

25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 27 Apr 2023 20:38

Greetings, Warlords

Darklords Rising turns 25 this year. At the height of its popularity, the Warlords series has been considered a peer of Heroes of Might and Magic. Sadly, while the latter has an enduring fan community even for the older games, Warlords 3 has mostly sunk into obscurity.

I've been tinkering with the available modding tools for a while, and I've decided that for its 25th anniversary in August, I'm going to release an overhaul mod, to maybe give the old game a little shot in the arm, and give long-time fans an excuse to delve into it again.

My goals:

- Rebalance all the units in the game. For many, that means only recalibrating their gold cost and some light touches, others will be changed significantly. Outliers that used to dominate competitive multiplayer will be nerfed, many more which were unplayed will be buffed. Abilities that were only introduced in DLR or its 1.01 patch will be a bit more widespread. The intent here isn't to make every unit competitive, but to make all at least playable and not be made obsolete by another, cheaper unit.

- Rework the heroes from the ground up, drawing on lessons from the K4 and X multiplayer mods. This will be major work, and balancing them will be tricky and probably dependent on how much feedback I get. My starting point is to have a common xp chart and AP progression for all heroes, that may get tweaked later on.

- Some light tweaks to the default.rul ruleset. Greater XP rewards for hard quests, and fixed mana crystal rewards from ruins to eliminate the feast-or-famine randomness.

- Comprehensive gold cost standardization across all items, without changing any of their effects. Among other things, the gold cost determines which items are affected by the Shatter and Create Item spells, so this is a necessary step.

- Lastly, it seems possible to modify the 8x8 different default army sets for playing random maps. Once I'm happy with the unit and hero changes, I aim to recreate those 64 army sets to provide for default

sides that are both thematic and balanced, with every unit and hero class being well-represented across the board.

I won't be modifying the existing campaigns and scenarios directly, but the goal is that replaying them with the new units and heroes will give you more interesting options for stack building and hero selection. There's no intention to include new art or create new units outright, and the end result will probably not be very compatible with the Stormheim mod, as far as balance and unit costs are concerned.

I will be posting updates and my thoughts on game balance as I go along, both here and at a few other places, to hopefully get some feedback. I've never been a part of the multiplayer community back in the day, but I'd be especially interested to hear from those who were. I don't expect anyone is still playing Warlords 3 multiplayer competitively these days, but I'd be delighted to be proven wrong. Multiplayer isn't the main concern of my mod, but I want it to be a better experience than vanilla DLR for anyone who wants to try it.

Farewell, Warlords. Until we meet again.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by KGB - 07 Jun 2023 03:50

I love the idea of more 1 turn PPDC units. But I think you need at least +2 to make it have any value. 8 units at +1 are only 32% likely which isn't high enough to matter. It's OK to have one 1 turn unit at +2 disease and another 1 turn unit at +3 disease if their strength/hits/move compensates so that 1 is meant for city defense and another for scouting/raiding etc.

A 1 turn unit with Group Warding is going to be reasonably powerful because the skill confers to the whole stack. Putting it on scouts means you'll need to make them cost a lot to justify giving them the skill which sort of defeats the idea of the scout being a cheap exploration unit.

If your dead set against using Stormheim units then +1 archery on scouts would essentially make them into Rovers. The whole reason Rovers were created was because players wanted a 1 turn unit with good move, high view, could lead units cross terrain and have Archery +1 so they could be used against fliers.

KGB

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Anomander Rake - 07 Jun 2023 09:32

But I think you need at least +2 to make it have any value.

Not necessarily. If PPDC units with +1 make sense (cheap, useful for other reasons) then they can be used. Correct me, warding doesn't work against PPDC (only against assassination, lightning and acid, not sure about archery).

A weak unit with warding 1 will not be powerful because it will simply be too weak to be placed in lord armies in later phases. But it can be useful (who hasn't been hurt by little gnolls?).

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 07 Jun 2023 11:15

sigh

I'd compiled a long reply, but the it got eaten by a 'session expired' notification when I tried to post it. I'll repeat it later, but right now I'm too frustrated.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 28 Jun 2023 14:34

It took me a while longer to get down to writing, but 've continued tinkering and we're getting closer to a playtesting release.

