



COLONIAL GAMIFICATION:

MAYA REPRESENTATION IN CIVILIZATION VI

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses the inclusion of Maya culture in historical strategy games, specifically *Civilization VI*. We investigate the game through the perspective of the Maya, marking this nation as important as other non-Western and Western civilizations in the game, to understand what is lacking in its representation. We find that the game depicts a limiting view of the Maya by ignoring important archaeological evidence. This is done by emphasizing Eurocentric notions of how a civilization should develop over time and by disregarding works of anthropologists on historical particularism. This paper emphasizes the representation of the 'Other' and how misunderstood this Other is in the media, such as video games; an industry that had been valued at more than 173 billion dollars in 2021. This shows lack of inclusivity of the Maya influences their cultural heritage and the Pan-Maya movement of the modern Maya peoples.

KEYWORDS:

Civilization VI, Maya peoples, archaeogaming, Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw, digital colonialism

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INTRODUCTION

The *Civilization* game has been the subject of academic debate over its focus on creating an anti-historical stance and historical alterities by using different ‘Nations’. These debates often center around the structure of the game, called 4Xs, which leads to homogenization of nations through genocide and erasure (Chapman 2013; Ford 2016; Tharoor 2016). Adding to that, Western and non-Western civilizations used by the game are seen as distilled versions of themselves and portrayed falsely by the developers (Ghys 2012; Mol et al 2017; Mol & Politopoulos 2021; Politopoulos & Mol 2021; Rassalle 2021). This history of misrepresentation was seen recently with the lack of consultation from the Poundmaker Cree nation about the representation of their leader and culture (Carpenter 2021, 40).

The goal of this paper is to analyze *Civilization VI* from a post-colonial perspective and by looking into the representation of Maya culture and its leader, Lady Six Sky.¹ This representation will be examined in terms of how digital heritage could influence the reception of the culture and heritage of the Maya peoples. This paper was the outcome of several discussions on ancient and contemporary Maya, influenced by the VALUE (Videogames and Archaeology at Leiden University) foundation lectures. It should therefore be viewed as a thought experiment exploring how digital representations of ancient civilizations are now becoming part of their contextual heritage.

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VI GAME

Sid Meier's Civilization VI is a popular strategy video games on most video game streaming platforms. The first launch of the Civilization game was in 1991 by Sid Meier and Bruce Shelley, who created a new game genre known as ‘4X games’. The four Xs stand for the ability of the player to interact with the world of the game: ‘eXploration’, ‘eXpansion’, ‘eXploitation’ and ‘eXtermination’ (Mol et al. 2017, 214; Ford 2016, 4). The goal of the game is to choose a cultural civilization, ancient or modern, out of the 52 available options and to create a strong civilization ‘that will stand the test of time’ (<https://civilization.com>).²

For each civilization to expand the player needs to unlock certain features named ‘technologies’ and ‘civics’, which will unlock different ‘governments’. To unlock new technologies, the player needs to select and unlock civ-

ics from the determined ‘civic tree’ which advances the civilization culturally. Civics unlock political ideologies from the ‘government panel’. Technological development and cultural advancement can be performed faster by building specific structures called ‘wonders’, such as the Pyramids of Giza and the Eifel tower (Mol et al. 2017, 214; Firaxis games 2016, 106-12).³ The game can be won through religious, technological, cultural or territorial victory (Firaxis games 2016, 146-50).

Each civilization has its own unique characteristics in the way of portrayal and playing, as well as specific perks and an agenda of ruling to be either more technologically or culturally focused.⁴ Furthermore, the game gives the ability to mix the ‘technologies’ and the ‘civics’, to create new scenarios each time the game is played. In a hypothetical situation within the game, the Egyptian civilization can take on technologies from 18th century England in combination with cultural innovations from the Italian Renaissance period. With these characteristics, any political ideologies of a civilization that are found in historical sources can be ignored to create an imaginary scenario that pushes the boundaries of historical reality.

