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## Gaming

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## 4

# Allegories of Control

### Playing the Algorithm

With the progressive arrival of new forms of media over the last century or so and perhaps earlier there appears a sort of lag time, call it the “thirty-year rule,” starting from the invention of a medium and ending at its ascent to proper and widespread functioning in culture at large. This can be said of film, from its birth at the end of the nineteenth century up to the blossoming of classical film form in the 1930s, or of the Internet with its long period of relatively hidden formation during the 1970s and 1980s only to erupt on the popular stage in the mid-1900s. And we can certainly say the same thing today about video games: what started as a primitive pastime in the 1960s has through the present day experienced its own evolution from a simple to a more sophisticated aesthetic logic, such that one might predict a coming golden age for video games into the next decade not unlike what film experienced in the late 1930s and 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Games like *Final Fantasy X* or *Grand Theft Auto III* signal the beginning of this new golden age. Still, video games reside today in a distinctly lowbrow corner of contemporary society and thus have yet to be held aloft as an art form on par with those of the highest cultural production.

This strikes me as particularly attractive, for one may approach video games today as a type of beautifully undisturbed processing of contemporary life, as yet unmarred by bourgeois exegeses of the format.

But how may one critically approach these video games, these uniquely *algorithmic* cultural objects? Certainly they would have something revealing to say about life inside today's global informatic networks. They might even suggest a new approach to critical interpretation itself, one that is as computercentric as its object of study. Philippe Sollers wrote in 1967 that interpretation concerns "The punctuation, the *scanning*, the spatialization of texts"; a year later Roland Barthes put it like this: "the space of writing is to be scanned, not pierced."<sup>2</sup> And a few years later, Jameson adopted a similar vocabulary: "Allegorical interpretation is a type of *scanning* that, *moving back and forth across the text*, readjusts its terms in constant modification of a type quite different from our stereotypes of some static or medieval or biblical decoding."<sup>3</sup> Not coincidentally, these three borrow vocabulary from the realm of electronic machines—the "scanning" of electrons inside a television's screen, or even the scanner/parser modules of a computer compiler—to describe a more contemporary, informatic mode of cultural analysis and interpretation.

Indeed, this same "digitization" of allegorical interpretation, if one may call it that, is evident in film criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, concurrent with the emergence of consumer video machines and the first personal computers. This discourse was inaugurated by the 1970 analysis of John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* written by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*. Their reading is aimed at classical Hollywood films, so it has a certain critical relationship to ideology and formal hegemony. Yet they clearly state that their technique is neither an interpretation (getting out something already in the film) nor a demystification (digging through manifest meaning to get at latent meaning).

→ We refuse to look for "depth," to go from the "literal meaning" to some "secret meaning"; we are not content with what it says (what it intends to say). . . . What will be attempted here through a re-scansion of these films in a process of active reading, is to make them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks; these are neither faults in the work . . . nor a deception on the part of the author. . . . They are *structuring absences*.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of computers and informatic networks, of what Gene Youngblood in the same year called the “intermedia network,” on the *Cahiers* mentality is unmistakable. Their approach is not a commentary on the inner workings of the cinematic text—as an earlier mode of allegorical interpretation would have required—but a rereading, a rescanning, and ultimately a *word processing* of the film itself. The *Cahiers* style of analysis is what one might term a “horizontal” allegory. It scans the surfaces of texts looking for new interpretive patterns. These patterns are, in essence, allegorical, but they no longer observe the division between what Jameson called the negative hermeneutic of ideology critique on the one hand and the positive hermeneutic of utopian collectivism on the other.<sup>5</sup> This is the crucial point: scanning is wholly different from demystifying. And as two different techniques for interpretation, they are indicative of two very different political and social realities: computerized versus noncomputerized.

Some of Deleuze’s later writings are helpful in understanding the division between these two realities. In his “Postscript on Control Societies,” a short work from 1990, Deleuze defines two historical periods: first, the “disciplinary societies” of modernity, growing out of the rule of the sovereign, into the “vast spaces of enclosure,” the social castings and bodily molds that Michel Foucault has described so well; and second, what Deleuze terms the “societies of control” that inhabit the late twentieth century—these are based around what he calls logics of “modulation” and the “ultrarapid forms of free-floating control.”<sup>6</sup> While the disciplinary societies of high modernity were characterized by more physical semiotic constructs such as the signature and the document, today’s societies of control are characterized by immaterial ones such as the password and the computer. These control societies are characterized by the networks of genetic science and computers, but also by much more conventional network forms. In each case, though, Deleuze points out how the principle of organization in computer networks has shifted away from confinement and enclosure toward a seemingly infinite extension of controlled mobility:

A control is not a discipline. In making freeways, for example, you don’t enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the freeway’s exclusive purpose, but that people

can drive infinitely and “freely” without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled. This is our future.<sup>7</sup>

