One of the bloodiest conflicts in human history, the Thirty Years War rages about you. As a minor house on the outskirts of the main conflict, you are all but forgotten by the major houses. But not forgotten by the bitter rivals at your borders. You desperately do what you must to keep your land and people safe from the ravages of war.

Through clever card play and management of your hand and resources, you must outmaneuver your opponents to build and maintain the strongest territory. This is the only way to earn enough renown to emerge victorious after surviving Three Years of War.

However, no one comes through war unscathed. The winner is merely the person with the will to survive by withstanding a level of suffering that drives their rivals to despair.

### Gameplay Overview

**Three Years of War** is played over the course of three game years. Each year is comprised of four Seasons where players fight for the right to claim important resources through clever card play. Between each season is an event phase affecting the players' limited resources.

Often, players struggle to choose the best option among nothing but undesirable outcomes—but must also be mindful of denying resources to their opponents. The player who best manages their cards and resources while limiting the impact of negative consequences will emerge victorious.

### Components

If this is your first time playing, carefully remove the cardboard components from their frames and recycle the leftover cardboard.

### Game Board

This board should be placed in the center of the play area, within easy reach of all players. It is important all players can see the cards placed on or near the game board.

### Cards

There are several different types of cards used during Three Years of War. You may wish to sleeve your cards to protect them in the long run.

#### Claim Cards (16 cards x 4 seasons)

These cards represent the different resources and hazards the players are bidding on during the drafting portion of the game. Many of the claim cards feature outcomes that are beneficial, harmful—or both.

**During setup,** separate the claim cards into four decks based on their season icon. Then shuffle each deck and place them face down on the corresponding spaces on the game board.

#### Interlude Cards (6 cards x 4 seasons)

After each season, an interlude card is drawn and resolved. Interludes are short events which often compare the players’ resources against each other or against other important thresholds.

**During setup,** separate the interlude cards into four decks based on their title. Then shuffle each deck and place them face down on the corresponding spaces on the game board.

#### Influence Cards (90 cards)

These cards represent the advisors, generals, and clergy who provide advice and counsel during the war. They are used to bid on the draft order for each season’s claim cards. Influence cards feature icons to distinguish which season they are associated with and may have beneficial or debilitating icons, as well.

**During setup,** shuffle the influence cards and deal four cards to each player. Then, place the deck face down next to the game board.

*Influence cards are an integral part of the game. This deck will be played through and shuffled several times each game.*
Lead Player Marker

The first person to pass during each season takes the **Lead Player Marker** to indicate they will lead during the upcoming interlude phase and play first during the following season's influence phase. Several actions, such as resolving interludes and playing influence, resolve clockwise from the lead player. *However, drafting claim cards is resolved in the order of the claim tokens.*

**During setup**, give the lead player marker to the person who suffers through the most soul-crushing job. Alternatively, you can select a lead player at random.

Claim Markers x5

These markers represent the order in which the players draft their claim cards at the end of each season, starting with claim marker “1” and working to the next consecutive number until all claim numbers have been used.

**During setup**, take the numbered claim markers equal to the number of players in the game, then place them on the corresponding spaces of the game board. Return any unused claim markers to the box.

Tokens

Three Years of War features a variety of tokens to track resources and points. All tokens are limited by their supply except for **Doom tokens**.

**During setup**, shuffle the Despair tokens and Writ tokens face down in separate piles. The values on these tiles are hidden from the players during play. All other tokens can be kept in separate piles, within reach.

Hope Tokens

While war is bleak, there is a glimmer of hopefulness from time to time, represented by **Hope tokens**. At the end of the game, a player will discard one random Despair token for each Hope token they possess.

Hope tokens are a limited supply. *Hope tokens are relatively scarce and very valuable.*

Despair Tokens

War is filled with physical and emotional trauma, suffering, and distress, represented by **Despair tokens**. Despair tokens have a number on one side which is kept hidden from everyone, including the person owning the token.

At the end of the game, if a player has any Hope tokens, an equal number of randomly selected Despair tokens will be discarded. Remaining Despair tokens are revealed, and the point values shown are *subtracted* from the player's score.

Doom Tokens

Doom tokens are a more severe version of Despair tokens; they are always worth -5 points and can not be negated by Hope tokens! Doom tokens only come into play if the entire pool of Despair tokens has been depleted. A player who suffers despair when there are no Despair tokens remaining must take a Doom token instead.

