MAGIC: THE GATHERING

Lands and Spells

Long live tournament reports.

By Jeff Cunningham | @WJC83 | Updated Feb 7, 2023 | 44 min read

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Author's Note: This report wouldn't exist if Tim Aten hadn't, in a calculated act of spite, intending to consolidate social capital gained following a deal-with-the-devil unlikely $110,000 winning streak on Jeopardy!, compelled the coverage reporter onsite to commit me to writing a tournament report if I finished in the Top 8—knowing full well both that my superstitiousness would prevent me from refusing this request mid-tournament, and that I am no longer capable of producing a report that inspires anything but ill will—thereby ensuring my ultimate defeat even in the event of a small victory. His cruel trap was executed with the precision of a master, leaving me here trying to pick up the pieces.

11-2 at Grand Prix Vancouver. Think it's a win-and-in—only 900-something players. Steve Rubin is today's endboss. That guy who, when you check Grand Prix coverage at the end of a weekend, is somehow always in the Top 8. His presence is calm—lacking any of the muscle tension that betrays lesser-experienced players' nerves in these situations—but composed. We're in the far corner of the massive lit-up tournament hall, in a makeshift feature match area. A smattering of spectators. Green tablecloth. Plastic on plastic.

The deck has some issues. I was feeling good after picking up two late **Basking**

Rootwallas, but by the fourth, I was getting the sense that the other guys at my table might know something about the format that I didn't. It's mono-green sort-of beatdown with a few red cards, with Satyr Wayfinders for two-drops plus a piddling graveyard theme—complete with Spider Spawning and a too-cute Dakmor Salvage. But the front half of the deck has a Faithless Looting, a Wild Mongrel, and a Reckless Wurm, along with two Eternal Witness, two Hooting Mandrills, a Wild Hunger, and an Undying Rage. More of a 2v2 scrapper than a Top 8 challenger, but it has some angles. It was good enough to steal the first round, what's one more?

Win the roll. Even have Wild Mongrel in hand. But after two hits, an exchange of a creature for a removal spell, and a Frantic Search, he plays Living Lore turn four as an 8/8 and Miraculous Recovery turn five on Angel of Despair, and I'm conceding.

Getting rolled wouldn't be the worst outcome. Better than making a mistake in a close match and having to digest it—having to process the fact that you *could've* but *didn't*. That you weren't good enough. Then again, there's always something to look back on—being inflexible in the draft, maybe. Maybe that's what I'll chew on this time.

I'm not resigned, but I'm prepared to handle a loss. The Grand Prix felt like an afterthought. I'd been playing more Magic this year because, after helping a friend prepare for a few Pro Tours, I ended up getting into Standard, and finishing well in a few consecutive Magic Online Championship Series monthlies mid-season. This propelled me to the upper ranks of the leaderboard for the Magic Online Championship, which distributes $200,000 among just 24 players, tantalizing me toward one last run. I'd thought the August playoff was the end of the series, playtested accordingly, and hit my target. But it turned out there was an entire other season left to go (because why wouldn't the series be 14 months long?). At this point, preparation time for a speculative payoff was getting hard to justify. Six bleary-eyed Sundays later, with accompanying bad beats, miserable pools, and punts, I didn't even qualify for the last playoffs.

C'est la vie, as Gabriel Nassif might say (or, more likely, *"cannnnnn't bellllllieeeeeeve whhat fell"*).

So, with the Magic Online prospect ~~brought to light as a vale of f***ing tears~~ passed, I was back to the one-Grand-Prix-per-year competitive Magic schedule, starting and ending with this one, after which I could keep to the humble business of doing other things. If I lose, the plan doesn't change.

If I win, then I guess the story has another chapter. In tournament Magic, prizes aren't awarded in even proportion with achievement; the top spots get the proverbial Cadillac, while everyone else gets steak knives. A hard fought 11-4 or 12-3, even from zero byes, about covers costs, and that's it. But maybe this characteristic prize concentration is essential to the compulsion: for providing the possibility of crossing a threshold so definite that it assures, in a single awesome moment, vindication and redemption for past struggles.



After my first draft, Marc Calderaro, the lone coverage reporter onsite, catches up with me for an interview.

We both got into the competitive Magic scene around the early 2000s, and can lament in common the progressive disappearance of old friends from the game. So much so that, in his case, between his increasing distance from the community, and Wizards' closed communication regarding his future with them, he tells me it will likely be his last event.

I ask him about the skeletal coverage of the tournament, and whether it's just the result of the GP's happening in the changeover period from one Organized Play structure to another. He's not sure, he says, but thinks it's just the result of a temporary end-of-year redirection of resources towards MTG Arena.

We talk a little bit about the format, and then he asks me some questions drawing on Magic history. He asks me why the tournament report format—which blended reflections on game-related strategy with reflections on the experiences surrounding the game—is dead.

