

# The fundamentals of tempo and how to apply them to draft Keeping Up To Speed: Aggression and Tempo in *Champions of Kamigawa*

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It is well known among local pros that I am not a fan of quickly beating down an opponent. Not for me the thrills of awful yet cheap creatures followed by situational finishers that are only useful when you're already winning. I'm all about card quality, card advantage and surviving long enough to bring my better deck to bear. I'll gladly suck up the early damage from a Suntail Hawk confident that my Anaba Shaman or Wall of Air will eventually take care of it without costing me a card. During the days of *Invasion* I would happily pass a Shivan Zombie if I could pick up Plague Spores instead – a sentiment that I'm sure delighted those drafting around me. When *Mirrodin* first came out I disdained popular opinion at the time and passed the very aggressive Bonesplitters while grabbing the seemingly slower Viridian Longbows. I find it painful to play with inferior cards and inevitably end with fairly expensive, yet powerful, decks.

So why, while playing in a **Magic Online 0-ticket draft** two weekends ago, did I find myself selecting Cruel Deceiver over Pull Under?

Aggression and Tempo. They finally make sense to me.

Not that I didn't understand aggression and tempo prior to this weekend. On the contrary, I knew full well the various theories and ideas involved in aggressive limited decks. But until now I've never found the arguments for such builds to be particularly compelling or necessary. To me, quick aggressive decks only worked against the unprepared and the mana-screwed. My decks were designed specifically to survive long enough that I could safely laugh from 12 life as my opponent plays a Disciple of the Vault across from my Clockwork Vorrac and Goblin Dirigible.

But I'm not laughing anymore. *Champions of Kamigawa* is the most suitable aggressive-play limited format I've ever seen, including *Tempest*. Fast enough that even with a dedicated preference for card quality over card aggression, I am passing along the 6 casting cost (6cc) spells for the nearly vanilla 2/1 creatures for two mana.

So what has changed?

Before that can be answered an understanding of aggression and tempo theory and its benefits is required. Once we have mastered the ideas I'll follow up with the exact reasons that *Champions of*

*Kamigawa* is different from previous sets and continue with some drafting advice for both you and your opponent. Get a beverage because this is going to take a while.

## Aggression and Tempo

It's important to distinguish between aggression and tempo. Aggression is a *style* of play while tempo is a *pace* of play. Aggressive decks have an opposite in defensive decks, but they are both fighting for control of the tempo.

An aggressive deck aims for a rapid tempo that if it does not win outright, positions a player for victory even as they lose control of the game. Aggressive decks are designed to take the initiative. They want to be generating multiple threats quickly that force their opponent to have exactly the right answers at the right time. Card quality and physical card advantage are often sacrificed for the sake of speed. The fewer draw phases an opponent has, the less likely she is to find what she needs. The end result is a faster-paced game – the aggressive deck has taken control of the tempo.

A defensive deck slows the pace of the duel to a pace that allows them to survive long enough to fully utilize their more expensive cards. Defensive decks are designed to take *back* the initiative by answering all the threats posed by the aggressive deck as efficiently as possible. The faster they can do this, the sooner they have regained control of the tempo and can move forward with their own victory conditions.

Aggression versus aggression generally becomes a race while defensive versus defensive becomes a battle of control, card advantage and game breakers. Today I'm going to leave those scenarios aside and concentrate only on the aggressive versus defensive battle. Note that defensive decks do eventually have to become aggressive in some way or another, but that tends to happen later, once they already have at least partial control of the board and is less interesting – when you're at 42 life it doesn't really matter how you win.

Tempo is a ratio of relevant threats to relevant answers. Tempo is a ratio of relevant threats to relevant answers. A high ratio indicates a fast or overwhelming tempo involving multiple threats or a single extremely large threat while a low ratio means there are answers prepared for threats that haven't even appeared, such as three Counterspells in hand with the mana to use them. This ratio is in constant flux as cards are played or removed. It's important to distinguish the "highly relevant" threats from the "less relevant" or "potential" threats when determining tempo. A 5/5 flier is a much more relevant threat than a 2/2 flier is. Equipment by itself is an implied threat that increases the relevance of other threats; it only increases the threat ratio if there are creatures to equip. An Orochi Sustainer on the second turn by itself is not much of a danger, though it has the potential to hasten the arrival of more relevant threats such as Order of the Sacred Bell and increase the tempo. But if you're holding Cage of Hands, a very relevant answer to the Order, then tempo will swing back in your direction as you negate both the relevant threat and the implied threat with a single card. AHonden of Seeing Winds is not a relevant answer to many threats but drawing an extra card or more each turn is likely to provide those answers and lower the threat ratio, thus the Honden is an effective potential answer and a quality investment.

While all creatures that can both attack and block can affect tempo in either direction, creatures with high power tend to be aggressive, as they are a more relevant threat while those with high toughness tend to be defensive as they are a more relevant answer, particularly if one creature can hold off many.

Unsummon, Master Decoy and Terror are popular and powerful because, among other reasons, they can act as either a threat or an answer. They can increase the threat ratio by removing a blocker (answer) or decrease the threat ratio by removing an attacker (threat). Spineless Thug and Wave of Indifference, on the other hand, are purely threats as they have no use defensively. Circles of Protection and walls are pure answers as they have little role aggressively.

