Reviews (Games)

Assassin's Creed: Origins [action-adventure video game].

Developer: Ubisoft Montréal. Platforms: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows/PC. Release date: October 27, 2017.

Imagine walking through the wide streets of Alexandria and looking upon its great library, admiring its sheer beauty, and marveling at the splendor of its architecture. This may seem like the kind of fantasy only the most die-hard ancient historians would dream up, but it is a fantasy come to life in the form of the video game *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. Boasting its own fantastical narrative plot, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* immediately became popular among gamers, but soon after its release it also gained the attention of educators. The focus of this review is not the game itself, but the downloadable content, labeled the "Discovery Tour." The game development studio Ubisoft Montréal was the lead developer of this now famous "Discovery Tour," a virtual educational experience that provides gamers and other visitors with footnoted historical documents, data, and lectures about Ptolemaic Egypt. According to Jonathan Ore, an interviewer of CBC News, the game designers drew on the expertise of several historians and Egyptologists, enlisting the help of individuals such as Dr. Evelyne Ferron of the Université de Sherbrooke (Québec, Canada), in order to build the historically accurate foundation of the game's expansion. Both the "Discovery Tour" and the main campaign of the game are set in Egypt in 49-48 BCE, during the reign of Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII (51-47 BCE). Providing educational experiences of this kind in modern games constitutes an untapped market or mode of spreading reliable information, and both can and should be taken advantage of for the purpose of learning about history. Exploring this kind of potential with regard to hands-on learning offers an opportunity to use video games in a setting that has predominantly and repeatedly shunned them altogether, namely, the classroom.

Since the inception of the medium, various video games have shared a common theme: fantastical fiction. Especially prevalent in video games which aim for some sort of historical basis, game development studios tend to take major liberties with history in order to create their own versions of famous or impactful events. Such versions of history are often riddled with inaccuracies; examples are games like *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Wolfenstein* which succumbed to the pop cultural demand to integrate zombies into every game/story, solely to appeal to a larger market of consumers. While this practice is completely understandable (after all, developers work in the business to make money) games like *Assassin's Creed: Origins* offer a twist to the formula. The overall plot places the player in the role of a Medjay (an elite Egyptian law enforcer comparable to a modern sheriff) named Bayek and his wife Aya. Together, these protagonists set out to avenge the death of their son and work to protect the

people of Egypt during the Roman occupation of Egypt and the upheaval of Ptolemy XIII's reign. In the course of the game, Ptolemy struggles to maintain his rule, while his sister, Cleopatra VIII, gathers forces and creates alliances with various Roman leaders in order to launch a coup. Concurrently to these developments, the game also introduces Julius Caesar and his Roman forces as they make frequent incursions into Ptolemy's kingdom, stoking further fears of invasion. Bayek's role as a Medjay brings him and Aya into contact with the members of a fictional secret society who are revealed to be the true culprits, manipulating events from behind the scenes. With a story of this caliber, it is no surprise that the title sold very well and received favorable reviews. Shortly after the initial release of the game, a feature of DLC (downloadable content) titled "Discovery Tour" was added to the game. Offered to players for free, the developers hoped fans of the game and of the series would want to take an interest in the various historical locations and sources which had inspired their new work of art. This free content was also added for Windows as a standalone expansion with only the "Discovery Tour" included for the educational market.

The "Discovery Tour" refers to a new educational gameplay mode which allows the player to roam freely through this recreation of Ancient Egypt in order to learn more about its history and the daily life of its inhabitants. Players are encouraged to embark on guided tours, specifically curated by historians and Egyptologists for educational purposes. This mode disables all of the fantastical or fictional gameplay mechanics of the main story. Side quests, conflicts with enemies, and various other gameplay constraints are removed to avoid possible distractions and inaccuracies. There are a total of seventy-five different guided tours which players can take. These are divided into five major categories: "Ancient Egypt," "The Pyramids," "Alexandria," "Daily Life," and "The Roman Empire." The first of these categories offers general information about Ancient Egypt, ranging from its major political and social regions to the kingdom's geography, major imports and exports, flora, and fauna. The second category focuses on pyramids, both in terms of architectural engineering and their cultural significance. The information provided here ranges from the origins of their design, beginning with the conception of the first step pyramid, and continues with a focus on the great architect Imhotep (late twenty-seventh century BCE). As the category concludes, it shifts its attention to the monuments known today as the Great Pyramids of Giza and their lasting historical significance.

The third category strictly focuses on the city of Alexandria, originally founded by Alexander the Great. The tours in this section discuss its splendor and importance as a commercial hub for the Mediterranean region. During my research into the "Discovery Tour," I found one particular tour within this category to be extremely interesting, namely, a highly detailed virtual tour of the Library of Alexandria. This may sound impossible at first, especially considering that there are currently no known surviving descriptions of the library, but by using primary and secondary sources of similar locations available to them, the

developers at Ubisoft Montréal put an enormous amount of effort into this specific digital creation. In their artistic process, the design team drew inspiration from surviving descriptions of other ancient Roman libraries found in modern-day Turkey. The last several tours in the Alexandria category discuss the importance of the famous Hippodrome, derived from the Greek words *hippos* ("horse") and *dromos* ("course"). Both horse racing and charioteer competitions occurred here, and the tour dedicated to the Hippodrome specifically describes the social function of the facility. Alexandrians were highly devoted to these event. They were fascinated by the rivalry of these races, much in the same way modern sports fans are obsessed with their favorite sports teams.

