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Civilization and the Narrative Engine

Considered one of the most successful turn based strategy games of all time, the *Civilization* franchise puts the player at the helm of one of the great civilizations of the world and tasks them with shaping its history as they will. Though the dev-created narrative of the game only extends to creating unique personifications of each nation, the various complex systems and mechanics of the game enable generation of dynamic player-generated stories on each successive playthrough. The procedurally generated world, interaction between AIs, and the mechanics of the franchise are just some of the reasons *Civilization* can be considered an excellent, relevant example of a **narrative engine** - a system of interconnected rules that facilitate the dynamic genesis of unique, narratively satisfying experiences.

To understand the concept of a narrative engine better, one has to first understand the concept of emergent narratives. Typically speaking, complex situations brought about by the interaction between game rules are often termed emergence, or emergent narrative [5].. Henry Jenkins, in his paper **Game Design as Narrative Architecture**[4], described emergent narrative as one of the four ways in which a narrative can be mapped onto gamespace. Hailing them as being neither pre-programmed nor pre-structured, Jenkins nonetheless distinguishes them from forays into pure chaos by the "narrative satisfaction" of the experience. The spontaneous nature of emergent narrative is a direct contrast to "embedded" or developer-created narratives as discussed by both Jenkins and Greg Costikyan [6]. A more comprehensive idea of what exactly emergence constitutes can be obtained by looking at the MDA framework [7]. This framework classifies developer created

content as 'mechanics', player experiences as 'aesthetics', and the behaviour of a game after player

input as 'dynamics'. Simply put, emergent narrative is a narrative experience that comes from a

game's 'dynamics' rather than its 'mechanics' (as defined by the MDA)
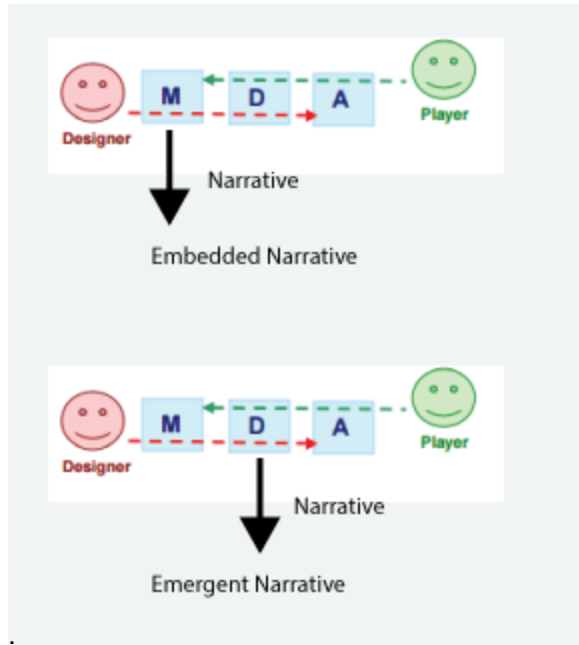
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Because of the somewhat unpredictable nature of a game's dynamics, emergence can

generally be classified into two categories: intended and unintended. Unintended emergent

narratives are narratives that come about more as a result of players, often as a community,

projecting an implied narrative onto a certain aspect of the game These come about, not as a result

of developer's intending to create emergent narrative systems but more due to the unpredictable

nature of their target audience. Fan-fictions, memes and community wide in-jokes can be considered

examples of this type of emergence. The type of emergence Jenkins talks about in his paper,

however, are not examples of this form of emergence. As Jenkins mentions when talking about the

Sims, intended emergent narratives exist as a result of conscious decisions made during the game's

development. The emergence found in *Shadow of Mordor* is yet another example of this type of

emergence. A narrative engine, essentially, is therefore a system that is designed to create and

accommodate emergence.. To be considered a successful example of a narrative engine, it has to be demonstrated how exactly the systems of *Civilization* franchise accommodate the organic genesis of emergent narratives.

Ever since the first installment came out for the MicroPose in 1991, the player's goal in the *Civilization* franchise has remained unchanged - to "build an empire to stand the test of time" [1]. Hundreds upon hundreds of hours of playing the game have taught me that doing so is much, much harder than it sounds. Inherently, how a game of *Civilization* will pan-out is impossible to plan out ahead of time. Even if the player were to play on the same exact map repeatedly with the same exact roster of AI Civilizations, the game would play out differently every time: Sometimes France would declare war on Rome because they had the superior military - sometimes they'd do so even if they didn't. Sometimes Rome would instead walk the path of diplomacy, shunning combat altogether. And sometimes, both Rome and France would get stuck in a pit of barbarity as neither civilization was able to claim that crucial Jungle tile before a crafty Iroquois settler was able to steal it away from under their noses. In short there are many, many little factors that affect the course of the game - some random, some procedural. These factors are largely responsible for the dynamically varying narrative arcs that can spontaneously appear in a *Civ* game and can be thought of as the *fuel* powering the aforementioned narrative engine.

