

Reviews (Games)

Assassin's Creed Shadows [action adventure game].

Developer: Ubisoft and Ubisoft Quebec.

Platforms: PlayStation 4 and 5, Xbox Series X and Series S, Microsoft Windows, GeForce Now, Amazon Luna, and Mac Operating Systems.

Release date: March 20, 2025

History runs through the veins of every person, connecting what we see on paper to what was lived by those who came before us: this is the framework of the *Assassin's Creed* video game franchise. The newest installment of *Assassin's Creed*, titled *Assassin's Creed Shadows*, was released on March 20, 2025, by Ubisoft. Other notable video game franchises created by Ubisoft include *Far Cry*, the *Tom Clancy* series, *Just Dance*, and *For Honor*. *Assassin's Creed Shadows* takes place in late 1500s feudal Japan and involves Oda Nobunaga and Akechi Mitsuhide. The game's ending depicts a fictional death for Mitsuhide. You play as two characters throughout the storyline: Fujibayashi Naoe, who is a shinobi ninja from the province of Iga, and the samurai Yasuke, who was an African samurai serving under Oda Nobunaga. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise expands the public understanding of history and makes it more accessible to a broad audience; however, in doing so, it also enables the Ubisoft development team to both adhere to history and take their own liberties.

The idea of the *Assassin's Creed* games is for you, the player, to experience the memories of an in-game playable character in two locations: the real world and a video simulation. The real-world aspect involves a technology company called "Abstergo Entertainment," which has developed a method of studying history by analyzing people's DNA to create a historical simulation of what their ancestors may have experienced. In the context of *Assassin's Creed Shadows*, you are experiencing the world of Japan that you have never experienced before, allowing you to play the roles of samurai and shinobi, which have been mythicized in the period to be these larger-than-life characters that once inhabited Japan. Both characters, Yasuke and Naoe, possess distinct skills and abilities and wield a variety of weapons, many of which can be used only by one of them. It is crucial to know when to use which character, because each brings something unique to the story.

Fujibayashi Naoe is a shinobi from Iga whose family had died during Oda Nobunaga's 1581 destruction of Iga. Playing her is similar to the typical *Assassin's Creed* gameplay in its other installments, where stealth and assassination are the key components. Granted, historically, the shinobi did not focus solely on assassinations, but Ubisoft does an excellent job of combining the real-world application of espionage and sabotage with the core concept of its games. Naoe has a variety of tools and weapons at her disposal that are used constantly throughout the gameplay; notable ones include the kunai throwing knives, a katana, a kusarigama, a tanto blade, and smoke bombs. She also has a grappling hook that she uses to scale buildings, helping her find rare items and acquire synchronization points. In the *Assassin's Creed* games, synchronization points are checkpoints to which the player can travel quickly at a later date. In *Assassin's Creed Shadows*, only Naoe can initially gain access to

these points due to her agile abilities as a shinobi. On the flip side, Yasuke possesses other abilities Naoe lacks.

In the game, Yasuke represents the real-life Yasuke, brought to Japan by an Italian priest, Father Alessandro Valignano, who arrived in 1579, and Luis Frois, a Portuguese priest who arrived in 1563. In 1579, Yasuke accompanied their journey as an enslaved person, caught the attention of Oda Nobunaga, was freed from captivity, and became a samurai. Now it is not clear whether Nobunaga officially made Yasuke a samurai; however, this is one of the creative liberties Ubisoft takes, given that Yasuke, for all intents and purposes, was acting as a samurai and advisor to Nobunaga. Unfortunately, the decision to make him a samurai was a major criticism the studio garnered against the game, along with race-related criticism; a central part of the latter was that many people did not know Japan's history, or even the history that included a samurai of a different color. This type of criticism serves as an argument in favor of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, as these games aim to bring a broader audience into the world of history through fiction.

