



Upkeep.



Alex 07/28/2024 3:48 PM

I have been thinking it would be “fun” to make a Magic-related zine sooo if you wanna write literally whatever you want or create anything that can be communicated on a printed page, “slide into my DMs”.

Look how far we have come. From a comment on a Discord server to a piece of physical media.

So, what is this zine? What is “Upkeep” supposed to be about?

Great questions. I am not sure I entirely know the answers.

This zine in particular maybe kind of started with a comment I made but is the end work of many other folks all of whom share a common interest in the niche Magic: the Gathering format that is Cube and all of whom spend an awful lot of time in the Discord server “MTG Cube Talk” (<https://discordapp.com/invite/tFBZ2Z3>). I do not think, in total, we spend all that much time talking about the “Cube” format.

Rather, and this gets to what *this* is about, Magic, and Cube, are a hub from which myriad spokes—conversations, interests, ideas—stem. The hope, or intention, is for “Upkeep” to function similarly. It is about Magic, with maybe more of a focus on Cube and the Cube events springing up around the country, but not really. That’s just a point of entry to whatever may come after. That is, when talking to folks about actually putting this thing together for real, the emphasis was on “upkeep” as a general concept or term and however one chose to tie that to Magic and/or Cube.

Maybe there will be future issues and a more coherent philosophy will coalesce with time. Maybe this is a one-off. Who knows.

Thank you for reading.

UPKEEP?!

by Nick Zolnierowski, LMHC

I often think about what it means to be a Magic Player. Maybe I should back up a little. I think that there's a difference between engaging with Magic as a casual hobby and waking up every day and knowing that you're a Magic Player.

So, what's the difference? Why does it matter? To answer myself, the differences are minor, and the list of reasons why it matters would be long and pedantic at best. It would certainly not make for great reading. Moreover, it's not really the point. Even more importantly, I don't care which side of the fence you fall on in your Magic life. That's your business, buddy. What I do care about, however, is how you're taking care of yourself and those around you, all while having Magic play some role in your life.

It's relevant at this point to mention that I provide mental health services as a psychotherapist for a living. While the clients on my caseload vary in terms of their backgrounds, one thing they all have in common is the constant challenge of finding a balance between the things they have to do and the things they like to do.

I can feel your confusion from all the way through the paper. "What the hell does any of that have to do with Magic?"

Thanks for asking.

None of my clients are Magic Players. To my knowledge, none of my clients know anything about Magic. That has not stopped me from incorporating one aspect of this beautiful game into my work.

Upkeep!

Upkeep?

Keep up.

The upkeep step in Magic is a fitting metaphor for therapeutic self-care, as both involve routine actions that maintain balance, address recurring issues, and prepare for future growth. Even my clients that have never seen a Magic card in their life tend to recognize the value of finding an intentional space in their life (in their turn for those getting lost in the metaphor). That space is the upkeep, *their* upkeep.

Consistent Check-In

In Magic, the upkeep step occurs every turn, acting as a regular moment for maintaining and assessing the state of the board. Similarly, self-care requires consistent check-ins—daily or weekly routines where we take stock of how we feel emotionally, mentally, and physically. Just as you cannot skip the upkeep step in the game, self-care should be non-negotiable in life. This can involve practices like journaling, meditation, or simply asking yourself, "How am I doing today?" It's a routine commitment to yourself, just as upkeep is to the game.

Managing Recurring Issues (Triggered Abilities)

In Magic, cards often have abilities that trigger during the upkeep, creating new effects or requiring the player to take a game action. These can be likened to recurring thoughts, emotions, or stressors that come up in daily life. (Doom Foretold comes to mind, and has a very apropos name.) Part of therapeutic self-care is recognizing these "triggers" and addressing them head-on. For example, if you know you experience anxiety in the mornings, you can use your "upkeep" time to engage in calming rituals or practices like breathing exercises. Just as you would deal with a triggered ability in the game, you handle emotional triggers with mindfulness and care in real life.

Paying Emotional Costs (Upkeep Costs)

Some cards have an upkeep cost—resources must be invested to keep the card in play. This is a powerful metaphor for how self-care requires effort and investment. Healing and maintaining mental wellness may involve "costs," like setting aside time for

therapy, exercise, or mindfulness, even when life gets busy. Self-care may also mean making choices that seem costly, like taking time off work or setting boundaries in relationships. These emotional "payments" are essential to maintaining balance and preventing burnout, just like upkeep payments keep valuable resources in the game.

