

Reviews (Games)

Assassin's Creed: Valhalla

[action-adventure open-world video game].

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal.

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

Release date: November 10, 2020.

The year is 855 A.D. The longhouse is filled with people dancing, horns are overflowing with mead, and two Viking clans celebrate their newly established union. Young Eivor presents Styrbjorn, her new Jarl (leader), with a token of unity, and the longhouse breaks out in song. Suddenly, a rival clan led by Kjetve the Cruel attacks the village, and Eivor's parents are executed before her very eyes. She attempts to escape by horse but ends up being attacked and forced onto a frozen lake. A wolf seizes the opportunity and grabs hold of her neck. Whether by skill, luck, or the will of the gods, she survives the attack and slays the wolf with an axe. So begins the saga of Eivor "Wolf-Kissed" Varinsdottir. *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, developed by Ubisoft Montreal, follows the story of Eivor, now an adult, as she departs Norway in late 872 A.D. with her adoptive brother and the Raven clan to establish a settlement in England in early 873 A.D. Eivor's goal is to form alliances with the various kingdoms, though this proves to be complicated as she navigates her relationship with other Danes, Saxons, and Britons in this foreign land. Ubisoft Montreal has created a story that showcases the interesting dynamics of different cultures and ideologies interacting with one another. Ubisoft Montreal is also responsible and acclaimed for its work with the *Far Cry* (since 2005) and *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* (since 2003) franchises.

Assassin's Creed: Valhalla is the latest installment of the ever-growing *Assassin's Creed* franchise, and it is the biggest departure from the earlier games for two reasons. Firstly, in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, Ubisoft Montreal fully embraces the concept of an open-world game. Although there is the clear storyline of expanding the Raven clan's diplomatic ties, the player does not have to advance through this plot in a linear fashion. The map of England is divided into regions of varying sizes (e.g., Oxenefordscire, Lunden, Snotinghamscire, etc.), and they have storylines that fit into the larger plot. Players can either choose to complete the main quests within any of these kingdoms all at once, or they can explore other regions and engage in side quests in between main quests (i.e., pursue self-contained storylines with little to no effect on the overall plot). Players can return to these kingdoms at any point to complete anything they have missed, or they can explore the new home of the Raven clan, Ravensthorpe, a settlement that can be expanded at the players' discretion. Players collect raw materials and decide which buildings to create or upgrade (e.g., armory, tattoo shop, etc.).

Secondly, the weaponry used by Eivor suits her role as a Viking warrior but does not fit with the idea of the hidden assassin popularized by the *Assassin's Creed*

franchise thus far. Players have several weapons they can choose from to wield on the battlefield, each with their unique attributes (i.e., different defensive capabilities, weight, attack strength, etc.): swords, one-handed or two-handed axes, shields, and different types of bows and arrows. The well-known assassination blade is also available for use, but it does not fit well with the rest of the weaponry. Players must decide what type of warrior they would like to be and choose equipment that will suit their play style (e.g., fast attacks with low attack damage, high defense and high attack damage with low movement speed, etc.). Additionally, each time players earn enough experience, they are granted a skill point which allows them to upgrade certain attributes, such as prolonged health or dealing out more damage with a certain weapon type (e.g., five percent more damage for all bows)—all by means of a skill tree, a menu which lays out these options. However, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla's* wide choice of weaponry only scratches the surface of Ubisoft Montreal's admirable commitment to create an accurate portrayal of the Vikings.

Every Viking settlement features the longhouse as its most prominent building, and this is where the Jarl is typically found since many important interactions take place there. *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* portrays the Jarl as an administrator of justice during times of altercations between the people and also as a fierce warrior on the battlefield. On several occasions during the game, an *althing* (i.e., a meeting of clan leaders) is hosted by a powerful Jarl to discuss serious matters. Even renowned warriors such as Eivor defer to the Jarl out of respect and custom. The Viking armies are comprised of both male and female warriors who move around by foot, horseback, or longship. While traveling on the river, members of Eivor's crew either recite personal tales or sing songs (like sea shanties). One type of side quest is purely focused on raids: the player takes command of a longship, sails to a coastal village, blows the horn, and leads fellow Vikings on an attack to plunder the village. Since the majority of the storyline is set in England, Eivor frequently encounters Christians during her adventure, and these interactions play out in various ways: they label each other as "heathens" and as "delusional," or both parties accept that they adhere to different religions and choose not to dwell on the subject, or they recognize the similarities of their beliefs and use this to foster the growth of their partnership. All of these elements work together to allow players to feel enthralled by the world Ubisoft Montreal has created.

