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Walk of Ages, Volume One

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Limited Information
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"Of course you lost everything, you got hustled! Yeah, they *let* you win the first 'guess a number' game, and right, *then* he wants to play for money? Yeah, I thought so. Just stay away from this 'Professor X' guy, and – oops, I gotta go."

Oh, hello there. A number of months ago I ran a poll asking the readers how they liked their walkthroughs. Here are the results of that poll again:

Do you prefer your walkthroughs utilizing		
Draft with detailed pick explanations and small game walkthroughs.	3150	62.3%
Sealed deck, going over inclusions and exclusions with small game walkthroughs.	1093	21.6%
Highly detailed games using Limited decks.	817	16.1%
Total	5060	100.0%

That last entry was a late addition, a concept that had been talked about but not really executed. A concept receiving ~16% of the votes – when it had never been done on the site – told me it was definitely an idea worth exploring at some point. That point is today.

My plan for Volume One is to go through a couple of games turn-by-turn. These were interesting games, with some debate-worthy decisions. Finally, a couple of puzzling game screens. These have correct answers, but the process of getting there was fun and worthy of some exploration. Simple enough plan for the week, so let's give it a shot.

Walkthrough 1

For reference, here's the deck used in the game:

Walkthrough Deck 1

Main Deck 40 cards		
1 Fungal Reaches 8 Mountain 8 Swamp 1 Urza's Factory 18 lands	1 Basal Sliver 1 Bogardan Hellkite 1 Coal Stoker 1 Firemaw Kavu 1 Flamecore Elemental 1 Gorgon Recluse 2 Gorgon Recluse 1 Greater Gargadon 1 Keldon Halberdier 1 Mogg War Marshal 1 Thick-Skinned Goblin 1 Triskelavus 13 creatures	1 Conflagrate 1 Foriysian Totem 2 Orcish Cannonade 1 Premature Burial 1 Prismatic Lens 1 Strangling Soot 2 Tendrils of Corruption 9 other spells

Of relevance are the removal spells and the 18 lands. 18 may seem like a lot alongside a totem and Prismatic Lens, but with Conflagrate, Triskelavus, Urza's Factory, Bogardan Hellkite, and double Tendrils I was happy to have them. This game takes place against Mike123, in the first game of our match. Therefore, I have no idea what he's playing.

