

• Instead of putting information in a dozen different places, *EU3* elegantly crams it into a single Swiss Army knife panel, which lets you gauge at a glance each province's relevant details.

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS III

Is that the Iberian Peninsula in your pocket?

PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive DEVELOPER: Paradox Interactive GENRE: Historical Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.gamergate.com) ESRB RATING: Everyone
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.9GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-32 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW



You're probably squinting at that title and wondering "What the heck's a *Europa Universalis*?" After all, we're talking third in a series you're as likely to find people geeking over as collecting signed copies of Norman Davies' *Europe: A History* or Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

No surprise, then, that *Europa Universalis III* isn't so much a shot at wooing mainstreamers away from Firaxis' *Civilization* or Creative Assembly's *Total War* games as reinforcing what this grand strategy tour de force does so spectacularly well: simulating the bristling negotiations, knuckle-gnawing economic tradeoffs, and tit-for-tat nation-state skirmishes that characterized Renaissance- and Enlightenment-era Europe.

That's not entirely fair. *EU3* does attempt to broaden its appeal somewhat by incorporating a clean (if crude) 3D engine and helpfully streamlining its interface by packaging formerly shambolic

commands into a single, intuitive info panel. Still, this is grand strategy for the indefatigable, composing 250 start-anywhere countries (from majors like France to minors like Munster) formed from over 1,700 individually conquerable provinces, then barreling forward in speed-adjustable real time from literally any point you choose circa 1453 to 1792. If the notion of supervising vassals, fiddling budgets, managing naval fleets, and massing three-pronged land armies among dozens of other duties over the course of 300-plus years makes you dizzy...well, it should. That's the beauty of this series: It doesn't compromise, and if anything, *EU3* proves it doesn't have to.

BEST YET? YOU BETCHERALS...

The first thing you sense playing *EU3* is just how well everything hooks together compared to its predecessors (chalk that up to lessons—both good and bad—gleaned from *Crusader Kings*, *Victoria*, and *Hearts of Iron II*). For starters, instead of historical events triggering monolithically, the event engine now vamps cause-effect style, i.e. the context must satisfy various trigger conditions for the event to

GRAND STRATEGY FOR THE INDEFATIGABLE.

occur. It's just a smarter way to run this sort of game, letting you organically shape history instead of being artificially corralled by it.

That sense of refinement suffuses everything, so that—for instance—nations no longer feel quite as arbitrary thanks to additions like alternate forms of government (monarchies, democracies) and "national ideas" (you can select up to 10 from 30 total) which yield unique reorienting improvements to variables like taxation and trade. A new espionage feature lets you deploy spies to incite insurrection or assassinate leaders, and diplomacy is at least twice as nuanced, including options to buy/sell individual provinces, engage in bilateral alliances, and subsidize other nations' wars.

Even the military's received an overhaul, so instead of purchasing reinforcements and marching them cross-country, armies now replenish automatically via the national manpower pool. This both rarefies your regiments and eliminates tedious, artificially punitive busywork. And while nothing trumps a human opponent, the improved A.I. plays a much shrewder game, acting more consistently in accordance with a nation's principles, but still capriciously enough to keep you jumping.

In anything this complex, someone's bound to tease out nitpicky balance issues eventually. But off the tarmac and for its breadth, *EU3* feels remarkably well-honed—arguably Paradox's finest achievement in the form to date. • **Matt Peckham**



• The revamped religious system adds the Holy See, a body of seven cardinals you can influence for boosts to stats like your national stability and prestige.

VERDICT

• Necessary but judicious refinements; deep and rich historical flavor; shrewd A.I.

• Tough learning curve; 3D visuals are a little rough around the edges.

9/10

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