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Unthinking Eurocentrism and Orientalism in Sid Meir's Civilization III

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### **Unthinking Eurocentricism and Orientalism in Sid Meir's Civilization III**

The "Civilization" series of computer games by Sid Meir are in my opinion, among the highest achievements of intellectual or thinking person's entertainment in all of Western Society.

Imagine, a computer game that simulates the epoch of human evolution, through the context of building user controlled civilizations. All the major races, governments, developments and geographies are represented in a realistic, yet intensely involved and unfolding interactive narrative the stretches from 4000 B.C to the present and beyond. Many of the key historical figures are also present to represent their people – Cleopatra, Gilgamesh, Alexander, Caesar and others appear on your computer screen with regularity and some authenticity as to their characters.

There are so many elements to the Civilization game that one must experience it to fully appreciate the creation of this masterpiece. The game is extremely intricate in its detail, and one of the hallmarks of the series is its technical excellence; it runs on many different computers without crashing, is very reliable and plausible.

Whenever I play Civilization III (a most recent iteration published by a company called Firaxis and also written by the venerated game author, Sid Meir), out of the many nations represented, I almost always choose to be the Iroquois. Ironically, Civilization III is one of the only times I get to play my own race in any computer game.

Yet, I also find myself filled with such indescribable loathing and regret whenever I see the “buffoon” that the designers used to illustrate the Great Iroquois leader, Hiawatha. By choosing to be him in the game, I never have to see his condescending face during negotiations or diplomacy.

Though perhaps not as insulting as the figure used for the Cleveland Indians, he nevertheless fits firmly within the “sambo” tradition (a humorous appellation of the Negro) in that he appears docile and childlike. This is especially true when compared to the character representations of the expressionless English, the compassionate French, the inscrutable Asians and even the proud Aztecs. Note the actual representations from the game:



Hiawatha, Iroquois   Elizabeth, England   Joan of Arc, French   Mao Tse Tung, China   Montezuma, Aztec



Note the similarities between this depiction of the Sambo and Hiawatha. The exaggerated eyebrows, the white of the eye appearing above the eyeball, the exaggerated smile (in comparison to the other leaders) and the accented nose which like the Sambo is pronounced and exaggerated.

Of course, one may argue that I (or the authors) may decide not to include the Iroquois in the game at all. But to me, it's hard to imagine civilization without the Native American, truly an underrated contributor to civilization – simple things like aspirin, the potato, coffee, and environmentalism and perhaps even the concept of American freedom itself. One should be both proud and lucky to be able to be Native American in the game.

Yet, if I chose another race there is always the chance that ignorant looking jester-like figure, whose very presence beckons the extermination of his people might appear on my screen, and when it does, I am filled with a double ontology. On the one hand, I see a representation of me, and what the designers think of me, coupled with who I am in the game, and the necessity to eliminate or culturally defeat my own people in order to win.

This angst is exasperated by the fact that the image they selected seems completely disconnected with my reality of Iroquois men, Iroquois history and the Iroquois nation. To me, this is obviously someone else's convenient representation of the Iroquois, and Native people in general. It is possible that this representation as the "sambo" makes it easier to justify the actual history and thus may assuage the guilt of those who consider how America was formed, and it serves as a statement of authenticity regarding the nature of colonialism itself.

For example, in the game, I always think twice about attacking the formidable Queen Elizabeth of England, or Otto Von Bismarck of Germany, but anticipate and expect conflicts with the super aggressive Zulus, the arrogant Incas and of course the ignorant

Iroquois. Such a feeling is not only based on actual history, but also the representation of the figures in the game.



Bismarck, Germany

Shaka Zulu, Zulu

Pachacuti, Inca

Hiawatha, Iroquois

Abe Lincoln, America

Notice the extreme similarity between Shaka Zulu and Hiawatha as representations of the “other”. In fact, save for flesh tone, nose and lip size, the models look almost identical.

