Civilization and Enlightenment: A Study in Computer Gaming and History Education

“Surveying Student-Players of Civilization IV”

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Abstract

This paper explores the learning and logistical outcomes of a history professor’s incorporation of a computer game in to his curriculum; specifically, the introduction of the historically-themed game series Civilization IV in a university survey course on the History of the Ancient World. The author, who had no experience working with gaming technology in the classroom, discusses the preparation for this project, its implementation, and its outcomes. Through students’ verbal feedback, written reports, and survey responses, the author assesses his attempt to capture his students’ historical imaginations with computer gaming technology and to enhance their critical, historical thinking about broad civilizational trends. It further analyzes both the anticipated and unanticipated learning outcomes, including the surprise responses from some students about the game’s educational disutility, which prompted a swift recalibration of the project’s final phases.

Introduction

This project studied the learning and logistical outcomes of incorporating a computer game into a university course; specifically, using the historically-themed game series Civilization in a lower-division survey course on the History of the Ancient World. This paper aims to convey the preparation for, implementation of, and outcomes that followed my decision to incorporate this computer game into my Ancient World History curriculum. Oft-studied for their utility as teaching
aides, Civilization and other computer games have garnered a great deal of attention by scholars who research teaching and learning outcomes (see the Selected Works, below). Foremost among them is professor Kurt D. Squire, whose research career has focused upon Civilization and similar games used by educators. Although professor Squire’s research inspired this project, it is important to underline that I am a Japan scholar and my doctorate is in History, rather than in Education. As a result, my chief aim is to share the outcomes of my classroom experiment with fellow educators who may wish to incorporate historically-themed computer games into their own curricula.

Since 1991, when the first edition of Civilization debuted, its designers have worked to combine the principal elements of civilizational growth and development with strategic game play. The game, produced by designer Sid Meier and his software firm, Firaxis Games, permits single players the opportunity to found, develop, and manage a major world civilization in a chronological, turn-based format. I am not a gamer, per se, but as an undergraduate student and history major in 1991, I found the game’s enablement of users to found, cultivate, and defend a major world empire to be captivating. Civilization left a deep impression, and though its graphics were rather simple at that time, its comprehensive approaches to land, agriculture, defenses, philosophy, faith, finance, taxes, and war more than compensated for the simple user interface. Much has changed since that time, and I have played very few computer games since, but Firaxis is still releasing more comprehensive versions of its game, including Civilization V in 2010.

This paper recounts and assesses my attempt to capture my students’ historical imaginations with computer gaming technology, and it shares an array of student responses to the project. Rather than attempt to situate this classroom project within the already rich, very expert literature on gaming and learning theory, I chose instead to conduct a solo gaming experiment and to share an array of student feedback on how the project unfolded. This paper recounts what it was like for me,
someone who has never incorporated a computer game into my teaching before, to introduce, manage, and assess the value of a computer-gaming assignment that was woven into my course curriculum. My approach, albeit open-ended and improvisational at times, generated a host of valuable and candid responses from my students, who gradually took the reins and taught me a great deal – both about using games in the classroom and about teaching World History in general. I must stress the independent, experimental nature of my effort, and I welcome debate from scholars and educators about my goals, methods, and interpretations. I hope that readers will find this frank, candid approach and my students’ responses as informative as I have.

**Pedagogical Inspiration for this Project and its Hypotheses**

Over the last several years, my teaching has increasingly become a two-way dialogue with students, a format that has helped me to convey my course material more clearly. As an historian, however, there are often extraordinarily large concepts embedded in the lecture and reading material with which my students must engage. For example, in my World History course spanning ancient times through 1450 CE, students are faced with the significant challenge of identifying and understanding the reasons for civilizational growth, expansion, transformation, decline, and legacy. In the classroom, the challenge lies in finding effective ways to convey and to assess students’ understanding of vast concepts like imperialism, decolonization, and civilizational progress. This was the impetus for this project, which aimed to assess the effectiveness of employing the computer game *Civilization* in my Ancient World History course as a tool for teaching students the fundamental principles of human historical development. My experiment hypothesized that my students would demonstrate and be able to articulate a clearer grasp of the broad principles of civilizational growth, development, and decline due to their scenario-based game play. I further
hypothesized that the game would enable some of the students to better visualize and understand the lecture material and assigned readings. While I had no control group, I intended to assess the above hypotheses both directly and indirectly. In both respects, I ended up with more than I bargained for.

