

Reviews (Games)

Assassin's Creed Mirage

[action-adventure open-world video game].

Developer: Ubisoft Bordeaux.

Platforms: Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Microsoft Windows/PC.

Release date: October 5, 2023.

The sun is scorching the dust-covered streets of Baghdad. Its citizens move about, talking, shopping, and conducting business. Suddenly, a man screams out in terror and begins charging through the crowd – clearly, he fears for his life. As he pushes through the crowd, he looks around and cannot find who or what is causing him such terror. He continues to run, causing more commotion. Bystanders whisper, wondering what is going on. Suddenly, like an eagle descending on its prey, a hooded man clad in white robes lands on top of the terrified man, and his screams are silenced. Guards on the other side of the road, realizing what has just happened, call out to the robed figure, drawing their swords. But before they reach him, he has already sprinted down the street, vaulted himself on top of a market stall, grabbed onto the ornate protrusions of a building, and whisked himself onto its roof. By the time the guards reach the roof, the white-robed figure is gone. The man he has killed lays in a pool of his own blood, with a single feather resting on his chest. This is the world of *Assassin's Creed Mirage*.

Assassin's Creed Mirage is the thirteenth installment in the now massive franchise from developer Ubisoft. As people familiar with the franchise know, each installment focuses on a different period in history and tells a fictional story embedded within and around real locations, events, and people. The common thread that ties the franchise together is the never-ending war between the Templars and the Assassins, or, as they are sometimes referred to, the Order of the Ancients and the Hidden Ones, respectively. In every game, they appear as recurring characters, different generations of each organization operating in the shadows, manipulating the major events of history. This brand-new installment, released October 5, 2023, is set in the city of Baghdad during the ninth century, with the story beginning in the year 861. The protagonist you play as is named Basim, a character who has appeared as a veteran master assassin in the prior game, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. This new game has players witness and play through the beginning of Basim's induction into the Order of the Assassins and his development into a young man caught in the Assassins' conflict.

In the ninth century, Baghdad found itself in the middle of the Islamic golden age, a time period known for the flourishing of knowledge and science throughout the Arabic world between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. That means *Mirage* takes place right at the height of this golden age and in the capital of the ruling Abbasid caliphs. The setting is beautifully realized by Ubisoft, who have managed to yet again immerse gamers in a deep and richly detailed historical locale.

Architecture, people, sights, and sounds are expertly crafted to provide players the sense that they have been transported into a living, breathing city of the past.

Basim's story begins in the slums of Anbar, where he works as a common thief. Basim wakes from a nightmare, his sleep haunted by what looks like a mummy or zombie. He conveys the contents of his dream to his fellow thief Nehal, who serves as a tutorial character for the player and as an introduction to the world. She and Basim venture out into the city to do some pickpocketing and free running. Eventually, Basim speaks with Dervis, a man offering a contract to steal a ledger for the Hidden Ones (i.e., the Assassins). Basim accepts the contract, showing clear interest in the organization. He mentions wanting to be of more use to them, having a desire to serve a higher purpose and to live a life beyond being a street thief. Basim receives word that the Hidden Ones are after a special artifact that is being held in the Prince's Winter Palace. Seeing an opportunity, Basim, with the reluctant help of Nehal, breaks into the palace and steals the artifact. This turn of events leads to retaliation against the people of the slums, particularly the children. Roshan, a member of the Hidden Ones, helps Basim escape pursuit and becomes his mentor as he begins his training as an assassin.

The mechanics of *Mirage* will be familiar to long-time fans of the franchise; much of the design and focus are a callback to its earliest games. This means that the game focuses much more on stealth, parkour, and hiding in plain sight as you stalk your targets. The core gameplay revolves around these elements as players follow Basim's story: a member of the Order of the Ancients, usually presented as a tyrant or scheming villain, has come to power within a district of Baghdad. Basim undertakes the task of uncovering their true identity by investigating their operations, seeking an opportunity to assassinate them, and liberate the district from the Ancients' control. The choices and tools players have available for completing the contract add variety to their interactions with the world.

Through cunning, creativity, and precision, players can complete objectives and assassinate targets in the city of Baghdad. Basim possesses a range of tools, including a smoke bomb, throwing knife, blow dart, noisemaker, trap, and torch, each serving a purpose depending on the situation players encounter. Beyond these tools, the famous social stealth system makes a grand return. In the first game of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, the social stealth system kept track of how much attention the assassin attracted from guards due to his actions. In order to complete missions, a player had to ensure that their protagonist would remain inconspicuous in public environments, blending into crowds, distracting enemies, or luring guards into secluded areas. In this most recent edition to the series, tokens have been introduced that can be used to bribe entertainers, guards, merchants, mercenaries, and rebels. In exchange for these tokens, the citizens of Baghdad will distract guards, look the other way, or assist the player in combat. The tokens are gained by completing contracts for the Order of the Assassins, pickpocketing, and other side quests.

One example of how a player might complete a mission is by focusing on stealth, a classic method present throughout the series: blending into crowds, stalking your target, striking when unseen. In order to accomplish this, a player needs to wait for just the right moment and keep an eye open for opportunities as they present themselves. Is the target isolated? If so, that would be the moment to strike. Such moments are where the iconic hidden blade comes into play. Since the inception of the series, every single game – including this new one – has featured a variation of the hidden blade, a wrist-mounted device that can swiftly unsheathe a blade for rapid kills and then retract back just as fast. This tool allows players to execute quick and stealthy kills. Often, taking the sneaky approach allows players to escape unscathed and avoid long, drawn-out battles.

Mirage sees the return of an urban environment, with the city of Baghdad featuring buildings that are multiple stories tall and tightly packed together. This creates the opportunity for players to utilize another method to reach their targets: parkour or free running. From the outset of the game, the player is capable of scaling almost any structure they come across. While players must search for the correct path up a building, typically filled with potential handholds to grip onto, it is rare to find an unscalable wall or building in the city. Once on the rooftops, players can leap across the narrow gaps and stalk targets from above. Additionally, you can literally ambush someone by leaping from a rooftop to strike your target before they ever see you coming.

