

Reviews (Games)

Ghost of Tsushima: Director's Cut

[single-player open-world action-adventure stealth video game].

Developer: Sucker Punch Productions.

Platforms: PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5.

Release date: August 20, 2021.

The year is 1274 C.E. A samurai army, led by Lord Shimura, marches toward the landing Mongol fleet. The mission: repel the invaders. A lone samurai is sent to challenge the Mongol leader to an honorable fight, one-on-one, but he is quickly doused with an accelerant and set ablaze with a torch. The samurai charge forward, prepared to avenge their fallen comrade. The result: the Mongol army brutally massacres the samurai. Lord Shimura is captured, and the main protagonist, Jin Sakai, is left for dead. *Ghost of Tsushima*, developed by Sucker Punch Productions, follows the story of Jin Sakai as he attempts to save Lord Shimura, his uncle, from the Mongols and retake the island of Tsushima from their control. Jin reluctantly decides to use any means necessary to accomplish his goals, whether they follow the samurai code or not. Jin's exploits eventually earn him the title of *The Ghost*—the newly-created living myth of a fierce, merciless warrior. Sucker Punch Productions weaves this elaborate story into a video game which succeeds on various fronts. Sucker Pucker Productions is also responsible for the successful *Sly Cooper* (since 2002) and *Infamous* franchises (since 2009).

The prevailing theme in *Ghost of Tsushima* is honor. Throughout the game, the underlying conflict in the main storyline is the role of honor in Jin Sakai's actions. Jin was raised, trained, and surrounded by the samurai. He was taught how to uphold himself in life and in battle (i.e., with honor). As the story progresses, Jin goes against the samurai code and begins to use tactics he knows would be forbidden by his fellow samurai. These tactics include using fear as a weapon, assassinating enemies instead of facing them head-on, attacking to cause suffering instead of attacking to kill, and using poison instead of conventional samurai weapons. The developers did an exceptional job of having this conflict grow over the course of the game. Non-player characters (NPCs) make comments about Jin as we explore the world, such as, "He tears them apart like a beast!" Lord Shimura sees glimpses of these dishonorable methods and reminds Jin that he is supposed to be an honorable samurai, that he is not *The Ghost*. However, after a bridge explosion leads to the death of many samurai, Jin and Lord Shimura argue and disagree on their next step. Jin ultimately takes matters into his own hands.

Jin sneaks into the Mongol camp and poisons the enemy forces, much to the disappointment of Lord Shimura. Jin is then imprisoned by the samurai for his actions, though he eventually breaks out with the help of his allies. This sequence of events brings up the sub-theme of the game, namely, duty to the Shogun versus duty to the people. Lord Shimura and the samurai denounce Jin for breaking the samurai code and the Shogun's law. Meanwhile, Jin argues that his actions are

necessary to prevent further deaths and protect the people of the island. After his escape, samurai NPCs are often heard stating that Jin is a monster, but civilians are heard asserting that *The Ghost* is a hero for protecting them. Jin eventually sneaks back into Lord Shimura's castle to enlist his help for a coordinated attack on the Mongol forces. Lord Shimura has forbidden the use of Jin Sakai's name in his presence since the latter has dishonored himself, so Jin is only referred to as *The Ghost*. The final encounter between Jin Sakai and Lord Shimura occurs in the game's last mission. Lord Shimura informs Jin that the Shogun has disbanded Clan Sakai, and they have met so Shimura can kill him. The developers use this encounter to bring the conversation back to the question of honor. Lord Shimura once again tells Jin that he has no honor, while Jin accuses Shimura of being a slave to honor. This new perspective on the conflict demonstrates how much these two characters have drifted apart both emotionally and in their respective mindsets. This scene serves as one final pull on the player's emotions, and it is extremely effective in doing so.

