

NEXT LEVEL DECKBUILDING

THE ULTIMATE MAGIC: THE GATHERING DECKBUILDING RESOURCE



BY PATRICK CHAPIN "THE INNOVATOR"

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The Ultimate Magic: The Gathering™ Deckbuilding Resource

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INTRODUCTION TO NEXT LEVEL DECKBUILDING

Being introduced to Magic is like being a kid again. Our minds become filled with possibilities; as big as the world is, we imagine countless ways to expand it. Building decks in Magic is exactly this: expanding the world, no matter how big that world may already be.

There's so much to see and do. Each new experience we encounter suggests a new idea for what to do with *this*, or how we could make *that* better. When we're first exposed to Magic and are surrounded by so much wonder, we dream of what does not yet exist.

Over time, however, The Fear creeps into us.

It's the fear of people thinking we're stupid. The fear that we will fail. The fear of rejection. The fear that we aren't good enough. The Fear crushes possibility and dissipates our energy. Really, it's much safer to critique decks in Magic, playing the "best deck," using existing strategies, and sticking with strategies others have already proven. We want to impress our friends, and we want to prove to ourselves how good we are. Sticking to netdecks is so much safer.

It's riskier to try to create your own deck. After all, what chance do we really have of making something something better than the pros play... or even better than what a million other tournament players have produced after incredible amounts of preparation?

We shoot down so many of our most interesting thoughts, afraid to share them with anyone lest we be judged. Much safer to say Faeries is good, or Jund is good, because then people will think we are smart.

Playing it smart is safe. If you try new ideas, you could fail.

And you will. *A lot.*

But what if we weren't afraid to fail?

What if there are worse things than failing — like not even trying?

Playing Faeries is smart. Playing Jund is smart. Playing Caw-Blade is smart.

Each one of these strategies was a new idea when they were first played. They were risky. And frankly, not a one of them won the first time. Zvi played Faeries at the Pro Tour before Bitterblossom was printed. Nassif played Jund while others were playing Faeries and 5-Color Control. People played Stoneforge Mystic in U/W Control before Pro Tour Paris.

**IT'S A LOT TOUGHER
TO OUTSMART A
STRATEGY YOU
HAVEN'T THOUGHT OF**

It might be smart to play the best deck, but people can outsmart the best deck and play strategies that beat it. It's a lot tougher to outsmart a strategy you haven't thought of, or have erroneously discredited. After all, how smart is it to use a bunch of sideboard space to beat a strategy that almost no one will play?

Consider the deeper meaning of the concepts "Stupid" and "Smart" (as aptly described by the Diesel Clothing Company, which briefly ran [a pretty incredible series of ads in this vein](#)). "Stupid" and "Smart" aren't used as labels because of the actual intelligence involved in the actions, but rather as a response to the experience of "feeling stupid" and the opposite of that, "making the smart move" (i.e., the safe one).

Is it smart to play the netdeck, instead of an original concoction? It can be pretty stupid to play something that may or may not work, given that nine out of ten of the best deckbuilders' decks fail, and your alternative is The Best Deck (which is safe, and a "Smart" play).

Of course, it's also pretty stupid to try to become a professional Magic player. I'll tell you, though, it was one of the best decisions I ever made.

The average finish at a Pro Tour is about 200th. Are you telling me that that sounds better than a one-in-ten chance of Top 8ing? Mediocrity is boring. I'd rather risk striking out to have a chance to hit a home run.

There are so many big choices we get to make in our lives — and if you're out for excellence, I can't offer better advice than to overcome The Fear. Most people are afraid to try new things, think new thoughts, tell new jokes, talk to new people, make up new careers, create new styles, build new decks, write new songs, invent new dance moves, create new archetypes, or do new things that are different from what everyone else does. They are afraid of saying something stupid, looking stupid, feeling stupid.

This book is for those who welcome the danger, for those willing to risk a hundred stupid ideas in pursuit of that rare brilliant idea.

Brilliant ideas are stupid ideas that worked.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON DECKBUILDING

Whether we're about to build a deck from scratch or are fine-tuning a deck we've been working on for weeks, deckbuilding is a multidimensional task that's best served by using multiple perspectives. People say things like "a big Sphinx's Revelation is game over," or "I got mana-screwed, then mana-flooded," or "this matchup is all about tempo," or "Control just doesn't work in this format," or "playing more than three colors is crazy."

These statements describe only the surface. They expose but a small portion of what's really going on.

Having a fixed perspective is nowhere near as powerful as wielding a fluid perspective that attacks the problem from multiple levels. When we use one perspective on a problem, then set that aside to study the problem from another perspective, we're often able to see solutions that we would not have uncovered if we'd used only a one-dimensional view. Readers of *Next Level Magic* will recall the four perspectives we are talking about, which can be applied in any order, giving us much more than four perspectives to solve a problem with. Expanding our ability to look at situations from multiple angles is doubly important when we are deckbuilding.

- Top→Down (What is there?)
- Bottom→Up (What is *not* there?)
- Backwards (What happened one step before the end? One step before that?)
- Forward (What is the first step to going where we want to go? One step after that?)

Top→Down thinking is analysis. It is looking to see what *is*. Top→Down is seeing the big picture. When building Top→Down, we start with something good and work our way down to the support cards. This is the most common starting point for deckbuilding, as it is the perspective where we build on and around ideas.

There are some benefits to playing with all Werewolves. Let's build around that.

Unburial Rites is the best reanimation spell printed in a while. Let's build around that.

Snapcaster Mage is one of the best creatures printed in a while. Let's build around that.

Liliana of the Veil is a unique three-cost planeswalker. Let's build around that.

When you are using Lord of the Unreal, or Tezzeret, Agent of Bolas, or Birthing Pod, it's logical to see how far you can push the theme. This is a form of Top→Down design: You have a card whose power level scales the further you go in the "linear" direction it encourages you.

This is what deckbuilders mean when they talk about linear cards. Some cards are good on their own, like Lightning Bolt. Bolt is an excellent card, but it isn't really getting much better when you "support" it. On the other hand, Tezzeret's power is proportional to how many good artifacts you use. When building around one of these linear cards, you build from the Top (the card worth building around) Down (towards the cards that logically fit the theme).

Similarly, if you start with cards like Mana Leak, Gideon Jura, and Consecrated Sphinx, you can build around them in Top→Down fashion as well. An awful lot of U/W "Control" decks are just collections of all the best blue and white cards, although these "Control" decks usually exclude the most aggressive ones. You start at the Top (you believe the best control elements in the format are Mana Leak, Gideon, and Sphinx) and work Down from there (Think Twice, Oblivion Ring, and Day of Judgment are logical support cards to help those three cards function).

When thinking Top→Down, you are looking to gather as many details as you can. It's not about organizing the data, just acquiring information. It's about combining the big picture with brainstorming. What do I know? What's good? What's powerful? What works? What's useful?

If Top→Down is the most common starting point, then the second most common is Bottom→Up. Bottom→Up thinking looks to see what is *not* there. What do we not know? What mistakes are being made? What's inefficient? What isn't working? What is useless?



After a playtest session, we can ask ourselves: Which cards were never cast? Which cards didn't pull their weight? Did any of our spells not do what we wanted? Did any of our creatures look like they weren't worth the cost? Did we have trouble with our mana? Were there opposing cards that gave us trouble? Many people get too focused on the "negatives," missing out on countless opportunities with their pessimism. But if we don't look at the negative side of a situation, we won't get as full a picture.

**WHEN A NEW
FORMAT EMERGES...
WE BENEFIT FROM
ASKING OURSELVES
ONE QUESTION:
"WHAT'S MISSING
FROM THE FORMAT?"**

If Top→Down is about the big picture, Bottom→Up is about what isn't (or shouldn't be) in the picture. What costs too much for its effect? What's too hard to cast? What doesn't work with our strategy? These are prime options to cut! We don't want to spend weeks of testing time tuning a fatally flawed deck. Looking for flaws can show us some things we may not like, such as a deadly weakness in a deck's design, but figuring that out sooner than later will save us time and heartache.

Keeping Bottom→Up thinking constructive is important. It's not enough just to tear everything down. When done right, Bottom→Up thinking is an act of creativity. By looking at what's not there, we are intentionally focusing on the gaps between what *is* there. These gaps are missing something, and it's up to us to fill in the blanks.

When a new format emerges, whether it's because a new set's being added, a change to the banned list, a rotation, or a rules change like the introduction of Modern, we benefit from asking ourselves one question:

"What's missing from the format?"

For example, before Innistrad, Standard was heavily warped around a couple of combo decks. Splinter Twin and Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle forced every strategy to be either extremely fast and aggressive or to feature counterspells and other heavy disruption. Once Innistrad became legal both Splinter Twin and Valakut rotated out, radically changing the "rules" of the format.

Both Top→Down and Bottom→Up thinking work well with a checklist (mental or physical) that you consult each time there is a new set, rotation, or format.

Here's an extension of the suggested starting list laid out in *Next Level Magic*:

- What are the dominant creatures?
- What is the cheap removal?
- What mass removal exists?
- What library manipulation and tutoring is available?
- How can people get card advantage?
- What mana acceleration is there?
- What countermagic exists?
- Do people use their graveyards?
- What are the most dominating artifacts?
- What are the most dominating enchantments?
- What are the most dominating planeswalkers?
- What are the powerful sorceries that people could play?
- What victory conditions are the strongest?
- Are there powerful combos in the format?
- Do you need to be able to destroy lands?
- How fast are the aggressive decks?
- What sort of discard exists?
- What sort of land destruction exists?
- What sort of direct damage exists?
- What cards change the rules in totally new ways?
- What is the most punishing thing someone could do to you if you have no removal in your deck?
- Can people steal your creatures?
- Are there good "bounce" effects?
- Can people lock you out of the game somehow?
- Are there any Cranial Extraction-type effects?
- Are there likely to be a lot of different decks played?
- What combat tricks are likely to get played, if any?
- Are there important haste or flash creatures?

These questions are only the tip of iceberg. By building your own format checklist, you can have access to an excellent tool for setting out on each new format. Whenever you think of a new question, go ahead and add it to the list. This way, you won't have to start from scratch with each new format that comes along.

A situation where there are *no* cards that answer one of these questions is just as important as when there *are* answers. Each format is going to care about different questions. These questions define the basic rules of the format.



We mentioned earlier that Splinter Twin and Valakut rotating removed the oppressive force of relatively fast combo decks. This leads us to important insights — such as the chain reaction that's likely to follow this major change. Midrange strategies were generally made obsolete by Twin and Valakut, so they hadn't been a big part of the format for quite a while.

Therefore, they were possibly poised for a comeback! If midrange decks return, what are the implications for the rest of the format?

Top→Down and Bottom→Up are really two sides of the same coin, of course. One is just looking at what is and considering the implications of that. The other is about looking at what is *not* and considering the implications of *that*. The other two perspectives, Backwards (also known as Back→Front) and Forward (Front→Back) also go together.

Backwards thinking is when we imagine what the end looks like and then ask, “What would have been the situation one step before that?” Then a step before that, and so on. Maybe we imagine playing a Sun Titan and getting back a Phantasmal Image that copies the Sun Titan, which then gets back another powerful permanent like Oblivion Ring or Liliana of the Veil.

We need to be realistic when we ask ourselves, “What would the game state have to be to allow us to pull off this play? What would our opponent have had to do (or not do) to get us into this position? What did the last turn look like?”

While the best-case scenario is helpful to know, a common deckbuilding mistake is to only imagine what happens when everything goes exactly according to plan. By identifying what *actually* needs to happen to bring the plan together, you can set up maximizing our chances of doing this. Imagining everything your opponents could do to mess your plans up can be frustrating, particularly if you have a good imagination. After all, if you're clever, you can think of a *lot* of ways someone could stop you. So it's tempting to focus only on things going our way... but if you're realistic about what your opponent is likely to do to try and stop you, you might be able to figure out how to stop him from doing that!



One powerful tool for creating a blueprint for winning is to start with a success (yours or another's), then go back one step at a time and see what it took to get the game to that point. What was the critical turn that decided the game? What plays gave a player card advantage, tempo, or a life advantage? Which of these plays mattered?

By starting at the moment the game ended and working our way backwards, we can uncover the turn that the game was *decided*. Once we know what actually secured the win (which could have happened earlier that turn, or even several turns before) we can look at the turns before that, one by one. By asking ourselves what creatures were important, what spells mattered, which battles were actually the most important, we can gain insight into how to build our blueprint to create a similar success. Rather than focus on the creature or spell that dealt the final point of damage, we are interested in the cards that provided the edges that eventually put us in a winning position.

Backwards Thinking is the perspective of strategic planning. How are you going to get to the place you want to be? Forward Thinking approaches this from the opposite side. It's the perspective of action, making it especially useful when we have a task in front of us. Instead of working our way backwards, we want to start at the beginning. What is step one in reaching our goal? Step two? For instance, with this Sun Titan/Phantasmal Image deck, what's our first turn going to look like? What about our second and third? When we're deckbuilding, we want to imagine what we'd want our opening hand to look like as well as what our plan is for the first few turns of the game.

Forward Thinking is about moving forward, application, doing. This is where all the strategic planning of the other perspectives pays off. Our Top→Down perspective gives us the details of what the format has, what is possible, what we are up against. Our Bottom→Up perspective then gives us an idea of what sorts of things won't work, whether because the cards just aren't there to support it or because other factors in the metagame would stand in the way.

RATHER THAN FOCUS ON THE CREATURE OR SPELL THAT DEALT THE FINAL POINT OF DAMAGE, WE ARE INTERESTED IN THE CARDS THAT PROVIDED THE EDGES THAT EVENTUALLY PUT US IN A WINNING POSITION.

Bottom→Up also gives us an idea of what sort of things we want to look for the next time we go back to Top→Down, since what's *not* there can provide us with valuable clues as to what might be. All of these details help paint the picture of where we want to end up, which we use in Backwards Thinking to figure out what we are aiming for. Backwards is how we begin to develop the plan, then we use Forward Thinking to act on the plan!

The Forward perspective is where the most learning takes place. While other perspectives often call upon us to produce the ideas from our imagination, Forward Thinking calls upon us to test our hypotheses and learn from our results. We begin each game on the first turn and try to take our new ideas to the conclusion we are looking for. Is this deck really going to get us from the start to where we want to be, over the course of a real game?

Forward Thinking is invaluable in getting to the bottom of a format. One crucial application is beginning playtesting for a format. Once we've used the other perspectives to develop a plan for where we want to end up, we can start at the beginning of "testing" and work our way towards that point.

The first turn of testing, so to speak, is to build a gauntlet. A gauntlet is a selection of decks that are representative of the field you expect to face, based on what you currently know. You want these gauntlet decks to be popular, stock versions. They should be mainstream strategies, but they should also test the boundaries of the format. Often, we'll build a gauntlet with a red aggro deck, a non-red aggro deck, a combo deck, a control deck, and a midrange deck, or some other diverse mix of strategies.

Five is usually a solid default number of decks to test against — though even these should be arranged in order of importance. If you expect two decks to be the most popular, make those two the starting decks that decks have to get through in order to earn the right to play games against the other three. It's not vital that every brew beat every deck in your gauntlet, but in general, you want to beat at least three of the five and have no more than one be a bad matchup. It is important that you're continually evaluating the format and reassessing your goals in it. If you expect one deck to be the most popular, it's likely a good idea not to have *that* deck be your bad matchup.

**IT IS IMPORTANT
THAT YOU'RE
CONTINUALLY
EVALUATING THE
FORMAT AND
REASSESSING YOUR
GOALS IN IT**

It's important to not get too stuck on testing against just the most popular two decks, though. By getting some games in against the entire gauntlet, you can learn some valuable lessons about how the format really plays out.

It's also important to get a feel for the gauntlet, not just to jam brews against it. Tournament players with a lot of experience can generally pick up any Zoo deck or any Faerie deck and have the right idea. However, most players are going to want to play a few games with each of the decks in the gauntlet against each of the other decks in the gauntlet to get a feel for them. This is greatly encouraged! Remember, it's not just you that you're helping, it's your teammates. The stronger you help make their games, the better competition they'll be able to give you. One of the best ways to improve at Magic is to play against and talk with the strongest players you can. Not everyone lives near by a bunch of pros however, so elevating the local community is the one of the best possible steps you can take to improving your game.

Once you have this starting point, you can start to throw your creations up against the gauntlet, and also play with the gauntlet decks as your friends and testing partners try theirs. There's nothing wrong with working on a "mainstream" deck, if that is what calls to you. Remember:

"If you aren't at least 25% brew, you've got no heart. But if you aren't at least 25% netdeck, you've got no brain."

As you begin to gain data from testing your ideas you'll start to adjust your perspective on the metagame. Which decks you feel are best may change, and how quickly you come to this conclusion may give you some idea of the conclusions that others are likely to draw. It's very possible that you may want to change the decks in your gauntlet after doing some testing. Besides, if you're testing for a format that has a large amount of tournament support, like Standard or Legacy, you're going to want to update your gauntlet regularly — sometimes as often as after each StarCityGames.com Open. This may seem like a lot of changing around the test decks, but Magic is a dynamic game and popular formats like Standard and Legacy are constantly changing.

**THERE'S NOTHING
WRONG WITH
WORKING ON A
"MAINSTREAM" DECK**

Forward Thinking doesn't mean only moving forward, since you'll often have to go back and start over. Each game against a gauntlet deck helps you take your first few steps, but each one is subject to change if you don't like where they're taking you. Forward Thinking isn't about already knowing the best first step; it's about testing a possible first step and seeing what we learn.

The first deck you run through the gauntlet is only one possible way to go. Keep in mind the important thing is the destination, not any one specific deck you may have come up with. It's okay to be passionate about an idea, even to have pet cards or a style — but if you're married to an idea, you may find yourself working towards “using that idea,” rather than “winning the tournament.”

This is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to these four perspectives, as they can be applied in actual countless ways. For now, we just want to make sure that we have some idea of how to use each one — so that as we start to delve deeper into both the art and science of deckbuilding, we can apply them to new situations, new challenges, new puzzles.

PROBABILITIES

“How many sources of blue do I need to be guaranteed two by turn 2? 54.”

-Erik Lauer

Of course, we don't actually need a 100% chance of our mana working. Merely playing 21 sources of blue gives us an 85% chance, which is generally more than good enough. But how good is “good enough”? How do we determine these probabilities? How do we use them to make our decks better without getting a math degree?

**HOW GOOD IS
“GOOD ENOUGH”?**

CARD DRAWING PROBABILITIES

The ability to calculate probabilities is an essential skill for a Magic player to possess — though most of the math that actually comes up in tournament play is not that complicated. There are two types of probabilities that we work with in Magic: *probabilities in deckbuilding*, and *probabilities in game play*.

When we're building decks, we can use probabilities to try to get an idea of how many of a type of card to play. This comes up most commonly with land. How many lands do we need to play total, how many lands that generate each color, and how many lands of each type are all important questions that can be assisted with a little math. It isn't that you need to have a certain percentage chance of drawing a color to be “okay,” it's that we can evaluate the relative cost of each change. For instance, if you're debating using a fourth Inkmoth Nexus instead of a fifteenth white mana, that would give you a 74.14% chance of drawing double white by turn 4 instead of 78.14%.

HOW TO DO THE MATH

People always talk about “doing the math” to choose between two lines of play. What does this mean?

Let's start with the basics. What are your chances of drawing a specific card in your opening hand? Well, assuming you have just one copy, you're looking at an 11.67% chance of drawing it in your opening seven. This is because you are seeing 7 out of 60 of your cards, and seven divided by 60 equals 0.1167 (or 11.67%).

So far, so good. Now to up the challenge: add a second copy to the deck. What's the probability of seeing one in your opening hand? Many people would guess 23.34% (doubling the answer from above). The real answer, surprisingly, is actually 22.15%.

This sort of math is called *hypergeometric distribution*. When we have only one copy of a given card, we can use simple division. Likewise, when we are only calculating the odds from drawing one card, division works again. However, having more than one card in the population (your deck) and drawing more than one card (such as your opening hand) requires slightly more involved math.

To determine the odds of getting a "hit" (drawing at least one copy of the chosen card), we start by calculating the odds of "not hitting," then subtract that from one. Imagine a scenario where we are talking about a card we have two copies of. The first card we draw has a 58/60 chance of not being a hit. The odds of the second card also not being a hit are actually 57/59 since there is one less card that it could be — namely, the card that we drew first.

This means for an opening hand of seven cards, the odds that we don't see the two-of in question is: $58/60 \times 57/59 \times 56/58 \times 55/57 \times 54/56 \times 53/55 \times 52/54$.

Note: You don't have to do this math! We have a shortcut available to us!

A trick for making this math easier — should we ever be in a situation where we want to figure out probabilities by hand — is to simplify the equation by "canceling out" the the numbers on top of the fractions with matching numbers on the bottom. We can only do this if we are multiplying all fractions, but it makes the math a lot easier. In this case, since 54, 55, 56, 57, and 58 are both on top and bottom, we can cancel them all out. This leaves us with 52 and 53 on top and 59 and 60 on the bottom. Now we just multiple 52×53 and divide that by 59×60 . This gives us .7785, which we then subtract from 1, leaving .2215, or 22.15%.

As a reference, if you play with four copies of a card in your 60-card deck, you're only going to see it in your opening hand about 40% of the time. Playing three copies? Now we're talking about 31.5%. Two copies put the odds at 22.15%, and a single copy shows up about 11.67%.

What about if we want to know the chances of drawing more than one copy? For instance, if we have 22 land in our deck, what are the odds of drawing three by the third turn? What does adding a 23rd land do to the odds?

**IF YOU PLAY WITH
FOUR COPIES OF A
CARD ... YOU'RE ONLY
GOING TO SEE IT IN
YOUR OPENING HAND
40% OF THE TIME**

Doing hypergeometric math for multiple success cases is more involved than is practical for the purposes of this book. But I'll tell you the secret... Use a hypergeometric calculator! The one I like to use can be found [here](#).

In the first field, *population size*, input the size of your deck (generally 60 or 40). In the second field, *number of successes*, input how many of the card in question you have (in this case, 22). The third field, *sample size*, is how many cards you will have seen by the time in question. For opening hands we'd use seven, but in this case we're talking about the third turn. This means we'll have seen either nine cards if we were on the play, or ten if we were on the draw.

Finally, for *number of successes in the population*, input how many copies of the card you're trying to hit. In this case, we want to see our chances of having at least three land by the ninth card. The answer we want is for \geq , which in this case is 0.719, or 71.9%. When we change the number for total successes in the population to 23, we find the probability is up to 75.5%.

But what are we supposed to *do* with this information?

Well, to begin with, we can make use of probabilities in our games. For instance, let's imagine that our opening hand has one land and two black two-drops. Can we keep it? First, what land is it? If our draft deck has ten Swamps and seven Mountains, and our only land is a Swamp, we have a 48.5% chance of drawing a land next turn. If we're on the draw, we're 74.2% likely to get there by turn 2. Those might be satisfactory odds.

Remember, to calculate the chances of drawing land on the fly, we just divide 16 (the number of land remaining), by 33 (the number of cards remaining in our library). To add a second draw to the equation, we multiply that number by $16/32$ (16 being the number of lands remaining, since if the first card was a land, we have no problems; and 32 being the number of cards remaining at that point). Chances by the third draw? Multiply that answer by $15/31$ (which now gives you an 88% chance), and so on.

What if that one land was a Mountain? Now, in order to cast the black two-drop by turn 2, you have to draw exactly a Swamp, not just a land. That means we have just ten hits out of 33 cards,

**WE OFTEN DETERMINE
ACCEPTABLE
SUCCESS RATES
& . . . USE THOSE AS
MODELS FOR
FUTURE DECKS.**

giving us a mere 30.3% chance with one draw, and a 52.1% chance with two. Even a third draw puts us at just 67.5%... which might be good enough in some circumstances (maybe we're on the draw, it's a mostly bad matchup, maybe one of those two-drops is a Pack Rat our opponent has few answers to).

Probabilities aren't just for in-game calculations. In deckbuilding, we often determine acceptable success rates and failure rates for certain types of events, then use those as models for future decks. We'll go into greater detail about the various "industry standards" for mana ratios and mana curves in the appropriate sections.

Working with probabilities isn't just about the math, either. It's often useful to use rules of thumb, such as counting each cheap cantrip as 25-50% of land, depending on your lands and mana requirements.

While we're on the topic of probabilities, here are a couple of charts that may be here mostly out of curiosity, but may also be useful as reference material or just for getting a better feel of the relative probabilities of drawing a card under different circumstances.

What follows is a list of the chances of drawing a certain card by a certain time. The numbers on the left correspond to how many copies of the named card are in our starting deck. The numbers at the top correspond to how many cards we have seen. Generally, that means assuming seven cards in the opening hand, with being "on the draw" showing us an extra card by each given turn. Simply find where the row that matches how many copies are in our deck to the column that shows how many cards we will have seen by the chosen point, and the chart will show you the chances of "success."

CARDS SEEN

NUMBER IN DECK

	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1	11.67%	13.33%	15.00%	16.67%	18.33%	20.00%	21.67%	23.33%	25.00%	26.67%	28.33%	30.00%	31.87%	33.33%
2	22.15%	25.08%	27.97%	30.79%	33.56%	36.27%	38.93%	41.53%	40.07%	46.55%	48.98%	51.36%	53.97%	55.93%
3	31.64%	35.42%	39.14%	42.72%	46.16%	49.46%	62.62%	65.64%	68.63%	61.30%	63.94%	66.46%	68.86%	71.13%
4	39.95%	44.48%	48.75%	52.77%	56.55%	60.10%	63.42%	66.54%	69.45%	72.16%	74.69%	77.05%	79.23%	81.26%
5	47.46%	52.41%	56.99%	61.21%	65.09%	68.65%	71.91%	74.90%	77.63%	80.12%	82.37%	84.42%	86.28%	87.95%
6	54.14%	59.33%	64.03%	68.26%	72.07%	75.49%	78.55%	81.29%	83.73%	85.90%	87.82%	89.52%	91.02%	92.33%
7	60.09%	65.36%	70.02%	74.14%	77.76%	80.94%	83.72%	85.14%	88.25%	90.08%	91.66%	93.01%	94.18%	95.17%
8	63.35%	70.59%	75.11%	79.02%	82.37%	85.25%	87.71%	89.80%	91.58%	93.07%	94.33%	95.39%	96.27%	97.00%
9	70.02%	75.11%	79.42%	83.05%	86.10%	88.66%	90.78%	92.66%	94.00%	95.20%	96.19%	96.93%	97.63%	98.16%
10	74.14%	79.02%	83.05%	86.38%	89.10%	91.32%	93.13%	94.59%	95.77%	96.71%	97.46%	98.05%	98.51%	98.88%
11	77.76%	82.37%	86.10%	89.10%	91.50%	93.41%	94.92%	96.11%	97.04%	11.67%	98.32%	98.75%	99.08%	99.33%
12	80.94%	85.25%	88.66%	91.32%	93.41%	95.02%	96.27%	97.22%	97.94%	98.50%	98.90%	99.21%	99.44%	99.60%
13	83.72%	87.71%	90.78%	93.13%	94.92%	96.27%	97.28%	98.03%	98.59%	99.00%	99.29%	99.51%	99.66%	99.77%
14	86.14%	88.80%	92.66%	94.69%	96.11%	97.22%	98.03%	98.62%	99.04%	99.34%	99.56%	99.70%	99.80%	99.87%
15	88.25%	91.58%	94.01%	95.77%	97.04%	97.94%	98.59%	99.04%	99.35%	99.57%	99.72%	99.81%	99.88%	99.92%
16	90.01%	93.07%	95.20%	96.71%	97.76%	98.49%	99.00%	99.34%	99.57%	99.72%	99.82%	99.89%	99.93%	99.96%

The other chart included here is for when you have anywhere between one and thirty of a type of card in deck and want to determine the chances of drawing at least one, two, or three copies. Note: I allowed for more than four copies of a “card” in a deck not just because of basic lands, but because sometimes you just want to know the chances of drawing a land at all (or drawing any one-drop, or any creature, or any card drawing spell, etc).

COPIES IN DECK

TO DRAW (or more)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	11.67%	22.15%	31.54%	39.95%	47.46%	54.14%	60.09%	65.35%	70.02%	74.14%	77.75%	80.94%	83.72%	86.14%	88.25%
2	0%	1.19%	3.35%	6.32%	9.92%	14.02%	18.48%	23.19%	28.05%	32.99%	37.93%	42.81%	47.57%	52.19%	56.62%
3	0%	0%	0.10%	0.39%	0.92%	1.74%	2.87%	4.35%	6.16%	8.30%	10.77%	13.54%	16.59%	19.89%	23.40%

COPIES IN DECK

	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1	90.08%	91.66%	93.01%	94.18%	95.17%	96.02%	96.73%	97.34%	97.84%	98.26%	98.61%	98.89%	99.13%	99.32%	99.47%
2	60.83%	64.82%	68.57%	72.06%	75.30%	78.28%	81.00%	83.49%	85.73%	87.75%	89.66%	91.15%	92.66%	93.79%	94.86%
3	27.09%	30.92%	34.87%	38.88%	42.92%	46.97%	50.98%	54.93%	58.79%	62.53%	66.14%	69.58%	72.85%	75.93%	78.81%

THE ART OF THE MANA BASE

INTRODUCTION TO MANA BASES

"Mana is usually the first thing I look for when I examine a new set or a new format. Many players try to figure out what cards they want to cast and then seek the mana to cast them, but I find it better to figure out first what mana is available."

*-Zvi Mowshowitz,
Rise of the Eldrazi: Mana*

Your mana base is the foundation that the rest of your deck is built on. Every mistake in your mana base is like a poison, weakening every other aspect of your strategy. The ability to build a good mana base is an extremely valuable skill set; however, it's also one that most players seem to neglect.

Being a master deckbuilder involves understanding this area of the game, but understanding how mana bases work also improves our ability to actually *win* games. We'd do well to continually work on this area of our game and improve our understanding of it. This takes time and experience, but understanding the science behind mana bases can help us gain more (and better!) experience with what time we have.

There is no magic formula to tell you how to build the perfect mana base, since building a mana base is 50% art. However, there are a number of basic guidelines we can use to help give us some structure to work with. These basic guidelines and concepts are not hard and fast rules, but they are useful to fall back on whenever we're unsure which way to go.

Building a mana base is an involved process that all too many players try to gloss over, as though the mana base will magically build itself. I can't even tell you how many decklists people have sent to me, asking for advice, with 36 spells listed out, followed by the number and words "24 land." Being mindful of how many lands we are playing, which kinds, and what other options are available in the format is crucial to a master deckbuilder.

Many common deckbuilding errors can be avoided with a better understanding of principles of mana bases. Many great ideas have been discarded after being inserted into a clunky deck list. How can we learn to design decks that function smoothly?

**THE SINGLE BIGGEST
FACTOR THAT MAKES
DECKS CLUNKY IS A
BAD MANA BASE**

The single biggest factor that makes decks clunky is a bad mana base. By studying the fundamentals, such as mana curves, the opportunity cost of expensive spells, how many lands to use, which ones to use, and how to build off of existing mana bases, we can improve our ability to convert our ideas into results.

MANA CURVES

In chess, every beginner makes the same mistake. They decide to attack, so they send one of their pieces at their opponent. Then another. Then another. This one-at-a-time “strategy” is hopelessly inefficient, as utilized this way each piece is only as good as it is in isolation. It’s only when using a number of pieces in harmony that you can get more “value” out of their pieces by forming them into the sum of their parts. Besides, the last thing we want to do is be like the bad guys in a kung fu movie, sending one guy in to fight Bruce Lee at a time!

In chess, this value comes in the form of how many squares the piece is attacking and defending, as well as mobility (how easily and far the pieces can potentially move) and activity (how much each piece is doing that is actually relevant).

In Magic, we seek to get value from our cards and plays. This value also takes a number of forms, depending on what our strategy is in a given game. These types of value are, at their core, options — and they fall into the basic categories of cards, life, and tempo.

Both players begin the game with seven cards and the ability to draw one a turn. Cards are a particularly interesting resource, as they are the one resource we start the game with and then naturally get more of over time.

Both players begin the game with twenty life, zero poison counters, and the rest of the cards in their library. These basic forms of life are resources we start the game with but that do not replenish.

Both players gain a number of resources each turn that will evaporate if not used. While the card we drew can sit in our hand, if we don’t play a land that land drop is gone. If we don’t use all of our cards on the battlefield each turn, that means they generally

**THE THREE BASIC
CATEGORIES OF
RESOURCES IN MAGIC:
CARDS, LIFE,
& TEMPO**

did nothing; it was like we didn't even have them. When you're dealing with these resources that you gain naturally over time but don't start with, you are dealing with tempo.

It is fairly intuitive why we want to attack with all our creatures that aren't doing anything else (if it's safe) and why we want to play a land every turn that we can. What is somewhat less well understood is that *we are wasting our mana on every turn that we do not use it*.

It's important to keep in mind that in Magic, like chess, every rule has exceptions (including this one). We're not talking about hard-and-fast rules, merely guidelines that are generally true. For instance, sometimes you don't want to play a land in order to bluff holding a counterspell, or to discard it to a Merfolk Looter's effect later. Sometimes attacking with one extra creature doesn't actually lead to winning the game earlier, but keeping a blocker home could stop a potential haste creature.

When it comes to using mana efficiently, it may be a common beginner mistake to waste mana — but it's also a very common tournament player mistake to be slave to mana efficiency. For example, imagine you played a Borderland Ranger on turn 3 and are contemplating playing Disciple of Bolas on turn 4, or passing the turn and “wasting” the mana. If you also have a Thragtusk in hand, it's probably right to just waste the turn then play Thragtusk, then play the Disciple the turn after. You aren't really “wasting” the four mana; you're “spending” it to get three extra cards, three extra life, and a token later in the game.

Another example: You are Mono-Red. You have tapped five of your seven Mountains to play Thundermaw Hellkite, joining your Rakdos Shred-Freak to knock them to eight. On their turn, they played Detention Sphere on your Thundermaw Hellkite, then dropped Augur of Bolas. Should you use your last card, Searing Spear, on it on their end step? After all, you want to attack, and this will save you two mana, right?

Except, it doesn't really save you any mana, does it? You aren't going to spend all your mana next turn anyway. If you use it now, aren't you just going to waste the mana next turn? Besides, what if you draw another Thundermaw Hellkite? You could just win on the spot, if you saved it. This doesn't mean you should always



wait — but rather that you should ask yourself if the option to have that two extra mana next turn is worth losing the option to decide to do something different with your instant.

Another common way people are slave to mana efficiency is to play a three-drop on turn 3, instead of a two-drop that would be better. More often than not, playing a three-drop on turn 3 is better; however, let's say you're choosing between Borderland Ranger and Call of the Conclave on turn 3. While it could be right to play the Borderland Ranger, if you're just racing your opponent and have plenty of mana, the Call does more damage per turn. You might be "wasting" a mana — but if what's important is how much damage you *can* deal, it doesn't matter how much mana you spend (or don't spend).

THE OPPORTUNITY COST OF EXPENSIVE SPELLS

Each card gives you a series of options. When you have an Elite Vanguard in your opening hand, a single white mana gives you the option to put it onto the battlefield and attack for two each turn, or block, or attack planeswalkers, and more.

Compare this to an Angel of Serenity, which is both a more powerful card to have in play and generally regarded as a better card overall. If you have Angel of Serenity in your opening hand, it doesn't have the option to attack on turn 2, nor block, nor help with planeswalkers. It's not just that you lose the option on that turn, but that you lose it *each* turn, until the turn you can finally play the Angel of Serenity. This doesn't even factor in the potential of drawing multiple seven-drops and having to play just one at a time. Even worse, you could have already lost the game by turn 7 — and that's assuming you even *got* to seven mana before the game is over, which is far from a foregone conclusion.

Does this mean we should only play cheap spells? Well, in general, cheap spells are better in Constructed — but the best expensive cards are so strong now, they can definitely be worth it. This doesn't mean you play all bombs, or even just all the "best cards." Some mana curves go higher than others. Mana curves of all shapes and sizes exist, including those that go up to six or above. Using an existing curve as a template can be helpful, but we must remember that the goal is to *maximize our mana efficiency*.



The big picture goal is, of course, to win at Magic. In general, whenever we're spending mana we're presumably getting closer to the win. Whatever we spend our mana on gives us "value." Whether it's card economy (such as extra cards, tokens, or selection), tempo (producing mana, bouncing an opponent's creature, getting an extra attack), or life (whether gaining life, dealing damage, or giving an opponent a poison counter), all of this value adds up towards our goal of winning the game. The more value we get, the more likely we are to win.

**WE MUST REMEMBER
THAT THE GOAL IS
TO MAXIMIZE OUR
MANA EFFICIENCY**

Every mana we spend on something that brings us closer to this goal is obviously good. Every mana we spend on nothing is a mana we would have liked to have spent on something better.

Using expensive cards is a common part of winning Magic strategies, but using them involves also using cheap spells early to buy us the time needed to get to a point where we can use the expensive cards. How many cheap cards and of what types varies greatly, but in general, when it comes to using cheap spells to buy us this kind of time we have two goals:

- Survive until our primary game plan starts working.
- Use our mana efficiently.

Surviving (or gaining an advantage) is the more important of the two, since no amount of mana efficiency is worth a damn if we lose the game. Once we have a plan that can reasonably accomplish this goal (or approach it), we can look to mana efficiency for how to improve our performance and our chances. In general, if we can make our deck use mana more efficiently, without disrupting the core strategy, it increases our chances of winning.

WHAT IS A MANA CURVE?

“The essence of the mana curve concept is that a deck must use all its available mana in a given turn for quick and efficient development, and nothing more. You can actually have a mana curve where the most expensive spell is one or two mana, and an equally valid curve that tops out at seven.”

*-Oscar Tan,
A Mana Curve Can Be A Line Or A Blob*

A mana curve is a calculated distribution of spells (and lands) that attempt to maximize your chances of utilizing all of your mana every turn. That means playing a certain number of one-drops, two-drops, three-drops, and so on. This most often means creatures, but it can also mean spells like Ponder, Desperate Ravings, Shrine of Burning Rage — even Mana Leak, if you’re okay with potentially Leaking the first spell that comes along.

What we’re actually measuring is our ability to spend our mana effectively, not just the actual costs. As a result, we count Porcelain Legionnaire (assuming we play to pay the Phyrexian Mana as two life) as a two-drop, while we don’t count Giant Growth as a one-drop because we aren’t playing it on turn 1.

Additionally, lands that enter the battlefield tapped count as one-drops, since you’re effectively spending the one mana that the land would have produced in order to upgrade it into a dual land (or whatever else it may do).

“Every mana you don’t spend is a mana you spent on nothing.”

A well-designed mana curve applies math to deck construction to try to give you the best chance of being able to tap out every turn. Why would you want to tap out every turn? Presumably, whatever it is you do with your mana is furthering your game plan. Every mana you don’t spend is wasted, so ideally, you’d like to “spend” all of your mana every turn.

What about a control deck that holds open Mana Leak? Isn’t that mana wasted if your opponent doesn’t do anything? Sure — but if they don’t do anything, then they wasted *their* mana, too!



Play too many lands and you'll run out of spells, then waste your mana every turn as a result of having nothing to spend it on. Play too few lands, and you risk missing key land drops early, meaning that you only get to tap one or two lands a turn (and have spells stuck in your hand doing nothing). The correct number of lands to play to optimize your ability to spend mana depends on how expensive the spells you're using are. Decks packing Llanowar Elves are obviously going to have very different requirements than decks using Cruel Ultimatum.

Mana curves are designed to spend all of your mana every turn as efficiently as possible... but which kind of curve you use depends on how many land drops you want to hit. The more land drops you need to hit, the higher your curve is said to go.

This means there are many different types of mana curves possible — and though you could potentially play countless mixes (and new cards are continually mixing things up), there are actually only a relatively few “normal” mana curves. This shouldn't be surprising when we take into consideration how few “top of the curves” there are. Does your curve stop at three? Four? Six? Cards like Birds of Paradise and Rampant Growth also lead you to curves of their own.

Still, the number of normal mana curves in Magic can be counted on your fingers and we'll cover them all in this chapter.

Deciding how many cheap cards to use is intertwined with our choice of mana curve. Mana curves are flexible, and can be calibrated to include whichever cards are most important to your strategy. The weaker the format, the higher the mana curve usually needs to be, as there just aren't enough top-tier cheap spells to fill an entire deck with.

How do we build a mana curve that's appropriate for our game plan? Well, our mana curve is built by working with “slots” — such as the one-slot, the two-slot, and the three-slot (also called “spots”, as in “spots on the curve”).

Before we can decide on which curve to work with, we need to figure out how high our curve is going. So what's our ideal draw? Given that our ideal draw involves no more than one copy of a single card, what is our ideal sequence for beginning the game?



These initial sequences can take many forms:

Turn 1: Kird Ape

Turn 2: Loam Lion → Lightning Bolt

Turn 3: Path to Exile → Tarmogoyf

Turn 1: Noble Hierarchy

Turn 2: Doran the Siege Tower

Turn 3: Elspeth, Knight-Errant

Turn 1: Ponder

Turn 2: Telling Time

Turn 3: Deceiver Exarch

Turn 4: Splinter Twin

Turn 1: Vivid Creek

Turn 2: Mana Leak

Turn 3: Esper Charm

Turn 4: Wrath of God

Turn 5: Cryptic Command → Vivid Crag

Turn 6: Snapcaster Mage → Cryptic Command

Turn 7: Cruel Ultimatum

One of the most common forms of “one-drops” on curves are lands that enter the battlefield tapped. The most common of all drawbacks for a land to have is often overlooked as a pseudo-one-cost spell. Your land drop for the turn generally gives you access to one more mana each turn that pertains to your curve. Playing a land that enters tapped means you have one less mana that turn, just like a one-cost spell would.

“Didn’t we just waste a mana?” Remember, you aren’t playing with lands that are just like regular basic lands. When you play a tapped land, presumably it’s to get some kind of value. When you play with a card, it’s kind of like a cantrip (since it doesn’t cost you a card) that costs one colorless mana and turns the land you just played into something special, such as a dual land (like Guildgates) or a manland (such as Treetop Village).

Of course, we don’t want to play all tapped lands. Not every one-drop is going to be good enough to make the cut in any deck, and there’s a limit to how many one-drops you can play effectively. Just as having too much library manipulation can cost us tempo, so can having too many tapped lands. While you do get something for the mana you spent, was it worth it?



Mana curves aren't just about playing cheap spells, either. For example, if you had four one-drops, twenty two-drops, and four three-drops, your spells would be pretty cheap — but you'd still have mana problems. Your two-slot is clogged and you have holes at the odd slots. This means you'll do nothing on turn 1 a lot of the time — plus, there's a very good chance you'll waste a mana on turn 3 by casting a spell that only costs two (which might as well cost you three if you're always wasting mana). You don't *need* to play a three-drop on turn 3 — but if you don't plan on doing something with the extra mana (like playing a land that enters the battlefield tapped, or both a one-cost spell and a two-cost), then you're just wasting mana.

We want to imagine our ideal sequence to begin a game. Knowing how many land drops we imagine hitting with our ideal draw is an important part of deck construction, as it clues us into what sort of a mana curve we're working with. Figuring out every mana curve by trial and error would — and did! — take years. Fortunately for us, we can build on the work of those that came before us.

Let's start at the very beginning. Magic's very first mana curve was the Sligh curve, named after Paul Sligh, who used it at a Pro Tour Qualifier held in Atlanta on April 21, 1996. Although it's commonly said that he won the tournament, Sligh actually finished in second place, losing to a Necropotence deck in the finals.

While the deck and curve were popularly known by the original successful pilot's name, they were actually invented by Jay Schneider. They were born of his attempts to use math to optimize Magic decks in ways people had never even considered. While the original name "Geeba" never caught on, the concept of a mana curve did. While it was initially thought of as a "deck," slowly the concept of the mana curve began to make its way into every major deck in every format.

It was Schneider who first imagined the concept of a mana curve and the idea of designing a mana curve *first*, then filling it in with cards. He theorized that there should be a variety of mana curves possible, and that decks no one had yet conceived of should exist to fill in these curves. This was the first such experiment.

Witness Magic's first deck designed to fit a mana curve!

**KNOWING HOW
MANY LAND DROPS
WE IMAGINE
HITTING WITH OUR
IDEAL DRAW IS AN
IMPORTANT PART OF
DECK CONSTRUCTION**

The math the original Sligh deck was built upon breaks down approximately like this:

Sligh

Paul Sligh Standard 1996

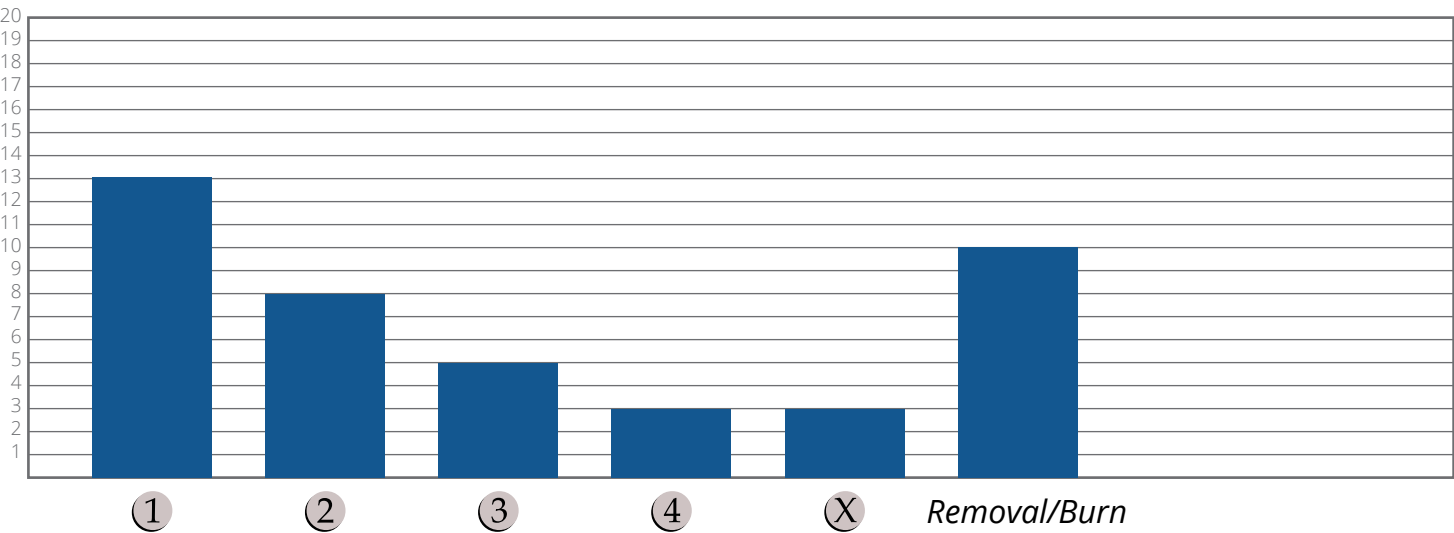
MAINDECK

- 4 Brass Man
- 2 Dwarven Trader
- 2 Goblins of the Flarg
- 4 Ironclaw Orcs
- 3 Dwarven Lieutenant
- 2 Orcish Librarian
- 2 Orcish Artillery
- 2 Orcish Cannoneers
- 2 Brothers of Fire
- 2 Dragon Whelp

- 1 Black Vise
- 4 Lightning Bolt
- 4 Incinerate
- 1 Shatter
- 1 Detonate
- 1 Fireball
- 2 Dwarven Ruins
- 4 Mishra’s Factory
- 4 Strip Mine
- 13 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

- 3 Active Volcano
- 1 An-Zerrin Ruins
- 1 Detonate
- 1 Fireball
- 4 Manabarbs
- 1 Meekstone
- 2 Serrated Arrows
- 1 Shatter
- 1 Zuran Orb



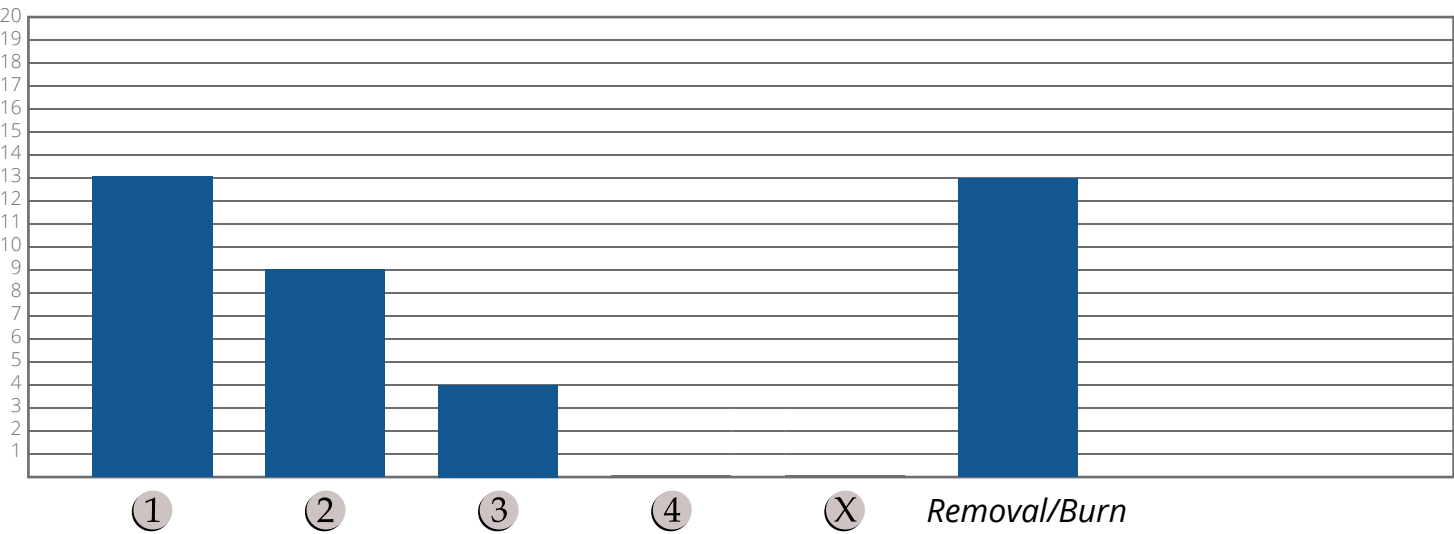
Remember, curves are math constructs that are *like* lines, except they’re not required to be straight. Of course, they *can* be a straight line, as is the case with the “Sligh Curve.” Sligh was a board control deck that could come out aggressively but also had a lot of subtle interactive elements. Its card quality was not as high as decks packing Dark Ritual and Necropotence or Land Tax and Balance, but it did have the element of surprise and a good curve.

Here is another example of the Sligh curve, which appears as a slope when graphed. This is Tomoharu Saito’s Extended Naya Zoo deck, designed fourteen years after the original Sligh deck.

Naya Zoo

Tomoharu Saito 1st Grand Prix Singapore 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK		SIDEBOARD
4 Wild Nacatl	2 Umezawa’s Jitte	4 Pyrostatic Pillar
4 Kird Ape	4 Wooded Foothills	3 Volcanic Fallout
4 Mogg Fanatic	4 Windswept Heath	3 Oblivion Ring
1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda	4 Bloodstained Mire	3 Ranger of Eos
3 Gaddock Teeg	3 Stomping Ground	1 Rule of Law
4 Tarmogoyf	2 Sacred Foundry	1 Ancient Grudge
4 Woolly Thoctar	1 Temple Garden	
4 Path to Exile	1 Forest	
3 Seal of Fire	1 Mountain	
4 Lightning Helix	1 Plains	
2 Incinerate		



Of course, even a Sligh deck’s mana curve can curve differently. For example, the first time a Sligh deck (or Mono-Red, for that matter) Top 8ed a major event was when yours truly took Sligh to a third-place finish in the Junior division of Pro Tour Dallas in 1996. This is the deck and the curve that Andrew Wills and I used for that event, which actually takes on more of a curve that the previous two lists.

Sligh

Patrick Chapin 3rd Pro Tour Dallas Juniors 1996 (Standard)

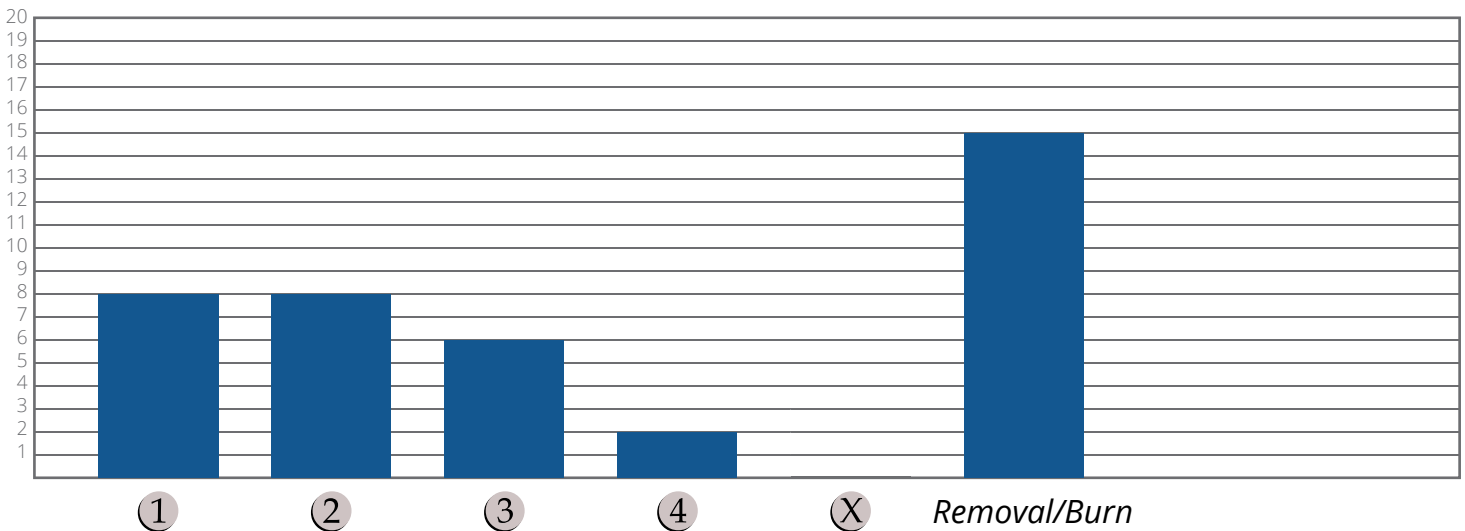
MAINDECK

4 Goblin Balloon Brigade
3 Gorilla Shaman
4 Ironclaw Orcs
2 Dwarven Miner
2 Orcish Librarians
4 Orcish Artillery
1 Orcish Cannoneers
1 Ball Lightning
2 Dragon Whelp
1 Black Vise

4 Lightning Bolt
2 Death Spark
4 Incinerate
1 Guerrilla Tactics
1 Hammer of Bogardan
3 Pillage
1 Strip Mine
3 Mishra's Factory
17 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Anarchy
3 Manabarbs
3 Pyroblast
2 Meekstone
2 Shatter
1 Red Elemental Blast



As you can see, not all curves are identical. With so many possible curves we could use, how are we supposed to determine which to use for a given deck?

Well, comparing our curves to similar decks that others have played can be an invaluable first step. Optimizing a mana curve takes experience, but we can get 90% of the way there by asking the following questions:

- What are you doing on turn 1? The usual choices are playing a creature, playing a tapped land, playing library manipulation, or using removal if your opponent has a first-turn play. How efficiently you need to use the first turn is a function of the format, but most of the time, we are going to want at least *ten cards* that we can play to take advantage of the first turn and often more. Rarely are we going to want less than eight, even in block formats. Remember, tapped lands count!
- What are you doing on turn 2? We basically always want at least *eight cards* we plan on playing on turn 2. This is obviously a crude guideline, but it is the easiest first step.
- How high does your curve go? Figuring out the high end is crucial. What is the most expensive card in your deck? What are you planning on doing the turn before that? Look at other existing decks to get an idea of how many high-end cards people are playing in decks similar to yours.
- Are there any special modifiers? For instance, mana acceleration always changes the needs of a curve. Birds of Paradise jump you straight to your three-drops. If your first play is a Farseek, it takes you to your four-drops a turn early. If you play tons of mana acceleration, you will often be looking at six mana on your fourth turn. Such a deck may easily play eight or more six-drops, when most decks are unlikely to play more than three or four, if that.

Not all decks use a Sligh curve. In fact, most decks do not; it's just one of many possible curves. As we saw above, even the "Sligh deck" I used in Dallas did not employ the original Sligh curve.

**COMPARING OUR
CURVES TO SIMILAR
DECKS THAT OTHERS
HAVE PLAYED CAN
BE AN INVALUABLE
FIRST STEP**

Señor Stompy

Svend Geertsen 4th World Championships 1997 (Standard)

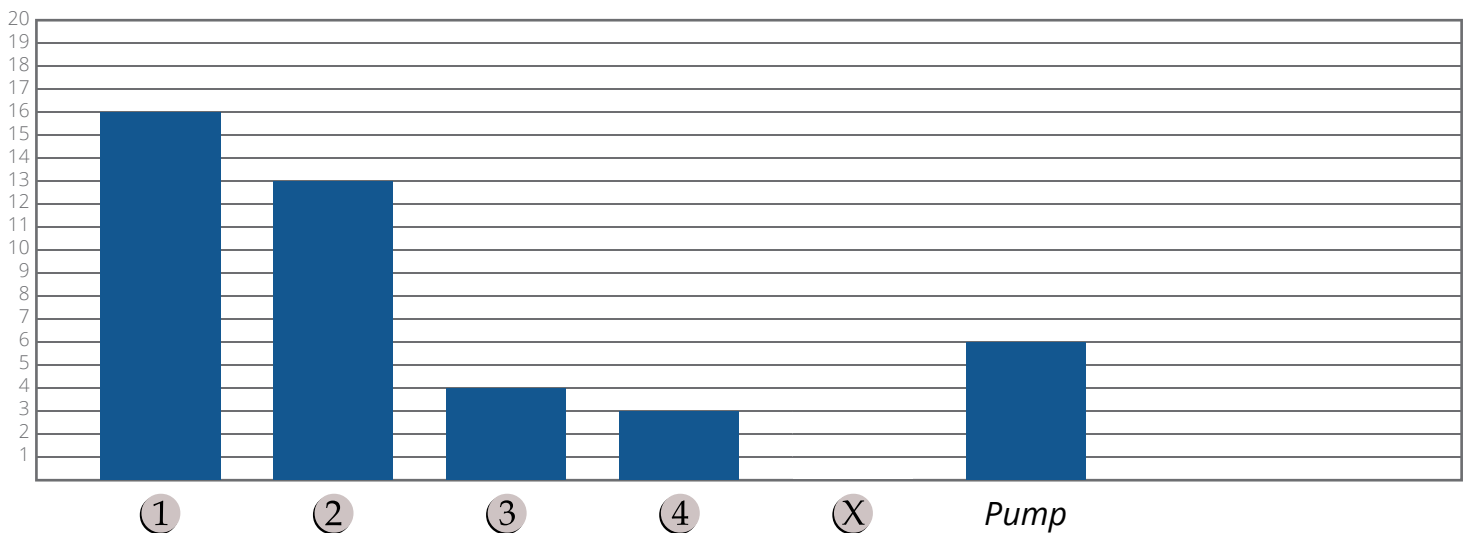
MAINDECK

4 Fyndhorn Elves
4 Ghazban Ogre
4 Quirion Ranger
4 Rogue Elephant
4 Spectral Bears
3 Harvest Wurm
2 Whirling Dervish
2 Jolrael's Centaur

2 Uktabi Orangutan
3 Lhurgoyf
4 Giant Growth
4 Winter Orb
2 Bounty of the Hunt
2 Heart of Yavimaya
16 Forests

SIDEBOARD

2 River Boa
2 Whirling Dervish
1 Uktabi Orangutan
2 Crumble
4 Emerald Charm
3 City of Solitude
1 Bounty of the Hunt



Take, for example, the 1996 mono-green beatdown deck, Señor Stompy. Even with this curve, we're seeking to spend all of our mana every turn. How can this be, with such a low curve? Stompy decks only played sixteen to eighteen lands. They still wanted to maximize their mana, they just wanted to spend some turn 2s playing a two-drop and another one-drop, as well as playing mana lockdown cards like Winter Orb to limit the mana their opponents could spend.

On the other end of the spectrum we can find decks that actually have radically different curves, such as Hall of Famer Darwin Kastle's Pro Tour Venice deck, The Claw:

The Claw

Darwin Kastle 6th Pro Tour Venice 2003 (Onslaught Block Constructed)

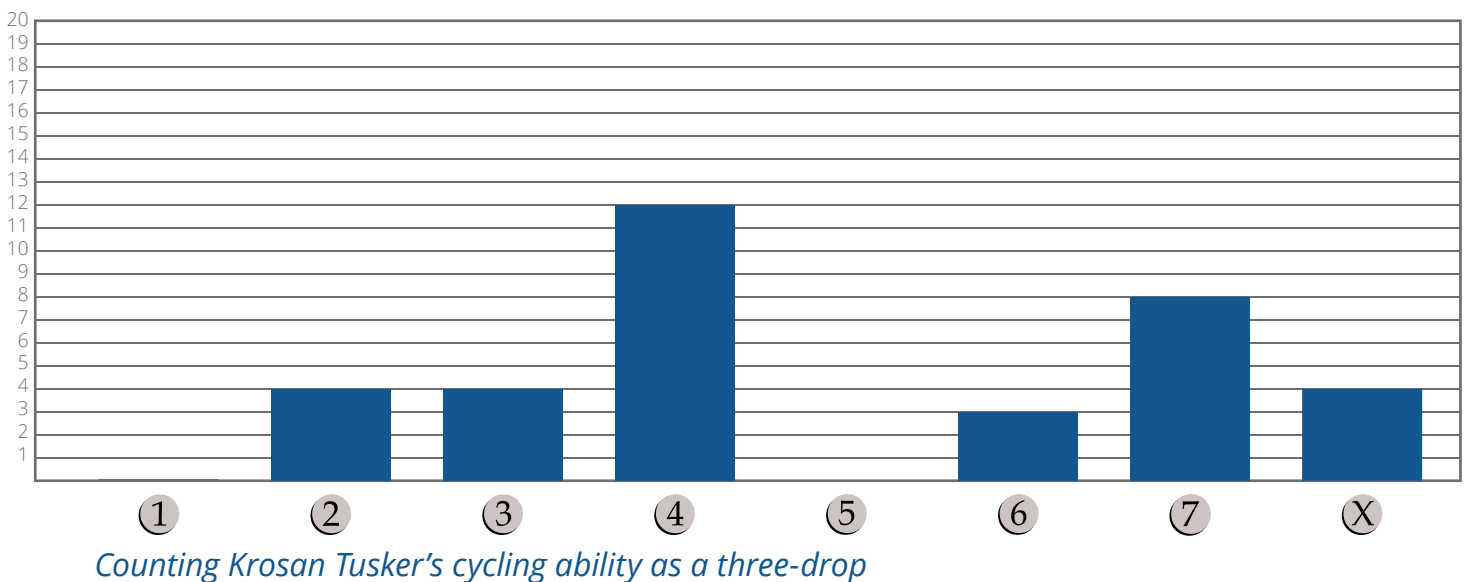
MAINDECK

4 Wirewood Elf
4 Goblin Clearcutter
4 Ravenous Baloth
3 Rorix Bladewing
4 Krosan Tusker
4 Imperial Hellkite
4 Kilnmouth Dragon

4 Explosive Vegetation
4 Starstorm
2 Contested Cliffs
11 Forest
8 Mountain
4 Wooded Foothills

SIDEBOARD

4 Shock
4 Naturalize
4 Silklash Spider
2 Insurrection
1 Slice and Dice



Wait, doesn't this throw everything we've been talking about out the window?

As you might've guessed, this deck is from a Block format. Block formats don't always give us great options, and Onslaught Block was no exception. Outside of Goblin tribal decks, there really weren't a lot of playable one-drop options. Even the Goblin decks revolved around creatures that cost four, five, and six mana, as the expensive cards were just so much better than the cheap ones.

Understanding Darwin's mana curve is really just a matter of looking at what he is trying to do. In this case, all he wants to do



is drop bombs, and primarily ones with converted mana cost of seven. Why is he using an eighth seven-drop instead of the four Rorix Bladewings? After all, Rorix is generally considered a better card than Imperial Hellkite or Kilnmouth Dragon for the cost, and he already has so many sevens...

The mana curve isn't really about the cost; it's about spending all of your mana every turn. If you were really going to go from six to seven, than there's no way you'd want so many more seven-drops than sixes. However, Darwin's plan is pretty clear; when he has four mana, he will play Goblin Clearcutter or Explosive Vegetation. Then next turn he will have seven mana and play the best Dragon he can. Sometimes, if he's lucky, Wirewood Elf will let him get to four mana a turn faster, but that's the general play pattern. Once you are going from four to seven you might as well play seven-drops, since if you play a six with seven mana, it is like you spent seven on it anyway.

Obviously, not every format is going to afford us this kind of time, but the point remains that we can create an awful lot of curves besides the Sligh curve. All we have to do is walk through the game and imagine how it will play out.

Here is one final curve to consider: the 5-Color Control deck Gabriel Nassif used to win Pro Tour Kyoto:



5-Color Control

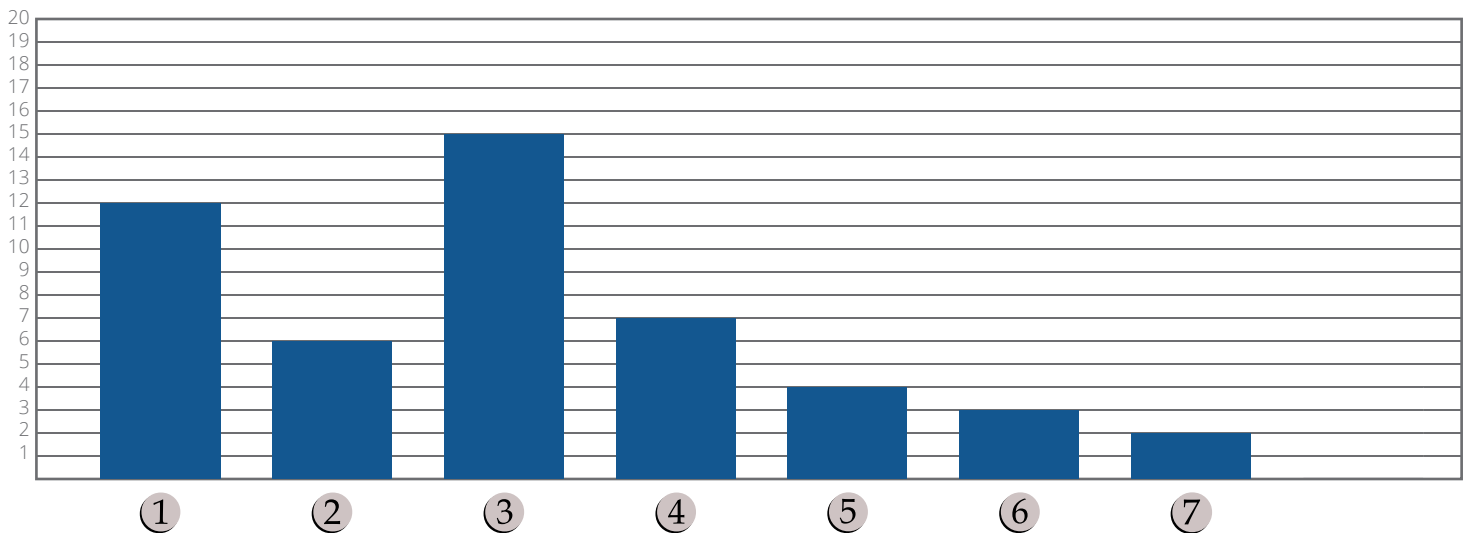
Gabriel Nassif 1st Pro Tour Kyoto 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Plumeveil	2 Cruel Ultimatum
3 Wall of Reverence	4 Reflecting Pool
4 Mulldrifter	2 Exotic Orchard
3 Broodmate Dragon	4 Vivid Creek
4 Broken Ambitions	3 Vivid Marsh
1 Pithing Needle	2 Vivid Crag
1 Terror	2 Vivid Meadow
1 Celestial Purge	4 Sunken Ruins
4 Esper Charm	2 Cascade Bluffs
4 Volcanic Fallout	1 Mystic Gate
4 Cryptic Command	3 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Scepter of Fugue
2 Wrath of God
2 Infest
2 Wydwen, the Biting Gale
2 Negate
1 Remove Soul
1 Celestial Purge
1 Wispmare



The curve above the three-spot makes sense — but how do you explain so few two-drops and so many three-drops? Well, to begin with this 5-Color Control deck needed to play a lot of Vivid lands to support its color requirements. Twelve Vivid lands is more than enough tapped lands to make sure that turn 1 is well spent, but what about future turns? After all, Vivid lands weren't like Glacial Fortress or Hallowed Fountain where later copies could enter the battlefield untapped.