This world and its stories draw on Norse mythology. Throughout the main storyline, Eivor experiences visions involving the god Odin advising her, explaining the repercussions of her choices, and attempting to give her orders. Many characters share their desire to be escorted by Odin's Valkyries to Valhalla, the resting place for warriors. When faced with death, these characters only request that they be slain with their weapon in hand to guarantee their entrance to Valhalla. In addition, Eivor experiences the realms of Jotunheim (Land of the Giants), Asgard (Land of the Gods), and Svartalfheim (Land of the Dark Elves)

through side quests in visions where she inhabits the body of Odin; however, Svartalfheim is only available as a paid expansion to the game.

No matter which realms players are exploring, they will encounter stunning graphics. The character models are extremely detailed, making some cinematic scenes to appear as if they are videos of real people interacting with one another. Throughout the regions, there are various environments that are clearly distinct from one another. Forests in the fall have a yellow-orange hue from the leaves covering the trees and the ground in addition to the sunset beyond the horizon. Some hills and mountains are rich with vibrant green grass, while others are buried underneath fog and snow. From crumbling statues to weathered buildings, remnants of the Roman civilization are scattered throughout England. There are also many places where the player can climb to the top of a building or the peak of a mountain and be greeted with the view of a bustling town or a beautiful landscape cut by a flowing river, respectively. The game's visual beauty cannot be overstated.

However, there are shortcomings that also deserve attention. Firstly, the skill tree that *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* utilizes to upgrade attributes is overwhelming, to say the least. The upgrades are not organized by type of attribute, so the player cannot solely focus on upgrading assassination damage or health. Rather, the upgrades are spread across the menu haphazardly, and it can be time-consuming to plan an upgrade path, though all upgrades increase the player's overall power level (i.e., strength). Secondly, as the game progresses, the minimum power level of the enemies increases. If players decide to focus on the main storyline and forgo the side quests for any reason (e.g., due to time constraints) – which is what I did, they will be underpowered because they cannot earn enough experience to keep their power level on par with the suggested minimum. That said, the game does allow players to lower the difficulty level at any point. Thirdly, while the storyline itself is interesting, the game eventually does feel repetitive. Nearly every story in the various regions ends with the same quest: storm the outer walls of a fortress, storm the inner walls, storm a central building, and assassinate the leader. Lastly, due to the emphasis on Viking combat, the assassin component of the franchise takes a backseat in this game.

Assassin's Creed: Valhalla fully embraces the concept of an open-world game as the latest installment in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. While the game does have its drawbacks, these are really the result of the studio's ambition to create an immersive game. Those who have played *God of War* (2018) will also enjoy this game since these two games have very similar combat systems and connections to Norse mythology. Like *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* does not play it safe and fully commits to the play style these earlier games have introduced. Fans of the original games may find this latest release unfamiliar in terms of combat and pacing, but players who enjoy games with an expansive map, numerous side quests, a riveting story, and a

complex system of customization will happily get lost in Ubisoft Montreal's new creation.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Anthony Chavez of Fontana, California, earned a B.A. in History (2018) and his Single-Subject Teaching Credential in Social Science (2019) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF.*

Mafia: Definitive Edition

[single-player action-adventure video game].

Developer: Hangar 13.

Platforms: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Microsoft Windows/PC.

Release date: September 25, 2020.

What does family mean to you? Family are people you care about, people you hold close to your heart, and people you would make sacrifices for. They are the same people you fight and argue with. They are people you would kill for. Yet family are also people who may betray you, people who may lie to you, or even hurt you. What does family really mean to you then? What would you do for your family? *Mafia: Definitive Edition* tells the story of Tommy Angelo, a hardworking cab driver who is scraping by in the fictional Midwestern American city of Lost Heaven around 1930. One fateful night, Tommy has an inadvertent brush with the Italian Mafia that showcases a life of reward too big to ignore. Soon he is embedded in the brutal world of organized crime, doing jobs for Don Salieri's "family" as it wars with the vicious Morello crime organization. As Tommy, you will have to establish yourself in Lost Heaven's treacherous underworld, where all is not as it seems, including who your friends and foes really are.

Mafia: Definitive Edition is a rebuilt game from the original *Mafia* video game, first released back in 2002. *Mafia* is an open-world single-player video game that serves as the beginning story of the *Mafia* franchise. This modern revamp of the original game is entirely redone from the ground up by Hangar 13. The game runs similarly to a previous game created by Hangar 13, namely, *Mafia 3*. *Mafia: Definitive Edition* copies *Mafia 3*'s gameplay aspect but that will be addressed later on. The new, "definitive" version of *Mafia* is rebuilt in a manner that can keep up with today's standard of video games while maintaining the first game's originality, albeit with enhanced mechanics, visuals, and audio. The game brings you into its world with a stunning view of the city from a bird's-eye point of view, including the glare from windows and the chrome bumpers of 1930s-era cars. The graphics of this initial cinematic pan of the game's city are absolutely breathtaking. The game itself does not even feel like a game; rather – from its opening title to our eventual encounter with the main protagonist – it feels as if we are about to watch a movie about the Mafia.

