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# There's No Such Thing as Luck

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Luck has always been a word that has annoyed me. By its very nature it seems counterintuitive and self-conflicting. Before I delve into what it is, if it is anything, and what implications it has for **Magic**, and what we can do about it, I want to really try and define it. Now, volumes have been written on this subject, so I will try and limit it to my opinions and the implications they hold relevant to the game. A good place as any is to start with the dictionary definition:

## Luck

- 1: your overall circumstances or condition in life; [syn: fate]
- 2: an unknown and unpredictable phenomenon that causes an event to result one way rather than another; [syn: chance]
- 3: an unknown and unpredictable phenomenon that leads to a favorable outcome, or its adverse; [syn: fortune]

Now, we can leave the first definition and fate to one side as it holds no ground with our pieces of cardboard. This area is more concerned with ideas of free will and omnipotent deities. Let's for now just assume that as much as possible, we are in charge of our own decisions and the reasons and easily predictable consequences of them.

I have a problem with the second definition, insofar as its unknown / unpredictable cause. Almost anything can be predicted or speculated, especially in **Magic** where the unknown is normally exactly what is the top card of your library, which can easily be predicted because it has to be one of the cards you put in your deck. I will call the event in question a random occurrence (assuming there are some things that ultimately cannot be pre-computed by humans), and for know allow 'luck' to be described as that 'phenomenon' that means that one random occurrence happens instead of an alternative event.



This then links quite nicely into the third definition. This states that 'luck' is something that is favourable or unfavourable. I'll talk more about this in a minute but for now I am more concerned with the idea that 'luck' is the phenomenon that changes one potential outcome to another. This is much like the concept of centrifugal force which, if I recall correctly from when I studied mechanics, isn't actually a force at all, but more the label given to other forces that actually do what centrifugal force claims to do. It's an umbrella term to simplify what is actually going on to make things easier to talk about. For me, this is as close to a good definition of the word 'luck' actually is—the nickname we give to something that alters an outcome. However, this is not what is meant when it is commonly used, and almost never in relation to **Magic**.

Luck is the name you give to a random occurrence for when it favours or disfavors you. Luck has the implication of fortune, and the implication that something that was outside your sphere of influence falls your way as if you deserved it—i.e., you've taken an event for which you hold no responsibility and made it your own anyway. Or that there is something you can do to encourage something out of your control (luck) to favour you—paradoxically assuming that you can influence that which by its very definition, you cannot influence. It is like trying to tame chaos.

## Getting Lucky

People make their own 'luck.' If you walk around smiling, more people are likely to smile back and your day will be 'luckier.' Conversely, if you walk around being miserable, people will be less inclined to do you favours and you will be more 'unlucky.' This idea of positive energy I find very attractive and can be applied to all aspects of life. However, it does little to explain or dissipate the idea people have that there are people out there who are inherently lucky or unlucky—"that guy always topdecks / opens the best Sealed."

We all topdeck every once in a while, we do it more often when we cater for it but we tend to forget the games where we topdeck and remember those in which we get topdecked. Tournament winners are not lucky—there is, believe it or not, a winner of every tournament that happens. In every single one, there is a winner, so lucky.

Most people are people who, when it comes to 'luck' situations, have an equal ratio of an occurrence working out for them as for when it doesn't; they're the average and the vast majority of us. Then there are some who,

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mathematically, will have things fall in their favour more often than not, and then there are those who will have the adverse and will mathematically, lose more. It is nothing to do with the individuals or the actions involved, simply that in rare case at the extreme of a bell curve, there will be those who win a lot of coin flips and those who lose a lot and in between will be the multitudes who remain average.

Life is too short for an infinite sample size for everyone. Simply put, if everyone were to flip coins non-stop for a limited period of time, some would win more, others would lose more, and most would win and lose equally. It's just the standard deviation of chance. For these short periods of time (from a few years to a whole lifetime—bear in mind that those who think they are lucky will go into endeavours believing it will work out and will be more likely to succeed because of this, so it can gain momentum), it partially explains why some people seem lucky in life and others inherently unlucky. This is beyond basic influences such as some people being smarter or making the most of their options or their positive energy reciprocating itself in others to good effect.

We would call those who won luckier and those who lost more unlucky. However, if we were to have an infinite sample size to work with, I am sure that this would even out. When we look at the outcome of these random occurrences, it becomes obvious that there is nothing we can do to influence them, once they have truly become random. So how can we take all of this into account and apply it to **Magic**?

