

Winning the Information War Search

Zvi Mowshowitz
Tuesday, March 21, 2006

There are situations where it will be tough to win and then there are situations where it is impossible to win. At some point in almost every game, there comes a time when one player has effectively won the game. An important strategic point is the difference between winning the game and killing your opponent. If you kill your opponent then you've won the game, but you can win the game without killing your opponent. In this context, I'm not talking about nonviolent paths to victory like decking or Battle of Wits – those would count as killing. What I'm referring to is the scenario where a player is still playing the game and might even have a lot of time left, but has no chance to win it.

There are various ways this can happen. The most frequent scenario involves a deck designed to win long games that generates a lot of card advantage or locks the other player out of any way to win. At some point, victory becomes inevitable. It can also happen when one player holds the kill in his hand, or it can even happen before the first turn. Here's my favorite example, which has happened multiple other times that I know about:

I was watching a tournament called the U.S. Open, in which players try to qualify for U.S. Nationals. They were also known as meatgrinders, with players staying up to play around the clock in single elimination events. Eventually the U.S. Open evolved into the Last Chance Qualifiers that precede every Pro Tour, but there is no comparison between today's run of the mill tournaments and the pure intensity and pressure of those old U.S. Opens. It was the fourth round, and the player drawing first was using a mono-Blue deck that won by playing and protecting a Thieving Magpie. He mulliganed to six, then to five, sighed and went to four. And then a funny thing happened.



He went to three. Then he went to two, then one, then zero. Every turn, he'd draw a card without looking at it and say "go." This lasted for eight turns, at which point he scooped up his cards and moved on to game two. In game two, he knew how to sideboard and his opponent had no idea what he was up against. This information gave him a large advantage in game two, and he went on to win the match. The crowd that watched him mulligan to zero debated whether he had done the right thing. Should he have tried to win the game, however small his chance of coming back?

No. There is a set number of cards where you need to throw in the towel, especially for a deck like this one that relies on gradual accumulation of card advantage. The interesting question in situations like this is when things become sufficiently hopeless that trying to win is pointless. At five cards, it is clearly not time to give up. At two cards you've clearly lost the game. The question is, once you see that four-card hand with no lands in it, what do you do?

There are several possible courses of action here, the first of which is what happened. There are two other options: Keep a four-card hand, and keep a three-card hand. Keeping the four-card hand without a land in it means that you're giving up four turns of information (and the chance to find land in your three-card hand) no matter what happens in an attempt to draw multiple lands off the top of

your library. The problem with this plan is that you have to commit to revealing what your deck does the moment you draw the first land. Once he sees that Island, you've lost much of your information edge. With an extremely bleak situation even if you get the lands you want, it seems logical to trade that in for what is likely a real game two edge. I would go down to three on that basis, and if I didn't find at least two lands there, then I would play the information game. If I did find two lands, it would be tough not to play the game even if you were four cards down.

Extreme situations sometimes require extreme solutions. It is hard to give up on a game like this, and most players would dismiss it as crazy. Not only is it not crazy, it is sometimes the correct thing to do. Giving up a chance to win right now for an advantage later on is tough. Witness the first round intentional draw, a tactic that Sean McKeown has advocated using when you have a deck that will do well against other decks that have a draw. In the right situation, it can have a dramatic effect on the tournament. I know that I've had tournaments where I was happy I had an early draw and others where that draw made things much, much harder. Would I have the resolve to concede a match I could draw or draw a match that I could still win in order to get the pairings I'm looking for later on? History shows that I didn't have what it took to do that, but looking from a distance, I know that I should have.

Like everything else in **Magic**, you decide what the right play is by considering the risks and the rewards. The difference is that here we're extending the scope of the risks and rewards under consideration. Before, all that was at stake was the current game, with perhaps an acknowledgement that the time left in the match can be important. Once the game was over, what happened during the game did not matter. Most of the time, that is a close enough approximation to the situation that nothing else need enter the equation, but there are other things at stake.