The game, overall, has a great storyline. Its main chapter-based story is fantastic, and any cutscene with Tommy speaking to Don Salieri always seems to generate some sort of suspense or a rather tense sort of vibe. The face camera technology used to make these cutscenes is the star of the show. Expressions of

guilt, anger, sorrow, and joy are all captured fantastically in this game. I will compare the gameplay difficulty from my first playthrough at a moderate difficulty level to my second playthrough at the game's highest difficulty level. During my first playthrough, I encountered hardly any challenges compared to the game's "classic mode" which is its highest difficulty level. Apparently, in this latter mode, ammunition left unused in a magazine is lost when a gun is reloaded, the cops are more alert to law-breaking, enemies are more dangerous, and the missions feel harder. The game does a great job of relating Tommy's past life as he recalls the major events he has experienced. Keep in mind, the story is that of Tommy sharing with a cop everything he has done—from before joining the "family" up until the present—in order to obtain protection from his former employer. Every so often we are brought back to this "intermission" cutscene as if we are watching a play. Forcing us to watch these scenes reminds us that what we are playing in the game is what Tommy has already done and is simply retelling in his firsthand accounts. These intermission scenes enable us to better understand what Tommy is doing and why.

The gameplay across all difficulty levels is the same, and the game mechanics, too, remain unchanged across all difficulty levels. Perhaps the only thing that is actually problematic across all difficulty levels is the game's driving feature. As the gameplay follows that of *Mafia 3*, so does its driving feature. Having played *Mafia 3*, I have to say that I disliked driving in that game just as much as I did in *Mafia: Definitive Edition*. Although driving and speeding feel perfectly fine, everything else related to it is a letdown. Hitting the brakes on your car never feels light enough or strong enough with respect to what is really needed in the moment. Turning the car left or right onto a different road makes it feel as if you are drifting rather than just driving casually. Although the vehicles are historically appropriate for the time period, it feels as though the game thinks you are driving an American muscle car from the 1970s rather than the game's 1930s automobiles. Speaking of driving, *Mafia: Definitive Edition* is also the first *Mafia* game to implement motorcycles as drivable vehicles. Riding a motorcycle feels even harder to handle. In each chapter, the game requires you to drive a lot to get to certain locations, and some chapters seem to consist of nothing but driving. For instance, having been a member of Salieri's crew for some time, Tommy is tasked with fixing a race to have the rival gang's driver lose so that Tommy's "family" can win their bets. Rather than simply taking out the driver, we steal his racecar and bring it to the other side of the city to a mechanic who has agreed to "tune-up" the vehicle in our favor. Once the car has been tampered with, we have limited time to return it to the racetrack. Besides these time constraints, the car itself misbehaves by steering more to the right or more to the left than we would like it to, and when we drive too fast, the engine is stalling. Once we are back at the racetrack, we learn that Morello's crew has roughed up our driver, so we are asked to drive the race in his stead. We lose the mission if we do not finish first and cannot progress in the story until we complete it. This must-win race is absolutely annoying and a

total headache to play at the highest difficulty level. I must have played this race over twenty times before I finally finished first, and all this just because the driving in this game is so challenging to get a proper handle on.

One of the best missions in the game by far is the attempted assassination of Don Salieri. The cutscene for this mission is something straight out of a classic gangster film, showing Tommy observing the outside of a restaurant as several cars pull up, men get out, reveal their guns, and just start to wreak havoc by shooting anything and anybody in the restaurant, including just about every innocent civilian, all in order to kill the Don. The remainder of this mission is nothing particularly interesting, but this main cutscene was great to re-watch when I had my second playthrough of the game. In the game's "classic mode" (i.e., its highest difficulty level), you really have to work on making certain shots count, given that your ammunition count works differently. It is much better to try and aim and shoot precisely, even with that infamous "Tommy Gun." It is a let-down that hip-firing the "Tommy Gun" is not really useful, considering that this weapon was mainly fired from the hip due to its weight of 10 pounds alone without any bullets or magazine inserted. Bullet spread is something you always have to control, otherwise, you are just wasting your much-needed ammunition.

