

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

# Win, Lose, or Draw

Ben Bleiweiss  
Uncommon Knowledge  
Wednesday, January 30, 2002



One of the unsung heroes here at MagicTheGathering.com is our fearless editor, Aaron Forsythe. Not only has Aaron been on the U.S. National **Magic** Team, but also was a member of a high finishing team Pro Tour squad known as the Car Acrobatic Team. What many of the readers don't get to see each week are the editorial corrections Aaron throws into our articles to make everything flow more smoothly.

For instance, here's a portion of an e-mail in regards to my [week-one](#) column:

From: Aaron Forsythe  
To: Ben Bleiweiss  
Subject: Re: Your week one column.

Ben: I added in mention of **Hammer of Bogardan**, which you somehow forgot to mention. I also added in **Ashen Ghou**, and made a comparison to **Ichorid**.

I also cut out your five paragraphs about why **Whiteout** is the best recurring card ever.

Remind me again why Mark hired you? Would you mind if I just put my own name in the byline for this column, since I rewrote it from scratch anyhow?

AF

Well, maybe things haven't been *quite* that horrific on my side (I made that up), but I have appreciated the input Aaron's given me for a card I've missed here and there. Without his help, I'd definitely have been lost long ago.

Which brings me to the topic of this week's column (lest you think I'd brown-nose my boss for an entire column): Alternate win and loss (and draw!) conditions in **Magic**. Ante cards aside, there were originally two "accepted" ways to win a game:

1. Reducing your opponent's life total to zero (most common)
2. Running your opponent out of cards (aka decking them—less common)

For a long time, those were the only ways to proactively win in **Magic**. Attack with some creatures, throw in a couple of **Lightning Bolts**, or maybe plop down a **Millstone**. Although the sheer quantity of cards available for gunslingers kept the permutations of these two strategies at a maximum (D/D: Decking and Damage), players across the land yearned for more ways to win the game. Little did they know they were to have their wishes granted in *Legends*.

## POISONING YOUR MIND

Hands up out there in the audience if you remember poison counters. In my opinion one of the most ill-executed mechanics in **Magic** history, poison worked roughly as follows: If a player received 10 poison counters over the course of a game, he lost. Sounds simple enough, right? Unfortunately, almost every creature ever printed involving poison was next to unusable. **Serpent Generator** cost 4 to activate, with the net result being a 1/1 poison creature each turn. **Pit Scorpion** and **The Dark's Marsh Viper** weighed in at a hefty 1/1 and 1/2 for three and four mana respectively, with no evasion abilities. The **Alliances Swamp Mosquito** got slightly better, if you like zero power flyers in your deck for two mana. It was some sort of a joke that **Mirage's Crypt Cobra** was made a **Hill Giant** (3/3 for four mana), allowing it to kill your opponent by damage well before it could ever poison them to death. **Sabertooth Cobra**, also from **Mirage**, slightly improved on **Marsh Viper**, while giving the opponent a built-in way to prevent the second poison counter. The best of the bunch (and thankfully the last) came with **Visions' Suq'Ata Assassin**, which finally got the equation right (a 1/1 with "fear"), but never saw play due to the overall weakness of other poison cards.



WHAT IS MAGIC?  
CLICK HERE!

GLEEMAX  
FIND OUT MORE!

Wizards of the Coast  
Dream Jobs Open Now

ASK THE PRO

PRODUCTS  
Tenth Edition  
All Magic products

RULES  
RULES

MESSAGE BOARDS  
MAGIC The Gathering  
Magic General Forum  
magicthegathering.com Forum

MAGIC ONLINE  
MAGIC The Gathering ONLINE  
Download Now!  
Magic Online III Launch Info

Ok, so the first go at an alternate win condition flopped horribly. But, you can't really blame Wizards for being a mite bit cautious about adding alternate paths of victory to **Magic**—if they make one too powerful, it will invalidate all previous strategies (D/D again), effectively making the entire previous card pool obsolete. So for years, we received spells geared down the paths two true (D/D, getting tired of that yet?), and were subjected to the era of combo decks (decks which won through a combination of cards designed to win through gaining massive card and mana advantage in one turn, then killing their opponent with a gigantic card drawing/damage dealing effect). This age began at Pro Tour - Paris with the emergence of the **Cadaverous Bloom** deck, continued through to Extended with an **Enduring Renewal/Goblin Bombardment** deck, and reached its pinnacle in the **Urza's** block, with the **Tolarian Academy**, **High Tide**, **Dream Halls**, and **Memory Jar** decks demolishing more "conventional" decks for months.

Maybe you were playing back then, and maybe you weren't; I can assure you that games played with or against these decks weren't a whole lot of fun. They could win as soon as turn one (and usually by turns 2-3), and gave their opponents no way to even play the game. You literally could sit down, lay a land, be killed, sideboard, lay a land in game two, be killed, and be out of the tournament.

