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10.ON THE BORDER: PLEASURE OF EXPLORATION AND COLONIAL MASTERY IN CIVILIZATION III PLAY THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Games like Myst, Civilisation and Anno 1602 are centred around the virtual travelling of the gamer through unknown worlds. The voyage s/he undertakes often hinges on notions of colonialist exploration, turning the gamer into a traveller who surveys and masters unknown domains and learns to control techno-scientific principles along the way. Since such games are related to a mentality of colonialism, questions should be asked about how such games can be located in its discursive formation. This paper will shed light on these questions by analysing Civilization III and my experiences of playing this game.

KEYWORDS

(Post)colonialism, science, ethnicity, appropriation

The past is always altered for motives that reflect present needs. We reshape our heritage to make it attractive in modern terms; we seek to make it part of ourselves, and ourselves part of it; we conform it to our self-images and aspirations.

(David Lowenthal, The past is a foreign country)[20]

NO-MAN'S-LAND

Leader 1

I hear the sound of wind and see some desert soil. As if a camera moves forward while staying close to the ground, more landscape comes into view and I am taken past a vast surface with palm trees and loose stones scattered on it. Then an estuary comes into sight. I can see ships sailing and people moving on the quays. A group of seagulls flutters up, uttering shrieks of alarm, as if they are disturbed by my presence. To the left of the water, two small towers stand with fires burning on top of them. They must be beacons. Behind the beacons I can distinguish a round building, partly shrouded in mist. It is clearly under construction since half in scaffolding and surrounded by some dispersed building stones. Or is it falling to pieces and am I looking at a restoration? Now the view tilts to the right and spirals up, turning around the building. It reminds me of the painting of the tower of Babylon by Brueghel, but then it is comprised of an accumulation of different architectural styles: starting off with the big stone blocks at the bottom, the tower consists of classical Greek, Roman and Gothic style elements, ending in a glass mirror walls at the top that look like part of a skyscraper. Judging by the hoisting crane that stands at the very pinnacle of the building, the construction is not finished yet. When the spiraling 'camera' has reached the summit it tilts even higher to a half-clouded sky.

Suddenly a plane flies into view from the right, making a roaring sound. A title is superimposed over the again empty image of the sky: *Sid Meier's Civilization III*.

Leader 2

A male looking foot lands in the mud and leaves a footprint. The colour of both mud and skin are of a light brown shade. The shot travels forward, staying close to the ground. I hear the sound of water and a river comes into sight. On the riverbank a woman is retrieving water with a bowl. The shot moves on, still showing the landscape from a low level. Now I can see more legs and some huts with thatched roofs. A slightly stooped man leaning on a stick comes into frame, while another man enters a hut. Behind the huts a road can be discerned. The long track continues to the road, where a cartwheel comes into view, followed by a fireside and more male legs.

In the next shot more legs follow, now seeming to belong to marching soldiers on a flat dry surface. I cannot see their faces or upper bodies, but their uniforms suggest that they are part of a Roman legion. In geometrical movement the legs march to the right, come to a halt, and then moves towards the player/viewer. The camera journeys through the rows of legs and sweeps up some steps.

At a similar speed the next shot trails through a muddy field in which poles with sharp points are planted in disarray. Still from a low position I see hairy legs and hear low human sounding grunts. Men are fighting using shields clubs as weapons. A heavy wooden vehicle enters the battlefield.

The following shot shows a long dry stonewall with green trees behind it and a field in front of it. Soldiers seek shelter behind the wall. I can see their faces. They hold muskets and seem to be wearing uniforms from the time of the so-called American Revolution. They

fire their guns while some of them simultaneously jump over the wall.

Now a shot follows where things are seen from above. Again travelling forwards, my eyes pass over cauldrons filled with red boiling liquid. I can look over a railing into a deep space, which seems to be a factory. A slight feeling of vertigo steals upon me. I can see a lump of heavy looking material rigged up. It obscures the view for a moment and the computer screen turns black. Then I can look into the immense space beneath, where a big conveyer belt is in use and people are pushing trolleys.