Looking at PPDC units competitively, it's clear that one one side, you want to have disposable fire-and-forget units whose primary, maybe only, purpose is to get the most PPDC/turn for the cheapest gold cost. You either use these in city garrisons, or in wave attacks, where you first curse, then poison and/or disease, then send a hero stack.

On the other end of the spectrum, you can have PPDC units that are strong enough to go into a hero stack. In the base game that's pretty much only the Undead Dragon, maybe Spectres too. You'd only use these to give an Evil Eye hero a 100% curse chance, or to counter a Berserk Shaman. SH famously also has the Lamia.

Balancing middle units is tricky. To be concrete, I've been contemplating the zombies > ghouls > plague carriers balance for my mod. I like having disease 1 on zombies, but as garrison units, they might then make D2 ghouls obsolete, as 2/3 are better combat stats than 3/2. If I buff ghouls to D3, then I also have to buff plague carriers to at least D6 to keep parity in D/turn. However, with D3, a full stack of ghouls will already have 96% chance of disease, so for a competitive min/maxer, the lower gold cost means they're superior to PCs anyway, even if those have D7. I have buffed PC movement slightly to 16, but thematically, I can't really justify them being much faster than ghouls. I can obviously tweak the gold cost, but that doesn't solve the min/max conundrum either, unless I make their cost practically equal.

So that's a bit of a creative impasse I'm in about these units. But maybe I'm worrying for no reason? Do (cheaper) D2 ghouls have a niche even when you can have D1 zombies? They at least have the movement to be a bit more flexible.

On the poison side, I feel like I have to overhaul Bees quite drastically. I can't justify them being the fastest flying unit in the game. Interestingly enough, the stats I have come down to are quite similar to the SH Banshee. Most importantly they've become a 1 turn unit. 2/1, movement 22, view 2, poison 3. No longer a scout, but quite deliberately a min/max poison delivery platform.

Spiders are the 2 turn poison unit, getting an additional hit point, so 4/2, and poison 5. Not as min/maxed, but a balanced unit for its tier. Mummies I'd like to keep largely unchanged as a 2 turn missile-immune garrison unit, with poison only being a side benefit.

Scorpions get buffed to 6/3, poison 7. Maybe I'm wrong about this, but I think 6/3 and 7/2 units are in the borderline area where they start being good enough for hero stacks.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 28 Jun 2023 14:50

KGB wrote:

I love the idea of more 1 turn PPDC units. But I think you need at least +2 to make it have any value. 8 units at +1 are only 32% likely which isn't high enough to matter. It's OK to have one 1 turn unit at +2 disease and another 1 turn unit at +3 disease if their strength/hits/move compensates so that 1 is meant for city defense and another for scouting/raiding etc.

In the case of my orcs, it's mostly for flavor and to differentiate them a bit from light infantry. It's clear that you need at least 3 PPDC to use them consistently and offensively. But one minor factor is that having even 1 PPD gives you immunity against opposing PPD units. At least according to the manual. I tested Curse, and it does strip medals even off units that have curse themselves.

A 1 turn unit with Group Warding is going to be reasonably powerful because the skill confers to the whole stack. Putting it on scouts means you'll need to make them cost a lot to justify giving them the skill which sort of defeats the idea of the scout being a cheap exploration unit.

In my plans, I have Group Warding on Scouts and Light Cavalry. The idea was that neither of them are strong enough for a slot in hero stack, or at least, if you include them it's a significant trade-off. I wanted stacks that include scouts to have a benefit that implies better situational awareness, less than an outright stack bonus, but good enough to weigh including them in your army list against other scouting units with similar move/view. Otherwise, Group Warding will only be accessible by Ranger and Paladin spells, maybe as a General ability.

Regarding cost, for 1 turn units I think scouting units should be a bit more expensive than light infantry equivalents, but cheaper than min/maxed garrison units.

If your dead set against using Stormheim units then +1 archery on scouts would essentially make them into Rovers. The whole reason Rovers were created was because players wanted a 1 turn unit with good move, high view, could lead units cross terrain and have Archery +1 so they could be used against fliers.

The good news is, if I get the 25th Anniversary Project into a releasable state, I'm very likely to continue working to bring Stormheim units into line, to fill the capability gaps.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 28 Jun 2023 15:11

Another quick question; there's a bit of a paradox where strength 8 units are practically as good as str 9, since they can get blessed (or built at a smithy) whereas str 9 is already the cap.

