Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Sid Meier's Civilization V
Platform: PC
Genre: 4X Strategy
Release Date: September 2010
Developer: Firaxis Games
Publisher: 2K Games, Aspyr
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Michelle Menard, Paul Murphy

Overview

       Sid Meier's Civilization V wants you to tell a story. In a game of grand 4X strategy, it is perhaps not the most significant quality upon first glance, but the narrative element of *Civ 5* emerges as a beautiful superstructure over the mechanical systems that power the game. It is a story that no other game can claim to match in scope -- 6000 years of history for all the great civilizations of an entire planet -- and it is the type of story that can be told again and again, though different each time. In the heat of the moment it is told with great sweeps and gestures, later recounted between old enemies in tender tones of reminiscence. It is the story of mad-libs, the story of democratic stories, the story of gamespace.

       To contain a story of such epic proportions, one would expect to find narrative components embedded into *Civ 5*. In the traditional sense, there are none. No cutscenes, no written stories, no scripted events. Instead, mechanical elements of the game contain narrative orientations. The personas that the players choose, the arrangement of the scientific and cultural development trees, the time-structure of the turns, and the place-names of settlements for each civilization are all narratively inclined, allowing narrative to easily emerge from player actions. Decisions made when encountering these narratively-oriented game-elements produce a multitude of micro-narratives, the summation forming a trajectory of a player's civilization. In this way, *Civ 5* is narratively elegant, situating all of its narrative production in player actions, rather than the code of the game.

Characters

       Civilization 5 contains no characters of narrative significance. Each of the forty-three civilizations is accompanied by a unique persona, a great leader who embodies the spirit of the nation, but the relationship between player and persona is more like a mantle

than a mask. It adorns the player and his/her decisions in the game, but is not analogous to the player's in-game avatar.

The exception to this statement is during games against AI opponents. Here, mantle becomes mask and the computer's nature is obscured behind the personality of the persona. Each persona is mechanically defined by a series of dispositions -- how the persona feels about war, expansion, religion, other civilizations, etc. -- that influence priorities in the AI's decision making process. These dispositions are modeled on the histories of the personas, making them distinct characters at the helms of other civilizations in the world. When a player encounters an AI controlled civilization, he/she is presented with a fully three-dimensional animated screen through which negotiation is conducted. The dispositions of the different personas are communicated through scene and body-language: Montezuma stands behind a ceremonial fire, with sharp flames illuminating his violent gesticulations; Gandhi opens his arms to you, his shoulders bowed in a non-threatening manner; for Caesar, you are hardly worth eye contact. These negotiation animations are completely absent when encountering a human player, allowing the personality that the player brings to the game to take center-light over any persona chosen.

In a game of *Civ 5*, the player's avatar is not a traditional person. The primary actors in the narrative arc of the world are the civilizations themselves, the military, scientific, and cultural accomplishments of a set of people within the boundaries of a single empire. Therefore, a player's avatar is the amorphous network of cities within the colored boundaries of that civilization's influence. The player becomes a network, and only an entity of geographic scale can appropriately correlate to his/her actions. A player's perspective in *Civ 5* is *third-person limited omniscient*. Within the boundaries of the nation, all is visible, but beyond is the fog-of-war, a complete obfuscation that is only pierced by units of the nation - and only as current as their memories of the place. A player's attributes are the productive forces of his/her nation (food, goods, science, and money) and not the dispositions of his/her persona. The true characters of *Civilization 5* are not people, but nations, abstracted networks of geography and production defined by the actions of the players.

Breakdown

Every time you begin a new game of *Civ 5*, a world is born. Starting in the year 4000 BC, a set of people representing what will become the great civilizations of the world each settle their first permanent city and begin a collective narrative of some six thousand years in scope. *Civ 5* tells a story few other games can match: a story that covers every stone of a planet, includes every single nation over more than six thousand years of struggle and progress. Where the narratives of other games draw inspiration from the novel and the epic, *Civ 5* draws from the history and the chronicle. It also draws inspiration from its players. No two playthroughs of *Civ 5* will ever be the same. The decision tree is eschewed for a true sandbox - one that meaningfully affects the narrative of the game (meaningfully *is* the narrative of the game). When players play against each other in a game of *Civ 5*, they collaboratively tell a story that will always be unique to that particular moment.

