Set Tactics

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The game of Set is not a strategic game. Nonetheless, there are techniques that good Set players use that new players ought to learn in order to get competitive more quickly. Since I recently taught a few new folks how to play, I thought I would discuss the strategies I use. For background, keep in mind that each pair of cards has a unique third card that makes a set with it.

Step one is to just scan the whole board, without any particular feature in mind. This strategy will almost never find sets for new players, because they haven't got their pattern recognizers wired up right. But it's good to do anyway, because you'll need it for the next step.

Step two is to look only at the most-common attribute. If there are six red cards, pop out the reds and look just at those. Since you've just scanned the board, you'll be able to find the attribute quickly. Among the cards with that attribute, you'll be able to see a set if there is one. If not, you can quickly check the greens and purples. If you still haven't found a set, you'll know you need differing colors. Here, it's often easiest to start with the smallest two categories: if there are three green and three purple cards, you only have nine pairs of cards to look at. And since you've scanned the board, you can often simply remember whether a pair's third card is available.

When new cards are dealt (especially when there are no sets among the twelve cards on the board), it's a good idea to look at those cards first. And if you've been tracking the distribution of attributes, you'll know what's common. On a board with lots of ovals, a new oval is exciting because it's very likely to complete a set.

At the beginning of the game, the average number of sets on the board is almost three. Pretty often, even if someone else got one, there will still be one remaining.

As an aside, very few board and card games discuss strategy in their rule books, which I think is a shame. Sure, there's some fun to learning the early tricks on your own. But with most games, the real depth happens after you've played a few rounds. Adding a tiny strategy guide to game manuals would help new players to enjoy games more.

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