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Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2008, 2 (1), p.129-144

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“Onahote,” the Iroquois warriors seem to say as the player squares off selection around them and right-clicks the mouse to send them forward. Blue circular outlines highlight the selected units at their feet. The mounted warriors spawn at the corral and announce “Forward!” in the voice of the European characters from *Age of Empires III*. The units are replicas of one another sent to encounter conflicts, collect resources, and reveal the map until they meet the end of the game world at black edges.

During the American Revolution, you as the player are tasked with traveling to an Oneida Iroquois village with your Uncle Kanyenke to set up defense against the Mohawk and Hessians. Your mother is kidnapped, which sends you on a search across the land to free villagers, take trading posts, and find her. Once you have her, the Iroquois Confederacy is disbanded, and you bring together Militia volunteers with Oneida to aid George Washington against the British and Mohawks. You are now known as Captain Black, it is a cold winter in 1776, and this is your story.

The WarChiefs, an expansion of the *Age of Empires III* Real-Time Strategy (RTS) game for the PC, follows the stories of two descendants of the John Black character from the first game in the single-player campaign Fire and Shadow. In the campaign mode, narrator Amelia, Nathaniel Black’s daughter, and Chayton Black’s mother puts retell these characters’ lives in the context of the RTS game mechanics. The chapters of Act I and II—Fire and Shadow—recount different battle scenarios with various maps and terrain, playable units and buildings, possible allies, and definite enemies. The Fire and Shadow campaign uses all of the available elements of games to signify, as “games can signify in ways that other narrative forms have already established: through sound and image, material and text, representations of movement and space” (Zimmerman, 2004). However, games signify in unique ways. This paper, which views games as “explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play” (Zimmerman, 2004), touches on each of these methods of signification in order to glean their meaning in the context of game design aesthetic.

As Eskelinen (2004) asserts, “There’s no guarantee whatsoever that the aesthetic traditions of the West are relevant to game studies in general and computer game studies in particular.” However, games designed and developed in the West certainly are influenced by Western aesthetics, and thus should be considered in this light. To take up Eskelinen’s challenge to find other aesthetic traditions to analyze games, this paper introduces the ludic qualities of the RTS genre, and then compares Indigenous and Western perspectives of interactivity, space and time, and narrative in a close reading of *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs*. *The WarChiefs* uses both Western and Native representations in game mechanics, sound, image, text, and narrative

elements. By interweaving these aspects, the analysis addresses how *The WarChiefs*, and thus the RTS genre in general, signifies Western design aesthetic while also considering the possibilities of Indigenous design aesthetic.

Challenging the Conventions

RTS games, including the genre-defining *StarCraft* and *Warcraft* series, and the genre-refining *Command and Conquer* and *Age of Empire* series, position players to engage in actions in the moment with the intent of military or territorial dominance over another player or the computer. The term “real-time” simply refers to the player’s the ability to make choices at any time, which differs from strategy games with turn-based play. Otherwise, these two wargame genres are quite similar. Core game mechanics centralize resource management, unit development, and competitive conflict. Resource management is broken down into gathering and using; the object is to control as many resource sources as possible to support unit development (Chan et al., 2007). Unit development consists of making units, upgrading units, and building; in turn, this cycle perpetuates further abilities to make new types of units out of new buildings, which need new upgrades, and so on. Ultimately, the goal is to master the time it takes to gather enough resources to push forward development that will cause the player to defeat his/her opponent in battle. Competitive conflict includes actions such as defending, attacking opponent units and buildings, and taking over resource sources. Exploration is key to this genre, since each step from a unit uncovers a hidden part of the map—the architecture of the game space—where the opponent or resources may be found.

The challenge in the design of a RTS game is to offer the player the ability to make both strategic and risky choices so that the player can experience variety in gameplay. Players balance rational and economic choices against irrational and daring choices in their use of resources and options for exploration and attacks. For example, it may be to a player’s advantage to risk sending the hero and a small group of units on an exploration at the start of the campaign level. In initial skirmish mode, the hero and the hero’s team of units have the opportunity to attack an opponent’s base before the opponent can build and spawn more units. However, without prior scouting, the player is unaware of the opponent’s capacity to defend or counterattack. Risk can mean pay off, a set back in spent resources, or defeat.