Preparing for the Day Ahead (Before the Draw Step)

The upkeep step in Magic happens before the draw step, which represents new opportunities and resources (drawing a card). In life, therapeutic self-care prepares you for what's next—it sets the foundation for how you approach your day, relationships, or challenges. By taking time in the morning to engage in self-care practices, you can clear your mental space, reduce anxiety, and be ready to face new challenges, just like a well-managed upkeep step allows you to effectively handle the rest of your turn.

Responding to Emotional Triggers

During the upkeep, players can respond to triggered effects with spells or abilities. In the same way, self-care helps us respond to emotions as they arise. If something unexpected comes up—a surge of anger or sadness, for instance—your self-care practices give you tools to manage it. Therapeutic self-care often involves being proactive, not just reactive. You might anticipate certain emotional responses (just like upkeep effects in Magic) and use the skills you've developed in therapy or through mindfulness to manage them effectively.

Preventing Burnout (Avoiding Negative Consequences)

If a player ignores upkeep costs or effects, they might lose important cards, weaken their position, or fail to control the game. Similarly, neglecting self-care can lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion, or even mental health crises.

In Magic, failure to pay upkeep costs might cause you to sacrifice a card. In life, failure to maintain self-care routines can result in neglecting your needs, leading to breakdowns or struggles. Engaging in regular self-care helps prevent these negative outcomes.

Reflection and Growth

The upkeep step offers a moment of reflection before progressing to the next phase of the game. Therapeutic self-care is often about reflecting on where you are emotionally and mentally before diving into the day or new tasks. This reflective process helps you grow, just like upkeep helps ensure that your game strategy is aligned with your goals.

If you're still here, thanks for reading, and I hope I didn't bore you too much. Whether you're a Magic Player or someone who plays this wonderful game casually, don't ever underestimate the power of the upkeep step. The great thing about real life is that you can make your upkeep last as long as you want and no one will ever yell "JUDGE!!!!" because you're playing too slow.

Paradox Haze doesn't exist in real life. Be mindful of your board state. Don't miss your triggers. This is all just a game we're playing together.

Be well and do good.

STEEL CITIES & BAD SYNERGIES

by Parker LaMascus

I never thought I'd say that cube is *too* replayable.

I was at Steel City Cube '24, with my best friend Matt along for the ride. Matt learned Magic with me in high school—his lawn-mowing income gave him unbeatable money rares and gave me an appreciation for countermagic—but his collection stopped with the Khans of Tarkir block, so he's an early-2010s Rip Van Winkle. Because I'm a roguish charmer and Matt loves cubing when we see each other, I'd swindled him into hosting me in Pittsburgh and hanging out at Steel City. This small 64-player event, put on by Greg (@dinrovahorror) and Taitan Games, turned out to be every bit as wholesome and enlivening as the larger multi-hundred-person event that is now CubeCon. It's a great weekend; five drafts in two days; we catch a Pirates ballgame one evening; 10/10. But then, on Sunday night, Matt asks me a question that stops me cold:

“What was the most fun synergy you saw this weekend?”

And I couldn't think of an answer.

It's not for lack of choices. I took a quick census of synergies I personally built or saw Matt play against:

- Punishing Fire + Grove (repeatable removal loop),
- Nexus of Fate + self-mill (an ever-increasing likelihood of extra turns),
- Baubles + Goblin Welder (card-draw loop),
- Nadu + Shuko (roughly 6-40 cards for 1 mana),
- Rebels chains (a tutor every turn),

- Soulherder + Stonehorn Dignitary (a lockout for combat),
- Deathtouch + Arcane Teachings (repeatable removal),
- Astral Slide + Loaming Shaman (recycling your answers while the opponent decks),
- Divining Top + Counterbalance (countering most spells the opponent casts)

There's only one problem with these intentionally crafted, lovingly interwoven synergies: They all suck eggs to play. Repetitive, unassailable inevitability is a good strategy to win, but it's also the nonsense that gets cards emergency-banned or tables flipped. Try-hard that I am, I was responsible for over half of these during Steel City, and each time, my opponent deflated like a week-old balloon. Matt was on the receiving end of the rest and had to skip the last draft event for his sanity. Unfamiliarity with cube combos aside, Matt is a mature and smart gamer with excellent taste, so his visceral dislike of these games made me examine these combos anew. Are we cube designers lost in the sauce, designing perfect puzzle boxes that are miserable to unlock?

