

How to Deal with Time Trouble

By Itzhak Solsky

The way to deal with time trouble is to never ever get into time trouble.

Time trouble hurts you, and you don't actually need it. It's a strange addiction, you make yourself play on adrenaline - but it doesn't help your game any.

The only thing time trouble does for us, is force us to play quickly in the later stages of the match, where errors and blunders count for so much more.

We tell ourselves, early in the match – “well, time is not important, let's just find the very best plays”. Then later time becomes direly important, and that's when we need to make the important decisions.

So how do we avoid time trouble? This is pretty simple. There are different strategies for this, but let me share a couple of ideas I use every time I play (and I never get into time trouble):

- 1) Always keep an eye on the clock when playing (Phil Simborg wisely adds; make sure it is set correctly, make sure you know how to start and pause it, remember to always pause it between games and don't be shy of calling for help when you need it);
- 2) Always make sure you're not lagging behind your opponent (unless she plays too fast and never thinks, and sometimes lagging by a minute or two is OK so long as there's still plenty of time left);
- 3) Remember that your job is not to find the absolutely best move in every position –but to create that “happy middle ground” between playing as well as possible and playing as fast as possible... and the middle ground would be – playing as well as you can while also minding the clock (making sure you don't fall too far behind);
- 4) This is a yardstick I regularly use when playing: figure how many games you might still play and how much time you would need for each one. Say you play to seven and you get 14 minutes (not counting the extra time per move) - you might play thirteen more games and not more - so you know that you have about a minute per game.

Now let's say that it's 2-0 (still to seven) and the cube goes to 4 – so you know that there's at most seven games remaining, including this one. And you can probably take considerably more time on this specific game - it does count for four games (because the high cube just eliminated three potential games), and the correct plays count for more.

- 5) Always keep an eye on the clock. Don't become so concentrated on the position or on various calculations, that the clock becomes “irrelevant”. Ask yourself “how much time can I reasonably afford to spend on this position” before going any deeper – this IS a

deep question, a deep match strategy question. Time allocation is an important element of successful match strategy.

The time trouble addict

Some people habitually get into time trouble.

If this is you, you're in great company, as some of the top players in the world tend to dazzle us by their brilliant speed play ("look! No hands!"). But most of us don't play so well when we don't have time to properly consider important decisions.

Surprisingly, the time trouble addict poses a special type of danger for us, as they can drive us into a strange kind of self-hypnosis...

Let's say that you're normally a disciplined player, you're deeply involved in the fighting stage of your match, with complicated scores and positions, you're behind 5a-4a, you still have some eight minutes left – and suddenly you notice that your opponent is down to her last minute or two.

You can get excited... but what do you know? Maybe she actually likes it this way. It's probably not her first time in this condition, and she may be used to it.

Of course, the opponent won't be playing quite as well (except if his name is, for example, Zdenek Zizka – who pulled a 1.47 performance against me last year in Istanbul despite playing with less than one minute through three complicated games) – but that's your opponent's problem. Don't make it yours.

How can I make this problem my own, you ask?

Simple! Just make her clock situation way more important than your own disciplined play. You can shift your concentration from your usual mindful play to – “oh wow, I'm going to win on time! Let's just complicate everything, make her think deeply and she'll forget the clock for just ten more seconds!”

A great idea – which ultimately leads to the opponent defeating you with just one second on her clock, and with you getting an awful performance rating because you've even made the game too complicated for your own good.

Case in point

The screenshot shows the eXtreme Gammon 2.19.211 pre-release Hummus interface. The main window displays a 3D-rendered backgammon board with green and brown triangles. The board is numbered 1-24. The left side (player 1) has a score of 51: 5/4 5/Off. The right side (player 2) has a score of 41: 22/17. A 'Time Trouble' warning is visible in the top right corner, indicating a checker is off and the pip count is 72 (-156) with a score of 57. The interface includes a menu bar (File, Transcribe, Action, Game, Batch Rollout, Analyze, Players, Options, Layout, Windows, Help) and a status bar at the bottom showing the current match score and performance rating.

Game 6: 2 - 5

Time Trouble

(1 checker off) Pip= 72 (-156) Score: 57

Game Log:

- 51: 5/4 5/Off
- 41: 22/17
- 33: Cannot Move
- 35: 51: 22/16
- 43: 6/3* 4/Off
- 36: 63: Bar/22* 23/17
- 53: Bar/20 6/3*
- 37: 32: Bar/22* 17/15
- 31: Cannot Move
- 38: 31: 17/14 16/15
- 63: Bar/19 20/17
- 39: 65: 23/18 14/8*
- 61: Bar/19 4/3*
- 40: 54: Cannot Move
- 65: 19/8
- 41: 62: Bar/17*
- 63: Bar/19 6/3
- 42: 55: 18/8 15/10(2)
- 42: 5/3
- 43: 61: 10/9 10/4
- 51: 19/18 19/14
- 44: 54: 18/9
- 44: 18/6 14/10
- 45: 31: 8/4
- 22: 10/8* 8/4 6/4
- 46: 31: Bar/24 9/6

Cube Move Summary

| Cube | Move | Summary |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Hummus | 33 (14) | Errors (Blunders) 21 (7) |
| | -3.663 | Equity -1.709 |
| 0 | Doubles (Blunders) 2 (1) | |
| +0.000 | Equity -0.225 | |
| 1 (1) | Takes (Blunders) 1 (1) | |
| -0.181 | Equity -0.431 | |
| -3.843 | Total Equity -2.364 | |
| -4.028 (16) | Luck (Joker) +4.028 (24) | |
| Intermediate | Advanced | |
| 13.82 | Performance Rating 7.53 | |
| Options | Match | |

This page is showing the overall results for the match or game.

Hummus

Pip= 228 (+156) Score: 217

10:16 pm 25/06/2024

I was falling for this exact trap not so long ago (which inspired this article...) and here you see the culmination of my strategy: with the opponent (a strong master and a very pleasant person) having seconds on the clock, I worked myself into a hyper-complicated back game with a demolished board, in which my mistakes would certainly be much larger than his (these are all the reds and greens you see on the left...)

Being behind 5a-2a in this match, in which our respective performance ratings were part of the competition, my "noble aspiration" was (later in the game) to get him to double, drop the cube (a blunder worth 0.200 in this "festival in red and green") and

force him to play at least another game with a second on the clock.

He did nobly well, played much better than I did (as the diagram shows) and deservedly won the match. As my game plan was based on his clock situation, I helped him become the hero of the day.

It would have been much better to simply concentrate on my best plays and mind my own clock situation, as usual, while coolly ignoring his predicament.

In backgammon, where the dice are paramount in any one match, this well-known saying holds even truer: we are never in competition with any opponent, but only with ourselves – with our own weaknesses and failings (both regarding our backgammon skills and simply as human beings).

A great human merit is being impervious to distraction, and an opponent with very little time can be quite distracting...

Heed the warning in this article and spare yourself similar unpleasant experiences when playing the time trouble addict.

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