Two of the greatest aspects of this game are its use of visuals and audio to enhance the gaming experience. The island of Tsushima is covered with various environments to show off the natural beauty of Japan, as well as the destructive consequences of the Mongol invasion. Throughout the island's landscapes, the player can encounter a large, open field of white flowers, a burning field or village, or a lake surrounded by trees with rich, red leaves. The transitions between these distinctive environments are smooth (i.e., you can see the natural change from one environment to the next), keeping players visually engaged as they traverse the open world. The visual component also contributes to the storytelling. For example, Jin encounters Ujimasa Yarikawa, a former samurai whose clan was disbanded after it had led a rebellion against the Shogun. The remnants of the clan established the town of Yarikawa whose layout closely resembles Castle Kaneda, the fortress which Lord Shimura is inhabiting at this point in the game. However, the differences between the two areas are striking: Yarikawa's color scheme is dark and bland, while Castle Kaneda's color scheme is bright and involves plenty of contrast. The dark colors represent Yarikawa's dark past and uncertain future, while the bright colors represent Lord Shimura's proud past and optimistic future. The style and quality of the visuals are beautiful and unmatched by most games.

The auditory component further enhances the enjoyment of the game. As players travel around Tsushima, they can hear birds chirping, their horse's footsteps, an arrow whizzing by their head, or the enemy's battle cry as they charge into battle. Furthermore, the game's soundtrack does an excellent job of matching the situation at hand. While a player is traveling or sneaking through a camp, the only sounds come from nature. When a player engages in combat, the music swells to match the intensity of the battle. When fighting major enemies (e.g., Lord Shimura or the Mongol Khan), the soundtrack is much different from any other fight and seems to really tug at the player's emotions. It is done quite well.

Ghost of Tsushima's gameplay is similar to other open-world games. Players have a variety of weapons to use in combat engagements, such as kunai, bow and arrows, bombs, katana (primary blade), and tanto (secondary/assassination blade). Some of these weapons can be upgraded for better lethality, handling, etc. There are also several attacks which can be unlocked as the player progresses through the game. This can be an overwhelming amount of information to remember while in the midst of a battle (i.e., which button combinations to use, which weapon might be best suited to the situation, etc.). However, this variety in weapons and attacks prevents the gameplay from becoming stale, a problem which could have easily occurred with a game of this length. In addition, players can earn and unlock several types of samurai armor. Each armor can be used for specific situations since they enhance certain attributes (e.g., overall health, stealth ability, overall damage, etc.). Armor serves both a functional purpose but also allows players to express themselves since it can be customized with different color schemes. The weakest aspect of the gameplay is the tracking mechanic. When a player decides to track an objective or mission from the map, there is a gust of wind that directs the player toward the objective. However, the wind gust does not take into account rivers, mountains, or any other natural blockades. So, it was frustrating to follow the game's directions, expecting to easily arrive at an objective but still spending extra time navigating past an obstacle. However, this does not detract too much from enjoying the game.

With regard to the historical and cultural aspect, *Ghost of Tsushima* does an excellent job of respecting Japan and the samurai in several ways. Firstly, the idea of honor is at the forefront of Jin's journey, and the game clearly establishes honor as an integral part of being a samurai. In addition, the game allows the player to unlock and switch between different fighting stances. This mechanic pays homage to the fact that samurai would learn different fighting styles which best suited them and their individual skills. Secondly, there are several Torii gates scattered throughout the island, and these gates lead to Shinto shrines. When the player reaches a shrine, Jin is given the option to clean it up and pray. Thirdly, certain locations prompt the player to sit down and admire something about the surrounding environment (e.g., look at the falling leaves, the sunset, etc.). A haiku is composed based on what the player decides to admire, and it is then recited by Jin as a short cinematic scene is played, which contains the areas the player had decided to admire. Lastly, the game has an option for "Kurosawa" mode. With this mode turned on, the game is overlaid with a grainy black-and-white filter which imitates the style of director Akira Kurosawa's films. Furthermore, there is an option to change the dialogue language to Japanese. With "Kurosawa" mode and the Japanese dialogue setting turned on, *Ghost of Tsushima* comes close to capturing the authenticity of a classic samurai film. The two downsides from having these settings turned on is that "Kurosawa" mode essentially deprives players of the rich colors and environments present in the game, and the Japanese

dialogue may cause some players to focus more on “reading” the scene rather than fully appreciating it. Nevertheless, *Ghost of Tsushima* pays homage to its setting.

Ghost of Tsushima is an overall enjoyable game from start to finish, but it is most likely not suitable for gamers who are looking for an easy-to-learn game. Remembering when and how to use the different fighting stances, which armor is best for the situation at hand, and the various weapons on hand can be frustrating at times. However, anyone who has played and enjoyed other open-world combat games, such as *God of War* (2018), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), or the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise (since 2007), will most likely enjoy this game as well since it utilizes a similar system for unlocking new abilities and similar controls for fighting. Individuals who have an interest in Japanese culture, history, or the samurai will appreciate the game’s narrative, as well as its dedication to honoring Japan. The complex gameplay and compelling narrative make it obvious that Sucker Punch Productions put a lot of hard work and passion into *Ghost of Tsushima*.

