

= Age of Empires =

Age of Empires is a series of personal computer games developed by Ensemble Studios (defunct in 2009) and published by Microsoft Studios . The first title of the series was Age of Empires , released in 1997 . Since then , seven titles and three spin @-@ offs have been released . The titles are historical real @-@ time strategy games , and their gameplay revolves around two main game modes : Single player and campaign . They competed with another popular strategy series , Civilization , and are set amidst historical events .

Age of Empires focused on events in Europe , Africa and Asia , spanning from the Stone Age to the Iron Age ; the expansion game explored the formation and expansion of the Roman Empire . The sequel , Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings , was set in the Middle Ages , while its expansion focused partially on the Spanish conquest of Mexico . The subsequent three games of Age of Empires III explored the early modern period , when Europe was colonizing the Americas and several Asian nations were on the decline . The newest installment , Age of Empires Online , takes a different approach as a free @-@ to @-@ play online game utilizing Games for Windows Live . A spin @-@ off game , Age of Mythology , was set in the same period as the original Age of Empires , but focused on mythological elements of Greek , Egyptian , and Norse mythology .

The Age of Empires series has been a commercial success , selling over 20 million copies . The popularity and quality of the games has earned Ensemble Studios a strong reputation in real @-@ time strategy gaming . Ensemble collaborated with Big Huge Games on Age of Empires III : The Asian Dynasties . Critics have credited part of the success of the series to its historical theme and fair play ; the artificial intelligence (AI) players fight with less " cheating " than in many of the series ' competitors .

= = Games = =

The games in the series focus on historical events throughout time . Age of Empires covers the events between the Stone Age and the Classical period , in Europe and Asia . Its expansion , The Rise of Rome , follows the formation and rise of the Roman Empire . The Age of Kings and its Nintendo DS spin @-@ off follow Europe and Asia through the Middle Ages . The Age of Kings ' expansion pack , The Conquerors , is set during the same period , but also includes scenarios about the Spanish conquest of Mexico , El Cid , and Attila the Hun . Age of Empires III and its first expansion , The WarChiefs , take place during the European colonization of the Americas . Its second expansion , The Asian Dynasties , follows the rise of Asia in the same period . Age of Empires Online focuses on the Greek and Egyptian civilizations . The series ' spin @-@ off , Age of Mythology , and its expansion pack , The Titans , are set during the Bronze Age , but focus on mythology as their themes , rather than history .

= = = Main series = = =

= = = = Age of Empires = = = =

Age of Empires , released on October 26 , 1997 , was the first game in the series , as well as the first major release from Ensemble Studios . It was one of the first history @-@ based real @-@ time strategy games made , utilizing the Genie game engine . GameSpot described it as a mix of Civilization and Warcraft . The game gives players a choice of 12 civilizations to develop from the Stone Age to the Iron Age . The expansion pack , The Rise of Rome , published by Microsoft on October 31 , 1998 , introduced new features and four new civilizations , including the Romans . Although the two games had contained many software bugs , patches resolved many of the problems .

Age of Empires was generally well received , despite some highly negative reviews . GameSpot criticized a confused design , while Computer and Video Games praised the game as strong in

single and multiplayer . The Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences named Age of Empires the 1998 " Computer Strategy Game of the Year . " For several years , the game remained high on the sales charts , with over three million units sold by 2000 . The Rise of Rome was not as popular : it had only sold one million units in 2000 , and attained 80 % as an aggregate score from Game Rankings .

= = = = Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings = = = =

Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings , released on September 30 , 1999 , used the Genie game engine , and had gameplay similar to its predecessor . Age of Kings is set in the Middle Ages , from the Dark Ages to the Imperial Age . It allows players to choose one of 13 civilizations , from Europe , Asia , and the Middle East .

On August 24 , 2000 , Microsoft published the expansion , The Conquerors . It added new units and five new civilizations , including two Mesoamerican civilizations ; the Maya and the Aztec . The Age of Kings was a bigger critical success than the first two games , with Game Rankings and Metacritic scores of 92 % . Microsoft shipped out more than two million copies to retailers , and the game received numerous awards and accolades . Critics agreed that The Conquerors expanded well on The Age of Kings , though issues of unbalanced gameplay were raised . The Age of Kings and The Conquerors won the 2000 and 2001 " Computer Strategy Game of the Year " awards from the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences , respectively .

In April 2013 , Age of Empires II : HD Edition was released on the Steam digital distribution platform for Windows operating systems . The HD Edition includes both the original game and the expansion The Conquerors , as well as updated graphics for high @-@ resolution displays .