If the players somehow run out of Doom tokens, use some other means to track additional Doom tokens... these three years of war are truly dire and horrific.

Writ Tokens

Writ tokens represent favors from a noble house and provide random resources and rewards. Icons on a Writ token are kept hidden from everyone except the person who owns the token. A player may look at any of their own Writ tokens at any time.

A player may reveal a Writ token at any time during the game, or wait until the end of the game to reveal them. For example, a player might reveal a Writ featuring Food icons to given them an advantage when resolving an Interlude card, or wait to reveal them at the end of the game to surprise opponents when scoring bonus renown for resources.

When a Writ token is revealed, it is applied immediately. If it shows Gold, Soldiers, Food, or Holdings the player adjusts their tracking sheet upon revealing the writ. If a writ shows Renown or Hope, the player takes the appropriate tokens and places them in their play area.
Renown Tokens

Renown is used to track victory, representing a combination of respect, accomplishment, fealty, and leadership over the course of three years. Renown tokens come in two denominations for easier counting.

Players are encouraged to “make change” from time to time during the game (trading five 1-point tokens for one 5-point token) to make sure there are enough 1-point tokens in the pool, since there are a number of opportunities to earn small renown rewards throughout the game.

Scout Tokens

These tokens represent a player’s spies and scouts. When a player receives a Scout token, they place it in their play area, then may look at a number of hidden cards or tokens equal to the total number of Scout tokens they own.

Each Scout token acquired allows a player to look at one upcoming face down Interlude card, or one Writ token or Despair token belonging to any player.

After secretly looking at a card or token, it is returned face down. Played at the right time, this information can prove vital to choosing which resources to pursue in the upcoming seasons.

Player Boards & Resource Markers

The players boards provide a convenient way to track Gold, Soldiers, Food, and Holdings during the game. The boards also feature season icons to indicate which season each resource is most closely tied to.

During setup, each player takes one player board and four resource markers. Each resource marker is placed on the [5] space of the four resource tracks.

Setup

Setup for Three Years of War is quick and can be aided by carefully bagging and storing components between games. Here is a quick summary of game setup:

- Shuffle all Interlude cards and Claim cards into separate decks by season and place each deck face down on their corresponding areas of the game board.
- Place claim markers equal to the number of players on their spaces on game board.
- Shuffle and place Writ tokens face down next to the Hope and Renown tokens.
- Shuffle and place Despair tokens face down next to the Doom tokens.
- Give each player a player board and four resource markers. Place one marker on the [5] space of each resource.
- Shuffle the Influence cards into a deck, then deal four Influence cards to each player. Place the remaining deck next to the game board.
- Select a lead player, who takes the lead player marker.
- You are now ready to start Spring for Year One!

Playing the Game

Three Years of War plays over three rounds, each broken into four seasons. Each round begins with Spring and travels through the other three seasons with a brief event interlude after each season. A single year is completed after resolving the interlude following Winter.

The game year starts out relatively mild and gets progressively more grim and challenging; resource cards tend to have more positive results in Spring and become less appealing or downright debilitating toward Winter.

Each season is broken into a series of phases. After all season phases are complete, play advances to an event interlude. Once the interlude is resolved, a new season begins.

A New Season

During each new season, players go through a sequence of phases. Once all season phases are complete, they move to the Interlude following that season.

Phase I: Levy Taxes

At the beginning of each new season, including at the start of the first Spring season, each player levies taxes on their lands and vassals, drawing cards from the Influence deck.

Spring Taxes

Before each Spring, including the first Spring of the game, each player draws 3 Influence cards.
Summer, Autumn & Winter Taxes
If it is not Spring, each player draws 1 Influence card.

Phase II. Exerting Influence

Shuffle the current season’s Claim Deck and reveal cards equal to number of players face up. Place them directly below the claim tokens on the game board. The players need to clearly see and assess these cards—it is important that everyone knows what is at stake!

Starting with the Lead Player, then going clockwise, each player must either pass for the current round or exert influence in hopes of earning a higher drafting position for the following phase. This pattern continues until all but one player has passed. The last player remaining takes Claim Marker 1 and will draft first the following phase.

