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Historical Narrative in the Music of Sid Meier's Civilization VI

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Sid Meier's Civilization VI is a 2016 strategy video game in which the player leads a historical civilization from 4000 BC to the present. The *Civilization* series is the subject of much scholarly writing, especially its representation of history and non- Western cultures. My work builds on Karen Cook's research (2014) on the technological progress and American hegemonic identity signaled by *Civilization IV*'s soundtrack. I argue that the music in *Civilization VI* contributes to a Eurocentric teleological progress narrative of history inherent in the structure of the game: the idea that history is a story of inevitable and positive technological and cultural advancement. I examine the four-stage progression of each civilization's theme music, including a case study on Egypt's theme, as well as the representation of historical music and musicians in the game mechanics. This work is key to understanding what messages players glean from the game and enabling nuanced uses in education.

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by

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Abstract

Sid Meier's Civilization VI is a 2016 strategy video game in which the player leads a historical civilization from 4000 BC to the present. The *Civilization* series is the subject of much scholarly writing, especially its representation of history and non-Western cultures. My work builds on Karen Cook's research (2014) on the technological progress and American hegemonic identity signaled by *Civilization IV*'s soundtrack. I argue that the music in *Civilization VI* contributes to a Eurocentric teleological progress narrative of history inherent in the structure of the game: the idea that history is a story of inevitable and positive technological and cultural advancement. I examine the four-stage progression of each civilization's theme music, including a case study on Egypt's theme, as well as the representation of historical music and musicians in the game mechanics. This work is key to understanding what messages players glean from the game and enabling nuanced uses in education.

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Introduction

"Remember that politics, colonialism, imperialism and war also originated in the human brain." These words by neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran signal my discovery of Colonialism. Over a hundred turns of technological and cultural advancements, each accompanied by a quote read aloud by the actor Sean Bean, have brought me to this point. Under my leadership, the Egyptian civilization has taken the monumental step into the Industrial Era. I can now extract more resources from far-flung cities with policies such as Raj and Colonial Taxes while energizing the core of my empire with Coal Power Plants. And I am now pursuing victory at an ever more accelerated pace. The melody that I have heard time and again up to this point played on the traditional oud and ney instruments now returns, backed by the full force of a symphony orchestra. The sweeping, dramatic lines and rich orchestration infuse this moment with a feeling of deep significance, almost reverence. "This," I think to myself, "is progress."

Sid Meier's Civilization is a long-running strategy video game series dating back to 1991. The series has been extremely successful, both critically and commercially, and

has been the subject of much academic discourse.[1] I am examining the most recent entry in the series, *Civilization VI*, released in 2016. In *Civilization VI*, as in the previous installments, the player takes the role of a leader of a historical civilization, leading their chosen civilization through human history from 4000 BC through the present and into the future. Over the course of a game, which may last around ten hours, the player will progress through nine successive eras: Ancient, Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, Industrial, Modern, Atomic, and Future.[2] *Civilization* is a turn-based game; players alternate turns with the other civilizations present in the game, controlled either by AI or other human players. On any given turn, the player may settle cities, construct buildings, improve natural resources, recruit units (both military and civilian), explore the map, engage in combat or diplomacy with other civilizations, spread their religion, choose new technologies and civics to research, and organize their government, all with the goal of progressing their civilization towards one of several victory conditions. A civilization can achieve victory through Science (launching an exoplanet expedition), Culture (attracting

[1] For a historical perspective see Adam Chapman, "Is *Sid Meier's Civilization* History?," *Rethinking History* 17, no. 3 (September 2013): 312–32; Apostolos Spanos, "*Sid Meier's Civilization* as a Historical Source," in *Games of History: Games and Gaming as Historical Sources* (Routledge, 2021): 153–61; and Eva Vrtačič, "The Grand Narratives of Video Games: *Sid Meier's Civilization*," *Teorija in praksa* 51, no. 1 (2014): 91-105. For an archaeological perspective see Shannon Martino, "Might, Culture, and Archaeology in *Sid Meier's Civilization*," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 84, no. 1 (2021): 32–43 and Angus A.A. Mol, Aris Politopoulos, and Csilla E. Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, "'From the Stone Age to the Information Age': History and Heritage in *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*," *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 5, no. 2 (May 2017) 214–19. For a sociological perspective see John Majewski, "What Do Players Learn from Videogames?" *The Public Historian* 43, no. 1 (February 2021) 62–81. For a musicological perspective see Karen M. Cook, "Music, History, and Progress in *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*," in *Music in Video Games: Studying Play*, ed. K. J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2014): 166–82 and James Cook, "Game Music and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, ed. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers (Cambridge University Press, 2021): 343–58.

[2] It is important to note that the player may win the game before progressing through all of these eras. Additionally, the Future Era was added to the game as part of the *Gathering Storm* expansion in 2019.

a certain number of visiting tourists), Domination (controlling each civilization's original capital city), Religion (having their religion be predominant in each civilization), and Diplomacy (gaining a certain number of Diplomatic Victory points by engaging with the World Congress). Each of the fifty civilizations has unique abilities that may push the player towards different victory conditions.

The game purports to have the structure of real history but is by its very nature full of anachronisms. These are often a part of the game's charm, such as the long-running joke of Mahatma Gandhi being programmed to act as a nuclear warlord.[3] Setting aside these easily noticeable, often humorous historical inconsistencies, *Civilization VI* still presents its own vision of history that the player enacts. Most players will make their way through the game without questioning the fundamental structure of the history they are playing out. Unquestioned narratives such as this are often the most powerful since they are simply taken for granted. What, then, are the historical narratives put forth by *Civilization VI*? And, given music's central place in the player's experience of the game, what role does music have in communicating those narratives?

Music manifests in two distinct but equally significant areas within *Civilization VI*. First is the background music, consisting primarily of pre-existing musical themes arranged and orchestrated by composer Geoff Knorr with additional contributions by Roland Rizzo. Knorr and Rizzo are both American composers who work mainly in the video game industry, including on multiple previous *Civilization* games. Each civilization

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[3] The idea that this behavior originated in a code bug in the first game was widespread but eventually confirmed by Sid Meier to be untrue in his 2020 autobiography: Sid Meier and Jennifer Lee Noonan, *Sid Meier's Memoir!: a Life in Computer Games* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 262-63.

has its own unique theme music that changes over the course of the game's historical

eras, totaling roughly fifteen hours of music across all civilizations. Additionally, the

historical existence of music is also represented in the mechanics of the game itself in the

form of Great Musicians and Rock Bands. These are units that the player can earn which

can create Great Works of Music and perform concerts, respectively, both of which

advance the player towards a Culture Victory. During the course of a game the player

interacts with music on two levels: perceptual (civilization themes) and mechanical

(Great Musicians and Rock Bands).

I argue that the music in *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* contributes to a teleological

progress narrative of history inherent in the structure of the game: the idea that history is

a story of inevitable and positive technological and cultural advancement. Although the

game does portray numerous non-Western civilizations and musicians, this narrative is

overtly Eurocentric and Americentric. The progress narrative is primarily advanced by

the progression of the civilization theme music over the course of a game. Additionally,

the musical game mechanics add texture to this historical narrative in the form of the

Romantic ideal of the composer as genius and the veneration of music as a static,

unchanging object. Throughout, the game positions longevity as the primary marker of

historical success and importance; the core question the game asks of the player is "Will

your civilization stand the test of time?"[4]

Millions of people have purchased, played, or otherwise engaged with *Civilization*

VI and the *Civilization* series in general. For a lot of those players, the game will be their

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[4] *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (2K Games, 2016), Microsoft Windows.

only exposure to many of the cultures and musical traditions represented. For example, I had no knowledge of the incredible tradition of Georgian polyphonic singing until hearing it in the game. These cultural representations, as well as the representation of history in general, can have a significant, if perhaps subconscious, effect on players. In her study of authenticity in video game music, Stephanie Lind writes of historical video games that "knowledge acquired through the game in turn informs gamers' understanding of history outside the game…. Gamers, in many cases, are unaware of their imperfect knowledge of history and the fact that they create new cultural constructs from these distortions."[5] If we want to understand what messages about music and its relation to history players are taking from *Civilization VI*, we must examine how those elements are portrayed within the game.

A certain amount of education naturally happens when playing historical video games such as *Civilization VI*. Tim Summers notes that "intentionally or otherwise, in drawing on actual world history to create a virtual world, a certain amount of informal education takes place, whereby the virtual world implicitly comments on the actual world."[6] In addition to the informal education Summers identifies, there is an increasing amount of research on the use of the *Civilization* games in formal history education, primarily at the high school and undergraduate levels.[7] Whether playing for education or

[5] Stephanie Lind, *Authenticity in the Music of Video Games* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022), 155.

[6] Tim Summers quoted in Lind, 40.

[7] For examples, see Matt King, "The Possibilities and Problems of *Sid Meier's Civilization* in History Classrooms," *The History Teacher* 54, no. 3 (May 2021) 539–67; Kurt D. Squire, "Replaying History: Learning World History Through Playing *Civilization III*" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2004); A. Martin Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games" *Society for History Education* 47, no. 4

enjoyment, it is important to know what message the game music is sending to the player. Beyond the scope of *Civilization* or video games in general, this study offers a fruitful opportunity to examine common conceptions of musical development throughout history, the importance of music in history, and the interaction between Western and non-Western musics within a Western historical framework. If presented in the right way, *Civilization VI* offers an opportunity for players, students, and fans to practice engaging critically with historical media.

I will begin by establishing analytical frameworks for both history and video games in order to bridge the gap between the two disciplines. I examine the role of narrative in history, both general history and music history specifically. I also pay special attention to the role of periodization in historical narrative as that directly applies to the game's eras. Historical narratives always carry ideology with them, especially when they are based on Eurocentric periodizations like *Civilization* is. I then draw a connection between game sound and game space, establishing how sound functions within the unique game space of *Civilization*. I borrow Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric within games as a way of analyzing their underlying mechanics. I provide an overview of previous research on *Civilization* as it relates to my work.

