

Chapter I

Discovering the New Age of Empires

Age of Empires III RETAINS THE WINNING ELEMENTS THE PREVIOUS *Age of Empires* GAMES AND INTRODUCES A NUMBER OF NEW CONCEPTS THAT ADD A UNIQUE STRATEGIC DIMENSION TO THE GAME. THE HOME CITY IS THE MOST REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE. THE HOME CITIES YOU CREATE CARRY OVER FROM GAME TO GAME, OPENING UP A SLEW OF NEW STRATEGIC OPTIONS.

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS AN OVERVIEW OF THE GAME THAT SHOULD BE ESPECIALLY USEFUL FOR NEW PLAYERS. IT ALSO REVIEWS SOLO AND MULTIPLAYER SKIRMISH MAPS AND OFFERS ADVICE ON SETTING UP SKIRMISH GAMES. THE BROAD CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER APPLY TO SKIRMISH, MULTIPLAYER, AND CAMPAIGN GAMES. NOTE THAT THE CAMPAIGN IS DISCUSSED IN DETAIL IN CHAPTERS 6, 7, AND 8.



Exploring the Game

If you're a new player, begin by firing up the game and selecting Learn to Play from the main game menu. Players new to real-time strategy games should then select Master the Basics; all others should proceed to Try a Game. Selecting Try a Game starts an Easy-level skirmish game between you and one other opponent. Helpful hints will guide you in what will hopefully be your first victorious game of *AoE III*. Note that both you and your opponent play as the British.

Having learned the basics, you might want to round off your newfound knowledge by reading the manual. The next thing to do is set up a Free-for-All skirmish game with any number of opponents. Make sure you switch on the game recorder; the Record Game check box is in the lower-right corner of the Single Player Skirmish menu. Play the game for roughly 10 minutes, then save and exit. Return to the main game menu and select the Help and Tools button. You'll see the option to view recorded games. Next, watch your game by using the pull-down menu to view the progress of selected opponents. You'll instantly pick up on the right moves to make to kick off any skirmish game of *AoE III*. Note that if you watch your own civ instead of spying on your opponents, the viewed locations change in accordance with your moves during the game. This may drive home a basic truth: half the time you spend watching something is better spent watching something else. Viewing a recorded game is a real eye-opener in terms of determining your playing skill (Figure I.1).

At this point, you might want to embark on the adventure of a campaign game. Note that in a campaign game, specific mission objectives will slant the development of your civilization(s); players new to the *AoE* series should play a few more skirmish games first to get a good grip on the game's economics (discussed in the next chapter). For now, let's continue with an overview of the game and the shortcuts you can take on your way to victory.



FIGURE I.1 *Whoa—how did they manage to build all that so fast?*



GAMEPLAY NOTE


*Skirmish games are ideal for honing your multiplayer skills. They provide the closest solo experience there is to playing online, and they help you perfect your favorite multiplayer strategies. In *AoE III*, skirmish games also let you build up your Home City for future online contests. For more details on multiplayer *AoE III*, check out Chapter 9.*

Preparing for a Good Fight

The first step in setting up a skirmish game is to create a Home City. The Home Cities screen that appears when you choose Skirmish from the main game menu features a Manage Home Cities button that accesses a list of options. Also click the Customize button to see whether you can beautify your Home City right away: some civilizations begin with up to 20 Home City customization choices, while others have none. You'll get extra customization choices when the Home City grows a level. Customizing the buildings is a neat way of making different cities of the same civilization look distinctive.

Once you've created and possibly customized your Home City or Cities, you'll be ready to enter the Single Player Skirmish screen to set up a game. *AoE III* lets you play against up to seven opponents in skirmish mode. Players may be organized into teams (meaning you have allies), or you can choose Free-for-All (no allies). New players should definitely start by playing one-on-one against a single opponent, and later try a game against multiple opponents within a team setup.