## Controlling Tempo

The first few turns are often crucial for determining the tempo of a game. Even in constructed formats there has never been a dominant deck that did nothing on the first four turns, even if it was just holding a Counterspell in anticipation. Due to the unpredictable nature of **Magic** it's possible that you can win without doing anything for the first few turns but it's extremely difficult to do so consistently against decks of comparable quality.

In limited formats the simplest way to improve tempo is bringing out multiple threats or answers in a single turn. In the first few turns of the average game most players will generate a threat or answer each turn as they play one spell that maximizes their available mana. But to get ahead you want to play more threats than your opponent has answers – two threats is better than one. As third turns go, Shocking a blocker so your Goblin Raider hits and then playing Canyon Wildcat increases the tempo much more than just playing a Sabretooth Tiger. This helps explain why Befoul is better than Pull Under.

So tempo is important, but how do we take and maintain control of it?

The best way to improve your tempo control is to reduce missed opportunities. Everything has a cost in **Magic**. Lands that remain untapped at the end of your opponent's turn represent opportunity that is forever wasted. Spells you can never cast might as well not have been drawn. Missing your fourth land drop and having nothing to play is like skipping a turn, but so is running out of spells on turn six as you continue playing lands seven and eight. And even if you play both spells and lands on turns three through five, they are no use if they don't keep you alive.

So, let's improve our mana curve.

With roughly 40-45% of your deck being a mana source and taking into account mulligans and various accelerants, you should be able to play your fourth land on turn four approximately 85% of the time. Therefore your deck should not require you to play a 5cc spell on turn five in order to survive or maintain tempo, and a large majority of your spells must cost four or less.

That being said, there will be times when you do play a fifth and sixth land on schedule but you'll only have 4cc spells available. It is in these situations where you want to have additional cheap spells or

abilities that can make use of those leftover mana. This is a critical idea that is often dismissed – it's important to maximize your mana usage in the mid-game.

With this in mind, we can break spells down into the following groups:

- Cheap – 1-2 mana
- Moderate – 3-4 mana
- Expensive – 5+ mana

To guarantee a cheap spell in your opening hand you want to have at least five in your deck. But it's important to distinguish between cheap threats and cheap answers, and when they become relevant. An aggressive deck wants five cheap relevant threats such as Samurai of the Pale Curtain or Hearth Kami. A defensive deck wants five cheap relevant answers such as Floating-Dream Zuberia or Consuming Vortex. Kodama's Might can act as a cheap potential threat or answer but shouldn't be counted for the purposes of your opening hand as it will rarely be relevant. Defensive decks often try to get away with fewer cheap spells because they either can't draft them or they have extremely defensive moderate spells such as River Kajin that can answer multiple threats. This is a risk that rarely works out against well-designed aggressive decks in *Champions of Kamigawa*.

Expensive spells should number at most five, and four is better. It's okay to have one or in your opening hand but if you draw too many too quickly then the probability of wasting opportunities is greatly increased either due to lack of mana or overwhelming early threats with no equivalent answers. Again, there is a tendency to try and squeeze a few extra expensive spells into a deck because they're so powerful but powerful spells are no use if the game ends on turn seven.



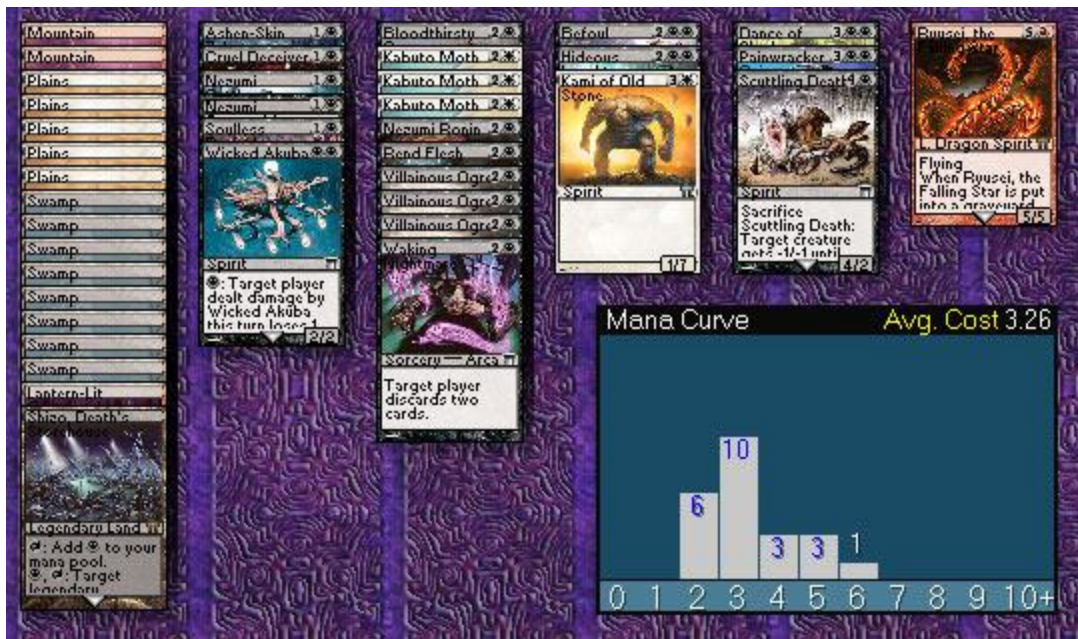
*This deck hopes to stall the ground until it's many powerful 6cc spells can come into play, but with only 13 creatures in the aggressive Champions of Kamigawa environment it is not likely to succeed.*

