

Beyond Lancaster and York: Contextualizing Wars of the Roses Board Games in Scholarly
Consensus

by

Nathan Dowell

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Department of History
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Professor David Defries

Abstract

The English Wars of the Roses, fought from roughly 1455 to 1485 between the royal houses of Lancaster and York, have proven surprisingly popular among board game designers. In creating games that seek to demonstrate the infamous chaos of the wars, these games have also begun engaging with each other on a historical level—each new game attempts to build upon the achievements of the first by drawing closer and closer to the current scholarly consensus. Despite this unique feat of forming an academic debate through the medium of board games, however, no designer has yet fully reflected key elements of the scholarly consensus. For this reason, this paper lays out an original design, intended as a contribution to the ongoing discussion of how the wars should best be adapted into tabletop games. This paper describes the ways in which this new design constitutes an important addition to the set of Wars of the Roses board games, through incorporating both newer innovations in game design and recent scholarship. First, the template for this type of board game is traced back to the Avalon Hill title *Kingmaker*. It is then explained how additional games have diverged from *Kingmaker's* model, but have not yet fully matched the current academic consensus regarding the motivations and timeframe of the war. Finally, the original design is explained, highlighting the ways in which this new game selectively breaks from *Kingmaker's* precedent in order to better reflect these elements that scholars find key to explaining the wars.

Introduction

The English Wars of the Roses, spanning from roughly 1455 to 1485, are most easily described as a series of dynastic conflicts between the rival royal houses of Lancaster and York. The wars are certainly best known for their dynastic elements, especially because they concluded with the fall of the infamous King Richard III and the rise of the Tudor dynasty. However, the Wars of the Roses were far more complex than this simple summary hints: as Michael Hicks relates, the period of the wars consisted of “three regional revolts...a host of private feuds, murders, ambushes, skirmishes, and sieges; thirteen full-scale battles; at least ten *coups d'état* and attempted coups; fifteen invasions...” and “five usurpations.”¹ The result of this collection of disasters is a historical event well known for chaos and disorder. What may be surprising is how popular these elements have made the period with designers of board games—and the extent to which these games are connected to scholarly argumentation. One such game, *Blood and Roses*, begins with an astounding disclaimer: “For those who care about these things—and there are many who do—I am a pro-Ricardian.” Richard III, designer Richard H. Berg believes, never “had anything to do with the so-called Princes in the Tower,” and his negative portrayal in Shakespeare’s famous play was based on “Tudor-driven tripe” written by Sir Thomas Moore. Furthermore, the designer is willing to defend this position, telling readers interested in sources “email me, I can give you plenty.”² Though this paragraph is short, it clearly establishes three important points: first, that the designer has a clear position on the historical debate surrounding the moral character of Richard III; second, he believes this position is relevant enough to outline in a board game; finally, Berg is more than willing to engage with others in arguing this

¹ Michael Hicks, “What Were the Wars of the Roses” in *The Wars of the Roses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 3. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npd9g.8.

² Richard H. Berg, *Blood and Roses Rulebook* (Hanford: GMT Games, 2014), 2.

historical position. These three points refer specifically to *Blood and Roses*, but they can also more generally be seen in nearly any Wars of the Roses board game. Games based on this period, as a rule, have adopted historical positions in their attempts to make sense of the notoriously chaotic wars. The earliest (and most notable) of these games was Avalon Hill's *Kingmaker*; subsequent games have attempted to refine and improve upon *Kingmaker*'s historical position while staying true to the chaotic storyline and free-flowing politics that the Avalon Hill game helped make synonymous with the wars. The tendency of these games' designers to directly reference their predecessors, invoke scholars, and offer multiple interpretations of the same key dynamics establishes them as not just creating variations on the same topic, but as participants in a historical debate held through the medium of board gaming. In tracing the relationship between the entrants in this debate, I have also created my own take on a Wars of the Roses board game, using modern innovations in both game design and historical scholarship. Ultimately, my design aims to provide an original contribution to the Wars of the Roses board game debate through adapting the academic consensus on the motivations and timeframe of the wars in ways that other games have not yet accomplished.

Tracking the relationship between Wars of the Roses board game requires at least a basic understanding of the wars themselves. Explaining this conflict in any real detail would require far more elaboration than is possible here, but the conflict's popularity with tabletop gamers can be illustrated through a brief summary of the wars' primary points. First, the roughly thirty-year long war had numerous vivid characters that continue to appeal to modern readers and gamers alike.³ For the Lancastrians: the weak-willed King Henry VI, whose inability to lead in a firm

³ Dan Jones, *The Wars of the Roses: The Fall of the Plantagenets and the Rise of the Tudors* (Westminster: Penguin, 2014), xxxviii.

