

Snarely Legal

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 Limited Information
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This is an interesting theme week for a **Magic** web site. On the surface, bluffing has nothing to do with actually playing the game of **Magic**. Any player can win plenty of games without resorting to tricks and traps. Some people even believe bluffing cheapens the game, a viewpoint I'll address in a bit. To me, and especially in regards to Limited, bluffing is part of the truer form of **Magic**. That's **Magic** not just as the card game, but as the strategy game.

Before we go any further into the discourse of where bluffing belongs, let's define the terms. What precisely is setting a trap / laying a bluff / enacting a deception, etc. in regards to the game? While all those terms mean slightly different things, the essence is the same: misinformation. Control of information is powerful in... everything, no less so in **Magic**. It's through information that your opponent acts, and it's through your misinformation that your opponent acts in a manner of your choosing. If perpetual Mindslayers don't sound exciting, than this week might not be for you.



Before continuing with the ins and outs of the art of the bluff, I'd like to address naysayer's of the so-called "mental game." There are people out there who feel bluffs and psychology have no place in regular **Magic**; that the cards should do the talking. As I understand it, their argument is that the game starts being more about people and less about cards. This is a valid point, but I believe only in the extreme. As I said, **Magic** is such a phenomenal card game because you can make plays beyond just what's on the top of the deck. It's exciting to have resources available that don't just tap for mana.

When both players have equitable skill, or (especially) when someone is overmatched in deck quality, it's nice to have something else to tip the scales. Bluffs and attempts at misinformation are engaging, game-sanctioned ways to do exactly that. I will never look down at anyone for playing the game that best suits them, but personally, I don't like to be 100% dependent on what's at the next draw step. Regardless of your personal views, the higher in tournaments you go the more you should expect to see bluffs and mental tricks. If you don't feel comfortable running bluffs of your own, at least be prepared against those who do.

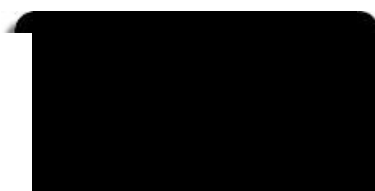
Once again, bluffs and traps are about information – faulty, missing, and otherwise. A bluff is essentially giving your opponent information that causes them to act in a manner contrary to their best interests. The key is that their action would be different had they access to perfect information (your hand, your morphs, etc.). Your part is feeding them the erroneous knowledge. Of course you don't *want* your opponent to know you're feeding them something. The trick is providing the pieces and letting your opponent connect the dots. You don't tweak the conclusion, just the information needed to get there.

Most of these traps revolve around either manipulating ingrained knowledge or manipulating information your opponent picked up through the course of the match. For the epistemology fans out there, this roughly equates to *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge. In this manner, an *a priori* bluff would be acting upset over an opponent's card (**Wrath of God**, **Manabarbs**) when you are secretly happy to see it. An *a posteriori* bluff would be using **Dream Stalker** to pick up a **Fathom Seer**, than playing a facedown **Shaper Parasite** after. In each case you've given your opponent information that's faulty. In the second example, perhaps now your opponent won't cast **Dead on your morph**, giving you the time to +2/-2 with impunity. These labels don't mean a whole lot except as categories, but understanding how information is processed is a key part of executing the bluff. In fact, if I had to distill the art of bluffing down to one tenet, it would be a simple one:

Know your audience.

The concept is gigantic, and not just for this subject. As a writer, I always want to know who I'm writing for so, I can better connect with them. For the magicthegathering.com audience of gamers and computer-centric folk, I know I can throw in a Super Mario Bros. reference for a smile. If I mess up some piece of math, someone will *always* let me know. A little understanding goes a long way. Ask any comedian or salesperson, and they'll say the same thing. You've got to know who you're talking to before you can successfully connect. In **Magic**, knowing your opponent is critical in how and whether to execute a bluff.

