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The Pace of the Game, Part 2: The Tortoise, the Hare and the Missile Bot

by Scott Heise aka HomerJr

Star Realms is a race. To win the race, you need to build a deck that can reduce your opponent's authority down to 0 in fewer turns than your opponent can yours. It doesn't mean building the biggest, baddest deck. Nor does mean collecting all of the cards of one faction. It means finding the quickest way to accumulate 50 damage to your opponent's authority (the finish line), while also slowing down his rate of damage accumulation if necessary.

In Part 1, "A Game of Four and a Half Decks", we explored how the average "race" lasts for 25-turns (13 player hands) and the concept of "decks". Now we'll dive deeper into the different ways you can run the race… specifically, is it better to be the Tortoise or the Hare or something in between? Which strategy accumulates combat in the fewest number of turns? I assert that both the Tortoise and the Hare are capable of winning races, so knowing *how* they run a race is important to knowing which will be the winning strategy in a given game.

First, let's define what I mean by "Tortoise" and "Hare" strategies in Star Realms. Then, we'll try running a couple races and see who wins. 🙂

How to Run the Race

In Star Realms, accumulating combat is the only way to move closer to the finish line. (This should be the mantra of every player…) There are two primary routes to accumulating combat :

1. **The Hare:** Buy cards that provide combat using the trade in your starting deck; and,
2. **The Tortoise:** Eschew combat initially in favor of adding trade and/or scrappers to your deck, in order to buy/play even more combat later.

It is important to note that Tortoise and Hare strategies do not refer to whether the strategy can win the race in fewer turns, but whether or not the strategy requires *time* (i.e., deck shuffles) to begin accumulating combat. Therefore, in general:

- **Hare strategies will accumulate damage in fewer turns the *shorter* the race is,** as they tend to accumulate combat at a steady pace.
- **Tortoise strategies will accumulate damage in fewer turns the *longer* the race is,** as they tend to accumulate combat faster and faster as the game goes on.
- **Bases can be either Tortoise or Hare**, depending on whether the base provides recurring value and whether your opponent destroys the base immediately after it is played.
- **The length of *your* race is essentially the amount of authority *your opponent* has remaining.** This means that the length of the race is not the same for each player. If one player plays bases and/or gains authority, then he is making the race longer for his opponent but not for himself.

Racing as the Hare

"Hare" strategies are focused on immediately accumulating combat and reducing the opponent's authority from the start, typically by buying combat cards as early and often as possible. Hare strategies will run a faster race the shorter the race is, as Combat cards require no time to amortize into combat (duh). Combat cards are also less vulnerable to bad draws and bottom-decking because they accumulate combat immediately when they are played.

Bases are another another, less obvious route becoming a Hare. Buying bases that have the potential to generate recurring economic/combat early in the game when your opponent has little or no combat in his deck can quickly accelerate your towards the finish line. Similarly, combat is also useful for keeping your opponent from becoming a Hare by destroying his bases before they can generate recurring trade or combat. More on bases in a sec…

- *Examples of "Hare" cards:* Blob Fighter, Battle Pod, Blob Destroyer, Imperial Frigate, Battle Mech, War World. Battle Barge

Racing as the Tortoise

Tortoise strategies are those which do not aim to immediately reduce your opponent's authority, but instead focus initially on buying trade cards and scrappers (Machine Cult). Tortoise strategies are slow to accumulate combat at first, but will accelerate non-linearly and thus run the race faster the longer the race is.

Remember, trade and scrappers are only a means to accumulate more combat. They do not move you closer to the finish line in of themselves. Therefore, they are only valuable if they leads to more accumulated combat than you would have gotten if you had originally bought combat cards instead. (PROTIP: Avoid using trade to buy more trade unless you really know what you're doing!) Trade strategies can run into trouble if there is little or no combat available to buy when you play your trade cards; likewise, scrapping is only valuable if you also add combat cards into your deck along the way. Usually, the goal of trade is buying the $6+ combat cantrips (cards that draw a card, such as BattleCruiser, Flagship, Battle Blob, Dreadnaught, Mothership, Command Ship, etc) as they cards accumulate combat the fastest and are best for making up for buying trade over combat at the start of the game.

Trade cards and scrappers are also more sensitive to bad draws and bottom-decking because they require a shuffle before their trade/scrap can translate into accumulated combat (i.e., the card(s) bought will be delayed by a whole deck).