Another shot of a plant follows. I am at first not sure whether the pillar construction, through which the shot takes me, is of yet another factory building. Then it becomes clear that I am taken to a different place: I can look upwards and see a space rocket. The title of the game is superimposed over this last image: *Civilization Play the World*.

Liminal scenes

The above-described scenes stem from *Civilization III* (Civ3) and its follow up *Civilization Play the World* (Civ3PtW). When the player starts the game up they follow immediately after the logo's of the company.

They are a no-man's-land between playing and not playing the game. The player can at this stage only watch or glance at the screen in a passive and maybe slightly distracted way. Referring to the title of this paper, they bring you both to the border of Civ3 and are bordering on the game-world and other-worlds. When you have passed these landscapes the game can begin and you can become a true player who has some control over the game. These transitional landscapes whet the player's appetite and make promises about what is to follow. They give an indication of what to expect when entering the game. As such they are steeped in references that are important for understanding the cultural meanings

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and the rules of the game.

Civ3

Voyage to the sky

By starting off both leaders with a trailer/pan/ crane shot the spatial mobility of the game and the omnipresence of the would-be player are immediately emphasised. Travelling and expansion are thus established as important parameters of the game and of the player's activities.

In the Civ3 leader which I first described, the voyage centres around the travelling to, and swirling around one high rising building. While the view starts at a low level it ends high up in the sky above the building. At the beginning there is nothing, just soil that looks like desert sand. Then some vegetation and the first human remnants (building blocks) can be recognized. For an instant, at the riverside, human activity can be discerned. Then these activities make place for a long spiraling shot in which only traces of past human activity are shown: starting with remnants of what seems to be an Egyptian construction and ending in the present conception of Western Modern architecture. At the very end of the shot human activity can be discerned once more when the plane comes in view and the tour is brought to a close by the title of the game: Civilization.

It is more than clear that the aspirant player is presented with a concise and rather linear history of Western culture through this sightseeing tour. The tower functions as a monument of the genesis of Western civilization, a locale that the player is invited to visit, to build and to explore. It forecasts a voyage in which the player starts with nothing but barren land and ends at the pinnacle of white modern Western culture. This culture and the progress of the player are imagined as an evolution from nature to culture in which specific past civilizations are literally envisaged as building blocks for modern Western culture.

Tower of Babel

By making a reference to the biblical story and image of the tower of Babel, a contradictory and paradoxical message about civilization is brought to the fore. On the one hand this alludes to the Judeo-Christian creation myth of the Babylonian attempt to build a ziggurat to reach God. According to the bible, this brought about the interference of God who prevented this blasphemous attempt by letting the builders speak in different tongues. It resulted in the scattering of people over the world, where those with the same tongue formed separate groups.[1] Hence this Babylonian image gives a Christian aura to the game that normalises demarcations between cultures. The player is invited to a Christian voyage in which the homogeneity of a specific culture seems to be right and unquestionable.

On the other hand one shouldn't forget that the tower of Babel in Civ3 is far from a uniform piece of work. As a contemporary *creative anachronism* [19], it promises a re-writing of the Biblical story. Viewed in this light, this tower of Babel entails a sacrilegious dimension, altering the genesis. In this new book of life different 'languages' are involved and are the key to a higher Christian civilization. They all serve however a monotheistic western culture that is presented as the pinnacle of a stable and progressive civilization.

Civ3PtW

While the voyage through time in the former leader takes place in one shot spiraling up to the sky, the leader of Civ3PtW contains more shots that show different areas and eras. However when juxtaposing all shots, a similar movement from down to up can be distinguished and a similar linear narrative seems to unfold, this time stripped from its Christian overtones, while in a way more conservative.

This leader also starts with a barren landscape, but this

time it does not take long before human presence comes into scope. A foot leaves a footprint: the beginning of travel, narrative and history. Shortly after this, a settlement is shown that seems to be based in pre-historic time. The hut, the wheel chart and the fire are marks of the human culture of the settlement. Hence the beginning of civilization is being related to settling down and the 'invention' of fire and the wheel. Time goes fast and the next three shots take us from a Roman legion to a chaotic and medieval battlefield, ending with the American civil war. Then humans leave the landscape, while we are taken through the industrial revolution. The last shot show us astronautics as the last stage of human development. Analogous to the tower in Civ3 the sky is the limit.