The game still has a few glitches even though it has been released for two years now. Although these glitches are nothing major or make the game in any way unplayable, one glitch did become a bother as an enemy would appear at the last minute on our screen when we were trying to be stealthy and our cover would be blown. There was even a glitch that occurred in a cutscene during my second playthrough when a car clipped through our vehicle while Tommy was talking to Sam and Paulie. Speaking of Sam and Paulie, these two characters are like brothers to Tommy. They are omnipresent from Tommy's days as a cab driver to when he eventually becomes one of Don Salieri's caporegimes. Apart from some small disagreements, there is trust between these three. Sam, however, always feels a little more distant from Tommy, compared to Paulie. He usually sits on the other side of the table from Paulie and Tommy, and we hardly ever have a mission where we do not have to protect Sam from the brink of death. For example, during the bootlegging mission, which features one of the most intense gunfights of the entire game and does not even take place in the city but, rather, in the countryside, a booze deal turns out to be a setup for the border cops to ambush us. While we manage to escape through gunfire with the booze, we repeatedly have to save Sam's life. Considering the game's theme of "family," it hurts to know that, as close as these three friends are, Sam will be the one to kill Paulie and try to kill Tommy as well in the game's final chapter. In the end, we cannot trust Sam to help us, nor can we trust Don Salieri himself who keeps information to himself that he has lied to us about. Throughout the game, we witness moments when Tommy believes that his choices or actions are not right and they do not sit well with him morally in the end. Stopping himself from killing or interfering with the attempted murder of innocent people or of one of the family's former associates, the game

shows that Tommy is not just a cold-hearted gangster but, rather, a caring individual, especially to his own (non-crime) family. Family, as Tommy would say, is a person's greatest weakness, but also a person's greatest strength. His own (non-crime) family is what ultimately gives Tommy the strength to testify against Don Salieri for all his criminal actions, which in turn allows Tommy to keep his wife and children safe in witness protection for over two decades.

While *Mafia: Definitive Edition* features great cutscenes that do not relate to any other games in this franchise, its best cutscene does relate to the sequel game. It shows the killing of Tommy Angelo by two of the sequel game's characters, Vito Scaletta and Joe Barbaro. In the original game, Tommy's death was brought about by two unnamed characters, so it was a welcome "reveal" to see and hear Vito Scaletta speak those final words to Tommy, "Mr. Salieri sends his regards," before Joe Barbaro guns Tommy down. While the game ends with Tommy's death, he does get to say to his wife, children, and grandchild that they will finally be safe now, and that – while friends come and go – family is forever.

Speaking as a historian, *Mafia: Definitive Edition* does make the Prohibition era come to life, and being able to play this game in its "noir"-style mode makes it feel even more classic. *Mafia: Definitive Edition* is far from being a perfect rebuild of the original video game, but it does bring the first installment of the *Mafia* franchise back to life with enhancements all across the board. With its historically accurate cars and weapons, as well as its authentic period feel, this game is suitable for any player who enjoys a great single-player story, especially if said player is a fan of the *Mafia* game world.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Carlos J. Marin of Whittier, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).*

Trek to Yomi

[*side-scrolling action game*].

Developer: Flying Wild Hog.

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

Release date: May 5, 2022.

Developed by Flying Wild Hog (the Polish studio of *Shadow-Warrior* fame), *Trek to Yomi* is an intense action game situated in premodern Japan. Its opening sequence introduces us to the main character, Hiroki, as he is learning the art of the sword from his *sensei*, Sanjuro. At the end of their training lesson, their village finds itself under attack. Since Sanjuro is the community's best *samurai*, he has to go and fight the intruders. Hiroki, feeling a sense of honor and the need to help, initially hesitates to follow his master, but then decides to go anyway. It is a beautiful scene in a premodern Japanese village with many different shops and buildings that Hiroki has the option to explore. Once he gets further along, though, he starts slashing through the intruders. Eventually, he works his way to the edge of the village to find the head of the snake: Kagerou. Kagerou is a powerful *samurai* who

has abandoned all sense of honor and only seeks power and control of the land. The two get into an intense sword fight, leaving Hiroki the loser. However, Hiroki is able to give Kagerou a scar that changes his looks forever, cutting off his nose and exposing his nasal cavity for the world to see. Infuriated, Kagerou proceeds to attack Hiroki, however, Sanjuro arrives just in time to save him. Using Hiroki's *katana* (sword), Sanjuro kills Kagerou, but finds himself mortally wounded. With his final breath, he entrusts the village and his daughter Aiko to his pupil Hiroki.

