

When One Land Is Better Than Five Search

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As some of you may have guessed from last week's poll it is mulligan week here at magicthegathering.com. In my experience mulliganing in limited is actually a deeper issue than it is in constructed formats. If you've constructed your deck from a huge pool of cards then you've had the option of putting in lands that produce multiple colours of mana and you've had the chance to test the deck to ensure the mana balance is correct. You've also had experience with the deck, giving you some amount of instinctual knowledge about which hands to keep and which to mulligan.

In limited formats you're often faced with a mana-base that's a little shaky as you're sometimes forced to run three colours from only 17 mana sources and you don't get access to all the mana-fixing luxuries of constructed formats. In addition you have to evaluate your deck's mulligan prospects without the benefit of many test games. Once you factor in cards that can replace themselves – as the Spellbombs can in this cycle – and other abilities that can affect casting costs, such as Affinity, then you can get some very complex situations.

The opening hands that I gave you at the end of last week's article covered several of these areas. By discussing the options you have with those hands I hope be able to explore some of those issues.

The deck in question was a blue-white Affinity draft deck. As a quick reminder the listing was as follows:

UW Affinity

Main Deck

40 cards

| | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 2 Ancient Den | 1 Auriok Transfixer | 1 AEther Spellbomb |
| 7 Island | 1 Cathodion | 1 Arrest |
| 6 Plains | 1 Fatespinner | 1 Bonesplitter |
| 1 Tree of Tales | 1 Frogmite | 1 Chromatic Sphere |
| 16 lands | 1 Iron Myr | 1 Leonin Scimitar |
| | 1 Leonin Den-Guard | 1 Leonin Sun Standard |
| | 1 Leonin Elder | 1 Sun Droplet |
| | 2 Myr Enforcer | 1 Sunbeam Spellbomb |
| | 1 Skyhunter Patrol | 2 Thoughtcast |
| | 1 Soldier Replica | 10 other spells |
| | 1 Somber Hoverguard | |
| | 1 Vedalken Archmage | |
| | 1 Wizard Replica | |
| | 14 creatures | |

The first opening hand for discussion is this one:

Leonin Elder, Chromatic Sphere, Aether Spellbomb, Frogmite, Thoughtcast, Wizard Replica, Ancient Den.



When I asked if you, the readers, would mulligan the above hand you responded as follows:

| Do you take a mulligan? | | |
|---|--------------|---------------|
| No, I keep it whether playing first or second. | 4869 | 41.4% |
| I mulligan it playing first, but keep it playing second. | 4107 | 34.9% |
| Yes, I mulligan whether playing first or second. | 1866 | 15.9% |
| I keep it when playing first, but mulligan it playing second. | 923 | 7.8% |
| Total | 11765 | 100.0% |

A pretty even split when it comes to playing first with this hand. Just fewer than 50% of you would keep this hand playing first. The vast majority of you would keep it if you were playing second though, as the number jumps up to around 75% then. It's good to note that more than a quarter of you changed your opinion based on whether you were playing or drawing. I believe this hand's value is very dependant upon the extra card gained through drawing first.

Overall the above hand does have a lot going for it. Given time, even without drawing another land, you can cast 5 of the 6 spells you have. You have a number of cards that can replace themselves although doing so will take time and will hurt the casting costs of your Affinity spells.

Before I go into great detail about your options with this hand I'm going to give you some feedback a few Pro players gave when asked if they'd mulligan the above hand.

Daniel Zink: Because you have only one land, this hand will stand or fall with whether you draw a land or not. Additionally, you have quite a good hand with a nice Affinity draw which turns great if you draw one of your Enforcers or a Hoverguard. This means that you have to take a look at the probability for drawing that much needed land.



World Champion Daniel Zink

Let's consider you are drawing first. You have 2 draws at the land which equals a probability of about 71%. This is quite a good chance and you can even sac the

Chromatic Sphere which increases your chance by another 14% although it does decrease the value of both Frogmite and Thoughtcast. I'd take these odds. On the other hand, when playing first your odds aren't that favourable anymore. Your odds for a good draw, which requires the land right away, are only about 45%. Sacrificing the Sphere is still an option, but I don't think that this possibility justifies running that risk. Keeping that draw when playing first is quite a gamble which I wouldn't take most of the time. I think you are better off mulliganing when playing first with this hand.

