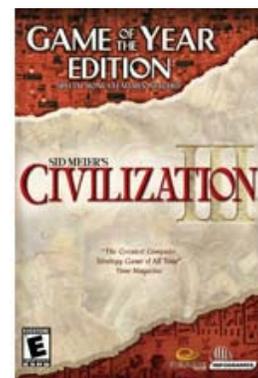
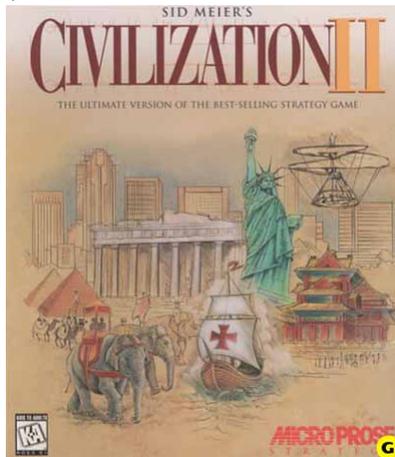
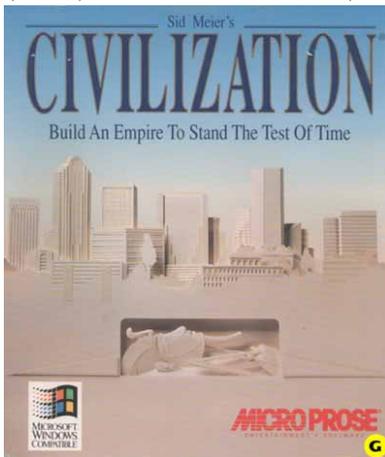


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The games of Sid Meier's Civilization (Civ) series have been a curious anomaly on the computer gaming landscape. The games are slow-paced, graphically mediocre by most standards, and have not been successfully ported to multiplayer versions. Yet the Civ series has enjoyed both success and critical acclaim. Many major gaming magazines or resources mark Civilization 1 and/or 2 as some of the best and most influential games ever produced. Gamespot.com¹ named it one of the 15 most influential games of all time. IGN's PC division named it the 4th best game of all time. It's in the Hall of Fame at Gamespy.com² and PC Gamer.³ Not only did the game receive high marks, but it catapulted its chief designer into a star within the computer gaming industry. Sid Meier is today considered a design guru and one of the most creative minds in the business.



Sid Meier's Civilization is a turn-based⁴ strategy game in which the subject matter is the rise of human civilizations and cultures throughout history. It is the ultimate god game. During the game, a player must balance elements of diplomacy, economics, government, military conquest, exploration, science and research, and population dynamics. The game can be won either by defeating other empires and dissolving them into your own, or being the first empire to reach Alpha Centauri, a mythical planet in space. Along the way, the player is forced to match wits against some of history's most prominent leaders. The original Civilization was released in 1991 for the PC by MicroProse, and has since been translated into multiple foreign languages.⁵ In addition, there have been many sequels in the series: most notably, CivNet (1995), Civilization 2 (1997), and Civilization 3 (2001).⁶



¹ http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/most_influential/p10.html

² <http://www.gamespy.com/legacy/halloffame/civ.shtm>

³ PC Gamer, May 1997.

⁴ Turn-based games allow the player to make all of his or her moves in a linear fashion during a 'turn', after which the computer or a competitor makes their moves. This process is repeated over and over. In real-time games, all of the action occurs simultaneously.

⁵ <http://apolyton.net/>

⁶ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index.shtml>

History: Pre-Civilization

The original Civilization was Sid Meier's piece de resistance, and probably the game for which he will be most remembered. However, many people often overlook the fact that Meier's career spans over a decade both before and after Civilization. Any review of Meier's development of the Civ series cannot be complete without an examination of Meier's work on other games, because they provide insight into the formulation of his designing principles and dogma.

