Civilization 7 lets you mix and match history — and it's a blast

Imagine Caesar Augustus at the head of an army of Mongol warriors or Ben Franklin building the Great Wall of China. In Sid Meier's *Civilization 7*, such flights of historical fantasy can become historical fact. The game has new ages to experience, new civilizations to build up, new leaders to guide them, and — for the first time in franchise history — the ability to mix and match leaders and civilizations to build the empire of your wildest dreams. *The Verge* had the opportunity to test out the game and talk with its developers at Firaxis Games. The brief, three-hour demo wasn't enough time to get a feel for how well leaders and different civilizations work together, but I left feeling excited about all the ways *Civilization VII* aims to change the course of history.

In previous *Civilization* games, civs were always tied to a specific leader who was usually, but not always, a noteworthy head of state. Later iterations of the game offered multiple leaders for civs, and on a couple of occasions where it made historical sense, one leader could straddle multiple civs like France and England both having access to Eleanor of Aquitaine, who, during her unusually-long-for-the-time-period life, was the queen of both countries.

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In *Civilization VII*, leaders are no longer tied to specific countries, giving players the opportunity to synergize the

special abilities and bonuses of leaders with the unique attributes and units of different civs.

“We’ve known for a long time that our community has wanted a ‘build my own civilization’ tool kit,” Ed Beach, *Civ 7*’s creative director, says. Beach explained that balance issues made this feature unfeasible for previous games, but it was a priority for *Civ 7*. “If we make all the leaders balance with each other and all the civs balance with each other, then mixing and matching will work.”

Before a *Civ 7* game starts, players will choose their leader, then their civ. The game will make recommendations as to what civ will best suit a particular leader according to the specific strengths and “styles” of each. I chose Amina, warrior-queen of Zazzau, as my leader. She’s an economic and militaristic leader suited for civs that like to fight or make a lot of money. I don’t like to fight, but cash rules everything around me, so I settled on pursuing an economic victory. And though her attributes make her well-suited to a civ like Egypt or Rome, I chose her to lead her native civ of Aksum.

In previous *Civ* games, Hatshepsut would lead Egypt. In *Civilization 7*, however, the choice is yours, and you can see what different civs she’s best suited to govern.

According to Beach, *Civ* games are developed according to a simple equation whereby one-third of the game is new, the other third is updated, and the final third stays the same.

Though *Civilization* is one of my “quintessentially me” game series, I completely skipped over *Civ 6*. But as I played Civ 7’s demo, I realized that the moment-to-moment gameplay fell into the “stayed the same” category. Despite missing out on an entire game, I was able to parse the new-to-me user interface. And what I didn’t quite grasp, like the feature that allows players to develop specialized districts within a city, the

game’s tutorial was very good at catching me up on.

One feature that was part of the “update” slice of the *Civilization* development pie was the historical era system. Where before, the passage of time was marked by a civ progressing from the ancient era to the classical era, Firaxis has streamlined the many historical eras into just three chapters — antiquity, exploration, and modern. Within each chapter are legacy paths or goals the player pursues with each path arranged into one of four categories that’ll sound familiar to *Civilization*-heads like myself — economic, military, cultural, and science. Since I was gunning for the economic victory, its attendant legacy path required me to do things like establish several trade routes or amass a wide variety of resources other world leaders would pay top dollar to get their hands on.

At the heart of *Civilization 7* is the idea that history is built in layers. Beach used the evolution of the city of London as an example, explaining how different empires dramatically changed the face of the city. The Romans built the city’s walls that the Saxons would later improve before the Normans came and updated them even further.

The ability to mix and match civilizations comes from this “layered” concept of history, and it doesn’t end when a player first picks their leader and civ. For the first time in the series’ history, players will be able to change their civilization at different points throughout the game. The game keeps track of the decisions players made and the legacy paths they pursued, then when a player progresses to the next chapter of history, they’ll get a new civilization to lead based on their choices.

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For example, at the start of the Exploration Age, I might have had the choice to change from Aksum into another economy-focused civ like the Dutch. Or, had I indulged her militaristic capabilities, I might have gotten the Spanish empire instead.

And though the idea of Ben Franklin leading the Chinese might upset some history buffs, the idea of civilizations evolving into something new based on the paths they take and the technologies they develop is sound history. London's various evolutions from a regional Roman capital to the crown jewel of the British empire is just one example.

"We have a system that's listening to events that are happening in the game world," Beach says. "And it has multiple thousands of little stories that can come out of the game because something has triggered."

Those events don't have to be civilization-shaking in scale, either. My scientists had developed a new food treatment technique but needed to know how to deploy it: should they use it on some bitter berries to make them more palatable or use it to soak some hyena meat? Since the idea of eating grilled hyena didn't sound too appealing, I chose the berries leading to the discovery of how to cultivate olives.

I bitterly lament that the demo didn't let me progress to the next age to see how impactful the humble olive would have had on my civilization's history or the new civs Aksum could have evolved into. That kind of dynastic storytelling has been missing from *Civilization* games, so I'm keen to see all the new histories *Civilization 7* will enable me to write.

Sid Meier's Civilization 7 launches on PC, Mac, Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch on February 11th, 2025.

https://www.theverge.com/24224489/civilization-7-hands-on-demo-impressions-firaxis-games