Dirk Baberowski: The first hand I keep drawing first for sure - it is so easy to draw out of that mana short situation since your hand contains all those cyclers and even a Leonin Elder to make sure you don't die right away. I would probably keep it playing first as well, since in that scenario you actually get to cast Thoughtcast before your opponent has had a chance to do anything too relevant (assuming you don't draw land right away). Exceptions to that rule would obviously be playing against a red or green deck with multiple Shatters or Deconstructs that could destroy my lone land.

Alex Shvartsman: I would mulligan this hand regardless of whether I am playing or drawing. The deck relies heavily on Affinity. Even if I can successfully draw into lands by cycling through my Chromatic Sphere and Aether Spellbomb, it will leave me with an average hand that lacks the artifacts I need to get out early Myr Enforcer or make another powerful play early enough in the game.

Anton Jonsson: I would probably keep the first hand if I'm going second, unless I know that my opponent's deck is bad. My reasoning is that the hand is passable even with only 1 land in the top 4 cards of my deck (and really good with a land in the top 2). Also the Elder should help regain any loss of tempo from missing a land drop. Going first however I would mulligan since the odds of getting a great hand is much worse.



Anton Jonsson, PT Amsterdam 2004

Terry Tsang: I would keep regardless if on the play or the draw. The curve of that hand is so low you can afford to stall for a turn or two and you have two cantrips to draw you into land. The Elder will also regain the life loss from a slow start.

Jake Smith: I would not take a mulligan - my turn 1 would be Ancient Den, Sphere. If I draw a land, I would make the Spellbomb on turn 2, and then wash the Sphere as I made the Frogmite. If not, then sacrificing the Sphere to draw a card and making the Spellbomb would be fine.

Victor van den Broek: This hand is a very tough one to make the decision for in my opinion. When going second, I'd keep it and be pretty happy with it even. You have two draw-steps to turn the hand from tough to very good (one land will do that). When going first, it's a bit more risky. If you draw a land, it's insane, but you can't really count on that. You'd lead with sphere and follow it up with Spellbomb/Frogmite if you draw a land, and otherwise you sac it to make Spellbomb and Elder (if you do draw a land then). I'd probably keep it, but that's mostly because this hand has the possibility of

becoming very explosive with all the card drawing in there. If you happen to draw an island you'll have a very good board by turn 4 or 5.

Opinion there is pretty mixed. The majority believe you keep it going second but they're split fairly evenly on what you do when playing first. That matches up very nicely with the reader's opinions too.

Before coming to the decision of whether or not to mulligan that hand you have to consider what your plays will be in the first few turns.

First of all I'm going to consider this hand when you are playing second. I think you have to lead with the Elder. This will give you some much needed life and will most likely inflict some damage on your opponent. If a land arrives in the first two turns, then I think your second turn would involve playing both the Sphere and the Spellbomb and on turn three you could cast Frogmite for one mana and then play the Thoughtcast for one mana as well. Even if you drew a non-Island land you can still cast the Thoughtcast here. You simply announce the Thoughtcast at which point it's casting cost gets locked in as just U as you have four artifacts in play. Then you sacrifice the Chromatic Sphere to give you Blue mana to pay for the Thoughtcast.



It's worth noting here that even if a land doesn't arrive until turn three you're still okay. You can cast turn one Elder and turn two Sphere. Drawing the land on turn three allows you to play both the Spellbomb and Frogmite. On your fourth turn you can cast the Thoughtcast and proceed from there. The chance of a land arriving by your third turn is around 85% and I think those are fine odds. Another land in the next three cards (two from the Thoughtcast and your fourth turn draw phase) and you're in fine shape.

In conclusion, I think going second this hand has to be a keeper. With 15 lands left in the remaining 33 cards of your deck, you've got a 45% chance of drawing a land on your first turn, and a 71% chance of drawing a land in either your first or second draw phase. As I just mentioned that goes up to an 85% chance of drawing a land by turn three and as a result I think this hand has to be kept if you were drawing first.

