



Laying the Groundwork

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Limited Information
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hey-o!

I'm Quentin Martin, and I'll be your source of all Limited information for the foreseeable future. I suppose a brief introduction is necessary so I'll present my credentials for your conscientious approval. I started playing when Ice Age was still for sale in the shops and before anyone had even thought about drafting. I played my fair share of PTQs starting from back when Urza's Saga was legal. My first Pro Tour was Invasion Block Constructed in Tokyo when I was sixteen. Like most players, I failed to make day two and simply enjoyed being in Japan. Since then, I've put up several successful Grand Prix finishes including four Top 8s. I finally made it to the Sunday stage of the Pro Tour in Prague last year, and, if you read [BDM's "What If?" Week article two weeks ago](#), almost made a return to it in Geneva. I started off, as I think most people tend to, by playing Constructed; it wasn't until I attended my first Nationals that I found my way into a draft. But times have changed and now forty-card decks are my specialty, fortunately deemed good enough by the powers that be to enable me to pass on the knowledge I've acquired to you.



In the immortal words of Julie Andrews, I'm going to start at the very beginning, because it is a very good place to start. Many different players, indeed many writers of this very column, have conflicting opinions about what makes Magic tick, and almost all of the varying perspectives originate from how people perceive the basics. I'm talking about card analysis or, in layman's terms, what makes cards "good." This will be the focus of today's article.

Do you remember how you first came across Magic and how you started playing? For me, it was during break one day at school. A friend was trying to work out what a distant aunt had given him for his birthday. Laid out on the table was a myriad of colourful pieces of cardboard with a dense, yet small, rulebook lying off to one side. He was scratching his head with a befuddled look on his face. Another friend, Tom Harle, who later became my teammate and PTQ companion, had picked up a pale-looking card with a picture that looked somewhat like an angry version of my mom with her arms on hips and asked, "What's 'Banding'?" I don't think there are many people out there, to this day, who could successfully answer his question, so let's hope we don't see the ability reprinted in TSP3. I remember reading [Craw Wurm](#) for the first time and thinking it was the best thing since sliced bread.

This is probably a fairly accurate description of how most players get into the game. Others may have been introduced by people who already played and so might have had an accelerated learning process, but I think what happened to me is better for you, at least initially. My reasoning is that if you learn for yourself, starting from a platform of almost complete ignorance, your education is guided by your own intuitive reasoning. It's not a matter of someone telling you a card is good 'because it is.' You know the card is good because you understand the underlying reasons for its strength. If you've ever seen anyone pick up a Constructed deck they've never played before trying to sideboard a matchup, you will realise they have no idea what they are doing. Whereas the person who is playing a deck he built will quickly exchange the relevant cards because he put them in the sideboard in the first place. The same is even more true for Limited. Play with cards you think are good because you have found them to be so, not just because someone has told you so. Or if they do so instruct you, ask them why the card is



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good.

One thing I left out in my introduction – I used to be a philosophy student. For this, I hope you forgive me. Cards are “good” because society dictates that they are. Not our society, but the cards’. Cards are good subjective to the other cards that they share living space with. In *Mirrodin* block, Oxidize was a clear first pick due to the vast number of artifacts that proliferated the block. However, if it were in Time Spiral it would find itself going fourteenth in the booster alongside Molder and Brass Gnat. Juzam Djinn was a powerhouse in constructed when he was first printed, but in the form of Plague Sliver he has hardly seen any play. The examples are endless.

In Constructed, this means that with every new set release, the decks and metagame have to be reviewed and changed. Many people understand this. Many people also fail to understand that this is exactly what happens in Limited too. For an example of a card that almost no one played in triple Time Spiral but now, with the introduction of Planar Chaos, often makes it into the main deck, look no further than Tolarian Sentinel. Planar Chaos brought with it many creatures with comes-into-play effects, such as Aven Riftwatcher, Citanul Woodreaders and Stingscourger, and other cards that combo well with the Sentinel, such as Reality Acid. With the absence of blue card draw in the new set, Fathom Seer jumped tremendously in value. I can go on and on. Newness brings change.

To truly understand why cards are good based on their surroundings, let’s examine Errant Ephemeron and Looter il-Kor. Before Kobe, most pros thought that the Looter was the better card. In almost any other format it would be, but Time Spiral is so deep in playables that the average power level of a deck is significantly higher than normal, minimising the (still great) impact of the additional card selection it provides. So Looter is still great, but slightly worse than normal, let’s take a look at Errant Ephemeron. He is good because of the Limited metagame, because almost no common can kill him. Only Temporal Isolation, Lightning Axe and Dark Withering are consistently good enough to take him down. He dodges Rift Bolt, Orcish Cannonade, Strangling Soot, Grapeshot, and your average Tendrils of Corruption. He beats every other common flying creature – the only other card that comes close is Castle Raptors. It might even be said that Ephemeron is the metagame-defining common of Time Spiral and, as such, the most defining card.

Ephemeron is such a significant card that it gives other cards increased strength. These cards are all strong in their own right, but their ability to deal with Ephemeron amplifies them. Dark Withering, Assassinate, Temporal Isolation and Lightning Axe are all more powerful as a result of being able to deal with cards in the format that most of their contemporaries cannot. Cards like Duskriider Peregrine and Giant Dustwasp lose expected value precisely because they can die as easily as an Ashcoat Bear to the majority of removal. With Planar Chaos, the Ephemeron has gained in value as it now also dodges Sunlance, Dead//Gone, Shaper Parasite and, more often than not, Erratic Mutation.

