Making the Best of All Possible Worlds

A Preview of Sid Meier's Civilization

by Alan Emrich

While Rome wasn't built in a day, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire only takes a good day's worth of play in this latest offering from **Microprose**. As an evolutionary step from *Railroad Tycoon*, Sid Meier's new game progresses from his fertile mind to the "fertile crescent" in *Civilization*, another one of those "compulsive-addictive" games that one can easily stay up until 4:00 AM playing and ends up thinking about constantly when *not* playing.

Sid Earth

In the beginning, Sid Meier (with Bruce Shelley) creates the Earth. Right away, players are thrown into the game with its opening menus. Players can play on the actual Earth, a randomly generated planet with Earth's "specs," or set their own parameters for a habitable word orbiting an G-type star. These "custom" planets are particularly enjoyable, for while every planet is the same size (in terms of the number of máp squares horizontally and vertically), the amount which is land versus ocean can be adjusted, as can the overall climate, temperature and the planet's age. (The younger the planet, the more dense its terrain features will be—i.e., large jungles or deserts as opposed to nearby diverse terrain in surrounding areas.)

The computer spends a bit of time generating the world and filling it with various logical and aesthetically pleasing terrain designs. There are a dozen different terrain types with "special resource" squares sprinkled throughout the board (oil, gold, gems, coal, gold, fish, game, etc.). The purpose of terrain is to allow players to find suitable city sites, build cities there and exploit the land. Naturally, cities founded near fertile rivers and grasslands will fare better in terms of growth than those on arctic and tundra squares, but cities on hills and mountains make excellent defensive strongholds despite their "slow growth" terrain.

Sid City

The game begins with each "player" (al-though, as in *Railroad Tycoon*, there can be only *one* human player who must compete against from 2-6 other computer players) having a single caravan of settlers roaming the land in search of a suitable city site. Once a city is founded, urban management quickly becomes the "game within the game" in *Civilization*. The player must allot the city's available labor to work the nearby land by irrigating, mining and building roads, or pull them off the land to create a class of "elite" citizenry within the city itself.

As the land is worked, food (symbolized by wheat stalks), resources (or "shields") and trade ("arrows") are produced. Optimally, food is produced in surplus to the city's basic consumption need, with the excess stored in the city's "food box." When filled, this box is emptied and the city grows by another point. With each increase in population, the amount of food required to fill the food box increases, and by discovering pottery (and building a granary), the food box is only half emptied each time the population increases.

Resources (symbolized by shields) equal a city's production output. In order to "buy" a city improvement (such as a temple, military unit or even a wonder of the world), a commitment must be made in resources. The city's resource box continues to fill until the unit is actually purchased. Spending money can hasten the purchase of items, but since for each shield still required to build an item *two* coins must be spent, the savings in time could ruin one's economy if this form of "emergency production" is used too often.

The trade units generated by a city's roads and waterways actually become one of three things, as determined by the player. Each trade unit either converts to a "coin" (i.e., money, based on the player's tax rate), a "diamond" (i.e., a luxury item required to keep citizens content, based on the player's luxury rate) or a "light bulb" (i.e., a unit of research towards the next technology advance based on whatever trade is not consumed by either taxes or the production of luxury items). Since money is required on a per turn basis in order to maintain one's city improvements, and luxury items, in turn, keep the urban populace from revolt, it is often difficult to balance a society's need for long term R&D ("light bulbs") against urgent, turn-by-turn social demands. To make matters worse, depending on one's current type of government (despotism, monarchy, republic, etc.), a certain amount of trade units are lost to "corruption," depending on the city's distance from the player's capital (palace).

Citizens not working the land to produce the food, resources and trade required for prosperity can become "elite citizens." These "Übervolk" come in three flavors; the taxman (who creates additional coins from the city each turn), Einstein (who produces additional light bulbs each turn) and the ever popular Elvis (who will constantly be putting down revolts by creating the luxuries required to alleviate discontent among the urban

populace). Often a society will have a pressing need for one of these commodities. For example, a war needs money so that military units can be purchased quickly. Having enemies with superior technology might call for every citizen possible to become an Einstein for a while. Likewise, the fall of one's capitol or a revolution causing widespread discontent creates a pressing need for "Elvi". Thus, the super citizens are there for the instant reward at the cost of some long-term growth for the city as the fields lay fallow from the drafting of farmers into the "elite citizen corps."

The People Are Revolting

Civilization can be played at five different difficulty levels (from Chieftain to Emperor). This affects computer opponent hostility (and "cheats"/"handicaps" bestowed the computer player), but—equally important—varies the level of tolerance the populace has for the player. The easier the game, the more people who will fill a city before new citizens begin to be born "unhappy." If there are more unhappy people than "wealthy" people to offset their numbers, a city goes into revolt. In this, the "Sid City" portion of the game, dealing with revolts becomes an ongoing aspect of game play. There are many ways to appease the masses. Raising the luxury rate will make people happy throughout one's civilization (at a cost in light bulbs produced each turn). Temples, cathedrals, courthouses and coliseums can be built. "Elvi" can be created. Settlers can be created (which removes a point of unhappy population from the city), one's type of government can be switched and even certain wonders of the world might help to restore order. Due to the frequency of urban revolt, however, every tool in the toolbox will be required to keep a lid on unrest. Players are advised that "smart play" is to be diligent yet creative in dealing with revolts.