Players who enjoy spy movies, thrillers, or media focused on cunning and intrigue will be delighted to know that information gathering, infiltration, and sabotage are options for contract completion. Sit on a bench in a busy market square while eavesdropping on the guards of one of your targets; perhaps they will reveal when a member of the Order of Ancients will be vulnerable. Before engaging in an inevitable battle, sneak around a fortress and disable the alarm bells. Bribe entertainers to distract some particularly stubborn guards. Set traps in front of important choke points to catch pursuers off guard during your escape. Each mission presents itself as a puzzle with many possible solutions, which can make completion very satisfying as the player can find their preferred playstyle.

Assassin's Creed Mirage continues the legacy of the franchise, basing fictional stories within real historical settings while incorporating real historical figures. The effort that Ubisoft has made to accurately represent ninth-century Baghdad is commendable. The game immerses players in the architecture, the historical landmarks, bustling streets, and atmosphere. Just taking a stroll down a street may result in you overhearing citizens protesting the rule of the caliph or perhaps haggling over the cost of goods. Everywhere you look, immense care has been taken to make the world feel real. Perhaps the most valuable part to historians is that embedded within the game is a series of collectibles that players can find. These collectibles are called Historical Sites. These unique locations encourage player exploration. When found and activated, players are given a brief summary of a particular artifact, concept, or place that actually existed. It is a great

opportunity for players to learn real history, as Ubisoft has gone as far as to cite sources directly in the summaries, including information like where the artifact being referenced is currently housed.

Mirage is yet another example of the potential of history as a setting and inspiration for the medium of video games. Ubisoft has long led this charge with its centuries-spanning series. Other games have done similar things but not quite to the level of detail that Ubisoft offers in their handcrafted worlds – these games can teach people history. Maybe it starts with just the small facts here and there, but eventually it can inspire further exploration into the topic or maybe even begin the career of a lifelong historian. While the story is fictional and the portrayal of real historical figures in the games can be controversial at times, the significant role this series plays in historical video game discussions is undeniable and continues to be influential for a reason. *Assassin's Creed Mirage* would be an engaging game for anyone who enjoys history, open-world exploration, or stealth and combat in a medieval setting.

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Call to Arms - Gates of Hell: Ostfront
[real-time tactics/real-time strategy video game].

Developer: Barbedwire Studios, Digitalmindsoft.
Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC.
Release date: June 11, 2021.

Wars throughout history are often limited to the memories and accounts of the veterans who participated in them, leaving historians and people interested in the topic to only wonder what a battlefield of its kind would look like. But there is an alternative way to experience these battles and skirmishes from a perspective I believe no other media can provide. This would be through a video game: *Call to Arms - Gates of Hell: Ostfront*. Developed by Digitalmindsoft, a German-based company, the game falls into the genre of real-time strategy, where you command squads of soldiers and vehicles from an aerial top-down perspective and are always in motion. Because of its dynamic nature, the game constantly challenges your micromanagement and quick decision-making skills to outmaneuver the enemy, resulting in high replay value. Digitalmindsoft is responsible for a variety of other real-time tactics games, which focus on different wars from the twentieth century. Their products include, for example, the *Men of War* franchise (since 2009). For *Call to Arms - Gates of Hell: Ostfront*, Digitalmindsoft partnered with Barbedwire Studios, a developer that focuses on historically accurate and realistic portrayals of World War II in video games, to craft an extraordinary experience.

Those with a passion and interest in World War II will find the recreation of vehicles, weapons, and battles to be particularly captivating. The Eastern Front is recreated with realism in mind, while still allowing for adjustments to maintain a smoother and more enjoyable gameplay experience. A notable example of the realism incorporated by the game developers is the vehicle combat. During combat, when the vehicles are hit by various munitions, the game takes into account the penetration power of the round, the thickness of the armor at the point of impact, and the potential damage to internal components if the armor is breached by a sufficiently powerful round. The game also considers which crew members would be wounded or killed as a result of the hit, meaning you will lose operational efficiency if the crew is injured or dead. Enthusiasts of military history will appreciate the opportunity to witness various vehicles from the period come to life and execute realistic tactics during the game's battle scenarios. This experience proves both enjoyable and educational, offering insights into warfare during the period. I believe the game's appeal lies in its realistic depictions of the Second World War, which may spark further interest in military history and even inspire individuals to pursue additional education in the subject.

Visually, the graphics of the game hold up well against other real-time strategy games, though when compared to the larger triple-A games coming out today, there is quite a noticeable difference. Color-wise, the game has a drab tone to match the darker tones of warfare, primarily making use of grey, muddy browns, dark greens, and white to make up the snowy, blasted warzone environments on the Eastern Front. The models of the weapons, vehicles, and soldier uniforms do an excellent job of being accurate to their real-life counterparts. Special attention was clearly dedicated to creating a realistic battle experience between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army, spanning from intense close-quarters skirmishes to long-range tank battles over large fields throughout the Eastern European countryside. An interesting feature within the game is the ability to select a vehicle or soldier and gain direct control over them from an over-the-shoulder third-person view. This allows you to get up close to the action in the game and sometimes achieve greater accuracy while aiming for your soldiers. When assuming control of vehicles, you are provided with a close third-person view, enabling you to fire and switch between different types of shells for the main gun of a tank, as well as operate other mounted weapons like hull machine guns or a coaxial guns. Such a viewpoint allows the player to aim more accurately and attempt to hit enemies through the fog of war. The "fog of war" is visually represented on the maps, with darker areas indicating areas where your soldiers lack line of sight. Objects like trees, rocks, hills, wrecked vehicles, and smoke will obstruct their vision, rendering those areas dark and indicating there is no information on what could be in the fog of war. Despite this, loud vehicles such as tanks remain audible through the fog of war, allowing players with a keen sense of sound to locate units without visual confirmation.

