

Reviews (Games)

Hearts of Iron IV [strategy video game].

Developer: Paradox Development Studio. Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC, Linux, Macintosh operating systems. Release date: June 6, 2016.

The eve of World War II is a rather popular time period in every medium, from books and movies to video games. Therefore, when this time period is included in someone's new work, the quality must be exceptional to be worthy of widespread attention. *Hearts of Iron IV* is just such a video game, focused on World War II and exceptional in its own right. This review focuses on both the type of game *Hearts of Iron* represents, but also how this game might find application by people of the historical profession or persuasion.

As a game, *Hearts of Iron IV* is a profoundly enjoyable experience. This is the fourth installment in the *Hearts of Iron* series. All the games in this series focus on the World War II era, but this latest installment expands the timeline by starting in the 1930s. The player can choose between a major or a minor nation, with an obvious gameplay focus on picking a country that had a bigger stake in the war, such as the United States, Germany, the Soviet Union, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan, since these nations had a more varied experience than, say, Turkey or China. Once a country is selected, the player must lead the country through the pre-war years and prepare for the upcoming upheaval. The first major events that take place are always the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War. Both the player and the simulated Artificial Intelligence world powers react to these events and attempt to come out on top. The game presents the player with an almost infinite number of choices right off the bat. One of the most impactful early-game decisions the player can make is the allocation of all factories already built in the country the player controls. This detail alone is one of the most engaging aspects of the game. Factories are needed to produce all weapons, equipment, tanks, ships, planes, and transport vehicles for one's army. In addition, the player can allocate factories to the production of non-war related luxury goods to produce tradable resources that could mean the difference between a fully fueled air force or one with only half the efficiency and range. One of the mechanics that really makes the decision-making process agonizing is the fact that, in this game, factories become much more productive the longer they produce the same thing. Thus, a line of infantry weapons that represents cutting-edge technology takes almost twice as long to produce as the same quantity of the old line when one switches all the factories over. Accordingly, troops run out if there is not a slow phasing process. The same situation occurs with tanks and planes. It might take two or three months to see one brand-new plane, whereas the allocated factories since 1936 will produce older-model planes at twice or sometimes three times the rate of the new one.

This minute attention to every little detail of the process is where the real enjoyment can be derived from this simulation of World War II.

The same process applies to navies, to politics, to trying to change the system of government in one's chosen country, and to the battles the player chooses, for example, who heads what army and how long it stays in a specific area. Every part of the game lets the player customize how the events of the war unfold, and there is real enjoyment to be derived from that experience. The game is endlessly deep, allowing players to be as detail-oriented as they wish. The national-focus system is very streamlined, but it still offers pivotal choices. For example, as the Soviet Union, one can choose to focus on establishing the same political patterns that played out during the war, increasing relations with Germany, and signing non-aggression pacts. However, the player also has the option to ignore this completely, and instead focus on the military or air force, preparing for the eventual German invasion by securing the western borders of the nation. As the United Kingdom, the player can choose to focus on nation building, home defense, colonial elites, or an endless list of considerations and choices that ultimately shape what parts of the empire are developed and what parts are ignored. If the player chooses to develop the Raj (i.e., the British sovereignty in India), for example, armies moving through that area will be better supplied and move more quickly, leading to an easier invasion of Manchuria, which ultimately allows for a strong defense against Japan. Ignoring this and focusing on Africa, however, leads to an exposed flank in Asia, but allows the player to better negate the power of Italy by removing its few colonial holdings from play early. This leads to fewer resources for Italy to utilize when it is building its military, as the iron and oil from Libya and Ethiopia now fall under Allied control. The player can choose to fortify Gibraltar or interfere politically instead and try to stop the civil war before it occurs. A fortified Gibraltar allows for an invasion of Spain that could leave Hitler open on three fronts instead of two. These sorts of decisions permeate every single aspect of the game, leaving the player with an almost inhuman number of choices, and that is just looking at two of the countries involved in the war. However, this is not a snap-decision, high-octane, or explosions-and-gunfire type of game. There is a strong emphasis on micromanagement of multiple different systems at the same time, but there are never really any split-second decisions or fantastical effects to keep your attention. Those who appreciate a well-laid-out plan and its perfect execution are going to be the people who can enjoy this type of game.

