

Resource Management

Before we get started rapping specifically about the four major resources and how to dig into them, here are a few general tips on accumulating resources in various situations.

tip: Wood first. Right off the bat in any game, you have to find the forest. In most scenarios, a forest is somewhere nearby--it is imperative that you get three or four Villagers out there, build a Storage Pit, and get the woodchopping going ASAP. You're going to need a ton of wood right away to get all your fancy buildings constructed, regardless of what age you're in.

tip: Food second. Once you get your wood production started, it's time to crank your food production into high gear. In an early game, this means berry picking. Find a cluster of bushes (there's usually one near your starting position), build a Granary, and start harvesting. At the same time, get a Dock built and get your fishermen fishing. If Farms have already been invented (with the advent of the Market), get four to five Farms running as soon as you can.

tip: Stone and gold third. Once you've turbo-boosted your wood and food production, then you can worry about these two resources, which gain increasing importance later in the game. With any luck, you've already discovered a few caches of each substance.

tip: Deathmatch tips. If you're playing in a Deathmatch scenario, with the standard obscene amount of resources, don't even bother using your Villagers to develop the land, with the exception of gold. These contests are usually over long before you've run out of resources, and your Villagers are better suited to building Academies, Stables, and Siege Towers. One exception to this rule is a case where you run into a lengthy naval engagement--you'll have to get some wood-harvesting going if you want to avoid running out of wood.

Now on with the resource descriptions.

Food

Hey, Villagers have to eat if they want to become big, strong Hoplites and Catapult units. Food is the backbone of your army. Fortunately, it is not a limited resource like the other three--you can accumulate as much food as you can create. And you'd better create a lot of it as fast as you can and however you can.

In the first age of the game, the Stone Age, food can be accumulated through three means: hunting, fishing, and berry picking. At this point you can't get food by farming. Unless you have lions or alligators or helpless gazelles around, forget about hunting--it's way too inefficient. In this age, find a berry bush cluster, set up a Granary nearby, and get your Villagers foraging. If you're near a river, set up a Dock and get your Fishing Boats out there. Quickly accumulate food and advance to the Tool Age and then build some Farms.

Food continued

If you must hunt, go for gazelles--they provide 150 meat and pose no threat whatsoever. If you absolutely must prove your machismo and hunt lions or Elephants, do so in bunches of four or five. Anything less will backfire on you. But remember this: rather than hunting for game, you should be hunting for nonmobile berry bushes.

Farming 101

Farms are the nutritional mainstays of your culture. Once you've researched farming via construction of a Market, throw down Farms in clusters of three or four. Use your Town Center, which is usually strongly defended as one hub, and build a Granary as a secondary hub. This way your Villagers won't have to go hiking to drop off their goods.

It's important to keep an eye on your Farms; you'll notice that once a farmland goes fallow, ambitious farmers will work the farm of their next-door neighbor. A fine gesture, to be certain, but it's a useless one--when two farmers work a single Farm, one of them becomes horribly inefficient and accumulates practically no food at all. One farmer to a Farm square, please. Plus, if your Farms all run dry while you're off battling somebody, your food supply is going to run out awfully fast.

Always research farming improvements as soon as you possibly can--the increased Farm capacities are well worth the investment.

Fishing

Fishing is easy money, right? Wrong. Build too many Fishing Ships early on, and you're being inefficient. Work the same square of ocean with two Fishing Ships and you'll run into the same problem as with farming: one of your ships will accumulate practically no fish at all. The way to work fishing is to keep it slow and simple. Unless you see five or six active sea zones, build only a couple of Fishing Ships at the beginning--this will keep your seas clear and your wood consumption down. As the game progresses and you begin to build increasingly more Docks, keep searching for new fishing zones. It's an easy, easy way to accumulate food.

Upgrading to the more powerful Fishing Ships will give you an increased capacity for fish, so it's a pretty good move most of the time, unless your immediate environment is out of fish or whales or the active zones are right next to your Dock. But it's not the most important of your resource research--wood, farming, gold-mining, and stone-mining improvements should all take precedence if you're short on resources.

Wood

In most games, it is imperative that you identify the location of the nearest forest, and that you get a squad of woodchoppers there before you do anything else. Without wood, your production of crucial new buildings, be they Granaries, Barracks, or those fancy new Archers you've always wanted, will be hopeless. But don't just rush into building that Storage Pit--sometimes a stone pile or gold cache will be situated right next to the trees, which will save you 150 wood.

Keep some protection around your woodchoppers; if someone kills them off, especially early on, you'll be in a world of trouble. If you can spare some stone, you might even want to go as far as building a wall around your hardworking choppers. This will protect them a little bit, or at least give you some extra time to react to malicious attacks.

Make sure you keep an eye on your forests; as they dwindle, your Villagers will have to make increasingly longer walks back to the Storage Pit to drop off their accumulated wood. In many cases, it's better to build a second Pit closer to the trees.

If you're using the trees as a natural wall between you and the enemy, make sure your eager-beaver Villagers don't chop through it while you're not paying attention, thereby giving your foes a hole to slip through.

Research wood-working first or second. Not only does it improve your woodchopping, but it also improves the range of your Archers, War Ships, and Siege Engines.

Stone

A little more abundant than gold, stone has only three uses: the building of walls, Towers, and the Wonder. You need stone for the Towers and walls initially. Right after you get your wood and food production into high gear, build a Storage Pit right next to a rock mound (with luck you found one nearby), and get that scrawny Villager a-crackin'. The ability to wall off weak spots of your base is crucial, and if you want to better protect your home, you'll need Towers. Which means you need lots of stone. Late in the game, this is especially true if you plan on building and defending a Wonder. For this reason, it's good to accumulate as much as you can as soon as you possibly can. Although there's usually more stone than gold, stone exists in finite amounts.

Gold

Early in the game, gold is nothing but a luxury. But there's a reason why you should accumulate it early--there's not that much of this precious mineral on most maps. And although you barely need it at all during the first two ages, how sweet it will be when you hit the Tool Age and still have 1,000 gold to distribute among a variety of more powerful units.

Once you get your wood and food going and can spare the expense of yet another Storage Pit, consider it vital to your nation's security to obtain and immediately put into operation at least one gold mine. And you should be looking out for a second one. Later on in the game, particularly if you want to enlist Priests or lots of Siegecraft or Elephants into your force, you're going to need plenty of gold.

But as much as gold is a natural resource, there is another way to accumulate it besides digging. You can build trade boats to ferry your goods to another player's Docks in exchange for gold. This process takes food or wood or stone away from you (never trade for stone, though--it's a finite resource) but doesn't take gold out of the other players' coffers. For obvious reasons, this method works best if you are playing with teammates who won't attack your Trade Ships. But it will work with unguarded enemy Docks--and these boats are fairly tough, with 200 hit points.

If you are playing on a team, make sure two of you build Docks right next to each other. Talk about easy money!

On the research front, it is very worthwhile to invest in the gold-mining upgrades--in addition to creating more gold for you, eventually the 25 percent tribute cost you get hit with when donating resources to another player will be erased. Take care of wood first, then food, then this one. As a general rule, it's not worth upgrading to Merchant Ships--they only gain an increase in speed and hit points. If your only recourse for gaining gold is the enemy Docks, however, this upgrade is worth the effort.