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PRO TOUR—SAN DIEGO

Weighing Your Options

Zvi Mowshowitz
The Play's The Thing
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Before I get to the puzzles, I'd like to spotlight the following e-mail I received from a man named Stephen. I found it highly amusing:

Dear Zvi Mowshowitz,

At the Ravnica Prerelease, I cast necromantic thirst on my friend's creature. What my friend didn't realize was that I had no creatures in my graveyard. That pretty much cost him the game. :D

That's quite the trick.

Some people said these kinds of mistakes never happened. Clearly they are wrong. You don't want to go to this too often, but I want to point this out for all those people who said that their opponents would never, ever forget that **Nezumi Cutthroat** can't block. Of course this time the mistake was made at a prerelease, so you could argue it doesn't count. To an extent you would be right, but I assure you that I've had plenty of people make these kinds of errors on the Pro Tour, where it counted the most. You absolutely have to keep an eye out for when opponents miss something obvious. The number of people good enough to never make these mistakes is far smaller than people think it is.

In this case, Stephen's play didn't require all that much risk. If his opponent had realized that Stephen had nothing in his graveyard, presumably Stephen would have started blocking and that would have made the Thirst relevant. In the meantime, Stephen had nothing in his graveyard so there was nothing useful to do with the Thirst. If his friend doesn't realize, then Stephen gets a big win. The best plays of this type share that quality: You have little or nothing to lose if you fail and gain a lot if you are right. (It's a lot harder to do something that will lose you the game outright if your opponent calls your bluff and then decide to bluff anyway.)

While I had hoped to bring you more stories of the *Ravnica* prerelease, I didn't get anything that was long enough to stand on its own or two pieces that fit together well. To help everyone's creativity and to increase the chance that things fit together, I'm going to help narrow things for next week. What I'd like to do is to look at some situations where neither player is in any immediate danger of dying and the game is not in its first few turns. There is a tendency to end up picking positions where either the game will end soon, which simplifies the decision tree, or it has just begun, which also simplifies the decision tree. While that's a fine place to begin, I'd like to start looking at decisions that don't have clear-cut resolutions.

In works of fiction, there are no unnecessary pieces. When you see a finely crafted **Magic** puzzle, you can rest assured that every card is there for a reason. I've solved many puzzles both magical and otherwise by finding the piece that didn't seem to fit and asking why it was there. For that reason, I'm not going to edit out the unhelpful information in today's position: I'm just going to give you his letter, minus the introduction that has no bearing on the case.

Dear Mr. Mowshowitz,

This was a *Kamigawa* block (all three sets) **Winston draft**. Only three players showed up on our regular night, so we ended up with that format. The draft didn't go as well as I'd hoped, so I was stuck playing a U/B/R. The core of the deck was blue with splashes from each of the others. Cards in the deck that may be of importance:

- Soratami Rainshaper** (only flyer in deck)
- Hearth Kami** (only Artifact removal)
- Rend Flesh**
- Figure the Still Wind**
- Mistblade Shinobi**
- (only 2 ninjas in deck)

Figure was the "fattest" creature in the deck--the only other guy bigger than 2/2 was **Scuttling Death**. My opponent was playing B/G/W. I knew he had a **Kokusho** and a **Plow Through Reito** in the deck from a previous game.

The game started badly for me with my opponent getting off to a quick start with an **O-Naginata** equipped on a **Kami of the Hunt** beating me around the head. After killing off the Kami, a



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Soilshaper, and another of his creatures, I had cleared the board except for O-Naginata. I was at 4 life, he was at 17. I had Higure in play. At the end of his turn, he had hard cast Okiba Gang Shinobi.

Present Status:

It is your precombat main phase.