The second aspect of this game that goes beyond whether it is fun to play or not is the fact that this game serves as a real tool to simulate the events of World War II. The applications are endless, but here is an example of a typical situation that can occur in this game: I play as a non-Allied country, in this case Turkey, and I am threatened by the Soviet Army slowly approaching from the East. As a precaution, I need to equip an army and air force that can hold their own against the Soviets. To do this, I need to find a way to acquire rubber to make my aircraft

production faster, as my current lack of a rubber resource is making the process take far too long. The only reasonable trading partner with rubber to spare and enough of a relationship to trade with me is Germany. At this point, the player can imagine the historical dilemma some leaders had to face in order to protect their countries. The choice of no rubber and a Soviet overlord vs. Nazi rubber and a free country seems to be an easy one for the player to make. I find this sort of engagement with the simulation to be very interesting. Anyone trying to play as the German nation can see that opening up an eastern front while the United Kingdom still stands is a terrible call; similarly, the war is almost too easy to win for Germany if that specific choice is not made. Applied to an introductory college or even High School History class, this type of teaching tool has infinite untapped potential. At the very least, the demonstration of the various battles in real-time simulation, including all of the various things that could have gone awry, offers a vivid illustration to what students are already learning about the war from books and lectures.

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Kingdom Come: Deliverance [single-player action-adventure video game].

Developer: Warhorse Studios. Platforms: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows/PC. Release date: February 13, 2018.

If you are planning to slay a dragon, murder a king, or save a girl from the tallest tower of a thousand-foot-high castle, I must apologize on behalf of Warhorse Studios, because none of these scenarios occur in this game. On the other hand, if you long to travel on horseback down the sandy streets of early fifteenth-century Rattay in Bohemia in the Holy Roman Empire (modern-day Rataje nad Sázavou in the Czech Republic), drink mead with a new friend, or replenish your belly with food from the local market, this game is for you. This review of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* will address gameplay and historical accuracies, of which there are plenty. The director, Daniel Vávra, is a Czech-born writer, director, and co-founder of Warhorse Studios, who previously worked on such popular video games as *Mafia* (2002), *Mafia II* (2010), and *Wings of War* (2004). Up front, I need to mention that this game is rated “M” (mature) for its lewd language, graphic blood (which you must clean off your blade to avoid upsetting concerned locals), and nudity (which can be avoided by not soliciting whores at the bathhouse or accepting the priest’s invitation to become wasted on alcohol), but what would you expect in a game that is set in the European High Middle Ages?

The opening monologue gives a simplistic overview of underlying historical tensions going into this game. The great emperor Charles IV had died in 1378, the same year in which the Papal Schism had begun, an event mentioned in the game. The schism, which will last until 1417, has divided Europe into two groups, namely, those who side with the pope (or anti-pope) in Avignon and

those who side with the pope (or anti-pope) in Rome. Charles IV's son Wenceslas IV ("the Idle") has taken the throne. He neglects affairs of state to the point that he even fails to arrive at his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor, upsetting both the pope and his own barons who turn to Wencelas's half-brother Sigismund for help. Sigismund originally plans to kidnap the king to bring him to Rome, but ultimately decides to consolidate power for himself, first by attacking Wencelas's allies, like the main character's city of Skalitz (modern-day Strážnice), which is where the game begins, in 1403.

This game is not for the faint of heart. Unlike the more popular games currently on the market in this genre, you will not be able to figure out the basic mechanics in ten minutes. Actually, it feels as if the player's character barely knows what is happening during the game. It is as if the player is actually catapulted into the Middle Ages as the lazy son of a blacksmith who simply wants to enjoy his girl and his friends, while having an unremarkable frame, face, personality, and demeanor. The player's character, Henry, or "Hal" as your father calls you, seems to relate to the stereotypical player behind the controller: lazy, drunk, up late, living at home, whining to mom about working, and incompetent with regard to combat or any skills of the tongue, especially when thrown into a dire situation of life and death. Everything about the main character, from his looks to his presence in Bohemia, is average. Refreshingly average.

