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Empire: Total War Updated Impressions - Diplomacy, Strategy, and Massive Land Battles

By Jon Miller, GameSpotPosted Oct 27, 2008 6:23 pm PT

Your free time is about to become a casualty of Total War.

At its height, the British Empire was the largest empire in history, spanning six continents and encompassing about one quarter of the world's population. Britain's ascension as the first true global power was a direct result of shrewd diplomacy, efficient trade, advanced technology, and, of course, military might. Re-creating such an empire falls into your capable hands in the upcoming strategy epic Empire: Total War.

After sitting down with Creative Assembly for an updated look at Empire, it's clear that this game is the largest Total War to date. Empires of the 18th century were built on foundations of diplomacy, trade, and military might on land and sea. Empire begins in 1700. All prior history is a prelude to the moment you take control of one of the game's 12 playable factions. From that point forward, the world is what you make of it. You can rewrite history and transform the Prussians into a bona fide naval force, the French into a peaceful economic power, and the Ottomans into a colonial empire spanning the globe. But each faction will begin with the same technologies, strengths, and weaknesses native to them in the 1700s.

As the Americans, for example, you'll control the 13 colonies. Looking at the campaign map, you may decide that economic growth is your first priority. Establishing trade routes is the key to economic success, and building ships is the first step toward riches. Several areas in the world, such as the Caribbean and India, are ripe with tradable goods. Creative Assembly likened these regions to a giant pie, and the number of ships you have assigned to trade routes in these regions dictates the size of your piece. Of course, many wars throughout history have been fought in hopes of grabbing a bigger piece of the pie, so allying yourself with factions competing for resources may be in your best interests.

But America is ripe with its own riches, and you can also invest in agriculture, developing farms that cultivate tobacco, cotton, and wheat. Soon other countries will drop anchor in your ports, purchasing home-grown goods and providing a bit of economic stimulus. A third source of income comes from taxing your citizens, and like in many past Total War games, the level of taxation has an inverse correlation with the happiness of your citizens. The King of England learned that the hard way.

Diplomacy will open increased trade routes and opens up the possibility for a military ally in a world that is perpetually at war. As the Americans, it would serve you well to repair relations with the British, establishing increased trade routes and possibly forging a defensive pact. If you are attacked by the French, for example, the British and their naval might will sail to the rescue, either by helping you in

America or attacking France at home, forcing the French navy to retreat. But allies will not automatically join you for invasions and offensive attacks; they'll join you only if it's in their best interests and your alliance is strong--a sort of 1700s coalition of the willing.

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Because history isn't written yet, says Creative Assembly, some events may not happen as expected. The French Revolution, for example, won't take place if the middle and lower classes are pacified by French royalty. Napoleon may be born into the Spanish Empire if it occupies territory in France. All told, there are about 100 historical figures that will add to the might of your empire, including famed scientist Isaac Newton and the infamous English rogue Dick Turpin. This being a Total War game, you can of course recruit assassins to eliminate such gentlemen and generals in secret--not all wars are won on the battlefield. But most are.

No matter your skill as a diplomat, war is inevitable. As your economy grows, weaker empires will continually look for their own piece of the pie. Wars will be fought on both land and sea, and victory will require fast reflexes, knowledge of the battlefield, and sound tactics. When battle begins, you'll enter the battle map, a three-dimensional arena that will often feature thousands of individual units. We witnessed one such battle as the Ottoman Empire fought the French in the deserts of North Africa. Land battles open with a deployment phase where you can drag and drop your units into various formations. Creative Assembly, controlling the Ottomans, placed its cavalry to the flanks, infantry in the center, and artillery to the rear. Just behind the infantry were placed two groups of grenadiers.

As the battle began, the artillery began firing quicklime toward the advancing French troops. Quicklime is one of the game's researchable military technologies and one of the most demoralizing. Shells of calcium oxide explode over enemy troops, burning their skin and blinding them. While certainly effective against the oncoming French soldiers, quicklime is especially valuable against entrenched troops in a defensive position without the freedom to move. Each faction will share the same technology tree, though the units trained in such research will be specific to each faction. For example, researching infantry as the British will give you access to the Redcoats, highly disciplined troops. Researching firing drill will unlock a rolling barrage in which the first line fires its muskets, then kneels and reloads as the second line fires. On the other hand, firing drill for the Americans may unlock sharpshooting ability as snipers employ guerrilla tactics from cover. The Ottomans employ Tatar light cavalry, while the Polish use the intimidating winged hussars.

Enemy AI will employ many of the same strategies that were used by their respective factions throughout history. In our battle, the French cavalry formed a "monster column" meant to charge directly though the enemy front lines. But the Ottomans expected this. As the French charged forward, the grenadier units attempted to fold around their flanks and catch the cavalry in a deadly crossfire, a tactic that Creative Assembly said worked several times earlier in the day when they

practiced this battle. This time, the Ottomans failed. Additional French cavalry decimated the unprotected artillery units to the rear, and the grenadiers were ineffective in close proximity to the French cavalry. Ottoman troops were demoralized and retreated, and the monster column continued its assault on the remaining troops.

Though the battle was lost, it was a visual pleasure. You can easily zoom in to the ground level and watch individual troops fight it out in hand-to-hand combat. Every musket ball and cannonball is individually modeled, and a hefty physics system ensures that things happen as they should. For example, a cannonball on a warm, dry day will roll along the ground, taking out any soldiers in its path. On a wet day, the cannonball will stick harmlessly in the mud. Likewise, rain and cold will dampen gunpowder, and a force dependent on artillery may become overrun by cavalry as they fall prey to misfire after misfire.

Weather plays an even more important role on the high seas. Creative Assembly walked us through a naval battle between the French and the Americans. Most ships of this time depended not on cannons, but on wind. Players that successfully harness the power of the wind will outmaneuver enemy ships for crucial shots. There are about 25 different ship types, from small yet maneuverable sloops to the powerful and heavy ship of the line. Each faction will have their own special ships. The Ottomans, for example, have a ship designed specifically to board and capture other ships. It sits low in the water, below the line of fire, and the crew will latch on to a potential prize with grappling hooks, allowing the talented hand-to-hand fighters to take over the vessel. Steam power is a researchable technology, and those technologically advanced ships are not dependent on wind to stalk their prey.

In the battle we saw, the Americans had researched fiery projectiles that resembled catapults at sea. The range of fire was more than twice that of cannon fire, so these ships deployed in the rear of the formation, acting as a sort of artillery unit. Many a French ship caught fire from this terrifying weapon, and crews that were forced to put out fires on deck were demoralized. Gun crews were forced to tend to the flames rather than fire on their prey, and the flanking American warships had a huge advantage. One fire burned directly through the hull of a French ship and the crew jumped into the sea. Most of these sailors were conscripts that never learned to swim, what Creative Assembly referred to as simply, "shark bait." The fire proceeded to burn directly to the powder keg, and the resounding explosion provided a moral boost for the Americans. As for the French... not so much.

We've only scratched the surface of Empire: Total War. Look for oncoming coverage in the coming weeks that includes new details on additional gameplay modes and multiplayer. In the meantime, feast your eyes on brand-new screens of this very-promising strategy games.

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bueno lo he leído pero preferiría ke alguien lo tradujera pa entenderlo mejor

y por cierto han cumplido uno de mis sueños jugar en un total war con los ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMERICA!!!UNITED STATES OF AMERICA!!! vivaaaaa!!por fin podre luchar por la libertad,la justicia,la igualdad,etc

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