

How To Play Horde

By Philippe Saner

Basic Concepts

By far the best way for black to capture all of white's pawns is for black's queen to reach the other side of the board so that it can capture the unprotected pawns at the back of white's formation.

By far the best way for white to checkmate black is for one of white's pawns to reach the other side of the board so that it can become a queen.

As such, both sides are essentially trying to push through one another. Since white's pieces are slow, in practice that usually means black is trying to push through while white plays defence. Black does have the option of sitting back and waiting for white to come, but playing defensively with black is quite difficult. Don't try it unless your attack has failed or you're really good.

The structure of Horde tends to magnify the importance of the queen, while decreasing the importance of knights and bishops. It's quite rare for black to win after losing the queen, but trading a bishop or knight for two pawns is something black is usually glad to do.

Horde offers many opportunities to trade pawns. It's generally a bad idea to take them unless you have a plan in mind. Whether you're white or black, you can make life really difficult for yourself by throwing away pawns in unproductive one-for-one trades.

The Opening

Horde does not have the deep opening theory that standard chess has. The openings are not named, and nobody's written books about any of them. But there's still a lot to learn about the opening, and many games are decided in it. Horde openings are very different from regular chess openings, and much of the variant's difficulty is in learning them.

White's main goal, early on, is to avoid two-for-one trades. It should not make its first move in the b, c, f, or g files. It should advance cautiously and try to block off as many routes of attack as possible.

Black, of course, has the opposite goal. It wants to set up two-for-one trades and open up lines of attack. Its first move is generally a5, h5, d6, or e6. A5 and h5 help to set up the rook attack described in the middlegame section, while d6 and e6 pressure c5 and f5 respectively. If white leaves those pawns protected by only a single pawn, a pawn-and-bishop attack can put black a pawn up.

White can sometimes obtain a decisive advantage early by placing a well-protected pawn on d6 or e6 after one of the black pawns threatening that space has moved. Doing so can pin one of black's pawns in place, making it very difficult for black to move pieces from one side of the board to the other and more or less paralyzing the queen. Once black's mobility has been restrained that way, white has almost free rein. Black can avoid this situation by not moving its d or e pawn when white has pawns on both d5 and e5.

If you'd like to learn more about the opening, you can look [here](#) and [here](#). The first link is an introductory study by Sinamon73, breaking down some of the most common openings in horde. The second link is a less-introductory study by svenos, one of the best horde players in the world. It shows how he prefers to begin the game. It might not be strictly appropriate for an introductory guide like this one, but it's there if you want to see it.

There's no clear line between the opening and the middlegame, and I'm not going to try and draw one. At some point, unless you outmatch your opponent utterly, the game will start to become surprising.

The Middlegame

The middlegame is (almost always) all about black trying to break through the wall of white pawns. Since pawns protect each other very well (at least against frontal attack), this requires black to make sacrifices. Fortunately for black, it only needs to pierce through in one place. So it can afford to spend a lot of material on making a single hole in the opposing formation.

Black's strategy is usually to capture a protected pawn, to have the capturer recaptured, and then to recapture the recapturing pawn. It's often well worth it to use up a bishop or knight this way, since it brings black closer to piercing the white wall. With that in mind, white should try to protect each and every pawn with as many pawns as possible.

White's weakest points are the a and h files. Each file supports the files next to it, so the files with only one neighbour are weakly supported and vulnerable. Plus, they're less useful for protecting other pawns.

a3 and h3 are critical spaces. If the queen reaches one of them when b2 or g2 is empty, there's no longer any way to keep the queen away from the back. As a result, one of black's greatest weapons is to use a paired queen and rook on a or h. The queen sits behind the rook, which is sent forward to capture on a3 or h3. If white recaptures, the queen is in the back. But the rook cannot simply be ignored; if not captured it can just keep pushing down the file. A rook in the back is nearly as deadly as a queen in the back, and there's nothing stopping the queen from following it.

