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KATHRIN TRATTNER

Abstract

This paper investigates how players engage with and reflect on the construction of the nation and its place in history in the turn-based strategy game series *Civilization* (1991–2025). The *Civilization* series has been studied extensively concerning portrayals of history and nationhood within the games, mainly through their rule systems. This study’s purpose is to add a player-centered perspective to this body of scholarship and thereby critically challenge assumptions about players’ reception of the games’ portrayals of the nation throughout history. For this purpose, a structuring qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze player discussions on the largest German-speaking *Civilization* forum. As this study demonstrates, players neither simply internalize nor ignore the games’ ideological underpinnings inherent to the structure of their rules as previous literature assumes. Rather, players negotiate *Civilization*’s portrayal of the nation throughout history in complex ways that are, most of all, dependent on their own national identities and feelings of belonging. The study thereby speaks to broader disciplinary discourses within game studies by critically investigating whether or how ideologies ingrained within games’ rule systems are perceived, discussed, negotiated, or sometimes even subverted by players.

Keywords

Player discussions; nation; history; identity; *Civilization*

> You do not want to tell me that Germany has only existed since 1871, right? Then you are exactly one of those to whom my post was directed. Germany exists as a ‘civilization’ or even nation longer (1848) and the HRE was German just as Austria was German at that time and the Habsburgs were German.

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> Germany as a state is young, as a nation old or was Goethe not German, Luther, Barbarossa? All these people are perceived as Germans and also the HRE was German in essence.
>
> Again for all I'm talking about the NATION. (Civ5Thr004, Pos. 123–124)

This is an excerpt from a forum discussion on the largest German-speaking *Civilization* forum. What started as a discussion of *Sid Meier's Civilization V*'s (2010) historical (in)accuracies in representing the Holy Roman Empire throughout history ended in an emotional plea for the trans-historical continuity of the German nation. There are different terms used in the above quote: *civilization*, highlighted through the use of quotation marks, is used very similarly to *nation*. Both *civilization* and *nation*, are, then, contrasted to the *state*. One is artificial, the other ones are natural. One is new, the other ones are old, perhaps even timeless. Another thing worth mentioning is that the post was written by a German. Perhaps the specific conception of the history of the German nation may also be impacted by that factor.

When a game like *Civilization V* models historical processes and lets players act *as* a nation, what does that tell us about how nations come to be, how they develop, and what they mean? And, perhaps even more interestingly, how do people who play the games relate that to their own notions of the nation and its place in history? By looking at discussions like the one above, we can not only learn how players perceive and evaluate what is portrayed in a game, but also how their own sense of identity may impact these perceptions and negotiations. This study investigates how players talk about the concept of the nation within the *Civilization* series and beyond as they discuss specific nations and their place in history. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

> How do *Civilization* players engage with and reflect on the games' portrayal of the nation and its place in history?
>
> What role does their own national identity play in these negotiations?

For this purpose, a structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023) was conducted to analyze player discussions on the largest German-speaking *Civilization* forum. By encompassing players' negotiations of the concept of the nation within (and beyond) the game series, the study aims to add a player-centered perspective to existing scholarship on the *Civilization* series, history, and the nation. In that way, it also speaks to broader disciplinary discourses by critically investigating whether or how ideologies engrained within games' rule systems are perceived, discussed, negotiated, or perhaps even subverted by players.

What (or when) is a nation?

To begin with, we need to take a step back and ask the question: what are we even talking about when we talk about the nation? Very closely tied to the question "what is a nation?" is the question "when is a nation?" (Connor, 1990). How the nation is imagined (Anderson, 1990) in relation to history plays a pivotal role in how it is understood as a concept. This is also reflected in the classic tripartite division of theories of the nation and nationalism into *primordialist*, *modernist*, and *ethno-symbolist* approaches (Antonsich, 2015, p. 298; Özkırımlı, 2010, p. 199; Smith, 1998). For the purpose of this article, we will focus on primordialist and modernist approaches. Primordialism "maintains that nations have always existed" (Antonsich, 2015, p. 299), meaning that "nationality is a 'natural' part of human beings, as natural as speech, sight or smell" (Özkırımlı, 2010, p. 49). In this view, the nation is of "immemorial or perennial character" (Smith, 1998, p. 159). From the 1960s onward, and particularly in the 1980s, a paradigm shift emerged in the field of nation and nationalism studies. The modernist view of the nation claims the exact opposite of primordialist positions: it "suggests that nations and nationalism are intrinsic features of the modern world" (Antonsich, 2015, p. 299) and that "nations, like states, are a contingency, and not a universal necessity" (Gellner, 1983, p. 3). In opposition to primordialist approaches, the modernist view of the nation, therefore, seeks to problematize the naturalization of the nation as timeless.

