

WHISPERS OF THE WOOD



**GAME
SYSTEMS
INC.**

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WORDS FROM THE WOOD

Darkness ascends! Welcome, foolish traveler, to the night-side of the world! This month the Wood is plunged into the maelstrom of Evil with our special DARK SERVANT theme issue. Wit and wisdom await you, with that chilling touch! Enjoy, all you of the black heart and cold soul!

Fear not, Free Peoples! It's always darkest before the dawn and the light will soon return. June's Whispers issue will be all yours - a Free People theme issue. Send in those Good strategy articles, poems, and what-nots. The deadline for submissions will be May 15th!

As usual, we've got a special topic for discussion this month: GAME REGISTRATION and POSITION REQUESTS. By now, many players have settled on what they feel is the "best" player position, or have developed a favorite that they prefer to play. If you have such a preferred position, by all means, request it at the time of registration. However, be advised that we can not guarantee you the position; that's something we only promise to previous game winners when they make use of their winner certificate. Your best bet is to submit a list of three to six positions that you'd like to play; this grants you a lot more flexibility and will almost certainly guarantee you a position you strongly desire. Basically, position requests are filled on a first-come-first-served basis. If you send in a set-up requesting the Noldo Elves as your first choice, we'll check and see if someone else has already requested it before you. If not, it's yours. If someone else did beat you to it, we'd go to your second choice. If no one had yet requested that, you'd get your second position. As above, if someone else had requested it already, we'd go to your third choice, and so on until we got you set up. In most cases, we've never had to look any farther than a player's third choice to accommodate him or her.

Remember what we said about previous game winners. As part of the booty for winning a game, they are guaranteed the position of their choice. So if a previous winner joined up in your filling game and requested the position that you had asked for, we would have to move you out and give the position to them. We'd then go through the process again of trying to match you up with a position you requested. So you see, it is strongly to your own advantage to give us a good number of positions that you'd be willing to play! Note that we can not hold a player out of a game until a given position becomes available. As I said, everyone has a favorite, and if we started holding players, we'd never get a game started - if you give us choices, you'll get set up.

This holds true for multi-player and grudge games as well. Unless you have a complete team of ten players taking the entire side of Good or Evil, we can't guarantee positions. Please give us a number of choices per team member.

Special Announcements! The GSI family has added a new addition this month - a bouncing baby boy! Our own Michelle Heath gave birth to her first child in mid-February and both are doing just fine. We send our warmest congratulations to the mother, and happy birthday welcomes to young Mr. Heath!

Three-week games! As of this writing we have a few intrepid teams eagerly awaiting challengers interested in three-week games. Those of you who may have experienced problems with timely mail delivery, or who may just want extra plotting and planning time in your game, may want to take advantage of these opportunities. Send in your set-ups without delay!

That just about wraps things up for this month. Enjoy your walk on the wild side! We'll see you in thirty days! Dennis



whispers of the wood

ALONG THE PATHWAYS

Words From the Wood	Inside Cover
EDITOR'S COLUMN	
Strategies for the Ages	1
ARTICLE	
Top Ten Reasons to Join the Dark Servants	2
HUMOR	
Personals	3
COMMUNICATIONS	
Dark Servant Economics	10
ARTICLE	
The Gift	11
POEM	
Why Nazgul Have More Fun!	15
ARTICLE	
The Assassin	16
POEM.	

WHISPERS OF THE WOOD is a monthly publication primarily for the use and enjoyment of GSI players of EARTHWOOD, EARTHWOOD - THE SEA KINGS, STATE OF WAR, and ME-PBM™. Subscription rates: \$15.00 for one year (12 issues) or \$25.00 for two years (24 issues). Individual issues cost \$1.75. GSI reserves the right to change these prices without prior notice of any type.

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Strategies for the Ages

Mike Petticord

In the first place, I am always Evil. Many ME-PBMs enjoy the smorgasbord approach, though a few persistent players like myself seek winning combinations with the Dark Servants game after game. I believe that the claim to "Goodness", usurping a position that Man is incapable of achieving on his own merit, is hypocrisy. Moreover, Good positions are often times played with more treachery and greed than can be dreamt of. So where's the difference?

In the second place, I often wonder what wholesale incompetence must have led to the collapse of the Free Peoples as depicted in T.A. 3019 of Tolkien's Middle-earth: the northern Dunedain kingdoms destroyed, Gondor shrunken, the Eothraim driven from Rhovanion, the Elder Races in virtual exile, and all of the neutrals on the side of Sauron. Given the ME-PBM set-ups on T.A. 1650, doesn't such Evil hegemony seem improbable?