**Basic Play of the Civilization Series and its Classroom Potential**

Players begin the game by choosing an identity in the form of the leader of a major historical people, such as Julius Caesar of the Romans, Pharaoh Cleopatra of the Egyptians, or Mao Zedong of the Chinese. This provides an opportunity for both male and female players to identify with the game and with their chosen civilizations. At the outset of the game, 10,000 BCE, the world is yet undiscovered, and all around each player’s tiny group of hamlets is darkness. Players must expand their reach through exploration, the cultivation of farmland, and the founding of new settlements. Infrastructure such as roads, mines, and city walls must be developed in order to facilitate communication, commerce, and security. Importantly, players must develop their civilizations in several conceptual ways also. Educated citizens must be tasked with the development of an alphabet, for without it, a civilization will never achieve writing, without which literacy cannot take root and further learning cannot progress. Other researchers must be put to work on making key technological advances; pottery, the wheel, bronze working, masonry, and so on. The game features several such lines of innovation that lead logically over time to greater and more sophisticated discoveries. For example, students learn that mysticism and astrology lead both to further religious innovation as well as to greater astronomical understanding. The latter can lead to the discovery of navigation, which ultimately permits ocean-going ship construction and overseas exploration. In the interim, political innovations such as monarchy, democracy, the republic, and so
on, serve as new frameworks for political rule. As time passes, these discoveries are announced to the civilizational leaders – the students – at time intervals that pass first in 1,000-year increments and later in 100, 10, and 1 year increments as the game reaches the modern era.

Should players wish to cultivate more martial, expansionist civilizations, such styles of rule require investment in the production of military units and the innovation of better and more sophisticated technologies. However, because the people can only be taxed so much before they revolt, this form of development comes naturally at the cost of more cultural institutions, such as libraries, schools, and temples. Players have to be careful not to upset their people, who will rebel if there are insufficient amenities to raise their urban ‘happiness’ level, which must be monitored closely. Religious innovations can help, and so can the erection of pacifiers like coliseums and cathedrals, but these too come at a price. In the interim, foreign civilizations eventually make contact, and while they may be hostile, they might also be cooperative and helpful. As the game unfolds, and as new technologies multiply, the players’ civilizations may become quite powerful, but their leaders must always be mindful of the threats from the frontiers.

As a means of teaching patterns of historical progression and civilizational growth, I felt that this game had the potential to serve as a unique and interactive platform. Although I always stress to my students that there is no universal, evolutionary model of history, as players, the students had to recognize that if certain innovations were not made, their people would perish. For example, without the discovery of pottery, no granaries can be built, without which cities cannot grow beyond a certain point, and might even be wiped out in the event of drought. As urban populations grow, aqueducts must be constructed to supply large cities with water, lest sanitation break down and disease run rampant. The array of challenges that can face players is truly great, extending from fiscal and diplomatic crises to the impact of scientific and technological achievements.
Players must learn to balance ambition with careful, practical planning, lest their civilizations be overrun by neighboring states, riven by protest, or blunted by war. From time to time, hints are given to the players in the form of counsel from wise ministers, who may advise further exploration, a lower tax rate, increased study of medicine, or even war. Ultimately, the decisions would belong to my student players, but the role of chance, and indeed of misfortune, always looms large. As players discover, the goal of the game is not to “win,” but to survive and to flourish.