For example, never bluff against the beginners. I'll give you a personal story for this one. Once upon a time, I was teaching **Magic** to a friend. After a few hours of instruction and practice, we were ready to begin our first game. Potently, my friend had opened and cast **Shivan Dragon** from his starter. At the time, the best my deck could cough up was an **Air Elemental**. Not a bad card, but certainly no dragon. Knowing blocking was futile and needing to start a race I sent in the Elemental, confident



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my buddy wouldn't risk his Shivan against a potential **Giant Growth**. But to my consternation, he looked at my **Air Elemental**, looked at his Shivan, and blocked. Immediately I realized my error. My friend, being brand new to the game, had never heard of **Giant Growth** or its ilk. As far as my opponent was concerned, 5 > 4. An easy block. I lost that game, a fact I was reminded about for years after. But I only had myself to blame. I forgot that while an experienced player may have taken the 4 damage to deal 9 later, a neophyte just wouldn't think that far ahead.

Understanding your opponent isn't just about gauging skill level, an imprecise label at best. It's about learning what they value. Does your opponent hate to have creatures of theirs die? Attack with your smaller creatures, confident they won't risk their bigger ones. Does your opponent hate to take damage? Then do the opposite, and wait until you have a pump effect or larger creature before attacking. Your opponents are rarely perfect players, and their weaknesses are vulnerabilities you can exploit. Laying a trap has absolutely nothing to do with you, and everything to do with them. Staying observant through a match has lots of benefit, including but not limited to learning your worthy opponent's tendencies. Remember, just because you care about something doesn't mean your opponent feels the same way.



Five is bigger than four.

After you've picked up their natural inclinations, the next step is affecting their judgment. This isn't as complex as it sounds. If you win the game off a solid artifact creature, watch to see if they immediately jump to sideboard a couple cards in. If they do, that might be a cue to take the offending artifact out. The spell you use to win a game is the one that will be freshest in their mind. The misinformation comes from them thinking you would always keep a game-winning card in the maindeck. You can further exaggerate this by reminding your opponent how awesome the **Transguild Courier** / **Mirari** / **Mantis Engine** was. Set a trap, and maybe they'll walk into it.

Another example? The game that originally inspired this article happened way back in the **LI Champs Adventure** column from last year. In it, I wrote about a match played against Gavin "Lesurgo" Verhey. In the first two games, Gavin had done very strong things with his **Peel from Reality**. In the third game, I played around the potential trick by not casting removal on any of his creatures, up until he tapped out or cast the Peel. Through playing around the blue instant I was able to take the third game and the match. Afterwards Gavin showed me his hand: some creatures, Peel From Reality, and a very surprising **Bathe in Light**. I told Gavin he had made an error in the match, as he forgot I didn't know about the **Bathe in Light**. To him, I never tapped out or played a removal spell, giving him no chance to cast either. To me, I was just waiting for **Peel from Reality** to be gone. Had Gavin cast it earlier in the match, I guarantee I would have walked right into **Bathe**. Unfortunately, Gavin didn't put himself in my shoes and took the loss as a result. Once you start looking at your hand and imagining yourself in their shoes, it's like you're playing both halves. That certainly can increase your chances of success.



Before we get to the final portion, I'd like to talk just a touch more about why someone would try a bluff. The short answer is simple: It increases your chances of winning. There's really no other reason to gamble, other than you think the odds are in your favor. I bring this up for two reasons: One, the situations where a bluff or trap is appropriate come up more often than people think, if one looks for them. Two, it's still far more likely that the best play is something straightforward. Bluff when you're encouraged to, play normally for the rest. Why mention this at all? Because there are some people who need no encouragement at all to attempt to trap.

