

**Form Through Function in Video Game Music:
Identifying Narratives in *Sid Meier's Civilization VI's*
Soundtrack**

Bachelor Associate Thesis

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Abstract

KEYWORDS: Video game, music, media, narrative, theming, poststructuralism, essentialism

What little scholarly research that has been conducted on video game music thus far mostly focuses on its purpose as a part of the game's overall design alone. This thesis will demonstrate that A. game music can also perform functions such as non-verbally conveying narratives to an audience on its own, and B. that this additional functionality is reflected in the form the music takes. *Civilization VI* is an excellent topic for analysis since it is both a cutting-edge, highly popular example of this function in action, and a solid argument for why this is of relevance to scholars of media and popular culture. *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack employs heavy theming in its soundtrack to reinforce cultural associations in its audience in tandem with music that evolves as one plays, which reinforces the game's narratives of societal progress through history; this creates a very essentialist and subtly Western-centric view of what a 'civilization' is and how it behaves.

Introduction

There is a dearth in scholarly research on video game soundtracks. Rod Munday (2007) has asserted in his paper “Music in Video Games” that “[t]he first and perhaps most important observation one can make about contemporary videogame music is there is no longer any such thing as ‘videogame music’.” (p. 51) Munday was referring to the fact that game music had moved beyond its early technological limitations that resulted in the ‘Chiptune’ genre, and that therefore it could take any form it pleased. “Therefore, the analytical focus must shift away from form and towards function,” (p. 51) Munday went on to argue.

Munday’s arguments have largely been the last word when it comes to meta-discussion of the value of academic analysis of video game music. There have been other attempts since to tackle the subject—in particular, the book *Music in Video Games: Studying Play* (Donnelly et al., 2014) is an extensive resource on the topic—but Munday’s assertion that we should focus entirely on function has stood.

I do agree with Munday to the point that game music has no consistent genre-defining characteristics any longer, but I disagree that form is irrelevant—because function leads to form, therefore unique functions beget unique forms of music. Game music can, theoretically, take any form the composer pleases. Since game music is employed for very particular purposes with no precise analogue in other media, however, it can assume characteristics not typically found in any other medium of music. It is precisely these unique characteristics that make game music worthy of scholarly study.

Subject and approach

In order to put to the test my hypothesis that the functions of game music beget unique forms, I have elected to analyze the soundtrack of *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI* (2016), composed primarily by Geoff Knorr in cooperation with many additional composers and performers. This game’s soundtrack caught my attention because it exhibits a combination of techniques that can be found elsewhere in the medium, but not in such a combination and to such a remarkable effect. Namely, the soundtrack prominently features theme music for each featured ‘civilization’ (based on various cultures, peoples, and nations throughout human history) that evolves through four different variations as players progress through different eras. The aim of my analysis is to pinpoint and critically examine the narratives about ‘civilization’ (the concept) and ‘civilizations’ (the cultures represented and characterized in the game). In order to get a clear picture, I must examine the game itself to identify the narratives therein as well as compare these narratives with those of the soundtrack to see how they support each other and how they

might conflict. I will take a case-by-case approach in this analysis, as I have found that examining examples best illustrates the various points of interest in the soundtrack.

The central question to be answered in this paper is, in what ways are narratives regarding the concept of ‘civilization’ conveyed to an audience through *Sid Meier’s Civilization VI*’s music?

I will examine three different sub-topics to answer this question. Firstly, what does the game define as a ‘civilization’? Where (and when) does one civilization end and another begin, and what role does the music play in defining this? Secondly, how does *Civilization VI* characterize civilizations through its use of theme music? And thirdly, how is *Civilization VI*’s evolving music used to represent technological and social progress throughout the ages? These are questions worth asking; though *Civilization VI* tries its best to appear value-neutral to its audience, it promotes a very essentialist view on what a ‘civilization’ is, and it does feature a subtly Western-centric view of history and the world.

Methodology

The theoretical framework of poststructuralism most closely applies to my methodology here. Poststructuralism’s central assumption is that words and concepts do not have fixed meanings, but rather that these meanings are entirely constructed. Though I will not be focusing too much on language itself beyond the game’s handling of the term ‘civilization’, I shall analyze and criticize the game’s essentialist narratives regarding ‘civilizations’ and human history. As Barker & Jane (2016) note, “perhaps the most significant influence of poststructuralism within cultural studies is its anti-essentialism. Essentialism assumes that words have stable referents and that social categories reflect an essential underlying identity.” (p. 23) It is ‘civilization’ that the game presumes as a social category, which I will be examining.

I am by no means the first to make a critique of *Civilization* in this manner; particularly Kacper Poblocki (2003) lambasted the series for being what he perceived to be the popular culture equivalent of the essentialist view of human history espoused by Samuel P. Huntington (1993) in his controversial thesis “the clash of civilizations.” The main focus here is to see what role the music plays in these narratives, and accessorially to investigate whether anything has changed in the series’ narratives since Poblocki’s paper.

Furthermore, it has been noted by Dovey & Kennedy (2006) that “[w]riting about games has been characterized by attempts, first of all, to identify exactly what a computer game is—what kind of media text is this? Is it a text at all or some entirely new object of study requiring entirely novel methodologies?” (p. 85) Dovey & Kennedy are referring to the choice between traditional media analysis of examining the narratives embedded in the text, or an audience-

focused approach that examines the interactive experience of playing. This paper will lean towards the former—for though *Civilization VI* is not a plot-driven game, it nonetheless tells a ‘story’—but I acknowledge the value of the latter approach.

