

[Games](#)[Books](#)[Community](#)[Events](#)[Help](#)[Articles](#)[MAGICTHEGATHERING.COM](#)[ARCHIVES](#)[TOURNAMENT CENTER](#)[MAGIC ONLINE](#)[GATHERER](#)[Home](#) > [Games](#) > [Magic](#) > [Magicthegathering.com](#) > [Columns](#)

Opposite Day

Noah Weil
Limited Information
Tuesday, February 5, 2008



How do you win more? Many virtual squids have given their virtual ink to answer this most primal of questions. The subject matter this week relates, but I want to look at things from a different angle. This week we're going to ask a different question: how do you get your opponent to win less?

You see...you see your hand, you see your creatures, you see your obstacles, you see your plans in your head. This is well and good; being able to visualize resources is an important step to using those resources. Here's the thing though: your opponent is doing the same thing. And there's a conflict with their interest and yours, what we colloquially call **Magic: The Gathering**. While powering through with your plans is a good start, a key corollary tack is to derail your opponent's interests. You know, disrupt them.



"Disrupt!?! You opened with that just to lead into disruption? It's been done! If you want to mess with them, play Thoughtseize!"

Yeah thanks, but I don't get passed Thoughtseizery as much as I'd like. Besides, you think the only way to disrupt an opponent is by playing spells? Which scenario is more effective?

PRODUCTS

MAGIC ONLINE



MESSAGE BOARDS



RULES





"I am certainly looking forward to adding one green mana plus one mana of any color to my mana pool in the soon time and playing big spells but oh no! FRUSTRATED."

Or



NO ATTACK



"What a glorious day to be alive! And I will remain alive for many days, because these cards will ensure life, and an unfortunate end to those two creatures. And my cookies are done! I will enjoy sampling those as soon as I destroy one of those, but wait, what's this? No attack?! Transparent, unhappy I am. :-"

While you've hardly won in the second example, you're also not down a card. This isn't a contest; *both* means of disentangling their plans are effective. An understanding of what your opponent wants to accomplish, and taking that away from them, is an integral part of Limited play. Unlike Constructed, with its well delineated archetypes and pre-tournament sideboards, decks in Limited are not so finely focused and as such, make up plans based on their draws to get objectives through. On-the-fly analysis is important, and tougher to pull off than seeing an [Ancient Spring](#) in an extended tournament and knowing they're with [Balancing Tings](#) or [Mind's Desire](#) or whatever. (Interestingly, a lot of Limited players who play the occasional Constructed over the years are pretty bad at analyzing what their opponent is doing off the major archetypes; simply a lack of doing the homework and/or reading [Mike Flores](#). But, they are above average at deducing an opponent's rogue strategy; shades of Limited where every deck your opponent plays is essentially "rogue.")

When playing Limited **Magic**, ignoring your opponent creates games that are particularly brutish affairs; no finesse. Who opened stronger, who draws better? These are dull questions, and worse, don't let players utilize skill, and worse still, aren't very fun. Once you start down the path of interaction, there's more room for error. There's also an opportunity to undo a particularly poor draw for you, or an exceptional draw from them. Getting in their way lets you counteract the effects of either. Once you understand what they're trying to do and how they're trying to do it, you get to make an *informed* decision on whether their plans will get in the way of yours. Of course they'll try to do the same thing, but that's the exciting part. It's a subtle battle, when to exert yourself and press

forward or when to assert yourself and pull back. Again, being able to put yourself in their shoes allows you to make the informed decision on whether you want to, or are able to interfere. What are they trying to do? How are they trying to do it? Is it going to be a problem? Being able to answer those questions regularly is a gigantic step towards high-level play.

