

# Becoming-state

## The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization

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“Representations of what lay beyond insular or metropolitan boundaries came, almost from the start, to confirm European power. There is an impressive circularity here: we are dominant because we have the power (industrial, technological, military, moral), and they don't, because of which they are not dominant; they are inferior, we are superior (...) and so on and so on” (Said 1994: 127).

“Thanks to Civilization I learned history and English” (Igor from Moscow, posted on the ‘HotGames’ mailing list (original spelling))

What would have happened to the world history, had the prospective artist A. Hitler been admitted to the Vienna Art Academy? This and other equally thrilling questions of necessities and contingencies of history have so far been tackled, and rather unconvincingly at that, only by political fiction and by some even less impressive social scientists (Ferguson 1998). But the issues involved are wider than the answers available: what is the major force behind history and does the world have to look the way it does? What is at stake here is our identities: why are we the way we are, and why can we not change it? One of the least impressive although lately highly popular answers to these questions was given by Sid Meier, who argued that the major force in history was the clash of civilizations, as it were defining the existent socio-political order. Some people saw the events of September 11, as a proof of Meier's (I mean Huntington's) thesis (Kaplan 2001) but not everyone noticed that it had been obvious to millions long before the infamous recent hijack. The point was ‘proved’ in 1991 when Microprose released a strategy game called Civilization.

Although praise or criticism of the clash of

civilizations thesis has usually been mailed to Huntington, it is Meier who was first, has more to say, and, as is argued in this paper, seems more convincing. Not only computer freaks, for whom Meier is the greatest software programmer of all times, but also respectful MIT researchers have been hailing Meier for the educational qualities of his game (Squire 2002). Civilization with its three sequels from 1991, 1996 and 2001 means much more than millions of copies sold all over the world: it means also dozens of fan websites, hundreds of volunteers from ‘all over the world’ (i.e. Europe, the US and Japan) working on open source clones of the game, a project going on for seven years now.<sup>1</sup> There is even a computer game called ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ (2002), also created by volunteers and conceived as a dead-ringer for Meier's work. The latest version of Civilization has been suggested a ‘critic's pick’ in *Time Magazine* (2001), hailed there as ‘the pinnacle of achievement’, and glorified in many other major news sources. To cut it short: Civilization is all-out enthusiasm.

Thus, with the technological generation gap vanishing, computer games can no longer be perceived as a play tool for teenage boys (Jen-

kins 1999) because their impact is much more widespread. Not only are some computer games, such as flight simulators, as the co-author of Civilization Bruce Staley reveals, targeted solely at adults (Herz 1997: 211) but programmers who work on Civilization clones *pro publico bono* elevate this game to the position of a public good, 'cause Civilization should be free', as a slogan of Freeciv (2002) reads. Free education, health service and access to Civilization for everyone: that is where the play becomes serious. Although Meier himself is orthodoxly apolitical, for many people his game does convey a major political message. For example when asked whether the emphasis on pollution in Civilization was indeed a green statement, Meier stated: "We very consciously avoid putting our political philosophy into the game. It takes you out of the fantasy and makes you aware that someone else designed this game" (Chick 2002). Well put: no blunt propaganda but instead Althusserian unconscious manifestations of cultural claims, of which Meier may well not be aware.

### **The grand narrative of the 'greatest game of all time'**

Computer games are largely indebted to quantitative science. It is in the rational choice theory research that the foundation for strategy games was developed back in the 1950s and 1960s. Such concepts as the Schelling's (1971) model of residential segregation or Axelrod's famous 'prisoner's dilemma' (De Landa 1993) allow us to reduce human behavior to a few simple variables, create virtual agents, observe their simulated behavior in time, as well as rerun the model with a possibility of altering the variables or the raw data at no cost (Featherstone and Burrows 1995: 14; Gilbert and Doran 1994). Such models, regardless of non-materiality of the subjects and the environment, have the weight of a scientific experiment: contingencies that are explored con-

tribute to establishing hard facts about social reality, such as in the case of Schelling the reasons of racial residential segregation in the US. Military geostrategists of the Cold War used similar models in order to predict what would have happened if the nuclear war should have been launched. The outcome of their study was always mutual annihilation, which convinced US generals not to play with fire (Herz 1997: 216). While Schelling's model was usually played on a board, the mentioned Rand Strategy Assessment was already conceived as software.

Commercial strategy games, just as flight simulators, were very often simply user-friendly versions of such military programs (Herz 1997: 216-17). Civilization was based on three computer games: Empire, SimCity, and Railroad Tycoon as well as a board game from 1981 called Civilization. Empire descends from the cold war military software: play itself is limited to choosing the best military tactic to dominate the randomly generated planet. SimCity, on the other hand, follows the scientific tradition: it is a real-time simulation of a city, where a player creates an environment in which virtual residents live, and depending on the conditions provided move in or out. Often, such commercial strategy games would return to the professional world, as was the case with Hidden Agenda employed in the training of diplomats and CIA agents (Herz 1997: 222) or SimCity extensively used at the 1994 Mayors Conference in Portland (Herz 1997: 221).

Civilization is the first bold attempt to simulate the whole of human history in computer software. Ambitious as it sounds, the game nevertheless does not go beyond reproducing models of social change well known, and extensively criticized, in twentieth-century social science. To take a notable example, in *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons* (1984) Charles Tilly dissects the vestige of nineteenth-century natural history in today's social science. The tradition often assumes that a society is a coherent, self-contained unit (Tilly 1984: 24-25) which moves

through standard and abstract stages (1984: 41-42), each more advanced and complex than the previous one (1984: 11). Such a model constitutes the backbone of Civilization as well.

