STACKING MAGIC

The Flexible Simplicity of Analog Rules
ERIC MURNANE & KENTON HOWARD

INTRODUCTION

Two rival sorcerers meet on a contested field. Their purpose: to destroy one another with fantastic creatures and powerful spells. At the same moment, two friends sit at a table for a card game. Each of them has brought their arsenal: a sixty-card deck with identical brown backs. Any who have played *Magic: The Gathering* (*Magic* hereafter) will recognize that these groups are one and the same. Nearing its twenty-fifth year in production, this trading card game has been a staple of hobby shops and comic stores across the United States and internationally for a generation. From its relatively humble beginnings in 1993, *Magic* has accumulated a devoted base of players while drawing new players into the fold. At its core, *Magic* is a social game. There is no single player option in the analog version. The makers of *Magic* certainly recognized this. One edition of the rules warns players, beginning with all capital letters: "IMPORTANT! Don't try to read through this rulebook until you've played a few games" (Wizards of the Coast, 2003). In discussing the game, both authors of this paper recounted how they learned the game from friends.

A substantial reason *Magic* attracts so many players is that it is an intensely social enterprise. *Magic* is relatively easy to learn

but nearly impossible to master. Much of this comes from the social dimension of the rules. Our discussion here centers on one of the key mechanics of *Magic*: the stack. This aspect of the game governs the way that players interact with each other on the level of play. As a mechanic, the stack is elegant due to what we call "flexible simplicity." Most of the time, players implement the mechanic in an ad hoc fashion, interrupting one another only when the need arises; however, when the need arises, players have the ability to deal with complex game dynamics and intricacies in a manner that we will argue is altogether rhetorical. It is these intense moments of gameplay that are of particular interest. The way that players resolve situations with such keen detail while readily breezing through more mundane interactions largely accounts for *Magic's* continued popularity.

In discussing *Magic*, we will here argue that the flexible simplicity of the stack greatly contributes to the game being well played. Our initial thoughts on the stack come from years of experience playing the game both casually and at the tournament level. In that time, we both observed players, who were quite aware of the rules of the game, only slow down gameplay when the interactions required careful thought. Our initial thinking was that players with a sufficient mastery of the rules did so because they recognized that strict application of the rules is only required when a situation is sufficiently complex. It is with this idea in mind that we played two games of *Magic,* transcribing the games as we went. In the first game, we played casually, only really slowing down when the need arose: essentially, we used flexible simplicity. In the second, we adhered stringently to the order of events as advised in the rules regardless of the need presented by the situation, ignoring the concept of flexible simplicity entirely. To say that the second game was tedious would be an understatement. Using these test games as a subject, we will demonstrate the usefulness in applying flexible simplicity

to the stack, drawing on theories in game studies as well as rhetoric.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly conversation surrounding *Magic* is decidedly scant. Galotti, Drebus, and Reimer (2001) used *Magic* to measure learning by participants. Trammell (2013) discussed the Wizards of the Coast's response to fan art modification. In considering the gameplay of *Magic*, Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop (2012) described the means through which players experience games on multiple levels. Paraphrasing *Magic's* creator, they note that "the time a player spends planning his/her deck is also part of the metagame." This moves the relationship between player and cards to one which is necessarily social. They went on to describe selection as "a process of exploring the thousands of combinations a player's deck can have. Garfield's concept of the metagame encompasses the entire context of play." Essentially, when a player has mastery of a given game, they consider cards as individual units as well as the relationship that individual cards have with other cards in one's own deck as well as potential decks a player might encounter from opponents. Of significance to Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop's argument is the social rhetorical nature through which players view individual cards and their combinations.

