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If you were to ask me to describe myself—to sum up my entire life, being, and purpose—in one word, it would not be gamer or writer or even (gasp!) supervillain.

It would be puzzler.

Creating and solving puzzles isn't just a hobby for me. It isn't just a career (currently supplemental, at one point full-time). It isn't just a mission. It's who I am. It's what I live and breathe. And writing for Puzzle Week has me a little flummoxed because I could write a weekly column on puzzles. Figuring out what to say in just one is like fitting an elephant into a Civic. (*CIVIC is a word made entirely of Roman numerals.*)

## A (Debatably) Quick History of My Life as a Puzzler

I've been solving and constructing puzzles as a hobby for as long as I can remember. As a kid, I always had one of those jumbo books with word searches, criss-crosses, cryptograms, and other kinds of puzzles. The weirder the puzzle was, the better. (Squiggle searches & regular word searches.) In third grade, I wrote a story about a despondent bird living in a tree—when asked why he was crying, he replied that his name was Oswald... OsWaLd... sad owl. In fourth grade, I wrote a crossword puzzle and handed it out in class. In 1988, my world was turned upside down when I was introduced to Games magazine. Variety puzzles... for adults? I didn't think such things existed! The July 1991 Games feature article was by Eric Albert (whom I'd eventually meet and become friends with) about the MIT Mystery Hunt. It described a no-holds-barred, adventurous, ridiculous puzzle competition that took teams of MIT students multiple days to complete. My mind was blown and my life would never be the same.

A year later, I enrolled in MIT. Six months after that I played in my first Hunt and finished well back in the pack. Eric Albert's team won. A year later, Eric's team ran the Hunt and I captained my team to victory—a victory we would not have achieved without an error accidentally introduced into the Hunt at the last minute by Eric's teammate Bruce Leban. (Bruce is therefore arguably the single most influential person in my life outside my parents, since the course of the rest of my life sprung from that point.) The prize for winning is merely a coin, along with the honor/chore (depending on who you ask) of constructing the next year's Hunt. I morphed from puzzle solver to puzzle maker. Driven by psychosis, obsession, and procrastination, I constructed the 1995 MIT Mystery Hunt—which at the time was the longest one ever—practically by myself. (Someday I'll actually get it into the Hunt archives.) The following year, my team (Chaos) won again, and I spent the year after that writing the 1997 Mystery Hunt. In the middle of that year, I parlayed my Mystery Hunt experience into an internship at Games magazine. I had become a professional.

I wound up spending five months working in the Games office. Due to the unusual circumstances of the magazine being sold and moved out of state (leaving behind everyone who wouldn't move), I ranked third on the staff in seniority after a month on the job. By the time I got out of there too, I had a Senior Editor credit under my belt. Over the next few years, I served as the cryptic crossword editor for Games on a freelance basis, and I'm still on the masthead as a Contributing Editor. I also wrote some *New York Times* crossword puzzles around this time. After writing my thesis about puzzles and graduating from MIT, I moved to New York to work as an editor in the crossword puzzle division of Random House (by far the largest crossword book publisher in the country) in Manhattan. (*Ignoring spaces, MANHATTAN is a cryptogram of HOI POLLOI.*) By "an editor," I mean the entire

multimillion dollar division was staffed by me and the incomparable Stanley Newman. And he didn't come in every day. (Eventually a third staff member was hired.) In 2000, I left Random House for Wizards of the Coast, and my era as a fulltime puzzle professional ended.

But puzzles were by no means out of my blood. In the fall of 2000, the United States hosted the 9th World Puzzle Championship. I led a team that included Richard Garfield, Mark Rosewater, Teeuwynn Woodruff, Mike Selinker, and Paul Peterson (all Wizards employees at the time) in constructing a team competition round that involved solving puzzles in order to correctly assemble a Mr. Potato Head out of numerically labeled parts. It turns out they don't have Mr. Potato Head in Hungary (who knew?), so we had to explain the concept of putting noses on taters to an international audience. Teeuwynn, Mike, and I have constructed convention-long puzzle contests for each of the last three Gen Cons. My work still shows up in Games from time to time as well.

