

# Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri as Cultural Critique

Brian C. Young

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Profs. De Laet and Sweedyk

In Sid Meier's *Civilization* series of games, the player takes control of a single civilization of humans just as they emerge from the nomadic lifestyle and begin building cities. The player can then command the people of that culture through the millenia, directing expansion, intellectual growth, and empire-building, peaceful or otherwise. While these games have been hailed as masterpieces of the strategy genre, they leave very little room for a true narrative structure. *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*, on the other hand, takes the same game structure and resets it into the future, as mankind begins colonizing other planets. Here, in the science fiction genre, the game designers can not only deliver a well-made and classic game, but also tell an intricate story. Woven into that story is the design team's grand vision of the future of the human race, as well as a few subtle warnings about the present.

The story of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* begins as its predecessor, *Civilization II*, ends, with the arrival of a human colony ship at Alpha Centauri. Rather than living up to intentions, however—the United Nations colony ship is optimistically named the *Unity*—the mission has fractured, and rather than working together to colonize a new world, the colonists are instead divided into seven factions, each one championing a particular ideology and their own opinion of what constitutes a successful colonization of the new planet. Much of the story of the game—revealed primarily through flavor quotes that the player finds each time a technology is discovered or a new facility built, and also a spinoff trilogy of novels by Michael

Ely—revolves around the conflicts between the seven faction leaders. As the end of the game approaches, it is revealed that the planet itself is an intelligent entity to be dealt with, and in the ultimate act of the game, merged with to become a new, transcendent entity.

In the backstory of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*, an unexplained calamity befalls Earth shortly after the colonization opens. Not only does this lend a narrative urgency to the game, but it also gives the first glimpse of political themes that will underlie the game: the implication that humanity caused its own demise is strong. Cutscenes and flavor quotes are seeded with subtle warnings that the power structures currently in place on Earth are dangerously flawed.

The new planet that the human race has found, officially dubbed Chiron but far more commonly known simply as Planet, is not immediately habitable to native Earth animals. The atmosphere is high in pressure and low in oxygen, and the native life forms—mind worms—are immediately hostile to intruders. Not only that, the ecosystem is optimized for the recycling of carbon compounds, so Planet has very little in the way of available fossil fuels. As such, the newcomers have to make drastic lifestyle changes in order to survive and thrive.

While previous games in the genre have tracked the amount of spendable resources the player has in terms of Earth-standard measures such as gold or money, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* instead marks the amount of *energy* that the player's faction has available. Not only is this a convenient and thematic way tracking an important and familiar game mechanic, it is taken one step farther, as “energy credits” are the accepted form of currency on Planet. Several quotes acknowledge and even emphasize the change away from arbitrary metals as

currency. One quote, attributed to the leader of the free market faction, captures the reason behind this change: “Life is merely an orderly decay of energy states, and survival requires the continual discovery of new energy to pump into the system.” Energy as a resource is a much more tangible and directly applicable thing to put value on than some precious metal.

The primary advancement of action in the game is through scientific research and discovery of new technologies. Clearly, without this structure, the game would be boring and monotonous. The progression also gives a clear, convenient framework to tell the game’s epic story of the future of mankind.

In the early game, when the colonists are still making the most basic of discoveries, the technical advancements are aimed only at two things: survival, and regaining an acceptable standard of living. Human civilization and life is more primitive and harsh than it was on the abandoned Earth, and the factions must first regain their footing before spreading out.

As the player progresses through the tech advancement tree, several common themes begin to appear among the different advances. One of the strongest threads is a set of genetic technologies, beginning with basic Biogenetics. While the immediate application of this technology is mundane at best—a faction that discovers it can henceforth build Recycling Tanks at bases—the flavor quote for the tanks is oddly dark. “It is every citizen’s final duty to go into the tanks and become one with all the people.” Although this is characteristic of the designers’ fondness for occasional dark humor, it also serves as a gentle reminder of the lengths the humans must go to in order to merely survive. They must recycle everything—including themselves. This idea, that such things as the sanctity of the human body are merely luxuries that can be discarded, is a theme that appears again before the end of the

game.

A second theme in the technology tree is the Centauri technologies, as the human race slowly gets to know the eccentricities of its new home. The first step in this thread is Centauri Ecology, giving the humans the knowledge to actively grow their own food and harvest resources. However, the planting of farms and forests and placement of solar collectors are considered only the most basic commands of the much broader category of terraforming.