Next, I turn my attention to the musical themes that represent each civilization. I outline the progression of themes over the course of a game, noting what changes in each

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(August 2014) 579–612; John Pagnotti and William B. Russell III, "Using *Civilization IV* to Engage Students in World History Content," *The Social Studies* 103, no. 1 (2012) 39–48; and Alexandre Joly-Lavoie and Frédéric Yelle, "Using Video Games to Teach High School History: The Case of *Civilization V*," in *E-teaching History*, ed. Joanna Wojdon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 93–114.

of the four chronological arrangements. I identify general trends across civilizations, specifically in relation to original composers (or lack thereof) and the usage of traditional instruments. All of this thinking is brought into focus with a case study on the Egyptian civilization. I argue that the progression of theme music, especially the introduction of the orchestra, positions European art music as the pinnacle of humanity's musical production.

After that, I look at the representation of music within the game mechanics, specifically the Great Musicians, their associated Great Works of Music, and Rock Bands. These are mechanics that the player will interact with in the pursuit of a Culture Victory. Both the victory condition and its constituent mechanics imply procedural rhetoric which I unpack. They reinforce the Romantic notion of the composer as genius and prioritize works of music in their static, idealized form. Finally, I conclude by summing up my findings as well as interrogating the tensions between the narratives presented by the theme music and game mechanics.

Historical video games offer a unique opportunity for players to interact with historical narrative in a way that is impossible in any other medium. Being the latest entry in one of the most popular historical video game series, *Civilization VI* represents a potential entry point into these issues for millions of players. Music plays a critical role in the communication of these narratives; in order to determine the messages absorbed by the players we must take the music into serious consideration. Identifying these narratives can prompt new ways of engaging with and learning from historical media.

Theoretical Framework

This study brings together ideas from both historiography and ludomusicology. Before I examine the interaction of music and historical narrative in *Civilization VI*, I first need to establish frameworks of how thinkers have conceptualized narrative in history and music in video games. Both of these areas are prone to underlying assumptions that can often go unquestioned. *Civilization* presents a unique confluence of history and video game music. Probing into the fundamental structure of each can provide insights about the other.

Narrative in History

The impulse to ascribe a narrative to history is common, especially in media where the primary goal is entertainment. Having some form of narrative arc or through-line makes a history much more engaging than just a list of events. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with portraying history as a narrative, it is important to remain conscious of the fact that narrativity in history inherently implies an ideology, or what Hayden White identifies as a "moralizing impulse."[8] He writes that "narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form…but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications."[9] A game like

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[8] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 24.

[9] White, ix.

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Civilization VI that attempts to capture, in some form, all of human history, is naturally

going to apply some amount of narrative to that historical content and context. The

purpose of this analysis, then, is to tease out the choices made in the construction of that

narrative and the ideological and political implications contained therein.

An area of history in which narrative often surfaces is periodization, the dividing

up of historical time into discrete units. James Webster writes that because periodizations

are a form of chronological organization, they are automatically a form of narrative.[10]

The way that a historian divides up time will always reflect the aspects and subjects of

history that they deem most important. Kathleen Davis goes a step further than Webster:

"Periodization as I address it, then, does not refer to a mere back-description that divides

history into segments, but to a fundamental political technique – a way to moderate,

divide, and regulate – always rendering its services *now*."[11] Although periodizations are a

method of organizing the past, they often tell us more about the present. I am not

interested in answering the question of whether we can accurately periodize history, but

rather in investigating what political narratives are inevitably present in existing

periodizations. In the case of *Civilization VI*, the periodization of history is ever-present

in the nine eras that the player advances through. The periodization of these in-game eras

and their associated musical themes creates a historical narrative of progress in

Civilization.

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[10] James Webster, "The Concept of Beethoven's 'Early' Period in the Context of Periodizations in General," *Beethoven Forum* 3, no. 1 (1994): 6.

[11] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 5.

The idea of progress as an overriding historical narrative only emerged in the West during the late eighteenth century. Thinkers of this time formed what has been retroactively termed "the Enlightenment project" to create a progressive, universal culture formed around ideas such as secularism and rationality.[12] The rapidly expanding political and technological power of the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made it understandably easy for Europeans and Americans of the time to place themselves in a historical narrative based around progress. Progress narratives are especially evident in historical periodizations. In his work on periodizations of Beethoven's life, Webster notes the human tendency to organize time in ternary periodizations. Which of the three periods is valorized then determines what worldview is captured through the periodization: originary worldviews valorize the beginning period, organic worldviews valorize the middle, and teleological worldviews valorize the final.[13] The progress narrative adopts a teleological worldview and places current-day humanity in the final, valorized period. The progression of technologies and civics in *Civilization VI* undoubtedly subscribes to this teleological worldview. The closer the player gets to the present day, the more powerful and influential their discoveries become.

A unique aspect of *Civilization* not present in most traditional histories is the existence of a definitive end state to history. This end state is represented by the various win conditions, corresponding to a single civilization's military, cultural, scientific, religious, or diplomatic dominance over all others. As with any narrative, people want a

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[12] Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlish, eds., *Progress: Fact or Illusion?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 1.

[13] Webster, "Beethoven's 'Early' Period," 6-7.

sense of closure in historical narratives. White suggests that this is a demand "for moral

meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as

elements of a moral drama."[14] Simply by virtue of *Civilization*'s ludic structure, the fact

that it is a game with a win-state, the gameplay fulfills this demand.

The progress narrative has its own place within Western music historiography.

Glenn Stanley cites the idea of progress in music as the strongest driver of music

historiography.[15] With their close connection to the concept of progress, each

civilization's musical themes in *Civilization VI* are also related to central ideas in music

historiography. There is slight disagreement between scholars on when the idea of

progress was incorporated into music historical narratives. In one of the first general

surveys of music histories, written in 1939, Warren Dwight Allen writes that while "the

word *progress* today expresses confidence and optimism, belief in human intelligence,

and in the possibility of its continual improvement," that connotation did not surface in

musical thought "until the seventeenth century, during the Baroque era with which this

history of music histories began."[16] In contrast, Stanley connects the idea of progress

with late eighteenth century music histories such as those by Charles Burney, John

Hawkins, and Johann Nikolaus Forkel.[17] Even in lieu of an agreed-upon date, it is clear

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[14] White, *The Content of the Form*, 21.

[15] Glenn Stanley, "Historiography," *Grove Music Online* (2001), 3.

[16] Warren Dwight Allen, *Philosophies of Music History: A Study of General Histories of Music 1600-1960* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1962), 246. Originally published as Warren Dwight Allen, *Philosophies of Music History* (American Book Company, 1939). All references will be to the Dover edition.

[17] Stanley, "Historiography," §3(i).

that what we refer to today as the late Baroque through Classical periods of music history were central to the introduction of progress into the music historical rhetoric, with the idea of progress only strengthening through the Romantic period. This time period also aligns with the emergence of what Lydia Goehr terms the "work-concept" in Western music.[18] The correspondence of this time period with the work-concept is strongly reflected in the game mechanics, as I will explore later on.

Although historians such as Burney, Hawkins, and Forkel did espouse a belief in progress, they recognized that it was limited and not inevitable.[19] Conversely, progress *is* inevitable in *Civilization*. The progress may be slow, but the player is incapable of continuing the game without progressing their technologies and civics and moving forward through the game's historical progression. Although the central belief in progress does place both the game's musical and mechanical progression in conversation with music histories of the late eighteenth century, the enforced inevitability of that progress sets it apart. Stanley also identifies some of the ideological implications of the progress narrative in music history: "Nationalism, universal-historical views and support for the legitimacy of secular music of the present and the past went hand in hand with a continuing belief in progress."[20] *Civilization* certainly marries the ideas of nationalism and progress. They are, in effect, the two axes that each civilization's theme music exists

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[18] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 113.

[19] Stanley, "Historiography," §3(i).

[20] Stanley, §3(i).

on: civilization and era. This conflation of nation and historical progress is mapped onto the game's teleological era progression and applied universally to all civilizations.

One possible objection to this close an analysis of *Civilization VI* is that the game portrays an imaginary history and, therefore, has nothing to say about real history. While it is true that the game makes no claims of being an accurate representation of the real course of history, it still is a window into how we view history. In his book *History That Never Happened*, Alexander Demandt postulates on the use and value of imaginary or alternative histories. He writes that "if the idea of history is to free us from the prison of the present, it accomplishes even more if it teaches us to look out of the narrow world of the real into the great space of the possible. Here there is a whole dimension to be gained."[21] *Civilization* offers an exploration of that great space of the possible. The game is, admittedly, a different kind of alternate history than what Demandt envisions. He is considering questions of slight changes to historical events, such as what would have happened if the Spanish Armada had landed in England in 1588.[22] By its very structure, *Civilization* is not tied to specific historical events, but it affords the player the opportunity to toy with elements of history in an expanded possibility space. By examining the rules and constants of that possibility space, we can get a better idea of what the game considers to be the essential narrative of human history.

This is not to say that I agree wholeheartedly with Demandt, however. He claims that

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[21] Alexander Demandt, *History That Never Happened: A Treatise on the Question, What Would Have Happend If...?*, 3rd ed., rev (Jefferson: McFarland, 1993), 10-11.

[22] Demandt, 98-100.

in reasoning about history that never happened, the reasoner reasons himself out of history: from our real 'I' we flee into the astral body of a historyless pseudosubjectivity. We place ourselves at the viewpoint of viewpointlessness and claim an impersonal pseudo-objectivity.[23]

Civilization certainly concurs with Demandt and would like the player to believe that by playing the game, they inhabit an objective restructuring of historical elements. I disagree with the proposition that such a "viewpointless" viewpoint is even possible. The historical possibility space of *Civilization* was created by individuals who are informed by their historical place and time, just as we all are. My goal is to identify and engage with the viewpoint presented in *Civilization*, even if the game would rather pretend it does not exist.