While playing a RTS, players manage real-time planning, making decisions without confirmed information, learning and modeling opponent behavior, reasoning out the changing environment, allocating resources, path-finding with units, and sometimes collaborating with other players in a multiplayer skirmish or alliances in campaign mode (Cheng & Thawonmas, 2004). Content theme is secondary to gameplay in the RTS genre, but still calls for analysis, as the content largely defines a background for the design choices in the context of the history of the design elements of wargames.

Playing the Interface

In game genres such as First Person Shooters (FPS), players enter a mode of immediacy where the medium is transparent, meaning players are able to look

through the screen. In the case of *The WarChiefs*, and the RTS genre overall, there is an emphasis on hypermediation, or an awareness of the medium, as the player is constantly looking at the screen and its interface to negotiate the gameplay (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). The interface boxes the map and switches between the Home City, rows of icons representing the various shipments you can send to your base, and a 3D capture of a colonial town, no matter what your current Nation or Home City is. All interactions with the interface consist of single-clicks, right-clicks, and occasional dragging when performing actions such as determining the resources you want available for shipments from the Home City in future gameplay.

Indigenous media such as storytelling emphasizes experiencing the story in a collective space without expression of authorial ownership over knowledge. The storyteller employs methods of immersion so that the listener is not listening to the storyteller, but rather experiencing the knowledge inherent in the story. In contrast, *The WarChiefs* uses cut scenes in-between campaigns to tell the progressive story as narrated by Amelia. Interactivity during cut scenes has long been an issue in game design—games such as the *Half-Life* series and the recently released *Assassin's Creed* have attempted to remedy this lack of player control by allowing character movement during in-game cut scenes. Allowing the player agency of movement during these narrative info dumps at least gives the player a sense of participating as opposed to merely witnessing. However, the player is still unable to effect change to the pre-designed event. In the case of *The WarChiefs*, the player is not put in the role of a character during cut scenes, but is instead told a story through Amelia's voiceover and accompanying visuals.

Interactivity, as described by game designer Eric Zimmerman (2004), can be broken down into four overlapping categories: cognitive interactivity, an interpretive participation with a text; functional interactivity, a utilitarian participation with the text; explicit interactivity, participation with designed choices and procedures in a text; and meta-interactivity, a cultural participation outside the experience of a single text. Certainly, interactivity can be applied to media such as books, but taking a closer look at explicit interactivity can highlight ways in which games are unique as interactive narrative systems of formal play. Indigenous media, such as storytelling, also includes interactivity, and emphasizes every participant as being in an interactive and enactive space when listening and interpreting.

In the RTS genre, the mouse serves as your communication piece for in-game actions. When you left-click on a building, you see its state of development or need for repair, as well as icons representing what units and upgrades the building can give you, depending on your resources. Icons are hued red when they are inaccessible due to your Town Center's "age." When you roll your mouse over an icon, the stats of the unit or upgrade appear in a pop-up box with additional information, such as the cost of the unit or upgrade. If you are unable to choose the unit or upgrade, the resources you are low on will appear as red text. If you have the required resources, you can successfully left-click an icon, and a new row with your queued actions will appear at the top of the icon rows at the bottom of your screen.

When your unit is generated, you can left-click and drag the mouse to highlight the unit, then right-click to designate an action. Actions are dependent on where you right-click. Open space generates movement, clicking on an enemy means attack, and in the case of villagers or settlers, clicking on resources translates to automatic

collection. Only hero class characters, such as Nathaniel Black, Kanyeke, Chayton Black, and Billy Holme, can collect treasures. These treasures can include items that translate to resources or characters that turn into additional units.