direction led to the rise of unpopular advisors; his determined wife Margaret, who became the de facto leader of the Lancastrians; Henry Tudor, who ended the Wars on the throne despite his weak claim and only tangential relation to the House of Lancaster. Their opponents were the House of York, whose leader Richard initially sought only the removal of Henry's advisor the Duke of Somerset, but eventually pointed to his own superior claim to the throne. York would never become King, but two of his sons would: Edward IV, who ruled for much of the Wars, and Richard III, subject of lingering controversy over his character and potential association with Edward's missing sons—the infamous Princes in the Tower. Another major element of the Wars was unpredictability: major players died quickly, and not all lords remained on the same side for long. With regard to the former point, nobles were sometimes killed in such rapid succession that multiple holders of the same noble title died within a decade of each other. On the subject of the latter point, the most famous example by far is Warwick the Kingmaker, namesake of the *Kingmaker* board game.⁴ A member of the powerful House of Neville, Warwick and his family were originally the staunchest supporters of the House of York. But after helping place Edward IV on the throne, Warwick fell out with the new king and revolted—initially in favor of Edward's brother George, but eventually as a Lancastrian supporter of Henry VI. Additional appealing elements of the wars to game designers—such as frequent assistance by outside mercenaries, long periods of peace between battles, and several periods where there were two Kings at the same time—only contribute to the overall impression of a historical event where anything could happen, no one stayed loyal for long, and only complete annihilation could stop a defeated family from making a comeback.

⁴ Andrew McNeil, *Kingmaker Rulebook* (Renton: Avalon Hill, 1979), 18.

While researching the interactions between Wars of the Roses board games, I have centered my efforts on six designs: *Kingmaker* (1974), *Sun of York* (2005), *Richard III* (2009), *Wars of the Roses: Lancaster vs. York* (2010), *Crown of Roses* (2012), and *Blood and Roses* (2014). Of these games, all but *Sun of York* and *Blood and Roses* offer a “complete” Wars of the Roses game, in that they attempt to cover political and economic, as well as military, aspects of the conflict. These games feature battles, but primarily focus on large-map maneuvering and long-term strategies. *Blood and Roses* and *Sun of York*, meanwhile, are played as individual battles, with an optional “campaign mode” loosely stringing the battles together in a historical narrative. Other connections between the games can be seen in their relationship to *Kingmaker*: nearly every game maintains some elements popularized by *Kingmaker*, but the rulebooks for two—*Crown of Roses* and *Sun of York*—explicitly identify *Kingmaker* as an inspiration, albeit one they hope to improve upon with more historically accurate designs.⁵ These games most clearly illustrate the dynamic for Wars of the Roses games: it is almost universally acknowledged that *Kingmaker* is a highly successful design based on outdated scholarship. Every subsequent designer, therefore, is faced with the task of providing a better historical experience while contending with the lingering specter of *Kingmaker*’s popularity.

This creates a challenge for anyone wishing to design a new contribution to the Wars of the Roses board game debate. Designs wishing to embrace a full-war approach—as opposed to a battle-oriented approach—must reinterpret the key aspects that *Kingmaker* already featured. The Wars of the Roses were a conflict in which the crown could be passed back and forth between the same two individuals, entire families could be wiped out in a few years, and a full decade

⁵ Stephen A. Cuyler, *Crown of Roses Playbook* (Hanford: GMT Games, 2012), Section 4.0.; Mike Nagel, *Sun of York Rulebook* (Hanford: GMT Games, 2005), 20.

could pass between major battles. The historical framework, meanwhile, is similarly often agreed upon by modern designers. Most rulebooks which include a section on history characterize King Henry VI as a king who gradually lost power to the nobles around him, eventually resulting in a dynastic struggle between Henry's house of Lancaster and the rival House of York. This basic interpretation is rarely disputed. The question is how a board game should reflect this interpretation. Should players control nobles, or Houses? Can the confusion of the Wars be maintained with only two players? How should the designer incorporate nobles who played an essential role in the late conflict, but virtually none in the first ten years of the war? Because *Kingmaker* already offered answers to these problems, subsequent designs have had to defend both their rationale for changing the mechanics and defenses of the mechanics themselves. But despite the vast number of ways that other games break with *Kingmaker*, the majority of them continue to follow its basic approach to motivations and timeframe, constraining how much they can truly offer new answers to these crucial questions. My design seeks to acknowledge this truth by purposefully breaking with *Kingmaker's* game structure, allowing for consideration of these same issues outside of the framework nearly all past Wars of the Roses games were designed from. This can be illustrated through three arguments: first, the modern template for Wars of the Roses board games was set by *Kingmaker*; second, attempts to create a more historically accurate game than *Kingmaker* have not yet fully matched academic consensus; finally, my design breaks with the *Kingmaker* template in order to better reflect the opinions of scholars, while still preserving the key concepts that prior games have popularized.

