

# BattleForge for Beginners: Learning to Read

by Richard Hagon

Welcome back to the world of BattleForge. This series of articles is designed to help you look at the Trading Card Game, or TCG, perspective in the game. Although there are dozens of lessons to learn – and many of them have literally thousands of articles dedicated to them across the history of TCGs - underpinning them all is one all-consuming, vital skill.

## Learning To Read.

Sounds simple, right? But the fact is that the language of cards is extremely complex, and the actual words on the card sometime give us little clue as to what they should be doing, or just as importantly, could be doing. In a world as fast and furious as BattleForge, squeezing every last drop of goodness from each and every one of your cards is the route to ultimate success.. This week, we'll go inside the Fire deck that comes pre-loaded, and start Learning To Read.



**Rich Hagon** spends his life around games. Whether it's role-playing, board, trading card, console, or computer games, he covers events ranging from conventions to world championships. He writes for various websites, and creates audio and video content for clients around the globe, including many of the biggest names in the gaming industry. Watching the best, talking and writing about the best, and playing with the best – it doesn't get much better than that.

Just like the Frost, Nature and Shadow decks, we're given sixteen cards to play with. At the heart of trading card games is a fundamental tension between getting what you pay for and getting more than you pay for. In other words, as the consumer you're always looking for a bargain. When we talk about cost, we don't mean dollars or yen or pounds. We're talking about the resources cost of playing a card. In the fire deck, this starts out at Sunstriders, who require just one Red Orb and 50 Power, right the way up to the mighty Fire Dragon at RRR1-250 (that's three Red Orbs plus one other and a cost of 250 Power.)

Everybody loves a bargain, and spotting them is what separates the best deckbuilders from the rest. Just like the real world, bargains can come in many price ranges, so it isn't just a case of hurling money and expecting to win because what you've bought is 'expensive'. Indeed, 'expensive' is an interesting word, since it implies not only a high price, but a price not worth paying. Sometimes the best cards in the game are going to 'cost a lot', but that doesn't make them bad. Just like any major purchase, we're going to expect more from them, and if we're wrong, the consequences are more severe.



As we go through the deck, and when you look at any cards in a TCG, these are the questions that should be uppermost in your mind:

What does it do most of the time?

Is it good at the job?

What is it bad at doing?

What can't it do at all?

What can it be made to do to my advantage?

How much does it cost to do this?

Does this represent good value?

Are there better ways of doing this?

How does this deck fit with my overall plan?

If this sounds like a lot to get your head around, don't worry. A lot of the time you'll arrive at the correct answer by looking and listening to what other people are playing, or trading for. Or you can read articles by people like me! However, if you want to get your hands dirty and get under the hood, these are the kinds of things you want to consider. Bear in mind that underneath any decent strategy game are hundreds of complex decisions designed to separate you from the competition. In trading card land, players pore over set lists for days and weeks at a time, looking to turn mud into gold and find the tiny edge that can mean the difference between triumph and disaster. Looking at the words on the card and deciphering the answer to these questions is what I mean by Learning To Read, so with alphabet to hand, let's go...

For ease, I reference cards like this:

Card Name – Color Requirements – Power Cost – Attack – Hit Points.

So...

Thugs – R – 60 – 660 – 450

Thugs need one red Orb and cost 60 Power to cast. They have an attack rating of 660, and 450 Hit Points. Simple. This sentence will offer you no strategic insight, but it's the attention to detail that constantly strikes me as I'm putting these articles together. When the Thugs appear, first they have a little teamtalk, and if you leave them alone for a moment or two, they start getting bored and doing pushups. Much love went into these little guys then, but are they any good?

Well, we're not expecting too much, since they cost very little. We get five 'charges', so in total we have access to 30 of the little blighters. What are they good at? They're good at not costing you much, which is something to consider when Power needs to be carefully pre-





served. Truthfully, individually they're going to get quickly outpaced, but then it's in the early game that you want them piling into the opposition. As a TCG player, I'm instantly drawn to special abilities. What are they for? Are they any good? It seems to me that Looter is potentially a great early-game ability. If you aim your Thugs at opposition structures, you won't only be getting some beats in, you'll also be generating Power. In a sense, it's possible to view the Thugs as essentially 'free' to cast, because although it may take a little time, they actively replenish your supply of Power. I like 'em..