- *Examples of "Tortoise" cards:* Trade Pod, Freighter, Cutter, Trade Bot, Supply Bot, Space Station, StarMarket, Blob Wheel, Defense Center, Space Station

Schizophrenic Bases

Any bases will benefit a Tortoise strategy because their defense will always lengthen the game by slowing down your opponent's damage accumulation. Every point of authority that you heal or combat that your opponent spends to destroy one of your bases is one less combat towards winning the race. But bases are not just for the Tortoises... bases that have the ability to provide *recurring* trade or combat can also become Hares, depending on whether they are destroyed immediately. If you're opponent cannot destroy your bases on the turn they are deployed, this means the base will provide their benefit to you for multiple turns in a row which will accelerate your deck very quickly, even faster than Hare ships could.

- *Examples of "Schizophrenic" bases:* Barter World, Central Office, Port of Call, Machine Base, Brain World, Recycling Center

Lengthening of the Race

There are two ways to change the length of the race, essentially moving the finish line for your opponent: 1) gaining authority, and 2) base defense. Both will effectively lengthen the game for you because they slow down your opponent's rate of damage accumulation. Gaining authority and base defense are therefore best suited to Tortoise strategies, though Hare strategies can also benefit from them if your opponent is a faster Hare than

you are and you need to slow them down just a bit. Someone running the race as a hare shouldn't concern themselves with them if they are winning the race (more on this in Part 3), except to deny your opponent the opportunity to lengthen the game to their benefit.

Forcing your opponent to discard cards with Star Empire also can slow down your opponent, though much more indirectly. The value of forcing your opponent to discard is directly related to the value of the card he is discarding, so Discard 1 will rarely have an impact on the race where as Discard 3+ can slow your opponent down significantly if he has to discard combat or trade that would have allowed him to buy a crucial combat card.

Enough Talk, Let's Run a Race

At this point I'm sure you're tired of me talking, so let's run some races!

SCENARIO #1 — Start Your Engines!

Let's take a relatively simple scenario. **Pick any TWO of the following cards as your opening buys (can be the same 2 cards or different):**

- **Merc Cruiser** (+5 combat)
- **Blob Wheel** (scrap for +3 trade) –> *assume it will be be played and scrapped in Deck 2 to buy a Flagship (+5 Combat, Draw a Card)*
- **Missile Bot** (+2 combat, scrap a card in your hand/discard pile; ally: +2 combat)

Assume that your opponent does not buy any defense (bases) or authority-gainers and you do not buy any other cards. **On average, which pair of cards will accumulate 50 damage in the fewest number of turns and win the race?**

Do you have your picks? Scroll down to see the results...

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(I'm not going to go into complete detail about how I put this together, but lets just that I gained a lot of respect for how complex this game can be just by how long it took me to model these simple scenarios. Although my models may not be perfect, I did my best to insert realistic probabilities for bottom-decking, ally bonuses, etc. so they should be accurate enough to illustrate the point.)
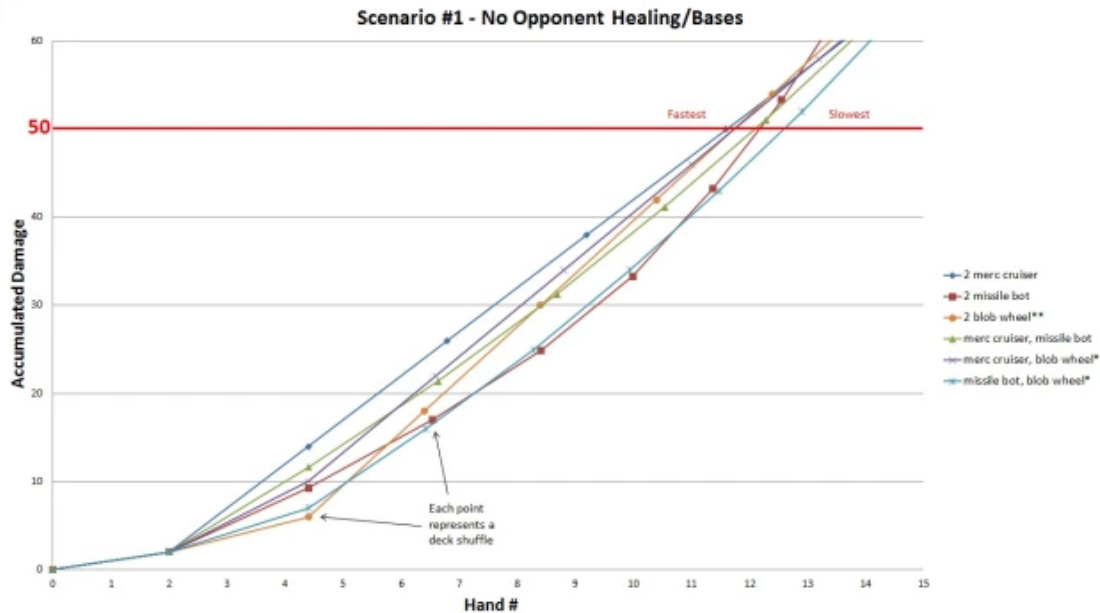
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OPENING BUYS	STRATEGY ARCHETYPE	# HANDS to 50 Combat	% of Average
2 Merc Cruiser	Hare x2	11.6	-3%
Merc Cruiser, Blob Wheel*	Hare + Tortoise (trade)	11.7	-2%
2 Blob Wheel**	Tortoise x2 (trade)	11.7	-2%
Merc Cruiser, Missile Bot	Hare + Tortoise (scrap)	12.1	1%
2 Missile Bot	Tortoise x2 (scrap)	12.2	1%
Missile Bot, Blob Wheel*	Tortoise (trade + scrap)	12.6	5%
	AVERAGE # of HANDS TO ACCUMULATE 50 COMBAT	**12.0**	

