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Today's article is going to be a more general strategy article. Over the last couple of months I've talked about how you might go about drafting aggressive decks vs. controlling ones, but often the role that you play in any specific match can change many times.

Even while you're drafting your deck can flip back and forth between aggressive and controlling depending on what cards you draft. Then during deck construction you probably will have a few cards choices that push the deck more in one direction than the other. Certainly while you are playing the game the situation may change from turn to turn and realising when to switch from one stance to the other is very important. What this all boils down to is determining how you are going to win with the deck that you have, in the situation you are in.

How you do this changes so frequently that it's usually impossible to have one over-riding strategy that never changes. So I wanted to take a look why you might go about changing your strategy on the fly and what sort of things can happen to make you want to do this.

Having a Plan

I've said this several times before and I'll reiterate it here again now: at all times – during the draft, during deck construction, during play – you should have a plan in your head about how you are going to win the game. There are several plans that work and several ways you can go about winning so I'll recap those quickly so we're all on the same page, and then move on to how and when to switch between them.

Plan 1 – Deal Damage

Yes, well, “duh” I guess. In almost every limited game you're going to want to deal damage to your opponent. The vast majority of limited games you win you do so by reducing your opponent's life total to zero. Plan 1 is what I'd also term the aggressive plan.

Dealing damage is all very nice and everything, but if your opponent deals damage faster than you then the eighteen damage you have dealt becomes irrelevant when you have lost. So this plan is all about dealing 20 damage to your opponent faster than they deal it to you. It could also be classified as the tempo plan because of that.

There are a lot of great cards that you might want to play that don't by themselves help this plan. Cards like Orochi Sustainer do not deal as much damage as cards like Loam Dweller. Indirectly they might help your deck, as a whole, deal damage faster as the Sustainer can allow your Order of the Sacred Bell to come down on turn three instead of turn four, but by themselves they don't aid your plan. A Waking Nightmare also deals no damage but if it takes two creatures from your opponent's hand on turn five it might prevent them from making the blockers they need to stop you from dealing damage. The things all of these other cards have in common however is that they all rely on a specific set of circumstances. You always know that your Loam Dweller will be a 2/2 and that your Villainous



Ogre will be a 3/2 but you don't always know that your Orochi Sustainer or Waking Nightmare will actually have a relevant impact on the game. The best aggressive decks often lack these somewhat situational cards and are usually better for that.

When you pit your own aggressive deck against another you will sometimes find yourself in a race situation, where both players believe they can kill their opponent first and go all out to do so. In this sort of situation there are a lot of cards that are quite unfair and will quickly swing things in your favour. Cards like Blood Rites, Devouring Rage & Greed can end a race in your favour that you might not otherwise have won. They can also help deal the final points of damage against decks that have stopped your creature attacks and so serve dual purpose there. It's important to try and get a finisher or two like this in your aggressive decks because of this.

Plan 2 – Don't Lose

If you don't lose a game, it's very likely that you will at some point win it. This is the control plan. The vast majority of its cards are about not losing the game, rather than focusing on winning it. This deck's plan is to get to a stage of the game where the opponent's threats have been neutralised and you are left with one or two creatures that haven't been dealt with which you can then ride to victory. The creatures you tend to rely on to eventually win the game are either very robust, or evasive. Cards like Konda, Lord of Eiganjo, Teller of Tales, or even a lowly Soratami Mirror-Guard are typical routes to victory.

Many cards that an aggressive deck would obviously shun become solid picks here. Cards like Heart of Light have no places in an aggressive deck but can be great in negating a threatening ground creature while still allowing your flyers to eventually win through the air.

This can be a trickier plan to implement but when you have the cards to make it work it's a lot more resilient. There are a lot fewer cards that disrupt it as compared to those that disrupt the aggressive plan simply because this plan incorporates having answers to the most common threats an opponent would play against you.

Plan 3 – Decking



This is an occasionally viable plan as my article from a few weeks back demonstrated.

This plan obviously requires more fore-thought than any of the others, especially during the draft and during deck construction where you really do need to focus on getting the cards to make the plan work.

This plan also features a few elements of 'Plan 2' as you do need to make sure you don't lose the game before you run your opponent out of cards. It used to be the case that a deck focusing on Dampen Thought could race a deck trying to deal damage with creatures but that isn't really the case any more and so you also need to make sure you have the necessary defensive cards to give you the time you need to implement your plan.

Plan 4 – Card Advantage

I'm giving this its own plan for purposes that will become clearer later. This is basically the anti-Tempo plan. There are lots of opportunities to gain card advantage in this set, and indeed in most

Limited sets, and when both players are only drawing one card per turn even getting up just one or two cards can make a big difference.

In a typical limited game that might last 8-10 turns each player is seeing 15-17 cards. Of those cards, probably 5-7 will be lands so let's make an assumption that most limited games involve the interaction of around 10 spells or so. Sometimes it's more but sometimes less as well. If you can gain two or three extra cards somewhere in that game then that's clearly a very large advantage you have and you will often be able to use that to win the game for you.