Music in Video Games

A crucial aspect of studying music and sound in games is determining how those sonic elements interact with and, indeed, create the game space. In his seminal book *Video Game Spaces*, Michael Nitsche links the visual and sonic representations of game space: "As with the virtual camera, there is no 'natural' listening position in a video game space, but like the camera, the sound 'tells' the space to the player. Sound implies the position of a virtual listener in the game world and shifts the player into that position."[24] Sight and sound combine to delimit and define the game space and to situate the player within it.

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[23] Demandt, 7.

[24] Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2008), 129.

Civilization presents a unique game space compared to most other games. The game world is a wide-open, flattened representation of a randomized Earth. Instead of taking on the role of an avatar and moving *through* the game space in a first- or third-person perspective, the player instead floats *above* the game space without any kind of physical representation, perhaps in a no-person perspective. The game sound only enhances the feeling of detachment. The majority of non-musical sound in the game is environmental sound such as birds, wind, waves, and occasional machinery from cities. The player hears these sounds on a zoomed-out scale impossible to hear in real life, placing the player in an otherwise uninhabitable subject position. It is upon this sonic canvas that the civilization theme music is painted. As Ted Friedman notes, the detached perspective of games like *SimCity* and *Civilization* leads to the player identifying not with a single role, but with a process or even with the computer itself.[25] Since the processes enacted by the computer in a game of *Civilization* are the whole of human history, in a sense, the player begins to identify with and embody the very forces of history.

A thorough understanding of the mechanical implementation of these historical forces is thus paramount to understanding the historical narrative lived out by the player. The rules and mechanics of any game can be interpreted in terms of "procedural rhetoric." Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as "the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular…. Procedural rhetoric is the technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking

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[25] Ted Friedman quoted in Nitsche, 222.

computational arguments others have created."[26] An immediately recognizable analog example of procedural rhetoric can be found in the board game Monopoly. The original version, called The Landlord's Game, was developed by Elizabeth Magie in 1903 to demonstrate the negative consequences of monopolies.[27] The rules call for players to conglomerate wealth and bankrupt their opponents, driving them out of the game. Even if modern-day players do not recognize it as such, the procedural rhetoric embedded in the rules of The Landlord's Game and modern-day Monopoly carries an anti-monopolist message.

Returning to the digital world of *Civilization*, Matt King claims that *Civilization V* communicates an antiquated version of history based on inevitable progress through its procedural rhetoric[28] and the same can be said for *Civilization VI*. The interactive nature of video games makes their procedural rhetoric especially powerful. Adam Chapman writes how the mechanical affordances given to the player along with procedural processes create meaning and produce a historical experience in *Civilization*.[29] In other words, the range of possible actions that the player can take and the ways those actions affect the underlying game systems are themselves communicating a message to the player. The player's autonomy is constrained by the game's ideology in ways that may not be immediately apparent to the player.

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[26] Ian Bogost quoted in King, "Possibilities and Problems," 549.

[27] Mary Pilon, "The Progressive Who Didn't Pass 'Go,'" *New York Times*, February 15, 2015.

[28] King, "Possibilities and Problems," 549.

[29] Chapman, "Is *Sid Meier's Civilization* History?," 319.

The antiquated version of history that King describes is also noted by Eva Vrtačič. She writes that *Civilization* presents cultural evolution as unilineal – from primitive to civilized – and universal – the same for all cultures.[30] She connects *Civilization* to Enlightenment thought, specifically the linear progression through discrete historical eras.[31] These trends have also been noted in the music itself. In the first ludomusicological study of the series, Karen Cook argues

> that the aural elements, specifically the soundtracks, signify to the game player the sense of chronological motion and technological progress on which *Civ IV* is based; that this role is unique in video game music; and that, on the one hand, the soundtracks support the observation of an American hegemonic ideology underlying the game, but, on the other, they show that the player's ability to interact with cultural products reveals a distinctly postmodern framework.[32]

My research uses Cook's work, especially the ideas of chronological motion, technological progress, and American hegemonic ideology, as a lens through which to examine the more recent *Civilization VI*.

How does all of this affect the player's experience? David Myers makes the point that replaying the *Civilization* series shifts the player's focus in a more analytical and abstract direction, focusing on rules and systems.[33] Experienced players who are devoted to optimizing their play will naturally gravitate more towards mechanics than aesthetics. There is a dichotomy in that the more time players spend with the game, the more likely they are to be influenced in some way by its ideology while also being more likely to

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[30] Vrtačič, "Grand Narratives," 94-95.

[31] Vrtačič, 95-97.

[32] Cook, "Music, History, and Progress," 168.

[33] David Myers, *Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 100.

view the game through this analytical and abstract lens. New players may be more struck by the aesthetic choices of the civilization themes, but long-time players are more likely to internalize the narrative of the procedural rhetoric. Both kinds of player interactions with the game work to construct history. As James Cook writes, "history is not something discovered, but something made."[34] The game developers have made a version of history in both their aesthetic and mechanical choices. At the same time, each player makes their own history each time they engage in a new playthrough. The civilization themes and procedural rhetoric are integral to the construction of histories for new and old players alike.

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[34] Cook, "Game Music and History," 344.

Civilization Themes

In *Civilization VI*, each civilization has its own unique musical theme. Each theme is presented in four arrangements, corresponding to four of the nine in-game eras: Ancient, Medieval, Industrial, and Atomic. This European periodization of history in general and musical history in particular is applied to all civilizations, regardless of its applicability to their own history or music. A progression from sparse instrumentation to Western orchestra backed by electronics runs across this periodization. In some cases, traditional instruments survive to play alongside the orchestra; in other cases they are left behind. The orchestra is held up as the musical pinnacle of civilization and electronics as the technological pinnacle. In addition to the instrumentation, the compositional techniques used in the Industrial and Atomic arrangements often show an imposition of Western aesthetics onto non-Western music. Both the historical periodization and musical progression reinforce a teleological conception of history driven by a Eurocentric view of progress.

Theme Progression

The progression of musical themes in *Civilization VI* is mechanically tied to technology and civic[35] progression. These are two parallel trees that represent technological innovations (e.g., Bronze Working) and political or philosophical ideas

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[35] The game uses the word "civic" as a noun.

(e.g., Foreign Trade) respectively. Progression through these trees is inevitable and unstoppable; the player cannot move to their next turn if they are not currently researching a technology and civic. Players may take slightly different routes through these trees in different games, but the overall forward motion and eventual destination is always the same. The player enters a new era when they discover their first technology or civic from that era. In addition to unlocking new units and buildings, progressing along the technology tree also updates the visual representation of existing units and buildings. In the case of the Ancient, Medieval, Industrial, and Atomic Eras, entering them will trigger the playing of a new musical arrangement.[36] The overall changes in these four arrangements are fairly consistent between all of the civilizations.

When the player begins a new game, no music initially plays. Only the diegetic sounds of the environment are heard. The Ancient Era theme begins playing only once the player founds their first city. This falsely and implicitly suggests that permanent settlement is a necessary precursor to a musical tradition.[37] These themes feature sparse instrumentation, usually only one or two musicians playing traditional instruments from the respective civilizations. The tempo is slow, the melody played very rubato with space in between phrases. This gives the effect of the musician spontaneously improvising the theme. A generous amount of reverb is added onto these recordings, enhancing the feeling of empty space between phrases. The reverb simultaneously reflects the empty space and "fog of war" surrounding the player at the beginning of the game, an aural

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[36] Every musical track played in the game is bounded on both sides by silence. This circumvents the issues of looping and fading that are common to most other video games.

[37] For more on the requirement of settling, see Vrtačič, "Grand Narratives," 95.

reminder of the geographic potential around them. Ironically, this reverberation would be more likely to result from an enclosed space such as a stone building or cave than the wide-open space of the game world. Although the physical realities of sound production do not align with the game space, the Ancient Era themes project a feeling of potential and possibility, both for the player and for their interaction with the space. As the game progresses and the player fills in more of the map with their cities and districts, so too will the texture of the music become more and more filled in. The player's manifest destiny of the physical game space is reflected in the increasing density of additional instruments in the sonic space.

The Medieval Era themes add viol and vielle to the instrumentation. These are European Medieval and Renaissance string instruments, ancestors of modern orchestral strings. Musically, they play a supporting role. With a straight tone and little articulation, they do not draw attention to themselves, rather filling in the texture and enhancing the sounds around them. The Medieval themes also typically add percussion instruments, either from the respective musical traditions or simply generic frame drums. The addition of percussion creates a more energetic, consistent beat, usually at a faster tempo. These additional instruments enable those from the Ancient Era to return to the theme with a new vigor and clarity. It is significant that the viol and vielle, while purposely not the most noticeable or identifiable instruments, are still a sonic signifier of European music. They foreshadow the encroaching of European musical values onto all civilizations that comes to fruition in the Industrial Era.

The most dramatic musical shift comes in the Industrial Era. Here the themes are arranged for full symphony orchestra. The Western orchestra permeates the music of all civilizations. It is no coincidence that this musical colonization coincides with the historical age of colonialism. In fact, Colonialism is a civic that the player can discover to start this era. The traditional instruments from the previous two arrangements are sometimes still present, but not always. In addition to the imposition of Western instruments, these arrangements are replete with Western musical aesthetics. These relate to form, harmony, and development, and will be explored in greater depth in the case study below. The thick orchestrations often lend the music a "cinematic" or "epic" quality that players are likely to associate with film music, a style that is itself indebted to the European Romantic musical idiom. The Industrial Era transforms the original music into something that would be considered a "complete piece" in the Western idiom, with a formal structure, dramatic arc, and melodic and harmonic development.

The final arrangements, arriving in the Atomic Era, are mostly the same as their Industrial counterparts, but with electronics layered on top of the orchestra. This reinforces the idea of the orchestra as musically superior; it persists to the last stage of musical progression. The technological developments represented by electronic music simply enhance what was already there. In the few themes that have voices as their original Ancient Era instruments, the voices often become autotuned or otherwise electronically manipulated in the Atomic Era. The most recognizably human element of the music is overtaken by technological progress. The Atomic Era serves to cement the

instrumental and aesthetic changes brought about in the Industrial Era, while promoting electronic technological development.

