

entrevista en gamasutra a CA's Mark Sutherns , en ingles

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Interview: Creative Assembly's Sutherns Talks Total War Franchise

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Now, Sega-owned developer Creative Assembly, which was founded in 1987, has offices in both the UK and Australia, and was acquired by the Japanese-headquartered publisher in 2005, is turning its eye to the colonial and industrial eras of the 18th and 19th century with Empire: Total War.

Much of the series' critical and commercial success has been based on its successful execution of battles at nearly unprecedented large scales. Gamasutra recently sat down with the company's Mark Sutherns, who discussed AI, piracy, pathfinding, and expanding the genre outside the 'hardcore' PC gamer.

How long has this been in development?

Mark Sutherns: Well, we've been developing this naval engine for some time; work began on that shortly after [Rome: Total War -] Barbarian Invasion. So work on that has been going for two, two and a half years. Other aspects of the game have had varied amounts of team working on them. So, roughly two, two and a half years of development time so far.

So it's a fully separate engine? Was it not possible to do within your existing framework?

MS: We didn't want to. It gives us advantages - trying to equip one engine to do both land and sea, I think we would've had to cut some corners in some aspects of both elements by doing that. So we already had the engine for land, we have a foundation for that already, and to make it fit with naval, we didn't think it would do a good enough job. So we just made the decision, a long time ago, that when we

did naval, it would be on a separate engine.

A lot of people do attempt to integrate all of it, and it can wind up making it a bit stretched thin sometimes.

MS: Yeah, and I mean, the naval element is not a rigid simulation, but at the same time I don't want to make it tactically light, where you select a boat and press a fire button and shoot a few rounds of fire and then a ship is sunk. We don't want it to have an arcade feel, we want to make sure that there is an element that is realism, and the real-world systems are more like they are in land battles.

In land battles you've got land, height, and the environments, and the weather conditions, all playing a part in how land battles are fought, and we wanted it to be the same for naval battles. So, weather conditions, as I say, are very, very important; wind speed is very, very important; if you're in still waters or shallow waters, that's an important aspect as well. So all of these things need to be modeled, and we felt that we needed a separate engine to do that.

These naval battles are very slow paced. I don't think it's too slow, but ships don't move fast.

MS: No. It's one thing; it will be tweaked. I mean, we're looking to do an extensive play test with the naval combat, because the element of the game is just more advanced at the moment. And also, it's getting that happy medium between making sure that the battles are fun, but also making sure they're not light experiences, in that you've got time to make tactical decisions, and got time where strategy matters, but at the same time it's not too slow, where it feels ponderous, and it is a real balance.

In our minds, naval battles need to be no more than 15 minutes, maybe 10 minutes in length - but at the same time, when you're fighting battles with maybe twenty ships a side, you know, that's quite a big ask, because you've got quite a lot to look after and to think about in terms of strategy.

So, we're still balancing, and the ship speeds that you saw there will definitely change by the time we ship. It's just making sure we get the right balance - the bigger ships have to be slower, but, you know, if you change the speed of the bigger ships, you have to change all the speeds of the ships that come underneath that, to make sure that it's all balanced correctly. It's a balancing act, and we don't really do that until post-alpha. It will change, I'm sure.

What are you using for pathfinding and stuff?

MS: It's all our own systems; we've always had our own pathfinding technology. And it's more complex now than it ever was for a Total War game, because we've got occupiable buildings on the land battles; we've never had that before; we have been able to position men on turrets, but we've never enabled you to send men into buildings.

We've got a whole new system in terms of certain troops, like light infantry troops, you can select a unit by infantry, drag them across an area, and they'll pathfind to elements of cover, naturally; they'll find hotspots where they can take cover. So there's more complexity to the pathfinding now, but it's a system that we've had from the Shogun days all the way up, so it's just something we've developed.

I was talking to Frank Pearce, who's working on StarCraft II at Blizzard, and I asked if he felt that pathfinding had come as far along as other systems, like collision or AI, and he said, by far, no.

MS: It is very, very hard to do. You know, we've got a lot of men on the battlefield, so the key thing for us is that it's always been possible to get a lot of men on the battlefield, but it's getting them to act sensibly that's the tough thing to do.

