.

photoshopped image of Seondeok titled "what if Seondeok of Korea looked a little more…
Korean?"[92]

On the left, a screenshot of the edit posted by user u/til. On the right the changes made to Seondeok's in-game character model by Firaxis in response to the backlash. Screenshots by author

Moreover, the appeals to the Korean nation were not exclusive of detractors of Seondeok. The most upvoted post by far that defends the choice of Seondeok, written by user u/Ethnicity-Ambiguous, is titled "Seondeok is not a Horrible Choice: A Korean's Perspective".[93] Both the user saying the choice of Seondeok is an insult to Koreans and the user providing a 'Korean's perspective' to disprove that she is a bad leader are situating the Korean nationalism at the forefront. A considerable number of posters— both Korean and not Korean— used Koreanness as source of authority and credibility.[94] For example, Korean posters on both sides strongly argued over whether Seondeok was famous in Korea. One user argued that "we don't study much about not-so-important leader like Seondeok", whereas another user— answering to a different post— posited that "I'm Korean and I've heard Seondeok plenty of times when I was young. Stop trying to frame the issue."[95] Additionally, questioning someone's belonging to the Korean nation was used as a line of attack

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[92] u/til, "What If Seondeok of Korea Looked a Little More.. Korean?" Reddit Post, r/*Civ*, 6 December 2017. www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7hvjpf/what_if_seondeok_of_korea_looked_a_little_more/.

[93] u/EthnicityAmbiguous, "Seondeok Is Not a Horrible Choice: A Korean's Perspective," Reddit Post, r/*Civ*, 7 December 2017. www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7i9jsx/seondeok_is_not_a_horrible_choice_a_koreans/.

[94] u/Annoyingpoisonuser, "Nice to Hear an Actu…", Reddit Comment, *R/Civ*, 7 December 2017, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7i4rwn/i_think_seondeok_is_a_bad_queen/dqw4kyt/.

[95] u/sekjun9878. "I'm Korean and I've …". Reddit Comment. *R/Civ*, 26 December 2017. www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7m4oyd/salty_start/drrm8z1/; u/ azureluna7. "Because in Korean Sc…". Reddit Comment. *R/Civ*, 9 December 2017. www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7i9jsx/seondeok_is_not_a_horrible_choice_a_koreans/dqzigtl/.

against their arguments. The aforementioned user u/Ethnicity-Ambiguous even felt compelled to add an addendum to their initial post saying:

"Lol so many people doubt that I am Korean. Not sure how to prove it, but neither does Civ VI Seondeok so I don't really care. I guess I should come clean and say I am ethnically half-Korean, born in Seoul, and Korean is my first language. There you trolls caught me. I am actually a dirty half-Korean in a Korean's skin trying to trick you all and push forward the global liberal agenda against men".[96]

Furthermore, Korean posters were not the only ones who attached great importance to Koreanness. When discussing why they were in favor of the choice of Wilhelmina of Orange but against that of Seondeok, one poster explained that, in their opinion, "the voice of the people which [the] leader is representing is the most important."[97] Because Korean gamers were against Seondeok and Dutch gamers were in favor of Wilhelmina, this user criticized Seondeok but accepted the choice of Wilhelmina. To this, another user replied that "lots of Koreans liked or didn't mind Seondeok though."[98] Even though each side claimed for itself the prerogative of representing the totality of the nation, political affiliation would be a much better predictor than nationality when it came to determining whether someone was a detractor of a defender of Seondeok or not.

While Reddit accounts are anonymous and therefore there is no way of reliably verifying any aspect of the identity of its users, roughly a fourth of the people involved in the polemic claimed— either through deictics or by explicitly stating it— to be Korean. And although these users all claimed to represent the nation in its totality in their opinions, Korean nationals were spread rather evenly across both sides of the polemic. Although there were more critics than there were defenders of Seondeok overall, Koreans were represented proportionally in both sides. Factors such as affinity and opposition to feminism, and left or right political alignments would be much better predictors of whether a user was a defender or a detractor of Seondeok, and yet the polemic was taking place in staunchly national terms. Koreanness, the meaning of it and the criteria of inclusion and exclusion were completely intertwined with this conversation about who should lead Korea in the game.

