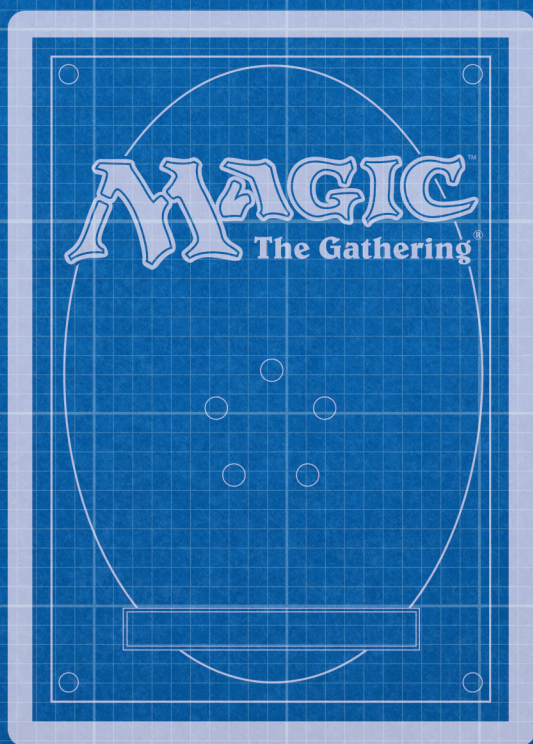


NEXT LEVEL MAGIC

A Guide to Mastering Magic: The Gathering

by Patrick Chapin “The Innovator”



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INTRODUCTION

WINNING MORE AT MAGIC

When I was a teenager, I had the good fortune to stumble upon the written work of George Baxter. At that time, the Internet was not as heavily trafficked as it is today, and there wasn't a lot of material written about Magic. While the strategy level of Baxter's books is very low by today's standards, they were groundbreaking at the time, and it was immensely satisfying to be able to read so much about the game I love to think about.

Fast-forward twelve years later to 2009. By then, there was no shortage of online strategy sites that update every day. This is great for keeping up with current trends; however, there is a timeless nature to a book, and there are ways of organizing general Magic theory that is only possible with a much more extensive work.

Now, five years later, the game has tripled in popularity, with tournaments harder than ever. The subjects discussed in *Next Level Magic* have proven timeless, though so many new cards have been printed, rules have been changed, and much has happened in the community, it is time for an update.

Next Level Magic is a comprehensive course on realizing your goals in Magic. Whether you want to win a Pro Tour or just put up better results at your local FNM, this book is for you!

We'll begin Section One by laying out a blueprint of the most useful way to approach improving your Magic game. We will discuss why Zvi was right when he said that the better strategy in Magic is about having more and better options, and we will examine the direct correlation between having effective mental shortcuts and making better decisions in Magic. These tools will help to form a

foundation that you can build on once we get to more specific Magic scenarios, but without laying this foundation, you will not achieve the results that you are capable of.

Section Two will center on the Four Perspectives: four ways of thinking that will be useful in every area of Magic. Whether we are discussing card advantage or building a Magic team, contemplating sidebar options or deciding on the twenty-third card for our Draft deck, these four perspectives will be useful in organizing our thoughts and tackling problems.

Section Three will begin our descent into in-game Magic theory. Here we will begin by discussing the nuts and bolts of Magic theory: the important differences between the early game, the mid-game, and the late game. We will help you to understand your role in a given game: should you be the aggressor or the defender? We will discuss card advantage, virtual card advantage, tempo, the Philosophy of Fire, mulligans, sideboarding, manabases, templating, and more.

Section Four is dedicated to the mental game. Here we will discuss everything from reading opponents to hiding tells, from bluffing to Jedi Mind Tricks. This section features a great deal of useful material, but as entertaining as this aspect of Magic may be, it is worthless if you don't have a sound foundation of tight technical play and a useful mindset.

Magic games are generally decided by tight technical play, not mind games. This material is useful and understanding it will make you a better card player, but it is vital to remember that playing Magic as perfectly as you can is what is important. It is generally better to spend your time and energy on playing excellent Magic rather than practicing "mind tricks" on people.

Section Five revolves around the major archetypes in Magic strategy. Here we will discuss everything from Control to Mana Denial, Combo to Burn, Discard to Weenie/Token, Reanimator to Aggro-Control, and more.

This section is not just a look at all of the major archetypes in the game's history, it is also a useful tool for breaking down the basic premises behind the major archetypes: what it takes for them to succeed as well as what it takes to defeat them.

Section Six is dedicated to Limited, primarily focusing on Draft, though there are some Sealed-specific areas. Although much of what it takes to succeed in Draft is based on Magic concepts discussed in earlier sections, there are concepts specific to Limited that need to be understood. When people write about Limited, they usually just talk about what cards they drafted or played, and what plays they made in game. We will discuss some fundamental Limited theory that many players are lacking in their game. This core understanding of drafting is extremely useful for anyone who plays Limited, whether at their local eight-man Draft or in the Top 8 of a Grand Prix.

We are about to get down to business... but before we do, it is imperative that we get on the same page with regards to our approach to the game. Just as it is dangerous to teach someone how to shoot a gun without teaching them how to use it properly first, it is dangerous to teach people Magic theory without helping them develop a solid foundation.

Without the proper approach to improving your Magic skills and understanding, you risk missing out on what you could be learning as a result of thinking you already know "enough." This is easily understood when you observe the amateur who

tricks someone at FNM with a “mind trick.” They then try the same trick over and over, patting themselves on the back each time it works without even realizing that they probably could have won even more games if they had focused on finding a more perfect line of play.

A subtle difference that separates masters like Jon Finkel, Kai Budde, and Gabriel Nassif from the average PTQ player is that Jon, Kai, and Gab seek perfection rather than settling for “pretty good.” You might say “nobody’s perfect,” but I would just ask that you consider for a moment what it means to get a perfect score on a test. Is that possible? It certainly is. When you are studying for that test, a B or a C may be a passing grade, but are you going to *try* to get a B or a C? No! You will get the best results if you strive for perfection. It is possible to obtain perfection, and the way to achieve it is to have the courage to strive for perfect understanding.

Many people are content to settle for what is “good enough” in order to make them feel better about where they already are. But for those seeking true mastery, nothing short of perfect understanding is “good enough.” If someone tells you that it is better to aim for a less-than-perfect understanding, that is surely a sign of someone trapped in confusion and frustration. (Or, even worse, they may actually be intentionally trying to keep you trapped in confusion for some selfish gain.)

For the purposes of this strategy guide, we will take it as a given that ‘the truth’ is *what is useful*.

I can show you some of it, at least with regards to Magic, and hopefully you can use that to find more of the truth yourself. *Next Level Magic* is about producing results.

Winning at Magic is thrilling, without question, but there are other areas of the game that can be extremely satisfying as well. Whether it's reading about someone a thousand miles away winning a tournament with a deck that *you* created, making great friends from all over at tournaments, or looking back on a key game and realizing that you made the *right* play in a difficult situation, there are so many areas of Magic to appreciate.

My writings are based on teaching what I know to be most useful for helping people get the results they are looking for, and that includes a broader perspective on community than many players start with and a proactive mentality towards the feedback you are acquiring.

It is not enough to just read about strategies for evaluating Draft picks or reading an opponent to see if they have a Counterspell. To be truly effective, one must act. Effective action is increased when concepts are applied immediately after you've been introduced to them. Many people have a delay between learning and doing: they learn or realize things on a mental level but don't take advantage of this newfound perspective for some amount of time afterwards. This constant delay can be overcome!

When you first learned how to play, you learned Magic concepts at a very rapid rate. You also immediately wanted to play a game. There is a connection. We want to recapture that momentum so that we begin to make rapid, real progress once again.

I have laid out the map of how we are going to tackle the extremely broad subject of winning more at Magic, but we must have the right outlook as we follow it. It is not enough for me

to just print decklists and suggest mana ratios; in order for me to do my job, it is important to get you thinking about Magic in a useful way.

Your job is to have new experiences. Experience is what produces feedback. It shows us the effect that corresponds to our new cause. To make the most effective action, it is useful to be honest with yourself. This honest reflecting will help you recognize a useful result which you will be able to build on.

When people try something new, many of them play over and over without reflecting on what is happening. They might be intoxicated with their wins; they might not want to take stock of why it isn't working. Regardless, it isn't a good way to do things—so don't be that guy. Reflect on what you are seeing and what it means. Take action, and then learn from the feedback. After that, adjust to what you have learned and take action again.

Make no mistake: experience alone will not improve your game to the degree that you are capable of. Without honest self-examination, those experiences will actually tend to make you worse at Magic.

That's right. Wrap your mind around that one.

Playing more Magic could actually make you worse at it, *if you are not consciously seeking to improve your game*. If you are practicing shooting a basketball wrong, you will actually be developing the wrong kind of muscle memory. This is how people who have been playing Magic for several years can actually play worse than they were only a few months after they started.

One of the most important things you can do to improve at Magic is to play more... but all this

playing is for naught if you are not *thinking* about the games. You need to analyze your decisions, theory, and why Magic is the way that it is. Attempting to convince yourself of how good you already are is of little value compared to consciously seeking to understand Magic as it actually is and improving your game in the ways that the game calls for.

The journey begins with you deciding to understand yourself. One suggestion is to keep a journal; any brand new notebook will do.

If you really capture yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses as best as you can possibly observe them, if you resolve to see yourself as you actually are right now, you'll be taking an enormous stride. Take a Fearless Magical Inventory of yourself.

How do you make a Fearless Magical Inventory? Simple: make a list of the things you secretly know you are doing wrong in Magic. Be *honest* with yourself. Stop lying to yourself and face reality. Take your ego out of it and admit you don't do everything perfectly, *yet*.

Make a conscious decision to stop pretending you are better than you really are. You are exactly as good as you are. No amount of fooling yourself will trick you into winning more. Make a list of *every* weakness in your game, no matter how much you may at times pretend it is not. Post this list online. Show your friends. Put it up on your Facebook. Put it somewhere public so that you can't lie to yourself any longer.

Once you take your ego out of it, you will be free to honestly improve every single one of these areas of your game. As long as you are embarrassed and ashamed of your mistakes, you will try to hide them from others and from yourself. Shine a light on

them and you will see what it is going to take to overcome them.

The Fearless Magical Inventory is probably the most important Magical concept that Sam Stoddard has written about, and I highly recommend you check out his excellent article on the subject: [**Creating a Fearless Magical Inventory**](#).

Even if you have read this article, I recommend reading it again and using it as a reference for making your own Fearless Magical Inventory. It is supremely useful to know where you actually are right now.

That is because to begin any journey, you have to know where you actually *are*. Having a general idea of where you are is not nearly so useful. If you want to drive from where you are to Houston, you'll want to know *exactly* where you are, or else you're going to take a *very* long time finding Houston (if you ever get there at all).

As you read and apply the material here, keep the idea in your mind of a "perfect" Magic player version of yourself. This player loves the game, and is technically flawless, while being creative, consistent, honorable, and mentally strong.

Let's get down to business...

SECTION ONE: SHORTCUTS

What is the core principle around which all other Magic strategy revolves? For the purposes of this strategy guide, we are assuming that your primary goal is to win—though obviously, we want to have fun with people, and maybe make money. Still, when we note that the primary goal is to win, it helps us be aware of what we are really trying to do.

In Magic's various aspects—drafting, deck construction, sideboarding, in-game play—we are often faced with many options, most of which have nearly unlimited potential consequences. Yet we only have limited awareness. You can look at this as though it is a bottleneck: we want to use more information than we are mentally capable of handling in any given moment.

Imagine you are drafting and you have a choice between Swordwise Centaur and Nyxborn Wolf. Ideally, you would be able to freeze time for a few weeks while you playtested two identical decks, except that one has the Centaur and the other has the Wolf.

You'd play a thousand games against various other possible draft decks until you could be certain which pick was better in your particular deck, given your particular drafting situation at this particular table. Instead, you have just seconds to choose. That is definitely a bottleneck!

Succeeding in Magic often comes down to having accurate systematic shortcuts in place to help you optimize complex decisions in short amounts of time. You may be brilliant, but they haven't built a computer yet that can play Magic well, let alone perfectly. There is just too much to consider.

The closest anyone has come is the AI found in the Xbox Live game, *Duel of the Planeswalkers*, but as



advanced as that program is, it is still nowhere near as good as a reasonable player. When the computer attacks with a 3/4 into your 4/4, it *always* has the Giant Growth. The computer does not ever bluff, ever. It doesn't know how. In addition, if you attack with a Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir into your opponent's Platinum Angel, they will block every time. Magic is far too complicated of a game for our current AI technology to produce anything but the most basic of strategies.

We want to talk about how to use shortcuts to think about Magic so that when we get to specifics like card advantage and mana ratios, we have a foundation for how to think efficiently.

"The player who has more and better shortcuts usually wins."

There are various sorts of shortcuts, and we want to cover a wide variety here in *Next Level Magic*. Let's look at some types of shortcuts that are useful to us.

One day, I was at an event in Minnesota and found myself battling in Extended. Unsurprisingly, I was playing Faeries, a popular choice at the time, and my opponent was piloting a Merfolk deck.

The challenger had a complicated board position involving a number of creatures, each with abilities that affected other permanents. To make matters more complicated, I had an Umezawa's Jitte, but was behind in tempo and facing Sygg, River Guide, Lord of Atlantis, and more. The game ended when I exiled his Lord of Atlantis with a Path to Exile. He forgot to protect it with Sygg, and the blunder was fatal.

I was probably still going to establish control with Umezawa's Jitte, but the long and short of it was that missing that play made the game completely



unwinnable. From one perspective, some might say this was a relatively obvious play... but when you think about it, was it really?

I have lost many matches to on-board tricks, everyone has. Just because the information needed to make the right play is available on the battlefield does not mean it is going to be *obvious*. In this game, there were no less than twenty potential activated abilities exerting an influence on the board. How can you keep track of every interaction between each of those abilities and every other ability on the battlefield, let alone when your opponent casts a spell?

Many expert players have developed such a built-in intuition with regards to Magic that they wouldn't even have to think about using a Sygg, River Guide on Lord of Atlantis in response to a Path to Exile. I would even go so far as to say that a majority of serious tournament players would stop the game and at least consider using Sygg's *ability*.

But how do they know to ask this question?

When Path to Exile is played on the Lord of Atlantis, how is the Merfolk player supposed to know to use

his Sygg? Is he supposed to check every one of the twenty permanents with activated abilities every time anyone does anything?

In this case, you can set up a possible shortcut with Sygg, River Guide. It is a deceptively complex creature—for example, how many people forget that when you attack with Sygg, if your opponent blocks with a Knight of the White Orchid and a Mulldrifter your Sygg is going to die even if you have plenty of mana? Remember, if Sygg gives itself Protection from blue, Sygg won't be able to give itself Protection from white since Sygg is blue. The same is true in reverse as well!

So, how can you create a mental shortcut that will help you know when to consider activating Sygg?

Sygg, River Guide has the following ability (aside from islandwalk): “1¹ ✱: Target Merfolk you control gains protection from the color of your choice until end of turn.”

To begin with, “protection from X” is one of the most complex abilities in the game. It affects targeting, damage prevention, and blocking. What we should realize is that Sygg's ability is potentially important whenever a “Merfolk” (who the ability affects) is going to be the target of a spell/ability, *or* dealt damage, *or* blocked (what the keyword affects).

It is almost like Magic Online, where you can place stops when you want to be able to act. Here, our shortcuts are mental stops that tell us to consider something when the condition is met—in this case, whenever a Merfolk is targeted.

It may seem like there is a lot going on there, but the key is that you are forcing your brain to get used to thinking about the relevance of the ability so

that your brain will begin to do it on its own. If you practice considering Sygg whenever a Merfolk is targeted, damaged, or at risk of being blocked, you will begin to do it automatically. You will get used to automatically thinking in this way, and then you will truly experience a saving of mental energy as well as an increase in awareness of the battlefield.

There are a number of great opportunities for mental shortcuts to aid you in game situations like this. Sometimes these involve general areas that warrant stops, such as when a card changes zones. Other shortcuts are more specific such as “when my opponent plays a Gray Merchant of Asphodel, killing it with the trigger on the stack will reduce the life drain by two.”

Some shortcuts that I find to be very useful include:

- Memorizing general pick orders for a Limited format
- Knowing whether I typically want to play first or draw first in a given format
- Knowing what to sideboard against common strategies before the tournament begins
- How to tap your mana efficiently (for instance, tapping artifact lands before basics since they are more vulnerable to disruption)
- Knowing what card to generally target when trying to disrupt a popular combo deck
- Asking yourself what your opponent could have when they make an unusual attack or block.



This last shortcut is particularly important, and I want to emphasize it here. When your opponent makes an attack or block that is not logical based on the cards on the battlefield, you need to have a mental stop that tells you to slow down for a second and ask yourself what the opponent is up to. Do they have a pump spell? Do they have a lethal burn spell? Do they have a Supreme Verdict? Put yourself in their shoes and ask, "Why would I make that play?" It is possible that it is just a misplay, but make sure you give them enough credit to at least ask what they could have.

SHORTCUTS IN THE MENTAL GAME

The mental game is one of the most important areas in which to develop effective shortcuts. The mental game includes everything from attitude to rapport, from mind games to mindset, and shortcuts are important in every aspect. From the way you sit in your chair to the way you talk to yourself, effective shortcuts will help us make better decisions.

Keep in mind, however, that this does not mean that you should be focusing all of your energy on developing your Jedi Mind Tricks. Too many players fall into the trap of thinking that “glamorous” mind games are the deciding factor in most games of tournament Magic.

Although countless matches are decided by mental trickery, this is not what being good at Magic is about, and it is not what makes a player a champion.

“More Magic games are decided by technical play than ALL other factors combined.”

In any one given scenario, it may come down to a mind game being your best or only shot at winning—but the vast majority of your wins will come from tight technical play. Besides, the games that do come down to mind games typically never would have gotten to that point if you had played tighter... or perhaps you only arrived at this opportunity because of your tight play.

Mike Long has one of the strongest mental games in the history of the game. He is responsible for many of the game's greatest bluffs, having won countless matches that would have been unwinnable if not for his mental abilities.

The thing is, even with those skills, he still relied on his technical play (which was among the best in his era) more than his mind tricks. No one has ever truly excelled at Magic on the back of mind games without strong technical play.

If you want to get better at Magic, focus on decreasing the number of mistakes you make per turn. If you think you aren't making mistakes every turn, you are probably making a mistake. If you learn how to analyze your play properly, a clear understanding of the types of mistakes you are making will lead to a huge increase in your ability to improve.

Basketball is a good example of where it is tempting to let flash trump substance. The replays on ESPN are filled with impressive dunks that seem to defy gravity, incredible feats that leave you in awe. So many novice basketball players spend all their time practicing their dunking, ignoring the fundamentals—and then they wonder why the scouts aren't interested.

But the scouts know: dunks don't win most games.

Solid shooting, rebounding, ball movement, and tight defense—those are the areas that decide games, seasons, and championships. The fundamentals may not be as sexy as that dunk from the free-throw line, but they are *far* more important. While many of your favorite players may dunk regularly, there are a lot of good players that only dunk occasionally. *All* of the good players have strengths that revolve around the fundamentals of basketball.

The shortcut to take away from this is: focus on improving your technical game. It is more important for improving your win percentage than any other area of Magic.

The important types of fundamental mental shortcuts involve how you think about what happens in Magic. For instance, how do you respond to your losses?

Top players generally take responsibility for their losses far more often than weaker players. They have developed a shortcut that includes honestly assessing the decisions they made in the game and evaluating what they could have done to change the outcome.

Most players just want to feel better about themselves, so they tell themselves a version of the truth that involves them losing because of “mana screw,” a “lucky topdeck,” or a “bad matchup.”

Do you think Luis Scott-Vargas sat around lamenting his mana screws at Pro Tour Hollywood? He did get a bit mana-screwed in a key match on Day Two. Did he lament his bad matchups? Again, he got some of those. What about his opponent's lucky topdecks? No, he took an honest assessment of his Top 64 finish in Hollywood and took responsibility for the result.

You are going to get mana-screwed, you are going to get bad matchups, and you are going to get out-topdecked. There are certainly things you can do to minimize these obstacles, but LSV took a good look at what he could have done different and realized that he wasn't making bold enough deck choices at Pro Tours.

Yes, he cashed at the Pro Tour, but to him this wasn't an excuse to settle for anything less than perfection. He realized he couldn't have done anything more to prevent that mana screw or that topdeck.

**TOP PLAYERS
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What he *could* have done, though, was play a different deck. Outside of the possibility of having fewer bad matchups, a new deck could have offered him a chance to win despite mana screw or his opponent's topdecks.

What did he do? He decided to play a “risky” combo deck at the next Pro Tour... and he won it.

Honest self-assessment and taking responsibility for your losses can make all the difference in the world, and LSV would not be a top player in the ranks of Jon Finkel and Owen Turtenwald if it were not for his mental approach to Magic and improvement.

Remember, we are not saying that Mind Tricks don't have a purpose or a place. Even if you are just trying to defend yourself from them, the subject is a rich one that is fascinating to contemplate. I am just saying that you want to be a well-rounded Magic player, not just a slam-dunk artist.

We will talk about Jedi Mind Tricks a bit later in this guide, as they are both interesting and useful. Mind tricks give you a lot to think about, even if it is primarily how best to defend yourself from the attacks of others—but they can be of great value.

The source of the mind trick aspect of my game is rooted in a strong understanding and awareness of what people call “implicit communication.” This makes me very good at reading my opponents' minds, and consequently, deducing their hand. This carries over into an area of slight influence over them as well as defense against the mental manipulations of opponents.

But we will discuss how to Jedi later. For now, the important point is to remind you that you need to develop useful shortcuts for how to think about

Magic efficiently. This is a more important area to start with in terms of improving your performance.



When it comes to the mental game, it is critical to develop a good system of shortcuts for determining when your opponent is likely to do something that changes the board. A good way to look at it is whenever an opponent does something that you would not have done based on the information you have, you should stop and ask yourself why they might do that.

Some examples of shortcuts for determining when your opponent might be up to something include:

- Your opponent blocks in a way that seems worse than another obvious way to block or makes a crazy attack.
- Your opponent does not play a card that you have already seen from their hand that would be logical to play at this moment.
- Your opponent taps an unusual selection of lands. For instance, he taps his Mutavault and Stomping Ground, but leaves two Forests untapped.

- Your opponent doesn't play lands that you know are in his hand.
- Your opponent uses a removal spell on what is clearly not the best target. Why would they kill the *second* best guy?
- You make a small mistake and your opponent *really* wants to not only let you take it back, but tries to convince you to.
- Your opponent phrases a statement or question in a very peculiar way. For instance, if your opponent says, "I give all my legal targets fear," you might want to ask yourself why he would say this in such a strange way.

In general, a good rule of thumb to remember is:

"When an opponent makes what appears to be an obviously suboptimal play based on the public information, ask yourself why he would do this."

SHORTCUTS IN DECKBUILDING

Shortcuts are vital for good deck construction. Without them, you would have to build every possible deck and test each one against all of the established decks in order to determine what you should play. This would take lifetimes.

Weak deckbuilders have worse systems that contain fewer shortcuts, and the shortcuts they have are less effective—so the time they spend on Magic doesn't produce much in the way of results. These people could spend more time on this and get better results, or they could use the obvious shortcut of netdecking... but without good fundamental skills, netdecks aren't enough. How do you choose which netdeck is best? How do you update it based on changes in the metagame over the past two weeks?

One important point that most PTQ-level opponents will overlook is that, when you're examining a new decklist, it is vital to take the source into account.

If you read about a new Reid Duke deck, you can assume from the gate there are going to be subtleties to the decklist; card choices that may not be obvious. On the other hand, if the pilot or designer is unknown, it is more realistic to believe the apparently suboptimal card choices are actually just that.

Great new decks can come from the most unlikely places, without question; however, in general, better deckbuilders will produce better decks most of the time. (That is what it means for a deckbuilder to be "better.") We're not trying to flatter the "good" deckbuilders in Magic, it is just a statement of truth as well as a useful shortcut to remember.

With this course, we are interested in what is useful. When it comes to studying new decklists, what is useful is generally that which produces the results we are looking for: wins. Of course, take care not to overcompensate by assuming someone you have never heard of has nothing to teach you.

I once wrote an article called **Right/Wrong: A Vintage/Non-Vintage Split Article**, which might be of interest to you if you want to read more on how to evaluate writers' and theorists' positions. Jon Finkel has said that one of the most important concepts that one needs to appreciate to master Magic is that everyone has something to teach you, and I agree with him completely.

Still, it is useful to ask yourself: who built the deck you are looking at? Are they building decks that actually win tournaments? Be careful here, as they may not have the benefit of having LSV, Finkel, and Owen making them look good.

Just because someone doesn't have a track record doesn't mean they are incorrect or that they couldn't be on to the next big thing. All it means is that they are *less* likely to have built the perfect deck than Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, Sam Black, or Zvi Mowshowitz.

Shortcuts in deckbuilding extend far beyond how to analyze a decklist you see. When building a deck from scratch, one of the most useful shortcuts to develop is a system of comparing whatever concept you have with any precedents that may exist. This is the concept of *templating*.

There really aren't that many basic archetypes in Magic. Templating involves taking an existing deck archetype and rebuilding it using cards that are legal in the format you are playing. For instance, you can

start with a past Mono-Red Burn deck and use it as a blueprint to help you build a Mono-Red Burn deck in the format you are actually playing.

Developing a system of shortcuts to help you think about deckbuilding theory is vital if you want to make an impact in the deckbuilding community. These templating systems can include shortcuts such as borrowing manabases from similar decks, studying decks that have successfully merged two strategies you are interested in, comparing mana curves, getting ideas for sideboarding, and so on.

The whole idea is to develop tricks of the trade that allow you to not have to think about *everything, every time*. For instance, it can be tiring to have to compute a new mana curve and color ratio for every deck you build, especially if it is many colors and you are not very experienced at working with mana ratios.

Building a red aggro deck? Study every red deck you can find that has enjoyed major tournament success. You will learn so much this way... for instance, like how almost no one has ever used Doom Blade-style effects to much success in burn decks. In addition, you will have a deep resource of possible templates to use when building similar decks of your own.

SHORTCUTS IN DRAFT

We will talk extensively about Limited when we get to the section on drafting, but I do want to say a few words on developing shortcuts for thinking about Limited. A common difficulty people have is when they don't know which of two obvious shortcuts to use. Do you draft the best cards, or do you draft the best synergy in terms of archetypes, color combinations and the like?

The best shortcut here involves a deeper strategy that combines both of those weaker shortcuts. You can do all right with a simple understanding of the typical pick orders for a color or combination of colors, just as you can do all right if you just pick cards that compliment a given theme.

However, to be a truly great drafter you must be able to weigh the relative value of a card's intrinsic power level with its synergistic power level in the deck you're currently drafting. Your experiences gained in playing more with cards will tend to take you down the right road... *but* you can make better use of this experience if you develop a system of useful shortcuts to make the most out of your drafts. You can't play an infinite number of times, so you want to make the best of the opportunities you do have!

Reading articles and having pros you trust give you the pick order for a new set is a good tool, but it should not be the only one you rely on. You are also going to want to examine each archetype that you may find yourself drafting, and examine which cards gain or lose value in that archetype. This way, you will be more able to make a decision in a matter of seconds that will help positively shape the rest of your draft.

YOU CAN'T PLAY AN INFINITE NUMBER OF TIMES, SO MAKE THE BEST OF THE OPPORTUNITIES YOU DO HAVE!

One shortcut for improving at Limited formats that many amateurs don't fully appreciate is the value of picking rares in practice drafts. When you are given a decision between a decent common and a non-bomb rare you have never used before, you should err on the side of picking the rare. If you draft a reasonable amount of time, you will have had plenty of opportunity to evaluate the commons.

However, an opportunity to see an obscure rare in action is often invaluable. Obscure rares have a tendency to get passed more since players are often reluctant to use an early pick on a card that they have no experience with.

If you bite the bullet and try drafting the card in a practice draft, you will build a much better understanding of the card. Is it a sleeper bomb? Is it too expensive in practice? Is it good with flyers? Regardless of what you will have learned, that information will typically be worth making a slightly risky draft pick in a practice draft. One of the greatest drafters of all time, Hall of Famer Mike Turian, wrote an article related to this subject entitled **Rare X** that is well worth checking out.

Shortcuts like these can add up to producing much more fruitful playtesting and practice sessions, moving you towards more wins.

Examine what shortcuts you are already using to aid you when it comes to drafting a deck. What about the shortcuts you use when learning about a Limited format?

Your opponent plays a decent spell for which you have no answer. You have one Counterspell. Do you cast it? It would be nice to stop the game in progress, put together a research team to evaluate the pros and cons, maybe playtest for a few months

and come to a conclusion as to the right play. However, we have to work with what we have.

Technical play is one area where focus becomes extra important. Focus is always important, sure—but when making in-game decisions on the right play, it is crucial to focus on the task at hand. The more focused you are, the more useful information you are processing at once.

Focus is the qualitative measure of how much you are utilizing your time. Remember, if you spent twenty focused hours on deck construction, then you will obviously tend to build a better deck than if you spent twenty unfocused hours or ten focused hours—unless you make negative progress, which we will talk about how to avoid.

Focus becomes more of an issue during a match because our time is fixed. You have about fifty minutes for each match, and usually no more. You even have to share that time with your opponent!

“Focus only on what matters.”

Jon Finkel may have said it best, and you will hear this again and again. It is all good to be willing to concentrate consciously. During a match, however, there is more than that to focus. Getting your subconscious mind focused properly is incredibly useful—but how to do so is almost entirely unknown to most people. We are about to examine how to do just that.

PICKING THE RIGHT SHORTCUT AT THE RIGHT TIME

Let's say you have just encountered a new obstacle, one where you find yourself confused in a situation you have never seen before. What is the first shortcut that you're going to want to use?

When people ask for me advice on how to handle a situation or just what to do, they are often surprised when they hear my response:

"What are you trying to accomplish?"

There is a subtle wisdom to slowing down for a moment and reflecting on what exactly you are doing. Ask yourself, "What am I trying to accomplish?" Perhaps even, "Who am I right now?" This is one of the most important things you will ever hear me say, and its truth does not just relate to Magic.

I have avoided countless play mistakes, bad deck choices, and wasted draft picks by applying this idea. I have also saved wonderful relationships and resolved unfulfilling ones, I have made hard life decisions that needed to be made, and I have figured out great ways to enrich the lives of my friends and loved ones.

Whenever you face a decision you are unsure about, regardless of whether it is "Should I block?" or "Should I move to California?", one of the most useful initial shortcuts you can utilize is to *ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish*.

There are a million things you *could* do to help you determine whether or not to block or whether or not to move to California—but if you start by asking yourself what you are trying to accomplish,

your brain can automatically sort the information in a way that is much more useful for trying to accomplish what you are trying to accomplish (which is really the whole point of shortcuts).

Since there are so many factors to consider, it helps to have a system to arrange the information in a way that considers what you are trying to accomplish. For instance, if you are trying to avoid death in combat this turn, you will automatically approach blocking *completely* differently than if you are merely trying to not lose your unblockable creature or if you are trying to figure out a way to remove an annoying attacker.

You want to defeat skilled players in your area. You want to identify and play amazing Standard, Block, Modern, or Vintage decks. You want to draft countless 3-0 decks, and be the best player you are capable of. There is so much to do and to accomplish in Magic. How can you obtain and be everything that you desire?

Regardless of whether you simply want to win your FNM, a Pro Tour, or even surpass the accomplishments of Jon Finkel and Kai Budde, you'll need to begin by following this rule:

“When in doubt, ask for help.”

There is a second part to this common wisdom that is often overlooked, however: if you don't ask *yourself* for help first, no one else can help you. Many times, asking yourself is enough. Great players like Finkel and Kai, William “Huey” Jensen and Reid Duke, question themselves continually. We ought do the same.

What kinds of answers do we expect to get when we ask ourselves, “What am I doing and what do I want to accomplish?”

In Magic, our goal typically breaks down to one of the following situations:

- Having the best mindset.
- Finding and building the best deck.
- Drafting or building the best Limited deck.
- Playing optimally.
- Developing our connections in the Magic community.

Once we figure out what we're trying to do, we ask ourselves which tools will provide a foundation for our success. Let's start by looking at situations that relate to each of these challenges. Soon, you will notice patterns.

The longer version is a little more descriptive, but also describes what this really means.

"When you need or want help, ask for help—but don't become dependent on others to help you. You have to be able to help yourself, but not to be afraid to ask for help when you need it."

THE MENTAL GAME – STAYING POSITIVE AND STAYING SHARP

*Each of us is currently as good at Magic
(or anything else in the world) as we are.
We are not better than we already are.*

As obvious as this might sound, people spend so much time and emotional effort trying to prove to themselves that they are already “good enough.”

The proper question is, “How can we become better?” The ultimate question is, “How can we become perfect?” The first shortcut we should be using constantly is to understand exactly how good we actually are and then focusing on what we *actually* want.

Everyone knows that better choices lead to better results. This is one of the reasons that every serious tournament player, from Luis Scott-Vargas to Paul Rietzl, begins dissecting a tournament by asking “Who won and with what?” That’s because they hope that if they know about this deck—a deck that had a better result than any other deck in the field—then they will be able to take advantage of that knowledge to help win a tournament themselves. The specific player who won helps paint the picture of what it took to win with this deck.

When studying someone who has done what you want to do, the goal is to know the qualities they possess that helped them accomplish whatever it is that you want. When you study a winner or a master of anything, you hope that the knowledge will help you duplicate (or exceed) that person’s successes.

The idea boils down to this: *Better ideas give us better results.* If you play a better deck than everyone else

**THE ULTIMATE
QUESTION IS,
“HOW CAN
WE BECOME
PERFECT?”**

at a tournament, you have an advantage. If you play better than every opponent you face, you have another advantage. And so on.

So how do we get to these better ideas? Getting better always begins by *focusing* on getting better. Always. There is no exception to this rule. When I first started playing, I didn't know the first thing about tournament play. My Magic universe consisted of just my brothers, my cousin, and some local friends. I enjoyed some success early on, but I was not content to just be as good as I already was. I wanted to be the best. (I still do!)

Many people around me spent their efforts on convincing themselves that they were already good enough; I spent my efforts on seeking perfection. People who make excuses in attempts to tell themselves that they are already good enough will never have the results of someone who humbly accepts that there is always more to learn.

What makes this true? It is *useful*.

I remember the early years of the Pro Tour. I was already competing heavily before there was a Pro Tour, but things were a lot different back then. First of all, I was one of the youngest successful tournament players of the early- to mid-Nineties, which is definitely in stark contrast to the old man I am today. People were just not as good at Magic back then. Strategy resources and writers that most take for granted today did not exist yet. StarCityGames.com, Zvi, Flores, and many others have radically changed the game. Magic theory had hardly been formed then, and most players had no idea how bad they really were.

It was only after years of studying what works that we as a community have been able to develop the

understanding of the game that exists today. This high level of understanding by many competitive players has led to an increase in the difficulty of tournament Magic.

Fortunately, there is good news: this wealth of information on what has worked in Magic is useful for figuring out what will work tomorrow and the next day.

“Focus on what is useful.”

(This is essentially what Finkel said above, but phrased in a way to draw emphasis to the fact that what matters is *what is useful*.)

Focusing on what you actually want opens your mind to all of its resources, especially when what you want is perfection. Plays that might have seemed obscure begin to come easily; ideas that surprise others start to flow. Why? When you are completely and utterly focused on your goal instead of your fears or your past accomplishments, *you will make the right play more often*. This is also especially true when practicing.

When you find yourself in a tight spot, stop everything and return your focus to where it belongs. Ask yourself, “What am I doing and what do I want to accomplish?”

For example, I was once playing the finals of an Extended PTQ, armed with a Mono-Blue deck that relied on High Tide to allow me to build a huge amount of blue mana by tapping and untapping my Islands over and over thanks to cards like Time Spiral and Turnabout. Eventually, I would win by pointing a giant Stroke of Genius at my opponent.

My opponent had a Five-Color Survival of the Fittest deck with a few twists. One of these twists was the killer hoser card Lobotomy, which he played on turn three. This allowed him to not only take the High Tide in my hand and exile it, but to exile *all* of the High Tides in my deck. (I had a Counterspell, but I had tapped out to cast Merchant Scroll.)



Now, many players would have conceded from this position, since my deck had neither creatures nor any defense to stop my opponent's creature attacks that were soon to follow. Without High Tide, I had no way to ever get ahead on mana aside from the usual method of tapping each land once per turn. That made it very difficult to get enough mana to Stroke of Genius my opponent for his entire library.

Instead of giving up, I stopped everything and focused. I thought about what was going on and asked myself:

"What am I doing and what do I want to accomplish?"

After some deep consideration, I came to the conclusion that I was going to draw cards and get Islands onto the battlefield as fast as I could. My goal

was to get every Island in my deck in play before he could kill me with creatures. Then I would use one of my Stroke of Geniuses on him during his end step, and the other during my turn. I would also have to convince him to activate Survival of the Fittest a couple times to take some cards out of his library.



I may not have been able to make more than one blue mana per Island, but I knew if I untapped my Thawing Glaciers enough times I could get every Island in my deck onto the battlefield. I carefully mapped out how many turns I could survive and how each was going to have to go in order to get where I needed to be.

He was confused as to why I did not concede, but I needed him distracted so that he did not figure out my plan. I acted like we just playing around and I was just going to go through the motions until he beat me. I just kept light conversation going, joking around and making fun of how silly of a game we were playing and how I had no chance, but I was going to make him beat me.

I Thawed and I Thawed, Time Spiraling over and over, eventually reaching a point where all of my Islands were on the battlefield. I Time Spiraled

one last time to refill my hand, setting up the final turn. He played a burn spell on me in response, without even thinking about it, not taking the game seriously. Little did he realize that if he had just burnt his own creature, it would have given him one extra card in his deck, leaving me one mana short of finishing him off and leaving him with one more turn and one more attack phase.

Finally, I had everything set up. I passed the turn to my opponent, who attacked and played more creatures. On his end step, I targeted him with one of my two Stroke of Geniuses. I untapped, played all of my Turnabouts, and targeted him with the other Stroke, leaving him with exactly zero cards in his library. During his draw step, he found himself one card short.

He was speechless.

It had never occurred to him that there was even a game going on. He had assumed that the game was done and over with for so long that this turn of events had blindsided him. Just looking at his face revealed there must have been a million thoughts going through his head—the first of which was, “Where did things go wrong?”

I had kept my focus and looked for victory even though at first glance it seemed impossible. I saw what I had to do to give myself an opportunity to win. My opponent failed to do the same.

I asked myself a series of questions, each related to “What needs to be done to win this game?” And what mattered was finding a way to win, then a way to cast those Stroke of Geniuses, then a way to build up enough mana and cards to pull it off. I just kept figuring out what mattered and focusing on it.

There was no time to torture myself for tapping out when I had a Counterspell. Yes, that was a mistake, but it was over with; it was not what mattered right then. I had to focus only on what mattered in order to find a way to win.

That was how I was able to win the game and the Pro Tour Qualifier.

Remember Finkel's advice:

"Focus only on what matters."

You are totally capable of the same level of play, the same level of awareness.

Focus on what you really want.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A FORMAT

Once you have built a foundation of constantly asking, “What do I want, and how do I get it?” then the next question is, “How do I use that foundation to create more opportunities and to get the results that we want?”

When it comes to building or choosing a deck, whether it is Standard, Modern, Vintage or Commander, you should ask, “What do I want from this deck and how do I get it?”

When the goal is to build “the best deck,” this can mean many things. You may want to win a tournament, or you may have any number of other goals. Regardless, one of the first bottlenecks we’ll be faced with is a lot of options in a limited amount of time.

We were able to distill the foundations of the mental game into asking one simple question. This helped us place our focus only on the right things. So what shortcuts will help you overcome all of the options for all the decks you can build? How can you find a great deck without spending your entire life searching for it? You can accomplish this by multiplying the power of your focus.

Magic has too many decks to overcome with just focus. You could lock yourself in a room with every card in a given format, doing nothing but building decks for an entire year, and *still* not have found the best deck. Yet professional Magic players seem to accomplish it all the time. How do they do it?

Even more interestingly, the same names seem to design the best deck over and over again. Nassif, Black, Wafo-Tapa, Kibler, Woods, Cuneo... How do they do it? What is their secret?

Many people were amazed at the Dragonstorm deck that Gabriel Nassif, Mark Herberholz, and I unveiled at the 2007 Magic World Championships. We gave the deck to a few of our friends—Jon Finkel, Bob Maher, and David Williams—and we dominated the Standard portion like few decks ever have. We even put two players in the Top 4 (Gabriel and I). Did we just get lucky and stumble upon a winner?

For Pro Tour: Berlin, Manuel Bucher and Olivier Ruel led a testing group that included Wafo-Tapa, Antoine Ruel, Paul Cheon, myself, and eventual Pro Tour: Berlin Champion Luis Scott-Vargas. That tournament was utterly overrun by Elf combo decks. In a tournament dominated by a single deck, we found the best version (for that tournament) by making a number of unusual card choices—choices that made us the target of jokes from players (and commentators!) who did not understand them.

The point of this history lesson is to bring attention to the fact that *all* of the top players either have teams or strong support networks that include players *on* teams. While pro players used to primarily test with whoever was located near them, the super-teams from seven years ago led to the world we see today where all of the strongest players in the world have formed alliances, building international testing groups with the absolute best players they can.

Here are just some of the top teams in the game, as of the summer of 2014.

The Pantheon – Patrick Chapin, Jon Finkel, Kai Budde, Zvi Mowshowitz, Gabriel Nassif, William Jensen, Owen Turtenwald, Reid Duke, Sam Black, Tom Martell, Paul Rietzl, Matt Sperling, Andrew Cuneo, Rich Hoaen, Matt Costa, Gaudenis Vidugiris, and Jaime Parke

**TOP PLAYERS
EITHER HAVE
TEAMS OR
STRONG SUPPORT
NETWORKS**

Channel Fireball – Luis Scott-Vargas, Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa, Brian Kibler, Josh Utter-Leyton, David Ochoa, Ben Stark, Eric Froehlich, Martin Juza, Shuhei Nakamura, Kenji Tsumura, Frank Karsten, Shahar Shenhar, Pat Cox, Brock Parker, and Ben Lundquist

Team Revolution – Raphael Levy, Guillaume Wafo-tapa, Jeremy Dezani, Samuele Estratti, Melissa DeTora, Roberto Gonzales, Alexandre Aurejac, Alexandre Bonneau, Elliott Boussaud, Rob Castellon, Kevin Chiche, Pierre Dagen, Alexis Gallais, Yann Guthmann, Mark Jacobson, Olivier Levy, Damian Mole, Guillaume Perbet, Justin Robb, Timothee Simonot, and Vidiando Wijaya

Team Face to Face Games – Alexander Hayne, Josh McClain, Jacob Wilson, Sam Pardee, Jon Stern, Lucas Siow, Alex Majlaton, Ben Moir, Glenn Mclellwain, Dave Shiels, Steven Wolfman, Brian Braun-Duin, and Todd Anderson

TCGPlayer – Conley Woods, Craig Wescoe, Harry Corvese, Ari Lax, Marc Lalague, Joe Demestrio, Chris Fennell, Seth Manfield, Stephen Mann, Matt McCullough, and Andrew Shrout

MTGMadness – Nico Bohny, Patrick Dickmann, Thomas Holzinger, Wensel Krautmann, Carsten Linden, Valentin Mackl, Florian Pils, Oliver Polak-Rottmann, Christian Seibold, and Lukas Tajak

Elaborate Ruse – Matej Zatlkaj, Stanislav Cifka, Willy Edel, Simon Gortzen, Lukas Jaklovsky, Joel Larsson, Olle Rade, Ivan Floch, Juliano Gennari Souza, Ludde Londos, Denniz Rachid, and Elias Watsfeldt

Team Japan – Makihiro Mihara, Yuuya Watanabe, Tomoharu Saito, Katsuhito Mori, and Yuuta Takahashi

Every top player in the game is playing with a team! It is not just playtesting that these teams do together, either: they support one another. Whether it is helping teammates find cards, brainstorming ideas, sharing hotels or offering advice on playing better, teams help provide a huge edge.

The fastest shortcut to deckbuilding, testing, and perfection is not just to move your focus to the task: you must also find others who are interested in the same general goal and join their focus. So if you like playing Standard and you want to build the best decks, find others who also want to do that, and engage with them. You'll start finding people who have the same interest as you and this is the foundation for building your own Magic team. (Again, we'll focus on this later.)

THE IMPACT OF BUILDING A MAGIC TEAM ON DRAFT

While our Magic team will be invaluable to us in every aspect of our Magic life, from deckbuilding to drafting, there comes a time when we must take what we've learned from our experiences with our teammates and turn it into success. And when we do, we do not have months to make decisions. A great example of this is when we are drafting.

In a draft, we have to decide between as many as fourteen cards, and do it forty-two times over, with only about fifteen seconds at a time to make a decision. What shortcuts can we use to build a deck that will win us a draft—or even a Pro Tour?

The first shortcut is to use our team learning time to focus on discovering what the best decks in a draft format look like. Once we know that, our choices become much easier because we are merely drafting elements of a deck we've already focused on.

My second Pro Tour Top 8 was Urza's Saga Rochester Draft, an outdated draft format where players drafted packs collectively one at a time, picking their cards face-up. My strategy for the event was to force the color black. I had practiced the format with a lot of smart teammates, and we had identified that black was far and away the best color. If I just focused my drafting on taking every black card I could, the deck would turn out better than if I split my focus between colors.

We would even go so far as to draft mediocre black cards over first-pick-worthy cards in other colors, as we were happy to give these great cards to our neighbors. That meant that much more black for us

when the packs came back to us, as now the person to our left would have a reason to pick cards of another color.

That Pro Tour was dominated by those in the know about Urza's Saga; Jon Finkel, Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz, Mike Long, and other world-class players all enjoyed the benefits of the knowledge gained by working with teams of top players. We all knew exactly what decks we wanted, we knew how many creatures we needed, and what the mana curve should look like. We knew what kinds of spells we wanted, right down to the very last card. That kind of clarity made it easy to focus on other details of the draft, such as what cards we were passing to our neighbors and which cards we thought we might get passed later.

HARNESSING YOUR HEIGHTENED AWARENESS WITH MINDFUL PLAY

“Zero Mind” is state of being where one lets go of all the clutter in their mind, accepting what *is* rather than trying to project onto it. It is a state of being pursued by countless players that realize it is a key to making the best choices in any situation. When you make the best choices in any situation, you are best positioned to win.

Whatever is happening around you is happening.

This statement is not nearly as obvious as it appears, since most people spend their energies trying to prove that what is happening around them is *not* really happening. (They also spend huge amounts of energy trying to convince themselves that things are happening when they are not.) This self-brainwashing makes many people feel better about themselves, but it is not a useful way to improve. Why not accept what is, and make the best decisions you can with the information you have?

The mind becomes cluttered easily by all the stimuli of day-to-day life. The Zero Mind is all about removing all of these thoughts so as to just *be*. Now for many, this is a far more daunting task than they realize—since when most people try to stop thinking about things, they find themselves thinking about them even more. The key is to let go of that which does not matter with regards to the task at hand during a moment of particular importance. Focus on that which matters.

“Exclusive focus on the task at hand is the number one shortcut to playing better games of Magic.”

Though this is a reiteration of the first point, it's a valuable one as well. During deck construction, playtesting, drafting, researching, and competing, you may take on a number of roles. You may be the "Enemy" (playing a tried-and-true deck in the gauntlet against someone else's new deck). You may be the "Hero" (piloting an experiment deck you want to play in a tournament against the tried-and-true decks in the gauntlet). You may be a research scientist, a scout, a coach, a community builder, or even a leader.

During your actual play, you should have only one focus. That will allow you to use as many of your resources as possible to achieve your goal. The question is, "What am I doing right now and what do I hope to accomplish?" In the world of Magic gameplay, the answer is the same no matter what round, tournament, state, or country you are in. Many players fall into the trap of being distracted by other thoughts: their girlfriend, that deck they *should* have played, where they are going to eat dinner tonight, that mistake they made in the last round. You can be better than this. Think *only* about the game you're playing.

**MASTERS REALIZE
THE KEY TRUTH
TO LIFE IS THAT
YOU MAKE YOUR
OWN LUCK**

This choice to "flow" is to choose to **focus exclusively on playing the game at hand perfectly**, and that will lay the groundwork for success. Should you ever allow other, unrelated thoughts to seep in, simply brush them out and begin anew with the turn you are on.

This will open opportunities to you that you wouldn't otherwise have perceived and it will *make* luck come in your favor. You are *not* a victim. Masters realize the key truth to life is that *you make your own luck*.

This does not mean you will roll seven at the craps table every time. Instead, remember what many

great masters have said: “I find that the harder I work, the luckier I get.” This was the key to Kai Budde's seemingly unbelievable luck during the one-year period where he won four of the seven Pro Tours.

Kai put himself in a position to get lucky. Take responsibility for your life and for your fortune. When you focus exclusively on the task at hand, your heightened awareness will allow you to find otherwise overlooked possibilities.

SECTION TWO: THE FOUR PERSPECTIVES

Is there any one system which will allow us to get the most out of our playtesting, game-playing, and strategic planning? Imagine you just completed playing out an eight-man draft. To perform even better in your next draft, you need to learn as much as possible from the one you just finished—and you need to do it in the shortest amount of time.

Often, you hear things like “Birthing Pod is game over,” or “I got mana-screwed, then mana-flooded,” or “It’s all about tempo and mana curve,” or “Just draft removal and bombs,” or “Just pick your colors and stick with them.” Sometimes you’re even the one saying them. These narrow observations are surface-level, and reveal only a small part of the picture of what is going on.

Fixed perspectives like these are weak compared with a reasoned, multilayered, systematic analysis. With a simple system for maximum analysis, you can get eight times the learning from your drafts. That number comes from the idea of using four perspectives instead of only one and from the synergy between the different angles.

If you view things from only one perspective, you will see only one part of the picture. A second perspective doubles the information you are taking in. A third perspective actually quadruples the information, as you can look at the experience from one perspective one way, and then apply another. Using all four of the perspectives talked about here is how we arrive at a focused understanding that offers up to eight times as much information for us to use.

In this section, it may be useful to get a notebook and a pen rather than sorting through the perspectives in your head.

After a Draft match, make a list of all of the moments in your games when either player made a play that gave them a significant advantage. Also think about moments during the draft itself when you made decisions that gave your deck a noticeable advantage. You can think of general strategies (like “Picked decent creature removal over decent creatures”), mindsets (“When in doubt, I attacked”), attitudes (feeling aggressive or defensive), or mind tricks that worked to your advantage.

This is an example of **Top→Down** thinking: perspective number one. This is analysis.

Top→Down thinking is looking to see what is.

It is usually best to start with Top→Down thinking, and then proceed to what can be called **Bottom→Up** thinking: You think of all the plays by either player that did *not* give them an advantage. Which spells turned out to be comparatively useless? What mistakes were made?

Note that playing a card that gives no advantage isn’t just neutral, it works negatively against you because it cost you a card (and possibly mana or some other resource). Bottom→Up thinking is essentially a test of creativity, because your imagination must fill in the gaps as we discuss what is *not* there.

Bottom→Up thinking is looking to see what is not.

Which draft decisions did you make that ended up hurting you? What general strategies affected your outcome negatively—maybe “Pick decent creature removal over decent creatures” ended up being disadvantageous in this case. What mindsets affected your outcome negatively?

When a new set comes out we can ask, “Which card types don’t we see in this set?” For example, there are very few good artifacts in Theros Block. Most of those that do exist, such as Bident of Thassa, Whip of Erebos, and Hammer of Purphoros, count as enchantments as well as artifacts. This changes our evaluations of what red offers, compared to white or green: red’s artifact kill is mostly wasted compared to white and green’s ability to kill enchantments.



Most sets do not feature a super-efficient discard spell to take out key cards, so you can hold your cards while you set up games. Theros block’s Thoughtseize throws this right out the window.

For both of these perspectives, you can have a mental (or actual written) checklist that you go through for new expansions.

- What are the dominant creatures?
- What is the cheap removal?
- What mass removal exists?
- What library manipulation and tutoring exists?
- How can people get card advantage?
- What mana acceleration is there?
- What countermagic exists?
- Do people use their graveyards?

- What are the most dominating artifacts?
- Enchantments?
- Planeswalkers?
- What are the powerful sorceries?
- What victory conditions are the strongest?
- Are there powerful combos in the format?
- Do you need to be able to destroy lands?
- How fast are the aggressive decks?
- What sort of discard exists?
- Land destruction?
- Direct damage?
- What cards change the rules in new ways?
- What is the most punishing thing someone could do to you if you have no removal?

The list goes on and on. If you actually write it down, you can add to it whenever you think of a new category, letting you avoid having to reinvent the wheel every time a new set comes out. The existence of cards in each of the categories is important, and the *nonexistence* of cards in those categories is just as important.

If you notice that a set is very much like a previous one except that there is no good permission, this might lead you to important insights. The absence of that one effect might have a chain reaction of changes. People might have previously been unwilling to play decks with expensive sorcery speed cards and assume that such decks don't work—but you wonder, “Hrmmm, what if...?”

As you see, the Top→Down and Bottom→Up perspectives are two sides of the same coin. One is about looking for what there is and considering the implications of that. The other is about looking at what is *not* there and considering those implications.

The next two perspectives, which also go together somewhat, are **Front→Back** and **Back→Front** thinking.

Front→Back thinking is when you imagine how things will play out in logical order from start to finish.

Back→Front thinking is when you imagine how things will end and work backwards in your mind to the beginning.

With all four of these perspectives, there isn't a perfect question to ask for each one. The very act of placing yourself in one of these perspectives leads to particular kinds of questions. Ask better questions, get better answers.

Remember! In school and in our culture, we are typically rewarded for having answers. In real life, however, questions must come before answers. Answers flow very easily once you ask the right question. Therefore, truly brilliant and successful people spend most of their focus on the process of asking better questions. This is in contrast to spending most of your focus trying to prove how smart you already are!

To do genuine Back→Front thinking, what you do is first imagine what the finished product might be like and then ask, "What would have been the situation one step before that?" Then a step before that, then another. If you imagine casting a game-ending Cruel Ultimatum, think about what would have to happen just before. What would the game state have to be to allow you to play it successfully? What would your opponent have to have done (or not done) on his turn? What about the turns before?

Make sure to ask what would happen realistically. Many, *many* people design weak decks because they can only imagine best-case scenarios. No matter which of the four perspectives you are using, you always have your goal in mind, first and foremost. The four perspectives are applied after you know

your goal and are trying to think your way through to reaching it successfully.

With Front→Back thinking, you ask yourself where you will be (or are) when you start. Then ask yourself what steps will take you closer. When designing a deck, ask "What would I like to have happen on the first turn? What kinds of cards do I want to see in my opening hand?"

Then ask yourself:

"What do I want to do on turn two?"



If you are playing with Noble Hierarch, you will want to play something like Doran, the Siege Tower or RhoX War Monk on turn two—but what if your Hierarch dies or you don't draw it? Tidehollow Sculler is a fine backup plan when you don't have the luxury of a Hierarch, and Birds of Paradise is a fine way to have more than four Hierarchs.

Many people would be tempted to play a more aggressive two-drop—but remember, if you draw a hand with Noble Hierarch, Rip-Clan Crasher, and Doran, the Siege Tower, the Rip-Clan Crasher starts

to look pretty disappointing. It is a fine card, but it doesn't mesh with how you want your deck to play out. Now imagine if it were a Tidehollow Sculler!



A turn-three Sculler is a fine play, especially if you can combine it with a removal spell in the same turn while hitting your opponent with Doran. If your Hierarch dies, you still have a nice turn-two play.

This is why the Noble Hierarch deck that Brian Robinson played to the Top 8 of Pro Tour: Kyoto chose Tidehollow Sculler and Gaddock Teeg as its two-drops.