This division of the field is, of course, simplified, as not all approaches to the nation fit neatly into one of those categories. Wehler (2019, p. 15), for instance, argues for an understanding of the nation as an initially *conceived order* which is developed by drawing on the traditions of an ethnic polity[1] and then gradually created as a sovereign unit of action through nationalism and its supporters. This means that he maintains some kind of historical continuity that goes back further than modernity in the formation of the nation, yet his definition is decidedly modernist in terms of the causal relation suggested between the nation and nationalism. For primordialists, nations bring forth nationalism, whereas modernists claim the opposite, namely that "nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round" (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 10).

Going back to the aim of this article—encompassing *Civilization* players' negotiations of the concept of the nation within (and beyond) the game series—we need to ask whether the attempts at defining the nation as outlined above can help us achieve this. I ask this question because what all previously discussed approaches to the nation have in common is that they deal with developments on a macro level. They are concerned with questions of the *formation* of the nation through "large-scale historical processes as well as the consequences thereof throughout history" (Trattner, 2023, p. 77). Yet, as Hobsbawm contends, nations are "dual phenomena,

[1] The term 'ethnic polity' is a rough translation of Wehler's (2019, p. 15) original term "ethnischer Herrschaftsverband".

constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people" (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 10). As much as we might want to dismiss primordialist views of the nation and go along with modernist definitions of nations as constructed when looking at them 'from above', the problem remains that, when we look at them 'from below', we can often see that "members of ethnic communities and nations … feel their communities are primordial" (Smith, 1994, p. 376), meaning primordialism is very common in everyday understandings of the nation by 'ordinary people' (Antonsich, 2015, p. 299; Wehler, 2019, p. 36). Therefore, for our purpose, a shift in perspective is needed. In line with Brubaker (2004, p. 115), I argue that "asking 'what is a nation?'—as countless analysts have done since Renan—encourages us to treat nations as entities" and will therefore not serve us much in trying to answer the research question outlined above. The purpose of this study is not to reproduce the category of the nation by attempting to define it, but to understand how it is ascribed meaning by different actors in different contexts, in this case, players discussing the *Civilization* series. It is about encompassing everyday understandings and negotiations of the nation in relation to media, specifically videogames.

Therefore, I aim "to make the category 'nation' the object of analysis, rather than use it as a tool of analysis" (Brubaker, 2004, p. 116). This entails moving away from questions of the *formation* of the nation in relation to history and, instead, shifting the focus towards *negotiations* of these ideas and thereby their reproduction and naturalization (Antonsich, 2020, p. 1232). A helpful approach to this is the analytical lens of the *everyday nation* (Brubaker et al., 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Thompson, 2001), which "explores how the nation resonates in different ways among a diverse population" (Antonsich, 2020, p. 1234). It is, then, not about the question of how nations come to be and develop, but about the question, "what do people do with the nation?" (Antonsich, 2020, p. 1232), and how they actively reproduce it in social interactions. Such everyday interpretations and negotiations of categories like the nation are profoundly influenced by and occur in connection with various forms of media, including videogames.

The nation and history in *Civilization* and beyond: Previous literature

As van der Merwe (2021, p. 138) asserts, there are surprisingly few comprehensive studies on nation, identity, and video gaming.[2] In recent years, several studies have dealt with specific national gaming cultures (Cao et al., 2025; Donald et al., 2023; Fiadotau, 2021; Jiang & Fung, 2019; Martin, 2018; Nie, 2013; Ramírez-Moreno & Navarrete-Cardero, 2024; Švelch & Houška, 2025). Authors have examined the role of nation states and national identity in the development and production of video

[2] For a thorough overview, see van der Merwe (2021, pp. 138–143).

games (Jiang & Fung, 2019; Parker & Jenson, 2017; Švelch & Houška, 2025) as well as representations of cultural and national identity within games (Cao et al., 2025; Donald et al., 2023; Zulkarnain, 2014). Compared to analyses of production and representation, very few studies have thus far dealt with players' interpretations and negotiations of the nation within games (Li & Li, 2023; Sudar, 2017). What is furthermore particularly interesting for the topic of this paper, is that studies that analyze portrayals of particular nations in the context of video games often emphasize the role history plays in these representations (Donald et al., 2023; Martin, 2018; Nie, 2013; Zulkarnain, 2014).

Not least due to the series' long history and enduring popularity, *Civilization* has long been a focus point of historical game studies. Furthermore, as Carpenter (2021, p. 44) points out: "the player, after all, is playing as the nation". It is therefore not surprising that *Civilization* is one of the most frequently discussed video game series concerning questions of the nation and/in gaming, especially in connection with history. Despite a few notable exceptions (Apperley, 2018; Carr, 2007; Majewski, 2021; Myers, 2010; Owens, 2011), most studies on *Civilization* that touch upon the topic of the nation are concerned with the games themselves rather than their reception. The main focus is, then, often on the games' rule structures and how arguments on how history (and/or the nation) works are made through those rules. Only a few studies focus explicitly on the construction of the nation in *Civilization* (Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022; Donecker, 2014). Mostly, these questions are only addressed in passing in the context of analyses of representations of history, colonialism, or imperialism (e.g., Bembeneck, 2013; Carpenter, 2021; Ford, 2016; Friedman, 1998). Within this body of scholarship, two aspects are of central interest to this study. Firstly, how the nation is represented in *Civilization*, how it functions and what ideological assumptions this is based on according to the literature. And, secondly, what assumptions are, then, being made concerning the players and their reception thereof. Regarding the former, some key characteristics of the nation, as modeled by *Civilization*, can be made out. According to the literature, the nation in *Civilization* is:

a) *Primordialist* in its conception. Every game starts in 4000 BC with one particular civilization "and the concept of the game presumes that the civilisation, as an historical actor, remains the same" (Donecker, 2014, p. 106) throughout all of history (cf. also Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022).

