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THE VISION BEHIND AGE OF EMPIRES ONLINE

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Submitted by **kube** on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 15:11

So now you have heard about Age of Empires Online, and have seen that it takes us back to the time period of the original Age of Empires. From an art direction standpoint, we took a look back at the roots of the original game as well. Before I get into the 'nuts and bolts' of the factors that made up the look of our most recent game, I wanted to give a little background and my personal history with the Age of Empires Franchise, because I'm personally very excited about revisiting ancient times.

Age of Empires was the first game I had ever loved.

I was addicted!

At the time of its release, I worked at a game company back in Pittsburgh, PA where we were just finishing up our first RTS game. But that wasn't what was taking up all of my time. It was Age of Empires! I never stopped playing. I played during lunch breaks, after work, and as soon as I got home. I loved everything about it. Well, everything except connecting to the zone for online play :)

I moved to Texas to work at my second game company, and that only lasted a couple of months before I would move jobs again. While I was there, I got on an initial beta release of Age of Empires 2: Age of Kings and I was absolutely blown away. It looked amazing, and it was an incredible amount of fun! I went to the release party and from that point on, I knew I had to work with the creators of the franchise that I loved… and a couple months later, I did.

So now fast forward to when we first started talking about creating Age of Empires Online - it took me back to my early years in the game industry, and I was beyond excited. I got to previously work on Age of Mythology and Age of Empires 3, but the original Age was such a special game to me.

There was a small group of about 6 artists that started the process. The group included Ensemble Studios first artist, Brad Crow, who has worked on every single Age of Empires game. We explored a lot of different avenues of where 'the look' could go. We talked about a look similar to Age 3, but when it came down to it, we really wanted to capture the more graphic nature, palette, and scale from the original Age of Empires. Additionally, when we would ask various people what they remember about the look of Age of Empires, so many people would respond with, "The villagers carrying the huge chunks of meat back to their Town Centers."

So after our initial exploration, we laid out this Vision Plan:

1. Create a timeless, bright, and visually appealing game that can technically run on a wide range of PCs, and still look good for years to come.

2. Create a bold and more graphic look with a lot of character. That means a lot of different things.

- Make the terrain vivid, but less 'noisy' so the buildings and units 'pop', and are easily identifiable.
- Explore exaggerated and unique silhouettes to create a large variety of units and buildings. This helps give even inanimate objects more character and appeal.
- Use animations, in addition to the units' unique proportions, to better differentiate and emphasize roles and classes
- Give the world and its inhabitants character and 'life', creating a digital terrarium for the player to control
- Less obstructive user interface and a more 'graphic look' to our iconography

This may initially seem a bit off of the trajectory of where Age 3 was going in terms of the look, but when compared to the original Age of Empires, you can see where this look got some of its foundation.

Development Blog 08/27/10- Similar screen shot from Age of Empires to show Size and Scale
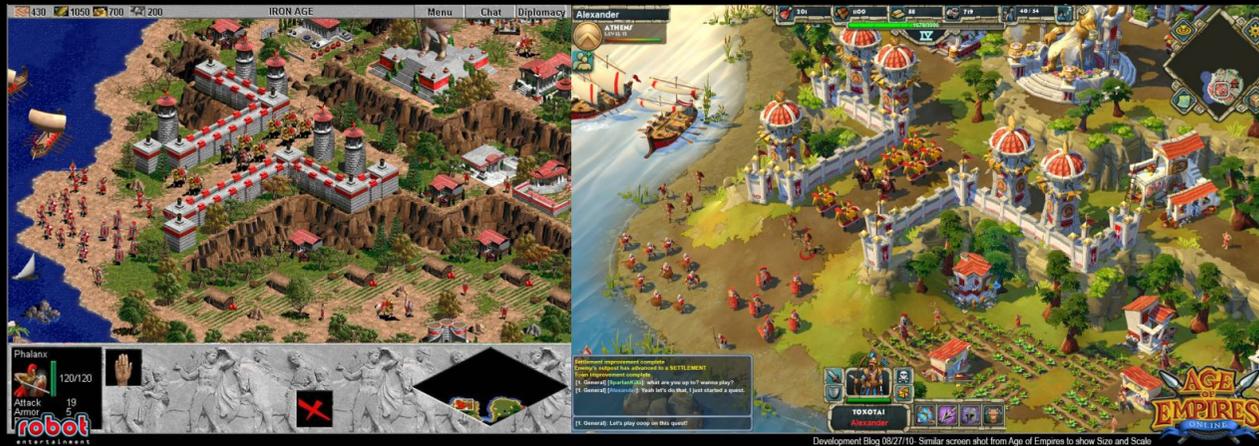
At its core, the look of Age Online was created to support the gameplay. You will notice some repetition in some of these points from our Vision Plan.