While the voyage up to the tower did at least leave some space for paradox and anachronism, such possibilities are now more limited. The history of civilization is not only presented as linear and uniform instead of heterogeneous[23], but also as a white and male process. Giving the people in the first settlement a mixed colour and gender maybe a feeble attempt to leave space for ambiguity, neither referring to the Black Eve theory or to the contested idea of white Europe as the cradle of civilization. But this rather doubtful strategy does not hold up for very long. The people in the following shots are all white and male, both suggesting that this is the main targeting group of the game as that they were the main players in history. Furthermore, since these men use technologies like tanks and guns, techno-scientific progress and the military apparatus are strongly linked to their historical progress. Thus the game promises to replay a myth in which non-westerns and women are not part of cultural history, but belong to nature and therefore cannot be seen. A myth in which expansionism, science, masculinity and whiteness go hand in hand and are naturalised.[12, 24] Indeed, playing the world promises to be a very particular enterprise.

But let me remind you that we are still in no-man's-land. Some expectations may have risen, some rules predicted, and some roles suggested. But identity politics change and become messier once you have crossed the border and you enter the world of Civ3 to become an active player.

ENTERING THE WORLD

To enter the real game and become a player, I still have to fill out some forms at the frontier. So I press a button after the leader, indicating that I want to start a new game. On top of the screen it says, "Choose your world". Underneath this virtual signpost I have to indicate some preferences. It makes me a bit nervous ("me, playing the world?") but also eager about what will happen after the form has been completed. I turn the repetitive sound down.

There are several options that I can choose from: "World size", "Barbarian Activity", "Climate", "Temperature" and "Age". I decide for a standard world with a lot of islands that are warm and wet. What keeps puzzling me however is what the category "Barbarian Activity" may mean between all these geographical classifications. So I reach out for the manual. It says that, apart from the random option, there are four "levels of Barbarian activity" to choose from: I can opt for "villages" if I "really hate Barbarians", in which case the Barbarians are "restricted to their encampments." The other levels are gradually giving less "restrictions" to the Barbarians, ranging from "Roaming," and "Restless" to "Raging". The latter most difficult level is explained as follows in the manual: "You asked for it! The world is full of Barbarians and they appear in large numbers." Daunted by this last description, I opt for Barbarians that are "roaming", in which case "settlements occasionally appear". [16]

The Barbarian tribe is introduced as being part of a

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larger category that mainly consists of geographical and geological options. Hence Barbarians are introduced as belonging more to nature than to civilization. This implication is further reiterated by the fact that the term Barbarian has become a current synonym for savage, inhumane and beastly behaviour. Thus a strong association is made between the modification of natural settings and controlling these Barbarians. Furthermore, they are seen as more controllable when they cannot move and are confined to their settlements, hence making their degree of movement correlative to how dangerous they are.

The equation that the player has to make between the Barbarian's level of nomadic activity and the threat they pose, points to a western mentality in which nomadic behaviour is placed on the periphery of culture as the 'other'. [6] Furthermore, that they are grouped together with non-human categories such as climate and age, indicates that their wildness can also be related to a specific western metaphor of science. As scholars like Merchant and Harding already stated in the 80's about the relation between gender and science, in western metaphors of science the 'other' is often conceived as raw material that has to be explored and controlled. The 'other', which meanings mostly fluctuate between non-white, woman and animal, is seen as wild and passive material that has to be controlled, tamed and scrutinized. [12, 21] Although I would not go as far as subscribing to the conclusion of Harding and Merchant that this ideal can be seen as part of a masculine scientific epistemology, in the game this scenario is indeed set up. Not only are the Barbarians presented as a wild tribe which has to be controlled, they are also presented as similar to scientific measurable entities, hence presenting them as the subject rather than the object of science and firmly situating them outside civilization, i.e. outside culture. The game thus subscribes to a western ideal in which scientific and colonial endeavours are closely intertwined. [24]

