

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

CONQUERING THE MAGIC KINGDOM

A Guide to Barbarian Kings-manship

by Nick Karp and Scott Laiken

This game (published in *Ares 3*) is one of those which simply feels right and one which I believe will still be played once other titles have lost their charm. The compactness and compensating openness of the game's system produces a playable and malleable specimen that promises to be a hardy packhorse for the imagination of players. I know that my own fancy had some exercise in inventing about half of the names on the map. (Do you know how difficult it is to create several place names that don't sound completely silly?) —RAS

Barbarian Kings is a game in which two to five players assume the roles of empire-minded kings on a mythical continent. The players raise armies and attempt to conquer neutrals and each other in a struggle for continental domination. The game is one of diplomacy and intrigue as well as battle, and every aspect of the game is influenced by powerful but risky magic. Combat units can move only if led by a king or hero, but can block the movement of enemy units and engage in combat without leaders. Movement is plotted, but since each player has only a few units that need to be plotted, writing orders is comparatively simple.

Barbarian Kings is a capsule game (11" x 17" map, eight pages of rules, 100 counters, originally published in *Ares*), but there are many options open to the players at all levels of the game. This article is intended primarily to provide hints to the player on some of the strategies and tactics that have been found most effective. Players should have a copy of the game itself handy as they read this article, although complete knowledge of the rules is not necessary.

Home Province Selection

A player's choice of his initial home provinces at the beginning of the game is an important one. Several factors must be considered when these provinces are chosen. The most obvious (but by no means the most important) factor is each province's Taxation Value. A high Taxation Value is desirable to begin the game with, but as the differences between the Taxation Values of most provinces is only four or five sequins, this is not nearly as important a factor as others.

One of the most important considerations is the nature of a province's occupants. The first turns of the game, constituting a mad dash to purchase units, usually results in a depleted unit supply by turn two or three.

Unless a player is sure that he is the sole owner of provinces of a particular racial makeup, his best strategy is to diversify and pick two provinces with differing occupants whenever possible. One should also take the countermix into account. Since there are more elven than dwarvish counters, for example, the probability is less that the elven countermix will be bought out on the first turn.

Another important factor in choosing a home province is its location on the map. Ideally, a player's provinces should be mutually defensible, far away from those of other players, near to rich and diverse neutral provinces, and either in or behind defensive terrain. In most cases, it will be impossible for a player to obtain areas matching each of these conditions in his initial choice of provinces; all these factors should be considered, however, and the provinces with the

greatest overall advantages should be chosen. The objective of the initial placement is to give a player the ability to expand very quickly by building armies of different types on the first turn and to secure a viable base for later recruiting and expansion.

Unit Purchasing

A player must make important decisions as to what units to buy. If a player has chosen his initial provinces well, then there will be units available when it is his turn to buy them, at least early in the game. Toward the middle of the game, the countermix will be depleted of most unit nationalities. In fact, a player may find himself having to invade a neutral province just so he can buy an undepleted nationality's units.

Basically, there are three types of units: infantry, cavalry, and fleets. Infantry are the most cost effective in terms of the ratio of

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combat strength to purchase price. They are almost always bought out by the end of the first few turns, however.

Cavalry will generally be available throughout the game, because it is usually not worth the additional 50-100% above the purchase and maintenance cost of infantry to get an additional movement point. The one exception to this is elven cavalry, which are the fastest land units in the game. They are expensive, and not particularly good in combat, but their great speed makes them worthwhile.

Naval units, unlike most cavalry, are true bargains. Although not quite as effective as infantry in combat, they are usually cheaper to purchase and to maintain. The generally low combat strengths of naval units are more than made up for, however, by the effectiveness of naval actions. Only 5 of the 47 provinces in the game are landlocked, representing less than a sixth of the total Taxation Values available. All-sea provinces represent as many points of Taxation Value as the landlocked areas, and these provinces are usually more easily captured and held, as there will rarely be more than one naval power in one section of the map.

