



Why I Play

*Noah Weil
Limited Information
Tuesday, April 1, 2008*



"Because it's there."

This week marks the end of the road for this temp. Before we get into this final subject matter, we've got a little housekeeping to take care of first. First, the poll results from that Cube discussion [a couple weeks ago](#):

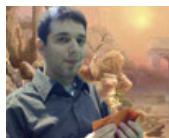
Best Cube Draft First Pick?		
Ancestral Recall	952	20.7%
Umezawa's Jitte	838	18.2%
Black Lotus	722	15.7%
Sol Ring	487	10.6%
Skullclamp	431	9.4%
Balance	234	5.1%
Masticore	201	4.4%
Some other card	161	3.5%
Yawgmoth's Will	160	3.5%
Chaos Orb	91	2.0%
Demonfire	80	1.7%
Mind Twist	79	1.7%
Psychatog	71	1.5%
Mana Drain	53	1.1%
Sylvan Library	49	1.1%
Total	4609	100.0%

I like **Ancestral Recall** as number one, and **Sol Ring** as number two, but it's possible that's reversed. **Umezawa's Jitte** seems a bit high, but considering it's more recent than most list residents, I get why it got the votes.

Next, new guy. For the foreseeable future, your Limited Information articles will be [written by](#):

Click [here](#) to see!

I mean [here](#).



Steve Sadin

Congratulations to Steve Sadin, and thanks to all the writers who contributed. I'm sure Steve will do great work, starting very soon.

And yes, this is my final column for this site. I know [I've said that before](#), so you can take it with a grain of salt, but I would not expect my sweet mug to grace these pages anytime soon. My responsibility was to make the transition to the next author as smooth as possible, which I hope I accomplished.

Since this is a transitive time for me as well as this column, I thought I'd look back at what got me into **Magic** and its various life intersections. So for my final time with the pen for the foreseeable future, I hope you'll indulge me some personal stories. Not much of a Limited focus this week I'm afraid. If that's upsetting, I promise to write these bon voyage articles no more than once a year. If it's still too unpalatable, well, the back button is usually located in the upper left of your browser.

Although I had read about **Magic** in a newspaper article previously, my first time touching cards was in the very beginning of my freshman year of high school, in 1994. Unlike the stereotypical geeky sorts who play fantasy

PRODUCTS

Shadowmoor Preview



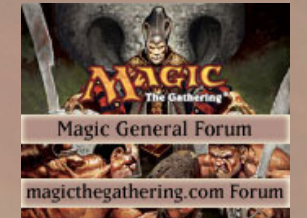
14 Days Until Prerelease!

[-discuss-](#)

MAGIC ONLINE



MESSAGE BOARDS



Magic General Forum

magicthegathering.com Forum

RULES



RULES

games, the two people who taught me were socially proficient, fairly sketchy guys (I think one of them is still in prison). They were good teachers actually, but ripped me off something awful. My very first trade:



Despite the burn—and I didn't figure it out for a while anyway—**Magic** had certainly intrigued me.

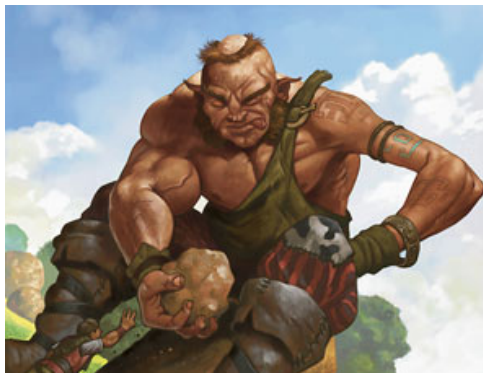
First off, of course the fantasy stuff was cool. God knows what **Fireball** did, but **Fireball!** Whatever it made happen, other wizards surely wanted no part of it. **Lightning Bolt** and **Dark Ritual** were incredible evocative, although the top of that list was definitely **Demonic Hordes**. It will turn on you! I loved it. Before I was anywhere near getting the rules down, those images and texts had me completely enamored. After those rules were somewhat integrated, I remember very clearly thinking **Healing Salve** was the ultimate card. "They need to get you down to zero, but this prevents them! You can't lose!" In my defense, I also saw the value of protecting creatures, and the art was cool. I never played **Dungeons and Dragons** growing up, but I enjoyed reading fantasy and science fiction. These cards were little fragments of those stories, maybe a story you put together yourself.

