

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Video Games as Participatory Public History

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Play with the past. Explore uncharted waters, drive hard bargains, rule the empires, fight the battles. Historical simulation games are a unique manifestation of public history because they are participatory. More than any other medium, they invite the public to play with the past, to enter virtual historical problem spaces and solve problems reflective of those faced by actors in the past. Though there is a distinction between designer and player, the act of gameplay by necessity allows players to take an active role in simulating the past. In the gameplay itself and in the forum dialogues spurred by the game, players are empowered to interact with the past and, as they do so, analyze and critique the game designers' visions of the past.

Video games like *Total War*, *Civilization*, and *Crusader Kings II* can usefully be labeled historical simulation games. They encompass historical settings and have core gameplay that models one or more systems of the past in a plausible way (McCall 2011, 2012). In the *Total War* series, for example, the player takes on the role of a political and military leader, tasked with building an empire in settings ranging from the ancient Mediterranean to feudal and early modern Europe. The player manages the economy and production of cities, researches technologies, engages in trade with other powers, and, most of all, controls the military. The actions the player takes and the choices they make as part of the core gameplay – moving armies, setting taxes, fighting battles, annexing territory, and so on – to an arguable extent simulate some of the historical actions taken by rulers in the periods modeled by the games. In the *Civilization* series, to offer a second example, the player controls the development of a civilization from its origins in the fourth millennium to the twenty-first century. The player determines where cities are founded, what resources are exploited from the terrain, what the civilization researches, constructs, trades, and so on. They also engage in diplomacy and, not uncommonly, war with other civilizations. Again, the core gameplay goes beyond the historical setting to include gameplay that abstractly models the past to some plausible extent. This category of historical simulation games includes the historical grand strategy games of

developer Paradox such as *Crusader Kings II*, city builders such as *Children of the Nile*, and the numerous war games made by smaller-scale developers.¹ Public history, of course, can be defined in many different ways. Appreciating games as forms of public history requires us to use an expanded definition, one that includes activities in which amateurs investigate and interact with the past in such ways that academic historians are peripheral, at most influencing amateur investigations through the historical monographs they have created (Jordanova 2000; Tosh 2008). In such history-making opportunities, understanding the dialogue between the public and the past is an important goal, and so it is appropriate to explore how developers of historical simulation games approach the history referenced by their choice of game.

First of all, unlike designers of games set in fictional worlds, those developing historical games have at least some level of obligation to the documented historical record. Consider the claims Paradox Interactive makes for *Crusader Kings II*:

Crusader Kings II explores one of the defining periods in world history in an experience crafted by the masters of Grand Strategy. Medieval Europe is brought to life in this epic title rife with rich strategic and tactical depth. (*Crusader Kings II* 2015)

The references this and other historical simulation game designers make to specific historical periods, characters, and concepts tie them to documentable history and create an expectation that there will be some connection between the game and the particular aspects of history that game explores. After all, there is no reason to make a game on a historical topic at all if not to leverage elements of the past to create engaging gameplay.

How do developers go about researching the historical content for such games? Our best evidence comes from developer interviews scattered across the Internet. These interviews suggest that those who design historical video games desire for their games to be historically accurate, or at least not demonstrably inaccurate. To achieve the goal of basic accuracy, developers draw upon historical evidence, but the levels and kinds of historical research they employ can vary greatly. For some developers, like Paradox and the Creative Assembly, it is a matter of conducting independent research, which generally means reading secondary and sometimes primary sources about the historical time and place. Conducting such research is a point of pride for these developers, something brought up in interviews (Gamers Nexus 2013; Mana Pool 2011; Worth Playing 2008).

The developers of the *Civilization* series, however, offer a striking contrast to the emphasis some developers place on research. Rather than conduct detailed research, the designers opt to include what they judge to be commonly known and shared historical ideas and narratives. Sid Meier, creator of the original *Civilization*, comes to this point in an interview:

When you were creating Civilization, how much research did you put into world history?

Sid: Not a whole lot. I did do a little bit of reading ... But basically, I tried to use fairly well known concepts, well known leaders, and well known technologies. I mean, it wasn't intended to be 'bizarre facts about history.' It's more like, 'Here, we all know a little bit about history, but now you get to take control of it, invent gunpowder, and the wheel, electricity, all sorts of cool stuff.' But you don't have to research to know what it is, you just know. *So you mostly based it off your personal knowledge and education?*

Sid: Right, it was intended to be something that anybody could play. (Gamasutra 2007)

Soren Johnson (2009), lead designer of *Civilization IV*, follows Meier's lead. In a blog entry, he comments, "While designers should still be careful not to include anything factually incorrect, the value of an interactive experience is in the interplay of simple concepts, not the inclusion of numerous facts and figures."