And you've seen that we've got walls and a lot more tree cover in this game, so the pathfinding has got to work, and work better than it ever has done, because the AI and the player's troops are going to maneuver across walls, and through tree-covered areas, and they've got to do it sensibly; we don't want it to look ugly in any shape or form. So it is a real important area of the game, but, you know, we're not encountering any problems as yet.

Yeah. And it can get extremely frustrating if it doesn't work to player expectations, obviously.

MS: Yeah. Absolutely.

How do you, in a game like this, teach tactics to people? On this scale it's like actual war tactics. Reading a book about war might give you an edge. To what extent can you do that?

MS: It's true. I mean, there are various ways we do it. We are going to have tutorials for land and naval battles, and we'll give pointers to some tactics in that. We're going to have some pointers on when you go into a battle, a naval or land battle. There's a loading screen that's going to have some tactics on that. The unit descriptions, for when you click on a unit, if you read the description it suggests ways in which that unit can be used.

But you're right in saying that players who come to this with some knowledge of tactics will have an advantage. But to be honest, a lot of it is pretty straight-forward, you know. To flank an enemy is going to be better than taking them head on; to attack from the rear is going to be better than attacking from the front.

So, you know, the basics. The Art Of War is pretty basic stuff. It's just making sure you can use your troops effectively in those scenarios. So it's not advanced techniques, a lot of the tactics of the period, but we want to make sure that real world tactics that you could read in a book, like Napoleon's battles, can be applied to the game. We want to make sure there is a reward for that.

If you adopt a tactic that should work, and did work in history, then it will work in our game; that's where we want it to be. And, you know, it's something the player will learn, and he'll have his favorite tactics and his favorite units.

How do you build the AI to work with that? Obviously, AI is born to lose, but where is the balance between making it too stupid? Obviously you don't want it to react exactly the same every time.

MS: No, and we've got a system in place to make sure that the AI is selecting the right tactics and the right "plays," if you like, at the right time. We've got various diagnostic tools to make that possible, where we can put the AI, come in in the morning, and it's fought a hundred battles. And it shows us the results of those battles; and it shows us the tactics it's used; and it shows us how it's fared against certain other tactics.

So, slowly but surely, we're piecing together an opponent which will have a set of plays that it can use, based on what the opponent is doing. Now, you know, we never go out of our way to make the AI cheat, or to make the AI stupid to make the player think he's fantastic - the player's got to earn his victories. We're very confident that the AI in this game is going to be our strongest yet; it's looking really good already.

We're building on a good foundation. The AI from Rome has done the basic things very, very well, but what we're doing with Empire is, we're going beyond that; we're teaching it tactics that were used in the period.

So when you start the battle, you'll see the AI start to shift his army, as a whole, into formations, and group his army more realistically than you've ever seen in a Total War game before. Before, if you saw an army approaching, it would come as one, and it would attack one or two units; here you're seeing a lot more movement outside, before the conflict has even started, just in the way the AI moves its troops around to deploy, because we're teaching it the tactics of the time, and under certain conditions it will

carry those out.

So we're doing a lot of work to ensure that the opponent appears very, very realistic, and reacts to the player's tactics. But, obviously, the player needs to be able to win.

How close to reality can you get, without breaking the player's ability to know what's going on, in terms of formations and tactics that the enemy will take?

MS: Well, it's just making sure you're always surprising the player. But no two battles are the same, because you're going into the battles with different units every time, and you're facing different units every time.

Other RTSes have set troop types, and you know what to expect from them because you know what special abilities they've got, and you know how, typically, the AI uses them. Now, in our game, yes you have specific unit types, but the AI will use them differently depending on which combination of troops its got on the battlefield. And also they'll use them differently depending on the air of the battlefield itself; so if there's a building there, or a steep area of hills, it will use different tactics than if it was a completely flat plane.

So, there is a lot of variety there, based on what the AI does, based on a whole range of factors. There are thousands and thousands of battlefields in the game that you can fight on, so every time you fight a battle, it's different. You're very unlikely to be fighting on the same battlefield twice.

How far can you go with that variety without overwhelming the player?

MS: I don't think it's overwhelming, I think it's just people would expect to see that. When they're playing the campaign game, it's a massive campaign game, and if I'm fighting battles in Africa, I want to see variety. I want to see that I'm fighting battles on different battlefields; I don't want to have an "African tile" which I'll see every time I'm fighting a battle in Africa.

