

Going Off to War

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 The Play's The Thing
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Equipment was first introduced to **Magic** in *Mirrodin*, and since then it has become a permanent fixture in the game. In the past, the role that equipment plays has been played by the cards that used to be called creature enchantments and are [now known as Auras](#). Every now and then they would see play, but tying them to the creature they were played on made them inherently weak. You use two cards to form one, and if you lose the creature you lose both cards. Equipment solved that problem by letting you move your Equipment to a new target at any time.

This makes Equipment a long term advantage, potentially making each of your creatures bigger for the entire game. If both sides have armies of similar strength, the player with the best equipment has the advantage. In the extreme case, an *Umezawa's Jitte*, which costs only two mana to play and two to equip, can allow a group of tiny white creatures to take on an army of legends and win. For Equipment Week, I thought I'd dig into the mailbag and see if anyone had a situation where equipment was important. James Burt sent one in that fit the description, from a match played at a *Kawigawa* Block Grand Prix Trial.

Some background on this position: Both players are using creature decks with a lot of good equipment, including using *Manriki-Gusari* to destroy the other players' equipment cards and especially deal with *Umezawa's Jitte*. In addition to the cards in play, you know from playing against similar decks that your opponents' tricks likely include *Umezawa's Jitte*, *Otherworldly Journey* and *Charge Across the Araba*.

YOU (12 life): in play - *Swamp* x5, *Hand of Cruelty*, *Nezumi Cutthroat*
OPP (6 life): in play - *Plains* x6, *Long-Forgotten Gohei*, *Kami of Ancient Law* (tapped, equipped with *Manriki-Gusari*), *Kami of Ancient Law* (tapped, equipped with *Manriki-Gusari*); in hand - 2 cards (unknown)

You draw *Manriki-Gusari*. [What do you do, and what is your plan?](#)

Your opponent has turned two 2/2 creatures into fearsome 4/5 warriors. He can get through right now for four damage per turn, since *Hand of Cruelty* has Protection from White and can block at will. Without the Hand around to block, he could do eight damage per turn instead. As we know from a previous article, even if it wanted to *Nezumi Cutthroat* can't block. However, he can't block it either.

Manriki-Gusari offers you the chance to turn the equipment war around. By equipping it to both of your creatures and tapping them, you can kill both of his copies of *Manriki-Gusari*, at which point yours is safe. He still hits you for six damage and has two 3/3 creatures, but soon your Hand will be 3/4, you'll be hitting him for three per turn and you will dominate the board.

[What's wrong with that plan?](#)

You are putting yourself dangerously low on life points. Once you are at six, he only needs two more hits to kill you and it is a fair bet that if he is willing to play *Long-Forgotten Gohei* that many of the creatures he draws will be able to hit you for three. Even if all he draws is a creature, you could suddenly be close to dead. Even worse, he could have *Charge Across the Araba* in his hand or draw it next turn and use it to kill you on the spot.

The other card you have to worry about is *Umezawa's Jitte*. This play will make you safe from Jitte in the long run, but it opens you up to Jitte on this turn because *Hand of Cruelty* is tapped. You can leave *Manriki-Gusari* on either creature, but the counters that will go on *Umezawa's Jitte* can kill the other. You haven't lost the game, but with your opponent still at six life you've made things a lot harder. It seems like every card in your opponents' deck other than a Plains is likely to be trouble, and he already has two cards in his hand.

[Is there a better option? What matters in this game?](#)

What matters in this game more than anything else are the life totals. Last week's article was all about how life points can change drastically in importance from turn to turn and game to game, and here they have taken center stage. If both players were at twenty life points, killing your opponents' equipment would be by far your most important job but he is at most three hits away from death and given the size of his creatures you aren't feeling that much healthier.



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This is especially true because of the nature of your creatures. Your opponent is playing white, which makes him unable to block either **Nezumi Cutthroat** or **Hand of Cruelty** even if he does not attack. His only permanent answer to either problem is to either kill you or use counters from **Umezawa's Jitte**. You should be looking to take advantage of that situation. He may have the long game right now, but that doesn't matter if he never gets there.

What's the best way to push that edge?

Nezumi Cutthroat is going to attack. There is no reason for him not to if you are not going to be using him to kill equipment. Assuming he is equipped, that will put your opponent at three. You can then move the **Manriki-Gusari** over to **Hand of Cruelty** and pass the turn. Alternately, you could attack with both creatures.

