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The Last Gasp

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The Play's The Thing
Wednesday, August 31, 2005



Before we get to this week's article I need to issue a quick correction and an apology. A lot of readers were confused by [last week's article](#) because they did not understand why your opponent would not tap a **Kami of Ancient Law** to destroy your **Manriki-Gusari** with one of his before you could even equip a creature. The reason is that the diagram that was posted was incorrect; both copies of **Kami of Ancient Law** were supposed to be tapped. I accidentally omitted that information and (as those of you who read the message boards for that article already know) Scott was out and therefore unable to catch and correct my error in time. Hopefully the article now makes a lot more sense. I have improved the procedure for catching such errors and I will do everything I can to make sure similar errors do not occur in the future.

I still intend to use multiple examples when I think it will help, but the more complex a scenario is the more there is to be gained from going into greater depth. With that in mind, today's problem is the most complex one so far. Your position is strong but depending on what your opponent has in his hand it could be precarious. The background given by the reader who submitted this is that your opponent is the best player at your local store. Rather than win as often as he can by using standardized decks, he instead chooses to play strange builds in order to keep himself challenged and keep it fair. You're both playing monoblue decks, and the end is near. He only has four cards left in his library, and you've got him down to three lands in play and four life points, but you're at only one life. The format is Legacy, so your opponent could be running almost anything. What you do know is that he is playing a deck heavy on counters including **Force of Will** and **Thwart**. He also has an unknown amount of bounce in his deck.

We don't know where all the other lands went, but for now assume that **Upheaval** is responsible but that your deck doesn't contain any more copies.

It is currently your precombat main phase.

YOU (1 life): in play - **Isochron Scepter** (imprinted with **Counterspell**), **Island x9** (three with **Annex** enchanting them); in hand - **Counterspell**, **Phantom Warrior**, **Evacuation**, **Echoing Truth**, **Reins of Power**; in library - 20 cards
OPP (4 life): in play - **Island x3**, **Vedalken Shackles** (tapped, stealing **Fatespinner**), **Ophidian** (tapped); in hand - 7 cards; in library - 4 cards --**Benjamin Visger**

The question is what to do. [How do you go about figuring this out?](#)

Once you get a sense of what is happening in play, your first job will be to play the role of detective. He has sixteen cards with which to win the game: Three Islands in play, **Vedalken Shackles**, **Ophidian**, seven cards in hand and the four cards in his library. Your first goal needs to be to figure out as much as you can about those cards. There is a wealth of information available. In addition to your opponents' actions, you know what his other forty-four cards are. Ask for his graveyard and look at it carefully – but not so carefully that you run the risk of running out of time. You have to prioritize. A round of **Magic** is fifty minutes to an hour in length, so unless this is game three and you are well ahead on time you can't take *too long* to break everything down.

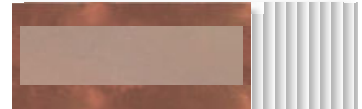
What are you looking for?

Your opponent's big disadvantage is that he lacks mana. Thanks to **Annex** and **Upheaval**, he has only three Islands in play right now and it is highly unlikely he has one in his hand unless he is saving it to use with a **Foil**. He has needed that mana for a long time and would have played it. That means that the biggest threats to you are spells that allow him to get strong effects without using up his mana. Either they have alternate casting costs or they cost one mana, which lets him cast both a two mana spell and a one mana spell.

The first card I would look for would be **Force of Will**. How many copies are in his graveyard? Given how strong the card is, there is a high probability that his deck has four copies of **Force of Will**. Your opponents' biggest issue right now is that he is stuck on three lands, so **Force of Will** is virtually a free veto – the one life is a bigger problem than the card he will need to remove from the game. If there are four copies in his



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graveyard, you can breathe easy. If there are multiple copies still missing, your job is going to be a lot harder. While you are checking for **Force of Will** you can continue to think about what else to look for.

If the match had plenty of time remaining and I was doing everything I could to win, I would look at every card in his graveyard and count the copies. Other particularly worrisome cards would be **Foil**, **Unsummon**, **Seal of Removal**, **Thwart**, **Daze**, **Force Spike**, **Disrupt**, **Misdirection**, **Mishra's Factory** and anything capable of doing direct damage. This is Legacy, so it is highly unlikely but you could die to **Psychic Purge**. Remember, you're at one life. Also worrisome would be any creatures that cost only one mana.



All right. [Skipping what you learn from his graveyard for a moment, what are your options?](#)

You need to either do four damage or survive four turns. Right now, your opponent has control of two creatures, either of which can deal the last point of damage. If you do not cast either **Echoing Truth** or **Evacuation**, you will die. **Echoing Truth** can protect you on its own if you target **Vedalken Shackles**; you take back control of **Fatespinner** and can block **Ophidian**. **Evacuation** takes all the creatures off the board. If your plan is to use **Echoing Truth**, you can consider also casting **Phantom Warrior**.

That means that you have three options. Option one is to cast **Evacuation**. Option two is to cast **Echoing Truth** and **Phantom Warrior**. Option three is to cast **Echoing Truth**.

[First, consider the scenarios where he untaps and then you cast Evacuation.](#)

With **Evacuation** your plan is to deck your opponent. Rather than cast creatures, you will be using **Isochron Scepter** and **Echoing Truth** to try and keep all of his creatures off the board for the rest of the game. In an emergency, you can use **Reins of Power** as a fog effect. If you can do this for four turns, you win. You get a free counter each turn off the **Isochron Scepter** to help you. The downside is that you're not putting any pressure on him, so he will always get the full four turns to try and win. This turn, he'll need to stop **Evacuation** if he wants to kill you. You have two spells that can back up **Evacuation**, so he needs three relevant spells to win the game but **Force Spike** and other similar spells count as the third relevant spell because this plan requires the full nine mana.