I. *Kingmaker* as the Wars of the Roses Template Game

The board game *Kingmaker* is crucial to understanding how Wars of the Roses games form a historical debate—the games could not engage with each other if they did not have something to

which they could respond. *Kingmaker*, by providing a base template that attracted much attention but falls short of historical “accuracy,” provides the critical first step in that debate. Originally published in 1974 and later reprinted by Avalon Hill, the game made a series of bold decisions that highlighted both the complexity of designing a game around the Wars and the interest that such a game could hold for players. Upon release, *Kingmaker* immediately attracted attention, and quickly became known as the definitive board game treatment of the wars.⁶ Regardless of how much later games diverged from the standard that *Kingmaker* set—and most of the games diverge significantly—it represented an opening salvo that unveiled the potential for Wars of the Roses games. To understand the precise shape that the resulting historical debate took, it is necessary to first analyze *Kingmaker* as a design and then explore how the later games responded—both through direct acknowledgement and subtler design choices.

Andrew McNeil, designer of *Kingmaker*, was faced with a unique challenge of game design: how to best reflect a historical period where practically any element could change at any time. To truly convey the feel of the Wars, McNeil had to devise a system where nobles could die or change sides often, political influence could be used to elect the King, and coveted titles and land holdings hold real weight for the players. McNeil’s solution resulted in a game design today regarded as a classic. First, he created a system where players are not directly linked to any particular noble or royal family. Instead, two to seven players each control a faction of nobles, randomly drawn throughout the game. These nobles can be assigned titles, offices, and mercenaries to give them both more troops in combat and more weight in Parliament. More importantly, nobles can be maneuvered around the board to capture royal heirs—the members of

⁶ Andrew McNeil, “The Making of Avalon Hill’s *Kingmaker*” in *Games and Puzzles* no. 72 (London: Edu-Games, 1972).

the Houses of Lancaster and York who can actually claim the throne. As the game's rulebook states: "the game is based on the premise that the powerful Noble families used the Lancastrians and Yorkists princes as pawns in a greater game of gaining control of England."⁷ This basic framework allowed further innovations—drawing nobles to join your factions resulted in an easy way to both reflect frequent death and allow combatants to switch sides. If a noble is killed, their card is returned to the deck—it can then be drawn by any player, reflecting the next inheritor of that title either rejoining their predecessor's faction or changing allegiances. In *Kingmaker*, only royals can be permanently killed—once the senior heir of a house dies, their successor becomes the new claimant to the throne. Parliament is also a key part of the game, allowing players to both vote on the next King and assign their allies important titles and offices.⁸

There were, of course, certain limitations that McNeil had to accept when creating *Kingmaker*. These limitations largely consist of historical characters which had to be combined or omitted for the sake of gameplay. Perhaps most notably, Henry Tudor is not specifically featured in the game. Instead, the noble card representing the House of Beaufort is treated as a possible King "if all Lancastrian royal heirs have been killed."⁹ This card represents both Henry Tudor—whose royal claim came from his mother, a Beaufort—and the Dukes of Somerset, the major Beaufort nobles who theoretically could have claimed the crown despite coming from an illegitimate line. Similar combinations can be seen in families which held multiple titles, such as the Nevilles. Due to *Kingmaker's* card design, each family can only have one title—so the Nevilles are treated solely as the Earls of Warwick, despite the family also including an Earl of Salisbury, a Marquess of Montagu, and (briefly) an Earl of Northumbria. Even more radically,

⁷Andrew McNeil, *Kingmaker Rulebook*, 1

⁸ McNeil, *Kingmaker Rulebook*, 4

⁹ Ibid.

feuding members of the same family were folded into their more famous branch, meaning that Nevilles like the Earl of Westmoreland who sided against their own family effectively have no presence in *Kingmaker*. Finally, minor families that rose to prominence partway through the war through unusual means are not represented. This would likely draw little scrutiny, if not for the matter of the Woodvilles—the minor family that Edward IV’s Queen came from. Edward’s favoritism of the Woodvilles is believed to have driven a wedge between him and several of his key allies, such as the Nevilles and even, later, his own brother Richard.¹⁰ Due to the game’s mechanics, omitting the Woodvilles does not mean that a major betrayal such as that of Warwick can’t occur—just that the given reasons for that betrayal are presented very differently.

Kingmaker’s influence—both in its successes and the areas where it had to cut certain historical characters—is clearly identified in the rulebooks of both *Sun of York* and *Crown of Roses*, but is also easy to see in the design of other games. *Sun of York*, as a battle simulation game, borrows from *Kingmaker* far less overtly than many other Wars of the Roses designs. But the game’s designer notes specifically refer to *Kingmaker* as a major inspiration—not for *Sun of York*, but for a larger-scale Wars of the Roses game the creator is designing.¹¹ *Sun of York* itself, meanwhile, places minimal importance on the types of mechanics that define *Kingmaker*, asserting that “what happened between these battles is not as important as the battles themselves.”¹² Nevertheless, even this battle game carries on key traits from its predecessor—most obviously the potential for nobles to change sides in certain situations. This potential is a defining feature of Wars of the Roses games. *Richard III*, for example, features a “treachery roll” where nobles can defect in the middle of a battle, a feature not seen in *Kingmaker*.¹³ Other games

¹⁰ Jones, *The Wars of the Roses*, xxxviii.