As the tech tree approaches the midgame, human society has settled into its new home. Any presumption of trying to return to the lifestyle abandoned on Earth is gone, as technologies make possible—and Planet makes necessary—changes that would have been previously unthinkable.

Some of the earliest technologies that really begin to move beyond the human realm also begin to foreshadow a third thread in the technology tree, that is, a gradual blurring of the previously definitive line between man and machine. The first two of these, Neural Grafting and Mind-Machine Interface, seem not to follow directly from any other advances, and their flavor quotes are bleak at best. One of the faction leaders is quoted regarding Neural Grafting, “I think, and my thoughts cross the barrier into the synapses of the machine. . . . But what I cannot shake. . . . is that thoughts cross back.” As the player moves onward to Mind-Machine Interface, the same faction leader warns of far more diabolical consequences, that the technology is being used by those bent on “creating their own private army of demons,” warning that whether the mind controls the machine, or vice versa, is far too difficult to tell.

As dark as the flavor makes these advancements sound, in the game itself they are among the most powerful and critical of the midgame technologies. Neural Grafting opens an option

in unit design that doubles the possible versatility of units, as well as a special project (The Neural Amplifier) that allows for a uniquely potent defense. Mind-Machine Interface enables two new and very mobile unit types, a special project (The Cyborg Factory) that is arguably more powerful than two previous projects combined, and the first nonviolent victory condition.

Also in the midgame, the player starts getting signs that, in the *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* diegesis, humans possess and can train potent psychic power, or “psi”. Even from the beginning of the game, the colonists have defended themselves against psi attacks from Planet’s native fauna. As the factions begin discovering higher technologies in the Centauri thread, they can start using their powers for their own ends; not only do they gain the ability to train the native lifeforms for use in their armies, psychic abilities make appearances throughout flavor quotes, and are implied to pervade every aspect of human life on Planet. Talents—those citizens with stronger natural psi abilities—are the upper class of citizens, and having enough Talents is necessary to keep civil order at all bases.

The increasing prevalence of such superhuman abilities is the first clue that the human race is growing beyond its previous bounds. This trend is solidified as the factions discover Homo Superior, and the human race officially evolves into a new species, psychically powerful beings of equal parts flesh and machine.

Even as the human race begins to tap into its latent psychic abilities, it gradually becomes more and more obvious that these abilities pale in comparison to those of the Planet itself. Somewhere around the midpoint of the game it is revealed that all the native life on Planet is interconnected and communicating, and the connections are mimicking a vast neural

system—Planet is thinking. In plot interludes from actual gameplay, the semi-conscious planetary mind contacts the player, eventually delivering a warning: human growth has gotten in the native life’s way, and there is “pruning” to be done.

The third powerful midgame technology, Biomachinery, is one of the later advances in the genetic thread. The project it allows, however, is easily the one project in the game that can single-handedly decide the outcome of a game. The first faction that can build the Cloning Vats is given maximal population growth in every base. In a game where population corresponds directly to a faction’s income of every resource, this project gives its controller an impressive advantage. Although the society envisioned has no objections to the idea of mass-production cloning, the culture from which the game emerged almost certainly would. The power of this project could almost be seen as a backhanded opinion on the cloning debate.

A technology thread that also appears near the late game is the appearance and application of fully self-aware machines. Soon after the human factions discover Digital Sentience, the next few available technologies are all applications of it to different fields: dedicated computer intelligences lay open the secrets of economics, make possible industrial procedures involving matter manipulation on subatomic levels, even allow the factions to generate and control small black holes to harness incredible energy. These technologies really mark the transition into the endgame, as any faction that has survived this long is going through new technologies nearly every turn, and racing for the end.

At the ultimate conclusion of the game, if no faction has won through military, economic, or political means, the first faction to discover all of the technologies can build the Voice of

Planet. With the construction of the game’s penultimate secret project, that faction jolts the planetary consciousness from its semi-conscious state into a fully aware entity.

When the planet awakens, it adopts a fully comprehensible voice and once again communicates with faction leaders. It offers an ultimatum, that the time has come to end individual consciousness. Humankind and Planet will join in a new, superior being, and the first faction to build the Ascent to Transcendence will make its mark most deeply on the new being. This is the ultimate victory in the game, and the game’s vision of the final destiny of the human race: ultimate unity brings godhood. It is an optimistic theme, and one that is far from unheard of in science fiction.

Where does *Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri* fall among the many different landscapes on which it might be found? It can be compared to games within its genre, or, since it has more original plot than many similar games, it can be viewed alongside other science fiction works, or stories with similar themes.