This plan is usually very slow though. It'll often feature as part of 'Plan 2' since card advantage is often how the control decks will try to win. It is also used in other non-controlling decks too and that's why it forms its own separate plan.

There are many cards that provide an easily quantifiable source of card advantage. Honden of Seeing Winds draws you one extra card a turn. It's expensive and slow but if it's in play for any considerable length of time it will likely provide enough advantage to win the game. Okiba-Gang Shinobi is another fine example. It'll frequently get two cards from your opponent's hand and then trade with another creature in combat, giving you a three-for-one.




There are also many creatures with Soulshift in this block that can provide card advantage, and there's the Splice mechanic as well. In general these are better sources of card advantage as they almost always provide additional spells, as opposed to simply drawing extra cards. If your opponent has drawn seven lands and only needs five then stealing two with an Okiba-Gang Shinobi hasn't actually gotten you any real advantage. Similarly, if you happen to draw four lands with your Honden then you still aren't 'up' any cards at all unless you needed those lands. You're in a better situation than if you spent four turns drawing them sure, but if you've lost the game in the interim that isn't much of a consolation. This is why I generally prefer Soulshift and Splice as a source of card advantage – they almost always function as extra spells.

Because it is so slow, this plan will often be vulnerable to the aggressive strategies of other decks so you need to take this into account when building your deck and when playing games out.

Putting Your Plan Into Practice

Many decks will have cards that allow you to function in multiple plans. The key thing is determining which is the best plan for any given moment.

As an example let's take a look at my draft deck from last week:

Limited Information 		
Main Deck 40 cards		
8 Forest	1 Briarknit Kami	1 Befoul

1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
8 Swamp

17 lands

1 Elder Pine of Jukai
1 Gibbering Kami
1 Haru-Onna
1 Matsu-Tribe Sniper
1 Moss Kami
1 Nightsoil Kami
1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi
1 Order of the Sacred Bell
1 Orochi Sustainer
1 Sakura-Tribe Springcaller
1 Shinen of Life's Roar
1 Skullsnatcher
1 Takenuma Bleeder
1 Venerable Kumo

15 creatures

1 Dance of Shadows
1 Honden of Night's Reach
1 Horobi's Whisper
1 Inner Calm, Outer Strength
2 Kagemaro's Clutch
1 Sensei's Divining Top

8 other spells

This deck has several plans running through it. It's obviously going to win through damage. Sometimes it'll be the aggressive deck but sometimes it'll have to try and control the early game and then win through its bigger guys later on. It also has Dance of Shadows to act as a finisher for the aggressive plan. Separate to those it has Okiba-Gang Shinobi, Honden of Night's Reach and a number of Soulshift guys so it can also plan to win through card advantage as well.

Looking at the rounds played out last week you can clearly see the different plans being implemented.



In round one the match was largely won through card advantage from the black Honden. The Honden was my first play upon reaching four mana despite having several good creatures in hand. As soon as I hit four mana I realised I wasn't under any pressure on the board and determined that winning through card advantage at that point was a safer route than trying to deal damage as quickly as possible. There was no need to race, as I wasn't being dealt any significant damage. If my opponent had even a Soratami Rainshaper on the board I'm sure my play on that turn might've been very different.

You can also see this in the sideboarding. Bringing in Skullmane Baku is only something you would do in a match-up you would expect to be slow and all about card advantage.

In round two things are completely different. I get a beatdown draw with a third turn Springcaller and fourth turn Moss Kami backed by a removal spell, and that game is over quickly as a result. There the Sustainer became very relevant and dramatically improved my draw as a result.

In round three the plan changed back to card advantage once again. I knew I could overwhelm my opponent through card advantage if only I could survive long enough to do so. Despite mulliganing going first in game two the card advantage garnered through the various Soulshift creatures I had would probably have been enough to win the game had I been able to handle the opposing Cunning

Bandit. You can see through the sideboarding decisions I made here how the plan changes the deck and the cards I want to play.

Overall there are four different situations in which you need to think about how you're going to win:

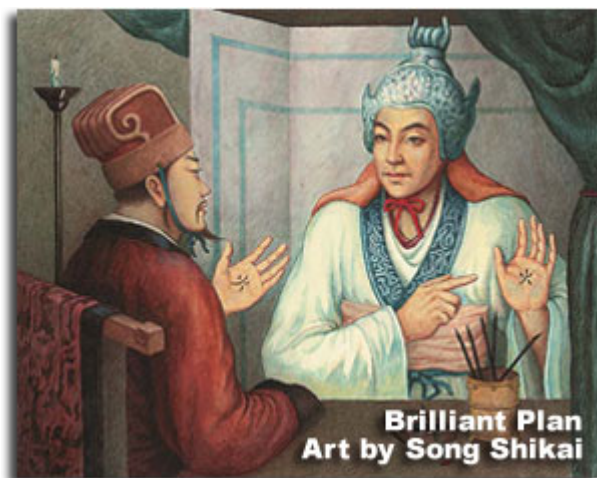
During the draft – Even when you are taking cards during the draft you should think about the deck you are creating and how you plan on winning with it. Once you get into the second and third packs of the draft you should have a rough idea as to 10-15 cards that will be making your main deck and you can start to form an opinion as to what plan you will most commonly be using. Once you know that you then adjust your picks accordingly.

