Civilization: Sid Meier’s Legacy.

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Case Study.
From his humble origins as the co-founder of a garage startup, Sid Meier has grown to become a game industry superstar. Most prominent in his success has been the Civilization series, which has sold over five million copies in its half a dozen incarnations.\(^1\) The success of the Civilization series can be attributed to Sid’s unique philosophy for game design. Sid’s emphasis on interactivity over flashy animation, sound effects and action sequences makes him truly stand apart as a game designer. It is this model of game design that makes Civilization so unique and was the vital lynchpin in its success.

**In the beginning...**

Sid’s successful career as a game designer began in 1982 when a younger Sid and future business partner Bill Stealey were both working for General Instruments Corporation. Excited by their conversations about video games, they decided to come together and founded Microprose, one of many basement computer companies founded in the early 1980s.\(^2\) Their first release, F-15 Strike Eagle, a flight simulator, came out later that year and went on to sell over one million copies worldwide.\(^3\) This initial success gave Microprose what it needed to take off: over the next seven years it would release eight new games including Silent Service, Sid Meier’s Pirates!, Red Storm Rising and F-19 stealth fighter.\(^4\)

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Sid Meier’s RailRoad Tycoon

In 1990, Sid Meier collaborated with Bruce Shelley of Avalon Hill to release Sid Meier’s Railroad Tycoon. Railroad Tycoon was inspired by the many hours Sid Meier had spent decompressing from Gunship by playing SimCity, the smash hit that Maxis Games star designer Will Wright had released on the world the year before. Sid’s main complaint had been that while SimCity was very entertaining, he wouldn’t be comfortable doing something similar unless clear objectives were set so that the player could actually “win” the game. In Railroad Tycoon, Sid Meier developed a lot of the same design aspects that would later find there way into Civilization. As Sid puts it:

“I got the idea of taking multiple simple systems and having them work together to create an interesting complexity. There was operating the railroad, playing the stock market, building track. It was like different things that individually are pretty simple and easy to understand and easy to get into, that when they interact, create an interesting kind of complexity.”

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In addition to this, Railroad Tycoon took a step up from SimCity and introduced competing railroads that were controlled by the computer. This was a unique concept that would become a cornerstone of Civilization.

**Sid Meier’s Civilization**

The original Sid Meier’s Civilization was released for DOS in 1991 and immediately changed the face of gaming forever. Lead design for Civilization was credited to both Sid Meier and Bruce Shelley, although it was inevitably Sid’s name that found its way onto the box, having become somewhat of a brand name. Fitting neatly on four 3 ½” floppy disks and running smoothly on a 386 with four megabytes of memory, it was by no means a marvel of technology. Its graphics were below average for the time and multimedia was limited to several basic sound effects and cheesy animations. The key to Civilization’s success lied in its scope: it was the first true “God Game”, allowing the user hundreds of options on both a macroscopic and microscopic level to lead their civilization through time as they watched it evolve from a bird’s eye view. It was the

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pinnacle of what Robert Rouse refers to as “complex gameplay emerging out of multiple consistent systems acting in parallel.”

Civilization underwent a considerable metamorphosis throughout its design phase. Sid had originally intended the game to have more of a SimCity feel, with cities basically maintaining themselves and the user having relatively minimal control. His choice to make city resource management a large part of the game was perhaps one of the most revolutionary elements of Civilization that contrasted it heavily from both its contemporaries and future strategy games. In SimCity, building structures became an end unto itself, with no other higher purpose in the game. In many Real-Time Strategy games, such as StarCraft, structures serve as little more than homogenous breeder pits for units. Also, Civilization added the ability to build unique improvements, known as wonders of the world (such as the Pyramids), to add further spice and complexity to the game. Civilization’s optimal balance of production and improvement was

9 “Sid Meier’s Legacy: Civilization Interview” available: http://www.gamespot.com/features/sidlegacy/civi.html
rewarded with numerous accolades among them being named “The Best Game of All Time” in 1996 by Computer Gaming World magazine.\(^\text{10}\)

Civilization’s underlying drive for maximum interactivity by a large number of systems acting in parallel is a good model for generating game histories. While the interactivity of the game is constrained by the limits of player game options, the number of systems that the player is able to manipulate simultaneously makes for a vast array of possible solutions to any game problem. This leads to what Richard Rouse refers to as “player-unique solutions to situations in the game.”\(^\text{11}\) Indeed this sort of “emergent” game play has yielded a myriad of strategy books and websites devoted to Civilization and its progeny. The very existence of these sites further reinforces the compelling nature of the Civilization franchise.