Before zooming in to a single case study, it is useful to outline a few of the general trends across all fifty civilizations' themes. All of the following information is visualized in Table 1. One notable aspect of the civilization themes is the matter of where the musical themes actually originate.[38] There are three main categories here: newly composed themes, themes with individual named composers, and themes based on traditional songs. Newly composed themes represent the smallest number with only five civilizations: Aztec, Scythia, Sumeria, Gaul, and Babylon. These are all long-dead ancient civilizations for which Knorr and Rizzo had no choice but to compose original themes based on what little is known about their musical traditions. There are seven themes with named composers: America, Brazil, Egypt, Russia, Spain, Netherlands, and Gran Colombia. Although on the surface these appear to be a diverse mixture of civilizations, in fact all of these are either European civilizations or civilizations directly impacted by European colonialism. As we will see later, the idea of the individual composer carries with it distinctly European ideologies. The remaining vast majority of themes are based on traditional music without any single identifiable composer. As an example, Korea is represented by the song "Arirang" which is hundreds of years old and holds deep significance to the Korean people. The use of traditional music makes it easier for these themes to connect to and represent their civilization as a whole. As we will see

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[38] All information about composer attribution comes from the published Industrial Era scores: Geoff Knorr, *Sid Meier's Civilization VI: Orchestral Score*, 2020. The scores, published by Knorr himself, are available for purchase on his website: https://www.geoffknorr.com/civilization-vi-sheet-music/civilization-vi-vanilla-dlc-expansions-all-industrial-era-scores.

later, this preponderance of traditional, often non-notated music in the civilization themes

stands in stark contrast to the narrative embodied by the game's Great Musicians.

Table 1: Civilization themes. Civilizations are listed in the order they appear in the published Industrial Era score, roughly in the order they were introduced to the game. Composer attributions are as they appear in the score. The final three columns denote whether or not at least one of the melodic instruments from the Ancient Era theme is still present in any of the later eras.

Civilization	Theme Music	Composer	Medieval	Industrial	Atomic
America	"Hard Times Come Again No More"	Stephen Foster	Yes	No	No
Arabia	"Banat Iskandaria"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	No
Aztec	Original composition	Roland Rizzo	Yes	No	No
Brazil	"Brejeiro"	Ernesto Nazareth	Yes	No	No
China	"Mo Li Hua"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Egypt	"El Helwa Di"	Sayed Darwish	Yes	Yes	Yes
England	"Scarborough Fair"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
France	No title provided	Traditional	No	No	No
Germany	"Ich hab die Nacht Geträumet"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Greece	"Seikilos Epitaph"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
India	"Vaishnava Jana To"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Japan	"Itsuki Lullaby"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kongo	"Banaha"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Norway	"Gjendines Bånlåt"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Rome	"Magna Mater"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Russia	"Kalinka"	Ivan Larionov	Yes	No	No
Scythia	Original composition	Geoff Knorr	Yes	Yes	Yes
Spain	"Recuerdos de la Alhambra"	Francisco Tárrega	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sumeria	Original composition	Geoff Knorr	Yes	Yes	Yes
Poland	"Hej Ide W Las"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Australia	"Waltzing Matilda"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macedon	"Tino Mori"	Traditional	No	No	No

Persia	"Kereshme and Reng-e Shalakhu from Dastgaah-e Maahur"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nubia	"Allah Musau – Zafa"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Indonesia	"Bapang Selisir – Rejang Dewa"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Khmer	"Khmer Rourm Sam Mawgee"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cree	"The Drums of Poundmaker"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Georgia	"Tsaiqvanes Tamar Kali – Shen Khar Venakhi"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Korea	"Arirang"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mapuche	No title provided	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Mongolia	"Pastor Song – Urtin Duu"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Netherlands	"Gaillarde L'esmerillonne"	Pierre Phalèse	Yes	No	No
Scotland	"Scotland the Brave – Bonnie Dundee"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Zulu	"Uthe Ubhuti Asizomlanda – Halala – Bayisa"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canada	"Vive La Canadienne – The Crooked Stovepipe – O Canada"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Hungary	"Cinege, cinege"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Inca	"Siempre Macho"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mali	"Mali Sadjo – Masana Seesay"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maori	"Pokarekare Ana – Ka Mate"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ottoman	"Ey büt-i nev edâ olmuşum müptelâ – Yelkenler Biçilecek"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Phoenicia	"Hurrian Hymn"	Roland Rizzo*	Yes	Yes	Yes

Sweden	"Slängpolska efter Byss-Calle – Helan Går"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gran Colombia	"Velo Que Bonito – Reir Llorando"	Traditional, Carlos Amable Ortiz	Yes	No	No
Maya	"Rabinal Achi – Xtoles – Bolonchon"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Ethiopia	"Tizita"	Traditional	Yes	Yes	Yes
Byzantium	"Akathist Hymn"	Byzantine Chant	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gaul	Original composition	Geoff Knorr	Yes	No	No
Babylon	Original composition	Geoff Knorr	Yes	No	No
Vietnam	"Ly Keo Chai, Trong Com"	Traditional	Yes	No	No
Portugal	"Fado Menor"	Traditional	Yes	No	No

*Based on an interpretation of the cuneiform notation by Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin.

As I alluded to earlier, the presence of traditional instruments from the Ancient Era arrangements in later eras is significant. Twenty-eight civilizations, just over half, do have at least one melodic instrument from their Ancient Era arrangement present throughout all of their arrangements. Of the remaining twenty-two civilizations, two (France and Macedon) lose their original instruments in the Medieval Era, nineteen in the Industrial Era, and only one (Arabia) in the Atomic Era. The fact that instruments are most often lost in the Industrial Era only serves to enhance the feeling of a significant historical break between the Medieval and Industrial Eras. Often when European civilizations lose their original instruments, it is because they have evolved into more modern orchestral instruments, reinforcing the idea of progress through musical development. Conversely, when non-Western civilizations lose their original instruments,

it feels as though they are being consumed by the European musical tradition in the form of the orchestra. On the other hand, when traditional instruments do persist through all eras, their civilizations maintain an aspect of their cultural identity even with the addition of orchestra. With the importance the game places on longevity, it is reasonable to read those civilizations with persisting instruments as being somehow more "successful" than those who lose theirs.

Case Study: Egypt

The theme music for the Egyptian civilization provides an excellent demonstration of the trends outlined above. Egypt's music is based on the song "El Helwa Di" by composer Sayed Darwish (1892-1923).[39] The melodic content of the song fits comfortably into the traditional Arabic maqam hijaz, with its characteristic lowered scale degree 2. To Western ears, ♭2 is often a marker of exoticism; while its appearance here may signal that meaning to some players, it is nonetheless an authentic part of the musical tradition. The Ancient Era arrangement begins with a solo ney, a traditional Egyptian flute. The ney plays the melody of "El Helwa Di" in a slow and contemplative fashion, leaving spaces between phrases which are accentuated by the added reverberation. An oud, a traditional Arabic lute, joins in heterophonically. Each musician simultaneously interprets the melody in their own way. The overriding feeling in this Ancient Era arrangement is of individual expression and musical interpretation.

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[39] An official recording of all four theme arrangements can be found at this link (https://youtu.be/eqJFVg05b8Q) at the following timestamps: Ancient 1:06:24; Medieval 1:08:36; Industrial 1:11:47; Atomic 1:17:49.

The Medieval Era arrangement adds in the aforementioned viol and vielle. These instruments are cast in a supporting role, playing a drone and reinforcing the melody which is still played by ney and oud. The added percussion instruments are all traditional Egyptian drums: the tar, a frame drum; the riq, similar to a tambourine; and the doumbek, a goblet drum. These drums provide a foundational groove and propel the music into a faster tempo. Even with the added instruments, this arrangement is still a presentation of the melody for the most part. There is very little in the way of added formal structure or melodic development. It feels as if the core of the music from the Ancient Era is maintained here, enhanced by additional Egyptian instruments. The distinctly Egyptian sound is nonetheless filled out by the European timbres of viol and vielle, signaling the instrumentation changes that are yet to come.

As with all Industrial Era themes, Egypt's is an arrangement of the original piece for large symphony orchestra. In addition to the host of ideological issues brought about by this usage of the Western orchestra, this arrangement also features many of the musical development techniques common to the Industrial Era themes. In the Industrial Era, Knorr has taken "El Helwa Di" and fleshed it out in a formal structure larger than the melody itself. This is most evident in the slow introduction at the beginning, seen in Figure 1. This is then mirrored by a slow coda at the end. These bookending sections, along with various transitions during the piece, situate the melody within a larger dramatic arc. The introduction also features fragmentation of the melody, a technique used throughout the arrangement. Because the fragment is taken from the first half of the melody, the characteristic ♭2 is delayed. That marker, both quintessential and

stereotypical, of Arabic musical identity is delayed as long as possible in this Western-oriented arrangement.
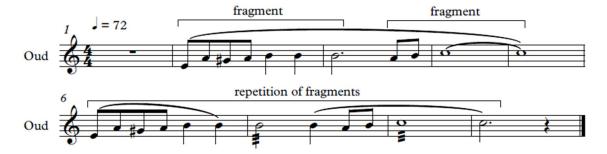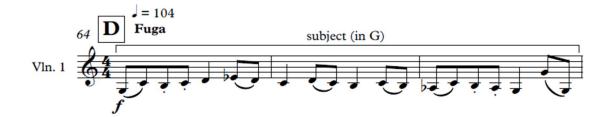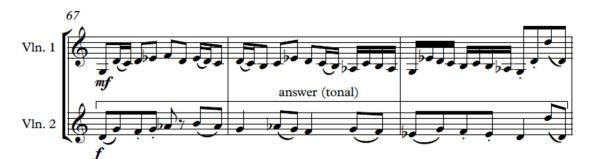

Figure 1: *Civilization VI*, "Egypt – The Industrial Era," mm. 1 – 9. Score reduction by author. Slow introduction featuring fragmentation of the melody.