Moderate spells are the meat of the deck and should vary in cost. Having five 2cc and eleven 3cc spells accompanied by only three 4cc spells will make it difficult to use all your mana or play multiple spells when you have four or five lands in play. But you don't want an 11/3/5 ratio either, as the same problem will exist at three, five and eventually seven mana. The exact ratios depend on the deck and how aggressive or defensive it is as well as where the relevant threats and answers are. There are lots of things to consider such as mana acceleration (which will skip you from two mana to four) and color requirements (WW is a lot tougher on turn 2 than 2WW on turn 4 or 4WW on turn 6). That is an entire article in itself and this one is already plenty long so I won't be going there this time around, but even without that full treatment it's still very helpful to at least keep these things in mind.



My first *Champions of Kamigawa* draft deck does not have a smooth mana curve.

Looking specifically at *Champions of Kamigawa*, there are a large number of 3cc playables so if you want to control the tempo you have to be very aware of your casting costs and make sure you have cheap spells to fill in the gaps on those later turns.



This deck has ten 3-drops but only three 4-drops and risks wasting mana until it gets six lands into play.

It's important to reiterate that it's not just about playing spells efficiently, it's also important to be playing spells that are relevant. Opening with Liar's Pendulum, activating it on turn two to draw a card and following it up with Dragon's Blood and Goblin Charbelcher makes very efficient use of your mana but answers no threats until turn five when the Charbelcher may or may not reveal enough spells to

kill a creature for three mana. Drafting a deck full of nothing but potential answers or "investments" is doomed to fail. This was often a risk in *Mirrodon* with the low creature counts.

A difficult aspect of tempo for any card advantage advocates is *sacrifice*. The value of Unsummon is obvious when used to save a creature after damage is on the stack or that is being targeted by Dark Banishing. But throwing away a card just to return an attacking creature to its owner's hand seems wasteful. What is important to consider is not the immediate card advantage but rather the relevant threat count. An aggressor tapping out to play a creature on turns two, three and four has generated three threats. If the first one is returned to their hand immediately than that threat is effectively removed for at least two (and possibly more) turns as they play their more expensive spells. From the aggressor's perspective, if the defender plays out three answers including blocking creatures, Unsummon, because it's so cheap, allows the attacker to remove one answer as well as bring out another threat, *both in the same turn*. The key factor is tempo – sacrificing card advantage now improves the threat ratio in your favor - thus reducing or increasing the amount of time a defender has to find appropriate answers.

## **Why Aggression Works**

Properly designed, an aggressive tempo deck will defeat your opponent before they can make use of all their resources. A Konda, Lord of Eiganjo is difficult to deal with only if it gets into play and stays there. And it's still not going to matter if you can win with a creature rush the following turn. Aggressive decks attain virtual card advantage by winning quickly - if I defeat you while you're still holding four cards you didn't have time to play or were returned to your hand, then you have effectively been forced to discard those cards. If you find that you're often lamenting at the end of the game that "if only I had played first" or "if only I had drawn a sixth land" victory would have been yours, then you are being defeated by aggressive tempo.

Aggressive decks attain virtual card advantage by winning quickly. A common advantage of aggression relates to land. While your cards may be inferior in quality, they also cost less to play so you can get away with fewer mana sources in your deck. Even when you inevitably miss a land drop, or are forced to mulligan one or two times, having cheaper spells means you're more likely able to function reasonably. If you can play 80% of your spells with three mana then it doesn't take much for your deck to get going while a more expensive deck would be stuck doing nothing or forced to discard.

In a similar vein, when your opponent has a difficult draw, you are much better prepared to take advantage of it if you have consistent and aggressive early plays. If your opponent's first creature is a 1/4 River Kajin, missing your third land drop isn't quite as scary as if you were facing a 2/1 Nezmi Cutthroat and 3/1 Bloodthirsty Ogre. If your opponent is flooded with land and only two spells show up in the early game, having a swarm of attackers will quickly finish him before he can draw out of it. As extreme land counts in either direction are a significant issue in approximately 10-15% of all games, having a deck that takes early advantage of it in both directions seems like an excellent idea.

An often-overlooked benefit of aggressive decks in tournaments is the ability to rest between rounds. Tournaments are generally quite draining but even more so if you're playing each round to the 50-minute limit or into extra turns. With a quick aggressive deck you can almost guarantee some free time between rounds to rest, eat, regain your composure and scout your competitors. That free time

doesn't come without a price though as the few turns you do play tend to be filled with intense calculation and all or nothing attacks where you sit on the edge of your seat hoping your opponent doesn't have an answer to your Devouring Rage. But if you can handle the additional stress, the rewards are yours.

So with all these benefits to playing aggressive tempo-based decks, why would anyone be the defensive player?

## **The Perils of Aggression and *Champions of Kamigawa***

Despite the many of benefits of aggression, historically sets have not been aggression-friendly. I'm going to go through an extensive list of things to investigate before you choose the aggressive option and then see how it applies to the current set.

