

## Battle tactics in 7 Ages

*By Greg Pinder*

While no doubt you are a pacifist at heart, if you play 7 Ages, you will eventually be forced to fight a battle or your empires will never realise their full potential and possibly won't survive at all. How do you win them?

*Some of the issues*

That isn't an easy question to answer. Here's one seemingly simple case to illustrate why not. Suppose you advance 6 units into a forest your opponent is defending with a single spear. The forces are:

<b>You</b>	<b>Your opponent</b>
3 x spears (1/+2) 2 x archers (0/+3) 1 x light horse (3/+2)	1 x spear (2/+2)

You have a stack of units as high as a mountain, shouldn't you just commit everything? I know I probably would but maybe that's not the best play. Your best value here is 12. That's a frontal value of 2 from the light horse (-1 because of the forest), 1 from each of two spears and support values of 2 from the other spear and 3 from each of the archers. Your opponent's value is 3 (including the +1 for the forest). Even if you pick a 0 card and your opponent picks a 7, you can't lose right? Wrong. There are quite a few event cards that could ruin this situation for you. For example, your opponent could play *Schwerpunkt* (card no. 17), doubling his unit's value to 4. Now his value is 5 and the 7/0 split would cost you 6 units. Or he could play *Outflanked* (card no. 27), halving your units' values. Now your value is only 6 to his 3 and a wide range of card splits could lose for you.

So, if committing all 6 units isn't the best way to play, what would be more effective? Well, drawing cards before deciding what units to commit helps a lot here. If you drew a 5, 6 or 7 card, you would know you would win even if your opponent drew a 7 and played one of those battle cards. In that case, you could commit everything to finish the battle quickly. But if you drew something else, there are more effective plays.

For instance, you could commit the three spears and one of the archers. That would give you a value of 7. If your opponent played no combat card, the card split has to be 5+ for him to win (if you tie, all committed units die and your two uncommitted units will then win it for you). A 5+ split only happens 6% of the time, so you would still win 16 times in 17. On the 17<sup>th</sup> time, you would commit your remaining 2 units for a value of 10 (doubling your only front line and only support unit because your opponent's forces are now all committed and therefore disordered). He can only beat you with a 7/0 split and that will happen less than 1% of the time. Together, you would only lose both rounds 5 times in 10,000. The other 9,995 times you would still win.

Now suppose your opponent played *Schwerpunkt* in the first round. He has to beat you by 4 or more on the cards. A 4+ split will only happen 12% of the time, so you will still win 7 times in eight. On

the eighth time, you commit the remaining 2 units and again only lose on a 7/0 split. The total chance of losing the battle is 9 chances in 10,000.

Finally, suppose your opponent played Outflanked in the first round, dropping your value to 4 in the round (3.5 rounds up). Your opponent needs to get a 2+ split to win. His chances of that are about 30%. If he wins, you commit your remaining two units for a value of 5 (doubled for your opponent's disorder but halved for the Outflanked). He needs to get a 2+ split again ( a tie here loses for you). His chances of winning both rounds are about 9%.

In those cases where you don't draw a 5, 6 or 7 card, this alternative approach has increased your chances of losing when your opponent doesn't play a card from nil to 5 in 10,000. If your opponent plays Schwerpunkt, the approach reduces your chances of losing from 74 chances in 10,000 to 9. If he plays Outflanked, it reduces the chances of losing from 2,057 chances in 10,000 to only 929. Overall, the alternative approach reduces your chances of losing from 13 in 10,000 to 8.

Making a difference only 1 game in 2,000 may not seem like much and I certainly wouldn't recommend taking the time to work out these sorts of odds – your opponents would kill you. I have only included this analysis to illustrate that things aren't always as clear cut as they might seem, that there are times when a moment's thought before acting will increase your chances of winning.

*What units should you commit?*

So, if you're not going to pull out your pocket computer for every combat, what units should you commit in a battle? This is the key question but isn't easy to answer. The most effective unit commitment depends on what your opponent commits, so what you should do depends on what you think your opponent will do. Combat cards like Deserter (card no. 14) and I Spy! (card no. 9) are useful precisely because they help you work out what he will do (or some part of it anyway) and so make it easier to work out what you should do in response.