Not necessarily. Like all skillful princes, Sauron had others do his fighting for him. His strategies were subtle, covert, and glacial. As game turns represent only two weeks of real time, such long-term strategies are only partially reflected in the sabre-rattling Middle-earth game of GSI. With patience and resolve, however, these strategies, discussed in the following paragraphs, may prove effective.

Nations are rarely homogeneous. They represent aggregates of indigenous and invading tribes that have assimilated with varying success. Disaffected minorities may be induced to assert claims with greater vehemence than the ruling classes might wish. Civil wars can be fomented.

This is simulated in game terms by the Influence Other, Threat, and Double Agent orders. Successful execution of these orders extracts a portion of the target nation's domain. Consequently, the affected populations may be said to have revolted. The target nation must expend strength in regaining them to the detriment of its national goals.

Additionally, entire axe-grinding nations wait upon the wings. These are the neutrals. I have no fondness for them. Neutrality as a choice indicates a mercenary desire to serve the beck of the highest bidder. They cannot, however, be safely ignored. Nor are sterile "I won't attack you if you won't attack me" pacts truly effective. Neutrals must be bribed. Products, gold, and artifacts must be bestowed even before talks of allegiance begin. The neutral must be convinced of the necessity of advancing into a position of conflict with a Good nation in such a way that s/he is happy to do so. Experienced neutral players, recognizing that such blandishments are part of the game, will not resent adroit cajolery.

Less skillful neutrals must be coerced. Threats and kidnappings serve to hold neutral assets as collateral subject to cooperation. Destruction of neutral property, however, is not Evil. It is stupid.

Perhaps most disruptive to individual nations is the challenging of its ruling dynasty by rival claimants. The death of heirless monarchs has precipitated war both civil (Wars of the Roses, 16th c.) and regional (Spanish Succession, 18th c.). A ruthless outsider may tinker with dynasties and exploit the collapse of ruling families with devastating effect.

In game terms, this is not directly simulated. Aside from the loss of a valuable character, the death of a sovereign will not plunge a ME-PBM nation into anarchy. However, the death of minor characters weakens a nation's skill base and forces its leading characters to perform the mundane administrative tasks usually reserved for the minor characters. For this reason, I recommend that the Dark Servants seek out and eliminate the new characters (i.e. the youth) of their enemies. It is easier and more damaging in the long term.

To summarize - T.A. 1650 of GSI's Middle-earth finds a semi-prepared monolithic Evil bloc facing a monolithic Good bloc that's armed to the teeth. Save for skilful Evil characters and a few Dark Summons spells, both sides possess equal access to all strategies. Militarily, the Dark Servants are at a grave disadvantage, but careful and subtle use of the above strategies can quickly serve to right the balance. I leave hints for further conduct of diplomacy to any other author who may wish to advance such.

TOP TEN REASONS TO JOIN THE DARK SERVANTS

10. New "Stealth" Fell Beasts allow Nazgul to fly around undetected by Dwarvish radar.
9. First 100 people to join get a free T-shirt.
8. High School diploma not required.
7. As everybody knows, the bad guys always win in Tolkien stories.
6. We own all the lawyers.
5. Barad-dur now features a guided tour, complete with mechanical shark attraction.
4. Those Balrogs really know how to dance.
3. Dark Servants: immortal wraiths and snazzy dragons. Free Peoples: long-winded Elves and talking trees. 'Nuff said.
2. Any organization that wants to kill Hobbits can't be all bad.

And the number one reason to join the Dark Servants is:

1. It's not as if someone's just gonna toss the Ring into a volcano one day.

Steve Stelter

PERSONALS: BARBS & BRAGS

Every current GSI player is entitled to a free 40 word personal in this column each issue, for each game they're in. Submissions require a \$2.00 charge for each additional set of 40 words (41-80 is \$2.00 etc.). GSI reserves the right to edit or refuse material deemed unsuitable.

GENERAL

Important Announcement

The special "GSI Vs. the World" grudge game previously advertised in this space has been canceled due to lack of interest and general infeasibility. Thanks to all those who did respond, but for the present the idea is on the shelf.

WANTED: Reliable team players to play ME-PBM. I am tired of paying for long distance calls. If you are a team player and have access to the internet with an e-mail address, contact me at erik @ ker. xenos. org

Laid back Evil dudes, half veteran, half new, seek Good team of similar mix for a three week game of fun and frolic. Enter the ring and save on phone-in fees! Direct replies to the KGB (Kinder, Gentler Badboys).

STATE OF WAR

GAME 80

Hey Craven,

I'm all set for the many Battles Requiring Ungodly Casualties of the Enemy. So B.R.U.C.E., where are you hiding? Or have you already run yellow and dropped?

Footloose, the Green Goose

EARTHWOOD THE SEA KINGS

GAME 41

What is that sound that rumbles over the hills, is it the end of the game? The clouds darken and an eerie silence falls between the distant thunder claps. The Storm is here to conquer all that stand or, like #25, crawl, in the way.

