

Article: Applying MTG Concepts To Yu-Gi-Oh! By Sam Pedigo

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First a brief recap of how I did at the WCQ just because I feel as though people will be wondering "So then why didn't you do well?" when reading the following article:

Round 1: I win the die roll and open really well. Finally some good fortune. He's playing Life Equalizer burn (noticed Johnny Li mentioned this card in his post-WCQ article).

Round 2: Lose the die roll, opponent opens Charge Recharge Lumina Lumina Garoth in Game 1 and opens Bandit Game 3 and follows that up with a Soul Charge for four on his next turn. I sided 2 Soul Release because Cycle Reader just doesn't do enough in these exact kind of situations but didn't see it.

Round 9: I open well but my opponent has the counter hand: Bear Lance Mind Control Sanctum Warning so I effectively lose in my second draw phase. Game 3 goes along the same lines. He played well though and I believe he's going to Worlds to congrats to Taj.

Untitled Article

Robby B. before winning YCS Indianapolis with Plants. Joe Giorlando before making Top 32 at seven straight events. Patrick Hoban before winning four events in less than a year. Samuel Pedigo before making it to Worlds to the second time not making Day 2 of the WCQ for the first time. Hopefully that last one happened, anyway. By the time this will have been published, I might have already quit full-time Yu-Gi-Oh. I won't be playing much beyond the 2014 North American WCQ format, but I feel as though I have another contribution to make towards our ongoing collective search as a community to obtain a more sophisticated understanding of the game—so I wanted to write it while I am still in the right mindset.

What do all of the individuals at the beginning of this article have in common? We all read Patrick Chapin's Next Level Magic. If you're looking to improve your game, I recommend laying down the \$30 for his book, as opposed to paying some \$97 for video tutorials elsewhere. It'll teach you new concepts, how to improve on ones you already understand, and finally put into words some of the ones you knew existed but just couldn't quite get your mind around before. You'll even find yourself thinking, "I've heard this before!" That's because Giorlando and Hoban have not only used this work for improving their game, but they have used it as a fundamental

source of inspiration for basic (and not-so-basic) Yu-Gi-Oh theory. It's really a great piece of work and highly recommended.

But I'm not writing this article to sell you on the book. I'm here to translate more of Patrick's Magic: The Gathering concepts into Yu-Gi-Oh terms. Our game is still relatively young and there are many concepts that have yet to be formally theorized and written about. Even in Magic, some concepts are still relatively intangible:

"Tempo is actually much simpler [than card advantage], though there has actually been a lot less written on it. As a result, it is more commonly misunderstood than card advantage.

But their game does have a decade on us; that's part of what makes Next Level Magic more than a book that provides the foundation for becoming a better card game player, and makes it also a strong source of inspiration from which we can derive and apply concepts which apply to our own game. After all, if you do take me up on my recommendation, you won't find anything that says this:

"When constructing any deck, one of my concerns is always having too many normal summons in the deck. This is because for every card in your hand that you must normal summon other than the one that you are allowed to summon per turn, is essentially a -1 for the turn.

That came courtesy of our Pat. But you will read this paragraph, from the other Patrick:

"The key to understanding tempo is to evaluate everything in terms of how much this resource is worth right now. To take tempo away from your opponent is to give yourself tempo, but this matters not at all if you don't do anything with it.

When you're reading those two sentences from Chapin within the context of Magic: The Gathering, the connection's not quite so obvious, so kudos for Hoban on being able to create that parallel. He's provided us with quite a bit of quality content over the years, and I'm going to begin this article discussing one of his:

"Characteristics of the Best Deck"

Back in February, Hoban wrote "The Three Characteristics of the Best Deck". Here's a link to the article:

<http://articles.alterrealitygames.com/the-three-characteristics-of-the-best-deck/>

They're attributes that should be applied to any deck you're considering. Sometimes, like during the 2013 September Dragon Ruler format, there's a best deck but during the 2014 WCQ format, there are a number of decks in contention. When there are multiple decks that rate out similarly, which one is the "best" really depends on the build and your timing. Consider the March 2012 format, for example: You would've found the most success, if you were able to dedicate the time to

mastering whatever deck you were playing, by using Dino Rabbit early on, then Chaos Dragons and Wind-Ups after that. But at the same time, Joe Giorlando found success with Dino Rabbit during Chaos Dragon's reign by taking out his hand traps for Macro Cosmos. What's important is that they were all relatively close to each other based on the cumulative ability of the deck when you considered all the attributes that make a good deck. Hoban's characteristics were:

- (1) Auto-wins
- (2) Consistency
- (3) Contradictions

But I disagree with these. While we agree that consistency is a key measure for evaluating the potential of a deck, I feel as though the others are inaccurate. Throughout my article, I will explain why I feel this way and, in the process, I will explain a number of other concepts that will help build on this position.

