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ARTICLE

Against the game: Sid Meier's Civilization and vernacular theories of language

Kate Spowage (iD)

University of Leeds, UK
Email: k.s.spowage@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, I explore videogames, language ideologies, and vernacular theory. Specifically, I examine the politics of language in Sid Meier's Civilization, with an emphasis on the representation of toponymy and the renaming of places after conquest. Civilization players lead quasi-imperial states, capture 'cities' from opponents, and rename them. Despite limitations in the game code, players use online forums to develop their understanding of the politics of toponymy. I argue that they participate in 'vernacular theorising' to critically engage with language-ideological premises coded into Civilization. In doing so, they sometimes make politically sophisticated and progressive observations, while also accepting problematic premises that structure their in-game engagement with language. I offer a deep engagement with theories of interpretation and ideology, which is vital for exploring how players negotiate ludic language ideologies, itself an important problem for the future of the field given the stature of videogames in popular culture. (Language ideologies, videogames, postcolonialism)*

Introduction

Sid Meier's *Civilization* (1991–2025) is among the world's best-selling videogame franchises. Between 2010 and 2016, one billion hours were spent playing *Civilization V* (Meier 2020:1). The average *Civilization VI* player has dedicated an astonishing 366 hours to leading simulated human societies—'civs'—through history. Players spend this time on an earth-like map, exploring and colonising land, exploiting resources, and conquering enemy 'nations'. The colonial undertones of the game have not gone unnoticed, and among other things postcolonial critiques have charged the series with uncritically reproducing colonial myths, reducing indigenous peoples to resources for exploitation (Mir & Owens 2013), reifying the logic of settler colonialism and *terra nullius* (Keynes 2023; Leggott 2023), and reproducing universalist and Eurocentric grand narratives of history (Pobłocki 2002; Vrtačič 2014). These critiques examine the ideological significance of the games as texts, which shape players as political subjects and, in theory, interpellate them into a colonialist understanding of human societies. Given the amount of time players dedicate to

Civilization, the stakes are serious. *Civilization* exemplifies the ideological richness of videogame texts and the ideological saturation of leisure time spent in play (Cassar 2017). It is also one of few games that allows players to rename spaces, which makes it a valuable case study for exploring the politics of language. Specifically, players can rename cities, which they must establish, conquer, and nurture to succeed. This feature has been overlooked in research on *Civilization*, but it is popular among players. This article aims to examine *Civilization* with a focus on the representation of toponymy and empire, which has not been explored in postcolonial critiques despite the political significance of toponymy in colonial settings (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, & Azaryahu 2010). Focalising toponymy reveals the ideological nuance of *Civilization*, and the crucial role of player interpretation in meditating its meaning. As we see below, the renaming mechanic itself is relatively simple, but players give it complex language-ideological significance through their renaming practices and paratextual talk about toponymy on online forums. In this article, then, I use *Civilization* as a case study for exploring the circulation, contestation, and negotiation of language ideology, particularly in relation to the politics of toponymy and situated within the wider problematics of popular culture.

Research into language ideologies and videogames has thus far centred on sociolinguistic stereotyping and characterisation, rather than naming mechanics (Ensslin 2010, 2011; Goorimoorthee, Csipo, Carleton, & Ensslin 2019; Tarnarutckaia & Ensslin 2020; Burrell-Kim 2023; Stein 2023). Almost all of this research is centred on first- or third-person games in which players control an avatar that engages in dialogue. Grand strategy games, like *Civilization*, are hardly explored, if at all, from sociolinguistic perspectives, in part no doubt because they are not character-driven, but process-driven. Simply, they tend to have a smaller range of characters with less dialogue, and therefore to be less interesting for the representation of speakers. But they simulate grand historical processes—usually including colonisation and conquest—and make arguments about how these processes work by presenting certain outcomes on screen. Bogost calls this 'procedural rhetoric', which emerges from software's ability to 'represent process with process' and provide a framework for understanding the world through 'rules' (gameplay mechanics) that condition 'affordances' and 'restrictions' (what players can and cannot do), as well as consequences (Bogost 2007:14). Grand strategy games can, and frequently do, model how the act of conquering a city, or colonising new lands, changes the world, 'representing history with rules of interaction rather than patterns of writing' (2007:125). Yet, as I argue in the first section, *Civilization* undersells the impact of colonialism and conquest on sociolinguistic matters, be it the macro-level transformation of linguistic hierarchies and ecologies, or the micro-level renaming of spaces. There is a potential for radical sociolinguistic representation in simulating these changes and linking them procedurally, but it is not realised by this series. In the following three sections, though, I examine player talk about toponymy, through the lens of vernacular theory, to argue that in many cases players read *Civilization* 'against the grain' and interpret toponymy as a political issue that IS procedurally linked to expansion and settlement. The formation of language ideologies for *Civilization* players turns out to be complex and, in some ways, laden with misconceptions. Nevertheless, I argue that, especially given its tremendous popularity, *Civilization* creates opportunities for raising political

consciousness and critical language awareness which demand the attention of critical sociolinguists.

Toponyms and language in *Civilization*

The representation of toponyms in *Civilization* is governed by the fundamental logic through which it imagines human societies. As Bijsterveld Muñoz (2022) observes, civs are imagined as Herderian cultural nations, led by immortal historical figures who are associated with specific spaces, cultural configurations, chronotopes, and languages. Each faction has unique buildings, units, abilities, and theme music, which communicate an identity for it. England, led by Queen Victoria, has the 'Workshop of the World' ability, the Royal Navy Dockyard building, and, somewhat discordantly, an instrumental version of the English folk song *Scarborough Fair*. This is an industrial, seafaring, anglophone, and monolingual idea of England, which is recognisable but necessarily selective. These stereotypical identity markers do not change, and, especially since the game is designed to evoke a sense of history in the making, *Civilization* naturalises the idea that political entities like 'England' are timeless, authentic cultural wholes. These are terms of engagement written into *Civilization*'s code, as part of a procedural rhetoric that reproduces 'the general idea that expansionism and capitalistic endeavours are necessary if society is to thrive' (Cassar 2013:339). Players cannot escape the basic organising principles of the modern international system and global economy. *Civilization* also treats coin-based money and geopolitical borders as natural elements of human organisation, present from the dawn of time, rather than constructs arising from specific geohistorical conditions. Alternative possibilities are thereby erased: there is no way to play *Civilization* as an anarchist, and, consequently, no suggestion that an anarchist world is possible.

