

Dominions II Strategy Guide

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Dominions II: The Ascension Wars is one of the best fantasy strategy games to come out in the past five years. It's better than Age of Wonders II, and much better than Heroes of Might & Magic IV. You'd probably have to go back to Heroes of Might & Magic III (1999) or Warlords III: Darklords Rising (1998) to find a game that has as much strategy, flow, and atmosphere as this. Unfortunately, a combination of the game system and the interface make this one of the most opaque games ever produced: beginners look at it, click some buttons, lose a few battles, and back away slowly. The game has a quick-start guide, but that only gets you started and doesn't explain what the basic issues are. If you've purchased this awesome game, but are completely lost, follow the quick-start and read this strategy summary. The interface may be a bit baroque, but that's the price of progress. Strategy progress!

If you have trouble understanding the game you might prefer the walkthrough that is available at <http://www.illwinter.com/dom2/walkthru.html>.

1 THE ISSUES

Dominions II is about one thing: your god and people worshipping your god. I guess that's kind of two things. Worship of your god is represented by "dominion," which is calculated on a per-province basis and is shown graphically by the candle icons. A tall white candle means your dominion is high, while a tall black candle means someone else's dominion is. If you don't have any dominion in any province, you lose the game immediately. In order to spread your dominion, you have to conquer at least some provinces. In order to generate income and build armies, you have to conquer a lot of provinces. So while the game is about going to church, it's also about killing people – at least those people who don't go to your church.

When you create your "Pretender God," which I guess is you in the game if you're into that sort of

make-believe, you determine a whole bunch of things, including your pretender's dominion score. The higher this number, the stronger your dominion is, so the faster it spreads, the harder it is for other gods to un-spread it. This is important because if you don't have a strong dominion, you'll need to do other things to spread the word of your god.

There are a lot of things to decide when you create a pretender. Since this is one of the most important things in the game, it's pointless to explain what choices to make without explaining what they're based on. So we'll wait until the end to systematically go through god creation. Believe me, it will be worth it.

1.1 Dominion

Didn't we just talk about this? Dominion is spread by five things: priests, prophets, temples, your capital city, and your god. Priests, prophets, and your god are units. Temples are buildings. Just like in real life.

Your god spreads dominion just by being wherever he is. The same goes for your prophet (you can only have one at a time) and your temples. Priests have to "Preach the Teachings of God" in order to raise dominion, and the dominion is raised only in the province they are preaching in. If there is a temple in the province, the preaching has increased effect. So to reiterate: dominion spreads outward from your temples, prophet, god, and capital. (This spread can be slow.) Priests can preach in a province, and raise the dominion in that province only.

1.2 Income & Resources

Gold builds buildings. Gold plus resources builds troops. Gold accumulates in your treasury. Resources don't accumulate, and can only be used in the province that they are produced in. Thus, if a province generates 5 resources per turn, it will only have 5 resources available each turn. If you don't use them, they go away at the end of the turn. There is a role-playing reason for this in the

manual, like that there are only so many forges and that blacksmiths can only work so fast. Whatever. It's a good device and is absolutely central to the game's strategy.

While you won't be able to determine how much income or how many resources a given province will produce until you've actually occupied it, you can generally guess by the type of terrain in that province. Farmlands give good income but poor resources, while mountains/forest are the opposite.

1.3 Fortresses

Fortresses do two things: they increase the supply value of nearby provinces, and they "collect" resources from adjacent provinces based on the fortress' "admin" value (determined when you chose which type of fortress your race would use, during god selection). This means that if your fortress has an admin value of 40, then 40% of the resources in each of the adjacent provinces will be collected and will become available in the province with the fortress. In addition, only half of a province's available resources can be produced unless that province has a fortress. So the only provinces that will be producing at "full capacity" will be the ones with fortresses in them. This makes fortresses the focal point of your military-industrial complex.

Fortresses also do a third thing, which is to provide sanctuary for besieged armies, but that's obvious because of fantasy realism.

The effect of fortresses on resources is one of the most important things in the game. For example: let's say a province generates 25 resources. Let's also say that you have built a fortress in the province immediately to the south, and another one in the province immediately to the north. Furthermore, let's say your god's fortresses have an admin value of 40, meaning that 40% of the resources in each adjacent province are collected by each fortress. In the above example, 40% of the resources in our 25-point province will go to the southern fortress, and another 40% will go to the northern fortress. Since 10 is 40% of 25, that 25-point province will lose 10 points to the northern fortress, and 10 more to the southern fortress. A total of 20 points are being collected, leaving only 5 resources in that province for production each turn. These 20 points aren't lost – they're simply moved elsewhere. But building your fortresses in the wrong place can cause big problems. The reason for this becomes obvious below.