The game constantly reminds the player how useless Henry is, "failing even to pass [...] [the] lowest expectations" after an archery test with Captain Bernard. Bernard actually appears to be your antagonist, compared to the lords who at least watch over you. While I must recommend training with Bernard as often as possible (because every time you swing your sword or axe, your, i.e., Henry's, swings increase in speed and potency), Bernard often belittles you as if he wants to wrap you in bubble wrap (if there had been such a thing back then). You cannot simply shoot arrows from one hundred yards away and expect to hit a character in the head, let alone catch a rabbit the first time it comes within hand's reach. Even if you train and level up in your archery skills, or take a "perk" that grants Henry a steadier hand when intoxicated, the lack of a reticle will force any player to throw down the controller in shame. On a brighter note, defeating an enemy, accordingly, feels earned. Every hit, slash, or attack parried is a thrill greater than defeating an arduous boss. I once spent two hours trying to kill bandits for a mission, when I could have simply done it with the help of the guard. No coddling will occur during this experience.

There are certain things that I was not expecting, but they are interesting and realistic. I never thought that I would get wasted with a priest and gallivant notoriously through the town of Uzhitz (modern-day Úžice). We even get to experience a sermon by Jan Hus of Prague on the corruption of the papacy, sowing the seeds of and foreshadowing Protestant rebellions. Henry has to know

it well enough, so the crowd does not grow too restless, because Father Godwin is too hungover to give the sermon himself.

Swords actually spark when hitting armor, leaving dings and scratches that constantly need to be repaired by an armorer or tailor, or you risk them breaking off during combat. If you do not wash yourself sufficiently, you are treated to disgusted looks from villagers or merchants when you attempt to sell your goods. The game you hunt rots within a day, only slightly prolonged by cooking. Henry's only real sources of revenue are occasional missions and looting the bodies of Cumans (i.e., Turkic nomadic people) and bandits that he somehow manages to kill. It is easier to kill an enemy if you sneak up on them and knock them out first, which the game never explains to you. I only realized the possibility of crouching because the controller layout is similar to medieval fantasy games like those of the *Elder Scrolls* series. Again, there is no coddling throughout the game. You have to figure everything out on your own, or pay someone to train you, just like in the real world. In the game, Henry's first interaction with his mom is her waking him up from a hangover, telling him to get to work and run some errands. Henry is so inept that the second mission of the game is literally titled "Run," tasking the player with trying to escape from the forces of King Sigismund as he raids Skalitz and kills almost everyone close to you. It took me five attempts to manage to simply flee. I would say the experience is like walking for the first time, except I fear Warhorse Studios may make players do that in their next development project.

In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, you cannot simply sleep all day anywhere. Henry becomes exhausted easily, and he has to find a bed every day or will talk gibberish and pass out. I attempted to learn all of the game's mechanics during the first mission, only to find myself being caught stealing, thrown in jail, and dying during a raid. If you wish to avoid paying fines for a crime, such as for walking around town with a lit torch, you can, later in the game, simply spend a night at the local jail. When in jail, Henry is literally given no food or sleep, thus his character's statistics plummet. Trust me: Do not eat rotten food! I nearly died. The random orange pot soup surprise suspiciously cooking on everyone's fireplace, on the other hand, is fine to consume, plus, unlike when eating food from a shop's inventory without buying it, no one will accuse you of stealing, and it costs no *Groschen* (coin used in the Holy Roman Empire).