A major advantage of naval units is their ability to transport land units. Ocean provinces are generally longer and thinner than land provinces, and thus naval transport effectively increases the distance that land units can travel in one Movement Phase. Naval units also possess great flexibility, enabling land forces in coastal provinces to strike into many more areas than they would otherwise be able to reach. Fleets are also useful in circumventing blocking forces that have been set up on land. Finally, naval units can participate in combats in coastal areas, throwing their weight into battle in addition to the strength of any units they might have been transporting.

The Airships of Wyls have both assets and liabilities. Their high speed and unique mode of travel make them perfect for securing provinces in the opening turns of the game. Their high combat strength, combined with their ability to carry other units, makes them equally powerful in battle.

The airships have one major drawback, however: their cost. Fourteen sequins is enough to make a player fearful of using them in any battle where there is a danger that they will be eliminated. They are also expensive to maintain, and for sheer combat power, the player is better off buying more cost-effective units.

Races

The five non-human races all have special abilities and liabilities. While not as cost effective as humans, certain races gain defensive benefits in their home terrain. An elven unit is effectively quadrupled in forest; a warfrog is quadrupled in swamp; and dwarves are doubled in mountains. These effects make it difficult, and sometimes next to impossible, to oust a non-human unit defending its home territory.

The last two non-human races are the whales and the orcs. Whales are fairly expen-

sive to purchase and are unable to enter coastal provinces, reducing their effectiveness to situations involving naval combat and blockades. The orcs, on the other hand, although weak, are the most cost-effective units in the game, and have many uses wherever cheap units are needed for a sacrificial blocking position or other such actions (i.e., where physical numbers of units are important, but strength is irrelevant).

The preceding comments are limited to those situations in which a player has a choice as to what units to purchase — a choice that will become increasingly restricted as the game progresses. Players are restricted by the provinces they control, by the sequins in their treasuries, and — most importantly — by the countermix. Toward the middle of the game, it will be rare for there to be infantry or naval units of any type available, and the players will be waiting like vultures for units to be killed so that they may be quickly grabbed and rebuilt. Precedence dice rolls for building units will often be very important; a player can minimize the effects of these rolls, however, by giving himself as many options as possible on what units to build.

When buying units and deciding whether to maintain them, a question will arise as to how much to spend and how much to keep as a reserve. It is usually a good idea to keep about 10 sequins available, slightly more if one has a wizard who casts spells that require cash expenditure. A cash reserve is always a good thing to have, as it can be used for bribes and to maintain units in the event of cash shortages in later turns. In any case, a reserve of more than 20 sequins is rarely needed.

Another important question concerns how many heroes to buy and the abilities to assign to each. In general, it is a good idea to keep at least two heroes on the map, in addition to a player's king. Keeping an extra leader around at all times is definitely better than ever being short a leader and thus being unable to move an army. The extra four sequins per turn will insure that the owning player will be able to outmaneuver understaffed opposing forces.

The choice of abilities for a player's king is very important. Magical talents (especially Mind Magic) alleviate the need for buying wizards early in the game, freeing needed sequins for buying heroes and combat units. If a king's Magic Value drops to 1, however, he cannot be fired as a wizard could be, and the player is stuck with a dud ability. A combination of march and tactics abilities is a king's most reliable choice. This choice will put the king up with his front-line armies, where he will be the best protected and of the most use (although, it is true, he will be taking more risks). A mixture of heroic and magical abilities is usually not a good idea. To use one or two heroic abilities, a king will have to be in the front lines where he will be taking risks without the protection that three martial abilities provide.

Magic

One of the most enjoyable aspects of *Barbarian Kings* is magic. Magic and its effects will be in evidence throughout the game-turn as spells can be cast at almost any time. Magic is almost as effective as it is fun. With the aid of a few sequins spent on conjuring, a wizard can wipe out an army, convert a gaggle of neutrals to his player's control, freeze an ocean, or raise zombie armies from the dead.

