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Taking Aim at Tempo

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Tempo week is a nice beginning, but the concept of time management is a constant theme in the Limited arena. Many, many articles will be devoted to the intricacies of the time and card advantage that entails Tempo. Therefore, this week is going to be some broad strokes as an introduction to the concept. By that I mean my concept of Tempo of course; it's a philosophy that seems to have a very many definitions and applications. Some people have trouble defining the term at all, like my main man Justice Potter Stewart when he said (mostly), "I shall not attempt to define [tempo], but I shall know it when I see it".

I'm sure many people remember Tempo's first incarnation in literature. Samuel 17:49, where David laid Goliath out with a sling. Goliath was a mighty...something, but plucky David out-maneuvered his enemy to a victory. Power isn't everything in **Magic** either. If it was, **Blazing Archon** would be a first pick instead of the 7-9th spot it (correctly) finds itself. **Blazing Archon** is certainly a powerful card, but who has the time? For that matter, what is time in **Magic**? So many questions! If I'm allowed to step on the purview of the Similac Guild, I have a formula:



Time = Life + Mana

Now those terms may require a little explanation, at least for the purposes of this article. So:

Life

I considered it a great step in my strategic development the day I learned that life points are not a particularly good indication of who's ahead. It's kind of a running gag in the high-level community: "Oh look, I have 18 life to your 15. I must be winning!" Never mind the fact the player at 15 life has three more creatures in play and four more cards in hand.

Indeed, I would say often it's the person with less life who is doing just as well or better than the player with more. That's because life points don't really matter, in the strictest sense. You have just as much chance of winning at two life as you do at twenty. Well, almost.

The difference in two life versus twenty is literally a matter of time. One spends life points to gain more time to achieve one's own ends. At more life, you have more of a shield to take attacks, which gives you more room to attack back. Contrast this with lower life, where you're at more risk. Not just more risk of dying, but more risk of being forced to abort your own plans for a different/worse one.

For example, on your second turn you play a **Grizzly Bears**. Your opponent plays a **Goblin Chariot** and attacks. You have the choice of either blocking or not. If you don't, you're spending two life points to do two to your opponent. That's a tempo-based decision right there, choosing to set the pace of the game. If you block, you're also making a decision based on time, in this case saying you think you're more likely to win the game given more time, rather than winning based on taking their time away. Which path is correct depends on many, many factors such as your hand, their colors, your deck, their play skill, and so on. I will say that most of the players I know would love to trade their own life points for their opponent's, more often than not.

In Limited you are always against a lot of unknowns. At the very least, you don't know your opponent's first picks. Those are often the strongest cards in their deck, so knowing them could give you a gauge on how strong their deck actually is. Unfortunately, it's a mystery, and a rather drastic one. Therefore, most competitive players believe its better just to kill 'em fast, rather than give them the time to draw their omni-bombs. Of course, that guideline has a great many exceptions, but I don't know many players that don't take away opposing life points when they can, even if it means throwing away a little of theirs in the process. Every time you give up the ability to take their life points just to preserve your own, you give each player more time. Consider carefully if you *know* your build can handle their deck unfettered. If not, take their time away!

Mana

Mana is the flip side of the time equation, and is certainly at least as important as life points. Assuming both players have drafted well and have reasonable openings, the game is going to have aggression, for the reasons stated above. Neither player wants the other to have the time to draw and/or cast their bombs. In this common

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Limited scenario, the game often goes to the player who uses their mana most effectively. It's not just a matter of having the best cards in your deck. It's about getting those quality cards *into play* as soon as possible. And if you want to play your cards, then you have to talk to Mr. Mana.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that the cards in each player's deck all have the good power levels for their casting costs. The 2/2 for two, the removal spell for three, etc. Now it stands to reason with a reasonable draw each player drops some lands and start playing threats and/or removing opposing ones. Each player does this little do-si-do action and then someone wins. The advantage going to the winning player is very simple; they either play more quality cards or prevent the opponent from doing the same.

There are many ways to accomplish this. You can simply out-draft or out-open the competition and bury them under a wave of excellence. You can also go the classic and popular card advantage route; draw more cards --> play more cards. These are fine methods of achieving some type of advantage, but they're worth their own articles. For Tempo, it's about removing your opponent the mana to play all their cards. Now this does not mean Land Destruction, no no no. Land Destruction is intrinsically flawed in Limited 90% of the time. You spend mana to play a card, but LD neither produces a threat on your side nor removes a threat on theirs. Sometimes you can get lucky with it, but that's not why you're here, is it? Frankly, I don't like any card that *rewards* an opponent for a mana flood. And if they're screwed, then a credible threat will do the job you're looking for, with the added benefit of not sucking after turn 5. However, when it works, it is great tempo.