Meier's story begins, fittingly, with a tall tale. In the early 80s, Sid was a systems analyst for General Instrument Corporation. One day he happened to be playing an arcade flight game with a co-worker, Bill Steale. Steale, a former military pilot, was amazed that Meier could consistently rack up such high scores. Meier explained that the secret to the game was remembering the patterns used by the enemy AI; once the patterns were learned, the player could respond before the enemy could. The story then has it that Meier bragged that he could create a game with better AI in a matter of weeks. Somewhere during this process, Meier and Stealey formed a small garage operation, and gaming giant MicroProse was born.⁷

MicroProse's evolution followed a similar script to that of many other pioneering companies in the gaming world – a small group of engineers working out of a makeshift office and eventually growing into a large operation:

MicroProse was a pretty linear evolution...reflecting what the PC industry was doing...The irony is we thought we were behind the curve, that the industry had already peaked, and we were just trying to catch up. This was like 1981, 1982. In hindsight, it was a great time, the timing was excellent.⁸

Despite the humble beginnings, MicroProse grew steadily through the 80s and 90s, and Meier built up an impressive resume of games, that spanned many genres. In 1985, the submarine simulator Silent Service brought a fresh emphasis on action and excitement to a genre that focused on realism and detail. This trend was continued in the wargames Crusade in Europe and Decision in the Desert. One particularly bright spot was Meier's Pirates!, an action/adventure/RPG game that ClassicGaming called "one [of] the greatest combinations of role playing, strategy, resource management and action ever to have

⁷ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index.shtml#formative>

⁸ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index.shtml#formative>

been produced.”⁹ Pirates! successfully blended just the right amounts of real-time and turn-based gaming. Experience with both these formats in Pirates! and other games would be crucial in Meier’s eventual work on Civilization.

However, Meier’s “fun” games were also balanced with detail-heavy simulations such as the wargame NATO Division Commander and the flight simulators F-19 Stealth Fighter and Gunship. NATO Division Commander was a port of an Avalon Hill board game, but was hampered heavily by an emphasis on detail and micromanagement. Although many of the wargames were disappointments, some of Meier’s flight simulators managed to combine just the right amounts of realism and fun. F-19, in particular, was lauded for breathing cerebral qualities into a genre centered mainly on reflexes and flying skill; for example, the F-19’s stealth capabilities meant that knowing when to fight was just as important as being able to fight well. Gamespot.com notes “MicroProse thus built its early empire by becoming the undisputed champion of flight sims, and it was games like Gunship [and F-19] that got them there.”¹⁰ Looking over Meier’s pre-Civ body of work, it was apparent that by 1990, Meier had experimented with enough games so that he had a good feel for how best to combine cerebral, detail-oriented gaming with fun gaming.

History: Enter The Classic

Will Wright’s SimCity introduced a whole new paradigm into computer gaming: the god-like simulation, where the player presides over a large map and interacts with a simulated system of some sort. Railroad Tycoon was Meier’s first SimCity-inspired game – a real-time strategy game in which the player takes over a railroad company and tries to out-expand and outmaneuver competitors. Crucially, it served as a testing ground for Meier to create simple systems that interacted to produce a complex simulation. Meier himself notes:

“[Railroad Tycoon] basically paved the way for Civilization, in that 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.”¹¹

This type of modeling scheme would come to full fruition in Civilization.

Meier began work on a prototype of Civilization as far back as 1989, and in 1991, MicroProse adopted it as a full-on project. Meier himself was responsible for most of the early programming and initial art. Eventually, Meier would be joined by collaborator Bruce Shelley (Age of Empires) and a small team of artists to finish the project. Meier is known as one of the best creative minds in the field, who can take a subject which interests him, research it, and then develop a game around the subject. In this case, he took on the daunting task of recreating the whole of human history. However, he emphasizes that his focus in Civilization was recreating history on a level to which most people, regardless of formal education, could relate.

In a game like Civilization many of the ideas there are important but they are ones that the players are already familiar with. As you start to play you start to run into “do you

⁹ <http://www.classicgaming.com/gotcha/1987.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index.shtml#formative>

¹¹ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml#tycoon>

want to invent the wheel or do you want to work on currency” – everyone knows those ideas so they feel they understand the decision. We do some historical research but it is not the starting point for a game. We want people to be able to start the game already knowing enough to play.¹²

That Civilization takes place on the grandest of scales no doubt contributed greatly to the game’s popularity and reputation. However, it was an ambitious task to say the least, and it was apparent to the developers that it would have to be designed very well.