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Humankind

[single-player/multiplayer turn-based strategy 4X video game].

Developer: Amplitude Studios.

Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC, Google Stadia, MacOS, Steam.

Release date: August 17, 2021.

Do you ever wish that humanity could follow a different path in history where the outlook is not so gloomy? Where you get to decide what is best for society? Where you are in charge? If so, then look no further than *Humankind*, where you (the player) lead your people to greatness in history books or to ruin and eventual oblivion. *Humankind* was developed by Amplitude Studios, and the game is considered their “magnum opus” of historical strategy games. Prior to *Humankind*, they had already created several strategy games and demonstrated their experience in this field, but these games had been based on science-fiction themes. Such games include the *Endless Space* series, which focuses on having players control civilizations far into the future and lead them to greatness. Knowing this, though, some players and critics have embraced the change in creative direction. That said, the game and its developers still have a long way to go before they can call this game a masterpiece. As of now, *Humankind* stands at a 7/10 with critics and a near 6/10 with players. The consensus between the two is that the game is a “breath of fresh air” as it presents a new take in the civilization-focused genre. Players are enjoying the narrative of changing their cultures as time progresses, as well as the fluid gameplay. However, they criticize some of the in-game mechanics, such as pollution, and that some cultures are simply too powerful when compared to others. For this review, I will be looking at the game’s visuals

and gameplay and eventually explore where the game does shine and where it does not. In the end, I will discuss whether this game is worth the purchase or not.

For starters, I was impressed that the developers at Amplitude wanted to push the narrative of an all-encompassing, humanity-based strategy game compared to the mono-culture narrative at the heart of MicroProse's and Sid Meier's video game series *Civilization*. At first glance, both are eerily similar turn-based games where players are given the "explore," "expand," "exploit," and "exterminate" or the 4X format in a single turn. I thought it would be an almost 1:1 rehash of most strategy games with minor twists. However, Amplitude was serious about its goal, and one can see this in the game's artwork. On their website, a cluster of historical figures and vehicles can be seen heading towards a city (dominated by pyramids). These figures are immediately recognizable even by non-history buffs: there is a modern scientist holding hands with a Celtic warrior, an astronaut, a Chinese settler, and – if one has a keen eye – a Roman Praetorian Guard and a Carthaginian war elephant. One can also spot planes from different eras flying in the sky. While historically inaccurate, it is beautiful artwork that portrays the goal of this game, which is a historical simulation in a game format.

Inside *Humankind*, the visuals continue to be just as impressive and realistic as they can be. Every single one of the game's 60 cultures has been recreated to be as historically accurate as possible and is a treat to behold. For example, when I started the game choosing the Harappans in the Ancient Era, they had their profile picture along with their own unit, building, and trait. The profile picture shows a man standing alongside a woman, overlooking an extensive canal network filled with farm plants and animals. The man's face looks like the statue (of the Priest-King) found at Mohenjo-Daro, and the latter is confirmed to have served as an inspiration to the artists. The Harappans, in this game, have a strong food economy, and its building supports that with a specialized canal network. When built along rivers, it increases food yields in the surrounding areas. As for units, the Harappans have a runner geared toward scouting and establishing first contact rather than conducting warfare. As an extra, players can zoom in and find a bustling, baked-brick-built city that mimics Harappan society and see traders and people roaming about the districts. All of this is the developers' educated guess what the real Harappan civilization would have been like, and it is rich. This synopsis is just one of the 60 cultures created by Amplitude but covering them all here would be beyond the scope of this review.

On the in-game map, the game offers highly detailed tiles that have differing biomes along with pre-marked territory lines. Such biomes can range from a desert to a tundra or to a deep ocean. Furthermore, these tiles can have food, industry, science, or money symbols attached to them. The tiles can be exclusive to one type, but some have overlapping types. For example, if one builds a harbor district, shallow water tiles may have food and money qualities attached to them. In the early game, territories and tiles have randomly generated curiosities and small events on the tile. When a unit moves onto them, they and your faction gain a

random number of resources. Territories have distinct map markers on their tiles as well. These are divided into two resources: strategic resources and luxury resources. Luxury resources, such as sage or coffee, can provide a boost to your culture and serve as a product for trade. Strategic resources, such as iron or horses, provide your culture with the necessary infrastructure and special units to build. These can be traded but are harder to part with as you could be providing your potential enemy with the materials they need.