The fourth category of the "Discovery Tour" gives an overview of daily life in Roman-occupied Egypt. Ranging from discussions about the traditions, diets, and daily routines of this society, from common people via Roman sentries to Roman and Egyptian elites, this category is by far the most extensive one in terms of concepts, discussions, and sources. The importance of mummification is explored, along with other religious rituals. Tours are available for those who want to learn about the basic agricultural food production techniques of the era. There is also information about medicinal salves and solutions, along with debates on the cultural lines between science and religion.

The final category details the influence of the Roman Empire through its occupation of Egypt. The initial tours explore the various military equipment and strategies used by the Roman legions, including descriptive accounts of weaponry and the construction of fortifications. Other guides explain the importance of aqueducts, and how the Romans took water management seriously. The Romans brought this beneficial knowledge with them to Egypt to bring fresh water into the cities for drinking/bathing and watering their crops.

The "Discovery Tour" is uniquely useful to historians and history teachers alike. *Assassin's Creed* has been a teaching tool ever since its first game. Ubisoft's historian Maxime Durand said: "[W]e also had a lot of testimonies from teachers, from professors, asking, 'Would you consider making a version of AC [i.e., *Assassin's Creed*] without conflict, without narrative?" Prior to the "Discovery Tour," many history teachers conducted recording sessions with their own consoles or attempted to bring the game into the classroom, but due to age ratings, they legally could not show the material without consent forms.

The developers and Ubisoft Montréal have stated time and time again that their motto, when it comes to their *Assassin's Creed* franchise, is "making history everyone's playground." Ubisoft is one of many studios at the forefront of a movement that revolutionized the way we view video games from an educational standpoint. The "Discovery Tour" is a well of knowledge that many historians can draw from in order to teach the next generation with a medium that is familiar to them. This may be the first of its kind, but who is to say that other studios will not find inspiration from the "Discovery Tour" and create their own virtual tours? The "Discovery Tour" of *Assassin's Creed: Origins* is

recommended for all those who are excited to explore their passion for ancient history in a (still relatively) new and exciting medium.

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Battlefield 1 [first-person shooter video game].

> Developer: EA DICE. Platforms: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows/PC. Release date: October 21, 2016.

When *Battlefield 1* was first announced, many modern military historians and gamers were both excited and skeptical. Finally, there was going to be a game reproducing the Great War, the "war to end all wars," a war that has become engrained in our psyches since high school when we read Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928). Given the challenges that World War I presents to a video game design team, EA Dice endeavored to encapsulate the feelings of soldiers fighting in the trenches, while also telling the lesser-known stories of soldiers in various roles around the world.

Creating a marketable console and PC game in the competitive first-person shooter genre is no small task. Given the dozens of games already created about World War II, the creators at EA Dice sought to fill a void in the video game market while releasing the game to commemorate the centenary of the Great War. The game has two major components: the single-player campaign mode called "War Stories," which consists of five chapters and follows the narrative of five soldiers in different theaters and roles in the war, and the multiplayer mode, which has various modes and maps throughout Europe and the Middle East. The developers have managed to stretch the narrative that World War I was a war of limited movement to make for an exciting first-person shooter scenario, while still upholding the war's grim realities and senseless losses.

The game tutorial opens with the war that everyone knows, the Western Front. The player is thrust into the middle of an enemy counter-attack as a member of the all-black 369th Infantry Regiment, the Harlem Hellfighters. The cinematic opening briefly introduces the details of the war and that it "ended nothing," and closes with the words, "You are not expected to survive." In a daze, you pick up your Hotchkiss M1914 machine gun, rush to the men in front of you, and are told to "hold the line." The enemy keeps pouring out of shell holes and from around trees and bombed-out buildings. After fending off as many soldiers as you can, you have expended the last of your ammunition and draw your handgun. Soon that, too, is out, and you are searching the ground for weapons and using your trench tool to whack at enemies as they approach. After a valiant effort, a soldier with a flamethrower appears, and you go down, the first of several casualties in a war that ended nothing. It would be a pretty boring game if it ended there, so you are transported further back in the line to keep up

the fight, but after each attempt, you are eventually overrun. A grim introduction to a devastating war.

The single-player campaign is dynamic, but relatively short-lived. Each of the five chapters takes about thirty minutes to complete, which is long enough to learn about the war, but not long enough to warrant purchasing the game solely for its single-player mode. While the *Battlefield* series has been criticized for its lack of attention to detail in single-player modes in the past, *Battlefield 1* delivers a cinematic and enjoyable, albeit short, introduction to the mechanics of the game. The first story follows a young tank driver who must battle mud, fallen trees, bombed-out buildings, artillery pieces, and other tanks to introduce the game's "capture-the-flag" objectives and the power of armor in this new, mechanized warfare. This first campaign was a bit of a letdown as it was quite glitchy, and the "capture-the-flag" aspect distracted from the historical realism. In similar games, objectives may be highlighted but usually involve destroying particular units, reaching waypoints, or simply surviving. But this first chapter felt a little too much like a game and was quite a departure from the dramatic realism of the tutorial that preceded it.

The next campaign puts you high above the action in a Bristol Scout plane as a pilot defending ground troops and shooting fighters, bombers, and balloons out of the sky. While defending the skies, the plane goes down, and you are once again thrust into the action in the trenches of the Western Front. Sneaking behind enemy lines and across No Man's Land is no easy feat, but seeing the barbed wire, mud, and bodies really adds to the realism. The final chapter requires that you defend the city of London from Zeppelins and leads to a dramatic *Mission Impossible*-like scenario where you must exit your plane, destroy a Zeppelin, and leap to safety. This Hollywood-style scenario is not the most historically relevant, but it provides a much more cinematic experience.