¹¹ Nagel, *Sun of York*, 20.

¹² Nagel, *Sun of York*, 20

¹³ Tom Dalgliesh and Jerry Taylor, *Richard III Rulebook* (Blaine: Columbia Games, 2009), 11

such as *Lancaster vs. York* allow players to “bribe” the nobles of their opponents, requiring attention to be put into ensuring that one’s nobles remain loyal. The specific loyalty system of *Kingmaker*—recycling deceased nobles back into the draw pile—is rarely seen in later games, but the underlying treatment of nobles is consistently adapted. Nearly every Wars of the Roses board game features nobles as the primary units of the game, attaches specific estates and titles to those nobles, and allows the nobles to return if killed as a representation of the title passing to a new heir. This system of nobility is a crucial element of *Kingmaker* that has become a hallmark of any game trying to represent the chaotic faction-shifting of the Wars of the Roses.

Kingmaker’s influence is most clearly reflected, however, in *Crown of Roses*. In fact, *Crown of Roses* was created out of an attempt to “rebuild” *Kingmaker*.¹⁴ But designer Stephen A. Cuyler eventually settled on an entirely different interpretation of the Wars, seeking to illustrate the same themes as *Kingmaker* through new mechanics. The resulting game retains nobles as the base unit of play, but reinterprets the Wars themselves as a contest between royal houses, abandoning the earlier game’s premise of nobles manipulating these heirs. In other ways, *Crown of Roses* similarly departs from its predecessor while maintaining the basic framework. Parliament still plays an important role, for instance, but is intentionally “faster and simpler,” combining influencing nobles—as a play on the betrayal concept—with bidding on special offices.¹⁵ *Crown of Roses* also adapts concepts that were left out of *Kingmaker*—such as minor nobility. Families that cannot sustain a regular block are given special action cards, symbolizing the participants that “were sometimes there and sometimes weren’t.”¹⁶ Similarly, the *Kingmaker* concept of nobles representing entire families is adopted to allow some royal heirs to begin the

¹⁴ Stephen A. Cuyler, *Crown of Roses Playbook* 4.0

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

game as nobles—Henry Tudor, for instance, was not old enough to participate in the early wars, but his block is available early on to represent his noble, but not royal, father Edmund. In general, *Crown of Roses* was created as a deliberate rebuttal to and improvement over *Kingmaker*, preserving the chaotic complexity that made the Avalon Hill game popular, but embracing specific elements of the Wars that wouldn't be possible to recreate in *Kingmaker*.

Kingmaker became the template for Wars of the Roses board games by including mechanics that highlighted the most popular aspects of the Wars. Later games, whether they specifically referenced *Kingmaker* or not, carried on these same types of mechanics even as they moved further and further away from the specifics of *Kingmaker's* design. But because *Kingmaker* is the template for this set of games, it is also the initial argument to which the later games responded. The Avalon Hill design spotlighted the chaos of the war at the expense of specific crucial interactions—other designs sought to build upon it while also laying a more historical framework. This relationship ensures that *Kingmaker* is the pivotal game in the series of Wars of the Roses designs, setting a framework in which all other games can easily be fit.

II. Later Wars of the Roses Designs and the Academic Consensus

Kingmaker's influence has not blinded later game designers to its historical flaws. Perhaps the most charitable explanation for the template game's shortcomings come from the designer notes for *Crown of Roses*, which report that the “historical faux pas” of *Kingmaker* “represented the prevailing views in academia at the time the game was created.”¹⁷ The similar notes for *Sun of York* are more direct: the designer studied the basis for *Kingmaker* “up to the point of determining that it is incorrect in virtually all of its assumptions.”¹⁸ Games built on the

¹⁷ Cuyler, *Crown of Roses Playbook* 4.0

¹⁸ Nagel, *Sun of York Rulebook*, 20

Kingmaker template, then, seek to save the elements that made the game a hit while providing new mechanics to create a more realistic experience. These games, on the whole, are successful at adding increased accuracy: many of the key elements of the Wars are treated with far more attention and nuance in these successor games than their template. Similarly, from a gameplay perspectives, the designers of these games managed to reference the inspiration of *Kingmaker* without merely copying its mechanics. As participants in a historical debate, Wars of the Roses board games engage with each other in thoughtful ways as both games and interpretations of history. In terms of the academic consensus, however, there are aspects of the wars that no game has yet fully adapted. Due in part to continued adherence to the basic principles of *Kingmaker*—though not its exact mechanics—these games fall short primarily when it comes to the motivations and timeframe of the Wars of the Roses.

