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Playing Around

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The Play's The Thing
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Before I begin, I'd like to reiterate the purpose of this column. When I talk about picking the correct Urza's land to destroy, the goal is not to demonstrate how to play against **Tooth and Nail**. The fact that the exact situation I describe frequently happens is a nice plus, but the bigger picture point is to show how to extract information from your opponents' plays (and also feed them disinformation through your plays). Those principles have wide application, with Urza's lands only being a special case of the principle. Last week I chose opponents that made rules mistakes because that is the purest, most extreme example of a strategic error, but the reason your opponent doesn't want to attack into the Cutthroat or use his **Oblivion Stone** does not actually matter. What matters is that you have to work to take advantage of that mistake. Maybe your opponent will remember that Cutthroat can't block, but I guarantee plenty of your opponents will be making plenty of mistakes against you (more than most of you think). The key from that column was learning how to adjust your play from what would normally be "correct" because your opponent's incorrect play has allowed better plays on your side, if you can find them.

Put another way, this column involves using very specific scenarios to learn the overarching lessons that will help you actually get better in your own games. As Scott Johns pointed out when he pitched this column to me, it's the difference between reading an article that tells you what deck to play this weekend and an article that gives you the tools to start making that decision on your own.

My other note is that while I have been getting a lot of good feedback, I need more good play situations. Many of those that were sent in were very good, but finding ones that fit the principle you're trying to illustrate is not easy, and I feel that normally it is better to use real situations whenever possible. I'm depending on you the readers to make this column the best it can be. This one comes from Paulo Vitor, who wanted to know if he made the right choice.

YOU (6 life): in play - *Okina Nightwatch* (tapped), *Hired Muscle* (flipped, 3 counters), *Gibbering Kami*, *Elder Pine of Jukai*, Forest x3, Swamp x4; in hand - Swamp, Forest; in graveyard - *Ghost-Lit Stalker*
OPP (13 life): *Genju of the Cedars* (enchanted Forest), *Orochi Sustainer*, *Orochi Leafcaller*, Forest x3 (one untapped, one tapped, one enchanted and attacking tapped), Mountain x2 (one tapped, one untapped); in hand - 1 card

Your opponent has just drawn, activated *Genju of the Cedars*, and attacked.
[How do you block?](#)



The big question is: What did your opponent just draw? If he drew nothing relevant, which includes any land, most creatures and a decent share of the spells he might have drawn, then he is a dead man. You have the kill on the board, coming over with unblockable creatures. If you let the Forest hit you down to two, then chances are the game will end on your turn. However, you also allow your opponent to win the game if he drew almost any pump spell like *Kodama's Might* or any burn spell like *Glacial Ray*. You have given your opponent a lot of what are called "outs": Cards that if drawn win him the game. Is there a better play?

In this case, there is a clearly better play and that play is to block with *Elder Pine of Jukai*. If *Elder Pine of Jukai* blocks, then burn spells can no longer win your opponent the game, although by killing *Gibbering Kami* they can buy your opponent time. Pump spells no longer do anything, since your opponent will be unable to block. The problem, as Paulo realized, is that your opponent still has a common card that can win him the game here: *Unchecked Growth*. That would give the Forest trample and enough power to kill you despite the block.

[Is there anything you can do about that?](#)

To stop *Unchecked Growth* from killing you, you would have to block with Scarmaker. If Scarmaker blocks, it will



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die. Once that happens, you still have the better position but you have given your opponent time to find a way to win this game. That happens whether your opponent has **Unchecked Growth** in his hand or not. In fact, Paulo blocked this way, and found out that his opponent had drawn not **Unchecked Growth** but **Kodama's Might**. He went on to win three turns later, but that was time in which his opponent could have found a way to win on top of his library.

In fact, it's even worse than that. What would have happened if his opponent had drawn **Unchecked Growth**? He blocks, and a smart opponent will choose to let his Forest die and trade it for Scarmaker. He then will replay **Genju of the Cedars** and pass the turn. At this point, the only way to win this game within the next two or three turns is to attack with **Okina Nightwatch**, which means that if your opponent draws any land then you will still probably die to the **Unchecked Growth**! Even worse, your opponent could play the Forest he just drew... and draw **Unchecked Growth** next turn. This is a true disaster. *By playing around Unchecked Growth, you managed to die to it.* **Unchecked Growth** is not a reason to block with Scarmaker – it is a reason to NOT block with Scarmaker!

That raises another question, since the card he has in his hand is so important. [What do we know about his hand?](#)

We know nothing, because this is his best chance to win the game no matter what he drew. With nothing useful in his hand, his only hope is to attack and hope you block. With something useful in his hand, he would attack to try and win the game outright or get you to block. There are a small number of cards that you can eliminate, but this is almost always going to be his best play.