They are fine plays on turn two, but both were selected because they can be played to great effect on later turns when his deck opens as planned with Noble Hierarch or Birds of Paradise.

We must remember to imagine how each step will play out. What is the next step? What is the step after that? When we are engaged in a task, we will often use Forward→Back thinking, as it is the perspective of action.

TOP→DOWN PERSPECTIVE ON TRUMPS

Elspeth, Sun's Champion, Ætherling, Blood Baron of Vizkopa, Stormbreath Dragon—these are the types of cards that can be the center of Constructed decks. They have game-changing effects that can essentially win the game all by themselves.



Sometimes, merely playing a card like Elspeth can be enough to turn around a game where you were greatly behind. Typically if you are in any sort of reasonable shape, playing something like an Ætherling can lock the game up for you.

Many people call these cards “bombs,” but that term is a bit vague. What does it mean for a card to be a bomb? One obvious guess is to say that “bombs” are really strong Magic cards, but that misses the point. Lightning Strike is a strong Magic card, but calling it a bomb is a bit of a stretch.



What are we really talking about when we refer to cards as bombs?

Typically, when someone talks about a bomb, what they are talking about is a trump card, a card that single handedly forms a bit of a **Soft Lock**. The term Soft Lock is used to describe a game state where one player is essentially assured victory due to the inability of an opponent to beat a particular feature of the game.

To lock up a game of Magic is to create a situation where the opponent cannot win, ensuring your victory. A **Hard Lock** is when your opponent absolutely cannot win. For instance, if you have Trinisphere, Crucible of Worlds, and Strip Mine, you can create a game state where your average opponent absolutely could not win (barring Dredge or a deck full of Simian Spirit Guides, etc.). Remember, it is not relevant if a way out exists—

every strategy in Magic has a foil somewhere—but whether your opponent *has* a way out. If not, it's a Hard Lock.



This is not to say that the only locks are ones where opponents can't cast spells. If you have Voltaic Key and Time Vault in play, you can use them to take all of the turns. The point is, if you are assured victory, then you have the game locked up.

A true Soft Lock is when you create a game state where the opponent *probably* can't beat you. For instance, Trinisphere by itself is a Soft Lock against a Storm combo deck in Vintage. If you play a Trinisphere, they probably can't beat you. They have outs, but it will probably beat them, and it *will* beat them if unchecked.

Trumps, on the other hand, are cards that place you at a higher stage than your opponent in the early game, or later act as a Trump to their entire strategy. We will talk more about the stages of the game in the section on strategy, **Stages Of Game Play**.

For now, we focus on trumps and how they are a useful concept to keep in mind when considering possible decks.

A trump card or combination of cards, possibly requiring a certain board state, virtually wins the game by itself against some strategies. This is not to say that it will always win the game for you, but rather that playing this card successfully tends to translate into a victory.

To properly understand trumps, you must remember that it is more than just a good card, but rather the context of the card. A Dark Confidant on turn two may act as a trump against many opponents, but what about turn ten? Cruel Ultimatum is obviously game-winning on turn ten, but what about turn two?

The reason we can view Dark Confidant as a trump on turn two in some formats is because it can create a significant advantage that we can realistically convert into a win *most of the time* against a number of opponents. A good rule of thumb is that if a card is getting you ahead by a card every turn or is generally too difficult for an opponent to come back from, then it likely has the makings of a trump.

Trump cards are a way to dominate a stage of the game. There are three basic stages of strategic gameplay in Magic: while some people talk about the “early game,” “mid-game,” and “end game,” they often leave an air of ambiguity around what exactly differentiates these stages from each other.

In addition, not all trumps are created equal. Often, when two players each play a trump, one will “trump” the other. If one player plays a Blood Baron of Vizkopa, that is a very powerful endgame but a timely Elspeth, Sun’s Champion will go over the top of it, kill it and completely take over the game.

Remember, just because you are in *your* mid-game doesn't mean that your opponent is in *theirs*. They could still be in their early game, or they could have already reached their end game. The real reason mana screw is so bad is because it keeps you stuck in Stage One while your opponent reaches a higher stage of their game.

In general, if one player operates at a higher stage than another, that player has an enormous advantage. For instance, if you reach a Stage Three endgame by assembling the three Urza lands while your opponent has just three or four land in play, you are going to have access to much more powerful cards. Likewise, if you can keep your opponent stuck in Stage One by turning his Urza lands into Mountains with Blood Moon while in Stage Two yourself, you have excellent chances of winning.

We will talk more about trumps later in this guide when we go over the three stages in more detail. For the time being, think of them as a play that tries to gain a game winning-advantage in the appropriate stage. Thalia, Guardian of Thraben might be a dominating Stage One play against Storm, Vedalken Shackles a dominating Stage Two play against creature decks, and Melira, Sylvok Outcast + Viscera Seer + Kitchen Finks a dominating Stage Three play against anyone trying to win with damage.

Trumps are far from the only way to win games of Magic. Not every strategy revolves around playing bombs, or even bombs with some support spells. While some strategies focus on playing cards that are good on their own, other strategies are more interested in synergy.



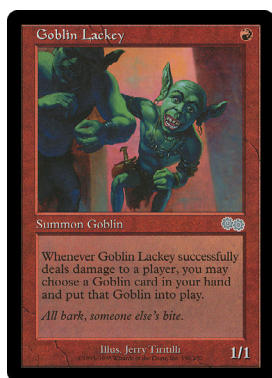
Trumps don't have to be only high-mana-cost cards, either. Tarmogoyf, Dark Confidant, and Wild Nacatl can create such an impact on the game due to their own raw power level that you can literally just overpower the opponent.



A hallmark of cards like this is that they create effects that are stronger than what you paid for. For instance, Tarmogoyf tends to be 4/5 or 5/6 for just two mana. Wild Nacatl is usually 3/3 for one mana. This is *totally* unfair. Dark Confidant lets you draw two cards a turn without spending anything other than a small amount of life. You should not be able to do that for two mana.

These are three of the best creatures in Magic of all time, all because they cost less than they should.

Goblin Lackey, Arcbound Ravager, and Narcomoeba are excellent examples of cards that get their strength from synergy as opposed to raw power. These three creatures are also undisputedly among the best creatures in the history of the game. Still, none of these creatures are particularly impressive without the proper context.



The key is that cards like this scale proportionately in power once you adopt a certain theme. Goblin Lackey becomes more powerful as you play more Goblins. Ravager grows stronger with more artifacts. Narcomoeba's strength is proportionate to how you can mill yourself, putting cards from your library into your graveyard.

Each of these themes can be pushed to an absurd degree, where essentially your entire deck is focused on exploiting them. Once you are dedicated to playing all Goblins, Artifacts, or Graveyard cards, cards that are benefited by these linear themes begin to reach awesome levels of power. We want to look for these kinds of synergies as well as cards that are just undercosted, providing a stronger effect than what you pay for, when building decks with a Top→Down perspective.

When you see cards like Goblin Lackey or Arcbound Ravager or Narcomoeba, it is logical to see how far you can extend the themes that accentuate these cards' power levels. This is a form of Top→Down design: you have a card that suggests a linear scaling, so you build from the Top (the card that rewards you for this) Down (towards the cards that logically fit with this theme).

Similarly, if you start with cards like Dark Confidant or Tarmogoyf or Wild Nacatl, you can build around them in Top→Down fashion as well. Zoo decks are just aggro decks that use all the best cards. You start from the Top (the most powerful creatures in the format are Tarmogoyf, Dark Confidant, Wild Nacatl, and so forth) and work Down from there (Lightning Helix, Tribal Flames, and fetchlands provide the most logical support cards).

The Top→Down Perspective helps us zero in on deckbuilding principles. It helps to imagine the best team of cards, and then build it. It is useful for both learning to study and actually playing better. People often call Top→Down “seeing the big picture.”

“Sphinx’s Revelation is the most efficient card drawer in the format, giving you a way to draw as many cards as you have mana for while also gaining you some life so that you survive long enough to use them.”

“You and I make a deckbuilding team, when we work together we build terrific decks!”

Or even:

“When I get sleep before tournaments, I make Top 8 more often than when I stay up all night the night before testing!”

These “big picture” subjects usually represent about 80 percent of what is needed to reach your goal.

There is significantly more to thinking Top→Down than just seeing the big picture, though. When you are thinking Top→Down, you are trying to accumulate as many details as you can. These details and ideas do not have to be organized yet.

If you combine “seeing the big picture” with brainstorming questions like, “What do I already know about this situation that is good/powerful/useful/working?” then you are starting to describe what is meant by Top→Down thinking.

Still, 80 percent is 20 percent short of perfect. Good is the enemy of great. Therefore, you better make sure you don't stop at big picture thinking. Just because you've realized that Reflecting Pool and Vivid Creek form an unbelievable manabase that allows a control deck to play whatever cards it wants *doesn't* mean that Wizards of the Coast should skip straight to sending you the prize checks.

Five-Color Control has been a popular archetype many times in Magic's history, and was especially revitalized while Lorwyn Block was in Standard thanks to the Reflecting Pool + Vivid Creek engine that was popular among tournament players, starting with Manuel Bucher's unveiling of the 'Quick 'n' Toast deck.



Just look at Pro Tour: Kyoto in February 2009; of the three hundred and eight players competing at the highest level in the world, *fifty-five* chose to run Five-Color Control decks powered by these lands.

Many players did well with this strategy, and many others did mediocre at best. But it was Gabriel Nassif (one of the greatest deckbuilders of all time) who ended up coming out on top. How was *he* able to convert Reflecting Pool and Vivid Creek into a Pro Tour Victory, another \$40,000 in cash, plus all the perks that go along with it?

Many knew the core concepts of modern Five-Color Control, but they lacked the details that made a deck great. Everyone knew that Cryptic Command was the best card in Standard, and by the time Pro Tour: Kyoto rolled around, it was well-understood that Cruel Ultimatum, Mulldrifter, and Esper Charm were the card-drawing engines fueling the powerful Five-Color Control archetype.

However, some teams missed subtle, and important, key changes in the format. Some people played Oona, Queen of the Fae or Cloudthresher instead of Broodmate Dragon.



Others used Rhox War Monk or Kitchen Finks instead of Plumeveil, or chose Remove Soul and Negate over Broken Ambitions.

Still others did not embrace the newest set, missing the value of cards like Volcanic Fallout, Wall of Reverence, Celestial Purge, Scepter of Fugue, or Exotic Orchard. Sometimes it is just a matter of coming up with clever technology like Wydwen, the Biting Gale.



Often, the best way to learn how to do something is to study those that are successful at doing what you want to do. It is not enough to know that Reflecting Pool and Vivid Creek let you play all the best cards. We want to know what exact list will give us the best chances.

This is why we don't stop after Top→Down thinking...

BOTTOM→UP THINKING (REMOVING THE WEAKEST LINKS)

After you have made progress by thinking about what the “big picture” is, you want to start thinking about what shouldn't be in the picture at all. You want to find cards that cost too much for what they do, cards that are hard to cast, and those that don't help what we are really trying to do. Those cards have got to go.

Make sure you don't spend weeks of quality playtest time tuning a deck that doesn't stand a decent chance against for the best decks in the format. You don't want to spend months preparing for an event only to strike out early as a result of not using new sleeves or insufficient shuffling.

It is important to follow the Top→Down perspective on a problem with a serious look at every card in every deck, every player on your team, every decision that you make that affects your improvement at Magic. You need to hold them all accountable, and that accountability starts with *you*. If you don't shuffle your deck enough *every* time—and I mean really shuffling, like six to seven riffles, perhaps even pile shuffling—then don't complain when you get a bad draw.

If you get a hand with no lands, take a split-second to ask yourself if you might be responsible for this in some way. Mentally check to make sure that you are shuffling enough, that your sleeves are not too worn, that your opponent didn't do anything suspicious with your cards. This is not to say that an opponent cheating is your fault, but not stopping someone from cheating you *is* your fault.

Bad luck happens, but one way to get better luck is to make better choices.

This means after every time you've finished playing a deck, ask yourself: "Which cards shined?" You should start looking for cards to cut in much the same way a football team must ask itself which players to cut. A single weak player on defense can cost your team any number of touchdowns.

Having the wrong card can lose games in just the same way.

Back when Broken Ambitions was legal in Standard, there are many players who chose to run a mixture of Remove Souls and Negates in their Five-Color Control decks. When the opponent plays a Mistbind Clique and they can't Negate it, or the opponent plays a Cryptic Command and you can't Remove Soul it, don't tell me they got lucky. Were you really using the right card for the job? If Remove Soul and Negate aren't doing what you need, consider other options. Broken Ambitions is probably not as strong a card as either, but if it always does what you need, then you should take a look at it.

Most deckbuilders have "pet cards" that they tend to play a bit more often than most people do. Sometimes this is indicative of a bad habit, but it is also very possible that they are just ahead of the curve. If you think a card is good, you don't need to throw it away the first time a good player tells you it's bad. It goes both ways, however. You have to be willing to shelve an idea if the time isn't right even if you love it.

At one point, I was working on Shards Block Constructed and was piloting a deck that used Cruel Ultimatum to gain a game-winning advantage... in theory. After a bit of playtesting with Manuel



Bucher, I realized that Cruel Ultimatum wasn't doing what I needed in this format. I love Cruel Ultimatum, no question, but I want to win more than I want to play that card. It wasn't working, so I cut it and tried picking up Martial Coup as a free agent. Business is business. The format changed quite a bit as a result of Alara Reborn, but the point is to not be a slave to a card you happen to like.

Another use of Bottom→Up thinking is to shortcut the deck selection process by recognizing cards (or combinations of cards) in an environment that essentially makes a certain type of deck unplayable.

The printing of Path to Exile radically changed the Standard landscape of its day beyond the obvious added option of a nice removal spell. As a result of the widespread adoption of Path to Exile in white decks, cards like Chameleon Colossus and Demigod of Revenge disappeared.



The ripples don't stop there, though. Decks that relied on Chameleon Colossus and Demigod of Revenge not only disappeared (or changed into something entirely different), but decks that struggled against these cards no longer had to fear them.

We had Path in our Five-Color deck for a while, since it is an efficient card and we like answers to Mistbind Clique that also deal with Chameleon Colossus and Demigod of Revenge. In the end, however, Path to Exile was so good that we cut it! It was clear that enough other people were going to use it that many opponents would be scared away from using the very guys we wanted to hit!

This sort of advanced Rock-Paper-Scissors among cards that beat other cards is a big part of enjoying success in Standard. It is one of the primary reasons why it is dangerous to just rely on copying last week's Top 8 decklists. There is much to learn from reading StarCityGames.com; you find out what has been working for people. But if that is all you do with the information, you are never going to be ahead of the curve.

Do you think you are the only person who reads StarCityGames.com?

A common mistake that many players made was to actually talk trash about Path to Exile. After all, *it was* the most hyped card in the set, and they felt that it couldn't live up to the hype. In fact, it was overrated by some: a number of people who claimed it would be superior to Swords to Plowshares, which it wasn't. In the end, however, it proved to be one of the defining cards of the format.

Today, creatures are more important than ever and Path to Exile is one of the most important creature removal spells in Modern, providing a much-needed reliable defense against Knight of the Reliquary, Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker, Arcbound Ravager, Thundermaw Hellkite, and more.

Maelstrom Pulse from Alara Reborn shared a similar story. When word first spread of the new card, people heralded it as the second coming of Vindicate. As a result of this huge popularity surge, there was a backlash of people claiming that it was nothing more than a difficult-to-cast Oblivion Ring.



The truth is that Maelstrom Pulse is not Vindicate—and if you ask it to be, you will be sorely disappointed. However, what it turned out to be is a powerful tournament staple that continues to help define Modern many years later. When evaluating new cards (and new decks!), it is important to view what you are looking at for what it *is*. Do not write it off just because it is not something old and familiar.

What you want to do is take this information and figure out what the future might look like based on it. For instance, if everyone starts taking Path to Exile *out* of their decks, then maybe it is time to bring back Demigod of Revenge or Chameleon Colossus. We realized that most players would play 1/1 flyers or direct damage at Pro Tour: Kyoto, so we took the metagame a step further and maindecked Wall of Reverence instead of Wrath of God.

A good player is likely to copy a successful new deck and pilot it in a tournament themselves. A great player may watch that trend and build decks on the next level of the metagame by using the Bottom→Up principle.

A great example of a card that can make the Bottom→Up perspective more apparent is Rest in Peace. Ever since the advent of the Dredge mechanic, people have been abusing Dredge as a way to fuel graveyard combos. Additionally, Reanimator decks abuse the graveyard along another axis. Graveyard decks have reached a scary point of having so much power that they can literally destroy an unprepared opponent so quickly that they never get to interact with the graveyard deck.

However, graveyard decks like Dredge are typically extremely vulnerable to graveyard hate such as Tormod's Crypt, Relic of Progenitus, Yixlid Jailer, and especially Leyline of the Void and Rest in Peace.



As a matter of fact, against many graveyard decks, a Rest in Peace drawn at any point is instant game-over, a literal two-mana "Win the Game." Similarly, Leyline of the Void provides an uncounterable trump to the entire Dredge deck that you can put onto the

battlefield before even taking a turn. As a result, if you are thinking about playing a graveyard deck, an important factor to consider is how many people are playing Rest in Peace and Leyline of the Void.

You can board in Chain of Vapor, you can try to beat down with Stinkweed Imps, but at the end of the day you are probably going to lose if your opponent plays either of these hate cards. What's more, Leyline of the Void starts the game on the battlefield, so discard can't even hit it... and Rest in Peace exiles your entire graveyard even if you destroy it!

This is not to say that you can't play graveyard decks in a field with Rest in Peace or Leyline of the Void. It just means that you have to examine the situation and what is really going on, and then react accordingly. If a Dredge deck is perfect for beating everyone who *doesn't* have hate, and those with it have it in the board, then you can usually count on winning game one. Then you can board enough answers to give yourself a shot at fighting through the hate in one of the next two games.



REVERSE ENGINEERING VICTORY BACK→FRONT

When you cross the finish line of a game, it is natural to think about the turn you won and what finished the job. However, only recognizing who was around when a task is completed without focusing on how the task was actually accomplished is a bad way to coach your team. You want to know who really pushed the project to completion, not just who was in the room when the deal was done.

There is no question that it is usually right to have one or more victory conditions in even the most controlling of decks, as you have to actually win at some point... but a common mistake people make is thinking that they need a lot more ways to win than they actually do. Typically, it is advantages you are interested in; the win comes once you have built a big enough advantage. The fastest way to create a blueprint for winning is to start with a victory (which can be yours or someone else's) and retracing step-by-step what it took for the game to get to that position. See what plays changed the tempo of the game, or created a large change in card advantage.

(The concepts of card advantage and tempo are so fundamental that they deserve their own sections. You are probably familiar with them already—but to read more about them, just jump to page 197 for card advantage and page 211 for tempo.)

A card like *Anger of the Gods* may look like an average card to a new player, since it does not win the game for you in the sense that it kills your opponent. But it can provide tremendous advantage that you can leverage towards victory in many matchups because of the potential to kill several of your opponent's creatures at once.



What does that mean? That means that every card and every mana that your opponent has invested in mounting most types of creature threats, are all removed in one fell swoop. Once one turn's worth of plays has negated several of your opponent's turns, you can play a card that might be much slower to kill your opponent (at least as compared to his quick onrush of creatures) and still expect to win. You have run your opponent out of gas.

You can trace the effect of cards like this back to their source by starting with the last turn of a game and peeling back the turns one by one. As you go back to the beginning of the game, you can find what the most important effects on the game were, determining what cards or combination of cards actually won the game. By taking the focus away from the card that actually dealt the final blow and instead examining the cards that provided the advantages that eventually led to victory, you can perfect your blueprint for how to get to that winning position.



Remember, you are not just looking for the single card that won you the game. There is no question that certain cards will often translate into victory far more than others, such as the tremendous impact

of Sphinx's Revelation, Desecration Demon, or Thassa, God of the Sea.

At this point, you should be looking for card synergy, a combination of cards that work together to create an airtight plan of success. For instance, Sphinx's Revelation was one of the most powerful cards in Standard from 2012 to 2014. Since its printing, it has been a format-warping powerhouse that has defined control. However, if it were not for great support cards like Supreme Verdict, Detention Sphere, and Jace, Architect of Thought, well... Sphinx's Revelation would not have had nearly the impact it did.

Back→Front Thinking is essentially strategic planning. How are you going to get to the place where you have determined you want to be?

LEARNING FROM FEEDBACK FRONT→BACK

Now that you have these three great tools, how do you put them all together and get the results you are looking for? An example of the Front→Back Thinking in action is when you imagine drawing seven cards and then take the game turn by turn from there.

This is the perspective of *application*. This is where all the planning you did with the first three perspectives really pays off. Once you have lined up all of your theories by taking a Top→Down approach, you will have found what the most important ideas of the format are. From there, you went Bottom→Up so that you could realize what is not likely to work because of other factors in the field. Then you peeled the game back turn by turn, identifying which cards and combos really won the game you.

Soon, you will be ready to test and to play.

Front→Back Thinking is where your learning takes place.

Front→Back Thinking also allows you to test any hypothesis by beginning on the first turn of each playtesting match and trying to take your new idea to the conclusion you are looking for. How realistic is it to get from the start to where you want to be, taking into consideration how the format actually plays out?

While preparing for an event, you will want to assemble a representative group of the important decks in the field. Typically, this will mean at least the top four to five decks most likely to be played, as determined by your studies of the net and from your private research. This “gauntlet” is what you will test your new ideas against.

While we were preparing for Pro Tour: Kyoto, we lined up our gauntlet in such a way that whenever any of us tried to build a new deck, the first test was “Can it beat Faeries?” This actually saved us a lot of time, because usually the answer was no and we had decided that if a deck couldn't beat Faeries—which was the most popular strategy at the time—then we weren't going to waste time testing it against anything else until it could.

After a deck was able to put up at least respectable numbers against Faeries, it would have a chance to square off against B/W, R/W, and so on. In this way, a new deck can actually try to work its way through the gauntlet, proving its strength.

In the spring of 2014 Standard format at the time of this printing, Mono-Black Control, Mono-Blue Devotion, and Esper Control form the backbone of the gauntlet. Before we will consider a deck for the current Standard format, we run it up against these three opponents, since that is most basic challenge that a deck in Standard has to face these days. It is only after a deck is proven to be able to hang with the big dogs that we run it up against R/G Monsters and R/W Burn to see if it is actually a competitive deck against the field.

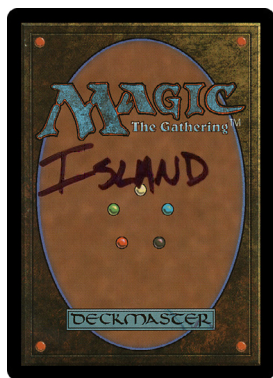
Some formats will have a single “best” deck that defines it. Jund, Faeries, Affinity—there are no shortage of past Standard seasons dominated by a single strategy. In such formats, any deck we consider had better be able to compete with the best deck. If not, it darn well better smash the rest of the format (and even then, it is a risky choice).

It is not necessary to own all of the cards for every deck that you want to test with and against. A vital component of most playtesting is the intelligent use of proxies.

A proxy is a card that represents another card for playtesting purposes. It can be cost-prohibitive to acquire all the cards that would be needed to make half a dozen decks for every format, but leftover commons from a draft are perfect for the task.

I personally prefer to use a black Sharpie and write on the backs of leftover cards. I tend to use sleeves in playtesting anyway, as the cards can get worn with heavy use. By writing on the backs, it removes the distraction of whatever the original card was and is typically easier to read.

When proxying on the backs of cards, always check the card to make sure it is of no value. I have seen the word *Cryptic Command* written on the back of a *Cryptic Command*, and I have seen the word *Island* written on the back of a *Mox Pearl*.



While proxies are obviously in no way legal for tournament use, they are an invaluable resource when playtesting—there is no reason not to practice against the best cards out there.

Typically, when I make proxies, what I do is write the casting cost (using W, U, B, R, and G instead of mana symbols, with U=blue), the name, and power/toughness (if any).

For lands, I just write the name in the center, and draw a few diagonal lines above and below it so as to make lands clearly distinct from the non-land cards. Make sure to let the cards dry for a couple of seconds before shuffling or sleeving them.

To get a good starting gauntlet, look at the results from recent major tournaments of that format. The deck database at StarCityGames.com is a great place for finding decklists to test against.

The important thing is to have at least one of each major style of deck. It is not always vital to test against five different beatdown decks... you'll usually find it more useful to test against the decks that are different from each other in important ways. That said, if there is a deck that is particularly popular, make sure you test against it.

A key to this process is to make sure that you build the decks that you think you will see. You should not usually spend much time testing two brand-new deck ideas against one another, unless you think that at least one of those deck ideas will actually be used by a number of others.

Who cares if Home Brew Deck #1 beats Home Brew Deck #2? If neither of those decks is likely to be played by any of your opponents, what is the point? Are you looking to beat your playtest partner? Testing time is limited, so you should spend the most time testing against decks that you might reasonably expect to face in a tournament.

Whether to test against a deck or not is a judgment call, but you don't get any extra credit for testing against a deck that you are very unlikely to face.

Can these four perspectives be used for more than just finding and testing the best Constructed decks?

Of course. As you finish this section and move to the next, we will begin to cover how exactly to build and use a far more powerful tool for success.

Let's talk about building your own Magic team.

APPLYING THE PERSPECTIVES TO BUILD A MAGIC TEAM

How can we take these four perspectives and start applying them immediately?

- Top→Down
- Bottom→Up
- Front→Back
- Back→Front

Let's use them to understand one of the biggest factors when it comes to winning games of Magic: building a Magic team.

Your foundation for success always begins with the people you surround yourself with. Your Magic team should work together to pool resources (trading and lending cards to teammates to make sure everyone has the right weapons to battle with), to exchange and create information through group testing, and to make sure every situation is more bearable (if not fun). Your Magic team will in some ways be like a business and in other ways like a scientific research group. Fun is vital, but it pays to take a serious approach to Magic teams.

Magic is not a sport in which a lone wolf has the advantage. Just look at the greatest players of all time. Jon Finkel worked closely with Team Deadguy members David Price, Chris Pikula, Tony Tsai, Worth Wollpert, and David Bartholow. Kai Budde worked closely with Dirk Baberowski and Marco Blume. Gabriel Nassif had Herberholz, Rubin, myself, and others. Kenji Tsumura worked closely with Sexy Lobster, a Japanese superteam of yesteryear.

Who are the best players of today?

Players like Luis Scott-Vargas, Brian Kibler, Ben Stark, Josh Utter-Leyton, and Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa, among many other superstars of the game, team up to form Team Channel Fireball. Owen Turtenwald, Reid Duke, William Jensen, and Jon Finkel work with many other superstars (myself included) to form The Pantheon.

There are far too many possibilities to contend with for one person. To master a game as complex as Magic, you need others to help you. Disharmony among teammates can be a poison that wastes more than you might imagine: teammates often bicker, quarrel, and insult one another when they should be helping. This splinters the team's focus, destroying the ability to build a solid foundation of trust, respect, and mutual accountability.

The best way to learn how to build a great team is to study great teams, which is what we will do here. The way we want to learn is to find the high points for each team and then try to step backwards until we end up where you are right now. Most of the examples here are drawn from my own experiences, as I've been blessed with a long career with a variety of chapters.

As you begin to develop your own Magic team, you'll assess your own strengths and weaknesses, you'll learn to work more efficiently with others, you'll make one another stronger, and you'll create a fun and rewarding place to play, improve, and succeed.

TOP→DOWN APPROACH TO MAGIC TEAM QUESTIONS

A Magic team is like a giant puzzle: each member is part of a bigger picture. The whole picture that we are looking to create is to realize our Magic goals. Each player has a different part of the picture, but they are only useful when they learn to come together and build on one another.

I have been fortunate enough to have been a part of a number of fantastic Magic teams over the years. I have been blessed with great minds to help push me further, and also enjoy good times with. I want to talk a little bit about the many teams I have played with over the years, and some things I have learned from these experiences. Hopefully this will be of use to you whether you're just beginning to build a Magic team of your own or are looking to improve the one you are a part of now.

I started playing Magic competitively in 1994. During my first tournament, *Fallen Empires* was the latest set and it was a bit daunting to try to explore the tournament Magic scene. I had just turned fourteen and couldn't even drive yet. I didn't live anywhere near events. There was next to no online Magic community at the time, as this was before The Dojo, let alone *StarCityGames.com* or *Magic Online*. Where to go?

At the time, I played with my cousin, my brothers, and some local friends of mine. More than anything, though, I just thought about the game and tried to figure out ways to find other Magic players. I asked everyone I played with to refer me to other places to play and other people to play with, and started to amass a modest number of connections in my own little slice of the Magic Community.

I eventually found a store a little over half an hour from my house that held large tournaments every week. I did extra chores in exchange for getting rides up to the store to play whenever I could. While playing up there, I met a man named Eric D. Taylor (also known as edt, Eric “Danger” Taylor, or Eric “Dinosaur” Taylor). He was not only one of the strongest local players, he was also an active voice in the fledgling Usenet community that helped define Magic's early years.

Despite our age difference, Eric took me under his wing and always treated me as an equal when it came to discussing Magic theory. In fact, although he had more experience with tournament Magic, I was very successful in playtesting with him. When I had demonstrated my ability, he had absolutely no qualms discussing theory with me and asking me questions when he wanted to learn something from me.

I had a number of early experiences learning about the tournament Magic scene from edt as well as gaining confidence when he made it clear that it was okay for me to teach him strategic concepts in the game despite my being “just a kid.” If not for this positive support, these life lessons, and this positive role model, I know for certain I would not have become the Magic player I am today or the theorist I strive to be. If I can help people to even a fraction of the degree that Eric helped me, it makes everything worthwhile.

While I competed locally as a youth, I did not attempt to make the transition to pro until I turned sixteen and could drive myself to PTQs. My first PTQ was for Pro Tour: Dallas, the first year of the Pro Tour. Back then, there was a Junior division and an Adult division. Strangely, in PTQs

Juniors played against Adults as well, they just cut to a separate Top 8 based on results.

I wanted to sign up for the adult division but was told that I should play in the Junior division as it was my first big event. I ended up going undefeated in the Swiss (playing against half a dozen adults) and easily won the Juniors' Top 8. It was not so much that the Juniors was easy as it was that everybody was so much weaker then than they are today.

Magic theory has come so far as a result of the efforts of Michael Flores, Zvi Mowshowitz, Brian Weissman, Mike Long, Kai Budde, Adrian Sullivan, Alan Comer, Brian Schneider, Erik Lauer, and others. In addition, Magic Online has tremendously increased the strength of play across the board. As if this wasn't enough, Magic has exploded during the five years since *Next Level Magic* was originally published. The game is nearly four times as big as it was back then! The 20,000th best player today is probably better than the 50th best player was in '96.

Now that I had made the transition to (semi-) pro, I needed a Magic team. I collaborated with the local qualified players and formed a team based on the store we played at the most, "Campus Collectibles." My experiences with Eric D. Taylor, Andrew Wills, Bill Flemming, Andrew Brown, "Fish," Tammy McGlohon, and Eric McGlohon taught me much about tournament Magic and what it means to be a part of a team. I had played football, basketball, and baseball as a part of my school teams, but participating on a team of adults in a mental sport was a totally different experience.

Jim, the owner of Campus Collectibles, went to great lengths to help us get the cards we needed, and he always provided us with a place to meet. When a store owner goes this extra mile to provide

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a good environment for tournament players, it can really breed a strong and positive scene. At the time, Campus Collectibles was one of the most represented stores in the country, fielding seven players per Pro Tour.

That experience taught me the power of cultivating a positive gaming environment, and today I am proud to be a part of RIW Hobbies, another example of a positive environment for gamers to meet at and play. When you decide to start taking serious steps towards building a Magic team, do whatever you can to help support a game store that is willing to support you and your teammates. If a store owner is providing you with a positive environment to play in, you should go the extra mile to do whatever you can to support their establishment, as this sort of opportunity is priceless.

Early on in my Magic career, I enjoyed some Pro Tour success and quickly began making friends with all the great minds that I came in contact with. I met David Williams and Chris Benafel in Los Angeles during my second Pro Tour; we met each other playing a little bit of Standard and end up becoming close friends for life, even eventually competing as a three-man team during one of the Team Pro Tours years later.

I had the opportunity to meet Mike Long early on and tested with him extensively before Pro Tour: Paris, which was my first “adult” Pro Tour and one that he went on to win with Pros-Bloom. Mike was not just one of the best players in the world at that time, he was also a very strong character that showed me the value of making Magic a culture that people care enough to get excited about.

I became close friends with Jon Finkel, who at the time was just some random kid tearing up the junior division with me. He loved the game more than just about anyone I have ever met. (He is also one of the smartest people I have ever met, and I have met some pretty smart people.) One of the many highlights of the past five years of Magic has been Jon's return to the game (and return to dominance!).

I discussed strategy with some of my early inspirations and role models, Chris Pikula and Brian Hacker. So much of what I learned about myself and what I value about the game I learned from these two men. As of this printing, neither is in the Magic Hall of Fame, nor on the ballot anymore, but they should be. If not for these two men, pro Magic would not be what it is today.

I talked theory with Brian Weissman, who at the time was probably the biggest name in Magic strategy writing. His Vintage (well, back then it was called Type One) creation, "The Deck," was one of the most important advances in Magic strategy of all time, and I aspired to learn all I could about deckbuilding from my interactions with him. I challenged his theory from the gate, as he was known as the best Type One player at the time—a title I planned on taking from him.

He and I developed a tradition of playing hour after hour of Type One (me with Mana Crypt combo decks, the progenitor of what is now Long.dec, and him with The Deck, which was essentially Five-Color U/W Control). We had all-Beta decks and would play in front of crowds of twenty or more for hours on end at every event.

One of the most memorable achievements of my early Magic career was when I argued successfully to Brian that Force of Will was not only good, it was

vital. At the time, he had spoken out against Force of Will, arguing that the card disadvantage was a weakness. I argued that the battles we were fighting were so important that you *had* to have Force of Will, or the other person could just use their Force of Wills to ensure that Timetwister, Wheel of Fortune, and Ancestral Recall would resolve.



One day, he and I played over and over and over again. Whereas initially he was willing to try two Force of Wills in his deck in place of Counterspells, he ended up conceding that four was probably the correct number of Force of Wills for every deck. He told me he now realized that the battles we were fighting were worth far more than a card, and that

if you use a Force of Will to protect an Amnesia or Timetwister it is not really card disadvantage at all.

It may be easy to laugh about this exchange today, but back then the theory of “card advantage” had only just taken off and people still did not know what to make of it.

You may also chuckle, “Obviously, Force of Will is good,” but remember, there was a time when people didn't think much of such landmark cards as Yawgmoth's Will, Necropotence, Demonic Consultation, Ball Lightning, High Tide, Tarmogoyf, Lion's-Eye Diamond, Elspeth, Knight-Errant, Mana Crypt, Hurkyl's Recall, or Bitterblossom. *Somebody's* got to play it first.



Hearing the strategist I admired the most tell me that I had taught him something had a profound effect on me. I had always been a deckbuilder, but it planted the seed for my desire to teach others.

I continually sought out the best players I could find, working with Olle Råde, Tommi Hovi, Mark Justice, Shawn “Hammer” Regnier, Eric Tam, Gary Wise, Jason Zila, Michael Flores, Dave Price, Alan Comer, Worth Wollpert, John Shuler, Tony Tsai, David Mills, and Matt Place, among many others. I can't begin to

describe how much I have learned from all of these people and to this day I make it a point to meet all of the top players I can. You would do well to take in as much as you can from the masters around you.

Not only does this networking offer you a chance to become well connected for Magic tech, it offers you a chance to make incredible friends from across the globe. I have won a lot of money playing Magic and seen much of the world, but it is trivial compared to how much these friendships mean to me. From Bucher to Finkel, from Garfield to Kenji, the friendships go so far beyond anything that I *cannot* stress enough that you should always go to the lengths needed to meet everyone you can. You'll establish so many great relationships.

In 1998, I officially joined Team CMU, which at the time centered on Erik Lauer, Mike Turian, and Randy Buehler. Aaron Forsythe, Dan Silberman, Nate Heiss, Andrew Cuneo and Brian Schneider were all part of the team, and I continued to work with edt throughout. I learned a lot about how to lead a team from watching Randy. He organized and made tough decisions while looking out for the good of the team.

I also learned how to help teammates improve, as Randy's leadership was a huge factor in the rise of Mike Turian, Erik Lauer, and Aaron Forsythe. This was also an environment where I learned a great deal about Magic theory and deckbuilding. At one point, I spent a summer in Pittsburgh, living primarily with Buehler, Turian, and Lauer.

Every day, I would wake up and go to the "O" to play cards, eat fries, and discuss theory with the team. To say that it was a privilege of epic proportions to discuss theory every day with Brian Schneider, Andrew Cuneo, and Erik Lauer is an understatement, as they are three of the greatest

minds this game (and its theory) have ever known. It was literally like growing up playing basketball with Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, and Wilt Chamberlain.

Surround yourself with smart people. Surround yourself with successful people. Surround yourself with the type of people you want to be like. So many people foolishly surround themselves with people who don't challenge them, and this is a sure-fire way to stifle anyone's growth.

In 1999, Team CMU teamed up with Finkel and Team Deadguy (Chris Pikula, David Price, Worth Wollpert, Tony Tsai, and David Bartholow) to prepare for the Urza's Saga Block Constructed Pro Tour. We were attempting to form the "Uber-Team." The Uber-Team was heralded as the "Yankees of Magic," and everyone we talked to wanted to be a part of it. At the time, we were trying the experiment of working with everyone who wanted to... and by the time the Pro Tour rolled around, we had an amazing twenty-one members.

Team "meetings" were disorganized, and information was not communicated to everyone in the group. There was no structure and no focus. When all was said and done, team members were dismayed by the near-universal failure of everyone on the team. I finished just outside the Top 8, but this was because I had chosen to go a different direction than the rest of the team.

I had come up with a crazy combo deck that revolved around Snap, Gaea's Cradle, and Deranged Hermit. I had tried for weeks to work on it with the Uber-Team to no avail. They had a team deck that they had built, and they were all married to it without ever giving my crazy deck a try.



None of them can really be faulted, though, as we just didn't have a good team structure or a useful system for playtesting. All the talent in the world cannot make up for a lack of structure. The team was unwieldy and inefficient.

I learned a lot from my experiences with the Uber-Team, though it was quickly disbanded. First of all, Uber-Teams are challenging to make work. People keep trying them and they will continue to do so, but they need chemistry and proximity or they will collapse from the breakdown in communication. These insights proved instrumental in the eventual formation of modern day teams like the Pantheon and Channel Fireball. They aren't just mailing lists of top players, they are friends with chemistry and they get together to do testing in person.

How big is the biggest a team can be? I really don't know, because it depends on the people involved, particularly the leadership.

I did have another experience with another long distance Uber-Team. In the fall of 2007, just about all of the top American players and Nassif formed a giant team that shared ideas while preparing for Pro Tour: Valencia. While everyone involved had

great times with one another, the team was too big and unmanageable to succeed. Additionally, with no physical meetings in person, people were not as motivated to bring the level of the team up.

After this experience, Mark Herberholz, Gabriel Nassif, and I decided to branch off and do our own thing for Worlds 2007. We continued to help our friends prepare and shipped quite a number of decks to people, including Finkel, Bob Maher, and David Williams—but the testing consisted of the three of us discussing ideas and brewing.

Mark and Gabriel are two of the all-time best deckbuilders in the game, and for me it was just like back in the day brewing with Lauer, Cuneo, and Schneider. Every day I would talk to Nassif on AIM, and every day he would ask me for another deck. Every day I would send him my latest crazy contraption, passing whatever ideas I had floating around in my head or whatever ideas I had heard of.

One day I sent him a list for a crazy Mono-Red Dragonstorm deck that I had built after hearing about a wild deck someone named Chris Sutton was playing in a Grand Prix side event. I had heard about a Spinnerock Knoll/burn deck using charge lands that he had developed, and I used this concept as the foundation for the list that I sent to Gab.

At the time, I did not think much of the list I had thrown together—I had been sending Nassif decks every day. It was not until the next day when I showed up in East Lansing to play cards with Gab and Mark that I found out some interesting news. When I arrived, Mark was not yet back to the apartment. Gab was playing in a Magic Online queue and seemed a little excited. I asked him what he was playing, and he answered, “The Dragonstorm deck.”



He was 10-0.

I watched him defeat a Faeries player easily in a match, then demanded that he drop from the event and quit playing the deck online. It was obvious that we had broken the format. Mark showed up a few minutes later and was optimistic about the deck, but wanted to try testing it under grueling conditions. He built a Mono-Blue Pickles deck to see if we would fold to countermagic.

After two games, he pronounced us done testing Standard and ready to break Legacy.

The 2007 World Championships proved to be my best Pro Tour finish up to that point. I ended up finishing in second place after an exciting semifinal match with Nassif and a wild finals against Uri Peleg. Up until the end of 2006 I had been unable to compete for a few years, but I had returned with a vengeance and made my way back onto the professional circuit. I was a veteran with many years of pro experience, but had it not been for the great opportunity to playtest with Mark Herberholz and Gabriel Nassif, I would not have been able to accomplish what I did.

In addition to the teammates who were directly involved, there were a variety of other people who helped contribute more than a little such as Paul Nicolo, a local player at RIW Hobbies.

Paul played a lot of Eternal formats and had only minimal Pro Tour experience. Still, there was a period of time where Herberholz and Nassif were out of town and I had no one to playtest with, and Paul spent hours and hours helping me prepare, particularly spending the time to work with me on the Legacy format that was one of the three formats for that event.

I do not play Legacy much, so having the perspective of an Eternal expert was invaluable. Working together, Paul and I designed a new Four-Color Counterbalance deck, a U/g/b/w deck featuring Tarmogoyf, Dark Confidant, and Swords to Plowshares that helped me dominate the Legacy portion. At the time, almost all of the Counterbalance decks were U/g/r, but we knew we were on to something.

It was a blessing to have a playtest partner with his heart in it, despite Herberholz and Nassif being out of town while I was starting to work on Legacy. Paul is such a great example of a team player, willing to put in the work to help you even when he himself was not qualified.

Throughout 2008, I experimented with a variety of team structures involving Herberholz, Nassif, Luis Scott-Vargas, Paul Cheon, and Michael Jacob. Things were not clicking, and we decided to try something different later in the year. Herberholz and Nassif once again took a step back to do their own thing, and Paul, Luis, and I joined forces with Bucher, Wafo-Tapa, and the Ruels.

After a trial run in at a Grand Prix in Rimini, we decided to work together in Berlin, spending the two weeks prior to the Pro Tour hanging out in a hostel in Germany. We found that we had amazing chemistry and could produce fantastic results when deckbuilding together.

When the dust settled at Pro Tour: Berlin, Luis Scott-Vargas was crowned the champion in his first Top 8 appearance, armed with the Elves combo deck that we had been working on for weeks. Olivier Ruel and Manuel Bucher had told us that they were on to something early on, and they ended up leading us to a version that few others had developed using Weird Harvest to speed up the deck.

The version proved less resilient to hate once the format adjusted to the deck, but it was the right deck for that moment on that day. It was just faster than the other Elf decks, giving it the advantage in the mirror and against non-Blue decks.

As *Next Level Magic* unfolds, there will be no shortage of stories about the Vivid Creek days, including Nassif being crowned the winner of Pro Tour Kyoto in early 2009. During late 2008 and early 2009 we helped lead the Five-Color revolution along with Shuhei Nakamura, Martin Juza, Charles Gindy, Jamie Parke, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, and Zac Hill.

Zac Hill, who actually went on to work for Wizards of the Coast, is an old friend of mine that was also a fellow writer at StarCityGames.com. During the late Spring of 2009 he had already signed the deal to go work for Wizards and was playing in his last Pro Tour in Honolulu.

Zac has had a successful career and has had a particularly big impact on the writing side of the game, but he had never Top 8ed a Pro Tour at that

point. This was his last chance, and he had always wanted to work directly with us.

This time around, Zac collaborated with Michael Jacob, Martin Juza, and myself on a Five-Color Cascade deck that I had brought to Hawaii. After a week in paradise preparing himself for his final shot, Zac ended up walking away with his first career Top 8, ending his pro player career on a very high note.

After Hawaii, I refocused my testing with a relatively America-centric team that included Brian Kibler, Gabriel Nassif, Paul Rietzl, Matt Sperling, Mark Herberholz, Michael Jacob, Ben Rubin, David Williams, Jaime Parke, Matt Sperling, and Johan Sadeghpour. This team was one of the two teams that formed the foundation for the Pantheon, the team I play with today.

In the fall of 2009, we prepared for Pro Tour Austin by testing a combination of Extended (fresh from the rotation of Onslaught, being replaced with Zendikar) and Zendikar Booster Draft.

We discussed ideas for many weeks before the Pro Tour, brainstorming and sharing the ideas and data we were coming up with. Whereas many teams came up with a list of everything *someone* might try, we actually got around to trying *everything* we could think of thanks to a team structure that was organized and efficient.

As a result, whereas most teams knew that Punishing Fire had a cute interaction with Grove of the Burnwillows but did not actually get around to trying it, we actually did. It was the 78th strategy or so we tried—but with an organized team dividing the work, you can accomplish much more than an individual would ever be able to. Mark Herberholz, Gabriel Nassif, and I built a variety of blue decks that

used the Punishing Fire + Grove of the Burnwillows combination to great effect. In the end, we decided to play Punishing Fire in our Gifts Ungiven deck.



Our teammates were not content to just sit on this technology, though. Michael Jacob had been interested in seeing Punishing Fire in a Naya Zoo deck. Meanwhile, Ben Rubin's intuition was that a Wild Nacatl deck was the way to go but was struggling to find a way to advance the strategy beyond the existing Naya decks that everyone already had.

Eventually, months of playtesting culminated in the building of Rubin Zoo—a Naya deck that featured our Punishing Fire technology as well as incorporating the Baneslayer Angels that Brian Kibler was pushing so hard to include (and rightly so). In the end, Rubin, Michael Jacob, Matt Sperling, and Brian Kibler built a Naya deck that they piloted to one of the most successful Pro Tour records of all time, 30-6 (not counting a bye one player received nor an intentional draw into Top 8).

The moral of the story?

Keep an open mind when exploring a format, as it is entirely possible that different sources saying seemingly contradictory things can actually lead to the same place. In this case, Gab, Mark, and I thought that Punishing Fire was the best combination in Extended, but only after we actually got around to testing it. Meanwhile, Brian Kibler just wanted to play Baneslayer, and Ben Rubin thought a Zoo deck was the best shell to work from.

What about the last-second brewing? Does this mean that all the months of hard work were for naught? Were all the decks that the team built but did not play a waste?

Not even remotely. Everything that led up to the building of Rubin Zoo was exactly that: leading up to it. The deck was not ‘just’ built the night before the Pro Tour, it was the culmination of months and months of playtesting.

The very next Pro Tour, Rubin, Kibler, and Rietzl tried brewing a different kind of Zoo deck the night before the World Championships and ended up falling short. What was different this time? Why didn't it work out?

Michael Jacob, on the other hand, stuck to his guns and played the same style of Rubin Zoo that had performed so well in Austin. The result? He went 6-0 and finished 14th in the world. The secret? The Rubin Zoo deck is the finely-honed result of months of preparation. The New Zoo deck that they tried to brew the night before was not tested against everything, nor was it tuned and perfected.

Does this mean that you should never brew a deck the night before an event? Not at all. It is just a reminder that generally, months of preparation are more likely to lead to success than last-minute



hijinks. Sometimes you'll want to gamble with a last-minute idea, but in general it is a risky move that will fail more often than it succeeds.

Pro Tour San Diego 2010 brought with it the printing of a Magic card that holds a very special place in my heart, Jace, the Mind Sculptor. Most players doubted the card at the time, calling it the most over-hyped card in years. Nevertheless, the Blue/White Control deck we played in the event posted the best win percentage of any archetype in the field, including a Top 16 finish by yours truly. After years of Mid-Range, Aggro, and Tap-Out, true control was back!

As some players' focus on the game increased and others' decreased, I eventually rejoined forces with Luis Scott-Vargas and his Team Channel Fireball along with Brian Kibler and Michael Jacob for Pro Tour Amsterdam. Our testing process for that event was very open and we also collaborated with Nassif's team, which included Paul Rietzl, Kai Budde, Matt Sperling, Eric Froehlich, Jay Elarar, and Guillaume Wafo-Tapa (who was mostly flying solo).

Despite far too many players to be a true team where everyone had all of the information of the group and all arriving at different places, we completely dominated the format, putting five players into the Top 8. The most important observation we made about the format was the realization again that Punishing Fire + Grove of the Burnwillows was the defining interaction in it. While we played a number of different decks, Punishing Fire was instrumental in the construction of all of them.

Another primary concern for all of us was mana. The mana in this format wasn't great, so finding ways to make it work was an important challenge. With so many of the lands in the format entering the



battlefield tapped, we also realized that finding the best one-cost cards would be crucial.

Pro Tour Amsterdam champion Paul Rietzl and Top 8 competitor Kai Budde piloted a White Weenie deck designed by Gabriel Nassif that took advantage of one-drops that could grow too big for Punishing Fire to kill, Figure of Destiny and Student of Warfare. Honor the Pure also made it hard for a Punishing Fire deck to keep up with what is normally a great matchup for it. As for the manabase? When you don't like the dual lands in a format, playing a mono-color deck makes for a very reliable manabase, and Windbrisk Heights added some extra power to go along with that reliability.

Brian Kibler and Brad Nelson designed a Doran deck that carried them to Top 8 finishes. The keys here were also a one-drop, Treefolk Harbinger, and mana-fixing via Murmuring Bosk. The opening of Treefolk Harbinger + Murmuring Bosk into Treefolk Harbinger and Treetop Village into Doran, the Siege Tower was a pre-made turn-four kill. Relying on Treefolk Harbinger, Doran, and other threats with three or more toughness meant Punishing Fire was also slow to catch up.



And last but not least, Michael Jacob made Top 8 with one of my favorite decks of all time, a Grixis control deck combining Jace, the Mind Sculptor, Cruel Ultimatum, Preordain, Cryptic Command, Mystical Teachings, and Punishing Fire!

How did we get away with a three-color deck in this format? Coalition Relic helped, but the real key was our one-mana spells. Lightning Bolt was such a powerful play for one mana that it could buy us some of the time we needed to make up for Crumbling Necropolis entering the battlefield tapped. Preordain gave us something incredible to do for one mana that also helped us dig to fix our mana as well. Preordain had just been printed and the world did not yet realize that it should be in every control deck, not just every combo deck.



The momentum continued, as did the extended testing network. The 2010 World Championships in Japan required three formats of preparation, but it also meant one more chance to bring out the Vivid lands for old times' sake! While Wafo-Tapa and I also shared ideas, for this event we began to work together a little bit more directly.

The result of all the preparation? Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa and Eric Froehlich made Top 8 and Guillaume Wafo-Tapa and Guillaume Matignon met in the finals!

After such a successful tournament, I decided to go to France early in preparation for the upcoming Pro Tour in Paris. My primary testing partners were Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, Gabriel Nassif, Raphael Levy, Guillaume Matignon, Michael Jacob, and a number of other French players.

For this event, no one liked any of the “stock” decks, but I kept experimenting with crazy decks, just rolling the dice to see if anything out of the ordinary was possible with Mirrodin Besieged. The result? Discovering how to make Tezzeret, Agent of Bolas work, catapulting me to my fourth Pro Tour Top 8.



On numerous occasions during the testing process, people were extremely critical of the Tezzeret deck. I stuck to my guns, however, listening to the results I was getting instead of the fears of people that thought it was “too weird.”

One of the best shortcuts to getting good results is to play some games with whichever teammates that are most against the deck you are working

on, as they will be particularly motivated to beat you in testing. If you can consistently win, that is a powerful thing. Remember, they probably believe what they do because of the experiences they have had both with and against it. Maybe the other pilot didn't play it well, but you showing them how it's done might change all that.

In testing for the Pro Tour in Kyoto back in 2009, Nassif and Heezy assumed that Faeries just beat Five-Color Control, end of story. They had tried it and found that to be the case and, as a result, dismissed Five-Color Control. Bucher and I had tuned our list to beat Faeries, making a lot of unusual choices to win that matchup. I kept wanting to work on Five-Color Control even though they wanted me to quit wasting time on a deck that was fatally flawed.

We eventually reached the compromise that we'd play fifty games. I'd play the Five-Color Control side and they'd play the Faeries side. I argued that Five-Color was a clear favorite game one, they argued the exact opposite, and both sides were so confident that we settled on an agreement: if Five-Color Control won more than half of the games, they would help me tune it and we'd play it at the Pro Tour. If Faeries won more than half the games, I'd abandon Five-Color Control and stop wasting valuable time on it.

Not surprisingly, Nassif and Herberholz brought their A-game. They wanted so badly to prove they were right that they gave the Five-Color Control deck its greatest challenge—far more difficult than earlier testing games had been. Nevertheless, Five-Color Control prevailed 28-22—and Nassif and Herberholz, masters that they are, let go of any ego and assumptions, looked at the results and saw

what was really there, not what they thought was going to be there before they looked. The result, of course: Nassif going on to win the Pro Tour with Five-Color Control!

After modest results that year with the small version of our testing group, I decided we needed to do something different in order to improve. Sam Black had been talking to me about merging Team Mythic with our testing group. We started collaborating for the World Championships in 2011, Rietzl was fresh off his third Top 8 in Paris, and we also brought in Nassif, Sperling, Michael Jacob, and Gerry Thompson.

It was the last year of the large Worlds, and it included one of my favorite Grixis decks in recent years on the back of our early discovery of Olivia Voldaren (a card very few players had even tried).

We finally pulled the trigger on the formation of a new team for Pro Tour Honolulu 2012. Combining the best of both teams and adding some promising new talents like Reid Duke, we abandoned the baggage of the olds teams and fully embraced our new team as an experiment worth going 100 percent in on.

Esper Spirits in Hawaii, Hexproof in Barcelona, Aristocrats and Jund in Montreal, Blue Devotion and B/W Mid-Range in Dublin. We had found a winning recipe that consistently created new top tier archetypes the field wasn't prepared for, and we were rewarded with two players in the Top 8 of each of those events.

Still, despite all of this, nothing could prepare me for the overwhelming experience of actually winning a Pro Tour.



With a lot of help from my team, I won Pro Tour Journey into Nyx using a Junk Midrange deck that hit the block format with Fleecemane Lion when no one expected it. It was also our team's best finish to date, with Reid Duke getting his first Top 8 and Jamie Parke completing the trifecta of three Top 8s in three different decades.



It has been a long journey, but I didn't just wake up one day and find myself teaming with legends like Jon Finkel, Kai Budde, Gabriel Nassif, Zvi Mowshowitz, and the best players of today... Owen Turtenwald, William Jensen, Reid Duke, and Sam Black. It was only after many experiences with many people and many teams that I was able to arrive at the place I am at now, a place where I am very happy to be.

It's insightful to note that even our biggest rivals, Channel Fireball, are some of our closest friends. In fact, Luis Scott-Vargas sits ten feet away from me at the game studio we both are designers at, Dire Wolf Digital. While both squads have their own preparation for Pro Tours, we often work together for Grand Prix or other events that don't draw every member from both teams.

Why not just merge the two? Remember the lesson of the Uber-Team!

When teammate after teammate makes the Top 8 at Pro Tours, and even wins them armed with decks that you helped build, it is exhilarating. (It's just as exhilarating as celebrating with them after each of *my* Top 8s.)

Working alone is not only inefficient, it opens you up to massive metagame errors. It is easy for one person to miss something vital, corrupting their perspective on a format. Besides, teams are fun! I know it seems like a serious undertaking to create a Magic team like that, but the way to start moving in that direction is to start moving in that direction...

MAKING A MAGIC TEAM!

Most of the best Magic teams revolve around a core relationship between two members. Once you have a partner, you have a team. Make sure you find a good core partner. You want someone you can work with, someone smart, someone you like to hang out with, someone as dedicated as you are. From there, you can look to add people to fill other roles and shore up your team's weaknesses.