Whether it is an information superhighway or a plain old freeway, what Deleuze defines as control is key to understanding how computerized information societies function. It is part of a larger shift in social life, characterized by a movement away from central bureaucracies and vertical hierarchies toward a broad network of autonomous social actors. As the architect Branden Hookway writes:

The shift is occurring across the spectrum of information technologies as we move from models of the global application of intelligence, with their universality and frictionless dispersal, to one of local applications, where intelligence is site-specific and fluid.<sup>8</sup>

This shift toward a control society has also been documented in such varied texts as those of sociologist Manuel Castells, Hakim Bey, and the Italian autonomist political movement of the 1970s. Even harsh critics of this shift, such as Nick Dyer-Witheford (author of *Cyber-Marx*), surely admit that the shift is taking place. It is part of a larger process of postmodernization that is happening the world over. ←

What are the symptoms of this social transformation? They are seen whenever a company like Microsoft outsources a call center from Redmond to Bangalore, or in the new medical surveillance networks scanning global health databases for the next outbreak of SARS. Even today’s military has redefined itself around network- and computercentric modes of operation: pilot interfaces for remotely operated Predator aircraft mimic computer game interfaces; captains in the U.S. Army learn wartime tactics through video games like *Full Spectrum Command*, a training tool jointly developed by the American and Singaporean militaries; in the military’s Future Combat Systems initiative, computer networks themselves are classified as weapons systems.

But these symptoms are mere indices for deeper social maladies, many of which fall outside the realm of the machine altogether—even if they are ultimately exacerbated by it. For while Bangalore may be booming, it is an island of exception inside a country still struggling with the challenges of postcolonialism and unequal modernization. Computers have a knack for accentuating social injustice, for ||

widening the gap between the rich and the poor (as the economists have well documented). Thus the claims I make here about the relationship between video games and the contemporary political situation refer specifically to the social imaginary of the wired world and how the various structures of organization and regulation within it are repurposed into the formal grammar of the medium.

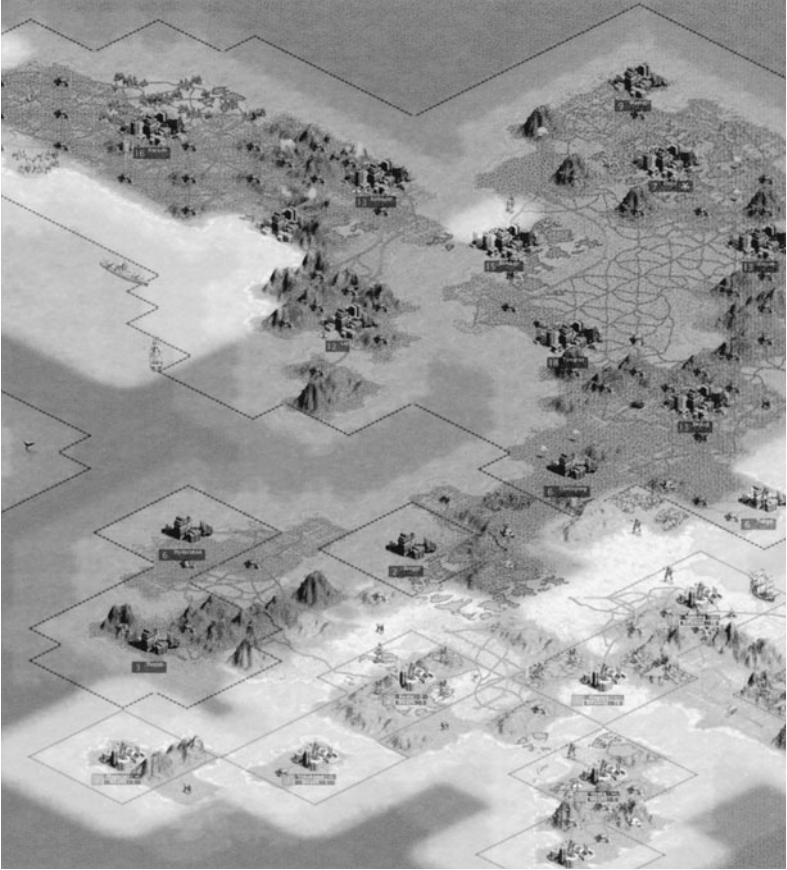
As Jameson illustrates in *Signatures of the Visible*, the translation of political realities into film has a somewhat complicated track record, for mainstream cinema generally deals with the problem of politics not in fact by solving it but by sublimating it. Fifty years ago, Hitchcock showed the plodding, unfeeling machinations of the criminal justice system in his film *The Wrong Man*. Today the police are not removed from the crime film genre, far from it, but their micromovements of bureaucratic command and control are gone. The political sleight of hand of mainstream cinema is that the audience is rarely shown the boring minutiae of discipline and confinement that constitute the various apparatuses of control in contemporary societies. This is precisely why Jameson's interpretive method is so successful. Another example: in John Woo's *The Killer*, not only is the killer above the law (or, more precisely, outside it), but so is the cop, both literally in his final bloody act of extrajudicial vengeance and also figuratively in that one never sees the cuffs, the bookings, the indictments, the court appearances, and all the other details of modern criminality and confinement depicted in *The Wrong Man*. Films like *Bad Boys 2* or *Heat* do the same thing. In fact, most cop flicks eschew this type of representation, rising above the profession, as it were, to convey other things (justice, friendship, honor, or what have you). In other words, discipline and confinement, as a modern control apparatus, are rarely represented today, except when, in singular instances like the Rodney King tape, they erupt onto the screen in gory detail (having first erupted from the bounds of film itself and penetrated the altogether different medium of video). Instead, discipline and confinement are upstaged by other matters, sublimated into other representational forms. The accurate representation of political control is thus eclipsed in much of the cinema (requiring, Jameson teaches us, allegorical interpretation to bring it back to the fore), which is unfortunate, because despite its unsexy screen presence, informatic



