

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS II: **Conquest, trading, diplomacy from the Middle Ages to Napoleon**

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Basic data

Objective: To play through history while experiencing different events and the variables that comes into play. Hereby getting a more dynamic and rich picture of how forces in history affect each other. Also the question of resources and strategy is important to acknowledge, when planning your actions in the game.

Target audience: Strategy gamers, historians, history students, and people with an interest in history.

Playing time: The game can be played for a very long time. The shortest realistic time for a meaningful scenario is around 2-3 hours. The Grand campaign stretches for days, perhaps even weeks depending on your playing style and the country you select.

Number of players: You can play single player or up to 8 players either on network or through the internet. All countries with no human player are computer controlled.

Materials included: One CD-ROM, one manual, scenario editor, and a world map of the different regions in the game.

Equipment required: Pentium 266, 64 MB ram, Graphic adapter (2 MB ram), Direct x compatible, Win95, 98, ME, 2000

Price: \$9.99

Introduction

As I looked over my empire my sense of fulfilment grew. Instead of betting on costly European wars I had early on expanded my colonial empire. The strategy was a success – in the early 18th century Denmark controlled most of North America and most western and southern parts of Africa.

This review examines to what extent Europa Universalis is useful in an educational setting primarily in teaching history in secondary school. The game is from 2001 made by Peter Kullgard and Frederik Malmberg. It was one of the most celebrated strategy titles in 2001, winning several awards reflected by Gamespy in their review: “Europa Universalis II is possibly the best historical strategy game there is. That’s not an exaggeration.” Today the game still enjoys a huge following with active forums discussions of history related to the scenarios in the game, and the game in general.

Europa Universalis II makes it possible to experience history in a new way. It is not about the facts of history but instead you engage with the underlying historical dynamics from 1419-1820 to change or enact the course of history. As a player I can try and maintain Danish dominance around the Baltic Sea or uphold English supremacy in France. The player has many options, some much harder than others. It is hard to avoid the consequences of history, and to do so you will have to use your historical knowledge to prevent historical failures. The game has some major historical events that you will have to address; for example, the rebellion in England in 17th century, the 30-years

war, or Spain's bankruptcy due to the overflow of gold. Usually you can influence these situations and choose between different options, but the events will occur.

One example would be: "In 1628 the English Parliament passed the Petition of Rights. Under its terms the King could not levy any new taxes without the consent of Parliament. Furthermore soldiers could be billeted in private homes. Martial law could not be imposed in time of peace. Finally, the petition of Rights forbids the imprisonments of individuals without cause". You can then choose to sign the petition or reject it; in any case your decision will have long lasting consequences on the countries degree of centralization or their stability.

The attraction of the game lies in its ability to live up to the strategy genre's principles. You are able to build up a nation, plan a strategy for several years, and then suddenly see your plans shattered by unforeseen events that demand a new strategy. The game is capable of entertaining the player at several levels, going from a first layer of military conflict to the deeper layers of culture, religion, economy, and policy. The exploration of the game universe never quite seems to end, and you constantly experience new connections or options that makes your decisions more complex. You need to take more variables into the equation.

The game features more than 180 countries, and it is possible to play them all spanning the period from 1419 to 1820. Among these are many non-European countries such as Manchu, Shawnee, Zimbabwe and China. It is possible to design new countries, scenarios, and events. There are currently several examples of this online. One of the most interesting initiatives is the EEP project, where historically interested volunteers around the world add data and events to the game to make it richer with historical data.

Overall the game has different dimensions, which can be controlled by the player, and the game universe encompasses a broader part of history than is usually the case in stereotypical

historical strategy games that are usually centred around World War II. In the following section, the different areas are described along with some of the questions and variables related to each area. However, it is hard to present the relations between the different areas. For example, one of the most important overall variables is the stability of your country. The stability is altered by nearly any decision you make, and numerous events more or less under your control: waging war, changes in domestic policies, diplomatic moves, rebellions, bankruptcy, religious turmoil, and culture to name just a few.

