

Winning isn't just knowing the game *Forgotten Lore: Mind Over Magic*

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Introduction from the Editor

E[nlightened Tutor](#) Rob Hahn was easily one of the most influential and important writers of **Magic's** earlier days. In a game that evolves at lightning speed, this article still stands the unforgiving test of time and continues to offer outstanding advice as well as ideas for speculation that transcend the game. To this day, *Mind Over Magic* has influenced my views of **Magic**(and **Magic** writing) perhaps more than any other article I've read. I hope you enjoy this first in an occasional series of articles featuring the great writing of **Magic's** first magazine, *The Duelist*.
- Scott Johns, [magicthegathering.com](#) Content Editor

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Great Minds

So what makes a great **Magic** player? The answers are as varied as the players themselves. Most are extremely good deck-builders, but some great players never make their own deck; they just copy a successful deck and crush everyone within driving distance. Most are aware of the subtle nuances of the rules, but there are some who would use a [Thawing Glaciers](#) before casting [Armageddon](#), not realizing that [Armageddon](#) would destroy both the Glacier and the land it fetched. The one thing that is common among all great players is a strong inner game of **Magic**, a kind of mastery within themselves that translates into mastery of the playing field. The inner game is not simply the brute will to win. The desire to conquer often translates into the uglier side of competition, appearing in the form of cheating, abusive behavior, rudeness, and



arrogance. The inner game is a mastery over the self that comes from experience. If the goal of the outer game is to beat your opponent, the goal of the inner game is to understand and harness the power of self.

The great players all compete with discipline and mastery over their emotions. Any player can win if he or she gets a great draw, or if an opponent is mana-hosed. It takes a great player to overcome a poor draw to claim a victory. Within the playing community, there are many ways to describe various facets of this ability: the Jedi mind trick, the good-player draw, or most often, luck. What is seldom recognized is that good players seem to get lucky more often because of their inner game. First, they build their deck to minimize the impact of a lousy draw. Second, they play with calm discipline even when things aren't going their way. Again, the focus is not on the almighty win, but on being wholly present in the game. The distinction might be a fine one, but I believe it holds nonetheless.

Active Intelligence

One of the greatest players I know is Sean Fleischman of Brooklyn, New York. He finished in the Top 16 at Pro Tour-New York, was second at Pro Tour Columbus, and is considered by many to be a brilliant deck designer. He was one of the first players in New York to use the [Balance](#) deck. I've never beaten Sean, but I've played him using decks that are theoretically his bane. Once, after beating me in the finals of a local tournament, he advised me to never stop thinking about the game while sitting across from an opponent.




It seems like obvious advice, but many times I've caught myself drifting off while waiting for my opponent to do something. For example, I might zone out while my opponent uses [Thawing Glaciers](#) during upkeep, rather than actively study the game even when things are slow. It takes discipline to remain committed when little is happening, but remember: some decks and strategies appear to do nothing while steadily plotting your demise.

Playing means more than just drawing, laying a land, or casting whatever's available. It means more than simply following a routine that has proven successful in most situations. The great players approach each decision carefully, reflecting on what each action or non-action will mean to the game

as a whole. It takes discipline to develop your strategic sense to the point where you're able to consider the repercussions flowing from what card you play, and when you play it. It is discipline that separates the great players from the good players, in any game or endeavor.

For example, how many of us actually look at what land our opponents play? We think we know what the opponent is playing by the third or fourth turn and stop paying attention. Having seen forests and mountains for five turns, we don't care whether he lays a forest or a mountain on the sixth turn. By this time, we know that it's a red/green deck, and we tune it out.

And yet, if a red/green player lays out a mountain on the sixth turn, it could mean he or she is building mana for an  spell of some kind, or holding a huge creature like an [Autumn Willow](#). If your opponent tapped the rest of the land, he or she may either have a [Lightning Bolt](#) for whatever creature you just played, or want you to suspect a Bolt. If you are attuned to the game, you could probably safely assume that your opponent doesn't have a [Land's Edge](#), because he or she isn't holding on to extra land.

Looking carefully at what mana your opponent taps and in what order may reveal the presence of other cards. During one tense game against a red/blue deck, I noticed that my opponent first tapped one island, then touched his second island, reconsidered, and tapped two mountains to cast a Frenetic Efreet. Even though he left two blue open (an important rule for any permission player) I assumed that he had no [Counterspells](#) in hand since his first instinct was to use the second island. I won that game because I was able to cast [Armageddon](#) on my turn without fearing a Counterspell.

Watching the way a player holds his or her cards and rearranges them might also reveal a thing or two, especially if you took notice of where that [Bolt](#) came from last round and where the drawn card is placed. Some might say playing in this way is "cheesy", but actually this is nothing short of good strategy. No one forced your opponent to line up all direct damage together, after all.

The key in all of this is an active intelligence. Great players are always playing, even if they do nothing but play land and end their turn. They are always looking, always analyzing, and always thinking of possibilities and probabilities.