The design of the user interface for Civilization was a natural step forward from Railroad Tycoon. Civilization takes its interface a step further however, by adding a dynamic text interface. This interface was unique in that it fully integrated a macroscopic snapshot of one’s civilization while at the same time giving the properties of the unit that


\(^{11}\) Rouse. “Game Design: Theory and Practice. Chapter Seven: The Elements of Gameplay.”
the player was manipulating. This model of interface is incredibly efficient in immersing the user in a wealth of encyclopedic data at a mouse click’s notice. It would become the template interface for not just the Civilization series, but a variety of other strategy games as well.

One issue that emerged in the design phase dealt with where to end the game. Essentially, as the player advances forward through time technology reveals itself in the form of 54 technological advances new units, city improvements and capabilities\textsuperscript{12}. Many argue that this approach is a poor simulation of reality, in that it clumps socially processes together with a lot of accidental discoveries\textsuperscript{13}. For instance democracy and gunpowder are both technology advancements available in the game, though the process by which one arrives at these discoveries is entirely different. While being a poor substitute for reality, by making the tech tree simple enough for a decision on what direction one wishes there Civilization to go in to be decided with a mouse-click, Shelley and Meier made it fun rather than tedious. The tech tree serves to make the game even more dynamic by adding yet another parallel system and giving the player one more ball to juggle, yet keeps from overwhelming the player by keeping it relatively simple.

One of the key issues that needed to be worked out in the design process was where to cut off the game. Sid Meier had originally wanted to include units such as paratroopers, aegis cruisers and stealth. Sid became concerned about if there truly was a good place to cut it off, and opted to cut the game off at World War II technology.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{13} Watrall, Ethan. “Chopping Down the Tech Tree: Perspectives of Technological Linearity in God Games. Part Two” Gamasutra. Available: \url{http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20000607/watrall_01.htm}.

\textsuperscript{14} “Sid Meier’s Legacy: Civilization 1.” Available: \url{http://www.gamespot.com/features/sidlegacy/civi.html}. 
turned out to be a wise decision, as it gave the game some room to grow in its second and third editions.

Other minor issues showed up in the original Civilization. The random number generator that was used to resolve unit combat often produced questionable results and was the largest complaint among Civ fans. Many players experienced frustration when their incredibly powerful and expensive battleship disintegrated upon attacking an intuitively weak legion unit, armed only with swords and spears. As veteran gamer Michael Gower puts it “Over the course of an hour I would find myself screaming at the screen at least half a dozen times when the computer produced results that made absolutely no sense.”

This problem was fixed somewhat in later versions of Civilization.

In December 1993, Microprose had undergone a merger with Spectrum Holobyte (of Tetris fame) and reshuffled its management team, making Sid Meier executive vice president of product development. This changed his role within the company, taking his attention away from the Civilization series and focusing it more on the general direction of Microprose. This would have adverse affects on the next game in the Civ franchise.

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Sid Meier’s change of focus away from Civilization showed in the second addition to the Civilization series, Sid Meier’s CivNet. It was nothing more than the original Civilization with a multiplayer version and a map generator tacked on. Many complained that the graphics were really behind the times and that it required far too many system resources for what it produced.\textsuperscript{17}

Many gamers had purchased it believing it was Civilization II when in reality it was just add on to the original Civilization. Making matters worse, the real Civilization II was released only a few months after CivNet.\textsuperscript{18} The entire letdown of CivNet can be attributed to Sid Meier not being directly involved with the project (it was produced by William F. Denman)\textsuperscript{19} as well as it being released too long after the original Civilization. If it had been released a few months or even a year after Civ I, it no doubt would have posted stronger sales than its meager couple hundred thousand units.\textsuperscript{20}

**Sid Meier’s Civilization II**

In 1995, Sid Meier’s Civilization II was released. It would be the last game of the Civilization series to be published and developed at Microprose. Sid Meier had become fed up with the new management from Spectrum Holobyte and would take his core team

