

el 8 historiador

Interview with Renaud Charpentier

Renaud Charpentier is game developer in Creative Assembly. Recently he directed *Total War Battles: Kingdom*; a strategy videogame set in the 10th century in England. The game is available for PC,

Mac, Android e iOS.



Renaud Charpentier. [Imagen cedida por el propio entrevistado]

El 8º Historiador: *What is the target audience of this game? What age or gender groups is it intended for?*

Renaud Charpentier: Anyone 12 years old and above! Really any player looking for some fairly deep strategy and tactical gameplay. Kingdom is built on the same pillars that any Total War game is appreciated for: high quality, grand scale strategy and historical grounding.

8° H: *Why did you choose to set the game in the 10th Century?*

R. C.: Kingdom is all about rising from rags to riches, starting as a village lord with literally a few acres and a mule and building a productive realm protected by an experienced army. The 10th century still allows for that on an individual scale, a single knight with a small force can still manage to carve out a kingdom for himself. There are no meta structures, like Nations or Empires, to prevent him from doing so. These bigger structures and a stricter feudal system will developed shortly thereafter after as a way to stabilize countries and to limit local wars between neighbors.

8° H: *Why did you choose England as the game's setting? Is there something particular about the culture, architecture, society or geography that makes it more interesting or more appealing?*

R. C.: Well, England in 915 is particularly interesting for us as it is in a state of constant strife; there is not yet a true King of England. Many smaller and bigger Kingdoms fight either for their survival or for supremacy, so it fits particularly well with what we want you to experience. Also, Creative Assembly is base in Horsham, England, so it's always great to use geography you know very well. There are game mechanisms that come directly from our own experience here in West Sussex: floods in autumn, droughts in summer, sheep herding and river management... Also, for everything military it was pretty easy for us to get references, historical data and an understanding of what was realistic for the time.

8° H: *Why did you decide to use castles as the basic organization unit, even though they weren't as common during this time?*

R. C.: The 9th and 10th centuries saw the emergence of castles as a form of protection from invaders (especially Vikings in England). Initially many of them were simple motte-and-bailey structures, but these were vulnerable to fire. Eventually, this design started to develop into the stronger classical medieval castle we all know. Quite often they were extensions or improvement on previous structures, wooden ones or even more ancient ones like Roman walls. The lord you play in

Kingdom has the rare fortune to start with a stone castle and then has the opportunity to exploit quarries to build others. That certainly contributes to your success... history favors and remembers the ones that used more advanced technologies; this is true for castles too.

8° H: *What kind of research did you do to develop the historical aspect of the game?*

R. C.: As with any Total War game we start with history books. As we live in England it was pretty easy to get high quality documentation; much easier than for other games we did where the best books might not be directly available or translated. Some of us also visited local museums and well known London exhibits like the British Museum. There are many relics of these days around us here, but you have to travel quite a bit as they are spread among villages. That was for the setting, the buildings and the economy; but for the tactics and the military warfare, the sources are less numerous. Rome had a very well described and organized military system, with formations, tactics, and dedicated units. After Rome abandoned England in the 4th century, that military heritage faded away. The armies became much smaller in size and much less organized, going back to straight field battles with simpler strategies. So we inferred how it might have been in these times by looking at what could have remained of the Roman heritage and what we know happened in the later medieval times.

8° H: *At what point in the game's development does the historical research take place?*

R. C.: It takes place at the start, in the first phase - the pre-production phase. When the core of the game is decided, each of its elements described and prototyped. This is where we choose the buildings, the units, the terms and the economic systems we are going to use. So we draw inspiration from history with particular attention to the details which can translate into interesting gameplay systems. We create games first and foremost, so we aim for something fun to play that makes sense historically, we are not creating history books and so can choose not to translate some realities of the period or, on the contrary, amplify others if they serve the game interest well.

8° H: *Is any member of the development team a professional historian?*

R. C.: Historical expertise is useful in preproduction, in other words during the first months of a project which will take several years. So we don't usually have full time historian with us in the development team, we work with external experts that advise us on the period we are covering.

