

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Errors and Judgment

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2007 WORLDS

Welcome back to your regularly scheduled Limited Information. There's a lot of ground to cover this time. First, the puzzle and answer from the screen [two weeks ago](#).

Opponent: 3 cards in hand, 8 life; Untapped: 1 Island, 3 Swamps. *Plague Sliver, Magus of the Mirror, Pit Keeper, Skulking Knight.*; Tapped: *Looter il-Kor, 2 Swamps*; Opponent's *Fool's Demise* enchanting your *Fury Sliver*



Worlds Recap

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RULES



You: 2 cards in hand, 2 life; Everything untapped: 3 Mountains, 4 Swamp, 2 Forest, *Phyrexian Totem*. You have *Spined Sliver, Soul Collector*, the enchanted *Fury Sliver*, and *Faceless Butcher* removing a *Plague Sliver* and enchanted with *Undying Rage.*; Your hand: A *Might Sliver* and a Mountain

While the solution isn't particularly complicated, the board certainly is. In addition, this is a real life scenario. One has to at least consider what the opponent, in this *Time Spiral* Limited environment, might be holding. In this case there are a lot of cards that a black-blue player could have (*Snapback, Tendrils of Corruption, Darkness!*) that would outright end any chances of winning. You can ignore those, because worrying about them won't do you any good. However, there is one card that is relevant that you can do something about, and that's *Strangling Soot*.

We know we have to win soon, because *Plague Sliver* means that doing nothing will equal death. Luckily for the solution, *Plague Sliver* is a double edged sword. The plan is to deal as much damage as possible so that his Slivers finish the job. That means getting both the *Fury Sliver* and his second *Plague Sliver* over to his side, before the upkeep. Conveniently again, the *Phyrexian Totem* lets us do exactly that. The major decision is when, and if, to play *Might Sliver*. The answer, and the error Brian made when he showed me the puzzle, was to not play *Might Sliver* at all. Here's the right way to play it.

1. Play *Might Sliver* and activate *Phyrexian Totem*.
2. Attack with the Totem and *Soul Collector*.
3. *Soul Collector* deals 3 damage as all kinds of damage hits the Totem. You're sacrificing lots of cards, just make sure two of them are the *Faceless Butcher* removing *Plague Sliver* and your *Fury Sliver*, while keeping *Might Sliver* alive.

The opponent will take 3 straight damage down to 5 life. The two *Plague Slivers* plus your given *Fury Sliver* deals the final 6, *Magus of the Mirror* not being enough to undo any of it. Unfortunately, Brian made the error of not casting *Might Sliver*, so *Strangling Soot* on *Fury Sliver* killed it off, leaving his opponent at a scant 2 life but giving him the win. Sure, Brian sacrificed two less permanents, but he lost the game. This is another instance of values changing based on what's actually going on in front of you, instead of some amorphous in-a-vacuum instinct. Ah well, mistakes happen.

Mistakes, coincidentally enough, are the topic of discussion today. The majority of published **Magic** strategy is on how to avoid mistakes. That's all well and good, but what to do when the inevitable occurs? This week is

dedicated to learning about errors, learning from errors, and recognizing why mistakes play such a vital role in competitive **Magic**. Hopefully this topic isn't too depressing, but just in case, the final part will be some play-at-home activities.

Before we delve into the meat of the topic at hand, it would be beneficial to define the terminology. Dictionary.com has a very interesting definition of mistake:

mistake *n.*

1. an error in action, calculation, opinion, or judgment caused by poor reasoning, carelessness, insufficient knowledge, etc.

This is pretty inclusive. For **Magic** I would emphasize that a mistake only applies when there is forgoing the *best* action that promotes a win, rather than some action or inaction that does not promote a win. Note that a mistake doesn't have to *actively* make the game worse for you, it just has to be a move that doesn't push you forward as much as possible. To put it simply, if it's not your best play, it's a mistake.

