

*Civilization: Sid Meier's Legacy*

Acclaimed as one of the greatest computer games of all time, *Sid Meier's Civilization* and its follow-up *Sid Meier's Civilization II* rocked the gaming world with a delicate balance of strategy and simulation. Listed as *Gamespot U.K.*'s number one all-time series among both computer and console games, "*Civ*" and "*Civ II*" are universally recognized for the level to which their creator, hall-of-fame designer Sid Meier, raised the bar in terms of overall outstanding game-play. Few games have risen to the level of excellence that these games have achieved in computer gaming history.

*Civilization*, published in 1991 by MicroProse, puts the player in the role of a lone settler in a vast, uncharted world in the year 2000 B.C., and gives him the task of building an empire to "stand the test of time."<sup>1</sup> To accomplish this goal, the player must take on the roles of general, city manager, diplomat, scientist, and economist, as winning involves not only managing the art of war against rival civilizations, but also maintaining the prosperity of the player's empire. The player must balance "the four impulses of *Civilization*"—exploration, economics, knowledge, and conquest—to become more powerful, either through peaceful negotiations or world domination. In 1996, MicroProse released *Civilization II*, a sequel that vastly improved on the original *Civ* while maintaining the integrity of the original's game-play.

The inspiration for *Civilization* came from the Avalon Hill board game of the same name, set in the Mediterranean area of Europe and North Africa. Although billed as "a game of crisis management and economical planning,"<sup>2</sup> Avalon Hill's game allowed for the existence of aggression toward other players and set the stage for a game of

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<sup>1</sup> MicroProse's *Civilization II* Game Manual, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lilback.com/civilization>

conquest, although maintaining that the game can be won on peaceful terms. Avalon Hill later released an expansion set called *Advanced Civilization* which revised the rules of the original somewhat, making the game easier to play. For example, the revised rules changed the prerequisites for victory, allowing for a shorter game.

Board games such as those produced by Avalon Hill had a profound impact on Sid Meier, who used to play Avalon Hill's military-based board games as a young man in college.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Meier's fascination with history and gaming led him to pursue a major in history and computer science at the University of Michigan. While working for General Instruments installing operating systems for computerized cash registers, Meier maintained a strong interest in computer games by designing games for the Atari 800 in the style of *Space Invaders*. When he met John Stealey in 1982, Meier took his gaming hobby to the next level. Meier and Stealey formed MicroProse with \$1500 in start-up cash, and began producing games for the commercial market. Meier designed the games and Stealey sold them, and although the fledgling company began as an out-of-home operation, by 1990 MicroProse was pulling in \$25 million each year.

After several years of designing games at MicroProse, including *Silent Service*, *Red Storm Rising* and *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, Sid Meier teamed up with Bruce Shelley to design the *Civilization* computer game, inspired by the Avalon Hill board game. Shelley, a board game designer at Avalon Hill since 1980 and a computer game designer since 1987, had worked with Meier on MicroProse's 1990 release *Railroad Tycoon*.<sup>4</sup> *Civilization* gave Meier the chance to draw on his history and board-gaming background, allowing him to tell a story of human progress that, while grounded in reality, gave the player the power to "rewrite history." Meier's own reflections on designing *Civilization* show this integration well:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.joabj.com/stories/meier.html>

“I think in hindsight, it really drew on probably more of me than any other game. I played a lot of board games when I was a kid; I'd read a lot of history—I just found out I could put more and more stuff in that game. It was a big vessel that could hold the Romans, and it could hold riflemen, and it could hold airplanes, but the problem was I didn't know where to stop. It was great that all the stuff I thought was cool when I was a kid—in going back in history to World War II and the Roman Empire and then Napoleon and the Civil War—could be put in this game.”<sup>5</sup>

*Civilization* had mass appeal. Not only did it receive critical acclaim for its addictive game-play and high replay value, but it allowed players to relive actual events and play a role in the progression from ancient times to the modern era. This interaction with historical human events gave the game a “humanitarian” feel, because players really cared about the virtual world in which they lived and ruled, created and destroyed. Players also enjoyed the power that came with controlling an empire that they “created,” and the game’s grounding in historical realism only added to this feeling of “rulership.” *Civilization* put MicroProse on the gaming map, and made Sid Meier’s name synonymous with quality game design.

