

strategy & Tactics: Warlords II

by Scott Love

The wars of old Illuria lie forgotten on the brittle pages of decaying volumes of history. They sit collecting dust in a library buried among ruins in a land long since abandoned. . . Illuria , they say, was a myth. The land of origins? Preposterous! A tale best left to old Storytellers and young children.

The peoples of Etheria far and wide now only vaguely know of that tiny land far, far away. Mothers tell restless children that the wolves of Balad Naran will eat them if they don't behave. . . but the seeds of the past are not entirely barren.

The Great Wars of Illuria may have been lost in antiquity, but the forces of History, Magic, and Power still stir the great armies and heroes to rally behind the colors of War. Etheria is a vast, limitless world filled with countless nations and castles. Lords rise and fall in an instant of Etherian life. . . and War rages across the endless face of this world forever. Some great kings may bring peace to areas of Etheria, but the entire world will never be tamed. The Second Dark Age is upon us all.

A Spectacular Sequel

Warlords II is without a doubt one of the most addicting games I've installed in months, if not years. It adds random maps (and thus great re-playability) to the original, adds a plethora of new armies, enhances heroes' roles in war, and hides each map from our eyes. While retaining the best of the original, Warlords II enhances the strategic puzzles of the game and will challenge players almost endlessly.

Winning Warlords II (hereafter simply "Warlords") is still fairly easy when playing against the computer even at its most difficult settings. . . the computer players are simply sluggish. Try setting your computer opponents to play for 10 or 15 turns before you turn on your own nation (leave it on Knight while you wait, then disband all but five or six of its armies).

For Warlords to be a true challenge, find a friend or seven and play against each other. In teams or in a free-for-all, playing against humans brings out the best in the game. The computer is forgiving and is predictable. . . humans are not. Patterns of strategy which work against the computer may not necessarily against a human opponent. (However, the reverse is true: strategies which succeed against humans will defeat the computer handily). This

column then assumes that you'll play against intelligent humans. . . who are intent on obliterating your armies and making your standard the torch from which they light your funeral pyre.

This column also assumes that you'll have Warlords set on its most difficult level. . . the map will be hidden, each computer player will be a Warlord, and neutral castles will build once attacked.

The First Step — Exploration

In the first few turns of each game you'll be faced with the question, "Where do I go?" Often games can be won or lost by striking off in the wrong or right direction. . . learning as quickly as possible what the map holds is critical to your game.

Don't leave your hero stacked with your starting army. That strong army should strike out in an opposite direction from your hero, and both should take neutral castles as they progress.

Don't bother with scouts, light infantry, or cavalry. Bats. Build bats. They move farther and uncover more land than every army save some of the strongest flying creatures. They also prove helpful later in the game. Set each neutral castle you take to build bats. . . despite the sense that they soon will be tripping over each other, you can never have too many bats. They're cheap and wonderfully helpful.

And here's an easy to miss fact: heroes can ride bats just as easily as they can dragons. Use a bat to give your hero wings in the second turn of the game!

Maximize the area your bats cover: by cutting a right to left diagonal pattern they'll uncover as much as possible by moving diagonally three to the right and then three diagonally to the left. You can also simply have them travel in diagonal paths. . . by moving this way you'll uncover more of the map faster.

Pay close attention to sign posts. . . These are often forgotten or ignored by many players, but they almost always provide valuable information. Use your bats also to change signposts to mislead your opponents. If you choose your words carefully you may send an enemy off in the wrong direction. Rather than commenting on a friend's hygiene or parentage, be subtle. Unaltered signposts help a great deal in discovering where castles lie. If an enemy cannot tell that you've altered one or two signposts, you may gain a small advantage. Be sure, in order to really confuse your other players, to leave a few signposts unmolested. If some tell the truth, which can be trusted?

The last tip to exploration focuses on scouts — there is a time when they are better than bats: when they're in the water. If they don't touch a shoreline, they can move farther than bats do, and they've a strength 4 in boats. Thus while your enemies kill the bats you send floating over their heads, they may have more difficulty (especially in the first turns of the game) killing or even reaching a boat.

