

# The Second Head: Double the Challenge

Anthony Alongi

Monday, August 15, 2005

- 
- 



- [Anthony Alongi Archive](#)

First, I would like to gloat over my amazing [predictive powers](#). A [sanctioned multiplayer format](#)? Really? Cool!!! I swear I had no idea this was going to happen. Nor do I believe I had any influence whatsoever on the process. These crazy cats at Wizards – who knows what they'll do next? Wait, I know, I'll make a prediction: they'll misprint a check to me for \$1,000,000! (Hey, it can't hurt.) While I'm giddy about the new format – I think it's a great move for Wizards, and for players – they don't pay me to love everything they do without question. Two-headed giant as a sanctioned format comes with complications. Remember how I told you all, years ago, about how you should be careful what you wish for?

Here we are. On balance, it's going to be a positive thing – a hugely positive thing. But everyone who wants to play this format should get a few things straight. Some of the seven challenges below are logistical. Others are strategic. Others are cultural.

We'll start, as we always should, with some rules.

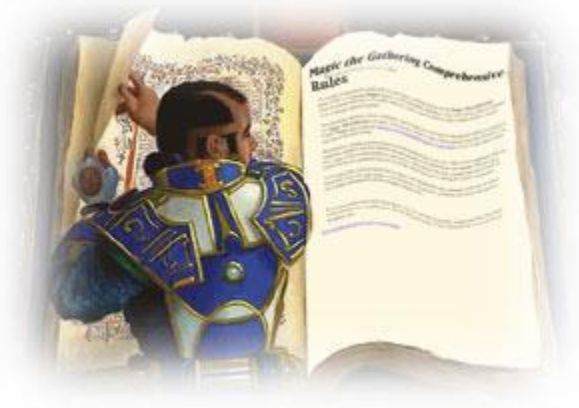
## Challenge #1 – The Rules

Before you read any further, go to the [comprehensive rules](#) and reference the section on Two-Headed Giant. Print it out. (It's only a couple pages long.) Read it.

You didn't do it, did you? You completely ignored me. That's okay – but realize I won't be answering any rules questions on this format via email. The answers you seek are either in those comprehensive rules, the [floor rules for Two-Headed Giant and Two-Headed Giant FAQ](#), or they're in the [Saturday rules column](#), or they're (gasp) in Mark Gottlieb's head.

Seriously – that's not a joke. Some rulings are *literally in his head*. Go ahead – ask his head. It'll tell you – I speak truth.

That said, I'll be happy to point out the five places where I think most players are likely to trip up the first time they try this cool new format.



**1) COMBAT.** Most people, I think, will get pretty quickly that the two players can pretty much play as one as they cast spells and put down lands and such. No problem there. But issues will arise when it's time to declare attackers and/or blockers. Why?

Because that's when two heads really do become one – with some exceptions. Those exceptions will raise questions. And since the stakes are generally higher in combat than they are in other phases, more people will really care about the answers.

Here's the common sense interpretation I believe will stick: *everything is about attacking each head of the entire opposing two-headed giant's body, until damage assignment.* At that point, you may (and in fact, you have to) decide *which one particular head* takes the blow.

So – let's say I control a Goblin Goon. My teammate Laura controls a Hypnotic Specter and a Doomsday Specter. You control two Eager Cadets. Your teammate Smudge controls no creatures, but has a Ghostly Prison and a Glacial Chasm.



We go into combat. Laura and I want to attack with everything. We look at Goblin Goon and we count. I have to account for *each part* of the opponent's body – so while Goblin Goon could have attacked Smudge in a duel (1 0), this isn't a duel. I look at your part of the body (1 2) and I see Goblin Goon fails the test for one of you – so it fails the test, period.

So we attack with the two Specters. Now we have to look at each of you again, to pay costs. You don't have a Ghostly Prison. But Smudge does. That means we have to pay two for each attacker (four total). If you had also thought to play your own Ghostly Prison, we would have to pay four for each attacker (eight total). But you didn't because you're lame, which Smudge goes ahead and says, which gets you upset but then you realize he was right, you *are* kinda lame for forgetting. See how important understanding the rules is?