What's your role?

Perhaps the most meaningful piece of content from Chapin's book might have been an old article he included from the last millennium (penned way back in 1999!) called "Who's the Beatdown?" It's actually free and you can read it yourself using the link below:

http://www.starcitygames.com/magic/fundamentals/3692_Whos_The_Beatdown.html

This Yu-Gi-Oh "article" is an essay in its own so rather than do Mike Flores an injustice and attempt to explain it myself, my expectation is that you'll use the link provided and read the original article before continuing.

Applying the Concept

An excellent example in Yu-Gi-Oh would be Dino Rabbit versus Chaos Dragons. You're using Rabbit (you should know that I'm disappointed in you for doing so) and your opponent just activated Gold Sarcophagus for Future Fusion. Suddenly, you're on a 2-turn clock. That makes you the beatdown. If you don't finish your opponent's life points before they're able to resolve that card, then you lose. You only have a couple of spells/traps and they run a significant amount of backrow hate, with Heavy Storm, Mystical Space Typhoon, Lyla and Ryko. Odds are you're not going to be able to stop it from resolving so now you'll most likely lose in a couple of turns. Normally you don't attack your opponent directly with Sabersaurus without Solemn Warning set because Gorz is a popular card this format. But you're going to fall to Future Fusion anyway, so you have nothing to lose. You must be the aggressor.

There was a YCS during the March 2012 format where the Finals serves as a pretty good illustration of what can happen when you mis-assign your role. Alexander Reed, piloting Chaos Dragons, was in commanding position during Game 3, with Lightpulsar Dragon and Red-Eyes Darkness Metal Dragon on board. His opponent,

Nizar Sarhan, was using Dino Rabbit and was going to have a difficult dealing with these two powerful monsters. But when Reed had the opportunity to attack his opponent directly, he got greedy and attacked with both monsters despite not being able to deal enough damage to do game. Sarhan dropped Gorz, the Emissary of Darkness and completely turned the duel around, in route to another YCS Championship. If Reed had recognized that he had no need to play with the kind of urgency that's associated with risking Gorz, as he was playing the more powerful deck, then he would be a YCS Champion.

Note that this isn't a question you should be asking yourself only when preparing for the decks you expect to face, rather, you should be asking this every game. If you're playing a 2011 X-Saber mirror match and you use Gold Sarc for Rescue Cat then Who's the Beatdown? Your opponent. What does that mean? You need to be ready for battle. Depending on the circumstances, since there are exceptions, they're going to get aggressive. Good duelists will recognize the urgency you have created for them and attempt to win the duel before you do.

But these scenarios are oversimplified and easy to recognize. How do we apply this theory?

Stages

To be able to understand what role to take in more complex situations, we need to understand another concept, first. Over in Magic: The Gathering, they have three "Stages". Roughly speaking, they describe a player's ability to play their game's equivalent of monsters and spells, based on the amount of resources from which they use to play cards (called mana). Once they have accrued sufficient mana to play a variety of moderately powerful cards, they have left the initial stage of the game and gone into "Stage 2". This is the part of the game where the most player interaction happens. There's a stage beyond this one, though, where they are able to play their most powerful cards, the kind that are able to win games all on their own.

Understanding these stages is important in Magic because each deck has a different goal and each matchup has a different dynamic. Decks that strive to reach Stage 3 and play powerful cards generally have a difficult time with quicker ones looking to exploit slower decks by playing lots of small creatures and cheap spells. Stage 2 decks do well against these faster Stage 1 strategies, though, because they're able to adequately begin playing their game before their life points have been wiped out and once that happens—their monsters are larger and spells are more powerful than those in the quicker deck. You could then use the same logic to see why Stage 3 decks do well against the mid-range ones. It's kind of like a complex game of rock-paper-scissors.