Choosing to Pass
If a player chooses to pass, that player takes the highest numbered Claim Marker remaining, along with any other resources indicated next to that Claim Marker’s space on the game board.

In addition to securing the last drafting position, the first player to pass each season also takes the Lead Player marker and 1 random Despair token. The first player to pass in a 5-player game, for example, would take Claim Marker 5, the Lead Player Marker, and 1 Despair token.

Choosing to Exert Influence
When a player chooses to exert influence instead of pass, they must play Influence cards from their hand while following these rules:

1. All of the cards played together must be from the same season. These cards do not need to match the current season (for example, a player may play Winter cards during the Summer)

2. The player must either match or increase the current Influence total.

Matching the current Influence total is only possible if all cards played match the current season. For example, a player can match during the Spring by playing Spring cards.

Increasing the current Influence total is generally done by playing cards out of season. For example, a player can increase during the Spring by playing Summer cards.

Each New Season Starts at Zero Influence
The starting Influence total each season is zero, meaning a player can increase the current Influence total by playing any single card featuring one or more Season icons.

Calculating the Influence Total
The value of the current Influence total is equal to the total number of season symbols on all of the cards played by the most recent player who chose to Exert Influence.

For example, if the Lead Player begins the phase by playing an Influence card with one Spring symbol, the starting bid is one. It is important to note that season icons indicate which suit allows a player to match influence during the phase, but does not force the other players into playing cards from the same season.

After a player exerts influence, play goes clockwise to the next player still competing for claim tokens, skipping any players who have already passed for the round.

Exerting Influence & Season Icons
A player who chooses to exert influence can remain in the round using one of two options:

1) Play a set of in-season cards
2) Play a set of cards from a different season

Regardless of the option chosen, all cards played at once must be from the same season whether or not they match the current season. For example, a player cannot exert influence by playing a combination of Spring, Summer, and Winter cards at the same time.

Matching Influence In Season
To exert influence in season, a player must play a number of in-season icons equal to the current Influence total.

For example, if the current season is Summer and the current Influence total is two, a player simply needs to play two Summer icons. This could be a single Influence card with
two Summer icons, or two Influence cards each with one Summer icon.

Raising Influence Out of Season

To exert influence out of season, a player must play a number of out-of-season icons one higher than the current Influence total.

For example, if the current season is Summer and the current Influence total is two, it would take three Spring icons or three Autumn icons or three Winter icons. Playing one Spring and two Winter icons, however, would not be legal because all cards used to bid must be from the same season.

Ignoring Previously Played Cards

When a player exerts influence, they set a new Influence total. All previous Influence cards are ignored—nobody is listening to those advisors—and are turned face down in front of the respective player.

The option to pass or exert influence may rotate back around to a player who previously exerted influence, especially when there are valuable resources (or dire consequences) at stake. When this occurs, the player has the same choice to pass or exert influence as before. This continues until all but one player has passed. The last remaining player takes Claim Marker 1.

Influence is Not Cumulative

When a player chooses to exert influence, new cards are not added to any previous cards. Only currently played cards are compared to the current Influence total. Since influence is not cumulative and previous cards are ignored, players do not need to match any previously played season icons.

Card & Influence Limits

When exerting influence, players are required to make a legal play while playing the fewest cards necessary. They cannot drastically raise the current Influence total by “over-paying” with additional cards. Remember, players are trying to conserve resources while holding their territory together.

For example, it is Spring and the current Influence total is one. A player can not play four 1-symbol Summer cards to suddenly raise the Influence total by three.

If the player chose to exert influence using Spring, they are limited to playing a single card with one or two Spring symbols.

If the acting player chose to exert influence using Summer, Fall, or Winter, they could either play a single card with two season icons, or two cards each with one season icon.

Playing out-of-season is the most common way to increase the current Influence total. However, playing cards with multiple icons can allow a player to increase the Influence total even when matching the current season.

Phase III. Seasonal Stakes

Once Phase II. Exerting Influence ends, all played Influence cards are collected by the lead player. Cards that do not match the current season are immediately discarded. Cards from the same season are checked to see if there are any resource or hazard symbols appearing below any season icons. In-season cards without symbols are discarded.

Season cards with symbols are collected by the lead player. Collectively, these additional symbols are referred to as Seasonal Stakes. They represent some significant impact by special events or weather that have taken place during that period of time. These Seasonal Stakes modify the current claim cards, altering their payouts.

