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Persia's Victory

The Mechanics of Orientalism in *Sid Meier's Civilization*

Angus Mol and Aris Politopoulos

A Persian city and the Pairidaeza in *Civ VI*.

A large Persian army consisting of archers, siege equipment, and fearless Immortals is wedged in a narrow strip between the sea and the mountains. Beyond this pass lies the Greek heartland and the ancient cities of Corinth and Athens. All that stands between Persia and their conquest of Greek cities is a handful of charioteers and bowmen. The battle commences. Arrows cloud the sky but fail to stop the advance of the Immortals. The Greek charioteers, caught by surprise and without enough room to maneuver, are quickly defeated. Corinth cannot stand the siege and soon falls. With minimal losses to the Persian army and little time for the Greeks to regroup, the city of Athens is soon to follow. In a defeat without distinction, the capital of the Greek world is ceded to the Persians. A few years later, nothing but toponyms are left to remind one of the once thriving Greek civilization.

This “what-if” fictional history took place in our recent play-through of *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* where we played as the civilization of Persia (fig. 1). *Sid Meier's Civilization* (*Civ* from now on) is a series of strategy games where the player can take the role of a leader of a civilization and lead it from 4000 BCE into the future. In this article, we discuss the presence of Near Eastern cultures in the game, as well as the characteristics of the Persian civilization, one of the most enduring civilizations in the series. Concluding, we discuss the western view of Persia in such

games, and ways the design of Near Eastern cultures in video games can move forward.

One may wonder why it matters what takes place in this game? Why should we, people who take the history of the Near East seriously, care about what others get up to in their own what-if fictions? First of all, what-if histories are a deeply ingrained method to make sense of the world: Understanding what form this method takes in games will allow us to communicate more effectively with the growing group of people who understand the past first and foremost through games. When it comes to popular historical games, no game is bigger than *Civ*. To give one a sense of perspective: From 2010 to 2016, people have spent the same amount of time playing *Civ*—1 billion hours—as we have visiting the world's six largest museums combined (fig. 2; Mol et al. 2017). Given this staggering number, the study of how and what “building blocks” *Civ* provides to create the histories of the ancient Near East, or any other place and time for that matter, becomes much more weighted.

The West and the Rest

Before proceeding to the Near Eastern civilizations presented in *Civ*, it is important to show what kind of cultures are predominantly represented in the game. *Civ* prides itself in the ability to play cultures from every corner of the world. Such a statement is, at first glance, true if one sees the types of civilizations in the series. Taking a closer look at the series as a whole, however, this supposed diversity starts to break down. In the table below, we



Figure 1. Screenshot of the authors during one of the *Civ VI* stream series “One More Turn,” playing as Persia. Image created by the authors.