b) *Homogenous* in its composition. Heterogeneity is only present above the level of the nation, whereas the games' "mechanic homogenizes those within the state, flattening out the possibilities for hybridity or a multiplicity of identities" (Carpenter, 2021, p. 44; cf. also: Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022, p. 1318; Carr, 2007, p. 234; Donecker, 2014; Friedman, 1998, pp. 145–146).

c) *Essentialist* in its characterization. Each playable civilization is defined by unique characteristics that delimit it from others, which attributes "an

essential nature to the nations being played" (Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022, p. 1318; cf. also Chen, 2003, p. 100; Donecker, 2014).

d) Reflective of *nationalist* sentiments. All of this speaks for an underlying nationalist conception of the nation (Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022, p. 1322; Donecker, 2014, p. 113; Friedman, 1998, p. 134).

It is important to note here that, strictly speaking, primordialist conceptions of the nation comprise the other points: A primordialist imagining of the nation implies that the nation is homogenous, it is an essentialist position and, putting all of that together, a nationalist one. However, on an analytical level, I argue that it makes sense to distinguish between these characteristics of *Civilization*'s portrayal of the nation because they emphasize different levels (e.g., the historical development of the nation versus the traits and characteristics its people are ascribed) that, like in scholarly literature on the topic, are likely to appear separately in the data.

This leads us to the second question of how players are thought to perceive and negotiate the way the nation is implemented in the games according to the reviewed literature. If ideologies are seen as embedded in a game's rule system, it is often implied that players must necessarily accept or even internalize those ideological assumptions (Bembeneck, 2013; Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022; Carpenter, 2021; Donecker, 2014; Douglas, 2002; Friedman, 1998, p. 136; Kapell, 2002, p. 133; Koabel, 2017, p. 64; Mir & Owens, 2013; Pobłocki, 2002; Stephenson, 1999; Voorhees, 2009). Another position contrary to the assumption of indoctrination contends that players do not really care about or even notice such ideological subtext (Galloway, 2006, p. 102; Majewski, 2021; Myers, 2010, p. 108). What both positions have in common is that they assume a relative homogeneity of players and their experiences and negotiations of what is represented to them through a game. This rather reductionist view of a passive audience has, however, also been criticized by several authors, who recognize the possibility of players critically engaging with *Civilization*'s portrayal and mechanical implementation of the nation and the ways it models historical processes (Apperley, 2018; Carr, 2007; Chapman, 2013; Ford, 2016; Ghys, 2012; Owens, 2011; Reichert, 2008; Zamaróczy, 2016).

Critiquing such approaches is, of course, not new, not only in game studies but also following a long tradition within actor-centered media research (Jenkins, 1992). As Apperley (2018, p. 2) summarizes for the case of *Civilization*: "It is entirely reasonable to observe that digital games like the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series are based on Eurocentric and colonial assumptions. However, it does not necessarily follow that through playing these games the players internalize these assumptions" (cf. also Carr, 2007, p. 223). Understanding discursive reproductions of the nation through the framework of everyday nation means acknowledging them as fragmented, conflicting, and heterogenous rather than assuming a uniform interpretation of the concept based on a deterministic understanding of media. The aim of this article is, therefore, to critically question the ideas of players' internalization or ignorance of

the ideological subtexts of *Civilization*'s portrayal of the nation by highlighting the heterogeneity of interpretations of the concept in relation to the games.

Research material and method

This study's research material stems from discussions on the Civilization Webring Forum (https://www.civforum.de/), the largest German-speaking forum on the game series. Online since the early 2000s, the Civilization Webring Forum contains over 9.3 million posts in around 100,000 threads by almost 24,000 users.[3] It is therefore a rich source in several regards. To find out how *Civilization* players engage with the games' constructions of the nation and its place in history and what role their own national identities could play in these negotiations, a structuring qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023) was conducted based on material gathered on the forum.

> Qualitative content analysis is the systematic and methodologically controlled scientific analysis of texts, pictures, films, and other contents of communication. Not only manifest but also latent contents are analysed. At the centre of qualitative analyses are categories with which all the material relevant to the research question(s) is coded. (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023, p. 21)

Kuckartz and Rädiker distinguish between different types of QCA: structuring QCA, evaluative QCA, and type-building QCA. For this study, structuring QCA was deemed an appropriate approach, since, as the authors explain, it "is usually used to structure the material according to topics and themes" (2023, p. 98). Therefore, "it is precisely the open, rather explorative research projects for which this method can work particularly well" (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023, p. 122). For coding the material, a deductive-inductive approach was chosen. The initial deductive codes were constructed based on the reviewed literature in combination with the research question. The benefit of this approach is that it enables a comparison between previous findings and assumptions from media-focused literature on the topic and the player's actual discussions and negotiations about it, thereby adding to the current state of research by actively engaging with it.

