

# The Civilization of *Sid Meier's Civilization*: Player Reception of Change in A Long-Running Game Series

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## INTRODUCTION

When *Sid Meier's Civilization VII* (Firaxis 2025; Civ7 from hereon) launched, something unusual happened: for the first time in 35 years, a mainline game in this acclaimed series was released to decidedly mixed player reception. How did this momentous shift in Civilization's fortunes occur?

This experimental exploration of player reception in a long-running, slow-to-change, popular game series, seeks to provide answers to this question by using a 'distant-to-close reading' approach of a large corpus of Steam reviews. In the conclusions, this reading is connected to the series' conservative — culturally speaking — theory of game design. This paper aims to be of interest for those interested in historical game and nostalgia studies and in particular addresses mixed-methods approaches to player reception and value systems.

## Distant Reading: First Approximation

The starting point for this analysis is a Natural Language Processing (NLP)-based distant reading of player ratings and comments on Steam, where Civ7 currently sits at a near split (48%) 'recommended/not recommended rating' based on 50k+ reviews.

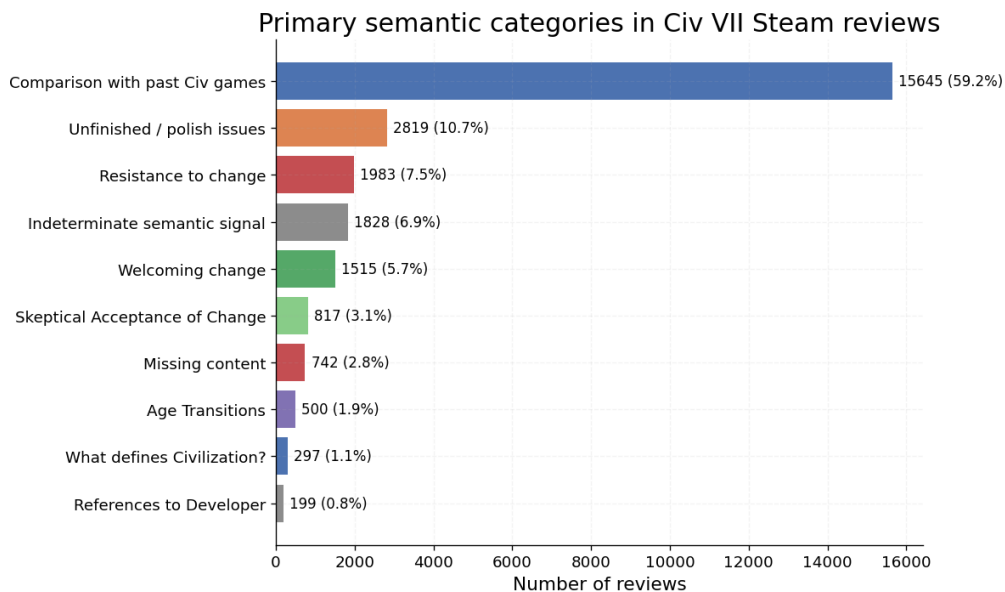
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All these reviews were scraped on December 1, 2025, using the Steam API, with the aim to understand in more detail how the community was responding to this new entry. We used BERTopic, a transformer-based method for unsupervised topic modelling, to extract themes across 26432 English reviews over 40 characters long (Grootendorst 2022).<sup>1</sup>

Aside from negative reviews by players who experienced game crashes or missing features, much of the mixed reception focused on changes to the UI, which many felt had adopted an overly minimalist approach. A second major theme running through the reviews were ‘Age Transitions’, a new mechanic that alters pacing and progression by resetting the map and introducing era-specific goals and civilizations. Other prevalent topics emerged in reviews addressing more novel mechanics and a general sense of Civ7 as a comparatively significant shake-up to the series’ core design.