You are given tasks, which either simply generate additional experience, or must be completed in order for you to succeed in the chapter and progress through the campaign. In order to build up your base and your units, you must gather resources as quickly as possible using your villagers or settlers. Your primary objective is to gather, build, and conquer. The more resources you gather, the faster you can progress through the ages—Discovery, Colonial, Fortress, and Industrial. Your age determines what classes of buildings, units, and upgrades you can choose from.

Regardless of whether you are playing colonialists or Natives, the mechanics remain largely the same: mine copper, silver, and gold; chop down trees; gather berries; kill animals and collect meat; kill treasure guardians and collect treasure; walk and reveal the map; attack and defeat enemies or defend territories; build trading posts and receive resources or allies. When playing Natives, you do receive an additional building unique to them: “Tasking Villagers on your Fire Pit invokes power for your Tribe and will give you access to unique Native abilities.” The Fire Pit is a circle with blue flames that your Villagers dance around. Dances include Fertility Rate, which speeds up the creation of units; Gift Dance, which increases your trickle of experience over time; Holy Dance, which creates “Medicine Men;” Mother Dance, which increases your population allowance; and Fire Damage, which gives you more damage against enemy buildings.

Given these mechanics, the player is forced to enact the narrative in a colonialist manner, concerned only with expansion and depleting resources. Once resources in your area are depleted, you are encouraged to defeat nearby enemies to take over their resources. In the “Trust” chapter of *Shadow*, you are tasked with earning the trust of the Sioux and gathering resources by destroying the moving wagons of the outlaws as they trek to their destination. In earlier chapters, you destroy existing trading posts to put up your own.

Henderson points out the use of terror and fear as a basis for power and law in modern European political thought. As propagated by the seventeenth-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, “In the state of nature, a scarcity of desired things created competition for resources, distrust (‘diffidence’), and glory (war and conquests)” (Henderson, 2000). When this outlook is filtered through the game design of *The WarChiefs*, the result is gameplay which is unrepresentative of North American Indigenous peoples, or as Hobbes defined them, savages of the Americas.

Even when playing Native characters, you are still bound to needing food, wood, and gold to generate buildings, units, and upgrades. Although the first two are understandable, the latter is certainly questionable, as Indigenous peoples of North America and other regions were supported by a trade economy before the arrival of settlers and forts.

In contrast to the Eurocentric perspective, Indigenous peoples do not believe that we are separate from the natural world (Battiste & Henderson, 2000), and thus we have worldly obligations to nature as to ourselves. It is unprecedented, then, to think that Native characters in *The WarChiefs* would be designed without mechanics such as

replanting trees, gathering and making medicines, using all parts of an animal (not just meat), and trading. But indeed they are limited to the colonialist viewpoints of success and a sense of progress, which results in a “You are victorious!” announcement on the screen when you win the final battle of a chapter.

Understanding Space as Time and Time as Space

In *The WarChiefs*, the player is enacting a plot with certain gameplay mechanics. The RTS genre in general relates to Jenkins’ concept of spatial stories, in that “Spatial stories [privilege] spatial exploration over plot development. Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character’s movement across the map. Their resolution often hinges on the player reaching their final destination” (Jenkins, 2004).

Given that “game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (Jenkins, 2004), in *The WarChiefs*, the space is represented maps. You see the terrain map where your units and buildings are seen from the God-view with faded out black space either representing where you have not traveled yet or the end of the map. You also have a 2D mini-map that shows the locations of your town center and units (usually represented by blue icons) as well as the locations of enemies in various colors, treasure marked by X, and resources that have either been discovered as you walk the map or revealed to you during the in-game voiceovers with allies.

This definition of space as mapped and marked territory follows colonialist depictions of ownership over land. When you reach the end of the game space, that which is not on the map, you are literally confronted with black nothingness that you are unable to walk into. An overhead view further enhances this representation. Understandably, games have limited space that can be accessed during any one level or in any open world due to media limitations. However, some game genres use illusions such as landscape views from a first-person perspective to provide a sense of space beyond the conflict directly in front of you. The design of environment in *The WarChiefs* suggests that space is defined by territory and that unmapped territory is non-existent and therefore unimportant.