To determine the sample, it was first crucial to understand the structure of the analyzed forum, which contains a vast number of threads and posts, not all equally relevant to the research topic. Sub-forums focused on technical issues, specific gameplay strategies, games other than *Civilization*, and off-topic discussions were excluded. This narrowed the focus to the general discussion sections for the first six main installments of the game series (MicroProse, 1991, 1996; Firaxis Games, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2016) where most debates about constructions of the nation and history

[3] As it is a German-speaking forum, all of the threads are in German. All of the translations in this article are the author's.

take place. Discussions on all of the first six main installments were included in the sample rather than focusing on one installment in particular, because within all of them the construction of the nation does not differ significantly in the characteristics outlined in the previous section. I then proceeded to search these sub-forums for the keyword *nation*, as the initial aim was to encompass how players use the term nation in the context of their communication about *Civilization* as well as beyond, exploring how they assign meaning to it. Therefore, all threads containing hits were evaluated regarding their relevance for the research question and, if they were thematically relevant, included in the sample.

In a first stage, I read all of the threads included in the initial sample without coding them, but instead marking passages that appeared relevant to the research question. At this stage, the sample was further condensed to a final number of 59 threads. The oldest thread in the sample is from 2001 and the newest is from 2023. Following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023, p. 102), I wrote memos for each thread, noting themes and narratives that I observed and evaluating how each thread relates to the research question.

As a next step, I developed my main categories. As mentioned above, I chose a deductive-inductive approach. The initial deductive codes are derived from the reviewed literature's arguments regarding how the games construct the nation (primordial, essentialist, homogenous, nationalist), as well as the presumed player perspectives on these portrayals (internalization, criticism, indifference). As I went through the first cycle of coding the entire material, I applied these initial deductive codes and gradually supplemented them by inductive codes derived directly from the analyzed discussions. Inductive coding took place in German since it is a German-language forum, thereby staying as close to the material as possible.[4] This was followed by a second cycle of coding with the adjusted code system. I then evaluated the data, focusing on category-based analysis and the relations between central categories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023, pp. 115–117), particularly between deductive and inductive ones as this allowed for a comparison of the results of previous media-centered literature on the nation in *Civilization* and the player's communication.

For additional context on the results to follow, it is important to clarify a few of the characteristics of the sample. As mentioned, the analyzed discussions stem from the general discussions sections on *Civilization*'s first six main installments because those were the ones where discussions on representation, history, as well as polls on favorite/least-favorite playable civilizations ("civs") took place. This means that the kinds of conversations the study draws upon are mostly discussions on which nations should be featured in the games and why or why not or whether players were happy or unhappy with how individual civs were represented in the game.

[4] The codebook, which is therefore partly in English and partly in German, is available upon request from the author.

Within these types of discussions, the contributors' attitudes towards how the games construct the nation, particularly in relation to history, as well as the ways they themselves assign meaning to the concept of the nation surfaced most clearly. Concerning the second part of the research question—whether or how their own national identity impacts these negotiations—it is important to note that I do not have any demographic data on the contributors in the forum. Since it is a German-speaking forum, that does narrow it down, yet German-speaking does not necessarily amount to identifying as German, of course. However, particularly in discussions on specific nations or playable civilizations, it is very common for contributors to state their own national identity as part of the argument (e.g., "we Germans", "as a German", etc.). Therefore, when I speak of contributors' national identity, I refer to their own statements on it. At this point it is also important to note that a discussion on national identity in Germany is different from the same debate in other national contexts, not least due to Germany's history. Therefore, these results—as any results of qualitative research—should not be generalized. A last point to clarify is that while there are clear narratives that I will present in the following, it is crucial to note that within the forum there are plenty of lively discussions as well as a very active content moderation. This is important to emphasize because it shows that the discourse is not at all homogenous.

Findings

The in-game and the abstract nation

As explained above, initially, it was important to understand how players use the term *nation* in the context of their communication about *Civilization* and beyond to explore how they assign meaning to the concept. Searching the sub-forums included in the sample for the term *nation* produced a very large number of hits because contributors to the forum tend to use the terms *nation* and *civilization*—referring to individual civs—largely synonymously and interchangeably, as illustrated by thread titles such as "Favorite nation".

Nation and *civilization* are, however, not only used interchangeably when it comes to discussions of concrete representations thereof within the game, but also on a meta-level. To illustrate what I mean by that, let us return to our initial example. In their plea for the transhistoricity of the German nation, the user writes: "You do not want to tell me that Germany has only existed since 1871, right? … Germany exists as a 'civilization' or even nation longer" (Civ5Thr004, Pos. 123). Here, they are not talking about Germany as a civ within the game, but about the German nation and its history *outside* the game. Again, the terms *civilization* and *nation* are employed in a way that implies they signify the same thing (or at least something very similar), which is emphasized by contrasting them both with the state, as I will elaborate on later. This example, therefore, shows that the terms *nation* and *civilization* are also

often used synonymously in discussions that go beyond the content of the game, meaning in reflections on the abstract concept of the nation.

