



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

On being stuck in Sid Meier's Civilization: the promise of freedom in historical games

Mol, A.A.A.; Politopoulos, A.; Lammes, S.

Citation

Mol, A. A. A., Politopoulos, A., & Lammes, S. (2023). On being stuck in Sid Meier's Civilization: the promise of freedom in historical games. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3719474>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3719474>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

On Being Stuck in Sid Meier's Civilization: The Promise of Freedom in Historical Games

Angus A. A. Mol

Leiden University Centre for Digital Humanities
P.O. Box 9500
2300 RA, Leiden
0031.71.5278828
a.a.a.mol@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Aris Politopoulos, Sybille Lammes

Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society
P.O. Box 9500
2300 RA, Leiden
0031.71.5272727, 0031.71.5272754
a.politopoulos@arch.leidenuniv.nl, s.lammes@hum.leidenuniv.nl

ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigate a fundamental tension in historical games: how they promise to let us experience the past as a playground while at the same time not offering the freedoms to radically explore and experiment with it. Historical games, for all their simulative and immersive power, are still rather stuck in specific forms of past-play. To investigate these borders, and what could lie beyond, we will employ a new political theory of the past, vested in archaeological and anthropological scholarship, as developed by Graeber and Wengrow in their book *The Dawn of Everything: A New history of Humanity*. In particular, we will use their ideas about fundamental freedoms to analyse how and to what extent processes and moments of radical historical change can be experienced in games. We will do so by focusing on the popular and influential game series Sid Meier's *Civilization*.

Keywords

Political theory, archaeogaming, historical games, game mechanics, freedom

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will interrogate the limitations and potential of experiencing freedom in historical games. Historical games often deal with moments and processes of dramatic change in the past, be it by 'simulating' conflicts, by highlighting pivotal events, by being set in times of upheaval, or by

presenting the player with historic decisions. Although such moments of change are situated in the past, in historical games the past *is* also the present. Indeed, ever since the outset of Game Studies, it has been clear that games set in or using elements from the past are firmly rooted in present day culture and contemporary views on (postcolonial) history and politics, of both game players and makers, and the communities and technologies in which they are embedded (Apperley 2006; Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Galloway 2006; Grufstedt 2022; Lammes 2003; 2010; Mol 2020; Mukherjee 2018; Mukherjee and Lundedal Hammar 2018; Politopoulos 2021). At the same time, there is a noticeably strong and persistent tradition of game designers and publishers who insist that their games are not concerned with political issues, past or present.

A case in point comes from Sid Meier, founder and longtime developer of the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series (MicroProse, Activision, Firaxis, 1991-, from here on out *Civ*). In an interview in 2016, Sid Meier argued that when Bruce Shelley and he were initially developing *Civ*, their fundamental goal was “not to project our own philosophy or politics onto things” (Tharoor 2016 n.p.). He further elaborated that playing out someone else’s political philosophy is “not fun for the player” (n.p.). More recently, Meier has devoted an entire chapter in his memoirs to counter and critique work by (game) scholars who had little trouble identifying politics in *Civ* (Meier 2020: 227-235). Although there is of course a difference between the intention of the makers and the experience of the player, it is at least curious that Meier has to be so adamant about what ‘his’ game is *not* about. One may indeed argue that his stance fits perfectly into an ideological attempt, studied extensively by marxist inclined scholars, to make history that is deeply rooted in hegemonic power structures look natural and factual instead of fabricated and mythologised to make ideologies ‘work’ stealthily (cf. Barthes 2012; Tager 1986).

The simple fact is that *Civ* is political. Claiming the a-political ‘high ground’ — and putting your foot down in your own memoir — as a foundational, highly influential game designer, who made a game titled after himself, in which the player takes on the role of a powerful leader at the dawn of civilization, plainly underlines this point. What is more, politics, specifically the politics of making decisions that will shape world history (in your game), is the very promise at the heart of *Civ*.

CIV'S COUNTERFACTUAL PROMISE

Civ is an experimental playground where players can transform history, by mixing historical leaders, technologies, architecture and political systems into something that is radically theirs and new. By playing with the past in this way, *Civ* allows players to create ‘what-if’ histories, also known as counterfactuals. Counterfactuals are based on the logical statement ‘Had A been, C would have been’ and are a core reasoning mechanism with which humans come to know their world. They are particularly common – even if eyed somewhat askance by many Historians – in our personal and collective attempts to make sense of the past. Perhaps the most famous counterfactual experiment is to ask ‘What if Hitler had been killed before he took power?’ The latter example, while cliché, underlines that these ‘what-if’ histories do not only concern plausible worlds, but also hinge on the idea of desirable worlds. This counterfactual game with the past not only concerns the history of ‘what could have been’, but also opens up to a past-political (and moral) philosophy of ‘what ought to have been done.’ This informs the answer to the question of ‘what should be done?’, and guides us towards enacting meaningful change in the present and for the future.