The game's footnotes rival those of the famous and notorious *Assassin's Creed* franchise. A codex entry will pop up for every blacksmith you pass, for every charcoal burner you smell, and for every historical figure that talks down to you (and they are easy to notice since they have actual names rather than simply being referred to as "villagers"). If you click on such a codex entry, you are greeted by a meaty synopsis on the person, place, or item in question, alongside a realistic medieval depiction. The maps in this game are superb. As soon as they are available to the player, world maps and city maps are not only easily discernable, but immersive in their art, style, and form, making you feel like you

are staring at an intricate tapestry every time you access a map. Speaking of the maps and their realism, this game is loaded with real history, and its places are real places. I even compared the map in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* with a Google-Maps version of the modern-day Czech Republic, and the images lined up almost perfectly (one notable exception is Skalitz, which is farther away than the game suggests). The place names in the game are the medieval German (or Bohemian) names, rather than the modern Czech ones.

For a comparatively small, yet ambitious enterprise like Warhorse Studios, it must have been exceptionally hard to replicate real-world interaction and authentic maps without going over budget. Nonetheless, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is enjoyable, even though its graphics are five to ten years behind those of other, big-name franchises. Major game critics, such as IGN, gave *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* an eight out of ten for its story, attention to detail, and focus on realism, while criticism was aimed at its technical bugs. I had heard that the game was buggy upon release, but I never encountered anything game-breaking (i.e., glitches that make completing the story impossible), but Warhorse Studios now has had a year since the game's original release to tie up loose ends. The game's graphics may be subpar for the taste of some players, but they are good enough to not be a distraction.

Does hyper-realism help or hinder the gameplay experience? From the aspect of escapism and glorious graphics, I actually did not enjoy this as much (especially when compared to games in the *Elder Scrolls*, *Witcher*, *Dragon Age*, and similar series). However, as a historian, I loved discovering the cultural history of early fifteenth-century Bohemia, something that is not too common in games currently available. There are, nonetheless, a few obvious flaws. When coming to a water trough (apparently dispersed throughout medieval Bohemia), you can simply press a button and your face becomes washed; even today we do not (yet) have the technology to wash ourselves in an instant. Also, Henry can (initially) barely hold a bow, but when he jumps on a horse he is simply an equestrian god. Finally, I wish *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* would re-create medieval Czech or at least use an accent for the sake of an immersive experience. I certainly enjoy it when the language, or at least the accents, are those of native regions.

I thought I would be able to visit Prague, but that never happened, which is probably realistic to the life of a medieval blacksmith's son who normally would have never ventured beyond his own town, let alone into the capital. I just wonder why Prague is mentioned so often in the dialogue if the creators did not plan for Henry to explore it at least once. The ending is disappointing as nothing that Henry is trying to accomplish actually comes to fruition. Yet, by the same token, how often, in real life, do we get the companion we want, or the sword (or whatever else) we desire, or perhaps even the justice we have been denied? While maybe less satisfying from the perspective of fantasy or personal imagination, this ultimately adds to the game's realism or at least makes me

want to purchase that next expansion pack, which is probably what Warhorse Studios wants me to do anyway.

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Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice [single-player action-adventure video game].

Developer: FromSoftware. Platforms: Xbox One, Playstation 4, Microsoft Windows/PC. Release date: March 22, 2019.

The encounter with the *tengu* of Ashina, who is Isshin Ashina in disguise, reveals how our protagonist received the name Sekiro: "Another rat. Ah, but those eyes ... a starving wolf. Before I kill you, tell me your name. Tell me your name! No name to give? You *shinobi* [i.e., male ninja warriors] are all the same. You die nameless, with no one to mourn you. However ... your left arm. A prosthetic *shinobi* arm, it reminds me of ... [bursts out laughing] that's it ... a one-armed wolf. I like it! Which means ... 'Sekiro.' This is what I shall name you." *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki and developed by FromSoftware, is a game that takes place in a fictionalized version of Japan's Sengoku period (mid-fifteenth to sixteenth centuries). *Sekiro* is Miyazaki's latest directed game. For those unfamiliar with Miyazaki's work, he is mainly responsible for directing the popular *Dark Souls* series, which pioneered a brand-new subgenre in gaming, the "souls-like" experience. A true souls-like game, at the very least, has to incorporate a punishing death system which forces the gamer to repeat a section or level while losing anything gained in the last playthrough. This death system is almost always accompanied by a boss checkpoint system that rewards skill-based gameplay rather than button smashing. In a nutshell, expect to die repeatedly throughout the game as you encounter every exploitation and secret that might get you that survival edge. *Sekiro* incorporates these elements so well that, in my opinion, it surpasses its predecessors, the *Dark Souls* games. *Sekiro* owes its success to the beauty, difficulty, and rich narrative that it so perfectly demonstrates.