In the next chapter, we encounter Hiroki and Aiko as leaders of the village. They discuss an attack by intruders against a neighboring village and decide to go to their aid and defend them against the intruders. Joined by their village's best *samurai*, Hiroki slashes through many enemies, but they eventually realize that this has been a diversion. As they all rush back to their own village, they find it in ashes. Chapter three explores their village—still burning and falling apart—with most of the villagers either dead or injured on the side of the roads. Slashing through many enemies, Hiroki eventually makes it to the end of his village to join Aiko, only to find out that she has been killed by the very man who is supposed to be dead: Kagerou. With his signature scar on full display, he tells Hiroki that he has killed Aiko. The ensuing duel between Hiroki and Kagerou theoretically offers a first possible ending to the game; in total, there are four possible endings. If you—as Hiroki—are able to defeat Kagerou, this is the first possible ending. However, it is practically impossible to defeat him, even in the easiest setting. If you cannot defeat Kagerou, Hiroki dies from being slashed in the stomach. He then wakes up in chapter four.

In this next chapter, we find out about the *yomi*, namely, the Japanese “underworld.” This is an afterlife where, in *Trek to Yomi*, everyone goes after they die. Hiroki sees the soul of Aiko, and he must follow her through the entire *yomi*. In this world, there are dead *samurai* who have turned into what the game dubs as the “blighted.” Slashing through them, as well as some other *samurai* ghosts and demons along the way, Hiroki eventually finds his deceased master, Sanjuro, and has to face the question which path he will choose: that of honor, that of love, or that of vengeance. The path of honor would be to return to the world of the living and take his village back. The path of love would be to stay in the *yomi* alongside Aiko. And the path of vengeance would be to return to the world of the living, seize his village, and take Kagerou's place. This is a preliminary question, intended simply to get the player ready for the final decision that will have to be made in chapter six. Chapter five continues in the same vein as chapter four, with Hiroki eventually meeting Aiko who asks him the same questions that her father, Sanjuro, had asked him earlier. Aiko then directs Hiroki to the end of the *yomi*, where he has to face a sequence of puzzles and more of the “blighted” to reach the end, a major boss battle. In chapter six, after the major boss battle, Hiroki sees his former *sensei*, as well as Aiko, and a younger version of himself, and he has to make the decision to follow either love or honor or vengeance. Regardless of his decision, Hiroki must return to the land of the living to defeat Kagerou, so Hiroki is let back

into his burning village where he must find his way to the villainous *samurai* and fight him in a duel. Kagerou's ensuing defeat leaves Hiroki with three options. In the way of love, he does not kill Kagerou, stops the latter from killing himself, and – as the picture pans out and the burning building collapses around them – Hiroki is presumably able to return to his love, Aiko, in the *yomi*, sending Kagerou back down there as well, never to be resurrected. In the way of honor, Hiroki kills Kagerou, walks out of the burning building, and becomes the leader of the village; he then does his duty, repenting for allowing the village to be decimated. In the way of vengeance, Hiroki kills Kagerou, slicing off his head, and then becomes exactly who Kagerou had been, aspiring to greatness for himself as the leader of many *samurai*.

I played *Trek to Yomi* on a custom-built PC, with an Intel core i7 9700k and a 3080 ti, as well as 48 gigabytes of RAM on a 2560x1440p monitor, which is a 2k monitor. The game initially looked like it was clear, but it has a tinge of vintage. There is an option for a grainy texture, which I decided to utilize, as it added to the effect and made premodern Japan look older. Not only was the texture grainy, but the graphics were also rendered in black and white. *Trek to Yomi* likely could be played on a computer not nearly as powerful as the one that I used, but it was absolutely beautiful.

The game mechanics are fairly straightforward. The sword-fighting duels occur in a two-dimensional scene while roaming around takes place in a three-dimensional setting. Fighting involves light slashes, heavy slashes, poking, and other forms of attack. These are not complicated to learn, but it does take about an hour to understand all of the controls. However, after this, the game is fairly intuitive. I would left-click my mouse for a light attack or right-click for a heavy attack. I would then use any combination of pressing the keys on my keyboard to switch between stabbing, turning around, throwing *bo-shuriken* (hand blades), using a bow and arrow, or discharging the gun in the game. The health system is also straightforward. For each bar you have on the bottom left, you can usually take one strike during a light attack, while two or three bars are required for a strike during a heavy attack. There is also stamina: if you run out of it, you are no longer able to run or attack easily. To refill your health, you have to go to one of the game's many designated shrines, where you tap the button "e," upon which your health is restored to "full" and your game's checkpoint set. Stamina can also be regained very quickly just by standing still or walking slowly.

There are many different side quests in this game that mean nothing to the main story, like saving an insignificant character. However, these side quests offer opportunities to pick up items that increase both your stamina and health. You can also pick up more *bo-shuriken*, arrows, or bullets, as you are limited with regard to the number of these you may carry. To throw them, you must be in the two-dimensional mode, and you must press the button "q." To switch between the three options, you would press "1" for *bo-shuriken*, "2" for bow and arrow, or "3" for the gun. To talk to people, as part of the side quests, you press the letter "e."

