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GC08 - Empire: Total War Q&A Feature

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Following an impressive Leipzig demonstration, TVG finds out more on one of our most eagerly awaited titles for 2009...

With a new timeline spanning a new type of warfare and the addition of naval combat, The Creative Assembly's Empire: Total War looks set to enhance the standards set by the popular strategy series.

TVG recently had the chance to chat with The Creative Assembly's Communications Manager Kieran Brigden and Associate Producer Mark Sutherns shortly after the game's Leipzig Games Convention demonstration, so read on to find out about the map size, the issue of slavery, and what's been removed and reworked for the sake of accessibility.

TVG: In previous Total Wars, barbarians have always been quite a factor in the turn-based strategy and you need them in the main RTS; being this is the era of Pirates...

(Spontaneous laughter and cries of 'Pirates' erupt from The Creative Assembly's ensemble...)

Kieran Bridges: Yes there are pirates. Pirates occur in places that you'd expect them like the Caribbean and places like that. They will rage your commerce routes and take percentages of your trade and they might attack your trade ships and fleets as well, so you might need to protect against the possibility of pirates and various pirate activities. On top of that, I can tell you that you will be able to play as the pirates in multiplayer. If you want to play a naval battle, you can play as pirates.

TVG: I assume given the styling of Medieval: Total War we won't be talking about skulls and crossbones and a pirate on your shoulder?

KB: Perhaps not the parrot, although the pirates of the time, we research everything as accurately as we can, the pirates did hoist flags like a skull and crossbones. Not perhaps for the RTS part of the game, but as far as the campaign map is concerned when you're identifying a pirate fleet it's probably one of the easiest symbols worldwide that is recognised as a pirate. But in terms of the RTS game we're still trying to work out what the actual flag design will be for pirate ships.

TVG: Will you actually meet them in the naval combat?

KB: You'll be able to fight against pirate ships both in the campaign and in the multiplayer mode. When you're fighting pirate ships you can also board those and seize them to add them to your own navy.

TVG: We took a look at the campaign map, can you talk a little about this, how far it will extend?

KB: If you imagine it to be like the 18th century world predominantly from the view of central European powers. In that respect, obviously it would have been North America, Central America, the Caribbean, the Indies, North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

So it's a pretty advanced map, it doesn't go as far east as places like China, but that's mostly because how the world is progressing in the 18th century. It wasn't quite yet the age when everything was discovered and the whole world was charted, certainly America was concerned with the New World at that stage and so we've reflected that in the game.

It's certainly the biggest one we've ever done in terms of the sheer volume of regions and places you can go, but it's not quite yet the entire world.

TVG: Speaking of multiplayer, are you talking about that at the moment?

KB: A little bit, it depends on what you're asking.

TVG: How many players?

KB: Well that's a good question, it's eight isn't it.

Mark Sutherns: Yeah the traditional battle mode is still there, you've got battles of up to eight players. Obviously, we've got naval combat, so you can fight naval battles in multiplayer. We're looking at new modes of play, but we're not yet announcing them. It's fair to say there are modes that we're considering, some which will please older players of the Total War fanbase that we've had all the way through from Shogun, and some which we hope will appeal to new players, maybe RTS players.

KB: There's a lot more than there used to be. We're trying to cater for our fans who've been requesting certain modes for a long time and also giving modes that might help a traditional RTS player.

TVG: Another factor of Total War surrounds the historical accuracy in terms of battles, do you have any examples at this stage?

KB: That's a good question. We're actually, in terms of strict terminology, we're removing the historical battles this time around. You can still fight custom battles, you can create certain scenarios that you want to fight, so you can create a rendition of Waterloo or Trafalgar, then you can go ahead and do that.

But we're at a stage now with Total War with Empire, whereby we feel that the game is historic enough, we don't need to prepare these sorts of maps, these kinds of layouts for you to feel like you're actually experiencing a historic battle. The biggest thing about Total War games is traditionally you got everything accurate at the starting point, so in this instance in 1700, and after that you make history. Certainly now with the new battle map system coming out of the campaign map, each battle is of sufficient quality that it feels historic on itself. Of course, if you want to create custom battles and fight them you still can.