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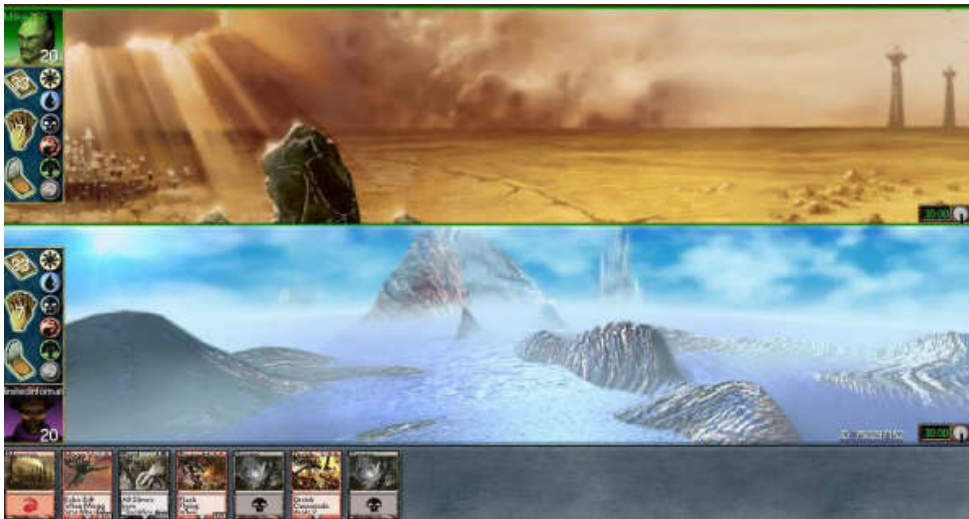
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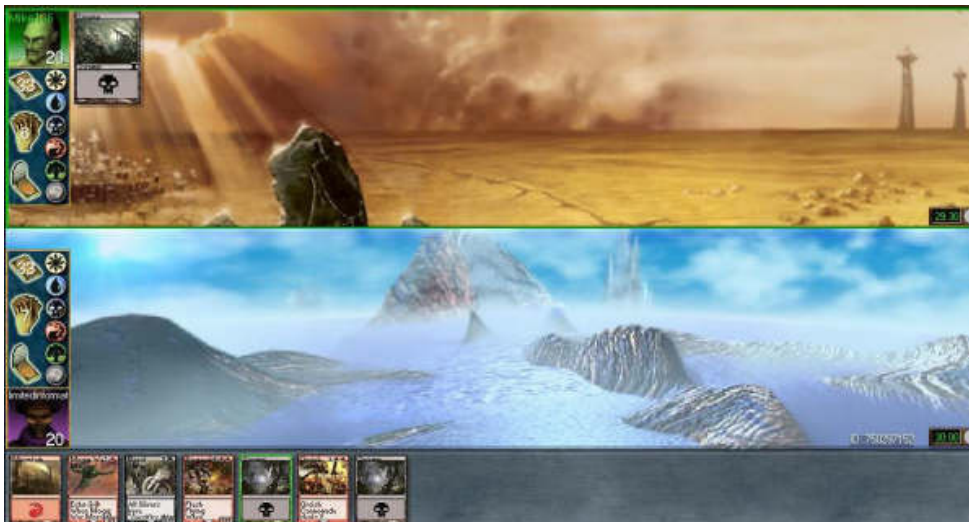
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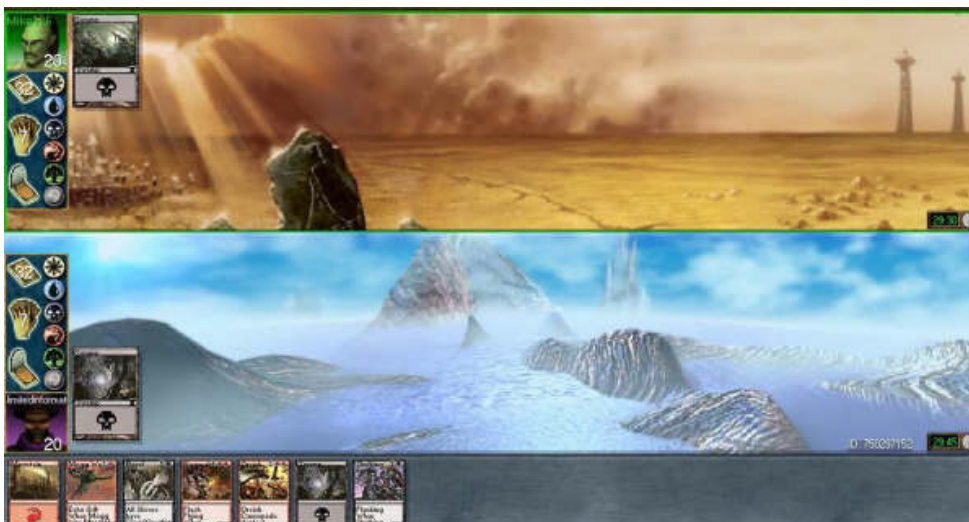
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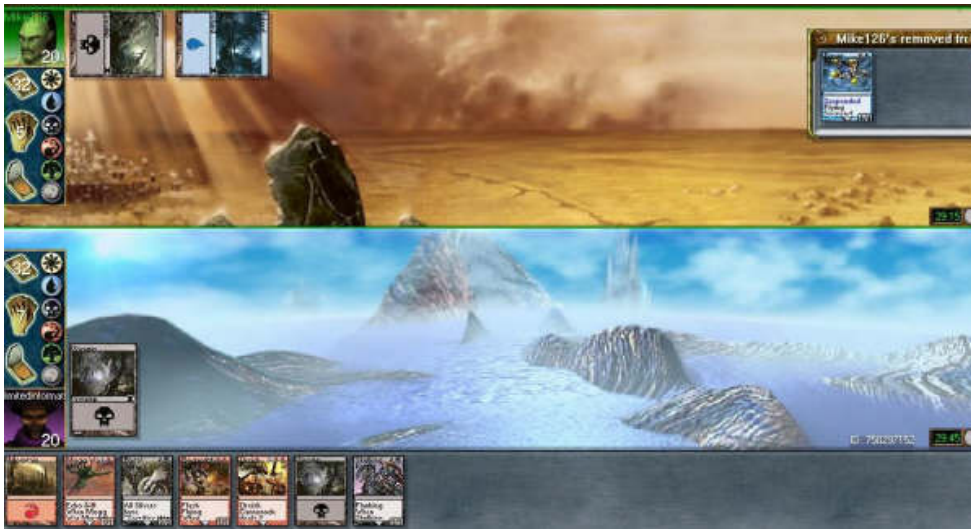
The first decision of the game, and some say it's the most important. Opponent, on the play, has decided to keep his seven so we need to decide if this is worth keeping on the draw. I believe this hand is *very* borderline. If you decide this hand should be thrown back I wouldn't hold it against you. In fact you may be right. I did decide to keep this, mainly on the strength of 18 lands, and by extension, the Cannonade. **Basal Sliver**, if it goes that long, could also boost out **Bogardan Hellkite**. Since this is a hand that could play well with more spells or more lands (although it would prefer more lands first), and I'm on the draw, I decide to keep. More on mulligan philosophy another time.



