#Reviewing Sid Meier's! Lessons in Game Design: Civilization and Wargames

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January 11, 2022

The occasion of the 30th anniversary of groundbreaking game *Civilization* provides a perfect lens to understand the impact of genre defining strategy games on the wargaming community.[1] *Civilization* is an expansive world-building strategy game that presses the player to make critical decisions about the future of their civilization and its progress. Lessons from the nature of the game itself and the memoir of its creator, Sid Meier, provide key waypoints for emerging wargame designers.[2]

Constructing open worlds and the freedom to develop innovative strategies that incubate strategic minds or threaten authoritarian societies are the unexplored frontiers. The lessons in game design that *Civilization* offers are important for the developing wargame research community to understand as decision-making games become a critical part of the military education process.

This article proceeds with a review of the lessons the community can gleam about wargames and play design from Meier. He offers important lessons on the nature of gameplay, the utility of computers for wargames, and the need to control outcomes and game conditions. Finally, there is a point of reflection about the nature of mentorship and winding down a career.

THE IMPACT OF CIVILIZATION

Reading Meier's recent memoir brings a flood of memories.[3] As an isolated teenager, I jumped quite willingly into the early computer strategy scene. The computer wargame genre was just developing at the time although there were many emergent wargames and serious strategy games that filled the marketplace. Early on *Pirates!* (1987) and *Red Storm Rising* (1988) caught my attention. Meier and his games were a constant in my life because the internet at this point was nascent.

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Yet, nothing caught my attention more than _Civilization_ (1991).[4] As a generation one player, I did my best to contribute to the incalculable number of hours the series has accumulated in total play time.[5] Strangely enough, a recent health scare and the need to slow down for a month led me right back to _Civilization_. The series continues and thrives.

The lessons in _Civilization_ are replete for international relations scholars, but I want to focus specifically on lessons for wargamers. Wargames are a growth industry in the international affairs community. What once was a niche hobby only suitable for basements and painted player figures became a legitimate part of the strategy industry with every new 0-4 now logging more hours playing wargames than analyzing the details of historical battles.[6]

This shift comes with good reason; the utility of a wargame and thinking through future decisions is clear. Yet, with a focus on gaming in the military, it is time that we reflect a bit on the impact and process of gaming. Meier offers a few core lessons throughout his autobiography that remind us of the importance of the player and having fun in the gaming experience, something many seem to forget.

WHAT IS A GAME?

Meier is often quoted saying that "a game is a series of interesting decisions."[7] While the origins of the quote are a bit mystifying even to Meier, he decided to embrace the idea over a series of talks and an entire chapter in his autobiography dives into the issue. Peter Perla, a father of the modern wargaming industry, notes something similar by stating "wargames revolve around the interplay of human decisions and game events; this active and central involvement of human beings is the characteristic that distinguishes wargames from other types of models and simulations."[8]

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The key point to extract is that a game must be about human choice, and there is basically no point in playing a game that is paint by numbers with set paths. Designers need to present interesting decisions to the player. For example, whether to nuke the opposition is not really an interesting decision, but what array of weapons, alliances, and international institutions might forestall nuclear violence presents a series of interesting choices. There are few better problem-solving labs that allow for the exploration of pragmatic decision-making under stress than wargames.

In his biography, Meier focuses more on the need for well-curated decision points in games. All games must be rock-paper-scissors in some way offering different options for direct attack, indirect ranged attack, and defense. While the research that goes into making a game might be limited compared to the research that goes into writing a book about a historical battle, there is still a need for well-curated decisions lest something like a nuclear-armed Gandhi becomes an uncontrollable meme. The lack of tether to reality is the greatest danger for the wargamer.

A well-made game should trigger emotions and make the player constantly think about strategies to try next. Superior strategy games should make the player seek to control their environment to beat the opposition by understanding as much as possible about the entire system of interconnections, which also exist in the real world. The wider idea of controlling outcomes and the possible utility of measuring outcomes over scale by various players makes the social science

applications that can be extracted from wargames promising. Yet, the basic idea that a game should be a fun series of choices is the core design strategy for the best games.[9]

COMPUTERS CAN DO IT BETTER

We are moving past the time when every child's first experience with gaming was playing a board game with family around a table. The simplicity of such games like *Chutes and Ladders*, *Sorry*, and *Monopoly* stay with people for a lifetime, but times have changed.

With the gaming industry overtaking the movie industry in market value and becoming an emergent form of soft power there is a clear need to reevaluate the impact of digital games on international politics.[10] There are fewer pressing cultural questions ignored by the wider research community than the impact of digital games on international society.[11] Digital games can simply do many things better than traditional board games.

We lose some interactivity between human agents by removing the board from the game, but the flexibility offered by the computer surpasses anything that can be offered in a traditional setup. There are two reasons this is true, for one, a computer can hide info much better than a board can. To operate under the fog of war on a traditional board requires the player to suspend disbelief in unrealistic ways.

Two, computer games can change on the fly. Rule sets can be rethought and changed at will. No game is perfect from inception, and they are always in need of alteration. There are other associated benefits, such as fairness of adjudication and the portable flexibility offered by wargames.

CONTROL OVER OUTCOMES

The final key lesson for wargamers is control over outcomes. We can infinitely rehash both historical and future battles to change the outcome. The best games are clear about what the victory conditions are but also do not seek to punish the player who makes mistakes and test the limits. As Meier notes, life is not a steady progression, when you fail you move on and try again. [12]

There is also the associated issue of modern combat. Outcomes for recent conflicts come with the pain of real moral dilemmas, many of which the player might have already felt before having served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Gaming about recent conflict is certainly unsatisfying, so, therefore, a key utility for modern wargames is to study future outcomes while moving on from the recent traumatic past.

WHEN THE END COMES

My main criticism of the Meier memoir is that it lacks an honest reflection of the end, that time when the ideas do not come anymore. Few are honest about what happens when originality is drained, but everyone who excels eventually comes back to Earth. Here, Meier's transition to burnout after developing Civilization led eventually to a Sebastian Bach inspired music game and essentially the end of new ideas after its failure.[13]

There was never a clear break when things came to a pointed end for the legendary designer but a transition from thinking about a Napoleonic era game to just making Sim Golf is stark. The

book lists the games developed each year and to witness the designer just give up on a Dinosaur based game and list it as unfinished was a clear cap of a career in hindsight.

The critical lesson of when the end comes, and we transition from original scholars to those whose sage wisdom guides the future cohorts is never clear. Meier makes this transition with this book but it is not apparent that he realized it. Instead, he holds on to the view that the next big idea is around the corner. The new generation can be held back by the past, a lesson the wargame community must learn as it confronts change and revolution moving forward.

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