

A primer on some of the key plays and strategies in Magic's most intimidating format.

Ascending the Vintage Learning Curve: An Introduction to Vintage Magic

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Hi everyone, and welcome! When Scott Johns asked me if I'd like to contribute a piece to this wonderful site, I jumped at the opportunity to talk about Vintage at the home of **Magic** on the [Web](#). My name is Stephen Menendian, and I am a regular writer for another other major Magical site, [Starcitygames.com](#). However, you may have seen a few of my pieces that I've written for this site in the last few years (clicky clicky on my [article archive](#)) or read about the deck I contributed to the **Magic** Invitational in this year's so-called "[Auction of the Geniuses](#)."

Vintage is an exhilarating format, but the barriers to playing it are formidable. Of all the formats in **Magic**, Vintage can be the most intimidating. Not only can it be outrageously expensive to build a competitive deck, but the format is mind-bogglingly expansive.



There are over 8500 cards legal in Vintage. That's over 40 sets and 12 blocks from 13 years' worth of **Magic**. The number of possible card interactions is unfathomable. Vintage games sometimes resemble a rogue's gallery of **Magic's** most famous (or infamous) cards. It's like fantasy baseball where you can select Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, and Mark McGwire for the same team. Cards like [Time Walk](#) sit side-by-side with [Dark Confidant](#) while feared bombs like [Balance](#) find a home in the same deck as [Golgari Grave-Troll](#). Playing with these cards and using new cards with old cards is part of the fun and allure of Vintage. The possibilities are limitless.

More so than the size of the card pool and the power level of many of the format's staple cards, many newcomers are most surprised by the feel of Vintage. Aside from the fact that Vintage uses the same rules, Vintage is as different from Standard as chess is from backgammon. If you are used to games of magic where most of the action revolves around creature combat, Vintage is going to seem foreign. That is not say that most games of Vintage don't feature creatures or that creatures aren't a common path to victory. Creatures are an important part of Vintage, but in Vintage they are more often used as utility and disruption than as combat instruments. The phrase "I'll block with..." is rarely uttered in Vintage magic. Creatures are often used as finishers, but there are half a dozen other common ways that Vintage players finish off opponents. The incredible strategic diversity is part of what makes Vintage so unique.



Most of the strategies in Vintage are the result of unintended interactions produced as more and more cards are printed every year. For instance, [Bazaar of Baghdad](#), a land out of the very first expansion, *Arabian Nights*, has fantastic synergy with the dredge mechanic (see [Golgari Grave-Troll](#)). That card combination can lead to a win in which no spell is ever played! (Read on to learn how.) Discovering these unique interactions and using them to your advantage is part of the thrill of the format.

Another part of the attraction of Vintage is the long history of magic that you are tapping into when you enter a Vintage tournament. Some Vintage cards are older than their pilots! Vintage is the format where you can personalize and play your own deck from month to month and year to year (making necessary adjustments of course), and thus tends to attract a slightly older and more mature player base. This is a format for people who have busy lives and don't have the time to test and prepare for

PTQs but still want the thrill of competitive magic without having to learn a new format every few months.

Once considered a "dead format," Vintage now has a thriving tournament scene. In addition to the active support of Wizards of the Coast, Starcitygames hosts a Power Nine tournament circuit where thousands of dollars of prizes are given away at every tournament.

Even the regular Pro Tour player has a lot to gain from playing Vintage, apart from the pure enjoyment of the format. Vintage will test certain skills and technical knowledge that other formats don't feature as prominently. Playing Vintage is like working out a different muscle group. Without playing Vintage, you won't get the full body workout. Playing Vintage will help you cross-train and make you see **Magic** in a slightly different light.

My goal today is to pull away the veneer of mystery around Vintage. I want to make it comprehensible for the competent magic player who really hasn't had a chance to dabble into Vintage waters before.

Preparing you for every single Vintage match wouldn't be much help. It would be too overwhelming to read in a single article and would be obsolete within a few weeks. Instead, I'm going to break down Vintage into its essential components. My goal is to help you make sense of this old format so that you are comfortable playing it and discussing it.

"Playing Vintage will help you cross-train and make you see Magic in a slightly different light."