Language is depicted in this dynamic world of static nation-states. Hawreliak (2019) argues that procedural rhetoric should be considered one part of a multimodal ensemble—that is, as a distinct semiotic mode that interacts with other modes to make meaning. Procedurally, *Civilization* presents factions as fixed cultural units, without internal social conflict. *Scarborough Fair* communicates additional information about the identity of England, through the auditory mode. Text-internally, it links England to an instrumental musical pattern, but for those who recognise the tune it also associates the faction with monolingual lyrics in modern British English. Auditory and visual modes help to communicate three kinds of character in *Civilization VI*: a narrator, who reads the text that accompanies new discoveries in the language of the interface; an advisor, who occasionally provides guidance, also in the language of the interface; and civilisation leaders, each of which has seven voiced lines used in diplomatic encounters. Leaders are voiced in languages that are associated with them or the faction they represent through processes of iconicity and erasure (Irvine & Gal 2000). Cleopatra, leading Egypt, is voiced in Middle Egyptian, which reveals some of the complexities at hand. Egyptian Arabic would better reflect modern Egypt, while Coptic would be an alternative as the most modern descendent of Ancient Egyptian. Cleopatra could be voiced in Koine Greek, the ruling language of her Ptolemaic dynasty. But she is presented as a culturally and linguistically 'Egyptian' ruler, though—like Ptolemaic Egypt—she was multilingual.

Figure 1. Cleopatra as depicted in the diplomacy interface.

Players hear Middle Egyptian, which is subtitled in the language of the user interface and associated with a model of Cleopatra and her background image (Figure 1). This multimodal ensemble does complex work: it connects language, nation, and leader, each of which becomes linked with cultural, aesthetic, and spatiotemporal characteristics. Cleopatra's clothing and background place the Egyptian civ, and its language, in a hot climate and an ancient era, via aesthetics that are marked as Ancient Egyptian (such as the usekh broad collar necklace). Each language is similarly situated in a network of meaningful associations, all of which fit dominant imaginaries of cultural nations.

Toponyms are given to three types of place: buildings called 'wonders', which offer unique bonuses; geographical features, including unique natural formations like the Great Barrier Reef; and cities. Civic and geographical toponyms appear on the map, introducing a patchwork of toponyms to the playable space. Apart from unique natural formations, geographical features are named for proximity to the civilization being simulated (see Figure 2). City names are assigned from a roster, which reflect what is considered to be part of a country in the present moment. Hence England has Leeds, Sunderland, and Ipswich, all currently under the control of the British State, but not Kingston or Calais, despite both being previously ruled by the British Empire or the British Crown. Spain is the exception to this rule, its roster

Figure 2. The digital layout of the game. Coloured boxes signal cities (Babylonian in blue and Vietnamese in yellow). Geographical features are named and taken from primary world locations: Maharloo Lake (Iran) and the Hamad Desert (Western Iraq and elsewhere in the Levant) are close to historic Babylon, while Ba Bé Lake is in Vietnam.

including the formerly Spanish colonial cities of Oran (Algeria), Havana (Cuba), and Manila (Philippines). The city names provided are often exonyms, because they match the language of the user interface rather than the language associated with the faction. By contrast, wonders—whose names are not visualised on the map—use endonyms relatively often. Firaxis included more endonymic wonders in *Civilization VI* than earlier entries, which may be a response to long-standing critiques of eurocentrism (Mol, Politopoulos, & Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke 2017:217). That said, each wonder has a page in the in-game encyclopedia, and some use endonymic headings while 'othering' indigenous cultures. Huey Teocalli, for example, is represented as hosting 'curious celebrations... such as the Panquetzaliztli festival celebrating Huitzilopochtli, when an effigy of the god made from amaranth seeds, bones, honey, and human blood was venerated, then given over to the populace to be eaten'. Here indigenous religious practices are presented as historical curiosities, although other endonymic entries offer sardonic critiques of colonial powers: 'Kilwa Kisiwani flourished as a major trade city until the Portuguese arrived in 1498 to "make improvements" to the city's infrastructure (if extorting tribute can be considered an improvement)'. *Civilization* players interact with toponyms in several ways, then, and there is no coherent politics to their distribution and use.

Civilization radically breaks with sociolinguistic history in its treatment of conquest and colonisation: neither has a procedural consequence on linguistic matters, communicated by any mode. Toponyms do not change in conquest, or for any reason, except player intervention. Players can easily rename cities, but doing so has no impact on gameplay. There are no rewards or punishments; by design, *Civilization* simulates history without linguistic struggle. This is not a criticism, per se: all games simplify reality, guided by the knowledge and beliefs of design teams and the elusive recipe for a 'hit' product. Among those constraints and concerns, designers set linguistic struggle aside. As de Zamaróczy (2017) observes, political organisation is also

simplified: the player has unchallenged control of an omniscient state with perfect knowledge of the territories, peoples, and resources under its control. They also have the unchecked power to act. These representations intertwine: players can capriciously change names, knowing there will be no opposition. Crucially, these specific simplifications court specific interpretations. If *Civilization* acts as an ideological structure—if it inculcates beliefs in players—it works to instil beliefs about language and toponymy that are at once bound to nation-states and depoliticised. I use 'depoliticised' in a precise, rather than evaluative, sense: toponyms are portrayed as unaffected by political change, itself only visualised in the forms of conquest and colonisation, and there is no engagement with struggles over toponymy or the significant limitations on the ability of states to alter the placenames people use. There is also no engagement with the effects of expansion on linguistic hierarchies or linguistic ecologies. As postcolonial critics contend that *Civilization* persuades players to think in terms of 'nations' and '*terra nullius*', so too might players be expected to learn implicit lessons about the connection between language and nation (close, with a single, bounded language), the linguistic implications of colonial expansion (negligible), and the nature of toponymic reinscription (basically unproblematic and undertaken with executive fiat). But this presumes that procedural rhetoric interpellates without interruption, and that the basic ideological contours of the game covertly determine player experience. If we look to actual players, and their ludic and interpretative practices, the picture becomes rather more complicated.

