

Playing your Pet

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Rough-Testing a Magic (tm) Deck.

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It's Magic day at your game club tomorrow, and you have a new deck idea you want to try out. You've picked out some spells that should work well together, and added a reasonable number of lands. Now you want to test it out, and do some tuning before you take it up against the tournament-level decks tomorrow. But you're home alone, and it's too late to call a friend. If only you could teach your pet to play....

Well, your pet can't really play Magic, but with a bit of imagination, it can inspire some good ways to test out a new deck. Various players swear by different tests, ranging from just dealing out several hands and checking to see whether you'd be able to cast any spells the first turn, to playing a duel against yourself using one of your other decks. The pet-inspired tests here are meant to give you some measurement of your deck's strengths or weaknesses, and how it's likely to fare when facing certain types of real decks. They also let you get used to playing the cards in your deck, and help you figure out your best combinations, which cards you need to protect with Counterspells, etc. {mospagebreak title=Goldfish} Goldfish

A goldfish is a rather boring pet: it doesn't do much, and you can't really interact with it. It just swims around in its bowl, and then one day the cat eats it or you come in and find it floating belly-up.

The most basic deck-test (originally called "The Test" on Usenet) is very much like a goldfish: it's an opponent who doesn't do anything. All you have to do is deal 20 points of damage as quickly as possible. (If your deck can't deal 20 points of damage against a defenseless opponent, it's time to give up Magic and start playing Go Fish. Unless, of course, it's a "jujitsu" deck--see below.)

Count how many turns it takes to kill the fish. Do this several times, and average the results to get a measure of the sheer brute power of your deck. Five or less is an amazing score, usually possible only with extremely lucky shuffles or a deck loaded with out-of-print cards. A more typical fast deck will score seven or eight fairly consistently. If your deck consistently scores over ten, you're likely to get chewed up by faster decks.

Exceptions to this are jujitsu-style decks--those that do almost nothing on their own, but turn all your opponent's forces against him. None of these tests will really give a good measure of a jujitsu deck's abilities. Also, the Goldfish opponent has no hand, so Black Vise and The Rack don't deal any damage and Hymn to Tourach is pointless. Decks based around these concepts will do better against real opponents than the Goldfish test would indicate. But even a jujitsu or hand-manipulation deck should have a few cards capable of dealing normal damage in case of an uncooperative opponent, so the test is still fair. {mospagebreak title=Turtles} Turtles

A turtle lives in a bowl like a goldfish, but is better at defending itself. If anything bothers it, the turtle just holes up inside its shell. Some Magic decks are like turtles: they don't really do much, but they have good defenses. The Turtle test measures a deck's ability to cope with this type of strategy.

For this test, the Turtle starts out with an Ivory Tower and six Circles of Protection in play (one of each color, plus a Circle of Protection: Artifacts). Every time you draw a land (whether you play it or not), the Turtle immediately adds the exact same land to his cards in play, for free. The Turtle never plays any cards other than the free lands, and doesn't use any non-basic land's special abilities (for instance, Maze of Ith's tapping ability or Strip Mine's land-destruction capability). The Turtle also draws a card every turn, trying to maintain a full hand of seven cards to gain as much life from the Ivory Tower as possible. Discard decks can interfere with this, and Vise decks can take advantage of it, especially if you destroy the Tower. The Turtle will always prevent as much damage as possible.

We won't even try to give "average" scores for this or the rest of the pet tests, because they vary so widely. The Turtle test is a lot tougher than the Goldfish, and players with decks that have no way of dealing with enchantments may consider it unfair. Fighting a Turtle can be frustrating. You may not have dealt any damage by the time you would have destroyed a Goldfish completely. (But look at the bright side--at least a Turtle won't replace his Circles once you destroy them, or play Karma or any of the other color-specific spells, like a real opponent might!)

Turtles are far from invulnerable, though, no matter what colors you play. The simple ways to beat a Turtle are: 1) destroy one or more of the appropriate Circles, 2) destroy or tap enough of the Turtle's lands so he can't power the

Circles, or 3) overrun him with so many sources of damage that he can't stop them all. Other approaches include using Sleight of Mind (to change the color a Circle protects against), casting Manabarbs or Psychic Venom on his lands (if he taps a land to power a Circle, then he takes additional damage from the enchantment and has to power more Circles) or Feedback and Power Leak on the Circles, and, of course, Gloom and Ghostly Flame. A few anti-artifact cards, to get rid of the Ivory Tower, can keep him from building up too much life before you get past the Circles. {mospagebreak title=Snakes} Snakes

Most pet snakes are constrictors: they wrap around their prey and squeeze it to death. The Snake test is a simple measure of a deck's resistance to squeezing. The Snake opponent starts the game with two Black Vises in play. (Yes, this means that you'll take six points of damage the first turn, and will likely take another four or six the second turn!) Other than that, use the same rules as the Goldfish test. Unlike the Goldfish or Turtle, though, the Snake can win a duel--that squeezing gets painful fast if you can't reduce your hand size. So you'll need to keep track of your win/loss ratio instead of (or in addition to) the number of turns it takes to win when figuring your deck's Snake score.

If your deck has few or no low-cost spells, you'll usually lose to the Snake, and most jujitsu and "permission" decks will lose even more quickly since most of their spells can't be cast unless the opponent tries to do something. If you find this test too harsh, you can reduce it to a single Vise, or give the Snake only one Vise at the beginning of the game and a second Vise two or three turns later. Does this seem unlikely? Keep in mind that a real sixty-card deck with four Black Vises in it has about a 45% chance of getting one out on the first turn, and about a 15% chance of drawing two of them within the first four turns of the game, without using any library-searching spells. A Black Vise or two is often the difference in many real duels. A successful deck should be able to deal with the constrictions of a Snake.