From these initial observations, a central differentiation can be derived concerning different levels on which the term is employed in the analyzed discussions: On the one hand, we have the in-game nation (the playable nation *in* the games) and on the other hand, there is the abstract nation (the concept of the nation *outside* the games). Differentiating between these two levels is useful because it helps us understand to what extent players tend to internalize or at least not critically challenge the games' design of the in-game nation and are, then, impacted by it in their perception of the abstract nation, as the literature often tacitly implies (e.g., Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022; Carpenter, 2021; Donecker, 2014; Douglas, 2002; Friedman, 1998; Koabel, 2017).

As helpful as this distinction between levels is from an analytical perspective, within the data themselves, there are significant overlaps between the two and they are not always fully discernable in the communicative reality of the forum. Conversations about the abstract nation are, on the one hand, triggered by discussions of the in-game nation. On the other hand, the latter is being evaluated and critically negotiated based on commentators' understanding of the abstract nation. In these evaluations of the in-game nation based on understandings of the abstract nation, players' ideas of historical authenticity and accuracy take on a central role.[5] Conspicuously, a general desire for historical accuracy, to 'play history as it was', was noticeable in different discussions throughout the entire sample. The "relation game – 'real' history" was, therefore, one of the main categories. Under this category, I coded statements relating representations of history within the game to 'real' history in terms of accuracy or authenticity, often forming the basis of commentators' evaluations of game content. This finding is interesting in itself since *Civilization*, according to the general idea of the game, lets players do a lot beyond that or even play 'against' history. Yet, at least within the analyzed sample, that does not appear to be interesting to most players. This strong desire for historical accuracy also applies to evaluations of how a specific nation or nationhood in general is represented in the games. It often comes down to the question: "is this historically accurate?" Therefore, layers of discussing *Civilization*'s portrayals of the nation (the in-game nation) versus discussions of the nation's place in history (the abstract nation) often overlap, because the latter is the basis for evaluating the former. It is precisely this desire for historical accuracy that leads to significant points of friction in how players negotiate the in-game nation in relation to the abstract nation.

[5] For detailed discussions of ideas of historical authenticity and historical accuracy in relation to games with historical settings and players' perception thereof, see Burgess and Jones (2022); Pfister (2020); Salvati and Bullinger (2013); Zimmermann (2021).

What or when is a nation? Ascriptions of meaning and demarcations

But how are those terms *nation* and *civilization*, used widely synonymously and interchangeably within the sample, ascribed meaning? Or, in other words: what does the nation signify to the players? As mentioned in the previous section, the threads that give us most insight into this question are those in which players discuss which playable civilizations (civs) they want or do not want to see featured in the game(s) as well as those that are focused on discussing the design of specific civs. The former inevitably brings with it the question of who gets to be a civilization (or a nation, since the terms are used interchangeably)—and, perhaps even more importantly, who does not. It is precisely within these demarcations where discussions of the in-game and the abstract nation overlap and ideas of the abstract nation and its place in history become the most salient. One of the central demarcations in this regard is the previously mentioned "distinction between the nation and the state"—another central category in the analysis. Under this category, I coded statements that juxtapose the nation and the state, thereby attributing the nation fundamentally different qualities, particularly concerning its place in history. This juxtaposition once again becomes apparent in our initial example: "Germany as a state is young, as a nation old or was Goethe not German, Luther, Barbarossa? … Again for all I'm talking about the NATION" (Civ5Thr004, Pos. 123–124). The importance of the question "when is the nation" to address the issue of "what is the nation" is quite clear in this post: while the German *state* has only existed since 1871, the history of the German *nation* apparently goes back a lot further than that.

Therefore, we can conclude that the state is lacking something crucial that the nation has: "Historical continuity". "Historical continuity" was also denoted a main category as it appears as a central feature of the (abstract) nation as discussed on the forum. Under this category, I coded statements that argue that a certain nation can be understood as a nation or civilization rather than, for instance, a state precisely due to its long and enduring history. Within the coded material, the "historical continuity" argument can be found concerning the in-game as well as the abstract nation. When this historical continuity is apparently not there in terms of understandings of the abstract nation and we are therefore confronted with a state rather than an actual nation, this often leads to discussions of whether such a state should even be featured as a civ within the game(s) as it does not meet that central requirement for civilizationness or nationness. A particularly interesting example in this regard is discussions of the US. In many cases, players on the forum are unhappy with the US being featured in the games as a civ because, according to them, the US is not a nation or civilization, but merely a state, precisely because of its short history, meaning its lack of historical continuity. As one user sums up in a discussion on civs and their leaders in *Civilization VI* (2016): "The USA is very artificial and has not existed since ancient times." (Civ6Thr002_1, Pos. 731) In the same discussion, another user taking on the same position argues: "But [*Civilization*] is about

civilizations, not countries. America, however, is part of the English civilization" (Civ6Thr002_1, Pos. 728).

