GAME GURU

1

DAVE MORRIS AND LEO HARTAS

STRATEGY
GAMES

THE MIDDLE SEA

ILEX

1 GAME GURU

STRATEGY GAMES

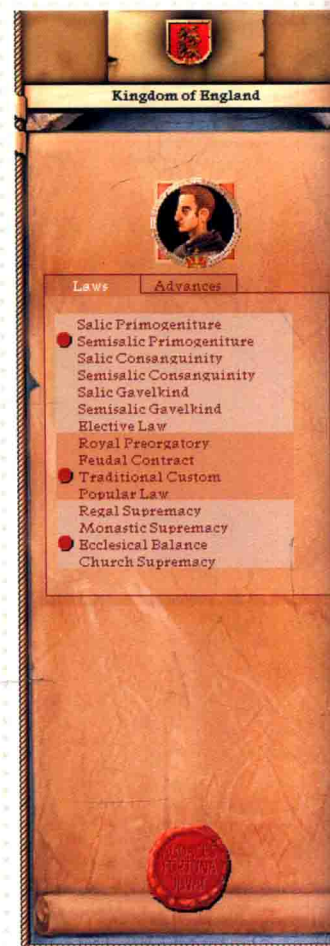DAVE MORRIS AND LEO HARTAS

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PREFACE

As any art form evolves, people start to analyse what is going on there under the bonnet. We are interested in finding out what makes the best examples work, so that we can try to make more compelling films or novels or games in the future.

The trap is when analysis becomes dry and academic. This is what we have striven to avoid with the Game Guru series. Our aim is not to create a series of textbooks where the obsessive picking apart of detail can obscure the bigger picture. Instead, we are presenting the reader with what we hope will be a thought-provoking overview of each genre.

Criticism in art is not just about judgment, or saying what is good or bad. Criticism should also have the goal of promoting understanding. The critical viewer or reader or player is one who will demand higher standards, which benefits us all. In the Game Guru series we hope to impart insights that will help designers and players alike to take a clearer view of what works in games, and why.

If you are a designer, we want to help you make better games. If you are a player, we want to help you enjoy games more. And no matter who you are, we want Game Gurus to stimulate your enthusiasm for the medium of gaming. Because what games will become over the next century is up to you.

DAVE MORRIS AND **LEO HARTAS**

Crusader Kings
Paradox.

ONLY A SHORT TIME AGO, COMPUTER AND VIDEOGAMES WERE REGARDED AS A TRIVIAL PASTIME. NOW, ONLY THE MOST DOGGED REACTIONARY WOULD REFUSE TO RECOGNISE THAT THEY HAVE BECOME AN ART FORM IN THEIR OWN RIGHT. ONE WHO SAYS, 'OH, I DON'T PLAY GAMES' IS LIKE A THEATRE SNOB OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY REFUSING TO ENTER A CINEMA – AND THEREBY MISSING OUT ON THE EXCITEMENT OF AN ENTERTAINMENT REVOLUTION.

January 2, 1066 ❖ 250 ☖ 100 ✝ 100

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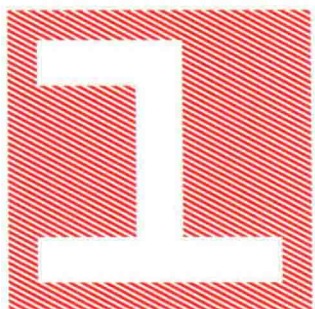

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STRATEGY

STRATEGY IS THE ART OF SOLVING PROBLEMS. MORE PEDANTICALLY, STRATEGIC THINKING INVOLVES ANALYSING A COMPLEX PROBLEM DOMAIN AND EVOLVING A METHODOLOGY, OR STRATEGY, FOR SOLVING IT. 'A METHOD IS NEEDED IN ORDER TO REASON ACCURATELY', WROTE DESCARTES.

MORE PERTINENTLY TO THE SUBJECT UNDER DISCUSSION, CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ SAID: 'STRATEGY IS THE PLAN OF THE WAR'. IF YOU SUBSTITUTE THE WORD 'CONFLICT' FOR WAR – WHERE 'CONFLICT' ALLOWS A BROAD ENOUGH INTERPRETATION TO INCLUDE CHALLENGES OF EXPLORATION AND SURVIVAL POSED BY THE ENVIRONMENT AND BLIND FATE – THEN CLAUSEWITZ'S DEFINITION IS ON THE MONEY.

