



STRATEGIES FOR DOMINION

by Master Swindler Jeff Hannes

Donald Vaccarino's *Dominion* is the progenitor of the deck-building genre, and probably more so than any of its descendants, this game is about **building** your deck. The rules are straightforward, making this an easy game to learn and teach, but the strategy? It's more involved than you might think. Fortunately, we've done all the legwork for you, compiled the knowledge and experience that comes from playing hundreds (thousands?) of hands of *Dominion*.

This strategy guide comes with a caveat I can't stress enough -- there are always exceptions! With each expansion come more options, and more cards which have the potential to turn conventional strategy on its head. When those cards are in play, you may have to adapt accordingly, but most of the nuggets in this guide can be applied to just about any selection of kingdom cards. For my examples I primarily use cards from the basic set, but the principles apply to any cards with similar effects. With that out of the way, let's dive in...

THE DOMINION LEARNING CURVE

Those who play a lot of *Dominion* tend to go through a similar learning curve as they get a feel for the game and begin to grasp on strategy. The Beginner sees all the interesting action cards and decides to try a little bit of everything. This rarely has good results. The deck is slow, gets clogged, and the player often finds himself with unplayable actions in hand and not enough treasure.

Once he's got a few games under his belt, he discovers how to combo cards with + actions... but then he goes overboard. The player buys 6 copies of Spy, and plays one after another. Except, all he's doing is cycling through his deck. Or the player buys tons of Villages, draws his entire deck, and still only has enough coin to afford...another Village. There's a reason seasoned *Dominion* players have come to call

this the "Village Idiot" strategy. If you're not improving your buying power with better treasures and + coin actions, your deck is going nowhere, no matter how many cards you can cycle through in a turn.

Then comes the revelation of the "Big Money" strategy, the notion that the kingdom cards are simply a distraction. This player plays a very simple and straightforward game... If you've got 3-5 coins, buy a silver. 6-7 coins buy a Gold, 8 or more buy a Province. They win a few games this way (probably against players employing one of the above strategies) and determine that the game is "broken." Except, against players who know what they are doing, this is NEVER a winning strategy.

Consider the simplest of examples: You buy just one action card, and it's a Militia. In this case it's pretty much unilaterally better than a Silver. The problems can come when you draw a hand with multiple copies of Militia, and can therefore only play one of them. But we'll get to that later. The point is, the notion that buying ZERO action cards is a winning strategy is absurd. Action cards will win you the game; they are what sets your deck apart from the decks of the other players. The key is to add them in moderation. And even more important is deciding which ones to include. What you may not realize is the importance



of making these critical decisions before you even buy your first card. Which leads us to...

THE OPENING SETUP

With skilled players, half the games you play will be decided before the first turn. It's all about analyzing the selection of kingdom cards available for that game, finding the combination that's going to lead to success, and then executing that strategy as you build your deck. With so many different combinations available -- especially once you start adding expansions -- it's impossible to pinpoint one winning strategy. But there are some universal things you should be looking for in every setup:



* Are there cards which grant +2 actions? If so, you have the ability to build a combo-driven deck heavy on action cards. If not, you're most likely want to limit the number of actions you buy. I'll go into more detail on this in the "Terminal Velocity" section below.

* Are there any cards which grant +1 buy? If so, it might be viable to build a strategy that generates so much

money that you can buy more than one victory point card per turn. If not, the best you'll ever be able to do on a given turn is probably to buy a Province, so consistently getting to 8 coins (and not a ton more) should be your endgame goal.

* Which attack cards might your opponents buy? If there's a Thief, Pirate Ship or other treasure-trashing card in the mix, you may want to focus on actions that

give + coins over treasure; they'll be more reliable if your opponents go the attack route. If there are hand-size reducers like Militia or Goons, be prepared to work with fewer options each turn. Don't base your strategy around the acquisition of several 5-cost action cards, because that may prove to be difficult to accomplish. With the expectation of a limited hand-size, you're going to want to put a premium on trashing useless cards and upgrading your treasures to get the maximum value out of even a reduced hand.