Two additional disclaimers must be made about my approach. The first is that I will not make guesses about, nor base conclusions on the composers’ or designers’ willful intentions in their creative process. My only assumption in this regard is that they intended to make a product that is entertaining to their audience and therefore profitable. The narratives found in the game and its soundtrack are not the result of intent to persuade; as series creator and namesake Sid Meier claimed in a 2016 interview, “[p]laying out somebody else’s political philosophy is not fun for the player.” (Tharoor 2016) Rather, they are the result of inherent or internalized biases, attempts to meet audience expectations or draw their attention, and/or perhaps human error or happenstance. What matters is not what was intended, but what narratives are present in the final product that audiences are exposed to—since, as Kanishk Tharoor (2016) points out, “few forms of cultural production about the world are ideology-free. The *Civilization* series is not devoid of political philosophy,” and “Meier may insist that the game’s designers only wanted to make a fun experience for the player, but they’ve made much more.” (Tharoor)

The second disclaimer is that, though I will talk extensively about narratives that seem to evade the notice of most casual observers, I do not mean to portray *Civilization VI*’s audience as passive or gullible. Audiences seem well-aware that they should take *Civilization*’s portrayal of reality with a grain of salt; in particular a popular in-joke involving the games’ portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi and his ludicrous propensity towards nuclear warfare, in contrast to his famously pacifistic real-life counterpart, highlights that the franchise has a reputation for less-than-accurate depictions of history. Yet it is precisely this reputation that allow their narratives to connect with the audience without critical examination, especially when delivered through the unassuming medium of music.

Chapter 1: Demarcating a civilization

The most central aspect of the *Civilization* franchise's framing of history and society is the titular concept of civilizations. I will examine this narrative through both the game and the music to analyze where they support and conflict with one another. *Civilization VI* is a grand strategy game in which players assume control over a fledgling civilization several thousand years BCE, guiding its economic, scientific, cultural, religious, diplomatic, and military development throughout history up to and including the present and an imagined near-future. Each civilization is thematically furnished with a logo, a mythologized historical figure to represent it, a set of signature innovations that give them boons during play, and—most importantly—a musical theme to tie it all together, which evolves along with the civilization as the game progresses.

The question is, what exactly does the game mean by a 'civilization'? Is it a country, a culture, a tribe, a race, an identity, a legacy? Another question would be where and when the dividing line between civilizations should be. For instance, are modern Germany and the Holy Roman Empire both part of the same 'civilization', or not? *Civilization VI* implies 'yes' by making Emperor Frederick Barbarossa Germany's representative, but *Civilization IV* (2005) still treated the two as separate. Given that the game's definition of 'civilization' is too nebulous and inconsistent to examine broadly, I will take a case study approach to identify issues at play.

The case of Macedon and Macedonia

The answers to these questions have social and political implications, which is best examined through *Civilization VI*'s series-first inclusion of Macedon as a playable civilization. The game's designers chose Alexander the Great as the historical figure to represent Macedon, which is remarkable since Alexander represented Greece in every previous entry in the series. The representation is, for the most part, carefully designed to avoid implying that the ancient kingdom of Macedon is in any way related to the present-day Republic of North Macedonia beyond the name and rough geographic location. Macedon's musical theme, however, is based on the ethnic Macedonian folk song "Tino Mori" along with music typically performed to accompany the Macedonian dance Bufčansko.

How could this have happened? Indeed, personal observation of online discussion of the game suggests that many others also noticed this contradiction, with most expressing puzzlement and a select few taking offense at the conflation. Cultural heritage and legacy are, after all, an important component to the construction of national identity, and the Balkan area has a tumultuous history of heated struggles over autonomy, ethnicity, and identity. In his paper

on national heritage and identity in 19th- and 20th-century Macedonia, Evangelos Kofos (1989) describes that Macedonia is exceptionally complicated since it is “[l]ocated on the convergent point of four conflicting national programmes—Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and Albanian.” (p. 230) Kofos goes on to note that Macedon’s venerated history and particularly the mythical figure of Alexander the Great bolstered the Greek nationalist ideology (p. 232) and eventually inspired nationalism among non-Greek Macedonians as well (p. 233). By reinforcing this association through its music, *Civilization VI* involves itself in this struggle over national identity and heritage before an international audience of millions of players.

National identity in America

Another case of the music interacting with national identity can be found in America’s theme. It is based on the parlor song “Hard Times Come Again No More” by Stephen Foster (1854) and starts out as a quiet, lonely banjo melody, played with a slow, free tempo and a subtle reverb effect. The song sounds remarkably humble and reserved—particularly as compared to common media depictions of America as bombastic and arrogant. Contrast this with *Civilization V*’s soundtrack (2010), which instead based America’s theme on the patriotic hymn “America the Beautiful” to accompany the mythical figure of George Washington, who in public consciousness represents the ideals of the American Revolution. One might suppose that the choice for “Hard Times” reflects a recent loss of faith in America, both as a beacon of virtues and as a unifying identity and associated set of cultural values.

It is important to note here that *Civilization VI* was released in 2016, at a time when domestic political divides in America seemed much starker than they had been in recent years. Foster’s “Hard Times,” perhaps not-so-coincidentally, was written at a time when the American Civil War was on the horizon; the future of a common American identity seemed uncertain. The song proved popular on both sides during the Civil War as well as abroad, however, and as such might be viewed as a symbol of American identity prevailing despite—indeed—having fallen on hard times, by highlighting a common struggle against hardship rather than emphasizing differences. Selecting this song to represent American culture at a time when many Americans’ national identity is in flux is certain to have left an impression. What we can see here, as with the case of Macedon, is that *Civilization VI*’s music does more than merely describe; it comments on identities and ongoing conflicts surrounding them as well.