The third campaign is set high in the Italian Alps as you take on the role of Luca, a member of the Italian special forces unit, the Arditi ("The Daring Ones"), who is searching for his missing brother behind Austro-Hungarian lines. This is one of the more controversial chapters of the *Battlefield 1* campaign, as there are some doubts as to the historical realism of the Arditi as they are portrayed in the game. The Arditi acted as shock troops who specialized in working behind enemy lines. In the game, they are depicted wearing steel armor and "Farina" helmets (which resemble a mix between the rebel helmets in *Return of the Jedi* and those of a medieval knights) to charge the enemy lines under cover of artillery to surprise the enemy in their bunkers. While this shock tactic was certainly used (as supported by historical evidence), there is little to support the prevalence of this on a large scale, leading many to wonder why this is even included in the game. What this chapter does well, though, is illustrate the effect the war had on families and to remind the player that these countless soldiers were human beings with hopes and dreams.

The fourth chapter takes place in the Ottoman Gallipoli campaign as you follow an Australian veteran soldier and a young recruit. The veteran is reluctant to protect his green comrade, and the young recruit is eager to prove himself. The campaign itself is visually stunning as you begin the mission bombarding the beachheads from a battleship, only to storm the beach on makeshift ramps with artillery exploding all around and the deafening sounds of screaming, resembling Omaha Beach in *Saving Private Ryan*. Once the beach is secure, the young recruit acts as a runner relaying information across the chaotic battlefield. This sounds like Mel Gibson in *Gallipoli* and is, indeed, highly derivative of that film. While the story is not necessarily new, the action is adrenaline-pumping.

The final campaign in the single-player mode follows a Lawrence of Arabia-type Bedouin fighter who must infiltrate Ottoman strongholds in the deserts of Arabia. Again, while it is not the most inventive storyline, the stealth aspect of the missions and trying to avoid detection adds an additional layer of excitement to the game that culminates in the destruction of a massive artillery train. As a standalone component of the game, the single-player mode leaves much to be desired. While the five chapters do an excellent job of introducing you to each aspect of the game (infantry combat, armored warfare, dogfighting, special units, and how to utilize stealth) the single-player campaign seems to act as an extended tutorial to prepare players for the multi-player mode.

The real strength of *Battlefield 1* and the reason it is receiving much of its acclaim is because of its multiplayer mode. The developers did an excellent job of turning older weapons and technology into a fast-paced and exciting first-person shooter. The multiplayer game consists of thousands of weapons and different character loadouts that can be utilized in six modes: "Conquest," "Rush," "War Pigeons," "Team Deathmatch," "Domination," and "Operations." Each mode is just a variation of the "capture-the-flag" theme, but with unique objectives. The most popular, and a traditional feature of the *Battlefield* series, is "Conquest." Two teams capture flags with the goal of controlling the map to reach a certain number of points. "Rush" is basically "capture-the-flag" but with an emphasis on staying alive while taking objectives in sequence. "War Pigeons" is like "capture-the-flag," but once a pigeon is captured, it is released to a new area of the map and summons a massive artillery barrage that is difficult to evade. "Team Deathmatch" is similar to "Conquest," but without any flags to capture; the goal is simply to eliminate the enemy. "Domination" is also similar to "Conquest," but on a much smaller scale, which makes the battles more intense and faster-paced. The most realistic of the multiplayer modes is "Operations." It is a combination of "Rush" and "Conquest," but only the attackers have to worry about deaths as they only get three battalions worth of respawns. If the defenders kill enough of the enemy without giving up all of their objectives, then they win. If the attackers take all the objectives without losing too many troops, they win. What is fun about *Battlefield* games is that there are vehicles, airplanes, special units, Zeppelins, artillery trains, and even horses, that can help you

achieve victory. This leads to a chaotic battlefield and is much more unique than your typical first-person shooter title. All the game modes are exciting, and as you are playing other people, each battle is new and unique.

Overall, taking a game about World War I and turning it into a revolutionary new first-person shooter is no easy task. The attention to detail with regard to weapons, uniforms, game maps, and historical battles is impressive. The game is constantly coming out with new downloadable content and new levels, so it would be nice to see some more single-player stories in the future. For example, a recent update to the game provided a series of "Operations" maps based on the Russian Revolution, which was a welcome addition, but there was no update to the single-player campaign. While the game developers sought to tell untold stories in the campaigns, it was entirely Triple Entente (Allied Forces)-focused, perpetuating the narrative that the victors were the "good guys" and the Central Powers were the "bad guys." If the goal of the game is to promote a diversity of perspectives about the Great War, it would be nice to see more missions from both sides of the conflict. This game is of interest to fans of first-person shooting games, but also to military historians or fans of the Great War who want to experience a simulation of the action. While this game may be played largely by adolescents, I would exercise caution as this is a violent first-person shooter with graphic battle scenes. However, it can also be a good gateway into studying history, as the game is very instructional, and all the cinematic scenes and wait screens employ the downtime to teach about different aspects of the war, often using stories told by voice actors based on World War I letters and memoirs. While the game could never fully replicate the horrific artillery barrages, days spent hunkered down in bunkers, or the massive infantry assaults across No Man's Land to almost certain death, *Battlefield 1* does a great job of making an important historical event accessible to the modern gamer, which is a feat that is not easily attainable.