In Civilization history is embodied in a 'technology tree' that leads the player through simulated time: all major human achievements are structured in a cause-effect chart that enables the player, starting the game in 4,000 BC with one settler and few 'advances' such as, say, irrigation, bronze-working and pottery to finish the game in 2020 AD with a hyper-modern society capable of colonizing outer space. How? The starting advances allow us to 'let our scientists work' on progress, for example ceremonial burial opens the way to mysticism. It also leads to monarchy but only if we have at the disposal both ceremonial burial and code of laws. Thanks to the ceremonial burial we can also build temples in our cities. Thanks to other advances, such as the wheel, we can additionally build stronger military units, in this case chariots.

This evolutionary model cannot be influenced by the player: the 'tech tree' always remains the same. The player will always move from the Ancient through Medieval and Industrial to the Modern Era, and the outlook of cities and clothing of citizens and advisors, as well as the representation of the player him/herself, after every mile step will become more fashionable, read: modern. The only choice available resides in the order in which such advances are uncovered: the science advisor always asks: 'what shall we work on?', and depending on our strategy we can set priorities on the agenda. A dove would possibly go for ceremonial burial before the wheel, while a hawkish player would perhaps do otherwise. The Parsonian 'branching tree' (Tilly 1984: 47), as well as naturally, the Toynbee's model of civilizations are perhaps figurations which are the closest to Meier's Civilization. Nevertheless, not only should social life not be perceived that way (for exact reasons, cf. Tilly 1984), but the natural sciences have abandoned such models a long time ago too

(Ferguson 1998, De Landa 1993). The only use of such models has to do with their 'universalizing' property (Tilly 1984: 97), and that quality is very well utilized by Meier.

A major theme in both twentieth century social science and Civilization is that modernization leads to differentiation, differentiation creates greater complexity, and complexity assures even greater strength, wealth and suppleness (Tilly 1984: 43-44). This usually involves an emphasis on the "natural history of economic development" (Tilly 1984: 82), division and specialization of labor, as well as the problem of social cohesion (Tilly 1984: 50-53). These concerns constitute the backbone of Civilization: we start with a 'primitive' tribe consisting of a few units, and gradually build up a sophisticated conglomeration of cities (with increasing population that after a certain threshold can be split into classes), infrastructure (roads, mines, factories, libraries, etc.), units (soldiers, diplomats, workers, etc.), resources (wine, oil, gold, etc.), and at certain moment our civilization is so complex that many players find the enterprise hard and even boring to administer (Chick 2002). Nearly every element of the game is quantified (not only money, production of units and infrastructure but also science and culture) and gradually 'produced': technological advancements are produced by scientists and culture is generated by the city infrastructure. The higher and the more efficient the production, the better the civilization, and the higher the chances of winning the game.

The speed of differentiation or 'growth' depends on several factors, of which the political system is the most important. In Civilization III there are six government models to choose from: despotism (everyone starts with it), monarchy, republic, anarchy, communism and democracy. Every political system has a 'work efficiency' inevitably associated with 'personal and economic freedom' (Infogrames 2001: 129) of the citizens, and it is lowest with anarchy (50 percent), average with despotism, monarchy, communism, and republic (100 per-

cent), and highest with democracy (150 percent). Thus, the economic reductionism mentioned above, which also derives from Railroad Tycoon (a game designed by Meier, and the third that Civilization was modeled upon) makes democracy ultimately the best political system. Although there are five possible ways of winning Civilization III the choice does not go beyond the ‘fetishism of the consumer’ (Appadurai 1996). Teenage girls can choose between five members of a boys band (of deliberately very different looks) to fall for. The problem is, however, that they all sing the very same song. The five options of Military, Cultural, Outer Space, Diplomatic, and Geographical Hegemony involve high levels of productivity (of military units, culture points, technology, and cities) that can be only achieved by entering the Modern Era. Even if we go for the military victory, which is not easily attainable under democracy, we have to be able to produce modern military units and thus enter the Modern Era. There is only one way leading there: through climbing the ‘tech tree’, that is through a dull rerunning of the History coded in it.

This history is not contingent in any way, but it is the history of the West. The Civilopedia (such nomenclature reinforces the hidden pedagogical aspirations of the game) explains for example that philosophy - which is a major discovery that leads to the two most advanced economic systems, democracy (in Civilization I) and republic (in Civilization III) - was invented in Greece. More generally, the technology tree is structured around the Ancient, Medieval, Industrial and Modern Eras, each of them representing the European and Northern American history. By way of illustration, in Civilization I alphabet advancement is represented by an icon with Roman letters, and the description discusses the origins of the Western alphabet. Medicine in all versions is ascribed to the Greek philosophy and Hippocrates. Perhaps, the bluntest statement rounds off the description of gunpowder in Civilization I: “Musketeers and Cannon (...) ended recur-

ring invasions of barbarians from Asia”. Some of such ethnocentric depictions, appearing in a rather erratic manner, and betraying a lack of serious research behind the concepts of the game, are removed from the later versions, yet without changing the very fact that the United States is made the ultimate inheritor of all the human advancement and elevated to the position of the most perfect and most ‘civilized’ state of all.

