

Using a plan rather than just sequences of good plays. Forward Thinking

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I. INTRODUCTION



Sun Tzu, a military strategist, once stated "*Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.*" This statement, written more than 2,000 years ago, tells us that action without planning can be fatal. **Magic** is a strategy game. But too often **Magic** players play the "game" while ignoring the importance of strategy. *Attend to the strategy and your game will strengthen immeasurably.*

This article is written to ease you into thinking strategically and persuade you of the importance of doing so. To accomplish that, I need to be absolutely clear what it is we are talking about. So before we get under way, let me quickly define some key terms as I will be using them.

What is a strategy? A strategy is a plan. There are a limited number of ways that a **Magic** game can end with a winner and a loser. The most common method of winning is to reduce an opponent's life total to zero. The plan that a deck has – the overarching strategy – is the big picture view of how that goal (winning the game) is accomplished.

What is a tactic? A tactic is a specific action undertaken to further your ultimate plan (your strategy). What does that mean in practical terms? In **Magic**, both players are already locked in battle from the moment the game begins. As a result, every decision relates, in some remote degree, to the opponent, and, hence, winning the game. Playing a land or drawing a card enables you to play a spell which will hopefully further your plan. Therefore, every card is a tactic.

So, the strategy is the plan you have, the role you are going to assume. The tactics are the plays you make to further that plan. Tactics are about 'the how,' and strategies are about 'the what.' In other words, a strategy is an approach that makes the best use of resources and other factors to secure advantage for a player's goal. Tactics are the means for implementing strategy. It's the difference between a plan, and a way of accomplishing a plan.

Now tuck those definitions away for the moment as we begin to explore what it means to be a forward thinker. Knowing what strategy is doesn't impress the importance of using it. To reach that point, we need to step back for moment.

II. PLAYING BLACKJACK AND SHORT-TERM THINKING

Let's take Goblins. Say your opening hand is:



Mountain, Mountain, Mountain, Siege-Gang Commander, Mogg Fanatic, Goblin Lackey, Lightning Bolt
What do you do on your first turn?

There are three cards you can play: a) [Lightning Bolt](#), b) [Mogg Fanatic](#), or c) [Goblin Lackey](#). It doesn't take a genius to realize that if you play turn one [Goblin Lackey](#), you can get a second turn [Siege-Gang Commander](#) into play, and that seems like a good idea.

Similarly, there are decisions to be made in blackjack. After the cards are dealt, you may "surrender" your original bet (depending on the rules you're playing under). Also, if you like what you've been dealt, you will need to decide whether to "hit" or "stand." But there is no planning. There is no forethought. There is no strategy. You are merely reacting to the cards before you with a simple *hitor stand* decision. Fortunately for the players, the design of **Magic** requires much more than that to win. This is particularly true of decks that are primarily beatdown-based or aggro-control. Much like whether to hit or stand with blackjack, the decision to play Lackey follows from some obvious math. This fact tends to reinforce bad habits. This article is an attempt to break us of those habits by showing that there is always value in thinking strategically.

That isn't to say that these decisions are always simple. But they don't involve long term thinking. Take the famous [Fires of Yavimaya](#) deck from 2001. Don't worry if you aren't familiar with the deck. For the purposes of this article, all that matters is what I've shown: Your opening hand is:



Forest, Mountain, [Karplusan Forest](#), [Birds of Paradise](#), [Raging Kavu](#), [Blastoderm](#), [Fires of Yavimaya](#)
Now, you might be inclined to play it like this:

Turn One:

Forest, [Bird of Paradise](#)

Turn Two:

Mountain. Tap the Mountain and your Bird and Forest to play and attack with [Raging Kavu](#). This play might appear to get the quickest amount of damage in, but investing with [Fires of Yavimaya](#) for the turn will actually do more damage. Why? [Blastoderm](#) has fading and can't actually do 20 damage without being given haste. To make the best short-term decision, you would need to realize that [Blastoderm](#) would be able to deal more damage if Fires is in play first. The card that made Fires broken was [Saproling Burst](#). If you draw [Saproling Burst](#) you can play the [Saproling Burst](#) on turn 4 (assuming you have another land as well) and you can remove three counters to swing with three 4/4 creatures in addition to whatever else you still have in play. That's at least 12 damage in one turn, which is difficult to stop because it is coming from more than one token. The key difference between this scenario and the scenario with Goblins above is that the Goblins example doesn't even require math. There is a certain intuition that **Magic** plays have that getting more cards into play is better. Goblin Lackey does just that. The turn two Fires of Yavimaya is more complicated than the decision to play turn one Lackey.

