



Don't get hyped for Age of Empires 4

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On 21 August 2017, Microsoft announced Age of Empires 4. There is a trailer on YouTube, but before you get excited let's break down what we know about the project so far.

A) It will exist at some point.

B) Relic Entertainment is developing it.

C) It will be exclusive to Windows 10.

That is the sum total of actual information provided at the time of writing. No release date, no game premise, no real sales pitch.

The trailer itself gives no real clues: at first you might be fooled into thinking all the rather nice concept artwork must be directly relevant to AoE4's planned content, but this is not so. As you near the end of the video you see that the images chosen are concept art dating from Age of Empires 3, and everything that came before was a depiction of the subject matter of the first two games drawn in the style of AoE3 concept art. For an announcement trailer this is fine: it essentially recaps, quite prettily, the history of a great RTS franchise. There is absolutely no reason to consider it at all indicative of the scope of Age of Empires 4. However, we are not left without things to talk about.

For many the real elephant in the room is that it is a Windows 10 exclusive and will only be sold on the Windows Store. It's difficult to assess the results of this decision at so early a date, but it's a certainty that locking it out from Steam and GoG, and preventing other operating systems from running it will greatly reduce the playerbase (and in a multiplayer game, the playerbase is part of the content you are purchasing). It's

entirely possible that the game will be good enough to convince people to adopt the Windows Store with open arms, but it's pretty clear that Microsoft is making a powerplay at the expense of Age of Empires 4. At this stage the decision can only seem disappointing.

Crucial to the question of the game's appeal is its quality, and that's where Relic comes in. To put it bluntly, they are a wild card.

Many readers will fondly remember Relic as the people responsible for the frankly fantastic *Dawn of War* and *Company of Heroes*. The latter especially would have revolutionised RTS if the genre's bubble hadn't burst – squad-centric combat, in-battle customisation, economy tied to territory control, realistic vehicle mechanics, destructible environments, intelligent AI and cover systems, fields of fire, garrisonable buildings... it remains a master class in what RTS can be. Similarly Relic made the inventive *Impossible Creatures* and the still highly-regarded *Homeworld* franchise. This pedigree alone should indicate that Age of Empires is in safe hands – but let's stop this train of thought here and think about it.

Age of Empires is a pretty classic RTS with a simple base-building, tech-up,

swarm-the-enemy style. It doesn't have a whole lot of tactical scope, terrain isn't important, cover has traditionally not been a thing, and it's mostly about picking the right strategy and gearing your economy to do it fast enough. It's a strategy game, whereas Relic arguably makes tactical games. This is especially stark with Relic's more modern fare such as *Dawn of War 2* and *Company of Heroes 2*, which place even less emphasis on base-building than their

predecessors (more on these games later.) Relic's RTS wheelhouse has always been squads, guns, tanks and cover: Age of Empires is primarily a game about spears, shields, walls and formations. The most obvious thing for a Relic-developed Age of Empires is to continue the technological progress onto the modern age. An Age of

Empires spanning late colonialism through the World Wars and into the Cold War is definitely viable and could be fun, though AoE3's emphasis on ranged combat didn't win over a major following. Moreover, innovations such as a smaller but more elaborate pool of factions to play, and the Home City system weren't well-received by players who think of AoE2 as having been perfection that brooks no improvement.

And Relic definitely isn't a studio content to paint by the numbers. *Company of Heroes 2* and the *Dawn of War* sequels made drastic changes to the formulae of their originals (which were in turn reinventions of the RTS genre AoE is the poster child for.) These changes have not been universally beloved, with CoH2 especially drawing a lot of ire for relying too much on pre-battle customisation, having microtransactions and locking content behind levelling. However, it still enjoys a healthy playerbase and the complaints seem to suggest that it's a good game despite unpopular features. *Dawn of War 3* is even more poorly received, though as I have not played it I cannot speak much about it. A common criticism is that it mashes together too many ideas from MOBAs – real-time strategy's far more successful lovechild, and anathema to RTS purists.

Relic at its mightiest and critically-acclaimed would have been an odd choice to develop Age of Empires 4, but at this stage they are a company that have lost a lot of their goodwill. It's not at all a certainty that they can make Age of Empires 4 a game good enough to overcome Microsoft's platform restrictions. However – it must be acknowledged that they are perhaps the only successful RTS developers currently at the game, and when they fail it's not for lack of ambition. We shouldn't be optimistic about AoE4's chances given what we know so far, but we can't write it off just yet.

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