

THE OFFICIAL MISER'S GUIDE

EPISODE 1 - ONE CHAPTER (CHAPTER ONE) AND FOUR APOLOGIES

About a year ago I had the chance to attend the New York premiere of the movie *Kick-Ass*, having been invited to that aforementioned screening by the awesome Hilary Rothing (aka Tricia Tanaka), who was at that point a television blogger for pop culture website UGO.

I would gladly have paid American greenbacks cash money to attend *Kick-Ass* (I see basically any comic book adaptation movie), but this premiere / screening was even cooler because *Kick-Ass* co-creators Mark Millar and John Romita, Jr. were in attendance and scheduled to do a Q&A session afterwards. Mark Millar is the writer who made Apollo kiss the Midnighter, invented the Ultimates, got a teenage Aunt May pregnant in *Trouble*, and whose online persona as a website columnist *in addition* to being a professional writer in many ways gave me the framework for the personality that I invented (and presumably all of you guys love having shelled out American greenbacks cash money for The Official Miser's Guide) and use for my own public persona online.

Despite being a gigantic Millar fan in general, I had not managed to read the graphic novel version of *Kick-Ass* at the point that my butt was in the screening seat, and so I didn't know that the film had one of those plot point discrepancies that regular folks never notice but gets fanboy undies and purist panties all knotted up when some director makes Moira McTaggart an American CIA agent or turns Glorfindel into Arwen Evenstar (or whatever).

Spoiler Alert!

Spoiler Alert!

Apparently in the comic book, when Kick-Ass reveals to the girl of his dreams that he is not in fact her gay best friend but madly gaga for her (and also a wannabe superhero), she has him beaten up (the more realistic situation according to Millar during the Q&A); however, in the movie she wraps her taut Hollywood body across him like a ravishing ribbon, and they make all kinds of awkward-teenage-monkey-superhero love.

Why, one of my fellow audience members asked, did Millar (who was intimately involved in all facets of the project, not just writing the original comic book) allow for the dramatically different change?

“Well,” he said in his dead sexy Scottish accent. “I figure if someone pays twelve dollars to attend a movie, they want to see someone having sex.”

So I realize at this point I owe you an apology.

Forgive me.

In fact, I probably owe you circa *four* apologies.

Forgive me.

Forgive me.

Forgive me.

Forgive me.

To the best of my recollection, there is no one having sex in The Official Miser's Guide.

However, it does feature all kinds of other stuff: knowledge and good times and secret wisdom and love all stacked on top of each other like LEGOs. And most importantly *my time*. With that, I'd like to thank you for sharing *your* time with me over this project.

You know we talk about all different kinds of resources in Magic—land drops, life points, cards, even the secondary market value of particular cards—but when it all comes down to it, there is really only one scarce resource in our lives: time.

So I would really like to thank you for sharing your time, that most precious resource, with me today and hopefully for the next six or seven weeks as we assemble—page by mental page—The Official Miser's Guide.

So what is The Official Miser's Guide? It's a fun, silly, but nevertheless descriptive name for a 30+ day audio program that will help you refine your skills and understanding of competitive Magic: The Gathering. We will focus on different areas, from improving your strategic understanding of how to approach a turn or win a matchup, to the specific mathematics that should be driving your mulligan decisions... but might not be, just yet.

Let's pause a moment and perform your first exercise. You can do this easily if you are reading the eBook version of The Official Miser's Guide, or if you are listening at your desk at work, but probably not if you are listening and driving. Please be safe!

Look at your fingers in front of you and wiggle them *as you continue to put your focus on something separate and specific, visually*. So if you are reading *The Official Miser's Guide*, *keep reading* (as you are wiggling your fingers in front of you like piano playing or whatever). If you are looking at a computer screen at work while listening and your fingers are on your keyboard already, you can start thrumming them as if you were typing.

Slowly bring your hands—still wiggling your fingers—to the peripheries of your vision, probably just to the right and left of your ears.

You should still be reading, still have your conscious vision on your computer screen (or whatever you are looking at), yet be aware of some goofball wiggling fingers to your right and left.