*Civilization III*, Firaxis Games, 2001

control is precisely the most important thing to show on the screen if one wishes to allegorize political power today.

Now, what is so interesting about video games is that they essentially invert film's political conundrum, leading to almost exactly the opposite scenario. Video games don't attempt to hide informatic control; they flaunt it. Look to the auteur work of game designers like Hideo Kojima, Yu Suzuki, or Sid Meier. In the work of Meier, the gamer is not simply playing this or that historical simulation. The gamer is instead learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart, global algorithm. To play the game means to play



the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel “algorithm”).

So today there is a twin transformation: from the modern cinema to the contemporary video game, but also from traditional allegory to what I am calling horizontal or “control” allegory. I suggest that video games are, at their structural core, in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age. If Meier’s work is about anything, it is about information society itself. It is about knowing systems and knowing code, or, I should say, knowing *the* system and knowing *the* code. “The way computer games teach structures of thought,”



writes Ted Friedman on Meier's game series *Civilization*, "is by getting you to internalize the logic of the program. To win, you can't just do whatever you want. You have to figure out what will work within the rules of the game. You must learn to predict the consequences of each move, and anticipate the computer's response. Eventually, your decisions become intuitive, as smooth and rapid-fire as the computer's own machinations."<sup>9</sup> Meier makes no effort to hide this essential characteristic behind a veil, either, as would popular cinema. The massive electronic network of command and control that I have elsewhere called "protocol" is precisely the visible, active, essential, and core ingredient of Meier's work in particular and video games in general. You can't miss it. Lev Manovich agrees with Friedman: "[Games] demand that a player can execute an algorithm in order to win. As the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns its hidden logic—in short, its algorithm."<sup>10</sup> So while games have linear narratives that may appear in broad arcs from beginning to end, or may appear in cinematic segues and interludes, they also have nonlinear narratives that must unfold in algorithmic form during gameplay. In this sense, video games deliver to the player the power relationships of informatic media firsthand, choreographed into a multivalent cluster of play activities. In fact, in their very core, video games do nothing but present contemporary political realities in relatively unmediated form. They solve the problem of political control, not by sublimating it as does the cinema, but by *making it coterminous with the entire game*, and in this way video games achieve a unique type of political transparency.

Buckminster Fuller articulated the systemic, geopolitical characteristics of gaming decades before in his "World Game" and World Design Initiative of the 1960s. The World Game was to be played on a massive "stretched out football field sized world map." The game map was "wired throughout so that mini-bulbs, installed all over its surface, could be lighted by the computer at appropriate points to show various, accurately positioned, proportional data regarding world conditions, events, and resources." Fuller's game was a global resource management simulation, not unlike Meier's *Civilization*. But the object of Fuller's game was "to explore for ways to make it possible for



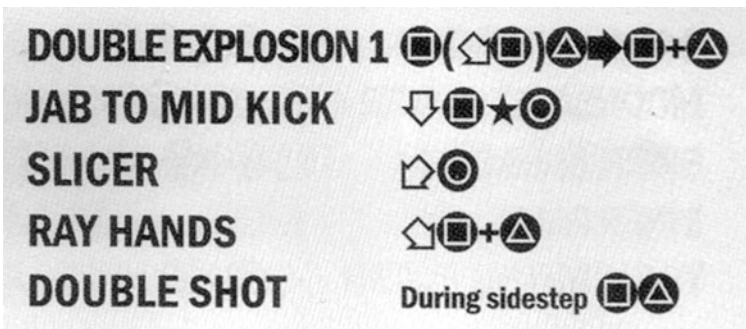
“City View,” *Civilization III*

anybody and everybody in the human family to enjoy the total earth without any human interfering with any other human and without any human gaining advantage at the expense of another.” While Fuller’s game follows the same logic of *Civilization* or other global algorithm games, his political goals were decidedly more progressive, as he showed in a jab at the American mathematician John von Neumann: “In playing the game I propose that we set up a different system of games from that of Dr. John Von Neumann whose ‘Theory of Games’ was always predicated upon one side losing 100 percent. His game theory is called ‘Drop Dead.’ In our World Game we propose to explore and test by assimilated adoption various schemes of ‘How to Make the World Work.’ To win the World Game everybody must be made physically successful. Everybody must win.”<sup>11</sup>