Tournament reports, in their basic form, date back to Magic's earliest Usenet posts. They were part of the fabric of turn-of-the-millennium Magic. So much so that one year at the Magic Invitational, for example, every competitor was required to write a tournament report.

It's a difficult question. Partly, technology and industry practices have developed in other directions. Magic content has come to be delivered in two primary ways: articles, that focus on strategy, and streams, that allow players to showcase their personalities. Magic sites are no longer even designed to have browsable archives, which further discourages the production of articles with relevance beyond the current format.

But maybe reports have also been outmoded in a deeper sense. I was saying to Geordie Tait a little while back that I liked his **"The Definitive Tournament Report,"** which captures the Pro Tour experience through the eyes of a first-timer. He told me he finds it cringe-worthy now and that it would be better off titled "Fogo de Chao: Confessions of a Barnacle." Mainly because of the increased public consciousness around gaming—"people already know from Joe Cardgame's Twitter that he isn't that interesting and neither is a Brazilian meathouse."

It could be the case that all the impressions that reports strove to capture—the abundance of game states, personalities, and micro-narratives—now do not seem to be more than mundane things put under a sentimental light. Shallow mythologies spun by observers whose claim to insight is only by the depreciated standards of their own resource-starved communities.

Back in those days it was easier to buy into the romance. Now it's fairly plain that the Pro Tour dream is nothing but a marketing construct, and failing to

acknowledge that makes the writer look like either a sucker or a salesperson. But, if the writer would instead attempt to dissolve the image, it raises the question—why write in the first place? The report strikes a negative chord that disrupts what players are trying to savor. It also takes longer to put together than the strategy content that comes naturally with Magic expertise. People used to subsidize the labor by thinking of the work as a tribute to the experience. Especially if dissatisfied, why bother?



On Saturday morning it's straight to the trenches. Haven't had a bye since the Bush administration (Sr.).

The energy in the room is charged, as people get seated into rows. Elbow to elbow.

My tournament had started on the rainy Friday, with a disastrous Team PTQ. I played with longtime teammate **Aeo Paquette** and Ryan Perez, a local moneydraft reg known for his extreme card evaluations. I showed up late, underslept, without having done my daily meditation, and having forgotten my cell phone in the car. We'd opened up a good pool with **Karn Liberated** and **Shriekmaw**, but ended up wasting our time bickering about how or if to accommodate **Emrakul, the Aeons Torn** and **Through the Breach**, ending up with terrible decks, receiving game losses, and losing round one. I was also dismayed to let a rules disagreement become hostile because I was too tired to find the right words to defuse it.

The rough day at the office had had the inoculating effect of reminding me just how much alertness is required to attempt regret-free Magic, and, today, with sleep and provisions, I feel solid.

Which is good, because I quickly need to advocate for myself, when the young kid across from me double-handed ships over a barely-registered heap of cards, and

the judge I ask to ensure I don't lose time tells me that there'll be a five minute verification process for me to sort things out.

"Well, is that time reserved for verification, or will everyone else be using that time for deckbuilding?"

"No, it's designated time for verification, after which you'll receive 20 minutes for deckbuilding, which should be more than enough."

"But sir, just yesterday I received a game loss for not finishing registering my decklist. The more time, the better, for deckbuilding."

"Yes, that's true." He writes +5 minutes on my decklist in case I need it.

Highlights are **Mikaeus, the Unhallowed**, **Murderous Redcap**, double **Wild Mongrel** (one foil).

I end up with black-green splashing red for **Vengeful Rebirth**.



Playing the **Engineered Explosives** was clearly a mistake. I thought the third color justified it, but the card is just too awkward with so many cheap drops of my own. In hindsight, the only change I would've made is to replace it with **Walker of the Grove**, edging out **Ghoulsteed** because of **Vengeful Rebirth** reach potential.

As I'm making the final tweaks, with the clock ticking down, I notice the kid across from me has built his deck but hadn't registered a single card. I consider minding my own business.

"Kid, you know you need to register a deck, right, not just the cards?"

He just looks at me glumly and says "I know."

As I'm leaving, the judge arrives to give him a game loss.

I show local player and Ultimate Masters Phantom Sealed League trophy leader Ellis Clay my deck and ask him to assign it a rating out of 10. He gives it a "soft 6."

I win the first seven rounds. Lots of play to my matches, but my deck performing as I'd hoped—aggressively postured but also having extra gears for the late game. **Mongrels**, with rehearsed vulnerability, into **Twins**; **Vengeful Rebirth**s for lethal+1; **Death Denied** for the occasional reload; **Mikaeus, the Unhallowed** for turnarounds and easy wins. I feel that I'm alert and playing well. Nothing outstanding per se, but tracking games closely and being highly conscious of the possible tricks and outs at every stage.

