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Time to get back to business, something I am eager to do. Today is all examples, all the time. If it has to do with playing against mass removal, it's making the cut. The experiment is to comment on situations with incomplete information, noting what things would be most likely to effect my decision. Here goes, starting with what will hopefully be the last time I'll ever need to mention a certain card:

Q: I'm playing a Green/White weenie deck. I have two Watchwolfs, a Savannah Lions, and a Birds of Paradise in play along with a Glorious Anthem, a Forest and 3 Plains. I have another Savannah Lions, and Glorious Anthem in my hand along with a Ghostway. My opponent has 3 Plains and no other permanents in play. I'm pretty sure that my opponent is going to cast a Wrath of God next turn and I need to choose what to do. Should I cast the Lion and the Anthem to do a potential 16 damage or save my mana and Lion and cast Ghostway on my next turn?

--Derek Arnold

A: If there was ever a time to sit back and protect yourself with Ghostway, this would be the time. You can almost certainly attack for lethal damage next turn, so there's no reason not to protect yourself. Set up for the lethal attack next turn and sit back on the Ghostway. If he doesn't cast Wrath, you almost certainly win no matter what you do.

Q:



Opponent (12 life)

in play:

- 2 Temple Garden
- 3 Plains
- 2 Forest
- 1 Loxodon Hierarch (w/ Fists of Ironwood)
- 1 Selesnya Evangel
- 3 Saproling Tokens (1/1)
- 1 Selesnya Signet

in hand:

- 6 unknown cards

Me (16 life)

in play:

- 5 Plains
- 1 Samurai of the Pale Curtain
- 1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
- 1 Leonin Skyhunter (w/ Loxodon Warhammer equipped)
- 1 Glorious Anthem

in hand:

- 1 Savannah Lions
- 1 Hand of Honor
- 1 Plains

I know my opponent has Wrath of God in his deck, though I don't know how many. I also know he has no way of stopping my fliers. I fear that as soon as he gets it, he will play it, simply because he has to stop my Skyhunter. Since I can't prevent Wrath, my question is: do I go straight for the kill and hope to win before he draws it, or do I play conservatively and hope that once he does play it, I can recover more quickly than he can? He has more cards in hand, plus more mana, but my Warhammer staying in play will help tremendously. (Both decks are Standard-legal.)

--Benjamin Visger

A: A question worth asking is whether he has any way to remove Loxodon Warhammer. Your opponent has no way of stopping flyers without a Wrath, but the reason that you're winning this game is the Warhammer. Without it, you're not going to generate enough damage and will lose on the ground before you can win in the air. Assuming that both Warhammer and Skyhunter are safe,

the question is whether the five points of damage and five points of life gain will be enough to force your opponent to Wrath. If you're confident that it is, there's no reason to use up your hand. Attacking for five will put him on a two-turn clock and there's nothing that looks like it can even remotely compete with that. Here you hang back on the ground, swing with the flyers, and save any additional creatures for after the first Wrath if it comes.

I'd also like to thank Benjamin Visger for using proper form; it makes things far easier.



This one is a multi-part question from Brian Kelly:

Q: Hi Zvi-

Let's say it is turn 4 (going first) and I have a Hypnotic Specter in play and a second in hand. I'm playing against someone who is playing some sort of White control deck, with 5 cards in hand. Right now my fear of Wrath is high. At what point should I go ahead and play the second Hippy? If he gets to four mana and does not Wrath, is that good enough?

A: Hypnotic Specter puts a lot of pressure on your opponent to use Wrath of God. If he holds back, he loses a card per turn and he risks losing the Wrath to your Specter. He might want to get greedy, but he can't afford to be. Once he has an opportunity to Wrath and chooses not to, you have to ask if he did something valuable enough to be worth postponing Wrath of God for. If he wasn't doing something amazing, it is safe to assume that he didn't have the option to Wrath, so to not cast the second Hypnotic is to be living in fear and allow your opponent to have a lot more time than he deserves.

If he misses his fourth land drop, is that good enough?

That's an interesting case, because it actually increases the chance that any given card in his hand is a Wrath. You don't want to risk disaster if he has the Wrath and draws land number four, but hitting him twice with a Specter and then having him two-for-one you with a Wrath is not exactly a disaster. Unless that would leave you totally helpless, you want to play the second Hippy. Even in that case, you probably want to put the pressure on him now.

In general, should I be happy with two damage and a card every turn, and make him deal with first Hippy before I play the other one?

Hypnotic Specter hitting them for a card is a situation I am generally happy with if they don't have any game of their own to compensate for it. Their card count is static and yours is going up by a card every turn. They cannot permit this to continue for long. There isn't enough information here to decide whether you want to keep playing creatures – so much depends on what you think your opponent is up to and the rest of the contents of your hand. I'd use the guidelines I outlined earlier, but the most important questions I would ask would be how the late game shaped up and whether

my opponent had answers that cost more than four mana that the second Hypnotic Specter might have a chance to stop. If I have reason to fear a long game, I need to get more aggressive, especially once my opponent misses his first chance to Wrath. If I'm not going to sneak more stuff into play I have to be confident that things are going my way.



If the Specter in question were Abyssal Specter or Headhunter, would the decision be different?