As one of the most definitive and culturally important examples of the '4X' sub-genre of strategy games, the rules of Civilization can be neatly classified - **ex**plore the map,**ex**pand your territory,**ex**ploit the map's resources, and,finally, **ex**terminate your enemies (though not always through force) [3]. Even though successive iterations the game have added more elements and nuances,the basic rules of Civilization have remained largely the same.

The objectives of the game revolve around having your nation be the most successful civilization by either destroying all opposing nations (domination), advancing enough technologically to leave behind the old world (scientific), or simply being the most culturally influential country

(cultural). Generally speaking, the play-space is divided into stationary cities, which form the heart of a player's empire, units that perform can manipulate the gamespace or other units by interacting with them directly, and a slew of utility improvements that passively affect the efficiency of cities.

Most games in the *Civilization* franchise allow for both single and multiplayer play sessions. It can be considered a testament to the robustness of *Civ's* AIs over the years that even with the minimal number of players (or none [2]), unique play states can develop simply through inter-AI interactions.The nature of the '4X' style of play, coupled with the procedurally generated play space and numerous, mutually exclusive win conditions, create a sort of 'political sandbox' - especially in Free-for-all multiplayer games. Sometimes to beat down the great army of Brazil from the North, one has to build up a legion of Indian Swordsmen. Alas, these elite troops require Iron to make - a resource one currently has none of. One could trade with their illustriously rich neighbours, the Venetians, for some Iron yet doing so would require giving them precious Whales - a luxury resource which would push them closer to a scientific victory. Yet, the more pressing threat of Brazil needed to be dealt with, and so a bargain with the Venetian devils was struck. This is an example of one of the many different political states that the dynamic narrative engine of *Civilization* create.

Aside from appearing as a result of interaction between rules, emergent narratives must also have an 'emotional' aspect to them, argues Jenkins.[4] in many ways, narratives and stories exist to elicit emotional responses from the audience. The absence of such a response would leave very little difference between a game and numbers being typed into a word document. Games like the *Sims* create this emotional bond via character customization,whereas *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor* deepens player-avatar bond via its unique handling of death as a mechanic. Since there's no obvious avatar in play for all intents and purposes in *Civilizatiion,* the game gets the player emotionally involved by letting them directly shape the play space. Building cities and improvements, and watching borders expand to cover the procedurally generated aspects of the play-space is quite visually pleasing. Add to that the embedded context of essentially being the nation itself and

watching the "world-timer" progress and you have yourself a situation where players are able to experience a real sense of ownership over the great nations the narrative-engine has allowed them to forge.

Costikyan argues that to get the most out of the unique style of storytelling afforded by video games, one may consider implementing a structured, embedded narrative that nonetheless afforded players a massive degree of control over how to navigate the narrative arc [6]. Though *Civ* is somewhat lacking in the embedded narrative department, the inherent rules of the game franchise, coupled with the multiple supported play styles achieve the same general results. The 'embedded narrative arc' of *Civilization,* as defined by its rules, involve founding cities, extracting the resources to become powerful, and then finally bringing that power to bare against your rivals - either violently or nonviolently. Where you build your cities,how you choose to amass power and how you finally choose to use that power is left completely up to the player's discretion. This is the part where the emergent narrative of *Civ* really gets to shine, thanks to the narrative engine.

The biggest practical hurdle opposing the definition of *Civilization* as a narrative engine is the abstractness of the player's role. Although the games try to put a face to the player by having them be a pseudo-personification of their nation's spirit (usually in the form of a great historical leader), the player's actual role in the story is very vague. Is the player a deity? Are they an immortal ruler living out their days in purgatory? Many many theories have popped up over time about what the player in a *Civilization* game actually represent. But none have ever been recognized formally by the developers. The 'non-entity-general' phenomenon has been presenting many many different strategy games over the decades. Civilization's handling of it, though, isn't quite the greatest. Add to that the the rather time-specific nature (and clothing) of most leaders in the franchise and even more critical dissonance between play and the narrative context is created. These dissonances can often keep players from fully engross themselves in the game's universe and thereby hold back certain elements of emergent narrative from manifesting.

In conclusion, it can be viewed that Civilization's wealth of complex interconnected systems make the spontaneous creation of complex situations a rather mundane matter. Though a lack of a discrete player avatar holds back certain elements of emergent narrative, the ability for players to significantly manipulate the play space allow players to still feel a certain degree of ownership over their in-game actions. The robustness of Sid Meier's rules and mechanics,combined with player and AI interaction with them, ultimately frame *Civilization* as an assembly line for the formulation of unique narratives - a narrative engine.

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