

Dominion Critical Analysis

Rules

-Introduction

The first text within *Dominion's* rules is flavor text that explains the justification for playing the game from an “in-universe” perspective for the characters that each player assumes the role of. Regardless of personal opinions players may have over the level of humor incorporated into the two paragraph entry in this section, the text nonetheless gives an overview of the game’s structure and goal in vocabulary that illustrates the theme (words like “feodum” and “treasury”) and remains understandable for the layperson. If given the chance to, I should always try and utilize a section similar to this in order to establish a more personal connection between the player and the game’s world before even delving into the actual mechanics or descriptive rules of play.

-Goal

The goal text is written to illustrate what the win condition is by the end of play. The last line of this section, “The player with the most victory points in his Deck at game end wins” is very clear in its description of how to beat the other players, even if I would have written it slightly differently to avoid potential grammatical awkwardness or gender bias (most victory points in their Deck by the end the game). The potentially confusing aspects of this section are all located in the first paragraph, in which it suggests to players that a winning deck must consist of lots of Gold, Provinces, and Kingdom Cards, while in reality, many advanced strategies can claim victory while keeping a thinner deck, or one that utilizes a select few varieties of Kingdom Cards or Treasures.

There are a few awkward lines throughout this section of the rules (for example, “the things you can do” can easily be replaced with “possible actions” given how “actions” is the term used later in the rules and it condenses the explanation), but it does effectively convey an overview of the difference between your deck at the beginning and end of the game. I should always try to expand any goal sections I write from just the mechanical endstate to include a more thematic justification whenever possible.

-Contents

The contents are all clearly outlined in terms of number and variety. The descriptions of the card tray and included inlay are considerably less clear than the visually reinforced depictions and explanations of the cards themselves. The breakdown of each card type and their relevant symbology and text is clear thanks to the hierarchy displayed for every card variation (Treasure, Victory, and the different kinds of Kingdom Cards). The exceptions to this clarity are the Randomizer Cards and the Kingdom Card that also acts as a Victory Card. Because the card backs are not shown until later in the rules, it would be easy for a player to assume that the randomizer cards had faces that looked like the indicated display if they had never played before. The simultaneous Kingdom and Victory card, “Gardens” is quite confounding to new players for its classification, and could have more special attention given to it as a unique Kingdom Card that gives out victory points (I would recommend writing this along with the text “Most kingdom cards are action cards, but there are other kinds” in this section).

The contents section is effective in giving both basic text and visual descriptions of almost every single card included in the base version of the game. I should make any content sections of my own games just as visually clear and easy to understand. The inclusion of every card here not only makes keeping track of the contents easy, but also aids in the mechanical understanding of the differences between each card and the categories to which they are assigned thanks to the effective hierarchy implemented in the visual design.

-Preparation

The actions taken by players in order to set up the game are all located in this phase, and these actions are effectively broken down by each card type outlined in the contents section of the rules. Especially important preparatory actions (taking 7 Copper and 3 Estates, for instance) are mentioned more than once throughout in order to more easily encourage playing correctly. Just like the goal section of the rules, there are a few points that could be rewritten to avoid potential gender bias by changing “his” to “their”, especially when the rules already shift between using “player” and “he/his”. The most significant lack of clarity comes from the rules labeling the Treasure, Victory, and Curse Cards as “the Supply”, when the grouping of Kingdom Cards (labeled “Kingdom cards”) also count towards the Supply in mechanical terms. This section of the rules does not clearly state that the Kingdom Cards are also a part of the Supply, which is a crucial detail in understanding how the game ends.

The rules get close to this statement by directing players to “Place 10 sets of the 25 different Kingdom cards next to the Treasure, Victory, Curse, and Trash cards to start each game”, but avoid explicit instruction. The rules could avoid potential confusion by including text that read “the Supply, continued” along with the text that labels the Kingdom Cards in a similar manner to the Treasure, Victory, and Curse Cards. The Preparation section of the rules teach me that combining both text description and visual indicators at the same time is an especially effective strategy in making sure first-time players understand the basics of starting a game. Having the beginning of a game designed in such a way that players can immediately and intuitively figure out how to begin is paramount to their first impressions of the game and likely a good indicator of their continued interest.