Figure 1. Space as Mapped and Owned Territory

Land and water are chartable in the scenarios, depending on the depth of water on an individual map and your choice to build a dock to create ships to either attack buildings and other ships or move units across water. Often, scenarios emphasize either land or water, but occasionally equally utilize both. In the “Crossing the Delaware” chapter, Nathaniel Black takes militia into small boats across the river to land and destroy tents around the Hessian town center without alerting the patrol. You are unable to cross certain icy or watery divides on the land by foot and must use the boats to change locations before landing and progressing to your final destination by foot.

Buildings are inaccessible as spaces, but are instead used to generate units or upgrades. Characters can go into certain buildings as a form of defense, similar to ships, but you as the player never see the inside of the building. Once a building is destroyed, all of the units appear where the destroyed building once was—negating the logical possibility that people inside a destroyed building would too be injured or killed.

As you place buildings, you encounter space as it concerns terrain that can be built on or obstruction from overlapping buildings. Buildings can be placed very close to one another, as long as the pixels don’t overlap. The same is true of moving boats and ships through bodies of water, although representations are generalized in favor of gameplay and there is no regard for weather conditions affecting movement.

Weather is only used once in *Fire and Shadow*, in the chapter “Valley Forge” where you need to send your militia out to chop wood to build tents inside the camp near the fires. The cold can kill them, and the longer they are away from the fires, the lower their health gets. By returning to the fire, they regain health. In this instance, their health bars become a kind of representation of the duration of time they have either been near or away from the fires. The healing “aura” of the medicine man units has a similar time-based response.

To understand the model of time in games, a game must be broken down by game state, play time, event time, mapping, speed, fixation, and cut-scenes (Juul, 2004). In addition to representing space, the mini-map also serves to provide a visual representation of the game state, the state of the game at a given time. The play time of each scenario can last anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and a half depending on your choices to gain more experience spending extra time destroying all enemy buildings or completing all the secondary tasks. The event time triggers new tasks and follows the level design progressed by a plot. Although the represented time is prone to jump years or generations in *The WarChiefs*, it remains linear, with gaps filled in with cut scenes.

In the setting of this territory-oriented space, time is purposefully manipulated for playability and mapping. Jesper Juul says in his “Introduction to Game Time”:

The relationship between play time and event time can be described as mapping. Mapping means that the player’s time and actions are projected into a game world. This is the play-element of games; you click your mouse, but you are also the mayor of a fictive city.

When you initiate the creation of a unit by clicking on a building and then clicking the unit you want to make, the icon of that unit in the rows at the bottom of the screen appears faded. The fade gradually ticks away in a clock-like manner against the background of the fully colored icon until the unit appears on the map. This visualization of game time is also used to represent how long it will take for the unit to “arrive” at your town center. This also appears as a pattern in the Home City screen, where you can choose units or resources often without cost, and the icons line up on the left-hand side of the screen in the order you clicked on them. Only one unit or resource can be sent at a time. However, in both cases, time relates to the icon, not how many of one unit are being created. It takes the same amount of time to make one unit as five, but the icon caps out at five units. As a gameplay strategy, then, it is advisable for the player to make as many of one unit at once if time is a major factor in the scenario.

Sending a villager to build results in the appearance of a partly constructed building graphic appearing at the location of your placement. The more villagers you task on building, the faster the process. Of course, as this is a game, time is greatly manipulated in that buildings take well under a minute to complete, which adds to “... the manipulation or completion of multiple relations [that] takes place in time – a kind of general economy of games” (Eskelinen, 2004).

Speed, then—the relation between the play time and the event time—is not representative of time as modern society sees it represented in seconds, minutes, hours, et cetera, but rather in days and weeks played out in a matter of minutes or

hours of “real time.” Real Time Strategy refers to the way in which the game state changes based on passing time rather than claiming a rigid hold to “real time” as represented by clocks.

The WarChiefs also has clear fixation, or historical time of the event time. There are event references that generate time meaning and also years, such as 1776 and 1781 mentioned in Amelia’s narration in *Fire*. This usage is, of course, representative of the Gregorian calendar and C.E. (Common Era).