Aggro-control is one of the best archetypes for people to pick up and play with little experience. It takes no grand plan or a perfect sense of "Who is the beatdown?" (a concept I'll explain in a bit) to play little critters, attack, and then play the burn spells or countermagic, which you just happened to draw over the course of the game, to finish the job. One of the most famous aggro-control concepts is the "Gro" concept.

Alan Comer



Main Deck 60 cards

6 Island	4 Brainstorm
4 Tropical Island	4 Curiosity
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10 lands	4 Daze
	3 Foil
	4 Force of Will
3 Gaea's Skyfolk	4 Gush
4 Lord of Atlantis	4 Land Grant
4 Merfolk Looter	4 Sleight of Hand
4 Quirion Dryad	4 Winter Orb
<hr/>	
15 creatures	35 other spells

Sideboard

2 Boomerang
4 Chill
3 Emerald Charm
2 Misdirection

4 [Submerge](#)

15 sideboard cards



The idea is simple: build a deck around [Quirion Dryad](#). The cheap or free spells that were printed in Masques block made [Quirion Dryad](#) a very strong creature. The fact that he was a two casting cost critter that not only could be easily protected, but had synergy in being protected, made Gro decks quintessential Aggro-control decks. While these decks didn't play themselves, they were incredibly intuitive.

Say your hand is:



[Tropical Island](#), [Island](#), [Quirion Dryad](#), [Gush](#), [Sleight of Hand](#), [Force of Will](#), [Foil](#)

Now, you might be inclined to go:

Turn One:

Island

Turn Two:

[Tropical Island](#)

[Quirion Dryad](#).

Playing spells is intuitive since that is why we play mana in the first place. Once the Dryad is in play, it will therefore be intuitive to play countermagic to protect it. More often than not, this will be the right play. For that reason, it doesn't even require that one realize before playing the Dryad that once the Dryad reaches play, they will be able to protect it with the other spells long enough to win. People are inclined to play threats, and then inclined to protect them when the need arises. That's one reason why these decks are so powerful – they don't demand much of us in order to play them well.

You can randomly play a deck and its cards, but without tethering your plays to the bigger picture – without constantly thinking about or being aware of what needs to be done, you are without moorings and can't possibly make the most important of evaluations: what is the right play? You might sometimes be making the right plays simply because the right plays happen to be the intuitive plays. But there is reason to believe that you aren't playing as well as you could, as we'll be exploring later.

Control and combo decks are where things get messy. Control decks require that you have a plan – a sense of what needs to be done.

III. THE BLUE CONTROL PRINCIPLE AND LONG TERM THINKING

Consider this thought experiment.

Suppose your deck is as follows:

Sample Deck



Main Deck *60 cards*

22 [Island](#)

37 [Counterspell](#)

22 lands

37 other spells

1 [Air Elemental](#)

1 creature



Obviously this deck is not legal, but it represents a very simple idea that will demonstrate what thinking ahead implies.

Suppose you fan open a hand that has:



Island, Island, Island, Counterspell, Counterspell, Counterspell, Counterspell

What should be running through your mind? Once you have an answer, [click here](#).

So what is [your plan](#)?

There are two reasons I presented this thought experiment.

First, you will realize very quickly not what you have to do to win, but what you must do to not lose. Almost any threat resolving means that you will lose the game. Therefore, your strategy depends upon your ability to counterspell every threat your opponent presents. With the Aggro deck, it is intuitive and obvious that playing men and turning them sideways into the enemy's territory will win games. But with a deck like this one, how you are going to win is secondary to how you are going to not lose. It is true that they result in the same end, but the focus is different. Winning is often intuitive and doesn't always require forethought. On the other hand, thinking about how to not lose demands that we formulate a plan.