The role of military

The military conflicts in *Europa Universalis* are often dangerous and you can never quite be sure if they are worth the risk. When you decide to enter into a war this will have consequences for years to come, and you should (if possible) prepare for war years ahead. You need to consider a lot of other factors than merely the number of troops, like geography, attribution, leaders, technology, alliances, current wars, fortifications, and domestic policy. Often knowledge of historical events and the problems nations faced historically can be an advantage for your planning. For example, it is not a good idea for England to enter into the 30-years war (1618-1648) in the start of the 17th century as you are facing instability due to religious and political conflicts during this period. Likewise it is a very good idea for Denmark to quell Sweden in the start of the 17th century before the warrior king Gustav Adolph the Great claims the throne, and the Swedish battle machine gets into gear. Likewise, Russia should probably not expand with colonies in the New World in competition with other European powers, when they can expand east into Siberia. It should be stressed that historical awareness is not limited to just knowing what areas to explore and colonize.

The importance of the financial situation

Your country's financial situation is extremely important in the game, and probably as important as your military acts in the long run. You need to watch out for inflation constantly as you raise armies, embark on war, and improve your infrastructure. You must avoid bankruptcy and be careful with the war taxes all of which is in a dialectic interaction with your country's stability.

When I tried to play Byzantium, I actually managed to fight off the Ottoman through loans, war taxes, and alliances, but my economy was completely shattered and it was close to impossible to recover.

The game distinguishes between income and expenses. Your expenses will explode when you are involved in war, and your income will decline due to ravaging armies. This will force you to 'print' money or take loans, which will result in inflation, and make it even harder for you next time to raise armies and improve infrastructure. The fixed expenses are kept relatively simple, consisting of maintenance of the military forces, interest from earlier loans, and a number of random historical related events. Your income comes from trade, goods, production, and gold mines, which all depends on the different regions in your country, your technology level, available resources and the world market in general. You can also get income from random events.

Political aspects of the game

In Europa Universalis II, the player has more control of what direction a country politically will take: Will you encourage Mercantilism on your nation or bet on free trade? Will you centralize or decentralize the government? Can you still defend having serfs, or will you free your subjects? You can influence your domestic policies in 10 different areas and slowly form your country, although historical events will still make it hard to alter a country's course completely. Will you bet on stability or nurture innovation, and be leader in technology? Is your country to become ruler of the sea or will you bet on strength on land?

In the 15th century, north of the later powerful Russia, lies the small trading nation Novogorod, which I tried to keep independent through history starting in 1419. This was extremely hard. Although I won over Russia, Poland-Lithuanian, Prussia, Sweden, and other smaller nations, I couldn't maintain technology development up through the 18th century. This was due to the fact that I had failed to modernize my domestic policies and therefore had a conservative, old fashion nation, where development of new technology was slow and expensive.

Your politics are, of course, also influenced by your geographic and cultural composition. A country with a variety of cultures and opposing religions should not free the people too much – they will spring liberation movements if you give them too much freedom too fast. Prussia would be bad off trying to build a large navy, and France is not in a good position to change her state religion to Moslem.

Diplomacy the glue of the game

Europa Universalis II gives you ample opportunity to use diplomacy to enhance your chances of success. Without a firm grasp of how to play different nations out against each other and maintain good relations with others, the game will become a lot harder. You must also use random diplomatic incidents to further your plans for expansion, and support your relations with other nations through gifts, marriage, trade agreements, vassalization, and alliances. It is through diplomacy that the really big changes are facilitated. For example, you can try to establish a strong alliance between Austria and Ottoman Empire, which would result in a interesting new scenario.

The game gives good insights into the importance of picking the right allies, and how important this can become in the long run. In the start of 17th century, Denmark and Sweden were fighting for supremacy in the Baltic Sea region. Historical Denmark was very close to getting an alliance with Russia through a royal marriage, however in the end the marriage failed on religious issues. Over the following years, Sweden slowly took over and became the

leader of the Baltic Sea region. In Europa Universalis II, it is relatively easy to enter into an alliance with Russia, and this has important implications for the war for supremacy in the Baltic Sea region.

This illustrates some of the problems with the game, as it fails to simulate on a small scale, and does not take into account that one-person 'stubbornness' could decide whether Denmark and Russia would enter an alliance. Here the game model is built up quite logically, and for both Denmark and Russia this is obviously a good idea. However this particular incident does not only show this problem with the game but also a potential learning opportunity if debriefing is used appropriately. The incident can serve as a good starting point for discussing different potential outcomes in the game world, and in history per se. This opens up for a discussion of historical dynamics and variables behind the divergence.