Going from there, I'm considering a blanket buff to all dragons, giving them +1 field, as terrain bonuses can boost strength to 10 before stack bonuses in the combat calculation.

I've noticed I have buffed a few of the 4 turn units, but I'd like dragons to stay ahead of the pack, and this would be one way to do it.

I have already implemented a 'field' bonus for some flying units like Eagles and Air Elementals, to signify them being more dangerous when units on the ground have no cover. To me, that makes sense for

Dragons too.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by KGB - 28 Jun 2023 21:06

A lot to process here in your last 3 posts and I hope I answered all your questions.

Regarding the PPDC units. I agree that there are only realistically 2 ways to use them. As cheap garrison/suicide units OR as units potentially strong enough to go into a hero stack (Curse being preferred since it amplifies Evil Eye).

For that reason I think 3 turn units with PPDC don't really make sense because those are 'tween' units that cost too much/take too long to be garrisons and aren't good enough for hero stacks. This primarily affects the Giant Scorpion and Medusa(3 turn units). You either need to make it 2 turns or 4+ and good enough for a hero stack and I think it only makes sense as a 2 turn unit.

Looking at what you have (or I presume you have) I see (numbers in brackets are turns/power level):

Poison - Orc Mob (1/1), Bees (1/3), Spiders (2/5), Mummies (2/4), Scorpions (3/7)

Disease - Zombies (1/1) Ghouls (1/2), Plague Carriers (2/7)

Paralysis - Cockatrice (2/3), Medusa (3/6)

Curse - Ghosts (2/4), Harpies (2/4), Spectres (4/6), Undead (5/5)

You'll note there is a lack of 1 turn paralysis and curse units (hence why Banshee was created). You also have duplicate 1 turn disease units. Why not switch Ghouls to +2 Paralysis (Dungeons and Dragons does this) and leave them as 3/2 combat so they are decent garrison units then move the Zombie to +2 disease. You also have duplicate 1 turn poison units with Bees and Orc Mobs that you should fix. Personally I think Orc Mobs should get banding bonus (the word mob is right in their name) of +2 to get them to 4/2. Then there is duplicated effort in Harpies/Ghosts (both 2 turns). A Banshee is really another name for a Ghost so you could switch the Ghost to 1 turn and give the stats or similar stats to the Banshee (esp if not bring Stormheim units). Then you just have to figure out Scorpions/Medusa and what you want to do there with them being awkward 3 turn units.

Regarding your test with Curse. Did it remove blessing too or just the medals. I swore Cursed units could not be cursed but maybe that meant only removing a Blessing. I am not sure if Poison units are immune to Poison, you'd need to test because a lot of things don't quite work the way they were meant to after all

the changes in 1.02 code.

Regarding Group Warding on Scouts. I still think its is too much and doesn't make that much sense (how do scouts protect you from acid and lightning etc) especially if you will make them cost more than Lt Inf! I'm guessing you removed Group Warding from the Hv Calv. If so, why not consider moving Group Warding to another unit like say the Pegasi. Right now it has a useless Morale +1 (plenty of units give that Morale or better). Since the Pegasi is meant to be a magical creature maybe giving Group Warding +1 makes more sense there. Alternatively (or maybe also), the Air Elemental is another possible choice (another magical creature) and at 4 turns it could get Group Warding +2 making it useful in hero stacks if it went to 3 hits. That way group warding is available in other places besides spells.

Regarding Dragons. Giving them +1 field is fine and makes sense for the reasons you mentioned. Especially since they cost SO much in gold to produce and to fit in your army set.

KGB

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Anomander Rake - 29 Jun 2023 09:37

The good news is, if I get the 25th Anniversary Project into a releasable state, I'm very likely to continue working to bring Stormheim units into line, to fill the capability gaps.

Good news. Will be happy to see also some another units like sets with Drows units (Drows, Drider, most of them are useful) and wizards (Black, Green etc... nice units but rather useless).

I think that teh biggest problem is giving utility to three-turn units and sometimes four-turn units. Because (especially three-turn) they rarely find a place in armysets. Maybe sometimes at first or rarely second allies trier. Three turn units are usually too weak to be used in lord armies and too expensive and too slow to produce to be used outside the lord armies.