You will benefit directly from a good team, without question, but you will benefit indirectly as well. It is emotionally satisfying to see your teammates stomp the competition, especially if you had a bad showing. You could say that the more you give, the more you receive—but you probably already knew that.

It is not just the invaluable Magic lessons I learn from playing with masters like Nassif and Wafo-Tapa—it is also the benefit of having a support network of friends that I can count on. Whether it is getting a hotel room, borrowing cards, discussing ideas, playtesting a matchup before the Top 8, getting last-minute sideboard advice, filling each other in on the talk of the tournament, sharing a cab, or helping each other out businesswise, such as cross-promoting a venture of one of your teammates with a venture of one of yours, your team is far more than a playtest group.

While the act of playtesting new decks is typically a vital function of a Magic team, you are also each other's coaches, each other's pit crew, and each other's advisors. Many novice players don't realize it, but scouting is legal in Magic.

That is right: it is *100 percent perfectly legal* to scout opponents and then share information with your teammates. As long as you obey the rules, such as not talking to teammates during a match, there are numerous advantages that teammates can pass on to one another, such as valuable information about what another team is playing.

Not to underestimate cheerleading and moral support, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. Teammates can help each other decide when intentional draws are wise. They can keep an eye out if a player is trying to cheat someone, particularly a teammate of yours. Teammates often share hotel rooms, share cards, and sometimes even share prizes with prize splits.

There are even times when a teammate will make the Top 8 no matter the outcome of their last round. Sometimes, a teammate get their pairing and a little math shows them that if they crush this last opponent, *you* may be able to squeak in the Top 8 on tiebreakers.

Normally he'd just draw, but now? He can help *you*.

This does not even *begin* to cover all the ways that teammates can help each other outside the game!

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG: A BOTTOM→UP LOOK AT TEAMMATES

What can go wrong? One of the fastest shortcuts to avoiding potential pitfalls through Bottom→Up thinking is to examine our Top→Down fundamentals and ask, “What is not this?”

For instance, when we say that the foundation of the Magic team is “people working together intelligently with trust and accountability,” you know right away what could go wrong. Disharmony would be a huge obstacle to this. If you can't get in sync with one another, whether it is for testing, discussion, or whatever, then forget about it... you will be wasting your time.

In the summer of 2008, there was a communication breakdown between myself and my close friend Mark Herberholz. We were still great friends, but we each had different ideas about how important testing for Magic was at this point and how much work we wanted to do. We had not been communicating with one another well, and as a result the relationship that had allowed us to dominate in late 2007 was floundering.

We took a break from working with each other and tried different things. I began working with Manuel Bucher and company, and he continued to work with Nassif. About six months later, we had worked everything out and decided to join forces once again, merging Herberholz and Nassif with the team that Bucher and I were on. We all had a lot of respect for one another and enjoyed each other's company—and we knew we could learn a lot from one another.

Our very first event as a new team was Pro Tour: Kyoto, where Gabriel Nassif took the Five-Color Control deck we had all been working on together and piloted it to a Pro Tour victory! Not only was my relationship with Herberholz and Nassif better than ever, the change allowed us to grow as a team, expanding to include some of the best minds in the game.

If you are not testing right, you might as well save yourself the time and energy. You can waste a lot of time if you are testing without any sort of scientific process. If you are not willing to do research, then you are not willing to win.

Like I said before: everyone tests. You think that just because you test, you're going to get a game-winning advantage over the millions of other people who test? In fact, when you hear that teams are falling apart, it's often because some players stopped wanting to test.

Finally, we arrive at the issue of trust. If you are afraid they are going to sell out your tech to another team, steal your cards, or even get between you and your significant other, then you don't want them as teammates.

Period. Find someone you can trust. The headaches from the first time four fetchlands go missing from your binder are going to outweigh the good feelings from a month of good teamwork.

Develop your people-watching skills. When I am deciding who I want my teammates to be, the first thing I wonder is whether or not I can trust them. You don't want to do business with people you can't trust. They have a word for business with people you don't trust: it's called war. You don't want to be at war with your teammates.

Another important factor to consider when developing a Magic team is how people will come to leave the group. This is counterintuitive to some, but the fact of the matter is that your rough draft of a Magic team is probably not going to be what your team looks like a year from now. If you don't have some sort of system in place to change the roster, you are still going to lose players—just not the ones you *want* to lose...

Instead, you will lose your best players as they move on to bigger and better things while you get stuck with players who were unwilling to conform to a higher standard. If you want to raise your team's standard and there are players who aren't willing to live up to that standard, then those players must be removed from the roster. It should not be cruel or mean, but rather just business.

You need to set a standard of excellence with regards to teamwork, contributions, and harmony that will allow your team to do the things you aim for. If you stop working with someone for a time, there is nothing that says that you will never be able to work together again. Sometimes it takes time. Of course, sometimes it takes a change in situation, too.

One thing that you want to remember in your Bottom→Up thinking is that teams can change and still succeed. Often, this change is vital to the success.

A core relationship can be a solid foundation for a team, but if you rely on just a few people for the vital operation of the team rather than the teamwork of the people who are participating and at regular meetings and discussions, you risk losing everything when a better deal comes along for that person.

You need to make sure everyone is getting better. One of the biggest mistakes “good” players make is being satisfied with endlessly cracking packs to draft and playing games of Standard for days on end without ever discussing what is going on. Yes, Magic is fun—but if you want to win at competitive levels, then use the skills you are learning here to examine and dissect each of your moves. Analyze each deck, each draft pick, and each tournament, all with the goal of improving on them.

DRAFTING YOUR MAGIC TEAM BACK→FRONT

The key to reverse-engineering a successful Magic team is to figure out what your team needs and work backwards from there. Look at teams that are having success and figure out what you need to do in order to match their accomplishments.

If you are not already a part of a Magic team, there is no time like the present to begin laying the groundwork for a Magic team of your own. The first step—and this one is big—is to find that core partner. Your central partner needs to be a good match for you, both in play ability and in fun chemistry. He or she needs to have a drive comparable to your own.

Once your core relationship is cemented, then round out your team. It's time to draft whatever you and your partner lack.

Trouble predicting the metagame? Draft a charismatic socialite. A well-connected source of information will prove to be a valuable resource.

Disorganized? Be on the lookout for someone with their affairs in order. Whether it is a structured journal of deck ideas or a binder organized by set, it is usually not difficult to tell if someone has a gift for organization.

Need more technology? Draft underperforming deck construction geniuses. We all know local guys who build interesting and innovative decks that are either outside the box or way ahead of the curve, yet they are not a top-level player. These types of Magic players are a tremendous asset to a team, since their ideas can help give teammates the firepower

needed to win tournaments. In return, a good team helping to raise their personal game can go a long way in getting them to enjoy the success they seek.

Having trouble drafting the team? Again, charisma can be big here, as it is in so many political games. Look for someone friendly and popular to help be the face of your team to help try to sell your team as a concept to the people you are trying to recruit.

Besides, win a few local events and you can typically gain a lot of local street cred, making your team a more appealing option for players you are trying to recruit. Even espionage can play a role!

Need work on keeping your playtesting sessions focused? Surely there are drill-sergeant types around. In a similar vein, if you need help with your mental game, look for who around you has the most Jedi-like mentality.

Short on cards? Remember, the subsection of Magic culture dealing with barns (a term derived from “barnacle,” meaning a devoted fan) is generally more affection than meets the eye. There are going to be people with a greater supply of extra cards than technology. These players might not normally have much to offer in the way of new decks, but having access to the cards you need is a part of the game as well, so these contributions are appreciated.

You should not take advantage of people barning you, but neither should you use these people and throw them away. Rather, approach it like a business relationship in the sense that you each have what you have to bring to the table.

Popular Magic theorists like Gerry Thompson have barns lining up to do his bidding. In return, GerryT doesn't just grace them with his presence—he

shares his latest decklists with them and gives them advice on how to improve their games. The “Barn-Hull” relationship should be symbiotic, not parasitic.

Short on people to draft with? Draft the whole freaking city, if only temporarily. Remember, not everyone you work with this month is going to be a core teammate in six months. Magic teams are a fluid, evolving thing.

The best strategy is to draft a combination of strengths. Draft people who win, but for reasons that are not obvious. You can learn so much from these people. Draft hardcore, diligent playtest warriors willing to marathon practice when the time comes. Draft people you would fear facing in a tournament. Draft people who inspire you. Your Magic team will be the foundation for your success. Don't settle for a lackluster team!

Remember, you don't just want a talented team with *potential*. You want a team filled with players who have the same basic goal as you. You want everyone on the same page with regards to what the team is about.

**THE “BARN-HULL”
RELATIONSHIP
SHOULD BE
SYMBIOTIC,
NOT PARASITIC**

BUILD YOUR TEAM RIGHT WITH FRONT→BACK THINKING!

Magic teams are about making the all the members within that group better (including you). Think of the result you want to create and eventually someone will come up with a great way to fill it, especially if you keep your goals in sight and are inclusive.

Is there an upper limit on the number of players that should be on your team? This is a tricky one, since the answer depends on what sense of the question you mean. When you are first building a team, if you are organized, it is realistic to think that you might expand your team to include five people, or a dozen, or even many more. There are so many PTQs that if you are trying to work your way up, the size of the team is less likely to be an issue.

An interesting history lesson to remember, however, is my experience with the Uber-Team. It is a constant temptation for pros to just add more and more talented people to a team. I mean if one good deckbuilder is good and two is great, ten must be insane, right?

Unfortunately, at the pro level, the reason Uber-Teams of twenty-one star players don't work out is that they all try to fulfill the same functions. They end up with a team with seven deckbuilders, seven star players, and seven socialite networkers—but who is the organized one? Who is leading the team? Who is doing the grunt work? Who is playtesting the gauntlet decks for the deckbuilders?

When you start getting teams that big, not everyone is communicating with everyone else and no one has access to all of the information that the team has. As you develop your own Magic team, make

sure to keep it a size that is manageable. That may mean five people, it may mean over a dozen... it all depends on the team members and the manager.

Also, make sure that everyone is being useful to the team in ways the team needs. A football team doesn't need twelve quarterbacks, and a hockey team doesn't need twelve goalies.

Make sure everyone has a position and that the team is balanced. Everyone has to pull their own weight and be accountable to the team. If you are supposed to work on a certain deck or a certain matchup, you'd better do that or you are letting the whole team down.

Another factor to consider is how to coordinate and schedule your playtesting. There is no purpose in creating a Magic team if you don't actually work together, whether by meeting in person before an event, playing at the local hobby shop, or talking online or by phone.

Set a team goal. Do you want to have someone on the team make Top 8 of a Standard Open and qualify for an SCG Invitational? Maybe you want to have someone Top 8 the next Pro Tour Qualifier. Or maybe it is time to turn it up a notch and get someone invited to the Pro Tour!

Eventually, you will want your goal to be "most (if not all) of my team is qualified." From there, you will start figuring out how you are going to go about Top 8ing Pro Tours. That is when you know it's the big time.

Once you have your goals, set a working schedule to accomplish those goals. If you are going to meet in person, set a date, time, and place. Stick to it! If you make a regular time a tradition, your productivity

will increase greatly. You are going to want to ask questions like, “Who is going to do research on this deck?” and “Who is going to build the gauntlet of decks to test against?” and “How are we going to find the cards we are missing from our decks?” and so on. If you want answers, ask the questions you want! The time that you are building your plans is the perfect time.

A vital component to Magic team success is harmony. One resource you can use to take advantage of this condition is using Facebook groups, or another similar system. They are free to make, and it is one way to organize your Magic team. It is a way that teams can rapidly communicate and keep track of the results of that communication.

But whether you have someone specific in mind right now or you just have a good idea of the kind of person you would like to work with, remember that those first few friendships form the core of the group that can lead you to success.

Sure, the dream is to someday work with Gabriel Nassif, Jon Finkel, or Luis Scott-Vargas, but you are not just trying to bask in their glow. You want to be a strong teammate who pulls his own weight. Work not only on your game as a player, but as a teammate, so that you are a valuable addition to whatever team you are on.

Remember to always keep your goals in mind as you take these steps. Use the four perspectives on each task to look at all the angles: you want to use Top→Down, Bottom→Up, and Back→Front first, so as to ensure you are on the right track before you make a move from Front→Back. It can be a little daunting at first to deal with four different perspectives on thinking, but be disciplined! With understanding of the four perspectives and the use of them as tools, your results will be multiplied.

**WORK NOT ONLY
ON YOUR GAME AS
A PLAYER, BUT AS
A TEAMMATE**

Once you have taken the steps needed to begin to assemble your Magic team, you need to act so as to ensure that your team will be effective. You want to work together to get the results you are looking for, both with success and with enjoyment.

What does this look like in action? Take, for example, the Facebook groups resource. If I wanted to start a playtest group for the upcoming Pro Tour Qualifier Season, I might make a Facebook group called "Winning PTQs in Summer 2014." I would then recruit players who I knew could and would contribute to this group.

Then I would ask the group what decks they thought could be the best in the format by posting a message to the group. Every member would get that message, and hopefully, someone would step up and start finding decks to post, helping to begin the discussion and leading the way to actual testing. If not, I would do it. Part of being a leader is doing what the rest of the group doesn't do.

Lead by example. Soon, players would begin to champion specific decks, testing them against our agreed-upon gauntlet. Every time someone gets a result, that result gets posted to the group.

This is not to say that Facebook groups are needed by any stretch of the imagination. It is just one example of a way to organize a team's information. When I lived in Michigan, I played cards at RIW Hobbies several times a week on set days. I meet up with teammates regularly and do these same things in person. When I am corresponding with teammates in other countries, we send emails to everyone on our list, again sharing information in the same way.

One of the most important things I want to stress to you in this guide is that you must work with people in order to succeed at Magic. If you are not already part of a playtest group or some sort of Magic team, begin laying the groundwork to be a part of one. Whether you develop a Magic team yourself from scratch or find a group to be a part of, it is imperative that you start working with people.

Even if you are hundreds of miles away from big cities, you have the internet—use it! A great place to meet like-minded players is in the forums of Magic sites where people are discussing Magic strategy, like Star City Games or MTGSalvation. You can also meet people on Magic Online or Magic League.

If you are serious about winning more at Magic, you cannot do it alone. No one can, at least not consistently. Magic is a game that rewards good intelligence and good ideas so heavily that those that work alone are doomed to starve when it comes to the nourishment found in good ideas.

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO GET RESULTS

What are the ingredients for successful results? Every day, in every way, we are getting various results. In Magic, the result we are looking for is to win matches (preferably while having a good time). *Next Level Magic* is all about getting the result of you enjoying the greatest possible increase in your Magic win percentage.

Whether it is the results you seek financially, the results you seek romantically with a particular person, or what is going to happen later today, we want certain results. Whether large or small, all results are brought about by the same components.

Awareness is the key.

People often assume that results are derived from the combination of time and effort, but the truth is that achieving positive results is the consequence of focused time and components such as desire, belief, resources, skills, and strategy.

Time spent is meaningless without adding the factor of focus, and effort is nothing more than a measure of internal conflict.

If you take a moment to observe, you will notice that we effortlessly create desired results all of the time. Conversely, we often spend enormous effort without getting much in the way of results. This mistaken formula ignores the significance of the other meaningful components as well.

FOCUSED TIME

Knowing how many hours somebody spent constructing a deck is meaningless unless we also know how focused that time was. How much of that time was spent daydreaming, reminiscing about a tournament last month, playing a few hands of poker, or watching clips on YouTube?

It is meaningless to know how much time somebody spent playtesting unless we know how focused that playtesting was on getting a particular result. You can draft a hundred times—but unless you are drafting—and thinking about drafting—in a focused manner, actively learning and getting better each time you draft, then the result will come more slowly (if at all). The same goes for studying for a test, crunching numbers at a desk job, or any other sort of work.

The number of hours spent studying are not a meaningful number to work with until we know how focused you were during those hours. The important information is not how long you were working, or even how hard you worked. What is important is what you accomplished, and the way to maximize your ability to accomplish is to focus.

Complete focus makes your time very effective. Therefore, if you have a fixed amount of time to dedicate to Magic, one way to maximize that time spent is to increase your focus to 100 percent. Focus on what? Focus on things that are getting you closer to your result. In *Next Level Magic*, the result we are focusing on is to become a perfect Magic player. If you think that aiming for perfection is aiming too high, read the section on mindset, in this guide.

Michael J. Flores once wrote **How to Win a PTQ**—an article that had a more profound impact on me than most Magic articles. In it he detailed how, and I quote, “If you really want to win a PTQ.... you can’t be satisfied with falling short.” Go read it! I am not sure I would have reached the finals of the World Championships in 2007 if not for the perspective it helped me with.

Putting in hours of focused time does not, however, directly lead to results by itself. There are other components that speed up or slow down the process. The first two of those components are mental; if these components are lesser in magnitude, then the results you want will take longer. If they are greater in magnitude, then your results will come faster.

Desire (Passion) and Belief (Expectation/Faith) function like valves: if these valves are at 100 percent, the flow is maximized. Anything less and the flow is lessened.

Players who are not passionate about winning will have much less of a chance of becoming great. If they do become great, it is because they are strong in other areas of the formula to make up for it... but they still will not have the achievements of someone with equal skill but more passion.

Take Mark Herberholz for instance. His talent, theory, and gameplay are all top-notch. But sometimes he is a force with few rivals, and other times he scrubs out without a second thought. See, Mark has a lot of things that divide his focus: work, poker, relationships. At times, some areas of life demand more of his attention; other times he is intensely dedicated to Magic. It is when he has this fire, this passion for the game, that he is an unstoppable force.

So why does he not just turn it on all of the time? You have to *want* it. How do we increase our passion, improve our *desire* for the result of becoming a perfect Magic player?

Think of something you really, really want. For instance, imagine hundreds of people walking up to you and congratulating you on being such an amazing Magic player and winning the Pro Tour. Imagine getting a check for \$40,000 from Wizards of the Coast. Imagine winning lots of packs on Magic Online and going infinite. Imagine winning your local tournament and the things people will say. Imagine your peers constantly wanting your advice on deck construction. Imagine their admiration.

Now that you are thinking about that which inspires you, connect the dots in your mind so that you can see the connection between being a perfect Magic player and those situations that motivate you. You want your desire to be flowing so powerfully that it inspires those around you.

Expectation works in a similar manner to passion. At 0 percent expectation, you are mentally blocking the result you claim to want to get. At 100 percent, you still may not get the result, but your Faith valve is turned up to full blast. You will persevere, learn at top speed, and feel confident. What should we expect, Magic-wise?

Expect to become a perfect Magic player.

This can mean many things to many people; it might mean that you are building optimal decks in every format you play, or that you have a perfect mindset which allows you to make optimal choices and feel good while doing it. You may have a perfect mind game, making opponents obey your whims with Jedi Mind Tricks worthy of a Jedi Knight. You might be

the perfect technical player, making optimal plays in every situation. You might be the perfect teammate, helping build a legacy that will be a blueprint for future Magic teams.

For an explanation of the counter-intuitive concept of aiming for perfection, refer to the section on Mindset. For now, I would like to point out that if you simply aim to “be the best,” you are relying on others being worse. This is not the best way. If you are fortunate enough to have a wealth of top-level pros in your home town, you may find that trying to be the best will help to a degree, but let me give you a hint: Gabriel Nassif, Yuuya Watanabe, Martin Juza, Jon Finkel, Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa, and Luis Scott-Vargas don't all live in the same town. If there isn't a vast network of strong pros around you, demanding perfection is doubly important.

Shooting for “being the best” is just a misguided way of shooting for perfection, since “perfect” is the best you can be.

Shooting for “trying your best” is actually fairly irrational. Think about it: it leads to an infinite regression. Should you try to try your best? How do you do that? By trying to try to try your best? Trying your best is not a goal but a process that flows naturally from the goal of perfection.

When you study for a test, do you try to get a 95? You might be content with a 95, but you certainly don't *try* to get a 95. To actually aim for a 95 percent would involve making sure you answer 5 percent of the questions incorrectly.

It is fine to be content with whatever you actually end up achieving, but aim for perfection. If you aim for perfection, then you will naturally try your best all the time... *without* trying.

**TRYING YOUR BEST
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A PROCESS THAT
FLOWS NATURALLY
FROM THE GOAL OF
PERFECTION**

How can we have 100 percent expectation of perfection, then? It is actually fairly easy, believe it or not. Just decide that, whatever it takes, you are going to get better and better until you become the perfect Magic player or die trying. When you aren't playing or thinking about Magic, fine. Let it go. When you *are*, however, your final goal is to become perfect with regards to Magic. To aid this expectation, think of all the things you actually do perfectly.

There is a foolish belief that since we are imperfect humans, we cannot do anything perfectly. Haven't you ever been drafting and gotten passed a nice creature in your color and a few terrible cards that no one will use? If you picked the nice creature, then you drafted perfectly, if for only that one decision, that one moment in time.

Have you ever gotten 100 percent on a test? Have you ever said exactly what you wanted to say in a certain situation? Have you ever made the perfect play to win a game? Just keep doing more and more of that, and less and less of the opposite. You will be closer and closer to your goal of perfection. As you win more—and more than your friends who are just “trying their best”—you will see the benefits first-hand.

These are certainly not the only factors that are going to go into improving, into achieving the results you want. Skill, ability, and resources will largely determine how big of a step forward you are able to take while achieving your goals, while strategy will determine whether your steps actually take you closer to the result you seek. This strategy guide will be mainly about strategy, at least explicitly...

But between the lines, we will be constantly working up your passion and expectation. We will give you

strategies to increase your skills, your abilities, and your resources.

Some examples of skills and resources are:

- Having access to the latest winning decklists.
- Having many popular decklists memorized.
- Building awareness of the current metagame.
- Connections with top Magic players and theorists.
- Understanding how new cards in a format will impact the use of other cards in that format.
- Knowing more than card texts, but rather how the relevant cards *actually work* without having to read the text printed on the card.
- Having access to whatever cards you want to play in tournaments.
- Knowing the popular sideboard plans of major archetypes.
- Shuffling sufficiently, efficiently, and without dropping cards or revealing information to the opponent.
- Experience building manabases.
- Knowing any relevant current errata.
- Having a Premium subscription to read StarCityGames.com's Magic articles.

A skill is generally a strategic system that a player is proficient with even at the unconscious level. A resource is similar, but generally refers to something external, such as an actual page of decklists, a subscription to StarCityGames.com, or a connection on Facebook with a Magic pro.

Let us say that Michelle Obama and I both wanted to get President Obama on the phone. Even if we both put in the same amount of focused time, both of us have the same desire to speak with the President, we both expect to be able to, and both of us use the strategy of dialing the White House. She is going

to get through, whereas I am not. This is simply because she has this component that I am missing.

Michelle has the resource of being married to him. With enough work, I might also be able to get the President on the phone, eventually, but it would take a lot more focused time, passion, faith, and strategy for me than for her.

With regards to that result, her strides are much longer than mine. However, if we were both trying to get Jon Finkel on the phone, there I would have a clear advantage. Sure, as First Lady she has ways to get in touch with people and could try contacting him, but the amount of effort and time it would take me is much smaller. This is obviously not limited to merely calling people.

The example I originally used in *Next Level Magic* was to point out that I surely had better odds of winning a Magic Pro Tour than Michelle Obama. This is not to say she couldn't, but it would take a lot more focused time, passion, faith, and strategy at this point for her to have the same chances I have right now, simply because I have more skill/ability/resource in that category. As fate would have it, I did manage to beat her to the punch, though she still has me beat on getting Barack on the phone.

It may seem like our skills and resources are fixed, but they aren't. Whenever you learn, grow, or accumulate cards, this component grows. This happens when there is a difference between your expectation and your ability. It happens when you push yourself or when you work to accumulate more resources, such as when you browse last week's PTQ Top 8 decklists on StarCityGames.com.

It doesn't matter if you are not currently as skilled and resourceful as anyone else in Magic. Where

you are at now isn't all that relevant, if you are improving. Our past is only our future if we aren't growing.

Finally, we need a good strategy to get the result we want. Otherwise, we will never reach our goal—or if we do, it takes us far too long. Strategy breaks things up into manageable steps and put those steps in order. This is strategy in a nutshell.

STRATEGY: SMALLER STEPS TAKEN IN THE PROPER ORDER

We have covered a lot of instances where people have done a good job of applying good ideas and strategies to get good results on the Pro Tour—but how do you get to that point from where you are at right now? Well, let's start by talking about something that we certainly have in common.

There was once a day when I did not know what Magic was. Then there was the first day that I learned how to play. How I got to here from that point is worth talking about.

First of all, there was no Pro Tour when I started playing. There wasn't even a very big tournament scene, though tournaments did exist. I didn't even have many people locally to play with, and at fourteen, I did not have an easy way to transport myself to places to find people to play. There was no StarCityGames.com. There wasn't even the Magic Dojo. Actually, in 1994, there really wasn't a whole lot going on in the world of the Internet at all.

Not only did I not know all of the cards in the sets that I had been exposed to (mostly Revised, The Dark, and Fallen Empires), but opponents would play cards that created effects I had never even imagined! I still remember the first time I played Channel on turn three against my friend Shawn. At the time, I thought I was hot stuff, running people over with my Channel/Fireball deck before they even got a chance to fight back.

I played Channel, drawing no reaction from Shawn. I turned nineteen of my life into colorless mana and tapped my Bird of Paradise and my other land to play a Fireball for twenty. Shawn's response?

He calmly Mana Drained my Fireball. I had never seen a Mana Drain before. When I read it, I was in disbelief. How could this be?



I ended my turn, and he simply untapped, played a Volcanic Island, and Fireballed me for twenty-one...

We had few cards, no StarCityGames.com, and hardly a connection to the outside world—talk about starting from nowhere! Many people start that way, with only a few cards and without much in the way of skills or resources. We didn't know all of the rules (you should have seen the way we thought the rules worked with Frozen Shade at first...).

I did have a few things going for me, though. I first start getting into Magic as a fourteen-year-old, and though I had school, I had just suffered a football injury that had me out for the season. I needed to find a new way to spend my time to keep my mind off of the game I was missing.

Focus is free, you just have to be smart enough to use it. I may not have had many skills or resources, but I did have an abundance of focus and time to spend, and the important thing is I actually wanted to focus on really getting better. I still do!

One of the most important things you can possibly take away from my experiences is that I enjoy success at everything I focus on long enough. The only thing I demand of myself is that I constantly strive for perfection.

What about desire? Before I ever owned a Magic card, I was introduced to the game by my cousin and a friend and we played with their cards. Immediately afterwards, my family went on a long vacation. It drove me nuts! All I wanted to do was play this Magic game, but I had no cards and would not be able to get any for weeks.

What did I do?

I made up over a hundred Magic cards of my own! That is right, before I even owned a single Magic card, I made a set of my own so that my two brothers, two sisters, and I could play in the van on the drive down from Michigan to Florida.

All I wanted to do was think about Magic and learn more about this incredible new world. Desire was not a problem.

What about expectation? I am at my best when I am filled with seemingly manic energy, bouncing all over the room with expectations of success. How would you like to celebrate qualifying for the Pro Tour? Making Top 8 at one? Winning one? It took me twenty years of playing Magic to win one, but trust me, it was beyond worth it.

It is important to note that my goal is to play Magic perfectly in tournaments—not to actually win them. That is more of a cause-and-effect relationship, as playing perfectly usually brings a surprising amount of success. Celebrate your successes, as well as your friends'. It feels good when you do win, so enjoy it!

That positive energy will only give you incentive to succeed. Remember, celebrating your successes and your friends' makes it easier for you to succeed and helps set your expectations high. Magic has plenty of barriers. Don't add more!

At fourteen, I had lots going for me, but was missing ability, resources, and strategy. Strategy really comes into play here: when you identify what you have, then you can use what you are missing to build a blueprint. Strategy is identifying what steps will be needed to accomplish a task and deciding what order to do those in. *Good* strategy is identifying what choices should be made and choosing which of those choices is the best to make first.

START WITH THE STEP THAT GAINS THE MOST GROUND

What step should you start with? The easiest one, of course! You want the step that will gain you the most ground on your way to the goal, the one that will create the best result. As a general rule, remember to build from strength. For instance, it was much easier for me to learn how to play well by playing against and talking with my friends than it would have been for me to write a weekly column on a Magic website and travel around the world staying with various Magic pros.

Nowadays the latter is working very well for me, but playing with my friends locally was certainly the easier first step. I enjoyed hanging out with my friends, talking about strategy was very interesting, and I was discovering new cards all the time. It was fun, and that fun still carries over to even today—much of the work I do revolves around playing with my friends, locally.

Not everyone is always going to be in a position to write a strategy column and travel around the world with Magic pros—at least not when they were getting into competitive Magic. But each of our experiences brings us to the next part of our life, and there is no telling what the future might hold.

Building from strength is a great strategy shortcut. One of the reasons it is so great is that you can apply it to anything, including playing, drafting, deckbuilding, and even collecting. In my situation, my best asset was my eternal love of the game, a passion that spread amongst my friends. When other people start to enjoy the game as much as you do, they are more highly motivated to pour their heart into it.

I looked for new places to play, but I always made sure to invite my friends, to try to give people every opportunity to not only stay in the loop but also to keep progressing themselves. This evolution continues even to this day. As you can see from above, the people I play with regularly changes over time, but it is through this process that I have arrived at a place of being a part of a Pro Tour-dominating team alongside so many Pro Tour champions.

Build from strength and you turn a few random local friends into a premier Magic team winning Pro Tour after Pro Tour. (Mark Herberholz was once just a little kid at the local store where I grew up!) We all have friends we love to play with, and playing Magic is always more fun when you build from the strength of shared community.

As we continue, you will find yourself asking mind-expanding questions of yourself, not mind-closing ones like so many do. You will find out more about how to cultivate teammates and nurture relationships with everyone in the Magic community that you come in contact with.

Constantly asking questions is critical to success. I found that my ability to take in (and, just as importantly, use) new information grew several times over once I started asking the right questions. Your result may be even better, as will your communication with teammates and others in life.

Please, please, please remember to keep perfection in your mind. It is not enough to “try to get good.” If you want to be good, seek perfection. If you want perfection, you are going to have to keep asking questions...

MINDFUL THINKING

It is possible for us to structure our thinking in ways that close our minds, limit our options. We can ask bad questions that cause us to make bad plays and keep us in ruts.

Or we can choose to not do that.

Earlier on we discussed shortcuts, which are crucial. However, equally crucial is that we take care to make sure that our shortcuts are opening up our thinking, not restricting it and closing it off.

What is “Mindful Thinking?” How does it contrast with rigid thinking?

We can take a card like Boreal Druid and say, “That is an Elvish Mystic that makes colorless mana.” However, we could also say, “That is *like* an Elvish Mystic that makes colorless mana.” Which thought will lead to more and better deckbuilding, drafting, and in-game decisions?



The second one, of course. It is not even close.

As a general rule, one good idea may be to change the phrases that consist of “[New Card's Name] is [This Particular Metaphor]” to “*One* way to think about [New Card's Name] is that it is *like* [This Particular Metaphor].”

Instead of “This is the best/right/correct way to do things,” we will often be better off with a more mind-expanding, “This seems like one excellent way to do things, and perhaps there are also other good ways of thinking about it.”

Some things in Magic are absolute, just like in life. For instance, if you reach zero life before your opponent and you don't have a card that says otherwise, you lose the game. When a card tells you to shuffle your library, you must. As of right now, if you are not playing with Un-cards, the Upkeep comes before your Main Phase. These truths are, as I write them, absolutely true.

So it is probably not necessary to change the statement, “Upkeep comes before Main Phase,” into “*One* way of looking at Upkeep is that it comes before Main Phase.” You do not want to take the idea of mindful thinking into the realm of absurdity, but most people actually err in the other direction. Most people are too rigid in their thinking. Even if we pride ourselves on being open-minded, the reality is that when it comes to ideas, our brains are set up in such a way as to constantly look for closure.

Why is that?

Closure is comfortable. It allows us to think about other issues. Once we have it figured out that a card is “totally useless” (or, on the flipside, “always a first pick”), then we are free to spend our fifteen seconds of drafting time thinking about something else, such as how that card is going to crush our opponent, or

what cards we have already drafted, or what our mana curve is looking like.

The problem is that a premature sense of closure closes off awareness to other potential options that we otherwise might have noticed. If we already feel certain, we do not ask, we do not question. Closure is comfortable, but mindfulness makes you smarter.

What you should take away from this is that even when it seems obvious that something is a certain way, take great care to ensure that there is essentially zero possibility for error before allowing you to think closed-minded thoughts.

I was playing against Brian Weissman, creator of one of the most prolific control decks in Type One history, The Deck. I was armed with a Mono-Black Necro deck against Brian's U/W control deck. I had not found a Necropotence until later in the game, after Brian already had a reasonable advantage from Land Tax and Mishra's Factory beatdown, so I was having some trouble crippling his resources with Hymns and Strip Mines like I normally would.



In addition, I had to Demonic Consultation for that Necropotence. Under normal circumstances this was not a big deal, since the cards that are being removed are of little consequence to a Necrodeck. However, two of my Necropotences were in the top six cards of my library and the third didn't come until there were just thirteen cards left in my library.

Brian knew that when the Necropotence resolved he was in a bit of trouble, but he diligently defended wave after wave of disruption, knowing that I had access to at most twelve more cards. His hope was to lock up the game in such a way so that I would not be able to win with the cards I had, allowing him to eventually take over and win at his leisure.

First I took out his Factories, as they were the most threatening. Next I tried knocking his hand out a bit. All the while, I was attacking with a Knight of Stromgald, figuring that I did not want to play a second one since it would not contribute much more damage to the table and I did not want to lose to Wrath of God. Eventually, he Wrathed. I played another Knight, drawing out another Wrath.

I went down to one life, obtaining my last card (which I knew was a Drain Life) after dropping my last Knight, leaving just Necropotence, Dark Banishing, Demonic Consultation, and Drain Life in my hand.

Brian drew... Disenchant!

He Disenchanted my Necropotence, causing me to run out of cards!

I had already decided that "Necropotence lets you draw cards if you pay life," and that it did nothing when you had no cards in your library or only one life. I had not even considered that this was only one



way to look at it, and that another way might be that “Necropotence lets you skip your draw step,” which might be a useful way to look at things when you have no cards in your library.

Back then, it was common for U/W players to never Disenchant Necropotence. The theory was that by the time you could Disenchant Necropotence the damage had already been done, and you might as well save your Disenchant for a Disk or something. However, in this case Brian played to his out and was rewarded by drawing the game-winning Disenchant that allowed him to run me out of cards.

At that point, I wasn't in the habit of thinking mindfully about Magic. If I had played that second Necropotence as insurance, I might have won—but Necropotence was, in my mind, a card that lets you get more cards in exchange for life. The fact that it also lets you skip your draw step indefinitely wasn't part of my rigid thinking. I had no more cards in my library and no more life to spend drawing cards, so I categorized the additional Necropotence as worthless.

If I had been more mindful in my thinking when I was originally learning about Necropotence and/or if I had thought more mindfully during play, such as by asking a question along the lines of, “What are *all* of the possible uses of each of my cards?” then I wouldn't have blundered.



KEEPING AN OPEN MIND PAYS

Keeping an open mind obviously stretches far beyond just in—game decisions. One of the most important areas that an open mind benefits you in is deck selection.

My very first professional event was the Junior division of Pro Tour: Dallas, back the first year of the Pro Tour. I had just turned sixteen and was looking forward to competing on a larger stage than I had been up until that point. I flew down to Dallas and met up with Eric “edt” Taylor and Andrew Wills, two players who played at the same store that I did. My preparation mainly consisted of playtesting with edt, but we had not produced anything that looked particularly impressive.

I initially worked on a U/R Counter Hammer deck that was based on Zur's Weirding. Eventually, I gave it up since it could not beat the W/G/R “Untargetable” style decks that were gaining popularity.



edt had a U/R/W Browse-Digger deck that seemed okay, but I thought it was underpowered in a field full of Necro and Turbo-Balance or CounterPost. He

went on to pilot it to an interesting record of 2-3-4, so perhaps it was a little slow.

The night before the tournament, I was doing some last-minute testing with Andrew. He was trying some sort of CounterPost deck, and I had picked up a Sligh deck that we had talked about but never tested. Back then, Goblin decks were a joke that you used to describe little kids' deck ideas.

The idea of a Mono-Red Aggro deck had never been used on the pro level, at that point. In fact, the name "Sligh" came from Paul Sligh, who had won a PTQ with a deck designed by Jay Schneider (originally called Geeba) that featuring such breathtaking synergies as Dwarven Trader and Goblins of the Flarg (which immediately killed itself if you control any Dwarves).



Andrew and I were just playing some random games to get a feel for the CounterPost deck. We knew that CounterPost, Necro, and W/G/R would all be popular strategies.

A funny thing happened, though: I won all of the games.

At first, we had a laugh about it. Then we determined it must just be a bad matchup for CounterPost. Then we started to wonder...

We decided to test the Sligh deck against Necro. Sure enough, we seemed to beat it. This was crazy. We laid out the deck and “innovated” it. Some interesting “innovations”:

+1 BALL LIGHTNING

No one else had suggested Ball Lightning (to the best of my knowledge), but I suggested it jokingly because I happened to have a Ball Lightning from The Dark in my collection. I am pretty sure if I had owned two copies that would have been the number. (It was Dave Price who added the other three. No wonder he gets to be the patron saint of red mages.)

Remember, at the time mono-red wasn't even a “real” archetype, and even those few who did talk about it had labeled it a “card advantage, midrange deck,” making Ball Lightning not thematic at all. In fact, up until that point no one had ever done well in a major tournament with Ball Lightning in any format. It is kind of funny what having an open mind looks like in retrospect.

+2 DEATH SPARK

Our solution to Pump Knights. This card wasn't used widely at the time, but it proved to be completely bonkers.

+2 ORCISH LIBRARIAN

This guy was amazing. Although he helped fuel a never-ending supply of Pillages and Bolts, the best part about him was that no one would kill him, saving their Plow for my “good creatures” instead. It is safe to say that Orcish Librarian went a long way towards paying for my college education.



We scrambled to build two copies of the deck. The hardest card to find was Orcish Artillery. Let's just say that not a lot of dealers showed up with those.

The next day, things got interesting. Andrew and I were the only two piloting the deck, and both of us started out 4-0. Andrew ended up hitting several W/G/R Maro-Geddon decks in a row, knocking him out of contention for Top 8.

However, I went undefeated in the Swiss, knocking out a couple of Necro decks, a W/G/R Geddon deck, a Prison deck, a Turbo Balance deck, and several CounterPost decks. After losing to a Balance-Prison deck in the semifinals, I received some scholarship money and invites to the adult division, which I parlayed into the original gravy train.

Although these are all nice things for me, the larger impact had to do with the change in the way the game was played. At the time, Goblin or Burn decks were what you would jokingly call your friend's rogue deck as an insult. The accepted theory at the time was that you had to build around the most powerful cards in the format, like Necropotence, Balance, and Land Tax.

We were fortunate to randomly pick up the Sligh deck we had in our hotel room, no question—but it would have been so easy to dismiss it as “not real” rather than to try it with an open mind and explore what was possible. When you play a rogue archetype that bucks traditional theory, you are going to find that it isn't good the majority of the time. But when it is, you may find that you have changed everything...

There are many Magic players who perpetually copy the latest decklists from the previous week's PTQ. Then there are many Magic players who take such

pride in their original ideas that they are always playing non-traditional strategies and cards, making it a point to never play what is popular. Both of these players are less effective than they could be.

I wrote an article in mid-2006 about keeping an open mind and understanding patterns in other Magic players' trends. That article went on to win Article of the Year on StarCityGames.com and helped jumpstart my Magic writing career. You may have already read it, but perhaps a reread with the new perspective you may have gained over the past few years would be beneficial.

INFORMATION CASCADES IN MAGIC

"In the early part of the Twentieth Century, the American naturalist William Beebe came upon a strange sight in the Guyana jungle. A group of army ants was moving in a huge circle. The circle was 1,200 feet in circumference, and it took each ant two and a half hours to complete the loop. The ants went around and around the circle for two days until most of them dropped dead.

"What Beebe saw was what biologists call a 'circular mill.' The mill is created when army ants find themselves separated from their colony. Once they're lost, they obey a single rule: follow the ant in front of you. The result is the mill, which usually only breaks up when a few ants struggle off by chance and the others follow them away."

*— The Wisdom of Crowds Pg. 40,
James Surowiecki*

Ghost Dad was a classic example of a circular mill (also known as an information cascade, which I'll get into later) in Standard years ago. Many B/W options were available, none obviously superior to the rest at first. With B/W control and B/W Hand in Hand as the default controlling and aggressive Orzhov strategies initially, Ghost Dad and Ghost Husk were two particular innovations people could select from if they desired.

Early on, more people were drawn to the alluring nature of Tallowisps and Pillories of the Sleepless. As a result, others imitated them, assuming they had some sort of good information that they were

basing their decisions on (such as the idea that Thief of Hope and Strands of Undeath might be stronger than Nantuko Husk and Promise of Bunrei, or perhaps that Ghost Dad's synergy made up for what it lacked in power).

As a result, players were convinced that Ghost Dad



was not just decent—it was great! It got to the point where in the Team PTQ season, Ghost Dad was the most popular B/W deck, followed by Hand in Hand, followed by Ghost Husk. Out of a hundred players playing Ghost Dad, perhaps ninety assumed it was good because everyone else said it was.

Now, in the long run, imitation has to be effective for people to keep doing it. People are not slavishly imitative (no matter how much it may look like that when everyone Netdecks). The results will carry information, despite a cascade. As I said, we'll get into what exactly these cascades are and how they form momentarily.

First, let's look a little more at what happened to the great Ghost Dad strategy.

Early on, Ghost Dad was winning, which fueled

its popularity. However, while it was doing so, it became more and more clear this was a function of it being played so much. One need only compare the percentages of the time Ghost Husk players were qualifying against the sheer number of Ghost Dad players.

"You know what I like? ...Math."

— Brian Hacker, originator of the concept of 'Beatdown.'

The results speak for themselves. Every week, Ghost Husk won a higher percentage of the time than Ghost Dad. Every week this happened, it sent a signal to players that Ghost Husk was better.

In reality, Ghost Dad was a gimmick. It had surprise value in a tournament where people were not expecting Spiritcraft, Shoals, and auras. It took many players a few weeks to figure out how to play against it. It was even a reasonable metagame choice, albeit for a metagame that quickly vanished.

It was not, however, *good*. Its cards are notoriously underpowered, it is slow, it is weak against all the best decks, and it is easy to play around once you know how. Ghost Husk, on the other hand, is a brutal, lightning-quick aggressive force that is strong against good decks while containing about as much synergy as Ghost Dad.

The smallest groups, then, are made up of people with diverse perspectives who are able to stay independent of each other (this doesn't imply rationality or impartiality, though... you can be biased and irrational, but as long as you are independent, you won't make the group dumber).

The interesting dilemma is that typically, the more influence a group's members exert on each other, and the more personal contact they have with each other, the less likely it is that the group's decisions will be wise. The group's playtesting will become inbred.

When a group of players first start testing with each other, they may have a variety of ideas to pursue. However, if the circle remains a closed, tightly-knit group, everyone begins to imitate everyone else. While this can make the individuals individually smarter (by having them make better card choices for a specific deck and tournament), it tends to make them dumber (by having fewer good ideas for card and deck ideas in general) as a collective due to everyone making the same mistakes.

For instance, if you have no idea what to play, copying Ghost Dad will greatly improve your chances for success in the short run. However, if everyone did this, they'd never discover Ghost Husk's true strength. Imitation typically benefits the individual; innovation tends to benefit the group eventually.

If you have a group of independent individuals with some information, and they each make a decision, that decision is based on two factors: primitive information and error. With a large enough group of independent people, the errors tend to cancel out. This leaves primarily useful information. As a result, groups of independent individuals (such as a compilation of PTQ winners) generally make the best decisions, as they have more useful information than any individual.

This, of course, assumes that the individuals possess any useful information and that they are not unduly influencing each other, causing a cascade effect. Let's take a look at what a cascade effect is and how information cascades are created.

First, let's say that someone organizes an unusual tournament: fifty of the players are given identical U/W decks in some new format. They are matched up against another fifty players, piloting R/G decks in this same new format. There is one round played, and no one sees the results of anyone else's match. A person at random is asked which deck he thinks won the most matches. Everyone else is able to hear his answer, though not his result.

Then a second person is asked, then a third, and so on. Each person who guesses the "winningest deck" receives a box of product. Everyone, beyond the first person, has private and public information to base their decisions on. The private information is the result of your match. The public information is what everyone else chose before you were asked.

Clearly, the first person will base his decision on the result of his match and how it played out. Now, let's say you are the fourth person asked. Your goal is to guess correctly and win the product. In your match, U/W won easily. However, the first three players all select R/G as the deck they think won the most... What do you name?

Most people would go with the group (against their own results), which is the rational thing to do. This would produce the correct answer more often than not, but would also usually start a cascade, essentially dooming everyone else if they were wrong.

The information cascade is a chain reaction of decision-making where almost everyone involved is basing their decision on the decisions of others, who in turn base their decisions on others, regardless of personal information.

**THE INFORMATION
CASCADE IS A
CHAIN REACTION
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Now, often these cascades carry a useful message to everyone quickly; when you are at a street corner and everyone starts crossing, even if you can't see the walk sign it is a fairly safe bet that the crowd knows what it is doing. However, if the first couple of people were in error, the cascade can send a harmful signal to all, such as everyone panicking and trying to run out of a movie theater when someone yells "Fire."

On the other hand, let's suppose the participants were each paid a box if the group arrived at the correct answer by a vote (still taken one at a time, as before). Now the group can essentially assure itself of success if everyone places their vote based on their private information rather than the group's decisions.

Even if the first three vote R/G, you would still say U/W to give the group the most useful information about your match. This would make you more likely to guess wrong, but the group is more likely to be collectively right. Encouraging people to make incorrect guesses actually makes the group as a whole smarter. Quantity and variety are actually better for a group than focusing on quality.

Let's look more at information cascades, but let us now consider why they don't happen more often in Magic. First of all, not all decisions are made sequentially. Each week, players all simultaneously select what they will play. The sequential effects thus often take several weeks. Also, Magic cards are peculiar in that there are two relatively huge advantages in being contrary and selecting something you know to be a weaker deck:

1. Obviously you have surprise value in the form of cards or strategies your opponents may not be prepared for.

2. “Weaker” (in the abstract) decks can post winning percentages versus the “best” decks, which means if enough people play the “best” decks, the “weaker” decks that beat them may be better choices for the metagame.

Of course, there are also other reasons people want to play strategies other than the best strategy, such as enjoying a different strategy more or not owning the cards for the best deck.

Information cascades can be useful for spreading information quickly and efficiently, such as crossing the street corner on Memory Jar and Skullclamp—do we really need to wait around for everyone to test thoroughly these cards and determine just how broken they are?

But the fundamental problem with an information cascade is that after a certain point, it becomes rational for people to stop paying attention to their own private knowledge and to start looking at and imitating the actions of others. If everyone is relatively almost as likely to be right about something, and everyone before you has made the same decision, it is rational to do what they did. But once an individual stops relying on his own information and starts imitating the group, the cascade stops being informative.

This is how decks like Ghost Dad come to be regarded as good rather than the mediocre decks that they are. The first few people who played it insisted it was good—and there’s no doubt that surprise value, the metagame, and fun were all factors in this opinion. As a result, people began to accept it as a given that Ghost Dad was a Tier One deck. Everyone (or many, anyway) thought everyone else was making decisions based on what they knew when in reality they were all making them based on what they *thought* the people before them knew.



The solution? Those army ants that wander off. The overconfident individual who insists he or she is right and the crowd has it wrong.

Do such people exist? Of course, and there are no shortage of such Planeswalkers in Dominaria. One reason is that people are, in general, overconfident. They overestimate their ability, their level of knowledge, and their decision-making prowess. They are more overconfident with hard problems than easy ones.

(As a side note: two exceptions to this are professional bridge players and weathermen, who are just about exactly as accurate as they believe. It really does rain 30 percent of the time weathermen predict a 30 percent chance of rain.)

Anyway, this is generally not good for the overconfident decision makers themselves, since it means that they are more likely to choose poorly. But it is good for society as a whole (or, in this case, the Magic community). This is because overconfident people are less likely to get sucked into a negative information cascade, and in the right circumstances can even break them. This is why many great deckbuilders are often chronically overconfident.

In short, cascades are created by people valuing public information more than private information. Overconfident people don't do that. They tend to go on gut instinct and place a higher value on private information. When they do so, they disrupt the signal that everyone else is getting. They make the public information seem less certain. That encourages others to rely on themselves rather than just follow everyone else.

Everyone effectively votes on what they think the best deck is for that week. People lay it out, see the results, and then vote again. People like Michael Flores, Alan Comer, Erik Lauer, Eric Taylor, Mark Herberholz, Darwin Kastle, and Andrew Cuneo may make nine bad decks for every good deck they design—but it is this diversity, this variety of options, that gains the collective the greatest opportunity to make the best decisions.

Groups are better at deciding between possible ideas than coming up with them. Innovation is an individual enterprise. We have already seen how intelligent imitation can be useful—but how can we avoid slavish imitation, when few will admit that they're mindlessly conforming?

Intelligent imitation depends on an initially wide array of options and information. Also, there must be a willingness of at least some people to put their own judgment ahead of that of the group, even when it's not sensible to do so (i.e. the overconfident people). Where does this leave us?

First, innovators are good for the collective, even if they hurt themselves at times by the choices they make. If you want to increase your edge in the deck tech department, it is useful to test with a variety of creative players. Jon Finkel may be friends with Mike Flores, but he certainly values him highly as a playtest partner. Why? Creativity can be more valuable than individual performance.

On the other hand, if you are one of those chronically overconfident players (come on, keep it real...), it may serve you to listen a little more to what the rest of your buddies have to say. This is particularly true for eccentric players, and players you test with less or influence less. Variety is the spice of life; involving yourself with two or

three playtest circles will increase your chances of choosing the best deck (for that particular tournament) exponentially.

Still, mindless imitation of those around you (or on the Net...) is akin to being one of those army ants that marches in a circle until death. Mark Herberholz found himself in a circular mill at the beach house in Hawaii. Almost everyone had convinced each other that their B/G/W control deck was *the deck*.

Mark wandered off, though, deciding that his perception (Heezy Street) was better than the group's perception (the failed Beach House deck). Heezy, of course, went on to win the Pro Tour, beginning a cascade of his own.

Are Scorched Rusalka, Frenzied Goblin, Dryad Sophisticate, Scab-Clan Mauler, Giant Solifuge, and Flames of the Blood Hand really the best cards for a Gruul deck?

Perhaps for that tournament they were, perhaps even now, but it is undeniable that there are a lot of other R/G cards worth considering that many wrote off, just assuming that everyone else was playing Mark's build for a reason (how many people tested all the options and arrived at Mark's build compared to how many took it for granted that someone else already had *done* that work?).

Now, personally, I do think Mark's build was the best. For that tournament, I wouldn't have changed a single card in the maindeck. That makes what followed an example of a positive cascade. The cascade, in this case, allowed everyone to very quickly decide what the best Gruul deck was and if they wanted to be R/G mages or not (instead of spending large amounts of time determining if R/G is even playable).



Basically, it is a fine line to walk between choosing what is “best in a vacuum” (knowing when to go with the crowd, i.e. Necropotence) versus what is best in a given situation (which often involves being that upstart who insists that they know something everyone else doesn't, i.e. Turbo-Stasis).

The truth is, people who netdeck all the time would tend to improve their group's decision-making by innovating a little more, even if their ideas are usually bad or even terrible. But it is their friends/ playtest partners who would benefit the most, since it would expose the group to more ideas and possibilities at the cost of individuals using “less safe” ideas.

If everyone does this, it maximizes the group's gain, but it is actually most beneficial in the small picture for any one individual to play it safe and let everyone else innovate (assuming your goal is to win the most games now).

What this means is that typically, people who netdeck do better than people who innovate. This makes sense, since net decks are generally good and new strategies are generally not. However, if you want to get an edge over the netdeckers, innovation is the way, you just need to be able to generate enough ideas that you can select the best one.

The biggest win is for everyone in your group to innovate (though not at the same time) rather than just ride the coattails of a few. This is particularly true for players who want to contribute more to your circle's performance than just their own. If actual tournament play is not your strong suit, supplying a variety of ideas (again, even if most are bad) to your group will bring everyone up.

The flip side to this is that those times you want to maximize short-term performance (i.e. at a PTQ or a Pro Tour), it can actually be disadvantageous to always be trying innovative ideas.

Typically, your ideas are not as good as you think. This means if you are consistently choosing an idea that ducks the crowd, you are probably putting yourself at a disadvantage. Of course, people do have good ideas (sometimes I get to have them).

The key is to find a group of playtest partners who recognize the difference between your good and not-so-good ideas and who are willing to say so. Also, be careful to sort among your friends' strong and weak ideas.

Long story short: if you typically netdeck, you should innovate more. If you typically go rogue, you should imitate more. (Both assume your goal is to win more).

The most effective strategy for a group of gamers to win the most when it counts involves diversity and innovation at their highest when it doesn't matter, and heavier imitation (though not slavish) when individual performance does.

Of course, knowing who to imitate is a whole other story...

**IF YOU NETDECK,
YOU SHOULD
INNOVATE MORE.
IF YOU GO ROGUE,
YOU SHOULD
IMITATE MORE**

MAYBE I'M JUST LIKE MY MOTHER (SHE'S NEVER SATISFIED...)

How important is our mindset and our attitude when it comes to winning games? We tend to hold two conflicting beliefs about mindset and attitude at the same time. We *believe* that attitude is everything, yet we tend to *act* as if attitude were nearly irrelevant, a trivial thing compared to concrete factors such as “having a great deck” and “tight technical play.”

Whenever we have conflicting beliefs, we should seek a greater level of awareness. If we can understand how and why mindset and attitude are important, we can get the most out of that resource.

Remember, your mindset serves as the backdrop for all of your choices. It is the background that gives context to your thoughts. It also serves as a shortcut for your decision-making, just as the scenery is a shortcut for telling a particular part of a story.

We want to have a mindset that maximizes our chances for smart play while minimizing bad play. This seems straightforward, but the reality is that a good mindset is not just a positive one. It is also not just about feeling good. The best mindset is one that makes us *play well*. Feeling good and playing well are certainly compatible, but we must remember that we want both, not just the one.

Nearly everyone assumes an attitude accomplishes one at the expense of the other. Be aware of a common type of competitive mindset that makes people very happy when they win, but very upset when they lose. People tend to have an alternate mindset when they lose, a mindset where they don't really care about things anymore, thinking their

opponent just got lucky, or is a pro, or it isn't really fair because you have a job and so on, so you don't have time to practice a lot, etc.

Basically, the typical mindset of people like this is “If I win, it is because of me. If I lose, it is not my fault, I am a victim.” This mindset enables them to win, but not to feel so bad if they lose. Unfortunately, it also prevents them from improving much—and it is obviously irrational.

There are certainly worse mindsets. For instance, one attitude that anyone reading this guide probably doesn't have is “I am terrible anyway, so who cares? I just play for fun and don't care if I win.”

Many players don't even realize that it is their mindset, not their lack of experience, that makes them a “scrub.” I highly recommend David Sirlin's excellent book, *Playing to Win*. His book and website, sirlin.net, offer incredible insight into the proper mindset for winning at games, including Magic: The Gathering.

If you really don't care if you win, more power to you, but I have found that people who make such claims are actually selfishly detracting from the competitive experience of others. If Magic is just a way for you to be social, then have fun—but it is not that useful to try to take away from the people who take it seriously enough to make it interesting.

Next Level Magic is about winning, so this mindset is really not much of a choice.

A better mindset might be, “Win or lose, the responsibility is mostly mine. If I lose, I want to figure out what I could have done better.” That may seem like an optimal mindset, but we can do even better. We are not content with anything short of perfection.

A perfect mindset would be one that allows us to feel good while simultaneously making us play more and more perfect Magic, as fast as possible. It must also point us in the direction of making more and better optimal plays and building better decks.