Each one of those lands is going to cost a mana, so they need to be factored into the plan. In this case, Nassif is content to play a tapped land on turn 2 in the cases where he doesn't have a good two-mana play. That isn't the dream scenario, of course, but he wants to ensure that he gets to play a three-mana spell on turn 3. Even with fifteen lands that come into play untapped, we're only talking about a 71% chance of having two untapped lands by turn 3. That means over a quarter of the time, he'll want to play a tapped land on turn 2. As a result, instead of playing eight or nine two-drops, he plays only six (the closest he can come to playing 71% of that).

Why does Nassif have fifteen three-drops, though? Well, the best cards in the format cost three mana. In fact, Esper Charm, Mulldrifter, Volcanic Fallout, and Plumeveil are so good that he's content to play another one on turn 4 in addition to another tapped land. Why is it so important to play so many of your tapped lands early? Broodmate Dragon and Cruel Ultimatum (his six and seven drops) are so powerful that he wants to be sure



that his sixth and seventh lands come into play *untapped*. His hand may have two tapped lands and two untapped lands — but he wants to get the tapped lands out of the way to give himself the best chances of playing his bombs on turns 6 and 7.

Having a vision of how you want your deck to play out is crucial. Once you know that, comparing your mana to other similar strategies should be at the core of you designing your curve.

HOW MANY LANDS TO PLAY

Interviewer: *“Why do (Germans) play one more land than everyone else in the same Constructed decks?”*

Kai Budde: *“I think we just like to cast our spells more than everyone else does.”*

-From Tom LaPille’s Lands Are Awesome

How many land drops do you want to hit?

Play too few lands and you can’t cast your spells. Play too many lands and you won’t have spells to cast. What’s a deckbuilder to do?

To make matters worse, there’s variance — so even if you have the right amount of lands, in any given playtest session you might have draws that suggest you’re off. Conversely, you could have the wrong land count but get a little lucky in a session, leading you to believe your mana base is correct when it isn’t.

We aren’t going to have hundreds of games to dedicate to every single mana base we ever build. Instead, we lean on shortcuts and general guidelines. Experience has shown us the general amount of land used in each sort of deck. This can provide the foundation that we build from, modifying to fit the new cards of the day. Maybe the latest cantrip makes us want a little less mana than usual. Maybe the amount of land destruction in the format makes us want a little more.

Asking ourselves how much mana we want to add to our mana pool is kind of like asking ourselves how much money we want to make. Just as many people try to live beyond their means, so too

EXPERIENCE HAS SHOWN US THE GENERAL AMOUNT OF LAND [TO USE]... THIS CAN PROVIDE THE FOUNDATION THAT WE BUILD FROM

do many try to spend mana beyond their means. They play cards that cost a lot, but they don't spend the time seeding the mana to pay for them.

To gain a greater understanding about how mana really works it's important to think about it in the right framework. It isn't enough to just use math and calculations to determine how many of each color to use. Deckbuilding is both a science and an art.

To master mana base creation we ought to face the truth about Magic, variance, and mana screw. When we take responsibility for our results, we get better results!

It can be scary — but we'd do best to face the truth about strengths and weaknesses and grow rather than spend our time convincing ourselves we're already where we want to be. Just as many people get super defensive at the very mention of discussing strategies for making money, as though their self-worth were inexorably linked to financial self-worth, so too do people get super defensive about areas where their Magic game could stand to improve. What's worse is when they can't even be honest with themselves about what they're doing and what they're trying to accomplish.

Cards are like opportunities to experience life, and mana is money. Both winning at life and winning at Magic can be accomplished any countless number of ways, with different players having very different ideas about what's important to them.

Of course, when we talk about "casting spells," what we really mean is "using mana." In addition to casting spells, there are numerous activated abilities we may want to use, such as Dreadship Reef, Rakdos Keyrune, Nantuko Shade, and Helix Pinnacle.

How much money do I want?

As much as it takes.

As much money as it takes to do what?

Whatever I want.



It's exactly the same as mana. How much mana do I want to add to my mana pool? As much as it takes to do whatever it is that I'm trying to accomplish. When I want to cast Cryptic Command, I want that four mana exactly as much as I want to cast Cryptic Command. The mana means nothing to me; it's just a means to an end.

How much mana should we make? Well, it depends on what you're trying to accomplish. If you have aspirations of casting Cruel Ultimatum, you're going to need a lot more mana in your mana pool than if you are packing Goblin Guides.

Why doesn't everyone cast Cruel Ultimatums? Why *would* they? Different people have different priorities. Imagine a Burn player with his Goblin Guides. He doesn't need a lot of mana at all, does he? Yet somehow, he does just fine. He can be stuck on two land and have not a complaint in the world, while across the table, the "greedy" 5-Color Control player is sitting there, stuck on six mana — still a mana short of completing their big-picture agenda.

The Goblin Guide player is no more noble because they are "getting by" on just two lands. They'd cast a Cruel Ultimatum if they could afford it. I don't care how dedicated a Burn player you are, if you could magically draw a Cruel Ultimatum that you could actually cast and was legal you better believe you would cast it. Why not? That's a way more potent effect than Lightning Bolt most of the time.

Does this mean that it's just better to have more mana? Of course not.

Why doesn't the Burn player play more cards that make mana so they can buy a couple of Cruel Ultimatums? Priorities. That isn't what's important to the Burn player. That isn't what they're trying to do. There's an opportunity cost to spending your time building your resources to such a point that you can actually afford Cruel Ultimatum and that's not the best strategy for every player, as every player wants something different.

You may say that everyone wants to "win" in Magic... but there are as many ways to do that as there are ways to be "be happy" in life. Just as we may have different ideas as to how to be happy, we may also have differing opinions on how to win a game of Magic.

**WHEN WE TAKE
RESPONSIBILITY FOR
OUR RESULTS, WE GET
BETTER RESULTS!**

Some people want to make a ton of mana as soon as possible. They don't care about what it costs them, or care about stability. Some people try to build stable resources to a large degree so that they can afford the more expensive things in the game. They've decided that the best tools for getting the experiences they seek are worth investing a lot of time and energy into acquiring them, even if they have to spend most of their time and effort cultivating means of paying for them.

Still others prefer a minimalist approach, intentionally keeping it simple. They just want to win — and if the best strategy doesn't take much mana, so be it.

And then there are the folks who want arbitrarily large amounts of mana. Ten mana? That's just not enough! Twenty? Please! There are plenty of strategies that seek to generate arbitrarily large amounts of mana — but if you've ever used an infinite mana combo and had to ship the turn after having nothing to cast with it, you know that mana is just like money; all the money in the world means little if you have nothing useful to spend it on.

Other players are interested in making plenty of mana, and work hard to make sure they can afford all of the useful tools that they believe will further their agenda. Maybe some of the things they want cost UUBBBRR, while others cost 2GGGG or 2WW. The solution? They do what it takes to cast their spells. This doesn't mean they lie or cheat their Cruel Ultimatum a mana short and hope they get away with it; it means they slow down a bit and play Vivid lands. Are Vivid lands good? Sure, especially with Reflecting Pool — but there's a cost, as there always is, with making mana.

Do you *want* to make more mana? Of course! We all do. So why don't we just dedicate more time and more cards to doing so? Again, opportunity cost.

Let's say you have a choice between charging your Dreadship Reef at the end of your opponent's turn or not. Generally, you're going to charge it — though not always. This is no different than having an opportunity to make \$20 on an opportunity that's right in front of you. If you have a bunch of boosters of Dragon's Maze that you're planning on selling at a store for \$2 in store credit each, then someone comes up to you and offers to buy them



for \$3 cash. Why not sell them to the new buyer? As with the Dreadship Reef, you have an opportunity already in front of you (the opportunity cost is low). You have only to act to cash in on it.

Adding lands to your deck has a very different sort of opportunity cost. Every land you add to your deck is one less spell, but every spell you play is one less land to help you play your spells. The right answer is a balance between the two.

Most people “cheat” on land and tend to play less mana than they should. They’re overly optimistic with regards to how well things will work out for them, imagining that 23 lands should be enough for their U/W deck or that 22 should be fine for their Lotus Cobra special. Then they complain about “mana screw.”

It sounds just like people who complain about being “money-screwed,” despite spending that hour, day, or year drinking, playing video games, partying, walking in the park with someone, reading books, dancing, watching television, or even gaming. They did those things instead of doing something to put themselves in a position to actually afford what they claimed they wanted in the future.

It’s up to you to decide what spells are best for furthering your agenda, but it’s not just the spells you decide. Every card is an opportunity for an experience. It’s lots of fun for some people to win tournaments and it’s lots of fun for other people to have epic games of Commander. Both of these players want to be able to play their spells, and they play lands to enable this.

When you play a land in your deck, you’re giving up an opportunity to do something else fun. That 25th land could’ve been a Thundermaw Hellkite! That 40th land in your Commander deck could’ve been a Spelljack! This is the same thing with spending time doing things that can make money. Every hour you spend at your job, you could’ve spent watching television.

When someone can’t afford to go to the movies, buy a wedding ring, fix their car, take a two-week vacation to Hawaii, or go to a concert it’s an experience that’s linked to every other experience they’ve ever had. You didn’t just start the game in this position. If you find yourself short of mana, ask yourself if you’re playing enough land.

**EVERY SPELL YOU
PLAY IS ONE LESS
LAND TO HELP YOU
PLAY YOUR SPELLS.**



GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

- Most people don't spend enough slots in their deck on making sure they have the mana to cast their spells. Likewise, most people waste too many slots on cards they think they enjoy, not realizing that they'd actually enjoy their deck much more if they had the mana to cast their spells and then drew spells that were more effective for accomplishing their goal.
- Even if you play the right mana base for your strategy, you're going to get mana-screwed in some games. The right mana base doesn't ensure that everything will work out as expected every day, or that you'll win every little battle. Additionally, even if you've built your deck suboptimally in the past, as long as you live there's always time to tune your deck. It may be round 4 of a tournament and you may be locked in for a little while, but there will always be more tournaments.
- Complaining about mana screw is foolish. It doesn't help you and the sympathy is an addictive drug aimed to make us feel better rather than be better. Everyone gets mana-screwed from time to time. It's the complaining about mana screw that's the problem.

Variance is a cruel mistress, but when you play a game of Magic there are consequences to your actions. Among these actions was agreeing to play a game that involves elements of chance. Even with the perfect mana ratio, you're going to roll a one on that twenty-sided die from time to time. If you agreed to roll that die, what is there to complain about?

VARIANCE
IS A CRUEL MISTRESS

Stop cheating on land! Study people who are successful at doing what you want to do. Ask yourself how many slots they spend on making mana, and what ways they go about it. Look at the spells they're selecting. What can you learn from those? There's no reason why you have to play the same mana ratio as someone else, but people with similar strategies can provide an awesomely useful blueprint for making sure you have the right mana to pay for the spells you want when you want them.

Additionally, there's no reason why you need to experience the same spells as some or anyone else. There's so much to discover in Magic; why limit yourself? If what you're doing isn't working, take a step back and imitate others who are succeeding. Remember though, if you always follow the crowd, maybe a little danger is in order. Trying something new isn't just about winning today, it's about strengthening yourself long-term so that you have the tools inside you to be able to create for yourself.

Just as so many cheat on land and play 22 lands when they should play 24 or 24 lands when they should play 26, many players pay little attention to the *contents* of their mana base. To them, the mana base is nothing more than "24 land" added to the bottom of a decklist as an afterthought. If you want to win at Magic, reflect on your mana base as well as your spells. There are a lot of ways to make mana besides just your nine-to-five variety of basic lands.

**STOP
CHEATING
ON LAND!**

SPENDING MANA

No amount of money actually buys happiness. It's the *experiences*. A basketball adds what it does to your happiness because of the opportunities it provides to experience life using it. The same is true with Magic cards.

Mana can be useful for giving you opportunities to win at Magic — to experience things like Birds of Paradise on turn 1, hitting Supreme Verdict on turn 4, having double blue for Jace, having a second Plains to fetch to cast Baneslayer Angel, enough acceleration to cast Mind's Desire on turn 1, and being able to cast Goblin Ringleader and Siege-Gang Commander, all the while having early disruption in the form of Wasteland and Rishadan Port.

These things may all lead to situations where you are “winning” but it’s not actually the mana making you win, it’s the gameplay and the synergies between your cards. An Island adds what it does to your winning because of the opportunities it provides to cast your spells using it.

Helix Pinnacle costs a slot in your deck. Every time you draw Helix Pinnacle there’s the opportunity cost, as you could’ve drawn something else that helped you more before you had a hundred mana. Helix Pinnacle is for some people, but not all, just like Lamborghinis are for some people, but not all. It doesn’t make you any less of a Magic player if you win with Gravecrawler or Restoration Angel rather than spending nearly infinite mana on luxuries like Helix Pinnacle. Why hate on someone that elects to Helix Pinnacle? Let them! Maybe they aren’t playing the optimal strategy as you see it but if they can put themselves in a position to activate it a hundred times, more power to them!

Who cares if you can’t afford Helix Pinnacle in your mono-red beatdown deck? If you had a hundred mana, it’d be a waste. You have no need for such excess. Twenty-one would buy you as big a Devil’s Play as you want 99% of the time.

Why force people to spend 24 slots in their deck if they don’t want to? How do you know everyone wants this “basic level of mana” you may think is vital to play a game of Magic? I’ve met plenty of Dredge players with absolutely no qualms at all about playing zero mana at all!

You know what, though? You play a Dredge deck with no mana-producing lands and you don’t really have room to complain that you couldn’t get rid of your opponent’s Leyline of the Void. You are the one that made the decision to spend all those slots on Stinkweed Imp and Bridges from Below. You make choices and you live with them.

**IT’S NOT ACTUALLY
THE MANA MAKING
YOU WIN, IT’S THE
GAMEPLAY AND THE
SYNERGIES BETWEEN
YOUR CARDS**

WHY CAN'T WE ALL HAVE AS MUCH MANA AS WE WANT?

DC10 is a Magic variant where everyone just has as much mana as they want. It's an easy casual format to play sitting at an event with a pile of draft leftovers. Two players just start drawing a card off the top and invest little thought or emotion into the game. The games are quickly over — and grow boring nearly as quickly. With nearly no cost to cast cards, the casting of them means almost nothing. There's little tension, little excitement, little meaning.

If mana can't buy better spells, what can it buy?

Instead of complaining that Primeval Titan costs too much to cast, we use ramp. A single land drop a turn isn't going to cut it for what you have in mind. So have a little heart and explore cultivating a plan! You can't afford something that costs mana you don't have? Go out and spend more of your life figuring out how to make some more mana. Sometimes it seems like there are no good sources of mana available. You don't have to sit around and wait for someone else to make a mana base for you!

Yes, six and seven mana is a lot (and let's not even get started on Eldrazi). If you want to be able to cast your spells? *Play enough land.* Don't "try" to play enough lands. *Play enough lands.*

It isn't just the quantity, either. It's equally important to spend your slots on the right kinds of lands. You may jam thirty Mishra's Workshops in your deck, but that isn't going to cast a Baneslayer no matter how much you want it to.

We're not victims. The highest EV play is to take responsibility for our actions and bring positive change to our lives when we want things to change. It's not the shuffler. We're the ones who decide our mana bases and how to use the cards in our decks.

You want to win more at Magic? Spend enough slots to get the mana you want, and use those slots wisely.



**THE HIGHEST EV
PLAY IS TO TAKE
RESPONSIBILITY
FOR OUR ACTIONS &
BRING POSITIVE
CHANGE TO OUR
LIVES**

PLAYING LESS THAN TWENTY LAND

Back in the early days of Magic, players would teach each other to play twenty lands in their 60-card decks. Early on, it became a sign of a “good” player to play 23 or more lands. Then a deck called Turbo Xerox came along... and people couldn’t figure out why they couldn’t beat Hall of Famer Alan Comer’s brainchild.

Comer, friendly as always, offered to show them his deck laid out. They were shocked to discover he had only seventeen Islands for mana! How was this possible? After all, Alan’s deck featured plenty of three- and four-drops. It turns out that Alan Comer had single-handedly invented the concept of using cheap cantrips to fix your mana. In fact, Turbo Xerox is *the* fundamental strategy that most blue Legacy decks are built on today.

What Comer realized was that even with just seventeen Islands and four Portent, he had about an 85% chance of having two Islands by turn 2 on the play (almost 90% on the draw). This also doesn’t take into consideration mulligans, which easily pushed him into the mid-90s.

Once he put together two Islands, Impulse and Foreshadow opened up to further fix his mana. In a pinch, Comer could just “cycle” his Foreshadows by naming the basic land his opponent played the most of. It was the combination with Portent and Memory Lapse that made Foreshadow so appealing, however. Sometimes Comer would keep a one-land hand on the draw and not get there by turn 2. In situations like this, Force of Will helped serve as a strange sort of Time Walk, buying him more time to fix his mana.

This may sound like a lot of work just to get three Islands by the third turn... but there is a payoff. Once Comer made that initial investment to assemble three Islands by turn 3, he had a major advantage over every other deck he would face. People with 23 land in their deck draw land 38% of the time. Turbo Xerox drew land just 28% of the time. This meant that more than one out of four times that Alan would draw a land he didn’t need, he would instead draw a spell (which was further compounded by Comer’s cantrips accelerating his draws in future turns, such as the aforementioned Portent + Foreshadow combo).



Cards like Ponder can help fix your mana. As a general rule, cheap cantrips like this can be looked at as being worth between 50% and 100% of your mana ratio. For instance, if you have 24 lands in a sixty-card deck, that is 40% land. If you add a Ponder, you could say it increases your land count by between 20% and 40% of a land.

In other words, adding four Ponders usually means you can cut a land.

Nowadays, mana bases of all shapes and sizes are played. Cantrip-filled Legacy decks are commonly built with only seventeen land, even today. Additionally, it is not uncommon at all for combo decks to have between fourteen to nineteen land, relying on many nonland mana sources (such as Dark Ritual effects and artifact mana) or needing only to play a few very cheap spells to function. The middle of this range is a pretty good number for someone who wants to draw at least one land, but would prefer to draw two, without getting flooded.

Of course, if your combo deck needs to play a land every turn in each of the first four turns of the game then you need a mana base more like midrange or control decks. We'll be examining decks that rely on two-thirds of their deck being mana to operate, as well as some that get by on shockingly low amounts, going all the way down to the extreme case of One-Land Belcher.

The important thing is to view all of these decks from the perspective of, "How much land do you need to draw in order for the deck to operate?" Some decks need most of your cards to be mana, while others don't need to draw land at all.

AGGRESSIVE DECKS

It's generally better to examine other similar decks people are winning with to determine quantity of lands, as the format determines a lot about how aggro decks can be effective — but as a guideline, I find that many aggro decks that only need one or two lands can get away with 20-21 land. If the curve has a number of plays at three, maybe a few at four, it is generally better to play 23 or 24.



If you have other sources of nonland mana in your deck (like Wall of Roots, Mind Stone, Rampant Growth, or Azorius Signet), they contribute towards your mana, but are not always worth as much as a land. A good rule of thumb here is to count them as being worth half a land... but make sure that you still play a minimum of 23-24 lands if your accelerators cost two, and 21-22 lands if your accelerators cost one.

Also, Birds of Paradise, Llanowar Elves, and other creature-based acceleration should probably be counted at one-quarter of a land, instead of a half, because they're fragile and tend to be unreliable as mana sources ("Bolt the Bird" being reasonably common tournament advice). The more you try to apply generalizations, the more they lead to more inaccuracies... but they *can* give us some guidelines.

MIDRANGE AND CONTROL DECKS

The spectrum between beatdown and control is a broad one. The difference between an aggro deck and a midrange deck is often just a matter of perspective. The same is true with control deck and midrange decks. Instead of worrying about where you should draw the line, let's look at a couple of simple guidelines to point us in the right direction.

To start with, if your curve has a number of plays at three, maybe a few at four, it's generally better to play 23 or 24 lands. However, if your deck is a little bigger, perhaps with a curve up to four- and five-drops, then 25-26 is recommended. "Big Control Decks," will often need even more land, using 26, 27, and sometimes even 28 lands.

What is the science and math behind this? Frankly, it's mostly just a product of experience... but it's also a product of how many land drops you need to hit. The more expensive the top of your curve, the more land you need. These are just crude estimates to use as a starting point, but they are better than nothing.



PLAYING A DECK WITH MORE THAN 50% MANA

Sometimes decks need to be built with half of it being mana sources. Usually, this only occurs with combo decks that have very nontraditional game plans. For instance, Valakut decks can turn every mana source into three damage, so playing 40-48 mana doesn't actually turn into mana-flood as often. They aren't actually playing 50% lands — instead, they're relying on tons of ramp spells.

Another example is with Storm Combo decks that use few actual lands, instead relying on mana "rituals" like Pyretic Ritual, Desperate Ritual, and Seething Song, to fuel engine cards like Past in Flames.

It's possible to play over half lands — but usually, this involves finding ways to play more than one land per turn. The classic example of this is 37-Land, a strategy so named because of how many lands people generally play in it. Manabond and Exploration allow the Lands player to play more than one card a turn, and Life from the Loam turns these into a very powerful card draw engine. This strategy is much more of a lock deck than an actual combo deck, but its strategy is certainly just as non-traditional.

There are certainly cases where people play beatdown, midrange, or control, with mana sources comprising more than half of their deck, but these generally include a ton of mana creatures (such as a green aggro deck) or expensive mana sources (such as Farseek or artifact mana).

Playing more than half lands should be usually avoided, as you usually get stuck with so many lands in your hand that you don't get to use them all.

THE FUNDAMENTAL TURN

What does your deck do?

What is its fundamental turn?

The fundamental turn is a concept pioneered by Zvi Mowshowitz to denote when a deck does whatever it "does." For aggro and combo decks, their fundamental turn is the turn where it wins



the game. For a control deck the picture is a little murkier, since different elements of the deck's strategy can work at different times in the game. In general, the fundamental turn for control decks is the turn that their game plan begins to work, giving them an advantage in the game that more than makes up for any disadvantages they incurred in the early game.

**DIFFERENT ELEMENTS
OF THE DECK'S
STRATEGY CAN WORK
AT DIFFERENT TIMES
IN THE GAME**

For instance, a turn 4 Supreme Verdict in a format predominantly featuring creature decks can easily make turn 4 into the fundamental turn for a control deck (though Standard at the beginning of 2013 was so built to combat Verdict, it's probably more accurate to say that, "casting a Thragtusk after a Supreme Verdict" marks the beginning of taking control).

When calculating your deck's fundamental turn ask yourself, "What turn do I win the game or threaten to take control of the game on?"

What are your key cards?

Your deck's key cards can provide a lot of guidance in construction of the mana base. If a particular card or combination of cards is central to your game plan, make sure your mana base is in harmony. For instance, if your Modern Dark Zoo deck is four colors and almost all of its spells cost two or less, you want to be sure you can cast all of your spells with the right two lands (which can be searched up by fetchlands).

Assume your deck features Kird Ape, Lightning Helix, Qasali Pridemage, and Dark Confidant. What are the ideal first two lands to fetch up?

If you want all four colors on two lands, then you want to find the optimal combination of shocklands. Lightning Helix and Qasali Pridemage suggest that you need a Stomping Grounds, since you need a non-white Forest and a non-white Mountain to cast both of those spells with just two lands in play. If you know that one of your lands is ideally going to find Stomping Ground early, but also needs black and white mana, that suggests the other land should be Godless Shrine.

We don't stop here, however. We actually use this information to help pick out the best mix of fetchlands.

Let's suppose we're using twelve fetchlands (which is not uncommon). Arid Mesa and Verdant Catacombs are easy, as they fetch up both of the key lands. What's next? Scalding Tarn, Misty Rainforest, and Marsh Flats all only get one of the two. Many novices would assume four Marsh Flats should come next, due to the deck being both black and white, but that isn't really what we are trying to accomplish. If our most traditional game play is to assemble Stomping Ground and Godless Shrine we'd be better served by ten fetches that get Stomping Ground and ten that get Godless Shrine, rather than eight and twelve. This suggests we play something like one Scalding Tarn, one Misty Rainforest, and two Marsh Flats.

Why not just play four Godless Shrines and four Stomping Grounds? First, it's obviously awful to draw all of one or the other. Additionally, sometimes we have to make do with just one land. Other times, we'll have three. When turn 3 rolls around, it's nice to have the option to get Sacred Foundry, which lets you represent both Lightning Bolt and Path to Exile while still tapping your first two lands for Tarmogoyf. Fetchlands are so good at what they do it's often right to err on the side of more fetchlands and less of anything else.

If your key card is Cruel Ultimatum, then you want to make sure your lands are set up to actually cast it (and that doesn't just involve making black, red, and blue mana). For Cruel Ultimatum, every colorless land provides nothing towards it (unless you play cards like Dimir Signet). Your deck may be more blue than anything — but when it comes time to Ultimatum, you can't be sitting on three basic Islands without something like Sunken Ruins to help out.

If you're playing a five-color Tezzeret deck, you can't just count Tezzeret, Agent of Bolas as being single black and single blue if your only black and blue mana comes from Darkslick Shores, Drowned Catacombs, and Sphere of the Suns. They may all produce both black and blue...but not at the same time. This can be made to work; it's just important to remember that Tezzeret costs a double Darkslick Shores in such a deck, meaning that twelve sources isn't going to be enough (despite no "double blue" or "double black").



If you want to cast Cryptic Command on turn 4, ask yourself: do at least three-quarters of your lands produce blue?

If you're playing a Solar Flare deck with Liliana of the Veil, Day of Judgment, and Sun Titan, you may have to decide how many Darkslick Shores to play versus how many Drowned Catacombs you want, as well as Seachrome Coasts versus Glacial Fortress. Ideally, you want to play Liliana on turn 3... so having more black lands that enter the battlefield untapped on turn 3 increases your chances of this. Meanwhile, you want to cast Day of Judgment on turn 4 and Sun Titan on turn 6, so having more white lands that enter *untapped* on turn 4 or turn 6 can help make sure you're not a turn behind.

To build the best mana base we can for a deck, we have to understand what the deck is trying to do... and then ensure that our card choices mesh with the deck's strategy. Are we drawing extra cards? Are we using accelerators? Do we have ways to utilize extra mana later? What does the board look like on our fundamental turn?

Whatever mana we use should take these questions into consideration.

**TO BUILD THE BEST
MANA BASE WE CAN
FOR A DECK, WE HAVE
TO UNDERSTAND
WHAT THE DECK IS
TRYING TO DO**

PLAYING ENOUGH OF EACH COLOR

Of course, it's not enough to just play the right number of lands. We also need to have the right colors of mana. Once in awhile, our list might be just 21 Mountains or some similar mana base, but more than 99% of the time we're going to have to actually select the right mix.

It's not just a matter of counting up the mana symbols to figure out the ratio (though this is a trick that helps a little in Limited). It's about how much of each color you need and when. For instance, let's say we're playing a "Team America" Legacy deck. If we need BB by turn 2 for Hymn to Tourach, it doesn't matter if our deck is evenly split between black, green, and blue. Force of Will just doesn't mean the same things for our mana base as Sinkhole.

How much of a color you can (or should) play is also a function of how good the mana is in a given format. Sometimes, we just

don't have enough good options — but some cards (or synergy between cards) are so good, we're compelled to play a deck that has "bad mana."

We have a variety of types of tools to work with when constructing a mana base. These fall under two categories: lands and nonlands.

THE TYPES OF LAND

Lands are generally evaluated on a scale based the number of colors of it produces. The basic categories are *colorless lands*, *one-color lands*, *two-color lands*, and *five-color lands*.

COLORLESS

There are two basic types of colorless lands. First, there are the truly colorless lands like Ghost Quarter, Tectonic Edge, and Mutavault. In exchange for not producing a color, you get some spell-like ability.

The other, less common type, is that of Moorland Haunt, Kessig Wolf Run, and Nephalia Drownyard. These may be colorless lands, but they function in some ways like two-color spells.

The real cost to use colorless nonbasics scales, depending on how greedy our mana base is. A deck that needs UU by turn 3 to cast Dissipate generally only needs about fifteen to sixteen blue mana sources. But let's say we also want to play Day of Judgment on turn 4. That suggests we use about fourteen to fifteen white mana sources. Let's also assume that we have decided that our blue/white control deck needs about 26 lands to have enough to actually cast its spells. We could build our two-color blue/white deck with four Seachrome Coasts, four Glacial Fortresses, ten Islands, and eight Plains, but that gives us eighteen blue mana sources and sixteen white mana sources.

That is a mana base that is "too good." "Wait," you might be saying, "isn't it better to have more sources of a color than we need?" How can a mana base be too good? Well, at a certain point you get diminishing returns for having improved mana. The increase in probability of playing Dissipate on turn 3 has to be



weighed against the utility of the alternatives, such as Moorland Haunt and Ghost Quarter. We could easily play two Moorland Haunts and two Ghost Quarters instead of two Islands and two Plains, and *still* have a comfortable sixteen blue and fourteen white sources. (And this says nothing of cards like Think Twice increasing our probability of hitting that second blue or white.)

ONE-COLOR LANDS

Again, we see two primary categories. The most common by far are basic lands like Island, Swamp, and Forest. Basic lands really are the most basic building blocks of mana bases, and they're good in basically every format. They may only produce one color — but they don't come into play tapped, they don't deal damage to you, and they don't count as nonbasics for the purposes of cards like Blood Moon.

The far less common variety are nonbasic lands with a special ability. Lands that produce a color of mana always have some other cost involved. Sometimes that cost is more obvious, like Treetop Village (which enters tapped) or Barbarian Ring (which dealing a point of damage when you tap it for mana). Other times that cost is hidden, such as Pendelhaven, which is both legendary (a drawback) and nonbasic (also a drawback).

TWO-COLOR LANDS

The most common form of mana fixing, “dual lands” produce two colors of mana with some sort of cost attached.

There are three common types of dual lands: those that enter the battlefield tapped some or all of the time (Creeping Tar Pit, Darkslick Shores, Drowned Catacombs, Secluded Glen), those that do damage to you (Underground River, Watery Grave), and finally those that take extra effort to operate (River of Tears and Sunken Ruins).

I may have surprised some readers by not listing Watery Grave as a tapped land — but because you can always choose to untap it, it functions much more like a painland (after all, you don't always *have* to tap your Underground River for black or blue).





While producing two colors used to be enough of a payoff for lands entering the battlefield tapped, nowadays lands that enter tapped have some other upside. Sometimes this is entering the battlefield untapped under certain conditions (Darkslick Shores, Drowned Catacombs, Secluded Glen). Other times we get some other upside, such as turning into a creature (Creeping Tar Pit), gaining life (Jwar-Isle Refuge), or named interactions on other cards (Dimir Guildgate).

There has even been a cycle of tri-lands, which are actually sort of like dual lands that enter tapped, and have the extra upside of producing a third color, such as Crumbling Necropolis and Savage Lands.

The cost of getting a second color is dependent on the format. In Standard, we have lands that enter the battlefield tapped some amount of the time. In Modern, a second color costs about a point of damage (fetchlands, shocklands costing two life half the time) or some other inconvenience (Sunken Ruins, River of Tears, etc).

In Legacy, the original dual lands are legal, making the only cost the fact that the land is not a basic land. The result of such differing bars for what dual lands cost you helps to define differences in what sorts of strategies are playable. For instance, in Standard, two-color decks are generally the most common (though Return to Ravnica, which specifically wanted to enable multicolor decks, has made three-color decks the norm). One-color decks and those with more than three colors are less common, but hardly rare.



In Modern, three-color decks are the norm.

In Vintage, people can play any number of colors they want with relatively minimal cost.

FIVE-COLOR LANDS

Finally, we come to five-color lands. Drawbacks range from pain (City of Brass) to tempo (Undiscovered Paradise) to mana (Shimmering Grotto) to depletion (Gemstone Mine) to requiring certain conditions be met (Glimmervoid).

Interestingly, the most common type of five-color land we will work with while constructing mana bases are fetchlands in formats where shocklands or original dual lands are legal. When we have access to cards like Misty Rainforest or Arid Mesa we can generally sculpt our mana base in such a way that we can count on the fetchland to find whatever two colors we need early. Later it doesn't matter, since we presumably already have our colors. Basically, as long as we play enough lands to be fetched up to cast all our spells, we can count our fetches as every color.

Imagine the following mana base:

- 4 Arid Mesa
- 4 Misty Rainforest
- 2 Scalding Tarn
- 2 Marsh Flats
- 3 Stomping Ground
- 2 Sacred Foundry
- 1 Temple Garden
- 1 Plains
- 1 Forest
- 1 Mountain

This list actually contains several more lands to fetch than lands that can actually be fetched. That's no problem, though, because when are you actually going to want to search and have nothing to find? When you need a tenth land? In your quick-burst Zoo deck? As a Zoo player, you want a very high probability of producing a green on turn 1 for Noble Hierarch, white for Loam Lion, and red for Kird Ape. How can you pull it all off?



Fetchlands consistently count as “all five colors,” since they produce whatever you need. Obviously if you have only one-color lands, it won’t make all your colors — however you are generally going to need at least two mana with a deck like this to play a lot of your spells. If you have the Stomping Ground, go find whichever white land you can. If you already have Temple Garden, go find a red one. Since we can count fetchlands as all our colors, we can say this deck has eighteen sources of red, seventeen sources of green, and sixteen sources of white (which isn’t too bad for a deck of only 21 total lands, three of which are basic).

Sometimes we won’t always have the ideal fetchlands available to us (such as formats where Misty Rainforest is legal, but Polluted Delta is not). Sometimes we won’t want to play one of every dual land we could, as when we use Volcanic Island but not Plateau. In situations like this, we must ask ourselves what we are trying to accomplish. What are our options?

Often, it will be up to us how “good” to make our fetchlands. There is a limit to how much it’s worth to invest in them. For instance, if you’re playing a five-color blue deck, you don’t want a Stomping Ground, Overgrown Tomb, Temple Garden, Sacred Foundry, Godless Shrine, and Blood Crypt messing up your Cryptic Command!



EXAMPLES OF MANA BASES

Let's take a look at a few sample mana bases, to get a feel for some of the ranges we might want to work with. Up first, a few mono-color mana bases.

Mono Red

Dayv Doberne 1st StarCityGames.com Open Series Indianapolis 2011 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Stromkirk Noble	3 Koth of the Hammer
3 Grim Lavamancer	4 Shrine of Burning Rage
2 Goblin Arsonist	3 Incinerate
2 Spikeshot Elder	3 Arc Trail
4 Stormblood Berserker	4 Brimstone Volley
3 Chandra's Phoenix	23 Mountain
2 Hero of Oxid Ridge	

SIDEBOARD

4 Vulshok Refugee
 3 Manic Vandal
 2 Perilous Myr
 2 Hero of Oxid Ridge
 1 Sword of War and Peace
 1 Arc Trail
 1 Traitorous Blood
 1 Mountain

The most straightforward of mana bases, 23 basic mountains and call it a day. Some mono-red decks are going to have just 20 or 21 — but however you slice it, you don't need to get too fancy in the right formats.

Rebels

Warren Marsh 2nd Pro Tour New York 2000 (Masques Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

3 Ramosian Sergeant	2 Disenchant
2 Ramosian Lieutenant	2 Seal of Cleansing
4 Steadfast Guard	4 Story Circle
4 Lin Sivvi, Defiant Hero	4 Parallax Wave
3 Voice of Truth	4 Reverent Mantra
1 Ramosian Sky Marshal	4 Rishadan Port
1 Jhovall Queen	22 Plains

SIDEBOARD

1 Distorting Lens
 4 Defender en-Vec
 1 Lightbringer
 1 Nightwind Glider
 1 Voice of Truth
 1 Seal of Cleansing
 2 Disenchant
 4 Topple

Taking the complexity up just a single step, it is a very common mono-color deckbuilding technique to use three or four copies of a colorless nonbasic and fill out the deck with basics. Whether the colorless land is Rishadan Port, Mutavault, Wasteland, Tectonic Edge, Hellion Crucible, Inkmoth Nexus, or anything else, this is one of the basic mana bases to use time and again.

Draw-Go

Randy Buehler World Championships 1999 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Rainbow Efreet	2 Dissipate
4 Force Spike	3 Forbid
4 Whispers of the Muse	4 Dismiss
4 Impulse	4 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Counterspell	4 Quicksand
3 Mana Leak	4 Stalking Stones
1 Memory Lapse	18 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Sea Sprite
4 Hydroblast
4 Wasteland
2 Capsize
1 Grindstone

Suicide King

Brian Schneider Extended 1999

MAINDECK

4 Carnophage	4 Cursed Scroll
4 Sarcomancy	4 Sphere of Resistance
4 Skittering Skirge	4 Hymn to Tourach
2 Flesh Reaver	4 Mishra's Factory
4 Dark Ritual	4 Wasteland
4 Demonic Consultation	14 Swamp
4 Duress	

SIDEBOARD

4 Dystopia
4 Engineered Plague
4 Funeral Charm
3 Spinning Darkness

Here are two examples of all-basics plus eight colorless lands. This is a common theme in formats that contain many tier 1 colorless lands, but don't contain many good gold cards.

Notice how each of these decks not only features eight colorless lands, but each has another mana source hidden. The mono-black deck features four Dark Rituals, while the mono-blue deck has four Wastelands in the sideboard. It's not that they board out Quicksand for Wasteland — but rather that in some matchups, they boarded up to 30 lands!



White Weenie

Paul Rietzl 1st Pro Tour Amsterdam 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Steppe Lynx	1 Path to Exile
4 Student of Warfare	4 Honor of the Pure
4 Figure of Destiny	4 Spectral Procession
4 Ethersworn Canonist	4 Marsh Flats
4 Knight of the White Orchid	4 Arid Mesa
2 Ranger of Eos	4 Flagstones of Trokair
4 Brave the Elements	1 Horizon Canopy
2 Mana Tithe	10 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Relic of Progenitus
 3 Burrenton Forge-Tender
 3 Path to Exile
 2 Rule of Law
 1 Angel's Grace
 1 Celestial Purge
 1 Lapse of Certainty

Here, we see an example of a mana base being used as part of a deck's core engine. Fetchlands and Flagstones allow for double landfall bonuses, meaning this deck packs a dozen lands with a primary purpose to make Steppe Lynx better. That may seem like a lot of work to trigger a single landfall creature — but Rietzl now has 40,000 reasons why it was worth it.

The single Canopy is a good example of a minor tweak that has some small benefit, but a small cost. It's also the type of cost that could be much greater if you ever drew two. Playing just a single copy minimizes the risk of the cost actually being problematic, while still adding options.



Wolf Run Green

Ben Friedman 1st StarCityGames.com Open Series Baltimore 2011 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise	4 Garruk, Primal Hunter
2 Llanowar Elves	4 Rampant Growth
4 Dungrove Elder	3 Beast Within
3 Solemn Simulacrum	3 Green Sun's Zenith
2 Batterskull	2 Inkmoth Nexus
1 Acidic Slime	2 Kessig Wolf Run
4 Primeval Titan	19 Forest
1 Wurmcoil Engine	2 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Thrun, the Last Troll
 3 Gut Shot
 2 Ancient Grudge
 2 Sword of Feast and Famine
 1 Acidic Slime
 1 Tree of Redemption
 1 Viridian Corrupter
 1 Beast Within
 1 Karn Liberated

Finally, an example of a “mono-color” mana base that contains two different types of basic lands. While Ancient Grudge out of the board technically makes this deck two colors, it’s still popularly described as being a mono-color deck because it shares more properties with a mono than a two-color deck.

Green decks aren’t the only decks that have this kind of a splash available to them. Occasionally, one or two basics can be combined with cards like Evolving Wilds to open up a small splash in an otherwise mono-color strategy.

TWO-COLOR MANA BASES

In a two-color aggro deck, it is more likely that thirteen to fifteen sources are enough for each color — though if you need two of a color, I would generally go back closer to eighteen. Noble Hierarch is much better on turn 1 than any other turn. How many ways do you have to play it on turn 1? If you want to play Terminate on turn 2, how many lands do you have that come into play tapped? Could you consistently play a land on turn 2 and still cast Terminate? Here are a few basic types of two-color mana bases:

Psychatog

Kai Budde 1st German National Championship 2002 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Nightscape Familiar
4 Psychatog
4 Force Spike
4 Counterspell
3 Memory Lapse
3 Circular Logic
4 Repulse
3 Probe

4 Fact or Fiction
2 Upheaval
1 Cephalid Coliseum
1 Darkwater Catacombs
4 Salt Marsh
4 Underground River
11 Island
4 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Duress
4 Ghastly Demise
3 Deep Analysis
2 Slay
1 Possessed Aven
1 Skeletal Scrying

Here, we see a fairly typical imbalanced two-color deck. Two-color decks will often have just eight dual lands to work with, but the mix of basics can fluctuate anywhere between an even split to no basics of the minor color at all. Notice how Cephalid Coliseum and Darkwater Catacombs are used in a very similar way that Paul Rietzl used Horizon Canopy in his mono-white deck — minor abilities that you don’t want more than one of. Mana

bases are often filled with mana sources that offer good effects with diminishing returns, and playing one of a variety of useful nonbasic lands is hardly rare.

While it is similar in colors, note how different Paulo's Faeries is compared to Kai's Psychatog.

Faeries

Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa 8th Pro Tour Hollywood 2008 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Spellstutter Sprite	2 Pendelhaven
4 Scion of Oona	2 Faerie Conclave
3 Vendillion Clique	4 Mutavault
4 Mistbind Clique	3 River of Tears
4 Ancestral Vision	4 Secluded Glen
4 Bitterblossom	4 Underground River
4 Terror	3 River of Tears
4 Rune Snag	2 Sunken Ruins
4 Cryptic Command	4 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Thoughtseize
3 Bottle Gnomes
3 Razormane Masticore
3 Damnation
2 Murderous Redcap

Paulo has a plethora of creatures, each with an “enters the battlefield” ability, not to mention an army of manlands. Meanwhile, Kai relies on fewer creatures and none of them act like spells when you play them. Faeries can't match Psychatog in permission, but helps make up for it with creature removal and the ability to race.

There are two important and related points here. First, Paulo's mana base was constructed in a format with far more (and better) options for special lands. But even accounting for his access to more dual lands than Kai, the 2008 Standard format also contained more manlands than one could (or would want to) play. It also featured a variety of “colorless” nonbasics, such as Pendelhaven.

This mana base isn't really going to be the best to template off of, as the choices of each type were a function of the best mix of the most powerful lands available in 2008 (which will surely never arise in the same configuration again).



What it *does* serve as is a source of a number of pieces of wisdom that we'd do well to master, such as the diminishing returns of nonbasic lands.

Sometimes, there will be dual lands that are enough better than the other options to just use them (such as Glacial Fortress and Seachrome Coast over Sejiri Refuge). However, when we have access to more good dual lands than we can use and they're very near each other in power level using a mix can maximize our chances of not being stuck suffering from the drawbacks of each of these lands. That said, if a particular land fits your strategy better it can easily be worth maxing out on that one, even if the land is generally weaker than the alternative.

For instance, Paulo's four Secluded Glen is no surprise, as his plentiful supply of Faeries made it virtually free. Underground River is generally the weakest of the three nonbasics he had to choose from to fill out his mana base, but he uses a full four, as it is the only one of the options that would let him cast Ancestral Vision on turn 1. For the remaining slots, Paulo goes with a mixture, as drawing one each of River of Tears and Sunken Ruins is better than two of either (two Rivers and you may have no black mana when you need it, two Sunken Ruins and you can't cast anything). Because the risk of ruin is even higher with two Sunken Ruins, Paulo makes the split three-two in favor of the River of Tears.

B/W Tokens

Luis Scott-Vargas 2nd Pro Tour Kyoto 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Knight of Meadowgrain
4 Tidehollow Sculler
4 Kitchen Finks
4 Cloudgoat Ranger
3 Ajani Goldmane
4 Bitterblossom
4 Terror
4 Glorious Anthem
4 Spectral Procession

2 Mutavault
4 Windbrisk Heights
4 Reflecting Pool
4 Arcane Sanctum
4 Caves of Koilos
4 Fetid Heath
2 Plains
1 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Burrenton Forge-Tender
3 Path to Exile
2 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
2 Wrath of God
2 Head Games
1 Celestial Purge
1 Wispmare
1 Ajani Goldmane

Luis's B/W mana base has a number of interesting components. Perhaps most loudly, it uses Arcane Sanctum as a B/W tapped land, without a single card that uses blue mana. But why does he need to cast anything blue? He'd play a B/W tapped land, so not using the card to full effect is fine. Black/White wasn't really a supported color combination, being neither friendly nor containing a tribe. Luis was just happy to have the eight real dual lands he did (not to mention Reflecting Pool to get extra value out of them).

He could have gotten by on more basics if he needed to — but all of these dual lands let him support both Spectral Procession and Thoughtseize, while still finding room for a couple of Mutavaults.

Rakdos

Orry Swift 1st Grand Prix San Antonio Trial 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Diregraf Ghoul	2 Sign in Blood
4 Gravecrawler	1 Victim of Night
4 Knight of Infamy	2 Brimstone Volley
4 GERALF's Messenger	4 Cavern of Souls
4 Falkenrath Aristocrat	4 Blood Crypt
3 Hellrider	4 Dragonskull Summit
3 Thundermaw Hellkite	4 Rakdos Guildgate
1 Pillar of Flame	7 Swamp
4 Searing Spear	1 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Pillar of Flame
2 Zealous Conscripts
2 Appetite for Brains
2 Bonfire of the Damned
2 Cremate
2 Ultimate Price
1 Underworld Connections
1 Flames of the Firebrand

Our final two-color example is from recent times (at least “recent times” as defined by the publication of *Next Level Deckbuilding* in July of 2013). Outside of the usual “play a lot of duals” approach, we can make a few observations.

First, notice how Orry's use of GERALF's Messenger puts a lot of pressure on the mana base. He doesn't just want to play the Messenger eventually, he wants it on turn 3. This means almost no lands that fail to contribute to this goal. Some players in the format didn't even use the basic Mountain.



Next, Cavern of Souls reminds us that from time to time five-color lands *will* be the best dual lands. It's worth remembering that lands with casting restrictions, such as the Cavern, must be dealt with delicately when factoring in things like being able to cast red noncreature spells.

The other important point is the use of Rakdos Guildgate. Many players were initially reluctant to use the Guildgates, since they were so much weaker than shocklands or M10 lands, and seemed to interfere with one-drop aggression plays. However, if you want to consistently play Geralf's Messenger on turn 3, and Hellrider on turn 4, you're going to need an awful lot of dual lands.

Even Orry's mana base is only 85% likely to find two red sources by turn 4 — and that's counting Cavern of Souls, which is certainly not always going to be naming Devil. Replace the four Guildgates with two Swamps and two Mountains, and now we're only 78% to find two red by turn 4 (not to mention only 68% to hit triple black on turn 3, as opposed to 76% like the above list).

THREE-COLOR MANA BASES

How good your mana can (and should) be is mostly a function of the mana fixing available in a format. Generally, in three-color aggro decks I like to have at least eighteen to nineteen sources of my primary color, assuming I need to have at least two mana of that color.

You can't just look at the lands that produce each color, however. For instance, Rampant Growth helps produce red or black mana... but it shouldn't be counted as green mana, since it costs green to start it.

You also need to keep in mind how many lands do the things you need at the right time. However, if you're trying to cast a triple-green card, Rampant Growth certainly helps. Farseek may seem like a different story, but it still doesn't give you that first green—so the fact that it fetches duals is less important to our mana base than might appear at first blush.

It is important to ask ourselves which of the three possible types of three-color mana bases are we looking for?

**HOW GOOD YOUR
MANA CAN BE IS A
FUNCTION OF THE
MANA FIXING
AVAILABLE IN
A FORMAT**

A BASE COLOR WITH TWO SUPPORT COLORS

RUG Delver

Antonino De Rosa 1st Grand Prix Turin 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Delver of Secrets	2 Deprive
4 Tarmogoyf	2 Vedalken Shackles
4 Snapcaster Mage	1 Electrolyze
2 Vendilion Clique	2 Cryptic Command
1 Phyrexian Metamorph	4 Misty Rainforest
1 Garruk Relentless	4 Scalding Tarn
4 Serum Visions	2 Steam Vents
4 Lightning Bolt	2 Breeding Pool
2 Burst Lightning	1 Stomping Ground
2 Spell Pierce	6 Island
1 Spell Snare	1 Forest
3 Mana Leak	1 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Blood Moon
3 Huntmaster of the Fells
2 Ancient Grudge
2 Relic of Progenitus
2 Threads of Disloyalty
1 Spell Pierce
1 Negate
1 Combust

This type of mana base typically contains almost all lands that make the primary color, excepting fetchable one-ofs (such as basics and shocklands) or colorless nonbasics. Note the relatively low five duals, because of Blood Moon's prevalence at the time.

TWO COLORS WITH A SPLASH

Esper Spirits

Jon Finkel 3rd Pro Tour Dark Ascension 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Delver of Secrets	1 Divine Offering
4 Snapcaster Mage	4 Linging Souls
3 Phantasmal Image	2 Moorland Haunt
4 Drogskol Captain	2 Evolving Wilds
2 Dungeon Geists	4 Darkslick Shores
4 Ponder	4 Seachrome Coast
4 Gitaxian Probe	3 Glacial Fortress
4 Vapor Snag	5 Island
1 Gut Shot	1 Plains
2 Mana Leak	1 Swamp
1 Revoke Existence	

SIDEBOARD

2 Dungeon Geist
2 Gut Shot
2 Surgical Extraction
1 Celestial Purge
1 Demystify
1 Dismember
1 Dissipate
1 Divine Offering
1 Mana Leak
1 Negate
1 Phantasmal Image
1 Revoke Existence

This is a great example piloted by Jon Finkel at Pro Tour Dark Ascension in early 2012. Rather than being a mono-color deck with two minor colors, these sorts of decks are really just two-color decks with a very light splash — a splash often enabled by a tri-land or some land searcher, such as Evolving Wilds, fetchlands, or Rampant Growth.

A RELATIVELY EVENLY THREE COLORS

An example of a three color deck with a relatively even split ratio would be Simon Görtzen's Pro Tour-winning Jund deck:

Jund

Simon Görtzen 1st Pro Tour San Diego 2010 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Putrid Leech	4 Savage Lands
4 Sprouting Thrinax	4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Bloodbraid Elf	4 Raging Ravine
3 Siege-Gang Commander	2 Lavaclaw Reaches
3 Broodmate Dragon	2 Dragonskull Summit
2 Garruk Wildspeaker	1 Rootbound Crag
4 Lightning Bolt	4 Forest
2 Rampant Growth	3 Swamp
3 Maelstrom Pulse	3 Mountain
4 Blightning	

SIDEBOARD

4 Deathmark
4 Great Sable Stag
3 Master of the Wild Hunt
2 Terminate
1 Maelstrom Pulse
1 Pithing Needle

This is an example of a true three-color deck, one that actually wants to play cards of each of its colors early. These types of mana bases aren't possible in all formats — but they aren't rare, either.

The most interesting part of this mana base isn't the card choices, but rather the quantity of each card. Twenty-seven lands and two Rampant Growths? This just shows the power of lands that function as spells, such as Simon's manlands. It's easy to replace normal lands with action lands such as manlands or Kessig Wolf Run; however, doing so brings a great deal of risk.

In addition to not always having enough mana to activate them, just look at how many of Simon's lands come into play tapped. In order to make room for the number of untapped lands he wanted, he had to play a higher total quantity (which made them effectively act as mini-Dark Rituals, when he really needed to hit that fourth land on turn 4).



FOUR- AND FIVE-COLOR MANA BASES

Four- and five-color mana bases are generally lumped together, as they use so much of the same technology. Let's start with one of the most iconic five-color mana bases: full-on Vivid-Land 5-Color Control.

5-Color Control

Gabriel Nassif 1st Pro Tour Kyoto, 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Plumeveil	2 Cruel Ultimatum
3 Wall of Reverence	4 Reflecting Pool
4 Mulldrifter	2 Exotic Orchard
3 Broodmate Dragon	4 Vivid Creek
4 Broken Ambitions	3 Vivid Marsh
1 Pithing Needle	2 Vivid Crag
1 Terror	2 Vivid Meadow
1 Celestial Purge	4 Sunken Ruins
4 Esper Charm	2 Cascade Bluffs
4 Volcanic Fallout	1 Mystic Gate
4 Cryptic Command	3 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Scepter of Fugue
2 Wrath of God
2 Infest
2 Wydwen, the Biting Gale
2 Negate
1 Remove Soul
1 Celestial Purge
1 Wispmare

This mana base is the poster boy of the problems with mana being too easy. It's one thing to want players to be able to cast their spells, but when their spells are Cruel Ultimatum, Cryptic Command, Wrath of God, Volcanic Fallout, and Broodmate Dragon all side-by-side, that's going a *bit* far. This build wasn't even as ambitious as some decks would eventually go on to be, making room for the GGGG-needing Cloudthresher.

How was this possible? Exploiting the interaction between Vivid lands and Reflecting Pool, Manuel Bucher turned the tournament scene on its head when he unveiled the first true Vivid land mana base at Pro Tour Hollywood 2008 (the same format where Paulo's Faeries list originated).

This is a perfect example of when a mana base builds a deck, rather than the other way around. It isn't that five-color players just scrapped together this mana base because they had all these spells to support. Once you get ahold of the technology of using ten or more Vivids in conjunction with Reflecting Pools and filter lands, the question becomes, "What spells would we play in a world where we can cast literally anything we want?"



U/B Teachings

Guillaume Wafo-Tapa 1st Pro Tour Yokohama 2006 (Time Spiral Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

2 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
2 Aeon Chronicler
2 Draining Whelk
1 Triskelavus
2 Think Twice
1 Snapback
2 Sudden Death
4 Cancel
4 Damnation
4 Careful Consideration
3 Mystical Teachings

2 Tendrils of Corruption
1 Haunting Hymn
4 Prismatic Lens
1 Academy Ruins
1 Urza's Factory
1 Molten Slagheap
4 Dreadship Reef
4 Terramorphic Expanse
4 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth
10 Island
1 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Detritivore
3 Premature Burial
2 Pull from Eternity
1 Disenchant
1 Extirpate
1 Fortune Thief
1 Mountain
1 Plains
1 Sudden Death
1 Temporal Isolation

While Wafo-Tapa has played his fair share of true five-color decks, his Pro Tour Yokohama-winning Teachings deck is really just a two-color deck with a couple of minor splashes to fill it out to four colors. In the format that followed, some players actually added the fifth color, powered off of five-color fixers like Terramorphic Expanse, Prismatic Lens, and eventually even Coalition Relic.

Wafo's list is another example of a mana base that is a part of the deck's core engine. While he uses lands like Urza's Factory and Academy Ruins (combining with Triskelavus) as alternate victory conditions, he also uses the full four Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoths to fuel otherwise silly Tendrils of Corruption. Why use four identical *legendary* lands? Outside of legendary land concerns, Wafo-Tapa knew that finding Urborg was crucial to his game plan, as he needed the lifegain from the Tendrils.



Five-Color Green

Matt Place Regionals 1997 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise	4 Arcane Denial
4 Quirion Ranger	2 Disenchant
4 Granger Guildmage	2 Armor of Thorns
4 River Boa	2 Terror
4 Whirling Dervish	3 Winter Orb
1 Karoo Meerkat	1 Armageddon
2 Jolrael's Centaur	4 Undiscovered Paradise
3 Maro	3 City of Brass
4 Incinerate	9 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Hydroblast
4 Pyroblast
2 Gloom
2 Terror
2 Simoon
1 Disenchant

This is one of the earliest decks to break the mold of traditional mana bases. Matt's five-color green deck defies expectation not only in terms of how many colors one can play, but how few lands one can get away with in playing them. Whenever there are two or more good five-color fixers in a format, a five-color deck may emerge. One possible form is that of a mono-colored deck that splashes three or four other colors, as we see here.

Supersaturation of five-color lands leads to some pretty bizarre mana bases from time to time. More often than not it's a crazy combo deck that uses large numbers of five-color lands, such as Tomoharu Saito's Hypergenesis deck from 2010 Extended (the format that gave birth to Modern).

Hypergenesis

Tomoharu Saito 8th Grand Prix Oakland 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Simian Spirit Guide	3 Oblivion Ring
1 Sakashima the Impostor	3 Thirst for Knowledge
4 Angel of Despair	1 Calciform Pools
4 Bogardan Hellkite	3 Forbidden Orchard
4 Terastodon	3 Fungal Reaches
4 Progenitus	1 Gemstone Caverns
3 Hypergenesis	4 Gemstone Mine
4 Ardent Plea	4 Reflecting Pool
4 Violent Outburst	4 Tendo Ice Bridge
1 Demonic Dread	1 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Leyline of the Void
3 Ricochet Trap
2 Ingot Chewer
2 Shriekmaw
2 Sakashima the Impostor
2 Firespout

If you plan to end the game by turn 3 or 4, the drawbacks of most five-color lands matter little to you. Sometimes they kill you but generally if you haven't already won by then you've already lost.

One other point of interest in Saito's mana base is the use of storage lands. Clearly Saito doesn't believe the storage lands are the best at fixing his mana early. Rather, they are a backup plan for the many games where the combo element of the deck fizzles and he has to just hard-cast the big creatures he was hoping to get into play with Hypergenesis.

An interesting feature of five-color mana bases is that generally all of the various guidelines for mana bases apply to them (at the same time). For instance:

If you're splashing a color with just one colored mana in its cost and you don't need it during the first few turns, eight to nine primary sources is a good rule of thumb.

If you want a particular color on the second turn, such as for Farseek or Mana Leak, you generally want at least thirteen sources (though this depends heavily of how good the mana is in your given format). Thirteen sources gives you an 88% chance of hitting one by turn 2. Similarly, you generally want at least 14 if you want it turn 1, twelve if you want it by turn 3, eleven if you want it by turn 4, and so on.

If you want two of a color, such as double blue for a counterspell of some sort, or double white for a sweeper, then you generally want fourteen to eighteen sources, depending on how early you want it. Eighteen sources means a 76% chance of hitting two sources by turn 2, so we want even more if the format allows it. Sixteen sources for turn 3 and fourteen sources for turn 4 give us similar chances of hitting the mana we need.

If we have a primary color that we absolutely *must* have in order to play, we probably want at least 18-21 primary sources of that color (though sometimes we want even more if we have triple requirements, like Gerald's Messenger or Cryptic Command).

What are primary sources of mana? The sources you can count on for the mana when it's relevant. For instance, Misty Rainforest counts as a source of blue or green, despite producing neither. Rampant Growth can count towards every color you have a basic



land of, except green (since you need green to cast it at all). You can still count it as your second or third source of green — just not your first. If you're trying to cast *Birds of Paradise* on turn 1, you can count *Copperline Gorge*... but you can't count *Rootbound Crag*. *Exotic Orchard* is great, but can't be counted on to cast *Cryptic Command*.

A special note on filterlands: some decks will have plenty of blue sources that are not red, and sources of red that are not blue (such as a Modern deck with *Islands* and *Valakuts*). In such a deck, we can sometimes count *Cascade Bluffs* as being almost 1.5 sources of blue or red for the purposes of *Cryptic Command* or *Volcanic Fallout*.



WAYS TO DEAL WITH EVENTUAL FLOODING

The fundamental dilemma of Magic's resource system is that early in a game you need lands, but at some point lands become dead draws. If you're just relying on the top card of your deck each turn, then eventually you will reach a point where somewhere around 40% of your draw steps are blanks. If the game's at a standstill, then you're actually skipping 40% of your turns!

Just think about those painful turns where you're getting attacked and are waiting to draw anything good. Each land you draw makes your entire turn wasted.

Is it any wonder so many players are tempted to play a few lands less?

Because we start the game with seven cards, not just one, we don't perceive this limitation as much. We have more spells than we can possibly cast in a turn. We begin the game bottlenecked on mana, in Stage One development. This subject is covered at length in *Next Level Magic*, but the short version is that we begin every game mana-screwed, since we usually don't have enough lands in play to cast any of our spells.

As the game progresses, we have access to more and more mana, meaning we're able to play more of our cards (and ending up with less in hand, since we've played more of them already). When we have enough mana for our deck to operate normally, we are said

to be in Stage Two. If we don't do something about it, rather than continue to grow, our position will sputter out.

There are a variety of solutions to this problem, and the right ones are most commonly a function of how “long game” of a strategy we are playing, and what sorts of effects have the best rate in the format. Here, rate refers to a card's mana efficiency, as in, “at what rate do you get power per mana?” Some aggressive strategies don't even bother addressing this issue, as they aim to win quickly; if the game goes long, they've probably already lost.

Controlling and midrange decks are generally going to feature quite a few methods of addressing mana flood. One very popular method is to use some lands that double as spells. These can range anywhere from manlands, like Raging Ravine and Inkmoth Nexus, to utility lands, like Kessig Wolf Run and Tectonic Edge.

Another popular approach—which is my favorite—is to draw extra cards. With enough card draw spells in your deck, you can draw enough cards to ensure that you never sputter out. While these kinds of decks generally have to play more land than others, the benefits of drawing cards compound. When you play a card draw spell, some percentage of the cards you draw are also card draw spells.

Another possible way to utilize your late game mana is with mana sinks, such as Devil's Play, Figure of Destiny, or Olivia Voldaren. Yet another tactic, though much less common, is to sacrifice or discard extra lands for profit; this includes everything from Faithless Looting to Dustbowl. Finally, just having a couple of late-game expensive cards can add a powerful dimension to a midrange deck.

While aggressive decks don't always play cards to combat late-game mana flood, they should always ask themselves if any cards in the format fill this role with a sufficiently low opportunity cost. For instance, there were formats with mono-red aggro decks that had little desire to pay for a late game... but Firebolt and Barbarian Ring had *such* low opportunity costs to play in the late game, they might as well play them.

Whatever your plan for combating late-game mana flood, even if the plan is to just try to win before it comes to that, it remains crucial to know what your plan is. Otherwise, you might not even be asking the right questions when tuning your deck.



TEMPLATING

The most important tool for developing mana bases is learning how to use *templating*. Templating is when you use something that already exists as the model for what you are making. For example, let's say you're making a new B/R deck. It's very useful to check out what other similar decks have used as a mana base.

Looking at the most difficult to cast spells can give you an idea of what decks might have similar mana-requirements. For instance, if your B/R deck uses Gerialf's Messenger and Thundermaw Hellkite, looking at other decks that use these two cards can give you an idea of what your mana base might want to look like.

On the other hand, if your B/R deck has twelve red one-drops and only splashes black for Falkenrath Aristocrat and Dreadbore, you're going to want a very different mana base.

You might use a fairly different mix of Bant control cards than Reid Duke or Sam Black, but it can still be useful to use their mana base as a template for your own. Obviously, you'll have to tweak it to meet your deck's needs, but this is a great starting point.

Do *not* cheat on land! Figure out what you're asking of your deck, then play the amount of land you're supposed to. Every rule has exceptions, of course but in general skimping on land is a mistake, losing us so many games that we might not even realize how badly it's affecting us.

When developing your mana base-making skills, start by studying every winning decklist you can. We can learn a lot by looking closely at every deck played in a tournament by our favorite deckbuilders. We aren't just copying, we are looking for patterns. What similarities do their mana bases have? What lands do they use four of? How many of each color do they use? How many lands do they play total?

Now look at what's missing. What mana fixing is *not* popular? What lands do they *not* play four of? Who *isn't* splashing a color, when you think they might be able to?

**WHEN DEVELOPING
YOUR MANA BASE-
MAKING SKILLS,
START BY STUDYING
EVERY WINNING
DECKLIST YOU CAN**

Now, ask yourself: how did the designer come up with this mana base? Did they just copy another popular, existing, mana base? What are the hardest spells to play in their deck? Lotleth Troll on turn 2? Geralf's Messenger on turn 3? Falkenrath Aristocrat on turn 4? What is their mana base designed to do?

When we have some understanding of why they played the mana they did, we can turn our focus back to the mana base of our deck and imagine what the games will look like. Are we counting Cavern of Souls as a red source because our only red cards were creatures? If so, we'd better factor that in if we're considering adding Bonfire of the Damned.

Learning from the mana bases of others is useful for every tournament player, but it's particularly important for aspiring deckbuilders. It's mind-blowing to think of how many potentially brilliant ideas have been lost to faulty mana bases that made the deck look too clunky or slow, when it could have been a monster. The more successful mana bases we study, the more we will intuitively understand what works and what doesn't.

DECKBUILDING TACTICS

DECK SIZE: THE 61-CARD QUESTION

It's so easy to just shuffle up 61 cards, rather than face the last and most painful cut. We've all done it; even at the professional level, you see people register 61-card decks despite the supposed wisdom that playing 60 cards is a must.

Well, which is it? Is it just foolish to play more than 60 cards, and are you throwing away percentages, or are there times that playing 61 cards (or more) is actually justified?

Does it even matter much?

Since there hasn't yet been a tournament-legal deck that could actually win on its own with 60 (or 61) copies of the same card, just about by definition some of your cards will be better than others. Even if it's only by tiny amounts, your win percentage does vary based on how good the hands you draw are. But defining the goodness of a card is more than just the card's intrinsic power — it's also about its synergy. Puresteel Paladin is naturally strong, but its ultimate strength is still dependent on the synergy with the other cards in your deck; for example, how much equipment do you play with? Can you take advantage of the mana saved by his metalcraft ability? Can you build a deck that uses him well, but still works when you don't draw him? Likewise, Duress is a strong card, but if the format isn't a good place for maindeck Duresses, it doesn't matter how good the card is in other formats.

What makes a good hand isn't always card quality either. Often, a good mix of cards is just as important as drawing the best cards — and sometimes more. The most common way to see this is a good mix of land and spells. Other common desirable mixes include "creatures and removal," "a mix of creatures of different mana costs," and "some reactive spells and a way to draw cards."

This desire to draw a good mix of different types of cards is a driving force motivating players to only play 60 cards. To start with a very basic example, let's look at a deck with 24 lands among its 60 cards. Let's suppose you're on the play and have a good mix of spells, with two lands. Looking at your hand, you have a good curve... but you need a third land on turn 3 to have a truly excellent hand. What are your chances of "getting there?"

**A GOOD MIX OF
CARDS IS JUST AS
IMPORTANT
AS DRAWING THE
BEST CARDS —
SOMETIMES MORE**

This math is relatively easy to calculate. Your deck is currently 22/53 land — but when determining your chances of drawing a card over multiple draws, a good short cut is to figure out what your chances are of *not* drawing the card in question. Then subtract that total from 100% (or whatever other total you are using).

**A GOOD SHORT-CUT
IS TO FIGURE OUT
YOUR CHANCES OF
NOT DRAWING
THE CARD**

In this example, your chance of *not* drawing a land on the second turn (remember, you are on the play) is 31/53. For the second card to be relevant we assume you missed on your first shot, so we can say the chance of *not* drawing a land on turn 3 is 30/52 (as there is one more non-land card missing). We now multiply these two numbers together (since we add probabilities by multiplying the chances of them both occurring with each other). This gives us 930/2756, or 33.75%. Since these are the odds that we *don't* get there, we subtract this from 100% to arrive at our odds of actually getting there: 66.25%.

Now let's consider the same scenario, except that our deck has 26 lands and 65 cards. This is the same mana ratio (40%) as the previous list. We look at our opening hand of seven cards and see that same mix of two land and five spells. What are our chances of "getting there" this time?

This time, we start with 24/58 lands, so our chances of *not* drawing a land on turn 2 are 34/58. Assuming we miss on that turn, our chances of missing again on turn 3 are 33/57. Multiplying these together, we get a combined total of 1122/3306, or 33.93%. Subtracting this from 100%, we see that despite having the same starting mana ratio our odds of "getting there" are only 66.07%.

That's a decrease of 0.18% *this turn* — which may not seem like much, but is just one of many places where we're losing fractions of a point. These fractions of a point add up! Truly great players like Luis Scott-Vargas, Brian Kibler, and Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa seem at times almost inhumanly lucky. In reality, they're just preserving all the tiny edges with tight technical play and letting their opponents throw away fractions of a point at a time until the game has been decided.

Where did this percentage go? Why does having a larger library make the same mana ratio not work as well? It's the same reason that larger decks, even 61-card decks, draw all land or no land

slightly more often. When you want a mix of cards, the larger your library, the less likely you are to get that mix — because drawing part of the mix doesn't increase your chances of drawing the other part(s) by as much.

To see a very simplified version of this, compare a deck of three lands and four spells to a deck of five lands and five spells. What are the decks' mana ratios? The first is 43% (3/7), the second is 50% (5/10). So which is more likely to draw at least three lands in the opener? The first deck has only seven cards, so you'll draw at least three lands 100% of the time. Even with a higher mana ratio, the second deck at least has the possibility of drawing only two lands in its opening hand.

As you scale larger and larger you continue to increase variance.

In the above example, we aren't escaping with only a 0.18% decrease — that's just the beginning. Want to draw a mix of creatures and spells? Creatures of different costs? Reactive spells and a card drawer? Lands of different colors? Each and every mix you're aiming for gets harder to achieve by a fraction of a percentage, and each of these fractions of percentage points add up.