Because of the lack of scholarly conversation surrounding *Magic* and analog games in general, it is useful to shift our attention to the larger conversation within the study of games. The concept of flexible simplicity that we propose is based on the work of Jesper Juul (2010), who discussed the flexibility of design in video games. While discussing the differences in difficulty levels among various video games, he pointed out that *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* have "difficulty levels that scale from very easy to near impossible, providing depth as discussed in chapter 2. *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*…represent a kind of flexible design that

lets players decide what type of game to play" (p. 129). In this case, Juul was discussing video games, in which the application of game rules is handled by code that has been programmed in advance. In the games described above, players might choose from various difficulty levels or other options that might influence gameplay, but the way game rules are applied is generally out of a player's direct control because those rules are mostly governed by the game's code. With those differences in mind, these games do function as a useful point of comparison to *Magic* because they are social games that usually involve multiple players, and Juul (2010) argued that "social game design isn't about creating a game that is strategically deep as much as it is about making sure that the game, in turn, creates interesting interaction between players" (p. 121). It would be inaccurate to describe *Magic* as not being strategically deep, but the rules of the game are specifically designed for interaction between players as well as for keeping the game interesting for them.

As mentioned above, a key difference between a video game and an analog game such as *Magic* is that the application of game rules is handled directly players instead of by code. In *Magic,* players actively interpret the rules that have been created by Wizards of the Coast as they play the game. This distinction might seem obvious, but it introduces a crucial difference between the rules of *Magic* and the video games that Juul describes. In *Magic,* the influence of player interpretation on those rules means that they are rhetorically and socially constructed by players in response to various in-game interactions, rather than being unilaterally applied by a computer. Since "contemporary perspectives on rhetoric often hold that 'everything, or virtually everything, can be described as rhetorical'" (Schiappa qtd. in Paul, 2011), this social element of analog gameplay suggests an interesting site of analysis, especially since it is one of the major differences between them and electronic games. Paul (2011) argued that "if rhetorical analysis is a critical perspective, focusing beyond

mere persuasion, all elements surrounding games are influential symbols worthy of study, as all games function persuasively." This claim suggests that persuasive elements might be found within many aspects of game design, including a game's rule system. In analog games like *Magic,* these persuasive elements are foregrounded in the way players discuss, or in some occasions argue about, interpretations of the game's rules in order to settle disputes during play. When players disagree, the rules become one of the main rhetorical elements used to persuade the opposing player that one's interpretation of the rules is correct. With this in mind, players can:

> [T]hink of a game as a language: a language contains a lexicon (the words) and a syntax (that controls the arrangement of the words). Scrabble is not an expressive game because the range of things we can do (the lexicon) is very small, and because the game forces us into playing for the goal (a very rigid syntax). Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas and Sims 2 feature a wide range of things we can do (a large lexicon), while accommodating a wide range of playing styles (a flexible syntax). (Juul, 2010, p. 139).

From this perspective, *Magic* would certainly have a large lexicon and a flexible syntax, as the game features over thirty thousand cards (i.e. things to do) and an incredible variety of playing styles in terms of how those ards can be combined into various decks. If the rules of *Magic* can also be seen as part of this language system, they accordingly must be able to accommodate the very broad "language" of the game itself. As such, the game's 224 page "Comprehensive Rule Book" can be very complex, lengthy, and technical, leading to rhetorical situations between players in which those rules must be interpreted, analyzed, and discussed in order to resolve gameplay situations.

While there are many flexible elements of *Magic* that could be examined, we argue that "flexible simplicity" is the best way to describe the ways the game's rule system is actually applied by players during play. In most cases, this effect can be seen in

players deciding upon how strictly to apply the rules of *Magic* in a particular game; by doing so, players introduce a social element to the game's rules that might only be possible in analog games. In fact, this flexible simplicity can even be observed on a case-by-case basis in *Magic,* as players usually rely on a strict interpretation of the games rules only when a particular gameplay situation requires it. The game's more detailed comprehensive rule book highlights this, claiming that those rules are "intended to be the ultimate authority for the game, and you won't usually need to refer to them except in specific cases or during competitive games" (Wizards, 2017c). They also note that "for casual play and most ordinary situations, you'll find what you need in the Magic: The Gathering basic rules" (Wizards, 2017c), a much shorter document that is intended for beginners. While these statements represent suggestions by the game's creators on how to use the rules, they also suggest that flexible simplicity is built in into *Magic's* rules intentionally.

