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Not His Last Gasp

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The Play's The Thing
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Second-guessing yourself is important. If you don't second-guess yourself, you won't learn what you did wrong and how you can avoid making the same mistake in the future. What many players forget is that the right play is not necessarily the one that would have won the game. People have a natural tendency to let the outcome of the game taint their outlook on their decisions. Mistakes that don't matter are disregarded, while weeks later you're still beating yourself up over correct decisions that turned out to lose you the game. In the tournament where I made my first Pro Tour top eight, I only remember one mistake – because that's the one that might have knocked me out.

With that in mind, here's today's first situation submitted by Jason Allen:

Dear Zvi Mowshowitz,

I would like to submit for your evaluation and potential use a play scenario from the Ravnica Prerelease a few weekends ago. It involves a middle- game decision that I was confronted with during a Sealed Deck flight. I feel I made the wrong decision within the game, but I'd like to see what your thoughts are on the subject.

It is your precombat main phase.

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3 cards in hand

Shambling Shell in Graveyard

OPP 16 life



5 cards in hand



Opponent (16 life):

In Play

- 2 Forests (tapped)
- 2 Swamps (tapped)
- 1 Plains (tapped)
- 1 Vulturous Zombie (Sick)
- 1 Stinkweed Imp (tapped)
- 1 Greater Mossdog

Hand: 3 unknown cards

Graveyard: Shambling Shell

Me (16 Life):

In Play

- 2 Forests
- 3 Swamps
- 1 Dimir Guildmage
- 1 Centaur Safeguard

Hand:

- Moroi
- Telling Time
- Farseek
- Last Gasp
- Forest

Graveyard:

- Elves of Deep Shadow

Your deck has three spells that can kill the **Vulturous Zombie** outright no matter how big it is, plus a **Trophy Hunter**.

Where do you go from here?

Vulturous Zombie is a huge threat that is only going to get bigger. If it stays on the table, you're almost certainly going to lose. Your opponent is tapped out, and you have **Last Gasp** in your hand. Right now only **Gather Courage** can save the Zombie, and if you cast the **Farseek** that you desperately need to cast then you can't kill the Zombie at all. Kill him while you still can! There seems to be little question that you will cast **Last Gasp** on the **Vulturous Zombie** before you cast **Farseek**.

That's exactly what he did, but alas it did not work:

I decided that my number one priority was to get rid of the **Vulturous Zombie**. I played the Forest, and seeing that my opponent was tapped out, I cast **Last Gasp** targeting the Zombie. Unfortunately, my opponent tapped the Zombie in response to Convoke out a **Gather Courage**, targeting the Zombie. My ineffective **Last Gasp** hit the graveyard, making the Zombie a 3/3 again.

Jason feels in retrospect that this decision was a mistake, saying this about it:

Of course, the original plan seemed viable too until that **Gather Courage** showed up. That's the true lesson of this story... beware the **Gather Courage**! There was more to the situation of course than just the Zombie that made me act in the way I did. I was well aware of the Shell in my opponent's graveyard that was sure to cause trouble. I thus decided to nip the growing Zombie in the butt before it got out of hand. Unfortunately, things didn't work quite the way I had planned.

Could he be right?

I intentionally didn't go into greater detail before making my decision because I didn't when I first saw it. I saw the situation and wondered why Jason felt it was worth thinking about. Now that we know it didn't work, let the second-guessing begin. Were there any signs that using your **Last Gasp** would only make things worse?

There are two possible ways that you could improve on this play. Possibility one is to read your opponent so confidently for the exact card in his hand – **Gather Courage** – that you try to kill the **Vulturous Zombie** another way or use the **Last Gasp** as the final blow on it a few turns down the line. You better be damn confident that you're right, because this puts you in a much worse position if you're wrong and might well not be enough if you are right. To do that in limited, where you don't even know that **Gather Courage** was in his initial card pool, you need strong evidence. The only decision that might tip his hand is that **Greater Mossdog** did not attack. If he's saving an untapped green creature, this could be the reason. The problem with that line of thought is that he has no reason to attack with **Greater Mossdog** into your **Centaur Safeguard**. From his perspective, trading damage at this point of the game is bad.

Possibility two is that you can play around **Gather Courage**, which would mean teasing out the **Gather Courage** without putting any cards in your graveyard. That means not casting any spells, which means it has to be this turn. There is only one action you can take, and that is to attack with **Centaur Safeguard**. What happens if you do attack? Without knowing his hand, my instinct is that chances are he will block because he can return the **Greater Mossdog** to his hand with dredge and trading off makes his **Vulturous Zombie** bigger. An even stronger argument is that he attacked with **Stinkweed Imp**, which seems inconsistent with not blocking. If he doesn't block, you're happy because he was probably going to bring back the **Shambling Shell** and make it impossible for you to block the **Greater Mossdog**.



