

Zvi Mowshowitz
 Tuesday, April 04, 2006

Before I begin, I'd like to give a great big thank you to all of you who wrote in to thank me for my column and let me know all that they've learned from it. Learning you've helped people out is what makes writing like this worthwhile, and I don't consider the column a failure at all. Instead, I consider it a noble experiment that resulted in some excellent content, but which couldn't quite work as designed in the end.

Here's a light one to think about before this week's main event:

Q: I have a question. Suppose I am playing a U/R deck that features Steam Vents. My opening hand includes a Steam Vents but no one-drops. My question is this: should I not pay 2 life and let it come into play tapped, or should I pay the life and not play anything on my turn, making my opponent think that I have some sort of response-instant I wish to play on his/her turn?

--Nathaniel Hatfield

The question in these cases is, what would you be representing and how will that change your opponents' actions? If you play an untapped Steam Vents on turn 1, you're paying two life. That's a big cost, so your opponent will believe you, but what will he think you want the mana for? Giving out false information only matters if it changes what your opponent does. In Standard right now, I would think you had a Shock in your hand. I'd also wonder why you were willing to pay two life for the chance to cast it on your first turn. That doesn't seem worth it, especially if you're going first. Thanks to that, I'm not even sure what I would think.

What about on turn 2?

Turn 2 is a different animal, because now you're representing Remand or Mana Leak. Those are cards that can have a much bigger impact. Knowing your opponent can't interfere on his second turn, especially if that means you get a third turn where your opponent can't counter, would often cause me to take a chance on something I wouldn't otherwise have risked. Playing the land tapped tells me you don't have either card, while playing it untapped tells me you have at least one and that information matters a lot. I can definitely exploit (and be misled by) that information. Even when you don't counter, there's a chance that I could look at that as a decision rather than you not having the option. It depends on what I'm trying to cast and how I think you view that card.

I think that sometimes on turn 2 you need to pay two life to keep up appearances, but on turn 1 it seems silly. However, in formats where you could easily have Force Spike (or better yet, your deck has shown him Force Spike previously) then paying two life on a bluff becomes far more interesting.



Remember that it comes down to perception. If your opponent doesn't have the tools to figure out what signals you're sending out, it does no good to worry about whether or not you are sending them.

This week, we have a neat little problem from a *Kawigawa* Block matchup in a PTQ for LA:

Dear Zvi Mowshowitz,

My friend and I expected to see a lot of Gifts Ungiven decks so we tuned a Black Hand deck to be able to consistently beat it. In order to do this we sacrificed a bit of aggression to go heavy on hand destruction and included Nezumi Graverobber. You can find the decklist at <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgevent/la05ptq/0730somerset> (6th place deck.).

Game 1:

In the early turns of the game my opponent plays Forests and a Swamp which tips me off that he's probably playing Gifts. As I untap on one of my turns, I find myself in a situation like this:



Opponent (12 life)

in play:

- 3 Forest (2 tapped)
- 1 Swamp
- 1 Sakura-Tribe Elder

in hand:

- 5 unknown cards

Me(20 life)

in play:

- 4 Swamp
- 1 Hand of Cruelty
- 1 Ogre Marauder (equipped w/Manriki-Gusari)

in hand:

- 1 Nezumi Cutthroat
- 1 Hand of Cruelty

1 Swamp
1 Cranial Extraction (just drawn)

I figured that I would probably want to play the Extraction and name Gifts Ungiven while he still had no Blue mana to respond to it. I saw no reason not to attack first though, so I did. He blocked the Hand of Cruelty and sacrificed the Sakura-Tribe Elder to fetch a Swamp, much to my surprise. This brought him to 9. The decision became whether or not to play the Cranial Extraction and what I should name if I did. My thoughts went immediately to two potent cards in standard Gifts decks: Hideous Laughter and Kagemaro, First to Suffer. Having either of these cards in hand while not having Gifts Ungiven would justify his move and Kagemaro was by far the more dangerous of the two.

Gifts Ungiven is certainly the best and most important card in a Gifts Ungiven deck – hence the deck name. Was this the right decision? How would you go about figuring out what to do here?