But what happens when you're both playing Stage 3 decks? It depends. Who has the more powerful cards? That's one question you might ask yourself. In Yu-Gi-Oh, the deck playing Judgment Dragon is probably the more powerful one, therefore if you're both using powerful "Stage 3" decks but they have access to the powerful

Lightsworn boss monster, it might be in your best interest to try to accelerate your typical game plan.

That's all just theory when applied to Yu-Gi-Oh, though, because there's one important distinction: Yu-Gi-Oh players aren't limited by an incremental resource system. We don't have mana dictating when we're able to play our most powerful cards. That doesn't mean these concepts don't apply to us. It's just far less tangible. Often in Yu-Gi-Oh it's a struggle between both players to create the most powerful threat for the least amount of resources. That's to say: Both players are attempting to hold onto their most powerful cards and be the last to play them. If it's a tightly contested mirror match, then this makes complete sense.

But what about when our opponent activates Gold Sarc?

How about if our opponent is running Lightsworn Rulers?

It wouldn't be wise of us to wait in these scenarios. We have to up the tempo. You have to be the beatdown.

Are you beginning to see the relationship here? If you're playing Lightsworn then your goal (if you don't open Charge Recharge) is to extend the game but by the same measure, you have to recognize that your opponents are going to try to take you out before you're able to summon Judgment Dragon. It's about recognizing both sides of the same coin and making the necessary adjustments, both in your preparation/card choices and during the game.

Applying the Concept

I believe not recognizing their deck's role in the meta will be the downfall of many players at the 2014 WCQ. Like many others, I'm currently planning on using Georgia at the event. It's one of many options:

Georgia

HAT

Bujin

Mythics

Lightsworn

Sylvan

Madolche

Prophecy

I'm going to attempt to briefly go over each of these matchups: Your role in any mirror will typically depend on the game-state and techs of each player. HAT is largely a reactive deck that seeks to beat you in the grind-game. However, because

Gears can gain advantage while playing a defensive strategy, the deck generally has a difficult time coming out on top. What HAT players typically try to do after siding is win as quickly as possible. They'll create openings through Dark Hole, Mind Control and Nobleman of Crossout to get direct attacks in with their Traptrix monsters and the Hands—cards you don't typically see used hyper-aggressively, as they're normally there to punish players for going on the offensive. They're the beatdown. Bujin players typically seek to extend the game. They'll use Kaiser Colosseum and Royal Decree to limit your ability to make full use of your resources while they setup. Once they have a loaded graveyard, they have essentially created a super-powerful ultra-resilient monster capable of dealing massive damage and will normally have Bujincarnation in hand in case you are able to maneuver your way through their board. Mythics have actually somewhat changed roles. They actually do both well, and it really depends on what they have and what game it is. It used to be that they had difficulty creating a constant stream of threats through backrows. Therefore they would use Felgrand and Skill Drain to help slow down the game so they could load up their graveyard and re-use their Dragon Rulers. Now Soul Charge gives them the ability to toss instant-threats on the board and, when combined with Royal Decree, they're often able to take even the early game with ease. I'd say they focus on doing this even more after siding when they have to deal with D.D. Crow, as well as Number 80 and Bottomless Trap Hole, all of which take away from their ability to grind through a duel. Next up is Lightsworn Rulers: Judgment Dragon. They're looking to extend the game just long enough to search and summon their boss monster. Once they successfully resolve its effect, they normally win. Prophecy gains incremental advantage through Spellbook Tower and doesn't always have access to powerful monsters so their goal is to extend the game. Finally, Madolche: This one's rather complicated but against Geargia they're looking to grind. Their continuous spells give them an endless stream of monsters. Furthermore they're able to apply lots of pressure with just a single Hootcake play.

Whew! Did you notice anything? Grind-it-Gears are actually the beatdown in lots of those matchups!

What does that mean? How does one go about using that kind of knowledge?

Tempo

We're getting closer but there's yet another concept that must be discussed: Tempo. Hoban's talked about this one at length (and uses it to justify his adoration of combo decks) but I aim to speak about it as it relates to the other concepts I've presented in this article. Essentially, this concept is the answer to the question posed in the previous section. If you're the aggressor, you're trying to increase the tempo and if you're the control deck, then you are attempting to slow it down. What is it?

