

## **Introduction to Magic: The Gathering™:**

### **Thematic Strategies and Tactics**

#### **Theater 98/198**

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**Time & Location:** Tuesdays 4:00-5:30pm

**Course Control Number:** 88072 (lower division) 88249 (upper division)

**Course Website:** <http://ocf.berkeley.edu/~nidia/decal>

#### **Introduction:**

Magic: The Gathering™ is the first example of the modern collectible card game genre and can be played in real time by two or more players using printed cards or virtual cards over the internet. Each game represents an exciting and often intricate battle between powerful wizards who attempt to defeat their opponents by using magical spells, items and creatures depicted on individual magic cards in the form of rules text and pieces of artwork.

Magic: The Gathering is about literature — it revolves around fantasy story cycles and multiple worlds that are fleshed out in over fifty novels and numerous anthologies. Magic is about art — its cards house over 10,000 pieces of original artwork that represent a generous cross-section of the fantasy art genre. Magic is about math — its decks and sets are constructed around carefully calculated probabilities. This, however, only begin to touch on what magic is all about; perhaps most importantly magic is about playing a game with other people. Since Magic players take on the role of wizards battling other wizards with the cards representing their spells the game may be about strategy, but it is as much about role-playing. Few would argue that role-playing is a form of improvisational performance and Magic is likewise a form of performance. In fact, in the realm of New Media, Magic in its current manifestations of Magic Online, Magic Workstation and OCTGN has become another facet of the global interactive games industry and thus a form of self-expression. Playing Magic online has become a virtual performance in which players become immersed in a fantasy world where they can display their gaming prowess through victory or their creativity through uniquely crafted or thematic decks. Magic, like many forms of New Media interaction, transcends traditional academic disciplines.

#### **Magic: The Gathering™ Overview:**

Magic: The Gathering™ is a collectible card game which draws heavily from fantasy tropes found in anything from Tolkien and Lovecraft to Dungeons and Dragons. Its player base overlaps with

that of Dungeon and Dragons but on the other side of the spectrum, quite a few of its competitive players have gone over to professional poker.

The game's attraction varies. Mark Rosewater, a lead designer of Magic for many years and one of their website's journalists, describes three psychographic profiles. Basically, people who play to win (ruthlessly if possible), people who play for the satisfaction of big spells or big creatures, and people who play with card combinations in mind. There is a fourth type of player that may not play at all and this type of person is interested in the fantasy story lines and art more than the game. However, players do not become attracted to the game for one of the above reasons but rather continue to play because of one of them. Most people are initially attracted by a simple sense of fun (balance of luck & skill) and intrigued by the potential for creativity.

This potential for creativity is powered by the vastness of the game. When Richard Garfield and a few of his fellow grad students designed 295 cards in August of 1993 the game was already very flexible; the basic mechanics have not changed since that time although many additions and amendments have been made. The game revolves around a deck of usually sixty cards and an initial hand size of seven cards. Players begin a game with twenty life and lose when they have none remaining. There are six basic card types and many subtypes. These basic types can be divided into two supertypes - those cards that stay in play until something causes them to leave play (permanents) and those that leave play immediately after they are played (spells). The important idea, however, is that every card does something different. Some cards represent a creature with a specific power and toughness and a special ability; others may represent a spell that causes an opponent's cards to become paralyzed. The mechanism for playing all of these unique cards is that every card has a cost. Most cards require that there are a certain amount of "land" cards in play in order to be played. Generally speaking, stronger cards have higher costs. The complexity of the game derives from the fact that every rule of the game can be altered if the text on the card being played says it does. In other words, cards don't just do simple things like take life or remove an opponent's cards from play but they can alter a player's maximum hand size or turn a spell into a permanent, etc. This leads to hundreds of thousands of significant combinations of cards. It was thought in the mid-nineties that designers would simple run out of ideas for new cards within a couple of years. Time has shown that this is not the case and that seemingly as more cards are developed more design concepts arise. This has led to the current existence of just over ten thousand unique Magic cards – all of which constitute a pool of cards that players can choose from to create a deck.

Magic is more complicated than bridge or other card games. Bridge is played with a fifty-two card deck, Magic is played with sixty. With Magic, however, there are not just fifty-two cards to choose from. As I mentioned, there are thousands. It would be as if there were 800 separate suites instead of four and each suite interacted differently with every other suite. Or perhaps a better analogy would be like having seven suites each with over a thousand cards where each card has a specific purpose in the rules of the game (I say seven for the five colors of magic cards plus lands and cards called artifacts). It is probably humanly impossible to memorize every Magic card in existence and what each does, but it is possible to get a feel for where to look for certain abilities. In fact, deck design can be so intimidating that many players choose to find a list for a preconstructed deck on the Internet and only make a few alternations of their own. This is a perfectly viable way for beginners to make decks. Today, online search engines specifically for Magic cards make finding the right card for a deck much easier than it was a few years ago.