Sunstriders – R – 50 – 450 – 360

Hmm. I look at the Bow Attack and think 'meh'. Sometimes small effects win you games, and I'm not advocating the route of 'don't sweat the small stuff', but this seems to be very small. 9 Damage is not a lot, even against small units. It's worth drawing your attention at this point to a nice feature, which is that Sunstriders are particularly good against a certain type of unit. In the game, there are four different sizes of unit – Small, Medium, Large and Extra Large – and these are, as you might expect, represented by S, M, L and XL on the card. So against Medium sized units the Sunstriders actually deal one and a half times their normal damage. That's not to be sniffed at, and trying to create a good matchup against particular sizes of unit is a neat aspect of play.. Once we get to Suppression Fire things really pick up.

As you play the game more, you'll develop your own list of buildings that are powerful, but in the abstract being able to turn off their attacks and special abilities seems good. As for the restriction of only being able to Suppress for 10 seconds out of every 20, I'm sure you've already spotted that a second squad of Sunstriders could work quite neatly in tandem with the first...



Wrecker – R – 50 – 570 – 540

The first of our single-creature units, and he looks mean. He's also the first creature where his Attack and Hit Points are basically irrelevant to his function. Why? Well, it's true that he can smash face, somewhat, but at only R50 we can imagine him running into much tougher opponents. However, in TCGs one of the most feared abilities is called Haste, where cards hit the table running, jumping and attacking. Here, Rallying Cry enables you to negate that tedious wait while your troops come online. With the ability in action, as soon as your troops appear they'll be into battle.

Suppose that you kick off with some Thugs and Sunstriders, and use the Thugs to generate more Power. Then you cast Wrecker, and before your opponent can stabilize, you've used Rallying Cry to pile out your next wave. Giving your opponent no time to think is a great plan in any game, and Rallying Cry helps you do that. This is a card I'd be thinking about making integral to a 'shoot-first-ask-questions-later' gameplan.



**Makeshift Tower – R – 60 – 345 – 800**

Any time you see numbers like 345 Attack, 800 Hit Points, you should probably be thinking about Defense, since that's where Makeshift Tower excels. 800 is a lot to chomp through, but we have a saying in cardland: 'Look how long it took me to kill him.' The important sentiment there is that we did, eventually, kill him. It might have taken until five past Christmas, but we killed him, and that means we won. Having a big back end is fine, but it has to be for a purpose. Just taking a long time to die achieves nothing.

In the case of Makeshift Tower, it has a Grenade Launcher. This sounds good, but in reality it's a moderately feeble affair. 3 seconds can be an eternity, and when it does actually launch it doesn't seriously impact the battlefield. So, why use it? Well, think of when it could be good. It could be good if you have your opponent locked down, with no way to deal with the tower. At that point, you could be the one saying 'look how long it took me to kill him', and winning long. That said, this sort of damage over time is probably best served in a deck built around that idea, and I'm not sure it's going to be that great for us here.



**Eruption – R – 80 – 250 damage.**

We met Eruption in the Tutorial, and oh it felt good to rain down destruction on the hapless opposition. The fact that it's immediately reusable is tremendous, because it doesn't narrow our strategic options. What we do with those options is a tricky affair, and depends on wider considerations of what our deck is trying to achieve (obviously winning, but how it goes about that.)

One way to use burn (the term for anything that just destroys things from on high) is to frazzle anything that moves until you run out of charges. You keep the way clear for your early men, and hope they go the distance, or at least to the point where your opponent can't stabilize. This indiscriminate approach is rarely satisfactory. A middle path involves hovering over the card, letting your ground forces do the work, and lending a hand where you feel your overall plan is



threatened by being slowed down. As you play more, you'll start to see which units are a proper pain to get round, and just have a great big juicy target on them. The third burn plan is to be reactive and largely defensive, using it only when you're in trouble. As always, having a button is only half the equation – knowing when to push the button is the other half, and it's the half that most frequently leads us astray.