If my opponent has only 1 or 2 units, I would usually just commit everything. Generally, the more you commit when you know your opponent can only commit a few units, the less effect the cards have and therefore the more predictable is the outcome. There are some exceptions and the previous section analysed one (extreme) such case.

My rule of thumb is to commit everything against 1 or 2 opposing units if my total combat value (before cards) will be at least 3 greater than my opponent's. I increase that difference by 1 for each point that the card I draw is less than 3 and reduce it by 1 for each point my card is above 4 (e.g. if my card is a 6, I would commit everything if I estimated that my units would have a lead of at least +1 before cards). My opponent might have a combat event card too but I usually ignore those. Life's too short to worry about such things.

If my opponent commits only one of his two units, I would usually commit everything again in the second round. The opposing unit will double its front line value but so what? I was prepared to face 2 units so why balk at a single unit even when it's doubled?

The trickier cases are when your opponent has 3 or more units. Once he has 3 units, he has viable options that could hurt you. He could commit all the units at once, beating you if you commit low.

Or, he might only commit 1 unit, letting him double his remaining units in the second round (or perhaps retreating with them) if you committed everything in the first round. That probably forces you to commit more than one unit but less than all. I like to commit units in pairs, one with a front line value and one with a good support value. I generally prefer to commit high in the first round. For instance, if I had 6 units, I might commit 4 in the first round and 2 in the second. If I had 8 units, I would probably commit 4 in the first and then either 4 or 2 in the second depending on what my opponent had left after the first round. If I have an odd number of units, I like to leave pairs after the first round, so the extra unit gets committed in the first round.

### *Skirmishing*

An important tactic to learn is skirmishing. You would mostly use this when your forces are inferior and you want to sacrifice a few units to wear down your opponent's strength. But you can also use it to convert a small edge you have in a large battle into a substantial edge. It is especially useful when you've drawn a low card for the round because that increases your chances of losing big if you make a large commitment.

The technique basically consists of committing a single unit against what you hope will be a high commitment from your opponent, leaving your remaining units with a numerical superiority over his uncommitted units. You then hope to turn that temporary superiority into an overall battle winning lead.

Which unit you sacrifice doesn't really matter because you expect to lose it. However, because I like to pair front line units with support units, my sacrificial units tend to be the odd unpaired ones. If I think that my opponent might also try to skirmish, I would be more inclined to play a strong front line unit as the sacrifice (especially if I've drawn a high card), because it might then score an unexpected skirmish win for me.

Let's look at an example. Suppose you cross a river into a fertile area. Your opponent has 5 units, one of which is a sword (3/+1). You have 7 units:

<b>You</b>	<b>Your opponent</b>
2 x swords (3/+1)	1 x sword (3/+1)
1 x spear (1/+2)	4 x other units
1 x archers (0/+3)	
1 x catapult (1/+4)	
1 x light horse (3/+2)	
1 x horse archer (2/+4)	

You draw a 2 card, so are concerned that throwing everything in might lose you 7 units. In any case, your opponent is a known skirmisher and this is a classic skirmishing situation for him. So, you decide to skirmish in the first round. You have 4 front line units and 3 support units, so committing one of the front line units is probably the right choice. Should it be the spear or a sword? Your opponent has a sword and +1 for the river and you've only drawn a 2 card, so whatever you commit is probably dead. I would throw in the spear and keep the stronger sword for later.

Your opponent reveals a sword, an archer and a 5 card, totalling 12 with the river modifier, an easy win for him. Skirmishing has worked because you now have 6 uncommitted units to his 3.

In the second round, you draw a 4 card. You have 3 possibilities. First, you could commit all 6 units, probably winning the round for you. If your opponent committed his remaining 3 units, your next round looks OK too but if he only committed one you might have a problem in the next round. Second, you could commit a pair of units. This would likely lose to a 3 unit commitment but might win nicely against a 1 or 2 unit deployment. Finally, you could commit 4 units (2 pairs), giving you a reasonable chance of winning against a 3 unit commitment and a probable win against anything else.