Taking Neutral Castles

Obviously seeing the map isn't enough. You need to take castles. The single most important skill you need to win Warlords is the ability to take castles as quickly as possible. The opening 15 turns of the game (provided you haven't set the Quick Start option) are a race to see who can kill off the computer players and take neutral castles the fastest. This point cannot be over-stressed. Blitzkrieg is law in Etheria.

Your strong first army should move out first, and in an opposite direction from your hero. Always use a road if one is available, and always, always read signposts (though remember to change some once you've read them). Take every neutral castle you can.

Actually, don't.

Remember that you need only take one castle in a cluster of neutral castles. That one castle can then build the army or armies you need to take the rest. This allows your attacking/exploring army to keep moving and pushing further out. Take a page out of W.W.II history: leap frog over some castles and take those which will allow you to fill in the rest later. The most important thing to do early on is expand out as far as possible and deny your enemies territory. Choose neutral castles with armies stronger than light infantry. . . building giants or wolves early on will help with taking more castles.

Moving In & Unpacking

Now once you've taken a neutral or enemy castle, what do you do with it?

Sack it. Especially in the early turns of the game. One of the key advantages in the game is getting new heroes quickly and having enough cash to build what armies you choose where you choose. Sacking every castle you take will bring in a good deal of cash, clear out extraneous armies, and allow you to quickly garner enough money to bring in a new hero.

Knocking out extraneous armies is often quite important: if a castle produces scouts, light infantry, light cavalry, and heavy infantry you won't be able to add to its production. It is worthless to you; whereas, if you've sacked it you have three or sometimes four slots to deliberately fill with spiders, griffins, and giants.

Consider: in the early stages of the game you need only bats and a few strong armies to take neutral castles. That means each castle needs bats with one or two castles working on wolf riders. If you only occupy a particular castle, its stronger army productions are going to waste. . . Sack now and build later. Wolf riders are only 500 gold and are one of the best bargains in the game. Giants, for the money, are also great offensive weapons.

Obviously you don't want to sack a castle that produces anything special, or giants and above. But if you see anything less powerful, sack away. With luck, you might just get a second hero on the third or fourth turn.

However, there are times when you will want to sack a great castle. . . when you're sure you can't hold it. In a recent, particularly painful battle, a certain friend of mine took a castle which produced dragons and sacked it. I took it back the next turn but he walked away with 1500 gold and I was left with scouts and heavy infantry.

Heroes — so much to do, so little time. . .

Throughout the game, heroes should obviously search ruins, get blessed and complete quests.

But one significant change from Warlords I to Warlords II is experience. As heroes collect experience they become stronger. Often a well-experienced hero need not carry many items in order to be a formidable presence on the battlefield. That said, a hero's goals change somewhat. Heroes should attack as many castles as they feel confident to win. Even go out

of your way to kill an enemy bat. Each victory adds experience. If you've the luxury, park a hero near the border of an enemy and pick off lone armies after having established a "road" war.

One particularly insidious way to gain experience is to leave two computer player castles untaken in your heartland. Then, when you've a hero nearby, take one of them. Then allow the computer to take it back. Then take one of the castles again the next time you pass by. . . if controlled well, this setup can be an endless source of experience. You may even win some medals if you stack armies with the hero.

Stack the hero with bats and eventually one or two will garner a medal. A blessed bat, with a medal or two, along with a hero bonus, is no longer inconsequential. . . and bats are far easier to replace than griffins, pegasai, or dragons. With bats in the game, your heroes' feet should never touch the ground, nor should they ever be in less than a stack of eight.

Quests: always have one in progress and make it a priority. Five archons at the right place and time can sway a battle permanently.

Last a strategic goal: build offensive movements around hero stacks. Follow a hero stack with two or three strong army stacks to hold the castles the hero takes. Think in terms of multiple stacks rather than lone heroes taking and then being forced to hold a single castle. Heroes should always move, gain experience, and kill your enemies.

