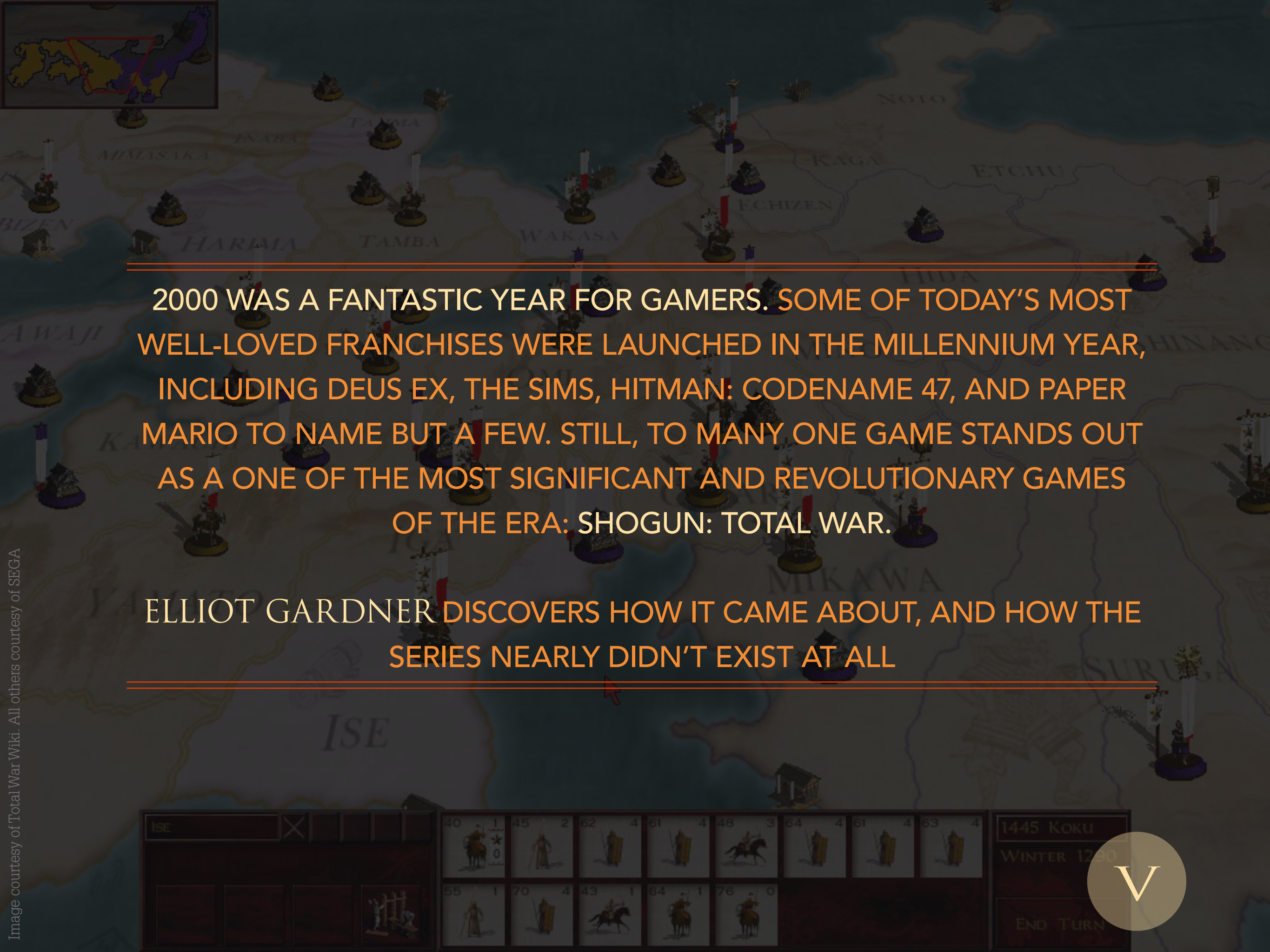


THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE

# TOTAL WAR

SERIES






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2000 WAS A FANTASTIC YEAR FOR GAMERS. SOME OF TODAY'S MOST WELL-LOVED FRANCHISES WERE LAUNCHED IN THE MILLENNIUM YEAR, INCLUDING DEUS EX, THE SIMS, HITMAN: CODENAME 47, AND PAPER MARIO TO NAME BUT A FEW. STILL, TO MANY ONE GAME STANDS OUT AS A ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT AND REVOLUTIONARY GAMES OF THE ERA: SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR.