What is wrong with the “it’s all my responsibility” mindset? Where is it imperfect or incomplete? To begin with, it tends to make you angry or upset with yourself when you lose due to an identifiable error or suboptimal play. A “responsibility” perspective causes you to try to minimize this pain by not making the same mistakes twice. However, you want to take things a step further.

You want a mindset that will motivate you to not make the same mistake without getting angry and feeling emotionally pained in the first place. Remember, dulling the pain by pretending that you don’t care doesn’t really work. If you are responsible, you *do* care when you make a mistake. We can’t have it both ways, but we can find a *better* way.

Another problem with the “responsibility” mindset is that it doesn’t allow you to learn much from your successes. Your successes will boost your ego, but not your skill. This can lead to delusion. It means that your self-estimation goes up without any actual improvement, which creates (or magnifies) the difference between how good you think you are and how good you really are.

That is not good.

Finally, people who are a slave to the “responsibility” mindset may lose several games in a row where they cannot identify mistakes that cost them games. This easily leads to frustration, helplessness, and the sensation of feeling burned out.

If you think you are going several games without making mistakes, you are probably mistaken. Even Jon Finkel makes many mistakes every game. However, it is possible that you are not making mistakes that actually cost you the game. For instance, if your opponent plays a Storm combo deck and kills you on the first turn, it is possible that nothing you did could have changed that.

**IF YOU THINK
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Surprisingly, the best mindset is actually somewhat counter-intuitive. It can be intimidating to some, but we can carefully examine it and see that it is the best strategy. It is the “absolute perfection” mindset. The problem most people have with aiming for perfection is that they aim to *already be perfect*.

It is impossible to already be perfect unless you are, well, already perfect. This leads to failure. Some people live in fear and think that perfection in any form is unattainable. It is simple to prove this false.

For instance, every word in this sentence is spelled perfectly correctly. How can this be? I am only human, and yet, somehow I have done something perfect. I wasn't always the best student, but I did sometimes get perfect scores on tests. That is actual perfection.

It is a popular logical fallacy that since we may not be perfect in every way, then everything we do is also imperfect. But the second part does not actually flow from the first. Just because something is not true for everything in all circumstances does not mean it can't be true in a *specific* circumstance.

Imagine that you are trying to screw in a Phillips-head screw. A Phillips-head screwdriver could be the *perfect* tool for the job. This view of perfection is a useful one that can help us accomplish tasks. It is obtainable.

Now imagine we have a unique screwdriver that no one has ever seen before. We go around searching for the perfect screw to tighten, but get frustrated because the tool we already have just doesn't seem to be the perfect tool for any job that needs to be done. This view of perfection is the one that frustrates so many people.

The key to overcoming this perspective is to realize that you don't have just one screwdriver. In fact, you can obtain whatever tool you need. You just need to be willing to set down what isn't working right now and acquire the right tool for the job.

You may die long before you ever perfect drafting, playing, or even your jump shot. However, you are being both arrogant and foolish if you think that you can decide right this second what is your best possible level of proficiency is unless you set the bar at actual, complete perfection.

The reason is that you logically *can't* be better than actual complete perfection. If you decide that this is the best you can actually do, then it makes sense logically. If you set the bar for yourself at near-perfection, how can you ever know that you couldn't have been a little bit better in time?

Always be content, never be satisfied.

Okay, let's say you decide to aim for actual, absolute perfection in Magic. To begin with, you are not a perfect Magic player already. You know this. Therefore, you do not need to be constantly doing what everyone else is, which is trying to prove to yourself that you are as good as you hope you are.

You already know that you aren't skilled enough, since you have set "enough" at perfection. Many people get upset when they lose because losing is

evidence that they aren't as good as they hope they are. They get happy when they win because they have more evidence the other way.

With the “perfection” mindset, you remain thankful for any material rewards that come from winning. You are also thankful, win or lose, for the enjoyment of playing and for the opportunity to increase your skills. This is automatic and doesn't require you to psyche yourself up when you lose in order to feel good. You don't have to trick yourself. And you don't have to pretend you don't care.

By aiming for absolute perfection, you will create the widest-possible gap between how good you want to be and how good you actually are. This gap between your current skill and where you want to be leads to a sort of creative tension that pushes you to improve your skills faster. The more motivated you are, the more you will find ways to improve.

If you think that you are already good enough at Magic, whether it is due to apathy or arrogance or ignorance, you will have no creative tension driving you. This actually is a good way of understanding people who are smart but don't learn much.

Let's compare this mindset to a very different one—the mindset of “trying your best” or “being the best.” As a kid, I was taught to try to be the best and to just do my best, which I am sure is a common experience. The thing is, there are pretty big disadvantages to this mentality.

Let's say you want to have the fastest car in town. One way to do this is to work on your car, upgrading the engine and so on. Another way is to vandalize and ruin the cars of everyone else. Let's say there are only three cars in town that could compete with you. Smash them all and you will be the fastest!

Outside of any moral problems with such a strategy, take care to remember that hurting others will actually reduce your own skill. It does this by reducing your standards and fostering both fear and doubt.

If you simply try your best, you will surely look for evidence that you are the best and ignore any evidence that you aren't. If you make a mistake and still win, you will tend to think about how you won, not about learning from your mistake. When you lose, you will be tempted to make excuses.

A wise man is one who learns from their mistakes. This can be a bountiful source of wisdom, such as learning what to avoid and what to be mindful of. However, a *true* master also learns from their successes. They learn how they actually get what they want. They learn more about what was able to work for them.

So many people glaze over their wins, only studying their losses. While this is important, you would be well-served to truly learn from your successes as well. Shoot for absolute perfection. Accept how you are right now, but act when you must. Do this and you won't have to *try* your best.

You will always *be* the best you can be.

DECIDING TO WIN: THE FIRE

What is the secret to walking away with the trophy, the invite to the Pro Tour, the check for \$40,000, or whatever it may be that you receive for winning? The key is the same, whether it is Friday Night Magic, Regionals, a PTQ or the Pro Tour.

This perspective is one of the most important lessons you could possibly take away from *Next Level Magic*.

Take a second to really focus. This is very important.

Decide to win.

Getting what you actually want in Magic heavily involves deciding to win. This seems almost like a bumper sticker that is easily written off, but the wisdom is truer than most realize. In Magic, this decision to win is known as The Fire.

The Fire is a burning passion for winning, for success, for perfection. The flames of The Fire can set those around you aflame, though this is very positive energy. The Fire must be nurtured, though, as it can be extinguished without the proper attitude.

The Fire is not some magic potion that will instantly make a Pro Tour Champion out of you. It is a state of mind, one that we can nurture and grow. You will need to understand mana curves, sideboarding, draft order, the stages of play, and so on... but through it all, you must also be committed to winning. Many of the best theorists in the world are not strong players: though Magic theory can help you win a lot more, it does not make you a champion on its own.

The foundation to success is not your memory. It is not the cards you own. It is not the right decklist. It is not even the right friends. We are only human, so it is easy for us to be driven by our emotions. If you are in the mood for something, you will surely enjoy it much more. This is important because if you have a mindset that leaves you in the mood for success, you will enjoy it much more than otherwise.

Mastering your mindset is not enough. Sometimes, it is not even possible. The only decision that I ever need to make in terms of mindset (or anything) is the decision to seek perfect understanding. Not a pretty good understanding, mind you. Even a great understanding is not enough.

When I am seeking perfection in my understanding, I am perfectly content. I don't get angry when I lose, though I am never complacent. Each moment holds a new lesson and in this mindset I am prepared to take full advantage of that lesson.

In the spring of 2007, I was competing in the Michigan Regional Championships, vying for a spot at US Nationals. I had not competed in a few years, and this was my first major tournament back.

I playtested for the new format and devised a Standard deck built around Korlash, Heir to Blackblade, taking advantage of new technology that was available as a result of the powerful Future Sight expansion. I prepared for the competition and then came up with a strategy that I liked. I decided to share that strategy with everyone who reads my articles, discussing my new deck and how to play with it in an article that went up on StarCityGames.com the day before.

In the first of nine rounds of Swiss, I was paired up against someone who had read my article and had



taken to heart my advice about what my deck's weaknesses were. He was playing a R/G aggro deck, one of the first I had seen with Tarmogoyf, and had added Threaten to his sideboard after reading my article—taking my Korlash is bad news.



Either it just kills Korlash, or worse, there is an Urborg in play and I die outright. After I lost to the sideboard technology he had specifically selected to beat my strategy, I could have easily held on to this bad beat story and told myself that it was okay, there was nothing I could do, I couldn't be blamed, etc.

But this is not my style. I decided to win. So I was 0-1 with eight more rounds of Swiss in front of me? It is what it is. I decided to win and refocused my efforts on the very next round. There was no use dwelling on my loss when the next round started. I focused on what matters and fought tooth and nail to try to turn around my second round.

In the very next round, I ended up with my back against the wall in a match against W/G/R Zoo (back before it was even called Naya). I was on the ropes and it looked like I was a goner: my opponent got me down to one. My opponent's deck had Lightning

Helix, Rift Bolt, Char, and more... as well as no shortage of dangerous creatures. How was I going to survive?

My opponent drew a card and I could tell that he had drawn a burn spell. He decided what to do, so I flinched towards my four lands that I had set aside to cast Tendrils of Corruption (which I currently did not have in my hand).



He attacked with his creature and I went into the tank, deciding if I should Tendrils the creature or chump block. I went to tap my mana, then thought better of it. Then I looked at him and said, "You drew a burn spell, didn't you?"

I decided to chump block and he decided that he would wait to burn me, since as long as he doesn't use his burn spell, I can't Tendrils his guy (he would just burn me in response).

On my turn, I drew a Foresee, letting me dig pretty deep into my library. Clearly my opponent was making a mistake by letting it resolve without burning me—but the only way I could win was through his mistake, so I just assumed he would make it.

This isn't really a fantastic Jedi Mind Trick, this is just good play. If you need your opponent to make a mistake to be able to win, then play in such a way to give them a chance to make that mistake.



The two cards I drew off of Foresee were Korlash and a Tendrils. The Korlash gave me a blocker to hold off his Tarmogoyf, and the Tendrils now meant that I *could* actually survive him trying to burn me out.

I just decided that I was going to win and played as though I was going to draw everything I needed in order to have a chance. I was dead to another burn spell? Fine. I would just assume that my opponent will never draw any more burn during a turn that I can't beat it. There is no use trying to play around what you can't play around.

If you are dead to a burn spell, you are dead to a burn spell. If there is truly nothing you can do about it, you might as well play as though they won't draw it. If there is something you can do, such as represent a spell like Tendrils of Corruption, then you do what you can.

This is not a license to be irrationally optimistic, however. If you are dead to a burn spell and can put your opponent on a three-turn clock instead of a four-turn clock with tight play, you better play tight, since by winning a turn earlier that play gives you a way to beat a burn spell fourth from the top.

For several turns in a row, my opponent never drew another burn spell and I was able to deal with everything I needed to. I won that game, winning the match, and went on to win every round the rest of the day and the title of Regional Champion. I had qualified for the National Championships through tight play, a tough mindset, and an unwavering desire to win even when it would have been so easy to make excuses for why it was understandable to lose.

A player who has The Fire is said to be so hungry for victory that they settle for nothing less and go to great lengths to fight for each and every win—no matter what bad beats they may be taking, no matter how bad the odds. Competitors with The Fire are among the most dangerous opponents in the game. They are generally thought of as champions.

The Fire can come and go in some people, but you can harness it within yourself. When Luis Scott-Vargas, Kai Budde, or Owen Turtenwald have The Fire, they are next to impossible to stop. That fire fuels their burning passion to succeed. There are few opponents as dangerous as the one that has decided to win.

DEVELOPING THE PERFECT MINDSET

What are your strengths? Ask yourself and be honest. Doing things right is fun, and it is good for you to enjoy yourself as you play. When you focus on your strengths, you will find yourself enjoying the game more and achieving more.

Magic presents countless fun opportunities, and that is what the game is all about. Imagine feeling peak levels of energy, fun, and precision while playing Magic. You can see how operating at this level would benefit your game.

To develop this perfect mindset, start with the goal you have in mind and work backwards. If you are constantly focused on that goal, if you are fully directing your mental abilities to that particular puzzle, then you can figure out the roadmap to getting there. Understand your goal.

Once you understand where you are going, ask yourself what mindsets you have had when you were playing well. Examine the games that you won; remember the attitudes you had and how you played.

It is invaluable to be able to draw upon hours and hours of playtesting. It is crucial for giving you the experience to look for patterns to recognize. If you have already been in this situation, it is a lot easier to *know* what the right play is.

Watch games that you aren't playing in. Imagine yourself in those games. This will add a whole new dimension to your ability to see what is going on in a game of Magic. When you take the time to watch great players, you put yourself in a position to learn from the best and avoid the mistakes that plague them.

Every time you sit down to a game of Magic, ask yourself if your mind is where it needs to be. If it is not, then *get it there!* It is easy to get distracted, of course, but it is your responsibility to re-focus on the task at hand. Talk to yourself and make sure you are on the right track. Remind yourself of your goal and reinforce your good plays.

Imagine an NBA basketball game for a minute. Picture your favorite player shooting a free throw. That routine he always goes through? The one where he breathes in, looks down, dribbles, looks up, and breathes out while shooting? That focus is so important that when people are playing basketball with millions of dollars involved, the players are taught to reinforce it with every single free throw.

When you play, you want to get in the habit of checking every resource area every turn. Check cards in hand, cards in graveyard, cards in play, cards removed from the game, life totals, all of it, every turn. You need to always know every card that is in effect and how it got there. You can't just float by in a daze.

A great way to process a confusing card is to pick it up and read it quietly out loud to yourself. This is very stimulating, and is best combined with a question to yourself about what this card does in the current position as well as what its future implications may be. Take the time to answer!

It is so important to have an idea of what cards could be played that would have a dramatic effect on the game. Good players know to keep Supreme Verdict and Gray Merchant of Asphodel in mind (depending on the format, of course), but you need to also constantly ask yourself how you plan to win the game, starting from where you are at *this exact moment*.

Play the game out for a few turns in your head.

When playing an aggressive deck, it can be helpful to visualize how many turns your opponent has before you defeat them. You want to minimize that number of turns—and thinking this way can help keep you focused, avoiding errors that give them extra turns to draw out of it and then beat you outright.

When playing a more controlling deck, look the other way. Imagine how long your opponent is going to give you before killing you to help give you an idea of how much time you have to spare before you manage to take control of the game. You shouldn't waste that time, but rather use it to gain some perspective on things like whether you have the time to cast Thirst for Knowledge or if you have to just Engineered Explosives one guy away.

A great way to refocus your mind is to change what is going on physically. Move around a bit, talk a little, shout if you have to. Former Player of the Year Tomoharu Saito is famous for the “Saito Slap” where he starts slapping himself vigorously, trying to gain focus. Gabriel Nassif talks to himself quite a bit, and you can always tell when he really needs to focus, as he will do things like start counting in French.

This mental side to the game is a theme we will reinvestigate later, once we get to the part of the book where we discuss reading people, bluffing, and mind tricks. Before we can even begin to talk about tells or Jedi Mind Tricks, we need to focus on the basics.

Remember, more matches of Magic are won by tight technical play than all other factors combined.

SECTION THREE: IN-GAME MAGIC STRATEGY

THE STAGES OF THE GAME

In a game of Magic, there are basically three stages of play that your strategy is operating at. Keep in mind this is with regards to you or your opponent, but the two of you are not necessarily going to be at the same stage at the same time. Your stage is independent of theirs.

For more on the stages of game play, check out [**The Breakdown of Theory**](#) by Michael J. Flores, as much of what I write about here is derivative of his work. He sometimes uses the term “phase” instead of “stage,” but I prefer stage because “phase” already has an important place in the Magic vocabulary.

Stage One is the early game. It is when you are essentially mana-screwed, can't cast many spells, and are operating *below* your “Minimum Game Threshold.” Your Minimum Game Threshold is the level at which your deck can operate on a basic level. For instance, many aggro decks only need three lands to be able to cast most of their spells. When they have zero, one, or two lands in play, they are operating below the minimum level needed to play their cards.

A control deck, on the other hand, generally needs at least four mana to play a lot of its cards. As a result, it may take it slightly longer to reach the mid-game of Stage Two.

Keep in mind that this is really just a question of the deck, not the strategy. For instance, plenty of midrange decks can't really function well on less than four mana. A good way to think of it is: how many land drops do you need to hit in order to not be mana-screwed? I think that most control players would concede that if they hit their first four

land drops, they aren't really mana-screwed. On the other hand, if a five-color control player's first four land drops are Island, Island, Reflecting Pool, Reflecting Pool, then they are mana-screwed—and, by consequence, still stuck in Stage One.

The early game of Magic is basically the stage of the game where you can't cast all of your basic spells. It is important to understand this aspect of the game not only for actually playing games but also for constructing decks.

Most experienced tournament players know that a Dark Confidant is a strong play on turn two against some opponents, but why is this not a trump on turn ten? A trump requires context.

A Dark Confidant can sometimes be a trump in Stage One and even Stage Two play, making it a powerful card when the opponent's strategy isn't at full speed. However, a fast deck like Zoo or TEPS doesn't care much about him, as they can quickly race to Stage Two or Three before their opponent exerts much of an impact on the board. A control deck, on the other hand, may need another turn or two to reach the same point that the Dark Confidant player is now at, and by that time the advantage Confidant has gained for them may be game-winning.

An even better example is Wild Nacatl. Few cards correlate with victory quite like a turn-one Wild Nacatl, but he is very unexciting at Stage Two or Three. Why play a card that loses so much utility by turn three?

What we care about is winning, and one way to do that is to give you the best possible chance of securing a game-winning advantage during Stage One.



Who cares if your opponent's deck is capable of eventually Tooth and Nailing out Kiki-Jiki and Deceiver Exarch? If you kill them before they can ever cast the Tooth and Nail, what is the problem?



A defining aspect of early-game play is that you are very limited as to what cards matter, since you can't play them all.

One of the most important dynamics to understand in Magic theory is that some decks try to gain a winning advantage during Stage One. Some seek the battle on Stage Three. However, dividing your energy to trying to conquer all stages of the game is generally not as good as people think.

This is why most of the best truly aggro decks tend to greatly limit most late-game cards like Rakdos's Return or Ruric Thar, the Unbowed. They are not trying to focus on Stage Three; instead, they are spending most (or all!) of their energy trying to make sure that they win during Stage One.

A control deck, on the other hand, often seeks to win during the end game, or Stage Three; it merely wants to survive the early game in order to get to the point where they can play an appropriate trump card such as Elspeth, Sun's Champion.

During Stage Three play, trumps will often either virtually “win the game” or cripple an opponent’s ability to do so. Of course, an opponent might be able to answer with an even greater trump.

For example, if you successfully cast Cruel Ultimatum, you will damage your opponent's board, destroy their hand, attack their life total, and be in a much better position to fight back next turn with all of the extra cards and life.



Many people just concede when someone Cruel Ultimatum them—but technically, the game isn't over and they can still fight back. But the long and the short of it is that it will be extremely difficult for the target of a Cruel Ultimatum to battle back and recover from this position.

I have no doubt you can think of countless scenarios where they *could* come back and win the game with another trump of their own, such as if they topdeck a giant burn spell, but it is just far more likely that the advantage you have built will carry you through to a win.

A defining aspect of Stage Three play is that very few of your opponent's cards matter they are severely

limited in the ways that they can actually meaningfully affect the board.

Tidehollow Sculler is a good card, but it is generally not going to be able to trump a Cruel Ultimatum after the Cruel hits. In fact, in the Lorwyn-Shards Standard seasons, almost nothing trumped a Cruel Ultimatum, which is why it was at the top of most controlling strategies' endgame plans.

Broodmate Dragon, another popular bomb at the time, was a particularly potent trump to Spectral Procession decks. The reason it was so good against Spectral Procession decks was *not* because it beats the card, but because generally the Stage Three games of those Spectral Procession decks are just not as strong as a Broodmate Dragon. Whatever they are doing when their deck is operating at full capacity is not going to be as strong as a Broodmate Dragon, and the game will tend to get worse for them as it progresses from here.

On the other hand, Broodmate Dragon was nowhere near a trump against the control decks of that era, as they would simply bin a couple of Volcanic Fallouts, Plumeveils, Wrath of Gods, and move on—and that's not even counting Cruel Ultimatum! The key to understanding trumps is to view them in context.

Let's take a look at a card whose strength is hugely dependent on context: Fiendslayer Paladin.

Obviously, it is incredible against a burn deck, and can be quite good against black aggro, combining lifegain with pseudo-hexproof. On the other hand, Fiendslayer Paladin is pretty terrible against control decks or decks full of green fatties. Whether or not it trumps the opponent's gameplan depends on the opponent. Whether or not it has the ability to do so



against some (or many) likely opponents determines if it has the makings of a trump in the current format.

Take a moment to think about your system for building decks. Typically, players build decks by some sort of sorting system like mana color ("I'm playing a Blue-White deck!"), offensive/defensive ("Let's build a Red-Green Aggro deck!"), perceived card strength ("My deck has so many bomb rares!"), or synergy/combos ("Let's build a Devotion/Affinity/Goblin/Storm/Dredge deck!").

These ideas are all fine and lead to great decks, but they are usually the more obvious decks possible. Building a deck that plans to win the endgame rewards a deckbuilder who can build his deck upon a foundation of trumps.

WHAT ABOUT STAGE TWO?

Well, Stage Two, or the mid-game, is essentially the most strategically relevant part of the game—and the one where the most relevant mistakes are generally made. Stage Two is when players have the opportunity to play most or all of their spells, but the battles being fought are still relevant. (This is unlike Stage Three, where most of the cards that are being played pale in comparison to the ones matter.)

If Stage One is about *Elvish Mystic* and *Force Spike*, and Stage Three is about *Ætherling* and *Elspeth, Sun's Champion*, Stage Two is about *Underworld Connections* and *Murderous Redcap*.



Stage Two involves both players having lots of decisions (unlike Stage One) but having most of the decisions matter (unlike Stage Three). As such, this is the point in the game where most people make the most mistakes that cost them the most games.

During Stage One, your ability to outplay people is limited by the spells you can cast—which, at this stage, isn't much. During Stage Three, your ability to outplay someone is limited by the highest trump involved.

The mid-game is where the little battles are fought. These little battles are where percentage points are won and lost, setting players up with the best chance of either reaching a successful end game or ending the game before it comes to that.

A classic mistake that many players make is to become so intoxicated with the cards that interact with the mid-game that they forget that they must position themselves either bigger than the opponent or faster than the opponent. You can two-for-one someone all day, but when they start casting Cruel Ultimatum you'll lose everything you worked for.

Likewise, cards like Murderous Redcap are great against quick aggro decks, but if your deck is all Redcaps and Siege-Gang Commanders you might find yourself at four life by the time you stabilize against an aggro player who need only show you a Flame Javelin to win.

It is not enough to have a good Stage Two; you must also have a purpose. If you're a fast deck, then Stage Two should generally be where you end the game so that your opponent doesn't reach his Stage Three, which will trump your game. If your opponent is aiming to play a trump that you can't beat, then you can't let it get to that point.

On the other hand, if your deck is a big deck, then you are using Stage Two to position yourself in a way that will allow you to set up your Stage Three trump.

Typically, a deck that does something big tries to leave Stage One as fast as possible, simply trying to survive long enough to get out of it. With a control deck, this may mean cards like Doom Blade, Detention Sphere, and Supreme Verdict. With a combo deck, this may mean playing enough Rituals

to try to win on turn three—sometimes the best defense is to kill your opponent before they kill you.

A combo deck generally tries to spend all of its resources advancing its own game to Stage Three as fast as possible. The idea is that your *Mind's Desire*, *Tooth and Nail*, *Enduring Ideal*, or *Dread Return* is going to trump whatever your opponent is doing.



This generally means that combo decks will have very short Stage Twos and will generally just try to advance from Stage Two to Stage Three as fast as possible. More commonly, the reason that combo decks spend time in Stage Two is because they *tried* to get to Stage Three and the opponent's *Thoughtseize*, *Rule of Law*, or *Slaughter Games* held them back.

A control deck, on the other hand, takes a different approach to Stage Two. While they want to reach Stage Three as quickly as they can, they have a different way of going about it. They generally try to advance their position each step of the way through Stage Two, rather than bringing Stage Three to them. Instead of casting mana-accelerating *Dark Ritual* effects to cast *Cruel Ultimatum*, they use *Wrath of God* and *Cryptic Command* to ensure that they live long enough to cast *Cruel Ultimatum* naturally.

Many players fall in love with nice mid-game cards that let them gain small advantages, forgetting that if their opponent is bigger than them all of that work will be for naught. They have to win *before* their opponent's Stage Three. Likewise, if you can't make it out of Stage One with enough room to breathe, the aggro decks will kill you.

In general, a good rule of thumb is that the mid-game decks have advantage over the early-game decks, as they are a little bigger but still fast enough, and the late-game decks beat the mid-game decks for the same reason.

Often, the fastest decks, however, beat the biggest decks—in the big decks' efforts to be the biggest, they dedicate so much to Stage Three that they leave themselves open to losing before they reach that point.

RELATIVE VS. FIXED VALUES OF CARDS

How can we most accurately represent a card's true value in any particular game situation? As we explain the concept, it will sound obvious—but take a good look around and notice how many people overlook the concept in application.

Most people fall into the trap of believing in Fixed Value, but the reality is that value is determined by context. How good is a Cryptic Command? How can we answer that question without knowing the format, the gameplay circumstances, what you would have to cut to make room for it, our mana curve and manabase, and so on?

Typically, there are two values that are important to know: Relative Value and Average Value. Imagine that you are playing some sort of a Next-Level Blue Modern deck that is base blue with a touch of green for Tarmogoyf. You want to try fitting a Cryptic Command in the deck. Most players tend to just think about how great the Cryptic Command is in a vacuum without comparing it accurately with the card that has to come out in order to make room.

This happens all the time in Limited as well. Amateur players just build decks with more than forty cards in order to fit in all the good cards. That's generally suboptimal, since every card over forty just decreases your odds of drawing your *best* cards by an amount that is equal to the increase in your odds of drawing your *worst* card, the forty-first.

This is not to say that it is a mortal sin to play forty-one cards (or sixty-one in Constructed); you can make arguments for an extra card for mana ratio considerations or attempting to deck opponents by running them out of cards. However, the vast



majority of the time players play more than the minimum, they are just lying to themselves about their motives.

While many novices make the mistake of just adding cards without considering the opportunity cost of drawing your other, better cards less often, good players can make a more subtle mistake. Good players often play cards that are clearly “good” (Fixed Value), leaving out the cards whose values are vaguer to them. A good example of this is a drafter selecting a quality common over the strange rare they have never played before, since they are not sure of its strength and don't have experience thinking about it in conjunction with the other cards they have drafted.

The best players find ways to accurately value all cards, and to always value cards relative to their context. Keep in mind what stage of the game you plan on playing these cards in.

Why is Shivan Dragon generally no good in Constructed (no matter how much I may love it...)?



Well, you generally cannot play Shivan Dragon until Stage Three, and at that point it is a very weak trump.

On the other hand, in a Limited match, a Shivan Dragon would *often* be a game-winning trump. As such, Shivan Dragon's relative value skyrockets in Limited. A good strategy for making this distinction is vital.

Let's say it is the first pick, first pack of a draft. You know the format well, but you obviously don't know what your final deck will look like. Especially when you are drafting from a full block with all three sets available, such as Theros, Born of the Gods, and Journey into Nyx, draft decks can vary widely. In this case, you need to be aware of the Average Value as well as the Relative Value of diverse cards.

When you examine the fourteen cards of your first booster, you cannot possibly judge each card's value in your deck-to-be since at this point the deck doesn't exist. Instead, you have to choose based on Average Values that you have previously assigned to each card. These average values are relative to the format, your playstyle, and so on, but not to your as-yet-undrafted deck. In Magic, we use Relative Value (contextual) whenever possible and Average Value (abstract) whenever necessary.

Let's imagine a pack of Journey into Nyx that contains Magma Spray and Flurry of Horns. If it is the first pick of the draft, we would probably pick the Magma Spray since it is generally a better card in the abstract. This power level is based on the Average Value to us of the card in this format.

However, if it is the third pick of the draft and you have already drafted two Felhide Petrifiers, then that pack takes on a whole new meaning. The relative value of the Flurry of Horns is much higher here because of its synergy with your other cards and the cards you are likely to draft at this point.

Likewise, you might normally take Riddle of Lightning over Squelching Leeches first pick, first pack. However, if your first three picks were Dictate of Erebos, Spiteful Blow, and Pharika's Chosen, the relative values have changed. You have to evaluate the various synergies (or anti-synergies) of the cards you are drafting, falling back on Average Value when you don't have enough information.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF MAGIC THEORY

In a game of Magic players start with a variety of resources, and *all* of the fundamental Magic principles are derived from the manipulation of these resources. These resources are, for the most part, components of the turn that you have the ability to do every turn:

- Cards
- Parts of the turn (Land Drop, Untap, Attack)
- Life total

That's right; there are really just three fundamental building blocks of Magic theory. You have probably read material on all three, perhaps under the following headings:

- Card Advantage
- Tempo
- The Philosophy of Fire

These three concepts deal with the basic manipulation of resources in Magic. The reason there are three is because there are three ways for a resource to be available to you in a game.

The Philosophy of Fire deals with resources that you start with and get no more of unless you pay for them in some way with the use of specific cards. The most well-understood example is that of your life total, but this also includes the cards in your library, how many poison counters you can endure without dying, and so on.

Tempo deals with resources that you have the opportunity to utilize every turn. The most important of these to understand is, surprisingly, the land drop—but the untap step and attack step are also important.

While they are not as relevant, this also includes the other steps such as upkeep and discard as well as abilities that you can trigger or activate once (or some amount) per turn, like Planeswalkers or an Icy Manipulator. You start the game with absolutely no Tempo, and it is only through the exploitation of parts of your turn (or the denial of parts of your opponent's turns) that you gain it.

Card Advantage (or, more accurately, Card Economy) is the big one. This is one of the most important concepts in Magic; its early pioneer, Brian Weissman, changed Magic forever by pushing the theory. Card Advantage is a unique resource in Magic because you start the game with seven cards (so it is sort of like the Philosophy of Fire), but you also draw a card each turn (so it is sort of like Tempo).

Card Advantage is the only fundamental resource that occupies a large amount of territory in both areas—so much so that sometimes it is useful to view it as one, sometimes the other, sometimes both, and sometimes neither. This is just a result of the strange things that happen when these two concepts meet. Card Advantage is at the very center of all resource management in Magic and thus it is generally the most useful building block to describe everything in Magic.

Let's talk about Card Advantage a bit.

CARD ADVANTAGE

What do the words “Card Advantage” mean, anyway?

Every Magic player who has been to a tournament in the past ten years has heard of Card Advantage. But where did it come from and what does it mean?

Card Advantage is really just the positive side of the spectrum of a concept known as Card Economy. As we mentioned above, Card Economy deals with the one primary resource that a Magic player has that is both initial (seven cards in hand) *and* accumulates (one draw phase every turn). Card Advantage is, at its core, about permanent resources, advantages that do not disappear on their own. Cards are the fundamental example, and every other sort of permanent advantage is spoken of in terms of “cards.”

But it is not just this resource that is important to understand, however. Just as the idea of a dollar means nothing without an understanding of what you can do with a dollar, you must understand what a card gets you in order to appreciate the seven cards you start with and the card you draw each turn.

Whenever you summon a creature, cast a spell, or put any permanent into play, you are generally dealing with a variety of costs. The primary costs to a card are the casting cost (or land drop) and the card itself.

One of the most important concepts in all of Magic theory is that whenever you play a card, it is not just the casting cost that you are paying. You are also paying the card! When you cast a Giant Growth to power up one of your creatures, the Giant Growth is gone from your hand. You now have one less card to work with.

This is not to say that Giant Growth is bad, or even card disadvantage. In fact, if your creature was going to die *and* your opponent's creature was going to live, but Giant Growth reverses that, Giant Growth can even lead to card advantage. If you don't lose a card on the board and your opponent loses a card, then your Giant Growth is in a way, +1 cards. (It would be +2, but the Giant Growth costs a card.)

Just about every player goes through a period of time where they do not yet realize the inherent cost of a card in every card they play. This can lead to any number of consequences such as players throwing zero-casting-cost creatures in their deck (thinking they are free) or playing with a variety of creature enchantments such as Holy Strength (thinking that one mana for +1/+2 is a good deal, but overlooking the cost of a card).

During this phase, every card that is all upside looks good to the player. A 6/4 for six mana with no drawback? That sounds great!

The problem is that every card has the inherent cost of a card and must be evaluated at its proper cost in terms of mana and the card. This is why so many one-drops end up being bad. Many of them are just not worth a card, let alone a mana on top of that. Most of the time, I would rather have a card than a 1/1 creature, so unless the creature is bigger than 1/1 or has a good ability, I don't want to spend a mana *and* a card to buy it.

There are a lot of cards that draw extra cards. A very popular card design is the cantrip—a card that draws you another card when you play it. This does not make the card free, remember, as it still costs mana and has a few other subtle costs, such as the space it takes up in your deck.



There are no cards in Magic that truly cost nothing, and even the cards that come closest (Urza's Bauble, Mishra's Bauble, Street Wraith, Gitaxian Probe and Edge of Autumn) can be abused despite not generating much of an impact on the game.



Some players seek to use cards like these so as to be essentially playing a deck that is "smaller than sixty cards," thereby increasing the chances of drawing the cards they *really* want.

Okay. So we start with seven cards, we get a new one every turn, and we spend them whenever we play cards. Who cares?

Well, in Magic, generally the player who has the most and best options has the advantage. The whole point of Magic strategy is to give yourself good options and to take good options away from your opponent. Every real strategy in the game revolves around this paradigm.

You will see control decks that draw extra cards. They don't really need extra cards to win; drawing extra cards give them more and better options.

You will see discard or land destruction decks that cripple the opponent's ability to play their cards. This is the very definition of taking options away from the opponent.

Part of why Counterspells are so inherently powerful is because they do both: they give the caster options and take them away from the opponent. Counterspells have been weakened in recent years in part because whenever they are decent, they have a tendency to become great very quickly.

Even a mindless Mono-Red Burn deck is based on options. Surprisingly, a Mono-Red Burn deck with few (or no) creatures is actually best viewed as a combo deck that generally tries to deny the opponent options by reducing their life total to zero before they can play the cards they want.

Every single card is either about giving you more and better options or denying your opponent options. Dark Ritual gives you options two turns before you would have had them. Esper Charm gives you the option to destroy an enchantment, draw two more options, or take away two options from your opponent. Hill Giant gives you a plethora of options, as all creatures do, the most important of which is attacking and blocking.



I know that this may come across as basic, but that is the point: we are talking about the basic building blocks of Magic. With a proper understanding of the basic components of Magic, we can better evaluate everything from in-game decisions to deckbuilding to evaluating new cards that come out.

Understanding the physics of Magic leads to winning.

This is why Magic theory is so very important to those that care about succeeding in tournament Magic.

Okay. So drawing extra cards is good and taking them away from your opponent is good. How good are we talking? How much is a card really worth? This is a much tougher question, as it is completely contextual. In the abstract we can talk about the value of a card, but in reality we are just talking about the value of a card in the context of all legal Magic cards.

The value of a card changes depending on the format. For instance, in Vintage, cards are a dime a dozen. Cards like Ancestral Recall, Timetwister, Necropotence, and Library of Alexandria ensure that merely buying a card for three mana is not an exciting prospect.

On the other hand, Esper Charm was at times one of the best cards in Standard, as it was primarily used as a way to draw an extra card (remember, it costs you a card) for only three mana. It does give you other options, but it is also a difficult three mana. So how much is a card worth?

There is no hard-and-fast rule here, though it can be useful to use comparisons rather than hard numbers. Remember, the utility of a card is vital to



understanding its value. This is why a Merfolk Looter is good despite it not technically drawing you extra cards. What would you rather have in your hand, seven lands—or three spells you could cast and two lands? In general, the utility is just as important as the physical cards.



This lack of a regular equation has some theorists questioning if we really need to talk about both cards and mana. AJ Sacher is one such advocate of evaluating Magic strategy purely in terms of mana, which he calls the “Theory of Stock Mana.”

The idea is that cards are just ways that you spend mana and that the player who gets more mana worth of value tends to win at Magic. Michael Flores is another source for ideas written about this way of viewing Magic theory.

For the time being, we will rely on the old rule of thumb that a card is generally worth around two mana, but the reality is that it is not about how much mana you spend. If you have four lands in play and tap two to do something and don't use the other two, it is essentially the same as if you spent four. Also, a huge misconception among players is that mana costs scale up arithmetically. The reality

is that six mana is not *just* two more than four mana, and eight mana is *certainly* not just two more than six mana. We will talk more about casting costs in the section on tempo, but there is more to say on card advantage.

In late 2009, Standard was full of two-for-ones. This is a specific type of card economy that involves cards that are essentially worth two cards in some way. Esper Charm is an easy two-for-one to understand, but what about Bloodbraid Elf? What about Call of the Herd?



This is where we start to get into “Virtual Card Advantage.” Is a Hill Giant in play a card? What about a Call of the Herd token?

VIRTUAL CARD ADVANTAGE

This is a gray area of Magic theory that I think is best resolved as viewing tokens as creature cards. This is not to say that Dragon Fodder is a two-for-one (although it can be). The question is whether or not the creature token is worth a card at all... And that comes down to the specific game state. If you have Glare of Subdual on the battlefield, every body counts, just as if you are playing a control mirror where your opponent has spot removal and no creatures.



On the other hand, if you are involved in a creature battle and all of the creatures trump 1/1s, then how much are they really worth?

This is an excellent example where Michael Flores and AJ Sacher's ideas of just considering everything in terms of their mana value shines. If you can assign a mana value to Dragon Fodder, then there is no need to speculate on how many "cards" it is worth. I generally like to think of tokens as being worth a card, whatever their size, although they are often very weak cards.

Just as you would generally not spend a card to get a 0/1 creature, a 0/1 token in play is usually not worth a card. But a 2/1 or larger creature *is* usually worth more than a card, and a good ability like flying and a good creature type (like Faerie) can mean a lot.

The only real area of dispute is that of 1/1s. Sometimes a Mons's Goblin Raiders is fine. Other times, it is best to view two of them as a Dragon Fodder. In the abstract, though, I generally put the value of a 1/1 token at worth around two-thirds of a card (at least in the current Standard). This is because the gold standard is the Grizzly Bear and it takes two 1/1s to trade with one, although you will also have opportunities to trade with random 1/1s, 2/1s and removal spells.

When evaluating the card economy of something, you have to look at not just how many cards it draws you but also how many cards it affects. Each permanent that is a useful piece to you is, in essence, a card. Each permanent you take away from your opponent is a card. Each card your opponent discards is a card. Even things that affect the game from an unusual zone, like Firemane Angel, are “a card.”



Card economy deals with advantages that have permanence, things that don't disappear on their own. Remember, we are interested in utility. A 0/1 token just doesn't give you the same options that a 3/3 does.

A Firemane Angel in the graveyard may be completely irrelevant in a given matchup—or it may be worth half a card a turn. It all depends on the relative value of the utility it offers.

What about Millstone? Does this destroy two cards a turn?

No, Millstone does not. Cards you have not yet drawn are not the type of resource we talk about when we talk about card economy. The cards in your library are a fixed resource at the beginning of the game—and if you don't act, they will never replenish themselves. The cards in your library are discussed more in the section *The Philosophy of Fire*.

Actually, to many people's surprise, Millstoning your opponent can be a double-edged sword. You do gain the knowledge of some of the cards they play, you take away options from them when they play Tutors, and if they run out of cards, they lose... but there are a *lot* of cards in Magic that benefit people from the graveyard.

Whether we are talking dredge, Tarmogoyf, flashback, unearth, reanimation, delve, Incarnations like Wonder, or threshold, there are countless ways for people to take advantage of having cards in their graveyard.

In general, Card Advantage is a Good Thing™.

More and better options is generally what we want—so if we have two options and one involves



better card advantage, that is a strong point in favor of it. This is why experienced players typically do not chump block early on.

Chump blocking is blocking with a creature that is just going to die without killing the attacker. The express purpose is to prevent some damage (or, occasionally, to prevent whatever it is that the attacker is accomplishing by attacking).

Inexperienced players make the mistake of throwing a 2/2 creature in front of a 4/4 at the first chance they get, even if they are at twelve life.

Here, they are confused about the relative value of the options the 2/2 creature gives them compared to the options that the four life gives them. A useful thing for them to consider is what are they going to do if they draw a 2/2 next turn? Block again? If they had just not blocked the first time, they could double-block and presumably kill the 4/4.

Even if you don't draw another creature, you could always just block next turn, so why give up that option now?

This is not to say you should never chump block unless it will kill you. In fact, if you have several flyers on the table that will kill your opponent during your next attack phase and your opponent is playing some kind of aggressive Red deck, it can be perfectly reasonable to throw a 2/2 in front of a 4/4 while at twelve life. In this case, you might just want to make sure you don't die during this attack phase.

The key is to figure out what you are really trying to accomplish.

Regardless of whether you are trying to take control or beat down your opponent, generally you are not

going to want to chump block until the attacking creature would kill you (or if you would prevent more damage than you are ever likely to take again from one hit). The primary exceptions to this are if some other card economy is affected (like getting hit by a Nightveil Specter, which would give your opponent an extra card) or if the life you would lose is worth more to you than the card you are sacrificing (like blocking a Monstrous Polukranos, World Eater with a Soldier token).



When playing games of Magic, it is generally better to have more “cards,” though how important this is depends on how much the concept of more options matters to you. This is why control decks typically care much more about card advantage than aggro decks. If you are trying to react to your opponent's threats, you are generally going to need more options than they have since some of your options will not be the ones you need or want.

Simply having more cards is not the end, but rather a means to an end. The point of most control decks is to reach a Stage Three that trumps their opponent's gameplan. Drawing extra cards is just one of the best ways ever devised for making this possible.

One final element of virtual card advantage that must be kept in mind is *card utility*. Adrian Sullivan has always been fond of describing “card economy” rather than “card advantage,” as he maintains it is generally more useful to describe the relative value of the “options” you are getting rather than just talking about how many cards you have.

One of the classic ways to get greater utility out of your cards is to play with “lands that do things.” A primary limiting factor in Magic is that you typically need lands to cast spells, meaning that often between twenty or twenty-four cards in your deck give you no options other than ways to cast the other cards you play.

This leads to the potential to end up in situations where you “run out of gas” and have just what you draw off the top of your library. Usually in these situations, drawing an Island or a Savage Lands is the same thing as drawing a blank (-1 card). Lands that do things overcome this—and since it is like drawing a spell later in the game, it is as though you are +1 card (since a basic land would have been a dead draw).



While there are lands that filter your draws, remove creatures, produce tokens, and much more, one of the most common lands that do things is the manland. From Mishra's Factory to Mutavault to Celestial Colonnade, there have been a wide variety of manlands throughout the game's history.



Playing with manlands gives you a sort of virtual card advantage, and though you have more “live draws” later, there is always a cost. Usually this cost is that the land produces colorless mana or enters the battlefield tapped. The real cost, however, is also the opportunity cost of whatever you could have played instead.

As you can see, it is not just how many options you have, the quality of those options is also relevant. Late in the game, it is not hard to see why someone would prefer a single Celestial Colonnade to having an extra Island and an extra Plains.

TEMPO

As we just saw, card advantage is so very tricky because it deals with a resource that you both start the game with (seven cards) and gain over time (one card a turn). Tempo is actually much simpler, though there has actually been a lot less written on it. As a result, it is more commonly misunderstood than card advantage.

Tempo deals with the resources that you gain every turn, but do not possess initially. The most common of these is mana. The most important thing to remember about Tempo is that it is all of your resources that are temporary (hence the name). These are advantages that will dissipate naturally.

At the beginning of a game you have no mana and no ability to generate mana. During Stage One, you just don't have the mana you need to work with. As the game progresses, you are able to build up your resources to a point where you can actually cast your spells. This is Stage Two—and the most common way of getting there is by playing land.

You start the game with no land in play and have the ability to play one land a turn. This basic limitation dictates the pace of the game, and consequently most of the conversations about tempo.

You can play one land a turn, so something that breaks that rule is worth some amount. This is why Signets cost two mana while Shadowblood Ridge costs nothing.

In addition to the ability to actually play land, the amount of mana you can generate each turn is essentially a function of how many turns have progressed normally (although if you do not draw extra cards, you will begin missing land drops at some point).



One of the primary reasons that Vintage is so different from Standard is the prevalence of mana accelerators like Black Lotus, Mishra's Workshop, the Moxes and so on. It is not at all uncommon for Vintage decks to be built to leave Stage One on their first turn. The way they do this is by gaining tempo.



Dark Ritual is a high-tempo play not because it produces mana but because it gives you more of a resource that you would normally have to wait for—namely, the amount of mana you could have in a turn. It may be card disadvantage on the surface (you *are* trading a card for this mana boost, after all), but if you can convert that tempo into something worth more than a card, then you stand to profit. Who cares if you are down a card if you resolve Necropotence on turn one instead of turn three?

Tempo is not just limited to Ritual effects, though. Take, for instance, Remand. Remand is a classic tempo card that lets you trade two mana for however much mana your opponent spent on their spell. In general, if you are Remanding spells that cost three or more, you are gaining tempo. If you are Remanding spells that cost two or less, you are losing it.

Why is two a loss? Because your card is reactive and requires you to leave the two lands untapped before your opponent even tries to cast a spell.



This is why Remand's popularity surges and then falls: it all depends on the expense of the cards that people are playing. When it was legal in Standard, Remand was one of the best cards in the format since the spells were so expensive. Remember, Remand draws a card, making its cost mostly just the mana, but it also doesn't really stop the spell, so its gain is mostly just mana, too.

Conversely, Remand was not particularly popular in Modern, circa late 2012. When the format revolved around one- and two-mana spells, Remand just wasn't the best option.

When Remand targets an opponent's spell that costs a single mana, it is the caster of Remand that falls behind in tempo. Of course, this ebbing and flowing continues and the 2014 Modern metagame has seen a resurgence of Remands hitting Splinter Twin, Birthing Pod, and Cryptic Command.

If you use a Lightning Bolt on a Scion of Oona, you have gained tempo because essentially you are ahead by two mana. This is not the end of the tale, however, since that two mana is for naught if you just leave two land untapped for the rest of the turn and do nothing with it.



Tempo is more than just the mana spent on spells, however. It is the manipulation of any resource that you gain over time but do not start with. This can include playing lands, untapping permanents, attack phases, and so on, as well as denying your opponent any of these.

The key to understanding tempo is to evaluate everything in terms of how much this resource is worth *right now*. To take tempo away from your opponent is to give yourself tempo, but this matters not at all if you don't do anything with it.

The easiest demonstration of this is Rite of Flame. Rite of Flame is one of the best cards in a lot of 7Extended decks because of the tempo it generates early on. However, this mana is of little or no value to you if you are drawing off the top, trying to draw action. Tempo is only worth what you can do with it.

Who cares if you Stone Rain your opponent if you don't take advantage of the fact that he is temporarily behind on mana? The classic problem with Stone Rain is that you are trading three mana for the land drop (since you both lose a card), which is generally not a great deal. In addition, your opponent already got to use his land, so you are further behind.



Where Stone Rain becomes good is when you either are gaining enough value out of the other parts of your turn (like the attack phase) to be worth the three mana, or you have enough land destruction so as to keep your opponent in Stage One on a longer-term basis. That is the tricky balance with a card like Stone Rain. There is a very fine line between when it is great and when it is terrible. Sometimes, the opponent drawing a single land can undo an entire game's worth of Stone Rains. Other times, a single Stone Rain can prevent every counter-play that an opponent was going to make.

The premier tempo deck of 2008 Standard was Faeries. Oh, sure, it had card advantage in the form of Spellstutter Sprite, Ancestral Visions, and Jace Beleren... but for the most part, the way

Faeries worked was that it played cards that built an advantage every turn that they sat in play (like Bitterblossom, Ancestral Visions, or Jace Beleren). Then it tried to use all of its other cards to “Time Walk” the opponent.



Every Remove Soul, every Broken Ambitions, every Agony Warp, every Mistbind Clique—they are all just “Time Walks,” or plays that try to prevent the opponent from advancing the game. Faeries is very much a Stage Two deck, as it moves out of Stage One very quickly but tries to ensure that the opponent never reaches Stage Three by throwing delay maneuver after delay maneuver in his way, all the while gaining an advantage every turn.

When you are building a tempo-based deck, the key is to figure out what advantage you are gaining as a result of the tempo you are producing. A Faeries deck gains tokens and cards, but also very much takes advantage of all of the extra attack phases it gets. (When you are beating down with 1/1s and 2/2s, you need all the attack phases you can get!)

You don't need to draw extra cards to play a tempo strategy; you just need to capitalize on something that you are gaining from time. For instance, there was once a five-color black aggro deck called Forgotten Orb that was based on black weenies, red, white, and green utility, and blue for permission like Memory Lapse and Arcane Denial.



The way this deck would work is that it would deploy some early creatures like Fallen Askari and Black Knight, then take a small lead on the board with cards like Man-o'-War, Uktabi Orangutan, and Nekrataal. Then it would use Winter Orb to keep the opponent out of Stage Three, sealing the deal with Memory Lapses and Arcane Denials.

Although Arcane Denial and Memory Lapse don't really stop threats that well in a vacuum, they are very good at wasting your opponent's time.

When you have a Winter Orb in play, this time is worth so very much. When you are attacking with 2/2s, you are getting paid for every turn that your opponent isn't stopping you. Memory Lapse normally gains you only two mana on a Wrath of God—but if there is a Winter Orb in play, it may be worth four turns. And if you have a Black Knight and a Fallen Askari out, those four turns may be worth sixteen damage.

Many people proudly Venser, Shaper Savant a Wild Nacatl and say that they have gained tempo on their opponent. This is usually not the case. Although Venser is great for gaining tempo, it is completely a matter of context. When you are making decisions in game or when building a deck, you must ask yourself how much mana each player is spending.

If you are trying to answer a Spectral Procession, Wrath of God is not actually that good, since it is just a one-for-one trade that loses a mana. This is why Detention Sphere on a Bitterblossom, while often correct, is not an exciting play.

If you are trying to figure out how to beat something in deckbuilding, look to answers that are at least the same cost (or cheaper) than the threat or answers that produce some other benefit, such as drawing a card, giving you a creature, or scrying.

If you are trying to figure whether or not to throw away resources during a game for temporary gain, ask yourself what you are doing with that tempo anyway. It's just like how if you draw seven extra cards and they are all land, they may as well be worthless; if you set your opponent back seven turns and do nothing with it, did it really matter?

This is why good Faeries players mulligan so much. They know that if they don't have a card like



Bitterblossom, Ancestral Vision, Jace, or Mistbind Clique, then what good is all the time they are buying themselves? This is not to say that they mulligan every hand that doesn't have one of these, but their hand has to be pretty freaking good to justify keeping a hand that doesn't do anything.

When you are dealing with tempo, ask yourself what you can do with it to determine its real value. If your opponent is the one with the tempo, ask yourself what they can do with it. If they can't punish you, who cares?

In the case of Five Color vs. Faeries, the tempo they gained was beating us over and over because of the Bitterblossoms and Jace. As a result, we used cards like Broken Ambitions, Volcanic Fallout, Plumeveil, and Terror to regain lost tempo and negate the advantage.

The utility of the tempo is what is that important. If your opponent is beating you with tempo, ask yourself what he is specifically doing that is gaining that tempo. Then address that. Mistbind Clique? Broken Ambitions and Terror. Cheap countermagic? Play uncounterable cards like Volcanic Fallout, or at least instant-speed threats like Plumeveil.

If you are thinking about focusing your strategy on tempo, ask yourself what you are doing with the time.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FIRE

You start the game with twenty life—and unless you do something about it, you won't get any more. That is not just a measure of how long you have to live, though, since you can actually live indefinitely at one life. You just need to not drop to zero.

Your life total is a resource that you start the game with, but do not gain over time (which is, essentially, the opposite of tempo). Many players make the mistake of thinking their life total *matters* beyond the fact that when it is zero, you are dead. It is true that it matters when you are using your life as a resource, but this is exactly the point.

Your life total is just a number. That is not what is important. It *is* a resource. That is *all* it is. The Philosophy of Fire is your “Continue To Be Able to Play the Game” Resource.

Necropotence is the most famous way to trade cards for life, but there are certainly dozens and dozens, maybe a hundred ways to do this outright. In addition to paying life for things (Stomping Ground, Elves of Deep Shadow, Hatred), you can actually use your life during a game as a resource.



For instance, let's say that you have a Supreme Verdict in hand and your opponent has a Daring Skyjek. You could use your Verdict to kill the Skyjek, but instead, you pass, agreeing to take three damage next turn. By waiting a turn, you give them a chance to play another creature so you can get a two-for-one.

You don't always need to be gaining material to have it be worth it to take the extra damage. For instance, let's say that your opponent attacks with a Lifebane Zombie and you have an Ultimate Price and Jace, Architect of Thought in your hand. You would like to kill the Lifebane Zombie to not only prevent three damage this turn, but also to help protect Jace next turn. However, if you use the Ultimate Price when he attacks, a Desecration Demon might come down during the second main phase and threaten to kill Jace outright. If they have the Demon, it's far better to let the Zombie live.



Besides, it's possible they have another creature but don't want to risk walking face-first into a Supreme Verdict. This means we can take the three damage to gain valuable information about how the turn will play out while denying our opponent information about what play we are going to make.

If they follow up with the Demon, you can kill it. If they play nothing else, you can kill the Zombie.

If they did hold a creature back, fearing a Supreme Verdict, you might have prevented three or more damage next turn (making up for the damage this turn), but more importantly, you will cost them three mana next turn. Yes, it is possible they had nothing, in which case, you are just losing three life, however, the games in which you are making that sacrifice are the games where you are already in a pretty good spot—you get to kill their only creature and drop a Jace.

This is not to say that you should always take extra damage for more options. The life points matter... but does it matter as much as the option? Decisions like this are what being good at Magic is all about.

The Philosophy of Fire is not just about trading your life as a resource, whether that trade is for card advantage, tempo, or options. It is also about trading your resources (again, cards, tempo, or options), to reduce your opponent's life total (or even raise yours).

Every time you Lightning Strike your opponent, you are trading a card (and two mana) to knock three life off your opponent. Experienced players realize this is generally not a great play early but are aware that it can become one. The important factor is what the opponent's life total means in this context.

When your opponent is at twenty, a Lightning Strike is hardly threatening to them, as the difference between twenty and seventeen isn't typically going to impact their game.

However, if you Lightning Strike your opponent and they are now at four life, suddenly they can no



longer safely tap out. You could Warleader's Helix them at any moment. This is a big reason why you should often not play out all of your lands late in the game with red decks (unless you have some X-spell or expensive mana-sink you're ramping into)—you want them to think they're in danger, so keep those lands in your hand and that information hidden! But this should also draw your attention to the advantages that having them afraid to tap out gains you.

If your opponent can't afford to tap out (or mostly tap out), that's going to make it much harder for them to play their Ætherling. Every turn they don't cast Ætherling, you have saved eight life. Remember, this equation may be continually shifting. Let's say you block a Mindsparker with a Mutavault. You have traded a card (and a 2/2 is often worth about a card) to prevent three damage.

On the surface, this appears to violate our policy about chump blocking. However, against a red deck, it's like you are “countering” a Lightning Strike. If you just need to untap so that you can cast a Blood Baron of Vizkopa, you might be happy to cash in that Mutavault for a little extra breathing room.

While playing against decks with a fair amount of burn, it is important to figure out how to minimize the amount of damage you are taking. If your opponent attacks with a 7/7 monstrous Polukranos, World Eater and you are considering blocking with a Mutavault, ask yourself this: is that Mutavault ever going to be worth more than seven life to you?

