



Combat Tactics

Quentin Martin
Limited Information
 Tuesday, March 20, 2007



Other than selecting how to play out your opening hand and which play to make each turn, the most difficult aspect in Limited, which is its strongest contrast to Constructed, is the combat phase. In Constructed you have near to perfect information about what tricks they might have because you know what cards each archetype plays. In white-green alone in this Limited format, there are 27 different cards that affect combat. But to allay your fears, it's far easier to figure it out than you might think.



When watching inexperienced players playing Limited, I often see the board clogged up with far too many creatures in a huge stand off. My games almost never look like this. So what are they doing wrong? They have no true understanding of the combat phase. They are afraid of what the opponent might be holding, they are unable to ascertain what he is holding from his plays and, even worse, they cannot even work out what creatures should attack and how the opponent's men should block even if no tricks are factored in at all.

I won't lie, it is difficult to work out the correct play every time. There are many questions that you need to ask yourself. Luckily, you do have to ask these questions every turn, and after a while you tend to keep a current balance in your head. If the board is currently even, with no one attacking, and your opponent draws a card and attacks, then obviously the game state has changed. He has either drawn a combat trick or a powerful enough creature to ensure his defence, so you should play accordingly.

What is the current situation?

This is the first thing you should query. What is the texture of the board? How much life do you each have? How many cards do you each have? What cards are you holding and how will they affect your decisions? Who is winning?

If you are dealing more damage to your opponent each turn than you are taking in turn, in relation to your life totals, then you are probably winning. For example, if you are dealing him 3 a turn and taking 1 back and you are both on 20 life, then you are winning. However, if the same thing is taking place, but you are on 4 and he is on 20, then he is winning, because you will die in four turns and he in seven. Whoever is attacking for the largest percentage life swing is winning. Extreme cases aside, this is a handy way to gauge the situation.

Whoever is attacking for the largest percentage life swing is winning.

Having assessed what is going on – how will you win?

What plays will you need to make to further your progress in the game? Is the game going well enough for you that it is not dependent on you peeling to improve it? If you are winning, what cards can your opponent have to stop you from doing so? And what cards can he peel to turn the game around? This is the next step. You know what is going on, now you have to work out how to either keep things going in your favour or to ensure that they will do so soon.

What input does your opponent provide?

What can he cast? What will he save/lose/kill? What information does his attack give you? What information has his previous attacks and blocks showed? What information have you gleaned from all of his other plays?

PRODUCTS

[Planar Chaos](#) [Time Spiral](#)
[All Magic products](#)

RULES

[Core Game](#)
[Basic Rulebook](#)
[Comprehensive Rules](#)
[All Magic Rules](#)

MESSAGE BOARDS

[MAGIC COMMUNITY](#) [All Magic message boards](#)
[magicthegathering.com forum](#)
[Rules Q&A forum](#)
[Magic Online announcements](#)

MAGIC ONLINE

[MAGIC ONLINE](#)
[Download Now!](#)
[Magic Online Academy](#)
[Magic Online FAQ](#)

NOVELS

[Time Spiral](#)
 Time Spiral Cycle, Book I
 by Scott McGough

Again, this might seem like a lot of things to factor in. Working out what he can play is a simple matter of looking at the mana available to him and then having enough knowledge of the format to know every single card that he can play off that mana that is relevant. (Aside: To succeed in Limited, you should know the exact text of every single card in the format.) It sounds like a daunting process, but there will often only be around five cards they can have, as many of them act to fulfill the same purpose.

The information might seem like the trickiest element to figure out, but it is simple. Every time you do something, you do it for a reason. So does your opponent. Take a look back and examine his plays from a different perspective and ask yourself why he makes the plays he does. When you look at it like this, everything he does reveals new things to you. What he attacks with, what he doesn't attack with, what he does pre-combat, what he didn't do last turn but does now that he has more mana or mana of a different colour – all these things speak volumes.

Every play he makes tells you massive amounts of information. If your opponent passes his second turn, and the end of your second turn, with **♣♣** up, it tells you that he doesn't have Scryb Rangers or any other two drop the two colours might have. If he does play something, say an Errant Doomsayers, then it means he doesn't have Benalish Cavalry, Amrou Scout, Spinneret Sliver, Ashcoat Bear, or Kavu Predator, amongst other cards. The easiest example of this is a morph. It fears to enter combat versus a Basal Sliver ever since it was played, but when land number six comes into play, it romps into the red zone alone. No bonus points if you guessed what it is – a Slipstream Serpent.