"Tempo is the manipulation of any resource that you gain over time, but do not start with. This can include the playing of land, untapping permanents, attack phases, and so on, as well as denying your opponent of these.

Because there is no resource system, tempo in Yu-Gi-Oh deals with monsters and the amount of pressure you can create with them each turn. It used to be limited to your normal summon but most players these days don't even know what that is (just kidding). That's because most decks have found avenues to get around that limitation. Monster Reborn provided an absolutely free way of circumventing the effect the normal summon rule has on tempo. Notice Konami got creative with Soul Charge, though, allowing you to gain tempo in one area at the cost of tempo in another. (I also believe it was a conscious effort to make Life Points more important and Upstart Goblin less relevant.)

Applying the Concept

But if you're playing Gears, and you're the usually the beatdown, then do you really want to be sacrificing tempo of any kind? No. That's why I believe Soul Charge should not be used in Georgia at the WCQ and that Call of the Haunted is a much better choice for this meta. Upon understanding the concepts I have presented here, making these connections, and testing the card out—I instantly improved my results with swift victories over decks like Spellbooks, which desire a prolonged duel.

Power and Consistency

It's time to bring it back home, now: What do I think are the qualities that make a deck a viable contender in the meta?

Earlier I mentioned that risking a loss to Gorz is the correct play if your opponent has a looming Future Fusion, courtesy of Gold Sarc. Playing the role of the beatdown deck often means taking risks you would prefer to avoid. It seems logical, then, to ask yourself, what incentive do I have for playing a deck that must take more risks? Consistency. Returning to the example of Dino Rabbit vs. Chaos Dragons, Rabbit provided a great amount of consistency. You tend to open with a playable hand a majority of your games. I don't mean opening Rescue Rabbit and Tour Guide to the Underworld, either. Often times this simply meant Sabersaurus and four backrows. On the other hand, Chaos Dragons would auto-win a lot of games due to Heavy Storm and Future Fusion, but there were also a significant number of duels that they would lose because they drew too many of the same Dragons they would send to the grave with Future Fusion without any way to special summon them.

You'll find that in a balanced format with a diverse group of decks vying for control, like in 2012, the difference between them is their varying degrees of Power and Consistency. It's also what separates them from the "Tier 2" decks and on down the line. They simply have a better combination of Power and Consistency. They aren't mutually exclusive, though. Every once-and-a-while you'll have a deck whose combination of Power and Consistency far exceeds the other decks within the meta.

Our most recent example of this was Dragon Rulers in 2013. Because they were powerful in both areas relative to the rest of the meta, only decks with inherent advantages in that specific matchup could compete with it. Remember it is all relative, though. Geargia wasn't a deck during those formats because Dragon Rulers were so much better in both of these areas. It's not as if the cards weren't available: once the four Dragon Rulers were limited, other archetypes that were previously far too underpowered, but extremely consistent, began to rule the metagame.

Applying the Concept

Back in early 2014, Pure Geargia emerged as a contender for the best deck because it rivaled the consistency of Fire Fist yet had the ability to OTK. It remained a contender after the release of Dragons of Legend (and Soul Charge!) because it was more consistent than Mythic Rulers, Lightsworn Rulers and Sylvans and had sufficient power to respond to the far more powerful fields those decks were capable of creating. It's an excellent example of being balanced enough in both areas to be a contender across different meta-games, provided the level of Power or Consistency doesn't far exceed its own.

Power vs. Auto-Wins

Auto-wins are a rather loose term that describes games in which you simply open far better than your opponent. But how do we determine what qualifies? It's a term that's usually used to describe a combo deck's ability to reach "Stage 3" immediately. Hieratic Rulers opening Atum and Dracossack on their first-turn during the January 2014 format would typically constitute an auto-win. But what if you're playing in a mirror match? Because they have the ability to match that field, can it still be considered an auto-win? Probably not. Whether or not something qualifies as an "auto-win" is dependent on a number of factors, including what your opponents might be playing. Furthermore, opening with both Armor and Geargiagear, when winning the die roll, seems like an auto-win scenario to me. I believe this term is far too vague and "Power" seems like a more appropriate term. You can assign a value to this category without it being influenced by other factors. Mythic Rulers will have a higher value than Geargia. If you're playing a Mythic mirror match then, depending on the techs each player is using, they will have the same amount of Power. Conversely, Lightsworn Rulers generally have an even higher level of Power than Mythics. If anything, auto-wins would be a function of a deck's Power and Consistency relative to the deck it is playing against. On the most basic levels of evaluating a deck, Power is more appropriate than "auto-wins".

