

review: Medieval Empires

by Karen Kaye

Type: Medieval Strategy Game

Author: John Willoughby

Shareware Fee: \$25.00 by check or money order (domestic only, \$30.00 international customers)

Requires: A Macintosh, 2 MB RAM for BW, 3 MB RAM for Color, Power PC compatible

Protection: None

Before I started the Medieval Empires (ME) review, I decided to do some research on the period. As part of this effort, I went out and rented Kenneth Branagh's "Henry V", again. Honestly, watching it was a synergistic combination of business and pleasure. (If IMG were in a different sort of business, I would rate the movie a big thumbs up). Admittedly, Shakespeare took some artistic liberties with his version of the story. None-the-less, the movie provides valuable insight into the life of the medieval monarch.

Above all else, the story is a testament to the direct relationship between the abilities of the king and the success of the kingdom. The necessity of personal intervention in even the smallest matters of substance taxed the rulers span of control to the limit. The loyalty of the subjects was a fickle thing, and the king constantly had to nurture the relationship with his most important knights. A clear line of succession was absolutely essential, since the civil wars that could result from a lack of an heir, could end the work of a lifetime to pieces in a matter of months. Disease, starvation, and superstitious ignorance appeared at every turn to conspire against the plans of the monarch. Raiders and barbarians would appear without warning and ravage the countryside. Often a monarch was fortunate just to hold the kingdom together against all these elements. With the average life expectancy being roughly 35 years (actually less for women), a regent's time for glory was woefully short.

The Dark Ages. Medieval Empires is a strategic "simulation" of the rise and fall of Kingdoms and Empires in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa in the years from 770 to 1470. The players take the part of medieval monarchs and attempt to lead their dynasties to dominate Europe. There are five scenarios — each covering approximately 100 years — which represent various periods during the Middle Ages. The campaign scenario covers seven hundred years of human history.

nce the program is launched and a scenario is selected, the players will be presented with a window showing the kingdoms and rulers for that scenario. Rulers start as either "Mac" or "Prince." Any or all of the former may be selected as player controlled, while the latter represent the rulers of smaller, fleeting states which will always remain under computer control. Players can even edit the monarchs' attributes, if they want to alter their historical capabilities.

All the action takes place on a single screen, which is subdivided into a number of panels. The Message Panel informs the players of the results of their actions and displays various random events which occur throughout the game. The Date Panel displays the current year. The game is turn based, with each turn representing the passage of five years. Monarchs take turns in order of increasing overall abilities: the least capable is forced to go first, and is most vulnerable to exploitation by the others. The Kingdom Info Panel displays information about the kingdom currently taking its turn. This includes the names of the kingdom and its ruler, the ruler's attributes, the number of actions remaining in the kingdom's turn, and the amount of gold in the kingdom's treasury. The Map Panel covers most of the screen and it is here that most of the activity takes place.

The map exists either in an Overview or Zoomed Mode. Overview mode is shown when the computer controlled players are taking their turns, and is good for getting a "feel" of overall developments. Zoomed mode is selected for the players own turns. Obviously, the information displayed gets more detailed. Provinces — an illustrative geographic area which is the basic unit of land in the game — display their name and show up to three icons descriptive of conditions in the region. The icons can be player selected from among the following: Fortification, Prosperity, Religion, Seafaring or Unrest.

Its Good to be the King. Medieval Empires is well documented, and the “docs” are included in several formats. I recommend that players do read this info, since John Willoughby makes certain assumptions — such as what it takes to pacify the Vikings once they get conquered — which significantly impact game play. In addition, the documentation provides complete explanations on the impact of random events and even goes as far as to point out the relationships between various language groups (this impacts a number of processes in the game, including diplomacy). After this short reading assignment, players are ready for the game.

Every monarch has four attributes. The first three, Prowess, Administration, and Diplomacy, determine how good the ruler is at war, government, and diplomacy. The fourth attribute, Drive, determines how many actions a ruler may take each turn. Each action represents a major effort by the ruler, and may be expended in attempts to campaign in or raid provinces outside the kingdom, defend against other kings’ campaigns and raids, to rule or fortify one’s own provinces, or to practice diplomacy. The execution of the actions is handled rather abstractly, but covers the major types of activity monarchs may desire to accomplish on behalf of the kingdom. The game also tracks the ruler’s language and faith. The rulers of a kingdom will change during a scenario as they die and are succeeded.

Each five year turn begins with a number of random events which may effect one or more of the kingdoms. After the events take effect, any Raiders that are active will attempt to pillage provinces in their target areas. When the Raiders have finished their depredations, the human and computer players take their turns.

