

25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 27 Apr 2023 20:38

Greetings, Warlords

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

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

My goals:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Farewell, Warlords. Until we meet again.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 11 Jul 2023 13:01

What I was wondering was if +1 Fortify would be an improvement over +3 Morale for the Silver Dragons. But I'll leave them as is for now.

Anomander has suggested a blanket increase for dragons' gold costs. I'm not opposed to that in principle. But the dragons I consider most undercosted are some of the Stormheim ones.

But to move on to T4 units, I want to talk about the Ally3 tier. I.e. units that cost more than 1000 gold, yet aren't dragons. The official patch which remodeled the army list unit costs changed a bunch of units, but left others in place, often with little rhyme or reason that I can see.

I think the best place to start is the Undead Beasts. In ROH, these were the only units other than dragons in T5. I've made some further changes since the first draft - hp to 4, move to 22, cost to 1300. I think Undead Beasts should be at the highest end of this tier.

Comparing them to the other vanilla Chaos 4 unit, Slayer Knights, I think these should be cheapened to 1000 or less. Str 8 is a big advantage over 7, and they're also slow. When you add heroes with items and spells, the difference between a 3 and 4 negative stack bonus is far less impactful than between 2 and 3. So I have a hard time deciding on which side of the equation Fire Demons should fall. Of all the vanilla Chaos units, these seem to be the most min/maxed ones, with original stats.

I've slowed down Fire Elementals a lot and buffed their Chaos to 3 too. I quite deliberately want them to be a faster, weaker, flying alternative to Fire Demons, but the question is what a good price difference between these two units should be, with my changes. I think either both of them should be eligible for Ally2, or neither.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by KGB - 11 Jul 2023 15:40

Since you mentioned the Undead Beast, lets focus on Chaos for the moment (Note, you should update your google doc's with your Undead beast numbers and anything else you've changed since I reference it often).

Here are the +3 or better Chaos units:

Red - 9/3 +5, 5 turns, 1500

Undead Beast - 8/4 +4, 4 turns, 1300

Slayer Knight - 7/3 +4, 4 turns, 1100

Fire Demon - 8/3 +3, 4 turns 1100

Fire Elemental - 7/2, +3, 4 turns 1100

(Emerald) - 9/3 +4, 5 turns 1200

The Red is the only option if you want +5. More importantly, now that you reduced cost to 1500, it makes Undead Beast even with changed stats look bad because it's only 200 more for flight and +1 more Chaos. So the Red might better off back at 1600 (or even 1650-1700) since it's the only way to get to +5 Chaos and a higher cost makes the Undead Beast at 1300 with 4 hits and 22 move look much better.

Slayer Knight should probably go to 1000 so it's the cheapest +4 Chaos unit and quite a bit cheaper than the Undead Beast.

Fire Demons won't ever get used in someone's set, especially not in Ally 2/3. But that's OK because they come from the Summoner spells and that's their role. But realistically given the reduction of the Slayer Knight these units need to be in the 900 range since they top out at +3.

The Fire Elemental now looks usable with +3 Chaos combined with flight. You can easily have this as your only Chaos unit if you have a Barbarian who can get to +5 or one of the heroes who have a Chaos spell. In fact if you lowered the cost to 1000 this unit would look even better for someone who wanted to avoid spending for a Red (or Emerald)

The Emerald dragon should go to 8/3 (like the Brass) and if the Red goes to 1700 this dragon should go to 1300. Otherwise just reduce the Strength to 8/3 and leave as is if the Red stays at 1600 (or 1500).

KGB

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 11 Jul 2023 22:43

I haven't adjusted the stats yet, but with a buffed Undead Beast as a viable Red Dragon substitute, it seems fair to move Slayer Knights, Demons, etc down to 1000 gold. I agree that Red Dragons need to be more expensive again. I do think Green and Red Dragons should have the same cost, as various heroes will have affordable access to either Morale or Leadership.

Fire Demons always seemed like a strong unit for their tier to me. I'm surprised they didn't see much use outside of summoning. Or maybe it is because their stats are good enough for the front line, so you don't need to rearrange them like Archons?

I'm starting to believe I need to address SH units at the same time as I rebalance vanilla tiers, not at some point in the future. I've written earlier that I see Emerald and Brass Dragons as providing 95% of the utility of the bigger dragons, at only 80% of the cost. So their price needs to go up, at the very least equal to the Undead Beast. Str 8 for them is an interesting semi-cosmetic nerf; I have considered reducing their movement to 24 to give the full dragons a slight edge in comparison.

If Fire Elementals are viable competitively but Demons aren't quite, it's hard to justify them having the same cost. Maybe the Elementals need to stay at 1100 then, while Demons get the same tier as Slayer Knights.

I started including SH units in the spreadsheet, and I think I have a write-up of Trolloc's edits to them somewhere in the files I got from you. I may include those as separate rows, or maybe comment on his changes in the notes column.

I haven't taken a closer look yet, but one thing that jumped out is how many units have 5 or 6 view - I've capped view at 4 for scouting units in my mod, so the same would need to apply to the SH units. That said, there's nothing wrong with having a dozen different T1 & T2 scouting units to choose from, all with their own strengths and weaknesses.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 11 Jul 2023 23:15

A couple more thoughts on 'experimental' abilities that could be put on SH units. I don't know if there's a full list of which hero abilities can also be used by units. These are just what I could think of, I may have missed some.