Rageclaws – R1 – 70 – 360 – 960

Here's the first of our cards that requires more than one Orb, so by definition we won't be casting it really early in the game. The ability Rage showcases perfectly what I mean by the questions 'what is it good at?' and 'what isn't it good at?'. It's possible that you could station Rageclaws next to your Makeshift Tower, and use it as defence. Possible, but rubbish. To get the most value out of Rageclaws, it wants to attack. And attack, and attack, and attack. In that order. As soon as it stops attacking, it resets, wasting all that wholesome bile that was being generated on its killing spree.

This card has a perfectly-formed niche in our emerging strategy of 'attack fast, attack often'. We describe this in shorthand as being a great 'fit' for the deck, because it slots into a space in the puzzle. Many cards can be good, but they don't 'fit' a deck, because of what they're designed to do. Right now, Makeshift Tower feels like a card that doesn't fit.



Fire Stalker – R1 – 70 – 820 – 580

The Tutorial gave us a glimpse of this, and there's much to like. At the highest levels of TCGs, players will often gravitate towards a deck with as many choices as possible, since this give them the most chance to outthink and outsmart their opponents. Here we get Inner Fire, and the application of this can be superb. In the sandpit, I ran him into some Bandit Footmen, my halfwits of choice for fodder.. The second set looked likely to take him down, but then I switched to Inner Fire, and every few seconds the Footmen got knocked back by Unstable Ember.. They basically couldn't touch him. Had I left him in his original configuration, he would have been toast. Experience will show you all the different ways a card can be used, but this is a tasty one. And then you get to wander around the map and go 'oh look, a structure..'

## Skyfire Drake – R1 – 110 – 1360 – 390



Here's another classic Learning To Read moment.. A lot of beginner players look at a card like this, and the number that sticks out is 1360. That's a huge Attack number. Given that it only costs R1-110, this is indeed a huge number. It's also largely an irrelevant number. Skyfire Drake is what's known in the business as a Glass Cannon. Indeed, some games even have a card called precisely that, in honor of the concept.

If you've not come across this before, the idea is that you have a cannon, which is obviously a dominating presence on the battlefield. Every shot it takes deals huge damage and threatens to overwhelm the opposition. Alas, it's made of glass, so sooner or later somebody sneezes somewhere within a hundred miles of it and it just plain keels over and dies in a heap of dead. This is not good. Consider the humble Bandit Skyrake, coming in at just 470 Attack and 440 Hit Points. Run these two against each other in the sandpit, you get a score draw. They both bite the dust, and that's not what you want when you've invested in the Drake.

There's another lesson here, which is that Art and Math are two different subjects and should be treated accordingly. What do I mean? Well, simply put, the graphical representation of cards and what cards actually do for you can be counter-intuitive. My Skyfire Drake look a million dollars, and the Bandit Skyrake absolutely does not. Yet our eyes deceive us, because the Skyrake is more than capable of getting the job done. Remember that underneath every gorgeous piece of art is a game engine, and that's where the battles are really won and lost. Turning around and saying 'but mine was bigger than yours, and it cost a lot more' will get you nowhere fast.

## Morklay Trap – R1 – 50 – 1200 Hit Points.



What's in a name? When you see it's a trap, you might be thinking about lying in wait for someone unsuspecting. Well, sure, you could play this that way. Plant it down near something you want to protect, and use it as part of a defensive perimeter that weakens or perhaps even kills the opposing forces before they can threaten your prized Monument. However, the developing theme of our deck is speed and burn, and that suggests that waiting for the opposition to wander by isn't the most efficient use of this card.



Instead, we can treat this as a proactive spell, and indeed not think of it as having any kind of permanency on the battlefield. In that sense, rather than being a Unit, we think of it as a Pseudo-Spell, with a near-instant impact. Cast, watch go boom, that's what I'll be doing with this awesome spell, which by the way is an absolute steal at just 50 Power.