Reinventing the Wheel

Advancing one's civilization is one of the few ways that *Sid Meier's Civilization* compares to the popular **Avalon Hill** boardgame, *Civilization*. In the boardgame, one saves up to buy Civilization Cards such as pottery, medicine, iron working, etc. Owning some cards makes acquiring others easier, so the evolution of discoveries progresses along fairly logical lines. In *Sid Meier's Civilization*, these same advances are purchased via light bulbs (scientific R&D), with each new discovery costing more

than its predecessor and specific prerequisites required before higher levels of technology can be reached. For instance, the discovery of "Advanced Flight" *requires* about forty previous discoveries (including such "oldies" as the alphabet, mysticism and bridge building). A vast, interwoven complex of discoveries, many of which are prerequisites for later discoveries, is built into the game and adds much to its richness and replay value. Interestingly, players are informed of many key events in the game by the same type of "newspaper" headline graphics which were also used in *Railroad Tycoon*.

The press aside, time is also an important concept in *Civilization*. Since the game covers an era from 4000 BC to the colonizing of Alpha Centauri (roughly 2000 AD), it would take a lot of 1-year turns to complete a game. Fortunately, early on, each game turn represents 20 years, which is later reduced to 10, 5, 3,
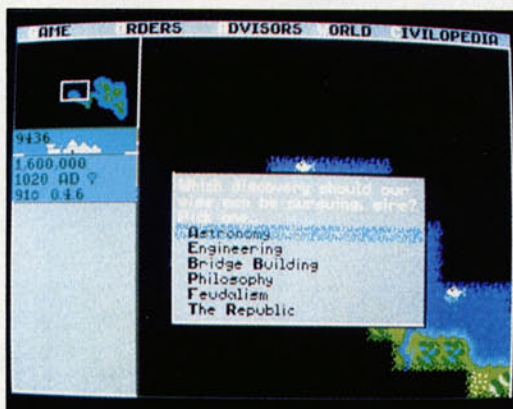
2 and finally 1 year per turn. This compressing of the time scale gives the activities of civilizations across the millennia the right "feel" throughout the game, although it *is* difficult to imagine all of WWII as lasting less than 10 turns. The player will find there are more drawn-out Punic and 100-Years type wars to be conducted than quick little 7-Years wars and Koreas. Interestingly, in the beta version playtested, a player will never face the threat of a serious civil war (even at the toughest levels) since cities which revolt never build military units which must be crushed, no matter how badly treated or ignored they are. Considering their significance in history, this writer is hopeful that civil wars will get their due in the final version of the game.

Will Wonders Never Cease?

A major object of the game is to build the highly expensive, long-term "wonders of the world." There are seven ancient,

seven medieval (and renaissance) and seven modern wonders of the world. Building them not only raises one's final game score by an impressive amount, but also give the player a certain long-term special advantage over other civilizations. For instance, building the Colossus, since everyone came to marvel at it, greatly increases trade at that city. Discovering the cure for cancer helps to keep everybody happy. The older wonders, however, are often made obsolete. For instance, Shakespeare's Theater ceases to provide its benefit of making people happy in that city once the discovery of electricity is made (with radio and television the presumed culprits). An important part of one's playing strategy, therefore, is knowing what "special powers" each wonder possesses and building them, in the right place and at the right time, to take best advantage. The sacrifice is enormous, but the long-term benefits can be also.

On War

In the movie *Patton*, our hero says "Next to war, all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance." In many way, *Civilization* proves this out. The nature of human happiness and prosperity is a struggle for excellence, not equality, and so it is that one must develop the technologies and military resources to insure his "place in the sun." The struggle for excellence in *Civilization* is not conducted on a purely military basis, however, for politics and economics are also closely related. Still, almost every aspect of the game seems to connect to a military application. Even the criteria for winning the game is biased in favor of the world conqueror over the stellar colonizer!

The secret is to know thy neighbors. Computer-controlled civilizations are all competing for ascendency, so knowing who can be bullied (like the Egyptians' Ramses), who can bribed (like the Americans' Lincoln) and who must be fought (like the Mongols' Genghis) is clearly "history lesson one." The beta software played by this writer, however, had no options for "random personalities" for the different leaders, so one's diplomatic play style can become pretty set after only a few games. The uses of diplomat units, however, is primarily for their military value. Gathering intelligence and conducting campaigns of bribery, treachery and sabotage are the primary mission of diplomats.

