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Mind Over Urzatron

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The Play's The Thing
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Before I begin, I'd like to thank everyone who wrote in to give me feedback on my first article that I couldn't write back and thank individually. There were simply far more of you than I ever expected, and while that is a good thing there are only so many hours in the day so if it seemed like no detailed reply was necessary consider this my answer. If you sent in a potential play situation, I saved it for when I have a chance to examine it. Keep letting me know what you think, keep providing good examples and I promise to make sure and at a minimum read all of it and respond when I can. However, please do not ask for advice on decks or decklists; that is a problem you must tackle yourself.

I'm going to start off with a small challenge in deck construction, despite the fact that this column is not about deck construction, because it is the purest illustration of this week's concept that I have ever seen. This happened to me at Regionals, where I decided to play for fun and to help me familiarize myself with Standard.

Situation: You have been given a sixty-one card decklist for a **Tooth and Nail** deck, including four copies each of **Urza's Mine**, **Urza's Power Plant** and **Urza's Tower**. You know that the deck should be sixty cards but do not know what the extra card is and have not done any playtesting so you've decided to trust those who have tested the deck. When your friend gets to the tournament, he informs you that the card that is not supposed to be in the deck is the fourth **Urza's Mine**.

What card do you cut?

Answer: **Urza's Power Plant**.

Why would you cut **Urza's Power Plant** when you are being told to cut **Urza's Mine**? Because you were told to cut **Urza's Mine**! **Urza's Mine** and **Urza's Power Plant** are functionally identical cards, so which one you cut does not change how your deck plays in isolation. It only changes how your opponents will react to your deck. Many players will attempt to stop you from assembling **Urza's Mine**, **Urza's Power Plant** and **Urza's Tower**. If they don't attack your Urza's lands, then it does not matter which one you cut. If they do attack those lands, they will attempt to stop you from getting one of each land by killing whichever land for which they think you are most likely to not have an extra copy. A man with two Mines or two Power Plants is mostly harmless, but a man with a Mine and a Power Plant is deadly. If there are people running around cutting **Urza's Mine**, then that makes it at least a tiny bit more likely that they will target **Urza's Mine**, which makes the extra **Urza's Mine** more valuable than the extra **Urza's Power Plant**.

Most decisions players make have to be made based on incomplete information. Sometimes that extra information is not important, but a large portion of the time the right play depends on what cards are in your opponent's hand or in his deck. If I have an **Urza's Mine** and an **Urza's Power Plant** in play, and you choose which one you want to target with **Molten Rain**, the game might depend on correctly guessing which card your opponent has an extra copy of in his hand. That is not always as random as it sounds. Let's take the purest example:

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• Add one mana of any color to your mana pool.

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6 Cards in hand



OPP 19 life



YOU 20 life



Cards in hand



YOU: in play - Mountain x2, Blinkmoth Nexus; in hand - Mountain x2, Solemn Simulacrum, Molten Rain, Arc Slogger, Pulse of the Forge, Beacon of Destruction

OPP: in play - Urza's Power Plant (Tapped), Forest (Tapped); in hand - 6 cards; in graveyard - Sylvan Scrying

It is turn three. Your opponent is playing Tooth and Nail and has just cast Sylvan Scrying for an Urza's Mine, which he then put in play. What do you target with your Molten Rain?

Answer: Target Urza's Mine.

Why do you go after **Urza's Mine**? In this case, the decision is easy. Your opponent could get any land in his deck into his hand and he chose **Urza's Mine**. He chose **Urza's Mine** for a reason and the chance he is holding another copy is almost zero. Go after it.

Now let's remove the safety net.

It's the same situation, except that when he cast **Sylvan Scrying** he searched for **Urza's Tower**, but then played **Urza's Mine** (keeping Tower in hand). [Which land do you target now?](#)

Answer: Target the **Urza's Mine** he played this turn.

This is the same answer, but is a much harder question. To answer it, put yourself in the mind of your opponent. There are two scenarios here. The one where your decision matters is where he has an extra copy of Mine or Power Plant, but not the other.

If he is holding an extra copy of one land but not the other, which is he more likely to be holding?

There are again two possibilities: If he drew the extra copy *this turn*, then you have no way of knowing which one it was. Therefore, assume that he drew the extra copy *before* this turn.

If you had two Power Plants and a Mine, which land would you play first? Instinct is to play the land that you can most afford to lose, in case your opponent destroys it. So, you'd normally play the redundant copy first. In the above scenario, the Power Plant came down before the Mine, so if there is a redundant copy of an Urza land, it's probably the Power Plant. So, we blow up the **Urza's Mine**, hoping that's the only copy of Mine the opponent has access to. In fact, this logic also works if the opponent is just choosing randomly: if they have two copies of something, they are more likely to play that particular land first, since there are more copies.

Using this kind of logic it's impossible to know how often you will be right, but it is clear that you will be right more often than you will be wrong.

Situation Three:

Your opening hand: **Urza's Mine**, **Urza's Mine**, **Urza's Power Plant**, Forest, **Sylvan Scrying**, **Tooth and Nail**, **Eternal Witness**

The game is about to begin. You have won the coin toss and know your opponent to be playing a deck that can cast **Molten Rain** on turn three but not on turn two. There is no chance he will go after a Forest. [What is your plan for the first two turns?](#)

Solution: Play **Urza's Power Plant** on turn one, Forest on turn two, cast **Sylvan Scrying** for **Urza's Tower**.

