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Picking the Pieces

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

The comparisons between **Magic** and chess are inescapable, and parallels between the two games could fill an entire article. I'm not going to make those parallels today, but hopefully you see them.

In fact, my explanation of **Magic** to non-**Magic** players is usually, "Imagine chess with thousands of different possible pieces where each piece, when played, changes the rules of the game. Then throw in the luck and bluffing of poker. That's **Magic**."

It comes as no surprise to me, then, that many readers have sent me unsolicited "chess" theme decks.

I haven't written about theme decks in awhile, so for those of you who are wondering what exactly I'm talking about, here is a definition.

To me, a theme deck:

- contains *only* cards (other than basic or mana-fixing lands) that fit the theme of the deck
- is playable (that is, it has a reasonable outside shot of winning a **Magic** game), despite its emphasis on aesthetics



If you are still confused, go ahead and read my theme articles on [Legends](#), [bears](#), and [countries](#). I've written about some alternate theme deck ideas, like recreating [flavor text](#) and [storylines](#) as well as [artist theme decks](#), but the first three articles really demonstrate theme decks in their purest form. Anyway, as you can probably tell, I like theme decks.

But why "chess" as a theme? Well, as I said the link between chess and **Magic** is fairly strong. The real reason I think chess theme decks are popular, though, is because they are really fun to make. Allow me to explain...

THE RULES OF THE GAME

Every chess theme deck I have ever seen has been black/white with an equal number of cards dedicated to each color. If you are wondering why, then it may do you some good to go stare at your friend's chess set for awhile.

Another idea, of course, is to build two decks--one white, one black. If the decks are balanced in power, this has some immediate appeal thematically since you can (and should) play the two decks against one another. For today, though, I am going to assume you will build a single black/white theme deck.

In addition to common colors, the decks I've seen tend to be filled to the gills with creatures representing the various chess pieces. Usually, the goal is to find cards to represent 1 king, 1 queen, 2 rooks, 2 bishops, 2 knights, and 8 pawns for each color. Here is where the fun of building a chess theme deck begins.

Chess sets can vary greatly in their interpretation of the individual pieces. There are Civil War, Tolkein, Star Trek, and Disney chess sets to name a very few. Perhaps this is why selecting **Magic** cards to represent the various chess pieces is both so appealing and ripe for creativity.

Onslaught provides an opportunity for making new and interesting chess theme decks with its emphasis on creature types. Given a set full of Legends and Lords, you can even build a chess theme deck using nothing but *Onslaught* cards. In fact, I think I'll do exactly that.

Below are examples of how I would build an *Onslaught*-only chess theme deck along with a more general chess theme deck. I will be making two decks simultaneously, so stay alert.

FROM LORDS TO MINIONS

The **king** in chess is the most important piece. For a theme deck, you can translate the importance of the king in two ways:

First, you can decide that the king is really central to how the deck should play. For example, in *Onslaught* you might choose *Ancestor's Prophet*, *Aven Brigadier*, or *Catapult Master* as your white king because they rely on the



other “pieces” (i.e. cards) and make them better. In these cases, the rest of your supporting white cards are either Clerics, Birds, or Soldiers.

For an *Onslaught*-only deck, I like this tactic of using Lords to represent the kings. For a white king I would choose **Aven Brigadier** because it gives me some flexibility with using both Birds and Soldiers. I would also use **Gravespawn Sovereign** for the black king because he is the only black Lord and because of the “Sovereign” in his name.

- white king: **Aven Brigadier**
- black king: **Gravespawn Sovereign**

Second, you can decide to make the king relatively weak and in need of protecting. This mimics chess, since it means the king won't be an offensive powerhouse and will rely on the other cards to win.

For a general chess theme deck, I would pick **King Suleiman** as the quintessential white king. In black, I would strive to find something equally gimpy and of an equivalent mana cost. **Dauthi Warlord** seems to work here as long as I use no other creatures with shadow.

- white king: **King Suleiman**
- black king: **Dauthi Warlord**

The **queen** is the most dangerous piece in chess. For this reason, I like to make the queen cards the ones that are most likely to take over and win the game for me. I also like them to have females in their art. In *Onslaught*, **Exalted Angel** is about the only appropriate white queen, while **Visara the Dreadful** stands out as the black queen. If *Legions*, **Magic's** next set, contains cards for Akroma and Phage, they will likely fit right into a theme deck as queens.

- white queen: **Exalted Angel**
- black queen: **Visara the Dreadful**

Queens for a general chess theme deck are tougher to pick. White has **Jhovall Queen**, while black has a choice between **Coffin Queen** and **Sorceress Queen**. What bothers me, though, is that neither black card is a mirror image of the white card in casting cost or effect. Still, in the absence of a matched pair it will have to do, and both of the below queens can definitely win a game single-handedly.

- white queen: **Jhovall Queen**
- black queen: **Coffin Queen**

What makes the **rook** difficult in a theme deck is that the piece is nothing more than a castle. I usually interpret the rook in **Magic** as a Wall, although this in no way mimics the chess rook's mobility. Still, until I think of a better system, **Crude Rampart** makes a fine white rook, while **Severed Legion** is a suitable black Zombie rook (my justification being that there are towers in the art).

- white rook: **Crude Rampart**
- black rook: **Severed Legion**

In a general theme deck, I can strive to make the two pieces as equivalent as possible. There are no better matched Walls in my mind than these two:

- white rook: **Wall of Essence**
- black rook: **Wall of Souls**

Magic's Clerics make great **bishops**. In *Onslaught*, **Aven Soulgazer** makes an interesting white bishop since it is both a Bird and a Cleric, and thus benefits from the white king. Meanwhile, **Rotlung Reanimator** is a Zombie and has the nice side effect of making the Soulgazer better. Neat.

