My System - A Guide to Tempo

Scott Johns
Monday, May 15, 2006

- **Scott Johns Archive**

Between playing this game since the days of *Arabian Nights* and Antiquities, competing with the world's best for many years on the Pro Tour, and also being the editor or producer for a **Magic** website for something like seven years now between Mindripper, Brainburst, and**magicthegathering.com**, I think it's safe to say I've read a *lot* of strategy articles on**Magic**. The best have opened my eyes to various aspects of the game that I either misunderstood or just didn't appreciate in the first place. Despite how many articles like that I've read now over the years, there's still one major area that seems drastically under-explored, particularly given how crucial it is to the game. So, while I've read what feels like near endless articles on card advantage, I've read almost nothing *comprehensive* on tempo.

The thing that's always puzzled me is that the articles I've read on tempo don't feel like the whole story. There are whole areas of tempo that I don't remember reading about anywhere, and there are also areas where I just disagree with what's out there. With all that in mind, this article isn't an attempt to write the definitive piece on tempo. Instead, this is just a look into how *I* see tempo. I often see examples of people misunderstanding tempo in articles, playing decisions, and even deck building, so I'm going to share how I look at and think about tempo. By showing you my system, I'm going to focus on what I consider the most important (and under-explored) aspect of tempo:*measuring* it. Some of this will almost surely be review for some of you, but I'm guessing that most of you will find a thing or two that you maybe didn't quite think about in the way I'll present it, or will even gain appreciation for some new concept you may not have noticed before.

And who knows, if the article turns out to be popular, maybe others will jump on the bandwagon and start sinking their teeth into this critical area as well. Zvi recently (and famously) called tempo probably more important than card advantage at this point, and I agree, but it only matters if you understand it enough to take advantage! I've been wanting to write this article for somewhere around seven years now, and it didn't get any easier when I took on the responsibilities for this site, but at some point I needed to just get it out there. We never really have the time we want for something like this, so hopefully by inking myself into the schedule and forcing myself to write this, I can help kick start some attention on the subject.

All set?

What is Tempo

Simple question right? Turns out the answer is anything but. In fact, the term "tempo" gets used for so many different things in **Magic**writing that I think that's part of why discussing it is so difficult, since writers using the word are sometimes talking about very different things.
For this article, when I use the term tempo, I'm referring to the damage race on the board. There's a lot more to it than that of course, but once you get the fundamentals of the damage race, you've got the tools to discuss the more advanced aspects of tempo. So, for now, we're focusing on the race to drop your opponent from 20 to 0. To do that, I'll be focusing mostly on Limited, because the kinds of scenarios you see in Sealed Deck or draft are the clearest to work with, and Limited formats are more commonly about the creature race. I'll be starting with just the very basics, so that we can really take a look at how things work. From there we'll use those tools to touch on other areas, but given how cloudy discussion of tempo has been, I want to make things as clear as possible in this article. With that in mind, I'll be using whichever creatures and spells most easily illustrate what I want to show. Forget about distractions like format or environment for now. Don't fall into the trap of "but I don't play with those specific cards he mentioned." Learn the principles underneath and I guarantee your game will improve.

The Cast

So, please allow me to introduce the cast of characters that will be lending me a helping hand today.

Grizzly Bears, *Gray Ogre*, *Hill Giant*, *Giant Growth*, *Shock*

I did warn you that I was breaking it down to the basics right? These cards and their relatives form the benchmark for how Limited formats get looked at, so they're perfect for examining something like tempo. By removing things like abilities and other complexities (for now), we can focus in on the

fundamentals. So, for now if I refer to a "bear" I'm talking about a 2/2 creature for 2 mana (though a 2/1 will often work too). For "ogre" I'm talking about a 2/2 for 3 mana, and for "giant" I'm talking specifically about a 3/3 for 4 mana.

Tired of hearing why we need to start with the basics? Me too. Let's get started!

The Clock is Running

When we talk about tempo, we're talking about how each player is doing in the race to deal 20 damage to each other without dying in the process. The key to understanding that race lies in finding a way to measure how you're doing in that race. For me, the big breakthrough came when I started thinking about this race in terms of *beats*.
Just like music or theater, a beat is a unit of time. Each action you take in a turn is one beat, same for your opponents. Assuming the beats are relatively equal in power, the key to pulling ahead in the race is by finding ways to get more beats than your opponent.