Innis, in the often-referenced *The Bias of Communication*, uses the space-based and time-based properties of medium to derive the reasoning for the rise and fall of empires:

According to its characteristics [a medium of communication] may be better suited to transportation, or to the dissemination of knowledge over time than over space, particularly if the medium is heavy and durable and not suited to transportation, or to the dissemination of knowledge over space than over time, particularly if the medium is light and easily transported.

He references, for example, the transportability of papyrus and declares its influence for Egyptians but notes its lack of preservability, which clay and stone by comparison win over (Innis, 1951). However, in provoking us to ask how a medium might be space-biased or time-biased, there is a direct concern with their ability to conquer either space or time relative to the context they are presented in, which further invokes a Western perspective.

The design of *The WarChiefs* drives to conquer space and time in the gameplay itself. Western culture seems fascinated with its own ability to conquer but also the abilities of other cultures, as if to glean insight into how to create a dominating empire, relevant to the goal in the *Age of Empires* series.

In contrast, Indigenous perspectives of space and time usually merge the two or emphasize space. In a Plains Cree mindset where existence consists of energy—animate, imbued with spirit, in constant motion—interrelationships between entities put space above time in importance (Little Bear, 2000). As with non-linear storytelling, concepts of time and space are also cyclic and take a step back to look at the whole and patterns visible from this viewpoint. Time is thus dynamic and reflective, as it represents patterns to expect, not forward-moving progression as seen by Western perspective.

In many Indigenous languages, such as the Maori of New Zealand, time and space do not have separate words, but rather the two are intrinsically linked concepts (Smith, 1999). Additionally, the structure of Indigenous language itself suggests a conceptualization of time. Most Indigenous languages are action or process-oriented with an emphasis on verbs and the descriptions that weave together events or actions rather than objects (Little Bear, 2000).

In light of the representations of space and time in *The WarChiefs*, certainly Indigenous perspectives are not included, but rather Western time is manipulated for gameplay and Western space is represented. An Indigenous design might incorporate a slower movement for the player situated around more actions with

references to seasons and cycles with greater reaches of land that hold meaning for every entity within that space.

Storytelling Trapped in Linearity

The definition of the term “narrative” and the nature of its use are largely debated in game studies. For the sake of a holistic view, narrative is considered with multiple meanings, but main concepts derived during this analysis draw from Henry Jenkins’ argument that games have narrative elements. This is not to suggest that story is the main ambition of *The WarChiefs*, but rather to emphasize the relevance of analyzing narrative elements that provide background to the ludic qualities of the game. Considering narrative elements is also particularly important in the context of the relationship of North American Indigenous peoples to storytelling. Traditional storytelling relates to understanding the world, why things are the way they are, and how to *be* within the world. These aspects of Indigenous storytelling are transferable to games when they are seen as an interactive space that constitute a storytelling event.

In the single-player campaign *Fire and Shadow*, narrative is certainly used in the sense of “a chain of events in the cause-effect relationship” (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996). In the case of this RTS design, a conflict, tension, and resolution occur within each chapter, but these elements also add to the narrative arc of a larger war. This definition of narrative is mainly used for historical context and puts the player in a state of re-enacting but also re-envisioning history by modifying outcomes using factual names and semi-factual situations. Games in the RTS genre often pull from historical time periods, but even in cases where the game content is entirely fictional (e.g., *StarCraft*), they incorporate the narrative arc of conflict, tension, and resolution. In North American Indigenous storytelling, individual stories are not told with linear time or in a pattern of conflict, tension, and resolution. Stories are often short but relate to a network of knowledge so that it is uncertain where one story ends and another begins. The central focus of each story is a happening and its effects on the people, the land, and the culture.

