

Multiplayer Tips

After playing countless hours of multiplayer conquests, six of the Gamecenter editors are here to share their favorite winning tactics.

Lee "Beefy" Hamrick

Get this straight right from the start, you would-be conquerors: this isn't Quake or anything like it. And for you smug C&C players out there who think you have it under control, think again. Although quick clicks on your mouse will help, and creating your buildings is important, the key here is successful planning from the word go.

After countless hours at my keyboard, I've found the crucial steps in my Age of Empires gaming are the early creation of a Stable, and getting a Scout out and about as soon as possible. Why? Not to immediately discover enemy and allied locations, but to find the lay of the land. And after I find out where the resources are, I get them coming in.

First stop: wood. It's usually in large forests, and a group of Villagers working in one location is generally sufficient--at least for the early stages of the game.

Second stop: gold! I can't stress it enough. You'll need gold to progress to more-advanced ages, and for the creation of more-advanced units. No strategy that relies heavily on Priests can even be attempted without a stockpile of the stuff. Trade Ships can help, but who knows who will be your ally or your enemy (or where they will be located)? The seas are deadly in this game, and I only count on getting my wealth from the hard work of my Villagers. Find as many gold stashes as you can, send a villager in, and if possible, build a guard Tower and a Storage Pit. Then give that man a pickax! Send extra workers over if you can spare them from farming. I've had as many as six gold mines working at once and have never regretted it.

Some might argue that trying to take over too much of the game world leaves you vulnerable to attack, but I disagree. Having a large area can leave your enemies wondering just exactly where your stronghold is, and that gives *you* the advantage.

George "Lunchbox" Jones

Decide what kind of game you're going to play as soon as you can. On anything but a Huge map, there usually aren't enough resources to fight extended wars against multiple enemies *and* build the Wonder. And if you're going to make a grab for the artifacts or ruins, you'd better make that decision in a hurry, soldier.

Get into your opponents' heads. If you know who you're playing against, picture in your mind how they'll probably play. If you've played with them before, chances are they'll play practically the same way every time. Use this knowledge to your advantage. If you've never played with your opponents before but you know them from around the office or they're friends, reflect on their personality--people's play style usually mirrors their personality type.

If you don't know who you're playing, a good defense is always a safe bet. Make sure that in the initial stages of the game, your base isn't all weak Villagers. If the enemy comes charging in, you'd better be ready.

If offense is your game, build Catapults quickly and research ballistics to create the ultimate destructive weapon. But beware: even a hapless farmer can quickly topple an expensive Catapult. Always surround your Catapults with a protective layer of horsemen, Archers, or best of all, heavy elephant Archers that have been given the Stand Ground command. To eliminate your opponent, create a line of four Catapults and five or six protective troops (including at least three elephant Archers) and then march into enemy territory. Always remember to protect Catapults from the rear as well and to station them far enough away from enemy boats and Towers. This combination is virtually unstoppable, and there's nothing like taking out a town in minutes with the fiery vengeance of this particular fighting combo.

And once you've got your enemies down on their knees, don't just destroy them if you're playing with more than four people. Make them ally with you. This way you'll have someone protecting one of your flanks, making life much easier against multiple opponents out for blood. If they refuse to ally with you, then crush them.

On the resource front, use your Trade Ships to generate extra gold--this is particularly useful if you're playing with teams. All you have to do is place Docks right next to each other, and you're all set. And don't forget about building Houses--you should get yourself to a 50 capacity as soon as you possibly can.

Alice "The Wall" Hill

Kill all the people. You won't win any humanitarian awards for this technique, but there's no better way to wreak havoc in an opponent's empire than to bring about a massive and sudden population shortage. Most ground forces are trained to destroy structures like Storage Pits by default, but using them to clear out the gentle and unsuspecting woodcutters, farmers, and builders is the fastest way to send your opponents back to the Stone Age. This dastardly technique is especially powerful early on in a game when resources are low and literally every man counts.

What to do? Build a Stable as early as you can and then send a Scout exploring. You'll not only uncover huge portions of the map quickly, but should your horseman encounter an enemy village scrambling to grow, you can easily wipe out the townsfolk before your opponent knows what hit him. Caution: don't leave your own town unguarded. Use Archers to flank your workers, and as soon as you have enough resources, protect your Storage Pits and key boundaries with Towers.

Use nature wisely. If defense is your game, or if you like to roam the map knowing your empire is well protected, make sure you limit the number of entry points into your empire by building walls and Towers for protection. Walls can block or at least channel an approaching enemy, and Towers make excellent early-warning systems if placed far enough away. Approaching enemies will draw fire automatically from a Tower, which in turn will sound the alert that you are under attack long before your main Town Center or key resources are in danger.

Play the resource game. Unfortunately, walls and Towers can use up a huge amount of stone unless you plan wisely. To combat that, always incorporate tree groves and forests as a wall-building shortcut, as well as ponds and other natural obstacles. But be careful: it's easy to wall yourself in and then find your resources dwindling. Rather than scrambling late in the game for another source of gold or stone, use horsemen to explore wide areas around your Town Center and send your miners to the farthest areas first--if you can adequately defend them. As the game progresses and resources decline, you'll have the luxury of moving closer to your home base, which is a snap to protect, especially if your walls and other key defenses are in order.