UNDERSTANDING THE ‘DIGITAL’ MAYA: MAYA REPRESENTATION IN THE GAME

A new collection of leaders and civilizations was introduced, including the Maya civilization with a new Maya leader introduced in the ‘New Frontier Pass’ expansion of the *Civilization VI* game, released on May 27th 2020. The choice of the leader, Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw, is different than in previous *Civilization* games, where the Maya were represented by male leaders Pacal II of Palenque ([https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Pacal_\(Civ5\)](https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Pacal_(Civ5)); Firaxis 2007, 29) and Chan Imix K’awiil ([https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Mayan_\(Civ3\)](https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Mayan_(Civ3))).⁵

The new leader is portrayed as a woman with an impressive headdress, holding what seems to be a jade spear and wearing elaborate decorations and dress (Figure 1). Jade is prominent on all the pieces of decoration, such as the jade central piece on the belt that depicts a Panthera. However, the rest of the dress seems simplistic, accompanied by extensive body paint on the face and arms. At first glance, the decoration of the leader seems more ‘Mayanesque’ than Maya, and only vaguely recalls the original depiction of Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw on Naranjo stele 24 (Figure 2).

¹“Lady Six Sky” is the Westernised name of the “Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw”. As this piece aims to a post-colonial view of the specific Maya representation in Civilization VI, all references on the main part of the article will henceforth change the Westernised names to the original Classic Maya names.

² This number is found [https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Leaders_\(Civ6\)](https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Leaders_(Civ6)), which is a list of all the leaders in the game, including the expansions ‘Gathering Storm’, ‘Rise and Fall’ and ‘Frontier Pass’. The original game contains only 28 leaders.

³ The manual does not include any further information about the expansions of the game, ‘Gathering Storm’, ‘Rise and Fall’ and ‘Frontier Pass’; just the original game with no added features.

⁴ Each leader has specific perks and subsequently, each civilization has its own ‘agenda’. For example, Seondeok of the Korean civilization has the ‘Cheomseongdae’ where her civilization produces more science points to unlock new technologies faster. Jadwiga of the Polish civilization has the agenda of the ‘Saint’, where she produces religious points easier to spread her religion faster.

⁵ During *Civilization II* and *I* games, there was no representation of the Maya civilization and culture.



Figure 1: Screenshot from loading screen to launch game

In the game, the most important feature of Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw is the 'Ix Mutal Ajaw' which is the name of the queen of Tikal, a former Maya ruler depicted in a stele dating to 761 CE (Pillsbury et al., 2017). In the game, this civilization feature grants extra points to the player if they position secondary cities around the capital city. This creates a defense system for the player, as units receive more attack power within the network of non-capital cities around the capital.

I. Socio-Political understanding of the city-state network

It was considered for a long time, from the 18th and mid-20th centuries, that the Maya were a peaceful civilization of the New World. However, after a series of archaeological campaigns from the 1960s, this idea has changed (Webster 2007). According to Smith and Montiel (2001), among the Mayas military engagement was one of the ways of dominating peripheral territory by larger centers. Through archaeological findings, we can trace a unique city-state network: 1) the main capital city, which was the political center, 2) a surrounding dominated territory, which connected through economic exchange the capital and the provinces, and lastly 3) the overall international context which influence of the capital was projected on (Smith & Montiel 2001, 247; Flannery 1998, 18).⁶ Societal complexity and craft specialties were characteristics of the main capital cities, which included glorification of the hegemonic leader of the city-state network (Hyslop 1990). The relation with the provinces provid-



Figure 2: Naranjo stele 24, depiction of Lady Six Sky (source: Wikipedia)

⁶ It is important to note that a core-periphery approach, as could be suggested in this generic simplification of the city-states' dynamics, has been disputed by later and even more recent studies on this subject (c.f. Schortman & Urban 2012, 476-478; Smith et al 2021, 378-382). However, this approach is good to have in mind due to the impact that it had in the conventionalization of network dynamics of Maya city states (c.f. Marcus 1992, 1998; Iannone 2002; Smith & Montiel 2001, among others).

ed economic exchange with this political center (Costin & Earle 1989; Fox et al 1996). The way of controlling the different provinces was employed mainly through military conquest, taxation, reorganizing settlements, and cooperation with local elites (Costin et al 1989; Redmond 1983; Smith & Heath-Smith 1994; D'Altroy 1992; Topic & Topic 1993). Epigraphers and archaeologists may also include a final category used to indicate ties between cities-states that are not currently understood, as seen in figure 3 (Martin 2020, 309).⁷