The issue of imperialism

Of note regarding how *Civilization VI* demarcates civilizations, especially as compared to earlier entries in the series, is that it takes great care to portray cultures and peoples that have historically been subjected to imperialism as autonomous from the imperial powers they were

subjected to. Scotland, for instance, is a civilization on its own entirely separate from England—the names 'Britain' or 'the United Kingdom' are not used. Similarly, the Māori are distinct from New Zealand, Kongo has always been independent from Belgium—in fact, the latter is not represented as a playable civilization as of yet—and so on. The *Civilization* series employs an alternate history in which historical imperialism and colonialism never occurred (though playable civilizations can and most likely will attempt to subjugate one another over the course of the game). Any civilizations that directly resulted from colonialism such as Canada and the United States are treated as if they have always existed.

Yet there is an exception to this rule: the in-game depiction of Australia, which made its debut in *Civilization VI*. It is clearly meant to represent the former British colony in its presentation and associated gameplay mechanics. Once more, the music proves the complicating factor. Australia's theme is a charming instrumental rendition of the popular bush song "Waltzing Matilda," which prominently features a didgeridoo droning away throughout—an instrument which unmistakably originates from Aboriginal culture, not that of the colonizers. This fact is further emphasized by the didgeridoo being unable to perform the main melody of a song that follows Western musical tradition, and therefore a fiddle is used as a substitute lead instrument while the didgeridoo provides a bass undertone. One might have made the argument that the colonizers adopted the instrument and therefore it represents them as well, but that contradicts *Civilization's* usual modus operandi of acting out an alternate history—one where the colonizers and Aboriginals supposedly never came in contact with one another.

The introduction of the Cree civilization in *Civilization VI* presented a different problem regarding the relation between imperial and colonized peoples. The Cree are portrayed as having an autonomous identity and history independent of Canada, the United States, and other Western powers. At first glance it might seem a step up from less respectful media portrayals of the Cree, but Poundmaker Cree Nation Headman Milton Tootoosis begs to differ (Shield 2018); he notes that the portrayal "perpetuates the myth that First Nations had similar values that the colonial culture has, and that is one of conquering peoples and accessing their land." (Shield) Tootoosis is correct; *Civilization VI*, like many strategy games, is centered around competition with other factions for supremacy. Including the Cree as a playable civilization in effect implies that they, along with all represented cultures, share this goal as a cultural value, which in turn equates the Cree to the very colonial powers that historically mistreated them severely. As Eva Vrtačič (2014) notes in her analysis of the narratives of *Civilization*, "the end justifies the means: for most *Civilization* players, destroying other civilizations is an integral part of the fun. Should one want to subvert such understanding of fun and lead a non-violent

empire, they will find this to be near-impossible.” (p. 93-94) Tootosis claims that the way *Civilization*'s narratives treat his people's history is no different than long-standing media tradition when he states that “[t]his is not new; Hollywood has done a job for many decades of portraying Indigenous people in a certain way that has been very harmful.” (Shield)

Yet there is a curious factor: the theme music for the Cree in *Civilization VI* is based on, and samples from recordings of grass dance songs from a 1976 album called *The Drums of Poundmaker*, which was created by the Tootosis family. What this suggests is that *Civilization*'s audience has come to expect an authentic, respectful portrayal of the Cree—hence music appropriated directly from a cultural authority. Yet Tootosis bemoans that “no one from the First Nation was consulted about the project,” (Shield) which indicates that it is only the *appearance* of being respectful to satisfy the audience's conscience that matters. *Civilization VI* acknowledged the cultural authority of the Tootosis family and implied their consent through sampling their music, but no actual cooperation or discussion took place. In a way, the superficial attempt to satisfy audience expectations of respect and to appear progressive implies that matters have changed at least a little—just not in a way that ultimately matters for the Cree.

Creating connections

The observable pattern is that the music's narrative function is to link different cultural concepts together. Lack of factual basis for these associations in reality seems to be no object, particularly in the observed cases of conflation between the Ancient Kingdom of Macedon and today's Republic of Northern Macedonia, and the European Australians and Australian Aboriginals. Many of the connections the music creates support the game's narratives and/or presentation, but the mentioned two instances only seem to complicate matters. What this suggests is that the technique being employed to create these connections is rather clumsy. In Chapter 2 I will explore this technique, which I believe to be the music's use of theming.

As for the central question of this chapter, the simple answer is that there is no consistent method that the *Civilization* series employs to draw a dividing line between one civilization and another. Though the games treat the distinction between civilizations as self-explanatory, which seems to satisfy audiences for the most part, the series is internally inconsistent. More importantly, however, the gameplay presents an ahistorical reality in which cultures that have an interrelated history in real life may never even meet in-game, which the music disrupts by referencing cultural connections regardless—both real and imagined. The only consistent portrayal of what a civilization is, is that it is a faction that seeks to dominate and exploit any other factions it coexists with—which leaves cultures that do not fit that mold either unrepresented or woefully misrepresented.

Chapter 2: Musical theming

One of the two core techniques at play in *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack is its use of theming. Most discussion of theming in an academic context pertains to its application in spaces such as public venues, but it can apply to the dimension of audio as well—both to support a broader theme established through other senses or to independently establish a new theme. Previous entries in the franchise also made use of musical themes, but *Civilization VI* makes a considerable spectacle of its soundtrack by recording live instruments rather than purely producing music digitally. The latter is the norm in video game music since live recordings require a high budget.