The Rules of Vintage

Vintage, like most **Magic** formats, shares the same [set of rules](#), from turn structure to slow play restrictions. The critical feature that distinguishes Vintage magic from every other format, more so than the fact that there is an enormous card pool and a restricted list, is the acceleration. Although there are dozens of accelerants legal in Vintage, among the thirty or so mana accelerants that are common in Vintage, there are eight cards that thoroughly define the format. These eight cards are what I call the "Rule" cards in Vintage, because they make Vintage what it is. They are all restricted, meaning that under the DCI rules you may only play one of each card. Check 'em out:



To that list could be added other cards, but those eight cards are ubiquitous. Every single deck in Vintage runs a few of these cards, and many run all of them.

To see why these cards make Vintage what it is, consider this possible opening play.

You sit down for your first game of Vintage and you play:

Turn One:

Island, Go

And your opponent opens with:

Polluted Delta, Mana Crypt, Mox Emerald

That can seem pretty intimidating, no?

There is a common myth that Vintage games are all about turn one kills. People unfamiliar with the format look at how absurd the above play *could* be and conclude that a game is won or lost on turn one. The acceleration common in the format leads can produce powerful early plays. This tends to feed the misperception that Vintage is the land of stupid brokenness. When you sit down to play other formats, you may not know what to expect, but you know that there is only so much that your opponent can do on turn one. With Vintage, such bets are off the table. It is the unpredictability, not the speed in itself that makes Vintage seem so alien. In a bit, I'm going to familiarize you with the

most common Vintage openings so that you have a more concrete sense of what is likely to happen on turn one.

It is *true* that Vintage games have fewer turns. In fact, the *average* Vintage game lasts just over 4.5 turns per player. Each Mox is like an additional land drop on turn one and permits mid-game plays more quickly. In some ways, however, Vintage magic is *slower* than other formats. In my experience, more Vintage matches go to time than in other formats (meaning they take longer than the 50 minutes per round). At the very least, there are far more matches that go to time than there are turn one kills.

How can both of those facts be true? The acceleration in the format compresses games of magic into fewer turns, but that doesn't make the games faster timewise. What the critics forget is that 13 years' worth of cards include not only the most broken cards, but also the best answers. Interaction in Vintage begins on turn one, and it's a knock-down, drag-out fight.

I run regular Vintage tournaments in my area, and as a tournament organizer, you have to keep in mind that the extra turns (that is, the additional five turns that players get at the expiration of a 50 minute round) typically take about *10 minutes* or longer. I say that to illustrate the fact that although Vintage may have fewer turns than other formats, that's because you are cramming more decisions and plays into a single turn. That's what makes Vintage seem so fast.

Breaking the Rules of Vintage

The flip side of the "rule" cards is that there are a lot of rule-breakers that help balance things out.

Check out the scenario I posted above. Now pretend that instead of simply playing an [Island](#) on turn one, you also dropped a [Chalice of the Void](#) onto the table for zero. You have just shut down your opponents explosive start with a simple and free play. There is *a lot* of interaction in Vintage in the early turns because the card pool is so big. You can run all of the best disruption spells in the game of magic, not just the best accelerants.



Thus, cards like [Force of Will](#), [Duress](#), [Chalice of the Void](#), and [Orim's Chant](#) thrive in Vintage. Other cards like [Misdirection](#), [Sphere of Resistance](#), [Cabal Therapy](#), [Stifle](#), and [Null Rod](#) are also common. If the eight cards listed at the outset of this section define the format, [Null Rod](#) breaks the Rule cards of the format, rendering them inert. In doing so, it in a sense breaks the rules of the format itself. [Null Rod](#) is immensely powerful in Vintage.

In a card pool as large as the one in Vintage, there are lots of cards that can "force interaction" on turn one. Not all of them require you to be on the play. Cards like [Force of Will](#), [Misdirection](#) and [Leyline of the Void](#) are immediately useful and have a powerful impact on the game. But virtually every game of Vintage continues beyond the first turn, you will almost always have an opportunity to do *something* to your opponent.

Role in Vintage



Some time ago, Mike Flores wrote that misassignment of role = game loss. He categorized all decks as either "beatdown" or "control." Mike's equation suggests that if you attempt to play the wrong role in a game of magic, you will probably lose.