It's also true that I'm running well. In round 4, against Zak Turchansky, across three games, I beat turn two **Bitterblossom**, turn three **Artisan of Kozilek**; turn two **Bitterblossom**. And in round seven, against Tobias Roos, I mulligan five times over the course of the match and still win. I think it was Gab Nassif that once pointed out that running good isn't about topdecks, it's about the little things. Which, to be sure, is kind of an unfortunate attribution because **Cruel Ultimatum** and **Ignite Memories**, but still. The false perception that accompanies running good is: "wow, if you keep it tight, it's hard to lose."

Between rounds, I wander the hall, dissolving into the crowd and cacophony. In 2010, at the beginning of the Grand Prix attendance surge that would culminate in 2015's 7,500 person Grand Prix Las Vegas, I described the experience of being at a multi-thousand person Grand Prix as like **being swept up in an ocean of people**, with an accompanying sense of disorder. This Grand Prix is under-attended due to the time of year; but due to the recent OP announcements throwing incentives into confusion, it's also particularly under-attended by pros. I notice only a few die-hards in attendance: Shuhei Nakamura, Martin Juza, Sam Black, and Paul Rietzl, who tells me that he's only here because he booked a non-refundable plane ticket

when the tournament was originally announced as Teams. "What about the rest of your team?" "They never book in advance."

Rietzl's one of many players that I can't really say I know on a personal level—I've never interacted with him outside of Magic—but that I share a long history with. Thinning vapors from the early '00s. Running 2v2s at—I think—Pro Tour Chicago '02, back when the sites were open 24 hours. Me and Jordan Berkowitz against Paul Rietzl and Ben Rubin, a few clusters of other degens milling around the hall, some homeless woman coming in and haranguing people, which of course became the fuel for some recurring bit, as funny as it was tasteless.

In round eight I'm paired against Brian Weller-Gordon. It's the second of three consecutive feature matches, but they're just the first four tables redirected to the corner of the room every round. I prop myself up on my foot, something I sometimes do to help me feel alert, and Paul Rietzl from the next table over calls me out for making a "total power move."

I'm pleased one game, when Brian passes with a tapped **Skywing Aven** and a blocker, and I make the decision to decline the attack for a turn, playing around a **Twins of Maurer Estate** I haven't seen and that he hasn't particularly telegraphed. Just as I'm passing the turn and wondering if that wasn't too conservative, he flashes them in. I win a nuanced match, hinging on things like APNAP orderings for persist creatures returning, and ending with a 4/1 **Scuzzback Marauders** and **Shed Weakness** for what I am told is known as a sweet lil' backbreaker.

Round nine, I play against Richard Liu, losing in two quick and forgettable games, ending the run at 8-1.

In a lost tournament report, someone observed that the two matches that impact us the most in a tournament are the first loss and the loss that eliminates us from Top 8 contention. The latter for obvious reasons, and the former because it reminds us that, despite a few lucky breaks, fate offers us as little protection as it does the next guy.



Next, Calderaro asks about the role of Magic in my life.

At this point, it's part of the fabric. I started playing with Revised, 25 years ago. My first Pro Tour was in the previous century. I've taught the game to my closest friends and family, and continued to talk about it with them over the years. I'm as grateful as ever to have the hobby and to be able to participate in the tournaments. And yet, I've picked up an ambivalence. An increasing disenchantment that the company that manages the game is governed by a dull corporate logic.

When I look at the cards I began playing with, I marvel at their integrity. There's no hint of commercialism in their design. No "remember, your audience is BOYS 14 and up." No branded characters on endless hero's journeys.



Richard Garfield has often said that his ultimate desire for Magic is that it achieve the status of a classic game. He did so almost right out of the gate. As Mark Rosewater puts it, Garfield innovated a "golden trifecta": the mana system, the color pie, and the trading card game genre. In addition to these relatively stable classic aspects, however, Magic contains the more contemporary aspect of perpetual generation. This both strongly associates the game with real-world money, and tasks Garfield's creative descendants with the role of maintaining and developing his creative estate.



Sunday, seatings go up at about 8:45 AM, by 8:55 AM everyone's seated at the tables, and at 8:59 AM the last breathless player is ushered to his seat.

I'm seated between the last two Pro Tour winners—passing to Andrew Elenbogen, being passed to by Ben Hull.

I open my pack and am pleased to see a **Wild Mongrel**, candy-lacquer foiled and nearly blinding when it catches the light. By the late rounds yesterday, I'd settled on a preference for red-green in draft. it was the deck I'd drafted most online to good success, and I figured you have a shot at a top tier deck if you end up with a couple **Mongrels**, but with a virtually guaranteed backup plan of a strong aggressive deck, given the depth of the commons. I was willing to go into other combinations, but knew that opening **Wild Mongrel** would make it easy. So I flick through the pack, relieved there's no better pick, then place the **Wild Mongrel** face down on the table, followed by the draft pack's thin white paper band as a hole card protector, which is immediately plucked away by the table judge.