Perhaps the closest analogue to *Civilization*'s use of themed music to represent cultures would be theme park rides such as Disney's "It's A Small World," yet *Civilization* has a different, more comprehensive approach. Rather than creating one recurrent leitmotif and modifying it to thematically suit each represented civilization, the soundtrack instead gives each civilization its own theme based on a real-life piece of music that exemplifies that culture. The resulting soundtrack is not only pleasant to listen to—reception seems to be glowingly positive based on personal observation—but also draws the audience's attention since the use of theming makes the music's purpose easy to understand and familiarize.

The comparison to theme parks is still apt, however, because *Civilization*'s depiction of human history is indeed 'theme park-ified'—one would be hard-pressed to find mentions of darker parts of history such as slavery and genocide. As Mol et al. (2016) note in their review of the game, "wars are waged between units that look more like small miniatures than actual combatants, fought with only battle cries and some clatter of arms. City sizes, indicated with single or double digits, drop a few points to indicate the massive loss of life after a successful siege," (p. 3) and that "*Civilization VI* continues this clean—we would argue too clean—view of historical societies and cultures." (p. 3) The purpose of theming in music is no different; the idea is to simplify and reduce a pluriform reality to a uniform representation that is more easily digestible to an audience.

Musically theming civilizations: stereotypes and time periods

The purpose of theming is to allow civilizations to fit neatly into categories that make sense to an audience. It is therefore no surprise that national stereotypes are frequently employed as part of a civilization's presented theme; France's theme music, for instance, is based on the drinking song "Quand je bois du vin Clairet" and its representative leader Catherine De'Medici is frequently depicted holding a champagne glass, evoking French

stereotypes of excessive wine drinking. This employment of stereotypes might be regarded as facetious and playful, analogous to how the game *Punch-Out!!* (2009) handles stereotypes in its character design and music—it is unlikely that audiences will sincerely believe the portrayed stereotype is reflective of reality. The function of invoking such pre-established stereotypical associations is to make the theme intuitive, which in turn makes the themed civilization more distinguishable from the other civilizations and easier to remember.

Another standout feature about *Civilization*'s use of theming is that it emphasizes a civilization's connection with a particular time period. This is already observable in how *Civilization*'s gameplay works—the unique strengths of civilizations are designed to grant them an advantage during certain eras of history, only to become obsolete after that era ends. An easily recognizable example of this is Greece, whose representation is centered almost entirely around the classical era. This is most likely because, when one thinks of Greek culture and identity, that particular period immediately springs out as the 'high point' of Greek history and is therefore the easiest association to make. Greece's theme music reflects this design choice; it is based on the Seikilos Epitaph, which is the oldest surviving complete musical composition known to archeology, emphasizing that Greece symbolizes a venerated, distant past.

Music is even used at times to create a connection between a civilization's 'past' and the 'present'. England's theme, for instance, is based on "Scarborough Fair," which is a ballad that evokes the Middle English period it stems from. Yet it also invokes the 'present' (that is, a much more recent, more 'alive' past) since it has been covered by several 20th- and 21st-century musicians, most notably Simon & Garfunkel (1966). A similar case applies to America's theme "Hard Times Come Again No More" and Australia's theme "Waltzing Matilda;" an observable pattern is that the modern covers tend to lean towards the folk genre. *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack also ties 'past' and 'present' together by way of its evolving music, which will be explored more in chapter 3.

Theming Germany: Medieval melancholy

A particularly notable example of stereotypical theming is that of Germany, whose theme is based on the folk song "Ich hab die Nacht geträumet"—a very doleful piece, especially noticeable among a soundtrack of otherwise mostly upbeat songs. This in combination with Emperor Barbarossa's characterization as pessimistic and surly clearly draws on stereotypes of German humorlessness and gloom. What makes this remarkable is that this was not at all the case in *Civilization V*, where Germany was represented by a relatively jovial portrayal of Otto von Bismarck and provided an airy rendition of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." This suggests that the selected theme is easily interchangeable, and that means those in charge of theming have

significant agency over which potential theme to pursue. The design philosophy of *Civilization VI*, it seems, leans more heavily towards use of stereotyping to create stronger themes.

As noted previously, the modern nation of Germany is implicitly defined as part of the same legacy as Barbarossa's Holy Roman Empire in *Civilization VI*, and Germany's theming is primarily centered around the medieval historic period as a result. This, too, is in contrast to *Civilization V*; not only does the choice of Bismarck as a representative instead emphasize a more recent time period, but "Ode to Joy" can additionally be read as a reference to Germany's present-day role as a core member of the European Union. *Civilization*, therefore, also has agency over which period to emphasize as a civilization's 'glory days', so to speak, which no doubt affects audience perceptions of that civilization's related national identity and heritage.

Essentialism versus biculturalism in Canada's theming

The effect of *Civilization VI*'s heavy use of theming is that it promotes an essentialist view of the represented civilizations. The term 'civilization' itself already interprets history as centered around competition between factions that can be easily isolated and identified—although as we have seen, even within *Civilization*'s reality it is impossible to draw a consistent division of different civilizations. The theme park-esque theming reduces complicated, pluriform, and loosely defined 'civilizations' to easy-to-understand, clear-cut national stereotypes and associations, which in turn implies that these civilizations *are* reducible to a single essence that remains consistent throughout history.

