

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Tortoise Power, Part1

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 Limited Information
 Tuesday, September 26, 2006



"We've been waiting at the finish line for a while now, waiting for these two competitors to come into the final stretch. One would think the hare would have been finished by now, but there seemed to have been some delay around the middle of the track.

Oh, I see someone coming now! It looks like... yes it is! I don't believe it, it's the tortoise and he's in the lead. He's crossing the finish line! What an upset! There's going to be a drug test of course, but for now it looks like this reptile can race!"

Time Spiral is upon us! I'm sure it's great fun. Unfortunately for the timing of this week's column, I haven't seen the full list yet. Assuming *Time Spiral* is good and popular and all that, LI will give the set plenty of attention. But for the nonce, what to talk about? *Ravnica* sealed strategy? *Coldsnap* rankings? *Mercadian Masques* block archetypes? I don't think those will fly. Instead this week (and the week after the next), will be dedicated to something a little more fundamental. Applicable to any set past or future, the topic this time is a little thing called racing.

My Saturday colleague Ted Knutson brought this topic up in his [how-to-attack column here](#). Here's a quote:

"Advanced - Am I going to win the race? This is the trickiest part to figure out because it involves thinking two and three turns ahead, taking into account what is in your hand, what you might draw from your deck, and what cards your opponent has that can foul up your plans..."



That's a pretty good description. The advanced label doesn't deter though, I think it's a subject worth tackling. Technically, a race is a situation where you're trying to win before you lose. That's slightly too broad for our needs though, since it describes *every single game of Magic ever*. The general usage of the term, and the one we'll be using today, is when two players are dealing damage back and forth to each other, with fairly close life totals and/or damage dealing capabilities. For example, you would say two players are racing when they're both have four power worth of unblockable damage going back and forth. For Limited play, damage-based races are going to be the standard 95% of the time, but a race could occur with any kind of victory condition. One player attacks life totals while the other attacks deck size, or poison counters, or whatever. In tournaments you'll have situations where players are racing the clock, trying to win the game before the round is over. There are many potential race situations, and identifying them is the first step to winning them. Since damage races are the most common and easiest to enumerate, we'll be sticking with those this time. As Ted said, it involves thinking of turns unplayed and cards undrawn. Here's a basic version:

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Here we have two creatures attacking back and forth. **Elvish Warrior** can't block the **Wind Drake** and **Wind Drake** doesn't want to block the **Warrior**. What else to do but attack? A race is most common when both players are dealing effectively unstoppable damage back and forth. That damage could be from an evasive source. It could just be from a creature the other player doesn't want to block. Whatever the origins of the damage, both players are dealing it to each other. This is a very frequent situation at the higher levels. In fact, quite a number of those Limited games end with a player winning exactly one turn before they would lose. If that seems unlikely, let's look at the reasons why a race *wouldn't* occur:

A player has a much stronger deck.

Be it from way better creatures or way better removal, their offense provides no danger to you. Your creatures are better, your mana is awesome, and you can eliminate anything that could even remotely prove threatening to you and yours. Your only real concern is deciding where to spend the prize money.

Does this happen? Sure, but far less often at the higher levels. At the place where both players know archetype strength and card evaluations, an incredibly lopsided matchup is much less likely. When both players know what they're doing, each player *should* have potent decks. If these decks are full of powerful creatures, what else is there to do but attack?

A player has an overwhelming mana advantage.

Again this comes down to the quality of the opponent. One of the hallmarks of a good player is being able to construct a robust mana base. This means employing the correct quality and quantity of lands, easing difficult-to-cast card inclusions, etc. Of course mana screw will occasionally happen, even to the best players. When that occurs, there won't be a race, there will be a person struggling for their life. The principle idea is that better players are mana screwed less often. When both players have their mana situations realized, the next step is summoning creatures.

A player has chosen to be defensive.

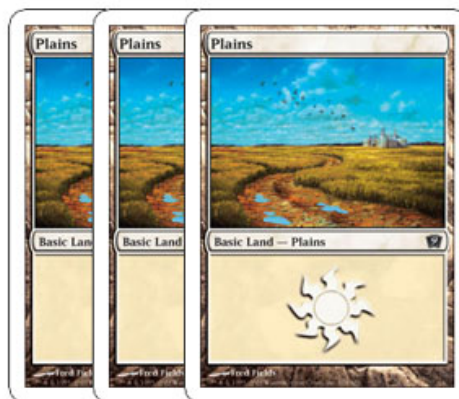
This is one of the rarer reasons for a race not to occur. Good players are good in large part due to being aggressive; seizing opportunities as they come. By extension, the inexperienced players are those that are far too miserly with their life totals. The whole premise of the race is giving up some life points to take theirs. Both players want to do this because, generally speaking, it's correct. If I'm playing someone who's clearly not willing to give up life, who won't attack for fear of being attacked back, I'm going to like my chances an awful lot. A person who's blocking just wants the game to go longer, to not lose. Pray excuse the simplicity of this statement but

The best way to avoid losing is to win.