The trouble is that I read Ben Hull for someone with a strong aggro preference in draft, remembering his Pro Tour Top 8s with white-red and **Hollow One**. The red dries up, and I begin to shift into black-green, which is cemented with a pack two **Shriekmaw**. I'm picking up several solid blue cards from late picks in pack one, and when I get passed a late **Talrand, Sky Summoner** in pack two, I commit.



Notable sideboard cards:

1 **Foil** 1 **Dimir Guildmage** 1 **Stitched Drake**

The deck ends up pretty good, but light on graveyard enablers. I regret passing up on a second Sultai Skullkeeper.

"Soft seven," Ellis says.

Round ten, I play against Nicolas Neary. I asked him how his draft went. He considers, then says, "well, I thought my sealed deck was bad yesterday, and I ended up winning a lot with it."

He's Bant ramp. Game one he neutralizes my threats, Cruises and Digs, and then eventually kills me with a Whirlwind Adept enchanted with a Flight of Fancy. He seems extremely light on creatures. Despite seeing most of his deck, I've only seen the Whirlwind Adept, a Deranged Assistant, and a Canker Abomination. I board out a conservative amount of removal, and win a quick game two.

Game three, I evoke Shriekmaw on his Deranged Assistant, but he's not depending on it.

At one point, I decline the opportunity to double block his Whirlwind Adept with Olivia's Dragoon and Dimir Guildmage despite doubting he has another reliable win condition.

Soon, he Flight of Fancies up his Whirlwind Adept. His Canker Abomination is holding back my assortment of 2/2s, and I'm suddenly in the position of having to chump block his Whirlwind Adept every turn—prompting him to play a spell out of his full hand—while I'm trying to catch up with my Dimir Guildmage.

I draw into one last chump blocker, the second Olivia's Dragoon, and pass the turn, expecting to be chump-conceding momentarily.

To my surprise, he passes back. He's out of spells to trigger Whirlwind Adept! This gives me a chance to remove the Canker Abomination, make an attack, and then draw into Aethersnipe the following turn to lock it up.

He tells me, also, that had I made the double block, I would've gotten blown out, since he had multiple cheap instants.

After that, I feel like I'm on a freeroll, having reversed an almost certain loss into a win.

I beat Ben Hull's four-color reanimator deck in round 11, but lose to Elenbogen's white-green aggro in round 12, after he correctly calls my bluff and goes all-in with a **Wild Mongrel**, dropping me to 10-2. I'm left wondering if I could've won either game with tighter play.



I asked Randy Buehler once why, in general, Magic Online was the way that it was, with its long history of underperformance, and he said "hubris." Lately, corporate arrogance has been most visible in the realm of Organized Play. The readiness with which the company disregards the interests of sectors of the player base that it had previously built up is frequently astounding. Most notably, in my memory: **removing unannounced all Grand Prix coverage**, including as little as round-by-round standings; **awarding lavish equity to 32 players** while leaving all other pro levels in the dark; **awarding $250,000 to a hand-picked group of eight players**, several of whom had left Magic for the superior prize support of other games, despite a prize-starved core pro player base; **attempting to evade paying out hundreds of thousands of dollars in Pro level benefits** after players had earned them in good faith; **replacing an established skill-based ranking system** with a flagrant pay-to-succeed model (**scaled back on protest**). The community has come to depend on **bursts of outrage** to compel the company to act with a base level of decency toward the same audience **they routinely charm with fantasies of the Pro Tour**.

In 2019, this is broadly unsurprising. What's interesting, to me at least, is the question of the root, extent, and inevitability of this state of affairs. Despite numerous trajectories—corporate developments, art direction, Organized Play, and, most subtly, gameplay itself—an underlying narrative can be discerned.

In 1993, Richard Garfield designed Magic, and Richard Adkison released it through the company he started in his basement, Wizards of the Coast. Initially, Adkison was idealistic. He committed Wizards to the goal of bringing analog games—Magic and other collectible card games, but also the perpetually marginalized roleplaying genre—to the mainstream. And **he ran Wizards something like an anarchist utopia**. Richard Garfield would later tell me that he considered this experimental environment to be **"a travesty,"** a huge waste of time and money, albeit one that gave him the freedom to explore the possibilities of the trading card game format. Wizards needed to focus on Magic.

Soon enough, Adkison's approach was failing both within the company and publicly. Wizards decided to go about growing Magic by traditional corporate means, with a particular emphasis on branding—the idea being that an intellectual property can be seeded with characters and storylines in such a way as to expand merchandising opportunities to their full potential (originally at least, Garfield and other key designers had been skeptical about the suitability of a linear story to a game delivered in a non-linear way—this is what inspired Antiquities' non-linear "archaeological" approach to its story). This shift in trajectory, along with a booming valuation thanks to the success of the Pokemon TCG, ultimately lead to Wizards' sale to Hasbro a few years later, around 2000, cementing Wizards' corporate commitments. About a year later, Adkison, predictably dissatisfied with the way Hasbro is managing Dungeons & Dragons, retired.