No Seasonal Stakes

If there are no Seasonal Stakes and all Season cards were discarded, players move on directly to Phase IV. Draft Claims.

One or More Seasonal Stakes

If there are any Seasonal Stakes in play after all other Season cards have been discarded, the Lead Player (who dropped out first during the previous phase) collects these cards. Then, the Lead Player assigns these cards, one at a time, to the Claim cards currently in play.

- Initially, no more than one Seasonal Stake card may be assigned to a single Claim card.
- In some rare circumstances, there will be more Seasonal Stakes than Claim cards. In this case, a second Seasonal Stake may be assigned to a Claim card as long as there is at least one Seasonal Stake on each of the other Claim cards.

Once all Season Stakes are assigned, the phase ends.
**Phase IV. Draft Claims**

In claim order, starting with the player with the number © Claim Marker, players take turns drafting Claim cards.

When it is a player’s turn to draft, the player takes one of the available face up Claim cards—including any Season Stakes assigned to that Claim card—and places their Claim face up in their play area.

Once all players have taken a Claim card, the Claims are resolved, in draft order. All icons on the Claim card must be applied and resolved, both good and bad.

**Seasonal Stake Icons**

*If a Claim card has Seasonal Stakes assigned to it, the symbols are treated as if they were printed on the Claim card itself. Symbols that would normally appear on the top, green section are resolved along with other icons in that section, etc.*

Once all Claim cards have been drafted and their effects applied, the Claim Markers are returned to the board. The Claim cards are placed face up on the bottom of their corresponding deck, and any Influence cards featuring Seasonal Stakes are placed in the Influence discard pile.

**Resources and Timing**

Claim cards are always resolved from top to bottom: Green, then Grey, then Red. The symbols in a particular section can be resolved in whichever order the player chooses—as long as all of the green resources are applied before grey, etc.

*For a complete list of resource icons, please see the reference sheet at the end of this rulebook*

**Targeted Effects**

If multiple symbols of the same type appear which allow a player to target another player, such as Casualty, Siege, or Thief symbols, the player may choose different targets for each symbol.

In fact, players may even choose to target themselves. Sometimes desperate times call for desperate measures.

**Green Section: Resolved First**

Gold, Soldiers, Food, Holdings: The acting player gains one of the corresponding resources per symbol. Adjust the player’s resource track by one per icon. Each track has a maximum of nine. Excess resources are lost.

Casualty, Siege: Targeted effects against a player’s Soldiers and Holdings, respectively. The targeted player loses one of the corresponding resource.

Thief: Targeted effects against a player’s Gold. The targeted player loses one gold and the acting player gains one gold. If the target player has zero gold to steal, the acting player does not gain gold.

Hope, Writ, Renown: Draw one token of the appropriate type per symbols. Writs remain face down.

Scout: The acting player adds one Scout token to their play area. Then, they may look at a number of hidden information sources (Interlude cards, Despair tokens, or Writ tokens) as the number of Scout tokens owned.

Cards: Draw Influence cards equal to the number shown inside the card silhouette.

**Grey Section: Resolved Second**

Locusts: The acting player chooses any one resource. Then, the acting player loses two of that resource while all other players lose one of that resource.

**Red Section: Resolved Last**

Death, Rats, Ruin: The acting player loses one of the corresponding resource (Soldier, Food, or Holding) per symbol. Adjust the player’s resource track by one per icon.

Despair: The acting player takes one Despair token per symbol and places it face down by their player sheet without looking at it. If there are no Despair tokens remaining, the player must take a Doom token, instead.

**Losing A Resource Currently at Zero**

If a player is ever forced to lose a resource they currently have set at zero on their tracking sheet, they must take a Despair token. If the acting player uses the Thief icon to steal Gold from someone with zero Gold, the acting player gains no gold, but the target must still take a Despair token.

**Event Interludes**

After completing a season, an event interlude is resolved before moving on to the next season. The top card from the corresponding Interlude deck is revealed and resolved.
**Marketplace**

Between Spring and Summer is the Marketplace Interlude, where players have an opportunity to spend Gold for resources and bonuses.

Each Marketplace card follows the same format, which lists three different rows. Each row represents one merchant and a possible purchase the player can make. A player can spend Gold on each row once. This means a player can spend a maximum of four Gold during the Marketplace event, receiving the benefit listed in each row once.