Playing first is a whole different kettle of fish however. The loss of the draw phase means all of the stats listed above drop by a turn. You only have a 45% chance of a land by turn two, and 71% by turn three. The question is: is that better or worse than a potential six card hand if you mulligan?

If you can make that 45% shot and draw one land in the top two cards you're doing fine. A land in your second draw step (i.e. your third turn) would give the same turn sequence as we just went through a couple of paragraphs back:

Turn one: Ancient Den, Elder.

Turn two: Chromatic Sphere.

Turn three: Land, Aether Spellbomb, Frogmite for 1.

Turn four: Draw step, Thoughtcast for U , sac Sphere if necessary.

You can draw a total of four cards in your fourth turn which gives you a huge chance of drawing your third land. You only need to get a little bit lucky to draw into one of the other spells you can cast for your remaining 2 mana on that turn as well. It's also worth noting that you've gained a minimum of three life and have a small blocker that could trade with an early Tel-Jihad Chosen or Alpha Myr.

Not drawing a land until turn 4 here would be quite bad but I believe that the Elder could buy you enough time that you could still recover from that. This hand is a little risky but I don't think it's any more risky than taking a random six card hand. This deck does mulligan fairly well as it can function off of a low land count, and it has ways of recouping the lost cards. However it's very difficult for any deck to recover from a three card deficit and that's what you would face if you had to mulligan again down to five cards whilst playing first.

If I were in a situation where I had more information I would certainly use that to aid in my decision. As Dirk mentioned if you were playing a player whom you knew had multiple cheap artifact removal then I think you should definitely mulligan this hand. Likewise, if you knew you were playing another blue-white deck I'd definitely consider that hand a keeper as I'd expect you to have time to draw out of the land shortage.

Alex is right when he says that successfully drawing land by cycling through the Sphere and the Spellbomb leaves you with a bad board position but if you're in that situation you haven't drawn the lands you were hoping for and your gamble hasn't paid off. I think if you keep the hand it's with the hope of drawing a land and leaving your artifacts in play for as long as possible in order to power up any further Affinity spells you draw.

Overall I like this hand because it drops a bunch of artifacts into play early which gives you a good chance of getting an early Enforcer or Hoverguard down should you draw one. I personally would side with Dirk, Terry, Jake and Victor and I'd keep it playing first most of the time too.

Let's move onto the second hand in last week's article:

Plains, Plains, Plains, Plains, Leonin Elder, Island, Wizards Replica.



This hand obviously offers far fewer options than the previous one. You do have spells that you can cast and you do have both colours of mana so on the surface this hand is fine. Could it possibly be more risky to keep this hand than the one land hand?

Before I go into detail, here's what you the readers chose to do with this hand:

| Do you take a mulligan? | | |
|---|-------------|---------------|
| No, I keep it whether playing first or second. | 4035 | 41.8% |
| Yes, I mulligan whether playing first or second. | 3247 | 33.6% |
| I keep it when playing first, but mulligan it playing second. | 1194 | 12.4% |
| I mulligan it playing first, but keep it playing second. | 1185 | 12.3% |
| Total | 9661 | 100.0% |

This time around your decision was far less dependent on whether you were playing or drawing. Three quarters of the people who responded made a definite decision to mulligan or not regardless of the whether they were playing or drawing.

I'm happy with that result as I think this is definitely a hand that you either think is good or bad. I don't think the extra card gained by playing second should have a big influence over whether this hand is a mulligan or not.

Opinion on whether you should mulligan the above hand seems split pretty evenly down the middle with around half of you choosing to take a mulligan. Would the pros mulligan this hand as frequently as the readers of this fine website? Let's find out:

Daniel Zink: I'd definitely mulligan this hand either way, because I can't see this hand winning a single game. The 2 spells aren't even great and you would have to draw very well to have a shot. I think a mulligan can only increase your chances here. Additionally you have 2 Thoughtcasts and the Vedalken Archmage which can counterbalance the mulligan.