Depending on your luck, territories may also contain natural wonders of the world. Examples of such wonders are the Hả Long Bay in Vietnam or the Yellowstone Geysers in North America. By finding these wonders, the discovering player's faction can earn fame points, and in addition, building an outpost or city there grants additional perks. Overall, this falls in line with other strategy games utilizing geographic determinism, implying that human history and society shape themselves according to their physical environment. By finding the best spot, players can grow themselves better than those unlucky enough to find areas to place their city early on in the game.

Humankind focuses on the narrative of human progression and long-term history-making. In-game, players go through seven eras to arrive where we are now, namely, the Neolithic, Ancient, Classical, Medieval, Early Modern, Industrial, and Contemporary Eras. Each of these eras has ten cultures related to its time. Players can get from one period to another by completing a series of tasks. Each task grants the player an era star, with seven of these stars needed to change cultures and progress to the next time period. Such duties may include researching the best science, growing the largest population, expanding one's city districts, winning the most victories, or exerting dominating influence on others. But it must be a combination of these tasks as these tasks grant you one star, each with a maximum of three stars being attainable per category. Focusing on one duty is a terrible idea as it makes your culture inflexible or difficult to progress with. A straightforward solution could be expanding your city by building science quarters (districts) that contribute to your research points and eventually land you two stars rather than one.

Battles in this game are fought both at home and abroad. In a battle with other armies, the game takes a macro-level, turn-based fight where unit stats are calculated based on a unit's combat strength, its innate modifiers, and the surrounding terrain modifiers. Even if your army is being attacked by a higher-era unit, you can still inflict damage on them by skillfully maneuvering your forces and using the terrain to your advantage. At home, you must keep your culture's war support high. If it falls to below ten "war support points" or lands at zero, you are forced to surrender to the enemy, and they are allowed to take any territories, districts, or trade routes you may have. To prevent this, victories are the key to secure yourself at home.

Despite how daunting and detailed the gameplay may sound, it is easy to understand after the first game or so. That said, this game rewards those who have

a plan on how to win and are patient with their culture. In the first game, I was utterly decimated as I had let my fear of falling behind the others control me. In a culture-vs.-culture-based game, falling behind your competitors increases your chances of being eliminated. I had tried to expand quickly, playing as the Babylonians, but the Babylonians were not equipped for heavy expansion. Instead, they were a scientific culture. By not understanding this, I squandered my culture's potential and was easily overcome by the neighboring Maya faction who sought to invade me. The game punishes those who rush into cultures and encourages a slower approach instead. Having the experience of six or more games by now, I highly recommend scouting out a perfect location for your capital and to continue scouting. Doing this will build a strong foundation for upcoming eras and provide you with the resources needed.

While the game is good, it is not perfect by any means and has a few issues. A massive issue pertains to the pollution mechanics implemented in the game. When a player (any player) reaches the industrial era, pollution starts to affect the planet and you long before the modern era. If left unaddressed, the player will suffer from rising tensions between cities and their neighbors due to irresponsible polluting created by their developing nation. Eventually, global warming will take effect and the planet becomes uninhabitable which results in a total loss for all players involved. As a solution, players can reduce their pollution numbers by planting forests or building nuclear power plants. As a historian, I understand why this was implemented as, in fact, there have been concerted efforts to address environmental issues such as the cleaning of England's Thames River during the industrial era. However, in the gamer's perspective, there are no ecological pretexts or events to set up pollution mechanics and global warming to prepare the player. As a result, pollution comes as a rude awakening for players who aren't prepared. It would make a lot more sense for the developers to introduce an environmental mechanic that starts early and progresses with the player as they evolve.