If you have an Ash Zealot, a Burning-Tree Emissary, and a Rakdos Cackler in play and your opponent has a Call of the Conclave token but is only at seven life, ask yourself if the creature in play is worth more to you than three damage (more than a Lightning



Strike). If your opponent has a creature you can't get through, like the Centaur token, the question is whether or not you will ever want to kill it. In this case, why waste a Lightning Strike that you eventually draw on the token when you could lose a creature in combat and use it to deal the last three damage to your opponent?

There is nothing wrong with throwing away creatures and other resources to deal extra damage or to prevent damage, but weaker players do this too much. Decent players avoid it. Good players look for when it is right to do so. The question is, "Is the resource you are trading worth less than the life points are?"

Many players make the mistake of thinking that lifegain is bad since it is generally not as good as rookies think. The truth is that lifegain can be a very powerful weapon against someone who cares about life totals. For instance, if you play Kitchen Finks against a red deck, it is not just two bodies that they have to get through, it is also two Shocks that have been undone by the lifegain. That is a lot of card advantage for a Green/White card that draws you no cards.

Even in a B/W Tokens deck that uses Bitterblossom, we can look at Kitchen Finks as two more attack phases before we die to our Bitterblossom, then two more attack phases if we can kill it. The key is to evaluate what that life matters in a given context.

The Philosophy of Fire extends beyond just your life total, however. Remember, this aspect of Magic strategy relates to resources that you start with, but do not naturally replenish. For instance, the cards in your library are actually a resource. Anyone who has ever used Arc-Slogger can attest to this... but it goes beyond that. If you are trying to win before you run



out of cards, then someone milling you can actually knock several turns off the clock. Poison counters work the same way. At the start of the game, you can handle nine poison counters before dying from the tenth.



Keep in mind that the relative value of these resources can change dramatically with the printing of new cards. For instance, if they start printing cards that let you take on poison counters for some gain, you will care a lot more about your ability to take poison counters.

As Planeswalkers have stormed to the center stage, they have brought an enormous change in Magic with them. These powerful cards are primarily vulnerable to attacking creatures and spells that can deal damage directly. As such, the Philosophy of Fire has taken on a new dimension now that it has overlap with "defense against Planeswalkers."

To understand the Philosophy of Fire, you must be in the habit of continually evaluating what events will take place later in the game that will be influenced by them.

For instance, let's say that you are at seven life and your opponent has three cards. If you let a Warleader's Helix resolve, now you must counter Lightning Strike or die.

On the other hand, if you counter Warleader's Helix, you could in theory let two Lightning Strikes resolve without losing. In a way, countering Warleader's Helix is actually a form of card advantage, as it means you can save two Counterspells that would have had to be used to counter Lightning Strike, at the cost of just one Counterspell (on the Helix).

One of the most effective shortcuts for understanding this aspect of Magic strategy is to get in the habit of asking yourself what life points are going to be worth to you and to your opponent as the game progresses. You will develop an understanding of the relative value of this resource (and remember to view it as just that!).

LESS CAN BE MORE: THE ART OF THE MULLIGAN

There is one more resource you start the game with that you do not have the ability to replenish as the game goes on: the mulligan.

At the beginning of the game, you have the ability to essentially buy a spell that reads “Shuffle your hand into your library and draw that many cards.”

This is obviously a very powerful option, and even though you have one less card (it is like you spent a card playing the above spell) this can actually impact your game by a huge amount. So many people are in the habit of immediately keeping all hands that have both lands and spells.

Taking mulligans is very underrated, and most pros take far more mulligans than amateurs. Everyone knows to shuffle back hands that have zero or one land... but many players don't understand that your mulligan decisions should *really* be based on how the game will play out.

If your hand won't let you do anything in time, shuffle it back. What is the point in being able to cast your spells if they won't give you a chance to win?

Let's say you are playing an aggressive Naya Zoo deck in Modern and your hand is Path to Exile, Path to Exile, Lightning Bolt, Ajani Vengeant, Sacred Foundry, Forest, Arid Mesa. What is the point of this hand? Do you really want to keep a hand that has no action for the first several turns? Well, what if you knew that you were the control player in the matchup? Then you might keep this strange hand, figuring you would kill their first couple of creatures and then get ahead with Ajani Vengeant.

This is unlikely, but the key is that you have to ask yourself where the hand is going. What will the game look like if you keep this hand?

When you look at your opening hand ask yourself first how the game will play out—then ask if mulliganing to six is likely to be better? If you don't have lands to cast your spells, how likely is it that you will draw them?

If you are keeping a one-lander on the draw, you may have two turns to draw a land without missing a beat. If you are playing Zoo, no problem. If you are playing Five-Color, ship.



If you are keeping a hand with Island, Island, Bitterblossom, Mistbind Clique, Mistbind Clique, Smother, Smother, what are the chances you will draw black mana? If you are on the play, this hand is usually pretty bad. There is just too great a chance that you will do nothing. Keep in mind, however, that this hand (like many others) can fluctuate in value a great deal depending on whether you are on the play or draw.

In general, hands that are a little mana light are more keepable on the draw than on the play. On the

other hand, slow hands are more keepable on the play than on the draw. A good shortcut to use here is to evaluate what you need to draw to make the hand playable or good. Then, figure out what are the odds that you will draw what you need by a relevant turn.

For instance, let's look at the previous example. If you have fifteen sources of black mana in your deck and are on the play, you have only around 28 percent chance of drawing a black mana by turn two and a 48 percent chance by turn three. Compare this to a 48 percent chance on turn two and 62 percent by turn three, if you are on the draw. Those are much better odds of "getting there" in a reasonable amount of time.

An important formula to know to help you calculate the probability of drawing a particular card is:

$$100\% - (N/X)$$

Here, N = the number of cards that are *not* your "out," and X is the total number of cards in your deck that are left. For instance, if you have 15 black mana and 53 cards left (seven are in your hand), then you are looking at $100\text{ percent} - (38/53) = 53\text{ percent}$. If you have multiple draws, you actually multiply the odds of missing each time together, then subtract that total from 100.

Why calculate the odds of not hitting and then subtract from 100? That is because it is actually the best way to calculate the odds if you have multiple draws. Many people think that if you have a 20 percent chance to "get there" and three draws, that you have a 60 percent shot of doing it. This is actually not true, though. In reality, you have only a 49 percent chance if your deck had 50 cards in when you calculated the odds.

$$100 - [(40/50) \times (39/49) \times (38/48)] = 49\%$$

I know this math is not for everyone, but it is included because you are going to want to be able to calculate your odds of drawing what you need in order to become a perfect player. Even if math is not your favorite subject, I strongly encourage you to learn this one formula as it is vital for high-level Magic play.

Remember, it is okay to round off to make math easier in your head! For instance, you could just round all of those fractions above to 4/5. It won't be exact, but it will be close enough for the most part. Keep in mind that if your library has very few cards left, each card that you draw that misses greatly increases your odds of hitting the next time.

For instance, if you had a one in five shot of hitting and three draws, *but your library was only five cards*, then the equation would look like this:

$$100 - [(4/5) \times (3/4) \times (2/3)] = 60\%$$

This is a skill that will take time to develop, but it is important to work on. I don't know a single high level pro who doesn't use some amount of probabilities, and this formula is at the center of it. Be patient with yourself learning this one, but make the effort... it *will* pay off. It would be easy for me to glaze over the importance of this equation so as to not scare people off, but it is vital to high level success so you are just going to have to trust me that it is worth learning how to use it during gameplay.

When you are evaluating your mulligan decisions, ask yourself if six is actually likely to be better. What kind of six-card hands would you keep? What would you send back again?

Many people are scared to death of going to five cards, thinking that it is an auto-loss. This is just not true at all. If you can't win with the six cards you have, give yourself a shot no matter how unlikely. Besides, I have won and lost with three- and four-card hands many times, let alone five. Five is actually not nearly as bad as it seems.

If you keep Lightning Bolt, Path to Exile, Temple Garden, Sacred Foundry, Stomping Ground, Windswept Heath, on the play against Faeries, you aren't going to win. If you mulligan, you could just play a Wild Nacatl on turn one and ride it to victory. It is not that unrealistic.

As you look at your opening hand, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish *right now*. Use Back→Front and imagine where you need to be, then imagine what it will take to get there. Use Front→Back thinking and imagine how the game plays out from here. What will it take for you to win? What would the game look like if you took a mulligan? What are your outs? You must stay mentally strong.

Many players tilt when they have to mulligan in important matches. But true champions like Luis Scott-Vargas in the Top 8 of Pro Tour Kyoto and Gabriel Nassif in the Top 8 of World's 2007 took multiple mulligans in key games, staying mentally strong and fighting their way to victory despite having only four or five cards on multiple occasions.

Even if the odds against you are 100-1, you must continue to strive for perfection. Play the perfect way that gives you that 1 percent chance. If you make a habit of striving to always make the right play, you will find yourself winning far more in total—even if you don't hit your long shot that particular time.

Why fear the mulligan? It is a tool. Be calm and rational, having the courage to use it. You must be mindful of your actions here, though: This is not a tool for autopilot use. Ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish and where the game is going.

A master uses the mulligan whenever he thinks that there is a greater percentage chance that a random hand of one fewer card would increase his win percentage. The trick is that this is more often than most realize.

IT TAKES 75, NOT 60...

There is, in fact, yet another resource available to players, although this one is especially different from the rest of the game resources:

This resource is your sideboard.

Sideboarding is a very misunderstood concept in Magic, since so many players fall into the trap of loading up their sideboards with cards like Pyroblast, Tormod's Crypt, Kataki, War's Wage, and Kitchen Finks without any regards to whether this is the type of effect they are looking for. There is no question that those are all great sideboard cards, the question is whether they are the optimal way for the deck in question to do what it needs to do.

Your sideboard is an opportunity to adjust your strategy during a match for a variety of reasons. The most basic of these is to play a card that is good against a specific color/strategy/deck, such as Pyroblast or Tormod's Crypt. While these are powerful options and are often right, there are other types of cards that should be considered and there are more important factors than just adding good hate cards.

For instance, your sideboard offers you a chance to remove all of the “dead” cards in your deck. Your opponent is playing a creatureless combo deck? It sure would be nice to take out all of your Supreme Verdicts and Path to Exiles. Your opponent is playing a Mono-Red Burn deck? Sower of Temptation and Threads of Disloyalty might not cut it. Your opponent is a White Weenie swarm deck? Maybe this is not the matchup for Blood Moon.

When constructing your sideboard, it is vital that you take into consideration how many dead cards



you have in each of your key matchups as well as how relevant this is. It is not vital to have twelve cards to bring in against a creatureless deck—but it is worth *something*, so if you are deciding between Putrefy and Smother in the sideboard, maybe the Putrefy has a little extra value in a deck with tons of creature elimination since you could bring it in when your creature elimination is dead.

In addition to trying to minimize dead cards, you also want to try to affect relevant matchups efficiently. For instance, if you are playing U/W Control in Modern, there are a variety of ways that you can gain massive percentage points against red decks. Every card like Kitchen Finks and Timely Reinforcements you put in is just huge, and cards like Celestial Purge and Runed Halo, and the like can add up fast.



You can select the most narrow, devastating hosers—cards like Leyline of the Void, Shatterstorm, Cranial Extraction, and so on—but these cards are much more instruments of precision. If you have a specific task you are trying to accomplish, a narrow tool may be ideal. However, often the field will be much more wide-open. In those cases, you will want to have some versatile cards in your sideboard

that still give you options when you play against an opponent who has a deck you did not anticipate.



Determine what your deck needs to do (Top-Down thinking) and how much you can afford to take out of your deck to do it. There are some decks that require the vast majority of the cards in the deck in order to function. Sometimes, sideboarding out eight cards can destroy the entire core of the deck. Other decks are highly customizable and it is very realistic to sideboard out fifteen.

Sideboard cards that have inherent synergy with your primary game plan are generally much more desirable than sideboard cards that just try to give the opponent problems because of their strategy. For instance, Thalia, Guardian of Thraben, Gaddock Teeg, Ethersworn Canonist, Pyrostatic Pillar, Meddling Mage, and Qasali Pridemage have all been popular sideboard cards in Zoo decks. Why? Because in addition to the powerful sideboard tool you are buying, you also get a body that helps continue the beats, which is your primary plan.

Conversely, a Planeswalker deck is not going to want to sideboard in *Runed Halo* since it can't protect Planeswalkers. And sideboarding in *Ethersworn*

Canonist to stop an Elf Combo deck is foolish if your primary way of interacting with Elves is sweeping the board with Firespouts.

(Take it from me. I sideboarded in Ethersworn Canonist against Elves at Pro Tour Berlin; I did okay, but I sure wish I had devised a sideboard strategy that had more synergy with my core strategy.)

There are some people who just jump to starting sideboards with four copies of Leyline of the Void in many formats. Is Leyline really what you want? I mean, it is one of the best anti-graveyard card, sure, but if your deck is full of cheap library manipulation and you just need to buy yourself a couple of turns, maybe Tormod's Crypt is what you want.

Another mistake people make is sideboarding in ten cards for a matchup when they only have five to take out. Let's say that your matchup against Faeries is not that good, but you only have five cards that are actually bad against them and want to bring in ten.

What do you do? Well, first of all, don't get in this position in a tournament!

But if your matchup against Faeries *is* so bad that you want to bring in ten cards yet only have five you want to take out, perhaps there are places in the maindeck where you can cut cards that are decent (but not great) against Faeries. Then you can replace them with cards that are more effective in their appropriate matchups, with the plan of sideboarding them out against Faeries.

For instance, in Kyoto, Nassif had two Terrors in his deck, but had so much to sideboard in that he actually was fine taking a Terror out after sideboarding against Faeries. That was strange because half the reason the Terror was there in the first place was to help against Faeries.



Because of this, he replaced the second Terror with a Celestial Purge to give him even better percentages against Figure of Destiny (the other reason to play Terror) by having a card that is also good against Ajani Vengeant and Demigod of Revenge.

Celestial Purge gave him better percentages against B/W (destroying Tidehollow Sculler) and Blightning Aggro, but lost a little of his percentages against Faeries. This didn't matter much, though, since he was sideboarding it out anyway.

If you can only afford to take out five cards, you don't need ten cards to bring in. Just pick the cards that are most effective for doing what you need done. Need sweepers? Pick the sweepers that do what you need. Need to beat Affinity? Pick the card (or cards) that punish them the most.

It is not enough to just sideboard against what your opponent's strategy is. You must also consider what their sideboard plan will be. What would make sense if you were them? So many people have been ambushed with the transformational sideboard where a creatureless deck sideboards in creatures that it is not even funny. Don't get caught with your pants down. Be aware of what your opponent may be up to.

In addition to sideboarding the right number of cards in each matchup and selecting the most effective cards for doing what you need, there are some other tips we are going to cover.

First of all, don't let your opponent know how many cards you are going to sideboard in. A good way to do this is to shuffle your entire sideboard into your deck, then pick out fifteen cards to not play. If you are short on time, this may not be an option—

and sometimes you may *want* them to know—but generally this is information that they can use against you.

Even if you don't have a single card to board in, don't let them know this. This is especially true in Limited, where people often have nothing to sideboard. I always keep extra land in my sideboard so my opponent can see me sideboard out a card and sideboard in a card even when I have nothing. In reality, I am sideboarding out an Island and sideboarding a different Island in.

Watch your opponent as they sideboard. How many cards are they bringing in? Watch their face, too. Be careful if you think they may be tricking you, but for the most part, you can just watch and an opponent will show you how many cards they are bringing in and taking out. This information can be extra important when you are deciding what to play around later in the game.

Did they only sideboard in two cards and you see a Guttural Response? You probably don't need to play around Boil, then. Did they take a long time to sideboard? Maybe they are not sure of their plan against you or they are not properly prepared for this matchup. If they were ready immediately and knew the exact changes to make, perhaps they have a definite plan that they have practiced many times before.

This is especially relevant if you are trying to figure out if they are the type of person who would have a particular devastating sideboard card against you. Someone who sideboards quickly, efficiently, and with purpose is much more likely to have the Boil, Kataki, and or Leyline in their deck.

When you sideboard, keep the core of your deck intact unless you specifically plan on transforming. If you are playing an Elf combo deck and you sideboard in three Chokes, three Vexing Shushers, two Viridian Shamans, and three Thoughtseizes, what are the odds you are actually even going to be able to go off?

If you finish your sideboarding and are shuffling as you wait for your opponent, watch their face as they pull cards in and out of their deck. Try to imagine what they are thinking as they do this. You would be amazed at how much information you can glean from people who can't help but think out loud with their eyes, mouth, and more.

Remember to keep in mind if you are going to be on the play or draw. There have been many times where I sideboard out a land when I am on the draw, or I sideboard in cards that are only really good on the play. For instance, I really like Stifle against Zoo when I am on the play with Faeries, but I don't like it that much on the draw.

When building a new deck, the sideboard should be kept in mind throughout—but I have found it useful to focus on the maindeck most of the time, at least until you have determined what basic deck you are going to play in this format. There are going to be decks that rely heavily on the sideboard, and you should test those decks sideboarded more often... but generally, it is more important to understand the basic workings of your deck. Don't jump to sideboarding until you know for sure what you are doing with the basic deck.

Most of the time that I make new decks, I don't even sketch out a sideboard—I just try the ideas to see if they're even remotely viable. The majority fail before they ever get past the first test.

Why did I need a sideboard for that? This is not a license to skip testing sideboarded games, however. In fact, most tournament players make the mistake of not playing nearly enough sideboarded games in testing to be really prepared.

If you try a concept and it seems to be working, sideboarding becomes particularly relevant when you are dealing with extremely punishing cards, whether it is Katakai in your deck or against it. If you are playing an extremely narrow deck, like Dredge or Affinity, it is actually better to test a lot more games sideboarded, as your Game Ones are often much more mechanical.

When I talk about ignoring the sideboard initially, I am talking about when you are creating a new deck for a new format. Even then, you cannot take the sideboard totally out of the discussion. For instance, when Michael Jacob and I discussed Alara Block Constructed, it was never far from our minds that players would have access to Relic of Progenitus, Thought Hemorrhage, and Anathemancer as well as tons of artifact removal.

The most important thing I can tell you with regards to sideboarding is: when in doubt, keep your core strategy the same if your core strategy is good in this particular matchup. And if your core strategy can't beat your opponent, *then* you should do things to turn the matchup on its head. Be unpredictable.

Practice and think about sideboarding a lot. People who are in the habit of writing decklists that end with "23 land" instead of a specific manabase generally are not as proficient at building manabases as people who continually practice. Sideboarding is the same way. Practice building sideboards and don't be afraid to template. Some people will have a manabase that you can borrow



from; other people will have a sideboard that you can use. Take advantage of this knowledge.

Sideboarding affects about 60 percent of your matches, and sometimes each card can have a huge impact. Keep this side of the game in mind and use the four perspectives when building your sideboard.

When you think about a match, think about what is there, then what is not. Imagine where you want to be and work your way back to the start. Then picture how your opponent will respond and where things will go from there.

ALL YOUR MANABASE ARE BELONG TO US

Developing a manabase for a deck is a very important skill set, and one that many players seem to neglect cultivating. If you want to be a versatile and complete player, you are going to want to work on this area of your game and gradually develop a better understanding of it over time. There is no magic formula that I can tell you that will teach you how to build the perfect manabase, as it really is a bit of an art that takes time to master.

The most important thing I can tell you with regards to developing manabases is to learn to make the most of **templating**. Templating is when you use something that already exists as the model for what you are making. For instance, you are making a new Red Deck Wins? It is very useful to check out what other similar decks used as a manabase.



If you are splashing Warleader's Helix and Chained to the Rocks, look at other red/x aggro decks with light splashes and see how many lands they used to make their splashes work.

You may have a totally different U/W/R Control deck than the one that won the last Modern Pro Tour, but it can still be useful to use that manabase as a template for your own. Of course, you will have to change it to meet your specific deck's needs, but this is a much better starting point than just pulling numbers out of thin air.

How good your mana can (and should) be is mostly a function of the mana fixing available in a format. Generally, in aggro decks, I like to have at least eighteen to nineteen sources of my primary color, assuming I need to have at least two mana of that color. If you only need one of each color, thirteen to sixteen sources can often be enough.

You can't just look at the lands that produce each color, however. For instance, Rampant Growth helps produce red or black mana, but it shouldn't be counted as green since it takes green mana to cast it. You also need to keep in mind how many lands do the things you need at the right time.

For instance, Elvish Mystic is much better on turn one than any other turn. How many ways do you have to play it on turn one? If you want to play Dreadbore on turn two, how many lands do you have that come into play tapped? Could you consistently play a land on turn two and still cast Dreadbore?

Control decks are harder to lump into a general rule, and templating is even more important. The main thing to remember, however, is *do not cheat on land*. This means to play the amount of land you are supposed to play, given what you are asking of your deck. This is not a hard-and-fast rule, but as a general guideline, skimping on land is a huge hidden source of lost percentage points.

It is generally better to examine other similar decks people are winning with to determine how many lands to play, but as a guideline I find that many aggro decks that only need one or two lands can get away with 20-21 lands; if the curve has a number of plays at three, maybe a few at four, it is generally better to play 23 or 24. If the deck is more midrange or control, perhaps with a curve up to four- and five-drops, then 25-26 is recommended. Some control decks need even more mana, playing 26-27 lands.

If you have other sources of non-land mana in your deck (like Mind Stone, Rampant Growth, or Azorius Signet) they contribute towards your mana, but are not always worth as much as a land.



A good rule of thumb here is to count them as being worth half of a land... but make sure that you still play a minimum of 23-24 land if your accelerators cost two, and 21-22 land if your accelerators cost one. Also, Birds of Paradise, Elvish Mystic, and other creature-based acceleration should probably be counted at 1/4, instead of 1/2, because they are fragile and tend to be unreliable as mana sources.

Combo decks can have totally bizarre manabases, ranging from anywhere between zero lands and

42 lands. The important thing is to view them from the perspective of, "How much land do you need to draw in order for the deck to operate?"

Many Vintage combo decks use between 10-14 land because a single land is often plenty, and even that is not really vital. Many combo decks in Modern's history have used 16-18 land, since this is a pretty good number for someone who wants to draw at least one land, preferring two, without wanting to get flooded. On the other hand, if your combo deck needs to play a land every turn in each of the first four turns of the game, then you need a manabase that is more like a midrange or control deck's.

Cards like Ponder can help fix your mana (when they're not banned), and as a general rule, cheap cantrips like this can be looked at as being worth between 50 percent and 100 percent of your mana ratio. For instance, if you have 24 lands in a 60-card deck, that is 40 percent land. If you add a Ponder, you could say it increases your land count by between 20 percent and 40 percent of a land. In other words, adding four Ponders usually means you can cut a land.

When developing your skills as a crafter of manabases, start by looking at all of the winning decklists you can. Examine every deck played in a tournament by every deckbuilder you have great respect for, then look at every tournament-winning deck; try to find any patterns. Look to see what similarities their manabases have. Look to see what is there.

Then look at what lands they *don't* use. What sort of mana fixing is not popular? What seems to be missing from the picture?

From there, it can be useful to take a successful template and reverse-engineer the numbers (Back→Front). Figure out how the deck's creator arrived at the manabase they did. What are the factors that determine their manabase: Runed Halo on turn two? Cruel Ultimatum on turn seven? Cryptic Command on turn four? Doran on turn three? What made them get to where they are at?

Once you have a better understanding of why they made the choices they did, look at your proposed manabase and imagine what the games will play out like (Front→Back). You are using Flooded Grove in a deck with Jund Charm and Esper Charm? Maybe there is a problem there. A potential problem is not a dealbreaker, but it is something to think about.



Studying the manabases of others is useful for all tournament players at all levels, but it is especially important for aspiring deckbuilders. More than one good idea has never seen the light of day thanks to a faulty manabase skewing the testing, and more than one deck did not enjoy the success it could have thanks to a series of bad mana draws. By using the four perspectives as you study the manabases of others, you can train yourself on an intuitive level to understand what works.

KNOWING HOW MANY OF EACH CARD TO USE

Something a lot of players struggle with is deciding how many copies of a card to put into their deck. It is not too hard to see that playing four is often right, as you will often be in a situation where the card is one of your better cards and you want as many copies of it as possible.

The next level of theory people come to realize is that with a single copy of a card, you give yourself access to some kind of effect somewhere in your deck while minimizing your chances of drawing it against everyone you don't want it against. For instance, if you have a Tormod's Crypt for your Trinket Mage, a Squee, Goblin Nabob for your Survival of the Fittest, a Sundering Titan for your Tinker, or a Tendrils of Agony to eventually find with a combo deck's tutors.

Sounds simple enough, but now here is where it gets tricky.

When do you play two copies of a card?

What about three?

This is one area where I learned a lot from Adrian Sullivan. While I did not always agree with his choices of numbers for cards in a deck, I eventually came to realize that he was not the pure contrarian he appeared. There was actually sound reasoning behind the often seemingly-eccentric card numbers.

The No. 1 reason that you'd run twos and threes is to manipulate the odds that you'll draw a card. Not every card is something you just want as many of as you can get. This is where the concept of diminishing returns comes in. Some cards get better the more

of them you play, like Accumulated Knowledge, Lava Spike, and Muscle Sliver. However, other cards get worse the more of them you play.

Technically, every card sees diminishing returns at some point (ok, maybe not Chancellor of the Dross), but generally if this point is much greater than four it is not particularly important other than dealing with trying to produce the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth copies of cards by using a weaker version in addition to the one you really want.

Take a card like Cruel Ultimatum, for instance. This card is clearly very powerful and can be game-winning—however, this doesn't mean you just stick four in your deck, even if your mana can support it. In fact, most Cruel Ultimatum decks that have been successful use two or three Cruel Ultimatums, since you actually get hugely diminishing returns on additional Cruel Ultimatums.

You will generally only have to cast Cruel Ultimatum once in order to win the game; this makes the second and third copy you draw worth less than the first. Looking at it the other way, we see that drawing the second Cruel Ultimatum actually hurts you even more than the first when you are getting beaten down and only have a couple land on the battlefield.

Here, the question becomes this: at what point is the increased harm from drawing Cruels early too costly when compared to the ever-decreasing value of drawing more Cruels? You may think that this is just a function of how expensive Cruel Ultimatum is, but it's not really about that.

Look at Terminate, a fantastic tournament-staple creature kill card. As good as it is, the more Terminates you play, the less they are each worth.



Adding a fourth Terminate actually only increases your chances of drawing one by turn three by 23 percent, whereas adding the first Oblivion Ring gives you a chance to ever draw it up from 0 percent.

This is not to say that your deck should be all singletons, but rather that attention needs to be paid to the relative value of each copy of each card. Often, particularly in aggressive decks, the point where additional copies of a card are not worth it is above four. For instance we would clearly play five Arcbound Ravagers in our Affinity deck, right? However, nothing is sacred. Sometimes you will see control decks with three Tarmogoyfs or three Baneslayer Angels. How can this be correct if those are the best creatures or even the best cards?

Diminishing returns.

The first Baneslayer in your deck adds a new element to your game, a new option. Add a second one and it adds less. Some amount of the time you will have two Baneslayers and the second won't impact the outcome of the game, though when you are low on mana, the second one could hurt you. Generally, each additional copy of a card is worth slightly less, and if we only want three victory conditions, there is no reason we need four Baneslayers for them to be effective.

Another common reason to play the twos and threes is to break the rule of four. Basically, sometimes you want to run five, six, or even seven copies of a card. One way to accomplish this is by running some other version of the same cards. Kathari Remnant is not as strong as Bloodbraid Elf, but we really wanted to play at least six Bloodbraid Elves in Honolulu—so much so that we played two Kathari Remnants. It wasn't that we were worried about drawing too many of it, nor did we need to

draw it; we just wanted six cascade spells at the four-spot and it was the next-best one.

Your deck will often have requirements that will be at odds with just playing a list of four copies of the nine best cards. Imagine that you've determined that you have a mana curve that wants fourteen creatures that cost one mana. If this is true, and it may well be, you are not going to be able to play four of each, generally meaning you'll need three cards that are four-ofs (presumably the best ones) and two copies of the weakest one.

Obviously another classic reason people run three copies of a card is to stick the fourth in their sideboard to access with Cunning Wish, Burning Wish, or Living Wish. Still, this is really just sort of the same principle as the one-ofs, just applied slightly differently.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that if your deck has a lot of library manipulation, whether it is Divination or Brainstorm, you will see more cards over the course of a game. This means two things. First you need fewer copies of cards to find them—particularly if you don't want to draw a bunch of them. Second, decks with a lot of library manipulation tend to not have room for four copies of every type of card, since so many of their cards just manipulate their library or make mana.

If you want to be able to sweep the board, have multiple types of spot elimination, creatures to win with, game-breaking spells, Planeswalkers, card draw, and permission, you are going to run out of room if you use all four-ofs. This is why so many control decks end up playing twos and threes, just like the Five-Color Control decks we have talked so much about.

To give a glimpse into some of the reasoning that goes on when deciding on the numbers of each card, I will break down the Four-Color Control deck I played at the 2009 State Championships. While this list is outdated, the thought process revealed is timeless.

4 LIGHTNING BOLT

Lightning Bolt is cheap, efficient removal. The added versatility of being an instant, hitting red haste creatures, hitting Planeswalkers and combining with other direct damage to form a back-up victory condition had me wanting to max out on Bolts rather than play something like Deathmark. I needed to recoup lost tempo from lands that enter the battlefield tapped, so having one-mana removal is important—and Bolt is just a stronger card than almost all of my cards. Though I am not sure I would play five, four was clearly better than three.

3 EARTHQUAKE

I used three because I really like drawing a sweeper against some decks and I can usually find a use for at least one Earthquake against most decks. Drawing two or three Earthquakes can potentially be very bad in some matchups, though. In control decks, three is a very common number for effects like this, as experience has shown it to balance the tension between really wanting it against Boros and Eldrazi Green, but not being able to handle drawing two against Jund and aggressive red decks.

When playing control decks that draw a lot of cards and dedicate most of their deck to drawing cards and adding mana, you begin to lower the numbers of all the types of effects. The idea is that rather than playing four of each answer, you play three—and all the extra space is spent on draw-twos or other library manipulation. Then you end up with a



better chance of drawing the answer despite playing fewer copies since you will be looking at more cards. (This also has the practical offset of leading to some card advantage which you sorely need to offset the potential to draw the wrong answers *and* having so many lands to draw in your deck.)

It is not that card advantage wins games—it is that it gives you more options that you need in order to make up for having some bad options, for needing the right options, and for having fewer options to begin with.

2 TERMINATE

I used two Terminates because I wanted nine cheap answers to single-creature threats. This was based on long experience with decks like this. Nine most closely approaches the ideal balance between “I *really* want to draw one against almost everyone” and “I can’t afford to draw three against some people” and “I can use Earthquake, Flashfreeze, and Ajani Vengeant to take pressure off of these slots.”

I should add that I think that Wall of Denial is better than Terminate. The other reason I selected two Terminates and three Wall of Denials instead of one and four is partly due to mana curve considerations—but mostly due to the fact that Terminate can solve some problems that Wall of Denial cannot, such as Vampire Nighthawk, World Queller, or an opponent’s Dauntless Escort blanking the Earthquake in my hand. Creatures like World Queller make me want to be able to find a Terminate *at some point*—and with all my draw-twos, it is reasonable to think that I will find that Terminate *eventually*.

The second Terminate increases the chances seeing one in the first twenty cards by 70 percent (compared to a singleton Terminate), whereas the



fourth Wall of Denial only increases my chances of having a turn-three Wall against Sprouting Thrinax or Ball Lightning by 23 percent.

3 FLASHFREEZE, 1 DOUBLE NEGATIVE

Flashfreeze was clearly the best maindeck counterspell in those days, but I opted for a single Double Negative instead of the fourth maindeck Flashfreeze in my “cheap counterspell” slot for a few reasons.

First of all, once again there was the diminishing returns issue, as drawing more Flashfreezes makes them worth slightly less. Second of all, this decreased the odds of drawing two against non-R/G decks.

Finally, drawing a Double Negative and a Flashfreeze is generally a little better than just drawing two Flashfreezes, and drawing two Flashfreezes is usually fine; however, I really didn't want to draw two Double Negatives and no Flashfreezes. When I put the Double Negative in my fourth cheap counterspell slot, I gave myself chances to draw one without ever getting “screwed” with two.

In addition, it wasn't just that the Double Negative was the fourth *cheap* counter—it was also doing double duty as the fourth *hard* counter (since as you'll see in a moment, this deck also runs Traumatic Visions). I determined that four counters that could hit non-red-or-green cards was the minimum I wanted to play.

Dropping to three hard counters would decrease the chances of drawing a hard counter by turn five by 24 percent—a drop I was not willing to accept. Increasing this to five would offer an increase of 14 percent, but I was not willing to accept the associated increase in drawing too much



countermagic... nor did I have the slots, as I had to shave numbers across the board to make room for everything I wanted to play.

It should also be noted that I could have helped both of these aspects by playing more Double Negatives... But I opted not to do that because I thought Double Negative was a far weaker card than either Flashfreeze or Traumatic Visions. I was only playing the one as a concession to space restrictions as well as the non-zero value of having access to one.

In other words, when your opponent knows you do not have Double Negative, they can play more liberally—whereas the potential threat of it makes it more difficult to play against you.

4 ESPER CHARM, 2 DIVINATION

Esper Charm was one of the absolute best cards in the deck. I played four because that was the limit, and I would play more if I could... And in fact, I played two Divinations because I wanted more Esper Charms so badly I was willing to settle for a couple of Divinations to circumvent the rule of four, as we discussed above.

So why six? This is mostly the result of lots of playtesting, as I experimented with as few as four and as many as nine!

3 WALL OF DENIAL

I initially used four, as I did the month before in Rome. It was the best creature removal against Jund, Mono-Red, and a number of others, *plus* it was great against Boros, and at least good against most people.

Why not four, then?



Wall of Denial was another case of diminishing returns, as every Wall beyond the first is actually not that good most of the time. My mana curve was definitely a consideration as well—but basically, I wanted to play 3.3 Walls! I decided after much experimentation that three was better than four at approximating 3.3 copies.

2 AJANI VENGEANT

I played three in Rome the month before, and they had been nothing but good for me. But something had to give, as I only had sixty slots.

I could definitely imagine more being correct, but I opted for only two because there is more at play than just the diminishing returns of drawing two Ajanis (which can't be on the board at the same time). In this deck, I had so much power at the top of my curve that I wanted to err on the side of more cheap cards in general. So if it comes down to the fourth Bolt or the third Ajani, then I have to go with the Bolt.

Now you may ask why not cut the Nicol Bolas (which we will discuss in a minute) for a third Ajani? That is a perfectly valid question, and it may even have been the correct call. However, after a lot of playtesting I determined that I wanted a powerful way to take over the game besides just Cruel Ultimatum—especially since occasionally I will end up in games that go so long that Cruel doesn't actually ensure my victory. Basically, I just thought I needed a way to go even *bigger*—and for that, I preferred Nicol Bolas, Planeswalker to Obelisk of Alara.

While Ajani works well with Walls and is just a great card, it is a sorcery-speed four-drop, so there was also some tension there.



3 TRAUMATIC VISIONS

I had four in Rome, but it was just a bit slow and I wasn't using the second Traumatic Visions I drew as a Counterspell enough to be worth it. In addition, I was primarily using the Visions to fix my mana—and since I had two more Divinations than I did at Worlds, I believed that the mana-fixing from them would be enough to make up for the lack of a fourth Visions (especially since I upped the Rupture Spire count this time around to help draw the right colors).

The downside to playing more Rupture Spires and Divinations was that I had to make up for the lost tempo; hence, my adding Terminates where I previously had a Oblivion Ring and a Wall of Denial, and cutting a Visions to help make room for a fourth cheap counter. (I had only played three at Worlds.)

3 SPHINX OF LOST TRUTHS

At Worlds, I played only one alongside two copies of Sphinx of Jwar Isle. I resisted for a long time, but Michael Jacob continually pointed out that Sphinx of Lost Truths was helping more consistently while Sphinx of Jwar Isle was usually only helping more against Jund (although that was the most common matchup).

While they did get boarded out a lot, they had added value in Game One, since they let you filter away the wrong answers and they make your Cruels way better.

3 CRUEL ULTIMATUM, 1 NICOL BOLAS

I only had two Cruel Ultimatums at Worlds and wanted a third... so I added it. I wanted to draw it so badly that I would have been willing to play a fourth (but not a fifth), even risking drawing two. However, I opted for Nicol Bolas instead of the fourth Ultimatum as I thought of the times where Nicol Bolas would offer me an avenue of gaining



an advantage that I would not normally have had. Bolas would be useful in offering me outs against an Eldrazi Monument, Emeria, the Sky Ruin, or even against Thought Hemorrhage... And that was worth the small decrease in chances of having a Cruel Ultimatum on turn seven when I needed it.

3 ISLAND, 3 SWAMP, 2 MOUNTAIN, 1 PLAINS

First of all, I thought it was important with my Traumatic Visions and fetchlands to have enough basics to cast Cruel Ultimatum.

Next, I wanted a Plains so my Traumatic Visions could find white mana. But since obviously it doesn't help me to cast Cruel Ultimatum, I opted for only one Plains despite the Baneslayer Angels in the board.

Finally, I added the third Island from a combination of wanting one more land that a) entered the battlefield untapped, b) untapped my Glacial Fortress, c) gave me more blue to activate Traumatic Visions, d) gave me more than just enough blue for Cruel later in the game, and e) gave me enough lands to make sure my Scalding Tarn always hit.

4 ARCANESANCTUM, 4 CRUMBLING NECROPOLIS

I found that the tri-lands were incredibly vital to making this manabase work. I didn't have much to do on turn one anyway. While a single tri-land went a long way towards making my mana work, a second one usually ensured that I was golden.

The tension is obviously that drawing all tapped lands is awful, but I tried to make up for this with tempo plays like Bolt and Terminate. Also, I have found it much worse to not be able to cast my spells than to always be a turn behind.



3 RUPTURE SPIRE

Playing three Rupture Spires was flirting with danger, as they were so slow, but I really didn't want to be stuck not able to cast my spells. As long as I only drew one, I was usually pretty happy to see them—and I didn't mind tapping out turn two, since I could recover from Sprouting Thrinax by casting Wall of Denial and I could fight Blightning with Divination.

Sometimes I held up the Flashfreeze on turn two rather than play the Spire, but usually when they had no creatures yet (which is to say they had no Leech and were on the draw).

I only used three since I really like drawing one, but the drop in relative value of the second one I draw is horrible. This is a good example of how different cards have very different rates of diminishing returns.

3 SCALDING TARN

This land was totally awesome. I wouldn't have minded having a fourth except that in testing I often ran out of Islands and Mountains to fetch!

In addition, there was a small amount of tension between Scalding Tarn and Esper Charm, since you often got red early, which made Esper Charm more difficult. However, you could usually plan around this, so I would have played a fourth copy if only I didn't run out of targets so often.

2 GLACIAL FORTRESS

This was a nice way to get white mana without messing up Cruel Ultimatum. I didn't play more because there were so many Islands already that it sucked to get stuck with six land in play where three were Islands + Glacial Fortresses, since the third might as well have been a Plains as far as casting Cruel Ultimatum was concerned.



I chose two Glacial Fortresses since I found that I wanted nineteen to twenty lands that helped with red and black for Cruel Ultimatum. The first Glacial Fortress is decent, though not a superstar, and the second one is kind of below average sometimes, thus I kept it down to two copies.

1 EXOTIC ORCHARD

This was a little bit of greed, and a little bit of the fact that I wanted another red source and thought one Exotic Orchard would be better than the Arid Mesa I played at Worlds. It was red most of the time, and against people who were not red, I Traumatic Visioned for a Mountain more often.

It would have been incredibly bad to draw two Exotic Orchards against Mono-White or Mono-Green, and I was not willing to risk it. Also, it was actually bad to draw two against a lot of people since it would often be just red or just black or another Glacial Fortress, making casting Cruel Ultimatum off it awkward. Still, it was usually at least one of my colors, often two, and it did come into play untapped, so I gave it the nod.



SIDEBOARD:

An important part of my strategy for this deck was adjusting my kill cards to be the ideal ones to get the job done.

Sphinx of Lost Truths was more of a Game One card, since it filters the wrong answers; however, the guy you want after sideboarding varies a lot depending on the matchup.

2 BANESLAYER ANGEL

Baneslayer Angel was good against creature decks and graveyard-based combo decks... plus, it was just



better after sideboarding since they always have less removal. I played two instead of four, since it makes their removal worse but with four, they can just keep all their removal in without fear of it being dead.

Baneslayer was so good that I could totally imagine playing more, but I did not think it was worth the space since I rarely want more than three or four creatures total—and usually I want Bloodwitches, Sphinx of Jwar Isles, or Sphinx of Lost Truths as well. Also, having different names was important to fight Thought Hemorrhage.

2 MALAKIR BLOODWITCH, 1 SPHINX OF JWAR ISLE

Bloodwitch was for every non-Boros white deck and some Boros decks. Sphinx of Jwar Isle was mostly for Jund decks, though it was randomly good against some reactive decks of the era. I only used one copy since it had a lot fewer applications than the other two. I also found that I want to have only three to four creatures at a time, so this configuration lets me optimize the mixture.

1 FLASHFREEZE, 1 ESSENCE SCATTER, 3 NEGATE, 1 HINDERING LIGHT

Just as it was important to adjust my creatures after boarding, it was important to adjust my countermagic. Not everyone was playing red or green, and not everyone was totally reliant on their creatures.

This mixture gives me the greatest chance to have the answers that I want in any given matchup while having a slant towards Negate, as I need to be able to take out creature removal against people who don't use many (or any).

Negate was the obvious card to put in against such decks, thus it earned the most slots in my sideboard.



I used the fourth Flashfreeze because using four of the best card was the legal limit. I used Essence Scatter and Hinderling Light over the fourth Negate since I wanted to have a variety of options, making it harder for opponents to play against me—and because I thought there were more situations where the value of the first Essence Scatter or Hinderling Light would be worth more than the diminished value of a fourth Negate.

For instance, against Jund, the threat of Hinderling Light was a stronger one than Negate, and I wouldn't have played four Negate against them anyway.

In addition, I might have faced a Ranger of Eos deck, gaining Essence Scatter a lot of value. When I played against someone where I wanted the fourth Negate, I wouldn't have missed it as much as I would miss having a second cheap counterspell that could counter Ranger. I didn't play Double Negative here because it was not powerful enough—it was mediocre against most opponents rather than especially good in a few key matchups.

1 THOUGHT HEMORRHAGE, 1 PITHING NEEDLE

High-powered answers to very specialized situations. These do, however, have strong diminishing returns, since a second copy will basically do nothing. Since I didn't have room to play as many of everything as I would have liked, I played one of each to get the most value out of each slot as one copy is way more than zero. Using one of each increased the chances of seeing one when I wanted it to 50 percent each after seeing half of my deck, whereas if I had used two of one but zero of the other I would have had a 75 percent chance of drawing one but *no* chance of drawing the other.

In addition, I wanted at least two great cards to bring in against graveyard combo decks but could



not justify Relic of Progenitus as the graveyard decks were just not popular enough. Both of these cards hosed Extractor Demon, so that gave me two slots for that role.

It was more important to have the first Pithing Needle against Elspeth or Luminarch Ascension than the second Hemorrhage against control or Magical Christmas Land decks. Likewise, the first Thought Hemorrhage was more important than the second Pithing Needle as the second copy of a card only increased your odds of seeing it by half as much as adding the first copy of the card. Balancing these tensions against each other is the real reason you see masters like Gabriel Nassif play so many one-ofs in sideboards.

1 OBLIVION RING, 1 DEATHMARK

These were minor ways to tweak the control elements. The main similarity was that they both killed fat creatures that were not particularly vulnerable to Lightning Bolt, which was critical since my maindeck relied heavily on Bolt. Oblivion Ring also had the whole “one copy is way more than zero” factor for dealing with things like Howling Mine or Eldrazi Monument.

Deathmark, on the other hand, was the ideal removal spell for tuning my deck against a lot of the field. The only reason I didn't play more was simply because it would have meant cutting a Bolt for a Deathmark which doesn't have quite enough value to justify the use of the space. The first Deathmark was excellent because in many matchups I actually wanted to increase the quantity of removal in my deck by one.



YOUR ROLE IN A GAME: WHO'S THE BEATDOWN?

One of the most important questions players are forced to answer during a game of Magic is, “What is my role?” Though most never realize they are doing so, both players inevitably answer this question through their actions. Yet the unfortunate thing for many players is that they misassign the role of beatdown player (or control player) to themselves when they should actually be acting as the other.

It is not about control, combo, and midrange.
It is about *understanding your role in a given game or matchup*.

It doesn't matter if you are attacking with Tattermunge Maniac, burning your opponent's face, countering all his spells, or assembling a three-card combo that will win the game for you. In all of these circumstances, you are actually either playing beatdown or control.

The more aggressive your deck is, the more it “wants to be the beatdown”—which is to say, it needs to be more focused on Stage One (faster). Conversely, the more defensive or inevitable your deck is, the more it “wants to be control,” which means it needs to be focused more on achieving Stage Three (bigger). Examining where your deck lies in relation to the deck you are facing can help uncover subtleties in strategy that you may want to pursue.

In general, the bigger deck wants to act as the control deck in any given matchup. Obviously, this means the faster deck is the beatdown—though there are exceptions to this, driven by peculiarities in matchups caused by unintended card interactions or secondary abilities of cards included for some other purpose.

For example, some Zoo decks (beatdown) are actually the control deck against Storm (a combo deck), because of cards like Thalia, Guardian of Thraben, Gaddock Teeg, and Ethersworn Canonist disrupting the Storm player. In general, however, the bigger deck functions as the control deck, and the faster deck functions as a beatdown deck, even if it doesn't have a single creature.

What does it mean to be bigger? Well, the “biggest” strategy is really a question of what is the biggest *viable* strategy.



After all, if you take Nassif's Five-Color Control deck and replace a Plumeveil and a Volcanic Fallout with a Negate and another Cruel Ultimatum, it is probably going to be an even bigger deck than the old one. Is this really viable, though?

One of the most famous control decks was “The Deck,” by Brian Weissman. “The Deck” was a five-color U/W deck that sought to take complete control of the game by stripping an opponent's hand, filling its own to seven cards, making non-flying creatures unable to attack, removing flying ones from the game, and destroying any dangerous enemy permanents, be they artifacts, enchantments, or lands.

Finally, once the game was completely locked up so as to ensure that absolutely no combination of cards could break the lock, Weissman would switch life with his opponent via Mirror Universe (which, due to a rules loophole at the time, could be lethal if Weissman could get down to zero), or just drop a Serra Angel that would kill in five turns (and providing more defense while doing so).



In essence, Weissman used Moxes, Swords to Plowshares, Disenchants, Mana Drains, and Red Elemental Blasts to survive to Stage Two. From there, he would use trumps like Jayemdae Tome, Amnesia, and Moat to try to secure an advantage and take him to Stage Three, where he would essentially have the game locked up with Disrupting Scepter and permission, backed by huge card advantage.

There is certainly a place for so called "midrange decks." The key is to be able to play the bigger role against fast decks and the faster role versus big decks.

"Misassignment of role = game loss" is probably the most important and useful piece of Magic theory Michael Flores has ever put to print, as talked about

in **Who's the Beatdown?**, which is probably the most important Magic article ever written. It is imperative to know your role, especially when you are piloting a deck whose role frequently shifts depending on the matchup.

I think the term midrange is a little bit of a misnomer, as it is not actually the deck's range that is "mid." It is really about thriving during the mid-game, doing well in Stage Two. I mean, a midrange deck could very well kill on turn four or turn 24, depending on the format and deck, and midrange decks often plan to take longer than many control decks.

But is this so-called range inevitability? Surely not, since some aggro decks have inevitability over midrange decks and some control decks do not.

Another strategy that some decks take to try to control the game is through some sort of resource denial or mana-lock. Is Brine Elemental plus Vesuvan Shapeshifter card advantage?



It is clearly a tremendous amount of virtual card advantage, as the Pickles player is typically able to ensure that she can play most of her spells.

Her opponent typically reaches a point of not being able to play almost any. The key here is that a combination of cards like this prevents the opponent from reaching Stage Three, or possibly even keeps them perpetually locked into Stage One.

Take, for instance, the card *Armageddon*. Sometimes it is used as a powerful offensive weapon, preventing the opponent from reaching their Stage Three. Other times, Prison decks (like Winter Orb control decks and the like) play *Armageddon*, often losing just as many lands as their opponent, but keeping the opponent trapped in Stage One (mana screw).

But even after an *Armageddon*, the Prison mage can still generate a tremendous amount of virtual card advantage since the Prison mage typically has artifact mana in play to continue playing her own spells. The opponent, however, would be left with many cards that, while he still held them in hand, he was effectively down on since he couldn't actually cast them in a reasonable time frame. Essentially, the Prison player is in Stage Two, with an opponent doomed to perpetual Stage One.

What makes a strategy fast? A fast strategy is The Beatdown. A fast strategy wants the game to end faster. A fast strategy wants to attack, even if it means leaving itself open to a counterattack. A fast strategy is often willing to take losses of board position, card economy, or card quality to move the game towards completion.

At its heart, a fast strategy is actually just like a control deck. It is just that the means by which it controls the game are the opposite of a big deck's. It seeks to exploit Stage One rather than Stage Three.



See, some mages may try to control the game with Cryptic Command or Wrath of God, but others take control a little differently. If Dan Paskins Lava Spiked me on the first turn, I would be very nervous. He is wasting no time at all taking control of the game. It is the very first turn of the game, and already he has dictated the ground rules of how our game is going to be. He has taken a sort of control that will allow him to have a great deal of control over my plays for the entire game.

When a skilled red mage actually Lava Spikes you turn one, it is a reliable sign of strength. Once my life reaches a critical point, the red mage obtains an incredible amount of virtual card advantage, as well as card quality.

When your life total is six, every Lightning Strike is a powerful card. In addition, the control player has to go to great lengths to not lose to a flurry of burn spells, such as by leaving mana open to counter spells.

Fast strategies win the game directly, usually racing the opponent's gameplan. The fast player is, in essence, saying "let's see which of us can execute our plan faster." Fast strategies like Red Deck Wins, Black Aggro, and White Weenie are usually fairly easy to identify—but remember, as with control decks, it is important to correctly determine what your role is with relation to your opponent.

You may normally play your G/W deck very aggressively... but if you are facing a R/G Aggro deck, you have to figure some things out. For instance, if the red deck is full of Firedrinker Satyrs, Burning-Tree Emissaries, and Ghor-Clan Rampagers, it is very probable that they are faster than you are. As such, you would do best to adopt the bigger position despite playing a normally-aggressive deck.



Against such a R/G deck, you may keep pace with them early and try to ensure that your life total never drops so low that you are at risk of being burnt out. Then, as the game progresses, you can take control with fatties like Loxodon Smiter and Advent of the Wurm, maybe running away with the game after a devastating Unflinching Courage.



However, if your opponent is piloting a R/G Monsters deck featuring Domri Rade, Polukranos, World Eater, and Stormbreath Dragon, you may be up against a fast strategy that is actually bigger than yours. Against such an opponent, it may behoove you to take the offensive, ensuring that the

opponent doesn't have time to decimate your board with fatties and Mizzium Mortars.



Against one R/G deck it is may be the correct play to play a Temple Garden untapped to deal two extra damage to your opponent, but against another you may actually want to play it tapped to slow the game down. The key is to correctly assign yourself the role of beatdown or control.

Misassignment of Role = Game Loss.

Flores was right. But how can you determine whose strategy is bigger, and who should be the beatdown? In matchups where you have two similar strategies, there are a lot of things that you want to look for to figure out what role to play. Here are a few:

- **Who has inevitability?**
If it appears that one player has a superior Stage Three and that the game will favor them more and more as it progresses, that player is surely the bigger of the two. This one is the most important. Whichever player has inevitability can generally afford to play control. If you will lose going long, don't go long! If your opponent's Stage Three trumps yours, don't let it get to that point.

- **Who has more ways to deal damage?**
This could be Desecration Demon, Mutavault, Gray Merchant of Asphodel, Lightning Strike, Rakdos's Return, Banisher Priest, Nightveil Specter, Chandra, Pyromaster, or Elspeth, Sun's Champion. The more options of dealing damage someone pays for, the more likely they are to be the beatdown.
- **Who has more creatures?**
This is often, but not always, a sign of beatdown. Creature choices themselves can be revealing; Boon Satyr is a very aggressive card, whereas Courser of Kruphix is more mid-rangey or controlling.
- **Who has more removal?**
This needs context—but if the removal is very defensive, like Supreme Verdict, that is usually a sign of someone aiming to go big whereas Unsummon is more tempo-based.
- **Who has more permission?**
Is it more controlling or tempo-based?
- **Who has the most card drawing?**
This almost always has to be the bigger deck... except, of course, if the card is just so powerful, like Necropotence, that an aggressive deck would use it despite not reaping the full benefits. The primary exception to this is with a combo deck.

SO WHAT ABOUT COMBO DECKS?

Combo decks can be fast or big. There are both beatdown combo decks and combo control decks.

One of the fastest combo decks of all time was the Tolarian Academy deck of years ago. This was an excellent example of a beatdown combo deck; they just tried to race you. They usually featured little if anything outside of more card drawing and mana production, eventually ending in a Stroke of Genius for sixty on their opponent.

Their answer to Jackal Pup and Cursed Scroll was to outrace them. In fact, the most successful red mages of that era were the ones who realized that they were the control deck against the blue decks. The blue decks were just faster, so the red decks adopted disruptive and defensive elements, ranging from Meltdown to Red Elemental Blast. If they had tried to burn the Academy player before they could go off, they would have lost.



Misassignment of Role = Game Loss.

In Vintage, Long.dec is a fine example of a beatdown combo deck. One of the more powerful strategies

in the format involves disrupting the opponent with a Thoughtseize on turn one, then playing a Draw 7 spell on turn two. Every card in the deck is involved in the process of producing mana, drawing cards, and making these things resolve. The only other cards in the deck are usually one or two lonely bounce spells to deal with whatever the opponent may throw at them.

When a player playing Tezzeret the Seeker faces an opponent playing Long.dec, it is tempting to turn the game into a race. This is a poor move on the part of the Tezzeret player, despite their deck being a combo deck—the Long deck is faster for sure! Their goldfish speed is faster, their Thoughtseize effects are cheaper than Mana Drains, and they have more trumps that can win the game if uncontested.

The Tez deck uses a variety of early control elements (Force of Will, Misdirection, Mana Drain, Thoughtseize, Duress, Mystic Remora, Commandeer, Red Elemental Blast) to survive long enough to go infinite with Time Vault and Voltaic Key.

To succeed, the Tez player has to be willing to adopt the control position and maintain control long enough to go off in the late game, even if that late game is just turn four or five.

That said, if the Tez player *can* make an early move, sometimes it is correct to do so. You cannot adopt the same role every time; instead, you must play what the board and your hand demands. Sometimes you must be the beatdown, other times the control.

Even if the matchup remains the same, the roles may reverse. A topdecked Elspeth, Sun's Champion can change everything. As any blue mage who has tried to beat down with Mull drifters before getting burnt out knows, just because you are control at



one point in a game does *not* mean you should maintain that position throughout.

On the flip side, some combo decks can very easily be controlling. For example, High Tide was a control deck that tried to control the game as long as it could. Then, usually the turn before they would die, they would go for it and try to combo off. High Tide could be looked at as a midrange deck—but as it played out, that format was so fast and offensive that High Tide was actually the most controlling deck that achieved widespread success. The Tez deck from above is also a combo-control deck.

When you are piloting an aggro deck against another aggro deck, or a control deck against another control deck, take a moment to determine whose strategy is bigger, *and* whose is faster. It may be that your strategy is both bigger and faster (meaning that you have a huge edge), but where does your opponent's best chances lie? Is his best shot trying to go big... or to go fast?

Control players have won many games by realizing that they would lose going long against a certain combo deck. As a result, they switch into beatdown mode to give themselves a fighting chance. They may not be designed to beat down—but if you can't be the bigger deck in a given board state and matchup, then in one way or another you must be the faster deck.