If you think about a game of **Magic** and how many choices truly exist, you realize that playing optimally every turn is really difficult. R&D member and Pro Tour winner Mike Turian famously said he has never played a perfect game of **Magic** in his life. While that's probably some hyperbole, the gist is that sustaining mistake-free play is nigh-impossible. Believe it or not, that's a good thing for a number of reasons.

For one, Magic has this interesting quirk where a player can screw up and still win the game. With the two out of three match structure, a player can blow an entire game and still win the match. This aspect is good for Magic for several reasons, not the least of which is keeping players around. Because people don't have to play mistake-free to win, the game gives you a chance to be human and still outplay your opponent. There's incentive to improve, because while by definition mistakes don't maximize your chances of winning, at least you get some cushion for learning along the way. People say the learning curve in this game is steep, but just imagine how it would be if each error was fatal.



In addition, mistakes, like mana screw, are great equalizers. Does that sound like crazy talk? After all, one is the epitome of skill and the other is the epitome of luck. Mana screw allows bad players to win and mistakes let good players win. On the surface, these don't appear equitable. And it's true they're not. They just happen to fulfill similar functions, that of giving people who wouldn't otherwise have a chance an opportunity to win.

Consider this: When are players most likely to play their worst? The answer is when they think their play doesn't matter. When does play (presumably) not matter? When either an opponent is mana screwed, or you are. After all, does it really matter if one doesn't play optimally when an opponent triple mulligans? Of course it matters, because people can win off a triple. In fact the best chance to win in that situation is if the other player thinks the game is a

foregone conclusion. I can't tell you the number of times I've been mana screwed so badly my opponent gets lazy. There's only so many times you can pitch at eight cards before your opponent thinks the game is in the bag. Yet that complacency is their undoing.

Scraping, clawing out every tiny advantage versus an opponent who's barely trying at all... I've come back from some impossible-seeming situations, all because an opponent assumed he couldn't lose and started playing terribly as a result. Eventually my bad luck got wiped away as my opponent let me recover my position. There's nothing sweeter than overcoming some ridiculous mana screw because your opponent opened the door. Thank you, mistakes, for making the game a fairer fight.

The irony is that often enough even though an opponent played incredibly sloppily, they'll still win. There is *some* justification for the stereotype that lots of mulligans equal reduced chances of winning. Your quintuple mulligan really was too much to come back from, even though your opponent effectively cast double Healing Salve on you. It's a bitter pill, watching an opponent you classify as inferior move forward. Isn't **Magic** supposed to be a game of skill? This is supposed to be a meritocracy! A common sentiment, except for the big words, but defining the game by bad luck is illusory.

This is why **Magic** is so happy to have games where the worse player won. Mistakes aren't always penalized. That sounds nice until you consider how much that stunts you as a player. A player that screws up and wins anyway loves to think he played great, because after all, he won. Soon enough that player will learn about statistical improbabilities and the good players will win again. When you accept the win at face value, you lose so much opportunity to improve. I like to think of it like this: for every game you win you get five experience points, and for every mistake you discover you get ten. Which route levels you up the fastest?

Incidentally, this was why I wasn't too upset with the Gargadon/**Faceless Butcher** miss two weeks ago. For those that weren't aware (and judging by the e-mail volume I was the only one), I sacrificed a creature to **Greater Gargadon** in response to a **Faceless Butcher** target instead of a **Faceless Butcher** casting. Some people were quite incensed that their Limited Information author missed such an obvious play. I had a great conversation online with a guy who thought I should step down from my authorship for showing such a blunder. Boo hoo, but that ain't happening anytime soon. Here's a heads up to my perfectionist readers: the more game and/or draft

walkthroughs published, the more mistakes you're going to see. It's basic math. The thing is, while I'm a little irked to miss the Gargadon play, I'm not at all upset to learn something. Chalk me up ten experience points, because I don't expect to miss that move again. Mistakes, mistakes that actually punish you, demonstrate areas where you need shoring up. How is that not valuable information? In fact, it's so valuable you should be looking for that data whenever possible.