The next significant melodic development in the Industrial Era occurs at Rehearsal D, marked "Fuga," seen in Figure 2. This is indeed a fugue based on the melody of "El Helwa Di." As is typical in a fugue, it features constant modulation and transposition of the melody. The intervals within the melody are also occasionally adjusted in the form of tonal answers to accommodate the fugue structure. For example, the interval between the second and third notes of the 1st violins at m. 64 is a minor second (C to B) whereas the corresponding interval in the 2nd violins' answer at m. 67 is a major second (G to F). This pattern of subject followed by slightly adjusted tonal answer is repeated in the violas at m. 73 and cellos and basses at m. 76. The fugue is an intrinsically European method of treating melody, applied here to music outside of the European art music tradition. The intervallic structure of the original melody is fundamentally altered, in some ways divorcing it from its original identity.
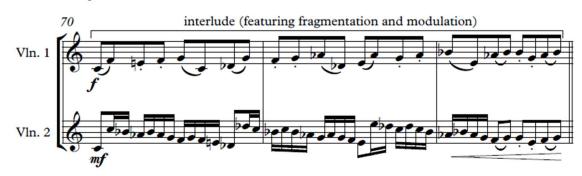
Figure 2: *Civilization VI*, "Egypt – The Industrial Era," mm. 64 – 78. Score reduction by author. Fugue with interval changes in tonal answers.

One other area of note in this Industrial Era arrangement is Rehearsal H, seen in Figure 3. Here the theme undergoes the process of augmentation. While the woodwinds play a melodic fragment in its typical eighth note rhythmic value, the brass play it in augmentation, with a quarter note rhythmic value. This augmentation is made possible through the visualizing power of notation and is thus a marker of the European music associated with that notation. Both of these rhythmic treatments are also presented in canon within their respective instrumental sections with a new voice entering either every beat or every other beat. Occurring at the climax of the arrangement's dramatic arc, this combination of augmentation and canon completely blows up the melodic fragment, suspending it in time and severing its connection to the rest of the melody it came from.

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Figure 3: *Civilization VI*, "Egypt – The Industrial Era," mm. 118 – 120. Score reduction by author. Melody in augmentation and canon. Accents denote the melodic fragment.

The Egyptian Industrial Era theme does still include the traditional instruments heard in the Ancient and Medieval arrangements. The drums play throughout the piece, maintaining the driving groove that they introduced in the Medieval Era. However, the melodic instruments, the ney and oud, only play at the beginning and briefly in the middle. They are notably not present during the aforementioned moments of fugue, augmentation, and canon. These Western developmental techniques effectively push the Egyptian melodic instruments out of the arrangement. An implicit message may be taken from this musical decision: the development of musical ideas through Western techniques supersedes the inclusion of traditional instruments. This paradigm reflects the suppression and marginalization of indigenous cultures by colonial powers. Whether the music, and the game as a whole, is endorsing or simply acknowledging this historical power dynamic is up for interpretation.

As with the majority of Atomic Era themes, Egypt's is essentially the same as the Industrial but with electronics added. Someone with the Industrial Era score could follow along and see on the page almost everything they are hearing. The orchestra is stable and persists through to the end of this historical progression. The majority of the changes affected by the introduction of electronics are to the percussion parts. The basic groove is the same, simply co-opted by electronics. The Egyptian percussion instruments, kept mostly stable in the Industrial Era, are now taken over by the sonic markers of technological progress. The changes that "El Helwa Di" has undergone through these four arrangements are emblematic of the changes experienced by all civilizations' theme music. Instrumentation progresses from sparse to dense with the introduction of European instruments and electronics. Additionally, Western musical development techniques are applied, corralling the music into a Western aesthetic space. These trends have a definite impact on the narrative implied by the music.

Narrative

Through the musical progression outlined above, *Civilization VI* applies a teleological narrative based on European periodization and notions of progress onto all of its represented civilizations. Naturally, there are significant issues with universalizing any historical narrative across all of humanity. As Allen puts it, "all attempts to make different histories fall into one linear scheme of development involve great, if not insuperable, difficulties."[40] I will explore these difficulties in greater detail below.

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[40] Allen, *Philosophies of Music History*, 237.

Through its system of eras, *Civilization VI* organizes time in a distinctly Eurocentric periodization. The stark contrast between the Industrial Era themes and their Medieval predecessors creates a definitive pre-modern/modern split. Davis makes special note of this split in historical thinking:

> The belief in a break between a medieval and a modern (or an early modern) period ever more intensively assumes world-historical implications for categories such as the sovereign state and secular politics – that is, categories with both ideological and territorial stakes – and for exactly this reason the 'Middle Ages,' like 'modernity' before it, has been vaulted from a European category to a global category of time.[41]

The distinction between pre-modern and modern created by the themes takes this European periodization of history and applies it globally. The fact that this split is signaled primarily by the introduction of the European orchestra only compounds this issue. Although the player may take the structure of the game for granted, the fact remains that the periodization of technologies, civics, and theme music is firmly rooted in European history and carries the implications of that history.

I consider the music in *Civilization VI* to follow a three-stage periodization. I think of the Atomic Era as an extension of the Industrial since it is essentially the same arrangement with a few additions and modifications. This aligns with the three-stage periodization of music that Karen Cook identifies in *Civilization IV*.[42] As Stanley notes, this ternary division of early, middle, and modern has been central to Western historical

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[41] Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, 5.

[42] Cook, "Music, History, and Progress," 174.

thinking since the age of humanism.[43] The very structure of the musical progression, not to mention its actual implementation, is steeped in Western conceptions of history.

In a three-stage periodization such as this, the valorization of the final stage corresponds with a teleological worldview.[44] Teleology is the idea that history is always moving in a forward direction toward some desirable end goal. The *Civilization* series wholeheartedly subscribes to this worldview. It is easy to understand why; as a video game with definitive win conditions, it is natural that the modern time period surrounding those win conditions would be in some way valorized. The concept of teleology also manifests in the music. As I have already shown, the orchestra emerges as the triumphant herald of Industrial Era music and maintains its position for the rest of the game, through the Atomic Era. In regard to *Civilization IV*, Cook claims that the orchestra represents the "teleological pinnacle of musical civilization."[45] The same absolutely holds true here. The fact that the orchestra persists in the Atomic Era cements its position at the end of the teleological arc and positions electronics as the technological pinnacle of civilization. There is perhaps a sense of an organic narrative within this overall teleological narrative since the valorized music is based on a style that is over 100 years old. *Civilization VI* seemingly rejects the compositional developments of the twentieth century, in stark contrast to *Civilization IV*'s prolific usage of the minimalist music of John Adams.[46]

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[43] Stanley, "Historiography," §3(iv).

[44] Webster, "Beethoven's 'Early' Period," 6.

[45] Cook, "Music, History, and Progress," 177.

[46] Cook, 177.

Instead, that older valorized time period is stretched all the way to the present, resulting in a teleology with an extended final period.

This teleology is deeply connected to ideas of development and progress in history. Allen writes that "the doctrine of development found favor with scholars who believed that nineteenth-century European culture represented the highest stage of development in time and space."[47] The valorization of nineteenth-century European culture and the organization of history as progressing towards that culture are intimately tied up with the musical progression in *Civilization VI*. Cook notes increased volume, fuller texture, more intricate rhythms, and more complex polyphony as markers of Western standards of modernization within *Civilization IV*,[48] and as I have shown above, these attributes are just as present and prominent in *Civilization VI*. Added to this are the Western techniques of musical development relating to form, harmony, and melody that serve to transform the themes from traditional songs into "complete pieces" in the Western art music sense. Cook writes that "this, to the game designers, is progress: cultural advancement through the continual homogenization of music."[49] Although the Industrial and Atomic Era themes in *Civilization VI* do retain some of their original identity through their melodies and traditional instruments, it is undeniable that the usage of the orchestra and Western musical aesthetics creates a narrative where in order for musical cultures to develop, they must become more homogenous and more Westernized.

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[47] Allen, *Philosophies of Music History*, 230.

[48] Cook, "Music, History, and Progress," 177.

[49] Cook, 176.

Game Mechanics

In addition to the civilization themes and other background tracks, music features heavily in the mechanics of *Civilization VI*. One of the victory conditions a player can achieve is a Culture Victory.[50] A Culture Victory is achieved when the number of tourists visiting the player's civilization is greater than each other civilization's number of domestic tourists. The two resources involved in this victory condition are Culture and Tourism. Culture is obtained through buildings in the Theater Square district such as Amphitheaters and Museums; Great Works of Writing, Art, and Music; World Wonders; and governmental policies. Culture functions primarily to progress through the civics tree, just as the Science resource progresses through the technology tree, and secondarily to bolster domestic tourism. The Tourism resource is obtained through the previously mentioned Great Works, in addition to buildings, Wonders, and the Rock Band unit. The entire function of Tourism is to attract visiting tourists from other civilizations, leading to cultural dominance over those civilizations and, ultimately, a Culture Victory.

Apostolos Spanos identifies the pursual of any kind of victory condition in *Civilization* as a marker of Eurocentrism: "this element of the game reflects the tendency of modern Western societies to focus on and appreciate strong determination, competitive

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[50] A note on capitalization: I am capitalizing game elements (the Culture resource) while keeping their related concepts lowercase (culture as a social phenomenon).

goal setting and focus to victory no matter what."[51] Applying this line of thinking to the

Culture Victory, I argue that the Culture Victory shows evidence of not just Eurocentrism

generally, but of Americentrism specifically. The cultural position that the United States

has achieved globally in the 20th and 21st centuries, especially with the advent of

globalization and the Internet, is as close of an analogue to a Culture Victory in

Civilization as exists in the real world. The game itself frames this cultural position as the

end goal of this victory: "If you aim to be the cultural epicenter of the world, this is the

victory for you."[52] To win a Culture Victory is to place oneself in the culturally

significant position of the United States at the turn of the millennium. The previous game,

Civilization V, made this American connection explicit; the leaders of culturally

dominated civilizations said the line "Our people are now buying your blue jeans and

listening to your pop music."[53] This line has become somewhat of an in-joke in the

community and even makes an appearance in *Civilization VI*: the achievement for

winning a Culture Victory is called "Buying Your Blue Jeans and Listening to Your Pop

Music." The Culture Victory in *Civilization VI* is both implicitly and explicitly coded as

an American conception of a strong, "successful" culture.

