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As many of you know, this will be my last column. After this, The Play's The Thing comes to an end. It would be impossible to cover every type of play situation that comes up in **Magic** - as cards are being printed, new possibilities are created faster than one person could hope to cover them. In my time here, I only managed to scratch the surface. However there is a procedure for dealing with situations you haven't seen before. **Magic** is about dealing with the new and different and the unknown. Those aren't problems unique to **Magic**, and you can get a lot out of applying general **Magic** theory outside the game. With my last article, I'm going to go over the procedure I developed over the years and applied week after week. The difference is, this time rather than focusing on a scenario or even a type of scenario, the emphasis is on the procedure itself. From my perspective, this column has forced me to look at what I do during a game and put it on paper in a form where players can read and understand it.

Step 1: What is this game about?

Magic is about winning, but what will determine who wins this game? There are decisions that are purely tactical, but that's a result of this step being trivial at that point in time. **Magic** has multiple ways of winning, and many roads to each of those goals. The most common answers to this question are:

1. This game will be determined by tempo.

These games are about tempo, with two general subtypes. In type one, both players are racing to complete their task first, such as when one person has the advantage on the ground and one has it in the air. In these games, your most important concern is the efficiency of your time and mana. You want to get as much as you can done as quickly as possible, and other considerations don't matter unless they will get in the way. Extra cards don't matter in these games unless one player runs out of cards and therefore things to do with his mana, or he needs to go digging for the tools he needs.

The other tempo games are where one player is trying to win the game on tempo and the other player is trying to prevent him from doing that rather than trying to use tempo to win. The classic version of this is a control deck up against a beatdown deck, with the control deck needing to make sure it doesn't get run over quickly. If the slower deck manages to stabilize, it can then attempt to win the game another way. If the battle is evenly matched, then it will have a large advantage if it reaches this point in reasonable shape. Because of that, the faster deck will generally be willing to sacrifice its resources at the slightest provocation to gain a little extra speed and the slower deck will do the same. A key question for both players is if the long game would inevitably go to the slower deck, or if the faster deck has a chance to win it as well. Some games that look like pure tempo battles are more complicated than that.



2. This game will be determined by card advantage.

When I first started playing this would have been first on the list, but **Magic** has gotten faster and players and decks have gotten better. The result is that this is now second on the list, but it is still very important. The "default" game of **Magic** is still one where the winner will be the one who has the most resources. All cards are not created equal, so it isn't about the pure number of cards each player has, but getting extra cards in these games tends to be devastating. The goal in these games is to do things that generate extra resources for you, which generally equates to more spells and total cards. Both players in these games will generally get to use everything they have, so they often come down to what I've called "lineup theory," where you try to plan out a way to exchange your cards for his cards in a way that leaves you with something he can't handle.

3. This game will be decided by one big war or access to one card.

That war is generally a counter war, but it doesn't have to be. What this means is, at some point in the future one player will try to "go off" in some way or will try to get a key card onto the table or a key spell to resolve. The traditional version of this model is a combination deck up against a control deck. The combo deck will eventually unleash a flurry of spells, and if he is stopped, then he will lose. If he succeeds, he wins. These games are about jockeying for position, as players try to do things that will improve their chances in the big fight or force the other player to launch it prematurely. They are forced to balance every move against the chance that this could be the moment when it all goes down (or that by revealing that you're not ready or making yourself unready, you give the opponent an opening to do something he would otherwise be unable to do). Often these are long waits in which both players are throwing away useless cards while trying to craft the perfect hand.



4. The game will be decided by access to critical mass of a resource.

The classic example of this is a land destruction deck trying to kill all the opponents' lands. If the other player has enough land to cast his spells, he would win easily because the land destruction deck has used so many spells trying to kill lands that he will effectively choke on all his lands. If he kills all the lands, his opponent casts nothing and it doesn't take much to beat someone who can't cast spells. A different version of this happens when one deck is full of creature destruction. If there's enough to cover all the enemy creatures, then that will carry the day, but if even one creature gets through, that would be the game. These battles look a lot like pure card advantage wars, but only certain types of cards matter.

5. The game will come down to whether one player can sneak through twenty damage.

This is close to tempo, and it's also close to critical mass of a resource. It's kind of a combination of the two. This is where one player decides to focus on attacking the opponents' life total. He will lose control over the game and the game situation, but if he can do enough damage, none of that will matter. Suddenly all that matters is attacking and protecting that important life total.