If you prefer venomous snakes instead of constrictors, use the Rabbit test (below) but substitute Marsh Vipers for the rabbits. And be sure to keep a snakebite kit on hand.... {mospagebreak title=Parakeets} Parakeets

Parakeets usually come in pairs, and when they're not hopping around on the floor or on the perches of their cage, they fly. And unlike goldfish, they sometimes bite.

The Parakeet test, in one or more variations, has been floating around the Internet for over a year. It's almost as quick and easy as the Goldfish test, and is, like the Goldfish, a measure of the brute power of your deck--with a slight bow to realism.

The Parakeet starts the game with Drudge Skeletons (1/1 black regenerating creature) and Phantom Monster (3/3 blue flier). The Monster attacks whenever it isn't futile to do so, until you manage to get rid of it somehow. You're attacked by Drudge Skeletons if you have no creatures or nothing it could block. It blocks the most dangerous creature when you attack, and regenerates whenever necessary. Other than that, follow the Goldfish rules. {mospagebreak title=Rabbits & Rats} Rabbits & Rats

Think of rabbits, and you're likely to think of the phrase "breeding like rabbits." The Rabbit test has a number of variants, but they all work pretty much the same way. The basic Rabbit gets one free Drudge Rabbit (1/1 colorless regenerating creature) every turn. Drudge Rabbits regenerate whenever necessary, for no cost. The Rabbit will attack whenever she can do so, but will always try to leave enough Drudges untapped to block all of your blockable creatures. Other than that, the Rabbit follows the Goldfish rules.

Other variants of the basic Rabbit test replace the Drudge Rabbits with either Will-O'-Rabbits (0/1 colorless regenerating fliers--these never attack, for obvious reasons), Scryb Rabbits (1/1 colorless fliers), or Rabbit Thallids (1/1 green creature). All of the Rabbit tests give a crude measurement of how well your deck will do against a "weenie" or "horde" deck. For an extra challenge, give the Rabbit a Meekstone and/or a Winter Orb, since many weenie decks make use of these cards.

Tom Pitt of CompuServe uses a very tough Rabbit variant called the Rat test. The Rat opponent gets one free Plague Rat each turn, and always attacks with half of her rats (rounding down) whenever able to do so. The rest of the rats will block in whatever way is most effective. If you attack with any flying creatures, then half (rounded up) of the untapped rats gain flying until the end of the turn. If you play a CoP: Black, it lasts for only three turns and is then destroyed.

Another variant on the Rabbit test, suggested by Izzy Gambliel of Metro Seattle Gamers, is the Angel test. The Angel opponent does nothing for the first four turns, but then gets one free Serra Angel (4/4 white flier, attacking doesn't cause it to tap) every turn. She attacks whenever she has a chance of dealing damage to you or killing one of your creatures, and blocks whenever possible. This simulates decks which take a while to get rolling, but pump out large creatures as soon as they have sufficient mana. {mospagebreak title=Cats} Cats

Cats don't play Magic. They consider it beneath their dignity. {mospagebreak title=Dogs} Dogs

Dogs are very smart, and, contrary to popular belief, you can teach an old dog new tricks. The Dog test is really a form of solitaire Magic. Take some of your extra basic lands (equal numbers of each type) and shuffle them together. Then

choose one action to correspond with each land type. These actions can be anything you want; you can make the duel as easy or as challenging as you want by varying them, or make it simulate a particular type of deck. You can restrict the Dog to casting spells that fit his available mana, or you can ignore the mana entirely, or count the amount of available mana but ignore the color.

For example, you might pick:

Island: Dog does nothing now, but Counterspells the next spell you cast. The Counterspell costs no mana.

Swamp: If Dog has four or fewer lands, he plays a Will-O'-The-Wisp. Otherwise, he plays a Sengir Vampire.

Mountain: If Dog has three or fewer lands in play, he Lightning Bolts you. Otherwise, he hits you with a Disintegrate for as many points as he has lands.

Forest: If Dog has only one land, he plays a Scryb Sprite; if two lands, a Grizzly Bear; three lands, Land Leeches; four lands, Giant Spider; five lands, Durkwood Boars; six or more lands, Craw Wurm.

Plains: Dog plays a Circle of Protection for whichever color you're using most that isn't already protected against, or CoP: Artifacts if you have more artifact creatures than colored ones. (Pretend the casting cost is just if Dog has only one land.)

For this particular set of Dog rules, Dog must tap the appropriate number of lands for the casting cost of his spells, but ignores the color requirements for the creatures which need two or more of one color to summon.

Each time that it's Dog's turn, flip over the top card from the pile of lands and put it into play in Dog's territory. Dog then does whatever action you assigned to that land, and then attacks if it's profitable to do so. When you attack, Dog will defend and/or prevent the damage in the most effective way you can think of. (Dogs are smart, remember?)
{mospagebreak title=Now What?} Now What?

As you played your deck against the various pets, you probably noticed some problems. Perhaps you had trouble getting enough mana, or you had plenty of mana but not the right color, or way too much mana and not enough spells to cast. Perhaps you did well against Goldfish and Rabbits, but died a horrible death when your opponents produced larger creatures. Perhaps you got squeezed to death every time by the Snake. Or perhaps you romped easily through all of them.

Whatever happened, you certainly learned something about how your deck behaves. You can use that information to tune your deck. You may want to add more land, or take some out. You may want to add some larger creatures, or anti-creature spells. You may want to add some cheap, easy-to-cast spells. You may want to junk the deck altogether and start over with a new concept. Or you may pack it away carefully, take it to the club tomorrow, and hope you do as well against humans.

Whatever you do, don't forget to feed your pet.