Another issue is that of cultural imbalances. Some cultures are highly sought after due to their benefits and perks, such as the Harappans in the ancient era. The Harappans offer a massive food boom, and due to this, the player achieves a larger population. Having a large population means building more armies that are almost unrivaled when compared to other cultures of the same era. Another popular culture is that of the subsequent Achaemenid Persians where players aim to grab their legacy perk of having two more cities to control. Normally, the game allows a culture to have two cities with technology perks allowing for more but choosing the Persians would grant the player a total of four cities: allowing for a massive economic boost in the long-term gameplay. By contrast, the Roman Empire, in the same era, is not as sought-after despite offering less upkeep for their army and more units in said army. I believe this is where Amplitude will need to spend more time on balancing in the future.

Overall, I believe that those who play the *Civilization* series will greatly enjoy playing *Humankind* as well. Both share the same turn format so it will not be difficult to get on board. I recommend playing *Humankind*, but only tentatively. At its release, the multiplayer side was still unstable, and the game would crash for its players. In addition, some of the gameplay mechanics/cultures boasted by Amplitude are either too detrimental or too powerful. However, Amplitude has shown the dedication and commitment to keep this game updated. Their previous sci-fi games like the *Endless Space* series were shown the same love/commitment and today boasts a comeback score of 8.5/10 by critics. I certainly enjoyed my time seeing my culture grow, and as the months pass by, I believe *Humankind* will be a great alternative to the kind of strategy game that *Civilization* has monopolized in years past.

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Imperator: Rome

[single-player/multiplayer grand strategy wargame/video game].

Developer: Paradox Development Studio.

Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC, MacOS, Linux.

Release date: April 25, 2019.

Veni, vidi, vici, “I came, I saw, I conquered” – a phrase coined by none other than the great Julius Caesar, a man who turned Rome into a powerful empire that conquered vast regions and exerted tremendous influence. What would one do in such a position of power? In the video game *Imperator: Rome*, one can explore the challenges of building an empire from the ground up.

Imperator: Rome is a complex strategy game that allows users to pursue the fate of their own virtual Rome. The game has two options: single-player and multiplayer. In single-player mode, players start their story of empire in Rome, which is comprised of eleven provinces, and neighboring territories are made up in a similar fashion. The players’ goal is to expand their power and grow from a small territory to a powerful empire. The game measures certain actions to serve as a guide to the status of one’s young nation; these include treasury, manpower, political influence, military experience, stability, aggressive expansion, war expansion, tyranny, and support in the Senate. Each serves as a way to keep the player in check and not just focus on expansion but, rather, plan for a lasting empire that will stand the test of time. Some of these game measures are more obvious than others. Treasury and manpower, for example, are affected by taxes, and the available men who can serve in the armed forces of Rome during wars against other regions can negatively affect how a player’s citizens view their actions and might trigger a revolt or cause the Senate to act against the player. The game is clearly not just about expansion through war or conflict. This is where strategical moves to align yourself with others can help keep you and your allies

to stay safe from outside forces. The player can make friends with other nations via a range of different options, including trade, similarities in religious and cultural beliefs, and mutual interests against foreign invaders. *Imperator: Rome* drives home the importance of a prosperous and organized state of affairs both home and abroad. Each province has a leader or governor whose actions are measured to show whether a revolt may happen, based on the character a player puts in charge of a city or region. It is important to remember to keep the people happy at home while trying to do the best for them overseas and abroad.

The video game publisher for *Imperator: Rome* is Paradox Interactive which is headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. Originally founded in 2004, they now market well over a hundred different strategy games, making them a leader in this particular genre of video games. Since 2006, the company has transitioned from selling physical copies of games to selling primarily digital copies instead. Each genre of video game attracts a specific type of player. Strategy games attract a particular subset of gamers who seek more challenging games that provide users with long hours of various gameplay and keep players entertained throughout their experience. This serves as the cornerstone to the Paradox group's success in the field of strategy games. According to Paradox Interactive's website, "[The] goal is to provide deep and challenging games and experiences, with hours of gameplay and endless variety, to our ever-growing community." Paradox Interactive achieves this goal quite handily in many of their games and have established a fanbase for each of their games. Supporters of Paradox Interactive find that their games have a wide range of variables that keep players engaged and wanting to play more.