Opponent (17 life):

On Board: 2 Swamps (2 tapped)
2 Forests (2 tapped)
2 Plains (1 tapped)
1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi, (untapped, sick)
1 O-Naginata, untapped

Hand: 4 cards, all unknown

Graveyard: Kami of the Hunt, Soilshaper

My Side, after untap and draw: (4 life)
2 Island (untapped)
2 Swamps (untapped)
1 Mountain (untapped)
1 Higure, the Still Wind (Untapped)

In Hand:

Hisoka's Defiance
Mistblade Shinobi
Dreamcatcher
Mountain

Graveyard:

Ember-Fist Zubera
Barrel Down Sokenzan

What would be the best course of action?

That's what he asked, after which he described what happened. Things do not look good. There is no reason to presume that your opponent is out of gas, and what he has on the board is already problematic. Oh, and you're also at four life. The only card you have right now that can stop the Okiba-Gang Shinobi is Higure, and even Higure can't prevent you from taking trample damage. First, decide how you'd play from here, then let's see what he did this turn. Here's a graphic of the current state of the game.

4 cards in hand

Kami of the Hunt & Soilshaper in Graveyard

OPP 17 life



YOU 4 life



4 cards in hand



What he did:

What I did was play the Mountain. I tapped a mountain and Swamp to make Higure unblockable. I paid U to ninjutsu in the Mistblade Shinobi, returning the Okiba-Gang Shinobi to his hand.

At this point, I had an untapped Mountain, Island, and Swamp. I knew he had the Okiba-Gang in hand. I could either hold the mana to cast Hisoka's Defiance or cast Dreamcatcher. I knew that I didn't have anyone with enough toughness to really absorb an equipped Okiba Gang, so I decided to play Dreamcatcher to help absorb the Shinobi.

How good is this plan?

Before considering whether the general approach is right, you should notice that this approach can clearly be improved upon. There is no need to tap the two mana to make Higure unblockable. If you attack it is highly unlikely that he will block, and even if he does the only cards that will let him win that fight can be stopped by Hisoka's Defiance. That's the only reason he would block, and you want him to block. You can now use ninjutsu to bring out Mistblade Shinobi if you so desire. The problem is that you can't recast Higure this turn.

Casting Dreamcatcher seems almost as bad as playing it in the first place. You shut off Hisoka's Defiance and in exchange you get very little. In fact, I'm not sure Dreamcatcher isn't a bigger asset in your hand so you can discard it if he tramples over Higure in a turn.

All right, so you can modify the plan this way. [What are your other options?](#)

There is only one other option available. You can hold back Higure to block, presumably trading it off and taking two trample damage. You would then discard Dreamcatcher and Mountain and hold Hisoka's Defiance. You lose three cards, but Mountain is unlikely to matter and Dreamcatcher is not much of a creature. That will leave you

at two life, with **Mistblade Shinobi** and **Hisoka's Defiance** against a four card hand. Those aren't good odds, but depending on what he has and what you draw it could work.

All right, [which option is better?](#)

The first option is far better because of the way this game is likely to go. On his turn, he will most likely recast Okiba and even if he does not he will probably cast a creature. You then untap and try to draw a land. If you do, you can cast Higure, make the **Mistblade Shinobi** unblockable and bounce his creature. You're now tapped out, but if he doesn't have anything cheap then he is now locked and hopefully you can use your draw step to deal with anything that doesn't get locked down. If you don't draw that land, there's a good chance you can make the trade of Higure for Okiba anyway. You'll just make it a turn later.

[How would your plan change if you were at sixteen life instead of four?](#)

If you are at sixteen, it means you can take a hit from Okiba. If you do so that means discarding two cards, so it's not something you would do lightly, but now you have that option if you want it. In fact, that is now part of the plan. If you don't draw the seventh land off the top of your deck, you'll probably need to take the hit from Okiba in order to preserve your ninjas. **Dreamcatcher** is one easy discard, but you don't have a second one right now. **Hisoka's Defiance** is valuable. Therefore, you have two choices. Choice one is to take the hit intentionally, holding back Mountain to discard it. Choice two is to play as you would have before and gamble on drawing a land. Since you'll have five mana tied up by Higure, you can't cast **Dreamcatcher** hoping to empty your hand. If you get hit, it's going to hurt. Option three would be to hit him with **Mistblade Shinobi** and hold Mountain in your hand, planning to take the hit next turn if he replays Okiba, but this gamble seems terrible. Drawing a land becomes a tragedy, as you fall a full turn behind and take an unnecessary hit, and if you don't draw a land all you lose is the card you drew. If it's an answer, you can cast it instead.