It is understandable, given that the question of whether someone embodies the nation inevitably asks one to define what the nation is. The repeated allusions to Korean nationality by both

[96] u/EthnicityAmbiguous, "Seondeok Is Not a Horrible Choice."
[97] u/ Orzislaw. "That's the Most Impo…", Reddit Comment. *R/Civ*, 9 December 2017, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7ioeea/dutch_queen_wilhelmina_has_just_been_teased_on_tv/dr0eycx/.
[98] u/bythehomeworld, "Lots of Koreans Like…", Reddit Comment, *R/Civ*, 9 December 2017, www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7ioeea/dutch_queen_wilhelmina_has_just_been_teased_on_tv/dr0gkub/.

sides reveal most of those involved in the discussion assume that those belonging to the Korean nation have both privileged insights into the matter and increased stakes in the conversation— after all, it is 'their' leader that the discussion is about. The belief that the leader in the game should function as an embodiment of the nation is completely accepted by both sides of the argument, even if they disagree about whether this particular leader is a good embodiment of the Korean nation. The game therefore plays a crucial role in articulating the opinions of both sides, acting as a shared baseline that sets the parameters around which the polemic takes place. Given that the portrayal of the leader these two sides share is exactly that which is proposed by the game— an essentialized nation embodied by its leader— they are basically arguing within *Civilization*'s representation of history. And it is not the only situation in which this happens.

Many of the more elaborate defenses of the choice of Seondeok argued that much of her bad reputation comes from her depiction by later Confucian scholars of the Joseon dynasty that had strong prejudices against women in government.[99] It was not that she was a 'bad queen', but rather that the history of her reign had been badly misrepresented in traditional historiography. Following this line of thought, Seondeok's achievements well merit her inclusion into the leader roster of *Civilization* representing Korea when represented faithfully. However, here too the game's representation of history functions as the common framework in which these arguments take place. There is no considerable polemic on what defines a good or a bad ruler, the parameters for this are taken from the game— which in turn echoes tropes that have been present in media and historiography for a significant amount of time.[100] The main point of contention between the two sides of this polemic is the question of whether Seondeok was a good queen, and the game's representation of history provides a common historiographical framework that both sides of the argument use to establish the 'quality' of a ruler. The defenders of Seondeok are not responding to the claims that she was not a great enough ruler to represent Korea by subverting notions of 'greatness' in history, but rather by providing what they see as evidence that she was great according to the same parameters of the people attacking her. Despite the wide divergence of opinions within the polemic, the arguments of a great majority of the people participating in it shared the baseline that is *Civilization VI*'s understanding of history.[101]

However, it is important to note that this is not the only possible way of engaging with the game's representation of history. John Majewski's recent survey of r/civ posts— the same Reddit

[99] u/Ethnicity-Ambiguous, "Seondeok Is Not a Horrible Choice."
[100] Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, remediation,* 1-5
[101] u/XavierAzabu, "The Real Reasons That Queen Seondeok Is Okay and What That Means for Himiko," Reddit Post, *r/Civ*, 9 December 2017.
www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/7ilehy/the_real_reasons_that_queen_seondeok_is_okay_and/.

sub-forum surveyed for the case of Seondeok— found several cases of players engaging in what he called "immersive critique". This concept defines those situations in which players are able to reconcile enjoying the game and interiorizing its rules with being highly critical of many elements of its representation of the past.[102] As someone writing a thesis on the game's representation of the past who also has thoroughly enjoyed playing games of the franchise for a staggering— albeit rather enjoyable— number of hours, I cannot but confirm this is certainly possible. Majewski is certainly right in pointing out that a lot of good—especially in the form of sparking interest in history and teaching particular ways of thinking about historiography— can come out of historical games like *Civilization*. This very thesis might have been an engineering project were it not for the influence of the franchise created by Sid Meier. However, Majewski's also admits that it is only "a decided minority" of players that engage with the game in this meta-critical way. [103]