* Are there any cards which allow you to trash other cards? If so, you will be able to build a more streamlined deck, and can therefore put together combos more reliably. If there are no cards in the mix capable of trashing, your deck is going to get bigger with every buy and there's nothing you can do about it. That's alright, but be aware that you're probably going to want multiple copies of key cards so that your deck continues to function well even after you get your engine going and start buying victory point cards.

* Are there any victory point cards other than the basic ones? If so, consider whether or not you will go after them, and plan your strategy accordingly. Also, take notice of whether the other cards in the mix support an alternate victory point strategy. For example, Gardens is significantly more effective when you can easily get your hands on + buy cards.

* Above all, single out the primary kingdom cards



you'll actually buy for this game and, for the most part, try to stick to it. Unless you're playing with certain cards from the Cornucopia expansion, most *Dominion* setups do not reward diversity. You are generally much better off focusing on three or four different action cards and taking multiple copies of each than to try a little bit of everything. Success in *Dominion* is all about consistency, and if

you've only got one copy of several different cards your turns are going to be unpredictable and erratic -- exactly what you're trying to avoid.

TERMINAL VELOCITY

Perhaps the most important aspect of deck-building -- and the most overlooked by newer players -- is the impact of the "terminal action." Specifically, this is an action card which does not grant additional actions. It is terminal because, under standard *Dominion* rules, you only get one action per turn. An action card which includes "+1 action" effectively replenishes this action when you play it, allowing you to continue to play a string of actions. But an action without that text will end the chain and be your final action of the turn (unless you've played a "+2 action" or similar effect).

More simply put, a **Terminal Action** is any action card which doesn't grant additional actions itself. The more of these you put in your deck, the more likely you are to draw a hand with multiple terminal actions. And when that happens, you'll generally only be able to play one of them, making the other as useful that turn as a victory point card. Though really, it's LESS useful, because at least that Estate or Duchy is

worth points at the end of the game. In *Dominion* you want to maximize your deck so that every turn you draw the best hand possible, with as many useful cards as possible. Drawing multiple terminal actions effectively reduces your hand-size, which it makes it harder to acquire better cards.

Now, that doesn't mean you can only buy one terminal action per game. But you do need to take some measures to avoid getting stuck with two terminal actions in the same hand. As a good general rule, limit yourself to just two terminal actions, plus one for every "+2 actions" card in your deck. This will ensure a good card flow. It's certainly not an absolute guideline, and the larger your deck gets, the more you can afford to have a third or fourth extra terminal extra with minimal risk of drawing two in the same hand. But until you get a good feel for the ebb and flow of playable actions, it's not a good guideline to follow. Note that this only applies to actions which do not grant additional actions. Any "+1 action" card basically replaces its action, and doesn't count in the tally either way.

OPENING SPLIT

Once you've analyzed the opening layout and come up with a general strategy for how your game will play out, the next step is implementing it. Barring the rare action or treasure which has a "when gained" effect



(such as Hinterland's Nomad Camp), your first two turns will always break in one of two ways. Either you'll have 3 Copper one turn and 4 Copper the other, or a split of 2 Copper and 5 Copper. The order is irrelevant. In the first two turns you're going to go through the first 10 cards of your deck, and only on the third turn will you have some sort of unpredicted variation. So it's either a 4/3 split or a 5/2 split, and you'll know which the moment you draw your opening hand.

When buying your first card, you should also decide what your second purchase will be. Consider how your third or fourth turn will play out if you draw both of these cards together. (There's about a 37% chance that it'll happen.) This means you certainly don't want your first two buys to be terminal actions.

Also consider the impact of a card-drawer like Smithy. The best starting complement to Smithy is almost always Silver. Why? Let's say your first two buys are Village and Smithy. There's about a 63% chance that you'll draw the Smithy without the Village on either turn 3 or turn 4. Then if you play the Smithy, there's a 43% chance the Village will be one of the cards you get with your +3 cards. And in that instance, it does you no good at all, since you won't have any actions left.



Now, the more cards in your deck, the less the chances of screwing yourself like this, but a huge factor in being successful in *Dominion* is getting off to a strong start. You have the most control over what you draw in the early rounds, so why even give yourself a chance of a bad draw? If you make sure the first two cards you buy can always complement

each other, you'll be off to a good start no matter how the fates of random draw play out.