The abilities Yasuke possesses differ drastically from Naoe's. While she deals more in stealth, Yasuke relies on brute force. The player sees this drastically through the health and power differences while playing each character. Naoe has almost half the health as Yasuke at any given level, along with two fewer stores of rations; Naoe gets three, and Yasuke holds five. Rations quickly restore health during combat and highlight the different play styles the game wants you to take when playing each character. There is also the power stat (or level), where Naoe has about a third less power than Yasuke, emphasizing the need to stealth while playing her. Yasuke, on the other hand, is a display of force not just with his stats but also in combat with his abilities and equipment. He wields, most notably, the long katana, naginata, a bow, and a firearm also known as "teppo." All of the weapons Yasuke can use, even the ones he acquires later on in the storyline, are heavy weapons, meaning characters' archetype of brutes handles them. These slow-moving enemies deal decent amounts of damage with each blow.

Looking at the gameplay mechanics, *Assassin's Creed Shadows* shies away from the typical *Assassin's Creed* map features, where it used to be the case that, when you hit a synchronization point, that region of the map was visible; in this game, however, you must access the synchronization point and still traverse the map to access all of the locations and side quests, gearing more toward the intel gathering side of the shinobi. Both characters you play have horses to help travel from one place to another, which in feudal Japan would have raised some eyebrows regarding Naoe, since it would have been uncommon back then for her to be riding in a city or town with weapons equipped to her. However, horses have been a staple in the *Assassin's Creed* games for the last handful of installments. There are also cultural gameplay mechanics. Early in the story, Naoe is taught the art of the Tea Ceremony by Sen no Rikyu, a tea master based in Sakai, as part of a required quest to advance in the storyline. There are also various Buddhist temples and shrines you can visit along the roads on the map. If you have your character pray, it grants your character certain ability buffs, opening the player to different religious beliefs and demonstrating how Buddhism was the main religion in Japan when Christianity arrived. Naoe also practices Kuji Kiri, a meditation

technique involving hand signs from ninjitsu, to enhance mental and spiritual strength during meditation. In contrast, Yasuke performs kata, which are weapon drills learned from a handful of characters as you progress through the story.

The game's storyline is a fictional retelling of Japan's late Sengoku (or "Warring States") period (1467–1600), focusing on the few rulers under Oda Nobunaga and the days following his death by seppuku (i.e., ritualistic suicide). If you had played this game when it was initially released, there was no warning that it was a work of fiction, which led to significant criticism from the Japanese public. The developers reacted to this by including a warning label when you first start the game. The criticism had arisen because not all historical characters are accurate representations, and some historical sites, such as castles, fortresses, and temples, do not fully align with the period in which the story takes place. The Codex tab in the menu solves much of this type of criticism. As you progress through the story and visit new locations and meet new people, you can view the Cultural Discovery tab of the Codex, which provides the player with extra information on a plethora of cultural and political topics of the time.

Feudal Japan has inspired many different types of media, so if you would like to continue the journey, its aesthetics are evident in other video games, books, and movies. The most recent video game with a samurai storyline is Sucker Punch Productions' 2020 release, *Ghosts of Tsushima*, available for PlayStation 4 and 5, as well as Microsoft Windows. It falls short due to many historical inaccuracies in the portrayal of the samurai, but it is still a fantastic game. There is also the *Shōgun* historical novel, originally published in 1975, followed by a 1980 television adaptation and another modern adaptation in 2024. Finally, if you enjoyed the story of Yasuke, an outsider adopted into the samurai class, you might also like the 2003 film *The Last Samurai*, featuring Tom Cruise, even though it contains many historical inaccuracies. Fans of the franchise will find a home in *Assassin's Creed Shadows* within the shared timeline of the other games, as well as new players who decide to pick it up for the first time. There are hours upon hours of gameplay to experience, especially with the first downloadable content (DLC), released on September 16, 2025, adding more to the story of Naoe and Yasuke as they traverse the Sengoku period. The franchise is a perfect way to gain brief historical knowledge while gaining a glimpse of how life was. All you must do is dispel some disbelief and immerse yourself in the world of *Assassin's Creed*.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Nathaniel Valenzuela of Fullerton, California, earned his A.A. in History with honors (2024) at Fullerton College and his B.A. in History with minors in English and Chicano Studies (2026) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He also served as an editor for volume 53 (2026) of *The Welebaethan: A Journal of History*.