The only drawback of the civilization growth and democracy (as we see no consumerism or similar phenomena) consists in the growing disorder, which once again seems a major theme in the models of social change criticized by Tilly (1984: 50-58). Our citizen icons literally turn into rebel icons, and if the number of ‘content’ citizens is lower than the number of ‘unhappy’ citizens, the whole city goes on strike. Similar phenomenon occurs when we are engaged in war for too long. We can solve the problem either by increasing the percentage of economic production devoted to improving living standards (Infogrames 2001: 131) or by stopping the war. This suggests that democracy is the system under which people are happiest (as opposed to e.g. communism, under which “many people decide to emigrate” (Infogrames 2001: 130)) and that democracy is the most peaceful system of all; offensive war is impossible (senate overrules the decision to go to war) in Civilization I, and inefficient (‘war weariness’ of the population leads to disorder) in Civilization III.

### **The garden of converging paths**

Yet, the basic promise given by Meier is quite different from what has been described above. What is it? An invitation to the Civilization III website makes it clear: “Rewrite History with the Greatest Game of All Time. Witness an epic adventure unfold before you as you wield the ultimate power and reinvent the history of Civilization” (Civ3.com 2002). Does it mean that we can go on our own counterfactual trip and

witness History at the same time? Derrida (1996: 92-93) argues that there are two types of discovery: establishing what 'there is', and (after Descartes) exploring contingencies. Curiously, which at the level of this advertisement seems no paradox, Meier promises both.

First, we can make discoveries by creating, and explore the contingencies of the human history. We can play on a map that does not resemble Earth, make Zulus and Russians neighbors, separate the French on an island, build the Pyramids in China and the Great Wall in Germany, discover theory of gravity in Japan and the like. This is what generally is called 'interactivity': the user influences the narrative (Darley 2000). And what Civilization promises is the ultimate interactivity: "Build the ultimate Empire - the way *you* imagine it", invites the Discovery [in the pre-Cartesian sense] Channel add of the game (Civ3.com 2002). Yet, 'ultimate interactivity' is a contradiction in terms - games are still about the interaction between the human and software, with one limiting the other.

The software offers a disclosure of what 'there is', the 'epic' that is to be unfolded. The mentioned *Time Magazine* (2001) review puts an equation sign between Civilization and History ("History has never been so addictive"), and many others emphasize the utility value of Civilization as an auxiliary tool in teaching history that has already happened (Squire 2002). Some of them seem to acknowledge that Civilization is not keen on detail. As we see this is a history constructed on the basis of nineteenth century folk wisdom. Virtually no one considers this to be a problem.

The interactivity dilemma, that is the question how much and which parts of the game can be influenced by players, and, conversely, which ones cannot, resembles greatly the heated nineteenth century debate on the relation between 'free will' and 'necessity' in history. The answer given by Meier is crude determinism, and very much in the Hegelian vein at that: "the world history is governed by an ultimate design (...) whose rationality is (...) a

divine and absolute reason' (Ferguson 1998: 29), even though Meier gives somewhat more space to free will. In that respect Meier would probably agree with Plekhanov: "influential individuals can change the *individual features of events and some of their particular consequences*, but they cannot change their general trend (...) *they are themselves the product of this trend*" (Ferguson 1998: 41, original emphasis). Indeed, as an add informs, we can "match wits with greatest leaders of the world in an all-out quest to build the ultimate empire" (Civ3.com 2002), and we do become one of such nearly divine leaders with a capacity for altering the course of history (hence the popular classification of Civilization in the 'you are the god' genre). The *telos*, however, is well known. If in the case of Hegel it was the Prussian state (Ferguson 1998: 30), the fetish-object of Meier's fantasies is the 'ultimate empire', the state that resembles most the end product of all human advancement, namely the United States of America.

Imagining what could have happened if one of the great leaders, say Hitler, was replaced by a different-minded computer player is crucial, for "if we want to say anything about causation in the past (...) we really have to use counterfactuals, if only to test our causal hypotheses" (Ferguson 1998: 81). The counterfactual elements in Civilization are there to test if (and prove that) the history as we know it is the inevitable one, which seems a rather typical feature of the counterfactual genre (Ferguson 1998: 11, 18). Following the logic of a scientific experiment, we repeat something in as many different conditions as possible, let's say drop a stone in as many places as possible. If the stone drops in all of the cases, we prove that gravity is universal, unless we can falsify this conclusion.

The advantage of computer software over traditional experiment is that we can drop such a stone in all places imaginable, not only those that exist but especially those that only could exist, as the guru of computer modeling puts it, in an 'epistemological reservoir' (De Landa

1993). In that sense Civilization resembles *The garden of forking paths* imagined by Borges. In his short story Borges introduces the prose of an imaginary author Ts'ui Pên that simultaneously encompasses all the possible outcomes of a given chain of events (Ferguson 1998). Civilization can generate an unlimited number of contingent maps on which a potentially unlimited number of players can make all the decisions desired with regard to an unlimited number of contingent civilizations (we can give our civilization any name, and name the cities as we wish). Yet, the trick is that if we control such environment, that is write its rules, we can make sure that the stone always falls.<sup>2</sup> Thus gravity seems to be a universal law, and there is no way to falsify this because... we predestined it to be universal. And even though De Landa (1993) argues that some computer models would be able to avoid this circularity, this is surely not the case with today's strategy games, and neither with computer models used in social sciences (Featherstone and Burrows 1995: 14). SimCity proves that regardless of the conditions simcitizens would always favor public transport (Herz 1997: 223). Civilization proves that the history of the West is the only logical development of the humankind that would have happened anywhere and any time, regardless of the initial conditions and players' strategies. The garden designed by Meier merges all the possible paths into the master narrative of the Western success.