**Project Implementation and Course Activities**

On our campus, the History program features a three-course World History series that covers the periods Ancient Times to 1450 CE, 1450 to 1800, and 1800 to the present. The first in the series, known as History 126, is a required lower division course within the History major, but it has a parallel option course, History 118, which focuses upon the early Western world from ancient times. Thus, History 126 is not strictly *required* for the major, and it is also not a required, campus-wide General Education course, though students from across campus do enroll strongly. When I came to teach the course from Ancient Times, I proposed to my Departmental colleagues to use the game *Civilization* in my class, which my students could play and analyze critically, vis-à-vis the lecture and reading material. (Our textbook was the second edition of *The World: A History*, by Felipe Fernández-Armesto, published by Pearson Higher Education in 2009.) With my colleagues’ approval and support, I ordered 60 copies of *Civilization IV*. My class, which was capped at 55 students, began with 60, and settled by mid-semester at 50 students. The class met in the late morning twice weekly for 75 minute lecture sessions, during which I often staged group discussions. I was the sole instructor, and there were no teaching assistants. (Rather than identify the specific semester during which this project took place, I will simply state that it occurred in
I introduced the game and the associated learning project during the first class of the semester, but I did not distribute the copies of the game to each student until the second week of the course, once the class roster settled down. Students thus had an opportunity to drop the course prior to the game’s distribution if they were not interested in participating in the learning project. The game, which was on loan to the students for the semester, was also made available on several laptop PCs belonging to our library, which could be borrowed on an hourly basis by any students who did not have computers of their own. When the game project was introduced, several students cheered, and several students seemed ambivalent. Most, however, seemed interested in the game and our plan for its use as part of our curriculum, which I explained was a form of classroom experiment that would rely upon and value their input. Later, they would be surveyed directly about their initial reactions to the project.

During the course, I aimed to integrate the game into our curriculum by pairing its civilizational approach with my lecture schedule, which focused each week upon a major empire of the ancient world. In two lectures weekly, I explored the ancient Mesopotamian cultures of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon, followed by the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms of Egypt, and then the Qin and Han Chinese Empires. Successive lectures then explored Classical Greece, the Persian Empire, ancient Rome, the Roman Europe, Tang and Song Dynasty China, ancient Israel, early European cultures, and so on. Students were required to play the game outside of class, starting anew each week from the perspective of the civilization that was discussed in lecture. The intent of the game’s use was to provide students with a means through which to better visualize the civilization under investigation, and to give them a chance to experiment with building their own empires. This, I hoped, would enable them to appreciate the challenges posed by exploring unknown terrain, cultivating land, pioneering new technologies and civilizational advances, managing a populace, fostering urban
development, and defending borders with both diplomacy and force. I aimed to let students encounter this array of challenges on their own before working in groups to discuss potential solutions to these hurdles.

At the outset, students were asked to play and to replay the game in order to grow familiar with the game’s layout, as well as to grasp which basic strategies delivered positive results and which brought disaster. Our lectures and readings on the world’s ancient societies unfolded concurrently, and students were required to submit a 500-word game report electronically each week, along with a required written summary of our assigned textbook readings. Our chosen textbook was the second edition of *The World: A History*, by Felipe Fernández-Armesto, published by Pearson Higher Education in 2009. Together, those two weekly writing assignments accounted for 20 percent of each student’s final grade. In addition, the submission of game reports counted toward the students’ classroom participation grade, which was a further 10 percent. In their weekly game reports, students were asked to summarize the outcomes of their play, and also to comment each week upon one specific component theme of the game, such as innovation, religion, government, diplomacy, or war. Roughly half of the students were able to speak to the manner in which the game designers had sewn the various developmental themes into the game. The other half of the class, however, exhibited some difficulty with this more abstract assignment, and those students commented only upon their game play and any difficulties that they were experiencing with the game interface, functions, or goals. Each week, I responded to every student electronically to offer advice, tips, encouragement, or general reactions to their comments. During our classroom discussions, students shared ideas and advice about game play and any particularly helpful strategies with one another. Often, I referred to the game during lectures when describing key historical events, cultures, or achievements, in order to draw parallels between those details and
aspects of the game’s design or play. Examples of this sort of course-related commentary are discussed below.

**Our Optional, Anonymous, Ungraded Exit Survey**

During the final week of the course, I distributed an optional survey to the students, for which I received institutional research board approval. Part I of the two-part survey asked for my students’ scaled responses to 15 statements about the game, such as its usefulness as a teaching tool, their reactions to its design and purpose in our course, and so on. Student responses to those questions appear in the charts that follow. Part II of the survey featured seven qualitative, short-answer questions to which students could respond in written detail if they wished. All but two of the 37 students who completed the survey provided answers to all or some of the questions in Part II. These questions were:

1. What, if anything, attracted you most to playing the game?
2. What civilization was your favorite to play? Why?
3. Are there any major developmental concepts that the game helped you to understand more clearly?
4. Was the game fair, or do you feel that the computer “cheated”?
5. What is a positive aspect of using *Civilization IV* in this course?
6. What is a negative aspect of using *Civilization IV* in this course?
7. Can anything be learned by playing “historical simulations” such as this?