Passing

Having ticked the boxes on the form, the game can finally start. At least, that is what I think. But a new screen pops up called "player set up" and another form has to be filled in. I clearly haven't understood the bureaucracy of this world yet. This time, the options on the screen are dazzling and I flick frantically through the manual for help. I have to choose my civilization and rivals from a row of about twenty options, which 'qualities' are summarized in terms like "industrious", "expansionist" and "religious". It strikes me that the manual indicates that in an expansionist cultures "Barbarian villages are more lucrative" and that religion makes anarchy last one turn". [16] But I cannot fathom the consequences of these qualities yet and have to concentrate on choosing from all the options on the screen. The civilizations range from Romans to Koreans and Americans. It makes me wonder how all these cultures from different times can figure in one game. I can choose one of the civilizations as mine and a max of five others as rivals. I am looking for the possibilities to choose allies as well, but no such option exists. On the screen I can also tick more than ten "Game Rules". Since I am not so keen on militaristic games I choose to un-tick the box "Allow Military Victory". The others rules range from "Accelerated production, to "Capture the Princess" and "Allow cultural conversion." I am curious about the function of the princess amidst all these rules and choose for that option. All decided upon, I press the button in the right corner.

PLAYING THE WORLD

I am an Aztec Indian

The next screen is mostly black with a little patch of green land in the middle. I must have finally crossed the border. The depicted patch of land is seen from a slightly tilted birds-eye perspective. I can also see a figure with a white long dress standing in the middle of it. She must be the princess. Some information is sum-

marized in a pop-up box on top of the screen:

It is the year 4000 BC. Your ancestors were nomads. But over the generations your people have learned the secrets of farming, road building, and irrigation and they are ready to settle down.

The choices that I have made previously are also summed up in this box. I am an Aztec Indian and my name is Montezuma. As a despotic ruler I have three enemies: the Americans, the English and the Spanish. It also states that my people are "militaristic and religious" and that they "have invested absolute power in" me, expecting that I can establish "a civilization that can stand the test of time."

Moving territory

When I click the pop-up box 'away' a new figure enters the screen, right at the spot where the princes stood, as if she has disappeared into thin air. The superimposed figure looks more muscular and wears a military looking green uniform. A white circle surrounds him. In the right down corner a new pop-up indicates that this is a "settler". It also specifies the year I live in, the kind of terrain I occupy and the civilization of which I am the despotic ruler.

In the left corner another box shows an even smaller little spot of green surrounded by black. When I move my mouse over this image, the bigger green patch on the screen also shifts. I figure that this is a kind of map. On the screen I can also distinguish some buttons with symbols: three in the upper-left corner and at least five in the bottom-middle of the screen. I point my mouse to the buttons and I learn that the ones on top of the screen are pointing to the world outside the game, i.e. they can be used for saving and quitting the game as well as to consult the Civilopedia, the help function. With the aid of the manual I understand that the ones at the bottom are meant for actions within the game, such as building, exploring and military actions. I

choose the symbol for "building" from the latter row of buttons and call my first city Mestophile. A city with some buildings emerges on the green patch of land. A depiction of a female head is shown underneath the city-landscape. When I try to understand what this head means by clicking my mouse on it, it only prompts the head to change into that of a veiled woman accompanied by a smiley symbol. Around Mestophile all kinds of information appears. It mainly seem to concern details and statistics about the situation of my state in terms of military and cultural progress and production.

Overwhelmed once more by the overload of information, I turn my attention to a new figure that has emerged in the middle of my city on the spot where the settler used to stand. It is a male looking "worker". Like the settler who built my city, he is enclosed by a circle. This appears to mean that I can 'activate' him. And indeed, I am able to move this figure with the help of my mouse towards the vast dark area around my city. The darkness he enters subsides to make place for more landscape with mountains, lakes and trees. This is fun: I can send my people out to retain land from oblivion. Since I can now see the princess again and since she also has a circle around her, I try to move her as well. This does not prompt her to shift however. It only activates her to give off a giggling sound. As if I tickled her.