Ammunition remains an important gameplay feature that separates *Gates of Hell: Ostfront* from others in its genre. In many real-time strategy games, soldiers and vehicles running out of ammunition are not usually a concern. But within this game, it is a constant concern, requiring players to keep track. This leads to more careful planning, as the player cannot afford to simply fire at anything that moves. Shots need to be taken sparingly, especially in defensive wave-type missions within the campaign. In a first-time playthrough, you do not know how many enemies will be coming, so every shot will need to count, and none can afford to be wasted. If the player's soldiers do run out of ammo, they can be commanded to scavenge weapons and ammunition from dead enemy soldiers. There is also the option of getting more creative with your defensive and offensive actions. If the player knows that enemies will be coming down a specific path, there are explosives, such as land mines or dynamite, that can be set up for the purpose of both conserving ammunition and inflicting massive casualties on your opponent. In offensive missions, if the player is aware of an enemy's presence within a building, they can collapse the building with a few shells from indirect fire, using mortars, field guns, and other artillery pieces available and thus weaken the enemy's defensive line. Again, this tactic enables players to inflict more losses on the enemy by creatively utilizing the environment to their advantage.

Looking at the multiplayer aspect of the game, you are able to team up with up to three other players to fight against a computer-controlled army or another set of four players. Firstly, there is the game mode called "Battle Zones." The objective in this mode is to capture and hold key points located around the various maps that can be selected. Whichever team holds them the longest wins the match. The second mode is "Domination." In this mode, you must inflict as many casualties on your enemy as you can while preserving your own soldiers. You must also keep an eye on your headquarters (HQ) and protect it against enemy attacks; if your headquarters is destroyed, your team loses. My personal favorite mode is the "Cooperative Campaign" mode, which lets you and a friend play through the primary set of missions within the game. As a result of playing with a companion, you are able to both split up your forces, leading to some unique maneuvers and gameplay. Alongside the campaign missions and multi-player battles, there is a single-player "Conquest" mode where you and a computer-controlled opponent engage in larger battles spanning several matches across randomly selected maps. You must attack during your turn and defend during the opponent's turn. Afterward, players have the ability to research new units and acquire fresh reinforcements to bolster their own offensive. These reinforcements may include various types of infantry squads with more advanced weapons, specialist units, support units, vehicles, and more. As the player wins battles, they make progress towards the enemy's HQ sector. Once this is taken, the player is victorious, and the conquest ends. The same can be said for the player's HQ sector; if it is captured, they will lose the conquest and will have to re-start from the beginning. As for all the game modes within the game itself, players can adjust the computer

opponent's difficulty to various levels. The primary distinctions between the different difficulties include limiting the player's resources while granting the computer opponent more, increasing the damage taken by the player's soldiers, and decreasing the player's damage output against the opposing army. This dynamic can be quite challenging on some of the holdout missions where the waves are significantly tougher in terms of health and difficulty, especially with certain weapons requiring additional shots to defeat opposing soldiers.

The game offers three optional DLCs (downloadable content) for purchase, providing additional content for players who wish to experience more after the initial launch. The first is *Gates of Hell: Talvisota* (\$17.99). This DLC, covering the Continuation War between Finland and the Russian army on the Eastern Front, introduces a new faction – the Finnish – with new units, weapons, and vehicles. It also includes an expanded campaign focused on the Finnish, with new missions to play through in single-player or cooperative play. The second DLC, *Gates of Hell: Scorched Earth* (\$9.99), adds additional units to the existing German and Russian factions and includes eight new single-player or cooperative missions, featuring missions like the siege of Sevastopol and the Battle of Narva as well as battles in Kursk and Kyiv. During the Russian campaign, the player can take control of units from the 1st Ukrainian Front and liberate Kyiv from its occupants. The last DLC, *Gates of Hell: Liberation*, is a free addition to the game, featuring battles from the Western Front and introducing the United States Army as a playable faction, which brings new weapons and vehicles to the game from the Western Allies. While the inclusion of the British army would have been welcomed, the focus on the Eastern Front makes the addition of any Western armies surprising.

Overall, I thoroughly appreciate this game for its entertainment value and my interest in historical events. While the game strives for realism, it remains focused on playability and enjoyment, omitting issues like vehicles getting stuck in the mud, breaking down due to manufacturing issues, or any of the other numerous issues that plagued the armies of the Second World War. Personally, I would not recommend this game for any kind of serious historical research unless it was specifically on the topic of historical gaming. However, I highly recommend it to those who have any level of interest in learning more about the war. For the general public, I truly believe that historical video games, along with movies and TV shows, are a great way to get more people interested in a variety of historical topics. They serve as valuable forms of public education, sparking interest and increasing awareness of historical events.

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Gerda: A Flame in Winter
 [role-playing narrative adventure video game].

Developer: PortaPlay, BirdIsland/PortaPlay.
 Platforms: Steam, Windows/PC.
 Release date: September 1, 2022.

December 1939. Gerda—the character you play—arrives at the train station in Tinglev, Denmark, where she is met by her husband, Anders, and her father, Herr Klien, a nationalistic German working at the train station. Upon speaking with both of them, you must make your first decision: Who will carry your bag? This is but the first of many decisions that you will make throughout the course of the game. With each decision, you progress forward as Gerda's quiet life is turned upside down. An adventure role-playing game, *Gerda: A Flame in Winter* asks the question: How far would you go to protect your loved ones?