### **Efficient Removal and Tricks**

The bane of the aggressive deck is efficient low-cost common and uncommon removal. Such removal comes in many forms:

1. *Point removal such as Shock, Pacifism or Terror*

Back in the day there were few things more satisfying than hitting a first-turn Hypnotic Specter with a Lightning Bolt or using a Swords to Plowshares to send an Erhnam Djinnfarming after an Armageddon. For a very efficient one mana you attained significant advantage by wiping out a threat that required a much greater cost to generate. That potential loss of advantage is still a risk today – there's no point in playing a 3/1 for three mana if a single Spark Spray or Kirtar's Desire takes it down while also allowing your opponent to play another blocker. Point removal costing more than three mana isn't an issue unless it takes out your Dragons, but if cheap versions are plentiful then you're going to be consistently entering the late game.

**ChK** - In the entire set, Glacial Ray and the uncommon Reciprocate are the only kill spells under three mana, which suggests that the Ray would be popular even if it didn't have splice. Consuming Vortex and Eye of Nowhere are the bounce alternatives, with the Vortex being a sought after card due to its instant nature. Compared to *Mirrodin* with Terror, Electrostatic Bolt, Shatter, the Spellbombs and Shrapnel Blast, it's a lot easier to keep creatures in play in the early game.

2. *Recurring removal such as Sparksmith, Auriok Transfixer or Prodigal Sorcerer*

By answering your best threat or multiple ones, pingers and tappers become an issue very quickly. In order to be relevant, quality recurring removal needs to cost three mana or less to play and one mana or less to activate as turn five is too late to start answering threats and two mana is too much to keep open each turn. Altar of Shadows is not an aggressive card.

**ChK** - Kitsune Diviner and the uncommon Honden of Infinite Rage are the only recurring removal available for three mana or less (Bloodthirsty Ogre is too situational and too slow) and both have restrictions as to when they can be used. Beyond that we have Frostwielder and Innocence Kami (which are effective but pricey) while Hankyu makes even the Ogre look speedy. Not quite comparable to *Mirrodin* with Spikeshot Goblin, the Crystal or Granite Shards and the aforementioned Transfixer and Viridian Longbow.

3. *2-for-1 creatures such as Shock Troops, Nekrataal or Man-o'-War*

Opponents playing blockers is expected. Opponents playing blockers that also remove a creature is a different situation altogether. By countering two of your threats with one answer, tempo is dramatically shifted into the defender's favor similar to playing two spells in a turn. With such an immediate impact on the game, 2-for-1 creatures should cost no more than four mana for best effect though they are almost always welcome – Dakmor Lancer may cost six mana but it's never in the sideboard.

**ChK** - "Free" two-for-ones are increasingly rare in **Magic** since Flametongue Kavudominated the tournament scene. Pain Kami is a quality card but it doesn't have quite the immediate impact due to the mana requirements of the activation. The Zuberans, in particular the Ember-Fist Zuberana, are the closest equivalent and even then the second effect is rarely game breaking. Scuttling Death is a bit more expensive but perhaps represents the best situation as soulshift provides a possible 3-1 advantage with the correct board situation. *Mirrodin* came up short here as well with the excellent Viridian Shaman followed distantly by the Goblin and Nim Replicas.

4. *Mass removal*

The biggest risk of developing an overwhelming early advantage is that your opponent will respond with Barter in Blood or Pyroclasm to regain control of tempo and simultaneously attain generous card advantage. Even Nausea, Tremor or Wail of the Nim can completely decimate an aggressive start and no one wants to lose their first couple of plays to a 14th pick. On the high and generally rare end you have expensive but thorough mass kill spells such as Slice and Dice, Starstorm and Akroma's Vengeance, all from *Onslaught* block.

**ChK** - In *Champions of Kamigawa* only Hideous Laughter will destroy multiple creatures with more than one point of toughness and unfortunately that includes every common and uncommon creature that it shares a color with (black) except the two difficult-to-play demons (ignoring Deathcurse Ogre). Infest, on the other hand, while effective against many of the black *Mirrodin* creatures, worked excellently with the large number of available artifact or artifact-equipped creatures. As players realize how important mass removal has become in this speedier environment, Yamabushi's Storm has rapidly gained popularity, especially when compared to Wail of the Nim or Tremor in past blocks. Even Myojin of Cleansing Fire, the high-end rare mass kill, costs eight mana instead of the usual six, indicating a definite preference for aggressive play by the designers.

It appears that the world of Kamigawa is extremely creature friendly.

Note that point removal tends to be in aggressive colors and also benefit aggressive decks. Though Pyrite Spellbomb is a bit less effective against a defensive Yotian Soldier than it is against an attacking Alpha Myr and sacrificing Shock Troops to remove a blocker before attacking isn't optimal, the aggressive player rarely has problems with drafting as much removal as they can. But in general, even though it seems counterintuitive, efficient removal tends to favor the defensive deck.

Combat tricks can often act as cheaper situational removal and they too benefit both aggressive and defensive decks. A Giant Growth or Shelter can save a creature on either side of the Red Zone. Unlike point removal, combat tricks don't tend to favor one side or the other – a Kodama's Might on a 2/2 kills a 2/2 or a 1/4 just as well. *Champions of Kamigawa* seems to have the standard number of combat tricks.

