Civilization. Microprose Entertainment Software: 180 Lakefront Drive, Hunt Valley, MD 21030.

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weave together ideological trends with material reality and give attention to both sides of civilizational encounters.

Anthony M. Stevens-Aroyo

CIVILIZATION: THE GAME


This is a computer game that every computer-literate civilizationist must acquire. If your conscience doesn’t allow you to play computer games, the sophistication of this product from Microprose will allow you to rationalize playtime as research. At last, civilizational studies have a computer generated model that will test hypotheses about the development of the world’s great civilizations. Would the Chinese empire have dominated the West instead of vice-versa if the Chinese had been more interested in military expansion? What might have happened if the Romans had been able to resist the Germanic invasions of the 5th century? This game allows for some experimentation in this regard. It is also fun.

The programming was based on readings from classic civilizationists such as Gibbon and Toynbee, but includes an updating with authors such as Charles Singer with his A History of Scientific Ideas, Will Durant’s definitions of civilization, and Paul Kennedy’s The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Thus, decisions made about the relative importance of technology, military power, form of government, the infusion of arts, etc. are colored by contemporary evaluations of civilizational process. The game also evaluates such new factors as environmental pollution and the importance of space discoveries.

The game allows the player to become the ruler of one of the world’s great civilizations. Depending on one’s prowess, the player can choose to compete with 3 to 7 other civilizations and at different levels of complexity. You type in your name, receive homage as “chief” and are deposited near the site of a still unfounded city in 4,000 BC. Your fledgling community is endowed with the civilizational achievements and cultural tendencies recorded for the empire you have chosen to lead. Romans possess bronze working and are militaristic, Egyptians understand the afterlife and are mystical, Chinese possess pottery and are inventive, etc. The player then must choose what developments the new civilization must seek. Mineral deposits, climate, rivers, fertility for farming, access to the sea and a host of other factors are included in the programming and correspond to history.

As the game begins, you can see only the world you have explored. If you
choose the standard game, this matches the world we know. But the adventurous can also select a new world fashioned by the computer that recreates the unknown for you just as much as for history’s original builders of civilization. Your development and expansion are constantly under threat by barbarian hordes that may appear by land or sea at any time. You eventually encounter other civilizations that have been developing along with yours. You are given options of peace or war, but the treachery of betrayal and revolutions can undo your choices. You can exchange technologies and knowledge or steal them. You can instruct your diplomats to be spies or to be negotiators for peace. And be careful, because competing civilizations can do the same.

Your civilization must decide upon priorities. Every decision costs money, which is related to the amount of trade, agricultural production and level of technology. When the priority outstrips resources, taxes must be raised. The contentment of the citizens is thus affected, which may lead to revolt. The different forms of government — despotism, monarchy, republic, democracy, communism — have relative abilities to control or regulate corruption and productivity. As the game advances closer to the modern period, the moves become increasingly complex and difficult. For instance, war is an easy matter in antiquity: the rules decides upon attack, then cavalry catapults and legions obey. But by the 20th century, hostilities involve consent and approval from the populace, and threats of nuclear extinction to the entire planet can invoke world alliances against an aggressor.

The game offers the opportunity to build wonders of the world, like the Great Pyramids, the Great Wall, or more contemporary ones like Copernicus Observatory or the Hoover Dam. These prestige monuments are costly, but bring influence and power to the ruler. When revenues are low, they can also be sold off and the money used for other purposes. Neglect of medicine and urban engineering will allow cities to suffer plague; lonely military outposts can be bought off by rival empires; peaceful cities can be destroyed by barbarians. All of these possibilities confront you, the leader of the empire. Periodically, the great historians of civilizations, Herodotus, Pliny, Gibbon, and Toynbee evaluate you and the competing civilizations in the game. If you manage to survive until the age of space colonization, you will receive an evaluation of your skill as the builder of an empire. If you don’t, the game ends with archaeologists discovering the ruins of your chief city and speculating on what went wrong.

The key to the game is to follow the civilization advances chart. Based on the authors named above, this chart allows you to know ahead of time what are the possible effects of each technological advance and what knowledge is requisite for future discoveries. The game allows you to sacrifice food production to scientific research, and when your scientists achieve their goals, a marvelous graphic announces the discovery and explains its usefulness. Your scientific advisor then suggests that
next priority, although the decision is left to you.

I used the mouse interface, which is recommended, but for some commands, the keyboard was preferable. The sophistication of the graphics is impressive, as is that of the sound displays and the ability to view monuments, resources, world discoveries and the relative standing with competing civilizations.

The creators have included what they call a “civilopedia” that categorizes, defines and explains about a hundred key civilizational concepts. I have played this game with my eight-year-old son at my side and have marveled at how useful this was as an educational tool. (If enough schools adopt this game for instruction, the ISCSC will have highly knowledgeable teenage members within a few years!)

There are drawbacks to the game for civilizational purists. The geographical location of other empires may vary from game to game. For instance, I assumed the role of the Roman chief in one game, but discovered that the German civilization was located in Mexico. Also, Zulus or Babylonians are as likely to discover atomic fission as Germans, Americans or Russians — something intrinsically possible, but factually untrue. There were some minor discrepancies between the manual and my version of the game, notably no text on the German civilization.

I found the game very absorbing, even to the point of addiction. But it takes several hours to advance significantly, and the game has to be saved over and over after each play. After four months, I have reached the 1940s, but it takes several hours now to advance just 3 or 4 years. Decisions on how to manage a local city become boring at this stage. I have derived the most satisfaction from the antiquities stage and also from replaying certain crucial periods of confrontation. Some may call this “cheating,” but it engages the hypothetical in civilizational study in a realistic way. I wish there were a way to play “against” another person in charge of a civilization, instead of being pitted against the computer each time. Such person-to-person competition might engage tournaments, much like chess games, that could be played among civilizationists. Also, it may yet be discovered how this program could be used in a college classroom to make civilization norms a part of regular instruction. All in all, this is worth its cost (I paid about $42 at my local Sears). Civilizational study will never be the same once you have played this game!

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