Fast forward to February 1945, Gerda and Anders are residing in a nice, cozy farmhouse set against the backdrop of snowy southern Denmark. Anders prepares to leave for work with his friends Torben and Peter while Gerda wakes up to tend to her daily routine. Gerda is a nurse in Tinglev, a nationalistic village that is angry at the Nazi occupation of Denmark. Their anger is not only directed at the Nazis but also at all Germans. Gerda, who is half Danish and half German, often finds herself in challenging situations due to her mixed heritage, though she is generally well-liked by many. Gerda goes to the clinic and encounters a German soldier in need of help, forcing her to decide whether to side with the doctor or force them to take him. This decision sets the tone for Gerda's role in the ongoing conflict: Will you take the side of the Germans, the Nazis, the Danes, or the Resistance?

Returning home, Gerda discovers Nazi soldiers searching through her belongings and, upon going to the bedroom, she finds one soldier attacking her husband. Anders cryptically instructs her to find clues hidden in the chicken feed. As a player, you can either question his statements or simply take his word for it. Anders is taken away by the Nazis, leaving Gerda alone with the knowledge that her husband has been keeping secrets. After examining the chicken feed, Gerda discovers a paper that confirms that Anders has been involved with the Resistance, aiding two Jewish people, a mom and child, and providing plans to the leadership of the group. With Anders held captive by the Nazis, Gerda embarks on a mission to save her husband, forming alliances with various groups and individuals.

As Gerda, players must navigate complex relationships and make strategic choices to gain trust and support. Developing relationships is key, as higher levels of trust make certain choices easier to navigate. So, you must determine who to invest your time in and who you believe will offer the least assistance. Some choices remain locked due to insufficient trust from others or lack of trust between you and various factions—the Danes, the Germans, the Nazis' occupation forces, and the Resistance. Gerda also writes diary entries, recording everything that has happened. You decide what comment she makes about the situation, which can increase your wit, compassion, and insight levels. This is an important factor in

choices because you can sway officials and other people by having points of compassion, insight, and wit. These points are critical as you cannot make certain decisions without them. Although it is a little hard to know which comment to choose in order to gain more points in the various categories, this does add the realistic element that not everyone has equal skills in wit, compassion, and insight. Another element to consider while playing is that you must choose where to go and what activities to do in the time allotted. Ultimately, you cannot do everything, you have to make decisions, no matter how difficult.

The gameplay is remarkably similar to that of *Telltale* games—your choices matter. The setting of the game, Nazi-occupied Denmark in 1945, is familiar in the sense that other media have examined the wartime experience of World War II. However, *Gerda: A Flame in Winter* examines the journey of a regular civilian who ends up in chaos trying to save her husband from death. In my opinion, the game depicts a very realistic point of view. All of the decisions are remarkably hard to make. You cannot do everything the game offers; you will have three to four areas to choose from but will only be able to interact with two to three. There were so many times I had to sit in front of the computer to reflect on what I wanted to choose because I wanted to save everyone involved, especially my husband. This game forces you to put yourself in the character's shoes. While playing, I was so passionate about the narrative that it felt like my choices were actually happening and that I was going through what happened in the game. At multiple points within the game, you must make a choice between personal ethics and what would be the best way to save your husband. You do not want to help the Nazis, but maybe getting them to trust you can help get your husband out? Or maybe helping the Resistance might break him out? Or do you try to save him on your own?

In my playthrough, I followed my instincts and avoided fully aligning with any faction, although I made a conscious effort not to help the Nazis. However, I encountered difficulties with the Danes whenever I helped other Germans. During war, people will die; it is inevitable, and I think this game shows that perfectly—you cannot save everyone. From what I have observed, I believe there are several possible endings: you survive, but sadly Anders dies; you both survive together, but at what cost; and you can both die. Ultimately, there were not many shortcomings to the game. While playing, my only issue was with the depiction of characters and their nationalities. They are shown with either the Danish flag or the modern German flag; in Gerda's case, both are displayed in a small circle. While this helps you understand the origins of each character, given the context of the time period, it perhaps would have been more appropriate to have used the flag of the German Reich.

Gerda: A Flame in Winter is incredibly realistic because it is actually a real-life story. Hans Von Knut Skovfoged, CEO and Creative Director at PortaPlay (the company that developed the game), shares the story of his grandmother, who was a part of the Danish resistance during World War II. Because you are interacting with a variety of characters on both sides of World War II, there is a more human

element to the game which even results in a humanization of the Nazi soldiers, who are given a personality. For example, Wolfgang Holtz, a Nazi soldier engaged to Gerda's childhood best friend Margrit Vestergaard, is a character Gerda encounters throughout the game. During my playthrough, he ended up dying, and I was devastated because I liked him even though he was a Nazi.

In terms of the overall historical aspect of the game, while playing, you encounter people, places, and events that ordinary people in Denmark would have encountered at the time. When you come across such moments, you receive an interesting fact to look at when Gerda writes in her diary. Such historical people, places, and events include the experiences of Danes during the occupation of Denmark (1940–1945) like fuel shortages, blackout rules, and rationing; Nazi organizations like the NSDAP-N (the Nazi Party in Denmark), *Zeitfreiwillige* (a unit of the Waffen-SS composed of collaborationist volunteers from Denmark), the *Hitlerjugend* (the Hitler Youth, a youth organization of the Nazi Party), and the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police force); and the work of the Danish Resistance (especially in Sonderjylland, or southern Jutland) through actions like railroad sabotage. The developers incorporate all of this historical context in the game and so much more, which adds to the realism of the experiences. They even show real pictures of the time that were found in archives. I did not know about many of the events mentioned in the game because, so far, I have learned more about the war itself than about how people were affected by the Nazis in their daily lives.

Overall, *Gerda: A Flame in Winter* is both enjoyable and educational, as it teaches about the time period and civilian life. While this game deals with a heavy topic, which you definitely feel while playing, it provides a fascinating way to learn about the ending of World War II without solely focusing on the war itself.

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Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

[sandbox action role-playing strategy video game].