The notable exception to the rule is the game's depiction of Canada. The in-game representation employs stereotypes much like the examples already discussed; they can build ice rinks and train Mounties, they are one of the only civilizations that thrive in cold tundra climates, and they can neither declare surprise wars nor fall victim to one, which can be read as a facetious reference to Canadian politeness. In addition to those stereotypes, however, Canada is also known for favoring a culturally diverse society rather than pursuing conformity towards a national identity. The theming of *Civilization VI*'s Canada reflects this by emphasizing Canadian bilingualism. Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier was chosen to represent Canada, who was known for his conciliatory policies and emphasis of partnership between the Anglophone and Francophone Canadian cultural spheres, and whose in-game representation delivers half of his lines in French and the other half in English. Canada's theme music also reflects this bilingualism, of course; though it is a completely instrumental performance, it is a medley of "Vive La Canadienne" and "O Canada," the former of which is the former anthem of Francophone Québécois Canadians and the latter, while available in both languages, is most well-known to international audiences in English.

Civilization's representation emphasizes biculturalism in Canada, which is based on the premise that the most defining aspect of Canadian culture is the tense relationship between the Francophone and Anglophone communities. Particularly the emphasis on a barrier between the two seems to invoke the titular model popularized by Hugh McLennan's 1945 book *Two Solitudes*. Whereas this somewhat breaks the series tradition of portraying homogeneity in culture, this biculturalism is still in contrast to multicultural models that are preferred by more recent Canadian authors, such as John Porter's (1965) vertical mosaic model, which emphasizes subcultures in Canada that each have their own story to be told, or—better yet—Janice Kulyk Keefer's (1991) kaleidoscope model, which emphasizes the interactivity and 'blending together' of those many cultures within Canada. One can be French-Canadian or Anglo-Canadian according to the bicultural model—but could one, for instance, identify as both Cree and Canadian? If so, would one be part of the Cree 'civilization', or the Canadian one? *Civilization*'s essentialist model shines through here, still unable to accurately represent the diversity and interactivity of cultures.

Signature instruments

It can furthermore be observed that *Civilization*'s use of theming is reflected in the choice of instruments. Instruments are chosen to represent cultural expressions associated with a civilization; this is most prominent in the first version of each theme, which often has that instrument playing on its own or with minimal backing instruments. If not, then it will surely present itself in the second version. The choice of instruments is, of course, meant to be intuitive and recognizable: America has a banjo, Spain has an acoustic guitar, Persia has a santur, Scotland (predictably) has bagpipes and marching drums, and so on. Not all represented civilizations have such a signature instrument—notably, many 'Western' civilizations have a fiddle as a 'generic' choice of lead instrument in the first versions of their theme.

What makes this insight useful is that it helps explain what went wrong with Australia's theme. When one thinks of 'Australia' and 'musical instrument', the first thing that comes to mind is most likely the didgeridoo. That it comes from Aboriginal culture is no object. Theming relies on subconscious associations, and in the deepest recesses of our minds, there is no longer any distinction between 'Australia' the nation established by European colonists and 'Australia' the geographic location that is home to both the aforementioned nation and the Australian Aboriginals who have lived there for millennia longer.

Exotic singing

This brings us to the final aspect that is striking about the use of theming in *Civilization VI*'s music, which is the role of vocal performance. Many of the songs on which the soundtrack

is based originally featured lyrics, but most of the soundtrack consists of purely instrumental performances. This in itself is nothing out of the ordinary. Instrumental-only music has always been the standard within video game music, since using vocals would automatically require a budget investment in a live recording and since the purpose of game music is usually to play in the background which means vocals might become distracting. Yet there *are* several themes in *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack which do use vocals—and what is remarkable is that these vocals often double as the signature ‘instrument’ of that civilization.

Many of these instances of singing can be construed as exotic—in the sense of ‘enticingly foreign’. The Mongols have throat singing, the Georgians have Gregorian chanting, the Zulu have a group performance which features call-and-response rhythms and the language’s famous click sounds, the Māori have a Haka chant, and so on. The fact that these recordings exist demonstrates that the usual reasons to rely only on instrumental tracks do not apply to *Civilization VI*—the design team evidently did have the budget to make live recordings, and they were willing to draw attention to the background music with vocals if it meant a more spectacular, memorable soundtrack. Yet so many tracks that could have had lyrics nonetheless remain instrumental, which serves to make those that *do* have vocals stand out more.

This exoticness has two consequences. The first is that it establishes the cultures associated with these civilizations as ‘other’; their singing techniques were considered interesting enough to serve as part of that civilization’s theme, and the reason they are interesting is because they are different. The second is that it displays from whose perspective *Civilization* is designed, and to what audience’s worldview it panders. Theoretically *Civilization* is being sold to a worldwide audience through digital distribution platforms, but only a select portion of that potential audience would consider all the mentioned techniques to be exotic—a Western audience, primarily.

The narrative function of theming

What we have seen is that *Civilization*'s use of theming allows audiences to easily categorize civilizations by invoking pre-established associations. Music is perhaps the most important component to the theme; its ability to make associations almost entirely without the use of verbal language is remarkable. The issue that this use of theming brings is that it strengthens the essentialist interpretation of cultural identities, which is the assumption that this identity is not constructed, but based on some core cultural premise that has always existed since—quite literally—the dawn of civilization. This essence, *Civilization* suggests, remains the same even if the represented culture is taken out of their historical context and placed into a fictional, randomly generated one.

Chapter 3: Representing progress through music

Civilization VI's soundtrack's greatest selling point, without a doubt, is the way it represents a civilization's social, cultural, and technological development through the ages. It primarily achieves this by creating four versions of each civilization's theme music, each more complex than the last. The first version represents the ancient and classical eras of history, the second starts from the early medieval period and ends at the industrial revolution, the third continues from there until the advent of nuclear technology, and the fourth continues until present-day and beyond. Some creative license is employed regarding civilizations that historically did not experience all of these time periods.