The game begins with a cinematic video accompanied by exquisite narration, regardless of the language chosen (I recommend Japanese). A wounded, nameless soldier staggers through Japan's crimson forest in the fictionalized lands of Ashina, stumbling onto a ravaged and war-torn landscape. The soldier collapses at the sight of the brutality before him. In the distance, two *samurai* battle to the death, one wielding a *katana* (sword), the other a *jumonji yari* (a Japanese cross spear). The sheer size and power of the man wielding the spear sends the swordsman flying backward when they clash. For a brief moment, the camera is on the swordsman's blood-covered face; his concentrated expression is daunting. In a matter of seconds, the duel is settled. Impaled at the neck by his

adversary's *katana*, the spear-wielding giant falls to the ground: "Master swordsman Isshin Ashina [has] staged a bloody coup and wrested control of the land." The video continues, and what follows is an introduction to the protagonist we will be playing, a small boy. Alone in a field of corpses, an unknown *shinobi* glides his *katana* across the boy's face, cutting him immediately, yet the boy shows no fear, no pain, and no emotion whatsoever. Instead, the boy grabs the *katana*'s tip and invites death. The nameless warrior asks: "Will you join me, starving wolf?" The boy nods and is taken away, in time becoming a master *shinobi*. Fast-forward, the boy, now a man named Wolf, kneels in front of a slightly ajar *shoji* (a traditional Japanese architectural door), and his father, Owl, the *shinobi* who had taken him in years ago on the battlefield, tasks him with protecting his master. In the video's final scene, some time has passed. It is winter, and a lone woman carrying a *wagasa* (an oil-paper umbrella) is seen walking across the snowy landscape. She reaches a cliff and down below lies Wolf, motionless. She drops a note and says "*Shinobi* ... Open your eyes. For the sake of your master."

Wolf or Sekiro, depending on who addresses him, begins by leaving the crevice in search of his master who is being kept against his will in a nearby tower. After a brief introduction to Sekiro's basic mechanics, you scale a cliff and speak to your master, Kuro, the Divine Heir, a child whose ancient bloodline grants immortality. You are given your *katana* and tasked with securing a safe route to escape with Kuro, but you are impeded by Genichiro, a leading member of the Ashina clan and the grandson of Isshin Ashina, the swordsman who had staged the coup decades prior. In a short cinematic video, Wolf approaches Genichiro in a field of white flowers, with the full moon overhead. Then you fight Genichiro and, whether you win or lose, the outcome is the same: you lose your arm and become unconscious. When you next awaken, a mysterious man, designated simply as a sculptor, tells Wolf that he has rescued him and fitted him with a *shinobi* prosthetic arm, "a fitting fang for a one-armed wolf." A *shinobi* prosthetic is an integral tool necessary to advance in the game, with upgrades available through discovery or by defeating bosses. The sculptor bids Wolf farewell and advises him to come back whenever upgrades are necessary. There is no real direction where the player should go or what the player should do next, however, valuable information is hidden throughout the game for players willing to piece together the lore.