Cube designers had good intentions, sure. The cards I just listed are all perfect to theorize about and argue over and fiddle with. A peachy arrangement, since most cube designers theorize and argue and fiddle about 10 times as often as they play games of Magic. "The cube was so fun to design, it must be equally fun to play!" But, again, reminder: a lot of these games blew chunks.

It's a painful contradiction for me. During my first five years of cube ownership, I was lucky to swindle *one* blood relative into drafting, let alone seven strangers. The rewards of design were all I had. I'd test-draft on CubeTutor while I was supposed to be doing grunt lab work, swap out fifty cards when the test drafts got boring, then say smart things about my replayable archetypes on Reddit. Repeat. This is why I fell in love with cube! But now that I love Cube, I want to *share* it—with casuals, lapsed pros, newbies, and their mothers—and making cube gameplay more approachable might be the best way to do that.

Back to Matt. He noticed my silence and repeated his question, jogging my memory. Okay, Steel City held some sweet synergies, too, even if they're the kinds of cards I would have cut in 2018 for boring me in playtesting:

- Buffing my double-striker (it's DOUBLE!)
- Building up a full Party (it's like flavor Exodia!)
- Day of the Dragons (all my anemic 1998-ass creatures become Dragons!)
- Valakut + Dryad (all my lands are Bolts! Just wait 'til I cast this Primeval Titan!)
- Huntmaster of the Fells + instants (see, I get to flip Huntmaster, which rules)

Now we're talking! Straightforward extensions of proactive creature combat with obvious counterplay. Maybe less fun to fiddle with the spreadsheet, maybe less *replayable*, but it is *firstplayable*. The whole Magic spectrum from me to Matt can sit down at a cube like this, grok and build a functional deck on their first try, and have a puncher's chance to outplay their opponent. If cube's not fun the first time, we won't have drafters to bore on the second time, so what do we have to lose?

I'm not really advocating any single design change, just reassessing my curatorial attitudes: I'm responsible for twelve match losers, too. Designing for infinite replayability, as satisfying as that is, might indulge unfun gameplay. Replayable is less important than firstplayable. Even if a firstplayable cube could get stale, this is 2024—cubes don't have to be down-payment-sized monoliths of power and nostalgia anymore. I can just make another cube out of bulk, or encourage a drafter to build their own. Case in point: my friend eugman's "2 cent cube," which Matt and I both loved jamming at Steel City. Matt even walked away with a 180-card copy as a prize, so that night we pored through his old trade binder to add exciting lawn-money Dragons and Morph Van Winkle cards to his first cube. Matt went from *drafting* firstplayable cubes to *designing* his first cube, all in one weekend!

If this incredible trend of local cube events is any indication, Cube is growing faster than ever. To build an even more excellent community, we need to welcome a wider range of people: EDH players, newbies who haven't drafted before, folks who quit the white-boys-club of competitive Magic. And they are themselves latent cube designers! We need our cubes to be fun on the first try. We need to introduce people to Cube, then get out of the way as they design their first game-within-a-ruleset.

We don't need replayability; we need firstplayability.

PEACE, LOVE, CUBE.

PARKER

I AM NOT A MAGIC PLAYER

by Sergio De La Guera

Most of us will not leave a legacy outside of our immediate social circle. Most of us will not have our names known. Most of us will not be truly “great” at anything. Most of us refuse to believe this. A truly modern mindset: *if I keep grinding, I can be the best—or at least one of the best.*

I believed that once, too. I spent decades imagining I would be a great musician. When that failed, I tried to be a world-class chef. When I burnt out of the kitchen life, I poured my energy into Magic: the Gathering. I thought that, given enough time and effort, I would be known in the community as a legend. Finally! Something to soothe the pride and vanity! I could live the Promise of working hard enough to be a master.