The 37 students who completed the survey also signed separate consent forms, as required by our institutional research board. Before leaving the room, I told the students that they were free to not complete the survey, or to skip any of its questions. (For this reason, some of the numerical responses to the 15 scaled questions in Part I do not add up to 37 in every case, and total only 36.) The surveys and the consent forms were collected by a student volunteer, sealed in separate envelopes, and delivered to the Departmental office assistant. Both envelopes were later forwarded.
to me, but as I promised the students, I did not open them for six months – well beyond the end of our course and the posting of final grades. (Note: I refer below to three forms of student feedback: the students’ anonymous survey responses, their verbal responses in classroom discussions, and their comments in writing assignments. In each case, I specify clearly the form of feedback to which I am referring.)

**Introducing the Game and Students’ Initial Reactions**

In classroom discussion, students’ initial reactions to the introduction of our game ranged from excitement, to ambivalence, and even to trepidation due to unfamiliarity with computer games in general. When surveyed, a majority of students said that they had played educational computer games in the past, and 25 of them responded that they were excited or somewhat excited when they learned that the course required them to play a computer game (see Figures 1 and 2).

![Figure 1. In the past, I have played educational computer or video games.](image)

*Agree Strongly = 5, Agree = 4, Agree Somewhat = 3, Disagree = 2, Disagree Strongly = 1*
In our discussions, more male students than female expressed an initial liking for the game or for computer games in general, but several of the female players did as well. Alternatively, rather more females expressed ambivalence toward or outright dislike of computer games, both verbally and especially in their weekly written game reports, but as it was a course requirement, they did play. Along the way, several female students came to find the game less objectionable than they had expected, and one even wrote in a mid-semester game report that she had laughed to herself when I warned the students to manage their time very carefully because the game was quite addictive. By mid-semester, however, she admitted in her weekly written report that she too was hooked, and had just played the game late into the evening. In fact, when surveyed, a majority of students responded that they came to find the game more enjoyable as they continued to play it (see Figure 3).
After getting acquainted with the game and its basic play, the time came to discuss the game’s functions and to enable the students to help one another to operate the game. Some students had not yet discovered how to use some of the features of the game’s visual interface, such as how to zoom in and focus on any of their cities in order to determine their productivity, tax revenues, population, or general morale. The game did feature a video tutorial, but few students found it especially helpful, and some stated in discussion that the tutorial moved very slowly (see Figure 4). In class discussion, however, peers with greater experience were able to coach their classmates and offer tips and advice. These discussions were very helpful for several students who were less accustomed to computer gaming, and those students who benefited were vocal about the usefulness of these discussion periods (see Figure 5). In order to maximize student discussion, I purposely did not create an online chat forum or message board about the game. This enabled me to witness their exchanges personally and hear their feedback, as well as to respond to any queries in their weekly written game reports.

![Figure 4. The game's tutorial helped me to get started.](image-url)

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<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Agree Strongly = 5</th>
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<th>Agree Somewhat = 3</th>
<th>Disagree = 2</th>
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Agree Strongly = 5, Agree = 4, Agree Somewhat = 3, Disagree = 2, Disagree Strongly = 1
Concepts and Challenges