Mike lays a Swamp and passes back. Him playing black is pretty ideal for this hand, as black has an abundance of low toughness creatures and general slowness.

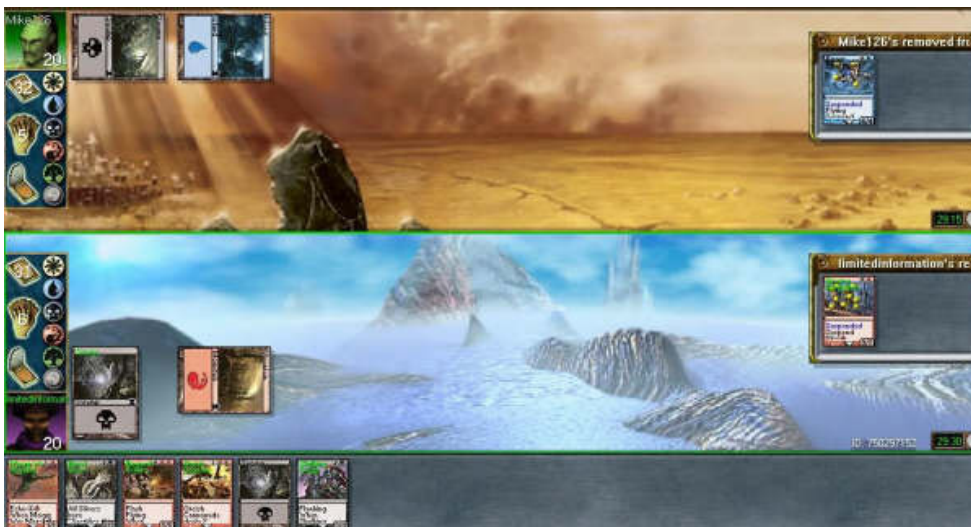


The first draw step. It's not a land, but it will be something castable with our mana, so it's not too bad. If the **Skulking Knight** draws fire, it may leave **Basal Sliver** alive longer for Hellkite tricks.



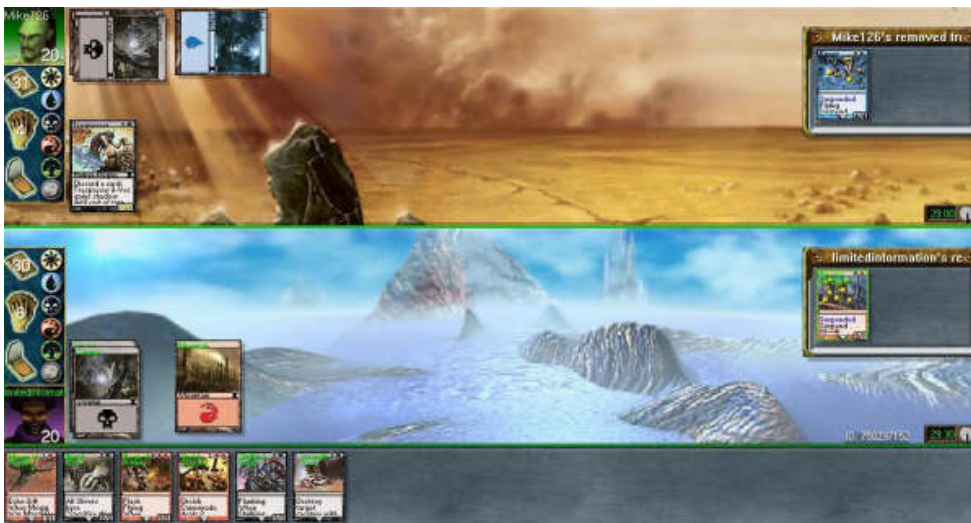
Crap. Mike has shown both of his colors and used them to suspend **Errant Ephemeron**. Not only is that excellent in its own right, this particular hand has absolutely no answer to the 4/4 flying beastie, at least anytime soon. Mike has just decreed the tempo of the game, which in this case means a race. That's unfortunate, because this is not a hand that's particularly race-friendly, what with 8cc Dragons and all. An unfortunate turn, but it's better for us to figure out now instead of later on. Playing a control game or card advantage game is now suicide. Mike126, I salute you for setting the pace of our game.