Additionally, a majority of the posts where he finds that feature these immersive critiques come from people who, in one way or the other, either explicitly state the fact that they've had some degree of historical training at a university level or show a considerable understanding of historiography. While such training is by no means a necessary requirement to be able to engage in these sort of critiques, there is an argument to be made that anyone familiar with development of historiography in the last 100 years and used to analyze historiographical arguments is arguably much more likely to engage in the immersive critique Majewski describes than anyone that is not. When Robert Houghton surveyed first year history students at the university of Winchester on the impact they believed games had on their interest and knowledge of history he found that students believed rated the influence of video games on historical knowledge the highest on the ancient and medieval ages, the time periods that are most neglected in the English education system. Despite their popularity, video games remain a relatively disreputable cultural medium when compared to other media in the cultural landscape. It would therefore make sense that, the more one learns about history from more prestigious sources the less influence a video game's representations of history has on one's perception of the past. [104]

Ultimately, although Majewski's portrayal of how this group of players engage with *Civilization* is quite convincing and contains a lot of promise about the use of video games in historical education, the way that a majority of players engage with the game is quite different—

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[102] Majewski, "What Do Players Learn from Videogames?" 76-79.
[103] Majewski, "What Do Players Learn from Videogames?" 72
[104] Robert Houghton, "Where did you learn that? The self-perceived educational impact of historical computer games on undergraduates,"*gamevironments* no. 5 (2016): 24-27.

and arguably more similar to what I have described in this chapter so far. That being said, Majewski's findings are indicative of the fact that some caution is in order before jumping to wide-ranging assumptions about the general practices and beliefs of players of *Civilization VI* on the base of this evidence. First of all, while the r/civ community is certainly quite sizeable, it pales when compared to the totality of player base of a game that has sold millions of copies. It is also, as the discrepancies between this analysis and Majewski's show, quite varied. This is not to say any of this analysis— or Majewski's for that matter— is invalidated because of this. I have tried to argue throughout this work that there is a particular way of engaging with *Civilization VI* that a significant number of players share and that has considerable effects in how they view the past. However, this should not be mistaken with the claim that this is only possible way of engaging with the game.

What can be inferred from this survey then? For once, that there is a significant number of players who play according to the rules of the game and whose understanding of the past strongly resonates with that put forward by said rules. This would explain the strong reactions that this form of dissonance— in the form of an element that they believed did not belong in the game— generated in considerable quantity. The fact that Firaxis took such swift action by changing Seondeok's appearance speaks to the fact that they considered this polemic a sizeable problem that needed to be addressed. People ask for changes in games quite regularly through channels like Reddit, and yet very rarely does one find these kind of quick changes as a response by the developers. Not only that, Firaxis also released Sejong the Great— one of the most requested alternatives to Seondeok— as a playable leader in another expansion a few months later. This goes on to show that, although the Seondeok polemic can by no means be taken as perfect generalization of player attitudes towards the game; it does reflect values and beliefs of a considerable enough section of the player base to make the findings of this work relevant.

Millions of people have played *Civilization VI* over the several years it has been released, and evidently there is a myriad of possible reactions to its discourse about the past. Despite this, it would seem that a considerable majority of players plays according to the game's rules— that is, they play enacting a particular historical narrative that privileges a nation centric view of historical development. While a majority of players do not take everything in the game at face value— especially the more whimsical aspects of its historical representation— polemics such as that of Seondeok suggest that the underlying meta-historical assumptions that underpin the game's historical representation are at least partially accepted by a significant number of its players, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that the game certainly helps cementing assumptions about the past. Much like a majority of historical games, *Civilization* is more adept at disseminating

ways of thinking about history than it is at teaching a set of historical facts.[105] This difference between transmitting content and epistemology is crucial to take into account to understand the power of videogames as an ideological medium. This is especially the case when considering that works such as that of David Williamson Shaffer have argued that—when it comes to learning— these ways of thinking about history are immensely more important than knowledge of historical facts in making up people's understanding of the past.[106] Basically, when it comes to learning about history, epistemological assumptions such as that of teleological progress in history will shape of one's understanding of the past in many more ways than the knowledge of a set of historical facts will. The power of *Civilization*—although this is applicable to other strategy video games whose structure of rules functions in a similar fashion— comes from the fact that it is precisely its epistemological assumptions about history what seem to 'stick' with players the most. For better or worse, the capacity of video games to convey and reinforce meta-historical assumptions about the world in an effective and convincing way should not be underestimated.