So, broadly speaking, there is an extramedium shift in which films about the absence of control have been replaced by games that fetishize control. But there is simultaneously an intermedium shift, happening predominantly within the cinema. What Jameson called the conspiracy film of the 1970s (*All the President’s Men*, *The Parallax View*) became no longer emblematic at the start of the new millennium. Instead,

films of epistemological reversal have become prominent, mutating out of the old whodunit genre. David Fincher is the contemporary counterpart to Alan Pakula in this regard, with *The Game* and *Fight Club* as masterpieces of epistemological reversal, but one need only point to the preponderance of other films grounded in mind-bending trickery of reality and illusion (*Jagged Edge*, *The Usual Suspects*, *The Matrix*, *The Cell*, *eXistenZ*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Wild Things*, and so on, or even with games like Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear* series) to see how the cinema has been delivered from the oppression of unlocatable capitalism (as in Jameson's view) only to be sentenced to a new oppression of disingenuous informatics. For every moment that the conspiracy film rehashes the traumas of capitalism in the other-form of monumental modern architecture, as with the Space Needle at the start of *The Parallax View*, the knowledge-reversal film aims at doling out data to the audience, but only to show at the last minute how everything was otherwise. The digital can't exert control with architecture, so it does it with information. The genre offers a type of epistemological challenge to the audience: follow a roller coaster of reversals and revelations, and the viewer will eventually achieve informatic truth in the end. I see this fetishization of the "knowledge triumph" as a sort of informatization of the conspiracy film described by Jameson.

But back to video games and how exactly the operator "plays the algorithm." This happens most vividly in many console games, in which intricate combinations of buttons must be executed with precise timing to accomplish something in the game. Indeed, games like



*Tekken Tag Tournament*, Namco, 1994

*Tekken* or *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* hinge on the operator's ability to motor-memorize button combinations for specific moves. The algorithms for such moves are usually documented in the game sleeve by using a coded notation similar to tablature for music ("Up + X-X-O" on a PlayStation controller, for example). Newcomers to such games are often derided as mere "button mashers." But in a broader sense, let us return to Sid Meier and see what it means to play the algorithm at the macro level.

### Ideological Critique

After the initial experience of playing *Civilization* there are perhaps three successive phases that one passes through on the road to critiquing this particularly loaded cultural artifact. The first phase is often an immense chasm of pessimism arising from the fear that *Civilization* in particular and video games in general are somehow immune to meaningful interpretation, that they are somehow outside criticism. Yes, games are about algorithms, but what exactly does that matter when it comes to cultural critique? Perhaps video games *have* no politics? This was, most likely, the same sensation faced by others attempting to critique hitherto mystified artifacts of popular culture—Janice Radway with the romance novel, Dick Hebdige with punk style, or Roland Barthes with the striptease. Often it is precisely those places in culture that appear politically innocent that are at the end of the day the most politically charged. Step two, then, consists of the slow process of ideological critique using the telltale clues contained in the game to connect it with larger social processes. (Here is where Caillois, presented in chapter 1 as essentially apolitical, returns with a penetrative observation about the inherent political potential of games, vis-à-vis the question of demystification and institutional critique. Reacting to Huizinga, Caillois writes that "without doubt, secrecy, mystery, and even travesty can be transformed into play activity, but it must be immediately pointed out that this transformation is necessarily to the detriment of the secret and mysterious, which play exposes, publishes, and somehow *expends*. In a word, play tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious. On the other hand, when the secret, the mask, or the costume fulfills a sacramental function

one can be sure that not play, but an institution is involved.”)<sup>12</sup> Critiquing the ideological content of video games is what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, following Brian Sutton-Smith on play, refer to as the “cultural rhetoric” of games.<sup>13</sup> For *Civilization*, the political histories of state and national powers coupled with the rise of the information society seem particularly apropos. One might then construct a vast ideological critique of the game, focusing on its explicit logocentrism, its nationalism and imperialism, its expansionist logic, as well as its implicit racism and classism. ↵