The Anoracians #14 fell, now the Macendians #10. Who shall be next? The quavering little Halflings hiding at 0127, 0316, and 0412? Or the Forest Elves #6? You blew your chance with a lie that will cut your own throat. No, oh no, the best is for last - #25, you stabbed me in the back and I will have you for my desert. Wa aa ha ha ha!

The Storm

EARTHWOOD ORIGINAL

GAME 229

First, the Rangers fell. Next, the Sorcerer was beaten into insignificance. Now the cheese stands alone, in his city at 1314. The obstacles have been removed from our way. From here, all roads lead to Rume.

No Quarter Given

Hey Sorcerer,

You're beaten. Why don't you quit? Rumonians are hiding and afraid of us. You both should try eating burnt biscuits. They're good for empty stomachs and minds.

Minute Aide

The Exterminator

Middle-earth™ PBM

GAME 3

What do Barad-dur, Buhr Waldmarh, Dol Guldur, Lavach Duhnnan, Luglûrak, Maethelburg, and Morannon have in common?

Each one was once the capitol of another realm - yet all now get their orders from Barad Ungol, lair of the Flamelord, Ren the Unclean!

Alas, the nations of Arfanhil and Kurgan are no more. It appears that Sauron's servants have the upper hand. Yet the Khazād shall never surrender! Fulla III, last decedent of the Seven Fathers, continues to lead the proud nation.

Baalroc

GAME 6

To the Bad Breath of Sauron,

You're already dead. Will you outlast me? I think not.

Elrond, Herald of Gilgalad

GAME 17

Rot 'N Bart,

I think you wrote the wrong game # down for your last Whispers submission. After all, we've never heard your whimperings before in this game, and it's a bit late to be adding stand-bys now.

See you later,
Meikor (#8)

GAME 18

Southern Gondor,

It appears the Liquidator is being Liquidated. My Balrogs are coming for breakfast, but I don't think you'll like what's on the menu.

The Mighty Ice King

P.S. Your pop centers are great producers.

Greetings Free Peoples:

We are pleased to announce the death of Gondor. Who is next? Could it be the Dwarves, or maybe the Faeries, and then Cardolan?

The Dark Knife lives.

Celdrahil,

You coward. Have you given up already? Just because your nation is in ruins, your troops are cowards, and your capitol's under attack, doesn't mean your nation's destroyed; just owned by us! Ha ha ha ha! Well, let's see where our mighty armies will go next? I hear Arnor looks nice in the Winter. Pay back time, Cardolan!!!

The Sons of Sauron!

Free People,

How do you expect to win when some of your nations are being led by incompetents? Just last month, an elf died in Mordor with an evil agent artifact on his body. We could use some mage artifacts. How about it, Elrond? You still have one more son.

Let it be known to he who holds our ring, that when you are found out, the growing might of Khazad-Dum will seek you out and destroy you. It will not matter if you are good or evil, that will just determine the method of your destruction.

Remember this Dwarven phrase: No friend ever did a Dwarf a favour, no enemy a wrong, without being repaid in full.

Bain

Dendra Dwar,

The armies you sent to Mirkwood and Gondor are gone. Their commanders, dead. Their artifacts, appreciated. Their tactics, poor. I guess all you have left is propaganda. By the way, what happened to your allies? You're next!

Thranduil

GAME 21

Carlton,

In the first three turns of our attack, you have lost two cities, three major towns, three towns, one navy, two armies, and four characters. I have lost one navy and one character. I think I'll keep what was yours.

Baaltrac

Rot 'N Bart is here to say
I've no one to play
I'll just have to go down and down
And terrorize a Haradwaith town
For Miss Q is almost out
And when I'm finished, you'll just pout
Too Bad!! Forever Free!!
Rot 'N Bart of Rhudaur

GAME 22

Greetings "Free" Peoples,
We enter our second year of play, turn 27, and neither side has a decisive advantage. My heart-felt thanks for making this game one of the few that is interesting and competitive in my experience with ME-PBM.

Meikor of Rhudaur #24

GAME 23

Dark Servants,
The mighty Khazâd continue on, alone if need be, against the forces of Evil. The Dwarves will never lay down their weapons and surrender like some of our cowardly allies. Khazadum will stand forever!

Gain I

The hated Numenoreans have succeeded. My warriors fought valiantly and well, but to no avail against the invading hordes. Congratulations, Northmen and Southern Gondor. Good luck, Ice King. Sauron's work falls to you alone.

Lord Enion
Leader of the Dunlendings

GAME 27

Be it known in Endor
The Clans of Dunland speak
Our banners now are white
Our spirits are not weak
We know the Shadow's lure
And yet its doom we seek
Let Darkness cower
From our power
Thy Future's bleak.

