

Zvi Mowshowitz  
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This was my first column at [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com). It had to accomplish several things: Introduce readers to me and to a new format, make that format practical, and then use it to get in a good take-home lesson. I knew going in that Scott and I were trying to do a lot but I felt I could pull it off. It is by no means perfect but I think that things got off to an excellent start.

**F**or those who do not know me, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Zvi Mowshowitz, and for about seven years I was a professional **Magic** player and writer, writing for various websites including Sideboard and [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com), and most recently for StarCityGames.com. I love **Magic**, and I especially like breaking the game down and finding out what makes it tick. In the past, I've asked big questions that tended to be aimed at constructed players trying to get a leg up on the competition for next week: What deck should you play and why? What makes this format tick? Those questions help for next week, but that's all they do. What they don't do is actually the most critical factor: they don't make you a better **Magic** player.

The goal of this column is to make you a better **Magic** player. You need to know what deck to play and how to build it, but the most valuable thing you can learn about **Magic** is how to play it well. No matter what anyone says about how often one deck beats another or how well their draft went, most **Magic** matches come down to the play over the board and that's what this column will tackle. The only good way to become a good **Magic** player is to analyze games of **Magic**. Ask what the correct play is and consider all the angles, and do that every time you play a game where there is an interesting position. For this column, I'll be analyzing board positions to illustrate strategic principles of **Magic** play, choosing the best examples from both my experience and that of others. While there's a certain structure to how I'll be going about this, don't feel that that's all I'll be doing. "Getting better at playing **Magic**" is a wide space to write about, and I'll be taking many different angles and approaches at it over time.

Let's get started!





For the first position in The Play's The Thing, I thought I'd prove that everyone screws up. They make mistakes, and they make them for various reasons. Sometimes they misunderstand strategic principles. Other times they're moving too fast, or miscalculate or otherwise just flat out mess up. Sometimes they don't take full advantage of their opportunities to mess with their opponent's head or realize what must be in their opponent's hand. Many matches come down to one play: Find it and make it and you win. Miss it and you lose. It often really is that simple, but only if you notice when the time comes! This was the first match I played in order to find a good situation to write about and right on cue this one came up. Of course, I blew it. Take a look at that board again, and see if you can figure out the best play for your side. When you're ready, click here to move on.

The play:

Sacrifice Rootrunner targeting whatever land you like. Use Soulshift to return Dripping-Tongue Zubera to your hand. Cast Kami of the Waning Moon and Dripping-Tongue Zubera, giving Scaled Hulk fear and making it 8/8. Attack for the win.

What I did, because I was playing too fast and not thinking straight:

Attack with both creatures. He didn't block, going to one life. I cast Kami of the Waning Moon to block Gibbering Kami. He cast a second Ember-Fist Zubera and passed the turn. I drew a land, called myself an idiot and lost the game.

No one is perfect, not even the great Kai Budde or Jon Finkel and most certainly not me. We all make mistakes. In this case, I didn't see the play and as a result I lost the game and later the match. By the time during his turn that I realized what I could have done, it was too late. I spent some time thinking about why I missed my chance to win this game to try and prevent myself from making the same mistake again and I figured out exactly what went wrong. My mistake was that I didn't even realize that I should be looking for a way to kill my opponent this turn.

I did not see the play because I didn't even realize that I should have looked for it, and if you don't look for something chances are very low that you will find it. I assumed he would block the Hulk, although he decided not to do so. Meanwhile, I was not thinking about Kami of the Waning Moon as a way to give my creatures fear; I was only thinking about it as a way to not die to his flyer and with Rootrunner I figured I could block long enough to give myself a chance depending on what the fourth card of his library and the top one of mine are. I also didn't think of Rootrunner as a way to get back a Spirit with its Soulshift ability, instead thinking of it only as a 3/3 creature.

The most basic lesson here is to make sure and look for a chance to kill your opponent, and the corollary is that if you have a way to kill him and you know he cannot stop it, then kill him! I know how obvious that sounds, but if you aren't keeping it in mind you're likely to miss it sometimes, just like I did. In a real **Magic** game, nobody comes along and says "okay, there's an important play now, don't miss it!" If you aren't watching vigilantly it's easy to think the current situation is just run-of-the-mill, that there isn't an amazing play waiting to be found. You not only miss some opportunities, you never realize they were ever there. By extension, since you don't know what you missed, you don't even know that you blew it! For all the games people blame on things like mana, how many other games do you think people lose every day that they could have won, if they'd just noticed when a key play was available?

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Getting back to my game, my mindset was that if my opponent had an unknown card in his hand, sacrificing Rootrunner could have been dangerous. I am putting all my eggs in one basket. If the Hulk doesn't kill my opponent, I am left with no secondary clock to try and win the game some other way. Rootrunner is dead and my board position has gotten far worse. In this particular case, this would still be a risk worth taking because it is highly unlikely that I can win if my opponent could remove the Hulk, and given his colors that would be by far the most likely way for him to not die. However, I didn't have to worry about any of that. My opponent's hand was empty, and he had no way to draw any additional cards because he had put the Sensei's Divining Top on top of his library. When that happens, it should be second nature to ask the question: Is there a way I could outright win this game right here?