Configurative Resonance and Playing Nationally

But what if players did not need any convincing at all in the first place? Until now, all of these scenarios explore situations in which players unconsciously reenact these nationalist narratives in the game, but what if reenacting these narratives was instead one of the reasons compelling them to play the game in the first place? When discussing speedrunning and no-hit runs, I pointed out that players can interact with a games with the aim of achieving goals that are different from those set by the game's designers. One of these ways is playing with the aim of achieving game-states that resonate with them in a particular way— what has been called configurative resonance.[107] Configurative resonance differs from other unorthodox engagements with games in one fundamental point: While practices such as no-hit runs focus mainly on the 'ludic' nature of the game, players engaging in configurative resonance want to create a particular representation through their play.

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[105] Elliott, "Simulations and Simulacra," 34-35.
[106] David Williamson Shaffer, *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 31-32
[107] Apperley, *Gaming Rythms*, 135-136

A trivial example of this would be the practice of players of 'dressing up' their avatar in a game with clothes or armor— that tend to give certain abilities or bonuses— in a way that is far from optimal because of purely aesthetic reasons. There is an enormous market for what are called skins (i.e. cosmetics aspects for one's avatar that have absolutely no impact in the game)— to the point where many of the biggest games in the market— such of League of Legends or Fortnite— are completely free to play and make a profit solely through selling these cosmetic additions to one's character. The fact that this is business model is extremely profitable testifies to the importance players attribute to representation when they play. Moreover, this concern for representation in players can also have significant effects in how they play a game. The ways in which this can happen are enormously varied— from modelling your own city in a city building game to making all of the members of your party in a role playing game look like your friends group— but the common denominator that they all share is that the reason why players pursue them is much more related to their desire to enact a certain narrative through play than it is due to the imperatives of the game's structure of rules. In other words, telling a good story trumps winning when players engage with games this way.

In the case of a historical game, these practices of configurative resonance mostly revolve around generating a game-state that resonates with the player's understanding of the larger historical discourse. Some of the most prominent examples of historical configurative resonance include attempts to reenact particular historical development in the most accurate way possible in the game to trying to enact counter-factual narratives that appeal to players.[108] However, out of all of these possibilities there is one particular way of engaging with games this way that is worth highlighting in this analysis and for which *Civilization VI* is especially well-suited: explicitly trying to re-enact nationalist myths. In the book that coined the term of configurative resonance, Thomas Apperley already noted that using national symbols as an identification tool in online games was a very common practice.[109] In the case of *Civilization VI*, every time a new civilization is released the comments on the release video will almost always feature one type of comment: that in which players express their happiness for being to play with 'their' nation.[110]

[108] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 210-15, 231-257; Mol, "Toying With History," 240-243.

[109] Apperley, *Gaming Rythms*, 136-137

[110] Lactosefr33, May 19, 2020, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI - First Look: Gran Colombia | Civilization VI - New Frontier Pass*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qKSQ1nvbDs&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=53&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization; @martinjmcc1981, January 24, 2017, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI: Rise and Fall – First Look: Scotland*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Yq-CCO2yJY.

For example, an Australian player expressed that his heart was warmed by the developers' decision to include their country in the game in spite of "how little important history we have."[111] A Chilean player wrote they had been playing *Civilization* since the first instalment in the nineties and they had always wanted to play with the Mapuche, a wish that had finally come true with the game's sixth instalment.[112] Sometimes these comments also include opinions about the particular image of the nation, as in the case of the player who— while celebrating the inclusion of Scotland— rejoiced in the fact that it was a scientific civilization and not "an inaccurate military option."[113] Similarly, a Hungarian player added a request to the developers to his cheerful comment about the inclusion of their country and asked if they could include an in-game bonus for allying Poland— presumably to reflect a particular affinity the user perceived between the two nations.[114] A particularly curious case is that of the release of Gran Colombia, whose inclusion into the game was celebrated by players of all the three republics that resulted out of the partition of the short-lived 19th century state.[115]