Let's say you're playing your friend using decks you've just drafted up. On turn one, you each pass the turn. On your second turn, you play a bear of some kind, and your opponent passes his second turn. You've just gained a beat. On turn three, you swing in with your bear, then make an ogre. For now, you're up two beats, but your opponent makes an ogre too. So, this turn was a wash, but you're still up a beat because of turn 2.

Makes sense? It's a simple little thing, but trust me when I say it makes all the difference in the world. By measuring tempo in beats, you have a way to evaluate the board position by actually taking measure of where each player stands in the tempo race. In the example above, once you've each had your third turn, you're up one beat on your opponent. The more beats you increase your lead by, the better your position becomes and the more difficult it becomes for your opponent to catch-up.

So, the key so far is that tempo is something you measure by taking the entire position into account and determining who is up on beats and by how much. With that in mind, let's try something that should illustrate this. What happens when a deck of ogres fights a deck of grizzly bears?

For the sake of this one, let's say the decks look like this:

Grizzly Bears!	*Ogres!*
6 Forest	6 Mountain

14 Grizzly Bears 14 Gray Ogre

To remove all randomness from the equation, each player is going to get to start with their whole deck in their hand, and there is no discarding due to maximum hand size.

What happens?

If you're answer was "who goes first?" you're on the right track. Let's start with Grizzly Bears on the play. Take a moment and think about how this game will play out, then click here when you're ready. On the play, Grizzly Bears will make a bear on turn 2, to nothing from Ogres on turn two, puttingGrizzly Bears up one beat. On the third turn it's a wash as both decks put out a 2/2, so Bears stays up the one beat it gained on turn two. But, on turn four, Grizzly Bears will gain another beat, playing out two creatures while the opponent plays just one ogre. That means turn four is plus another beat for the bear deck, putting it up two beats total. Without even bothering with how attacking or blocking has gone, notice how many creatures each player has cast by the end of turn 4:

Now, notice that for turn five the same thing will happen, as the bear deck picks up yet another beat by double-casting. On turn six the bears deck picks up an additional beat as well, getting to triple-cast while ogres only gets to double-cast. So, at the end of six turns, the creatures summoned compare like this:

So, you've got the bear deck up a total of four beats at this point. Those beats were gained on turn two, four, five, and six, when the bear deck got to play more creatures than the ogre deck, gaining one extra beat on each of those turns.

Not All Beats Are Created Equal

The example above is easy because each card does exactly the same thing. The only important difference between Grizzly Bears andGray Ogres in that example is that one costs two mana while the other costs three. Once in play, they each do the same thing, so the beats are all equal. Normally, however, cards are not that equal.

Beats are somewhat subjective, because as the game progresses what counts as a full beat will change. On the second turn, playing a bear is a perfectly good beat. Doing so on turn five without anything else is clearly sub-par. So, the trick is that beats need to be re-evaluated based on the game state. A 2/2 for 2 is pretty good, but if they made a Hound of Konda on turn 1, you're playing catch up. If the table starts flooding with 4/4s and 5/5s around the fifth turn, you're going to have to discount how important some of those earlier beats are. We'll come back to this in a bit, but the important thing to keep in mind for now is that while beats are subjective, being able to get a feel for where each player is in the damage race is still useful. It just won't always be as clear as the ogres vs. bears example above.

Gaining Tempo Advantage

Tempo works a lot like card advantage in Limited games in that the more advantage you gain, the more likely you are to be able to convert that advantage to a win. Drawing many more cards than your opponent doesn't guarantee you'll win, but it makes it more and more likely. The same goes for

tempo. So, particularly with Limited in mind, the key is understanding how to generate extra beats over your opponents. Here are some easy ones to help illustrate the concept.

Mana-Efficient Attackers

This just comes down to the ogres vs. bears match again. If you're making threats that cost less than your opponents' threats but are reasonably equal in their impact, you're going to have opportunities to pick up beats. Often this will be something as simple as making a monster on turn two when the opponent whiffs, or double casting.

Inexpensive Tricks

In many draft formats, one of the ways I often gain tempo is something along the lines of this example.