Ironically, the Abraham Lincoln of America is very similar to Hiawatha of the Iroquois – an almost laughable figure whose arched eyebrows and bizarre costuming, looks out of place with the other world leaders, especially early in the game, thus making it easier for Americans to be some other race and compete against America. He is a figure with whom at least part of America still takes issue with, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center at least 500 extremist groups in the United States use the Confederate flag - which is the nation Lincoln was trying to defeat – as a symbol. To include him regenerates the Civil War in the minds of Americans, and to make him similar to Hiawatha (comedic, always smiling) may help inspire and justify his supposed opposition to racial superiority. While Lincoln was chosen to represent America, he remains not only controversial, but also an abstraction, an inoffensive cartoon when compared to someone who they may have chosen like Thomas Jefferson, John F. Kennedy or even Dwight Eisenhower. There is very little that the modern American can identify with in

this depiction of Lincoln which differs so greatly from the man seen in the statue on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Along those same lines, imagine how different the Iroquois would have to be treated if Geronimo, Sitting Bull or even Chief Joseph represented them. Three easily identifiable figures that were forced into combat against colonialism, shared similar tragedies in American history, and thus serve to remind us of perhaps the dark side of the U.S. Civilization. Instead however, the authors chose someone completely detached from Colonialist history. Hiawatha; a religious leader, a man of legend, the “George Washington” of the Iroquois people, while ignoring George Washington as the logical choice for America.

One may argue that neither Sitting Bull, Geronimo or Chief Joseph were Iroquois, and the game takes great pains to explain an accurate history of the Iroquois. Yet, the designers in fact, follow the Hollywood tradition of the “mark of the plural” regarding American Indians, the notion that we are all the same. For example, the true nature of our history is marginalized and made trivial by having the Iroquois “special” piece represented in the game as a “Mounted Warrior” when in fact the Iroquois rarely fought with horses ever if at all. In the game the Iroquois are represented on horseback with the feathered war Bonnet (indicative of the Plains Indians a totally different culture from the Woodland Iroquois). Hiawatha sports a Mohawk with 2 feathers and no bonnet while his warriors have many feathers, which are a traditional symbol of status and achievement. This misrepresentation of all American Indians as if we are “all the same” or that

inaccuracies in our history are acceptable, is not present to my knowledge with the representation of any other race. Their special pieces are accurate representations of that culture or race's unique contribution to military history (such as the Japanese Samurai or the Roman Legion).

Although the authors of the game point this discrepancy out in their explanation of Iroquois history, there is still no explanation as to why this overt error made its way into the game. It is, in the end, like the choice of Hiawatha, one of convenience.

It is easy to attack games like "Grand Theft Auto" or "Hitman 2" for their overt racism and violence. One could even look at a game like "Mafia" and say it is an unfair representation of the Italian-American experience. The more violent games have always had the spotlight and attention when it comes to popular and even congressional criticism. But what about the more covert racism present in games such as Civilization III? People in the Game Industry hold and revere such games for their "serious" application and use for higher order thinking skills. Could it also be true that these games teach other, perhaps unintended lessons – such as an unquestioned acceptance of white male superiority (Eurocentrism) or an "Orientalist" description of history?

According to the late Scholar Edward Said, "Orientalism" (construction of the Orient as "other" when compared to the West) included "the Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries." This is certainly true of the Native American representation as explained above, the Feathered

bonnet represents all Indians in the game, and ironically it is also true of the representation of Arabs.

The designers chose Abu Bakr (arguably the first Caliph of Islam) as the representative of the Arab race/culture in the game. This may be consistent with their choice of using great people from history to represent certain nationalities or races. However, in the case of Bakr, the authors exhibit Orientalism because Bakr's role in history represents worldwide religion, Islam, not so much a people, Arabs. It would be the same as using the Pope to represent Italians, but of course they use Caesar to represent the Italians or Rome.

Thus, Europeans and all other races or cultures enjoy the distinction between religion and nationality. Abu-Bakr the Arab is the only religious leader, other than Hiawatha of the Iroquois to represent his race/culture. Although one could argue that Mahatma Gandhi of India, as represented in the game, is also a religious leader. Either way, this is Orientalism - to make a sweeping generalization of the other - for example, the notion that religious leaders could be military leaders is both ignorant and unacceptable. This disregard for the non-west adds a further unique burden on Orientals who play the game because they must kill or compete with those humans who defined or were architects for their modern religions.



Abu Bakr, Ancient Architect of Islam



Osama Bin Laden, Modern Enemy of the West

In the Islamic sense however, it's relatively easy, Abu Bakr, who in fact ruled Islam (and not the Arabs per se) for a very short period (2 years), and by then was very old and known to be very benevolent, in the game, however, he conveniently, resembles a young Osama Bin Ladin (see pictures above). Thus, not only is the representation of Abu Bakr inaccurate in terms of his age as a leader, but accordingly in Muslim tradition, all drawings or similar representations Abu Bakr, do not exist and in fact are forbidden.