Because Vintage is so compressed, role is critical. In Vintage, the dichotomy is slightly different. Because beatdown and creature combat isn't a common Vintage strategy, most Vintage strategies do one of two things. *In Vintage, every deck either goes for the throat and attempts to kill you as quickly as possible or does everything in its power to prevent you from playing anything at all.* Attacking with creatures isn't really fast enough to fall into the former category, and so creature-based strategies generally try to prevent the opponent from winning. You see cards like [True Believer](#), [Meddling Mage](#), and [Kataki, War's Wage](#) in creature based strategies because they are so disruptive. They prevent the opponent from winning while slowly bleeding away at their life total.

The reason that role is so important is that role isn't merely matchup-dependent, it is also situation dependent. Vintage decks need to know how to switch roles when it is advantageous to do so. Mastering this subtlety is possibly the most skill-testing part of the format.

Familiarizing Yourself with the Vintage Opening

I couldn't possibly prepare you for every match in Vintage, nor would you want me to try. The first place to really begin to learn the nuts and bolts of Vintage is with the Vintage Opening. The Vintage Opening is something like the chess opening. There are virtually unlimited [possible openings](#) in chess despite a limited number of pieces and a restrictive board. The same is true in Vintage. However, some openings are more common than others. A basic familiarity with some of the common Vintage openings will go a long way to making you feel comfortable with the format.

I'm going to present ten different Vintage openings. Hopefully, this will demystify Vintage and show you what the format is really like. Once you've gotten comfortable with the inevitable uncertainty embodied by the Vintage opening and understand what various openings tell you about the game, you will be well on your way to learning Vintage. It's the unknown and the acceleration that tends to scare people the most. Very few Vintage games open like a Sealed Deck match with "Land, go."

Opening Scenario 1

Turn One



- 1) Land (could be a [Polluted Delta](#), a [Flooded Strand](#), a blue-based dual land, or an [Island](#))
- 2) [Brainstorm](#)
- 3) Mox (could be any color)
- 4) Pass the turn.

This or some variant thereof is far and away the most common opening in Vintage. As innocent as that play might seem, it is actually a recipe for war.

It's essentially no different than White developing its pieces on turn one in chess with e4 (moving the pawn in front of its king forward two spaces). e4 in chess is designed to give freedom to White's bishop and queen at the same time that it strikes out in the center of the board attacking squares that Black might seek to control. In other words, it is a defensive as well as developmentally sound play. It doesn't block anything in and opens up as many avenues of subsequent play as possible. [Brainstorm](#) opens up lots of turn-two plays and defends against possible opposing plays, just as e4 does in chess. The [Brainstorming](#) player is fixing their opening hand, correcting inefficiencies and weaknesses. A mana-light hand can find the lands it needed to see. A mana-heavy hand can find the spells it wanted to see. A control player may find [Force of Will](#). A Fish player may find [Wasteland](#) or [Null Rod](#). A combo player may have found the right combination of acceleration, protection, and broken spells it wants to unleash upon you on turn two.

Before moving onto more common openings, I want to show you two openings that are not likely, but show you the range of possibilities in Vintage.

Opening Scenario 2



- 1) [Swamp](#)
- 2) [Dark Ritual](#)
- 3) [Duress](#)
- 4) [Hymn to Tourach!](#)

This opening used to be a staple of the format, but is now fairly rare. As much as this play might seem to hurt you, there are better uses of [Dark Ritual](#) nowadays. After all, this play costs your opponent three cards for three of your cards.

Opening Scenario 3

- 1) [Mountain](#)
- 2) [Goblin Lackey!](#)

This opening is probably familiar to most Constructed **Magic** players and is actually quite strong in Vintage. It just isn't that common, because it is only mediocre by comparison to other potential starts.

This opening is very easy to make in Vintage and is considered one of the standard Vintage opening plays:

Opening Scenario 4

Turn One



- 1) [Mishra's Workshop](#)
- 2) [Trinisphere](#)

Turn Two

- 1) Land
- 2) [Juggernaut](#) (or [Smokestack](#))

Fortunately for you, [Trinisphere](#) has been restricted and so this play is now a rarity. The more common opening is [Sphere of Resistance](#). The principle remains the same, however.

Take a look:

Turn One

- 1) [Mox Emerald](#)
- 2) [City of Brass](#)
- 3) [Sphere of Resistance](#)

Turn Two

- 1) [Mishra's Workshop](#)
- 2) [Smokestack](#)

This is one of the most common starts from [Mishra's Workshop](#)-based decks. [Mishra's Workshop](#) is one of the most important cards in Vintage, because it makes cards like [Sphere of Resistance](#) asymmetrical. This play will slow you down and put you in your opponent's vice grip! It's the boa constrictor, so watch out!