There are four Branches of Magic to which a wizard may belong: Mind Magic, Elemental Magic, Illusory Magic, and Necromantic Magic. Of the Branches, Elemental Magic contains the spells that will give the greatest tactical advantages. This Branch contains spells that are involved mainly with blocking enemy movement by storms, floods, and the like. The problem with these spells is that, like all magic in *Barbarian Kings*, they are undependable and cannot be counted on to work when needed. Thus, although the spells are useful to pin an enemy force down while the wizard's player is on the offensive behind enemy positions, the Elemental spells are of little use while on the defensive except as an extremely risky, or desperate, venture.

One spell in the Branch does not affect movement, but can be used to harrass the enemy directly: a Tornado spell which makes tax collection in any one province impossible for a turn. One must always be careful of reprisals when one sends a tornado, however, and if you have a province with a higher Taxation Value than your enemy's highest, it is not to your advantage to start a tornado war. Even when an enemy has no means of retaliation, tornadoes are mainly just nuisances. Sometimes you can really catch an enemy with his pants down, though, if he has amassed a huge army and is depending on his next turn's revenue to maintain it. Hitting a province with a Taxation Value of eight or ten can destroy three or four units for lack of maintenance if the owning player has a depleted treasury, without the wizard's player ever having to go into battle!

Mind Magic, true to its name, is subtler than Elemental Magic, but is also less effective in many cases. The Branch's magic deals basically with gaining the friendship of neutral or hostile forces. The Branch has several powerful spells, but its most effective spell, Allegiance (which allows a player to gain permanent control of any number of neutral units) is useless after all neutrals have been eliminated, a condition that usually applies by the end of the fourth turn. Thus, it is a good idea to purchase a Mind wizard early in the game, unless you assign the Branch to your king.

Illusory Magic, by far the weakest of the Branches, is not worth wasting a wizard on. The Branch possesses only three spells, which allow a wizard to make units invisible, to detect invisible units, and to create illusory armies. The first spell is not as effective as it might be, because the spell affects only one leader and the units stacked with him. The necessity of the presence of a leader with the

invisible units makes the spell too expensive for use on blocking units intended for defense where such a spell would otherwise be highly effective, so the spell is essentially offensive. There is only the usual one third chance that the spell will work in the first place, making it a shaky foundation upon which to base an offensive. The spell which detects invisible or illusory units is also extremely limited, and the spell to create illusory units is equally useless, as the rules state that illusory units must be removed upon demand by a player who wishes to construct new units. With the countermix limitations, the above restriction is tantamount to declaring illusory units useless. The Branch of Illusory Magic is not recommended for use by any spell-caster at any time.

The Branch of Necromancy is an effective Branch. It has spells to kill enemy units and leaders, and to raise units from the dead. Although the kill spells have the usual one third chance of working, they are so enormously effective if they do function that the Branch is worth having for them alone. The elimination of a hero at the wrong time can be devastating to a marauding enemy. The kill spells cost the casting player sequins if they are successful, but the cost of the spells is usually substantially less than the purchase cost of the units they destroy. The spell that raises killed units from the dead is equally effective, allowing the wizard's player to gain units without paying anything for them (saving an average of four or five sequins per unit for an army of often six to seven units) and also without having to worry about precedence rolls during the Finance Phase. The spell is dangerous to operate, as friendly units are sometimes killed when the spell backfires, but it is far more profitable than it is risky.

As noted before, the effectiveness of magic is limited by the generally less than 50% chance of a successful cast. Nevertheless, a good player will always take magic into account when planning a campaign of any sort. Magic is one of the aspects of *Barbarian Kings* that distinguishes it from an ordinary battle game; it makes each game unpredictable while adding lots of player value at the same time. Friendly magic can be a great asset if used at unexpected moments.

General Courses

When a game begins, only about 15% of the provinces on the map are player-occupied, and about that many more will be occupied by neutral units. Most of the map is completely empty, and a player's objective on the first few turns should be to take as many unoccupied provinces for himself as possible. If a player is unlucky enough to begin the game with player neighbors, some attention will have to be paid to defense as well, but neutral areas are easy pickings, and first attention should be paid to capturing unoccupied and neutral-guarded territory. Players should not worry about maintaining lines at this point of the game, but rather concentrate on grabbing as many tax points worth of provinces as they can.