The historical ideas formed, whether through formal research or not, are intended to serve a successful commercial game, not a monograph or some other form of historical work. This is a critical point for understanding the connection between these games and the documentable past. Though developers of historical simulation games generally seem to want to achieve some level of historical accuracy, their primary goal is to make a successful game. The medium brings with it special design tensions. Time and again, developers and players alike note that historical detail and engaging gameplay can conflict. But what makes for engaging gameplay? One of the key elements, often cited by Gamasutra (2012), is the player's ability to make interesting choices. Historical simulation games appeal largely because they empower. Players are in a position of importance, able to participate in a model of the past, making decisions that have a lasting effect on the game world. To allow a player to experience this power, a game must present meaningful choices to the player with reasonable clarity. This can lead the designers to create choices where historically there may have been none. So, for example, historical city builders like *Imperium Romanum* allow the player to place personally every building in their fledgling Roman city, though the historical processes that determined where buildings were located were far more complicated. *Civilization* allows players to decide which resources each and every city in their empire will harvest and what each will produce. *Total War* games empower players to try virtually any formation and tactic of their choosing on the battlefield. In addition, these games create quantifiable goals through scoring systems and other metrics, embedding in their model of the past a clarity of purpose rare for historical agents (McCall 2012).

Interesting choices are of little appeal to players if they are not clearly presented along with their potential effects on the game world. One of the hallmarks of successful video games, accordingly, is that they effectively train players to play them, providing necessary information and context in discrete chunks as needed – on-time and in-demand (Gee 2003). Choosing to situate a game in the historical world can go a long way toward providing players with the background knowledge they need to make informed choices in-game. Doing so can create a comforting sense of familiarity with the game world (Destructoid 2012). A game as complex as a historical simulation, however, runs the risk of overwhelming – and thus losing – players. Too much detail and the player can become swamped, familiarity changing to overload (Johnson 2009). So, the trick for developers is to leverage the powerful benefits of a game's historical setting while avoiding the drawbacks of confounding detail. Ultimately, this requires designers to engage in a significant amount of simplification as they model their historical topics in a game. The level of detail retained in a game will vary from designer to designer. The *Civilization* series is well known for taking complicated historical processes like research, economics, diplomacy, and warfare and simplifying them into a manageable form for the player. Other games like those made by Paradox abstract historical processes less, and feature more complicated interfaces and the inclusion of a great deal more historical detail.

Regardless of the level of detail in the game, however, many details from documented history must simply be left out to make the game manageable and engaging.

Jim McNally, lead designer of Longbow Games' *Hegemony: Philip of Macedon*, calls this process "caricature" and notes:

Why do we use a caricature of history? Because a caricature is easier to manipulate than the raw history. A caricature is a simplification that distorts the history to highlight major concepts or points of interest. Those simplified points of interest can then be manipulated by the game engine rules, much like the points of a digital model can be manipulated by an animator to create an expression or artistic image. For example, our current project, *Hegemony Rome: Rise of Caesar*, is not intended to be an exhaustive simulation of the Roman Empire, or Roman society, or even the life of Caesar. It focuses on a single extended military campaign, and even with that the simulated elements must be abstracted in such a way to highlight the historical concepts; distortion can illuminate. (2012)

Call it caricature, abstraction, or simplification, it is critical to the game-design process. Certain key features are emphasized while others are ignored altogether.

The process of simplifying is not the only way designers shape the historical content of their games. They convey their understandings of the past in the games' systems. In a very real sense, historical simulation games are rhetorical in that they promote principles accepted by the designers, principles often seen by the designers as common sense. It has been well discussed that the games in the *Civilization* series promote a sense of geographical determinism not unlike that hypothesized by Jared Diamond (1997) in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Fogu 2009; McCall 2011). Critics have also noted that despite the seemingly open-ended play in the series, the technology tree, that branching list of technologies and their prerequisite technologies, assumes a Western-style narrative of progress (Poblocki 2002). The assertions embedded in the logic of simulation games need not be so loaded, however. The city builder *CivCity Rome* places the player in the role of a city governor who ultimately must keep the inhabitants of his city happy, implying that maintaining the population's material happiness was an important goal of Roman rule (McCall 2010). The *Total War* series of games includes the effects of morale in battle. Soldiers in their games do not always fight to the death but are routed when their morale drops too low (McCall 2014). The list could go on indefinitely; simulation games operate according to the historical principles accepted by their design teams.