There is some variation in how the theme music evolves, but for the most part it follows an easy-to-understand pattern. The first version is played with very few instruments and a slow, free tempo, as if to indicate that the musical performance is still unsure, experimental, with few solidified traditions yet. The second version usually speeds up the tempo considerably and adds a variety of acoustic instruments, propping up the melodies introduced in the first version. The third version, by contrast, is more of a break-away, with the previous performance being replaced almost entirely by a grand orchestra. The final version is the most remarkable since it is not a new recording at all, but rather a digitally produced variation of the third version.

Musical innovations and social changes

Already we can observe a narrative at play here-- namely, changes in musical technology are taken as an allegory for how human societies take different shapes throughout the ages. The first two versions are the most oriented towards the individual performers. There are few enough instruments that listeners can easily isolate each one, and the performance is more freestyle than the later versions. The second version of Brazil's theme, for instance, consists of an acoustic ensemble performing a lively rendition of Ernesto Nazareth's tango "Brejeiro." Close listening reveals that the individual performers make a high number of improvisations regarding tempo and grace notes, which does not disrupt the overall performance.

Contrast this to the orchestral third version, which, while certainly grander, does not allow for these personalized improvisations since orchestral music relies on a large collective of instruments each performing a carefully conducted role. One might read into this a commentary that a post-industrial revolution society is more urbanized and market-based as compared to feudal or subsistence-based life, which (supposedly) reduces freedom of choice and the significance of individuality in society.

The fourth version is also remarkable since it is digitally produced whereas the first three versions are all recordings of live performances. This acknowledges the shift away from performance towards production as the musical norm; as Starr & Waterman (2018) note, “[d]evelopments in sound recording technology and software have exerted a transformational impact on popular music since the late 1990s.” (p. 558) Indeed, the inclusion of this technology is meant to symbolize a shift from ‘traditional’ to ‘popular’; Hungary’s theme, which is based on the folk songs “Hej Dunáról fúj a szél” and “Cinege, Cinege,” is outfitted with synths and a dance beat near the end, while Sweden’s theme—a medley of folk and drinking songs—closes with a rocking electric guitar.

The Zulu theme, meanwhile, makes very prominent use of autotune in its final version, which can be read as both an acknowledgement of autotune’s general role in popular music as well as an acknowledgement of autotune’s popularity among especially African artists. As Andrew Stanley (2012) concludes in his thesis examining this phenomenon, “Auto-Tune itself lends itself quite well with historical trends of musicality and cultural hybridity that have pervaded African music and culture long before its colonization.” (p. 80) The inclusion of autotune can hence be read as a commentary of how modern pop has affected African music. What is remarkable is that the inverse of this commentary can also be observed in the soundtrack; the Zulu theme makes prominent use of call-and-response singing rhythms, acknowledging this significant contribution to pop music appropriated from African culture.

Globalization, Westernization, and the presumption of progress

Civilization’s essentialism is reflected in its depiction of how a civilization develops itself through history. All civilizations follow a mostly linear development along the game’s outlined technology and civic trees, which in *Civilization VI* end with the advent of globalism and social media. It is presumed that these developments are always for the betterment of humanity. Indeed, the overarching narrative of *Civilization VI*’s audiovisual design is that discovery and innovation are what drive ‘civilizations’ forward. This is best exemplified by the game’s main theme “Sogno di Volare (‘The Dream of Flight’)” by returning guest composer Cristopher Tin (2016). The Italian lyrics are based on an apocryphal quote by Leonardo da Vinci which romanticizes man-made flight as the ultimate liberation. Da Vinci thereby assumes a mythical role as the exemplar of an inherent human drive to discover and progress technologically, culturally, and spiritually, and *Civilization VI* is framed as a celebration of that drive. (Unexplored terrain, for instance, is visually represented as an old ‘here be dragons’-style map, as if beckoning the player to explore it and discover everything the world has to offer.)

The issue here is that *Civilization* represents this linear path of progress as a markedly Western one. *Civilization* presents a rigid vision of what an ‘advanced’ civilization looks like, one that affirms Western ideals. As already mentioned with the example of the Cree, not all cultures fit this mold of a ‘civilization’ that seeks to colonize and dominate others by any means necessary. The music worsens this issue because it progresses from ‘exotic’—the early versions displaying signature instruments and styles—to ‘Westernized’—all themes become orchestral by the third version, which is a thoroughly European ideal of what high art in music should sound like. This progression to Western ideals of a civilized society is depicted as glorious, with initially reserved and simple themes becoming more grandiose and bombastic with each iteration.

Counter-narratives: critiques of imperialism

To *Civilization VI*'s credit, counter-narratives to this Western vision of progress can also be read within its presentation. For instance, a 2019 expansion pack (re-)introduced a system that simulates the destructive ecological consequences of post-industrial revolution societies, showing that not all scientific innovations lead to a better, sustainable society. The Māori are introduced in this expansion pack as a civilization that lives more in harmony with their local climate—during gameplay they benefit more from unexploited forests, cannot ‘harvest’ (permanently deplete) natural resources, and appreciate ecologically-minded fellow civilizations. Of course, the ‘in touch with nature’ theming could also be read as an unfortunate invocation of the ‘noble savage’ stereotype.

