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# Figuring Out Why (Playing Around 2)

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The Play's The Thing  
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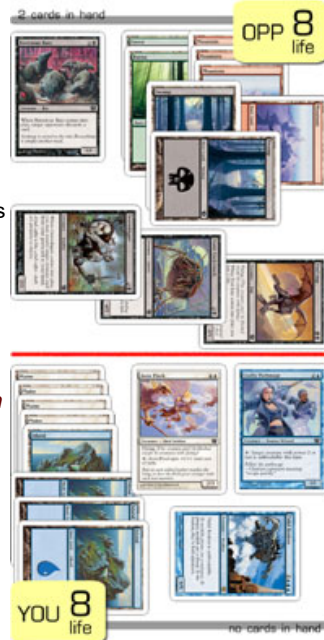


One of the most important skills in **Magic** is figuring out what your opponent has in his hand, then figuring out what to do about it. It is rare that you can be certain, but often there are not many ways for he plays to make sense. He may not think he's giving away his hand, but if you pay close enough attention, that is often exactly what he is doing. Today's two examples involve situations where your opponent makes an attack that only makes sense if they know something that you don't. You need to figure out what in order to know how to react. Regardless of the specific cards in play, this exact kind of scenario plays itself out on **Magic** tables all the time, which is why this skill is so crucial.

It is his attack phase, your declare blockers step.

**OPP (8 life):** in play - *Gravedigger* (attacking), *Giant Cockroach* (attacking), *Foul Imp* (attacking), *Ravenous Rats*, *Swamp* x2 (1 tapped), *Mountain* x4 (1 tapped), *Forest* x2; in hand - 2 cards  
**YOU (8 life):** in play - *Plains* x4, *Island* x4 (3 tapped), *Aven Flock*, *Tidal Kraken* (tapped), *Crafty Pathmage*; in hand - no cards

Your opponent just cast *Ravenous Rats*, forcing you to discard the land you were holding back as a bluff. He then attacked with all of his other creatures. What do you have to take into account before you decide how to block?



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Your immediate reaction should be to ask the question: Why did he attack in this situation? There are several possible reasons.

**Possible Reason 1:** He feels he cannot win the game.

Often players who can't win any other way will attack with all of their men in case you forget to block or otherwise do something massively stupid. At the very least, they get to see your reaction and how you respond to the attack. If there will be another game, often players can gain valuable information about both the opponent and his deck in this way even though they have already lost. However, you can ignore this case. If he can't win the game, then as long as you don't do anything monumentally stupid then he still can't win the game.

**Possible Reason 2:** He has to convince you to block in such a way that he can kill one of your creatures.



Right now, on the table, you have him dead next turn. If you lose *Aven Flock*, you need another turn to kill him. If you lose *Crafty Pathmage*, any flyer can delay you for a turn. At this point, a key thing to realize is that there is little reason to keep *Aven Flock* out of combat. If *Aven Flock* blocks a two power creature and *Crafty Pathmage* does not block, every spell that kills the Flock could also kill you. The only spell that can potentially kill *Aven Flock* in any scenario without accidentally killing you is *Volcanic Hammer*, which kills *Aven Flock* if you block *Giant Cockroach*. The way you would protect Flock from Hammer would be to block *Foul Imp* with *Aven Flock* and *Giant Cockroach* with *Crafty Pathmage*. If he does have Hammer, that also raises the question of why he would risk dying on his next turn by attacking with *Foul Imp*.

If he is unable to kill *Aven Flock* but he has a flyer in his hand, his goal is to kill *Crafty Pathmage* so he can block *Aven Flock* next turn. After that, he hopes to draw a card that can win him the game. You can guard against that by blocking *Giant Cockroach* with *Aven Flock* and not blocking with *Crafty Pathmage*, but as we'll see later on that carries other risks.

**Possible Reason 3:** While he cannot kill *Aven Flock*, he thinks that the damage he does is worth losing a creature even if you do not also block

with *Crafty Pathmage*.

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For some reason, he thinks doing damage to you is valuable. You may or may not agree with him, but he is in a better position than you are to judge how valuable that damage is. He knows what cards he has in hand and he knows what cards are in his deck. The question now becomes, why is he willing to trade a creature for damage in this situation?

Again there are several possibilities, but you have a big hint: You have a **Tidal Kraken**. He couldn't kill it last turn with anything other than **Blaze**, and if he has **Blaze** then you're dead either way since there's no way to avoid taking one damage and he then casts **Blaze** on you for the remaining seven points. What he wants is to deal damage. That means that he can kill you if you do not block, with the prime suspect being **Lava Axe**.