Laura pays four mana. (I can't – they're not my creatures.) Now comes time for fast effects and such, but nobody has any of those. Really, isn't this complicated enough? And we're still on part 1 of challenge #1! We've gotta get moving! Neither of you can block the specters so they both hit – one Doomsday, and one Hypnotic.

Laura (who could consult with me if she wanted, but she doesn't want to) assigns her damage – each creature can hit a different head, or both can hit one head. The rules allow for either. Since you have six cards and Smudge only has one, Laura decides to deal the Doomsday's Specter's damage to you, and the Hypnotic Specter's damage to Smudge.

But wait! Smudge has a Glacial Chasm! (Silly Laura. She should have consulted with me.) So the two damage he would have taken is prevented. You, however, still take two from the Doomsday Specter. Laura looks at your hand and makes you discard the Ghostly Prison you held back. Now don't you feel worse?

### **IF ONE HEAD DIES...**

606. 8b Players win and lose the game only as a team, not as individuals. If either player on a team loses the game, the team loses the game. If either player on a team wins the game, the entire team wins the game. If an effect would prevent a player from winning the game, that player's team can't win the game. If an effect would prevent a player from losing the game, that player's team can't lose the game.

**Example:** In a Two-Headed Giant game, a player controls Platinum Angel, which reads, "You can't lose the game and your opponents can't win the game." Neither that player nor his or her teammate can lose the game while Platinum Angel is in play, and neither player on the opposing team can win the game.

But at least you understand the rules of combat a bit better now.

**2) DEATH.** The rules state this pretty clearly, but let's go over it just to be sure: if one head dies, the other one dies.

Did you mill one player down and now they can't draw? That team is dead.

Did you give one player ten poison counters? That team is dead.

Did the player you gave ten poison counters to control a Platinum Angel? That team is still alive.

Did that player's teammate play Control Magic on that Platinum Angel, because he thought it would be funny to do so? That team is still alive.

Did the guy who first controlled that Platinum Angel use abusive language in front of everyone at the tournament, because his teammate is wasting cards? The team is still alive.

Did that player get a game loss for unsportsmanlike conduct? Now that team is dead.

**3) CONTROL.** When you control a permanent or effect that refers to "you", it means you and you alone. If you control a Bringer of the Black Dawn, only you may pay two life and get the card.

There are a million other examples. Just remember: you means "you"! Er, except when it doesn't. See below.

**4) TURNS.** If "you" get an extra turn, or skip a turn, then your entire team does. So when you Time Warp your teammate, you're also helping yourself. And when you play Eater of Days, there's still a (huge) drawback.

**5) MINDSLAVING.** This one gets a section all to itself.

When I asked the rules staff at Wizards about how to play this card in Two-Headed Giant (Whose turn do you control? Do you get to see the other player's hand? Can you attack the other player?), I got this from Paul Barclay:

`You blast off and nuke the site from orbit. It's the only way to be sure.`

Thanks, Ripley. Actually, Paul did follow that up with a very clear and concise answer:

`You take both player's turns.`

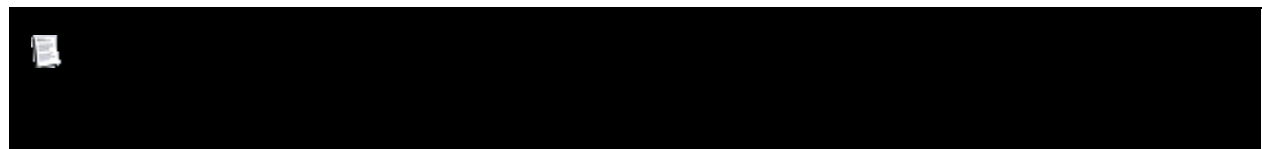
Wow. Yes, that's a real ruling. So Mindslaver, which was already disgusting enough, just got even better.

But to make up for it, so did Arboria. After all, based on the combat discussion we had above, one teammate can not do anything, while the other does – and the other team still won't be able to attack them! (Wait. The other team can do that too. Okay, Arboria's still worse than Mindslaver. Glad we cleared that up.)

Now that we all understand the rules a bit better (and have printed them out...right?), let's talk about some of the less technical challenges Two-Headed Giant faces.

