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Topic of the Year: Connective (T)issue

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Review: A Total War Saga: Troy - the Late Bronze Age between archaeology, history and epic literature

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Videogame. A Total War Saga: Troy. Genre: Turn-based / Real-time Strategy Release date: 13/08/2020. Publisher: SEGA Developer: Creative Assembly. Platform: PC, Mac (Epic Games Launcher)

ම Open Access

Keywords: archaeology, videogames, Pre-Classical Greece, Iliad

The last chapter of the acclaimed turnbased strategy "Total War" videogame series (Giongiani 2020), with real time battles, was published in 2020 by SEGA and is set in Greece during the Late Bronze Age. Here, the player can control one of the many kingdoms involved in the Trojan War, each one guided by their legendary kings and heroes, and try to conquer Ilion first-hand. In the main campaign, which follows the events of the Iliad, players have the possibility to choose either the Greek or the Trojan side (in this case trying to change the Homeric events). In addition, there is a free campaign without specific objectives, but only a long-term one ("Risk" style), based on the historically documented expansion of the chosen kingdom at the end of the Bronze Age. The strategy to achieve one's goals is always left to the player, who therefore maintains a certain degree of freedom and autonomy compared to the historical-literary events. There are also individual battles, in real time, which recall some of the most famous ones of the era (and of the epic), which are introduced by historicalliterary information regarding the event itself, the real or presumed historical setting and the political powers involved.

In this video game it is necessary to control every aspect of the chosen kingdom, from the buildings to be built in the cities to the level of happiness and demographic growth of their inhabitants, to diplomacy, economy, exploitation of natural resources, government (also enacting edicts and conferring offices)

and training and movement of troops. All of this takes place on a large, near-full-scale map that includes Greece, the Aegean from the Bosphorus to Crete, the coasts of Asia Minor, Chalkidiki and the coast of Thrace, in which the action develops in shifts, as in an immense "Risk" game. The battles take place in real time, in a setting that incorporates the morphological characteristics of the place in which they are fought (whether it is an open field or a city under siege), and it is possible to call in nearby armies as reinforcements, both personal or allied forces, fighting epic battles with more than seven thousand warriors simultaneously on the field. Once the deployment is completed, the player must control his army as effectively as possible, exploiting both his and the enemy's strengths and weaknesses and giving orders to his platoons, while the opponent does the same. At this stage, it is important to keep an eye out not only for the losses that are being suffered, but also on the morale, which if too low will lead the soldiers to flee the battle in terror. The hero in command of each army, according to Homer, is present on the field next to his men, fights with them and has skills that allows him to motivate or support them when necessary; moreover, he may even face the enemy hero in a duel. When the battle is over, the winner decides the fate of the prisoners and collects the remains of the fallen, and in the event of a siege, he evaluates what to do with the conquered city, which can be annexed to his kingdom, raided, or destroyed.

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Although the historical-literary accuracy is never perfect due to the freedom granted to the player (Anderson et al. 2009, 2010; Kapell & Elliott 2013; McCall 2012, 2016; Fraser 2019; Spelta 2020), this video game is very immersive and realistic in its general representation of the settings, giving one the possibility to immerse himself in a living world, made of choices, possibilities, and consequences, even on a large scale. This situation conveys the feeling of truly being in front of a geopolitical representation of the Late Bronze Age, allowing players to identify with the kings of the time, to better understand the world in which they lived, and to comprehend the reasons for certain choices. A very important feature of the time was the religious aspect, made up of temples, oracles, auspices, divine "signs" and (almost) direct interventions in human affairs: this is very well represented in the game, where an important aspect of the management of one's kingdom is precisely that of worship, with the need to periodically organize hecatombs and various rituals to keep the Gods satisfied so they will answer their prayers and assist the heroes in battle. As already mentioned, in battle one has the feeling of commanding an army made up of single individuals, who need time to move, carry out orders and attack (despite occasional losses among the troops), and whose armor and equipment are historically accurate and realistic, with some licenses for gameplay and balance reasons. The heroes are very faithful to the descriptions made by Homer, both in their appearance and in their equipment, which is however also aligned with what they could actually have worn at the end of the Bronze Age. The game then introduces small gems related to the origin of certain legends and mythological tales, giving the possibility (with the favor of the Gods) to recruit the Minotaur or Polyphemus (heroes of distant kingdoms who have fallen in disgrace, strong and mighty, but forced to anonymity), the centaurs (skilled archers on horseback able to lead their steeds without bridle), the sirens or the harpies (entirely female ranged units, typical of the Cyclades, able to lower the morale of the enemies with songs and rituals of misfortune) and even the giants (warriors much more powerful, taller and more massive than their fellow soldiers which come from the mountain regions). Here, the intention to combine history and mythology is commendable, recalling the possible origins