## Luck in Magic

I've already mentioned how I believe a positive outlook will increase your success in life and what people deem luck. The same is true in **Magic**. Not only will it mean that you are more aware and see more angles, your confidence can often mislead opponents into thinking you are in a better position than you are and making mistakes. When drafting, if you have a negative frame of mind you will often miss important signals and wind up with an inferior deck. During games, many people lose because they are defeatists. They have mentally conceded the game turns before it might end. Some even scoop the game at this point and don't even allow themselves outs. Your opponent could screw up, and they often do; you might have misevaluated the board situation or forgotten that you still have outs in your deck. At high-level play, the fact that your opponent might cheat, even whilst winning, gives you another out. I remember someone telling me that "I was so lucky, cheats always play me." Hmm...

Wishing others good luck has always been a phrase that frustrated me. I mean, I'm all for the good intentions and the nicety, but I would rather wish them success than imply that I thought luck existed.

In essence, everything you intend to do in the game minimises luck. You learn how to become more skilled so you have more chances of winning. You learn how to build a better deck, you learn how to draft better, and you learn how to play better. Drafting and deck construction increase the number of your cards in your deck that will help you get into poor situations and you maximise the number of cards that will help you get out of them. By playing well, you minimise the chances your opponent has to get out of the situation you put him in. People complain that their opponent topdecked their only out the turn they needed it, but do not realise that often their own poor play either gave their opponent more turns to draw the out or overcommitted turning the eventual out into one in the first place.

I've been whined at on **Magic Online** more times than I care to remember about how lucky I was, about how unlucky my opponents have been, and how the shuffler is corrupt. I will not even address the endless mundane comments about the shuffler, but the rest, almost equally mundane, are made through ignorance (probably frustration more often than not, but ignorantly even then). They show me their hand at the end of the game so I can see how screwed they were. Sure, they are often unlucky to not have drawn the land they needed, but often their hands didn't have the goods to win the game even if they had hit their land drop.

People seem to complain about how I have better cards than them or how their draws were nothing like mine. The simple case is that I read a draft's signals better and so improve my chances of being passed higher quality cards. I construct my decks better, meaning that I am more likely to curve out, and I play better, meaning I am more likely to still have the crucial removal spell for when it is crucial and haven't already wasted it on a pointless creature.

Don't get me wrong, it sucks to have a player rip his **Profane Command** to take a game. However, the simple fact is that I will have minimised his chance of drawing it and it being lethal and that he will not probably be able to pull it off again within a three-game match. He had a very low percentage chance of both getting to still be in the game when the Command would win it for him and an equally slim chance of actually drawing it in time. It wasn't luck that enabled him to do it, it was a random occurrence. It was maths. So what can you do to improve your 'luck' and decrease your opponent's?

## Playing to Your Outs

This one is quite simple. When you've got your back against the wall, take a moment to pause. Bring to mind the image of your deck when it was laid out during construction. How are you going to win this game? What drastic measures and 'good fortune' will you need to pull it out? Once you've come up with a plan, then you're good to go. It might involve several very specific and timely topdecks, but you've already planned that that's how you're going to win. It isn't luck, but skill, if you happen to draw them and win.

Likewise, when you are winning, take a moment to run through your opponent's potential options and outs. Make sure careless play doesn't give them any additional outs or over-commit when their only out is a **Final Revels**,



Thundercloud Shaman, Incendiary Command, or Austere Command.

## The Correct Mana Base

This is where most weak players lose a lot of their games. They don't play enough land, or they play too much. They don't include enough to provide a particular colour. They are afraid to splash when it's correct, or splash double-costed cards. Much has been written about how many land is correct in Limited. The rule of thumb is seventeen in a deck with excellent mana and eighteen when the deck is heavy or has a dodgy manabase. I covered how many land to play for a splash in [last week's article](#).

You can also minimize the number of double-costed cards in your deck, if doing so won't depreciate the power too much. This is not needed in a two-colour deck, but if you are splashing, or even running plain three colours, then it is definitely in your interest to cut the number of these down as they have a lot of potential to provide clunky and disruptive draws.

The decision about what is the correct build for a Sealed Deck factors its manabase in heavily. The age old argument of power versus consistency continues to rear its head, and it is consistency that I will talk about here. This has always been a fine path to tread, but as long as there is reasonable overall power within a deck, walk the consistent path.

## Everyone Likes Curves

Just as it is important that you draw the correct land every game, it is equally needed that you curve out as best as possible. We've all lost games to opponents who hit their curve every turn and we've lost games where our hand ended up clogged with all our deck's late drops. To minimise this, pay very close attention to your curve. You want as many efficient early drops as possible so you will not get out tempoed and also so you can dictate the pace of the game and force your opponent into compromising positions. The trick is to make sure that you are happy drawing those two-drops in the late game. Cards that help smooth the curve for very little cost are also handy. You will find cantrips like **Brainstorm** far more at home in Constructed decks, but **Ponder**, although I must admit that I cut it more often than not, is a great card for doing this and is a must if your curve looks dire.