You've got just a few more steps left before you launch your game. To begin with, consider what map you want to play, because there are some big gameplay differences between them. To use an obvious example, choosing the watery Caribbean map means you'll be building a lot of ships, and wood will play an extra-important role in your economy. Note that any map that forces you to build a navy and make naval landings automatically encourages a Boom strategy (you'll find brief descriptions of classic RTS strategies in the game manual).



GAMEPLAY NOTE

The default difficulty level is Hard. This is the ideal setting for experienced AoE players who want a pleasant, challenging game. However, players new to the series should begin at Moderate difficulty, while players new to real-time strategy should select Easy.

The options on the pull-down map menu are as follows:

- **All Maps.** Selecting this option means the game will choose a map at random from all the maps available—including maps created by you or someone else with the game's Scenario Editor.
- **Standard Maps.** This option delivers a random map chosen from among the game's original 15 maps.
- **List of Maps by Name.** You can also choose a specific game world from the original 15 maps. After you choose a map, you must decide on the game rules. These are explained in the game manual, so just note that choosing Supremacy over Deathmatch makes for a faster ending to the game. Selecting a Nomad start has you build your civilization's colony from scratch (Figure I.2).

Finally, note that checking the Player Handicap box doesn't handicap you, but instead boosts your settlers' efficiency (gather rates). It may be a good choice when you want to even out the odds in a multiplayer game. However, note that experience points earned in a Player Handicap game won't count toward increasing your Home City level.



FIGURE 1.2 *Let the races begin!*

Winning Games

Once the game is rolling, keep one thing in your head at all times: your goal is to win. In Deathmatch mode, that means erasing your opponent(s) from the map. In Supremacy mode, that means beating up on your opponents so badly that they cry uncle and resign from the game. When a player resigns, his buildings and units remain on the game map. You can destroy them and earn extra experience points if your armed forces have nothing better to do (which is unlikely).

Winning games involves making an intelligent effort in three areas:

- **Exploration.** Locating your opponents is the number-one priority in any game. Locating treasures and economic resources comes in a close second. The Explorer unit and exploration in general are discussed later in this chapter.
- **Economy.** You don't need to have the strongest economy to win a game, but you certainly need a robust one. Efficient economic strategies differ according to your choice of civilization and game map, and are discussed in detail in Chapters 2 (general strategies) and 5 (civilization-specific strategies).
- **Military.** You need a strong army to raid opponents, defend against their raids, expand and secure new territories, and eventually raze all of your opponents' structures. We'll examine the game's military closely in Chapter 4; also, don't forget to read the manual. It contains descriptions of all the game's units, which aren't repeated in this guide.

The following scenario is a loose outline that weaves the activities in these three areas into a single thread. It's intended to get relatively new players up and running quickly. More-detailed economic and military strategies are discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 8.

THE ROAD TO VICTORY

The miniwalkthrough for a Skirmish game presented here begins with the earliest Starting Age choice available: Nomad. Players who begin the game in a later Age should skip the opening paragraphs.

To start with, use your Covered Wagon to build a Town Center right where you are, right away. The starting locations of competing civilizations are sometimes pretty close together, but there's no guarantee moving your Covered Wagon around will result in a better location. However, if a couple of neighboring players build nearby Town Centers right away, you may have a serious problem! The game doesn't allow building anything close to other players' towns, and when there are more than six players on a map things can easily get crowded (Figure I.3).

Of course, once you know a particular map you might pull off such opening gambits as moving the Covered Wagon to build your first Town Center in a better location. The payoff from this gambit depends on your starting position and on the map; if your Wagon has to travel a very long way to the right spot, it's not worth it. You'll lose too much time right at the start. As a rule of thumb, if building a Town Center in a different location from the starting position involves a delay of more than 30 game seconds, build right where you are. Keep in mind that the process of actually building a Town Center takes a full game minute!