6. The game will come down to... something else.

It can be whether a player figures out a trick, whether he decides to take a certain risk, what he guesses with Cabal Therapy or Meddling Mage... it can be just about anything. Most games fall under

one of the first four categories, but not all of them. And then there's...

7. The game is over.

This is what I was getting at during the Information War articles - some games are already over. You'll be playing more games after this one, and sometimes that is where you need to focus.

8. The game could depend on one of multiple factors.

This one also happens a lot. It's important not to get tunnel vision and focus only on the factor that seems most likely to decide the game, especially when players start making big sacrifices in areas they think don't matter. It's easy for something that seemed irrelevant to matter a lot. A player who ignores his life total might suddenly be in danger of dying because he took fourteen damage from his lands, or he might be short on mana because he sacrificed three lands to get a speed boost. You can't ask the question of what is important once and then stop. You need to constantly re-ask the question whenever there's a possibility that the answer could have changed.



Step 2: Find a way to make the analysis of the current situation manageable

Analyzing possible choices in a **Magic** game isn't easy. How far into the future do you look, how many branches of the decision tree do you examine? You have limited time. This is where you need to find a way to look at the situation that will let you compare all your choices and figure out which one is best. The way you get both better at this and faster at playing in general is by developing tricks and shortcuts. Here are the ones I use most:

1. Things that always win or lose the game for you.

If there's a card you can't beat, don't try. If there's something that wins the game for you no matter what you do, then you can safely ignore that possibility. For now, you can safely assume none of these scenarios apply.

2. Things that render your decision irrelevant.

This is a close variant: If something would lead to the same result no matter what path you take now, you don't need to worry about that scenario either.

3. Choices where one is strictly better than another.

Often when you have a lot of different choices, one will just be a worse version of another. If two choices seem similar, especially if one seems "a little off," see if it's just worse or close enough to just

worse that it can be eliminated right away.

4. Remember the decisions you've already made, and make decisions in advance when you can.

Planning is central to good play, and planning involves thinking ahead. Sometimes you need to rethink your plan, but most of the time you should stick with your plan.

5. Be consistent, especially in what you play around.

This goes with remembering past decisions, but it requires special notice. If you've chosen to play around a Mana Leak, then you need to keep playing around that same card or what you did before does you little good. If you decided that you'll lose if he has one, then there's little point in being timid now.

6. Remember similar situations in the past. Draw parallels with them.

If you've already made this decision in a similar situation, maybe you've already done your thinking. This is especially true if you analyzed your decisions after the game, creating new intuitions. Also remember that often the choice you made before is an even better choice than it was before – in that case, there's nothing to think about. If it got worse, think about how much worse and how close the decision was before. The more creative you are drawing these parallels, the more useful they are.



7. Force every branch of the tree to be bad for your opponent.

Often you can end your analysis of a branch of the tree with "and he can't be happy about that," or something to that effect. This is dangerous if overused, but the principle is sound. If a branch of the decision tree is bad enough for your opponent, it can effectively be treated as a win for you or close to a win. Similarly, you can turn this around and understand how your opponent might play. If there is a choice that makes things good for your opponent, assume he'll make that choice (if it doesn't depend on him having a card he might not have). Learn to develop a sense of when a line is sufficiently lousy that it need not be considered.

8. Watch for inflection points.

Inflection points are places in which the advantage shifts from one player to the other in an aspect of the game, or it becomes possible for that to happen. When you see one of these, it often means that you need to re-evaluate what matters, because someone is opening up a new front of attack or has become vulnerable. This can also be the result of a strange draw where something isn't going according to plan. The opposite works too: If you watch out for these, most of the time you'll know that they aren't there.

9. Check for better strategy, then for better tactics.

If one strategic plan is flat out better than another, it takes a lot for tactical considerations to force you down a different path – so look at the long term first.

10. Develop intuition.

A large part of this is "develop rules like these whenever possible." Most of the time, figuring out how your deck, matchup or format works and developing an intuition about what that deck needs and wants, and how it deals with different things, is the most important thing you can do. Learn that this deck always plays Llanowar Elves before Birds of Paradise without an in-hand reason not to, while this other deck does the opposite. This deck plays the painland first, this one plays the *Ravnica* land – all things being equal. This one hands out removal like candy, while another allocates it like war rations.