## **Creature Quality**

Before rushing to pick 2/2s for two mana early, it's critical to check whether the set has the appropriate creature tools to design an aggressive deck. And perhaps more importantly, you need to make sure the defensive options are limited or surmountable.

The generic creature is the "Gray Ogre" – a 2/2 for three mana. As a rule of thumb, independent of specific abilities or hindrances, any creature with a power equal to or greater than its casting cost such as Wretched Anurid is efficiently aggressive and any creature with a toughness strictly greater than its casting cost such as Angelic Wall is efficiently defensive. The creatures that bleed into both groups or have a high combined power and toughness such as Ember Beast are generally excellent overall and can function either way, depending on their abilities. Generally a minimum power of 2 is required for a creature to be considered aggressive though exceptions can be made for 1-power creatures with aggressive abilities such as Slith Firewalker.

There are exceptions to every rule, especially when abilities are taken into account. Thoughtbound Primoc, a 2/3 flier for three mana, can be considered aggressive as not only does it have evasion, it has a high relative toughness for a flier that will allow it survive combat with most other fliers under five mana. Fog Beast, despite being a 4/2 for only three mana, cannot be considered aggressive as there are so many situations where it cannot attack that it is best thought of as a wall (see "Defender" below).

With all of this in mind, there are three primary creature concerns when considering your aggression options:

1. *Efficient High Toughness Creatures*

Four is generally the magical number when it comes to an appropriate toughness for effective blocking and ground stalls. There are plenty of kill spells that deal two damage and there are a bunch that deal three, but very few dish out four or more and they're never cheap. Creature power is the same, you can find lots of 3cc or lower creatures with 2-power, and a reasonable number with a 3-power, but if you want to consistently deal four damage in the attack phase you need to be drafting a lot of rares. The reason Flametongue Kavu was so popular was that it broke so many of these rules.

Therefore, if a set has a lot of cheap or reasonably priced 4-toughness creatures, you're going to be in trouble. For example, *Eighth Edition* has Vine Trellis, Wall of Stone, Standing Troops, Horned Turtle and Wall of Air (1/5!) in the 3cc range, with Giant Spider, Fighting Drake, Wall of Swords, Hunted Wumpus and Lesser Gargadon filling out the 4cc slot and bringing additional points of power. Power can make a difference on defensive creatures as it prevents attackers from swarming and dealing damage while one creature "bounces" off the 1/4 without dying. There is a surprising difference between Giant Spider and Harsh Deceiver, both four toughness creatures for four mana.

**ChK** - *Eighth Edition* may have ten low-cost high-toughness common and uncommon creatures but in *Champions of Kamigawa* there are only four - River Kajin, Harsh Deceiver (which lacks a second point of power), Kami of Old Stone and Sosuke, Son of Seshiro. In Kamigawa it is significantly less likely that your aggressive creatures will be effectively held off in the early game by high-toughness creatures.

## 2. Large Creatures

In addition to worrying about cheap creatures with a high toughness, you also have to worry about the overall average size of all the creatures in the set. If everyone is playing 2/3 creatures for three mana and building up to 4/4s (or 3/6s!) for five, your 2/1s for two aren't going to get too far. But if most of the creatures in the set are small then drawing a vanilla 2/2 on turn seven may still have an impact on the game.

**ChK** - By my rough calculations, the average playable creature in *Champions of Kamigawa* has the same power as the creatures in *Onslaught* (the last set with a standard color spread), but approximately one less point of toughness. The generic 4/4 green creature for five mana is not available for the first time since *Urza's Saga* (where it was a 4/5 Blanchwood Treefolk). The largest reasonable creature is the 5/5 Moss Kami, and the 5-slot is empty. This means that small creatures have free rein to cause trouble without worrying about having to gang-block a giant beast early on. There are also no 2/3 or 3/3 creatures for three mana - the early game can be dominated by the tiny, especially if they have bushido.

## 3. Availability of Efficient Aggressive Creatures

Are there enough efficient creatures in the set to consistently build a draft deck? If there's only one non-rare 2-power creature for two mana in each color, then it's fairly unlikely that you'll ever be able to draft enough of them for a deck. Sure, Wild Mongrel was fantastic but it was also the only 2cc green creature in *Odyssey* that had a power of 2 barring threshold. *Mirrodin* was so filled with equipment and other artifacts that it was tough to find enough creatures at all let alone fast and aggressive ones.

**ChK** - If there aren't any big creatures then by default there must be a bunch of small ones, but are they efficient? In a word, yes. There are nine 2/1 or 2/2 non-rare creatures for two mana. While *Odyssey* block had similar numbers, most of those creatures came with significant disadvantages. Phantom Whelp and Mad Dog are no Wicked Akuba or Hearth Kami, and Crypt Keeper is definitely no Nezumi Cutthroat. There are also the Zuberass and even some playable 1/1s with evasion such as Soratami

Cloudskater. And not only are they aggressive, they often have abilities that make them useful in the late game. They can destroy artifacts or enchantments, turn land into cards, or pump up for extra damage when they get through. This alleviates the risk of playing smaller creatures as they retain usefulness in the late game.

## Aggressive Tone

Some environments are just better suited for aggression than others. Lots of consistent evasion such as shadow or fear (outside of *Mirrodin*) indicates the possibility for quick games. If Flanking, First Strike, Trample or Haste are plentiful then early attacking becomes more likely. If the defining attribute of the environment is 2/2 morphs for three mana then defense returns to favor.