Trek to Yomi offers a rendition of premodern Japan that is devoted to historical accuracy, which is reflected in its classical architecture, as well as the amazing fighting scenes and the prevailing sense of hierarchy. The game is fun to learn, and the controls are not too difficult to master. The two-dimensional fighting feels like a classic video game (transporting me back to the days of playing on the original Nintendo Entertainment System), while the sophisticated graphics and awesome effects add a new level. However, once the game hits chapter four, it leaves past realities behind. This is where historians are likely to lose interest in the game, while hardcore gamers may just start getting into it. The entire “trek” through the *yomi* feels quite long and drawn out. I did enjoy, though, how it showcases both former friends and foes, and both groups are, in fact, trying to kill Hiroki: his former foes just want him dead, while his former friends are mad that he has abandoned the village. The idea of the “blighted” does change up the story from a *samurai* fighting only other *samurai*. However, after chapters four and five, I was ready to be out of the *yomi* and return to the world of the living. Even the main character, Hiroki, states in the game that he is tired of the mind games, and he just wants out already. The game’s three possible endings are a commendable feature. The path of love takes Hiroki’s and Aiko’s story to its somewhat romantic conclusion. The path of vengeance essentially turns the player into a new version of Kagerou. And the way of honor is the one that any true *samurai* would take, which is the path I originally took.

The first half of this game is playable and enjoyable by everyone, as it is a classical Japanese-style sword-fighting game with a somewhat compelling story. The grainy texture of the black-and-white screen makes the game seem mysterious and classic at the same time, giving it the feel of an old movie. After the beginning of chapter four, many players might start to feel lost, and this is the part that was not personally enjoyable for me (it is the game creators’ interpretation of the *yomi*). I also did not enjoy that the *yomi* felt drawn out much longer than it needed to be. However, after returning to the land of the living, my excitement returned. Those with an interest in premodern Japan, as well as those who appreciate video games involving *samurai* culture—from *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) to *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) – will likely enjoy *Trek to Yomi* as well.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Robert Fleming of Cypress, California, earned an A.A. in History (2019) at Cypress College and a B.A. in History (2021) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in history at CSUF.

War on the Sea

[real-time strategy game].

Developer: Killerfish Games.

Platform: Microsoft Windows/PC, MacOS.

Release date: February 2, 2021.

A large blast of anti-aircraft fire explodes near American Helldivers as they rapidly descend toward the Battleship *Yamato* of Japan. Right before the American aircraft

drop their bombs, six torpedo explosions happen all along the left side of the Japanese battleship. The culprit is the silent hunter of the seas, a United States Navy Tambor-class submarine that has managed to sneak through the destroyers screening the largest battleship ever built in history. This is one of many scenarios players can experience in the real-time strategy game *War on the Sea* (2021) by Killerfish Games. Set during World War II, the game's factions are the United States of America's Navy (U.S.N.) and the Imperial Japanese Navy (I.J.N.) in the Pacific theater between 1942 and 1945. Killerfish Games, a small independent studio from Adelaide, South Australia, is not a newcomer to strategy games. Their previous titles include *Cold Waters* (2017), *Pacific Fleet* (2014), and *Atlantic Fleet* (2016), so it is no surprise that *War on the Sea* is a naval strategy game as well. The game is similar to other real-time strategy games with both a strategic and a tactical level of gameplay, such as *Star Wars: Empire at War* by Petrograph (2006), *Wargame: Red Dragon* by Eugen Systems (2014), or any of the *Total War* games by Creative Assembly (2000–present).

When starting up the game, the main menu allows the player to choose between single missions in which the player plays through a historical battle, for example, the sinking of the Battleship *Yamato* during the Battle for Okinawa in April 1945 as either the U.S.N. or the I.J.N. Not all of the battles are between aircraft and ships. Other battles include ship-to-ship fighting or submarine and anti-submarine warfare (A.S.W.). These battles are good practice for understanding the game's many different controls. I made the mistake of not completing the tutorials (which are very helpful). In fact, the tutorials are essential since controlling the naval units is more involved than playing your average game. For example, in this game, you are given control of the speed of ships, their rudders, damage control, and weapons. Additionally, the submarines give the player control over how deep to dive underwater. Once I had mastered the skill of maneuvering my ships, I got to the "real" thing: weapons control. While not as detailed as in simulation games, weapons control in *War on the Sea* is still more intricate than just shooting at the enemy. Ship combat in the game often occurs when ships are 5,000 to 30,000 yards from each other. It is like trying to hit a moving car with a football while one is oneself in a moving car and a football-field length away. If this sounds impossible, it is not, but it is hard, so hits and kills do not happen as fast as in other games. One needs to formulate a high-target solution using the Fire Control Directors (F.C.D.) on each ship to score a hit. This number is affected by the size of the ship, the speed of both vessels, how often they change direction, and the weather. The game has a numbers detail for the sea weather or how much the waves are causing ships to pitch and roll. The lower the number the better, to add to my earlier car-and-football analogy: imagine that your car is going 50 miles per hour and the other car is going 30 miles per hour on a football field with many potholes. These variables affect the target solution when firing at surface ships and hunting for submarines. If this sounds super hard to do, it is not after a bit of practice.