TVG: The turn-based strategy in the last game was deeper than it's ever been; the Catholic church came into play with the Pope, subterfuge was a big element, what sort of things are you doing in this historical era to fill the gap?

KB: I see what you mean. Mark's a bit of an Empire campaign mode expert on this one, but I'll start off by saying that we've slimmed it down, but deepened the number of options. So the number of things you can do is massively expanded but the micro-management and other kinds of fiddly bits that you're required to do those things has been made a lot less in terms of accessibility.

I'll let Mark take that one on.

MS: It's like Kieran says a lot of the stuff that maybe was and were present in previous games perhaps weren't as accessible as they could have been. You're looking at stuff like recruitment, upgrading buildings, now all of that has come out and we've either centralised it and made it available in one central menu for your whole faction or we've pulled it out and added it to the campaign map itself.

So buildings are now upgraded via the campaign map not via the cities, where before in Rome, Medieval, you clicked on the city, if you wanted to upgrade your barracks you had to find it and upgrade it. You don't do that now, the barracks is on the map. That adds a couple of things. Probably the biggest thing you can see at a glance is where your most profitable regions are, so you can see your own and you can see your enemies. If you want to cripple your enemy's trade or their military, you know what region they're getting the most from so you can see where their commercial ports are, so I know that's where I want to attack. Whereas before you had to send a spy in to get an idea of their infrastructure and so on, a lot of that stuff was hidden, whereas now it's out there in front of the player and that makes it more accessible.

With recruitment, you had to click on the city, click on the barracks and recruit troops, now you just click on the general and he recruits from nearby military establishments, so you order the troops you want and they arrive at the general after a set number of turns. That will reduce the number of splintered armies you get around the map. Before you may want to build some cavalry to the north and some artillery to the south, and you may end up forgetting about certain small armies and they get involved in splinter battles. It can become a little tedious so we ruled that out, so everything is about averaging so you get bigger armies moving around, fewer armies but more significant.

In terms of features, religion still plays a part, but it's part of diplomacy now, it's part of your relationship with other factions. So if you share a religion with another faction you're going to get on better with them, you're going to relate with them better. If you have religions that maybe aren't compatible then it's going to be a factor in diplomacy, they'll have their suspicions of you.

Diplomacy itself we've done a lot of work in terms of giving the player more information on their relationships with other factions. You can see now at a glance how other factions view you and other factions, so for example if I wanted to choose my allies and I wanted to go to war with the Dutch, I could see at a glance who are not favoured by the Dutch and maybe ally with them and wage a war against them. It's a very useful tool in building up this political system in the world, which we've never really had before.

Apart from that, I would say that religion was a major factor in medieval times but trade is a major factor in these times. So establishing lucrative trade routes and seizing trade theatres such as the Caribbean, Africa and the Indies, if you can get a foothold in those territories you can get trade ships active and

protect them with your navies that's where the money comes in and that's then where you can fund your war effort. So trade is by far much bigger than it's been in any of our games. We've got a full supply and demand system, where you're importing goods and exporting goods. Commerce raiding and pirates all play factors in that and they all act as a springboard to fire up the naval battle, so we want to make sure when you fight a battle everyone counts. So there's an awful lot of new features in the campaign map but a lot of it now is far more accessible than it was in our previous games.

TVG: In that sense how do you tackle the issue of slavery, is that not in the game?

MS: Yeah it is a difficult issue and it's not something we wanted to trivialise so basically what happens is, Africa is a trade theatre and it's something you can make money from. So it works like the other trade theatres, you put ships into that area and you generate money from that. So slavery's not something we've addressed head on if you like, because it's not something that should be trivialised for entertainment. We didn't really want to breach that area, but at the same time it was a factor in terms of what goes on in the game. If you abolish slavery in the game, you earn more 'prestige' and that's just one way of actually earning prestige in the game. Prestige is a new way to win the game, so slavery is a factor in terms that you can be awarded for abolishing it, but we don't recognise it as a resource.