What is in your opponents' hand? He has five cards, and that leaves room for a lot of possibilities. As Evan noted above, the biggest hint you have is that he fetched a Swamp with his Sakura-Tribe Elder rather than an Island. The first question that brings up is:

Is your opponent holding the Island in his hand, or was he missing it but considered the Swamp more important?

Kagemaro, First to Suffer requires two Swamps (plus another if you want to sacrifice it the turn it comes into play), Gifts Ungiven requires one Island. The only reason you'd need three Forests this early is Kodama of the North Tree, and even if that card is in his hand (and there's no reason to believe it is even in his deck), he could always play the third Forest later. If he is holding an Island, he has a lot of good reasons to play it and no real fear in this world that you would destroy it. There are two reasons I can think of that he might have the Island in his hand. Either he's being quirky and doesn't realize that he could be taking away his own options, or he is doing this to try and deceive you. The first possibility is unlikely, because it is most people's instinct to get various colors of mana into play early. It is unlikely that your opponent would be aware enough to try and fool you in this way, but it is possible.

However, there are two other factors in play here. Most Gifts Ungiven decks play only one Island. Given that, he is statistically unlikely to have the Island. Even more than that, suppose he had Island and Gifts Ungiven. Why did he play Sakura-Tribe Elder last turn? Playing Gifts Ungiven seems like a far more important thing to do. In fact, this line of reasoning seems to all but rule out him having both Island and Gifts Ungiven.



What will determine who wins this game, and how do you plan to win it? Cranial Extraction forces players to plan the rest of the game out when they play it. You could go after the cards you think are likely to be in your opponents' hand, if you think the short term is more important. You could also think about the long term and try to cripple your opponents' deck for the rest of the game. Often this is the type of knowledge you can only gain from playtesting. Which cards are important? How good is your long game depending on what card you remove? Do you need to win quickly?

In my observation, the biggest mistake players make with "name a card" cards like Cranial Extraction, Cabal Therapy and Meddling Mage is to focus too much on long term thinking and not on the situation in front of them, the same way a lot of people overvalue the deck thinning effect of searching for a land or two out of your library. If the card you are going to name is not something they can use right now, or you know it isn't in their hand, then you need a big payoff in the long term. The long term effects are nice, but the reason these cards are good is the monkey wrench they throw into your opponents' game right now by taking away the card he most wants. That doesn't mean you should focus only on the next turn, but what it does mean is that you should pay a lot of attention to what could happen over the next few turns. This goes double if the short term is when you have the best chance to win or it is when you are in danger of losing.

In this case, what is the short term outlook?

Right now you're trying to kill your opponent. You have good offense on the table and your opponent has a mana heavy deck with nothing on the table and potentially significant colored mana issues. If you are going to win, winning soon seems like your best bet. How can your opponent answer the question you're asking? His best potential answer is Kagemaro, and getting the second Swamp definitely hints that this is likely to be his plan. Naming Kagemaro makes it much harder for your opponent to stabilize the board, he is probably playing many copies and it is even a key part of his long term strategy. This seems like the clear card to name here.

Here's what happened:

I decided that even if I didn't hit the card in his hand it was still worth removing from his deck so I cast the Extraction. It resolved and I named Kagemaro. Sure enough, two of them were removed from his hand. This gave me enough leverage to win the game. Looking back on the game now I realize that there was an important aspect I didn't consider. Although I believe my opponent's play wouldn't have made sense in any hand in which he had Gifts Ungiven, it was perfectly possible that he had an Island in hand and just wanted to get the other Black mana to be prepared for whatever he might draw. Under this scenario my Extraction would have missed the most important card in his deck. However, as a worst case scenario this is far from a disaster, as it means that neither of the cards I feared the most were in his hand.

-Evan Kaplan

There are some details he didn't cover, but overall his thinking is solid. If there was one thing I would criticize, it is that he is still too concerned with the long term implications of what he is doing, but this is a strong analysis.

I've got a few more columns, so I'll do my best to make them count. Once again, thanks to all of you who wrote in to tell me what this column meant to you.