The campaign for the game is set during the 1942 Battle for Guadalcanal in the Pacific Ocean's Solomon Islands. Much like the real battle, the Americans and the Japanese aim to control the island, as well as the surrounding islands, and build a level-5 airfield. I first played as the Americans, choosing to bring an aircraft carrier (C.V.) and destroyers (D.D.) to escort my merchant fleet (M.V.), which I needed to ferry troops and supplies to build and upgrade the airfield. I also got a few submarines (S.S.) since I used most of the starting command points to get the C.V., the basic currency in the game. The player earns command points at the end of each week or by sinking enemy ships. As the Americans, you are the aggressive faction since the I.J.N. is already in control of Guadalcanal, but I first had to defeat the enemy fleet guarding the island before landing any troops. So I sent in one of my S.S., and before I could fire on a heavy cruiser (C.A.), the I.J.N. D.D. quickly found me, began dropping depth charges (which I tried the best I could to dodge), and quickly sank my S.S. due to flooding. A recurring action happened to most of my American S.S. because of the difference in technology of both factions. After my first S.S. had sunk before it could even fire on the I.J.N., I launched an air strike from my carrier, *Enterprise*, consisting of twelve planes called Avengers and armed with torpedoes. Once I found the five I.J.N. ships guarding Guadalcanal again, I started the tactical battle, and my planes quickly found their targets. After dropping their payload, the I.J.N. ship's anti-aircraft (A.A.) fire only shot five of my planes down. However, out of the twelve torpedoes launched, only three hit, and out of those three only one was not a dud. This is one of the many balancing aspects of the game, and it is optional, along with friendly fire, dud bombs, and ships crashing into each other, but I did not turn these off. So, my first air attack was not a success. Still, I found during the next attack, using the Dauntless dive bomber, that I had more success due to there being no dud bombs, and after a few more attacks I sunk a C.A. and one light cruiser (C.L.) before night came at 6 p.m., meaning that I could no longer launch aircraft until 5 a.m. the next day. Thankfully the game has a fast-forward and pause button in both strategic and tactical modes due to it taking place in real hours and minutes. Once I could launch aircraft, I used my remaining Avengers planes as scouts, since they have the longest range between the Dauntless bombers and the Wildcat fighters, to find the I.J.N. ships. When I found them again, they were sailing away from the island, so I sent in my M.V. with a D.D. escort to unload supplies at Guadalcanal, but an hour before we reached it, my convoy got attacked. When starting this tactical battle, my ships were sailing along when I got an alert that there were torpedoes in the water. I tried to maneuver my ships out of their path, but two of the merchants took hits in their bow. I started damage control on them while I got my D.D. to speed over to where the shots were coming from. But it was like the I.J.N. S.S. just disappeared due to the American sonar being inadequate compared to the I.J.N., which is another balancing aspect of the game. These encounters became a continuous thing throughout my play-through. Every once in a while I would find an I.J.N. S.S., but that was just the beginning of A.S.W. To sink an S.S., the player has to line