To examine more closely how players position themselves toward these changes, we developed a lightweight ‘semantic classifier’ (Ratner et al. 2017). Concretely, we used MPNet embeddings to place each review in a vector-based space (Song et al. 2020). We then measured their proximity to a small set of our own example sentences — e.g. *“the new design ruins the fun,”* or *“love the new direction”* — acting as known ‘anchor points’ in the semantic multidimensional vector-space to capture e.g. player expressions of resistance to change, endorsement of change, and comparison to earlier titles. The outcome of this classifier provides support for the theory derived from the topic model: a significant part of the reception around Civ7 revolves on comparisons with other games in the series (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** A bar chart showing the division of primary semantic categories in Civ7 reviews.

### Close Reading: How reviewers react to change

On close reading and annotating three-hundred randomly selected reviews, comparisons surfaced often in relation to breaks in continuity with the established formula, frequently framing discontent through long-term familiarity with the franchise. For example: “I have been playing the civ series for over 10 years with hundreds of hours of gameplay and this game is terrible. [...]” Another notes: “I’ve

been playing Civilization for years, and Civ 7 is the first time I genuinely felt like all that experience meant nothing. Yes, some of the new improvements are cool, but they changed so much of what made Civ... Civ.” Reviewers also tied this sense of discontinuity to specific mechanics, for example: “Game is truly a horror show and is honestly sad considering how good the last one was. [...] The Age Transformations gimmick is what truly kills the game.”

Nevertheless, the same comparative frame also generated more ambivalent or positive responses. As one player paradoxically reflects: “This is already a great Civ game, and will be better (as per usual unfortunately), but [...] this is a great evolution of Civ (I've 1000s of hours in each going back to Civ1).” Other reviews embraced the departure more directly: “It feels new, it feels crispy and it feels like Civilization. If you aren't a fan of change...this isn't the game for you.” As another veteran player summarises in a review titled *A Civilized Perspective on Civilization 7*: “As someone who's journeyed through every iteration of *Sid Meier's Civilization*, I might be in the minority when I say this entry [...] at first glance might feel like simplification. But I'd argue it's refinement.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Civ7: Breaking the Rule of Thirds**

As echoed in the words of this last reviewer, Civ7's reception is part of a refined ‘civilization of *Civilization*’: a long-term, referential, communal framework in which players can draw on decades of convention to articulate what Civ *ought* to be. Within this framework, even small alterations reverberate strongly, because they touch on a deeply held sense of ‘how we do things in *Civilization*.’ In contrast to the current upset, the normally slow pace of discourse and change is not accidental but follows Sid Meier's well-known “Rule of Thirds”: one third of Civ's design remains constant, one third undergoes smaller adjustments, and one third is open to substantial redesign (Meier 2020). Civ7, as our readings suggest, appears to have shifted this balance more aggressively than previous innovations in the series (Pravdová and Cihlářová 2024), certainly more than many players expected.

The approach taken here — distant-to-close readings working towards a theoretical framing — not only shows how players negotiate innovation, continuity, and series identity, but can also point to where those negotiations become charged. What distinguishes Civ7 from its predecessors is that several of its most debated mechanics — in particular its Age Transitions — directly reshape *how history is told* within the game (see also Dubbelman 2016). These changes alter pacing, causality, and the structure of historical process itself, a previously unmoveable pillar of the series (Mol et al. 2026). The mixed reception to Civ7 therefore invites an open-ended question for developers and player studies on this and other ‘game civilizations’: how do long-running game series balance the need for innovation with the historically grounded expectations their own past designs have cultivated?

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

[To be added after blind review]

### **ENDNOTES**

1. No lakes were boiled and no new GPU megastructures were erected in the course of running these analyses. All NLP work used compact transformer

models (MPNet + BERTopic) running on a local machine with a relatively modest environmental footprint.

2. These quotes are anonymized and cannot be referenced to their source on Steam to avoid (indirectly) identifying or sharing personal data of individual reviewers through their Steam IDs.

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