The reason why the players writing these comments are so happy is not that they added a nation that is particularly powerful or fun to play as— their joy comes from the fact that is 'their' nation that is being added to the game. In this light, it is highly unlikely that players whose choice of civilization is motivated by a desire to play with one's 'own' nation even require the strong nudging of the game's system of rules in order to play according to the nationalist tropes the game puts out. They are attracted to the game precisely by the prospect of re-enacting this nationalist narratives, not in spite of it.

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[111] isaachamann7869, February 2, 2017,comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *CIVILIZATION VI – First Look: Australia*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qKSQ1nvbDs&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=53&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization.

[112] felipenadeau1346, May 19, 2020, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI - First Look: Gran Colombia | Civilization VI - New Frontier Pass*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qKSQ1nvbDs&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=53&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization.

[113] adoredtv, January 24, 2017, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI: Rise and Fall – First Look: Scotland*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Yq-CCO2yJY.

[114] RBATOR1986, November 27, 2018, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI: Gathering Storm - First Look: Hungary*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlLlHGD5w6U&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=42&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization.

[115] nelsonandrestamayo9281, May 19, 2020, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI - First Look: Gran Colombia | Civilization VI - New Frontier Pass*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qKSQ1nvbDs&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=53&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization; carlosfernandez8762, May 19, 2020, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI - First Look: Gran Colombia | Civilization VI - New Frontier Pass*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qKSQ1nvbDs&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=53&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization; arielgaray302, May 19, 2020, comment on Sid Meier's Civilization, *Civilization VI - First Look: Gran Colombia | Civilization VI - New Frontier Pass*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qKSQ1nvbDs&list=PL-lTq9LJCHpQQnhVN-zAHfWXV0UglZ1mr&index=53&ab_channel=SidMeier%27sCivilization

There is also an inter-nationalist version of this engagement. In a world where globally marketed cultural products increasingly rely on nationalist imagery in order to sell, many consumers develop specific affinities for nationalist narratives from other countries. American teenagers fervently follow Korean boybands, Japanese adults bond over their love of Spanish flamenco, and many Spanish kids almost only watch Japanese *anime*. The national labels on these products are not superficial, they are in fact a core part of how they are marketed and consumed— to the point in which they are often considered a part of a nation's soft power in national strategies.[116] A similar kind of engagement with a superficial and stereotypical version of a particular nation-state can also happen in *Civilization VI* . One could even say that, due to its capacity to present players with a discrete package that claims to contain the essence and history of a nation state, the game is perfectly positioned to satisfy players who are particularly interested in playing as a certain nation. *Civilization.* If any of the people mentioned before also played *Civilization VI*, choosing to play as a nation they are particularly fascinated with would just be another way of extending these kind of inter-national engagements to another medium. Much like the players who play with the intention to re-enact 'their' national myths, the players who engage with *Civilization* this way will also come with a set of particular expectations and desires that will shape the way they play.

Essentially, there is a great number of players come into *Civilization VI* with a set of pre-existing notions of what the nations they can play as will look like and how they will play. Many even already know both which civilization they want to play as and what they want to do during their playthrough before they even boot up the computer. These desires and expectations will inevitably shape their practices in the game, to the point where they might even forgo optimal strategies in order to enact a particular narrative that appeals to them. In this light, going back to the reddit posts that boasted of particular achievements reveals another possible interpretation of them. When discussing nationalist practices in play, I argued that the reason why these screenshots most often featured a playstyle perfectly aligned with the civilization controlled is that, in order to achieve most game-states that are deemed worthy of boasting of, players needed to play according to the game's nationalist understanding of history. However, when one considers configurative resonance it is equally as possible that players there really did not need any shepherding towards enacting these motifs. Instead, the reason why they post these screenshots in the first place is that achieving that particular game-state was . When examining a post when, for example, a player boasts about the immense wealth they have amassed through trade with Portugal, there are two possibilities that

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[116] Iwabuchi, "Against Banal Inter-Nationalism," 439-442

often overlap.[117] Was this particular player trying achieve a particularly good run of the game and did they therefore play according to Portugal's unique strengths— and in doing so enacted a narrative that has a set of connotations about Portugal and its history— or they did start the game with the intention of playing Portugal and enacting these very narratives?