STRATEGY GAMES DIFFER FROM SIMPLE PUZZLE GAMES. TYPICALLY, PUZZLES ARE NON-COMPLEX. PUZZLES MIGHT BE COMPLICATED TO SOLVE, BUT THAT'S SOMETHING ELSE. COMPLEXITY MEANS THAT THE CONDITIONS OF THE PROBLEM DOMAIN ARE NOT SIMPLE RESTATEMENTS OF THE UNDERLYING RULES. IN OTHER WORDS, IN STRATEGY GAMES, THE PROBLEM REQUIRING SOLUTION OUGHT TO BE EMERGENT FROM ANOTHER SET OF CAUSES.

WHY IS THIS A REQUIREMENT? THE ANSWER IS THAT WE HUMANS ENJOY ACQUIRING AN INTUITIVE GRASP OF COMPLEX PROBLEMS. THE CHESS PLAYER EXPERIENCES THIS WHEN HE OR SHE GLANCES AT A BOARD AND KNOWS AT ONCE WHO IS WINNING. STRATEGY IS THE PLEASURE OF SEEING THE BIG PICTURE.

THE PROBLEM DOMAIN IS AN ABSTRACTION THAT DISTILS A SCENARIO DOWN TO ITS INTERESTING ELEMENTS. IT COULD BE A MATHEMATICAL MODEL OF THE ECONOMY, IN WHICH CASE THE STRATEGIES INVOLVED ARE THE GOVERNMENT'S PROJECTIONS FOR TAXATION AND PUBLIC SPENDING. IN STRATEGY GAMES ALL KINDS OF SUB-GENRES ARE POSSIBLE.
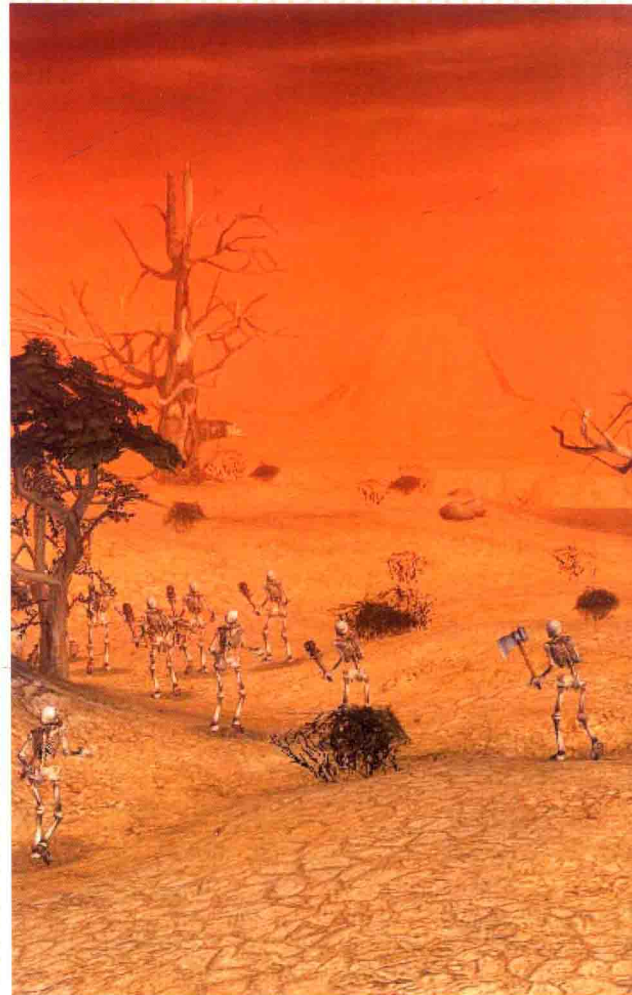
'NO ONE ELEMENT FORMS THE HEART OF STRATEGY GAMES. THE MAIN OBJECTIVE IS TO ENCOURAGE THE PLAYER TO MAKE DECISIONS AND FORM A STRATEGY. AN IMPORTANT PRACTICAL POINT TO NOTE WHEN MAKING A GAME IS ENSURING THAT, IF YOU GO TO THE EFFORT OF IMPLEMENTING A SPECIFIC ELEMENT (BUILDING STRUCTURES, STRATEGIC BENEFITS FOR EXPLORATION, TACTICAL COMBAT), THEN THE PLAYER MUST CLEARLY UNDERSTAND THE CHOICES YOU ARE PRESENTING AND SHOULD GAIN ENJOYMENT FROM MAKING THE CHOICE. YOU ALSO HAVE TO ENSURE THAT, IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE ELEMENT, THEY WORK TOGETHER. YOU COULD SAY THAT THE HEART OF THE STRATEGY GAME IS MADE UP OF COMPONENTS, AND TO FUNCTION PROPERLY THOSE COMPONENTS NEED TO WORK IN HARMONY.'

