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Notions of Desire and Fulfillment in *Civilization II* and *Alpha Centauri*

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Most media attention regarding video games focuses on titles from more violent and war-like genres, while city and nation building games tend to be ignored. Because a large amount of controversy regarding the gaming industry is based on fears of children emulating behavior they see in games, it is clear why these strategy-based games go relatively unscathed in the political and media arenas. If Grand Theft Auto III teaches a child how to become an efficient gang member, then Sim City would seem to teach a child how to become an efficient city mayor. With this conclusion reached, there is a tendency to dismiss city and nation building games as harmless, and return to the study the more dangerous games.

However, the nature of civilization building games is inherently political and demands analysis. Because these games tend to represent the organization, development, and administration of an entire civilization, how politics, life, and society are presented in the game becomes significantly important. Two nation building games, *Civilization II* and its sequel *Alpha Centauri*, are especially deserving of a critical analysis. While the two games are structurally similar, the historical context in which they are placed is radically different. *Civilization II* has the player create a nation from the dawn of human history, and ends with the Modern Age. *Alpha Centauri* takes up where *Civilization II* ends; the player is to colonize an alien world, starting at the year 2100 AD.

Both *Civilization II* and *Alpha Centauri* are nation-building games, which place a heavy influence on the decisions that the player makes. As the leader of a civilization, the player is able to choose what items their cities build and which technologies their scientists research. In the beginning of the game, each player's civilization consists of a single settlement, which can be developed and expanded across the game world. Both games follow a simplified model of

economic production: each city can produce one item at a time, and the speed of production is based on a city's available natural resources and population.

In a manner that is more common among board games than video games, players take turns instructing their cities and units. A player can spend as little or as much time thinking and planning their next move; the same amount of game-time will have passed by the next turn, regardless. City production and technological research is represented by the number of turns until completion, and unit movement is regulated by a certain distance that can be traveled per turn. Because most players are often irritated when having to wait long amounts of time for human opponents to play their turns, *Civilization II* and *Alpha Centauri* are not usually played against other humans. Instead, a computer-controlled player leads the other civilizations, making decisions near-instantly.

Both games also place heavy emphasis on technological development, utilizing a tech tree to guide and regulate which discoveries a player can research. At the very bottom of the tree are the most basic technologies; in *Civilization II*, they include the wheel, pottery, and the alphabet. In the beginning of the game, the player can only research these developments. However, as a civilization discovers each technology, they are allowed to progress higher in the tree. With the discovery of the pottery, masonry becomes available to research. These technologies are often interrelated; for example, when writing and a code of laws is discovered in *Civilization II*, Monarchy becomes available to research.

Technology is a large focus of the game; new discoveries allow new items to be built, which give significant benefits to a civilization. For example, in *Alpha Centauri*, the discovery of Social Psychology allows for the construction of a recreation center, which increases the

productivity of citizens in each city it is built in. Military units are also closely related with technology, as more powerful units can be produced with the development of new discoveries.

Civilization II represents a perverse desire for modernity. One way in which this occurs is through the stressed importance of technological development. In the game, the level of technology that a civilization has developed is the primary meter-stick by which progress can be measured in the game. The closer a player is to the “Modern Age,” the better their civilization is. This drive for modern life is exemplified in a certain practice, called “beating the clock.” The game is designed so that a player with average skill will discover technologies around the stage in the game that corresponds to the historical date when the technology was truly discovered. For example, the Printing Press technology should be near discovery around the in-game turn 1500 AD.

Expert players, however, are able to build civilizations more efficiently, and discover technologies earlier in the game world than they were discovered in the real world. This causes some players to set a mid-game goal of developing a modern technology at an in-game date significantly earlier than the historical one. One might strive to have Electricity by 1500 AD, or Railroads by 1000 AD. In the context of Civilization II, such an achievement is a sign of a skilled player. However, such a desire for the Modern Age becomes dangerous when the true implications of modernity are discussed.

Not only does Civilization II perpetuate a desire for advancement to the modern life, it also glorifies the inevitable outcome of such a society: global war. In fact, a massive, worldwide conflict, bent on domination and assimilation, is the most obvious way to win the game. Whenever a player’s civilization has invaded all other civilizations, incorporating them into their nation-state, that player is declared the winner. However, due to game mechanics, one cannot

begin a global assault before the Modern Age. While military units exist throughout the entirety of the game, only small-scale skirmishes can be fought until players discover the right technologies, such as Mass Production, Machine Tools, Radio, and Steel.