One particular dimension of game play to which I had very much wished to expose students was the challenge of maintaining effective diplomatic relations. In the *Civilization* series, peoples from neighboring civilizations sometimes appear without warning, and while some are friendly, others can be stubborn or even hostile. These peoples dispatch emissaries to greet the players and make offers or demands, any of which can have serious consequences. Here, I anticipated correctly that students would have differing approaches to the game, and would employ different strategies. Several of them embraced their responsibilities as imperial leaders very readily, but others were not inclined at the outset to consider the seriousness of the challenges posed by rival civilizations. When the latter students’ cities were suddenly seized by rival forces in unprovoked attacks, or when their diplomats were rebuffed, the students’ natural reactions were surprise and even outrage. Hence, as anticipated, the game offered fertile ground for discussing the limits of imperial power, as well as the bitter consequences of conflict and war. The impulse when faced with unwarranted hostility is to counterattack, but war requires immense sacrifices of blood and treasure, and there is
no guarantee of victory. Several students discovered the hard way that sometimes, diplomacy is the better option. A key parallel between our course material and this aspect of the game play is the invasion of Middle-Kingdom Egypt by the Hyksos people, who conquered the eastern Nile delta region in the 18th century BCE, inaugurating Egypt’s Second Intermediate Period. The seizure and occupation of Egyptian cities by the warlike Hyksos invaders was an ideal historical example of the many frustrating occasions when rival civilizations attack and take a player’s territory. The students could appreciate this obvious design parallel, which I emphasized in lecture.

On the other hand, several students expressed dismay that their efforts to remain neutral and peaceful in negotiation with rival peoples proved to be an unsuccessful strategy. Some of them stated very plainly in discussion that they preferred to remain peaceful, and to treat all visiting diplomats kindly. As they soon realized, however, this strategy is fraught with peril. One female student lamented in discussion that her willingness to accept her neighbors’ requests for free passage through her lands had left her cities vulnerable to attack. She later realized, she said, that she had become a ‘doormat,’ and that rival leaders were walking all over her. She added that she had resolved to be more firm during negotiations and to refuse such requests for tribute or free passage, which was a strategy that several other students agreed was more prudent. Indeed, as expected, those students who experimented with uniformly “nice” diplomacy soon realized that it was not a uniformly practical approach to dealing with hostile foes. In illustrating this point, one student responded on our survey that her “empires fell either through diplomacy, religious conversion, war, and my own failure to respond aggressively to attacks.”

Beyond diplomatic lessons, several students commented in discussion and on their surveys that they enjoyed seeing the way that civilizations unfolded. In Part II of our survey, one student wrote that she could now appreciate just how challenging it was to be an imperial leader, and another said
that he liked the opportunity to play a game involving the civilizations that we studied together in the class. As for the heart of my project, which aimed to enable students to better visualize major developmental concepts, the students offered several very useful insights. One student responded in Part II that it was useful to see how important technological advancement was, and to learn how to manage state finances. A third responded that “it really brings home the idea of advancing from straw huts to walled cities to skyscrapers.” As for identifying the ideal pace for expansion, a fourth student responded that “a civilization must be cautious to never overgrow or it will not be able to maintain itself.” This conclusion was echoed by a fifth student, who responded that the game helped him/her to more clearly understand “the balance between maintaining the needs of your people and trying to expand your empire helped me visualize the problems leaders would have faced.” Finally, a sixth student responded that a positive aspect of using Civilization IV in this course was “learning broad historical themes.” Together, the above responses were supportive of my project’s principal goal (see Figure 6), and a majority of students agreed at least somewhat that the game’s major concepts reflected our course material (see Figure 7).

![Figure 6. Civilization IV helped me to visualize key historical trends and developments, such as survival, technology, war, and diplomacy.](image)

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Unexpected Student Responses

Along with these anticipated outcomes, however, there were also significant surprises. As the students grew steadily better informed about World History through our lectures, readings, discussions, and writing assignments, they grew unexpectedly confident about speaking directly to the game’s educational utility and disutility, and some of the classroom debates became quite heated. Indeed, roughly two-thirds of the way through the 16-week semester, their opinions began to shift very noticeably. By that point, the game had grown repetitive and somewhat tedious for several students, so I asked the class to work in small groups to identify reasons why the game is historically instructive, and the reasons why it is not. Four groups of five to six students were tasked with preparing comments in favor of the game’s instructive utility, and four more such groups set about compiling reasons to the contrary. After 10 minutes, the groups united to form two sides, compiled their lists, and then proceeded to debate the game’s value to history education. Although the debate was lively and both sides were passionate about the game’s pros and cons, it was the dismissive conviction of the “no” side that intrigued me most. Several students cited the ahistoricity of the game’s timeline, in which Pharaoh Cleopatra could encounter Otto von Bismarck
or Mohandas Gandhi. One student responded in Part II of our survey that “regardless of the civilization you were playing any ‘historical person’ could show up regardless of time or place.” For many students, this seemingly superficial design characteristic, which was the decision of the game designers, proved to be a serious deficit for the game’s educational utility. Although it seemed to me to be a simple effort by the designers to give each civilization an historical identity by portraying one of its more famous leaders, many students could not look past this historical liberty. Indeed, they were quite correct – the game lacks a critical, challenging dimension of historical change that has beset most every civilization, and that is the question of dynastic or political succession. In the game, there is only ever one leader: the player, who is seemingly immortal.