FIGURE I.3 *Build your Town Center right away, and use your Explorer to make life difficult for nearby competitors.*

Your Explorer

Your Explorer is you. He is the immortal hero of AoE III, capable of a great variety of tasks. Most importantly, your Explorer is capable of building both Town Centers and Trading Posts. Remember to build Trading Posts with your Explorer, not with your settlers—it's much more efficient! Explorers have 400 hit points to begin with, and they gain 100 hit points with each Age advance; you can also boost their hit points, attack strength, and speed by recovering certain treasures. The Explorer is a self-healing unit that recovers hit points while motionless. However, if he loses all his hit points, he must be “rescued” by units belonging to your civilization. To effect an Explorer rescue, move your units into his vicinity. This might be difficult if your Explorer was felled in the middle of an enemy town; in that case, your only option might be to ransom him back to your Town Center. Do not hesitate to spend the 200 coin necessary if your Explorer has collapsed in enemy territory in the early stages of the game. An active Explorer supported by a couple of military units can make the money back very quickly by recovering a few treasures.

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Your second opening move should always be to allocate a hotkey to your Explorer or Explorer team. You'll want to be able to jump quickly to your Explorer, because in AoE III micromanaging your Explorer pays dividends in the shape of recovered treasures. Other players' Explorers will be very quick to recover any treasure that's unguarded or has a single guardian, so make sure they won't steal them from under your nose! Keep an eye on your Explorer's progress by watching the minimap; any white Xs that appear mark treasure locations. Treasures may consist of game resources (food, wood, coin), invisible game items (such as special armor for your Explorer), or units, and killing the treasure guardians gives a small experience-point bonus that is nevertheless quite meaningful in the opening stages of a game.

Some civilizations get a little bonus in the form of an extra exploring unit (such as the Dutch Envoy or French Native Scout); in other civilizations, the Explorer has an extra special ability (Portuguese Explorer's Spyglass, Spanish Explorer's ability to train War Dogs); Chapter 5 lists those details. What's important here is that you always remember to take maximum advantage of any exploration bonuses you enjoy. In real-time strategy games, swift initial reconnaissance is always key to victory, and in *AoE III* efficient exploration is further rewarded with the possibility of recovering many treasures.



ENSEMBLE STUDIOS

ENSEMBLE STUDIOS TIP

Don't forget! Not only can Explorers pick up treasures, but so can your settlers. This comes in handy when your Explorer is across the map and you want to pick up a treasure next to your base.
—Nick “The Moongoat” Currie



GAMEPLAY NOTE

AoE III introduces the concept of experience points, which count toward Home City shipments and higher Home City levels. Points are earned through game activities such as gathering resources, building structures, and destroying enemy buildings and units. The moment you reach an established point threshold, a Home City shipment will become available or your Home City will advance a level, letting you add an extra shipment to the Home City warehouse and a new customization to the way your Home City looks.

Home City Shipments

Each Home City starts at Level 1 with a set of 15 shipments distributed among four game Ages: Discovery, Colonial, Fortress, and Industrial. Initially, some shipments may be sent only once, while others may be sent infinite times. However, advancing into the fifth game Age means that most one-time shipments from the previous four Ages can be sent again. Shipment contents may include game resources (food, wood, coin), units, and technologies that may improve your economy or your units. A Home City receives the ability to send an extra shipment for each level increase, up to a total of 20 shipments. As explained in the manual, your choice of the five extra shipments should mirror your strategy of playing with a chosen civilization. For example, when playing an economically oriented civ such as the Dutch, you might choose to give yourself even more economic advantages to build an economic powerhouse. However, never forget one essential fact: what matters most is not how many shipments you'll get, but how fast you'll get them. Getting a couple of shipments earlier than any other player can give you a very good edge in the early stages of the game. Do not overlook the importance of the rather prosaic shipments that contain resources! An early shipment of 300 food will often be exactly what you need to swiftly advance into the Colonial Age, or quickly build up your army once you're there. You'll find more information about Home Cities and shipment choices in Chapter 3.

Experience points are accumulated through a very wide variety of game tasks such as gathering resources, constructing new buildings, training new units, and destroying enemy units and buildings. You'll quickly notice an important rule in action: destroying something earns more experience points than building it. *AoE III* is a game, not real life, and war pays—remember that whenever you feel queasy about killing a few enemy settlers (the screams are very entertaining).