For the most part, these other considerations are things that can impact the remainder of the match. There are two basic categories to worry about here, time on the clock and issues of information. The hope of most players most of the time is that time remaining will be irrelevant in a match, but sometimes it becomes painfully clear that there is not enough time. When that happens, you have to weigh your chance to win the game against the chance that game three or even game two might not finish. At other times, the clock is on your side, but in that case you simply don't give up until he finishes you off. Time is a complicated matter full of ethical issues and I've addressed it before on another website, so for now I will restrict myself to informational issues.

How much does information matter? It can matter a lot. Consider cards like Cabal Therapy and Meddling Mage - they are very powerful, but their power requires you to know a lot about your opponents' deck. If you don't know what card to name, they lose a lot of their value. Then there are sideboard cards, which range from color hosers like Slay, to cards against card types (Terashi's Grasp), to cards whose purpose is to tune your deck. No matter what you do with those fifteen slots, as long as you're not using a card like Burning Wish, those cards are there to help you adopt your deck to deal with what your opponent is trying to do. That's only possible if you know what you are up against. I know that I've sideboarded incorrectly all the time, based on a misunderstanding of my opponents' deck. What you sideboard is only the tip of the iceberg, because the play in the game makes a big difference too. Think back to all the previous columns where I talked about which cards you should be worried about or what your opponents' plan was.



That raises the question of what information is most valuable. The biggest thing to know is just a general outline. How does your opponent intend to win? What is his basic strategy? Next in line are those cards that individually have the power to change your decisions, especially cards that you wouldn't expect. Combat tricks, quirky counters, oddball threats, alternate routes to victory, anything that changes the way the opponent might want to play. Some things are worth hiding, and cards like Giant Growth are often at the top of that list once your basic strategy is out of the way.

A safe way of looking at situations like this is that revealing extra information for next game is a small mistake, but losing a game you would have won is a catastrophic mistake. You need to be very confident that your risk of losing the game through these tricks is minimal, but it is an error to say that it needs to be known to be zero. The next class of games are those in which you've won, especially when you have the kill in hand or more counters ready than they have cards. In those games, your goal becomes to extract the maximum amount of information from your opponent while giving away as little information as possible. Meanwhile, your opponent is still trying to win the game because he doesn't know that this is impossible. If you know that it is almost impossible for you to lose and you don't need the time on the clock, it makes sense to see how your opponent tries to climb out of it. If you can look through his hand, even better. If you can look through his deck, better still.



That brings us back to the more conventional situation where a lot of players will sometimes be willing to concede to hide information – the opponent is casting a card like Cranial Extraction and is about to see your deck. In the case of Cranial Extraction, you obviously want to wait until they name a card before you make your decision, but once they do that and reveal that information to you, then you need to decide whether you think the game is worth fighting. If you can't win, showing off your deck will only serve to cripple you for the rest of the match and potentially even after the match, if you have a bizarre deck that your opponent might

now prepare for or even copy. Here the payoff is so clear that it is easy to justify giving up the ghost. However, people forget that losing a game you were almost certainly going to lose anyway is no different from almost certainly winning a game rather than winning it. This is unlikely to be the biggest hole in your game, but it is still a significant hole.

It was also a hole of mine when I was playing professionally. I was good at knowing when to give up a lot game or use that game to get information, making hopeless attacks or declining to play cards on the off chance that my opponent would show me cards. There is a freedom in knowing you can't win, and that's even more true when your opponent doesn't know it. However, I was much worse at the harder job of knowing when not to cash in the win. I would tense up and get nervous whenever I thought that I could win the game, afraid that I would throw the game away, especially when it involved doing something complicated or taking a risk. I knew in the back of my mind that I should be worried about issues of information, but all I wanted to do was make sure that I won. I was aware enough to know that it was imprecise, but I couldn't create enough momentum to fix it.

Next week my goal is to deal with examples of these situations – you need to decide whether to end the game or allow it to continue. As much detail as possible should be included, but I will consider anything that raises interesting strategic questions.