## **Challenge #2 – Deck Type Dominance**

I would like to perform a public service. I would like to help every person who wants to make a post on any message board heralding how this format will fail. Simply cut and paste the following paragraph, insert it into your post, follow the bold-faced and bracketed instructions, and hit "Enter":





And now, I'll save the next poster some time as well:



Our play group tested this format a couple of months ago. After two games, I heard much positive feedback, and then three pieces of negative feedback. Here, in order, and I kid you not, are the three pieces of negative feedback:

- "Creature theme decks (e.g., elves) will dominate this format."
- "Control decks (e.g., Counterspells and Wrath of God) will dominate this format."
- "Combo decks (e.g., Mindslaver and Bringer of the White Dawn) will dominate this format."

Folks, I've got exactly two minutes here where I am the authoritative player on this newly sanctioned format. At two minutes and one second, [Zvi](#) will reanalyze everything and come up with a brilliant unified theory, at which point the entire Pro player field will adopt it, blow past me, and make me obsolete once again. So while I have the floor, can I make this simple point:

*This "challenge" for Two-Headed Giant is a non-issue.* If you hear someone boldly advance a theory of what will "dominate", ignore it.

Instead, play this format as you would play any tournament-sanctioned format. Study it. Build and test decks. Think hard about what would beat those decks. Adjust appropriately. Whatever you think is dominant, has an answer. Learn to play the metagame. That's the real challenge to this format!

Personally, I like control's early chances in this format – as I can attest better than most, it's hard to stop two control decks that work well together in the same game. One or both can easily set up a long-term win condition, or even a little combo engine down the road. But your job as a player is not to whine about this fact. Your job is to find the several weaknesses in control's armor, and exploit them.

All right, Zvi. It's all yours.

Which brings us to our next challenge.

### **Challenge #3 - The Culture of Multiplayer**

For players who like to divide things into "us" and "them", watching a bunch of Pro Tour wannabes descend upon one of the more revered formats in multiplayer Magic can be a bit daunting. One thing you could be sure of when you went to your local store – if more than two players were in the same game, people were more relaxed. You could watch them and no one would talk about "hoarding tech". Heck, you could probably join them next game. Teammates wouldn't look you up and down and try to assess how many Pro Tour points you had.

Now, some of that is going to change.

Part of what I want to say here falls under the category of "be careful what you wish for." Many multiplayer enthusiasts have been asking for more respect from Wizards – sanctioned tournaments, or at least a set of common rules. Well, guess what. We got both, which means there's a lot of new respect out there for multiplayer. There are tournaments and prizes to be won! As soon as you introduce tournaments and prizes, you introduce incentives. And once you introduce incentives, people take the game a lot more seriously.

If you find yourself caught up in a grand discussion about "how do we fix this" – you don't. Frankly, you don't *want* to fix it. The problems we are about to face have little to do with the decisions Wizards makes about what to sanction and what not to sanction.

No, the problems we are about to face have to do with human nature. When the stakes go up, the knives come out. People want the prize. If there's a format with a prize, they'll go for it – and some will act like jerks to get it.

You cannot control this. (Add it to the list in your life.) What you can control, however, is your own behavior. *Take responsibility for your own happiness.* Here are some specific suggestions:

1. **Go in numbers.** When you go to a tournament using the new Two-Headed Giant format, go with a group of friends. Have your pairs in mind already – heck, practice beforehand. You'll have a better time if you know more people there.
2. **Go with a teammate.** If you go alone to an event like this, accept that you are at a competitive disadvantage. You may get paired up with someone else looking for a teammate, which is great – but your decks are likely to struggle together.
3. **Practice.** If you've had a lot of fun in multiplayer games and feel like it would be great to compete in a tournament, be ready for it. Not only should you coordinate your decks, you should play them frequently against other teams.

The need to practice decks with at least four players at a time, instead of two, highlights an interesting barrier to entry for newer players: in sanctioned multiplayer formats, you need a larger playtest group to do well. This translates to clans on **Magic Online** – a sanctioned multiplayer format, in essence, encourages us to run in packs, like wolves. I find this completely acceptable – favorable, in fact. Multiplayer **Magic** requires you to have a few friends. Sanctioned multiplayer **Magic** requires you to have a few friends *capable of commitment*. Commitment requires maturity – well, you see where I'm going, here...

