

SCENARIOS & VARIANTS

EMPIRES FOR TWO

A Play System for General Application to the Scenarios

by James F. Epperson

Empires was well regarded at this year's awards ceremonies: It took both an Origins Award and a Game Designer's Guild Award. *Empires* sells well although (I think) not as well as it deserves. The nominal subject probably deflects a good number of people who would really enjoy the game if they'd just imagine that it's a science fictional or fantastic continent instead of Europe. Perhaps when I get around to having most of it transferred to microcomputer format, some of you foot-draggers will take up the scepter. —Redmond

Empires of the Middle Ages, or just *Empires* for short, is one of those dream games that comes along once in a very blue moon. It is original, innovative, challenging, and best of all, one helluva lot of fun! Unfortunately, a great deal of that fun is lost when there are only two or three people to play a scenario. The game loses much of its flavor with each empire that is not active in the game.

This article is an attempt to present a mechanism by which *any* of the scenarios can be played by as few as two people, without losing all of the multi-player flavor. The key idea is that those empires which are not player-controlled still enter into the game, as empires. They may either function as *Independent Empires* (operating according to a standard procedure, sort of like a peaceful Magnate), or as *Allied Empires* (controlled by one of the "live" players). The status of a given Empire may change over the course of time, from Independent to Allied and back, and even to Alliance with different players. Players can gain or lose Victory Points due to the handling of their Alliances.

[33.0] INDEPENDENT AND ALLIED EMPIRES

COMMENTARY:

These rules can be used whenever the number of Empires in a scenario is greater than the number of available players. There are three kinds of Empires: *Player Empires*, directly controlled by a player; *Independent Empires*, which function according to a set program; and *Allied Empires*, which are more or less controlled by the player with whom they are allied.

[33.1] COURSE OF PLAY

[33.11] Every Empire listed in the scenario description is used in the game. **Exception:** The Millennium Scenario (28.0) lists seven possible empires,

and there are only six different marker colors. Therefore, the players may decide to eliminate one of the smaller empires from the game.

[33.12] The normal Sequence of Play is followed. The order of play is determined as usual in the Initiative Determination Phase. Independent Empires always take their turn as soon in the Round as possible; Allied Empires choose spots according to the desires of the player to whom they are allied.

[33.13] All Empires, regardless of status (Player, Allied, or Independent) use their own markers to indicate claims, ties, possessions or conquests. The fact that one Empire is allied to a player does *not* mean that that player "takes over" the Allied Empire as part of his own.

[33.2] INDEPENDENT EMPIRES

[33.21] Independent Empires function according to a standard procedure each turn. Although the procedure as given below is fairly inclusive, we do not even hope to have covered every possible circumstance of play. For this reason, it is suggested that a different player run each Independent Empire each turn, and that this player's interpretations be regarded as binding. Serious disputes can be resolved through diplomatic parley.

[33.22] The general course of action for an Independent Empire is as follows: 1) draw and act upon Event Card; 2) tax, if possible; 3) conduct *four* endeavors, if possible; 4) tax, if not possible in #2 and possible now.

[33.23] The general order of endeavors for an Independent Empire is as follows: 1) Rule Areas in Unrest; 2) Rule other Areas; 3) Fortify; 4) Conquest or Pillage. The specific rules governing endeavors for Independent Empires are given in Case 33.24. Note that an Independent Empire *always* saves one Year Card and two gold units for a Defensive Endeavor, even if there is no one following the Independent in the Round who could attack it. Independent Empires *never* conduct Diplomatic Endeavors, although they do have Diplomatic Statures. Furthermore, Independent Empires always conduct Defensive Endeavors if they have the necessary funds and Year Cards to do so.

[33.24] Independent Empire Procedure

A. Event Card: Draw the Event Card, which is immediately revealed to all players. If it is the Missionary Fervor Card, it is replaced in the deck and another card is drawn. If it is *not* a Holding Card, it is treated normally and all effects of it should be duly noted (see below for special effects of the Leader Dies Heirless Card); if it *is* a Holding Card, it is kept and played as soon as possible. Since only three cards may be kept at any one time, discards will have to be made of unplayed cards; those cards held longest are discarded first, regardless of content.

Holding Cards which are played and kept (like the Tactical Systems or Enlargement of King's Per-

sonal Demise Cards) are never discarded so long as there are any unplayed cards still held by the Independent Empire.