Reality did not take long to set in. I topped out at a mediocre ranking on Arena. I went 3-2 or 2-3 in online leagues. I grew frustrated and kept throwing myself at the problems. I watched hours of videos. I wrote notes on my gameplay. I spent way too much on in-game currency. Mostly, I lost.

Don't I deserve to be a Magic player?

The internet has connected us to everything all at once. Countless books and articles have been written on how our brains are turned into puddles, bombarded by curated perfection. A less discussed side effect is the pervasive pressure of *survivor bias*. Any niche, any hobby, any interest we find ourselves looking into delivers countless “winners.” We watch LSV (one of the greatest players of all time) casually drafting vintage cube and dominating and think “well, I could learn to do that.” We watch aspiringspike (a popular Twitch streamer) win with wacky brews and think, “I like to

make wacky brews. Can I be the next aspiringspike?” We hear stories of people who have reached the upper echelon through grit and perseverance, and they’re telling us that if we stick with it we can join them. We push. We are left disappointed. We feel lied to.

Many people at the juncture have decided that whatever thing they are striving for is a part of their identity. *If I’m not a Magic player, then who am I?* I have struggled with forms of this question my entire life, as have most of you, I’m sure. If I’m not a great musician, who am I? If I’m not a great chef, who am I?

I am not a Magic player. I am a person that sometimes plays Magic. Divorcing my identity from the product of a corporation has opened up my relationship with the game and increased my enjoyment exponentially. Why do I have to be the best? Hell, *why do I have to be good?*

It is a sickness of modern society. We are encouraged to give our identities over to platforms of commerce. We divide complicated selves up into digestible packages to easily serve to others. We are pushed to monetize our hobbies, to be productive, to *not waste time*. Don’t waste your time just playing Magic, for fun, because you enjoy it. Give your identity over to it. Become “A Magic Player.” Why does Wizards want us to do this? They can sell “A Magic Player.” They can sell *to* “A Magic Player.” They can’t sell a lifestyle to someone who just thinks of it as a fun game to play.

Cube is a beautiful sidestep from the endless treadmill. A self-contained world, divorced from the contrivances and pressures of Wizard’s need to please their shareholders. Well, it could be. There’s just that pesky issue of identity. So many of us willingly put ourselves right back onto the track, selling ourselves the lie that the sanctioned format players lap up. The endless consumption. The desire to be something that can be sold to the world. The sublimation of yourself into the corporate structure.

I am not a Magic player. I am not a Cube designer. I am a person who plays Magic, once a week, with some friends. We don’t really talk about Magic otherwise. Casting off the product of identity that I have been sold has let me explore who I really am - somebody who is pretty mediocre at most things. Someone who won’t be tied down

to an easily packaged label. Someone who wants to experience, enjoy, then walk away to something new. A person who can sit down to play a game of Magic without the voice of modernity in my ear, whispering, "Shouldn't you be better at this?"

“BECAUSE I PUT IT THERE!”

by Mark

When Alex reached out for me to write something for this zine, I had grand plans of crafting my magnum opus. I drafted and scrapped a number of stylistic pieces I thought would sing off the page before arriving here and simply sharing what's been on my mind the last few weeks. As Cube grows in popularity as a format, I find myself running into a lot of the same issues I have with Commander/EDH. Namely, it's intimidating! So, I've challenged myself to lower that barrier to entry however possible. My two cents:

Playgroup design is difficult.

The other week, my Cube, which is specifically designed to be welcoming to beginners and experienced players alike, was put to the test when our local playgroup had a brand-new-to-Magic player join us. Over the night, by far the biggest challenge wasn't teaching someone new to both draft and play Magic all in one night, but making sure everyone involved was patient, kind to the new player, and still able to have fun. There were some challenging moments managing player expectations and some logistical hiccups such as needing to restart the draft during pack 2, but overall we succeeded! Things didn't go exactly to plan, but everyone walked away smiling. My reminder to everyone that night – and here, too – is that you were new to Magic and new to Cube at one point too. Making sure that player wants to come back next time means more full draft pods and, better yet, more friends to come.

Cube design is simple.