In November 2013 , a second expansion entitled The Forgotten was released by Microsoft exclusively for the HD Edition . A third expansion named The African Kingdoms was released by Microsoft in November 2015 , also exclusively for the HD Edition .

= = = = Age of Empires III = = = =

Age of Empires III , released on October 18 , 2005 , was built on an improved version of the Age of Mythology game engine with the most significant changes being the updated graphics engine and the inclusion of the Havok physics middleware engine . The game is set in the period between 1421 and 1850 , and players can choose one of eight European nations . The game introduced a large number of features , such as home cities . Described by Ensemble Studios as " an important support system to your efforts in the New World , " home cities helped provide the player with resources , equipment , troops , and upgrades . They could be used across multiple games , and upgraded after each battle ; it was compared to a role @-@ playing game character by Ensemble Studios . The first expansion to Age of Empires III , The WarChiefs , was released October 17 , 2006 . Most gameplay changes in the expansion pack were small , but it introduced three new civilizations , with a focus on Native Americans . Most notable was the introduction of the WarChief unit . The second expansion , The Asian Dynasties , went on sale October 23 , 2007 . It was a jointly developed product ; Big Huge Games helped Ensemble Studios develop the game , with Brian Reynolds joining Bruce Shelley as lead designer . The game expanded the Age of Empires III universe into Asia , and introduced three new civilizations . Reception towards Age of Empires III was mixed ; Game Revolution described it as " about as much fun " as a history textbook , while GameZone argued it was " one of the best looking games , much less an RTS game , that is out on the market currently " . It sold more than two million copies , and won the GameSpy " real @-@ time strategy game of the year " award . The WarChiefs failed to equal the success of its predecessor , with a lower score on both Game Rankings and Metacritic , and The Asian Dynasties ' score was lower still with 80 % .

Several collectors ' editions of Age of Empires III included a hardcover artbook . The last page of the artbook has a pictorial depiction of the series ; the Roman numerals below each panel range from I to V , indicating the series would include an Age of Empires IV and Age of Empires V.

Ensemble Studios employee Sandy Petersen said that the image " was total speculation on [their] part . "

In 2008 , Microsoft announced they were closing down Ensemble Studios following the completion of Halo Wars . Some of its employees would form a new team as part of Microsoft Studios . Kevin Unangst , director of Games for Windows , denied it was the end of the Age of Empires series , telling The San Francisco Chronicle " we 're very excited about the future potential for Age of Empires " . Edge confirmed , in an interview with Microsoft 's corporate vice president of interactive entertainment , Shane Kim , that Microsoft continued to own Age of Empires and that they had plans to continue the series . However , Bruce Shelley wrote in his blog that he would not be part of any new studios formed .

== Spin @-@ off games ==

Age of Mythology shared many elements of gameplay with the main series , and was considered a part of the series , despite its different focus . The campaign in Age of Mythology tells the story of an Atlantean , Arkantos , and his quest to find why his people are out of favor with Poseidon . Microsoft published the game on October 30 , 2002 , and its expansion , The Titans , on October 21 , 2003 . The Titans featured the Atlanteans as a new civilization . Its campaign is shorter than previous expansions , and centers on Kastor , son of Arkantos , who falls for the lies of the titans and frees them from Tartarus . Age of Mythology sold more than one million units in four months . It scored 89 % on Game Rankings and Metacritic . The Titans failed to equal the sales success of Age of Mythology , although critics rated it highly .

Backbone Entertainment developed Age of Empires : The Age of Kings as a turn @-@ based game for the Nintendo DS . Majesco published the game on February 14 , 2006 . It is similar to other turn @-@ based games , such as Advance Wars , but with a gameplay based on its PC counterpart . Age of Empires : The Age of Kings scored 80 % on Game Rankings and Metacritic . Konami brought a game of the same title to the PlayStation 2 around five years earlier than the DS version , but the game had little promotion , and sold poorly .

On August 16 , 2010 , Microsoft announced Age of Empires Online , which was a free @-@ to @-@ play Games for Windows Live online game , it developed in collaboration with Robot Entertainment . It featured Free @-@ to @-@ play experiences via Games for Windows LIVE as well as : A persistent online capital city that lives and grows even when you 're offline , Cooperative multiplayer quests , trading and a level @-@ based system that lets you progress at your own pace .

On April 13 , 2014 , Age of Empires : World Domination was announced . It was developed by KLab Games for the iOS , Android and Windows Phone .

