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Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome to the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. I'm Bailiff Jesse Thorn. We're in chambers this week, clearing the docket. With me, as always, is Judge John Hodgman. And Judge Hodgman, we also today have a very special friend of the court.

John Hodgman: That is right! Joining us from his home in undisclosed location, the wonderful John Darnielle!

(John chuckles.)

Singer, songwriter, novelist, actor in Rian Johnson and Natasha Lyonne's famous television show, *Poker Face*, and now here with us on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

Now, John Darnielle, you know we love you.

John Darnielle: Oh, thank you. I love you too.

John Hodgman: Let us be known that we love you. And the Mountain Goats is your band. You've got a new album out called *Jenny from Thebes*. You're about to go on tour. Everything's happening. We're going to talk more about that a little later on. But the reason you're here today is some time ago you revealed to me and to the world that you are really into *Magic: The Gathering*, the card game, correct?

John Darnielle: Some would say too into it, yes.

John Hodgman: Yeah, but because you love *Magic: The Gathering* so much, we asked our listeners for *Magic: The Gathering* related disputes. And boy, did we get them!

John Darnielle: I was gonna say, you really opened up a hornet's nest there. *(Laughs.)*

John Hodgman: We also asked *Magic: The Gathering* if they would sponsor this episode, and they said no. So, as it happens—

John Darnielle: Well, you know, Hasbro is on hard times right now. They don't have a lot of extra. *(Laughs.)*

John Hodgman: No, they don't—that's true. Yeah, that's right. Everyone's eking by. Everyone's just trying to make it. So, as it happens, John, all of these cases that you're about to hear, they may sound like they're about *Magic: The Gathering*, but they're not.

John Darnielle: That's what *Magic* is. *Magic* is like that. *Magic* is also not necessarily about magic. It's about having a good time with your friends.

It's about storytelling. It's about all kinds of different things.

John Hodgman: No, I just mean to say all these cases are about a different game that I'm calling *Spellcast! The Get Along*.

John Darnielle: Oh, oh, is it *Spellcast! The Get Along*? Okay. Got it.

John Hodgman: *Spellcast! The Get Along*.

John Darnielle: Well, did you look this up? Spellcaster is actually one of the apps that people used to use to play magic online before they came up with their own client. Spellcaster is a way you can play with your friend far away.

John Hodgman: No. No connection. And I have my attorneys working on that.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Unrelated. Yeah.

John Hodgman: Yeah. It may sound like these disputes are about *Magic: The Gathering*. It turns out they're actually about *Spellcast! The Get Along*, a completely different game that is sponsoring this podcast.

John Darnielle: That I've never played.

John Hodgman: I think you'll find a lot of it is applicable.

John Darnielle: Amazing.

John Hodgman: Okay, Jesse, let's hear our first dispute about the totally real game, *Spellcast! The Get Along*.

Jesse Thorn: Here's something from Jeff in Pennsylvania. "My brother and I have a dispute about direct damage spells in the game *Spellcast! The Get Along*."

(They chuckle.)

John Darnielle: Even Jesse, who does not play, is struggling with this one.

Jesse Thorn: "Direct damage spells have always been part of the game, but they were informally outlawed in our old regular game at the Philadelphia comic shop back in 1996. I have moved on from this rule. My brother has not. Now, when I deploy direct damage spells, my brother complains for the rest of the night or flings his cards across the room. Who's right?"

John Hodgman: Who's right? John Darnielle, much like *Magic: The Gathering*, *Spellcast! the Get Along* is not just about playing a card game, but it's also about spending time with friends.

John Darnielle: With friends' family.

John Hodgman: Or your brother. And is it cool to throw your cards across the room?

John Darnielle: I mean, I don't wanna issue a blanket rule stating that it's not sometimes totally cool to do that. (*Chuckling.*) But I will say it compares to *Monopoly*, that like if you choose to play *Monopoly* with your family—

John Hodgman: You've already made a mistake.

John Darnielle: You are making a choice, right? There are other games you could play that will not erupt into arguments. *Magic* is not—do I need to use the *Spellcast* thing?

John Hodgman: No, you can say whatever you want.

John Darnielle: So, with *Magic* it depends on what kind of player you are. Like, I don't care if I lose. I mean, I like to win, but I get rolled over constantly, and it does not bother me. Plenty of people can't stand losing. Because when you lose—well, I had a bit that esteemed New York editor Sean McDonald very gently talked me out of including in my book, which was—

John Hodgman: That's the editor of your novels, the most recent one being *Devil House*.

John Darnielle: Yes, Sean, he writes his own *Imprint*, *MCD*, *Times*, *FSG*, or *XFSG*. But there was a long (*chuckling*) digression in part seven of the book—rather long—in which the rules of the game were explained. And it was an extended metaphor about how the goal of the game is usually to grind your opponent's life down to zero, right? Nobody wants that. Metaphorically or otherwise, nobody wants to see their life total reach zero. Right? However, there's other ways of play that are even worse. Direct damage spells are kind of a nonnegotiable part of the game, though, is the thing.

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You can't—

John Hodgman: Yeah. Explain what they are.

John Darnielle: So, it's called—one way, informally, is “damage to the face”. Because you have these creatures—right?—who are defending your life total. Right? So, usually, if I'm trying to put, say, one point of damage at you—right?—you have a creature who can block that, or you have a spell you can cast in response that can prevent it from happening. Maybe.

John Hodgman: In other words, if you're dealing damage in this card game, I can play one of my creatures—say like an orc or a semi-centaur or whatever.

John Darnielle: Or—yeah, or a rat or whatever. But the creatures will already be out there, and I have creatures who are attacking you.

John Hodgman: Oh, but they'll take the hit. They'll take the hit for me.

John Darnielle: They can block. Sometimes they'll die in the process. Quite often, right? But direct damage—there's a spell, a red—a 1 mana spell called Shock. It's a very powerful, common card that deals 2 damage to any target. Now that target can—“any target” is a super powerful phrase. That means I can put it to your creatures. I can put it—if you have what's called a Planeswalker—which is not a creature but who stands out on the board doing stuff—I can put it at him. Or I can do it to the face, which is to you, right?

That's not a term in the game; that's an informal term players use. Damage to the face is really kind of aggravating, because unless you are playing the color blue—unless you're playing Control—you probably can't prevent the damage to the face. So, direct damage is—

John Hodgman: I was going to say, Jesse, there's an exception if you're playing the color blue.

Jesse Thorn: (*Pretending he already knew.*) Yeah. If you're playing Control, certainly. But if you're just playing a rat—

John Darnielle: (*Laughing.*) Jesse picks it up very quickly.

Jesse Thorn: If you're just playing a rat, John—

John Darnielle: Well, so rats are in—are black mana, which is swamps. Each color of mana has its own sort of element. Swamps, forests, mountains.

John Hodgman: Let's just define the term mana, M-A-N-A.

John Darnielle: So, mana is sort of like the gas you use to pay for your spells, to pay for casting creatures, to pay for casting the spells that will deal direct damage—which are usually going to be Instants and Sorceries. An Instant I can cast at any time, a Sorcery I can usually only cast on my turn. Right?