When discussing social elements of gameplay in video games, Juul (2010) cited *Magic's* designer: "Game designer Richard Garfield notes that 'a particular game, played with the exact same rules will mean different things to different people,' and he uses the term metagame to describe these differences" (p. 121). What is interesting about both Juul's and Garfield's claims is that the video games Juul describes more often use the "exact same rules" from game session to game session than an analog game like *Magic* because those rules are applied by code. By contrast, analog games are not always played with the exact same rules each time because those rules are socially constructed. Players might follow the rules more strictly in one game than in another because they have the flexibility to simplify or modify gameplay rules on the fly for various reasons. In *Magic,* the most common example of flexible simplicity might be when players do not strictly obey the rules of the game in order to speed up play, an occurrence that happens frequently, and is demonstrated in

the first game that we played. As noted above, this concept is built into the game's rules system, and it is best exemplified by the stack, a specific subset of the game's rules that govern many of the interactions between cards. We will provide gameplay examples from *Magic* to support this claim more fully later in this paper, but it is worth providing a brief overview of the game's rule system, since our analysis of the game will rely on such very specific elements of the game's rules.

THE RULES OF *MAGIC*

Before any thorough discussion of our own test games can take place, it would be prudent to outline the basics of the game. The current comprehensive rules of the game are just over two hundred pages, so we will strive to faithfully present them here in a condensed format. However, it should be clear that this explanation is at best a paraphrase. Gee (2003) notes in his Active, Critical Learning Principle that ideally "[a]ll aspects of the learning environment…are set up to encourage active and critical, not passive, learning" (p. 49). In a social game like *Magic*, this learning would take the form of an experienced player showing decks to a novice and walking him/her through a few practice games, but we will do our best here.

The Basics

Perhaps the most succinct description of how *Magic* is played lies on their own website. According to the Wizards Strategy site (2017b), players are "powerful mages each armed with a deck of *Magic* cards representing lands, creatures and spells. Each player summons creatures and casts spells, trying to knock the other down from 20 to 0 life and win the game." This is certainly a good start. In a standard game of *Magic*, players each have a deck of sixty cards. They draw seven and decide who goes first. Over the course of a turn, a player draws one card, plays up to one land (the principle resource cards in *Magic*) as well

any cards in their hand which he/she she wishes, provided they have sufficient mana (as determined by lands they have in play). Figure 1 demonstrates some of the cards a player might use in a deck. In *Magic*, players construct a deck from the cards which he/she owns. This deck can be any combination of the game's five colors: black, blue, green, red, and white. Those represented in Figure 1 are all green (for the sake of simplicity). From left to right the cards below are a land, an instant, and a creature.

Figure 1. Sample Cards. Images from Gatherer (Wizards 2017a)

Lands represent the primary way that a player would produce mana (represented by the symbol on the "Forest") which is in turn used to pay the costs represented in the top right of both the "Giant Growth" and "Elvish Archers." It is with these cards that a player attempts to either reduce an opponent's life to zero or empty the cards from an opponent's deck. If either of these occur, the player wins.

Turn Order, Priority, and the Stack

With the absolute basic structure of the game established, we can turn our attention to the more nuanced aspects of the game. Each player's turn is divided into numerous phases with a specific focus and set of actions that each player can take. The untap phase is first. All the player does here is reset the cards

on his/her side of the table. Next is upkeep phase; the player can use spells and abilities that are instant speed (can be used instantaneously) during this phase, and pays any required "upkeep costs" of his or her cards as necessary. Then there is the draw phase, in which the player simply draws a card. Nothing can be played during this phase. After that, the player has his/her first main phase. During this time, the player can play one land, as well as any cards he/she can afford. The main phase is the only time that one can play most creatures. Then, there is the attack phase in which, unsurprisingly, the player can attack the opponent with any creatures that have been in play at least one turn. This is followed by a second main phase and finally a discard phase in which a player reduces his/her hand to seven cards if he/she has more than that. It is worth noting that most turns, especially early in the game, are quite short. Players rarely call out the transition between these phases unless they have a specific reason to do so – in fact, it is common to see players reset their cards, draw a card, play a land, and use a nonverbal cue (such as tapping the table) to indicate the end of a turn, all of which might happen in a matter of seconds.