That's it.

That's the exercise.

If you want to stop now because you are in the middle of the office and you look like a clown, I can understand that. However if you are on your own time and no one is standing there judging you right now, you can keep wiggling; I would love it if you could continue with the exercise throughout your enjoyment of this episode.

Another strategy that will accomplish the exact same thing is to extend your awareness to something like the legs of your glasses (I wear glasses), while you continue to do what you were looking at already.

What you just did is consciously engage your peripheral vision. We'll get more into why this is *useful* tomorrow, but for now, back to Opening Day proper.

You know, I have worked with the absolute best players of all time, as a playtest partner and deck designer, over the past fifteen years—I actually got to play my first Pro Tour in 1996 if you can believe that—I have not only driven Pro Tour and Grand Prix Top 8s with unique strategies, but National and World Championship wins.

But more than that, just being around the best players ever, I have been able to pick up the kinds of things the average, aspiring grinder has not yet been exposed to. Stuff that is blatantly obvious to some Pro Tour Champions probably never occurs to the aspiring PTQ player, who is today just focused on increasing their likelihood of making Top 8. We are going to go over specific things to look out for and identify in your own game that you might want to change—and things that your opponents might be doing—that aren't 100% on the up and up.

And each and every day, we are going to give you a homework assignment.

Yes, a homework assignment!

Why?

Right now some of you are scratching your heads and saying, I know from the U/G Genesis Wave deck that Michael Flores is some kind of evil lunatic, but I paid dozens and dozens of hard-earned American

dollars on this, and he is going to give me homework like my second grade teacher?

Yes.

Yes I am.

Because a lot of what we are going to work on might seem out there to you, certainly different from how you approach Magic and—to a different degree—life... and homework will help you reinforce the changes that you learn during each day's audio episode.

Homework doesn't necessarily have to be hard. It might only take twenty minutes, and often a twenty minutes *while* you are watching television, playing Mario Kart Wii, or going for a jog around the neighborhood. Trust me. Magic is fun to me; that's why I have stuck with it with the passion that I have for the past seventeen years. Homework will be productive, but also fun. Promise.

So the other thing that might be running through your head: audio.

Why audio?

Today Luis Scott-Vargas, Conley Woods, and Michael Jacob make liberal use of Magic Online as a tool to teach their readers Constructed play or deck design. But a lot of you probably remember that *I* was actually the first writer to mainstream the use of Magic Online screen capture software and integrate Constructed replay videos with articles or as metagame teaching tools.

In an age where YouTube is one of the most popular entertainment websites on the Internet, isn't a move from video [just] to audio like a step backwards?

It turns out that the answer is: NOT EVEN CLOSE.

It probably won't surprise you to hear that I am a Magic podcast junkie. As far as I know, Top 8 Magic, the podcast that Brian David-Marshall and I have been doing for more than six years, was the first—and still the best—Magic podcast. I also listen to other podcasts, like Canada's The Eh Team podcast, or Yo! MTG Taps! with Joey Pasco and Bigheadjoe at StarCityGames.com. I found myself listening to these podcasts at work. My background is very details-intensive—writing very technical advertisements or working on auction bidding and game theory with lots of spreadsheet work. So my eyes and mind would generally be engaged, but I could have my ears open.

Podcasts—that is, audio content—I found to be perfect for work.

Because I am a Magic podcast junkie, I found myself trying to shoehorn other types of Magic media into the same experience. I would go to DailyMTG and download old Pro Tour Top 8s and check out Nassif's called shot, or the \$16,000 Lightning Helix, or the incomparable Brian Hacker color commentating on Maher v. Davis.

But you know what?

You can't just *listen* to Gabriel Nassif topdecking into the Cruel Ultimatum CALLED SHOT. In order to get the full effect, you have to

watch Nassif organize his mana and joke about what he is doing beforehand.

So—at least for the way that I was enjoying Magic content—I found video to be worse than audio content.