Green mage extraordinaire Jamie Wakefield reportedly kept a mistake die with him, which he would move up by one whenever he made an "obvious" error. I like the idea, but I think the execution is a little optimistic. First of all, if you're noticing your errors the exact turn after, you probably should just play slower and think things through. I personally would find that kind of self-scrutiny distracting during a match, besides the fact that if you screw up you really don't want your opponent knowing it.

You: "Go ahead." *Crap, I forgot to play my creature this turn. Better move up the ol' die.*

Opponent: "You didn't do anything that turn. What mistake could you possibly have made? Oh, I see. Umm, **Mindstab** you."

Spectator: "Hey, who's throwing dice?!"

You can see that a visible mistake die is dangerous for everyone involved. Instead, I like the end of the game as prime mistake-gathering time. This isn't to determine if things were errors based on winning or losing, but by being able to see the results of your decisions through the path of the game. This is actually tougher to pull off than it sounds. If you won the game the instinct is to congratulate yourself for a job well done, not look for aspects of suckitude. If you lost, a common move is to blame the loss on opponent topdecks, or the shuffler, or the stars, or whatever the scapegoat *du jour*. It takes some genuine humility to admit you didn't perform as well as you could have in a match. Humility is a trait that seems to be disproportionately shy in **Magic** players, but it's a quality worth cultivating. I have a lot of respect for anyone who, after taking a loss, asks his or her opponent on mistakes they made during the match. This indicates a strong desire to learn and improve, without letting ego get in the way.

In fact, I was doing some games the other week for an upcoming walkthrough. I had a really interesting match against a gentleman named Rob, the results of which you'll see in 2007. I was happy to have the images and thought nothing more of it. The next day I received an e-mail from Rob, where he asked about the mistakes he made during the match and asked for opinions on where he went astray. He even included screen shots from *his* side of the game, which will make for some interesting viewing when that article goes up. I was quite impressed with Rob's interest in self-improvement, especially with the amount of work and self-analysis he put in. The fact Rob just qualified for Pro Tour – Geneva is probably a coincidence, as opposed to demonstrating his drive to succeed.

The ego aspect to mistakes is one that doesn't get much attention. How many people have played against, or been, a person who immediately conceded after making an embarrassing blunder? How many people didn't immediately scoop, but the big mistake threw them off their game so badly they conceded in slow motion? Sadly people get all kinds of shameful when they realize they've slipped. This is a human reaction, but unfortunately a very self-destructive one. I like making a mistake I can learn from. If I'm so off my game I'm making rookie errors, there's just no value. If you make a big mistake, a whopper that burns you with shame, take a moment to compose yourself. Count to ten, take a cleansing breath, get up from the table, whatever you have to do. Once you're ready, get back in the fray, keep your eyes open, and play your best.

Has this stuff made sense so far? It might seem obvious, but when you throw emotions into the mix things can get touchy. Errors do tend to bring out feelings in players, so there's no problem covering the fundamentals. To recap: think back on your game to see if you could do better, both when you lose and when you win. **Magic** doesn't punish mistakes as severely as it could (more on that in a bit), so it's up to you to be self-vigilant and maintain high standards. Don't be too distressed by the inevitable errors, even the devastating ones. There's always another game around the corner, and if you stay humble enough to learn, you'll be a stronger player for next time. And finally, even if you lose to a worse-playing opponent, statistics even out over time. Keep practicing and learning, while they continue to make errors, and you'll get your wins back with interest.