Orcs Mob literally banding trait is ok but in game is a lot one turn units with this trait.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 29 Jun 2023 17:48

KGB wrote:

For that reason I think 3 turn units with PPDC don't really make sense because those are 'tween' units that cost too much/take too long to be garrisons and aren't good enough for hero stacks. This primarily affects the Giant Scorpion and Medusa(3 turn units). You either need to make it 2 turns or 4+ and good enough for a hero stack and I think it only makes sense as a 2 turn unit.

The key word is "competitively". The way DLR is set up, assembling an army set of 15 out of a roster of 90, I think it's fair to recognize that some units can be balanced, yet not good enough for competitive use. Maybe we need a segue into what appropriate balance for 3-turn units should look like. Aren't 3-turn units used primarily as merc3? I'll point out that I've already changed Medusae to a 2-turn unit, a slightly cheaper Reaver.

Looking at what you have (or I presume you have) I see (numbers in brackets are turns/power level):

Poison - Orc Mob (1/1), Bees (1/3), Spiders (2/5), Mummies (2/4), Scorpions (3/7)

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You missed some; I have Goblins with Paralyze 2. Going from Warlords Battlecry lore, Orcs like to use poisons, and I can justify Goblins using paralytic agents. I also think Paralysis could be interesting in scout vs scout clashes. Mummies only have Poison 3 by default.

I also have Bats with Disease 1 for flavor. For Ghouls and PCs, I'm undecided how high exactly their Disease should be, to keep one from making the other obsolete entirely, but also to make up for their lower movement compared to other PPDC units.

One thing I may not have mentioned in this thread, in order to give Necromancy a slight boost, by not having Wraiths make Wights obsolete, I've switched roles between Ghosts and Wights. Wights get Str 5 and Curse 3, Ghosts get Str 4 and Fear 2. They basically become cheaper, slower, weaker Dark Pegasi. Harpies get a Movement buff, and will be the min/max Curse unit for now.

I think it's fair to have some PPDC units that are min/maxed, and some where the ability is more for flavor. Banding is tricky to balance on low level units, because they quickly out-class ostensibly tougher units in the 1-turn design space. I don't want them to become equal to or better than heavy infantry, which is the default "expensive" 1-turn garrison unit (Str 3 +1 city) I already have Barbarians

as the main banding unit in that tier.

Regarding your test with Curse. Did it remove blessing too or just the medals. I swore Cursed units could not be cursed but maybe that meant only removing a Blessing. I am not sure if Poison units are immune to Poison, you'd need to test because a lot of things don't quite work the way they were meant to after all the changes in 1.02 code.

I'll have to run more experiments on this, and get back to you. It certainly doesn't hurt to double-check. What I did was have two stack of Spectres fight each other, with a Shaman having Berserk active. I don't remember if Bless was involved.

Regarding Group Warding on Scouts. I still think its is too much and doesn't make that much sense (how do scouts protect you from acid and lightning etc) especially if you will make them cost more than Lt Inf!

I wanted to have a more in-depth discussion of Warding anyway. From the regular units, it either represents outright imperviousness (Rock Elementals), or, in case of Wargs and Wolfriders, heightened awareness and reflexes. Knights had Warding 1 in 1.0, but got Group Warding in 1.01. The former might be due to their heavy armor, but the latter never was a good fit; maybe to represent a Paladin-like aura?

But conceptually, I see Warding primarily as an assassination counter, and as such, having scouts spot assassins and warn the rest of the army is how I justify it. Maybe it's a bit more of a stretch, but the same could be said for getting in cover in time to dodge acid and lightning attacks.

But mechanically, how would you rate Warding and Group Warding? I tend to think it's less powerful than a +/-1 stack bonus. For Warding, it obviously matters a lot how strong the unit itself is. Wargs and Wolfriders aren't exactly high-tier units, but I get that they're intended as Gnoll and assassin counters. I think the Rock Elementals are more interesting, since they have good-enough combat stats for a hero stack (I think?) Do/did they see use as Assassin/Black/Blue counter units? How about their level of Warding? I'm inclined to buff it to 4. How do you evaluate the SH Royal Dragon?

On last thing is Warding as a hero ability. I have this notion that a few heroes should be thematically designed around being able to reliably solo neutral cities; mainly the Monk, Vampire and Barbarian. Obviously, assassin units are a concern there. I was considering giving the Barbarian Warding 5 for 2 AP, while the Monk and Vampire get access to different solutions. Does that sound like a fair cost? I realize it's probably being more of a thematic ability than being of much use for competitive min-maxing.