I often get asked whether a specific play a friend has made was correct or not. However, the information they give me is incomplete. You need to know what was going on in the turns previously to assess what cards he may have. You need to know what other cards both you and he have in your decks. In brief, each game is different, subjective to the nuances of both of your plays and decks. It is unbelievable how much information is available, if you know how to look for it.

Are you happy with what the table will look like afterwards?

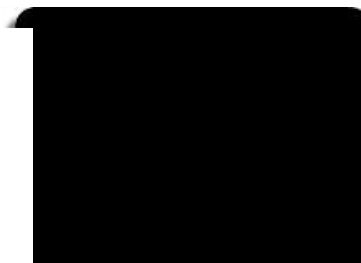
This is often the easiest way to work out whether the play is correct or not. Envisage what the board will look like in the aftermath, if you like it, then it's a good thing. Perform this process with all of your options, and the one that leaves you feeling safest is the best. Some plays might seem better but upon reflection, you would often rather have done something differently. You should always make the play that maximises your chances of winning the game. For example, you might have the option of playing an Aether Web or a Strangling Soot to get the best out of combat. They both have the same end result except if you play the Soot, you will have the Web left in your hand; whereas if you play the Web, you will have the Soot remaining and your creature will be slightly larger. As a base rule of thumb, it is better to have the bigger guy and the better card, the Soot, in your hand. However, in this specific scenario, your opponent has made it obvious that he is holding a removal spell which you are positive the Web will foil. Thus, you are happier knowing you have played around your opponent's next trick too.



How much room do you have to play with?

Sometimes you will be under lots of pressure. It will become apparent that you no longer have the luxury to play around certain cards such as Tromp the Domains, Stonewood Invocation, Strength in Numbers, Fortify or Squall Line; so you simply play as if those cards do not exist. However, most of the time you do have options and it is up to you how tight a line you want to tread. Say you are on 20 life, with a superior board position, and your white-red opponent plays Disintegrate to kill your Serra Sphinx, your biggest threat. You have a Draining Whelk in your hand – what should you do?

I have deliberately not given you all the information. Most players would flop the Whelk onto the table in a heartbeat with a big grin on their face; and then go on to lose. Let us say that your board position post-Disintegrate is still dominating enough such that you are incredibly likely to win, and that the Whelk does not make your subsequent attack lethal. If you Whelked, attacked him to, say, 7, and he chump-blocked with everything – how stupid do you look when he topdecks Desolation Giant and then Akroma, Angel of Wrath to win the game? The Disintegrate was not enough for you to



warrant having to use the Whelk, you had enough room to sit on the Whelk until your opponent played a card you *had* to counter. If you can play around everything and still win, then do so. This type of play comes with a warning though – it is very advanced and as such very difficult. Be careful.

Do you have limited resources to deal with certain cards your opponent currently has or might have?

You might have only one card in your deck to deal with his two bombs. Although he hasn't drawn either of them yet, you have drawn your only removal for them – do you have the luxury to keep hold of it for a future scenario? Must you burn it now and hope the bombs do not rear their heads, or if you use it now will it limit the strength of his bombs if he draws them or deny him the time to draw them.



These are the questions that should be going through your head. To see how useful they have been, or how well you understood them before, let's see how you do in a series of ever more difficult examples.

Exercise 1

It is your opponent's turn. He has untapped and drawn and is attacking with both of his Ashcoat Bears. He has no splash colour. What is your play?

Opponent
4 life
Two cards in hand



You
13 life
No cards in hand



Opponent:
4 life
Two cards in hand
In play: 5 untapped Plains, 5 untapped Forests, 2 tapped and attacking Ashcoat Bears

You:

13 life

No cards in hand

In play: 3 tapped Islands, 3 tapped Mountains, untapped Jaya Ballard, Task Mage and face down Shaper Parasite, tapped Pardic Dragon, Deep-Sea Kraken, Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir, and Greater Gargadon.

Answer:

The first thing you have to do here is figure out how on earth you could lose this board position. There is only one correct play here. You block both of his Bears, trading your far superior men for his. There are only two possible combinations in his hand that can concern you. The first is the only realistic one – a land and a Squall Line for the draw. The other combination is a Saltblast for the Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir and a Dawn Charm/Chameleon Blur/Angel's Grace to stay alive to topdeck the Squall Line. This is an example where you have all the room in the world to play around every card in the format, so do so. Even though it might seem horrific to block like this, it is one hundred percent correct.

Exercise 2

This is from a friendly game against Dolf Hendrixx, one of the up and coming Dutch players. It is his fourth turn of the game. He was on the play and curved out nicely with his mono-white deck, opening with a Benalish Cavalry followed by a Saltfield Recluse. He has made his fourth Plains pre-combat and has attacked you with everything. What is the play?