The Lead Player chooses whether or not to spend Gold to make any purchases, and applies any purchases immediately. Then, the next player clockwise from the Lead Player either passes or makes their Marketplace purchases, and so on, until all players have passed or conducted any Marketplace purchases.

After all players have had an opportunity to purchase resources at the Marketplace, the event interlude ends and players begin the Summer season.

**The Field of Battle**

After Summer, war is waged and soldiers fight and die during the Field of Battle event. This interlude compares player resources against each other to see who has the most, the second most, and the least of a particular resource.

Most Field of Battle events compare each players' Soldiers, but not always. Whatever resource is compared, the player with the most of that resource—*or all players tied for the most of that resource*—receive the reward shown below the 1st Place section on the left side of the card.

Next, the player with the second most of that resource—*or all players tied for the second most of that resource*—receive the reward shown below the 2nd Place section in the center of the card.

Finally, the player with the least of that resource—*or all players tied for the least of that resource*—suffers the consequences shown below the Last Place section on the right side of the card.

**Second or Last?**

With ties, sometimes several players may actually have the second most of a resource—which also happens to be the least of the resource!

Rewards and positions are resolved from left to right, so if there are no players remaining after 1st Place and 2nd Place have been awarded, then no players finish in Last Place.

**Reaping What Was Sown**

After Autumn comes the harvest and Food is compared to various resources during the Reaping What Was Sown event. If players have a surplus of food, they can exchange excess food for other resources. If they do not have enough food, they suffer Despair.

**Check Food Reserves**

First, each player checks to see if they have more Food than the resource shown on the first line of the card. Whether a player has more, less, or an equal amount each has different consequences. First, the Lead Player resolves all consequences. After the remaining players resolve the event in clockwise order, the event ends and players move on to the Winter season.

**The Player Has More Food**

If the player’s food is *more than* the listed resource, they have the option to continue to the next line, indicated by the green check mark, to perform an exchange of goods.

The player performs the exchange shown on the second line once. This often requires reducing the player’s Food resource amount by one or two in exchange for increasing another resource, drawing tokens, cards, or receiving some other benefit.

Icons separated by a slash “/” provide an “either / or” option to the player. The player may choose the benefit listed on one side of the slash or the other, not both at the same time.

If a player chooses to make the exchange, they must immediately *Check Food Reserves* again and resolve the impact of whether they now have more than, an equal amount to, or less than the indicated resource.
Players are not required to participate by exchanging Food for rewards, even if they have more Food than the listed resource. They may pass and wait for the other players until the event is done.

The Player Has An Equal Amount of Food
If the player’s Food is equal to the resource listed, the player gains no benefit but suffers no consequences and their role in the event is over.

The Player Has Less Food
If the player has Food less than the listed resource, the player takes a Despair token and their role in the event is over.

The Bitter Months
Winter is a harsh and punishing time, but The Bitter Months represent the utter darkness before the dawn. During the Bitter Months, players check to see if their Holdings can protect their people and resources until Spring finally arrives.

Each Bitter Months card compares Holdings to one other resource. There are only three possible outcomes. Compared to the shown resource, the player will have more Holdings, an equal number of Holdings, or fewer Holdings. Each player finds the row that corresponds to their status and applies the results shown to the right side of that row.

Hand Limit Check
After The Bitter Months event each year (including the final year) if a player has more than nine Influence cards, they must discard down to nine.

After all players have applied the event results, The Bitter Months event is complete and the year is over.

End of the Year
If this was the first or second year, a new year begins with Spring, then continues as outlined through the original play sequence until the third and final year is completed. After the third Bitter Months event is resolved, three years of war have passed and the game ends.

Game End & Scoring
After the third and final year, the game ends. This triggers several different end-game bonuses before players calculate their final scores and determine the winner.

The game end actions are resolved in the following order.

Reveal Writs
Any Writs that have not already been revealed are now turned face up and their effects applied. This may be an immediate adjustment of a player’s resources or may allow the player to draw a special token, such as Renown or Hope, and add it to their play area.

Resolve Hope
For each Hope token a player owns, the player to their left randomly selects one face down Despair token to discard. The Despair tokens are revealed as they are discarded so everyone knows the value of the tokens being removed.