Upon completion, simulation games offer to players historical problem spaces, working models of spaces with environmental features, agents, goals, affordances, and constraints (McCall 2012). The initial state of a game's problem space, to the extent it is fixed, can be thought of as a historical representation. It establishes the starting state of the virtual historical world. As soon as play starts, however, the player is enabled to make important choices in order to overcome obstacles and achieve goals embedded in the problem space. The game reacts to players' choices, updates the problem space according to the logic defined by the designers, and play continues.

Necessarily, however, player interactions take the game from a historically documentable starting point to a counterfactual history. *Crusader Kings II*, for example, allows the player to start his game at various dates in European history. At any given date the map of Europe is divided into territories under the control of nobles according to the historical information the developers have been able to find. As one simple example, starting in late 1066 the player finds William of Normandy as the new king of England; starting in 1337, Edward III is king and the Hundred Years War has just started. Paradox does not stop with historical kings; barons, dukes, and counts generally map to documentable agents when that information is known, and the political

boundaries of the map change to match the history of the time and place. Once the player selects a dynasty to control and starts to play, however, the game simulates the actions of all these various rulers as they engage in politics, diplomacy, war, and economics. Each ruler operates according to the rules and priorities established in the game code. In the best of circumstances, those rules and priorities authentically map to some of those that were in play in the documentable past. Even so the player's freedom of choice and the fact that artificial intelligence (AI) agents' choices are coded as probabilities, not certainties, means that the narrative of gameplay will bear similarities to the broader historical context of the period and place but likely not to the specific historical chronology. So one can centralize eleventh-century England under King Harold instead of William the Conqueror, but doing so still requires mastering feudal politics, diplomacy, and military strategy. Indeed, this ability to create an alternate history is one of the appeals of such games. "Can I do better than a historical figure did?" can be a powerful incentive for gameplay. As one player puts it when referring to the game *Civilization*, "I do consider a Civ game to be much more satisfying and engrossing when it feels like I have actively participated in the unfolding of a sweeping epic saga of humankind that spans a whole world and several millennia" (Civilization Fanatics Center Forums 2011).

Since historical simulation games generate experiences that, when played, do not map readily to documented historical chronologies, debates about their historical accuracy require a reconsideration of terms. Uricchio offers a helpful point by distinguishing between a historical representation and a historical simulation (2005). A historical representation is defined by its fixed nature. Representations, most often created in the medium of textual narrative, relay the events and causes of those events in a fixed, linear fashion which, if done according to the standards of the historical discipline, correlates to the documentary evidence for the event or phenomenon in question. Historical accuracy as a standard applied to representations means bearing a narrative or fixed illustration that is faithful to the evidence. A simulation, unsurprisingly, does not behave as a representation. It models systems and processes and requires player input, input that changes the outcome. These systems and processes, in conjunction with player interaction, lead to problems, choices, actions, and outcomes that when narrated quite probably will not correlate well to any evidence-based narrative.

What games have the potential to do, however, is provide a historically authentic simulation by modeling the effects of historically documentable systems and processes in their problem spaces. They can generate understanding of historical context, the factors that were at play in the past that led to certain outcomes over others. In this respect, they share common ground with good counterfactual history (Ferguson 1997). Whether it is a matter of planting a city in a geographically advantageous area, conducting profitable diplomacy, commanding troops, or establishing trade routes, historical simulations can model past systems potentially very well. In this way, they have the potential to be very powerful media for encouraging thought about historical processes and how they have influenced agents in the past.

Once a game is released to the public, the main wave of historical play and interpretation begins. Work on public history talks of shared authority between historians and members of the public. When it comes to simulating the past with a historical game, authority is likewise shared between designers and players. For the game does nothing without a player, and so designer and player are in a sort of active, constructive dialogue about the past through gameplay.