-Playing the Game

-Starting Player: Determining the starting player randomly is inadvisable in terms of competitive play, especially among players that have experience and may already have complex strategies in mind for the current Kingdom Cards available to them. There isn’t much information in the “full version” of the rules located on the left side of the document that wouldn’t be reasonably explained in the truncated version located on the right side. The rules could specify using the ages of players or the proximity of a player’s birthday to the current date

to decide the order, but not specifying it in the rules seems deliberate. I should always try to use a system of truncating or simplifying rules in the way the *Dominion* uses to make looking up rules later much easier by mitigating the feeling of searching through walls of text.

-Turn Overview: The simplicity and effective nature in which this order is conveyed is significant. I doubt that an overview should include anything more detailed than this, nor any information more vaguely conveyed. This is a prime example of teaching how the balance of precise information and clear partition through bolding text can make rules effective for players.

-Action Phase: The action phase instructions are clear in specifying the basic options available to players during each turn. While the possible effects of actions cards that change this phase significantly are not discussed in focused detail, the basis for understanding how this phase works is offered immediately. The section outlining “Common terms used on the Action cards” goes into great detail about the mechanics of Action Cards and their effects on the game, although it does not mention any specific cards or use any particular examples from gameplay. The truncated version of the terms on the right is much more beneficial for first time players when reading the rules before playing, especially given how many situation-specific circumstances are discussed in the full version on the left.

The entire section on the Action Phase teaches me that deciding exactly what order to put information in is likely the most important part of writing rules after the initial process of writing them. First-time *Dominion* players can still play the game without having read over all the information in the rules exhaustively, but the information placed first (the information that players are more likely not to skip) is by far the most vital for understanding this phase of the game.

-Buy Phase: The buy phase instructions are relatively concise and offer a multitude of gameplay examples for the player to learn from. Clarification on how much the individual Treasure Cards are worth is effective given the large amount of numbers present on those cards specifically. While some of the extra examples or clarifications are not absolutely necessary, they are clearly targeting newer players, but are not located in the truncated section of rules on the right side. I would consider including visual examples in this situation, just like the rules included earlier for the Preparation section.

-Clean-Up Phase: The clean-up phase is shorter than the previous two, and it has essentially the same positive and negative aspects of its writing: the examples are very detailed, the truncated version of the rules on the right side are often better for newer players but aren't illustrated as such in an obvious manner, and the pronouns used are exclusively male for no established reason.

-Overall: In many cases, the version of information located on the right side of the document was more than sufficient in explaining the concepts needed in playing the game. The rules would be benefitted by making this column of rules more highlighted for first time players, since a lot of the concepts discussed or elaborated upon in the more fleshed-out version on the left side of the document are not necessary to grasp completely until they come up during gameplay. There still remains the potential gender bias of always utilizing male-specific personal pronouns instead of using they/their in this section of the rules.

-Game End

The simplicity and effective nature in which the end of the game is explained is significant. I doubt that an explanation of how to end the game should include anything more detailed than this, nor any information more vaguely conveyed. This is a prime example of how to concisely word the conditions surrounding ending a game.

-Additional Rules

The additional rules section should be more incentivized to read at some point earlier in the rules. While many of the rules mentioned are truly additional, there are some vital situations described that apply to even the first game for new players. The section overall is written very clearly, even if it sacrifices a bit of precision to do so (although the right column of simplified rules would take up less than half the page without the extra spacing, the fully expounded rules take up an entire page of the rule document).