     The remainder of this section will focus on the musical aspects of a Culture

Victory, namely Great Musicians, Great Works of Music, and Rock Bands. I evaluate

their mechanical representations in the game to determine what messages those

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[51] Spanos, "Historical Source," 156.

[52] *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, Civilopedia: Cultural Victory.

[53] *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (2K Games, 2010), Microsoft Windows.

representations might deliver to the player. I also draw heavily from the Civilopedia, the in-game "encyclopedia" that offers both mechanical information and historical context.[54] Although not a core element of gameplay, the Civilopedia functions as the game's attempt to provide the player with factual information and encourage further exploration outside the game, and therefore should be considered. As Shannon Martino notes, the Civilopedia is not always accurate, due to both a lack of expert consultation and sheer quantity of research necessary for the breadth of the game.[55] I am analyzing Civilopedia entries for both accuracy and narrative, especially when that narrative conforms with or opposes the mechanics of the represented game elements.

Great Musicians

Great Musicians are just one of several types of Great People in *Civilization VI*. These are units representing specific historical figures that can be earned during a game and used to the player's advantage. Great People are earned with Great People Points. The Points come from the appropriate districts (for example the Theater Square district produces points for Great Musicians) in addition to government policies and World Wonders. Players may also patronize Great People to earn them before they have enough Points by paying Gold or Faith to make up for any missing Great Person Points. All civilizations compete for Great People from a shared pool that rotates with every game era. This puts the player in a position similar to a wealthy patron attempting to attract artists or other intellectuals. While that aspect does have some historical backing, there is

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[54] Civilopedia entries can also be read outside the game on the fan-made wiki site: https://civilization.fandom.com/.

[55] Martino, "Might, Culture, and Archaeology," 32.

a degree of tension with the player's overall positionality as the leader of a civilization. In some ways, it sends the message that these Great People are not products of their culture, but rather exist outside of that culture until called upon to deliver their "greatness." Once earned, these Great People serve a variety of functions including improving military units, earning resources, and creating Great Works.

Great Musicians are third in the sequence of Great Writers, Artists, and Musicians, all of whom create Great Works of their respective type. Great Writers are available from the Classical Era onward, Great Artists from the Renaissance, and Great Musicians from the Industrial. A common statement in histories of music is that music is "the youngest of the arts."[56] One example of this line of thinking is that the great art form of sculpture developed thousands of years before the great musical form of the symphony. This idea is a natural result of an attempt to conceptualize a linear historical development of art in the West.[57] The Great People in *Civilization VI* conform to this linear history. The player unlocks Great Artists and their sculptures long before Great Musicians and their symphonies. As I have argued above, the game positions the European orchestra as the pinnacle of musical civilization through the civilization themes. The same is true here; Great Musicians do not appear until the time in history when the genres associated with the orchestra are being written. This time period at the end of the eighteenth century was also when composers began thinking of themselves as

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[56] Allen, *Philosophies of Music History*, 256.

[57] Allen, 256.

writing discrete works of music.[58] The emergence of the work-concept in European

music and its associated genres form the historical context in which the Great Musicians

are situated.

The pool of Great People available at any given time is constrained by the given

game era. A consequence of only unlocking Great Musicians in the Industrial Era is that

many of them are placed in an era that does not correspond to their historical reality.

There are several composers whose lifespans would place them in what the game

considers the Industrial or Modern Era, who are instead classified as Atomic or even

Information Era composers.[59] For a complete listing of Great Musicians, see Table 2.

Drawing on Karen Cook's research, James Cook notes how *Civilization IV* uses

Renaissance music to represent the Medieval Era and Baroque music to represent the

Renaissance, in what he refers to as "musical chronology collapsing in upon itself."[60]

Civilization VI, on the other hand, presents the reverse version of a collapsed chronology

with its Great Musicians. Composers as far back as the Renaissance are collapsed into the

Industrial Era onwards. Instead of earlier eras being represented by later musical styles,

as in *Civilization IV*, earlier composers are made to fit in later eras. The effect in

Civilization IV was to represent distant time periods with more familiar music. In

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[58] Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum*, 206.

[59] For purposes of this comparison, I am looking at the year the game begins in if the player chooses to start in a later era to see what years the game considers to be in which eras. The start dates of each era are: Ancient = 4000 BC; Classical = 1000 BC; Medieval = 500 AD; Renaissance = 1350 AD; Industrial = 1725 AD; Modern = 1890 AD; Atomic = 1945 AD; Information = 1995 AD. During a typical playthrough, the player will likely not progress through the eras at exactly this pace. However, this is in my opinion the best way of determining what year the game thinks each era "should" begin in.

[60] Cook, "Game Music and History," 353.

contrast, *Civilization VI* holds up music from the 17th to the early 20th centuries as the only composed music worth celebrating. By claiming that composers who died before 1940 are representative of the Information Era, *Civilization VI* implicitly suggests that no music composed since then is truly worthy of status as a Great Work. This is just one aspect of the game which feeds into the prioritization of longevity as a marker of worth; since the chosen Great Works of Music have been around longer, they are more worthy of being admired than those actually composed during the more recent time periods in question.

Table 2: Great Musicians. All biographical information obtained from Grove Music Online. Eras that do not correspond between the game and real history are written in italics.

Great Musician	Nationality	Sex	Dates	In-Game Era	Real Era
Yatsuhashi Kengyo	Japanese	M	1614-1685	*Industrial*	*Renaissance*
Dimitrie Cantemir	Moldavian	M	1673-1723	*Industrial*	*Renaissance*
Antonio Vivaldi	Italian	M	1678-1741	Industrial	*Renaissance/*Industrial
Johann Sebastian Bach	German	M	1685-1750	Industrial	*Renaissance/*Industrial
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Austrian	M	1756-1791	Industrial	Industrial
Ludwig van Beethoven	German	M	1770-1827	Industrial	Industrial
Frédéric Chopin	Polish	M	1810-1849	*Modern*	*Industrial*
Franz Liszt	Hungarian	M	1811-1886	*Modern*	*Industrial*
Antônio Carlos Gomes	Brazilian	M	1836-1896	Modern	*Industrial/*Modern
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky	Russian	M	1840-1893	Modern	*Industrial/*Modern

Scott Joplin	American	M	1867-1917	Modern	*Industrial*/Modern
Liu Tianhua	Chinese	M	1895-1932	Modern	Modern
Clara Schumann	German	F	1819-1896	*Atomic*	*Industrial/Modern*
Lili'uokalani	Hawaiian	F	1838-1917	*Atomic*	*Industrial/Modern*
Antonín Dvořák	Czech	M	1841-1904	*Atomic*	*Industrial/Modern*
Juventino Rosas	Mexican	M	1868-1894	*Atomic*	*Industrial/Modern*
Gauhar Jaan	Indian	F	1873-1930	*Information*	*Industrial/Modern*
Mykola Leontovych	Ukrainian	M	1877-1921	*Information*	*Industrial/Modern*

One odd aspect of the mechanics of Great Musicians is that they are functionally interchangeable. While they do represent different composers and produce different Great Works of Music, they all work in the same way and none of the Works are mechanically distinct. In contrast, most of the other Great People do have distinct mechanical identities based on the specific historical figure in question. To compare two Great Scientists, for example, Isaac Newton instantly builds a Library and a University and boosts the Science output of Universities while Galileo Galilei provides an immediate influx of Science based on the number of adjacent Mountain tiles. This directly contradicts Demandt's point about alternative histories where he says that "in contrast to inventors and discoverers, no substitutes for great artists can usually be identified."[61] The technology tree presents science as an inevitable, linear progression. New discoveries will always be made by one person if not another, which is why Demandt considers scientists

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[61] Demandt, *History That Never Happened*, 31.

interchangeable in alternative histories. But the Great People present the inverse

proposition: that scientists are unique and composers, and by extension their works, have

no individuality besides their surface-level aesthetic qualities.

The Civilopedia offers insight into how the game conceptualizes the place of

these Great Musicians within history. The Civilopedia entry for the Great Musician unit

claims that they were the guardians of the soul of a people and that they "expressed the

collective sorrows and joys of each civilization."[62] This aligns with what Eileen Ka-May

Cheng identifies as the Romantic notion of the "cult of the artist that privileged the artist

as a figure who possessed a special ability to communicate with the divine and access

higher truths through the use of the imagination and emotion."[63] *Civilization* replaces the

divine with a civilization's collective consciousness, but the Romantic impulse to elevate

individual genius remains the same. The Civilopedia considers music to be the most

emotional, and therefore most subjective, of the arts, making it difficult to define "great"

music. It posits that "perhaps the best way to judge this 'greatness' is how long a piece

has continued to be played and appreciated by others."[64] This definition of greatness

leans into longevity. According to the Civilopedia, music is a static object, created by a

single person to express the feelings of a culture, that accrues value through continual

cultural relevance.

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[62] *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, Civilopedia: Great Musician.

[63] Eileen Ka-May Cheng, *Historiography: An Introductory Guide* (London: Continuum, 2012), 63.

[64] *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, Civilopedia: Great Musician.

Other Civilopedia entries reinforce this standard of notated Romantic genres being prioritized. The entry on Antonín Dvořák refers to his "chamber pieces, miniatures, a concerto, and an opera" as "serious" music (written in quotations in the entry), in contrast with "dance bands and theater orchestras."[65] The entry on Symphonies states that Ludwig van Beethoven "elevated the symphony even more, from a popular but common genre to supreme musical artwork."[66] Both of these entries provide additional evidence of the game's preference for notated music that can function as a static aesthetic object and be transmitted in written form. If longevity functions as a key aspect of historical value, notation makes sense as a vehicle for that longevity. The concept of the Great Musician perpetuates the Romantic cult of the artist, and the choice of genres and preponderance of composers from the Romantic period reinforces those values.