1.4 Armies

The complex theological underpinnings of *Dominions II* notwithstanding, this is a fantasy strategy game. The whole point of a fantasy strategy game is to build magical armies to take over the make-believe world (which always ends in -ia, like Urgaia or Britannia or Erathia), and that's also the point here. The fact that here you're on a religious crusade just makes it more philosophical.

As we learned above, armies are produced by gold and resources. Gold is collected from all provinces and pooled. Resources are not. Different provinces produce different units. Units have widely varying resource costs. This means that if a province can produce heavy cavalry, but the province doesn't generate enough resources to produce the 16 points it costs to build one heavy cavalry unit, then that province will have to queue up a heavy cavalry unit and spend multiple turns building it.

So, you can see how building a fortress in the wrong province can cause problems. Let's say that a province generates some high-resource units. Let's also say that, like in the example in the fortress section above, you've built a couple of fortresses (or even one fortress) adjacent to this province. What will probably happen is that the forts will end up taking so many resources out of this province that you won't even be able to build a single unit here, unless you place it in the build queue and use the resources over multiple turns. If you play a race that depends on independents for its "heavy" units, you've just wasted a province and probably a fortress. So be careful where you build fortresses – while it may not seem so bad to be able to build 20 light infantry per turn, it will be probably be better in the end to build three heavy cav.

This is actually only a problem for some races, because usually, a fortress will allow you to recruit your native units in that province. However, this is not the case for land fortresses built by amphibious races, so planning where your fortresses are going to go is always a good idea.

1.5 Commanders

Armies can only move when they are led by a commander. Commanders have different leadership ratings, which determine how many units they can control. While resources are a limiting factor in building high-resource armies, commanders are actually the limiting factor in building large armies of cheap

units. You can recruit up to 50 non-commander units in a single province per turn, but only one commander, so unless you have a special race and a ton of money to spend on expensive commanders, you'll have to have multiple commanders in a province to be able to mobilize your new army.

Commanders can be priests, mages, or just soldiers. Right-click on them to get all their vital details. Sometimes random commanders will show up at the gates of your fortress, because they heard about you and stuff. Some of them may have skill in magic paths that your pretender does not. This is a bonus, and should not be wasted.

Armies require supply. This means that you can't just pile a ton of units into a province without consequences, because they'll starve. Giants eat a lot, so they need a ton of supply. Weaker units don't need as much. Some units don't need to eat at all. In some ways, this game is like a gastronomic simulator.

1.6 Combat

I could probably write an entire strategy article on combat, and maybe I will someday when my *Dominions II* obsession puts me in the hospital. As you probably found out when you tried to play the game without reading the manual, you can't directly control your units on the tactical map. Instead, you give them orders beforehand, and then they go and fight and maybe they win and maybe they don't but in the end you tell them "good game!" and that "we'll get 'em next time." If they're not all dead.

The most important thing about combat is morale. When units rout, they are no longer participating in combat. Once all your units rout, you lose. When all your commanders are dead, your units rout. When a squad takes too many casualties, it routs. Routing is bad.

The higher a unit's morale value is, the less likely it will be to rout. The larger a squad is, the more casualties it can take before it routs. However, if your squads are too big, most of your units will be standing idly in the back while the front rank fights it out with the enemy. The trick is to arrange your units so that the maximum number of units get into the fight.

Click on the green boxes to the right of each squad in the "Army Setup" screen. This allows you to move your squads around prior to combat. Put your melee units up front, and your archers behind them. Put some cavalry or fast-moving units out on the flanks, so that they can get around and behind the enemy. If you don't know what

orders to give your units, leave this alone. The AI does a pretty good job of fighting the battles for you. Once you have seen how things work, you can get in and start tweaking. It's a good part of the fun.

When thinking about damage, look at a unit's strength and protection. A low defense unit has little chance of hitting a unit with high defense. A low-strength/low-damage unit has little chance of hurting one with high protection. The solution is to have many units attack a single high-defense unit, because each attack in a round reduces the defending unit's defense value by one. It's the classic "swarm the giant" strategy.

Commanders who can cast spells in combat will do so. That leads us to ...

1.7 Magic

If I could write an entire article about combat, I could write a TV mini-series about magic. Magic is divided into paths and schools. The paths are things like air, water, earth, fire, death, nature, and some other things you've probably seen in a lot of movie documentaries about magic. You gain skill in magic paths by purchasing levels at the beginning of the game (during god creation).