Just as medieval scholars used the existence of contradiction in a text as indication of the existence of allegory, so *Civilization* has within it many contradictions that suggest such an allegorical interpretation. One example is the explicit mixing of ahistorical logic, such as the founding of a market economy in a place called “London” in 4000 BC, with the historical logic of scientific knowledge accumulation or cultural development. Another is the strange mixing of isometric perspective for the foreground and traditional perspective for the background in the “City View.” ✓

The expansionist logic of the game is signified both visually and spatially. “At the beginning of the game,” Friedman writes, “almost all of the map is black; you don’t get to learn what’s out there until one of your units has explored the area. Gradually, as you expand your empire and send out scouting parties, the landscape is revealed.”<sup>14</sup> These specific conventions within both the narrative and the visual signification of the game therefore reward expansionism, even require it. Meier’s *Alpha Centauri* mimics these semiotic conventions but ups the ante by positioning the player in the ultimate expansionist haven, outer space. This has the added bonus of eliminating concerns about the politics of expansionist narratives, for, one assumes, it is easier to rationalize killing anonymous alien life-forms in *Alpha Centauri* than it is killing Zulus in *Civilization III*. Expansionism has, historically, ↵ always had close links with racism; the expansionism of the colonial period of modernity, for example, was rooted in a specific philosophy about the superiority of European culture, religion, and so on, over that of the Asiatic, African, and American native peoples. Again we turn to Meier, who further developed his expansionist vision in 1994 with *Colonization*, a politically dubious game modeled on the software

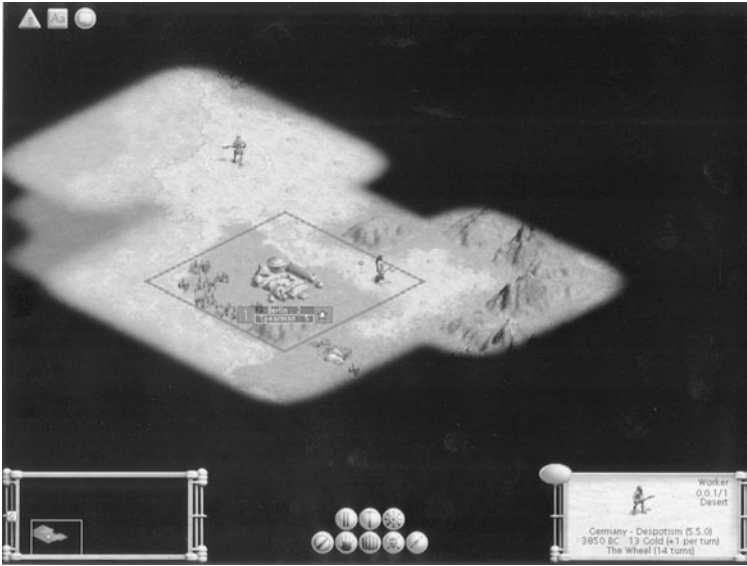
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*Colonization*, Micro Prose, 1995

engine used in *Civilization* and set in the period between the discovery of the New World and the American Revolution. The American Indians in this game follow a less-than-flattering historical stereotype, both in their onscreen depiction and in terms of the characteristics and abilities they are granted as part of the algorithm. Later, in *Civilization III*, Meier expanded his stereotyping to include sixteen historical identities, from the Aztecs and the Babylonians to the French and the Russians. In this game, one learns that the Aztecs are “religious” but not “industrious,” characteristics that affect their various proclivities in the gamic algorithm, while the Romans are “militaristic” but, most curiously, not “expansionist.” Of course, this sort of typing is but a few keystrokes away from a world in which blacks are “athletic” and women are “emotional.” That the game tactfully avoids these more blatant offenses does not exempt it from endorsing a logic that prizes the classification of humans into types and the normative labeling of those types. ←

Worse than attributing a specific characteristic to a specific racial or national group is the fact that ideological models such as these ignore the complexity, variation, and rich diversity of human life at many



*Civilization III*

levels: the *Civilization III* algorithm ignores change over time (Tsarist Russia versus Soviet Russia); it erases any number of other peoples existing throughout history the Inuit, the Irish, and on and on; it conflates a civilization with a specific national or tribal identity and ignores questions of hybridity and diaspora such as those of African Americans or Jews. In short, it transposes the many-layered quality of social life to an inflexible, reductive algorithm for “civilization”—a process not dissimilar to what Marxists call reification, only updated one: to create balanced gameplay, game designers require an array of variables that can be tweaked and tuned across the various environments and characters.) And while one needs no further proof of the game’s dubious political assumptions, I might point out that the game is also a folly of logocentrism; it is structured around a quest for knowledge, with all human thought broken down into neatly packaged discoveries that are arranged in a branching time line where one discovery is a precondition for the next. But so much for ideological scrutiny.

