

## **Novice to Expert: Expertise in Magic: The Gathering**

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“I’m pretty sure double strike doesn’t work that way,” said Rick. He was wrong, of course, I had been playing this game since I was eight. We were in the middle of a Magic: The Gathering (MtG) game and I had just swung for lethal.<sup>1</sup> Rick, having not realized how the rules worked let my attack go through, and would subsequently lose the match as a result of his misunderstanding.

I learned to play MtG at two points in my life, once when I was eight, and again when I was in my early twenties. When I was eight, I learned to play in two ways: by watching my brother play and by reading the rulebook. So while I knew the rules to an extent, I really did not understand how the game was played, nor was there any meaningful learning or teaching taking place. In this environment understanding was nearly impossible, which led to me quitting the game for over a decade. Compare this to when I began playing again in my early twenties. With comparable experiences with other card games, more intuitive instruction, and removal of pre-existing knowledge and assumptions, my second time learning to play MtG resulted in my gaining of a deeper and more concrete understanding and mastery of the game.

Let us flash back to a time before the great recession. I was eight years old and everything that my brother was trying or interested in, I was quick to follow suit. He had just begun playing MtG, and not wanting to be left behind, I begged my mom to buy me a preconstructed deck at Target. This deck came with 60 cards and a rules booklet. This booklet contained all the facts one would need to learn the rules of MtG, and I read it all. While I may have memorized some of the rules and keywords that are needed to play the game, I lacked a

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<sup>1</sup> The Full list of Magic the gathering rules can be found at <https://magic.wizards.com/en/how-to-play>

serious understanding, as I had no way to categorize or classify these facts into concepts that would lead me to true understanding (Bransford, 9). Instead, I was left with a flawed interpretation of how the game worked, brought on by pre-existing knowledge and assumptions (Bransford, 10). In addition, my “classroom” in which I was tested was not conducive to learning, as I would either play against my friend, who also did not understand how to play the game, or against my brother, who did not have a level of in-depth knowledge in the game which are necessary for effective teaching, nor the experience teaching someone (Bransford, 20). All these factors led to me not enjoying playing as I often felt lost and eventually quit the game.

About thirteen years later, something unexpected happened. It was my senior year of college when I found out that some friends of mine played MtG. I remembered very little about the game as a whole aside from the very basics. This time, not only was I able to learn how to play, but I also had truly gained a level of understanding of the game and its workings that I feel that I can classify myself as an expert. I was able to achieve this level of understanding in a number of ways. First, I was chunking the information in ways that were more conducive to real learning. For example, instead of trying to figure out “which cards were best”, I spent time learning the different categories that combine to create good decks. This new organization of knowledge helped catapult me from a surface level of knowledge to a deeper conceptual understanding (Bransford, 36-38).

Next, I had much more time to gain experience in learning how interactions within the game created more advantageous situations for me. Because while chunking and the like can help create a base on which to build knowledge, the most sure way to become an expert in something is to spend time gaining experience within the subject (Bransford, 32). Much the same way a student can learn vocabulary terms but will not truly know how to use them unless they

spend the time using them in sentences and seeing them in context, I had to spend many hours watching and experiencing different card interactions so as to truly evaluate the best way to play the best cards to use in particular situations.

The final aspect to my learning was the context and environment in which I learned. This time I had joined a community of people who had given me a sense that we were all learning and figuring out the game together. Just like students gain deeper understanding in classrooms in which everyone, including the teacher, learns together (Bransford, 25), I was able to make much deeper levels of connection and mastery in a group in which everyone encouraged questions, did not make me feel like foolish for not knowing something, and expressed genuine curiosity as we all experienced learning everytime we found something that no one knew or had figured out.

When a student fails at something in school, be it learning the quadratic formula, the periodic table, or writing a thesis statement, it is important that we, as teachers, reflect on what happened that might have caused this to happen. After all, this student may not have friends years down the line who are going to interest them in relearning these skills. I had the luck of being in a place to learn something that has become a passion for me, so I want that for all the students who come through my English class, even if, by the end of their time with me, they still are not the biggest fan of writing or reading.

References:

Bransford, J. D. (2000). How people learn brain, mind, experience, and school: Expanded edition. National Academies Press.

Wizards of the Coast. (n.d.). *How to play: Magic: The gathering*. MAGIC.

<https://magic.wizards.com/en/how-to-play>