ELLIOT GARDNER DISCOVERS HOW IT CAME ABOUT, AND HOW THE SERIES NEARLY DIDN'T EXIST AT ALL

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Creative Assembly's Total War series is a true monolith of the strategy gaming genre.

Selling over 20 million copies over the course of more than a dozen games and spin-offs since its inception at the turn of the century, Total War is arguably one of the most influential tactics and strategy game franchises of a generation.

But you'd be wrong to assume that it's always been smooth sailing for what is now one of Sega's most successful intellectual properties, and as art director at Creative Assembly Sega Kevin MacDowell discusses, what we know now as Total War almost didn't exist.

# THE BIRTH OF A SHOGUN

Shogun: Total War is set during the Sengoku Jidai warring states period of 15th-17th century Japan, but this wasn't always going to be the case.


"The original plan for Shogun: Total War was to design a kind of low-cost rip-off game of KKnD (Krush, Kill 'n' Destroy), or something like that based on Chinese mythology," says MacDowell. "And the development studio was going to be in China somewhere, because Mike Simpson, our current creative director, and who still works on Total War, has history in China as a child."

But what changed Simpson's (known colloquially as the 'Father of Total War') mind on where to base the series' progenitor? MacDowell has his own suspicions:

"It was sometime in the late 90s. For many years at the office I saw this board game hanging around at the office that was all 'samurai swords the board game'. I think maybe they were playing a lot of that game and they thought it'd be cool to do something on Japan."

“THE ORIGINAL PLAN FOR SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR WAS TO DESIGN A KIND OF LOW-COST RIP-OFF GAME OF KKNND, OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT BASED ON CHINESE MYTHOLOGY





This move proved to be a big hit with audiences and critics alike, with the time-period allowing players to adopt a breadth of play styles in order to reach their eventual goal of becoming shogun of feudal Japan; a type of hereditary military dictator of the period.

Many praised the art style of Shogun for evoking what they felt to be a fictionalised but accurate historic experience, though MacDowell admits that it's difficult to balance historic accuracy with players' expectations.

"The funny thing is we don't always strive to be accurate to the particular

time periods that we're looking at, what we strive to do is to be, in a way, accurate to the perception of the time periods.

"If we look at Shogun and Shogun 2, they're set in medieval Japan. At the time, most of the country's art was very tightly based upon Chinese art, so there wasn't a huge amount of distinction between China and Japan in terms of visual style.

"So we actually chose to base the look and feel of those games upon 18th and 19th century Japanese art, because that's the stuff that looks quintessentially Japanese."

# THE REVOLUTIONARY CAMERA TILT

Even though the setting had been dramatically changed, it would turn out to be a surprising and experimental move that would eventually revolutionise what was to originally be a top-down two dimensional game into what we now know as Total War.