On August 25 , 2014 , Age of Empires : Castle Siege was announced . It is a touch @-@ based game developed by Smoking Gun Interactive . It was released on September 17 , 2014 for the Windows PC and Windows Phone 8 .

== Development ==

== Historical elements ==

The development phases of the Age of Empires games were similar in several ways . Due to the games being based on historical events , the team often had to do large amounts of research . However , the research was not in depth , which , according to Age of Empires designer Bruce Shelley , is " a good idea for most entertainment products . " Shelley also said that Ensemble Studios took most of the reference material from children 's sections at libraries . He pointed out the goal was for the players of the game to have fun , " not [its] designers or researchers . " At the Games Convention Developers Conference in 2007 , Shelley continued with this thought and explained that the success of the series laid in " making a game which appealed to both the casual

and hardcore gamer . " Shelley also remarked the Age of Empires games were not about history in itself , but rather " about the human experience ; " they focused not simply on what humans had done but on what they could do in the future such as " going into space . " Ensemble Studios developed Age of Mythology in a different way than the previous two games . The team had worried they " couldn 't get away " with a third historical @-@ based game , and chose mythology as the setting after they had discussed several options .

= = = Artificial intelligence = = =

The artificial intelligence (AI) used in the Age of Empires series has been developed and improved regularly by designers . AI specialist Dave Pottinger noted the development team gave the AI in the original game a very high priority , and spent over a year working on it . He said that the AI in the game relies on tactics and strategies to win , instead of " cheating " by giving bonus resources to itself , or tweaking its units to be stronger than normal . Pottinger later noted that the Age of Empires series team took great pride in their AI playing a " fair game " .

Age of Empires allows players to choose to play either along specialized , story @-@ backed conditions or as individual battles against the AI (and other players) . Choosing to battle against the AI ? rather than following the storyline ? allows the AI to adapt to players ' strategies and even remember which games it won and lost . The AI eventually overcomes players ' strategies and easily destroys their villages after several games . For instance , in Age of Empires III , this is referred to as playing a " Skirmish . " However Age of Empires III allows players to refine their strategies further against the AI by " Building a Deck , " which allows players to replace " Home City " shipments with improved alternatives .

In Age of Empires II : The Conquerors the AI was given a high priority , the result being the " smart villager " feature , which was highly popular in subsequent games of the series . After building a structure that stores or produces resources , smart villagers would proceed to collect resources related to the structure , such as crops from farms or ore from exposed deposits .

Age of Mythology : The Titans lets players use an AI debugger when creating custom scenarios ; players can change the settings of computer players and make them act according to certain patterns . More basic changes to the AI had previously been available in the series ' first two games .

= = = Graphics and visuals = = =

The graphics and visuals of Age of Empires improved with each successive release . From the original release to the second , Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings , noteworthy improvements gained praise from several critics . With the release of Age of Mythology the praise continued , and the fourth release , Age of Empires III , garnered even more .

GameSpot praised the improved graphics in the second release , Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings . Eurogamer welcomed its introduction of female villagers as compared with the original male only version . Allgame praised the advanced grouping and path @-@ finding systems in the second release . Despite the improved graphics , Allgame complained that units in Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings were at times difficult to distinguish from one another , a point numerous reviewers agreed on . Nevertheless , Game Revolution wrote that the second release was " the best looking of the 2D RTS games out there right now . "

The graphics continued to improve in Age of Mythology and was praised by a majority of reviewers . IGN ranked the graphics in this third release , " a joy to watch ... awesome . " GameSpot assented , also rating the graphics a 9 out of 10 . Game Revolution agreed , and PC Gamer stated that the graphics in the third release " are packed with detail . "

The trend in improved graphics continued well into the next release , Age of Empires III , much to the delight of reviewers . IGN stated , " After seeing the screenshots , our jaws hit the floor at the amount of detail . " 1UP.com described Age of Empires III as " one of the most beautiful games you will put on your computer for the foreseeable future . " GameSpy agreed , stating , " Age III 's

graphics are unmatched in the strategy genre . " Age of Empires III builds on and introduces new features to the prior release , Age of Mythology , such as the inclusion of the award @-@ winning Havok physics simulation middleware game engine for the Windows version and PhysX for the Mac OS X. The innovative result is that pre @-@ created animations are avoided ; instead events are calculated according to the physics engine . Consequently , views of events like building destruction and tree felling are not pre @-@ recorded . GameSpot also admired the graphics in the fourth release but complained about " the awkward unit behavior . " Other graphical features of the game include bloom lighting and support for pixel shader 3 @.@ 0 .