A key part of my success at Regionals in 2007 was Mark Herberholz's advice that I should sideboard my Aeon Chroniclers out against Gruul and keep the Rise/Falls in. After all, I was clearly the control deck, so I needed to use every weapon available to me to contain the aggressive R/G decks. Rise/Fall meant two fewer cards I had to worry about, whereas Aeon Chronicler was just a victory condition that was not as good as Korlash.



Likewise, many a red mage has improved their win percentage upon realizing that they have inevitability against a certain control deck. Then, instead of just attacking all-out, they play to win the long game—whether it is by building up a fistful of burn or just reaching enough mana to exploit some uncounterable burn like Banefire, Urza's Rage, or an unearthed Anathemancer.

Whatever you do, make sure you are at least conscious of what role you are playing. It is completely fine to shift mid-game or as the stages change, but you have to have a plan.

Who has inevitability? Who is the beatdown?

SECTION FOUR: THE MENTAL GAME

JEDI MIND TRICKS AND GETTING “THE READ”

Sometimes people do what we intend them to do. Other times, they ignore what we want them to do. And still other times they outright contradict us.

What makes some people so very persuasive? What makes some people's ideas seem nearly irresistible? What does it mean when “The Force is strong with this one?” Why are some people so good at mind tricking others? Are mind games immoral or shady?

In order to understand the morality of persuasion, we need to be able to distinguish when it is appropriate to compete and when we should be cooperating. That subject could be the subject of a book all its own, but given the space we have to work with a simplified explanation will have to do.

In non-competitive situations, we only want to use persuasion to overcome ideas in people's heads that are not useful, that are in error. We use persuasion only to educate, to lead people to a better understanding of truth, which is in the group's best interest and leads us further in our pursuit of perfect understanding.

When we are playing Magic, however, the outcome of the game is a competitive affair. Both players voluntarily agreed to the battle. And make no mistake, it is just that: a battle between two opposing forces. There can only be one winner.

However, both players can enjoy themselves, and do not need to be against one another with regards to their enjoyment despite competing ruthlessly inside the game. Just because you're at war doesn't mean you can't be polite and enjoy yourselves.

We should compete wholeheartedly, though, and dedicate our whole mind to the task of winning the game. To that end, we should use any and all tools available to us that we feel would benefit us, as long as it *actually* benefits us and is within the framework of the rules we have agreed to.

Bluffing is a universally familiar concept, and it is an important part of being a Jedi, but there is so much more to it. Bluffing is suggesting to your opponent that you *do* have something that you don't, or that you *don't* have something that you do. It is confusing your opponent by helping him to see something that is not really there.

A classic bluff goes something like this: you attack with your 2/2 Runeclaw Bears. I have a 4/4 Serra Angel, but I do not block because I assume you have a Giant Growth. Why else would you be attacking with your Runeclaw Bear in this position?

Now, here is the fun part: what if you didn't have the Giant Growth?

What if you just knew I would not block because I would not risk such a great creature just to kill a Runeclaw Bear when you *obviously* have it...

See, this is where the mental game can really play a big role. What if I realized that you were running this play and just blocked, figuring that if you have it, you have it? Of course, what if you don't attack one turn, then you draw a card, then you attack? See how complex it gets? It really comes down to being able to get a read on your opponent.

When I am trying to get a read on my opponent, there are a variety of techniques that I find very helpful. A common situation is where I have two spells and I am not sure what order to play them in;

if my opponent has a Counterspell, I want to play it one way (perhaps to play the weaker card first, walking it into the Counterspell), but if my opponent does not, I would play it the other way by leading with the stronger card.

In a situation like this, I may stop for a second relax and then stare into my opponent's eyes. What is he doing *right now*?

If he keeps reading his hand, looking internally, it is a much different sort of energy than if he is intently focused on me and my cards. This is a situation where it is useful to gain information about your opponent's typical responses.

For instance, study how your opponent behaves when he draws his card. If he gets happy and then plays a card that wrecks you one time, but another time looks depressed and says go, you build a database of his behavior. Some people will consistently react in the opposite manner, faking sadness when they draw the nuts or pretending to be happy when they have drawn their third land in a row.

Study your opponent's body language and start to catalogue what it all means. This observation of an opponent actually carries over beyond just games in person, where you can physically see them. Sometimes I get asked how to read people or bluff on Magic Online.

There is no question you are much more limited with regards to what options are available to you in this area, however there is more to the mental game online than just "tapping two Islands, then untapping them" to bluff a counterspell.

Identify where your opponent has their stops set. What does this tell you about their strategy? Pay particular attention to how long your opponent takes to make each action. Magic Online is a place where your time is a particularly precious resource. If your opponent spends fifteen seconds to do something that should be automatic, file that information away. Keep it in mind.

Some players try to get into talking trash online, to try to get their opponent off their game, but this strategy can backfire, as it can make your opponent more determined to beat you plus it can be just as distracting to you if you are not careful. A much better tactic is to try talking to your opponent casually, and then discuss previous matches. He may want to tell you about his mana screw so badly that he reveals to you his sideboard plan or finisher.

Still, the mental game plays a larger role in person and there is much you can do to improve yours. One of my favorite articles that I wrote in 2008 was [**How To Jedi**](#), an article that helped detail some techniques for increasing your mental game. This article is required reading for anyone trying to make the step up into highly competitive play, and as such, I am including it here. If you have already read it, I suggest another look. You may have a different perspective at this point.

HOW TO JEDI

In the fictional reality of Star Wars, the Jedi Mind Trick is a Force power. Jedi who know the power can, by using the Force, influence the actions of other “weak-minded” sentient beings.

Jedi typically perform this ability with a wave of the hand and a verbal suggestion (for example, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for”). If the trick is successful, the victim will reply by restating the suggestion (“These aren’t the droids we’re looking for”) and will immediately think or do whatever the Jedi suggested. The hand wave may not be required to use the power; in the films, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn both perform the wave first when using the trick, as does Luke Skywalker.

—Wikipedia on Jedi Mind Tricks

The Jedi Mind Trick is the Holy Grail of Magic's mental side. Yes, the actual Holy Grail, as in there is absolutely nothing higher. This is that which is pursued, chased by so many, but captured and executed properly by so few.

Michael J. Flores has had much to say on the topic of how to get an edge in Magic. He comes from the same school of thought as I do regarding the idea that there is no great play (regarding technical play). There is just the right play and all the others.

Here's an excerpt from Mike Flores on gaining an edge in Magic, from **Introduction To Advantage: Three Ways To Get An Edge**.

THE ACTUAL EDGES

In my experience of Magic, there are only three possible avenues to get an edge:

- 1. Forcing Bad Play*
- 2. Deck*
- 3. Operational catch-all/Operations Management*

*Please note, again, that **there are no 'great' plays**. There are no heroic plays that allow you to steal victory where a lesser player would have lost. No. Unless the opponent tosses the game in the graveyard himself, all your amazing plays are doing is propelling you towards your correct limit, where the player who is supposed to win **actually** does."*

This is a somewhat unfortunate wording that tries a little too hard to express how technical play is a science, not an art, and there is a right answer. What it fails to convey, however, is that there are great plays, at least in the sense that people watching you will tend to remember their greatness. The key to a "great play" is usually one of a couple of things.

- 1. A very complicated or difficult-to-conceive line of play.* (Of course, this is subjective, but so is the word "great.")
- 2. Choosing a seemingly-worse play on the strength of obtained information.* An example of this would be getting a read on your opponent and allowing the information obtained to influence your line of play. If you *know* your opponent has Profane Command in his hand, sometimes it is better to make a play that would normally be incorrect if it wasn't for your information.

As a note: Flores has suggested that I not advocate PTQ players to try and use information gained in this way, since the vast majority of PTQ players cannot gain this information reliably.

When you get a bad read on your opponent, it is usually worse than not reading at all—so if you are going to try to read your opponent, you should really go ahead and do it correctly. I will talk about how to do this better in a bit, but I am of the opinion that PTQ players *should* do this. You'll never learn if you don't try.

3. *Forcing Bad Play.* This sort of Great Play is when you use the power of your mind to manipulate an opponent into engaging in a lesser line of play. Examples include leading your opponent to a false read, clouding your opponent's mind, and tricking your opponent into thinking a substandard strategy is better than it is.

Choosing the deck you play is one of the greatest skill-testers you face, but it is a subject that is covered extensively elsewhere and is not totally relevant to our discussion today.

One note, though, regarding deck choice and Jedi Mastery. When a Jedi chooses which deck to bring to the fight, they consider not just how the deck *should* do against the field, but also how it actually *will* do, taking into consideration the players involved.

For example, Dredge may have deck advantage against the field as a whole... but there is not much room to improve your percentages on the back of Great Play. Your percentages are already as good as they are going to get, so it is up to you to lose as few percentage points as possible to technical misplay.

As a counter example, I suggest looking at Death Cloud. Death Cloud is an excellent example of a deck that has fine percentages against the field as a whole, but also allows a player room to *play*. See, with Death Cloud you have more opportunities to do the three things listed above in order to lead towards Great Plays.

Even Dredge has potentially complicated and hard-to-see lines of play, so there is always that sort of Great Play...but Death Cloud also allows board positions where there are multiple ways to play a game that offer better percentages depending on what the opponent has. As such, if you can read your opponent, you can choose and play accordingly.

Forcing Bad Play is certainly possible with Dredge, as it is a very easy deck to play poorly against. However, your options are often constricted in this regard, as your opponent often has perfect information and your plays are typically scripted. Usually a Dredge player's best bet is to cloud the mind of the opponent so as to block their ability to understand a situation.

Death Cloud, on the other hand, allows for more opportunities to mislead the opponent, thus getting them to play less than optimally. This doesn't mean Death Cloud is better. In fact, it is actually the opposite by default. The truth is, if you are rolling dice, Dredge might be the best in the format. But if you are better than the people you are playing against, there are other choices that will actually give you higher EV.

Operations include things like shuffling the top of your library when you activate Sensei's Divining Top so as to not allow the opponent to know the cards' positions relative to how they were last turn.

While these following examples of tighter operations are *not* Jedi Mind Tricks, it should be understood that a Jedi performs these actions properly. It is not great play to do so, it is merely wrong to not.

DO NOT PLAY LANDS AS YOU DRAW THEM

Not even mixing them into your hand, revealing to your opponent that your hand has not changed. This is not a hard-and-fast rule, just a generality.

Sometimes, it can actually be useful to mislead your opponent with this technique. For instance, you may take a minute to decide whether or not to mulligan. Let's say you have a keepable hand, but you are mana-flooded. You may say something along the lines of "We'll just have to get there." Then knock on your library, acting as if you need to draw something in order to be able to play.

Then if you draw a land that you can play this turn, assuming there is not a compelling reason to play another land, just slam it onto the table as though you it was the perfect card to draw this turn.

Don't even mix it into your hand. You have represented before your draw that your position is a certain way. This play could actually reinforce the idea in your opponent's head that the position you represented is actually the one they are dealing with.

A good example of this technique is when playing against Pickles (a deck using Brine Elemental and Vesuvan Shapeshifter to lock the opponent down) with a deck that is capable of making powerful plays but which can't deal with creatures well... a combo deck, maybe. Let's say you're mana-flooded and have some action for later, but don't plan on making a play on turn three. If you act as though your hand is insane but you just need to draw land then

windmill a land into play from the top of your library, your opponent will be more likely not to tap out for a morph against you on turn three despite it actually being safe for them to do so.

Their respect of your hand could lead them to want to hold open Rune Snag or a similar response. Typically, you don't want an opponent to know the actual strength of your hand as it lets them plan accordingly.

That said, sometimes you want to let your opponent deduce information about your hand and have it turn out to be correct. For example, let's say you know that your opponent isn't going to be able to stop your hellbent Demonfire in two turns.

You may want to count your mana and ask him what his life total is, suggesting that you have the Demonfire that you actually have. Then, when you kill him with it two turns later, he will secretly think that he had a read on you. When in game two, you may find yourself in a position where your opponent has to decide between trying to go off next turn with a lower chance of success or waiting a turn and go off for sure. Then you count your mana, again asking his life total even though this time you don't have the Demonfire.

Be subtle! If well-executed, your opponent may think that they have a read on you and think that they have to go off early, even if it means only a 70 percent chance of success.

If they actually knew you didn't have the Demonfire yet, it would be a better play to wait a turn and win with certainty. However, if you can get them to value the misinformation enough to think that you have a Demonfire for sure, they may go for the play that has a 30 percent chance of failing. You will still

probably lose this game, but a 30 percent chance of winning is certainly better than having one more turn and just hoping to draw the Demonfire.

It is plays like this that starts to cross over from Operational Play to Jedi Mind Trick. In fact, many Jedi Mind Tricks are in reality just using Operational Play to cover up what you are actually doing, which is misleading or confusing the opponent. In fact, typically a Jedi Mind Trick will involve choosing a lesser line of play, either from a strategic standpoint, or an operational one, on the presumption that the advantage you will gain from this move on a mental level will be greater than the cost on the physical one.

IF YOU READ THE SPELLS YOU DRAW, DO NOT NEGLECT TO READ LANDS

I see a lot of people shuffle the cards they draw, but when they draw a land, they don't spend much time reading it. They know its applications. However, the Profane Command they drew will invoke a different response. It is fine to read cards you draw. In fact, you should, as you may see something you otherwise would have missed. The key is to disguise this activity by occasionally reading a basic land, especially when you aren't going to play it that turn.

Also, sometimes you should take a mental snapshot of what you drew and then think about it extensively while doing something else, such as looking at your opponent's graveyard (which is a better trick when you draw a Cryptic Command than when you draw a Tarmogoyf).

Everyone has run this to some degree, but take it a step further. For instance, when you have no cards in hand and you draw a land, read it. Ask your opponent a question, such as "How many cards

in your hand?" or "You're only at ten?" Then move your eyes back to the text box of your land. Then take a moment to remember a birthday party you attended as a child. You may not realize what all you are doing, but your body will subtly behave in ways that are difficult to fake consciously, such as a gentle rolling back of the eyes up and to the left. Then your opponent will have new information to base their decisions on.

Information that is wrong.

Speaking of looking at the graveyard...

**DON'T LOOK AT THE GRAVEYARD WHEN
AND ONLY WHEN YOU DRAW A CARD THAT
MAKES IT RELEVANT**

That would be one of the original Magic tells. Instead, try to keep a good grip on the graveyard situation on a regular basis, checking every few turns regardless.

Sometimes you will draw a Tarmogoyf and you won't know how big it will be. This is okay, but if you are honestly not sure whether or not you will play it and that will depend on how big it will be, then you need to do a little work to obtain this information without letting your opponent know what you are doing. It is one thing to let your opponent know that you have a Tarmogoyf. It is much worse to reveal that you both have a Tarmogoyf and another play that may cause you to not want to play the Goyf, such as a Pernicious Deed.

So how do you get the information you need without letting your opponent know you are getting it or need it?

Misdirection.

Some of my favorites include:

- Ask your opponent, “Do you have it?” Look them in the eye, then look at the back of the cards in their hand, then back into their eyes. Then look at their graveyard, pausing for a split-second on a business card, such as Dissolve or Supreme Verdict. This will suggest that you are trying to obtain information about their hand, rather than the graveyard. Usually, people in this predicament will then focus so much energy on masking the contents of their hand that they will not focus on what information you may be gaining elsewhere.
- Look at the life totals on your pad of paper. Then suddenly ask “Wait, you’re at sixteen, right?” (Do this when you know they are at sixteen.) They will say “Yes,” at which point you should look at their graveyard and pause for a split-second on all their fetchlands.
- Ask “How many are you playing?” Then look at their graveyard and mumble a little, like “Let’s see, you could also have...”

You get the idea. The point is it is often very useful to say something pertaining to anything other than what you are doing to draw focus to that subject. Then whatever physical action you take, such as reviewing graveyards, seems to be in support of that subject. There are countless other examples of operations management and clever plays you can use to exploit people thinking you are just managing your play, rather than forcing bad play from your opponent. Let’s move to a couple full-blown Jedi Mind Tricks.

Now the good stuff: Jedi Mind Tricks. Force Manipulation. Using your sheer force of will to control your opponent’s mind.

First up: the “Long Kill.” One of the greatest moves available to a Jedi is named after one of the greatest manipulators of the Force to ever carry a lightsaber, Mike Long.

I was playing CMU Academy in Pro Tour: Rome a decade ago, and was eventually paired with an opponent armed with a Phyrexian Dreadnought/Reanimate/Pandemonium deck fueled with four Lion's Eye Diamonds and four Yawgmoth's Wills.



The Academy deck I was piloting only had two Stroke of Geniuses (one for me and one for you, as Erik Lauer was fond of saying). Four Time Spirals ensured that this was plenty, since if times got tough you could just reset things. However, I had a peculiar game in which I cast Time Spiral twice on the first turn, but could not go off. I eventually had to pass to my opponent who tried to turn-one kill me, but I had the Force of Will. Nice format.

So, I start Time Spiraling again and eventually have gone through all four, still not able to find a Scroll Rack, a Vampiric Tutor, anything. Eventually, I Stroke myself to try to find my one Mind over Matter or a way to retrieve it. I succeed, but end up not having enough mana to kill my opponent until next turn.

I have to pass. He tries to kill me again, but I do not have a Force of Will. I know what I have to do.



I do the only thing I can do. I Stroke myself as hard as I can with my last Stroke. I now have no roads to victory left short of concession. I need to find a Force of Will, and this is the only way.

I obtained a full grip and easily countered his Yawgmoth's Will. Now it was my turn. I untapped; I played a Scroll Rack. I asked my opponent how many cards were in his library. After he counted, I added sixty-six mana to my mana pool. Next I cast Vampiric Tutor and just looked at my opponent.

He looked back, so I said, "I am just going to Scroll Rack for it. You only have fifty cards left in your library, right?" With that, he scooped up his cards and we went to the next game.

This is, of course, a move made famous by an alleged story involving Mike Long in Paris, 1997, with Pros-Bloom against Mark Justice. Long story short (no pun intended), Mike was in the process of going off and eventually had to remove his only Drain Life from the game to Cadaverous Bloom in order to cast Infernal Contract. As the story goes, this didn't

faze Mike for a second. Mike knew he had to do it and immediately knew that in order for him to win he would have to make Justice believe that he had already won.

As the tale continues, Long is said to have just gone through the motions and did everything the way you do it when you are going to win. This act was said to be so convincing that Justice, one of the greatest players of that era, conceded, thinking that it was purely academic at this point.

The truth is that the game Long removed his Drain Life was one of the games he ended up losing, but that he was so confident and unflinching in his removing it, Justice had every reason to believe that Long had two. This allowed Long to sideboard his Elven Cache out despite the fact that doing so would mean a single Coercion could end the game against him. With Justice now convinced that Long had multiple copies of Drain Life, he would never choose to make Long discard it if he ever had the option.

This was a fantastic play in and of itself, but the coverage of the era twisted the story a little, merging it with another story where Long executed a similar play in another round. Despite the tangling of legends from yesteryear, the fact remains that this Jedi Mind Trick is forever associated with Mike Long and was a move he pulled on a number of occasions.

A derivative of this play is to use the threat of it to obtain information from your opponent. For instance, let's say that you have a Psychatog that has just become lethal. Your opponent has no blockers, but cards in hand. You attack, but in order to kill your opponent, you would have to go all-in, leaving yourself vulnerable to removal.

In that case, you may want to consider a line of play where you ask your opponent his life total. Then make a public show out of counting your hand and graveyard. When it adds up to enough, ask, "So that's game, right?" You would be amazed how many players will concede from that position.

It is usually too risky to go all-in like that when they could have a Smother or something, but a concession is a sure thing. If they don't concede, then you have gained information.

A good player will not concede from that position, as they will know that you can't really afford to go all-in... but if you are playing against someone of a weaker will, you may be able to deduce information about them when you ask them if that is game. If they appear to be trying to be clever and say something like, "So you are discarding all your cards?" this may be a tell that they have an answer.

Switching gears a minute, I would like to share a move I was discussing with Magic pro Michael Jacob yesterday. Let's say you are playing against a weak-willed Goblin player. You are, of course, playing Next Level Blue, so you are not thrilled with this proposition, but fortunately you aren't just Dredging, so there is room to play.

Your opening hand is Tarmogoyf, Trinket Mage, Vedalken Shackles, Island, Island, Flooded Strand, and Pithing Needle. This is a fine hand, although there a couple of ways to play it.

See, the default play is to play a fetchland and retrieve a Breeding Pool, saving you two points of damage for your turn-two Goyf. That may be the right play much of the time, sure... however, there is another play. There is another way.

The Jedi would not be content to merely make the technically-correct play. He would test the waters first, before ever playing a land. For instance things may go down like this:

The Jedi looks at his grip, sees what he must do, and then stares into the eyes of the Goblin player. After twenty seconds or so, the Goblin player may get uncomfortable. At the first sign of discomfort, or any emotion actually, the Next Level Master says something like, "Why are you so easy to read? You are going to play a Wooded Foothills and pass."



The Goblin player may not be able to help his body's involuntary reaction. If he has Wooded Foothills in his hand and no one-drop, he may glance down at his hand without realizing it. Be careful. If the force is strong in your opponent, they may use this opportunity to mislead you.

However, if you have a sick read and suspect that your opponent actually has the Wooded Foothills in hand, you may want to drop the Island and cast Pithing Needle, hoping to mana-screw him.

Remember, in order for this technically suboptimal play to be correct, you have to be sure enough that

your opponent has a Wooded Foothills that it will be relevant to risk it. The majority of players who try to execute such a play will fail. However, if you want to be a master, you have to be able to at least try such a move when you feel it is appropriate.

Another tactic I employ is to begin a conversation with my opponent regarding his deck. I talk about cards he has in his deck, like Rune Snag and Cryptic Command, and watch for any sort of body language that might tell me anything.

Then I play a spell that my opponent would surely counter if he could. Then, if he counters it, the tell I witnessed is cataloged as evidence of strength: he has permission. If he does not, the tell is categorized as a sign of weakness: he doesn't have permission. Then when I am deciding whether to lead with the best spell in my hand or the second-best, I can try to continue the discussion with my opponent to try to elicit a reaction from his body. This information will help clue me in to the contents of my opponent's hand. This is one reason I prefer decks that cause games to go long. This means there will be more time for me to "learn" my opponent.

Usually, by game three I will have learned enough about my opponent's tells that I will be able to Glasses of Urza them at will. The key is to cause an interaction that will lead the opponent to have to think about your words. It is not his words you are concerned with, however... it is his body language. Different mannerisms mean different things to everybody. However, if someone touches their nose, looks down, touches their ear, smiles, stutters, whatever, it may be in reaction to the thoughts that you are forcing them to process.

How do you fight this? If your will is far superior to the person trying to manipulate you, then you



can actually turn the whole thing around to your advantage, subtly offering up misinformation.

However, your will isn't going to dwarf everyone. Sometimes you will face another Master. Sometimes you will face someone on a higher level than you. How do you shield your mind from such attacks when you are out of your league regarding command of the Force?

If I were to suggest one technique that all aspiring pros learn it is how to break rapport. If you suspect that you cannot out-will your opponent and want the fight to be on the field of technical play rather than mind control, then it is *vital* to break rapport. You must not interact with your opponent the way he wants.

For instance, if he asks you questions about the game state, such as cards in your hand, life total, anything, do *not* get into the habit of answering. You must tell him the truth, but do not just answer "five," etc. If your opponent has a command of the Force greater than you, you may not even realize what they are really doing. But if you take small steps to cloud the interactions, you can limit his ability to read you. For instance, when they ask you how many cards in your hand, ask how many lands they control before you answer.

Maybe you don't answer out loud, you just show them the backs of your cards. Maybe you just say, "Yes." Maybe you say, "*Just* seven" (when you have seven, of course). The important thing is to not *just* answer. It is so, so important to not get in the habit of doing what your opponent wants, even if it is just answer their question. If you make it easy for your opponent to obtain information from you about anything, it makes it easier for your opponent to obtain information from you about *everything*.

If your opponent tries to get a conversation going with you and you feel like they are out of your league with regards to their command of the Force, then ignore them, behave randomly, spout nonsense, act bizarrely, whatever... just don't do what your opponent wants.

If you are out of your league and facing a Jedi with a greater mastery than you and he asks you if you are having fun, ignore him. Don't acknowledge him. Or say something that has nothing to do with what he said, such as, "How many cards?"

This may seem rude, but if you are dealing with a Jedi Master, these are the sorts of techniques that you must be able to employ to shield yourself. If he talks about a card that may or may not be in your hand, don't answer him. Avoid conversation with a Jedi out of your league, at least while the *match* is still in progress. Anything you say can and will be used against you. The hope is to move the game more and more towards a technical struggle where you are both just playing cards. If you don't interact with him, his powers are greatly constrained.

They say you can't con an honest man. Remember that when you are playing a Master. If you stop trying to take advantage of your interactions and focus on negating them, you will limit your opponent's ability to con you.

Remember, this last section is not about how to play as a Master, but rather how to protect yourself when you are out of your league. It is fine to hold conversations while playing and very useful when you have greater Force than your opponent, but you have to know your limits. There is nothing wrong with denying an opponent just about any and every attempt to interact with you outside of the game.

Don't lie to your opponent about the game state or anything like that, and make sure they can find answers to questions like how many cards are in your hand. You have a duty keep public information public. That said, *don't* do what your opponent wants. When you let him manipulate you, even if it is just answering a simple question, you give up more and more control over your will.

EVERYONE NEEDS MENTAL STRENGTH

There are some people who will point to great players like Kenji Tsumura and Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa, who are legendary with their technical play but are not known for their mind games. They claim that because some of the all-time greats do not employ Jedi Mind Tricks often that they must be flawed, but the truth is that this is just a function of the fact that different players have different styles.

Paul Rietzl, Mike Turian, Mark Herberholz, and Mike Long are all famous for their mental game and making wins appear out of nowhere. This does not mean their style is better or worse than Kenji, PV, or anyone else. It just means they focus on different skills. Every top player uses mind tricks to some degree, but even those that do not consciously employ them are well-versed in them. You need to be able to guard yourself against them!

I brought up the topic of the morality involved because all the mind games in the world will be relatively ineffective if your attitudes towards them are wishy-washy. Either mean it or don't, but don't half-ass it. Remember, it is of the utmost importance to stay within the confines of the rules of the games you play—but that your mind games may confuse an opponent and cause them to make mistakes which lead to their losses *doesn't mean you shouldn't do them*.

In fact, it is much the opposite. You are at war! This is a competition. And besides, he may eventually thank you for the lesson, as if it costs him this match, he will likely not make the same mistake twice.

I was playing at a \$5,000 Standard tournament in Indianapolis in March of 2009. I was piloting a G/B/w Doran Aggro deck and my opponent in a feature match is armed with a R/W “Boat Brew” deck (Aggro-Reveillark). There were dozens of people watching, and Evan Erwin was recording the game on camera for The Magic Show, documenting what would become the infamous “Profane Bluff.” No pressure, right?

The critical turn involves me controlling a Cloudthresher, a Chameleon Colossus, two Wilt-Leaf Lieges, and eight land, sitting at ten life. My opponent has been playing off the top of his library, but he has drawn bomb after bomb and is now sitting on a board of Siege-Gang Commander, four Goblin Tokens, Elspeth, a Soldier token, two Stillmoon Cavaliers, and two untapped lands, with two Windbrisk Heights with cards under them and seventeen life.



I draw my card for the turn...

Profane Command!

I was excited—but a split-second later, I was filled with horror as I realized that my Chameleon Colossus had protection from black, so I could not give it fear.

My opponent only had two black creatures, so if I could give all of my creatures fear and make my opponent lose six life, I would win easily.

What is the play?

The first step was to smile and excitingly slam the Profane Command on the table, hoping to draw the concession.

My opponent just looked at me.

I said, "You are only at seventeen, right?"

He replied, "Yes."

I said, "Profane Command!"

He asked, "What are you going to do with it?"

No!

What was I to do? I quickly surveyed the board. I could Profane Command the Siege-Gang, and maybe if neither Heights had anything too bad, I could live another couple of turns if I was lucky.

I decided to go for it.

I tapped all of my lands and said "Profane Command for six; you lose six life, and all of my legal targets gain fear."

At this point, I asked again, "You are only at seventeen, right?" Then I added a sort of rhetorical laugh, as in, "Isn't this over?"

He asked me if I attack with everything. I said, yes, I attack with everything. He tried every combination of blocks with his Stillmoon Cavaliers, trying to figure out what the trick was.



To his credit, he realized something was amiss; he figured that there must be some way for him to live based on his read of me. Still, he did not end up blocking with any of the non-black creatures and died in combat.

Immediately afterwards, I pointed out to that I had given only my legal targets fear. He said “Sure, so?”

“All of my *legal* targets gain fear.”

He smiled and laughed as he realized his blunder. He knew something was up, but couldn't see it in time.

After hearing this tale, some amateur players questioned this play and whether or not it was shady—but after conferring with a number of other judges (and not just the one watching the match), all agreed that there was absolutely nothing wrong with this play. See, there are a few keys here.

Do *not* misrepresent the game state or do something illegal. Many players would have said “All of my guys get fear.” Or even, “Only your Stillmoons can block.”

Neither of these statements is true. You are allowed to bluff and represent a Giant Growth in your hand. You are allowed to pick up your card that can't block and act like you are thinking of blocking with it, as long as you don't actually block with it. However, if you actually misrepresent the rules, that is going too far. For instance, if your creature is not allowed to block and you try to block with it, that is cheating.

In this case, I took great care to not indicate that Chameleon Colossus had fear, but rather took advantage of the fact that my opponent would surely assume it.

I did not point to the Colossus when I cast Profane Command. I did not say all of my guys gain fear. I specifically said, “All of my legal targets gain fear.” This is an example of a shortcut that players can agree to during a match. If I had been asked to clarify which creatures exactly are the legal targets, I would have named the Cloudthresher and both Wilt-Leaf Lieges. It would be illegal to target the Colossus, so you can't do it.

You may ask, “How is it okay to not specify the exact cards when you cast the spell?”

Well, I did, I gave all of my legal targets fear. That is an exact set of targets, which takes care of the judge—and since my opponent did not ask for clarification, it is implied that he has no problems with this communication.

Have you ever played Path to Exile and targeted “the big guy” when your opponent has a 4/4 and a 2/2? You did not name the exact target, but your opponent agreed to the communication, so there is no problem. Tournament Magic would be very difficult if not impossible were it not for shortcuts in gameplay and communication, such as targeting, changing phases, what color of mana you are tapping your land for, and so on.

The most important thing to remember here is to *follow the rules*. In addition to not misrepresenting the game state, I also was careful to specify exactly what I was doing. I did not just say Profane Command, lose life, fear. That would be ambiguous and not actually fulfill the targeting requirements of my spell. You want the ambiguity to be in your opponent's head, not in the actual game.

A good way to think of it is like this: You want to fool your opponent, but you do *not* want to fool

the judge. Say the words that you do and take the actions that you do in such a way so as to make it clear to a judge what you are doing.

Also notice how after the game, I helped explain everything to my opponent in a friendly way. Outside of obviously not wanting to foster any hard feelings, there is also a strong incentive to cooperate with my opponent now that the match is over. He is going to help my tiebreakers—plus, if I help this person in a way that helps them win matches in the future, they will be more favorably inclined towards me the next time I deal with them.

If I had instead just tried to make them feel dumb about the blunder, who is to say the next time our paths cross, I won't be at their mercy somehow? I might be looking for a draw, or just looking for someone to trade cards with. It pays to cooperate with people outside of the game.

In fact, in general, I tend to try to cooperate with everybody whenever possible. It is not just that I want everyone to be their happiest, although that is true. It is really just selfish though, as when everyone is encouraged to do what they think is best and to help everyone they can, it leads to the most happiness for the group as a whole.

The flip side to this is that when someone voluntarily decides to compete against me in a game of Magic, I can dedicate myself to competing against them with all of my heart and mind, and with a clear conscience. In day-to-day life, when my friends lose, I feel empathetic and want to try to prevent these situations from happening. In Magic, you are going to get matched up against friends and friendly acquaintances. You have to be willing to let them lose and not feel bad about it.

A battle-hardened warrior must be willing to do whatever it takes—within the rules, or you aren't really playing the game anymore. Jedi Mind Tricks are within the rules according to Wizards of the Coast, as well as all of the pros I know and my own perception of fair play. As long as you follow the rules of Magic and the rules of the DCI, then it is fair game to trick your opponent with a clever play.

A smart competitor exploits every possible advantage as long as it does not compromise a greater purpose. One obvious example would be breaking the rules, as you may gain in the short term... but none of what you are doing will mean anything if you acquired it through illegal means. Imagine how hollow it would be to cheat your way to a Pro Tour title and then for the rest of your life have to live with the knowledge that you weren't good enough to win and that your title is a lie, a theft, a cheat?

**DON'T BE THAT
GUY. IT ISN'T
WORTH IT**

That would be a pretty horrible fate! But fortunately, you have control over this: *don't be that guy*. It isn't worth it, as it is the Magic equivalent of selling your soul. All the riches in the world do you no good if you have no soul, and all of the Magic wins in the world will do you no good if you acquired them through lying, cheating, and stealing.

Morality is certainly an important issue, but as long as you operate within the framework of the rules and with honor, then you will have right on your side. Still, an important point that many people miss is that it is usually a far better use of your time spent on Magic working on improving your technical play. If you are actually sitting around practicing leveling your opponent, you would have probably profited more if you had spent that time just reflecting on your game and examining the proper plays.

If you are going to use mind games, more power to you—but do not get so fixated on them that you lose focus of what is important. Technical play decides more games of Magic than all other factors combined.

UNDERSTANDING IMPLICIT COMMUNICATION

For many people, communication and influence are a very explicit phenomenon. These people are more likely to be fixated on current problems and looking for solutions, rather than on the nuances of effective communication. Everyone communicates in their own way, but there are patterns we can observe. Explicit communicators generally have slightly different strategies for evaluating the information they have, their intuitions, their feelings, their hopes, and their fears.

Spelling suggestions out for these people makes it much easier to lead them where you want them to go. Some people, on the other hand, are more subtle and deal more in implicit communication. A better route with them is to rely less on words and more on creating an experience, an emotion, a memory, a sensation.

If someone is more attuned to explicit communication, you often get a better reaction by explaining why it is that you want to talk to them and why it would be in their best interests to hear what you have to say, and so forth. If someone responds better to implicit communication on the other hand, you will often find that you elicit a better reaction by just smiling, asking them a question, laughing, and listening while looking into their eyes.

People have tons of associations and generalizations built up in their brain. These are based on previous experiences and events in throughout their lives. Imagine this as sort of a hard drive filled with information. This hard drive tells that person how to feel and what to think about any new stimulus that should arise, whether it is a game situation in Magic or if you're asking them out on a date.

It is not nearly so important what you intend your words, your body language, or your actions to mean. What is really important is that person's *perception* of you. If you are speaking English, your words mean something very specific and you are selecting them for a reason—but if the person you are talking to doesn't speak English, your intention means next to nothing.

When you speak English to someone who doesn't speak English, the words will spark little or no meaning in them. This is an important point to remember, because you need to understand that everything you say, every movement of your body that the person can see, every tone in your voice, it is just a symbol that sparks meaning in them depending on *their* brain, not *yours*. The symbol itself means nothing. How they interpret it is what gets remembered.

Have you ever bitten into a lemon? If you were to imagine what that is like, how the sour taste felt as you sunk your teeth into it...

As you read that, an experience was triggered for you. A sensation may have appeared on your tongue and your mouth may have begun to water. You may have actually even experienced a little bit of that sour taste in your mouth.

Were the words sour?

The sourness was already encoded in your mind and was sparked by my words. Those sentences triggered an involuntary reaction that caused your brain to access the memories it has available to it relating to that experience.

What if, instead of describing the scenario of biting into the lemon, I had said, "Imagine what it is like to bite into a lemon, right now. Imagine the sour taste."

That is an example of explicit communication. Explicit communication can be very useful, no question, but an important attribute to remember with regards to it is that *explicit communication allows someone to stop, think, and veto the message!*

Implicit communication does not! You may not actually obey an implicit message. It may be vague, conflict too strongly with other ideas or beliefs in your head, or any of a number of other factors, but the message is not consciously vetoed.

The goal with implicit communication is not always straightforward. Remember, you don't need your opponent to agree to anything, sometimes. Sometimes, it is merely enough to make them think about whatever it is you want them to.

For instance, if you ask them if they have a Counterspell in their hand, they may not answer you. But if you implicitly suggest they look at their Counterspell, they may not even realize when they look at the card at the end of their hand.

What if you and your opponent both have a few creatures on the battlefield and you want them not to attack you. What do you do? Well, there are a lot of other factors and a number of ways to play this, but it may not be particularly effective to just say "Don't attack me."

This is an explicit command and they will likely veto it. (It may confuse them, as now they are trying to figure out why you would say something so absurd, which might make it a reason to do it, but let's set that aside for now.) What you really want to do is send a symbolic message that implies "Do not attack."

How about if you lean forward aggressively and start (in your head) counting up how much damage your creatures can do? You can move your hands somewhat towards your cards as though you are itching to attack. This doesn't assure you of anything, as your opponent will still attack you if it is obvious to your opponent.

The thing is, how likely it is that your opponent will figure out to still attack is a function of how good of a player they are and how obvious the situation is. A stronger mental game has the capability of tipping the scales in some situations. Players with strong mental games have the perspective to realistically analyze the situation to determine if this is one where the scales may be tipped.

Let's imagine a scenario. Your opponent plays a Fire-Field Ogre and it can easily kill you in a few turns. You have only a Cylian Elf in play that was beating down your opponent, but now it can't trade with your opponent's guy.



"Okay, I guess the beats are over," you say. "How am I supposed to get through that guy on defense?"

He'll probably attack next turn, but there's a chance he won't. You might play another relatively

unimportant creature and act depressed that you cannot continue the beats. You have to be able to assess how likely you are to succeed with these maneuvers and how much you stand to profit. If you try such a tactic and it is obvious what you're doing, you will be further away than when you started.

If you have a 3/3 who can't block and your opponent has a 3/3 who can and you are at two and your opponent is at fifteen, it may be in your best interest to *not* attack and act as though he is staying home on defense. Do *not* try to block with him, but you are more than fine in subliminally suggesting to your opponent that this is what you are doing.

That is just playing cards.

It is a minor point, but one of the primary differences between dealing with men and dealing with women is that it is often more useful to be more subtle with women, whereas men need you to kind of spell it out for them.

Take care! If you *do* decide to flex your mental game muscles, make sure you do not end up as one of those people who demonstrate great pride with regards to the lamest of "mind games." Most people don't have a clue how to really influence people, so they may fixate on weak, useless attempts.

These are the people who tap four blue as though they are going to Cryptic Command your Reveillark, and then decide not to. You may play around them having Cryptic Command anyway, but that is because you can. After you finish beating them down, they may try to mock you for having fallen for their trick, because they didn't really have it. Oh, you *didn't* have a Cryptic Command when you let that Reveillark resolve? Who would have guessed!?

I have played more games involving Counterspells than most. You want to know how to bluff a Counterspell? Leave open lands that can cast the Counterspell and hold cards in your hand. Anything else you do has only a fraction of the impact that most people would like to believe.

If you are very experienced, the best play against most players most of the time is to not give up any information about your hand. If they are a particularly weak opponent, it may be useful to resort to such sophomoric tactics and arranging your lands in such a way as to spell out the Counterspell you are bluffing, but this is not the area to spend your time working on.

Generally, when people want somebody who isn't going to automatically cooperate with them to do something, they ask themselves the equivalent of, "What explicit message can I say to them that will cause them to do what I want?"

At best, a novice will use "reverse psychology" because they figure their opponent will contradict what they say. The thing is, almost everyone is aware of reverse psychology, so if you say "You should attack," when you want to someone to not attack, it is not very likely to be successful. Mainly it will just get them to think more, which is not really what you want to be doing.

The better question to ask might be, "Which *implicit* message can I convey by the symbols that I suggest?" Remember, the concepts, ideas, and experiences the recipient experiences will be triggered by their own associations with those symbols.

You can't control how your message will be interpreted, though you can control what symbols

**WHICH IMPLICIT
MESSAGE CAN I
CONVEY BY THE
SYMBOLS THAT
I SUGGEST?**

you suggest to people. These can range anywhere from words you say to your body language. They can be related to the tone of your voice, your expressions, your hand movements, your breathing, your posture, and more.

If you really want to sell the idea that you have a Counterspell, you could briefly glance at the land in your hand when your opponent casts a minor threat and glance back. They may look to see if the spell is fine, while you just kind of hang out as though it didn't even occur to you to counter it. Generally, someone without a Counterspell is more likely to make a show of saying, "That's fine," thinking that will convince people they had something they could have done.

When you are using implicit messages to influence someone and the message is one they would probably reject if you were explicit, then the obvious, surface meaning of your words and actions is just for cover. When you use your body language to do things like getting ready to tap your lands, or when you lean forward and motion towards your creatures or shuffle cards back and forth in your hand "deciding" between them, you are using implicit communication.

In these cases, there is no explicit message at all. People tend to perceive these movements as unconscious on your part, even though they do have meaning. They will generally not associate them with an attempt to communicate, but rather see them as a read on you—information they think they are learning from you without you realizing it.

So far, we have been talking about influencing people who are not already inclined to cooperate with you. In the section, we will talk about a different aspect of the mental game: how to get people to feel

like they want to cooperate with you, even if they are your opponent in a game of Magic. This is done via *building rapport*.

Before we move on, though, I want to take a moment to remind you that as a student of the game you should be mindful of the mental side of the game and all that goes along with it, but spending your time practicing mind games is not going to be as useful an effort at improving as reflecting on game decisions and seeking a better understanding of Magic.

A common mistake that many players develop when they first start getting decent is an unhealthy preoccupation with mind tricks, thinking that this is what it will take for them to get to the next level. Players at this stage reason that since they are *obviously* playing perfectly and at a high level, this is “the only way to get an advantage.”

The truth is, Jon Finkel, Owen Turtenwald, Reid Duke, and Luis Scott-Vargas all make many mistakes every game! If the greatest of the great make mistake after mistake, what makes you think *you* don't? Magic is too hard to play truly perfectly at all times.

This is not to say that you should not make perfection your goal or that it is unobtainable all of the time. But no matter who you are or how good of a player you are, *you can get better*.

The time you have to dedicate to improving at Magic is generally best spent either playing or reflecting on Magic theory. Magic articles, conversations with good players, and internal reflection all help here. If you want to get better at Magic, study and practice Magic. No one in Major League Baseball practices throwing dangerously inside fastball pitches designed to get to under the skin of the batter.

They do, however, read books on the game, watch films, listen to lectures, study other pitchers, and imagine pitching in their head over and over.

You only have so much time to dedicate to improving at Magic. Use it wisely.

BUILDING RAPPORT

You know how sometimes people do exactly what you say when you ask, and sometimes they will not do what you want at all? Peoples' brains naturally filter the instructions coming in as being from "me/us" or from "them." This is an important concept to reflect on if you want to strengthen your mental game.

Instructions from "me/us" feel like they should be obeyed.

Instructions from "them" are to be contradicted.

If the listener is unsure of who is giving them the instruction, they have a tendency to want to consider them more closely before acting. This could be from a friend, a parent, or a writer on StarCityGames.com.

Is it possible to give people instructions so that they seem to be coming from themselves, so that the person feels compelled to obey? Yes, it is! And the key is understanding this "me/us" idea and how to bridge that gap by building *rapport*.

Rapport is when you have a connection with someone that causes them to identify themselves with you. The idea is to pace the game, pace your language, pace your actions, do everything you can to mirror their current experience and to strengthen that connection. It is as though you and the other person are running and you are taking steps equal to theirs at the same speed with your right leg moving with their right leg, and so on.

When you have set your pace to be that of your opponent's, you eventually reach an opportune moment and take the lead. You are mirroring and

imitating. You are sending subtle suggestions that you are like your opponent, you are on the same page, you are having similar experiences, and you see the world the same way he or she does. That helps bring them to a point of feeling like you and they form an “us.”

Once your opponent identifies with you in some sort of sense of unity, you have built rapport. Ways to discern if you have rapport with your opponent include:

- They agree or say “yes” to most of what you say.
- They mimic your emotion or words.
- They talk about what you want them to be talking about.
- Having your emotional state match theirs.

Peer pressure is so very effective because friends develop strong rapport with one another. Instructions from one peer to another feel very much like they are coming from within. When an idea comes from you, one generally does not question it: you just do it. If you have a Mountain Dew on the table and the idea comes to you that you want to drink some, you reach over, pick it up, and take a drink.

Now here is where it gets interesting: if you are talking to someone at the table and you two are in sync, agreeing on ideas, maybe both leaning forward with similar posture, when you take a drink, they reach for their drink and take one as well! This is not to say that you can command people at will this way—but most of the time, if one has rapport with another person, each will feel inclinations to do many of the things suggested by the other.

The most common and obvious example of the “Pace, Pace, Pace, Lead” style of rapport in Magic is when people say “Done?” at the end of their opponent's turn. Every time the person says “Yes” in response to this, they are taking a step closer to automatically obeying the other person.

While the mind tricks are not for *everyone*, something that everyone needs to know is when to avoid mindlessly agreeing with their opponent. I highly recommend that you get into the habit of not answering “Yes” to that question. It is a trap. When you do, it leads towards mindlessness. It leads to saying “Yes” without even stopping to think about it.

By the time you realize you didn't attack or didn't use your Vithian Stinger, it is too late. Be especially careful when you play someone you are in rapport with. You may have more influence over them, but you are vulnerable to their influence as well.

How do you know if you are in rapport with someone? Ask yourself some questions. How do you feel about them? Have you two been agreeing in general or on a few things in a row? Have you been talking about things you have in common? Do you two both say “Yes” a lot? Are you seated in similar positions? Are your facial expressions similar? The list goes on and on, but the primary question is “Are you and the other person *connected*?”

Building rapport is quite simple, really. For instance, when your opponent wins the die roll, you ask, “You are playing first, right?” When they say, “Yes,” you smile and after they play their first land, you politely ask, “Done?” They are.

A couple turns later, they play Chandra's Phoenix when you have no creatures in play. You say “Attack for two?” They agree.

**ARE YOU AND THE
OTHER PERSON
CONNECTED?**

By keeping the energy positive and agreeable and suggesting the things they want to do anyway, they begin to view your commands as coming from within. And why not? Thus far, everything you have suggested has meshed with their internal views.

Later in the game, you may decide you want to give them a simple instruction they might otherwise have not done. If it is not obviously stupid, they will be far more likely to follow it because of this rapport. People are obviously going to have their guard up, though, so if you try telling someone who has a creature when you have no blocker, “Don’t attack,” you will accomplish little beyond breaking rapport.

A much better attempt to exploit this rapport is to say, “Got the counter?” when you play a decent spell that you don’t really care about and you’d like them to waste a Counterspell on it.

When I am playing a match against someone, one of the first things I try to do is figure out is whom the matchup favors, as well as if my opening hand is good or a bit weak. Aside from helping me make in-game strategic decisions, this information is useful for helping me figure out what I am *really* doing.

With sites like StarCityGames.com making top-rate decklists available to anyone who wants them, you are not always going to be able to have advantage on your deck choice alone, even if you are Gabriel Nassif, Sam Black, or Guillaume Wafo-Tapa. Sometimes, it can help to try to look elsewhere for additional percentage to leverage into a win.

At the beginning of your match, you can ask your opponent what they have played against so far, how they’re doing today, or just talk to them about a cool deck you saw. You want to be careful not to

give them a lot of information about you that they didn't already have—but at the same time, this can be an opportunity to find out if your opponent is chatty and likely to be in rapport with you, or if he is reserved and likely to keep shields up at all times.

This is a key distinction to make in order to assess your plans and whether or not mind games fit into them. It's a distinction that will also tell you if you are going to have to take bigger risks to get an edge, or should just nurse an advantage that you already have.

We want to know if our opponent is likely to get on board with our pacing and our leading. What better way to find out then to try pacing them? Talk about something of mutual interest. A good way to find out a mutual interest is to talk about something you *know* they are interested in. For instance, a player they played earlier, a friend they playtest with, a deck they played in a previous tournament, and so on.

Even if you don't have a ton in common, you both play tournament Magic, so you have a foundation to work with. Try to get them to talk about their experiences and then demonstrate to them that your experiences are much like theirs. While you talk to your opponent, don't judge them. Rather than tell them your thoughts on their deck, be a good and positive listener. Rather than try to act friendly and fake, you should instead look to see the *genuine* similarities in your experiences.

An example of the subtle advantages to be gained from rapport is in my match against Uri Peleg in the finals of the 2007 World Championships. I was playing a Mono-Red Dragonstorm deck featuring a lot of burn, rituals, charge lands, and Spinnerock Knoll, all fueling Dragonstorm and Bogardan

Hellkite. Uri was piloting a B/G/w Doran deck making use of mana creatures and potent threats backed by plenty of removal and discard as well as some Planeswalkers and manlands.

During our match, we chatted, joked around, and got into a rhythm with each other where we were very much on the same page.

We pick up with Peleg's analysis from his **World Championship Tournament Report: Part Three**.

"Game Four is the game in which I made a play that could have thrown away the match.

Here is the situation:

I have in play two Birds of Paradise, Doran, the Siege Tower, Riftsweeper, two Forests, Caves of Koilos, and Llanowar Wastes. My hand is filled with good cards, the most notable being a Cloudthresher which I had just reached the mana to play.

Patrick was at eleven life, with eight mana untapped due to his storage lands, and having two Spinnerock Knolls. It took me a while to figure this out because I was tired, but I reached the conclusion that the best play was to keep the Birds back so I can play Cloudthresher rather than trying to kill Patrick this turn (nine damage from my creatures plus two from the Thresher).

Unfortunately for me, when I entered my attack Patrick made a move to write down his life total. I caught this out of the

corner of my eye, so I didn't think it was a trick, and the possibility of ending the tournament on this turn was tempting. I moved in, and he had the Hellkite, devastating my board."

—Uri Peleg

Peleg went on to win the game and the match a few turns later, but I ended up having two turns to draw a burn spell to win the game—two turns I shouldn't have had. All because of a little mind trick.

There is more to this story, however. Remember what I said about tight play being superior to mind games? Well, here you have me tricking someone in the finals of the World Championship, but I did not capitalize on the turns I had bought and ended up following a reasonable line of play, but not the best one. I essentially gave myself a 75 percent chance to win instead of an 85 percent chance... and it cost me.

Who is to say what it would have taken for me to see the line of play that would have given me the extra 10 percent that I needed? Suffice it to say that merely tricking Peleg was not enough. At the end of the day, mind games can buy you a lot of opportunities (in this case, I would have been at less than a 25 percent chance to win if not for my trick), but all the mind games in the world are meaningless if you cannot couple them with good technical play.

Is there a good way to create opportunities for mind tricks without exposing yourself to an opponent who may seek to turn your rapport with them against you? Yes, quite simply, take responsibility for your own plays. Don't let habit, memory, common sense, or especially your opponent make your plays.

You are not playing Magic to earn your opponent's approval. You are playing Magic to become the perfect Magic player. The good player makes most of the good plays. The great player isn't satisfied until they have exhausted all of their options.

How can we make sure that we are choosing our plays rather than letting our opponents choosing them for us?

Take the time to choose each of your plays yourself.

If you are at all confused as to what to do, just stop and take a moment to think about it. There are going to be times where you are in a race against the clock and cannot afford to spend a spare moment on much—but in general, it would do you good to follow the lead of players like Jon Finkel, Gabriel Nassif, and William Jensen.

These players can play quickly if they need to, but in general they take the extra couple of seconds needed to think out their actions... and this has made all the difference. Too many players think it is enough to simply slow down for the important decisions. The problem with that line of logic is that they are not always going to know what the truly important decisions are unless they stop to think about it...

Regardless of how you plan to incorporate any of these aspects of the mental game into your game, you *must* remember, "Whatever you do to improve your game, make sure you hold on to what you are good at. Remember your strengths."

Too often, players will be so caught up with something they have learned that they overlook or neglect the strengths and skills they already

possessed. This can actually lead to them achieving worse results than before they “learned” this new thing that was supposed to improve their game.

If you honestly reflect on your games, both with regards to your strategic decisions and your mental tactics and card-playing finesse, you can start making small improvements across the board regularly. This will eventually lead to a stronger strategic understanding, a stronger mental game, and a stronger thought process. If you want a stronger mental game, be honest when you examine yourself and do it *continuously*.

SECTION FIVE: THE BASIC ARCHETYPES IN MAGIC

There have been countless strategies employed throughout the years in Magic; however, generally speaking, the vast majority of them fall into a few major archetypes.

CONTROL/PERMISSION

Control strategies generally seek to survive Stage One, begin building advantages in Stage Two, and eventually reach a Stage Three endgame that will win the game for them. While these strategies tend to be somewhat reactive and tend to employ more powerful cards than many other strategies, they can typically be divided into “those with permission” and “those without permission.”

Permission-based control decks can range anywhere between Five-Color Control decks like Nassif’s, using only the most basic amounts of permission to make it to Stage Three, or they can go to the extremes of classic Wafo-Tapa or Cuneo Draw-Go decks, featuring almost all permission and card drawing.

In general, most permission-based control decks rely on a good deal of card drawing to compliment either a boatload of Counterspells or a token amount of permission and a selection of defensive control cards appropriate to a given format. A style of permission deck that has been appearing more and more over the past few years is that of the “Tap-Out Control” deck, a strategy that Michael Flores more-or-less brought to the mainstream with his Jushi Blue deck in the 2006 Standard format.

While many blue mages struggled with how to win games without ever tapping out on their own

turn, Flores went full-speed in the other direction, embracing powerful Legends like Meloku, the Clouded Mirror and Keiga, the Tide Star, despite having many counterspells in his deck.



The idea was that you can use the counterspells to buy yourself time to start dropping Melokus and Keigas, then tap out without fear: nothing most opponents are going to do is going to be as good as Meloku or Keiga anyway, so you will still be ahead compared to where you were the previous turn. Once one of them sticks, you can use the rest of your counterspells to maintain the advantage you have built.

The idea was a novel one, and changed what people thought blue decks were capable of. Even to this day we see the influence of this school of deckbuilding. A good example is the Planeswalker control decks which use permission and various control elements to buy a little time in the early turns or help solve specific problems. Rather than staying untapped all the time, Planeswalker control decks will often start tapping out on turns four through six, playing powerful cards like Jace, Architect of Thought, Kiora, the Crashing Wave, and Elspeth, Sun's Champion.

They all figure that nothing the opponent is going to do will be as good as what you just did... so tap out without fear!

It is vitally important to build control decks with mana curves in mind, just as with aggressive decks. You may not be playing a creature on turn two, but you still want to do *something*.

When building a control deck, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish. What is the reason for your deck existing? It is not enough to just like playing with these cards. Why your deck? A proactive strategy has natural advantages over a reactive strategy, as the reactive strategy is contingent on correctly predicting what others will do. As a result, the reactive strategy must be held to an inherently higher standard in order to be playable.

When playing against counterspells, try to sculpt the game in such a way so as to bottleneck the opponent either on cards, mana, or life—any resource you can constrain them on will do. For instance, if they have tons of counterspells in their deck but can only cast one this turn, you may want to lead off with a weaker spell, which they presumably won't counter so as to protect themselves from the next one. At this point, you could just not play a second spell this turn, then repeat this plan next turn.

They already wasted the mana keeping their lands untapped. If you wait a turn, they will have to waste mana again next turn and if you are ahead on board, this translates into advantage. This does not mean you should just sit around and wait for them to draw what they need, however. It is important to play actively, as they aren't always going to have *it*. Beating permission is about sneaking things through (or under) their countermagic and making

them think you have so much that they need to save their permission to counter. Cheap cards that have already resolved are generally the weak point for decks like this.

Try to get a read on them and figure out what they are telling you about their hand. Look at the way they hold their hand, the way they tap their lands, the things they are saying, and the way they have played their cards.