John Hodgman: So, and yeah—and that's interesting, because in *Spellcast! The Get Along?* Yes. We call them Spellows. Yeah, Spellow coins.

John Darnielle: Spellows. Oh, that's the thing. If we were actually going to do the full *Spellcast* thing, the number of extra terms I would need to replace these things—

(*Hodgman laughs.*)

It would take me three days to bone up on this stuff.

John Hodgman: Now you're getting excited! Now you understand the allure of *Spellcast! The Get Along*.

John Darnielle: Oh yeah, I'm getting a whole—you know, my Spellows and my Majos.

John Hodgman: More terms.

John Darnielle: But yeah, so there's these, there's these things I can do in blue. And mana is what is produced when I tap a land, right? Each land generally produces 1 mana by tapping it. Right? And as you can see, this is math for people who were not good at math. Like me!

John Hodgman: I've never learned how to play any of these games, whether it's *Magic* or *Spellcast* or whatever. But I love hearing you talk—I love hearing you talk about it.

John Darnielle: What's funny, this is one of the things that's satisfying about it. Five years ago, if you'd have shown me the rules of this game, I would have said to you, “Oh, I'm never going to understand this. This is impossible.” Right? You learn it as you play. So, it's exactly like soccer or baseball or something—or hockey. Generally speaking, if I sit down and try and explain hockey to you, Mr. Hartford Whalers Cap, you will say, “Oh, I'm not going to get this game.” Even the offsides rule seems impossible to understand when it's explained to you. But when you watch it played, then you say, “Oh, I get it. He can't pass. It's a two-line pass. He can't do that.” Right? Except I think they eliminated that rule.

(Jesse confirms.)

I think they can now do—which is just—you know, I'm a curmudgeon. And I think when they change rules purportedly for faster play or whatever—I think, you know.

John Hodgman: Jesse, it's true that the one game that you do not want to know the rules to at all before you get into it is hockey. Get out on the ice and just figure it out!

John Darnielle: Just get on. You'll figure it out.

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: Why are they playing this game in such an unusually gentle manner in the unusually gentle city of Philadelphia?

John Hodgman: So, yeah, in their old Philadelphia game, they banned these direct damage spells!

John Darnielle: So, they are expressing a taste for a playstyle, right? And the best way I can explain this to you is with a different playstyle that they haven't banned—surprisingly, because direct damage—the problem is I can load up a bunch of direct damage spells that, if

you've chosen not to play Control—and most people are against Control, as you might imagine, might be gathering, I like to play Control.

John Hodgman: Yeah, no, if there's one thing that is true about my life, I am not against Control. Very much to my mental ill-health.

John Darnielle: So, as I say, Control is the color of blue. Islands, right? There are players who, when they see you cast a Turn 1 island will immediately resign. They don't want to play against that deck. Right? It's just not fun. Because what I do with my Control deck is prevent you from playing your game, right? You sling a direct damage spell at me, and I play a spell called Negate.

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And that stops you from doing what you tried to do. And you wasted your spell. You don't get it back, right? And all I did was play on your turn. I wait for you to try to do something, and I stop you from doing it. That's blue, right? Direct damage, however, for those of us who like—do you remember chiptune, the era of music? Uh, when—

(John confirms.)

Yeah, and it was music that was very fast. Or Atari Teenage Riot, that type of music, right? Direct damage is that style, where if you don't have the nerves for it, you're gonna say, "I didn't get a chance to do anything, and already I'm down four." Right? And it's very aggravating to play. And they're all red decks. This is all red mana. So, what they're expressing at the kitchen table there is that they don't like that play style—that they'd rather you didn't play red. But the mature opinion about this is that like, look, there's a bunch of play styles banning an entire play style. You might as well ban the color red if you can't do direct damage, because that's what red does.

John Hodgman: Or what might have been okay in 1996 in the comic book shop in Philadelphia when you were kids, now in the year of our God or Whatever—2023, going into 2024—maybe it's time for Jeff and his brother to play some direct damage!

John Darnielle: Maybe so. I mean, it's fine for one of them to just start playing blue, and then there won't be any direct damage problem. *(Chuckles.)*

John Hodgman: I'll tell you what, I heard about half of what you said, because I was mostly writing down new names for Mountain Goat songs based on phrases you were saying, starting with, "The Color of Control is Blue".

John Darnielle: *(Laughs.)* It's my long-awaited response song to "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair".

John Hodgman: Yeah. We have another case that sort of gets at this too, Jesse?

Jesse Thorn: Here's something from Tony. “My friend Dylan and I were playing *Spellcast! The Get Along*. I played the land card Rainbow Veil. Everyone agreed to pass Rainbow Veil along to the next player at the end of our turns, but Dylan didn't. He played Simic Growth Chamber. This bounced Rainbow Veil back to me and set me back 1 mana for the rest of the game! I was just trying to have fun and give everyone extra mana.”

John Hodgman: And this is obviously a typo. That should be Spellow. Spellows instead of mana. But you get the idea.

Jesse Thorn: Rainbow Veil is a land card that says it adds 1 mana of any color to the mana pool, and it passes to your opponent at the end of the turn.

John Darnielle: Right, and this is the same conflict as the last one, is some people are trying to play a friendly game that is more about having a conversation, just hanging out, right? And somebody else wants to win. Now, John's gonna like this a lot. At some point somebody wrote an article breaking down three types of players and contending that you will find people who are blends of these three types, but everybody is one of these if they're playing. Spike is one. Timmy is another.

(They all snicker.)

Who's the other one? Spike, Timmy, and I know there was a third one...

John Hodgman: I didn't know they were names.

John Darnielle: Spikes, Timmys, and Johnnys, right? Spikes are the ones who want to win. That is the only reason they are playing the game is to win. They may have fun doing it or they may not. They may be playing for money. They may be competitive, but they're extremely competitive players, right? And their only interest is in winning, right? Any other interest they have is ancillary to this. Timmys want to play cool cards. They see a card that is extremely powerful, and they just want the opportunity to get that card on the board—right?—and let it do its thing. Right? And Johnnys I never—in a great irony, I never remember what Johnnys are supposed to be doing. Let me find the article. “Johnny is the creative gamer to whom *Magic* is a form of self-expression. Johnny likes to win, but he wants to win with style.” This is me, right? I don't want to—

John Hodgman: You're literally a—you literally are a Johnny.

John Darnielle: Yes. And the thing is—and that's why I lose more than most people, because I want—if I win, I want to do it on my own terms. I want to have designed the deck myself instead of playing the meta, which means you find a deck that somebody else has built that's very efficient and you play those cards, right? Spikes generally do this, and they might make their own slight adjustments, but they're not trying to build a deck that tells you anything about their aesthetics. Pretty much every writer I think alive is going to be a Johnny. *(Chuckles.)* He's going to want to say, “I'm going to make a deck that expresses who I am. Right? That tells you something about me. Right?”

But your friends, one of them is a Spike, and he wants to play a game that he can win. So, we figure out a way to get Rainbow Veil back in his hand. And he's excited about this. His friends are Timmys. They're trying to have fun with playing cards, right? They want to play a cool card. They want to get their turn with Rainbow Veil.