To understand the ways in which motivations are presented by Wars of the Roses board games, it is first necessary to discuss how these games portray factions. Numerous games have sought to expand upon the basic template established by *Kingmaker*, primarily by altering the player factions—the feuding groups represented by each player, who they seek to win the game as. In *Kingmaker*, players control political factions untethered to any particular royal or noble house. Affiliation changes frequently, and players are encouraged to risk some supporters or heirs in favor of more powerful assets. The uniqueness of this design—a Wars of the Roses game where players are not directly competing as the Houses of Lancaster and York—has been abandoned by practically all successors. Every game has taken a different approach in trying to replace this system, however. *Richard III*, like the battle-focused games, is a two-player game and thus can easily have one player control Lancaster and the other control York.¹⁹ *Lancaster vs.*

¹⁹ Dalgliesh, *Richard III Rulebook*, 3.

York also used these two factions, but is intended for four players: each faction is represented by two players, even though only the player who scores the most points can ultimately win the game.²⁰ *Crown of Roses* wished to have every player control a different faction, so it promoted the noble houses of Neville and Stafford to be controlled by the third and fourth players.²¹ Each of these solutions recognizes the autonomy of royal heirs far more than *Kingmaker*, but none fully accounts for the academic perception of the wars.

This perception is best explained through an understanding of the motivating factors driving the participating nobles. John Watts characterizes recent Wars of the Roses Scholarship as evolving from two movements: one that began in the middle of the twentieth century, and one that began a few decades ago. The first, Watts relates, broke with the dominant theory of “bastard feudalism”—unchecked systems of patronage resulting in widespread chaos—by bringing about several elements of academic consensus: “to take the wars seriously,” to think about the scope of the wars, and to attempt to provide an explanation.²² The final element, according to Watts, was complicated by the multiple outbreaks of the wars, requiring not only a reason for their initial cause, but also for their repeated occurrence and eventual resolution. The more telling movement, however, is attributed by Watts to Christine Carpenter. This movement began inquiring not only into the scope of the Wars, but their ideologies—how were the actions of the various factions influenced by their personal beliefs? It’s long been understood that Henry VI was a weak king, but Carpenter laid a framework in which the nobility’s reactions to this weakness were driven by far more than just personal ambition or obligations to patrons. “Justice,

²⁰ Peter Hawes, *Wars of the Roses: Lancaster vs. York Rulebook* (Mahopac: Z-Man Games, 2010), 3.

²¹ Cuyler, *Crown of Roses Playbook*, 4.0

²² John Watts, “Polychronicon: Uncivil Wars? Interpreting the Wars of the Roses” in *Teaching History* no 148 (London: Historical Association, 2012), 28

the keeping of order, the defense of the realm, the taxation and representation of the people,” Watts notes, were all key concerns for every major player, from Queen Margaret to the Duke of York.²³ Ultimately, the heart of the Wars of the Roses has been found to lie with the question of kingship—where should the balance be found between a kingdom’s obligation to respect kingship and a king’s obligation to rule well?

This question creates a paradigm for the wars where participating nobles were not merely seeking power for the sake of it. Dan Jones presents the wars not as a case of “bastard feudalism” or even of over powerful nobles, but instead as a story of “a polity battered on every side by catastrophe and hobbled by inept leadership.”²⁴ The issue was not merely an abundance of ambition, but an absence of stability. The vast majority of nobles who attempted to seize power during the Wars, Jones argues, did so because they believed that they could restore this stability. Scholars continue to argue over whether the Duke of York could have been a better king than Henry because this debate was the very center of why they feuded. Such an explanation also accounts for the Duke of York’s change in actions—under the traditional interpretation, the Duke’s initial motivation of seeking to remove Henry’s advisors is typically dismissed as a front for his true royal ambitions. Jones’ explanation, meanwhile, holds that the Wars of the Roses were a “disaster” that befell England “despite the efforts of its most powerful subjects.” Here, York’s increasingly ambitious actions represent not a hidden overarching plan, but instead proportionally drastic steps to match a drastic situation. York sought to do what he thought would stabilize his realm—his opponents did the same, only in pursuit of their own paths to stability. The results, perhaps, are the same either way—violence that ended in the death of

²³ Watts, “Uncivil Wars?” 49

²⁴ Jones, *Wars of the Roses*, xxxviii

nearly all involved—but when the incentive for this violence changes, so too do the historical structures that a board game must represent.

The issue is that no modern Wars of the Roses game has adequately conveyed this consensus. Designers are not unaware of the role of kingship; in fact, it is incorporated into nearly every design. As the rulebook for *Sun of York* explains, “it can be argued that King Henry VI was the reason for the Wars of the Roses.”²⁵ The King was crowned “far too young, prone to piety and fancy, and misled by his advisors”²⁶ But these problems with Henry are not represented as such—instead, the game features a dice roll between battles to determine Henry’s survival and mental health. *Crown of Roses*, meanwhile, forces the block representing Henry VI to always be accompanied by a noble, because “giving him the powerful noble army size and ability to function normally made little sense.”²⁷ In these ways, both games account for Henry’s inability to lead—but they do not account for the view of most historians that this weakness drove the events of the wars. The goal of the player controlling Henry is to end the game as King, through winning a political, economic, or military victory. The players controlling other Houses have the same goal—situating the conflict fundamentally as a struggle for control. Even as Wars of the Roses games recognize that historians no longer view the Wars as merely a desperate battle for power, they fail to completely incorporate academic explanations of the key motivating factors. Players may be encouraged to win by accumulating economic points, but they are not encouraged to save England’s economy. Regardless of how the designer notes depict the crises facing the government, players are expected to seek power for their faction—carrying

²⁵ Nagel, *Sun of York* 9.3.2

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Cuyler, *Crown of Roses*, 4.0

on the same fundamental themes as *Kingmaker* despite efforts to adopt more academically sound designs.