The real question now is how important keeping Mountain and **Dreamcatcher** is to your chances for winning. If you manage to hang on to both, you'll probably end up with more land than you need in a few turns and all the Mountain does is let you discard the next land you draw to the **Dreamcatcher**. One way or another, what you're probably giving up is a card. Without that card, you're counting on the lock but you can potentially protect it backed by **Hisoka's Defiance**. Are you now in a good enough position that you can give up that card and still hope to win, or do you need to gamble on drawing a land? This is a Winston draft with three people in it (the details don't matter, but in any three man draft you know a lot) so you know about your opponent's deck. If you think you can ride the lock, playing it now and taking the hit lets you protect it with **Hisoka's Defiance**. You risk falling a turn behind as well, but with Defiance up there's a good chance that most of his real threats can be countered. This plan is especially good if he is packing arcane removal.

The real hidden benefit of the first approach is that you keep Defiance available at all times. He can't use an arcane removal spell to stop you and there are other cards you may want to stop. If this is his primary way out of the lock, then this is worth making a big sacrifice. Otherwise, playing the land and hoping to draw another risks only that you will draw and lose a spell on your next turn and in exchange you can buy a full turn worth of time if you get lucky. That's a good risk.

As always it comes down to risk and reward: What you think you need to win the game, how likely you are to win under each scenario, and the chance each will happen. Keep in mind that some things may not be able to often make the difference between winning and losing – if you feel that those two cards don't matter, then losing them is not that big a deal to you. It's possible under some similar scenarios that the biggest problem with discarding them is that you might get hit again later!

As a postscript, [here's how it actually turned out:](#)

On his turn, he cast Kokusho. With no way to stop the trampling flyer (thanks to **O-Naginata**) on his next turn, Kokusho swung for the win.

Clearly, I had a bad situation. I had used a fair amount of my removal to try and restabilize the board. The **Hearth Kami** (somewhere in the deck) was the only way I knew to deal with the Equipment.

Thanks so much!

Note that while **Hisoka's Defiance** can counter Kokusho, Kokusho is not a particularly dangerous card for your opponent to have in this spot because you can deal with it if you still have your toolbox of Ninjas, and you need those Ninjas. The key is to preserve your tools. When your deck is overmatched or your draw is relatively poor, often you need to choose the path that preserves your best cards. Early on, trading can help you if your opponent has a mana problem but later trading off will leave you at a bigger disadvantage and simplify the board. You give up your good cards for some of his good cards, and that leaves his good cards against your bad cards. Then you lose.

It's even worse when you're thinking about making a bad trade. The better your long term situation, the more willing you should be to make bad trades. If I've drawn five extra cards with **Flow of Ideas** and am about to draw six more with the next one, I won't care about using six spells to kill my opponent's three creatures if it stabilizes



the board. I'll still be ahead. If I have ten removal spells in my sealed deck, I can take out a second or third turn creature that is not a long-term threat to not take early damage. If I have three removal spells I have to treat them like gold. You don't have to crush your opponent into dust, you only need to win the game.

That should also give a taste of what I'd like to get to over the next few weeks: The end of the scenario is not a kill but a situation where you have a solid chance to win the game. It's easy to sit back and reason everything out when someone is about to die, but it's not easy to know when to do that in the middle of the game. It is important to know when to stop and think, especially when there is no clear-cut answer.



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