-Kingdom Card Description

This section lists every single card in the game, but it does not clearly state what each card does on its own. None of the pictures included in the rules are of high enough resolution to read comfortably. The additional descriptions and situational elaborations for each card is helpful, but only some of the cards are described clearly (like Smithy or Throne Room).

Mechanics Breakdown

Regular Drawing-Regular drawing occurs after each player's Clean-Up Phase. The player will draw until they have five cards in their hand after they have made sure to discard any cards that are currently in their play-area and hand (assuming they have completed their Action and Buy Phases for the turn).

Shuffling-Shuffling is mixing up all of the cards in a player's deck in order to randomize the order in which they will be drawn. Shuffling occurs at the beginning of the game, as well as any time that a player would otherwise be unable to draw because their deck is empty. When shuffling occurs in the latter scenario, the entire discard pile is shuffled to form the new deck for the player to draw from.

Discarding-Any time a card is sent to the discard pile, whether it be from a player's hand, a Supply Pile, or a the play area, it is discarded. This occurs naturally at the end of each turn for the current player, but can also occur outside of your own turn when certain Actions are played.

Buying-During the Buy Phase, players will be able to gain a card equal to or less than the amount of Treasure Cards added to any temporary coins gained from Action Cards during that turn. Players have one Buy by default, but this can be augmented by effects of certain Kingdom Cards.

Actions-Playing any Kingdom Cards during your turn is considered an action. During each Action Phase, you have one action by default, but this can be augmented by effects of certain Kingdom Cards. Actions will allow you to gain a significantly varied field of benefits (or inflict negatives upon other players) depending on the instructions on the card(s) you play in your Action Phase.

- **Reaction**-Specific Kingdom Cards can be used as a reaction to the effects of other Kingdom Cards. “Reaction-Actions” take effect specifically when played in response to cards played during another player’s Action Phase. Reactions are commonly used to counter Action-Attacks that have negative effects, like gaining curses or discarding cards before you have a chance to take your turn.
- **Trash**-Cards can be placed into the Trash Pile (on top of the Trash Card set out amongst the Supply Pile) during gameplay. Cards in the Trash cannot be interacted with under normal circumstances.
- **Gain**-Players can gain cards by taking them from a Supply Pile and incorporating them into their deck via the discard pile or directly into their hands. Gaining cards can be done directly through actions, but can also occur when players buy from any of the Supply Piles.
- **Set Aside**-Cards that are “Set Aside” are removed from the loop of cycling through a player’s deck, hand, and discard pile. These cards are put in their own pile and are normally returned to the deck at the end of the game.
- **Draw X Cards**-Specific Kingdom Cards will allow players to draw a set number of cards determined by the text on the card itself. Drawn cards can heavily affect the remaining actions or buy phase of that player’s turn, but will still be discarded with any unused cards that remain in the player’s hand. If card(s) on the top of a player’s deck have been revealed, they can make more informed decisions as to when to use Kingdom Cards that allow for drawing. Drawing can also be used to enhance the Buy Phase of a turn if Treasure Cards are added to the player’s hand.
- **X Coins**-Specific Kingdom Cards will allow players to temporarily add that number of coins to the Buy Phase of their current turn. These coins do not carry over past the current turn, so they can only play a role in a single Buy Phase.
- **Reveal**-The cards that are “revealed” are shown to all players and then put back to whatever position they were originally, unless the card that caused the reveal says otherwise.

Game Mechanics Critique

Regular Drawing-Drawing five cards per normal turn makes the game a lot more focused on the strategy of deckbuilding than it would be with any larger number of cards. From the very beginning of the game, a player can plan ahead by understanding the exact contents of the hand they will receive next turn. The implied ability for players to count the cards in their deck and keep track of them in their head throughout the game is balanced by the increasing size of each individual deck over the normal course of play.

Shuffling-The basic mechanic of every deckbuilding game is shuffling the deck once you “run out” of cards. Because the order of each turn defines shuffling in such a clear manner, the process works to augment the rest of the game by not getting in the way of other mechanical actions. Working around the exact order of actions during a turn, shuffling included, makes every decision even more important, and the game benefits from it.