John Hodgman: Well, wait a minute. I just want to clarify here, because there are a lot of names being thrown around. Tony played Rainbow Veil. But Dylan bounced it back to Tony with a Simic Growth Chamber card in order to deny the extra mana to the other players. Who's the Spike?

John Darnielle: The Spike—who's the guy who bounced it back?

John Hodgman: Dylan.

John Darnielle: Dylan played Simic Growth Chamber, right? So, Dylan's the Spike.

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Dylan's the one who is trying to put other players at a disadvantage for his own advantage.

John Hodgman: What's a Simic Growth Chamber?

Jesse Thorn: “When Simic Growth Chamber enters the battlefield, return a land you control to its owner's hand and tap it to add 1 tree and 1 water drop to your mana pool.”

John Darnielle: So, that's 1 forest, 1 blue mana, and 1 green mana. And that's a powerful card. That's an uncommon land, and it enters tapped. But when it does so, you get to put a land back in your hand. So, what he just did is buy himself an extra land. Because you need land to cast spells, that puts him at an advantage. It's what's called card advantage. When you have more cards than the other guy, you have an advantage. The guy who's doing that, he's playing Spike. His only concern is winning—right?—and putting other players at a disadvantage by denying them access to the mana that he has.

John Hodgman: Alright, I'm just gonna add two more track titles to the album.

(John laughs.)

“Land Advantage”.

John Darnielle: “Land Advantage” is a good one.

John Hodgman: And “That's a Powerful Land, It Enters Tapped”.

John Darnielle: So, well, you know, I have a song called “If a Powerful Animal Comes” that I think the name comes from the flavor text of some other games. On all these cards, you'll

sometimes see lines of prose—right?—and that's called flavor text. And some other game had the line, “If a powerful animal comes,” and I went, well, I like that. I'm taking that.

John Hodgman: Boy. Jesse, did you hear John Darnielle buzz marketing his album? Wow.

John Darnielle: (*Chuckles.*) It was on the album *Dark in Here*, here on Merge Records and Tapes, recorded at Fame in Muscle Shoals, with Matt Ross-Spang, the great Matt Ross-Spang producing.

John Hodgman: He's just gone. It's like raw capitalism all of the sudden.

John Darnielle: Look, I was born to pitch, John.

Jesse Thorn: If I know one thing, guys, it's this: “In the feudal days of Acacia, finding the Rainbow Veil was often the goal of the knight's quests.”

John Darnielle: So, this is the flavor text of Rainbow Veil, which is interesting because it's a land. And most lands don't have flavor text, but strange lands that do extra things like this sometimes do.

John Hodgman: Flavor text?!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, the flavor text is written by the Flavor Unit, Queen Latifah's rap group.

(*They laugh.*)

John Darnielle: Thank you, Jesse. You rule. They should do a co-branding! They should do a secret lair with Queen Latifah, that would be great.

John Hodgman: So, John, before we go to the break, we're going to hear about a fourth style of player called Luna. We have to make a ruling on Tony's case. So, was it uncool for Dylan to bounce the Rainbow Veil back to Tony? Or was it in-bounds?

John Darnielle: Uh, it's in-bounds to me.

John Hodgman: In-bounds. Sorry, Tony, you're a Timmy. Dylan's a Spike. That's the way it goes. We got two Johnnys and one Jesse. But we gotta take a break. Yes, Jesse?

Jesse Thorn: Let's take a quick break. We'll have more fantastical card cases around the corner on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. We're clearing the docket with our pal John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats. Here's a case from Joseph in St. John's, Newfoundland. "My partner Luna and I play *Spellcast! The Get Along*." Very popular game, a lot of parallels to *Magic: The Gathering*, but is definitely different. "Luna doesn't like to attack other players, because it's too mean. When Luna does target another player, they always apologize. I believe Luna should be more aggressive. It will help them win more and have more fun."

John Hodgman: Alright, John D., same deal, right? But is there a style of player who is just apologetic, and is that a cool way to play?

John Darnielle: Oh yeah, I actually—there was a prerelease streaming thing where you play against people who, you know, sometimes say, "I'm so sorry. I don't mean—" I happen to love these players the most, the ones who apologize before they destroy you. It's like, you know—but I think that's probably a psychosexual issue I have to work out. But that's—there's all—it's why this game is so good. It's why I'm such a fan of it and such a, you know, sort of an evangelist for it is like there are so many ways to play, and it really is more evidently a style of self-expression. You're sharing something about yourself in the way you play, right?

And I think that's why people don't like these burn decks is like, "Oh, what you're telling me about you is you're not here to play a game with me. You're just here to beat me." You know? And that's true in many other sports. You know, we experience this on baseball fields when we're kids and everything else like that. But which kind of spell does Luna like? Luna doesn't like what?

John Hodgman: Luna doesn't like to attack other players.

John Darnielle: Oh, but you can't—*(laughs)*. So, Luna—unfortunately, Luna wants to play a style that I'm now delighted to tell you about. It is the style that people hate the most, but those of us who play it can frame it in a way that makes it sound benign when it is in fact so much worse than direct damage. What do you need to play *Magic*, John? What's the one thing you must have that you cannot play *Magic* without?

John Hodgman: Time? Um... and cards.

John Darnielle: Cards is correct.

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Cards is correct. Time is also correct. But you have to have cards. And you have to have a deck of cards, which—

John Hodgman: Yeah, let's about cards for a second, because I've been hearing a lot of terms like burn deck, and overpowered deck, and all eternal's deck, but people might not know either *Magic* or *Spellcast*. In this game, you have cards to start. You earn cards or capture cards. You build a deck that has moves in it that only you can do. And you carry that deck with you.

John Darnielle: You no longer take other people's cards. That was in the first iteration of the game; you actually were playing to win the cards. But you don't do that anymore. You bring your own cards. This would take a long time to explain. There's another version, called Draft, where you're all opening up packs and building a deck on the fly, basically. You pass the cards around in a circle; you take one and pass the rest of the pack along. And in this way, over the course of three packs, you build a deck.

Jesse Thorn: Famously, that's what my friend Matthew from the flea market likes to play.

John Darnielle: Yeah, no, because Draft is the purest form of *Magic*, because you can't bring anything but your skills to it, right? The cards you're gonna get are a matter of chance and your good choices, right? And so—but I've—I mean, if you don't know what you're doing—like, I can still tell you what card I passed to the left, and this woman looked at me and said, “Are you sure?”

I said, “Yeah, yeah, no, it doesn't fit with my deck.” She's like okay! And then when I played her, 10 minutes later, she just completely rolled over me, because I had passed a card called Dream Trawler that you should absolutely interrupt whatever you were trying to build to take the Dream Trawler, because it will kill the opponent dead. (*Chuckling.*) And so—

John Hodgman: “Take the Dream Trawler”.

Jesse Thorn: Write that down, John.

John Hodgman: Yeah, I'm writing it down.

John Darnielle: If you should pull a Dream Trawler, do not pass it to the right or to the left. But the style of play I was going to tell you about is called Mill. And this will take a minute, but I think you'll be happy with it. So—

John Hodgman: Put a minute on the clock!

John Darnielle: So—oh, I meant a minute metaphorically, John, as you well know.