Opening Scenario 5

Turn One

1) [Underground Sea](#)

2) [Duress](#)

This opening play is very common! It can come from a combo deck or a control deck or even an aggro-control deck. It attempts to clear any critical resistance out of the way so that the player may resolve the spell they wish to resolve on turn two. Alternatively, [Duress](#) may find a really threatening card in your hand and get it out of your hand.

Opening Scenario 6

This is a very, very common opening. It builds upon the opening I showed in the first scenario. Suppose you play:

Turn One

1) Land

2) [Brainstorm](#)

3) Mox

On their turn, you play [Force of Will](#) on one of their spells.

Turn Two

1) [Island](#)

2) Pass the turn holding up [Mana Drain](#).



[Mana Drain](#), like [Mishra's Workshop](#), is one of the critical cards of the format. The reason this play is so threatening is because if they play a spell on turn two and walk into [Mana Drain](#), you will untap on turn three and use their own spell's mana to fuel draw spells. The other thing that makes this play so deadly is that if they don't play any spells, you can use your two lands and Mox on their endstep to play [Thirst for Knowledge](#) to draw some cards.

Learning to fight and play around and within this opening is one of the most crucial skills in Vintage.

Opening Scenario 7

Suppose your opponent plays:

Turn One

- 1) [Forbidden Orchard](#)
- 2) Mox (of any color)
- 3) [Oath of Druids!](#)

Since the Orchard has generated a token on your side, your opponent can begin activating [Oath of Druids](#) on their turn. Don't be surprised to be staring down an [Akroma, Angel of Wrath](#) or a [Darksteel Colossus](#) on turn two!

As powerful as that opening appears, it actually turns out to be mediocre in many Vintage games. First of all, that opening doesn't actually win the game until turn four, giving you plenty of time to find a side route to victory. There are ways to stop the Oath and to delay the lethal blow with bounce or removal.

Some plays may seem harmless but are actually very deadly. Many deceptively innocent plays in Vintage begin with this card:

Turn One

- 1) [Bazaar of Baghdad](#)

Imagine what could happen on turn two!

Opening Scenario 8

Turn One

- 1) [Bazaar of Baghdad](#).
- 2) Activate Bazaar, discarding [Worldgorger Dragon](#) and two other cards.

Turn Two

- 1) Mox (of any color)
- 2) Land
- 3) [Animate Dead](#) (or [Dance of the Dead](#)) targeting [Worldgorger Dragon](#).

This play creates an infinite loop that you can use to generate as much mana as you want and to cycle through your entire deck with [Bazaar of Baghdad](#)! You can easily use that mana to win the game.

This play can be beaten any number of ways: [Wasteland](#)ing the Bazaar, Stifling the Dragon, countering the Animate, using [Pithing Needle](#), Duessing the Animate, playing a bounce spell on the Dragon - all of these answers are common in Vintage.

Opening Scenario 9



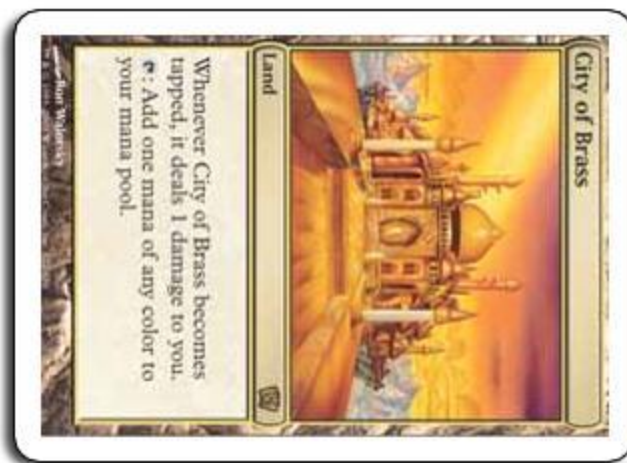
Turn One

- 1) [Bazaar of Baghdad](#).
 - 2) Activate Bazaar, discarding [Ichorid](#), [Stinkweed Imp](#), and Golgari-Grave-Troll
- Turn Two

- 1) On upkeep, activate [Bazaar of Baghdad](#), dredging the Troll and the [Stinkweed Imp](#). Discard the Dredgers and another [Ichorid](#). Remove a black creature in your now-crowded graveyard to return the first [Ichorid](#) to play.
 - 2) Attack with [Ichorid](#).
 - 3) Land
 - 4) [Cabal Therapy](#)
 - 5) Flashback [Cabal Therapy](#) sacrificing [Ichorid](#).
- Within a few turns, all four Cabal Therapies will find their way to the stack!