And of course, there's always the golden rule:

11. Focus only on what matters.

Wise words from Jon Finkel. Everything has the potential to matter, but often there are small advantages and disadvantages to different choices that are simply not big enough to matter. Of course, all things being equal, even a tiny advantage matters, but often it is clear that something isn't worth worrying too much about right now.

Step 3: Compare the viable possibilities. Decide which play gives you the best chance of winning the game, based on your analysis.

Ideally, this consists of calculating a percent chance that you will win the game under each scenario. Strictly speaking, you should calculate your chance of winning the *match*, but in practical terms that is rare enough to be ignored. People's brains don't think that way, so you'll have to settle for relative chances. When decisions are clear, this is fine. When they are close, that's when you try to find a way to isolate the decision you're making and figure out what is at stake apart from the rest of the game. If you'll make many decisions like this one, it's time to make sure you have a plan and then follow that plan until things change enough to make it worth getting a new plan. If this is a one-time decision, see how it fits into the rest of the game. Think tactically, strategically, or both as appropriate.

In the end, many decisions come down to what some people call "judgment calls." In common parlance, what that means is that you have two or more choices and there are arguments you can make in favor of all of them. Some would say you have multiple good plays, or sometimes no good plays and multiple bad ones. You're not precise enough to decide between them. Here, Jon Finkel once again has words of wisdom: "There's no such thing as a good play. There's the right play and then there's the mistake."

He's right.

That doesn't mean you need to be that hard on yourself. In strict terms, a "good play" means you didn't know if you were making the right play, but man... this **Magic** thing is hard. That play wasn't so bad. It's important to keep in mind that "good plays" don't actually exist, but as long as you remember that, you can still think in those terms. They are too useful to give up. When you decide whether something is a good play, what you mean is that it is a reasonable choice given the information and ideas that you have at your disposal. The danger is when you start thinking of a good play as a play that does something good. That way lies trouble, and it leads to players in good positions not taking proper advantage because they saw a "good play" when what they actually saw was a good position.

When you need to choose between multiple good plays but don't know which is the right play, the first thing you should do is make a mental image of the situation in your mind (if you haven't started doing this automatically). Memory is a vital tool in **Magic**, and in my top tournaments I could have told you every play of many of my games a week later. You make a mental note here because you'll want to go over the problem later. What you'll notice then is that you probably barely scratched the surface of the things you could have thought about. I've never done a postmortem on anything complicated without uncovering new things I hadn't considered.

Once you've done that, it's time to make a decision. It comes down to instinct, and you need to get to know your instincts. It's not about good or bad instincts, it's about the biases that your instincts display. Watch to see which way you naturally lean. If you tend to focus on controlling the game all the time, then when the decision is close, choose the non-controlling path. If you tend to be hyper aggressive, this is where you hold back. That helps protect you from yourself, but when you can, there's a better way.

That better way is deck, format, or matchup intuition. In addition to all the rules you lay out for yourself to use in step two, here is where you learn which style a deck wants you to play in when you need to make a difficult decision. Almost everyone underreacts to the stylistic decisions a deck calls on you to make for all but the most basic and obvious decks. Think to yourself "This deck always wants to get damage in, even at the cost of sacrificing its creatures." Another deck might have the opposite rule: "Worry about board control, and don't be in a hurry." Embody your deck. Break the rules when it's obvious you should, but if it's not clear, then play the deck the way it was meant to be played. When you build a Limited deck, you should be thinking about what this instinctive rule should be and tune your deck accordingly.

Step 4: Do it.

What are you waiting for? Time's a wasting!

Step 5: Think about it more later.

Never stop analyzing your plays, your opponents' plays, your friends' plays, games you see replays of on **Magic Online**, and everything else you see. That's the best way to learn.

A Final Note

This game has meant so much to me over the past decade. I got a chance to play one of the best games of all time. I got a chance to play it professionally, I got a chance to write about it and play it for a living. I even got a chance to work on the design and development of the game itself! I couldn't ask for anything more. However, at least for now, my time with the game has come to a close. This column has come to an end and so has my time working at Wizards of the Coast, as my internship with the company recently ended. I had a great run, but it is time for me to move on to other things. Perhaps I'll be back some day. They say no one ever really quits.

Have fun!

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