Fate/Samurai Remnant [action role-playing game].

Developer: Koei Tecmo, Omega Force, Type-Moon Studio BB.
Platforms: PlayStation 4 & 5, Nintendo Switch, Microsoft Windows.
Release date: September 28th, 2023.

Just like many other media, video games have limitless possibilities when it comes to creative and imaginative ideas, so—what if you played as a samurai in Japan where your shopkeeper is King Gilgamesh of the "Epic of Gilgamesh," where one of your close allies is Samson of

biblical fame, and where you share a delicious meal with the goddess Circe of Greek mythology? As jarring as such a mash-up of ideas may sound, *Fate/Samurai Remnant* carefully crafts a fictional scenario during Japan's early Edo period (1603–1868) in which a secret war unfolds between historical figures and mythological characters. From intense battles to exploring the vast city of Edo, the selected characters all fit or adapt to the setting, and the developers make great use of their history to ease them in. The *Fate* franchise is an established Intellectual Property (IP) from Type-Moon in Japan, comprising multiple novelizations, video games, animated series, and movies that have been so meticulous about maintaining historical details and references that students have been known to use the franchise to pass their History college entry exams. All of these pieces of media center on the basic premise of choosing a time and place from the past and gathering at least seven key historical and mythological figures throughout Earth's history to battle and claim a wish they want granted.

The primary developers of *Fate/Samurai Remnant* are Koei Tecmo and Omega Force, who are best known for their game series *Dynasty Warriors* (since 1997), which is a hack-and-slash series based on China's third-century CE "Three Kingdoms" period that was full of war and famine after the collapse of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). These developers ended up making a popular style of gameplay and have been hired to make variants of major Japanese IP's such as *The Legend of Zelda* (since 1986), *Gundam* (since 1979), and *Fire Emblem* (since 1990) into these *Warriors* style games.

The story of *Fate/Samurai Remnant* follows a lone samurai named Miyamoto Iori (1612–1678). He has recently lost his adoptive father figure and mentor, the famous samurai Miyamoto Musashi (c. 1583–1645), whose claim to fame had been his unique and undefeated fighting style of using two katanas, Niten Ichi-ryū. Musashi had also authored the "Book of Five Rings" (1645), which used Zen Buddhism for as a philosophy toward battle and personal development for an individual's life. With no Lord to serve, Iori finds himself working as a hired sword for Edo until, one day, he gets dragged into an arcane ritual. The Waxing Moon ritual gathers seven figures and binds them to seven "heroic spirits," people who are renowned throughout history and myth, to clash against one another and claim the Waxing Moon as their prize, granting one wish. Iori's fate is now bound to Yamato Takeru, a Japanese folk hero of the imperial dynasty, both tied together as Master and Servant to fend off the numerous forces pushing to remove them from the competition. Iori and Takeru share an off-putting dichotomy—with Iori raised to be a samurai meant for war but serving in an era of peace, and Takeru knowing nothing but battle and slashing through any obstacle in his path, but now restrained by a society focused on civility and order. They are so divided from each other that Takeru does not reveal his own name to Iori, staying under the class title given to him, Saber, for the majority of the story. As the story progresses, Iori sharpens his blades and skills from fighting opponent after opponent, especially legendary warriors who could crush the average person. Iori finally finds a purpose for his katanas, and his journey slowly reflects the progression of his master's "Book of Five Rings," growing not only his techniques but his sense of self-worth. Meanwhile, Takeru starts to appreciate the pleasures of a peaceful era, from enjoying a warm dinner every night with Iori to the wealth of entertainment and market life developed thanks to the post-war period. He begins to

understand the value of a single life, and what had once been a willingness to destroy everything with a single stroke of his sword, ends up being another blade meant to protect the people of Edo. Eventually, he allows Iori to say his true name and for them to stand as equals.