Opponent

20 life

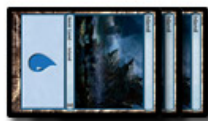
Four cards in



You

18 life

Six cards in hand



Opponent:

20 life

Four cards in hand

In play: 4 untapped Plains, tapped and attacking Benalish Cavalry and Saltfield Recluse.

You:
 18 life
 Six cards in hand
 In play: 3 tapped Islands, untapped face down Slipstream Serpent

Answer:

Again, another easy solution. Only a madman would attack with the Recluse here without a trick. There are only really four tricks that might make sense here: Fortify, Whitemane Lion, Stonecloaker and Celestial Crusader. Unless this is Game 2 and he saw your entire deck in the previous game and knows that your only morph is a Vesuvan Shapeshifter (which we know is not the case), then you can easily rule Fortify out, because no morph is worth trading Recluse and Fortify for at this time. It makes no sense that he has the Lion here as he stands to gain nothing. The Stonecloaker might want to come online here and start the beating but it is an unusual play, especially given that the Recluse would have been even more board dominating than the addition of a flyer would be. This leaves us with what is clearly the answer – Celestial Crusader. It is an aggressive start and he wishes to get more damage in. There is no advantage for him to wait until your end step to cast it and he would rather deal you 2 additional damage with the Recluse at this point than prevent 2.

It should be noted that if he knew that the morph was a Vesuvan Shapeshifter, it might be possible that he is holding either a Serra's Boon or a Serrated Arrows, but again this situation is highly implausible. This is the last of the easy puzzles.

Exercise 3

This is from a side event grudge match between Dutch super-star (and housemate) Ruud Warmenhoven and the world's best, Kenji Tsumura. Late into an epic first game, Ruud Saltblasted Kenji's freshly made Jedit Ojanen of Efrava but neglected to attack with his Ashcoat Bear into Kenji's tapped out board. It is now Kenji's turn, he has drawn another Island. What should he do?

Ruud
 10 life
 One card in hand



Kenji
 10 life

In hand:



Ruud:

10 life

One card in hand

In play: 5 Forests (three tapped, two untapped), 3 Plains (two tapped, one untapped), untapped Ashcoat Bear

Kenji:

10 life

An Island in hand

In play: 3 untapped Forests, 3 untapped Island, untapped Uktabi Drake, untapped Crookclaw Transmuter

Answer:

The first question that should be apparent here is why on earth did the Bear not attack. Those who didn't notice this are probably worried about Hailstorm and should only attack with the Uktabi Drake. This is, however, wrong, because there is a reason the Bears did not attack. There are only two tricks that Ruud can play that would hold the Bears back, and they are Aether Web and the third ability of Evolution Charm.

The best way to work out any attack is to start by figuring out what would happen if all your men turned sideways. If this was the case here, and Ruud had the Web, he would block the Drake for free, fall to 7, and have a blocker to trade with the Crookclaw Transmuter – not a good end result. If Ruud has the Charm, then the Bear will fly and trade with the Transmuter – not the worst end result, but there are still two further attacking options. The Drake could attack alone; suicide in the face of a Web and a good trade with a Charm. If the Transmuter attacks on his lonesome, it will trade with both the Bears and either of Ruud's options. Now, we know that Ruud will use his trick no matter, so it is clear that the correct attack is to attack with just the Transmuter.

As it turns out, Kenji did attack with his Transmuter and Ruud did the unexpected – he took three. One of the best plays I have ever seen. The double bluff. He explained to me later that he had three Penumbra Spiders he hoped to topdeck and by not attacking with the Bears he saved himself from taking 2 additional damage. It was an impossible damage race for him to win, given his deck, so he gained himself an extra turn to draw a Spider. This play would only work against a high-level opponent who is good enough to go through all the needed steps of reasoning. Once more proving the old saying about never bluffing an idiot.

Exercise 4

This example is difficult. It is one of the situations you will face all the time – where the information is not as clear as in my previous examples and you are left to work out what the right play is facing a multitude of potential tricks. The game so far has lacked interaction as neither player has had much of the opportunity to put in a good attack. In your turn, you upped the ante by tapping out for a Magus of the Arena. Before combat, your opponent Saltblasted it and has now swung in with his men. What is your play?