Players, theorists, and forums

Cultural products are subject to interpretation. Ideological content might land—procedural rhetoric might interpellate—but it also might fail. Meaning is not 'found' but 'produced' or 'decoded' from texts. As Kreminski, Samuel, Melcer, & Wardrip-Fruin (2019:45) put it:

> players often imagine or create stories beyond those that are represented literally in the game. They may place unexpected weight on events or details, including apparently cosmetic ones, that seem inconsequential from a gameplay perspective; extrapolate the ramifications of events or details in ways that were not intended by the game's developers; and generally bring their own creativity and subjectivity to the process of narrativizing their play experiences.

For Toh (2019), player experience has a role in shaping the meaning of a videogame, alongside the gameplay mechanics and narrative elements within the text. This, in turn, introduces a host of factors that might affect the messages received from the game. Among them Toh (2019:ch. 6) includes the time a player has available to play and their level of gaming experience, and we should also acknowledge social positioning (class, ethnicity, gender, and so on), education, and the political and ideological milieu one inhabits. The impact of education is obvious, if not always examined, in academic critique; disciplinary tools and training enable scholars to interpret texts, including games, in specific ways. Lammes & de Smale (2018) make this explicit by playing *Civilization VI* and recounting their discomfort at its colonial undertones. Far from losing sight of their beliefs, they frame

the experience of play through their knowledge of postcolonial theory. In doing so, they intervene in postcolonial critiques that assume players will easily inhabit certain subject positions made available by the game (the 'coloniser', the 'imperialist', the 'warmonger'). Their response is shaped by their being professional intellectuals, trained in critical thinking, but we should not presume that people without such training respond to games uncritically.

I argue that the concept of *vernacular theory* offers some insight into how non-professional players interact with *Civilization* (see Baker 1984; Gates 1988; McLaughlin 1997). Vernacular theory names the everyday acts of theorising and 'making sense' of the world that people engage in, which can run counter to the ideological structures we all navigate. Hall makes the point that '[i]deas only become effective if they do, in the end, CONNECT with a particular constellation of social forces' (1986:42). This relates to history and lived experience: if 'definitions imposed from above simply don't match daily social experience', you 'either deny yourself or learn to question authorized versions' (McLaughlin 1997:21; see also Hall 1986:41–42). For McLaughlin, vernacular theory and academic critical theory both serve to challenge cultural assumptions that are naturalised by ideology—they are the same sort of activity, but differ in status, rigour, and linguistic register (1997:6). McLaughlin (a literary critic by training) exemplifies the point with a conversation between four strangers, overhead on a train from New York to North Carolina. All four used varieties of English that are marked in terms of race or class, and they began 'trading stories about dialects and social judgements based on speech and style' (1997:27). McLaughlin (1997:28) sums up that:

> none of the people in this conversation had heard of sociolinguistics or the academic debates over Black English and other questions of the politics of verbal style. But they had moved in their talk from specific linguistic examples to a discussion of the cultural definitions of language use, organized around the marks of distinction produced by gender, race, and class.

The subject of speech became a starting point for vernacular theorising—for interrogating the politics of language and linguicism. Together, through interaction, anecdotes, and reflection, they found ways to recognise and critique sociolinguistic structures and hierarchies.

The point that videogames cannot control the beliefs of players is critical, and the concept of vernacular theory helps to explain what happens when players are not 'duped'. The easiest conclusion is that such players are 'resisting' ideology, but this explanation has limitations. It suggests a binary between the 'resistant' and the 'duped', caricaturistic positions which underestimate the complexity of ideology. Gramsci argued that ideology has a 'material structure', encompassing 'everything that directly influences or could influence public opinion... libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture, the layout of streets and their names' (1930/1996:52–53). Any ideological text is only part of the ideological structure in which a player (or reader, or viewer) is immersed. Players NEGOTIATE ideology, adopting, adapting, and rearticulating ideological elements from the text and connecting them with existing beliefs and ideological currents from elsewhere. Negotiating ideology might lead to responses that are more progressive or political

than a given text, and/or to the reproduction of associations that serve established power relations and social structures. Thus McLaughlin argues that vernacular theorists constantly raise 'fundamental questions about culture' in 'ordinary language', but suffer from the lack of precision 'unselfconscious language creates' (1997:5). They are 'canny about some of the institutions they encounter but naïve about others' (1997:22), often framing questions through 'local' or situated concerns rather than attempts to produce 'macrosystems of explanation' (1997:6). Concretely, a vernacular theory might arise as an attempt to make sense of a text, alone or as part of a community, and the conclusions drawn might be neither systematic nor rigorous. Still, they may seed a more complex and critical understanding of the issues depicted.

