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Pulling the Trigger

Zvi Mowshowitz
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Many decks use mass removal spells as their primary weapons against creature assaults. Cards like **Wrath of God** and **Pyroclasm** risk being poor against decks without creatures they can remove but they are some of the most potent cards in **Magic** in the right match-up. With such variable value from match to match and situation to situation it is vital to know when to use these cards and when to wait for a better time. I'd also like to note before I begin that this week I intentionally chose situations where there was little question what the correct course of action was, going so far as to modify the hands I had originally chosen when I realized that they were not as clear cut as I had wanted them to be. The principle is similar to the one I used for mulligans: In the future, I'll come back and cover a series of positions that are less clear, and if you have one I encourage you to send one in. For this first article, I'm going to make things more clear-cut for teaching purposes.

A good first example was posed in an e-mail as follows: Your opponent plays out a first turn **Isamaru** and a second turn **Hand of Honor**. You are holding **Pyroclasm** but no creatures and no other ways to remove creatures. [How do you decide whether you cast it on your second turn?](#)

If you don't cast **Pyroclasm** now you're agreeing to take four damage, remaining behind on tempo and passing up a chance to get two cards for one; if you cast **Pyroclasm** now you're leaving yourself defenseless against any additional creatures until you can draw an answer off the top of your library. Even more important than that, you are passing up the chance to get even more than two for one in the future if your opponent plays out more creatures that **Pyroclasm** can kill.

Assuming you're currently playing a Standard match the answer to these questions is that most circumstances of this type require you to play the **Pyroclasm** immediately because you fear **Glorious Anthem**. If he has one, he's going to play it on his next turn and when he does your **Pyroclasm** will suddenly go from a trump card to one that you're hoping you can trade off at some point and you'll be two turns from dead right there.

Note, by the way, that we're not going into your own deck at all here, or even most of your hand. Those are certainly factors, but as is often the case with the column we're simplifying some factors so that we can focus in on others for the sake of discussion and to keep the scope of the problem still useful. Here's the key though: the better you get at understanding the basics, the better you'll be able to use those fundamentals to apply additional factors, such as "what is my own deck's plan, and how do I get there?" In fact, that's the whole point of the column: giving you the tools to make more informed decisions on your own. (And that's not to say we won't cover those additional factors in other articles or other examples.)

However, let's take **Glorious Anthem** out of the picture. For whatever reason you know that this card is not in your opponent's deck. [How do you go about making your decision on when to pull the trigger?](#)

At this point you have a one turn respite before you worry about **Pyroclasm** losing its potency. Why only one turn? There's a little card called **Umezawa's Jitte**, one that is very common in decks like this. If he puts **Umezawa's Jitte** on one of his creatures, that creature will be safe from **Pyroclasm** and from that point on it will be very difficult to kill more than one creature with **Pyroclasm**.

In the long term, the principle here is the same: While **Pyroclasm** is an amazing spell right now, there are good reasons to suspect that in the long term it will lose its potency. That is not always true for **Pyroclasm** and it is rarely true for a card like **Wrath of God** (which is just one of the reasons why **Wrath** is so powerful). The two probably have the same value on turn two in this case (or would, if you could cast **Wrath** on turn two) but as bigger creatures or pumping effects enter the picture **Wrath** becomes stronger for a creatureless deck. [Given that, what is probably the right approach here?](#)

On his third turn your opponent is likely to have the ability to play at least one additional creature and most of the creatures he could play will die to **Pyroclasm**. If you don't need to be concerned with **Glorious Anthem**, a third turn **Pyroclasm** is guaranteed to be at least as effective as a second turn **Pyroclasm** and has the potential to be even better. By waiting a turn



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you are giving your opponent the opportunity to overextend and lose additional creatures at little cost to you. Right now you've denied him the chance to play out any extra men in his hand and that would be a tragedy.

Note also, by the way, that in doing this you've also shown your opponent (once you *do* cast the **Pyroclasm**) that you're capable of slowplaying your reset buttons. (They may not know for sure, but they'll suspect, and that's good enough.) Sometimes you won't actually have the option in hand, and it can be a powerful asset when your opponent has that much more trouble trying to decide whether you even have the reset in your hand at any given time. Wrath effects are far less powerful in the hands of players who always play them at the first opportunity, as it becomes much easier for opponents to know when they do and don't have them in the first place. Countless matches have been won by players who held back their offense against a player they knew could sandbag Wrath effects, only to find out later they didn't even have one in their hand that game!



This logic would break down if you had an important third turn play, but if you don't then waiting for one turn is probably your strongest play. After that, even if there is no risk that your cards will 'go dead' you will be under a lot of pressure and your opponent will be unlikely to be commit too many extra resources to the table. These issues become clearer as we move to situations involving **Wrath of God**, since Wrath is a pure trump card against creature decks and remains one throughout the game. It is your big red (white?) button: In case of emergency, press this button if you can, but don't waste it.

Another thing worth remembering when thinking about a card like **Wrath of God** is that it can get you out from under a tempo disadvantage as well as generate card advantage for you. You can be faced with situations like this one, which mimics a board position that comes up all the time:

It is your precombat main phase.