In one case, he has a flyer in his hand you want to block with only **Aven Flock**: If you lose the Pathmage, it will give him a turn to find an answer. In the second case he has a card like **Lava Axe** in his hand and you want to block with both creatures so he won't kill you. In the third case, you want to block with both creatures so that he can't kill **Aven Flock** with his **Volcanic Hammer** and buy himself that turn.

That means you have to guess.

#### What are the consequences of guessing wrong?

If you don't also block with Pathmage and he can kill you, you die. The only card he can plausibly have that can kill you if you don't block with Pathmage but can't kill you if you do block with Pathmage is **Lava Axe**. If you do block, he loses **Giant Cockroach**, you lose **Crafty Pathmage**, and you go down to six. If he plays a flyer then you are going to die, because he can attack next turn to get you down to five. If he has a removal spell in addition to **Lava Axe**, you have the same problem. However, if he has neither then you will win.

If he has nothing and you block with both creatures, nothing happens. You still win on your next turn. If he has a flyer in hand, or a **Volcanic Hammer** that can now kill **Aven Flock** given the damage on it, then you give him a turn to draw an out. This could potentially cost you the game, but has a low probability of happening since it requires multiple unlikely things to happen. He still needs help to win. You've given him another turn to find an answer and this is unfortunate but not all that bad.

#### Given that, what should you do?

The risk of not also blocking with the Pathmage is that you die. The risk of blocking is that you give him an extra turn. You don't get a bad trade overall, giving up a 1/1 to kill a 4/2 – you just give him another turn if he has something. One of these is a lot worse than the other. Therefore, you need to be very confident that his having a lesser answer than **Lava Axe** is far more likely than **Lava Axe**. I don't think that is the case, since **Lava Axe** is playable and your opponent could have had it in his opening hand. Most other answers would have to have been drawn recently. Therefore, the choice is clear: You block with both your creatures. You don't flat out know he has **Lava Axe**, but there's clearly a decent chance that he does and I would put him on this card instinctively. Not only is this the most likely situation, it's also one that we can play around reasonably and still be the favorite to take the game.

That turned out to be right. This situation was sent in by Dan Faber, and he was the one attacking. His opponent blocked only with **Aven Flock**, and then Dan finished him with **Lava Axe**. Dan felt that his opponent should have known it was **Lava Axe** in his hand. Puzzles like this are a lot harder to figure out when you don't already know the answer. I'm not convinced that you can flat out know, but it is more than fair to say that you should suspect and the cost to play around it here is low. Your choice is clear, and not blocking with Pathmage was a greedy, greedy decision.

Note that also blocking with Pathmage would still be correct even if not blocking would leave you at six. This is because of **Enrage**. While **Enrage** is not as big an issue as **Lava Axe**, it is still a way for you to lose that your opponent could easily have been holding since the first turn and that explains his actions perfectly. The risk versus reward equation here would still support a block. Also note that if you are currently at eight then **Enrage** doesn't matter for the same reason that **Blaze** doesn't matter: You're dead no matter what you do, because you can't block all three attackers.



This next one is a treat, as it comes to me from my good friend Alan Comer. Alan has recently left Wizards and as part of his re-entry into the **Magic** community has been doing a lot of *Ninth Edition* drafting. I asked him to be on the lookout for a good position, and pretty soon he had one for me. Here it is:

At the time of the picture, it is your opponent's precombat main phase.

**OPP** (12 life): in play - **Glorious Anthem**, **Flowstone Crusher**, **Mountain** x6, **Plains** x2; in hand - 3 cards

**YOU** (20 life): in play - **Goblin Chariot**, **Wind Drake** (tapped), **Sea Monster**, **Island** x5, **Mountain**; in hand - **Wildfire**, **Anarchist**; in graveyard - **Shock**

Your opponent casts **Panic Attack** and attacks for eight with **Flowstone Crusher**.

#### What is in his hand?

Once again your opponent is making what seems like a poor trade. **Panic Attack** can prevent up to three creatures from blocking, so why would he burn it now instead of later? This could be a tempo thing, where he wants to get use out of his mana this turn, but he has plenty of time. It seems like giving up his trick here for just eight damage is terrible, giving you valuable information and not getting the most out of his cards when he has several more turns. Even if you play a third creature, **Panic Attack** is still a falter. He could just have a second **Panic Attack** in his hand, but most people won't play multiple copies of that card all that often.

However, there is one very clever scenario that makes this play a potential game winner: He's trying to set something up with that **Panic Attack**.

What is the card in his hand that could single-handedly win him the game if you don't realize it is there?