B. Taxation: If there exists at least one Area in the Independent Empire, besides the Court Area, which may be profitably taxed at a rebellion value of *one or less*, then all such Areas, including the Court, are now taxed for the maximum gold which can be obtained for a rebellion value of one or less. If the Court is the only Area which meets the above criterion, or if no other Area does, then taxation is postponed until after endeavors are conducted. Independent Empires never plunder.

C. Endeavors: The choice of endeavors to be attempted is made by following the decision flow chart below. Note that only four endeavors are ever attempted, sometimes less. The last Year Card is saved for a Defensive Endeavor, even if there are no Empires that follow play next in the Round. The manner in which gold may be spent to increase Effectiveness Ratings is given below, as outlined in Case 33.25.

To determine what endeavors are attempted, the following series of steps is followed four times in succession; the result, each time, will be the next endeavor to be attempted.

1. Has the Empire been attacked since its last turn? If so, attempt a *Fortification Endeavor* in one of the Areas which was attacked. ("Attacked" means either a Pillage or Conquest Endeavor from a Raider, Magnate, or other Empire.)

2. Is there Unrest in the Empire? If so, attempt a *Ruling Endeavor* in one of the Areas in unrest.

3. Are any Areas at less than maximum possible Social State? If so, attempt a *Ruling Endeavor* in one such Area.

4. Are any Areas totally without Fortification? If so, attempt a *Fortification Endeavor* in an unfortified Area.

5. Do any Areas have Fortifications of only Level 2? If so, attempt a *Fortification Endeavor* in such an Area.

6. Is there gold to pay for a Conquest Endeavor? If so, a *Conquest Endeavor* is attempted, with the target being picked as though the Independent Empire were a Magnate.

7. Attempt a Pillage Endeavor. Pick the target as though the Independent Empire were a Magnate. Any gold *is* collected.

Note that the endeavors are only "attempted." It is, of course, possible that the first endeavor called for by the above steps will be impossible: The Empire may not have sufficient gold to fortify, or may not have the Administrative Stature to rule with a high enough Effectiveness Rating, etc. If this is the case, then return to the series of steps above, at the step after the one which called for the impossible endeavor. **Example:** If the Empire had just been attacked, but had no gold at all, then it could not pay for the Fortification Endeavor called for by

Step 1; therefore, play would proceed to step 2, and if necessary, step 3, and so forth.

In an extreme case, it may be that the Empire will be unable to do anything whatsoever. Simply save the Year Cards for possible leader stature checks at the end of the Round, and proceed to the next Player-Turn; Independent Empires are not bound by the normal requirement that at least one endeavor be attempted.

If there is more than one possible target for an endeavor, then choose the one Area most like the Court Area of the Empire as target; if there are still multiple targets, resolve the situation by means of a die roll.

D. Second Taxation: If the Empire were unable to tax at Step B above, then it taxes now, using the same criteria.

[33.25] Gold is spent to raise the Effectiveness Ratings for endeavors according to the following schedule. If the basic (i.e., pre-gold) Effectiveness Rating is less than +1, then gold is spent to raise it to +1, but no higher; if the basic Effectiveness Rating is greater than +1 but less than +5, then gold is spent to raise it to +5, but no higher; if the basic Effectiveness Rating is greater than +5 but less than +8, then gold is spent to raise it to +8, but no higher. The gold is always spent, if available, except that two gold units are always saved to pay for a Defensive Endeavor.

[33.26] Independent Empires are subject to stature checks in the normal fashion.

[33.27] Independent Empires may vote in parleys. Their votes are controlled by the real players, according to dice rolls. For each Independent Empire, each player rolls two dice and adds his Diplomatic Stature; the player with the highest total gets the votes of that Independent Empire. The dice rolling is done for each individual issue being voted upon in the parley.

[33.28] It is not at all uncommon for an Independent Empire to be an interested party in a parley. For example, a player could attempt to gain a claim to one of the Independent's Areas. In this and similar cases the Independent votes its own self-interest, regardless of Case 33.27.

[33.29] If an Independent Empire is forced to move its Court Area, then it chooses the Area of appropriate language and religion which has the highest total of population plus maximum possible Social State. If the Court cannot be relocated, see Case 33.6.

[33.3] ALLIED EMPIRES

[33.31] Allied Empires are controlled by the player with whom they are allied. (See 33.4 for procedure on how to gain and lose alliances.) That player conducts the Player-Turn for his Allied Empires just as if he were playing them himself. Each Allied Empire has its own spot in the rotation of play during which the controlling player conducts its turn; he may tax as he wishes, conduct endeavors as he wishes (using, of course, the stature of the leader of the Allied Empire, and not his own), and, in short, do all that a player of a "normal" Empire might do.