This second quote furthermore indicates another point of differentiation between state and nation and thus another, closely related characteristic of the latter: "Cultural cohesiveness". As a category, this speaks to the idea of the nation as being defined by a set of shared cultural characteristics that endure throughout time. The common sentiment within the analyzed sample in this regard is that the state as a bureaucratic construct does not build upon shared culture, language, and history in the same way the nation as a community does. Therefore, the US is not considered its own nation or civilization, but rather part of the 'English' civilization, which is why the US should, then, also ideally not be featured as a civ. As we will discuss in more detail later, this category of cultural cohesiveness as a central characteristic of the abstract nation according to the commentators also closely relates to the homogenous and essentialist character often attributed to the in-game nation in *Civilization* by the literature.

In summary, the terms *nation* and *civilization* are used widely interchangeably within the analyzed sample, referring to both the in-game nation (the playable nation *in* the games) and the abstract nation (the concept of the nation *outside* the games). The specific meanings assigned to the nation become visible especially by looking at various demarcations that are drawn around it: distinctions such as the state versus the nation reveal that the nation is characterized by historical continuity and cultural cohesiveness. Yet, it is also important to point out that while those are clear tendencies in the players' conception of the nation and its place in history, the respective discussions on the analyzed forum are not at all homogenous. On the contrary: particularly discussions on historical continuity and cultural cohesiveness as markers of what a 'real' nation or civilization is reveal central points of friction as contributors try to make sense of the in-game nation by reconciling it with their ideas of the abstract nation. Within these points of friction, the desire for historical accuracy often plays a central role.

Primordialism versus historical continuity

One point of criticism players very frequently address on the forum concerning how *Civilization* simulates the nation, given their desire for historical accuracy, lies in the games' fundamentally primordialist mechanics. Starting out in 4000 BC with a nation that does not change throughout history, not even in its name or leader, is conspicuously often criticized as ahistorical and counterintuitive. As one user points out:

> Even with empires/countries that are still called the same today as they used to be, you can't assume the kind of continuity that Civ makes us believe. There were certainly longer phases of continuity … but there were always major upheavals. (Civ5Thr004, Pos. 652)

This is a quite common position in the forum: the primordialism inscribed in the games' rules suggests a kind of historical continuity that cannot be reconciled with players' desire for historical accuracy. In other words, the way the in-game nation is designed does not align with their ideas of the abstract nation in this case. Some users even point out the ideological purpose behind such primordialist views of history and the nation: "Have you ever noticed that the appropriation of the Germanic tribes for the Germans or the Gauls for the French serves the 'system' of the nation state to legitimize itself through history?" (QuThr05, Pos. 243). Comments like this reveal one of the previously mentioned points of friction: while the primordialist nature of the in-game nation as it is inscribed into the games' rules is repeatedly criticized (from different perspectives), the idea of historical continuity is nevertheless a central feature of what players understand to be a nation in the sense of the abstract nation. This raises two questions. First, what is the difference between these two conceptions of the nation's place in history? And, second, is the idea of historical continuity that is so often stressed as a marker for 'real' nations or civilizations just a toned-down version of the games' more extreme primordialism that doesn't ask us to look back 6000 years but at least considerably further than the 19th century? Again, these cannot be answered in a generalized way. Rather, the analyzed discussions reveal big differences in the respective understandings of the nation and its place in history, depending on which civ is being talked about at the time. Here, another central factor comes into play on the basis of which the positions are differentiated: national identity. In concrete terms, this means that historical continuity is ascribed especially to the nation with which players identify.

Since the research material stems from a German-language forum where the majority of users are German, it is worth taking a look at their discussions on the games' representation of Germany first to illustrate this field of tension. Conspicuously, players within my sample are often very unhappy with the separation of the Holy Roman Empire and Germany as two civs, since they conceive both as being in historical continuity with one another. Within a discussion of whether the Holy Roman Empire and Germany should really be one civ instead of two in *Civilization IV* (2005), one user writes: "The German people have not only existed in Europe since 1871, but for almost 2000 years!" (Civ4Thr11_2, Pos. 44). In this example, Germany is attributed a clear historical continuity, going back even further than the Holy Roman Empire, but as far as Arminius (18/17 BC–AD 21). By naming the year in which the first German state was founded and contrasting it to the German 'people's' existence in Europe, the historical continuity of the nation is emphasized once again via this distinction, as in our opening quote. Another post in the same thread takes up this distinction even more explicitly: "This brings us back to the fundamental distinction between state and nation. Germany did not exist as a state until the foundation of the Reich in 1870/71 - but as a nation much earlier" (Civ4Thr11_1, Pos. 1053).

