

Tips From Middle-Earth **Play-By-Mail™**

by Joe Playtester

After almost a year of playtesting ME-PBM™, I've picked up some tips that I'd like to pass on to people who are new to the game.

IN THE BEGINNING...

First of all, you might want to take some time to choose which nation that you want to be. Every position has its own sets of strengths, weaknesses and special abilities. Each position is truly unique and each game is different. This means that experienced players won't have as much of an advantage over rookies, as is the case in other games.

When you get your first turnsheet and setup stuff, take the time to examine your position. I suggest that you decide early in the game whether you want to be strong in characters or in military strength. It is practically impossible to have strong characters and strong armies. It is much better to have great characters and a passable army (or vice versa) than be moderate in both areas. If you are moderate in both areas, your characters can get bumped off by a character strong nation while your armies can get crushed by a great military nation.

Most positions start out with a fair amount of cash. I suggest that you name several new characters as early as you can. Not only will this give you more actions, (each character gets two orders per turn), but you will have more time to build them up and make them more powerful.

Remember, only major towns and cities can support a capital. If you start out the game with only one population center at this level, IMPROVE ANOTHER ONE AS SOON AS HUMANLY (ELUENLY?, DWARUENLY?) POSSIBLE. I cannot stress this enough. If you lose your capital, and it cannot be moved, you will be out of the game. It's as simple as that.

I realize that most of these suggestions are going to cost gold out of your nation's treasury. It's a simple fact of life that we can't always afford what we want to do. You will have to prioritize. It is much, much better to put something off for a few turns than to go broke trying it without sufficient funds. If you run out of money, again you'll be eliminated. It's sometimes useful to go in with a few players and monopolize a resource on the market to make money, but don't do it unless you can afford it. Sometimes the market won't let you sell when you want to.

Look at your map and find out who your neighbors are. If you are lucky enough to be near people of your alignment, get in touch with them and coordinate where you can. This can be VERY effective. Two or three nations who go to war against one nation will have a nice edge.

If you have a lot of enemies near you, don't hesitate to talk to them as well. It is possible for you to withhold hostilities for a while and it can be beneficial for both sides. In my game, the Witch King didn't go to war with many of his good neighbors for at least ten turns, and believe me, you

can get a lot of building done in ten turns. Be careful though, it is easy for this kind of deal to fall apart due to lying and backstabbing.

Talk to the neutrals near you early. Find out what kind of person s/he is, and from that decide how you want to deal with them. You should probably refrain from attacking the neutrals in the beginning of the game. After all, they may be potential allies. Do not ignore the neutrals either. If they go untouched for a long time they can get very powerful, and they might also be potential enemies. What to do about the neutral positions is one of the hardest decisions to make. I've seen several players get backstabbed by the neutrals. Some lost because of it and others were weakened. On the other hand I've seen neutrals work very honestly with other nations with no dirty dealing at all. Remember, neutrals don't have to change alignment to work with or against you. You simply have to decide whether or not you can trust the "player" as opposed to the nation. Also, don't expect a neutral to change alignment early in the game. Doing this locks him into a course of action and weakens his position. Those people who try and harass a neutral to change before he is ready will probably lose him to the enemy.

MILITARY NOTES...

ME-PBM is an outstanding strategic game. To those of you who enjoy wargaming and similar diversions, ME-PBM has much to offer you. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Many of you may think that the number of troops that you have in your army is the most important thing to consider. This is not always the case. I've seen armies paste enemy armies 1 1/2 times as large. There are many reasons why. These reasons are weapons and armor, morale, training, commander rank and mages.

Upgrade your army's weapons and armor whenever possible. Simply put, the better your weapons, the more damage you do. The better your armor, the more damage you can take.

Morale can drastically affect the performance of your fighting forces. Morale is also one of the hardest things to change. The only way to make morale go up fast is to destroy armies and population centers. Capturing pop centers gives you some morale, but not as much as destroying. So, if you can find a place where an enemy has placed a lot of weak pop centers or armies, take them out. Also, keep your army fed. Lack of food won't reduce your amount of troops, but it will reduce your morale, and I said before, raising morale is more difficult. Refusing personal challenges can also reduce morale, but if you have to choose between losing morale or having your commander killed by a more powerful character, you should take the morale loss. Conversely, if you've got powerful characters in your army, issue personal challenges. Your morale will go up if you win and it will go up if you are refused.

Training also helps your military a great deal. I suggest splitting your armies up so that light and heavy cavalry are in one army and the infantry

troops are in the other. Having fewer armies allows you to put more commanders with the armies, and thus you will be able to do more training. Train as much as you can. Remember, training also raises the levels of your commanders as well as your armies.

Your troops will also be more effective if you put better commanders in charge of the army. The better the commander, the better the army. Sometimes you may want to forego this to put your most powerful character as second in command. If you do this, you may be able to surprise your opponent into accepting a personal challenge because they may not be aware of your "killer character."

Some nations have quite a few mages to begin the game. If you have mages with good combat spells, don't hesitate to send them along with the army. I've taken out enemy camps while casting a 2000 pt. defensive spell. The net result of this is destroying a camp while taking no losses. A competent mage can only help the army that he travels with.

I suggested before that it is a good idea to separate your troops between infantry and cavalry. The main reason for this is to get the movement advantage for your cavalry army. This is especially helpful if you have a lot of plains near your country. If you don't start with a lot of cavalry, I'd beef up your cavalry force if you are going to split it off. It's not much good having an army with great mobility if you can't do anything with it. Roads are very important in the game. They allow you to move much further during your turn. Control roads where you can. Also, don't forget about evasive movement. At first it may not look like evasive movement is worth much because you can only move half of your normal distance. Don't let this fool you. If you have an army trapped by a better army, move evasively so that they have to work to catch you.