Going first, I play some kind of bear on turn two, and my opponent whiffs. (+1 beat)

On the third turn, I swing in with my bear, then make an ogre. They make an ogre too (still +1 beat)

On the fourth turn, I swing in with my two creatures, they block one of them, and I use an inexpensive trick like Giant Growth to kill their creature, preserving mine. My other creature gets through for damage, they drop to 16, and I use my remaining mana to make another bear or ogre. At that point, assuming they only make one creature, they've lost another beat. They're now already 20% dead and I have three creatures in play to just one on their side. From here out they're so far behind on development that they'll have to block, making each trick in my hand that much more powerful. Should things continue like this, at some point I'll be able to win just by swarming in with my superior numbers to put it away. Note though that at no point did I ever get something like a two-for-one or other forms of card advantage. I just found ways to play and manage my cards more efficiently so that in the end I had more in play than my opponent. This scenario is quite easy to achieve in most Limited formats, if you keep an eye out for it, since cards like Giant Growth tend to be much easier to get than cards like Shock.

Cheap Removal

The scenario above is a common one (using a combat trick like Giant Growth), but you can get an even better version with a cheap removal card like Shock. Given your choice, the removal version (as opposed to using a trick to take out a blocker) is almost always superior because their creature doesn't even get to block, forcing through even more damage on your side. But, and this is where beats come in, the removal you use will only gain you tempo advantage if you are able to do something else that turn as well. If you're spending four mana to kill their four mana creature, you're just preserving the current tempo state rather than advancing it. That's the main reason why cards like Shock are so often very high picks in aggressive Limited formats, whereas more expensive removal may go slightly later, even though it's "more powerful". Every time you pick up a beat, you put your opponent that much farther back on their heels!

Bounce

With that in mind, it's a great time to talk about bounce spells (boomerang, unsummon, etc).

There is a perception out there that "tempo" just means using up your cards to race. That's part of it, but it doesn't take beats into account. That's the reason so many people just generically think of bounce as "tempo cards" even though their impact on tempo will depend completely on beats!
Time for an example. With you on the play, you each make a bear on turn two. On turn three you spend two mana to boomerang their creature, then swing in with your guy to do two damage. On their turn three they replay their bear.

Was the boomerang a tempo card? Well, that depends again on how you're using the word "tempo". Yes, you got through for two damage you might not have gotten in had the creatures traded, but since the opponent could just replay their creature you ended up even on beats. So, the bounce spell didn't gain you any advantage in beats - you still have basically equal development on both sides of the table. However, had you used Unsummon instead, then used your other two mana to drop out a bear also, now you'd be up a beat for the turn.
And there's the key. Bounce is often seen as a tempo strategy, but it's only tempo advantage if it gains you beats! The reason it's so often associated with tempo is because it works well with a tempo-gaining strategy, but unless you gain beats in the process you'll often just be using bounce to preserve the tempo advantages you've already achieved. Try this one:

Turn	*You*	*Opponent*	*Result*
1			
2	bear	just 2nd land	+1 beat
3	bear	ogre (you shock it)	+1 beat (+2 total)
4	giant	giant	

At this point you're still up two beats and your opponent is way down on the life race, but the opposing giant threatens to minimize the beat advantage you're getting from having those bears. So, if you use your entire fifth turn to just bounce the opposing giant (with a spell like Repeal) you didn't increase your beat advantage if they just replay the giant, since you each played one beat that turn. But, by bouncing the giant, you preserved the game state where you were already up two beats.
In fact, until the opponent gets their turn, you're actually up three beats. There are actually two other things going on here, which we'll get to shortly, but for now I hope this example shows how cards like bounce effects interact with tempo. The key is keeping track of how the beats are measuring up. Sometimes bounce will gain you additional beats on your opponent, sometimes it will go the other way. The difference is crucial though. Often you'll hear (or read) about players just blindly throwing cards like Repeal into their deck, thinking it makes them have a "tempo deck". But, if those cards don't work with the rest of the deck to generate additional beats over the course of the game, the bounce on its own isn't going to make the deck faster, and might even make it *slower* !

As a quick side note, this also brings us to one of the most important tempo articles out there. Back in the days of IPA, edt (also known occasionally as just "Eric Taylor") wrote a great article for the Sideboard called Controlling Tempo. In it, he focused mostly on the equation of how much mana you're putting into neutralizing a threat as opposed to how much that threat cost in the first place. It's a great article, and mana is definitely at the heart of the equation, but the piece I think edt was missing was the idea of beats.