Developer: TaleWorlds Entertainment.

Platforms: Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Microsoft Windows/PC.

Release date: October 25, 2022.

The rags-to-riches story is one of the most popular and archetypal narrative structures one can employ. What would you say if I told you that the journey to those riches depended entirely on your choices, and that the tale would unfold in a violent medieval realm? These are the conditions and opportunities presented by TaleWorlds's *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*. Initially the game was launched in early access, a type of release where the product is still a work in progress, on Monday, March 30, 2020. Since then, it has undergone significant updates, and its

complete version was finally released on October 25, 2022. During the two years of early access, TaleWorlds focused mainly on fixing bugs or issues with the initial build of the game, adding more and more mechanics and content until it was time to officially release the final build. The final build is something to behold—an entire fictional continent for players to explore and interact with.

The events of *Bannerlord* take place in Calradia, a fictional representation of the European continent. The story is set during the year 1084, toward the end of the Calradic Empire—think of it as a parallel to the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the rise of the so-called “Dark Ages.” During the time period in which the game takes place, there are a wide variety of up-and-coming kingdoms looking to challenge the former empire and stake their claim in the lands of Calradia. These include factions like the Aserai, who are characterized as desert nomads inspired by real Islamic and Arabic empires; the Sturgians from the north, who are an amalgamation of Slavic and Viking inspirations; the Vlandians, who make great mercenaries and bear a resemblance to various European cultures (especially the Normans, Vandals, and Goths); the Khuzaites, who are a derivative of the Mongolian Empire, complete with powerful cavalry and fast movement speed; and the Battanians, who resemble early Anglo-Saxon cultures with a focus on woodland combat. The Empire is also selectable as a faction; and they are inspired by a combination of central European cultures and the Roman Empire.

The nation you choose to play as mainly affects the statistical bonuses to your abilities as a character; it rarely, if ever, directly affects how non-playable characters interact with your player character. For instance, choosing a Sturgian will net you and your warband a 20 percent reduction of the speed penalty normally applied when traveling through snow. Alternatively, choosing the Empire will grant your character a 20 percent construction speed bonus to building town projects, completing structural repairs, and building siege engines. Building a character can be as deep or as shallow as you want it to be. Of course you can design how your character looks, but most options look quite terrible because graphic quality was never the focus of *Mount & Blade* games; it has always been about simulating medieval worlds. After designing the look of your character, you are presented with a series of background questions that are related to the nation you chose to play as. These background questions serve the dual purpose of giving your character a backstory before the game begins and granting bonuses to a variety of skills depending on the choices you make. During your adolescence, did you work at the village smithy? Or sell produce at the local market? The former bestows a bonus to your two-handed skills and your vigor, while the latter applies the bonus to your trade and charm skills. Many of these choices are irrelevant to the narrative or gameplay, so you can ignore what they say and just focus on trying to get the exact skill bonuses you want.

The sandbox-like nature of the game encourages multiple playthroughs. There are so many different ways to play the game, and it would be difficult and tedious to do it all with one character. So, I settled on creating three distinct characters.

The first was a merchant and blacksmith named Martin. Martin began his story by helping a local village deal with a bandit problem; he hired villagers to join the fight with him. After defeating the bandits, he took the money and supplies the villagers paid him and immediately bought grain, sheep, and any other supplies for sale. He then traveled to the closest city in the north called Lycaron. It was here that Martin sold his supplies and used them to buy iron ore and hire soldiers as bodyguards. At the local smithy, Martin began to craft weapons, and once finished, he took the weapons and traveled to neighboring cities and kingdoms to sell them. Sometimes he would buy other supplies and sell them for a profit in a different kingdom since the game has a simulated market economy, with supply and demand affecting the pricing of goods throughout the entire map. Martin maintained his routine, increasing profits as he went and hiring more and more soldiers as protection. Initially, this was quite a simple, yet dull gameplay loop, but once you are carrying supplies worth thousands of gold, bandit warbands take an interest and attack you during your travels throughout the map. Martin had no martial talents, and so, in battle, he would mainly command his troops to charge while he watched the chaos from afar. Admittedly, this was not the most engaging way to play, but after a while, Martin was obscenely rich and able to buy himself the nicest clothes, armor, and weapons, even if he could not use them that well.

The next character I made was called Faramir, a classic knightly figure who was skilled with a sword, shield, and heavy armor. After dealing with the same bandit issue that Martin had started his story with, Faramir went on to swear fealty to the leader of the Southern Empire, the widowed Empress Rhageaea. From there, Faramir went on to serve the Southern Empire, completing quests for Rhageaea herself or any citizens in need of help. He was often rewarded with gold, which he used to grow his army. This story was much more engaging because Faramir was leading the charge in most of his battles and was always in the thick of every combat encounter. It is here that the game's mechanics really shine; of course, one could never say it is extremely realistic, but it tries to be, and there is an internal logic to the way combat plays out if you are paying attention. Use archers to weaken forces before they reach you, create a defensive shield wall at choke points, and charge your cavalry around the flanks of the enemy to flatten them from the side or the rear—all logical tactics that consistently work. Most importantly, no one character is a "hero" capable of taking on more than two or three characters. If you try to "solo" a warband, you will be surrounded and killed quickly. You will always need your men with you, so put some thought into how you engage in combat. Faramir was a natural leader and great combatant; after completing so many quests, he was granted a fort to call his own. This opens up the kingdom management system to the player. Faramir could now manage the fort and surrounding villages by setting up tax systems and trade routes, by staffing farms and guard towers, and by all sorts of micromanaging.