The narrative of *Civ 5* is emergent. The author of narrative in *Civ 5* is not the game designers, but instead the players, indicating a substantial shift in the location of narrative production. This shift present in emergent storytelling is a culturally significant shift, representing the possibility for a more democratic storytelling. Successful systems for emergent narrative are culturally empowering, particularly in a society that is overwhelmingly consumptive when it comes to narrative. Emergent narrative is not un-designed narrative, and *Civ 5* does an excellent job illustrating this. Using a system of narrative orientation, *Civ 5* creates the materials needed to tell meaningful stories, both alone and with other players.

Narrative orientation takes the gameplay components of a game system and invests narrative significance into them. This way, when those pieces collide according to the gameplay decisions made by the player, meaningful interaction occurs. When narrative orientation is done incorrectly, the story that is produced will not be meaningful and players will not be invested. One of the most successful elements of narrative orientation displayed by *Civ 5* is the way it creates clear authorship. Almost all of the major components in the game are tied to one of the civilizations -- i.e. to a player (whether human or AI) -- giving a clear sense of authorship to every moment of narrative. *Civ 5* is a game between players, and the game system operates as a base to facilitate this, rather than trying to influence the story itself. The great leaders of each civilization are one aspect of narrative orientation that has already been briefly discussed. They help to maintain the illusion of a player-driven game when AI players are present, helping to distinguish between the game system and the systems that run each of the AI civilizations.

In a narrative of conquest, exploitation, and grand scale, a charming sense of humor helps to balance the tone of the game. The mad-lib nature of *Civ 5* produces this needed refreshment.   To have King Gandhi the Warmonger take over the city of Boston in 200 BC provides tremendous delight to players, even the one who is losing his/her city. The pleasure of this mad-lib humor is more than just silly mish-mash however. It is a cultural *detournement* of conventional history, providing a sense of historical autonomy and playing with the rigidity of our pasts. In this way, *Civ 5* does more than just catch our interest with allusions to actual history. It empowers us to reinvent history.

McKenzie Wark, in his book *Gamer Theory*, suggests that the *Civilization* series provides a way for understanding our contemporary reality. For Wark, *Civilization* "is not so much an allegory for world history as an allegorithm for gamespace itself." The "allegorithm" (an understanding of the world derived from a player's relations to his/her game's systems) of *Civ 5* casts the player as game designer. "There are dependent and independent variables," Wark says, "...[designers] will choose cultural, business, and technical options that maximize long-term advantages… [the *Civilization* series] models not so much "civilization" as the game design business, which in turn models modern gamespace." For Wark, the actions of the player express a method of creation and authorship that correlates to the way games are made (which for Wark's theory of gamespace, also correlates to the way reality is produced for consumption). From this understanding, a meta-narrative emerges in *Civ 5*, in which the player acts out the process of world design that shapes our contemporary existence and our relation to games. Unlike the actual narrative of *Civ 5*, this meta-narrative is not player driven. Instead, it is

like a theater play or ritual, symbolically reenacting the creation myth of our contemporary moment.

Strongest Element

There are five ways to win *Civ 5*, each celebrating a different style of play: conquest for the aggressive player, science-production for the loner, diplomacy for the socialite, culture for the synergist, points for the min-maxer. It is not coincidence though that each of these play-styles also embodies a cultural way of being: domination, self-industry, unity, art, perfection. A player's decisions each turn are shaped as much by the question "what is my civilization's way of being?" as "what is the best way for me to win?". The player's work as author defines the way he/she plays the game by determining *what kind of civilization* he/she wants to bring into the world. This is an impressive moment not only for the way that the player's perception of narrative influences gameplay decisions, but also for the types of philosophical/cultural questions that the emergent narrative of *Civ 5* asks the player to subtly grapple with.