He had it figured out that you don't want to just be relying on cards like Repulse (which costs 3 mana) in a format defined by bears (which cost 2 mana), saying things like "When you pay three mana to destroy something costing two, all that happens is you lose tempo." That's important, but only looks at one slice in time. Thanks to beats, we know that there's more to the equation here. If you spend turn three tapping three mana for an Urza's Rage to kill a bear, or spend two mana on aTerminate, but don't use that extra third mana, they are basically the same; you traded a beat for a beat, keeping the tempo race even. *But*, if you used Terminate to kill that creature, then used the last mana to also gain a beat, such as Shock on another bear, or Giant Growth in a fight so your guy lives and their guy dies, now you've generated a +1 beat advantage, and *that's* what actually matters. So edt had part of it, and it's an important part - using less mana to cancel more mana opens doors, but those doors only matter if you use the saved mana to gain beats in the process!

Tempo and Card Advantage

There is often an assumption that tempo and card advantage are opposed to each other. Either you're trying to draw extra cards (and losing tempo in the process) or you're throwing all your resources at the damage race instead, bleeding cards all along the way. As your understanding of tempo gets more sophisticated, it's important to note that both of those are just oversimplifications. **Magic** is a*really* complicated game to talk (and write) about, so people get used to shortcuts. While tempo and card advantage are often competing strategies, that's definitely not *always* the case. The most common overlap comes in gaining a two-for-one on the board, as opposed to in hand. So, for example, a card like Mind Rot generates a card of card advantage on turn three, because you used one card and they lost two. But, you skip a turn of development to do so, and the cards you stop are cards in hand, not cards in play, so you're making a sacrifice in tempo development to gain card advantage, same as if you'd taken your fourth turn to cast Train of Thought for two cards.

But, once you start removing multiple cards *from play*, tempo and card advantage start overlapping. For example, your opponent could cast three 1-toughness creatures over the course of the first few turns, to your nothing. On your third turn, you cast a Plague Spitter. All of the opposing creatures die, and you come out up a beat because you have the only creature in play, getting a 3-for-1 on card advantage too in the process. In Ravnica block Limited, a common tempo *and* card advantage gain comes from killing a creature that's enchanted with an aura like Fencer's Magemark. For example, you each make creatures on turn two. You make a creature on turn three, but he casts magemark on his first creature turn three instead of making another creature. On turn four if you cast Wrecking Ballon their only creature you pick up a two-for-one in card advantage and also come out two beats ahead in the process, thanks to having two creatures against an empty field. (Though remember, they haven't had their turn yet.)

Lastly, another common way to gain beats in Limited while gaining card advantage comes from forcing gang-blocks on your fatties and then using combat tricks to gain the upper hand. If you charge in with a Bramble Elemental and they block with a pair of bears, a Gather Courage is going to gain you a card in card advantage, since they lost two creatures and you just lost your Gather Courage. Better yet, given how cheap combat tricks like this can be, you have that much more mana left to swing extra

beats in your favor by casting more creatures or removal with what's left. There's a lot of synergy here, because the more tempo advantage your deck gains, the more you force your opponent into having to block in the first place! That also brings us to the next issue I wanted to cover.

Initiative

So, we measure tempo in beats, which are actions in a turn. What a beat means exactly changes as the game progresses (because turns become more powerful) and can be affected by the game state, but the basic idea behind one beat is "an average level move for this turn of the game." Gaining and maintaining advantage in beats comes from doing more things in a turn than your opponent, and can lead to card advantage in the process too. Beats can also be gained by using moves that cancel multiple beats by our opponents, such as using a Giant Growth to kill two creatures, wiping out two beats for just one mana. But how do we translate that tempo into a win? For that, we first need to understand a concept I'm going to borrow from chess: initiative.
Initiative refers to the player that's setting the pace of the game. In many games of chess or **Magic**, the game is not stable. One player is on offense, pushing at the other. The player with the initiative has the advantage of tempo, while their opponent is forced to react to that advantage. Like everything else with tempo, we're back focusing on the race.