[33.32] Deals may be made between a player and his Allies and even between two of his Allies at his behest, but they are strictly regulated. Gold may only change hands if it is being used to pay the direct costs of an endeavor, or as directed below. (Gold from an Ally may *never* be used to pay endeavor costs for the player's own Empire.) Claims and Areas may be exchanged, but on a strict one-for-one basis: a claim for a claim, an Area for an Area; an Area which is claimed and possessed may only be exchanged for another Area which is also claimed and possessed. When Areas are traded,

any difference in Social State is made up in gold; if an Area in unrest is involved in a trade, the Empire receiving it obtains an extra five gold units as compensation.

[33.33] Allied Empires undergo stature checks in the normal fashion. Such checks may affect the status of the alliance, however; see Case 33.4.

[33.4] GAINING AND LOSING ALLIED EMPIRES

[33.41] Allied Empires are gained by conducting Diplomatic Endeavors against the Court Area of an Independent Empire. (This is an exception to Case 12.12.) The process is similar to conquest in that, in general, several ties will be needed to gain the Alliance. The number of ties required is equal to the maximum possible Social State of the Court, plus the population value, using a population of "one" for all Areas of smaller population.

Note: The actual Social State of the Court is not important — the maximum possible is. A standard Diplomatic Endeavor is carried out, using all appropriate modifiers; a "C" result counts as enough ties to reach the maximum number required for Alliance. Note that these diplomatic ties are against the Court of the Empire, not that particular Area. So, if the Court of the Empire is moved to another Area, the ties move with it. The number of ties held by any one player does not change when this move happens, even though the number needed for alliance might change.

[33.42] An Independent Empire may *not* play a Diplomatic Coup Holding Card to remove ties against its Court. However, a player may use such a card to remove ties against the Court Area of one of his Allied Empires. The Card must have been drawn by the player's Empire.

[33.43] If one player is allied to a given Empire, and a second player obtains the requisite number of diplomatic ties, there is no immediate change in the status of the original alliance. However, the second player may, at his whim, subtract *two* from the Effectiveness Rating of any endeavor attempted by the Allied Empire. Moreover, he will be in a position to acquire the Allied Empire for his own should a stature check occur (see 33.44).

[33.44] If a stature check is made on a non-player Empire (i.e., Independent or Allied), the status of the Empire *may* be changed. Each player having sufficient ties to qualify for an alliance rolls two dice, adding his Diplomatic Stature to the result; a similar die roll is made on behalf of the non-player Empire. The player with the highest total retains/acquires the non-player Empire as an Ally, and continues that Empire's turn. If the non-player Empire itself has the highest total, then it retains/acquires Independent status, and the turn is completed via the procedure of 33.24.

[33.45] If a non-player Empire draws a Leader Dies Heirless card, then a different process is employed. Each player having *any* ties to the Empire's Court now rolls two dice, adding in his own Diplomatic Stature and the number of ties he has, and subtracting *twelve*. The result is the number of ties he now has to the Court, up to the maximum of the number required for alliance; the negative results are treated as zero. If, after all this is done, any players have enough ties to qualify for an alliance, then 33.44 is used to determine which, if any of them, gains the alliance.

[33.46] Players may spend gold to improve their dice rolls in either of Cases 33.44 and 33.45, but the amount to be spent must be secretly declared prior to any dice rolls being made.

[33.47] If a player goes through a stature check and emerges with a *lower* Diplomatic Stature as a result, then the status of each of his alliances is checked using Case 33.44

[33.48] If a player draws a Leader Dies Heirless card, then he loses all alliances (since he loses all ties). Any other players who possess enough ties to his (former) allies may then attempt (via 33.44) to gain these alliances.

[33.49] Alliance may be voluntarily terminated at any time by the player involved.

[33.5] VICTORY POINTS

Clearly, players must be judged on how well they manage their allies, else they will just suck them dry. Accordingly, whenever a player acquires an alliance, the current Victory Point total for that Empire is noted, as of the instant the alliance takes effect. When the alliance is terminated, any change in Victory Points is added directly to the player's own Victory Point total. Thus, if his allies go down in Victory Points, so will he, and vice versa.