While *Civilization* offered players an extremely addictive gaming experience, players were limited to playing against computer-controlled opponents. MicroProse answered the call for a multi-player version of *Civilization* with *CivNet*, released in 1995. *CivNet* offered players the opportunity to play against another human being in the turn-based tradition of the original. This game received mixed reactions, however. While players were excited about the prospect of a multi-player *Civilization*, the game was released only four months before the release of *Civilization II*, and MicroProse waited for sales of *CivNet* to level off before releasing the storied sequel. *CivNet* was graphically outdated by the time of its release, so this was seen as MicroProse’s attempt to squeeze all the profits out of the original *Civilization* before *Civ II* took center

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ensemblestudios.com/ourteam/shelley.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml>

stage. Around this time, Avalon Hill jumped on the computer gaming bandwagon and released a computer version of its board game *Advanced Civilization*. This game remained true to the game that inspired *Sid Meier's Civilization*, drawing on many common concepts between the two games, but it was essentially very different from Meier's creation.

In 1996 MicroProse released *Sid Meier's Civilization II*. This sequel was an attempt to update the graphics and sound of the original, while addressing some game-play issues of the original as well. Although Sid Meier's name graces the title of the game, *Civ II* was designed and programmed largely by Brian Reynolds.<sup>6</sup> A veteran of Meier's previous work, having worked extensively on *Sid Meier's Colonization* in 1994, Reynolds was no stranger to producing games under the name of the gaming legend. While Meier and Reynolds collaborated in the initial planning stages of *Civ II* with Meier providing his services as a creative consultant throughout the project, Reynolds was essentially the game's lead designer. With the success of the original *Civilization*, Meier's name had earned customer recognition, and MicroProse was quick to take advantage of this marketing tool.<sup>7</sup> Despite this attachment to a game he did not make, Meier approved of the final version of *Civ II*. The game went on to sell over a million copies and spark several expansion sets and spin-off games, most notably Activision's *Civilization: Call to Power* in 1999.

Many of the changes made from *Civilization* to *Civilization II* were cosmetic. By 1996, the graphics of the original *Civ* were grossly outdated, and Meier even reports being criticized "Sid, it looks like an EGA game."<sup>8</sup> For the sequel, Reynolds implemented high-resolution graphics and scaleable fonts and windows, as well as a

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameld=15>

<sup>7</sup> <http://paranoidproductions.com/ramblings/rambling5.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml>

classical soundtrack composed by David Evans. In addition, new military units and city improvements were added to give the player more to build and to conquer. Most players will agree that invading an enemy city with both chariots and elephants is far more exciting than with chariots alone.

Not all of the changes were superficial, however. Improvements in game-play were a top priority for Reynolds, who took great care to fix some of the problems that had made the original *Civ* unrealistic. For example, occasionally a very lucky phalanx unit could withstand the onslaught of an offshore battleship, since the battleship's strength of 12 and the phalanx's strength of 2 gave the phalanx a 1 in 6 chance of winning the battle. The thought of ancient spearmen defeating a modern steel warship is ridiculous, so Reynolds made an effort to design a new battle system in which modern units have increased hit points and firepower. Under the new system, it is possible for the phalanx to damage the battleship, but the chances of the phalanx winning the battle are negligible. In addition, Reynolds improved the diplomacy aspect of the game, implementing an enemy AI far superior to that of the original *Civilization*. Players must now act much more carefully in diplomatic negotiations, as rivals are more apt to remember past transgressions and may be unpredictable in their own right. Brian Reynolds commented on the non-cosmetic improvements to *Civilization II*:

"I was particularly proud of the improved diplomacy and AI in Civ II, which I think is some of my best work, and the work that Doug Kaufman and I did on game balance made Civ II one of the best-balanced games to date."<sup>9</sup>

These improvements made *Civ II* an even better game than its predecessor from a playability standpoint, daring to improve on the near-perfect game-play of Sid Meier's original *Civilization*.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://pc.ign.com/news/15111.html>

MicroProse's involvement with the *Civilization* series hasn't been all success stories, however. In 1998, a legal battle erupted between MicroProse, Avalon Hill, and Activision regarding *Civilization* trademark rights.<sup>10</sup> Some time after the release of *Civ II*, MicroProse learned that Activision had reportedly received a license from Avalon Hill to produce games under the original *Civilization* name. In response, MicroProse bought Hartland Trefoil, Ltd., the original creator of Avalon Hill's board game in the United Kingdom. MicroProse argued that Avalon Hill had only served as Hartland Trefoil's distributor outside of Europe, and took both Avalon Hill and Activision to the U.S. District court, citing:

“...claims of false advertising, unfair competition, trademark infringement, and unfair business practices as a result of Activision's recent announcement of plans to develop and publish *Civilization* computer games under a purported licensing agreement with Avalon Hill. The lawsuit challenges Avalon Hill's ownership of trademark rights to the *Civilization* name...”<sup>11</sup>

Six months later, the lawsuit ended in a settlement granting MicroProse all rights to the *Civilization* franchise. Steve Race, CEO of MicroProse, said of the settlement: “This settlement clearly establishes MicroProse as the holder of the ‘Civilization’ property.” Activision, under license from MicroProse, acquired the rights to produce its own *Civilization* game, *Civilization: Call to Power*. It also acquired the rights to the name “Call to Power” as well as the rights to distribute *Civilization II* on the Sony Playstation outside of Japan.

At present, the *Civilization* franchise is thriving. Activision released its title *Civilization: Call to Power* (1999) and its sequel *Call to Power II* (2000) to great success. MicroProse benefited from the release of *Civilization II: Fantastic Worlds* (1997), as well as *Civilization II: Test of Time* (1999), both of which offered players new

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.cdmag.com/Home/home.html?article=/articles/010/002/civilization\\_lawsuit.html](http://www.cdmag.com/Home/home.html?article=/articles/010/002/civilization_lawsuit.html)

<sup>11</sup> [http://headline.gamespot.com/news/98\\_01/22\\_mpose/index.html](http://headline.gamespot.com/news/98_01/22_mpose/index.html)

venues in which to build their empires.<sup>12</sup> Sid Meier has since left MicroProse to co-found Firaxis (with fellow designer Jeff Briggs), and the gaming industry is anxiously awaiting the release of *Civilization III* from this company.<sup>13</sup>

Sid Meier's vision in creating the *Civilization* series has had an important influence in shaping the process of game design throughout the computer game industry. At the heart of his gaming philosophy, Meier stresses the importance of game-play over flashy graphics and eye-candy. This is consistent with Meier's *Civilization* design, which did not offer anything new to the market in terms of graphics and sound but rather set precedents for game-play and replay value. In contrast to Meier's philosophy, more developers in the current game market are following graphics-intensive trends, as evidenced by the explosion of first-person shooters following the success of *Doom*. While graphically enticing, many of the post-*Doom* shooters did not offer players anything new in terms of game-play—hence, they were dubbed “*Doom* clones.” In the same vein, Meier believes that big advertising campaigns undermine the integrity of the industry if the game cannot “speak for itself” with solid game-play. Meier, commenting on the state of the computer game industry, made reference to these aspects of his design philosophy:

“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.”<sup>14</sup>

Brian Reynolds apparently learned something from his mentor, applying these design principles in the creation of *Civilization II*. Although we do see cosmetic updates in *Civ II*, the improvements to the sequel's game-play show that *Civ II* is not simply

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.mobygames.com/game\\_group/sheet/gameGroupId=22/](http://www.mobygames.com/game_group/sheet/gameGroupId=22/)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.firaxis.com/about.cfm>

“*Civilization* for a mid-nineties audience.” With its improved AI and battle system, *Civ II* genuinely plays better than the original, but perhaps Reynolds’ biggest accolade was the preservation of the parts of the original that worked well. *Civilization*’s fundamental game-play engine did not have any significant flaws, and Reynolds’ decision to preserve the “classic” *Civilization* feel upholds his commitment to solid game-play over flashy eye-candy.