**Lava Field – R1 – 120 – up to 2100 damage.**

On the face of it, Lava Field is just plain worse than Morklay Trap, so why would we use it? It costs a lot more Power, does up to the same damage, it just doesn't seem to make sense. I have two answers for you. First, it's always worth looking at the details. The Morklay Trap begins with a cone shape, whereas Lava Field gives you the full 360 degree treatment. Also, even though we may be intending to use the Morklay Trap immediately, the fact remains that once it hits play it stays precisely there, and can take no account of the ebb and flow of battle around it. Lava Field gives us roving strike capacity, targeting to where we need it most at the moment we need it.

Although depressing, the second factor to consider is redundancy. This basically means stacking up more than one card that does a particular job. The Morklay Trap may be a fine fillet steak, and Lava Field a fast-food burger, but they're both still meat, and provide food. In BattleForge terms, that means that sometimes we have to make do with less than the best, and look for the best we can from our second-string players. But truthfully, if I was looking to improve the deck, this is one of the first cards I'd be looking at cutting.

**Virtuoso – R2 – 120 – 1790 – 1700**

Now we need three Orbs before we can cast, so we want plenty of bang for our buck. In terms of flavor, this is an awesome card. It's worth casting this guy just for the Trumpet of Jellicoo sound effect. Speakers to eleven – so much fun. That said, his ability isn't necessarily the best thing about him, because those numbers are really hefty. This is a guy who can take a hit and give it right back in spades. In a way, I'd think of him as a 'finisher', which is what we call a card that's designed to end the game sooner rather than later. It's pretty costly, especially with that jump to the third Orb, but it smashes very nicely.

The question you have to ask yourself with a card like this is 'Can I do this better with something else?' It's possible that the walls will indeed come a' tumblin' down when you set off the ability, but at a vastly reduced cost we have Fire Stalker, which is also decent against structures. It's possible therefore that your Virtuoso is a big answer



to a small threat, and there are no style points for overkill, just the possibility of being punished for inefficiency. If you're in a scenario where structures are going to be a serious pain in the backside, then by all means wheel this bad boy out, and there's no doubt it's great to have something that powerful sitting there as a late-game option. Just don't use the sledgehammer to crack a nut.

**Magma Hurler – R2 – 100 – 1700 – 975**

I had a feeling that this had some comedy potential, so I lined up my stooges in the form of Bandit Footmen and decided to see what they could do against it. Guess how many sets of Footmen it takes to down one Magma Hurler? Two? Three? Keep going...It was six. Now that's a lot of resources going into one unit.

In TCGs, the holy grail is something called Card Advantage. Now Card Advantage has been written about more than almost anything in TCGs, and arguments rage about what technically is and is not Card Advantage. For our purposes, all we need to know is that if we manage to kill two of their units with one of ours, we're ahead, or 'up one'. In this example, we created a six-for-one trade. We rendered five sets of Footmen useless, and then 'traded' our Magma Hurler for the last set.

This way of looking at things has two very important things going for it. First, it allows you to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your own team against a definable yardstick. Yes, Sunstriders and Thugs and Wrecker can make a good start, but if they run into a Magma Hurler they're going to reveal their shortcomings in short order. Second, and this is one of the most important lessons from any TCG or indeed RTS...

In practical terms, there is no such thing as 'nearly dead'.

What does that mean for us? It means that effectively cards are binary in operation, in that they are either 'on' or 'off'. It doesn't matter whether or not they're about to expire in the next few seconds/turns, the fact is that they continue to do the things they do right up to the moment you actually extinguish them. In some games, cards weaken as they come closer to death, but as a fundamental principle you should regard anything that has a pulse as being a potential threat. In our example above, five sets of Footmen perished to the Magma Hurler. At the point where the fifth set died, the Magma Hurler was in sole possession of the sandbox. You couldn't say 'but they almost killed him', since although that would be true it would be a pyrrhic victory indeed. If you think of units as being alive and well right up





until the moment they're actually pronounced dead with a doctor's certificate and everything, that's almost certainly a good move. Nearly dead? Don't be fooled.



Tower Of Flames – R2 – 120 – 2700 – 2100

Now this is the kind of card I'm happy to get behind in the back end of a fight. The fact that Fire Ball kicks in every two seconds makes it effectively constant, and can be trained on any Ranged attackers. Once they get a little closer, Volcanic Ground offers a sturdy second line of defence. As we'll see in future weeks, things start to get really interesting once we start using more than one faction for our deck, and Tower Of Flames is exactly the kind of card that fits in with a strategy of setting up decent defense and then going to town with the Fire Ball ability.