Civilization	Commercial	Expansionist	Industrious	Militaristic	Religious	Scientific
Americans		X	X			
Aztecs				X	X	
Babylonians					X	X
Chinese			X	X		
Egyptians			X		X	
English	X	X				
French	X		X			
Germans	X	X				
Greeks	X					X
Indians	X				X	
Iroquois		X			X	
Japanese				X	X	
Persians			X			X
Romans	X			X		
Russians		X				X
Zulus		X		X		

“Civilization Characteristics,” *Civilization III*

### Informatic Critique

In conjunction with these manifest political investigations, the third step is to elaborate a formal critique rooted in the core principles of informatics that serve as the foundation of the gaming format. The principles adopted by Manovich in *The Language of New Media* might be a good place to begin: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. But to state this would simply be to state the obvious, that *Civilization* is new media. The claim that *Civilization* is a control allegory is to say something different: that the game plays the very codes of informatic control today. So what are the core principles of informatic control? Beyond Manovich, I would supplement the discussion with an analysis of what are called the protocols of digital technology. The Internet protocols, for example, consist of approximately three thousand technical documents

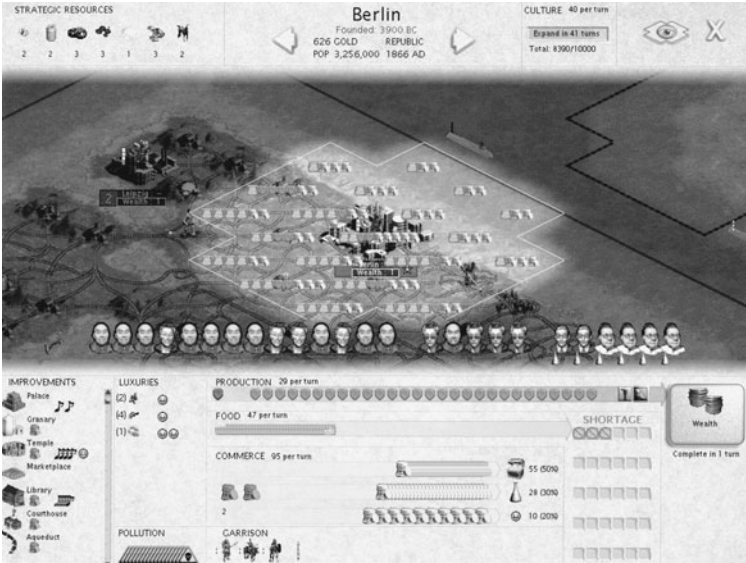


published to date outlining the necessary design specifications for specific technologies like the Internet Protocol (IP) or Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). These documents are called RFCs (Request for Comments). The expression “request for comments” derives from a memorandum titled “Host Software” sent by Steve Crocker on April 7, 1969 (which is known today as RFC number 1) and is indicative of the collaborative, open nature of protocol authorship (one is reminded of Deleuze’s “freeways”). Called “the primary documentation of the Internet,”<sup>15</sup> these technical memorandums detail the vast majority of standards and protocols used today on game consoles like the Xbox as well as other types of networked computers.<sup>16</sup>

→ Flexibility is one of the core political principles of informatic control, described both by Deleuze in his theorization of “control society” and by computer scientists like Crocker. The principle derives from the scientist Paul Baran’s pioneering work on distributed networks, which prizes flexibility as a strategy for avoiding technical failure at the system level. Flexibility is still one of the core principles of Internet protocol design, perhaps best illustrated by the routing functionality of IP, which is able to move information through networks in an ad hoc, adaptable manner. The concept of flexibility is also central to the new information economies, powering innovations in fulfillment, customization, and other aspects of what is known as “flexible accumulation.” While it might appear liberating or utopian, don’t be fooled; flexibility is one of the founding principles of global informatic control. It is to the control society what discipline was to a previous one.

Flexibility is allegorically repurposed in *Civilization* via the use of various sliders and parameters to regulate flow and create systemic equilibrium. All elements in the game are put in quantitative, dynamic relationships with each other, such that a “Cultural Victory” conclusion of the game is differentiated from a “Conquest Victory” conclusion only through slight differences in the two algorithms for winning. The game is able to adjust and compensate for whatever outcome the operator pursues. Various coefficients and formulas (the delightfully named “Governor governor,” for example) are tweaked to achieve balance in gameplay.

What flexibility allows for is universal standardization (another crucial principle of informatic control). If diverse technical systems



*Civilization III*

are *flexible* enough to accommodate massive contingency, then the result is a more robust system that can subsume all comers under the larger mantle of continuity and universalism. The Internet protocol white papers say it all: “Be conservative in what you do, be liberal in what you accept from others.”<sup>17</sup> The goal of total subsumption goes hand in hand with informatic control. The massive “making equivalent” in *Civilization*—the making equivalent of different government types (the most delicious detail in early versions of Meier’s game is the pull-down menu option for starting a revolution), of different victory options, of formulaically equating  $n$  number of happy citizens with the availability of luxuries, and so on—is, in this sense, an allegorical reprocessing of the universal standardizations that go into the creation of informatic networks today. In Meier, game studies looks more like game theory.