The timeline of *Imperator: Rome* is loosely based on the founding of Rome and its transition to a mighty empire. On a historical note, the game seemingly tries to guide the player to make moves that resemble what happened in history, so the game's creator appears to have done rudimentary research on the history of Rome. The game's expansion packs imply that there is some understanding of critical moments that led to the creation of the Roman empire as we know it. There is mention of the Punic Wars and of the power vacuum that resulted from Alexander the Great's sudden death. Even the loading screens have noteworthy quotes from various individuals who were influential in ancient Rome. Due to the game's nature of allowing players to basically build their own version of Rome, it is difficult to say whether the game is entirely faithful to the history of the Roman empire. Certain factors prevent players from deviating too extensively from the story of Rome, but there is still room for players to feel as though they decide the fate of Rome.

Games similar to *Imperator: Rome* are, not surprisingly, also published by Paradox Interactive. Their most comparable game to *Imperator: Rome* is probably *Europa Universalis* (2000). Fans of the *Europa Universalis* series believe that a lot of their game's elements and game mechanics served as the foundation for *Imperator: Rome*. However, Fans also see the differences between the two games. In *Imperator:*

Rome's case, the world map is much larger and not limited to the sphere of influence of early European conquests. The map encompasses more regions which also include India and vast areas of the Middle East. The reason for the inclusion of these territories is to allow for connections to Alexander the Great and the power vacuum that resulted from his untimely death. Another game that is similar to *Imperator: Rome* in terms of its basic elements is *Great Conqueror: Rome* (2020) which is a mobile game, developed and published by EASY Inc. One could argue that *Great Conqueror: Rome* is a more streamlined version of *Imperator: Rome*; they are similar enough to compare their gameplay mechanics but even more similar in their depiction of Rome. *Great Conqueror: Rome* takes a similar approach to its game but allows the less experienced strategy gamer to explore the genre.

The strongest recommendation for the game would be to develop a complete tutorial. *Imperator: Rome* fails to provide an adequate tutorial and leaves little room for unexperienced players. Some video games are plagued with overly in-depth walk-throughs that become tedious to the players, but in *Imperator: Rome's* case, players have to deal with the opposite problem. The existing tutorial provides a really bare-bones approach that alienates and discourages new players from joining the community of advanced strategy games. The tutorial leaves users with many questions and provides no viable answers. This has resulted in fans relying on the existing community for answers. Some veteran players of the games made by Paradox Interactive have begun to make their own unofficial tutorials to help new players understand the complexities and nuances of the games. *Imperator: Rome* could garnish more support and popularity if the tutorial provided a more in-depth approach and demonstrations of each of the various choices that players have available to them. Since the game is comprised of many moving parts and various causes and actions, it would definitely help users to have a better foothold on what actions they can and should be taking. For new players, a little hand-holding would go a long way, especially for those not familiar with Paradox Interactive and the layout commonly used in their strategy games.

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A Total War Saga: Troy Mythos

[single-player/multiplayer turn-based/real-time strategy video game].

Developer: Creative Assembly, Feral Interactive.
 Platforms: Microsoft Windows/PC, MacOS, Linux.
 Release date: September 2, 2021.

When a man steals another man's wife, a whole civilization may burn to the ground. Over 2700 years after its conception, Homer's *Iliad* continues to capture people's imaginations. One especially popular recreation of the epic poem is Wolfgang Petersen's movie *Troy* (2004) which grossed almost half a billion dollars at the box office. However, for the sake of simplicity and entertainment purposes, Petersen's *Troy* left out many important details and characters. In 2020, Game

developer Creative Assembly tried their hand at the subject matter with the release of *A Total War Saga: Troy*, intending to add plausibility to the *Iliad*'s mythological events and characters in what they termed "The Truth Behind the Myth." But this philosophy ultimately fell flat as the fantasy community thought Creative Assembly had not gone far enough with Greek mythology, while the historical community became frustrated with the game's lack of realism. To remedy this, the company decided to release *A Total War Saga: Troy Mythos* on September 2, 2021, to provide both a more historical experience as well as a fully mythological one.