1. Age of Empires Online is about creating your empire and controlling massive armies.

- We changed the field of view to allow players to see more on the screen.
- Less interface taking up the screen allows you to see more of the field of play.
- The buildings and user interface took up so much of the screen in Age 3. We really wanted to change that for Age Online without losing the core functionality or impact that those visuals actually gave you.

  2. Having very readable and unique looking units and buildings

- Different proportions and silhouettes to the units help to define their roles.
- Tall and lean archers vs. large and burly infantry
- Not keeping the units 'in scale' to the buildings makes them easier to see on the screen. This also makes the gear that they can be customized with easier to see among the fray of the battlefield.
- Unique silhouettes and iconography to the buildings to make them more readable.
- A large horse shoe on the stable versus the crossed swords on the Barracks. This makes buildings easily identifiable at a glance.
- The final piece that really helps the silhouettes is the animations and behaviors of the units. It was important to make sure that their stances and animations were unique from one another to help differentiate the unit types.

SIZE MATTERS!!

Size and scale along with the proportions and relationships to object details and surrounding buildings are very important when it comes to readability and differentiation.

While I'm not changing the volume and overall dimensions of the space that the house is occupying, the specific details are scaled up quite a bit to exaggerate fact that it's a house, and not another type of building.
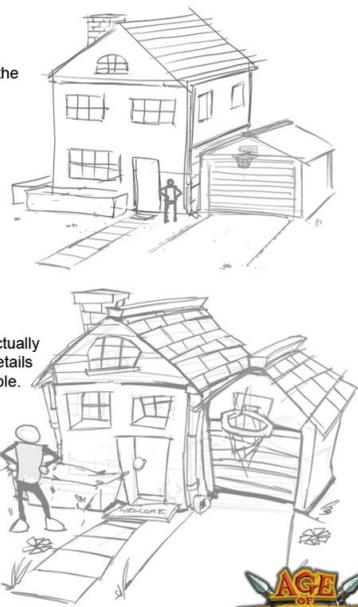
Now it's clear that the man can't actually occupy this house, but since the details are exaggerated, it's more believable. It's a game!!

SILHOUETTE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

Here you see the realistic watch tower alongside a more exaggerated version of the tower. Both have a decent amount of negative space but you can see that the stylized tower has a more destinct shape. This not only accentuates the tone, but gives our buildings more character; especially from our game view.

Development Blog 08/27/10- Size, Proportions, and Shapes of buildings

So that gives a behind the scenes look at building the initial blueprint and eventual foundation for the look of Age of Empires Online. We started with the timeframe and the core fundamentals of A0E1, and created an appealing world where people are going to love to create and conquer empires. We're all really excited at Robot Entertainment, and looking forward to fans of the franchise as well as some new people getting a chance to check it out in motion.

Filed Under: **AoEOnline**   **Art-Bot Central**

kube's blog

AOE TRANSITION
Submitted by redhrts on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 14:49.

This article gave me a window into the mind of RE. I agree that the combination of breaking apart the large taskbar and brightening up the game content really should appeal to most people.

INTERESTING...
Submitted by Master_Bob on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 15:42.

I like what you guys are doing with the game. Now only if that beta invite came, I would have something to do this weekend... *sigh*

A THOUGHT

Submitted by **omicron1** on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 16:20.

From the "Bottleneck" image, it looks like maybe corners aren't being used to their potential.

I remember reading this in an article on UI design a ways back: Corners and screen edges are easier for gamers to access with the mouse than other areas of the screen. For instance, it is very easy to click the start menu button on Windows Vista - both because it's in one corner, allowing you to mouse to it in one gesture with no adjustment; and because the little circle that makes up the visual elements of the start button isn't the limit of its collision box - that box includes the lower-left most pixel.

In AoEo, it seems that the buttons the user will want to click most are in the bottom center of the screen - and furthermore, their hitboxes, visually at least, don't extend to that bottom pixel. This means that the user who clicks said buttons will be forced to jockey with the mouse a bit before he can click them...

On color schemes: I really enjoyed the "dried dirt/desert" textures in Age of Empires 1. In your comparison screen, all the dirt is muddy... I trust you'll have proper desert environments in AoEo? With antelope skeletons and little round cacti?

UI DESIGN

Submitted by **deanparkr** on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 16:54.

Interesting thoughts Omicron1 about UI design. I am guessing the reason the UI doesn't touch the bottom of the screen is because if it did that would cause the screen to scroll as traditionally players move the mouse to the edge of the screen to scroll up, down, left and right.

FIX TREE PLZ!

Submitted by **Fuzer** on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 18:12.

Fix tree plz!

A SOLUTION TO THAT MAY BE

Submitted by **omicron1** on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 18:30.

A solution to that may be ascertained by looking at where players generally scroll the screen: If they move the mouse to the center of the sides, use the corners for interface; and vice versa.

Alternately, make that unit-information panel disappear when nothing is selected.

Also, it is a trivial task to detect if the mouse is over a button/interface and if so, keep it from scrolling, if that is the desired behavior.