If your Town Center's days are numbered, don't give up. Whisk the remaining settlers you can find as far away as possible and build another Town Center. This works even better if you plan ahead while your resource supply is strong. Start a satellite town somewhere far from your original city and replicate as much as you can in terms of defense and production. It's harder to defeat an opponent who functions as essentially two different empires, and, if built properly, a second Town Center will be an excellent source of resources closer to an enemy so you don't have to walk new Villagers for miles if you're struggling to attack.

John "Mr. Patient" Marrin

Fishing is one of the most economical ways to rack up critical food supplies early in a game. It can also keep the chow coming in during the later stages. Fishing is easy, doesn't require Villagers, and you can simultaneously use Fishing Boats to uncover black parts of the map much faster than if you explore by foot. Having a good fishing strategy can't win you the game, but it will definitely help in a big way by getting you off to a good start in the food department.

Looking for water early in the game is key, but knowing just how big the body of water is

you've discovered is important, too. You don't want to build a Dock in a mud puddle. If you find water on the very edge of the map, chances are it's a narrow strip of water that runs completely around the map. Although this band of water lets you trade with allies and can even let you launch a surprise attack with War Ships, it isn't ideal for fishing. Look for a larger body of water before casting your nets.

Building a Dock is quick and doesn't require much wood, but finding the right location is essential. Try to find a larger bay to build a Dock. This is important for a couple of reasons. First, fish are more likely to be more plentiful in a larger bay area, and second, it gives your boats more room to move around. If you build a Dock in the narrow band of ocean on the edge of a map, your boats will simply clog up the passage.

However, you don't have to build a Dock at all to reap the chicken of the sea, if there are fish jumping close to shore. This is especially useful early in the game. Just select a Villager and click on the jumping fish. The Villager will start spearing away till all the fish are gone. If you're going to do this, though, build a Storage Pit near the fishing site, or your Villager will have to lug the fish all the way back to town.

Finally, let's talk boats, a relatively simple matter. The standard Fishing Boat is fine for starting out. It can hold ten units of fish before having to head back to the Dock to unload. But don't stop at just one. You should build a few to hasten the food-gathering process. The upgraded Fishing Ships are faster and can carry more, but if you're strapped for resources, this upgrade is not essential.

Once you have your fishing operations going, occasionally check your various waterfronts to make sure your fleet isn't slacking off.

To protect your fleet, it can pay to build a couple of War Ships to patrol your fishing grounds. Because fishing is a relatively low-maintenance affair, you'll often let your fleet go on their own to concentrate on land-based battles and development. This is a prime opportunity for an enemy to wipe out these innocent gatherers.

Doug "Curly" Lombardi

Someone once said, "It's all about resources, protection, and exploration." I'd like to add, "In that order."

Finding what you need to advance *and* stay fresh and vibrant is key. And what you always need first, regardless of where you start the game, is wood. If you do start the game in a later age, you also have to build fast, mobile units to find the rest of what you need, and to help expedite matters more efficiently.

Once your Stable is built, the Scout is off exploring, and a Storage Pit is built next to a big batch of trees, try to track down two each of both stone and gold. Place Storage Pits by each, but not before you can get a Tower up. Meanwhile you should have been generating grunts constantly, so it should be no problem sending a handful to mine each of these valuable resources.

While all of this is happening, be sure to set up an equally stable food supply via fishing, farming, and/or hunting. Hunting is a rugged sport and can usually be handled by just a few unaccompanied grunts. But it's never a bad idea to protect advanced food lines: give farmlands a Tower and send a big bad ship to cover every school of Fishing Boats. If you're not engaged in any sweaty battles yet and your supply lines are wired, protect all of them even further by building a great wall, strategically using clumps of trees and coast. And make all possible weapons and Ballista upgrades while building the strongest units your civilization is capable of. Be careful not to box all these forces inside the wall. Before you shoot for a Wonder, send out a militia or two to collect artifacts and eliminate as many enemy workers as they can find in their lifetime. This simultaneously enlightens your view of where your opponent is going to come from and what kind of weaponry he might bring. At this point your attention should be paid at the same time to generating and centralizing the grunts who will build the mystical structure that will ultimately (you hope) win you the game.

Finally, when you drop the big structure down, be ready for the enemy to bring the thunder. Exert all your energies building secondary walls and Towers.

Erica "Diggity" Smith

Go for the gold. Find as much gold as soon as possible, building a Storage Pit and assigning several workers to mine as much as possible, as quickly as possible. Rest assured that for every person playing, the gold will disappear that much quicker.

Woodcutting is secondary to gold mining. It's a good idea to put lots of Villagers on woodcutting early on and do it consistently throughout the game. If you start off on a coastal area, set up several Fishing Boats and fish to collect food quickly. Once farming is an option, get multiple farmers hunting, then research Irrigation and the Plow to quickly gather food. You can worry about your military units later in the game--once you get your resource intake squared away. I tend to build up a strong economy and advance to the next age before thinking about conquest and defenses. But I'm not sure I'd recommend it; I usually hate myself when I get attacked early on in the game and can't recover enough to become a strong civilization.

I also recommend building a Stable and Archery Range early on. The Barracks aren't as important, though you should always build one--the more units you can crank out in a hurry, the better. I prefer playing races that have Elephants, and once these mighty creatures are available, I usually start producing as many of them as I can. (I still need to work on the conquest part of the game, though.)

My favorite tactic is to tear down a Wonder before it's built, or at least to kill all the hardworking Villagers involved. Only one Elephant required!