[My article on quotas](#) goes into the exact specifics of the curve in more detail, but almost as important as early drops are the late drops. You need to have enough of these powerful cards so that when you hit your late mana, you use it efficiently and put some really dominating cards on the board. However, as previously mentioned, you must beware having too many of them in your deck, otherwise you will have difficulty curving well. I think five cards that cost five or more is really the maximum unless your deck has a lot of mana acceleration.



## D.E.F.E.N.C.E.

This links into the idea of the curve a lot, but it deserves its own subtitle. Funnily enough, if you stay alive longer you will give your superior deck and superior play skill more time to prove itself. If I am given time, I will probably win the game. To this end, if your deck has a good late game or plenty of card advantage, then it is normally in your advantage to make the game last as long as possible. So play cards like **Angelic Wall** to hold the early game. Tempo cards like **Pestermite** are also a form of defence as they buy you more time.

The inverse of all this, if you think you're not particularly good at the game yet, or if your Sealed pool is dire, is to go as aggressive as possible. It's no surprise why experienced players tend to always play blue or control decks whilst it is far more common to see newer players sporting Boros or Kithkin. In Constructed, I would much rather a weak opponent play a control deck than an aggro deck as I will have ample opportunity to outplay him. This brings me nicely to the last key area of luck elimination which, as always, is my personal favourite.

## Card Drawing

Another of the key elements of luck whining in Limited is about people who have cracked bomb rares. At the end of the day, though, most rares can be neutralised by commons, or more accurately, multiple commons. A simple counterspell will deal with almost every bomb. Sure, you may not always have it when they draw their bomb, but that's why you have lots of card drawing, so you will find your counter before they find the question, and if you draw it later, you have a higher chance of drawing a bounce spell to it if it is a permanent, or more creatures, if it is removal. Think about it—**Wrath of God** is one of the most powerful Limited cards ever printed, but if your opponent just plays a **Mulldrifter** afterwards, they're probably winning.

The answer to almost everything in **Magic** is drawing more cards than your opponent. This maxim can be taken a little too far, but it suits our needs for now. Playing an early **Counsel of the Soratami** neutralises a

mulligan and digs further for any land that might be missing. In the late game, it is as if you drew two cards for your turn instead of one. You can deal with large creatures by blocking them with two poor ones, et cetera. Sure, you have to have the right answers in your deck, but as long as they're there, draw more cards.

## Don't Skate on Thin Ice

One of the reasons why you hold onto removal and don't waste it on a random creature, even one that's currently dealing you damage, is so that when the creature that you really need to kill shows up, you can do exactly that and kill it. The same can be said about blocks that you choose not to make because they have untapped mana or you don't that you will a few turns later so you can trump their pump spell with removal or use your own removal to save your guy. These are things good players do often because they are concerned not with how scary the board is now, but how scary it can become.

Sometimes it's not possible to cater for every possibility, but you can often take a lot of things into account. You will often have the opportunity to be able to play around the worst your opponent can do. It is not always correct to save a guy with a pump spell just because you can if you have a more valuable creature that may well need saving soon. You need not leave yourself open to a blowout. Wining on 1 life is still winning.

Say you have the choice between two plays, one of which will mean you will win in a few turns but will get destroyed if your opponent has or draws a certain card, the other of which will allow you to continue to stay ahead in the game, but lose a little ground now. When faced with this kind of option it is normally correct to make the cautious play as the first play means you could lose the game, and opportunities to win will probably still come if you are currently ahead. There's no need to go all-in if you don't need to. Why let your opponent get 'lucky' and rip his out, if you can take a few more damage to limit the damage his out would cause if he does draw it. Being cautious isn't always the right play, but if you have room to manoeuvre in, use it.



Don't get me wrong—the role of random occurrences in **Magic** is huge. It's the reason the game is great. Casual players have the chance to beat the pros. Being mana-screwed can mean you'll have a tricky game pulling out the win, likewise with mulligans. It would be interesting to see what happened to the game if it became more chess-like if it were possible to reduce the random factor. However, that's not the case, so we are left having to continually make calculated decisions based on known and speculated variables. We do are best to reduce the variance of chance and it is how successful we are with minimising it that dictates how good we are at the game.

Wherever you are, best of luck with your next tournament.

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*Widely considered one of the world's foremost Limited competitors, Quentin Martin has four Limited Grand Prix Top 8s and a Top 8 at Pro Tour–Prague 2006. Between his **Magic** expertise and a background in philosophy, it's no surprise Quentin is well known for his strategic insight and theories on the game.*



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