This model could be considered as part of the centralization versus decentralization debate for understanding the different Maya polities (Foias 2013; Schortman & Urban 2012). The former accounts for one large city-state, such as Tikal and Caracol, were the main powerful economic centers controlling a large territory, that included different sized city states, thus creating a political hierarchy between city-states that were controlled from one center (Foias 2013, 61). The later can differentiate depending on the cultural political model adopted, however all are similar when accounting a weakly centralized model (Foias 2013, 60), as seen in the three-party model mentioned in the previous paragraph. One important point mentioned by Foias (2013) when describing this discourse is

that post-processual thought extended the discourse as it included variability of change on both models, meaning that proxies such as power or economic control could be lost. With processual thought in mind, he concluded that the dynamic model given by J. Marcus is significant in having a basic understanding of Maya polities.

The dynamic model is defined as a different perspective into the discourse by showing repetitive cycles of growth and decline within this organization/network system of city-states (Marcus 1992). Thus, it is suggested that the forementioned three party pattern, in the earlier paragraph, actually changed whenever the main capital city declined and/or another city state gained more economic and political power (Marcus 1998; Iannone 2002). To provide evidence of this, a recent survey project conducted in Central Mexico proves that the hegemonic character of the Maya city-state network changed dynamics in circular movements because of political fragmentation (Smith et al 2021, 380).⁸ This survey provided proof this through ceramic analysis of different periods in the Yauhtepec Valley, in Mexico, that the 'dynamic model', or that power structures were not static, were changing depending on economic and political relations between the city states. Even if these descriptions provide an image into the po-

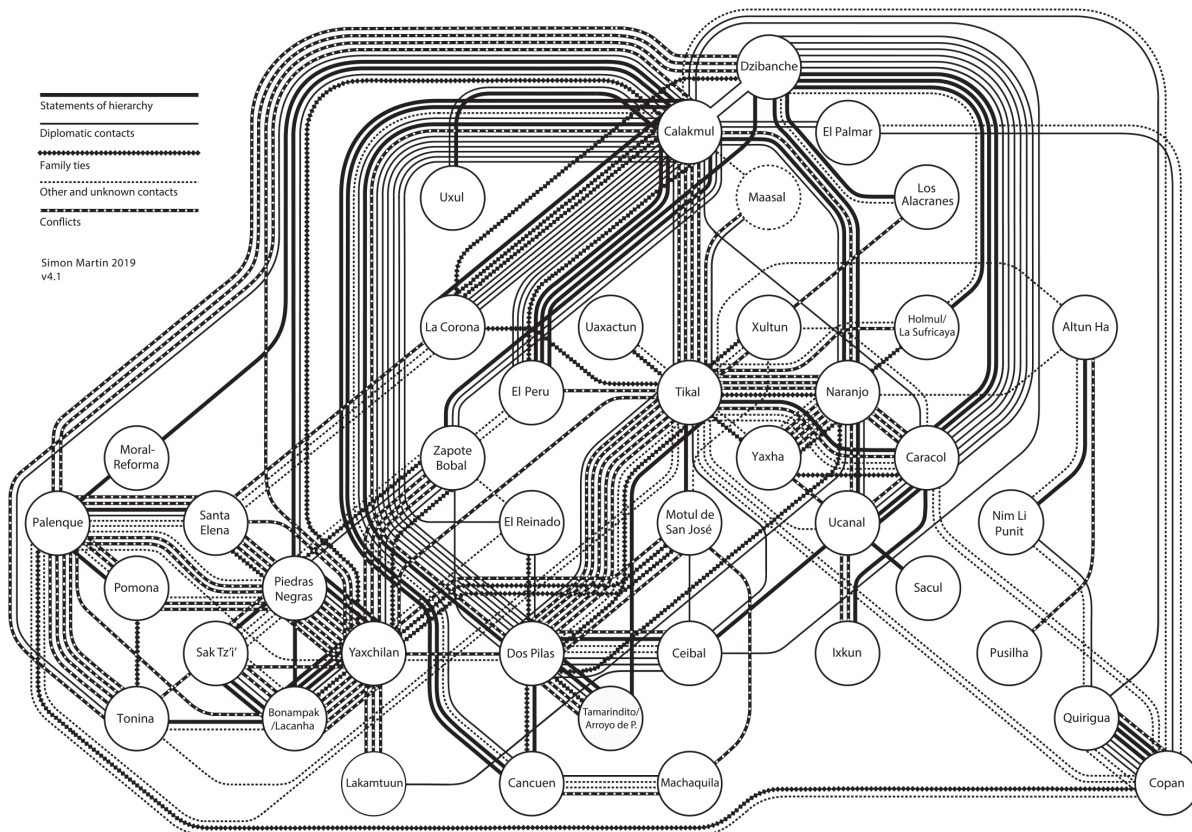


Figure 3: Schematic interpretation of the connections included within a Maya city state network in the Classic period (Martin, 2020). Reproduced with permission of Cambridge University Press through PLSclear.