The necessity of thinking about how you will avoid losing will trigger a strategic train of thought that will examine lines of play and give you greater insight into the workings of your deck. It will occur to you long before you see [Air Elemental](#) that having one [Air Elemental](#) means that you can't let *any* creature resolve, otherwise you might not even be able to attack! It is a short distance from that realization to the epiphany that if you fit one more [Air Elemental](#) in the deck, you could let a significant threat resolve and still swing with a second [Air Elemental](#) by holding the first back to block. That would give your deck much-needed flexibility.

The second reason for this thought experiment is that it directs your attention to one thing which none of the scenarios so far have brought up: the contents of your library. There is a fundamental difference between thinking about how you are going to win with a deck like this and a deck like Goblins. In the Gro, Goblins, and Fires scenarios, the only thing that mattered was your hand. You

played the [Goblin Lackey](#) because you had [Siege-Gang Commander](#). You played the Fires instead of [Raging Kavu](#) because you had [Blastoderm](#) (the possibility of drawing [Sproling Burst](#) came into the equation, but [Blastoderm](#) being in your hand was the primary driver there). These decisions were made based upon things that were visible to you. When you think about how you are going to win with a deck like the mono-blue list I presented here, you begin to think not about just what is in your hand, but the contents of your library. Your thinking is no longer immediate, but long term. Mike Flores recently wrote an [article](#) on one of the most famous **Magic** decks in history. "The Deck" had a fairly simple yet powerful plan:

- Step One: Stabilize
- Step Two: Secure your position
- Step Three: Play your finisher and win

With a deck like this, all of your cards are designed to help you survive. You drop [Moat](#) to stop the creature rush and play [Swords to Plowshares](#) to survive until [Moat](#) can reach play. You play counterspells to protect your [Moat](#) and yourself from spells that would otherwise kill you.

Then [Jayemdae Tome](#) comes into play and helps you draw two or more cards a turn to ensure that you can protect yourself, and/or [Disrupting Scepter](#) is used to neutralize the opponent's ability to stop you. Finally, after you have complete control of the game, you drop [Serra Angel](#) to finish your opponent off, ending their misery.

To summarize, the blue control principle is a principle which helps us think ahead by redirecting our attention to one additional factor: the contents of our deck. It does this by forcing us to confront the question: how do we not lose? Playing [Moat](#) and the like would not make much sense if you didn't know that at some point [Serra Angel](#) was going to join the battle.

Now that I have helped you see the importance of the cards in your deck, not just your hand, it is time to tie all of this forward thinking together into strategic thinking.

IV. WHO'S THE BEATDOWN AND STRATEGIC THINKING

Imagine two decks. Each deck has sixty cards. Each deck is randomized and there are no tutors or shuffle effects in either deck.

How can we figure out which deck, between the two, will win more? One way to figure that out would be to play the decks against each other an arbitrarily large number of times. If you played 50 games just by drawing and playing each deck against each other, you will find that one deck tends to win a certain ratio of games. For example, Deck A might win three of every five games.

What this does not account for is strategy. If you are just drawing and playing cards, you may be able to figure out, roughly, which deck has a better chance of winning, but you aren't really learning how to maximize the chances of winning, even if the match-up is unfavorable.

Remember, the decks have no fetchlands and no tutors so if you were to randomly shuffle both decks and cut them, you could record the deck order and see how many different ways you could play each deck with the same starting order.

For example, suppose the top 10 cards of one deck were:

- [Forest](#)
- [Giant Growth](#)
- [Forest](#)
- [Llanowar Elves](#)
- [Forest](#)
- [Grizzly Bears](#)
- [Creeping Mold](#)
- [Order of the Sacred Bell](#)
- [Forest](#)
- [River Bear](#)

Let's say you played your first game and this deck lost. In the first game, you played [Creeping Mold](#) on turn five on your opponent's [Dancing Scimitar](#). In the second game, you come to the exact same situation and you discover that if you play turn three [Creeping Mold](#) on their land, they won't be able to play the [Dancing Scimitar](#) for many turns later. You make this play and you win a game that you would otherwise lose.