More than once, I've seen comments in various Discords from new designers that feel nervous about making their first cube. Instead of simple encouragement, more enfranchised players sometimes list off a hundred "tips" that sound like warnings, only adding to the confusion. Throw some cards in a box and have fun! Cube is the closest thing left to the nostalgic memories I have of playing with whatever Magic cards my brother gave me back when I'd never heard of the game before. Draw people in with your favorite cards and draft night memories; don't push them away with the rules and logistics you got carried away with. And for you newer designers, sometimes the best answer to "Why is this in the cube?" is "Because I put it there!"

A GREEN KOAN

by D.S.B



It's hard to find a muse in life. At the time of writing that swap I had not yet walked all the trails in the foothills near my house, and I was not really known or followed on CubeCobra or Discord.

The unknown was my muse. And into it I could put any thoughts. There's a weird freedom writing things and leaving them in the void, a similar freedom of getting slightly lost on a trail system. There's a creative energy in that naivety. And once all the trails are known, and the communities and people met and friended, something is gone.

You can walk into the foothills at night, and without fail you will find a version of yourself up there. They will be wandering some slightly different path, humming some different song, stuck in their slightly different mind. Most times, when you find yourself, the other will be heading back to the city, while you are only beginning your walk. Do they go back to your house? Do they live out your little life, while you become invisible in the trees and rocks of night? And after you have lost all visibility, after the sense of individual things becomes blurred, the sobering thirst of physicality rebuilds your unpleasant body, and you too walk back to the city. But why do you not see yet another self walking into the mountains on your return journey? Who's life do you return to?



CAPITOL CUBE CHAMPIONSHIP, KIND OF

by Alex Houstoun

Somewhere between ten and fifteen years ago I listened to a segment from the NPR program *This American Life* in which a person attended a fan convention for the first time—it was for the television show *Dark Shadows*. Over the arc of the piece, the guest speaker describes the early excitement, hunger, and nervousness of recognizing that you are in a room, a space, surrounded by people with a shared interest to how that elation gradually gave way to an exhaustion and desperation to escape the very reason everyone has gathered. A comedic moment comes at a banquet breakfast on the last day of the convention, an event the speaker is unsure he even wants to attend at the point but has already paid for: the speaker ends up enthusiastically and desperately steering a conversation with another attendee towards Chicago sports teams—a subject the speaker otherwise loathes—simply because it happens to be a common ground. Simply because it is not *Dark Shadows*.

The piece stuck with me for whatever reason it is we sometimes remember things. Maybe it was because this was early into my foray of listening to podcasts. Maybe it was because it felt a little bit like a warning. Here is what happens when, after having an interest for years that you have been unable to share with a broader group, you are in a space with people and you have all gathered because you have exactly that one thing in common. There can be too much of a good thing.

Whatever the reason that it has remained lurking in the back of my mind, I thought about it a lot in the lead-up to the Capitol Cube Championship this August—my

first time attending a Magic event outside of Friday Night Magic drafts at a local game store a lifetime ago. Granted, a critical detail is that the piece is focused on the convention experience as it takes place over multiple days—a, in many ways, long weekend—and Capitol Cube was a single day event—a breezy eight or nine hours. Still, I found myself thinking, often: how much do I actually like Magic? How much do I really want to spend a day playing this game?

It's silly in a sense, if not silly outright.

When I pick-up Jill early that morning to drive us to Arlington, I try and exorcise some of this anxiety by poorly summarizing the *This American Life* piece. I try and play it as a joke, “haha do I really like Magic enough to spend the day playing and talking about it?” The joke, or fear, doesn't translate. We end up spending the thirty-minute car ride talking about Magic while Kelly Moran's *Moves in the Field* plays quietly on the stereo.

We make it to the venue and park in a nearby garage. As we start to walk from the car, I notice someone else has exited their vehicle and the backpack they are carrying has the distinct rattle of dice. I pause and call out asking if they are also “here” to play Magic which they confirm. The three of us begin walking out of the garage and in the direction of the venue talking about how we found out about the event and where we have come from. I have forgotten both the name of this person and where they have come from spare that it was a distance of over an hour—maybe the Blue Ridge Mountains? The conversation as we make our way across some streets and into the hotel lobby where Capitol Cube is hosted is primarily me asking questions about living in a smaller town in Virginia, comparing it to my own time in Williamsburg, VA, and how pretty parts of Interstate 64.