In parallel with this overarching corporate development, the game's art direction followed its own growth period. The earliest cards may not be motivated by branding considerations, but they're also something of an artistic hodgepodge. With the demand for regular set releases comes the need for a consistent, coherent art direction. Mirage shows art direction at the cusp of rising out of the

hodgepodge era, without branding staples like amped-up heroes and an action-packed plot. Mirage, like the sets that preceded it, has the feeling of occurring in an open multiverse; narrative richness is implied, with room left to be filled by the imagination. It gives the best idea of Magic's artistic orientation before the branding intervention, which takes over by the last set in the block, Weatherlight.

A central figure in Magic's history—second only to Garfield in terms of creative influence—arrives around this time: Mark Rosewater. In my view, Rosewater largely personifies the above shift, and ends up becoming its spokesperson. Rosewater credits himself with **bringing the psychological perspective to Research & Development**: "I feel my influence has been a focus not on how the game works but in how the audience perceives it. We're not just making cards, we're making cards for people. If we understand who they are and what they want, we'll be able to do a much better job." And, over the years, Rosewater has become the company's most forceful advocate of using market research to source public opinion so that it can be efficiently satisfied.

What's striking is that with Rosewater—or with the overall change in perspective that he vocalizes—the metrics by which the game designed measures success come to closely overlap with the metrics by which the corporation measures success.

In a podcast released in 2019 on the topic of market research, Rosewater says, "the reason we all do the market research is that we want to learn what you guys want. My job—or, *all* of our jobs—is to make a game that you all want to buy. Something you enjoy. And... one of the easiest ways to do that is to ask you what you do and don't like, and use that information to constantly adapt." Or, from **a tweet commenting on a poll between two sets**: "the 'voting' that matters most is the one where people vote for their likes and dislikes with money." Phrased as a formula, then: the extent that a set sells evidences the degree to which people like it, which is posited as the designer's standard of success and the measure of the set's quality.

On the surface, the idea that the designer aims at what's *liked* is innocuous, even

obvious. In fact, the shift in focus from making something *great* to making something *popular* has insidious consequences. It's worth examining the position's logic closely—abstract as this may seem—because of the sheer pervasiveness of its influence, in Magic and elsewhere.

The problem with the above formula is that it's reductive in a way that ultimately subsumes the game designer's purpose to the corporation's. Popularity doesn't equal quality because while the consumer knows what they *want*, or what *seems* good to them, they don't always know what they *need*, or *is* good for them, especially considered on a longer-term aggregate often poorly calculated for by the consumer.

The corporation's marketing arm is equally agnostic—it aims at maximizing profit. The better the product, the easier to sell, but strictly speaking what matters for marketing is how the product can be made to *seem*. So much so that one could say that this interest is incentivized to leverage any disparity between perceived quality and actual quality, locating the balance point of maximum willingness to pay at minimum cost to produce. There's even a term for the common practice of a supplier's gradual depreciation of a product's materials up until the point when the buyer would consciously notice and object: "quality fading." The marketing interest is also constantly looking to increase its consumer base, motivating adjustments to appeal as widely as possible.

The designer, by contrast, is motivated by the goal of making the best game possible. This can be defined in terms of its desired effect on its audience. A designer *can* aim, at one end of the spectrum, to provide customers with a more or less intensely pleasurable experience for which they're willing to pay a commensurate amount. The *seeming* good is the aim, with the calculus as to its actual benefit left to the consumer. This is one legitimate way to attempt to make something good—the approach described above that synchronizes with corporate interests. It's a position that would have McDonald's as the model of success.

Or, at the other end of the spectrum, the designer can aim to deliver something that

not only seems good, and that the consumer is willing to pay for, but that contains something beneficial that may even go unnoticed, whether it's nutrition, or a richer experience occurring beneath the level of immediate conscious awareness.

That might sound moralizing but I think it's something most creators attempt naturally to some extent, Rosewater included. And if I'm off the mark in ascribing Rosewater this view, take the above as a suggestion of what happens when sufficient pressure is exerted by the corporation on game design.

Besides—Garfield disagrees with me on the above point and seems to have no objection to the position I'm calling Rosewater's, except as it applies to extreme cases ("**skinnerware**" aimed at "**whales**"). The current state of Magic seems to be a refinement, not a distortion, of Garfield's conception. To take one example, Garfield expresses little sentimentality for old aesthetics and, in general, seems to consider all such aspects as strongly subsidiary to game mechanics. I believe he considers the trajectory I'm describing to be both necessary and good.

