

Zvi Mowshowitz
Tuesday, March 28, 2006

This week, I'll be diving into the mailbox. It feels good to finally have generated a lot of feedback and have it be because I've raised questions and stimulated thought, rather than getting myself corrected over and over. It wasn't even all questions – there were those who wrote in to raise important points, and I won't be excluding them either. I'll start with a basic question that some people may not be clear on, and move on from there.

Q: *Can you concede to a card in response? For example, can you concede when your opponent plays Cranial Extraction and you haven't played any cards and you don't want them to look at your deck?*

--Bob Smith

A: You can, at any time, pick up your cards and give up the game. Cranial Extraction is the best example right now of a card where you might rather lose than let it resolve. When not online, it never hurts to let them name the card first, because that's information you can use. Then you can concede in the middle of the resolution of Cranial Extraction. It doesn't matter that you don't have priority – you can always concede. However, note that on **Magic Online**, if you wait for them to name a card then they will get to see your deck. In that case, if you're going to concede to save information, you need to do it before they pick a card.



Q: *Hello, Zvi. I have a question regarding the card Telepathy. How valuable is a card that exposes your opponent's secrets, but does nothing else? I've not seen it played frequently in any format. Peek, on the other hand, did see play because it could draw a card and would give you a temporary information boost. Is information and a possible psychological advantage worth using a card with no direct effect on the game? Thank you.*

--Geoffrey Rutherford

A: Seeing your opponents' hand even once can be very powerful, and seeing it repeatedly is even more powerful. It can change the entire complexion of the game and even carry over to the next game thanks to the knowledge you have gained about your opponents' deck. The problem is that you simply can't afford to pay a card to get that information. Peek gets you a lot of information at a relatively cheap price, but it's still more than you can afford to justify in terms of deck space except under special circumstances. Cards like Castigate are the best way to see your opponents' hand. You get the information in addition to the primary effect of the card, which is to take a card in your opponents' hand away from him.

Q: *You made a reference to not playing a Giant Growth in game one in order to maintain the surprise factor in game two. I would like to suggest another trick regarding Giant Growth effects. The trick is that if you haven't used it and you are going to win anyway, make sure to spend it on the killing blow in as many copies as you have. I suggest this only when you are 100% sure you will win either way. The time to do that is when you*

know that the reason Giant Growth is in your hand at the end of the game is that the card is essentially dead in this match and you plan to 'board it out. The psychological advantage that garners is that in game 2 your opponent has to play like you could have a Giant Growth and not having them means that play is incorrect.

--Nate Prawdzik

A: A player who isn't thinking too carefully about why you are doing what you are doing will see the Giant Growth and react accordingly, not knowing whether it is in your deck. If you need to use the Giant Growths to win, or from his perspective you seem to need them, this play is solid no matter what level your opponent is thinking on. The risk is that in those games where you clearly didn't need to Giant Growth, your opponent might realize why you were overkilling him on the last turn. In that case, he might logically think to himself: My opponent has just decided to show me a card in his deck for no reason. If he's a smart player, there must be a reason why he wants me to know about Giant Growth. That means that he intends to sideboard out Giant Growth! He might change his mind, but that seems to be his intention. Of course, there is then the third level of thinking, and so on...

The other important point here is that Nate, like every other player (including me), wouldn't consider doing this if it had even a tiny chance to blow the game – the play is right if all things are equal, but it is impossible for players to consider it to be valuable enough to risk the game. Technically it should be important enough to risk the game if that risk is small enough, but it carries a lot of danger once you go down that road.

Q: *Dear Zvi Mowshowitz,*

I especially enjoyed your latest article, and it reminded me a funny match that occurred in my second tournament. It illustrates Information retention vs. Disinformation:

It was last round of French Regionals, the winner was qualified for Nationals. I was playing Counter-Rebel against Fires. My first hand was great, but had no White mana. However it contained 2 Brainstorms, and I was playing second, so I figured out that my chances of getting this White mana on turn 2 were greater than 50%, and kept. This was a horrible mistake due to inexperience (having "only" 40% chances to lose the game on turn 2 is not a great deal), but I did it. Two Brainstorms and no sight of White mana later, I knew I was nearly bound to lose.

At this time, the only cards I played were 3 Islands and 2 Blue spells. I had some counterspells that could have earned me some time, but a River Boa was on the table. Moreover, my deck killed very slowly, the round was 50 minutes only, and if I tried to win this game and lost anyway, the threat of a draw was big. So I decided to scoop on my third turn, making all my friends shout.

Game 2, not only did I know how to sideboard, but my opponent, who spent the whole first game trash talking about how my deck was a bad metagame call, sided against Blue Skies. I won this one in 10 minutes, and ended up winning the match.

The battle of information is not only about who gets the more information from the opponent, but also who achieves to give his opponent false data.