Next turn I draw a **Greater Gargadon**. It's still not a land but Gargadon does play well in race environs. The question is, do we suspend the Gargadon or play the **Mogg War Marshal**? Playing first that question might be a little interesting, but on the draw it's no contest. Those slow War Marshal tokens are going to be put off by a morph or whatever, making the turn a complete waste. We also definitely would not pay echo, which further reduces its effectiveness. Suspending **Greater Gargadon** gets the time counter process started, plus it combos very well with the **Mogg War Marshal** whenever we get around to casting it. Suspending **Greater Gargadon** is the right move.





Next turn Mike tapped all for a **Trespasser il-Vec**, a fine move that's still promoting the race situation we are / we will be in. The next draw step is interesting as it provides...



...**Strangling Soot**. Still not a land, alas. Now we've got some major choices. Playing **Mogg War Marshal** helps Gargadon, but it doesn't really prevent any damage. At this point, Mike couldn't care less about card advantage. I know we're both at 20 life, but trust me, we're racing. If for some reason his hand is so full of juice that he can't discard a card, I don't much like our chances either. The War Marshal is just too defensive here, and may not even do anything resembling defense. It's out.

How about **Strangling Soot**? It's not a bad play, except again, very defensive. Without **Errant** around, killing a madness enabler would be reasonable. With the **Ephemeron**, it's just prolonging the problem. Plus I don't really mind taking a free hit from the **Trespasser**; it would mean **Errant** brings me to one life instead of four. Against B/U, that's a negligible difference.

As to which creature to play it's a little tougher. **Basal Sliver** is "safe" in that it dies to less things, but I still have that **Sliver** earmarked for other purposes. **Skulking Knight**, while vulnerable, is the biggest guy and the best racer. It's risky of course, but that's necessary at this point. Keep in mind that with this board we're losing right now. The worst-case scenario would be my opponent laying a land then casting a morphed **Coral Trickster** and flipping it to kill **Skulkers**. It's a gamble, but each avenue has its share. Gotta go with the one that promotes the best chance of winning.



Hmm, my opponent lays a land, taps all four for...bad news.



Faceless Butcher was a nice pull this turn. Ah well, at least Skulking Knight goes to feed Greater G. There's no way we're winning the game without the 9/7 involved.

Next turn I draw Conflagrate. Still not a land, but it's not bad at all. You'll note with another source of Red, it can kill Errant Ephemeron. But, it's not the play this turn. It kills a guy of course, but still doesn't move things along further.

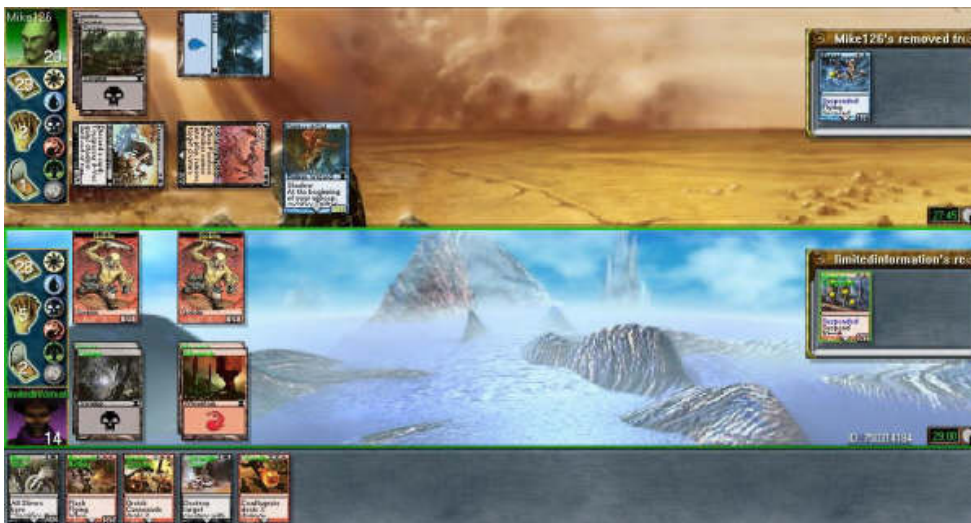


Now is the time for that Mogg War Marshal. It's a defensive play, but at least we know it will be defensive since the guys definitely block Faceless Butcher. If the Goblins prevent Trespasser from attacking (unlikely), so much the better. Either way, the War Marshal makes a big push towards getting Greater Gargadon out, which will still be a necessity. It's the move this turn.

