

What is "Tempo"?

Intro

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Tempo is a frequently used term in card gaming and, I think, one of the most important and intuitive concepts in strategy, with application far outside card games. However, often, when we look into it further its meaning becomes unclear or multiple conflicting definitions surface. I think the term is generally understood intuitively but is difficult to comprehend concretely.

I would like to set out own definition of what tempo is, and my thoughts on its importance in strategy. I expect there will many definitions and thoughts that conflict with my own due to the ill defined nature of the term.

My own thoughts are informed primarily from my own experiences playing games and thinking about strategy, with a small amount of research done for this article, so I hope you will be able to use my thoughts to inform your own, whether you agree with them or not, and vice versa.

- Hale

So What Is It?

To me, tempo tells us which player is the attacker and which is the defender at any given point in a game.

Often during a game, one player will be in a stronger position to attack their opponent, and the other is therefore forced into a defensive position. The defender is forced to play reactively, spending resources to prevent the threat that the attacker has just presented, while making only limited progress toward threatening them.

On the other hand, the attacker is is not being threatened by the defender, they are able to keep the progress the have already made toward victory by presenting new threats that must be answered and if they go unanswered gain even further.

In this situation the 'tempo' is held by the attacker, allowing them to dictate the pace of the game and force their opponent to respond to their plays.

Of course, in many cases, the tempo can shift significantly with the play of a single card. And in a close game the tempo may shift back and forth with every one or two turns as each player answers their opponent's threat while playing their own.

A bit of History:

The term 'tempo' in card games originates in Magic the Gathering, having been ported over from chess before that.

In order to describe tempo Chess.com states:

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"When you successfully move your piece to a good square and force your opponent to stop their original plan to defend against your newly created threat, you have gained a tempo."

I think this description fits quite well into how the terminology is understood in card games as well, at least intuitively, if not always concretely.

Other Uses of the Term

Tempo is also often used to describe plays, cards, and decks as well. These descriptions generally refer to a large gain in tempo.

- A high tempo play may swing the game significantly in one player's favor.
- A high tempo card may be able to produce high tempo plays more consistently than a low tempo one.
- A tempo deck may also be able to consistently produce large swings in tempo compared to other decks, and may specifically rely on these large swings in tempo to win.

However, describing cards and decks in this way is often very tricky, if not entirely impractical, in my opinion. To me, tempo is inherently a state of the game, not inherent to a deck or card. So whether those decks of cards actually produce the tempo they are described as having is highly situational and dependent on the particular game.

For example, I expect most people would consider Summon Sleeping Widows a high tempo card. However, while it can produce a large tempo advantage when played, it can also be played defensively, or simply for the value of two bodies from one card.

Similarly, Guilt Link is a card that I expect would generally be considered a value generating engine. But, probably the highest tempo play I have ever made was playing two copies of Guilt Link back-to-back. Simply because my opponent's board state was such that they could not afford to

attack into it, which countered their immediate threat of attack while also developing the ready spells for use later.

Tempo is control over the pace of the game.

Which player is able to play proactively and which can only react to their opponents play.

Having the tempo means you can set the pace, the beat, the rhythm of the game. You force your opponent to dance to your tempo rather than dancing to theirs.

It is a position of power and control over the game, although often fragile and quick to change hands.

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