This sounds rather abstract, so it is worth returning to *Civilization*. Like strangers on a train, gamers often discuss their experiences of play with one another, through retellings and other kinds of interaction. As Gee puts it, they 'engage in their own "game studies" as they play, reflect on, and talk about games' (2014:30). For him, players 'become experts without any formal credentials' (2014:34). This 'expertise' is developed in multiple ways. Players experiment with gameplay systems and research phenomena portrayed in games. They join communities, including online forums, to develop ideas and 'theorise'. In different terms, Jeremiah McCall (2018) has made the point that *Civilization* forums are sites for 'participatory public history'. He means that, despite the fictive elements of history in *Civilization*, the discussions players have about the game are tantamount to explorations of the past and its representation. For instance, McCall examines a debate over the absence of slavery in *Civilization*, undertaken on the *Civilization Fanatics* fan forum. The question at issue is whether *Civilization* sanitises history by not simulating slavery. The discussion allows players to deliberate the moral and ethical issues around the treatment of slavery and to think about the concrete historical (and contemporary) reality of enslavement (McCall 2018:415). In this case, the ideological impact of the game is derived at least as much from discussion as from the text and gameplay experience. *Civilization* becomes a tool to think with, an interface for confronting and exploring issues. Whatever it means to avoid depicting slavery, players recognise it as a specific choice that belies historical reality. This critical examination suggests vernacular theorising, and it is also evident in online discussions about *Civilization*, language, and toponymy.

To explore how *Civilization* players negotiate ideas about language, I have analysed data from three popular forums. Following McCall, I examine *Civilization Fanatics*, alongside the subreddits *r/Civ* and *r/CivVI*. Forum users discuss and debate *Civilization*, while also engaging in sociopragmatic language games and making claims for different kinds of identities and capital (see also Tarnarutckaia & Ensslin 2020). To understand the forum cultures, I adopted a 'netnographic' approach (Kozinets 2015). I found that conversations are often fragmented; some posts never receive a response, while thematically similar posts are sometimes scattered across the forums. Some posters bring formal learning or independent research to bear on debates, while others offer no evidence for their claims. Posts are an observable aspect of the negotiation of ideology, but this process also has private elements in thought and reflection. Thus, even posts that receive no engagement can have an impact if read by those who 'lurk' on the forums (reading but never posting).

Considered together, the posts form an ideological paratext, constructed in dialogue with the text itself (Tarnarutckaia & Ensslin 2020:2). To triangulate 'naturally occurring' theorisations of toponymy within the data, I adopted 'renam*', 'city nam*', and 'chang* name' as search terms, intending to collect a dataset covering all threads (collections of connected posts) that involved discussion of toponyms over roughly two years (October 2021 to November 2023). However, the *Civilization Fanatics* search engine was unable to accommodate wildcards or to reliably impose date limits on results. As a contingency, I searched each inflection of the search terms individually, and collected the 'top' threads from *Civilization Fanatics*, which seemed to be chosen by a formula of search term relevance and date. I read all posts, and excluded several which were irrelevant. I anonymised players and assigned them numbers for ethical reasons, with those who initiate threads additionally labelled as 'OP' ('original poster') to clarify their role in discussion. I then used inductive coding to mark emerging themes of the data, (such as 'language play', 'storytelling', and 'power'). Several particularly rich posts and threads emerged from this process, which I read in relation to the language-ideological text and vernacular theory. The discussion below is centred on these examples, as an eclectic exploration of the data that offers insight into the negotiation of language ideology on the forums.

Language, toponymy, and politics on the forums

Despite *Civilization*'s procedural rhetoric, most forum users treat toponymy as political, in the senses that it is or should be affected by conquest or colonisation, and that it registers or reflects power relations, particularly via indexical links to discrete cultural nations. Only two posters, in separate threads, deny that placenames are political—and in both cases others contest the point. In the most interesting of these, OP begins by requesting technical advice on renaming 'Kiev' to 'Kyiv' in the game code. The context ('reasons that may or may not be obvious') is the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The request tracks geopolitical and language-ideological shifts: the war prompted public discussion about whether to call the Ukrainian capital 'Kiev' (transliterated from Russian *Киев*) or 'Kyiv' (Ukrainian *Київ*). Kushner (2022) summarises the thinking: 'spelling it as Kyiv means you acknowledge that it is a Ukrainian city', while using 'Kiev' signals that 'you agree with the worldview of Vladimir Putin'. Whether or not real use is so straightforward, using 'Kyiv' has become an intelligible expression of support for Ukrainian independence. The OP makes a technical request, then, but is also demonstrating their knowledge of the politics of toponymy, and by extension taking a position on the invasion. Most responses treat the thread in the terms set by OP—as a request for technical assistance. The exchange below is an exception:

(1)
P639 [11]:   Why though? It has always historically been named Kiev; History as well as today are no different, despite current events going on.

P434 [4]:   Not to mention the name is different in different languages. Mine is Slavic, so is my secondary language and both spell is as Kiev

P634 (OP) [-3]: You didn't answer my question. I'm not here to have a conversation, I'm asking how to edit game files.

P639 [-8]:   It seems pointless to do though.. you're asking how to deny history in an entire game about world history to support a current issue.

               I'm just saying it doesn't make sense.

P634 (OP) [24]: Thanks for the input. You're right - while playing as Emperor Ramesses II of the Ancient Egyptian Empire and fighting King Washington of America with Giant Death Robots, I've learned much about world history and would hate to sully that by changing a name in personal solidarity with a country defending itself from a tyrant IRL.

In effect, P639 denies that names are political. 'Current events'—the war—are figured as external to toponymy, suggesting that placenames are stable not only through time but through history. P434 does not deny toponymic politics, but critiques the premise of 'Kyiv-as-solidarity' from a different angle—'Kiev' is used in non-Russian Slavic languages. Both contributions give reasons for using 'Kiev' that are not imperialist, though players may deem them inadequate. The OP frames these contributions as inappropriate for the thread, restating technical advice as the conversational goal. The numbers displayed above represent the balance of 'upvotes' and 'downvotes' (roughly analogous to 'likes' and 'dislikes') on a post. OP's first response is downvoted, and we can only speculate as to why. It could be that others find the topic important, or that attempting to end the conversation is simply a *faux pas.* Users may see the technical rationale for the thread as disingenuous; elsewhere in the thread, someone notes that OP could have got the advice they needed without mentioning the specific names they wanted to change, implying that they intended to make a political point. Ultimately, the balance of opinion falls in P634's favour. P639's final post is downvoted to the point that it is hidden on Reddit (one must actively request to see it). They restate their argument about history; in response, and to resounding upvotes, the OP sarcastically critiques the idea that historical accuracy should trump political solidarity in *Civilization*'s toponymy. They do not refute the premise that the city has always been called 'Kiev', but they explain that the use of either name is political. We should not overdetermine the significance of the votes, but they seem to indicate that others agree.