As is suggested by the computer, I press the spacebar. Then I decide to build a mine and send my worker just outside the city borders (marked by lines) and click on the symbol for mining. He starts to dig. A head looms up, accompanied by a text: "Sir, the borders of Mestpohile expand because of his high culture." Indeed, the square around my city has widened. I begin to wonder what is meant by 'culture', the more since I only have built a mine so far, so again I turn to the manual, that states the following: "Culture represents the impact of your civilization 's customs, art, and philoso-

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phy in the countryside surrounding your cities, and is represented by borders". I am quite proud of having achieved this so quickly.

I have another helper by now, a "jaguar warrior" and I send him out to explore some huts that I can see on the territory outside my land. As soon as he arrives at the spot the huts disappear and a pop-up informs me that "the Zapotec tribe has taught us pottery." Curious what this is supposed to mean in term of civilization, I turn to the Civlopedia. It shows a "tech tree" that consists of all kinds of "inventions" and indicates how these are related to each other. In this tree-like structure pottery is connected with an arrow to mapmaking. A bit puzzled by this, because I thought that I was in the process of making a map already, I look for extra clues in the manual. The subsection "Climbing the Technology Tree" explains that this is a "tree of advances" and that by choosing "a line of pursue" carefully, new "discoveries" will be eventually announced by my "chief investigator." This is interesting: I just have to set goals and my scientist will automatically make "discoveries". [16]

In a time span of about five minutes of playing the game, I haven't only learned a lot about the basic rules and required skills of the game, but I have also had a lesson in how these parameters are connected to cultural notions. The imagining of borders seems to be pivotal in this framework.

Borders are meant to expand in Civ3, that is if you want to win. As the scholars Jenkins and Fuller already noted in 1995, this ideal of expansion can be related to a western colonial "metaphor of discovery." Discussing Nintendo and cyberspace in terms of travelling and new frontiers, they locate this metaphor in a specific American nostalgia for the past when white settlers colonized America. Replaying this metaphor is according to the authors a means to counter "a contemporary sense of America as oversettled overly familiar and

overpopulated" and to satisfy "the desire to recreate the Renaissance encounter without guilt." [11]

Although, this American nostalgia for new frontiers and open spaces is undoubtedly part of Civ3's attraction, the game has a more 'global' and complex meaning as well. One can distinguish two kinds of borders in Civ3: the obvious borders around the chosen civilization, and the borders which separate the filled in territory from the unknown and untouched black space on the screen. Both borders share the quality of shifting, or more precisely expanding when the game is played well. Hence the exploration of the world goes hand in hand with the expansion of your own realm. This fits seamlessly into a European colonial attitude towards homeland and colonies. In this view, colonies function as a primitive resource that should expand to enable the homeland culture to expand, yet not being fully recognized as part of it. In the game this stance is for example reiterated by the fact that you can visit a village of huts outside your domain and absorb their knowledge or culture to bring it back 'home' and expand your borders, whilst the village itself still not belongs to your territory and simply disappears when it has lost its function. Seen in this light, Civ3 also entails a pleasure in playing the old fashioned European (male) colonizer who expands border by mapping the outside world, hereby simultaneously strengthening the borders of his own metropole. Civ3 thus bears on several white western histories of exploration and expansion at once and can therefore better be called a postcolonial game.

As the participatory observation above shows as well, this enterprise is more linked to space than to time. As Jenkins states for Nintendo and Friedman for Civ2, it can be best described as a "spatial story" in which there is a continual "transformation of place into space, as the blackness of the unknown gives way." [10, 11] According to Friedman this retreating blackness can

also be connected to a new sensory 'digital' and cybernetic experience in which the player identifies more with the map, always playing from a "God's eye perspective" than with characters: "Simulation games are maps in time, drama's which teach us how to think about structures of spatial relationships".[10] Friedman may have a point when it concerns identification in games compared with identification with characters in film and television, although also then it should be added that the identification processes in these 'old media' have a cybernetic side in the sense that the user/viewer identifies with an apparatus.[15] What he however forgets is that such an omnipresent position is at least analogous to the position of the player of board games which involve spatial strategies. Furthermore the "way of seeing" he talks of, can also be related a wider western discourse of the visual that strives to represent a Godly perspective and which genealogy has roots in Renaissance western painting and is in that sense is not just new. [5]