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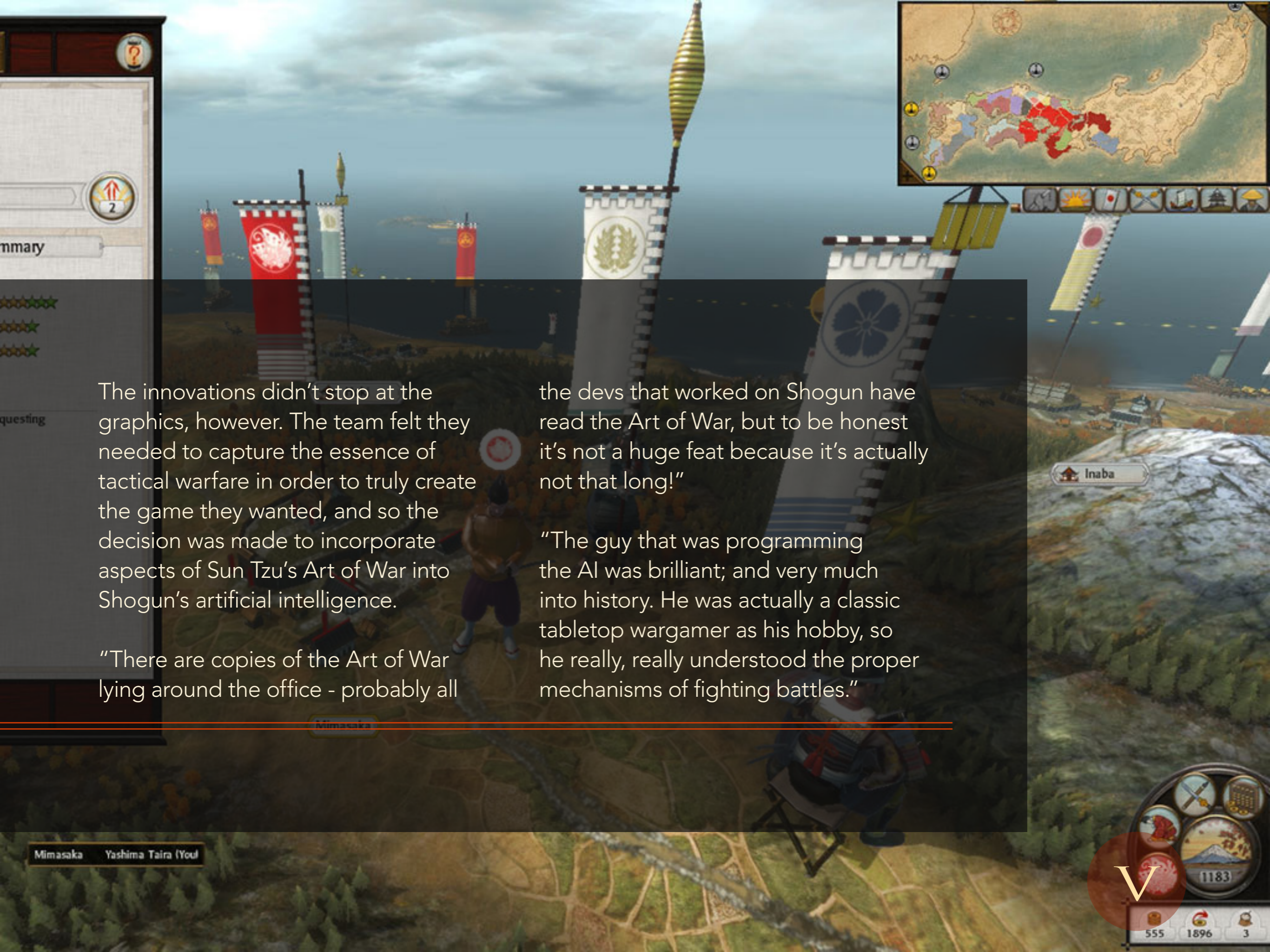
“It’s quite simple, it was first designed as a top-down game but then one of the graphics programmers decided to see what would happen if he pulled the camera down and tilted it, and it was like ‘whoa that’s awesome, let’s do that!’” says MacDowell.

But that simple decision to play around with the camera was arguably one of the most important in the history of the franchise, and has affected the entirety of real-time strategy ever since.

“It was a completely different game, with a totally different feel – a million times more immersive. That was probably the key moment that changed Total War from being that low budget clone to being something really special.”

Shirabyoshi  
Gin  
Left-click to select, double left-click to show more details  
One of your shirabyoshi. Shirabyoshi can seduce rivals' characters, and entertain your generals and provincial nobles.