Problems with the game

I have tried to describe some of the areas in Europa Universalis II to illustrate the richness and complexity of the simulation. It should be said that I have playtested this game for well over 3 weeks of full playing time, and have still not mastered it. However, as you progress some problems become apparent. One major problem is that the AI, although improved from the first Europa Universalis, is still lacking in quality and challenge. Using the multiplayer mode can solve this, but this requires that you are able to play with several players simultaneously. Even then, you will still have a lot of computer-controlled countries that act a bit strange. This can also make it hard to discuss the evolution of history in the game opposed to the real historical development. Sometimes the AI makes strange choices.

The game also seems to crash a little too often, although this has also been improved through patches. The yearly auto-save option makes it somewhat better, but could be expanded so that it can be set to once every 3rd month.

The complexity is initially a barrier, and can be quite overwhelming in comparison with other game genres. On the other hand, once you understand the in-game help and the basics of the game, you are able to play the game at some level. Slowly you appreciate new features of the game and take them into account in your decisions. So the way you play the game and understand the historical climate becomes still more multi-faceted. This is in line with learning theories on computer games that stress scaffolding, incremental learning, and probing (Gee, 2007). You are able to slowly expand your knowledge and constantly test your understanding. For example, the domestic policies demand a good overview of the game to realise the consequences. The complexity is also apparent in the messages that pop-up, which are initially quite overwhelming. It is possible for you to turn some of this off, and the game will remember your selections. Still, it is a problem for most players, and especially players with less experience.

Another problem is the pace of the game. Initially it can seem slow and with few events, however this is possible to regulate by turning up the speed, which is recommended when you play. You then pause the game when an event occurs. In this way the game plays a bit like SimCity, where you will also run out of money and patience if you have the speed on slow. As you learn more about the game you can speed the time up between events, or gather information in peaceful times that will improve your ability to make the right decisions, when events occur. The game has rich statistics on other nations with valuable information, and to stay on top of the diplomatic relations is quite a task.

Sometimes it also seems quite odd that nations outside of Europa become part of European alliances. For example, Creek is at war with Austria although they have absolutely no contact. Although the diplomatic system is more advanced than most strategy games, it is a problem that you can only be in one alliance and not enter into a non-aggression pact, or as France and England, make minor alliances with Native American nations. It also seems that the nations outside of Europa are far easier to play than

European nations mostly due to less competition and the possibility for expanding.

Educational considerations

I believe that the game has educational potential, and I have conducted a two month-long history course, teaching with the game in a Danish high school involving 85 students and two teachers. This has served as the basis for my PhD (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005).

Although on the surface the game seems very interesting from an educational perspective, there are several challenges. The game is one of the most advanced strategy games, and tries to borrow a lot from the simulation genre in that you can choose your own goals, and the underlying model is quite complex. This means that you need a lot of time to learn the game. This problem is to some degree relieved by the tutorials, but for the students without computer game experience it is a long road before they master the basics of the game, and can focus on the more educationally relevant historical questions.

The experiences with students aged 16-18 years suggest that the learning curve is very steep, and if you only play a couple of hours for 2 weeks you will not be able to master the game. This problem is aggravated because the students with game experience will play the game for fun outside of class, while the students with less game experience tend to play it less at home.

The lack of game skills is a problem, as the students will focus on learning the game universe, interface, and rules instead of taking the experience to a higher level. At this higher level, they should analyze, reflect, and discuss the events in the game. Furthermore, these events should be understood in relation to historical knowledge and discussed in relation to other historical resources to gain an awareness of the underlying variable and dynamics of history in this period.

Even though you set-up groups and time for these discussions, most students do not have the tools and knowledge to engage in these discussions. It also seems that the concept of history as 'not just facts' does not really fit into most students' concept of history. They feel frustrated and unsure of what they are expected to do with the game, and what the purpose is. This is a trend that has become more apparent for history teachers over the years

Still, in my opinion Europa Universalis II is an interesting game for educational purposes and offers a rich game-based environment where you can explore the dynamics of history. However, it seems that the game would work best in a condensed one week theme-based cross-disciplinary teaching setting, where you have time to play the game for longer periods of time than 47 minutes (one lesson in Danish schools).

You may not be able to change the history books, but you will be get an entirely new world map when you finish the game. A map that you have shaped through wars, diplomacy, trade, and exploration over several centuries. This is history in action at it finest.

References

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