Getting a good mix of cards is only part of the equation, though. You also want your best cards, as mentioned earlier.

Whether it's Bitterblossom, Wild Nacatl, or Stoneforge Mystic, you have a "best" card. Only one card can be the best card — though what it is could change depending on the matchup. While it's possible that multiple copies could mean the fourth copy is the best (like Accumulated Knowledge), typically the first copy is the best (your first Jace is better than your fourth), due to diminishing returns.

Diminishing returns is the concept that you get less out of something the more you do it. Whether it's adding more and more discard spells to your black deck (eventually they don't have cards in their hand too often), Mark Herberholz drinking beers, or sideboarding more and more cards for a matchup. Maybe the first few cards will give you an extra 20%, but it's unlikely that doubling that number will give you another 20%. Eventually, you run out of percentages that it's even possible to gain.



Not only do you have a best card, but you also have a worst card. Again, only one card is your worst card. Typically, it's the fourth (or last) copy of something.

Now, in between your best card and your worst card you have every other card in your deck. All 60 (or 61) cards could theoretically be arranged from "most likely to contribute to victory" all the way down to "least likely to contribute to victory." It's a zero-sum game, so if one card leads to you winning a higher percentage of the time than you normally do, some other card has to contribute to you winning less often than you do on the average. It doesn't mean you should cut those cards, as you have to play at least 60, and it's quite possible that they're the "least bad" of all of your options.

If we measure how good cards are by how much they increase (or decrease) your win percentage when you draw them, we see that there is actually an average power level somewhere in your deck. It is at this average power level that we would find a card that when you draw it neither increases, nor decreases, your chances of winning.

If you add a 61st card to your deck, it is very clear that you're bringing down the average. The 61st card cannot possibly be as good as the average, because the 60th card is not as good as the average. An awful lot of your cards are likely to not be as good as the average. This 61st card may help you win games sometimes, but it will contribute to losses more as a whole. Otherwise, it wouldn't be your 61st card. Some other card would be, and you should cut that one instead.

How much does this 61st card really hurt us?

Let's imagine we're playing a Valakut deck. While this is quite the simplification, let's assume that if we draw at least one Primeval Titan by the fourth turn, we have a 70% chance of winning. But if we don't, our chances are a mere 40%. Setting aside mulligans and small decreases in deck size from cards like Rampant Growth (which would only make this effect more pronounced), we can calculate our probability of having a Titan by turn 4 using a similar method to the one we used above.

IF ONE CARD LEADS TO YOU WINNING A HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF THE TIME... SOME OTHER CARD HAS TO CONTRIBUTE TO YOU WINNING LESS OFTEN

To calculate the chances of drawing at least one, we first calculate the chances that we *don't* find at least one. The first card in our opening hand is 56/60 to *not* be Primeval Titan. Assuming that the first card wasn't Primeval Titan, the second card is 55/59 to not be Primeval Titan. Using the formula from the Probability section, we do this for the first ten (on the play) or eleven (on the draw) cards, and find:

$56/60 \times 55/59 \times 54/58 \times 53/57 \times 52/56 \times 51/55 \times 50/54 \times 49/53 \times 48/52 \times 47/51$ (and $\times 46/50$ if on the draw).

We then subtract this total (47.2% or 43.4%) from 100% to give us a 52.8% chance of seeing a Primeval Titan by turn 4 on the play, and a 56.6% chance on the draw.

If we kept the scenario the same, except this time we used a 61-card deck, our chances of drawing Primeval Titan by turn 4 would be merely 52.2% on the play, 55.8% on the draw. Here, we have given up an average of 0.7% of our chances of having a turn 4 Primeval Titan *every game!*

If you look at the win/loss numbers, with 60 cards we're expected to win the matchup 57.9% of the time. If we go to 61, now we're looking at winning the match 56.2% of the time. That's a decrease of 1.7% points, right there! That's throwing away one out of every fifty-nine games!

All these tiny percentages add up — and it's the little edges that can make or break you over the course of a tournament. Sometimes, that one game will be game 3 playing for Top 8. Sometimes that game will be in the finals. Whether it's a lost percentage from decreased chances of getting a good mix of cards, or just a decrease in your probability of drawing your best cards, it is *quite* clear that the burden of proof is on whoever would seek to justify more than 60 cards.

Let's examine the possible reasons to "break" this rule.

- *We might need to run our opponents out of cards.* This is pretty much only going to come up in Limited, with a 41-card (maybe more) deck. Decking people "the hard way" is ambitious, but not impossible. After all, Shawn "Hammer" Regnier won the second Pro Tour ever this way.

Shortcut: Remember, fractions cancel out. We don't have to bother multiplying most of the numbers, since a 56 on the top of a fraction anywhere in the multiplication cancels out a 56 on the bottom. As a result, all we have to do is multiply

$$\frac{(50 \times 49 \times 48 \times 47)}{(60 \times 59 \times 58 \times 57)}$$

Still, we need to ask ourselves: Is this realistic? Could it really come down to decking? This also assumes we aren't even drawing extra cards, either. Assuming we actually think we can pull it off, we still need to consider if it's worth the decreased probability of drawing our best cards. If we think there's only a 5% chance we'd actually deck someone, is it worth having a 2.5% less chance of drawing Grave Titan every turn? Limited is a format where our best cards are often notoriously superior to our average cards.

As for Constructed, it's exceptionally unlikely that you'll run someone out of cards just by virtue of having 61 cards in your own deck. Games in Constructed rarely come down to this without someone speeding things up. Besides, card draw spells, fetchlands, and more are *far* more likely to occur than a 61st card ever letting you win this way.

- *We might want a mana ratio that isn't possible with 60 or 40 cards.* While it's very possible that this is the best solution you might be able to come up with due to limited time, the value of drawing your best cards compared to your worst cards is worth *significantly* more than the highly speculative fractional mana requirement that you may believe you need.

And even if it were true, it could often be serviced by adding cantrips or lands that have spell-like functionality, like Tectonic Edge. Jamie Wakefield was famous for advocating a 25/62 mana base, and even *he* has repented.

While you'll generally have enough time in Constructed to not have to resort to such measures, limited deckbuilding occurs on a shorter clock. Here it's undesirable, but not a mortal sin, to resign yourself to 18/41 or some other such mana base. Additionally, options for nonbasics or cantrips to help smooth out mana ratios are far less available in Limited.

- *We have a lot of cards we need to play for our deck to function, but we don't want to draw them.* This may be true to a degree, such as with Cavern Harpy, Dream Stalker, and Parasitic Strix in an Aluren deck. However, we do have cards that we do want to draw, like Imperial Recruiter and

**JAMIE WAKEFIELD
WAS FAMOUS FOR
ADVOCATING A 25/62
MANA BASE, & EVEN
HE HAS REPENTED**

Aluren. I have yet to see the deck that contains many cards that have to be played (but don't want to be drawn), and no cards that we do want to draw, in particular.

Gerry Thompson and I were experimenting with 65- and 66-card Mystical Teachings decks in 2007. The theory was that this would let us play a number of cards we wanted in our deck (but didn't particularly want to draw), such as Extirpate, Grim Harvest, Venser, Bottle Gnomes, and the fourth Teachings. While it was never fully resolved if this idea really was all that practical, we still occasionally philosophized about strategy with a deck kernel above 60. Deck kernels tend to be much lower than 60, but how much varies from strategy to strategy. Since we can only play 60 or more, it's generally a mostly theoretical conversation.

- *We have all cards of the same power level. What are we playing, 61 Mishra's Factories? Even 36 Relentless Rats and 24 Swamps is more consistent than 39 Relentless Rats and 26 Swamps!*

There's an old joke that John F. Rizzo used to make about Plague Rat decks. When asked about 40 Rats and 20 Swamps, he said he'd rather play 36 Rats, 20 Swamps, and 4 Demonic Tutors (to find the Rats when he needed them).

- *We're playing Battle of Wits (or some other strategy that requires more than 60 cards).*

Sure, sure, I suppose. Battle of Wits is quite powerful, though it does have the drawback of only being playable in subpar decks. Battle of Wits has never been tier 1, despite having "pay 3UU, win the game." Why? We've already seen how much it hurts us to add a 61st card. Imagine doing that 180 more times!

Battle of Wits is an exceptionally powerful card that embodies the problems with increasing deck size. Is it playable? Sure, but those types of strategies are few and far between.

- *We have limited time and don't know what to cut, so we make a small mistake rather than risk a big one.*

This is the best possible reason to play 61 cards. Playing 61 is almost always going to be a non-zero liability but it's a much smaller one than the potentially catastrophic cutting of a card at random — or worse, a card that you was crucial.



While sometimes it comes to this, it's generally better to cut one of the worst cards (even if it is not the *actual* worst) rather than just play 61 (since even your tenth worst card is well below average). Aggressive and midrange decks are just about always going to want to play 60, as you generally have tons of possible cards that you could cut "if you had to." Combo and control start to get into that space where things are a bit tricky, and you have to be careful to not accidentally disrupt the foundation the deck is built on.

It's usually worth making an educated guess, unless it's a particularly intricate deck. We should generally look to cut something that doesn't do something crucial or unique. For example, cutting our eighth discard spell is pretty safe, whereas cutting one of our two Grave Titans would be much riskier. Magic is a game of tiny edges; being disciplined enough to make that final cut is just another way to increase our chances of winning each game. That discipline adds up to wins over time.

**BEING DISCIPLINED
ENOUGH TO MAKE
THAT FINAL CUT
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WAY TO INCREASE
OUR CHANCES OF
WINNING**

HOW MANY OF EACH CARD TO USE

Figuring out which cards to play is tough enough. So how are we supposed to figure out how many of each to use? Playing the maximum four copies of a card is the easiest card quantity decision to understand — and it's quite often right, since you'll often want to draw certain cards as much as possible.

But what about the rest of the possible numbers?

Playing a single copy of a card can be very important, since adding that first copy gives you access to some kind of effect that you hadn't had before in this deck. Other cards that manipulate your library make one-of copies clearly invaluable — a category that includes card drawing and card filtering, not just Demonic Tutor-type effects. But even if we don't have library manipulation, a single copy of a novel effect gives us a chance to make a certain type of desirable play, while minimizing the risk of drawing it in all the matchups where we don't want it. This also keeps the value of the card maximally high, if its value suffers from diminishing returns.

While some cards get better the more you play of them — cards like Muscle Sliver, Gravecrawler, and Lava Spike — many cards actually get worse the more you play of them. Really, almost every card sees diminishing returns at some point, but we're typically concerned with using less than four copies of cards that dramatically suffer from diminishing returns.



A great example of a card with diminishing returns is Rakdos's Return. Rakdos's Return is a very powerful card that can win games on its own. It's also very expensive and doesn't impact the board, making it risky to draw two copies of the Return against an aggressive strategy. Additionally, while the first Rakdos's Return will shred an opponent's hand, the second one can actually be pretty weak as they no longer have any cards to discard.

Rakdos's Return does do X damage, which is a decent combo with the first X damage (albeit an expensive one). This means Rakdos's Return doesn't totally fall off in multiples... but there's still a heavy price to pay in card strength when you draw a second copy. As a result, the most common number of Rakdos's Returns for people to play is two. This is a number that suggests that one wants a reasonable chance of drawing a single copy, but without a significant risk of drawing two. Two copies gives us a 40% chance of drawing a copy by our sixth turn (39% on the play, 41% on the draw), while having less than a 5% chance of drawing both copies.

By contrast, playing three copies gives us a 54% chance of drawing the card in question. While this is effectively about a third more likely that we'll draw the card than if we played only two, it's *also* nearly two and half times as likely (12% total) that



we'll draw two copies by turn 6. Going from two copies of a card up to three means that over a hundred games, we'll have 14 extra games where we draw at least one copy... but we'll also have 7 extra games where we draw two or more by turn 6.

Another great reason to run twos and threes is to break the rule of four. There will be times where we want six copies of a card — and occasionally, there are multiple cards in the same format with the exact same text, letting us functionally play up to eight copies. But even when we're not dealing with exact duplicates, we'll often use cards with similar functionality to *emulate* having more than four.

If we wanted six copies of Supreme Verdict, maybe we use four Supreme Verdicts and two Terminus, since Terminus is the next best option. This actually points to the main reason to run twos and threes: we can fine-tune the probability that we draw a certain card by tinkering with the numbers of specific cards.



Often, our deck will have needs that can't be met by just playing four copies of each of the nine best cards. For instance, let's say we have a mana curve that wants ten two-drops. In this relatively common scenario, we generally play four copies of each of the two best, plus two copies of the next best two-drop we have access to.

Decks with a lot of card drawing or library manipulation will want twos and threes more frequently. They get to look at so many more cards, they'll often have better chances of drawing

a three-of than most people have of drawing a four-of. This is particularly important when the card is important, but suffers from diminishing returns. Additionally, decks full of card drawing and library manipulation tend to not have room for four copies of every type of effect.

One final corner case reason to run only three copies of a card is when we need to put the fourth in our sideboard for cards like Burning Wish, Cunning Wish, or Living Wish.



REMOVAL

Removal used to be a relatively simple component of deckbuilding. There were only a few good removal spells and everyone played them. Creatures weren't very good, so there wasn't much need for a huge supply or a lot of tough decisions to be made.

We live in a very different world now.

These days, people rely on a far wider range of permanents to gain advantages, and more of them are relevant. There are far more good creatures than people can play and the creatures that *are* good are good in a much wider array of ways. In addition, artifacts (including equipment), enchantments, planeswalkers, and lands that do things are all potential problems that need to be addressed.

In addition to such a diverse mix of potential threats that we need to be able to react to, we also have a very diverse mix of removal. No longer do we have a clear pecking order of Swords to Plowshares, Lightning Bolt, Incinerate. Now, there are a lot of reasonable options, and the “best” ones may change from week to week.

For instance, spring of 2013’s Standard featured a variety of black removal spells. Ultimate Price, Devour Flesh, Victim of Night, Tragic Slip, Liliana of the Veil, Tribute to Hunger, Sever the Bloodline, Crippling Blight, Dead Weight, Dreadbore, Warped Physique, Putrefy, Abrupt Decay, Far // Away and more. Each had their advantages and disadvantages, and while some had a more powerful baseline (such as Liliana compared to Crippling Blight), the best choices took into consideration the specific context the format is presenting (for instance, if you were piloting a Zombie deck against a format full of Thragtsuks).



Not every deck needs to be able to remove every kind of permanent. Sometimes, you don't need to be able to remove any at all. Can't remove planeswalkers? Most creatures can do that. Can't remove artifacts? Well, if the most popular artifacts are equipment, then creature removal can help. Can't remove enchantments? Sometimes you just have to tough it out, sometimes not a lot of people play them, and sometimes your plan to get rid of an enchantment is to attack for twenty (also known as the “race it or ignore it” plan).

Some decks, like Jund or Mono-Black control, will play tons of removal. Other times, decks like G/W Aggro or White Weenie might play none at all. Understanding each color's strengths and weaknesses, the sorts of removal we have access to, when to use it, and how much are all important skills for deckbuilders to have at their disposal.

WHITE

White is the best at dealing with enchantments, the worst at dealing with land, and generally above average at dealing with every other type of permanent. While it certainly doesn't *have* to be used defensively, white is one of the absolute best colors for defense as they can generally deal with any nonland permanent in a variety of ways.

Some of their best solutions to cards involve neutralizing the threat rather than actually destroying it. This approach often involves greater mana efficiency solving the problem for cheap, but carries with it a risk of their work being undone.

White's biggest weakness is in their inability to meaningfully interact with people gaining an advantage from something besides permanents (namely, sorceries and instants). Generally, the best they can do here is disrupt a player's ability to play them in the first place, by adding costs and restrictions to what people can play.

BLUE

When it comes to removal, blue is in a category all its own. Rather than actually destroying permanents, blue will bounce, tap, steal, or counter them. While blue can generally work around any specific permanent they plan for, the color is notoriously weak at dealing with permanents they weren't expecting.

What permanents blue can even bounce, steal, or otherwise manipulate varies from format to format, so it's a good idea to keep an eye on what blue's capacities are in a given style of play. Often, blue's solutions to things are expensive, unwieldy, slow, or unreliable.



Blue's struggles to deal with permanents are made up for by drawing lots of cards and using library manipulation to find the right answers at the right times. Additionally, blue has nearly a monopoly on the ability to deal with permanents as they are being cast (which it is *very* good at), and is by far the best at dealing with threats that are not on the table (such as sorceries and instants).

BLACK

A defining characteristic of the color black is its ability to kill creatures. It has a wide range of good options for creature kill, generally featuring a variety of cheap removal spells: more expensive ones that give you extra value, options that can hit hexproof creatures and creatures with protection from white, sweepers that kill many creatures and creatures that can kill other creatures.

Generally, whatever creatures you want to be able to kill, you can, and when you don't know exactly what creatures you need to off, black always has a lot of good versatile answers that can cover a lot of bases.

Unfortunately, the rest of black's removal isn't nearly so good. It's passable at dealing with land, below-average when dealing with planeswalkers, and nearly helpless when it comes to dealing with artifacts and enchantments. However, it shores up these weaknesses by being second only to blue at dealing with threats off the table. Discard is the most common of black's tools for dealing with problems off the table (both permanents and spells), but it also has access to the best graveyard hate and Cranial Extraction-type effects that remove specific cards from a player's library.

RED

Without question, red is best known for its direct damage. A big part of the strength of "burn" spells is their versatility. If you play twenty creature kill spells, you're often going to be stuck with a lot of cards in your hand that you can't use efficiently (since you've killed all the creatures and are just waiting for the next one to come along). With burn spells, you can generally point them at your opponent to finish a game that your creatures could not.



Burn spells often make red the best at dealing with small creatures, though black is always close to (and sometimes above) red. They can deal with bigger creatures, but that's always a tougher proposition. Burn spells make red the best at dealing with planeswalkers. Plus, the color is good at dealing with lands and artifacts.

Two of its glaring weaknesses are a complete lack of ability to interact with enchantments and very little in the way of interactivity off the battlefield. Red has a few minor ways to change targets and randomize things, but in general it doesn't meaningfully disrupt an opponent's spells, aside from occasionally disrupting their mana supply.

GREEN

Almost the inverse of black, green is generally very good at dealing with any kind of permanent *except* creatures. It's among the best at dealing with artifacts, enchantments, lands, and even planeswalkers (which they also have added strength against because of how many good creatures green has, which can just attack the planeswalkers). They are also known for their versatile answers to these permanents, often using cards that can deal with two or more of the noncreature types.

Creatures are generally the most important permanent to be able to deal with, and green is last by far. They have a few options that temporarily neutralize the threat and a number of ways to punish fliers, but that's about it. Additionally, green is the worst at disrupting an opponent's game plan off the table.

To counteract these major weaknesses, green has fantastic creatures (often the best creatures) and is significantly better at mana acceleration and fixing, which it can use to race or add colors that can solve these problems.



RANKING EACH COLOR'S REMOVAL

CREATURES

1. Black
2. Red
3. White
4. Blue
5. Green

LANDS

1. Red
2. Green
3. Black
4. Blue
5. White

ARTIFACTS

1. Green
2. Red
3. White
4. Blue
5. Black

PLANESWALKERS

1. Red
2. White
3. Green
4. Black
5. Blue

ENCHANTMENTS

1. White
2. Green
3. Blue
4. Red
5. Black

THE STACK

1. Blue
2. Black
3. White
4. Red
5. Green



CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB

These days there's a wide selection of removal spells, whether we're looking for versatility, efficiency, high power or low cost.

For instance, imagine we're looking for a sideboard removal spell. If we need help with early game tempo, perhaps an opponent with a lot of one-drops, Dead Weight might be appealing. On the other hand, if we have enough cheap interaction and are looking for a brute-force instrument to solve particularly difficult threats (or just to give us more midgame power) we might go for a more powerful but more expensive card like Sever the Bloodline.

A good rule of thumb when making tuning decisions like this is to ask ourselves, "do we need more speed... or more power?" For control decks, the answer against aggro is usually speed over power. Against control, more power is generally better than more speed. For aggro decks, the opposite is true more often; we want more power against other aggro decks, but to stay fast against control.

Mid-range decks require assessing the situation and figuring out if they are the beatdown, or the control. The famous question, *"Who's the Beatdown?"* is actually an important question that helps drive deckbuilding, not just game play.

A card being more versatile does not necessarily mean it's less efficient. Magic cards have a huge range of card quality. For instance, Oblivion Ring is a far more versatile card than Rebuke, despite the fact that it costs the same. While it's not strictly better, it is significantly better in almost every context that is relevant to Constructed, despite having so much more flexibility than Rebuke.

Sometimes, the decision is between two options that could have extremely different results, such as Dead Weight versus Oblivion Ring. There's a high probability that the two decisions will lead you down very different paths. However, we're also going to be called to make a number of subtle decisions, such as choosing between Doom Blade and Go for the Throat.

With Doom Blade and Go for the Throat, we have two choices that will be the exact same over 90% of the time. Which one is better may vary from week to week but those little edges add up and this type of decision is much more solvable than some we will encounter.



We start by identifying the functional difference between them, then figuring how often one will work but not the other. Then we ask ourselves how relevant having the *wrong* one will be.



Rather than comparing on a creature-to-creature basis, it's more useful to judge on a deck-to-deck basis. For instance, Doom Blade vs. Go for the Throat is nearly an irrelevant question when you're facing the G/W aggro decks of late 2011. Yes, Blade Splicer creates an artifact token, but you're not going to be short on good targets to hit. While Doom Blade *would* be better, having the wrong one isn't super-relevant.

By contrast, if you face a Zombie deck having a fist full of Doom Blades could be as fatal as packing a fist full of Go for the Throats against Tempered Steel.

This isn't just an on/off type of thing, either. For instance, mono-red decks of that era would often use eight to twelve artifact creatures. They had a number of targets for Go for the Throat, so drawing one wouldn't be too bad. However, if you have all Go for the Throats you're eventually going to have a problem.

When you're faced with two options that are so close that you don't know what is better, a good default strategy is to play a mix. It isn't so much about hedging your bets as it is about diminishing returns. After all, the first dead removal spell hurts a lot less than the second one (similar to how mulliganing once doesn't hurt nearly as bad as mulliganing a second time).

Additionally, playing multiple versions just gives you more options. You'll have both in your hand some percentage of the time. If they're the same card you'll have less options than if they're different. Card quality is more important than diversity, and we don't want to play different cards just to "be different." Still, if the choice is close, diversity should be considered.

**PLAYING MULTIPLE
VERSIONS GIVES YOU
MORE OPTIONS**

Another common choice to have to make for selecting removal is between burn spells and Doom Blades (or any black removal spell). Burn spells aren't just for the beatdown player, as they can be extremely efficient at dealing with small creatures and can help address weaknesses to planeswalkers. Besides, the damage matters, particularly in midrange decks that may need to switch modes into a more aggressive role.

By contrast, Doom Blade-type spells like Ultimate Price are generally better when it comes to dealing with big creatures. It's important to be mindful of just how much targeted removal you are actually playing with, as opponents will often have a wide range of how many creatures are actually in their decks. While burn spells tend to make each other better, multiple Doom Blades tend to make each other Doom Blade worse. This leads to a lot of midrange and control decks playing one or two copies of a lot of different types of removal, rather than just packing four of the same one.

Another form of the "versatility versus efficiency" question is when we have to choose between an expensive card that solves many problems or a cheaper one that is more narrow but faster. For instance, let's say we want a sideboard creature that destroys artifacts. Acidic Slime does this and more, whereas Manic Vandal has far fewer applications. Still, we'll want Manic Vandal some percentage of the time, despite having no additional abilities and being worse in three ways (no death touch, can't hit enchantments or land, and it's not an optional trigger).

The reason? It costs less. If you're playing against an Affinity deck, waiting two turns to play the Acidic Slime could be the difference between getting hit by a Cranial Plating two extra times.

When making this type of choice, we should ask ourselves a few questions: What are we trying to accomplish? Do we need the versatility? What does versatility cost us? What does it cost us if we *don't* have it? In general, we err on the side of versatility when it comes to maindeck cards and cost effectiveness when it comes to sidebar options.

Long ago, destroying artifacts and enchantments used to be pretty close to a necessity for most decks thanks to cards like Winter Orb and Stasis. Nowadays, the importance of artifact and enchantment removal waxes and wanes but most people are able to get by without maindecked artifact removal. When making such decisions, we should ask ourselves how important it is to be able to remove those cards as well as see if there are ways to solve the problem without actually destroying the offending permanent.

Having a plan against planeswalkers is a more common issue maindeck. If we're playing an aggressive strategy, then the plan is pretty straightforward. However, if we're playing a controlling or creature-light strategy, we need to have a plan against planeswalkers. We can't just let people "draw" extra spells against us!

In recent years, the default strategy has been to err on the side of using creatures (even in control decks) as well as keeping an eye out for versatile removal spells that can hit other permanents in addition to planeswalkers. For instance, cards like Oblivion Ring, Devil's Play, Ratchet Bomb, Cyclonic Rift, and Pithing Needle can address planeswalkers while having a variety of other applications.

Not every problem needs to be solved on a long-term basis. Unsummon and other "bounce" cards are popular methods of solving problems temporarily. If they buy you enough time to move the game into a winning position then it doesn't matter if they didn't kill the creature.

To determine if tempo plays, such as bouncing or tapping permanents to temporarily hold them off, are appropriate, ask yourself if time is the resource you're looking for. If you aren't going to do anything with the time then such measures are a waste. However, if you use this time to deal the needed extra



damage, set up your combo, or play a card that puts you in a winning position then bounce might be the type of solution you want.

One other note to consider with cards like Unsummon is whether they can profitably bounce your own creatures. Playing cards with “enters the battlefield” triggers increases the value of bounce cards, as they can let you occasionally reuse abilities.

BANESLAYERS AND MULLDRIFTERS

Basically, every creature in Magic falls into one of two categories:

- Baneslayer Angel
- Mulldrifter



While there are a few subcategories, like Trolls (which are really Baneslayers) and creatures that function as a spell, like Firemane Angel and Ghost-Lit Stalker (which are actually Mulldrifters), for the most part it is useful to think of every creature as being one of these two types. To start with, let's take a look at the difference between Baneslayers and Mulldrifters and how we can use this information.

Baneslayers are creatures where the value is in the creature itself.

Mulldrifters are creatures that give you value outside of the creature.

Examples of BANESLAYERS

Baneslayer Angel
Falkenrath Aristocrat
Geist of Saint Traft
Hellrider
Bloodline Keeper
Phyrexian Obliterator
Vampire Nighthawk
Lotus Cobra
Hero of Bladehold
Birds of Paradise
Fauna Shaman
Phyrexian Crusader
Steppe Lynx
Tarmogoyf
Dark Confidant
Signal Pest
Juzam Djinn
Consecrated Sphinx
Wolfir Silverheart
Kor Firewalker

Examples of MULLDRIFTERS

Mulldrifter
Thragtusk
Snapcaster Mage
Restoration Angel
Augur of Bolas
Angel of Serenity
Craterhoof Behemoth
Gerald's Messenger
Entomber Exarch
Wall of Omens
Seagate Oracle
Vengevine
Chancellor of the Forge
Stoneforge Mystic
Squadron Hawk
Skinrender
Acidic Slime
Ember Hauler
Obstinate Baloth
Gatekeeper of Malakir

Though rare, there are a few creatures that are actually both Baneslayers and Mulldrifters; I refer to them as *Titans*. This name comes from the M11 and M12 Titans, which both had an “enters the battlefield” ability (a common trait of Mulldrifters), and were 6/6s with attack triggers that demanded a response (a trait that would qualify them as Baneslayers). Thundermaw Hellkite, Emeria Angel, and Oracle of Mul Daya are some more examples of Titans.

Here’s a good rule of thumb: “If you care about killing it, it’s probably a Baneslayer. If killing it loses you value, it’s probably a Mulldrifter.” Note that a creature’s ability to draw cards has nothing to do with being a Mulldrifter. Dark Confidant, Scoll Thief, and Consecrated Sphinx are all Baneslayers because their value is gained by remaining on the battlefield.



Additionally, card advantage is not an absolute must for a card to be a Mulldrifter. For instance, Centaur Healer and Kor Hookmaster are both Mulldrifters but do not gain card advantage, instead offering another resource. Mulldrifters are creatures that function like a spell also creates a creature.

Understanding the difference between Baneslayers and Mulldrifters is a crucial element of high-level deckbuilding. Removal is very popular in most formats some of the time and in some formats most of the time.

Of course there are formats, such as Vintage, where removal is not that popular. Almost everyone has a couple of removal spells, but no one has *that* many. The common strategies for removing creatures that other people use need to be considered when deciding what kinds of creatures we actually want to play ourselves.

One common high-level strategy is to strive to play *only* Mulldrifters so as to turn our opponent's removal into "bad cards." Once you start playing with Baneslayers, the more you have the better they get. This is because the first Baneslayer you draw makes your opponent's removal spells good but each Baneslayer that lives is excellent. The more Baneslayers you have, the more you'll tend to keep on the board, since the first one draws out their removal spell. Depending on your deck, there's no reason why you'd need twenty, or even more than a few. It's just that, percentage-wise, the more Baneslayers you play the better each of them is.

The most common mistake I see novice deckbuilders make regarding Baneslayers and Mulldrifters is mixing them too much. There is no problem replacing some spells with Mulldrifters in a deck of Baneslayers, since Mulldrifters are like spells anyway. But it doesn't work the other way. If you need a specific Baneslayer for your deck to work, such as Knight of the Reliquary or Lotus Cobra, you're going to be vulnerable to creature kill. That's okay. Once you have some Baneslayers in your deck, there is nothing inherently wrong with adding more assuming they fit your strategy. You don't need to play *all* Baneslayers though, since Mulldrifters can be added to any deck without clashing.

The problem comes if you try to do it the other way. If your deck is all Mulldrifters, then creature removal is bad against you.



Once you add any true Baneslayers (or at least Baneslayers that aren't also Mulldrifters) you're opening yourself up to all of your opponent's removal. This doesn't have to be a deal breaker, but all too often people recklessly throw Baneslayers into decks that didn't have any. Take a moment and ask yourself, "Do I care about opening myself up to removal?"

Keep in mind, not playing Baneslayers main doesn't carry over to the sidebar. In fact, sideboarding out your Baneslayers is the oldest trick in the book (and one of the best).

Let's say we're working on a mono-black deck. Vampire Nighthawk and Bloodline Keeper are powerful threats from the Baneslayer side. Using them can work great but it *does* mean that our opponent's removal is going to be good. Obviously we can use things like discard to help work around this, plus not everyone has a lot of removal and it only takes one threat sticking to do some serious damage.

There is an alternative approach. We could cut the Nighthawks and Bloodline Keepers and move towards a build with no good removal targets. Instead, we could play Ravenous Rats, Germal's Messenger, and Griseldbrand to ensure that even if our opponents have removal spells all of our creatures are still giving us value. If we already had the Nighthawks and Bloodline Keepers, cutting a discard spell for a Ravenous Rat wouldn't make our opponent's removal better than it already was. However, if we add a Bloodline Keeper to our deck with Rats, Messenger, and Griseldbrand our opponent's Searing Spears just got a lot better.

We can also observe an interesting corollary for artifacts. If people are playing maindeck artifact kill, then playing any artifacts turns their removal on. If people are only sideboarding in their artifact removal, then playing a small number of artifacts is no big deal. Are they really going to sideboard in artifact kill for just a couple of artifacts? If they do, do you care that much? After all, if you draw the artifact and they don't have the removal, great. If they do have the removal, you generally each traded a card and some mana. If they draw the artifact removal and you *don't* have the threat, they're sitting on a semi-dead card. This is why the best artifact removal cards generally do more than just destroy an artifact, such as destroying multiple artifacts, giving you a creature, or having added flexibility in what it can destroy.



SIDEBOARDS

On average, you play about 50% more sideboard games than game 1s — which says nothing of occasional best three out of five matches or matches involving a tied game. This means playing sideboarded games are actually *more* important than maindeck games. Additionally, we only have fifteen sideboard cards, compared to our 60 maindeck cards. This means sideboard cards should generally be more effective than those in the maindeck.

How do we measure effectiveness? We can't always predict a win based on the number of how many sideboard cards we've drawn. We also don't always have sideboard cards as game-deciding as Leyline of the Void against Dredge. What about sideboarding a card like Deathmark?

Obviously, sideboard cards that try to win the game are great but we also want to use sideboard cards that give us value. While card advantage or a life total change are both very reasonable forms of value to get from a sideboard card, the most common form is that of mana advantage. For instance, the one-mana Deathmark trading with the three-mana Knight of the Reliquary, or cashing in a two-mana Flashfreeze to neutralize a six-mana Primeval Titan is of great value to us.

Let's take a look at my Grixis Control deck from the Standard portion of World Championships 2011:

Grixis Control

Patrick Chapin World Championships 2011 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Snapcaster Mage	4 Forbidden Alchemy
3 Olivia Voldaren	3 Slagstorm
2 Precursor Golem	4 Blackcleave Cliffs
1 Wurmcoil Engine	4 Darkslick Shores
1 Inferno Titan	4 Sulfur Falls
1 Devil's Play	2 Drowned Catacomb
2 Galvanic Blast	1 Dragonskull Summit
2 Doom Blade	1 Copperline Gorge
1 Go for the Throat	1 Shimmering Grotto
1 Ratchet Bomb	5 Mountain
3 Mana Leak	3 Swamp
4 Desperate Ravings	1 Island
3 Liliana of the Veil	

SIDEBOARD

1 Galvanic Blast
1 Geistflame
1 Slagstorm
2 Ancient Grudge
1 Mana Leak
1 Negate
1 Flashfreeze
1 Dissipate
2 Surgical Extraction
2 Curse of Death's Hold
1 Wurmcoil Engine
1 Mimic Vat

Let's take a look at each sideboard card, one at a time.

Galvanic Blast is doing “Deathmark” duty here (and actually *was* Deathmark during playtesting). Why did we switch to Galvanic Blast? The popularity of the Illusions deck meant that we wanted to be sure we had a sufficient number of answers to an early Lord of the Unreal or Delver of Secrets. Additionally, Mirran Crusader was a real concern, as it already dodged Doom Blade and Go for the Throat. Good one-mana removal spells are very common sideboard tools, as they’re among the best ways to buy yourself tempo against certain decks. Galvanic Blast is a good tempo play because it generally kills things worth as much mana as it costs or more. Tempo, for the most part, is really just mana efficiency.

Why does this matter so much? After all, how much are we actually gaining by Galvanic Blasting a Lord of the Unreal? Is saving one mana *really* that big a deal? What about Delver of Secrets, where we aren't even saving mana?

Notice how the Grixis deck has almost no one-drops to start with (aside from the Galvanic Blasts we’re discussing now). Illusions is actually a pretty good matchup, but we have enough respect to know better than to underestimate the strategy. If our opponents lead with Phantasmal Bear or Delver of Secrets then follow it up with Lord of the Unreal or Mana Leak it’s easy to start falling behind. It isn't about playing Galvanic Blast on turn 1 — after all, we have only ten ways to pull that off. It helps to be able to play a second tapped land on turn 2 and a Galvanic Blast, setting up a clear path for turn 3 with an untapped land. Playing a Galvanic Blast and a two-drop like Desperate Ravings is a great way to spend turn 3 — but even better is Snapcaster Mage the Galvanic Blast we used on turn 1 or 2!

If that Galvanic Blast had been even a Doom Blade (which is a great sideboard card in its own right) we would have had to wait until turn 2 or 3 to kill the Lord of the Unreal, taking two or more additional damage (depending on if they played another guy, and if our spell had even resolved). Then when we tried to make our Snapcaster play we’d have to wait until at least turn 4 (and that’s assuming our fourth land even comes into play untapped). By then, we’d be open to *their* Snapcaster rebuying Mana Leak!



As you can see, saving even a single mana can have a cascading effect on the game. Sideboarding cards like Galvanic Blast also reveals the technique of using more maindeck cards in your sideboard to tune your deck. It is *such* a crucial sideboarding skill to be able to see your entire 75 as your deck, and not just the 60. By remembering to view our sideboard as a possible extension of our maindeck we'll often find the best way to tune our deck against an opponent is to use even more of whatever is already working.

Geistflame has a lot of overlap with Galvanic Blast in terms of giving us cheap answers to important threats like Birds of Paradise and Delver of Secrets. Why the difference? Alex West and I determined how many answers to Mirran Crusader we actually wanted, compared to how many answers to Delver of Secrets. We determined that we actually wanted more answers to Delver than Mirran Crusader.

Why? We only have so many cards to board out against Mirran Crusader decks. A common sideboarding mistake many players make is devoting too many cards to a specific matchup. You start getting serious diminishing returns on your sideboard cards when you're sideboarding out cards that were good anyway.

Geistflame gives us that added answer against Delver of Secrets, Phantasmal Bear, Birds of Paradise, and Llanowar Elves. Additionally, since it doesn't have to hit two-toughness creatures, we get added value in the form of card advantage since the extra removal spell sitting in the graveyard is one less removal spell we have to use on a Snapcaster Mage or Inkmoth Nexus later.

Slagstorm's role actually varies a great deal depending on your opponent. It gains us card advantage when used to combat a Humans deck curving out with Champion of the Parish, Grand Abolisher, and Mirran Crusader. It saves us mana when it deals with lots of tokens from Moorland Haunt or Elspeth, Knight-Errant all at once. It's important to ask yourself how the opponents you're facing are going to try to beat you, and then figure out how to one-up that. Slagstorm's ability to fight Geist of Saint Traft is important, as players vulnerable to Galvanic Blast are often going to use the Geist to try to fight back.



**A COMMON
SIDEBOARDING
MISTAKE ... IS
DEVOTING TOO MANY
CARDS TO A SPECIFIC
MATCHUP**

Ancient Grudge is one of the most famous sideboard cards of all time, as it's the gold standard for artifact removal. At just two mana, it's not uncommon to net mana the first time you use it (such as hitting a Sword of Feast and Famine usually for a profit of three mana).

It's the flashback, however, that puts it into the upper echelons of sideboard cards. For just a single mana, you get *another* answer to a problem artifact. Being exceptionally versatile (so many decks play key artifacts), saving mana (Grudge is very cheap), and gaining card advantage (Grudge is a built in two-for-one) combine to make this a perfect ten — so good, in fact, that I'm actually happy to splash green in order to flash it back.

Notice how light of a splash you can use to flashback off-color flashback cards. After all, if you're happy with Grudge as a Shatter early on, it's okay to not have access to green mana to flash it back until much later.

It's also worth noting that Ancient Grudge has excellent synergy with the Grixis maindeck, making every Forbidden Alchemy better.

Another important note is that we aren't just using Ancient Grudge because we can. Grixis has a lot of maindeck creature removal, but just a single Ratchet Bomb and a very small amount of permission to combat artifacts. This means the maindeck is vulnerable to cards like Shrine of Burning Rage and Sword of War and Peace, meaning Ancient Grudge is here not just because it's efficient but because it addresses one of our weaknesses.

Ancient Grudge is the type of card people love to just jam into decks, regardless whether it answers the right problems. It's obviously an excellent sideboard card overall — but we do have to remember to ask ourselves if Grudge's effect is what we really need to have done. For instance, if our Affinity matchup is already awesome, then adding four Ancient Grudges may be a waste of sideboard slots.



Mana Leak, Negate, Flashfreeze, and Dissipate are all very similar — but there's a subtle strength in the variety of counterspells here. All four aim to secure us a sizable mana advantage, with their main targets being Titans (usually Primeval Titan). So why four one-ofs instead of four Flashfreezes? If Counterspell itself was legal, then sure, that approach would be fine. None of these cards is Counterspell, however, and each has a drawback of its own.

Negate doesn't stop Titans themselves (though it does hit Green Sun's Zenith, planeswalkers, and other permission). Flashfreeze doesn't counter Wolf Run's Wurmcoil Engine or Solemn Simulacrum, nor does it work against U/W, U/B, or Solar Flare. Mana Leak works against both of these, but can be played around. It's the best option, actually, but we already have three maindeck, so can only play one in the board.

Finally, Dissipate can hit anything and even exiles the target (useful for hitting spells like Chandra's Phoenix or Forbidden Alchemy). Unfortunately, Dissipate does cost three, which can be significantly slower (especially if we drew multiple copies, which could happen if we played all four Dissipates). Additionally, Dissipate is our only double-blue spell, making it challenging for our low-blue mana base.

Since each of these cards has a weakness and is on roughly the same power level the variety means that we will generally have a better mix of options. This means we'll have more possible plays when we draw multiple sideboarded counterspells. It also means we'll have more options on how to sideboard, particularly if we face an opponent we weren't expecting. Streamlined aggro decks will often be chock-full of four-ofs, valuing consistency, while well-designed control decks will often place a premium on diversity because it makes it harder for the other player to play around your cards when they can't be sure what's coming next.

An opponent playing around Flashfreeze might walk into Negate, or an opponent playing around Leak ends up vulnerable to Dissipate. This doesn't mean that every control deck should be a Highlander deck with all one-ofs... but there's a reason control decks tend to have so many more singletons, especially when they feature a lot of card draw.



NEVER MAKE THEIR CARDS GOOD

When selecting our sideboard, we must be sure to avoid making our opponent's deck better after sideboarding.

Wait, what? How would we make their deck better?

Let's imagine you're playing a Bant control deck and are considering sideboarding in Mayor of Avabruck against blue decks since your maindeck has nothing worth using removal on. If your opponent is playing a U/W/R Midrange deck, they might be stuck with some Searing Spears that they left in against your control deck — they need to kill Thragtusk somehow, and they don't have anything better. Their Searing Spears aren't good... but if you board in the Mayors you will turn their bad cards into good ones!

It's not enough to just sideboard against what our opponent's strategy is now; we must also consider what their sideboard plan will be. What would make sense if we were them? The transformational sideboard where a creatureless deck sideboards in creatures is one of the oldest tricks in the book, but it still works. We must be mindful of what our opponent may be up to.

Imagine we're playing an UrzaTron deck with lots of artifacts. Maybe we're struggling with Burn decks, so we consider adding Sun Droplet. The problem, of course, is that our opponents already want to sideboard in cards like Ancient Grudge or Shattering Spree against us. Sun Droplet is just going to walk face-first into the cards they're going to have anyway.

SIDEBOARDING THE RIGHT NUMBER OF CARDS

Another mistake people often make is sideboarding in ten cards for a matchup when they only have five to take out. Let's say that your matchup against Faeries isn't good, but you only have five cards that are actually bad against them. You want to bring in ten cards from your sideboard.

What do you do?



Perhaps there are places in the maindeck where you can cut cards that are decent (but not great) against Faeries. Then we can replace them with cards that are more effective in their appropriate matchups, but plan on sideboarding out against Faeries.

The example I always use is Nassif at Pro Tour Kyoto. He had two Terrors in his deck, partially because they're good against Faeries. The thing is though, he had so much to sideboard in that he was actually finding himself wanting to cut a Terror after boarding. Half the reason he had the Terror to begin with was to hit Mistbind Cliques and Mutavaults!

As a result, he replaced the second Terror with a Celestial Purge to give him even better percentages against Figure of Destiny decks (the other reason to play Terror) by having a card that also works against Ajani Vengeant and Demigod of Revenge (two major weaknesses for Terror). Additionally, Celestial Purge gave him better percentages against B/W (destroying both Tidehollow Sculler and Bitterblossom). Even though the change lost him a little bit of percentage game 1 against Faeries, it gave him more edge against the field. By having more strength against red and B/W decks he could better afford to spend the sideboard space against Faeries.

If you can only afford to take out five cards, you don't need ten to bring in. Pick the cards that are most effective for doing what you need done. Need sweepers? Pick the sweepers that does exactly what you need. Need life gain? Pick the best ones. Sometimes you can't beat a matchup without using ten cards. If you only have five to bring out, ask yourself if you're actually supposed to spend this much sideboard space beating this deck. Sometimes it's right to accept that a certain matchup is going to be hard. Other times, we'll have to walk away from a deck when it's just not practical to make it beat a particularly weak (yet popular) matchup.



MECHANICAL OPERATIONS

Don't let your opponent know how many cards you're going to sideboard in! Obviously, we have to work within the time limit we're under. However, when convenient, it's a good habit to disguise your sideboarding in some way. One possibility is to shuffle your entire sideboard into your deck, then pick out fifteen cards to not play.

Another possibility is to sideboard out a basic land from your draft deck and sideboarding in another identical copy. This way, our opponent doesn't know we don't have anything to sideboard against them. Yet another possibility is to just sideboard in four cards, then search through your deck and sideboard out four cards (even if they're some, or all, of the cards you boarded in).

Watch your opponent and their face as they sideboard. How many cards are they bringing in? Be careful if you think they may be tricking you, but usually you can just watch and your opponent will show you how many cards they're boarding. This information can be valuable for deciding what to play around.

Did they play a Flashfreeze after sideboarding just two cards? They're less likely to have Timely Reinforcements, so you probably don't need to play around it. Watch their body language, particularly while you're shuffling and waiting for game 2. Did they take a long time to sideboard? Maybe they're not sure of their plan against you, or they're not properly prepared for this matchup. If they were ready immediately and knew the exact changes to make, there's a good chance they have a plan they have practiced many times before.

This is especially relevant if you're trying to figure out if they're the type of person who has a particular devastating sideboard card against you. Someone who sideboards quickly, efficiently, and with purpose is much more likely to have Creeping Corrosion, Slaughter Games, or Leyline of the Void. If they're taking a while and seem unsure, it's more likely they're trying to figure things out, such as if they want an extra Doom Blade or Tragic Slip.



When sideboarding, keep the core of your deck intact unless you specifically plan on transforming. If you're playing an Elf Combo deck and you sideboard in four Chokes, four Guttural Responses, and four Thoughtseizes, you may stop your opponent from interfering... but what are the odds you're actually going to "go off?"

Keeping the core of your deck intact is generally the most important rule of sideboarding... but if the core of your deck can't beat the opponent, look to see how you can make things unpredictable. Mixing things up and looking for variance can lessen the advantage an opponent has over you.

Be mindful of if you're playing or drawing. There are times where it's appropriate to sideboard out a land on the draw (in some attrition-based matchups) as well as cards that are only worth keeping in the deck when you are on the play (such as some mediocre counterspells against aggro). This doesn't mean we want to go sideboarding out a land in every deck, but it *is* a tool at our disposal for those uncommon times where it is right to do so.

The sideboard of a deck should be part of the equation during all of deck design. However, focusing on the maindeck is generally more useful during the exploration period. Once you've determined what basic strategy you're going to play, it becomes more important to shift more focus to sideboards. Additionally, if you have a deck that's either particularly reliant on the sideboard (many control decks) or particularly vulnerable to certain sideboards (many combo decks) you're going to want more sideboard practice.

When I'm brewing, I usually don't even sketch a sideboard. I just try ideas and see if they're viable. The majority of new concepts fail immediately. Generally, it's more important to understand the basic workings of our deck before we jump to sideboarding. If the maindeck doesn't work, time spent on the sideboard might as well have been set on fire.

If we find a concept that works, then sideboarding is an invaluable area to work on as well as practice. It's an area that's rife with advantage to be gained, as most players don't practice with sideboards nearly enough. Think about how many games people practice against Dredge. Now imagine if you were the Dredge



player: Think about how many post-sideboard games you have practiced against Jund, against U/W Control, against Storm Combo. The difference in experience in a matchup can be huge, and many matchups are totally different after sideboarding.

Remember to practice and think about sideboarding often. Just as people who write “24 lands” when describing a deck to their friend don’t get as proficient at building mana bases, so too are people who don’t include a sideboard when talking about the deck they want to play. Practice building sideboards! This is another area where templating (starting with an existing list or partial list and using it as a blueprint) can pay large dividends.

PREPARING FOR WHAT WILL ACTUALLY SHOW UP

If our goal is to win the tournament, then we’re going to pick the deck (and sideboard) that gives us the greatest mathematical probability of winning the whole thing.

This is *not* the exact same thing as having the greatest chance of winning a random match.

The decks in the Top 8 aren’t the same as Day 2 of a Grand Prix, nor are the Day 2 decks the same as the Day 1 decks. Some deckbuilders like to say they want their maindeck to beat the Swiss and their sideboard to beat the Top 8. We don’t want to go overboard and out-think ourselves, but we do want to be prepared.

It’s only truly important to prepare for the decks that are likely to show up.

“Being right” in Magic deck selection is ultimately about putting yourself in the best possible position to win if you repeated the same tournament several times.

Your sideboard is there to give you the best chances of gaining or maintaining edges in as many matchups as is reasonable. We want as much of an edge as we can get, and we want to beat as many matchups as possible. Where we draw the line is generally a function of the popularity of the deck we are preparing for. We’d rather beat three decks 55% of the time rather than beating one deck 80% of the time, one deck 50%, and one deck 35%.

**BEING RIGHT
IN MAGIC DECK
SELECTION IS
ULTIMATELY ABOUT
PUTTING YOURSELF
IN THE BEST POSSIBLE
POSITION TO WIN**

Sideboard space is precious. Understanding how much of it we need to beat various matchups is important for determining if our maindeck is what we really want, as well as determining which matchups are worth beating (and which ones we just accept are going to be rough). We can utilize narrow but devastating hosers like *Leyline of the Void*, *Slaughter Games*, and *Creeping Corrosion*, but sometimes we'll want cards that can be used against a larger selection of strategies. Particularly in wide-open fields, we want to be able to tune our decks against opponents who are using decks we haven't seen or tested against.

SIDEBORDING SWAPS

A sideboarding swap is when you have a subset of cards that you plan on sideboarding in for another subset of cards against certain matchups. These cards can all be identical, such as taking out four *Path to Exiles* and putting in four *Thoughtseizes* against combo, or varied, such as cutting two *Ultimate Prices*, three *Supreme Verdicts*, and a *Terminus* for two *Negates*, two *Dissipates*, and two *Jace, Memory Adepts* when sideboarding against control decks.

Sideboarding lets us take out our “dead” cards, and a sideboard swap provides some structure. In the example above, we're talking about a control deck with six removal spells (*Ultimate Prices*, *Verdicts*, and *Terminus*) that we might take out against some combo and control decks. Since so many of those decks are going to involve us sideboarding out the same number and types of cards, in this case anti-creature cards, the game plan is to have an equal number of anti-spell cards to exchange. Common choices often involve permission, discard, and ways to gain a big advantage, such as planeswalkers, bomb creatures, or other threats.

It's vital to consider how many dead cards we have in each of our key matchups and how much that matters. Cards don't have to be *totally* worthless to be considered “dead cards” — it's more about if whether actually want a card in your deck that's generally not very effective.



Remember: we care about winning the tournament more than any given matchup. So it's not just about replacing dead cards, it's about getting an edge where we need it (and where it's efficient).

Let's say you have nine maindecked creature kill spells. Do you absolutely need nine anti-spell cards to bring in? No, not always. It's nice to be able to bring in something that does anything — but sometimes it isn't worth the space to be able to replace that ninth removal spell.

Of course, careful planning of the sideboard matches we're most likely to face may lead us to make a few minor adjustments that ensure we have enough playables against everyone. For instance, we replace one Thoughtseize in our sideboard with an Inquisition of Kozilek so that we have exactly enough cards to board in against a mono-red Burn deck.

THE POST-SIDEBOARD WIN PERCENTAGE WE NEED

Let's say we have a deck we like, but it has a rough game 1 against a popular deck in the format. How much do we need to turn the matchup around after boarding?

Well, that depends largely on how bad the game 1 is, and how much we actually care about gaining percentage here.

How good can we make game 2? A lot of people mistakenly aim to get the game win percentage up to 50%. If you were behind in game 1, you're still the underdog here regardless of the actual percentage. If you lost the first game, you've gotta win two more for a victory; your opponent only has to win one.

What if you can get your odds of winning post-sideboard games up to 60%? That has to be good enough, right? After all, you were losing the matchup and now you have the edge in two out of three of the games.

Well, if you were down 40/60 pre-board you are now a 55/45 favorite. If you were down 25/75 pre-board, you are now a 51/49 favorite. Sometimes that's going to have to be good enough, sometimes it's not. It just comes down to how much that percentage is worth to you. If Jund is 25% of the field and Affinity is only 7% of the field, an extra 5% against Jund might be worth a lot more than gaining 10% against Affinity.



We want to playtest the game one matchup enough to have a feel for just how bad our bad matchup is. If you're only a little behind in a game one, aiming to get up to 70% is often not unreasonable, and can turn a 40% game 1 into a 67% chance of winning the match. Sometimes we settle for coin flips, but we don't want coin flips. We want favorable matchups.

SIDEBOARD MISTAKES

One of the most common sideboarding mistakes is to jam extra copies of cards we didn't have room for in the maindeck, particularly cards that we have three of in the main but no room for the fourth. Vindicate is a classic example. It is a great card, and often good against everyone — but if you didn't have room for the fourth maindecked copy, then why do you have another in the sideboard? Are you going to board it in against everyone?

If you know you have stuff to take out, but the cards that you take out varies from opponent to opponent, it *can* be right to have a general utility card that comes in against everyone. This is rarely the case though, and generally we can find a more effective way to use that sideboard slot.

Removal, particularly one-for-one removal, needs purpose. You don't want to just throw a bunch of "cards people usually play" in. If you're going to have removal in your sideboard, it should have a clear context that calls for it. For instance, if you're going to sideboard Ultimate Price you should have an idea of which creatures and which matchups lead you to want to do this.

There's nothing wrong with one-for-one removal cards *as long as you have a plan for them*. For instance, in some matchups only one of our opponent's cards matters — cards like Leyline of the Void, Pyromancer Ascension, or Blood Moon. In such matchups, there's very little limit to how many efficient ways you can play to fight just that one card. If that one card is all that matters, then nothing else matters and every Nature's Claim is solid gold.



We have to be careful that we're only going to the sideboard for as many cards as we have cards to cut. Take, for example, a deck that has three maindecked Ultimate Prices, and perhaps sideboards in some Dead Weights. If you have some other inefficient thing you want to take out, you're increasing your total removal count. But if you're boarding out Ultimate Price for Dead Weight, then Ultimate Price is still good because your opponent's playing a fast aggro deck. You are potentially gaining minimal value here, speeding your removal reaction time up, but you're still killing four creatures. Remember, it's not how good the sideboard cards are; it's how much *better* they are than what they are replacing.

Another common mistake is to sideboard cards that are "good sideboard cards" without regard to the maindeck's strategy. Is Rule of Law really the best way to stop Elf Combo, or might Ethersworn Canonist fit your strategy better? Do you actually want the Canonist when your primary plan against Elves is to sweep the board with Supreme Verdict? You might want the Canonist in case you don't draw a sweeper, but is that really the best card you could draw when you don't have one? At some point, you have to have some confidence in your ability to execute your basic game plan.

The sideboard is a tool for helping us win the game. This can mean supporting our primary strategy or allowing us to change our strategy. Whatever we do, we must be sure that the cards we are sideboarding work with our deck.

DECKBUILDING IN COMMANDER

While Commander may be a "casual" format, that doesn't mean deckbuilding isn't important. The deckbuilding strategy and tactics found in *Next Level Deckbuilding* are generally applicable to Commander as well, but there are a few key differences to keep in mind when building a deck for this format.

First of all, know what your goal is. When we're building tournament decks, most of the time our goal is just to win the tournament. Commander is a very different animal. If we were entering a Commander tournament to try to win a Mox, we might be more inclined to set up some infinite-turn deck using lots of card drawing, mana acceleration, and cards like Time Warp and



Walk the Aeons, perhaps with an abusive commander like Prime Speaker Zegana or Azami, Lady of Scrolls. We could fill our deck with nothing but ways to abuse the rules of the format. In fact, that's what we'd look to do in most tournament formats.



But this approach isn't usually optimal for most Commander games.

Most people play Commander outside of tournament settings, and have no intention of testing for a ruthless tournament. Even when folks play in tournaments, the tournaments are rarely high stakes; they're more about encouraging the social aspect. If your goal is to have a good time and have everyone in the game have a good time, you're going to have a different valuation of cards.

This isn't to say you shouldn't play to win. Rather, this is to suggest that if your top priority is having fun, then picking more "fun" cards (as opposed to just abusive) may be a worthwhile strategy. Additionally, if you want to play with the same people week after week, you probably don't want to be the guy who's always showing up with a deck that makes people want to quit.

Another important question to consider is how many people will be playing in your games. Decks meant to face three players are going to look a lot different than decks meant to face just one. The more other players in game, the more important it is to have cards that let you play politics. Even if you don't plan on doing much verbal politicking, there is certain amount implied by actions.

For instance, if you have counterspells you can save them specifically for people who go after you. That way, people who want their stuff to work learn to not pick on you. If you have Naturalize, you might save it to for someone who gives you a hard time (or threatens to). If they don't leave you alone, you can Naturalize their toys, but if they stay out of your way, you'll let them have their fun. Often, you won't even need to use the Naturalize, since the threat of it is often strong enough to keep them from pointing that artifact or enchantment in your direction.

Cards that sit in play and can be activated offer a powerful tool for influencing the behavior of your opponents. Multiplayer specialist Anthony Alongi dubbed these sort of cards "rattlesnakes," as they imply a threat that deters people from messing with you. Some good examples include Maze of Ith, Pernicious Deed, Seal of Doom, and No Mercy. These cards get better as more players join your game.



Another class of cards that improves with more players is that of the "pigeon." Pigeons are cards that scale by player. Some good examples includes Syphon Soul, Verdant Force, and Consecrated Sphinx. These can be extremely powerful and are quite common in multiplayer games, however, you must be careful to not draw too much hatred from the rest of the group. If you're constantly punishing every other player and creating extremely powerful effects for yourself they may team up against you to wipe you out.



The other side of the scaling by player coin is that of the “plankton.” This sort of multiplayer card feeds everyone. The more players, the more people get fed. Howling Mine may seem contrary to your goals in a four-player game, since opponents are drawing three extra cards for each one of yours; however, the power is pretty spread out and usually doesn’t give a single player a massive advantage. Additionally, such a move may make other players value having you in the game, meaning they turn their weapons somewhere else. We don’t always need to beat everyone else ourselves. Sometimes, we want to get other people to do our dirty work for us.



There are a few other types of multiplayer cards worth understanding if you play a lot of Commander (or other variants). “Gorillas” are big effects that can impact the game even when there is a lot going on. “Area of effect” spells like Supreme Verdict and Upheaval are the primary thing to look for here, but also check for fatties that can dominate the board, such as Massacre Wurm and Terrastodon.

Counterspells and Naturalizes were mentioned above, and are great examples of “spiders” — sneaky cards that let you have tricks up your sleeve. This unknown element makes you a dangerous opponent that other players may be inclined to avoid stirring.

Finally, there are “cockroaches” — cards that make it so that you never seem to die or run out of business, allowing you to renew or recycle your resources. These cards can make you into enough of a tank that others might not feel like it’s not worth going after you. Additionally, they can help ensure you have fuel to keep going through numerous opponents. Some good examples include Academy Ruins, Blue Sun’s Zenith, and Oversold Cemetery.

Mixing and matching the various types of multiplayer cards is great and should be done in whatever fashion best suits your play style. Experimenting with new cards is also crucial, as the last thing you want is for your play group to have you totally figured out.

Commander has a few rules changes that can impact deckbuilding; the most important of these is the commander rule. Not only does it dictate what colors of cards you can use, it’s a legend that you can count on getting many times every game. This makes it an ideal card to build around. Playing cards that combine well with your commander is Commander Deckbuilding 101.

Additionally, Commander’s higher life total, larger deck size, Highlander rules, and the possibility of commander damage can all change our valuations of cards. Whenever you face a new question that you don’t know the answer to, using the four perspectives from the first chapter can be invaluable.

Experimenting, tuning, and tweaking are all great, but at the end of it all remember the number one rule of multiplayer: *Have fun!*



CARD EVALUATION

How do you evaluate cards? Most casual and PTQ players can't do it well, and most pros are mediocre at it at best. Improving this skill is one of the most powerful ways possible to put yourself ahead of the curve.

For competitive purposes, Magic cards are generally evaluated based on two primary axes:

- Rate
- Synergy

A card's "rate" is its raw efficiency in general. It's not strictly evaluated in a vacuum — since in a vacuum, no card means anything. Every card has to be evaluated in relation to the other cards you could possibly play.

One of the challenges in evaluating new cards is that we don't yet know how good the other new cards are or what works best together. Evaluating a single new card wouldn't be too much trouble, but how can we evaluate 250 new cards being released at once?

When we evaluate cards, we must have a specific context in mind to make any sense of our evaluation. The most common context to apply is the format we're considering using the card in: Standard, Legacy, Commander, Modern, Vintage, and Draft all have different contexts for evaluating them. The normal "rate" in Standard is quite different than draft or Vintage.

$$\text{Rate} = \frac{\text{Effect}}{\text{Cost}}$$

"Effect" is anything that furthers your attempts to win the game. This means giving you more of one or more resources, or taking away one or more resources from your opponents. The three basic types of resources are cards, tempo, and life.

WHEN WE EVALUATE CARDS, WE MUST HAVE A SPECIFIC CONTEXT IN MIND TO MAKE ANY SENSE OF OUR EVALUATION

CARDS

The raw material we shape decks from, “cards” refers to cards in hand, permanents (including tokens), and anything generating an effect from another zone (such as a Firemane Angel that triggers out of the graveyard, or a suspended Ancestral Vision).

What makes actual cards special, as a resource, is that it is the one resource you both start the game with and acquire more naturally over time. One of the most famous types of advantages, card advantage, is based on having more of this resource than your opponent. While gaining card advantage can be a crucial component to some strategies, it is far from the only way to game yourself a winning advantage.



TEMPO

While it’s one of the most often misunderstood concepts in Magic, tempo isn’t really difficult to fathom. To say it is the resource of time would be accurate, but not particularly useful. Rather, it’s the sort of resource you don’t start with, but gain every turn (or over some given amount of time).

Ninety-seven percent of the time, this refers to mana. Likewise, whenever you see the word “tempo” in Magic strategy, it is generally fine to mentally replace it with the word “mana” to get the general idea.

When you spend three mana on a creature and your opponent spends four to kill it, you are gaining tempo, because you are gaining mana.

When you spend three mana to draw two cards, you’re gaining card advantage, but losing tempo, because you’re losing mana.

When you Unsummon your opponent’s Baneflayer Angel, you’re going down in card advantage, but gaining tempo.

LIFE

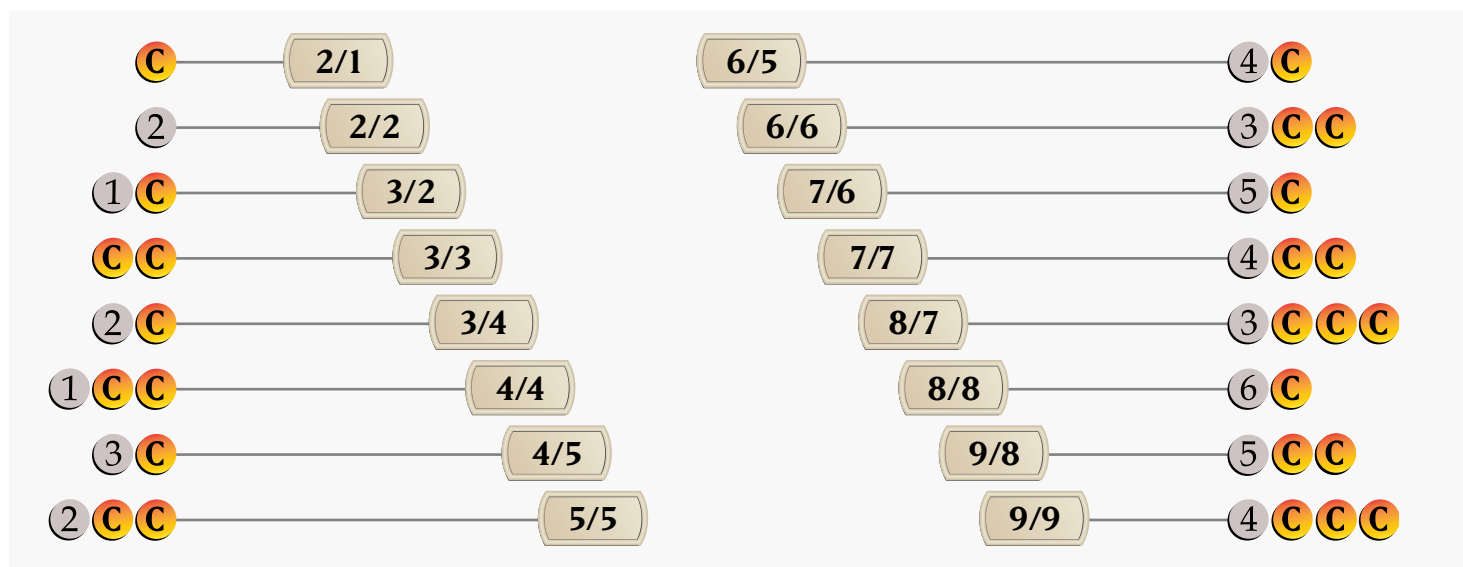
This category of resource actually deals with all of the resources you have that keep you from dying. Most of the time, the relevant one is your life total — but it also includes the cards left in your library that keep you from being decked and how many more poison counters you can take before dying.

Sometimes we're willing to give up cards or tempo to get an advantage in the life department, such as chump blocking to prevent damage that would kill you or using Fireball to target your opponent's face. Other times, we're willing to give up life to gain some cards or tempo, such as activating Necropotence, or not blocking a Dryad Militant with your Arbor Elf.

When we talk about a card's rate, we're describing its efficiency. The most common type of card is a creature, which is a "card," as far as the three resources are concerned. In addition to costing a card, it also costs some mana, and knowing how much creature you should get for how much mana is critical in evaluating cards properly.

How much creature you get for each cost is something that varies from format to format and season to season. In general, we can look at what sorts of creatures get played (and which would).

In recent Standard (circa late spring 2013), baseline is generally around:



The Cs can be any color of mana, though obviously certain colors are going to have more above-rate options than others. In general, we consider a 3/2 and a 2/3 to have the same rate, though contextually, you may value one set of stats higher than the other.

This list does not suggest that we would play with a 6W 8/8 “vanilla” creature, but rather that’s the baseline cost for a card. We generally don’t play 2/1 for 1 with no abilities, unless we have a reason to. It is possible for a card to be so above-rate you want it even when it doesn’t have anything to do with our deck (a 1W 8/8 vanilla card would be a must-play!) but that would not be true for a “correctly costed” card.

A good rule of thumb is that baseline rate for Standard is a creature with a power and toughness equal to its converted mana cost, with extra stats equal to the number of colored mana symbols in that cost (regardless of whether they are all the same color or several). This starts to break down a little with expensive creatures, since cost in Magic is not linear in terms of opportunity cost.

Generally, creatures smaller than a 2/2 aren’t really worth the card you spent on them unless they do something significant for your deck. A 2/1 is much closer to a 2/2 than a 1/2 is, so the bar is much lower, but the cost of a card is often the most significant cost a creature has.

In general, adding a mana to give a creature +1/+1 is “fair” — though on creatures with abilities this might be considered a slight drawback since it means going another turn without the benefit of that ability.

Not all stat combinations are created equal. While a 1/2 and a 2/1 may have the same combined power and toughness, the second point of toughness usually does little for the creature, while a second point of power makes it kill twice as fast and trade up. Of course, if you’re using a creature primarily for an ability (like Deathrite Shaman), you could prefer the 1/2 body.

In general, well-balanced stats are usually the best. If the stats are unbalanced, an extra point of power is usually preferable.



Most creatures in Magic won't have a rate as good as on the table, as evidenced by the way good draft creatures don't always cross over into Standard. In addition, not a lot of creatures have base stats better than those without a drawback. Usually, creatures will be the listed stats or smaller. If a creature you are evaluating is smaller than baseline costs, the difference between the cost you paid and the body you got is how much you are paying for whatever abilities it has.

For example, Knight of Infamy costs 1B for a 2/1 with exalted and protection from white. The baseline cost would be a 2/1 for B, so we're paying 1 mana for these two abilities. Outrider of Jhess, on the other hand, costs 3U for a 2/2 with exalted. Since a 2/2 is worth about two colorless mana, that means we're paying 1U for exalted. That's more than twice the cost we paid for Knight of Infamy — and the Knight also had protection from white! This makes it pretty clear just how much better of a rate Knight of Infamy has than Outrider of Jhess.

Thundermaw Hellkite costs 3RR for a 5/5 with flying, haste, and when it comes into play, it deals one damage to each flying creature your opponents control and taps them. The baseline rate would be a 5/5 for 2RR, so we're spending a single mana for all of those abilities. No wonder that card is popular!

How much are abilities worth? Well that depends entirely on the rest of the creature. A 1/3 haste creature is a lot less exciting than a 3/1 haste creature. Some abilities are common enough that Magic R&D shortcuts for costing them. Minor keywords, such as trample, first strike, reach, deathtouch, vigilance, flash, or unleash are often worth around half a mana (a colored mana symbol), meaning a 3/2 creature with trample is at a similar rate to a 3/3 vanilla with the same cost.