If a player has more Hope tokens than Despair tokens, extra Hope tokens are discarded—they do not factor into scoring.

If a player gained any Doom tokens during play, they cannot be discarded by Hope tokens.

Reveal Despair
All remaining face down Despair tokens a player has are turned face up. These tokens represent negative points that will be subtracted from the players’ scores. Each Doom token is always worth -5 points.

Bonus Scoring: Resources & Cards
Starting with Gold, each player compares the number of remaining resources they have against the other players. For each player someone has more than in a resource, they earn 1 Renown.

Players conduct this bonus scoring by comparing the four main resources—Gold, Food, Soldiers, and Holdings—as well as the number of cards remaining in hand at the end of the game.

For example, the players start by comparing Gold. Alex has 5 Gold, Brady and Chris each have 3 Gold, while Morgan and Sam have just 1 Gold left.

Alex has more Gold than all four other players and scores four bonus Renown. Brady and Chris have more Gold than two other players (Morgan and Sam) and each score two bonus Renown. Poor Morgan and Sam, tied with one Gold, do not have more than any other players and earn no Renown.
**Final Adjustments**

After determining the bonus points for resources and cards, be sure to subtract points from Despair and Doom tokens!

**To the Victor!**

After all bonus scoring and final adjustments have been made, the player with the most Renown wins the game.

If there is a tie, the player with fewer negative points from Despair and Doom wins. If there is still a tie, it is a shared survival after three horrific years of war.

If anyone ends the game with *negative* Renown, their lands fall into chaos, the soldiers and vassals who don’t die from starvation or the plague flee to other territories, and their legacy is one of shame and disgrace. Better luck next time!

In some rare cases, the highest Renown value may actually be negative. The player with the highest Renown in this situation does technically “win” the game, but their noble house has still suffered mightly and their deeds likely forgotten over time.

**Additional Guidelines**

**Resource Maximums**

Each of the four main resources—Gold, Food, Soldiers, and Holdings—caps at nine on the player tracking sheets. If a player would gain resources that would exceed nine, the excess resources are lost.

**Hand Limit**

During each year, there is no limit to the size of a player’s hand of Influence cards during each year—it will likely increase and decrease quite a bit over the course of play.

However, after The Bitter Months event each year (including the final year) if a player has *more than* nine Influence cards, they must discard down to nine.

**Token Limits**

Most token types are limited to the number of actual tokens available with the game. Hope, Writs, Despair, and Scouts have a limited supply. Once those tokens are gone, they are gone for good. Writ tokens used during play are *not* returned to their starting pool, but removed from play.

The only two token types which have a theoretically infinite supply are Renown and Doom. If either pool runs out of tokens for these resources, use some other means to keep track of them.

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**Game Credits**

*Game Design & Development:* Jay Little  
*Graphic Design:* Jacob Walker  
*Playtesting:* Dozens of amazing playtesters and designers from Protospiel Madison and Protospiel Minneapolis.

**The Game Crafter**

Special thanks to the fine folks at The Game Crafter. In addition to being a great on-demand publishing resource, they support Protospiel playtesting events in the Midwest. I am also a professor teaching game design and board game production and The Game Crafter has been very generous by helping keep my prototyping lab stocked.

**The Power of Protospiel**

Back in the spring of 2015, after only a week of design, I took my first crude prototype of Three Years of War to Protospiel Minneapolis. The response was incredibly positive from the playtesters at the event. Over the next few months I put in a lot of time and effort to further develop the gameplay as well as create a more professional prototype.

That fall, I took an updated version of Three Years of War to Protospiel Madison. Things went even better than I could have hoped. Several times after a game wrapped up, someone from that session would come back with other friends asking to play again. One of the players even received the worst drubbing I had ever seen, ending with a negative score, but he immediately wanted to play again, saying it was the most fun he ever had losing a game.

If you are a game designer—aspiring or otherwise—I cannot endorse strongly enough the value of playtesting events like Protospiel and Unpub, or open playtesting at game conventions. It may take a bit of research to find events near you, but they are worth it. In addition to all the great feedback, over the years, Protospiel events have given me the opportunity to make lasting friendships with a number of players, game designers, and publishers.
These rules and graphics are still being refined and polished. There may be slight changes between the content and images contained in this rulebook and any final, published product.