THE BENEFITS OF WAR

Making war can both destroy your opponents and earn you plenty of experience points. To begin with, you earn a good number of experience points for the military units you create to wage war. Subsequently, attacking a rival player means earning experience points for every destroyed enemy unit and structure. It's easy to accumulate plenty of experience points making war (Figure 1.4), and plenty of experience points means more and faster shipments from your Home City.



FIGURE 1.4 Burn, baby, burn, and make me plenty of experience points.

Here we come to an important difference between *AoE III* and many other RTS games. In most games, waging war means paying a heavy penalty in economic development. In *AoE III*, this doesn't have to be the case. And since early shipments are especially valuable in terms of quick economic development, making war can actually speed up your economy a little instead of throttling it. For example, a shipment of eight free Crossbowmen not only gives you extra muscle, but also saves you a whopping 480 wood that you can use to build up your colonial capital. The moral is this: making war pays off especially well in the early stages of the game.

To step on the warpath, however, you need to reach the Colonial Age (obviously you won't have a problem when you start the game in the Colonial Age or later). The Colonial Age lets you construct buildings that train military units, and opens up military-unit shipments from the Home City. It follows that a civilization started as Nomad or in the Discovery Age must focus on advancing to the Colonial Age as quickly as possible. The following section provides relevant advice, and assumes you've chosen Supremacy as the victory condition on the Game Rules menu. If you've chosen Deathmatch, things are simpler—you begin the game with a large stock of resources.



GAMEPLAY NOTE

When you're starting a skirmish game, set your sights squarely on getting into combat as early and often as you can. There's no quicker way to earn plenty of experience points than through combat victories.

Notes on Team Solidarity

Your development strategy may be greatly influenced by your allies if you're playing in a team setup. At the Very Hard difficulty level especially, a lot of your moves will be dictated by your allies' moves. Aggressive and fast-growing allies may let you focus on your economy, which needs to be especially robust to compete with the computer players' boosted gather rates. Alternately, you might find that just a little push from you is all an ally needs to vanquish an opponent early in the game. When you're playing a solo game at the highest difficulty level, you must be very mindful of your allies' welfare and help them when they're not coping with an attack. At this difficulty level, you have virtually no chance of single-handedly fighting back a team of enemy civs. When your allies are gone, so are you.

GOING COLONIAL

Advancing into the Colonial Age costs only 800 food. The problem is, creating settlers costs food too, and you definitely need to create many new settlers right at the start of a new game. The handful that appears when your Town Center is complete is enough to swiftly unpack the initial provisions, and not much else.

Make sure you order your settlers to unpack the food first, and immediately spend it on new settlers!

When all the crates are unpacked, order one settler to build a house and one to chop wood, and send the others to gather food. Keep pumping out new settlers until you have around 20 (check Chapter 5 for civ-specific details). As a rule of thumb, you should send all new settlers to gather food until they gather it faster than it gets spent creating a new settler. Your house builder should be chopping wood when he's not building something; once you've got food coming in faster than it goes out, begin adding extra lumberjacks. Send your 12th or 13th settler to gather coin from a mine. Note that this is a very general course of action that is applicable to most game civilizations, but not all. For example, Ottomans get free settlers, and Dutch settlers cost coin instead of food, so you'll be mining lots of coin right away. Very roughly, the right initial workforce setup is 10 settlers gathering food, eight chopping wood, and two mining coin. However, do consult Chapter 5 for civ-specific development advice! Also, stay alert for unique opportunities such as a heavily wounded enemy Explorer that you can take out of the action (bringing a bonus of 45 experience points), or stealing a rival's freshly arrived supplies (Figure 1.5).