Meier had always been a firm believer in prototyping and testing, and the development of Civ was no exception. Shelley describes the countless iterations of prototyping that Civilization went through:

[Meier] basically did all the prototyping by himself. Once he had a build that was playable, we began an iterative process of talking about the game, then he'd re-code it, we'd play it for a day and then we'd talk again. I usually came to work earlier than he did, but at some time in the morning, he'd come in with a new version of the game, he'd give it to me, and he'd say "Okay, play this for a couple of hours and tell me what you think." Then we'd get together in the afternoon and I'd give him feedback on what I was liking and what I wasn't liking. Then he'd work on a new version. So basically, he built a new version of the game every day for roughly a year.¹³

The earliest versions of Civ were actually done in real-time, just like SimCity and Railroad Tycoon, which were both examples of the success a game developer could have in giving the player a god-like sense of control in real-time. However, the real-time paradigm proved too passive for the game of domination and conquest that Meier and Shelley were envisioning. Meier’s previous experiments with both real-time and turn-based games (most notably in Pirates!) enabled him to understand the defect. Meier recalls his eventual dissatisfaction with the real-time version of the game: “It always had a hands-off feel, "I'm trying to make something happen, sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't." You didn't really feel like "The Emperor" or "The King," making things happen.”¹⁴ Meier and Shelley halted work on Civ to work on another MicroProse project (Covert Operation) before returning to Civ with the idea to make it turn-based. According to Meier, once the game was converted to turn-based strategy, the development “really came together.”¹⁵

Although both Meier and Shelley felt that they were producing a “special” game, it was a bit of a departure from the usual. In the early 1990s, MicroProse was dominating the flight simulator market, and the strategy genre was in a slump. Meier describes the state of strategy games at the time as “In those days, strategy was a dirty word. If you called your game a strategy game, it was the kiss of death. Strategy games in those days were generally hex-based, complicated games about the military. They were so hard to play, you had to be a fanatic.”¹⁶ Meier’s Civilization brought widespread appeal and relevance to a crossover audience and breathed an element of fun into what some considered a dying genre.

¹² <http://www.mindjack.com/interviews/sidmeier.html>

¹³ <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml#civ>

¹⁶ <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1-pg2.html>

The original Civilization was released without much fanfare in 1991 by MicroProse. Initial sales numbers were slow, but as news spread of the wonderful gameplay and addictiveness of the game, sales shot up.¹⁷ Civilization garnered a number of awards in 1991-1992, and is still today considered to be the most influential strategy game of all time.¹⁸ It was the first turn-based strategy game to break the 100,000 units sold mark, eventually selling over 850,000 units!^{19,20}

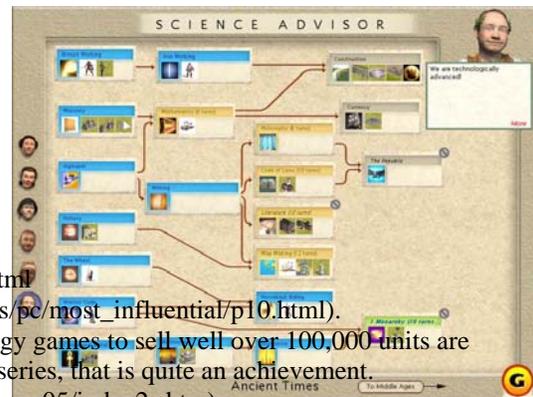
Design Choices – Making Human History “Playable”

A number of design choices helped to make Civilization the success that it was, and many of the features introduced in Civ are still used in games today. For starters, the modeling system used by Meier managed to blend together elements of economics, military conflict, science and research, intellectual growth, demographics, government, and long-term planning into a coherent whole that “captures the flow of human innovation and cultural expansion.”²¹ This ‘complexity out of simple systems’ design principle – begun most noticeably with SimCity and then continued in Railroad Tycoon – resulted in a simulation that was so good that even the latest incarnation of Civilization (Civ3, 2001) almost a decade later added only one extra element (culture) to the model. One of the design goals for Meier was to give gamers a solid feel for this model and how it determined the game results, rather than envelop it in mystery. The developers decided to tackle this problem by using icons to represent the game states as much as possible.