I don't know if you notice the difference between how I do voiceovers for my Magic game play videos versus how other writers do it, but my background comes from the years I spent in the booth with Randy Buehler; I try to recap the main action of what is occurring on the battlefield rather than assuming that my viewer is paying close attention to every detail... I guess that would make it easier for me to not watch one of my own videos as a listener :)

So when something exciting is happening in one of my colleagues' videos—or Pro Tour Top 8 coverage, or GGsLive—I would have to jump between windows, taking me out of what I was doing in terms of answering emails, working on spreadsheets, writing copy, or writing ads.

I guess it's possible that I do voiceovers for people like me.

Okay, we've got the What and the Where down. What about the:

- Who?
- Why?
- and How?

The Who isn't just me telling you my opinion on things (for whatever reason you would listen); it's me and you and lots of the greatest names in this game—and further on in the program—actual guest stars.

A lot of readers comment on my frequent name-dropping in articles without really understanding why I have always done it. I mean, "[Who's The Beatdown?](#)"—generally considered to be the greatest Magic article of all time—was driven by my railbirding a particular match played by my best friend as he failed to make Top 8 of a particular PTQ. The name-dropping might actually answer a big question you have before you even ask it.

How come I am doing this program?

I haven't won any Pro Tours or anything.

But I have "been around," writing at the top of the Magic media field for more than fifteen years. The best—or at least many of the most famous and / or successful—players in the world have come to me as a go-to resource. Even if I didn't have Magic expertise myself, anyone who has been railbirding the best for as long as I have—anyone with any kind of a functional IQ, that is—can't avoid having picked up something useful.

This is the basis for strategies that you can take, carry forward, and replicate, to improve your game, your overall experience, and your enjoyment of the process at the same time.

Case in point: A few years ago I was qualified for Pro Tour Charleston. Incidentally this was around the same time that Jon Finkel made his

comeback Pro Tour appearance. Most people don't know this, but Jon and I were collaborating on a book that has yet to see the light of publication. I would go over to Jon's apartment with a podcast recorder and try to lead the most naturally talented, ingenious player of all time into comprehensible paragraphs and sound bites that we could eventually edit into something publishable.

I was not successful initially.

Then Jon had a radical idea—which was to just play Magic.

His theory was that stuff would come out in the games that we could translate into general rules of good game play.

Initially I thought he could play Magic Online and I could bird everything he did with a spiral notebook in my hands, but he wasn't interested in that at all. Instead—like I said, I was qualified for the Team Pro Tour—he had me bring playtest decks, and we started that way, practical insofar as my preparation for Charleston.

Something amazing happened—which is that “The Fire” got lit under Jon's seat—and he decided to start preparing for Charleston himself. He brought back his old Antarctica teammates—the OMS brothers—and used his Hall of Fame qualification to get them all invited. Our one-on-one gaming sessions grew, and all of a sudden, Jon's palatial SoHo apartment became a hub of gaming, the early stages of what would become the New York FinkelDraft scene that has produced comeback stories like Jon in Kuala Lumpur, Jamie Parke as the finalist of the World Championships, Tom Martell's emergence as a notable player at all, and

countless PTQ victories—with Jon's Charleston teammate Steve OMS now even in the Hall of Fame himself!

What does this have to do with anything?

While I was trying to bird Jon professionally, Tony Tsai—the Shark—was birding him personally. “Here,” Tony said as he handed me a box of sunflower seeds one day. “I saw Jon eating these, so I went and bought some. They're probably what makes him smart.”

The scales lifted off my eyes.

I had come to Jesus via a most surprising path.

From that day on, we just copied whatever Jon was eating that seemed out of the ordinary. Sunflower seeds were just the start; at the time, Jon was big into Red Bull, especially when working (Jon then worked from a home office—he would make stunning feats of execution while the rest of us were at the card tables), so we started chugging Red Bulls too; more than that, I expanded into red VitaminWater because, hey, it was supposedly full of taurine (supposedly the active brain enhancer in Red Bull), as well.