There are other factors to card evaluation other than the immediate interaction with other cards. Metagame literally means “beyond” the game and is normally used to refer to the analytical speculation of what the makeup of a format entails and how it interacts. In Constructed, this helps in both deck choice and individual card selection. A certain deck might become unplayable if you perceive its nemesis to be the most popularly played deck. In order to combat the most popular deck, you will often add cards to the main deck and, especially, to the sideboard. The same process is applicable in Limited. It is often easier than the future forecast of a metagame in Constructed because there are fewer cards and rarity ensures you will not have to factor some of them as heavily as others.

What does a Limited format reveal? One of the first things that happens is the revelation of the speed of the format. Whether it is fast or slow goes on to effect the strength of the individual cards. In a slow format, cards like Aetherflame Wall lose value whilst cards like Think Twice increase; these evaluations invert with a fast format. What dictates what speed a format is? The cards themselves. If cards like Penumbra Spiders, Thallid Shell Dwellers and Mogg War Marshals are prevalent then this will slow the format down. Conversely, if there are lots of cheap, efficient beaters backed up by an abundance of cheap creature pump and cheap removal, the format will speed up. It is normally only after extensive testing that you really understand the ins and outs of a format, but analysing it from this angle will help you far more than studying a pick order or taking cards simply because, individually, they look strong.



The understanding of a format also extends to its colour combinations. It is clearer to see how two colours support each other and what their weaknesses are, if you understand what the rest of the format, as a whole, can do. Benalish Cavalry is a good example. In WU there are almost no good two drops; as a result, the Cavalry gains in value because it is a minority case. If you are drafting WG, then you will be lacking in removal, so cards like Sunlance, Saltblast, Temporal Isolation and Utopia Vow all gain a higher value than when they are drafted in other archetypes. UB lacks good early defence, so Dream Stalker and Aquamorph Entity should be picked higher than normal. The list is endless, and it is because of this flexibility that many top players shy away from definitive pick lists.

It is often possible to analyse cards by themselves. This is often done at the start of a format when it is practically impossible to assess cards in their social context. There seems to be a basic set of objective rules in Magic that mean that if you pay so much, you get so much. Three mana will buy you a 2/2, four a 3/3 and so on. Various things contribute as well: An additional ability might be worth a power/toughness reduction or the addition of another coloured mana; one mana will draw you a card, but you have to pay three to draw two, leaving all sorts of possible abilities to be tagged along in between; being an instant or having flying often costs you an additional mana, and so on. These are the base costs upon which we intuitively assess cards.

Card evaluation done in this way allows you to recognise whether or not you are getting a good deal to start with and, therefore, whether or not that card is likely to be good in the as-yet undeveloped format. Constructed-defining cards have always been those that seriously broke the card creation 'rules' that R&D have steadily built up. Most of the "good" cards in Limited will also be "good" simply because they possess inherent traits of strength. Other cards, like Dream Stalker, will be "good" because of how the block internally reacts – it fulfills both the social niche of the minority as well as that of card interaction. In other words, it combos well with enough cards to make its inclusion warranted in a support role.

For a slightly larger picture of relevant applications of this new way of looking at how cards are evaluated, let's take a brief glimpse at Constructed. The basis of Constructed is limited skill selection and card evaluation. Constructed is just a very big Sealed deck, where your card pool is several sets and expansions. For anyone who has tried to build a deck in a new block format, you will know what I mean. Go online now and try and build a deck to play in a Time Spiral Constructed queue. To start with your deck will feel just like a Limited deck. You will play it, and find cards that you don't like and this will generate ideas to play other cards instead, and so on. It should remind you of how you felt at a prerelease, when you realised that the Keldon Marauders you were playing did nothing game after game, whereas you lost almost every round to Uktabi Drake, a card you had thought unplayable and had foolishly left in your sidebar.

The best and most relevant application of this theory is in Two-Headed Giant. We have two Grand Prix, a PTQ season, and a Pro Tour of Time Spiral Limited 2HG, including GP Amsterdam last weekend. As I have already said, any new format needs new appraisal, so what makes this 2HG format different from any other? It is already an old format. We have drafted it many times before and know what is good and bad – in *normal* Draft and Sealed conditions! It will be like trying to switch from bass guitar to electric. We have to relearn it, reassess all the cards and the entire format they form. The ball park has changed completely – two players, twice the mana, fifty percent more life – so many changed variables of the normal objective aspect of the game. This is the hardest type of learning – the destruction of what one already knows to replace it with something completely different from the same building blocks. I will leave the topic of 2HG for a later series of articles where I hope to dissect what makes that format work, how different cards have gained and lost tremendous value, how to build Sealed decks, and how to draft it.



Looking at it from this angle it should become obvious how important the ability to recognise the strength of cards is given the eternal flux that results from new expansions continually coming out; and, as a result, how being aware of this will improve your game. It might reflect itself in small things like winning your local prerelease or doing well on the Pro Tour in a new format. Or it could open your eyes to the inner workings of the game that were shrouded to you beforehand and, with this revelation, you might improve drastically as a player and finally win that PTQ and make it to the elusive heights of the Pro Tour. For now I hope this basic take on card evaluation has rung true, and from this solid foundation, I hope to move onto more complex issues safe in the knowledge that the groundwork has been taken care of.



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