The root disagreement seems to be whether the designer has any business designing beyond what the most customers *want*. In my view, the position that the designer does not have any such business takes the minimum amount of responsibility. It assumes the customer's degree of agency is absolute—which flatters the customer and makes the position sound democratic and morally significant—at the same time as it unleashes the marketing arm of the corporation to attempt to exploit the faults in its customers' perceptions as much as possible. If I'm going to dedicate myself to a lifestyle game, I'd prefer the designer to be more committed to looking out for my best interests—constantly pushing for improvements that elevate the game's excellence and integrity without necessarily holding up to a monetary cost/benefit analysis or a maximum popularity bump. Is the fast food model the only one available for creative products?

But let's take a step back to check this perspective in terms of the game's central aspect: gameplay itself. has gameplay been degraded at *all*, or is it as good or better than ever? The **New World Order** is universally recognized as a success and a return to the original spirit of Magic (Garfield calls it "the Old World Order"). And

there's no reason not to believe that **the new crop of R&D members** is ambitious and driven by good game design as such. The design skeleton employed across sets is probably too rigid—NWO sets have a vaguely homogenous feel. The cards' flavor and function could be better matched; creature types should mean more than they do. Many sets seem as though they need a careful final edit, perhaps relying too much on Magic's self-correcting features to compensate for rough edges. But if there is one part of the game most resistant to corruption, it's gameplay itself. But maybe this is the bedrock used to leverage the rest.

If there's a critique to be made, it's subtle. It may become more apparent as the game is increasingly designed for and presented via Arena, which is Magic mainlined. One of Magic's handicaps has seemed to be that it's a game designed for analogue play operating in a largely digital market. Arena demonstrates that this handicap can be almost entirely minimized. Without mana screw, waiting during drafts, or the fussiness of sideboarding, and with constant in-game action, and faster matchplay than ever, Arena concentrates the thrilling parts of Magic. It will be excellent at growing the player base. At the same time, the game is brought closer to its competitors than ever. It sometimes feels like Magic but within a stimulating but generic-feeling video game overlay.

When I consider Arena's dopamine workout I'm sometimes reminded of a pair of articles by former R&D member Zac Hill. **In the first**, Hill championed Magic's ability to "address real human needs." Namely, to produce pleasurable feelings of "flow"—feelings of increased problem-solving capacity and productivity—and "fiero"—feelings of meaningful conquest. By the next year, **he'd left R&D**: "Magic can be a lens into reality, but it can also serve to distract you from it. And as much as entertainment is talked about—loved, even—for its capacity to distract people from reality, to 'escape' from it, to provide a simple type of pleasure, that kind of conversation is *f***ing horrifying* the more you think about it. Because I can't think of a better definition of *death* than 'an escape from life'—that is, an escape from *reality*."

Is it possible to distinguish an aspect of a game that's *addictive* rather than *good*—

say, to identify the aspect of World of Warcraft that compels some people to funnel their life into it and then come away feeling empty—or are such suspicions like blaming alcohol for the alcoholic?

Taking in the big picture, it's fair to ask if my criticisms are the result of demanding too much from what's intended as an accessible juvenile hobby for a broad public. Are they the result of my trying to occupy an image incapable of sustaining adult sensibilities and expectations, expectations like that Wizards of the Coast ought to behave as if they were a government and not a corporation?



As experienced players know, when it comes to opening hands, it's best not to expect too much. Any reasonable seven. Lands and spells. Game three against Steve Rubin, my hand is sufficient by those standards but decidedly mediocre. Basking Rootwalla. Brawn, Eternal Witness, some lands. Is this the hand that's going to get me back to Valhalla? Arcadia? 21st century London? It'll have to do.

Lead with Rooty. Draw another, raw dog it, instead of Faithless Looting out of the 'yard, to avoid a Rune Snag I saw game two, and to get an extra pump in. A couple more pumps while other creatures trade off. I get him down to about 10 with some pressure on the board.

He's a bit flooded. Plays a Dig Through Time. Plays a land.

Says, "I played the wrong land." Thinks.

Passes the turn.

I take a minute to figure out what he's representing. Frantic Search into Miraculous Recovery? Was he sincere about playing the wrong land? Is that this guy's angle?

Condition your opponent to trust you, and then swoop in at the decisive moment—the Mike Long special?

I attack and get through for some damage.

He plays a **Fiend Hunter**, then an 8/8 **Living Lore**. I have **Undying Rage**, the same one I played on his 8/8 **Living Lore** in game two on the way to the win. Attack through. **Fiend Hunter** has to chump. Play a third **Basking Rootwalla**.

Sometimes, when I watch Pro Tour coverage of significant matches, I wonder what is going through a competitor's mind when a win becomes a foregone conclusion. At the moment, I get a taste of that mindset, a background sense of the advantage bar. But it's turned low.

He attacks with the **Living Lore**. No point blocking with **Basking Rootwalla**—he'd kill it then draw the cards anyway.

"10 it is." He **Digs** again and I get the **Undying Rage** back.