The maneuver of moving existing phenomena into neutral, contingent grounds is well known in politics. The reason why during the Cold War both the West and especially the East spend so much money and effort on the Olympic Games is that only there could they prove that they are essentially better (Goldberg 2000, Hill 1999). Real life can be unfair. On a ring, when the two sportsmen are almost naked, and where the fair-play is fanatically guarded by international referees, it is only your skills that matter. In Civilization the race is also fair: the human and the AI have all the

same starting conditions (one settler in 4,000 BC) and the same opportunities because the rules are the same for everyone.<sup>3</sup> The point is, however, that there is only one path you can run on. That means that every Civilization, also the Iroquois, has an equal opportunity to become the United States of America but only those who are skilled and clever enough do succeed. This is where the economic reductionism of Civilization surfaces: the best player is the one who is the best manager, who can attain his or her goals in the most efficient way, increase the productivity (military, cultural, scientific, etc.) and still guard the social order. That regularity suggests that present-day superiority of the West lies in personal abilities of its leaders and citizens who produce more under democracy than under, say, despotism, and that the backwardness of the Rest lies in their individual and collective inferiority. This is the story that we already know very well.

The most obvious equivalent of Civilization is *Robinson Crusoe*. Robinson personifies the West that gradually comes to itself by building up a civilized life (culture) on a wild island and reinventing all the technical tools that were in use in Defoe's England. By the end of the book Robinson the castaway manages to become Robinson the Englishman, all thanks to hard work, discipline and reason. He is also able to transcend the limitations of nature and leave the island (Goody 1998: 42-43). Contingency of the location and of the hero turns this story into the modernist master narrative. It is an exploration of the roots of the humankind (West) but in a sense opposite to Conrad's *Robinson Crusoe*, as well as Civilization, is a trip out of the heart of darkness towards the light of civilization. This is what the Civilization III manual tells us about it:

“When you start a game, your first units are surrounded by the darkness of the unknown. Though you could choose to let this Settler and others wander around, the first military unit they ran across would capture them. As

soon as you find a decent site, you should have your Settler build a permanent settlement - a town. You must build at least one town, because only towns (which grow into cities and metropolises) can produce units, food, income from commerce, and all the other things that allow your civilization to grow and develop” (Infogrames 2001: 47).

In the beginning of the game we can see only our units and a huge black screen - the map is revealed only when we move our unit into the darkness. Like Robinson who just woke up on the shore, we are extremely vulnerable to any danger, and we can be captured by the savages. And thus we have to build a home/town. Then the process of domestication of the hostile, wild environment starts. We meet other humans/AI although in the beginning we do not know our rivals. Then we start growing and developing, from a rather savage being (look at the animation of the most basic units, such as warrior) into a modern man. It is no accident that in the fan’s jargon playing Civilization is often referred to as ‘gettin’ civilized’.

### **Towards the clash of civilizations**

The irony lies in the fact that the three different versions of Civilization present rather diverging views on what is meant by ‘civilized’. They are simply mere reflections of the milieu in which Sid Meier and other designers lived at the time of writing the game. While playing Civilization for the first time at the age of 12, I was impressed by its scope as well the historical research. Unfortunately, this is how Meier describes the development of the Civilization’s ‘tech tree’:

“I just kind of tossed it together with the idea that someday we’d go back and fix this thing. That would be the real tech tree, but for now I just kind of thought off the top of my head to come up with fifty or sixty important developments and linked them together. But we even-

tually got so used to that and enjoyed it. We made a few changes, but it was essentially the tech tree we ended up with” (Chick 2002).

Thus it is no wonder that released in 1991 Civilization I is highly inflected with the cold war mythology. The only way to the end of history or salvation leads either through military annihilation of all the enemies, or through winning the star wars (i.e. building a space shuttle and colonizing a planet called Alpha Centauri first). The game, especially at the lower levels of difficulty, is constructed in such a way that around half way through only one AI civilization would be counting as a serious rival to the human player, and others, if surviving, would be supporting either of the superpowers. Moreover, the Russians are here led by Stalin, while the Americans by Abe Lincoln. Each of the civilizations has its own ‘strategy’ or ‘characteristic’, and in Civilization I the Americans are dubbed ‘friendly’ and ‘civilized’, whereas the Russians are ‘aggressive’ and ‘militaristic’. In order to put that into perspective, for example the French are ‘aggressive, expansionistic and civilized’, the Egyptians and the Chinese are just ‘civilized’, whereas the Zulus are solely ‘aggressive’. These are the innate characteristics of civilizations that cannot be influenced by the user, and the AI opponents act accordingly. Similarly, what is later called ‘foreign advisor’ in the cold war version of Civilization is referred to as ‘intelligence advisor’. Diplomats can fulfill the roles of spies, such as sabotage or technology theft, and only in later version are the two separated.

