

Empire: Total War Exclusive Preview: The Road to Independence

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Empire: Total War Exclusive Preview: The Road to Independence, Multiplayer, and Hands-on Naval Combat

By Jon Miller, GameSpotPosted Dec 1, 2008 5:58 pm PT

We explore every facet of the largest Total War game to date.

In Empire: Total War, your fledgling nation will do battle by land, by sea, and, if you don't want to get your hands dirty, by diplomacy. We've closely followed the progress of this upcoming strategy game over the last few months, and we recently sat down with developer Creative Assembly for new details on the Road to Independence single-player story mode, as well as multiplayer. But first we got our hands on the game's naval combat--the first true real-time naval combat included in a Total War game--and lived to tell you about it.

Creative Assembly's main focus for naval combat, just as with traditional land-based combat, is keeping the action accessible. The Total War series has made a name for itself by featuring massive battlefields teeming with thousands of individual soldiers, but at the same time ensuring that each unit group is easy to control. Though it is possible for large-scale naval battles to include entire armadas of warships for multiple factions, the battle we fought featured the British versus the French, with each faction assigned two frigates and two sloops respectively. On an even playing field such as this, Creative Assembly wanted to ensure that sound use of tactics and the ability to harness the wind would decide a winner.

"The wind plays a huge role in naval battles so it pays to sail with it, rather than attempt to maneuver against it," says Mark Sutherns, associate producer. "Always consider range and effectiveness when selecting shot types to maximize their impact. Always be mindful to keep your own ships out of each other's cone of fire. I've seen many an 'own goal' take place because of a stray cannonball crashing through the deck of a fellow ship! Finally, try and take out the enemy's admiral early to give the fleet a big hit in morale."

A simple heads-up display tells you the direction and strength of the wind as well as the weather. Across the bottom of the screen, you see the unit types available, and as in past Total War games, you can simply click on a unit's icon to select it, and then click on a location to move to it. In addition, you can turn your ship on the fly if you would like to avoid, say, a row of guns bearing down on you. A cone-of-fire icon displays your firing range and radius on both sides of the ship. As for your own firing options, you can choose a standard shot meant to damage the hull; a chain shot aimed to take out the ship's mast, rendering it immobile; and a grapeshot fired across the deck in order to take out the enemy crew. To do maximum damage, you want to maneuver your ship across the bow or stern of your enemy, avoiding his broadside guns while bringing your own guns to bear. It's your responsibility to load the guns on both

sides of your ship, and there is definitely a thrill in unleashing an entire broadside barrage upon your foes. In a particularly heated battle with multiple ships to control, you can assign your guns to fire at will.

Of course, this is all a lot easier said than done, and a sophisticated computer AI will punish you for tactical errors. If you do manage to incapacitate a ship, it may be best to attempt to board and capture it, rather than sink it to the depths of the ocean. The Ottomans were well trained in hand-to-hand combat and are adept at boarding, as is a contingent of British marines. Captured ships are immediately added to your fleet, and you steal any enemy technology on board. Many battles will be won or lost by research and technology.

“A personal favorite is the Rocket Ship,” says Sutherns. “This late technology launches a fiery projectile that, if not contained, can burn out of control on the wooden decks. If the fire reaches the powder keg below deck, it can also trigger a powerful explosion. It is advisable to keep well clear of the flames however, as a strong wind will happily carry the destruction over to a passing vessel.”

Thankfully the French were not armed with such wicked weaponry, but they were victorious nonetheless. Though we were defeated, the point-and-click commands were simple and easy to use, and just as in past Total War games, they allowed us to focus more on tactics, however flawed they may be.

Another new addition to the Total War series is a narrative-driven single-player campaign called The Road to Independence. In it, players will wage war in three different episodes as the Americans, growing from a group of defiant colonies to world power.

“This is a great starting point for newcomers to the series, as it gradually introduces the Total War experience across three compelling chapters,” says Sutherns. “The Road to Independence sees you taking charge of the foundation of Jamestown as the British, all the way through to acting as Washington and removing the evil tyranny of Britain from the United States. It's a mission-based campaign set within a strong narrative structure that gives a brand-new experience to our established players and new initiates alike.”

In the first episode, you play the part of British colonial settlers and establish Jamestown. Hostile tribes of natives are constant threats, as are the lack of resources. The second episode sees you take charge of the British forces in the French Indian War as you attempt to drive the French from the continent. The final episode introduces the American faction as the new country declares independence and breaks free from the rule of the British. New players can use this mode as it introduces tactics, diplomacy, and research, while veterans of the Total War series will appreciate the inclusion of an engaging narrative to follow.

It does remain to be seen, however, if such a campaign will be included in the multiplayer modes of Empire: Total War. Long have fans craved an online multiplayer campaign in addition to historical battle

scenarios and siege games. While Creative Assembly has yet to announce such a mode (if one even exists), the studio has made it clear that it listens to its fans.

“A multiplayer campaign is something that we have considered for each of our Total War games, Empire: Total War included and this would certainly be something that we'd love to introduce so we'll see,” says Sutherns cryptically.

We do know that Empire will include multiplayer naval battles, and that Creative Assembly is utilizing Valve's Steamworks for seamless matchmaking and downloading of new content.

Not that Empire will be short on content. This is the largest Total War to date, with a campaign map that encompasses most of the globe, focusing on North American, European, and Indian theaters of war. Creative Assembly utilized NASA satellite data to create what is says is not only the largest map, but the most detailed.

“From the outset, you will notice that we have moved many of the resources outside of the city walls and onto the map,” says Sutherns. “Farms, ports, villages, mills and universities all have their place and can all fall victim to a rampaging army if you don't leave your city walls to defend them.”

City management, diplomacy, and subterfuge will continue to play their respective roles in Empire. Micromanagers will be able to set tax rates by region and by class. If you play as the American faction, for example, you may wish to raise the taxes on the lower classes in the industrious north, while raising the taxes of the rich plantation owners of the agricultural south. Gentlemen can be placed in universities to further your faction's research or steal research from other factions, says Sutherns. And if an opposing general insults you? Engage in a one-on-one duel of pistols, an excellent way of dispatching important enemy leaders without engaging in all-out war.

From what we played, Empire: Total War looks to be as ambitious as its predecessors, and fans of real-time strategy and empire-building genres will have their hands full when it's released next February. Until then, prepare your bayonet.

<http://www.gamespot.com/pc/strategy/...ops/;thumb;2>

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