Toponyms become touchstones for political conversations and stance-taking across the dataset. Cree placenames like Pihtokahanapiwiyin are often exoticised by players. In (2), (3), and (4), forum users position Cree placenames like Pihtokahanapiwiyin as nonsensical or strange, contextualising the 'correction' of sorts in (5).

(2)   Some cat just walk on the keyboard
(3)   Is it some form of Klingon?
(4)   It shortens as 'keyboard mashinople'
(5)   The Cree language only barely had writing so these names were supposed to be said. and no, those drummers aren't singing in Cree either, they're just vocalizing.

The first sentence of (5) seems to register that Cree was an oral language until the 1800s. The second sentence references the Cree theme music, which is unique for including human voices, as vocalisations. This player is the first to raise the use of voices in the Cree soundtrack, but in phrasing their comment as a response to the presumption that the voices are singing, they imply that they expect other forum users to be ignorant of the distinction between singing and vocalisation. Talk about toponyms thus leads to this player intervening in the presumed ignorance of the playership around Cree culture. That said, (5) also situates the Cree language and placenames in the past, a practice another player takes issue with in a separate thread:

(6)
P359:   Wait till you learn about Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubua-
         gungamaugg Yeahhhh... The Native Americans liked long names for things.
         It's amazing
P370:   considering Indigenous peoples still exist, and considering many still refer
         to these places in their own languages, it's a continuing practice. they liked
         to do it but they also like to do it. if Indigenous erasure weren't a problem
         then it would be fine to leave it past tense, but erasure is very prevalent, and
         so it's better to avoid only using past tense.

Rather than providing what would seem to be a preferred response—a sense of wonder at the exceptionally long toponym, or, indeed, the history behind it—P370 critiques the presupposition that indigenous American languages are no longer used and the pursuant suggestion that indigenous people no longer exist or are no longer culturally distinct. In the interactional context, the injunction serves as a performance of progressive political knowledge, similar in function to (5), and together the two examples offer some insight into the kinds of informal social sanctions that might pertain to certain views on the forums. This is another layer of complexity in the ideological surrounds of *Civilization*, which becomes an integral part of the ideological paratext and its construction. It also indicates the potential for even dismissive or exoticising comments to inspire more critical engagements with the text and its representations. Toponymic choices are cast as politically significant, with properly ideological significance in terms of erasing or acknowledging indigenous groups in North America.

The idea that toponymic choices are politically significant informs practices and narrations of renaming, which in turn offer insights into vernacular theories of language. Regarding toponymy, it is important that while *Civilization* depoliticises placenames in the sense explained above, it also positions players as heads of state and, if they choose to play this way, warmongers. This is often the vantage point from which players approach toponymy, informally theorising toponymic change in contexts of violent subjugation. Examples are scattered across the dataset. The logic is often implicit, though here (7) offers some insight into (8) and (9) (each is from a different thread).

(7)   You Germans... know who owns you when Berlin becomes Berlinopolis
(8)   Londongrad

(9)   Londonbul

Linguistic bricolage is used to assert ownership over territory, drawing links between two iconised national languages through toponymic morphemes. Elsewhere a similar kind of symbolic domination is achieved by inscribing the conquered city with lexical and semantic elements connected to the conquering force. As Spain, one player names conquered cities 'Nueva X' because 'I thought it would be how a real empire would do things'; another renames Washington 'New Beijing' 'just to rub salt in the wound'. Both examples embrace the subject position of conqueror, using gameplay mechanics to echo historical colonial naming practices, while also adapting them for different iconised languages and cultural nations.

Storytelling sometimes allows players to cultivate implicit theories. Take (10), where a player renames conquered cities but leaves the first letter unchanged.

(10)   This way, the new citizens of my empire know where they belong and, in my infinite benevolence as a merciless conqueror, their original heritage is represented by one single letter. Rejoice citizens!

This is a self-conscious, satirical comment on the player's own performance of domination in the position of conqueror. They revel in the position, but not uncritically; in fact, precisely by roleplaying the conqueror, they perceive and reveal the possibility of renaming places as part of the consolidation of empire. This tendency is more pronounced in a thread that opens with a detailed narrativisation of two in-game wars between the player (Germany) and a CPU opponent (Australia). The player had, at the time of writing, conquered Australia's capital city, effectively defeating the faction. They frame this as 'revenge' because Australia started the war. They write 'I want to rename their capital to erase all of their existence', having already 'erased their culture by renaming [Newcastle, another Australian city] 'New Berlin''. The suggestion, clearly, is that toponymic reinscription is a form of cultural erasure. This is a popular thread, and the story is upvoted and applauded by commenters. Fellow players offer a broad range of potential names: puns, insults, the names of 'bad neighbourhoods' in Canberra. Nobody refutes the cultural erasure premise. The conceptualisation of naming as political, cultural, and symbolic defies *Civilization*'s processual depoliticisation of toponyms, while embracing elements the cultural-nationalist organisation that render these plays at subjugation intelligible as instances of one nation dominating another.