The other, lesser, major historical issue facing Wars of the Roses board games centers around timing. This issue is based less on new academic information—as the sporadic nature of the wars have long been known—and more around the increased willingness of scholars to extend their treatment of the conflict beyond its traditional start and end dates. Anthony Goodman, for instances, depicts the Wars as a “series of “upheavals,” because portraying them as a single political conflict would fail to convey their entire scope.²⁸ The Wars of the Roses often moved quickly, but they also settled into the background for long periods of time. After violence first broke out at the 1st Battle of St. Albans in 1455, it would be four years before relations between Margaret and York deteriorated enough to warrant another battle. 1459, 1460, and 1461 were all busy years for the Wars, but by 1462 Edward IV was firmly King of England, and ruled securely until 1470. He would rule for an additional twelve years after the death of Henry VI and the Prince of Wales in 1471. Only after Edward’s own death—and his brother Richard’s rise to power—did another “Lancastrian” claimant arise in the form of the loosely-related Henry Tudor. Tudor defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 to become King Henry VII, but not all historians consider his victory the end of the Wars. To Jones, the way the Tudors rose to power practically ensured the wave of uprisings and imposters that Henry faced: “only from the slaughter and chaos of the fifteenth century could such a family have emerged triumphant, and only by continuing the slaughter could they secure their position.”²⁹ Taken as a whole, then, the Wars of the Roses span from 1455 to 1485—but the factors

²⁸ Anthony Goodman, “Preface” in *The Wars of the Roses: Military Activity and English Society 1452-97* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Book originally published 1981.

²⁹ Jones, xxxix

underlying the Wars span from roughly 1450, when Henry VI's problems with his advisors first became apparent, to the early sixteenth century when Henry VII finally executed or imprisoned the final Yorkist claimants to the throne. If the Wars are seen as a conflict for stability, then that stability was not truly achieved until long after the final battle was fought.

Most board games have no way to portray this large span of time. *Kingmaker* chose the most obvious route of reconciling this issue, by allowing the game to be relatively timeless—turns do not perfectly equate to years, while players have access to enough royals and nobles to simulate the feeling of playing through the entire Wars. It is not a perfect solution, relying on vagueness to cover for timeframe issues, but it did set the stage for the timeframe of future games: an ideal Wars of the Roses board game, it seems, must allow players to begin by controlling Henry VI and the Duke of York but end by letting them fight through Richard III and Henry VII. Most games would not proceed in this way, but it is the possibility of these events occurring relatively accurately that other games have sought to emulate. These games often solidify the relationship between turns and years, and even add elements to allow for more accuracy—*Crown of Roses*, for example, comes with several scenarios, some starting later than others and often allowing certain nobles to play partway through the game.³⁰ Battle simulation games have an even easier path to historical accuracy, as they merely have to present battles as conflicts between Lancaster or York, with no need to represent the complex changes those two factions underwent. None of these approaches, however, fully conveys the breadth of the Wars of the Roses as portrayed by historians, nor the lingering challenges faced by the victor—there

³⁰ Cuyler, *Crown of Roses Playbook*, 2.0

has not yet been a true solution reconciling the need for playability with the astonishing scope of the wars.

Wars of the Roses board games have accomplished a remarkable feat in carrying on a historical debate in the form of tabletop gaming. Each game design provides a slightly different outlook on how scholarly views of the Wars can be portrayed in the form of a game. There remain areas, however, where games have not reflected the opinion of historians, with the motivation and timeframe for the Wars being the two biggest examples of this. Continuing to reflect *Kingmaker's* take on these elements ensures that certain disparities remain between Wars of the Roses games and Wars of the Roses scholarship, even as great connections have been formed in other areas.

III. Crafting a Wars of the Roses Board Game within the Historical Consensus

This analysis of the relationship between Wars of the Roses board games—and between those games and the scholarly understanding of the wars—reveals that there is room for a design which can successfully adapt the motivation and timeframe that other games are lacking. In creating such a design, however, I have had to abandon some of the fundamental frameworks set by *Kingmaker*. I have also had to call upon more recent innovations in board game design, approaching the process of game creation in a way that would not have been available to previous designers. Most importantly, this means that the wars in my version are experienced differently—as a series of games, rather than in a single extended session that attempts to cover the entire period at once. This initial decision creates an effect that impacts every element of the game, and also allows me to focus on the historical structures that scholars argue were the most important to the Wars. To best convey the decisions that define my own take on a Wars of the Roses game, I will discuss the design in stages: first, my approach to the timeframe issue;

second, my solution to the problem of motivation, and finally my takes on the lingering themes of betrayal and death necessary in any game of this type.

