

What Makes a Leader Great? A Reflection on Civilization V: Brave New World

written by Rory Fleming | August 8, 2014



Have you ever felt wooed by power? The desire to have your name jotted down in history's endless tomes? *Civilization V: Brave New World* provides the cure. You can finally step inside the mind of a Genghis Khan, a Sejong, a George Washington of the United States. Your leader can suit your personality, because you have the choice. What kind of power would you seek?

Next, do you want to be the world leader through diplomacy, destruction, culture or scientific progress? As you build your empire from a tiny capital city up to a sprawling masterpiece, complete with infrastructure, infantry, and relics, you make decisions that aggregate toward a goal in real time. It is up to you to make history—do you have what it takes?

By nature of its powerful content and egalitarian approach (any civ can win any given game), the game has a powerful metanarrative. You can choose to inhabit one of a dozen historical empires from the perspective of a famous (or infamous) leader. And as you are trying to select one from the game setup menu, you wouldn't be wrong to recognize that some of these leaders are "losers" in some major sense of the word. Either the empire shattered and is no more than some ruins in a suburb of Tunisia (e.g. Carthage), it was never really very impressive on a world scale (e.g. Siam), or your "empire" wasn't really one at all (e.g. Shoshone).

However, the point of *Civilization V* is that you have the capacity to change the course of history forever. Are you Pocatello of the Shoshone? Your strengths are coded in an abstract sense to what they would have been in your life, except that the game assumes that you were building up your nation from 4000 BC to 2050 AD. Then, you would have a shot at sending America back to the Dark Ages. With nukes. Or if you wanted to be more peaceful, you could win by merit of reaching Alpha Centauri first with your superior scientific might, or do the same through cultural imperialism or leading the World Congress. Unlikely, yes, if you are looking at things through the lens of a textbook. But Sid Meier and Firaxis set the rules here. And who knows, if the Shoshone and America had an equal start in terms of time and resources, would Washington still have come out on top? These are the fascinating questions that the game has us ask.

The other aspect of the game that is worthy of consideration is its choice of leaders. How do we decide who a historically mighty ruler is? Whose name sends shivers down the spine of history? Is it a leader who protected his or her people against insurmountable odds and was in the end snuffed out like a dog? I apologize to you, Haile Selassie, though there are people on Earth who still consider you a prophet or God. Or is it a name that, through some

combination of good-heartedness and mental illness, let a rising colony go?

Let's take a look at some hypotheses:

1. We romanticize an era gone by and the leader's personality as emblematic of that era.



Civ V's take on Poland's Casimir the Great

Poland, led by Casimir III the Great, is arguably one of the strongest civilizations in the game. He also has the best music. The Poland that he represents is a Poland before the one tarnished by modernity, most notably during the German Occupation during World War II. Millions of Jews were killed during that time, as anyone alive after 1930 would know. In Casimir's time, though, Poland was a great, regal nation. Casimir himself was a noble and just king. He was skeptical toward absolute sovereignty; he was derided by some as the "Peasants' King." He defended Jews strongly, enforcing a law that called for a death sentence when defendants kidnapped Jewish children "for the purpose of enforced Christian baptism." All in all, one cannot see much to dislike in Casimir, unless you strongly dislike (1) beards; (2) the working poor; (3) Jews; and/or (3) Poles.

But the sad truth is that Poland had a rough time in the last century. After World War II, Poland got swept up by the opportunism of the Soviet Union, which was trying to spread the influence of communism to Eastern European nations. After a time, Poland came to be considered a Soviet satellite with little of its own agency. It was only in 1989, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that Poland became once more an independent Republic. However, do we not romanticize better times? Is that not part of what it is to be human?

2. Sometimes a leader's incompetence is charming (in retrospect, or to the other side).



Maria I of Portugal

Maria I of Portugal is a notably controversial choice. And it is understandable: she went mad. When she started to lose her mind, as the story goes, she ordered all court festivities mirror the austere nature of a church service. Later, when in an asylum in Brazil, her screams could be heard from the street! In a world that still stigmatizes mental illness, her accomplishments are buried under a veil of shame for the Portuguese people,

who refer to her overwhelmingly as “Maria the Mad.” However, the Brazilians are much fonder of her: if not for her, the road to independence would have been substantially more difficult. They refer to her as “Maria the Pious.”

Why would Sid Meier and company choose such a controversial figure, one who would upset the homeland but champion its relative across the waterway? Possibly because she is fascinating! There is also something charming about a strong female figure who helped remedy the wrongs of colonialism. There are few forces that can exploit a region of the world as thoroughly as colonization by the European powers, a wisdom that we see more clearly now. I know that I can find it in myself to forgive a disgraced leader who is marred by mental illness and ultimately seems to want rightness in the world. This is even if the leader is a little naïve. When I learned recently that ex-U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL) wanted to give an iPad to every single American child in our schools, I couldn’t help but smile, even if the plan itself sounded a little untenable. In spite of his fraudulent and illegal financial behaviors, I cannot help but wish him the best in psychological recovery.

3. We cannot fault unflinching resistance in the face of unjust takeover.



Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia

I return to Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia between 1930 and 1974. This great ruler appealed to the League of Nations after his people endured invasions on the part of the Italian government during and preceding World War II. His speech at Geneva has been considered one of the rhetorical landmarks of the 20th century, delivered just after being hooted and jeered at by Italian journalists in attendance. The core of the speech was a simple and powerful message: Let my peace-desiring people alone.

Similar to how Maria I helped Brazil escape the clutches of imperialism, Haile Selassie made a stand against fascism for the entire world. *TIME* named him the man of the year soon after, and he was celebrated worldwide for his tenacity and spirit. Ultimately, it did not stop Italy’s aggression, but that further vindicates the spirit of the leader and his famous speech. Whereas Italy was on the very wrong side of history, Haile Selassie was destined to be respected for his steadfast support of his people.

4. The power of narrative overrides the justness of the person.



the infamous Genghis Khan

You know who is arguably not the nicest person? George Washington, the first President of the United States of America. You know who is particularly cruel? Genghis Khan, the infamous and terrifying Mongolian warlord! But both of these men are figures hopelessly surrounded and elevated by myth. In Mongolia, Genghis Khan is larger than life, still considered one of the national symbols of their culture despite his genocidal, scorched-earth military tactics. George Washington is on our paper money, yet he was a huge classist who loved to lash his troops. Even if he did not condone individual murder, he laid waste to the indigenous Americans who had every right to the lands that we have taken from them. Washington is lucky he was born when he was and became famous before we gained the hindsight of history.

Ultimately, though, the desire to concoct a grand narrative—often whitewashed—is too strong. Humans are narrative creatures. We need stories, and sometimes, we like uncomplicated characters. Sometimes, in our weakness of character, we find certain cruelties “cool” when they are distanced enough from us, especially when these acts are coded under military campaigns. In the guise of war, human beings get away with a lot. This is why the military info leaks of Chelsea Manning are, while unsurprising, still important.

And at the end, we must ask: What of capable leadership? *Civilization V* shows us a multitude of routes, what could have been, if the geography and resources were different. The game drives back to that “what if” impulse: what if England won the Revolutionary War? What would we look like? What if Africa had all the oil? These material necessities often drive the form a civilization takes and the ideology it adopts in the real world, in our time. As humanity develops more technology, we may find ourselves defined less by our “starting places” and the minerals they held. In our ongoing, imperfect human history, quality leadership is still a work in progress.