I favour the third option, so let's try that one. You leave out a sword and a catapult and commit the other 4 units. They have a value of 13, rising to 17 with the card. Your opponent turns over all 3 units, worth 9, and a 5 card, rising to a total of 15 with the river modifier. You win easily. You confidently commit your last 2 units and your opponent commits his remaining 2 units. Your sword and catapult are worth 14 (doubling because your opponent is now disordered) and your opponent's units are worth 6, rising to 7 for the river. Only a 7/0 split on the cards will save him. He doesn't have it, so a clever use of the skirmishing tactic has won the day for you, eliminating 5 units for the loss of only one of your own.

### *Cities*

In the game's early ages, cities have only a small effect on combats and there's not much you can do about them anyway. Once you find yourself facing level 3 cities though, they are having a major effect and you really need catapults to smother them.

Needing to commit a catapult each round (except when skirmishing, obviously) affects your commitment decisions because, unless your superiority is overwhelming, you need one available for each round.

Since most empires only have 3 of these units before they discover cannons in the 4<sup>th</sup> age, you should be very careful about taking on too many cities at once.

### *Tactician leaders*

Tacticians can have a big effect on your chances of winning a battle because they give you a chance to swap a bad card for a better one (they increase your average card value from about 3.5 to about 4.5). If your first card is a 0, you would draw again, obviously. But what if it's a 1, 2 or 3; should you draw again if you get one of those?

The simple case is where you know what card you need. If you know that a 1 card or better will win for you even if your opponent draws a 7, there's no point in drawing again because you might get a 0 and lose. If you know that only a 7 card can win for you even if your opponent draws a 0, throw back anything that isn't a 7. Such cases are rare though, so you need a rule of thumb for the rest.

Most people would agree that you should hang onto a 4 card or better but, in fact, if you toss back a 4 card you will get a 4 or higher again just over half the time, so the decision's not that obvious. The

statistics are finely balanced though, so what you should do probably depends on whether you're a pessimist or an optimist. I'm a pessimist, so my rule of thumb is hold 4s and better; optimists would hold 5s and better.

When should you commit a tactician to win ties for you in a combat round? One clear case (but one that many players seem to miss) is when you are committing all remaining units you have in the battle. If they die, the leader goes too, so there's no downside in throwing him into the mix. The less obvious cases are where you could lose the leader but not the battle.

If the leader has no other abilities, I would throw him into each round where I wasn't skirmishing. A tactician has no purpose except to influence battles; so, if you won't use him, he's already dead.

If he has other abilities that I value, I would throw him in where I thought I had a good lead in the round (say, +2) assuming perhaps a 4 card in my opponent's hand.

### *Retreating*

Plenty of players just fight the battle to the end even when they are clearly losing it and could have retreated. My usual approach is to retreat as soon as I can if my opponent has twice as many units remaining as I do or has played a combat event that gives him a big edge throughout the battle.

If you can see that you're losing and plan to retreat, your commitment strategy should change. In a lot of cases, you should commit only 1 unit a round to minimise your losses until your opponent has committed everything. But your opponent might be trying hard to stop you retreating and committing low himself to avoid having to commit that last unit. In that situation, you can get a lot of mileage from committing high to win a round unexpectedly. That might provoke a higher commitment in the next round, when you will have reverted to committing just 1 unit.

If you want to retreat and have a tactician present, you can control the time of retreat by committing all your units. A good strategy then might be to commit everything (including the leader) to win the round, then retreat. Your opponent can try to stop this by committing high himself if he has a good chance of winning. If that's likely, committing just a single unit will be likely to work for you (make sure you point out the usefulness of your tactician first so your opponent knows that you might be trying to retreat).

### *Combat event cards*

When should you play cards to increase your chances of winning a battle? I think a lot of the answer depends on your personal style of card management. Do you like to cycle through your cards quickly or are you more of a hoarder? Personally, I think the battle cards are not important enough to warrant saving for themselves, so I tend to play them whenever I'm in a battle where they will make a difference.