Following in the styles of its predecessors, *Fate/Samurai Remnant's* gameplay is about mowing down waves and waves of enemies and ending encounters that are led by a Boss-type enemy. What makes the game stand out is not just Iori's usage of a dual katana fighting style, but a unique Action role-playing game (RPG) mechanic of incorporating different fighting styles and switching them at a moment's notice during battle. Iori truly takes his master's teachings to heart as he develops five different fighting styles throughout the course of the game—namely, Earth, Water, Wind, Fire, and Void—each representing a section from Musashi's book. Starting off with only two, Iori uses Earth to represent the standard use of a singular katana, while Water represents the Niten Ichi-ryū, his master's dual katana style. One style displays a solid defense as you focus on one opponent, while the other carries more fluid mobility as Iori cuts through numerous enemies. As the story progresses, Iori develops his disciplines and even incorporates magic into his fighting styles. Wind gives Iori the adaptability to slice up people with one hand and cast giant fireballs with the other. Fire is a tenacious form that grants immense power after Iori sustains damage.

Void is the culmination of Iori's lessons as to represent this untouchable form, attacking at lightning speed but gradually becoming slower if he has taken any hits. The beginning of the game feels simple and slow but, as the player progresses, so does Iori's arsenal, and suddenly everything is so fast and bombastic. Your own skills grow alongside Iori's throughout the story. Supporting Iori in combat is the wide cast of characters that Iori encounters and occasionally allies himself with. Most notably, Servants can be called on to swap in or simply use their techniques to change an entire battle in the player's favor. The most prolific aspect of these Servants is the Noble Phantasm system, a Servant's ultimate technique that wholly represents their story and how their name became famous enough to be worth calling upon, letting you feel this awesome power as you can end a battle in one fell swoop or get yourself out of a sticky situation in a Boss fight. When the player is not weaving through the battlefield, they can explore all of Edo and experience the bustling city in a post-war era. Follow Takeru, as he gets to witness the food stand culture and drags Iori along to pay for it all. Handle wandering Ronin who are nothing but petty thieves and murderers now that they have no Lords to guide them. Go sightseeing among many historical landmarks and locations that not only represent Japanese history but can also reward you and restore Iori's vitality upon interacting with them. To help improve Iori, it is not just about using experience to improve his swordsmanship, but also about using the spoils of battle to craft and upgrade equipment. Need more money or special items? The great hero of Babylonian mythology and ruler of ancient Mesopotamia, King Gilgamesh, has been summoned as a Servant who can independently compete, but decides to maintain a store for the player to frequent, Babyloniya. Gilgamesh accepts both special and common items as coins, so it is relatively easy to have the funds for necessary upgrades.

The game's art and sounds are phenomenal. At the beginning, you receive a beautiful animation summary of the game's cast and setting, done by CloverWorks, accompanied by a song, "Zanya Gensou" by LICCA and Spiral Radder. The music starts out somber as the animation shows some of the tragic low points of a character's past and the pain they have experienced right before, swelling as it cuts to the intense conflicts between them and unleashing their attacks in amazing, eye-catching hand-drawn sequences. The soundtrack always hits the right tone for the scenes it accompanies, bringing a cheerful vibe to the more friendly areas or emphasizing the tense, dire situations you end up in during the numerous conflicts. The architecture of Edo Japan is on full display, showing how active and rich the city is with all its people and businesses. The developers not only include main staples like Edo Castle's magnificent presence throughout the game, but they have also even crafted places like Yokosuka, a port city dedicated to Dutch trade at the time. The most notable aspect of the art is whenever Iori dreams and witnesses Takeru's past. Iori had already gathered that Takeru might have been from Japan's Heian period (794–1185), so every dream sequence is depicted in Heian period-style paintings. It is flat but has very impressive color selections, with all the important points vibrant and front and center. Each sequence is like going through a scroll of paintings rather than a slideshow or a picture book. It is like viewing the famous "Great Wave off Kanagawa" (1831), a woodblock print by Katsushika Hokusai, where every point of color is impactful, and alongside it is a fluid animation that is subtle but helps breathe life into it.