Though we should like to know more about players' experiences with historical simulation games, those of most are beyond our reach. The multitude of Internet forums, however, where players can and do share their thoughts and opinions about games with their peers, offer an untapped resource for investigating how players can interact with the history embedded in games. Of course, using forum posts is not without its problems. Most of all, it is very difficult to know how much the ideas of those posting are representative of the – assuredly – many more who do not post their opinions about a game. Furthermore, the number of different forums and the thousands of posts make it difficult even to guess whether a particular point of view represents the majority of posters. Still, since the forums allow essentially any gamer to participate in them, they publicize players' ideas ranging from support to analysis and criticism of their games. Forum threads, therefore, illustrate the types of experiences and understandings players *can* have interacting with these games. This is a critical point: the forums show us a range of possible interactions with the game available to anyone who wants to share their thoughts. Accordingly, a qualitative study of several forum threads can illustrate some of the ways players interact with historical games.

Before beginning, a couple of notes are in order. The source of each post on a thread is identified by the poster's user ID followed by a number in parentheses indicating the number of the post in the thread. Egregious errors in spelling or punctuation have been corrected for the sake of the reader. The genders of posters are generally not known, and so the text uses gender-neutral pronouns.

Debating the simulation of history in the forums

The topic of the first thread to be considered, Total War Forums (2013), is the portrayal of the Spartan faction in *Total War: Rome 2*, a strategy game set in the third-century-BCE Mediterranean. The original poster (OP), OJSAMPSON, alleges there have been complaints that Creative Assembly made the Spartans too weak in the game. They begin with this provocatively polemical post:

I've seen so many threads from fans of [the movie] *300* complaining about the Spartan faction. Have you people even read a history book? The Spartans were in a MASSIVE decline at the time of this game (272 B.C.) They had discontinued the Spartan Agoge and had a pretty bad military ... The fact that they're even a faction is almost wrong due to them being annihilated a few years after the game's start. *300* fans, get a history book and read some actual facts about the Spartans, not what Hollywood wants you to believe. (2013)

Significantly, the OP proposes an arguable hypothesis to answer a meaningful historical question, and they do so by using the game as the framework for the discussion. In this instance, game discussion becomes a historical debate. Note, too, that the player has actively thought about the game's models, not passively accepted them.

There are various responses to the OP. One type notes that historical accuracy needs at times to give way to gameplay. Zerik (24) has the snappiest articulation of this: "Sometimes when playing a video game, the Rule of Cool must outweigh historical accuracy." Several other posters concur, showing that like designers, players also recognize the tension between historical detail and engaging gameplay. Ethabus (5), who noted that sacrifices sometimes had to be made for gameplay, also commented: "One of the perks of the game is being able to change history." SusaVile (14) concurred: "I really

don't want to follow history, I want to recreate history, that's the idea here." These comments reveal players that are firmly aware that through their gameplay they are creating their own narratives that will, by definition, differ from documented historical narratives. Sarog (20), provides an intriguing take on the idea of players changing history:

The game involves changing history in the sense of exploring military counterfactuals. What if Carthage had won the Punic Wars? What if Gaul was never conquered? etc. This ability to change history really only involves battles won and lost, factions risen and fallen, the way empires become drawn on the map. That is not some kind of broad break with history. The factions, the map, the unit rosters, all continue to remain bound by historical confines. Taking a faction that failed historically, and turning it into a great empire, is your objective in Rome II. Changing that faction, remaking it into your own image, is not Things like Sparta's unit limit exist for very good historical reasons, and if you want to triumph as Sparta you must overcome its historical flaws. By all means, change history. But do it credibly, without demanding that the flaws of your chosen faction be conveniently forgotten so that you can have an easier time of it.

This is a particularly interesting post because it touches on the differences between representation and simulation. Sarog's point here is essentially consistent with what Uricchio has written about representations versus simulations. Furthermore, Sarog considers operating within historical limits adds an entertaining challenge to the game.

There are a number of posts arguing against the OP's position. One of the more substantial comes from Banta (27), who writes:

Lol. Sorry bud, but you're wrong. By 272 BCE, Sparta is still in her 200 year period of DECLINE, where she continually becomes less of a regional power. This collapse comes to a head in 146 BCE when Rome absorbs Greece as a full province ...