Attacking is the surest way to do exactly that in Limited play. You know they'll be doing the same to you. Players of caliber embrace this, which again is why you're going to see much more aggression and racing at the top tables of PTQs and GPs. Attacking isn't *always* the best way to go, it's just the best way *more* often. Why that is will be covered in more detail. Exceptions do exist, which we will discuss below. For now though, let's look at some construed situations.

Scenario 1:

Opponent: Hill Giant (tapped), 3 Mountain, 3 Forest



You: Phantom Warrior, Storm Crow, 3 Island, 3 Plains

You are the Blue/White player with 17 life. Your opponent has 19 life. It is your main phase and neither player has any cards in their hand, although this is a Limited match and there are regular cards still lurking in both players' decks. [What's the play here?](#)

Attack! This is an easy one, since if the board stayed exactly the same, you win the game. Check it out:

Your attack brings them to:	Their attack brings you to:
16 life	14 life

13 life	11 life
10 life	8 life
7 life	5 life
4 life	2 life

Now it looks like you'll get them down to 1 life and then die. This is easily remedied - just leave the **Storm Crow** to block one turn. On the second to last turn, attack them to two life, chump with **Storm Crow**, and deal the final points on the final turn. No sweat.

Racing is fundamentally about math and probabilities. The above example was simplistic, but the essence is there. You saw how the turns would progress and you made the move that best exploited it. Yes, under this plan you lose if they draw a **Shock** at some point. There are all kinds of cards they can draw that will cause you to lose, but that's exactly why attacking is so important here. Currently, you are winning! *They* are the ones going uphill, the player that needs to draw out or lose. If you start holding back, blocking and protecting your life total, then that merely gives them additional turns to draw answer X or threat Z. Why give them that opportunity? Let's try one a little harder:

Scenario 2:

Opponent: Hill Giant (tapped), 3 Mountain, 3 Forest



You: Phantom Warrior, Storm Crow, 3 Island, 3 Plains

Everything is exactly the same except this time you are at 14 life while your opponent remains at 19. [What's the play?](#)

Attack! Yes, technically you are the one losing here. However your position is not that precarious. All you need is one more threat or one more chump block to take the game over. A lot depends on the top of each of your decks. This situation is closer, no doubt. The problem is, your only other play is double blocking, and that's fraught with issues. You get decimated with any pump spell or any kill spell. If your plan works, you've traded a **Phantom Warrior** for a **Hill Giant**. That's not the worst thing, except you're left with a **Storm Crow** with an opponent at 19 life. That's a lot of damage for one little Crow. Basically, if your double block plan works, you're in trouble, and if

your double block plan *doesn't* work, you're in very deep trouble. Avoid the whole mess and keep attacking. You need to get a bit lucky to win, but you need to get far luckier to win in any other scenario. The statistics are in your favor.

Racing is being on the edge, making yourself vulnerable just to exploit opponent's vulnerabilities as well. Racing requires understanding beyond what's immediately in front of you. You'll see some real **Magic** as each player struggles for every tiny edge as their **Armageddon Clock** clicks down. It's not reckless though. Attacking every turn because you don't want to do the math is reckless. Racing requires a sharp understanding of the relative worth of your creatures now, and down the road. With that in mind, one final base set puzzle:

Opponent: Hill Giant (tapped), 3 Mountain, 3 Forest



You: **Goblin Chariot**, 3 Mountain, 3 Forest, **Goblin Chariot** (in hand)

This time it's a little different. You're at 11 life with an opponent at 18. Unlike the previous examples, your creatures are not evasive. [What's the move?](#)

Attack! This might not be intuitive, since these cards aren't as worthy as **Phantom Warrior** or, um, **Storm Crow**. However, that's the very reason to use them. These creatures get obsoleted quickly. When your opponent plays an X/3 creature, the Chariots will hold back. When you play a creature that requires the **Hill Giant** to stop attacking, your Chariots hold back. Most likely, any further creature you play would probably swing the race in your favor, causing the **Hill Giant** to stop attacking. *Only after* your Chariots can't viably attack should you be looking at blocking duty. With the above scenario, you're not there yet. Get in the damage while you still can. By the way, getting to a place where the **Hill Giant** does stop attacking is pretty favorable. If you can push them into a defensive role, and be the last person to stop attacking, you've set the stage well for scenarios down the road. After all, they're the ones running scared.