Even with the exact same deck order and the exact same cards, a single decision can change the outcome of a game. Over time, the more you play the deck and the more the choice arises between playing [Creeping Mold](#) on a land or some other thing, you will be able to see which play more often then not wins the game.

In this section I am going to argue that just as making the right decision on a tactical level such as whether to [Creeping Mold](#) the land or the Scimitar can affect the game, the decision making at the strategic level is just as important. Moreover, the decision making at the strategic level can help you see which play is correct at the tactical level.

Let me explain what I mean.

Let's say you are playing a famous deck called "Illusions-Donate."

Kai Budde - Pro Tour-New Orleans



Main Deck

60 cards

14 [Island](#)
 4 [Shivan Reef](#)
 4 [Volcanic Island](#)

22 lands

0 creatures

4 [Accumulated Knowledge](#)
 2 [Brainstorm](#)
 1 [Capsize](#)
 4 [Counterspell](#)
 4 [Donate](#)
 3 [Fire // Ice](#)
 4 [Force of Will](#)
 4 [Illusions of Grandeur](#)
 1 [Impulse](#)
 3 [Intuition](#)

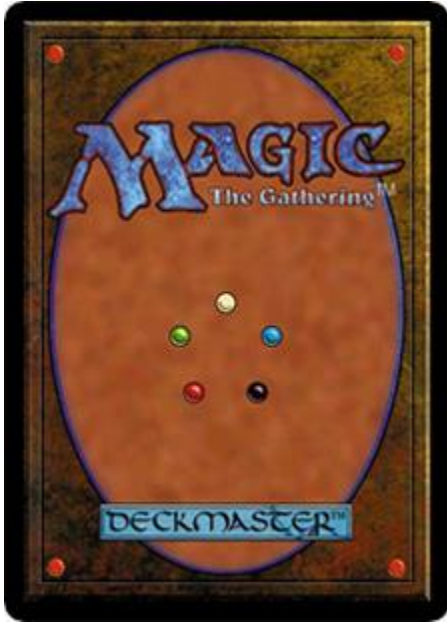
Sideboard

1 [Hibernation](#)
 2 [Hydroblast](#)
 3 [Morphling](#)
 4 [Pyroblast](#)
 3 [Pyroclasm](#)
 2 [Stroke of Genius](#)

15 sideboard cards

- 4 [Merchant Scroll](#)
- 4 [Sapphire Medallion](#)

38 other spells



This deck was piloted by Kai Budde to a Pro Tour New Orleans victory and was for a time the best deck in Extended.

The base idea behind this deck is to combine the resolution of [Illusions of Grandeur](#) and [Donate](#), the end result being the gaining of twenty life before Illusions gets donated to the player's opponent, where it eventually becomes too costly to maintain and is sacrificed, dealing twenty points of damage and more often than not ending the game.

Now, looking at the deck, is it a control deck or a combo deck? It is both at the same time.

Imagine that you see this hand, going second and after drawing your card for the turn, with Illusions Donate:



Island, Island, Island, Sapphire Medallion, Counterspell, Intuition, Merchant Scroll, Illusions of Grandeur

How do you play this?

Turn One:
Island, go

Turn Two:

What is the optimal play? Why? [Reveal the answer.](#)

You have two options. You can hold up counterspell or you can play [Sapphire Medallion](#).

If you play the [Sapphire Medallion](#), on turn three you can play [Intuition](#) for three [Accumulated Knowledges](#) and play [Accumulated Knowledge](#) to draw three cards. Then on turn four you can play [Merchant Scroll](#) for the fourth [Accumulated Knowledge](#) to draw four cards, drawing you a total of seven cards in two turns. In those cards you should probably see the [Donate](#) and another land which will enable you to combo out on turn five.