up the D.D. to pass parallel over the top of the S.S. before dropping depth charges. After several attempts, I finally scored a hit, and sinking them satisfied my thirst for retribution after they had damaged some of my ships. For a couple of weeks, I built up my troop strength on Guadalcanal by having my M.V. convoy travel between Guadalcanal and the main base of New Hebrides and by using air attacks during the day to turn back any I.J.N. M.V. which tried to do the same. But on September 15, an I.J.N. task force managed to land more troops and build a level-2 airfield with Val dive bombers. This was due to the *Enterprise* being out for repairs since it had become low on attack aircraft. Now that the island had I.J.N. attack aircraft, I thought I had to have my C.V. provide air escort to my M.V. to Guadalcanal. It turns out that this was not as big a threat as I thought it was. The I.J.N. would launch Vals, but since there were only four of them, I found that, by adding a couple of C.L. to the M.V. as an escort, they could stop these attacks before they could damage any ship because an American strength in the game is good radar and even better A.A. on their ships. After two weeks of moving troops and supplies to Guadalcanal, I finally took control of the island when one of my scout aircraft spotted a task force with two battleships (B.B.) and two C.A. Still, it was already past the time to launch an air attack, so, thankfully, I managed to save enough command points for a second task force with a couple of light and heavy cruisers of my own. That night, I fought my first night battle, which resulted in a draw. I managed to sink one enemy B.B. and both C.A., but most of my ships, except for two, were sunk. The two which survived were badly damaged and required to be out for repairs for a week. In night battles, because it is so dark, the player has to have his ships launch star shells over the enemy targets to have any chance of a hit. You have to get close, and this is a terrible idea when going up against I.J.N. B.B. since they have so many guns, and it makes the threat of I.J.N. torpedoes greater since most I.J.N. C.A., C.L., and D.D. have more and faster torpedoes (and not many of these are duds). Later on, when I got a South Dakota-class B.B. to rebuild a second stack force to guard Guadalcanal at night, I got into another night battle, and my B.B. got hit with a couple of torpedoes. Luckily, the damage was very little, and I did not need to pull it off the front line. Toward the end of my American campaign, I spotted the B.B. *Yamato* coming toward Guadalcanal. I had two C.V. at this point, so I launched 24 Dauntless and was able to cripple her severely. When I found *Yamato* again, I launched a second attack, and this time I chose a mix of eight Avengers, armed with rockets, from Guadalcanal and twelve Dauntless from *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, which was enough to sink her. Within the next couple of days, I won the campaign by building the level-5 airfield.

The second time I played as the I.J.N., and – unlike the U.S.N. – they are more of a defensive faction since they have access to more B.B. at a lower price. Their smaller ships have twice the number of torpedoes as the U.S.N. I started with a few Tone-class C.A. with a couple of D.D., but I put more points into S.S. since the I.J.N. torpedoes would explode on impact. I sent all my ships to Guadalcanal to

fend off the Americans, and my first battle was similar to my American campaign. Still, this time – as the I.J.N. – I was about to sink a U.S.N. Brooklyn-class C.L. and get my S.S. away without the U.S.N. D.D. ever finding me. Once I got my surface ships near Guadalcanal, it was a different story since the U.S.N. had brought a C.V. to the fight, and immediately my ships were hit by Dauntless. Though none sunk, they were all badly damaged and had to be sent back to the I.J.N. main base at Rabaul (Papua New Guinea) for repairs. This is another balance feature in that most I.J.N. ships lack radar and are very vulnerable to air attacks, which is why the airfield at Guadalcanal is so essential. My M.V. was near Guadalcanal at this point, but I decided to wait for nightfall before offloading my supplies since I did not want to repeat the same mistake I had made before. Over the next few weeks, I saved enough points to create S.S. groups comparable to the German Wolfpacks in the Battle of the Atlantic. Like the Germans, I would use aircraft to find the I.J.N. M.V. coming out of New Hebrides and then attack in groups, sinking two or three U.S.N. ships at a time, then retreat and subsequently proceed to sail ahead of the M.V., wait, and attack again. Only a couple of times did the U.S.N. find my silent killers, and I still lost a few in action. Often, if they did find my S.S., they would do one depth-charge run before losing me due to stormy seas or rain. Still, this was often due to getting under the thermal layer, which is perfect for hiding from D.D. and is another detail in this game that makes A.S.W. so exciting.

While the game lacks voice dialogue, the design features make sense when playing, unlike so many other games. I do not want to hear a constant voice telling me that they are taking fire while I am micromanaging ten different ships in a surface battle. *War on the Sea* also lacks a CO-OP campaign mode or a multiplayer, single-battle feature, which is disappointing since fighting the A.I. (Artificial Intelligence) can get tiresome. This game is for players who do not mind games that are not straight shooters but require patience and strategy to win. The complexity of the controls makes the management of each ship a task in itself, but this is due to how detailed the game is. Another complexity involves the controls to move the camera on the opposite side of the keyboard as the rudder controls. I used a program to reprogram the key binding when playing, which made my play-throughs so much easier. The game is beautiful, featuring gorgeous sunsets as well as the accurate portrayal of the American torpedo detonators, which failed so often that an officer once dropped one from a crane, nose first, in front of a group of generals, confident that it would not explode. All these elements assist in making *War on the Sea* the fulfillment of any naval or World-War-II fanatic's dream of launching submarine attacks, fleet night battles, and air attacks.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: *Anthony Lambright of La Palma, California, earned a B.A. in History (2018) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF.*