John Hodgman: Too late! This is *Spellcast*!

John Darnielle: So, in Mill, I'm making you throw your cards away into the graveyard. Right? That's what you're—when you discard a card or when a creature dies, it goes to the graveyard. Unless it goes into exile; I'm not going into that. But the first thing you have to do, every turn you take, is draw a card. If you can't draw a card, because there are no cards in your library, then you lose, right? Then it doesn't matter what your life total is. Your life total can be 30,000, and you still lose to me, personally, because I have milled your deck. I have put all your cards in the graveyard using my magecraft, right? And so, people hate playing against Mill, because what Mill does is not only prevent you from playing your spells, it just says, “No, you don't get to have any cards to play.”

There's only one style of play that I think is hated, maybe even more, and it's harder to do. It's called Land Destruction, where I just destroy your lands. That's really hard to do, Land Destruction. Mill's comparatively easy. And the first time my son, Moses, wanted to play, he was about four. And he saw me building decks, and really want to. And I handed him one, and I took one, and we started to play. And I realized that I had a Mill deck. *(Chuckling.)* Explaining to your four-year-old that he has to continually keep putting his cards in the graveyard is one of the more unpleasant errands of fatherhood I've ever done.

“So, okay, well, buddy. Um, this says that you have to take the top three cards of your library and put them in the grave.” And the look on his face was like he understood that he wasn't going to be getting those cards back. And the question on his face was why? Why do I have to do that?

John Hodgman: You were Spiking your own son.

John Darnielle: Well, no, this isn't Spiking. It's milling is what it is. It's playing—and Spikes don't generally play Mill, because Mill is beatable in a lot of ways. If you're playing against a Mill deck there's a lot of things you can do. And one of them is if you're playing a bunch of cards that you can get back from your graveyard. Then you don't care about your graveyard. You can just get them back. But most decks can't do that. And there's a great card called Cut Your Losses that says, “target player mills half their library”, right? And it has a thing called Casualty, which says if I sacrifice a creature whose power is 2 or greater, I get to do that twice. So, I mill half your library, and then I mill the other half all in one move. I will never get enough of playing Cut Your Losses. It's my favorite thing.

John Hodgman: Wow. So, but it's the deck that determines that you play Mill, because you've got a bunch of Mill cards and that's what you have to play.

John Darnielle: Well, so you usually wouldn't play Mill in Draft. You build your own decks, right? You build them from the cards that you have or buy or on arena that you have come into possession of. And then you choose what colors you're going to build your decks around and what style you're going to play.

John Hodgman: Right. So, with regard to Luna, the style of Luna's play is to be incredibly apologetic. And also, I had a note here from Luna's partner that they'll roll a randomizing die when attacking in order to not take responsibility for the damage they're doing or something.

John Darnielle: You know, I said about something else, this sounds like a very—I understand. Like, ‘cause I don't like—like I say, I don't love damaging people face to face. You know, like, “Here you go. Sorry, I'm about to beat you.”

John Hodgman: Yeah, but it's not always damage to the face. Sometimes it's damage to a rat!

John Darnielle: Yeah, to the creatures.

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But the goal of that is to eventually get the creatures out of the way so that I can put damage on you. Right? But I mean, that's—I have the same conflict when I'm playing any competitive game. I have the same conflict, you know, betting on horses. You bet on one horse, well, you've basically said to the other horse, "I don't think you're as good or as fast as this other horse."

John Hodgman: Yeah, but you don't have to go over to the horse and actually say it, John. I've told you that at Saratoga many times. The horses don't speak English. You don't have to go up to them and say you don't believe in them.

John Darnielle: Yeah, but the horse—very, very powerful psychic beings, horses, and they know. They know. They can see you in the stands.

John Hodgman: Well, then say it from the stands. You know, and we don't have to trudge through the mud to find them.

John Darnielle: I bet against you! I bet against you. Don't bother! (*Laughs.*)

John Hodgman: So, what is your advice then for Luna? Do you think that Joseph's right, that Luna should play more aggressively?

John Darnielle: No. Luna should play Mill, and Luna should play in a play style that takes those cards away from their opponents. Or Luna should play white Enchantments and render all the other creatures inert so that they can't do any damage. And Luna should perhaps play a card called Overwhelming Splendor that reduces all of the—I know, you feel me, right?

Jesse Thorn: John, write that one down.

John Darnielle: Luna should play Overwhelming Splendor, which will make all of their opponent's creatures, no matter what they were once, will now all be 1/1 creatures that lose all their other abilities. And a 1/1 can only deal 1 damage, which is not much damage. So, yeah, there are a number of strategies available to Luna to prevent this damage from occurring. But you can't have a rule that says you don't get to deal damage.

John Hodgman: There you go, Luna. John D. has just dealt you Overwhelming Splendor. Here's some more—

Jesse Thorn: Wait, hold on Judge Hodgman. I think you've been writing these down to give a new Mountain Goats album to JD, but I think by the time we're done, I think we'll be able to write and record the Mountain Goats album. We'll have enough material that—

John Darnielle: Jesse, I know you as a big hip-hop enthusiast, and I think this is your chance. You may know that Post Malone bought the most expensive *Magic* card ever to exist, so, uh—

John Hodgman: What does that have to do with hip-hop?

John Darnielle: Doesn't Post Malone make hip-hop?

Jesse Thorn: Eh.

John Hodgman: That was my joke. Sorry!

John Darnielle: (*Laughs.*) You guys are really looking for beef, aren't you?

John Hodgman: Hey, I don't play Mill!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I'm a real Spike.

John Darnielle: I will mill Post Malone's One Ring card. I will mill it. (*Laughs.*)

John Hodgman: Post Malone bought the most expensive deck of—

John Darnielle: No, the most expensive single card.

Jesse Thorn: John, you know, I know the name of a *Magic* card.

John Hodgman: Yeah, what is it?

Jesse Thorn: I had *Magic* cards when *Magic* cards were new. I would estimate the time frame to be 1993 and 1994.

John Darnielle: You should send these cards to me right away. Uh, First Class Air with insurance, and I will take good care of them.

Jesse Thorn: A good card is Serra Angel.

John Darnielle: Serra Angel's a good card. It's still—it gets reprinted a lot. It's a strong and good card, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Don't you agree, Hodgman? Serra Angel is a good card?

John Hodgman: Serra Angel's an incredible card.

John Darnielle: (*Laughing.*) I love John assuming the mental authority.

John Hodgman: Serra Angel's a great card. Wouldn't you agree, John?

John Darnielle: No, it's just a good card.

John Hodgman: It's a good card, sorry, my mistake. Good card is what I meant to say. You're suggesting that Luna should play Mill, but we know that Luna is a little apologetic by nature. Should Luna play Bold Mill or Meek Mill?

(Jesse snorts.)

John Darnielle: I don't—I'm not familiar with Mr. Mill's work to say, I think.

John Hodgman: Style of play, should it be Bold Mill or Meek?

Jesse Thorn: Meek Mill, the Philadelphia rapper, Meek Mill.

John Darnielle: Philly—you know, Philly falls out of the conversation when people talk about rap, but Philly is a big town for rap that people should talk about more.