Although Creative Assembly has created games such as *Blood Money* (1989), *FIFA International Soccer* (1993), and *Viking: Battle for Asgard* (2008), they are best known for their *Total War* series which revolves around a turn-based campaign with elements of real-time strategy in various historical eras and regions. *A Total War Saga: Troy* introduced some new and welcome mechanics. Whereas in previous titles, players had the single resource of money to spend on building their empire, *Troy* added a more realistic approach by having players manage food, wood, stone, bronze, and the extremely rare and valuable gold. Another welcome addition is the "Divine Will" mechanic where a player can spend resources praying and sacrificing to the main gods of the Greek pantheon for various bonuses. However, other attempts to add variety fell short, such as allowing units to switch between wielding their weapons in a single or double-handed form. Because units already have stats (i.e., statistics) that make them suitable for specific roles, such as holding a line or flanking, this was an interesting but ultimately useless and ahistorical mechanic. A particularly annoying mechanic is the nemesis system where a certain faction will eventually declare war on the player and take away the option of entering diplomacy. This often results in players having to single out their nemesis faction before they can move on to their main objectives; further frustration is added due to the fact that a new nemesis will appear once the first one has been eliminated. There is also the recurring theme of players surviving the initial challenges of their campaigns, creating armies consisting of their elite units, and easily winning the game as the AI (artificial intelligence) cannot cope. Despite these hit-or-miss additions, Creative Assembly's *Troy* did well when it came to immersion and pulling from the *Iliad* for individual faction mechanics.

The first thing the player notices upon launch of *Troy* is the artwork. The main menu depicts a rotating round shield with bronze etchings while the player hears an ominous soundtrack, creating the sense that this is the beginning of an epic journey. Upon clicking on the "new campaign" tab, the player is shown bronze statues of the *Iliad*'s Danaan heroes: Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus (at the time of writing this review, there is also optional paid downloadable content that adds Diomedes and Ajax). At the top of the screen, there is an option to switch to the Trojan factions where one can play as Hector, Paris, Aeneas, and Sarpedon, or if a player has access to the extra paid content, the Amazonian factions of Hippolyta and Penthesilea. After selecting a faction and

proceeding, the player is shown a cutscene describing the classic tale of Helen's abduction and is given some suggestions for first steps on the campaign map. After this, one immediately notices the campaign map, as it depicts symbols of cities, trade routes, and resources. The horizon and uncharted parts are displayed in a way that resembles clay pottery and ancient maps respectively. There is also evidence of Creative Assembly looking into scholarship as the equipment of units include bronze cuirasses from the Mycenaean period (which have been found in archaeological digs), crescent shields, and chariots. Moreover, units are delineated into light, medium, and heavy categories to provide some semblance of the fact that men had to buy and maintain their own arms and armor.

In addition to these weight classes, each faction comes with unique mechanics and units that suit a certain playstyle. For example, Achilles's faction revolves around lighter, more versatile units for maneuverability; Hector's faction consists of heavy units that are meant for frontal assaults or hammer-and-anvil strikes; and the Amazonian factions boast cavalry and fast-moving skirmishers. However, the lengths to which Creative Assembly went to be true to the epic poem does not end there, as they also pulled directly from it to make the factions truly unique. To give an example: according to the *Iliad*, Achilles was known to have mood swings, and the game features this in the form of four emotions that can be triggered by various events and actions: "proud" which has no effects; "indignant" which grants bonuses to resources and public order at the cost of influence over territories and diplomatic exchanges; "grieving" which grants bonuses to unit experience and favor with the gods at the cost of public order; and "outraged" which drastically increases unit effectiveness at the cost of resource production and growth in territories. To drive home the idea that he was the greatest warrior of the Trojan War, playing as Achilles also comes with a set of "living legend" popup missions that entail challenging local warriors. When the player challenges an opponent via the menu tab, one of three events occurs: the AI will either immediately recognize Achilles's superiority, deny the challenge and force the player to defeat the character on the battlefield, or trigger another popup menu that requires Achilles to leave his army for a few turns; the player can also opt out of these choices and find and defeat armies led by these warriors on the battlefield. After all challengers have been defeated, the player is given a few units for instant recruitment and receives a bonus that makes the hiring and upkeep of troops less expensive. This lasts for a limited period before the player must repeat this process.

With unique faction mechanics and a more difficult system of resource management, the base game was a welcome addition to the series after its initial game-breaking bugs had been patched. But much of its unpopularity came from the mentioned "Truth Behind the Myth" approach where mythological beings were portrayed with an essence of plausibility: giants were large men with mammoth skulls for helmets; the Minotaur was a man donning a bull's pelt; harpies were groups of skirmisher women in feathery clothing; and the centaurs were men on horseback. To unlock and recruit them, the player has to capture

settlements that denote their presence and build their respective structures. Due to these barriers and the fact that these units made a marginal difference in armies, they often went unrecruited in my campaigns. Further, Homeric characters such as Achilles were single-entity units with abilities such as health regeneration and stats that made normal units largely ineffective against them. It is for these reasons that the *Mythos* expansion became necessary.