A: This is a far more borderline situation than before. On turn 3, you know the top card is not a Plains, but do you have a chance to come back? With only a River Boa in play, that's two damage a turn. There is still a decent chance that a comeback could happen, especially since he had counterspells ready to stall for time. At a minimum, I would hold out another turn, as more information could be gained and no information needed to be given away. After another turn, if you had to discard a card that would give too much away, you could consider giving up. You could even have your opponent realize that your deck couldn't be Skies. Sure, Skies could play Brainstorm, but Skies couldn't have a hand that it could keep that would now be so bad that it would consider giving up on game one. It doesn't make sense – what do you have, and what did you keep? A hand with no creatures in it? You're clearly hiding something important. However, most opponents will not think on this level. It is far more likely that they will chuckle and assume the obvious. Giving your opponent this false information is wonderful – sideboarding against a deck of flying creatures is exactly the opposite of playing against a control deck, even though they both share a color.

This next comment is also from the same player:

Q: *Another example was in my first tournament, the previous Regionals. I was playing Hermit/Opposition against Bargain combo. I had a low count of permission, and no sideboard against combo decks, so the matchup was horrible. First game I got very lucky, since my opponent didn't go off and basically killed himself. Then I just smiled widely, took away 15 cards of my deck and put my whole sideboard in. Game two, I lost on turn 2, period (Bargain could win as early as turn 2). Game 3, I played first, laid a turn 2 Yavimaya Elder, and then sit back with my mana untapped for the rest of the game. I had a great hand of lands, Submerges and Treacheries. My opponent was so concerned about how many counterspells this young noob had brought in, that he waited for Duress before trying to resolve his key spells. When he saw my hand, he of course immediately tried to go off, but the Elder had put him on low life and he fizzled.*



It may not have been a good strategy (crippling my deck was a high price just to give false information to my opponent), but it was so fun I couldn't resist trying it. It's interesting to compare this to good players that bring their whole sideboard and then remove 15 cards, in order to prevent their opponent to know how many cards they sideboarded.

--E.R.

A: I felt it was important to pick an example where a player went too far. I can't agree with the decision to actively cripple your deck in this spot. He points to the correct strategy, which is to shuffle in all fifteen cards and then take some out. This leaves your opponent in a position where he doesn't know what is going on. Is your sideboard strong? Maybe it is, but maybe it isn't. You at least have something to hide, and there's still that huge grin on your face – and you're going to a lot of trouble if not many cards are going in. You are at least a strong player that needs to be respected, as you are denying him information. This technique is worth using far more often than players use it. I also wouldn't mind the whole slam in the fifteen and then “adjust” which fifteen came out, or something similar. Of course, in this case it worked, but there was a huge chance that it could have cost the

game. Most of the value of the play came (in my opinion) from keeping the mana untapped. That represents disruption better than the false sideboarding.

Q: *I was playing a Vintage deck that relied on using two Horn of Greed, Fastbond, Zuran Orb, and Timetwister, along with a Regrowth to cycle repeatedly through my entire deck. Basically, I would play every land that I could until I ran out of cards in my deck, then I would tap them all and sacrifice them to the Zuran Orb, then I would Timetwister. I would play more lands until I drew the Regrowth, grab the Twister, play more lands, tap, sac, etc. Before doing this, of course, I cast Abeyance to make sure that my pesky opponent did not do anything to stop me.*

At what point, in my amassing of mana, does it become clear that you should just scoop? This is clearly not a fast way to win, although once it gets started and the Abeyance gets off, nothing is going to stop it. (The deck also featured a Trade Routes, so there was virtually no way to fail to keep going, unless you do something catastrophically stupid.)

I ask because I was playing an opponent who refused to concede. Normally this gentleman was a clever player, and he was clearly trying to gain information. Here is the key: He was playing a mono-Green Stompy deck. He had no real method of stopping me in his deck, save killing me faster than I could go off.

Granted, his deck is going to win faster than mine, should that occur. But, it took me approximately forty of the fifty minutes to get to the point of showing him the kill card.

However, even his deck cannot necessarily kill me twice in ten minutes, especially should I get into a place where I can stall in game two (i.e., I drop a Moat). At that point, he cannot win at all, and the time that he spent in Game One was wasted, wasn't it?

He seemed to gain nothing from watching me perform my shuffling and dropping of lands, rather than a keen sense of irritation at the tricks I was pulling. Am I analyzing this wrong? I had a theoretically infinite amount of mana. So long as I had something even as inefficient as a single Jester's Cap, I could win the game. Why keep going?

Thanks!

Harkius

--Daniel Hill



A: Ah, Horn of Greed with extra land plays. Those were good times. However, this goes back to an even earlier deck of mine: TurboZvi, the first deck that killed you a long, long time after it had the game locked up. With that deck, past a certain point they had seen every card in your deck and even though you were shuffling, it was impossible to fail. Your hand would keep growing in size, and it was full of card drawing you could play for free, so even the worst possible sequence of cards stopped being a problem for you. However, the problem for these decks was that the most efficient kill condition in terms of cards in the deck took a long, long time. My first sanctioned game with TurboZvi, I took forty minutes to win and I had lots of practice.