of legends which, like the Iliad, start from a base of truth that was then lost in myth and literature. The names of the various faction and the heroes who guide them, playable and nonplayable, derive from both historical sources and the Homeric epic. Finally, it is possible to recruit priestesses, emissaries and spies, agile units that act only on the tactical map and that can influence the favor of the Gods, improve diplomatic relations and sabotage cities and enemy armies. The less historically accurate aspect is probably the presence of two factions of Amazons which derive from the Greek legends and who fight alongside the Trojans. It must be noted, however, that they have equipment and units typical of the micro-Asian territory, although they are exclusively female

From direct experience, I can finally say that "A Total War Saga: Troy" is a very engaging video game in which one can immerse himself for several hours, and which gives the player time to reflect on the course of the action and on the living world full of large and small aspects in which the events develop, effectively recreating a realistic image of the atmosphere of the period.

Now, I will present some examples of historically and archaeologically accurate aspects of this videogame which are based on archaeological finds. Furthermore, I will focus on some examples which demonstrate how the atmosphere created in the game is well aligned with the historical period in which it is set. The examples presented here are inspired and/or cited from my own experience on this videogame, while notices and archaeological finds on Late Bronze Age military history on Salimbeti (2020).

Starting from the introductory video which plays as soon as the game begins, immersion in and attention to the historical era are visibly central issues, with the story being told in an alternation of black-figure vases (not really existing) and short video clips in 3D graphics. The "journey through time" then continues in the game, where all messages, warnings and events are accompanied by quotations from the Iliad or the Odyssey and images in the style of black-figure vase paintings. In the early stages of the game, the player is accompanied by Homer himself, who provides help and advice by working as an integrated tutor, sometimes using quotes from his own literary works. Finally, a

significant detail in my opinion is the choice to indicate bronze, one of the in-game resources, with a symbol that closely resembles the typical Mycenaean "oxhide" ingots, contributing to the feeling of historical-archaeological authenticity. Another impressive resemblance, which immediately struck me positively in the Mycenaean campaign introductory video which is shown before the game begins, is the look of Helen of Troy (formerly "of Sparta"). Her make-up is designed like the face (not clear if a priestess or sphinx) preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Mycenae, and she is dressed in a Minoan-Mycenaean fashion which recalls the frescoes of Mycenae and Knossos, although the diadem she wears is rather nonrealistic. This attention to archaeological detail in a character who will no longer appear in the game is very important from my point of view, because it contributes to a sense of immersion. An important physical resemblance is the one regarding the priestesses (already mentioned above), who have exactly the appearance one would expect, recalling the figures portrayed in the frescoes and the Bronze Age statuettes from all over the Aegean area: flounced skirt, shortsleeved "jacket" (here closed on the front for rating reasons) and a hat with a feather on top; even the hairstyle is a faithful reproduction of what is seen in the Mycenaean frescoes. Since they are characters that, especially from a certain stage of the campaign onwards, often recur in the game, their well-researched appearance maximizes the feeling of "time travel", which already successfully pervades the game.