The question is, what will happen if you attack and he blocks?

If he doesn't cast **Gather Courage**, both creatures will die. Once that happens, the **Vulturous Zombie** will trigger because your **Centaur Safeguard** went to the graveyard. In response to that, you can cast **Last Gasp** to kill the **Vulturous Zombie**. He can still cast **Gather Courage**, but you still have a better board position than if you hadn't attacked. If he casts **Greater Courage** on the **Greater Mossdog** (how great is that!) then you can respond with **Last Gasp** on the **Vulturous Zombie**. He keeps the **Greater Mossdog**, but you kill the creature that needs killing.

Therefore attacking leads to one of two results. Either he blocks and you're happier than if you hadn't attacked, or he doesn't block and you get three damage in. Again, you're happier than if you didn't attack. If for some bizarre reason he blocks with the **Vulturous Zombie**, you're ecstatic. This option is strictly better than casting **Last Gasp** first, so even though it only matters if you're up against **Gather Courage** there is no question that you should attack first.

Now suppose that you attack with the **Centaur Safeguard** and he does not block. [Do you still cast Last Gasp?](#)

If he doesn't block, should alarm bells go off in your head? As I said before, chances are that he will block if he doesn't have **Gather Courage**. If he does have it, suddenly not blocking makes a lot more sense because he can now protect his **Vulturous Zombie**. That's what I thought at first, because I made the mistake of not realizing that the **Vulturous Zombie** was green. However, it is green, so there's no way for **Gather Courage** to be shut off, which means that your opponent hasn't given you any reason at all to worry about it – there's no way that he would have acted any differently if he didn't have it. It is ironic that this ends up having no effect on what your correct play is, but that doesn't mean that it isn't a mistake. It is a mistake to do the right thing for the wrong reason. When that happens, you're just lucky that the mistake didn't matter. Playing correctly is even harder than it looks, because to truly play correctly you don't just have to make the right decisions but use the right reasoning to make them.

Either way, the trade you offered him by attacking is not all that great. The reason he might take it is that he can bring back the **Greater Mossdog** with dredge, but by taking the damage he can bring back the **Shambling Shell** instead and render the **Centaur Safeguard** largely moot. This play makes perfect sense even if he doesn't have **Gather Courage**.

If you think you can see that **Gather Courage** in his hand, you are seeing ghosts. Yes, it could be in his hand. Yes, it could cost you the game. No, you can't know he has it. The only reason you've gotten this far is that you know that he did have the **Gather Courage** in his hand. That doesn't mean you can't refine your strategy to give you a chance to play around **Gather Courage** – there's no question that he might have it. It is a common after all. But if you do more than that, you are seeing ghosts.

At this point, you need to try and salvage the game as best you can. There are three outs left in your deck, as Jason points out when the game resumes:

From there, I decided my best bet was to try to draw into one of the several kill spells in my deck to take care of the **Zombie**. I still had a **Brainspoil** and 2 **Disembowels** as well as a **Trophy Hunter** that could combine with the **Moroii** to take down the **Zombie**.

Unfortunately, I hadn't drawn any source of blue mana yet, so I had to use the **Farseek** to fetch an Island. That made the **Zombie** even bigger, and I realized I was on a rather quick clock. On his turn, he dredged back the **Shambling Shell** (putting a **Swamp**, **Forest**, and **Lurking Informant** into his graveyard), cast it, and attacked for 6 in the air (5 from the **Zombie** and 1 from the **Imp**). I went down to 10 and he passed the turn.

On my turn I drew **Crown of Convergence**, played **Telling Time** to reveal Island, **Birds of Paradise**, and **Golgari Germination**. I took the **Birds** to my hand, put the **Island** on top and the **Germination** on the bottom. I then played the **Birds** and passed the turn.

On his next turn, he did nothing during his first main phase and entered his attack. He swung with the **Imp**, the **Zombie**, and the **Shell**. I blocked the **Zombie** with the **Birds**, the **Shell** with my **Centaur**, and took the **Imp**. He stacked damage and sacked the **Shell** to put a counter on the **Zombie**. I went to 9 from the **Imp** but then up to 12 from the **Centaur's** triggered ability.