The story of *Sekiro* revolves around immortality and the consequences of either seeking or obtaining it, and it is up to the player to sever these ties of immortality. The game presents various forms of immortality. First, there is Sekiro's master, Kuro, the Divine Heir, whose blood contains the Dragon's Heritage or true immortality. Second, Sekiro's blood pact with Kuro has enabled him to resurrect after death, yet at the cost of infecting the civilian population with a disease referred to as Dragonrot which, if left untreated, is fatal. Third, the Rejuvenating Waters that come from the Divine Realm where the Divine Dragon

resides will grant immortality at the cost of losing one's sanity and, ultimately, humanity. Finally, the last form of immortality is a result of experimentations by the Senpou monks who have tried to create their own Dragon's Heritage, but instead, perhaps unknowingly, have created Dragonrot which results in centipedes infesting their host's body, moving the corpse after the host has died. The burden of immortality existing in the world causes misery for everyone, and Kuro struggles with the burden of his birthright and feels guilty for having given Sekiro immortality, while wishing to rid the world of immortality. Kuro tells Sekiro: "I wished to save you. I'm sure that I would do the same thing given another chance. However ... undying begets stagnation. The Immortal Oath, the Rejuvenating Waters, the Dragonrot. They all corrupt men to the point that they no longer live as men. I wish to sever the chains of stagnation bred by the Dragon's Heritage. Wolf, will you help me achieve this aim?"

Sekiro is a massive game with so many noteworthy subjects that could be discussed in greater detail, so I wish to touch upon some of these themes, if only briefly. The game is impressively detailed with regard to actual historically accurate Japanese architecture, combat technique, attire, and Japanese mythology. Throughout the game, the immense Japanese castles are incredibly authentic, down to the smallest details. For example, the castle walls curve to prevent climbing by invaders, and the rocks rendered in the walls are of different shapes and sizes because the Japanese built their walls without any mortar, instead placing perfectly fitting rocks on top of each other. Furthermore, in the walls surrounding the castles, there are holes in various shapes, either triangles or squares; these are called *sama* (loopholes) and are defense mechanisms used for shooting arrows or firearms. In the game, the enemy units use these *sama* for their explicit purpose. Architecture aside, the combat techniques used by the *samurai* throughout *Sekiro* are impressive and believable. When killing opponents, Sekiro impales them through the neck, head, or open spaces in an enemy's armor, and not through solid metal armor as in other games. By utilizing real-world sword techniques like *itto-ryu* (the one-sword school), the fighting animations come alive. The attire worn by the *samurai* or *shinobi* is detailed and functional. The most common form of Japanese armor found in *Sekiro* is *mogami dou* which consisted of five solid pieces of sheet metal, with four hinges, all laced together. Finally, the most fascinating aspect of *Sekiro* is its heavy use of Japanese folklore, my favorite being the folklore surrounding the red-eyed carp, which ties into a famous Japanese folk story, *Yao Bikuni*. This is the story of a fisherman who catches a strange fish with a human face. He offers the fish as a meal to his friends. However, one friend notices the human face on the fish and warns the others not to eat of it. The friends secretly wrap their pieces to dispose of it later, except for one who is drunk on *sake* and later, carelessly, gives his piece of the fish to his daughter. The daughter eats it but appears to be unharmed. Over time, the girl grows up and gets married, but eventually stops aging altogether, living to the age of 800 years as a Buddhist