When we went to the turn-based idea of the game, we had this sense of what I call 'discreteness'. Everything is clear. Everything is done by integers. You move three squares. You need ten food to increase your population. There was a feeling of really being hands-on and we wanted to carry that through with the icons. The other thing is that 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 and we don't have some magical model churning away in the background, dividing a bunch of floating point numbers that would tell you at some point, "Congratulations! You've won or you've lost!" The icons reinforce that this isn't a complicated game.²²

Thus, iconography was built into the game to give players a sense of understanding about the Civilization world.

Along those lines, Meier and Shelley introduced another feature to ease the player's understanding of the game's mechanics: tech trees. The trees laid out the types of growth that were available in the game, but also infused the game with a sense of



¹⁷ <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1-pg2.html>

¹⁸ [Gamespot.com \(http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/most_influential/p10.html\)](http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/most_influential/p10.html).

¹⁹ Considering that, to this day, the only turn-based strategy games to sell well over 100,000 units are Civilization 1, 2, and 3, Panzer General, and the X-Com series, that is quite an achievement. (<http://www.gamespy.com/articles/february02/strategygames05/index2.shtm>)

²⁰ <http://apolyton.net/civ1/>

²¹ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml#civ>

²² <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1-pg2.html>

accomplishment. Meier adds, “Our tech tree originally came from the same idea of bringing to the player these touchstones of history that they're familiar with.”²³ Hence, because the game was so long, it was important to give players intermediate goals to work towards. Another feature that was added to combat the epic scale and length of the game was the Wonders of the World. These special structures, once built, gave their builder’s empire special abilities, and competitors were blocked from building the same Wonder.

As described earlier, the decision to make Civ a turn-based game rather than a real-time game changed the experience drastically. Civilization is still today seen as THE turn-based strategy game, because it proved relatively early on that turn-based games could be just as engaging as their real-time brethren. Interestingly, although most gamers and developers see real-time strategy games as more action-packed and dynamic, for Meier and his team, turn-based gaming turned out to be more active for their vision of the game. Although the game moved much more slowly as a result, Meier liked the fact that the players made each move in their empires, instead of relying on spotty AI to fill in the details. Also, the slower pace of the game meant that players could plan out their strategies at their leisure and examine the status of any portion of their empires with ease and in more detail than real-time could every provide.²⁴ Although some do complain about issues of micromanagement at the end stages of the game, Meier managed to keep the game interesting by adding intermediate goals, as mentioned before, and smooth gameplay and efficient modeling mechanics. Thus, even though the game moves slowly, many Civ players describe their experience playing the game with the ‘just one more turn’ phenomenon – unlike action games in which most of the gameplay is episodic, in turn-based gaming most gameplay continues until the user chooses to quit.²⁵ As such Civilization and its successors have been some of the most addictive games ever produced.

Improving On A Classic & Copycats

After the smash success of Civilization, Meier looked to other directions for a number of years, none of which had the same impact as Civilization. Some of these games included the forgettable Covert Action, Colonialization, and CPU Bach, a musical emulator. Meier then returned to Civilization in 1995 with a multiplayer version of the original game called CivNet. However, multiplayer was not a good direction for turn-based strategy to go, because of its slow pace, its lengthy duration, and the periods of waiting-time needed for multiple players to act. In fact, Meier acknowledges that, to this day, he has yet to come up with a good way to play Civilization with multiple players.²⁶

However, in 1997, the Civilization series was reanimated with the release of Civilization 2, a game that again won numerous accolades because of its improvements on the original. This time around, Meier was not the primary designer. Instead, a young developer at MicroProse named Brian Reynolds (who had been mentoring under Meier extensively) took most of the control of the project and brought it to completion. The

²³ <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1-pg3.html>

²⁴ <http://www.gamespy.com/articles/february02/strategygames05/index2.shtml>

²⁵ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml#civ>

²⁶ <http://www.mindjack.com/interviews/sidmeier.html>

most significant advancement in the game was visual. The outdated graphics were completely revamped, along with adjustments in the diplomacy system and the game's AI. Importantly, the game's design did not disturb the gameplay or game mechanics of the original, which had worked so well. Civilization 2 went on to become an even bigger success than the original (in terms of sales, not influence), selling well over a million units.