8° H: *If not, is there anyone helping with historical details in the artistic, architectural or archaeological fields? We would like to know if you were helped by professionals to design the castles and other materials, such as weapons and armor. If not, what sources did you use to help with their designs?*

R. C.: Our sources can vary depending of the game and historical period, but for Kingdom we had access to a lot of good reference books, so we used these as a base. That can be complemented by online resources, especially for weapons, armors and items where a photograph from a museum item is always better than a literary description. Historical specialists work more as gatekeepers for us: they review what we plan to create and warn us if something is clearly irrelevant or out of place, time wise. Some aspects of 10th century England are well documented, while others lack documentation almost entirely, so we got a bit of freedom and tried to interpret what could have been from what was before that time, the Roman occupation, and what came after and was certainly already "in the making". England was not yet a unified country, so you had greater disparities in terms of architecture than what you find 300 years later.

8° H: *Why did you decide to develop a historical videogame instead of a fiction alone? Is a historical theme profitable for videogames?*

R. C.: Kingdom is a Total War game and using historical settings has always been a staple of what we do since Shogun, set in medieval Japan. Using history as a base has some advantages. First of all you already start with a rich, coherent and documented world to build your game in. Dragons and space ships are great, but you have to create them all from scratch and then aim for the coherence history gives you to begin with. It's also very important for strategy games that players know about the "tools" they are going to be using – the units they are going to be

playing with. You already know that knights should charge archers but avoid pikemen; you already know that your levies are cheap fodder troops and that your crossbowmen should avoid melee combat at all cost but can deal great damage at long range. But if we give you a Class3 Nadelian Corvette equipped with ion cannons... you don't know that it is the perfect counter to a Nebulean Orbital Station... we will have to teach you that and you will have to learn it, making the game harder to understand. So it's not a question of profitability, it's more a question of richness and accessibility .That's probably why among the great strategy games licenses you will find many that use historical settings.

8° H: *Would you say that historical accuracy is among your prime objectives? Or is the medieval background just to give the videogame an attractive appearance?*

R. C.: Our prime objective is to propose a fun and deep game, not a fully accurate but boring one, that is for sure. The background is here to give accessibility and also richness, to help the immersion of players in our virtual world. So we respect history in the sense that we won't do or use something that is completely out of place, but we won't sacrifice gameplay on the altar of exactitude. It's a balancing act but most of the time history helps us, it brings us habits, tactics, ideas that we can then translate in game systems. So it's definitively more than just a backdrop.

8° H: Based on your criteria, is this game meant to be historically didactic? That is, while having fun playing the game, can we learn elements of history at the same time? Was this idea among your initial objectives from the beginning of the game's development?

R. C.: We won't pretend to be great history teachers, that is for schools and history books, and it would be a bit farfetched for any game to try and take on that role. But at the same time, we do try to make sure that the player does learn something every now and then when they least expect it. Games are very immersive, that's their strength, and so once you are in there, you do learn quite

a bit, even if it's not the principal objective of the experience. We see that as a good historical novel: *The Three Musketeers* is an adventure, filled with great characters, plots and actions. It's not a history book, but, as we do, it respects its setting, so after reading it you realize that you now know quite a lot about the old French regime. We think our game, at best, can achieve the same result, a familiarity with a time period.

8° H: *As videogame designers basing your ideas on history, do you believe that historical accuracy must sometimes be subjugated or even sacrificed to get a better gameplay experience or to make the game more attractive to the public?*

R. C.: You should not sacrifice anything, but you will have to choose, and so choose to ignore some details because they don't help you design a better game. To go back to the stone built castles that we let you create in *Kingdom*: some existed in these times, but we know they were rare and that few lords got to build them. Letting players build these is better for the game (nicer, justify walls blocking water and invaders etc...) but not a sacrifice of historical truth, we just omit that most other castles would have been made of wood. We choose to represent one reality of that time and not another one. But no, you don't get to use cannons, even primitive ones. That would be snapping the neck of historical accuracy.

8° H: *Developing a videogame requires an interdisciplinary team. Were your ideas for the game ever rejected by your fellow team members? How much influence do you have over the decisions being made about the game's development?*

R. C.: Many design ideas are rejected along the course of development, because many can prove to be weak. There is a great difference between a "good idea" and a working game system, and before it is implemented and tested you can't be really sure that it will be "fun" and interesting. An idea can "work" and be doable, but still prove not that strong in the end. It can also be other specialists (programmers, artists...) that tell you that it can't be done like that or that it won't look good, so you need to exchange a lot, discuss ideas, be very open to suggestions, changes and improvement proposals. In the end the game director is

responsible for the direction of the game, so they are the gate keepers, they decide what goes in and what can't, but it doesn't mean all of their own ideas gets in, either. A good team operates like a rock band: everyone brings something, but the result is more than the sum of the individual contributions.



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