The post continues in this vein, then concludes with the following:

Lastly, I'd like to point two things out. First, ... the player is allowed to manipulate and completely alter history, so to some degree the only historical accuracy that matters is the history before the start of 272 BCE. Second, there are how many footnote nations in this game that can be brought to power. Do I need to name a few? [the poster does] The only notable nation to resist Roman rule, and even to beat Rome on many accounts, are the Parthians. It would be a pretty shallow game if you could only play Rome, Egypt, or the Parthians.

Like Sarog, Banta fully agrees that historical accuracy, if that means matching the documentable past, can only pertain to the very start of the game. This authoritative sounding post not only provides a substantial historical argument against the OP, but it also delves into the connection between history and gameplay, noting that the inclusion of historically weak factions is a desirable concession to gameplay because it broadens the players' options for play. What comes next is something of a rarity in the forums but still worth noting. Poster ThOms (39) quotes Banta (27) and asks: "Your source," to which Banta responds with a demonstrably true statement: "Paul Cartledge: *The Spartans*, and A History of Sparta: W G Forrest. Both leading experts in Spartan history." Not only does the debate probe a legitimate historical issue, there is even some source criticism at work.

There are a number of other interactions in this thread introducing other, smaller points of historical argument on topics relevant and unrelated to the main thread. A final entry from Kidlegionae (61) will have to suffice here:

[The Spartans] were excellent soldiers IN THEIR TIME, but apart from good soldiers they were good for nothing else. NEVER achieved an empire or did something great. Some people make fun of Spartans because they were only good to polish their shields and march (most of the time not even going to war); overspecialization is bad, to make an empire you don't need only soldiers.

Kidlegionae offers a different interpretation of Sparta from what has been advanced so far in the thread. It is sophisticated enough in its premise, if not in its wording: Sparta was the supreme power on the battlefield but was structurally unequipped to rule an empire. Their last comment is particularly noteworthy: "Perhaps to please the Spartan fans something fair in the game would be to give them boosts in their hoplites but nerf them a lot in economy." To translate: Kidlegionae suggests that the game could stay historically accurate and deal with the complaints of fans by making Sparta's hoplite soldiers outstanding warriors while drastically reducing ("nerf") the economic power of the faction. In short, Kidlegionae offers both historical interpretation and a way to implement it in the simulation game. They are engaged in participatory play with history.

This thread illustrates some important possibilities for player participation in games about the past. First, it is clear that players do not have to accept passively the models of the past that the developers have embedded into their games. Rather, they can actively critique the models, and even offer suggestions for how to adapt gameplay to better fit their historical understanding. They participate in the representation and simulation of history. Second, the posters are engaged to varying extents in the craft of history as they discuss the game. Discussions of what count as historical facts and how those facts may be interpreted take place. There is even the occasional reference to sources of evidence. Third, the topic itself is one of substance. Antiquarian discussions abound on the forum to be sure; nevertheless, players can develop deeper historical issues. Finally, the forums are their own manifestations of public history in action, but a public history largely independent of both game designers and, it would appear, academic historians. This latter group enters the debate only if their works on the subject have been consulted.

A second thread, Civilization Fanatics Center Forums (2011a), centers on the historical accuracy of the *Civilization IV* modification, *Rhye's and Fall of Civilization*. The OP, SilchasRuin, begins their post by criticizing the starting locations of various civilizations in the game. Then they move to a second point, concerning the implementation of religions in *Civilization* itself:

I also read a lot about people saying that Judaism should not spread so far or even be a religion in the game. Well, firstly Christianity and Islam originated from Judaism. Secondly, after the diaspora Jewish people spread throughout the known world, and played a major part in the development of European history, especially (and I know this sounds stereotypical, but if you look at the history it is true) in economics. So, I think that it was just as important in world history as say, Zoroastrianism, even if less people followed it.

Essentially, the problem as this poster sees it is that Judaism spreads too easily between cultures and across territories in the game. The game's model makes the religion appear

to be more of a missionary religion than it historically was or is. Still, *SilchasRuin* implies the religion should be kept in the game because of its great significance in world history. In response to this portion of the thread, *Kairob (2)* responds:

Name one Civilization that should historically adopt Judaism as its state religion. Now compare that to the civs that shouldn't but often do. (Greece, Rome, Babylonia, Egypt, Carthage, Ethiopia, sometimes Persia). There is a pretty clear clue here about how to improve historical accuracy.