At this time, I have written around seven hundred words seemingly about a cube event. Almost seven hundred words not about Magic—the general theme of this publication. This is an observation. I am not the most direct storyteller. Is that a belated warning? Have you already figured that out?

There is time for loitering and saying hello to familiar faces and friends when we arrive at the event venue, a convention hall at a hotel. Jokes about the early start time, the amount of caffeine people have had or plan to have, the soundtracks for the trips down or up or from the east or west—music to sufficiently get one “in the right headspace”, “pumped”. Jill sits down with Dan, a member of our local group, and the person who walked in with whose name I have forgotten vanishes elsewhere—I have forgotten more. Zac (Hill), also a member of our local cube group, comes by and shares some details of a very fun sounding European trip he was on and had only returned from twelve to sixteen hours beforehand. It is not terribly long before the event commences in earnest, and everyone is sorted into their appropriate seats for their morning drafts. I find myself in Seat #4 drafting Zac’s Standard Cube.

I had a framing I wanted to attempt in trying to write about my experience at Capitol Cube Championship. You may already be aware of this. I play Magic—I get to cube draft—on a regular, almost weekly, basis with a small group of folks at a local brewery in the shadow of a much larger group of folks playing Commander. We typically have about three hours for our little gatherings and that feels like about the right amount of time. I like the routine, the game, the people I have met, the little community we have fostered.

Since it had reemerged from somewhere in my mind, I wanted to use the *This American Life* piece as a way of explaining some trepidation that I felt about spending a “whole” day, eight hours, more or less, devoted to Magic, to cube. Some real basic math: that would be almost three times as much time as I typically spend playing this game; it would be more time than I spend working at my job in a given day—I am writing the first draft of this line, these lines, in my little cubicle in my big office building on my company’s time.

That morning, in the car, as I summarized the *This American Life* piece to J---, I was simultaneously aware of the fact that, if I actually followed through on this zine, if I actually followed through on trying to write about my experience at Capitol Cube Championship, I had a way of presenting things that reflected the sort of cleverness I

like to read in the works of others, that I imagine I could maybe be capable of. I am easily influenced by the words and presentations of others. I felt I had a line.

Now, as I try to translate a set of feelings and memories into words, and I get to the actual presumed focus of the piece, I feel that I am losing the lead I had. More accurately, I have found myself interrupted on the course, the line has become shaky, because of more recent words I read while trying to write.

In early September, about three weeks after Capitol Cube and a week or so into writing some version of these words, I read Dan Ozzi's interview with Patrick Kindlon of Drug Church and, for better or worse, some of Kindlon's words resonated: "I'm going through a thing where I'm fucking sick to my stomach at profundity. I hate it. I hate a stranger's effort to enlighten me. I don't want anything to do with it." *See* ZERO CRED, danozzi.substack.com.

It feels absurd to say what I was originally aiming for was meant to be profound, but it would also be absurd to act modest and pretend there was not some gesture in that direction. I used to love reading tournament reports although I found the majority of them rather rote and, big words coming from me I know, poorly written. My father used to tell me it took a real gifted writer to write about sports. I think it takes a real gifted writer to write about anything in a way that someone else may find compelling to read. In college, I was very much moved by the work of Maurice Blanchot and the notion that writing is a paradox—the words I write are a feeble representation of abstract thoughts, a poor translation, that then are retranslated from words to the reader's thoughts. People write because they are forever trying to surmount this disconnect. I loved the idea of trying to grapple with that impossibility, never overcoming it but maybe coming close—I still do. Maybe that's what this really is.

I have drafted the Standard Cube two times prior to this event. The first time didn't go over so hot as I attempted some low-curving aggressive Boros deck that wasn't terribly aggressive and then got blown out by part of the cube's design intention, making "it possible and desirable to play and win with cool/awesome threats like Angels, Dragons, Dinosaurs, Demons, Planeswalkers, and other analogously-sweet, thematically-resonant cards — maintaining a high level of per-card appeal overall." *See*