Opponent (20 life)

in play:

- 4 Mountain
- 1 Mogg Fanatic
- 1 Goblin Matron
- 1 Goblin Warchief

in hand:

4 unknown cards

You (16 life)

in play:

- 2 Tundra
- 1 Island
- 1 Plains

in hand:

- 1 Wrath of God
- 1 Counterspell
- 1 Mana Leak
- 1 Crucible of Worlds

1 Faerie Conclave
1 Island

You just untapped and drew that **Wrath of God**. There was much rejoicing, but once you're done with that, [what do you do?](#)

Your opponent has four points of pressure right now, and in the long term that's enough to force you to clear the board, but doing so now would be suicidal. You'd be tapping out, and your opponent could easily play more than four points of pressure back onto the table before you can untap with your counters. If you wait a turn, you can keep **Counterspell** and possibly **Mana Leak** available for anything you deem too dangerous to let onto the table. It's far from safe, but it is a lot less likely to get you killed than casting **Wrath** this turn. It also lets your opponent play more creatures that will fall into the **Wrath** (although there are several that you would have to counter anyway).

In that situation you had all the right ingredients for waiting a turn. That **Wrath** had too many jobs to do for you to use it up now. This, on the other hand, would be an example of a hand that would **Wrath** now in that situation:



Wrath of God, Wrath of God, Swords to Plowshares, Swords to Plowshares, Mishra's Factory, Faerie Conclave

No reason to wait now. Your **Wrath** has a lot less value now, since you have plenty of back-up. You don't need this **Wrath** to generate card advantage or stabilize the board for you. Those jobs have plenty of good applicants. In a way, your **Wrath** is less powerful in this game because it is less important and you are willing to trade it for fewer creatures. It's not as important to you.

The extreme case is a hyper-valuable **Wrath of God** you have in a draft deck where your opponent has no idea that you have it. You'd try to manipulate the game such that the **Wrath** singlehandedly wins the game. Whenever you're considering using a card like **Wrath** you need to ask yourself what jobs the card needs to do in order for you to win the game. When you're counting on mass-removal cards to keep you in the game by killing several creatures you can't afford to trade them off cheaply, and when you're counting on them for tempo you can't leave yourself exposed. The fewer buttons you have, the more you must use caution when pressing them. Often opponents will know full well that you are likely to have a **Wrath** or similar spell, and hold back so they'll have enough power left for afterwards.

Those are big reasons why it can be an especially effective strategy to have 'too many' buttons. The second **Wrath** lets you use the first one and catches your opponent unprepared. It's hard to have three sets of threats even if you suspect that the second **Wrath** is coming. Mass destruction spells that are 'too good' can end up not being all that good after all because players hold out trying to get too much. As long as your opponent doesn't expose too many of his creatures, that **Wrath** sits in your hand unused. In a way, the best **Wraths** are those that you don't need, and the same can be said for **Nevinryral's Disks**, **Pernicious Deeds** and all such things. When your long-term outlook reaches a certain threshold you can start burning these cards to remove a single target with no worries.

It's also important not to forget that sometimes a card like **Wrath of God** is not only not the star of your deck but that on occasion it can be an actively bad card. In these cases, go ahead and burn it whenever you can gain an advantage by doing so. There's a reason that most decks don't play the card at all.

These phenomena are similar to something that I've read happened during playtesting. One teammate gave another a deck to try out and the deck was doing well. At some point during the testing, the designer of the deck noted that the **Grizzly Bears** in the deck were actually supposed to be **Kavu Titan**.





After that, the deck did not do as well for the player in question! **Kavu Titan** is a strictly better card than **Grizzly Bears**, so you would expect the deck to do better. What happened was that instead of playing his **Kavu Titans** right away the player would too often hold out to try and pay the kicker cost. The lure of the 5/5 creature that was being 'given up' whenever the Titan was cast as a 2/2 prevented him from keeping up the pressure that was vital to the success of the deck. (Put simply, having choices only helps if you understand the game well enough to take advantage of what those choices offer!)

It is often important to focus in on what you do best or need the most without worrying too much about whether there was a way for you to get more. This applies to playing over the board just as much as it does during deck construction. (For the record, that's actually one of Mark Rosewater's favorite stories from early *Invasion* design. Mark was playing a deck with **Kavu Titans**, but didn't know it had the kicker ability, so he was just always playing them as 2/2's. Once he knew they had the option to make them 5/5s he started waiting too often to play them, and his results diminished as a result. In this case we're talking about a creature, but the underlying lesson goes straight toward the decision on when to hold back your mass removal spells too. As I mentioned above, sometimes reset buttons are worse in practice than they should be, simply because people are holding them too long and getting hurt in the process.)

Few cards vary so much in value from game to game as mass destruction spells. To use them properly you need to understand what you need from them in order to win the game in order to avoid holding out for too much or using them up when they won't give you what you need. Reset buttons are one tool in your deck's bag of tricks. The better you understand the role of that tool (both in general, and also by taking specific board positions into account) the better results you'll have.

Starting up for me soon is another thing that can be great but could also be a dud: We're running best-of columns soon, as we're coming up on Wizards of the Coast's holiday break. It feels so soon for me to be selecting 'best-of' columns, as if I started writing this column just yesterday. It's going to be strange looking back, but then we get previews shortly after we return. Everyone loves a good preview! In the meantime, if you're interested feel free to post in the message boards which of my articles you feel would make good candidates for bringing back and a quick note why.



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