The walls of Troy, the ultimate goal of the campaigns centered on the Achaean kingdoms, are reproduced realistically, as are the siege tactics of the time. The only inconsistency is that in the real-time battle map Troy appears much larger than it actually was at the time, with wide open spaces inside it, necessary to allow combat between troops once the walls have been crossed, a fact that is justifiable in terms of gameplay necessity. The siege towers present in the game closely resemble the famous Trojan Horse designed by Ulysses, except for the legs; however, having no certain data about the real appearance of these machines, there is in fact room for imagination and hypotheses, in which this aesthetic choice is inserted as a sort of "homage" to the Iliad. The city of Mycenae is well reproduced even in the tactical map, with the palace on its citadel, the famous "Circle A",

clearly visible, and the pair of lions, symbol of the city, positioned above the gate; the shape of the walls, however, is conventional, and simply indicates their existence around the city, without reference to their original appearance (or the one on the real-time map). There are also several houses outside the walls, and inside them in the real-time map, all with the typical architecture of the Mycenaean houses. These are small details, it's true, but it is important to highlight them because they demonstrate the attention paid during the game's development also to aspects that do not strictly concern the art of war. The tactical map presents a very accurate geography, with the cities correctly georeferenced at a scale of almost 1:1, which makes the journey to Asia Minor long and complex, with the need to pass between the Aegean islands through long travel times both by land and sea. These features add geographical and historical authenticity and convey the sense of hardship which was common at the time when moving over certain distances, making clear the importance of considering the costs and unexpected dangers along the way, and, of course, the longer times of travel.

The attention to military units and their historical looks has always been a symbol of the videogames in the "Total War" series, and this last chapter lives up to the expectations: the equipment of every unit appearing in "A Total War Saga: Troy" is historically and archaeologically researched and can be easily confronted and matched to its original counterparts. For example, heavy shielded spearmen units have rectangular or "figureeight" shields (quite different from each other), helmets are made of boar tusks, bronze or studded leather with ponytail or brush crests and sometimes decorative horns; light lancers have crescent-moon shields and long spears (perfectly corresponding to their look in Bronze Age vase-paintings), the medium and heavy armours are all based on (or are precise replicas of) the typical Mycenaean bronze armour (the so-called "Dendra Panoply") and are perfectly reproduced down to the greaves. The light armours are made of leather reinforced with metal scales or with large bronze studs (different in dimension and design). The round shields, wielded by all swordsmen units, are the most complicated part of the equipment: according to the Iliad, everyone carried one, but the archaeological and artistic evidence is scarce in

this sense, and is largely linked to light warriors such as lancers or javelinists, with rather small shields compared to the bearer. In this case we can probably speak of an artistic license that is a little closer to Homer's work. However, there are also some units that are more respectful of this peculiarity of the small round shields designed for light and fast-ranged units such as the shielded slingers: these soldiers have no armour, and for protection in battle they rely on a bronze-scaled helmet and a small round shield. The presence of archers in the armies of the Late Bronze Age is well documented, even if there is no certainty about the size of the arches: from some iconographic evidence they seem rather short, while from others they appear mediumsized (like modern sports arches), perhaps for reasons of representation space. In the game, it was decided, also for tactical balance reasons, to equip archers with classic medium-sized bows, which allow them to inflict good damage at a considerable distance. In the Bronze Age, we know, horses were smaller than the present ones and even of those used in the Classical era, therefore in the military environment they were very rarely ridden but were used mainly in parades or on special occasions, almost exclusively as a status symbol. Their only military use was for the locomotion of war chariots, light or heavy, which had constituted the real "tanks" of all the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern armies since the dawn of civilization (in Greece, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Egypt). "A Total War Saga: Troy" takes this aspect into account, and in fact it is not possible to train cavalry (apart from very rare occasions), which is thus replaced by chariot units with a very historically accurate look.