I am playing Civilization I on the King level, and in 1812 there are only four civilizations left. The Russians are the least advanced ones, and basically engage in war with everyone and every time. Their medieval units attack my cities for no reason. Stalin every now and then blackmails me, and when I do not give him what he wants, money or technology, wages a war against me. They are equally desperate and annoying like the numerous barbarian

units, whose destiny is to emerge from nowhere and attack blindly, and at a certain moment I can no more distinguish the two. On the contrary, the Americans do not expand but are happy on their own rather small island. They have only five but exceptionally large and fairly advanced cities. Devoted to science and building Wonders of the World (they have already Pyramids, Great Wall, United Nations and Cure for Cancer, compared to none of those erected by Russians), they are certainly heading for the space shuttle, and not for the military victory. And not only are they more peaceful than the Russians, but also way ahead in achieving their goal. Have I heard this before?

Just as Abe Lincoln manages to stay in power in Civilization II and Civilization III, comrade Stalin is replaced by Lenin in the second and then by Catharine the Great in the third episode.<sup>4</sup> Their innate characteristics apparently change by 2001 as well since the Americans become ‘expansionist’ and ‘industrious’, and the Russians turn ‘scientific’ and ‘expansionist’, whereas between 1991 and 1996 only the Americans change their ‘friendliness’ for ‘rationality’. More changes come along with the Alpha Centauri, in a version of the game from 1999 set on a planet where the space shuttle rivalry in Civilization ultimately led to, generating new transcendence projects, diplomatic and geographical ways to win and get out of the simulated environment. Civilization III embraces those developments, adding one more, or as *Time Magazine* (2001) emphasizes, the ‘key to this society’, namely culture.

Before the release of Civilization III fans had been mailing Meier their suggestions on what should be ‘improved’, and culture belonged to popular requests. A fan called Cass wrote: “In our planet’s civilizations’ history, one aspect which is somewhat repetitive but not yet reflected successfully in any Civ (or Civ-like) game is a people’s loyalty to their culture”. The game designers posted on the Civilization website the following answer: “Thought you’d never ask! Yes we are addressing these

ideas fairly vigorously. Culture and nationality will play dramatic roles in your Civilization’s history” (Civ3.com 2002).

Indeed. Civilization III borrowed from the Alpha Centauri a concept of explicit borderlines between civilizations, but here their range depends on the ‘culture’ of the cities that these borders surround. Such a ‘culture’ is a numeric value generated every turn by the buildings that are in the city: temples, libraries, universities, and so forth, as well as the ‘wonders of the world’. 10, 100, 1000, 10,000, and 100,000 are the turning points, when the borders around the given city, and thus of civilization, expand. This renders much more significant the Wonders, which in the previous versions strongly affected only the final score given after the game, but, given their extremely high cost, influenced the actual game play rather marginally. The general trend of this edition is anti-militaristic: powerful concepts such as ‘war weariness’ are introduced, all to make peaceful hegemony more profitable than warfare. ‘Cultural victory’ is possible when a player has generated 40,000 points of the ‘culture score’, calculated on the basis of the ‘cultural’ value of city improvements and Wonders, with the value of a single building increasing over time.

Moreover, the ‘cultures’ of different civilizations are matched against each other, and if you have a more powerful culture, others can be ‘in awe of your culture’ and thus more friendly and likely to give in during negotiations, etc. What is more, “When a rival city is near your borders and your culture vastly outranks theirs, a strong desire to enjoy the benefits of your society can drive the citizens to defect and join your empire” (Infogrames 2002: 53). They want to enjoy living the way we do, and this is a source of even more pleasure to us (Zizek 1990).

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the examples above. Suffice it to say that the concept of culture is a recent construction and that it is ultimately connected to power (Wolf 2001). More importantly, Civilization is



an interactive mirror, a dynamic *psyché* that tells us that we are the most beautiful creature in the world. It is a tool that confirms the reality of concepts that the player wants to see confirmed. It is not only Meier and a few collaborators who write the game. Meier emphasizes, also for marketing purposes, but there is a lot of truth in it, that the user's contribution to the game's design is significant. In most cases the affair boils down to finding 'bugs', inconsistencies in the simulated environment that are then incorporated into the software in the form of 'patches'. Ideological contributions such as Cass' suggestion are welcome as well. It is here also that Meier's genius lies, since the designers are able to sense which 'improvements' are expected.

Naturally, we can always argue that the reason why the cultural imperialism is so blunt in Civilization I and subtler in Civilization III is because only now does technology allow Meier to design programs with a larger amount of details. The improvements, nevertheless, usually are restricted to the outlook of the game, and AI's sophistication. As Meier says:

"The idea of a game about civilization is kind of scary, because it could easily get out of control and be totally unplayable, unmanageable, and gigantic. So we wanted to reassure people right at the beginning that these are concepts that were clear. (...) The icons reinforce that this isn't a complicated game" (Chick 2002).

The cultural imperialism of 2001 is subtler than the one of 1991. And the reason why, as *Time Magazine* (2001: 5) writes, "unlike movies, computer games tend to get better with each incarnation" is that every consecutive version of Civilization is to a large extent a reflection of its socio-ideological milieu.