One related thing we haven't talked much about yet is half turns, another concept from chess. In chess, the player going first is spoken of as having basically a "half turn" advantage in development, reflecting the fact that they're moving before their opponent does. **Magic** is the same, though I'm not going to bother trying to figure out if it's actually a "full" half turn or whatever. For simplicity's sake, it should serve fine to simply say that, playing first, you naturally have the initiative, but that just means you get a natural advantage. If your deck doesn't take advantage of it, and your opponent's deck does, your opponent can end up with the initiative. On the play, you get an advantage. The more pressure you put on, the bigger that advantage becomes. If, instead, you fall behind on tempo, having gone first will cushion that problem by a bit.

For example, Hound of Konda turn one going second feels a lot like a bear on turn two going first, if the rest of your deck is similarly built. The important point regarding half turns is that, while we often measure beats once each player has had their turn, so that we can compare how they are doing, the*actual* play happens *each* turn. So, half turns take into account that, sure, you may have bounced the guy and it will be back on their turn, but in the meantime that means he isn't there to interfere with your attack *right now*.
Why does initiative matter? When you have the initiative, you set the race. One advantage of this is that you can force them to block on your turn more often. There is a natural advantage to forcing battles on your turn in Limited, because you are more likely to have mana (or more mana) open than your opponent. That means you're the one with the ability to influence the fight with the help of combat tricks. The more you pull ahead, the more you can force opponents into undesirable situations, compounding the situation.

Once someone falls far enough behind, you can start swinging in with even your smaller outclassed guys, because they are forced to block your bigger guys to stay alive. This way, your little beaters continue to have value even at a stage of the game when they otherwise could have become outclassed, an advantage you would have lost without the initiative. For the tempo player, the lesson

is crucial. If you let it, **Magic** has a built-in equalizer that favors the defender, because they get to choose how to block. However, the lower an opponent gets on life, the less options they have to block your small guys with their big guys, since then your big guys threaten to finish them off. The more tempo advantage you can generate, the more this principle will keep your opponent from being able to defend themselves well by trying for favorable blocks.

Tempo advantage and tempo maintenance

Now that we've got the idea of initiative and half turns, we can turn back to something earlier that we had to gloss over. First, a reminder: the single most common misunderstanding I see from players regarding tempo is confusing tempo maintenance with tempo advantage. Canceling an opponent's whole turn with your whole turn is **not** a gain in tempo! (It's part of a tempo-based strategy, but it is not a **gain** in tempo.) If they make a turn two bear and you boomerang it on your turn two, the tempo situation is basically the same as if you had played your own bear. Either way, your turns were effectively equal in terms of tempo. The difference is tempo advantage versus tempo maintenance.

Take an easy example: Turn 2 bear, turn 2 bear. You cast a Man-o'-War, bouncing their guy. They play a guy (either the original or perhaps a new 3cc guy). You gained a beat with your Man-o'-War by removing one of their threats from the board while adding one of your own. At the end of turn three you have tempo advantage because you're up a beat.
Now, tempo maintenance is a different story. If you are up three guys to one and you spend your turn bouncing the last guy they played, you haven't gained tempo overall since they'll just replay the guy on their turn. However, since you're already up 2 beats, maintaining that status quo is just fine with you right now. The longer you can maintain that 2 beat advantage the more life your opponent will lose and the more difficult it will become for them to stabilize (remember, at some point tempo advantage tips them over into having to make unfavorable blocks). In this case, you're using tempo maintenance cards to preserve the tempo advantage you gained earlier. That's why cards like Repealare often referred to as "tempo cards" even though they often won't generate tempo on their own. Instead, they compliment a tempo strategy well by allowing you to keep maintaining the current game state where you have a tempo advantage.

Immediate beats and invested beats

But, and this is the part I had to gloss over earlier, there's actually a bit more to it than that, and it's another critical element to this equation: removing blockers is different from making new attackers. Why is that true? The short answer is: "Attackers are later, but blockers are now." It's so important that I'd like to take a look at that earlier line again.

Removing blockers is different from making new attackers.

This is the other reason bounce gets associated with tempo so much. If you and your opponent are keeping equal on beats but the creatures just keep trading, you aren't getting any damage in. But, if you are somehow removing their creatures rather than just making more of your own, now your damage is actually getting through. It's a crucial step, because this is where the actual damage getting done plays into the concept of beats. Let's look at two simple examples.