John Hodgman: You were going to say Post Malone bought the most expensive card. Why don't you restate that just so that we have it clearly?

John Darnielle: Post Malone bought the most expensive *Magic* card ever to exist, which is the One Ring—as in “One ring to rule them all, one ring to bind them” in the recent cobranding with *Lord of the Rings*. Not cobranding—but the—

John Hodgman: One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them, right, John?

John Darnielle: In the darkness bind them! That's correct, as memorably sampled on a summoning album, I think, on Stronghold. But I could be wrong.

Jesse Thorn: Just as Post Malone bound hip-hop, pop, R&B, and looking like you smell bad.

John Darnielle: *(Laugh.)* Well, I think Post's success is such that if he wants to look that way, he gets to look that way. So.

Jesse Thorn: It's impressive.

John Danielle: He's apparently a very, very, very good player. My friend Jack Antonoff also plays *Magic*, and I think he's a very good player. There's a lot of—you know, it's something you can do with your friends on a tour bus, right? If you haven't yet alienated them so that they don't want to play games with you anymore, *(laughing)* you can play *Magic* with them.

John Hodgman: What did Post pay for the one ring card? What'd you say?

John Darnielle: Oh, millions and millions, I think. But here's the thing. The reason it's the most expensive card—you're going to like this—how many of them do you suppose were printed?

John Hodgman: I gotta go with one.

John Darnielle: One is correct.

John Hodgman: It's the one ring!

John Darnielle: 2.6 million.

John Hodgman: All so that he could go up on top of a volcano and throw it in there?

[00:30:00]

John Darnielle: I mean, I think we're all in agreement, you should absolutely do this. And then charge pay-per-view—right?—and make his 2.6 back. (*Laughing.*) I mean, that—to me, this would be truly magical business sense. (*Inaudible.*)

John Hodgman: Or *Spellcast-y*, if you will. Some quick snap judgments on some card disputes.

Should Vince and Reggie use proxy cards in their unsanctioned play? I hope you know what those words mean. Go ahead.

John Darnielle: So, yeah. So, proxy cards—the thing is, there is—I don't think there is a good case against proxy cards. If you—

John Hodgman: These are counterfeit cards.

John Darnielle: Well, that you made yourself, right? That—if I show you a card trick that involves me ripping up the Ace of Spades, right? And you know some of these tricks, right? Or I eat it or whatever, but then later that night, we want to play *California Lowball*, we will just put together an Ace of Spades from paper, right? And we'll use that. That'll be the ace, right?

John Hodgman: No, I'm going to insist that you regurgitate it. Why did you even eat it? Let's play the game.

So, let me, let me understand. If we all agreed to use proxy cards, and it was okay, then I could make a Serra Angel of my own right now using a piece of paper and a pen?

John Darnielle: Absolutely. You don't even have to write the rules text on it if we know what a Sarah Angel does. Here's the arguments for and against proxies. Argument for proxies is some of these cards are expensive and hard to find. I have to order them by mail order. I may not have enough money to buy—you know, I don't have enough money to buy a Mox Amber, or whatever. You know. But I want to play a deck that has it. I know this deck that I can design that will be cool to play but I can't afford.

John Hodgman: Yeah, that's Johnny style. You want to play some cool cards, and you want to do it with style.

John Darnielle: Well, but not only that, there's a justice angle to it. If I want to play soccer with you, all I need is a ball. And that is why people will often argue soccer is the best game. And I find that argument persuasive, right?

John Hodgman: Beautiful game.

John Darnielle: Any barrier to entry—it is the beautiful game, because any barrier to entry means less fun for more people, right? Whereas if you're playing no proxies, it means that my—the power of my deck is limited eventually by money or luck. If I lucked into some cards playing draft, that's great. So, the argument for proxies is that it's kind of classist for you to say, “Oh, I have more money than you. So, my deck is better than yours.” But the argument against proxies is like, look, that limitation—as with many limitations—is an invitation to creativity, right? This is the Catholic position. Like, when I take a lot of stuff away from you—right?—I say, “You can't do this, and you can't do that,” you find a way to be creative within those rules and find creative routes to things that you wouldn't have found without the limitations.

The people who believe in proxies are just hollering bullshit right now. “No, I don't care about any of that. If I don't have the money to play the same deck, you have an actual advantage over me.” It really is the correct argument, but the aesthetic argument appeals to me as an aesthete, right? It's like I like limitation, but then you should be playing limited if you like that. You should be playing draft, right?

John Hodgman: So, you find—Vince wants to use proxies, because he wants it to be about fun, not money. You find in Vince's favor in this case?

John Darnielle: I find in Vince's favor that proxies for kitchen table, for unsanctioned play, there's no good argument against proxies.

John Hodgman: Our Reddit user on [MaximumFun.Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/user/40PercentDolomite), 40PercentDolomite, asks, “Was it correct for me to stop using my Mythic Rare Artifact card because it overpowered my deck and it bummed out my fellow players?”

John Darnielle: At kitchen table, as you might imagine, you and I would both be sympathetic to who wants to play a card that just takes away other people's fun, right?

John Hodgman: In this case, 40PercentDolomite was using their Mythic Rare Artifact card to turn their opponent's creatures against them by transforming those creatures into green and black elves. Good use of that card? Yes or no?

John Darnielle: Good use of that card if you want to win. I'm not sure which card does that, but that's very like Overwhelming Splendor that just like takes all your creatures and says, “Well, now they're a bunch of 1/1s, and they can't do anything else.” It's not an indestructible

Enchantment, so you can respond to that Enchantment. And in real life, you can also respond to my Enchantments.

But the thing is—this is a key question is like why are we playing? Are we playing to have fun with each other? And do we want the game to last so that we can hang out together, have some hot chocolate, talk about movies in between turns? There is a style of play called Commander, which is played by three or more people, right? It's the most popular and most rising form right now. And in Commander, the cards can get very powerful. You can do a bunch of damage, but it's not even about that. It's about having fun with three people, because the conversations are better than the *My Dinner with Andre* format of one on one, right?

And—(laughs) viewers, you can't—your listeners can't see that I got John to respond with my referencing *My Dinner with Andre* and I'm—I'll be glowing from that all day.

John Hodgman: I'm responding! I'm just saying—Jesse Thorn, you're out there in Hollywood, right?

(Jesse confirms.)

As of this recording, the WGA strike is over. We've ratified the new contract. As of this recording, the SAG/AFTRA strike is preliminarily over. We're waiting to ratify the new contract. Hollywood is open for business. Can you, Jesse Thorn, get out there in Hollywood—

[00:35:00]

—and pitch someone to make a movie of the three of us playing a Commander game of *Spellcast! The Get Along* as a feature film?

Jesse Thorn: I've got Bruckheimer's number.

John Hodgman: Great. We can call it *Apologize Before You Destroy Me*. Right? That'll stop someone in their tracks on Netflix or whatever streamer you use!

John Darnielle: Oh, absolutely. They will absolutely use that on WebFilms, actually. Netflix declined to sponsor me, so I'm calling them WebFilms now.