- white bishop: **Aven Soulgazer**
- black bishop: **Rotlung Reanimator**

Then again, **Disciple of Grace** and **Malice** make excellent bishops as well. I'll try them in my general theme deck as the matched pair.

- white bishop: **Disciple of Grace**
- black bishop: **Disciple of Malice**

Knights are often the early workhorses of a chess game, and so they should be for your chess theme deck. Ideally, they are 2- or 3-casting cost and can kill pawns. **Catapult Squad** fits in white as the Soldier knight, while **Undead Gladiator** has a very black knightly feel.

- white knight: **Catapult Squad**
- black knight: **Undead Gladiator**

The very existence of **White Knight** and **Black Knight** probably had you thinking about a chess theme deck in the first place. No reason not to use them here.

- white knight: **White Knight**
- black knight: **Black Knight**



There is fodder in chess thanks to the **pawn**, and so you might as well use the fodder in **Magic**. Pawns can be vanilla, dinky creatures you expect to come out early and die easily. Some decks might bend the normal constructed guideline to use 8 of the same card for its white and black pawns, but I am just as happy using 4 of two different cards. In *Onslaught*, the white pawns seem clearly to be **Gustcloak Runner** and **Glory Seeker** if I am using a Soldier theme. In black, **Festering Goblin** is a great black pawn. After that, I suppose **Headhunter** works as well as any, though I wish there was a more vanilla Zombie to add here.

- white pawn: **Gustcloak Runner**, **Glory Seeker**
- black pawn: **Festering Goblin**, **Headhunter**

So far, my general chess theme deck has used matched pairs with the exception of the queens. No use to buck the trend now. **Dega** and **Necra Disciple** can make up half of the pawns while **Eager Cadet** and **Cabal Trainee** have nice mirrored qualities to them.

- white pawn: **Dega Disciple**, **Eager Cadet**
- black pawn: **Necra Disciple**, **Cabal Trainee**

If you follow this formula, you have 32 creatures in your theme deck. Assuming an average land count of 24, that leaves four extra slots for cards. You could use cards like **Head Games** and **Harsh Mercy** to round out the theme in clever ways, or you may want to find another aspect of chess to enhance the deck. In the decks below, I have used **Slate of Ancestry** and **Bargaining Table** as my thematic chessboards. I've also used **Grand Coliseum**, which adds a little thematic spice to the competitive atmosphere of chess.



Chess Onslaught		
Onslaught-only chess theme deck		
Main Deck 60 cards		
10 Plains 10 Swamp 4 Grand Coliseum <hr/> 24 lands	1 Aven Brigadier 1 Gravespaw Sovereign 1 Exalted Angel 1 Visara the Dreadful 2 Crude Rampart 2 Severed Legion 2 Aven Soulgazer 2 Rotlung Reanimator 2 Catapult Squad 2 Undead Gladiator 4 Gustcloak Runner 4 Glory Seeker 4 Festering Goblin 4 Headhunter <hr/> 32 creatures	4 Slate of Ancestry <hr/> 4 other spells
Endgame		
Chess theme deck		
Main Deck 60 cards		
10 Plains 10 Swamp 4 Grand Coliseum <hr/> 24 lands	1 King Suleiman 1 Dauthi Warlord 1 Jhovall Queen 1 Coffin Queen 2 Disciple of Grace 2 Disciple of Malice 2 Wall of Essence 2 Wall of Souls 2 White Knight 2 Black Knight 4 Dega Disciple 4 Eager Cadet 4 Necra Disciple 4 Cabal Trainee <hr/> 32 creatures	4 Bargaining Table <hr/> 4 other spells

As I suggested earlier, you may decide to make entirely different choices in a chess theme deck, which is one of the beauties of theme deck building. Do you want to make a red/blue chess theme deck with **Lord of Atlantis** and **Goblin King** as your kings? Have at it! Want to change the rules so that if a king dies you lose the game? No problem! Want to make a chess theme deck for every block of cards and see which wins? Sounds like a great

evening! "Chess" is nice in that it allows for lots of fun ways to interpret the theme while remaining relatively structured.

One suggestion, though: Against other theme decks, your chess theme probably won't be immediately obvious. I suggest playing your land in a chessboard pattern of Swamps and Plains on the table. That may help to get the point across.

Have fun with you theme deck building, and as always if you throw a "theme party" let me know how it goes and share some of the decks. I'm always happy to see how other folks interpret the same idea.

Oh, and I didn't forget what day it was today! Happy Thanksgiving to all my American readers (and Happy Thursday to everyone else)! And we all know what I think of holidays... they're the perfect excuse for another theme deck! Below is a Thanksgiving Chess deck that somehow miraculously combines today's two themes. Lots of tasty birds!

-j

Chess is for the Birds

Thanksgiving-Chess theme deck

Main Deck
60 cards

12 Plains	1 Aven Brigadier	2 Blessed Wine
12 Swamp	1 Devouring Strossus	2 Feast of the Unicorn
24 lands	1 Commander Eesha	4 other spells
	1 Desolation Angel	
	2 Battlewise Aven	
	2 Battlefield Percher	
	2 Aven Soulgazer	
	2 Wake of Vultures	
	2 Gustcloak Skirmisher	
	2 Belbe's Percher	
	4 Suntail Hawk	
	4 Circling Vultures	
	4 Carrier Pigeons	
	4 Poultrygeist	
	32 creatures	

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