The benefit of Magic is that of an exceptionally rewarding game. Many of us these days spend a great deal of our free time playing games — mostly electronic games. Many of these games are fun and habit forming but I think that Magic has more to offer than most. Magic allows far more creative involvement than any electronic role-playing game I have ever played.

## **Course Overview:**

In this course we are going to focus on building decks around certain fantasy themes and the imbedded power struggles therein. We will explore a different broad theme each week and every student will be asked to make a deck within the restraints of that theme. The student is encouraged to consider themselves as a wizard with certain characteristics when building a particular deck. For example, if the student was building a deck as a necromancer it would make little sense for them to include healing spells in their deck — they would instead want to focus on how to make an effective deck with the living dead and cards that evoke disease. We will still cover the mechanics and strategies of the game but within the context of thematic deck construction. We will discuss balance and imbalance within the game and questions such as whether it is possible to make a beast-master summoner as powerful as a fireball wielding pyromancer or a mind control wizard. Theme decks are required to be playable and students will be asked to describe how their deck functions. Game play is encouraged but not required.

The goal of this approach is to explore Magic: The Gathering™ as a strategy game while expanding on its role-playing and fantasy aspects. We hope to also discuss why people play Magic, what their intentions are and where they derive enjoyment. Imaginative creativity and analytical tactics will be delicately balanced. This approach will hopefully be appealing to those that usually play competitively and especially accessible for those who have never played before.

## **Assessment:**

- Attendance
  - Students cannot miss more than two class meetings and receive a pass.
  - The class will meet once a week for 90 minutes.
- Reading
  - The reading for this class comes mainly from websites. The links are posted under the homework section of the syllabus.
  - Much of the reading is optional and only 30 minutes a week should be spent on reading. Student will be notified when a reading is not optional.
- Deck Creation and written submissions
  - You will be required to submit deck lists each week starting the second week of class.
  - A brief paragraph summarizing how your deck works and its thematic content. Make sure to keep such summaries as simple as possible so that a beginner in the game could understand them.
  - This weekly assignment should take you approximately one hour.
- Students are required to present a monologue, from the perspective of a wizard of their creation, for their final project. Monologues will be presented in class on the final class meeting. They must be 2-3 minutes in length, give a spirited account of the wizards friends, foes, strengths, and weaknesses, based on a deck theme, created by the student.
- If you meet attendance requirements and submit 70% of deck lists and paragraphs in a satisfactory manner then you will receive a pass in the class.

Note: In the case of over-enrollment the first two weeks of class will be mandatory and students who do not come will be dropped. If the number of students enrolled remains too large, seats will be given to those students who enrolled first.

<b>Schedule</b>		
Date	Discussion Topic	Homework
1/26  DeCal Week 1  Smstr Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review syllabus</li> <li>Game play overview, including T1 format.</li> <li>MTG Website (Rosewater, Ask Wizards, Building on a Budget, Daily Deck, etc.)</li> <li>Colorwheel</li> </ul>	Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>List of Creature abilities</li> <li>Light Rule Book 10<sup>th</sup></li> </ul> Optional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Magic 2010 rule changes</li> </ul>
2/2  DeCal Week 2  Smstr Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overview of three major types of decks: Agro, Control, and Combo</li> <li>Cycles of Cards</li> <li>First Core Sets: Alpha (A), Beta (B), Unlimited (U), Revised (R)</li> <li>Early Expansions: Arabian Nights (AN), and Antiquities (AQ)</li> </ul>	Gaming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a <u>mono-colored theme deck</u> based on one of the <u>three major deck types</u> discussed in class and a <u>creature type</u>.</li> <li>Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Card Cycles</a></li> <li><a href="#">Legends</a></li> <li><a href="#">Arabian Nights</a></li> </ul>
2/9  DeCal Week 3  Smstr Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building multi-colored decks.</li> <li>The hundred worst Magic cards of all time.</li> <li>Early Expansions: Legends (LG), The Dark (DK), Fallen Empires (FE), and Homelands (HL)</li> </ul>	Gaming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a <u>multi-colored theme deck</u> with at least five cards chosen from <u>100 worst</u> list.</li> <li>Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">100 Worst Cards</a></li> <li><a href="#">Older deck-o-pedia</a></li> <li><a href="#">Newer deck-o-pedia</a></li> </ul>
2/16  DeCal Week 4  Smstr Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction to hybrid decks and hybrid deck strategies: agro-control, mid-range, control combo, agro combo, or agro control combo.</li> <li>Core Set: Fourth Edition (4E)</li> <li>Beginning of the Weatherlight</li> </ul>	Gaming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a <u>hybrid theme deck</u> based on one of the hybrids discussed in class.</li> <li>Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Set FAQs</a></li> </ul>