In the meantime, your Explorer should have been exploring constantly and recovering treasures with relatively weak guardians. Remember you can't afford to have your Explorer lose a fight at this early stage, and think twice before tackling a treasure that has three guardians. Best of all, click on the guardians and check their hit points before you start shooting. Use the Explorer's Sharpshooter ability to kill the first guardian with a single shot, and try not to get into scrapes that necessitate diverting settlers

ENSEMBLE
STUDIOS

ENSEMBLE STUDIOS TIP

Hunting is the quickest way to gather food. Eight settlers or seven Coureurs sent out hunting enable you to keep a steady stream of new settlers or Coureurs coming out of your Town Center. —Sandy Petersen



GAMEPLAY NOTE

Save an extra 250 wood as quickly as you can so that your Explorer can build a Trading Post in a Native American village. This will let you recruit native warriors, greatly boosting your military very early in the game! Building a Trading Post in a Native American village not far from an enemy Town Center can be a particularly wicked move.



FIGURE 1.5 *I hope zey packed ze canned snails and frog's legs... An intrepid little band of French Coureurs helps itself to an enemy civ's food shipment.*

to help out your Explorer. If you manage things relatively well, you'll win enough experience points to get a couple of Home City shipments before your initial workforce of 20 or so is complete and you begin the advance to Colonial Age.

Once you've got enough food to advance into the Colonial Age, switch a few food-gatherers to chopping wood. You should enter the Colonial Age with a Market and a couple of houses already built, and a handsome supply of wood. It's going to cost around 1,000 wood to build Barracks, recruit five Pikemen and five Crossbowmen, and construct the couple of houses that you'll need to raise the population limit. If your civ allows recruiting Musketeers, don't go crazy recruiting them just because they don't cost wood. The beginning of the Colonial Age is when you should begin a series of economic upgrades, as well as continue to create new settlers, and all of that costs a lot of food along with some wood and coin.

As pointed out earlier, part of your effort should go into building a Trading Post in a Native American village. The native warriors you'll gain are priceless in the early game. If you time things right, shortly after advancing into the Colonial Age you should be able to field a neat little army consisting of a shipment of military units from your Home City, the first batch of units from your new Barracks, and a troop of native warriors. An army like that is strong enough to start an early rumble with a competing player (Figure I.6). For more details on conducting war, please turn to Chapter 3.

In summary, after roughly 10 minutes of game time, you should have achieved the following:

- **Created a healthy economy.** You'll know you have enough settlers gathering resources when you can keep creating new units and constructing new buildings as needed, and yet your stocks of food, wood, and coin keep growing. In other words, resource inflow is greater than outflow.
- **Explored the map.** You don't need to uncover every nook and cranny. Locating all the other players' Town Centers, all the Native American villages, and all Trading Post sites is enough.



GAMEPLAY NOTE

Don't send Home City shipments that become available close to your Colonial Age advance. The Colonial Age opens up shipments of military units, and it's nice to have a shipment or even two saved up for that very purpose.



FIGURE I.6 Enlisting the help of a Native American ally in the early game can deliver a swift victory.



- **Secured space for further expansion.** This may differ widely depending on the number of players in the game. At one end of the spectrum is a Free-for-All involving eight players; to secure enough *lebensraum* for your civ, you'll most likely have to erase a couple of neighboring players. On the other hand, when you're playing solo against a single opponent, living space for your civ won't be a problem, and you'll focus on gaining control of strategic spots on the map instead.

Once you've achieved the described goals, the opening game is over. You're into the middle game, and a new set of challenges awaits.

GRAND STRATEGY THROUGH THE AGES

What you should do next amounts to this: simply continue wiping out your opponents until there are none left. One very tricky moment is when you're deciding whether to attack a player that's the weakest, the strongest, or the closest. If a player is strongest or weakest *and* closest, that's your target. Otherwise, check how the strongest player is doing. If the strongest civ in the game is embroiled in one or more vicious wars with another player, you can consider dealing with it later.