Umarth (4) joins in the discussion:

Regarding Judaism, I've said before that I think the whole religion system is broken from a historical/sociological point of view. But Judaism is especially broken because

- a) it's not a missionary religion, so it doesn't fit Civ's religion spread model at all
- b) it has never been a major "world religion" in terms of numbers, even if it is geographically widespread
- c) you can count the political entities that have had Judaism as their state religion on one hand ...

It would be interesting to have a mod that represented the Jewish diaspora in some other way though.

This post essentially ends this part of the thread: the three agree that the model of religion in the game does not simulate Judaism well.

Even more than in the last thread the debate remains ostensibly over game mechanics – the model of world religions in the game. But the posters use the mechanics to discuss a deeper issue of real historical significance, the features of Judaism and other world religions and their impact on world history. The mechanics of the game in short, have led them to reflect, however briefly, on the role of world religions in history.

A third thread, *Steam Community Forums (2013)*, discusses *Paradox's Crusader Kings 2*. In this grand strategy title, the player guides a medieval dynasty through centuries of simulated history and numerous generations, arranging marriages, building family and political ties, intriguing against rivals, fighting wars, and trying to improve the rank of his dynasty through the acquisition of new titles and new lands. Succession laws are an important feature in the game. These differ from region to region and, as in history, have a critical influence on the transition of power and status from one generation to the next. The legal form of inheritance for most areas in Europe at the start of the game is agnatic-cognatic succession, where women can only inherit land and titles if there are no eligible male heirs. The OP seeks a solution to a problem this has caused him:

So I'm trying to get my girlfriend to play *Crusader Kings* with me, but she's pretty displeased at the difficulty of maintaining a female ruler. Is there any mod or console command I can use to make gender irrelevant to rulership?

The thread is initiated because a pair of players seek some way to modify the game, either by typing a special code while playing (the console command) or loading a player programmed expansion to the game that modifies existing features (the mod). *FrogDog (1)*

responds with two suggestions for how to play the game as is and have more women inherit positions: “You could have the Basque culture, which allows absolute cognatic [inheritance]. I think the Cathar religion allows it too.” This is followed up by Ninthshadow (2):

FrogDog nailed it, in game wise. Absolute cognatic succession (in the laws tab) sounds like the ingame solution and it’s not particularly hard to institute for a lot of rulers. With SoA [note: the *Sons of Abraham* expansion for the game] it seems the Cathar religion allows women in almost all major roles, from leading armies to council spots.

The OP rejects FrogDog’s suggestion that his girlfriend play as a Basque: “Absolute Cognatic [succession] however is ONLY available for Basque, and we want to be able to start outside of Portugal.” Several posters offer more technical solutions. By editing certain files that are part of the game’s data, it is possible to change the game rules so that all cultures allow true cognatic succession; that is, women can inherit titles on an equal footing with men. Another poster shares their own experience:

Is it difficult to have a female ruler? I had a game where I had three female rulers in a row. This was in Agnatic Cognatic succession. They took all of the places required to form the Roman Empire and all of the land the Karlings had except West Francia and Aquitaine and maintained it. It is possible to have good female rulers however ... it is a historical game set at a time period where woman are generally disrespected by men ... However some of my best rulers have been females.

Like the previous thread on Judaism, this thread shows a conversation operating on multiple levels. Ostensibly the conversation is about game mechanics pure and simple. At the same time, however, it is a discussion about women’s historical ability to inherit land and exercise political power in the Middle Ages. The posters use the medium and terminology from the game to address a historical issue. In doing so on a public forum, they have engaged in their own work of public history.

Developing personal rules of play and modding the game

The previous post raises another important point. Not only can players actively critique the games they play, they can make choices regarding how they will play a game. This point also arises in the thread “Does anyone play CIV realistically?” (Civilization Fanatics Center Forums 2011b), which begins:

When I play a game of Civ I’m playing it to build a civilization and try my best to create a story with it. I’m building my Civ not to win the game, but to stand the test of time. I love history and like to use Civ as a tool to in a way create it, or change it. Beating the AI can be fun, however I’ve found it more enjoyable to just see how my civilization lasts and builds in time. If it fails, it fails, if it conquers the world ... well, I have a story to tell don’t I. To help with this, I’ve always set house rules for myself.

ScubaSteveWA, the OP, goes on to list a number of rules he imposes on himself while playing. Most involve role-playing, essentially restricting him from taking advantage of flaws in the game’s AI. Though not all posters agree with him, several do note that at times they play Civ for the experience of building a civilization rather than simply striving to beat the game’s AI.