Early on look for cards that will increase your buying power. If you're going to use your 3-coin turn to get a Village, make sure your 4-coin turn gets you a coin-provider like Militia or Chancellor. You can almost never go wrong with using your 4/3 split to buy a 4-cost action and a Silver, but plenty of other combinations work as well.



If you've got a 5/2 split... well then you're probably golden. Getting your hands on a 5-cost card early will likely give you a jump on the competition, so be sure to grab the best one available. As for the 2-cost... don't feel compelled to spend the money just because you have it. It is pretty much NEVER worth it to spend an opening buy on an Estate or Copper. So if there happen to be no 2-cost cards in the opening set, or if the only 2-cost card doesn't complement your 5-cost card (for example, they are both terminal actions), consider just passing on the buy for that turn. The fact that you've got a 5-cost card in the first two turns already puts you ahead of the curve, and one less buy increases the odds you'll see that 5-cost card on turn 3 or 4 -- by a lot more than you might think. With a 12-card deck, there's an 83% chance you'll draw your 5-cost card on turn 3 or 4. With an 11-card deck, those odds increase to 91%. And drawing the card by turn four means it will get shuffled back in to your deck in time for a chance to draw it AGAIN on turn 5. When that happens, you're off to a flying start.

It's a general *Dominion* rule that you should

never forget -- just because you CAN buy a card doesn't mean you SHOULD. Always consider the larger picture, and whether or not that card will make your deck operate more smoothly and -- most importantly -- increase your buying power.

THE 3/5/6/8 PROGRESS SCALE

There's a general progression in just about every game of *Dominion*. At the start of the game you can produce 3 or 4 coins with ease. In fact, you're guaranteed to be able to produce 4 (or more) on one of your opening turns. Your first goal in most setups is going to be to advance to the "5" threshold, which will allow you to start buying the powerful 5-cost actions. From there, your goal should be to get to 6 coins so you can buy Gold. And finally, achieving 8 coins in one hand so you can buy a Province. 90% of *Dominion* games will follow that progression. If you have 6 or 7 coins you'll almost always buy a gold.



Sometimes there may be a six-cost action card worth taking, but if that card doesn't directly help your coin production and you haven't bought any gold yet, you probably want to hold off. A good example is The Adventurer. In the right deck (most notably one which can trash Copper) it can be an incredibly effective card -- but only if you have good treasures to find

with it. Get a couple gold FIRST and the Adventurer will be much more potent.

Once you get to 8 coins you're almost always going to want to purchase a Province, since you never know when those opportunities might arise again. However, that won't always be the case. Obviously if

you're playing with Prosperity's Platinum and Colony the threshold changes and you're new goal is 9/11 (for Platinum and Colony respectively). But even without Colony available, there are times -- especially if you've got a really strong engine going early -- that it pays to hold off on filling your deck with Provinces. You'll learn this by feel, but there's a fairly easy litmus test. Ask yourself, "How confident am I that I will be able to generate 8 coins next turn?" If the answer is "very" you can afford to not buy a Province. In all other instances, buy the Province now, while you have the opportunity in front of you.



GOING TO THE CHAPEL

This section might seem out of place in what is supposed to be an all-encompassing strategy guide, but no card demonstrates the importance of deck-thinning -- that is, removing less useful cards from your deck -- than Chapel. There are many other cards which do it on a smaller scale, but none as drastically or effectively. However, being able to execute an effective Chapel strategy can open your eyes to just how big a difference deck-thinning can make. It's for that reason that I believe any *Dominion* player who truly wants to take his or her game to the next level must at least familiarize themselves with this particular strategy. The principles you learn here can change the way you look at the game, and for the better.

All things being equal, the Chapel strategy is the most effective in the game. Again, there will always be exceptions based on the card mix, but you



can almost never go wrong with an aggressive deck-thinning strategy. With a 5/2 split the Chapel opening is a no-brainer... get the best 5-cost card you can (ideally one that provides coin) coupled with a Chapel. In a 4/3 split, your best bet is probably Chapel and Silver. It may seem inefficient to buy a 2-cost card when you've got 4 coin, but the effects of Chapel are EASILY worth 4 coins. In

fact, this will hardly be the first time during the game you buy "less" than you can afford.