In other words, it would look like this:

Turn Two:

Island number 2, [Sapphire Medallion](#)

Turn Three:

Island number 3, [Intuition](#) for [Accumulated Knowledges](#). Play [Accumulated Knowledge](#) for three cards

Turn Four:

Play [Merchant Scroll](#) for [Accumulated Knowledge](#) #4 and play it drawing four more cards. Play another Island and pass the turn.

Turn Five:

Play another Island, play [Illusions of Grandeur](#) and [Donate](#) it to your opponent. Smile.



Now, if you were playing against an aggro deck, that plan would be logical. The Aggro deck probably can't deal twenty damage before you get to turn five and won't be able to disrupt your combo once you've played it.

But what if you were playing the mirror match? If you played [Intuition](#) for three [Accumulated Knowledge](#)s on turn three, and you go to play your [Accumulated Knowledge](#), if your opponent has even one [Accumulated Knowledge](#) in hand, then they will be able to respond by drawing three cards first and possibly counterspelling your [Accumulated Knowledge](#) in the process.

Or what if you were playing against a faster combo deck? What if you were playing against a combo deck that regularly won on turn three?

It wouldn't make sense to play the cards in the same way. You would want to be able to use your [Counterspell](#) instead of just "goldfishing" (a term that means playing the deck to see how fast you can win without playing against an opponent). The right play might be to hold the [Counterspell](#) up on turn two and then [Merchant Scroll](#) for another [Counterspell](#) of some sort. This is more than just a tactical play – a decision such as what to [Creeping Mold](#). It is a decision that suggests which "role" you should play: either being the "control deck" and emphasizing your countermagic, or being "combo" and comboing out as quickly as possible will give this deck the best chance of winning in any given match-up. The trick is to figure out which role that is.

Renowned [magicthegathering.com](#) writer Michael Flores came up with a framework for understanding "role" in **Magic** and the importance of role determinations. It's called "[Who's the Beatdown?](#)" Flores divided all roles into "control" and "beatdown." Broadly speaking, the beatdown player is the aggressor and the control player is the defensive player. Typically, but not always, beatdown means combo or creature-based strategy. Similarly, a control deck typically has counterspells and creature removal. For example, Goblins would be a beatdown deck and mono-blue control would be a control deck.

The formula that Mike offered up is simple: misassignment of role = game loss. The important truth that *Who's the Beatdown?* reveals in the nugget of wisdom that "misassignment of role equals game loss" is just the idea that in any given match-up, there is an optimal role that maximizes your chances of winning the game. If you misassign your role – if you are supposed to be the beatdown and you play control - you significantly impair your chances of winning the game. Sun Tzu is saying the same thing. If you are just playing cards without a properly formulated strategy, you significantly impair your chances of winning.

To reiterate, taking the Illusions-Donate example provided above, the control role will normally be your only chance of winning against a faster combo deck whereas playing combo will probably be your best chance of winning against a beatdown deck. It is true that the consistent turn three combo deck could stall out and permit you to win first, but that isn't something you can count on. You have to figure out how to maximize your chances of winning and playing "control" in that match is, most of the time, the only way you will win. You may still be unable to win. But it isn't about whether you have a favorable match-up. It isn't about whether, in the mono green example, you lose most of the time regardless of what you target with [Creeping Mold](#). *It is about making the plays and assuming the role that maximizes your chances of winning.* You have to figure out how you can maximize your chances of winning, even in an unfavorable match-up. That's where assignment of role becomes so important.

Since, in **Magic**, strategy often can be simplified and categorized by the concept of "role," thinking about role is a useful and focused way of thinking about strategy. Many decks, however, have more nuanced roles that shift from beatdown to control and back to beatdown, depending on the match-up. For example, in some match-ups, the proper role for Illusions-Donate is control. In others, the proper role is beatdown (combo). The determination of which role is proper is based upon which role maximizes the deck's chances of winning.