Before we wrap this topic up for the week, I want to once again emphasize how individual **Magic** games can have disingenuous results between skill and wins. Interestingly for this discussion, skill is both relative and absolute. It's absolute in the sense that there are the best plays and everything else is a mistake. It's relative in the sense that there are degrees of mistakes. For example, there could be three separate plays: Play creature A, play creature B, or mana burn for five. Playing creature A is the right play, making the other two mistakes. However, playing guy B is certainly a lesser mistake than randomly taking off a quarter of your life. So in this case, making a lesser mistake, even a series of them, may still be enough to win a match. The trick is that people generally play only as well as they need to, rather than as well as they could. I'll give you a story to illustrate this idea.

Let's pretend there's a player, Joe, who has unlimited potential for the game. He could theoretically be the best player in the world. Joe currently plays with a group of fairly poor drafters. They make basic evaluation errors at the draft, then play badly. Joe is by far the best player in the group, but that's not saying much. Joe rises to the occasion, which hardly involves much elevation. He wins every game through basic moves, all rote, no exertion.





Why would Joe need to put in effort when game wins fall in his lap? It's good enough for the play group, but when Joe plays in a real tournament that basic stuff won't go far.

So let's put Joe in a different situation. Joe now regularly drafts with the best players in the world. All the PT



and GP winners get together once a week to draft in, uh, Atlantis. Joe once again rises to the occasion, which in this case is high indeed. For these guys Joe needs to make smart bluffs, and push aggression, and eke out card advantage, and all the other tricks the top players do when facing off against each other. They need to engage and reach, because basic stuff is not going to cut it. The requirement of the situation forces Joe into becoming a better player. Joe is now awesome because he needs to be.

Now, most readers of this column fall within the middle of these two extremes. Depending on your goals, middle of the road stuff won't get you what you want. So it's *your* responsibility to hold yourself to a high standard, not because you need to, but because you want to. Do you really want to make fewer errors? The technique is simple: make playing well matter. Whether it's from high opposition or high standards, playing better is a result of being willing to learn and caring about the lessons along the way.

Tough subject! If you made it this far than you get the fun stuff: another round of Limited Pointing. This is a system designed by R&D to test the quality of cards in limited in relation to their environment. *Time Spiral* has been out for a while now so hopefully people have formed some opinions on the merits of certain cards. The scoring the company uses is as follows:

- 5.0:** *I will always play this card. Period.*
- 4.5:** *I will almost always play this card, regardless of what else I get.*
- 4.0:** *I will strongly consider playing this as the only card of its color.*
- 3.5:** *I feel a strong pull into this card's color.*
- 3.0:** *This card makes me want to play this color. (Given that I'm playing that color, I will play this card 100% of the time.)*
- 2.5:** *Several cards of this power level start to pull me into this color. If playing that color, I essentially always play these. (Given that I'm playing that color, I will play this card 90% of the time.)*
- 2.0:** *If I'm playing this color, I usually play these. (70%)*
- 1.5:** *This card will make the cut into the main deck about half the times I play this color. (50%)*
- 1.0:** *I feel bad when this card is in my main deck. (30%)*
- 0.5:** *There are situations where I might sideboard this into my deck, but I'll never start it. (10%)*
- 0.0:** *I will never put this card into my deck (main deck or after sideboarding). (0%)*

[Here](#) and [here](#) are some articles on previous pointing exercises.

Next week we'll have the public's take on the cards, as well as my own. Thanks for reading.

Castle Raptors	0.0 ▼
Spirit Loop	0.0 ▼
Evangelize	0.0 ▼
Fathom Seer	0.0 ▼
Riftwing Cloudskate	0.0 ▼
Draining Whelk	0.0 ▼
Assassinate	0.0 ▼
Phthisis	0.0 ▼
Sudden Spoiling	0.0 ▼
Coal Stoker	0.0 ▼
Conflagrate	0.0 ▼

- Disintegrate ▾
- Ashcoat Bear ▾
- Sporesower Thallid ▾
- Unyaro Bees ▾
- Locket of Yesterdays ▾
- Paradise Plume ▾
- Lotus Bloom ▾
- Calciform Pools ▾



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