\textsuperscript{17} UseGroup commentary comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.strategic - Nov 24, 1995 by Old Man.
\textsuperscript{18} “Moby Games: Sid Meier’s Civilization II” Moby Games available: http://www.mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameId=15/.
\textsuperscript{19} “Moby Games: Sid Meier’s CivNet” Moby Games available: http://www.mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameId=1892/.
\textsuperscript{20} “Sid Meier’s Legacy: Civnet” GameSpot. available: http://www.gamespot.com/features/sidlegacy/civn.html.
of Bryan Reynolds and Jeff Briggs with him to form Firaxis shortly thereafter and bring
his focus back to making good games.\textsuperscript{21}

Most of the actual design for Civilization II was taken over by Jeffrey Briggs,
Douglas Kaufmann and Brian Reynolds.\textsuperscript{22} Civilization II underwent an extensive
makeover from the original
Civilization. Several new
features were added. To
compensate for the bad
combat generator that fans
had complained about in the
original Civilization the
designers added two new
statistics, known as hit points
and firepower to give more
contemporary units, such as
those with firearms, an even
greater advantage against their medieval or ancient foes.\textsuperscript{23}

Several other improvements were made in Civilization II. A variety of new
improvements, wonders and units were added. The tech chart was further flushed out.
Diplomacy features were expanded. A number of other cosmetic changes were made as
well. Multimedia was added, with animated advisers and video for when Wonders were

\textsuperscript{21} Vargas, Lulio “Sid Meier Interview.” MacGamer. May, 07 2002. available:
\textsuperscript{22} “Moby Games: Sid Meier’s Civilization II”
constructed. The graphics resolution was improved and the perspective of the game was changed, changing the map to an incline rather than the overhead tile view of the original. The concept of inter-civilization traded was expanded on, showing signs of how the trade system would emerge in Civilization III.  

Civilization II would be one of the last games that Microprose would produce. With the loss of Sid Meier, Microprose had lost its trump card and largely evaporated into a minor subsidiary of Spectrum Holobyte, which was itself slowly riding into the sunset. Civilization II would go on to be awarded Game of the Year—1996, by PC Gamer Magazine.

Civilization II would have a number of smaller add-ones that would be sold both by Microprose and Hasbro Interactive. Hasbro Interactive, a subsidiary of the Hasbro toy giant, had acquired Spectrum Holobyte and Microprose in an orgy of acquisition trying to corner the video game market in the mid-1990s. In an effort to squeeze every last bit of capital out of its investment, it haphazardly released Civ II: Multiplayer Gold Edition and Civ II: Test of Time in 1998 and 1999. Neither of these games made much noise and were not able to keep Microprose or subsequently Hasbro Interactive, from going under. In 1999, Hasbro closed the former offices of Microprose in Alameda, CA and Chapel Hill, NC. Shortly thereafter, the remnants of which were sold of to video game publisher Infogrames in early 2000.

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24 ‘Civ II Manual” p.39, 41,57-59.”
25 “Civ III awards” Official Civ III site.
Sid Meier’s Civilization III

In 2001, Infogrames and Firaxis released Sid Meier’s Civilization III. Civilization III was revolutionary in a variety of ways. The flashy multimedia approach that had been added to Civ II was underemphasized in favor of increasing the interactivity yielded to the user. A moderate amount of animation and sound was kept in the game, in the form of movement and combat animations for units, the diplomacy window and the soundtrack, but the things such as the wonders animations and advisor animations that had appeared in Civ II were largely scrapped so that resources could be better allocated to enhancing gameplay. Programmers and developers focused their attention on creating a game experience that Sid Meier describes as the “ultimate Civilization experience.” Sid took a relatively active role in this version of Civilization, although the primary masterminds behind the game were Jeff Briggs and Soren Johnson. Many of the subordinates had previous Civ

experience as well: Dave Evans, one of the programmers, had composed the music for 
Civ II, to give just one example.\(^{28}\)

Several new systems were added to the game that completely changed game play. 
One of these was the introduction of strategic resources and luxury goods. Strategic 
resources are items such as iron, coal and uranium that are spread throughout the world 
map. They are vital to a civilization at certain tech levels to permit the manufacture of 
certain military items and city improvements available at that technology level. For 
instance, swordsmen, one cannot build jet fighters without aluminum, or build railroads 
without iron and coal. Without the right strategic resources, a civilization may find itself 
unable to produce contemporary units or improvements and thereby poor and vulnerable 
to attack. As not every civilization on a planet can have a complete monopoly on every 
single strategic resource, it can serve the role of either a catalyst for trade or a catalyst for 
war. Luxury goods are items like silk and spices that aid in keeping the populations of 
your cities happy, yet another vital component of winning the game. Together these add 
both a dose of realism and a further element of emergent game play.\(^{29}\)