Dirk Baberowski: The second hand I send back playing first, and consider keeping it drawing first in the right matchup (white vs white for example where elder and replica alone can stall someone for ages), but generally would send it back as well.

Alex Shvartsman: I would keep that hand but not be happy about it. Elder gives me an extra turn or two to catch up with my opponent after overcoming the potential manaflood, and Wizard Replica can block their early drops. It is a defensive hand,

German National Champion Dirk Baberowski which is exactly what I want if I am slightly mana-flooded.

Anton Jonsson: This scenario isn't even close for me. 5 lands and 2 mediocre spells and with those 5 lands I can't even cast all the spells in my deck. To win with that hand you would have to draw like 4-5 spells in a row.

Terry Tsang: This hand I would keep if playing and mulligan if drawing. I tend to find that mulliganing on the play has a much more substantial effect then on the draw. In either case the draw in hand 2 is poor but keepable.

Jake Smith: This hand I would mulligan - this deck is pretty ok, and the opening hand does nothing.

Victor van den Broek: I think this hand is a mulligan regardless of whether you play first or not. You don't put any pressure with it (two one power creatures, blech). You need to draw into good cards soon and Myr Enforcer isn't particularly hot with this hand if you should draw it. Bonesplitter, Scimitar and Sunstandard would make the hand much better but this is just not a hand I can see winning a game unless you get very lucky on the draw. I would definitely trade this in for 6 new ones; they're bound to be better. You also run the risk of drawing one of the two double blue spells, leaving you with an uncastable card until you draw one of your 6 remaining islands.

A big majority of the Pros are in favour of the mulligan there.

The things you must consider when deciding whether or not to keep this hand are not as complex as for the last hand. You do have enough lands, too many in fact. You do have spells you can cast. The only thing to really consider is what you're likely to draw over the first few turns of the game and whether those draws will give you a better chance of winning the game than a potential mulligan.

After this opening hand we're left with a deck that contains 11 lands, and 22 spells. So the rest of our deck is exactly one third land. If we were drawing first on average we should draw two more spells by turn three, and four more spells by turn six. Sounds promising? It does until you consider that by turn six, just with average draws, you will have drawn a total of 6 spells and 7 lands. It's not until turn nine that your draw will average out to 50% spells. Given that the deck has 60% spells to start with you'd have to be fairly lucky to draw enough spells to bring you to that level.

The other thing to consider is that there are a number of spells that are effectively 'dead' draws unless something else happens. In this situation the Vedalken Archmage and the Fatespinner are both uncastable unless another Island is drawn. The problem there is you don't want to draw any more lands! Of the 11 lands left in your library 5 of them are non-island so there's absolutely no guarantee that the next land you draw will produce blue mana. I'd also consider the Iron Myr a dead draw at this point. It's just an over-costed 1/1 with a pretty useless ability here. You also have to take into account that you're almost certainly going to have to cycle through the Chromatic Sphere or the Sunbeam Spellbomb if you draw those. Those two cards can basically be discounted from the deck as they'll replace themselves as soon as they appear.



Taking all that into account we're actually left with a deck of 31 cards (7 are in the opening hand, and we remove the Sphere and the Spellbomb that immediately replace themselves with the next card down), with 14 of those being dead draws (11 remaining lands, the two double casting cost blue cards, and the Iron Myr). Instead of our deck containing just 33% useless cards, it actually has something more like 45%! If we now consider our next 7 draw phases, we're most likely to only get 4 useful cards from them. This means on average, by turn 7, having drawn 14 cards we will have received only 6 useful ones. That is not a good hand and it won't win you many games.

I think the overall strength of Affinity in general should also be considered in a scenario like this. For Affinity to be powerful you obviously need a good number of artifacts in play. Thoughtcast isn't so great when it costs four mana, and Myr Enforcer is very mediocre when you have to pay six. But that's the situation we find ourselves in here. The chance for an explosive Affinity draw with this opening hand is incredibly low indeed and would have to involve drawing a perfect sequence of cards.

The first hand was worth keeping as we figured we had a 45-70% chance of it becoming a good hand as early as turn two or three. This second hand though has a much, much lower chance than that and in fact with average draws will still be considered weak. As Anton Jonsson says, you'd really need to draw 4-5 spells in a row to have a good chance of winning with a hand like this. The chances of that happening are very remote indeed, somewhere below 10%.