Although the official sequel to *Civilization* and *Civilization II* is the aptly-named *Civilization III*, *Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri* is undeniably a member of the series. The technology tree, diamond map grid, and distinct unit styles are hallmarks of Sid Meier’s strategy games. As a member of this series, what connotations and cultural context does *Alpha Centauri* inherit? Which of these still apply to *Alpha Centauri*, and which does its new setting manage to negate?

Thanks to its simplification of the development of civilization—there are only a set number of societies that can advance, and any others are only to be assimilated, used, or destroyed—the *Civilization* series has been criticized as overly Western-centric, being “in-

fused with an American ideology that is comforting insofar as it justifies genocidal practices and the stealing of land.”<sup>1</sup> The barbarian units in these games only appear outside all civilizations’ areas of cultural influence; a civilization can make itself safer by expanding until its borders encompass an entire continent. As such, accordingly, the *Civilization* series glorifies imperialist and expansionist social policies, and turns anything about them that some might consider a drawback and instead praises those faults.

The *Civilization* games represent the minor or barbarian tribes by huts scattered across the landscape. As the player’s units enter those squares, the player is rewarded with money, technology, units, or a new city, or attacked by barbarians. *Sid Meier’s Alpha Centauri* has a similar mechanic for random rewards or punishments scattered about the landscape; however, rather than these landmarks being a preexisting part of the world, they are instead scattered survey pods from the broken starship *Unity*. The argument that expansion across Planet in any way oppresses people simply cannot be made when no human being can live on the planet without being a part of one of the seven factions. The equivalent of *Civilization*’s barbarian units, rather than fellow humans that are somehow outside any culture, are instead hostile swarms of individually mindless, at first bent on nothing but exterminating any human life. Fighting the mind worms is as much a matter of survival as it is of expansion.

Although a similar style of gameplay, the stories of *Civilization* and *Alpha Centauri* fall into distinctly different categories. If classified according to literary genres, the *Civilization* games would be considered historical fiction, although those games have much less actual story. *Alpha Centauri*, on the other hand, is undoubtedly science fiction. Rather than merely

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<sup>1</sup>“You Have Unleashed a Horde of Barbarians!’: Fighting Indians, Playing Games, Forming Disciplines,” Christopher Douglas. |<http://alpha.furman.edu/~cdouglas/barbarian.htm>

telling a story of how the past could have gone, it spins a grand tale of what the future could hold. In the final appendix to the game's instruction manual, creator Brian Reynolds waxes eloquent about the point of the story.

As a basket in which to keep all our eggs, Earth is more precarious than ever, yet we continue to dilly and dally. . . . Are we content to stew in our collective juices, to turn inward as our planet runs inexorably out of resources and wait for the Universe to grow tired of us and wipe us out? Or shall we claim the planets and stars, distribute our eggs among many baskets, ensure the long-term survival of our species, and in the process embark on the greatest adventure of all time?

The boundless optimism of the game is no mistake, not told merely for the sake of the story. Any ideal or philosophy in the game is not there by mistake, but rather as a calculated placement by the design team.

One of the most pointed and direct criticisms emerging from the story is that, as the U.N. mission shatters, the crew of the *Unity* divides not by nationality, but instead by ideology. Each faction, once the dust settles and the colony pods have landed, has a distinct goal and way of achieving it. With these goals, there are very good diegetic reasons for the difference in gameplay between the factions. While other games in the series have had similar gameplay differences, in the *Civilization* games the human race is divided by nationality. Any rationalization of actual difference between nationalities is shaky, at best.

In modern culture, the idea of enhancing the human mind via implanted computers would be met with skepticism at best, revulsion at worst. However, on Planet, that enhancement opens the way not only to powerful and necessary technologies, but also to the next great

step beyond *Homo sapiens* on the human evolutionary ladder. Clearly, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* has clear opinions on certain contemporary moral issues, especially those involving genetic research and cloning. With the importance of advances involving genetic study, and the power of such projects as the Human Genome Project or the Longevity Vaccine, the designers' opinion on the matter can be summed up in one flavor quote, "We hold life to be sacred, but...does the sacred brook no improvement?" It is possible, or even laudable, to revere life but still study its basic origins with the intent to improve them.

To be fair, even while holding up such high ideals for technology, the game ignores or glosses over the dirty details of how they are to be achieved. Debates on animal or human testing are nowhere to be found, as well as any number of other conflicts over the ethics of various political, economic, or scientific practices. The idea of science fiction as optimistic escapism, though, is not a new one, and at this, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* succeeds exceedingly well.