In *The WarChiefs*, the completion of the narrative arc is ensured by the game design. You are given tasks in each chapter to complete that drive the narrative forward. Some of these tasks are optional, but the narrative doesn’t change whether you complete these or not, as these only result in additional experience points that allow you to add cards to your deck of resources or units you can send from your Home City to your base in the game. The player can’t change outcomes undesignated by the designer, since the primary required tasks are either completed or failed. If you fail, you must restart the chapter. The designer, in this design strategy, asserts authorial control over the plot of the *Fire and Shadow* campaign.

You as the player represent the main character of each Act. Nathaniel and Chayton each have their own pre-determined traits, but you are put in the role of carrying out their actions. Your level of control of the actions is minimal in that you need to do what is required to complete the task to either move on to the next task or succeed in the chapter. (The player’s role as an enactor of these actions will be discussed later.)

In *Fire*, you play as Nathaniel Black, a loyal patriot, the son of Nonahkee the Iroquois and John Black the Scot and former leader of the Falcon Company. You lead Oneida Iroquois and militia at varying capacities based on the scenario through a series of battles with Cornwallis, the British, the Hessians, and the Mohawks. You face off with Colonel Kuechler at the Battle of Morristown and conclude by winning at the Battle of Yorktown.

In *Shadow*, you skip a generation to play Nathaniel's grandson Chayton Black during Red Cloud's war. Advised by Billy Holme, you must set up trading posts and a railroad, which stirs up attacks from the Sioux. You negotiate a truce with Red Cloud and Crazy Horse that holds for almost a decade. Times change when Holme is Sheriff and a gold rush hits the Black Hills; the truce is off. You return to protect the mining camps from Natives, build trading posts, and defend against incoming Spanish. You change sides when you realize Holme is just after gold at any cost, which pits you against Colonel Custer as well. You must earn trust with the Sioux and Cheyenne by killing Holme's outlaws and facing off with Holme in a mining cave. In the Battle of Little Bighorn, the object is to bring three Warchiefs to your base, lead skirmishes before Custer arrives to destroy the nearby enemy buildings that he will otherwise get forces from, and defend your main camp. Once Custer arrives, you don't need to defeat his entire force, but instead simply target him with a single right-click and kill him to win the campaign.

Historically, during what was referred to as the Indian Wars, settlers did indeed push further westward and Plains Tribes led attacks to prevent the placement of railroads. In order to take over the Black Hills, and thus the gold, the U.S. government declared that all Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne who refused to be placed on reservations were to be considered hostile by 1876. Colonel Custer was defeated in the Battle of Little Bighorn, in part due to dividing up his military. Although historical accounts have been sketchy concerning whether or not Custer sympathized with Natives, *The WarChiefs* certainly presents him in the light of the unrelenting enemy. He refers to the Sioux and Cheyenne as a "bigger problem" and later confronts Chayton, who suggests they meet with Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse to negotiate peace, by asking, "Are you white or Indian?"

These two narrative elements are presented in the form of cut scenes, which Henry Jenkins (2004) refers to as a form of micronarrative. Between each chapter is a brief cut scene that presents the basis for the next conflict. After a narration by Amelia, the cut scenes feature your character and his interactions with other characters in the context of the past on a larger linear timescale but present in terms of your progression through the storyline.



Figure 2. Cut Scene of Kanyenke and Nathaniel Black

Amelia also plays a role as a storyteller, although her telling follows the linear pattern of Western story. Her narrations also add opinion to the plot. You see her in only one cut scene when she visits with Chayton just as the decade-long peace between settlers and Natives has been interrupted. Interestingly, although she herself is mixed blood Iroquois and Scottish as the daughter of Nathaniel Black—Scottish and Iroquois—and an Iroquois woman, Chayton Black only refers to having an Iroquois grandmother and Lakota-Sioux father when he is first asked about looking “Indian.” The extent of Amelia’s background rests in who she was born from and her hand in leading the Falcon Company before passing it on to Chayton. At the end of Shadow following your victory at the Battle of Little Bighorn, she concludes with a point on Chayton’s decision to change sides: “Whether or not he made the right choice—history will be the judge of that.” The game, in this way, points to its own revisions of history, a new media play on the cinema of attractions moment in which there is an attempt to break down the barrier between audience and actor (Gunning, 1990), or in this case, player and designer.