“The Standard Cube, Part 2 – The Cube” published on Hipsters of the Coast. Basically that translated into five-and-higher mana value bombs. The second draft went a lot better as I leaned more into bigger, splashier sorts of cards and it was my intention when the draft started to use those prior experiences to inform the morning’s draft. Instead, I ended up in another Boros aggressive deck. Despite repeating a past mistake I manage to beat my round one opponents bigger, slower deck and eek out a win in round two as well. The final match is against Zac and, despite having lost to Zac every time we have played previously, I find myself momentarily thinking “holy shit what if I go 3-0? Wouldn’t that be unreal and unthinkable?” It remained such and I lost to Zac in three games. Over the course of it we find a little bit of time to talk some more about his trip but I find myself trying to stay silent because I want to concentrate. Because maybe I want to win. I did not sign-up for the event or drive to it that morning entertaining any thoughts of performing well, of being a good player, but finding myself in a position where it was possible to be a “winner”—and to get an enamel pin confirming this fact—was exhilarating. I am not a spike necessarily but, in that final round, goddamnit I want a pin so badly.

As the final matches of the morning wrap up, I find Mark and we make plans to get lunch somewhere nearby. As we start our walk out of the building we run into Dan who, with a smile on his face, tells us about his experience drafting the vintage cube at the event and losing on turn one in game one to a reanimator combo deck; this experience was the worst of it but set the tone for the rest of his morning. Internally I feel vindicated and relieved that I requested not to be matched to that cube.

We separate from Dan at some intersection and Mark and I end up at Good Company Doughnuts & Cafe where neither of us get doughnuts—good sandwiches though. Outside we sit with Alex, someone who travels a humbling distance to sometimes play with us, and talk about whatever. The three of us then make our way back to the event and I find a moment to write to a note to myself that “This has been nice so far.” In retrospect it is not entirely clear if I am referring to the event or the meal I just had as I follow with: “It is a little overcast outside and kind of cool, comfortable for August.” It was a rather pleasant August day... to spend inside.

Before the afternoon draft I sit in the hotel lobby for a little bit, drink more coffee, write the aforementioned lines in my “gournal”, and talk for a little bit with Patrick, someone who I have met a few times in the context of Magic/Cube. Our conversation is kind of short and generally about how things are going but also not particularly focused on the reason we are both sitting in a hotel lobby in Alexandria, VA.

As luck, or fortune, would then have it, Patrick and I are seated across from each other for the second draft of the day, the Twube Cube—a cube where every card has a converted mana cost of two or less... except for Lurrus. Patrick has headphones on before the draft starts and when we make eye contact I ask him what he is listening to. He says it’s a mix of house music which I say sounds nice and makes me wish I had a pair of working headphones and was doing something similar. For a while my brother would come over to my house to play Magic and I had a lot of fun playing minimalist music/sounds during the evening—Hiroshi Yoshimaru, Susumu Yokota, Emily A. Sprague, Ana Roxanne, Tim Hecker, things to these general effects. It seems rude to try and continue a conversation with someone who has headphones on so I start making comments at Anthony on the opposite end of the table.

I didn’t study the list of cards in the Twube before the event and figure that, based on my own low-curving cube, I should value things that can be mana sinks. I end up in a Jeskai delver spells deck and write down “God only knows ho this deck plays”. The first round is against Anthony who is ranked the number one player at the whole event. We engage in a fair amount of banter and ribbing and also joke about how, after the event is done, we will both be plagued by social anxiety about whether or not anything we said was unwelcome. I also tell him that I want to take his enamel pin from the first draft if I win this round. Somehow I do win this round and, in the process of it, learn that there is power in the cube. I never saw any of it and my confidence in my deck and chances of winning any further rounds plummets.

The second round is against a—the?—Lurrus deck. I end up winning in three games and, writing now, I wish I was not feeling so fried in the moment so that I could write down something more substantive than “what the fuck I won”. I think it came down to Spell Snare being a very good card. My opponent is someone who traveled from an area close to Doswell, VA which is off of Interstate 64. While I am white knuckle

gripping my cards during the match, I try and talk a little bit about that area, the drive up here, things of that nature. I learn that my opponent traveled up with her sister and she is also in this pod. I make some comment about it's fun to play this game with a sibling and mention my brother but then have to quickly explain that, no, he's not here, he doesn't like Magic like this... or this much. Playing is just something he does sometimes when he is going through bouts of boredom. Honestly, his approach seems very liberating. That said, I also think about how it is exhilarating and fun to be so invested in something that you travel with friends and family in the middle of the night to a new city so you can share in an event, a passion, with other folks for a day.