Counterfactuals are a core mechanism of many historical games and have been characterised by Adam Chapman (2016: 239) as a “rhetorical technique to draw out [historical] arguments.” While rhetoric and

arguing are *de facto* political actions, Chapman's view on counterfactuals in games is more focused on the practice of History (i.e. historicising as a scholarly discipline). In her work on counterfactuals in *Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox Interactive 2013) and other Paradox Games, Ylva Grufstedt (2022), proposes to expand Chapman's conceptualization of counterfactuals. Grufstedt does so by studying non-Historical epistemologies of historical game making and playing, showing how, for example, framing and wishful-thinking are inherently part of player interactions with the past. In the same vein, counterfactuals can be seen as a form of historical counterplay. A counterfactual does not play against the game's rules — as per the more standard understanding of counterplay (see Meades 2015) — but against the 'rules of history' (Mol 2020, see also Apperley 2018).

Counterfactuals powerfully remind us that games give us the freedom to interact with and retrace the past, in theory at least. This is also the agency promised to us in *Sid Meier's Civilization*. Yet previous analyses of *Civ* have laid bare that its histories repeat a dominant Western historical narrative, including but not limited to, replicating Colonialism and Orientalism (Carr 2007; Lammes 2003; Mol and Politopoulos 2021; Mol et al. 2017). *Civ* gets us stuck in the very histories that many, including us, would rather leave in the past. At the same time, empires, colonialism, and nation-states do not pop into existence at the start of the game, they are the result of many turns that are at first free of these political structures. So, while *Civ* can certainly be analysed from these specific parts of history to its beginning, it is also valuable to start at the dawn of a game of *Civ* and explore what freedoms it affords. We will do so by building on the concept of freedom(s) as detailed in the *Dawn of Everything*, an archaeological, political theory of civilization (Graeber and Wengrow 2021).

THE THREE FREEDOMS

In their book *The Dawn of Everything: A new history of humanity* (2021) Graeber and Wengrow debunk a widespread historical myth — and myths wield enormous power — concerning the development of 'civilization' as an unstoppable process towards a specific 'Western', post-Enlightenment present. Graeber and Wengrow start by deconstructing a uniquely European myth: the political philosophy of Rousseau, particularly his enormously influential *Discourse on Inequality* (Rousseau 1755). This work starts off with a thought experiment, inspired by travel journals and other proto-ethnographic accounts describing 'noble savages' living in and on the fringes of expanding European colonial states. Its idea is that, in their 'natural state' humans lived bountiful but socially isolated lives. Rousseau posits that, when humans started living together, when civilization began, people kickstarted a system of ever-increasing and competing wants and needs that required to be structured somehow, lest society fall apart. Rousseau saw the State, which, through a 'social contract' holds superior authority over its citizens, as a necessary political intervention.

Rousseau's theory cemented a view of the past in which there is a single path through history, from isolated bands and tribes to ancient agricultural states, through to colonial empires, and ultimately the modern nation-state — a trajectory known as 'the model of social evolution' in archaeology (see e.g. Service 1975). Yet Rousseau's thought experiment was just that, it was an imaginary undertaking that became a standard model of civilization's origins. Rousseau was, in a sense, engaging in counterfactual play with the past. This counterfactual turned out to be such a desirable one for many who wrote History afterwards that it has obscured the existence of alternative past-political systems, experiences, and trajectories, including but not limited to fundamentally egalitarian, large-scale, non-state collectives. Of course, alternative political systems still exist in many places, most notably in indigenous communities (see e.g. Falleiros 2017). More recently, these alternative social structures have also been re-discovered by archaeologists in the past (see e.g. Borck and Clark 2021). Laying out this evidence for successful,

alternative social structures beyond the nation-state and in the pre-Enlightenment past, *The Dawn of Everything* debunks the foundations of post-Rousseauian political theory (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 6-11). *The Dawn of Everything* opens up the potential of alternative histories in which the present nation-state is just one possibility among myriad socio-political and socio-cultural configurations.

The Dawn of Everything, as should be clear from its title, is a wide-ranging reappraisal of ‘history as usual’, aiming to elucidate how we have gotten stuck in the current moment and hoping to provide ways out of it (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 112-3). While the book has drawn criticism, much of it is focused on the details of the archaeological and historical studies presented in it. However the dust settles on the (counter)factual details of this work, in this paper we are most interested in the new political theory presented in it, based on three fundamental freedoms: *the freedom to move*, to step out of a social structure or situation; *the freedom to disobey*, to not follow instructions without (violent or disciplinary) consequences; and *the freedom to create*, to make new or transform existing relations, and out of that, novel social structures (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 132-3).

Interestingly, play and the freedoms it affords are an important part of Graeber and Wengrow’s conception of meaningful change in the past. The book, for example, discusses ‘play-kings’, rulers that were only in power during a festival or another special moment and under mandate of ‘their’ people, and ‘play-farming’, loose and flexible methods of cultivation which leave people free to pursue any number of seasonal activities (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 117). This playful conception of freedom is grounded in archeological, historical, anthropological, and, importantly, indigenous knowledge of non-Western people that, for example, had and took “the freedom to move in and out of farming” (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 260). The point is that the repetition and propensity of play underlying these and other cultural practices are vested in communal agreement, creative emulation, and the freedom to move in and out of these structures. Although the authors do not directly refer to works from play and game studies, obviously the idea that culture “arises in and out of play” and that play is rule-based, creative, and undertaken freely is a very old one (Huizinga 1938: xi).