Granted, this is not a black and white picture. Most instances of play are neither purely ludic (i.e. only focused on winning and interiorizing the rules) nor purely focused on representation. These classifications are much more heuristic than they descriptive. The reality of how people play is more likely better characterized through a spectrum were there rules and representation are each at one extreme. Much like the consumers of any other form of media, video game players are neither blank slates who go into games with no expectations or pre-existing beliefs nor people who will be completely unaffected by the game's messages. Depending on their subjectivities, the context of the play session (e.g. playing alone, playing in front of an audience that is watching your stream…) , and a myriad of other factors, players will tilt to one or other side of this spectrum. It is nonetheless worth noting that— in a world where national identities are very much hegemonic across a great portion of the world and in which much of intercultural communication happens through an inter-nationalist framework— *Civilization VI* provides (inter-)nationally minded players a medium in which these identities can be performed in a virtual space. In doing so, it inevitably shapes the way this performance will take place.

Concluding Remarks

Although this chapter is necessarily an incomplete account of how people make sense of *Civilization VI*, I would argue that this analysis has shown yielded several crucial findings. The first is that the notion that the system of challenge drives an overwhelming majority players towards interiorizing and playing along the rules. This is confirmed by the fact that a considerable number of the players play according to the nationalist motifs laid out by *Civilization's* rules. The second is that there is a significant number of players that have either interiorized this structure of rules through play or confirmed their already existing beliefs through it—most probably a mixture of both options. While the Seondeok polemic is a particularly explicit example of the way in which the game shapes and plays a crucial role in the articulation of the opinions of players about the past and the nation, much of this process happens in a much more implicit way. It is in the developers best interest to avoid

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[117] u/smjkh, "5K GPT I Can't Spend It Fast Enough," Reddit Post. *R/Civ*, 9 April 2023.
www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/12go87z/5k_gpt_i_cant_spend_it_fast_enough/.

incidents such as this polemic, and therefore making players resonate with the game's representation of history is in a video game designer's best interest. But this in turn means putting forward hegemonic understandings of history and national identity— which serves to confirm the biases of a great number of the game's players.

Additionally, I have also shown how— by means of configurative resonance— the game can also be a place in which players who share these opinions can articulate their (inter-)nationalism through play. These players do not really need any convincing or confirming, and what the game provides for them is a space in which they can perform their national identity or consume the representation of another nation— all of this through play. What these findings show is that, for a significant subset of the *Civilization VI* player base, which largely coincides with the most active and dedicated players, of the game plays a crucial role in mediating how they make up and articulate their beliefs about the past and the role of nations in it. Through both resonance and configurative resonance *Civilization* shapes how its players understand history and national identity. This is a testimony of the persuasive power of video games.

Conclusion

In a column for *Game Developer*, lead designer for *Civilization IV* Soren Johnson was asked to sum up what he believed to be some of the most important tenets when it came to game development. In it, he touched upon the fact that many of the most successful games in the sector are based on real world themes, and briefly pointed to what he believes to be the core element that makes a game based on the real world successful. In Johnson's words:

"Creating a game about a real topic can lead to a natural but dangerous tendency to cram the product full of bits of trivia and obscure knowledge to show off the amount of research the designer has done. This tendency spoils the very reason why real-world themes are so valuable— that players come to the game with all the knowledge they already need. Everybody knows that gunpowder is good for a strong military, that police stations reduce crime, and that carjacking is very illegal. As Sid puts it, "the player shouldn't have to read the same books the designer has read in order to be able to play." Games still have great potential to educate, just not in the ways that many educators expect. While designers should still be careful not to include anything factually incorrect, the value of an interactive experience is the interplay of simple concepts, not the inclusion of numerous facts and figures. Many remember that the world's earliest civilizations sprang up along river valleys -- the Nile, the Tigris/Euphrates, the Indus -- but nothing gets that concept across as effectively as a few simple rules in Civilization governing which tiles produce the most food during the early stages of agriculture.".[118]