priestess before taking her own life. In Japanese folklore, the fish is referred to as *ningyo*, a human fish or mermaid whose flesh grants immortality. In *Sekiro*, the folklore comes to life with a different spin in the form of a giant carp with a human face and a warrior priestess named Yao who eternally guards the entrance to the Fountainhead Palace, an area just before the Divine Realm. Priestess Yao is infested with centipedes, the implication being that she has eaten of the giant carp's flesh either willingly or unwillingly, has gained immortality, and now has to fulfill the eternal task of guarding the entrance. Immortality is the focus in *Sekiro*. It affects everything you do until the very end, and *Sekiro* offers four possible endings.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice is an amazingly detailed game that highlights Japanese folklore, architecture, and history in an entertaining way. *Sekiro* will appeal to gamers who desire a challenging game with skill-based mechanics; historians will appreciate the rich folklore and landscapes that tie the lore together; but anyone will appreciate the sheer beauty of the game. I recommend playing the *Dark Souls* series or *Bloodborne* for a more European or British take on history. *Sekiro's* four endings consist of a bad ending, a good ending, an alternative ending, and a true ending, yet I believe they all embody the same message. They all center around the idea that death is positive, and that those who do not embrace death only live half-lives. The bad ending features Sekiro betraying everyone and becoming the embodiment of *Shura*, a Buddhist demigod of war (*asura*). The good ending, alternative ending, and true ending result in Sekiro having one final battle with Genichiro who ultimately loses against Sekiro. Beaten, Genichiro sacrifices his life to bring forth a demon who takes the form of his grandfather, Isshin Ashina; this can be attributed to Genichiro's obsession with protecting the Ashina clan, and, since his grandfather had represented the peak of the Ashina clan, Sekiro would now have to face Ashina in its perfect form. However, Sekiro defeats the demon Isshin, which results in Isshin bowing down and requesting an honorable death: "Well ... Done ... Sekiro ... Farewell." Afterward, Sekiro is presented with options: in the good ending, he spares Kuro and kills himself, allowing Kuro to live a mortal life after feeding his master the dragon's tears, which had been obtained after defeating the divine dragon (the dragon's blood grants immortality, while the dragon's tears grant mortality). In the alternative ending, Sekiro feeds Kuro the dragon's tears, kills Kuro in his mortal state, and lives the rest of his life as a sculptor, waiting for the next *shinobi* who might require his aid. Finally, the true ending is only achievable by fulfilling various requirements and gaining the frozen tears from the Divine Child of Rejuvenation, which will allow Kuro's spirit to be transferred. It is referred to as the true ending because it leaves a cliffhanger for future sequels. In the true ending, Sekiro feeds Kuro the dragon's tears and the frozen tears, allowing Kuro to pass away peacefully. Sekiro then picks Kuro up and says: "We must leave this place, my lord." The following scene has the child of the Rejuvenating Waters transfer Kuro's spirit into her heart, and thus, together, Sekiro and the

child of the Rejuvenating Waters embark on a journey to rid the world of immortality: "Let us depart to the west. To the birthplace of the Divine Dragon."

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Total War: Three Kingdoms [strategy video game].

Developer: Creative Assembly. Platforms: Microsoft Windows, Linux, Macintosh operating systems. Release date: May 23, 2019.

It is the year 190 CE, and China is roiling with unrest and primed to be united under one powerful warlord. The Yellow Turbans (peasant rebels) have overtaken much of the land that the Han rulers had held, and all of China is waiting for the one who will finally put an end to the chaos. *Total War: Three Kingdoms* offers players the chance to become that warlord. Whether one is a fan of the series, a real-time strategy fan in general, or one who is not fond of video games in general but has a love for history, this game has something of value for everyone. After a brief overview of the setting and visuals, this review will examine the game from the point of view of each of these three categories of potential players, and highlight what makes the game worth the purchase.

First and foremost, a look at the setting of the game and how the gameplay is structured. Ancient China is a rather rare subject in historical fiction. The most famous work on the period is the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a fourteenth-century novel generally believed to have been authored by Luo Guanzhong. The text begins with the Yellow Turban Rebellion and the unrest it caused in many different parts of China. Several soldiers of fortune rise to prominence in this era, as they join forces and crush the rebellion. These soldiers, noticing the weakness of the Han (the current ruling dynasty of China), attempt to wrest control of the country for themselves. The most successful of them early on is the clever Cao Cao, who uses his political savvy and cunning to dominate the northern kingdom of Wei. He is challenged for ultimate control of China by Sun Quan, a military leader from south of the Yangtze River, who unites the kingdom of Wu under his banner. Finally, in the western kingdom of Shu, a distant relative of the Han emperor, Liu Bei, leads a quiet honorable life until he comes to prominence as someone who will stand for the weak and downtrodden. Together, these three leaders embody the titular Three Kingdoms, and the struggle among them to control all of China is the main story of the novel. These aspects of the story are the game's most significant literary influence. Many of its themes and ideas are featured in the game, among them, most importantly, the story of Liu Bei, Sun Quan, and Cao Cao as the essential protagonists, as well as Dong Zhou who is considered, above all the other warlords, as the antagonist. The player starts the game by choosing one of the legendary warlords of the era, and the game's base version offers twelve respective choices. While the usual suspects are present,