Graeber and Wengrow are also concerned with times of change or what they refer to as *kairos* (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 524). In such times of metamorphosis, they argue, frames of reference undergo a shift and real change is possible. It is in those moments, however, that play often ceases to be play. The aforementioned play-kings stop being play-kings when they start killing people, and play-farming stops being play-farming when people are not free to select or switch between other modes of subsistence (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 505). We have an interesting paradox at hand when dealing with play in times of change. Play is at the root of social experimentation and malleability, but play ceases to be play when it loses its auto-telic quality and instead gains a direct and radical function outside of itself.

Graeber and Wengrow argue that, at least in our modern day and age, people have lost these freedoms, and are, as a result, stuck in one form of social reality, rooted in (state) violence and domination. Yet through play and other expressions of the freedoms to move, disobey, and create, social experimentation and change are made possible. This enables human societies to shift, transform, or maintain a social order of equality (see, for example, Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 461). Historical games are not time machines that allow us to change the trajectories that led us here, but through counterfactual historying and other playful modes of knowing they, in theory, offer the promise to understand, re-experience, and re-mix the past (Grufstedt 2021; Mol 2020; Politopoulos et al. 2019a; Sutton-Smith 1970).

Games are then, in potential, persuasive and empowering spaces and playing with these three freedoms may help us get unstuck. Still, they are, of course, different from the archaeological sites, written

histories, and ethnographic accounts that make up the source material of *The Dawn of Everything*. So, to be used for studies into the political theory of historical games, the three freedoms need to be reframed. We suggest that, in games, *the freedom to move* relates, for example, to the extent that players are able to move their character and/or in-game camera around in the game space and to take action in the game space, thereby moving through and changing landscapes, artefacts and timelines. At larger scales, these mechanics give rise to historying and placemaking that may offer the player possibilities to travel pluriverse timespaces. So, for instance, a cutscene does not offer much mechanical freedom because it withholds interactive agency from the player, while open world exploration would (potentially) offer more of this kind of freedom.

The freedom to disobey relates to the ability of players to take consequential (or inconsequential) gameplay actions, without the game ‘punishing’ them for this. It is about the freedom not to do what the game primarily invites or demands you to do and about having access to different ways, or verbs, to do things. But it can also be about how counterplay — be it against the rhythms of the game or history (Apperley 2014; Mol 2020) — is consequential for being able to play without getting stuck. For instance, if the game gives you no choice but to kill an NPC in order to keep playing, this infringes on your freedom to disobey. Non-diegetically, being able to hack or mod a game without repercussion and resistance, is a good example of having the freedom to disobey.

The freedom to create is closely connected to these two freedoms and concerns the possibility for players to create new structures within a game. It is about imagining, experimenting, making, and unmaking the (game)world. In-game you do this through interactions to which the game meaningfully responds with a change to its structure. Of course, most — if not all — games promise this interactivity and reactivity, but in practice, and as algorithmic artefacts, games provide it to very different degrees (Galloway 2006). For instance, if you select a character and the world of the game does not respond to that selection at all or negatively, there is limited freedom to create (your own identity as a character). A game that gives you the option to choose your companions and their presence elicits a meaningful response in-game, is a good example of this freedom in action.

The three freedoms we describe here are clearly part of the same dynamics that trigger vectors of change in games and are thus often intertwined. Moreover, they exist as contextual, multi-vectoral degrees of freedom, not as binaries or ‘sliders.’ You may not be able to move around freely in a cut-scene, as in the aforementioned example, but sitting back and watching may free your mind to come up with a creative move in the game later. Pondering the freedoms of games will also by its very nature break free from such old binaries as the virtual and the real and the boundaries of ‘magic circles’, as the politics of these freedoms can be practised in all sorts of game and non-game spaces. The obvious danger with such a framework is that it can truly become a ‘theory of everything’, rather than a way to bring necessary light into old discussions and ways of playing. However, we are still very far removed from that. While we believe that this framework can be used to ascertain the degree of freedom of players in video games of all kinds and has connections to political activities beyond games, for this paper’s purpose we are particularly interested in those games that also conceptually deal with changeable histories, historical ‘progress’, and freedoms in the past. So, how does *Civ*, as a prime example of such a game, allow for these three freedoms to unfold in a regular playthrough, taking us from the dawn to the end of history?

FROM THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING TO THE END OF HISTORY IN SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION

A game of *Civ* opens with the promise of a new world history retold. You, the player, are given free reign to set the parameters of this new history. First you choose your own leader and civilization, the one that you will guide to greatness. Then you can select your adversaries; who are they going to be and how many? You also get to choose a world map, its size and its geographical layout. Do you want to play on an archipelago, a giant landmass, or something close to our earth's continents? You can even select how much resistance you would like from counter-civilizational forces, represented in-game by barbarians roaming the land. Once you have chosen these settings you are ready to play the game.

In *Civ I* this starts with the black void, only broken up by parcels of green land with some units. It is an image of a world on which you look from above (Figure 1). It holds the middle between a map and a landscape and you can fill in the black nothingness until the whole world is seeable. In later games the blackness has gone, replaced by the terra incognita iconographies of early modern maps, but you still are presented with an empty surface to impose a landscape on, including your people (as units) and infrastructures. In short, you get to build a new world from scratch, one that resonates with your own world in certain ways, but also promises the weaving in of a new historical process with unpredictable and unprecedented outcomes. At the same time, in this process of digital placemaking the cultural, political, and historical landscape you will bring into being can't be undone (Foth 2017; Halegoua and Polson 2021; Hjorth and Richardson 2017). Slowly you make nothingness into somethingness.