On my turn, I drew the **Island**, played it, and activated the **Guildmage** to draw the **Trophy Hunter**. Unfortunately, the **Zombie** had grown too large at this point to use the **Hunter** effectively, so I played the **Moroii** as a blocker and passed the turn.

As expected, he dredged back the **Shell** again, (putting an **Elves of Deep Shadow**, **Plains**, and **Transluminant** into the graveyard) played the **Shell**, and attacked with the **Imp**, **Mossdog**, and **Zombie**. I blocked the **Zombie** with the **Moroii** and took the **Imp** and **Mossdog** down to 8. He passed the turn.

I drew a **Swamp**, played it, and then used the **Guildmage** to draw another **Forest**. Even though it was meaningless at this point, I used the **Guildmage** again to draw the **Brainspoil** I'd been waiting for. Of course, I didn't have enough mana to cast it, so I had to pass the turn.

He drew and **Alpha Striked** to put me out of my misery.

In retrospect, I think I could have won this game if I had played the **Farseek** instead of the **Last Gasp**. I would have then been able to play the **Moroii** on the following turn to trade with the **Zombie**. That course of action would have left me with the **Last Gasp** in hand, so I would have been able to use that in response to any **Gather Courage** shenanigans.

All right, that's what happened. [Was this loss inevitable, or could Jason have turned things around?](#)



Jason's overall plan of finding a removal spell is certainly correct. A removal spell is his only chance. The execution of that plan can be improved. The first mistake comes on the second turn when resolving **Telling Time**. Jason should have chosen **Island**. **Telling Time** only costs two mana, so he could have played the **Island** and activated **Dimir Guildmage** to draw an extra card. With seven lands out, he could then still play **Birds of Paradise** off the top of his library, putting him a full card ahead.

The next mistake came when he blocked with **Birds of Paradise**. The **Vulturous Zombie** gets bigger every time one of your cards hits your graveyard, so you end up at a higher life total by letting it through and then chump blocking then by chump blocking and then letting it through. The mana from the **Birds** is also potentially relevant. The **Zombie** is going to be big, but it's not all that big yet. Once you let it through, you end up at seven after gaining three life from **Centaur Safeguard**.

On the next turn, you have **Birds of Paradise** and seven lands. The first card you draw is **Trophy Hunter**. As he noted, the **Trophy Hunter** is no longer going to be fast enough to get you out of this position. You have eight mana left, so you can use four of it to draw a card while saving four to play **Moroii**. You draw **Swamp**, which you play along with **Moroii**. You are now two cards ahead of where Jason was.

Your opponent attacks you. You have **Moroii** and **Birds of Paradise** to block with. If you block with **Birds** then you need to draw a land if you want the ability to cast **Brainspoil** and draw a card with the **Guildmage**. **Moroii** can't trade off with the **Mossdog** anymore; all it can do is force him to sacrifice the **Shambling Shell**. That's not nothing, but it's not what you want to happen. Either way, **Moroii** must die because if you let either creature through **Moroii** will kill you. In fact, you're going to need to force him to sacrifice his **Shambling Shell** in order to let you keep your **Guildmage** and the **Guildmage** is your ticket to potentially get back into this game. Therefore **Moroii** blocks **Greater Mossdog** while **Birds of Paradise** blocks the **Zombie**. You take one damage, down to six.

At this point, you untap and draw **Brainspoil**. Neat! You're at seven and your opponent has a 5/5 that isn't getting any smaller in addition to the **Stinkweed Imp**. An efficient use of your mana is to cast **Brainspoil** and **Trophy Hunter**, or you can decide you're sufficiently behind enough that you are willing to use the **Guildmage** and try to spike a land off the top of your deck.

At this point we don't know what would have happened, but that's not the point here anyway. The real point is to look back and see what other possibilities there were, what other things could possibly have been done better. Getting the details right makes a big difference, saving you a full two cards. It is easy to spend your time second-guessing your earlier decision in a game like this rather than concentrating on the best way to try and save the game. You need to stay focused on what matters, and then after the game make an objective assessment of whether you made the wrong decision. These games can be saved more often than players think.

As always, if you have a situation you want to submit, please [take a look at the guidelines](#). (Thank you to Jason for doing such a good job getting all the important information in!) For now, I'd like to continue to encourage the submission of situations where neither player is in any immediate danger. Next week **magicthegathering.com** won't have new content (Wizards of the Coast is moving to a new building) but I'll be back the week after that with an interlude strategy article on a topic that I'm surprised nobody has covered much yet. After that we'll get back to the scenarios, so please take a moment to send one in if you've got a good one.



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