So I don't think it's what's overwhelming to the player, I think it's what's expected, and our job is to deliver that as well as possible. I think environments in this game are going beyond anything we've done before, and it's not just the battlefield which looks fantastic, it's the outfield as well, around it. So you feel like the battlefield that you're fighting on is part of this realistic world, because you can see, in the distance, detail.

In previous Total War games, we've paid a lot of attention on getting the battlefield right, but around it we kind of blurred the detail. We're not doing that on this game; we're building everything in detail. And it really sells the idea that you're fighting in this real, realistic world.

And, as I say, I want if I'm fighting a campaign in America, I don't want to fight on the same battlefield twice, I want to see different environments that will throw me different things to deal with; like farm houses, like steep land, like rivers to cross, and so on.

What scale of battle can you actually have without going too far?

MS: It depends. I mean, I think battles in this period were very, very large, and so we're reacting to that by making sure that unit size increases to accommodate, and I think we're going to go beyond the ten thousand mark. Traditionally, ten thousand is a kind-of benchmark that we've gone for in our games, and I think we're going to go beyond that.

It will depend on the spec of the machine you're running, because it'll all be scaled, but a decent spec will be about ten and around a thousand troops on the battlefield at once - which will look bloody great.

Because the thing is, the animation that has gone into the game makes those troops react and behave so realistically that you'll look along the battlefield line, and you'll struggle to see any repeated animation.

It's really more like a film in that respect, in that you're zooming in on the camera, they're one on one duels, right across the battle line. So even from a zoomed out view it will look cool, and when you zoom in, you'd better see these battles going on one-on-one.

How much focus is there on realism of the weapons and outfits and all of that?

MS: A lot. I mean, it's something we do have to compromise on at times, because we need to make sure that the faction colors are bright enough and clear enough that people know who's who on the battlefield.

You know, you'll get some of our fans saying, "Oh, that uniform wasn't realistic," and, "That wasn't red on that bit," or, "That wasn't as large as it was in reality," and the reasons why we make those decisions is because it's critical for gameplay, because we need to make sure the player can identify troops. So we do have to make some compromises sometimes in the

uniforms.

The weapons - musket fire, rate of fire, accuracy, reload times - we're modeling them as realistically as we can. Again, within the realms of gameplay. You know, you don't want to be two minutes loading a gun before you can fire again in the game - we need to compromise on that somewhat - but we want to model the fact that untrained troops won't load as fast as trained troops.

So one thing we're going to have is, if you've got one unit, and he's up against an identical unit, this one is more trained than that one; he will be more effective, and he'll kill more through accuracy, and he'll load faster as well. So, that is all realistically modeled in the game, but with an element of gameplay brought in, to make sure that it's not tedious.

Who does the research for that? Is that internal?

MS: All the team. Yeah, we've got a team of about eight designers who, when recruited, they were recruited because they have an interest in history; they're all historians, of sorts, and we've got experts in every area. So we've got a couple of naval designers, we've got a guy who works on the land battles solely, and we've got the guy who works on the units and factions of the time. So they are all historians as well as designers.

Our console project guys are completely separate, so they're all kind-of traditional designers, if you like. The guys on the Total War project? They are your tabletop gamers and RPG players. They're heavily into board games; they have all sets, they have military tabletop games, and they also have got extensive knowledge on the period as well.

So they're not, you know, traditional designers, as such; they are honed specifically to make Total War games.

Have you considered doing things like The History Channel has, with battle recreations and that kind of stuff?

MS: Yeah, we did a series, we did [the television program] Decisive Battles [which used Rome: Total War for historical battle recreation] a few years ago. You know, we'd be really interested in talking to them, and looking to use this engine, because of the period it uses.

And that's an interest to a lot of people in this country, and other countries as well, and we're going to be covering the evolution of war. We're going to be modeling that, and all the units of that period are going to be there, and we've got naval battles as well now.

So, you know, we'd be excited with the prospect of doing another series like that, because I think the engine really does give the ability to recreate massive battles relatively easily. Because we can model any battlefield, we can create factions, and we can model the tactics of the time very easily in our game.

Do you actually model any of the key figures from those battles in those periods?

