

Zvi Mowshowitz
Tuesday, January 24, 2006

Ideally, on each turn of each game you will consider all of your options, gather all the available data, figure out the probability that each play will win you the game and, after a careful analysis, choose the one that gives you the best chance. The trick is learning to do that analysis accurately and to do it in a finite amount of time. The challenge of today's example is to analyze what might happen well enough to figure out which play gives you the best chance.

Hi Zvi,

Just wanted to get your thoughts on this situation where I felt I made the wrong play recently. Playing Constructed Standard online, my opponent (11 Life, 2 cards in hand) is playing Red/Blue with lots of sorceries (like Eye of Nowhere, Pyroclasm, Wildfire, Sleight of Hand) and Magnivores. He has in play:



Opponent (11 life)*in play:*

2 Island (all tapped)
 3 Mountain (all tapped)
 1 Shivan Reef (tapped)
 1 Magnivore (currently 6/6, tapped)

in graveyard:

3 Pyroclasm
 1 Eye of Nowhere
 1 Smash
 1 Sleight of Hand

in hand:

2 unknown cards

Me (10 life)*in play:*

2 Sacred Foundry
 1 Plains
 1 Umezawa's Jitte
 1 Paladin en-Vec

in graveyard:

1 Volcanic Hammer
 1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
 1 Umezawa's Jitte
 2 Savannah Lions

in hand:

1 Lightning Helix
 1 Devouring Light
 1 Paladin en-Vec

So my question is, what should I have done?

As I've noted before, a lot of the mail I get asks about the last decision a player makes. It's important to keep variety, but it does help put the situation in stark relief: Make the right decision and win, make the wrong one and lose. That focuses the mind. The other advantage is that these are the positions where extensive analysis can be realistic. I can see myself spending several minutes thinking about a situation like this one, especially if it was game three or the match was well ahead of schedule in terms of time left on the clock.

There are three plays here that are worth thinking about: Equipping Umezawa's Jitte, playing the second Paladin en-Vec, or sitting back to play Devouring Light. Each needs to be considered in turn.

Equipping Umezawa's Jitte puts your opponent at dead next turn, as he is at nine and about to take six from Paladin en-Vec, followed by three from Lightning Helix. That's a big advantage, especially here as your opponent has a deck that is highly dangerous. He has huge monsters with haste that are only going to get bigger each turn.



The downside of this play is that it leaves you highly vulnerable. You're going to take a minimum of six damage when he attacks with Magnivore, leaving you with only eight life to play with counting both Jitte counters. Each sorcery he plays adds one damage, so you're in real danger even if he doesn't have a second Magnivore. If he does have a second Magnivore, any castable sorcery kills you. That's a big risk. Another question is, what would happen if he plays Wildfire? He attacks for seven, putting you at three and leaving you without the mana for Lightning Helix. At this point, if you attack for the full six, he'll kill you on the backswing, so you'll be forced to hold back the Paladin and hope you can live until you can find the mana for Lightning Helix again.

The other problem with this play is that it risks letting him sap a lot of your time by killing the Jitte or bouncing the Paladin. He's shown the ability to do both, and both advance his position on the board while buying him a turn, but the good news is he only has one turn to use them before he dies.

Choice two is to play a second Paladin en-Vec. If he casts Wildfire, you can attack with one Paladin and hold one back, with Jitte waiting for you if you get to two mana. That's the best case scenario against Wildfire. If he plays a second Magnivore, you go down to four, or three if he plays a sorcery. Volcanic Hammer and Magnivore together kill you, but they do that if you make any reasonable play.

The big disadvantage of this play is that it is guaranteed to give your opponent two turns. The big *advantage* is that it is the only play that gives you a reasonable chance to survive a Wildfire.

The third play is to sit back on Devouring Light. If your opponent doesn't cast Wildfire, you'll be able to trade the Devouring Light for Magnivore. That makes this the best response to a second Magnivore. If he doesn't have a second Magnivore, then this makes you safe from anything but Wildfire. He won't have any way to do serious damage to you, and once the second Paladin comes down he'll be on a quick clock and have several problems he needs to solve. His deck is unlikely to have any way to solve all of them.



The other problem with this play is that it is highly suspicious. Why didn't you equip Umezawa's Jitte? If he smells what you're up to and doesn't attack, you're worse off than if you had played the second Paladin. That's certainly an underdog to happen, but it is far from impossible.

Those are the three options. Play one kills your opponent on your next turn, cutting off his chance to draw an answer, but it leaves you vulnerable to both Wildfire and a second Magnivore matched with a cheap sorcery. It also gives your opponent several ways to buy more time than he otherwise could. Play two gives your opponent two turns to draw an answer but gives you your best shot against Wildfire and a decent shot against Magnivore. Play three makes sure you live through the turn but is the weakest of all against Wildfire and gives your opponent a chance to make a great play.

How do you choose between them?