Witchqueen of Gundabad,
Where have I been? You mean after destroying all of your starting armies, capturing Eldanar and Shedun, destroying all Rhudaur armies, capturing his capital, I guess I took a break.

Anyway, since we are asking questions, won't Meneldir go free with your death? See Ya!

Argeleb II
El and the Vaders
P.S. A hurricane is not an ocean.

GAME 30

Hoarmurath viewed the ruins of Tir Anduin and said to his assembled commanders and mages "4600 dead Dunlendings at the cost of 2355 Dark Servants, not bad. May we meet the dragon Itangast again, he was a worthy ally."

GAME 34

Quietly, the Corsairs have passed from this earth. Quietly, shall Southern Gondor pass from this earth. Quietly, I have done this and will continue to do this for I will be QUIET no more.

Zarendarger (17)

GAME 35

Durkarian, least of Murazor's commanders, roars challenge, "Bloody Sarkar, the ghosts of Angsul's children cry for you to face a warrior!" Arthedain's flocks waver as their commander trembles in his tent and the Wailing Host surges to the attack.

Arthedain Report:
The war against Angmar and Rhudaur is going well. Carn Dûm and Cameth Brin have fallen. Total victory is not far away.

Baaltrac

Good bye, Rhudaur, we hardly knew ya'. The Witch King is next.

Algion

GAME 36

People of Middle-earth,
No GOOD deed shall go unpunished. No NEUTRAL deed shall go unnoticed. No EVIL deed shall go uncelebrated.

So sayeth Uvatha
P.S. Bain, you can run but you can't hide. Din Ohtar will be avenged.

Fear for your life, Free People of Middle-earth, for a dark storm has arisen from the Sea of Rhun to reclaim Rhovanion. Tremble in my shadow,

Northmen, I will make it slow and painful.

So sayeth Uvatha
Lord of Rhovanion

GAME 37

I raised a huge army - bought lots of steel. I charged at the Sinda, expecting a good fight. When I got there, no one was home and I had nothing to fight but an unfortified city.

#20 and bored (Azaro)

GAME 40

Dear bad guys,
I have 1500 ranks worth of characters at 3522. This game is DULL. You're fighting poorly! I dare you - ALL OF YOU! - to try and fight me! Let's see what you've got!!!

Really bored Noldo (Azaro)

GAME 41

Hear me, Men of the North!
The Eye has fallen upon you! Die! Die! And you Azaghal, thousands of stumps will not protect your soul from my knife!

Uvath Dreadsinger

Winter storm warning!
Middle-earth Weather Service is warning of dangerous "Cloud" and "Ice" levels in Arthedain and Cardolan. "Frankly, it's just not safe for characters to be about," said one source, citing the recent deaths of Sarkar and Sarek.

As the sun rose in the sky and a stiff breeze blew across the bay, Angamaite and his blood, Sangahyando, looked out from their great warship Kinslayer and watched as the great fleet of Umbar sailed forth. "Soon, brother, we will have

what we deserve and Castamir will be proud."

GAME 45

The "Quiet One" lies silent beneath her home of sand. Soon the other undead shall join her, as the walls of Mordor become their mausoleum; the Witch King is invited to attend.

The Wandering Prophet

GAME 47

The winter snows turn crimson red
The blue-skinned hoards of battle Dead.
Enemies in life lay locked together
From river plains to hills of heather.
Shadows linger after light's last chance
Laughter echoes and the fires dance.

Ren

GAME 48

Evils,

Don't be foolish. Although my armies (and allies) have destroyed Murazor, I am still strong in the South. Southern Gondor will not stand for Evils in our land. Extreme action is already being taken.

So says Kurgan

GAME 51

Elven Wannabes,

I have found you all unfit for duty. I will rid you all from Mordor personally if I have to.

Elrond

Chief of Corporate Security
P.S. I see Wormtongue is at it again in Harad and the far South.

GAME 53

Battle of Dol Amroth!

In a massive naval battle involving over 200 ships, the Southern nations of the Corsairs and Haradwaith defeated the pride of Southern Gondor

and its Cardolan allies. Lord Argirion's fleet awaited the charge of the Corsairs in standard formation; Cardolan's small navy attempted to surround the Corsairs, while on the other end of the battle lines, the Harad fleet successfully flanked the Gondorian vessels.

Many Southern warships and a few transports were lost, but the Free Peoples suffered tremendously - it was apparent that their transports were fully loaded from the sounds of trapped and drowning men, and at the least, Lord Argirion, Mage Baranor, and Commander Lanaigh were all seen on sinking flagships . . .