Major keywords are generally worth somewhere between half and a full mana — keywords like haste, lifelink, and hexproof. Flying is probably the keyword that I would say most closely rides the line, being the weakest of the major abilities but generally worth closer to a mana than a half.

As always, however, we need to use common sense to evaluate how much utility we are getting out of the ability. A 6/1 deathtouch is generally not as good as a 7/1 vanilla, while a 1/6



deathtouch creature is a lot better than a 1/7 vanilla. Change that to trample, and it cuts the exact opposite way.

There are even a few abilities worth more than a mana, such as double strike. For double strike, I generally double the creature's power, then consider it to have half of first strike. For instance, a 2/2 double striker has a better rate than a 4/2 creature with the same cost, but is generally not as good as a 4/2 creature with first strike. This doesn't take into consideration possible synergies with pump spells, but that's really what we're doing when we are evaluating a card's rate — just evaluating it in general. These sorts of evaluations make for a reasonable step 1 — but step 2 should be comparisons to actual cards that people are playing whenever possible.

What about creatures that draw a card, like Elvish Visionary?

In general, drawing a card is worth just a hair under two mana in Standard. This means a 2/2 is worth about the same as a card — which is particularly important to remember when evaluating creatures smaller than a 2/2, and the reason cheap creatures are often not worth the card it took to cast them.

"Enters the battlefield" triggers can be evaluated like spells that happen to also give you a creature for an added cost. Often these triggered abilities are effects so minor that we might not want to spend an entire card on them, but can be quite valuable as part of the package deal. A good way to figure out how much you are paying for the "enters battlefield trigger" is to evaluate how much the card would cost if it didn't have that ability (as detailed above), then compare it to the actual cost.

For instance, Acidic Slime costs 3GG for a 2/2 creature with deathtouch that destroys an artifact, enchantment, or land when it enters the battlefield. It's probably fair to consider a 2/2 Deathtouch creature to be about as powerful as a 3/2 creature, or about 1G worth of value. Contextually, it is important to remember that while we might prefer a 3/2 on turn 2, a 2/2 deathtouch creature on turn 5 is probably more valuable (since there's a good chance of being able to trade it for a more expensive creature).



This means we are paying about 2G to be able to destroy an artifact, enchantment, or land... which is a better deal than we normally get with cards like Creeping Mold!

Of course, cards and mana aren't the only resource we may be asked to spend on a creature. Creatures that do damage to us aren't super-common, but there are usually a couple printed a year. Measuring the value of life invested in creatures is pretty easy, since life is a resource that has value we work with in so many other areas. In general, a card is worth about two life. This is prone to massive shifts, depending on context — but empirically, two life for one card is just about the middle of the road. As you may have realized, this implies that a mana is worth about a life (which is why Blaze isn't a very good deal, since it always costs one mana more than the amount of damage it does).

Let's try some real world examples using the tools we have laid out here.

Kalonian Tusker

A 3/3 for GG is baseline rate. It's fine, but nothing special. It's worth noting that while the GW cost of Watchwolf may look more exotic, it's actually easier to cast in a G/W deck, on average, than the Kalonian Tusker. This is balanced by the fact that you have to actually have green and white to play it in your deck, unlike the Tusker.

Thundermaw Hellkite

As mentioned above, we're getting haste, flying, and his "enters the battlefield" trigger for just one mana. Haste alone is pretty close to an entire mana's worth of value on its own. This means we're getting flying and the trigger for "free" — so Thundermaw Hellkite is very above rate.

If we say that flying is worth almost a mana, as well, that brings us up to almost a full mana above the baseline rate. It's hard to evaluate exactly how much that ability is worth, since it would probably cost us more than we'd want to spend, but I think it's fair to say that it's probably somewhere between the difference needed to get Thundermaw up to a full mana above rate and half



a mana (which would put him somewhere in the 1.25 mana above rate space).

Being even half a mana above rate is a pretty significant deal... so even if there's no obvious home for a new card, if it is far above rate, we can predict a home (or homes!) will materialize for it.

Knight of Infamy

Above, we noted that we're spending one mana for the text box. How much is the text box really worth, though? In my experience, exalted is almost as good as +1/+1, but not quite. It is, however, worth more than a mere +1/+0. Protection from a color is an ability that fluctuates in value a great deal, but is generally worth a little more than half a mana.

How did I come to this conclusion? This is just an observation from years of playing. Becoming good at evaluating cards involves building up our tools and knowing how to use them.

Paying one mana for two abilities that are each worth slightly more than a mana is, by definition, a good deal. It's not the best card in the format, but it is above rate — which tells us Knight of Infamy is a "strong card."



Mulldrifter

Evaluating cards that can be played multiple different ways adds a new twist. Now, it's not just a matter of adding the effects together, but placing a value on each of the options. Mulldrifter is like a split card, where the two sides are Divination for 2U and Divination + Wind Drake for 4U.

Mulldrifter is a little easier than most, as one of the two sides of the card is actually already pretty close to baseline rate. While drawing a card is worth two mana, we wouldn't pay two mana to draw a single card (at the expense of a card), as that also costs a card. That said, we also don't get to draw two for two mana, since using a card to draw two is actually more velocity than a single cantrip.



In Magic, “Velocity” is how fast you’re able to look at more cards in your deck. Each card is 1/60th of your deck — but if you cast Divination, you’re seeing not only the Divination, but two more cards, representing seeing a sum total of 1/20th of your deck. A card that draws you two cards is not only drawing you an extra card, but also “cycling” a card — which helps point us in the direction of why the baseline cost of a draw-two is three mana.

Mulldrifter is basically a Divination with kicker 2: Put a 2/2 flier into play. How much are we getting for that two extra mana? How good is a 2/2 flier? Well, if a 2/2 is worth about a card, and flying is worth between half and a full mana, that means we’re getting about 2.5-3 mana worth of value as a bonus, for that extra two mana. That’s a good deal, to be sure... but that doesn’t factor in the value of the option.

If Mulldrifter was the same text without evoke, it would already be a good card, as it would be a baseline Divination with an extra bonus worth far more than we’re paying. Factor in the ability to cash it in for a Divination, and now we are talking about one seriously overpowered card.

The option to spend two mana to cycle a card is often worth a mana, and the option to cycle a card for three mana and get two cards is about 150% as strong. That means we’d generally expect to pay between at least a mana, possibly as much as a mana and a half to get such a great option. Instead of actually paying for this ability, however, we’re getting a creature so good, it’d be above rate even *without* this ability!

Boros Elite

Many cards have variable power levels, depending on if you’re willing to do what the card asks. Boros Elite asks you to put at least two creatures into the Red Zone with it. In exchange, you’ll get a creature worth almost two mana.

Isn’t it worth WW to get a 3/3? Sure, but we’re talking about a 3/3 that is always a 1/1 when blocking. Let’s say we’re getting about 1W worth of value, which is a mana above the baseline rate... when we are fulfilling the criteria. When we don’t, we’re a +1/+0 away from rate, a.k.a., “half a mana.”



That means we have to figure we'll going to trigger Boros Elite at least a third of the time in order for him to make it to be *as good* as its baseline rate. It isn't super-interesting to us how good he is in a random context. What we care about is how good he is for us. As such, we should ask ourselves how often we would trigger him. The more often that number is above 33%, the higher above rate he is.

Ancestral Recall

Ancestral Recall is the only card that has consistently competed with Black Lotus for the title of "Best Card in Magic." Why? What makes this card so good?

Drawing three cards is generally worth about five mana, despite the fact that a few cards over the years have been printed that let us do it for four. Think of it as a Divination with a cantrip (two mana) attached to it. Tidings let us draw four — but remember, Tidings was absolutely excellent and about a mana above the baseline rate.

Ancestral Recall is even an instant and has the ability to target opponents under the right circumstances. A cost of 3UU would result in a card people would play (and Jace's Ingenuity demonstrated this, as it saw a fair bit of play, despite not even being able to target opponents). This makes Ancestral Recall undercosted by 3U — a cost which is rivaled by very few cards in the game's history.

Why is it better than Balance, though? Balance is probably properly costed at 4WWW (though it would be a fairly oppressive and undesirable card to print, as it promotes very unhealthy things). As such, if it was printed as is, but with a new cost, it would probably cost at least 6WW. Let's just assume we could get away with it at 4WWW, though. We're still talking about being undercosted by 3WW — a full mana more undercosted than Ancestral Recall.

There are three things to remember, here. First, Ancestral Recall is proactive and can be used by basically anyone, and will always be good. People who actually want Balance often find it better than Ancestral Recall when they use it; it's just far more work to use it.



Second, Ancestral Recall costs one mana, meaning its cost is just 20% of what it *should* be. Balance costs 28% what it should cost, so as a percentage, Ancestral is actually more undercosted. Finally, Balance is on the shortlist of cards that can actually compare to Ancestral Recall, despite being a reactive white card.

Gruul Guildgate

This one comes up over and over. This is the definition of baseline, as experience has demonstrated that a land entering the battlefield tapped is worth a second color of mana. These cards are sometimes passed over simply because of too many other good options, but this really is the baseline.

What's more interesting is using this understanding for evaluating other cards, such as Raging Ravine. One big difference between Raging Ravine and Treetop Village is that Raging Ravine's ability to make two colors is worth an entire mana worth of value as compared to Treetop Village — for the same reason that Gruul Guildgate is worth a mana of value compared to Forest. This means that while Treetop Village's ability costs you a mana to buy, the value of Raging Ravine's ability *is the amount it is above rate!*



FINDING THE OBVIOUS DECKS

New sets coming out make for exciting times... but it always seems like there are some people who know exactly which cards to start exploring first, while most people are weeks behind, waiting to hear what the Internet has to say. How can we be one of the players starting in the right places?

When evaluating a new set, there are four important types of cards to look for.

- Rate Cards
- Novel effects
- Contextual Strengths
- Remakes

These four questions are the starting point for evaluating new cards, the three lenses we should consider for each card added to a format. They're also really just the four perspectives in use.

RATE CARDS

Rate Cards are just efficient. What makes a Rate Card? Whenever we get more value from our card than the baseline rate, the card succeeds as a rate card. It can be obsoleted by better rate cards, but it's at least in the conversation. This is really Top→Down thinking in disguise.

NOVEL EFFECTS

Whenever a card does something that no other card does (or, at least, does as well), it has the potential to be a Novel Effect. Even when an effect looks strange or corner case, if nothing else does it, there's the potential that we could actually want this. This can include "build around me" cards like Eye of the Storm or Maze's End, but can also include roleplayers, such as Loxodon Smelter's ability to counter discard, or Ghost Quarter's ability to give land destruction to anyone without costing a dedicated slot in a deck. Seeing what a format is missing is a powerful form of Bottom→Up thinking.

CONTEXTUAL STRENGTHS

Champion of the Parish makes us want to pay close attention to every new human that comes out. Shocklands make Farseek stronger than it normally would be. When we're interested in Gravecrawler, the next step is to find zombies. Asking these sorts of questions (and finding which questions to ask) allows us to use Front→Back thinking to build from where we know we want to start.

REMAKES

Whenever Wizards makes a new version of a successful card, we would do well to ask how this new version compares to the old. We must also remember to ask if the old one would have the same success in today's format. Comparing new versions of cards that made a particular strategy possible to older versions that worked is a form of Back→Front thinking.



When we have a new pool of cards to evaluate, it's worthwhile to go down the spoiler and consider each card from each of these four perspectives. At the time of this printing, Dragon's Maze was the most recent Magic Set to be released, but these principles hold true for all Magic sets.

As new cards are revealed, we should ask ourselves these four questions about each card.

- Does the card have an above-average rate?
- Does it do something novel?
- Does the format have a reason the card would be more interesting?
- Is the card like something else that did something we wanted?

In any given format, we want to know what the default best cards are at each cost. When we have a new set added to the mix, each new card should be compared to what options are already available. Does a new card have a better rate? Is it better in combination with a card you're already using?

Of course, once a year, when the first set of a block comes out, the format is turned totally upside-down by rotation. In those chaotic times, the best strategy is usually a combination of looking at other similar formats (the previous Block Constructed, what Standard decks didn't lose much), and marrying that to the opposite approach, which is to just start from scratch and throw out your assumptions.

Remember, "how good a card is" isn't just a number. These rate calculations are just to give us an idea of what tier of card we are dealing with. When it comes to two options that are in the same ballpark, there's only so far theorycrafting can take you; at a certain point, you have to just play some games and get some data. Still, we can ask ourselves what it is we're trying to accomplish with the card, which will help us focus on finding which card would do it better.

We can also ask ourselves how often a game will be decided by card A, where card B would have produced the opposite result. When we're testing, if we come to a spot where card A lost us the

**"HOW GOOD
A CARD IS" ISN'T
JUST A NUMBER**

game, but card B would have won it for us, that's one vote. When card A wins us a game that card B would have lost, it's one vote the other way.

These votes are just a tool to gain more information — but it's important to remember that if card B would have made you win by a *larger* margin (or lost by a smaller one), that's not really a vote for card B. Over time, we may determine that one card is just a better version of the other... but losing by a smaller margin is still losing. If card A wins you 10% more games, but many of your losses are even bigger, who cares? It's the win percentage we care about.

MULTI-LEVEL THINKING

Part of figuring out which of the new cards are going to be good is figuring out which cards *other* people will think are good. Early in a format, perception can often matter more than raw power — or even the reality of how strong cards and strategies end up being! If everyone thinks White Weenie is real strong, then beating White Weenie can be very valuable, even if no one plays that deck a month later. At the beginning of a new format, intuition and psychology are especially valuable tools for predicting what others imagine the baseline to be.

After a format has had a little more time to mature, data from recent events should play a larger role in shaping our perspective of the format. Intuition and psychology are still important, but now we're focusing on figuring out which level people will position themselves on.

Level 0 is playing "Rock," a.k.a. The Best Deck — or at least the *perceived* best deck. This is just Rock-Paper-Scissors and not to be confused with the B/G deck type, known as "The Rock." At the beginning of a format, this is often a good level to be on. It can be easy to overthink ourselves and imagine that others have everything figured out. In general, the reason to not play the perceived "Best Deck" on week one is because you believe you've found something stronger or better in the field you expect. This may sound obvious, but falling for The Fear is a very common trap.

**EARLY IN A FORMAT,
PERCEPTION
CAN OFTEN MATTER
MORE THAN
RAW POWER**

The Fear is when you start imagining that everyone has the cards you can't beat. Originally, it described the experience of wanting to play Red Aggro, but then succumbing to the fear of everyone's anti-red sidebar cards. Sure, they're totally awesome against you — and if you face someone with them and they draw them, it's going to be tough! But it can be easy to get carried away in our paranoid fantasies of just how much people are going to hate your deck out. We want to respect hate cards and metagame positioning, but we can't lose sight of where the format is really at.

Level 1 is playing "Paper," since it beats The Best Deck, "Rock." This can be as simple as just playing a deck that's good against another, but it also includes playing cards or variants that are good against the perceived best deck. If Zoo is level 0, playing slightly bigger creatures and removal might be level 1.

Often, after a few weeks, a really dominant deck can emerge. If there really is a counter to the strategy, then the metagame can take on a truly Rock-Paper-Scissors feel. In metagames like this, it's important to figure out if the perceived Paper *actually* beats Rock, though. An awful lot of people come up with all of these reasons why a deck should beat another, instead of looking at the data (i.e., their results) honestly and objectively.

If many people are at different level 0s, then trying to get a level ahead of them can be tricky. Perhaps you foil the R/G aggro deck, but half the people in the format think G/W aggro is level 0! However, if you believe that most people are at the *same* level 0, then to level the format, you may want to put yourself at level 1 and beat whatever they are doing.

Level 2 is "Scissors," finding the strategy that best beats the strategies that beat The Best Deck (the most popular). When people talk about the "Next Level," this is what they mean (assuming they aren't talking about a credit card game). It's about anticipating what other people will do in anticipation of the metagame.

Why beat what we think people will think beats what's the best, instead of just beating the best?



So say you are restricted to playing Rock, Paper, or Scissors only in a format where Rock is twice as popular as Paper or Scissors. Which deck should you play?

It's pretty obvious right?

That's right... Scissors!

Well that probably wasn't so obvious. In fact if you just want to "make Top 8," the answer is almost certainly Paper. However with a certain number of rounds an interesting thing happens...

Paper is the New Rock.

- Michael J Flores

The Basic Test of Metagaming Competence

Basically, in a small tournament, Paper can be what you want in order to beat all of the people playing Rock. However, midway through the day of a PTQ or GP, the format can take a turn. If there really is some Paper out there killing all of the Rocks, eventually, Paper can overtake Rock as the most popular strategy.

Once Paper is the new Rock, then Scissors is the new Paper. Yes, Scissors can have a rough time in the early rounds when there's so much Rock all over the place... but if you can make it past those early rounds, the field at the top can be exactly what you want to face.

Magic tournaments tend to be extremely top-heavy events. Winning a PTQ once is *way* better than finishing second three times.

We want to give ourselves the best possible chances to win — which generally means relying on play skill in the early rounds, and hoping to dodge bad matchups. Then, later in the event, when we're facing tougher competition, we'll have an edge in our deck to help push us over the top.

So how many levels deep do we go? After all, if we're in a true Rock-Paper-Scissors metagame, go one level too deep and we're in the exact worst spot in the format.

Remember, it isn't always about being on the next level. Sometimes, Rock is so strong you should just play it (like Elves in Berlin or Flash in Columbus). It's not that Elves couldn't be beat: it definitely *could*, which is why Mono-Blue Faeries eventually took over the format. However, not enough people really understood Elves yet, and positioning yourself to beat it wasn't as good a strategy as just *being* Elves.

Going one level too far is a real risk. When you position yourself to beat the deck that would have been good for people to play (but they don't, at least not enough of it), you're really just leveling yourself. For instance, way back in Pro Tour Paris 1997, I was playing Pro Magic's first major combo deck, Bloom-Drain. I tested with Mike Long and had the best deck in the tournament. However, the secret tech that pushed Bloom-Drain over the top, *Infernal Contract*, was revealed to everyone at the Pro Tour the day before during a rules meeting.

I foolishly overreacted and switched to a B/R midrange deck that beat Bloom-Drain and other B/R midrange decks, foolishly getting caught up in the hype and imagining that a lot of other people were going to switch to Bloom or B/R to beat Bloom. Then I faced a random Canadian Naya deck, a U/W control deck, a Grixix Reanimator deck, and more, but not a single Bloom deck.

But hey! At least I beat the two B/R decks I faced!

When it doubt, it's best to err on the side of not out-leveling yourself. Each level you go further into the future, the resolution of your clarity of what that world looks like gets lower. If you're unsure about the level you're at, take it down a level and usually you can see the next down much more clearly. When it seems like a level is fuzzy and confusing, that's a sign that you're looking at the wrong possible future.

THINKING LIKE R&D

When a new set comes out, there are so many possibilities to explore, how do we know where to start? One of the most useful strategies I have found is to put myself in R&D's shoes. They aren't making cards at random! They won't always be able to engineer formats the exact way they want — but they're going to try, and they are the ones who control the numbers on the cards.



How do they determine what cards are slightly overcosted and which are undercosted? They push the ones that promote things they want to support! This means they are generally going to try to push cards that promote fun play patterns, cards that people are going to enjoy, and cards that are going to sell sets.

For instance, people like to be able to cast their spells, so dual lands are good a far higher percentage of the time than most types of cards. Conversely, Stasis is a play pattern that makes players feel impotent and frustrated if it's done correctly — so if we see a new Stasis variant, it is probably less likely to be good.

That said, R&D also has certain types of mistakes they make over and over again. Maybe they can't help themselves, or maybe it's just because these elements of the game are so much harder to predict or are built on precedents that are also wrong.

For instance, blue is the best color far more often than any of the other colors. Part of this is that the designers that have the final say on the numbers (and thereby, the power level) of cards have a bias towards blue strategies. Another part is that drawing cards is really fun. Another is that blue really does have the most abusable portion of the color pie, so mistakes are amplified. Finally, a lot of blue card designs are influenced by the perception of players that will compare new blue cards to old ones. R&D wants new blue cards to look good — but many of the old cards they will be compared to were broken, so it takes a lot to not look bad in comparison.

When looking at a new set, such as Dragon's Maze or M14, we should ask ourselves, "What would R&D want to be good?" Even if we correctly figure out what they would have wanted, it doesn't mean they succeeded. However, it does give us a good idea of where to start looking.

FINDING THE "OBVIOUS" DECKS

When a new set hits, how do people determine what the "obvious" decks are? Reading Magic articles to stay in touch with the Magic community is particularly important for arming ourselves with the best information possible... but reading can only take you so far. Quite a few opponents at any given tournament have all read the same things we have!

**WHEN LOOKING
AT A NEW SET...
WE SHOULD ASK
OURSELVES,
"WHAT WOULD
R&D WANT TO
BE GOOD?"**

Finding the “obvious” decks is rooted in identifying the pillars of the format. What is the format based on? Generally, there will be three or four cards that hold the format together, defining it. Figuring out these pillars is a very different game, depending on if the new set is released during a rotation (such as the first set of a block), or if it is just being added to the mix. If we’re talking about the first set of a block and a rotation means it’s a brand-new format, we start by asking the following questions:

**GENERALLY, THERE
WILL BE THREE OR
FOUR CARDS THAT
HOLD THE FORMAT
TOGETHER**

- What are the absolute strongest cards in the format? On raw power level, what cards have the best rates?
- What are the most novel strategies that have succeeded using cards like these? Are any of the uncommon strategies supported? Do Fish, Draw-Go, Lock Decks, Big Spell, Traditional Combo, Storm, or Lava Spike decks have reason to exist in this format?
- What was good in other formats similar to this one? What was good in the last Block format? What Standard decks relied on cards that are still legal?
- What strategies were weak to the things that left Standard? Necropotence was legal for a while before anyone used it. Once Black Vise was restricted, Necropotence surged to the top tier.

Not every strategy will be viable in every format — but we’ll be examining each of sixteen deck macroarchetypes in depth. There, we’ll identify which strategies nearly always work, and which need something special. These “uncommon” strategies generally take a critical mass to work (such as enough burn spells to make a Lava Spike deck), or a key component to get printed that generally isn’t (such as an engine that can be used for a two- or three-card instant-win combo).

When a new set hits, how do people determine what the “obvious” decks are? Each of the common archetypes tend to have good chances of being in a given format, so asking ourselves what this format’s Red Aggro and Swarm decks look like is a useful early step. To look for the uncommon strategies, we must identify the key components for each and look to see if they exist in the new format.

When a new set is added to a format, we're going to ask similar questions — but there's a much bigger focus on "what did the format look like," and "what in the new set is going to change that balance of power?"

What cards need homes? These are generally cards so good on rate, a home will appear for them. What cards inspire new archetypes? Is there a new tribal lord? A card that explicitly rewards you for using a lot of a mechanic? A card that combines with a couple other cards to win the game? What cards are going to go in the existing popular strategies? What cards are going to be good against the existing popular strategies?

At the end of the day, applying the four perspectives to new formats is a powerful tool for helping understand what is going on beneath the surface.

Top→Down

What's there? What new cards have the best rates? New mechanics?

Bottom→Up

What's missing? What doesn't the new set help? What answers does the new set not solve? What new cards don't have obvious counters?

Front→Back

When we have an idea of where everyone else will start, we ask ourselves, what's the next step in the metagame after that? How about after that?

Back→Front

What worked in other formats? How can we reverse-engineer those strategies to make a deck in this format?



THE SIXTEEN MAJOR ARCHETYPES

There are four basic types of strategies in Magic:

- Aggro
- Midrange
- Control
- Combo

Each of these basic strategies is further divided into four major archetypes.

Aggro

- Red Aggro
- Linear Aggro
- Swarm
- Fish/Suicide Black

Control

- Tap-Out
- Draw-Go
- Lock
- Combo-Control

Midrange

- Rock/Junk
- True Midrange
- Non-Blue Control
- Aggro-Control

Combo

- Big Spell
- Traditional Combo
- Storm
- Lava Spike

At times, decks will contain elements of more than one of these major archetypes — but in general, decks are properly aligned to one of these archetypes more than the others. Understanding each of the major archetypes helps us not only build new decks of these types, but also when it comes to knowing how to beat them. Each of these major archetypes has underlying themes that are consistent, whether the deck is made in 2003 or 2013.

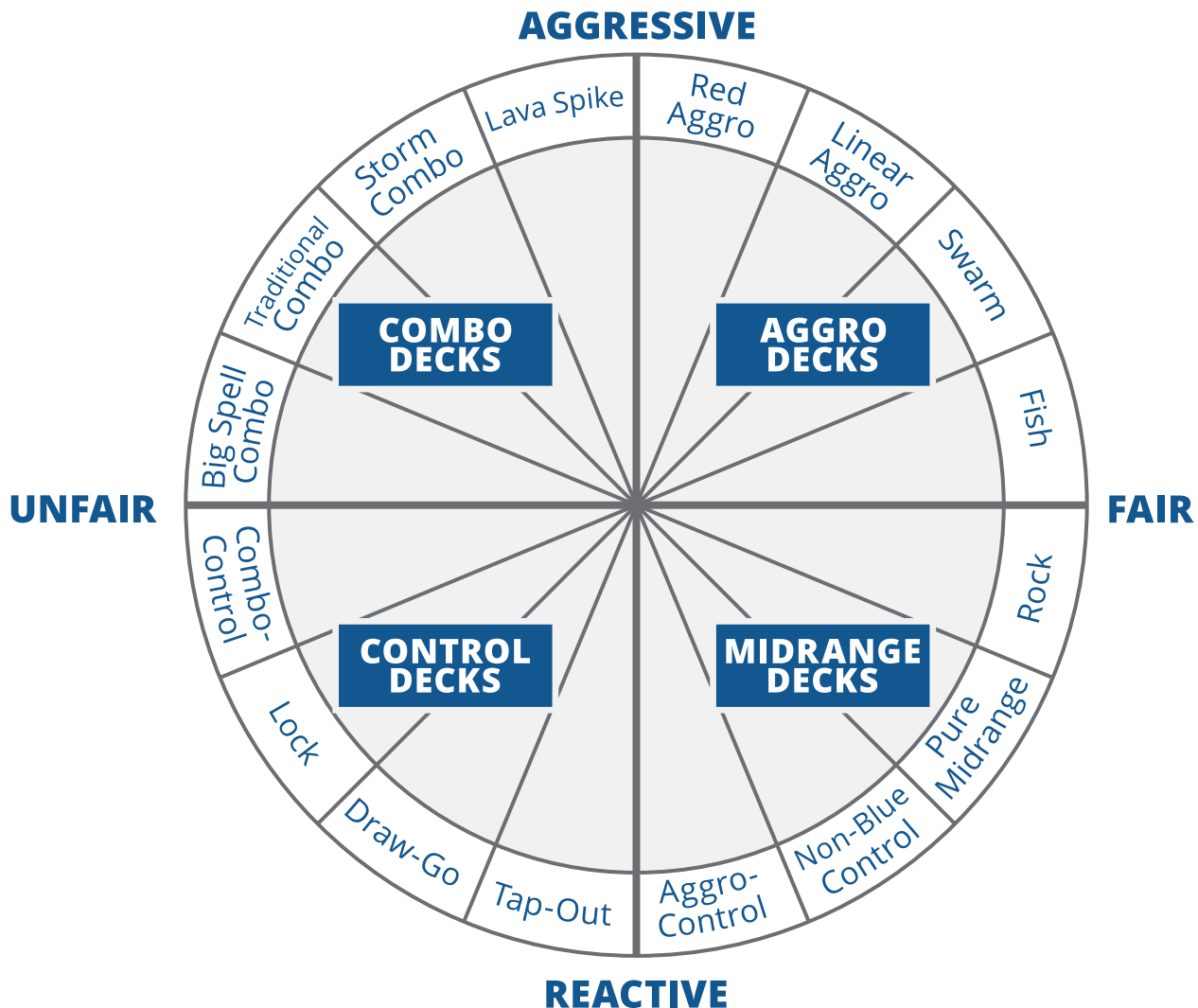
We will take an in-depth look at each of these archetypes, discussing successful examples throughout Magic's history, how to build them and beat them, as well as how likely they are to be successful nowadays.

Magic has evolved quite a bit, and not all of the major archetypes are given much support by Wizards of the Coast anymore.

Understanding which archetypes are supported these days is crucial for succeeding at building Standard decks — however, Modern, Legacy, and other older formats are quite likely to contain decks from all sixteen schools.

Additionally, Wizards screws up sometimes. From time to time, archetypes they didn't mean to push end up on top, so we want to be well-versed in all sixteen styles.

These sixteen major archetypes are not completely crisp and distinct from one another; quite the opposite! They're like a spectrum, with Fish blending into the Rock, which then blends into True Midrange, and so on — all the way to Lava Spike, which actually completes the loop, blending into Red Aggro.



DECK #1: RED AGGRO

Red Aggro is one of four macro archetype decks that compose the Aggro family, along with Linear Aggro, Swarm, and Fish. These four deck styles share many broad designs and operational features — the most important of which are:

- A primary or secondary focus on creature-based attack (especially “getting the jump” on the opponent in the early turns)
- Generally low average converted mana costs (CMCs)
- A default tendency to “play the beatdown” role in a *Who’s the Beatdown?* scenario

Depending on format and resource availability, Red Aggro can share quite a few cards with archetypes as disparate as the Lava Spike deck (perhaps obviously) to some surprising similarities to implementations of The Rock, Junk, or Pure Midrange threat decks like Jund or Naya. Red Aggro encompasses everything from the historical landmarks Sligh and Deadguy Red, the quintessential “Red Deck” — Red Deck Wins — and close neighbors like Boros, Zoo, and even Fires of Yavimaya.

For readers who are most familiar with some of these historical decks, you can see that while all can vary quite a bit in terms of creature quality — literally everything from Ironclaw Orcs to Tarmogoyf at the two-spot — every Red Aggro deck shares these differentiating principles:

- A lower curve than many of its peers, enabling the deck to seize initiative in the early turns, which manifests in creature beatdown
- The capacity (if not necessarily an emphasis on the ability) to finish games via a non-interactive “reach” tool set. Sometimes that capacity is quite impressive (Deadguy Red’s double-Fireblast potential) or somewhat embarrassing (Fires of Yavimaya’s Assault/Battery and Earthquake)
- An almost-necessary implication is the ability to remove blockers with those burn spells (a capacity not shared by all Aggro-family decks), and an almost constant stream of difficult questions to ask whether you should use your burn spells to remove creatures or go to the face

Red Aggro is differentiated from other Aggro decks by that first word in its name, “Red” (as most any respectable Red Deck can end a game outside The Red Zone), which is not necessarily the case for many other aggro decks.

It’s differentiated from the Lava Spike deck by a more meaningful capacity for interaction, a generally superior capacity for traditional resource management, and less of a direct reliance on the principles of [The Philosophy of Fire](#) — a Magic theory that relates the value of life to cards, roughly approximating a card as being worth two life.

That said, both Red Aggro and the Lava Spike deck can draw a tremendous amount of strategic value from The Philosophy of Fire; the main difference being — *ahem* — a *philosophical* one. Some Gruul/Zoo decks from past Extended formats (Red Aggro decks) actually grew out of The Lava Spike deck. Adam Prosak once asked if we were supposed to believe that a Spark Elemental was going to deal more damage than a Wild Nacatl over the course of a day! When we adjust our mindsets in this way, we can think of a Wild Nacatl that hits, say, twice, as three “Shocks” for the purposes of eroding the opponent’s life total two points at a time, rather than “a creature”.

Tournament players are often drawn to control and aggro-control decks as decks “worthy” of their play skill. Interestingly, Red Aggro is actually among the most difficult decks to play at peak levels. More than any other deck style, Red Aggro demands instantaneous valuations and reevaluations. Should I burn that creature — possibly even having to spend two cards to do it — or should I hold back to aim at his face? Do I care about threats? If my creature can win a fight with that potential blocker, should I bother to burn it to get in? What’s the tension and the relationship between the battlefield and the opponent’s life total? How much time do I have?

While every deck in the history of competitive Magic has had to answer *some* questions, Red Aggro has had to do so with cards that are generally weaker than everyone else’s. They often have precious little — and perhaps absolutely *no* — card drawing. It’s rare that a Red Aggro deck gets to play with something along the lines of a Lightning Helix... and in the larger formats where they do, the opposition has toys like Remand, Spell Snare, or Gifts Ungiven.

This section will cover:

- Sligh
- Deadguy Red
- My Fires
- Boros
- Naya
- Rakdos

Where did it all begin? Well, for me, it began at Pro Tour Dallas 1996. It was my first Pro Tour, and the first time a mono-red deck made Top 8 a major event.

Sligh

Patrick Chapin 3rd Pro Tour Dallas Juniors 1996 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Goblin Balloon Brigade
 3 Gorilla Shaman
 4 Ironclaw Orcs
 2 Dwarven Miner
 2 Orcish Librarians
 4 Orcish Artillery
 1 Orcish Cannoneers
 1 Ball Lightning
 2 Dragon Whelp
 1 Black Vise

4 Lightning Bolt
 2 Death Spark
 4 Incinerate
 1 Guerrilla Tactics
 1 Hammer of Bogardan
 3 Pillage
 1 Strip Mine
 3 Mishra's Factory
 17 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Anarchy
 3 Manabarbs
 3 Pyroblast
 2 Meekstone
 2 Shatter
 1 Red Elemental Blast

First, though, a brief aside.

In the spring of 2011, over the weekend of the StarCityGames.com Open Series Edison, where Red Deck specialist Patrick Sullivan and his Ember Haulers made a triumphant return to his home state to take down that Standard Open at the height of Caw-Blade... There was a dinner. And at that dinner, there was a draft.

But the draft was not the kind of draft where you crack packs of cardboard designed in Renton, WA and printed by Carta Mundi. It was a draft of ideas — and in this case, drafting teams of deckbuilders to break a format.

Experts and pundits argued about how highly past and present Team CMU (and eventual R&D developers) Erik Lauer or Brian Schneider should have gone. Flores couldn't keep his mouth shut, and midway into the draft blurted out that any good team would have a Red Deck master. Osyp Lebedowicz (whose pick it was) immediately scooped up Tsuyoshi Fujita, and Steve Sadin slammed Mark Herberholz — leaving Flores with no option but Tomoharu Saito. (Gerry Thompson would later comment he would have just taken PSulli himself).

Phil Napoli had been rocking back and forth in his chair, almost uncontrollably with excitement while these picks were being made. “I've got the best one! I've got the best one!”

So come Phil's pick, he blurted out his Red Deck master, the rumbling steam, the pick-to-be literally bursting out from his lips:

“Paul Sligh!”

This of course resulted in a raucous explosion from basically everyone else at the table, and — finally — with Osyp attempting to change his previous draft pick to [the fictitious] “Romeo Charbelcher.”

The “Sligh” deck, you see, was named for Paul Sligh — not its designer, but merely the first fellow to qualify at a PTQ with it (and a second-place finish, at that). Jay Schneider, the Sligh deck's proper designer, named it “Geeba,” but the name didn't exactly catch on.

The Sligh/Geeba deck brought many important concepts to competitive Magic, the most important of which was probably the introduction of the mana curve. You can see from the Dallas deck — a descendant of Schneider's design — some of these principles in action. Goblin Balloon Brigade and Gorilla Shaman were one-drop creatures that had some utility to them (in particular the “Mox Monkey”). The Sligh/Geeba deck could start punishing the opponent Red Zone-style on turn 2.

Now, you might scratch your head at the obviousness of this innovation — but it was an important one in the mid-1990s, when many decks did nothing until turn 4, when they could (finally) cast Wrath of God.

Before this point, the notion of a “Red Deck” being played at the highest levels would probably have been met with ridicule from the average Pro Tour player.

In addition to the famous concept of a mana curve, the Sligh deck introduced a macro concept of recurring card advantage via utility creatures — a concept that was, ironically, later optimized out of red aggro decks, but adopted in countless other places. Gorilla Shaman and Orcish Artillery were capable of generating very real card advantage in a world of Zuran Orbs, Ivory Towers, artifact mana, Black Knights and pump knights. In an era when a Necropotence deck's first line of defense might be Contagion, perhaps backed up by Paralyze, you can see how devastating an unchecked Orcish Artillery might be — and, in fact, how hard to “check” that Artillery was at all!

There were two large reasons that gave way to the opportunity to gain card advantage this way: 1) the creature removal was so good, and 2) the ramifications of what it meant for the creature removal.

The creature removal — highlighted by Lightning Bolt and Swords to Plowshares as fast and direct answers to Hypnotic Specter — was obviously *tremendous* for purposes of killing creatures at a low mana cost — as in, “one mana.” This meant that, for the most part, only uber-efficient creatures were played at all; primarily the aforementioned Knights and Orders.

This created a strange loop of further opportunity. Let's say you are a black Necropotence player with a front line of 2/1 protection from white, pumping Orders of the Ebon Hand, and 40% of the creatures you are going to have to deal with are other black players with pump Orders. Cards like Contagion are going to look even better than they look normally (two creatures for zero mana, in a deck with unending cards-in-hand advantage?), and you're going to reject obvious Terror-like solutions (like today's Doom Blade and Ultimate Price).

So it was, in fact, the ripple effect created in part by the efficiency of removal spells that actually gave opportunity to the Sligh/Geeba “inefficient” creature suite.

Consider a Swords to Plowshares against a Goblin Balloon Brigade, especially if you've never heard of a Red Aggro deck. Remember, at the time no deck like this had ever performed at the Pro Tour level. Short answer: *You aren't going to spend it, at all.* That means it's going to get in and chunk out a Fireblast's worth of life before you even realize you're in trouble.

How about a Swords to Plowshares against an Ironclaw Orcs? Most white players of this era were saving their Swords for Erhnam Djinn and Serra Angel, and even disliked trading with other people's White Knights. "Anyway," the white mage might think, "my White Knight outclasses that stupid Ironclaw Orcs on the battlefield." Except...

An Ironclaw Orcs does exactly as much damage as a White Knight. Sure, it might have a disadvantage instead of a stack of hyper-efficient text, but Lightning Bolt doesn't discriminate. You Bolt the other guy's Knight and "first strike" never comes into play.

As you can see, especially from a historical standpoint, Sligh/Geeba came onto the scene as a metagame predator, yet it accidentally ended up becoming one of the most important pillars of deck design theory.



Deadguy Red

David Price 1st Pro Tour Los Angeles 1998 (Tempest Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Jackal Pup	4 Cursed Scroll
4 Mogg Conscripts	2 Scalding Tongs
4 Mogg Fanatic	4 Giant Strength
4 Mogg Raider	4 Kindle
4 Fireslinger	4 Wasteland
4 Canyon Wildcat	16 Mountain
2 Rathii Dragon	

SIDEBOARD

4 Shatter
4 Stone Rain
2 Jinxed Idol
2 Scalding Tongs
1 Torture Chamber
1 Rathii Dragon
1 Apocalypse

Turn 1: *Mogg Conscripts*.

Turn 2: *Giant Strength*.

Go. :(

Dave actually won that game! Price would, of course, go on to win the Pro Tour and cement his position as the Reddest of the Red Mages. Few players have ever have been so concretely identified with a single strategy as Price.

Two years after Dallas, Red Aggro was still disdained by many pros. Price's continued devotion to the deck (he guaranteed a Pro Tour invitation the previous year after a 6-0 with a Fireblast / Lava Hounds build at US Nationals the previous summer), a PTQ win, and of course this Pro Tour win.

This build of Deadguy Red is a good example of a deck that was built to beat itself. Patrick Sullivan, probably today's foremost Red Aggro theorist and aficionado, would tell you that sustained success in the mirror relies largely on an understanding that most of the cards in the deck are about as good as one another. So winning a mirror (or pseudo-mirror) is often about picking an axis, making the game revolve around that axis, and winning the heads-up fights that occur on that axis.

For example, if you decide all the cards are functionally as good as one another, one possible advantage might be to play the lowest land count and curve so you can cram in more spells of equal strength. Over many games, you will draw slightly more spells, which will give you a kind of "card advantage" even though you both draw at a rate of one card per turn.

The Tempest Block Deadguy Red deck played a whopping twenty lands. Everything cost one or two mana. This was a twofold mirror-breaking strategy to gain that elusive "card advantage" and to drop its hand quickly for Cursed Scroll (a direct potential source of both card advantage relative to creatures and a recurring damage source). Tempest Block (prior to the Stronghold set when the card Shock was printed) was a unique format in that though it featured one of the best cross-format "burn spells" ever in Cursed Scroll, the actual burn spells were thin. There was really just Kindle.



The Deadguys exploited this knowledge in a couple of ways: They knew the only burn spell to speak of cost two, so the opponent wasn't likely to have a ton of burn spells. So they played Giant Strength to win the inevitable creature fights. In other circumstances they might burn a blocker, but here they needed a different way to gain an advantage.

The Deadguys played only the two Rathis Dragons because Dave Price knows what a mana curve is, and they had only twenty lands. They were, however, a massive way to gain an advantage. Remember, most creatures were tiny guys on the ground and there was essentially no direct way for the average Red Aggro deck to burn a 5/5 out of the sky, so Rathi Dragon could block sometimes, but was really a non-interactive way to chunk out 25% of the opponent's life total.

Dave and the Deadguys made a bet that most other Red Aggro players were also going to be focused on Cursed Scroll, meaning that everyone had a macro goal of dropping a ton of little guys and maximizing the time they had few cards in hand. The presence of Cursed Scroll (and a macro willingness to trade cards of the same value) meant that even in the absence of quality burn spells (remember, Dave had scored his 6-0 at the 1997 US Nationals with four Fireblasts in his deck), getting a lot of creature damage in might not be obviously easy (as they were themselves reduced to Giant Strength). Scalding Tongs was a surprising piece of technology that exploited an assumption of what "everyone" was trying to do.

The result: a Pro Tour win and the legitimization of a legacy.



My Fires

Zvi Mowshowitz 7th Pro Tour Chicago 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise	4 Saproling Burst
4 Llanowar Elves	1 Earthquake
3 Jade Leech	2 Dust Bowl
4 Blastoderm	4 Rishadan Port
3 Two-Headed Dragon	4 Karplusan Forest
4 Assault // Battery	10 Forest
4 Chimeric Idol	5 Mountain
4 Fires of Yavimaya	

SIDEBOARD

4 Kavu Chameleon
3 Earthquake
3 Flashfires
2 Tangle
2 Reverent Silence
1 Obliterate

My Fires is not strictly a Red Aggro deck, but it is useful for demonstrating the overlapping of various archetypes and macro-archetypes. For example, the same Faeries deck (Aggro-Control) can, over the course of the same match, play both Fish and Draw-Go. What differentiates My Fires from Pure Midrange (which it shares a number of cards with) is largely the lens we look through.

Fires of Yavimaya, a global, one-sided haste-enabler, gave My Fires a fundamentally different angle of attack from other big creature / midrange creature decks. Imagine that you've just tapped out for a Wrath of God: haste looks kind of like burn.

Zvi's inclusion of Assault // Battery was essentially unique for the era. Most Fires decks played burn spells like Rhystic Lightning (as Hall of Famer Rob Dougherty did, to combat Blinding Angel), or Urza's Rage (as Hall of Famer Jon Finkel did, though it was the default solution due to inherent card power). The closest analogue to Assault // Battery was Ghitu Fire for two mana (which was Pro Tour Champion Mike Pustilnik's strategy).

Note: not everyone even played burn at all. Hall of Famer Brian Kibler played *nothing* in his burn slot (and didn't even play Fires of Yavimaya, for that matter).

Zvi's strategy was to cut off the opposing Fires deck's best draws (Assault // Battery could hit a turn 1 Birds of Paradise, thus stopping a turn 2 Fires of Yavimaya) and to "get bigger," allowing him to win more games where both players got their draws. He



eschewed the ubiquitous River Boa for not being a big enough play. Being bigger (and playing non-fading Blastoderms in the form of Jade Leech) let him exploit the seemingly symmetrical Earthquake to get attackers in (“You go ahead and regenerate the River Boa you were planning to block with”).

And of course, Assault / Battery and Earthquake gave My Fires a measure of Red Aggro-style reach.

My Fires played a ton of mana — 25 lands on top of eight Birds and Elves — so Zvi figured he should do something with the excess. Yes, he would be able to potentially win a game drawing only one significant threat (even fading, a Blastoderm could do twenty thanks to the haste from Fires of Yavimaya), but that wouldn't necessarily save him from mana flooding.

Zvi's solution? Play a ton of Rishadan Ports and Dust Bowls so he could get some disruptive value out of all those lands.



Boros Deck Wins

Tsuyoshi Fujita 5th Pro Tour Los Angeles 2005 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Savannah Lions
4 Grim Lavamancer
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
4 Goblin Legionnaire
3 Kataki, War's Wage
4 Firebolt
4 Lava Dart
4 Lightning Helix
4 Molten Rain
4 Pillage

1 Pulse of the Forge
4 Bloodstained Mire
4 Wooded Foothills
2 Windswept Heath
4 Sacred Foundry
1 Eiganjo Castle
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep
4 Mountain
1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Purge
3 Blood Moon
3 Flametongue Kavu
3 Fledgling Dragon
2 Umezawa's Jitte

Fujita's Boros Deck wins carries forward the mana disruption subtheme of My Fires, though he used actual spells to do so. In Fujita's defense, Pillage kills an artifact (not just a creature) and he had to deal with 4/4 artifact creatures on his way to the Top 8. Meanwhile, Molten Rain did two damage (very “Philosophy of Fire”) while keeping an opponent off his best lands.

The most important aspect of this deck is its mana base. At the time, the notion of playing eleven mana-producing lands enabled by Onslaught Block sacrifice duals was unheard-of. Today we see decks with tons of fixing lands and relatively few tapping-for-mana lands... Fujita, arguably history's greatest beatdown deck designer, was the first to go here.

Having already explored My Fires, Boros Deck Wins should be a relatively straightforward Red Aggro implementation. Fujita took advantage of a critical mass of in-color quality creatures to go with his burn spells. Just imagine Jackal Pup being upgraded to Savannah Lions... *in a Red Deck*.

Naya

Tomoharu Saito 1st Grand Prix Singapore 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl
4 Kird Ape
4 Mogg Fanatic
1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
3 Gaddock Teeg
4 Tarmogoyf
4 Woolly Thoctar
4 Path to Exile
3 Seal of Fire
4 Lightning Helix
2 Incinerate

2 Umezawa's Jitte
4 Wooded Foothills
4 Windswept Heath
4 Bloodstained Mire
3 Stomping Ground
2 Sacred Foundry
1 Temple Garden
1 Forest
1 Mountain
1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Pyrostatic Pillar
3 Volcanic Fallout
3 Oblivion Ring
3 Ranger of Eos
1 Rule of Law
1 Ancient Grudge



What?

<Ring, ring, ring.>



I need some Saito decklists for his Top Ten Deck Designers of All Time entry.





You have the Zoo decks?

*Of course I have the Zoo decks.
What else did he make?*



*He pretty much made a bunch of
Zoo decks. When I realized that, I
pulled my vote for him.*

*You pulled your vote for him?
He was pretty dominant
in 2008-2010.*



Well, I switched that vote.

He voted for you.



As he should!

A lot of people voted for him.

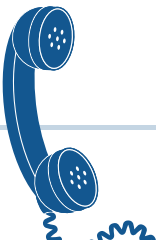


*So? People can vote for who
they want to vote for. I'm not
responsible for their votes.*

*But one of the reasons everyone
thinks he was such a great deck
designer is that YOU told
everyone on every podcast and in
every Top Decks that he was.*



*Are you saying I should have voted
for Gerry Thompson?*



While Saito actually did work on a lot of non-Zoo decks, it is worth noting that he is considered an elite deck tuner / developer, more than a designer. During this period, Saito worked diligently, week after week, perfecting his Saito Zoo deck (what we would probably call “Naya” today, as something like 100% of “Zoo” decks of the era tended to want to drop a turn 2 Dark Confidant).

The biggest piece of technology implemented here is the adoption of then-new tool Path to Exile as a four-of, and the implications to the sideboard (plus one each of Forest, Mountain, and Plains). Saito didn't just figure out one of the best new elimination spells — but realizing others would, built his mana base to be able to exploit *their* use of Path to Exile.

Here we see Boros Deck Wins taken to the next level. If moving from Volcanic Hammer to Lightning Helix inspires a Savannah Lions upgrade to Jackal Pup... What does that say about Kird Ape on the one? Wild Nacatl?

These decks just have better *cards* than Sligh/Geeba, enabled by a decade and more of new sets, advances in technology, better creatures, and exotic lands. But at the end of the day, the concept driving behind them is the same:

Red Aggro decks generally:

- Play the beatdown.
- Look to seize the initiative with lower costs and a creature-based attack.
- Can finish games non-interactively with burn spells.



Finally, a current (as of this writing) take on Red Aggro:

Rakdos

Ian Kendall 1st StarCityGames.com Open Series Los Angeles 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Rakdos Cackler
4 Stromkirk Noble
4 Knight of Infamy
4 Ash Zealot
3 Hellhole Flailer
4 Falkenrath Aristocrat
3 Hellrider
2 Thundermaw Hellkite
4 Searing Spear
4 Pillar of Flame
4 Cavern of Souls
4 Blood Crypt
4 Dragonskull Summit
10 Mountain
2 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Vampire Nighthawk
2 Zealous Conscripts
2 Cremate
2 Ultimate Price
2 Appetite for Brains
2 Flames of the Firebrand
1 Slaughter Games

Here, we see a higher curve than many of the previous Red Aggro decks. This is driven by two factors:

- Access to great midrange options, like Falkenrath Aristocrat, Hellrider, and Thundermaw Hellkite
- Thragtusk exists and puts a ton of pressure on aggressive strategies to be able to push 30 or more damage past lots of blockers.

While this build of Rakdos is definitely red with a black splash, many of the popular Rakdos decks of the era were black with a red splash. Galf's Messenger and 24 other black creatures doesn't stop a deck from being Red Aggro; all it needs is to be complemented by red burn spells, such as Searing Spear, Pillar of Flame, Flames of the Firebrand, and Brimstone Volley.



Because Wizards of the Coast has changed which strategies they support over the years, not all strategies will be viable in all formats. To help make clear which strategies are generally well-represented in Standard (at least as of this printing, 2013, and over the next few years) and which decks are primarily for Modern and older formats, at the end of each archetype section will be a Viability Rating. This rating will be on a scale of 1-10 and will give an idea of how likely this archetype is to be a realistic, high-level Standard tournament deck.

10 = This strategy is certainly viable, 1 = It is extremely unlikely this strategy will be viable.

For Red Aggro:

VIABILITY RATING - 10

There will surely be Red Aggro decks in all of the Standard formats for the next few years. It is one of the classics, and is always supported by Wizards.

DECK #2 LINEAR AGGRO

"R&D is making our decks for us!"

WHAT IS A LINEAR?

A "linear" mechanic refers to a set of cards intended to be played together, generally at scale. Skirk Prospector into Goblin Warchief into triple-Goblin Piledrivers into Siege-Gang Commander is an obvious group of cards from Onslaught Block that almost any player can identify as being good to play all together. With a linear, generally the more cards you have of this type, the better.



Artifact-heavy sets where we might pair Disciple of the Vault and Arcbound Ravager (to create an obvious mega-damage synergy) with Thoughtcast and artifact lands (to catch up and get ahead) work the same way. Many of the most iconic super-strategies in Magic — Rebels, Goblins, or Affinity — are Linear Aggro decks.

There's no reason why a linear mechanics deck need to be aggressive, or even creature-based. Astral Slide is a non-Blue control deck, Dredge decks end up placed somewhere on the combo spectrum, Merfolk is generally a Fish deck, Faeries are Aggro-Control, and Slivers somewhere in-between.

The point is, linears can be at the center of any number of different decks... but when they form the basis of an aggressive strategy built around exploiting that linear, we refer to those decks as "Linear Aggro."

Linear Aggro decks generally:

- Use synergy to create interactions more powerful than any one card can normally be
- Can borrow elements from a large variety of other archetypes
- Are all-in on their theme

Linear Aggro decks can be among the most aggressive strategies available. They can end up sharing properties with other archetypes, such as Madness with Aggro-Control, Kithkin with Tokens, or Affinity with Storm Combo. But aggressive decks that function primarily by exploiting a single mechanic or creature type have similar properties. These strategies push as hard as they can in that single direction. They rely heavily on synergy, rather than purely on card quality.

When these strategies have access to cards that are both highly synergistic *and* inherently powerful, they come to dominate formats.

When evaluating a Linear Aggro deck, it's important to keep in mind that it generally takes a non-zero amount of work to support the linear (i.e., the mechanic/tribe you're exploiting). As such, it's important to remember to get paid. If you are going to go to all the trouble of valuing/over-valuing "artifacts," "Goblins," or "Madness" on a card, it better enable you to do something better than you could do normally.

If Slivers (and Counter-Sliver in particular) is such a defining concept in Magic, how come practically no one plays Slivers in Legacy? The answer is that even when you have a number of the best Slivers in play — say, Muscle Sliver and Winged Sliver — they still aren't as powerful as two-drops like Tarmogoyf, Dark Confidant, or Stoneforge Mystic (none of which asks you to devote another 25 slots in your deck to support it). Which brings us to...



THE FIRST RULE OF LINEAR AGGRO DECKS:

Make Sure You're Getting Paid

Yes, it might be fun to make a Giants deck, a Knight deck, or a Haste deck. Some players make these decks just because they can. Yes, Giants and Knights *are* creature types, and “haste” is a word you might see on multiple Magic cards...

But successful Linear Aggro decks are distinguished by actually getting rewarded for playing many cards that push against one of those mechanics or tribes. Gaining a single R/W dual land and having your Giants cost two less when your Stinkdrinker Daredevil lives is not a suitable payoff for competitive Constructed. A single Knight Lord that pumps your other Knights to a size that isn't even as good as other cards people are playing is a clear violation of The Prime Directive.

All your creatures have haste? So what? Haste may be a great ability, but what are you playing with that actually pays you for staying completely on theme, instead of using better cards like Ember Hauler, Figure of Destiny, or even Shrapnel Blast?

For practical purposes, we'll focus on a subset of historically successful Linear Aggro decks that 1) are illustrative of the concept, 2) show you how someone might actually be paid off, and 3) contrast some key points of differentiation and dissension that can be instructive for your own Next Level Deckbuilding (which sometimes means non-conformity). All respect to M'tenda Lions, Stalking Tigers, and Balduvian Bears (and all their other creature-type brethren), but this chapter will look specifically at:

- Rebels
- Humans
- Tempered Steel
- Puresteel Paladin
- Affinity
- Goblins
- Infect



Rebels

Warren Marsh 2nd Pro Tour New York 2000 (Masques Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

3 Ramosian Sergeant	2 Disenchant
2 Ramosian Lieutenant	2 Seal of Cleansing
4 Steadfast Guard	4 Story Circle
4 Lin Sivvi, Defiant Hero	4 Parallax Wave
3 Voice of Truth	4 Reverent Mantra
1 Ramosian Sky Marshal	4 Rishadan Port
1 Jhovall Queen	22 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Defender en-Vec
4 Topple
2 Disenchant
1 Lightbringer
1 Nightwind Glider
1 Voice of Truth
1 Seal of Cleansing
1 Distorting Lens

Linear White Weenie decks are closely related to Swarm decks. What differentiates this particular group of aggressive decks is what it can do with a Ramosian Sergeant, or how it can push and exploit a Cavern of Souls.

We're starting on Marsh's Rebels to illustrate Linear Aggro decks because it so unapologetically highlights how absurdly far you can push a linear mechanic while remaining competitive. Marsh could start on a turn 1 Ramosian Sergeant... and then never cast another spell, while *still* managing to draw multiple cards per turn and utterly dominating the game.

Ramosian Sergeant could go and find Ramosian Lieutenant, which in turn could find the (eventually banned) Lin-Sivvi, Defiant Hero; Lin-Sivvi could then go for Ramosian Sky Marshal and Jhovall Queen. Marsh could literally walk from one-drop up to a legitimate six without ever casting a second spell. If you've been wondering what "getting paid" means, hopefully it's now crystal clear: by sticking to the Rebel tribe, we're able to play a one-drop who literally searches up an entire army all by himself.

Payoff - *Sticking to the Rebel linear makes half of our creatures potential one-man armies and constant sources of card advantage.*

Weakness - *Activating Rebels every turn costs a lot of mana, so mana denial in the form of Rising Waters gave the strategy fits.*



How many other one-drops are a first-turn Necropotence of sorts? A progressive mana consumption engine that further pays your beatdown deck off for playing 26 lands?

Much of the rest of Marsh's deck is designed to win mirror matches (Disenchant and Seal of Cleansing against opposing Parallax Waves; Story Circle and Reverent Mantra as assumptions that he would be facing nothing but white creatures with similar strategies), but it makes a further illustrative point:

THE SECOND RULE OF LINEAR AGGRO DECKS:

You still have to pay attention to mana curve and other basic tenets of deck design.

Many wannabe rogue deck designers forget the basics and jam in every card that matches. To be successful with Linear Aggro, you still have to be aware of things like starting on turn 1, and having things to do along the way — even if you are on plan, on point, and essentially going where you want to go.

Marsh would only have Ramosian Sergeant in his opening hand about a third of the time. Even when he did, he might still have to have something to do on turn 2, hard-casting a Steadfast Guard being an excellent beatdown option. Then, on turn 3, he could start searching.

The interesting payoff with a Rebel deck is that you can win when you're mana-flooded, and win differently when you're mana-screwed. Lin Sivvi pays you off (and big) when you have ten or more mana in play — but being stuck on three lands with “just” a Ramosian Sergeant can still leave you with an army of free Grizzly Bears in just a few turns.

As part of the most unmatched streaks in the history of Magic, Kai Budde did Marsh one place better with his W/G Rebels deck in a Top 8 that featured fellow Hall of Famers Brian Kibler, Zvi Mowshowitz, Rob Dougherty, Kamiel Cornelissen, and Jon Finkel. With a Top 8 rounded out by Pro Tour Champion MikeyP and two-time Canadian National Champion Jay Elarar, Pro Tour Chicago 2000 was one of the toughest Top 8s of all time.



Rebels

Kai Budde 1st Pro Tour Chicago 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Ramosian Sergeant	4 Chimeric Idol
3 Steadfast Guard	2 Ramosian Sky Marshal
3 Longbow Archer	4 Wax // Wane
2 Defiant Falcon	4 Parallax Wave
4 Lin Sivvi, Defiant Hero	2 Dust Bowl
2 Defiant Vanguard	4 Rishadan Port
1 Thermal Glider	4 Brushlands
1 Rebel Informer	16 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Armageddon
3 Seal of Cleansing
3 Wrath of God
3 Mageta the Lion
1 Defiant Vanguard
1 Lightbringer

Budde's Rebels played the full number of Ramosian Sergeants (arguably his best card, and certainly his cheapest game-breaker). Despite his second-place finish in New York, Marsh took a bit of criticism back in 2000 about his decision to run only three.

With Longbow Archers as a partial response to Jay Elarar's Rishadan Airships, you can see how Kai was even more keenly aware of the mana curve in his 26-land deck as Block Rebels gave way to Standard Rebels. Specific card choices, like Defiant Vanguard, were there to take the edge off of heavy-hitting Blastoderms and Jade Leeches without spending actual cards; Wax // Wane was a one-mana trump to either Parallax Wave or Saproling Burst that could occasionally save Lin-Sivvi from an Urza's Rage or Ghitu Fire.

Payoff – *The Rebel linear adds some staying power to a fast and aggressive beatdown strategy, giving you a game plan against sweepers.*

Weakness – *Opposing Lin-Sivvis could be quite difficult, on account of the old legend rule.*

Let's take a look at a more recent example. This U/W Humans deck by Rick Stout gives us another angle on the White Weenie Linear. Unlike Rebels and its first-turn Ramosian Sergeant, Stout didn't have a control-crushing / beatdown-besting engine to play on the first turn.



But he *did* have Champion of the Parish, which could yield an insane level of power with any number of follow-ups. First-turn Delver of Secrets was the most dangerous thing that most decks feared at the time (and Rick could do that, too) — but even the blind Delver was less relentlessly damaging than a Champion followed by Gather the Townsfolk, or a second Champion + a Delver of Secrets on the second turn.

U/W Humans

Rick Stout 3rd Grand Prix Minneapolis 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Champion of the Parish	1 Negate
4 Delver of Secrets	1 Mass Appeal
2 Elite Vanguard	1 Runechanter's Pike
1 Gideon's Lawkeeper	1 Sword of War and Peace
4 Snapcaster Mage	2 Moorland Haunt
3 Geist of Saint Traft	2 Cavern of Souls
4 Ponder	3 Glacial Fortress
4 Vapor Snag	4 Seachrome Coast
3 Mutagenic Growth	5 Island
2 Gut Shot	5 Plains
4 Gather the Townsfolk	

SIDEBOARD

3 Timely Reinforcements
3 Celestial Purge
2 Divine Offering
2 Flashfreeze
2 Negate
1 Mental Misstep
1 Sword of Feast and Famine
1 Unsummon

Though history thinks of Delver of Secrets as a U/W or U/R Aggro-Control card, Delver of Secrets is just as Human as Champion of the Parish or Gideon's Lawkeeper... at least before it goes all Insect! And while you probably think of Snapcaster Mage as an iconic contributor to any number of decks other than a White Weenie variant, it, too, is Human — and not only Human, but highly synergistic with desirable tempo-generating effects like Gut Shot, Mutagenic Growth, or Vapor Snag, not to mention potentially backbreaking in context with Gather the Townsfolk or Timely Reinforcements.

The human frailty (*ahem*) of these nonconformist drops showcases the efficiency of Cavern of Souls in this deck. On the first turn it can tap for either white for Champion of the Parish or blue for Delver of Secrets, and both are the kinds of one-drops that send shivers down the spine. Cavern of Souls is exactly



the Linear Aggro exemplification of Rule #1: You get paid off by playing it because it gives you exactly enough blue to make your seemingly underpowered little white creatures look like John Wooden was coaching them in the 1970s.

This was a format where both tempo-oriented aggro-control and midrange defensive decks had Mana Leak and even Dissipate. The ability to resolve a key Human through a counterspell was a non-zero incentive. Most U/W Humans decks didn't go to the advantageous extreme of Stout and his actual cross-format All-Star blue creatures — but “White Weenie” of this era wanted blue anyway, because Moorland Haunt was such a long game control-killer.

Of course, you also had the ability to break away from the linear from time to time to name Spirit...

While Geist of Saint Traft isn't a Human, it was good enough to supplement a strategy so linear that it played 15 other Humans and Cavern of Souls. Making him uncounterable (or just getting the blue for him) all helped in little ways to increase the viability of the linear White Weenie strategy in the face of Primeval Titans and Lingering Souls. We will revisit this era (and subtype) again in a moment.

Payoff – *Champion of the Parish rewarded the Human linear, but Delver of Secrets was the reward of another sort of linear — the “play lots of spells in your aggro deck” theme.*

Weakness – *Trying to straddle two themes leaves us very vulnerable to drawing the wrong mixes of cards.*

AFFINITY

“Affinity” refers to an iconic sub-family of decks that can evoke any number of memories among Magic players of a particular generation. On the one hand, Affinity is *the* iconic Linear Aggro deck. It was one of the most powerful cross-format decks of all time, with neutered versions dominating formats as disparate as Extended and Legacy, and elements surviving to Modern and even Vintage (in the form of Skullclamp decks).



At the same time, Affinity may be the clearest example of R&D — especially Development — going too far in their enthusiasm, resulting in a landmark decline in tournament attendance.

Unlike some other Linear Aggro decks, most of Affinity's cards were under-powered (or even useless) in any other deck. In that sense, it's a brilliant example of both Rules 1 and 2! Not only are you certainly getting paid off by playing Disciple of the Vault (which effectively has no text in most contexts) and Arcbound Ravager (which has no ability without a ton of artifacts on board) together, but the curve-lowering power of the Affinity mechanic turns Thoughtcast, which is unplayable as a five-mana effect, into a one-mana card that *spits* on Preordain — which was a top three card in Standard during the age of Caw-Blade.

Probably the biggest development mistake I made while interning in Wizards R&D was pushing to have Disciple of the Vault's casting cost reduced from 1B to B. Now, to be fair, Arcbound Ravager cost three mana at that point, but we should have taken the Disciple of the Vault/Atog decks Henry Stern was making more seriously.

Affinity is a deck that needs to be discussed in generations. The “full-on” era of Affinity included not just the iconic Batman and Robin of Arcbound Ravager and Disciple of the Vault, both using the company of double-digit artifact lands... but also both Skullclamp *and* Æther Vial.

Vial Affinity

Jelger Wiegersma 4th Pro Tour Kobe 2004 (Mirrodin Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 3 Ornithopter | 2 Chromatic Sphere |
| 4 Arcbound Worker | 1 Talisman of Dominance |
| 4 Disciple of the Vault | 4 Thoughtcast |
| 4 Arcbound Ravager | 4 Blinkmoth Nexus |
| 3 Myr Retriever | 4 Seat of the Synod |
| 4 Frogmite | 4 Vault of Whispers |
| 4 Myr Enforcer | 4 Darksteel Citadel |
| 4 Skullclamp | 2 Great Furnace |
| 4 Æther Vial | 1 Glimmervoid |

SIDEBOARD

- 4 Electrostatic Bolt
- 3 Genesis Chamber
- 3 Terror
- 2 Glimmervoid
- 1 Myr Retriever
- 1 Furnace Dragon
- 1 Great Furnace



We could argue that the original Affinity deck wasn't particularly deep, as it only had two sets to draw its card pool from— but it *was* notoriously overpowered, evidenced by these facts:

- It has survived essentially Block intact for performance in many other contexts.
- So many of its cards were banned, beginning with Skullclamp.

Hall of Famer Brian Kibler made Top 8 of the 2004 US National Championship playing an anti-Affinity deck that boasted an alleged 90% win rate against Affinity (the main splashed green exclusively for Oxidize). And even Kibler ended up losing to William Postlethwaite in the Top 8, because BillyP drew all four Skullclamps. Kibler was full of gas throughout, yet managed to be outpaced by BillyP's relentless resource advantage.

None of Affinity's cards are overpowered when taken by themselves. Frogmite, for example — a four-mana, vanilla 2/2 — is sort of comical as a key contributor to a deck of this power level. However the ability to play so many cards, so cheaply, in games that went so quickly made for a nearly unbeatable combination. A vanilla 2/2 might not be scary by itself — but combined with a first-turn Æther Vial and multiple artifact lands, fueled by a Thoughtcast, Affinity might be able to deploy these 2/2s with the speed of Suicide Black running on Dark Rituals, with the reach of Deadguy Red when you factored in Arcbound Ravager + Disciple of the Vault, backed up (in some builds) by game-ending Shrapnel Blasts.

Payoff – *Sticking to the linear gives us access to undercosted Frogmites, Myr Enforcers, and Thoughtcasts, as well as making our cards stronger (such as Disciple of the Vault, Arcbound Ravager, and Myr Retriever).*

Weakness – *Playing all artifacts makes artifact destruction much stronger than it normally would be.*

Affinity

Aeo Paquette 2nd World Championships 2004 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Ornithopter	4 Cranial Plating
4 Arcbound Worker	4 Thoughtcast
4 Disciple of the Vault	4 Chrome Mox
4 Arcbound Ravager	4 Great Furnace
4 Frogmite	4 Seat of the Synod
2 Sombre Hoverguard	4 Vault of Whispers
4 Welding Jar	3 Blinkmoth Nexus
4 Shrapnel Blast	3 Glimmervoid

SIDEBOARD

4 Furnace Dragon
4 Annul
4 Seething Song
3 Serum Visions

Affinity shined in far more formats than Block Constructed. Amusingly, Aeo Paquette Top 8ed World Championships 2004 with a Standard deck that boasted exactly zero non-Mirrodin Block cards. The banning of Skullclamp in Standard and elsewhere simply had Affinity switch to a different piece of equipment in Cranial Plating. In this case, a less (but still very) powerful card that, again, literally *only* functioned in the Affinity deck.

How terrifying is Cranial Plating with Vault of Whispers and Glimmervoid up, in the midst of an Arcbound Ravager-led six-artifact creature attack? Damned if you do, damned if you don't. No matter how you block, it's not going to go well, as both the Plating and the Ravager counters can move to the most devastating spot.

How not-scary is Cranial Plating without support from Vault of Whispers? Oh no — not +1/+0!

Payoff – Like all Affinity decks, we get cheaper cards and larger outputs by sticking to artifacts.

Weakness – Like all Affinity decks, increased reliance on quantity of artifacts leaves us vulnerable to artifact hate.



Adding other sets would, of course, add new cards to Affinity — its most famous win being an Extended Pro Tour by Pierre Canali. As dangerous as Linear Aggro decks can be, their very nature can expose them to hate cards like Engineered Plague, Tivadar's Crusade, or Kataki, War's Wage. Canali was able to use Meddling Mage and Kami of Ancient Law — sometimes expertly with his Æther Vials — to combat the anti-Affinity hate enchantment of the day, Energy Flux.