With those values established, it is also important to examine how the game represents composers outside of that white, male, European, Romantic idiom. The three female Great Musicians – Clara Schumann, Gauhar Jaan, and Lili'uokalani – are described in their Civilopedia entries as something other than primarily composers: Schumann as a pianist (and wife to Robert),[67] Jaan as a vocalist,[68] and Lili'uokalani as Queen of Hawaii.[69] My aim is not to disparage these other aspects of these women's

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[65] Civilopedia: Antonín Dvořák.

[66] Civilopedia: Symphonies.

[67] Civilopedia: Clara Schumann.

[68] Civilopedia: Gauhar Jaan.

[69] Civilopedia: Lili'uokalani.

lives, but rather to show that within the framework of Great Musician as genius composer, writing about them in terms outside of composition even further separates them from their white male counterparts. Similarly, the entry for Scott Joplin, the only Black Great Musician, spends more time discussing the genre of ragtime than Joplin himself.[70] The attempt to represent a diversity of composers is certainly admirable and appreciated, but placing them all within a cult of the artist framework leads to the above composers seeming even more othered than they might otherwise be. As games critic Adam Smith astutely notes, "the diversity is often in the flavor of the game rather than in its systems."[71] The game developers have done a decent job of adding the flavor of diversity to the roster of Great Musicians, but the mechanical systems and textual descriptions reinforce European Romantic notions of "great musicianship."

Great Works of Music

Great Works of Music function mechanically the same as Great Works of Writing and Art. Once earned, the Great Person of each respective type can create a set number of Great Works (two for Music). Those Great Works are then placed in open slots in buildings and World Wonders in the player's cities. From that point on, each Great Work will passively accrue both Culture and Tourism for the player, slowly furthering their progress towards a Culture Victory without requiring any additional effort. There are only three World Wonders (Bolshoi Theater, Broadway, and Sydney Opera House) and

[70] Civilopedia: Scott Joplin.

[71] Adam Smith quoted in Martino, "Might, Culture, and Archaeology," 40.

one building (Broadcast Center) with dedicated slots for Great Works of Music.[72]
Although these are locations for the performance of music, either live or prerecorded,
they function exactly like Art Museums do for Great Works of Art. There are no
performances of these Great Works of Music; they simply sit on display like a piece of
art in a museum. This is yet one more instance of "great" music being treated as a static
aesthetic object to be housed in a single location and not interacted with, only appreciated
from afar, akin to a painting on a museum wall. In the real world, music is unique
because of its temporal nature. A performance of a piece of music is a fleeting event in
time that can never be truly repeated. Of course, the existence of recording technology
changes this dynamic, but Great Works of Music are meant to represent "the work itself"
and not any given recording of that work. The mechanical implementation of Great
Works of Music puts the focus on the music as an idealized "work" instead of something
that is performed and listened to.

This mechanical representation of music brings to mind the imagery of Lydia
Goehr's book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. Goehr examines the turning
point in European music history starting at the end of the eighteenth century when music
began to be thought of in terms of individual, static works. Goehr notes that in 1835
Franz Liszt declared the need for a "musical museum" for the purposes of displaying
music as a fine art.[73] Liszt would likely be pleased to find that he is featured in
Civilization's digital version of the musical museum. The museum exists to display what

[72] Several other buildings and Wonders have slots that can be used for any type of Great Work.

[73] Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum*, 205.

we consider to be "works" of music. As Goehr explains, "we treat works as existing after their creators have died, and whether or not they are performed or listened to at any given time. We treat them as artefacts existing in the public realm, accessible in principle to anyone who cares to listen to them."[74] This description of the work-concept fully aligns with the mechanical implementation of Great Works of Music. The Works continue to exist within the museum long after their composers are gone. They are available for the player to listen to at any time but will continue to persist in their identities as unique works even if they are never actually listened to. Although this conception of music may seem perfectly natural to most players, it is important to be conscious of the fact that it originated in a particular cultural and historical time and place. Even if the work-concept can be applied to a variety of music, the fact remains that it comes from European art music and will always be best fit to that tradition.

As the majority of Great Musicians are European composers, it is no surprise that the majority of Great Works of Music are in the Western classical genres. The only exceptions are the works by Dimitrie Cantemir, Gauhar Jaan, Liu Tianhua, and Yatsuhashi Kengyo who wrote music in the Ottoman, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese classical traditions respectively. A full listing of the Great Works of Music and their respective genres can be found in Table 3. The most common genres represented within the Western classical tradition are symphonies and other pieces written for orchestra. The inclusion of symphonies as Great Works of Music certainly reinforces the Civilopedia's

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[74] Goehr, 2.

claim that a symphony is a "supreme musical artwork."[75] Thankfully it is not the only

genre included. There are a substantial number of solo pieces represented, both Western

and not. This at least helps dispel the notion that bigger automatically means better.

Smaller works for a single performer can be as "great" as monumental symphonies.

Although Western classical music and the symphony more specifically are arguably

overrepresented and the Romantic conception of music is prioritized, they do not

completely dominate the overall palette. There is a surprising and refreshing amount of

compositional diversity on display in the Great Works of Music.

Table 3: Great Works of Music. Titles are written as they appear in the game.

Great Musician	Great Works of Music	Genre/Instrumentation
Yatsuhashi Kengyo	• Rokudan no Shirabe • Hachidan no Shirabe	Koto Solo
Dimitrie Cantemir	• Pesrev Adjem Yegiahi • Prince of Moldavia • Uzzusule Beresvan	Ottoman Classical (Chamber Music)
Antonio Vivaldi	• Four Seasons: Winter • La Notte Concerto	Concerto
Johann Sebastian Bach	• "Little" Fugue in G minor • Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major	Organ Solo Cello Solo
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	• Eine Kleine Nachtmusik • Symphony #40, Mvt. 1	String Orchestra Symphony
Ludwig van Beethoven	• Ode to Joy (Symphony #9) • Symphony #3 (Eroica Symphony) Mvt. 1	Symphony
Frédéric Chopin	• Nocturne in E flat Major • Valse Brillante Op. 18	Piano Solo
Franz Liszt	• Transcendental Etude No. 9 • Mephisto Waltz No. 1 "The Dance in the Village Inn"	Piano Solo
Antônio Carlos Gomes	• Fosca - Mvt. 1 (Abertura) • Alvorada	Opera (Orchestral)
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky	• Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture • Dance of the Little Swans	Orchestral Ballet

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[75] *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, Civilopedia: Symphonies.

Scott Joplin	• The Entertainer • Maple Leaf Rag • The Easy Winners	Piano Solo (Ragtime)
Liu Tianhua	• Liang Xiao • Kong Shan Niao Yu	Erhu Solo
Clara Schumann	• Prelude and Fugue Op. 16, No. 3 • Toccatina in A minor	Piano Solo
Lili'uokalani	• Lili'uokalani's Prayer • Sanoe	Song (Vocal)
Antonín Dvořák	• New World Symphony (no. 9) - Mvt. 4 • Serenade for Strings, Op. 22 Mvt. 2	Symphony String Orchestra
Juventino Rosas	• Sobre las olas • Vals Carmen	Piano Solo
Gauhar Jaan	• Raga Khamaj Jogiya • Raga Bhairavi	Indian Classical (Vocal)
Mykola Leontovych	• Carol of the Bells • Prelude for Choir	Choral

These Great Works of Music also have a sonic representation within the game. Possibly due to copyright concerns on the part of the developers, all of the Great Works of Music are represented by low-quality MIDI reproductions. The player will hear each of these when they first create the Great Work and can re-listen whenever they like through the Great Works screen, which essentially functions as a gallery in which to display the player's Great Works of all types. The use of MIDI instruments, while certainly pragmatic, serves to remove any sense of life from the pieces. This issue is exacerbated for the vocal music of Jaan, Lili'uokalani, and Leontovych. These pieces are reproduced using MIDI instruments (sitar, guitar, piano, or organ) instead of voices, further removing them from the sounds of an actual performance. This is especially problematic in the case of Gauhar Jaan. The Civilopedia cites her recordings of native songs for the Gramophone Company as her "most significant contribution to

civilization."[76] In addition to placing importance in her recordings as a means of securing longevity for a musical tradition, it also locates her voice as central to her identity as a Great Musician. However, the usage of MIDI sitar in her Great Works essentially strips her of her individual voice, the thing which the game itself claims as the most important part of her "greatness."

Allen's approach to studying music history has a surprising amount of applicability here. In his preface to the 1962 edition, he writes that "the history of the West and that of Western music cannot be studied in air-conditioned isolation, disturbed only by the dissonances of 'rock and roll' on the one hand and of artistic dode*ca*cophony on the other. (The added syllable is my [Allen's] own.)"[77] Setting aside Allen's dismissal of serialism, his concern about the study of music history maps well onto *Civilization VI*. The MIDI renditions of Great Works feel like studying those pieces "in air-conditioned isolation." They are representative only of the notes on the page, what the game seems to consider to be "the work itself." They are the music in its most sterile form, devoid of any life brought about through performance. This aesthetic sterility is only disturbed mechanically by the introduction of the Rock Band unit, the game's attempt to grapple with music as performance.

Rock Bands

Rock Bands were added in the *Gathering Storm* expansion in 2019, almost three years after the base game. This expansion focused on fleshing out the later portions of the

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[76] Civilopedia: Gauhar Jaan.

[77] Allen, *Philosophies of Music History*, ix.

game, including new features such as climate change and the Future Era. Rock Bands were an addition to keep the Culture Victory interesting and relevant in the late game. While I would not go so far as to say they feel tacked on, their mechanics are a significant departure from Great Musicians and Great Works. After discovering the Cold War civic, Rock Bands can be purchased with the Faith resource. They become an output for Faith in the late game if the player is not using it for the various Religion mechanics. The association of Rock Bands with Faith positions rock music as a site of cultural worship, and their association with the Cold War suggests a relationship to propaganda.