For Muslims and for Native Americans, it may on the one hand, be easy to fight against your people because the representations of their leaders in the game are so laughingly inaccurate and without merit. For example, how can one seriously believe that Abu Bakr looked like Osama Bin Ladin, or that Hiawatha was more sambo than Iroquois? Why don't we just treat it like the joke that it is?

Because of all the historical figures represented in the game Abu-Bakr and Hiawatha are the most living, or the most real to this day.

It was Bakr, for example, who (during his 2 year reign) penned the Holy Quran in the version we know today. The Quran is read by every single Muslim in the world as this is one of the 5 “pillars of Islam.” It was Hiawatha (who some Native Americans consider the equivalent of Jesus in Indian form) who articulated the “Great Law of Peace” which is the fundamental basis of the Iroquois government and philosophy that continue to exist to this day. Thus these are not people of history, they are people who made history, a history that is still alive and evolving. It is Orientalism to believe that these leaders are the same as the others represented in the game.

It is safe to say that no Arabs, Native Americans, or Muslims work for Firaxis, and if they did, or scholars were consulted before hand – dare they accuse their employer of racism, Orientalism or even Eurocentrism without opening up a whole “can of worms”?

For example, as one looks deeper it appears that all the racial representations in Civilization are merely superficial backdrops - interesting quirks for what in the end, must be, adherence to the Eurocentric - “white man’s” concepts, values, actions and attitudes in order to be successful in the game.

Stam and Shohot define Eurocentricism as:

a discourse that projects a linear historical trajectory...which sees history as a series of empires...in which Europe alone is seen as the “motor” for progressive historical change. Eurocentricism also sanitizes Western History while patronizing or even demonizing the non-west, it appropriates the cultural and material production of non-Europeans while denying both their achievements and its own appropriation.

Building mines, irrigating the land, building bombers, factories and huge bombs that kill indiscriminately are a complete anathema to everything that the Iroquois civilization stands for and is about. Therefore, the question is raised - how could the Iroquois possibly participate in the game in the first place? It is the “Great Law” of the Iroquois that states, “the greatest strength is gentleness.” That from a Eurocentric view is not a great civilization, in fact, as history would have it, it is one that deserves to be destroyed or permanently occupied so that its resources can be diverted to the more “intelligent” or technologically savvy race.

Thus, to have the Iroquois in the game would be the equivalent of including Tibet (another civilization based entirely on religion and benevolence) as a great civilization and to have them represented by the Dalai Lama, when in fact Tibet (like the Iroquois) has been wiped completely off the map, and is never coming back. Yet, this brings us to the real reason why the Arabs or Native Americans are now in the game (and Tibet is not) – obviously, to sell more units.

Said states that “a rejection of Orientalism is the rejection of greed as a primary motivating factor in intellectual pursuit.” This then becomes the “double blow” of the Civilization game, it uses these people to sell more units, while it humiliates them as deeply as possible to confirm Eurocentric power to make and sanitize history, to contextualize the current “Pax-Americana” and to justify genocide as a natural occurrence when building a “great” civilization.

Thus, the Eurocentrism within a game like Civilization III emerges as a result of the nature of defining a “great civilization” according to the perspective of one race or culture. Invariably, this definition emerges from white men who (for various reasons) exclude alternative definitions and use race, culture, civilizations and great leaders to teach the world that the only way is “our” way and that “you” would have been more successful – or your leaders would be more famous and remembered if you were “more like us.” The Iroquois, the Zulus and the Mongols exist in the game as a convenient lesson of the failure to adopt the white man’s Eurocentric ways, which are the keys to victory or survival. “You either do it our way, or you die.” In fact, no matter which race/culture you choose your behavior to win the game must be the following:

1. Build and nurture many large cities.
2. Make as many people work as hard as they can, while doing as little as needed to make them happy.
3. Try to take all the resources possible, if necessary kill for them.
4. Exploit the earth as much as possible to make you richer.