Fate/Samurai Remnant is a fantastic entry into the franchise, allowing a unique story to stand out on its own, but giving a lot of fan service to those who have been with the series for a while and recognize iconic characters. It shows that, despite Koei Tecmo having numerous titles to this gameplay, there is always a way to keep it fresh and display impeccable storytelling, both through cutscenes and dialogue during battle. This review was composed within forty-four hours and having experienced two of the four available endings, and I would recommend this game to anyone who enjoys a strong cohesive story with fast paced action. Those who particularly enjoy history and mythology, or even just like to experience different locales on their own, will appreciate the seventeenth-century Japanese setting and how mythology blends together with history in a masterfully woven story. The game has a plethora of difficulty settings, so anyone can pick it up and take it easy or enjoy a test of their skills and adaptability. There is a New Game+ system where you can take your save over into a new playthrough and unlock even more side story contents to get the whole picture of the cast and what their journeys were. Whether it is multiple replays or just a single run, this game is worth the try for its bountiful cast and beautiful storytelling.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Christopher Quan of Pasadena, California, earned his A.A. in Humanities and Social Studies (2019) at Pasadena City College (PCC). He is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University of Fullerton (CSUF).*

Kingdom Come: Deliverance II [first-person role-playing game].

Developer: Warhorse Studios.

Platforms: PC, PlayStation, Xbox.

Release Date: February 4th, 2025.

The year is 1403. You find yourself encased in heavy armor, fighting in the garrison of a castle in medieval Bohemia, which is currently enduring a brutal siege. Smoke, the smell of gunpowder, and screams of war fill the air. Boulders and ladders strike the wall, as dozens of men breach the battlements. You engage in combat with your enemy. This is the opening scene of the game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, released on February 4, 2025, by Warhorse Studios. So far, Warhorse Studios has created only one other title, which happens to be the game's prequel. Both games aim to create an enjoyable, historically accurate role-playing game that is set in the late medieval period, specifically shedding light on a period of political strife in the Holy Roman Empire. You, the player, embark on an epic journey engaging with politics, combat, and survival mechanics. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* is an excellently crafted role-playing game, one that truly immerses you in fifteenth-century European life. As such, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* stands out as a game set in the medieval period. Typically, representations of this era include magic, dragons, and supernatural aspects. Contemporary games often do not use the historical setting of medieval Europe as a narrative source, but rather as their inspiration for an art style. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*, however, does not just use this period as a backdrop; it crafts an excellent experience that immerses you in the world of late medieval Europe. The game's mechanics, characters, settings, and other aspects, for the most part, have historical counterparts. The game does an exceptional job of entangling its experience with the real medieval era, more so than any other role-playing game.

The game presents a vast open world, full of castles, villages, farmland, forests, rivers, and medieval industries such as charcoal manufacturing and mines. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* does not depict these places as mere boring backdrops to a story; rather, it utilizes them as immersive locations. I will discuss this immersion later on. The player's character, Henry of Skalitz, and his companion, Sir Hans Capon of Pirkstein, are central to the main story. The game picks up right where the last game, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, had left off, with Bohemia engaged in bloody political disputes regarding the leadership of the Holy Roman Empire. Henry had found himself entangled in the political strife between King Wenceslaus IV and his brother Sigismund, as he was thrust from the peasantry into the service of Sir Hans Capon. These two relationships develop more from the first game, as the two of them grow extremely close. The first section of the game is entirely dedicated to saving Capon, later developing into a much more grandiose story. The story propels you directly into conflict with Wenceslaus, and throughout the game you try to undermine his attempts at establishing control. Wenceslaus was a real historical figure, one who participated in political schemes that are relatively accurately displayed in the game. Wenceslaus, historically and in-game, took the reins of the Holy Roman Empire and Bohemia from his brother, Sigismund, before being deposed himself. The game shows the conflict that his schemes caused. Another example of a historical figure is Jan Žižka, a pivotal leader to himself and others during the

course of the game through various military excursions. These are just a few of the historically relevant characters impactful to the game's plot who were also extremely impactful to the real history of medieval Bohemia (i.e., the modern-day Czech Republic).