In this way, Civilization II not only justifies, but encourages the scourge of war that has plagued modernity. Instead of learning from the lessons of twentieth century, the player is directed to repeat them, but in a more efficient manner. In most Civilization II games, there are no suffixes attached to great wars; the First World War is usually the last.

While the main focus of the end-game is usually on global war, there is a second way for players to win the game without achieving a worldwide hegemony: the space race. Once a player has researched a certain number of modern technologies (Space Flight, Rocketry, and Nuclear Power, to name a few) they can begin work on a colonization spaceship, bound for Alpha Centauri. The first player to have their civilization build all necessary parts of the spaceship (a long, cumbersome task that takes decades of in-game time) is automatically declared the winner.

This ending may seem less violent than the first victory scenario, but it still rooted in a practice of militarism, only on a cosmic scale. In the context of the game, which places win conditions on domination and power, the colonization ship can be seen as a chance for the winning civilization to not simply achieve global hegemony, but total control of the galaxy. Furthermore, the colonization ship falls victim to the technological fundamentalism that is inherent of the modern age. The player does not win the game when the ship safely reaches Alpha Centauri or when a settlement is successfully established. Instead, the player wins the game when the ship lifts off; implying that all a society needs to do is build the right technology in order to be saved.

A final aspect of Civilization II is apparent in the third way that the game ends. If no civilization dominates the rest or launches a shuttle by the year 2020, the game is over. A categorical method of point-counting is used to determine which civilization is the “best” in 2020, and the game declares that player to be the winner. This sudden expiration is unsettling, as it is a manifestation of the inability of modern society to recognize an existence beyond itself. Like a calculator forced to divide by zero, the modern society cannot come to terms with its own existence when it has no more technology to develop. The sudden end of the game can be seen as a metaphor for the inevitable crash of the Modern Age.

In stark contrast, Alpha Centauri can be seen as a liberation from the modern condition that dominates the theme of Civilization II. Unlike its predecessor, Alpha Centauri starts with a back-story: the spaceship launched at the end of Civilization II reached its destination intact. However, in the forty years that the ship spent traveling through space, Earth had destroyed itself through a massive war. In this first opening moment, the failure of the modern society is not only recognized, but embraced.

This setting is essential to the theme of Alpha Centauri: the goal is not overtly broadcast as domination of the planet (as in Civilization II), but to recreate humanity while remembering the tragedy of Earth. While the world of Alpha Centauri (called Planet) is similar to Earth, it has one significant difference: a native fungus exists on Planet that appears to be sentient. In the early stages of the game, settlement is impossible in fungus-infested areas, and technologies are developed that can destroy the fungus. Later in the game, however, the player discovers that the every fungus on Planet is networked, creating a massive, sentient neural net. Technology is developed in the middle of the game which allows for a symbiotic relationship between the native life and the human colonies.

The technology tree of Alpha Centauri also can be seen as a movement away from a modern world, towards a more postmodern society. Early in the game, players can gain significant advantages from employing heavy industries, dominating social civics, and wealth-accumulating technologies in their civilizations. However, as the game progresses, these modern developments become harmful to civilizations; meanwhile, new technologies becomes available that allow for a less dehumanizing existence. Green economics replace free markets and planned economies; politics of democracy replace fundamentalism and police states; values of knowledge replace those of power and wealth. Social theories such as Eudemonia and The Will to Power also emerge later in the game, with significant benefits to their adoption.

However, the most important technological discovery in Alpha Centauri is what truly defines it as a postmodern work: Transcendent Thought. After almost all other technologies have been researched, the player can choose to work on a project that will ascend humanity to a higher plane of existence. Combining the network of the self-aware planetary fungus and the digital networks of the human civilizations, individuals become able to “upload” their personalities into the new network. The new society lives forever as “bright children of the stars, dancing in and out of ten billion years.” This is the ultimate victory condition, but it is not simply a crazed science fiction story.

The transcendence and planetary fungus concepts have their basis in the postmodern concept of the rhizome, as described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Unlike arborescent structures (such as trees), rhizomes (grasses and fungi) have no clear hierarchy or root. In a Deleuzian sense, the rhizome is the only way for a society to function without being subjected to power or dominance. Because such a structure is truly democratic, with no ability for hierarchical roots to exist, such a biological organism can be seen as an ideal model for society.

Deleuze and Guattari invite their readers to become part of the rhizome, but only in a metaphorical and social sense; such a biological organizational pattern would be impossible in our current state. However, the fungus-based transcendence witnessed in the ending of Alpha Centauri is the ultimate fulfillment of the rhizome.