Turn	*You*	*Opponent*	*Result*
1			
2	bear	bear	
3	ogre	ogre	(bears trade this turn)
4	giant	giant	(ogres trade this turn)

In this game, both players are exactly equal in terms of beats. At the end of it, it's about to be turn five and both players have 20 life and a giant in play. Now, let's compare to another game with equal beats.

Turn	*You*	*Opponent*
1		
2	bear	bear
3	Seal of Doom bear, swing for 2	ogre
4	Wrecking Ball ogre, swing for 2	Wrecking Ball your bear

Just like the last one, both players are equal in beats here. In fact, at the end of turn four, nobody has anything in play but land. But there's a key difference -- in this one the opponent has taken four damage! Why?

Removing blockers is different from making new attackers.

Both players are playing at the same rate of beats. *But*, player one has the initiative. We say each player is playing at the same rate of beats, but that's only if we look at each turn as a *full* turn, letting the opponent catch up to you by waiting to evaluate the position until you've *each* had a turn to play. But that's not how **Magic** actually works. Since you went first, you have a half turn advantage. That means you get to swing in with your guys first. So, every time you remove opposing creatures, your existing creatures get a chance to swing in for more damage. One of the conclusions to draw from this is that if you're seeking to win through tempo advantage, you want to avoid trading when possible. It's much better to gain beats while using evasion and removal and other ways to get your attackers

through. That way, not only are you ahead on development, but your opponent is taking more damage along the way too.

While we're here, note also that using edt's system he would have said you lost some tempo when you used the 3-mana Seal of Doom to take out a 2-mana bear in that last scenario. But, thanks to an understanding of how beats work, we know that's not actually the case. I'm not pointing that out to bash on edt, in fact I'm thankful to have great articles like his to work off of. Instead, it's just a good example of how the tempo writing up to this point doesn't actually reflect well how actual games of**Magic** play out. Hopefully this article can change that!

Virtual Tempo

Now that we've got a feel for how gaining advantage in beats can affect the game, we can start using that knowledge to look at some more advanced aspects of tempo. That brings us to a critical concept that I call "virtual tempo". Tempo doesn't exist in a vacuum; it is just one ingredient in a complex mix. Card quality comes into the equation as well, and in this case I mean card quality in terms of *the current game situation*. Time for a scenario: They bear, you nothing, they ogre, you ogre, they ogre, you 2/4.

So, your opponent was on the play and you've each had four turns. What's the tempo situation in this scenario?

You're actually down a beat (2 creatures to 3) and yet you aren't behind in tempo. What gives? That is the crux! You are down beats, but tempo isn't just beats, it's the measure of the race. Because of the board situation, a 2/4 is enough to stabilize – and the more stabilized a board position is the less important beats become. Think of it this way: how many 1/1s does it take to overwhelm a single 2/2?

But, despite having stabilized the board, you're still actually down a beat in this position. To show why that matters, let's take a more extreme example. In this one you even whiffed on your third turn, doing nothing until the Foot Soldiers on turn four. Here's how the board looks after 4 turns.

In that position, you're down two beats. For now, the situation has stabilized, but that doesn't change that you're down two beats, it just means that it's harder for your opponent to get to you despite the tempo advantage he has because you've stabilized the board. What you've achieved is virtual tempo. Even though you're down two beats on this board, the card you've played has trumped the beats in play on the other side.

But the term "virtual" is an important one here. You aren't *really* even on beats, it just feels that way as long as you have that 2/4 in play. If your opponent does anything to kill or otherwise remove that blocker, you're going to be feeling those missing beats immediately. The lesson is an important one, as it's at the very heart of successfully playing offense or defense in **Magic**.

Virtual tempo doesn't cancel tempo advantage. It's only as stable as the card(s) providing it.

So, the more your control deck has to rely on virtual tempo, the more important it is that those virtual tempo cards remain in play! Keeping Limited in mind specifically, it means aggressive tempo decks must draft with virtual tempo in mind so that you have trumps to defensive cards that can cancel out your tempo advantage. How to do that depends on which environment you're talking about, but the best drafters know exactly what threats are most likely to cause problems defensively, and which cards they can hope to draft which will get around those problem cards.