The gameplay and its mechanics are also historically inspired. Technique and proficiency are gained over time instead of simply being learned by the click of a button. The combat itself is also sourced largely from historical sources. Inspiration for the techniques and fighting styles is pulled from historical sources. Combat feels much more realistic when playing, compared to contemporary counterparts. Instead of "arcade-like" fighting, quick and lacking methodology, combat can be described as a brutal, slow-paced, strategic fight to the death. An argument could be made that this commitment to historical accuracy can make combat less enjoyable for the player. The game's dedication to historical accuracy expands to weapons and armor as well. Although the developers' variation of armor and its accessibility to the player are liberties taken to make the game more enjoyable, it is still largely accurate to the era. Weapons, in the form of swords, pole-arms, maces, and others, are also based on medieval innovations. Another interesting historical trend that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* depicts is the further development and widespread application of gunpowder weapons. The game includes primitive gunpowder weapons and makes them accessible to the player. The *Handgonne* is based on historical sources, and is extremely inaccurate and ineffective at range. However, the game's commitment to historical accuracy mandates its inclusion. Another gameplay aspect included as non-player weapons are siege weapons. The game includes bombards, early predecessors of cannons, and trebuchets, and their effectiveness and application in siege warfare are depicted fairly accurately.

The setting of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* is extremely immersive. A significant location central to the world-building and plot is the city of Kuttenberg, the modern-day Czech city of Kutná Hora. Kuttenberg is a bustling city, full of everything you would expect a medieval city to have—from blacksmiths to shops full of medieval items, taverns, churches, manors, and bathhouses. Many of these features are not just static backdrops; they are locations where you can interact with their features and inhabitants. The city is excellently created, feeling alive, non-player characters flow throughout the streets, and interactions can be had with many of them. The game's characters are also extremely interesting. Long conversations can be had with many of them, as they will detail jobs or quests for you to do, as well as their lives and problems, or simply tell stories. This level of world-building makes *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* feel so alive. The historical basis of its settings and characters makes you feel truly immersed in the era.

While this game excellently depicts history in a hybrid between fiction and historical figures, this depiction is not perfect and has some minor downsides. The main character is likely the largest historical inaccuracy, as he is a peasant who was elevated to the ranks of the nobility. Although he is not described as a noble, his involvement with the nobility, his lifestyle, and his access to social and economic perks would normally have been reserved for the nobility. Thus, this level of social mobility is relatively inaccurate. Other gameplay factors that are inaccurate are various systems implemented to make the gameplay much more enjoyable, for example, the inclusion of healing items and potions. Such items are obtained either

through purchasing them or a complex system of alchemy, in which the player can create and obtain these items. As we know, a drink concocted from brewing marigold and commonly found garden weeds cannot actually instantaneously heal a wound sustained from an arrow to the chest. Another example is the crossbow. The crossbow saw widespread use during this era, and it is indeed present in the game, however, just on a much smaller scale than one would expect for this era. Again, some liberties were taken to make gameplay more enjoyable; however, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* remains an extremely compelling historical source despite minor historical inaccuracies.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance II can be considered one of the most historically accurate role-playing games on the market. Another game with a medieval-like setting is *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. This game is amazing; however, it lacks the historical accuracy of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*. Another historically themed game is *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*, a game set in a similar era but focused largely on strategy instead of role-play and immersion. Even *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*'s predecessor, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, while extremely immersive, does not come close to the level of immersion found in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* is a major success because of its immersion, story, and world-building. This world, so excellently crafted by Warhorse Studios, truly makes the player feel fully immersed in fifteenth-century medieval Europe for hundreds of hours of content. However, this game is not for everyone. Historical accuracy can oftentimes affect the pacing of the game's combat and other systems. Its realism can absolutely find itself burdensome to those who desire a more casual, arcade-like experience, and learning the game's mechanics and how to use them effectively requires an absolutely steep learning curve. Enjoyment may be delayed for those expecting more immediate gratification, simple mechanics, or a gaming experience with fantasy elements. I would recommend *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* to anyone interested in exploring or deepening their understanding of this period. This series truly offers a unique experience that cannot be found with any other game. While some mechanics and gameplay aspects can turn away more casual audiences because of the level of historical accuracy, Warhorse Studios has meticulously developed a story and world based on history. This is so absolute that it even dictates where the developers placed roads in cities. For history enthusiasts, this game is second to none for exploring medieval Europe and a premier example of video games as art.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Chase Thomas of Brea, California, earned his B.A. in History (2026) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties

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

Developer: Creative Assembly.

Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC, macOS.

Release date: July 25, 2024.

The world is in chaos. Raiders attack the shores from Egypt to the land of Hatti, from Mycenae to Babylon. The great empires are on the precipice, beset by famine and embroiled in civil war. This is the world of the Late Bronze Age Collapse, the setting for *Total War: Pharaoh*, a turn-based strategy game with real-time battles. Developed by video game company

Creative Assembly and published by the Sega Corporation in October 2023, the game received an expansion (downloadable content or “DLC”) in July 2024, titled *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties*. The very first decision the player must make in *Dynasties* is as what faction they will play. There are thirty-nine playable factions to choose from, thirty-seven of which are grouped into the five major geographic regions of the game, Egypt, Hatti, Canaan, Mesopotamia, and the Aegean; the last two playable factions are grouped together as the “Sea Peoples” factions, without a particular geographic base. Of the thirty-nine factions, fourteen are classified as “major” factions and twenty-five are classified as “minor” factions. Major factions are distinct from the minor factions of the game in that their faction leaders have special abilities that provide substantial advantages to the player at the start of the game, while minor factions, albeit possessing their own leaders, generally do not have such advantages. On top of these thirty-nine factions, the world of *Dynasties* is populated by an additional 123 non-playable factions controlled by the game’s artificial intelligence (AI). Once the player has chosen their faction and configured their game settings, they are met with a cutscene that quickly establishes the instability of the game’s Late Bronze Age setting.

Gameplay in *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* takes place on one of two maps: the campaign map and the battle map. The vast majority of actions the player can make in a given turn occur through the campaign map. Through the latter’s menus, the player can manage their faction’s economy, governing policies, conduct trade and diplomacy, and control the movements of their faction’s armies and fleets, moving them from one war theater to another. The player can also access from the campaign map a list of relative faction strength and an overview of their own accrued victory points. The battle map, by contrast, contains a minority of gameplay features. Yet while containing just a fraction of features in *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties*, all the battle map’s features are the game’s most time-consuming, as they all manage, in some way, the game’s real-time strategy component. If the player is not paying attention, they can easily spend almost half their time there. On the battle map, the player engages their troops against an opposing army, either in an open terrain set-piece battle or in the storming or defense of a settlement. In any case, to secure victory, the player must not only carefully micromanage their troop formations, as one portion of their army pushes against the enemy while another defends; they must also carefully consider the terrain of battle, as some terrain types, such as desert dunes, will impose penalties on troop movements. Battles are considered over when one army’s troops are either all killed or forced into retreat. The game itself is considered over when a faction has successfully obtained enough victory points. The player can obtain victory points by meeting certain victory objectives, which range from the conquest of settlements to the construction of monumental buildings.

Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties and its base game *Total War: Pharaoh* were both created by Creative Assembly and published by the Sega Corporation. Creative Assembly created the *Total War* franchise almost twenty-five years ago, with the release of the first game in the franchise, *Shogun: Total War* (2000), and it has been creating games in the franchise ever since. While most famous for its development of games in the *Total War* franchise, Creative Assembly has also created other widely acclaimed games, such as the horror survival game *Alien: Isolation* (2014) and the real-time strategy game *Halo Wars 2*. Meanwhile, the Sega

Corporation, more commonly known as "Sega," is one of the most established video game developers and publishers. Sega is perhaps most famous for its development of the *Sonic* video game franchise and for its publication of *Total War*.