If you are going to play battle cards, you should set up your battles to exploit them. Do you have a treachery card? Don't waste it on a meaningless border skirmish; use it in that fortified mountain area that will otherwise be impossible to crack. Better yet, plan for the treachery by making retreat impossible. You can do that by putting units in each area the betrayed units could retreat to

(Breakthrough – card no. 84 – can really help with this). Since you only need one unit to launch the treacherous attack, you should have plenty left to do the surrounding.

Are you going to play Charge! (card no. 52)? Make sure half the units you commit that round are cavalry units to get the maximum benefit from the card. Similarly, if you have Barrage (card no. 61), make sure you take a lot of missile units into the battle.

Do you have Rout (card no. 55)? If you have the edge in the battle, think about committing all your units to encourage your opponent to retreat. The destruction of his retreaters will come as a nasty shock.

If you've got a Deserter (card no. 14) or I Spy! (card no. 9), you can see part of your opponent's battle plan each round. If you've played both, you can see his whole plan. Inside information on what your opponent is doing in each round takes a lot of the doubt out of the battle and increases your chances of allocating your forces efficiently.

Cards like Sapper (no. 101), Local guides (no. 106), Alpine training (card no. 105) and Amphibious training (no. 4) cancel various terrain effects. Use them up straight away because the effects are fairly small. The only exceptions are possibly Alpine training and Local guides because they can undo the otherwise troublesome mountain effect, so think about saving those if you will need to capture a nearby mountain area. All these cards become less useful in the later ages of the game, when the increasing values of the units reduces the relative effect of terrain modifiers.

Mesmeriser (card no. 56) is a more interesting card. Most people simply use it to take the higher of the two combat cards in each round. This produces the odd effect of your opponent actually hoping for middling value cards to minimise the mesmeriser's effect. But there are two unusual cases to think about with this card.

First, you can use it to lose a battle by taking the lower card. Why would you ever want to do that? Because this is your empire's last area and losing will save you the trouble of folding an empire that is finished. If you are playing one of those barbarian empires that can vacate areas, you might couple play of this card with a suicide attack that takes out a few opposing units before it goes under. So, you might use the mesmeriser to take the highest card to win the first few rounds, then swap to lose the rest.

Second, play of the mesmeriser alters battles where you have a tactician. Normally, I would toss back a card that was a 3 or less because I have a 67% chance of drawing at least as good a card. With the mesmeriser in play, you know you can't lose on the cards, so you might as well try to win. With that thought in mind, I would try to increase my chances of getting a wide split between the cards by tossing back a 3 or 4 card and keeping anything else.

The High command card (no. 66) is probably the hardest of the battle cards to use well. Basically, it lets you look through your opponent's units and choose up to 3 of them that your opponent must commit that round (although he can commit others as well). At the least, looking through his units will let you know every unit he could commit but the card's actually more useful than that. The main advantage arises if you aren't the favoured side. You will need to use the skirmishing tactic to even things up. If you force your opponent to commit at least 3 units, you make it hard for him to cope with your skirmishing. A typical response will be to commit only the units you forced, in

which case you could think about committing more units in a round when you get a good card, winning it with a good pay off.

Which units should you force your opponent to commit? I prefer to force missile units. This tends to make you opponent commit more units to protect them, making the skirmishing tactic even more effective. It also means that your opponent will struggle to put together an effective force for the later rounds, multiplying the benefit you get. Of course, if for some odd reason he has lots of missile units and few front line ones, make him commit the front line ones to leave him with a real problem later on.

Suppose your opponent has an elephant. If you force him to commit it, he must win the round or retreat. If you are the favoured side in the battle, that means you can probably commit high and end the battle right away without the normal skirmishing. If you aren't the favoured side, making him use the elephant is likely to produce a high commitment, so you could throw only in 1 unit, playing the skirmishing game yourself. Either way, you know not to use cavalry units in that round.