Another thread showing similar features discusses the role of slavery in *Civilization*. Lynxlynx (OP) begins the thread:

What [do] you think about slavery in Civilization? Does it fit the game? Some may think that slavery is questionable, but it is not. Slavery is just pure evil just like war. Yet it is part of the past, and quite a lot of early civilizations [were built] on slaves. :-(Just [because] we don't want to think of it doesn't mean it [didn't exist].

Lynxlynx then offers suggestions for how the game might be changed to incorporate slavery mechanics. Essentially they propose that a player can enslave inhabitants of conquered cities. The enslaved become workers who can develop the land around cities, but who also create unhappiness for the enslaving civilization. Lynxlynx also proposes that civilizations can eventually reach the point where slaves can be freed if the player chooses, increasing the happiness of the civilization. They finish by suggesting that incorporating a slavery mechanic in the game would provide more incentive in the ancient portion of the game to go to war, since war would bring slaves as was the case historically. It would also give players more options upon conquering a city than the usual two: incorporate it into one's civilization or raze it.

Several posters essentially agree, and there is a healthy level of debate about whether this proposal would be a good change to make and whether including slavery would hurt the popular appeal of the game. Three posts stand out in this dialogue. First, Tahitian moon (5) comments:

I think [slavery's] already in the game in a way: you can make raids to capture other empire's and city-state's civilians and make them your workers, I imagine it [as a] kind of slavery. Also you can demand a tribute from city-states that are afraid of you, and one of the option[s] is 'enslave a worker'. Actually that level of slavery in the game is enough for me at least.

Krikkitone (13) adds:

Basically your empire is made up of "slaves" one way or the other ... the actual specific status doesn't affect gameplay.

After this, Cliomancer (14) notes:

I think the way the game is set up you can assume that you've got slaves if you want. From Slavery to Serfdom to Indentured Servitude to Not Really Having Any Better Options, all flavours of historical human misery are open to your imagination.

This exchange is significant for a number of reasons. First off, we see, yet again, players pushing back against the models in a game, playing with their very gameplay, and offering their own additions and subtractions. Second, discussing those additions and subtractions essentially amounts to a legitimate historical discussion on the effects of slavery, again mediated through a discussion of game mechanics. What stands out most of all, however, is that these final three posts suggest the power that the player has to construct their own historical narrative through gameplay. They are not forced to understand the games' components in a particular way – for example, capturing enemy workers as a form of slavery – but can choose to do so. In short, the player takes an active role constructing their own historical meaning from the game.

The next stage of players actively choosing how to experience their game is the mod-makers. Mods are unofficial additions to a game that in some way modify gameplay. They are made by fans who feel they can improve one or more aspects of the game's play. Some mods add or change game features, others revise the graphics or interface of the game. Then there are those, the minority to be sure, that make changes to the core game in order to make it play more historically accurately. *Rome Total Realism* provides a useful example. The official site for this mod to *Rome: Total War* calls the mod "a set of complete modifications for *Rome: Total War* developed by an international team of skilled individuals with a passion for history" (Rome Total Realism). The feature list of the mod is impressive: "hundreds of new historically accurate units," "authentic battle formations and army deployments," and a "totally revamped combat system" are just some of the changes made to the core game. The list of contributors is no less impressive. Artists, digital musicians and filmmakers, coders, and even a group called historians. Ultimately, as is appropriate for what is essentially an open-ended dialogue about the past, once the game is modified for historical realism, the mod itself becomes grist for the forums to debate.

From the initial planning and research to the gameplay and public discussions, historical simulation games both are and foster important participatory forms of public history. The games themselves offer interpretations of the past in the form of simulations. They offer to players historical problem spaces in which players can act and interact. There are as many styles of play as players. Many simply play and enjoy. Even then the game is a participatory form of public history, and the player has a great deal of choice in how they choose to play, from the adoption of special rules of play to the installation of game mods. Some go still further and engage in the messy work of history making on the forums as they debate the historical merits of this game feature or that. Many posters raise questions about the historical accuracy of the games they play. In response, others say it is just a game, suggesting that they are highly aware of the mediated nature of history in their games. One of the most striking features of forum discussions is how authentic historical discussions are generated by the game mechanics. In a variety of ways, players are using the historical simulation game as a point of entry to play with the past.

Note

- 1 For a list of historical video games, see McCall 2011.