

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Sovereign

Avalon Hill's Kingmaker Puts You Behind The Throne

by Terry Lee Coleman



FOR THOSE OF US WHO GREW UP PLAYING BOARD WARGAMES, AVALON HILL SEEMS ALMOST A PART OF OUR extended family. Games such as STALINGRAD and TACTICS II are relics of a bygone age, when wargames could still be found on store shelves next to MONOPOLY or RISK! While many wargamers feared that AH would go the way of the dinosaur, the company somehow managed to persevere, even discovering four-color artwork along the way.

As the years went on, AH began to diversify with family games (shudder), sports games (well, OK) and even (say it isn't so) role-playing games, the majority of which sold, and continue to sell, quite well. With the advent of computer wargaming, though, AH's adaptability didn't hit a snag, it came to a screeching halt. Games such as B-I NUCLEAR BOMBER were dated even when they were released back on the old 8-bit machines. More recently, DIPLOMACY was a flop, and COMPUTER THIRD REICH, seen as a potential savior for AH's "Silicon Simulations," had one of the worst AIs of any wargame released by a major company. Most damning was that the game couldn't even model the rules of the boardgame, so inadequate was the conversion.

A SINGLE, SOLITARY SUCCESS

Since announcing their re-entrance into computer games, the question on every

wargamer's tongue is: "Will Avalon Hill ever really manage to get a classic boardgame converted to the computer, and will they do it right?" Sure, OPERATION CRUSADER is great, but that was the guys at Atomic, right? And besides, that game is currently only for the Mac—what about us real wargamers that own IBMs? We've been jilted so many times, is this our last chance for the big dance?

While many gamers wait (not so) patiently for the IBM version of CRUSADER, they may find their cares readily forgotten with KINGMAKER, so long as they are willing to contest the Wars of the Roses in solitaire fashion. For KINGMAKER has one great oddity: it's a conversion of a classic multi-player boardgame that has

no capacity for more than one player, totally neglecting hot-seating, modem, and play by e-mail.

In spite of this, the game is strangely addictive, and a class act. The first indication that this effort is something fresh is the striking intro art. The opening screens offer a spirited narration of the backstory by none other than Will Shakespeare. Obviously, such can be dismissed as mere fluffery, but the truth is that this actually helps suspend disbelief—especially the authentic British accent, which sounds more than a little like Malcolm McDowell.

To my surprise, the game ran without crashing, despite the many on-line com-

plaints to the contrary. But it has a mouse-only interface that reminded me of an Amiga game—due no doubt, to the game's European origins. There was not a hot key to be found. What's a real gamer to do?

THE PARCHMENTS OF PLAY

Many gamers shun documentation. Nonetheless, those used to 290-page tomes of obscure (and often questionable) design justifications, or worse, virtually no documentation (as with far too many games lately), will find the manuals included with KINGMAKER a pleasant departure from the norm and well worth poring over. Splashed throughout with color and eminently readable, the two manuals (historical and game) have been touched by Avalon Hill's deft graphic hand. Anyone reading the reference manual will have little trouble in play, the clumsy interface notwithstanding. In addition to the "need to know" information provided in the Reference Manual, AH has wisely included the historical "nice to know" information in a separate manual for those interested in the historicity of the conflict.

The object of play, for those unfamiliar with the boardgame, is to have control over the last surviving heir to the English throne. To this end, the various forces maneuver nobles of their faction, with their corresponding forces, around the land engaging in combat and attempting to kill off the heirs controlled by the other players, computer-controlled in this case.

Simple? In concept, certainly, but the game's real strength, like that of its boardgame father, is in the variety of ways you may achieve this goal. The nicest change from the version CGW sneak previewed in March is the flexibility of the AI.

Kingmaker

Price: \$59.95

System: IBM

Requirements:

286 or better,

VGA graphics,

5MB hard drive

space, mouse;

supports AdLib,

Roland,

SoundBlaster

sound cards

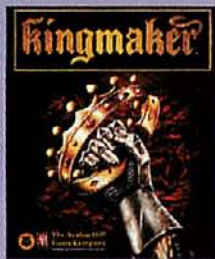
Protection: Documentation Check

Developers: Paul Cockburn, Graham Lilley

Publisher: The Avalon Hill Game Company

Baltimore, MD

(410) 254-9200





A ROSE IS A ROSE Will Shakespeare sets the stage, as you engage in the gleeful pilfering of royal heirs from the York and Lancastrian houses.

