Civ-Polemics: The Burden of Command - Play, Pain, and the Moment the Magic Circle Cracks

Daniel Jeong

Sid Meier once described a good game as “a series of interesting choices.” But what happens when those choices stop feeling interesting and start feeling unbearable? My Twine project, Civ-Polemics: The Burden of Command, takes Civilization VI’s familiar mechanics of progress and control and reframes them as moral weight. The question at its center is simple but troubling: When does play become too real to be playful - and why? Drawing from Nietzsche’s claim that “to live is to suffer,” I argue that playfulness relies on a buffer between imagination and survival. When a game’s procedures or imagery mirror real-world political violence, that buffer fails, and the player slips from play into moral labor. At that point, fun collapses into responsibility, and the magic circle breaks.

The game’s main character is an invented leader-narrator, an amalgam that deliberately resists Civ VI’s cheerful, decontextualized grandeur. Rather than impersonating any single historical figure, this voice oscillates between head of state and player-witness. That shifting perspective lets me explore how simulation begins to feel like complicity: each “Dilemma” frames a recognizable contemporary policy knot (drone strike, border crisis, surveillance dragnet), and each “Consequence” writes the feeling of being stuck inside it.

The keyword I chose to work with is playfulness. As Miguel Sicart defines it, playfulness is an attitude - a way of inhabiting situations that is mobile, appropriative, and contingent - rather than a property confined to magic circles or formal rule sets. When the world refuses to be appropriated - because its stakes are too proximate or too grievous - playfulness vanishes.

Two particular readings shaped the way I approached the project. First, Sicart's account of playfulness as a critical stance - capable of subverting contexts but not immune to them - clarifies why some designs produce ethical friction rather than liberation. Second, Aaron Trammell's work on the politics and histories of play (who gets to play, and under what conditions) helped me see that play is never simply a neutral retreat; it is structured by privilege, safety, and distance. Where distance erodes, so does the affordance to remain playful.

In Civilization VI, abstraction protects the player. Even as entire civilizations disappear across hexagonal tiles, the aesthetic of distance - miniature soldiers, omniscient camera, euphemistic notifications - turns history into a toy box. The procedural rhetoric, as Ian Bogost might put it, teaches efficiency more than empathy. In Civ-Polemics, I invert that comfort. My "Dilemmas" and "Consequences" take Civ's clean systemic logic and inject the messiness of recognizable contemporary events: drone strikes, border crises, surveillance programs. By eroding aesthetic and conceptual distance, I ask the player to feel the collapse of playfulness.

Here, Patrick Jagoda's idea of "difficulty" as an ethical mode was crucial. Jagoda argues that difficult games invite reflection by refusing immediate mastery - they slow players down, making them aware of their own agency's limits. I extended that logic into the emotional register. I shifted the source of difficulty from interpretability to morality. In "The Drone" sequence, the general's blunt phrasing ("Two women and three children are in the building") punctures the player's illusion of procedural detachment. It's not a test of skill or optimization - it's a test of conscience. This is how my game dramatizes the Nietzschean claim that "to live is to suffer": once play trespasses too near the conditions of survival, it becomes life and the suffering beings, thus ceasing to be play.

Meanwhile, Sicart's Play Matters frames playfulness as a temporary autonomy - an attitude that reconfigures reality through imagination. But in Civ-Polemics, that autonomy fails. The protagonist's lament in the Break scene ("The moment the game borrowed too faithfully from life, it stopped being a performance and became the decision itself") is directly

indebted to Sicart's warning that playful appropriation dies when structures become too rigid or stakes too grave. My game's tone - detached yet trembling - stages this death of playfulness in real time. The leader can no longer play with their nation - they can only bear it.

To push that collapse aesthetically, I kept the audiovisual design stark and minimal: no triumphant anthems, no top-down god's-eye view. Instead, a report-like interface and flat lighting evoke bureaucratic fatigue. Those choices grew from Isbister's notion of emotion by design: the affective power of subtle UI feedback and pacing. I wanted the player's affective arc to mirror burnout - to feel the friction between clicking through menus and confronting meaning that refuses to stay virtual.

The optional escape section of the game - the Break - functions as both narrative climax and philosophical essay. It is where the player-character realizes that the "simulation" has transgressed into something unplayable. Here I drew on Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella's essay on virtual subjectivity, which asks what it means to exist meaningfully inside designed worlds. They argue that digital spaces are not escapes from existence but extensions of it - that play always already implicates the player's moral and existential self. My "Break" passage literalizes that insight: the leader's dawning awareness ("It stopped being a toy; it became an argument") marks the collapse of escapist distance. The virtual subject can no longer sustain separation from the AFK world, and the player, sharing that collapse, exits the magic circle not by choice but by consequence.

This convergence also resonates with Aaron Trammell's writing on the politics of play. Trammell reminds us that play is never neutral; it is structured by systems of power that determine who gets to treat the world as a playground and who must endure it as a battlefield. In Civ-Polemics, the protagonist experiences that inversion firsthand: a privileged, godlike position of command gradually becomes a site of helpless participation. The game's realism - its mirroring of ongoing and past geopolitical crises - refuses the player the privilege of abstraction that Civilization VI offers. The pleasure of control decays into the nausea of complicity.

Together, Trammell, Sicart, Jagoda, and Gualeni/Vella helped me crystallize my central claim: that play becomes too real to be playful when it breaches the buffer that protects imagination from implication. The experience of fun depends on the illusion of distance, but once choices echo recognizable harm, the distance collapses. My game's aesthetic minimalism and textual gravity are meant to make that collapse felt - not dramatized in spectacle, but registered in hesitation.

In short, Civ-Polemics: The Burden of Command is a critical re-imagining of Civilization VI's fantasy of omnipotent leadership. By retooling its mechanics into ethical dilemmas and embedding Nietzsche's dictum - to live is to suffer - into its very flow, the project stages the moment where play becomes endurance. The result, I hope, is not a rejection of games, but an invitation to think about what we demand of play, what we escape through it, and what happens when the world we try to escape follows us inside.

References

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