including Liu Bei, Dong Zhou, and Cao Cao, so are lesser-known warlords, including Kong Rong or Ma Teng. There is even a “Bandit Queen” character named Zheng Jiang, an amalgam of some lesser-known bandits, that provides a slight twist on the standard warlord formula. The character you choose will dictate how you play the game, with Cao Cao offering a wealth of sneaky and diplomatic options that are not available to someone playing as Sun Jian, who gets significant bonuses for being in hostile territory and waging open warfare. The game is split into two different sections, namely, the campaign map where diplomacy, trade, espionage, and grand strategies take place, and the battle map where the units on the campaign map decide how many troops are present and in what configuration they are deployed for the actual battle.

The quality of the visuals is comparable to that of other current games in this genre. The way the game looks is also consistent with the *Three Kingdoms* novel, as the artistic style is extremely emotive of ancient Chinese paintings and artwork in general. The campaign map is among the most beautiful in the series. The details and the effort put into it is apparent. There are little villages and large towns, all animated with water and lighting effects that make even the most underperforming computer yield a pretty impressive image. The battles are also really well done, with choreographed moves saved for hero characters and such, but not too prevalent as to distract from the tactics of the battle. This all leads to a perfect balance between a consistent play experience and an impressive visual impression.

For fans of the series, nothing said so far is too jarring, as everything with Creative Assembly has been fairly consistent these last few years. Anyone who has kept up with the *Thrones of Britannia* (reviewed in the 2019 volume of this journal) or any of the *Total War: Warhammer* titles will immediately see some familiar aspects taken from these two games. Units that take several turns to muster, hero characters who are dominant and overpowered, and a family tree: these are all concepts introduced in past titles that finally made it to the standard historical titles. The most extensive change for past *Total War* players is going to be the espionage system, which is a real highlight of this game. Unlike in past games, there are no priests or spies or anybody along those lines to engage in espionage; rather, the whole system is now run via a more organic and realistic system. Spies are assigned to a specific faction, and they infiltrate that faction and serve on the council of the rival faction. If they do well enough they can be assigned cities or lands. If a player were to try to capture said cities or lands, the spy would be able to facilitate that action, making the battle easier by opening gates, or splitting off with major portions of the rival army in tow. This system is probably my favorite innovation in the *Total War Saga*.

For those who have not played a *Total War* game in the past, this title is an excellent opportunity to join the series. In the way this game is structured, there are significantly more streamlined processes than in some of the older games, which favor newer inductees to the *Total War* universe. The family tree and

technologies from the *Shogun* and *Rome* series are all far less well implemented and explained than their counterparts in *Three Kingdoms*. The uncomplicated battle mechanics and the relative similarity of all the units also make the game far easier to pick up and play. For example, *Warhammer* titles have factions with such divergent units as goblins, dragons, vampires, elves, griffons, and steam tanks. To manage and learn how to utilize all of these is difficult for someone trying to focus on playing a strategy game that contains enough complicated systems as it is. The approachability of the game is also evident from how many available tools there are for support and help (hand-holding if you will) to which new players have access. If new players so desire, they can follow a direct path, with detailed missions that direct them toward a given end. For anyone looking to get started in the *Total War Saga* or explore a real-time strategy game with amazing graphics, *Total War: Three Kingdoms* certainly is a solid choice.

Finally, for the non-gaming historian, this game features a records mode that sticks to the details of the original time period without fancy frills or additions. The records mode recounts the story of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, except that the generals are normal humans instead of overpowering demi-gods. Cavalry, infantry, and ranged units work in the same rock-paper-scissors configuration as they had in previous titles. For anyone trying to experiment with a simulation of ancient Chinese battles, this mode is the perfect tool.

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