Figure 1: The Authors getting stuck for one more turn in their playthrough of *Civ I*.

Flash forward six-and-a-half thousand years and what was once yours to shape is now inscribed with lines, units, cities and so on. Your world is fully explored at this point, its boundaries drawn, and its order decided. The specifics of this history you played through are non-replicable, as it has come into being through numerous contingent decisions and steps taken by you and the AI over several hundred turns. Even so, the game somehow feels less unique than it did in the beginning. It is quite likely you ended up in a counterfactual world that still mimics your present, just with a different cultural label,

layer and flavour attached to the power that runs that world. Times and spaces may have become mixed, but the end result is still roughly the same. Especially if you are an experienced *Civ* player, you have seen it all before. Getting to the end of this playthrough's history is another chore as the last time you made a choice that would change the course of your civilization is many turns ago. You are, in short, stuck. And you wonder how *Civ* got you there, and whether you and it can get unstuck in some way other than by never playing the game again.

This 'pastiche' description of *Civ*'s beginning and end game is based on many of our playthroughs of this game, but even more starts. The early game of *Civ* is masterfully designed and consistently provides, to quote Sid Meier, a series of interesting choices that power through entire stretches of their own early history. Yet even going back to our own first eager games of *Civ*, we still felt the ends of its game history were much less fun than its starts. While this requires future and more detailed study of other player's experiences, we are certainly not alone in this. Indeed, many threads discussing *Civ*'s boring endgame can be found in community forums such as r/civ and CivFanatics (e.g. Balalenzon. 2017; Krajzen 2013; MosheLevi 2009; Wiscomptons_Finest 2019). We suggest this unsatisfying endgame is the direct result of mechanics that constrain initial freedoms, which replicate the feeling of being stuck that Graeber and Wengrow point to as a more general, modern-day sentiment (2021: 504).

Consider, for example, how the literal mechanics of movement shift over time. Movement in *Civ* has two vectors. Firstly you can move the player view around the map — and into menus. This freedom is there from the beginning and throughout, but at the start this does not seem very consequential, most of what you see is unexplored territory whether you pan north, south, west, or east. More consequentially, you can also move your units around the world in any direction you want. The first time they move into a part of the world that your units have not yet been to, they uncover a bit of the map. This seems like a small change to make, but, in the explorative phase of the game, every square (or, since *Civ5*, hexagon) you move to permanently inscribes your map onto the empty game world surface.

Once a part of the map has been uncovered the game's expansion mechanics require you to make it your own and fill it in. One of your starting units is a settler, and they have the ability to create cities. When you and your settler have moved to the ideal spot, you give the command and your very first city is created. Citizens are simply confined in cities from that point on, the only people in your civilization that move around are military, settler, and support units used to change the landscape. Notably, units cannot move into or share the same location as foreign units. Moreover, your cities have 'cultural' boundaries that surround it and segregate it spatially. These boundaries expand as your economic and cultural resources increase and progressively colour the landscape in your *Civ*'s colour. This prevents other civilization's units from moving into what is now your territory and, similarly, it prevents you from moving into theirs.

The main mechanic in which you can get back some freedom of movement is by making 'Open Border agreements', which allow units owned by one civilization to enter the territory of another. You can only get these agreements through *Civ*'s version of the diplomatic process, a system of sub-mechanics keeping count of relations between civilizations. For the player, these become tangible in a separate section of the interface where you meet and confer with the leaders of other civilizations in the game. In single player *Civ* games this diplomatic process is shaped partly by the player's actions towards AI-controlled civilizations. For example, taking the freedom to move through or close to territory that is not your own will be received negatively by your AI opponents. Such player actions will be received differently depending on an AI leader Traits (or, in *Civ6*, their Agenda). These are rule-driven parameters that are frequently stereotypical takes on the historical characters and cultural mentalities

these leaders represent. For example, *Civ*'s Shaka Zulu has a Trait that will always trend towards violent interaction with his opponents, while the parameters shaping Gandhi's AI choices will heavily trend to keeping peace.

Your repeated diplomatic encounters with these colourful characters is the closest to what a singleplayer game of *Civ* has to offer in terms of social relations. Considering *Civ* has many rules that govern its gameplay, the vast majority of which you cannot disobey (without hacking, modding, or cheating), these encounters feel airy and much less demanding. Indeed, a good part of their fun resides in *not* listening to the demands of your AI opponents. This refusal to obey the wishes of these leaders are, in the early game (generally) free of consequence and is, diegetically, the closest to the freedom to disobey as conceptualised by Graeber and Wengrow. Yet there are many other mechanics feeding into player-AI leader interactions, a major one being the quantitative strength of your military units versus those of your opponents. Diegetically, if you can't back up your words with weapons, they will ring more empty to the leader you are conversing with. So, after the early part of the game these leader interactions become more forceful, threatening, and are driven by higher stakes. The freedom to disobey thus becomes more constrained. Over time, relations become stuck in a web of threats and broken promises, painstakingly accounted for and processed algorithmically. For example, if you make an enemy of a leader in the mid-game, it is likely that they will remain your nemesis until the end of time. The only way to retain the freedom to disobey is to make sure you are the superior military power, which is simply the freedom all oppressors have had historically.