By the Pro Tour, our snacks were all sunflower seed-based, and I drank more Red Bull that weekend than almost any weekend before or since; any weekend but one, anyway.

Now history will tell you that Jon's big comeback WIN on the Pro Tour would not come until Kuala Lumpur and Lorwyn block, but for my part, copying all kinds of stuff that may or may not have made any difference at all resulted in a personal record at the Team Pro Tour that would

have been comfortably good enough for an individual Top 8. I played better Magic that weekend than I ever did at any other Pro Tour and got compliments from the friends who are usually the ones dressing me down.

Now I said that there was maybe one other weekend that I filled myself with as much taurine as Charleston, and that was a bit later, at the New York State Championships, which was my next big tournament after the Pro Tour. I drank like three sugar-free Red Bulls and five red VitaminWaters—at least—over the course of the day and easily cruised to my win with Brian Kowal's This Girl Angel deck.

Just one week later I was talking to my friend DC Dave, who was up for the New Jersey Grand Prix from, you know, Washington, DC, and he asked me about my taurine supplementation during tournaments. Because Magic players are a varied, colorful, talented, and quite interesting lot, DC Dave works for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, which is a not-so-secret division of the United States Defense Department responsible for basically everything that could conceivably fall between the end posts of "the Internet" and figuring out how to get monkeys to fly jet fighters [by the way that was a project DC Dave was working on at the time].

Anyway, the reason he was so interested in taurine supplementation—and the fact that I seemed to do better at decision making and in long tournaments while using taurine—was that at DARPA they had "a book on how to make Iron Man." It is essentially every piece of technology the Defense Department has on how to enhance a human in one book... that DC Dave wouldn't let me read.

Taurine was in that book.

“We don’t know exactly what it does,” said DC Dave, “but we know that it does something.”

Well, apparently one of the things it does is help you perform a bit better in Magic tournaments, possibly even in small doses, considering how much of it is in a bottle of VitaminWater! It probably won’t surprise you, then, to learn that all the way into 2011, while in the midst of writing *The Official Miser’s Guide*, I won a TCGPlayer.com 5K using many of the principles and techniques described herein—including, in this case, nonstop Red Bull and taurine VitaminWater (plus, today, I actually just take taurine supplements).

I included this because it’s just a funny story that intersects somewhat with what I am talking about here: the Who. Snacks and Red Bulls aside, there are some very real—often strongly mathematically provable—techniques that we can learn from the best players of the past fifteen years and more that we can integrate into our own games.

Okay, that leaves us with the Why and the How.

The Why is easy: I love Magic, and presumably you do too. We can share something together that makes everyone happy and makes everyone better. I think there are fun things that you will learn—and learn to do while you’re participating in *The Official Miser’s Guide* program—that will not just make you a better gamer, but better at life. Really.

Okay, here goes the How.

Have you ever heard the terms “legalese” or “legal loophole” talking about lawyers or how they get *obviously guilty* defendants out of trouble? I think that the ire that some people have talking about lawyers comes from the fact they think so differently from everyday citizens.

For example, a lawyer might make the argument that his client didn't commit a particular act, but *even if she did*, that act wouldn't rise to the criteria of the crime she is accused of. It's like a roller coaster of savage S-turns is whirling about in the lawyer's imagination, and the judge and opposing counsel have to have similar carousels or at least hot dog stands between their ears, too, to accept, consider, or combat that kind of an argument.

She didn't do it, but even if she did, it doesn't constitute a crime (or at least that crime), indeed.

A lawyer in this spot has to actually imagine multiple, potentially conflicting universes just to write a sentence in a brief!

Me, I have no beef with the obviously different way that lawyers have been taught to think. In fact, I was in my first year of law school when I wrote [“Who's The Beatdown?”](#) and I think that that—combined with the fact that I had a good eight years of Socratic technique-driven Jesuit education before college—informs how I approach Magic and how I am going to present this material.

Before we go any further, I want to make something clear: I don't particularly care what you think. I don't mean that to be a jerk; I mean that it is very hard to actually change someone's mind about something

that they have decided they believe, and when successful persuasion *does* occur, it's usually because the persuade-ee is convinced that they came up with the idea all by themselves.