In the examples above, and those that follow, players engage in and narrate exercises in speculative toponymy. These are not attempts to faithfully represent renaming as it has occurred in the primary world, but rather experiments with gameplay mechanics that make it possible to imagine novel instances of toponymic change. Yet these changes are not divorced from the colonial history that *Civilization* draws on and reimagines. They respond to it, in some cases modelling colonial toponymic dynamics (as with 'Nueva X'), and in others using city names as a tool to explore the relationship between colonisation and toponymy. While *Civilization* does not portray this as a processual relationship, it becomes processual through player action, and the processes initiated by players form the basis of much of the

online discussion. The best example of this point, which I explore below, involves posts by several forum users but is focalised around the practices of one player who discusses their experience playing as Ireland in unusual detail. It demonstrates how language-ideological strands intertwine for more developed vernacular theories that are both thought-provoking and flawed, repoliticising toponymy while missing crucial nuances in the politics of language.

Speculative toponymy and postcolonial revenge

The thread begins in a playful frame, with users rendering French toponyms in English orthography (e.g. 'Marsay' for 'Marseille'). In their first post, P271 introduces their account as 'how I entertain myself while dominating the map'. Playing as Ireland, they 'immediately' Gaelicise (their term) the names assigned to Irish cities, giving three examples derived from toponyms in the Republic of Ireland:

(11) Donegal → Dún na nGall
(12) Kilkenny → Cill Ceannaigh
(13) Dublin → Baile Átha Cliath

The player is responding to the history of Irish toponymy. When the British State ordered the systematic mapping of colonial Ireland, it also oversaw the anglicisation of Irish placenames. Some were translated, with Irish morphemes substituted for English equivalents, but often English orthography was used to approximate Irish phonology, severing semantic connections to local lands, communities, and histories (see Nash 2009). The process was part of the establishment of English dominance in Ireland—in Nash's words, 'a form of colonial cultural violence deeply tied to the late nineteenth-century decline of the Irish language' (2009:140). Placenames were discussed by Irish cultural nationalists, who were consequential actors in the Irish anticolonial resistance. Douglas Hyde (1892), who would become the first President of the Republic of Ireland, called on 'a native Irish government… to provide for the restoration of our place-names on something like a rational basis'. Hyde called this restoration the 'de-anglicisation' of Ireland, and this is precisely what P271 seems to attempt. 'Donegal', 'Kilkenny', and 'Dublin' were all coined as phonological approximations of Irish placenames. In (11) and (12), P271 replaces the anglicised toponym with its pre-anglicisation counterpart. The different renaming logic in (13) replicates the usual Irish name for Dublin, Baile Átha Cliath, rather than 'Duiblinn', the Irish source for the anglicised toponym. At one level, (13) reflects actual practice, but there is also a rhetorical force to the decision, which emphasises the gulf between English and Irish placenames. This is not simply an exercise in translation, and together the examples suggest a certain historical linguistic awareness on the part of the player, alongside an investment in the linguistic 'Irishness' of their part of the map.

The registration of common Irish usage in (13) seems to be intertwined with P271's sense that the 'less-English' toponym is inherently the more authentic or autochthonous one, an idea that is drawn out by the fact that they also 'de-anglicise' (their term) Scottish placenames:

(14)   Edinburgh → Dùn Èideann
(15)   Glasgow → Glaschu
(16)   Aberdeen → Aibher Deathan

In Scotland, however, the British State had no systematic renaming programme. Scottish toponyms, in general, evolved diachronically, influenced by the ethnolinguistic diversity of medieval Scotland. Gaelic, also known as Scots Gaelic or Gàidhlig, was spoken predominantly in the Highlands, while Inglis, or Early Scots, was dominant in the Lowlands. The first of these languages is considered a sister to Irish (which is also called Irish Gaelic or Gaeilge), the second an ancestor to Scots or Scottish English. All of these naming choices are political, and they offer different ways to narrate the proximity of linguistic varieties used in Scotland to Ireland, England, a Gaelic family, and a Germanic (or narrowly English) family. These varieties are, accordingly, embedded in nationalist politics in complex ways. The Irish language has an enduring connection with Irish Republicanism, such that gaelicising Irish placenames is intelligible as a republican act. Scots Gaelic, by contrast, has a more recent and more ambiguous position in Scottish nationalist movements. In fact, struggles for Scottish constitutional sovereignty have tended to use Scots as a national symbol (Paterson, O'Hanlon, Ormston, & Reid 2014). It is not the case, then, that Scottish and Irish nationalist politics are both intertwined, at least to the same degree, with Gaelic languages. The linguistic politics of Ireland and Scotland are further complicated by the fact that Northern Irish loyalists link Ulster-Scots—another Germanic language—to Scots, as part of a claim to cultural and ethnic Britishness (see Crowley 2006). P271, then, recognises that language was (or is) an arena of struggle in the colonial British Isles, but in their speculative toponymy they treat Gaelic names as always being more authentic than Germanic counterparts. Thus, in their words, they use 'the actual Irish name'. The implication, which simplifies Scottish toponomy significantly, is that the new names in (14), (15), and (16) would be the actual (authentic) Scottish names.

The renaming practice above makes sense from the perspective of a theory of British constitutional and colonial history as a matter of discrete, national powers, representative of already-formed national cultures, controlling territory, and naming it accordingly. Thus, a pre-colonial past is figured as the authentic locus of national culture, making 'de-anglicisation' a method of national restoration for Irish and Scottish places alike. If this rejects the procedural treatment of toponymy as unrelated to conquest in *Civilization*, it clearly echoes the multimodal link that the game establishes between discrete nations and languages. In fact it goes further, by situating toponyms within the realm of nationally circumscribed culture, as with several examples above, against the game's practice of rendering toponyms in the language of the user interface. From this position, P271 asserts an alternative cultural and political organisation, imagining the 'Celtic Fringe' as a cultural-political unit in opposition to England. These strands of thinking are drawn out in a discussion that takes place following P271's first post, in which P170 (OP) and P264 deliberate over which most 'deserves' to be featured in *Civilization*: Ireland or Scotland. P170 (OP) argues that Scotland is 'already somewhat covered' by the inclusion of England, which they see as 'basically a British civ'. Again, the contribution traces the contested cultural mappings of the British Isles: here Scotland is seen as Germanic

(British) with Ireland as Gaelic (it is not clear whether this applies to the Republic or the island of Ireland). P271 responds:

(17)   if anything was going to be combined, I think making a Gael Civ out of Ireland and Scotland would be much better than lumping either of them with England as 'British'.