[33.6] DEMISE OF EMPIRES

[33.61] If an Independent Empire ever loses its Court Area and is unable to establish a new one, then it must either be granted asylum by some player, or cease to exist entirely. If more than one player wishes to grant asylum, a procedure similar to 33.45 is used: each player adds his Diplomatic Stature, number of ties to the Independent's Court (before it was lost, of course), and the result of rolling two dice. The player with the highest total is able to grant asylum to the Independent Empire, and necessarily gains an alliance to the Empire in exile. This is treated in all respects as a normal alliance, but the rules governing exile apply in full force (see Section 21.0).

[33.62] An alliance to an Empire in exile is represented by granting the player Empire which has the alliance a number of diplomatic ties sufficient to gain an alliance to the last Court of the Empire now in exile. When the Allied Empire leaves exile, this is the number of ties which the player Empire has to the new Court. It thus behooves the player Empire to so arrange things that the new Court does not require too many ties for an Alliance!

[33.63] If an Allied Empire loses its Court and cannot establish a legitimate new Court, then the player to whom the Empire is allied has a choice: either grant asylum to his ally, or voluntarily terminate the alliance, thus letting 33.61 take effect.

[33.64] If no one wishes to grant asylum to an Independent Empire, then the Empire is more or less dismantled and removed from the game. All of its claims, however, do remain in place. If a Magnate ever appears in an Area of the same language and religion as the Court of the "dead" Empire, and if this Area was *ever* possessed by the "dead" Empire, then instead of a Magnate the original Empire reappears. Leader Statures are determined as though from a Stature Check on a 3-3-3, and six gold units are placed in the Empire's treasury.

The original purpose behind the development of these rules was to allow two friends to play any of the scenarios without having so much extra space on the map. It makes a great deal of difference to the German player that Burgundy, France, Denmark, and Poland are real, semi-coherent Empires on his borders, rather than just more areas to conquer and rule. This difference becomes acutely obvious when the Byzantine gains alliances with some of his neighbors. It makes for a much more interesting game, even with only two players.

There are two reasons for gaining alliances: one, to do nasty things to your live opponents; and two, to get cheap Victory Points because almost any fool can run an

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the game. This couldn't be farther from the truth. I didn't like the simulation of the battle but I thought the "game" was great. I must have to have played it eight times. I have never had so many last turn cliffhangers in a game.

The game relied so much on the occupancy of Kursk and Orel. As the Soviet player all my efforts were aimed at capturing Orel once my reinforcements were triggered by the German capture of Lgov. But the Germans had normally offset the balance so far in their favor that they could reinforce against a threat on Orel and still have sufficient strength to capture and hold Kursk against the offensive potential available to the Soviets at that stage of the game — in the two strategic victories outcomes Kursk was being held by four very battered steps of the once glorious 2nd SS Panzer Korps!

As the German player one does well to follow most of James Smolen's advice, except that the main aim should be to link both thrusts — regardless of losses — to stand any chance of having sufficient force to capture Kursk. Also, never waste forces in reducing Soviet units if they can be cut off (thanks to good old infiltration movement — you should have listened to your playtesters, Eric).

The Soviet player seems to lack the mobility in crucial areas — particularly in his vital defense weapons, the anti-tank guns, which, as Class II units, struggle through friendly entrenchments trying to join stacks sufficiently strong to deter enemy assault. More often than not, they were overrun for their trouble after falling behind their accompanying forces.

Soviet mobility is further impeded by the less than helpful rail net and the strict rules applied to their use. If the German player is careful in the timing of his attacks that will trigger the reinforcements, he can be sure

that these forces will not interfere too much with his offensive designs. These ahistorical restraints thus force the Soviet player to keep a large proportion of his anti-tank forces in reserve, awaiting the inevitable German breakthrough.

The German player can find a great deal of success for very little effort. His efforts should be based on careful planning of attacks designed to rip holes in the Soviet front regardless of the state of the defense prepared by his opponent. Despite warnings to the contrary, he is able to shift forces from the line if they cannot make any headway to points more likely to achieve a breakthrough. Once Lgov succumbs to the inevitable the only tenable Soviet-defense line is four vital hexes nearer to Kursk. The German player will then have at least one turn to organise his hammer blow assault and keep his supply lanes free of interference from partisans and the like. Psychological warfare is another weapon in the Wehrmacht's arsenal, especially if the armored forces achieve the large penetrations early in the game. The Soviet player is likely to be distracted from his attacks on Orel and Belgorod if an early threat is likely to capture Kursk.