Instead, I am much more interested in *how* you think. Specifically, how you formulate arguments and how you think about and approach Magic.

Instead of trying to convince you to think exactly the way that I do—I don't know that you would want to, for one thing—the material in this project is going to be more about giving you the tools to produce your own great ideas, but with a much better measuring stick for evaluation than you had yesterday.

Some of you probably already know this, but when I presented my U/G Genesis Wave deck on TCGPlayer.com, the response was overwhelmingly negative. I mean like a tidal wave of “this is a bad deck” and “you are a bad person”-type comments. It was so ludicrous that Patrick Chapin posited that there must just be one forum troll with seventy-five separate accounts posting because no group of people could possibly be so bad and hostile and wrong all at the same time.

The thing that was really shocking at the time was that the U/G Genesis Wave deck—while not perfect at that point and not perfect even come the World Championships—was simply the most powerful strategy conceived of in Standard at the time, with numerous almost unlosable matchups. It wasn't so much a matter of opinion as readers being unable to differentiate not between “optimal” and “suboptimal” or between degrees of viability, but between “very good” and “very bad.”

Now it *obviously* couldn't have been "very bad," as right after the World Championships, Conley Woods and one of his buddies two-for-two'd the Top 8 of an Open event with a modified version of the U/G deck; it might have had a soft Boros matchup or so, but "very bad" could not remotely describe the deck.

As you build upon your own knowledge and experience in Magic—and I'm sure you have a working amount already or you probably wouldn't be listening to this—you will be able to operate closer to the beginning of that last sentence, rather than the train wreck at the end of it.

If you ever wonder how I've been able to stay relevant and popular for the past fifteen years—without a Pro Tour win or any of the trappings that mark the top echelon of my Magic writing colleagues—the answer is there. I am concerned with the development of new technology and in developing how my readers think. Improving and enriching their experiences, challenging what they think already and giving them—giving you—things you love that you can walk away from an article with, and not just a format-breaking deck.

But while we're on the subject of format-breaking decks, it's probably no secret that I think about things a little bit differently from most players (and it really *shouldn't* be a secret considering the topic of the last ten or twelve paragraphs). Over the course of *The Official Miser's Guide*, I will share with you some of those different ways that I evaluate card choices and imagine or visualize endgames, the processes by which some of these successful Napsters and Lightsabers and Gnarled Masses find their ways on excess napkins, let alone in front of players at the final tables of Pro Tours.

And a final word on format.

Earlier I mentioned that we are going to do homework every day. Homework is especially important today because at this point we are 3,000+ words into the first episode, and I almost feel like I haven't given you anything besides some new student orientation BS or diploma polishing about myself that you probably didn't need to hear.

Now the bet is that we can build on your skills, reinforce what you are good at, and give you tools to supplement what you haven't mastered yet. Imagine for the sake of argument that on Day Zero you are only 25% as good as you can be, and any given unit in The Official Miser's Guide is only useful to the tune of 1%. Provided we can teach you anything at all and give you tools—and homework—that can help make those tools real to you, what does that look like at the end of 30 days? I think you'll be surprised.

Figure 0101: Some Imaginary Numbers

	Multiplier = 1.01	Growth
Day 0	25.00%	0.00%
Day 1	25.25%	1.00%
Day 2	25.50%	2.01%
Day 3	25.76%	3.03%
Day 4	26.02%	4.06%
Day 5	26.28%	5.10%
Day 6	26.54%	6.15%
Day 7	26.80%	7.21%
Day 8	27.07%	8.29%
Day 9	27.34%	9.37%
Day 10	27.62%	10.46%
Day 11	27.89%	11.57%
Day 12	28.17%	12.68%
Day 13	28.45%	13.81%
Day 14	28.74%	14.95%
Day 15	29.02%	16.10%
Day 16	29.31%	17.26%
Day 17	29.61%	18.43%
Day 18	29.90%	19.61%
Day 19	30.20%	20.81%
Day 20	30.50%	22.02%
Day 21	30.81%	23.24%
Day 22	31.12%	24.47%
Day 23	31.43%	25.72%
Day 24	31.74%	26.97%
Day 25	32.06%	28.24%
Day 26	32.38%	29.53%
Day 27	32.71%	30.82%
Day 28	33.03%	32.13%
Day 29	33.36%	33.45%
Day 30	33.70%	34.78%

These are some numbers I made up, imagining a player's potential growth at 1% per episode of The Official Miser's Guide.