Perhaps one of the most feared openings for the control player is this:

Opening Scenario 10



- 1) [City of Brass](#)
- 2) [Xantid Swarm](#)

This play frees the combo player to play whatever spells they wish on the following turn if the [Xantid Swarm](#) resolves. However, it doesn't defend against cards like [Chalice of the Void](#) and [Null Rod](#). I've shown you a smattering of Vintage openings. The Vintage Opening is the play you will see every game. Become comfortable with the possibilities, limitless as they are, you won't be surprised too

often. Don't be frightened off your game, but learn to roll with them knowing full well that sometimes they will roll you over and sometimes you can absorb the hit.

Goldfishing with Four Vintage Masterpieces

I've selected four common Vintage decks that I want you to goldfish with a few times using the nifty function built into the Vintage decklists here. I will start you off with a deck where the average non-Vintage player will probably recognize a good deal of the cards.

Here is a deck that is great for Vintage beginners. This decklist made Top 8 at the Vintage Championship this year. Take a look:

Blue-White-Black Fish



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Flooded Strand	4 Aether Vial
1 Island	1 Ancestral Recall
3 Mishra's Factory	1 Black Lotus
1 Plains	4 Chalice of the Void
1 Strip Mine	4 Force of Will
4 Tundra	1 Mox Sapphire
2 Underground Sea	3 Swords to Plowshares
4 Wasteland	1 Time Walk

20 lands

19 other spells

4 Dark Confidant
3 Kataki, War's Wage
4 Meddling Mage
3 Ninja of the Deep Hours
3 Stormscape Apprentice
4 Voidmage Prodigy

21 creatures

Sideboard

2 Annul
2 Crucible of Worlds
2 Disenchant
1 Energy Flux
1 Enlightened Tutor
2 Tormod's Crypt
4 True Believer
1 Umezawa's Jitte

15 sideboard cards



Click the icon in the upper right hand corner of this decklist. This will give you an opportunity to goldfish with the deck and to see what it looks like. Take a look at the opening hand and click "New Hand" or "Mulligan" to fool around and see what kind of draws this deck gets.

Once you are familiar with the basic contents of this deck, think about what disruption you would play on turn one. Goldfish the hand until you have a tough choice on turn one and turn two. How do you decide which plays to make? Which cards do you play on turn one? Which cards will you play on turn two?

Now I want to give you another taste of a Vintage deck you probably will recognize as an outgrowth from Extended. Check out Vintage Ichorid:

Updated Meandeck Ichorid



Main Deck *60 cards*

4 Bazaar of Baghdad	1 Ancestral Recall
4 City of Brass	1 Black Lotus
4 Gemstone Mine	4 Cabal Therapy
1 Strip Mine	2 Chain of Vapor
_____	4 Chalice of the Void
13 lands	1 Chrome Mox
	1 Crop Rotation

4 Ashen Ghoul	1 Imperial Seal
4 Golgari Grave-Troll	4 Leyline of the Void
4 Ichorid	1 Lotus Petal
4 Putrid Imp	1 Mox Jet
4 Stinkweed Imp	1 Mox Sapphire
_____	4 Unmask
20 creatures	1 Vampiric Tutor

	27 other spells



Do a couple of goldfishes and then read what I have to say here.

The deck's basic game plan is to try and play a turn-one [Bazaar of Baghdad](#) and as much disruption as you can, whether it be [Unmask](#), [Leyline of the Void](#), or [Chalice of the Void](#). Click "New Hand" until you find a hand with Bazaar. Pretend that you play and activate the Bazaar. Which cards would you discard?

On your second turn you could use the Bazaar on your upkeep to dredge a lot of cards and discard more [Ichorids](#)! Think about how you might go about playing this deck. What tough decisions are you facing even on turn one? Do you find hands where you could [Unmask](#) but not play another card you may want to play?

Now I want you to move onto a more brutal Vintage deck.