A player who wastes his forces and leaders attacking another player at the beginning of the game will suffer for it later when he has to fight to gain provinces that other players have taken by just waltzing through. By the same token, unguarded neutral provinces are to be preferred over guarded ones, for the simple reason that combat is a risky business. The Allegiance spell of the Mind Branch is of paramount importance at this time, not only because it gives a player units and provinces cheaply, but also because it frees a player's armies to take other areas as well. The same criteria as those for choosing provinces at the beginning of the game should be used for occupying provinces.

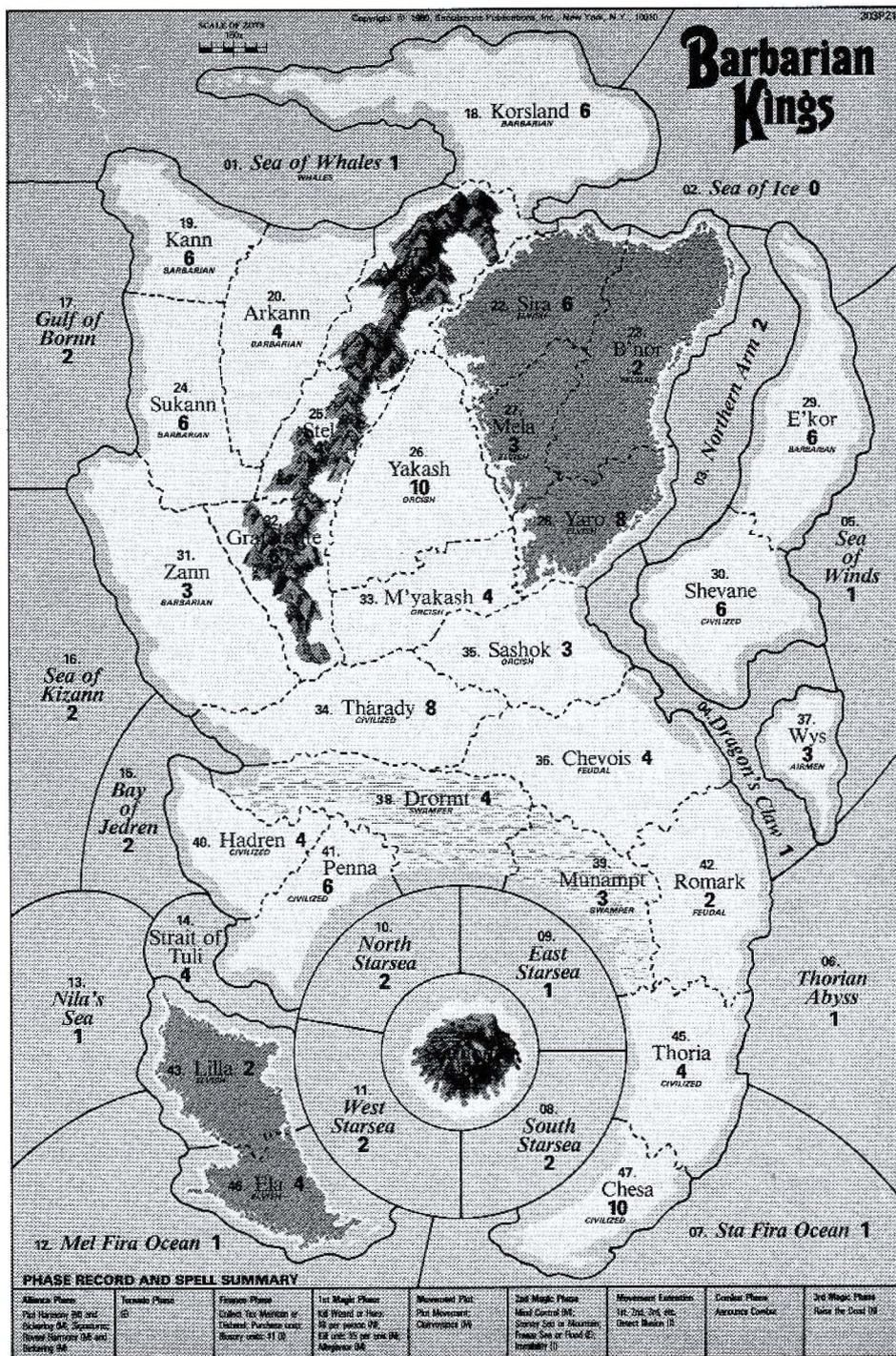
Players should be less picky at this point, however, and try for quantity as well as for quality.