PAUL TWYNHOLM, LEAD DESIGNER AT CLIMAX

Left: *Spellforce: The Order of Dawn*. Phenomic.

Above: *Gettysberg*. Firaxis. *Command & Conquer: Generals*. EA Pacific. *Haegemonia*. DigitalReality.

Desert Rats vs. Afrika Corps
from Digital Reality

1 WAR

COMPUTER STRATEGY GAMES CAN TRACE THEIR LINE OF DESCENT FROM THE MONUMENTAL HEX–GRID BOARDGAMES USED TO SIMULATE GRAND SWATHES OF HISTORY SUCH AS THE RISE AND THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE OR, ON AN ONLY MARGINALLY LESS GRANDIOSE SCALE, THE CAMPAIGNS OF NAPOLEON.

IT IS THEREFORE NOT SURPRISING THAT THE EMPHASIS IN THE GENRE HAS BEEN ON WAR. WHEN YOU ARE FACING ANOTHER PLAYER ACROSS A PAPER MAP AND YOUR DICE AND COUNTERS ARE TO HAND, THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE WINNER. APPEASEMENT IS FOR WIMPS.

WHEN THE GENRE MOVED OVER INTO THE NEW MEDIUM OF COMPUTER GAMES, THAT ALL CHANGED – POTENTIALLY AT LEAST. WITHOUT THE NEED FOR HUMAN OPPONENTS, THE NATURE OF THE ENTERTAINMENT COULD CHANGE. STRATEGY-FLAVORED VARIANTS OF SOLITAIRE ALLOW THE PLAYER TO EXPLORE AND COLONIZE THE NEW WORLD, TO MANAGE A CITY OR AN AMUSEMENT PARK, TO BECOME AN ANT OR A GOD – OR ANYTHING IN BETWEEN.

CONFLICT REMAINED AT THE CORE OF STRATEGY, BUT NOW CONFLICT WAS OPEN TO WIDER INTERPRETATION. INSTEAD OF AN ADVERSARY INTENT ON CONQUEST, THE CONFLICT MIGHT COME FROM MANAGING TENSIONS WITHIN THE GAME – MAKING YOUR POPULACE BOTH HAPPY AND HARD-WORKING, FOR EXAMPLE, OR FINDING A HAPPY MEDIUM BETWEEN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND STABILITY. SO STRATEGY TOOK A FEW STEPS INTO THE MANAGEMENT GENRE, BUT HUMAN NATURE DOESN'T CHANGE. THE REAL ALLURE WILL ALWAYS BE WAR. CLAUSEWITZ FAMOUSLY DECLARED WAR TO BE THE CONTINUATION OF POLITICS WITH THE ADMIXTURE OF OTHER MEANS. IN THE CASE OF MOST STRATEGY GAMES WE CAN REVERSE THAT. POLITICS EXPLORATION, DIPLOMACY AND TRADE ARE ALL JUST PRELUDES TO WAR.

'KILL THEM ALL. GOD WILL KNOW HIS OWN.'
ARNAUD AMAURY

Even the most beatific pacifist can see the appeal. You are a commander of armies and you are fighting to become ruler of the entire world – even if that world is just a single map the size of a football field. In true strategy games you plan the spread of your empire, choosing your battles and advancing ruthlessly against your rivals. Daring, timing and tactics are the keys to victory. There can be only one winner and you are determined to be that one. The play intention at the heart of strategy is to make yourself master of all you survey.

Strategy is not the same as tactics. Tactics deal with the way you deploy the troops you have in a given battle. Strategy views the bigger picture, determining not only the mix of troops you bring to that battle, and the place you choose to fight, but your overall doctrine of war and the way you set about achieving your goals.