At this point the focus shifts to your opponent. What cards are likely to be in his hand? Knowing the contents of his deck is not enough. You need to think back over the history of the game. As usual, the risk of running into a card that your opponent would have cast on a previous turn is much lower than the risk of a card that would have sat in his hand since the beginning of the game. Would he have cast Magnivore? Would he have cast Wildfire?

At this point, I'm going to make a virtue of necessity. I wasn't told how this game developed, so let's use a little detective work; learning how to deduce things about games is highly valuable. Given what we know, how did this game get where it is now?

The exact sequence is impossible to know for certain, but we know a lot. You have thirteen cards between your hand, your graveyard and in play with no way of drawing extras. Your opponent has fifteen, two of which came from Sleight of Hand and Smash, so he has naturally drawn thirteen as well. It is your turn, so if no one took a mulligan, that means that you went first and it is your seventh turn. Smash took out Jitte and the three Pyroclasms in your opponents' graveyard killed Isamaru and your two copies of Savannah Lions on three different turns. Eye of Nowhere was used to buy time, perhaps bouncing a Jitte. Your Volcanic Hammer went after your opponent directly. You're at ten, which is almost certainly two hits from Sacred Foundry and six damage from Magnivore. His lands are all tapped, indicating that Magnivore came out last turn.

What does that tell us about his last two cards?

Wildfire would have been in his hand the entire game if he had started with it in his hand. The only turn he could have cast it was last turn and casting Magnivore seems far better. A second Magnivore is trickier, but he spent three of his first five turns playing Pyroclasm and the fourth playing Smash on an Umezawa's Jitte, unless he did both last turn. In either case, he was too distracted on previous turns to be able to play a second Magnivore. That means that both of the cards you fear the most are still out there. Volcanic Hammer could have done the same job as Pyroclasm, but it makes sense given the way things played out that he would cast Pyroclasm over Volcanic Hammer. Minimizing this effect is that there are few cards that he can't have in his hand. A second Smash makes perfect sense. So does the fourth Pyroclasm, or the second Eye of Nowhere. The seventh and eighth lands can't be ruled out either - there's essentially nothing you can rule out!

That wasn't as much help as it could have been. Now the question becomes, how do you go about choosing among your three options?

When you give your opponent a turn, you expect compensation for it. In exchange for not putting your opponent on a one-turn clock, what hands are you hoping to defeat? There are effectively two: Magnivore/Sorcery hands and Wildfire hands. How often does option two defeat Wildfire? You're going to win if no other spells are cast, but he has all the remaining mana. It would be a game. How often does option one defeat Wildfire? In this case, the game won't end until someone casts a spell. Chances are reasonably good that it won't be you - you're a solid underdog. Option three makes you an even larger underdog.

All right, how about Magnivore? Option two means that a second Magnivore would create a stable board with you at three life barring Volcanic Hammer or Eye of Nowhere. Unfortunately that doesn't leave that many sorceries and even if it did, all you've done is stay alive. These games do not favor you. In variation three they do favor you, since you can safely put your opponent on a clock, but you're still going to be in Volcanic Hammer range and Eye of Nowhere range for multiple turns.

The flip side of that question is: How dangerous is the extra turn you're giving to your opponent? Chances are he'll only draw one more card. For now we can assume he has neither Wildfire nor Magnivore, so how much does drawing an extra card help him? All those calculations were made based on those spells being cast this turn. Next turn is a very different animal. Suppose you chose option two. If he casts Wildfire a turn later, he's going to lose. If he casts Magnivore a turn later, he's going to lose. Suppose you choose option three, he has neither spell and he walks into Devouring Light. He's essentially lost the game - no one spell in his deck can turn the tide.

The potential problem hands are then if he has Magnivore with no backup or other action that is helpful but would not have stopped him from dying if you had chosen option one. Are there ways for him to put himself in a position to draw the second piece of the puzzle thanks to the extra turn you have given him, or set it up with his fresh set of mana? How likely are these scenarios?

At this point, it comes down to taking what you know about his decklist. As I've said before, exact calculations would be impractical even if you had full information about your opponents' decklist. You simply do not have the kind of time for an analysis that digs deeper than this, and only in extraordinary situations can you think for even this long.

Time to make a choice, then see what really happened.

I would choose to play the Paladin and attack for two. I hate giving people extra turns, but in this case it is hard for that extra turn to help him that much and easy for the change to make a big



difference. If he has an answer you're better off, and if he doesn't, you seem far more safe next turn than you are now. Any number of pieces of information could swing that decision.

Here's what happened, in his words:

I chose to equip the Jitte, and swing, putting my opponent at 9, and giving me enough to kill him next turn. On my opponent's next turn, he played a Sleight of Hand, then another Magnivore, costing me the game.

That last explanation I gave for why I would make the decision is also the quick answer: Upon analyzing the situation, it rapidly becomes clear that you are vulnerable right now in ways that you won't be if you get the second Paladin on the table, and you're only giving your opponent one more card to find a threat. Normally that's all the thinking you'll have time for when making your decisions.

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