Even trade has overt military implica-

tions. While it might seem the most peaceful thing in the world to establish a trade route to a foreign city, the increase is trade only gives the player *establishing* the trade route an advantage. Computer players never seem to establish them with the human player, but apparently do so with ease among themselves. Caravans are also used to rush the production of those long-term investments known as wonders of the world, which can quickly free up a city for more important (and often militarily useful) items.

It's a difficult concept to grasp, but many a city in a republic has had to build things as "peaceful" as a cathedral or coliseum so that its armies could march off to war. This is because the populace of the city had to be "appeased" so that the armies could deploy beyond the city gates without throwing the whole town into unrest. It seems that virtually *everything* in *Civilization* translates into a military advantage. While quite historical, the overt implications of this aspect of the game may be a turn-off to some.

The clash of military units, by comparison to the aggressive struggle for economic and diplomatic superiority, is almost anticlimactic. While one must sweat over building up individual cities and discoveries, armies bump into each other with the ultimate in instantaneous finality. Combat is resolved by the old "ping pong balls in the fishbowl" technique. A unit with an attack strength of four puts four ping pong balls in the fishbowl, while a unit with a defense strength of three would put three in the bowl. The computer mixes up the seven ping pong balls, then pulls one out to determine the winner and eliminates the loser. Terrain, fortifications and a unit's "veteran" status will all effect its strength, and as technology progresses, so do unit strengths and abilities.

Political Correctness

Civilization also strives to be a "hip" game and deals with popular social issues from the standpoint of "political correctness." Thus, global warming is a tremendous threat (one that is all too often realized in the beta version). Odd, for such a recent, unproven theory.... Evolution is expressed in the game's introduction, but at least *that* debate has been around a while. Pollution, therefore, becomes a society's primary focus after industrialization takes place, with players being channeled toward more politically correct power plants, recycling centers

and mass transit to address the problem. Even the beta test "super highway" wonder of the world gave way to "women's suffrage." While women's suffrage is a novel concept for its effect during game play, it is also another brick in the wall of political correctness.

"... And the Omega."

Ultimately, most *Civilization* games end in the "space race." Assuming that one hasn't managed to conquer the world (which, according to the victory point schedule in the beta version, is the optimal ending), one must discover the plastics, robotics and superconductors necessary after building the Apollo program, and build what this writer calls "the space ark." A scant section of the documentation covers this penultimate endeavor, but it will require much time, usually, before things are perfected. Time during which players are often lunging at each other's capitals (where their palaces

are located), since that is the only way to sabotage the opponent's space program. The wars can get particularly nasty toward the end-game for this reason and with nukes flying, global warming setting in repeatedly and SDI defenses popping up like weeds, the end-game is almost a game unto itself.

One disappointing element is the continuance of technological evolution. There is none. The technology of the games ends at circa 2000 AD tech levels, and then players research generic "futuristic technology" (a.k.a. "the meaning of life") for some bonus victory points. This writer would like to have seen the extra effort made for nanotech items and science-fictionesque units to play with while the space ark is spending some 60 years (turns) on its way to Alpha Centauri. Of course, one wouldn't get to play with them for very long before the game ends, but hovercraft and space shuttles should have been made

available despite their limited time of usefulness in the game.

"The Value of a Good Thing Is To Have Done It."

All its diverse elements make *Civilization* an extremely rich and rewarding game to play. Surely the design and development teams must have agonized over all that had to be left *out* in order to make the game playable. Everything from the stirrup to super highways is not included in the final package, and this writer can only speculate as to the effect of their loss. One loss that *everyone* will suffer from, however, is the absence of a tutorial. Without a real "hands on; do this, do that" introduction to the game, new players will often find themselves in the same kind of quagmire people did 6000 years ago. ("Sure, Ogg, pottery sounds like a great idea, but what will it *do* for us?") The beefy 120+ page manual is going to have to be fairly well studied before one dives into the salient points of civilization building, and more is the pity for players will not discover (game) literacy until about 1000 BC or so.

When the dust settles and one is left to excavate the history of his civilization at the game's end, it all boils down to a point total. Of paramount importance is the size of one's population and how happy they are. This is followed by the mega-points awarded for building wonders of the world. Turns of complete world peace and the generic "futuristic discoveries" pay some bonus points, but great negatives are assessed for any pollution within the empire (as per the game's "politically correct" bias). Still, in terms of victory points, there is no substitute for global hegemony through world conquest. As in *Railroad Tycoon*, a hall of fame lists the top five games played.

The Histories

When the second issue of *Computer Gaming World* was published, the cover was a picture which satirized the apes at the obelisk from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. On that cover, the apes discover a computer disk as their obelisk, and so progressed forward. That's the image to keep in mind when thinking about *Civilization*. Sure to succeed beyond even *Railroad Tycoon*, a new Olympian in the genre of god games has truly emerged and *Sid Meier's Civilization* is likely to prove itself the greatest discovery in computer entertainment since, well... the wheel! **cgw**