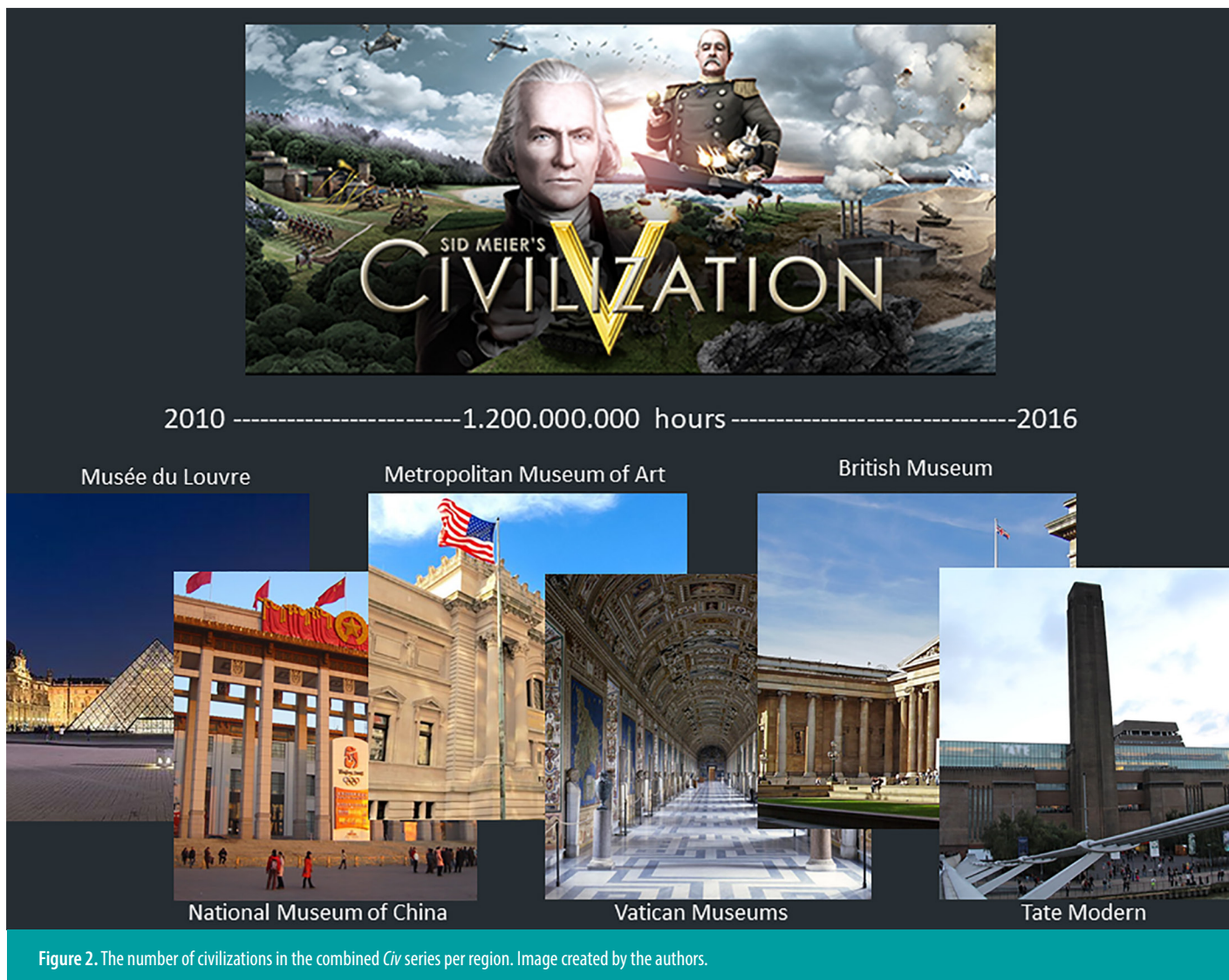
see that from a total of 66 civilizations that make an appearance in the series, 23—more than a third—come from Europe (fig. 3). This number is staggering considering that Europe has only 50 sovereign states, meaning that almost half of the countries of the continent are part of the game. The next most represented continent is the combined North and South Americas, with 14 civilizations out of 34 sovereign states. The most enduring among them is, probably not unsurprisingly, the United States, followed by several historical Central and South American cultures such as the Aztecs and the Maya. Several indigenous groups of North America make single appearances across the series (e.g. the Sioux and the Iroquois). Every other continent or geographical group is minimally represented: Asia 16 (48 countries), Africa 9 (54 countries), and Oceania with only 4 civilizations (14 countries). In conclusion, looking at aspects such as the civilizations and wonders included in the game, it becomes clear that *Civ* has a decisive western focus. The question that arises then is, how are other cultures represented within this western scope?

Histories of Civilization

The reason we chose to research *Civ* lies in its popularity both as a strategy game as well as a historical game. The first installment of *Civ* was released back in 1991 by Microprose and bears the name of its original creator Sid Meier. Five more installments to the series have been released with multiple expansions and spin offs, with *Civ V* currently being the most successful of all, having sold more than 33 million copies worldwide. *Civ VI*, released in 2016, sold 1 million copies in the first two weeks of its release. To let the developers themselves describe their game, on the *Civ V* website we read: “*Players strive to become Ruler of the World by establishing and leading a civilization from the dawn of man into the space age, waging war, conducting diplomacy,*

discovering new technologies, going head-to-head with some of history’s greatest leaders and building the most powerful empire the world has ever known.” (www.civilization5.com)