There you are laying threat after threat, maybe offing a few of theirs, when suddenly you drop [The Hammer](#):

Now he's in for it. Your poor opponent has a hand full of ultra-powerful cards, but he just doesn't have the mana to cast them. If only he had a little more time - I mean a little more mana or a few more life points. Something! But no, your teched out four-mana sorcery worked its **Magic** and took away too many clicks of the clock. Well played!

Ahem, sorry. Honestly, that move happens all the time, and it does indeed work once in a while. Sometimes players side in land destruction when they're severely overmatched in card quality, hoping to get lucky and change their 5% chance to 15%. Not a bad way to go if that's all you can do, but again, our goal is not be in that situation in the first place. So let's look at some cards that have similar effect tempo-wise, with just a touch more reliability.

Man-o'-War

[Aaron Forsythe](#) stated that **Man-o'-War** is above the curve for a Blue creature. Because of this, it's unlikely to be reprinted anytime soon, for which we should all be very thankful. Consider this opener:

Turn 2 you play a **Grizzly Bears**.

Turn 3 you play a **Land Leeches**.

Your opponent plays a turn 3 **Trained Armodon**, the stopper of your little army except, damn, you played **Man-o'-War** on your next turn. You missed a land drop, but that's ok, you now have 6 power worth of creatures in play to your opponent's zero. Your development was perfectly normal, but it sure looks like a blitz when you compare permanents in play. Your opponent can try to play catch up at this point, but it's going to be very difficult. At some point the other player may have bigger guys in play, but since you got him so low in life points off your temporiffic start, you can just attack with everything and kill him. Imagine what would have happened if you had yet another **Man-o'-War** in that opening! In Limited, you're doing pretty well if their only way to survive is **Wrath of God**. **Man-o'-War** just offers too much effective disruption at too little a price. The start above is a possibility, or you can merely play **Man-o'-War** later along with any other card with impact. Now, not only is your opponent set back a turn in development, you've added two more cards for him to deal with. It's quite savage. How does it compare with our modern jellyfish, one **Ogre Savant**?



Ogre Savant

On the surface, our oxymoronic friend compares favorably to **Man-o'-War**, being the larger half of that duo. But of course it is an inferior card, and not just because of the two color bit. Nope, the reason that **Ogre Savant** is the worse card is that five-mana price tag. The difference between five and three is huge for a couple of reasons.

For one, it's far more difficult to have the game extremely lopsided in aggression at the five mana stage, versus the three mana one. Of course it is possible to play a threatening two-drop, three-drop, four-drop, and then **Ogre Savant**. If that happens, the Savant is a super star. That possibility is what makes the creature a pretty high pick in R/U archetypes. That kind of start is rare though; it's far more likely that the players are trading creatures and spells so that no player should have more than 2-4 power worth of extra damage on one side. Compare that to the 6-0 power imbalance in the **Man-o'-War** example.

Another minor flaw in **Ogre Savant** is that the five mana level usually provides creatures with higher power than three and especially higher



toughness than two. It's a sad day when your **Ogre Savant** trades with a two-mana card on the same turn your opponent plays a three-mana card! The tempo has become the tempoe! Still, the Savant is a fine card, allowing you to press an advantage or stave off their solid start. How about another Izzet special?

Vacuumelt

Vacuumelt, like all those wild replicate cards, goes up in value as the game goes later. That's an issue for the tempo player, because tempo gets far worse as the game goes on. Tempo relies on the opponent not being able to play more than one credible card a turn. The later the game goes, the more mana they have, and therefore the more options to cast any and all the cards in hand. Unfortunately for **Vacuumelt**, the more effective it gets, the less effective it gets. Consider:

Stage 1: Early game, costs the same as a regular-sized threat but doesn't provide one. Stops one creature, briefly. Equivalent card - **Sacred Nectar** or **Lava Spike**. Yuck.

Stage 2: Mid game, costs as much as a major threat. Doesn't provide a threat but should remove the two expensive cards from their side. Decent tempo if you have the aggression to back it up. Equivalent card - Sorcery speed **Blinding Beam**. Incidentally, **Undo** was so savage because it provided this kind of effect at half the cost, which let you play yet another threat (**Man-o'-War**?) the turn you cast it.

Stage 3: Late game, costs as much as the moon. Guaranteed to remove some relevant creatures, but they'll have enough mana to play everything again. Good for a one-shot attack. Equivalent card - **Incite Hysteria**

Overall, it's a pretty narrow card. **Vacuumelt** has a place in certain decks, but personally, I prefer it as an anti-Aura sideboard card than any kind of tempo enabler.