Another system added to the game is the idea of culture. This is the sum product 
of your temples, libraries, wonders and other cultural improvements that give your 
civilization an identity. Your culture gives you an advantage in negotiations with other 
civilizations and the culture of individual cities is pinnacle in defining the borders of your 
civilization. If a civilization neglects culture, it is likely to begin losing its own cities to 
cultural defections to other civilizations and also to be treated with contempt by its

\(^{28}\) “Sid Meier’s Civilization III” Moby Games. Available: 
http://www.mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameId,5289/.

\(^{29}\) Instruction Manual Civilization III, p.59-60
adversaries. It is a vital aspect of Civilization and it has even become possible to beat the
game by means of a cultural victory over the computer opponents.\textsuperscript{30}

In an effort to give the user more possible endgames, the
designers of Civ III opted to give the user 6 possible ways to win the game. In addition to
the two original ways to win, by building and sending a spaceship to Alpha Centauri or
conquering the world, the designers added four new forms of victory. These include the
aforementioned cultural victory, a diplomatic victory by building the United Nations
wonder and being elected chairman, a victory by game score and a victory by conquering
2/3 of the planet by the time the clock
runs out.\textsuperscript{31} These added modes of
winning give the player a greater
number of options and paths to follow
in planning out the long-term vision of
their civilization.

Individual civilizations have
now been customized to have among
other things their own cultural
identities, strengths and unique units.
These various aspects give the player
further factors to take into
consideration and plan around accordingly. These also play into the concept of a Golden
Age, a new feature that allows the user a period of greater production, trade and military

\textsuperscript{30} Instruction Manual, Civilization III. p.131.
\textsuperscript{31} pp.173-176.
strength for them to take advantage of. This is yet another thing to plan around because if
a player sets up for a Golden Age properly they will be able to springboard themselves a
considerable distance ahead of their opponents or catch up if they are behind. This adds
yet another system that must be taken into consideration by the player and a further
element of interactivity.\textsuperscript{32}

All these factors added up to a game that in many ways exceeded its expectations. Sid
Meier and his design team had taken an award winning formula, expanded on it and created a truly
unique, challenging and highly interactive game. “Just one more turn” syndrome once again plagued
the dorms of countless college students and caused many a late day to be taken. In recognition for their efforts, the design team was rewarded with numerous accolades including “Game of The Year” 2001 from Computer Games
Magazine, “PC Strategy game of the year” 2001 from gamespy.com and being editors choice of five other computer game industry publications.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} pp.142-143.
Sid Meier goes against the grain of the multiplayer revolution when he states: “the single player experience has always been our primary focus.” Despite this, Civilization III nevertheless came out with its own multiplayer version, Civilization III: Play the World, less than a year after debuting Civilization III. Unfortunately, the Play The World expansion would become a disappointment. It found itself being panned by critics, primarily because of its shaky multiplayer option. Gamespot.com went so far as to say "the multiplayer is also an unmitigated disaster. Play The World’s multiplayer is almost unplayable.” As a company that had for years emphasized the single player in its games, particularly Civilization, Firaxis had indeed disappointed. Play The World now looks slated to follow down the same path that CivNet found itself traveling down about 8 years earlier.

History will remember you as...

Sid Meier has followed down a long trail since producing the original Civilization in 1991. His own road to success has been littered with both successes and failures. Fortunately, in the fast paced world of the computer game industry, he has managed to produce hits time and time again. The Civilization series itself is littered with numerous successes and failures along the way, but the core elements of it Civ I, II and III have all been smash hits that have changed the industry through their emphasis on interactivity rather than multimedia. There overwhelming success can be attributed to Sid picking his battles wisely. They are not technological marvels; they are marvels of user interactivity. Sid Meier’s success should serve as a harbinger for a game industry preoccupied with


polygon counts and refresh rates. As Sid puts it: “If we don't have gameplay, we can't really compete with other forms of entertainment because we can't do graphics as good as the movie industry and we can't make sounds as well as the recording industry. All we can do that's special to us is be interactive. So we have to hang on to that and make sure we do a good job.” Civilization embodies this interactivity in so many ways and will forever remain Sid Meier’s legacy.