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The key thing to realize is what your opponent's play does to your next turn. By tapping his only creature, he makes it likely that you will now attack with **Goblin Chariot**. That leaves you with only **Sea Monster** back to block. **Sea Monster** is big, so he'll have to get it out of the way, but there's one very good way to do that and it fits perfectly with the play your opponent has made.

If he casts **Threaten**, he takes your **Sea Monster** and attacks with both it and **Flowstone Crusher**. That is more than enough damage to kill you if you don't have a blocker. Alan says that he outright figured out that his opponent had it. We've all had games like that – suddenly everything falls into place. You have to be careful, because you can be wrong. Alan was right that **Threaten** had suddenly become far more probable. I would even call it a favorite against many opponents, but it takes a lot to outright know that someone has a card. I don't think that you outright know in this spot. I think it would be correct to put him on the card, but I wouldn't be married to that assumption.

What is your plan now?

The question now becomes, can you play around **Threaten** and if so what will it cost? For now, that means you need to keep a second creature untapped in addition to **Sea Monster**. That way, if he casts **Threaten** he can only hit you for eight. A second option is to leave two extra creatures back, which would let you instead lose both creatures and take no damage. Being at four life is dangerous against a red deck, but remember that you'll need to keep playing around whatever you choose to play around. Once you decide to hold back multiple creatures, you'll need to keep them in reserve for the rest of the game. In this case, that doesn't seem too bad. You likely will not get another chance to attack on the ground. You give up two damage from **Goblin Chariot** and will have to cast **Anarchist** without a sorcery to get back, rather than only having to choose one of those two, which probably means you'll kill your opponent a turn later.

How big are those costs?

Casting **Anarchist** here is a very small cost. You may save yourself important future tempo, since **Anarchist** costs five mana, and you give yourself a stronger ability to counterattack on future turns. Unless you have a huge number of sorceries in your deck, you probably have a number of turns in which **Anarchist** would otherwise have to sit in your hand. You need him now.

Holding back **Goblin Chariot** costs you two damage and that costs you a turn off of your damage clock. That is a much bigger cost in my mind than casting **Anarchist**. Those two damage could make a big difference. The question now becomes how bad is it for you if he casts **Threaten** and does eight more to you. There's also the danger that he also has removal and therefore can outright kill you if you don't save multiple extra

creatures. **Threaten** is going to be frustrating to guard against but once you give up on attacking on the ground you become a lot less afraid of **Threaten**. For those reasons, my plan at this point if you draw an irrelevant card like a land is to cast **Anarchist** and hold back both creatures.



You untap and draw **Volcanic Hammer**. [What do you do now?](#)

Well that threw a monkey wrench into your plans. Before, there was no question that you played **Anarchist**. Now there is a big downside to casting **Anarchist** because you are giving up the chance to cast **Volcanic Hammer** a second time. At a minimum that is three damage to your opponent and there's a good chance this can kill an important creature later in the game. You don't want to waste it, but what would your plan be? You could cast **Volcanic Hammer** at his head this turn and hold **Goblin Chariot** back, but the potential tempo loss alone probably makes this worse than casting **Anarchist** and attacking with **Goblin Chariot**. The only real option that opened is to fully expose yourself to **Threaten**, and that seems like a terrible decision.

Therefore your move doesn't change. As weird as it looks, you cast **Anarchist** and attack with only **Wind Drake**, putting your opponent at ten. He has four turns to find an answer to **Wind Drake**, and **Volcanic Hammer** can probably remove the first one he draws even with **Glorious Anthem** on the table. Your chance of winning this game is now very high. **Volcanic Hammer** was a great card to draw, but it could be a disaster if it makes you forget what needs to be done.

I hope this provided a good counterpoint to my earlier column "[Playing Around](#)" where you were considering playing around cards that your opponent had no particular reason to have in his hand. This time he has a reason, and that makes all the difference. It takes a strong incentive to go after phantoms: You need to be rewarded for being right a lot more than you are punished for being wrong. The more likely your opponent is to have the card you're worrying about, the more legitimate it is to adjust your play to be able to defeat that card. These types of decisions come up all the time, and I'm sure that I will be revisiting them again.

With that in mind, I'd like to introduce [submission guidelines for the positions I use in this column](#). If you're thinking about sending in a scenario please read them, keep them in mind, and follow them to make sure that I get positions that I can use. That's better for everyone. The most important thing is to make sure that you include all the details. Right now, I want to jump into situations that use the new cards from *Ravnica*. Tell me what happened at the prerelease! I think a few cases of 'Wow, those cards can do that!' would be a neat change of pace.



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