In addition to choosing your next target carefully, you must also balance the need for strong armed forces with the need to keep advancing Age after Age. You cannot afford to fall behind the other players in this respect! As explained in the next chapter, Age advances get progressively more expensive, and require the same resources you need for creating military units. It's sometimes very hard to tell what will bring victory closer: 20 new military units, or an Age advance that opens a host of new options. The bottom line is that you must keep up with the other players in Age advances, and ideally overtake them by an Age. You can do this by investing in your economy, by damaging your rivals' economies, or by doing a bit of both. What you should do depends, of course, on the specific game you're playing. But here are some ground rules:

1. Don't let your opponents go about their business in peace. It's all fine and dandy to focus on your economy if that's what's needed, but don't forget to balance that with raids on enemy settlers. Use cavalry, and when playing Free-for-All, retreat to lead the pursuing enemy forces onto another opponent. While they're busy beating up on each other, you can hit your original target once again.



GAMEPLAY NOTE

Once you're in the game, select Options from the Menu. Check UI (User Interface) Options and make sure the game displays Player Score. It's a great tool for monitoring your opponents' progress. Most importantly, it shows how many Trading Posts each player owns. The teepee symbol denotes a Trading Post in a Native American village.

2. Even as you're mercilessly raiding enemy colonial towns, build up your economy to the point where it produces resources faster than you can spend them—and that's while constantly creating new military units and building new structures.
3. Advance into the next Age as soon as possible, meaning you've got the resources and no enemy armies are knocking at your door. If there's a slight coin shortfall, consider selling some resources for cash. A new Age often brings new economic upgrades that can give your economy a big boost.
4. Keep an overview of what's going on in the game at all times. It's frustrating to triumph over an opponent only to discover that another opponent has grown stronger in the meantime, and is about to wipe the game map with the remains of your conquering army.

For more details on managing the economy and the military in the later stages of the game, please turn to Chapters 2 and 4. You'll also find civ-specific economic and military advice in Chapter 5.

Whichever way your game goes, know this: the experience points you've earned toward advancing your Home City's level aren't lost even in games that you've lost or quit. They'll carry over into your next game. If you've earned enough points to advance your Home City a level or two, you'll get new shipment choices (the manual calls them "cards") when you launch a new game from the same Home City. So it's really worth your while to keep fighting even when your game isn't going very well. In *AoE III*, it's better to go down fighting than to wimp out!

READING THE POSTGAME SCREENS

After your game ends, look at the postgame screens. New players especially will learn a lot when they compare their achievements to other players'.

You can view the postgame screens whether you've won, lost, or quit. When you click Postgame on the game menu, the Awards screen opens. It lists which civ was best in what category; most importantly, it breaks down the experience points you've earned and how they translate into increased Home City levels. The screens that follow detail players' achievements in specific areas, such as resource-gathering or the military; and at the very end, is the informative Timeline screen (Figure 1.7). Use its pull-down menu to see how you compare to the other civs in selected categories.

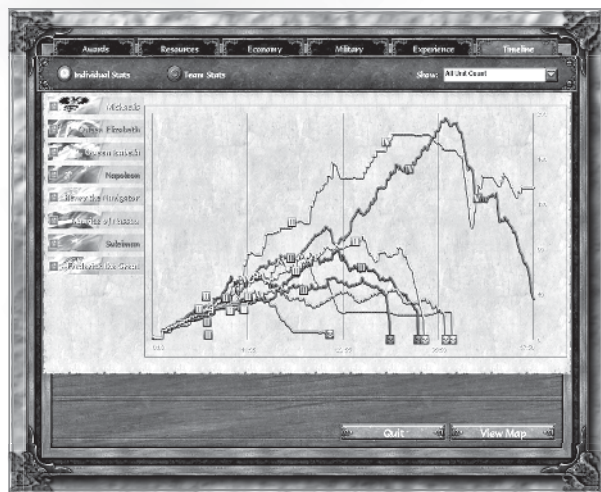


FIGURE 1.7 *The Timeline postgame screen charts your civilization's progress in graph form.*

All in all, there's no quicker way to improve your skills than watching recorded games and linking what you see there to the information on the postgame screens. You'll see very clearly what you're doing wrong and what you're doing right.

Now that you know what the game's about and how to set about improving your playing skills, turn to Chapter 2 and take a closer look at the game economy.





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