

How Civilization Became a Course

Written by Kimberly Weir

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KIMBERLY WEIR, JUN 18 2012

I had never heard of *Civilization* until one day my husband, who is also my colleague, happened to mention this game. He had not played the game since I met him, but a new version had just come out. As he described the premise, I became more and more intrigued as I realized just how well the simulation seemed to address international relations issues. Sid Meier's *Civilization* (or *CIV*, as it is affectionately known to gamers) allows the player to take on the role of a leader, competing with either the computer, or networking to play in real time with others, to be the first to build up one's civilization. From two-level games to sustainable development, protecting state sovereignty to resource wars, *Civilization* offers a very personal way for students to encounter an endless number of international issues as the decision makers of their own empires.

The game has a bit of a learning curve—especially for those who are not familiar with strategy games. As I played, I became convinced of the usefulness of the simulation as a learning tool. We recruited a few students as guinea pigs, by enticing them with independent study credits to do a trial run of the course I decided to design. The results of that research, along with a full write-up of all the introductory international relations concepts that are addressed in *Civilization* (with the exception of religion, which was added in *CIV IV*), are detailed in this article, which appeared in *Simulation Gaming* in August 2011.

Since writing that article, I have taught 'Using *Civilization* to Learn Diplomacy & Negotiation' seven times during intensive, three-week summer inter-sessions, with enrollments ranging from 10 to 20. The game works very well during the compressed semester, designed for courses with a non-traditional pedagogical approach. I also incorporated the game into a regular semester-long International Relations introductory course, but only did that once. Requiring a computer simulation for a general introductory course caused some students grief.

At the start of the course, I warn students that I am not responsible if they end up addicted to the game, because just one more turn is always necessary before shutting down for the day. Besides choosing among the many civilizations to be Cleopatra, Alexander the Great, or Genghis Khan, players also decide which type of strategic approach to take to conquer others, as well as which Wonders of the World to build, crops to grow, and technologies to develop. While building up the civilization's military, infrastructure, culture, and economy, leaders also have to pay attention to other civilizations that compete for resources and allies, might unexpectedly declare war, or may even send in spies.

The class initially met every day in a computer lab. As newer versions were released beyond the less sophisticated *CIV II* (now in *CIV V*), the computer lab machines were too full of other programs, causing endless frustration as the computers froze mid-turn. Once the ratio of students bringing laptops to the computer lab outnumbered those enduring the crashing lab machines, I moved to meeting just once a week to review concepts and discuss technical difficulties students encounter with the game. During the remainder of what constitutes class hours (which amounts to about 12 hours per week), students are expected to play the game.

Course assessment is based on discussion, papers, and play logs. The course is divided into three sections: The State; Conflict, Cooperation and Security; and International Economic, Law, and the Environment. Discussion takes place via BlackBoard, where I post five sets of questions. Three of those pose questions about the above issue-areas, while the other two are general game and course debriefing questions. Students also earn credit by posting or responding to technical or strategic questions about the game.

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The objective of the papers is for students to connect real-world events with concepts covered in class and their game experiences. This year, for example, some of the topics covered were the conflict between the Sudans, the South China Sea dispute, and issues with damming the Mekong River. Both the discussion questions and the paper encourage students to consider what is realistic or not about the game.

Students also turn in play logs for two complete games (up to at least the year 1500 C.E.) that detail various accomplishments and interactions, along with the rationale for each. They log trade, declarations of war and peace, agreements, infrastructural advances, and so forth. The purpose is to keep students aware of the decisions they make rather than just lapsing into mindlessly playing the game.

Over the years, I have had much positive feedback from students about their learning experience. And each year, word of mouth is usually what drives enrollment for the class. Even though the inter-session moves very quickly, which would make traditional teaching methods difficult, this unique approach imparts knowledge in such a way that students learn about diplomacy and negotiation through virtual experience.

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