Some of the theme music can also be viewed as chronicling a history of imperialism. For instance, the bagpipes and marching drums in Scotland’s music represent Scottish cultural identity and are prominently featured in the first version but are abruptly absent from the second version onward. They do make a grand return in the final minute of every version, however, when “Scotland the Brave” is triumphantly reprised after the interlude formed by “Bonnie Dundee” ends. This reprisal noticeably becomes more rousing and jubilant with each iteration. Considering *Civilization VI* also made the design decision to specifically represent Scotland this time (rather than more vaguely ‘the Celts’, as previous entries did), it is not difficult to read this as a critical allegory for British imperialism in Scotland and a vote in favor of an independent Scottish identity, which is a remarkably topical narrative considering the question of Scottish independence remains a hot topic in British politics.

The themes for the Cree and Australia can similarly be read as critiques of colonialism. The Cree start with samples of grass dance songs taken from *The Drums of Poundmaker* by the Tootosis Family (1976), and Australia starts with a didgeridoo that can be viewed as a

representation of Aboriginal culture. Both do not follow the Western tradition of music that *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack relies on, and so more and more Western instruments are simply layered on top of the audio samples until the latter is practically pushed to the background, displaced by a Western performance. Yet these indigenous voices never disappear entirely; the Cree grass dance song still features strongly throughout even as an orchestra blares over it, and the didgeridoo can still be heard humming its tune when the final version of "Waltzing Matilda" fades out. The narrative that can be read here is that both the Cree and the Aboriginals were forced to withstand European colonialism and attempts to erase their culture, but they managed to maintain their identity in spite of that and are thus still able to let their voice be heard today.

The dominance of American pop music

Finally, I would like to devote special attention to the narratives at play in the evolution of America's theme. While most themes feature a progression from humble to grand, this is exceptionally outstanding in the case of America's theme. As we have examined, the first version of that theme can easily be construed as a commentary on loss of faith in American national identity. It does not end there, however. The second version livens up the composition with additional acoustic instruments playing at an incrementally increasing tempo. The third, orchestral version continues with a dramatic trumpet lead, reminiscent of American composer Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man"—thereby invoking America's mythical status as a country by, for, and of 'the people' as contrastive to Europe's aristocratic societies.

The fourth version is the most interesting one, however. It increases the tempo of the song a few notches further and adds lively percussion, a supporting piano, and a few subtle synthesizer lines. This invokes two associations at once. The first is that sprucing up an orchestral performance through digital production in this manner creates a very cinematic effect; this is no coincidence, as one of America's unique abilities in *Civilization VI* is to create movie studios, which significantly increase their cultural influence over other civilizations.

The second is that it evokes the genre of pop music. The percussion forms a repetitive, simple, catchy rhythm, and the piano can be heard playing a I–V–vi–IV chord progression during the second verse; this progression is sometimes informally nicknamed 'the pop song chords' due to its ubiquity across a vast corpus of pop music. The use of Stephen Foster's music makes the association complete; Starr & Waterman (2018) identify Foster as "the first important composer of American popular song" (p. 52) because "[h]e was probably the first person in the United States to make his living as a full-time professional songwriter." (p. 52)

What makes this important is that popular culture, media, and music, in *Civilization*'s terms, are some of the most important means of achieving global dominance through sheer

influence over other civilizations. This is done primarily through the production of cultural works—the aforementioned movie studios reflect this, of course, but *Civilization VI* emphasizes music as perhaps the most important medium of extending a civilization’s influence. Music’s influential power was already acknowledged previously by allowing players to create ‘great works of music’ (mostly famous classical pieces) that draw tourists to one’s civilization, but in *VI* players can also recruit rock bands to go on tour abroad on their behalf. The influence gained over the visited civilization is quantified in terms of record sales. *Civilization V* already acknowledged the power of pop music as a tool of cultural influence by using the phrase “[o]ur people are now buying your blue jeans and listening to your pop music” to signal an impending cultural victory for the player (note also the mention of blue jeans—another symbol of American popular culture). *VI* emphasizes the cultural power of music even more—and goes one step further by implicitly declaring America the modern master of this medium as well as cinema. Indeed, America in *Civilization VI* is geared primarily towards pursuing such a cultural victory over a military one or any other kind.

A soft power Cold War victory

The portrayal of America is remarkable since *Civilization* tries to maintain a value-neutral appearance, and part of the allure of the game is that any civilization of the player’s choosing can become the ‘protagonist’ of their own story—rewrite history in one’s own vision, as it were. The soundtrack, however, preferentially treats America as the main character of a heroic tale, rising from a point of humbleness to a triumphant achievement. This is especially contrastive with how Russia is portrayed by its theme music. It starts as a fairly standard rendition of the song “Kalinka,” but in the third version it suddenly turns very deep and ominous, and the fourth version sounds downright threatening and imposing—which is odd considering the lightheartedness of the original song.

The reason for this seems to be rooted in the Cold War. The game’s visual theming prefers to emphasize Imperial Russia under Peter the Great’s rule to avoid acknowledging the more controversial Soviet era of Russian history. The association in the music is made obvious in the final ‘atomic era’ version, however, by the inclusion of Red Army Choir-esque baritone male singing, as well as a haunting noise that can be heard about forty seconds in which evokes the telltale sound of a nuclear alarm siren blaring in the distance. If America is the hero, then Russia must be the villain of the Cold War. Portraying America and Russia in this manner is a series tradition that, as Kanishk Taroor (2016) observes, goes all the way back to the first entry; “[i]n *Civilization I*, the Russians are described as innately ‘aggressive’ and ‘militaristic,’ while the Americans are ‘friendly’ and ‘civilized.’” Sid Meier himself even admits in an interview

with Taroor that “Russians were always the bad guys in the military games we made through the 1980s,” (Taroor) although he also insists that “the Cold War hadn’t fundamentally shaped the *Civilization* series,” (Taroor) which now seems difficult to believe.