As a game, *Kursk* is certainly a strain on the grey matter for both players and can be fun in a morbid way. Success does not depend on the whims of the die but rather on the differing abilities of the players to organise and coordinate their forces to gain most benefit from the rules. Unfortunately this puts less, rather than more, pressure on the German player, thus throwing simulation out of the window; the Germans should have been made to sweat and strain for every hex gained — just as they did historically.

In summary, I hope that I have stayed within my brief by reviewing the game as the designer demanded — i.e., as a simulation of

the climactic episode in the history of the War in the East. I feel too much effort was expended on the OB to the detriment of development of systems truly capable of reflecting the problems faced by the two sides. I wouldn't have lost any sleep had the OB been slightly inaccurate if in return I had played a game which had taught me the problems faced by a commander trying to crack a toughened walnut with a small hammer. Instead I was shown how this hammer could first shatter the shell and then batter the nut into submission.

The game is held together by a number of good ideas which only succeed in creating a rather shallow and gimmicky feel. In spite of everything going against it, the game manages to provide an extremely tight and tense situation for the opponents to surmount. Unfortunately this was not the designer's *stated* intention and in consequence he cannot accept the praise that this achievement would ordinarily warrant.

The history of the world contains many "what-ifs." Games too follow the same trends; what would *Kursk* the game have been like if the designer had had more time, more money for more counters, a bigger map and so forth? Historically the Germans were lacking in critical areas; the game reflects many of the problems encountered.

Kursk is an enigma, both the battle and the game. Historically it should never have happened, yet did; the game looks as if it should work, yet does not come off. It is not for me to recommend a cure, but it does seem such a shame that so much effort should be wasted for the amount of fine tuning required to achieve the designer's aims. *Kursk* held so much promise but was too far beyond the reach of the man who decided to grab the nettle. Perhaps history has been repeated after all. ■■

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are necessary since the attack sequence allows for many attacks, especially anti-tank fire. I don't consider this a major drawback as it will help average out the luck factor in a game, especially one with only 7 to 9 turns.

It would be worthwhile to mention two more points of possible confusion, although both are minor. First, the Indicator letter on the counters does not correspond to the Unit Manifest/Order of Battle. The letters used in the two systems refer to different subjects. Second, the term "Line of Communication" as employed in the game is different from the usual usage (did I mention something about a "Warning to Experienced Gamers"?) and, for once, actually means what it says: it refers to the approximate radio communication range between a unit and its commanding HQ. This is why the Line of Communication can cross an enemy unit or its ZOC; this is the first instance where I have seen a realistic definition of the term in a game.

Opinion Time

My opinion of *Kursk* is obvious: I think it is one of the best simulations of a massive land battle in WWII I've ever seen. It is a good, albeit somewhat long, game. I can find very little to complain about in the rules which, to my way of thinking, make or break

a game. They are clean and well organized. The rules in particular were carefully scrutinized for discrepancies and inconsistencies and very few were found. The only major complaint I have is the lack of a unit tabulation (as compared to the HQ listing given), which makes the set-up unnecessarily long (see addenda). For its size this game includes an amazing amount of information for so small a package. It will teach gamers something they may not have had to face before: the problems of controlling a front at the corps level and how to cope with real-time decision-making during the course of an attack. I will definitely recommend the game to serious gamers and especially to the gamers who want a simulation that is also a good game. I would not recommend it to those players who want an *Ogre* or *NAW* level game, unless you are interested in expanding your gaming ability. □□

Editor's Note: The *Kursk* addenda and optional rules were compiled by Eric Goldberg, who wishes to express his thanks to Neil K. Hall, Michael Flagiello, and Doug Hensley for their assistance in this task. ■■



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Empire better than the above procedure allows. In most cases, the Independent Empires will cycle through good times and bad, depending on the luck of the draw and geography (it's tough to be in the Western Mediterranean when the Saracens are active), but they will rarely expand much. Under the more flexible management that a player can provide, however, it is quite possible that these smaller Empires can bloom rather nicely. Of course, it is in your opponent's interest to see that your ventures with your allies fail, and fail miserably.

The procedure is by no means perfect, and may not even be complete (hence 33.21), but it is the best compromise between efficiency and simplicity that could be had.

It should be fairly obvious that gaining alliances is not easy. A lot of ties are required, since the Court Areas tend to be the more prosperous, heavily populated ones. It is for this reason that "C" results give the whole ball of wax. Also, note that when a non-player Empire draws a Leader Dies Heirless card, then anyone with *any* ties has a chance at getting an alliance. It thus may pay to establish at least one tie with each possible Court.

I'd like to thank Mr. Jamie Adams for his assistance with this project. ■■