Another reason why a smaller elite force is better than a large mob of troops is cost effectiveness. It cost a lot of money to maintain your troops. This is based solely on the number of troops. This advantage I'll call "player demoralization." If you send a huge army to attack another player, he's going to be a lot more bummed out than if you send a normal sized army. Odds are good that he won't know how good your troops are. All he'll know is the rough size of your army and the name and ability of your commander.

Speaking of army size, an army's size is determined by the average size of all armies that turn. An army that's listed as large on one turn can be listed as huge in the following turn. This doesn't mean that the army has added more troops. It is more likely that the average army size for the turn is lower.

As I mentioned before, it isn't that easy to tell what a person has in his army before it attacks something of yours. You can try to send an agent to the hex that you think he will end up in hopes of getting a scouting report. Remember that you can only get a report like this if you know the name of the army commander. The best way to get a report on an army is as follows. Send a commander to the area where you think the

army will be next turn, then use the "recon" order. If the army lands within one hex of your commander, you will probably receive some information about the army. Usually you will find out the name of the commander and the approximate number of troops in the force. If you require more information, you can try to send an agent in to scout it. It still isn't easy, but at least you will have some information to work with. Since it is difficult to scout an army, use this to your advantage. If someone is attacking you, send a hundred man army to his capital. Unless you are reconned or land on a pop center, he won't know what you have marching toward him and will probably have to pull back troops to defend his homeland. Thus, you have put him on the defensive. I have seen this work well several times during the playtest.

On the subject of troop types, I suggest sticking with the heavies. Heavy cavalry and heavy infantry, that is. Men-at arms, light infantry, and light cavalry are at least half as strong and tough as their heavy counterparts. The lights are better in more terrains, but unless you have TONS of forest, rough, mountains, or swamp in your country, the heavies will still beat out the lights. There is no difference in creating light and heavy infantry, so go with the heavy. Men-at-arms are created with pre-made arms and armor, so if you don't have the resources to outfit new troops, you may want to hire some of them, but they are so weak it's almost better to have naked heavy infantry than armored men-at-arms. It takes an extra unit of leather to hire heavy cavalry over light cavalry. If you don't have the extra leather, I suggest waiting until you do. Remember, it's cheaper to have a small amount of heavies than a whole bunch of lights. Archers are always good to have around. You don't have to make weapons for them and their bows are the same as steel weapons. Archers are very poor on hit points though. Get them into good armor a.s.a.p. Another thing to consider when hiring new troops - the fewer types you have, the easier it is to get them trained.

ON CHARACTERS...

I said it before and I'll say it again, name a handful of new characters as early as possible. The more characters you have, the more actions you can perform. This will allow you to build faster. A character that has been on the game for ten turns is going to be more powerful than one that was just named. Another thing that I would like to stress, DON'T GET TOO ATTACHED TO YOUR CHARACTERS. Characters are going to die. It is as simple as that. The odds of a player going through the whole game without losing a character are astronomical. If you are really keen on your characters, you may be goaded into rash actions in the name of vengeance and retribution and it is never good to let yourself get forced into a set of actions. Also, if you are overly protective of your characters, you'll probably refrain from doing anything risky with those characters. If this happens, you'll fall behind to other players who do take calculated risks. This will only serve to strengthen your enemy. I'm saying that you'll find it

difficult to get things done if you are overly conservative. By the way, this is another reason to name new characters early...to replace ones that get killed off.

Unless you have really good agents, the easiest way to terminate enemy characters is the ever popular "personal challenge." If a personal challenge takes place, one of the characters will die. Assassinations will also kill characters, but you need good agents to do this. It is not very common for characters to die during army combat. Unless the enemy is a lot better than you, your characters will probably escape. The exception to this is naval combat. If your navy gets trashed on the high seas, all of your characters with that navy will be feeding the fish.

Don't underestimate the amount of damage that good characters can cause. If you have good characters, you can wage war with them and leave your troops home to defend your capital. Mages and commanders are the best at personal challenges. Once you've gotten some good ones, bump off some enemy characters. Remember, you can't personal challenge an army commander unless your character is in an army. No problem here, just send in some master agents to assassinate them. It is allowed to assassinate army commanders. Agents can also steal, kidnap, and other fun stuff, otherwise the odds are against you. If you want to build up agents faster, see if one of your allies has a poor pop center that he doesn't mind being sabotaged. Send your agent there and have him sabotage resources. Since you are friendly with your ally, you'll get positive modifiers to do this and you'll probably succeed. Remember, agents and emissaries can be used against allies as well as enemies. I wouldn't suggest making a habit of this though. Speaking of emissaries, they can allow you to take over enemy pop centers by reducing loyalty. Definitely get some good emissaries named. If you can coordinate with some allies, you can take over those pesky little highly fortified pop centers without losing any troops.

As a general rule, you can get away with hard actions with rank 50 characters as long as there are no negative modifiers. If a nation dislikes or hates you, you'll be at a minus to perform emissary and agent actions in their pop centers. In this case, you'll want to be at least rank 70 to try a hard action in an enemy pop center. Average actions can usually be successful at rank 30 with no negative modifiers. Easy actions seem to be at about 50% success rate with rank 10 characters. Don't assume that easy actions will automatically succeed. I've seen them fail quite a lot.

IN CLOSING...

The only thing I have to say in closing is have fun and don't quit. This is a really great game and you will get hours and hours of enjoyment out of it. Don't think that you are out of the game if things look bleak. All you have to do is ask an ally to transfer a major town to you and then move your capital to it. Your enemies won't know where you went and you can rebuild to attack him another day. Anything can happen in Middle Earth.