Finally, the freedom to create is both *Civ*'s biggest promise and where it is diegetically most constrained:

Become Ruler of the World by establishing and leading a civilization from the Stone Age to the Information Age. Wage war, conduct diplomacy, advance your culture, and go head-to-head with history's greatest leaders as you attempt to build the greatest civilization the world has ever known (civilization.com; emphasis ours).

In *Civ* you are promised the potential to play with history in order to create the world's greatest civilization. It doesn't matter which civilization you choose to play as, and it doesn't matter how you choose to play the game, more aggressively, more peacefully, or with a focus on economy, mechanically you will always be driven to create 'the world's greatest civilization'. The contents of this civilization will look very similar to any other great civilization you could have built, going through all the same historical trajectories, from the ancient era to the information era and stuck in a counterfactual reality that is not the same as ours, but it is also not particularly different.

You are never given, for example, the option to create your own mode of government. In *Civ6* you can swap between a small pool of government structures, but these are euphemistic versions of governments from western history: autocracy, oligarchy, classical republic, monarchy, merchant republic, theocracy, democracy, fascism, and communism. You can make minute changes by prioritising certain policies over others, make your fascist government even more aggressive, or your merchant republic to work like a financial clockwork, but you have no option to fundamentally design your own government or mode of governance. If you are like us, this stuckness can initially be countered by coming up with all sorts of 'wild' political pairings for your game: Communist Americans, Democratic Aztec, the Zulu Republic! Still, this counterfactual trick gets old fast. The Zulu Republic in *Civ* does not meaningfully play or even look different from, for example, the Dutch Republic.

Contrary to Graeber and Wengrow’s ideas of play-kings discussed earlier, the ability to jump in and out of political structures, in *Civ* you are actively punished for doing so. Once, for example you move into the modern era and choose Democracy you can include 8 policy cards in the structure of your government, clearly making it a more powerful form of government. If, however, you decide to revert back to an oligarchy or to classical republic, both from the ancient era, you will only have 4 policy slots available. Such an action would place you at such a disadvantage compared to your adversaries that you might as well stop playing the game altogether. Wanting and growing power is central to the way the game forces you to play. The reason for this is that Sid Meier’s enterprise promotes the view that most fun is had by the player when they have the most power. In particular, when he looked at history to design *Civ*, he felt it were the kings who had the most power and as such would have had the most fun historically (Meier 2020: 204). If you concede your power in *Civ*, you concede your ability to have fun. In short, you don’t get to be a play-king, and jump in and out of power. Instead, you are to be a real king for the sake of fun.

If one of your cities gets fed up with you being a real king, either because you didn’t invest enough in them or they are too far away from the core of your empire to remain ‘loyal’, it becomes a ‘free city’ (Figure 2). Free cities, however, are not particularly free. They are, rather, free fodder for the strongest civilization on the map to conquer them. Free cities cannot create their own forms of government, they cannot set up their own tech tree, and cannot revert back to previous modes of being. The moment a city becomes free it becomes hostile against every civilization and acts in the same way as Barbarians act in the game, senselessly violent, impossible to engage with in any diplomatic way, and stagnant as a culture. The only non-violent way of acquiring free cities is by exerting enough ‘cultural’ influence over them until they decide to hold a petition to join your civilization. So, free cities are never allowed to sustainably create their own political futures or remain free for very long.



Figure 2: Valladolid has low Loyalty and is about to revolt against Scotland (CivFanatics n.d).

Another play concept discussed by Graeber and Wengrow is that of play-farming, an idea based on Murray Bookchin’s ecology of freedom (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 260). They define play-farming

as the ability or proclivity of human societies to move freely in and out of farming, to not be locked within one mode of subsistence. This type of ecological fluidity, they argue, where human societies can move between farming and hunting-gathering, and mix and match their subsistence strategies as they choose, has been typical of human societies for thousands of years. As an aspect of human creativity it is excluded from the histories of *Civ*. *Civ*'s sense of progress has always been about the tech tree in which technologies, discoveries, and modes of being are tied to specific historical sequences. You can never get to education, for example, unless you have learned mathematics. Any discovery in the tech tree gets you stuck with the assumption that it should always enable the same things, mathematics will always (eventually) create banks, gunpowder will always create weapons, nuclear fission will always create nuclear bombs. The more you are progressing on the tech tree, the less free you become. *Civ* assumes, much like most of the popular historical narratives, that technologies shape human societies and not the other way around (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 498).

In their book, Graeber and Wengrow argue that the important question to ask is not what the origins of social inequalities are, but how humanity got stuck in a single mode of social existence (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 112-3). *Civ* is not interested in this latter question, contrary to its promise of rewriting history, but gets you stuck as part of its core design. In his memoir Sid Meier wrote that settling your first city should be a statement where players “declare their place in the world and their intent to rule it” (Meier 2020: 122).

FREE TO PLAY?