It was a costly, but worthwhile, victory for the Southern Alliance, and a mighty blow struck against Gondorian imperialism.

GAME 54

Salutations, Lord of Pirates,

Do not confuse stupidity with inexperience. You have taught us the meaning of treachery and we learn well. How does it feel to loose an army of 2680 men against an undefended town? Condolences to Loruder's family. We grieve for the loss of our beloved Dark Lady Adunaphel, but she died to save our nation from your cowardly attack. We will not forget. So great and powerful rooster of the sea, we wait for you.

Soulcatcher
Vampire Lord

GAME 55

We of Harad declare for the Free Peoples - not by choice, but because Mordor has been so obnoxious. Join me, fellow Neutrals, in teaching a few bloated egos a lesson in manners . . .

Haruth Raman
Emperor of the South

GAME 56

The first hostile action has been committed. The Easterling people are rising up in anger. Our course has been set. Dread onto the enemy.

Zarendarger (25)

GAME 57

Will someone, anyone, give Southern Gondor's dinghies docking privileges? We're tired of him sailing up and down the coastline, it scares away the fish.

Akhorahil

The following day, as Ji-Indor was roaming the free city of Minas Anor, admiring the slums whose stench and squalor so reminded him of home and kin. A sudden warm wind whirled from above. Too late! Ji-Indor fell, wounded. Celdrahil was on his way to join his huge army for its Winter '93 Mordor tour.

Condolences to the families of Lomelinde, Fuinor, and Gaurhir.

GAME 59

We have identified a poison polluting the map; a force which corrupted elves in games 6 and 18. We know who or what it is and will not tolerate it spreading through this game. Rest assured, we will fight it wherever possible, and in the end, we WILL stomp it out!

The White Council

Quiet Avenger, rest in peace.

Now the war shall continue with one less. The question now is: How shall the Dark Servants seek vengeance? Or will they also melt away?

Cry Havoc and let slip the dogs of War! The Dark Servants march and all Rhovanion falls under our sway. I salute the Free People armies with courage to stand and look forward to meeting you in battle.

Lord Uvatha

Kill the Dwarves,
Kill the Elves,
Keep the artifacts for ourselves.

The war is just started, yet the Eothraim perish. Elf, Dwarf, and Beoring corpses litter Mirkwood. Angmar marches and the South shudders with war. I will bring the news to my Master. He will be most pleased.

The Mouth of Sauron

GAME 60

As the dark claw of Sauron reaches out of Mirkwood and closes on the Woodmen, Durthang falls to Eothraim. But it shall once again fly the flag of the Ice King.

Khamul

GAME 61

As goodness reigns supreme and the free lands prosper, darkness stirs. An eyelid long at rest flashes open to reveal the unyielding loathing of the visions hidden within. The ancient urges felt many times before now again rush through their familiar courses as the feral madness that always accompanies its brother, clearly dictates his destiny. He knows what must be done. Their fates are sealed and they will fall one by one. But first . . . my ring.

Evil Eye

GAME 65

Be it known that the Easterlings are Neutral, and care not for your petty wars. Leave us in peace, and we shall not hinder you; attack us, and you shall be destroyed.

Ovatha
Emperor of the East

Just for the record,

- 1) Rhudaur attacked first.
- 2) South Gondor's feint into the Haradwaith was a ploy to make the Quiet Avenger feel safe - bye bye QA!
- 3) The Meric 3 are not liars.
- 4) If you try hard enough, you can explain everything with a conspiracy.
- 5) Total paranoia is not total awareness, it is total irrationality.
- 6) If you see a short, bearded woman walking around, don't laugh. She might just kill you.

Smile!

Threlin
Lord of the Khazad (Azaro)

GAME 66

No one shall escape from the horror of my absolute Evil!

Anonymous

From Mordor to Angmar
From Gondor to Rhun
The shadows are cast
From Sauron's New Moon.
With this paradox of light
Shall the Nine ride the night.
The Witch King of Angmar

Ages ago, Varda set the Valacirca in the heavens, the crown of Seven mighty stones to trumpet Melkor's doom. The Sickle of the Valar again swings high, now trumpeting Sauron's

downfall. Evil, be warned, your doom is upon you!

This is for the Goods of this game,
I eat Shelobs for breakfast, balrogs for lunch, and invite dragons for dinner, while spitting out vampires. For fun, I ruin lives . . . slowly and permanently.

Shiek Alaa - Kiljhyuman

GAME 68

When lying and wounded on Mordor's dread plains
And the goblins come out to cut up what remains

Then hold tight your cross-bow and sever your brains

And go to your god like a soldier.

Tarandor (from Kipling)

GAME 69

Eru's children shall inherit the Middle-earth. The blight known as the Dark Servants shall be dealt with in time. I'm set for a new go around.