Sage Advice. . .

When a hero finds a sage, he or she is presented with an extremely significant choice. . . gold, a map, or items. Forget the gold. . . sages have better things to offer. Forget the map. That's what bats are for. Items. . . always select items. A stronghold is revealed which cannot be seen by your opponents and always holds something of extraordinary value.

Settling In

Once you've established a heartland, far away from your front, you need to start thinking about garrisons. Minotaurs, spiders and griffins all have city bonuses. Spiders are without a doubt the best garrisoning troops there are. They produce in two turns, start at a strength of 5, have a +2 bonus in a city and, if that city has a defense of 2, end up being a total strength of 9. Griffins have a base strength of 6, but produce in four turns. . . it's much better to have two 9s than one 10 strength army.

Also try to keep one or two special allies or armies in each cluster of castles. . . if need be they can move to defend a castle in their area. Thinking in terms of area defense with help because it is almost impossible to create a perfect defense in each and every castle on the map.

Temples: bless yourself as much as possible. Pious troops are effective troops. Think of temples as castles. Defend them, prevent your enemies from entering, and attack your enemies' temples.

More Batty Intelligence. . .

By now you've probably established a common border with a human. . . kill every bat that gets near you. Use your own signposts if you need to keep track of how far your enemy has uncovered your territory. Create a roving patrol of griffins to destroy boats and bats. Keeping

your enemy in the dark is critical to your success.

And there's another way to keep your enemy in the dark. . . this tool cannot be overused: fight order. Warlords displays whichever army is to fight last in a stack. Set bats to be the last in the fight order and everything, even dragons, will be hidden beneath their icons. Bats are believable. . . they're in the middle of the fight order. . . and will prevent your enemy from guessing what you've got in any given stack.

Which is why you need to produce bats: to circumvent this trick with bats and the fight order. Attack an enemy stack with a bat to see what the stack holds. It's suicide, but heck, this is genocide. And maybe you'll get lucky and kack one unit.

And here's a similar trick: park a bat above a boat and your opponent may think he or she is facing a flying unit rather than a boat and retreat.

Intelligent Skirmishing

One further way to keep your enemy in the dark is to try and guess where her or she has failed to uncover the map. Sometimes a player may forget to clear the map all the way to the edge. . . if you sneak a stack down the exact edge of the map, you may go undetected.

Another skirmishing trick deals with more detailed fight order manipulation. Consider moving one or two stronger types in front of weaker armies when you attack. (Only when you attack). One giant may take out five heavy infantry units, whereas a the wolf that usually fights before the giant might lose. . . and you'll need that wolf later to be sure.

And always attack in groups. Eight single attacks will fail against a strong unit where a unified attack of eight armies will stand a good chance of winning.

Know your bonuses. Read how combat works. Calculate the odds. Unless you understand how combat works (as laid out in the manual) you may very well underestimate weaker armies.

Castles: Siege and Conquest

Wrong game? Taking castles is somewhat straight-forward in Warlords. . . the army with the biggest guns usually win. Attack castles and make sure you've enough troops following your attack group to garrison immediately. Use vectoring to bring armies to the front.

For defense, always buy three units in your castles. Two should be bats and scouts. The third should be that castle's main production unit. Don't waste effort by creating dual-purpose castles with four units. . . give castles one job to do and don't waste money.

Last, when you take a castle, especially one you think may be retaken by your enemy soon, fill its four production slots with worthless armies and hope he or she doesn't sack it when it falls. You'll make that castle worthless to them.

The War Continues. . .

I hope you've found this column helpful. Before signing off, allow me to remind you to use deception and logic when attacking other nations. Think about decoy troops: stacks of seven scouts with a bat on top just to scare and confuse your enemy. Flank your opponent. Don't attack him or her where their nation is strongest. . . cut deep into their soft underbelly. Use

heroes to attack and ward off your enemy.

Good luck. Enjoy the electronic genocide. May Etheria never know peace.

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