The innovations didn't stop at the graphics, however. The team felt they needed to capture the essence of tactical warfare in order to truly create the game they wanted, and so the decision was made to incorporate aspects of Sun Tzu's Art of War into Shogun's artificial intelligence.

"There are copies of the Art of War lying around the office - probably all

the devs that worked on Shogun have read the Art of War, but to be honest it's not a huge feat because it's actually not that long!"

"The guy that was programming the AI was brilliant; and very much into history. He was actually a classic tabletop wargamer as his hobby, so he really, really understood the proper mechanisms of fighting battles."

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# BUGS, PATCHES AND TROUBLED LAUNCHES

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Shogun was a huge hit, but it was the games that followed that secured Total War's legacy, and it may surprise many to hear that unlike many modern IPs, there wasn't a long-term plan in place for the future of the series.

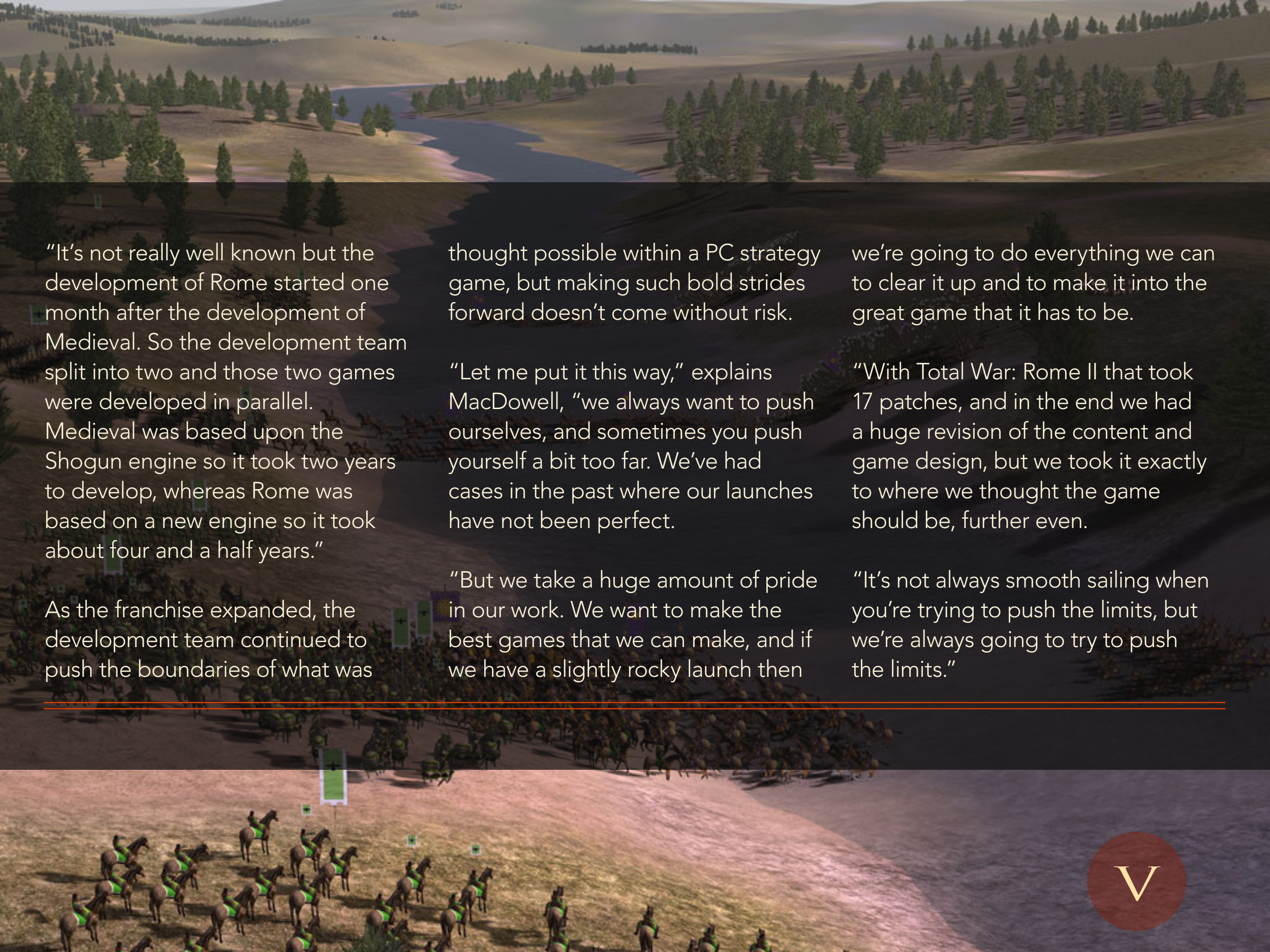
“THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROME STARTED ONE MONTH AFTER THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIEVAL: THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM SPLIT INTO TWO AND THEY WERE DEVELOPED IN PARALLEL