Affinity

Pierre Canali 1st Pro Tour Columbus 2004 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Arcbound Worker	3 Cranial Plating
4 Disciple of the Vault	4 Thoughtcast
4 Arcbound Ravager	1 City of Brass
4 Meddling Mage	2 Glimmervoid
4 Frogmite	2 Blinkmoth Nexus
3 Somber Hoverguard	4 Darksteel Citadel
3 Myr Enforcer	4 Vault of Whispers
4 Æther Vial	2 Ancient Den
4 Chromatic Sphere	2 Seat of the Synod

SIDEBOARD

3 Kami of Ancient Law
3 Chill
3 Engineered Plague
3 Cabal Therapy
2 Seal of Removal
1 City of Brass



Payoff – Affinity cards.

Weakness – Cards that destroy many artifacts, such as *Pernicious Deed*.

Various Affinity descendants have survived the years of successive bannings. Since Affinity's first appearance, most of the iconic elements — Æther Vial in Extended, Disciple of the Vault and Arcbound Ravager in Standard, Ancient Den in Modern, Skullclamp almost everywhere — have seen bannings. And yet, the essential synergies and relentless powewr of these cards has kept them relevant in a variety of formats. Even without Great Furnace, Mary Jacobson's Modern Grand Prix Top 8 contributed to a brief run where women outperformed Hall of Famers in Grand Prix on average.

Affinity

Mary Jacobson 5th Grand Prix Lincoln 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Memnite	4 Cranial Plating
4 Ornithopter	3 Springleaf Drum
4 Signal Pest	4 Mox Opal
4 Vault Skirge	2 Glimmervoid
4 Steel Overseer	4 Blinkmoth Nexus
2 Arcbound Ravager	4 Inkmoth Nexus
4 Etched Champion	4 Darksteel Citadel
4 Galvanic Blast	2 Mountain
3 Shrapnel Blast	

SIDEBOARD

3 Ancient Grudge
3 Blood Moon
3 Ethersworn Canonist
3 Torpor Orb
3 Whipflare

The DCI didn't let Mary play with artifact lands (beyond Darksteel Citadel), and she responded by running only two Arcbound Ravagers. Her deck was more about getting in consistently with Etched Champion and the ability to play zero-cost threats like Ornithopter and Memnite, which could then be buffed by Steel Overseer or Signal Pest.



While Mary's Cranial Platings didn't have the same level of oomph as some of her predecessors, the ability to give +9/+0 or thereabouts to an Inkmoth Nexus (rather than the traditional Blinkmoth Nexus) shows how a Linear Aggro deck — even one from just two sets — can benefit from access to additional tools.

With so many key enablers and artifact incentives banned, the Modern incarnations of Affinity turn to metalcraft for added power. In addition to invincible evasion from Etched Champion, Mox Opal helps make up for Vault of Whispers and Galvanic Blast helps make up for Disciple of the Vault.

Payoff – *This time, we see an increased reliance on metalcraft for the artifact payoff.*

Weakness – *As always, artifact hate is Affinity's Achilles Heel.*

What happens when the Swarm deck and the Affinity deck are the same deck? Scars of Mirrodin didn't just reinvigorate Affinity-like decks in Modern. Memnite, Signal Pest, and Vault Skirge had a life of their own in Standard first, in the form of the Tempered Steel deck:



Tempered Steel

Luis Scott-Vargas 7th Pro Tour Nagoya 2011 (Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Memnite
4 Signal Pest
1 Vault Skirge
4 Leonin Relic-Warder
3 Blade Splicer
4 Hero of Bladehold
4 Dispatch

4 Origin Spellbomb
4 Glint Hawk Idol
4 Tempered Steel
2 Mox Opal
4 Inkmoth Nexus
18 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Mutagenic Growth
2 Elspeth Tirel
2 Indomitable Archangel
2 Marrow Shards
2 Revoke Existence
2 Contested Warzone
1 Dismember

Team Channel Fireball positively dominated World Championships 2011, with Josh Utter-Leyton, Conley Woods, Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa, and Luis Scott-Vargas taking up half the Top 8 (though none of them could best Jun'ya Iyanaga's Ancient Grudges).

Tempered Steel could have easily been in the Linear Swarm section. It's essentially a Swarm deck, but as with Rule #1, it gets paid off by playing mostly artifact creatures (i.e. the buff from Tempered Steel itself); and with Rule #2 the speed and efficiency of Mox Opal and Dispatch.

Payoff – *Tempered Steel giving your creatures +2/+2 creates a much bigger effect than you would normally get for three mana. Additionally, we get some metalcraft rewards.*

Weakness – *Like all of these artifact-heavy decks, area of effect artifact removal like Creeping Corrosion is a real problem.*



Puresteel White

David Sharfman 1st Pro Tour Nagoya 2011 (Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Memnite	4 Flayer Husk
4 Glint Hawk	4 Mortarpod
4 Vault Skirge	4 Sword of War and Peace
4 Puresteel Paladin	1 Mox Opal
2 Leonin Relic-Warder	4 Inkmoth Nexus
4 Hero of Bladehold	19 Plains
2 Dispatch	

SIDEBOARD

2 Dismember
 3 Kemba, Kha Regent
 2 Leonin Relic-Warder
 3 Mirran Crusader
 2 Revoke Existence
 2 White Sun's Zenith
 1 Plains

My former protégé and top ten deckbuilder of all time, Mark Herberholz, designed this different linear White Weenie deck from the same era, helping David Sharfman secure his Pro Tour title in the process.

Also an artifact-based linear deck, Herberholz's deck exploited the card drawing power of Puresteel Paladin rather than the power-and-toughness boost of Tempered Steel. As we've implied earlier in this section, the further you push a linear, in theory, the more powerful you can become; at the same time, you can become increasingly vulnerable not only to specific hate cards, but *also* to cards that are effective against specific classes of similar cards. For instance, both Tempered Steel and Goblins profit by amassing



a large number of small creatures on the battlefield quickly, and deal a super-normal amount of damage specifically by abusing that volume of creatures with cards like Tempered Steel, Goblin King, Goblin Piledriver.

But once you've decided to commit a volume of creatures to the battlefield — whether they are artifact creatures, Goblins, or anything else — you are now disproportionately exposed not just to linear hate cards but cards that are good, in general against large numbers of small creatures. Cards like Day of Judgment, or even Druid's Deliverance!

Payoff – *Metalcraft is technically the reward... but really, it's that we get to turn Puresteel Paladin into a game-winning powerhouse by sticking to the theme.*

Weakness – *This deck was actually much less vulnerable to artifact removal than many of its peers, instead having a weakness to spells that could kill its Paladin.*

A deck like Herberholz's certainly has its vulnerabilities, but you need to consider how to contrast two powerful, competing, linears. What do you do when one makes you more vulnerable to a common defensive strategy, and the other makes you more resilient against it? What's the format good at defending against? Artifacts? Goblins? Green creatures? One-toughness creatures?

Positioning... it's all about positioning...

Let's take a look at some actual Goblin decks. Jim Davis is one of the grand masters of Goblins, with numerous top finishes with the strategy in various formats over the years. The build below has a couple of interesting points worth mentioning.

First, Mental Misstep is very exciting here. It's unexpected, and causes big trouble for opponents doing unfair things. Certainly, having Mental Misstep is one way to get ahead in an Æther Vial race...

The other is the sideboard. This dovetails directly from the questions at the end of the last section. Let's say an opponent is all-in, relying on Engineered Plague for defense. What's he supposed to do, blue deck or no, when you answer with a Krosan Grip? Emrakul, the Aeons Torn is certainly hard to fight — but what about a deck that can Goblin Matron for Stingscourger, then play that for somewhere between one and *no* mana?



Goblins

Jim Davis 2nd StarCityGames.com Indianapolis Invitational 2011 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

4 Goblin Lackey	2 Siege-Gang Commander
1 Skirk Prospector	2 Mental Misstep
4 Goblin Piledriver	4 Æther Vial
2 Mogg War Marshall	4 Wasteland
1 Tin Street Hooligan	4 Rishadan Port
4 Goblin Warchief	4 Arid Mesa
4 Goblin Matron	4 Scalding Tarn
4 Gempalm Incinerator	2 Taiga
1 Goblin Sharpshooter	5 Snow-Covered Mountain
4 Goblin Ringleader	

SIDEBOARD

3 Krosan Grip
 3 Pyroblast
 3 Pyrokinesis
 3 Relic of Progenitus
 1 Stingscourger
 1 Tin Street Hooligan
 1 Mental Misstep

Once again, we see Rules #1 and #2 intersecting profitably with an opponent's ostensibly more powerful — and certainly more expensive — base strategy.

Payoff – *Goblin Lackey, Goblin Piledriver, Goblin Warchief, Goblin Matron, Goblin Ringleader, and Siege-Gang Commander all get stronger the more Goblins we play.*

Weakness – *Sweepers and cards that lock out tiny red ground creatures that share a creature type (Sphere of Law, Moat, Engineered Plague, etc).*

Sitting Dead Red

Dan Paskins Regionals 2003 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Skirk Prospector	4 Siege Gang Commander
4 Goblin Sledder	4 Skullclamp
4 Goblin Piledriver	4 Shrapnel Blast
4 Goblin Warchief	4 Chrome Mox
1 Sparksmith	4 Great Furnace
4 Goblin Sharpshooter	4 Blinkmoth Nexus
3 Clickslither	12 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Molten Rain
 4 Shatter
 3 Sparksmith
 2 Electrostatic Bolt
 2 Furnace Dragon

The lazy man might just look for creature types or keywords and jam tons and tons of like-minded cards together. We know from Rule #1 that you're supposed to get paid off when you make a Linear Aggro decision.

Now look at how Paskins killed his darlings and stepped around the obvious. The competing Goblins deck of the day was Tsuyoshi Fujita's Goblin-Bidding deck. Paskins believed his straight Goblins "Sitting Dead Red" had the advantage in a mirror (the opponent had four symmetrical Patriarch's Biddings, while Dan had four unorthodox Shrapnel Blasts). Like the blue in U/W Humans, Dan had just enough artifacts to give his Shrapnel Blasts teeth.

Payoff – *Goblins, as a tribe, has long offered countless rewards for sticking to the theme, which can even include non-Goblin cards like Clickslither.*

Weakness – *In addition to the usual weakness to sweepers, repeatable creature kill, such as Lightning Rift, could be problematic.*



Go Anan Deck

Tsuyoshi Fujita 1st Japanese National Championship 2004 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Goblin Sledder	4 Siege-Gang Commander
3 Skirk Prospector	4 Electrostatic Bolt
4 Sparksmith	4 Oxidize
4 Goblin Sharpshooter	3 City of Brass
4 Goblin Warchief	4 Wooded Foothills
3 Clickslither	12 Mountain
3 Goblin Goon	4 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Naturalize
4 Skullclamp
4 Starstorm
3 Viridian Shaman

Genius deck design requires a willingness to kill our darlings. This means nothing is sacred. No matter how much we may like a card, we have to be willing to cut any of them if they're no longer optimal.

Maybe the bravest example of being willing to kill our darlings was the Go Anan deck. It arrived at the height of Goblins (and Affinity!) in Standard, and Hall of Famer Tsuyoshi Fujita used it to win the 2004 Japanese National Championship. Fujita decided

there were only two large-scale, viable strategies (the Goblins mirror and Affinity) and built a deck around the incentives to Linear Aggro, with attention to Linear Aggro.

See what he swapped? See what he has missing?

Tsuyoshi took out Goblin Piledriver! His theory was that against those two creature decks — both decks that profited by laying out dozens of bodies — he was never getting through with a 1/2 anyway... so why try? Instead he went with the relatively unpopular Goblin Goon, a creature that, if the opponent intended to block, would take several bodies with it, and was a bear on defense.



Paskins and Fujita are the “thinking man's” red designers. They can identify a linear with the best of them, but their understanding of formats, incentives, inter-deck interactions, and fantasy versus reality allows them to figure out when to dissent. Even when, on the surface, they’re “just” playing a variation on The Deck to Beat, it’s strategic shifts, like Dan's or Tsuyoshi's, that are the definition of Next Level Deckbuilding.

Payoff – *“Goblins matter” cards — but most notably, not Goblin Piledriver!*

Weakness – *Sweepers, which while rare, did exist (such as Starstorm).*

Now, let’s take a look at one of the more Linear Aggro deck designs: Infect.

U/G Infect

Kelvin Chew 6th Pro Tour Return to Ravnica 2013 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Glistener Elf	4 Vines of Vastwood
4 Noble Hierarch	2 Apostle's Blessing
4 Blighted Agent	4 Inkmoth Nexus
2 Ichorclaw Myr	4 Misty Rainforest
3 Gitaxian Probe	4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Groundswell	2 Breeding Pool
4 Might of Old Krosa	2 Pendelhaven
3 Rancor	2 Forest
3 Serum Visions	1 Island
4 Sleight of Hand	

SIDEBOARD

4 Spell Pierce
4 Spellskite
3 Creeping Corrosion
2 Dismember
2 Negate

Chew's deck is linear — a 1/1 creature for one is at best marginal in most formats, and an unblockable 1/1 creature for two is marginal even when it has hexproof — but add infect to either, and now you have the basis for a potential combo-beatdown deck.

As with true Affinity, Infect represents an Aggro-style deck whose cards would be weak (or unplayable!) in other contexts, but shines in the face of substantial cross-card synergies, a critical mass of creature buffing, and free / odd angles coming off of lands.

For instance, Pendelhaven is pretty good on most 1/1s... but it makes for a sort of Quadruple Strike on a Glistener Elf or Blighted Agent. Vines of the Vastwood was a Negate with upside in Eldrazi Green, but it can end games on turn 3 here.

Chew didn't play the Mutagenic Growths that allowed some Standard Infect decks to win on the second turn (i.e. Glistener Elf → land drop → Groundswell + Groundswell + [Phyrexian] Mutagenic Growth) — but he had any number of turn 3 kills available, all via a critical mass of spells.

As with Affinity, Infect is a Linear Aggro deck whose fastest kills can somewhat resemble Storm Combo, chaining many cards together into a single offensive burst. Also like Affinity, Infect gains angles and opportunities by being a beatdown deck instead of “just” being a combo deck. There’s really nothing stopping you from poking your opponent several times with a Blighted Agent he can't block, maybe mixing it up with a Pendelhaven buff, while defending your creature with Apostle's Blessing and defending yourself with Negate and/or Dismember.

How does Infect intersect with our two rules of Linear Aggro?

It's not just that the Infect deck is linear (as Noble Hierarchy does not itself have infect!), it's that we're getting paid off by playing creatures that are slightly smaller and more fragile than most of their competition. Glistener Elf strikes like Isamaru, Hound of Konda by itself, and a stumbling defender is unlikely to survive even two strikes. That goes double for Blighted Agent (except he also can't block). The costs in this deck are low — as low as zero mana — and, again, we get paid well when we assemble them. A simple, one-mana Rancor is almost unprecedented in its hammer-



handedness when applied to some of the creatures in this deck. And its resilience? Rancor + Inkmoth Nexus is as disorienting as it is comical... and potentially effective.

Payoff – *Sticking to the infect linear means all of our pump spells are twice as powerful and opposing life gain is worthless.*

Weakness – *All of our creatures have one toughness, and with so many pump spells, we can be very vulnerable to removal.*

Finally, let's take a look at a linear aggro deck from today:

Naya Blitz

Aaron Leblanc 1st StarCityGames.com Open Series Orlando 2013 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Champion of the Parish
4 Boros Elite
4 Experiment One
4 Burning-Tree Emissary
4 Flinthoof Boar
4 Lightning Mauler
4 Mayor of Avabruck
3 Thalia, Guardian of Thraben
4 Frontline Medic

2 Ghor-Clan Rampager
3 Searing Spear
4 Cavern of Souls
4 Sacred Foundry
4 Stomping Ground
4 Temple Garden
2 Sunpetal Grove
1 Clifftop Retreat
1 Rootbound Crag

SIDEBOARD

3 Boros Reckoner
3 Pacifism
3 Boros Charm
2 Gruul Charm
2 Fiend Hunter
2 Tormod's Crypt

As is the case with so many linear aggro decks, we see the influences of another macro archetype; this time, Red Aggro. What makes this a Linear Aggro deck more than a Red Aggro deck? Well, taking a look at this list, which theme occupies a larger share of the strategy? Which theme influences more of the card choices?

Payoff – *Champion of the Parish and Mayor of Avabruck give you more value per mana than you would normally be able to buy, in exchange for sticking to the theme.*

Weakness – *Sweepers and opponents with removal backed up by problematic creatures like Olivia Voldaren.*

VIABILITY RATING - 7

Today's most common linear aggro decks are built around a tribe with a lord, or a mechanic that works well the more you have of it.

DECK #3: SWARM DECKS

Swarm decks represent a family of decks that form a loose alliance with Red Aggro, Linear Aggro, and Fish, a.k.a., “the beatdown.” These first four decks share many broad features (and sometimes cards), but their primary focus tends to be creature-based attack. All of them generally want to play the beatdown, favoring cheap creatures and early damage over other available lines of Magic execution. For our purposes, Swarm decks include traditional White Weenie decks, as well as token-based strategies. White or not, these decks are primarily “beatdown decks without reach and limited interaction with cards not in play.”

Here, “reach” refers to the ability for a beatdown deck to win outside of attacking, a useful term coined by Adrian Sullivan many years ago.

Swarm decks generally:

- Primarily win by playing numerous small creatures, maximizing swarm at the expense of reach
- Generally win combat by enhancing their own creatures, rather than focusing on killing all opposing creatures
- Have token-making spells and cards that create multiple creatures (these are common, though not vital)

The dichotomy of beatdown decks is largely an opposition between Red Aggro and Swarm decks. If Red Deck Wins does ten damage with creatures, the next ten isn’t always that tough, because it has a lot of reach. White Weenie? Not a lot of reach. Deal eighteen damage with creatures, and you might find getting the last two in to be impossible. W/R Aggro almost always plays with reach; White Weenie rarely does. Linear Aggro decks might contain reach, such as Disciple of the Vault or Shrapnel Blast, while others might not. Some Goblins decks can muster up some final points with cards like Siege-Gang Commander and Goblin Sharpshooter, while other Goblin decks aren’t built that way.

Red Aggro as a *concept* isn’t strictly superior to Swarm decks. But it’s useful to understand that Swarm decks are more limited in *how* they can win.

So instead of beating an opponent up and finishing him off with direct damage, as Red Aggro might, Swarm tends to play either higher quality creatures, or more creatures (sometimes generated via card advantage). Often, it will buff their creatures via cards like Rancor, Umezawa's Jitte, or Glorious Anthem. Swarm decks often play nicely with strategically synergistic planeswalkers. And though Swarm might not necessarily win outright in any way but The Red Zone (meaning it can be locked out by cards like Ensnaring Bridge or Moat, especially if caught unawares), it can often play an elegant system of advantages... or even progressive lines of strategic surgery! The simplest concepts in Magic — Stompy or White Weenie proper — are obvious examples of Swarm decks... But so are some of the most head-scratching Selesnya builds like Ghazi-Glare or Maverick.

The concept of Swarm is as old as the game itself. From the onset, Magic has given white decks Crusades to buff many creatures at the same time. Parts of its playbook can be shared across many different similar decks; we see Linear Aggro getting boosts with Goblin King, and Fish does the same with Lord of Atlantis.

So too can Swarm pull back on some of the odds and angles of the other fifteen macro archetypes. There are quite a few historical decks that skirt a line between Swarm and Non-Blue Control. Cedric Phillips's most famous deck, Kithkin, is quite obviously a White Weenie deck... that draws on Linear Aggro elements.

Swarm doesn't care if you cast creatures or spit out tokens. If your game plan is to spread out multiple small threats, buff some or more of them, and win by attacking... You're probably playing a Swarm deck. Though there are exceptions to every rule, Swarm tends to have the least interaction with opposing strategies — opposing *cards*, sure, but much less in terms of disrupting or preempting *strategies*. Add too much discard and disruption, and you might be in Suicide Black territory. Again, the chief differentiator between this deck and other beatdown decks is how well it can put an opponent away without attacking. Burn cards? Probably Red Aggro.

Tokens and Overrun? Probably Swarm.



Which is not to say that Swarm can't be interacted *with*. The nature of these decks is that opposing Wrath of God-type cards are very good *against* Swarm. Part of the challenge for the high-level performance of these decks is the ability to cope with a control deck's board sweepers.

This section will include:

- Ghazi-Glare
- White Weenie
- B/W Tokens
- Señor Stompy
- The Aristocrats

Ghazi-Glare

Katsuhiko Mori 1st World Championships 2005 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Llanowar Elves	3 Glare of Subdual
1 Birds of Paradise	2 Seed Spark
4 Selesnya Guildmage	4 Vitu-Ghazi, the City Tree
4 Wood Elves	4 Selesnya Sanctuary
4 Loxodon Hierarchy	4 Temple Garden
3 Kodama of the North Tree	4 Brushlands
3 Arashi, the Sky Asunder	1 Okina, Temple to
2 Yosei, the Morning Star	the Grandfathers
3 Pithing Needle	5 Forest
3 Umezawa's Jitte	1 Plains
2 Congregation at Dawn	

SIDEBBOARD

3 Hokori, Dust Drinker
 2 Carven Caryatid
 2 Greater Good
 2 Naturalize
 2 Yosei, the Morning Star
 1 Kodama of the North Tree
 1 Kodama's Reach
 1 Seedborn Muse
 1 Wrath of God

Katsuhiko Mori's World Championships deck, Ghazi-Glare, ushered in the mid-2000s domination of the Pro Tour by that era's Japanese greats. Ghazi-Glare absolutely dominated small creature decks, but obviously had to get most of its wins in The Red Zone. Certainly, the deck had resistance to creature removal via cards like Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree... but an opponent who could lock out attackers (for example, using Yosei, the Morning Star + Debtors' Knell + Miren, the Moaning Well) could breathe a sigh of relief if he stabilized at one life.

Ghazi-Glare buffed its creatures with cards like Selesnya Guildmage mid-combat, and it showcases just how richly layered



and strategic Swarm decks can be. Congregation at Dawn can get you “three stupid Elephants”, a.k.a. “three Loxodon Hierarchs to muck up the board and gain you 12 life against Boros or Gruul beatdown.” It actually had inevitability against cards like Meloku, the Clouded Mirror, thanks to the uncounterable Arashi, the Sky Asunder, and could lock down opposing threats with its namesake Glare of Subdual.

While Ghazi-Glare had some of the typical limitations of Swarm decks the deck could morph into a lock deck once Greater Good was brought into the equation, due to its ability to repeatedly trigger Yosei, the Morning Star.



Game-Breaker – Glare of Subdual and Umezawa's Jitte

Weakness – Sweepers!

Ghazi-Glare represents one extreme of Swarm decks... The most elegant, most head-scratching, and probably one of the most powerful looks ever at the archetype. There are way more simple Swarm decks, of course:

White Weenie

Tom Chanpheng 1st World Championships 1996 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Savannah Lions	4 Swords to Plowshares
4 White Knight	4 Disenchant
4 Order of Leitbur	1 Balance
4 Order of the White Shield	1 Reinforcements
2 Phyrexian War Beast	1 Reprisal
2 Serra Angel	1 Armageddon
1 Zuran Orb	1 Kjeldoran Outpost
1 Lodestone Bauble	4 Strip Mine
1 Land Tax	4 Mishra's Factory
1 Sleight of Mind	15 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Divine Offering
2 Serrated Arrows
2 Arenson's Aura
1 Black Vise
1 Energy Storm
1 Exile
1 Kjeldoran Outpost
1 Reprisal
1 Sleight of Mind
1 Spirit Link

Tom Champheng survived a sea of full-on Necropotence decks (including beating the Pro Tour's first superstar, Mark Justice) to take the 1996 World Championships using White Weenie.

This deck is relatively straightforward — solid attackers starting with Savannah Lions, attacking efficiently for the win without reach.

Cards like Armageddon gave White Weenie (and, for that matter, G/W Erhnam Djinn decks) a window to play like lock decks... but Champheng (like Mori would a decade later with Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree) actually wanted to get a bunch of lands in play and win with Kjeldoran Outpost, especially against under-prepared control decks.

Game-Breaker – Twelve “protection from black” creatures and a bunch of restricted cards

Weakness – Sweepers!



The real strength of this deck came from correctly predicting the most common opponent, as Mono-Black Necropotence's popularity made running twelve creatures with Protection from Black into some severe tech. The Next Level element of the deck was running Sleight of Mind to switch Protection from Black to Protection from Something Else (or to annihilate an opponent who tried to go Swamp, Dark Ritual, Gloom after sideboarding).

However Champheng forgot to play Adarkar Wastes *and couldn't even produce blue mana, ever.*

In a classic example of making lemonade out of lemons, legend has it Tom played with his Sleight of Mind exposed, on top of his sideboard, to scare black opponents out of siding in the otherwise-backbreaking Gloom.

White Weenie

Paul Rietzl 1st Pro Tour Amsterdam 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Steppe Lynx	1 Path to Exile
4 Student of Warfare	4 Honor of the Pure
4 Figure of Destiny	4 Spectral Procession
4 Ethersworn Canonist	4 Marsh Flats
4 Knight of the White Orchid	4 Arid Mesa
2 Ranger of Eos	4 Flagstones of Trokair
4 Brave the Elements	1 Horizon Canopy
2 Mana Tithe	10 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Relic of Progenitus
3 Burrenton Forge-Tender
3 Path to Exile
2 Rule of Law
1 Angel's Grace
1 Celestial Purge
1 Lapse of Certainty

Almost fifteen years later, in Extended, Paul Rietzl won Pro Tour Amsterdam with much the same kind of strategy — White Weenie / Tokens without reach!

Rietzl played a much more offensive deck, relying on Steppe Lynx and many landfall-friendly lands to get his beatdown on. Necropotence was no longer the enemy... Paul's "hate bear" was Ethersworn Canonist, which slowed down Bloodbraid Elf and nixed Storm-style combo decks while, like Champheng's White Knights, putting the opponent on a clock.



Game-Breaker – *Brave the Elements and Mana Tithe can be better than Time Walk for just one mana — and a Time Walk can be invaluable when most of Rietzl's creatures can take over a game on their own.*

Weakness – Sweepers!

While his deck lacked the control-crushing inevitability of Kjeldoran Outpost, this more modern look at White Weenie utilized the extraordinarily efficient Spectral Procession to transform one card and three mana into three 1/1 (or bigger) creatures. A good rule of thumb for evaluating token producers is to add the combined power and toughness of the tokens produced, and compare that output with the mana cost.

In *this* deck, Spectral Procession basically always costs three mana — so it makes three power of *flying* creatures for three mana, which would be reasonable as a single creature / single card. As a bonus, the power is spread across multiple bodies, which is great not just from a kind of card advantage perspective, but is particularly effective in a deck with Honor of the Pure.

In Paul's deck, with Honor of the Pure buffing his Spectral Procession tokens, we're talking about three 2/2 flyers — or six power (and six toughness!) for three mana, across three bodies. This is more than reasonable!

Token producers can be tricky to evaluate. Look not just for their naked levels of efficiency (token producers like Spectral Procession don't get printed every set), but also how they interact with other cards. You're hunting for the synergies they can represent to a deck, or at least within a format's context.

Blade Splicer is conditionally above the curve (four power, three of which has first strike for three mana), but can be particularly effective in a format that includes Restoration Angel. Selesnya Guildmage is okay as a 2/2 for two mana, but becomes unstoppable given time; add the potential synergy of Glare of Subdual (giving 1/1 Saproling tokens something productive to do, especially a way to interact with more powerful creatures) and the Guildmage starts looking like one of the top cards in a format. Nest Invader is also, grudgingly, a 2/2 for two with a bit of token upside, but it has something extra going for it: speed!



A genius like Zvi Mowshowitz could play a first-turn Noble Hierarch, tap the Hierarch and his first land for Nest Invader, and play a Windbrisk Heights. All of a sudden, his opponent might be staring down a turn 3 Emrakul, the Aeons Torn (or “at least” a Primeval Titan). Thanks, hideaway mechanic! You might not play Nest Invader all the time, or rate it a particularly effective token producer, but in context? It could give you some pretty high-powered draws.

The previous year, Luis Scott-Vargas followed up his Elf Combo Pro Tour win with a finals playing a White Weenie deck; that is, *Black-White Weenie*:

B/W Tokens

Luis Scott-Vargas 2nd Pro Tour Kyoto 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Knight of Meadowgrain	2 Mutavault
4 Tidehollow Sculler	4 Windbrisk Heights
4 Kitchen Finks	4 Reflecting Pool
4 Cloudgoat Ranger	4 Arcane Sanctum
3 Ajani Goldmane	4 Caves of Koilos
4 Bitterblossom	4 Fetid Heath
4 Terror	2 Plains
4 Glorious Anthem	1 Swamp
4 Spectral Procession	

SIDEBOARD

3 Burrenton Forge-Tender
3 Path to Exile
2 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
2 Wrath of God
2 Head Games
1 Celestial Purge
1 Wispmare
1 Ajani Goldmane

LSV's deck combined many small features, none of which took center stage by themselves, but snowballed into a powerful creature strategy.

He played persist creatures like Kitchen Finks to grind out a control deck's removal cards (or could combine Kitchen Fink's persist “drawback” with the +1/+1 text on Ajani Goldmane to become particularly persistent). He could use Tidehollow Sculler to disrupt control, while getting the jump on the opponent by providing a clock.

Of course the big payoff on this strategy was the production of tokens, in concert with mass creature-buffing effects. Bitterblossom was close to the #1 card at the time, and very likely the #1 threat. This card could pump out 1/1 flying creatures



turn after turn; it was great in Faeries (its usual home) but also contributed in Elves and saw play in Blightning Beatdown. Yet in B/W Tokens, Bitterblossom linked hands with Spectral Procession and the bomb-like Cloudgoat Ranger to make tons of small bodies that became *big* bodies with Glorious Anthem and Ajani Goldmane.

Game-Breaker – *Bitterblossom + Ajani Goldmane*

Weakness – *Sweepers!*

Though powerful, LSV's deck was also a metagame deck that exploited a hole in mass removal — namely, Faeries making life hard on traditional control decks. He famously looked over his quarterfinals opponent's decklist the night before the Top 8, saw his opponent had no way to dig out from the many bodies his deck could produce, and with great certainty decided the best playtesting was to get a good night's sleep.

Now, not all weenie / tokens decks need be *White Weenies*. Many implementations of the classic Swarm are actually green-based, such as Señor Stompy (or just Stompy).

Old-school pro Svend Geertsen wowed the world in 1997, making Top 4 of the World Championships with this super-straightforward creature deck:

Señor Stompy

Svend Geertsen 4th World Championships 1997 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Fyndhorn Elves	2 Uktabi Orangutan
4 Ghazban Ogre	3 Lhurgoyf
4 Quirion Ranger	4 Giant Growth
4 Rogue Elephant	4 Winter Orb
4 Spectral Bears	2 Bounty of the Hunt
3 Harvest Wurm	2 Heart of Yavimaya
2 Whirling Dervish	16 Forest
2 Jolrael's Centaur	

SIDEBOARD

2 River Boa
2 Whirling Dervish
1 Uktabi Orangutan
2 Crumble
4 Emerald Charm
3 City of Solitude
1 Bounty of the Hunt



Despite not being white, Svend's Stompy deck was basically just a White Weenie deck with no token generators. It represents the other extreme of Swarm decks, where Ghazi-Glare might be the most methodical. This deck is just *all* beatdown.

Stompy was quite obviously wide open to creature elimination (try getting your Rogue Elephant killed on turn 1 or 2), but it actually had a surprising amount of shenanigans it could pull off. If the opponent tapped out for Wrath of God, Svend could punish him with Winter Orb (remember, Geertsen's deck not only had a super-low curve, but cared so little for its lands it often sacrificed them to Rogue Elephant or Heart of Yavimaya). Or — and of course, this was a different era with different removal parameters — could make a big Lhurgoyf that would exploit the Wrath and put the opponent on a clock (especially once Winter Orb was slowing his opponent down).

Geertsen's Stompy wasn't the most interactive deck (other than interacting with the opponent's face). Most of its card-to-card play was Giant Growth or — ugh — Bounty of the Hunt. These cards took the place of Crusade, kind of, and kind of played Counterspell to Lightning Bolt. Fortunately, these wannabes just kind of killed opponents.

Game-Breaker – *Winter Orb and a low land count paired with super mana-efficient threats*

Weakness – *Sweepers!*

Stompy decks — especially without token producers or other card advantage — can be deeply vulnerable to consistent creature removal. Because they can only win in The Red Zone, cutting off their creature attack is quite simply lethal.

At the 2000 US National Championship, local hero Frank Hernandez fielded a Stompy deck with tools Geertsen had never dreamed of. He had Rancor — the greatest creature buffer ever — and he could open on one of eight two-power creatures on the first turn, or go even quicker with Vine Dryad.

But!



Hernandez was blown out in his Top 8 matchup with eventual Champion Jon Finkel. Finkel absolutely tore him up with a virtual *nine* copies of maindecked Perishes. Jon played four Vampiric Tutors and four Yawgmoth's Wills, so he basically had Perish whenever he wanted it, eventually locking down the game with Thrashing Wumpus.

Swarm decks have some unavoidable leaks, it's true. But on the other hand, it's also been one of the more decorated macro archetypes.

If you want to play this kind of deck, there are various questions you should ask yourself in order to gain an advantage over a format. For example, Paul Rietzl evaluates creatures on their resilience to removal. The efficacy of token producers with cards from Kjeldoran Outpost to Spectral Procession can be a powerful source of advantage, "card" or otherwise. While Swarm decks are among the least interactive macro archetypes ever, they can still exploit productive interactions.

To round out our tour of Swarm decks, let's look at a recent invention, unveiled by Team SCG at Pro Tour Gatecrash:

The Aristocrats

Tom Martell 1st Pro Tour Gatecrash Montreal 2013 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Cartel Aristocrat
 4 Champion of the Parish
 4 Doomed Traveler
 4 Cartel Aristocrat
 3 Knight of Infamy
 2 Skirsdag High Priest
 2 Silverblade Paladin
 4 Boros Reckoner
 4 Falkenrath Aristocrat
 1 Restoration Angel
 2 Zealous Conscripts

4 Orzhov Charm
 2 Linging Souls
 1 Vault of the Archangel
 3 Cavern of Souls
 4 Godless Shrine
 4 Sacred Foundry
 4 Blood Crypt
 4 Isolated Chapel
 1 Clifftop Retreat
 3 Plains

SIDEBOARD

3 Tragic Slip
 2 Sorin, Lord of Innistrad
 2 Blasphemous Act
 2 Linging Souls
 2 Obzedat, Ghost Council
 2 Rest in Peace
 1 Skirsdag High Priest
 1 Mentor of the Meek

Tom Martell won Pro Tour Gatecrash, a Standard Pro Tour, with one of the weirdest-looking examples of Swarm decks in all of Magic's twenty-year history. The Aristocrats has drawn much critical fire, but it achieved the most important bar of success in Pro Tour deck design: It won the Pro Tour it was designed for. According to primary designer Sam Black, it exploits Magic's most powerful mechanic... sacrificing your own creatures!

You might laugh, but the Cartel Aristocrats and Falkenrath Aristocrats in this deck could push through damage and keep more powerful creatures on the table despite an opponent's removal spells. Doomed Traveler does lots of things we've touched on. It's an aggressive drop, is resilient to removal (and synergistic with the Aristocrats), *and* is a token producer.



The Aristocrats is full of clever interactions. Not only could it ruin an ultimated planeswalker's day with Cavern of Souls into Zealous Conscripts, it could deal thirteen points to the opponent with Blasphemous Act + Boros Reckoner. And it pushed the various mechanics, beginning with sacrificing its creatures, into its other mechanics. You like token production? What about 5/5 tokens? If there is one thing The Aristocrats can do, that's set up a morbid trigger for Skirsdag High Priest.

The rest of the time, this deck looks like a classic fast-guys-and-buff implementation of Swarm decks: pure White Weenie

/ Tokens. Open with a turn 1 Champion of the Parish; buff Champion of the Parish with Knight of Infamy (2/2), getting in for three with the exalted buff. Follow up by pairing with Silverblade Paladin (putting the Champion to 3/3) and you're attacking as a 4/4 that can deal *eight* damage! That's more than half the opponent's life already. Follow with Falkenrath Aristocrat (which is, of course, very removal-resilient) and the game might just be over by turn 4 or 5.

Game-Breaker – *Falkenrath Aristocrat and Skirsdag High Priest*

Weakness – *Sweepers!*

The Aristocrats took advantage of nearly twenty years of White Weenie technology, and plays, if not Ghazi-Glare level, a pretty interactive game for Swarm. A hallmark of Swarm decks is their lack of reach. However, they're also defined by their relatively sparse interaction with cards not in play. Our next deck, Fish/Suicide Black, goes the other way on the interactivity spectrum, packing a core strategy bent on fighting the cards that *aren't* in play.

VIABILITY RATING – 10

There's always some sort of Swarm deck, though it's certainly not always white. Whether Swarm strategies are tier 1 or merely tier 2 can often fluctuate from week to week in a format.

DECK #4: FISH (SUICIDE BLACK)

Play this. Don't ask any questions. Don't change any cards.

In the final spring of the twentieth Century, my good friend Michael J. Flores was sitting at home in his parents' house, somewhere in suburbia, outside of Cleveland. He had just graduated from college and had not completed his transformation into New Yorker.

He had just received that era's equivalent of a text message.

A tiny IRC window opened (an odd sort of text message you had to be logged onto your computer to receive), relaying a message by way of a crude sort of Internet connection that ancient civilizations used that required you to connect with a telephone land line.

Well, wouldn't one Kaervek's Spite make sense, especially if we're already playing a Demonic Consultation package?

That sounds like a question. I said, 'Don't ask any questions'!

Flores' benefactor was one Brian Schneider — a shadowy, mythical figure to most of 2012's Magic populace, but a true master revered by the bulk of the best deck designers of all time.

Schneider was a terror of a diamond-cutter, dropping a format-snapping deck out of nowhere. His most successful Pro Tour design was perhaps the Tongo Nation Frenetic Efreedom deck from Pro Tour Chicago 1997, which put Justin Schneider into the Top 8, David Mills into his second Pro Tour finals, and Mike Long in ninth place on tiebreakers.

He would show up for a Pro Tour, unqualified and without having tested, look at some big American team's decks, tell them to change something, and they would, without question, *just do whatever thing he said*. On more than one occasion, Schneider would make a deck for the last week of a PTQ season, and everyone who played it would win their respective Blue Envelopes.

The reason you might not know about Brian is that he left to go work in Wizards R&D in the same generation as Randy Buehler, Mike Donais, and Worth Wollpert, serving as the head of the Development team for some years.

"Brian Schneider never ceased to be the best deck designer in the world. He just broke all the cards before the public ever saw them."

–Zvi Mowshowitz

Suicide King

Brian Schneider Extended 1999

MAINDECK

4 Carnophage
4 Sarcomancy
4 Skittering Skirge
2 Flesh Reaper
4 Dark Ritual
4 Demonic Consultation
4 Duress

4 Cursed Scroll
4 Sphere of Resistance
4 Hymn to Tourach
4 Mishra's Factory
4 Wasteland
14 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Dystopia
4 Engineered Plague
4 Funeral Charm
3 Spinning Darkness

The Suicide King was played in a total of four Pro Tour qualifiers over a two-week period. Both Flores and Francis Keys won PTQs. Tongo Nation attorney Jon Becker lost in the Top 8 by two points, having (*ahem*) forgotten to pay for his Carnophage, so excited was he at the prospect of a lethal rush. Albert Tran (altran, for those of you who know of this legendary figure of The Magic Dojo days) played an ostensibly match-winning Demonic Consultation, left himself with only three cards in his library, and watched in horror as his High Tide opponent just played a short High Tide + Stroke of Genius to kill him. (Luckily, altran's PTQ was at least won by Team Discovery Channel teammate Patrick Lennon Johnson, piloting Bob Maher Oath.)

What should be obvious is that The Suicide King was an unbridled success, an absolute monster of the battlefield.

So how did it work?

The Suicide King is an example of a Suicide Black deck; a hyper-aggressive deck that puts a lightning-like clock on the opponent, while keeping him off-balance with disruption. Sarcomancy has a nasty habit of biting the hand that feeds it. Carnophage will also damage you (and if you forget to pay a point, like Becker did, the cost will be a bit worse than just a point of life).

And Flesh Reaper? That's worst of all! The bet when playing a "suicide" deck like Brian's is that you're substantially faster than your opponent — because you're basically both killing you.



Suicide Black decks, therefore, thrive in formats dominated by all-or-nothing combo decks, where dealing 19 points of damage to yourself is relatively innocuous (as long as you don't lose the 20th!), and struggle in formats with other fast creatures or burn decks.

Game Breaker – *Dark Ritual and Cursed Scroll*

Weakness – *Other fast creature decks and the color red*

Suicide Black, which is actually in the same family of decks as “Fish” (just wait!), is the last of four macro archetype decks that comprise the Aggro family. Fish / Suicide Black shares this classification with Red Aggro, Linear Aggro, and Swarm. As you know by now, these four archetypes share many broad design and operational features, not the least of which are low-to-average converted mana costs (CMCs), creature-based attacks, and a default setting to “beatdown” when determining the role in a matchup.

Fish is an interesting style of deck to close out the Aggro family, especially as we transition from Aggro towards Midrange. The Fish side takes its name from, well, “Fish” (a nickname for the Merfolk tribe). Some Fish decks almost necessarily share a close connection with Linear Aggro (contrast “Fish” directly with, say “Goblins”) — though at least for some builds, its closest cousin is actually four archetypes away, on the other end of Midrange as Aggro-Control transitions into the Control family.

Aggro-Control and Fish are in fact often mistaken for one another — and in the context of a particular format, the decks will often share many individual cards. In addition, especially when comparing Fish or Aggro-Control to traditional control decks, they both tend to play the beatdown, run out a threat (whether it is a Bitterblossom or a Master of the Pearl Trident), and then use their permission to hold a lead they already have.

The distinction between them is that Fish / Suicide Black plays out its threats *and then* plays out its Time Walks, whereas Aggro-Control generally plays out its Time Walks before getting in with its threats.

These ideas can be complex but let’s break them down into general concepts that you can mix, match, and *use*. The big idea here is that Merfolk, Blue Skies, and Suicide Black decks all fall under the same banner. When The Suicide King plays a big first turn — say Swamp + Dark Ritual + Sarcomancy + Sarcomancy + Carnophage — the opponent is officially *on notice*. There’s six power in play, which is quite close to a three-turn clock. Threats are down! What do you block with here? *Can* you block, at all?

AGGRO-CONTROL & FISH ... TEND TO PLAY THE BEATDOWN, RUN OUT A THREAT, & THEN USE THEIR PERMISSION TO HOLD A LEAD THEY ALREADY HAVE

The number of creatures that could answer a 2/2 on turn 1 were relatively narrow. Are you going to put your Llanowar Elves in the way? A block from even a Jackal Pup is a pretty painful exchange. Now, even if you have the Lightning Bolt... The Suicide King *still* has two more 2/2 beaters!

Now a low-curve deck like Suicide Black has awesome stuff *for what the cards cost* — but a 2/2 (generally with a risky drawback) is not in and of itself the most impressive kind of card for the format that you can think of. Remember, the Thawing Glaciers of Combo Winter were still happily (and commonly) untapping. On turn 1? Sure. Awesome. But on turn 3 or 4, when every deck in the format could double-Fireblast, Natural Order, or Time Spiral their respective ways to Stage Three? Not so much.

So what you had to do was keep your opponent off his Fundamental Turn — the old “play your Time Walks” once you’ve already played those threats. A single Duress doesn’t stop a combo deck on the order of High Tide at its height... but it *does* force the opponent to reassemble a missing piece, more often than not. Congratulations! You’ve just bought a turn!

And when you can send in for six damage? A turn might mean the game.

Hymn to Tourach and Funeral Charm did much the same thing: Hymn was often better than Duress (nabbing two cards rather than one) but sometimes worse (you hit two extraneous lands and he still gets you); Funeral Charm could hit the opponent on his draw step once you emptied his hand, but was generally much worse than any of the other disruption (though far superior to, say, Cursed Scroll).

Wasteland and Sphere of Resistance were the gems of Brian's build. The Suicide King was the first great Sphere of Resistance deck. In this case, it was a direct answer to High Tide, but had even greater impact in some matchups. Both Sphere of Resistance and Wasteland are adept at keeping the opponent off his Fundamental Turn — which is just perfect for a deck whose card power can't really compete with an opponent operating at the high end of Stage Two.



Let's now consider the highest-performing Fish deck in Pro Tour history — which, incidentally, happened just a few months prior to The Suicide King's debut:

Merfolk

Nicholas LaBarre 2nd Pro Tour Rome 1999 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Manta Riders	2 Force Spike
4 Lord of Atlantis	4 Counterspell
4 Merfolk Traders	3 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Suq'Ata Firewalker	4 Force of Will
4 Man-o'-War	4 Wasteland
3 Waterspout Djinn	18 Island
2 Curiosity	

SIDEBOARD

4 Hydroblast
2 Phyrexian Furnace
2 Bottle Gnomes
2 Force Spike
2 Disrupt
2 Serrated Arrows
1 Nevinyrral's Disk

In 1998, Pro Tour Rome was defined by two cards, both of which were often played in the same strategy: Time Spiral and Tolarian Academy. One blue mage who managed to make a successful go of things without either of those was Frenchman Nicholas LaBarre. His Fish deck was good enough to earn second place in arguably the highest-powered field in Pro Tour history, his cheap blue creatures leaning heavily on Force of Will and Curiosity. Nicholas would plop a creature or three onto the battlefield, ideally gaining the early initiative, then counter the opponent's most relevant spells just long enough to eventually attack for the win.

The default MO of this deck, then, is to drop a clock and fall back on permission in much the same way Suicide Black relies on disruption. The permission could be used to hold a lead by protecting your permanents from removal, or to break up a combo (which was far more relevant in the days of broken combos).

Creatures at the time of Pro Tour Rome were quite weak compared to what we see today, whereas counterspells were relatively overpowered. How good were the counterspells, contextually? Labarre's lead-off runner was Manta Riders. His three — yes *three*, in Extended beatdown — was Man-o'-War (essentially the same card in a mono-blue deck as Standard non-staple Æther Adept).



In 2013, a 4/4 creature for four mana has to have substantial special abilities to see play... and here LaBarre was playing Waterspout Djinn, which has a bit of a disadvantage.

And yet, facing down stacks of potent (and eventually banned!) cards ranging from Demonic Consultation to Necropotence to Windfall to Time Spiral itself... This rag-tag band of 1/2s for two and 2/2s for three elbowed their way all the way to second place in a Pro Tour dominated by Tolarian Academy.

Game-Breaker – *Force of Will and Nevinyrral's Disk*

Weakness – *Other creature decks, particularly when backed up with removal*

Nevinyrral's Disk sticks out like a sore thumb in this deck; it *is* weird to see the clunky and expensive Disk in a deck with so many cheap permanents. But contextually, it makes sense. Academy decks would lay out a ton of permanents; if you could stop their Time Spiral, Windfall, or Stroke of Genius, they might often be out, and blowing up their artifacts would set the Tolarian Academy itself back substantially.

Compare this to:

U/b Merfolk

Tomoharu Saito 1st Grand Prix Columbus 2010 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

4 Cursecatcher	4 Force of Will
4 Coralhelm Commander	4 Wasteland
4 Silvergill Adept	4 Mutavault
4 Lord of Atlantis	2 Flooded Strand
4 Merrow Reejeray	2 Misty Rainforest
4 Æther Vial	2 Scalding Tarn
3 Spell Pierce	1 Polluted Delta
4 Daze	4 Underground Sea
4 Standstill	2 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Engineered Plague
3 Tormod's Crypt
3 Submerge
2 Umezawa's Jitte
2 Nature's Ruin
1 Perish



Saito's deck has much the same spirit as LaBarre's from a decade earlier, again with Force of Will protecting his Lord of Atlantis clock. While Saito still got to play with superb permission, look at how much faster and deadlier his individual threats were. Not only has Æther Vial been banned in some formats, but for Saito, it helped his Fish outmaneuver Counterbalance (you never have to *cast* your one- and two-drop creatures when the opponent has a Counterbalance with a Sensei's Divining Top on the battlefield).

Additionally, Æther Vial resolving turn 1 into Standstill on turn 2 is almost oppressively strong for many opponents. If nothing goes off-label, it's like an Ancestral Recall that makes the opponent play worse. To break or not to break? If you break, when? The opponent often won't cast spells for fear of your Standstill — but you can still play out creatures as uncounterable instants, inviolate and inopportune.

Cursecatcher was Saito's lone one-drop creature, but it's pretty obvious what an upgrade that was relative to Manta Riders. Manta Riders is a little better against creatures (you can Jump over blockers), but Fish isn't the archetype you choose when you foresee creature decks across the table anyway.

Game-Breaker – Æther Vial and Standstill

Weakness – Other creature decks, particularly when backed up with removal

As strong as Fish and Suicide Black can be against combo and control decks, they are among the weakest in the Aggro family against other Aggro decks. Just consider Nimble Mongoose, or perhaps the Modern-banned one-drop Wild Nacatl. What's Fish going to do against a 3/3 creature for one mana?

The whole notion of this strategy is to play out threats, gain the initiative, and then use “Time Walks” (whether permission or disruption) to hold a lead while the opponent is behind. But what if the opponent's not behind to begin with?

You may have noticed from the various decklists that The Suicide King's lone resistance to creatures maindeck was Cursed Scroll. Though it could jump through hoops or cycle through a stack of



sideboard cards to fight little guys (Funeral Charm to fend off Ball Lightning, Spinning Darkness for Jackal Pup), anything bigger than a 3/3 probably wasn't leaving any time soon. A resolved Natural Order might require you to play twin copies of Demonic Consultation finding two copies of Engineered Plague, one for Elves, one for Saprolings, while arranging for a Dystopia to be in play *at the same time*.

Labarre's deck was similarly ill-suited to fighting Aggro; we already talked about how clunky Man-o'-War and Nevinyrral's Disk can be. Suq'Ata Firewalker has some ups against little guys, but it's far from the answer you want when facing a substantial threat at satisfactory speed (and if you're facing Red Aggro, you might *still* get burnt out).

If you're considering a Fish / Suicide Black strategy, you'll want to keep the metagame in mind. Though at the time of this writing Joshua Cho was recently successful at a StarCityGames.com Legacy Open with a Fish deck updated with Master of the Pearl Trident (for Lord of Atlantis redundancy), Merfolk as an overall strategy has waned in popularity and efficacy. And no wonder, given a format where two-thirds of the expected decks pack sizable creatures like Nimble Mongoose, Wild Nacatl, Tarmogoyf, Scavenging Ooze, or Knight of the Reliquary... for similar and cheaper costs relative to what Merfolk can muster.

Generally speaking, Fish is strongest against decks that it can knock off-balance with disruption and/or permission, that are slow enough to beat with its creatures. This is highly format-dependent — but Fish's “fish” are most commonly combo decks that don't like being interacted with, or permission-based control decks with limited reliable board control. So when the expected opposition is primarily efficient beaters... You might want to go another direction.

You may have noticed that despite Saito's win at the Grand Prix a few years back, Merfolk as a whole is substantially less popular than other aggressive decks that feature cheap creatures + permission, and that Suicide Black hasn't posted an impressive finish in many seasons.

**FISH IS STRONGEST
AGAINST DECKS
THAT IT CAN KNOCK
OFF-BALANCE WITH
DISRUPTION
& THAT ARE SLOW
ENOUGH TO
BEAT WITH ITS
CREATURES**

This is largely due to the trend in Magic making better and better creatures (with disruption having withered to a pale imitation of its previous self). When The Suicide King was tearing up all those PTQs, good players had to weigh their options — but ultimately decided that, yes, it was worth the risk to play a 2/2 creature for only one mana. Now that there are 3/3 creatures for just one mana, and when decks from Red Deck Wins to U/R Delver can command a 2/2 *haste* creature for one mana, the prospect of paying life turn after turn for a Carnophage or Sarcomancy is much less attractive.

In fact, given that you might very well be being attacked by such superior creatures, it would be positively *suicidal*. Essentially, there are other decks that can fulfill against the incentives of Fish and Suicide Black, either with stronger creatures or less downside (or both). And gamers — even more than most people — respond to incentives.

Hatred

David Price 4th Grand Prix Seattle 2000 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Carnophage	4 Duress
4 Sarcomancy	1 Kaervek's Spite
4 Dauthi Horror	3 Unmask
4 Dauthi Slayer	3 Hatred
4 Phyrexian Negator	1 Spinning Darkness
4 Dark Ritual	4 City of Traitors
4 Demonic Consultation	16 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Masticore
3 Cursed Scroll
3 Perish
3 Sphere of Resistance
2 Null Rod

The Hatred sub-archetype is even more suicidal than “regular” Suicide Black. It mixes efficient creatures and evasion with a lightning-fast combo kill (so here is a deck that is three-quarters Fish, with one foot firmly in the Combo deck family).

City of Traitors provides redundancy if you don't draw a Dark Ritual, powering out a second-turn Negator to follow a turn 1 Carnophage or Sarcomancy. The combination of Dark Ritual and City of Traitors make it easy to cast Hatred at any point in the game. Even though Price only ran three copies of Hatred, Demonic Consultation gave him the ability to assemble explosive mana + the kill spell at the cost of just one mana.



Hatred can win games that other Suicide Black decks can't... But it makes the deck even worse against Red Aggro and company. Forget about getting your creature removed in response... They'll point that Shock to the face!

Game-Breaker – *Dark Ritual and Hatred*

Weakness – *Other creature decks, the color red*

Esper Spirits

Jon Finkel 3rd Pro Tour Dark Ascension 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Delver of Secrets	1 Divine Offering
4 Snapcaster Mage	4 Linging Souls
3 Phantasmal Image	2 Moorland Haunt
4 Drogskol Captain	2 Evolving Wilds
2 Dungeon Geists	4 Darkslick Shores
4 Ponder	4 Seachrome Coast
4 Gitaxian Probe	3 Glacial Fortress
4 Vapor Snag	5 Island
1 Gut Shot	1 Plains
2 Mana Leak	1 Swamp
1 Revoke Existence	

SIDEBOARD

2 Dungeon Geist
 2 Gut Shot
 2 Surgical Extraction
 1 Celestial Purge
 1 Demystify
 1 Dismember
 1 Dissipate
 1 Divine Offering
 1 Mana Leak
 1 Negate
 1 Phantasmal Image
 1 Revoke Existence

Noticing a theme? Fish decks are often at their best when they can exploit a format short on creature decks. They are less common, now that Magic is so creature-centric... but they still pop up once in a while, even in Standard. For instance, early in 2012, Jon Finkel finished third in Pro Tour Dark Ascension with this Fish variant.

As you can see, not every Fish deck needs to have a ton of counterspells. Sometimes, a single key piece of disruption is enough. Fish decks can also look to put much of their disruption in the sideboard, if it's very hit-or-miss whether or not you want it in a given format.



In many ways, this Spirits deck rides the line between Swarm and Fish, with its minimal disruption package supporting token-making and pump effects.

Game-Breaker – *Delver of Secrets and Drogskol Captain*

Weakness – *Problematic creatures like Titans and sweepers*

Fish and Suicide Black are Aggro decks that hold their leads with disruption. Our next chapter, Rock/Junk, features the opposite: a disruptive deck that also hits you with creatures.

VIABILITY RATING - 3

There are a lot fewer cheap, quality counterspells than there used to be. There are also fewer Dark Ritual effects, fewer pitch spells, and there aren't always good cheap discard spells. While Wizards nearly always supports Aggro-Control to some degree, Fish/Suicide Black is a viable strategy less than half of the time (though it does pop back up from time to time, and it remains a regular fixture in older formats).

DECK #5: THE ROCK / PT JUNK

This chapter features two closely related Midrange decks: The Rock (originally “The Rock and His Millions,” after WWE Champion Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson) and Junk (short for its original name, “PT Junk”). The Rock is traditionally a B/G deck — but can occasionally branch out into other colors (usually red but sometimes white or even blue), whereas Junk is essentially synonymous with B/G/W.

The Rock and Junk are members of the Midrange family, sharing that honor with Pure Midrange, Non-Blue Control, and Aggro-Control. Like most Midrange decks, The Rock is a style that plays both threats and answers, with threats in particular climbing the power as well as mana curves over time.

Stylistically, The Rock is closest to its Aggro neighbor Suicide Black, but kind of its opposite number. Suicide Black and The Rock are both creature decks with disruption... but Suicide Black errs more on the offensive side with fast discard. Whereas The Rock errs less on offense (wayyyyy less on offense) and more on an aspect of play Suicide Black tends to ignore: progressive card advantage.

The Rock often shares many cards with contemporary Non-Blue Control decks (in particular Mono-Black Control decks or Black Control decks with light splashes); in fact, it'll tend to play the control in a *Who's the Beatdown?* scenario, even against most other control decks.

Conversely, PT Junk can be seen as the stepping stone between Suicide Black and The Rock — less singularly offensive than Suicide Black, but less concerned with progressive card advantage than The Rock — and tends to look like many Pure Midrange decks, if you removed red and swapped out black.

Rock decks generally:

- Try to be just a little bigger than the most common aggro decks
- Blend acceleration and modest disruption to try to race bigger decks
- Play green primarily for creatures, black for discard and removal

THE ROCK PLAYS BOTH THREATS & ANSWERS, WITH THREATS CLIMBING THE POWER & MANA CURVES OVER TIME

There had been Survival of the Fittest decks since, well, the printing of Survival of the Fittest. Sol Malka was one of the world's most vocal Survival of the Fittest designers, and had been an advocate of B/G-based decks for as long as anyone can remember.

An avid wrestling fan, Malka is also credited with giving The Rock its name — naming Phyrexian Plaguelord “The Rock”, with “His Millions” being the squirrels made by Deranged Hermit. Because of this, and the connections leveraged two years later in service to The Rock, it's easy to assume Sol was the sole creator of the strategy. His Cabal Rogue teammate Bill Macey won a late Urza's Block PTQ with a more aggressive take on B/G (such that attack-oriented versions will forever be “Macey Rock”).

Not a whole lot of players know that the first Block PTQ ever taken down by what we would call The Rock was *actually* by Hall of Famer Jelger Wiegersma. [Here's Jelger's 1999 Block take.](#)

The Rock

Jelger Wiegersma 1st PTQ 1999 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Elvish Lyrst	4 Phyrexian Plaguelord
3 Rofellos, Llanowar Emmisary	3 Splinter
4 Priest of Titania	3 Diabolic Servitude
4 Yavimaya Elder	4 Treetop Village
4 Yavimaya Granger	4 Swamp
4 Masticore	16 Forest
4 Deranged Hermit	

SIDEBOARD

4 Harmonic Convergence
 3 Sick and Tired
 3 Hidden Gibbons
 2 Gaea's Embrace
 1 Eradicate
 1 Defense of the Heart
 1 Multani, Maro Sorcerer

While Jelger played a lot of powerful threats — Deranged Hermit, Masticore, and arguably Phyrexian Plaguelord — you can clearly see The Rock's grounding in progressive card advantage here; Yavimaya Granger is like a slow, Rampant Growth-plus, while Yavimaya Elder is a slow, green Ancestral Recall. The goal of playing Diabolic Servitude was to get additional value from these creatures, especially in situations where they could block and/or use some sort of card-advantageous special ability.

Masticore was the dirty dog of its day, the hard-working, regenerating cleanup machine — what made Phyrexian Plaguelord relevant was its ability to take down a durable Masticore via the big -4/-4 activation. Of course there was substantial synergy with the Plaguelord's -1/-1 ability (in particular with Deranged Hermit and its chittering acolytes), especially in Deranged Hermit fights. As you can see, there were a lot of nickel-and-dime advantages built into this deck.

The card advantage themes went all the way to the sideboard. Note the Harmonic Convergence, which from a pure card advantage perspective can deal with multiple enchantments all at once, *without* putting them into the graveyard. The card, at three mana, was a good foil to the flagship card Replenish, but it wouldn't set up the opponent's *next* Replenish!

From the earliest build of The Rock we can see how The Rock approaches other matchups, in addition to its attitude towards progressive card advantage. This is a strategy designed to take all comers, and seeks to customize itself to answer all different sorts of threats. Removal against creatures (including card advantage removal like Masticore, or Sick and Tired); Splinter against artifacts (including opposing Masticores); and of course, Harmonic Convergence against enchantments.

Macro issue: You have to draw the right answers against the right threats because The Rock will have problems racing most respectable strategies in isolation. When analyzing Rock and Junk decks, it's useful to determine what questions they are actually trying to answer.

Interaction – *Built to beat permanents with Elvish Lyryst, Splinter, and Harmonic Convergence against artifacts/enchantments, and Plaguelord/Masticore to lock out creatures*

Weakness – *Drawing the wrong interactive cards at the wrong times*



PT Junk

Adrian Sullivan 116th Pro Tour Chicago 1999 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 River Boa	2 Land Grant
3 Simian Grunts	3 Aura of Silence
3 Hunted Wumpus	4 Mox Diamond
4 Cursed Scroll	3 Bayou
4 Swords to Plowshares	4 Savannah
4 Tithe	4 Scrubland
4 Duress	3 Treetop Village
4 Funeral Charm	4 Wasteland
3 Demonic Consultation	

SIDEBOARD

4 Ebony Charm
3 Choke
3 Powder Keg
3 Spirit Link
1 Treetop Village
1 Aura of Silence

The first PT Junk deck appeared at the Pro Tour that was fed by Jelger's PTQ. At the time, a favorite deck among pros was Pro Tour *Jank*, which was kind of a Knight-based Zoo deck, generally R/W-based (most commonly U/R/W). Jank used white for creatures and red for supplemental burn — a kind of Deadguy Red with better creatures. The name PT Junk was a bit of a play on Jank's name.

The Top 8 of the Extended tournament where this deck was played featured Oath of Druids at two mana, and Necropotence and Tinker at three mana... But these folks were paying four for Hunted Wumpus and the sum total of *six* for Simian Grunts! Hopefully, others were doing something more interesting with their Demonic Consultations. It was here that Gerard Fabiano famously tried to Consult for "Humpus Wumpus," which judges wouldn't accept because it didn't exist as a card, leading him to settle for Cursed Scroll.

Interaction – *Duress and Funeral Charm for the hand, Aura of Silence for artifacts/enchantments, and Cursed Scroll /Funeral Charm/Swords to Plowshares for creatures, Ebony Charm for the graveyard, and Demonic Consultation/Powder Keg to pull it all together*

Weakness – *Drawing the wrong interactive cards at the wrong times*



The Rock

Michael Pustilnik 1st Grand Prix Las Vegas 2001 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise
3 Wall of Roots
4 Yavimaya Elder
4 Spike Feeder
2 Spike Weaver
4 Spiritmonger
1 Phyrexian Plaguelord
4 Duress
2 Vampiric Tutor
2 Phyrexian Furnace

4 Pernicious Deed
1 Recurring Nightmare
1 Choke
1 Living Death
2 Dust Bowl
4 Treetop Village
4 Bayou
8 Forest
5 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Diabolic Edict
2 Uktabi Orangutan
2 Emerald Charm
1 Massacre
1 Phyrexian Furnace
1 Rank and File
1 Stench of Evil
1 Tsunami
1 Choke
1 Volrath's Stronghold
1 Dust Bowl

The Rock proper appears more significantly as an Extended deck, most famously in the hands of Sol Malka. Malka produced a good run, and a money finish in the Pro Tour. However, it was Mike Pustilnik who went on to win Grand Prix Las Vegas with the strategy.

Choke to find with Vampiric Tutor is interesting — but it's worth noting there were *zero* Islands in the Top 8! Where were all the Donate decks that were supposed to show up?

Speaking of Donate, The Rock was in part a metagame deck. While it didn't really command a position of true strategic dominance over Donate, the presence of Spike Feeder forced most Donate players to deal over twenty damage — which could necessitate two copies of Fire // Ice or a full-on second combo. If a Donate player didn't win quickly enough, The Rock could just play Pernicious Deed and leave up four mana. He could then respond to Donate by destroying Illusions of Grandeur (which would probably kill the Donate player). Duress and Choke were good disruption, and the presence of some pretty good creatures helped The Rock win quickly enough while an opponent was off-balance.

One of the most underrated new visions of the future Malka produced in this era was to Vampiric Tutor for a land; I don't mean "I need a land, so I'd better get a land." I mean the snooty blue

magicians of the era might refuse to counterspell a Vampiric Tutor, thinking “I’ll just counterspell whatever he gets” — and then get blindsided by a land like Dust Bowl. Dust Bowl + Yavimaya Elder was hell on many multicolored control decks.



And Diabolic Edict killed *many* a Morphling.

Interaction – *Deed for nonland permanents, Dustbowl/Choke/Tsunami for lands, Duress for the hand, Phyrexian Furnace for the graveyard, and Spike Feeder for Donate/Illusions*

Weakness – *Drawing the wrong interactive cards at the wrong times*

It would be nice to recount that after Pustilnik’s win, The Rock set the metagame on fire — but in reality, 9th-on-breakers Grand Prix odd man out (and Hall of Famer) Alan Comer had set into motion the powerhouse MiracleGro deck... and fellow Hall of Famers Ben Rubin and Brian Kibler would run with it to produce sickestever. deck for the next Grand Prix. An aggro-control deck, MiracleGro was also effective against Donate... but *also* had a great matchup with The Rock!

The B/G/W colors of PT Junk probably performed at their best at the Extended Pro Tour Amsterdam 2010, where Brad Nelson added a Pro Tour Finals and Hall of Famer Brian Kibler racked up another one of his many Top 8 appearances.

One of the secrets of this deck was that Kibler — primary designer of the so-called “Treehouse” — approached it as a Zoo deck, a “Junk” deck in colors but less so in attitude.

Treehouse

Brian Kibler 6th Pro Tour Amsterdam 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Treefolk Harbinger
3 Loam Lion
4 Tarmogoyf
4 Putrid Leech
4 Doran, the Siege Tower
4 Knight of the Reliquary
1 Chameleon Colossus
1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
4 Thoughtseize
3 Duress

1 Nameless Inversion
4 Maelstrom Pulse
4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Misty Rainforest
4 Murmuring Bosk
3 Reflecting Pool
3 Treetop Village
1 Twilight Mire
3 Forest
1 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Leyline of the Void
3 Rule of Law
2 Reveillark
2 Slaughter Pact
2 Zealous Persecution
1 Basilisk Collar
1 Bojuka Bog
1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant

Extended at the time had a shortage of good dual lands, and one of the reasons that Junk was attractive was that these colors had not just a dual land, but access to a *triple* land in Murmuring Bosk. Treefolk Harbinger could line up a land, or Doran, the Siege Tower! You could play a bunch of Treefolk Harbingers — all lining each other up — until Doran flipped them all into essentially Wild Nacatls crossed with Demonic Tutors. They could even find Nameless Inversion, if the situation presented itself!



Interaction – *Duress and Thoughtseize for the hand, Maelstrom Pulse and Treefolk Harbinger for Nameless Inversion for permanents, Leyline of the Void/Bojuka Bog for graveyards, and Rule of Law for Storm decks*

Weakness – *Drawing the wrong interactive cards at the wrong times is always a weakness for these decks, but the more proactive nature of Treehouse minimized this compared to other Rock/Junk decks*

Junk colors have achieved a previously unprecedented level of success in the recent Return to Ravnica-era Standard — though this is actually more like a strange Swarm deck that only plays like a true Junk deck once our creatures provide relevant interaction against opposing game plans.

One of the most overtly high-utility elements of the next deck is that it's just a good G/W deck that can unlock the highly desirable Thragtusk + Restoration Angel combination. Restoration Angel is the best Simian Grunts ever — less mana, no echo, and a beneficial “enters the battlefield” effect.

Junk Reanimator

Kenji Tsumura 6th Grand Prix Nagoya 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Arbor Elf	4 Unburial Rites
4 Avacyn's Pilgrim	1 Gavony Township
4 Centaur Healer	2 Cavern of Souls
2 Restoration Angel	4 Overgrown Tomb
4 Thragtusk	4 Temple Garden
4 Angel of Serenity	3 Sunpetal Grove
2 Craterhoof Behemoth	3 Woodland Cemetery
4 Grisly Salvage	3 Isolated Chapel
4 Mulch	4 Forest

SIDEBOARD

3 Somberwald Sage
 3 Deathrite Shaman
 2 Abrupt Decay
 2 Cavern of Souls
 2 Sever the Bloodline
 2 Garruk, Primal Hunter
 1 Oblivion Ring

With an eight-pack of one-drop Elves and Pilgrims, Junk Reanimator can hit the ground running, which is an echo of Adrian Sullivan's original attempts with Mox Diamond.

Grisly Salvage and Mulch mirror cards like Land Grant and Tithe, but you'll note how Kenji can keep things interesting by dumping lands and creatures into the graveyard. While the deck is thought of as a Reanimator deck, you don't *need*-need to win on the back of Unburial Rites.