Setting up that attack on a or h requires black to remove its own pawn in that file, and to capture the foremost white pawn in that file. The most common way to do this is to advance the pawn to a5 or h5 and a knight to b6 or g6. Then, if the pawn captures on b4 or g4, the knight can follow up by capturing on a4 or h4. Sinamon73's [study](#), which I also linked in the opening section, describes this attack in some detail.

One thing to watch out for, as white: once the pawn is out of the way, the rook threatens the pawns in front of it very effectively. Before moving a pawn to attack a rook, check to make sure you're not exposing the pawn right in front of the rook to capture.

The value of white's pawns is extremely variable. A pawn at the back of the formation is nearly worthless; a pawn at the front is quite valuable. A pawn with promotion opportunities is extremely precious. Developing pawns, moving them forward while protecting them, is important for white even when those pawns aren't doing anything in particular.

Black, meanwhile, doesn't care about developing its pieces overall. It needs to pierce the white wall, but apart from that it's quite happy to have pieces sitting in their starting positions. White will come to black's side of the board eventually, so a black pawn on row 7 is a lot more powerful than a white pawn on row 2.

White is often presented with a choice about which pawn to (re)capture a black piece with. There are two general guidelines to keep in mind when making such choices. First, you want to avoid making any of your files too thin. If white only has one or two pawns in a given file, that file is vulnerable to a breakthrough from black. And second, you want to (re)capture with pieces that can be replaced. You want to be able to move up the pawn right behind the one you (re)captured with, and the pawn behind that one, and so on. White pawns increase in value as they move forward, so it's valuable to give yourself opportunities to advance safely within your own formation.

The importance of tempo in the middlegame varies hugely from move to move. It's not rare for positions to arise in which one side completely lacks any good way to advance its position. When this happens for black, it can usually fiddle a rook or something back and forth; this gives white time to tighten its formation and bring its back-row pawns up but isn't too terrible. When this happens for white, it's worse; white can only move forward, so it ends up in the unenviable position of deciding where and how it wants to lose material.

The Endgame

The endgame begins when black's queen, or occasionally one of black's rooks, reaches the back of white's formation. When white wins overwhelmingly, there may not be an endgame. But most games have an endgame, and it often begins well before the outcome is decided.

Sometimes new players, playing white, give up when the endgame starts. This is a mistake, because horde games are decided by a single careless mistake in the endgame all the time. It's the most difficult phase of the game.

Essentially, the endgame is a race. White advances while black takes pawns. White wins if it can promote one of its foremost pawns before black renders the white formation harmless.

Rendering the formation harmless doesn't mean destroying every pawn in it. It means breaking it up into pieces that aren't capable of promoting a pawn. And the key to that is reducing its width.

Width is what makes a formation dangerous. A king alone can easily and reliably capture a two-wide column, no matter how deep, just by standing in front of it. A rook can capture any number of one-wide columns by sitting in the back row and eating any pawn that enters it. A knight or bishop can capture a single one-wide column, and a pawn can at least immobilise one.

The queen's job, in the endgame, is to separate white's pawns from one another so that none of them can get past the king and the other leftover pieces waiting for them.

Because the endgame is a race, delaying the opponent is of paramount importance. White should seek to build an attacking formation that's time-consuming to dismantle. If one move can add two moves to the time it takes to destroy white's final attack, white should make that move. But a single move which neither advances the attack nor effectively delays black can be catastrophic.

Black, of course, has its own tools for delaying white. The two-for-one trades that it used to pierce white's formation early in the game are even more effective now that white has no time to prepare for them. That's why black doesn't need to develop its pieces: a black piece sitting idly in its starting position is actually well-positioned to slow white down in the endgame. And sometimes these delaying tactics are more than just that; sometimes they actually serve to destroy an attacking white formation.

One final note: watch out for stalemates. As white, once you've promoted a pawn or two, don't relax and move carelessly. It's surprisingly easy to stalemate the king by accident. And as black, watch out for your own pawns. A one-wide column, or even a single white pawn, stuck against one of your pawns after everything else is gone can make a victory into a draw.