One of the strongest cards in *Ravnica* for Limited play is **Glare of Subdual**. This is a card I generally live in fear of, because it completely flips the game around. I cannot stop my opponent from playing this card. I can't destroy it once it's in play. I can only try to kill them quicker than they draw it. Odds are they don't have **Glare** in their deck, especially if we're playing with *Time Spiral*. On the other hand, odds are they have some other card(s) I'd rather not see. I would prefer to kill them before they draw a ridiculous card. Now the kicker is that they feel the same about my deck. Who knows what crazy bombs lie in wait? Perhaps (random incredible *Time Spiral* card) is the 22nd card down in my deck. My opponent is certainly hoping I don't live that long. Interestingly, these goals are not in conflict. We both want the game to end sooner rather than later. We would just prefer to be the one left standing along the way. Given a choice, of course you'd rather win in 30 turns than lose in 10. The ideal situation though, is to kill them before they find their stabilizers, or their unstoppable fliers, or even just get out of a mana screw. Aggression is about solving problems before they occur.

In the scenarios above, no player has cards in hand. That's a device for simplicity's sake, one not particularly likely in real games. What is relevant and controllable and far more likely are the cards that can break a race in your favor. For example:

Creatures: You're trying to deal damage and not die. Creatures play both of these roles well. Your trick is not immediately playing a creature as soon as you draw it, if that creature doesn't have relevance to the game. If you're attacking with fliers and he's attacking with ground creatures, is that fresh 1/1 non-flier going to do anything? Is it going to attack next turn? Is it going to block this turn? If the answers to both are no, why play it? Your opponent's math is dependent on your attacking and blocking capabilities. If you hold on to a creature or creatures until they've committed to a course of action, you might just catch them in a poor spot. Incidentally, holding on to your creatures also protects you from the Wrath-effects that slowly become their only out. You can still play any creature you want, just try to consider the optimum time to reveal your hand.

Player-centric Burn: This is an interesting case, because these cards are pretty much good *only* when you're racing. **Flame Jet** is the last card you want to draw when you're getting wounded. If you're doing the pounding, **Flame Jet** is superfluous to your inevitable win. It's when you're both dealing damage to each other and the game is tight that burn becomes interesting. That spell in your hand is secret info to their true life total. Their pad might say 13 life. Your pad might say 13 life. But that **Lava Axe** in your hand says they're really at 8. With them thinking they're +5, and you knowing the truth, attacks take on a whole new tenor. Does burn go into a Limited deck? Depends, is your deck one likely to get into a race? By the way, you feel free to ask similar questions for cards like **Incite Hysteria**.

Damage Prevention: Roughly analogous to burn, it's a secret boost to your manifest life total. You get to be just a touch more liberal with your race engagements, because their math is all askew.

Removal: Good stuff. Looking at that **Hill Giant** versus evasion example, if the Giant player had a **Shock**, what was his best course of action? If he did the math too, he'd realize that **Storm Crow** was going to be hanging back for a turn. That would be a fine time to kill something, for the win and all. Removal is often spent as soon as it's drawn, on the most threatening creature in play. That's a narrow application, when it has such great blocker-killing capabilities as well. Correct removal timing is a tricky subject and worth its own article. For now, just know that taking out blockers to deal more damage isn't a bad place to be, racing or otherwise.

Aggression is good but it's not always the best course. For the final point this week, let's look at an exception to starting a race. Above, I said attacking is correct because you don't know what horror show is lurking in their deck. What if you change "don't know" to "don't care"?

For example, let us say both players have plenty of creatures out. If you made the right attack, some of your guys would get through, but your opponent would get some of his in as well. You would be racing. Now let us assume the math favors you slightly, like scenario 1. Let us also assume your opponent sees this, and won't start an offensive for fear of losing the race. Finally (this is the important part), let us assume you have 7 lands in play and



a **Plague Wind** in your hand. With this set of circumstances it would be crazy to start a race. You're putting yourself in needless risk. At this point, you don't care what they might draw. All you need to do is stay alive until you find lands 8 and 9, cast **Plague Wind**, and win on the spot. If you're the **Plague Wind** deck or the Glare deck or what have you, consider whether you want to fire the tournament pack pistol. In the previous examples, you didn't know if your cards were better or worse than theirs. Now you know you have the trump. It's in your hand. "Stay alive before they kill you" is simply worse than "stay alive so you can win the game." Is this a common scenario? I don't know, how often do you open a **Glare of Subdual**?

Next time you get the chance, watch the Top 8 of a PTQ or premiere event online. See how often players engage in aggressive behavior, and especially see how well things go when they don't. We'll revisit this topic in two weeks time, with some real-world examples and *Time Spiral* cards. Until then, thanks for reading.



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