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Total Faith

Magic is a game of chance. Bad draws happen. I have lost more matches to strange – nay, supernatural – draws than to any other single cause. I could have thirty land and access to alternative mana, and I'll draw a [Mishra's Factory](#) and nothing else for seven turns and die to a [Mtenda Lion](#), despite having fourteen sources of blue in the deck. Bad things just happen.

One difference between great players and others is total faith in their ability to win. Great players have hope in the most hopeless situations; they believe in both their skills and their deck in order to deal with whatever situation confronts them. Great players play with absolute confidence.

I distinctly remember playing Mark Chalice at the first professional tournament. After the first day, he hadn't done as well as he had



hoped with his Necrodeck, so his spirits were low. I was playing a blue/white deck with four copies of [Land Tax](#) – a card that had proved to be his bane during the tournament. I somehow managed to play three [Land Tax](#) cards in a row. He commented dryly, “Damn [Land Tax](#). I always lose because of that card.” He then proceeded to beat me into oblivion with hordes of [Knights](#) and [Specters](#) and killed me with a [Drain Life](#). Did I get a poor draw? Probably. But what most impressed me about that game was how unflappable Chalice remained.

I can think of countless other examples. Steven O'Mahoney-Schwartz facing down a horde of [Erhnam Djinns](#) and [Spectral Bears](#) with a single [Black Knight](#), holding five lands in his hand and nothing else. His opponent, fazed by the total faith in Steve's demeanor, made playing errors until Steve drew [Zuran Orb](#), followed by [Nevinyrral's Disk](#), then [Necropotence](#), then [Ivory Tower](#), and finally [Drain Life](#) for the kill. Again, the amazing thing for me is that Steve maintained the same look of steely determination whether he drew a swamp or [Zuran Orb](#).



Great players also seem to play with an almost superhuman positive attitude. I'm thinking specifically of Hammer's performance last year in the second professional tournament, but other examples are easy to find. They rarely curse, rarely have fits, generally do not behave rudely, and so forth. If they're mana-hosed, they look and play as if they meant to draw just one land. In more instances than I can remember, great players overcome whatever initial difficulty they face and win the game. If they lose the first game, they play as if they have the next two games in the bag. They play this way even if they got crushed, humiliated, and embarrassed in the first game. Their opponents, on the other hand, tend to get overconfident, excited, and perhaps as a result, do not play as carefully as they need to, and lose.

Healthy Perspective

At the end of the day, those players who are truly great seem to understand that **Magic** is just a game, and that a tournament – even the Pro Tour – is just one event. If they lose a game, they focus on the next two games. If they lose a match, they focus on the next match. If they lose enough matches to drop them out of contention, they focus on the next tournament. If they lose three tournaments in a row, they expect to win the next one. If nothing goes right, they just step back and stay positive, because it's just a game after all.

If you lose control of the inner game of **Magic**, then you lose the mental toughness that it takes to overcome all obstacles. You cannot win except through good luck. Great players not only build decks that minimize the effect of luck on the outcome of the match, but less obviously, their attitude neutralizes the debilitating effects of chance on their concentration.

One of my recent tournament experiences illustrates how the inner game of **Magic** works. I played in a large Standard tournament using pre-1997 restrictions with a deck that I had tuned and retuned to perfection. I knew the deck inside out, and had used it to beat a wide variety of opponents. In one match, I lost the first game because my opponent played a third-turn [Kjeldoran Outpost](#), and when I tried to cast [Armageddon](#), my opponent happened to have [Arcane Denial](#) in hand.



Looking back, I knew that my deck was easily the best suited to deal with my opponent's deck, as it contained [Armageddon](#), [Winter Orb](#), [Mudslide](#), [Wrath of God](#), [Pyroclasm](#), countermagic, [Swords to Plowshares](#), [Lightning Bolt](#), [Circle of Protection: Red](#), and [Mystical](#) and [Enlightened Tutor](#). But I was shaken by the loss; I lost faith in myself and in my deck and did not regain it even after I crushed him in the second game. In the third game, I played tentatively, nervously, forgetting one thing after another, until I found myself at 4 life. Only then did I notice that my opponent had been attacking me with an ever-increasing horde of Outpost tokens even though I'd had a [Mudslide](#) in play for the last ten turns! I lost that game, and the match, because of a stupid playing error. How did it happen? You could say I was careless, stupid, whatever, but what really happened was that I had allowed myself to lose the inner game of **Magic**. I did not believe that I could win, so I found a way to lose. Having lost the inner game, I could not win the outer game.

I pulled myself together after that match, put it out of my mind, and tried to regain my composure. I won four straight after that, defeating decks that could have beaten mine, simply because I refused to lose the inner game. No matter how bad things appeared, I told myself to have faith, to play with active intelligence, and to keep things in perspective.

Think back to a loss that you later realized you should have won. How strong was your inner game during that match? And think back to those games you won even though logic suggested you should have lost. How strong was your inner game then? And more

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importantly, do you face up to loss and victory with the same graceful strength? This is character, and this is the pinnacle of the inner game of **Magic**. To attain that level of strength in life, I believe, is an excellent reason to play **Magic** in the first place.