Much of my puzzle attention these days is spent solving. In 2004, I played in 8 team puzzle competitions that lasted 3 hours or more. Only four of them required plane trips. My team came in first in three of them.

Event	Month	Team	Location	Place
MIT Mystery Hunt	Jan	ACRONYM	Cambridge, MA	3rd or 4th, depending how you count
Microsoft Puzzlehunt	Mar	Staggering Geniuses	Redmond, WA	1st
Shinteki Aquarius	May	Here Be Dragons	Palo Alto to San Francisco, CA	1st
Dr. Linxo Hunt 1	Jun	Zyzzlvaria	Seattle, WA	1st
The Game (Justice Unlimited)	Aug	Blinded By Science	San Francisco to Palo Alto, CA	4thish (there's no definitive way to measure)
Intercoastal Altercations	Oct	Mexed Missages	Cyberspace	3rd, I think
Dr. Linxo Hunt 2	Oct	Vogon Poetry	Seattle, WA	2nd
Shinteki Untamed	Nov	Here Be Dragons	San Francisco, CA	3rd

And that list doesn't include traveling to Boston for the National Puzzlers' League convention in July! What's next for me? Staggering Geniuses is hard at work creating the next Microsoft Puzzlehunt (a smaller-scale clone of the MIT Mystery Hunt run on the Microsoft campus that was founded 7 years ago by... Bruce Leban) since we won the last one (which was constructed and run by... Bruce Leban's team). The MIT Mystery Hunt is less than a month away. (If you're an MIT student, you like solving puzzles, you'll be on campus in mid-January, and you're not on a Mystery Hunt team, contact me via the email link at the bottom of the page. I may be able to help you find a team.) The next NPL convention is in Los Angeles. I'm looking forward to it vehemently. (*VEHEMENTLY, when uppercase, is a word made entirely out of straight lines.*)

More information on Dr. Linxo: [hunt.craxer.com](http://hunt.craxer.com)

More information on Shinteki: [www.shinteki.com](http://www.shinteki.com)

More information on Intercoastal Altercations: [www.puzzlers.org/cons/#IA](http://www.puzzlers.org/cons/#IA)

More information on Justice Unlimited: [www.snout.org/Game/](http://www.snout.org/Game/)

## What's Your Point?

So now you know way, way too much about my life. But what does any of this have to do with **Magic**? Well, I've used **Magic** as a medium for puzzles for years. I don't mean the "How do you win the game" scenario puzzles that Mark Rosewater popularized (though I have made a few of those for this website). I mean word puzzles painted with the palette of **Magic**. Back in the 1995 Mystery Hunt,

one of the puzzles I wrote was a cryptolist. A cryptolist is a series of items with something in common that has been encoded in a simple substitution cipher. (Each letter is replaced by a different letter, and the replacements are consistent throughout.) Here's what some of it looked like:

VZHKINDD UQOVGYR  
IENRR KNX  
INCC CQLGOXQXL  
VHRKQV GHEEHE  
VCNP RONOZY  
NOHL  
RNJNXXNG CQHXR  
OUH-GYNBYB LQNXO HA AHEQPR

Since this is a **Magic** website, it comes as no surprise that this is an encoded list of **Magic** cards. But now imagine that this is not a **Magic** website. And I didn't tell you that it was a list of **Magic** cards. In fact, it's January of 1995 and you've never even heard of **Magic**. But maybe your teammate has (this is MIT, after all, and **Magic** had clearly gained a strong foothold on campus). Decoding the list would be difficult for three reasons:

1. Some of the words are not English. The first word up there decodes to CUOMBAJJ, featuring a happy double-J. Other words on the list include ATOG and FORIYS.
2. Internet cryptogram programs were not readily available at the time.
3. The words that were decodable didn't make much sense together. SAVANNAH, sure. LIONS, sure. SAVANNAH LIONS? That's not a phrase.

Solving the list was quite doable, however, for two key reasons:

1. The letter distribution is pretty much the same as in normal English. O and A are more frequent than K and V. E is surprisingly scarce on the list, but you can pick out the vowels. (Note that there were 10 more entries, so you had more data to work from.)
2. I expressly left in two words, early in the list, that had very recognizable letter patterns. You may not have heard of "Ball Lightning" or "Cosmic Horror," but a diligent codebreaker would certainly see LIGHTNING in CQLGOXQXL and HORROR in GHEEHE. That would give you enough letters to break other English words in the list, and the whole thing would fall.