And then there was the play. It wasn't instantaneous, but I did learn of the incredible strength of **Magic: The Gathering**, the game. Drawing off the top, *deck construction*, bluffing; these were high-value concepts. While I had always been a game fan, from Monopoly at age 4 to spontaneous game creation on car trips to family poker night, **Magic** had something special. If you're reading this I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.

I played **Magic** when I could, but playing with the very small group was losing its luster, especially when they found other projects. **Magic** was starting to dry out for me too, but two things brought it back to the spotlight. One was the introduction of the local game store. [The Source Comics and Games](#) was an important space for meeting and playing with new people. Getting better, seeing more cards, trading; The Source offered all the things I didn't even know I was missing. I became a little regular, which in itself was a rare thing (we moved around a lot when I was a kid). But the real milestone was my very first tournament, held at the University of Minnesota in 1995.

Tournaments and competitive play were really the keys to the kingdom. As [I wrote back in January](#), competitiveness has always been a draw for me. That first tournament was exciting and satisfying in ways it took me a long time to understand. Each tournament, which was effectively a series of devastating losses, just kept fueling my interest forward. I was really terrible back then, but enthusiasm to learn counted for a lot. The tournaments were infrequent, but that just created more anticipation.

It was at one of these events that the next milestone hit. I was starting to incorporate lessons about the game when I ran up against this incredibly cocky fellow. We had never met before, but after destroying me in the first game he called to his buddies, asking how short that game, and my defeat, had been. In Game 2 I won more quickly, and called to his same group to see how long *that* game had taken. This brash opponent, whose name I later found out was Cory, wasn't laughing anymore. I don't remember who won our match, but it was the beginning of a long association. Cory was one of the best players in the state, and his group was at the forefront of theory and practice. As you can imagine, they were right bastards too, but I enjoyed my time there immensely. Status was a function of skill, or at least the most recent win. It was quite engaging, and far different from daily life.



School, the contemporaneous event, was dull. I was capable enough I suppose, but lacking in motivation. Socially I was hardly a pariah, but neither was I particularly on the inside. School was simply a place I had to be,

not anywhere I wanted to be. **Magic** offered something that "normal" life didn't put up elsewhere. A new store arose, [Dreamers](#), where I spent a lot of time. They had twice-weekly events and the store owner was as competitive as anyone else. There was a lot of skill, and no small amount of trash talking. As much as a game store could be, it was a charged area. In fact, Dreamers is still the bedrock of competitive **Magic** in the state.

Some Pro Tours happened. Pro Tour 1 had a nice deal where you could call in to register, which I did. My grandmother lives in New York, so I had a place to stay (she would generously offer her apartment again for the team Pro Tour four years later). I continued to get crushed and learn. Each event brought distinct lessons, which I incorporated and got better. The gains were slow but substantial. It was a fun time.

But then, a shift. I continued to improve, enough that I became a top player—someone people didn't want to face. It was a heady feeling, but (I realized later), it brought troubles as well. I started seeing myself as a top player, if not expecting to win outright, certainly expecting to win more than I lost. But this is a dangerous path, these expectations and self-identification. If I knew then...

First off, you cannot control results in **Magic**. Trust someone who's spent almost half his life with the game: you cannot control wins and losses. Send the best player in the world against the worst player in the world and, if given enough time, bad pants is going to win a match. Given even more time, the so-called awful player is going to unleash some gigantic string of wins against that best player. On any given day, any player X can beat any player Y. That's a good thing for **Magic**, but not too fun if you're player Y.

However, that's not the real issue. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, life goes on. The real problem comes when you start to identify yourself as someone who "wins," be it at sports or cards or the stock market, or whatever. You can classify yourself as a winner at **Magic**, but then how do you interpret losing? I recommend the long view, but that's easier said than done when in the short term your particular event has just ended.

The issue I ran up against was balance. **Magic** was starting to take up too much energy, and especially identification. I would write deck lists in class, on napkins, anywhere inspiration would strike. You could argue writing deck lists when, at the very least, equivalent things were taking place showed a lack of judgment. I might agree. But my problem arose from the identification.

To explain, imagine a grove of trees. Each tree represents some aspect of You, especially where you put your energy. The size of each tree represents your devotion or investment or self-identification with that interest. The larger the tree, the larger that interest. For example, religion is a major part of your life, so that particular tree is pretty large. You appreciate Shakespeare but don't seek him out, so that interest is a wee sapling, etc.