TVG: How many factions are there and can we get some examples?

KB: We've got 12 playable factions and obviously as you've seen from the demonstration, Prussia and Great Britain are amongst those. I don't think it will be too much of a surprise to say they're the major European powers, along with France and so forth. Russia is also going to feature. We're not announcing the full list yet because there are a couple of more that we are balancing right now to make sure they are a playable faction. We also include a couple of factions that are outside the traditional European powers, so again giving players a variety of different play styles.

There are approximately 50 factions in the game world in total, and you mention barbarians, there's no such thing as a rebel faction anymore, i.e. you know every time a rebellion happens they have the same kind of rebel flag and they were rebels. When a country or region goes into rebellion, it spawns a historically accurate rebel force in that location. In that, sense there's a huge number of nations in there.

TVG: Naval battles are a natural step forwards for the series, but considering battlefield warfare of the time, surely it's just rows of people...

KB: Shooting each other yeah.

TVG: The demonstration was a huge reassurance.

KB: Yes and we know that a lot of our fans had exactly the same reaction. They're like, 'you're going to ranged combat we won't have any melee encounters', but you got to remember that, as well as being the age of the musket, it's also the age of the bayonet and bayonet technology is something you can learn and advance all the way through the game.

To that end you've got different types of bayonets, like plug bayonets, ring bayonets and socket bayonets, and all of those help your troops retain accuracy and the use of their rifles whilst at the same time using their guns essentially as spears. In addition, melee combat is important but it's a critical choice when you choose to commit.

It also means you get a greater sense of variety on the battlefield, it's not just lines of cloned units, there's a lot of different types with different abilities. For example, cavalry units like Dragoons are actually mounted Cavalry units with sabres, they're able to ride in and fight battles and then dismount load their rifles and start shooting, before mounting up again and moving. So they fight both melee and ranged combat. Ranged combat adds a huge range of new features to the way that you play the game, so it's not just a kind of stand in a line and shoot, as you've seen today we've got a full cover system, a garrison system, all of these things add to the way the game is played.

But yes from a fans perspective, myself obviously being a fan of the series as well as you, melee is still very important and as you've seen, seeing thousands of guys crash into each other with bayonets and stab the hell out of each other, it's still there so don't panic.

TVG: AI has always been an important factor in Total War titles, but seeing them move around both sides of the city hall and flank was very impressive, and the battles have plenty of individual action, that looks deeper than ever so what sort of improvements are we looking at?

KB: Taking the AI first, the battle AI is an entirely new system, completely rewritten. We've separated that from the campaign AI so we've now been able to specialise the kind of actions and knowledge of a campaign game AI and specialise the battle knowledge AI.

The battle knowledge AI has an understanding of basic formations and techniques used in the period, along with some special formations and techniques specific to certain factions and generals. In addition, it has an understanding of compensation of forces and the movement of forces on the battlefield. It's got a much better understanding of its zone of control and ranged weapons as well, meaning that it can effectively move its troops to the best range of fire and stay out of yours and so on and so forth.

It's certainly a massive jump up and, technically speaking, the way that we've achieved that is moving from a state-based system to a goal-orientated system. It has a goal, it constantly juggles its objectives based around that goal, and that includes fighting, rear guard action, moving back to places it can garrison itself, flanking manoeuvres and so on and so forth. Finally, we train it by letting it play against itself for hours upon end, working out manoeuvres and techniques so it can become truly reactive.

On the animation front, we improved all the mesh combat animations by adding an entirely new animation system and by motion-capturing professional stuntmen who worked on films like Troy to add loads of new animations to the game.

Unfortunately at this stage, The Creative Assembly's duo were dragged off, but rest assured Empire: Total War left us desperate for more.

TVG would like to thank Kieran Brigden and Mark Sutherns from The Creative Assembly, along with SEGA's Stefan McGarry for arranging this opportunity. Empire: Total War is slated for release on February 6th 2009.

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Re: Habrá batallas navales online.

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