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Buchel, Alex. SAGA: Core Rulebook [miniatures wargaming manual].

> Translated by Matt Morgan (Lingolsheim, France: Studio Tomahawk SARL, 2018). 52 pages. ISBN: 9791095599050.

Since the 1980s, the market for board and miniatures gaming has entered into what many call a "golden age" for board game producers and consumers. With formative games such as *Chainmail*, which motivated the creation of genre-defining juggernauts such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, as well as the influential and often controversial *Games Workshop*, the gaming industry has been on a near-

constant uptick in game production and consumption. The tabletop game industry and the miniatures hobby have come a long way since H. G. Wells wrote his miniatures wargaming rule set *Little Wars* (1913). The modern gamer has the ability to choose from games with rule sets inspired by nearly all time periods and geographical areas, with various levels of realism and scale to the battle. In 2018, a small French game company produced the second edition of its medieval rule set *SAGA*. Initially, in 2011, a quiet release by indie board game publisher Studio Tomahawk, the game was now a public affair drawing international attention within the gaming culture. Players were eager to once again dive into the game's mixture of legendary heroes standing alongside historical rulers in pitched battle. As the title implies, the game frames players participating in events within their army leaders' ever-expanding narrative, writing their deeds and glories through the clashes between opponents on the table top. *SAGA* and its rules supplements provide an easy entry into tabletop wargaming that would interest both historians and those wanting to try "what-if" battles of historical figures, both the culturally formative and the mythopoetic.

Miniatures wargames are simulated battle scenarios played between two or more players using miniatures representing the fighters on the battlefield. The size of these board games varies greatly. Some games use abstractions to represent soldiers, where one miniature could represent dozens or hundreds of troops. Others abstain from such abstraction and have each model represent a single participant in the battle. *SAGA* uses relatively small armies of a few dozen models, each representing a single person: the army's warlord and proxy for the player on the table top, the leader's veteran hearthguard, highly trained warriors, or conscripted levies. During games, players take turns maneuvering their units of warriors around the battlefield and engage in skirmishes, using dice to determine the outcome of these clashes. Each model and unit on the board is given pre-determined statistics to represent their combat capabilities. To assess whether a model succeeds or fails at a task, such as whether an archer's arrow manages to find its target, dice are rolled and compared to the model's statistics. The more difficult a task or the less trained the individual completing the task, the higher the number the dice will need to show in order for the model to succeed. For example, a veteran archer might only need a three or higher to succeed, but an untrained levy might need a five or even a six. Unlike a board game, a miniatures wargame uses rulers or other measuring devices to determine a model or unit's movements, which allows players a great degree of control over their troops. The elements simulating battle are only one aspect of the hobby. Players may use objects fashioned in the shape of physical features such as trees, rocks, or farmhouses to represent terrain and provide a three-dimensional element to the battlefield. Much of the interest and satisfaction for many gamers is to model and create a beautiful battlefield with fully painted armies. This celebrates their artistic abilities as much as their strategic skills.

SAGA provides an excellent starting point for individuals interested in beginning or even just trying miniatures or historical war games. The soft-cover book contains just 50 pages, including the glossary and other supplemental material. Printed in full color, the rules offer many color-coded examples to help new players understand the concepts. In addition, for those interested in the modeling part of the hobby, the book also includes numerous pictures of fully-painted and beautifully detailed miniatures to inspire hobbyists. Viking raiders and Norman crusaders gaze out to meet the players' eyes or to survey the field of battle before a charge. However, these options miss an opportunity, one which many more miniatures gaming rulebooks should embrace, namely, a center-fold depicting two armies clashing on a table top. Not only would this show readers the spectacle of a fully painted army and modeled terrain, but it could provide a benchmark as to what the creators intended for the players' full experience of the game. Even with this slight oversight, the game introduces readers to the key concepts of not just the game but also the greater sphere of the modeling hobby.

Studio Tomahawk had stressed simplicity with *SAGA*'s first edition. While the second edition does make the game more complicated to mitigate uncertainty, this was needed as the rules now eschew the ambiguous wording that competitive players had been able to abuse to the detriment of the game. While the basics of the game are easily understood and learned, there are subtleties that require a half-dozen games or more to be fully grasped. However, the rulebook sometimes boasts the simplicity of its rules. Alex Buchel writes with almost a self-congratulatory tone: "We must admit that we are quite proud of having created a game where an army list can be written on a beer mat or a bar receipt." (45). While it is greatly appreciated that this comes after Buchel has stressed the game creator's focus of *SAGA* on socializing and simplicity, allowing more time to focus on being with friends, this boast rings a bit hollow.

This is no longer the first edition of only four model types (warlord, hearthguard, warrior, and levy). Now, army composition allows many more exceptions or changes based on differences between factions. For example, Vikings are allowed to change a unit of hearthguard into berserkers who sacrifice defensive capabilities for pure aggression. However, if Harald Hardrada (commander of the Varangian Guard before becoming king of Norway and claimant to the English throne before his death at the 1066 Battle of Stamford Bridge) leads a Viking army, he may change a unit into the defensive and heavily-armored Varangians. Yet, still, if Harald Hardrada leads a Byzantine army (called "The Last Romans" in "The Viking Age" rules supplement) the entire force must be comprised of Varangians. To make matters more complicated, the Viking Varangians and the Byzantine Varangians differ in their defensive capabilities, with the latter having lighter armor. These complexities usually only matter when one is looking at the game in its entirety, which most will not do. Many instead may choose to focus on one or two factions, learning the subtleties and intricacies of one faction before moving on to another. *SAGA*

must be given credit for the relative simplicity of their game. At its 2011 release, it was trend-setting. Since its initial publication, there has been a move toward simplicity in games and a paring down of rules. *SAGA* was at the forefront of that trend. In the seven years since its publication, larger publishers have taken notice and followed this trend. In 2015, the hobby giant *Games Workshop* whittled their *Warhammer* rulebook from hundreds of pages down to just four. While weathering much controversy in this choice, they made a similar move in 2017 with their more rules-dense game *Warhammer 40,000* to a mere 15 pages with much positive criticism. *SAGA* proved to be years ahead of the current trend.