The narrative embedded in *Civilization VI*’s soundtrack is that America heroically won the Cold War because it countered the villainous Soviet Russia’s military oppression and threat of mutual destruction with the persuasive power of music and media. This echoes an argument that Joseph Nye Jr. (2004b) made regarding soft power, which he defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” (p. 256) He argued that “[w]e won the Cold War against the Soviet Union with a strategy of containment that used our soft power as well as our hard power.” (p. 257) The difference is that Nye is making a scholarly argument to convince readers (and especially government officials) to take soft power seriously. *Civilization VI* not only takes this argument as fact, but nonverbally narrates it into a jubilant accomplishment—a reason to believe in the righteousness of American values, since they use ‘civilized’ persuasion through the irresistible appeal of their cultural values rather than ‘brute’ coercion through military force. America ‘won’ a culture victory in real-life history, and it is wonderful, the soundtrack almost seems to say. There is an odd self-referentiality at play here, where *Civilization VI*’s narrative both comments on and thereby raises audience awareness of American soft power, while also adding to it by extolling the virtues of America to that audience.

Reclaiming America

This also puts America’s music’s progression from loss of faith to regaining it in a new light. Nye (2004b) also observed that “Anti-Americanism has increased in the past few years,” (p. 255) and argued in another paper (2004a) that “[t]he United States’ most striking failure is the low priority and paucity of resources it has devoted to producing soft power.” (p. 4) Nye made these arguments in the context of the War on Terror which understandably dominated American foreign policy discourse at the time, and which undoubtedly dented the narrative of American heroism. Campbell & Kean (2016) corroborate the assertion of a less influential America by noting that the post-Cold War era more generally depleted American international influence, “as a significant debate emerged whether the United States was not by 2015 a power in relative decline.” (p. 297)

What *Civilization VI* is doing, then, is responding to the waning power, influence, and faith in America by offering a narrative of redemption. If America triumphed over oppressive Soviet threats by convincing other factions of its virtues, then why should it not do so in the present or the future? *Civilization VI*’s music hereby invokes the myth of renewal and

rediscovery, of an undying national will to realize and live up to the ideals of the American dream, which Campbell & Kean note remains a common aspect of American political ideology and discourse (p. 36-39). Rather than mundanely exalt the beauty or virtue of America, as *Civilization V* did, *VI* employs its evolving music to create a narrative progression: America has fallen on hard times, but it can be reborn and reinvent itself, as it has done time and time again in the past. All that is needed is for people to believe in America once more.

Conclusion

What can be safely concluded about *Civilization* is that, despite keeping up an appearance of value-neutrality and more recent attempts to outwardly appear more progressive, not much has changed between the day Poblocki published his analysis of the series and today. *Civilization VI* still espouses an essentialist, Western-centric view of history as a competition for dominance between civilizations. The fresh techniques employed by the soundtrack only serve to further empower these narratives. Theming reinforces the idea that there is an identifiable essence to civilizations and that there are easy, intuitive ways to tell them apart. The evolutionary progression of the music, meanwhile, extends this Western-centric essentialism to the way civilizations develop. In the meantime, however, there is still no consistent answer as to what a civilization is supposed to be, which is presumably why upon closer inspection these narratives tend not to have much of a basis in reality.

I disagree with Poblocki's implication that *Civilization* is the pop-cultural equivalent of Huntington's thesis—as Tharoor puts it, “[i]t is hardly fair to tag Meier with the sins of Huntington.” I do, however, find these narratives concerning and would encourage more scrutiny towards it, particularly the complacent assumption that the game is ideology-neutral or ‘just for fun’—it seems oftentimes more of an excuse for the developers to avoid responsibility for spreading these narratives, and for the audience to avoid having to think critically about them, than a sincerely held belief. As this paper has demonstrated, it pays to be critical; not many would initially expect that a soundtrack could nonverbally convey as many ideas as this analysis has identified.

How to approach game music analysis

Hopefully, this paper has demonstrated through example that there is value in scholarly examination of a video game's soundtrack. Not only because, as with movie soundtracks, it plays a significant role in the overall presentation—more than simply auxiliary support to the visuals—but also because it can have narrative purpose all on its own. Lots of narrative purpose, in fact; my analysis of *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack was not at all exhaustive—as a text, the soundtrack is indeed quite rich—though I believe I have covered all the most important points.

The issue is that I cannot guarantee my findings in *Civilization VI*'s soundtrack can be easily applied to the soundtracks of other games. As I argued in the introduction, different functions beget different forms, and *Civilization VI* puts its music to the very specific purpose of thematically representing a plethora of theme park versions of vaguely demarcated cultural entities across various eras of human history. Other soundtracks can surely be found that use

theming, as well as ones that employ this kind of ‘evolving’ music—but I do not know of any that use both at once. If there are any, then they certainly do not employ these techniques in the same way or for the same purpose as *Civilization VI*, and hence the form will be vastly different as well.

This means that there is no general theoretical approach that can be applied to all game soundtracks. The best option available is to take an in-depth case study approach, as I have done here. Games can not only be quite distinctive in form and function to other media, but also to other games. Scholars will have to identify new and interesting developments in the field of game soundtracks from observation and argue for their relevance on a case-by-case basis. Taking a broader approach from the start will only lead to dead-ends, and then back to Munday’s assertion that game music must not exist since no consistent, distinctive patterns of form that differentiate it from other media can be identified. Perhaps with enough case studies, patterns will emerge after all—but there is no way to know that ahead of time.

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