John Hodgman: We can get a Freevee out of, in any case. I think we have one more quick one before we go to break, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I'm not going to pitch that to Bruckheimer. I'm going to pitch that to the Duplass Brothers. Here's one from Derek in Tacoma. "I'm an actual attorney acting on behalf of my 13-year-old son, Wyatt. He brings suit against his older brother, Rowan." Wow. Devs, Wyatt's attorney is OP.

(Hodgman cackles.)

John Darnielle: It's overpowered, yes he is.

Jesse Thorn: Nerf Derek. Okay. “Wyatt has a *Spellcast! The Get Along* deck that is dinosaur tribal themed.”

John Darnielle: Oh, that's hard. That's a hard deck to beat.

Jesse Thorn: “He always beats Rowan with this deck. Now Rowan says he hates all dinosaurs and will not even watch dinosaur movies.”

John Darnielle: Oh no.

Jesse Thorn: “Please rule that dinosaurs are cool, and that Rowan shouldn't drag dinosaurs just because he can't beat Wyatt.”

John Darnielle: So, I believe that Judge Hodgman will agree with me that it has been preemptively ruled by the judge who precedes us all that dinosaurs are cool, right? Dinosaurs are cool in eternity, and they were cool before us, and they'll be cool when we're long gone.

John Hodgman: Wait a minute, are you talking—you're talking about the judge who precedes us. Are you talking about God or Whatever, as we refer to it here on this podcast?

John Darnielle: I'm referring to God, almighty. (*Laughs.*)

John Hodgman: God Almighty or Whatever, who loved the dinosaurs so much that he/she/they brought the dinosaurs home with a big old meteor just to hang out with them?

John Darnielle: Are you really wanting to open up the question of the intentionality of God's behavior and whether or not God set a universe in motion that gave us actual free will and chose then to absent himself from making such choices with me, who will talk about this all day? (*Laughs.*)

John Hodgman: I don't know, John. Is this movie called *Apologize Before You Destroy Me* or not?!

John Darnielle: (*Laughing.*) Yes, it is. It's very much called that.

John Hodgman: I think we can all agree, no matter how we feel about metaphysics, that Tyrannosaurs are cool, Brachiosaurs are cool, Parasaurolophus-osaurs are cool. All dinosaurs are cool, right?

John Darnielle: Yes, very true. But playing tribal dinosaurs is a way of playing Spike. It's a way of saying, look, I'm just going to run. That's mono green. It means you're only playing green cards. You're not playing anything else. There are some red dinosaurs, but mainly they're green. And what they're going to do is great big creatures that will stomp on you. In

fact, one of the terms for dinosaur decks, you call them stompy, right? Because they will stomp on you, right? And it's not fun to get stomped on. And you have to—it happens very fast.

And so, Wyatt's brother is complaining, “I don't like to play against this deck.” And this is, you know, it's the same as with *Monopoly* and stuff. It's like the little brother is saying, “Can we play a deck that's more fun to play against than you just flinging damage at me all day?” But so, yeah, I think his brother should build a different deck and let his brother also have fun.

John Hodgman: So, you're saying that Wyatt should get rid of some—should build a non-dinosaur deck if he wants to have fun with his brother Rowan, otherwise Rowan's going to stomp away from it.

John Darnielle: Wyatt should—there's more than one deck to play. Play a deck that his brother—I'm assuming his brother's a little younger. And uh—

John Hodgman: No. In fact, Rowan is the older brother.

John Darnielle: Is the older brother.

John Hodgman: Rowan is getting stomped by Wyatt and Wyatt's dinosaur deck.

John Darnielle: Oh, well, Rowan's just mad that his little brother's beating him. It has nothing to do with dinosaurs at all.

John Hodgman: So, what's the resolution?

John Darnielle: Well, the resolution, if he's the older brother—I mean, then it's sort of incumbent on him to build a deck that responds to the dinosaurs. You know, and that's what this song is called, is “Response to the Dinosaurs”. (*Chuckles.*)

John Hodgman: “Respond to the Dinosaurs”?

John Darnielle: *Response to the Dinosaurs*. It's a whole album.

John Hodgman: What's some Johnny D. style deck building advice you could give to Rowan? To counter the dinosaurs?

John Darnielle: So, he should be actually be playing fast burn—the one you started talking about flinging damage, damage spells, right? If by the time—because dinosaurs, most of them are expensive to cast. You have to play what's called ramp, which is being able to make your land work harder for you to get these big creatures that cost a lot to play out. You're not getting a big dinosaur out on turn two or turn three. You don't have the land to play for it, because you only usually play one land per turn. If I'm playing red, I play one mountain. I play Shock, 2 damage to your face right away before you've even conceived of summoning a

dinosaur, okay? And two turns later, I'm going to play a turn that lets me duplicate my Shock, 2, 2 again, 6 damage to your face. By the time you get a dinosaur out, you're at 2 life worrying about what to do with that life.

[00:40:00]

Which I'm then going to take away by casting Demon Bolt on whatever 4/4 you brought out.

John Hodgman: Phew! Write it down, Rowan! Write it down and remember it. Remember—

John Darnielle: Yeah, play burn. But I don't like playing burn, is the thing. Burn is boring to me. It's like—it wins games very fast, and it's as alienating as big dinosaurs. Again, because the other thing that he can do is play blue. If you cast a 12/12 dinosaur, and I just cast Essence Scatter, it cost me 2 blue—1 blue and 1 any color, right? Well now that dinosaur goes to the graveyard; I never see him again. He's with the rest of the dinosaurs, right? Play Control.

John Hodgman: Whether it's burn or blue, Rowan, there's a path for you to beat those dinosaurs. Remember: dinosaurs are big and stumpy. But the little, small, wily mammals, we're the ones who are still here. You can do it, Rowan.

Jesse Thorn: Let's take a quick break. When we come back, more card game disputes.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Judge Hodgman, we're taking a quick break from the docket. And I have my eye right around the corner on our appearance at SF Sketch Fest on January 27th. It's our favorite show of the year, every year. I love to be part of SketchFest. I've been part of SketchFest since, I think, the third SketchFest ever—which is now like 20 years ago.

John Hodgman: Yeah. I mean, San Francisco is your home. So, this is a literal homecoming for you. But absolutely for me, a native of the southeastern region of Canada known as New England, going to SketchFest to perform *Judge John Hodgman*—that's my home, too. Like, I cannot wait to get back. And this year we're going to a brand-new home, the beautiful Palace of Fine Arts! This remarkable structure is, I guarantee, to be the only show that we do in a venue that has a lagoon. And we would love to see all of you there. It's at 4PM in the afternoon, and there's nothing else going on, on a Saturday. So, come on out and fill the place at bit.ly/JJHOSF24. That's all-capital letters, or just go to SFSketchfest.com. You'll find us there and you're going to find a lot of other cool things that you want to be a part of as well.

Hey, we need your cases for this show. So, if you've got a dispute that you'd like us to consider to adjudicate live on stage that afternoon, as always, go to MaximumFun.org/jjho, and let us know that you'll be in town.

Jesse Thorn: I've said it before, and I've said it again. If you have a problem with my mom, Judy, now is your chance to air that beef. Because—

John Hodgman: Yep, she'll be there.