In short, Meier responded to the 'culture talk' that surfaced after the end of the cold war and incorporated it in his model of history reduced to the clash of civilizations. In Civilization I the clash was mainly military, economic

and technological, whereas subsequently it became also cultural. By embracing nineteenth century models of social change and by brutal projection of the Western history onto contingent grounds of randomly generated maps, random civilization names, random starting positions, random distribution of resources and the like, he essentializes the story of the Western success, suggesting that their causes lie in personal abilities, rationality, high administrative skills and other qualities of the Westerners, reducing culture to an imperialist check list (one either has it or not), and suggesting that starting conditions (both ecological and cultural) do not matter in the absorbing of a new advancement since there is no difference between 'developed' and imported advances. Liberal democracy is the best political system, developed by the most cunning ones, and can be swallowed *en bloc* by all those who wish to live peacefully surrounded by thriving economic, cultural and scientific life, just as the Americans do today. This is nothing but the 'master narrative of globalization' (Kalb 2000) that stirred minds in the 1990s. Civilization is therefore the 'greatest game of all time' (*Times Magazine* 2001) not only because it is a good game, as Meier would wish, but precisely because its own master narrative embodies the master narrative of globalization.

### **Converting power: software/hardware/wetware**

The question that comes to the foreground is: why do people like playing the game so much? Part of the answer lies in the congruence of Civilization's master narrative with the master narrative of globalization. By comparison, Age of Empires, the only serious competitor of Civilization, tries to do that as well but its narrative is too fragmented. Arguably, the major reason of success resides in the carnivalesque 'lease of power' that the player is experiencing. As Tilly notices, alongside differentiation in some sense the process of modernization

brought about intense concentration of capital in the hands of capitalists and concentration of the means of coercion in the hands of the state (Tilly 1984: 48-50). Civilization is an offspring of that process. In a sense, the state is the only actor in the game. It has the ultimate hegemony over the means of violence and over the capital. In another, the powerful modern state (i.e. the United States) becomes an object of attraction and envy, and the game promises power (empowerment) that comes from that state (the exclusive agent). Civilization offers an opportunity, literally and in the absolutist sense, to become the state, and to 'wield the ultimate power' over a contingent world for a few hours. That empowering promise of the game is derived from the notion of interactivity. The state that we become at the same time comes to itself by means of a not always precisely formulated yet salient Hegelian dialectic waltz of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, very much *a la* Fred Astaire, i.e. up a stairway: e.g. mysticism and the code of laws lead to a more advanced monarchy. By playing Civilization we enable the American state to come to itself, and what is more: we ourselves become that state. In that sense, Civilization is a tool of creating subjects who internalize the logic and mythology of the greatest narrative of all embodied in the technology tree.

The two aspects of power, i.e. *potestas* (e.g. the repressive power of the state) and *potentia* (empowerment) are converted to each other. The first source of *potestas* that we turn into our own *potentia*, as already mentioned, is the software: the power of the West coded in the technology tree, the narrative as well as the virtual environment that we slowly but consequently conquer and master (Jenkins 1999). Moreover, Friedman (1999) argues that playing strategy games such as Civilization involves co-operating with the machine, learning how it 'thinks' and think along with it, "becoming an extension of the computer's process" and ultimately learning "what it feels to be a cyborg", that is a hybrid of a body and a

machine (Friedman 1999: 122; Haraway 1989). In the popular culture discourse the main characteristic of a cyborg is his (it is usually a male) super-human power. The Terminator is perhaps the most typical example. Technology 'improves' his body with instruments of warfare and subordination that pure biology cannot provide (Springer 1996). Machines are the fourth 'classical Other', along with non-whites, animals and women (Braidotti 2002). At the same time computers are power-machines, compared on the basis of their calculating power and memory (Springer 1996: 100). Playing the game is to a very high extent a process of domesticating the powerful and often scary Other, creating a bond that would make it less threatening, and thus making us more powerful, in the same way we tame a wild horse by riding it. Here the source of *potestas* that we can turn into *potentia* is the hardware we play on.

Finally, the players experience the empowerment because they often feel that playing computer games, just as cyberspace, liberates them from the constraints of their own physical bodies, referred to in the cyberpunk discourse as 'meat' or 'wetware' (Stone 1992: 107). Yet, cyberspace (and so do computer games) "both disembodies (...) but also re-embodies in the polychrome, hypersurfaced cyborg character of the console cowboy" (Stone 1992: 109). New media offer an opportunity to reconfigure the "exterior of the body as cultural representation" (McCarron 1995: 261-262), create a hybrid of an organism and a machine that in the consciously constructed utopia of Haraway (1989) would transcend the predominant power relations. The fantasy identities from Internet chat rooms are perhaps best examples of the idea. Yet, the "reconstructed body does not guarantee a reconstructed cultural identity, but [in most cases] reinforces the traditional race and gender models" (Balsamo 1996: 128). As in Civilization, the constructed technobody reinforces the predominant power relations and the supremacy of the American state. In the case of Civilization

the 'console cowboy' is the state that comes to itself and that we gradually become. How does it happen?

This new cyborg technobody has little to do with the traditional physical body, but resembles rather the Deleuzian 'body without organs', or as Kroker puts it, "fantastic simulacra of body rhetorics" (Woods 1999: 219), a process rather than a product (Balsamo 1996: 131), "a sensor, an integrated site of information networks (...) a messenger carrying thousands of communication systems: cardio-vascular, respiratory, visual, acoustic, tactile, olfactory, hormonal, psychic, emotional, erotic (...) a living recording system" (Braidotti 2002: 230).