The final match of the round, and the day, turns out to be against the aforementioned sister who, somehow, managed to amass multiple pieces of power and really abuse a card that probably no one ever thinks of, Plaguebearer from Exodus, and Psychic Frog, a card with a rapidly growing infamous reputation it seems. I lose in three games and feel affirmed about my drafting intuition that mana sinks were going to be valuable as it is Plaguebearer's ability of "{X}{X}{B}: Destroy target nonblack creature with mana value X" that ultimately did me in.

At this time, it is close to the evening and the event is more or less done. There is a final draft for the top eight and folks are welcome to draft and play and hangout as they see fit. Somehow I have done well enough to be in the top sixteen which feels funny and strange and still does. This does not mean too much beyond that I can take home a playmat if I want—I do not want that; I wanted, and still want, a dang enamel pin—and I feel some confused sense of wonder as to if I may be kind of decent at this game. Playing since the event has made me feel a little more reassured that this was maybe a fluke.

I go and hang out in the lobby for a little bit and talk with people I know. Patrick and Alex are there and Patrick has a baseball game playing on his phone. They ask me if I care about baseball and I think about how weird and funny this is that it seems like the sort of callback to the radio piece all the way at the start of this journey that would feel cliched in a work of fiction but of course these things happen in our lives. I tell them I do not actually care about the sport but have enjoyed going to baseball games on the occasions that that has happened. We talk a little more and more people come out and soon folks are getting drinks and making plans to go out for dinner. It's asked if I would

like to join and I say thank you for the invitation but I really just want to go home. It would be nice to see my kids before they go to bed but really this has been a lot of people and I kind of just want quiet. To fold laundry and do the dishes and maybe think about Magic but in the way that I do when doing those activities—as an escape, as something to occupy my mind more than it occupies my actual time.

I find Jill and tell her I am thinking of leaving and confirm that she'll be okay to make it back to our area on her own. I gather up my cube and thank Lincoln for organizing the event. I had a lot of fun I say a few times which is true and also an understatement. As I walk towards the garage where I parked I run into someone who I knew of more than I actually know as we have mutual friends and happen to work in the same office. We say hello and say we should have lunch at work at some point because it is funny that it is such a small world and it would be nice to maybe have someone to get lunch with at the large office building who doesn't want to talk about work.

I listen to *Moves in the Field* on the drive home and think a bit about the day. I do not have any profound insights at that time. I do not have any profound insights now. I do not think I ever wanted to make anything profound but I did want to try and establish some form of connection or understanding. With regards to what I am not sure.

When I pack up my cube after a draft I ask people to not unshuffle or sort their cards. I explain that I have this little ritual of how I like to enter deck lists and sort cards. I usually say something to the extent of how it's all the little supplementary aspects of Magic that I like the most. The organizing, the tinkering, the thinking, the way it provides an easy means to do something else. To write over 3,400 words about the game but really not about it at all.

Maybe that is the point trying to be made. This game or hobby or “lifestyle” is so much more and less than that. It is a means to a beginning and a way to do something else outside of what it purports to be about. It is not a matter of gathering in a space and fixating on a single shared interest. It is the way that things blossom or stem from that initial focal point and the intersections and divergences that emerge from it.

It is not profound, it simply is.

CONTRIBUTORS

Alex Houstoun wrote an article for Lucky Paper one time, is the co-editor of *Dead Reckonings: A Review of Horror and the Weird in the Arts*, and otherwise likes sharing , and writing about, old-time spooky stories at spookyseason.substack.com.

D.S.B “Esoteric Apophenic”

Mark AKA RandomFool is a Washington DC-based Cuber that recently returned to MTG after a 15-year hiatus. His other interests include birding, film, and sci-fi/fantasy novels.

Nick Zolnierowski lives in Queens, NY with his family and a very spoiled beagle named Mikey. Hate mail can be sent to nick.zolnierowski@gmail.com or via Instagram @nickz_lmhc.

Parker LaMascus is the editor of Lucky Paper, author of “The History of the Cube Format,” and a featured cube designer at CubeCon '23 and many local events. Find him at phillymtgcube.com next time you’re in town.

Sergio De La Guerra “no bio. i am not a wanker”