Grand Arbiter Augustin IV

Now here's a tempo card I like! Not only does it enable you to play more and better threats sooner, it slows opponents with the same effect. Speeding up your time while slowing theirs is pure tempo, and quite powerful. Keep in mind that like all tempo cards, its effect is drastically reduced the later the game goes on. The taxing penalty and the **Stone Calendar** bonus look pretty pointless come empty hands and 8 lands in play. It's up to the drafter to decide if the more consistent pick is the better card. Still, this guild leader can be one scary guy.

Karoo

Yeah it makes more mana, but at what cost? The turn you play it, your Plains can't be tapped. There's a blow to your development. Then it comes into play tapped, so there's another wasted land drop. The only time it looks like it wouldn't interfere with your threat progression is when you don't need the extra mana. And it only gives you an extra colorless! I think this one needs to be left on the bench.

The (Modern) Karoos

First off, there is some tempo lost in the beginning. Whatever turn you play your **Simic Growth Chamber**, or whatever, that's the stage in development where you miss out. Sometimes that means playing something like 2 two-drops instead of a two-drop and a three-drop, which can indeed be serious. Second, someone may **Wrecking Ball** away your Karoo and leave you extra far back. If they have an aggressive continuation, you may indeed tempo yourself right into a loss. The bounce lands are not without a little risk. However, a lot of things can go right with them. If you tap out the turn you drop the Karoo, or didn't have anything to play anyway, you aren't *necessarily* setting yourself back. Then you will have all the benefits of a double land without any penalty. In addition, since they do provide extra mana over the long haul, there will come a point where you're actually more resistant to tempo, by giving you more opportunity to play multiple spells in one turn. Karoos offer a little risk now for a big reward later. Players are still more than willing to take their chances.

Speed

Oh I know there's no card called "Speed" (although c'mon R&D, where was **Stop//Go**?) Speed, the hyper-aggressive start, is simply the original tempo-maker. Let's say you come out of the gates blazing. Perhaps some **Gobhobblers** on the early turns, some **Bloodscale Prowlers**, wham bam, The End. Your opponent looks shell shocked, and why shouldn't he? You've crushed his dreams in a whirlwind of velocity. The game's over while he's still holding a bunch of uncastables.

Speed is definitely a factor in Limited games, but wins from it usually come from a stumbling opponent, rather than a strictly dedicated speed deck. This is not to say those decks can't happen, and there are certainly slower decks and faster decks in draft and sealed. However, most players are aware of the possibility of an opponent's quick opening, so they draft and build accordingly. **Benevolent Ancestor** doesn't do damage, but it's great at stemming off a speedy start from an opponent. The longer your deck needs to win, the more you need to address the possibility of getting out-tempoed by an opponent, with Defender-type cards. That's the version of a speedy



deck versus a controlling deck. When both decks have aggressive builds, it's not just tempo but a Race. However, that's another article.

Speed alone can win games, but it's inconsistent. The perfect draw looks, well, perfect, but any kind of misstep in the process makes the whole deck fall apart. **Wild Cantor** has an *occasional* place in a speedy deck, but it looks just awful on turn 10. R&D knows that sick speed in Limited is overwhelming and unfun, so it's rare these days to find the cards that can build the speediest of decks e.g. like vicious early drops or cheap threatening tempo cards like **Man-o'-War**. Like the examples though, they can happen. My personal advice with speed is to give your deck the option of a speedy start, if only to combat theirs. I like being able to exploit a mana light draw from an opponent, but I certainly wouldn't want to *depend* on it. I'm into cards that are threats at all stages of the game, but I'd be the first to admit there are exceptions.

Ravnica block in particular has an interesting relationship with speed and tempo. On the one hand, people trying to put their colors together can give you a little breathing room to do the same. On the other hand, that's a vulnerability you or your opponents can exploit. Of course, people do know about that possibility so they plan for better mana or earlier defenses. Now that knowledge lets you avoid caring about early aggression, so you can be more liberal with your mana base and your threats, giving you amazing late game potential with less risk. Your opponents know this plan, so they...

Tempo is tough. **Magic** is fun. Thanks for reading.

-Noah Weil

Bonus Request

People keep asking about the mana of RGD. How many lands, which ones, etc. I'd love to talk about this issue, but I have no card pools to work with. So please, send 'em in. Draft decks, sealed decks, made-up decks; it doesn't matter. I'll look at some interesting unfinished ones and discuss them soon. For these decks, just send the main-deck and a few relevant sideboard cards. The unknown lands should be the focus.



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