Robert Vroman made Top 4 with this deck at the Vintage Championship. It's called Uba Stax, and it is a fearsome prison deck.

Uba Stax



Main Deck

60 cards

3 Barbarian Ring	1 Black Lotus
4 Bazaar of Baghdad	4 Chalice of the Void
4 Mishra's Workshop	4 Crucible of Worlds
3 Mountain	1 Mana Crypt
2 Rishadan Port	1 Mana Vault
1 Strip Mine	1 Mox Emerald
1 Tolarian Academy	1 Mox Jet
3 Wasteland	1 Mox Pearl
<hr/>	
21 lands	1 Mox Ruby
1 Duplicant	1 Mox Sapphire
4 Goblin Welder	3 Null Rod
1 Solemn Simulacrum	4 Smokestack
<hr/>	
6 creatures	1 Sol Ring
	4 Tangle Wire
	1 Trinisphere
	4 Uba Mask

33 other spells

Sideboard

2 Duplicant
4 Granite Shard
3 Jester's Cap
3 Tormod's Crypt
3 Viashino Heretic

15 sideboard cards



Goldfish a couple of hands and think about, play by play, what you would do. Which land do you play on turn one? Think about the various combinations of cards! [Wasteland](#) + [Crucible of Worlds](#). [Bazaar of Baghdad](#) + [Goblin Welder](#)! What other combinations do you see?

The last deck I want you to goldfish is Travis Spero's winning list at the Vintage Championship (a deck I created by the way!): Meandeck Gifts.

Meandeck Gifts



Main Deck

60 cards

- 2 [Flooded Strand](#)
- 5 [Island](#)
- 3 [Polluted Delta](#)
- 1 [Tolarian Academy](#)
- 2 [Underground Sea](#)
- 2 [Volcanic Island](#)

15 lands

- 1 [Darksteel Colossus](#)

1 creature

- 1 [Ancestral Recall](#)
- 1 [Black Lotus](#)
- 4 [Brainstorm](#)
- 1 [Burning Wish](#)
- 1 [Chain of Vapor](#)
- 1 [Demonic Tutor](#)
- 1 [Fact or Fiction](#)
- 4 [Force of Will](#)
- 4 [Gifts Ungiven](#)
- 1 [Lotus Petal](#)
- 1 [Mana Crypt](#)
- 4 [Mana Drain](#)
- 1 [Mana Vault](#)
- 4 [Merchant Scroll](#)
- 2 [Misdirection](#)
- 1 [Mox Emerald](#)
- 1 [Mox Jet](#)
- 1 [Mox Pearl](#)
- 1 [Mox Ruby](#)
- 1 [Mox Sapphire](#)
- 1 [Mystical Tutor](#)
- 1 [Rebuild](#)
- 1 [Recoup](#)
- 1 [Sol Ring](#)
- 1 [Time Walk](#)
- 1 [Tinker](#)
- 1 [Vampiric Tutor](#)
- 1 [Yawgmoth's Will](#)

44 other spells

Sideboard

- 1 [Chain of Vapor](#)
- 2 [Fire // Ice](#)
- 1 [Hurkyl's Recall](#)
- 3 [Pithing Needle](#)
- 2 [Pyroblast](#)
- 1 [Pyroclasm](#)
- 2 [Red Elemental Blast](#)
- 1 [Tendrils of Agony](#)
- 2 [Tormod's Crypt](#)

15 sideboard cards



If your opening hand has [Brainstorm](#) and you [Brainstorm](#), which cards do you put back? Typically, when you play [Merchant Scroll](#) you will find either [Ancestral Recall](#) or [Force of Will](#). This is one of the format's premiere control decks. What do you make of it?

If you like what you see, you can read more about Vintage elsewhere on the Internet.

[Jonathan Wang](#) over at [Starcitygames.com](#) is doing an excellent job of breaking down the major Vintage decks for the Standard player.

For those of you with premium membership at StarCity, Pat Chapin has written an excellent article covering the Vintage basics and explaining why Vintage is so fun [here](#).

Also, if you want to read up on the Vintage Championship and goldfish a few more of the decks found there, you can find that report by the great Ted Knutson right [here](#).

I hope you've enjoyed this article. You are well on your way to enjoying a new world of magical possibilities. Pat yourself on the back, because you've made your way up the Vintage learning curve and you are none the worse for the wear.

Stephen Menendian