Discarding-The process of discarding cards works especially well when it creates conflict for players—whenever cards are forced to be discarded (players using “Militia”) or leveraged to improve their initial hands (“Cellar”), discarding improves the game the most. Discarding is often a matter of course at the end of turns because some cards are worthless in certain hands (like estates, which are only useful at the end of the game).

Buying-The Buy Phase of the game relies on using the “free” ability for each player to make a single purchase of a supply card every turn. Buying has to be managed later in the game just like the economy of Treasure Cards, or the resources of the number of actions you have per turn. The more buys a player has in a turn, the less likely they are to have actions that give them temporary coins or the actions necessary to draw more cards or run through their current deck. The balance of buying, performing actions, and having enough coins at the end of turn to make ideal purchases is a delicate one.

Actions-Actions are the most influential and game-changing part of every single turn. While buying particular cards in certain orders is important to managing your economy as a player, the actions you take will have the greatest effect in determining what you can accomplish per turn.

- **Reaction**-Most reaction mechanics are based on defending oneself from other players that are using attacks, effectively delaying the plans of the other players while furthering their own strategy. Most Reaction-Action Kingdom Cards are fairly weak when played on their own, because the largest benefit to having them in your hand is to act as a form of insurance rather than being immediately useful in most cases.
- **Trash**-Permanently getting rid of cards by “trashing” them is a good way of clearing a player’s deck and making it easier to draw the cards that are key to their ideal strategy (or strategies). Using cards that allow you to put others in the trash is often most useful for planning out future strategies and preparing your deck for better turns, rather than utilizing an action that has immediate benefit. Putting cards in the trash also has a debatable value in games that do not incorporate Curses, one of the few cards that throwing away gives exclusively positive benefits from.
- **Gain**-Adding cards to one’s deck is a crucial part of any deckbuilding game, considering it would be logistically impossible to win without adding any cards from the Supply. Gaining cards is one of the more complex mechanics thanks to the inherently dichotomous nature of adding cards with the intent to use them in synergistic combos with cards that may be harder to draw with a larger deck. Another task of balance is added to the player’s list of jobs with the mechanics of Gain.
- **Set Aside**-While this mechanic is not as common in the base game, the idea of placing cards outside the gameplay loop of cycling through deck, hand, and discard, is valuable. This ability allows for strategies that normally would collapse thanks to bloated decks to become viable, but it also means that without certain cards to work in conjunction with this mechanic, it may become useless, making the cards that allow players to set aside cards worthless for that entire game.
- **Draw X Cards**-Drawing more cards in a turn is most useful when a player is: looking to make a larger buy (or buys) with many Treasure Cards, trying to combine multiple cards that allow for extra actions and other benefits, or need a specific card to make a particular strategy work. The competition between extra buys, extra actions, temporary coins, and

extra drawing is the main source of player choice and conflict within each turn's Action phase.

- **X Coins**-The ability to add temporary coins to a player's Buy Phase shifts in value over time, tending to be stronger in the earlier turns of the game due to the low number of coins actually added (one or two in most cases) and the high cost of most sought after cards in later turns. This potential issue has possible remedies found through gameplay, and can be easily used as an advantage if players can manipulate the number of actions they can take to stack up cards that give out temporary coins in order to make purchases without needing nearly as many Treasure Cards.
- **Reveal**-While it is not an absolutely necessary part of the game, revealing cards can be a strategically advantageous when playing with groups that understand the mechanics of the game particularly well. The general use of revealing cards is more to choose how to deal with them (i.e. if they should be discarded or moved to the top of the deck) during Attack-Actions or due to your own card's effects. Revealing is mostly a way of giving all players a strategically level playing field in cases where actions could potentially shake up the next round of turns or a particular player's developing strategy.