4. **Act like an adult.** Even if you're not an adult, there's nothing stopping you from impersonating one. This means that before a tournament, you practice when your group requires practice. You help each other get better, because you realize it makes *you* better.

During a tournament, you engage in sportsmanlike behavior, even if everyone else around you isn't. You talk things through seriously with your teammate and work to make quick, smart decisions. If things don't go your way, you don't pout or complain. When you win, you shake hands with both opponents. When you lose, you shake hands with both opponents and give them full credit for the win (not your bad draws, or your teammate's mistake, or any other silliness).

After the tournament, you debrief with your teammate. You reflect on what you did well, and where you could have both done better. You prepare for the next one.

This is how it works, when you sanction a format – or when you engage in anything where people are seriously competing. You prepare professionally, engage professionally, and reflect professionally. It's a bit less recreational, to be sure. But there are constantly new *unsanctioned* formats springing up...

5. **Metagame.** This is a necessary skill in **Magic** – I don't care if you're playing casually or in tournaments. You need to learn how to react to changing reality. If you start seeing *Mindslavers* all over the place (see above), then learn how to change your decks so that you're playing with more *Naturalizes* and *Willbenders*. If you're up against double-control all the time, make a list of the aggressive and control strategies that work against such decks and hit them back hard.

A little poem for those of you who are feeling down about "too many tourney decks" in your Two-Headed Giant games:

*Don't whine, if you please – just refine.  
Don't whine, if you please – redesign.  
Instead of complaining, read what I'm explaining,  
Don't whine to the sweet melon vine.*

Yeah, here's what happened on that last line. I'm consulting my rhyming dictionary, and under four-syllable entries for "whine" (and four syllables is what I had to fill – folks, I'm not exactly Walt Whitman reincarnate!) they had many, many intriguing possibilities. Not all of them make contextual sense. But frankly, poetry annoys me, and I saw no reason to cooperate.

6. **Withdraw, if you need to.** People stop playing sanctioned **Magic** all the time. For some, that means no **Magic** anymore. For others, it means rediscovering casual play. Maybe you'll need to, too. Take some time off, gather around that old kitchen table, and do something different. Or play the same two-headed format, but without all the pressure. What's stopping you?

Maybe you'll return to the tournament scene in a few months. And maybe you won't. The world will keep spinning, regardless.

Did casual **Magic** die when people started playing duels in tournaments? No. Will casual**Magic** die when people start playing two-player teams in tournaments? No.

#### **Challenge #4 – Personal Relationships**

Let's operate under the assumption that the format *The best teams will be those that learn to cooperate...*

has pretty clear and consistent rules, isn't horrifically unbalanced by decks we know nothing about, and isn't forcing casual players through tournament hall doors in shackled pairs. What other challenges might Two-Headed Giant face?

As the companion article today by Laura Mills points out, one of the great benefits of Two-Headed Giant is that you and someone else can finally work together really closely in the same game. You can analyze each other's move, give each other critical feedback, get angry when that person isn't listening to you...

...excuse me, were we just saying how wonderful it would be to play alongside someone else?

Well, mostly that will be true. But like any partnership – like when you roommate with a buddy at college, or when you put money into a joint venture with someone you barely know, or when you get married – there will be an awful lot of pushing and pulling as you try to figure each other out. It doesn't matter how well you know each other – there will be a transition.

The best teams out of the gate will be those who can quickly learn to cooperate. Some teams will solve this "rules style", by taking advantage of the primary player's supremacy. Just put the "smart one" in the primary player role, and just let her make all the decisions. (Great! Now all you have to do is decide together who the "dumb one" is.)

Other teams will solve this more equitably, by splitting up decision-making duties. For example, one player might make all combat decisions, while the other makes other decisions. Or maybe the pair of

you will decide that whenever you can't come to agreement, you'll make like a college hoops game and alternate the "possession arrow" – player A got to make the call last time, so player B will make the call this time.

Whatever works.

Since we're on the topic of communication, let's segue into what may become the most important tactical advantage a team can give itself in this format.

## **Challenge #5 - Communicating as a Team**

So you can finally legally consult with someone during a tournament game. Congratulations.

Unfortunately, the more you say to your teammate, the more information you're giving the other team. "No, don't play Wrath of God yet! We'll wait until they overextend!" Um, no.