Untap, **Undying Rage** something. Attack.

He offers the handshake.

"I made a mistake," he says, "I could've played the **Fiend Hunter** a turn earlier. I just tapped wrong." He thinks it over, "I feel I could have maybe won that one."

Aeo approaches the table, "**Undying Rage**, eh?"

If I'm being honest, I am—by way of intense relief—elated. It's just a Grand Prix. 900 more or less casual gamers in a room. But after so many attempts, so much built-up anticipation and disappointment, spaced out over years, it's almost shocking to once again break through.



I enjoy competitive Magic as a hobby. I'm invested. I'd prefer to occupy the experience entirely. But I can't endorse it without qualifying it, especially when it seems that agreeableness is just taken as license for more quality fading. My favorite genre of Magic writing, when it's well done, is the one that attempts to improve the game by criticizing it, partly because it's underrepresented, partly because it contains, in the negative, a purified version of the game. Geordie Tait's **Just Another Dead Bonsai**; Matt Sperling's **Platinum Pro Club Changes, Corporate Greed or Legal Mandate? (Both?)**; Chris Morris-Lent's **The PT Sucks**; Jesse Mason's **Kill Reviews: Mirage Block**.

Even if one accepts the dismal and reductive argument that "Wizards/Hasbro is a business and they'll proceed in the way that profits them the most," there are still two things invested players can do to help maintain the game's integrity. First, to demand better—not taking that argument as cause for deference. Second, to point out ways that the company could be making more money.

My feeling is that the company underestimates the integrity of Organized Play systems, relative to their optics. Tournaments without integrity are less fun to watch.

Magic has the character that when tournaments are too small, metagames become inbred and non-representative, personalities and storylines insufficiently diverse—64 people is a good minimum number, balancing altogether the fascination of watching a metagame get worked out from multiple angles, watching the best players, and have a Top 8 cut that feels well-earned.

When **a high-stakes tournament mixes competitors** drawn from skill-based invitations and personality-based invitations, because the latter, outside of their element, lose at a disproportionate rate, it gives the entire tournament an air of illegitimacy and cash giveaway. There are ways to correct for this that still reward personalities for their contribution to the game.

In general, make the system fair. Don't warp it for the sake of easy marketing opportunities. Don't play favorites. Allow for upwards—and downwards—mobility along a skill-based hierarchy. Don't lock in a stable of familiar faces by awarding bonus points or otherwise stacking the deck.

Recognize that the competitive ecosystem extends beyond the Top 8, or Top 32. Spread the money around a little bit. Don't allow $100k+ equity gaps between the haves and the have-nots. 33+ do more work as ambassadors than is probably realized. Set rules in advance and use objective procedures so that no one justifiably feels screwed and becomes a wary if not toxic asset.

Don't make sheer time-commitment an essential factor in competition. Allow for people with life obligations to participate. These people provide outreach into the normal well-adjusted world.

Overall: market the dream, but honor it too. If a Top 8 means something in November, it shouldn't mean nothing in January.



The Top 8 is:

Andrew Elenbogen Charles Wong Paul Rietzl Shuhei Nakamura Chris Smith Jeff Cunningham Jason Fleurant Santo Tallarico

The Top 8 convenes to discuss procedures, but Shuhei makes everyone wait while he breaks to use the washroom, which Rietzl calls "a total power move." Because there is no coverage of this event, there will be no decklist exchange.

I open a **Wild Mongrel**, but mostly take red cards in the first pack.

When laying out the second pack—as anyone who's played in a Competitive Rules Enforcement Level draft with pre-opened and stamped packs knows—one cards is included in the opposite direction and is hard to avoid during the facedown count. It's a **Bitterblossom**—what I've been told is the best card in the set. I figure I'm going black-red. When I squeeze open my pack however, who's there to greet me but another **Wild Mongrel**, as glossy and iridescent as the inside of a conch shell. On balance of a variety of factors, I decide to stay with green. The decision pays off, as I receive two more **Mongrels** over the course of the draft, for a red-green aggressive deck just a few **Reckless Wurm**s short of the nuts.



Notable sideboard cards:

1 **Devoted Druid** 2 **Arena Athlete** 3 **Reckless Charge** 1 **Hooting Mandrills** 1 **Patchwork Gnomes** 1 **Raid Bombardment**

In the brief window before the matches, I show Perez my deck, saying I think it's the best I've seen in the format. Apparently he'd predicted I'd take a **Wild Mongrel** over a **Bitterblossom**. Perez rolls his eyes, "You're going to win a Grand Prix." Actually, I already won a Grand Prix, back in '02.

In the quarterfinals, I'm paired against Elenbogen with a "medium-minus five-color control deck," and roll him both games, again using **Undying Rage** to neutralize a large blocker.

In the semifinals, I'm playing against Jason Fleurant, A.K.A. JasonA.