P271 repositions Scotland as having a national affinity with Ireland, in distinction from England. In doing so, they mobilise an understanding of history that is not derived from *Civilization* as a text. They write that the Celts of Ireland and the Western Highlands (Goiedelic Celts) were uniquely able to resist the incursions of the Roman Empire, claiming a shared history of resistance for Ireland and Scotland as cultural nations. They use renaming to stage a Gael nationalism that echoes—perhaps resuscitates—historic linguistic and cultural connections. Like all nationalisms, it is deeply selective, ignoring complexities that are central to cultural and constitutional problems in Britain and Ireland. *Civilization*'s representation of the nation is accepted while its delinking of colonialism from toponymic and sociolinguistic struggle is rejected. Instead, renaming is seen as a form of political resistance on behalf of 'authentic' (meaning 'Gaelic') Irish and Scottish cultures, in explicit opposition to England and the English language.

Because it is conceptualised as intimately political, toponymy becomes available as a tool for reversing colonial naming policy and imagining its application to a colonised anglophone power—the USA. Thus, as Ireland, P271 also 'Gaelicise[s] the English names'. They give these examples:

(18)   Baltimore → Baile an Tí Mhóir
(19)   Cleveland → Claimh Land or Tír na Claimh
(20)   New York → íorcaidh Nuadh

P271 acknowledges that there is a continuum here, between names that were 'originally' Irish in (18) and Gaelic names that they construct in (19) and (20). Below is their most explicit reflection on this practice:

(21)   I feel like renaming cities is a little rebelling for hundreds of years of England making speaking Irish and Scottish punishable by death in an effort to erode the sense of culture and national identity.

Here, the player explicitly positions their ludic practices as a form of rebellion, something that scholars might theorise as 'everyday resistance' (see Scott 1985). They are imagined as small insurrections inspired by historic injustices to Irish and Scottish people at the hands of England (whether that term refers to the State, the 'nation', or something else entirely). This implicitly confronts the ideological work of *Civilization*, and in doing so P271 builds a critical awareness of the colonial politics of language. Like other examples that weaponise toponymy to stage symbolic dominance, it suggests a perception of something that might be called ideological in toponyms themselves, with gaelicising placenames presented as supportive of a Gael nationalism. True to the nature of vernacular theory, it also marries valuable insights

with misconceptions. Certainly, cultural and linguistic subordination was part of the consolidation of Great Britain. But Irish and Scots Gaelic have never been targeted by a death penalty, even if a more nuanced and complex argument could be made that both were imbricated in 'slow death' by social and political exclusion (see Roche 2022). Linguonyms are enlisted to support P271's Gaelic nationalism, breaking from mainstream use: the term 'Irish' is commonly used for the Gaelic varieties of Ireland, but 'Scottish' is not an analogous term for Scots Gaelic—when used, it is more often a synonym for 'Scots' or 'Scots English', aligning it with the opposite position in this binary cultural politics. The Baltimore example (18) also gives a sense of the detail that might be missed in this kind of theorising. The American city was named for Anglo-Irish Lord Cecil Calvert, 2nd Baron Baltimore. The Barony was named for Baltimore Manor, a tract of confiscated Irish land gifted to George Calvert in 1622. The Crown's design was that 'through the guidance of their English landlords, the native population was to become anglicized and hopefully adopt the Protestant faith' (Lyttleton 2017:46). It is unclear whether, as per (18), 'Baltimore' derived from *Baile an Tí Mhóir* 'Town of the Big House', but the US city was certainly named for the Calvert family—Anglo-Irish landlords facilitating the plantation of Ireland. This example suggests the difficulties in recovering an 'uncorrupted' Irish toponymy and culture from historic English expropriation and exploitation. Importantly, *Civilization*'s depiction of homogeneous, unchanging cultural nations solicits the more simplistic language-ideological reading.

Toponymy, play, and politics

To conclude this article, I want to draw out some of the stakes of this discussion, for a critical, political consideration of language ideologies in popular culture. *Civilization* is the product of a videogame industry that has roots in resistant cultural practices but, to paraphrase Hall, is nevertheless organised by capital for players (1981/2018:351; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009). Critics have demonstrated that the text naturalises capitalist and colonialist versions of human progress, and scholars recognise it as part of a dominant, mainstream culture that is hardly counter-hegemonic (Bogost 2007; Cassar 2013). It does not aim for a radical or even coherent depiction of sociolinguistic politics, tying languages to multimodally constructed Herderian nations but featuring no connection in the procedural mode between language and conquest—even though conquest is figured as the victory of one cultural (and linguistic) nation over another. But crucially, to echo Hall, there is a 'dialectic of cultural struggle' around *Civilization* (1981/2018:354). Vernacular theory captures part of this struggle, whereby players make something unexpected of the text by resisting and incorporating distinct elements of its ideological makeup. Hall argues that popular culture is a 'battlefield where no once-and-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost' (1981/2018:354). *Civilization* seems to bank victories for fundamental principles of the extant world order, including the Herderian language ideology that is intertwined with the global system of nation-states. Yet in a meaningful way players capture the terrain of toponymy, whence they launch an offensive on colonialist domination even while playfully inhabiting its central positions of power. Put in less militarised terms, the (language-)ideological impact of *Civilization* is uneven

in its uptake, meaning that we must attenuate our critiques of the text with an understanding of how ideology is negotiated by players.