MS: Yeah. Empire will have key historical figures cropping up in the game as you play. They don't appear at set times, but under certain conditions, these characters will arrive.

So, if you create a general, in a certain year, in a certain location, under certain conditions, that general could be Napoleon. But it will depend on how the player plays; that means that your game, that you're playing, you'll have different encounters in it than my game.

So there is an RPG element there. And they all have traits and characteristics, so when Napoleon does enter the game, he'll clearly be a brilliant leader, and an inspiration on the battlefield. But there's no guarantee that these guys will crop up; they're just there as added ingredients, to add variety and flavor.

This kind of game strikes me as being incredibly time-consuming to develop. I know the audience for Total War exists already, but why so much time and focus?

MS: I think it's that the game - and all the major Total War games - demand that. We never want to make a quick and easy Total War game, because it's impossible to deliver quality, doing it like that.

Yeah, this game is massive; it has taken time to develop. There's still work to be done on it. But the payoff will hopefully be massive for us as well, because I just think that the appeal of this game, because it's got the naval in it, it'll appeal to a new audience.

I also think because certain factions like North America is fully playable; with the faction in North America, you can fight the War of Independence, and so on. That will appeal to a different audience, I hope.

I think the fact that the warfare in the period is gunpowder and lead, is muskets and cannons, will appeal to a different audience than perhaps Medieval II did, for people who weren't into the knights and armor and so on.

So I think we will grow the audience of Empire through those elements - there's no doubt about that - but to do it well, it takes time, absolutely, and we don't want to cut corners with things.

We want to make sure that, you know, the naval engine for example is a testament to that. When we did naval warfare, we wanted to actually do it well. We could have put it into Medieval II, but we knew it wasn't ready, so we saved it for this game. It makes more sense in this game, and also it pays off because of the time we spent on it.

Yeah, there may be elements that we wanted to do for this game that we may have to save, we'll have to see, but right now it's looking good. In the putting of overall work into it, in terms of the amount of ingredients that go into the game, it's going to be absolutely huge.

The audience for this game is still going to be the super hardcore among game players, and a lot of people are actively trying to get away from that. I wonder if that is an opportunity, in fact, to gain a larger percent of the hardcore audience, because so many people are focusing outside of that.

MS: Yeah, well I hope the opinion of the game is going to go beyond absolutely hardcore, because I think, as I said, the naval combat and the nature of the combat on land battles being more action-based because it's muskets, will hopefully bring in people who haven't maybe solved a Total War game before.

But I think you're right in saying that this is a chance for us to get a larger slice of the strategy game market, which may or may not be diminishing, but I think this game could certainly take some of the action RTS players and bring them over to Total War.

I hope so, I really do, because I think the game has a lot to offer to those guys as well as the historical hardcore strategy gamers that we've had for many years.

Have you ever considered, maybe not with this game, targeting Korea?

MS: It's not something that we've directly considered, no - and I know that StarCraft II are doing that very

directly with that game, but it's not something - I mean, that's led, really, on the multiplayer side of things.

While we are developing multiplayer, it's never been the kind-of 'at the forefront' of Total War, the way that multiplayer in StarCraft has been. I know that Korea is an audience that's driven by that.

But in future iterations of Total War - because Total War will go on, and will have projects developed in different settings and themes than Total War - that's not to say that we won't look at one particular set and say, 'This is the right time to maybe widen the appeal beyond the existing market.' It's possible.

Have you considered platforms other than PC?

MS: Not currently. But we're fully aware that, you know, this is a big year for RTS on the console, so it's very much, from our point of view, seeing what happens with that before considering any moves in the area. It's not something we're considering right now.

[Creative Assembly and parent company Sega have since announced Stormrise, a real-time strategy game heading to consoles.]

When it comes to PC games, there are a lot of piracy issues, and distribution issues. Is that up to Sega, or do you guys have input into that?

MS: It's a two-way thing. Yeah, there are things going on at the moment that we can't talk about, which will be revealed in good time, before we address that issue. But it is led by Sega, and third parties are involved, but obviously we have a say on what we want to do. But that will be revealed soon, hopefully.

There are solutions there; there's one such, that we're looking at at the moment, which we're hoping to get an agreement with. Will be pretty good.

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