To summarize, strategy is a plan or role you assume. It is often characterized broadly as "beatdown" or "control" or more precisely as aggro, aggro-control, combo, and control, among others. We have talked about how short-term thinking is important and we have talked about how long-term thinking is often about considering what is in your deck. **Strategic thinking** adds one additional layer: **it takes into consideration what your opponent is playing.** What your opponent is playing becomes a critical element in figuring out what role you should assume. The example of Illusions-Donate has made this clear.

We have come a long way from playing blackjack, to being a forward thinker, and finally to being a strategic thinker.

The next time you come to a situation where you aren't sure which play is correct, stop and think about the contents in your deck, what's in your hand, and which role is proper for this match based on what you think you are facing. Thinking strategically will more than likely help you reach a good decision. It will help you formulate a plan. It will force you to synergize your tactical plays with each other and in the process maximize your chances for winning.

I have an example from Vintage where I faced a difficult choice that benefited significantly from thinking strategically. It made the difference between winning and losing the game. I apologize in advance if these cards are foreign to you.

I was playing mono-blue control and my opponent was playing a very fast blue-based [Gifts Ungiven](#) control deck called "Short bus Severance Belcher" (SSB). SSB wins by playing [Tinker](#) or [Yawgmoth's Will](#), which is usually found via [Gifts Ungiven](#). I had won game one and we moved on to game two. My opening hand was as follows:



[Library of Alexandria](#), [Force of Will](#), [Ophidian](#), [Island](#), [Mox Pearl](#), [Mana Leak](#), [Counterspell](#)

Before I describe the scenario, just looking at this hand, what seem to be the strong [lines of play](#)? My opponent was on the play and he went:

Turn One:

Island, [Lotus Petal](#).

He tapped the land to play [Ancestral Recall](#). In Vintage, [Ancestral Recall](#) is not a card you want to let resolve. It lets your opponent get very far ahead and a mono-blue control deck like the one I was playing may be unable to control the flow of threats if Ancestral resolves. It is also possible that he has [Red Elemental Blast](#) in hand since it is game two and he has [Lotus Petal](#) in play to cast it. Before looking at the hand, what would you say the [proper role](#) for mono-blue control is in the combo-control match?

The proper role for mono-blue is almost always "control." If I have threats like Energy Flux and Back to Basics against an artifact deck, then my game plan can become trying to get those into play – a "beatdown" strategy of sorts. Similarly, if I can force Ophidian into play, I can become the beatdown player for the moment and then use Ophidian to maintain control of the game.

Based upon what you know so far, what is the [correct play](#) and why?

The correct play is to let [Ancestral Recall](#) resolve.

Mono-Blue Control basically fears two cards from the opposing deck: [Tinker](#) and [Yawgmoth's Will](#).

If [Tinker](#) is played on turn one or two, it is probably going to resolve because they will have [Force of Will](#) to protect it. [Tinker](#) finds [Darksteel Colossus](#) in all likelihood and there is nothing mono-blue can do to stop that very easily.

If the mono-blue player can survive for two turns without [Tinker](#) being played, then the Library will win the game for the mono-blue player. If I let Ancestral resolve, I can play turn one [Library of Alexandria](#) and turn two Mox + Land to have both [Mana Leak](#) and [Force of Will](#) up.

However, if the mono-blue player focuses on the fact that [Ancestral Recall](#) is a really powerful card that should probably be stopped, they will be making a short term tactical play that sacrifices the ability to use [Library of Alexandria](#) – with no assurance that it will actually prevent the [Ancestral Recall](#) from resolving.

By realizing that playing control, playing turn one Library and turn two Mox, Island will win the game if the mono-blue player can survive to that point, you will see that countering the [Ancestral Recall](#) is the wrong play because it doesn't fit into the deck's best plan for winning in that game. You've moved from looking at a short term question ("Is [Ancestral Recall](#) good enough to fight against?") to long-term, strategic thinking ("What's the best long term plan, based on how I see this match-up and the cards I currently have?").

V. ADJUSTING YOUR PLAN

If there is one thing that strategic thinking and "Who's the Beatdown?" should impress, it is that you should come into every match with a plan. That plan should reflect how you think you are going to win the match. You should have an idea of how the match is going to play out before you even draw a card.