Non-permission-based control decks are a totally different animal, one that is generally bested defeated by determining where their weak point is and exploiting it. Without permission, there should be a hole in their game somewhere unless they lock you somehow. Figure out what their Achilles' heel is.

Sometimes their weakness will be discard, sometimes it will be burn... but generally, non-permission-based control decks are particularly vulnerable to Stage Three trumps like Sphinx's Revelation and Elspeth, Sun's Champion.

When building a non-permission-based control deck, you need to have a pretty good reason for it to exist as they are generally not as good as people think. Very rarely do they turn out to be winners—and when they do, it is either because of some powerful card draw engines, such as Life from the Loam, Gifts Ungiven, or Underworld Connections, or a lock like Winter Orb or Stasis.

LOCK DECKS/MANA DENIAL

Lock decks are a particular brand of control deck that heavily crosses over into the combo realm at times. The idea here is to create a game state where the opponent can no longer win. If they can no longer win, they generally eventually lose. Rather than resort to a degenerate Stage Three, these decks move to a Stage Two where they are permanently locking the opponent in Stage One. It is important to remember that these sorts of decks are few and far between, nowadays, as Magic design philosophy has evolved quite a bit over the years and these sorts of cards are far less common.

The most common lock decks are mana lock decks like Winter Orb, Stasis, Armageddon, Blood Moon, Devastating Dreams, or Nether Void. Notice that these are all locks of one form or another. In essence, a mana lock is a type of trump you may wish to employ.



In addition to mana locks, one may also create locks with cards like Dovescape, Solitary Confinement, or Erayo, Soratami Ascendant to make players unable to resolve spells or deal damage anymore.

In reality, any deck can employ some kind of a lock, it is just that lock decks like Prison are built with the idea in mind that they will set up their combo and everything else will revolve around that.

To beat a lock deck, one must determine what it is they are doing to lock you out. Then, examine each component of their lock and determine what the weak link is. Which part of the chain can you break?

Not all mana denial decks are built around a combination that shuts you out: some use land destruction spells to disrupt the opponent to a degree that they can't play their own game anymore. After all, if you use sixteen cards to attack your opponent's land and sixteen cards to control the threats he is presenting during the first few turns of the game while you are busy destroying his land, he could in theory be stuck in Stage One (mana-screwed) while your remaining few spells finish him off.

The most common land destruction decks of today are Ponza decks, which we will talk about in the burn section to follow.

BURN

Burn decks can mean a variety of things, though most commonly there are four major archetypes that people sometimes give this label to.

The first is the Lava Spike Deck. The Lava Spike Deck is a direct bloodline descendant of the “All Lightning Bolt Deck,” where the idea is to have every card in your deck function like a Lightning Bolt and quickly kill your opponent with direct damage, ignoring anything they do.

This strategy is particularly appealing to amateur players, as it is not only incredibly easy to play but it is incredibly consistent as well as consistently decent. This strategy is not as common among top players, as it removes almost any opportunity to leverage skill in any way during a match. In addition, it is easily foiled, whether by a Circle of Protection: Red, a faster combo deck, or an aggro deck backed by permission.

Still, this strategy is one that people must keep in mind when building decks, as it *has* reared its ugly head countless times over the years and will continue to re-emerge every time a sufficient number of cheap burn spells are printed.

The Lava Spike Deck is best viewed as a combo deck, not an aggro deck like most people think. In reality, it doesn't really attack you and a traditional defense does very little. It is much more useful to think of it as a combo deck that must resolve any six to seven spells.

The best way to fight this sort of deck is with lifegain or damage prevention, a faster combo, or cheap countermagic with card draw and early pressure. Often decks like this are particularly vulnerable to some trumps, like Worship.



The next type of burn deck that we will talk about is that of Red Deck Wins. This is the modern day ancestor of Deadguy Red, which was a major turning point in Magic deckbuilding.

At the time, just about all mono-red decks were essentially midrange aggro-control decks—the so-called Sligh deck we will get to in a moment. David Price changed all of that when he added Fireblasts and Viashino Sandstalkers to his mono-red deck, pushing the deck in a more aggressive direction.



Modern-day Red Deck Wins (RDW) decks are based on hyper-aggressive low mana curves that typically select the most aggressive creatures in the format. These creatures are used to put early pressure on an opponent while any creatures that might block are burnt out of the way.

Once the opponent's life total is low enough, all of this direct damage provides the deck with some reach, giving them a plan to finish off an opponent who has set up their defenses.

What is "reach?" We are not talking about the ability to block flyers, here...

Reach is the long-term capability of a deck to continue advancing its gameplan once an opponent's defenses have been set up. Classic examples include Lightning Strike, Ghor-Clan Rampager, Gray Merchant of Asphodel, Stormbreath Dragon, Brave the Elements, and Boros Charm.

In addition to a large selection of cheap burn spells, Red Deck Wins sometimes has a light land destruction suite, taking advantage of that tempo by making the most out of each attack phase. The ideal creatures for this sort of deck often have a power greater than their casting cost or haste. Other creatures fill in the gaps, no question, but the stars generally feature either high power or haste.

Lifegain will still help you to beat this deck, though in this case you'll want cheap removal and good blockers as opposed to counters and card drawing. This strategy is generally very vulnerable to a quick combo.

We mentioned Sligh decks above, and we should take a moment to reflect on them as they are one of the four major archetypes of burn. Sadly, due to the vast improvements made to creatures across the board, they have mostly fallen out of favor.

A Sligh deck is generally an aggressive mono-red aggro deck featuring a mana curve, a fair amount of burn, and a deckbuilders' eye towards board control. Whereas Red Deck Wins values cards with haste and cards that deal damage to an opponent, Sligh is more concerned with creatures that generate a board advantage—cards like Vulshok Sorcerer, Mogg Fanatic, Orcish Librarian, and Dwarven Blastminer. In addition, its removal is less focused on maxing out damage to the opponent and more focused on controlling the board with cards like Pillage, Death Spark, and Arc Lightning.



Lifegain can be okay against Sligh, but it is less useful as a weapon here since Sligh decks tend to take control of a game. Card advantage, a fast combo, or fat creatures are your best options to get an edge over a deck like this.

The final school of burn-styled deckbuilding is Ponza. Ponza decks have been more-or-less accepted by the mainstream for the past seven years, although various pilots have enjoyed success with Ponza decks as long ago as 1999.

Ponza is a style of mono-red that is best summarized as a combination of land destruction, direct damage (often utilizing more expensive burn choices than other Burn decks, for instance using Anger of the Gods and Fated Conflagration) and bigger threats (or at least bigger than the Firedrinker Satyr-style of creatures adored in the above decks; think Stormbreath Dragon and Chandra's Phoenix).

In addition, Ponza decks are notorious for taking full advantage of the special lands available to them to give them a sort of implied card advantage.

The standard drawback of land destruction is that when you do it, your opponent is happy to draw lands whereas you aren't. But with a plethora of powerful nonbasics like Mutavault and Tectonic Edge, the Ponza player is happy to draw lands too.

Defeating Ponza decks involves a strategy similar to beating Sligh decks. Card advantage, a quick combo, and fat creatures are all strong—though if your deck is a bit mana heavy, a good way to gain an edge here is to have *more* mana, whether it is by playing an extra land in the deck or sideboard, or by playing cheap countermagic that can counter the appropriate land destruction spell.



Red Deck Wins-styles of aggro decks tend to be the most common, as they are just about always playable now. The others tend to be a little bit more contextually driven, relying on a critical mass of cheap burn spells, a strong selection of board control cards, or a particular reason why land destruction is good in a format.

DISCARD

Another resource-denial strategy is Discard. Discard decks share some similarities to land destruction decks; land destruction decks of long ago would feature a *ton* of land destruction, pushing the theme all the way. Today, they are more commonly set up to feature a land destruction element in a deck that does other things.

Discard decks have evolved a lot the same way. Whereas fifteen years ago people would play twenty discard effects alongside The Rack, today they use a smattering of seven to ten discard cards to complement some other strategy. The most common strategies are The Rock and Suicide Black.

The Rock is the definition of a midrange deck, and is essentially a B/G Stage Two deck that uses black for discard and creature removal and green for great creatures and mana acceleration. It is a beloved archetype for many, but is prone to mediocrity—and this is primarily because the theory behind this archetype is suspect.

At their core, many midrange decks have a strategy of countering the opponent's strategy in order to foil them. If your opponent is the fast deck, they play control. If your opponent's deck is bigger, they play beatdown. They do neither of these jobs particularly well, which brings us to the inherent flaw in traditional midrange strategies.

It should be remembered, however, that in the past couple of years aggro decks have been getting more card advantage and more fatties while control decks are using more creatures themselves as well as using midgame tactics to help make it to the endgame. Some people talk about these new aggro

and control decks as midrange decks, but really they are just using healthy applications of midrange concepts while avoiding the classic midrange trap.

The trap is that in order to beat the beatdown decks, the classic midrange deck often uses lots of removal spells that are essentially defensive cards, like *Putrefy* and *Damnation*. In order to beat the combo and control decks, they use an assortment of cards like *Thoughtseize* and *Cabal Therapy*. The problem is that generally, the anti-beatdown cards are terrible against control and the anti-control cards are terrible against beatdown, resulting in a dozen bad cards regardless of which matchup you are playing (hence the classic saying that the Rock is 45 percent against everything).

Suicide Black decks are generally very aggressive black weenie decks that use a token amount of discard (instead of the land destruction used in red weenie decks) to disrupt an opponent. Now that these decks do not have access to cards like *Dark Ritual*, *Hymn to Tourach*, or *Necropotence*, they generally rely on cards like *Thoughtseize* to help justify playing them (instead of just playing a red aggro deck or a white aggro deck).



The basic types of discard that people use to complement their strategies are either Thoughtseize-type effects, Stupor-type effects, Mind Twist-type effects, or Scepters/Specters.

Thoughtseize-type effects (Duress, Cabal Therapy) are the most commonly-used discard spells, as they are generally solid role-players that can help pick apart intricate strategies.

Stupor-type effects (Rise/Fall, Hymn to Tourach, Blighting) are more about just gaining a little card advantage and interfering with an opponent's development rather than caring so much about what cards are discarded.

Mind Twist effects (Rakdos's Return, Mind Shatter, Mind Sludge, Persecute) are all about knocking the opponent out in one fell swoop. This type of effect gains popularity when there are a sufficient number of reactive decks in a format and becomes particularly popular when used in conjunction with mana acceleration (or as a sideboard plan against combo and control). Additionally, the printing of a particularly strong option, such as Rakdos's Return, will lead to more decks playing such cards than otherwise would have.

Finally, some players use Specters or Scepters as permanent forms of card advantage. Specters (such as Hypnotic Specter or Sedraxis Specter) are often used with mana acceleration, or as a tactic against an opponent who does not expect you to have creatures.

Scepters (Liliana of the Veil, Scepter of Fugue, Muse Vessel) are generally used as anti-control control cards, allowing one control deck to attack another on a front that they may not be prepared for.





This doesn't work if the opponent is likely to have solutions to most permanents, such as Maelstrom Pulse.

Discard is a powerful tool when used right, though these days it is probably best used to complement another strategy. Defeating it is easiest for beatdown decks, generally, as well as decks that draw a lot of cards and decks that use the graveyard (like Dredge, Flashback cards, Reanimator, etc.).

There are a variety of specialized tools available to you, as well, such as Guerrilla Tactics, which specifically targets discard decks, or Loxodon Smite (a good card that happens to have extra strength against discard). Often, discard decks are particularly vulnerable to cheap and powerful permanents.

COMBO

The term “combo” in Magic gets used in a lot of places. But when we are describing archetypes, it generally refers to a type of strategy that involves playing a combination of cards that wins the game. While most decks rely on reducing opponents to zero life to win the game, or possibly ultimating a key Planeswalker, combo decks win by assembling their combo. You can have combinations of cards that build incremental advantages and winning by being ahead on the board, but for the purposes of determining how best to defeat them those sorts of decks don't fall into the traditional combo slots.

Combo decks can be control or beatdown, and generally the difference is whether a it tries to go off as fast as it can (beatdown) or it tries to survive a few turns while it sets up its combo (control).

As a beatdown deck, Combo can be extraordinarily effective, because often one can assemble a winning combination of cards faster than people can deal twenty damage with creatures.

As a control deck, Combo can also be very effective, as a combo kill often solves every problem a control deck might have. Can't kill a Thrun, the Last Troll? Who cares? If you have a combo kill, you can just do it and not worry about Thrun.

We discussed the differences between beatdown Combo and Combo control more in the “Who's the Beatdown?” section. Here, the primary differences we want to talk about Storm decks versus true Combo decks versus big-spell decks.

Storm decks are decks that go off by reaching a critical mass of live spells, with little regard for what most of those spells are. Dragonstorm, Mind's

Desire, Grapeshot, Brain Freeze, Empty the Warrens, Ignite Memories, and Tendrils of Agony have all been central to Storm strategies... but there have actually been a number of strategies in this style that don't use the storm mechanic, and some before storm even existed. Glimpse of Nature/Elves, Academy, old High Tide decks, Pros-Bloom, and Mono-Red Burn (Lava Spike) are essentially Storm decks.



The usual recipe for this style of deck is to play tons of cards that make mana and cheap spells that draw cards. You keep making mana and drawing cards until you play a Storm spell that allows you to get paid for all the spells you have been playing all turn. (Lava Spike is a slightly different animal, but operates in a similar way for most strategic purposes.)

Two and three-card combos are the other primary school of Combo deck. These decks often revolve around three-card combinations that win the game, such as Melira, Sylvok Outcast + Viscera Seer + Murderous Redcap, Enduring Renewal + Goblin Bombardment + Shield Sphere, or Reveillark + Body Double + Greater Gargadon.



Other times, people are able to exploit two-card combos that win the game themselves, such as Deceiver Exarch + Splinter Twin, Donate + Illusions of Grandeur, Through the Breach + Protean Hulk, Aluren + Imperial Recruiter, or even the famous Time Vault + Voltaic Key. Requiring only two cards instead of three is a *huge* benefit, and often players are willing to play lots of bad cards in their deck (that they don't need to draw) in order to make these type of combinations possible (such as Cavern Harpy or Body Double).



Whereas Storm decks usually require over 75 percent (and sometimes as much as 90 percent) of the deck to be dedicated to the engine, the X-card

combinations of cards are often just as powerful and usually require a lot fewer dedicated cards. Many players have enjoyed a lot of success by just inserting easy “win the game” combos into existing decks.

Due to the often-compact nature of these types of combos, players of these strategies can often fill their deck with a lot more reactive cards and library manipulation. This makes this strategy better for combo-control, whereas Storm decks have a tendency to be beatdown.

There is a price to pay, however, as these decks often have a huge weakness: the bad cards you must play in order to utilize the combo. From a Combo deck's perspective, a “bad card” is a card that is very poor from a gameplay perspective when you don't have your combo. Goblin Bombardment, Protean Hulk, Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker, Cavern Harpy, Donate, False Cure, Enduring Renewal, Greater Gargadon, and so on are all usually very weak strategically for these kinds of decks when played in isolation.



As a result, if the opponent is able to continually disrupt your gameplan with discard, countermagic, mana denial, removal, and

disruptive permanents like Meddling Mage, Gaddock Teeg, or Ethersworn Canonist, you will generally be in a position where many of his cards are negating many of yours. At some point he has some random dudes beating you down and a Counterspell, and all you have is a Viscera Seer and a Protean Hulk that you are nowhere near casting.

This is not to say that true Combo decks can't work. In fact, many of the most successful decks in the game's history have been two- and three-card Combo decks. But they generally only thrive when they are either:

1. *Under the radar*, so that people can't become over-disruptive, causing the problems listed above, or:
2. *So fast* that the opponent doesn't have time to disrupt or race.

There is a possible third solution:

3. A degenerate card drawing engine, so that you are so far ahead on cards that a few dead cards won't slow you down.

This solution is the best and has produced decks among the absolute best, like Trix (Necro-Donate). The problem with this solution is that it requires a degenerate card draw engine to exist. Necropotence and Yawgmoth's Bargain are not legal in most formats!

The final type of combination deck is the Big Spell deck, although the term "combo" is used loosely here. You often do not need to combine the big spell with anything other than the mana to cast it.



A Big Spell deck is built on creating a relatively quick Stage Three that wins the game by playing a single big spell that generally equates to victory thanks to the way their deck is built. Mind's Desire and Dragonstorm function as Big Spell decks some of the time, but their storm properties are generally more dominant. More classical examples of Big Spell decks are Urzatron, Tooth and Nail, Enduring Ideal, and even (to a degree) Cruel Ultimatum.



These decks can sometimes function as fast combo decks, playing a variety of mana acceleration to speed up their Stage Three (Enduring Ideal), or more generally control decks with a combo kill, such as Tooth and Nail, Tron (by way of Mindslaver), or Cruel “Control.”

The strength of these decks is that they allow you to win most games that you resolve a single key spell, and they allow you a ton of room to play a real game outside of your kill. The weakness is that they are generally much slower than other combo decks and more vulnerable to mana denial. Additionally, they may have lots of dead cards (Tooth, Ideal) or a weakness to tempo decks (Tron, Cruel Ultimatum).

Occasionally, Big Spell decks will exist that revolve around a Big Spell that is not that expensive, such as *Shardless Agent* and *Violent Outburst* being used to cascade into a “free” Hypergenesis. While a deck like this can often be incredibly deadly, it usually has a massive downside to offset the incredible power of whatever its big spell is (such as how the Hypergenesis deck cannot have any support spells that cost less than three mana).

Another example would be *Goblin Charbelcher*. *Goblin Charbelcher* can be used in a deck with only two lands to almost guarantee that a single activation will deal twenty damage to an opponent. The cost? You only get to play with two lands in your entire deck. This type of Big Spell deck is usually incredibly potent, being both fast and deadly.

However it is also usually very fragile, as the massive drawbacks associated are extremely exploitable by savvy opponents: you can pick on the large number of cards in the Big Spell deck that can't affect the board, the large number of “bad cards,” the strange manabase, or the reliance on playing many spells in one turn.



WEENIES/TOKENS

Back in the day, White Weenie used to be the classic example of a weenie strategy, though the strategy was often relegated to fringe status by the top tournament players. Nowadays, there is a much greater assortment of tools for swarm players to use: token generators, more and better Glorious Anthem effects, more and better Lords for your tribes, and many more options for inherent synergy.

When you're dealing with Tokens, the classic formula is to use a cheap selection of fast creatures and a number of ways of committing multiple creatures to the board, as well as ways to take advantage of these superior numbers on board. The most common ways to do this are to use Anthems and Lords, as well as cards like Windbrisk Heights that require a lot of creatures on the board to exploit. Anthems and Lords basically cover the cards that boost your armies' abilities as a whole, such as Spear of Heliod, Dictate of Heliod, Hall of Triumph, and Collective Blessing.

A good way to look at token generating is to add the power and toughness of all of the creatures made, and adjust this value relative to the value of the number of bodies in your deck. For instance, Spectral Procession is so incredible because a 3/3 flyer for three is a great deal, and three bodies is of huge value when you are playing Honor of the Pure. Dragon Fodder, on the other hand, is a lot less exciting because a 2/2 ground creature for two mana is not such a hot deal, and two creatures is a lot less significant than three.

Another good way to look at token generators is to imagine your typical lines of play and add the costs together as well as the effects. As is so common in



Magic, the key is to evaluate how much value you are getting and mana is a good indicator.

For instance, would you pay three mana and then two mana (a total of two cards) to get three 2/2 flyers and an enchantment that sticks around powering up all of your other guys? When you look at it that way, you see how powerful Honor of the Pure is in a deck that consistently opens this way.

What about Dragon Fodder + Goblin King? Here, we have spent two mana, then three mana, and what have we produced? Again we have three 2/2s, but they don't fly. In addition, if our opponent sweeps the board (as people generally do against tokens), we lose everything. The Spectral + Anthem combination leaves an Honor of the Pure around after a Volcanic Fallout, so all is not lost.

Token decks must address their big problem, which are Wrath of God effects. How do you deal with board sweepers? Most (though not all) formats feature a selection of ways to sweep the board. If your token deck doesn't have a plan to address the big problem, then you are going to have trouble.

There are a variety of ways to combat this, ranging from permission (some light countermagic in key spots to counter their Wrath), mana denial (Molten Rain, Armageddon, or Winter Orb to make sure they can't cast their Wrath), discard (Thoughtseize or Brain Maggot to take their Wrath), cards that prevent the effect (Boros Charm, Rootborn Defenses, or Meddling Mage), super speed (being so fast that you kill them before they can cast their Wrath), or even just playing so many token generators and Anthems that they must use a sweeper on a single spell's worth of creatures.

There is no question that sweepers are a huge problem for a deck like this, but you can use a ton of cards to give yourself some resiliency. For instance, Bitterblossom is a great way to generate tokens; even if your opponent Wraths, you still get more.

Stompy decks (including many White Weenie decks) actually fall into this category despite having no token generators. The key is that they just play lots of dumb dudes and ways to pump them; they usually run a minimum of interactive cards that don't affect combat.

The best weapons against swarm decks are general sweepers like Supreme Verdict, Anger of the Gods, and Drown in Sorrow. You can also use combos and locks, since most swarm decks don't have a ton of disruption. This can make them especially vulnerable to combinations that prevent them from winning (like Dictate of Kruphix in a deck full of Fogs) or just win outright (like Seismic Assault and Swans of Bryn Argoll).

Whereas a control deck must often use powerful sweepers backed by a strong Stage Three, midrange decks often have fewer tools to use here, making them more vulnerable. Still, sweepers can be used to great effect, and I particularly like Detention Sphere if it is in your colors. Remember, it is like a sweeper when used against token generators, as it hits all tokens that share a name.

It can also be useful to look for other exploitable aspects of a particular swarm deck you are gunning for. For instance, Blood Moon may help be effective at locking out a swarm deck with tons of nonbasics. Color hosers like Perish can obviously be useful against a mono-color swarm. Engineered Plague preys on a swarm of Goblins.

LINEAR AGGRO

These days, the most common aggro decks outside of tokens and Red Deck Wins seem to be linear aggro decks based on some inherent internal synergy among the cards chosen. The idea is that you are playing a bunch of quick aggressive cards that get better and better the more you have, each helping all of the rest.



Plague Rats were the original linear aggro, although that term has come to encompass Affinity, Goblins, Kithkin, (non-combo) Elves, U/G Madness, Slivers, and now Devotion. The idea of linear aggro is a tricky one to nail down, since often the deck shares a variety of properties with a deck in another archetype such as Aggro-Control, Tokens, or even Combo. The important thing is that you are paying a cost (using a variety of cards that share a mechanic or type) so you should generally be getting paid back with value.

Perhaps a better way to think of linear aggro is that it is a sub-category that can further define a deck. Generally, there are two types of linear aggro decks: there are those driven by creature type (Goblins, Kithkin, Slivers) and those driven by a mechanic

(affinity, dredge, devotion). These decks are often very easy to make very powerful—but they *do* have a tendency to be exploitable, as players can choose hate cards that beat the entire linear mechanic that the deck is built on.

Just as a lack of genetic diversity leaves a population open to risk of plague, the lack of diversity among linear aggro's cards leaves it wide-open to cards that hose that linear. All you have to do is determine what it is that gives this linear its strength, what reward for following that linear, then use this to determine the proper tool for punishing this exact behavior.

For instance, Affinity rewards you for playing all artifacts, so artifact hate is obviously good, and cards that let you destroy all artifacts (like Shatterstorm and Kataki, War's Wage) are great. Okay, that one is obvious; how about we look at Goblins? Here, the linear is playing with tons of creatures with creature type Goblin. The antidote? Obviously, if you can do something to punish the creature type specifically, like Engineered Plague, great; otherwise, look to see what other features you can punish.

All the Goblins are small red creatures? What about Sphere of Law? The Goblin decks use all creatures? What about Wrath of God? The Goblin decks attack with tons of creatures at once? What about Ghostly Prison or Sphere of Safety?

Once you examine what it is that their linear encourages them to do, you can properly determine how to counter it. Use the four perspectives. Look to see what they are doing, then look to see what they are *not* doing. From here, imagine ways to punish what they are being rewarded for doing, then imagine how to get to a point where you can do that.

Finally, look to see what they will do in reaction to your hate. It is not enough to just play Kataki and cross your fingers; you have to be aware that they may Darkblast, Spell Snare, or Galvanic Blast to fight back.

Remember to avoid the common pitfalls that many players find themselves in, which is building linear decks just because they can.

I can't even tell you how many people have shown me tribal- or mechanic-driven decks where they consistently choose weaker cards than they could just so that the cards "fit their theme." If you are considering building a linear aggro deck, make sure it justifies itself. What are you getting in exchange for dedicating yourself to your linear? With Affinity you get everything cheaper and more powerful than you normally would; Slivers and Allies power each other up. Make sure you are getting paid (in terms of value)!

AGGRO-CONTROL

This category is somewhat controversially named, but since this term is widespread and commonly known, I will use it. Some popular Aggro-Control decks include Faeries, Caw-Blade, and Merfolk.

An Aggro-Control deck is one that seeks to deploy quick threats early and support them with a variety of control cards like permission, removal, and bounce. Against a control deck, these support cards are used to protect the threats that the Aggro-Control player plays. Against a combo deck, the control cards are used to keep the Combo player out of Stage Three long enough for the threats to defeat them. Against a beatdown player, the control cards are used to help create a position where the Aggro-Control player has a reasonable control of the board and can craft a superior board position. As you can see, Aggro-Control decks attempt to do a better job of what it is that midrange decks strive to be—namely, to beat down against control decks and control against beatdown decks.

Tempo is often more important in these sorts of decks than in most others. As such, to really understand the Aggro-Control archetype, you must be intimately familiar with the concepts described earlier in *Knowing Your Role and Tempo*.

Defeating Aggro-Control is often just a matter of being much faster than them, or just a little bigger (with regards to your endgame being a slightly stronger trump than theirs).

Remember, in general, a much faster deck wins, but a slightly bigger deck wins even if it is a little slower. This is a good rule to remember in general, not just against Aggro-Control.

REANIMATOR/TINKER

Reanimator decks can take a variety of forms; sometimes they masquerade as control decks, other times as fast combo decks. But the basic premise is that you are doing a fair amount of work to set up your deck in such a way so as to be able to “buy” a much more powerful permanent than you pay for.

The most common way to do this is to Unburial Rites or Zombify a powerful creature like Iona, Shield of Emeria or Elesh Norn. The idea is that you are jumping through hoops to pay four mana (and sometimes less) for a creature worth *far* more.



Decks like this often will use a smattering of various control cards (such as discard, counters, sweepers, or spot removal) to help keep the game under control until they gain a huge advantage with their reanimation effect.

Occasionally, there will exist powerful enough reanimation tools that you can actually try to Reanimate a game-winning creature on the first or second turn, which is a fairly strong trump in and of itself. Long gone are the days of Animate Dead and Reanimate, however—these days, most reanimation

spells cost four or five mana, making very fast reanimator decks much more common in Legacy and other high-powered formats.

Creatures are not the only thing that can be cheated onto the battlefield from the graveyard, as artifacts can be as well with cards like Goblin Welder. In fact, any type of permanent can be slotted into this theory; the idea is that you are buying a much stronger permanent than you are paying for.

In fact, the graveyard is not the only place to get this effect from, even if it is the most common. Sometimes cards exist that allow you to cheat a powerful permanent into play from your hand (Show and Tell, Dramatic Entrance) and occasionally there are ways to search your library for a powerful permanent and put it directly into play (Tinker, Natural Order, Summoning Trap).



When evaluating Reanimator decks, you must evaluate both how much value the player is getting from cheating on the casting cost as well as how much selection they will have available to them when choosing a target for their spell.

Decks like this are generally at their best when the field is wide-enough open field that players

don't hate them out (whether it is Path to Exile or Extirpate) or if they have an engine that is so incredible that they can just overpower the hate (Entomb, Tinker).

To defeat Reanimator decks, it is useful to evaluate the specific decks you are aiming to beat and use the four perspectives. What is it doing? What is it not doing? How does it plan to get where it needs to go? Where do things go after it “does its thing?”

For instance, a graveyard-based Reanimator deck gets a powerful creature in the graveyard and then “cheats” it into play. It generally is not good at just casting its creature normally. It might plan to get to this position by casting Gifts Ungiven and searching for Iona and Unburial Rites. (Gifts Ungiven makes you put two cards in your graveyard then put the rest in your hand, so if you select just those two, they will both go to the graveyard, setting up the reanimator combo next turn.) From there, you just want to ride that to victory, using a little permission or removal.

To beat a deck like this, look for weak spots. You could attack the graveyard with a card like Extirpate or Faerie Macabre. You could attack the creature with something like Path to Exile or Cryptic Command (to bounce it), if it is vulnerable to that type of thing. You could attack the reanimation spell itself, such as countering the Unburial Rites or Gifts Ungiven.

Reanimator decks that are more Tinker-style are tougher, but you can just plan to deal with whatever it is they are getting with removal or you can try to deny them the ability to play their card with disruption like Meddling Mage.



GOOD STUFF DECKS

This is sort of a catch-all category that tries to neatly tie together strategies that seem to feature elements of a variety of archetypes, but are generally more centered on good cards. These decks can be aggro or control but are most commonly midrange, and most are commonly collections of sixty good cards with a reasonable amount of synergy.

There is not a lot to discuss with these decks beyond the fact that they are chronically overrated by players, and since they do not focus on any one linear they are difficult to hate out. They are fairly easy to build at a level that is competitive, although they are far more successful at higher levels when there is greater inherent synergy in them.

For instance, Boat Brew (R/W Reveillark) was successful as a Good Stuff deck because of all of the natural synergies, like Figure of Destiny and Ranger of Eos, Siege-Gang Commander and Reveillark, Path to Exile and Knight of the White Orchid, and so on. If you are going to build a Good Stuff deck—which is completely fine—then you really want to keep an eye on the deck’s internal synergies.



These sorts of decks are often best early in a format's life, as players have a tendency to develop more focused decks as time goes on. Still, you can enjoy a lot of success with a Good Stuff deck; you just need to stay synergistic and really use the best cards there are. That is your advantage, since any one of your cards is generally at least as good (and possibly better) than your opponent's.

Your opponent may have powerful combos that win the game, or have a better Stage Three, or just be faster... but *you* have the best cards on a one-to-one basis when they are lined up. If you don't have the best cards, what do you have? What good is a Good Stuff deck if you aren't playing the good stuff?

Defeating a Good Stuff deck is often made much easier or much more difficult depending on your strategy's inherent strengths or weaknesses. It is difficult to really exploit a Good Stuff deck, as the deck often has few specific weaknesses. The way to beat them is with a broken combo deck or card advantage and to just add some really powerful cards to your strategy. Your deck may have better synergy but fewer good cards than they do... so add good cards! Cards like Sphinx's Revelation, Elspeth, Sun's Champion, Polukranos, World Eater, Baneslayer Angel, Jace, Architect of Thought, Bloodbraid Elf, Cruel Ultimatum, and so on are just strong cards, making them ideal for fighting Good Stuff decks. I know that these sound like maindeck cards, and that is because they are. We want to fight Good Stuff decks Game 1, since they are hard to get a huge edge on, and besides, we like playing good cards anyway.

SECTION SIX: DRAFTING

WINNING WITH FORTY CARDS

In 2007, I won the Standard portion of US Nationals with a Tarmogoyf/Mystical Teachings deck, but failed to Top 8 the event on account of my 4-3 record in the Limited portion. I used to be one of the stronger drafters in the game, but I had not competed at the higher levels in a few years—and while I was gone, Magic Online had left its mark on the game.

Everyone is so much better than they used to be. I mean, literally the 1,000th best drafter in the world today is much, much better than the 50th best drafter was back in the first year of the Pro Tour. Times change—and in order to thrive in the game today, it takes a lot more understanding and practice than it once did.

I redoubled my efforts. Once Lorwyn came out, I practiced the Limited format heavily. My first opportunity to demonstrate what I had learned came at Grand Prix: Daytona. I had practiced, and then practiced some more. I thought I was ready to tear it up with the big boys. I had experienced success forcing black in Urza's Saga and decided to try forcing that strategy to work in Lorwyn, this time with blue.

I ended up with a record of 10-4-1, finishing in the money, with most of my losses coming from Kenji Tsumura. But this finish was hardly the tournament-dominating performance I was looking for. It would have been so easy to just be content that I had cashed at all, but I was not about to settle for anything less than perfection.

I sought out some of the best drafters of the day who were in attendance—Mark Herberholz, Gabriel Nassif, Gabe Walls, Rich Hoaen, and Kenji Tsumura—

and I asked them for help. I didn't know it all, but at least I knew enough to know that I didn't know it all.

They explained to me some of the mistakes they saw I was making and gave me alternative perspectives to consider, above all else suggesting I work on being willing to draft green (and being willing to not draft blue) if it isn't right.

After honestly analyzing my game and using the four perspectives, I took the feedback I had gained and adjusted my drafting and play accordingly.

When the World Championships rolled around that December, I was prepared. This time, I drafted a R/G deck and a B/G deck, using everything that those great players had suggested. My natural style is blue control—but thanks to this willingness to learn how to draft green aggro decks, I was able to finish 5-1 in the Limited portion. In turn, that helped carry me to the Top 8 and my eventual second-place finish.

That was the World Championships where Nassif, Herberholz, and I unveiled Mono-Red Dragonstorm. But if not for my honest examination of my Limited game and my willingness to learn from the feedback I was getting, I never would have got to the Top 8, let alone be a part of exciting matches like the memorable battle with Nassif involving Ignite Memories in the semifinals!

Drafting is very interesting for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it is simultaneously very much the same game as Constructed Magic, but also very different. The skillsets used to play Limited overlap in many areas, but different skills are highlighted.

It is almost like the difference between playing point guard or center in basketball. You are playing

the same game, but a different set of things takes prominence. Someone who plays point guard in the NBA could probably play center better than most people not in the NBA, and there are certainly players who can reasonably play both positions. But it is important to realize that anyone can improve their Limited game. All it takes is intelligent practice and honest reflection on your decisions.

Much of the Limited Magic you will play will actually take the form of Sealed Deck rather than Booster Draft, but it is typically more efficient to spend the majority of the time you are working on Limited on Draft. This is because Sealed Deck typically uses some of the skills that a good drafter has, whereas drafting takes all of the skills of Sealed and requires far more.

One piece of advice to keep in mind, however, is that Sealed will not have the rich diversity of decks that Draft has. If you draft black cards, that means there is less black for everyone else (and more of the other colors, obviously). In Sealed, there is no such correlation. In fact, it is much the opposite. In Sealed, most of the time some color or combination of colors is going to be the strongest, and as a result the majority of people will all play it.

In any given Sealed format, there may be one or more colors that are stronger than the others—and as a result, you will see more people playing decks built with them. When you recognize trends like these, you can derive a lot of useful information; for instance, if everyone is playing black, maybe maindeck swampwalkers are a good call.

Another difference between Sealed and Draft is that there are roughly twice as many cards (and as a result, bombs) in a Sealed pool as there would be in a Draft pool. This is just a function of opening twice as many packs.

This is not to say that Draft decks are not as good! It is just that a Draft deck's strengths come more from synergy, whereas Sealed is more strongly influenced by broken rares that can dramatically affect the game.

It is not hard to compensate for this, though. For the most part, it is simply a matter of figuring out if you should play a consistent, fast and aggressive deck, or if you should build a slower, more powerful controlling deck. In some aggressive formats, we may prefer speed and consistency over powerful bombs. On the other hand, if our pool does not lend itself to a very aggressive deck, then we need to try to be more open to nontraditional archetypes for this format.

It is important to be fluid and change with the times. In Zendikar draft, I tended towards extremely fast black/red aggro decks. Conversely, in Shards of Alara drafts, I would try to play the most bombs possible, filling my deck with removal, mana fixing, card advantage, and a few fatties. In that format, a two-color aggro deck was my *backup* plan.

Sealed seems to more heavily reward powerful cards than Draft, so it can be useful to keep this in mind when switching gears between the formats. It is important to be aware of any differences caused by the larger card pool and lower consistency. Sometimes in a Draft format, you'll want to play first, but in Sealed, prefer to be on the draw. This is because in Draft, the decks are more streamlined and selected for synergy, and the format is faster. In Sealed, the format is slower, my mana is not as good, and sometimes I just want to draw more cards and find my bombs.

**A DRAFT DECK'S
STRENGTHS COME
FROM SYNERGY,
SEALED IS MORE
INFLUENCED BY
BROKEN RARES**

When drafting, there are a few factors that point towards who is more likely to be successful and have the highest chance of winning a particular table:

1. Who has the best strategy and shortcuts for drafting?
2. Who has the best strategy and shortcuts for playing with the cards in this format?
3. Who has the best understanding of the information they are getting with each booster pack they are passed?

GENERAL STRATEGIES AND SHORTCUTS FOR DRAFTING

Let's start with the first point. What are the strategies for drafting, and the shortcuts that we can analyze to determine what is best? This is an area that I think is best approached from two directions at the same time, and the more experience you gain with a specific format, the more you move from one to the other. We want to balance “What is good in general?” with “What is good in this format?”

In Limited, there are some general themes that are important to understand and appreciate when compared to Constructed. Although these can change as the contexts change, in general these themes are true for most Limited formats.

1. Removal is really good. I mean *really* good. In general, a good removal spell is better than all but the absolute best creatures.
2. Bombs can be worth a great deal if you can support them, but you generally shouldn't ruin your awesome BR Aggro deck to splash a Polukranos, World Eater.
3. Card advantage and mana-fixing are very important in control decks, whereas aggro decks generally sidestep these issues by playing a cheaper curve and fewer colors. In order to win with control, you usually need a lot of removal, card draw, and some broken rares. In order to win with aggro, you need a low mana curve, a few support spells, and consistent mana.

4. Combat tricks are really good. This is one of the major differences between Constructed and Limited. In Constructed, most combat tricks rarely see the light of day thanks to the highly hostile nature of the game towards individual creatures. In Limited, however, there is a much better chance that your opponent will not have the perfect foil to your trick. As a result, Giant Growth-type effects, damage prevention effects, and anything else that affects the board at instant speed is at a premium in Limited.
5. Random creatures are better than random spells. In general, in Limited, most creatures are at least decent whereas spells have no guarantee of even being not terrible.
6. Out of forty cards, you may play between fourteen and nineteen lands, although sixteen to eighteen is far and away the most common. Usually, you want to make sure to have at least eight sources of each of your main colors, although again this is really a function of what fixing exists in the format.

DRAFT ARCHETYPES: KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT BEFORE THE DRAFT

The draft archetypes from block to block actually vary a great deal and are usually driven by the key commons and the mechanics of a given block. One of the best ways to learn the basic archetypes of a given block is to read helpful columns by strong players whose opinions you trust, like Sam Black and Ben Stark.

For the most part, almost all of the decks you draft are going to be aggro or control, with aggro decks typically more common. The types of aggro and control decks vary from format to format—but in some blocks, such as Theros, decks can take on combo-like elements, or even aggro-control.

When you are studying a Limited format and trying to identify the main archetypes, look to see what mechanics exist and what commons best exploit these mechanics. In addition, look to see what colors have incentives to work with other colors.

I am all about blazing a new trail—but we don't innovate just to be different! We still want to do the things that R&D incentivizes us to do to a degree.

Generally, allied color combinations tend to work together better than enemy color combinations, simply because most sets feature more cards to help these decks than not.

A B/R aggro deck focused on cheap creatures, ways to enhance them, and removal may have very different card evaluations from a W/R aggro deck focused on the heroic mechanic... but they are still essentially both beatdown decks.

In Limited, beatdown decks have some common themes.

In general, you want to have a variety of plays on turns two through four. It is nice to make sure that you have a three-drop on turn three, but if you play another three-drop on turn four it might as well have cost you four mana. This is yet another reason to build your decks with its mana curve kept in mind. One-drops can be particularly nice, but in most formats there are very few good one-drops for Limited, and it is generally better to do nothing on the first turn than to play a one-mana 1/1.

Removal is still at a premium in aggro decks, but you want to try and stick to aggressive creatures and tempo plays rather than card advantage and late-game bombs (though they are both still good).

Control decks, on the other hand, tend to care much more about powerful cards and card advantage, caring little for creatures and tempo. With control decks, early picks are generally spent on removal and bombs. Mana-fixing comes when it's convenient, though you must be disciplined enough to draft it.

Control decks often prioritize card choices completely differently than other draft decks. Take, for instance, Font of Fortunes in Theros Block draft: this card is very mediocre in aggro decks, but in control or decks that can trigger other cards because it is an enchantment, the card is quite respectable and actively sought-after.

It is also important to realize that just because you might like control, that doesn't mean it is always going to be a good option. Theros Block supports the full range of aggressive and controlling strategies, but some formats, like Avacyn Restored



Limited, for instance, make control generally a poor choice of strategies.

To better understand the types of card evaluations that each archetype calls for, I recommend looking for articles from strong drafters such as Sam Black, Owen Turtenwald, William Jensen, and Ben Stark.

Four of the top players in the world, and not a one of them makes all the same picks as another! The important thing is to read what they have to say about *why* they value the cards they do. *This* is what makes their articles such gold—their explanations for what specific archetypes in that block are trying to do is invaluable, both when you are examining the whole format and when you're fine-tuning your personal strategy.

While specific draft archetypes will be very quickly outdated after this printing, there are concepts that remain timeless, such as the perfect deck. The perfect deck is a theoretical construct that allows us to construct a draft deck that we want to play.



There are many cards in Limited that are essentially interchangeable with each other, such as Akreon Skyguard—Wingsteed Rider—Battlewise Hoplite, or

Ajani's Presence—God's Willing—Battlewise Valor, or Bolt of Keranos—Magma Jet—Lightning Strike.



Some are better than others, but they are fairly similar in application. The theory behind finding the perfect deck is to continue to draft the “same” deck over and over, learning more and more about it until you determine just how much removal you really want, how much fixing you *really* need, and how many 2/1s for two you require to get it going.

When you know what your deck will look like before you draft it, then you approach the draft from the perspective of doing what it takes to build the deck you are imagining rather than just taking the best cards. This is not a perfect method, but for a player who is often better at Constructed than Limited (like me), it is very a useful way to bring Constructed skills into the draft.

DRAFTING A WINNER IS ONLY HALF THE BATTLE

Playing well in Limited is essentially still just playing good Magic—but compared to Constructed Magic, which is often far more strategic, Limited is more *tactical*. This is to say that in Constructed, you spend much of your time learning the strategies that you will use both in card choice and in game decisions (such as how to time things so that you have the mana for Boros Charm the turn your opponent wants to Supreme Verdict). In Constructed, the same patterns come up over and over again, so being able to predict these patterns and then dance the dance allows you to enjoy a great deal of success from disciplined training.

Draft, on the other hand, is often far more improvisational. In just about every game, you are going to have situations come up that you have never seen. This extraordinarily varied take on Magic lends itself well to tactics, which is part of the reason why Giant Growth-type effects are especially strong in Limited (that, and there is just a lot more creature combat).

Which leads us to the other big difference in Draft:

Constructed has a fair bit of creature combat, no question, but it is nothing compared to the endless creature combat found in Limited. Understanding how creature combat *really* works takes practice, but the best way to improve is to continue to try new ideas, keep an open mind, use the four perspectives when evaluating new ideas and situations, and honestly reflect on the feedback life gives you.

In general, though, the skills used in a game of Limited are still just good technical Magic, there

are just a much larger variety of possibilities that you often have less control over. Practice often—but if you are fortunate enough to be able to draft in person with people, don't just play your three rounds and take apart the deck.

Obviously, if you have to give the rares to the group to be divided up as a prize of some sort, so be it—but you can use proxies, and you can play games in between rounds of the draft as well. The idea is to just get in practice playing games of Limited in a format. This is where you learn things like how to play around Boon of Erebos and knowing how low of a life total is safe against a B/R aggro deck.

We will talk more about how to specifically target your Limited game for improvement below when we apply the four perspectives to improving at Draft.

READING AND SENDING SIGNALS

One of the most interesting elements of a draft is the flow of information. In a Constructed tournament, you know the possible card pool up front, just the same as you do in a draft. However, you must use an entirely different method of deducing what your opponents are going to play.

In a Constructed tournament, experimenting with different ideas, talking with people, reading Magic sites, and looking at past tournament results can give you an idea of the decks you'll need to build *your* deck to beat.

In a draft, you are aware of the possible card pool right out of the gate, but the specific cards in the draft are unknown to start with. As a draft progresses, you gain more and more information to help you make future decisions.

You will hear Magic players discussing Draft theory talk about “signals” sent to them by their neighbor. These signals are not some form of illegal collusion between players conspiring together; signaling is the Magic term for sending information to the players next to you by way of what you are picking (and what you are not picking). This is not only legal, but vital to success at competitive drafting.

In a booster draft, it may be every person for themselves, but you do have influence over your neighbors' available card pool—and they have influence over yours. Your interests are going to be tied together at times, since there will be picks available that may benefit you both at the cost of the rest of the table. Again, this is just standard Draft theory.

The idea is that if you cooperate with your neighbors, both you and they will get better decks compared to the rest of the table. You can't talk to your neighbor or show them your cards... but you certainly *can* do things like taking the very weak Flamespeaker's Will (when you are playing W/U Heroic) and leave him with a Nature's Panoply (trying to help cement them into green).



In this case, you are not passing the Nature's Panoply because you think it is bad. You are not passing it to be a nice guy to your neighbor. You are passing it because you think it is in *your* selfish best interest. If you're drafting a W/U Heroic deck, you want to try to ensure that your neighbor ends up with green as one of his colors, rather than fight you for either of yours. In this case, you are sending a signal to the person on your left that they should play green. This is a good thing!

One of the popular misconceptions among novices is that you should hate-draft bombs so that you don't have to play against them. This is typically very shortsighted. If you can play the bomb then by all means, knock yourself out. However, if you are passing a Favored Hoplite to take a Polukranos, World Eater when you are drafting a W/R Heroic

deck, you are probably making a mistake. Obviously, if you're rare drafting, that's a different story, but if you are in the Top 8 of a PTQ, you want to make the picks that give you the best chance to win.



The Polukranos is a stronger card, no question; it is one of the best. However, you are only going to have to play against three of the seven opponents at this table. Even if you face this player, they may not draw it. Even if they draw it, it might not be every game. Even if they draw it every game, you may be able to remove it with Divine Verdict, Banishing Light, or Excoriate. Even if you can't remove it, you may be able to race it, as your deck is very aggressive.

The point is, that Favored Hoplite will help your deck in every match—and even if you take the Polukranos, it is not like you have stopped a card or anything. Your opponent will just have to play something else instead. Hate drafting is generally not that good a strategy. (Which is not to say you should never do it; it just shouldn't be your default.)

Now, a Team Draft is a totally different story. Not only are you much more likely to have to face it—but every round you don't face it, a teammate will!

Since this is the third pack, there isn't really a value in sending signals... so if there is nothing good in the pack for you, go ahead and hate draft.

The key is that Favored Hoplite is actually a good card. If we had been talking about Ephara's Warden, which is hardly that exciting, it would be far easier to justify hate drafting. Keep in mind that the person on your right might not even be green!

What if you pass it and he ends up wasting a pick hate drafting it? Even if he splashes it, now his mana is worse. Pass a bomb in pack two and it might cause that player to move into its color and out of yours, leading to getting passed a bomb you actually want in pack three. In general, pack one is the best pack to be friendly in, as your actions set up how things will be in pack two. It is not so much that you want to help your neighbor as it is that you want to help them be where you are not.

There is also a hidden benefit to friendly drafting. When you develop a reputation for friendly drafting, you will find that other players will be friendlier drafters around you, as they know that you can play nice. If you savagely hate draft a neighbor for little or no gain, you run the risk of dealing with someone with a chip on their shoulder the next time you sit next to each other in a draft.

When drafting, make sure to give a little weight to how much a pick leaves your options open or closes them off. For instance, Keranos, God of Storms is a first-pick bomb, but it commits you to both blue and red and that's far from most people's first choice in Theros draft. Banishing Light, on the other hand, is not as powerful—but it doesn't restrict your future options as much, which might make it a better pick (depending on your style).



Your opening pack doesn't give you any information about the person to your right, but it *does* reveal information about the direction the people to your left are likely to go. When you get passed a pack, examine it from the perspective of what is there, as well as what is *not* there. What rarity is missing? Remember, there is a chance that a foil that was taken, not a common.

What are the best cards left? What color or colors seem to be missing from this pack? This can give you invaluable information about what is open for you to draft. If the person to your right passes you a fifth-pick Magma Spray and you had drafted Ajani's Presence, Launch the Fleets, War-Wing Siren, and Reprisal, maybe you should consider switching from W/U to W/R. Losing the War-Wing Siren is not a huge loss, but the promise of more red to come—both in this pack as well as pack three—makes the signal mean so much more than just a flyer.



When should you look to switch colors? In many formats, I tend to base one of my colors on my first pick or two of the first pack, then pick up my other color when I see what colors are available. Theros in particular is a format that makes me want to stay open, color-wise, prepared to abandon picks if signals and bombs suggest a change.

With each pack that gets passed to you, ask yourself what the person passing you the pack is saying to you with the cards that are left. If there are five cards left in the pack and they are all green and red, that should tell you that green and red are probably open. Even though they are all unplayable cards, the person to your right probably took an unplayable card in his color rather than an unplayable red or green card.

If you get passed a pack with only one card missing (a common) and the pack contains the actual best commons in each color except red, what does that tell you? Well, it is possible that there is a foil missing—but in general, that pack would make me think that the person to my right took a red card. Remember, the person to your right is not always going to draft the *strongest* card. The player on your right may have color preferences. They may also just have different card evaluations than you!

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON IMPROVING AT DRAFT

TOP→DOWN

The Top→Down approach to improving your drafting skills first involves deciding what you are looking for. You need to look at the big picture and what sorts of things you want to be in order to become a great and continually improving drafter.

1. You want to understand basic Limited strategy, the sorts of concepts that are important in Limited games, and the differences between Constructed and Limited.
2. You want a clear understanding of the format and what sorts of things people are doing to gain an advantage, as well as a detailed idea of the decks you want to draft (and the decks others are drafting!).
3. You want a flexible strategy for drafting the deck you envision, sending and receiving signals clearly.
4. You want to play intelligently and with technical proficiency.

When it comes to actually determining what the best strategy is at a given table, we need to ask ourselves two questions: what is the overall best drafting strategy for this format? And what sorts of archetype preferences do the particular drafters at this exact table have?

Most players with experience drafting Theros draft know that a fast, aggressive Heroic deck can be very

powerful. Does this mean that a fast, aggressive Heroic deck is the best deck to play? We need to consider what everyone else at the table is going to do. Some players prefer to avoid the most-drafted color because of how many people fight over it, preferring one of the lesser-drafted colors since it's likely to be more open.

So what does it take to have a flexible drafting strategy? Having preferences and plans is fine, but we also have to be willing to go the direction the pack is telling us. We need backup plans! For instance, let's say we prefer W/U, but also look to W/R and W/B when blue's not open. What about when white's not open? Maybe we just pick the best of what's available and look to play green and splash all four of the other colors if we don't end up on a dedicated path.

Shards of Alara Block was one of my favorite Limited formats and very instructional in regards to flexibility. Just about everyone eventually figured out that the Esper Shard is very powerful in Shards Draft. So does this mean Esper is the best deck to play? We need to consider what everyone else at the table is going to do.

I usually favored Five-Color Control decks in that format because if Esper was available, I would draft the Esper cards and just splash the other colors—but if Esper turned out to be overdrafted, I could make Grixis, Jund, or Naya a bigger part of my strategy.

The basic strategy that I used in Alara Block was establishing control by way of card advantage, removal, and making my opponent's cards dead (for instance, playing with no creatures that die to Magma Spray).

With card advantage, larger creatures, and removal, I would set the game up to go long enough to win with bombs. In Limited, there are going to be a lot of trumps that are less effective in Constructed. For instance, in that format, Flameblast Dragon could often be a game-winner all by itself.



My understanding of the format led me to believe that Esper and Five-Color were the most powerful draft archetypes in the *abstract*.... but it takes much more than this to grasp the format. For instance, Branching Bolt was a good removal spell that was absolutely devastating when it managed to kill two creatures. Losing two creatures in this way would often cost you the game, so I made a conscious effort to draft my deck in such a way so that Branching Bolt would not kill more than one creature under most circumstances.

This means if I drafted a bunch of 3/3 flyers (which I often did), then none of my creatures without flying would have a toughness of three or less. If a creature gave card advantage (like Elvish Visionary) or had a pump ability (like Paragon of Amesha) or had a protective ability (like protection from red or shroud), it could obviously get around this. In general, the question I asked myself was,

“Will Branching Bolt blow me out?” If a certain Draft pick would make that the case, I’d give that a lot of weight.

For instance, Rakeclaw Gargantuan is generally a fine card, but I tended to value him lower in Five-Color Control since I often preferred the 3/3 flyers and I didn’t want to lose the game to a Branching Bolt. In addition to Branching Bolt, there are a variety of other spells that make the difference between three and four toughness huge in that format—Agony Warp, Resounding Thunder and Naya Charm, just to name a few.



This perspective is not only useful for Five-Color Control, of course. Whatever strategy you adopt, it will serve you to examine what sorts of parameters the format puts on you. What does it take to have a flexible drafting strategy? As you can see, I preferred a Five-Color approach, as it lets me take Esper when it is available... but when Esper dried up, it also gave me the flexibility to move into another direction without wasting my early Esper picks.

When developing a strategy for yourself, you are going to want to have more than just a Plan A and a Plan B. You want to have a general direction (or directions—it is okay to have multiple plans depending on what you open!) to take in the draft as well as clearly-defined ways to know when to deviate from the plan and what directions you could go versus which you should avoid.

For instance, I found from experience that many Bant cards didn’t work well with the Five-Color strategies I favored. They didn’t really take advantage of Exalted very well, Giant Growth effects don’t work well in a defensive deck, and many of G/W’s creatures are cheap weenies that fail the Branching Bolt/Magma Spray tests.

This is not to say that I didn't value individual cards highly, though. For instance, one of my favorite cards to draft in that format was Waveskimmer Aven. Many other players will pass it late, since it is typically not what most Exalted decks are looking for. For them, it is slightly difficult to cast, not super-aggressive, and just doesn't mesh with their strategies.



From my perspective, though, it is a 2/4 flyer on defense, making it immune to much of the common removal. It attacks as a 3/5, making it a formidable threat, and the casting cost is not really an issue since I planned on taking the time to fix my mana anyway. In addition, five-drops were especially valuable: I liked to play Obelisks in my decks, allowing me to skip straight from three to five on the mana curve.

To identify whether you are playing technically proficient games of Limited, you can look for a variety of things. First of all, are you recognizing the mistakes that you make in every game? If you just lost a Limited game where you and your opponent each cast spells, attacked, and made decisions but you can't identify any mistakes you made, then you are probably making a big mistake in how you perceive yourself.

Before the 2008 World Championships, I practiced drafting with Manuel Bucher quite a bit. I had not been playing as much Limited that year and was not yet well attuned to the Shards Block Limited format yet. I sat next to him in countless Magic Online drafts and learned how to draft well. By the time I competed in Worlds, I was a very strong drafter in that format.

While I did very well in the Standard portion of the event, I only managed a 3-3 record in the Draft portion. Both of my decks were quite strong, so what went wrong?

It is not enough to simply draft a strong deck. You have to actually play the games with it. I lost a feature match to eventual Top 8 competitor and Hall of Famer Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa. I am not sure what exact decision I could have made to pull out the match, but our games were complex and close. This leads me to believe there is a good chance I could have won if only I had played with more technical proficiency.

After Worlds, I examined my performance honestly and critically with one of the top drafters from years ago, Mike Long. We reviewed my games and the results as well as my preparation. Eventually, we determined that the problem was that while I had spent a great deal of time practicing “drafting,” I had not actually played very many games myself.

This led to unfamiliarity with the subtle nuances of how the format would play out. But rather than beating myself up over this flaw in my game, I took stock of the situation and vowed to actually play all the games associated with drafts in my preparation for the next Pro Tour without allowing myself to take anything back.