5. Develop science and technology to defeat nature, increase productivity and more efficiently extract from the earth.
6. Develop science and technology to more effectively kill other people, especially those different from your own.
7. Use these killing tools to impose your will on others.
8. Make sure you win and all others lose.

This becomes the real “power” of the game. All of the above behaviors are entirely accurate when describing the ascension of Europe and America to achieve world dominance. So the game, while easily dismissed as “pure entertainment” also contains an irrefutable story that both justifies and explains how and why things look the way they do today on this planet. It makes things like Eurocentricism, wars and racial competition seem necessary, inevitable, rational and fun.

Another example of Eurocentric thinking within the game lies in the fact that the conquest of the American Indians fundamentally changed the Europeans who did it. Contact and conquest of the Native Americans not only introduced new ways of thinking to the Europeans but inspired technologies that responded to what was being learned. For example, Weatherford writes that the introduction of the Potato to Europe by the Native Americans marked a fundamental shift in European history as power went from the hotter sunny climates (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal) to the colder climates (Britain, France, Germany and Russia). Yet, within the game and its technology tree, no credit is given to other races, and the drive for all is to be just like America in order to win.

In the game to develop a technology all you need to do is commit the resources of a city for a sufficient amount of time and like magic, that technology appears. This ignores the cultural dimensions of technology and assumes that all people no matter what race or culture would use the technology in a similar way. How for example, could Abu Bakr, a man whose only real interest is in serving Allah create an Atomic Bomb or a Spaceship to leave the earth?

The game promotes and sanctifies the technology worship cult. The only real downside to technology other than pollution is that it may make certain achievements obsolete. Yet, technology, I believe, is a double-edged sword. While it may make life more efficient it also causes health, compassion and the notion of family to deteriorate somewhat as new diseases are introduced along with the arrogance of being “smarter” as evidenced by the technology. In fact, I would say that a major flaw in European thinking is that superior technology means a superior relationship to God. Technology further causes a disconnection from nature, promotes individualism and may encourage alienation.

History is sanitized within the game – missing for example is slavery, racism, the global implications for genocide, and neo-colonialism (for example, what America is doing to Saudi Arabia or Nigeria). Imperialism in the game is just as natural a phenomenon as global warming. One cannot establish a “Puppet Government” from afar, nor is there any inclusion of social justice movements, government collapse from within, a relationship

between religion and government, the existence of competing ideologies or what Herbet Marcuse calls “surplus repression” within a civilization. There are no occurrences of internal genocide as caused by Imperialism such as Rwanda, Cambodia or East Timor in the game. There are no colorful yet flawed figures in the game such as Idi Amin, Ronald Reagan or Kim Jong Il. Killing or starving your own people is of no real consequence. Religion, nationalism and the media are subordinated to technologies rather than the other way around. Instead there are just armies, resources, technology, cities and pollution.

Perhaps the most damaging indictment of the existence of Eurocentric thinking within Civilization comes from the nature of the “God Game” itself. One can ostensibly survive for 6,000+ years without concern for health, family or internal threats to power. In a game that I believe only a white male could make, no one ever questions your power or use of it. There may be productivity loses, but these are usually superficial and easily handled. The game is “manifest destiny” made fun for the PC.

There are no ethnic, cultural or class tensions or revolts. People like Karl Marx, Malcolm X or Emiliano Zapata do not really exist. There is very little deference given to concepts as they relate to culture such as language, the arts, escapism or religion. Civilizations that have no viable minority to withhold the majority generally lead to excessive or extremist behaviors.

The only emotion in the game is survival. There is no clear distinction of your race or culture save for some internal calculation and the color of your pieces. You don't really care about your people and the representation of them within the game is truly abstract. In the end it's a game that's really "all about me."

Certainly, I think Civilization III is a great game, one created by a hard working man, Sid Meir. My intention here however has been to point to flaws in his work which are mostly caused by Eurocentric thinking and Orientalism. I think he treads on dangerous waters when he assumes that multiculturalism is shallow and can be made convenient for corporate commercialism.

In 1915, America saw the rise of another, similarly flawed genius, D.W. Griffith, who is widely seen as the "father of film grammar," and yet, his insistence in deploying technology to promote racism, Orientalism and Eurocentrism made him in the end a tragic figure. "It was like writing history with lightening" was the description of Griffith's film "Birth of a Nation" by then President Woodrow Wilson. Has America has created its second D.W. Griffith?