In contrast to my previous ideological concerns, the point now is not whether the *Civilization* algorithm embodies a specific ideology of “soft” racism, or even whether it embodies the core principles of new media adopted from Manovich, but whether it embodies the logic of informatic control itself. Other simulations let the gamer play the

logic of a plane (*Flight Simulator*, or Meier's own flying games from the 1980s), the logic of a car (*Gran Turismo*), or what have you. But with *Civilization*, Meier has simulated the total logic of informatics itself.

But now we are at an impasse, for the more one allegorizes informatic control in *Civilization*, the more my previous comments about ideology start to unravel. And the more one tries to pin down the ideological critique, the more one sees that such a critique is undermined by the existence of something altogether different from ideology: informatic code. So where the ideological critique succeeds, it fails. Instead of offering better clues, the ideological critique (traditional allegory) is undermined by its own revelation of the protocological critique (control allegory). In video games, at least, one trumps the other. Consider my previous claims about Meier's construction of racial and national identity: the more one examines the actual construction of racial and national identity in the game, the more one sees that identity itself is an entirely codified affair within the logic of the software. Identity is a data type, a mathematical variable. The construction of identity in *Civilization* gains momentum from offline racial typing, to be sure, but then moves further to a specifically informatic mode of cybernetic typing: capture, transcoding, statistical analysis, quantitative profiling (behavioral or biological), keying attributes to specific numeric variables, and so on. This is similar to what Manovich calls the logic of selection—or what Lisa Nakamura calls "menu-driven identities"—only now Manovich's pick-and-choose, window-shopper logic of graphical interfaces governs a rather distinct set of human identity attributes. As Nakamura laments, "Who can—or wants to—claim a perfectly pure, legible identity that can be fully expressed by a decision tree designed by a corporation?"<sup>18</sup> So the skin tone parameters for player character construction in everything from *Sissyfight* to *World of Warcraft* are not an index for older, offline constructions of race and identity, although they are a direct extension of this larger social history, but instead an index for the very dominance of informatic organization and how it has entirely overhauled, revolutionized, and recolonized the function of identity. In *Civilization*, identity is modular, instrumental, typed, numerical, algorithmic. To use history as another example: the more one begins to think that *Civilization* is about a certain ideological interpretation of his-

tory (neoconservative, reactionary, or what have you), or even that it creates a computer-generated “history effect,” the more one realizes that it is about the absence of history altogether, or rather, the transcoding of history into specific mathematical models. History is what hurts, wrote Jameson—history is the slow, negotiated struggle of individuals together with others in their material reality. The modeling of history in computer code, even using Meier’s sophisticated algorithms, can only ever be a reductive exercise of capture and transcoding. So “history” in *Civilization* is precisely the opposite of history, not because the game fetishizes the imperial perspective, but because the diachronic details of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple. It is a new sort of fetish altogether. (To be entirely clear: mine is an argument about informatic control, not about ideology; a politically progressive “People’s *Civilization*” game, à la Howard Zinn, would beg the same critique.) Thus the logic of informatics and horizontality is privileged over the logic of ideology and verticality in this game, as it mostly likely is in all video games in varying degrees.

So this is not unique to *Civilization*. The other great simulation game that has risen above the limitations of the genre is *The Sims*, but instead of seizing on the totality of informatic control as a theme, this game does the reverse, diving down into the banality of technology, the muted horrors of a life lived as an algorithm. As I have alluded to in Jameson, the depth model in traditional allegorical interpretation is a sublimation of the separation felt by the viewer between his or her experience of consuming the media and the potentially liberating political value of that media. But video games abandon this dissatisfying model of deferral, epitomizing instead the flatness of control allegory by unifying the act of playing the game with an immediate political experience. In other words, *The Sims* is a game that delivers its own political critique up front as part of the gameplay. There is no need for the critic to unpack the game later. The boredom, the sterility, the uselessness, and the futility of contemporary life appear precisely through those things that represent them best: a middle-class suburban house, an Ikea catalog of personal possessions, crappy food and even less appetizing music, the same dozen mindless tasks over and over—how can one craft a better critique of contemporary

life? This is the politically dubious, but nonetheless revealing, quality of play identified by Adorno in the supplement to his *Aesthetic Theory*: “Playful forms are without exception forms of repetition”; “In art, play is from the outset disciplinary.”<sup>19</sup>