"Ok, Ben," you might be asking yourself, "that's all fine and dandy, but absolutely none of those decks had an alternate win condition. Sure, some killed you with a massive **Stroke of Genius** or **Drain Life**, but that's still Decking/Damage. Why are you going off on such a tangent?" And my reply: Because with so many absolutely broken decks running around that ended the game so quickly, suddenly the "alternate win condition" cards didn't need to be as restrictive as poison. Two years of combo had shown that players could (and would) build combo decks that didn't fit the conventional "spirit of the game" (cast spells and attack with creatures over a series of turns, playing move-and-counter with your opponent), so why not just finally print cards which said "win the game," but make the condition hard enough to attain that you'd need to build your deck around said win condition?

## WINNING WITH FLAIR

In *Prophecy*, we had our first tentative step in that direction, with **Celestial Convergence**. Reminiscent of the *Nemesis* fading mechanic, this enchantment could technically allow your opponent to emerge victorious. To avoid that, you'd need to fit your deck with a good amount of life gain and/or ways to protect the Convergence from being **Disenchanted** over the course of seven turns, but if you could pull all that off, the game would simply stop, and end in a win. Eureka! No more decking, no more poison, no more damage dealing, this was a card which won you the game, and took a number of turns to set up (as opposed to the previous barrage of combo decks).



Invasion block's multi-colored theme melded perfectly with the first true "win the game right here and now, period" card, **Coalition Victory**. You had to work hard to win with this one, folks, (not counting a deck with **Shyft** and multiple original **dual lands**), but if you pulled it off, your opponent would be shamed by your truly impressive board set-up.

*Odyssey* block thus far has seen no less than three alternate win cards: **Battle of Wits**, **Chance Encounter**, and **Mortal Combat**. **Battle of Wits** (banned in the unsanctioned Five-Color format, by virtue of mechanics) startled many by winning and placing in several prominent Standard and Extended events, proving you *can* win with a 200+ card deck. **Chance Encounter** forced the errata of **Frenetic Efreet** (under the new wording, you only flip a coin if the Efreet is still in play, otherwise you could activate it a billion times when the Encounter is in play, and odds say you'll hit at least 10 of them). **Mortal Combat** is sure to see play in decks, with cards like **Hermit Druid** and **Traumatize** around in various formats to fill your graveyard quickly.

## UNIQUE WAYS OF LOSING

But wait, there's more! Notice way back in the beginning I used the term "proactively win." When there are winners and there are losers, and certainly there are cards which will instantly lose a player a game. The first came way, way back in the original set, and was recently renovated and tweaked. I refer, of course to **Lich** and **Nefarious Lich**, the original and heir to the throne of "I can't believe you're playing that!" The card-drawing power of both of these ☠☠☠☠ enchantments is negated by the fact that if your opponent casts a single **Tranquility**, you immediately lose the game!

Sharing a *second* lose condition with the **Nefarious Lich** is **Forbidden Crypt** from *Mirage*. The Crypt allows you to draw out of your graveyard at a price: Should your graveyard run out, so would your entire game. At least you could **Boomerang** the Crypt to avoid dying; neither Lich gave you that option.

Speaking of returning permanents to your hand to prevent yourself from losing, I refer you to Randy Buehler's [week-one article](#) about **Transcendence**. The latest of the cards which will instantly bring defeat under certain conditions, this enchantment switches up for down and down for up. Should you reach 20 life, it's suddenly "game over."



Most famous of all the lose cards (and the only one to see significant tournament play so far) has been around for years. I speak of **Final Fortune**, the heavily-penalized reprint of **Time Walk**. You get one extra turn to win the game, and should you fail, it's lights out for sure.

A curiosity came in *Legends*, with the printing of **Divine Intervention**. Although **Celestial Convergence** can also force a draw, **Divine Intervention** stands as the only card ever printed in **Magic** whose sole purpose is to draw the game. Seen as a troublemaker, it was banned in Type 1 play for a long time for fear of it making tournament matches take too long. It was eventually not only unbanned but unrestricted, so feel free to play with four in your local Type 1 tournament (just don't tell them I sent you).

There are a ton of alternate win condition cards (of which a majority involve poison counters), and a handful of lose condition ones. As **Magic** progresses, I'm sure we'll see other ways to instantly win or lose games besides damage and decking, and this will bring out the creative deckbuilders to try and find innovative ways to triumph.

Cards That End the Game Non-Traditionally			
Expansion	Win	Lose	Draw
<i>Alpha</i>	-	Lich	-
<i>Legends</i>	Pit Scorpion Serpent Generator	-	Divine Intervention
<i>The Dark</i>	Marsh Viper	-	-
<i>Alliances</i>	Swamp Mosquito	-	-
<i>Mirage</i>	Crypt Cobra Sabertooth Cobra	Forbidden Crypt Final Fortune	-
<i>Visions</i>	Suq'Ata Assassin	-	-
<i>Prophecy</i>	Celestial Convergence	Celestial Convergence	Celestial Convergence
<i>Invasion</i>	Coalition Victory	-	-
<i>Odyssey</i>	Battle of Wits Chance Encounter	Nefarious Lich	-
<i>Torment</i>	Mortal Combat	Transcendence	-

Next Week: Under the Sea, or Very Pun-ny

Discuss this article on the [message boards](#).

Ben may be reached at [uncommonknowledge@wizards.com](mailto:uncommonknowledge@wizards.com).

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by **StarCityGames.com**, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



[Respond](#) via email



[Ben Bleiweiss](#) archive

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

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.  
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