Magic schools are something else. These are things like, conjuration, evocation, alteration, and other things that make perfect sense in fantasy game logic. Instead of purchasing these skills at the outset, you have to research them throughout the game. When you research a certain level in a school, you get to cast the spells from that school that belong to a path in which you have sufficient skill. Path – school. It's very complicated, but we'll get there eventually.

For example: Cold Blast is in the second level of the Evocation school. It's a second-level Water path spell. If you're at least a level 2 Water mage, and you accumulate enough research to unlock Evocation 2, you get to cast Cold Blast. End of story.

Acid Bolt is in the third level of the Evocation school. It's a second-level Water path spell and a first-level Fire path spell. If you research up to Evocation 3, you must be at least both a second-level Water mage and a first-level Fire mage to cast this. If not, sorry. There are plenty of other cool spells in Evocation 3. If you meet the path requirements, you get to cast them once you research that level of Evocation.

Some spells make you pay in magic crystals. If you need to cast spells which require these crystals, you'll

need a source for them, and that means you'll have to search for them. The higher level mage that searches, the better his chance for success. This means that your pretender should do some initial scouting for crystals, especially if you chose a magic path that isn't supplied by your race's initial magic site.

Research can only be done at a laboratory, and spells that require gems can only be cast if the mage who is casting them has the gems on hand. Since laboratories serve as convenient gem collection points, you don't have to worry if your mage is in a province with a lab. But if you plan to send him out into the wilderness and still want him to cast these kinds of spells, you need to give him some appropriate gems to carry. This is done in your laboratory's magic resources treasury under "Transfer gems to commanders."

What if you don't have the right kind of gems? Under your commander orders for a mage at a lab you can select "Alchemy" and convert astral gems to gems of your choice, or vice versa. You can also convert earth and fire gems to gold.

Read the Grimoire that comes with the thick printed manual. See any spells that are cool? You had better see them – many of them are cool. Think about what may work in a battle. Would summoning some kind of water elemental be useful? Yeah, I should think so. If you have a source of crystals for it, research the spell, load your commander up with the necessary crystals, and send him off into combat. He'll do the right thing.

2 THE PRETENDER GOD

Here's where we get to build a pretender god. Remember all of the stuff from this article, because this is like a test. We're going to use Jotunheim as an example because Vikings are Scandinavian and kick ass.

2.1 Select physical form

You get a lot of choices here. I like the Son of Niefel because he's tough, looks like a Viking, and has a lot of hit points and high leadership, which makes him good for fighting which is what Vikings do. The downside is that he only starts out with Water 2 and Dominion 2, but we can raise those later, and he comes at a very reasonable 50 points. That gives us 450 for the rest of the creation process.

2.2 Enter the name of your god

This is up to you. Since this is a fantasy game, names should sound as stupid and faerie-like as possible. Brucelas is always a good choice. This costs no points, so we still have 450 left.

2.3 Magic

This is a tough one. It's a good idea to have at least two paths of magic, because you will probably have more than one source of magic crystals. Because I have some stuff in mind for Brucelas the Viking Son of Niefel, I'm going to go with Water 8 and Earth 4. Notice how much it costs to raise my Water level once I get up above 5. I choose Earth not because it's a particularly good fit with water (it's not, at least in terms of dual-path spells) but because it opens up the Construction school and will let me cast some neat spells with just 4 skills levels in the path. 160 points left.

2.4 Dominion

Ok, here is where stuff starts getting crazy. You can "tilt the scales" in any of several categories, like order/sloth, growth/death, fortune/misfortune. Note that with Jotunheim, tipping the scales in various ways opens up special dominions (or, you can just click on "special dominion" and it will give you a list). You can also change your dominion value here. So much to do!

First, get a plan. Are you going to try and wipe the map out with military conquest, or will you be a bit more sneaky and try to propagate your dominion? Because Jotunheim has very expensive units, it will be almost impossible to create huge Jotun armies. If you combine this with a low dominion, you're going to be hard-pressed to have enough military force to defend all the temples you're going to have to build, with money you won't have because Jotun units are so expensive. So high dominion is a good idea.

Kick dominion up from 2 to 6. Ouch! Only 90 points left. So let's try to get some more points back. We can do this by tilting some of the scale towards the "negative" side, like towards sloth and away from production. Or, in our case, towards turmoil and away from order. This is going to increase the unrest in our provinces, but so be it. One click gets me 40 extra points! And look – a new special dominion opens up! It's called "Restless Worshipers." It costs 50 points, but its effect is to make my pretender's dominion spread more quickly. With a

dominion of 6 and this special power, I'm gonna be one powerful evangelist. I have 80 points left.