	<p>Saga.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ice Age Block: Ice Age (IA), Alliances (AL), Coldsnap (CS)</li> <li>• Mirage Block: Mirage (MI), Visions (VI), Weatherlight (WL)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">MTG Salvation</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Top 50 Nonbasic Lands</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Top 50 Artifacts</a></li> </ul>
<p>2/23</p> <p>DeCal Week 5</p> <p>Smstr Week 6</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Banned cards and extended format.</li> <li>• Tempest Block: Tempest (TE), Stronghold (SH), and Exodus (EX)</li> <li>• Urza Block: Urza's Saga (US), Urza's Legacy (UL), and Urza's Destiny (UD)</li> <li>• Core Set: Fifth Edition (5E)</li> </ul>	<p>Gaming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create <u>theme deck</u> with at least two <u>banned cards</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Infinity Combos</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Formats</a></li> </ul>
<p>3/2</p> <p>DeCal Week 6</p> <p>Smstr Week 7</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conclusion of the Weatherlight Saga.</li> <li>• Masques: Mercadian Masques (MM), Nemesis (NE), and Prophecy (PY)</li> <li>• Invasion Block: Invasion (IN), Planeshift (PS), and Apocalypse (AP)</li> <li>• Core Set: Classic (6E)</li> </ul>	<p>Gaming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a <u>theme deck</u> with Timmy, Johnny and Spike in mind.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Timmy, Johnny and Spike</a></li> </ul>
<p>3/9</p> <p>DeCal Week 7</p> <p>Smstr Week 8</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morph, tokens, and tribes.</li> <li>• Odyssey Block: Odyssey (OD), Torment (TO), and Judgment (JU)</li> <li>• Onslaught Block: Onslaught (ON), Legions (LE), and Scourge (SC)</li> <li>• Core Set: Seventh Edition. (7E)</li> </ul>	<p>Gaming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a <u>five color theme deck</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Sets of Five</a></li> <li>• Play and War chapter from Johan Huizinga's <i>Homo Ludens</i> (p89-95)</li> </ul>
<p>3/16</p> <p>DeCal Week 8</p> <p>Smstr Week 9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mirrodin Block: Mirrodin (MR), Darksteel (DS), and Fifth Dawn (FD)</li> <li>• Kamigawa Block: Champions of Kamigawa (CHK), Betrayers of Kamigawa (BOK), and Saviors of Kamigawa (SOK)</li> <li>• Core Set: Eighth Edition (8E)</li> </ul>	<p>Game play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create an <u>artifact theme deck</u> or <u>Kamigawa theme deck</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Melvin and Vorthos</a></li> <li>• Play and War chapter from Johan Huizinga's <i>Homo Ludens</i> (p95-104)</li> </ul>

<p>3/30</p> <p>DeCal Week 9</p> <p>Smstr Week 10</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ravnica Block: Guildpact (GP), Dissension (DIS), and Ravnica: City of Guilds (RAV)</li> <li>• Core Set: Ninth Edition (9E)</li> <li>• Vanguard</li> </ul>	<p>Game play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a <u>guild theme deck</u> or <u>five-color highlander theme deck</u> or <u>Vanguard deck</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Timmy, Johnny, Spike and Vorthos Revisited</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">50 Top Gold Cards</a></li> </ul>
<p>4/6</p> <p>DeCal Week 10</p> <p>Smstr Week 11</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominaria.</li> <li>• Time Spiral Block: Time Spiral (TSP &amp; TSB), Planar Chaos (PLC), and Future Sight (FUT)</li> <li>• Lowryn Block: Lowryn (LRW), Morningtide (MOR)</li> <li>• Shadowmoor Block: Shadowmoor (SHM), Eventide (EVE)</li> <li>• Core Set: Tenth Edition (10E)</li> </ul>	<p>Game play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a <u>Pauper theme deck</u> or <u>Storyline deck</u> or <u>Tribe deck</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Dominaria</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Timeline</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Unusual example of a Tribe</a></li> </ul>
<p>4/13</p> <p>Decal Week 11</p> <p>Smstr Week 12</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portal (PT), Portal Second Age (P2), Portal Three Kingdoms (P3)</li> <li>• Unglued (UG), Unhinged (UNH)</li> <li>• Planechase</li> </ul>	<p>Game play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a <u>ridiculous theme deck</u> or a <u>Three Kingdoms theme deck</u> or <u>Planar deck</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck theme and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Known Multiverse</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Planes of Planechase</a></li> </ul>
<p>4/20</p> <p>DeCal Week 12</p> <p>Smstr Week 13</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elder Dragon Highlander</li> <li>• Shards of Alara Block: Shards of Alara (ALA), Conflux (CFX), and Alara Reborn.</li> <li>• Zendikar</li> <li>• Core Set: Magic 2010.</li> </ul>	<p>Game play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create an <u>Elder Dragon Highlander deck</u> or <u>Prismatic Deck</u> or <u>Sanctuary duel-deck</u>.</li> <li>• Submit a brief overview detailing deck them and design.</li> </ul> <p>Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Elder Dragon Highlander</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Prismatic Rules</a></li> </ul>

4/27 DeCal Week 13  Smstr Week 14	Wizard Monologues	
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