⁷ The figure was originally provided by Martin and Grube 2000 and in the second version, used in this paper, published in 2008. The schematic map of the Maya networks has been adjusted in the Martin 2020 publication due to newly found evidence.

⁸ The survey project results as seen in this publication provide an overview of the urbanization processes of the Yauhtepec Valley of central Mexico. This survey project strived to reconstruct socio-political understanding of the different population centers from the Formative (1100 BCE-100 BCE) until late Colonial period (1650-1820 CE).

litical and economic system of the classic Maya, it must be noted that the complexity of the Mayan civilization has not been fully explored yet.

II. Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw

King of Tikal, B'alaj Chan K'awiil, the father of Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw, placed her as the founding leader of a new royal family at Naranjo. This decision was taken to create a strong alliance between Caracol and Naranjo in 682 CE, as seen in Naranjo Stela 31 (Sharer 2006, 383; Closs 1985, 72; Iwaniszewski 2018, 191). Thus, Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw became sole ruler; something that happened only rarely in Maya royal culture as it was mostly patrilineal (Sharer 2006, 387; Martin & Grube 2008, 14). She was never inaugurated as a formal ruler of the city, but was considered as such. Even though she was not considered a 'holy lady', as seen on Naranjo Stela 24 (Closs 1985, 74; Proskouriakoff 1960, 466), she carried out the calendrical rituals and recorded them in different stelae, as any male Maya king would. However, Iwaniszewski (2018) suggests that the epigraphical interpretation of Stela 24 is that Lady Wak Chanil Ajaw could be considered as a 'Lunar Goddess'. It is still not clear whether this title is connected to her royal title (Iwaniszewski 2018, 194; Helmke 2017, 83). In 695 CE, she started a series of military campaigns to regain secondary centers for the alliance with Naranjo and reassert authority over the region, as seen on Stela 1 of Naranjo (Sharer 2006, 390; Martin & Grube 2008, 75).

CRITICAL REFLECTION

I. How the Maya are represented

The most important aspect of the Maya civilization, which was ignored in its representation, was the politics of the Maya and their city-state networks. It is glaring, once considered the archaeological models presented above, that the game creates an oversimplified perspective of the ancient Maya city-state. For example, even though *Civilization VI* portrays the Mayan civilization as unified, archaeological sources and inscriptions give no indication that the Mayas were ever unified (Martin & Grube 2008; Foias 2013). On the contrary, as discussed above, the Mayan civilization followed a dynastic system and each network was often in opposition with the others for ideological, religious or political and economic reasons (Martin & Grube 2008).

An aspect that could be considered close to the reality of the ancient Maya cities is that *Civ VI* has the function of creating districts with distinct specialities; these districts produce, among other things, various technologies, and serve religious and/or other cultural functions. The big centers of the Maya could be focused on ideological-ritualistic and political and administrative functions (Sanders & Webster 1988). However, these specialized districts are available for every 'nation' in the game, not just the cities built by the Maya, therefore suggesting that this is a matter of game structure rather than of historical and social representation.

II. How the game mechanics function and influence the representation.

We see that every representation of a nation is influenced by the structure of the game. The game provides specific choices to the player with the technology tree, civic tree, and government panel; drastically reducing the portrayal of civilizations and cultures. By limiting the player with specific technological, cultural, and governmental options, the game oversimplifies the idea of a 'civilization progressing through time'; effectively promoting an anti-historical world (Chapman 2013). These guided choices about culture and technology could be referred to as 'determinism'. Ghys (2012) argued that technological determinism in games creates a linear way of unlocking and progressing through the game, but at the same time gives us an idea of how people interpret history. He argued that this model is controversial as it represents a history of technology in a linear way, without noting its historic complexity. This deterministic understanding of history has been seen in other historical strategy games, such as *Civilization IV* (2005), *Rise of Nations* (2003), *Empire Earth* (2001) and *Age of Empires* (1997). This determinism could be understood as an oversimplified analysis of history within a Western understanding that serves to 'reduce' the 32 non-Western civilizations.