One of the ultimate consequences of translating nineteenth century natural sciences as well as behaviorist psychology into social sciences and history, and thus into computer strategy games, is the individualization of observed phenomena: "the only way around this problem", Ferguson writes, "is to take up diplomatic history, where states can, in the time-honoured tradition, be anthropomorphized" (1998: 63). The concept of stages and growth as well as the idea that such civilizations are coherent and self-contained entities based around a set of values and philosophical principles (Huntington 1993) all belong to the anthropomorphic natural history and the modernist idea of the rational self.<sup>5</sup> Meier blindly follows this tradition, also because the historical determinism in Civilization can only be modified by the 'great leaders' who embody their states in the absolutist sense, as well as for the simple reason that only one player can actually lead the state, and without that element the game play would become rather nonsensical.

The state is not only conceptualized as a body (e.g. in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, or Brinton's perception of revolutions as a fever), but also often described as a machine (e.g. Kafka's *Trial*, or Weber on bureaucratization). In that sense the state is a peculiar hyper-powerful cyborg too. Interestingly, the most powerful and destructive states, such as the Nazi Ger-

many, were perceived as a 'machinery'. The Nuremberg Rally parades were perhaps the most powerful manifestation of the state's bio-mechanical power.

In short, the extraordinary carnivalesque empowerment that is offered by Civilization is a trade-off. We pay for the possibility of having an illusion of ultimate agency (once again 'fetishism of the consumer') by engaging in a play with the state, and more specifically by internalizing, cannibalizing as well as identifying with the modern Western state. The game is constructed in such a way that we can only become all-powerful by becoming the US.

This is where the bio-politics (Foucault 1977) of computer strategy games manifests itself. The great bulk of the actual play of Civilization amounts to constructing the representation of the mega-powerful cyborg state-body and disciplining the 'meat'. Once our settler metamorphoses into the city/home (i.e. the unit disappears after establishing the city, and from the initial number one on, turns into the number indicating the population size), it multiplies like primitive cells. In Civilization I units actually look like cells, and the play in which we 'grow' and 'develop' as Meier notoriously calls it (Chick 2002) boils down to a monstrous orgy of non-sexual reproduction. We impregnate, to paraphrase Vivian Sobchak, "not the woman, but the universe" (Springer 1996: 118-119). We live off the generated map, exploiting its 'natural' resources, and the body-state we construct resembles more a neural network or a fungus than a body with organs: a network of cities, roads, railways, irrigations, mines, and fortresses. The way we arrange our cities on the map is the main domain of our creative control, and we can project our self onto the map, or reconfigure our body in whatever way we want. The body-state seems to be genderless (we can be either female or male but this bears no influence upon the play) and raceless, since regardless of which civilization we play, the cities still look identical, only different players have different city and boundary colors, and those are fully accidental. We can call our

body-state and cities in any way we want.

At the same time, our real body is left behind on the chair we are seated on. It is a very well known phenomenon amongst the Civilization fans that the game sessions usually take long hours during which the 'wetware' is ostensibly neglected and marginalized. The 'meat' undergoes a training during which it has to stay in one place without moving for hours, while the restructured powerful body of a cyborg is being constructed. The game sessions end when the 'flesh' cannot support the restless mind any more, and the player goes to sleep either with a feeling of victory, in case the virtual cyborg body he or she cared to construct is powerful enough, or humiliated if the player has been defeated both by the AI opponents, i.e. both software and hardware, as well as one's own 'wetware'.

The machine either cannibalizes us, that is takes over our cities and territory, or beats us up. If we lose the game, in Civilization I we see archaeologists digging out remains of us/our civilization. In Civilization III the losers are bruised and wounded, just as if a moment ago they have lost a boxing duel, surrounded by talking heads of victorious leaders who humiliate us even further by making juvenile remarks: 'what's that smell? Did someone step into something?' or 'what's the matter? Are we too rough?', or to quote my favorite and lucid 'Only human...'. Indeed, if we remain 'only human', that is a creature less powerful than a cyborg, the result is a humiliating victory of the flesh over the technobody.

## Final remarks

Criticism in the similar vein has been voiced from many sides by those who pinpoint Civilization's historical inaccuracies, yet usually concluding that although Civilization is not very keen on detail, it does show a 'larger picture' of social change and interrelations between large processes (Friedman 1999, Squire 2002). The present paper is aimed at showing

that this is precisely the problem: basing computer simulation on nineteenth-century models of natural history is not adequate to explore contingencies of human history, but instead in a quasi-scientific fashion in fact reinforces the well established narratives of cultural imperialism.

We should be rather skeptical about any hopes of designing computer models that would simulate the social environment, no matter if they resemble heat or light or disclose laws or probabilities. Instead, a historically embedded analysis, as advocated by Tilly (1984), should be used to shed some light on processes of large-scale social change. Hidden Agenda, a game designed in 1988 and now largely forgotten, which places the player in a position of a freshly elected president of a Latin American state who has to slalom between different pressure groups, both internal (army, guerillas, church, labor unions, etc.) and external (US, USSR, IMF and the like) provides us with an ample sense of direction for the historically embedded computer game that reorganizes our perception of the Other. Games should be interactive museums that "offer strategies of making history into personal memories, (...) provide individuals with the collective opportunity of having an experimental relationship to a collective or cultural past they either did or did not experience" (Landsberg 1995: 178). Historicism (Tilly 1984) and nomadism, conceived as locating the focus of attention on the periphery (Braidotti 2002), can remedy the strategy games.

Many critics of the computer games express their skepticism towards extrapolating conclusions from the game narratives onto the players' behavior in real life. The heated debate about the effects of violent games as well as violence on television has not been conclusively resolved. Indeed, there is no convincing evidence that players who turn into hyper-masculine 'console cowboys' or Terminators are ready to shoot everyone in their real lives (Squire 2002, Herz 1997).