Unsuccessful Element

The juxtaposition of a narrative way of being with the competitive elements of the game is not only what makes *Civ 5* so great but also what causes its greatest problems. *Civ 5* promises you infinite worlds, but the victory conditions of the game mean that there are only so many ways of being that *Civ 5* will accept as valid. Sometimes this can be useful to bring awareness to complex issues like national defense, land rights, and international relations, but more attention could have been paid to several elements for what they say about our world and how civilizations can exist. The technology tree is a first-class progress narrative. Cultural diffusion is simply a means to control other nations. There are essentially greater and lesser civilizations (players and city-states). The victory conditions are totalitarian and imperial (be it through oppression or ideology). *Civ 5*'s game systems are structured so that you cannot avoid these underlying assumptions as you play the game, and designers need to be more aware of the types of narratives they allow when the design their games.

Highlight

The narrative of *Civ 5* reaches its peak moments of interest as it transitions from the early-game into the mid-game (around turn 100). At this point, the world begins to come together into a cohesive and intelligible object, transitioning from a local understanding and narrative of a player's own civilization to a more collaborative stage of world politics. The idea of winning is still too far off to dominate play, and the player's civilization has enough of a history behind it to feel truly personal. Civilizations who have min-maxed in one direction begin to round themselves out here, as the expansion-contraction of the technology tree's dependencies begin to take effect. It is during these turns that players can become absorbed in the flow of the game, and it is here that the best stories emerge once the game is done.

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Critical Reception

Given the genre and emergent quality of the narrative, it is not something that is commonly critiqued or even actively engaged with by most game reviews. This, however, does not mean that a consideration of the narrative is not present in the reviews or that the way the narrative is told is not of importance to those reviewing the game. Anthony Gallegos, in a review of the original game (before expansions) at IGN begins by saying:

> My Iroquois nation spreads across the world quickly, being likened to plague by my enemies. In real life, this relatively small group of people was all but wiped out by the end of the 20th century, but in my game, they are a force to be reckoned with -- a nation wresting control of the seas with modern navies, and taking cities by force with infantry and tanks. Manifest Destiny takes on a whole new meaning …
> This is what Civilization V is all about.

Judged by its presentation, graphics, sound, gameplay, and lasting appeal, no specific consideration was given to the narrative when Gallegos gave the game a 9/10, but it is the first thing that Gallegos speaks of. He says that this narrative experience, this revisioning of history and construction of a nation, is "what Civilization V is all about."

Critics were often most frustrated with the AI players of the game. Quintin Smith, from Eurogamer.net, gave *Civ 5* an 8/10, criticizing its AI for being "opponents that won't make for fond memories." He regards the great leaders as people with distinct personalities, but finds their gameplay decisions to be "curiously terrible." He acknowledges that the production of narrative works best with other players, saying "for all the hours [*Civ 5*] eats up, outside of multiplayer it gives disappointingly little back."

Lessons

- Not all game narratives need to draw inspiration from the novel and the epic. *Civ 5* demonstrates the success of the history as a narrative structure, and this same principle should be expanded to cover other less explored writing structures.
- When designing games with player-driven or emergent narratives, specific attention should be paid to narrative authorship. *Civ 5* locates all narrative production in human players or AI players, defining clear authors for the collaborative world narrative.
- Emergent narrative benefits from more authors. *Civ 5* tells its greatest narratives when multiple human players contribute to the world-narrative and are able to share their story with each other.
- Embrace mad-libs when designing emergent narratives! *Civ 5* maintains the levity required for such a long-form game through its humorous mad-libbing of real historical elements. These juxtapositions are also a great form of culture-jamming or *detournement*.
- Be aware of how the game systems affect the narrative players are capable of telling. Sometimes this can be enlightening, like the meta-narrative derived from Wark's book, *Gamer Theory*, but it can also be bad, like the imperialist and totalitarian limitations of *Civ 5*'s narrative potential.

Summation

       Civ 5 does a phenomenal job of empowering its players to tell unique historical narratives. The narrative components of the game are elegant, situating narrative production in the act of gameplay. Because of its genre and lack of traditional narrative components, however, *Civ 5* might not get the recognition it deserves among game writers and narrative scholars. It presents a shift away from 'games with narrative' and towards 'narrative-platform games,' invoking a more democratic form of narrative specific to interactive media. *Civ 5* is more than just spreadsheets and strategy; it is a platform for participatory culture and innovation in narrative design.