Jesse Thorn: Dollars to donuts, Judy's gonna be there. But I do want to forewarn you, she will defend herself.

John Hodgman: Yeah. And by the way, you can't pay with donuts.

Jesse Thorn: Mama don't take no mess, as they say. *(Laughs.)*

John Hodgman: Jesse, what's going on in the Put This On Shop right now?

Jesse Thorn: Well, the holiday season has passed. And I want to give our listeners a chance to do some very classic after Christmas shopping. So, if you use the code “2024justice”, “2024justice” during the month of January, you get 25% off anything in the entire store.

John Hodgman: 25% off! That's a quarter off!

Jesse Thorn: Even the like fine jewelry. *(Chuckling.)* In fact, I'm concerned I might accidentally like sell gold for less than its melt value. But! You know, that's life in the big city! I already made the code, “2024justice” at PutThisOnShop.com. There is something for everyone there. And we had such a great holiday season. Thank you to all the *Judge John Hodgman* listeners who shopped in our shop in person and online. So, go to PutThisOnShop.com, and use that code, “2024justice”, and you can have a great discount on anything during the month of January. Let's get back to that docket!

John Hodgman: Let's get back to that docket!

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. We're clearing the docket. Our guest is the great John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats.

Here's one from David in Warwick, Rhode Island. “I haven't played *Spellcast! The Get Along* since 2002.” All of the smart guys got out of *Spellcast! The Get Along* in 1993/1994 is my understanding. They were playing it at Nueva Middle School in Hillsboro, California. But then when they went to School of the Arts in San Francisco they became artsy.

(John agrees.)

“During the last game, I played a card called Double Deal against my brother Derek. According to the text on the card, Double Deal deals 3 damage to the Derek now, and an additional 3 damage at the beginning of the next game, Derek.”

John Darnielle: Oh, that's an old card! Wow.

John Hodgman: It's a very specific card, just for Derek.

John Darnielle: They don't print cards like that anymore.

Jesse Thorn: “After this, Derek has refused to play me again for 21 years. Please order Derek to play *Spellcast! The Get Along* with me and take the damage. 5 points! Adjusted for inflation.”

[00:45:00]

“I need to display my superiority; it's important.”

John Darnielle: I'm going to put in the chat the art for Double Deal in the chat. There it is. Uh, as you can see, this is splendid. Right? This is a beautiful, old piece of *Magic* art. They don't look like that anymore. They're now very professional. But that looks like it was made by—you know, by a person who did it in his notebook, right?

John Hodgman: Yeah. It looks like it was drawn by a withdrawn seventh grader.

John Darnielle: Yeah. By—you know, by somebody who plays D&D. Right?

John Hodgman: And obviously, the card is not just targeting Derek. It's literally “Double Deal deals 3 damage to your opponent now and deals an additional 3 damage to that opponent at the beginning of the next game that you play”!

John Darnielle: With the player. That's right. But it's still one player. It's one guy. So, the other guy's going to start his next game at minus—(*stammers*) he's going to have a handicap in the next game. Right? I mean, the thing is, in terms of formats, if you're playing this card now, there are so many other cards that that will make Double Deal a non-issue. He should play what's called a life gain deck. It's remarkable that we've talked about *Magic* this long without me telling you how much I hate life gain, right? I live to oppose life gain decks.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

John Hodgman: An extremely weird motivational video.

John Darnielle: I will do anything to make a person who plays a life gain deck wish they hadn't, right? To make them feel bad about it. But a life gain deck against Double Deal—go ahead, damage me for 3; I'll be up by 6 by turn two anyway, right? ‘Cause there's—it's very possible to just keep gaining life and gaining life and punishing your opponent with the life that you gain. If you run a card, John Hodgman, named Vito—that's V-I-T-O, Thorn of the Dusk Rose. Right?

John Hodgman: That's Jesse's nickname.

Jesse Thorn: That was my birth name, yeah.

John Darnielle: (*Laughing.*) That was my birth name. So, Vito, Thorn of the Dusk Rose, has a static condition that means this is true as long as he's on the board. Whenever you, the person playing Vito, gain life, your target opponent loses that much life. I just can't stand this. This just drives me out of my mind.

John Hodgman: It's like Gore Vidal used to say, "It's not enough that your enemies fail. You must punish your friends with the life you gain."

John Darnielle: This is exactly what Vito is. And it's why I dislike Vito. It's like, you go ahead and gain life, but don't make me pay for it. You know? And so—I mean, they should just play it, and he should take the damage. And then—

John Hodgman: Is there any deck that he can build that would not merely with—you know, mitigate the damage that he's starting with, but also get back at David the brother for instigating it in the first place?

John Darnielle: So, yes, there's actually—I would strongly recommend, and I can't think of the names of the cards, because I can't think of what the condition is, but swamps produce black mana, right?

John Hodgman: Jesse, just so you know, swamps produce black mana.

Jesse Thorn: Thanks for that, John. I appreciate your expertise.

John Darnielle: Jesse looks stoic about this. (*Laughs.*) That's right. So, a lot of these black decks let you pay life to do stuff, right? Pay 2 life to do something. And some of them reward you for having lower life. You'll have a creature that gets bigger as your life gets lower. You'll have something you can only do if you have 6 or less life, right? And these are—they are tricky decks to play. Right? Because obviously, if you get down to zero, you're done. Unless there is a card that also I know you're gonna like. Cloudsteel Kirin is an artifact creature that you can reconfigure for 5 and attach to another creature, and once that has happened, you can't lose the game, and your opponents can't win the game. (*Laughs.*)

So—and there's another card called Platinum Angel. It has the same static condition. You can't lose the game, and your opponents can't win the game. However—

John Hodgman: What's the name of that card again?

John Darnielle: Platinum Angel is the easiest one of these. But the thing about Platinum Angel is it's destroyable, right? If I destroy Platinum Angel, then you can lose the game. Right?

John Hodgman: Oh, okay. But as long as it's in play, you're invincible.

John Darnielle: Yeah. There's a couple more. There's a—well, so Lich's Mastery is a legendary Enchantment, and it's hex proof. That means you can't target it, right? It just sits there. You can't do anything to it. And it states that you can't lose the game. "Whenever you gain life, you draw that many cards. Whenever you lose life, for each life you lost, exile a permanent you control or a card from your hand or graveyard. When Lich's Mastery leaves the battlefield, you lose the game." Right? Really complicated card, and usually you're going to lose when you play it.

John Hodgman: Sure. Real easy game to play, very accessible, jump right in. As simple as that.

John Darnielle: (*Cackles.*) It's very funny, because there's a format called jump-in that's supposed to be an easy format to play. You just jump right in and play it. This card will not be found in that format, I don't think. (*Chuckles.*) But I think, yeah—I think he should play. I think the ruling is go ahead and play a game of *Magic*, and beat your brother, and make him regret that he played Double Deal.

John Hodgman: I couldn't agree with you more!

[00:50:00]

Absolutely, Derek, get in there, get Lich's Mastery, get a Platinum Angel, do what you need to do, and enjoy what John Darnielle calls your reward for lower life.

John Darnielle: (*Chuckling.*) That's right, reward for lower life. That's my autobiography.