I think this sort of hand is a little deceptive. It looks okay on the surface but it's actually very bad indeed. Keeping an opening hand like this one is a mistake albeit a very common one that a lot of players make.

That's it for mulligan week from this column at least. Next week we'll be moving onto another draft situation that I'll outline here.

This time around it's a *Mirrodin-Mirrodin-Darksteel* booster draft. You've gone through the first two *Mirrodin* packs already. You were hoping for a blue-black Affinity deck but that kind of fell through and you gradually moved into black-red instead. Here's your selection of playable cards after the two *Mirrodin* packs.

Lifespark Spellbomb
Gold Myr
Needlebug
Triskelion

Pewter Golem
Barter in Blood
Consume Spirit
Nim Shrieker
Nim Lasher
Wail of the Nim
Wall of Blood

Pyrite Spellbomb
Goblin Replica
Atog
Shatter
Shrapnel Blast
Krark Clan Grunt
Great Furnace

Neurok Familiar
Aether Spellbomb
Somber Hoverguard
Fabricate
Crystal Shard

You open up the following *Darksteel* pack:





Artifact Creature

1: Target artifact creature blocks Auriok Siege Sled this turn if able.
1: Target artifact creature can't block Auriok Siege Sled this turn.

Everything in its path is either pushed aside or ground under.

3/5



Creature — Rat

When Chattering Rats comes into play, target opponent puts a card from his or her hand on top of his or her library.

Bottom feeders sometimes rise to the top.

2/2



Artifact Creature

Flying

Modular 1 (*This comes into play with a +1/+1 counter on it. When it's put into a graveyard, you may put its +1/+1 counters on target artifact creature.*)

0/0



Nourish

Instant

You gain 6 life.

Golfruit grows abundantly wherever Sylveok druids live, as if the Tangle knows that humans are not as hardy as the beasts or as nimble as the elves.



Artifact Creature — Golem

Affinity for Islands (*This spell costs 1 less to play for each Island you control.*)

Flying

The longer it soars above the shimmering swirls of the Quicksilver Sea, the more it adopts their unpredictability.

2/4



Creature — Goblin Shaman

☞, Sacrifice an artifact: Add ☞☞ to your mana pool.

Fallen enemies are fed to the scavengers. Fallen friends are thrown into the Great Furnace, their souls returned to the Great Mother.

2/2



Echoing Truth

Instant

Return target nonland permanent and all other permanents with the same name as that permanent to their owners' hands.

A single lie unleashes a tide of disbelief.



Unforge

Instant

Destroy target Equipment. If that Equipment was attached to a creature, Unforge deals 2 damage to that creature.

Compared to the fire of the forge, the strength of steel is nothing.



Hallow

Instant

Prevent all damage target spell would deal this turn. You gain life equal to the damage prevented this way.

"Bend with the storm, then reply in kind."



Leonin Bola

Artifact — Equipment

Equipped creature has ☞, Unattach Leonin Bola: Tap target creature.

Equip 1 (*1: Attach to target creature you control. Equip only as a sorcery. This card comes into play unattached and stays in play if the creature leaves play.*)



Essence Drain

Sorcery

Essence Drain deals 3 damage to target creature or player and you gain 3 life.

Mephidross claims all life within it. What cannot be twisted is absorbed.



Darksteel Ingot

Artifact

Darksteel Ingot is indestructible. (*"Destroy" effects and lethal damage don't destroy it.*)

☞: Add one mana of any color to your mana pool.

Which card do you draft?

- Pristine Angel
- Arcbound Crusher
- Oxidize
- Auriok Siege Sled
- Chittering Rats
- Arcbound Stinger
- Nourish
- Spire Golem
- Krark-Clan Stoker
- Echoing Truth
- Unforge
- Hallow
- Leonin Bola
- Essence Drain
- Darksteel Ingot

Submit

That's it for this week. Next week we'll be covering the possibilities presented in the above pack.

Thanks for reading,

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