One final caveat to examining the game from opposite eyes: players have an unfortunate tendency to dismiss an opponent they label as "weak." As soon as someone goes first turn **Mountain**, **Lightning Bolt** / **Death Spark** / **Chain Lightning** / **Firebolt** / **Scorching Spear** / **Blazing Salvo** / **Firestorm** / **Lava Dart** / **Tarfire** / **Landslide** / **Lava Spike** / **Mana Clash** / (**Thopter**) **Reckless Abandon** / **Spark Elemental** / **Spark Spray** / **Searing Touch** / **Seal of Fire**, **sac** / **Shock** / **Shard Volley** / **Sonic Seizure** / **Winter Sky** they're immediately dismissed as some kind of [button masher](#). "Who cares what they're thinking, if they don't even know enough to not do [XYZ]?"

Well, maybe. In the case of **Scorching Spear**, something is definitely amiss. But what if that **Tarfire** was just a prelude to an awesome curve into **Wort**, **Boggart Auntie**? You may disagree with the execution, but their plan is definitely a step above random flailage. Since their best-case scenario in the above is a living, breathing Wort, you can use that info to frustrate their plan by holding on to a **Spitebellows** or **Sage's Dousing** as needed.

What's my point, besides that **Scorching Spear** is an abomination? It's simple: don't underestimate your opponent. Give them the benefit of the doubt. They might be under-skilled, or there might be a set-up. Even the poorest of players has the ability to "level up" during a match. Who hasn't been playing a game when an "ah ha!" moment struck, and we suddenly executed a play we hadn't realized before? Even if you determine their plans aren't Grade A, don't discount their *potential* to adjust as needed. But don't worry prodigies, we do give a little attention to the mistake-ridden down the road.

Decipher

The first step to figuring out their schemes is to watch what they're doing. Obvious-sounding I know, and yet for such a simple idea it can be hard to penetrate. "He stopped playing cards for five turns while you kept playing creatures? And then he played **Wrath of God**, eh? Shocker..." Your opponent is naturally your best source of information on what they're doing. Players (not you, other players) get a crafty plan in their heads, get a little taste of blood, and start ignoring the warning signs. Is your opponent making appropriate moves to your moves, or is something weird going on? If something smells fishy, take a step back and figure out why. What cards would be in your hand if you were playing like they are?

The next stage is trying to figure out what your opponent cares about. If you have out a **Prodigal Pyromancer** and **Wind Drake**, and your opponent has a **Shock**, which creature he decides to kill is *huge* information. Is your opponent vulnerable to **Tremor**? Does he have **Giant Spiders**? Does *your opponent* have **Tremor**? New questions, sure, but far more specific than "What is going on?"

It takes effort to care about something, to divert attention from you to something external. Yes, that removal isn't going to play itself. Nevertheless, a great many players simply throw a burn spell at whatever's hurting them or blocking them, without really considering what your opponent would want to see happen. It's a fairly safe bet no opponent wants to see their **Chameleon Colossus** get hit with a **Weight of Conscience**, but could they say the same of **Stonybrook Schoolmaster** versus **Kithkin Zephyrmaut**? Can you put the pieces together to see what your opponent would want removed from combat least, and for the kicker, look at your board and determine if they're right? Because if you don't care about a card, and they don't care about a card, why would you waste a spell on it? **Thieving Sprite** is the popular example of this. I've seen players immediately play a **Hurly-Burly** on a **Thieving Sprite**, when it barely has an impact on the board and has already taken a card. Who cares? Of course if you add some **Boggart Sprite-Chasers** or **Mistbind Clique** to the picture everything changes. What does your opponent care about now?

After that is figuring out the tenor of the game. This one gets pretty fun. Knowing who, if anyone, is the aggressor is a classic, shifting puzzle. As difficult as it can be to determine who should be attacking and win, the information is clearly critical. If you're attacking and they're attacking, who's right? After all, one of you is going to lose. And while fortunes can shift on a topdeck, keep in mind they may have already drawn what they need and are just trying to get you in range. Be especially wary when they're giving away more life than they're taking. Even the most novice of players can pick up that $2 < 3$, and anyone who's willing to make the trade may have something going on. What kind of cards would be in their hand to make their play correct? Can you do something about it? Note that you shouldn't live in fear; there are a lot of cards out there and most do bad things to your health. That said, if your instincts are screaming something, don't ignore it. Trust your gut, and even if you're wrong, you'll have more experience next time.