Zarendarger (10)

GAME 70

Hey, Bad Guys!

Boy, this game's gonna have you screaming obscenities in no time. Hope you didn't bet your rent money on the outcome! For an appetizer, observe your Cloudhead . . .

The Inner Circle

GAME 72

I am become Death . . .

Naurmegil
Cloud Lord

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Dark Servant Economics

J Walton

This article is directed ONLY at Dark Servants; they have a specific problem in ME-PBM: few population centers. The Free People start with numerous pop centers. Dark Servants vary, but it's generally on the order of six to twelve. "But we Dark Servants make up for that with plenty of gold reserves," I hear you cry. Wrong. Think of your gold reserves as "paid in capital" - what you initially have to work with.

Any good analyst knows that you don't pay salaries with capital after the first year; you have to be working off your assets and resource base. Capital is used for things that *increase* your assets, or for special projects. The same thing goes in ME-PBM. You need to use your gold reserves to build your assets and to finance "special projects".

To translate this into game terms - if your deficit is more than you can reasonably expect to handle by trading on the market, you are paying from capital. For example, my deficit is -5652. My bronze production is 1,452, and I consider that "excess". As long as the bronze sell price stays above four, I've got my head above water. The problem is, the market price may not stay above four, and then you and I are in big trouble if that's what we've built our economy on.

There is an old saying that majors think about tactics while generals think about logistics. In ME-PBM, you're a general. To get you thinking about this in proper terms, let's look at what is required to build an army, get it in the field and keep it there. For sake of reference, I'm going to work with a 1500 heavy cav' army, with steel weapons and steel armour, recruited at a city. It runs like this: **Turn 1** - Make sure the appropriate resources are there. Buy mounts, leather, steel, or whatever you will need for the next turn's recruiting. Split army (it's cheaper). Recruit 500 HC. Possibly build a backup commander (\$5000). Maintain commander (\$1000). Turn cost = \$6000.

Turn 2 - Maintain commander and backup (\$1600). Maintain 500 HC (\$3000). Recruit an additional 500 HC. Transport resources in for next turn. Possibly train a bit. Turn cost = \$4600.

Turn 3 - Maintain commander and backup (\$1700; training made them better). Maintain 1000 HC (\$6000). Recruit 500 additional HC. Train some more. Turn cost = \$7700.

Turn 4 - Ready to move out. Maintain commander and backup (\$1800). Maintain 1500 HC (\$9000) and get food for them. Turn cost = \$10,800.

Total cost to build the army: \$29,100. Does anybody in any game have a spare \$29,100 floating around, especially on the Dark Servant side? Then the other shoe drops: *every turn after that, until some of the troops start to die, that army will cost you almost eleven thousand dollars.* That's more than a city at 100% tax rate. So where is the money coming from? That is one of the most critical questions for Dark Servants from turn #1 on. To this end, I want to present some suggestions.

1) **Camps.** As far as I can tell, the "average" camp will pay for itself in two turns or less. This recompense may be in gold, it may be in related production dealings on the market, or whatever, but that is the way it works out to me. Therefore, as a Dark Servant, **CREATE CAMPS.** If you start with an emissary,

great - first turn, create another emissary and move to a spot to put down a camp. If you don't have an emissary at game start, create one on turn #1 and then create another on turn #2. Every turn after that, you should be attempting to create two camps. "But what if I don't get any useable production," I hear you ask. I have two responses to that question. First, you *could* scout ahead of time, but, in my opinion, you're wasting too much time and too many orders. Second, there is a use for those "useless" camps - keep reading.

2) Taxes. If at all possible, drop your tax rate *immediately*. A 20% tax rate gives you a steady +2 loyalty every turn, at every pop center. That's going to be important when you later have to raise your tax rate - and you will.

3) Villages and Towns. Camps don't give you tax revenue, but they will drop in loyalty just the same. At least if you have a village, you are getting the money for it. Those "useless" camps from item 1 above will be useful villages or towns. Be aware that villages and towns have the same pay-back period (if you include all the costs from camp to town). It's a matter of choice which way you go. If the area is defensible and there are few resources to be lost, I like towns.

4) Armies. ME-PBM is an unusual game. Generally, in PBM, your objective is to preserve your initial army as long as possible. In ME-PBM, your objective is to spend your initial army as *quickly* and as *wisely* as possible. Remember that 1500 HC army that's eating up \$11,000 per turn? You should have one that is comparable at game start. The objective is to either disband it immediately (if you can't use it in a reasonable time frame) or get good use out of it. Take a pop center you can defend (but not with that army having to sit on it - remember, you have to pay for it) or destroy some of the Free Peoples' pop centers. Annihilate (or at least chew up) one of the major Free People armies. Don't throw your army away unless you need to, but don't hang on to it, either. You don't have the money to maintain an army very long.