Contradictions

I do not think that "Contradictions" should be one of the factors for evaluating a deck's ability to do well in the meta, either. You reject a deck because it's unable to reach the minimum threshold of Power and Consistency. Contradictions describe the reasons why a deck that is on the cusp is unable to do so.

Applying the Concept

Here's an example taken from Hoban's article:

Prophecy – Spellbook of Crescent is not what a 3 of should be, but the deck is forced to play 3 of them or it is not consistent enough and will lose to itself. Any time a deck makes you violate a rule like this, there is a contradiction which is going to hurt the deck's performance.

Essentially he's saying that Spellbooks are not consistent enough and an attempt to make them more consistent by running multiple copies of Spellbook of Crescent is like taking one step forwards and one step back. You'll run into the same issue with Madolche: They don't have enough strong opening plays.

- Madolche Anjelly
- Madolche Magileine
- Madolche Mewfuille and Madolche Messengelato
- Madolche Hootcake and Effect Veiler or Maxx "C"

You have a 68% chance of opening Anjelly or Magileine. Then another 7% of Mewfuille and Messengelato IF you're running three of each. I'm not even completely sure how to add Hootcake into the mix since it not only requires a hand trap but you also need your opponent to provide an opportunity for you to get decent value from it. You're looking at 80% at best. But remember that everything's relative to the alternatives and Gears have an 84% chance of opening Armor Arsenal or Geargiagear. That's 1-in-20 games. It might not seem like a lot but that's practically a guaranteed difference maker at a YCS. Because of this, Madolche duelists often attempt to add additional monsters that are good to open with: Fire and Ice Hand, Fire Fist Bear, T.G. Warwolf and Tenki, Artifacts, Ghostricks and more.

There are a couple of problems with this, though: (a) You'll draw too many monsters too often. Having four or more normal summons in your opening hand makes it very difficult for any deck to win the game, but (b) even if drawing too many monsters wasn't an issue (even though it is), by adding more monsters, you're taking away space in their deck for defensive cards. Remember Madolche decks also use Chateau and Ticket. Even if we assume a minimalistic 2:1 ratio alongside 2 Mewfuille 2 Messengelato 2 Fire Hand and 2 Ice Hand then we're already at twenty cards. Gears only need sixteen spots for their nine stand-alone cards.

But why's that a problem? There are quite a few decks that don't run a powerful defensive lineup.

There's a reason for that: Decks like Mythics and Sylvans create defense by summoning powerful monsters. It isn't easy to OTK somebody when they have monster(s) that have an ATK or DEF upwards of 2,600 attack. Both decks also have access to monsters like Divine Dragon Knight Felgrand and Mecha Phantom Beast Dracossack also that have built-in defense. 2,100 is really good for a normal summon, but it isn't good enough when your opponent can summon monsters like Felgrand and Dracossack, or spam 2,300 xyz monsters without much effort.

Furthermore, I don't think the Hands have much synergy with the deck when you consider the deck's role in Who's the Beatdown? They're far too reactive.

Best case scenario for the Hands is vs. Geargia, against whom you don't even need to combo against because you can just control the board with a 2,000 ATK Hootcake and 2,100 ATK Messengelato. What are they going to do? If they deal with them then you're just going to do it again, and you also blocked 4,100 potential points of damage. They're strategy against you as a Madolche player should be to wipe out your LPs before you're able to grind through all of their defense so the Hands are a great way to punish them for going on the offensive with GGX and Ragnazero. But what happens when you aren't able create pressure with Chateau and either Hootcake or Messengelato? If all you have are the Hands then they aren't going to be effective and remember that Geargia is the best case scenario for the Hands (and they only account for 30% of the meta at most):