**Magic** is usually played as a game of incomplete information. You have a hand your opponent can't see and he has a hand you can't see. Something that is the right play if he is holding nothing but land could be fatal if he has a removal spell, and the play that stops you from losing to that removal spell could hurt you a lot if all he has are lands. It might even give him the chance to draw that removal spell you are so worried about. By emptying his hand or tapping all his lands, an opponent is making your life a lot easier. You know everything you need to know, so you can analyze the position completely and know exactly what your options are.

Keeping mana untapped has a similar effect. If you have no mana, you can only cast free spells. In many formats there are no free spells, and in others most decks are unlikely to run them. In limited formats such spells can be considered highly unlikely unless you passed one in a draft. Even if you have nothing but lands in your hand, keeping enough mana untapped to cast a spell that could realistically be in your deck will force opponents to consider the possibility that it is in your hand. Whenever you have both mana and at least one card, there is always the chance that you have a nasty surprise waiting for your opponent. Even if the cards he has to worry about seem unlikely, it is

far harder to make a potentially suicidal attack into the unknown than it is to attack knowing everything that could happen.

With that in mind, here is a second situation.

Your opponent just cast Ambition's Cost, then knocked out most of your hand with Mind Rot and dropped two creatures onto the table:

One Card in hand

OPP 17 life



YOU 4 life

Cards in hand



What's your play?

Do absolutely nothing. Say go.

If your opponent knows to attack you, you have lost this game. He turns his creatures sideways and once he does that he wins. It doesn't matter if you have the Air Elemental in play or that he is about to lose more than half of his army. You will take four damage and you will die.

Now, the Air Elemental is the way you hope to win the game. That Air Elemental will be able to do a lot more damage when it is in play rather than sitting in your hand. While it is in your hand it can't attack, it can't block and you might be forced to discard it. But none of that matters, because right now it is far more valuable in your hand than it is in play. What that is so important turns out to be the key to the whole thing.

In play it is a five turn clock, but that would only serve to shock your opponent into realizing the obvious: If he turns all his creatures sideways, he wins. You are at four life, and even with the Air Elemental you can't block enough of them to stay alive. The attack that would kill you requires him to use all his creatures even though he will lose many of them with little or no compensation and be vulnerable to a counterattack, which is why his attack is called an Alpha Strike. None of that matters if your hand is empty, because there is no risk to your opponent: No matter what you do, he wins. However, if you have a card in your hand then you could conceivably show him Holy Day, Blessed Reversal, Chastise or even Healing Salve. If you have any of these cards, his attack loses him the game. Two of these cards are common, so there is a decent chance that he might not attack even if he notices that he could kill you. His chance of noticing also goes up dramatically if your hand is empty, because it acts as a trigger in his mind: My opponent has no hand. Can I win? By waiting a turn to cast Air Elemental, you are making it far harder for your opponent to attack you, while also getting the best chance to draw more answers every time your opponent doesn't kill you when he could have.

The two situations are opposite sides of the same coin. The first is one of the most basic principles of **Magic**: If you have a play that always wins the game, take it. There is no reason not to make a play that always wins the game; what could be better than winning the game? For the same reason, you should take the time to look and see if there might be a way to win the game whenever there's a chance that you have the tools to do it. If you have a creature that can grow whenever cast a spell, see how many spells you can cast. If you can give your creatures fear, see how much power you can force through. Make sure to look at everything your cards can do; even abilities that didn't seem relevant last turn might make the difference now, especially abilities that require you to make large long term sacrifices for small short term gains. When there is no long term, who cares what you have to sacrifice?

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The flip side of that is that you should be careful to avoid giving your opponent a play that always wins the game. If he has a kill on the board, it is worth making a big sacrifice if you need to in order to keep mana untapped and at least one unknown card in your hand. By doing this, you are forcing him to consider the unknown. You might have that miracle card that turns the play that kills you into the one that loses the game for him. When you're out of cards, he can look for a sure kill knowing that there is nothing that you can do about it. When the only thing that stands between your opponent and a win is his decision to not make the play that kills you, improving your position has to take back seat to making sure he doesn't decide to try and win the game. Always look for a way to win the game, even if it means that you need a little help from the man across the table.

I'd like to finish my first column here by asking for your help. Your feedback is even more valuable than it would usually be since it can help me refine the column's format and make it better. What did you like, what didn't you like, and most importantly what can I improve? The other request is that

you send in play situations you feel are worth looking at here. Even if I don't use it, I'll try my best to give everyone my opinion on what the best play would have been. To allow us to fully recreate the situation, include as many details as you can and if you have to fill in the blanks by guessing. I will invent positions when I have to and keep an eye out for those from my own games, but I believe that real situations work best unless there's something very specific to illustrate that can't be shown well otherwise. For everything but the play examples I'd suggest the message boards, but the specific game scenarios should probably just get emailed to me using the link below.

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