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Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by KGB - 30 Jun 2023 18:43

It's true that not all 90 units are going to be able to be used competitively. Also I assume you will be wanting to make some theme based sets for the neutral sides (I'm assuming you will change the 8 neutral sides) for when players play against the AI. You'll have to do this if you are changing the names in your mod from 'Lt Infantry' to 'Lt Infantry25' to indicate these are your 25 anniversary units/heroes etc.

That said, if you make a bunch of them duplicate units (ie multiple 1 turn units with poison) then most will never get used other than in your theme sets and you've wasted a lot of your time balancing for things not used.

3 turn units are used in Merc3 and Ally 1. They are also found in the regular army set in slot 6 where the most common choice is the Siege Engine (esp with no Stormheim Battering Ram). Most players will have 2 of the 3 turn units in their army set so when thinking about 3 turn units you need to realize they probably only get to choose 1 since the other will be a Siege Engine/Ram.

For me, 3 turn units need to do something unique that I can't get elsewhere or costs a LOT to get elsewhere on 4/5 turn units. The best 3 turn units are Siege Engines/Battering Rams (high siege), Groll Calv/Assassin (high assassin), Cyclops (archery immunity+trample), Moonguard (high missiles+good strength), Roc Rider (flying Siege). Others like the Unicorn can be used (good morale + very high movement) on occasion on certain maps where they are plentiful or in certain army sets designed around them. The rest of the 3 turn units in the game either need to be made a lot better or would be better off being 2 turn units.

Until you publish a list of all your changes (cost, hits, move, strength, skills etc) it's hard to figure out how all the changes to the 1/2 turn units will work out and how good they will be. For example what did you do with Imps? They are ideal 1 turn units other than the CRAZY high cost of 300 because a bunch in a city with Lightning +2 can wreak havoc on a hero stack as good as a city full of Gnolls (+1 Assassin). So I'll wait to see your numbers for the 1/2 turn units to comment further.

The Ghost/Wights change seems interesting. I can't remember if you can put Necromancy on units (or whether it can only be on a hero). You might try and see if it works. If so, it might make a fun skill to put on a 3 turn Undead unit (Wraiths maybe) so that at +3 Necromancy Wraiths could make Wraiths and lesser units.

With regards to Warding, I agree with you about what it means on Wolfriders/Wargs/Scouts vs what it

means on a unit like the Rock Elemental.

Rock Elementals saw use in 1.01 and earlier when speed was 2x movement. Mostly for attacking cities full of units with the Assassin skill. At 6/4 they just aren't good enough vs Dragons at 9/3 in hero battles and the 15 move is a killer and they are eaten alive by Golems. They'd need to be at least 7 str and move 18 to be viable in hero stacks and no one thinks of Rock Elementals as fast moving. I don't remember the last time I saw someone use Rock Elementals in an army set unless it was a theme game (ie no dragons).

I rarely see the Royal Dragon used and when I do it's always been in Ally 4. The individual warding just isn't good enough to justify needing more than 1 of them to handle the few cities that have assassin units.

On the other hand, if Imps cost comes down a lot to make them viable 1 turn units (even if their stats needs to go to 1/2 from 1/3) and there is a viable 1 or 2 turn unit with Acid (Slimes aren't good enough) then Warding and Group Warding may become a lot more valuable to have on a Royal Dragon or other unit that could go in a hero stack (Air Elemental with group warding that I mentioned)

Hard to say how good warding/group warding is because you either really need it or you don't need it at all. Something like +2 Group Warding on a viable hero unit like a 7/3 Air Elemental would make that unit get used for sure. +1 Group Warding on a less unit (a 2 turn unit like Pegasi) also has a place for non-hero stacks too.

You have to be careful with Warding on a hero. I originally gave the Monk warding and he became a 1 man killer because of the cheap upgrades and the spells that boosted his hits/strength and the presence of strength items etc. Players were easily able to get a 15/4 Monk (cheap XP table) that was almost unkillable with the Warding so I removed it. Warding on a Vampire might help it get used but I don't think the Monk or Barbarian need it because they get plenty strong now (both can easily reach 15/4 status at L6 if they find a strength item or two) and become hard to kill.

KGB

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