Interaction – While being very much a Swarm/Big Spell hybrid, this list can be Junk-like when Centaur Healer and Thragtusk interact with opposing evasion and haste creatures, Restoration Angel and Angel of Serenity against removal and problematic creatures, Craterhoof Behemoth against sweepers, and lots of interaction in the sideboard

Weakness – Graveyard hate, getting raced, and drawing the wrong interaction at the wrong times

The original PT Junk deck played a fair amount of discard, and tried to win a long game with Cursed Scroll and Treetop Village; check out Angel of Serenity in this deck, especially alongside those two copies of Cavern of Souls (going up to all four after sideboarding). It's very tough for a control deck — especially a control deck that plans to beat a Reanimator with Nephalya Drownyard — to beat a deck with Cavern of Souls set to "Angel." And when that Angel is Angel of Serenity?

Kenji could hit the table through a counterspell *and* target an Angel of Serenity (or more than one) in the graveyard. That way any time an Angel in play was killed, Kenji could reload (and reload

against the graveyard). Because it only takes four hits to win with an Angel of Serenity, this could make for a hard, long game for control to overcome.

And beatdown?

A turn 2 Centaur Healer — especially with Restoration Angel waiting in the (*ahem*) “wings” — that sets up up Thragtusk? That’s exactly where you want to be against beatdown. The deck could even go into race mode with its many cheap creatures, turboing into a Craterhoof Behemoth kill.

Is this a stark departure from the original philosophies of PT Junk? *Maybe...* but another way to look at it is that it’s more a realization of the things Junk always wanted to do, namely to to play with initiative and interact with all different kinds of decks successfully.

We think of “Junk” as a color combination, but The Rock is an attitude.



G/B Death Cloud

Chris Manning 7th US National Championship 2005 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Plow Under
4 Eternal Witness	4 Death Cloud
3 Viridian Shaman	3 Chrome Mox
2 Solemn Simulacrum	1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
3 Kokusho, the Evening Star	12 Forest
4 Sensei's Divining Top	7 Swamp
3 Echoing Decay	
4 Kodama's Reach	

SIDEBOARD

3 Cranial Extraction
3 Circle of Protection: Red
2 Hideous Laughter
2 Persecute
2 Sylvan Scrying
2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
1 Plains

This is Chris Manning’s bomb-laden Death Cloud Rock from the Top 8 of the 2005 US National Championship.

From the most uncomplicated perspective, this deck is just The Rock. Solemn Simulacrum, Eternal Witness, Viridian Shaman... Just value guys. Pick any of them up with value ninja Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni? You get even more repeatable 187 action.

Interaction – *Viridian Shaman* against artifacts, *Echoing Decay*/
Hideous Laughter against tokens, *Plow Under*/*Death*
Cloud against expensive spells, *Cranial Extraction*/
Persecute against the hand, *CoP: Red* against burn, and
Boseiju against permission

Weakness – *Drawing the wrong interactive cards at the wrong times*

The bomb in this deck (not counting *Plow Under*) is *Death Cloud*. *Chrome Mox* in play — or setting yourself up with *Sakura-Tribe Elder* and *Kodama's Reach* — gives you a mana advantage when you play *Death Cloud*. Note that it's advantageous to shift an "even" number of cards from your hand to the battlefield (i.e. converting cards to acceleration), because if you can dump your hand (and your opponent has cards in hand), then the *Death Cloud* will be doubly biased, as you'll discard fewer cards and have more lands left over.

Death Cloud itself can kill a ton of guys and deal a devastating amount of damage. *Sensei's Divining Top* is an artifact (and therefore doesn't "die" to *Death Cloud*) and it can help you recover (or set up) a soon-to-be lethal *Kokusho, the Evening Star*. *Death Cloud*'s ability to single-handedly take over a game helps demonstrate just how easily the line between The Rock and Big Spell Combo can become blurred.

VIABILITY RATING - 5

The Rock can usually be made in some fashion, though card design in recent years tends to push us more towards Pure Midrange decks filled with "good stuff".



DECK #6: PURE MIDRANGE

Like the other midrange strategies (The Rock/Junk, Non-Blue Control, and Aggro-Control), Pure Midrange decks tend to play with both offensive and defensive cards, utilizing many and most aspects of the turn. With at least three other midrange strategies, the question we might ask is...

What makes Midrange “pure”?

Decks of this strategy tend towards “good stuff” decks. Pure Midrange decks tend not to be blue, and favor individual card quality over deck synergy. One of the most common configurations of Pure Midrange is cheap removal + a variety of good creatures at various points on the curve.

There isn’t a whole lot to say about Pure Midrange decks in general, except that they tend to be overrated by amateur players. Because they err towards individual card efficiency over synergy, Pure Midrange decks tend not to be able to exploit the multipliers that define Magic’s most notorious boogeymen, and essentially never present an inexorable combo.

Think about a card like Cranial Plating or Goblin Ringleader. Is Cranial Plating “good”? It’s potentially *great*... but only in an Affinity deck. Goblin Ringleader? Pretty mediocre... unless you’re flipping over lots of Goblins. Decks relying on individual card efficiency don’t get linear aces like these.

Successful Pure Midrange decks tend to fall into one of three categories:

- Early format decks - they’re successful relatively early in a format, because it’s easier to identify good cards than to build good decks.
- Respectable Stage Three decks - Pure Midrange decks tend to be weak to unfair decks, but can be excellent against fair ones. When a Pure Midrange deck can do something that’s at least *somewhat* unfair (even if that thing is worse than what a *really* unfair deck might try to do), it can have a leg up in the metagame. A good example might be blowing up all the opponent’s lands.

**PURE MIDRANGE
DECKS... FAVOR
INDIVIDUAL CARD
QUALITY OVER
DECK SYNERGY**

- Decks that exploit the landscape of the format as a whole
 - Most elite deckbuilders focus on winning only a single big tournament with their best designs; however, for Pure Midrange decks to persist successfully over time, the rest of the format tends to have to cooperate. If you can really choose the most efficient cards, and your opponents are not coming at you with unfair strategies, you can gain a strategic edge. Modern Jund might be a good example.

The single over-arching advantage that most Pure Midrange decks share is a resilience against being hated out. Because they are *not* linear, they don't auto-lose to cards like Ethersworn Canonist or Leyline of the Void.

George Baxter's House of Pain

George Baxter 5th Pro Tour New York 1996 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Knight of Stromgald
 4 Order of the Ebon Hand
 4 Hypnotic Specter
 4 Erhnam Djinn
 2 Sengir Vampire
 1 Ishan's Shade
 1 Zuran Orb
 2 Barbed Sextant
 4 Dark Ritual

4 Lightning Bolt
 4 Hymn to Tourach
 3 Fireball
 2 Mishra's Factory
 3 City of Brass
 3 Karplusan Forest
 1 Lava Tubes
 2 Sulfurous Springs
 12 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Red Elemental Blast
 2 Dark Banishing
 2 Ihsan's Shade
 2 Nevinyrral's Disk
 2 Serrated Arrows
 2 Shatter
 2 Tranquility

The Swiss portion of the very first Pro Tour was led by George Baxter playing a quintessential Good Stuff deck. Baxter tried to identify the best cards in the format — specifically, the best threats — and he just played all of them. Baxter played four copies of Hymn to Tourach, could challenge the opponent to have a Lightning Bolt or Swords to Plowshares on the first turn via Hypnotic Specter, and punished white decks in general with all the protection from white.

Game-Breaker – *Dark Ritual, Hymn to Tourach*

Weakness – *Wrath of God and Armageddon*

Erhnageddon

Preston Poulter 4th Pro Tour New York 1996 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Elvish Archers	2 Icy Manipulator
1 Spectral Bears	2 Armageddon
4 Erhnam Djinn	1 Nevinyrral's Disk
2 Autumn Willow	1 Wrath of God
1 Zuran Orb	2 Hurricane
3 Land Tax	2 Strip Mine
4 Swords to Plowshares	4 Mishra's Factory
3 Disenchant	4 Brushland
2 Aeolipile	2 Havenwood Battleground
2 Fellwar Stone	1 Ruins of Trokair
1 Sylvan Library	8 Plains
1 Balance	4 Forest

SIDEBOARD

2 Divine Offering
2 Essence Filter
2 Reverse Damage
2 Karma
1 Fellwar Stone
1 Ivory Tower
1 Serrated Arrows
1 Armageddon
1 Disenchant
1 Land Tax
1 Autumn Willow

Standard around the time of Pro Tour One created the original paradigm for Rock-Paper-Scissors in Magic; Necropotence versus G/W versus U/W (which was ultimately victorious). U/W was the translation of Weissman's Deck from Type I to Type II, Necropotence was a singular *enigma*... and G/W, in the far less evolved Pro Tour of Standard in 1996, was the dominant good stuff strategy.

Poulter's deck had three copies of Land Tax for card advantage, but for our purposes it's more important to look at essentially everything else. He played Sylvan Library, Elvish Archers, and Spectral Bears on two, point removal in the forms of both Aeolipile and Swords to Plowshares, and Icy Manipulator doing double-duty as anti-creature and mana-disruption. Artifacts and enchantments have mighty short lives against Preston's Disenchants and Divine Offerings, and Nevinyrral's Disk could in theory answer any style of permanent. Poulter could evade damage and gain life, and even use Hurricane as a kind of end-game Fireball.

Game-Breaker – *Armageddon, Land Tax, and sweepers*

Weakness – *Counterspells, since this build is so reactive and has so few real threats*



Unlike other good stuff decks, the 1996 G/W deck could draw a line in the sand between Stage Two and Stage Three. Erhnam Djinn — or better yet Autumn Willow — in play? Armageddon. Preston used to troll USENET saying that if you drew Armageddon, you should probably play it.

The problem with this signature card, of course, was that it was symmetrical. It could be played around. U/W decks had an advantage over G/W decks at the time because they had many classes of spells to deal with creatures — from Swords to Plowshares of their own to Balance and Wrath of God — and could in theory save their counterspells for Armageddon.

Worse might be an opponent who simply played strategically.

A test situation might be to try to get in with your Erhnam Djinn. Did it just connect? Okay, Armageddon.



But what if the opponent knew what was coming? Level Zero play would be to destroy the Erhnam Djinn... You know, use his cards to do what they were supposed to do and keep damage off. In that case, the G/W mage would spend his mana playing another threat. But if a not-defenseless player took a hit? G/W might go 'Geddon and see his Djinn Plowed in response, leaving him with no advantage.

Certainly G/W could be a reasonable strategy. Multiple copies of it made the Top 8, and versions various persist all the way to today in Legacy, but would it be the *best* strategy? You can probably see that the format (and at times your opponent) might need to cooperate in order to get maximum value out of this Pure Midrange.

The Red Zone

Brian Kibler 3rd Pro Tour Chicago 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise	3 Wax // Wane
4 Llanowar Elves	4 Armageddon
4 River Boa	4 Rishadan Port
4 Chimeric Idol	4 City of Brass
3 Jade Leech	4 Brushland
4 Blastoderm	4 Karplusan Forest
4 Ancient Hydra	8 Forest
2 Rith, the Awakener	

SIDEBOARD

4 Armadillo Cloak
3 Tsabo's Decree
3 Kavu Chameleon
2 Flashfires
2 Simoon
1 Obliterate

Hall of Famer Brian Kibler's first trip to the Top 8 tables came with the help of The Red Zone. When looking at Red Aggro, we discussed Zvi Mowshowitz's My Fires from the same Top 8. Though the two decks share many elements — Blastoderm, one-drop accelerators, and the emerging adoption of six-drop Dragons — the ultimate implementations of each were quite different.

Game-Breaker – *Armageddon, Ancient Hydra, Rith the Awakener*

Weakness – *Lack of Reach, not many angles of attack*

Kibler's deck didn't have a lot of reach or range. He packed big guys only. Besides Ancient Hydra, his deck — named "The Red Zone" — pretty much had to win in The Red Zone. That said, Kibler's deck boasted a proactive plan, flexible removal, and — like Poulter and company back at Pro Tour One — could blow up all the opponent's lands. In his career-making Top 8 victory over fellow Hall of Famer Mowshowitz, Kibler won multiple interesting ways.

One of them was by dropping Armageddon, blowing up both players' lands. Zvi didn't expect this, as their decks seemed symmetrical in so many ways. So in a sense, it was Kibler's ability to identify and seize an opportunity that gave him that win... Especially given how surprising it was for Zvi on the receiving end.

Of course, the iconic win was by applying Armadillo Cloak to Rith, the Awakener. Armadillo Cloak did two very midrange things: one hallmark of Pure Midrange is playing great guys, especially big



guys for their costs. Armadillo Cloak made Kibler's already-big Dragon even bigger. He could pull an animal out of red removal range. The other, of course, was to give him yet another not-focused thing to be good at... this time life gain. *All good.*



Boat Brew

Brian Kowal 1st Cruise Qualifier 2008 (Standard)

MAINDECK

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| 4 Figure of Destiny | 4 Ajani Vengeant |
| 4 Mogg Fanatic | 4 Mind Stone |
| 1 Burrenton Forge-Tender | 3 Reflecting Pool |
| 4 Knight of the White Orchid | 4 Windbrisk Heights |
| 4 Kitchen Finks | 4 Battlefield Forge |
| 4 Murderous Redcap | 4 Rugged Prairie |
| 4 Ranger of Eos | 4 Plains |
| 3 Reveillark | 3 Mountain |
| 3 Siege-Gang Commander | |

SIDEBOARD

- 4 Guttural Response
- 4 Vithian Stinger
- 4 Wrath of God
- 3 Runed Halo

Brian Kowal, midrange master, was the architect behind Boat Brew, the above-listed R/W "good stuff" deck. This was one of his more influential designs, earning him a free trip to the Magic Cruise, and inspiring later players to top finishes.

Game-Breaker – *Reveillark, Siege-Gang Commander, and Ajani Vengeant*

Weakness – *Control decks that could go over the top of it*

This midrange deck is somewhat unique due to its internal power levels and synergies. Unlike most midrange decks across Magic history, Kowal actually presented some solid interaction against more powerful opponents, and could even challenge a blue deck's Stage Three.

At the same time, over half the cards in his deck were legitimate game-winning threats that had to be dealt with (many of which would produce multiple additional threats). In a roundabout way, this deck was actually a sort of precursor to Mythic, the Bant deck Zvi Mowshowitz designed that finally articulated the concept of playing all big threats and mana.

Kowal could two-for-one a careless opponent with Knight of the White Orchid, or play Ajani Vengeant on turn 3 via Mind Stone. More importantly, Reveillark gave Kowal a card in a league with Cruel Ultimatum. He could retrieve powerhouses like Siege-Gang Commander, which produced card advantage.

Ranger of Eos was both a solid card advantage engine in this deck and a hate-Tutor of sorts. While typically you'd get Figure of Destiny with Ranger of Eos, the presence of one maindecked Burrenton Forge-Tender allowed the deck a massive strategic advantage against conventional Red Decks, especially seeing that Reveillark could recycle the Forge-Tender.

Boat Brew offered advantages on all three of the points outlined at the top of this chapter. Cards like Kitchen Finks and Murderous Redcap were highly resilient and could prevent the opponent from gaining an advantage on the ground. Especially given its unveiling relatively early in the format cycle, the Boat Brew cards simply had many ways to prove more individual value. So many of them did more than one thing, took somebody out, gained life, or drew cards; it was almost The Rock-like.

Ajani Vengeant was one of the first planeswalkers to really kick butt and take names in Standard (especially before Jace, the Mind Sculptor was unveiled). This card could play like Armageddon — a one-way Armageddon! — giving Boat Brew a pair of possible routes to Stage Three domination.



Naya Lightsaber

Andre Coimbra 1st World Championships 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Noble Hierarch
4 Wild Nacatl
1 Scute Mob
4 Woolly Thoctar
4 Bloodbraid Elf
4 Ranger of Eos
4 Baneslayer Angel
3 Ajani Vengeant
4 Lightning Bolt

4 Path to Exile
1 Oran-Rief, the Vastwood
4 Arid Mesa
4 Rootbound Crag
4 Sunpetal Grove
4 Forest
4 Plains
3 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Celestial Purge
4 Great Sable Stag
4 Goblin Ruinblaster
2 Burst Lightning
1 Ajani Vengeant

Andre Coimbra's 2009 World Championships deck, designed by Michael Flores, is perhaps the purest example of Pure Midrange. The deck is built on an unambiguous paradigm of choosing the best available cards without a thought of synergy. It offered the best removal (Lightning Bolt and Path to Exile), the best acceleration (Noble Hierarch), and the best in threats (almost everything else from Bloodbraid Elf to Baneslayer Angel).

Game-Breaker – *Bloodbraid Elf, Ranger of Eos, Baneslayer Angel, Ajani Vengeant*

Weakness – *Fast aggro such as Vampires*

Naya Lightsaber was a reaction to the dominant Jund decks of the time. Flores argued that it played *even more* Top 10 cards than Jund — claiming that while Jund played Blightning, Naya Lightsaber played more of every other good thing, with the combination of Ranger of Eos into Wild Nacatl, and Baneslayer Angel offering more in total than Blightning alone.

Jund versus Naya battles of the day often came down to topdeck fights. Jund had Blightning, so was potentially better at clearing the Naya player's hand. But Naya presented creatures like Woolly Thoctar and Baneslayer Angel that didn't die to Lightning Bolt, requiring more than one card to take down. Eventually no one had anything, and it came down to topdecks.

In that position, Blightning was less good than usual but Ranger of Eos (often fetching the solo Scute Mob), Ajani Vengeant, or Baneslayer Angel could lead to a very quick victory. Both decks could come out quickly with Bloodbraid Elf, but Naya's were a turn faster.

In this sense, Naya Lightsaber was the kind of Pure Midrange that thrived in a format with few *unfair* decks, but lots of other midrange decks. Everyone was doing similar stuff, but Naya Lightsaber boasted the rare combination of playing not only a faster game, *but* commanding more of the big stuff that mattered in the middle and late games.

Flores may have innovated “not playing Jungle Shrine” in Naya decks, but by the time Pro Tour San Diego 2010 came around, Tom Ross had better options for his mana base, including the Worldwake manlands. This next build is less focused on individual card efficiency, given the emergence of broken Flagship cards. Worldwake brought us not only Jace, the Mind Sculptor, but Stoneforge Mystic — and Ross immediately put it in his Naya deck.



Here we see Stoneforge Mystic fetching for Basilisk Collar, allowing Naya to “make its own Baneslayer Angel”. Behemoth Sledge gave his G/R/W the same kind of oomph that Brian Kibler’s Armadillo Cloaks did nearly a decade earlier. The unique feature of Boss Naya was the so-called “little kid combo” of Cunning Sparkmage + Basilisk Collar. Against creature removal-poor decks like White Weenie, Ross could create an inexorable machine gun... and even gain life

Boss Naya

Luis Scott-Vargas 3rd Pro Tour San Diego 2010 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl
 4 Noble Hierarch
 2 Birds of Paradise
 1 Scute Mob
 2 Stoneforge Mystic
 4 Knight of the Reliquary
 4 Bloodbraid Elf
 4 Ranger of Eos
 2 Ajani Vengeant
 1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
 3 Lightning Bolt
 1 Path to Exile
 1 Basilisk Collar

1 Behemoth Sledge
 2 Oblivion Ring
 1 Tectonic Edge
 1 Sejiri Steppe
 1 Raging Ravine
 2 Stirring Wildwood
 2 Terramorphic Expanse
 4 Arid Mesa
 3 Misty Rainforest
 1 Rootbound Crag
 5 Forest
 2 Mountain
 2 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Cunning Sparkmage
 2 Baneslayer Angel
 2 Dauntless Escort
 2 Manabarbs
 1 Basilisk Collar
 1 Behemoth Sledge
 1 Goblin Guide
 1 Oblivion Ring
 1 Stoneforge Mystic

Jace, the Mind Sculptor's debut Pro Tour featured a number of other developments. Tom "the Boss" Ross took Naya Lightsaber to the next level. Yes, playing Naya at that point was sort of *previous* level, but in the hands of Luis Scott-Vargas, Boss Naya produced one of the most impressive Pro Tour runs of all time.

Game-Breaker – *Knight of the Reliquary, Bloodbraid Elf, Ranger of Eos, and Stoneforge Mystic finding Behemoth Sledge/Basilisk Collar*

Weakness – *Jund decks evolving to be better versions of it, Jace the Mind Sculptor giving blue the power it needed*

Boss Naya was pretty solid for a non-Jace, the Mind Sculptor deck... But LSV ultimately stumbled on mana in the Top 8 against eventual champion Simon Goertzen. As Luis would say, "Jundstice."

Jund

Simon Görtzen 1st Pro Tour San Diego 2010 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Putrid Leech	2 Lavaclaw Reaches
4 Sprouting Thrinax	4 Raging Ravine
4 Bloodbraid Elf	4 Savage Lands
3 Siege-Gang Commander	4 Verdant Catacombs
3 Broodmate Dragon	2 Dragonskull Summit
2 Garruk Wildspeaker	1 Rootbound Crag
4 Lightning Bolt	4 Forest
2 Rampant Growth	3 Swamp
3 Maelstrom Pulse	3 Mountain
4 Blightning	

SIDEBOARD

4 Deathmark
4 Great Sable Stag
3 Master of the Wild Hunt
2 Terminate
1 Pithing Needle
1 Maelstrom Pulse

The Deck to Beat of this era was, without a doubt, Jund. We talked previously about how Naya Lightsaber was in-part a reaction to Jund, making for better mid-game topdecks and a greater concentration of high-end threats. We also talked about how it was mana screw that did in LSV, preventing a flawless run from start to Pro Tour Championship.

Knowing this — and knowing how ubiquitous Jund would be at both top and bottom tables — what can we extrapolate from Goertzen's deck? What makes it special?

Look at that land count. *Twenty-seven lands! And Rampant Growth!*

Goertzen dubbed his deck “all lands, no removal” because he cut creature removal to play an unprecedented number of lands. The thinking here is that the remaining cards in Jund were so good, the only way he could lose would be to be mana-screwed... So Simon simply played all the lands. Anyway, the printing of Raging Ravine gave him something to do with his lands, even when he got flooded.

Game-Breaker – *Bloodbraid Elf, Siege-Gang Commander, Broodmate Dragon, Garruk Wildspeaker*

Weakness – *Cheap permission combined with card draw, Baneslayer Angel*

And finally?

By November of 2012, Jund had become the most popular deck in the Modern format. It was kind of like a rehash of Standard several years earlier, with Bloodbraid Elf once again the signature creature of the format.

Yes, there were some unfair decks, but the heavy interaction of the Jund decks — Thoughtseize and Liliana of the Veil for discard, plus Abrupt Decay to break up creature combinations like Exarch Twin — allowed this midrange deck to compete in the face of unfairness.

Once again, one of the hallmarks of Pure Midrange is that it's overrated by amateur players. But in the case of Modern, the Jund deck had enough speed and a critical mass of sets to draw against in order to present a legitimate defensive front. The format, like previous Standard ones, could potentially degenerate into topdeck fights, with Liliana of the Veil standing in for Blightning (but, of course, offering more long-term value).

4-Color Jund

Josh Utter-Leyton 2nd Grand Prix Chicago 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Deathrite Shaman	4 Raging Ravine
4 Dark Confidant	4 Marsh Flats
4 Tarmogoyf	4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Bloodbraid Elf	4 Blackcleave Cliffs
3 Liliana of the Veil	1 Blood Crypt
4 Lightning Bolt	1 Godless Shrine
3 Thoughtseize	1 Overgrown Tomb
2 Inquisition of Kozilek	1 Stomping Ground
2 Abrupt Decay	1 Swamp
2 Terminate	1 Forest
4 Lingers Souls	1 Plains
1 Treetop Village	

SIDEBBOARD

3 Rakdos Charm
 2 Rule of Law
 2 Batterskull
 2 Olivia Voldaren
 2 Shatterstorm
 1 Ancient Grudge
 1 Grim Lavamancer
 1 Maelstrom Pulse
 1 Phyrexian Metamorph

As we said at the very beginning, if you're going to play a deck built on individual card value, you'd best have the most valuable individual cards. Jund was the most popular deck. Games boiled down to topdeck fights. One-for-one cards traded with opposing combo pieces. How do you gain an advantage, using largely the same tools, given such a paradigm?

You add Linging Souls.

Linging Souls has performed and even dominated in basically every format — except for, ironically, Block — since it was printed (and that's because it was pre-emptively banned in Block prior to the Pro Tour). Tom Martell won in Legacy by attaching an Umezawa's Jitte to Linging Souls, Jon Finkel grabbed his umpteenth Top 8 by buffing Linging Souls with hexproof Spirit lords in Standard, and Josh Utter-Leyton casually added a fourth color to the mighty Jund...

Let's take Linging Souls out of the abstract and appreciate it in terms of its metagame. Think about any of these situations:

- Against Liliana of the Veil? You don't even need white mana if you're going to discard Linging Souls to Liliana of the Veil. It allows you to break the symmetry on Liliana's [+1] ability, and the ability to produce multiple creatures gives you great defense against an opposing Liliana of the Veil. Just remember how hard the little Spirits are to block!
- Against Geist of Saint Traft or an opposing Bloodbraid Elf? Just half a Linging Souls takes a lot of the thrust out of these signature gold creatures. How much card advantage is Bloodbraid Elf really buying when you're trading half a card for the 3/2 body? How scary is Geist of Saint Traft if it is itself scared to attack?
- Against Signal Pest, or Affinity in general? Jund in Modern was generally considered soft against Affinity / Red Robots. But one quarter of a Linging Souls can stand in front of an Inkmoth Nexus, Blinkmoth Nexus, Vault Skirge, or Signal Pest. Affinity gains an advantage over Jund by pairing evasion with Cranial Plating for big hits... but Cranial Plating does not buff toughness. Fractions of cards defeating full cards makes for great defensive math.



- Against counterspells or in attrition fights? The natural card advantage of Linging Souls should be obvious on its face. Pair it with a Bloodbraid Elf? Your opponent's got problems.

Game-Breaker – *Dark Confidant, Linging Souls, Liliana of the Veil, Bloodbraid Elf*

Weakness – *Unfair combo decks and certain U/W strategies... but generally these weaknesses were minor, albeit common*

There isn't a *whole* lot to say about Pure Midrange. Generally speaking, it lacks the nuance of some other archetypes and deck families, but Wrafter did a good job pushing it to the threshold of Midrange's full potential. He took a known strategy and innovated it admirably. Not surprisingly, Linging Souls quickly became stock in Modern Jund thereafter...

Finally, enough was enough. The ultimate midrange card, Bloodbraid Elf, was banned.

VIABILITY RATING – 9

These days, Pure Midrange decks are almost always viable and good. What are the best cards? How many of them can you throw into a deck together? You're halfway there...

DECK #7: NON-BLUE CONTROL

“Non-Blue” Control is one of four macro archetypes that comprise the Midrange family, along with Rock / Junk, Pure Midrange, and Aggro-Control. These four deck styles share many in-play features, the most unifying of which are an interplay of both threats and answers, as well as the utilization of most aspects of the turn as a deck progresses in power over time. Midrange decks usually win by attacking, but might not play a creature before turn 5.

Most of them dedicate double-digit spell slots to creature removal, hand destruction, or other purely interactive elements. Even the more aggressive Midrange decks tend to have some sort of fallback disruption or progressive card advantage element. While any *Who's the Beatdown?* matchup analysis will be game-specific, Midrange decks tend to err on the “control” side without actually being members of the control family.

Non-Blue Control decks generally:

- Prey on formats that are nearly exclusively creature-based
- Need a card draw advantage engine to really succeed
- Can be easy traps to fall into, with bad versions being very common

“Non-Blue” Control is kind of an odd name, as the deck style is a Midrange deck... and there is actually no guarantee that the deck is even *not blue*. Being “Non-Blue” Control is more an attitude about what kinds of threats (and especially answers) a deck plays, how it figures into a format, and what its attitude towards card advantage is.

This section will include:

- Napster
- Mono-Black Control
- G/W Control
- W/R Slide
- Tezzeret

**NON-BLUE CONTROL
IS MORE AN ATTITUDE
ABOUT WHAT KINDS
OF THREATS
& ANSWERS A
DECK PLAYS, HOW
IT FIGURES INTO
A FORMAT, & ITS
ATTITUDE TOWARDS
CARD ADVANTAGE**

There are more than a few popular niche decks in the Non-Blue Control, including many variations on Mono-Black Control, Mono-White Control, and some styles of linear battlefield control decks. These decks are generally somewhere on the spectrum between The Rock and Big Spell. Regardless of which sort of Non-Blue Control deck you are working with, it's important to remember one fact:

Non-Blue Control decks are not good.

Wait.

What?

Non-Blue Control decks are not good.

This statement may require a bit of explanation before we proceed — as it is *not*, in fact, a statement of fact. Like many broad statements, “Non-Blue Control decks are not good” may be true much of the time... not *all* of the time.

It's fairer to say that Non-Blue Control decks are rarely the most powerful decks in a format, tend to have either glaring weaknesses or fatal flaws, and tend to be avoided by top players (except in small formats). Non-Blue Control decks tend to excel only when a player has a strong understanding of a metagame's popular decks, and most importantly the kinds of threats and answers that are likely to show up (so that it can make sure to pack the right answer cards).

As such, Non-Blue Control decks tend to be less successful early in a format (where matchups are less predictable and threats are more in flux), but can be the right choice either a) when choices overall are limited, or b) when you can get a *really* good bead on what the other guy is planning to do.

Non-Blue Control decks are not good might not be “true” ... but as a sanity check, it can be awfully useful. A famous story involving three of the oldest names in Magic — Zvi Mowshowitz, Michael Flores, and Jon Finkel — illustrates the point.

Zvi was taking a look at an early version of Flores's infamous “Napster” deck (a Vampiric Tutor-based Non-Blue Control deck).

**NON-BLUE CONTROL
DECKS ARE
NOT GOOD**

Zvi scoffed at its random assortment of cards and Tutor gimmick as “just not powerful”... and continued to scoff for the next several hours, even as Flores won the tournament in question.

Flores convinced Jon Finkel to play Napster at the 2000 US National Championship. In a fitting twist of fate, Zvi was actually eliminated from the Top 8 by Finkel, armed with Napster. Finkel eventually went on to win the tournament to great fanfare... a victory Flores has ensured none of us are at risk of forgetting.

Zvi put considerable work into Napster, eventually conceding that the deck could in fact beat a large portion of the decks in the metagame... but never admitted to its actually earning the adjective “good.”

Napster

Jon Finkel 1st US National Championship 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Skittering Skirge	2 Unmask
2 Phyrexian Negator	4 Vicious Hunger
2 Skittering Horror	4 Yawgmoth's Will
1 Stromgald Cabal	1 Persecute
1 Thrashing Wumpus	1 Massacre
4 Dark Ritual	1 Eradicate
4 Vampiric Tutor	2 Dust Bowl
4 Duress	4 Rishadan Port
1 Engineered Plague	2 Spawning Pool
1 Perish	15 Swamp
1 Stupor	

SIDEBOARD

2 Engineered Plague
 2 Rapid Decay
 2 Phyrexian Negator
 1 Phyrexian Processor
 1 Powder Keg
 1 Thran Lens
 1 Stromgald Cabal
 1 Eradicate
 1 Massacre
 1 Perish
 1 Stupor
 1 Unmask

Napster is a special case among Non-Blue Control decks. For one thing, it looks a bit odd, over a decade after its day in the sun. That said, Napster is loaded with cards that are now restricted and/or banned — namely Dark Ritual, Vampiric Tutor, and Yawgmoth's Will.

One of the common traits among Non-Blue Control decks is that they generally feature a card advantage engine. Napster was no exception, using Yawgmoth's Will to gain a winning advantage

after playing an attrition-ish game. One major advantage of Napster over most Non-Blue Control decks, however, is the use of the Vampiric Tutor + Silver Bullet package, allowing it to solve difficult problems and hate out specific strategies.



This does allude to a fatal flaw in Napster (like all Non-Blue Control decks): it can't take on all comers. There are always problems you can't solve. Part of the reason that Zvi was initially so skeptical of the deck was that it had no Silver Bullet for the cards Morphling or Treachery. Engineered Plague? A 2/2 Morphling would be less problematic, but still hard to get through.

Fatal Flaws - *Morphling, Treachery, Enchantments*

Zvi, who was debating between Grim Monolith blue decks and Replenish combo, could not get his head around a deck that had no good answers for any of the decks he would consider playing. It's easy to see how for a master of Zvi's pedigree might say "Non-Blue Control decks are not good," even though Napster is among the best Non-Blue Control decks ever formulated.

Non-Blue Control decks might not be good... *but they often have good matchups.*

The trick, when playing a deck in this family, is to figure out two things:

- What are its good matchups?
- What is its weakness — its fatal flaw?

If you have many good matchups, then great! Playing a particular Non-Blue Control deck might be exactly where you want to be... as long as you can avoid the fatal flaw. As a sanity check, you should always, always, *always* consider the overall power of your Non-Blue Control deck. Is it powerful? Are you powerful at all? A good way to lose with a Non-Blue Control deck is to simply be bowled over — even when you do everything you want and get everything your deck can give, but are just trumped in Stage Three when your opponent's standard operating procedure goes bigger than you do.

Non-Blue Control decks, while not the most popular strategy among top-level designers, do have quite the passionate following. There's something quite appealing about trying to recapture the magic of the board control decks of days gone by. Basically, there's a certain percentage of players who believe every set is finally going to be Mono-Black Control's return to glory. It generally isn't, but it does come back just enough to keep things interesting.

The name "Non-Blue Control" really tells the story about these decks. Generally, they want to play control, they really do, but they just aren't very good at the "blue" things that we typically associate with control decks. Namely, they tend to lack permission, and may lack card drawing. Viable Non-Blue Control decks often excel at the not-blue aspects of control (namely, killing creatures) and can be adjusted to fight various competing archetypes. Though they're often soft to "real" control decks or combo decks (or both), they can be built to beat specific combo or control decks... *when you know exactly what it is you want to beat.*

Usually, this is done by pre-empting the combo in some way, or by playing some unbeatable trump game plan against the control deck that attacks them from an angle they aren't prepared for. At the end of the day, though, they'll never be able to "take on all comers" like the true students of Weissman.

Want to win with Non-Blue Control? Always be on the lookout for your own fatal flaw.

**WANT TO WIN WITH
NON-BLUE CONTROL?
BE ON THE LOOKOUT
FOR YOUR OWN
FATAL FLAW**

Mono-Black Control

Rob Dougherty 3rd Pro Tour Osaka 2002 (Odyssey Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Nantuko Shade
2 Shambling Swarm
2 Stalking Bloodsucker
3 Innocent Blood
4 Chainer's Edict
4 Rancid Earth
4 Diabolic Tutor

4 Mutilate
1 Haunting Echoes
4 Mind Sludge
1 Skeletal Scrying
3 Cabal Coffers
25 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Braids, Cabal Minion
4 Faceless Butcher
3 Mesmeric Fiend
2 Ghastly Demise
2 Skeletal Scrying

Fatal Flaws - Opponents with bigger Big Spells, relatively few threats, mana development

Hall of Famer Rob Dougherty was on a hell of a run when he led the Swiss at Pro Tour Osaka — he was in first place going into the Top 8 and through to the Top 4, before going down 0-3 to fellow Mono-Black Control player (and Hall of Famer) Olivier Ruel.

Dougherty's deck was somewhat powerful in a vacuum despite its linear ("Swamps matter") allegiances with Mind Sludge and the follow-up Haunting Echoes that could tear an opponent's deck to Swiss cheese... But it has very troubling weaknesses in terms of overall deck construction.

For one thing, this is a curve that very few players can love.

Four Mind Sludges? Four maindecked Rancid Earths? Four Diabolic Tutors? Only one Skeletal Scrying?

Rob didn't arrive at these numbers by accident. He built his deck to punish creatures even more than most Mono-Black Control decks, with Shambling Swarm (and the cute combo of Innocent Blood + Shambling Swarm). With four copies of Rancid Earth, he was well-equipped to fight Squirrel Nest in some U/G variants. Teammate Paul Rietzl put Stalking Bloodsucker in Rob's deck to follow the "natural curve" of turn 4 Mutilate into turn 5 Cabal Coffers for Stalking Bloodsucker. Arguably less powerful than Laquatus's Champion, the Bloodsucker could go over the top and win very quickly after crippling the opponent.

Remember, this deck was Odyssey Block, so the number of potential opponents (especially at Pro Tour time in a pre-PTQ season) was largely limited to other black or U/G decks. Rob equipped himself for the Mono-Black mirror by playing more Mind Sludges (Mind Sludge mattered) and Rancid Earth to slow down the opponent's Mind Sludge, especially on the draw.



You hear all the time the old Finkel adage to focus on what matters, and that doesn't just apply to in-game. Rob did a great job of focusing on what mattered in deck construction. He knew what mattered in the MBC-on-MBC fight and biased his deck as best he could to win with low margins...

Which did not help him whatsoever in his Top 4 matchup against the similarly-armed Olivier Ruel. The limitations of Rob's deck simply caught up to him. All three games featured some collapse of MBC's fatal flaws.

Rob's deck, as well-built as the Odyssey Block MBC probably could have been, still featured 28 lands and no real way to regulate its land / spell draws. You don't have a lot of choices when your deck balloons at the four- and five-slots. You want to cast Mind Sludge? You had best have five-plus Swamps in play.

In game 1 against Ruel, the two eventual Hall of Famers got into a Mind Sludge fight, but Olivier had three Skeletal Scryings in his main versus Rob's one, and drew two of them. The second one (post-Dougherty Mind Sludge) was for eight, easily making it the biggest big spell of the duel.

In game 2, Rob actually had “the draw” — but Olivier snuck under Rob's turn 3 Rancid Earth (intending to ride Rancid Earth into Braids, Cabal Minion), breaking it up and eventually playing his own Braids. The clunkiness of Rob's curve got him there.

It was even worse in game 3, when Rob's third land was a Cabal Coffers (which does next to nothing with only two Swamps in play). Rob played out multiple Nantuko Shades to try to race, ate a two-for-one Mutilate, and — still stuck on three — Ruel's own Braids, Cabal Minion.

None of this is meant to minimize Rob's accomplishments or superb deck design skills, of course. Rather I'm trying to illustrate that even in Block, where Non-Blue Control is probably most appropriate and least likely to be trumped, it's *still* going to have at least one fatal flaw to be exploited.

Mono-Black Control

Kai Budde 24th Pro Tour Osaka 2002 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Undead Gladiator	1 Riptide Replicator
2 Visara the Dreadful	1 Mind Sludge
4 Duress	1 Haunting Echos
4 Innocent Blood	3 Corrupt
4 Smother	3 Skeletal Scrying
4 Mutilate	3 Cabal Coffers
4 Diabolic Tutor	23 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Nantuko Shade
3 Mesmeric Fiend
3 Cabal Therapy
2 Chainer's Edict
2 Engineered Plague
1 Mind Sludge
1 Corrupt

Fatal Flaws - Opponents with bigger Big Spells, various contextual exploitations, such as Smother being ineffective against Blistering Firecat and Visara being ineffective against Threaten

It's important to note that a slavish amount of work put into a Non-Blue Control deck can shore up potential fatal flaw exposure. For instance, a deck like this could easily be exploited by Compost, a popular color-hoser of the era. Simple theory couldn't solve a problem like this — but untold hours of trying various ideas lead to Laquatus's Champion as a sideboard option allowing Mono-Black Control a way to change what the game was about.



The Block MBC exposure to Rancid Earth and Braids, Cabal Minion never went away, and Braids decks eventually overtook MBC decks in the Odyssey Block PTQ season. Though Justin Gary would make Top 8 of the 2003 US National Championship with a similar MBC deck, the eventual deck of the hour was G/R Beatdown, which exposed many of even the Standard MBC's fatal flaws.

Whereas MBC had Innocent Blood, Chainer's Edict, and Mutilate, G/R Beatdown had removal resilience in Call of the Herd and Elephant Guide, and sometimes haste. You can't Smother an unmorphed Blistering Firecat! Stalling behind Visara the Dreadful is great... except when the opponent's plan is Threaten. Champion Joshua Wagener played *four* maindeck copies of Phantom Centaur! And Corrupt is powerful when you get it online, but can be too slow against a Wild Mongrel exploding out a third-turn Violent Eruption.

What are your good matchups again? *Always know your Fatal Flaw.*

G/W Control

Brian Kibler 6th US National Championship 2004 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Eternal Dragon
4 Oxidize
2 Gilded Light
4 Pulse of the Fields
4 Renewed Faith
4 Wing Shards
4 Wrath of God

4 Akroma's Vengeance
3 Decree of Justice
4 Temple of the False God
4 Elfhame Palace
4 Windswept Heath
12 Plains
3 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Purge
3 Tooth and Nail
2 Darksteel Colossus
2 Duplicant
2 Mindslaver
2 Reap and Sow

Fatal Flaw - Bigger Big Spells

Brian Kibler made Top 8 of the 2004 US National Championship with this Non-Blue Control deck. The clever sideboard shifted the deck to compete head-to-head with a sideboarded Tooth and Nail. Gilded Light was a necessity in the main, as the deck had essentially no outs against Mindslaver.

Remembered for being one of the all time best decks against Affinity and conventional Goblins decks, it was nevertheless quite exposed to various Big Spells. Mono-red or G/R Goblins? No problem. Goblins with Patriarch's Bidding? *No chance.*

W/R Slide

Osyp Lebedowicz 1st Pro Tour Venice 2003 (Onslaught Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

2 Gempalm Incinerator
2 Daru Sanctifier
4 Exalted Angel
2 Jareth, Leonine Titan
4 Lightning Rift
4 Astral Slide
3 Renewed Faith

4 Akroma's Blessing
4 Akroma's Vengeance
4 Starstorm
4 Forgotten Cave
4 Secluded Steppe
10 Plains
9 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Avarax
3 Demystify
3 Disciple of Grace
2 Akroma, Angel of Wrath
2 Gempalm Incinerator
1 Oblation

Fatal Flaw - Bigger Big Spells

The structure and curve of this deck are a bit deceptive as, because it had so many cheap cycling cards, Osyp rarely wasted any mana.



Though Osyp did the thing most Magic players most aspire to (winning his Pro Tour), even as a Block deck, this Astral Slide had some serious problems. It relied heavily on playing out lots of permanents, but was itself an Akroma's Vengeance deck (and remember, *other* people also played this card). While other Slide players were beaten up by Beast-Bidding and Zombies-based Patriarch's Bidding decks, Osyp was largely unprepared for those angles.

Worst yet, he had an atrocious matchup in the William “Baby Huey” Jensen Explosive Vegetation deck. A deck that could plop down Silvos, Rogue Elemental or Akroma, Angel of Wrath fairly quickly, that Big Spell deck was a tremendous favorite against straight R/W Slide.



In their epic Top 8 matchup, Jensen stalled for a moment with Akroma, Angel of Wrath in hand, and Osyp was able to get his down first. Though Huey eventually had the mana to play Akroma, the legend rules at the time didn't have the current “both legends die” rule; instead, you could only have one on the battlefield. So Huey was simply not allowed to play his.

At the final Grand Prix of 2003, Osyp one-upped himself, putting several of his teammates in the Top 8 (including Josh Ravitz at third and Eugene Harvey at second) and many more in the Top 16 and Top 32 with an updated R/W Slide deck; Osyp himself finished 29th.

Piloting Osyp's list, Eugene Harvey faced off against Hall of Famer Bob Maher with a no-Slide R/W Non-Blue Control deck in the finals. Once again, we see a core vulnerability of the Non-Blue Control strategy: with no counterspells to stop anything, the deck will often just lose to a bigger Big Spell.

In game 1, Maher missed his third land drop, but played a Lightning Rift. He eventually just cycled Harvey to death.

In game 2, Maher goaded Harvey into Sliding out Maher's Eternal Dragon... and then Bob just played Decree of Annihilation, blowing up both boards but leaving Bob with a 5/5 flyer.

No counterspells? Can't say "No?" Welcome to the world of Non-Blue Control decks.

Let's take a look at one last "Non-Blue" Control deck, piloted by former player of the year, Shouta Yasooka:

U/B Tezzeret

Shouta Yasooka 16th Pro Tour Dark Ascension 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

2 Spellskite
1 Phantasmal Image
4 Bloodline Keeper
1 Batterskull
1 Wurmcoil Engine
3 Liliana of the Veil
3 Tezzeret, Agent of Bolas
4 Tragic Slip
2 Despise
2 Grafdigger's Cage
1 Doom Blade

1 Go for the Throat
4 Ratchet Bomb
2 Sphere of the Suns
1 Tumble Magnet
2 Curse of Death's Hold
2 Black Sun's Zenith
4 Darkslick Shores
4 Drowned Catacomb
4 Inkmoth Nexus
9 Swamp
3 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Phyrexian Crusader
3 Distress
3 Flashfreeze
2 Phantasmal Image
2 Curse of Death's Hold
1 Doom Blade

Here, we see another example of a blue Non-Blue Control deck. What makes it a Non-Blue Control deck? The lack of permission, with just a few Flashfreezes as a concession to Primeval Titan decks. The deck may produce blue mana, but it is a Mono-Black control deck in its heart.

Liliana and Tezzeret provide the card advantage engine that these Non-Blue Control decks so desperately need, but even Bloodline Keeper can do the trick if allowed to live.

Fatal Flaw - *Ramp/combo decks, due to a lack of interaction off the battlefield*

VIABILITY RATING – 6

While Non-Blue Control decks (particularly Mono-Black Control) are extremely popular to build at the beginning of new formats, they're only viable about half the time. The most important piece to the puzzle is a powerful card advantage engine, such as Necropotence, Yawgmoth's Will, Phyrexian Arena, Skeletal Scrying, Lightning Rift, or Eternal Dragon.

DECK 8: AGGRO-CONTROL

Considered by many top players to be the Cadillac of Magic strategy, Aggro-Control is a curious member of the midrange family that rests among the most fluid of the macro archetypes. When on the offensive, Aggro-Control looks and plays more like Fish than it does its Midrange family members...

At its core, however, Aggro-Control is really the *inverse* of a Fish deck.

See, a Fish deck is all about attacking, then playing a “Time Walk” or two to neutralize the opponent’s turn (and that pseudo-Walk can arrive in the form of a counterspell, bounce, a removal spell, or some other method). An Aggro-Control deck uses its Time Walks to gain a tempo advantage, then closes the game out with an attack or two.

In smaller formats especially, you’ll see decks that really blur the lines between Aggro-Control and Tap-Out. In larger formats, you’ll see a showcase of decks with the speed of an aggro deck, yet retain all the flexibility and power of a control deck.

Aggro-Control decks generally:

- Play the control game against aggro
- Play the aggro game against control
- Revolve heavily around gaining tempo advantages

Aggro-Control decks often play the role of rulebreaker, combining the initiative of beatdown with the late-game lockdown power of control. As such, these decks often play long and elegant Stage Two duels, that often seem decided from turn 1 or 2. The advantage is there by virtue of card strength, which can be frustrating for some players, even if the Aggro-Control decks still demand adept execution. Many of the finest —and most hated — decks in the history of Standard fall under the Aggro-Control banner. The distance between a good Aggro-Control deck and a broken one is shorter than any other strategy.

**MANY OF THE FINEST
& MOST HATED
DECKS IN THE HISTORY
OF STANDARD
FALL UNDER THE
AGGRO-CONTROL
BANNER**

This section will include:

- AggroBlue
- Counter-Sliver
- Counter-Rebel
- Faeries
- Caw-Blade
- U/W Delver
- Spirits
- RUG Delver

One of the first dedicated Aggro-Control decks was played at a Neutral Ground local tournament by the godfather of Magic strategy, Robert Hahn, after Regionals 1997. The highly successful decks of that Regionals played a lot of 4/4 blue flyers, but it was unclear if the five-mana Air Elemental or the four-mana Waterspout Djinn was the way you wanted to go. Certainly Waterspout Djinn had a steep ongoing price, given the discount of “only” one mana. But Waterspout Djinn was *faster* than Air Elemental, helping race the then-premier two-drop and blue beater River Boas.

AggroBlue

Robert Hahn Regionals 1997 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Cloud Elementals	1 Browse
2 Suq'ata Firewalker	4 Force of Will
2 Waterspout Djinn	1 Fireball
2 Air Elemental	1 Earthquake
4 Unstable Mutation	2 Thawing Glaciers
2 Spirit Link	2 City of Brass
4 Incinerate	2 Undiscovered Paradise
4 Counterspell	2 Adarkar Wastes
3 Fellwar Stones	10 Island
2 Disenchant	2 Mountain
2 Impuse	1 Plains
1 Flooded Shoreline	

SIDEBBOARD

4 Pyroblast
 4 Hydroblast
 2 Disenchant
 2 Political Trickery
 2 Exile
 1 Spirit Link

Hahn — the mouthpiece of Brian Weissman, popularizer of card advantage, and eventual CEO of The Magic Dojo — assembled what modern readers might identify as a bit of a scattered deck; his stated goal being to give blue “something to do” while still “being mighty.”

Clearly, there are better examples of a focused deck than this, but we can see some of the gears turning that would eventually develop into Aggro-Control proper. Hahn was still married at the time to the traditional role of blue as a control color (note his red cards and their flexibility not only as finishers, but as battlefield control). Still, we can see his desire to get hustling quickly. Cloud Elemental is quite a bit faster than even Waterspout Djinn, and Unstable Mutation makes for some of the fastest blue imaginable.

Would these cards prove faster than *actual* fast decks (i.e. Deadguy Red)? Probably not, but that wasn’t the goal, and that isn’t the long-term goal of Aggro-Control as a macro archetype.

Aggro-Control decks can go from good to great very quickly, and that boost is usually a function of them getting access to overpowered cards (which they often make the best use of). Identifying what cards an Aggro-Control deck aspires to break can give us a good idea of its true strength and where it aspires to be in a format.

Overpowered Cards - *Counterspell, Force of Will, Thawing Glaciers*

Weakness - *Creatures with 4 or more toughness*

In a *Who’s the Beatdown?* situation, Aggro-Control generally finds itself the aggressor against control (and more on that later), but it has to play defense against actual beatdown decks (at least in the early game). In that sense, it can consistently appear to be the classic *Who’s the Beatdown?* loser, a poor pure control deck when forced into that role, if a flexible one that can repair itself via sideboarding.

That said, Aggro-Control is generally superb at hitting the cross-hairs of initiative and card power (and, often, initiative and card *advantage*). As an offensive deck, it’s usually slower than a format’s fastest aggressors — and as a control deck, it generally has fewer tools, if by design (hence the potential weakness to



actual creature decks). Good players love Aggro-Control because if you draw out all the possible matchup possibilities, Aggro-Control may be behind against beatdown, but it usually has the advantage against both combo and control.

If you can execute.

Math.

And beatdown?

In the right formats with the right tools, they can be dealt with as well, via a combination of removal, life gain, and good old fashioned transformation.

Generally, the aggro-control deck deploys quick threats early and supports them with a variety of control cards like permission, removal, or bounce. Against a control deck, these support cards are used to protect the threats that the Aggro-Control player plays (which, again, is very similar to the Fish battle plan). Against a combo deck, the control cards are used to keep the combo player out of Stage Three long enough for those quick threats to end a game. Against a beatdown player, the control cards are used to help create a position where the aggro-control player has a reasonable control of the board and can win with a superior board position.

“Real” beatdown decks often play threats that are much faster or more efficient than the aggro-control deck’s tempo/answer suite, which is the source of the potential matchup weakness. But if beatdown misses a beat, the card filtering, card drawing, tempo, and overall blue-ness of Aggro-Control can help it pounce on any available advantage.

Though they look very little like their midrange neighbors, modern Aggro-Control decks operating successfully do the best job of being what midrange decks strive to be: beatdown against control, control against beatdown, and switching between both roles against combo.

One of the reasons Aggro-Control is a disproportionate favorite of good players is that it rewards them disproportionately. Give a weaker player the same cards, decks, and overall strategies, and they’ll be less successful. Aggro-Control is slower than beatdown,

but fast enough for a great player to press an advantage. Their creatures are usually smaller than those of a Tap-Out or other midrange deck, but can be big enough, given perfect timing and successful attacks. While a cooperative format will sometimes give aggro-control decks powerful tools, they often have to do more with less card advantage than their *bluer* “actual” control bretheren.

As such, defeating Aggro-Control can just be a matter of being faster than they are, or just a little bigger, or drawing more cards.

Aggro-Control isn’t always good — but when it is, it goes from “good” to “great” in a very short span. It has the potential to be the control and the beatdown — so while it can be a short-term *Who’s the Beatdown?* loser against actual beatdown, it often represents the Holy Grail of matchups: It can perform as *both* beatdown (due to its inherent initiative) and control (due to its counterspell-driven inevitability), violating the opponent’s ability to take any role at all.

Counter-Sliver

Trey Van Cleave 3rd Gateway Masters Series 2000 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Crystalline Sliver	4 Force of Will
4 Hibernation Sliver	4 City of Brass
4 Muscle Sliver	4 Tundra
3 Winged Sliver	4 Underground Sea
2 Acidic Sliver	2 Scrubland
3 Annul	2 Gemstone Mine
2 Swords to Plowshares	1 Undiscovered Paradise
3 Demonic Consultation	4 Flood Plain
4 Daze	1 Tropical Island
4 Aura of Silence	1 Volcanic Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Erase
4 Pyroblast
3 Worship
2 Hydroblast
2 Swords to Plowshares

In the 1999-2000 Extended season, Slivers rose out of Extended to be the bigger and better Merfolk. Especially at the time, the two decks were thought of as being very similar, with Counter-Sliver packing the same Force of Will defense as Merfolk. However, because it was able to draw power from all five colors, it it packed substantially more power and higher-quality creatures.

The five-color mana base did much more than that, as well. Demonic Consultation, Swords to Plowshares, and Annul gave Counter-Sliver substantially more flexibility — and more long-term control capability — than mono-blue Merfolk.

Part Linear Aggro, part Fish, Counter-Sliver was also part Lock. The Sliver linear — harkening back to the days of Plague Rats — built greater and greater efficacy the more Slivers were on the battlefield. Muscle Sliver gave them punching power, Hibernation Sliver gave them resilience against control (and fast access to Force of Will fodder), and Winged Sliver gave them evasion to race other creature decks. Crystalline Sliver even gave the deck a kind of combo kill via Crystalline Sliver + Worship.



An oddball four-mana sideboard card in a sea of twelve one-drops, Worship challenged beatdown opponents. *Can you kill a Crystalline Sliver at all?* Because if not... you aren't winning this game.

Overpowered Cards - *Demonic Consultation, Force of Will*

Weakness - *Necropotence decks that could respond to all of Counter-Sliver's angles of attack, then refill their hand and call it a day*

Like almost all aggro-control decks we'll be discussing today, Counter-Sliver had a variety of long-game control elements, but could play respectable threats on the first two turns. In that sense, aggro-control decks can play like Brian Weissman's baby — but they get to start out with their Serra Angels in play. A Sliver or three can be pretty potent in the first couple of turns... but there are two-drop (and one-drop!) creatures that can put the control icon to shame, at a fraction of the mana cost.

Counter-Rebel

Kamiel Cornelissen 2nd Pro Tour Chicago 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Ramosian Sergeant	4 Absorb
2 Defiant Falcon	2 Dismantling Blow
2 Defiant Vanguard	2 Fact or Fiction
2 Lin Sivvi, Defiant Hero	2 Wrath of God
1 Rebel Informer	1 Rout
1 Ramosian Sky Marshal	1 Dominate
1 Jhovall Queen	4 Adarkar Wastes
4 Brainstorm	4 Coastal Tower
4 Counterspell	10 Island
1 Disenchant	8 Plains

SIDEBOARD

3 Prohibit
2 Fact or Fiction
2 Dominate
2 Disenchant
2 Circle of Protection: Green
2 Mageta the Lion
1 Wrath of God
1 Rout

In arguably the most decorated Top 8 in Pro Tour history (six of the Top 8 went on to become Pro Tour Hall of Famers, including Jon Finkel and Kai Budde), Kamiel Cornelissen burst onto the Pro Tour with the outstanding (and then-innovative) Counter-Rebels, a perfect example of Aggro-Control.

Rebels was a known quantity since Masques Block Constructed, achieving success in many forms. Kamiel used the tools of the Rebels deck — ostensibly creature deployment for the purposes of eventual victory via The Red Zone — as a *control* deck.

Overpowered Cards - *Ramosian Sergeant, Lin-Sivvi, Defiant Hero*

Weakness - *Extremely aggressive Rebel decks (which fight permission and sweepers well) and mana denial (Armageddon, Rising Waters)*

As we will later see with iconic two-drops like Bitterblossom and Stoneforge Mystic, Kamiel could drop Ramosian Sergeant on the first turn, and then go to town. Ramosian Sergeant could chain up through Defiant Falcon, Lin-Sivvi, and eventually get to Jhovall Queen. The Rebels chain was a combination of threats and Fact or Fiction... all of which allowed Kamiel to leave his mana open.

He could sit back every turn, and use his Rebel chain if he had the opportunity, his counterspells otherwise.

The initiative against “real” U/W Control decks should be obvious. If they move to Wrath of God your Rebels... stop them. Against many creature decks, Kamiel’s Counter-Rebels would be better set up for defense; he could chain into Defiant Vanguard (itself a searcher) to block Blastoderm... a freebie kill spell that would potentially forward his battlefield position.

Interestingly, we also see the potential holes of Aggro-Control. Kamiel finished second, losing to Kai Budde’s traditional Rebels deck in the finals. It was a mirror match where Kamiel had Counterspells and Kai’s game took place on the table. Just as a U/W Control player’s counterspells were bad against Kamiel’s Rebels... Kamiel’s counterspells were bad against Kai’s.

Up next, the ultimate tempo deck...

Faeries.

It could play two different ways. You could play Bitterblossom on turn 2, and just try to keep the opponent’s game plan from getting too out of hand. Bitterblossom was simply the most powerful available threat at the time. It also perfectly illustrates Aggro-Control against true control decks. Bitterblossom was a source of both threats and card advantage. Though it taxed the Faeries player’s life total, that resource was plentiful against a *real* control deck. Faeries could sit back, making threats turn after turn, attacking or playing Forcefield, and leaving back all its mana to answer the opponent — who probably had to play threats or more probably answers — on his own turn.



U/B Faeries

Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa 8th Pro Tour Hollywood 2008 (Standard)

MAINDECK

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 4 Spellstutter Sprite | 2 Pendelhaven |
| 4 Scion of Oona | 4 Mutavault |
| 3 Vendillion Clique | 2 Faerie Conclave |
| 4 Mistbind Clique | 4 Underground River |
| 4 Ancestral Vision | 4 Secluded Glen |
| 4 Bitterblossom | 3 River of Tears |
| 4 Terror | 2 Sunken Ruins |
| 4 Rune Snag | 4 Island |
| 4 Cryptic Command | |

SIDEBOARD

- 4 Thoughtseize
- 3 Bottle Gnomes
- 3 Razormane Masticore
- 3 Damnation
- 2 Murderous Redcap

Overpowered Cards - *Bitterblossom, Ancestral Vision, Cryptic Command, Mistbind Clique*

Weakness - *Cloudthresher, Makeshift Mannequin, and some aggro decks (like Demigod Red or some Elf aggro decks)*

Even without a turn 2 Bitterblossom, Faeries had tremendous time advantage capabilities due to a high concentration of flash creatures. All the creatures PV played had flash. He could start fights, gain information, and certainly answer threats — all on the opponent's turn. Main phase removal like Wrath of God was substantially blunted. Again, even without Bitterblossom, the Faeries deck could sit back and do “nothing,” then two-for-one the opponent's plans with a Spellstutter Sprite or Cryptic Command, or Time Walk via a well-placed Mistbind Clique. All the while, he'd have attackers ready, though he had passed his turn with nothing on the battlefield.

Operationally, Faeries planned to hang out and build a snowballing set of advantages based on its tempo cards (at least in Game 1), never truly taking full control of the game. Faeries could win via gradual advantages — or, if pressed, switch violently into an endgame race (even if that race was just a race against its own Bitterblossom).

Faeries could glue Mistbind Clique to Cryptic Command, or go positively White Weenie with Scion of Oona after Scion of Oona. As such, Faeries could win out of nowhere, sometimes using only a single attack!

Absurdly, it could play a largely passive game most of the time, almost “Draw-Go”-like. Because of this common line, at the time of its height in Standard, Gerry Thompson argued that the Fae were actually an operational control deck (while obviously looking like a classic Aggro-Control). Faeries could sit back and do nothing, like the best of the Draw-Go, one-upping any dreams of Steel Golem shenanigans with their hyper-efficient Vendilion Cliques. This attitude was highly defensible, given the ability of the deck to bring in lots of removal cards (including the iconic planeshifted Wrath of God transplant Damnation). It looked very much like the equal (and opposite) of a U/W control deck, indeed!



Among its many sideboard removal cards was Murderous Redcap. Castable as a black spell, this four-drop could also be cast with *red* mana... mana PV might get from an opposing Magus of the Moon (Redcap's job being to execute that 2/2). When we say that Aggro-Control is often a favorite of good players but can be alienating to the masses, well, Faeries is the clearest example of this. The cards Bitterblossom and Mistbind Clique represent the lowest failure of Wizards' development. Why is it relevant to print cards like Volcanic Fallout (allegedly Volcanic "blowout") if you're just going to save Mistbind Clique with the tribal stamp on Bitterblossom? Surely all those sweepers — Jund Charm and the uncounterable Fallout — were meant to kill lots of Faeries in response to Champion, stranding the 4/4 Time Walk...



But why oh why was Bitterblossom a Faerie?

Caw-Blade

Ben Stark 1st Pro Tour Paris 2011 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Stoneforge Mystic	1 Day of Judgment
4 Squadron Hawk	1 Sword of Feast and Famine
4 Jace, the Mind Sculptor	1 Sylvok Lifestaff
3 Gideon Jura	4 Tectonic Edge
4 Preordain	4 Celestial Colonnade
4 Spell Pierce	4 Glacial Fortress
1 Sylvok Lifestaff	4 Seachrome Coast
1 Sword of Feast and Famine	1 Misty Rainforest
3 Mana Leak	5 Island
1 Deprive	4 Plains
1 Stoic Rebuttal	

SIDEBOARD

4 Oust
3 Ratchet Bomb
2 Baneslayer Angel
2 Divine Offering
2 Flashfreeze
1 Negate
1 Sword of Body and Mind

Caw-Blade is perhaps the greatest Standard deck of all time, once again showing us an aggro-control deck well above the curve.

Its two-drops — Stoneforge Mystic and Squadron Hawk — were both powerful card advantage engines. Most good players at the time would mulligan hands without one or the other, knowing that the inherent card advantage of either two-drop would dig them out of a six-card start, or even a five-card one.

Preordain was one of the most powerful cards in Standard that could win mid-game, or rescue weak keeps. Kept a non-Stoneforge Mystic hand? Preordain might just find you a Squadron Hawk!



While they're both super-powerful aggro-control decks, Caw-Blade is kind of the opposite of Faeries. Faeries was a result of R&D pushing a particular linear, full of overpowered mistakes. Caw-Blade, on balance, is like a testament to freedom, defying conformity to R&D's plans.

Case in point: It didn't occur to R&D that you could play Stoneforge Mystic without very many creatures... or without very much equipment! The deck was mostly control cards, with the two-drops giving a Caw-Blade player the Aggro-Control edge. (Otherwise, he'd be reduced to playing largely a U/W Control game with Wrath of God, some permission, and planeswalkers.)

Sylvok Lifestaff was a great little silver bullet that gave Caw-Blade a relatively low-cost, effective solution to attackers. When the format became more about Caw-Blade mirrors, that Lifestaff eventually became a Mortarpod, which could shoot opposing Squadron Hawks out of the sky in response to being equipped by Sword of Feast and Famine.

Caw-Blade's natural advantage against more traditional control decks should be obvious: it's faster, it can play a card like Stoneforge Mystic to gain an advantage on the table, and then hang back on counterspells. The opponent will have to play catch-up by casting either removal or threats of his own, exposing himself to Stark's permission.

But against beatdown?

Caw-Blade could be good (especially with Sylvok Lifestaff), but it was far from perfect in its natural state. You'd see Caw-Blade players siding out Mana Leak for Oust, Ratchet Bomb, or Baneshlayer Angel (particularly on the draw) — they needed cards that could either control time, or take control of the battlefield proper. Caw-Blade was generally uninterested in trading cards with a beatdown opponent on a mana-for-mana basis, and would focus either on card advantage or handling multiple creatures simultaneously with sweep or superior battlefield positions like Baneshlayer Angel. Oust traded with “anything” at a mana advantage.

Overpowered Cards - *Jace the Mind Sculptor, Stoneforge Mystic, Preordain, Squadron Hawk, Sword of Feast and Famine*

Weakness - *Getting banned for being the most dominant deck of all time*

After the banning of **Jace the Mind Sculptor** and Stoneforge Mystic, the mantle of Aggro-Control All-Star fell to Delver of Secrets/Insectile Aberration. Delver has become a cross-format staple, dominating both Standard and Legacy in builds including straight U/W, Esper Spirits, U/R Counter-Burn, to tempo machine RUG Delver.

Whatever the specifics, Delver of Secrets has one massive advantage over similar decks: the speed and variance of Delver of Secrets. A Delver player can randomly be gifted with a 3/2 flyer on turn 1, and a *tremendous* level of initiative. The onus would be on the opponent to answer the creature... and again, the Delver player might already have the Mana Leak!

Once such initiative is established, Delver players — like Bitterblossom players and Stoneforge Mystic players before them — would essentially be Weissman control mages starting out with their Serra Angels in play. While they certainly *could* use their counterspells to stop threats, generally it's more useful to protect their leads as they race to the finish.



U/w Delver

Matthew Costa 7th Pro Tour Dark Ascension 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Delver of Secrets	1 Dismember
2 Invisible Stalker	4 Mana Leak
4 Snapcaster Mage	1 Runechanter's Pike
4 Geist of Saint Traft	3 Sword of War and Peace
4 Vapor Snag	3 Moorland Haunt
4 Ponder	4 Glacial Fortress
4 Gitaxian Probe	4 Seachrome Coast
2 Thought Scour	9 Island
2 Gut Shot	1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

3 Timely Reinforcements
 2 Phantasmal Image
 2 Dissipate
 2 Revoke Existence
 1 Consecrated Sphinx
 1 Day of Judgment
 1 Dismember
 1 Divine Offering
 1 Mutagenic Growth
 1 Oblivion Ring

The iconic Delver deck, Costa's list remained the model for months. Costa himself immediately followed up his Pro Tour Top 8 with a Grand Prix win.

Overpowered Cards - *Delver of Secrets, Snapcaster Mage, Geist of Saint Traft, Ponder*

Weakness - *Fast aggro, like Humans and Zombies*

Spirits

Jon Finkel 3rd Pro Tour Dark Ascension 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Delver of Secrets	1 Divine Offering
4 Snapcaster Mage	4 Lingering Souls
3 Phantasmal Image	2 Moorland Haunt
4 Drogskol Captain	2 Evolving Wild
2 Dungeon Geists	4 Darkslick Shores
4 Vapor Snag	4 Seachrome Coast
4 Ponder	3 Glacial Fortress
4 Gitaxian Probe	5 Island
1 Gut Shot	1 Plains
2 Mana Leak	1 Swamp
1 Revoke Existence	

SIDEBOARD

2 Surgical Extraction
 2 Dungeon Geists
 2 Gut Shot
 1 Celestial Purge
 1 Demystify
 1 Dismember
 1 Dissipate
 1 Divine Offering
 1 Mana Leak
 1 Negate
 1 Phantasmal Image
 1 Revoke Existence

Showcasing the ability to create a massive advantage on a dime, Finkel's Drogskol Captain deck could "Crusade" up Lingerin Souls tokens to switch gears — shifting from defensive into a flying aggro-swarm that put the opponent on a two-turn, hexproof clock with the snap of a finger. Cards like Dungeon Geists could leech the opponent's initiative while adding material to Finkel's offense. Phantasmal Image had many responsibilities, from taking out opposing Geists of Saint Traft to teaming up with the Captain.

Overpowered Cards - *Delver, Snapcaster Mage, Lingerin Souls, Ponder*

Weakness - *Sweepers, particularly green ramp decks full of red sweepers*

RUG

Gaudenis Vidugiris 1st Grand Prix Atlanta 2012 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

4 Delver of Secrets	3 Lightning Bolt
4 Nimble Mongoose	4 Daze
3 Tarmogoyf	2 Fire/Ice
1 Scavenging Ooze	4 Force of Will
4 Brainstorm	4 Wasteland
4 Ponder	4 Misty Rainforest
3 Thought Scour	4 Scalding Tarn
4 Spell Pierce	3 Tropical Island
2 Spell Snare	3 Volcanic Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Submerge
3 Surgical Extraction
2 Ancient Grudge
2 Cursed Totem
1 Gilded Drake
1 Pyroblast
1 Red Elemental Blast
1 Scavenging Ooze

A perennial favorite (and consistent finisher) in Legacy Opens and other top Legacy events, RUG Delver is both the quintessential tempo deck and the abusive offensive icon of the Aggro-Control set. Combining Brainstorm with the (former) Standard format's Ponders, RUG Delver has some of the most effective Delver of Secrets support cards. It can also push the initiative with the arguably more dangerous Nimble Mongoose and two-drop wunderkind Tarmogoyf, while falling back on numerous counterspells to protect itself, including taxing answers like Spell Pierce, free spells like Force of Will, or taxing free spells like Daze.