Our first indication that aggression is cool and trendy is the bushido mechanic. In an environment of smaller creatures a +1/+1 boost represents a significant improvement. While helpful for both aggressive and defensive decks, of the fifteen common and uncommon creatures with bushido, only one costs more than four mana and only two have a toughness greater than 2. The mechanic reeks of aggression as bushido is combined with Haste (Ronin Houndmaster), First Strike (Kitsune Blademaster) and bonuses for attackers (Nagao, Bound by Honor).

There is also the unnamed green mechanic where a damaged creature remains tapped for an additional turn. This acts as temporary form of evasion or delay that can be utilized by aggressors (Orochi Ranger) and defenders (Matsu-Tribe Decoy) though experience has shown it more useful on offence.

There are two primary keywords to watch for when determining how defensive an environment will be:

1. *Defender (Walls)*

Note that there are a lot of walls in that list of high-toughness creatures in *Eighth Edition*. A predominance of walls indicates trouble for the aggressive player as they're always so underpriced for their power and toughness. A 3/3 for one mana is ridiculous unless it's Cinder Wall, a creature you don't want to waste your third turn play removing by running a Trained Armadon at it. Back in *Fourth Edition*, Carnivorous Plant was the cause of many incomplete games because as a common 4/5 for four mana, no one could get ever get through for any damage.

**ChK** - There are none. Not one. Zero. Nada. Zip. This is the only set outside of *Arabian Nights* that does not have at least one wall in it. Enjoy it while it lasts.

2. *Regeneration*

You want to see frustration? Watch a Canyon Wildcat, Balduvian Barbarians and Lightning Elemental being intimidated by a Drudge Skeleton sitting on an untapped Swamp. Cheap regeneration such as Horned Troll, Deepwood Ghoul or Crypt Sliver allows a player to stay on the defensive while still developing their game.

Meanwhile it's costing you a creature each time you attack. It is noteworthy that not only

has regeneration become much rarer in recent sets, it's also becoming more expensive outside of the basic set – the days of Wall of Bone and River Boa are well behind us.

**ChK** - One creature - Kashi-Tribe Reaver, and not only does it cost four mana, it takes more to regenerate it. At the fringes there is Villainous Ogre but only when there's a demon in play and even then it can't block, making it purely aggressive anyway. Serpent Skin does the trick but it's expensive and replaces playing a creature on the third or fourth turn while risking a two for one exchange. Numai Outcast does regenerate for only B, but it also costs 5 life. And it's a 1/1 for four mana – not quite the defensive expert we're worried about. Regeneration is essentially non-existent in *Champions of Kamigawa*.

### 3. *Finishers*

An important aspect of an aggressive deck is the availability of finishers. Are there sufficient finishers in the set to promote aggressive play? There's no point in dealing 18 damage to an opponent if there's no way to get through for those last two points. Creatures such as Flayed Nim or Lone Wolf give the aggressive player some difficulty to stop damage once the defensive player has controlled the board. Direct damage such as Consume Spirit or Blazecan finish an opponent who thinks he's out of reach as can extreme creature enhancement such as Enrage. Evasion is the most common finisher, either through spells such as Panic Attack or Blinding Beam, or through creatures with fear or trample like Gluttonous Zombie and Fangren Hunter.

**ChK** - There are plenty. Thief of Hope or the various red pingers are a consistent but effective method of dealing those last few points. While Blood Rites is a slow substitute for the easy-to-use X spells, Devouring Greed and Devouring Rage are both common, if risky, methods of dealing significant damage unexpectedly and Strength of Cedars is an exciting surprise on a lowly Zuber that was supposed to slip through for just one. Aggressive evasion is best packaged on the nimble Nezumi Cutthroat but it is readily available from other sources. Kami of the Waning Moon and Guardian of Solitude exist purely to give other creatures evasion while Kami of Fire's Roar and Teller of Tales remove blockers while also exerting some board control themselves. Significantly, defense is so porous that there is very little demand for Uearthly Blizzard or Terashi's Cry despite both being Arcane and able to remove multiple blockers for a turn, though with Dance of Shadows and Lure doing all that and more, this may not be such a surprise.

*Champions of Kamigawa* is a very aggressive environment.

## **Inevitability**

Each turn that passes favors the defender as they begin to even out their spells and lands and make use of their more powerful answers. There is nothing more frustrating than realizing that you can no longer win no matter what you draw because your opponent has played Visara or a second Honden or Circle of Protection. With unlimited time and mana, a deck of quality expensive spells tends to come out ahead and some people prefer to play a deck that always has a chance, no matter what is thrown

at them. If you can't handle randomly losing to an opponent drawing their one answer that you can't defeat, then aggression is not for you. Some players sacrifice aggression to splash answers and that can be effective, but if the environment is host to numerous powerful cards that allow for quick recovery or domination, then it might be time to reach for that 18th land and those 6cc spells.

**ChK** - Let's summarize. There are lots of small creatures and very few big creatures or creature with a high toughness, and absolutely no walls. Cheap point kill is restricted to a single common spell, which is about the same frequency as mass kill, recurring kill and 2-for-1 removal. There is no regeneration and fear is working again. A dominant keyword mechanic is aggressive and evasion and finishers are plentiful at reasonable prices.