We can deduce the type of histories the game wants to create by looking at how the game is played, as well as how the game is pitched by its developers. *Civilization* has an underlying concept of history as linear progress that pertains to both the mechanics and the style of the game, which ends up defining the players’ experience. Progress is understood as a rationalist concept of a constant improvement of the human condition. This is enforced by a cheery style and content that at some points—for example, during fights between opposing forces or in its vanilla analogy of “national socialism” as a political system referred to as “order”, with no mention of slavery or systemic racism—becomes decidedly euphemistic. This is particularly interesting seen in the light of how the game is concluded. Despite the euphemistic approach to history, for a player/civilization to win, he or she still needs to enforce global, imperial domination through military, scientific, diplomatic, religious, or cultural means. In the end, all civilizations will either totally win or totally lose, and there certainly is no room for cultures that do not wish to compete. One can choose to play any available culture of the world, but that civilization will always be led by a single individual, always take similar steps through history, always marching toward the same end. Admittedly, for many it is not so much the end goal that matters, it’s the history you make along the way. Even so, while there may be a seemingly infinite amount of configurations of leaders and the steps they take through the game’s history, the general rhythms of the game are much the same across multiple playthroughs. The reason for this is that the mechanics underlying *Civ* give rise to the same set of historical patterns of growth, competition, and conquest. In short, the histories we get to tell with *Civ* are deeply teleological, with a clear end in both time



Region	No. of Civilizations
Americas (north and south)	14
Europe	23
Africa	9
Asia	16
Oceania	4

Figure 3. The total hours players have spent playing *Civ V* from 2010 to 2016 compared to the total hours the collective humanity has spent in the six largest heritage museums of the world in the same timeframe. Image created by the authors.

(now or the near future) and state, culminating in domination of one civilization over all others. It is teleological, because, as intended by the game developers, the mechanics and aesthetics of the game take us down the same beaten path, traveled on by millions of us during billions of hours. Contrary, therefore, to what Sid Meier would like to argue, *Civ*'s histories are deeply political, and they are in particular shaped by the specific politics of the game's developers and the community of players who consume

their work (Mol et al. 2017; see also, for example, Lammes and de Smale 2018; Martino in this issue). It is deeply imprinted by western values, notably idealizations of imperialism and history as an always upward curving line of progress. Nonwestern societies and cultures are impacted by this framework, to the point that many in-game civilizations morph into "funhouse mirror" versions of their actual historical counterparts. As we shall show in this article, *Civ* certainly has an interesting relation with the region that is often seen as the cradle of civilization, offering a mostly orientalist history of the Near East.

Civilization and the Mechanics of Empire

Civilization's critical success paved the way for a new genre of strategy video games, called the 4X genre. The 4X stands for the standard gameplay sequencing that happens in such games: eXploration, eXpansion, eXploitation, and eXtermination. The player is dropped into a mostly unknown map that she first has to explore and then expand upon. As the player expands outward, she has to start exploiting the resources provided on the

Civilization	Civilization I	Civilization II	Civilization III	Civilization IV	Civilization V	Civilization VI	
Arabian		Saladin/-	Abu Bakr	Saladin	Harun al-Rashid	Saladin	5
Assyrian					Ashurbanipal		1
Babylonian	Hammurabi	Hammurabi / Ishtari	Hammurabi	Hammurabi	Nebuchadnezzar II		5
Egyptian	Ramesses II	Ramesses II/Cleopatra	Cleopatra	Ramesses II – Hatshepsut	Ramesses II	Cleopatra	6
Hittites			Mursilis				1
Ottoman			Osman	Mehmed II – Suleiman	Suleiman	Suleiman	4
Persian		Xerxes / Scheherezade	Xerxes	Darius I – Cyrus	Darius I	Cyrus	5
Sumerian			Gilgamesh	Gilgamesh		Gilgamesh	3
Phoenician						Dido	1

Figure 4. All the Near Eastern civilizations present in the *Civ* series and their corresponding leaders for each game. Image created by the authors.