Poker, the so-called "other game," has an ailment known as Fancy Play Syndrome (FPS). FPS is the condition of making gigantic, intricate plays solely for the purpose of being the intellectual giant, rather than actually increasing the amount you win. A triple-reverse over-the-shoulder checkraise sounds neat and deceptive, but if you could have made more with simplistic betting, it was the wrong move. Yet despite this truth, some poker players are drawn to pointless intricacy. The reason for this varies, but in my experience it usually boils down to *because they can*. That is to say, a person takes pride in their tricking abilities, and wants to utilize the talent as much as possible. The problem with that is simple. Once again, if it doesn't give you the greatest chance to win, it's the wrong move. There are times for the crazy plays, but sufferers of FPS try to pull something off way more than the situation calls for.



There are parallels in **Magic**. Some people – perhaps you know them – will try to bluff and deceive as much as humanly possible. A person at a Limited PTQ will brag loudly about all their bomby rares or lie about what colors they're playing. This is the type of player who will go to tap two **Islands**, and then graciously allow the spell to resolve. *Every time!*

Hero: "I'll tap one of 29 Forests to play Llanowar Elf, versus your board of three Prodigal Sorcerers, two Serrated Arrows, and Consumptive Goo."

Villain: "Hmmmmm..."

Five minutes later...

Villain: "I'll allow it."

Or:

Turn 10

Hero: "You're at 1 life, right?"

Villain: "No. I mean yes." *

Hero: "And you're tapped out, and have no cards in hand?"

Villain: "Looks like."

Hero: "K, I'm going to Urza's Rage you."

Villain: "Well..."

Hero: "With kicker."

Hero: "With Sulfuric Vortex in play."

Villain: "Hmmmmm..."

Five minutes later...

Villain: "I'll allow it."

** It is a violation of DCI rules to ever deceive your opponent about the game state. That includes, but is not limited to, lying about your life total, whether you played a land in a turn, the power and toughness of a heavily enchanted creature, etc. Bluffing is sanctioned by the rules. Cheating is not.

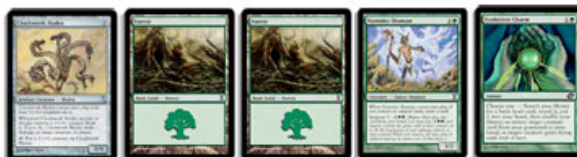
I would say the previous examples are crazy, except that if you're reading this you probably know someone just like that! At some point it becomes less about winning and more about fueling one's ego. **Magic** (like poker) does attract people who like to prove themselves intellectually. Ironically enough these people look like doofuses, but that's beside the point. The lesson here is, *don't be that guy!* This entire week is dedicated to fun and ideal ways to set a trap. Trust me, there are plenty of opportunities to bluff in the game of **Magic** without resorting to ridiculous theatrics.

The reason to skip the constant chicanery is twofold. First off, you still look like a doofus. More importantly, you lose the whole point of bluffing, which is to keep them guessing. Instead of fostering confusion, you create indifference. There may be some play value to boring an opponent to tears, but you certainly lose the edge of giving an opponent the chance to draw the wrong conclusion. That's really what setting a trap is all about.

For the final part today, and to inject a little execution into all this theory, here's a list of some of my favorite tricks and traps. Erik Lauer, please turn away.

Morph Shenanigans

Morphs, by design, lead themselves to all sorts of fun bluffs. With that in mind, what would you do in this situation?

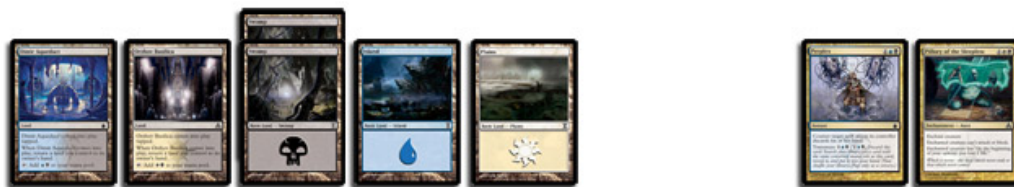


Opponent: 2x Mountain (tapped), Forest (tapped), Blazing Blade Askari (untapped)
You: 2x Island (tapped), Forest (tapped), face down Vesuvan Shapeshifter (untapped)
In hand: Clockwork Hydra, 2x Forest, Nantuko Shaman, Evolution Charm