At least in part as a result of its wider format, RUG Delver does what you want Aggro-Control at its best to do: It's a control deck that starts out with the speed of a creature deck. But it's also a beatdown deck that can fall back on the format's fastest and most consistent control elements to not just *manage* the opponent's progression, but hold a lead it probably started out with.

Overpowered Cards - *Delver of Secrets, Tarmogoyf, Force of Will, Brainstorm, Wasteland*

Weakness - *Heavy creature decks, like Goblins or G/W Maverick*

VIABILITY RATING – 9

There is every indication that Aggro-Control is going to be viable most of the time. Why? Because the good blue cards are now set up to buy time, rather than completely lock people out of the game. When Wizards of the Coast makes mistakes, it favors Aggro-Control about 40% of the time (with combo at about 50%, and everything else 10%), so Aggro-Control is always a threat to take over a format.

There aren't that many merely good Aggro-Control decks. Once they get good? They're usually great.

DECK #9 TAP-OUT CONTROL

"Sometime later, Mike Flores changed the face of Magic forever. Week after week, he would present a new 'tap-out control' deck, usually headlined by Keiga, the Tide Star. Mike's philosophy was much different than my own. He actually wanted to kill his opponent. What blasphemy! He found that tapping out for a Keiga was more likely to win you the game on the spot than trying to grind out your opponents. The main reason that was true was that even if Keiga died, you got a ton of value by stealing their best creature. Current things like Oona don't do that for you. Archon of Justice saw a brief period of play, but was notoriously awful against removal like Sower of Temptation, Oblivion Ring, or Unmake.

"In fact, if it wasn't for Faeries, I think that an end-game control deck would be amazing right now. We're almost entirely back to basics. There's a White Weenie deck, a red deck, a few midrange green decks, and some permission decks. The problem is that Faeries doesn't fit the mold, and preys on slow control decks. I didn't quit playing 5-Color Control because 'I couldn't get it to work,' as Patrick would say... It was simply because Faeries is a monster, and it's too difficult to defeat regularly. I did like my chances against every other deck, just to be fair.

"Cruel Ultimatum doesn't solve the Faerie problem, by allowing you to play more anti-Fae cards or otherwise. Just try and build an anti-Fae 5-Color Control deck. I dare you. I imagine it would look more like a Flores deck than anything."

*-Gerry Thompson,
One Step Ahead - Anatomy of a Control Deck
December 10, 2008*

Tap-Out Control is one of four macro archetypes that make up the Control family, along with Draw-Go, Lock, and Combo-Control. In the broadest terms, "Control" family decks generally seek to survive Stage One, begin building advantages in Stage Two, and eventually reach a Stage Three endgame that will win a duel for them.

**"CONTROL" FAMILY
DECKS GENERALLY
SEEK TO SURVIVE
STAGE ONE, BUILD
ADVANTAGES
IN STAGE TWO, &
EVENTUALLY REACH
A STAGE THREE
ENDGAME THAT
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Generally speaking, “Control” decks tend to be reactive and employ more powerful cards than most other strategies. But more importantly, they can be differentiated and divided into two groups: “those with permission” and “those without permission.” It is only those with permission that we tend to consider *true* control decks, with the others more properly categorized as Midrange decks.

Again speaking generally, permission-based control decks rely on a good deal of card drawing to compliment either a mass of counterspells... or they have a token amount of permission, but a nice selection of defensive control cards appropriate to the format. The deck style at hand here, the “Tap-Out” deck, is a medium-to-high permission deck that really does sit squarely between its neighbors Aggro-Control and Draw-Go.

Aggro-Control starts off with the initiative (i.e., it quickly crosses out of Stage One with an awesome threat like Bitterblossom or Stoneforge Mystic) and then uses its permission to hold that lead throughout Stage Two; by contrast, Draw-Go allows the opponent to attempt to do whatever he or she likes, answering over and over with voluminous permission throughout Stage Two, generating advantages until it presents a Stage Three threat: typically more permission than the opponent can possibly present threats.

Tap-Out decks generally:

- Use permission to buy time, rather than secure control
- Brute force opponents, rather than rely overly on synergy or finesse
- Requires a quantity of big advantages, since some of the power of its cards will be wasted at times

The classic model for Tap-Out draws on the mana advantages of permission defense early — whether that’s by making greater use of short-term resources or flat-out answering cheap threats. But then it starkly taps out and switches into a Stage Three game, often without permission backup.

The purpose of permission in this Stage is that of aggro-control, with the objective to now limit the opponent's game at an extreme level — whether that's taxing the opponent for two or even three cards in every exchange, or ultimately denying the opponent the option to continue playing the game.

Tap-Out Control gambles on turn 6 just as Counter-Sliver might on turn 2, though what an opponent can do on turn 6 may be more substantial than what he or she can on turn 2, so the payoff must be quite a bit higher. A Stoneforge Mystic or Bitterblossom is indeed very powerful for a two-drop... but untapping with a Kamigawa Block Dragon is a true Stage shift.

While they are often mistaken for Draw-Go, Tap-Out Control decks — like Aggro-Control — may never actually have *true* control of a game. Just as tapping down all of an opponent's proposed attackers with a Cryptic Command while attacking with some Faeries may be just a *bit* better than what your opponent is attempting, Tap-Out Control decks ask if whatever they play on their turn is really deadlier than its bombs. After all, the Dragon is going to punish you even *after* you spend a card or two getting rid of it.

So even though Tap-Out Control decks can *look* quite a bit like Draw-Go decks (especially when you start chunking out their distributions of counterspells, support cards, threats and mana) these decks are not the ones burying you under a progressive oppression of two-for-ones on your own turn and scaling up resources while you wither down... until finally chipping you to nil with a dozen attacks from a 2/1 *land*.

Tap-Out was first brought to tournament Magic success by the Mad Genius of Magic, Erik Lauer, with his 1997 terror Big Blue; reinvigorated via a puzzling (and perfect) transformation by Zvi Mowshowitz and Scott Johns in the early 2000s; and finally developed and popularized by Michael Flores and Osyp Lebedowicz, as well as their various crews in 2006. Eventually the principles of Tap-Out were adopted and evolved by Manuel Bucher, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, Gerry Thompson, Mark Herberholz, and myself — well, once there were more things worth tapping out for.



Big Blue

Erik Lauer New York Magic 1K 1997 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Wall of Air	4 Ancestral Memories
4 Ghost Ship	3 Sky Diamond
4 Mahamoti Djinn	3 Fellwar Stone
4 Counterspell	4 Mishra's Factory
4 Control Magic	4 Thawing Glaciers
2 Browse	16 Island
4 Force of Will	

SIDEBOARD

3 Steal Artifact
2 Disrupting Scepter
2 Boomerang
2 Circle of Protection: Red
2 Brass Man
1 Hurkyl's Recall
1 Plains
2 Political Trickery

Though he's largely remembered today as the architect of advanced Necropotence innovations, Erik Lauer *also* became a terror of Magic's early \$1,000 tournaments on the back of his mono-blue deck. Lauer was notably the first player to take control in this direction (popular opinion at the time was that you "needed" white for Swords to Plowshares, Wrath of God, and the Restricted List cards like Balance and Land Tax). Lauer was successful in the face of all popular expectation... inevitably leading to imitators.

Most of those went with a Nevinyrral's Disk route (especially once they got a look at Erik's Ghost Ships), but Lauer himself preferred the "six Diamond" build; his theory was that superior mana acceleration — especially once fed into superior card drawing — led to more consistent advantages, like a third-turn Control Magic.

Big Cards - *Mahamoti Djinn, Ancestral Memories, Control Magic*

Weakness - *Noncreature permanents could be a real problem when they snuck past the permission*

Notable in this deck:

- Wall of Air - Probably the first serious use of a Wall in tournament Magic. It was perfectly sized at 1/5 to deter Necropotence's trademark 2/1 Order of the Ebon Hands.
- "Only" two copies of Browse - Lauer recognized the diminishing returns on multiple copies of Browse, and preferred to put his faith in the immediate Ancestral Memories.

- Ancestral Memories - Lauer was happy to tap for this (ideally around turn 4, given his mana situation) to dig into a Force of Will. His Plan A was to tap out for Mahamoti Djinn the next turn and defend it. Eventually, he could bury the opponent with selection + cards in hand.
- The mana - Fellwar Stone or a sideboarded Plains (accessible via Thawing Glaciers) could assist Erik in powering up a Kjeldoran Outpost stolen by Political Trickery.

Interestingly, the one card missing from this blue + Thawing Glaciers deck was Brainstorm... and it's *particularly* odd, given that Lauer was one of the innovators of Brainstorm + Thawing Glaciers in Standard. It's a reminder that no matter how obvious Brainstorm might seem to us today, it was overlooked for many years.

U/W Millstone

Zvi Mowshowitz 11th US National Championship 2001 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Opt	2 Story Circle
4 Accumulated Knowledge	4 Wrath of God
4 Counterspell	4 Fact or Fiction
3 Millstone	4 Adarkar Wastes
3 Tsabo's Web	4 Coastal Tower
2 Last Breath	8 Island
4 Absorb	7 Plains
3 Dismantling Blow	

SIDEBOARD

4 Mahamoti Djinn
3 Mageta the Lion
2 Rout
2 Gainsay
2 Juntu Stakes
1 Last Breath
1 Disenchant

Mowshowitz found himself in a six-way tie for Top 8 with fellow Pro Tour champions Jon Finkel, Dave Price, and William "Baby Huey" Jensen; Zvi finished 11th.

While Mowshowitz's maindeck was more of a Lock deck, relying on Millstone to win and Story Circle for defense, his Next Level sideboard plan against decks that could potentially bring in some kind of Disenchant effects was to — like Lauer before him — tap out for Mahamoti Djinn!



Mahamoti Djinn at 5/6 is not just a great racer (requiring just four turns to kill) but also a perfect solution to Fires' signature Blastoderm. Blastoderm is a 5/5 creature... with shroud. Mahamoti Djinn at 5/6 can block and kill a Blastoderm, or hold one off while it fades away. Given that a sideboarded Fires deck might have no burn cards — and that Blastoderm's own shroud would prevent its controller from being able to pump it with Fires of Yavimaya — Mahamoti Djinn was the perfect trump.

Big Cards - *Mahamoti Djinn, Mageta the Lion*

Weakness - *Vulnerable to creature kill, so not maindeckable, nor as good game 3 as game 2*

Jushi Blue

Mike Flores 2nd New York State Championship 2005 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Jushi Apprentice	1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
3 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	1 Miren, the Moaning Well
3 Keiga, the Tide Star	1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
4 Remand	1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
4 Boomerang	1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
4 Mana Leak	2 Dimir Aqueduct
4 Hinder	4 Quicksand
4 Threads of Disloyalty	4 Watery Grave
2 Rewind	10 Island
3 Disrupting Shoal	

SIDEBOARD

4 Drift of Phantasms
4 Execute
3 Cranial Extraction
2 Rewind
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Dimir Aqueduct

Flores's succession of Tap-Out decks started at the 2005 New York State Championship. A crew of New Yorkers, including Flores, piloted the above Tap-Out deck... and *all* of them made the Top 8. Between them, they lost only one non-mirror match all day.

Of particular note is the Dimir Aqueduct in the sideboard. The strategy of playing a land in your sideboard is generally underutilized in Magic. Extra land can be useful both against aggro decks (where you can't afford to miss a land drop) and fellow control decks (so you can force them to make the first play, thereby playing into one of your counterspells).



Big Cards - Meloku and Keiga

Weakness - *Someone going even bigger, going more draw-go, or having even bigger threats to play when Jushi Blue taps out, such as Debtor's Knell*

While there are some similarities to our next deck, Draw-Go, there is an important underlying philosophical difference. Tap-Out's early-game Mana Leaks, earlier-game Disrupting Shoals, and "get out of jail free" Boomerangs were all there *not* to gain control, but simply to gain time — time needed to draw lands that will eventually tap for one of those Stage Three legends. Remand was of particular utility, as it was both a cheap counterspell *and* a cheap cantrip (which could help draw more lands and dig to a Kamigawa Legend). Remand has been of varying popularity over the years — mainly because it only gains tempo when it's countering a spell of greater cost, or when it locks up excess mana — say it's countering a one-drop when the opponent only has one mana of that color.

This Tap-Out strategy was ultimately successful because it was so "safe." Most players just didn't know it yet. They were busy being excited about new cards like Lightning Helix or Umezawa's Jitte. But especially with Boomerang there to help undo four mana of Jitte + equip, Jushi Blue could manage the early turns. And then?

Osyp Lebedowicz said it best: What are the chances whatever the opponent is doing is better than Keiga or Meloku?

Even if the opponent was able to take down Keiga, the Tide Star, doing so would be quite costly (two to three cards), *and then* Keiga would steal the best creature on the battlefield.

Subtly, Jushi Blue would often *not* play Jushi Apprentice on turn 2 against aggro (where it would prove a rod for Lightning Helix), instead saving that two-drop for a Disrupting Shoal pitch on a tap-out turn (a very Lauer play, to be sure). Jushi Apprentice spent a lot of time in the sideboard against aggro, being swapped out for Execute or Drift of Phantasms (which was less a blocker than a Demonic Tutor for Execute or Threads of Disloyalty).



URzaTron

Osyp Lebedowicz 5th Pro Tour Honolulu 2006 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	1 Blaze
4 Keiga, the Tide Star	1 Invoke the Firemind
4 Mana Leak	4 Izzet Signet
4 Remand	4 Urza's Mine
2 Pyroclasm	4 Urza's Power Plant
2 Telling Time	4 Urza's Tower
4 Electrolyze	2 Tendo Ice Bridge
4 Compulsive Research	1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Tidings	4 Shivan Reef
2 Confiscate	4 Steam Vents

SIDEBOARD

4 Annex
4 Giant Solifuge
2 Pyroclasm
2 Repeal
2 Smash
1 Ryusei, the Falling Star

While some UrzaTron decks are built as Lock or Big Spell decks, Osyp's build is a continuation of the "tap out for Keiga and Meloku because they're better than everything else in the format" philosophy.

Tapping out for Keiga was successful because it was, more or less, the biggest trump/Stage Three in Standard. If opponents started going bigger, this strategy could be in for trouble. Put another way, the viability of this strategy is entirely predicated on the functional "truth" that what you are tapping out for really *is* better than what anyone else can do. While sixes (and Keiga in particular) are undoubtedly powerful, sixes aren't sevens — and tapping out for a Kamigawa Block Legend while allowing an opponent to counter-tap for Debtors' Knell might be the Tap-Out mage's death knell.

Big Cards - *Meloku, Keiga, Tidings, Confiscate, Invoke the Firemind*

Weakness - *Land destruction, permanents stronger than Meloku or Keiga*

When building a Control deck, ask yourself what you're trying to accomplish. What's the reason your deck exists? You can't just play cards because you like them — at least not in competitive Magic. What is "your deck" and how is it differentiated from the mainline similar strategies of the day? Proactive strategies have fundamental advantages over reactive ones, as reactive strategies



are only effective when they can correctly predict what the opponent's trying to do. As a result, the reactive strategy must be held to an inherently higher standard.

Years ago, tapping out was thought to only be a viable strategy when you had Force of Will in hand. Today? It's standard operating procedure.

This viability can apply even in formats where good counterspells are thin on the ground. Shortly before the resurgence of a Standard Mana Leak, Brad Nelson was able to take down a Washington, D.C. Grand Prix with U/W Tap-Out.

Why bother counterspelling a Vengevine (that will humiliate you in the long run) when you can just tap out for Gideon Jura and make him attack into your Baneslayer Angel (which you previously tapped out for)? Besides, one of those things you can tap out for on turn 4 is *better than all*.

U/W Control

Brad Nelson 1st Grand Prix Washington D.C. 2010 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Wall of Omens
4 Baneslayer Angel
3 Jace, the Mind Sculptor
2 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
2 Gideon Jura
4 Path to Exile
4 Spreading Seas
3 Oblivion Ring
3 Day of Judgment
2 Mind Spring

1 Martial Coup
2 Everflowing Chalice
2 Tectonic Edge
4 Celestial Colonnade
4 Glacial Fortress
2 Arid Mesa
2 Sejiri Refuge
7 Island
5 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Negate
3 Kor Firewalker
2 Celestial Purge
1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
1 Jace Beleren
1 Kor Sanctifiers
1 Martial Coup
1 Oblivion Ring
1 Sphinx of Lost Truths

Big Cards - *Jace, Elspeth, Gideon, Baneslayer, Mindspring, Martial Coup*

Weakness - *Vengevine, Blightning*

THE PROPHECY OF GERRY THOMPSON

Remember that quote from Gerry Thompson about the viability of Cruel Control, especially as it related to Faeries? Just three months later, Gabriel Nassif got his hands on a Cruel Control deck built by Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, Manuel Bucher, and yours truly.

5-Color Control

Gabriel Nassif 1st Pro Tour Kyoto 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Plumeveil	2 Cruel Ultimatum
3 Wall of Reverence	4 Reflecting Pool
4 Mulldrifter	2 Exotic Orchard
3 Broodmate Dragon	4 Vivid Creek
1 Pithing Needle	3 Vivid Marsh
4 Broken Ambitions	2 Vivid Marsh
1 Terror	2 Vivid Meadow
1 Celestial Purge	4 Sunken Ruins
4 Esper Charm	2 Cascade Bluffs
4 Volcanic Fallout	1 Mystic Gate
4 Cryptic Command	3 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Scepter of Fugue
2 Wrath of God
2 Infest
2 Wydwen, the Biting Gale
2 Negate
1 Remove Soul
1 Celestial Purge
1 Wispmare

This Cruel Control deck was specifically built to annoy one-toughness Bitterblossom tokens with Plumeveil and especially Wall of Reverence as an echo of Lauer's Wall of Air, with Volcanic Fallout (or "Volcanic Blowout," as Mark Herberholz would say). Almost every single negotiable card in this deck was built to fight Faeries. Terror was good against Mistbind Clique; Celestial Purge for Bitterblossom. Broken Ambitions against Cryptic Command and Mistbind Clique... with everything else short of six or seven mana capable of helping the deck to catch up. Even Pithing Needle could shut off the painful side of Faerie Conclave or Mutavault.

An echo of previous decklists, Nassif's deck used its medium-to-low permission to buy time against generic opponents, eventually overwhelming opponents with big tap-outs Broodmate Dragon and Cruel Ultimatum (ideally, and especially in Nassif's case, off the top).

Demigod of Revenge? Doran, the Siege Tower?



The same Remove Soul and Celestial Purge positioned to punish Mistbind Clique and Bitterblossom could potentially answer any of the supposedly elite threats in the format... until Broodmate Dragon and Cruel Ultimatum taught them the meaning of *true* power.

Big Cards - *Cruel Ultimatum, Broodmate Dragon*

Weakness - *Reveillark, planeswalkers*

Building a mana base supporting a seven-drop with so many Vivid lands was a unique challenge for this deck and this format, given that the deck needed UUU, BBB, WW, RR, and G (plus whatever Plumeveil is supposed to cost). It was not, therefore, a question of how many lands the deck played, or how many colors a particular land could produce in the abstract, but how many lands *hit the battlefield untapped*. The minimum for such a deck is fourteen; Nassif played sixteen. Exotic Orchard could key off of the opponent's lands (especially opposing Vivids), and Reflecting Pool could tap for anything even if your own solo Vivid was down to zero counters.



Of all the decks in the history of Magic, Tap-Out Control rewards planning and preparation most. It's a deck that's designed to flip a game into Stage Three on a dime, and then compete there.

Cruel Ultimatum did change everything, but it wasn't really about Cruel Ultimatum. It was merely the first really big spell that could create brute force wins for controlling strategies of the new era — making up for the lack of cheap, robust control cards and lock

mechanisms that allowed true control decks to exist. The rise of Aggro-Control also cemented the changing of the guard regarding schools of control decks. Cruel Ultimatum marked the beginning of a new age — one in which Tap-Out transitioned from a fringe archetype to a regular metagame fixture, while true control went the opposite route.

"So was I wrong about Cruel Ultimatum? I suppose..."

*-Gerry Thompson
August 18, 2009*

VIABILITY RATING - 9

Pick the most powerful things you can do in the format — things that are more powerful than what other players are doing. Then pick the tools that will allow you to survive in order to do those things. Then tap all your mana...

And let the chips fall where they may.

DECK #10: DRAW-GO

Draw-Go is the deck that *really* broke all the rules... and then the rules changed.

A pure control deck rising out of one of the most purely-aggressive eras in Standard history, Draw-Go is a testament to the twofold devotion to basic Islands and innovative genius of the early Team CMU.

Erik Lauer started tapping out for Mahamoti Djinn in 1997, but teammate Andrew Cuneo taught the world to, um, *not* tap out for *anything* a year later in 1998. Fifteen years later, Andrew Cuneo is still blazing the do-nothing trail.

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, Draw-Go is one of four macro archetypes that make up the Control family, along with Tap-Out Control, Lock, and Combo-Control.

As with Control family decks in general, Draw-Go simply seeks to survive during Stage One, build advantages (generally via instant-speed card advantage) in Stage Two, and secure complete control when it hits its Stage Three. For this archetype, “complete control” can manifest in a number of ways, including a Capsize semi-lock on all the opponent's permanents (sort of rubbing Draw-Go up against Lock, at least in Stage Three) to an overwhelming advantage in cards in hand, ideally where Draw-Go has more counterspells in hand than the opponent has cards.

The base thesis of Draw-Go is to do *nothing*. Play a land and pass the turn; that’s why it’s called “Draw-Go.” You draw a card, then say “Go,” and — if everything’s going the way it is supposed to go — never do anything else.

Draw-Go decks generally:

- Plan on countering much to nearly everything the opponent does, usually playing fourteen or more counterspells
- Rely largely on one-for-one trades, meaning card advantage is needed
- Need some kind of a sweeper to clean up everything that snuck under the permission

**PLAY A LAND AND
PASS THE TURN;
THAT’S WHY IT’S
CALLED “DRAW-GO”**

Draw-Go decks all rely heavily on some manner of card advantage. As their MOs are typically one-for-one counterspells, Draw-Go decks are at a natural disadvantage against beatdown decks, simply because their opponents play fewer lands; if both decks draw one card per turn, the beatdown will simply draw more threats than Draw-Go will answers. A defining necessity of each Draw-Go implementation is its route to card advantage.

The best control decks are built on a curve, just like beatdown decks. When building a Draw-Go deck, it's imperative that you build on a curve in order to keep pace with faster opponents in Stage One and Stage Two.

Finally, Draw-Go decks generally tend to play some sort of sweeper (Nevinyrral's Disk, Shard Phoenix, Powder Keg) to “catch up” ... The combination of playing reactive counterspells (some of which are off-curve or inappropriate) plus a reliance on one-for-one answers under pressure almost necessarily implies that Draw-Go will fall behind on the battlefield at some point. The ability to zero the game back to even on the battlefield while drawing extra cards is one of the hallmarks of an eventual Draw-Go win, even if that win comes some fifteen turns later.

When Draw-Go fights another control deck, it tries very hard to *always* hit a land drop and pass. A good Draw-Go player will often sacrifice card advantage potential for land drops, and assumes that the first player to tap mana on his own turn will be the eventual loser. This is dramatically different from Tap-Out.

From the Draw-Go perspective, they are happy to see Tap-Out tap out.

“Mana Leak that, bro.”

This section will include:

- Draw-Go
- CMU Blue
- Counter-Phoenix
- U/b Tog
- Dralnu du Louvre
- U/w Faeries
- Esper



Up first, the original. Andrew Cuneo's deck at this point was somewhat raw, but many of the important pieces were there. He was willing to play fourteen counterspells, even if that meant lowering himself to using Power Sink.

He did not yet have the “first guy who taps mana on his own turn loses” attitude, hence packing only 22 lands (though Cuneo played Mind Stone to accelerate into a turn 3 Nevinyrral's Disk if need be).

Draw-Go

Andrew Cuneo Regionals 1998 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Steel Golem	4 Dismiss
2 Dancing Scimitar	4 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Whispers of the Muse	2 Argivan Restoration
4 Counterspell	3 Mind Stone
2 Power Sink	1 Winding Canyons
4 Dissipate	4 Quicksand
3 Capsize	3 Syvelunite Temple
2 Disrupting Scepter	14 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Hydroblast
3 Dream Tides
2 Jester's Cap
2 Knight of the Mists
1 Amber Prison
1 Essence Bottle
1 Rainbow Efreet
1 Steal Artifact

Most of the “odd” cards are synergistic with Draw-Go's artifact limitations. For example, you can activate Winding Canyons, play a Steel Golem, retain priority, and play a *second* Steel Golem before the first resolves. By the time the second Steel Golem hits the battlefield, the first Steel Golem will have already been put on the stack, and hence provide zero conflict with the Golem's “You can't play creature spells” restriction.

Argivan Restoration was another way to get around Steel Golem. In addition to being Nevinyrral's Disk numbers five and six (presumably after a successful activation), Argivan Restoration could allow you to “play a Steel Golem” (bringing it back from the graveyard) with one already in play.

Finally, Andrew could respond to the activation on Nevinyrral's Disk by Capsizing it. That's right, Nevinyrral's Disk isn't a sacrifice effect... It just destroys all the artifacts in play, including itself. If it's gone by the time its effect resolves, well, no problem. For you.



Andrew's original conception of Draw-Go could achieve inevitability with either of its two main buyback spells. Whispers of the Muse could let Andrew draw and draw and draw without committing mana on his own turn — which could allow him to leave open mana for defense, but then get two-for-ones on his opponent's end step when the opportunity presented itself.

He could also go into a Capsize lock, especially after getting to the 12-15 mana position. With double-buyback, Andrew could of course return twice as many lands to the opponent's hand as the opponent could play. Depending on the kind of opponent Andrew was facing, he might never commit a Steel Golem before locking up all their lands.

All this said, while Draw-Go was an important — and macro archetype-naming — first step, Cuneo's initial implementation was undeveloped compared to later models (by the time we see CMU Blue one deck from now, you will be able to see how far Andrew's teammates Erik Lauer and Hall of Famer Randy Buehler took the Draw-Go principles). He only played 22 lands, and he had quite a ton of finishers, and even ways to free those finishers up a bit in the face of competition like Uktabi Orangutan.

While every Draw-Go deck has the same basic weakness (fast decks with lots of cheap threats), they have a number of other elements in common:

Counters - 14

Sweeper - *Nevinyrral's Disk* (plus *Argivian Restoration*)

Card Advantage - *Whispers of the Muse*, *Capsize*, *Disrupting Scepter*

The release of Exodus, and with it the permission spell *Forbid*, dramatically changed the fortunes of the Draw-Go family of decks for the entirety of their collective viabilities — particularly in Standard. *Forbid* gave permission decks tremendous value on their card drawing. Gone were the days when Draw-Go would have to desperately hope to topdeck a counterspell; now any excess land was at least half of one.



CMU Blue / “Cuneo Blue”

Randy Buehler World Championships 1998 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Rainbow Efreet	3 Forbid
4 Force Spike	2 Dissipate
4 Whispers of the Muse	4 Dismiss
4 Impulse	4 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Counterspell	4 Quicksand
3 Mana Leak	4 Stalking Stones
1 Memory Lapse	18 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Wasteland
4 Hydroblast
4 Sea Sprite
2 Capsize
1 Grindstone

CMU Blue is the deck that modern readers probably most closely identify with a pure Draw-Go exemplar. Erik Lauer and Randy Buehler positioned this as a metagame deck, a kind of “Blue Sligh” with Force Spike.

Team CMU's core observation was that since most opponents were now tapping out frequently to maximize their mana efficiency, Force Spike was an early-game powerhouse. If opponents tried to play around it, they'd often be slow enough that the CMU Blue deck could beat them with Whispers of the Muse instead. (Besides, a late-game Force Spike was fine Forbid fodder.)

Counters - 21

Sweeper - *Nevinyrral's Disk*

Card Advantage - *Whispers of the Muse*

For such an influential deck, there really isn't a lot of strategy to it. The most futuristic part is that from Force Spike up, these counterspells have actually been selected in a mana curve — which was a revolutionary idea from a control deck's perspective.

Steel Golem notably disappears from this build. While tapping out for a 3/4 on turn 3 was great against Red Aggro, it was terrible against most everything else. They decided to go crazy on the Sea Sprites and Hydroblasts in the sideboard instead.

CMU Blue is the purest sort of Draw-Go deck. You can't actually do anything proactive before around turn 6 (where you might

“risk” a Rainbow Efreet with UU up). Aside from the game's iconic catch-up combo breaker, Draw-Go is all lands and permission (21 counterspells and 26 maindeck lands, with four more in the side).

You want to know why you so rarely see a good two-mana counterspell these days? *This deck.*

Cuneo Blue changed deckbuilding, but it also changed the way counterspells were made. Draw-Go is the epitome of what can go wrong when blue gets too many good, cheap counterspells. All it does is draw and say go... but you don't get to do anything fun, either.

Dissipate, Negate, Mana Leak, and Essence Scatter are all fine cards, but they just don't make 'em like they used to. This macro-archetype broke a fundamental element of the game... and this is why we can't have nice things.

Typical hallmarks of a Draw-Go deck include:

- A high land count
- A powerful — often relentless and reusable — source of card advantage to make up for that high land count against more threat-intensive competition
- Lots and lots of one-for-one answers (most flexibly counterspells)

What they don't need to be is mono-blue. Randy had good success during the Tempest Block Constructed season with a U/R variation, substituting Shard Phoenix for Whispers of the Muse (though Whispers remained available):

Forbidden Phoenix

Randy Buehler 3rd Grand Prix Lisbon 1998 (Tempest Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

1 Mogg Fanatic
4 Shard Phoenix
4 Shock
4 Counterspell
4 Mana Leak
1 Scroll Rack
4 Forbid

4 Intuition
3 Capsize
2 Dismiss
1 Caldera Lake
4 Reflecting Pool
14 Island
10 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Mogg Fanatic
3 Portcullis
3 Shattering Pulse
3 Thalagos Drifters
2 Stalking Stones
1 Dismiss

Randy again played a staggering number of lands in this Draw-Go build (29 main, two more in the sideboard). Interesting omissions: Wasteland was legal, but he didn't run it; Whispers of the Muse was legal, but he went solely with the Intuition + Shard Phoenix engine. Amusingly, Team CMU had begun with Whispers of the Muse in the deck, but found all they ever wanted to do was cycle them to try to draw land. So, they did the logical thing and cut them all for land, going all the way up to the unheard-of 29 lands main, with more in the board.

In this deck, you could Intuition for three (or so) copies of Shard Phoenix; over time you could re-buy your Shard Phoenixes, or put them back on top of your deck with Scroll Rack (and Intuition for three again). Every time you re-bought your Shard Phoenix on upkeep, that was an extra card (from the same card), making for one of the most relentless (if not quick) card draw engines of all time.

Shard Phoenix did at least triple duty in this deck. It was a card you could discard to Forbid. Forbid + Shard Phoenix, with Forbid re-buying itself automatically and Shard Phoenix, *again*, made for a limitless source of card drawing via upkeep rebuys. That gave you therefore essentially limitless Forbid fuel, given sufficient time. You could also kill small creatures with it (it was a kind of flying Pyroclasm, the stand-in for Nevinyrral's Disk in Block). It was also your finisher.

This U/R Draw-Go again played on the fourteen-counterspells model; it had a low curve with four Mana Leaks, but was so locked into the Forbid combo that Randy didn't even play four copies of Dismiss! I mean, why pay four for your two-for-one when you can pay three at a clip of infinite card drawing?

Counters - 14

Sweeper - *Shard Phoenix*

Card Advantage - *Whispers of the Muse, Capsize, Shard Phoenix/Intuition/Forbid*

At this point, it may be productive to talk less about the insurmountable-ness of cheap counterspells + efficient card advantage, and more to touch on the potential weaknesses of Draw-Go, a.k.a. "How to play against counterspells."



One strategy is to try to sculpt the game in such a way so as to bottleneck the opponent on cards, or mana, or life... *something*. For instance, if they have tons of counterspells in their deck, but can only cast one this turn, you may want to lead off with a weaker spell, which they presumably won't counter so as to protect themselves from the next one. At this point, you could just not play a second spell this turn, and run it again next turn.

In the first Masters Series event, Pro Tour winner Trevor Blackwell was playing a Trinity Green deck against the greatest player of all time, Jon Finkel. He used a variation on this strategy to escape The Machine's Ophidian + Forbid soft-lock. Trevor patiently resolved Rofellos, Llanowar Emissary — which at 2/1, Finkel did not consider powerful enough to counter. He sent in his 1/3 card-drawing Snake and continued to find fodder for Forbid.

But while Trevor certainly did not have a lock on the game, he now had something to push up against; Jon was drawing two cards per turn, but Forbid begs a short-term one-card loss in card economy. That's not an even trade. With Rofellos down, and a bit of patience, Trevor had enough mana to test Jon with multiple “must-counter” threats per turn over multiple turns... and the mighty Jon Finkel eventually ran out of steam.

Any time a Draw-Go player does his thing — passes the turn with mana up — they have *already* wasted mana. Every time you wait a turn, they will have to waste mana again. If you have an advantage on the board, this translates into a continuing advantage.

This doesn't mean you should just sit around and wait for them to draw what they need — or worse yet, give them the clear to bury you if they have some kind of Whispers of the Muse. You have to examine the tools available and apply the right one to the situation you are facing. Sometimes that means playing actively, as they aren't always going to have it.

It may be important to play actively. Beating permission is about sneaking things through (or under) their counterspells, or making them believe you have so many threats that they need to save permission to counter something else. Cheap cards that have already resolved are generally the weak point for decks like this.



In the Top 8 of Grand Prix Milwaukee 2002, I was paired against the ever-disciplined Neil Reeves. I tanked on whether to mulligan, and despite some observers thinking it was an auto-Paris, I kept. The hand was nothing but lands, Birds of Paradise, and Llanowar Elves — no legitimate threats. On turn 3, with plenty of mana, I tanked again, but just passed the turn. Eventually, I drew a Compulsion, leading me to tank once more. This time I led with the Compulsion, with just one card in hand, but four mana open.

Reeves — playing a Draw-Go-esque Psychatog deck — *let it hit*. Reeves had just one counterspell he could play, and was concerned this was bait to try to sneak in an Opposition. Instead, I just sat back and used the mana flood to start cycling through my deck with Compulsion. Basking Rootwallas and Arrogant Wurm made Compulsion into a legitimate card advantage engine.

Try to get a read on your opponent and figure out what they are telling you about their hand. Look at the way they hold their hand, the way they tap their lands, the things they're saying, and the way they've played their cards. Information is extremely powerful. You can even get that from your opponent.



MORE RECENT (& MORE MULTICOLOR) DRAW-GO DECKS

U/b Tog

Ryan Fuller 1st San Diego Masters Series 2002 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Psychatog	3 Undermine
2 Force Spike	3 Repulse
4 Peek	4 Fact or Fiction
4 Predict	4 Cephalid Coliseum
4 Æther Burst	4 Salt Marsh
4 Counterspell	4 Underground River
4 Memory Lapse	9 Island
1 Gainsay	2 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Slay
3 Hibernation
3 Disrupt
2 Lobotomy
1 Divert
1 Force Spike
1 Gainsay

You may be more familiar with Upheaval / 'Tog decks, like those played to such success by Kai Budde, Zev Gurwitz, or Carlos Romao. These played Nightscape Familiar as a kind of Sapphire Medallion, and could even the score with Upheaval. Those sorts fall enough under the combo-control umbrella to appear in Combo-Control.

Fuller's deck, by contrast, is almost a pure Draw-Go. Four Psychatogs are stand-ins for Steel Golem (albeit much more powerful than any Golem), fourteen maindeck permission spells, a little board control and a ton of cantrips and card draw.

Fuller could use his Psychatogs exactly like Steel Golems; he could tap out on turn 3 to scare off most aggro players, but more likely he'd use it as the finisher once he had built up a huge advantage. Psychatog can win in one hit, giving Ryan's removal another dimension, as it's much faster than most Draw-Go closers.

Counters - 14

Sweeper - *Æther Burst, Hibernation*

Card Advantage - *Fact or Fiction, Predict*

Dralnu du Louvre

Guillaume Wafo-Tapa World Championships 2006 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir	4 Repeal
1 Dralnu, Lich Lord	4 Rewind
1 Skeletal Vampire	1 Seize the Soul
3 Spell Snare	1 Commandeer
4 Rune Snag	4 Desert
4 Remand	2 Dreadship Reef
4 Think Twice	3 Dimir Aqueduct
1 Last Gasp	4 Underground River
1 Sudden Death	4 Watery Grave
4 Mystical Teachings	7 Snow-Covered Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Bottle Gnomes
3 Persecute
2 Shadow of Doubt
2 Dreadship
1 Helldozer
1 Darkblast
1 Spell Snare
1 Trickbind

Wafo-Tapa is better known for his Pro Tour-winning Time Spiral Block Constructed Mystical Teachings toolbox deck — but out of his expansive palette of control decks, Dralnu du Louvre is the most Draw-Go.

This deck basically *never* has to tap mana on its own turn. Even *lands* in this deck (specifically Dreadship Reef) gave Guillaume a return on doing nothing and passing (unused mana, after all, could be poured into the Dreadship Reef). Especially against other control decks, Guillaume could stockpile mana into Dreadship

Reef to do multiple things in one turn (remember how Trevor Blackwell beat Jon?) or to get to the necessary flashback mana for Mystical Teachings (while still doing other useful things).

Mystical Teachings is often used to set up silver bullets, but Guillaume's deck is actually quite redundant. As with the best Draw-Go decks, this one has a ton of permission. Mystical Teachings can find the rare bullet, but it can largely be characterized as another source of instant-speed card drawing, complementing Think Twice.

Creatures in this deck mostly had flash due to playing with Teferi, making for an even more Draw-Go experience of (almost) never actually tapping mana on your own turn. Wafo-Tapa would even try to avoid tapping out for Skeletal Vampire by finding Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir first (which even made the Vampire Teachings-able).

Counters - 16

Sweeper - *No true sweeper, giving it an added weakness that it attempted to compensate for with Deserts and blockers*

Card Advantage - *Mystical Teachings, Think Twice, Dralnu*

It can be easy to assume that Draw-Go is synonymous with a very creature-lite strategy. That doesn't have to be the case, though. What about Faeries in Draw-Go?

The following is the U/W Faeries list I won an Extended PTQ with in April of 2009. Obviously, this deck bears some resemblance to the U/B Faeries deck we looked at in Aggro-Control — but consider just what a Draw-Go game it can actually play. After turn 1 (when we might suspend an Ancestral Vision), we can leave back mana to counterspell the opponent until we flash in a Vendilion Clique as a clock. Or we can use Spellstutter Sprite or Venser, Shaper Savant to Draw-Go our opponent while simultaneously putting a threat onto the battlefield.



U/W Faeries

Patrick Chapin 1st PTQ 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Spellstutter Sprite	2 Vedalken Shackles
3 Vendilion Clique	4 Cryptic Command
2 Venser, Shaper Savant	3 Riptide Laboratory
4 Ancestral Vision	4 Mutavault
4 Spell Snare	4 Flooded Strand
3 Path to Exile	2 Polluted Delta
2 Condescend	3 Hallowed Fountain
2 Umezawa's Jitte	1 Steam Vents
2 Engineered Explosives	4 Snow-Covered Island
1 Thirst for Knowledge	4 Island
2 Threads of Disloyalty	1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

3 Sower of Temptation
3 Flashfreeze
2 Circle of Protection: Red
2 Kataki, War's Wage
2 Relic of Progenitus
1 Future Sight
2 Stifle

Counters - Fourteen (if you count Venser)

Sweeper - Engineered Explosives

Card Advantage - Ancestral Vision, Vedalken Shackles, Umezawa's Jitte, Thirst for Knowledge, Riptide Laboratory

As you know, archetypes can be fluid. Labels are useful insofar that they can chunk complex ideas into more manageable bits, but rigid categorization of cards or play style will actually rob you of flexibility and strength. Just as it's often right to tap out for a third-turn Steel Golem to defend against a 2/1 red creature in a deck that isn't "supposed" to tap mana on its own turn early, one style of Faeries can play as an aggressor, using its counterspells to hold a lead while another — admittedly sans Bitterblossom — can use similar cards to play a pure defensive Draw-Go game.

Esper Control

Ben Stark 3rd Pro Tour Gatecrash 2013 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Augur of Bolas	4 Sphinx's Revelation
2 Snapcaster Mage	4 Nephelia Drownyard
3 Restoration Angel	4 Drowned Catacomb
4 Azorius Charm	4 Glacial Fortress
4 Think Twice	4 Isolate Chapel
2 Devour Flesh	4 Hallowed Fountain
1 Ultimate Price	2 Watery Grave
1 Dramatic Rescue	2 Godless Shrine
2 Dissipate	2 Island
4 Supreme Verdict	1 Plains
2 Planar Cleansing	

SIDEBOARD

3 Gloom Surgeon
2 Angel of Serenity
2 Duress
2 Jace, Memory Adept
2 Witchbane Orb
1 Negate
1 Psychic Spiral
1 Rest in Peace
1 Dispel

What's this? A deck with just two maindeck counterspells? Surely this can't be a Draw-Go deck, can it?



They sure don't make counterspells like they used to!

Arguably the most "purely" control of the Control family of decks, Draw-Go stops opposing threats card-for-card — most often using permission spells, but not always. In early 2013 Standard, there just weren't many good counterspells, and Cavern of Souls made the format hostile for those that did exist. Instead, Stark relied on removal spells, bounce, tons of sweepers, and blockers, aiming to take control of the game with a timely Sphinx's Revelation.

Counters - 2 (But every single spell in the deck is a removal spell or draws a card)

Sweeper - Supreme Verdict, Planar Cleansing

Card Advantage - Sphinx's Revelation, Think Twice, Augur of Bolas, Snapcaster Mage, Restoration Angel

VIABILITY RATING - 5

They may not make counterspells like they used to, but they still make tons of ways to gain card advantage. As long as you don't have to tap out on your own turn to bury your opponent under an avalanche of card advantage while thwarting any action they may take, you may be able to find a Draw-Go deck in a new format. We shouldn't force it where it doesn't belong, being willing to move into more Tap-Out directions when needed, but good sweepers and good instant speed card draw are the most important elements.

DECK #11: LOCK

Lock decks, like their relatives Combo-Control, tend to have a special relationship with Stage Three. Combo-Control decks often play like Draw-Go decks for the first X turns of the game, then win suddenly in a single attack of one huge Psychatog, or Blightsteel Colossus, or one hundred tiny Deceiver Exarchs. In contrast, Lock decks tend to look like Non-Blue Control decks for the first several turns (whether or not they are actually blue)... then build to a Stage Three that deprives the opponent of options or actions.

When we say they act like Non-Blue Control decks, we mean that Lock decks care about the battlefield, interacting with the opponent's permanents in the first Stages of the game, setting up over time. Like Combo-Control decks, a Lock deck's Stage Three can look or feel like a completely different game of Magic than the first several turns of the game. *Unlike* a Combo-Control deck, a Lock player's Stage Three tends to continue for many turns while he wins with a series of attacks (or Millstone taps, or whatever), whereas a Combo-Control deck tends to win instantly.

Like Tap-Out decks, Lock decks tend to use mana proactively and spend mana on their own turns in a way that can affect the opponent's position on the battlefield (or, at least, affect his strategy). Tap-Out Control might tap out for Keiga, The Tide Star to discourage an attack, whereas Lock will tap out for an Icy Manipulator to *prevent* an attack.

Like Draw-Go, Lock decks often have some permission component. Unlike Draw-Go, Lock decks tend to use permission strategically to protect the positions they're setting up rather than tactically to stop their opponents' threats. In this way, a Lock deck's permission is much more the permission of a combo deck than a control deck.

While a Lock deck will often look like a Non-Blue Control deck in the early turns, the differentiation is that if the Lock deck does what it wants to do, it will suppress the opponent's strategy entirely. In that sense, it's not "merely" playing from a position of superiority. The opponent shouldn't be able to play at all once everything comes together for the Lock.

Though there is often some sort of contextual way to “unlock,” decks in the Lock family *do not have fatal flaws*. The opponent might be able to disrupt it with relevant cards, sure, but Lock decks at least have the capacity to transcend “has good matchups” into “has a dominant proactive strategy.”

Put another way — and this may be a reason Lock decks tend not to use their permission to interact with the opponent’s threats — the Lock deck’s strategy *itself* is a method of strategy suppression; ergo, they often don’t need to concern themselves with mere threat suppression.

Lock decks generally:

- Are more concerned with keeping the battlefield under control than explicitly stopping opposing threats
- Use permission to protect their strategy, rather than to suppress an opponent’s
- Build towards a Stage Three endgame that is usually a de facto win

This section will include:

- The Deck
- Turbo-Stasis
- Prison
- Vore
- Next Level Blue

THE DECK

The history of control decks, perhaps the history of card advantage, of Magic strategy at *all* begins with the granddaddy of The Lock family: Brian Weissman’s The Deck.

The Deck was, if not the first Control deck, the line in the sand that changed how Magic players thought about the game. The Deck harmonized multiple then-unappreciated thresholds of Magic strategy. Most important of these was card advantage, which included drawing extra cards, destroying (or neutralizing) multiples of the opponent’s cards with a smaller number of cards, and the still-underappreciated forcing your opponent to draw dead cards.

The Deck was creature-poor, not creature-*less*; therefore an opponent playing in good faith *had* to run creature removal. Their removal was just bad most of the time.

The Deck

Brian Weissman DunDraCon 1995 (Type 1)

MAINDECK

2 Serra Angel	1 Braingeyser
4 Swords to Plowshares	1 Recall
2 Red Elemental Blast	1 Sol Ring
1 Ancestral Recall	1 Black Lotus
1 Time Walk	1 Mox Emerald
1 Demonic Tutor	1 Mox Jet
1 Regrowth	1 Mox Pearl
4 Mana Drain	1 Mox Ruby
2 Counterspell	1 Mox Sapphire
4 Disenchant	1 Library of Alexandria
2 Disrupting Scepter	3 Strip Mine
1 Timetwister	4 City of Brass
1 Jayemdae Tome	4 Tundra
2 Moat	2 Volcanic Island
1 Mirror Universe	4 Islands
1 Amnesia	3 Plains

SIDEBOARD

2 Divine Offering
2 Circle of Protection: Red
2 Blood Moon
2 Red Elemental Blast
1 Ivory Tower
1 Jayemdae Tome
1 Disrupting Scepter
1 Moat
1 Fireball
1 Tormod's Crypt
1 Feldon's Cane

While The Deck gave us the beginnings of the structure for control and card advantage, what draws our attention in *this* chapter is its importance as Patient Zero of an eventual Lock epidemic. The Deck created an environment that was hostile to permanents. It killed things well with Disenchant, Swords to Plowshares, and a variety of other destructors.

One innovation that Weissman made was not caring about the opponent's life total. He was going to win in Stage Three in a lockdown position, so it didn't matter if he gave the opponent a little life.

Weissman innovated the use of Moat over The Abyss, because Moat was faster at functionally dealing with more permanents simultaneously (by, say, neutralizing a swarm of the opponent's attackers). The Abyss could also deal with multiple permanents as

a single card, but it took time to do so. Weissman could shortcut any non-fliers with Moat and then proceed.

A further shortcut would be Mind Twist, sometimes by using Demonic Tutor to find it. After clearing the opponent's hand, Disrupting Scepter would complete the lock. Weissman would knock one card out of the opponent's hand (presumably the only card he had, if any).

Note that in order to actually further his strategy, the opponent would probably need multiple Disenchants for Moat and / or Disrupting Scepter. For these — or for any collected creature removal — Weissman would ideally have a Mana Drain in hand to answer it. In addition to Ancestral Recall, Weissman would be drawing extra cards via Jayemdae Tome.

So there you had it: an opponent with no cards in hand, continually suppressed with Disrupting Scepter (while possibly drawing “dead” creature removal). His ground assault was halted by Moat; if he was playing burn, a sideboarded Circle of Protection: Red would quench those fires. The only way you might see your way back to a fair game of Magic would be to draw multiple Disenchants... but Brian, drawing extra cards, would have multiple Counterspells and Mana Drains.

How did The Deck actually win?

Weissman's genius was to use Serra Angel. With four toughness, Serra Angel could withstand Lightning Bolt; remember, he was an innovator in a time where opponents thought that giving their opponents four life was suboptimal, so Swords to Plowshares was less prevalent. He had the ground locked down with Moat and the hand locked down with Mind Twist + Disrupting Scepter... *What about the sky?*

Serra Angel could attack for four — putting the opponent on a five-turn clock — but *it could also block flyers*. So even the way Weissman won was synergistic with his proactive plan!

There was another possible route — which was to simply play a fast Serra Angel via Mana Drain mana, or perhaps with a little Lotus love. Against a sideboarded opponent who was focused on killing all enchantments and artifacts (or played like he was up against a creatureless deck), Serra Angel was probably going to be



the biggest creature in a game — big enough to play defense and offense simultaneously. Many Lock decks can theoretically win without first locking — here hand-locking — the opponent down, though generally these are considered *gambits*.

The Lock - *Disrupting Scepter locking opponents out of counterplay, Moat locking out ground creatures, eventually closing with Serra Angel*

Weakness - *Eventually the world discovered Necropotence, a card that could completely refute the Disrupting Scepter lock single-handedly*

TURBO-STASIS

Turbo-Stasis was an essentially one-tournament near-clean break designed for the 1996 Black Summer. Necropotence decks at the time were exceptionally mana-hungry, so they had a tendency to tap out. Being prevented from *untapping*, therefore, put them into a very uncomfortable operational position.

The “Turbo” in Turbo-Stasis referred to Howling Mine, which was the secret of Turbo-Stasis's consistency. Turbo-Stasis players simply drew more lands to fuel their Stasis upkeeps! Howling Mine could be asymmetrical in a world where Necropotence players had no draw steps, or it could double as both card drawing and a kill card (where the opponent would run out of cards by drawing first after several turns of drawing three and four cards at a time). It also took the card advantage edge off of Alliances then-newcomers Lim-Dul's Vault, Arcane Denial, and Force of Will. When everyone always has seven cards in hand, what's one or two cards among friends?

Close to twenty years after its dominance at US Nationals, Turbo-Stasis remains one of the most successful new deck integrations of new cards, playing a number of Alliances spells with great strategy and necessity. Three of the Turbo-Stasis designers — Matt Place, Mike Long, and Scott Johns — all graduated to the Top 8.

Similar to how Herberholz, Nassif, and I heard about a mono-red burn deck with storage lands, Matt Place and company heard about a Stasis deck used by Tommi Hovi to win Finnish Nationals.

It was originally designed by Esa Ristisuo, albeit without the benefit of any cards from Alliances. They ran into a Finnish player looking to play against Necrodecks for \$100 a game at Origins, where Nationals was being held. The concept intrigued them, so they put together a version based on what they remembered seeing plus some Alliances cards (Lim-Dul's Vault, Arcane Denial, and Force of Will).

While Turbo-Stasis was certainly the deck of the weekend, the tournament itself was won by Dennis Bentley's B/R Necropotence, which was unusually well-armed with both Pyroblast and Shatter, which were serious problems for Turbo-Stasis's key permanents.

Turbo-Stasis

Matt Place Top 4 US National Championship 1996 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Zuran Orb	4 Arcane Denial
3 Despotic Scepter	2 Kismet
1 Feldon's Cane	4 Force of Will
1 Ivory Tower	2 Recall
1 Land Tax	4 City of Brass
4 Howling Mine	4 Adarkar Wastes
4 Stasis	4 Underground River
4 Lim-Dul's Vault	13 Island
4 Boomerang	

SIDEBOARD

3 Mana Short
2 Blue Elemental Blast
2 Disenchant
2 Hydroblast
2 Wall of Air
1 Kismet
1 Lodestone Bauble
1 Swords to Plowshares
1 Black Vise

The basic proactive plan of this deck is to get down Stasis — possibly with Kismet — to slow (or, preferably, lock) down the opponent's strategy of attack. It can pay for Stasis just by playing and tapping lands — which is, of course, synergistically fed by the intersection of 25 lands (all of which tap for U) and Howling Mine.

The Turbo-Stasis player can use either Boomerang or Despotic Scepter(!!!) to get out from under his own Stasis, get a hopefully big untap, and reset. Recall — again hopefully fueled by Howling Mine — can get back spent copies of Stasis to keep the game down. Amusingly, the first version they built had just one Despotic Scepter, but after sleeping on it, Matt decided to go up to three on the morning of the tournament (a judgment call that proved very wise).



Kismet is largely gravy, as the deck has more than enough Arcane Denials and Force of Wills to fight most opponents' attempts at proactivity in the "Stasis" environment — though it would, of course, substantially harden this deck's soft-lock Lock.

The Lock - *Stasis + Kismet, with Howling Mine, Lim-Dul's Vault, and Recall to fuel it, and Despotic Scepter and Boomerang work around it, eventually winning with Feldon's Cane*

Weakness - *Opponents that could break the lock with artifact or enchantment removal, or sidestep it with vigilance creatures*

Successful? Maybe. But Turbo-Stasis was one of the least fun decks to play against, ever.



PRISON

"The Prison" refers to any number of decks that played Icy Manipulator and Winter Orb. Original innovators were USENET contributor Chris Cade and the original best player in the world, Mark Justice. Variations on The Prison were brought to great glory by Pro Tour Top 8 competitor George Baxter, Juniors Pro Tour Champion Justin Schneider, Jon Finkel (where The Prison was the weapon of choice for his first Pro Top 8), and of course, Mark Justice at the very first Pro Tour.

Prison

George Baxter 2nd US National Championship 1996 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Deadly Insect	4 Serrated Arrows
4 Swords to Plowshares	2 Titania's Song
1 Black Vise	2 Wrath of God
1 Land Tax	4 Fellwar Stone
3 Winter Orb	3 Mishra's Factory
3 Aeolipile	4 Strip Mine
3 Divine Offering	4 Brushland
2 Disenchant	3 Adarkar Wastes
1 Balance	1 City of Brass
1 Sylvan Library	7 Plains
2 Armageddon	1 Forest
4 Icy Manipulator	

SIDEBOARD

3 Serra Angel
3 Hydroblast
2 Sleight of Mind
1 Adarkar Wastes
1 Disenchant
1 Disrupting Scepter
1 Ivory Tower
1 Winter Orb
1 Wrath of God
1 Zuran Orb

Baxter's deck was built specifically to perform in the same Black Summer as Turbo-Stasis, when Necropotence was not only the *best* strategy, but the most *common* strategy. Necropotence decks would hurl huge volumes of mana into Knight of Stromgald, or tap all their lands to fuel up a Drain Life. Therefore, they would often leave themselves tapped out on the opponent's turn.

Then The Prison deck laid down Winter Orb. If all Baxter did was play a Winter Orb using a Fellwar Stone, he'd be playing at an advantage; he could untap his Fellwar Stone *and* land, whereas the opponent — his mana-hungry opponent — would only untap a land. This allowed Baxter a far more option-rich sequence of turns, creating an environment where one player could play Magic and the other couldn't.

Baxter's lock was Icy Manipulator + Winter Orb; these two cards both on the battlefield allowed Baxter to tap his Winter Orb on the opponent's end step. Rules at the time stated that tapped artifacts didn't function, so Baxter could untap all of his lands on his turn, but the Winter Orb would be untapped during the opponent's untap step. This was a clear table-turn from "fair" to "asymmetrical."

The full-on Prison combination would include a second Icy Manipulator. So, in addition to untapping his own stuff, George could — during the opponent's upkeep — tap down whatever land the opponent *untapped*. So not only could Baxter actually do whatever he wanted despite the presence of the Winter Orb, he could continue to aggressively suppress his opponent's mana.

The only way most Necropotence players could deal with a ton of artifacts was Nevinyrral's Disk, which entered the battlefield tapped. George had not only Disenchant but Divine Offering for that piece.

You'll notice that while Baxter was oppressing lands, his opponent's could still play creatures, especially small ones. That's why his deck was chock-full of Aeolipile and Serrated Arrows and Swords to Plowshares. In a pinch, Icy Manipulator could tap a creature; this could force the opponent into committing multiple creatures, right into the thunderous clutches of an angry Wrath of God.



Speaking of committing more and more resources, a player under any kind of Winter Orb (and surely Icy Manipulators too), would have no choice but to commit more and more lands, which made them perfect prey for Armageddon. George was just fine blowing up his own lands, given that he had both Land Tax and Fellwar Stone (the latter of which would allow him to function in a low-land environment).

The Lock - *Winter Orb + Icy Manipulator, with Armageddons to top it off*

Weakness - *Opponents that could break the lock with artifact removal*

Players in the icy grip of The Prison had something in common with Baxter working a Land Tax: they'd have lots of cards in hand, but have a hard time getting rid of any, which meant that for all practical purposes they were mana-screwed. Black Vise could punish them (and would punish Necropotence mages in general). Baxter had a solo Deadly Insect that could win in three or so swings, but chose to run Titania's Song as well. Tapping down a ton of guys or removing all blockers could set up a single Titania's Song turn with a bunch of 4/4 creatures on Baxter's side... that is *the kill*.

As we said, the average response a Necropotence deck would have to a Prison plan was Nevinyrral's Disk, which might be prey to a Disenchant or Divine Offering. It's notable that Baxter lost to a B/R Necropotence deck in the finals (which played Shatter).

Note the delicious interaction between these two Lock decks. Even when Turbo-Stasis bounces or Scepters away its own Stasis, it's going to have some mana problems due to Winter Orb. Meanwhile, Baxter's sideboarded Serra Angels will work just fine even if he's supposedly under the opponent's "lock." Baxter could play a ton of Disenchants and Divine Offerings to ruin the Stasis deck's plan — the least of which might be drawing extra for Howling Mine and then denying the opponent his symmetrical right.

All of these determined why the seemingly dominant one-tournament spike of Turbo-Stasis only made the Top 4, whereas Baxter's Prison got to Top 2.

Prison

Jon Finkel 3rd Pro Tour Chicago 1997 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Tithe	3 Armageddon
2 Swords to Plowshares	2 Gerrard's Wisdom
4 Counterspell	4 Marble Diamond
3 Winter Orb	3 Sky Diamond
2 Gaea's Blessing	4 Mishra's Factory
2 Sylvan Library	2 Undiscovered Paradise
1 Pyroclasm	4 Tundra
3 Aura of Silence	3 Savannah
4 Icy Manipulator	2 Plateau
3 Serrated Arrows	1 Volcanic Island
3 Wrath of God	1 Flood Plain

SIDEBOARD

3 Erhnam Djinn
3 Wildfire Emissary
2 Pyroblast
2 Gerrard's Wisdom
1 Aura of Silence
1 Disenchant
1 Gaea's Blessing
1 Hurkyl's Recall
1 Red Elemental Blast

This deck is notable for a couple of reasons: for history's sake, it's the deck that Jon Finkel used to achieve his first of many Pro Tour Top 8s. It's also Jon's favorite deck of all time; he considers it a masterpiece, perhaps justifiably.

Note the mana base: Jon played Undiscovered Paradise, which has a kind of "getting untapped mana" synergy with Winter Orb. Jon would argue that between Diamonds and Tithe, he had quite a few mana sources — but his deck played only seventeen actual lands, reducing his exposure to his own Armageddons. Interestingly, Finkel's only blue cards were the UU Counterspell. He considered the addition of blue — Counterspell in particular — essential to shore up the fatal flaw of Baxter's Non-Blue Control version. From Finkel's Prison, ideally, there would be no escape.

The Lock - Winter Orb + Icy Manipulator, with Armageddon

Weakness - Opponents that could break the lock with artifact destruction

While he won game 1 with either Mishra's Factory or Gaea's Blessing recursion (where he would doubtless keep getting back the same copies of Counterspell), what makes this deck the epitome of Next Level Deck Building is the sideboard. In his first Pro Tour Top 8 deck, Finkel unveiled the first full-on transformative sideboard!



Note that the only permanents he might show an opponent in game 1 would be artifacts. Lands, everyone has; a couple of enchantments, whatever. But even his kill-card lands became artifacts when attacking.

This is a clear signal: *I have artifacts; the rest of your removal is dead.*

So when he brought in Erhnam Djinn and Wildfire Emissary after sideboarding, it could be devastating (and make for some fast games). The opponent might be over-prepared for Icy Manipulator, not realizing Jon's Diamond setup was for a turn 3 Erhnam Djinn. Great shades of Lestree! He could, in fact, play Erhnam-Geddon like a 1995 Standard deck!

Besides being merely highly successful in terms of stealing free wins, Finkel's card choices echo the genius of Weissman. He was creature-poor, not creature-less, so could create inefficiency in his opponent's draws. His creatures themselves were highly resilient. Most opponents would take out some removal, but might leave Lightning Bolt for Mishra's Factory or to go to the face. Both of Jon's four-drops lived through a Bolt. Maybe the opponent hedged by keeping Swords to Plowshares, but Wildfire Emissary laughs at your Swords to Plowshares.

Pretty good deck.

VORE

Vore — named for its primary kill card *Magnivore* — was one of at least four high-performing U/R decks to debut around the time of Guildpact (and therefore heralded the coming of Steam Vents). Owling Mine got all the glory in Hawaii, URzaTron and other Hattori-Hanzo 'Tron-style Big Spell decks would do well in individual play for years, and U/R Wafo-Tapa Tap-Out was the blazing first trumpet of a Hall of Fame-caliber career...

Vore became a darling of the Team Constructed PTQs that immediately followed Pro Tour Honolulu. Nikolas Nygaard finished just out of the Top 8 in Honolulu in 10th.

U/R Vore

Nikolas Nygaard 10th Pro Tour Honolulu 2006 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Magnivore	3 Tidings
4 Sleight of Hand	3 Wildfire
1 Genju of the Spires	1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
4 Eye of Nowhere	1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
3 Mana Leak	4 Shivan Reef
3 Pyroclasm	4 Steam Vents
4 Compulsive Research	7 Island
3 Stone Rain	7 Mountain
4 Demolish	

SIDEBOARD

4 Remand
3 Shock
3 Volcanic Hammer
2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
1 Mana Leak
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Pyroclasm

Vore creates a permanent-hostile environment... by smashing permanents. The Vore dream on the play is to run Eye of Nowhere on the opponent's first land, forcing him to discard. Then he can follow up with Stone Rain and Demolish, with the lock being a lockdown of the opponent's mana.

Vore can thoroughly smash players with weak openers (or who kept two-land hands) — but one of its great features is the ability to interact legitimately, if need be. Eye of Nowhere can lift a huge creature just as easily as it can a land, and Compulsive Research and Tidings refuel Vore's ability to stay relevant just as the opponent starts to get a foothold. Vore's ability to use mana proactively on the play gives it a key structural advantage over other control decks — but in particular, Boseiju, Who Shelters All could ensure the resolution of key mana denial spell right through a presumed wall of permission.

Nygaard played the role of a kind of contra-Weissman, who set up opponents with Mind Twist then locked them down with Disrupting Scepter. Instead, Nygaard jabbed at opponents with one-of land denial, and then thoroughly spanked them with Wildfire. *Four* lands. Ka-boom!

The Lock - *If you have no lands, you can't cast your spells!*

Weakness - *If your spells only cost one mana, you can cast them before your land gets destroyed, and if you can kill Magnivores, the deck doesn't really do a lot else*



Nygaard's "Serra Angel" was Magnivore. Magnivore, full of sorceries, could kill in as few as two attacks... and it starts out with haste. The beauty of this beater is how synergistic it is with the rest of the deck's plans. Sleight of Hand, Eye to Nowhere, Stone Rain, Demolish, Tidings... *Yum.*

Yum, yum... *Here I come.*

NEXT LEVEL BLUE

While Counterbalance-Top decks have existed basically since the printing of Counterbalance, in one form or another, it was not until Next Level Blue that the strategy completely took over a format (eventually leading to a ban, albeit at least partially due to how much longer it caused tournaments to take).

Next Level Blue

Patrick Chapin 2nd PTQ Detroit 2008 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Tarmogoyf
3 Trinket Mage
1 Sower of Temptation
1 Tormod's Crypt
4 Sensei's Divining Top
3 Spell Snare
4 Counterbalance
4 Counterspell
4 Vedalken Shackles
3 Thirst For Knowledge
2 Cryptic Command
2 Engineered Explosives

4 Chrome Mox
1 Miren, the Moaning Well
2 Academy Ruins
1 Tree of Tales
4 Flooded Strand
4 Polluted Delta
2 Breeding Pool
1 Steam Vents
1 Hallowed Fountain
3 Island
3 Snow-Covered Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Ancient Grudge
2 Tormod's Crypt
2 Sower of Temptation
2 Threads of Disloyalty
2 Global Ruin
1 Krosan Grip
1 Engineered Explosives
1 Pithing Needle

Next Level Blue was actually based on an earlier deck I designed, Chase Rare, that Remi Fortier won Pro Tour Valencia 2007 with after being given the deck by Luis Scott-Vargas just before the tournament. While Chase Rare had more of an aggro-control shell, Next Level Blue just tried to play a passable control game until it could completely lock opponents out of the ability to play spells that cost one, two, or three (completely crippling most opponents).

The Lock - *Sensei's Divining Top let you control the top of your library so that Counterbalance could always hit*

Weakness - *Spells that cost five or more could completely sidestep the lock*

In a pinch, Sensei's Divining Top could jump back to the top of your library, ensuring no one-cost spells ever resolve. Most of the time, however, it was letting you search through your library at lightning speed, combining with fetchlands to give you access to many new options per turn and increased chances of finding Counterbalance. Already have Counterbalance instead of the Top? Just use Trinket Mage and go get one!

Why win with Tarmogoyfs? They were just the most efficient victory condition, since they were such good blockers early but could put a lot of pressure on creature-light opponents.

Vedalken Shackles provided a secondary locking mechanism, as many creature-based strategies could never break through its ability to ensure you always controlled the best creature on the battlefield.

Next Level Blue was the last truly great lock deck, slowing games and tournaments to such a crawl that Sensei's Divining Top was eventually banned, accelerating the transition towards Aggro-Control and Tap-Out blue decks, rather than true Lock decks.

VIABILITY RATING - 1

Control decks began with Lock... but Magic design has moved away from the sorts of cards needed to make these decks work. Getting locked out of a game and being forced to sit and watch, helpless to impact the game, is a seriously unfun experience for players. As a result, we don't see much support for strategies that attempt to do this. I'd love to include a recent Lock deck to show how they look today... except there haven't been any successful Lock decks in years.

This is not to say they will never return, or that someone couldn't break a format open by discovering something R&D missed... but nowadays, this is the least common archetype, and this chapter of Control is mostly over. Control decks may have begun with Lock, but they haven't ended with it. The evolution of Control — certainly some of the deadliest — can be found in the next chapter... the closely related Combo-Control!



DECK #12: COMBO-CONTROL

In my first year returning to playing serious Magic, Mark Herberholz — formerly my apprentice, now possibly one of the best deckbuilders on the planet — invited me to play in the Sliver Kid Two-Headed Giant Pro Tour, carrying me in with his Pro Points. I got back into the scene properly with a win at the 2007 Michigan Regionals; US National Championship in 2007 was to be my big debut.

On a roundabout tour to Baltimore, I stopped in New York City to have lunch with Jon Finkel and to visit the Flores family. I was told it was going to be another summer of Flores Magical Christmas Land. Mike had abso-positively broken the format, discovering a two-card combo that would doubtlessly define Standard Magic until the next set rotation...

The term “combo” in Magic gets thrown around a lot. If you ask some players, seemingly everything is a combo, even a *mondo* combo. Dark Ritual and Necropotence! Kird Ape and Taiga! Mountain and Lightning Bolt! Like peanut butter and jelly... Nay, peanut butter and *chocolate*. Combo. Combination. Combo Nation.

But when defining deck archetypes, “combo” usually refers to a type of strategy wherein playing a specific combination of cards leads to a win whenever they show up together. Magic has plenty of card combinations that build incremental advantages or just have lots of synergy with one another. While it’s great to have cards that play well together, a deck is usually only called a Combo deck when its primary plan is to assemble a combination of cards that *actually win the game* when you put them together.

In fact, the next four archetype chapters of *Next Level Deck Building* refer to four different takes on Combo decks.

Combo-*Control* decks generally refer to a family of decks that have a foot in each of the two macro archetypes. Either they’re essentially Control decks that do the kinds of things that we talked about in discussing Tap-Out Control and Draw-Go (counter spells, draw a bunch of cards, play lands every turn, build on incremental advantages) with very short Stage Three games (i.e. one turn).

COMBO USUALLY REFERS TO A TYPE OF STRATEGY WHEREIN PLAYING A SPECIFIC COMBINATION OF CARDS LEADS TO A WIN WHENEVER THEY SHOW UP TOGETHER

Or they're decks that spend all their slots and resources doing controllish things (drawing cards, countering spells, getting lands out) that they have so little room left, they *must* win using a very finite number of cards.

