

Improving your play by challenging your assumptions and habits

Forgotten Lore: 10 Mental Locks of Magic

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Monday, October 11, 2004

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Introduction from the Editor

Before **Magic** celebrity Mark Rosewater got a full-time job at Wizards of the Coast he was actually a writer for *The Duelist*, **Magic's** first magazine. When I began the *Forgotten Lore* series earlier this year as a chance to highlight the best articles from *The Duelist* I asked if there were any articles from those days that he was particularly proud of. He immediately named this one. As with other articles in this series the specific cards mentioned might be a bit dusty, but his suggestions and advice in this article hold just as true today as they did over nine years ago. I hope you'll enjoy this trip back in the nostalgia machine, smile at some of the antiquated references, and maybe pick up some great advice along the way.

- Scott Johns, [magicthegathering.com](#) Content Manager

This article originally appeared in early 1995 in The Duelist #4. It is presented here in its entirety.



by Mark Rosewater

What separates an average **Magic: the Gathering** player from a very good **Magic** player? Is it the number of cards owned? No. For every good player with nothing but a starter deck and a few boosters, you'll find a collector who is lucky to win two games in a row. Is it knowledge of game mechanics? Familiarity helps, but again, it is not the key to winning. If so, the rules lawyers would consistently win, and that isn't always the case. What quality, then, makes the

difference? In my opinion, it's how a player thinks. Too often players handicap themselves by creating rules that don't exist. So with a tip of the hat to Roger Von Oech's book *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, I present the ten most common "mental locks" of **Magic**, along with ways to get around them.

1. "Bigger Is Better"

This mental lock is easiest to observe in beginners. Watch them open a starter deck for the first time. They pass the [Benalish Hero](#), the [Scathe Zombies](#), the Merfolk, and then they stop at the [Craw Wurm](#). "Wow, a 6/4 creature!" They have to play with that! The logic seems so sensible. The bigger the creature, the fewer hits you need to finish off your opponent, the quicker the game.

This idea that "bigger means a shorter game" doesn't stop with just creatures. It extends to artifacts ("[Rod of Ruin](#) just does 1 point when [Aladdin's Ring](#) does 4"), spells ("Why use a [Shatter](#) when a [Shatterstorm](#) will destroy all artifacts?"), and even enchantments ("If I add [Flight](#), then I'll have a Flying, [Firebreathing](#), First-striking, [Burrowing Hill Giant](#)!"). In each case, the player mistakenly assumes that the biggest resource will ensure victory.

This way of thinking neglects the tradeoff one makes for the bigger cards and effects. They offer increased power, but at the cost of decreased control. Take big creatures. They all have significantly high casting costs and/or difficult upkeep demands. Therefore, reliance on big creatures (and their increased power) means dependence on luck (decreased control). The big artifacts, too, have high casting costs and the added problems of expensive activation costs ([Aladdin's Ring](#) costs eight to cast and eight more to use), restrictions (many artifacts, like the [Rocket Launcher](#), cannot be used on the turn they enter play), and limited uses ([Nevinyrral's Disk](#), in most circumstances, gets used only once). Loss of control is most apparent in spells with big effects. If your welfare rests on keeping a particular artifact in play, a [Shatterstorm](#) becomes useless.

The final example of this lock is what I call the "make your own" type. Instead of casting big creatures, some players like to make them by piling enchantments on a small creature, thinking it can win the game alone. Here the loss of control comes as increased vulnerability. Relying on one creature to win is a problem when common spells in most colors can destroy it. Big creatures and spells have their place, but balance them with smaller, less costly cards. As a friend used to joke: "I have a deck that automatically defeats my opponent on my tenth turn. All I need is an opponent who'll let me survive that long."



2. "Rare Cards Are Superior"

In trading, a rare card is very valuable, worth several uncommons or numerous commons. Also, because the rare cards are the least known, they have an air of mystery and excitement. Many a player knows the joy of surprising your opponent with some spell and hearing those magical words, "You can do what? Let me see that card." But problems arise when players confuse the importance of a rare card's trading value with its play value. As **Magic's** creator, Richard Garfield, has often stated, rarity should not be equated with power. Compare [Benalish Hero](#) (a common white card) to [Timber](#)

[Wolves](#) (a rare green card). Except for color, these cards are identical (one casting cost, 1/1 banders). Obviously neither is more powerful than the other; they're the same card. Why, then, are [Timber Wolves](#) rare? Because banding is not a common ability in green. In fact, [Timber Wolves](#) are the only green banding creatures in *Revised*. This uniqueness dictates their rarity. To overcome this mental lock, resist dismissing cards on any basis other than their usefulness in a particular deck. Yes, you may have traded your left arm to get a particular card, but that doesn't necessarily make it useful in every deck.