Despite the overwhelming presence of graphics-intensive games in the market, game developers today respect the role of quality game-play in a game’s success. A great example is *Half-Life*, one of the many next-generation shooters that hit the market in the past few years. Despite its dazzling graphics, *Half-Life* innovates within the first-person shooter genre to give the player a gaming experience that few other first-person shooters can offer. Honored as one of the industry’s best games, *Half-Life* is a testament to the importance of game-play in the market today.

From a business angle, MicroProse’s legal battle with Activision and Avalon Hill reveals much about the state of the computer game market. At the core of the matter, MicroProse’s dispute involved the use of the name “Civilization” in concordance with any game not published by MicroProse. The company felt that Activision’s production of *Civilization: Call to Power* under license from Avalon Hill was a violation of its intellectual property, and sought to claim exclusive ownership of the name. Obviously, it was in MicroProse’s best business interest to own the *Civilization* name, as the brand name itself was said to be worth \$60 million in 1997.<sup>15</sup> The question is the extent to which a company can claim “violation of intellectual property” on the grounds of protecting its business interests. One could argue that the matter revolved around a name, and nothing more. Despite the similarity to the original *Civilization*’s turn-based

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml>

engine, *Call to Power* is essentially very different from MicroProse's games, and did not claim to be a member of the famed *Civilization* series. Activision did not seek to plagiarize nor undermine the integrity of MicroProse's games, and this calls MicroProse's claim of "violation of intellectual property" into question.

MicroProse is a business, however, and as such must prioritize its financial interests highly. The successes of *Civ* and *Civ II* had made the name "Civilization" synonymous with quality gaming in buyer's minds, and there was substantial evidence to conclude that a game entitled "Civilization" would receive extra attention in the competitive market. Regardless of how strongly the name "Civilization" constitutes intellectual property, MicroProse had good reasons for claiming the name as its own. Retaining exclusive rights to a profitable name is a powerful business strategy for any company, and MicroProse is no exception.

MicroProse's lawsuit reveals the significance of name attachment in the computer game industry. More often, game developers are looking to design and produce games that will produce buyer interest on the basis of name alone. A prime example of this is MicroProse's insistence on prefixing any game title remotely connected to Sid Meier with his name, regardless of how much he worked on the game. In this way, developers are designing games based on a name, rather than naming games based on a design. In the early days of computer gaming, a designer could feasibly wait until a game's completion before deciding on a fitting title, similar to an author who titles his novel after it is written. In today's industry, designers must think of the game's title as a framework—any designer of a *Civilization* game must remember to design in the *Civilization* tradition, and not stray from the formula set by the name.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.cdmag.com/Home/home.html?article=/articles/010/002/civilization\\_lawsuit.html](http://www.cdmag.com/Home/home.html?article=/articles/010/002/civilization_lawsuit.html)

Ironically, game developers' reliance on a name-determined framework by which to design games conflicts with Sid Meier's own philosophy on the art of game design. Whereas today's industry is convinced that a game's success depends on its association with a particular series or genre, Meier holds firm to his belief that a game is evaluated on the basis of its game-play. As a part of a larger entertainment industry, Meier believes that the quality of the interaction between game and player determines the success of the computer game industry.

"If we don't have game-play, 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."<sup>16</sup>

Years of industry-watching have shown that gamers, on the whole, agree with Meier—a game, regardless of affiliation, is only as good as the game-play experience it provides its players. It comes as no surprise that the man is considered a gaming legend.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.civfanatics.com/sidlegacy/index2.shtml>