The first question is, did you actually have a lock on the game, and did your opponent know that once he saw the kill card? He was under an Abeyance, so he clearly can't stop you. He can only hope you fail to win, and that seems unlikely. In fact, once you get past a certain point it will become impossible thanks to Trade Routes: You can pay one life to draw two cards, and if you keep some of your lands on the table then after a certain point nothing can touch you. If he has also seen the kill condition, he's already seen every card he is going to see and Timetwister cards cannot help him.

At this point, your opponent knows he has lost the game if you don't make a colossal blunder. That's possible, but for now presume that it is unlikely enough that it can be ignored. His problem is now that he can choose how much time will be left on the clock, since both players have all the information they are going to get. How long does it take each player to win? The correct answer for him from a strategic standpoint, provided he doesn't mind both players sitting there for a while first, is to choose the smallest number where he is confident he can win both remaining games. At that point, he can hope that if it gets to game three then you might not have time to win it.



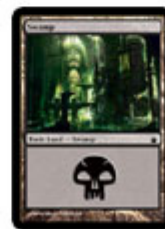
For this reason, decks that have win conditions that take more than five minutes or so to go off need to have a backup plan in their sideboard. In this example, once the combo player goes off he will be drawing lots of cards and gaining lots of mana. There's no reason other than a possible tiny gain in efficiency to take forty minutes to win. A single Wish card could fetch a victory condition, and there are many to choose from. The worst case scenario is to put a single spell in the deck whose primary purpose is to win the game outright. Sideboarding in a faster kill card solves all potential problems, and that small loss of sideboard space is the price you pay for a slow deck.

Of course, it could also be that your deck is making your opponent mad and he doesn't want to give you to have to go through the motions. There are those who don't want to reward what they consider bad behavior!

Q: Hi Zvi,

The situation below occurred in a RRG draft on MTGO last weekend. What I found interesting about it is that my opponent (a player with a 1750+ rating) seemingly made a mistake which turned out to be not a mistake, but his only way to win.

Here is the situation.



Opponent (9 life)

in play:

- 3 Forests
- 1 Plains
- 2 Swamps

in hand:

- 3 unknown cards

Me (10 life)

in play:

- 1 Greater Mossdog (enchanted w/Pollenbright Wings)
- 5 Saproling Tokens
- 3 Forests
- 1 Golgari Rot Farm
- 1 Swamp
- 3 Plains

in hand:

- 1 Swamp
- 1 Shrieking Grotesque
- 1 Farseek

It is the beginning of my turn.

I did nothing on my first main and attacked with all my creatures. My opponent played Withstand, taking him down to 4 life, but he chose to prevent damage from 3 saprolings rather than from the Greater Mossdog, therefore creating 3 more saproling tokens. I thought it was a mistake, but it turned out that I was the one who made the mistake. On my postcombat main I played the Shrieking Grotesque (enhanced to make him discard a card).

--Sylvain Lauzac

Show answer.

A: When people in desperate situations start acting strangely, there are a number of things it can mean. Sometimes the player who has lost knows he has lost and is clicking through because he doesn't want to concede. Sometimes he gets sloppy. Sometimes he just wants to see what you do or make you think. Then there's always the risk that he's making that strange play because if you get careless and he gets lucky then there is a way that he can steal the game out from under you.

As always, when your opponent does something that seems to make no sense, you should try and figure out why he did it. In this case, he had a clear choice. He could choose to give you creatures or not give you creatures, and he chose to give you creatures. Why would he do that? For some reason, he wants you to have more men. There are three possibilities: He might be messing with your head, but assuming he is not, then either he doesn't care if you have men and wants to mess with your head or he actively wants you to have more men. If he's messing with your head, he has almost certainly lost the game and it doesn't what you do in this spot. Now presume that he isn't.

If he doesn't care about you having men, he is either going to try and kill you before your next attack, in which case it doesn't matter if you play another man, or he intends to use mass removal to clear the board, in which case you should not play another man.

The real question is, why would he actively want you to have more men? What does that mean?

What cards in this format punish you for having lots of men? There was one that I thought of right away once I asked myself that question, and that card was Netherborn Phalanx. At this point, a quick count of creatures in play indicates that playing another creature could potentially cost you the game. There's no compelling reason to play the creature, so you don't.

In fact, that's exactly what happened: On his main he played Netherborn Phalanx, taking him down to 0 life and winning the game.

That's in addition to the obvious in this article's context: Why reveal more about your deck when you don't have to? Once you've locked up the game, don't keep piling on unless it actually shuts off your opponents' chance to climb out of the hole he is in. Even if he hadn't given you extra creatures here, there was no good reason to need more men and I would have simply passed the turn. If the game isn't over, let him prove it. Even if it isn't, chances are that he will be using mass removal to get back in it – even if I can't think of what that spell might be off the top of my head. I'd only play the extra creature if I was positive that I couldn't be punished for it.

On a final note, as you all know this column will be coming to an end soon. I am grateful that I've had this opportunity to write here at **magicthegathering.com** and I hope that I've helped a lot of you become better players and gain a new perspective on the game. Without too many more articles left, the next month will be your last chance to get your situation into the column. Don't spend the rest of your life wondering!

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