Along those lines come "tappers" like Minister of Impediments. As the game progresses, each beat has a tendency to become more powerful on average. The advantage to tappers is that they can switch targets to whatever the *best* targets in play are. So, on turn three, aMinister of Impediments is a three-mana beat, and will start cancelling out the best opposing creature as soon as it's active. But the power of this class of cards is that the tapper isn't locked in. As better targets appear, the tappers just switch to whichever creature is now best.

So, using Minister as an example, for one three-mana beat you get to cancel out whatever the best creature is at any given time, even if that creature might cost far more mana than you ever invested in casting your Minister. Even better, if it's been used defensively, at some point of your choosing you have the ability to use the dreaded double tap, tapping something down on the end of the opponent's turn, then tapping something down again on your own turn, making defense for your opponent difficult indeed. Though it may not seem intuitive at first, tapping creatures tend to be outstanding for tempo-based decks. The exception in the past has been when the tapper's activated ability (which is usually a single mana) is slowing down your own development (particularly if you put together your mana wrong), which shows why Minister of Impediments is such a powerful card, since it doesn't require any mana at all beyond the initial investment.

Lastly, while we're talking about how card quality and beats interact, I want to mention something else that doesn't get a lot of attention. Depending on what environment you're playing in, there's often some class of creature that, by nature of its stats, will often have not only the ability to swing in for damage on your next turn, but can also prevent an attack from the opponent in the meantime. A great example of that right now is Golgari Brownscale, a card I love in many of my *Ravnica* drafts that have enough green mana to put him out reliably on turn three. The reason is that most creatures that come out before the Brownscale can't attack through it, and most creatures that come out on the same turn can't block it!

So, even though your opponent may have otherwise picked up a beat on you turn two when they made a bear and you whiffed, when you play the Brownscale the bear can't attack now. Even better, your opponent probably can't block once it's your turn, unless they want to risk double-blocking when you're the one that has mana available (assuming they made a typical-costed creature on their turn).

I call this effect a "forced pause" because you're taking an attack step away from your opponent while continuing fluidly with your own offense. Whatever you call it, it comes up *so* much in Limited that I wanted to make sure to mention it in this article. Another good example would be *Odyssey* draft, where very few creatures have a power of three. Because of that, the four-mana 2/3 cycle of creatures (like Krosan Archer) were outstanding because they often prevented opposing creatures from attacking when they first came out, and then they could often swing in on your next turn if you wanted. In the process, these kinds of creatures basically remove an attack phase from the opponent, even though you get to swing in on your own turn (should that be what you want). Each time you play one of these creatures on schedule you will often stutter the opponent's attack phase, gaining a half-turn on a racing opponent by preventing them from damaging you this turn while continuing to develop your own offense in the process. Combine this kind of effect with other moves that actually pick up additional beats and you can have your opponent on their heels in no time!

O and D

That leads to another related topic, offensive and defensive tempo. So far we've been focusing on just two offensive decks racing each other, but that's not how all **Magic** games work, particularly once you move to constructed formats. When you're on offense, playing something that helps offense will help your tempo. Defense can have tempo too, often with the intention of stabilizing - getting to another stage of the game where the more defensive deck has superiority.

So, in these tempo races, you have to adjust your evaluation of beats based on the match-up. An offensive deck playing against a pure control deck may pick up some beats on turns one and two by deploying some quick beaters, but if it has to pause on turn three to cast something like Carven Caryatid, it's a lost beat if the opposing deck doesn't have any creatures that would have come through on the ground anyway.

So, for offensive decks, the key is to generate beats that gain an advantage against the defensive deck. For defense, the key is often to play beats that cancel out the opposing attackers. For example, something like a Wall of Spears (back to Limited, obviously!) can really put the hurt on an attacking deck full of two-toughness creatures. In the examples above we showed how a card like Foot Soldierscould generate virtual tempo against smaller creatures by making it too costly for them to attack. But, if you can pull off that kind of defense while also making enough beats in the meantime to not fall behind in the first place, that's not just virtual tempo, that's actual tempo stabilization, which is much less tenuous. That principle is why decks that are good in the late game of Limited formats are so well served by creatures with stats like 2/4, since they can cancel out multiple opposing creatures (which in and of itself becomes a kind of card advantage). And, by also staying relatively close in actual tempo (not just virtual tempo) you make it much more difficult for the aggressive deck to topple your defenses. The better you understand how beats interact with offense and defense, the more success you'll have drafting (and beating!) both offensive and defensive decks.