Finally there's deciphering the structure of the match, i.e. what each deck wants to be doing. In some ways this is easy; color breakdowns like [last week's foray](#) give certain tendencies. At the very least you know a blue-black deck isn't running **Gilt-Leaf Ambush**. But don't just assign your opponent a deck type based on their colors. There are dozens of ways to draft and play blue-black. Some are more effective than others... but don't assume every



Sorry, *Abomination*.



opponent got that memo. Regardless, once you know what your opponent's overarching goals are, you can decide if there is something you want to do about it.

Break?

There are times you deduce their plan, and there's nothing you can do about it. Milling, for example, can be unassailable. Aside from killing **Drowner of Secrets** or **Ink Dissolvers**, you simply have to beat the opponent before the library goes missing. Even then however, knowing that your life total is invulnerable gives you useful intel. Even if you're helpless against a determined plan, you may not be sunk. There's always the second game (below).

A more interesting question is whether, knowing what your opponent wants to accomplish, you care. For example, I was playing a green-blue deck the other day, splashing for **Heat Shimmer**, **Tarfire**, and **Footbottom Feast** (the deck had a lot of evokers). My opponent, with an aggressive red-black Goblin deck, decided to start throwing Torchrunters at my face instead of my creatures. This is a strong indication of what my opponent was trying to accomplish; what he felt his best chance of winning entailed. Unfortunately for him, I was holding onto **Bog-Strider Ash** and **Tarfire**, which is a fun little combo that's particular good at keeping its owner alive. As such, his intentions weren't going to lead anywhere. In another time and place, I may have had to keep creatures back or use **Tarfire** more preemptively. This turned out to not be one of those times.

Similarly, there are times the mill strategy is untouchable, and there times when you have a trump. One **Primal Command** or **Footbottom Feast** can completely negate a mill strategy. Having that info lets you use your tricks to remove blockers rather than "threats" and focus on the real issue, since you know the mill danger isn't. Your opponent, putting themselves in your shoes, will look at what you've decided to care about and will make a similar adjustment to their play and/or deck. It's a fun little dance.

Speaking of adjustments to play and/or deck, these are the two avenues of attack. For the first, turning down the heat on a race situation or not attacking into their tricks like the situation at the beginning are fine ways to tangle your opponent up. In that **Neck Snap-Sentinels** example, what happens if you don't attack? Your opponent likely plays the Sentinels, since it's better than doing nothing, than has to decide if it's worth playing another creature on their turn, and then if they want to attack with their 2/3. All avenues are fine for you, you've got full power to frustrate their board development or have mana open for **Briarhorn** / reinforce / whatever. What a great spot to be in, all because you took a logic **Peek**.

The other method of running interference is with the cards in your deck. Presumably the cards you're playing already oppose your opponent to some degree. *Crafting* your deck around your opponent's plans is a little tougher, what with the prescience and all. There was some movement for this in the old Rochester draft days but even then, pre-sideboarding for your first round left you in bad shape for rounds two and three. There is some opportunity to whittle your deck into a more focused anti-opponent build, but in most situations your best bet is simply to build the tightest maindeck possible.

But *post-sideboard*, there you've got options. Limited sideboards are a fertile topic of discussion, probably worth their own space sometime. The short version is that while you're drafting, potential sideboard cards shine as static to specific strategies. An opponent's reliance on **Fertile Ground** or planeswalkers is cut short with **Rootgrapple**, **Hostile Realm** is hot sauce against **Indomitable Ancients** types... the beauty of this game is that almost any card can do something good for you in the right set of circumstances.

Once upon a time at an old *Odyssey* block team pro tour, I was matched up in a white-red mirror. We split the first two games, but, while my deck was fairly aggressive and speedy, he had the edge with a preponderance of white healer-types. His plan and method of winning was fairly obvious: stabilize the ground and use the clerics to push through offense at his leisure. My maindeck was quite weak to this. Was there anything in the sideboard to undo his intentions? It didn't look like there was, until the sideboard revealed **Lead Astray**.