SAGA occupies an interesting space within the miniatures gaming community. The game is not purely historical, nor is it purely fantasy. The game creator has attempted to give each historical faction an aesthetic impression based on their historical and cultural history. For example, Vikings have an aggressive playstyle, with their ability to use the suicidal berserkers and reliance on abilities that give the faction melee bonuses. This reflects the popular and not entirely inaccurate view of Vikings as aggressive raiders and pirates. Meanwhile, the Carolingians rely on their cavalry, and their abilities focus on lending their horseback units extra speed or combat ability almost to the exclusion of infantry. While not entirely historically accurate, these choices reflect and emphasize the cultural value of the units involved. Through this emphasis, the factions give the feeling of the historical culture they represent without the hindrance of over-reliance on minutiae.

This reflection may veer almost to stereotype in places, but the temporal, spatial, and cultural area *SAGA* covers allows for a certain level of extraction. The game pulls from literary sources to influence the feeling of playing a faction, inspiring the creation of the rules based on the values and themes of that culture's writing. Pulled from the lines of his *Chanson*, players may have Roland, Count of the Breton Marches, lead their Carolingian forces. Should Roland be dispatched by opposing forces, he sounds his *olifant* to summon reinforcements. Jarl Sigvaldi of Jomsburg (the leader of the semi-legendary Viking city of Jomsborg, whose inhabitants were known as vicious mercenaries) could join the player's faction as a sell-sword. The game brings a deep level of customization to players' medieval battles. There are even rules for non-standard battles, should players decide to recreate some historical struggles. These include rules in the supplements "The Age of Vikings" and "The Age of Crusades" for Steppe tribes, Umayyads, Lombards, Cathars, Cilician Armenians, and Mutatawwi'a, among others. In addition, players can choose from any company's range of models for their army and are not required to purchase the miniatures from a single publisher in order to participate in tournaments, which other miniatures games often demand. This large faction choice and the game's model agnostic method of army creation allow for a high degree of customization, as the game supports different tolerances of historical accuracy.

SAGA provides an easily understood, inexpensive entry into the previously niche culture of tabletop wargaming. It yields an interesting mixture of the historical with the mythopoetic without venturing too far into either camp to the point of alienating interested parties. I suggest the game to those interested in historical fiction, those who want to settle a "what-if" argument (such as, whether Roland's Carolingians could defeat Harald Hardrada's Varangian Guard), and those interested in trying a historical tabletop game. I would also recommend the game to teachers who want to supplement their instruction on the medieval period through visual and kinesthetic exercises. However, I offer a caveat that the game's use as a teaching tool would require forethought on the part of the instructor, active participation from mature students, and a significant contribution of time for painting and set-up from both instructor and students.

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Call of Duty: WWII [first-person shooter video game].

> Developer: Sledgehammer Games. Platforms: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows/PC. Release date: November 3, 2017.

In October 2003, Activision published the first *Call of Duty* game, and players were given the opportunity to storm the beaches of Normandy for the first time on console and have their first experience with the 101st Airborne Division and the 1st Infantry Division, commonly nicknamed "The Big Red One." This marked the beginning of one of the most storied and successful franchises in video game history, with its name ringing familiar worldwide. In the decade since then, Activision has moved the *Call of Duty* universe to the present-day Middle East and to futuristic explorations, but their latest entry brings the series back to its roots. Teaming up with development studio Sledgehammer Games, the aptly-titled *Call of Duty: WWII* brings players back into the heat of the action of the western theater of the war. This review considers the historical accuracy of the plot and gameplay, as well as the suitability of this game for educators when teaching the subject matter to students.

Call of Duty: WWII's opening mission starts off with a bang, having the player command Private Ronald "Red" Daniels of the "Big Red One" 1st Infantry Division on D-Day, (June 6, 1944). In a *Saving Private Ryan*-esque Omaha Beach scenario, Daniels helps lead the charge off the beach and to the fighting on the cliffs and trenches of the German defense stations. Of note to educators is the vivid detail of the battle in the storming of the beach, the remarks of the soldiers

that they are "lost" from their original landing zones (a common occurrence on Omaha Beach) and that the DD tanks are unable to make their way to shore, which explains their lack of tanks. Successful in their landing, Daniels and the rest of the squad begin to liberate France. In between battle missions and cutscenes, players witness how soldiers and officers in the war lived, talked, ate, and grew close to each other, giving them a sense of the camaraderie that the soldiers experienced, such as the group's agreement that everyone's favorite German was the actress Marlene Dietrich. Daniels and the "Big Red One" then take part in "Operation Cobra" and are tasked with securing the town of Marigny. Once this is accomplished, they team up with British and French Resistance forces to prevent V-2 rockets that are being transferred by armored train from being used against the Allied Forces' upcoming liberation of Paris. Educators will recognize that the British in the game correctly identify the V-2 as the world's first functional guided missile, but due to its extreme height and weight it had to be transported by rail. The player then takes part in gathering intelligence for the liberation of Paris and assumes the role of a female French Resistance fighter, Camille "Rousseau" Denis, going undercover as a French aide to steal German military documents and assassinate a high-ranking general. Having successfully completed her objectives, she brings the documents to Daniels and the group, and the Americans and the Resistance forces liberate Paris to throngs of cheering crowds. This mission is beneficial to educators in that its opening scene has the French Resistance meeting in an underground room beneath a bar, showing the Resistance's reliance on secret meeting locations, and Rousseau's "cover" reflects the levels of French collaboration with the occupying Germans.