If you ever wanted to risk inevitability, those are some pretty compelling arguments that now is the time.

*Each turn that passes favors the defender as they begin to even out their spells and lands and make use of their more powerful answers.*

## **How Do You Draft It?**

Didn't I say in the introduction that I've never been a fan of aggressive tempo decks? Why would you look to me for how to draft one?

Well, I'm going to take a shot at it anyways!

First of all take heed of everything written so far. Review the section on controlling tempo and apply it. Before you draft a card figure out where it fits into your deck. Is it a threat or an answer? Is it aggressive or defensive? Is it a relevant threat or a potential one? Make sure your mana curve is well rounded with an emphasis on an aggressive and relevant lower end. Try and include evasion and at least one finisher but never more than two or three of each. Heck, if there's nothing helpful in the pack, counterdraft the cards that worry you the most such as Hondens or River Kajins. Just because you're playing black is not a good reason to draft a 6cc Kami of Lunacy that's just going to sit in your sidebar – you *want* your opponents playing those kinds of spells.

One thing that hasn't been mentioned so far is color selection. If you're planning on being aggressive, Black and Red are the first two colors you should look at. While all the colors have their aggressive options, they are much wider in Black and Red, which specializes in cheap creatures with high power and low toughness as well as point kill, finishers and aggressive mechanics. White is the next best option with efficient creatures, occasional kill and evasion and lots of tricks. Green seems like it should be aggressive with lots of tricks but it tends to specialize in larger and slower creatures and lack any sort of removal or finisher since Overrun. Blue is the least aggressive of the colors as it specializes in defensive creatures and the more expensive fliers so it's best as a secondary color. But this isn't definitive – blue fliers can be very aggressive if tempo can be controlled on the ground and black/red decks can use early kill as control until they can bring their late game spells online. Your primary color will likely be black or red but even green/white can throw together some aggression once in a while.

I'm going to summarize some of the best aggressive common and uncommon cards that I've mentioned for each of the colors as well as any comments that weren't made elsewhere. It is very unlikely that you could draft a deck purely from these lists, as many of the best aggressive cards are also the best cards in general and will be highly contested. And it's not enough to blindly draft the cards; you have to build a deck too. If you have finishers or triggers based on spirits and arcane, make it a priority to grab them earlier. If you're picking up red and white cards, aim to generate some samurai synergy.

## **Black Creatures**

Bloodthirsty Ogre, Cruel Deceiver, Kami of the Waning Moon, Gutwrencher Oni, Nezumi Cutthroat, Nezumi Graverobber, Nezumi Ronin, Thief of Hope, Villainous Ogre, Wicked Akuba

Gutwrencher Oni is an example of sacrifice – a few extra cards is worth the very relevant early threat.

Honorable mention goes to the rare Seizan, Perverter of Truth as the "complete package". Combining large relevant threat, direct damage and additional cards, Seizan will be much more helpful to you than an opponent who is already struggling to play cards in hand.

## **Black Spells**

Rend Flesh, Rend Spirit, Soulless Revival, Befoul, Dance of Shadows, Devouring Greed, Swallowing Plague

Kill in general is useful even if it only maintains tempo instead of improving it. Soulless Revival is included only because it is cheap so it can help make use of extra mana in the mid or late game.

## **Blue Creatures**

Guardian of Solitude, Soratami Cloudskater, Soratami Mirror-Guard, Soratami Mirror-Mage, Soratami Rainshaper

The large Soratami are rarely fast enough on their own, they almost always need to be supported by a second color. The Mirror-Mage is an example of sacrifice – you throw away three or six turns of playing land to remove two answers and hope it's enough.

## **Blue Spells**

Consuming Vortex, Hisoka's Defiance, Eye of Nowhere

The Defiance is of variable quality depending on the opposition and may be the worst of the cheap aggressive blue spells. When effective it definitely helps control tempo, but it's risky as it may sit in your hand unused. The Eye of Nowhere is probably better in the sideboard but you're often desperate for cheap spells and the arcane aspect sometimes comes in handy.

Notice the very small number of aggressive blue cards. There's a reason just over two of the [sixteen undefeated decks](#) after the first round in GP Paris were playing blue.

## **Green Creatures**

Humble Budoka, Kami of the Hunt, Kashi Tribe-Reaver, Order of the Sacred Bell, Orochi Ranger, Soilshaper, Sosuke, Son of Seshiro

The Kami's ability to grow often acts as evasion in the early game and if consistently triggered provides a 3/3 for three mana. The Tribe-Reaver is expensive for only 3 points of power but the regeneration and don't untap ability makes it a persistent threat worth playing. Following up on a Soilshaper with a two mana spirit is similar to attacking with a 4 power haste creature on turn three with a potential 3/3 threat each turn thereafter. Later in the game it's not as strong but experience has shown that it's worth playing. Sosuke is another creature that's a bit too expensive for its power but that's justified by the additional aggressive abilities as well as the fantastic toughness that lets it survive most battles.

## **Green Spells**

Lure, Serpent Skin, Kodama's Might, Strength of Cedars

Serpent Skin is definitely no Kodama's Might but the opportunity to generate a large regenerating threat makes it a playable if you need additional tricks.