Our starting point in this paper was rather conventional: historical games are political — notwithstanding Sid Meier's protestations. Yet, as counterfactuals, as political philosophical and potential aspirational spaces, it is fascinating and valuable to explore in depth how their politics operate. For example, how is (not) having freedom to change history in *Civ* mimicking the dynamics of (not) having freedom historically? Our examples show that these mechanics of freedom are a core part of the game's beginnings, that become constrained over play time and are (practically) absent at the end. Moreover, players do not have the freedoms in the game to do something about this.

Of course, this stuckness, this inability to meaningfully change the endgame of *Civ*, is rooted in the fact that games are algorithmic artefacts that, by design and necessity, constrain how we can interact with(in) them. Producing a game that is inclusive of the diverse political historical trajectories as described in *The Dawn of Everything* would be highly complex. Historical Games are not complete simulations of the past and they should not be. Still, they are specific models of the past (Graham 2020). so perhaps we should simply look for other specific models than *Civ*?

In this light it is interesting to consider a game that is diametrically opposed to *Civ*: the stealth-action series *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007-; from here on out *AC*). *AC* players too are promised that ‘history is our playground’ (Batchelor 2018). Interestingly, most *AC* games are set in times of political upheaval and historical change: from the Peloponnesian War to the Russian Revolution (Politopoulos et al. 2019a). Yet, in *AC*, changing history is fully beyond the remit of the player. In fact, players cannot really interact with the past at all. *AC* achieves this through a narrative trick: players are, as a modern-day character, experiencing the past through the immutable ‘genetic memory’ of an ancestor. Players have freedom to roam around, but mechanically have relatively few diverse ways to interact in the past, as the limited in-game actions available to us are only violent in nature.

The *AC* games are prominent members of a specific type of historical game that unequivocally promises historical experiences of radical change. *We. The Revolution* (Polyslash 2019) takes place during the French Revolution and lets you play a judge of the revolutionary tribunal; in *Riot: Civil Unrest* (Leonard Menchiari and IV Productions 2019) you get to experience various protests of the recent past around the world (either from the perspective of the protestors or that of the police); and in *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (INK stories 2016) you walk around as a photographer during the height of the protests against the Shah in Iran. These games visually, narratively, and aesthetically are all about the radical moments of historical change, the promise of every revolution. They often are as constrained as *Civ*, based on the mechanical need to stick with the facts of history of that time — and, in *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*, a desire to share this important history. In these games you get stuck in revolution, locked into the perspective of the spectacle of historical upheaval, yet unable to experiment with the direction of social and political changes.

If even games set in revolutionary times are stuck, is it even possible to find mechanics for historical games that are rooted in giving the player the freedom to move, disobey, and create? We admittedly do not have the answers to this question yet, but we believe that these should be sought by asking the following more targeted questions: i) what could games look like that are fundamentally based on the three freedoms, and ii) how can we find mechanics in games that are traditionally not moving away from Post-Rousseauian political theory and Western histories?

Games and game mechanics that foster these three freedoms actually already exist, especially if one looks into the world of analogue games. Tabletop role playing games, and even more so non-blockbuster role playing games, already include mechanics that enable experimentation and facilitate play experiences that can potentially be more free and creative. Such a study of analogue games would deserve its own dedicated analysis, however, and goes beyond the scope of this paper. For digital games, the blockbuster *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) offers a great example (Fan et al. 2022; Huuhka 2019; Politopoulos et al. 2019b). In *Minecraft* the player is free to move quite literally anywhere in its generated world, a world so large that one needs years to traverse it. The freedom to disobey is maybe a bit more difficult to tackle here, but it is present. While *Minecraft* does have a story that can be followed, if the player wishes to do so, there are no consequences or gameplay disruption if one decides to ignore this completely. Non-diegetically, *Minecraft* is moreover a game that allows and enables (much more in the Java version than the Microsoft version) the disobeying of its limited rules through enabling cheats or modding. Finally, *Minecraft* gives you the freedom to imagine, experiment, make, and unmake structures, landscapes, and worlds. Both diegetically and non-diegetically, a player can do more or less whatever they want in this blocky, pixelated world building game. From reshaping entire landscapes, to making computers within computers, to recreating heritage from around the world, *Minecraft* is fundamentally a game about not being stuck.

We are not claiming that *Minecraft* is the perfect game, but it sets an example as there are aspects of *Minecraft* that make the implementation of mechanical freedoms more straightforward compared to other ones. There are, for example, no constraining narrative mechanics, and no NPCs to interact with in a narratively meaningful way. In the basic version of *Minecraft* you are also playing by yourself, unless you decide to open your world up to, well, the world. Of course, in *Minecraft*, like any other computer game, you are still bound to the algorithmic nature of this artefact and its game's rules. The world will always be made of pixelated blocks. Building in diagonals is basically impossible, and if you don't eat (in survival mode at least) you will die.