Once during each turn the players may tax the kingdom at one of five rates, without having to expend action points. The tax rate selected must attempt to balance the monetary requirements of the realm with the potential rebellions incited by a high tax rate. A monarch with poor administration skills needs to be exceptionally careful with the taxation policy: well developed provinces are especially difficult to pacify, and are much more likely to rebel and break away from the kingdom.

The game continues until the end of the scenario or the campaign. During a typical scenario, each kingdom will have been ruled by several monarchs of various abilities. The kingdoms will experience growth during the reign of able leaders, and are likely to regress during the time of weak kings. The winner is determined by totaling points for various provinces claimed and owned, as well as the prosperity of these provinces.

[The Orb, the Scepter and the Crown.](#) I downloaded the ME demo during a routine canvassing of the on-line services for new files. I scanned the accompanying info and started the game. I played through the first scenario, and started a second one. I had mixed emotions, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Despite the initial impression of simplicity, I decided that it had a certain appeal.

First and foremost, ME replicates the atmosphere of misery of the Middle Ages with great fidelity. The cycles of poor harvests, disease and even the Black Death countered most attempts to build a better society. The Vikings controlled certain provinces of Europe so totally with their raids, that even the greatest kingdoms were unable to oppose them. The Great Mongol Hordes swept all before them, and nearly trampled Christian civilization into the dust. During this period the world surely was no garden spot.

The game has good replay value. Only the starting points of the scenarios are historically accurate, from there things develop differently each time. This way the player is not locked into a predetermined series of events based on historic chronology. A few major historic events, such as the splitting of the Frankish Empire at a predetermined date, do occur in

every scenario.

ME is fast, even on a 68030 machine. Even though I was not able to confirm this personally, the game is certainly even faster on a Power PC (PPC). The campaign can be played in about two hours, and a scenario can be completed in about 20-25 minutes. The AI is proficient and very versatile: it can play any or all of the kingdoms. The interface is very friendly, and a breeze to learn. Players can modify the ratings given to the monarchs. The graphics are rather plain, and reminded me of a Risk™ map. This is a weakness, but not detrimental overall. Lastly, there is no need to hook up the stereo speakers: aside from an occasional error beep, the game produces no sound.

This is not Camelot. I admit, after my initial doubts, I had a good time with this game. It ran smoothly, and was Powerbook friendly. The more I played, the more I wished that John would expand it, and release it as a commercial product. There are some aspects of the Middle Ages which are not covered in the current version, and which, if included, would really raise the value of the game. For example, the game ignores the Crusades completely, and therefore omits a series of events which defined the middle part of this time period. Additionally, some other features are handled rather abstractly.

iplomacy is one of these areas. It would be far more rewarding if marriages could be arranged, fiefdoms granted, titles given and ambassadors sent. The game should allow the players to take more specific actions, instead of just a generic diplomacy die roll. Similarly, succession is purely a chance thing. I would prefer being able to spend action points toward ensuring that I have descendants, instead of just being told that I died without heirs. The game could also track the age of the monarchs, and perhaps change their attributes with age: this way regents could have a higher Drive in their youth, and possibly better

Diplomacy skills in their old age.

The game made me wish that a ruler's attributes were not player modifiable, or at least that this was a selectable option at the beginning of the scenario. It is far too tempting to improve a weak king, instead of working through the situation. Furthermore, with experience, I wanted each turn to cover less than 5 years of time. With life expectancy being what it was in the Middle Ages, a monarch like Henry V, disappears from the world scene in just a few turns. This too would make a nice option.

The Chronicles. John Willoughby has been refining the game for some time now. It has undergone several minor fixes, and this version (3.1.2) corrects a major bug encountered by PPC users among others. John is looking for feedback from the players, as well as ideas for new features. He wants the game see the game continue to evolve.

The Royal Court. Having said that I had fun playing ME and how well it reproduced the feel of the Dark Ages, I must explain the low overall rating. I considered the whole product. While the game is fast and fun, it is lacking in several areas.

The graphics are simple, and the lack of any sound becomes noticeable after a while. Not every game should be Myst™, but I think the "average" Mac gamer — if there is such a thing — expects more. I also considered the price of the game. It is hard to assess the value of someone's creativity, the best that can be done is to make some comparisons. When I consider some of the excellent shareware utilities that can be had for \$10-15, I have to say that ME is not cheap. Ultimately, everyone can decide this issue for themselves: that is the beauty of shareware.

The game will find its greatest popularity among those who enjoy the period of the Middle Ages. I recommend that you give the demo a try and support John's work if you like it. It has much promise, and I would really like to see it continue to develop.

Pros

- Reproduces the "feel" of ruling a Middle Ages monarchy
- Good historical research
- Fast
- Versatile AI

Cons

- Simple graphics
- Lack of sound
- At \$25.00, it is not cheap
- Some actions are handled abstractly
- Omits completely several major historic events from the period of the Middle Ages

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