At the time, I had a bare grove, except for one gigantic tree in the center, that **Magic** interest. And [Gaeas Cradle](#) you know, it's dangerous to have all yourself defined by a single interest, *especially* one that was effectively uncontrollable. Yet despite the ironclad logic of "cannot control games," each loss was like a huge axe gouging out bark. What was the real-world translation? Frustration and anger, sometimes despondency. It wasn't fun and it wasn't healthy. Looking back I realize the problem was twofold. For one, I needed to balance my activities. Secondly, at some point there had been a shift from playing to stretch one's skills to playing to maintain one's skills. It was that change that was really draining the fun.

Imagine the last time you had a particularly difficult task, but through solid effort you managed to succeed. Oftentimes those situations are stressful and tough, and we don't think of being happy while working with them. But there is often a feeling of satisfaction with these tasks, the ones that you need to stretch a little bit to accomplish. It's the pleasure of working hard towards a goal, and succeeding. As long as [**Magic**] has that for you, that need to push yourself to succeed and learn, it should remain enjoyable.

In my case, I started new activities, both within **Magic** and without. Writing became a hobby, obviously a work in progress. Our core little **Magic** group expanded and started doing non-**Magic** stuff, bowling, casino games, and so on. Taking on new challenges, while looking for new aspects of current ones, became a model for deriving satisfaction. The little grove became more diverse, and the trees weren't quite so large. **Magic** started changing its tenor too. While its capacity as a competitive outlet was still valid, there was more a sense of relaxation, social play, and going out to events to see buddies; very similar to how I started at The Source years ago. When I moved halfway across the country a number of years ago, **Magic** was a piece of familiarity in a brand new town, as well as a nice bridge to the locals.

To be honest even today losing can still bug me, although definitely not to the same degree. This absurd distaste for losing almost certainly makes me a stronger player, but at what cost? I was incredibly adept at scrambling in losing situations, vigilant about rules problems, etc. Losing was really unpleasant, so I worked really hard to not get there. But its inevitability kept casting a pall over the games, so that I was so focused on the outcome I couldn't enjoy the process. These days I try hard, thought it seemed so effortless back then, at trying to do the turns right and not stress on how the game actually turns out.

Because lately **Magic** has been transitioning away for me. My education is not dull, and is quite time-consuming. When I'm not studying, which is approximately never, spending time with loved ones and keeping the house in order seems paramount to slinging spells. To be fair, I've done a lot. From the highest level of competition, to playing around [Anthony Alongi's](#) kitchen table, to the opportunity to write about **Magic**, to actually making cards, and even producing some card names and flavor texts. There's not a whole lot further to go, which I define as critical to getting that sense of satisfaction out of activities. Of course the competitive thirst is still there, but that's also been balanced out with other activities. School can be plenty competitive, but besides that every Wednesday our dodgeball league meets for some games. A little variety and a little intensity and that itch is scratched well enough. Yet I still play, and have no plans to retire anytime soon.

Why do I still play? **Magic** offers an amazing amount of reasons to play, even though it can [Mudbutton Clanger](#) be taken too far. These days I play to see friends and have some fun, which I think are pretty good reasons. When the mood strikes, I'll load up **Magic Online** and hit a queue (biased or not, I still think *Lorwyn / Lorwyn / Morningtide* is one of the best Limited formats of all time). I could imagine trying to hit the circuit later on, but mostly, it's comforting to have a game which I still enjoy playing, and with whom I still enjoy playing with.

Why talk about this at all? A lot of people get dangerously invested in the game, so that their original reasons for playing become swallowed up. BDM [recently spoke](#) on how people started playing **Magic**. Are those *reasons* for your playing still true today? If not, should they be? Those appraisals allow you to make the course corrections necessary to continue enjoying what you do; to keep things dynamic instead of routine, expanding instead of maintaining. "Do the best you can to enjoy what you do" is the strongest lesson I can deliver.

And just like that, we've reached the end. This game has given me quite a bit, and I'm grateful for the opportunities I've received and especially the people I've met. If statistics are any indication, a large number of you are awesome people, and I appreciate your allowing me to share these tips and experiences over the previous months. It's been a pleasure. Best of luck to all your future endeavors, and thanks for reading.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Noah Weil](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#)

© 1995-2008 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