[* = assume the Wheel will be be played and scrapped in Deck 2 to buy a Flagship]

Did you pick the winning pair of cards?

This scenario was the very definition of a SHORT game as your opponent did not do anything to slow down your damage accumulation, so it should be no surprise that the double Hare strategy (2x Merc Cruiser) took the

fewest number of turns to accumulate 50 damage. As for the Tortoise strategies, trade was slightly more efficient than scrap, illustrating how in general trade can be amortized into combat more quickly than scrap can. Having said all that, the six different combos are only separated by less than +/- 1 turn, so the luck of the shuffle would probably have a bigger impact on determining the winner if someone were to play out this scenario in a real game.

SCENARIO #2 — Less Drag Race, More Laguna Seca

Now let's slow the game down a bit. Let's say your opponent buys a Cutter as one of his opening buys, so that now he will **heal 4 authority on each of his decks**. Otherwise everything else is the same. **On average, which two cards will accumulate 50 combat the in the fewest number of turns in this scenario?**

Do you have your cards picked? Scroll down to see the results...
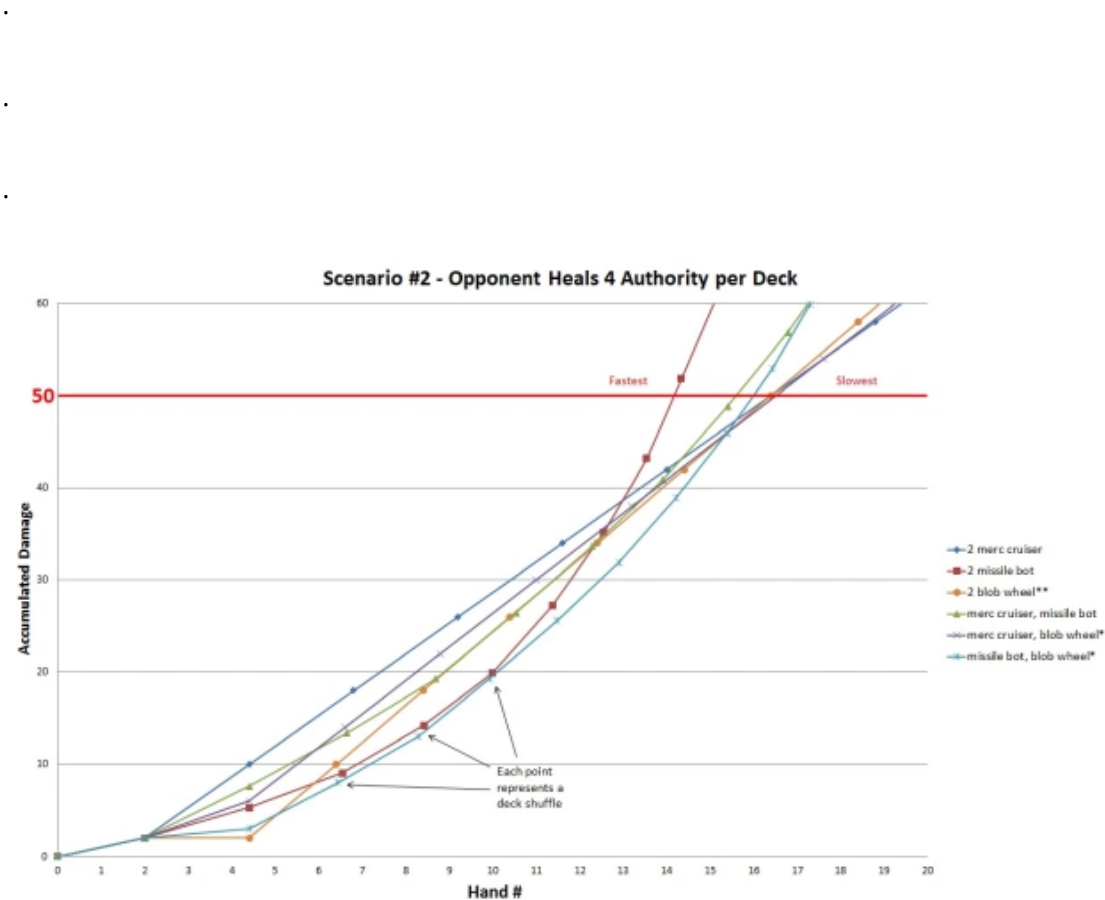
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OPENING BUYS	STRATEGY ARCHETYPE	# HANDS to 50 Combat	% of Average
2 Missile Bot	Tortoise x2 (scrap)	14.2	-11%