Taking the character of Total Recall for a

proof, Landsberg (1995) suggests that the 'prosthetic memory' of the constructed technobody blurs with the memories of the physical bodies. Of course only an empirical analysis of attitudes of the Civilization fans towards the current ideological rhetorics and policies of the United States could tell us anything conclusive about that subject. Such an endeavor, nevertheless, goes beyond the scope of this paper. My line of argument runs parallel to Edward Said's (1994) analysis of the cultural imperialism of the English and French novels. I suggest that what *Robinson Crusoe* did for the colonial England, Civilization does for today's United States. It is up to the reader to assess the weight of that influence.

My own guess is that software such as Civilization is more likely to generate support for the Western superpowers than the traditional tools of cultural imperialism. In examples presented by Said (1994), cultural imperialism is coded in a medium that one can objectively distance oneself from. The perfidity of Civilization's cultural imperialism goes one step further: it sneaks into players' own activities, penetrating as deep as their own reconstructed body. A critical distance to a process that one is part of is very difficult to assume. We are not only reading *Robinson Crusoe* but actually writing it, or more precisely, paraphrasing Ford, we are told that we can write anything we want as long as it is the master narrative of globalization. The history of Western civilization is to a very high extent a history of the camouflage of power and the means of coercion, and not as Elias wanted its dissolution (Bauman 2001, Foucault 1977). It is always difficult to spot power in the concept of culture (Wolf 2001, Said 1994) but in strategy computer games such as Civilization power is almost invisible because, at least at the level of rhetoric, it belongs to us.

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## Notes

1. When I refer to Civilization I mean all the three versions. When I refer to any of them separately, e.g. Civilization II, I refer only that particular version of the game.
2. There is a new 'edit scenario' option in Civilization III that gives players certain possibilities with regard to altering the game rules, including the 'default' technology tree (so far it was possible only to make new maps). Such scenarios created by Civilization III players have appeared on fan sites only recently, but it goes beyond the scope of the present paper to examine their content here.
3. There is no artificial intelligence per se in Civilization but only simulated opponents. They are, nevertheless, dubbed AI by the game designers and fans, and for convenience I keep to that nomenclature in this article. In Civilization III at the higher difficulty levels AI is 'cheating' a little, but this is, as Meier claims, to compensate for other deficiencies of non-human players, thus to use positive discrimination to make the game really fair (Chick 2002); also in Civilization III different Civilizations have some 'unique' features, e.g. the French musketeers are stronger than other musketeers, although this impact is rather cosmetic, and this option anyway can be switched off by the player.
4. In Civilization II there are in fact two leaders of the Russians: when the Russians are led by the human player, 'Lenin' pops out in the box where the player has to type his name; when the Russians are led by an AI, it is Catharine the Great.
5. On civilization, cf. Toynbee (in Tilly 1984: 99).

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Becoming-state. The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization. Kacper Poblocki. "Representations of what lay beyond insular or metropolitan boundaries came, almost from the start, to confirm European power." Although praise or criticism of the clash of civilizations thesis has usually been mailed to Huntington, it is Meier who was first, has more to say, and, as is argued in this paper, seems more convincing. Not only computer freaks, for whom Meier is the greatest software programmer of all times, but also respectful MIT researchers have been hailing Meier for the educational qualities of his game (Squire 2002). If you were to tell the children and adults who first bought copies of legendary PC game designer Sid Meier's Civilization in 1991 that they would still be playing some version of this classic game of imperial expansion almost thirty years later, they probably wouldn't have believed you. Yet Civilization's staying-power also sits uncomfortably with an incipient opposition from those opposed to its imperial overtones, and provides a fascinating window into the persistent, underlying colonial assumptions of modern-day society. While the game has developed and expanded in complexity over the decades, the essential elements have remained the same since I've been playing. Given the immense cultural currency of video games, and their popularity among What is your favorite civilization on Sid Meier's Civilization VI? Why do some people prefer Civ2 to other Civ games? Which civilization do you hate the most on the "Civilization" game series? When you become powerful or close to winning a victory, they suddenly break your alliance, denounce, declare war, or all at the same time. I have been playing Sid Meier's Civilization 5 for a few years now and it is one of those games where once you start, it's difficult to stop. "Just one more turn" turns into "just one more hour" and before you know it, it's 5AM on a Tuesday and you're "just one more turn" away from getting that great wonder you were waiting for. Poblocki, K. (2002) "Becoming-state: The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization ", Focaal "European Journal of Anthropology, Vol. 39, pp 163-177. Defining the Social Studies. Jan 1977. R D Barr. J L Barth. S S Shermis. Barr, R.D., Barth, J.L., and Shermis, S.S. (1977) Defining the Social Studies, National Council for the Social Studies, Arlington. Oh yes, you heard me right: The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization. Say it louder: "The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier's Civilization. It had to be written. Somewhere out there in the collective conscience there was an anthropological analysis of Civ and now I have found it. And I rejoice in this knowledge." Civilization offers an opportunity, literally and in the absolutist sense, to become the state; the state that we become at the same time comes to itself by means of a not always precisely formulated yet salient Hegelian dialectic waltz of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, very much a la Fred Astaire, i.e. up a stairway: e.g. mysticism and the code of laws lead.