[What happens once Evacuation resolves?](#)

On the first turn, it is not much easier for him to get a creature back down than it would have been for him to win outright. You will try to counter it the same way you would have tried to counter his counters, and he has to spend the same mana on the creature he would have spent on a counter. That means that if you survive the three spell requirement you will also end that turn with no creatures in play. You have **Isochron Scepter** and he has **Vedalken Shackles**.

Once that happens, he has three turns to win and you may or may not still have **Counterspell** in your hand. Either way, he needs to go through the Scepter each turn, he can't attack until at least turn two no matter what and you have **Echoing Truth** for the first creature and **Reins of Power** for the last turn. **Reins of Power** acts as a fog here because you use it to take all creatures out of combat while he is attacking. This scenario looks good. If he had the free spells, he should have killed you when he had the chance. The big problem is you are giving him time and time is a bad thing to give. He has four turns to draw and play both additional lands and spells that can get him out of this problem. The Scepter is powerful but chances are he is sitting on a better hand than yours.



We have our first option. [What about option two?](#)

If **Echoing Truth** is countered, you die whether you have **Phantom Warrior** or not. Your only way to live would be to then cast **Evacuation** or **Reins of Power**, but you would be better off using **Isochron Scepter** and **Counterspell** to try and protect **Echoing Truth** and that would leave you without the mana for **Evacuation**. If **Phantom Warrior** gets cast, you will have four mana remaining. That is enough to use **Isochron Scepter** and cast the **Counterspell** in your hand. He needs to go through two counters, which requires three relevant spells. If you don't cast **Phantom Warrior**, you protect yourself from spells like **Daze** and **Force Spike**.

Once **Vedalken Shackles** goes back to his hand, he can either recast it or try and cast something else instead. Either way, you're automatically going to fight anything he tries to do with the **Isochron Scepter** since it costs you

nothing to use it. On your turn, you can attack him down to two with **Phantom Warrior** giving him only one turn to try and stop you. You still have **Evacuation** and **Reins of Power** in reserve if you need them.

What would it take for your opponent to win against this plan?

When you cast **Phantom Warrior**, you are starting a potential fight during your own turn with your opponents' mana untapped. With that mana tapped, you are committed to the **Echoing Truth** plan. Your opponent can now use a counter on **Phantom Warrior** using mana that might have gone to waste. That leaves you with a choice. If you fight for **Phantom Warrior** you will win that fight but then there is a good chance **Echoing Truth** does not resolve and you die. That means you need to respond with **Echoing Truth** to make sure it is going to resolve. Once it does you can fight for **Phantom Warrior**, at which point he will untap and you will have only **Counterspell** to stop him from playing whatever he wants. There are a number of cards that he can force through that put you in a position where your two creatures can't defend against him.

What is wrong with this plan?

The problem with this plan is that you are casting **Phantom Warrior** but **Phantom Warrior** is unlikely to impact your ability to win the game in this scenario. It can kill your opponent, but it seems likely that your opponents' best chance to win the game is right here. Rather than do your best to minimize his mana, you are giving him a chance to use his mana efficiently and opening yourself up to spells that would otherwise not be relevant. Your opponent is at four life, but you can't afford to go after him right now. Next turn you should be in a better position to do that if you want to.

What about option three. casting only Echoing Truth?



If you cast **Echoing Truth** alone, you can do it on his turn. If he has the three relevant spells, you lose the game, but that is true in all scenarios. If he does not, you will untap and he will have only **Ophidian** while you have **Fatespinner**. There is the small concern that he will start skipping his draw step with **Fatespinner**, but if he does that then **Phantom Warrior** will kill him. On your next turn, you can cast **Phantom Warrior** without exposing yourself to anything and then use it to win the game or try to deck him depending on what he plays out and how he responds to **Fatespinner**. The biggest problem here is that you are giving him a chance to win the game with a bounce spell, but bounce spells were already relevant because he could target **Isochron Scepter** and force you to use a counterspell of some kind.

Which option is best?

Now that you have a good understanding of the different paths you have available, this is where you get to apply any knowledge you've gained through looking at the opponent's graveyard. There are advantages to options one and three. If your opponent clearly is not running any **Force Spike** effects, **Evacuation** seems like the best plan. It prevents there being creatures on the board and therefore gives him less ways to try and win the game. It also lets you choose to take away **Vedalken Shackles** from the equation by allowing you to not play a creature. You could also use **Echoing Truth** on the Shackles later to allow you to replay your guys, especially if you draw a tenth land. However, if **Force Spike** effects are something you have to worry about then the **Echoing Truth** plan protects against them and becomes better.

There is more you can consider here, going into the way the other turns might play out, but this is about as deep as you want to go. There is one more thing to consider: If your opponent is going to play a relevant spell on your turn either way, you most certainly do not want to cast **Phantom Warrior**. That is another reason to pass the turn. By passing the turn, you potentially deny him the use of his mana and you also deny him information. He doesn't know how you plan to stop him and if he casts any spells during your turn he has to do so blind. Once you see what he has, you can once again consider both of your choices and go from there.

This game must be planned out from this point, if it has not been planned out already. **At any point in which you have multiple plans that make sense, you need to weigh all the plusses and minuses of each plan.** What cards is each plan strong against? Under what conditions is each better than the other? Sometimes the trade-off is the ability to play around a card, in this case **Force Spike**. In other cases you are taking more general risks right now to avoid giving your opponent time. The other important thing to remember is that you care most about the point at which it is easiest for you to lose. If your opponent has the chance to kill you with three spells now, it doesn't matter that much whether he needs four or needs five to win on his next turn. If he didn't have three spells, what's the chance he is going to have four next turn? Often you can take a huge hit later on to get even a slight edge during the crucial turn.



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