This example demonstrates the key tenet to being a puzzlemaker, which is something I figured out early on: A puzzlemaker is creating a challenge—a mental showdown—between himself and the solver. *The puzzlemaker must set himself up to lose that battle.*

The solver has to win. The puzzle has to fall. Fledgling puzzlemakers often have the attitude that they want to "win"—that they want to stump the solver. But if the solver is stumped, then the puzzle is a failure. It's either too hard or flat-out unsolvable. Constructing a puzzle is finding the balancing point between mental torture device and entertaining trifle. A successful puzzle is like an iron maiden with a faulty lock that, when manipulated just right, not only springs open but serves the person inside ice cream. (*ICE CREAM is a phrase made entirely of element symbols from the periodic table.*)

## Aren't There Decks in this Column?

Later. As I mentioned earlier, I'm part of a team that's created puzzle events for the last three Gen Con game conventions. It shouldn't be surprising that I've tossed some **Magic** puzzles into that environment. A couple of years ago, I came up with an encoding mechanism built out of artifacts. The puzzle below represents a left-to-right message, but the only way to reproduce it here was to break it into rows. Pretend it's one long string of cards, and see if you can figure it out.

Answer

For the 2004 Gen Con Monster Hunt, I put together a puzzle that had two columns of images. The left-hand column contained pictures of **Magic** creatures. The right-hand column showed various random things. They weren't in order. You had to figure out what the relationship was between the two columns, and (in doing so) connect each left-hand picture to its corresponding right-hand picture.

Answer

In closing out this section, I'd like to mention that the Indianapolis Convention Center is quite cavernous. (*CAVERNOUS is a word that contains no ascenders or descenders.*)

## Decks Now?

Yes, decks now. For the following decks, I have encoded the cards by doing nothing more than removing extraneous letters. For each card, I have left alone a chunk of consecutive consonants that appear within the card name. However, I have removed all of the card's other letters. Still, the card is uniquely identifiable, thus proving that you didn't actually need all those other letters anyway.

Let's look at some examples, keeping in mind that with no other context to go on, these can be very tough. Only one card in the history of **Magic** contains the consecutive letter sequence LLJ. Do you know what it is?

Answer

How about STV?

Answer

Want to get a really weird letter sequence? Try RJH.

Answer

The letters can appear at the very end (or beginning) of a card name: LKS

Answer

Let's go longer: FTBL.

Answer

Spaces, hyphens, and apostrophes *never* appear within the consonant sequence: TCHT

Answer

At this length, you know you're dealing with a compound word (and most likely a made-up one): NCHSN.

Answer

Two-letter ones are harder than five-letter ones: XF

Answer

I guarantee you won't get this one: LMS

Hint

Answer

Didn't I say something earlier about good puzzlemakers not trying to stump the solvers? Huh. Anyway, there's tons of these, and each new set introduces some new ones and takes some old ones away. Here are three decks constructed out of only cards that have this property, as well as basic lands. Although some nonbasic lands fit the pattern, none of them worked for any decks. And none of those lands was a pain land. (*PAIN LAND is a phrase made entirely out of US state postal abbreviations.*)

I know that it's very difficult to solve these mini-puzzles in a vacuum. That's why you'll be helped by context within the decklists. The basic lands tell you what color(s) the cards in the deck might be. (Don't forget artifacts!) The columns tell you whether a card is a creature or a non-creature. And the cards in each column appear in alphabetical order.

Wing and a Prayer

**Casual consonant deck**

Answer

Gobbodeath

### **Casual consonant deck**

Answer

Phat Beetz

### **Casual consonant deck**

Answer

And now that you're all experts, I've got one last puzzle for you. There is one **Magic** card that has an astounding six consecutive consonants. As before, there are no spaces, hyphens, or apostrophes breaking up these consonants, and Y counts as a vowel. Can you figure out what card it is?

Answer

Until next year, have fun with puzzles! (I know I will.)  
Mark