Timeframe is the first element that must be dealt with, because it is the one element that previous games have innovated with the least. Nearly every Wars of the Roses game has attempted to represent the entire period at once, with the exception of battle simulations and games with later-starting scenarios, such as *Crown of Roses*. But modern board games are not always single-setting experiences—especially with the rise of Legacy Games. Legacy Games are campaign-based board games which unfold over the course of multiple gaming sessions.³¹ Typical board games can be replayed any number of times, and are essentially the same every time. Legacy and campaign games, however, deliberately build a single story out of numerous sessions, with each game directly influencing the outcome of the next. This type of game typically uses sealed compartments, stickers, and game-end bonuses to change the ruleset every time a game is played. Applying this system to a Wars of the Roses game offers the immediate benefit that the entire scope of the Wars does not have to be conveyed at once. My design, thus, opens in 1450, with players controlling various factions surrounding Henry VI. As the games progress, elements will be added that alter the objective of players. The player controlling the Duke of York, for instance, would be aware that they have a claim to the throne from the beginning, but they would have the ability to reveal that claim at the right time—potentially in the first game potentially a few games later. This same system offers numerous benefits in terms of historical accuracy. In a legacy campaign, minor families such as the Woodvilles can arise naturally between games, initially young heirs like Henry Tudor can emerge once they are old

³¹ Dized, “The rise of legacy and campaign board games, and what it means for the hobby” *Medium* (Medium, 2018). <https://medium.com/@getDized/the-rise-of-legacy-and-campaign-board-games-and-what-it-means-for-the-hobby-aec851dc3085>

enough, and newly crowned Kings like Edward IV have the potential to expand their power over a long period of time, without the quick turnaround that is practically mandated in a game like *Kingmaker*. Legacy campaigns do require some sort of shape, to guide the players: my design divides games based on stability levels, allowing for several years to pass between games if a King ends the game with a stable nation and only a few months to pass otherwise. Even the characters that players control can change, with new playable characters entering the conflict as old ones die or enter exile. This creates a fluid, variably-paced game that reflects the sporadic but violent nature of the Wars themselves, and highlights the chaotic feeling that is central to any adaption of the Wars of the Roses.

The adoption of Legacy mechanics, however, does not remove the need for good mechanics within a game—the ability to carry over game abilities from one game to the next means little if the individual games are not well-defined and exciting in themselves. This means that my design needs solid core mechanics, a requirement that I have tied into the question of motivation. As has been noted, scholars generally believe that the Wars were an attempt by various factions to stall the impact of numerous crises on a weak government. Previous games have overlooked this motivation in favor of setting the factions against each other immediately. Instead, I have opted for an approach that encourages the players to feel the same pressures as the characters they are controlling. England in this game is suffering a wave of problems, beginning with an economic crisis compounded by the rapid collapse of English holdings in France. As the games progress, additional problems or opportunities will arise based on how stable the government of England remains. For this reason, all players are encouraged to take any actions they can to maintain stability—even if these actions put them into conflict with other players. By placing this responsibility on players, I reflect the motivation that scholars support,

turning the game from a rush for power to a desperate battle for stable government. Mechanics introduced in later games as part of the Legacy campaign will introduce elements that encourage players to reveal their claims to the throne, as well as additional dynastic resources that complicate the question of which ruler each player should support.

My key to successfully balancing this onslaught of crises is the core mechanic of the game—Royal actions. As in many games, each player will have actions they can perform every turn. Moving to various castles and land holdings, raising troops, and conducting diplomacy on non-player controlled nobles are all actions that any player can take. But the King can take royal actions—powerful actions that impact the entire realm. Raising large armies, permitting invasions of foreign kingdoms, and issuing acts of resumption to regain royal land are examples of this type of action, which can be taken four times per turn. The problem—and the driving force of the early games—is that the player who begins as King is playing as Henry VI. Henry’s weakness and reliance on advisors is reflected in the fact that he can only take one of his four royal actions—if the other actions are to be taken, they must be given by the King to other players. This creates an atmosphere where all players are theoretically working to preserve the stability of the realm, but the King’s decisions on who to trust and who to empower will be open to question by all. Giving power to the wrong player—and the wrong character—could result in alliances that can compound into full rebellion in later games. But if enough royal actions are not taken per turn, automatic events such as rebellions and the fall of English holdings in France will decrease stability and harm all players. Thus, Henry needs to allow players to take actions, but the decisions Henry and those he empowers make will directly affect how others view their ruling capability. Henry’s reliance on advisors further compounds this problem—if he is replaced as King, the new King can take all four royal actions, but that can only happen if a

dynastic war begins. If there are multiple Kings—even if one is in exile—there will similarly be multiple, potentially conflicting royal actions issued per turn. Pushing players into this position reflects the chaos of the wars in a way that previous games have not captured, centering the problems facing the Kingdom around the very realistic motivation of nobles trying to maintain stability—the biggest question is what steps players will take to achieve that goal.