5) Stealing. Stealing is perfectly okay - both gold and pop centers. However, don't think you can support your economy that way; you may fail in your theft attempts or you may succeed, but the victim may not have any gold to take. And remember, if you can steal from them, they can steal from you. Stealing from the Free People is a wonderful idea, but if you are trusting to thievery to keep your nation going from turn-to-turn, you might as well drop the game now.

The process of gaining economic strength and flexibility is long and complicated. Achieving it needs to be a Dark Servant priority from turn #1, and you have to advance on it each turn.

The Gift

Nathan J. Hellmers

A tale I have of long time past,
Of things exchanged, of fate sealed fast.
I'll tell in full now, if I might,
Of journey down to endless night.

I

Of old I was a king of men,
And that is where my tale begins.
I still recall those happy days,

Before my hair turned fast to gray
Youth's blood was mine and great strength too
And hair like jet and eyes sky blue
And thick beard on a sunny face.
I walked with style and moved with grace.
With shoulders broad I stood straight tall,
And of those days I still recall.
A king of men I was of old,
With silver rings and crown of gold,
And robes I wore of purple bright,
My boots shone black as starless night.
A scabbard with a mighty sword
Hung by my side in case of war.
Arrayed as such a Dread I was,
And over me was made much fuss.
For I was king of men and all
And of those days I still recall.

II

But then, alas, it came one day
That I began to feel great age.
How it happened, I cannot guess,
That father time was besting best.
Now when I walked, I leaned on a stick.
My health was poor. I oft was sick.
Now I was bent and frail and thin.
A silver web hung from my chin.
On bony hands were clinking rings,
Tarnished badly, much like their king.
And dented crown unsteady lay
On thinning head of wiry gray
And wrinkles had begun to show
Upon my face that once did glow.
My eyes clouded and shoulders sagged,
My purple robes felt like death's rags.
My boots wore dust from long journeys,
My sword held rusted victories.
But still I ruled, though bones were cold;
Still king of men, though I was old.

III

And so it stood for many years,
And so increased my aging fears.
I e'er would sit and dwell upon
A hope to keep from being done,
Death's deed, which frightened me more than
Anything that walked on the land
Or swam in sea or flew in sky.
The knowledge that I soon would die
Was like a dagger in my mind,
Pursuing ever from behind.
I oft would glance around to see
It gaining, ever more quickly.
And so it stood, and so it went;

My once young mind was being rent.

IV

Yet ere I lost my sanity,
One final hope was left to me.
A notice I'd post far and wide,
In cities and in countryside,
That anyone who knew a way
To keep Death's hunting dogs at bay,
Should bring their answers to my ear.
And then, in return, I would hear
What e'er they asked as just return,
And give it gladly as well earned.

V

No sooner was my notice nailed,
Then a stranger at my gates was hailed.
A foreigner he seemed to be,
Who said he must now speak to me.
On urgent matter was he sent,
He said as on his way he went,
Up to my throne, and spoke forthright
And claimed a cure for dimming life.
"Ride to the crossing nine miles east.
Alone you'll ride and there you'll meet
Me, and within my palm the cure
That gives the power to endure."
Then I asked, "If I take your cure,
Will my reign and kingdom endure?
For crownless life to me is naught.
And with what should this cheat be bought?
What treasures shall I give the one
Who keeps Death's deed from being done?"
"In this venture, I seek no gain,
And a crown you'll indeed retain.
Now, my lord, at dusk you will ride
And meet with me this very night,"
He said in words like silver notes
That from harp's strings do softly float.
"The Lord of Gifts should be your name,
Rightly so, for in all my reign
I've known of none who'd give so free,
Such a gift as you give to me."
I said in such a joyous voice,
And then my heart did thus rejoice,
As I set out at dusk that eve.
The gift of gifts I would receive.

VI

No horse there was like one that I
Rode underneath a shadowed sky.
An awesome beast he was indeed,
And should have pranced most mightily,
But he walked now with head bowed low;
Most hesitant he was to go.