You should have an idea as to what your deck needs to be able to implement its plan and concentrate more on what your deck actually needs rather than what the best card in your colours is.

It's rare that you'll take a much weaker card over a more powerful one; you probably aren't going to take Minamo Scrollkeeper over Shinen of Flight's Wings for example. However, there will be times when you need to pick Ashen-Skin Zubera over Waking Nightmare as I did last week, or Frostling over Frost Ogre, or Glitterfang over Shinen of Fury's Fire.

During deck construction – Most of your choices for your main deck will be obvious but you will often have numerous options for the last 3-5 cards that get included. Often a lot of these will be situational, and the choice you make will depend on how you expect your deck to win. Should you play Skullsnatcher or Ember-Fist Zubera? Should you play Distress or Raving Oni-Slave?

These choices may seem comparatively minor, and sometimes they are, but if you are deciding on the final five spells to make your main deck then that's more than 20% of your deck that you're making decisions over. If you draw a couple of these final choices in a game they could end up having a large impact on how the game plays out.



During play – It's when you are playing each game that you really have to understand when to change your plan, as it will frequently change from turn to turn.

Let's say you are playing blue-white against black-red and have stabilised the board on the ground and have a Mothrider Samurai holding off a Gibbering Kami and Kami of the Waning Moon in the air. You're behind on life 16-12 but have a Soratami Mirror-Guard that's letting one of your ground guys get in each turn. You probably don't want to start racing at that point and attacking with the Mothrider too, as the Gibbering Kami will hit you

back and the Kami of the Waning Moon can take out your Mirror-Guard if that attacks. The Mirror-Guard is your way to win here, and unless your opponent top-decks a lot of Spirits in the next 5-6 turns you'll probably be able to race ok. You can also alpha-strike using the Mirror-Guard on two of your ground guys later on.

All of a sudden your opponent draws Glitterfang. Now he can give something fear every turn which means you suddenly have to drastically alter your plan and figure out a way to race that. Just one card from your opponent forces you to completely change your outlook on the game.

Another example is when you might be in a racing situation with your black-red deck against an opposing black-red deck. You draw Death Denied and that gives you the opportunity to change your plan completely. You can try to start trading guys off instead and then win later on the back of the card advantage Death Denied will give you.

Many times during play you will need to reevaluate how you plan to win the game and adjust your play based on that plan.

During sideboarding – Once you know how your opponent is going to win you can then adjust your plan accordingly. If you think they are going to win through aggressive creatures then board in cards that will counter that. If you think they are going to try to control the game and win through card advantage then you might want to lose some of your slower cards and make your deck more aggressive after sideboarding. You might also want to board in additional finishers like an extra Devouring Rage if you think you will struggle to win the long game any other way.

Once again you should have a plan as to how to beat the deck you have now played against and there are lots of cards that you might want to include or remove from your deck based on that.

When You Can't Win

One of my close friends in England has the uncanny knack of winning games that I would deem impossible to win. He does this often simply because he does not concede until the game is actually over and because he never gives his opponent credit for spotting the obvious.

If there's only one possible way you can win the game then make it your plan to do exactly that.

There will be games where your opponent has a lethal attack on the table and you have no cards in your hand or anything in play that can prevent it. It's tempting to just scoop up your cards and think "Well, I'm dead, all he has to do is attack and I obviously have no tricks so that's the end of that game". Don't always assume your opponent knows that! Often players get fixated on a certain play – like simply attacking with a Nezumi Cutthroat each turn – and they don't see that they can attack with everyone for the win. They get into a set pattern and don't re-evaluate the situation every turn. This is something you will rarely be able to capitalise on but it does happen sometimes so if you're in a position where you know you have lost don't automatically assume your opponent knows that too.

The other thing to do is to give yourself a chance to get lucky. You may be massively behind in a game with no foreseeable way to win and give the game up as lost. Before you do that make sure there's literally no possible way or no combination of top-decks that can save you. If you do have that Devouring Rage in your deck make sure you do not start chump blocking with your creatures before you absolutely have to. You may just draw it and then find you're short that one last Spirit if you do.

If you think to yourself "Well the only way I can win is if I draw two straight lands and my opponent lets one of my guys through so this Strength of Cedars will kill him" then play as if that is going to happen. If you give yourself a chance to get lucky then sometimes you will, but if you give the game up as lost before it really is you may find that you could've gotten lucky and drawn out of it if you'd played the game in a different way.

If there's only one possible way you can win the game then make it your plan to do exactly that. Chances are it won't happen but even if you only win one game in 40 because you do top-deck that exact card that you needed that's still an extra game you do win that you wouldn't otherwise have won, and that could be all the difference between a place in the PTQ Top 8 and a journey home.

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