The campaign then shifts from the action in France to the early battles in western Germany. The "Big Red One" fights its way through the city of Aachen and the Hürtgen Forest. In Aachen, Daniels and the player witness the ugly side of war, as the once beautiful city lies in ruins, and the player takes part in violent house-to-house fighting. A particular moving moment in this mission is when the player must rescue and escort two German sisters from a hotel basement to a rallying center for civilians, but as the player helps the older sister climb onto the waiting truck, German soldiers suddenly appear, and a firefight begins, and in the chaos the older sister is killed in front of the player and her sister, illustrating the cruel realities of war. The Hürtgen Forest mission takes place soon after and quickly becomes a bloodbath, as the "Big Red One" cannot overcome the German defenses, and the player has to witness two of their squad members and their lieutenant being killed in battle. Following this, the "Big Red One" is in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge (December 16, 1944, to January 25, 1945) and must defend their positions against advancing German armored and infantry advancements, and then press forward to attempt to quell the heavy artillery fire on their position. During this process, the team learns that the Germans plan to destroy the Ludendorff Bridge in Remagen should the offensive fail, and the

team attempts to stop the explosives from being delivered in order to protect the bridge. While successful, Private Robert Zussman, the squad's only Jewish soldier, is captured and sent to a notorious POW camp.

Here, the game shifts toward a heavier, more presentation-like mode. With its defeat imminent, most of the German Army rushes west to surrender to the Allies, so there is a lack of combat gameplay. However, as the Allies push east, they discover the horrors of the Holocaust and the mistreatment of POWs, and the squad decides to find Zussman at all costs since they see what the Nazis will do if they find out he is a Jew. The game cuts back to photographs of prisoners held in various concentration camps in horrible conditions, and it shows a cutscene of SS Commandant Metz (a reference to the real-life Erwin Metz) at Stalag IX-B executing prisoners and singling out those to be sent to forced labor camps, among them Zussman who is shown as being horded into the cattle rail cars. The game then starts back to the last camp of which the team has knowledge, Berga Camp. The player, encountering no enemies, walks through the camp, takes in the barbed-wire pens, prisoner quarters, shoe pile, work stones, prison gallows, guard-dog pens, and machine gun towers. Seeing that the prisoners have recently been moved from the camp, the squad moves out and rescues the prisoners from a death march, and Daniels frees Zussman from Metz, shooting and killing the latter. Zussman and Daniels embrace, and Daniels is then shown with his wife and child back home in America, promising to never forget his squad mates. Educators will respect this final mission as a mature and detailed look into the horrors of the Holocaust in relation to the living and working conditions of the camps.

Unspecific to any particular level or mission, the campaign has some strong historical accuracies. Weapons, uniforms, language, scenery battle tactics and flow, and sounds are spot-on, a personal favorite being the familiar CLING of the M1 Garand. Grenades and explosions will knock the player down, and wiping mud from one's face gives a sense of real-life combat. Unlike previous titles, the player must receive help from fellow squad mates to attain healing, replenish ammunition, and call for air support, adding to the reality. However, *Call of Duty: WWII* still has its inaccuracies, such as portraying black U.S. soldiers fighting on par with white soldiers, even though the Armed Forces were officially segregated at the time, and the developers' choice of omitting the swastika symbol completely (save for a few brief scenes in the Paris mission). While it is understandable that they would wish to exclude images of a vile symbol and racial discrimination, historians will recognize the absurdity of replacing the swastika with the German military cross or a simple red flag being draped across occupied France or Germany. Also, despite being called *Call of Duty: WWII*, the game omits completely any scenes or dialogues from the Eastern Front or the Pacific Theater, with Japan and the Soviet Union not even being mentioned in the game. It puts British characters into small-level support roles,

and it contains over-the-top action scenes such as taking out an entire armored train with two army jeeps, or neutralizing an entire enemy squad with a pistol.