The next step is putting the Chapel to use. Don't be distracted, don't hesitate. Play the Chapel when you draw it and trash EVERY Copper and Estate in your hand. That means you won't be able to buy anything that turn, but it's fine... You're trying to lower the size of your deck as fast as possible. You'll have plenty of buying opportunity in a few turns. The one exception would be if you get Silver-Copper-Chapel in the same hand, in which case you want to trash your other two cards and spend three to get another Silver. You can't trash ALL your copper before buying a second Silver (unless you've got a Market, Festival, Militia or similar), otherwise you'll grind your deck to a halt.

But ultimately you're trying to get your deck down to four or five cards. Chapel, and stuff that produces coin. Then you start gearing up for overdrive. Buy 5-cost cards that give you coin and/or more cards. Buy Gold when you get six coins. When you finally get to eight coins? (And it'll happen fast if you do it right.) Don't buy a Province just yet. If there are any +1 Buy cards available, your goal is to get 16 coins in

your deck. Executed properly, a good Chapel deck will be able to burn through most if not all of the deck in one turn. Plus, if you buy Provinces too soon, they'll start to clog up your very small deck. Even if you're only going to buy one Province per turn, wait until you've got a cushion of at least 3-4 coins in your deck,

Of course the effectiveness of the Chapel strategy and timing can be dependent on what your opponents are doing. If a card like Pirate Ship or Thief are in the game, this can seriously hamper things -- unless you can rely almost entirely on cards like Festival and Market to produce your coins. But if you're stockpiling Silver and Gold and junking all your copper... well, with those attack cards on the table you're only helping your opponents and guaranteeing you'll get robbed. Also, if your opponent is going the Chapel route as well, timing can be everything. Whoever gets their full-on engine running first is going to win, so don't delay TOO long, and building up to the 16-coin double might not be feasible.

In the right setups, the Chapel strategy can certainly be beat, but if you want to progress to the next level of *Dominion* skill, you owe it to yourself to try it out at least a few times, if for nothing else than to see just how effective a deck with only Silver/Silver/Silver/Gold/Chapel/Market/Market can be.



THE ENDGAME

No matter what the kingdom selection or what strategy you're employing, the endgame is often the same. Final scores in *Dominion* can be very close, so it pays

to keep close tabs on the impending end of the game. For starters, always keep track of how many Provinces are left. If you get to a point where that number is equal to or less than the number of players, the game could conceivably end with you only getting one more turn. Likewise, keep a watch for three empty piles, and don't forget that Curses count as a pile that can help end the game.

Once you've identified that the end is near, it's time to adjust your deck-building strategy. There comes a point where the only thing that matters is victory points. At that point, even an Estate is a better buy than a Silver. Also pay attention to how many cards are left in your deck. Even if you think you might have three or four turns left, if you've just reshuffled your deck, you may not even get a chance to play any new cards you buy. At that point you might as well focus solely on cards which will net you victory points. If you miscalculate and do have a turn or two after shuffling your deck... well, your buying power may be slightly stilted at that point, but you'll likely have



made up for any losses by using those last few turns to pick up some extra victory points.

Another key question... when should you start buying Duchys? As a general rule (barring a card which plays off of Duchys), not until at least half the Provinces are gone. And at that point, it really depends on the pace of the game. Is it a curse-laden, deck-clogged game where players are

struggling to get to 5 coins let alone 8? In that case, the Provinces may never run out and you might be better off trying to burn out three piles -- and therefore

relying on Duchys for your victory points. By contrast, if it is a game where the money is flowing and everyone can afford Provinces with ease -- well then you need to see the writing on the wall for the endgame and start grabbing Duchys while you have a chance.

What you don't want to do is start buying them early, when you're still building up your deck's buying power. A 5-cost card with a special ability you'll get to use even just 2-3 times is generally a better investment than a Duchy. But if you've reached the point where you only might get to use that Mine once, go for the Duchy instead.



THE FINAL WORD

Actually, there isn't one. As long as new *Dominion* cards keep coming out, or even as long as you mix and match expansions with the existing card pool, the strategies specific to each game will be ever-shifting. But at least with mastery of the general concepts here you'll be prepared for anything. Well, maybe not for the amount of length *Alchemy's* Golem adds to the game, and maybe not for whiney tablemates who complain about how broken the Jester is, but you should be good for everything else!

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