Figure 5. The avatars of the leaders of Persia from *Civ II* to *Civ VI*. Image created by the authors.

map and start competing for them against other (artificial intelligence or real) players. Eventually, the goal for the player is to exterminate her foes, either by violent means (war) or some other form of domination. This type of play is conceptualized in the game as “forming your empire.” Interestingly, what the game asks the player to do fits very well with the broader definitions historians and archaeologists have been using to describe empires. In those definitions, empires are often described as expansive states that incorporate other states through various forms of annexation like direct conquest, economic dependency, cultural incorporation, and other means. In addition to the game asking the player to play in a specific kind of imperialistic way, *Civ* also understands what is outside the confines of a culture as barbaric. In the landscape, the player will encounter villages of “barbarians” as well as “barbarian” units. These units will more often than not be unreasonably violent and are a constant source of nuisance early in

the game, before technology advances. Barbarians can be dealt with by violent means, and as the ages progress they will eventually disappear from the map, either because they were killed, or they were captured by players. Anything that lies outside of the scope of civilization, as perceived by the game, is barbaric and will eventually be eliminated, a view that fits with a colonial understanding of history (Lammes and de Smale 2018). While all civilizations in the game have more or less the same end goal, each culture plays a bit differently based on the various attributes and characteristics of the civilization. Near Eastern civilizations are often understood as even more imperialistic and war-focused than most (western) ones. This is apparent in our analysis of Persia, which fits the colonial and orientalist narrative of the more nuanced empires of the West versus the totalitarian empires of the East (Liverani 2005).

Civilizations of the Near East

In the game, the Near East is represented through a total of nine civilizations. We have included Egypt in this count, as it is often studied by historians and archaeologists within the scope of the Near East. Looking at this list (fig. 4), one can observe that the cultures represented in the game come predominantly from the distant past and do not represent modern countries. This becomes even more apparent once we take a look at the leaders by whom these

cultures are represented (fig. 4). A number of observations can already be made. The most enduring Near Eastern civilizations are the Arabs, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Persians. This can be interpreted as a particularly classical view of the ancient Near East. The Arabs are in three out of five cases represented by Saladin, one of the Arab leaders best known in the western world for his conquests, his war against the Crusaders, but also for his contemporary reputation for chivalry and generosity. For the Babylonians, Hammurabi is presented in four out of five games—a ruler who is known in the West for his laws inscribed in the Code of Hammurabi. A centerpiece of the Near Eastern collection of the Louvre, this stele has transcended in many ways its purpose and is considered in the western world as foundational to the conception of the “code of laws,” a term that is also present in the game. Finally, the presence of Egypt in popular culture is persistent and one would expect that they have a strong presence in the game. The only Near Eastern culture to be present across all six installments of the game features two of the most well-known, albeit chronologically very distant pharaohs, Ramses II and Cleopatra. However, it is in Persia that the western, classical view of the Near East is most clearly exemplified.

Persia In Civilization

To analyze the presence of Persia in *Civ*, we look at six main characteristics: its leaders, its unique units, its unique buildings, its spoken language, its symbol, and its capital city. We then distill three overarching themes that create the concept of Persia in the series and conclude how these can be interpreted. Persia has a very long history ranging from the Elamite kingdom in the fourth millennium BCE all the way to modern-day Iran. What can be described as the Persian Empire has also seen multiple manifestations, starting with the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736 CE), the Afsharid Dynasty (1736–1796 CE), the Zand Dynasty (1751–1794 CE), the Qajar Dynasty (1785–1925 CE), and the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979 CE). Given this rich background of Persian history, one could expect a diversity in the ways Persia has been represented in *Civ* over the last two decades. The developers, however, have chosen to focus exclusively on the Achaemenid dynasty, using leaders such as Cyrus (559–530 BCE), Darius I (522–487



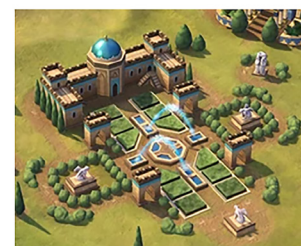
Figure 6. The “Immortals,” the unique military unit of Persia in *Civ VI* (left), and the so-called Susian guards from the palace of Darius I in Susa, which could possibly depict the Immortals (right). Image created by the authors.



Apothecary (*Civ IV*)



Satrap's Court (*Civ V*)



Pairidaeza (*Civ VI*)

Figure 7. The three unique buildings of Persia (from left to right): the Apothecary (*Civ IV*); the Satrap's Court (*Civ V*); and the Pairidaeza (*Civ VI*). Image created by the authors. Source: <https://civilization.fandom.com/>.