What about Mythics? Water? Lightsworn? Sylvans. Hootcake isn't going to create the same amount of pressure because 1,900 ATK doesn't mean anything in those matchups. I believe that in those matchups Madolche becomes the beatdown. It's unlikely that either of you will run out of monsters but they'll be favored the longer the game goes on because once you run out of defense, their creatures more powerful stats and effects will trump yours. Therefore your goal should be to win the duel quickly, leveraging your defensive cards as a means of keeping your opponent from developing their gameplan and gameboard (Madolche players understand how difficult it is to deal with Felgrand), creating more opportunities for you to deal damage in the process. Do you see why Fire and Ice Hand might conflict? You're trying to be the aggressor but they're reactive cards.

Suddenly the success that Nate Forte had at ARG Washington, D.C. with his T.G. Madolche deck makes more sense! Fire Fist Bear gave the deck an inherent edge against Geargia, sure, but it also provided more offense vs. the combo decks. Why haven't similar Madolche decks duplicated his success? 3 T.G. Warwolf 1 T.G. Striker 1 Fire Fist Bear and 3 Tenki and the Madolche engine took up 23/40 cards! That's a lot of space.

Because

Ultimately the reason the deck hasn't performed up to pre-PRIO expectations is, in the current meta, it is neither consistent nor powerful. You must be one or the other (if not both) in Yu-Gi-Oh and it does not excel in the early game on a consistent basis nor does it have the power needed to thrive in the late game.

Summary

Note: Throughout this article I've used Geargia as my example in the "Applying the Concept" sections. Yes, it's been my deck of choice for the past couple of years now but I never would've claimed that it might be the best deck until now. I used it as an example, yes, due to my familiarity with it, but more importantly because I feel as though it serves as a great way to illustrate many of the concepts discussed throughout this article.

Madolche was dismissed as an option because it does not have the consistency to win often enough in the early game and lacks the power to compete in the late game. On the other hand, Geargia, known as a grind-deck, has an excellent mix of consistency and power. It will open well in four of five games it plays and even once it does reluctantly enter the late game in a meta with Lightsworn, Mythics, Sylvans, Madolche and Mermail, it still has the power to compete. It's only through recognizing the deck's role in the meta, though, that the deck's potential can be maximized. When speed and an up-tempo strategy is required, Soul Charge isn't a wise choice as the battle phase is often far too steep a cost.

These are all conclusions that are only reached if you know the different stages of the game, are able to identify your own role in the duel, and understand how the combination of those factors influence tempo. These concepts also help explain the role of Power and Consistency as the primary factors for evaluating a deck's ability to compete within a given meta: Consistent decks tend to be less powerful, but perform better early in the game. While Powerful decks have the ability to achieve a strong early game, they don't have the consistency to do so on a regular basis, so they make up for it with a very powerful late-game.

If you understand all of this, you can improve your deck selection and will have a better chance of optimizing your deck's ability to perform within the meta.

/end

Take it for what you will that a MtG player actually won the event. Congrats to him.

I actually don't have some huge beef with Hoban's "Characteristics" or anything. It really just provided a good "frame" in which to speak about the various topics I wanted to discuss. I think even Pat might agree with the idea that "contradictions" are the application of the characteristics. Only thing it changes about his article is

perhaps the title: "Characteristics of the Best Deck" "Characteristics and the Application of them to Determine the Best Deck", which is obviously a bit more complicated anyway.

Regarding my own status as a duelist for those who are interested: I'm still going to be taking a break for the next couple of months but Konami happened to schedule YCS Lima, Peru in September, during the format in which I didn't plan on playing at all. Assuming I do go to Peru to see Number 33: Chronomoly Machu Mech, I'll continue playing on through YCS Dallas and maybe the one in California. I also want to visit Australia and I've been under the assumption they'll have another early next year, so there's that, too. The vacation opportunities (the primary motivators for me at this stage) coming up are just too good to pass up (two of the three places the wife and I both really want to visit), but I am going to quit eventually hahah. Hopefully I'm able to complete my quest for ten before then.

That said, I'm not even sure if I'll be writing any more articles after this so I also want to give another thanks to everybody in the Yu-Gi-Oh community who has supported me as a writer, duelist and most importantly, friend, over the years. I couldn't have achieved everything that I have without your help. Thank you all.