Minecraft is also not a historical game, or at least not according to conventional definitions. Historical games have been defined as games that are set in a historical place and/or time (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007) or more broadly as games that draw upon or refer to history or discussions about history (Chapman 2016). Recently, McCall (2022) further elaborated on this, arguing that historical games are modes of History, and that games represent selected aspects of the past. In thinking about how we can use games to experiment with the past, however, we would argue that *Minecraft* affords a historical process in, what can perhaps be considered, a more fundamental and profound sense than ‘traditional’ historical games (Politopoulos et al. 2019b). Paradoxically, *Minecraft*, giving its players access to the three freedoms, enables a mode of (hi-)storying that is actually devoid of History. As a result, players are free to tell their own stories, and in doing so, they often choose to tell stories of the past. We argue that one way to do this is to have games based on the three freedoms, games that enable players to freely roam around the past, to hack through or otherwise reconstitute the mechanics of games, and create new past-future worlds.

CONCLUSIONS

While we focused on *Civ* in this paper, this promise of radical freedom and the bounded way in which this promise is broken is emblematic of many, if not most, historical games. How, let alone why, players are doomed to retread history as usual are large, multi-faceted questions, involving a deep and wider study of the intersecting mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics of past, play, and politics. As part of this much larger project, in this paper we investigated how *Civ* mechanically presents its players with freedom, as a single, but highly influential and revealing example of a historical game.

Through exploring mechanics of (constrained) freedom in *Civ* using the political theory developed in the *Dawn of Everything*, we get new insight into how current politics in games arise from deeply historical ones. Our analysis underlines that games — at least historical ones, but we think this insight reaches beyond this subgenre — are as much the result of the politics of present play as they are of politics in and of the past. The framework we are proposing to use for this, based on the work of Graeber and Wengrow, gives us the possibility to think of historical games as arenas for political discourses and in terms of human freedoms. Furthermore, based on a deconstruction of the grand historical narrative of socio-political evolution, it is also aspirational in how we want to offer a new analytical framework to understand — and possibly design — histories in games in ways that do not endlessly repeat post-Rousseauian myths, rooted in and favouring Western histories, but rather thrive in more diverse experiences of and experiments with past and present political systems from societies around the world.

We recognize that such a call may seem too idealistic to some or simply out of the purview of (Historical) Game Studies. But we are hopeful about the possibility to study, design, and play games about the multiplicity of human histories that enable radical change in present society. *Civ*, particularly its start, shows some real potential for this. However, the end of history in *Civ* is bounded and unfree. While being bounded in a (historical) playground is not necessarily a bad thing, the crux is if this boundedness can lead back into freedom and all the fun that involves. We feel this current moment in time needs mechanics that do just this, where play can move away from old structures, disobeying their insistent presence, and create new ones. Games, rooted in counterfactuals and other playful ways of knowing the world, have immense potential for liberating the past, fostering creativity in the present, and opening up future trajectories of change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication is supported by the Leiden University University Fund (Snouck Hurgronje award for project “Past-at-Play Lab”) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO projects “Playful Time Machines: Experiencing The Past in Video Games”, grant number VI.Vidi.211.249) and “Playing Politics: Media Platforms, Making Worlds”, grant number 406.20.CW.005).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apperley, T.H. 2006. “Virtual Unaustralia: Videogames and Australias Colonial History”. *Proc. of Cultural Studies Association of Australasias Annual, UNAUSTRALIA*.
- Balalenzon. 2017. The game becomes extremely boring after like turn 200. Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/6m416z/the_game_becomes_extremely_boring_after_like_turn/
- Barthes, R. 2012. *Mythologies: The Complete Edition*. New York, US: Hill and Wang.
- Batchelor, J. 2018. “History Is Our Playground”: Bringing Assassin’s Creed into the Classroom”. *GamesIndustry.Biz*. 14 February 2018. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/history-is-our-playground-bringing-assassins-creed-into-the-classroom>.
- Borck, L. and J.J. Clark. 2021. Dispersing Power: The Contentious, Egalitarian Politics of the Salado Phenomenon in the Hohokam Region of the U.S Southwest. In *Power from Below in Ancient Societies: The Dynamics of Political Complexity in the Archaeological Record*, edited by T. L. Thurston and Manuel Fernandez-Gotz 247-271. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carr, D. 2007. “The Trouble with Civilization”. In *Videogame, Player, Text*, edited by B. Atkins and T. Krzywinska 222–36. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Chapman, A. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- CivFanatics. n.d. Loyalty (Civ6). *CivFanatics*, [https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Loyalty_\(Civ6\)](https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Loyalty_(Civ6))
- Dyer-Witheford, N. and G. De Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minnesota, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Falleiros, G. 2017. Notas Para una Crítica Anarco-Indígena al Individuo. *Palimpsestos: Revista de Arqueología y Antropología Anarquista*, 1(0): 209-227.
- Fan, Y.H., C. Lane, and Ö. Delialioğlu. 2022. “Open-Ended Tasks Promote Creativity in Minecraft”. *Educational Technology & Society* 25 (2): 105–16.
- Foth, M. 2017. “Some Thoughts on Digital Placemaking”. *Media Architecture Compendium: Digital Placemaking*, 203–5.
- Galloway, A.R. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minnesota, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Graeber, D., and D. Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London, UK: Allen Lane.