Overall, the best parts of *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* as a game have to be its levels of strategy and excellent visuals. In terms of the layers of strategy, the player is able to strategize on as large a level as a faction's finances and army movements, down to the maneuvers of an individual formation of troops in battle. Each level and action requires a degree of deep thinking that proves highly satisfying when the player finds a solution. Meanwhile, as the player is amid battle or planning their next turn, they can appreciate the bright, beautiful colors of the game models. The worst characteristic of *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* is the wait time between turns. On average, it takes about three minutes for all the AI factions to make their moves during their turns. But even that is not that bad. Considering that a turn for the player takes about six minutes, without real-time battle, and at least twenty minutes with a real-time battle, and since those three minutes are for all the over 160 other factions of the game, the AI's three-minute game period is relatively fast. Still, those three minutes add up during long sessions of play, and the player can only watch and observe what events they can in their field of view while the AI "plays."

From a historical standpoint, *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* holds up well. In visuals, *Dynasties* captures the aesthetic of ancient Egypt. Every background the player sees is like a colorized hieroglyph, and every character model is like a hieroglyph come alive. *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* also does well in incorporating historical events and details into its storylines. Waves of Sea Peoples, for instance, migrate across the game map, eventually invading factions with coastal territories and becoming a crisis that the player possessing such coastal territories must eventually deal with, as the empires of the Late Bronze Age Collapse had to in actual history. Even smaller historical details are incorporated into *Dynasties'* gameplay, such as the Egyptian sidelock of youth, a real ancient Egyptian cultural practice used in the game to characterize one of the Egyptian faction leaders, Ramses, as a courageous, if rash, young man. Perhaps the only major issue with the game's historical verisimilitude is in its battles. While individual troops are equipped with authentic weapons, such as the Egyptian *kopesh*, the fact that troops march and battle in well-ordered formation runs counter to the likely disorganized battle style of the Late Bronze Age. It is, however, a necessary simplification to ensure a streamlined player experience. Otherwise, for better historical accuracy, the player would have to deal with, for example, managing 144 individual fighters rather than twelve troop formations, something which could make the micromanagement of *Dynasties* so difficult as to be impossible.

In terms of gameplay, *Dynasties* is very similar to most other titles in the *Total War* franchise, which are turn-based strategy games that divide the player between a campaign map and a real-time battle map. That said, there are unique aspects of *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* worth noting. For instance, in most other *Total War* games, the player only has to manage money (to pay for troops and buildings) and food (to keep their armies fed). By contrast, *Dynasties* has a much more complicated economic system. In this system, introduced in *Total War Saga: Troy* (an expansion to which was reviewed in volume 49 (2022) of *The*

Welebaethan: A Journal of History, [online](#)), the player must now manage five different resources—food, wood, stone, bronze, and gold—several of which are often required to recruit troops or construct buildings in a turn. Compared to the base game, *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* feels like a major improvement. In the base game, the player has a campaign map restricted to essentially the eastern Mediterranean (i.e., parts of Anatolia, Canaan, and ancient Egypt). In *Dynasties*, by contrast, the player has a map that is effectively double the size, encompassing now all of Anatolia, ancient Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia.

Overall, I would recommend this game to anyone who loves turn-based strategy. For those who love to relax by immersing themselves in the world of a game, *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* presents enough challenging problems that will keep the player coming back for more. Meanwhile, for those who go to games to relax by not thinking, I would recommend that they look for a different title. *Total War: Pharaoh Dynasties* cannot be played on autopilot. Likewise, the gamer who enjoys thinking but dislikes micromanagement is advised to steer clear of *Dynasties*. This game cannot be won without at least some degree of micromanagement, be that managing a faction's economy or commanding troops in real-time battle. For any of these players who is now still interested in playing, however, I would recommend they play *Dynasties* on a friend's laptop to see if they enjoy it; if—after at least three hours of gameplay—they are still interested, they can purchase this title.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Xavier Nunez-Sundara of Anaheim, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History with a minor in Chemistry at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society) and the University Honors Program.*