The problem with Johnson's approach to designing games is that, in order for players to already have all the knowledge they need to play the game before they start playing, it is vital for the game to espouse common sense views that will not clash with a majority of the players' worldviews. The structure of rules then works to create a simulation of reality in which these pre-existing notions are confirmed, reinforcing these already hegemonic beliefs. To paraphrase Soren Johnson, everybody knows that nation states are homogenous, age-old entities that constitute the only legitimate form of social organization— but nothing gets that concept across as effectively as a few simple rules in Civilization governing what the unique bonuses of each civilization are.

There is a myriad of ways in which *Civilization VI*'s structure of rules reinforces established but problematic understandings of history and the role that nation states play in it. Its understanding of space inevitably fosters a vision of the world in which zero-sum conflict is inevitable, its

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[118] Soren Johnson, "Analysis: Sid Meier's Key Design Lessons," *Game Developer*, 5 May 2009. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/analysis-sid-meier-s-key-design-lessons.

representation of historical time echoes nationalist history writing, and its portrayal of culture casts homogenous and immutable nation-states as the sole characters that will take part in that zero sum conflict over the ages. This generates what arguably constitutes a highly problematic historical narrative. Civilizations— which represent nations in everything but name— in *Civilization VI* fulfil a very specific role within the game's structure of rules. They are the vessel on which the rules deposit the most immutable and intrinsic baseline on which the rest of the more variable and random elements that shape the game are built on. Nations in *Civilization* are one of the only constants in a game that generates the entire world at random every time a new game starts. To attach all of these qualities to nationhood is certainly more an attempt at crafting an interesting and deep structure of rules that results in a good game than it is an attempt at conscious nationalist indoctrination. However, it is too much of a coincidence that almost every video game in the historical strategy genre has used nationhood in its design as the touchstone that contains the most immutable and intrinsic elements of the game's rules. It is difficult to assess how much of the prevalence of these nationalist narratives is due to biases on the side of the developer and how much it is an attempt to cater to player sensibilities. In any case, there is certainly a need for more varied understandings of culture and history that could arguably make games as good as those based on nationalist essentialism.[119] Scholarly efforts to bridge the gap in between academia and the public should strongly consider branching out into a medium that has immense potential to teach ways of thinking about history.

But how do players of *Civilization VI* take in these messages and these understandings of history and the nation? I believe to have shown throughout this thesis that for a significant number of players of this game, *Civilization VI* serves as a crucial mediating device to express national identities online. For starters, the practice of playing nationally is very widely spread— something understandable given how many of the channels through which new players get to know how to play the game incentivize this practice. Granted, some authors might dismiss this as players merely following what the game shows to be the optimal set of strategies, and this element is certainly not absent. However, if players only played nationally in order to win then they would've hardly cared who the new leader of Korea was in the game. If all they saw in the nation they played as was a set of variables to be optimized there would not be YouTube comments all over the release video for each nation where people rejoice over the possibility of playing with their nation. The Seondeok polemic is admittedly an extreme example in the degree of passion and animosity that it generated,

[119] William Uricchio, Uricchio, "Simulation, History, and Computer Games," in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 336

but it does certainly dispel the possibility of studying play in any way that completely forgoes understanding a game's representation of the world and how it might resonate with players.