2.5 Castle

This is the last selection. Since we're playing Jotunheim, we need a lot of resources to build units, so we need a high admin value. We would also like a high supply value, since our units are giants and use a lot of food. Fortified city looks good: it has the highest admin value (50), one metric assload of supply (500), and a decent defense (100). However, one fortified city costs 5 turns to build and 750 (!) gold. Yikes. Scratch that. No wonder it only costs 80 points. A castle costs the same amount of points, has just slightly less admin (40) and the same defense (100). Unfortunately, it only gives 150 supply, but it only takes three turns to build and requires 450 gold. Much more reasonable. We take that. Zero points left = perfect efficiency!

3 THE SYNTHESIS

Ok, so that's a lot of craziness. What the heck are you supposed to do with all that information. You have a god, but so what? What buttons do you click on?

First, scout the map a bit. The unit that says "sneak" when you move it is a scout. Scouts can hide in enemy provinces, don't initiate combat (unless you tell them to), and report back on what is going on there. Before you send your initial army on a raid, send the scout to an adjacent province you'd like to invade. Do you outnumber the province's defenders? Are they weaklings like militia and light infantry? If so, attack them. If not, maybe try another province. In the early game, you want to win the battles the first time because you need to expand. Note that as you conquer provinces adjacent to your starting fortress, you'll collect more resources there. Try and capture the provinces adjacent to your capital as quickly as possible. That will give you a good income and resource base to go conquer the magic faeries.

Check out your special units available for their characteristics. Jotunheim has a pair of Research-7 units, the Skratti and the Gygia, which are perfect for hiring and putting to work in the magic library, or wherever you learn about cool spells that blow things up. Other races have similar units, although the special units are quite varied between races and it's a good idea to examine your potential recruits thoroughly. You need to

start researching the magic schools, so once you have some units working on this, you have some thinking to do. The Skratti is also a level 2 Blood mage. Make of that what you will.

If you're clicking on all of your units trying to figure out which one of the "The Prophet" is, relax. You don't have one. Yet. When you start the game, you don't even have any priests. You can recruit them, though, and one of the orders you can give a priest is to "Become a prophet" whereupon that's exactly what he will do. His priest level will increase by one, and he'll start radiating dominion just like a temple, except that he can move. If he gets killed, you won't be able to name a new prophet for a while, so don't get him killed.

Scroll through the different schools of magic. Click on the spells that are in your path(s). Do they look useful? Arcane Masonry (Construction level 5 / Earth level 3) is a pretty sweet spell, but if you already have strong fortresses, and aren't in danger of being besieged any time soon, you don't need it right now. Find something else to research. Are you an all-fire mage? Are you currently trying to research Thaumaturgy level 6? If so, in the words of Master Shake, "Why are you doing it?" There are no Fire spells that are made available by Thaumaturgy 6, and the only Fire spell above level 5 in that school (Purgatory, level 7) only works against undead. Do you have urgent mummy problems? If not, go find some other books to read.

Your first battles will be against independent units defending their home provinces, but eventually you'll be up against enemy nations. Dominions II has no diplomacy (it's gods fighting – they're not about to start combining religions) but sometimes the AI will leave you alone if you leave it alone. If it sends you a message that it's declaring war on you, though, feel free to go kick its ass. Find its nearest fortress, build an army, and go besiege it. Taking out a fortress removes a huge recruiting center, and you get to use the enemy fortress for yourself! It's very excellent.

Once you have a reasonable empire, there are more things you'll have to worry about. Primarily, you need to worry about the possibility of enemy armies taking over your provinces. The best way to avoid this is to position your armies so that there are only a couple of entryways into your empire, and those are covered by armies. Once an enemy gets "behind" your forces, things get interesting (and frustrating) because with the simultaneous movement system, you're going to end up guessing where the enemy is going next turn. The best way to deal with this is to minimize the number of provinces he

can move to. Keep a “front line” of armies adjacent to his territories. If you’re attacking him, he’s probably defending and not thinking about attacking your territories. If pressed, concentrate your defense on your fortresses. You can hold out there while you recruit armies elsewhere to come and help.

We haven’t even talked about changing taxation rates to put down unrest, organizing local defense, fighting underwater, patrolling, or many of the other cool things in this game. That’s something you should explore on your own. *Dominions II* has a lot of stuff going on, but much of it only makes sense once you’ve played and experienced it.

I expect to add further installments to this guide. If you have an idea or correction, email dominions2@maladjustite.com and put “*Dominions*” in the subject line.