With these two central design decisions addressed, there remain a variety of smaller issues that my design hopes to improve upon from previous games. Most importantly, my game needs to allow for the rapid series of betrayal and replacement of nobles that has become the hallmark of this set of games. First, important characters need to be capable of being permanently killed. Previous games have accomplished this feat with “generic” noble cards or blocks that represent entire families. My game similarly uses base stats that apply to all characters in a family, but the characters will also be uniquely distinguished from each other. During the Wars of the Roses, family members regularly betrayed each other, fought each other, and negotiated with each other for stronger positions. Lumping all related nobles into one game component removes this element of the wars. Splitting them into individuals also allows for a more accurate sense of death—players will be able to track exactly who takes over from the last holder of a title. This also means that families have a finite amount of members—losing an entire noble family, as during the wars, is entirely possible in my design. Even player characters will not be immune from this—one key starting character, the Duke of Suffolk, was historically killed the year the first game is set. The very real possibility that characters can die opens the potential for new characters to take important positions, while also adding urgency to the repercussions of player actions. This establishes an atmosphere of fearing not only the loss of allies, but even a

player's own faction—the threat of a full reset in the next game underlies every decision made, crafting a game that can change even more than traditional games about the wars,

Betrayals will need to be handled slightly differently, to reduce the random nature of changing allegiances in many Wars of the Roses games. Betrayals were in fact an important part of the wars, but they were also driven by specific motivations—Warwick was influenced by a variety of reasons, from Edward's disregard of Warwick's attempt to negotiate a royal marriage to the resulting rise of the Woodville family. In my game, betrayals can occur in one of three ways. First, characters controlled by players can of course change allegiances at any point. Allies, however—characters not controlled by players—will have two separate ways of betraying the player they work with. The first depends on power and rewards. One element I plan to restore from *Kingmaker* is that titles and estates can be freely given to any noble. Certain allies, however, will expect certain levels of reward. A family such as the Nevilles will likely expect more support than a more minor House. If you fail to allocate these awards, other players can attempt diplomacy actions that can sway nobles to their side—perhaps similar to the old idea of “bastard feudalism,” but also representative of an era when even minor nobles could gain concerns about their leader. This creates a resource element to the game, where players have to keep an eye on their own ally cards, to ensure that other players don't attempt to offer better rewards. The final way that betrayal can occur hinges on the fact that special allies will have a special icon on them. The meanings of these icons will be in a sealed booklet not open at the beginning of the game. As the game progresses, players will read more pages of the booklet, revealing the meaning of different icons. Some icons may represent loyalty—meaning the ally will return to their original player—while others may represent a requirement for additional rewards or even an aversion to serving on the same side as other allies. This allows the game to

include not only betrayal, but also other individual traits such as personal feuds, goals, and connections. The more powerful a player gets, the more care they need to put into managing their faction—just as with the Wars of the Roses, I intend for the illusion of stability to sometimes be just as chaotic as open war.

The intricacies required to fully adapt the Wars of the Roses into a board game cannot be entirely explained here. These key mechanics of timeframe, motivation, death, and betrayal, however, provide a basic understanding of how my design seeks to build upon what other related board games have already achieved. The Legacy mechanic provides a new standard for historical board games, allowing the story to evolve with the same types of twists and changes in direction that defined the actual wars. My other choices similarly aim to capitalize on the work of historians by encouraging players to view the wars in a new way, grappling with complex decisions and implications that could topple the government just as easy as they could stabilize it—carrying on the atmosphere that originated with *Kingmaker* using the latest innovations in both game design and historical analysis.

Conclusion

The Wars of the Roses are not an event that is easy to describe or translate to other mediums. But board games have seized upon this complexity, even closely connecting game designs to historical interpretations in a debate held through the medium of tabletop gaming. In designing my own addition to this debate, I have analyzed first the current state of Wars of the Roses games—based on the template game of *Kingmaker*—and then the elements of academic consensus that have not yet been included in a game. My design highlights these elements, breaking with *Kingmaker* by adopting the recently popularized Legacy Mechanics and placing aligning player goals more closely with the motivations of the nobles they are representing.

These decisions seek to preserve the aspects of Wars of the Roses games that have made the era popular, but also to push the boundaries of how well a board game can represent scholarship. My game targets the subtler, more complex elements of scholarly consensus over the Wars to illustrate the potential of board gaming as an intellectual medium, as well as to advance conversation over what Wars of the Roses game designs can achieve even outside of the template set by *Kingmaker*.

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