Occasionally, micronarratives are shown in the map mode at the completion of a task. In the “Ambushed!” chapter of the Shadow campaign, you fight your way through Natives as Chayton Black to reach Crazy Horse’s camp to negotiate peace (nevermind the irony that you can’t avoid fighting and demolishing their camps on the way), only to witness your ally Sheriff Billy Holme come up around the other side of the hills and throw explosives down on Crazy Horse’s camp once you’ve distracted him. This is an unexpected event and adds to a later decision your character makes.

There are also times when micronarratives are used during gameplay in the form of subtitled voiceover interactions that happen during action. These are used to alert you of changes in the game state—new tasks, your progress with tasks, and changes in alliances. In the Shadow chapter, after trying to defend American colonialists chopping wood from ongoing Natives to help build a large fort, Sheriff Holme tasks you with destroying the Native villages of women and children nearby. During a voiceover, you are alerted that Chayton makes the choice to change sides,

and you as the player then need to create trading posts, develop your Native forces with few resources, and destroy the fort you just built.

This matter of ethics brings up the player's construction of a story when interpreting their gameplay. Kurt Squire, when using the popular RTS *Civilization III* in an educational context, found that "students used concepts such as infrastructure, natural resources, or isolationism to interpret and analyze gameplay. As students suffered defeats, they discovered the importance of geography. By the end, several students were using gaming experiences as conceptual tools, explaining how a scarce natural resource such as oil could destabilize global politics" (Jenkins & Squire, 2003). However, Jenkins & Squire (2003) also discovered that "few detected the game's geographical, materialist bias, or realized that *CivIII* minimizes the role of historical figures and cultural factors."

When breaking down the reviews of *Command and Conquer: Generals*, another RTS, Geoff King (2007) gleaned that "far more players devote attention to issues relating to gameplay than to the specific historical or geopolitical context in which the game is set." However, it is arguable that the gameplay itself is also a narrative when using J. Hillis Miller's interpretations. Similar to the RTS war-based genre, "Chess certainly has a beginning state (the setup of the game), changes to that state (the gameplay), and a resulting insight (the outcome of the game). It is a representation – a stylized representation of war, complete with a cast of colorful characters. And the game takes place in highly patterned structures of time (turns), and space (the checkerboard grid)" (Zimmerman, 2004). Additionally, "turn-based strategy games such as *Civilization* seem to favor causal relations over temporal ones to create event structures that have remarkable similarities to complex board games" (Eskelinen, 2004). Although *The WarChiefs* is a RTS, the gameplay mechanics and representations of space and time are largely similar, and these causal relations fall back to the cause-effect form of narrative.

In *The WarChiefs*, each playable chapter has an initial starting state where your units, allies, enemies, and resources are placed, changed by your movement and actions in the space, which results in winning or losing the designated tasks. As a RTS, it also represents war with lead heroes and repeated base units. The game occurs in purposefully modified time and a map of terrain to be uncovered. Understandably, the campaign mode differs greatly from the random mode and customizable mode. The campaign has pre-established design to reinforce the narrative, whereas the other modes rely simply on the game state, gameplay, and outcome to be generated by programmable random factors or player customization.

Across all modes of play, character units are depicted in physical appearance, abilities, and oral responses to player commands. These immediate responses to the player's clicking actions also fall into micronarratives. Language is minimized to a few words, and in the case of Native characters, both English and a few "Native" words are used across all peoples without recognizing regional difference ranging from Aztecs to Iroquois. Since the passing of knowledge in Indigenous cultures is centered around language and symbol, it is also a strong belief that language is sacred and that "any attempt to change Indigenous language is an attempt to modify or destroy Indigenous knowledge and the people to whom this knowledge belongs" (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). If the game design had taken this into account, the use of language as a micronarrative form would be specific to each culture and unit.