Unfortunately, with the success of the sequel came inter-office turmoil. By the time Civ2 shipped, MicroProse was under completely new management, and Meier, dissatisfied with the direction in which the company was now headed, decided to leave and start a new company. In 1997 Meier, Reynolds, another key developer named Jeff Briggs, along with a few faithful created Firaxis Games. There, they would go on to produce more turn-based strategy hits, like Alpha Centauri, Gettysburg, and the latest incarnation in the Civ series, Civilization 3 (released in October 2001).

Additional trouble brewed from outside the companies. In 1998, Activision released their own version of the real-time strategy series with the game Civilization: Call To Power. Not only was the game a blatant rip-off of the Civilization games, its designers went so far as to name the game after the original and pass it off as one of its successors. Eventually, MicroProse went to court with claims of "of false advertising, unfair competition, trademark infringement, and unfair business practices against Activision."²⁷ MicroProse ultimately won out and forced Activision to license the name from them.²⁸ However, Meier himself did not seem to take the matter very well, saying "know how hard it is to make a game, so I'm not anxious to criticize any other games out there. But if you're going to use other people's ideas, you need to also add a goodly number of your own."²⁹

Why Was/Is Civilization So Good?

Part of the reason why Civilization is viewed so highly is that its lineage is almost single-handedly promoting the survival of the turn-based strategy game. Gamespy.com recently published a series of articles comparing real-time strategy versus turn-based strategy. They noted that, although the Civilization series has had success, by and large, "Real-time strategy sells better, way better, than turn-based strategy."³⁰ Most gamers today simply prefer the fast-paced action and the dynamic graphics. Civilization's remarkable ability to circumvent these problems is twofold: firstly, its subject matter is so epic that people are intrinsically drawn to it. Civilization's tour of human history is appealing both in terms of the feeling of control that is derived from the game as well as the fact that players get a chance to rewrite history. The appeal of 'playing god' has been matched in other simulations such as the SimCity series, The Sims, Black & White, and other games. However, none of those games had such an epic feel to them; Gamespot refers to Civilization as "the quintessential world exploration/conquest game."³¹ In Civ, the narrative *is* human history. Secondly, it simply has done its job better than any other

²⁷ http://www.cdmag.com/articles/010/002/civilization_lawsuit.html

²⁸ Activision now markets the game as part of the Civilization lineage, even though none of the original Civ team had any part in the development of Civilization: Call To Power. (<http://www.activision.com/games/civilization/>).

²⁹ <http://www.cgonline.com/features/010829-i1-f1-pg5.html>

³⁰ <http://www.gamespy.com/articles/february02/strategygames05/index2.shtm>

³¹ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml#civ>

strategy game to date. The execution of solid gameplay, simple and understandable game mechanics, and sound design choices made the game extremely playable.

Furthermore, because the Civilization series is a true strategy game, it avoids some of the pitfalls associated with other genres. For example, Chris Crawford's game design tenet of non-linearity is carried out well in Civilization.³² Moreover, although there is not a strong sense of character attachment in the classical sense, because the player assumes control of the Civ world, he or she becomes the main 'character' of the game. And the narrative treats the whole of human history – something intrinsically interesting to nearly everybody.

The Civilization series (and perhaps its SimCity brethren) stands as the archetypal example of a series of games that was developed stressing concept and gameplay over graphics or other technical wizardry. One GameSpy.com editor noted, "Civilization made the empire-building genre really come to life, and get the attention it deserved. It also proved that fancy graphics and 3d sound were not needed for an immersive and enjoyable game."³³ This is a lesson that many of today's game designers could use well. Meier himself has always stressed gameplay over snazzy graphics and production:

I kind of miss the days when games were judged on their game-playing merit alone. I'm a little concerned about how far we (the game industry) are into the licensed four-page-ad marketing blitz era these days, which may be a natural evolution of the industry. But I'm always worried when we put more emphasis on glitz and production values than on the game. That's a trend that looks good for a while until you realize there's no game industry any more.³⁴

At the very least, the work of Meier, his team at Firaxis, and like-minded colleagues should ensure that we will avoid such a catastrophic outcome.

³² <http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/peabody/game-book/Chapter6.html>

³³ <http://apolyton.net/civ1/news/151199.shtml>

³⁴ <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml#state>

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