Forge a dynastic empire across the medieval world.

GRAND STRATEGY GAME

Crusader Kings III

The king is dead! Long live the king!

WE NEVER THOUGHT we'd say it, but for once we're thankful for the massive, intrusive, just plain long tutorial that comes with a game. After years of not playing them, of diving into the first mission and decrying it as the game's fault if we couldn't work out what the controls did, both of this month's games have stopped us in our tracks.

What *Crusader Kings III* and *Flight Simulator* have in common it that they're not pick-up-and-play experiences. *Flight Simulator* is an unforgiving simulation of when a large piece of metal intersects with many natural systems. *Crusader Kings* is an unforgiving simulation of a natural system—your family—intersecting with more natural systems and, quite often, multiple large pieces of sharp metal.

Played in the abstract, it's a scrolling map overlaid with pop-up windows filled with detailed stats, text, and a nice line in 3D graphics. You take the role of a medieval noble with a small amount of land to his name, and set about conquering more. The twist is that you're not expected to survive. Your king will succumb to illness, battle, or a sharp piece of metal on a dark night, and be succeeded by his heir. If you're lucky, you've had the time, patience, and ability to groom this heir

for power, ushering in a golden age of trade, learning, and expansion. If you're unlucky—say your heir meets with an accident—then you may be succeeded by your lustful, disease-riddled cousin who always hated you and married his sister.

You can only play the hand you're dealt, but you can always try to improve things in the future. Arranging marriages can bring power, money and influence to your house, along with beneficial genetic traits that may, or may not, be passed down to your offspring. Every member of every court in every country seems to hold an opinion on everybody else (this must be exhausting) and raising opinions so that you're universally liked, or feared, is one way of getting on in the world.

Another is to wage war, which sees your armies, represented as a single soldier, step forth to lay siege to enemy cities and knock their armies about. The whole thing is complex enough to make replaying the tutorial a sensible tactical decision, and it's all too easy to get overextended and have an unregarded little ruler from a dusty corner of the continent ride into your capital in an attempt to seize it. After all, he'd always hated you.

For all this, *Crusader Kings III* is as much a game of characters as it is of

thrones. There's some rich comedy to be had from occasional pop-ups detailing the sort of deviant antics we always knew aristocrats were capable of. And though your dynasty might be sprawling, the stories it generates feel intimate, giving you just enough detail to whet your imagination's appetite and let it fill in any of the gaps.

With low system requirements but demanding everything from the player, *Crusader Kings III* may not be too obviously different from the previous game in the series, but it's in the refinements, the newly smoothed edges, and the streamlined paths through all those text-filled pop-ups where it finds its majesty. –IAN EVENDEN

VERDICT

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Crusader Kings III

➕ **RICHARD I** Sprawling empire-builder with reams of text and a sharp eye for satire.

➖ **RICHARD III** Imposing grand strategy with a lot going on at once, and plenty of reading.

RECOMMENDED SPECS CPU, Ryzen 5 2400G / i5-4670K. RAM, 8GB. GPU, GTX 1650 / R9 390X.

$50, paradoxplaza.com/crusader-kings-iii, M-rated

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