As expected, next turn the *il*-Vec takes shadow and both creatures attack. I block with the Marshal and sacrifice it to the Gargadon, allowing me to remain with two more turns worth of Butcher blockers. Also at some point I'll need to get Mike down to 18, but that's an issue for later.



After combat Mike taps his Island to play **Drifter il-Dal**, another evasive threat but another one highly vulnerable to the front end of **Conflagrate**. I see... a plan!



Well there's that mana I've been looking for, and it's the right color to boot. Alright, scheming time. Here's the relevant info:

- Mike spent his fifth turn and four mana locking down his only blue to play **Drifter il-Dal**.
- I take that to mean he's out of major threats. All lands? All **Cancel**? Don't know, don't care. I'm playing as if what's in front of me is what I need to punch through.
- If I take damage from all the creatures I can't block, I go down to 5 life. Not a bad number because it means I get an extra turn to take **Errant Ephemeron**, as long as I kill it the turn after. When racing, math is your friend.
- I really want to get my opponent to 18 life before **Greater Gargadon** comes into play. It shaves an entire turn off the game. I *really* want this.

Taking this into account, there are a few options.

Option 1: Cast **Strangling Soot** on **Trespasser**. I take **Drifter** and **Errant** next turn to eight life. If I draw a Mountain I can Conflag **Errant Ephemeron** for one, then flashback for three more on **Errant**. **Drifter** still needs to go, if I draw *another* land I can flashback **Soot**, or I can race with **Gargadon**. Of course this all depends on drawing that ephemeral Mountain next turn. If not, we got problems. We can do better.

Option 2: Cast **Conflagrate** for one on **Trespasser**. Attack with a token and get Mike to 19. Four cards in hand. Mike brings out **Ephemeron**, I take 6 points down to 8 life and my untapped token blocks the **Butcher** (sacrificed to **Gargadon**.) On my next turn I have five cards; they all aim at **Errant** and **Drifter**. The token attacks Mike down to 18, then I sac everything else to bring out **Greater Gargadon** (preferably when the **Butcher** attacks), and start attacking for 9 points a shot. Pretty nice.

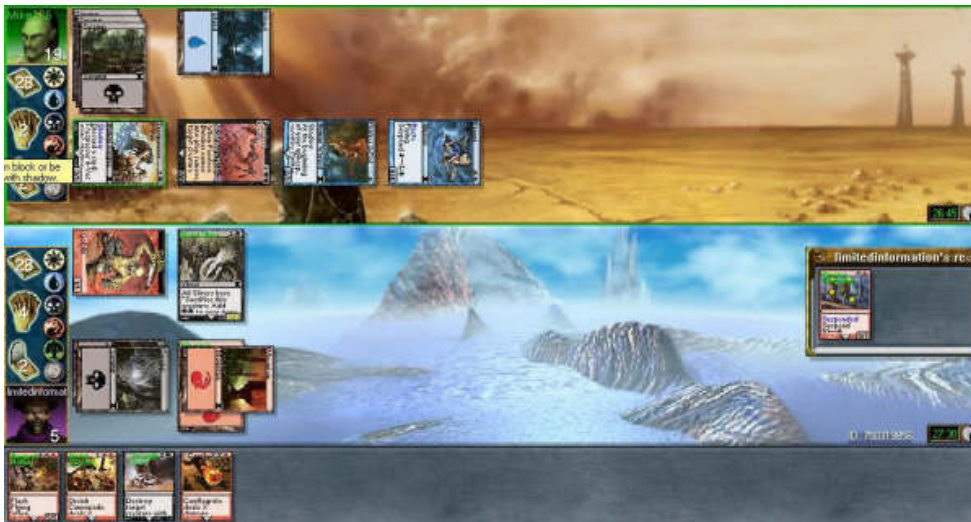
Option 3: Cast **Basal Sliver**, attack for 1. Next turn go down to 5. Then attack with **Basal**, bringing Mike down to 17, sacrifice it and cast **Conflagrate**, killing the two one-toughness creatures. Next turn **Errant Ephemeron** takes me to one life, while possibly I sac out **Gargadon**. On my turn cast Conflag for at least four and possibly five depending what else Mike did. Also nice.