Jason and I go way back. When we were both teenagers qualified for Pro Tour Osaka in 2002, he asked if he could sleep on the floor of my hotel room since he was broke (denied 'em). A few years later, at the height of the local money draft

was broke (denied 'em). A few years later, at the height of the local money draft scene, he was a regular opponent; one time, I insisted he hadn't allowed me to cut his deck before he'd drawn his opening hand and forced him to redraw into the nuts, causing him to howl with delight (deserved it).

He does have one annoying behavior. No matter when you stop shuffling, he'll continue shuffling for another 30 seconds. Power move. Bush league sh**.

I'm not sure what happened in Jason's quarterfinal match, but the head judge already seems to be annoyed at him for pushing the limits of slow play.

I get to be on the play.

Game one. I have an aggressive hand: Two **Wild Mongrel**, **Undying Rage**, **Firewing Phoenix**, three land.

Turn two, **Wild Mongrel**.

He plays **Thermo-Alchemist**.

Turn three, I play **Undying Rage**. Attack him to 16.

He plays **Cathodion**.

Turn four, I attack him to 12. Play **Firewing Phoenix**.

He pings me to 19. Untaps, attacks with **Cathodion**.

My mind is all Vegas and the Mirage as I "no blocks" down to 16.

He passes.

Turn five, I attack with both **Wild Mongrel** and **Firewing Phoenix**. Four cards in hand—representing lethal.

He starts thinking. Poker-faced; not expressionless, but his facial muscles are

relaxed. He looks somewhere between stunned and deep in thought. I put him on Fire.

"Fire?"

He looks up at me. "Huh?"

"Fire my Firewing Phoenix?"

He continues to look at me, appearing semi-stunned.

"I don't know, I'm waiting on you," I say.

The head judge hurries him along.

"No blocks."

My hand is four cards. "Eight's good." He goes to four.

Start to feel uneasy. Play Wild Mongrel. Say go.

End of turn, he pings me to 15, Ices my untapped Wild Mongrel, pings me to 14.

He untaps, pings me to 13, Reckless Charges Cathodion. Attacks.

"Six?" I ask, hoping against hope now.

"No—" He pings me to 12. Double Cleaves the Cathodion.

"Yep." Screw up my face, check the math, check my grip. Pack 'em up.

"Sick one."

I win the next game with an aggressive Wild Mongrel/Anger hand, despite his winning several consecutive flips with Molten Rebirth, but flood out in the third game. I offer a "good games, nice deck," and I mean it—but the small crowd

laughs. Too reminiscent of MODO salt, I guess.



The Pro Tour, like the cards, began as something simple and cool. Skaff Elias went out on a limb to start a tournament circuit that would allow players a place to compete and which would market the cards by its very existence. The cool part is just getting to play the game you like in a competitive setting. The Pro Tour—Mythic Championship—is increasingly becoming an exercise in marketing, networking, and self-promotion. Soon, every aspect of the game will be #sponsored.

The success of Arena, alongside the failure of Artifact, has made one thing clear: paying a designer to attempt to make a great game is much less efficient than successfully managing the one that designer already made 25 years ago. Top-tier game designers are salivating over the robust revenue models of digital CCGs—and Wizards still has the best one. Hopefully the company recognizes that Magic's hybrid analog/digital nature turns out to be a strength in a world full of analog-only dinosaurs and digital-only clones. Magic's long history, and history of legitimacy, is one of its most valuable assets.

Anyway, who knows what fate has in store? Maybe some intra-cosmic law of entropy means that every brilliant invention ends up in a marketing junkyard eventually.



Somewhere along the way, the cacophony had faded into echoes. The hall is mostly empty now, as the skeleton crew goes about tearing the site down. Metal

poles laying on concrete. Green tablecloths slumping off tables. A few guys finishing a cube. I receive some warm congratulations from the local players and friends who are still around. Ellis says I probably lost because I didn't seek out his rating.

Should I have seen it coming in game one? There were three decision points where, if I'd anticipated the possibility of a combo kill, I could've taken my foot off the gas. On his third turn I could've blocked **Cathodion** with **Firewing Phoenix**; on my fourth turn, I could've not attacked with **Firewing Phoenix**; or, I could've pumped my **Wild Mongrel** to the max, forcing a removal spell—the riskiest line, but also the last chance, if I got spooked. The ability to recur **Firewing Phoenix** gives much more sense to any of these lines than they'd have otherwise. But it also seems like it might all be hindsight bias, considering we didn't have decklists. I'm still not sure what's correct.

Again, on the weekend, I'm caught between satisfaction at what was and dissatisfaction at what could've been. In this case, though, I know it'll be easy to let go—my luck was good, my punishment modest. My brother's friend Adham offers to give me a ride home, and as we head back out into the rain, I'm already starting to dream again of the $10,000,000 Magic Pro Tour.



WRITTEN BY

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