Finally, on that unit info panel in general (which I'm guessing is not final, as it seems to hide all the numbers (EG attack value, range)): Maybe move the four small buttons to the left bottom side of the description panel? Also, as a random suggestion, find out which of those four icons (stances, formations, attack-move?, and delete) is the most commonly needed - then make that button/those buttons larger. For example, the "kill me" button is one of the more rarely-used options in your typical RTS interface, whereas formation is a common choice. You can maximize usability while maintaining the same screen real-estate (although messing with the "cleanness" of the design) by adjusting relative sizes of the buttons.

ROCK MY WORLD

Submitted by Mendozacheers on Fri, 09/03/2010 - 23:16.

nice job and a very nice article, i love the ideas and looking forward getting a chance with the beta =D

I LOVE IT!

Submitted by Poseidon on Sat, 09/04/2010 - 02:48.

I love it!

BETA FOR OMICRON1

Submitted by deanparkr on Sat, 09/04/2010 - 04:35.

omicron1 - I hope you apply and get in to the beta! Thats very interesting thoughts about the UI design, and would be well worth posting in the beta feedback forums

MEH.

Submitted by randomrosso93 on Sat, 09/04/2010 - 10:46.

I really don't like the art style in this game...
Something about it, seems weird... Too cartoonish.
But needless to say, I guess it looks alright.

I'VE ALREADY APPLIED. I

Submitted by omicron1 on Sat, 09/04/2010 - 15:00.

I've already applied. I applied literally the hour it was announced.

Haven't gotten in yet, but maybe next month.

@randomrosso: I might take issue with the outwards-slanted walls. They somehow look out-of-place even in the cartoon world - compare the houses in the lower-right corner to the farm buildings right next to them, or the walls' cornerpieces to the rest of the walls.

I think perhaps the issue is that the outwards-sloping walls are a graphical effect that might be observed in conjunction with a wide-angle "fisheye" lens. In a scene rendered from a nearly-orthographic perspective, they look as offputting and out of place as, say, an orthographically-rendered object might look in a perspective scene. There's just something to them that says "Doesn't belong in this picture."

One other thing that looks out-of-place is the tower roofs - they're too large both compared to the tower and compared to other nearby

objects. The shape of the tower says "one man lives here" (at least in part due to the size of the crossbow bolts); yet the size of the towertop platform says "five people can comfortably man this building." When looking at the thumbnail view of the bottleneck image, the first thing that pops out to me is "five round red hot-cross-buns!" Likewise, the tower looks out-of-place next to the wall (which, it must be assumed, is a common companion to our towers). It's literally three times as tall as the wall! Compare to the AoE1 screenshot, where the tower is only twice as high as the wall it's guarding (and looks like it comfortably seats five based on the artwork).

FUZER WROTE:FIX TREE PLZ! I

Submitted by xjake88x on Sat, 09/04/2010 - 20:24.

> **Fuzer** wrote:
>
> Fix tree plz!

i lol'd

AWESOMENESSNESS! I LUV IT!

Submitted by fanaticgamer on Mon, 09/06/2010 - 11:02.

Awesomenessness! I luv it!

NICE STUFF!

Submitted by JohnnyPhoenix on Mon, 09/06/2010 - 13:14.

Thanks for this Blog Post Kube... really explains some stuff ;) Keep Up the good work with the game RE

CASH VIOLET CORNER WELL BEING INSURANCE PRICES

Submitted by matthewmclain88 on Thu, 03/01/2012 - 21:43.

I personally envy the dear information and facts you offer inside your posts. I'll search for your blog post and possess my children drop by right here frequently. My business is rather guaranteed they may learn plenty of new products here compared to everyone different!
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INSURANCE BLUEPRINTS FOR INDEPENDANTLY EMPLOYED

Submitted by matthewmclain88 on Fri, 03/02/2012 - 23:25.

Beneficial occupation! I've noted several content articles to read through but you will great. That is the child. Thank you for giving this tasty write-up. Be expecting your current next content.
insurance blueprints for independantly employed

FAMILY MEMBERS HEALTH AND FITNESS INSURANCE

Submitted by matthewmclain88 on Fri, 03/02/2012 - 23:34.

I actually respect the precious information and facts you are offering inside your content articles. I will bookmark your website and have absolutely the kids visit below often. I'm very convinced they'll discover a lot of brand-new goods listed here when compared with everyone different!

family members health and fitness insurance

VERY USEFUL INFORMATION ARE

Submitted by kellywilson on Tue, 03/20/2012 - 05:36.

very useful information are showing in this article. Thanks for sharing such an informative article with us.interstitial blinds|cordless integral blinds

SANT RITZ CONDO SANT RITZ

Submitted by u0301466 on Mon, 01/21/2013 - 23:34.

Sant Ritz Condo Sant Ritz facilities provide full family entertainment needs for your family and loved ones. Indulge in a serene and tranquil lifestyle right in the heart of Potong Pasir.

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