In all *Civilization* installments up to the newest release of *Civilization VII* (2025), which is not part of the sample, the most basic principle of the game has remained

unchanged: players start out in 4000 BC with a fixed, unchanging nation to "build an empire to stand the test of time". The analyzed discussions, however, indicate that, at least within my sample, fans of the game series also have significant issues with this kind of extreme primordialism. It is criticized as ahistorical in discussions that focus on the general principles of the in-game nation in *Civilization*. Players argue that nations have ultimately changed throughout history, sometimes users even explicitly speak of ideologically tainted retrojections in the ways the games construct the nation.

This does not mean, however, that the common view of the abstract nation we can observe in the sample is a radically modernist one that contends that nations are constructed and products of modernity. While the extreme primordialism inherent in the games' rules is generally criticized for a lack of 'historical accuracy', and therefore not in line with most players' understanding of the abstract nation, a transhistorical idea of the nation is nevertheless often accepted—especially in the case of one's own nation. This brings us back to the question what this transhistorical core of the nation is that apparently sometimes persists. This historical continuity refers above all to the idea of cultural cohesiveness throughout history, which was mentioned in the previous section. Here, we can observe another central point of friction when it comes to players' attempts to bring together the in-game nation with their ideas of the abstract nation.

Cultural cohesion versus essentialism

The example of the US as a playable civ shows us that it is often not understood as an actual nation because language and culture are viewed as crucial elements linking the history of the US to England. In that sense, the US is understood as a state in terms of a bureaucratic entity but not a nation in terms of a transhistorical cultural community, thereby disqualifying it as a civ in the opinion of many of the posts by (German) players that were analyzed as part of the sample. The historical continuity of nations is, like in this example, often understood to be based on shared 'culture', language, and identity as binding elements throughout history. Such ideas of transhistorical cultural cohesion, then, distinguish 'real' nations from those that are not.

The notion of cultural cohesion across history also suggests a close connection to two central characteristics of the in-game nation in *Civilization* according to the literature: *essentialism* and *homogeneity*, which were both part of the initial deductive code set. In fact, it is precisely in this context that considerable points of friction become apparent once more. When tying this vague idea of transhistorical cultural cohesion to specific characteristics (e.g., traits in the game) that persist throughout history as modeled by the games, we can, again, see differences in players' evaluations thereof according to their degree of identification with a given civ. One example often provided by the literature for the essentialist nature of the in-game nation is the leader traits. They define a given civ through inherent, unchanging

characteristics that endure throughout history and at the same time delimit individual civs from one another (Bijsterveld Muñoz, 2022, p. 1318).

Overall, discussions on the forum mostly reveal a clear desire of players for individual civs' uniqueness, which is argued for by referring to the unique character of the individual nations they are based on. We could, therefore, assume that the players within the analyzed sample are firmly in line with the logic of the games as it seems as though the construction of the in-game nation as essentialist in its characterization coincides with their ideas of the abstract nation as having some sort of unique essence. Yet, the situation is again more ambivalent and the discourse all but linear. When it comes to ascribing specific traits or characteristics to individual civs and discussions of whether those are 'realistic' or 'historically accurate', it is conspicuous how users are quicker to do so comfortably and find it appropriate with non-European civs.

When we look at the other end of the spectrum, however, and turn towards the example of Germany again, we can, once more, observe a special way of dealing with these ascriptions, which further illustrates the role of users' own national identity in evaluations of constructions of the in-game nation. For instance, in discussions on the design of Germany as a civ, users on the forum are mostly very unhappy with Germany's traits in the games—in each installment and regardless of what those traits are specifically. One post in a thread on the design of civs in *Civilization V* in relation to 'reality' sums up this frequent position: "When I look at the leaders and their traits … I would say that they fit almost everyone. Except for the Germans" (Civ5Thr008, Pos. 124). This quote is particularly revealing regarding the points of friction we are confronted with here: it illustrates that the dissatisfaction with the design of the German civ along concrete fixed characteristics and traits is significantly greater than with others and that it is therefore not a general agreement or disagreement with the portrayal of the nation as essentialist in its characteristics. In another thread about which nations Fixaris has misjudged in *Civilization III* (2001), one user expresses their dissatisfaction with Germany being characterized by a fixed small number of traits, because: "If we are honest, we Germans were/are militaristic, expanding, scientific as well as industrial, except for religious, we actually have all the attributes of the Civ peoples" (Civ3Thr06, Pos. 183). This quote implies that users are generally not unhappy with the design of Germany because specific characteristics are missing or deemed unsuitable, but because of the idea of characterizing a nation through specific traits throughout history altogether suddenly seems counter-intuitive to players when it comes to the nation they identify with.

Overall, we are once again left with an ambivalent situation. While there is a general strong desire within the analyzed sample for clear cultural boundaries between individual civs to emphasize the uniqueness of the nations they represent, which can be viewed as an essentialist position, there are also many voices that criticize this way of designing the in-game nation—particularly when it is based on the nation

they identify with. Nevertheless, an idea of cultural cohesion throughout history still defines that very nation, but it remains vague, while specific, unchanging characteristics are deemed too simplifying. Therefore, we can conclude that within the analyzed sample, the nation users identify with is mostly perceived as transhistorically culturally cohesive, yet diverse in its characteristics, although this is not fully in line with the games' logic.