Strategy involves a gathering of **many** decisions toward a plan including:

- Understanding the resources (for example: mana) available and needed
- Selecting key objectives and appropriate targets (sideboard hate, dealing with a difficult threat)
- Reaching a clear understanding of the specific interim goals to reach the strategy (such as getting a draw engine online or playing [Wrath of God](#) to stabilize)
- Deciding which **tactics** to use and when (timing is critical)

"Who's the Beatdown?" is really just one element of forward thinking. But it doesn't actually provide all the answers you need. Just because you have a strategy doesn't mean you have to stick to it. What it does is focus your tactical plays so that they have synergy with each other. You need a plan going in and you need to be creating and recreating your plan each step of the game.

In **Magic**, things can change very quickly. Your opponent could stall out on two mana providing a prime opportunity to shift roles and seal the game up. You need to be in a position to take advantage of such opportunities by being strategically flexible.

You might be wondering, all of this strategic thinking and plan adjustment may be great for control players, but as a beatdown player, how does this apply to me?

Sometimes the game will unfold in such a way that your regular strategy cannot succeed. For example, consider Goblins in Legacy. This deck is clearly an aggro deck. But what do you do if a [Moat](#) enters play on the other side of the table? Your plan has to change. Although your goal (reducing the opponent's life to zero) is still the same, your strategy is no longer viable. Instead, you have to quickly formulate an alternate route to victory. In this case, you need to find [Goblin Sharpshooter](#) and figure out how to get him lethal as quickly as possible.

The situation doesn't have to be as straightforward as [Moat](#) for role to be important in a given match. You may be playing a deck like Red Deck Wins against a combo deck like [Mind's Desire](#) in Extended or [High Tide](#) combo in Legacy. Instead of your plan being to beatdown with creatures and win with burn spells, you may realize that post-board, your optimal plan is to resolve hosers like [Pyrostatic Pillar](#) and supplement them with cards like [Pyroblast](#). You may even have the tools to implement a certain plan pre-board, even though they may be blunt instruments instead of the finely sharpened blade of a hoser. Thinking strategically will help you marshal whatever resources you have into an optimal plan suited for the situation at hand. You may be able to [Pillage](#) a [Sapphire Medallion](#) and burn out a [Cloud of Faeries](#) and stop them from comboing.

The reason we formulate a strategy is because a strategy reflects understanding of our deck and our expected opponents. The strategy or plan you begin any game with should reflect what you believe is your best chance of winning. However, you should feel free to alter that strategy when you think your chances increase with an alternative plan. You don't have to find your primary plan to be completely obsolete before you entertain the idea of changing your plan.

For example, take The Deck. Every once in a while, you would fan open a hand that had [Black Lotus](#), a Mox and [Serra Angel](#). Instead of being methodical and keeping control over the game while sticking to your game plan described in section V, players might want to engage in what was referred to as the "Angel Gambit."

Quite simply, the Angel Gambit was dropping [Serra Angel](#) on turn one and hoping it would go the distance. A **Gambit** is an early tactical play which is used at the expense of some resource or long term goal. In other words, you are sacrificing resources into a strategy which is incompatible with efficient use of your primary strategy. By using your [Black Lotus](#) you are giving up a resource that could be spent playing countermagic or dropping [Moat](#). Moreover, if the [Serra Angel](#) is removed, you have lost one of your win conditions. On the other hand, the chances of [Serra Angel](#) going the distance are generally good.

VII. CONCLUSION

As Sun Tzu said, *"Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."* Strategy is a plan to tie the individual plays together into a coherent whole. More than two thousand years ago, Sun Tzu taught that optimal strategy emerges from understanding our adversary, understanding ourselves, and understanding the terrain. In Magic terms, that means knowing what your opponent is playing, knowing your deck, and understanding the conditions under which you will be competing so that you will be prepared to adjust your plan accordingly, creating and recreating it as needed.

Strategic thinking isn't new. But consciously recognizing strategy – formulating a strategy in the first place and evaluating tactical plays by thinking about how they fit into one's larger strategy - is the challenge facing **Magic** players today.