BCE), and Xerxes (486–465 BCE). The Achaemenids are the most familiar Persian dynasty to the west due to the Greco-Persian wars and the continuous presence in popular culture with movies such as *300*. The only other ruler who is presented is Scheherezade in *Civ II*. In that game, the developers chose to have a male and a female leader for each civilization. However, it is puzzling that they chose Scheherezade, given that there never was such a Persian ruler. Scheherezade is popular in the western imagination due to the popularity of *One Thousand and One Nights* and was picked for that reason. Looking at the portraits of these leaders (fig. 5), we can also observe a strictly westernized view. Xerxes and Scheherezade from *Civ II* play very much into the Arab-oriental perception of the Near East, having nothing to do with the Achaemenid imagery. As the game versions progress, there seems to be some attempt at placing Persian leaders within an Achaemenid setting, although there is neither consistency nor success. In *Civ IV*, for example, Darius I is presented as a very white individual with a moustache, standing in front of what seems to be a skyscraper. Cyrus in *Civ IV*, on the other hand, is presented as black with braided hair and beard. Darius I in *Civ V* is the only one who is standing in what can be interpreted as an Achaemenid setting, an artistic representation of Persepolis. Finally, Cyrus's background setting as shown in *Civ VI* does not seem to be particularly relevant, but his armor does look out of place.

In *Civ*, each civilization has its own unique units and buildings. These units are more often than not military and define the military power spike of each civilizations. For Persia, this unique unit is the Immortals, a name derived from Herodotus who called these soldiers *Athanatoi* (=Ἀθάνατοι) (*Hist.* 7.83). Their Persian name remains unknown. Herodotus offers a vivid description of their weapons, armor, and function as both standing army and imperial guards. While their actual function remains contested, several scholars have found similarities between textual evidence and the so-called Susian guards from the palace of Darius I at Susa. Despite the fact that such textual descriptions and pictorial evidence exist, the immortals in *Civ VI* do not have much in common with them (fig. 6).

	Civilization I	Civilization II	Civilization III	Civilization IV	Civilization V	Civilization VI
Persian Leaders	-	Xerxes	Xerxes	Darius I	Darius I	Cyrus
	-	Scheherezade	-	Cyrus	-	-
Unique Unit	-	-	Immortal	Immortal	Immortal	Immortal
Unique Building	-	-	-	Apothecary	Satrap's Court	Pairidaeza
Language spoken	-	English	English	Farsi	Aramaic	Pahlavi (?)
Symbol	-	Teal	Teal			
Capital	-	Persepolis	Persepolis	Persepolis	Persepolis	Pasargadae

Figure 8. A table with the comparative information regarding Persia from *Civ II* to *Civ VI* discussed in this article. Image created by the authors.

Immortals are a very powerful military unit in the early stages of the game, giving the Persians an advantage in early warfare, but fall off as the game progresses. The unique building of Persia, a mechanic introduced in *Civ IV*, is different for each installment: It is represented as the Apothecary in *Civ IV*; the Satrap's Court in *Civ V*, and as the Pairidaeza in *Civ VI* (fig. 7). These collections of buildings refer more to concepts than to actual buildings of the Achaemenid Empire. According to the Civilopedia, the in-game version of the Wikipedia, the Apothecary refers to the professions of *ašpiu* and *asu*, the first a spiritual doctor and the second to a form of physician responsible for the acquisition of medicine. From a game-mechanics point of view, the Apothecary gives the Persian civilization significant bonuses on trade and economic growth. The visual representation of the Apothecary is a domed building, an architectural style that was actually not present in the Achaemenid period. The Satrap's Court refers to the administrative role of satraps, the provincial governors of the Persian Empire. This unique building also offers significant bonuses to trade and economy. Finally, the Pairidaeza refers to the famous Persian gardens. This unique building offers considerable trade bonuses but also enhances the ability of the Persian civilization to increase the production of culture. Commonplace among all three buildings in the game is a focus on trade and economic growth.

An interesting feature of the *Civ* series is the use of languages. While in *Civ I–II* all civilizations use English, from *IV* onward, the developers decided to include more languages and eventually gave each civilization its own. For Persia, however, there seems to have been some confusion. For *Civ IV* the developers used modern Persian, for *Civ V* they used Aramaic which, while spoken at the time, is not related to Old Persian, and for *Civ VI*, they

used Pahlavi, which refers to the written forms of Middle Persian, dating much later than the Achaemenid Empire. As such, in none of the installments is the native Old Persian used. From *Civ IV* onward, each civilization also has its own symbol. For *Civ IV* and *V* the developers chose to symbolize the Persians with the scimitar sword, known in Persian as *shamshir*. However, these swords were introduced into Persia much later, probably after the twelfth century CE and, as such, have nothing to do with the Achaemenid Empire. In *Civ VI*, the developers luckily decided to go with a version of *Shahbaz*, a symbol that was actually used by the Achaemenids (fig. 8).