## **Red Creatures**

Akki Coalflinger, Ember-Fist Zubera, Frostwielder, Hearth Kami, Kami of Fire's Roar, Ronin Houndmaster

The Coalflinger has a very aggressive ability that makes blocking your creatures extremely difficult. The Zubera, while lacking in points of power, just sneaks on to the list with the cheap casting cost and potentially relevant point of direct damage. Frostwielder is a bit slow on defense but works well as a finisher. Ronin Houndmaster with haste and bushido is the definitive aggressive creature.

## **Red Spells**

Uncontrollable Anger, Honden of Infinite Rage, Blood Rites, Blind with Anger, Devouring Rage, Glacial Ray, Hanabi Blast, Yamabushi's Flame, Unearthly Blizzard

Uncontrollable Anger is expensive for a trick but makes up for it by being permanent. An aggressive Blind with Anger counts as two threats the turn it's used by removing a blocker and then attacking with it.

Honorable mention goes to the rare Soulblast, the ultimate all or nothing finisher that's difficult to answer and thus perfect for an aggressive deck.

## **White Creatures**

Kabuto Moth, Kami of Ancient Law, Kitsune Blademaster, Kitsune Diviner, Nagao, Bound by Honor, Samurai of the Pale Curtain

The Moth is a source of recurring tricks and makes all combat decisions very difficult for your opponent. Nagao starts each turn as a 3/3 but should end each attack phase as a 4/4.

Honorable mention goes to Isamaru, Hound of Konda as the best first turn play in the set.

## **White Spells**

Cage of Hands, Indomitable Will, Blessed Breath, Otherworldly Journey, Terashi's Cry

The Journey is doubly useful in that it can keep your creature alive after damage is on the stack (with a bonus) as well as remove a large blocker for a turn. A 6/6 dragon is only slightly worse than a 5/5 dragon!

Call to Glory can be included if you have six or more samurai. Candles' Glow wasn't included as damage prevention without a boost to power or toughness is too expensive at two mana and the life gain is irrelevant. It's still a reasonable card that can be included; it's just not a particularly aggressive one.

## **How Can You Stop It?**

Let's say you're the type of person who refuses to play puny little creatures – you love the huge fliers and every large legend is a friend of yours. You want big spells and big effects – how can you survive in this busy world of tempo?

Well, just as the best aggressive decks are Black or Red, the best defensive decks are often Blue or White (green, as usual, gets the short end of the stick).

Re-read the "Perils of Aggression" a few pages back and apply it to Kamigawa block. Grab as many River Kajins and Kami of Old Stone as you can. Take as many early drops as you can with a selection of tricks and Consuming Vortices to buy time. Make sure you have a Mystic Restraint or two to handle Frostwielders as well as some enchantment removal for Hondens and even a Ghostly Prison to slow down the pace or some life gain to keep out of reach of finishers. Throw in a touch of card drawing and some flying finishers and you're good to go. Well, as good as you can get in this block; as we said, the set isn't really built for defense. In fact, with such little kill black/red decks are forced to become aggressive where in prior years they always had some control options.

Both Hondens and Zuberass are currently popular strategies on the Internet that can be difficult for an aggressive deck to face. I suspect that these strategies have become favorites due to their effectiveness against the dominant aggressive archetype and they can certainly be a challenge. The Honden strategy is particularly effective as aggressive decks will have trouble with two 1/1s a turn or gaining four life a turn or even dealing two damage a turn. Even an aggressive green or white deck still needs to have drafted enchantment removal as well as draw it at the right time. Zuberass aren't easy either; once two of them are in play an all-out attack can be quite costly or even nullified with replacement creatures or life gain. Since Zuberass can be played so quickly and in such numbers, evasion and finishers often become useless, as the aggressive deck doesn't have the time or opportunity to deal sufficient early damage.

The arcane strategy as demonstrated at [GP Paris by Quentin Martin](#) becomes a race to get those six or seven Dampen Thoughts through before 20 damage gets through. I'm not convinced this archetype will dominate a well-designed aggressive build though the versions that use red for Glacial Ray may be more effective against multiple small creatures. As this style becomes more popular I expect Hisoka's Defiance and Waking Nightmare will be drafted more vigorously and we'll have to see if that proves effective.



Martin, GP Paris '04

## Conclusion

Almost eight thousand words later, I hope everyone understands why I took Cruel Deceiver over Pull Under. While only a 2/1, Cruel Deceiver is a valuable commodity as a relevant 2cc spell that is both a threat and an answer. Pull Under, on the other hand, is a poor quality 6cc kill spell (compare it to Betrayal of Flesh or Murderous Spoils) that's too slow (it can often be replaced by one of the Rends that cost half as much). There are many more powerful 6cc spells that I'd rather be playing and with room for only two in most decks I'll wait for those to come around and not bother wasting the draft pick.

After ten years of limited play, the most significant difference for me in *Champions of Kamigawa* is the harsh look at my mana curves. Despite [my great success using expensive spells and only a few two-drops](#), I can no longer prosper with that strategy. One of the great things about **Magic** is the constant flux and this is no different. I'm always looking forward to my next draft and I hope the next two expansions support this new ideology.



*I'd like to dedicate this article to my father, a newspaper and television journalist who never seemed to think I was much of a writer and often announced I was wasting my time with that "card-thing". After a short battle with cancer, he passed away last Wednesday as I was writing this.*