The question mark for your opponent is figuring out what the morph is. You really don't want your opponent to know it's the awesome **Vesuvan Shapeshifter**, but how to trick him? Saying "This is not **Vesuvan Shapeshifter**!" is about as effective you think it is. Therefore, let your actions do the talking. In this case, the solution is simple. Play a **Forest** and tap out to suspend **Nantuko Shaman**, then attack with the morph. Your opponent will see you clearly unafraid of their 2/2. At the very least it appears you don't care about your creature (misinformation), but more likely your opponent will think it can save itself, because he will think your morph is a **Fathom Seer**. End result: Your opponent takes two damage and never, ever throws an **Orcish Cannonade** at the facedown. Dealing two points and keeping your Shapeshifter safe? Sounds like a pretty good turn.

Reveal tricks

This was a pretty common maneuver in *Ravnica* block, where Transmute would give a lot of controllable information to an opponent. For example, consider this board and hand:



Opponent: 2x Mountain, 3x Forest, Streetbreaker Wurm (all tapped)
You: Dimir Aqueduct, Orzhov Basilica, 2x Swamp, Island, Plains (all untapped)
In hand: Perplex, Pillory of the Sleepless (one more Pillory in deck)

This play is deck- and board- dependent, but should I be so lucky to have another Pillory in the deck, I'll Transmute **Perplex** for that second Pillory and immediately cast it on the Wurm. This option assumes that **Perplex** is worth less than a Pillory and that Pillory is the best 3-cost card left in your deck, neither of which are big stretches. The bluff here is that people don't *usually* tutor for cards they already own. Most opponents would think a player transmuting for a **Pillory of the Sleepless** did not already have one in hand, and rightfully so. The advantage gained is simple: Your opponent thinks you had and have no removal spells. That's usually a cue to start playing out one's best creatures instead of waiting around, which nicely fits into your plan of casting removal on their best stuff. Nothing fancy, and somewhat rare in limited besides, but effective nonetheless. If it's counterintuitive to you, imagine how it looks to the opponent!

Bluffing with No Risk



Opponent: [Wall of Roots](#) (untapped)
You: [Deadly Grub](#) (untapped)

Assuming there's nothing relevant in play or in your hand, why precisely *wouldn't* you attack here? There's zero risk to you, unless you don't mind an opponent trading a pump spell for your Grub. Most likely, your opponent will block and you'll say go, or you'll play a guy, or whatever. Once in a great while, the opponent will be so scared to lose their Wall that they'll take three damage (although they'll feel bad for doing so). The chance to get those three points in are worth quite a bit, since it's all upside. In addition, *not* attacking is telling your opponent that you have no pump effects at all. Of course, if you're reading this and thinking, "I don't want my opponent to know I have a pump spell," well, I like the way you think.

Picking Up the Pen

My favorite, and it's oh-so-simple. Let's say your opponent is considering an attack, and you want him to do exactly that. What's the best route? Pick up the pen and get it ready to adjust your life total. The talented players won't fall for this, of course; that's one of the reasons why they're talented. But for a great many players, seeing a despondent player with pen in hand is a red-hot flare to attack away. Then you throw down [King Cheetah](#), or block with [Spinneret Sliver](#), or what have you. A silent move, but it communicates so much. By the way, the best bluffs get your opponent to do something they want to do anyway. All they need is a little direction.

I hope this opening salvo into the exciting world of psychology and traps has piqued your interest. **Magic** is a wonderful card game and an amazing people game besides. Check out the coverage of previous high-level events, I'll bet you'll find a number of matches where a well-executed bluff earned some serious advantage for the initiator. It's a part of the game, and should you be so lucky, a very enjoyable part at that. Share your favorite bluff stories in the forums! Until next week, thanks for reading.



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