As a general rule, units should not be disbanded if it is at all possible to maintain them, especially later in the game when unit scarcity becomes more noticeable. There are, however, exceptions to this rule.

If a hired wizard backfires while casting a spell, and his magic value drops to 1, he should be beheaded and replaced. Wizards are too expensive to maintain as duds when an expenditure of six sequins will bring them up to full strength.

The second exception should be used only in rare emergencies, and is most effective

Reproduction of *Barbarian Kings* map.



tive when one player holds all the provinces of a given race. The trick is to disband units in one province in order to put them back in the countermix so that they can be rebuilt elsewhere. This is an expensive and dangerous tactic, and its success will often be determined by a risky precedence roll. It is sometimes necessary, however, when a player has overextended himself and left his rear areas open to plunder unless reinforcements that would otherwise be unavailable appear very quickly.

Two other tactics that deal with purchasing units are rather nasty. The first is building more units than one needs just to prevent another player from building them. The infantry and naval units of a nationality can often be completely bought out by a player with his initial sequin allotment at the beginning of the game, and if several players gang up, they can deplete the counters of several nationalities completely. This would leave a player's territories open to capture, because he would be unable to build on the first turn.

Another tactic, in a similar vein, is to attempt to buy all the naval units available. The total cost of all fleets is less than 120 sequins, a small enough sum to be handled by one prosperous player over a few turns if his opponents are not vigilant. If a player ever manages this feat, he is in excellent shape, and will probably win the game.

Combat

Combat in *Barbarian Kings* is fairly abstracted. Nevertheless, there are several tactical tricks that are important to understand and use effectively. Blocking actions are a good example. Using these actions, an enemy army of any size can be stopped by one unit placed in its path. When combined with the game's system of movement point by movement point movement, the result is that blockades can effectively be set up by having a leader drop off a sacrificial unit in the path of an enemy army and then withdraw while the main body of a friendly army gathers. This tactic cannot hold enemy advances for long, but it is a way to delay an enemy, especially if cheap orcish or feudal infantry can be used.

Another important use of the Blocking rule is in garrisons. Although a player will only be able to set up real lines in rare instances, there will always be certain major avenues of approach to a player's most valuable provinces. Obviously it would be financially impractical to leave a full-fledged army to guard each of these provinces, but if a few blocking units are left to screen a player's outer perimeter, the units will be able to hold an approaching enemy force until a defensive army can arrive, with newly-built reinforcements if necessary. Again, cheap orcish or feudal infantry are the best units for this purpose.

Unless a player is willing to expend an excessive part of his income buying and maintaining leaders, there will always be a shortage of leaders available for maneuvering if a player attempts to assign a leader to

each friendly stack. This difficulty can be overcome by equipping leaders with the march ability and using each to move two or more stacks. Leaders are able to pick up and leave off units along their paths of movement so long as no unit or leader exceeds its own movement allowance. Although it is true that a unit profits from a leader's march ability only if the leader begins and ends his movement stacked with that unit, nevertheless the players will find this tactic necessary and more effective than limiting the number of moving stacks to the number of friendly leaders on the map.