3. "A Card Has One Use"

When players encounter a new spell, they usually try to figure out how to use it in play. Unfortunately, as this mental lock demonstrates, once they find that first use, many players stop searching. Take [Phantasmal Terrain](#). A player might see [Phantasmal Terrain](#) as a way to change his own lands in order to get a necessary mana color. Then, assuming he has "cracked" the spell, the player moves on to other cards, missing out on [Phantasmal Terrain](#)'s many other uses (landwalking, triggering enchantments, neutralizing special lands, denying your opponent a particular mana color, and so on). Because players find only what they look for, the solution to this mental lock is to broaden your expectations. Assume all spells (even ones you know well) have other uses, then look for them. Much of **Magic**'s excitement comes from the creativity of its players. Creative play not only makes the game more enjoyable but can give a competitive edge as well. Anyone can win with a [Fireball](#), but only a few can do it with a [Conservator](#).

4. "I Can't Play Positive Cards On My Opponent"

In general, players place **Magic** spells in two categories: "positive" and "negative." Positive spells (such as [Unholy Strength](#)) produce beneficial results, whereas negative spells (such as [Weakness](#)) are destructive. You usually reserve the positive spells for yourself and save the negative ones for your opponent. This misconception is so prevalent in **Magic** that it produces two different mental locks. The reason lies in the very idea that a particular quality is good or bad. For instance: [Flight](#). A flying creature can avoid the opponent's grounded creatures while attacking and block any creature while defending. A pretty good ability, isn't it? That's the trap. At times, having Flight would be a handicap. Getting [Flight](#) just prior to a [Hurricane](#) or an [Earthbind](#), for instance, could kill a creature. Wouldn't it be just too bad if that creature happens to be your opponent's?



Remember that an enchantment's controller is the only one who can pay its activation costs. For instance, if you play [Regeneration](#) on an opponent's creature, you choose whether or not to save the creature when it dies. This is beneficial when your opponent has creatures you don't want to go to the graveyard, such as a [Rukh Egg](#) or [Blazing Effigy](#). Consider any spell's effect not only on yourself, but on everything in the game. Play a [Healing Salve](#) to keep your opponent's [Wanderlusted](#) creature from dying. [Giant Growth](#) would work well in conjunction with [Terror](#) and [Creature Bond](#). And maybe a [Dwarven Warrior](#) could make your opponent's Creature Sweeper (a [Thicket Basilisk](#) with [Lure](#)) unblockable. The key is to keep your mind open to any possibility. This leads us to our next mental lock...

5. "I Can't Play Negative Cards On Myself"

Just as with the "positive" spells, judge cards based on what result they can create. [Weakness](#), for instance, might seem like nothing but a disadvantage until you realize that you might need to lower your own creature's power (when a [Meekstone](#) is in play, for example). Players are always wary of casting negative spells on themselves and their creatures. The key to breaking this mental lock: take it as a challenge to find the beneficial use of the most destructive spells. Just when your opponent thinks she has you, [Swords to Plowshares](#) your [Craw Wurm](#) as a fast effect to gain life and stay alive. [Paralyze](#) your [Shivan Dragon](#) to allow you to untap it during upkeep and avoid [Smoke](#). [Oubliette](#) your one [Serra Angel](#) just before you [Balance](#) and watch your opponent lose all her creatures. The thrill of **Magic** is finding these devious uses of the cards. They aren't often easy to find, but that's what makes them so fun!

6. "Don't Forget The Order"

The order of the main phase doesn't take long to pick up. Just watch a game or two. First you play a land, then you cast all the spells you want, and finally you attack. This order is simple, easy to remember--and not in the rules!

Often the order above makes the most sense: you can use a land the turn you bring it out, so why not get it out first? You have spells that affect your attack, and you might as well cast them all at once. Then, because you have nothing else left to do, you attack. But the point of this mental lock is the danger of habit. You're making decisions unconsciously rather than thoughtfully. As a result, many players don't play as efficiently as they could. **Magic**, by design, is a game of reaction. Each player moves based on the actions of the other. The best way to keep an opponent at bay is to keep him guessing how you might respond. For this reason, a main phase should maximize the unpredictability of your response while setting up your future moves. You want your opponent to waste his defenses on the wrong things. For example, if you need to cast an important spell, it might have a better chance of succeeding after an attack, when your opponent's resources are at their lowest. If you want to get a useful land into play, perhaps a few spells might draw enough fire to let you succeed. Use this flexibility to keep your opponent off guard. A little surprise can go a long way.