As an entire genre, the first-person shooter also illustrates this type of allegorical interpretation of info-politics. Dash the naysayers, the shooter is an allegory of liberation pure and simple. This complicated genre is uncomplicated. There can be no better format for encoding and reprocessing the unvarnished exertion of affective force. I think of *Unreal Tournament* or *Counter-Strike* as the final realization of André Breton’s dream of the purest surrealist act: the desire to burst into the street with a pistol, firing quickly and blindly at anyone complicit with what he called “the petty system of debasement and cretinization.” The shooter as genre and the shooter as act are bound together in an intimate unity. The shooter is not a stand-in for activity. It is activity. (Just as the game is not a stand-in for informatics but is informatics.) The experience of the shooter is a “smooth” experience, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term, whereby its various components have yet to be stratified and differentiated, as text on one side and reading or looking on the other. In this sense, the aesthetics of gaming often lack any sort of deep representation (to the extent that representation requires both meaning and the encoding of meaning in material form). Allegory has collapsed back to a singularity in gaming. In fact, the redundancy in the vocabulary says it all: “the cultural logic of informatics.” The activity of gaming, which, as I’ve stressed over and over, only ever comes into being when the game is actually played, is an *undivided* act wherein meaning and doing transpire in the same gamic gesture.

## A Theory of Pretending

This last point may be recontextualized through a fundamental observation about video games made at the outset of this book, that games let one *act*. In fact, they require it; video games are actions. Now, following the definition of literary allegory as “other-speak,”<sup>20</sup> I must define the gamic allegory: it is “other-act.” The interpretation of gamic acts, then, should be thought of as the creation of a secondary discourse

narrating a series of “other-acts.” A century ago, Maurice Blondel suggested the word “allergy,” following his theory of “coaction” or “another’s action.”<sup>21</sup> Blondel’s use of the term assumes the existence of more than one individual, yet it is still an interesting influence because of his focus on parallel actions. Coaction proper in the context of video gaming would mean something like multiplayer action, which itself would need to be supplemented with a reading of the allegorical multiact. Either way, the interpretation of gamic acts is the process of understanding what it means to do something and mean something else. It is a science of the “as if.” The customary definition of allegory as “extended metaphor” should, for games, be changed to “enacted metaphor.” (In fact, for their active duality, zeugma or syllepsis are even more evocative figures of speech.) When one plays *Civilization*, there is one action taking place, but there is more than one significant action taking place. This is the parallelism necessitated by allegory. The first half of the parallelism is the actual playing of the game, but the other is the playing of informatics. For video games, one needs a *theory of pretending*, but only in the most positive sense of the term, as a theory of actions that have multiple meanings.

Again, Bateson: “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.”<sup>22</sup> So the roll of control allegory is—methodologically but not structurally—to see the nip and process neither the nip nor the bite, but instead what the bite denotes. I say methodologically but not structurally because there is no camouflage here: the playful video game may metacommunicate “this is play,” but it can never avoid also being informatic control.

In this sense, I suggest that the game critic should be concerned not only with the interpretation of linguistic signs, as in literary studies or film theory, but also with the interpretation of *polyvalent doing*. This has always been an exciting terrain for hermeneutics, albeit less well traveled, and in it one must interpret material action instead of keeping to the relatively safe haven of textual analysis.

The critical terrain has likewise shrunk in the age of interactive media from a two-way relationship involving the text and the reader-as-critic to a singular moment involving the gamer (the doer) in the act of gameplay. The game-as-text is now wholly subsumed within the category of the gamer, for he or she creates the gamic text by doing.

This explains the tendency toward control allegory in informatic culture. The primary authors are missing from this formula not because I wish to debase the growing auteur status of game designers, nothing of the sort, but simply because they are no longer directly involved in the moment of interpretation—but this has been the case in interpretive studies for many decades now.

Here, then, are the two allegorical modes compared side by side. Traditional or “deep” allegory seems to have its center of gravity in the early to mid-twentieth century and particularly in the cinematic form (à la Jameson), while control allegory finds its proper consummation in new media in general and video games in particular.

	Deep allegory	Control allegory
Emblematic medium	Cinema	Video games
Political expression	Class struggle	Informatic control
Hermeneutic	Reading	Processing
Parallelism	Other-speak	Other-act

Video games are allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control. In fact, the more emancipating games seem to be as a medium, substituting activity for passivity or a branching narrative for a linear one, the more they are in fact hiding the fundamental social transformation into informatics that has affected the globe during recent decades. In modernity, ideology was an instrument of power, but in postmodernity ideology is a decoy, as I hope to have shown with the game *Civilization*. So a game’s revealing is also a rewriting (a lateral step, not a forward one). A game’s celebration of the end of ideological manipulation is also a new manipulation, only this time using wholly different diagrams of command and control.

In sum, with the appearance of informatic reprocessing as text—in the style of Sid Meier, but also in everything from turntablism to net.art—allegory no longer consists of a text and another text, but of an enacted text and another enacted text, such that we must now say: to do allegory means to playact, not, as Frye wrote, to allegorize means to write commentary. And hence Deleuze: “The philosopher creates. He doesn’t reflect.”