The mapping and making visible of unknown spaces maybe partly understood in terms of a shifting sensory perception, it surely can also be related to a postcolonial mentality. As Douglas argues in relation to American history and Civ3, it is a way to cope with a paradoxical colonial past, in which the occupied land is described as virgin land - hence uninhabited - despite the peoples that already live there. By labelling these natives as wild and belonging to nature, they become invisible and unthreatening. According to Douglas this way of coping can also be discerned in the the way Barbarians pop up out of nowhere, as well as in how the villages with "goody huts" disappear once they are explored [8]

But again, I'd like to de-Americanise this interpretation slightly. As I have shown, the wild unknown and unpredictable can also be related to a more broad and complex Western historical attitude in which non-settled cultures are conceived as outside culture and are not

capable of building their own tech-trees. The trailer at the beginning of Civ3 doesn't deliver false promises when it comes to the ethnocentric view the game has on civilization: it starts when one settles and expands, meanwhile appropriating the cultural and economical capital of others in a unmarked and white norm.[17]

That the game refers to a colonial past and does so by emphasising space is clear. But it does something more with this past than just replaying it in a safe way. It reshuffles it. This reshuffling can be seen in its temporal representations. As an Aztec leader I can have Americans as enemies and develop space travel. Time is a slippery thing in the game and history is not what it used to be. This fluidity of time may be linked to a postcolonial and contemporary disorientation of belonging. At a time were great groups of people from mainly poor countries have migrated to the land of former colonizers, history cannot be easily retold in a singular way. Civ3 show this postcolonial bewilderment by making time anachronistic. It nevertheless counters this unsettled feeling by emphasizing the uniformity within borders and making space and nations unproblematic categories. It thus still strives to overcome this heterogeneity of civilization. Seen from this perspective space is represented as in accordance with dominant ideologies, whilst time has a more unstable character in the game and is played out differently. It is at this temporal level that culture becomes messier and paradoxical qualities of postcolonial cultures seep through.

CHANGING THE WORLD

Civ3 offers the player opportunities to experience the highly contested ideology of appropriation and colonial expansion in a place outside daily life [7]. To a great extent its encoding is pushing the player into a dominant postcolonial structure. But as the above account of time, as well as my analysis of the tower of Babel show, the game also presents opportunities to twist make fun

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of, or doubt this myth. Such possibilities arise more than once in Civ3. I can be a leader of an ancient culture and beat the Spanish colonizer, thus changing western history. Moreover, the unbridled megalomaniac and militaristic thrust of Civ3 and the 'incorrect' jokes that pop up, can at times be ideologically over the top and absurd. It is at these moments that the game can turn into parody or pastiche and ideology is de-naturalized.

The notions of pleasure as coined by Fiske may help to understand this side of the experience. Pleasure then relates to the possibility of the player to converse with ideologies and change their meanings, i.e. decode the game differently. [4, 18, 26] As Saxe phrases it in his article on games and violence:

(...) it is like a postmodern power ritual, where players gain a visceral sense (...) without ever actually doing a thing, except spending their money, focusing their eyes and playing with a few buttons and a joystick. [25]

Most players will visit the world of Civ3 as such a power ritual: not changing ideologies in a subversive way, but expressing and tasting a post-capitalist power in a cathartic pastiche of the postcolonial world.

The landscape of Civ3 can also be appropriated in a more drastic manner. This happens when gamers make so called mods and patches.[15, 22] More than often such changes are quickly incorporated in new releases of the game, thus changing from subversion into co-modifications.[13-15] However, some of these changes remain too 'shocking' to get included. Amongst the many websites dedicated to the game, there is for example one that offers a Guerrilla modification pack, including Palestine with "suicide bombers" as a special unit.[3] Another site proudly announces that the patch in which Hitler is the leader of Nazi Germany is now also available for Civ3.[2] How problematic or sick such alterations may be accord-

ing to some of us, they do point to the limitations of the game and what really remains shrouded in darkness. Their makers being illegal immigrants who threaten to change notions of civilization.

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