So what's the play? It's pretty close between two and three, but I think two is slightly better. It's not the difference in my life total, although that's not a worthless point. It's just that option two requires fewer things that need to go

right. Mainly, **Basal Sliver** dying to Tendrils or Soot = game over. But I either didn't see or miscounted option two, and put option three into action. At the end of turn five, my board looks like this:



As expected, Mike falls into my carefully laid trap by dealing insane damage on his sixth turn. The sucker! A card is pitched to Trespasser and the untapped goblin gets sucked into defense and **Greater Gargadon's** maw, in that order. At the end of my opponent's turn, the board looks thus:



Next turn things go as planned. After combat, the **Conflagrate** is thrown at Drifter and Trespasser. Here's what the board looks like then:



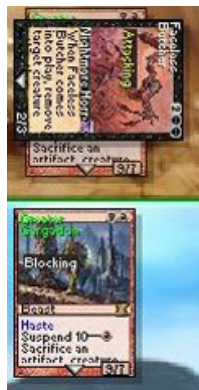
Lemme guess what you're thinking:

"Noah, you suck! Why didn't that goblin attack along with **Basal Sliver**? You're just going to bring out **Greater Gargadon** anyway!"

No sir! Why would my goblin attack? To deal a point of damage? If I'm dealing damage past Mike's 18-life zone, I want it in nine point chunks. One more point will not change the clock. In other words, it does not change the amount of turns needed to kill Mike. But still, why leave it back at all? Mountain, **Suq'Ata Lancer**?

Well, no, if Mike randomly pulls out a haste guy I still die. The real answer is both simple and complex. For the last three turns Mike has attacked with everything he's had, including **Faceless Butcher**. Every time the Butcher attacked I've blocked with a goblin. This turn I'm not going to do that, but I really don't want Mike to know that. If I randomly attack with the goblin it's jarring. It's weird, and it may disrupt the subtle tapestry we've woven these last few turns. The only reason to attack would be if I drew a **Lightning Axe** that turn, to go along with a **Strangling Soot** already in hand to kill both of Mike's creatures. Otherwise, and what's obviously on the board, is a **Greater Gargadon** waiting to unsuspend. It's not impossible to believe that whatever else happens to Ephemeron, the **Greater Gargadon** looks to take on **Faceless Butcher**. It's an open invitation, an obvious one. If, however, I leave a guy back for blocking, a chump blocker in fact, than everything is the same and Mike has no reason to suspect otherwise. I'm laying a trap, and part of that means forgoing one worthless point of damage.

Certainly a great many people would see the trick and not fall into it. That's fine and dandy. The question is, in which path am I more likely to trap my opponent? I don't think anyone can argue that attacking, rather than leaving back a chump blocker, makes me look weak. By the way, it still doesn't matter if it *works*, it just matters if it gives you the best chance. I'll talk about this idea more in the "setting a trap" column, definitely a topic coming up soon. As it is...



Zing! Mission accomplished. Would Mike have attacked anyway had I had no untapped creatures? Possible, but I believe not quite as likely. Regardless, the snare works and I am aiming to get back into this game. Then Mike lays a real gift out, a **Sage of Epityr**. **Sage of Epityr** has one toughness!



I believe giving up every permanent and every card in hand counts as all-in. However I am riding my hopes on a crazy-large 9/7. There are worse creatures to rely on. Down goes 9 points o' Mike.



This is a pretty positive spot actually. If Mike has no removal or bounce, I crash through X chumping creatures then kill him. I know he's playing black-blue, the "removal and bounce" colors, but what else is there to do? Hopefully that Sage gave him four lands to choose from. Heck, he can have four **Mana Skimmers** as long as they all chump away before Mike perishes.



Nooooooooo!

Well, it was worth a shot. The death blow? Delivered oh-so ironically by an **Undertaker**.



At the end of the game I saw two points of contention. The first was the mulligan decision. I don't know if there was a draw out there to beat Mike's, but perhaps the deck should have rolled the dice on a new one anyway. The second mistake, and more likely to be an actual mistake even though it kind of worked out, was missing option two on turn five. Even though option three ended up being better, it was and is still a mistake. Aside from those two, I felt I played a reasonable game, taking advantage of draws and opportunities when I could. Had I played first things may have been very different, but *that's* a tune that's been sung before. While I didn't win, I have to concede it was a Good Game. How about [another](#)?



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