Other criticisms of the game were also important to the students. Several of them stressed that the game lacks critical historical pressures that have had immeasurable impact on human history. These include natural disasters, which are noticeably absent from the game. Some students found this oversight to be absurd. Similarly, several of them noted that while the game’s world map does feature diverse terrain and obvious climatic zones, the earth in *Civilization* does not feature weather patterns of any kind. Other criticisms included the limited manner in which the player’s civilization may develop certain innovations, which the students did not find to be very reflective of real world innovation, which is not hemmed in by fixed patterns. More practical issues involved the somewhat unintuitive nature of the game’s controls, which novice gamers found to be intimidating, and the repetitive nature of the game, which students played anew each week. Finding the time to play and to report on the game was also difficult for some. Several students felt that the game play took time away from studying, and one student responded in Part II of our survey that it felt like “busy work.” One student even stated plainly in class that she had learned nothing at all from the game.
I had not expected that such a large number of the students would find the game so ahistorical as to be counterproductive to learning. Indeed, in their scaled survey responses, 18 of them agreed strongly that the course lectures and readings had made them feel more confident about judging the game’s historical accuracy (see Figure 8). Furthermore, in an even more surprising outcome, 14 of them disagreed that the game was a more interesting learning tool than our other coursework (see Figure 9). While deeply gratifying as an instructor, the students’ newfound confidence was subverting the aims of my experiment, at least in part. Consequently, it became essential to adjust the game’s intended purpose and, recognizing the shift in opinion, to use the students’ reactions as a basis for an exercise in critical analysis.

![Figure 8. Our lectures and readings helped me to feel better informed about history, and better able to judge the game's historical accuracy.](image)

![Figure 9. This game was a more interesting learning tool for visualizing broad historical principles than our lectures or readings.](image)
A Change in Pedagogical Direction

By roughly week 9 of the semester, it became necessary to alter the game’s original purpose and to grant the students an opportunity to deconstruct the game, which had grown more repetitive than instructive. In discussions and in their writing assignments, students’ continued criticism of the game’s ahistoricity became a platform for debate over its shortcomings. Therefore, in order to capture this sentiment and to channel it constructively, I proposed to create a take-home essay question as part of our final exam. The proposed question would ask each student to write an imaginary letter to the game’s designers, suggesting ways to improve its historical accuracy vis-à-vis our course material. Most students responded very positively to this suggestion, and I distributed the question at our final class. As instructed, the students brought their 1,000-word, prepared answers to the exam and submitted them there. Significantly, only 3 out of 50 students did not write the final exam, either because they did not submit all of their weekly writing assignments, which were a course requirement, or because they stopped attending very late in the semester. Significantly, this was a far better outcome than the previous five semesters during which I had taught courses in our World History series courses. Typically, enrollment had fallen to between 40 and 45 students by mid-semester, and around 40 had written the final exams, on average. (Though not conclusive, this particular course did boast greater enrollment, and better retention than my earlier World History courses, and little else about the format or style of the other courses had differed, save for the period of history under investigation.)

As I did not seek specific permission to make use of those written exam answers in this study, I will not quote their words directly. Suffice to say that most of the students’ suggestions for an improved version of the game generally reflected the kinds of things that they had said in class.
One of the most common suggestions included updating the identities of the civilizational rulers to better reflect the likelihood that contemporary world leaders would meet in the appropriate eras. Although some students acknowledged that this would be difficult for civilizations that perished long ago, especially if they survived beyond their actual historical eras, the students were in broad agreement on this point. Also, many of them asked that further effort be made to represent the earth’s physical characteristics, including weather, climate, and natural disasters, more realistically. In a nod to the game’s designers, however, no students suggested improvements to the graphics, style, or general appearance of the game, which in their survey responses they generally agreed was very effective (see Figure 10). Students responded especially enthusiastically to the game’s portrayal of the Egyptian and Roman civilizations, which we also studied extensively in class.