Group Warding: If any unit has Group Warding 2, it should be a dragon. I think this would be an interesting alternative for the Royal Dragon.

Group Acid & Lightning: Since I presume they would stack with spells, I can't see going higher than 1. Acid is a fit for Cthulhu, aka the Leviathan, while the Warlocks are the obvious choice for Lightning.

Necromancy only works on the attack, but I see this more as a gimmick for non-hero stacks than can mop up weak cities. I'd change the Undead Horde into a T3 unit with Necromancy 2, now that Wights are buffed a bit.

Life Drain I think is too strong to be put on units. At best, it would have to be on a dragon, but none of the SH ones fit thematically.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Anomander Rake - 12 Jul 2023 09:36

I've capped view at 4 for scouting units in my mod

I'm not convinced. The diversity of views ability allows you to choose scouts from a wider range of units.

Some are stronger, others recognize more. It works fine.

Unit balancing.

I don't think it's possible to restore the usability of units slower than 20 movement points. They would have to be very cheap and faster to produce. Even then it will be unlikely.

In army set we need to have a set of units for the lord, some cheap crews and possibly a reconnaissance. There is simply not enough room for strong and slow units.

For example if I was going to use some cheap chaos replacement I would use Ice Demon. Good against armies without lords and lords not developing leadership and he has 22 mov. 2 more than Fire Demon it was important.

Dragons

Generally only their increase in price (purchase price and set up price) may be able to replace them. We sometimes use Drider (4 chaos) from some army set. Unit has 8/2/20 and units like this can be useful. However, its biggest disadvantage is still mobility.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Hannibal Rex - 13 Jul 2023 15:07

I've written earlier about my thoughts on View - View is capped at 7, and you still need to have room for Watchtowers and View/Grp View spells to have an impact.

I don't see unit movement as harshly as you. It's a good data point to keep in mind that faster units may need to be more expensive, so you can't afford to create an army list exclusively of fast units, unless you're willing to accept that these units will be weaker in combat and have less strong stack bonuses. Still interesting to see how you assess Ice>Fire Demons.

I have now completed the write-up of all SH units in the spreadsheet. I've also made separate rows for Trolloc's modifications to them. If I understand it correctly, his changes never caught on, and I don't think his modification still exists as a download anywhere. But it's interesting to see what a competitive player considered to be the balance concerns with the SH units, back then.

I wonder which tool he used to give units a slayer +3 ability. Molotov's editor doesn't seem to be able to do it. But this isn't something I would want to repeat, anyway. He also included a lot of poorly fitting subtypes to high tier units, to make the slayer ability more useful.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Anomander Rake - 14 Jul 2023 08:07

Ice Demon is cheaper than Fire Demon, it is also slightly faster and produces faster. Chaos +2 can be enough and where it is weak +3 is also weak. For me, the speed and ease of placement in the AS were decisive.

Anyway I rarely used Ice Demon but I've never used Fire Demon.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by KGB - 14 Jul 2023 17:19

The reason so many Stormheim units got huge view was to make them useful options when selecting units.

Players in online MP games needed ways to remove as much of the fog of war on the map as possible because with turns only lasting 3-4 minutes you don't have a lot of time to move every scout and look for enemy units. So the idea was with huge view radius you could station 1 unit 6 squares from another unit and so on so you could see the enemy units coming without needing to move every scout.

You can make non-dragon units more valuable by reducing all the dragon view ranges to 3 which is what the Undead Dragon has. This would make units with view of 4-6 much more useful and valuable.

I took a first glance at your Stormheim units and with the changes in price to the Emerald/Brass they are essentially useless. With the cost THAT close to the Red/Green there is no reason to take them unless you are desperate. That final +1 (to +5) is worth WAY more than just 200 gold cost. They weren't badly costed at 1200 and would be fine at 1250-1300 if you reduced strength to 8/3 along with the movement reduction you already made.

I disagree with Anomander about making slower units useful. In games that aren't 1 army starts like his, lots of other units can be used and will be used. Units with 16 moves are fine *if* they have a dedicated purpose on defense (assassination, archery, PPDC etc). That's why faster units should have lesser values in those skills (+1 archery vs +3/+4 archery for slower units) to make the slower units viable.

KGB

P.S. There are still plenty of units both flying and non-flying that are moving 20+. You may want to lower a lot of those to 20 unless they are very specialized in movement in order to help balance things. For example units like Pegasi/Pegacentaur moving 24 could easily go down to 20 and still have value. It would also be a good idea to go over all the cavalry type units (basically anything with riders on them) and make them more consistent move wise, maybe the heaviest armored like Knights at 18, Hv Cavalry types at 20 and lights at 22 and then Elven get an extra +2 because they are elves type thing.

=====

Re: 25th Anniversary Project

Posted by Anomander Rake - 14 Jul 2023 19:04

In games that aren't 1 army starts like his, lots of other units can be used and will be used.

I disagree. Even if slow units could be useful, they have no place in the Army Set. Also it's always a matter of the unit being needed in the lord's army. If you put a slow one there, the lord will be slow to complete quests for example. Starting method is irrelevant here.

Recently I tried to use again Warlocks (18 mov.pnts). Great 2 turn unit with 4 lightning but too slow. As I wrote earlier, armies without a lord are of secondary importance. However, when Warlocks add to the lord's army, this is slowed down. I sadly threw them away.

=====