Discussion

As the examples above have shown, it is safe to say that within the analyzed sample, players do notice and discuss *Civilization*'s portrayal of the nation throughout history and what it symbolizes. Furthermore, we can also observe that within these discussions, players do not simply internalize the games' ideological underpinnings inherent to the structure of their rules. In many cases, players do recognize the mechanical implementation of the nation in *Civilization* as being what the previous literature on the series also observes: primordialist, homogenous, essentialist, and nationalist, even though posters may not use these exact terms. However, it is neither consistently the case that this corresponds to their understanding of the abstract nation which they therefore approve of, nor that it contradicts it throughout and which they criticize. As the discussions within the sample have shown, conversations about the portrayal of individual civs and their 'nationness' can vary considerably and they vary mostly depending on the degree of identification with a given civ. While there are patterns in understanding the abstract nation and relating it to the in-game nation, the crucial point is that players interpret the nation and its place in history differently according to their respective feeling of belonging to a certain nation and, thereby, also evaluate constructions of the in-game nation differently.

This becomes most apparent when we look at players' evaluations of the ways the nation they identify with is implemented in the games. A focus on players' discussions on Germany developed during coding. As explained previously, initially, I searched for the keyword 'nation', which produced a very large number of hits. The focus on Germany arose as a result of these first insights into the field because there was a noticeable discrepancy in how discussions unfolded compared to conversations about other nations. This comparison allowed for insights into the relevance of discourses of identity in this context that might have been less visible had I focused only on Germany right away. In other words: the specific way Germany is discussed in the forum takes on another dimension by contrasting it to discussions of other nations. As the analysis has shown, users' evaluation of the portrayal of their own nation and its place in history is often subject to its own criteria, which are not applied in the same way when evaluating other nations or the image of the nation in general in the games. This observation is also in line with Sudar's (2017) analysis of forum discussions on *Europa Universalis II* (2001), where

users also seemed to be particularly unsatisfied with the portrayal of 'their own' nations in the game.

In many cases in the sample I analyzed, we can furthermore observe a clear dissonance between this unique perception of one's 'own nation' and its place in history and players' general desire for historical accuracy when playing *Civilization*. This dissonance means that some ideological and historically simplifying modes of representing the nation are accepted while others are criticized in different cases. We saw this with the example of the game's primordialist structure, which is criticized as historically inaccurate but is in many cases accepted in a toned-down version for one's own nation. We also saw it with the question of the essentialist nature of Civs, which is less accepted with the nation one identifies with while still attributing a transhistorical cultural cohesiveness to it at the same time. Neither of those are fully in line with the games' logic, with how the in-game nation works, but they do not point towards a downright rejection of those logics either. As Carr (2007, p. 223) explains: "To assume that tropes discernable in either the rules, or the wider cultural context—or both—will necessarily result in a particular repercussion (of whatever kind) at the level of play is problematic". As this study has illustrated by looking at the example of Germany, players negotiate *Civilization*'s portrayal of the nation through its rules in complex ways that are, more than anything, dependent on their own identities and feelings of belonging. It thereby not only speaks to the diversity of individual interpretations of the abstract nation, as the analytical lens of the *everyday nation* suggests, but also to the heterogeneity of players' modes of engaging with and evaluating a game's rule-system and the ways ideologies are inscribed therein.

Outlook

On February 11, 2025, *Civilization VII* was released. Following its showcase at Gamescom in August 2024, it was clear that the new installment would bring big changes to the series—particularly when it comes to its portrayal of the nation. In *Civilization VII*, players can change civilizations throughout history as the new mechanic of 'ages' is introduced. This is the first time in the history of the series that its basic primordialist mechanic of playing an unchanging nation throughout history is being dissolved. This huge change in how the nation is imagined through the game's new rules was worth taking another look at the forum to see what players think about it. As a thread on the introduction of this new mechanic right after the game's showcase at Gamescom indicates, players' opinions were very divided. On the one hand, there was a lot of skepticism about dissolving the demarcations between individual civilizations and players thereby not being able to fully identify with a civ anymore. On the other hand, the change was welcomed by many as being "more historically accurate" and some negative comments were being called out as chauvinistic and nationalist. A poll integrated into the thread even showed an almost 50-50-tie between positive and negative responses to the change. For future

research, it would be interesting to investigate how this radical change in the *Civilization* series' construction of the in-game nation is perceived and negotiated by players.

In conclusion, the forum discussions summarized above indicate once more that players' negotiations of the way *Civilization* models the nation and its role in history are not at all homogenous but reflect diverse voices and positionings towards what a nation is, how it functions, and how a game can or should reflect that. What they also show, however, is that even if players reject or criticize this new mechanic, it does not make them want to play the game any less.

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Data availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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[6] Dom Ford is also an editor for *Eludamos*. To avoid a conflict of interest, he recused himself entirely from both the initial editorial assessment of this article and the peer review process.

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