Finally, each civilization has its own starting capital city. For Persia, the developers used Persepolis for *Civ II–V*. However, Persepolis was a ceremonial capital for Persia, with probably little administrative function and without a proper urban space. From a historical point of view, therefore, it makes little sense to have Persepolis as the largest city in this empire in the game. In *Civ VI*, the developers decided to change that and made Pasargadae the starting city and capital.

Conceptualizing Persia

Now that we have described the unique characteristics of Persia in the game, it is possible to create the broader conceptualization the series has for this particular civilization. Based on these data, as well as the many hours spent playing or reading reviews of Persia in other installments of *Civ*, we see three main traits as defining Persia: (1) a focus on war; (2) a focus on trade, gold, and administration; and (3) a focus on monarchy. In all *Civs*, Persia thrives in early warfare. Its unique unit has been discussed as being very powerful early in the game, encouraging

the player to engage in combat. In *Civ III*, Persia has an emphasis on offensive infantry military production, and in *Civ V* Persia can get increased combat statistics for its military units. In *Civ VI*, Persia has significant bonuses on surprise wars and gains extra loyalty from occupied cities, creating an even more favorable environment for early warfare. Regarding trade and economy, Persia has significant bonuses when engaging in economic administration and trade across all installments. In *Civ II*, the Persian AI (i.e., Persia controlled by the computer) has the “perfectionist” trait, trying to maximize its economic output; *Civ III* Persia had an emphasis on wealth and trade; and in *Civ IV*, the bonuses of the Apothecary focus on economic growth. In *Civ V*, this focus on trade was expanded even further with the introduction of the Satrap’s Court and the fact that Golden Ages (a mechanic of the game) lasted longer for Persia if it became richer over time. The third and final trait seems to be a focus on monarchy. In *Civ*, the player can choose among different kinds of government, and Persia often receives significant bonuses when using the monarchy form. In *Civ III*, for example, monarchy is described as the “favorite” for Persia, and the player is not allowed to choose the republic government. In *Civ II*, Persia has unique titles for their monarchs and fundamentalists (a term used by the game for religious leaders), using *shah* for the king and *ayatollah* for the high priest, both terms unrelated to the Achaemenid Empire, but related to Persia’s modern history. It is also interesting to see how the game describes Persia and its kings to the players. In *Civ VI*, for example, when the player chooses to play as Persia and Cyrus the following text appears:

Claim the crown, Cyrus, King of Persia, for you are the anointed one. With immortal soldiers, and unwavering faith, you will conquer and rule the peoples of the world. You may see many alliances forming around you, but do not be fooled—such is an antiquated and weak way of navigating the world. Make no promise unless it aids you in achieving your goals.

Once again, we see the focus on warfare in this quotation, as well as the powerful messaging toward monarchy. The game warns the players that alliances are for the weak and very unlike the power of the Persian king.

An Orientalist View

From what is discussed above it becomes apparent that *Civ* has a very particular view of Persia. For *Civ*, Persia is its Achaemenid phase sprinkled with cultural characteristics of other periods of Persian history or histories of the broader Near East. This combination of cultures and styles becomes apparent in the palace Persia can build in *Civ VI* (fig. 9). We have exclusively Achaemenid rulers, and even the Civiliopedia entries



Figure 9. The Persian palace shares its architecture with India, Scythia, and Arabia in *Civ VI*.
Source: <https://civilization.fandom.com/>.