As always, getting the best deal is your goal, and it's worth comparing this with Virtuoso, which has exactly the same cost. The Tower has much higher stats, and decent abilities. Virtuoso has manoeuvrability, and a dedicated special ability that you'll really be grateful for, sometimes. So when you get your third Orb online, think about which direction you want to go. For me, most of the time the Tower is going to be your new best friend.



Inferno – RR1 – 300 – 8 meteors.

When you first start playing, chances are you're going to use a mono-color deck ie red for Fire, blue for Frost, green for Nature and purple for Shadow. For as long as that continues to be the case, there is no functional difference between a spell that costs R2 (requiring 3 Orbs, one of which is red) and one that costs RR1 (requiring 3 Orbs, two of which are red.) From a deckbuilding perspective, this makes all the difference in the world. We'll talk about deckbuilding later in the series, but that double red requirement is a severe restriction in how we can use a card like Inferno. In simple terms, the designers have made the card not just red but 'super-red', meaning that only the most dedicated red mages will be able to wield its fiery goodness.

While they were at it, the designers have also made sure that we think very carefully before pushing the button, as 300 Power is way more than double anything else we've seen so far. 300 Power? For that, I want the keys to the mansion. Against a motley assortment of ground troops, it's fabulous. Against a single entity like a Bandit Walker, it doesn't shine. If you're going to spend all that Power, and jump through the hoops of securing double-red Orbs in a multi-color deck, make sure you spend it wisely.

We're almost done, with just two cards to go, and they're right at the top of the spectrum.

**Fire Dragon – RRR1 – 250 – 2150 – 2400**

Let's not mess around, this thing looks amazing. Just take a moment to summon it and watch the shadows it casts across the sandbox. Truly spectacular. Of course, we want it to be truly spectacular in the game as well, especially as we require four Orbs to cast it. To be honest, I'd be very reluctant to hang my hat on a strategy that was predicated on having four Orbs under my control.

Sometimes that's just not going to be possible, and sometimes, if you have them, you're well on the way to victory without something like this coming out of the skies. Apart from anything else, even Fire Dragon can't be two places at once, and there's a good bet you're going to be battling hard to maintain control of that many Orbs. That said, it truly does dominate, and rivals the Trumpet of Jellicoo and the Morklay Trap for entertainment value.

**Fire Sphere – RRR1 – 150 – Thousands of damage bwah haa haa!!!**

You know how sometimes you find yourself up against a foe in a computer game, and you've died repeatedly trying to get past the irritating Boss, and get to the next portal/level/world? And you know how there's a moment when you realize that you've finally got your head round it, and that your next plan is the one that's actually going to work? And you know the satisfaction you get when you see that strategy falling into place, and see his life total dwindling away and know that you're absolutely going to get him as long as you just keep going and there's nothing he can do to stop you? OK. You know all those feelings.





Now I want to talk about the moment just after you know that he will inevitably go down. You start to grin. Your finger tightens over the mouse. You lean back in your chair, finger poised. You know that 'dead by 1 hit point' is exactly the same as 'dead by 1000 hit points'. You know that you should carefully husband your resources for the battles ahead. You don't care. You click on the biggest, baddest, most expensive, four-horsemen-of-the-apocalypse card you can find, and wait, finger hovering, waiting until he's almost, almost, almost dead.

And then you hit him. You blast him so hard and so fast it's like you vaporized the entire universe right along with him. And it feels gooooooooooddd.

And that, my friends, is Fire Sphere.

We've got through a lot today, and if you're new to the world of Trading Card Games, there are some pretty heavy concepts that I've given you thumbnail sketches of. As your time in the game develops, you'll start to see these at work, in your deckchoices and those of your opponents, and how players go about utilising their cards to good effect. Using these TCG skills will bring you closer to mastery of the battlefield, no matter what Factions you choose to play with.

Until we meet again, have fun playing the game.  
As ever,

*Rick*