Why would you expose **Urza's Power Plant** when you could make the safe play of **Urza's Mine**? You do it because no one will expect you to do it. Most opponents will instinctively go after the land you played most recently, mostly for the reasons described above. (Those who choose at random will choose at random.) The key thing to realize here is that you will have two Urza's lands in play on turn three even if you draw a second Forest, because there will be nothing worth getting back with **Eternal Witness**. You have no reason to play a second Forest, but have good reason to play a second Urza's land so that you will have all three in play as soon as possible. With **Urza's Tower** in your hand, your opponent will have no choice but to go after Mine or Power Plant to avoid giving you eight mana on your next turn. Since you were willing to expose the Power Plant when you could have exposed the Mine, or even better you might not have had a Mine yet, he'll do what I said to do earlier: Take out the wrong land, and shake his head when you show him that he was wrong.

There seems to be a contradiction here. In the second position, I recommended killing the most recently played land. Then in the third position, I recommended a course of action that makes my choice in the second situation a mistake that could cost you the game. How could both be correct? Both can be correct at the same time because the decision to play the Power Plant over both Mines will be highly unusual. A player choosing at random is more likely to reach for a Mine, and a player choosing on purpose will almost always play the land he can afford to lose. To play the land you do not want removed, you have to make several leaps. First you need to realize that it matters which land you play. Then you need to realize that there is little or no risk that you will be facing a land destruction spell before you can play a Mine. Third you need to notice that this order of play will make him more likely to kill the Mine.

It is hard to make a counter-intuitive play, and even harder to make it instantly. The less time you think about which land to play on turn one, the less likely your opponent is to suspect that you are up to something. When you want your opponent to think you are being tricky, playing slowly can help, but when you want him to think you are not being tricky then you want to play quickly.

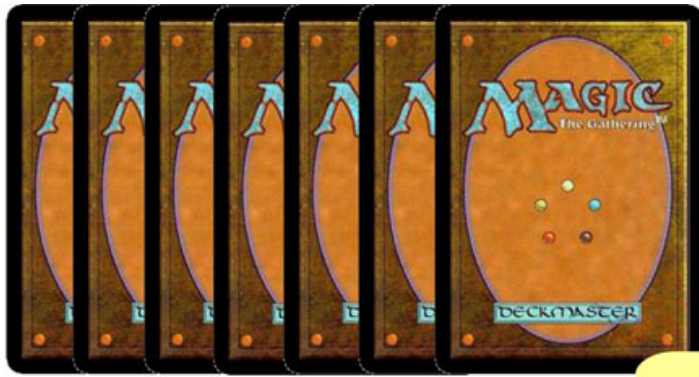
When playing against all but the highest level of opponent, it is the correct percentage play in situations like this to assume they are not being tricky. Most of the time they are playing directly because they had no other option. Even when there was a chance to be tricky, most of the time they will choose not to take advantage of it. It is hard to sacrifice something real to try and trick your opponent, so you have to be confident that it will work. For one thing, many players that they face on a regular basis are difficult to bluff because they are not good enough to notice what they have to notice for the bluff to work. That was one big criticism of my last column's second example. Many players said that the opponent would attack anyway. They're right in the sense that he probably will attack even if you hold the **Air Elemental** back, but you dramatically improve the odds that they will not attack by holding the **Air Elemental** in your hand. It is important not to give up on a game even if your odds of winning are low.

The result of all of this makes bluffs and tricky plays relatively rare. They require motive, opportunity and means, and even when all three are present often they still do not happen. When considering if an opponent is trying to trick you, keep in mind that in order to trick you they don't just need to decide to trick you. They also need to have

the ability to trick you! Then they need to realize that they have that ability and consider whether or not to do it. Often they won't have that opportunity, or it would be too costly or they flat out don't notice. This is especially true in situations like this one where most players won't even realize that there is a chance for mind games to be played. However, even if I was playing against someone like myself, I would have no choice but to remove the second land played anyway. There are too many reasons why even a world class opponent would end up playing the game naturally, which makes it that much more rewarding to misrepresent what you have.

There is one more important strategic point to remember with the Urzatron, as a complete set of Urza's lands is often referred to. **Urza's Tower** is obviously the best land of the three, because it provides three mana when you have a complete set while the others provide only two mana. However, ask yourself how often it will matter whether you have two Towers, one Power Plant and one Mine or one Tower, one Mine and two Power Plants. Yes, one provides one more mana than the other, but how often do you need that extra mana? Even if you can use it, how often will not having that mana cost you the game? The answer is that it is highly unlikely that this will matter. However, that doesn't stop people from putting blinders on when it comes to **Urza's Tower**.

It is important not to give up on a game even if your odds of winning are low.



7 Cards in hand

OPP



YOU



Cards in hand



YOU: in play - Forest, Urza's Power Plant; in hand - Forest, Tooth and Nail, Sundering Titan, Urza's Tower x2, Urza's Mine x2
OPP: in play - Mountain x2; in hand - 7 cards

What would you do here, having drawn the second Urza's Mine off the top of your library?

Players will destroy Urza's Tower when given the opportunity, almost no matter what, so long as they do not know you to have another copy. Your opponent will have a choice to make, and that little push makes it better to remove the Tower. At the same time, players understand that the Tower is a target so they tend not to expose their Tower when they don't have to. When a player plays a Tower and it does not complete the set, you can be

confident that one of two things is probably true. Either they do not have the remaining piece of the set in their hand, which left them no choice, or they have another copy of **Urza's Tower**. Act accordingly, and ironically it pays to avoid destroying **Urza's Tower** when you have the chance because that is what they expect you to destroy.

Little decisions like this can be the difference between a player having five mana and that player having nine mana, and that will often be the difference between winning and losing. There can be more to playing interchangeable lands than meets the eye. More importantly, understanding how these kinds of play decisions work will apply to much more of your game than just these narrow scenarios.



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