Combat units can also attack without the presence of a leader, and leaders can exit enemy occupied areas without the enemy having a chance to block them. Thus, properly utilized, one leader can drop off a blocking unit in an enemy occupied province and then go to fetch a friendly army. Even more dramatic than a hero with a single march ability is a king with two or three such abilities. Such a king can handle almost all troop movement necessary for a major war.

Unless a player has odds of six-to-one in a battle, or he knows that he will be able to govern the retreat of the enemy stack through the retreat ability, it is a good idea for a player to drop off one unit in each province the player controls that is immediately adjacent to the province where the battle is to occur. Once again, orcish and feudal units are ideal for this sort of frontline garrison duty. It is unpleasant to force the retreat of a powerful enemy army, only to see it split up into small groups which capture your own provinces by their retreats.

Another important tactic is the use of different races for different tasks. When attacking elves in a forest, use elves. If you do not have any, attack the province only if absolutely necessary. In its own territory, a non-human unit is as strong as two or three civilized legions. Cost-effectiveness is an important part of the game, and the utilization of the proper units for an attack will be necessary to a player's success in battle.

Player-to-Player

One important aspect of the game that has been neglected so far is inter-player relations. *Barbarian Kings* is intended to be a multi-player game, and although it can be played with two, it is best with four. When five play, the map gets crowded too quickly, too few units are available to be built, and the number of turns when the players are expanding through neutral territories, one of the most enjoyable periods in the game, is greatly reduced. As in most multi-player games, alliances are the key to winning. These alliances include informal deals between players as well as the written contracts allowed in the game. Two players can almost always overwhelm one quickly, even if that one has a greater tax base than both of the other two combined. The two have greater flexibility in building units, twice the chance of achieving precedence in the Finance Phase, and the special abilities of two kings — a not insignificant advantage.

Alliances can and should be brought about and ended through bribery. The game is at its most enjoyable when players are bidding for each other's allegiances.

Barbarian Kings is a true player's game. It has a basically simple system with lots of subtle and not-so-subtle tricks for the players to discover, only a few of which have been mentioned here. Most of all, however, the game is lots of fun.

Barbarian Kings Addenda

[7.1] **Clarification.** If more than one Player's units occupy a province during the Finance Phase, none gets to Tax the province.

[8.2] **Addition.** If a king is captured by a neutral unit, he is returned to his owning Player if (1) the neutral unit is destroyed; (2) if its allegiance is obtained through an "Allegiance" spell; or (3) if the owning Player expends four times the neutral unit's province's Taxation Value. Each Movement Phase that a captive king remains a neutral's prisoner, there is a one in six chance (a 1 on a six-sided die) that he will be executed. In all cases, kings may not be rescued simply by moving Friendly units into the province where the king is being held, but must rather be ransomed or have their captors destroyed. Captured kings may not use spells.

[9.6] **Addition.** A unit may not retreat into a neutral-occupied province.

[9.8] **Clarification.** Neutral units that receive "Retreat" results are eliminated instead.

[10.42] **Clarification.** Any units stacked with a Hero affected by this spell may move with the Hero and engage in combat at the casting player's discretion if the units are stacked with the Hero at the end of the Movement Phase. Note, however, that such movement and combat is restricted by other aspects of this spell. ■ ■

Opening MOVES [continued from page 2]

Charles Roberts Awards

Best Pre-20th Century Game: *Napoleon at Leipzig* (OSG); **Best 20th-Century Game:** *Cityfight* (SPI); **Best Fantasy/SF Game:** *Creature that Ate Sheboygan* (SPI); **Best New Game:** *Ironclads* (Yaq); **Best Professional Magazine:** *Fire & Movement*; **Best Amateur Magazine:** *Perfidious Albion*; **Hall of Fame:** David Isby; **Outstanding Service to the Hobby:** Dick Bryant, Jay Hadley.



Pete Reese racked up a 13-0 record in SPI's *Chickamauga* and *Napoleon at Waterloo* tournaments at Origins 80, garnering a cool \$350 for his efforts and a round of applause from SPI.

I extend my personal congratulations to all the companies and individuals.

—Redmond