The 4Xs structure guides nations to have a predatory expansion over the map and encourages colonization over other civilizations. The world of *Civilization VI* is created to give an interactive perspective of storytelling and creates a complex relationship with a hypothetical time and space with protagonists being different civilizations. The game's 4Xs structure leads the player to a clear-cut 'Victorian England' type of colonization over this digital world (Ford, 2016). These last features push the game into a neo-Roman colonization game, as it focuses the player to just do these commands. Thus, diversion from gamification of colonialism is difficult, and the developers intended for the players to play the game in a homogeneous way (Poblocki 2002; Pöttsch & Hammond, 2012).

On the other hand, we could argue that this 'playground' of history and nations might be appealing. The freedom allowed by the game has created hypothetical historical events. In *Europa Universalis II*, the players could switch the role of nations and "colonize the colonizer", therefore creating anti-historical events; for example, players created a strong enough Oman to take over Zanzibar (Apperley 2006, 4). This was the original goal of the creator of the game who wanted to create an 'apolitical game', or as he specifically stated in an interview: 'one of our fundamental goals was not to project our own philosophy or politics into things. Playing out somebody else's political philosophy is not fun for the player' (Tharoor 2016).

THE HERITAGE OF MODERN MAYA PEOPLES

Keeping the above case study in mind, it is important to notice how ancient heritage of minority peoples, such as the Maya, has been continuously misinterpreted and misused by media for profit. This is sadly a common phenomenon, as the misrepresentation and misappropriation of Maya culture has been long present in large-media products, such as movies, television shows, or clothing lines taking ‘inspiration’ from Mayan indigenous weavers. Even if in the past decades there has been an effort to reduce this phenomenon, it has not yet stopped (Webster 2007; Arden 2004). Maya groups have been battling these colonial frameworks from different countries, both their own and foreign. For example, the Pan-Maya movement (created in the 80s as a response to the marginalization of Maya groups by both politics and modern society) aims to address how the international media mistakenly portray the Maya peoples as a homogeneous group with a uniform identity (Vogt, 2015). It is important to realize, then, that the Maya identity is the dialectic that exists between the formation of modern Maya identity and the historical narratives about the Maya; two intertwined and mutually constitutive elements forming a heterogeneous whole.

The example of the *Civilization* series shows how the games’ inclusion of minority peoples’ heritage was not necessarily intended for the better promotion of marginalized groups, but rather for the social or economic benefit of providing that space. The game dynamics do not promote Mayan history, nor does the way the leaders are portrayed do justice to the way they have been carved on the stelae that archaeologists are still able to study today. Most importantly, there was no collaboration in *Civ IV* with Maya peoples on the subject of their heritage even though the representation of the Maya in *Civ VI* (or any other media) could *de facto* be considered as part of the Maya cultural heritage (Balela & Mundy 2016; Eklund & Sjöblom 2019). It follows that this flawed media representation of heritage should have been organized differently: its purpose should not have been to provide a partial (and distorted) image of the Mayan heritage, but also to educate people that lack any background information on the complexity of being part of the modern Maya. In this framework, the notion of collaborative (or community-based) archaeology, as recently promoted by several scholars (e.g., Cipolla 2021), might provide a profitable framework for future endeavors in the region, promoting an approach that focus on partnerships with local communities both in archaeological research and in media portrayal.

CONCLUSION

Historical strategy video games can create an experience of understanding the uniqueness of each civilization. The fact that *Civilization VI* is showing this uniqueness of nations through colonial tactics is interesting to note. These tactics have not changed through the different versions of the game and made it even more popular, thus encouraging the colonial thinking over different nations and homogenizing them with a neo-Roman approach. We should respect civilizations and their differences and not try to reduce them to imaginations of them, such as in a historical particularism debate. On the contrary, there is significant potential of engaging with different cultures and interacting with them through ‘play’. In this way, historical video games, and other media, can show respect to these civilizations’ that experience hardships and continuous marginalization.

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