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# Instants at the Right Time

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Learning Curve  
Wednesday, June 25, 2003



I often think back to my early days as a **Magic** player and all of the things I have learned about how to play this game. Certainly the most complex lessons pertained to instants (and interrupts, which have since been melded into a single card type). How many times have you seen a new player play a mountain, then tap it and play **Lightning Bolt** or **Shock** targeting his opponent? It takes a little while to learn that you should play your instants at the end of your opponent's turn to make the most efficient use of your mana, have the widest window of opportunity to dispatch your opponent's threats, and possibly even bait him into using a counterspell at the end of his turn so you will have a clear opportunity to play an important spell on your turn.

## Learning to Play Instants

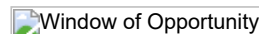
That's the first step most players take when learning the fundamentals of good game play: Don't play instants—or effects that can be used as instants—until the last minute. Use **Prodigal Sorcerer** during your opponent's end step. Use **Jayemdae Tome** during your opponent's end step. Play **Fact or Fiction** during your opponent's end step.

Expounding on what I said before, the reasons experienced players typically do things in this way is to (a) keep their options open and (b) keep their opponents guessing.

Keeping your options open is important because it forces your opponent into bad positions. If you have a **Prodigal Sorcerer** in play and shoot your opponent with it on your turn, your opponent might then play a **Ball Lightning** on his turn and attack you for six. By leaving the Sorcerer untapped, he can never play the **Ball Lightning**, as you will just kill it.

With actual instants, it gets even better. Don't play the **Shock** you just drew; wait and see if your opponent plays something nasty (like a **Ball Lightning**), and then you can decide whether to **Shock** it, **Shock** your opponent, or do nothing. The power is in your hands. And once your opponent learns that you aren't going to waste your instants at inopportune times, you keep him guessing about what plays you will make in response to his. Even if your hand has no instants, the threat of untapped lands on your side of the table will make him nervous.

## The Next Level: Windows of Opportunity



Playing in such a way is good, but there is always more to be learned. As you and your play group get better and better (or as you start playing in tournaments), you'll run into all kinds of tricksters hoping you'll walk into their traps so that they can destroy you with instants. You have to find your window of opportunity. And that comes when your opponent is tapped out.

The best examples of this have to deal with countermagic. I remember when I was first starting to play more competitively, I tried my hand at the ubiquitous blue-white control deck. A more tournament-experienced friend of mine explained something about playing against other blue decks that has always stayed with me... "Whoever plays the first spell will lose the game." He was emphatic. He would sooner discard a **Mahamoti Djinn** than try and play it and lose the ensuing counter battle. He likened it to a game of chicken. Both players would develop their mana and craft their perfect hand and once someone blinked—in this case tried to play a spell—the other person would win. While it is not necessarily an accurate description of modern **Magic** it seemed like a revelation to me at the time and profoundly affected the way I approached the game.

By tapping out, you let your opponent know the coast is clear—you can't stop what he is going to do. If you tap out on your sixth turn to play a Djinn, not only is the Djinn going to be countered or killed, most likely, but your opponent can then play whatever spell he likes without having to worry about you stopping him. Hence the "don't blink first" attitude.

Of course, you can apply this knowledge to other tricks besides counterspells. If your opponent has an annoying 2/2 in play, the best time to **Shock** it is whenever that opponent taps out—he can't save it with a **Giant Growth** or **Shelter** or anything like that. Once he taps out, he loses his options and he loses his bluff, and you can go in for the kill.



The premises also hold true for matches using modern tournament decks. Your opponent taps out at the end of your turn to use **Compulsion**? That would be the perfect time to **Cunning Wish** for a **Ray of Revelation** and destroy the powerful card selection engine. You see, even though it was the end of *your* turn, it was the best time for you to play instants.

*Scourge's* new hot instant, **Stifle**, will also make players rethink their windows of opportunity. The most common time that players use their **Polluted Deltas**, **Wooded Foothills**, and other fetchlands is at the end of their opponents' turn. The advantage to doing this is slight: you don't tip your hand as to what your main color is. You can choose to fetch one color or another based on what you can glean from your opponent's land drop. But now with **Stifle** in the environment you will want to play and use your fetchland immediately—on the first turn, going first anyway—out of fear of having your land **Stifled** (which is akin to a one-mana **Stone Rain!**). So your window of opportunity here is—surprise!—when your opponent is "virtually" tapped out (he has no untapped lands in play).



## Caveats

There are, as always, caveats to playing the game in this way. The first is a savvy opponent. Some players will never tap out, either because they are holding the answer to your instant (like **Giant Growth**, **Shelter**, or **Confound**), or because they want you to think they are. Unless you can make a play that will force your opponent into pulling the trigger first, you may have to bite the bullet and play your instant anyway, even if the time isn't perfect.

The other problem arises when playing against people using "free" cards. Some cards, like **Force of Will**, **Invigorate**, and **Prismatic Strands** can be played under certain circumstances for no mana, meaning that even if your opponent is tapped out, he still may have a trick up his sleeve. Experience is the best teacher in these cases. As you learn your opponents' decks and their play styles, you'll be able to make more informed decisions about when the coast is clear and when invisible dangers lurk about.

Next week I will be talking about what developments in 8th edition will force you to rethink your decks.

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