Now I realize some readers weren't around those *Judgment* days, but I hope even recent inductees can appreciate why **Lead Astray** is a poor card and a regular fifteenth pick. While mini-**Falter** and I guess mini-**Fog** effects have a place, it's rare. Aside from the filling up your graveyard for the occasional threshold ability, **Lead Astray** didn't even have fringe benefits like **Unearthly Blizzard's** Arcane subtype or **Caterwauling Boggart's** flavor text. But in this match, a card to tap down healers was precisely the opposite of what my opponent wanted to see. I remember his reaction clearly: "**Lead Astray**?! That card is terrible! ...Good games."

Your classic sideboard cards are well established in whatever format, the **Disenchants** and the color hosers and so on. But getting a strong grasp of what your opponent is trying to do opens a new world of dismal cards to include; your **Soothing Balm** and **Overload** and **Fog**. If you can get in their head a little bit, predict the future a little bit, and know Card X may very well *derail* them, make them *very unhappy*, isn't that worth something? Stop thinking of yourself!

Etc.

For today's final note on this loaded topic, let's take things on another tack. Besides determining whether their strategy is a hindrance to you, consider whether their strategy is a hindrance to them. I said above you should give your opponent the benefit of the doubt on a play until you have evidence to the contrary. Still true, but what happens when you get that evidence? Error-prone players don't actually self-destruct; you still need to give them a push. There are many times an opponent will show you he does not have a full grasp of the subtleties of the board. This is an open invitation. How many times did the lowly **Terraformer** kill a **Sewerdreg** in *Ravnica*? For more on this idea, check out one of [Zvi Mowshowitz's old gems](#). His first scenario is a perfect example.

The thrust here is to conceive of the range of your opponent's choices, from a move being one piece of an intricate plan to and out and out mistake. Sometimes your opponent will do something off the wall, out of desperation or in interest of trapping *you*. For example:



It's your upkeep. You spent the end of last turn playing **Faerie Harbinger** for **Nameless Inversion**. Your opponent has a Wort and they're about to get their own **Nameless Inversion** back. While there are other Goblins they could get back, you really don't want them to have the Inversion back in their hand. Unfortunately this opponent doesn't want you to play your **Nameless Inversion** this turn, and has played **Pestermite** to tap your lone **Swamp** during your upkeep. [What do you do?](#)

Add a black mana to your pool and float it to your draw step, draw **Nameless Inversion** and take out Wort. Your opponent is either unaware or hoping you are unaware of the semi-obscure rule that allows you to float mana from your upkeep to your draw step without losing the mana and burning. It doesn't come up too often.

"Floating" Mana
 Mana pools empty (and players take mana burn) as phases end, not as steps end. The beginning phase consists of the untap step (when no player gets priority), the upkeep step, and the draw step. Mana pools don't empty until the beginning phase ends at the end of the draw step.

Your opponent made a good play here, accidentally or not. But however strong their play seems, you are not helpless. Often, taking a moment to figure out what they're doing and what they hope it will do will provide a solution or a better play. Your opponent desperately did not want you to play **Nameless Inversion** there, but don't let a little thing like that stop you.

Just out of curiosity, how many people were aware of the floaty-upkeep-draw step rule?

Were you aware before reading this article that you could float mana from your upkeep to your draw step?

Yes

No

And in this vein, one final question. You've got an ordinary red-black Goblin draft deck against your opponent's five-color mess. You easily win the first game on the shoulders of your aggressive creatures. Your opponent elects to draw first in the second game, puts his mana together, and beats you senseless. It's Game 3. Do you play first or draw first?

Play first or draw first?

- Play first. This deck is aggressive and wants to lay the beats ASAP.
- Play first. You always play first in Draft. The opponent is wrong for wanting to do anything else.
- Draw first. His deck is prone to self-destruct. Why not promote it?
- Draw first: He wants something. That's reason enough to do the opposite.

[Submit my Vote](#)

Results next week. Thanks for reading!



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Noah Weil](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2008 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