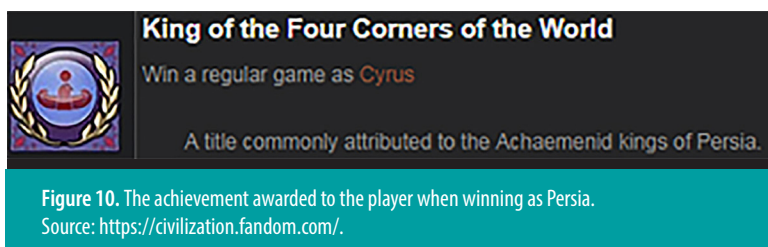


Figure 10. The achievement awarded to the player when winning as Persia.
Source: <https://civilization.fandom.com/>.

end their discussion of Persia with the conquest of Alexander. This is a particularly classical/westernized view. What is most familiar to western audiences is the Persia of the Greco-Persian wars, and little is known or discussed in popular history after that. At the same time, Achaemenid Persia is presented as a war-mongering empire, thriving on military conflict from the early stages of the game. This is very much in line with the popular view of Persian history as it is taught in documentaries and popular media. The empire is also described as focused on gold, very much playing into the trope of a rich, exotic, and decadent Near East. And finally, its focus on monarchy plays into the fantasy of eastern rulers being totalitarian, contrary to the democratic West. Such a description of an ancient Near Eastern empire fits within the concept of orientalism as analyzed by Edward Said (1979).

In his influential study on orientalism, Said argued that this term denotes the ways the West is coming to terms with the East based on the Orient’s special place in western experience (Said 1979: 1). He further argues that orientalism cannot, and should not, be seen solely as the doctrines of European superiority over a dogmatic view of the East (although these undeniably exist), but also as the varied works of individual authors dealing with the Orient. It is through the combination of these perspectives that we can truly understand the orientalist view. For that, Said pays particular attention to the aesthetic aspect of the oriental representation, and the ways the Orient is represented as a whole either through symbols or caricatures. This aesthetic aspect is crucial for our understanding of how Persia is portrayed in *Civ*.

Persia, and Near Eastern civilizations in general in *Civ*, are presented with their characteristics as understood and presented by the West. The Persia described is the one that we are familiar with, an image that is a patchwork of Persian traits (e.g., domed architecture; Near Eastern

literary tropes; *scimitar*) placed on top of an Achaemenid canvas. However, it is not only in the aesthetics of the game that we see this orientalist view. It is also in the mechanics, the way both the game and the Near Eastern civilizations play out (fig. 10). *Civilization* is a game that focuses on imperial mechanics, and this is only reinforced in the way Near Eastern cultures are meant to be played. The focus on monarchies and totalitarianism as favorable forms of government is indicative of this: It plays right into an understanding of Near Eastern cultures as “hydraulic societies,” a theory suggesting that governmental structures of cities and states in the Near East were totalitarian by necessity (Wittfogel 1957), which has already been proven to be a myth (see, e.g., Fernea 1970; but also more recently Scott 2017).

Steps Forward(?)

While the view of Persia and the Near East in general in *Civ* is undeniably orientalist, there are definite steps forward being taken. *Civ VI* in particular, while not moving away from the Achaemenid trope, includes several more authentic aspects of Persia than previous installments. Pasargadae as the capital, the inclusion of Pairidaeza and the focus on cultural production, and the inclusion of the *Shahbaz* as a symbol all are steps toward a more accurate representation of Persia. However, as a supposedly apolitical experience of the past, *Civ* is still struggling with the specters of (colonial) imperialism and orientalism as well as the fallacy of history as progress. For now, the experiences of history that it offers are based on the history of the West (and in particular on the history of America). It does, however, make for an enticing and enduringly popular game. All these traits that we discussed might be the subject of debate, but the reality is that a lot of people enjoy and have fun playing this game as well as other historical games set in the region, including several of the also immensely popular *Assassin's Creed* series. Indeed, the popularity and broad approach to history of *Civ* and other games clearly have the potential to create positive and impactful historical experiences (see also Gilbert 2019). We are quite sure a number of current scholars have had their budding curiosities in the history of the Near East sparked by this game, something that no doubt will also be the case for the future generation of educators and researchers.

When it comes to shedding its own historical legacies, *Civ* has made some steps in its latest installment, but it is not quite there yet. In that, the growing field at the intersection of archaeology and video games can play a crucial role: By constructively, yet critically, voicing our own ideas about the past and our playful experiences with it, we too can shape the experience of history in this game and perhaps even the future history of this game. The breadth of topics in this issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology* has shown that this is also true for experiences of Near Eastern history in general as well. Games have the potential to express unique and inclusive ideas about the history of the Near East, but this potential is still untapped. It is on us, experts of the past, to reach out to game developers and help shape a better gaming environment.

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