Call of Duty: WWII's multiplayer mode is an enjoyable and fairly accurate experience. The player is able to choose a "Division" character of "Infantry," "Airborne," "Armored," "Mountain, or "Expeditionary," with each class having different strengths and weaknesses as different types of soldiers in the war would. For example, "Infantry" allows one to add more attachments to one's weapons, as infantry would get into firefights more often. "Mountain" allows one to remain undetected by the enemy, much in a way a sniper would. And "Airborne" allows one to move more quickly. Iconic weapons from the war are featured, such as the STG-44, PPSh-41, MG-42, M1 Garand, Luger pistol, and the Thompson "Tommy" submachine gun. Maps are based on real-life battle sites such as Pointe-du-Hoc, the Ardennes Forest, Aachen, Paris, Czechoslovakia, and aboard a U.S. destroyer, as well as places imagined as battle sites such as the docks of London during a German invasion or battling near the Great Pyramids and Sphinx in North Africa. Scorestreaks, or special attacks earned if players garner certain scores in their life, include calling in artillery strikes, mortars, the ability to wield a flamethrower, and the ability to call in an airstrike on a specific location. The new mode introduced in the game, "War Operations," is a team-based objective mode in which players are randomly assigned to the "Allied" or "Axis" side and must work was a team to accomplish their objective, such as stopping the enemy's tank from advancing or blowing up the enemy's communication equipment. This mode highlights the need for teamwork and communication, as one person alone cannot overwhelm the enemy team and do it all without help. Some criticism of the multiplayer mode includes the lack of a "battle royale" mode that has become increasingly common in first-person shooter games over the past few years, the lack of attachments that were previously available in other *Call of Duty* games, the lack of map and weapon count at the launch of the game (there has been more added on to date), and the number of glitches that plagued the game in its first few weeks after launch. Despite these criticisms, the mode remains enjoyable for the player community as there is much to appreciate, and it provides an accurate look at battle scenes and loadout in the war.

Call of Duty: WWII is a good game to add to the collection for gamers and historians alike. The great story and strong multiplayer (of the most important and extraordinary events in the history of World War II) earns an enthusiastic recommendation. In comparison to the many first-person war shooters, such as *Battlefield*, *Rainbow Six*, and *Counterstrike*, *Call of Duty: WWII* is the only one to include both a large, polished campaign mode (explaining and exploring its game setting) and a large and interactive multiplayer mode that suits the common player, with *Battlefield* hosting its iconic 100-person mass lobby and *Rainbow Six* and *Counterstrike* being made up of only small, more professional teams. In addition to its obvious entertainment value, *Call of Duty: WWII* can also

be used by educators to help illustrate and better connect with modern students' use of and experience with this and similar games to help show events such as battles, soldiers, human suffering, and the equipment and vehicles in action in a way that cannot be done in a classroom reading text or by looking at a still photograph. While this reviewer realizes that games such as these still have a few years to go before becoming accepted use in many classrooms, educators should be eagerly awaiting their arrival. Younger generations are increasingly using technology for all aspects of their lives, and their devices are only getting more sophisticated. Growing advances in the abilities of consoles, mobile devices, and platforms, and virtual-reality capabilities are leading to a growing expansion of gaming and viewing, and these platforms will undoubtedly make their way into education as well. For the educators that are looking for a leading point into this future, *Call of Duty: WWII* is a fantastic place to start.

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Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia [strategy video game].

> Developer: Creative Assembly. Platforms: Microsoft Windows, Linux, Macintosh operating systems. Release date: May 3-June 7, 2018.

The year is 878 CE, the sons of Ragnar Lodbrok and the Great Heathen Army have been halted by Alfred the Great, and the Viking raiders settle into the north and east of England with no signs of heading home. This critical period in British history is the backdrop for the latest installment in the *Total War* series, *Total War Saga: Thrones of Britannia*. Warring English kings vie for control of the island, new Norsemen arrive to carve out their own settlements, and, as the game's opening states cinematically: "Kings will rise. One will Rule."

Creative Assembly has developed a long list of strategic games in its *Total War* series, but this is the first installment in what they are calling the *Saga* series. While previous titles have focused on large geographic areas covering most of Europe and North Africa, the *Saga* series promises a more focused look at specific locations during particular crisis points in the history of a respective region. With the buzz surrounding shows like History's *Vikings*, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, and Netflix's *The Last Kingdom*, it is no surprise that ninth-century England was the choice for their newest game. Critics of previous titles, such as *Rome II: Total War* and *Medieval II: Total War*, have lambasted the lack of attention paid to the British Isles, so this title has in many ways been a long time coming.

Developers of the *Total War* series pay a great deal of attention to historical accuracy with the goal of replicating the economic, political, religious, and military aspects of whatever time period they are trying to recreate. *Thrones of Britannia* stays true to that goal, probably more so than previous titles, often as a detriment to the playability of the game itself. According to the developer blog, the creators utilized a variety of available primary sources, namely, the *Anglo-*

Saxon Chronicle for England, the *Annales Cambriae* for Wales, and the *Annals of Ulster* and others for Ireland. The developers also acknowledge the lack of period sources for northern England and Scotland, and they therefore turned to Dr. Neil McGuigan (University of St. Andrews) for help to create the most accurate historical depiction they could. They also wrote a downloadable book for early adopters that contains excerpts of the chronicles and historical research on the ten playable factions.

The campaign map is a detailed recreation of the British Isles with stunning graphics that bests most other *Total War* titles. Zooming in on this particular point in time allowed the developers to add a layer of historical authenticity that was not as feasible in previous games which spanned much larger geographical areas and much more extensive time frames. The developers created ten playable factions and a multitude of other non-playable factions based on historical sources. They even decided to name the cities, towns, and factions based on what they believed would have been their chosen names at the time and not based on modern conventions. For example, Wessex is Westseaxe, Northumbria is Northymbre, and so forth. While most of the regions are accurate, the developers do acknowledge that some regions had to be tweaked and some factions invented in order to make all the factions have a balanced early game.