GameSpy awarded Age of Empires III the " Best Graphics " award at GameSpy 's " Game of the Year 2005 . "

= = = Music = = =

Stephen Rippy has been the series ' music director since the first game . He has had occasional help from his brother , David Rippy , as well as Kevin McMullan . He created the original music in Age of Empires with sounds of instruments from the periods in the game . These sounds came from actual instruments , and their digital samples . The tunes were the result of extensive research on the cultures , styles , and instruments used . Rippy said that sound development on The Age of Kings was easy , since there was knowledge of the instruments used in the Middle Ages . Therefore , they were able to reproduce the tunes for the soundtrack of the game . In Age of Mythology , an orchestral instrumentation was used , instead . According to McMullan , the team also collected large numbers of audio recordings from zoos , and created " a massive sound library of [their] own material . " The music of Age of Empires III was similar to The Age of Kings , in which the team used more historical instruments ; Rippy noted the team used instruments such as " bagpipes and field drums " to give it a realistic feel . Finally , some infrequent mood pieces were the product of a collaboration between Rippy and Sean Paul .

= = = Collaboration = = =

Ensemble Studios worked together with Big Huge Games to develop The Asian Dynasties , Age of Empires III 's second expansion . This was the first joint venture for both teams . The reason for them doing so was compatible schedules : Ensemble Studios was busy with other projects ? particularly Halo Wars ? while Big Huge Games ' real @-@ time strategy team had few projects at that time . Big Huge Games did most of the work , but Ensemble Studios designers Greg Street and Sandy Petersen joined in the brainstorming , and had control over the final product . Both studios had roles in testing the game before its release .

= = Reception and legacy = =

The Age of Empires series has been a commercial success . As of 2008 , five of its games have each sold more than one million copies . According to Gamasutra , Age of Empires had sold more than three million copies , and The Rise of Rome sold one million copies as of 2000 . Around the same time , Microsoft announced that they shipped over two million copies of The Age of Kings . In 2003 , Microsoft announced the sales of one million copies for Age of Mythology . By 2004 ? prior to the release of Age of Empires III ? the Age of Empires franchise had sold over 15 million copies . On May 18 , 2007 , Ensemble Studios announced that two million copies of Age of Empires III had been sold . Games in the series have consistently scored highly on video game review aggregator websites Game Rankings and Metacritic , which collect data from numerous review websites . As noted in the table to the right , the highest rating game is Age of Empires II : The Age of Kings , receiving a 92 % score from both sites .

Critics have credited Age of Empires for influencing real @-@ time strategy (RTS) games such as Rise of Nations , Empire Earth , and Cossacks . Star Wars : Galactic Battlegrounds was also influenced by the series : it utilized the Genie game engine , as Age of Empires and Age of Empires

II : The Age of Kings had , and was considered by critics to be a very close replica to the games ; IGN began their review with the statement " I love Age of Star Wars , I mean Star Empires . Whatever it 's called , I dig it . " and GameSpot wrote that " fundamentals of the Age of Empires II engine are so intact in Star Wars : Galactic Battlegrounds that veterans of that game can jump right in . " In October 2005 , Shelley commented on the impact of the series . In a GameSpy interview , he explained that parents would " tell Ensemble Studios that their kid is reading books about ancient Greece because they enjoy playing with the triremes so much , or that they want to check out books about medieval history because [the] game taught them what a trebuchet was . "

Shelley has said that the key to the success of the games was its innovation , rather than imitation of its peers . He also claimed the unique elements in the games " helped establish the reputation of Ensemble Studios as masters of the real @-@ time strategy genre . " Mark Bozon of IGN wrote in his review of The Age of Kings , " The Age of Empires series has been one of the most innovative real @-@ time strategy games for PC in the last decade or so . " Gamenikki called Ensemble Studios " the developer that started it all " when they talked about how much Age of Empires III had done to advance the real @-@ time strategy genre . Shelley has acknowledged the success and innovation of Age of Empires helped to ensure Ensemble survive its early periods since startup . In 2005 , Shelley complained of critics holding an " innovation bias " against the series ; citing the 60 % score from Computer Gaming World , he said that despite Age of Empires III being " perhaps the best selling PC game in the world , " reviewers expected " something really new , " and rated it harshly .

Bungie Studios chose Ensemble Studios to develop Halo Wars , an RTS game based on their Halo series . They said that one of the reasons they chose to work with Ensemble was because of the " awesometastic " Age of Empires series . They also noted that Ensemble was the perfect choice " to realize the original vision of Halo , " which started life as an RTS .