John Hodgman: But you must face David again. Go fulfill your destiny, Derek and David.

John Darnielle: Get revenge.

John Hodgman: So, there's one other little case that's not related to *Spellcast! The Get Along* or *Magic: The Gathering*. But we were just on the road, the Van Freaks Roadshow. You're on tour right now, John D., correct? You can go to—what is it? Mountain-Goats.com?

(*John confirms.*)

Where you can find all the places that John is playing solo and with the Mountain Goats. You can see John Darnielle in many forms. Choose the form.

John Darnielle: We've got the Duo tour in January that starts in Charlotte that'll be a lot of fun. With Craig Finn and Bully opening. It's a whole package. It's gonna be really fun.

John Hodgman: Get thee over there. But while we were on our tour, one listener came to the tour, met us afterward, and mentioned this interesting conundrum. Jesse Thorn, you want to read us about it?

Jesse Thorn: Chris was his name, from Nashua, New Hampshire. “I am a middle school music teacher, and I teach my students birdsong is not music. Am I wrong?”

John Darnielle: (*With no hesitation.*) Yes!

(*Hodgman laughs.*)

Emphatically, immediately, yes. There's absolutely no—oh my god. I mean, go talk to Olivier Messiaen, the French composer who's absolutely canonical at this point, though he was scandalous when he was new.

Jesse Thorn: What a coincidence, I was gonna do that after the show. He and I were going to have lunch.

John Darnielle: I'm afraid he sings with the angels now. Oh, I'm—excuse me, I have to really respect my own transition there. That was good. (*Chuckles.*) So—but yeah, Messiaen wrote an entire great piano piece about birdsong. I mean—

John Hodgman: Yeah but let me ask you a question. Human or bird was this composer? Human or bird?

John Darnielle: (*Laughing.*) Human. He was a human being.

Jesse Thorn: JD, him writing a piano concerto based on or inspired by birdsong, or even designed to reflect birdsong, is something that I can't imagine Chris would argue is not music. I think what Chris is suggesting—and this is informed by our brief conversation with him at our live show—is that if it doesn't involve human intentionality, it isn't music. It's just sound.

John Darnielle: No, I don't agree with that at all. But I think—I mean, this is a question that—what you want to do when you're having this discussion with your students is that's an opportunity to read John Cage and to really engage with Cage thought, right? Uh, John Cage, because of his best-known piece, “433”, sort of ends there for a lot of people. But he's one of the truly great thinkers of the 20th century about music, because he asked a lot of questions about what music is, what it means, about what we exclude when we insist that it's only organized sound and when we insist that it's about human intention. A lot of John Cage's stuff is throwing the *I Ching* to get results. And it's music. It's still music.

Here's the thing. Everything is music. Sylvia Plath has a poem called “Morning Song”. Do you guys know this one?

Jesse Thorn: No.

John Hodgman: Uh, I had that card briefly, but I had to sell it.

John Darnielle: (*Laughs.*) So, if—and I know this is maybe insufferable. I would like to read a poem on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast that I think answers this question definitively.

It's about the birth of a child, and it's "Morning Song" by Sylvia Plath.

"Love set you going like a fat gold watch. The midwife slapped your foot soles, and your bald cry took its place among the elements. Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue. In a drafty museum, your nakedness shadows our safety. We stand 'round blankly as walls. I'm no more your mother than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow effacement at the wind's hand. All night your moth breath flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen: a far sea moves in my ear. One cry and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral in my Victorian nightgown. Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try. Your handful of notes; the clear vowels rise like balloons."

So, my ruling is that if Sylvia Plath says that that's a handful of notes, then that's music. And that's—and I defer to the poets on all judgments.

John Hodgman: Well, I agree with you that I think that—you know, and even Chris mentioned Cage when we were talking about it. But go and read Plath, go and read your Cage, Chris, and rethink it. Because we do have to decenter humans in our experience. 'Cause that birdsong is real song. I'm a little confused though, John, because I was reading along on my Sylvia Plath card.

(John affirms with a laugh.)

And maybe you have a different edition or something? But what was the last line of your version?

[00:55:00]

John Darnielle: "The clear vowels rise like balloons."

John Hodgman: Yeah. 'Cause I have that part and then it says, "Take the Dream Trawler."

John Darnielle: *(Laughs.)* I really—I would love for Sylvia Plath to just mill me ruthlessly; that would be my dream.

(They laugh.)

John Hodgman: John Darnielle, let's just go over it again, Mountain-Goats.com or just Google "Mountain Goats", and you'll get there.

John Darnielle: Also, I'm on BlueSky, and I'm still occasionally going to the bird app. You know, it is what it is. *(Chuckles.)*

John Hodgman: Yeah. We won't talk about it, but on BlueSky, what is your moniker?

John Darnielle: It's the same. It's Mountain_Goats, which I did on purpose, so it would be the same thing.

John Hodgman: Mountain underscore Goats on the socials, [Mountain hyphen Goats.com](https://MountainHyphenGoats.com) on the URL. The new album is *Jenny from Thebes*, and it's absolutely brilliant, available wherever you get your music now. And you should absolutely go check out John Darnielle on tour. Just Google “John Darnielle tour” or “Mountain Goats tour” or whatever it is. I've been to several of your shows, and there's nothing more life affirming than being there and John D. catching your eye as he sings his songs.

John Darnielle: Which I will now—you know, I got contact lenses today. I've been performing without glasses. It's been giving me some freedom. But when I last tried contacts, I couldn't stand them. And I thought, but if it's only for a couple hours a night, that will be like the best of both worlds. So, wish me luck on that.

Jesse Thorn: Big if true. Devs, JD's eyeballs are OP. Nerf JD's eyeballs.

(John laughs.)

The docket is clear! That's it for another episode of *Judge John Hodgman*. *Judge John Hodgman*, created by Jesse Thorn and John Hodgman. Marie Bardi-Salinas runs our social media. Our producer is Jennifer Marmor. We're on Instagram [@JudgeJohnHodgman](https://www.instagram.com/JudgeJohnHodgman). Follow us there for evidence and other photos from the show. And check out the MaxFun subreddit, [MaximumFun.Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/r/MaximumFun), to discuss this episode. That's at [MaximumFun.Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/r/MaximumFun).

And we always want and need your cases, whether they're about *Magic: The Gathering*, *Spellcast! The Get Along*, or *Mille Bornes*. Mine are all about *Mille Bornes*, the French card game where you're a racing car. Go to MaximumFun.org/jjho to share them.

John Hodgman: And hey, listeners, if you have ideas for *Spellcast! The Get Along* cards that you'd like to add to the deck, why don't you post them on [MaximumFun.Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/r/MaximumFun) or send them to us on social media, and we'll repost them at Instagram, [@JudgeJohnHodgman](https://www.instagram.com/JudgeJohnHodgman) or something. I'd love to see what your *Spellcast! The Get Along* card ideas are.

Jesse Thorn: We'll talk to you next time on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

Speaker 1: Maximum Fun.

Speaker 2: A worker-owned network.

Speaker 3: Of artist owned shows.

Speaker 4: Supported—

Speaker 5: —directly—

Speaker 6: —by you!