Even if you're a good whisperer, you're taking unnecessary risks. We need to face facts: the better teams at this format are going to perfect silent signaling.

How do we know this? Look at the closest relative this format has among sanctioned **Magic** formats: team sealed. In team sealed drafts, players are allowed to communicate with each other silently as they make their picks. There are all sorts of hand signals used (some more polite than others) to make sure a teammate picks the right color or card – or leaves it alone for a teammate to pick up.

Since many pros (and pro aspirants) have already learned to do this in one format, they'll quickly adapt to the next. Fortunately, hand signaling is not rocket science. All you need to know how to communicate is:

- how to designate a permanent on the board
- how to designate a card in a teammate's (or your) hand
- how to time a play (as in, "don't play that this turn...play it at the end of their next turn")

The first two can probably be handled through pointing most of the time – but every once in a while, you'll want to keep it a secret what you're considering. So you may need codes for the color and stats of certain creatures, and/or other permanents. These will be more workable, the deeper the format gets (and the more certain decks emerge as predictable tournament staples).

Of course, all this takes us back to challenge #3 and the culture of a multiplayer format. Yes, folks, multiplayer will feel very different at tournaments. I fully understand the irony that a format that encourages more friends to talk to each other may, in fact, end up with less talking on the tournament level. It doesn't mean it's evil – it means folks are being competitive.

## **Challenge #6 – Logistics**

There are at least two kinds of logistical challenges to the new sanctioned format.

The first is about following the rules. We talked a bit about play rules above, but don't forget the deck-building and floor rules! Never before have you cared so much what is in another player's deck – because if your teammate has four copies of a card you really think will work wonders in your deck, you can't play it. (This includes non-basic lands – what I expect will be the most common stumbling point. Assuming sideboards are allowed after the first game of a match, you'll also have to watch those.) I highly recommend that you maintain this deck-building restriction, even if you never play in a tournament – because Two-Headed Giant simply plays better if you aren't facing eight of a given card.

Another rules-related concern – drawing the line at touching your teammate's permanents. With all the talking and signaling and such you're suddenly allowed to do, it may become tempting to touch your teammate's permanents or hand to be clear. Don't. It's against the rules and in a tournament, you risk losing a game to do so. Learn how to communicate without touching.

The second kind of concern is about numbers. To have a proper duel, you need two. To have a proper two-headed duel, you need four. Generally, it's easier to find two than four players – and more groups are divisible by two, than by four.

While this is mostly something we can leave to the tournament organizers to figure out, I would imagine there will be times when a scheduled tournament will be disturbed, delayed, or even canceled by a numbers issue. It shouldn't happen too often, and the format should be quite viable – but please be patient with your organizers as they grapple with a new sanctioned format. No whining, okay? Especially if you're in Minneapolis and I'm attending – I'll beat Steve Port as we both rush to slap you upside the head.

## **Challenge #7 – Format Innovations**

The last challenge to the format is about creating something new. Everyone who plays this format regularly will have a responsibility as it rolls out – a responsibility to keep mucking with it.

On the formal side, this means contacting Wizards – *not me*, Wizards – with your complaints and suggestions regarding the format. A reminder – I will not carry messages for you to the DCI, nor do I have any pull over what these good people do. Over time, the DCI may be inclined to tweak here and there, depending on what we all learn.

On the informal side, it means doing for Two-Headed Giant what 5-Color **Magic** did for duels – provide players who go to tournaments with "something to do" while they're waiting for the main event.

For ideas, I recommend scanning the casual rooms in *Magic Online*, where different formats from Prismatic to Tribal already influence two-headed giant enthusiasts. I'd also point out the rather popular 2x2 draft format that many experienced players use with booster packs – except instead of duels once the drafting's done, you break out into a Two-Headed Giant game.

A new informal four-player format would be really good not just for Two-Headed Giant players, but for **Magic** generally. More than anything else, it would remind the players who are shaping a new multiplayer culture that there are, in fact, casual roots to this game.

Enjoy this format, everyone. It will twist and turn in some unpredictable (and occasionally predictable) ways. It will surprise us. It will do, ultimately, what we love **Magic** to do: entertain us by stretching our minds. If you can handle it, I'll see you – and a teammate – on the other side of the table.

*Head off to the other half of this article*