![Figure 10](image)

**Global Outcomes and Conclusions**

In my view, this project was a successful classroom learning experiment, but it required a significant and unexpected shift in approach midway through the semester. I had expected that the
game would provide a unique means of visualizing the past and an opportunity for students to experience the challenges of managing their own empires, and these expectations were, by and large, validated. However, the game’s fundamental ahistoricity also proved to be an ideal opportunity for students to apply the course material toward identifying and suggesting corrections to several of the game’s historical shortcomings. If I had not provided a forum for open debate, and had not been receptive to several students’ criticism of the game’s utility as a learning tool, this project could very well have ended in failure. The shift came when one student spoke up very pointedly to say that she was not learning anything from the game. At that moment, I opted to absorb and redirect the students’ criticisms and I asked them to suggest design improvements that would enable the game to better reflect world history. Although I had told the students at the start of the semester that we would be playing the game as critical thinkers, this was a more urgent and critical shift than I had anticipated. Nevertheless, giving the students an opportunity to deconstruct the game was viewed by most of them as a constructive exercise. Significantly, this survey statement was the only one with which the students did not disagree strongly (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Playing the game critically and debating its accuracy in class was a constructive exercise

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<th>Agree Strongly</th>
<th>Agree</th>
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Overall, the students’ response to the incorporation of a computer game into this World History course was mixed. When asked if their enthusiasm for the course material increased after playing
Civilization IV, a total of 18 students disagreed, which was the largest number of negative responses (see Figure 12).

Still, while many students’ enthusiasm did not increase overwhelmingly, more students did respond positively to the above statement than negatively. Furthermore, the majority responded positively when asked if they would take another class that involved a computer game (see Figure 13). It appears that, for some students, the prospect of playing a computer game was perhaps more intimidating than actually playing it.

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Naturally, the students were required to play the game in order to remain enrolled in the course, but this appeared not to be too onerous, as playing the game and submitting weekly written game reports did benefit their participation grade, which was 15 percent of the total (see Figure 14). For instructors, assessing participation in a class of 50 students is often very challenging, but the game provided an ideal means of interacting with the students on an individual basis. While reading so many game reports each week was time consuming, I found it quite enjoyable to hear their responses, some of which were very creative, and it gave shy or reserved students an opportunity to tell me their opinions in a private forum. This enabled me to get to know the students better than I can by reading chapter summaries or conducting class discussions.

![Figure 14. I liked that playing this game and submitting game reports benefited my participation grade.](image)

I would certainly incorporate the *Civilization* game series, or another like it, into a future class on Ancient World History, for it was an ideal vehicle for classroom discussions about how to represent history. The game did provide a means of visualizing the past, and as I had hoped, and it did help many of the students to better understand and appreciate large developmental concepts that unfold over time. The game was therefore very complementary, but it also had its limits. Most of
the students agreed to some degree with the statement that the game had packaged and sold history as entertainment (see Figure 15).

If I do use this or another game in future, I will not tie it so tightly to the lecture schedule, and I will not attempt to focus the weekly game reports upon specific developmental trends. Instead, I will let the students play the game from start to finish several times, and I will ask them to comment more broadly upon the developmental strategies that they found worked best. I will maintain the classroom discussions about the game, but I will focus them more actively upon the issue of the game’s historical accuracy vis-à-vis the course material. In this way, I will build more actively toward the breaking point, beyond which students begin to find in the game less, rather than more educational utility. Then, I will proceed as before toward debates over this issue, but I will end with a final project that asks students to suggest ten specific changes that they would make to the game in order to increase its historical accuracy and classroom utility. Overall, the game is indeed designed to be entertaining, but my students also found it to be a focus for critical debates about or study and representation of the past.
Selected Works on Computer Gaming and Learning


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