Once Faramir was left to manage his fort, I felt it was time to try something different. I created the iconic raider, a Viking-like, axe-wielding warrior named

Ragnar. Ragnar decided to help the small farm with bandits, take every bit of money he earned, hire mercenaries, return to that farm, and completely wipe it out. This began a chaotic loop of raiding, stealing, and killing any small targets he could find, mainly villages and smaller towns. Using the weapons and supplies from the raids, he would feed and pay for his raiding party, which grew to a rather large size. Of course, it did not take long before multiple kingdoms began to send armies and warbands to hunt down Ragnar. This was where travel and positioning on the map became vital for survival. By carrying a lighter load and having more horses, you can outrun other parties who may be after you. Also, running into the forests allows you to hide from armies that may be looking for you. There were times when Ragnar was unable to outrun the soldiers sent after him; this resulted in a savage, chaotic battle that was often filled with hit-and-run tactics. Unfortunately, this gameplay loop became quite stressful, and the terrible actions of Ragnar caught up with him when two massive armies converged on his position, wiped out his raiders, and killed him.

This game has so many engaging moments of emergent gameplay: the potential stories you can create, the roles you can fill, and the opportunities to just exist in this medieval simulation seem endless. The game is not without its flaws; if you are used to beautiful cinematic games with top-tier voice acting and animation work, you will not find that here. Often, non-playable characters with lots of dialogue are not even voiced, so there will be quite a bit of reading dialogue depending on how often you are interacting with diplomacy or trade. You can walk around cities, towns, and villages and view a very passable representation of a “world” that exists; however, it does not necessarily have the dynamic nature of something like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Red Dead Redemption*. This game is trying to simulate an entire continent. You can always tell what the focus of development was, namely, the combat and the economy.

The game’s value for the study of history mainly comes in the form of the simulation itself. It is an opportunity to engage with and exist in what a medieval world “might” have been like. Of course, any serious historian will quickly point out some of the game’s silly or anachronistic elements that are included for the sake of player fun. *Mount & Blade* can be a gateway for students to learn about and study medieval warfare, economies, kingdoms, and politics. The simulation is clearly inspired by all of those topics as they existed within our real history. If you are someone capable of role-playing and making their own fun, this game is perfect for you. If you want a well-crafted cinematic story, you might want to look elsewhere. A comparable game with a focus in medieval world building is *Manor Lords*, a real-time tactics and strategy based game released on April 24, 2024. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*.

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Synaxarion: Acts Part 1
[third-person adventure video game].

Developer: Ignatios Productions.
 Platforms: Nintendo Switch.
 Release date: October 27, 2022.

No sentence has ever changed the world as “It is finished,” when Jesus gave up the ghost on the Cross. The tearing of the veil in the Temple, the darkening of the sky, the earthquakes, and the rising of the dead that proceeded afterwards turned the whole world upside down. The Crucifixion and the events that followed are often seen as compelling moments in history that many would consider traveling back to if they had the opportunity. Aside from attending Mass or Divine Liturgy, the closest you will get is *Synaxarion: Acts Part 1*, developed by Ignatios Productions, a Catholic media production company. The game begins with the Crucifixion and ends where the Book of Acts finishes (hence the name) with tidbits added in from the Synaxarion. For those unfamiliar with the Synaxarion, it is defined immediately upon clicking “New Game” on the main menu:

The Synaxarion is a collection of Saints’ lives, which are celebrated each day of the year. They are a light that leads us to Christ in every generation, a living Gospel. The ministry and very life of Christ is worked out in the lives of the Saints, His faithful servants. They are the glory of the Church, the God-bearers on earth and in heaven. Most of the Saints were unknown to the world, but the Grace of God made them known to the whole universe and to all the ages. Amen.

The Synaxarion is the collection, also known as “Lives of the Saints” used by the Greek Orthodox Church; it is known in the Slavic nations as the “Prologues.” Upon loading into the game, you find yourself, a disciple of Christ, at Golgotha, where the world of ancient Judea emerges in a beautiful array of colors. The game was made in the Unreal game engine, which is the software framework used by the majority of game developers due to its powerful 3D creation tools, and it certainly shows. The game’s visuals bear resemblance to another title on the Nintendo Switch, *Octopath Traveler* (without the sprite animations). The music is fitting for the area; it is very Middle Eastern, though it does feel like some of the music (particularly on the world map and elsewhere) came from royalty-free music resources. You approach the foot of the Cross, impossible to miss on the map due to it being a 3D rendering of a Byzantine icon depicting the Passion, and press “A” to start the scene. The screen goes dark before displaying a beautiful Byzantine icon of the Crucifixion, with the text following the account in St. Luke’s Gospel. All scenes found in the game (Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hades, Pilate’s Court, etc.) are depicted via iconography. After the retelling, you approach St. Mary Magdalene, who requests that you tell St. Joseph of Arimathea so that the burial process can begin. You can also approach St. John, St. Longinus (the centurion who pierced Jesus’ side and was healed of his blindness), and a few other Roman soldiers, if you would like, who offer some dialogue before heading into Pilate’s court, where the rest of the story plays out.

Being on the Switch, the game makes use of both joycons. The left joycon is used for movement, and the right joycon is used for interacting with NPCs (non-player characters) as well as for adjusting the camera angle. Upon hitting the “plus” button, you open the menu, which gives you several options: “Save Game,” “Return to Entrance” (which sends you to the entrance of the level or area you are in), “Options,” and “Exit to Title Screen.” In this pause screen, you also see the next objective for you to reach (e.g., talk to Nicodemus, etc.). Each loading screen will offer some Christian trivia, usually rotating between the Synaxarion, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, or gameplay tips.