Figure 3. Icons for Character Units

Despite these numerous narrative elements, each retains the linear Western form of narrative in *The WarChiefs*. In the very narration of Amelia, who is mixed blood, you still follow a Western timeline from grandfather to grandson, one battle to another, charting across territories in a straight-ahead manner. Although you are re-enacting the past, you follow a linear progression. Indigenous storytelling is non-linear by comparison. Stories are told to explain why things are the way they are and how to be in life. The stories usually give a lesson about ethics and morality. Although Chayton does make an ethical decision in the Shadow Act, it is not presented as a personal lesson he has learned, but rather a heroic choice he has made to save Natives who would otherwise be unable to protect themselves.

Following the Circle

The implications of applying clearly Western, and more specifically colonialist, design aesthetics to a game with Indigenous characters without regard to incorporating Indigenous aesthetic is one of misrepresentation and simplification of a culture to game mechanics used universally throughout the *Age of Empires* series. Notably, the game design makes an attempt to address a different mechanic by giving Natives the Fire Pit, but in so doing, reduces prayer and dance to manifestations of strategies for imperial improvement.

The Real Time Strategy and Turn Based Strategy genre shares similar themes in their design. Poblocki, in his article “Becoming-State: The Bio-Cultural Imperialism of *Sid Meier’s Civilization*,” asserts:

In *Civilization I* the clash was mainly military, economic, and technological, whereas subsequently it became also cultural. By embracing nineteenth century models of social change and by brutal projection of the Western history onto contingent grounds of randomly generated maps, random civilization names, random starting positions, random distribution of resources and the like, [Meier] essentializes the story of the Western success, suggesting their causes lie in personal abilities, rationality, high administrative skills and other qualities of the Westerners, reducing culture to an imperialist checklist (one either has it or not), and suggesting that starting conditions (both ecological and cultural) do not matter in the absorbing of new advancement...

This can also be said of *The WarChiefs* gameplay found in the Skirmish mode, which mixes all races for head-to-head competition, although this is primarily seen in the single-player campaign Fire and Shadow when you are able to play Native cultures

at certain points. In both gameplay states, the mechanics apply the perceived abilities of Westerners to Native cultures. This suggests their successes in war and survival would have been much greater had they had a different worldview or been guided by mixed blood leaders who could appear as Native but who held what is presented as the logical and fruitful colonialist expansionary view.

One RTS-like game that does make an attempt at representing Indigenous concepts of space and time is the wildlife tycoon *Venture Arctic*, by independent design company Pocketwatch Games. In the game, you learn about Inuit representations of the cycles of life and death and the seasons by making animals interact with one another and the environment based on their individual traits. For example, two polar bears can mate, survive throughout the winter cold, and eat certain animals. The game relays concepts such as environmental sustainability, the necessary cycle of life and death, and the sun, moon, and seasons as depictions of time, all without using representations of people. Unlike the wargame RTS style, *Venture Arctic* presents the computer—nature—as a collaborator that helps you determine the best play choice to make during a given season or in a particular event.

In *The WarChiefs*, the designers signify colonialist aesthetic from visual representations of people to the geopolitical implications of gameplay mechanics, despite putting the player in the role of playing Natives in some chapters. As Jenkins and Squire point out: “There is no such thing as a neutral simulation; they all embody assumptions about the way the world works” (Jenkins & Squire, 2003). This is certainly the case for simulations but also for games in general, which are systems of signification. Analyzing the meaning of a game’s signification adds to an argument that designers should take care in the implications of the game they are designing. How the player interacts, how the player experiences space and time—if the two are even to be divided when concerned with an Indigenous perspective—and how the player interprets the narrative elements should inspire unique interactive narrative systems of formal play. The RTS genre in general needs new mechanics in order to properly design play that is relevant for simulating North American Indigenous peoples and their culture. As is, *The WarChiefs* fails to properly represent the peoples and culture due to its inherent Western design that originates from the development history of the RTS genre and simulation wargames overall. Addressing this fault offers possibilities for new innovations in a genre that has mostly focused on improving aspects such as graphics and ping time rather than developing on the design and core mechanics, the most essential part of any game.

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