If you attack with both, your opponent drops to one life. The only way he can survive your next attack is to remove counters from **Umezawa's Jitte** to gain life and remove your equipment with his, putting you at eight. He could also win the game by killing you with **Charge Across the Araba**. **Umezawa's Jitte** gives your opponent four outs to survive for several turns, but it can't be in your opponents' hand given the way the game has gone. Charge, however, could have been there since turn one, and that makes it far more dangerous.

If only **Nezumi Cutthroat** attacks, your opponent drops to three life. If he attacks with both creatures, one of them will die to the Hand and he'll lose one of his **Manriki-Gusari**. That's terrible for him, so he'll tap one Kami to blow up your **Manriki-Gusari**. **Umezawa's Jitte** won't help because you'll block whichever creature is equipped with the Jitte. At this point, he'll have to pass the turn back to you after casting whatever he draws. If he has a Charge, it doesn't help him: Attacking with both creatures still gets him killed.

At this point, he's at three and you have four points of damage on the table. If he does not have **Otherworldly Journey** in his hand, an attack kills him. If he does have it, he then will drop to one life and be very dead on your next turn even if he pulls a Jitte. He'll need to hit you for twelve, so he needs you to not draw a creature and he needs to have both **Otherworldly Journey** and **Charge Across the Araba**. Alternatively, you could attack with just the **Nezumi Cutthroat** again. If he takes the damage, he goes to one life and dies to the **Hand of Cruelty** on your next turn while the Hand protects against Jitte. If he did not play a creature, he once again has no way to kill you even with a Charge. If he uses **Otherworldly Journey**, that makes the **Nezumi Cutthroat** lethal on its own if it attacks again so it doesn't buy him anything without a second copy.



So which plan is better?

That depends on how confident you are about the cards your opponent has in his deck. If you know your opponent is playing a standardized deck, which is sometimes called netdecking, then you can sometimes be confident you know exactly what is in your opponents' deck. In that case, you are giving your opponent an extra turn but there is nothing he can do with that turn: He is locked. None of the cards in his deck will save him, so the chance to play around even a combination of cards is worthwhile. The only question is which is more likely: Two **Otherworldly Journey** and enough backup to win after buying the time, which is how he wins if you don't go for the kill, or one Journey and **Charge Across the Araba**. Two copies of the same card are less likely to find their way into your opponents' hand, and even if they do that's no guarantee that he can win the game.

However, an opponent whose deck could contain anything is far more dangerous. A good example of a dangerous card that would make sense is **Final Judgment**. If that is in his deck, every turn gives him another chance to draw a sixth Plains and quite possibly clear the board. He then will have the edge in the new battle thanks to his remaining card in hand and three surviving nonland cards on the table. In a PTQ or Grand Prix Trial, most opponents playing all the cards you've seen so far will be playing a standard decklist and this plan is the best. The better you know your opponent, either from before the match or by talking to him and observing him during the match, the better your judgment will be when you have to decide if he could have rogue cards in his deck. Here, holding back Hand is probably the right approach.

Why do you need to think about all of this right now? It seemed clear what the right move was this turn, so once you know that shouldn't you make that play? Sometimes that is the right approach, as you do not have unlimited time during a match. In this case, thinking about all of this before making your play could fairly be called overkill but it does serve a purpose. You need to make sure that at least one of your plans is better than the alternative. Removing your opponents' equipment is not a useless play, but it should be clear quickly that your opponent will die to your attacks if he does not find something to stop you, and it should also be clear that it won't be easy for him to kill you first.

You only need to analyze far enough ahead that you know what the right play is right now. Sometimes that means looking twenty turns into the future. At other times, you don't need to look past the current turn. You want to make sure you're prepared, but there are diminishing returns from being too prepared.

Equipment works on a similar pattern. You have to go to war with the army you have, not the army you want. When you have a lot of creatures, a little equipment is a big help. When you have a lot of equipment, you can wind up wincing when you draw more equipment because it's causing you to fall short of your recruitment goals. For decks with a lot of inexpensive creatures, the best case scenario is a mix of creatures and



equipment. For decks that have a lot of slots devoted to other things, you can't afford equipment: There's too big a chance that there will be nothing to equip. The result once again is a set of shifting priorities. Sometimes you'll need to focus on preserving your creatures so you can get the most out of your equipment. At other times, you'll be looking to find equipment for your creatures. Early in the game, you'll want to be building up both resources so they can lay the foundation for victory. As the life totals shrink, being prepared becomes less and less important. Equipment, creatures and everything else become worth sacrificing in the name of those last few points of damage.



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