Yes, it would make me much more inclined to play additional creatures. A card discarded at random forces your opponents' hand and threatens to devastate his game. A card of his choice might not matter. He might even welcome it in exchange for the time you're letting him have. You can't be confident that you have enough going on to win the game, so you need to get more aggressive than just playing one creature.

Q: Game one just finished, and it went quickly. I was playing a bad mono-Black aggro deck sporting evasive creatures like Nezumi Cutthroat and Foul Imp, with some removal like Last Gasp and Enfeeblement (i.e. Last Gasp 5-8). I had Jittes, Shuko, and Unholy Strength. Every creature in the deck had some kind of evasion (even Hand of Cruelty).



My opponent had devastated me game one; I had been on the play, and when I saw a Forest and an Overgrown Tomb with an Elder, I thought he was playing just Green/Black like I'd been seeing all day; I played out a third creature to get a fifth-turn kill. He fetched a Plains and Wrathred, and killed me not long after with big ground creatures like Grave-Shell Scarab. I don't believe he had Stinkweed Imp main. His deck seemed to be aggro-control; mine was plain aggro.

My plan was to play one creature at a time that could get through, and chump block/trade Hand of Cruelty if I got the chance; I thought I'd try to out race his damage. I ended up losing, but the second game was close (third game loss was a bad hand). It's the classic way I used to beat control, but I don't know if it still works.

Was there a different game plan I should have gone with?
--Conrad Corbett

A: This approach all but presumes that your opponent can't do much to punish you for giving him a tremendous amount of time. The deck you're running sacrifices card strength for speed at every

opportunity, so it seems unlikely that you can win by intentionally letting the game go long. His cards are more powerful than yours, and given time, he will convert that into a win. You need to not give him that chance. To me, there are two approaches that you can take in this spot. You can ignore Wrath and try to win the games where he does not draw one, or you can commit the first wave and try to hold back a second wave of creatures in case you lose the first one. Which approach I would take would depend on the details, especially the strength of my draw and what he was up to.

Two damage per turn is a lot better than none, but it's also not enough to win the game against a deck that concentrates on the late game. If you give someone ten turns to beat you, chances are they will find a way. You need to be putting enough hurt on your opponent to make him unlikely to live to the point where his deck can take control. Otherwise, you've let him win the game whether he has his mass removal spell or not. The flip side of that is when you don't mind a long game. In that case, there's no reason to give your opponent the chance to make a good trade in situations like this.

This next situation gives you the Wrath of God, but I felt it was illustrative of the holding back approach and other aspects of the topic at hand, so I decided to include it.

Q: I was using a Blue/White control deck with 4 Fact or Fiction and four Wrath of God. My opponent knew both of these facts, and was using the holding back approach, playing a threat, letting me Wrath, then playing another threat. I knew he was doing this. The game was winding down and he had a threat in play, and a few cards in hand (maybe two or three) when I played fact or fiction. A Wrath showed up with some other draw spells and lands. he divided it up draw spells vs. Wrath and lands. I then debated for a while on what to do. I had a Wrath in hand already, so I did not need the second one. But if I Wrath and he draws or has in hand another threat, I lose. Which pile should I take?



A: Your opponent is making you think, which means he probably made a good division. Now you need to choose between Wrath of God and some card drawing spells. Your deck should have the advantage in the long game, so the question turns to how you are most likely to lose this game. Which aspect of Wrath of God is the important one right now? Wrath does two things for you, both giving you card advantage (which he is trying to minimize at the expense of time) and stabilizing the board. In this case, it is clear that the card drawing spells offer more card advantage than the Wrath, but the Wrath can control the board.

I don't have enough information here to decide which is more important, but the important thing is to understand how to make that decision. The first question I ask myself is whether I could lose the game in the next few turns due to tempo if I don't get the Wrath of God. In this case, I already have the first one, so the dangerous scenario is where I Wrath to remove the threat on the board, tapping that mana means I can't stop his next threat from hitting the table, and I then don't have a good response. If that scenario can't happen or seems highly improbable, I'd be much more inclined to take the card drawing. The flip side of that question comes next: Do I have enough card advantage to secure this game, or am I worried that I'm spreading myself too thin if I take only one spell off of the Fact or Fiction? If I have plenty of extra cards already, it makes sense to make my hand more secure against something sneaking its way onto the board, but if I need to replenish my hand, then that starts to take priority.

In general, taking the card drawing will be correct in this spot if you have enough mana to both Wrath and counter afterwards.

What happened in the game was: He took the Wrath, played it, the opponent played another threat, he Wrathed again and then topdecked Meloku and that was game.

When you're asked to balance different risks or resources, the question will usually come down to which is more likely to decide the outcome of the game. What matters? What do I have enough of, and what do I need more of? When you're playing against this player, you need to get inside his head. When you are this player, that's even more true.

Another interesting dynamic here is that there are two similar questions that get asked. One is "How can I win this game?" and the other is "How can I lose this game?" They are similar, but it is often important to know which one to ask. When you are losing, you need to ask yourself how to give yourself a chance to win. A play that doesn't give you a chance to win is the worst possible play, and a play that minimizes how bad things are is generally a mistake when it means that things will be bad no matter what. When Wrath would devastate you, it's no solution to choose a path that devastates you no matter what by costing you too much time. The flip side of that is that once you are in a position where you expect to win the game, the time has often come to figure out how you could lose rather than asking how you can win. Take risks when you have to, but only when you have to.