“I think it was just ‘try to do something and see what happens’, so at the beginning there was no plan, until we got to a certain point of Shogun where it was looking really promising and a lot of people were getting really excited about it. It was at that point we decided that there's definitely room for sequels,” says MacDowell.

Rather than root the series in Japan, or even Asia, Creative Assembly decided on the much more ambitious route of entirely overhauling the theme and setting of what would turn out to be not one, but two sequels.

“We started immediately on Medieval: Total War and Rome: Total War...at the same time.”





"It's not really well known but the development of Rome started one month after the development of Medieval. So the development team split into two and those two games were developed in parallel. Medieval was based upon the Shogun engine so it took two years to develop, whereas Rome was based on a new engine so it took about four and a half years."

As the franchise expanded, the development team continued to push the boundaries of what was

thought possible within a PC strategy game, but making such bold strides forward doesn't come without risk.

"Let me put it this way," explains MacDowell, "we always want to push ourselves, and sometimes you push yourself a bit too far. We've had cases in the past where our launches have not been perfect.

"But we take a huge amount of pride in our work. We want to make the best games that we can make, and if we have a slightly rocky launch then

we're going to do everything we can to clear it up and to make it into the great game that it has to be.

"With Total War: Rome II that took 17 patches, and in the end we had a huge revision of the content and game design, but we took it exactly to where we thought the game should be, further even.

"It's not always smooth sailing when you're trying to push the limits, but we're always going to try to push the limits."





# FROM WARFARE TO WARHAMMER

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Total War's latest instalment has taken the series in a totally different direction. In May 2016, Total War: Warhammer was released, catapulting the franchise once again into the limelight, but this time by shedding the historical focus and instead operating in a high-fantasy setting.

“THE INTENTION IS TO MAKE A THREE-PART VERSION OF WARHAMMER; THE HISTORICAL TEAM IS STILL PRESENT, AND THEY'RE DOING 'SOMETHING', BUT THAT'S SECRET FOR NOW!

“We had been thinking for some time that we wanted to expand our audience and one great way of doing that is to move into a new genre, and we'd been thinking about that for many years actually. Part of our problem with doing that was that we're not a studio that had been set up to that kind of creative inventive design and character work because we worked so closely with historical stuff. We were a little bit worried that we would have this group of developers and we would all want to maybe pull our own direction, and we'd all want to make our own fantasy IP.”

“At the same time, we had a little bit of a relationship with Games Workshop, and at some point they invited us over to talk about using Warhammer fantasy as an option for a Total War game.”

“We now have the Warhammer team, and the intention is to make a three-part version of Warhammer; the historical team is still present, and they’re doing ‘something’, but that’s secret for now!”

The move proved to be a runaway success, described by some critics as the development house’s best tactical game to date, and it seems customers agree, with Total War: Warhammer becoming the fastest selling game in the series, with half a million copies sold in the few days following its release.

And with figures like that, you can be certain Creative Assembly Sega is going to continue revolutionising the strategy gaming sector for years to come. 🚩

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