The game consists of two parts, namely, the campaign map and the real-time battle map. It is based on a series of moves that the player makes on the campaign map during a specified turn, with each turn representing one season, or a quarter of a year. The player can make economic decisions like raising or lowering taxes, diplomatic decisions like declaring war or making alliances, military decisions like raising or moving an army or attacking enemies, and settlement decisions like upgrading buildings or technologies. When players have finished, they can end the turn and wait for the computer "players" (AI) to make their moves. When a player engages an enemy, the clashing forces zoom in to reveal the real-time battle map, where the player becomes the general and controls military forces to exploit an enemy's weaknesses and emerge victorious, or sometimes be routed with the rest of the player's forces.

What separates *Thrones of Britannia* from other games is the simplified gameplay and focus on events and game mechanics that are unique to each playable faction. With previous *Total War* titles, the player had to broker trade deals, establish building chains to allow for new units or technologies, and use agents like priests and assassins to influence political outcomes. *Thrones of Britannia* has simplified all of that by making trade automatic, having unit types and a technology research tree based on certain objectives, and replacing agents with "followers" who can be added to each of one's nobles as they earn more accomplishments on the campaign map or on the battlefield. Having so many things going on in the background speeds up the gameplay significantly, but it can also leave the player feeling somewhat out of control of his or her kingdom. Each of the five cultures (Anglo-Saxons, Gaels, Welsh, Great Viking Army, and

Viking Sea Kings) and all ten factions have unique modifiers, events, and units that affect their gameplay, which ensures that no two campaigns are the same.

Campaigns all begin with a similar goal: crush the rebellion in your kingdom and then proceed to reach certain victory conditions, like conquering all of Britain or achieving fame. As a seasoned *Total War* player, my first impression playing Westseaxe was that this was not all that different from previous titles. I took Alfred the Great and his army to crush the rebels, using my usual tactic of pinning down infantry with my archers, engaging with my infantry, and using my cavalry to flank the enemy and crash into their rear, which caused the enemy to panic and disperse. The battle was over. With the confidence of a quick victory under my belt, I proceeded to make a few diplomatic alliances, and after a few hours I had managed to defeat the Viking invaders and conquer most of Britain. The early game was the most exciting, as each turn was uncertain, but as I gained more land and made more money through taxes, I had little difficulty in the middle and late game. I was a little disappointed.

So, I decided to play a Gaelic faction, Circenn, in Scotland. The game started out much the same way as with Westseaxe until I made a few wrong moves. First, I made a military alliance which dragged me into a war with three different factions. Soon after, I realized I had been neglecting my nobles by not giving them estates from the land I was conquering, which meant that I had two of my generals split my army and plunge my territories into rebellion. After finally quelling the rebellion, King Áed was assassinated, leaving me with a sixteen-year-old heir that none of my nobles respected. Soon my little faction was in open civil war. In almost the same amount of time it had taken me to conquer most of Britain as Westseaxe, I was defeated by infighting and ungrateful nobles in Circenn.

While I have played five or six campaigns since and am still impressed by the unique experiences and replayability of the game, there are some elements of the game that are repetitive or detract from the player's experience. The adherence to historical authenticity may have some critics praising the game's mechanics, while others may abhor the departures that *Thrones of Britannia* takes from other games in the series. One of the key changes is with unit recruitment. Generals can recruit units only when they are within a walled town or settlement, and it takes multiple turns for the unit to muster to full strength. This means that if one is attacked, there is no way to quickly raise a force in defense. In past titles, units took a turn or two to be created but would start at full strength, and generals who had the money could also hire mercenaries for a quick boost to troop strength. Another realistic modification that is controversial is the addition of food upkeep for recruiting units. Units and buildings require a certain amount of food, and when one falls below that amount, units suffer attrition. This makes farms a strategic target when attacking enemies who are stronger. This brings me to the third issue, which is that the enemy will relentlessly sack your villages while never actually besieging your towns or fighting a pitched battle. While this

is historically sound, it can be obnoxious to chase an enemy around the map when you are one or two turns behind them retaking each village that they raid.

In addition to the single-player campaign, players can also chose to do quick battles against AI, multiplayer battles, and multiplayer campaigns, which is new to the series. Quick battles allow the player to experience the different unit types and to play around with different unit match-ups. One highlight of the real-time battles are the modifiers and detractors that each unit has. Spearmen get a bonus fighting cavalry, infantry can form a shield wall against archers, archers can spook cavalry by using flaming arrows, and so forth. Knowing how to take advantage of these weaknesses is essential. Players can also compete online against each other in battles or with each other in campaign mode, but apparently *Thrones of Britannia* players are introverts because the servers are almost always void of anyone, which has not allowed me to try out the new campaign feature.

The game certainly has some bugs to be worked out as it is still relatively young in the constantly updating modern game world. It has so far undergone one significant update and is just now starting to release downloadable content. *Total War* also has a history of opening up its content for programmers to modify, improve, or tweak as they see fit, so I imagine a lot of the kinks will be worked out in the coming months. While some critics of the game may cite its departure from previous games in the series as a weakness, I argue that its departure is actually what makes this game so great. The lack of unit diversity, the dependence on food, and the constant sacking of villages are changes that make *Thrones of Britannia* all the more realistic. While this game might not have many applications outside of pure entertainment, the historical nature of the gameplay provides an interactive learning environment that encourages teens or young adults to investigate ninth-century English history and could be a starting point for those interested in experiencing a simulation of medieval life and warfare. Instructors interested in recreating battles for a lesson on military history could require students to play a "Quick Battle" or screencast themselves playing through a historical battle to demonstrate tactics or strategy. Anyone interested in military history, the Vikings, ninth-century England, or grand strategy games should think about giving *Thrones of Britannia* a try.

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