The vernacular theories that players develop, in dialogue or otherwise, also play an important role in altering the conditions of interpretation for other players. In this sense, vernacular theorising joins the procedural mode (Bogost 2007) and wider multimodal ensembles (Hawreliak 2019) including player experience (Toh 2019) as an element of the construction of meaning in videogames. In part, this is because the players who share thoughts on the forums are, ipso facto, writing the ideological paratext in a particular way. For the dataset considered here, at least, this paratext treats renaming as a political act—almost universally. Players can also modify or 'mod' *Civilization,* adding factions, changing graphics, or altering core gameplay mechanics. As Kurashige points out, the changes introduced to modified games can indicate 'the extent to which players recognize and respond to the limitations and shortcomings of... procedural rhetoric' (2019:11). For her, players who reject and rewrite elements of procedural rhetoric become 'cultural producers in their own right', renegotiating the ideological terms established by videogame corporations (2019:11). The interpretative, critical responses of players inform the creation of an alternative product, usually distributed for free. There are, in fact, several *Civilization* mods that change toponymic mechanics. The most popular, 'Rosetta', echoes the contributions of several players quoted above by situating toponyms within the realm of national culture, dynamically changing city names according to the national language associated with their owners. The mod creates a processual link between conquest and toponymy—'Napoli' becomes 'Nápoles' when conquered by Spain—but it remains incapable of simulating a multilingual power, reproducing the suggestion that one nation speaks one language. Without radically changing the fundamental rules of the game, it cannot show players that toponymic change is often instigated by changes of regime, as examples from Nazi Germany and the USSR satellite countries demonstrate (see Buchstaller, Fabiszak, Alvanides, Brzezińska, & Dobkiewicz 2024). There are suggestions for new mods across the forums, which would alter the importance of toponymic change by, for example, dynamically renaming geographical features in response to conquest and expansion, or introducing a 'happiness' penalty when players rename cities. At present, these more complex mods have not been made, but the fact that they have been proposed offers some insight into how players respond to *Civilization*'s procedural rhetoric, and how the conditions of interpretation could be altered for future players.

It is important to register the complexity of language-ideological uptake and the recursive potential for vernacular theorising to alter the ideological text or paratext, but it is crucial that we seriously consider the political potential of popular plays with toponymy. Placenames are touchstones for cultural struggle, in narrativisations of *Civilization* and beyond. On the forums, the meaning of renaming as an act is struggled over, as players refuse to mirror the text in detaching language from symbolic domination. Toponymy also becomes an entry-point for confronting other ideological premises, linguistic and non-linguistic. Conceptualising talk on the forums as evidence of vernacular theorising allows us to recognise rippling confrontations with ideology, where, for instance, the ideological consignment of indigenous American cultures to the past is called into question through the discussion of

toponyms. *Civilization*, it turns out, can register an anti-imperialist accent, or a popular postcolonial critique. This reluctance to think SOLELY about language in conversations about toponymy hints at the possibility for these practices and discussions to play a role in the formation of players as political subjects with a certain kind of sociolinguistic awareness. It is as though they recognise a conspicuous absence in the procedural rhetoric, a failure to simulate the sociolinguistic processes of war and empire, and they respond accordingly. This is, in potential at least, a process of political awakening: as McLaughlin argues, 'ideological power isn't total… political resistance is made possible by intellectual critique, and… it is not only "intellectuals" who can produce that critique' (1997:29). Critical engagements with *Civilization* create opportunities for collaborative reflections and vernacular theorising, sensitising players to the importance of toponymy in the exercise, extension, and contestation of political power. If they recognise toponymic struggles in action, they can access a deeper understanding of some of the ambitious political projects of our time. It may not escape the attention of these players that on the day his second presidential term was inaugurated, Donald Trump ordered that 'the Gulf of Mexico' and 'Denali' be renamed 'the Gulf of America' and 'Mount McKinley' respectively, as part of an ideological programme positioning himself as an American patriot. Players might also become aware of the Kiev/Kyiv question and the 'Hinduisation' of Indian toponyms like 'Islamabad', both mentioned in passing on the forums, alongside the changing territorial coordinates of 'Palestine' and 'Israel'. One question that remains, and is beyond the scope of this article, is how that critical sociolinguistic awareness might be transmuted into political engagement or action. For our purposes, the point is that players are neither resistant nor duped; they think, negotiate, and create opportunities for a deeper understanding of subtle operations of power.

Finally, it is worth restating that, with some seventy million sales, *Civilization* is POPULAR, in the sense that it inspires sustained and significant engagement from a global audience. There is stiff competition in the videogame market; *Call of Duty*, another game structured around national political units, boasts half a billion units sold. If we are to understand the circulation and contestation of language ideologies, and ideology in a more general sense, we must work with these texts in careful and critical ways. Among game studies scholars, at least, it is widely accepted that videogames now sit among the ideological material that shapes social thought, but it is worth returning to Stuart Hall's account of popular culture to clarify their importance. Hall (2018:360–61) writes:

> Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture—already fully formed—might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters.

Vernacular theorising works towards the constitution of a new culture in demarcated online spaces—not a socialist one, but one that seems critical of colonialism, symbolic domination, and indigenous erasure, to name a few themes that are drawn

out in the paratext. It is not, straightforwardly, a culture of the powerful. This game, which has been roundly and justly critiqued by postcolonial critics, emerges as a cultural terrain turned against its own most problematic entanglements. Players critique colonisation, in some cases mobilising the conceptual link between a single language, a discrete nation, and a national territory. This mirrors historical anticolonial movements undertaken on cultural nationalist grounds, and in discussions around Cree, Irish, and Gaelic placenames there are echoes of the logic that a people are identifiable and sovereign because they share a language. Where these critiques lead is an open question. This is a pervasive and problematic language-ideological issue: the idea of a national language has contributed to the rise and fall of political orders, but in many contexts also governs a politics of discrimination, assimilation, and linguistic insecurity. It has long been propagated through mechanisms like national literary canons and national presses, and now it appears to be embedded in one of the best-selling videogame franchises of all time. This alone signals the need for sociolinguists to engage in rigorous, critical examination of language ideologies in videogames, using tools that allow us to clarify and critique meaning between text, player, and vernacular theory.

Notes.

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