As *Troy's* "Truth Behind the Myth" approach turned out to be a predominantly negative experience that was either not fantastical or historical enough for fans, the September 2, 2021, *Troy Mythos* update and expansion attempted to remedy this by adding a historical campaign that removes mythological units, turns heroes into general units with bodyguards, and compromises by making it so that Homeric characters cannot be killed (they can be wounded which renders them unavailable for a number of turns). It also adds a mythological campaign with units that resemble their depictions in legends, keeps heroes as single-entity units with legendary stats and abilities, and adds expeditions to hunt down and recruit one of three beasts of myth: Cerberus, the Griffin Patriarch, and the Hydra. When embarking on an expedition, the player must assemble a hunting party consisting of a general and troops to accompany them. After doing so, five dilemmas in the form of popup menu events occur, asking the player to make decisions directing the expedition. These events add units and bonuses and create conditions for the final confrontation. Once these conditions are met, a final battle that must be fought manually (rather than via the game's AI auto resolve function) appears with the result of recruiting the legendary monster into your ranks. Another welcome addition in this update is the empire management bar; as more armies are raised and settlements are upgraded, resource production and the cost of maintaining armies becomes increasingly inefficient, further adding a sense of realism as the player's empire inflates.

After playing through a mythological campaign as Diomedes with my expedition targeting Cerberus, I can say that this update and expansion is worthwhile for those who, like me, saw promise in bringing the *Total War* series to the Trojan War. Despite the fact that I prefer the more historical titles, the addition of the mythological campaign was an entertaining experience. Having Cerberus in my army, the hound's mechanics also brought the ability to recruit Elysian Shades (the undead souls of Hades), a new specialist agent, and a new commandment for fully owned provinces, which increases resource production and makes provinces immune to public order penalties. Moreover, the reworked mythological units are depicted as they are described in Greek mythology, are much more powerful, and further immerse the player. Although the units and Cerberus made battles relatively trivial, this was somewhat expected, as I was harnessing the power of the hound of Hades. The addition of the expedition also made this playthrough feel less stale. When added to the fact that Cerberus is one of three choices that brings new units, abilities, and commandments to the campaign, the replay ability of this game increases.

As for the historical campaign, I played, but did not finish, a playthrough as Aeneas due to time constraints. However, I can say that the addition of bodyguards to accompany generals made the game feel much more like its historical predecessors. It also makes campaigns more challenging due to the fact that the player cannot rely on the legendary strength and abilities of their generals. This is more in line with what I like to see in these games, and I will likely be putting more hours into this option as a result. One gripe I have is the lack of unit formations, which greatly takes away from the strategic aspects of this game. For instance, although the phalanx is mentioned in the *Iliad*, albeit sparingly, there is no such option in the game. While this is largely historical, as organized formations were not heavily implemented during this time, it makes battles feel dumbed down.

Overall, *Troy* with the *Troy Mythos* expansion is an enjoyable experience. However, if you are new to the series, *Troy Mythos* would not be my first choice, as it is more complex compared to its predecessors. Moreover, I cannot recommend *Troy* to new players, because it almost requires the *Mythos* expansion and paid additional content to be fully enjoyable. Choosing a previous title, such as *Rome* (2004), *Medieval 2* (2006), *Shogun 2* (2011), or *Rome 2* (2013) would probably be more beneficial for those who want to introduce themselves to the series. While these previous titles also come with additional paid content, the base games still provide a worthwhile experience. For those who enjoy fantasy, Creative Assembly has also released *Warhammer* (2016) and *Warhammer II* (2017), and is expected to release *Warhammer III* in late 2021. Another deterrent for newer players is the difficulty of battles. Although all titles in the series stress the importance of tactical maneuvers, such as flanking, this is especially important in *Troy Mythos*. Morale plays a much larger part as well, as beginning units tend to break rank more easily. In sum, if you are either a fervent fan of the Bronze Age and Greek mythology, or enjoyed reading the *Iliad* and want to see it recreated, or someone who is not new to the franchise, or all of the above, *A Total War Saga: Troy* and the *Mythos* expansion are worth picking up.

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