This rigid turn structure is not to say that the opposing player cannot do anything during the active player's turn; the game's rules allow the opposing player to play certain types of cards (instants) during the active player's turn, which allows for interactions between the players. With the exception of playing a land, any time a player uses a card in his/her hand, that card goes on the stack. According to the comprehensive rules (Wizards, 2017c), "A spell is a card on the stack. As the first step of being cast (see rule 601, 'Casting Spells'), the card becomes a spell and is moved to the top of the stack from the zone it was in, which is usually its owner's hand." Essentially, the act of playing a card causes it to form a physical stack on the table. The "active" player gets the first chance to play a card during each phase of a turn, after which the opposing player gets the opportunity to

play one of his/her own. This exchange is passing priority. If the opponent plays a card, priority returns to the first player. This process of responses between players continues until both players do not wish to play a card. The stack is then resolved starting with the card which is on top. This led to the expression in *Magic* "last effects happen first." The last spell played is the first one to take effect. This back and forth between priority using the stack is ultimately where the most interesting interactions between players occurs.

THE STACK AND RHETORIC

With the basic framework of *Magic* established, we can begin our discussion of the test games played by the authors of this paper. As previously discussed, the games in question consisted of one game in which both players adhered to a more casual structure while the other game utilized strict adherence to the turn structure as described in the previous section. As a control, two sixty card decks were constructed and used for each game. In the casual game, Howard used the green and blue deck while Murnane used the white and red. The first few turns took just a few seconds each. Murnane played a Mountain on turn one. Howard played a Forest and a Sedge Scorpion on turn two.

Things did not really become interesting until turn twelve. It was Howard's turn and he controlled a Nephalia Seakite as well as a Frog Lizard token creature. Murnane controlled a Geist-Honored and two token creatures. Howard attacked with both the Seakite and the Frog Lizard. As demonstrated in Figure 2, an interesting stack emerged from the attack phase on this turn. After attacking, priority passed to Murnane who declared Geist-Honored Monk as a blocker for the Frog Lizard. Both creatures had a power and toughness of 3. Normally, this would result in both creatures dying. However, Murnane played the spell Gods Willing targeting Geist-Honored Monk. This would give the

creature protection from green, saving it from dying. Moments such as

Figure 2. Stack from Game One

these are especially interesting if examined as competing rhetorical situations. Grant-Daive (1997) explains that such situations revolve around the concept of exigence or "what the discourse is about, why it is needed, and what it should accomplish" (p. 266). In this case, both players represent rhetors (speakers), but the exigence that each player seeks is in direct competition. Their goals are mutually exclusive.

Howard seeks for the combat to resolve in his favor: both creatures die in combat. Ultimately, the moves of each player are rhetorical in that they see a potential outcome for the interaction which is favorable to them. Bazerman (2004) notes a "successful text creates for its readers a social fact. The social facts consist of meaningful social actions being accomplished through language, or speech acts" (p. 311). A social fact then is a proposition rendered through successful action. In the course of a game of *Magic*, a player achieves exigence in a given moment through the

execution of successful speech acts. These namely are achieved through playing cards and using abilities. In such a situation, players are constrained (Grant-Davie, 1997, p. 273) by the cards which they have in their hand and the available resources to use them. The stack demonstrates a historical record of players competing for their social fact to be true. By playing Gods Willing, Murnane was essentially rendering Howard's social fact false.

However, the rhetorical situation at hand is always as complex as a player has the capability to make it. Had Howard not responded to Gods Willing being placed on the stack, Murnane would have achieved his exigence. In response, Howard played Griptide, also targeting Geist-Honored Monk. Because the stack operates from the last card played down to the first, Griptide removed Geist-Honored Monk from combat. This meant that when the stack moved on to Gods Willing, the spell no longer had a legal target. It "fizzled" or was rendered useless. This ultimately demonstrates the flexible simplicity of the stack as a game mechanic. When players both agree that the social fact of a creature or spell being played is true, nothing happens, and gameplay quickly moves on. Contested rhetorical situations such as those described above only emerge when the need arises, and the game rules that govern how the stack resolves therefore only become complex when they need to be.