Early on in development, it was readily apparent which factions were most dangerous. Now, the potential silicon opponents are more random in style and in the extent of their deviousness. For instance, one game had Neville ready and willing to cut deals with me for ransoming captured nobles. The next game, he was unbelievably aggressive, threatening to run me right out of the game.

Since gamers always ask if the AI cheats (presumably so they can complain if they lose), I did notice that they seemed to know more of what was going on than the human player. Then again, what good villain doesn't know more than the hero? At least the inevitably few cheats are subtle for the most part. One of the most obvious ways of increasing the difficulty of the game is to deploy before the AI players, similar in fashion to having to set up forces first in a multi-player human game.

FORGET ME NOT

A large part of the strategy in KINGMAKER is deciding which titles and assets to bestow on your nobles. While the titles are historical, you may choose to have Cromwell be the Captain of Calais, while Greystoke is the Chancellor of England.



TO ARMS, MEN! Issuing commands is limited to the number of nobles present at the battle, so plan carefully!

The latter is one of the most powerful positions in the game, as the Chancellor may call Parliament if there are two crowned heirs in play. As in real life, the clergy also have significant political clout, as only an archbishop or two bishops may crown an heir, and said heir must be in a cathedral for the coronation to be valid.

The various computer players are rather efficient at assigning titles and exploiting their effectiveness. Every office has its limitations, though,

as even the powerful Chancellor finds the majority of his strength waning as he moves away from the safe confines of the Tower of London. For nearly every asset, there is a counter. In one game, I was boldly prancing all over the map with my strongest noble, having granted him the office of Marshall of England. Suddenly, I ran into a relatively small noble, Loos, who had the help of Saxon mercenaries. Ambushed, I could only watch in horror as my brave noble was beheaded, with a sonorous voice bellowing out over my speakers, "Thus perish, traitors all!"

STEEL MY SOLDIERS' HEARTS

Combat is a simple affair in the basic game, with increasing odds giving proportionally greater chances to defeat the enemy in classic "count 'em up and roll-the-die" fashion. Although easily learned, the disadvantage of the basic system is that smaller forces cannot win an outright victory and must hope for an indecisive result to fight another day.

The advanced combat system has a miniatures feel to it, simpler than in the recent FIELDS OF GLORY from MicroProse, but more fun. Each noble is deployed on a tactical battle display, and you decide how the forces will be split between left, right, center and reserves. You decide what each wing of your army will do, from shooting arrows to closing with a particular enemy force. Tension mounts as one force attempts to rout the other, while the enemy may

strike directly at the opposing noble or heir. Since orders in combat are limited to the number of nobles present at the battlefield, often a group of lesser nobles can take down a single mighty force. But their life expectancy is just as short as it is in the basic combat system.

As if battle weren't enough to deal with, random events appear like the plague—quite literally. Each turn, cities succumb to the Black Death, along with any nobles or heirs which happen to be present. Storms may cause ships to find a safe harbor, or prevent a particular battle. Nobles may join your cause, or that of your enemies. But at least the AI players are subject to the same whims of fate as the human.



WHERE DID YOU COME FROM? Computer opponents are rarely predictable, making for an engaging and replayable game.

Actually, KINGMAKER is philosophically close to, of all things, CIVILIZATION. Like CIV, it has a fairly steep learning curve to master, which is mitigated by on-line hints—which, thankfully, are much more helpful than those found in CIVILIZATION. Those pesky computer opponents play a bit more fair than their CIV counterparts, but they are less forgiving. Human players will have to pay attention to advice from the manual, such as the suggestion to grab an heir on the first turn, as they attempt to juggle the many elements of play. Challenging and fun, despite its lack of high-tech glitz or multi-player options, KINGMAKER establishes a fine beachhead for AH's return to the computer wargame market.

KINGMAKER

*** 1/2

PROS Great subject matter, good conversion of a classic strategy boardgame, clever and varied AI

CONS No multiplayer option, repetitive animations that cannot be turned off, awkward interface