If you bought this game expecting action, combat, or anything of the sort typically associated with video games, you will be sorely disappointed. While this is a video game, it is more of a visual novel (i.e., a video game genre that tells an interactive story primarily through text). The developer does have a role-playing game (RPG) titled *The Last Dragon* in the Nintendo eShop for those desiring a more actionable experience. In *Synaxarion: Acts Part 1*, there is a form of achievement hunting/puzzles in the game through the collecting of coins and treasure chests (which are primarily used to unlock stories of the Saints on the world map) that a “wise old man” buried across the game; however, that is the only additional content present. I initially sidestepped coin collecting because, personally, I just wanted to experience the story, but the game will lock you out of progressing forward unless you have collected enough coins and/or chests. A couple of hours into my playthrough, I had to go to the Upper Room (see Mark 14:15, Luke 22:12, and, of course, Acts 1:12–13, etc., in the New Testament), but the game refused to grant me entrance until I opened one chest (which can be found in Pilate’s Court). Of my few complaints regarding the game, this is probably the most egregious. Another issue I encountered quickly with the gameplay is that my character would frequently get stuck in weird corners of a map and would not budge no matter which direction I moved the joycons. The only thing to do at that point was pause the game to hit “Return to Entrance” and respawn at the beginning of the map again. While this one might be chalked up to personal preference rather than objectivity, I did not like the fact that the game requires the Switch to be docked. This was annoying as, on several occasions, I was not able to play with my Switch docked, so I would have to have the Switch propped up somewhere in my room while using my joycons. It would be much simpler had the developers allowed the game to be played in handheld mode (holding the Switch as opposed to hooking it up to the TV in dock mode). The game’s entry on Nintendo’s website does say that all modes of play are supported (TV, Dock Mode, and Handheld), so the information might be incorrect.

Thankfully, there is more I like about the game than I dislike. The most attractive aspect of the game is, by far, the art. When a game is full of beautiful Byzantine iconography and excellently detailed models for the characters, it is near impossible to be ugly. The visuals for the world map and certain buildings, in particular, remind me of assets found in RPG Maker. Specifically, some assets,

notably buildings, appear to be reused. However, I do not blame the developer for this decision because indie developers pour their soul into their work and often face budget constraints that are more severe than those encountered by AAA developers. Another detail I loved – and wish more games would employ – was that non-player characters (NPCs) will actually move their heads to follow your character, tracking your movements if you approach them, which I have not seen since playing the massive multiplayer online game (MMO) *Mabinogi* during my childhood. If you accidentally open a dialogue with an NPC, you can walk away, and after a certain distance, their speech bubble disappears. Lastly, I love that a Christian developer is making Christian-themed games. The last era where Christian video games were prominent were the 1980s with games like *The You Testament*, but none of them were very good. You do have various video games available that are either inspired by Christian material, such as the video game *Dante's Inferno*, or Christian themes, such as *Doom*. However, it is unlikely that many Christian parents would purchase such games for their children due to the presence of hyper-violent content found in those entries.

One neutral point I might add, as this might matter for some, is that the game is not “original” in the sense of artistic liberty. Aside from the models used for the buildings, interiors, and characters, everything else is taken straight from Orthodox tradition or use. All scenes are depicted via iconography. There is no creative liberty taken with the portrayals or with the way the dialogue is written: everything is taken directly from the Bible, the Synaxarion, or hymns. In other words, the game and its developers are very true to the source material.

When considering who might purchase the game, I think it is important for anyone who identifies as Christian to consider buying it, regardless of denominational leaning. If Christians wish to encourage the creation of more Christian-themed content, then they should consider financially supporting existing Christian developers. That said, the target demographic appears to be Orthodox Christians given the content and visuals. For example, one scene in the game depicts the Harrowing of Hades, which, while mentioned in the Scriptures, is not as pronounced or covered in churches outside of Orthodox and Catholic circles. However, if the idea of a visually interactive Book of Acts appeals to you, then I would encourage you to buy this game. If nothing else, the game is only \$4.99 on the Nintendo eShop and takes less than 4.0 GB of space, so there is no real downside to purchasing it. *Synaxarion: Acts Part 1*, which can be found in the Nintendo eShop for digital download on any Nintendo Switch Console, is rated T (for “Teen”) for blood, sexual themes, and violence.

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Total War: Rome Remastered

[turn-based strategy video game with real-time battles].

Developer: Creative Assembly, Feral Interactive.

Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC, Android, macOS, iOS.

Release Date: April 29, 2021.

How will you dominate the Mediterranean in 270 BC? Can you do better than the ancient Romans? What if the Carthaginians had won all three of the Punic Wars? What if Persia had reclaimed their lost territory and more during Alexander the Great's conquest? What if Gaul took control of the Italian Peninsula 745 years before the fall of Rome in 476 AD? These are some scenarios *Total War: Rome Remastered* (2021), developed by Creative Assembly, can show us. *Total War: Rome Remastered* has the base game and two expansions that take place at different times during the time of the ancient Romans. The base game sees the Roman Republic at the heart of Rome. The player's goal is to win the *Imperial Campaign*, which requires them to choose one of nineteen factions and try to conquer the known world of the Mediterranean in 270 BC. The *Barbarian Invasion* is the first expansion pack of the original game *Rome: Total War*. This pack takes place during the migration period and during the time of the Western Roman Empire's collapse (363–476 AD). *Alexander* is the last expansion pack the game received. It takes place from 363 BC to 323 BC and has you take control of Alexander the Great through his conquest of the Persian people and their empire.

On the game's main title screen, there are three different game types: the *Imperial Campaign*, *Historical Battles*, and *Custom Battles*. Each game has a custom battle type. In this mode, the player can choose the factions, the units that will be deployed, and the map location. The game and the expansions all come with their own time- and period-specific scenarios called *Historical Battles*. These battles are based on famous battles sourced by Creative Assembly from historical records, with some creative liberties. These preprogrammed battles feature preassigned units from the respective faction and are set in the starting scenario depicted in the records. In the *Imperial Campaign*, the player can choose from various Mediterranean factions: in the base game, these are the Roman, Greek, Carthaginian (African), Barbarian, and Eastern cultures; in *Barbarian Invasion*, these factions are Hunnic, Nomadic, Barbarian, Eastern, Northern African, and Roman. By contrast, in the *Alexander* expansion, the only faction available to the player in the main campaign is Macedonia, home to Alexander the Great.