7A. "I Must Use My Cards As Soon As I Can" or

7B. "I'd Better Hold Onto My Cards As Long As I Can"



Players tend toward one of two extremes. Either they play every spell as soon as possible, or they hoard spells like a precious commodity. Let's start with the "must cast it now" mindset. Getting resources into play can be beneficial, as it gives you an early advantage, but this does not mean that you should blindly cast every spell the first chance you get. For example, suppose you hold a [Mana Flare](#). You should only cast it if you feel that getting an extra mana per land will be more beneficial to you than to your opponent. Will you achieve maximum benefit by casting that [Lightning Bolt](#) now, or might you find a better use for the spell later? Examine where you think the game is going. If you expect a lot of little creatures to appear soon, then wait. Because instants, interrupts, and fast effects can be used at just about any moment, there is less need to worry about losing opportunities to use them.

Now look at the spell hoarders. Taking to heart the advice given above, these players fear that casting a spell now might mean missing better opportunities later. This is a valid concern, but it makes them vulnerable to an even greater threat: the opponent. A small creature vulnerable to a [Lightning](#)

[Bolt](#) this turn can metamorphose quickly into something you can no longer deal with. The key to overcoming this mental lock is balance. Be ready to use your spells, but be careful not to waste them.

8. "I Have To Hit My Opponent"

Because you get your opponent's life to zero to win, many people fall into this mental lock by hitting the opponent any chance they get. There are two things to remember. First, balance offense and defense. Using direct damage on your opponent often leaves you vulnerable to creature attacks. Beginners make the common mistake of resisting the use of a [Fireball](#) on a 1/1 creature. Not thinking it a threat, players [Fireball](#) the opponent, only to lose double digits worth of damage when the creature attacks turn after turn unchecked. Second, there are things more damaging to the opponent in the long term than loss of life in the short term. A [Mind Twist](#), for example, is much more devastating early in the game than a [Disintegrate](#). A [Mana Short](#) can help you out in places where a [Fireball](#) never could. And a well-placed [Stone Rain](#) can be worth multiple [Lightning Bolts](#). The key to this mental lock is to think of the *entire* game. A direct-damage spell to your opponent might feel good now, but can cost the game down the line.

9. "I Shouldn't Sacrifice Things"



What do [Atoq](#), the [Sage of Lat-nam](#), [Horror of Horrors](#), [Elder Spawn](#), and [Ashnod's Altar](#) have in common? They are all cards you don't see played often, because they require something that the average player avoids like the plague: sacrifices. "Why," players think, "should I play something that won't even work unless I get rid of a perfectly good creature/artifact/land/card in my hand?" The answer is threefold. First, it allows you to squeeze extra resources out of your deck. For instance, suppose you've used your [Rocket Launcher](#). It will now leave play at the end of your turn. By sacrificing it before then to the [Atoq](#), you can do two extra points of damage. Or imagine that, late in the game, your opponent kills your [Sengir Vampire](#). [Horror of Horrors](#) lets you trade an excess swamp to regenerate it and keep it alive. In each case, something worthless turned into something of value. Sacrificing cards also lets you get rid of permanents you no longer want. An [Ashnod's Altar](#) can remove a [Wanderlusted](#) creature from play. A [Sage of Lat-nam](#) can get rid of the [Copper Tablet](#) that is

now hurting you more than your opponent. And a [Fallen Angel](#) can keep your opponent from [Control](#) [Magicking](#) any creature by removing it from play. In each case you even get a little bonus for your trouble--extra mana, an extra card, and a +2/+1 bonus, respectively. The final use is the most subtle. By having cards that can give you something as a fast effect, you keep your opponent off-guard. For instance, when you attack with an [Atog](#), your opponent seldom knows how big it will be. This quality of mystery can be a big advantage. So next time you look through your cards to make a deck, take a second look at the sacrifice cards. There's a lot more to them than meets the eye.

10. "All I Need Is Life"

This mental lock falsely assumes that gaining as much life as possible will lead to victory. The idea is that a player who can accumulate enough life will win simply by outlasting the opponent.

The flaw in this thinking is that no matter how much life you have, it won't defeat your opponent. Every turn that you focus on your own forces is a turn that the opponent gets to attack unchecked. In the end, it's a race of your ability to heal against his ability to do damage. In a game where cards doing damage outnumber cards that heal twenty or thirty to one, it is typically a losing race.



Also, by avoiding interaction, you lose your biggest advantage--surprise. If you only focus on yourself, you remove your opponent's greatest obstacle. Remember, too, that giving life to your opponent (with a [Swords to Plowshares](#), for example) is not necessarily bad if it accomplishes a bigger task. **Magic** is a game of interaction. Players win by joining the conflict, not running away from it.

In Conclusion

One of the most enjoyable aspects of **Magic** is the creativity it inspires. Using cards and spells in new ways and new combinations is at the very heart of **Magic's**...well, magic. These mental locks are simply a way for players to recognize limitations they have put on themselves. The key to all these locks is ultimately the same: creativity. By challenging assumptions and habits, you can break out of old patterns and make new and exciting discoveries. In the struggle to become the best **Magic** player you can be, your greatest opponent is yourself.