Amazingly, in just 30 days, with a mere 1% improvement over what you had the day before, you will go from 25% to almost 34% of your potential... but relative to your own level, you will have grown by nearly 35%.

Now of course these numbers are imaginary, but go with me for a second. What if there is some real game changer that alters the way

you approach some aspect of Magic in a new and positive way for all time? My guess is that for some players that will be, oh, around Day 22, when we get to the mathematics of opening hand evaluation. What if you get some kind of gigantic 5% improvement *just* on that day? What does that look like?

Figure 0102: Some Bigger Imaginary Numbers

	Multiplier = 1.01	Growth
Day 0	25.00%	0.00%
Day 1	25.25%	1.00%
Day 2	25.50%	2.01%
Day 3	25.76%	3.03%
Day 4	26.02%	4.06%
Day 5	26.28%	5.10%
Day 6	26.54%	6.15%
Day 7	26.80%	7.21%
Day 8	27.07%	8.29%
Day 9	27.34%	9.37%
Day 10	27.62%	10.46%
Day 11	27.89%	11.57%
Day 12	28.17%	12.68%
Day 13	28.45%	13.81%
Day 14	28.74%	14.95%
Day 15	29.02%	16.10%
Day 16	29.31%	17.26%
Day 17	29.61%	18.43%
Day 18	29.90%	19.61%
Day 19	30.20%	20.81%
Day 20	30.50%	22.02%
Day 21	30.81%	23.24%
Day 22	32.35%	29.40%
Day 23	32.67%	30.70%
Day 24	33.00%	32.00%
Day 25	33.33%	33.32%
Day 26	33.66%	34.66%
Day 27	34.00%	36.00%
Day 28	34.34%	37.36%
Day 29	34.68%	38.74%
Day 30	35.03%	40.12%

This time I imagine that the same player got 5% better once learning about mulligan math. Not. A. Stretch.

So if you have a one-time 5% lift, three-quarters into The Official Miser's Guide amidst a month of otherwise mediocre lessons. Your personal capacity for Magic can jump 40% in a month?

Holy imaginary numbers Batman!

The thing is, I think that for most players, there will be more than one day like that. Before you bought this audio program, you probably read the hype copy and shook your head, asking if it could possibly be true. Yes, this project is the equivalent to over a year of top Magic strategy articles by YT (yours truly). More than one of them will be as moving as "[Who's the Beatdown?](#)" to more than one listener / reader / beloved customer.

I thank you again for your time and your faith, and for today, I beg you twenty more minutes.

So what we are going to conclude with today is our first homework assignment.

I want you to smile.

Put on a goofy grin. I mean a big, whopping, toothsome grin. If you stare into the mirror doing it, great. I mean you don't have to. You can do it at your desk if you are listening to this at work, or you can keep smiling it forward after the Opening Day audio stops if you are listening in your car or on your commute.

I just want you to smile.

For twenty minutes.

I know, I know. It sounds stupid. And anyway, who smiles for twenty straight minutes? The answer is that you do. For today at least. I'm not going to tell you why, yet, but it's going to be awesome, and it's going to be worth your 1% today.

There is an additional track with about twenty minutes of royalty-free stuff that came with my iMac that you can listen to after this recording, to keep time with your smile, if you so choose.

Otherwise, I'll see you tomorrow with an introduction to technology (plus you will find out why you were wiggling your fingers next to your ears like playing peek-a-boo with a two-year-old).

LOVE

MIKE

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