Finally, it is necessary to spend a few words about the appearance of the Homeric heroes: it is interesting to note how the developers have been extremely faithful to the descriptions in the Iliad, reproducing helmets, armour, shields and weapons with abundance of details and using materials that are as realistic as possible, without slipping too much into fantasy. For example, Agamemnon wears a helmet whose crest, although very particular, is documented, with decorative horns quite common at the time; the armour is certainly very decorated and elaborate, worthy of a king of enormous wealth, as it is always described, but it actually follows the typical Mycenaean model. The same can be said for Achilles, whose helmet derives from his representations in later vase painting (and from Homeric descriptions) and whose armour, although entirely in gilded bronze, follows the design of the light studded leather armour of the time. The age-old question of the large circular shields remains open: those of the heroes meticulously coincide with the descriptions that Homer makes of them, but, as I have stated before, at the time they might have been smaller, or rectangular (like the one of Ajax), while these shields are closer to those wielded by hoplites in later centuries. In my opinion, in this case the desire to portray the Homeric heroes by carefully following the descriptions present in the Iliad should be appreciated, because they are more literary than historical characters, introducing archeologically accurate elements where possible, but following the epic text for the rest (very detailed in describing the shields and their decorations). Hector's conical helmet with ponytail crest and armour are typical Anatolian models, although obviously made very rich and elaborate, but it is his shield that deserves a few more words: although it also derives fully from Homer's reports, the model is not so unrealistic, as shields with similar appearance are actually documented during the Bronze Age in the Aegean area, although rarely. In this case too we note the desire to combine history, literature and myth, at least as far as possible considering the exceptional nature of these heroic figures.

In conclusion, it can be said that "A Total War Saga: Troy" is a video game with a relevant degree of archaeological, historical and even literary accuracy (considering the fidelity to the Iliad's descriptions and events). The will of the developers (Creative Assembly) to create a usable and functional product, closely linked to what is documented about the military units of the Aegean area in the Late Bronze Age, is very clear. The attention to military equipment, in addition to the various political and diplomatic aspects of the time combined with a good literary fidelity and some artistic freedom, often necessary for practical, technical or balancing reasons, create a very enjoyable videogame, capable of encouraging its players to deepen their knowledge about this era. The atmosphere is ultimately very engaging and immersive, and helps even those who are not already "in the field" to understand and familiarize with that distant and somewhat mythical world.

When the mythological aspect emerges, it almost always does so without exceeding, in an attempt to reconcile the legends with their possible origins. The presence of the Amazons deserves a separate discussion, because I believe it was a secondary addition, intended to provide something different and particular to the title, drawing heavily on myth and popular culture. Personally, I am not in disagreement with this choice: first of all, because there is no claim to authenticity in their campaigns, both are legendary and mythical, even more than the Achaean or Trojan ones. Secondly, because they are part of an additional content (DLC) which is purchasable separately, and do not belong to the main body of the game, which makes it clear where the attention must have actually been placed in evaluating it.

Having played this videogame for about 45 hours, I can also spend a few words on the gameplay itself: as a whole, it is of the highest quality, like the previous chapters of the series, being better in some aspects and introducing several new features, such as the heroes in the field, the possibility for them and their agents to level up and improve over time, the mechanics linked to the favour of the Gods and the profound differences between one faction and another not only in terms of military units, but also with regards to the deep management in the very nature of government and army. The administration of diplomacy is improved, with relations between factions capable of changing

over time for better or worse, in spite of the actions carried out even towards other neutral factions, or depending on how powerful, opportunistic or faithful every player is.

A fully intended limitation is the impossibility of recruiting armies in cities, which have their own non-modifiable garrison, or of moving them without being led by a hero: this is done to reflect the Homeric atmosphere, with armies always being led into battle by heroes or famous kings. The only real flaw is the artificial intelligence of the other factions in the field: they often take a long time to make a decision or move an army, manage the economy in an uncertain way and sometimes participate in wars with factions never seen before, which they have just met or with which they have never engaged with, dragging the conflict for dozens of shifts without any real outcome and then asking for peace mostly out of boredom. In battle, the armies behave much better, showing resistance, skills, and good strategic decisions, even if they are sometimes caught completely by surprise by coordinated or unforeseen actions. However, some weaknesses in the A.I., always noticeable in strategic titles in general and in the past titles of the "Total War" series, together with some creative freedom with regards to mythology, do not obscure the overall quality of the game, which remains relevant in terms of its historical-archaeological, entertainment and gameplay aspects.

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