In fact, strict adherence to the procedures of the game without the need present can lead to a frustrating gameplay experience, as we learned in game two. In playing the game, each player declared each phase: Untap, Upkeep, Draw, First Main, Attack, Second Main, Discard. Additionally, each time a player cast a spell, he declared the casting, placed the card on the stack and gave priority to the opponent; each player also announced these "priority passes" even when he had no spells or creatures to play, since technically the game rules dictate that this happens. Despite game one having 31 turns and game two only having

14, the second game took over twice as much time to play. Additionally, Murnane (who was notating the game) forgot to attack on turn 9 and nearly forgot again on turn 11 due to the tediousness of the situation. There were no particularly interesting situations during the game itself, but both players were not exercising flexible simplicity during this game. The game could have been resolved much more quickly and without such tedium had we done so.

Our play experience during these games suggests that if the stack represents a rhetorical situation in which exigence is contested, then it simply does not make sense for players to delve into the rhetorical steps of the stack when they both agree on the social facts which are at stake. This is how *Magic* is played most of the time. To put it another way, players who have mastered the rules know when a situation calls for slowing down and carefully examining what rules are at play. Chen (2007) explains how games regulate pacing, saying, "In order to maintain a user's Flow experience, the activity must balance the inherent challenge of the activity and the player's ability to address and overcome it" (p. 32). In a digital game, the feedback mechanisms programmed in regulate flow. However, when two players sit down to play *Magic*, they rely on each other to slow down when the need arises. Just as importantly, they know when to maintain a steady pace. Players without this mastery will ultimately have a hard time finding partners. Thus, the social dynamics of *Magic* encourage approaching the stack as flexibly simple.

The flexible simplicity of *Magic's* rules is a social and rhetorical phenomenon that can be observed more broadly in analog games as a whole. In one sense, it could be argued the rules of all analog games exhibit flexible simplicity: since players always interpret the rules of an analog game as they play, they always have the option of modifying or simplifying them if they wish. In fact, the second game we played, in which we followed the rules as strictly as possible, does not represent how *Magic* would be played in

"real life:" even in competitive tournaments that feature rules referees and high-level gameplay, players rarely call out the transitions between turn phases or adhere strictly to the stack unless it is necessary. There are some obvious reasons for the application of flexible simplicity: it makes gameplay move more quickly, and it makes games more fun. That being said, the complexity of game rules obviously varies from game to game, and *Magic* provides an example of a game where the rules are particularly complex, as evidenced by its lengthy comprehensive rulebook. However, the interesting aspect of *Magic's* rules is that they are only as complex as they need to be in any given instance, and while there are examples of cards and decks that produce incredibly complicated game states, the rules accommodate those states while also allowing for a quick, simple, and fun game between friends.

One conclusion that can be drawn from *Magic's* implementation of the stack to handle these situations is that analog games can be developed with this flexible simplicity in mind. The stack is an elegant rules construction that is specifically designed to make *Magic* as simple or as complicated as it needs to be in a given instance, allowing players to engage in a wide variety of interactions without slowing the game down or making it tedious to play. From a game design standpoint, it represents a good example of how the rules of analog games should be designed: while there might obviously be reasons for a game to have very complex or difficult to learn rules, the stack shows that game rules can easily accommodate a wide range of play styles and interesting interactions without being particularly complicated themselves. Flexibility could therefore become a guiding principle for analog game rules, and considering its long-standing popularity, *Magic* serves as a good example to other games of how to implement the concept.

Finally, we argue that flexible simplicity is a unique affordance of analog games; while other types of games can exhibit flexible

design in other ways, the concept we propose here requires human interpretation of game rules, which is a feature that is usually exclusive to analog games. While Game Studies has paid less attention to analog games than their electronic counterparts, flexible simplicity is an example of a rhetorical concept that is only exhibited by analog games, and is therefore an interesting site of analysis going forward. Social games exhibit a wide variety of rhetorical concepts because of their very nature, as they require social interactions and communication with other players; however, analog games require an additional interpretative element because players must apply the rules of the game themselves. If the rhetorical elements of *Magic* and other analog games are going to be analyzed more thoroughly in the future, flexible simplicity offers a concept for discussing the rule systems of such games.

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