While I was unable to compete in the following Pro Tour due to unforeseen circumstances, I did spend a great deal of time practicing and diligently learning the format. In fact, once I embraced the format and actually took the time to get good at it, I found that it was a lot more fun, which only furthered my desire to play.

The long and the short of it is that if you want to win at Draft, you need to play with technical proficiency. If you want to play with technical proficiency, you need to practice, practice, practice.

Kai Budde and Kenji Tsumura will be remembered as two of the absolute greatest players of all time and both owe the bulk of their success to their technical games, which may be the two best ever. How did these masters reach a level where their technical game was as flawless as this game has ever known? They practiced *more* and they practiced *smart*. They honestly assessed their game and the formats as a whole—and rather than wasting energy convincing themselves they were perfect, they rationally sought the most perfect truth they could obtain.

You may be an imperfect drafter at the moment—but when you know what you are looking for, you can move on to ask yourself what stands between you and becoming a perfect drafter.

BOTTOM→UP

The next perspective to consider is Bottom→Up. After you ask yourself what you *are* looking for, you should ask yourself what is *preventing* you from having:

1. A basic understanding of Limited strategy.
2. A strong grasp on a specific given Limited format.
3. A clear understanding of a flexible Draft strategy.
4. Tight technical play skills.

So what prevents you from having the best overall Draft deck archetype in a given format? What prevents you from having an understanding of what preferences the other drafters at this particular table may have?

These are the bottlenecks you must overcome. They constrict your flow towards perfection. You need to develop a plan to either overcome these difficulties or to bypass them entirely.

Whenever you deal with a bottleneck, it serves you well to begin by identifying what the bottleneck is. This is the inherent limitation that you are overcoming, and the central theme to Bottom→Up thinking in general. It is about looking to see what the limitations are. Once you have an idea of what limitations you must overcome, you can move on to Back→Front thinking.

BACK→FRONT

Once you have identified the bottleneck in question, the limitation that is holding you back, you will have the blueprint for how to beat it.

The key is to imagine what it would be like if the bottleneck was cleared. Ask yourself what made that happen. What if you never know what card to take out of a pack? Imagine having learned all that you needed so that you would know what card to take out of every pack.

What would have had to happen? You would have had to practice drafting, you would have had to try a lot of new ideas, and you would have had to learn from people who *do* know what the best cards are in a given situation.

As a result, if your ability to win at drafting is impaired by not knowing the right cards to take in an unknown situation, and you want to improve this aspect of our game, you simply:

1. Practice drafting. Play more without getting discouraged, and be honest with your reflection when examining yourself. Play with a variety of people. Don't just draft, though: think about your drafts and analyze the key picks using the four perspectives.
2. Try a lot of new ideas. Be brave and try cards you have never played before. Actually pick cards you have never had before at a premium. For instance, whenever I draft in *any* event other than a pro level event, when there is a pick between a solid common and a rare I have never played before, I pick the rare even if it is worse on paper.

This is not to rare draft, this is a technique for adding to my experiences.

Most of the time you will find that the card you knew was better *is* better. However, occasionally you will discover fantastic technology that could win you games someday. You know how good Magma Spray is, but you might not know how good Twinflame is.

3. Study the top drafters like Sam Black, William Jensen, and Ben Stark. This can be as simple as reading articles or as complex as watching a draft recap on Wizards' webpage for the Top 8 of Pro Tour: Honolulu from the perspective of your favorite pro at the final table. Write down all of the picks you would have made, then ask yourself afterwards whose pick appears to have been better. Ask yourself why they might have made the choices that were different from yours.

Even if breaking a bottleneck involves going *through* another bottleneck, that is just fine. Figure out what the new bottleneck is that prevents you from getting rid of the first, then get rid of it! Sometimes it can take two steps, other times ten, but don't be fooled: there will be a finite number of steps. Regardless of whether or not your bottleneck is "I don't have the cards I want to play with and can't afford to buy them" or "I have no one good in my area to practice with," you should systematically identify the limitations holding you back and then imagine what things would have to be like to overcome the obstacle. Then act!

If you don't have the cards you need you (or the money to buy them), practice with proxies to determine which cards you *actually* need. Then, when preparing for tournaments, get into the habit of trading with other players. Talk to a local hobby shop and offer to help out at FNM, perhaps by volunteering to do some judging. If they have enough judges, find some other way to help the store out! Outside of any special deals they might cut you, it is a great way to meet other gamers and open up the possibility of trading for (or even borrowing) cards you want for tournaments.

No one's good enough in your area? Expand your area to include Magic Online, Facebook, StarCityGames.com article comments, or Magic League. Travel to more events. Develop a network online and it will lead you to be more incentivized to travel further and meet more good players.

Regardless of what limitation is holding you back, start by identifying it, then visualize what things are like once you are past it. Then try to imagine how you got there. When dealing with drafting specifically, identify the factors holding you back and visualize having bested those obstacles. Start from the finish and work backwards one step at a time until you have seen your way back to the start. Once you have found a way that leads to where you want to go, you will have a roadmap for how to get there. This sort of organized thought will prove invaluable in many, many areas of life, not just Magic.

FRONT→BACK

Once you have worked your way back to the start from the imagined perfect execution, you can start from where you are and move forward.

There are a number of common bottlenecks that most people experience in their progression as drafters. Some examples of these would include:

1. Having people to draft with.
2. Knowing basic Draft strategy.
3. Knowing what cards and archetypes are good in a given format.
4. Knowing what other people like to draft.
5. Being able to play well enough to take advantage of the decks that you draft.

Let's look at these limitations one by one.

First of all, it is vital to overcome the “Who do I play with?” bottleneck if you want to improve as a drafter. Let's imagine what it would be like if you always had people to draft with. What would it be like?

Well, first of all, you would have a gaming store or other local place to meet with teammates and friends to draft with. In addition, you would have enough good drafters that you could always put together a competitive draft to prepare for events and learn formats. Finally, if you do not have the luxury of living near many other people, you could be very active online—not just playing, but messaging people, reading, and being a part of a community like a Magic Online clan.

Finding the best place to play in your area can be very important. If you are fortunate enough to have a gaming store that holds FNM or any sort of competitive scene, go the extra mile to try to encourage the players there. Help set up event nights and try to help other people break the bottlenecks that are holding them back from getting together with the gang. Make everyone feel welcome and go to lengths to support the store that is supporting this gathering.

*Look out for the people
who look out for you.*

It is not just enough to get seven warm bodies seated at a table with you, however. You want to have good players to draft with in order to keep your skills sharp and teach you new things. As a result, you should make it a high priority to help bring the skill level up of everyone involved in your local drafts.

It is not about beating these people—not today! It is about making you a perfect player. To do that, you are going to need to surround yourself with greatness. The easiest way to do that is to constantly try to help everyone around you succeed.

If you don't have a solid group of players who have time to play in your area, then you must play and spend a lot of time online. Even if you do have such a group, being actively involved online can help you improve quickly. I am not just talking playing in Magic Online eight-mans; I am talking about reading websites, participating in forum discussions, reading coverage, and communicating with a number of other players.

A combination of experience and studying good players is generally the best way to overcome the bottleneck of Draft strategy in general. The bottleneck of knowing what cards and archetypes are good in a particular format is not as daunting as one might think. Imagine what it might be like if you knew what cards and archetypes *might* be good. You would probably be the type of player that plays regularly. You probably don't just play, though, you probably learn from the trends in the drafts you are in, as well as talk to (other) pros about their perspective on drafting in this format.

Keep track of the decks you draft and your results with them.

How many times do you draft B/R? B/U? U/W? R/G? What were your results with each of these decks? Try to keep a record of every deck you draft in a notebook. Record the colors, your results, and key picks you made as well as your observations afterwards. In fact, it takes a little extra effort, but if you are very motivated it can be useful to record the actual decklists you play to use as a reference later.

It wasn't until Ben Rubin, Matt Sperling, and I recorded results from all of the drafts we were doing in Austin, just before the Pro Tour, that we realized that the decks that were base black and base red were consistently going 2-1 or 3-0 and the other colors were consistently underperforming.

In addition to keeping track of your personal results, record what deck went 3-0 and what decks went 2-1 at each draft. Once you observe patterns like we did with Zendikar, you can jump on them and try to figure how to exploit them. A great example of this for me was during Triple Urza's Saga Rochester Draft.

I had realized that the decks that 3-0ed were almost always black, and that the majority of 2-1s were also black. This led me to explore just how far I could take advantage of this information, so I began forcing black in every draft.

This was producing solid results for me, but it would be frustrating when people on both sides of me would play black as well, making me share the best picks with my neighbors.

I decided to try an experiment and incentivize my neighbors to give me the black. I vowed to take the best black card under almost *any* circumstance, passing the better cards from another color to my neighbor so as to lure them into those colors.

I actually had one very public draft that went on to earn me a fair bit of notoriety where first-pick, first-pack I took the aggressively-mediocre Blood Vassal over the high-class removal spell Arc Lightning. Now to be fair, the Draft *was* Rochester, so the other drafters could see how serious I was about wanting to take black and how I was willing to give up almost anything for it—but the same concept applies today even in Booster Draft, just on a diminished level.



In that draft, I took a weak Gray Ogre that would normally barely be a twenty-third pick in many decks... but it wasn't that I wanted the Blood Vassal as much as I wanted my neighbor to commit to red. Sure, I was sending a pretty loud and clear message that I would be friendly and pass any good cards in any other colors if I could just have black, but I was also directly incentivizing my neighbor to move in a direction that wouldn't hurt me.

People called me crazy, but I went on to go 2-1 in the draft after both of my neighbors stayed out of black all draft. I passed an Arc Lightning, a Zephid's Embrace, and a Shivan Hellkite, but ended up being rewarded by being passed two Corrupts and having two neighbors that were R/g and U/W respectively, leaving all the black for me. I splashed white in that deck—but during the first two packs, whenever I had a choice between a decent black card and a better white one, I took the black card.



A record of 2-1 is hardly impressive, but it was a rough draft, and I think I did better than I would have if I had been fighting my neighbors. Interestingly, one of my neighbors went on to win the draft, and the other went 2-1 as well. Interesting... the more important feat was that I

demonstrated that I was going to fight to the death for black in Urza's Saga and I was willing to ship anything in any other colors. People remember this stuff, which carries into breaking the bottleneck of knowing what other people will play.

When the Pro Tour rolled around, I was well-known for my bold Blood Vessel over Arc Lightning pick and had the reputation of "forcing black to the death, but will ship *anything* in any other colors if given black." As a result of this policy, almost every table I sat at during the Pro Tour, I was able to set my neighbors up into U/W and R/G (or close) and get three people's worth of black for myself. Thanks to this advantage, I went on to Top 8 one of the toughest Pro Tours of all time. (The rest of the final table consisted of Jon Finkel, Mike Long, Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz, Svend Geertsen, Worth Wollpert, Terry Lau, and Lucien Bui.)

How can you overcome the obstacle of not knowing what other players in your draft are going to pick? Finding this information out is possible without ever having played a game with the people you are sitting with! Imagine the steps that could happen that would lead to you gaining that information.

Maybe you had a conversation with some random strangers at the tournament earlier in the day, asking about color preferences—and one of them ends up at this table. Perhaps you read the match coverage from the Pro Tour or a Grand Prix that just took place. Anyone who read the coverage from Pro Tour: Kyoto could easily find out that most of the pros strongly preferred Esper in Shards-Shards-Conflux, just as the pros in Rome at the 2009 World Championships seemed to favor B/R in Zendikar.

Whether it's talking to as many people as you can, watching draft videos, or participating in online

discussions, there are a number of ways to increase your knowledge about the cards that other people are typically inclined to draft. This is not to say you should draft these cards, too; rather, it gives you information you can use to decide what you will draft in light of the preferences of others.

I first looked to drafting Five-Color Control in Shards Block because everyone liked Esper so much. The Esper cards are the best and I want to be able to use them, but I am acknowledging that many other people feel this way—so I want to make sure I have a solid plan for if people fight over it.

I thought that the black and red were so deep in Zendikar and so good that it is worth pushing hard to get into them. I will let my neighbor pick one of my colors if they want (as long as it is not green), but I am definitely getting either black or red, that is for sure. My plan to swap black for white or to swap red for blue gave me a lot of flexibility while still aiming for the strongest color combinations.

These are all realistic ways to break through this bottleneck.

People love to talk about Magic... so go ahead and talk to them about it, especially about what you want to know. What colors and archetypes did they draft? What did they play against? Who won, and what cards made the difference? That type of information is going to tell you what they think. This can lead to benefits you might never have anticipated.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE COLORS IN LIMITED

When you are first trying to develop your Limited game on a legitimately pro level, it is useful to develop shortcuts for thinking about the different colors and their relative strengths and weaknesses. These shortcuts can be useful not only for figuring out what cards to draft or play but also to identify the value of new cards as they are printed.

This edition of *Next Level Magic* was completed when Journey into Nyx was the most recent set... but you should know that the information contained here is timeless and will be of use to you each time a new set is released. We talked earlier about making a list of things to look for in a format, such as countermagic, discard, burn, and so on. Now, let's start to build a list of attributes the colors have.

The interesting thing about this list is that it will evolve over time rather than just grow like the other list. Wizards R&D is continually redefining the color pie, and color-specific abilities move around in their continued efforts to improve the game (and try to make the other colors able to compete with blue!).

When a new set comes out, it can be helpful to review this list to get an idea of how the colors have changed. For instance, let's say you made a list of your top picks in Theros for Draft, your ideas and observations about the format. Then, when Born of the Gods is released, you can analyze what strengths and weaknesses the various colors have in the set. Take those observations and evaluate how this will change a Limited format that now has one less pack of Theros.

Then, once Journey into Nyx was in the mix, you could continue to build on your observations.

Notes kept in a notebook are a very powerful tool, and the act of actually writing them down makes it far more likely your brain will remember the content of them on its own. When in doubt, go back to the four perspectives and apply them to whatever you are examining!

The most important stat on a Magic card is the casting cost (or, rather, the cost to play it, as the *real* cost may be something other than its casting cost, like Ancestral Vision, Bone Splinters, and so on). Having the opportunity to use all of your mana every turn is a very valuable one that is worth working for. Like we discussed in the section on Tempo, every turn that you *don't* spend all of your mana, it is like you did spend it—you just didn't get much for it.

In Limited, this is an important reminder to actively think about your mana curve when drafting and building your deck. A good mixture of spells at different casting costs should be a primary focus of your draft. Aggressive decks tend to want two-, three-, four-, and possibly one- and five-drops, with the possibility of including more expensive cards depending on the build and the power level of the cards.

Control decks are more likely to have their curve go a little higher in any given block, but it is still important to have plays available to you on most turns. In many Limited formats, control decks don't need to have many two-casting-cost creatures; they can plan on spending that turn fixing their mana with a Nylea's Presence, casting a Font of Fortunes, or just playing a cheap removal spell.

Of course, control decks will often just want some early creatures to help defend and buy themselves some time.



Full Theros block is a somewhat aggressive format, however it has slowed down a lot compared to triple Theros draft. There is a wide range of decks from hyper-aggressive Heroic decks, to five-color ramp decks, control decks that win with flyers to combo-like decks that just build an unstoppable threat.

One of the attributes to look for in the different colors is what casting costs they have a lot of good commons at, as opposed to the ones where they don't. If black is all three-drops in a set and green is all three-drops, then you are going to have trouble drafting B/G.

In addition to determining what colors go well together, you can learn subtle secrets to formats. For example, in Zendikar draft, B/R had several good plays for turns two and four, but few on turn one or three. As such, you may want to pick a Vampire Lacerator over a Surrakar Marauder, especially if you already have some two-drops, despite the fact that the Marauder is a stronger card.

It is not simply a matter of memorizing pick orders and just selecting the card highest on the list in your colors: you want to draft a deck that works well with itself. A good mana curve leads to a smoother draw and a deck that plays on curve more efficiently.



Of course, you also have to take into consideration where your draft might be headed. While B/R decks have no shortage of two-drops and really appreciate aggressive one-drops, your priorities may be very different if you ended up B/U. With blockers like Kraken Hatchlings and flyers like Umara Raptors and Windrider Eels, a B/U deck would be far more likely to pick the Marauder, even if it isn't a stronger card.



A deck like this is going to have a lot less removal to clear a path for the Lacerator to get through. Instead, it can tie up the ground with Kraken Hatchlings and win with evasion, and the Marauder plays right into that plan. In addition, B/U had less two-drops and as such was particularly interested in good ones.

One of the best ways to identify what spots on the curve each color excels at is to compare their common creatures in order of how good they are. Compare the five best black creatures to the five best green creatures.

Focus on the creatures at each cost that are better than other creatures of their cost... though you should remember that not all draft decks are based on the common creatures. For instance, when I play Five-Color Control in Shards block, almost all of the commons I drafted were removal, mana fixing, and card advantage.

Many people get hung up on trying to list pick orders for cards in sets they are drafting. The flaw with this is that pick orders can change a lot contextually. For instance, in Theros Block draft, your pick orders will vary wildly depending on whether or not your drafting Heroic, if you care about Devotion, what your mana curve looks like, what colors you might be splashing, and what synergies exist between the cards you have drafted so far. Try to keep an idea in your head of what your deck is trying to do, and pick cards that complement this strategy.

Developing your pick orders is very useful, but make sure to set your thinking up in such a way so as to be able to adjust your rankings depending on your deck. If you almost always draft the same archetype, then your pick orders might not fluctuate all that much. However, if you find that you are

only enjoying success with one or two archetypes, whereas you are struggling with another archetype, perhaps the problem is your pick orders are not adjusting enough.

I know that I always struggled in Shards Block when I tried to draft non-blue decks, as my internal pick orders that I have developed for the Five-Color Control archetype fell flat when I tried to translate them to Bant aggro or two-color beatdown decks. This can be overcome with practice and discipline.

At the end of the day, drafting is a lot of fun. Even if you can't always get eight people together, Magic Online is a pretty good place to practice, as you can find a decent draft at all hours. I will tell you one final key to drafting, which is true for me and I am pretty sure it is true for most people: you'll have more fun when you draft if you win more. And you'll win more if you are having fun when you draft.

CONCLUSION:

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

It is time to apply what you have read here, listen to the feedback you are getting, reflect, and adjust accordingly. This guide is set up to be easy to refer back to, so when you're working on certain areas of your game, I encourage you to revisit the applicable section.

Remember, it is not enough to read words by Gerry Thompson, Brian Kibler, Sam Black, Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa, Michael Flores, Reid Duke, LSV, or myself. To really improve, you have to apply what you have learned and honestly examine your game and the plays you are making. In addition, you have to stay current with the game. Reading content that requires effort to access, such as StarCityGames.com Premium, is actually very useful even beyond the strategic writing.

By doing things like acquiring a Premium membership, you are essentially making a statement to yourself and to the universe that you are willing to do what it takes to give yourself the best possible tools to succeed in Magic. Read articles on every site that interests you. Participate in forum discussions. Be a part of the culture and make friends with as many Magic players as you can. Facebook is an extraordinary tool for networking with other Magic players, and if you are serious about winning at this game, it behooves you to network with others that are as well.

Make sure that you are revisiting material when your perspective evolves. Sometimes, re-reading an article that you haven't read in years can reveal a new perspective that you were previously not ready for. *Next Level Magic* is designed to be re-read periodically. After reading it and then gaining

experience over a matter of months, valuable new insights will emerge upon future readings. Check out *Next Level Deckbuilding* when you're ready to continue your Magic studies.

Have fun when you play Magic. I know this one sounds obvious—but the truth is, when you are really enjoying Magic, your heart will be much more in it and you will improve at a much faster rate. If you are feeling Magic burnout, take a step back for a minute. If you are not having fun, do something to change that. Getting better is going to take work... but if you aren't having fun at least some of the time, something should change.

Finally, play more Magic. I know this sounds easy for me to say and you would love to play more Magic, but take better advantage of the opportunities you do have to play. Obviously, different people have different obligations ranging from school to work to family... but however much time you do have to spend on Magic, spend it efficiently.

The truth is, you probably spend a lot of time that you are hanging out with Magic players joking around and having some laughs. This is all well and good—but remember, if you really are limited in how much time you have to practice Magic, you probably want to make the most of the time you do have. Reading Magic articles and talking about ideas is useful, but at the end of the day there's no substitute for experience.

Practice makes perfect...

Settle for nothing less.

Patrick Chapin
“The Innovator”



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Near the end of 2008, I was talking to Mike Long about my aspirations of writing a book on Magic strategy. I said that there were a number of areas of Magic theory that had not been discussed in any sort of timeless fashion. In return, Mike talked to me at length about a project that he and David Mills had worked on a few years before, and suggested that I use it as a starting point in the applicable areas and expand outward from there. I agreed with some of the areas that were discussed in their work, and it is with much gratitude that I have used some of their ideas in my segments on Shortcuts, The Mental Game, and The Four Perspectives. I truly appreciate their support and valuable contributions to this project.

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Next Level Magic has truly been a labor of love. I had no idea when I set out on this endeavor just how much goes into making a book, but the journey has been immensely satisfying and I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to write it.

GLOSSARY

Aggro

A strategy that is fundamentally proactive. Generally refers to an attacking strategy (as opposed to a reactive or defensive one).

Aggro-Control

A somewhat confusingly-named hybrid between an attacking strategy and a controlling strategy. Most commonly refers to a deck that launches a quick creature assault backed by permission or some other form of heavy disruption. Like midrange decks, aggro-control decks tend to resemble aggro decks when they are against control decks and control decks when they are against aggro decks. See pg. 353.

Anthem

A card that gives most or all of your creatures +1/+1, such as Honor of the Pure, Hall of Triumph, or Lord of Atlantis.

Archetype

A deckbuilding strategy, such as Five-Color Control, Mono-Red Burn, or White Weenie. An archetype describes a number of decks that generally share primary colors, end goals, and many of the same cards as each other. They can be centered on a color combination (such as Jund), a basic strategy (such as burn), a mechanic (such as Affinity), or even a single card (such as Hypergenesis). There are a variety of ways to build Jund decks, but they have enough similarities that it is useful to talk about them as a single archetype. A common deckbuilding technique when improving or trying to defeat a deck is to study the archetype and what its history can teach us about similar decks.

Audible

To switch decks the night before or the morning of a tournament. This term comes from the American Football term for when a quarterback switches the play at the last second.

Average Value

Abstract evaluation on how strong a card is in general, not in a specific deck or context. See pg. 191.

“Bad Cards”

A term for cards that are inherently weak, but necessary for a powerful combo to work. For instance, most Protean Hulk combos involve a Reveillark, a Body Double, a Carrion Feeder, and a Mogg Fanatic. Reveillark is generally a very strong card, but in this case we would call it a “bad card” (generally with quotes) since it is close to a dead draw in a Protean Hulk combo deck. Reveillark may be one of the absolute best creatures to draw in some decks, but in a Hulk combo deck, you rarely are able to cast it or even to get much value out of it as a creature if you do. (Your goal is generally to find a way to discard it so that you can combo)

Back→Front Thinking

When you imagine how things will end, then work backwards in your mind to the beginning. To use this perspective, visualize the finished product or goal, then imagine one step before that, then one step before that, and so on. See pg. 78.

Bant

Green, white, and blue together.

Barn, Barning

Derived from the word “barnacle,” “barn” is a slang term that is occasionally used negatively. It is more commonly used affectionately to describe a person who is following a better/more famous player. It is also used to describe the relationship a skilled or famous person would have with a young protégé.

Beatdown

Magic slang for attacking or aggression.

Board Sweepers

See Sweepers.

Boat Brew

A particular W/R midrange popularized in late 2008 and early 2009 revolving around Ranger of Eos, Figure of Destiny, Ajani Vengeant, Siege-Gang Commander, and Reveillark.

Boros

White and red used together.

Bottleneck

A bottleneck is a phenomenon where the performance of an entire system is limited by one or just a few factors. A four-lane highway that has two lanes blocked due to construction, causing massive rush-hour pile-ups, would be an example of a real-life bottleneck.

Bottom→Up Thinking

Looking to see what is not there. Many people only listen to the things someone says, but when you use Bottom→Up thinking, you consider what sorts of things were not said, as this can often be just as revealing but in different ways. In Magic, you might look at a format and notice that there seems to be a lack of combo or control decks, which might tell you that it is a safe time to play all creatures, Planeswalkers, and removal. See pg. 71 and pg. 385.

Broken

Slang for “So good that it causes the game to break thanks to a very powerful effect.” Nowadays, excessive hyperbole has rendered the term meaningless, as people describe just about anything as being ‘broken’ and will often use the term ironically. When used properly, however, it references something that should not be allowed because it makes everything else too bad to consider.

The other correct way to use Broken is to describe doing something in Magic that is “unfair,” or outside the scope of playing creatures, attacking, and destroying stuff. For instance, when someone casts Ad Nauseam, they are typically doing something “Broken.” Note, this does not strictly correspond with “Too Good;” Zoo is often a much “better” strategy, but is not broken at all, since it just plays creatures, kills stuff and attacks. By contrast, the Ad Nauseam player may have no creatures, no attacks, no removal, and instead just uses their cards to create a situation that lets them win the game automatically—in essence, breaking the interaction that lies at the heart of Magic.

As an additional note, the vast majority of cards, combos, and decks that people say are broken or degenerate, aren't. They may be strong, you might not understand how to beat them—but for the most part, they are not broken or degenerate unless they are so good that they should be banned or artificially limited in some way.

Budde, Kai

One of the greatest players of all time. Hall of Famer Kai Budde won seven Pro Tours, a feat more impressive when you consider that no other player has won more than three. In addition, Kai's dominance during his prime was so far off the charts that most experts predict it will never be topped (as many believe that players are too good these days to ever allow for that kind of dominance again). In addition to being the game's greatest at winning tournaments, Kai also has a reputation for being the hardest worker the game has ever seen, leveraging an unmatched work ethic and proficiency at playtesting into unmatched tight technical play.

Burn

A generally mono-red strategy where one's deck contains nothing but direct damage, haste creatures, and mana, that aims to reduce the opponent's life total to zero via direct damage, before they can execute their gameplan. This is an archetype that often bridges the Aggro and Combo archetypes, as Burn decks have a tendency to behave like both at times (for instance, it is often said of Extended Burn spells that they are combo decks that try to assemble the combo of "any seven spells." See pg. 331.

Cantrip

A term for a card that draws a card in addition to its normal effect. Most commonly refers to a card that includes the line "draw a card;" however "cantrip" is also used to describe any card that gives a onetime boost of card advantage.

Card Advantage

Describes card economy, the number of "cards" you have. Cards are a unique resource in that they combine elements of both Tempo and The Philosophy of Fire.

You start the game with cards (like the resources of The Philosophy of Fire), but you gain more every turn (like Tempo). Although cards are the unit of measurement for card advantage, it is really a measure of all of your resources that are not going to disappear naturally on their own, which is why it also describes tokens on the battlefield and cards affecting the game from your graveyard.

Most commonly, card advantage is used to describe cards that can produce an effect that is worth multiple cards. They can do this by drawing cards, by destroying multiple cards, by having the ability to be used twice, or creating two different effects that are each "worth a card."

In general, card advantage is a good thing because more cards means more options and whoever has the most and best options will generally be at the advantage. See pg. 197.

Card Utility

A cousin of the Card Advantage theory that is generally less useful because its wide-open description en-compasses nearly everything in Magic. The basic idea is that it isn't so important how many options you have, but rather how good those options are. For instance, a single 7/7 in play is generally better than three 1/1s, despite being "fewer cards." This idea is self-evident to experienced players, but hard to measure in theoretical purposes.

Card Pool

The cards that one can build their deck out of. In Limited, these are the cards you opened or drafted. In Constructed, it is all of the cards in the format.

Cheat

Aside from the obvious expression describing intentionally breaking the rules, to "cheat" on lands is an expression that means to play fewer lands than you should, and to "cheat" something onto the battlefield is to get it onto the battlefield without paying its casting cost. Tinker, Dread Return, Show and Tell, Oath of Druids, and Narcomoeba all involving "cheating" something onto the battlefield. Keep in mind, these two uses have nothing to do with something being against the rules and are not illegal. See pg. 354.

Chump Blocking

To block with a creature that will die without killing the attacking creature. Most commonly used when preventing the damage the attacker would deal is worth more than the chump blocker, such as when the attacker would kill the defending player.

A common amateur mistake is to start chump blocking too early.

Clock

1) How much time is left in a round. 2) How fast you are threatening to win the game.

If you play a Vampire Lacerator on turn one, you just put your opponent on a ten-turn clock. However, if you play a Putrid Leech on the second turn, you have just increased the clock to a three-turn clock: your Lacerator puts them to eighteen this turn, and your Leech and Lacerator hit for six each turn from now on. Obviously when used this way, it is continually fluctuating as both players play cards that speed up or slow down the "clock." When deciding on lines of play, especially with Aggro decks, it is useful to consider each line of play's effect on the "clock."

If you can deal two damage to yourself and one damage to your opponent, how do you decide if you should? If they are playing total control or combo, you might just do it figuring that your life total doesn't matter as long as it is not zero. However, if you are playing against another aggro deck you would do well to consider whether it speeds your "clock" up at all. If you kill your opponent a turn faster, then that two damage you dealt to yourself might save you eight if your opponent has a Broodmate Dragon or even win the game for you if your opponent dies the turn before they can cast Martial Coup.

Combo

A word with a number of meanings in Magic, most commonly used to describe two or more cards that work together to create an effect that is greater than the sum of their parts. When describing an archetype, it generally refers to a strategy of trying to assemble a combination of cards that win the game on their own rather than attacking or taking control of a game.

Note that this use can actually describe so-called, “one-card combos” like Tooth and Nail, Dragonstorm, Mind's Desire, and Enduring Ideal. In general, a combo deck aspires to win the game through a means other than attacking or taking control of a game, generally doing something “broken.” See pg. 340.

Control

1) A deck archetype that uses a strategy of stopping the opponent from winning. Once the opponent is rendered harmless, the control deck wins at its convenience. As such, it's often said of a control deck that “it doesn't try to win, it just tries to not die.” The theory is that if it does live long enough, it will eventually win. See pg. 325.

2) The person that is not taking the beatdown role in a matchup. Whereas generally the beatdown player wants to be faster (beating an opponent before they reach their Stage Three), the control player wants to be “bigger,” in that they want a Stage Three that trumps their opponent's.

Deadguy Red

The name for the first mono-red aggro deck that moved away from card advantage and board control toward all burn and haste. While these types of decks are now most commonly called Red Deck Wins or Burn or just mono-red these days, the original Deadguy Red is named after the influential '90s Magic team Team Deadguy, consisting of David Price, Chris Pikula, Worth Wollpert, Tony Tsai, David Bartholow, and Jon Finkel.

Degenerate

Related to “broken,” a term for something that is so powerful it makes the game not work right any more. This term is used much less than “broken,” and as such as retained much of its original meaning.

Diminishing returns

When something (such as a card) gains less value the more you have of it. For instance, a combo deck that is all mana and card draw gains a huge amount by adding a Fireball to win with. The second Fireball you add is worth something, but not as much as the first. Adding more and more Fireballs makes each one worse in this sort of scenario. However, each one has a cost, since they not only take up a card and a slot in your deck, each one is one less of something else you could be playing, like a bounce spell, a card drawer, more mana, or a tutor. See pg. 247.

Disruption

This term describes ways one has to interact with their opponent, such as making them discard cards, destroying lands, countering spells, removing permanents, preventing spells from being played, exiling their graveyard, or any number of other ways to affect the opponent's game. Often most applicable when considering Combo matchups, since relevant disruption is often very powerful against combo whereas most other types of cards mean very little beyond changing the timing on the clock.

Dojo, The

The original Magic strategy website founded by Frank Kusumoto. Although The Magic Dojo is now defunct, much of its contents have been preserved by classicdojo.org.

Dredge

A term that has come to mean the most dedicated graveyard based deck in a format, even when it does not contain any cards with the dredge mechanic.

Early Game

Also known as Stage One of a game, the early game is when you are essentially “mana-screwed” and must operate below your minimum game threshold, which

is the level at which your deck is operating at a basic level. The concept of viewing the early, mid, and late game in terms of Stage One, Stage Two, and Stage Three and the idea that you are often not going to be in the same stage as your opponent was first coined by Michael J. Flores, often using the term “phase” instead of “stage.” See pg. 189.

Esper

White, blue, and black used together.

Explicit Communication

Direct verbal communication by using words that spell out what is being suggested. See pg. 307.

Fearless Magical Inventory

An idea first presented by Sam Stoddard that encourages one to boldly list one's weaknesses in Magic. The goal is to stop lying to yourself about your current game, and instead, to honestly face what needs to be done to progress your game by making it a matter of public record. See pg. 13.

Fetch lands

Powerful lands printed in Onslaught and Zendikar (example: Polluted Delta and Arid Mesa) that allow you to sacrifice them and pay one life to fetch one of two different land types from your deck. Most commonly used to fetch a dual land like Underground Sea or Stomping Ground.

Finkel, Jon

One of the greatest players of all time, as well as one of the most iconic. Jonny Magic's fourteen Pro Tour Top 8's dwarf even Gabriel Nassif, Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa, and Kai Budde's nines and tens. Finkel is most famous for his love of blue cards as well as his longevity.

Jon Top 8ed the junior division of the very first Pro Tour in 1996 and, twelve years later, won Pro Tour: Malaysia, accomplishing every major Magic accomplishment along the way including induction into the inaugural class of Magic's Hall of Fame. Since the last printing of Next Level Magic, Jon has gone on to Top 8 two more Pro Tours, with accomplishments continuing to pile up.

Fire, The

An overwhelming desire to win, a burning passion for success, for perfection. See pg. 171.

Fixed Value

A common amateur mistake where one does not take into consideration that context often changes the values of cards. See pg. 191.

Flores, Michael J

One of the game's most prolific writers, Flores is also notable for many revolutionary deck designs and principles that continue to leave their mark. Author of the most famous (and arguably best) Magic strategy article of all time, "Who's the Beatdown?"

Four Perspectives

The four ways to view a problem. These are Top→Down, Bottom→Up, Back→Front, Front→Back, which can be combined with each other in different orders to gain new insight. See pg. 53.

Front→Back Thinking

When you imagine how things will logically play out from start to finish. See pg. 81.

Fundamental Turn

A concept pioneered by Hall of Famer Zvi Mowshowitz, in which a game of Magic is viewed in terms of the turn where your deck does whatever it is you are trying to do. For an aggro deck, this usually

means the turn where you attack for lethal or finish with a barrage of direct damage.

For a combo deck, this is the turn you “go off,” either assembling your combo or casting your “big spell.” For a control deck, this is the turn where you make a play that undoes all of the previous disadvantage you have had so far in the game, such as when you cast Martial Coup, Cruel Ultimatum, or (in some formats) a simple Wrath of God. The Fundamental Turn is a measure of how long it takes your deck to work.

Gauntlet, The

A collection of stock decks that are representative of the expected metagame designed to test the merits of a new deck.

Going Off

This is the moment where a Combo deck or a Big Spell deck plays its combo or big spell, usually in a bid to win the game on the spot.

Good Stuff

A term for a type of deck that relies on all inherently strong cards, opting for power over synergy.

Grixix

Blue, black, and red used together.

Hacker, Brian

Early Magic pro and writer who invented “Beatdown,” as well as revolutionized Draft theory by teaching people such now-essential elements as playing with more creatures than they were, the true value of combat tricks, how to build a strategy out of attacking for two, and that people should run sixteen to eighteen lands instead of thirteen to fifteen.

Hard Lock

A combination or game state that renders one player totally unable to win.

Hate

Cards that are extremely effective at combating a particular strategy. Often extremely narrow and more commonly found as sideboard cards.

Heezy

American Magic slang word for someone that has had too much to drink and gets themselves into trouble without any protection from the obstacles they encounter.

Home Brew

Slang term for a deck built by its pilot, generally defying conventional classification. See Rogue Deck.

Hoser

See Hate.

Hulk Combo

A number of combo decks revolve around getting Protean Hulk to go to a graveyard from the battlefield. The controller of this combo searches their library for a Carrion Feeder and a Body Double (copying Hulk). Then they sacrifice the Body Double to the Carrion Feeder to search their library for a Reveillark and a Mogg Fanatic (which is sacrificed to deal one damage to the opponent). Next the Reveillark is sacrificed to return Mogg Fanatic and Body Double (copying Reveillark). At this point you can keep sacrificing the Mogg Fanatic and Body Double until the opponent is dead. A Body Snatcher is typically used in conjunction with this combo as an insurance policy in case the Hulk player gets stuck with a combo piece in their hand that they cannot get into their graveyard.

Implicit Communication

Transmission of information through the environment and experience, rather than just directly presenting words and ideas. This often includes body language,

insinuations, implied suggestions, subliminal messages, and acting in a way that puts an idea in someone's head. See pg. 307.

Inevitability

A tendency to win if the game lasts long enough. For instance, we might say that in general, a Control deck has inevitability over an aggro deck, because the longer the game goes, the more likely it is to win.

Infinite Loop

See Recursion.

Information Cascades

A chain reaction of decision-making where almost everyone involved is making their decisions based on the decisions of others, who in turn are making their decisions based on others, regardless of personal information. This leads to popular opinion coming to believe something that might not actually be true. This phenomenon and how it relates to Magic is documented in my most widely-acclaimed article Information Cascades, which has been reproduced in full starting on pg. 152.

Jedi Mind Tricks

When you help persuade an opponent to adopt an inferior line of play based on suggestion or other forms of mental manipulation, it is a true Jedi Mind Trick. This is the most famous element of the mental game of Magic, though frequently this word is used (inaccurately) to describe any sort of bluff.

Jund

Black, red, and green together. Took on special meaning in 2009 and 2010, as the Jund Deck of the era, revolving around Bloodbraid Elf and Sprouting Thrinax was among the most popular and successful of all time.

Late Game

Also called Stage Three, this is the point in the game when your deck is operating at full power and you are able to play cards that threaten to win the game if not immediately checked or a greater trump is played. It is common for the majority of cards to be somewhat irrelevant at this stage of the game, as the cards that matter tend to matter much more than the rest. For instance on turn ten, a Lightning Bolt is usually just going to trade one-for-one, whereas Cruel Ultimatum can be worth between seven and eleven cards, making it more important than a fist full of cards that an opponent could have.

Library Manipulation

Cards that allow you to draw cards, change the order of cards in your library, or search your library for specific cards.

Linear

A synergy-based deck that revolves around pushing a mechanic, creature type, or some other such theme to the extreme. These types of decks tend to be far more powerful than the sum of their parts and can often prey on unprepared opponents. However, they are often especially vulnerable to cards that hate out that theme (since the whole deck is that theme). For instance, Kataki punishes Affinity, and Leyline of the Void punishes Dredge.

Long, Michael

A controversial pro from the old days who achieved many great successes, including winning Pro Tour Paris '96. While Long is a subject of much dispute in the Magic community given his reputation for shady play (for which he was, briefly, suspended), his mental game was undisputedly among the best of all time, as was his deckbuilding prowess. He designed many famous and successful decks including Long.

dec, a Dark Ritual combo deck named after him that is still popular in Vintage today.

Magical Christmas Land

This is a term to describe the fantasy world where everything works out perfectly and in the best possible way. For instance, you might build a deck that plans to play a turn-one Noble Hierarch, turn-two Lotus Cobra, turn-three Harrow into Cruel Ultimatum. Will such a deck fire consistently enough to win you a tournament? Will your opponent never have a Lightning Bolt to destroy your creatures on turns one or two? Yeah... In Magical Christmas Land.

Manabase

The cards in your deck that make mana or find it. This includes lands, artifact mana, and Rampant Growth like effects, as well as rituals like Rite of Flame. It is useful to keep your manabase in mind when making changes to a deck, as small changes to the non-mana cards can often call for changes to the manabase. See pg. 242.

Mana-fixing

Cards that help you get the colors of mana you need. Generally done in one of two ways: either they produce the mana you need (Underground Sea, Birds of Paradise, Ancient Ziggurat, Izzet Signet), or they fetch the land you need to get that mana (Polluted Delta, Sakura-Tribe Elder, Rampant Growth).

Mana-Screwed

When you don't have enough mana to cast your spells, you are said to be mana-screwed. Everyone starts the game in Stage One, which is a way of saying that everyone starts mana-screwed.

However, if you only have one or two land, you might not get out of Stage One as planned and begin to cast your larger spells, at which point this term would apply. A player can also be said to be mana-screwed

when their mana is disrupted by cards like Stone Rain, Blood Moon, or Winter Orb. It can be useful to understand when you are stuck in Stage One, but many, many amateurs make the mistake of always blaming mana-screw when they lose, which is often partially inaccurate and impairs their ability to improve.

Manlands

Lands that turn into a creature. Examples include Celestial Colonnade, Mutavault, Treetop Village, and Stalking Stones.

Matchup

Two particular decks facing each other, such as “Earthquake is very strong in the Grixis versus White Weenie matchup.”

Metagame

An estimate of what percentage of the field is playing a particular deck in a given event or format. For instance, you might say that Jund occupies 30 percent of the Standard metagame (since 30 percent of people are playing it) and as a result Bant is a poor choice in that metagame (since it loses to Jund, a very common deck).

Sometimes “metagame” is used as a verb to describe the action of making a choice that might not be the best in a vacuum, but is specifically chosen because the pilot believes it will give them an advantage against the opponents they expect to face.

Note that correctly understanding the metagame for a new format (for example, Extended right after a set rotation) can provide great benefits. If you can correctly guess that a large portion of the field will be playing a given deck, and you have a deck that routinely beats that deck, then you will have a distinct advantage.

Mid-Game

Also known as Stage Two, the middle game is the most strategically relevant part of the game, and where the most mistakes are made. In this stage of play, you can play most (or all) of your spells, but the battles that are being fought are still relevant—unlike Stage Three, where the spells are so impactful that they make everything else nearly irrelevant. See pg. 187.

Midrange

Generally used to describe a deck that is built to thrive in Stage Two, often trying to get out of Stage One quickly, but not spending much energy keeping others out of Stage Three. This often leaves the Midrange player at an advantage against Aggro decks and “smaller” Midrange decks. In addition, as the Midrange decks get “bigger,” they start becoming vulnerable to the faster Aggro decks. Midrange decks used to be chastised by many veteran players, as they tend to have weaknesses against many Control or Combo decks. However, in formats with minimal Combo and Control, they can thrive.

Mindset

A set of methods, assumptions, and shortcuts that tie into your perspective. See pg. 177.

Mindful Thinking

Keeping an open mind, but thinking about what matters. See pg. 142.

Mirror, The

When you are playing against the same deck as you. The identical mirror is when your sixty-card list is the exact same, whereas most consider it a mirror if the decks are the same archetype even if their specific decklists are different. Sometimes, people use the term semi-mirror to describe a matchup where the two decks are similar in many ways but have

key differences that make them function somewhat differently in one or more important areas.

Misassignment of Role

When a player mistakenly thinks they should be aggressive when they should be defensive, or play defensively when they should be aggressive. Understanding your role in a game is critical to success in Magic. See pg. 270.

Nassif, Gabriel

One of the greatest players of all time. Inducted into the Magic Hall of Fame in 2010. “Yellow Hat,” as he is sometimes called by his friends on account of his once trademark ridiculous bright yellow hat, is considered to be one of the best deckbuilders in the game’s history. His nine Top 8s include two wins, a record rivaled by only Jon Finkel, Kai Budde, and Paulo Vitor Damo da Rosa.

Although technically French, Nassif has been claimed by the Americans after years of working closely with them. He has a reputation for being the “luckiest player of all time,” as exhibited in the “Instant Classic” survival of Ignite Memories in the Top 8 of the 2007 Magic World Championships, and his “Called Shot” in the Top 8 of Pro Tour Kyoto 2009. (The called shot was where he drew a card face-down, empty-handed, with no board and facing lethal damage—and then, before looking at it, announced that he was arranging his Cruel Ultimatum mana for the win. He flipped it over, and won.)

Naya

White, green, and red used together.

Neighbors

The drafters sitting next to you. They are of particular importance since they have the most influence over which cards get passed to you.

Netdeck

A popular decklist that is available online, and as a result is well-known.

Next Level Blue:

Originally the name of the dominant Counterbalance-Top deck to emerge in early 2008, it eventually became synonymous with any low-mana blue Good Stuff decks that wins with incremental advantage (rather than a combo kill).

Nuts, The

A term borrowed from poker that means "The Best" or "Something Unbeatable." Can also be expressed as the "Nut High."

Operations Management

Elements of playing Magic outside of primary strategic concerns that can still have an impact on the game, such as shuffling, ordering your lands, the layout of your graveyard, the sleeves used, the method of keeping track of life total, randomization methods, and so on.

Pace, Pace, Pace, Lead

A technique used when attempting to exert mental influence over someone. The idea is to say a number of things that the other person agrees with, then when they are used to agreeing with you, get them to agree to something that is in your best interest. See Jedi Mind Tricks and Rapport on pg. 318.

Perfect Deck, The

A concept pioneered by Mike Long and David Mills that involves practicing a Limited format over and over in pursuit of an understanding of what an ideal deck would look like in that format, such as how many two-drops, how many three-drops, how much removal, how many pump spells, and so on. This

“Perfect Deck” in your imagination can then guide you during a draft when deciding between two close picks and give you perspective on how to value certain types of cards. See pg. 368.

Permission

Countermagic, such as Counterspell, Mana Leak, Cryptic Command, and Force of Will.

Phases

See Stages of the Game.

Philosophy of Fire, The

Manipulation of the resources you and your opponent start with, but do not acquire more of unless paid for. The most common of these is the life total, and the consequent attacking of the life total with direct damage, or by using the life total as a resource for cards like Necropotence. Adrian Sullivan coined the term and was the first to thoroughly examine the topic, though he originally used it purely to discuss the conversion of life into a resource.

It was later popularized by Michael Flores, Zvi Mowshowitz, and Dan Paskins, among others. Other Philosophy of Fire resources include the cards in your library and how many poison counters you can take before dying. Closely related to Card Advantage and Tempo. See pg. 220.

Pikula, Chris:

Most famous as the guy on the card Meddling Mage, Chris was a member of Team Deadguy and one of the most active voices from the Pro Tour's early years. Pikula was a driving force in Magic culture, and alongside David Price he helped to lead the crusade to stamp out the cheating that plagued competitive Magic's early years.

Playtesting

Preparing for an event by playing a variety of decks against all of the decks in the Gauntlet. While improving one's technical play is important, the top priority is usually tuning a deck or selecting which deck you think would be best to work on. Many people make the mistake of just playing games over and over, rather than objectively examining their results and playing the matchups that will teach them the most.

Ponza

A mono-red deck that usually blends land destruction elements with direct damage and large red creatures. See pg. 334.

Prison

A style of deck that seeks to mana lock an opponent by assembling a combination that makes the opponent unable to cast spells. (A classic example of a Prison deck revolves around Winter Orb and Icy Manipulator.) These decks are not as common any more, as the types of cards that can lock people out of the game are very rarely printed these days. Also, a place you don't want to be. See pg. 329.

Proxy

Using one card to represent another, often just a land or a common card with sharpie on the back. Used in playtesting so that you can test cards out without having to purchase or trade for the real cards.

Rapport

A crucial element to Jedi Mind Tricks, rapport is essentially when you are on the same wavelength as someone and they begin to identify themselves as with you rather than against you. See pg. 316.

Reanimator

An archetype that revolves around “cheating” a card onto the battlefield; in other words, playing a powerful card without paying its true casting cost. While this archetype is named after reanimation spells, it can revolve around cards like Natural Order or Show and Tell instead. See pg. 354.

Recursion

See Infinite Loop.

Relative Value

How good a card is within a given context. See pg. 191.

Removal

Cards that can deal with a permanent, most commonly a creature. Generally valued at a premium in Limited.

Reverse Psychology

A low-level psychological tactic where someone tries to trick you into doing something by telling you not to do it. See pg. 312.

RIW Hobbies

A premier full service game store at 29116 Five Mile Rd, Livonia, Michigan 48154. For information, check out riwhobbies.net or call 1-734-261-7233.

Rochester Draft

An old style of draft that is no longer supported as a regular format, where a booster was opened face-up on the table and players went around in a circle picking cards; then picks went back the other way, with the eighth player getting the eighth and ninth picks. During the second pack, the player that picked second had the first pick, and so on.

While this Draft format was preferred by many pros, it takes several times longer to actually run the draft, plus some disputed the fairness on account of the increased ability of neighbors to work together if they were friends.

While Booster Draft is the primary Draft format as of the printing of this book, Rochester Drafting is still used in various aspects of the game, such as when a team splits up the rares they have won in a team draft.

Rogue

A deck that is not well known or is in some way not within the bounds of any of the primary decks in a format. A good rogue deck quickly becomes a part of an established metagame, losing its rogue status; a bad rogue deck fades into oblivion.

Signals

The information being sent by drafters to one another. You can tell a lot about what your neighbor is drafting by applying the Four Perspectives, which can give you an idea of what sort of cards you can expect to get passed in the future. See pg. 372.

Sligh

The original mana curve deck, named after Paul Sligh after he won a PTQ with it. Sligh was actually originally designed by Jay Schneider and called Geeba, though that name never caught on. One of the more important deck's in Magic history, as it was the first successful archetype that the Sligh deck was a mono-red board control deck—though these days Ponza, Red Deck Wins, and Burn Decks are far more common. See pg. 333.

Soft Lock

A game state where one player is nearly assured of victory due to the inability of the other player to beat a particular feature of the game. See pg. 61.

Stages of Game Play

A more accurate way of talking about the early-, mid-, and late game, that is most closely tied to your ability to execute your primary gameplan and play your spells. Michael Flores was the first to really break down how important it is to view the early game and late game as potentially happening at different times for each player (instead of simultaneously, as in Chess, which was how Magic was originally perceived). See pg. 181.

StarCityGames.com

The No. 1 Magic strategy website, and a reliable source for every Magic product on the market.

Strategy

Smaller steps taken in the proper order. This is your plan to gain an advantage or win the game. Whereas tactics deal with a specific situation, strategy is a more general underlying plan of attack, such as “Play fast creatures and clear the way with removal.”

Swarm

A strategy whereby you create a large army of creatures, each of which may start out somewhat weak, each of which is turned into potent threats with spells that enhance your creatures or their numbers. See pg. 347.

Sweepers

Spells that can kill a number of creatures at once, such as Supreme Verdict, Earthquake, or Engineered Explosives.

Swiss

The rounds of a tournament that are played before cutting to the Top 8. Most Magic tournaments are Swiss with a cut to Top 8, meaning you play against people with the same record as you for a set number of rounds, then the top eight finishers play a single elimination playoff.

Synergy

The relationship between cards that work well together. One of the primary questions that deckbuilders face time and again is how to balance synergy and power. One card might be stronger in general, whereas another works better with your theme. Which do you play?

Tactics

A plan for gaining an advantage in a specific situation that is not necessarily what you would do every time. For example, attacking with a 2/2 when your opponent has a 4/4 because you are pretty sure that your opponent won't block for fear of a Giant Growth.

Tap-Out Control

A style of blue deck first popularized by Michael Flores that uses light permission to slow the opponent, then starts tapping out to play spells that are generally better than anything the opponent would be doing (making it irrelevant that the blue player has no Counterspell capabilities available for the turn).

Technical Play

Logical decision-making in games so as to optimize your resources and play as correctly as possible given all of the "known information," such as the cards on the battlefield. Technical play is everything besides the mental game and operations management. It does not factor reading your opponent, bluffing, or other mind tricks.

Tech, Technology

Slang term for a cutting-edge card, play, strategy, or deck. Usually refers to a new solution to an existing problem. For instance, Michael Jacob's Rubin-Zoo deck was fairly standard, but he did have some new technology, such as splashing black for Deathmark to gain an advantage in the mirror.

Tell

When you can gain information about an opponent based on their body language or some other indirect accidental communication. For instance, some people rub their ear when they are bluffing. Others read the front card in their hand when they are about to play it (as a trick).

Learning how to be aware of opponent's tells while masking your own is a key element of the mental game of Magic. See pg. 288.

Tempo

Manipulation of resources that you gain every turn, but do not begin with initially. Mana is the most common element of any discussion on tempo, as you can only play one land a turn, and each land generally produces one mana each turn. This fundamental restriction is at the heart of most matters of tempo in Magic. Tempo measures advantages that are temporary, hence the name.

Brian Weissman invented Card Advantage, but it took many more theorists like Eric D. Taylor and Adrian Sullivan to better flesh out this concept. Adrian Sullivan invented the Philosophy of Fire, but it took Michael Flores and Dan Paskins to fill it out. Theorists like Scott Johns, Brian Hacker, and Eric D. Taylor brought tempo to the front of discussions in 1996, but it is the author's opinion there had never been a robust and thorough explanation of what tempo is until this text, though there is still a great need for future theorists to build on what is presented here. See pg. 211.

Templating

Using something that already exists as a model for something you are working on. In Magic, this most commonly refers to an archetype or a manabase. See pg. 28.

“The Deck”

A Five-Color Control deck that was primarily U/W invented by Brian Weissman in 1995. It sought to take total control of a game with potent answers and a lot of card drawing before eventually winning at its leisure. This was a revolutionary concept, and is widely regarded as the most important deck ever built. See pg. 264.

Threats

Generally used to describe cards that are capable of winning the game. In most contexts, refers to creatures and non-creature permanents that can win the game, such as Planeswalkers, but at times is used to discuss only cards that the speaker considers to be “relevant.” For instance, Sakura-Tribe Elder is not always considered a legitimate threat, whereas Baneshlayer Angel, Tarmogoyf, Ajani Vengeant, Cursed Scroll, Stormbind, Cruel Ultimatum, and Tinker all would be.

Time Walk

To progress the game a way so as to imitate the effect of the Magic card Time Walk. It can refer to a situation where you take another turn after your current turn, but most commonly it refers to a play that neutralizes everything relevant the opponent was doing that turn. See Tempo.

Top→Down Thinking

Looking to see what is there. This is the most basic perspective, and can be as simple as looking at a list, a tournament, a card, or anything else and asking yourself, “What am I looking at?” See pg. 60.

Tri-Lands

Lands that produce three colors of mana, most notable Savage Lands and the rest of the “Tri-Lands” from Shards of Alara.

Trump

A card that elevates the level your deck is operating at or decreases the opponent's level. Sometimes used in a similar manner to Hate or Hoser. See pg. 60.

Two-For-One

A card or play that results in +1 card advantage, such as using Supreme Verdict to kill two creatures or Bloodbraid Elf cascading into a "free" Putrid Leech. This is one of the most basic ways to gain an advantage in Magic.

Uber-Team

A team formed by multiple large pro Magic teams trying to work as one. Historically, these have never worked out and the major teams that enjoy the most success function as a single entity. See pg. 96.

Value

Any benefit. For instance, you might Flashfreeze a Blightning and gain a mana of value (the difference in their casting costs). Alternatively, you might Lash Out your opponent's Wren's Run Vanquisher, with the value being the clash and the possibility of dealing three damage to your opponent.

This can describe a play that benefits you, as when you attack with your creature before casting Day of Judgment. If they don't block, you just got a little more "value" out of the turn. If they do block, well, you were going to lose that creature anyway.

Virtual Card Advantage

A way of talking about having more card economy than your opponent without necessarily having any more cards. For instance, if you Slaughter Games your opponent, you might not hit any Cruel Ultimatums from their hand directly, leaving you -1 card when it comes to card advantage.

However, the fact that your opponent cannot cast Cruel Ultimatum later, despite having built his deck under the assumption that he would, can leave you with a great deal of "Virtual Card Advantage." Every time your opponent would have drawn a Cruel Ultimatum and gained a huge amount of card advantage, they are instead drawing a random other card. This concept is frequently used when talking about token creatures which can be like card advantage, but without any extra cards. This subject helps demonstrate why Card Utility is often more important than card advantage. See pg. 204.

Weenie

1) A small creature. 2) A deck full of small creatures.

Weissman, Brian

One of the founding fathers of Magic theory. Invented Card Advantage and The Deck. See pg. 92.