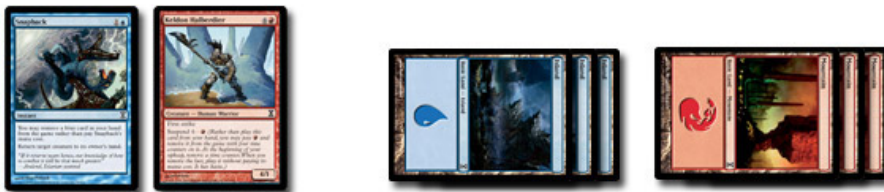
Opponent
20 life
Three cards in hand



You
20 life



In hand:



Opponent:
20 life
Three cards in hand

In play: 3 Plains (two tapped, one untapped), 4 Forests (3 tapped, one untapped), an untapped Thallid Shell-Dweller with five spore counters, and tapped and attacking Wormwood Dryad, Nantuko Shaman, and Citanul Woodreaders

You:
20 life
Snapback and Keldon Halberdier in hand

In play: 3 tapped Islands, 3 tapped Mountains, untapped Blazing Blade Askari, Coal Stoker, and face up Shaper Parasite

To help you out, the tricks he can have are: Aether Web, Might of Old Krosa, Strength in Numbers, Temporal Isolation, Thrill of the Hunt, and Whitemane Lion (other cards like Momentary Blink and Dawn Charm do exactly the same thing, only worse).

Answer:

Let's look through the many options we have here. The Sam Gomersall school of Magic is to block to see what trick they have, if any, if the block is not too negative. This is often applicable in the early game where the casting of a trick can make the caster lose a lot of tempo, but it could also come into play here.

The most obvious block is to trade the Shaper Parasite with the Nantuko Shaman and the Blazing Blade Askari with the Wormwood Dryad and bounce the Coal Stoker off the Citanul Woodreaders. It should quickly become apparent that this block does not have much going for it. Should he have Thrill of the Hunt you will put two of your creatures into the bin. Aether Web leaves him with a very big Shaman

(though you have Snapback in hand). Whitemane Lion snatches the Shaman back for more card advantage, and the Coal Stoker that you saved still cannot attack through the Thallid Shell-Dweller.

There are many other blocking combinations – suffice to say, they are not as good as this one. The second best block would be applying the School of Sam. Stick the Askari in front of the Dryad and your other two before the Woodreaders. This plays around most of the tricks he can have, and taking 3 damage at this point in the game is irrelevant so we have no worries there. Thrill of the Hunt is still very good, but it seems okay to trade the Askari for half of it. Temporal Isolation, Might of Krosa, and Strength in Numbers save the Woodreaders and trades for the Coal Stoker. Whitemane Lion is very good for him here as everyone wants to return a Woodreaders to their hand if ever possible.

All in all, this block looks very good, though Thrill is still bad, as is Lion, and you make Might of Krosa more effective than it is in other options. But this is still not the best block.

Before moving on to other suggestions, it should be noted that you are holding Snapback and Keldon Halberdier. If you can block in such a way so that your opponent is not faced with a favourable option to use his trick (always a good thing as he will have to leave the mana up for it another time, or, in the case of the Lion, not have another guy on the table), then you can leave Snapback mana open next turn to trump his trick should he then cast it. The Halberdier might be enough by himself next turn to stop the next attack and if your opponent feels confident enough to swing into that, then that narrows down what the trick can be. If you draw a land, you can do both. So ideally, we do not want him to play his trick. We can find a good enough block.

There is only one block available that ensures your opponent will not play his trick. It is the only block that protects against Thrill of the Hunt (the most powerful trick in this scenario). It also denies your opponent the opportunity to play a very advantageous Whitemane Lion this turn. The Parasite blocks the Woodreaders and the other two block the Dryad.

As in the last block, we are still taking three damage, and this is still no problem. On the surface it seems this block is inferior as we are trading the Coal Stoker for the Dryad rather than the Askari, but neither one of those is of particular relevance to the board right now as they cannot break through the wall. This block is the best because it plays around every single card he could have. It leaves him no good options and forces him to keep open that mana another time. It also means you can untap to the cards in your hand and feel safe.

Exercise 5

I will leave you with a cliffhanger from one of my Pro Tour – Geneva games. This is a situation that is still puzzling the pros. No one can unanimously agree on the correct play. You have three cards of average worth – an okay trick, a solid creature, and a good creature. You and your opponent are both at 16 life and you are being attacked, what is the correct play?



Opponent
16 life
Three cards in hand



You
16 life
Three cards in hand



Opponent:
16 life
Three cards in hand
In play: 3 untapped Islands, 3 untapped Mountains, an untapped 1/1 Goblin token, and a tapped and attacking face up Fathom Seer

You:
16 life
Three cards in hand
In play: 3 tapped Forests, 2 tapped Mountains, untapped Nantuko Shaman and Ashcoat Bears

Have fun in the forums...

Q



[Discuss on the message boards](#)



[Quentin Martin archive](#)

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