At the outset of the game, the player has only three starting factions to choose from in the Roman culture: the House of *Julii*, the House of *Brutii*, and the House of *Scipii*. If the player conquers a faction in the main campaign, it will unlock that faction as playable in another campaign. While you begin with the Roman faction, you are free to conquer whatever you want. The three Roman houses need to appease the Roman Senate as well as the people (S.P.Q.R., i.e. *senatus populusque Romanus*) by completing tasks that reward you with units, fame, or *denarii* (the in-game currency). During gameplay, there are two types of maps: the campaign map

and the battle map. On the campaign map, the player is tasked with maintaining their chosen faction's growing empire. This is where the turn-based part of the game begins. After a player exhausts all of their possible actions, their turn is over. In-game time moves along at a pace of six months for each turn that is taken. The possible tasks the player oversees completing can be broken down into two categories: *City Maintenance* and *Empire Maintenance*. With *City Maintenance*, the player needs to maintain public order by recruiting military units (both land and sea), spies, assassins, and merchants. *City Maintenance* also chooses what building is to be constructed or repaired if needed. The city panel is where taxation is set to either low, normal, high, or very high. If public order is not maintained, riots will start, destroying city buildings. If not quelled, a full rebellion will take over the city, kicking out garrisoned troops. With *Empire Maintenance*, the player must use diplomatic agents to engage in negotiations with other factions, which can result in trade, military access, alliances, ceasefires, map information, tributes, region exchanges, and bribery. The player is also able to move their armies, fleets, and agents around through the fog of war on the campaign map. Each unit has a set number of movement points per turn. Armies and fleets can engage in battles with enemy factions. Armies can lay siege to cities. If a city has a wall and the attacking army has no siege engines (onagers or *ballistae*) or siege equipment (battering rams, siege towers, sapper points, or ladders), they must be built a turn before the battle. Once the battle is initiated, the map changes to the battle map. The battle map implements the real-time strategy aspect of the game. The player commands units that have been assembled on the campaign map before the battle, directing them into battle on open fields or during city sieges. These battles are won by either killing all enemy units or routing all enemy units off the map. In sieges, the player is additionally tasked with capturing and holding the town square for three minutes. The player must focus on each unit's morale to make sure the unit does not flee from the battlefield. Morale is affected by fatigue, the size of the enemy forces, and the leader of the army. The player must keep the general or captain of the army from being killed by the enemy, which causes the biggest loss of morale.

Total War was developed by Creative Assembly and originally published by Activision, though the rights were later acquired by Sega Corporation, who now publishes the games. Activision has been a well-known video game developer and publisher since 1979. Located in Santa Monica, California, Activision is most recognized for several franchises: *Call of Duty*, *Guitar Hero*, *Crash Bandicoot*, and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. The Sega Corporation is one of the oldest publishers and developers and has been well-known in the video game market since 1960. Located in Shinagawa, Japan, Sega was one of the biggest rivals to Nintendo during the "Console Wars," which started in the 1980s and persisted until their departure in 2001 from the console manufacturing side of the industry. After 2001, Sega shifted their focus to developing and publishing games. Sega is renowned for creating the *Sonic* games, as well as publishing multiple series: *Company of Heroes*, *Persona*, and *Total War*. The developer of the series, Creative Assembly, now a

subsidiary of Sega (acquired in 2005), was founded in 1987 in Horsham, England. Creative Assembly is known its series *Total War*, a turn-based strategy game with real-time battle sequences. They have solo-developed several other games including *Alien: Isolation*, a survival horror game based on the *Alien* movie franchise, and *Halo Wars 2*, a real-time strategy game from the *Halo* series.

Total War: Rome Remastered is a remastered version of the third installment of the beloved *Total War* series, which is known for depicting historical periods of great warfare: the Sengoku period of Japan, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Revolution, the High Middle Ages before the Crusades, and the Three Kingdoms era. The game uses the real names of units, people, and cities. The units of each faction have similarities to each culture but have unique unit types specific to them. The Roman factions utilize the real names of different types of soldiers: *Hastati*, *Principes*, and *Triarii*. This game is a good representation of the time period of the Mediterranean Sea between the years 363 BC and 476 AD. I have played all of the factions that are unlockable for the game. Each of the factions is intended to be balanced, but the Barbarian and Eastern factions do struggle during the middle to late part of the game. The visuals for the game have been improved compared to the 2004 original game. There is voiced dialogue every time a unit, army, fleet, or agent is selected. These dialogues can get annoying for some people since they repeat themselves whenever selected. The remastered unlocks include all factions for the player, except for rebels and the Senate. Furthermore, the graphics have been updated from the original 2004 release. With the map looking less pixelated, the use of water-colored cutscenes in addition to in-game assets helps update the visuals for the remastered version. The map user interface (UI) has the addition of wider zoom, additional information tabs, and map rotations. These features became standard after the release of the fourth game, *Total War: Empire*, in 2009 along with the introduction of a new game engine. When in battle, the troops tend to be slow to react to orders. The remastered version boasts an improvement to the game's artificial intelligence (AI) pathing, allowing for more tactical maneuverability on the battlefield as well as the addition of the merchant on the campaign map. Even with this improvement, the AI still has some units getting stuck on terrain or walls, but far less frequently.

The original *Total War* was my introduction to the franchise, and I have played it for at least 200 hours. I continue to recommend this game and franchise to any PC (personal computer) gamer who is interested in history. Even with the newest game in the series, *Total War: Pharaoh*, released 2023, *Total War: Rome* is considered to be the best game in the series to date, giving Creative Assembly a reason to create an updated remaster. With the ability to create "what if" scenarios with ancient Mediterranean civilizations, the remastered version keeps players coming back for its high replay value.

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