'THE MOST CERTAIN WAY OF ENSURING VICTORY IS TO MARCH BRISKLY AND IN GOOD ORDER AGAINST THE ENEMY, ALWAYS ENDEAVOURING TO GAIN GROUND.' *FREDERICK THE GREAT*

The goals themselves are usually set by the victory conditions of the game. Total destruction of the foe is not only unrealistic; it also tends to create a drawn-out endgame by forcing the winning player to scour the map looking for every last enemy soldier who must be wiped out to trigger victory.

Preferable is some form of partial victory or a specific condition that will cause computer opponents to surrender. You can also legitimately apply this to human-controlled troops. Why should they not throw down their arms when the cause becomes hopeless, after all? It's a good feature to thwart the occasional never-say-die human player who derives warped solace from forcing his opponent to play on long after the outcome of the game is obvious.

'WHEN THE ENEMY ADVANCES, WITHDRAW.
WHEN HE STOPS, HARASS. WHEN HE TIRES, STRIKE.
WHEN HE RETREATS, PURSUE.' MAO TSE TUNG

SECTION 1 WAR

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'IF AN INJURY HAS TO BE DONE TO A MAN, IT SHOULD BE SO SEVERE THAT HIS VENGEANCE NEED NOT BE FEARED.' NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI

Above: *Time of Defiance* from Nicely Crafted Entertainment.

Below: *Against Rome* by Independent Arts.

Specific goals are common in campaign levels, especially in games with an explicitly historical basis. Here the player must satisfy an objective in order to win. For example, holding a bridge for 20 minutes, gathering 500 units of gold, capturing all ten sacred relics, or building a 'wonder of the world'.

Some games allow players to define their own objectives. This can create interesting gameplay but needs to be handled adroitly. The different objectives must be of equivalent difficulty. Also, there need to be clues that will allow opponents to deduce the player's customised victory condition. Then the tension between achieving the objective and disguising it becomes a matter of strategic thought. If the objective can abruptly be accomplished without the other players having any chance to anticipate or counter it, the feature of being able to choose the objective adds nothing but an element of luck. And it isn't luck that's bad in a strategy game, only luck in the absence of anything else.

Above: *War Times* by IS Games.

Right: CDV Software's **Codename: Panzers.**

UNITS AND ATTRIBUTES

GAME DESIGN INVOLVES CHOOSING A LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION THAT ALLOWS USERS TO PLAY AROUND WITH THE INTERESTING ELEMENTS OF A SCENARIO WHILE NOT HAVING TO BOTHER ABOUT THE CLUTTER. WHAT THE DESIGNER IDENTIFIES AS IMPORTANT – THE QUINTESSENTIAL ELEMENTS THAT HE OR SHE USES TO DEFINE UNITS (CHARACTERS) AND ATTRIBUTES IN THE GAME ABSTRACTION – IMPLY A DIRECTION AND EMPHASIS FOR THE GAMEPLAY.

Say you're setting out to create a game called *In Tents*, the strategy game of camping trips. Characters have to complete various tasks to stay happy and healthy. Just considering the physical attributes of the campers, you're going to need to define things like speed (how fast the character moves), appetite (how much food the character needs), stamina (how long a character can stay active before needing a nap), strength (governs tasks like chopping wood, the loads the character can carry, etc.) and aim (accuracy of shooting gun or bow).

But how many attributes do you need? Too many and your game becomes a distinctly solitary vice. On the other hand, too few and there's going to be no depth of gameplay. Also, some of the attributes may be derived from or interdependent on others. For instance, stamina is the rate at which the character uses up energy. We might expect

high strength or speed to burn up energy faster, and so give lower stamina. That's potentially interesting for gameplay purposes – it means that it's wasteful to use the strongest character for light tasks that a couple of weaker characters could handle. But it also means we've jumped a level of abstraction, and while this is OK as far as the player is concerned, it still needs to be thought through in the ur-design – the underlying design layer – or it could lead to more serious problems later.

'Each unit should always come with a price tag: resources, spawning time, upgrades, sacrificed units. Also, the unit should have a weakness. A powerful ground unit may not be able to attack airborne units, for example. For a unit to be valid there must be way to counter it.'
DANNY BELANGER
Director of Internal Development at Strategy First

Below: *Magic & Mayhem: The Art of Magic* from Climax. Units are conjured up by wizards to be sent into battle.

Bottom: *Codename: Panzers* from CDV Software.