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Places to Go: Apolyton

by Stephen Downes

Yesterday I spent twelve hours and eleven minutes playing [Civilization III](#), a strategy game that allows players to, as the slogan reads, "create civilizations that stand the test of time." It was my first time playing the new Middle Ages module, and as the Empress of Byzantium, I found myself coping with the ever-present incursions of the Abbasids, the rise of the Osmons, and most worrisome, the Crusades emanating from the Holy Roman Empire.

Games like *Civilization III* are attracting increasing attention in the educational community for their potential to support learning. A recent article in BBC news, for example, observed that "using *Civilisation III* to teach students about history showed that it could be a powerful way to get them to realise that solving a society's problems can not always come from making a single change" (2005). In light of such reassessments, educators who seek to understand gaming technology—and to incorporate customized forms of such technology in their teaching—will find the [Apolyton](#) Web site worthy of exploration.

Apolyton is not an educational site. Its primary goal is not to talk about how to use games in courses, about how to improve academic performance with games, or about how to make learning fun. It is "a site created by Civilization fans, in an effort to provide information on the entire Civilization genre of computer gaming" (n.d.). In addition to *Civilization III*, Apolyton covers earlier versions and variations of the game (such as *Galactic Civilizations*) and *Civilization*-related activities such as tournaments, forums, and gaming tips. At the same time, educators who visit this site will discover information and resources that can support their own experiments with gaming technology as an instructional tool.

Upon entering the Apolyton site and scanning the news in the right column, readers usually select their game of choice from the list offered in the upper left corner. Selecting, say, *Civilization III* takes you to the [game page](#). Structured like a blog, the Apolyton *Civilization III* page lists, in reverse chronological order, a series of news items related to the game. Items may include information about ongoing tournaments, press coverage, and reviews. New visitors should take the time to read a number of the items on this page (as well as in the [news archives](#) linked at the bottom of the page) in order to get a sense of the range of topics—from the potential role of *Civilization III* in learning, such as "[Educating in the Classroom](#)" or "[Doctorate on 'Edu'gaming](#)"; to social commentary, such as "[Political Leaders Should Play, Not Fight](#)"; to collaborative games, such as the [Civ III-Conquests Democracy Game](#).

Resources on the *Civilization III* page may be found in the menu at the upper right. Educators are likely to select [Apolyton University](#) first and to feel daunted by the discussion page that shows up. Pressing forward, however, to a topic such as [AU History 101](#) reveals not only discussion but also dozens of specific games designed to illustrate topics in *Civilization III*. Writes a contributor (known only as alexman):

Apolyton University is a school of strategy, where students sharpen their Civ3 skills and share their experiences in a series of thematic games. When playing an Apolyton University game, gaining and sharing knowledge is more important than getting a high score, or even winning the game. Participants are encouraged to share their strategy after the game, and even to try several attempts. (qtd. in badams52 2003)

Further examination of this discussion thread in turn illustrates how players of *Civilization*, like most popular computer games, may go well beyond the original game design. One way to do this is to construct a

predesigned game with maps, cities, and player units already set out by the scenario author. Clicking on one of the games listed in the discussion thread—[Mini Tourney IV - Babylon and On](#), for example—the reader follows an introduction and then an unobtrusive link to a file with the suffix .sav: this type of file will be recognized by *Civilization III* players as a saved game, the format used to launch a player into the scenario constructed by the author. On Apolyton, readers can find hundreds of such scenarios covering every era of human history as well as fictional history and alternative histories.

Additionally, games like *Civilization* support what are called "mods" in the gaming world. A mod is an adaptation of the software that runs the game itself (usually called the "game engine"). In the [Civ III Mod Directory](#), readers can see mods with new units added, playing rules changed, and more. One popular mod is the Civ3MultiTool (C3MT), which allows a user to edit many game elements directly. Readers can view not only the most recent mods, but also those that are the most popular and the top rated.

The existence of scenarios and mods for commercial games such as *Civilization* suggest largely unexplored areas of innovation for educators. When looking at sites for traditional learning games, one sees that the intent is usually to create a game in order to satisfy some learning objective. Thus we see [Math Baseball](#), [The Counting Game](#), and any number of other topic-specific learning games. What sites like Apolyton suggest, however, is that instead of embedding a game into learning, it is possible to embed learning into a game. By selecting an already popular and widely customizable game such as *Civilization*, instructors can incorporate elements from many disciplines into a format their students already spend their days playing. Games like [Doom](#) and [SimCity](#) likewise allow extensive customization, which in turn allows a variety of environments—and not just a strategy scenario—to be used to support educational gameplay.

For example, West Point's Major Curtis A. Carver Jr. received permission and assistance from the creators of *Doom* to reconfigure the code of the game. As Jerry Seay reports, "What Carver developed was a game in which his students could generate multiple choice questions as they maneuvered through the game, which now graphically placed the player in the familiar hallways of the campus at West Point. If they answered correctly, then they proceeded to the next door or level, or received some extra bonus" (1997, "An Adapted Computer Game").

Even more interestingly, the existence and widespread popularity of mod kits allows students themselves to create their own modifications to games. In this regard, such computer games offer a much more sophisticated, technologically advanced analogue of such activities as the [Lego Robotics Kids Classes](#) in which students are able to "reprogram" their Lego "software" to create unique Lego-based robots and other creations. We can imagine student class projects of the future where students learn about the city of Paris by creating a simulated version of it or where students come to an understanding of Napoleon's strategy by recreating the Battle of Waterloo as a strategy game modification.

When we think of games in learning, we need to get beyond the idea that a game is like a book or a blackboard or an exercise book, beyond the idea that a game is an appendage to the traditional sort of learning that takes place in the classroom. While games could be used this way, there is good reason to believe that a game as a *learning environment* holds much more potential. By manipulating the game, by creating new scenarios and new possibilities, a student may stretch beyond mere factual awareness of the subject being taught to a deeper understanding of the relevance of the information and the context in which it applies.

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