In a way, Rock Bands do mechanically function as cultural propaganda. Unlike Great Musicians which create Great Works that passively generate Tourism, Rock Bands serve as the one method of actively increasing the Tourism output to other civilizations. They do this by putting on performances. Rock Bands must perform in territory belonging to other civilizations; there are no domestic concerts. A performance grants a one-time increase of Tourism pressure to the civilization it was performed in. An unsuccessful performance will cause the Rock Band to disband, and the unit will be deleted. A successful performance will gain Album Sales for the Rock Band, increasing its Tourism in future performances. A successful performance may also result in the Rock Band leveling up and gaining a Promotion, a special ability. The probability of a successful or unsuccessful concert is random and cannot be affected by the player. A higher-level Rock Band has a higher chance to perform a successful show. This mimics the difficulty of breaking into the popular music scene and the positive feedback loop of popularity once a group has "made it big."

The Civilopedia entries for Rock Bands and their associated Promotions are

tonally a significant departure from the rest of the Civilopedia. While most of the

Civilopedia reads like a well-meaning attempt at an informative encyclopedia, the Rock

Band entries are more reminiscent of an opinion piece. These entries constantly use

sarcasm to diminish rock music and rock musicians. They put words such as "album,"

"music," and "good" in quotation marks[78] and describe rock music as "atonal jangling"

and "too loud."[79] The entry for Album Cover Art ends with the following: "No album

cover art has ever graced the walls of any self-respecting museum."[80] Given that

displaying Great Works of Music in museums or museum-adjacent buildings is how they

generate culture, this sentence, coupled with the mechanics of Rock Bands, serves to

separate the two. This comparison is spelled out explicitly with a claim that Rock Bands

are "a notable contrast from more elegant small ensembles, like the chamber orchestra."[81]

Rock music is positioned as an entirely different medium on a lower echelon of quality

from so-called "Great Works," with this idea based partially in the perceived longevity of

Great Works "displayed" in buildings.

  This sarcastic disdain for popular music is obfuscated by the occasional inclusion

of academic-sounding language. The Album Cover Art entry contains this sentence:

"Each album is given an iconographic image which stands as a visual synecdoche for the

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[78] *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*, Civilopedia: Album Cover Art.

[79] Civilopedia: Rock Band.

[80] Civilopedia: Album Cover Art.

[81] Civilopedia: Rock Band.

entire work and is placed on the cover of the album."[82] All this sentence is really communicating is that art is put on album covers and that that art represents the album as a whole. Similarly, the entry on Glam Rock describes stage personas as "blurring the boundaries between cultural signifiers and a sardonic, postmodern deconstruction of these signifiers."[83] I highlight these quotes because they show the unused potential of these entries to take their subject matter seriously. They miss an opportunity to write about the significant effect of popular music on culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in favor of sarcastic jokes and elitist language.

One could argue that these entries are simply a case of one or two writers having fun and should not be taken too seriously. But the issue arises when considering the surrounding context. The remainder of the Civilopedia strives to be a valid resource for providing basic information to the player and encouraging further individual exploration into a subject. These entries do the opposite. They provide little real information and serve only to shut down critical thinking about their subject matter. They couch themselves in academic jargon to project an air of superiority and authority while also using sarcasm to suggest that such an academic analysis of popular music should not be taken seriously. The result is a confusing mess that leaves the player uninformed and unsure how to feel about a significant cultural icon, the Rock Band, that was clearly put into the game because the developers thought it an important part of cultural history.

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[82] Civilopedia: Album Cover Art.

[83] Civilopedia: Glam Rock.

Procedural Rhetoric

The procedural rhetoric of Great Musicians and Rock Bands give a window into what kind of music *Civilization VI* values in history. Great Musicians and Rock Bands have no mechanical relation to one another. There is no sense of composition and performance being linked in any way. The Great Works of Music are never performed within the context of the game, only displayed. Conversely, the Rock Band units never perform any unique pieces of music. There is only a single ten second sound cue for a Rock Band performance that changes slightly to reflect whether the performance was successful or not. The Rock Band units also have no individuality other than the names the player chooses for them, which are purely cosmetic.

The cultural mechanics of *Civilization* value music as a static aesthetic object, not as a living performance tradition. Great Works written by Great Musicians that can be preserved and transmitted over time in notated form constitute the foundation of musical culture. As Goehr puts it, European Romantic composers informed by the work-concept "began to see musical masterpieces as transcending temporal and spatial boundaries."[84] This speaks to the desire in *Civilization* for longevity. These "masterpieces" transcend temporal barriers by persisting as Great Works forever once brought into existence. And they transcend spatial barriers by being available to all fifty civilizations, claiming to belong to the shared history of humankind. Conversely, while Rock Bands are useful in spreading Tourism in the late game, the supposedly impermanent nature of popular music performance means that these units leave little lasting impact on civilization. Although

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[84] Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum*, 246.

they may provide a large burst of Tourism, there is no record of a Rock Band's existence once they disband; they leave no permanent mark on history.

This procedural rhetoric directly impacts what messages and information players take away from the game. King surveyed players of *Civilization V* about what aspects of history they feel that they have learned the most about from the game. The most commonly chosen answer was "individual leaders and noteworthy persons."[85] This correlates with what I claim as the procedural rhetoric of the Culture Victory game mechanics. Great Musicians are largely displayed through a Romantic "cult of the artist" lens and their Great Works are considered noteworthy due to their longevity. Although useful, Rock Bands do not have the same level of long-term mechanical impact or historical staying power as Great Musicians. Coupled with the dismissive nature of the Civilopedia entries concerning Rock Bands, the procedural rhetoric suggests to the player that popular music is simply a passing fad, engaging in the moment, but not significant to history as a whole. Although the player may learn the names of a few composers and pieces, they will leave the game with a narrow and distorted view of music's place within real-life cultures and history.

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[85] King, "Possibilities and Problems," 545.

Conclusion

The structure of *Civilization VI* is inherently teleological. The player is always progressing through history to more and more powerful technologies and civics with the end goal of "winning" history through one of the various victory conditions. The teleology is made explicit through the organization of the game's eras in a distinctly Eurocentric periodization. Each civilization's musical themes then reinforce this Eurocentric teleology. They progress from sparsely textured with traditional instruments to densely textured with Western orchestra and eventually electronics. The orchestra colonizes the traditional instruments to assert itself as the peak of humanity's musical accomplishments. Melodies undergo musical development that bring them in line with European musical aesthetics, aligning them with the Romantic work-concept.

Simultaneously, the music represented in the game's mechanics tells a similar narrative. Great Musicians conform to and reinforce the Romantic ideal of the composer as genius. The Great Works that they create adhere to the work-concept and promote the conception of music as a static, unchanging object that persists after its composer's death. Rock Bands and the Civilopedia entries that discuss them serve to delegitimize the role of popular music in culture, positioning it as a fleeting phenomenon. Across all manifestations of music within the game, longevity is prized as a marker of success in history.

This is not to say that there are no tensions between the narratives put forth by the civilization themes and the mechanics. The mechanics strongly advocate for a conception of music as a static object that does not change over time. In contrast, the entire purpose of the civilization themes is to change over time. Similarly, the Great Works present only music written by a single composer as being worthy of inclusion in the "musical museum," while the vast majority of civilization themes are traditional melodies impossible to trace back to a single source. I believe that these tensions can be somewhat alleviated by considering the Industrial and Atomic Era themes through the lens of the work-concept. The melodies from earlier eras have been manipulated and arranged such that they seem more like "complete" pieces of music, especially with the addition of orchestra. The progression of civilization themes, then, is a progression towards the European work-concept as seen in the Great Works, and all of the ideology contained therein.

What then might be an alternative to this narrative? What might an alternate musical progression look like? One possibility would be to have the specific civilizations present in any given game impact each other's musical development, instead of all of them being impacted by only Western art music. This would fit in with the already existing soundscape of the game; as the game currently stands, when players explore and meet new civilizations, those themes are added to the pool of available tracks for the game to select and play in the background. This idea would essentially function as an extension of that musical sharing. It could also be tied to the Culture Victory condition; as one civilization becomes more culturally dominant over the others, its music could

have more of an impact on all of the other civilizations. In this way the musical progression and the narrative suggested by it would be dynamic, shaped by individual gameplay experiences rather than a static and Eurocentric view of progress.

An alternative to the current Great Musicians and Rock Bands would be to lessen the separation between composition and performance. The work-concept is so heavily prioritized in *Civilization VI* because the Great Works simply sit in the "musical museum." Great Works could instead be something that could be used in performances in the game, an active participant in generating Culture and Tourism instead of something passive in the background. There could be a mixture of music adhering to the work-concept and music outside of it to more accurately encompass how music is made in a wider variety of cultures. Of course, these solutions would come with a whole host of challenges to implementation, but these are merely some general suggestions and not definitive answers. The problems outlined above are not easy to address. Doing so would involve a fundamental restructuring of both the game mechanics and our general understanding of history. Nonetheless, it is valuable to examine the historical narrative at play and to consider what alternatives may be possible.

Playing *Civilization VI*, whether it be for personal enjoyment or an educational activity, can still be an informative experience. The important thing is not to view the game as an accurate representation of history, but rather as a representation of one of the myriad ways history can be told. Instead of asking "What does this game tell me about history?" ask "What does this game tell me about how we think about history?" The music in the game is inextricably tied with that historical metanarrative and can be

examined in much the same way. Goehr writes that "few express discontent with the basic way of looking at classical music, but that is because people are generally unaware of how they do look at this music."[86] This lack of awareness is part of what creates representations like *Civilization VI*'s mechanical systems and what allows them to be received uncritically. However, concrete representations like this, especially ludic ones that can be interacted with, can provide effective ways of reflecting on aspects of our thinking that usually remain hidden to us. Interactive systems like games externalize ideological narratives and allow us to reposition our own thinking in relation to them. When viewed through the lens of historical narrative, the music in *Civilization VI* can facilitate that kind of reconsideration.

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[86] Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum*, 272.

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