Playing around cards is often good strategy. That is especially true in constructed, where you can be confident your opponent has multiple copies of the card you fear in his deck, but it can also make sense in limited. Often your opponent will have a dangerous bomb or trick that could turn the entire game around. You might know about it because you paid close attention during the draft and know he must have it, or more often you saw it in a previous game or heard about it from a previous opponent. In many games he will draw half or more of his deck, which creates a high probability he will be holding (for example) **Final Judgment** even if it is his only copy.

However, playing around cards can backfire. When you play around a card, you're sacrificing to avoid losing to a card or set of cards. That often will open the door for other cards or give your opponent time. You always need to make sure that sacrifice is worth it, and you also need to think ahead. Once you "put your opponent on" a card, meaning you are going to act as if it was in his hand, the chance that you are right only goes up over time. There is no point in playing around **Unchecked Growth** this turn if you cannot play around it next turn.

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The ideal way to play around cards is to do it when it costs you nothing. You could be in a position like this. Your PTQ opponent seems to be playing a control deck, but he had to mulligan multiple times and it has not been his finest draw...

YOU (20 life): in play - Plains x4, *Isamaru*, *Hound of Konda*, *Samurai of the Pale Curtain*, *Hand of Honor*, *Lantern Kami* (all creatures tapped, all Plains untapped); in hand - Plains, *Hand of Honor*, *Hokori*, *Dust Drinker*, *Lantern Kami*

OPP (5 life): in play - Plains x2, Forest x4, Swamp x2; in hand - no cards; in graveyard - *Sakura-Tribe Elder* x2, *Kodama's Reach*

[What do you do after the attack, which brought your opponent down to five?](#)

This is an (almost) pure example of a free chance to play around cards. If your opponent is going to get out of this jam, he doesn't have that many choices. A single blocker is no help, a single removal spell does nothing. He doesn't have blue mana so there's no threat of Meloku. The only realistic ways out of this jam are **Final Judgment** and **Hideous Laughter**. In either case, casting additional creatures will get them killed. If he doesn't draw either card, you win whether you cast a creature or not. There are some ways to lose the game by failing to play a creature that are possible – for example, he could play **Vital Surge** to buy a turn and then draw removal for global for three straight turns – but they are orders of magnitude less likely than your opponent drawing a global removal spell this turn.



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The point here is not to teach you how to play this matchup, but to highlight the decision-making process. That position was a straw man, but if you start modifying it you start to raise interesting questions. A more interesting example might be: [What would you do if instead of Lantern Kami your hand included a Celestial Kirin?](#)

Assume you play **Celestial Kirin**. There are now two scenarios. If he draws **Final Judgment**, you lose **Celestial Kirin** for nothing. If he draws **Hideous Laughter**, you get to attack him down to two and then put him in a position where even a second **Hideous Laughter** won't stop you; he needs to draw **Final Judgment**. That means that **Hideous Laughter** is no longer an out for him beyond buying him a turn.

However, go back to the scenario where he rips **Final Judgment** off the top of his library and gives you his best maniacal laugh. Whether you play **Celestial Kirin** this turn or not, your next play should be **Hokori**. There is no way for you to kill your opponent next turn, but leading with **Hokori** cripples his mana and limits his options far better than **Celestial Kirin** could have. You lose a card, but you are still so far ahead that it is unlikely to matter.

You can potentially gain a lot by casting **Celestial Kirin** against **Hideous Laughter**, and you lose little by casting it against **Final Judgment**. Unless you feel that **Final Judgment** is several times more likely than **Hideous Laughter**, you should play **Celestial Kirin**.

Playing around a card in someone's hand is not all that different from playing around a card in play. If my opponent plays **Hand of Honor**, I'm going to 'play around' **Hand of Honor** by not attacking with creatures **Hand of Honor** could block and trying to prevent the Hand from attacking me every turn. If my opponent has a **Hand of Honor** in his hand and I find this out, perhaps because I played **Psychic Spear** on my first turn, then I will choose my plays to minimize the damage of that **Hand of Honor**. If my opponent is known to have **Hand of Honor** in his deck, but I don't know what is in his hand, I'll factor in that he might have it. I'll even design around that card when building my deck or sideboarding it, if **Hand of Honor** is popular enough. I might choose to play green creatures instead of black creatures in my Green/Black deck, or choose creatures with four toughness.

That becomes even more important when thinking about spells like **Final Judgment** that have a big impact. When you play against a deck that can cast **Wrath of God** or one of its variations, the possibility that your opponent can drop the hammer and wipe out everything you have played needs to be on your mind at all times. Entire decks have been abandoned because they had no good way of playing around **Wrath** effects: Either they played all their creatures and walked right into the **Wrath of God** (or equivalent) or they held back and gave their opponents too much time to build up a defense.

The result was that their only solution was to use the same response that you do in the first example. They assume that if the opponent draws **Wrath of God**, they are unlikely to win the game no matter how they play. If there is nothing you can do to beat a card, all you can do is assume that they have not drawn it and try to kill

them before they do. Against the wrong deck, you might need to decide this before your opponent even looks at his opening hand.



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