- Graham, S. 2020. *An Enchantment of Digital Archaeology: Raising the Dead with Agent-Based Models, Archaeogaming and Artificial Intelligence*. New York, US: Berghahn Books.
- Grufstedt, Y. 2022. *Shaping the Past: Counterfactual History and Game Design Practice in Digital Strategy Games*. Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Halegoua, G. and E. Polson. 2021. “Exploring “Digital Placemaking””. *Convergence* 27(3): 573–78.
- Hjorth, L. and I. Richardson. 2017. *Pokémon GO: Mobile Media Play, Place-Making, and the Digital Wayfarer*. London, UK: SAGE Publications Sage.
- Huuhka, M. 2019. “Journeys in Intensity: Human and Nonhuman Co-Agency, Neuropower, and Counterplay in Minecraft”. In *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, edited by S. Karkulehto, A.-K. Koistinen and E. Varis, 218–35. Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- INK stories. 2016. *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*. Multi-platform: INK stories
- Krajzen. 2013, 23 October. The core of 4X games "boring endgame problem" - a short essay about Rapidly Increasing Complexity. *CivFanatics*, <https://forums.civfanatics.com/threads/the-core-of-4x-games-boring-endgame-problem-a-short-essay-about-rapidly-increasing-complexity.677400/>
- Lammes, S. 2003. “On the Border: Pleasure of Exploration and Colonial Mastery in Civilization III Play the World”. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05163.06568.pdf>.
- Lammes, S. 2010. “Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games and Postcolonial Culture”. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4 (1): 1–6.
- Leonard Menchiari and IV Productions. 2019. *Riot: Civil Unrest*. Multi-platform: Merge Games.
- MacCallum-Stewart E. and J. Parsler. 2007. “Controversies: Historicising the Computer Game”. *DiGRA ‘07 - Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play*.
- McCall, J. 2022. “History Games”. In *Play Studies-Encyclopedia of Ludic Terms*. IT University of Copengagen. <https://eolt.org/articles/history-games>.
- Meades, A.F. 2015. *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- Meier, S. 2020. *Sid Meier’s Memoir!: A Life in Computer Games*. New York, US: WW Norton & Company.
- MicroProse, Activision, Firaxis. 1991-. *Sid Meier’s Civilization*. Multi-platform: MicroProse, Activision, Hasbro Interactive, Infogrames, 2K Games.
- Mojang Studios. 2011. *Minecraft*. Multi-platform: Mojang Studios, XBox Studios, Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Mol, A.A. A. 2020. “Toying with History: Counterplay, Counterfactuals, and the Control of the Past”. In *History in Games*, edited by M. Lorber and F. Zimmermann, 237–58. Berlin, Germany: transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839454206-013>.
- Mol, A.A.A., Aris Politopoulos, and Csilla E. Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke. 2017. ““From the Stone Age to the Information Age”: History and Heritage in *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI*”. *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 5 (2): 214–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2017.9>.

- Mol, A. and A. Politopoulos. 2021. "Persia's Victory: The Mechanics of Orientalism in *Sid Meier's Civilization*". *Near Eastern Archaeology* 84 (1): 44–51. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713527>.
- MosheLevi. 2009, January 2. CIV 4 Games become Boring when Approaching Late Game. *CivFanatics*, <https://forums.civfanatics.com/threads/civ-4-games-become-boring-when-approaching-late-game%C2%85.326251/>
- Mukherjee, S. 2018. "Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism". *Games and Culture* 13 (5): 504–20.
- Mukherjee, S. and E. Lundedal Hammar. 2018. "Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies". *Open Library of Humanities* 4(2), 33. <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.309>
- Paradox Interactive. 2013. *Europa Universalis IV*. PC, Paradox Interactive.
- Politopoulos, A., A. A. A. Mol., K. H. J. Boom, and C. Ariese. 2019a. "History is our Playground": Action and Authenticity in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 7(3): 317-323. <https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.30>
- Politopoulos, A., C. Ariese, K. H. J. Boom, and A. A. A. Mol. 2019b. "Romans and Rollercoasters: Scholarship in the Digital Playground". *Journal of Computer Applications in Archaeology* 2(1): 163–75. <https://doi.org/10.5334/jcaa.35>.
- Politopoulos, A. 2021. "Virtual Ziggurats: Orientalist Views and Playful Spaces". *Near Eastern Archaeology* 84(1): 52–61. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713526>.
- Polyslash, 2019. *We. The Revolution*. Multi-platform: Klabater.
- Rousseau, J.J. 1755. *Discours Sur l'origine et Les Fondements de l'inégalité Parmi Les Hommes*. Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey.
- Service, E.R. 1975. *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution*. Norton.
- Sutton-Smith, B. 1970. "The Playful Modes of Knowing."
- Tager, M. 1986. "Myth and Politics in the Works of Sorel and Barthes". *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (4): 625–39.
- Tharoor, K. 2016. "Playing with History: What Sid Meier's Video Game Empire Got Right and Wrong about "Civilization"". *Longreads. Recuperado de* <https://Longreads.Com/2016/10/26/What-Sid-Meiers-Video-Game-Empire-Got-Right-and-Wrong-about-Civilization>.
- Ubisoft. 2007-. *Assassin's Creed*. Multi-platform: Ubisoft.
- Wiscomptons_Finest. 2019. Does anyone else consistently get "bored" near the end game? How do you overcome it? *Reddit*, https://www.reddit.com/r/civ/comments/a7cpv2/does_anyone_else_consistently_get_bored_near_the/