Merc Cruiser, Missile Bot	Hare + Tortoise (scrap)	15.6	-1%
Missile Bot, Blob Wheel*	Tortoise x2 (trade + scrap)	16.0	1%
Merc Cruiser, Blob Wheel*	Hare + Tortoise (trade)	16.4	3%
2 Blob Wheel**	Tortoise x2 (trade)	16.4	3%
2 Merc Cruiser	Hare x2	16.5	4%
AVERAGE # of HANDS TO ACCUMULATE 50 COMBAT		**15.9**	

[* = assume the Wheel will be played and scrapped in Deck 2 to buy a Flagship]

What a difference a longer game can make! By adding just a single Cutter to his deck, your opponent has slowed down the pace of the game by an average of *four hands* (33% longer than Scenario #1). By lengthening the game, the scrap strategies now have enough time to amortize their deck thinning value and overtake the Hare strategies in terms of damage accumulation. The double-scrap approach beats the next best pair by nearly *two full hands* on average! In fact, the top 3 pairs all contain at least one scrapper. The pure Hare strategy ends up going from the quickest strategy on average in Scenario #1 to the slowest strategy on average in Scenario #2.

Trade does not fare as well in this scenario as scrap does, but from the slope of the lines you can see that the trade strategies will overtake the Hare if the game were to last a few turns longer. I admit that neither of these examples are fair evaluations of trade-heavy strategies in general. Blob Wheel is a special kind of trade, as it is trade "one-time use". Most trade cards can be used multiple times and thus will hopefully add several combat cards over the course of the game. Unfortunately trying to model the impact of trade cards over an entire game can be tricky and is heavily trade row dependent. But since I think knowing how much trade is just enough to is a very important aspect of winning at Star Realms, I'll try to find a better way to quantify the impact of trade in future article.

So, given the results of these scenarios, what do you think would happen if the opponent bought two Cutters instead of one, thus healing 8 damage per deck and extending the game even longer? Which pair of cards do you think would accumulate 50 damage in the fewest number of turns? Will scrap still be king? I'll leave that one up to you. 🙂

Final Thoughts

You can see from the two scenarios above what a dramatic result changing the pace of the game had on which type of strategy will win the race in the fewest number of turns. In summary:

- The Hare will accumulate damage in the fewest number of turns the shorter the race is.
- The Tortoise will accumulate damage in the fewest number of turns the longer the race is.

- Gaining authority and playing bases lengthens the race for your opponent, which is most beneficial for the player who is the most like the Tortoise.

Both the Tortoise and the Hare can win a race in Star Realms. Of course, a game of Star Realms is rarely so black and white... you can only build a deck from what the Trade Row gives you, so usually your deck will become a mix of Tortoise and Hare. So, in a given game, how do you know how much Tortoise and how much Hare you should be? And once you've focused on a strategy, how do you know whether you're winning or losing the race? Are there any calculations or heuristics that can help quantify the pace of the game and aid in decision making?

I hope to discuss all of this and more in Part 3!

Cheers! And may the shuffles be ever in your favor.

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5 thoughts on "The Pace of the Game, Part 2: The Tortoise, the Hare and the Missile Bot"

Eduardo
September 22, 2015 at 1:16 pm

Really nice visualizations on this article. Great work.

John
September 22, 2015 at 6:11 pm

Nice article! I really like the data analysis and the graphs!

Dave
September 24, 2015 at 7:09 am

Nice article. I'd like to see more about the model used to generate these results. I had trouble understanding how those early choices positioned the player to best react to the variability of subsequent market draws. Perhaps that wasn't the focus here, but then it is hard to see how the charts have meaning with respect to what happens in an actual game.

Also, i wonder if the terms "sprinter" and "closer" might be useful alternatives to convey the idea that the "tortoise" player is really building up toward a big finish (and not doing the traditional "slow and steady"), while the "hare" in star realms actually goes as quick as he can in hopes of ending the race before the closer is ready.

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porf
April 27, 2020 at 7:22 pm

where is the part 3?