These examples also showcased the way in which the game's representation of history and nationalism plays a crucial role in mediating discussions around both history and national identity that take place among many of its players. *Civilization*'s portrayal of the past has in this case to act as the shared framework around which these discussions take place, and in doing so it acquires a considerable power to shape these conversations. The fact that both the defenders and the critics of Seondeok took this historical representation for granted and argued completely within its framework shows how video games can mediate and shape conflicts and debates over national identity in a similar way to that of more traditional media. Additionally, *Civilization* also provides a space to perform national identities via nationalist historical re-enactment— a function in which the game, in choosing what to highlight and what to ignore in its historical representation, also gets to steer these expressions. In short, the way in which the game's system of rules understands history through its— which portrays history as a timeless struggle for global hegemony in which the sole legitimate and relevant actors are homogenous and essentialized nations— provides both an epistemological framework around which players can articulate their own beliefs and opinions, as well as a digital playground in which these nationalist narratives can be re-enacted. Whether it does so by means of its rules confirming the biases of its players or by providing a nationalist playground, *Civilization* arguably functions as a powerful device that steer its players' understanding of national identity and history towards an inter-nationalist version of the past.

This thesis has further confirmed the scholarship that attributed great importance to popular culture in the creation of people's perceptions of the past and national identities. It has shown that *Civilization* has a lasting effect in how people perceive both history and national identity. It would seem that, for the newest generations, video games have become an ubiquitous part of the 'cultural curriculum' of history. *Civilization* admittedly lacks the society-wide level of reach and intergenerational impact that, for example, a movie such as *Forrest Gump* has had on the societal perceptions of history in the United States.[120] Yet, within the smaller scale of player communities such as r/civ there is no residue of doubt that this franchise has come to play an important role in how this group of people understands the past. Moreover, due to the close relation between cultural memory and nationalism, *Civilization* has also become a crucial element in shaping how its players perceive and perform national identities. It manages to do this by providing its players with a

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[120] Wineburg et al., "Common Belief and the Cultural Curriculum."

framework to understand 'their' national identity but also— perhaps more importantly— by placing this national identity within a wider inter-national constellation and by providing an understanding of the past that turns all history into national history. Michael Skey already theorized that this connection between the national and the inter-national plays a crucial role in legitimizing nationalism on a global level, and this analysis of *Civilization* provides a case-study that further emphasizes the importance of this connection. [121] Finally, by showing the great extent to which nationalism plays a crucial role in many of the cultural dynamics of a medium to which scholars of nationalism have paid relatively little attention, I hope that this work will highlight the importance of further research on how nationalism shapes video games and the way that people play them.

For future research, it would be really interesting to try to gain access to some of the metadata— the internal statistical data gathered by many games on an anonymous basis that is generally used by developers to improve their product— of historical games. Metadata of this kind includes information such as which percentage of games played feature a certain strategy, how many times a particular faction is played, or the amount of players that play with a particular setting. These metrics are mostly used to fine tune the game's balance (e.g. if something is picked almost every game it might be necessary to release an update that makes it somehow weaker in order to increase the number of optimal strategies) or to make sense of player preferences to develop new games (e.g. if players really like playing in a particular way, developers might increase the possibilities of playing that way in a sequel). There is, however, considerable potential in using this information for research purposes. Sadly most companies in the sector consider this kind of information a trade secret, and therefore obtaining it poses a considerable challenge. Would it be possible to establish some form of collaboration between the scholarly community and some of the developers of historical games? One option might be to try to ask for access to older metadata that is no longer that sensitive or useful for a game's developers; thus circumventing some of the more pressing concerns that inform the restricted access to these metrics. This kind of large scale statistical information would help scholars interested in player practices to better pinpoint how different players engage with games.

I will be the first to admit that this path is certainly not devoid of potential hurdles but, given that until now it the possibility has not really been explored, attempting to follow this route is well worth the try. It is especially important when one considers that the role of new media such as video games are going to be playing in societal debates about the past in the future. Although I have only

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[121] Skey, "The Mediation of Nationhood" 8-9

focused on this happening in the case of one game, I would be extremely surprised if *Civilization* was the only game that fulfills this kind of role in shaping people's understanding of history and performance of national identities. This is a world in which the discussions that shape how societies perceive themselves and their past are taking place across an increasingly wider media landscape. Understanding the unique characteristics and limitations that media such as video games afford those who interact with them therefore becomes crucial for any scholars trying to make sense of contemporary debates about the past. In this light, it becomes imperative that public historians and scholars of memory and/or nationalism focus on making sense representations of the past in new media.

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