And then it came to pass in me
Had grown a strong hesitancy.
Yet still I rode through darkening night,
"Til blazon torch was within sight.
I rode right up and there he stood,
All draped in black, face hid by a hood.
"Greetings," he said in whisper soft.
His right hand held the torch aloft,
While left hand was held in clenched fist
In which I hoped lay promised gift.
I dismounted and looked about;
Alone we were, without a doubt.
I looked now at the fist to see
Just what it was he had for me.
He opened wide his hand to show
A tiny ring that seemed to glow.
"Twas made by Elves long years since past,
"Twill take your life and make it last,"
He said in strangest, hissing voice.
Fear welled, but still I had the choice.
I took the ring from his black hand,
And silence covered all the land.
I held it up and gave it thought.
I slipped it on and then was caught
In nightmare worse than few dare dream.
I was caught in trap unforeseen,
For then an evil, icy cold
Burned down into my very soul.
I had come to him in good faith,
And now was turned into a wraith.
And looking 'round, I now could see
Eight other wraiths standing with me.
Looking now on the hand of he
who gave me the ring, was indeed
A ring on which words were engraved
To keep us in darkness enslaved.
And then he placed a crown upon
My head, for I had now become
The Ringwaith King, yet servant still
To our Dark Lord's evil will.
For He was indeed the man
Who'd promised me a gift most grand.
Yet all the blame should be mine still,
For greed's the root of all evil.
Now I must serve 'till end of time,
That's my tale,

The First of the Nine

NOTE - Opinions expressed in the following article are those of the author's alone. Game Systems neither agrees nor disagrees with the author's viewpoints.

Why Nazgul Have More Fun!

Jim Ghiloni

Though ME-PBM is in many ways weighted toward the Free Peoples and the Neutrals, playing an Evil nation is definitely a more exciting experience. There are many reasons for this, some of which I will list below.

1) Evil nations tend to be more character-oriented.

Without a doubt, if you want to play an economic or military superpower, your best bet is with the Goodies or the Wishy-Washies. However, nothing conveys the excitement of Middle-earth more than the skilful use of powerful characters. While the Elves tend to control the most powerful individuals in the game, the Evil nations have superior characters overall. If you want to explore the arcane - researching spells, hunting up artifacts, or blowing away large armies with a few men-at-arms and a slew of mighty spell-casters, try out the Dragon Lord or Blind Sorcerer positions. If you prefer espionage, ask for the Long Rider or the Cloud Lord. Imagine your opponent's dismay as your well-placed agents blow up his precious fortifications, steal his gold, and assassinate his army commanders just before your allies' armies appear in his capital.

2) Evil Nations are more balanced.

Most of the Good and Neutral nations tend to be either strong militarily (the Eothraim, the Dwarves), economically (Harad, Arthedain, Northmen), or have powerful characters (Noldo, Sinda). If you want a balance between these factors, at least between military and character strength, then Evil is the side for you! Few nations can boast the balanced attack posed by nations such as the Witch King, the Dragon Lord, the Dark Lts., the Ice King, or the Dog Lord, all of which are characterized by strong characters and competitive armies.

3) Evil nations have cooler artifacts.

Unlike the Goodies and the Wishy-Washies, all Evil nations start with at least a few artifacts. Many of them have a whole arsenal of combat and rank-enhancing artifacts with which to buttress their already powerful characters. Also, their superior mages give Evil nations a better shot at locating lost artifacts. You haven't played ME-PBM until you've taken a standard character and jacked his challenge rank up 100+ points just by equipping him with combat and skill artifacts!

4) Everyone fears Evil.

This becomes obvious when you realize what the first piece of advice given to rookies by their more experienced Good allies is: "Always refuse personal challenge against evil armies!" Just by sticking Murazor or Khamul or Urzahil in an enemy's capital will force them to waste half the actions of their characters there refusing personal challenges. And don't forget the psychological impact of agent actions or the effects of those funky Spirit Mastery spells that Evil mages tend to get more frequently!

5) Evil nations have more incentive to cooperate.

This may seem to go against our firmly held prejudices against Evil, but it is actually true. All but two Evil nations are located in or near Mordor. There are only two nearby powerful threats to Mordor: the Eothraim and North Gondor. Thus, it is in the interest of Evil to quickly begin coordinating attacks on those two nations. At the very least, you end up with six nations concentrating on two. Sure, Arthedain, Cardolan, and the Noldo should similarly gang up on the Witch King, but that is the extent of it. The Sinda and Dwarves are spread all over the map, the Woodmen and Northmen are not long for the world anyway, and the Eothraim and the Gondors have their hands full with the gathered might of Mordor.

6) Evil nations seem to have more encounters.

This reason may be the weakest, but it seems to be generally true. The Witch King is assured of multiple dragon encounters, someone in Mordor will encounter Shelob, and the Dragon Lord will unfortunately find Galadriel roaming his lands constantly. While many of these encounters may not be beneficial, they do add an element of interest to the game. Finally, most encounters tend to happen in the mountains and the Evil nations have many more pop centers in the mountains.

The Assassin

Silent as a shadow
Quick as lightning
When I come for you
There will be no time for fighting.

Feel my blade
Between your ribs
For when we drew lots for your life
I got first dibs.

As your blood flows warmly
Over my hand to the floor
Know that your friends will soon join you
Beyond Death's Door.

Erik Ker