Combo-Control decks generally:

- Play a controlling game, but have a Stage Three that goes beyond victory condition, instead being an actual game-ending combination of cards
- Play a game that is somewhere between Tap-Out and Draw-Go, but with a one-turn endgame
- Will play a slower game often, but threaten to win in the very early turns making it hard to judge their pacing

While decks of the Combo-Control classification often play for several turns, acting like pedestrian Control decks for much of a duel, once they hit Stage Three, that's usually it: the game ends. *Finis*. One turn.

Some of the most famous — and certainly most *t* — decks in the history of Magic are (or, rather, “were”) Combo-Control decks. These decks tended to be hard to play against and were often oppressive. These decks tended to be very resource-rich, and sometimes capable of very profitable interactions. Ergo, opposing decks might try to fight them on an even playing field. While they could certainly beat an opponent on the merits — countering all their cards, killing their creatures, or variously out-resourcing them — the great difficulty of playing against a Combo-Control deck was that they *didn't* have to win on the merits. You could think you were playing an even game and then *POOF!* You're drawing 100 cards, or taking thirty damage in a single attack with no permanents in play.

You know what's really filthy about Combo-Control?

These decks will often play a nine- to ten-turn game with you, making you think that you have a chance. But many of them can clear it — and easily — in only three or four turns.

This section will include:

- High Tide
- Swans
- Upheaval/Tog
- Gush Control
- U/R Twin (Standard)
- RUG Scapeshift

High Tide

Kai Budde 1st Grand Prix Vienna 1999 (Extended)

MAINDECK

1 Palinchron
4 High Tide
1 Mystical Tutor
1 Brainstorm
4 Impulse
4 Counterspell
3 Merchant Scroll
2 Arcane Denial

3 Frantic Search
4 Turnabout
4 Force of Will
4 Time Spiral
3 Stroke of Genius
4 Thawing Glaciers
3 Volcanic Island
16 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Ophidian
4 Hydroblast
4 Pyroblast
2 Null Rod
1 Mountain

It was Eric Taylor who first put forth the idea that High Tide was not so much a combo deck but the ultimate control deck. Some early versions of High Tide played three copies of Mind Over Matter and were more reliant on the card Intuition. (Among other effects, they could Intuition for three copies of Mind Over Matter and keep one.)

The Combo - *High Tide + Time Spiral/Turnabout, eventually killing with Stroke of Genius (possibly using Palinchron with High Tide to produce an arbitrarily large amount of mana)*

The Control - *Ten counterspells, tons of card draw to find them, and Turnabout to act as a Fog, in lieu of sweepers*

All versions of High Tide — including Kai's — could win on the third turn with some variation of:

Turn 3: Tap an Island → High Tide → Tap the other Islands → Turnabout my lands → untap → Tap all three → Time Spiral → redrawing and untapping

High Tide was not particularly consistent going off on that turn. Sure, you'd draw seven cards with all your lands untapped — but anything could happen. Your opponent could draw up a grip full of Force of Wills, or you could simply fizzle.

By Vienna, Kai had adopted the Thawing Glaciers plan that yours truly and a couple others had popularized. He also played zero copies of either Intuition or Mind Over Matter, relying completely on chaining Brainstorm into Impulse, Frantic Search into Time Spiral, and finally Stroke of Genius. He even played Ophidian in the sideboard!



High Tide of this stripe was simply the greatest control deck that had ever been conceived at that point. It was all mana, card drawing, and permission. It was a pure control deck — it just pointed one of its card drawers at an opponent to end the game.

This deck's combo, which we'll discuss later, was somewhat reminiscent of Storm Combo. It catalyzed a big turn with High Tide, then used the various Turnabout / Frantic Search / Time Spiral untap cards to net mana. With enough lands in play (which was likely on the back of a few taps from Thawing Glaciers), the deck could produce unending mana with Palinchron.

However you got there, after a critical mass of mana: ka-boom! Lethal Stroke of Genius.

The following Swans deck, by Luis Scott-Vargas, was meant to be a Combo deck; he played cards like Simian Spirit Guide to get out onto the battlefield quickly (and to hit the RR in Conflagrate). *But* it could also play as a reasonably controlling deck.

Swans

Luis Scott-Vargas 11th World Championships 2008 (Extended)

MAINDECK

2 Simian Spirit Guide	3 Blood Moon
4 Swans of Bryn Argoll	1 Conflagrate
4 Ponder	4 Chrome Mox
4 Spell Snare	1 Breeding Pool
2 Mana Leak	1 Cascade Bluffs
2 Condescend	3 Flooded Strand
4 Chain of Plasma	4 Polluted Delta
2 Engineered Explosives	2 Steam Vents
4 Thirst For Knowledge	1 Watery Grave
4 Firespout	8 Snow-Covered Island

SIDEBOARD

3 Ancient Grudge
2 Remove Soul
2 Pact of Negation
2 Mystical Teachings
2 Engineered Explosives
1 Vexing Shusher
1 Blood Moon
1 Gigadrowse
1 Muddle the Mixture

The Combo - *Swans of Bryn Argoll + Chain of Plasma, letting you discard cards to draw three cards as many times as you want, eventually killing with a discarded Conflagrate*

The Control - *Eight counterspells, five sweepers, Blood Moon, and some very mediocre burn spells*

It's quite obvious that this deck cares about the battlefield. It played Engineered Explosives and could lock down mana with Blood Moon. One under-appreciated aspect of Swans is that you could always just *block*. What, exactly, gets through it?



In terms of its combo, Swans was the rare two-card combo that could actually fizzle. The combo was Swans of Bryn Argoll + Seismic Assault. Send lands at Swans, draw cards, some of which are lands, keep going. In theory you keep drawing, draw indefinitely, until you can send ten lands at the opponent. In practice, it's possible to run out of lands by drawing too many otherwise good cards.

Of course, there's no shame in getting in there for four with the Swans (maybe more than once) to either set him up or finish him off. The somewhat hybrid nature of the "Control" side of this Combo-Control makes it particularly strategic here.

In the chapter on Draw-Go, we talked about Ryan Fuller's take on Psychatog at an early Masters Series event. That deck used Psychatog — long the inheritor of Morphling's one-time crown as the best creature in Magic's history — as the best possible Steel Golem. It could potentially tap three for its "Steel Golem," or it could win with a sequence of small-to-medium attacks.

Despite the availability of a very good single threat creature, there was no real Combo or Big Spell angle to Ryan's deck.

It became essential for the deck to change with the printing of Chainer's Edict. Psychatog is an intrinsically *durable* creature — you can just laugh off a spent cantrip or some Fact or Fiction detritus to live through a Firebolt — but a card like Chainer's Edict straight-up wins the fight against a creature that's usually sitting alone on the battlefield. And because of the flashback on Chainer's Edict (which could become accessible either via playing lots of Birds of Paradise or Cabal Coffers, both of which were available along Odyssey Block in Standard), decks that relied 100% on Psychatog to actually win the game were in an increasingly Bayesian position: change or die.

This is what facilitated the move from the initial Psychatog decks — exemplified by the first big win by Fuller at the Masters Series — to the quintessential Combo-Control deck.



ZevAtog

Zev Gurwitz Neutral Ground 2002 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Nightscape Familiar	4 Fact or Fiction
4 Psychatog	3 Upheaval
4 Standstill	4 Underground River
4 Counterspell	4 Salt Marsh
4 Æther Burst	1 Darkwater Catacombs
4 Repulse	12 Island
4 Circular Logic	4 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Gainsay
4 Ghastly Demise
2 Lobotomy
2 Mana Short
2 Exclude
1 Slay

Back before the StarCityGames.com Open Series, one of the great nexuses of Constructed deck design was Neutral Ground in New York — the training grounds of Hall of Famers Zvi Mowshowitz, Steven O'Mahoney-Schwartz, Jon Finkel, and many other notable contemporary players. The reason was simple: Neutral Ground — largely in conflict with New England rivals Your Move Games — ran regular Standard tournaments, and put up cash prizes!

Pro Tour Historian Brian David-Marshall and Hall of Famer Rob Dougherty (then the respective proprietors of the two stores) called the inter-store war The Grudge Match. The store's constant high level of competition — and cash incentives — produced many strong decks with rogue origins. They kept doing it year after year — and in 2002, it was Zev Gurwitz's turn.

ZevAtog was primarily distinguished by the use of Standstill as its secondary card drawing engine. Zev could play it on the second turn and create a kind of sub-game, where many players, especially less-experienced ones wouldn't know what to do. Are we supposed to drag the game to an — *ahem* — actual standstill? Wait for ZevAtog to fill up to seven cards in hand before breaking the enchantment?

It was a “damned if you do, damned if you don't” moment in Magic. How is a small creature deck supposed to act? ZevAtog could set up *so much* time and card advantage. How bad is breaking a Standstill against an end-of-turn Æther Burst (especially a multiple Æther Burst), which would allow Zev to play Psychatog and possibly replay a Standstill (you know, now that he's gotten three free cards)?



Standstill could also be challenging for an opponent's rules knowledge. Let's say the opponent has decided to play slowly, and both players have accumulated seven cards in hand. Zev moves for an end step Fact or Fiction, which triggers a Standstill break. *If the opponent does not let Standstill resolve* — that is, if the Standstill break is still on the stack — and he responds with a counterspell, *that* spell will put an *additional* Standstill break on the stack, which will resolve first.

So yes, it was entirely possible for Zev to propose a Standstill break (which would give the opponent three cards, which would probably have to be discarded, which is why Zev was breaking it in the first place), where an opponent unfamiliar with the rules *would actually give Zev the three cards instead!*

And depending on the outcome of any counterspell war, Zev might get the Fact or Fiction's worth, too.

Now the Combo-Control angle on this deck is simple: Remember Chainer's Edict?

The point of slowing down the game with Standstill was to give Zev time to play nine or more lands. Then he could play Upheaval with three floating, play a land, and play his Psychatog with U open (presumably to give him Circular Logic backup).

Ideally, the opponent would be left with one land in play, no blockers, and not enough mana to play Chainer's Edict. Also, he'd have to discard tons of cards. Having himself discarded many cards from his own Upheaval, the ZevAtog player would have ample fuel to kill the opponent with one swing from the mighty Dr. Teeth.

He played control for nine to ten turns — yes, and exactly one turn of “combo.”

The Combo - *Upheaval + Psychatog + Circular Logic*

The Control - *Eight counterspells, eight bounce spells, and eight excellent blockers, plus Upheaval as a sweeper of sorts*



U/B Tog

Carlos Romão 1st World Championships 2002 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Nightscape Familiar
4 Psychatog
4 Counterspell
3 Memory Lapse
3 Chainer's Edict
4 Repulse
3 Circular Logic
3 Cunning Wish
3 Fact or Fiction

3 Deep Analysis
2 Upheaval
2 Cephalid Coliseum
4 Underground River
4 Salt Marsh
1 Darkwater Catacombs
10 Island
3 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Duress
3 Ghastly Demise
1 Coffin Purge
1 Fact or Fiction
1 Gainsay
1 Hibernation
1 Mana Short
1 Recoil
1 Slay
1 Teferi's Response

By the World Championships, it was quite clear that Upheaval-Psychatog was the best strategy. Given that all these players could run cheap instants and Fact or Fiction, Standstill suddenly fell to the wrong side of symmetrical. The best performing of the Upheaval-Tog players (and best performing overall) was World Champion Carlos Romao.

The Combo - *Upheaval + Psychatog + Circular Logic*

The Control - *Ten counterspells, bounce, edicts, blockers, and Upheaval as a sweeper*

Notice his departure from Zev's card drawing and removal suite choices. He chose Deep Analysis over Standstill, as it was a better "grinding" card, and rejected Æther Burst. Romao's deck was built to kill other people's Psychatogs, and his personal discipline as a player gave him a completely unblemished record in Standard: undefeated in the Swiss, followed by the 3-0 sweep in the Top 8.

Romao had figured out strategically that the only threats the opponent could actually beat him with were Upheaval and Psychatog, ergo, he let most of his opponents' card drawing spells resolve. There was plenty of that on both sides, and especially Deep Analysis isn't particularly vulnerable to permission. Next Level Deckbuilding? Sure, but in this case, quite a bit of Next Level strategy... yielding a World Champion.

Chris Pikula used the next Combo-Control deck to win a large Vintage tournament in 2011. As with High Tide, the nature of many Vintage Control decks leads them to the Combo-Control route... The format is so rich with restricted cards like Ancestral Recall, Fastbond, Time Walk, Yawgmoth's Will, and various Moxen that they *have* to win as Combo decks. There just isn't room to win the old-fashioned way.



Gush Control

Chris Pikula 1st TDG Summer Open 2011 (Vintage)

MAINDECK

3 Dark Confidant
 1 Blightsteel Colossus
 2 Jace, the Mind Sculptor
 3 Preordain
 2 Mental Misstep
 2 Spell Pierce
 1 Ancestral Recall
 1 Brainstorm
 1 Mystical Tutor
 1 Nature's Claim
 1 Fastbond
 1 Vampiric Tutor
 1 Sensei's Diving Top
 1 Voltaic Key
 2 Mana Drain
 1 Time Vault
 1 Time Walk
 1 Demonic Tutor
 1 Hurkyl's Recall

1 Tinker
 1 Yawgmoth's Will
 4 Force of Will
 4 Gush
 1 Sol Ring
 1 Black Lotus
 1 Mana Crypt
 1 Mox Emerald
 1 Mox Jet
 1 Mox Pearl
 1 Mox Ruby
 1 Mox Sapphire
 1 Tolarian Academy
 3 Misty Rainforest
 3 Scalding Tarn
 3 Tropical Island
 3 Underground Sea
 2 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Leyline of the Void
 2 Sower of Temptation
 2 Trygon Predator
 2 Mental Misstep
 2 Nihil Spellbomb
 1 Hurkyl's Recall
 1 Nature's Claim
 1 Pithing Needle

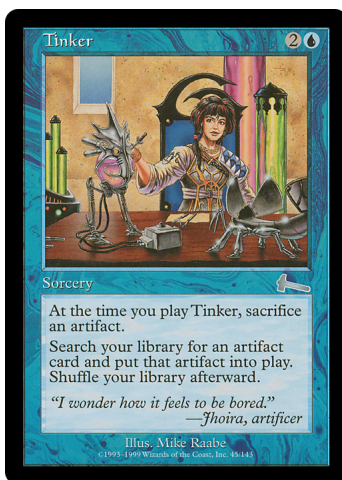
The Combo - *Time Vault + Voltaic Key, Tinker + Blightsteel Colossus + Time Walk, Yawgmoth's Will + restricted cards*

The Control - *Ten counterspells, Nature's Claim, Hurkyl's Recall, Jace to bounce creatures, and more specialized control cards in the board*

Mr. Meddling Mage's deck has many of the trappings you'd associate with the Control deck, even if it is a bit afield of Weissman's Lock Deck. Chris played counterspells like Force of Will, Mana Drain, Mental Misstep, and Spell Pierce, and could interact with permanents via Jace, the Mind Sculptor or Nature's Claim. He could even grind card advantage via the aforementioned planeswalker (which, as you know, is better than all) or Dark Confidant.

... But to actually win?

Tinker. Into Blightsteel Colossus. The one-shot robot.



Tinker + Time Walk with a little explosive Lotus mana could make it all the quicker. Again, as with ZevAtog and other Upheaval-Tog decks we see a deck that can play a controlling game — might even play “mostly” a controlling game — but that can kill with a single explosive move.

Additionally, assembling the combination of Voltaic Key + Time Vault effectively ends the game immediately, in true combo fashion. The other road to victory? Cast Yawgmoth's Will, setting up either of these two combos. Honestly, though, generally untapping with Jace is usually good enough for a win in Vintage.

U/R Twin

Michael Flores 1st TCGPlayer Open 2011 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Deceiver Exarch
 4 Sea Gate Oracle
 1 Pilgrim's Eye
 2 Inferno Titan
 2 Jace Beleren
 4 Jace, the Mind Sculptor
 4 Preordain
 2 Spell Pierce

4 Into the Roil
 3 Mana Leak
 4 Splinter Twin
 4 Tectonic Edge
 4 Scalding Tarn
 10 Island
 8 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

2 Pyroclasm
 2 Manic Vandal
 2 Spell Pierce
 2 Spellskite
 1 Basilisk Collar
 1 Elixir of Immortality
 1 Consecrated Sphinx
 1 Trinket Mage
 1 Dispel
 1 Jace's Ingenuity
 1 Jace Beleren

While we will detail Pro Tour Champion Samuele Estratti's two-card combo Modern Splinter Twin with Traditional Combo, it's interesting to look at the Standard Combo-*Control* version Michael Flores used to win the TCGPlayer Open in the spring of 2011. This deck differs from "real" two-card Combo decks in that it has no tutors (unless you count Sea Gate Oracle and Pilgrim's Eye). Preordain, Jace, the Mind Sculptor, Into the Roil, and Jace Beleren all draw cards rather than looking for them. The deck was built to grind through Inquisition of Kozilek and go over the top of Spellskite.

The Combo - *Deceiver Exarch + Splinter Twin*

The Control - *Five counterspells, lots of bounce, Inferno Titans, and tons of blockers, with sweepers, artifact destruction, and more permission in the board*

Gerry Thompson called this deck "the control version of" Exarch-Twin, in contrast to the supposedly faster three-color decks that tried to jam out their combos with Inquisition of Kozilek. The Flores build fully intended to play out six or more lands before doing anything (other than tapping out for some kind of Jace), and would win with six-drop fatties or burying people under Jace, the Mind Sculptor as often as the actual combo (as was the case in the finals of that event).

Amusingly, Splinter Twin would occasionally find other targets besides Exarch, allowing repeated “enter the battlefield” triggers. Even the lowly Pilgrim’s Eye would occasionally get Twinned up — but at the very least he could block a Squadron Hawk, regardless of which Sword it was carrying in its crooked talons.



The combo itself was Deceiver Exarch + Splinter Twin; add one to the other, and we can make any number of hasty 1/4 creatures to beat our opponent to death in a single turn. The deck was effective, if short-lived. The prophecy of Twin overtaking Caw-Blade never came to fruition... but eventually the banned list did.

Okay — remember that sick combo from the beginning of this chapter? The combo that would doubtless define Standard? That combo was Beacon of Immortality + Rain of Gore. Beacon of Immortality doubles target player's life; with Rain of Gore in play... game on!

When discussing this ostensible game-winning combo with Flores, we decided the combo would be best served in a Combo-Control shell, for all the reasons listed above.

The Greatest Deck That Never Was

Patrick Chapin Magical Christmas Land 2007 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir	1 Careful Consideration	4 Calciform Pools
2 Gigadrowse	1 Damnation	4 Graven Cairns
4 Rain of Gore	1 Pact of Negation	2 Rakdos Carnarium
4 Remand	4 Beacon of Immortality	4 River of Tears
4 Muddle the Mixture	1 Haunting Hymn	4 Tolaria West
4 Remand	4 Azorius Signet	2 Shivan Reef
4 Mystical Teachings	1 Rakdos Signet	2 Adarkar Wastes
1 Clutch of the Undercity	4 Coalition Relic	1 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth

The mana base for this deck was some of my finer work, as there's more to it than meets the eye. The ability to drop Rain of Gore in a deck with a one-half white combo? In a blue shell — essentially retaining all the tools and power of a Teferi Teachings deck? On top of everything else, we didn't play a single land that counts as an Island or Plains! Cryoclash was very popular at the time, and the prospect of completely dodging that particular hate was quite hot.

In looking for possible sideboard options, it occurred to me that Wall of Shards would be pretty sick with Rain of Gore. Then we read Rain of Gore and realized it wouldn't work with Wall of the Shards... which then had me asking, "Wait a minute. If Wall of Shards doesn't work with Rain of Gore, why would Beacon of Immortality?"

The horror on Mike's face was unmistakable.

We enlisted go-to Magic lawyer and tax-man (and former Tongo Nation member/Pro player) Jon Becker to battle on Magic Online. The first few turns, Becker assumed we were playing one of a million control decks... until we dropped the RAIN OF GORE.

"What is this?"

"You'll see! Gotta make sure this works..."

Mike drew cards, set up, and aimed his Beacon of Immortality.

And Becker's life went up.



Apparently, Rain of Gore is not the same as False Cure.

What would have been the rare Clean Break, like Mono-Red Dragonstorm, instead plummeted into Mike calling all his apprentices to stop them from stockpiling Rain of Gores. While this would have been yet another Combo-Control deck taking the title of “best deck in the format,” The Greatest Deck That Never Was instead serves as a reminder that — yes — for every great deck that a great deck designer produces, there are innumerable failures you never see.

Let’s take a look at one more Combo-Control deck, this time from last year at the 2012 Modern Pro Tour. While some Scapeshift decks were built around Prismatic Omen and Wargate (as more of a Traditional Combo deck), this approach is built on playing a sort of U/R Control game (a popular color combination for Combo-Control), while ramping mana until it can reach the Magic number of seven (or eight, if the opponent refuses to do two damage to themselves with their lands). The kill condition is still a Big Spell “one-card combo,” so this deck is more properly rated as a hybrid of the two archetypes.

RUG Scapeshift

Shi Tian Lee 4th Pro Tour Return to Ravnica 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
3 Snapcaster Mage
4 Serum Visions
4 Telling Time
4 Remand
3 Izzet Charm
4 Search for Tomorrow
1 Electrolyze
3 Cryptic Command
4 Scapeshift
2 Repeal

2 Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle
1 Halimar Depths
4 Steam Vents
4 Stomping Ground
1 Breeding Pool
2 Misty Rainforest
2 Flooded Grove
3 Forest
3 Island
2 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Relic of Progenitus
3 Vendilion Clique
2 Obstinate Baloth
2 Volcanic Fallout
1 Ancient Grudge
1 Beast Within
1 Electrolyze
1 Wurmcoil Engine
1 Nature’s Claim

Once Scapeshift resolves, you can find a Valakut (or two) and six lands that count as Mountains, dealing 18 or 36 damage to the opponent. This is a pretty far cry from an “infinite” combo, but it’s generally enough to get the job done.



The Combo - *Scapeshift + Valakut the Molten Pinnacle*

The Control - *Ten counterspells, bounce, burn, and lots of very potent sideboard options to be better equipped to play a controlling game*

Combo-Control decks, like other Control decks, have to be built for the format they’re in. This list doesn’t have sweepers — but as of 2012, Modern wasn’t really about Swarm strategies. Instead, it was a format heavily populated by Jund, Affinity, U/W Aggro-Control, and tons of combo decks. As a result, we see Obstinate Baloth for discard, artifact kill for Affinity, Vendilion Cliques against permission, and counterspells plus Relics for other combo decks.

VIABILITY RATING – 3

These decks still pop up from time to time — but are far more common in Modern, where the size of the card pool allows for more game-winning interactions. That said, these decks do pop up in Standard, from time to time, and they’re not always the result of a mistake by Wizards. It’s only when they’re too fast or too good at playing a Control game that they can really be over-the-top.

DECK #13: BIG SPELL COMBO

Big Spell Combo is the first of four macro archetypes making up the Combo family. Bordering closely on the iconic Upheaval of Combo-Control, the term *combo* is used loosely here — as quite often, you don't need to combine a big spell with anything other than the mana to cast it. Big Spell is often the “one-spell combo,” and its position in the Combo family relies on casting that one huge (and presumably expensive) spell, as well as the non-interactivity and/or snowballing inevitability that happens afterwards. Big Spells often pair themselves with other cards *by themselves*.

**BIG SPELL IS OFTEN
THE “ONE-SPELL
COMBO,” & ...
RELIES ON CASTING
THAT ONE HUGE SPELL**

Not everyone feels like their Big Spell deck is a Combo deck... hey, whatever they have to tell themselves!

A Big Spell deck advances to Stage Three (often relatively quickly) and wins the game by playing a single *Big Spell* that allows it to generate a tremendous contextual advantage. That advantage — and thus the choice of the Big Spell — is based on the parameters of the format, the structure of how the deck is built, and the ability to go over the top of any opponent when our game plan is successfully enacted. Even if the game isn't technically over yet, the chances for an opponent to come back are remote.

What is the difference between this and Storm spells like Dragonstorm or Mind's Desire? For those cards, it's the counting, the amassing of a critical amount of pre-storm activity that is important. For Big Spell decks, all you have to do is play the Big Spell.

Big Spell decks generally:

- Are set up to maximize the power of a single spell (or a few similar spells) with the intent of winning the game upon successfully playing a single copy
- Can play a legitimate “backup” game with the rest of their deck, since the key big spell requires a relatively small percentage of the deck to work
- Frequently require “bad” cards that are needed in the deck in order to turn the Big Spell into a game-winner, though these cards do not need to be actually be drawn or cast

The iconic Big Spell in Standard and Extended might be Tooth and Nail; its little brother Natural Order brings a Big Spell to less-focused (or hybrid) decks. Both Tooth and Nail and Natural Order require you to play with gigantic fatties that you will usually never be able to cast. “Bad” cards are usually uncastable (or just really bad rate cards) when used outside of their combo synergy.

Many different strategies have Big Spell elements or end games, including Mindslaver in U/W UrzaTron or Cruel Ultimatum in 5-Color Control. The strength of the Big Spell concept is that it allows you to win most games where you resolve the single key spell, while often allowing you room to play a legitimate game outside of the so-called “one-card combo.”

The weakness is that Big Spell decks are generally much slower than other combo decks, and more vulnerable to mana denial; contrast an Ad Nauseam (Storm Combo) deck, which can still cast a lethal sorcery with one (or no!) lands in play to Tooth and Nail (which usually taps for nine mana by making five or more consecutive land drops). The structure of Big Spell decks often leaves them with dead draws (like both Tooth and Nail and Enduring Ideal), or openings to tempo decks (like Cruel Control).

Occasionally, a combination of cards unanticipated by R&D will allow for a Big Spell that *is not* expensive — such as Shardless Agent or Violent Outburst being used to set up the “free” Hypergenesis. While such decks can be deadly, they often come with unique limitations of their own. For example, Hypergenesis itself may be a mythical one-card combo... but you still have to have some game-winners *in hand* to take advantage of it, and you can have literally no support cards cheaper than three mana (or your cascade spells won’t work).



Goblin Charbelcher is one of the fastest decks available in Legacy; it's a Big Spell that takes advantage of a deck *with only one or two lands!* While incredibly potent when you hit, you're still *playing a deck with only two lands*. What happens when something goes wrong?

While often high in the power department, Big Spell decks can be cursed with strange mana bases, unusual levels of fragility that can be exploited by observant opponents, or an inability to sideboard without violating an essential structure of the deck.

This section will include:

- Tooth and Nail
- Enduring Ideal
- Cascade
- Valakut
- Tinker

TwelvePost

Gabriel Nassif 2nd Pro Tour Kobe 2004 (Mirrodin Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Viridian Shaman
4 Solemn Simulacrum
1 Leonin Abunas
1 Duplicant
1 Platinum Angel
1 Darksteel Colossus
4 Oxidize
4 Sylvan Scrying
4 Oblivion Stone

4 Reap and Sow
2 Mindslaver
4 Tooth and Nail
2 Talisman of Unity
1 Blinkmoth Nexus
3 Stalking Stones
4 Cloudpost
16 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Chalice of the Void
4 Pulse of the Tangle
4 Tel-Jilad Chosen
1 Duplicant
1 Mindslaver
1 Platinum Angel

Big Spell - *Tooth and Nail*

Payoff - *Tutor for and deploy two creatures, usually expensive ones, that often lock out the game or win immediately*

"Bad" Cards - *Darksteel Colossus, Leonin Abunas, Duplicant, Platinum Angel*

The Pro Tour Kobe format was defined by Ravager Affinity. Not only were chronic threats Arcbound Ravager, Disciple of the Vault, and the full retinue of artifact lands legal, but Skullclamp was available as well.

And yet you have the master Nassif piloting the original Tooth and Nail deck to the finals! It was a no-Affinity finals, in fact, where he lost to Tsuyoshi Fujita's Red Deck in the hands of Masashiro Kuroda. Many pundits saw the Kobe finals as the defining duel between two of the greatest deck designers in the world, at the time.

Despite the speed of an aggressive Affinity, Nassif was able to stay competitive by playing a fair number of acceleration effects. He needed to hit nine mana, and could do so by either slowing the predicted opponent down with Oxidize (which cost one mana), and by using both both conventional and format-dependent acceleration: Talismans, Solemn Simulacrum, and of course Reap and Sow for Cloudpost. Cloudpost is a powerful land (and costs very little as your first land); Nassif could find many Cloudposts in a hurry between Sylvan Scrying and Reap and Sow. Talisman of Unity into Solemn Simulacrum isn't exactly the worst backup plan, either.

Playing 38 cards dedicated to mana and mana acceleration may seem like a lot, but we see similar mana counts even today. How many mana sources did Valakut decks play? What about Kessig Wolf Run? Dedicating over nearly two-thirds of the deck to mana is a hefty cost, sure — but in this case, the payoff was getting to resolve Tooth and Nail.

Platinum Angel + Leonin Abunas was a soft lock (you had to kill the Abunas to kill the Angel — and in Block, the ability to do both was not trivial underneath the Angel's five-turn clock). Alternatively, just “Tinkering” out the Darksteel Colossus put the opponent on a quick clock. In fact, the G/W transformative Tooth and Nail sideboard played by Brian Kibler at 2004 US National Championship just put out two fatties to race!



G/W Control

Brian Kibler 6th US National Championship 2004 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Eternal Dragon	4 Akroma's Vengeance
4 Oxidize	3 Decree of Justice
2 Gilded Light	4 Temple of the False God
4 Pulse of the Fields	4 Elfhome Palace
4 Renewed Faith	4 Windswept Heath
4 Wing Shards	12 Plains
4 Wrath of God	3 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Purge
3 Tooth and Nail
2 Darksteel Colossus
2 Duplicant
2 Mindslaver
2 Reap and Sow

Kibler's Tooth and Nail package *had* to be especially compact, as he had to fit it in his sideboard (the maindeck was essentially inviolate against a room full of Affinity and Goblins, but a "real" Tooth and Nail deck would consistently go over the top).

Big Spell - *Tooth and Nail*

Payoff - A pair of *Darksteel Colossi*, adding up to 22 points of indestructibility

"Bad" Cards - *Darksteel Colossus*, *Duplicant*

Interestingly, we see here an unusual capacity to introduce / reintroduce fair play to a Big Spell matchup. Kibler could set up Akroma and Darksteel Colossus. If the opponent answered with Leonin Abunus + Angel (or double Platinum Angel), the Dragonmaster could Wrath of God away their end game, while leaving his own Darksteel Colossus fair and square.

Later builds add other two-card end games, such as:

- Darksteel Colossus + Darksteel Colossus (a Wrath of God-proof, one-attack win)
- Triskelion + Mephidross Vampire (kill all your creatures)
- Kiki-Jiki, Mirror-Breaker + Sky Hussar (attack for infinite)

Clearly, adding more sets and widening format opportunities improved Tooth and Nail's ability to lock down the board post-Big Spell.



Enduring Ideal

Andre Mueller 2nd Pro Tour Valencia 2007 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Lotus Bloom	3 Enduring Ideal
4 Sensei's Divining Top	1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
4 Orim's Chant	3 Flooded Strand
4 Pentad Prism	3 Sacred Foundry
4 Burning Wish	1 Godless Shrine
1 Pernicious Deed	3 Sulfur Vent
3 Solitary Confinement	4 Ancient Spring
4 Seething Song	4 Tinder Farm
1 Honden of Seeing Winds	3 Windswept Heath
2 Dovescape	1 Plains
3 Form of the Dragon	

SIDEBOARD

4 Leyline of the Void
3 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
3 Tormod's Crypt
1 Cranial Extraction
1 Enduring Ideal
1 Morningtide
1 Pyroclasm
1 Vindicate

Big Spell - *Enduring Ideal*

Payoff - *Progressive Inevitability / lock down over multiple turns (e.g. Solitary Confinement + Honden of Seeing Winds + Form of the Dragon)*

"Bad" Cards - *Form of the Dragon, Solitary Confinement, Honden of Seeing Winds, Dovescape, Pernicious Deed*

Mueller's deck was set up to build to a one-card combo. His Big Spell (and deck's namesake) was Enduring Ideal, which would allow it to tutor for a lock component every turn. The successful Ideal player would in theory grab the contextually-best card in his deck every turn, incrementally advancing his position turn after turn.

Against ground beatdown (in particular, non-red beatdown), he might go for Form of the Dragon. In another "damage matters" spot, it might be Solitary Confinement, which would be followed up with a tutor for Honden of Seeing Winds. Dovescape would lock an opponent out of spells, where over time, the Ideal deck could win a battle of Epic sorceries and out-Dove the opponent.

Where other decks would be dropping a 3/3, Ideal could be pushing out its epic seven. Pentad Prism is better than Boros Signet here, as it helps Ideal "explode" to seven (re-use of a card is irrelevant if you only plan to cast one spell); the expenditure of a Sulfur Vent or Tinder Farm is equally meaningless when you're shooting for epic.



Enduring Ideal is perhaps the *ideal* example of potential Big Spell limitations. Epic is a pretty restrictive condition. Once your first Ideal resolves, you literally can't cast anything else the rest of the game.

You can also just run out of enchantments. What if your opponent has creatures like Kami of Ancient Law? He can invalidate your plan by running you out of epic! For instance, if you lose your Honden, how are you to going to pay for Confinement? Dominant Big Spell decks therefore often create sub-games. *How can I win even when my opponent resolves his Big Spell?*

One of the cleanest examples of the Big Spell deck is the cascade family of combo decks: Hypergenesis and Living End.

Hypergenesis

Tomoharu Saito 8th Grand Prix Oakland 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Simian Spirit Guide	3 Oblivion Ring
1 Sakashima the Impostor	3 Thirst for Knowledge
4 Angel of Despair	1 Calciform Pools
4 Bogardan Hellkite	3 Forbidden Orchard
4 Terastodon	3 Fungal Reaches
4 Progenitus	1 Gemstone Caverns
3 Hypergenesis	4 Gemstone Mine
4 Ardent Plea	4 Reflecting Pool
4 Violent Outburst	4 Tendo Ice Bridge
1 Demonic Dread	1 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Leyline of the Void
3 Ricochet Trap
2 Ingot Chewer
2 Shriekmaw
2 Sakashima the Impostor
2 Firespout

Big Spell - Hypergenesis

Payoff - Multiple huge fatties, often lethal in one or two attacks, in play on turn 2 or 3

"Bad" Cards - Progenitus, Terastodon, Bogardan Hellkite, Angel of Despair, Sakashima the Impostor

Saito merely had to play Ardent Plea, Demonic Dread, or Violent Outburst, and he *would* hit Hypergenesis... there are simply no other spells he *could* hit.



Now, of course that meant that he couldn't play fast action to defend himself. No Lightning Bolts here! If he wanted to do three, Saito would have to wait on three for a Firespout, taking heavy damage along the way.

Saito could hit a second-turn cascade with Simian Spirit Guide, but that should probably tell you something about the limitations of this strategy... Your only acceleration catalyst technically has a cost of three mana!



Unlike almost every other kind of combo deck, this one can't really fix its hand. Hypergenesis (or, rather, a cheap cascade *into* Hypergenesis) may be an extremely easy-to-hit one-card combo, but you still have to have some monsters in hand to actually take advantage of it. The quality of your Hypergenesis is directly dependent on the quality of your hand... and it's not like you can do much sculpting to set that up, given the casting cost and time requirements.

Yes, Hypergenesis can put you into a nigh-unstoppable position with a fast clock (especially when you have multiple Angel of Despairs), but the card *is* symmetrical. Your opponent might have something awesome, or you can even give an opponent the lands he needs to trump your Hypergenesis (and committed creatures) with a Wrath of God.

Travis Woo went another direction with his cascade combo. Rather than Hypergenesis, Travis went for Living End as his big spell. His creatures are all far less impressive than an icon like Progenitus... but his deck was also far less draw-dependent. Travis could cycle into land drops or improve his hand turn after turn. He could let the opponent get to a certain level of investment before chopping him off at the ankles with a Wrath of God-like effect that put several of Travis's attackers into play.

Living End

Travis Woo 4th Grand Prix Oakland 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Fulminator Mage	2 Night of Souls' Betrayal
4 Deadshot Minotaur	4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Ingot Chewer	2 Arid Mesa
4 Monstrous Carabid	2 Scalding Tarn
4 Street Wraith	1 Blood Crypt
4 Valley Rannet	1 Overgrown Tomb
4 Jungle Weaver	1 Stomping Ground
3 Living End	3 Swamp
4 Violent Outburst	3 Mountain
4 Demonic Dread	2 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Shriekmaw
3 Kitchen Finks
3 Maelstrom Pulse
3 Thought Hemorrhage
1 Yixlid Jailer
1 Night of Souls' Betrayal

Big Spell - *Living End*

Payoff - *An asymmetrical battlefield position, often resulting in a combination of lethal attackers for you and no board at all for your opponent*

"Bad" Cards - *Deadshot Minotaur, Ingot Chewer, Monstrous Carabid, Street Wraith, Valley Rannet, Jungle Weaver*

He could drag out Fulminator Mages, blocking while taxing an opponent's mana base, knowing the Fulminators were coming right back. While technically Living End *was* a symmetrical card, few decks (other than a Living End mirror) would have a critical mass of creatures in the graveyard by the time it fired.

In some formats, simply playing mana acceleration (and along with that, more expensive and necessarily "bigger" spells) gives rise to the de facto Big Spell deck of the format. Hence, there's substantial blurring in this area, since there's a rough continuum



that ranges from actual “one-spell combo kill” (e.g. Scapeshift), to some kind of a de facto win via a single spell (e.g. Tinker), or just playing the biggest thing, where even if it’s technically a “fair” play, it is so much better than the format’s default value that it might as *well* be an Enduring Ideal (e.g. Primeval Titan).

You’ll notice that disparate Big Spells like Scapeshift and Primeval Titan will often get you to the exact same place, and that Tinker decks (which typically play a ton of mana acceleration) can accomplish similar ends either by playing the iconic namesake or just casting huge threats with all that mana. What actually happens in any of these decks’ Stage Threes is fairly format-dependent and contextual within the course of a game.

Gerry Thompson’s Valakut Ramp, the deck he used to win the 2010 StarCityGames.com Invitational, is a good illustration of mana ramp working hand-in-hand with Big Spell-style combo. For one thing, the deck is full of relatively expensive fair casts (more than a full slot’s six drops, multiple seven-drop, and a sideboarded Terastodon taking an *eight*-slot); you need lots of mana and mana acceleration to get all of those things rolling. So GerryT played 28 lands as well as sixteen dedicated early-Stage accelerators.

Valakut

Gerry Thompson 1st StarCityGames.com Richmond Invitational 2010 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Overgrown Battlement
4 Primeval Titan
1 Inferno Titan
2 Avenger of Zendikar
4 Explore
4 Khalni Heart Expedition
3 Pyroclasm
4 Cultivate
4 Harrow

2 Summoning Trap
4 Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle
1 Khalni Garden
1 Verdant Catacombs
3 Terramorphic Expanse
3 Evolving Wilds
11 Mountain
5 Forest

SIDEBOARD

3 Acidic Slime
2 Koth of the Hammer
2 Lightning Bolt
2 Obstinate Baloth
2 Summoning Trap
1 Pyroclasm
1 Rampaging Baloths
1 Ratchet Bomb
1 Terastodon

Big Spell - *Primeval Titan, Summoning Trap (sometimes even Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle)*

Payoff - *An inevitable position via Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle or a lethal attack from either Primeval Titan or Avenger of Zendikar*

"Bad" Cards - *The 11 Mountains. This is basically a mono-green deck with 53 mana sources, so yeah, I'd say the 11 Mountains are pretty bad*

If you keep casting acceleration, playing out lands, then your top end is just going to be bigger than theirs. Avenger of Zendikar doesn't take very long to kill the opponent, and the old adage is that if someone attacks you with a Primeval Titan, you're probably going to lose unless you attack them back with a Titan. But Gerry isn't just playing expensive spells for retail cost. Look at what Primeval Titan is searching up: Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle.

Valakut decks didn't actually *need* Primeval Titans to compete in Standard; Primeval Titan just made them much better. You could just sit there with Valakut and sufficient Mountains in play and win eventually. Lead on a Pyroclasm and then play an Evolving Wilds... ho hum, you can take down a Baneslayer Angel with relatively little investment. With *two* Molten Pinnacles in play? It's awfully hard to kill you with creatures. A Mountain can take out a Titan. You can sacrifice a Terramorphic Expanse mid-combat to shoot down a Celestial Colonnade.

Of course, playing a Primeval Titan (or especially an ultra-fast and super-lucky Primeval Titan, say via a Summoning Trap) can set up your Valakut inevitability perfectly (by putting multiple Valakuts onto the battlefield) — and if you ever attack, you probably only have to do fourteen damage. GerryT's whole support staff — Khalni Heart Expedition, Harrow, Cultivate, Explore, all of them — was designed to either get to Primeval Titan or make Primeval Titan look really good once it was already going.

For example, you might have a Titan down, play a Khalni Heart Expedition, attack, put some Valakuts in play (and double quest counters on any such Expedition), play your "fair" land for turn, and then sacrifice Expedition(s) for six to twelve damage *per*. It's kind of hard to isolate what the Big Spell was here — probably both Primeval Titan and non-spell Valakut (in multiples or no) — qualify.



Another way to abuse Valakut is to play it in a deck containing Scapeshift.

While we discussed Scapeshift in Combo-Control, it's also very much a Big Spell deck, as well as being a perfect hybrid of the two strategies. Isn't Valakut + Scapeshift a two-card combo? Well, since you didn't have to draw the Valakut, it's fair to say you need just the one big spell (Scapeshift). This is in sharp contrast to Prismatic Omen + Scapeshift decks that actually have to assemble a two-card combo to win.

RUG Scapeshift

Shi Tian Lee 4th Pro Tour Return to Ravnica 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
3 Snapcaster Mage
4 Serum Visions
4 Telling Time
4 Remand
3 Izzet Charm
4 Search for Tomorrow
1 Electrolyze
3 Cryptic Command
4 Scapeshift
2 Repeal

2 Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle
1 Halimar Depths
4 Steam Vents
4 Stomping Ground
1 Breeding Pool
2 Misty Rainforest
2 Flooded Grove
3 Forest
3 Island
2 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Relic of Progenitus
3 Vendilion Clique
2 Obstinate Baloth
2 Volcanic Fallout
1 Ancient Grudge
1 Beast Within
1 Electrolyze
1 Wurmcoil Engine
1 Nature's Claim

Big Spell - *Scapeshift*

Payoff - *One Shot Kill*

"Bad" Cards - *Ten Mountains in a U/G control deck*

Before Summoning Trap for Primeval Titan, there was Natural Order for Verdant Force — Jamie Wakefield's career-making Secret Force deck. And alongside Jamie's green lover was a little sorcery for 2U that did much the same thing as Natural Order... To the point that Jamie called Tinker decks "Blue Secret Force."

To close out the Big Spell chapter, we'll look at three different Tinker decks played by Hall of Famers Alan Comer, Bob Maher, and Bob Maher, *again* to huge finishes in Standard and Extended.

Suicide Brown

Alan Comer 5th Pro Tour Chicago 1999 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Masticore	4 Phyrexian Processor
2 Phyrexian Colossus	4 Thran Dynamo
4 Mana Vault	1 Null Brooch
4 Voltaic Key	3 Crumbling Sanctuary
1 Cursed Scroll	4 City of Traitors
4 Grim Monolith	3 Ancient Tomb
3 Mana Leak	2 Dust Bowl
1 Arcane Denial	12 Island
4 Tinker	

SIDEBOARD

3 Annul
 3 Null Brooch
 2 Back to Basics
 2 Disrupting Scepter
 1 Caltrops
 1 Crumbling Sanctuary
 1 Mana Leak
 1 Phyrexian Furnace
 1 Thran Foundry

Big Spell - *Tinker (+various)*

Payoff - *Positional, the perfect large effect, worth far more than was spent*

"Bad" Cards - *Phyrexian Colossus, Crumbling Sanctuary, Null Brooch*

Suicide Brown is perhaps the most redundant form of Tinker decks — the almost “Big and Dumb” version. It’s the kind of deck that looks at its hand, sees what it can do, and tries to beat you with whatever it’s got lying around. Unlike many Tinker contemporaries, Comer & Co. played four Masticores. They wanted to draw it, and they often had the mana to play it in their opening hands. An unchecked Masticore — especially on the first turn — is a fast clock, a trump to most creatures the opponent can cast in the early game, and, again, redundant. The “Suicide” in the name came from the deck’s same attitude towards quickly finding (and playing) a Phyrexian Processor. Win now, or you can probably race... and if need be, fall behind on a Crumbling Sanctuary.

Tinker was used in Suicide Brown not so much as a tutor and a cheat, but as a method of further redundancy. Comer was fine drawing and playing a Crumbling Sanctuary for defense (he played all four), but sometimes he had to go find one before he died.



The primary difference between this deck and other mono-blue Tinkers was not just its “Big and Dumb” — almost *green* — attitude towards its threats, but in that the deck could play a kind of faster Fish. Down came a threat — here a Phyrexian Colossus instead of a Cursecatcher — and it would sit back and Mana Leak or Arcane Denial your answer. Comer assumed the game wouldn’t last long enough that he would have to draw more than one or two counterspells (but if he did, there was always Tinker for Null Brooch).

Tinker

Bob Maher, Jr. 2nd World Championships 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Metalworker
4 Masticore
1 Phyrexian Colossus
4 Voltaic Key
4 Grim Monolith
4 Tinker
4 Tangle Wire
4 Phyrexian Processor

4 Thran Dynamo
1 Mishra’s Helix
1 Crumbling Sanctuary
3 Stroke of Genius
4 Rishadan Port
4 Crystal Vein
4 Saprazzan Skerry
10 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Annul
4 Chill
4 Miscalculation
2 Rising Waters
1 Mishra’s Helix

Big Spell - *Tinker, Stroke of Genius (+various)*

Payoff - *Positional, the perfect large effect, worth far more than was spent*

“Bad” Cards - *Phyrexian Colossus, Mishra’s Helix, Crumbling Sanctuary*

Jon Finkel actually beat Bob Maher in a Tinker mirror match for the 2000 World Championship, but I think you’ll see in a moment why we chose Bob’s implementation.

Maher’s deck used Metalworker as an additional source of mana acceleration redundancy (as well as a potential Tinker catalyst). His Tinkers were more surgical than those of Suicide Brown, with Stroke of Genius serving as an additional Big Spell and even as a combo-kill (you could Stroke yourself to put lots of artifacts in your hand, use Voltaic Key to tap and untap your Metalworker, and then Stroke out the opponent). His sideboard Rising Waters gave the Tinker deck a nod to a Lock deck in his sideboard plans.



Tinker

Bob Maher, Jr. 1st Yokohama Masters Series 2003 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Metalworker	2 Phyrexian Processor
4 Masticore	1 Mishra's Helix
1 Phyrexian Colossus	2 Upheaval
4 Voltaic Key	1 Urza's Blueprints
1 Crumbling Sanctuary	3 Stroke of Genius
4 Grim Monolith	3 Ancient Tomb
4 Tinker	4 City of Traitors
4 Tangle Wire	4 Rishadan Port
4 Thran Dynamo	10 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Seal of Removal
3 Sphere of Resistance
2 Crumbling Sanctuary
1 Defense Grid
1 Mishra's Helix
1 Null Brooch
1 Predator, Flagship
1 Upheaval
1 Urza's Blueprints

Big Spell - *Tinker, Upheaval (+various)*

Payoff - *Positional*

"Bad" Cards - *Phyrexian Colossus, Mishra's Helix, Crumbling Sanctuary, Urza's Blueprints*

Maher's Masters Series win featured yet *another* Tinker deck. In addition to the Tinkers and Strokes of the past, Maher's Upheaval inclusion gave the deck a very recognizable Big Spell in Upheaval, which usually went for Upheaval + lots of artifact mana. The classic "Big Spell that spells doom but doesn't actually kill you... yet" feel.



None of which is to say that this threesome of mono-blue Tinker decks is the extent of Tinker, or of mana acceleration setting up big blue ways to win. A U/R Tinker deck won its Block Constructed Pro Tour in Rye Town in 1999. Various U/R Tinker decks of that era won through every combination of Citanul Flutes and Wildfires. In a sense, many later URzaTron decks (especially U/R Wildfire versions) carry forward the Big Spell tradition, mixing mana acceleration and effects ranging from “just” a Keiga, the Tide Star (a strategy that borders on Tap-Out Control) to bigger game land destruction decks, backed up by Izzet Signets or set up by positional plays like Annex first.

Of the sixteen core strategies, Big Spell may be the most format-contextual. Sometimes you can look at an Enduring Ideal and nod your head; *yes, that’s a combo deck*. But other times, the scale of a format might cut off with a seemingly fair, if powerful, card.

How big does “big” have to be? I’ll finish off Big Spell Combo with one of my favorites: the Five-Color Cascade deck Michael Jacob and I designed for Pro Tour Honolulu 2008, which Zac Hill piloted to a Top 8 just before going to work for Wizards of the Coast.

5-Color Cascade

Zac Hill 6th Pro Tour Honolulu 2009 (Shards of Alara Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Wall of Denial
4 Bloodbraid Elf
2 Kathari Remnant
2 Caldera Hellion
2 Ajani Vengeant
4 Esper Charm
4 Maelstrom Pulse
4 Traumatic Visions
3 Bituminous Blast
1 Obelisk of Alara
3 Cruel Ultimatum

1 Nicol Bolas, Planeswalker
4 Exotic Orchard
4 Rupture Spire
3 Arcane Sanctum
3 Seaside Citadel
2 Jungle Shrine
4 Swamp
3 Island
2 Mountain
1 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Blightning
4 Celestial Purge
3 Deny Reality
2 Qasali Pridemage
1 Scepter of Fugue
1 Ajani Vengeant

Big Spell - *Cruel Ultimatum*

Payoff - *Greater Power... There is always a greater power*

“Bad” Cards - *That’s an awful lot of lands coming into play tapped...*

The life gain and battlefield positioning of a Cruel Ultimatum really, *really* helps against a beatdown deck assuming you can live seven turns. The difference between a control deck that can force through a Cruel Ultimatum and one that can't is telling.

To be fair, this deck is actually a hybrid between Big Spell and Tap-Out Control. (And yet, amusingly it's *not* a Combo-Control deck...) In many formats, it would be closer to Tap-Out; but given the block environment where it lived, Cruel Ultimatum was generally game over.

Again, this is format-dependent. You have to determine whether you're bringing a knife, or a nuke, to this gun fight.

Big Spell Combo decks as a whole?

VIABILITY RATING – 8

Big Spell decks most commonly manifest in the form of ramp decks — and while it's not always possible to produce one-shot kills, it's generally a pretty common strategy to funnel most of your resources into being able to produce spells capable of producing game-winning advantages.

DECK #14: TRADITIONAL COMBO

Chances are you already know what a “traditional” combo is in the context of Magic: The Gathering. When we talk about Traditional Combo decks, we’re talking two- and three-card combinations. More specifically, we’re talking decks that *tend to win immediately* when the specified two or three cards show up together. Rare is the Traditional Combo deck that builds any kind of incremental advantages or chooses to fight an attrition war.

As always, remember that strategies fall along a spectrum. Certain iconic decks possess traits that defy single-categorization (for example, My Fires was discussed both in the Red Aggro and Pure Midrange chapters). For our purposes, Traditional Combo decks err on the side of speed and redundancy, rather than the flexibility and hybridization of their Combo-Control brethren.

Traditional Combo decks — especially at their best — tend to be *fast*. One of the clearest distinctions against Combo-Control decks is that in most cases, Traditional Combo decks play the beatdown when considering *Who’s the Beatdown?* in a matchup. Think about a deck like Cephalid Breakfast: turn 1 Shuko, turn 2 Cephalid Illusionist. Not only is that a relatively simple and fast two-card, three-mana way to win, it’s simply faster than the fastest possible beatdown deck. The vast majority of Traditional Combo decks can kill the opponent more quickly than almost any deck can win by attacking with creatures.

**TRADITIONAL COMBO
DECKS CAN KILL
MORE QUICKLY THAN
ALMOST ANY DECK
CAN BY ATTACKING
WITH CREATURES**

In contrast to Storm Combo decks, Traditional Combo decks tend to command certainty of victory if not disrupted. They almost never “fizzle,” but on balance, they tend to play many strange and unattractive cards that provide little to no utility outside their roles in the combo itself.

Traditional Combo decks generally:

- Sidestep the usual need to attack or gain a dominating board position by assembling a two- or three-card combination that wins the game outright
- Win faster than is normally possible by attacking with creatures
- Thrive on redundancy, wanting specific cards, not quantity of cards

More than almost any other macro archetype in Magic, Traditional Combo decks want to dig to specific cards, instead of just drawing extra cards — unlike, say, Storm Combo. Many times a Traditional Combo deck just wants to find one half of the combo or other... you know, so they can win on the spot with their weird cards that almost never fail.

This section will include:

- Trix
- Dark Depths
- Flash-Hulk
- Breakfast
- Twin
- Wargate

Full-On Trix

Scott McCord 2nd Grand Prix Philadelphia 2000 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Dark Ritual
4 Mana Vault
4 Duress
4 Demonic Consultation
3 Vampiric Tutor
2 Brainstorm
1 Hoodwink
4 Necropotence
4 Donate

4 Illusions of Grandeur
4 Force of Will
1 Contagion
4 Gemstone Mine
4 Underground River
4 Underground Sea
6 Swamp
3 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Phyrexian Negator
3 Annul
3 Hydroblast
2 Contagion
2 Unmask
1 Hoodwink

Until the unveiling of Flash-Hulk at Grand Prix Columbus in 2007, Full-On Trix was generally considered the most dangerous deck of all time. An Extended deck, Full-On Trix was not just a great combo deck, but an exemplar of the principle of just playing all the best cards. Trix played Mana Vault, Dark Ritual, Demonic Consultation, Duress, Vampiric Tutor, and, of course, Necropotence. *All* of these cards, with the exception of Duress, were eventually banned in Extended.

Necropotence — one of the most powerful card-drawing engines of all time — was used to draw into the Trix combo of Illusions of Grandeur + Donate. In this deck, you could use the

manipulation (Demonic Consultation, Vampiric Tutor, etc.) to set up Necropotence or the combo. Further, Necropotence was a hell of a grinder. You could draw up, assemble your mana suite (Mana Vault, et al) or your disruption suite (Duress and Force of Will) to get way ahead and/or ensure that your Illusions + Donate stuck.

Combo - *Illusions of Grandeur + Donate*

Weakness - *Enchantment removal could destroy the Illusions with the life gain ability on the stack, killing the Trix player before they can Donate it away; life gain could also force the Trix player to go off twice*

Step 1: Play Illusions, gaining twenty life. Step 2: Donate the Illusions of Grandeur to the opponent. He will eventually fail to pay the cumulative upkeep and lose twenty life.



A strong argument for Trix's dominance was not *just* that its card quality was so amazing, but that it was a combo deck that *gained twenty life* in the middle of going off. How could beatdown compete? Gaining lots of life was, of course, synergistic with Necropotence, allowing the Trix mage to assemble and *reassemble* a disruption hand to defend himself until the opponent died.

Weird Cards - *Illusions of Grandeur isn't so great if you actually have to pay the cumulative upkeep indefinitely. Donate has little to no other text, though Donating a tapped Mana Vault could get some extra points in.*

McCord played a Contagion and a Hoodwink. One was for Elvish Lyrist, and the other was to immediately kill the opponent (or to defend against permanent-based Naturalize effects, like Aura

of Silence or Seal of Cleansing). An active Elvish Lyryst could kill a Trix player with the “gain twenty life” on the stack (he would die before gaining the life); ditto on a Seal of Cleansing. If the opponent gained life above twenty (i.e. from a Spike Feeder), Scott might have to go off a *second* time. Three-color Trix decks accomplished the same ends with Firestorm, which could both kill Elvish Lyryst and deal a couple of points to the opponent.

Redundancies - *There was no replacing either side of the Trix combo, but Vampiric Tutor and Demonic Consultation could produce either side essentially on demand. The Trix combo was both fragile and somewhat easy to overcome — many players ran transformational sideboards including Phyrexian Negator, and sometimes Masticore or Skittering Horror, winning via beatdown.*

U/R Trix

Kai Budde 1st Pro Tour New Orleans 2001 (Extended)

MAINDECK

2 Brainstorm	3 Intuition
4 Counterspell	1 Capsize
4 Accumulated Knowledge	4 Illusions of Grandeur
4 Merchant Scroll	4 Force of Will
4 Sapphire Medallion	4 Shivan Reef
3 Fire // Ice	4 Volcanic Island
4 Donate	14 Island
1 Impulse	

SIDEBOARD

4 Pyroblast
 3 Pyroclasm
 3 Morphling
 2 Hydroblast
 2 Stroke of Genius
 1 Hibernation

Kai Budde cemented one of the finest runs in the history of Pro Tour Magic with yet another win, using a seemingly depowered Trix deck after Necropotence and company fell beneath the banhammer.

His combination was the same as McCord’s (Illusions of Grandeur + Donate), but Kai used a card drawing/card selection model to get there via Impulse, Brainstorm, and Accumulated Knowledge.

Intuition for Accumulated Knowledge could approximate an Ancestral Recall, and Intuition could itself “Demonic Tutor” for either combo half, as Kai played three-plus copies of each in his deck.

Combo - *Illusions of Grandeur + Donate*

Weakness - *Enchantment removal and lifegain, particularly cards like Aura of Silence; a fast clock with a lot of meaningful disruption*

“Trix” could be mono-blue, but Kai could use Fire/Ice to get rid of an Elvish Lyrist or top off a Spike Feeder.

The deck was reminiscent of High Tide as Combo-Control — and would be even moreso when it, too, adopted Thawing Glaciers (and sometimes even Treachery) to supplement the Morphling transformation.

Dark Depths

Paulo Vitor Dama da Rosa 8th Pro Tour Austin 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Dark Confidant	4 Chrome Mox
4 Vampire Hexmage	4 Dark Depths
3 Vendilion Clique	1 Ghost Quarter
4 Thoughtseize	4 River of Tears
4 Chalice of the Void	4 Sunken Ruins
3 Engineered Explosives	4 Tolaria West
4 Muddle the Mixture	2 Underground River
3 Beseech the Queen	4 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth
3 Repeal	1 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Bitterblossom
2 Damnation
2 Threads of Disloyalty
2 Tormod's Crypt
1 Doom Blade
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Pithing Needle
1 Slaughter Pact
1 Yixlid Jailer

Combo - *Vampire Hexmage + Dark Depths*

Weakness - *A 2/1 is relatively fragile, but the 20/20 Marit Lage token was perhaps even more so. Repeal could deal with it for very little mana, providing tremendous value. Path to Exile and so on were also available. PVDDR used Chalice of the Void (outlawing one-mana cards) as a proactive solution.*

The combo is a straightforward one: Vampire Hexmage + Dark Depths. Sacrifice Vampire Hexmage to remove all the counters from Dark Depths, get a 20/20, attack for the win.



Dream Draw:

Turn 1: Urborg → Thoughtseize your answer

Turn 2: Dark Depths (now a Swamp, thanks to Urborg) → Vampire Hexmage!

Weird Cards - Vampire Hexmage was a surprisingly sprightly body, but Dark Depths had little utility by itself. Yes, you could occasionally invest lots of mana into your Marit Lage token, but that generally wasn't the winning Plan A in a quick format like Extended.

Redundancies - PVDDR played lots of ways to get 1/1 tokens after sideboarding — Bitterblossom and Meloku the Clouded Mirror — because the two-card combo was not particularly robust against a prepared opponent. However, Gerry Thompson's hybridization proved to be one of the greatest decks of all time.

Eventually, GerryT got his hands on this strategy and took it to the Next Level by incorporating the *additional* two-card combo of Thopter Foundry + Sword of the Meek, on top of the Vampire Hexmage + Dark Depths combo. This combination allowed the deck to produce 1/1 creatures equal to its mana by sacrificing the Sword of the Meek to Thopter Foundry to make a creature, which would of course bring back the Sword. Rinse, repeat. Though it wasn't an instant win like some two-card combinations, this one was a tremendous supplement, giving the Thepths version easy wins against players with grips full of Repeal and Path to Exiles.

Thepths

Katsuhiko Mori 1st Grand Prix Yokohama 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Dark Confidant	1 Compulsive Research
4 Vampire Hexmage	2 Repeal
1 Jace, the Mind Sculptor	4 Chrome Mox
4 Thoughtseize	4 Dark Depths
1 Duress	1 Ghost Quarter
4 Muddle the Mixture	4 River of Tears
3 Thopter Foundry	4 Sunken Ruins
2 Sword of the Meek	2 Tolaria West
2 Smother	4 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth
1 Echoing Truth	3 Island
3 Thirst for Knowledge	2 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Extirpate
3 Deathmark
2 Damnation
2 Jace, the Mind Sculptor
1 Darkblast
1 Duress
1 Gatekeeper of Malakir
1 Phyrexian Arena
1 Sphinx of Jwar Isle

Combo - Vampire Hexmage + Dark Depths, Thopter Foundry + Sword of the Meek

Weakness - The hybridization of the two two-card combinations was actually designed to shore up the original Dark Depths deck's fault points! This deck was so effective, it led to multiple bannings.



Weird Cards - Thopter Foundry is relatively weak (though not awful) on its own; ditto on Sword of the Meek. Neither card is an All-Star outside the combo.

Redundancies - The main redundancy was the inclusion of an additional entire two-card combination. In addition, Mori's version could win with Jace, the Mind Sculptor as its semi-soft lock.

Flash-Hulk

Steven Sadin 1st Grand Prix Columbus 2007 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

1 Carrion Feeder	1 Echoing Truth
4 Dark Confidant	1 Massacre
1 Body Snatcher	4 Force of Will
1 Karmic Guide	4 Chrome Mox
1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker	4 Polluted Delta
4 Protean Hulk	3 Flooded Strand
4 Brainstorm	1 Tropical Island
4 Mystical Tutor	1 Tundra
4 Sensei's Divining Top	1 Underground Sea
4 Counterbalance	3 Island
4 Flash	1 Swamp
4 Daze	

SIDEBOARD

4 Leyline of the Void
 4 Quirion Dryad
 3 Massacre
 3 Swords to Plowshares
 1 Reverent Silence

Combo - Flash + Protean Hulk

Weakness - Graveyard hate, creature removal, board-locking elements like Ghostly Prison. Sadin primarily got around these weaknesses with the Counterbalance lock and a transformational sideboard, plus turn 1 kills.



All you had to do was play Flash (as early as turn 1 with Chrome Mox!) and put Protean Hulk into play. You don't pay any additional mana, so Protean Hulk dies and the fun starts. This is not the same as a Big Spell combo deck because you actually need to draw two specific cards, even if you only actually *cast* one of them.

What happens next is actually somewhat convoluted. Rumor has it that Sadin didn't really know what his combo did and won the first six or so rounds of the Grand Prix with opponents just scooping to his Flash + Hulk reveal. Owen Turtenwald had one removal spell, which Sadin could have beaten if he only knew how... and he didn't!

Steve got him back though, beating Owen in the finals. He did so by first finding Carrion Feeder (one mana) and Karmic Guide (five mana), with one plus five equaling Protean Hulk's proscribed six-mana benefit. Karmic Guide entered the battlefield and returned Protean Hulk to play. Carrion Feeder re-sacrificed Hulk...

This time, it went and found Kiki-Jiki, Mirror-Breaker. Kiki-Jiki would then copy Karmic Guide; in response, Carrion Feeder would sacrifice the legendary Goblin so that when its activation resolved, Kiki-Jiki would be in the graveyard for the Karmic Guide copy to return. Steve would do this a bazillion times and put many, many hasty Spirits into a position to attack the opponent into oblivion.

While this seems like a complicated number of cards, the two-card combo was in fact just Flash and Protean Hulk.

Weird Cards - *Sadin's deck was full of weird cards. Flash does relatively little outside the combo here (though in the past, it was a hell of a way to get Morphling into play in a blue mirror). Protean Hulk is prohibitively expensive to hard-cast. Kiki-Jiki, Mirror-Breaker has some theoretical applications...but just try playing it for its actual casting cost. Body Snatcher could actually be cast, but it was really there to ensure the deck could still go off with some component of the combo in hand.*



Redundancies - *Sadin's Flash-Hulk version, built by R&D Member Billy Moreno, is considered by many to be one of the strongest Magic decks ever fielded, and certainly the strongest to ever win a Grand Prix. Flash-Hulk was no secret, and there wasn't just one way to build it. Yes, Moreno-Sadin had a solid shell — but what set the deck apart was that, like Thephts, it played another entire combo!*

In addition to Flash-Hulk, the deck also played Counterbalance-Top. So there was the general advantage of Sensei's Divining Top + Dark Confidant (which gave this two-card combo deck a legitimate route to "regular" card advantage, at little cost) which benefited from the crossover with Counterbalance-Top. Especially in a format like Legacy, where the only cards cast at full mana cost generally one or two mana, Counterbalance could be a lethal tool.

Another Legacy classic is that of Cephalid Breakfast. Cephalid Breakfast is essentially a fringe strategy today. It has posted some impressive results during the Legacy portions of some previous World Championships and a Top 8 or so in Legacy Open play, but has not been widely embraced by the Open Series community.

This is a version I built as an experiment, with Michael Flores:

Breakfast

Michael Flores Experimental Deck 2012 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

4 Nomads en-Kor	1 Shuko
4 Stoneforge Mystic	3 Lim-Dul's Vault
4 Cephalid Illusionist	1 Umezawa's Jitte
3 Narcomoeba	1 Dread Return
1 Murderous Redcap	4 Force of Will
1 Lord of Extinction	1 Batterskull
1 The Mimeoplasm	4 Flooded Strand
4 Æther Vial	4 Polluted Delta
4 Ponder	4 Tundra
4 Brainstorm	3 Underground Sea
2 Cabal Therapy	2 Scrubland

SIDEBOARD

4 Meddling Mage
 3 Dark Confidant
 3 Swords to Plowshares
 2 Abeyance
 1 Linging Souls
 1 Stern Proctor
 1 Sword of Body and Mind

Combo - *Nomads en-Kor + Cephalid Illusionist*

Weakness - *Cephalid Breakfast is very fast, but the broadest criticism is that the opponent can interact with it no matter what. Permission, discard, creature removal, graveyard hate, Counterbalance, and sometimes even cards as janky as Fog.*



Once both creatures are in play, you target the Cephalid Illusionist repeatedly with Nomads en-Kor (which has a zero-mana activation ability) to mill almost your entire deck into your graveyard. In so doing you should flip up to three copies of Narcomoeba (which you can put into play) and your Dread Return. Soften the opponent up with some Cabal Therapy flashbacks and then fire off Dread Return from your graveyard!

This version uses The Mimeoplasm as its kill card, removing Murderous Redcap + Lord of Extinction to brain the opponent for lethal; others can go for a Kiki-Jiki, Mirror-Breaker kill (a strategy snatched from Flash-Hulk), generally working with Sky Hussar or Pestermite. Recently, players have tried bringing back Laboratory Maniac and Azami, Lady of Scrolls with Reveillark, drawing a card to win with no cards in the library.

Each combo has something to say for itself. The Mimeoplasm doesn't have to attack; Kiki-Jiki can go for infinite; Laboratory Maniac can win without attacking, killing regardless of the opponent's life total.

However the *true* two-card combination is Nomads en-Kor + Cephalid Illusionist, which enables the others.

Weird Cards - *Cephalid Breakfast is full of weird cards. I probably don't have to tell you that Cephalid Illusionist is not good on its own merits. Any of the actual potential kill cards (Kiki-Jiki, Lord of Extinction, etc.) are probably next-to-impossible to cast, and do nothing but finish games.*

Redundancies - *Some Cephalid Breakfast decks have relied on the zero-mana activation cost of Nomads en-Kor to hybridize the Life combo (tag a Task Force repeatedly and then sacrifice it with Starlit Sanctum). These versions usually go for green, and play Living Wish instead of Lim-Dul's Vault to access a land combo piece as well as a creature. These Cephalid Life decks go for a three-card combo of Nomads en-Kor + Daru Spiritualist + some sacrifice effect (usually the Sanctum, but sometimes Worthy Cause) to gain essentially infinite life.*



Shuko reduces the anti-creature interaction possibility. (You can't Lightning Bolt a first-turn Shuko!) The beauty of it is that Stoneforge Mystic can find Shuko, making it great redundancy to that half of the combo, but it can also serve as the gateway to an entire additional strategy!

This version of Breakfast is a hybrid and can more or less play the game of Esper Stoneblade. Umezawa's Jitte and Batterskull give this version of Cephalid Breakfast a fallback plan of one of the most powerful centerpieces in the format — for the *likely* occasion of a prepared opponent.

Twin

Samuele Estratti 1st Pro Tour Philadelphia 2011 (Modern)

MAINDECK

2 Spellskite
4 Deceiver Exarch
3 Pestermite
2 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker
4 Preordain
4 Ponder
2 Dispel
1 Sleight of Hand
1 Lightning Bolt
4 Remand
3 Firespout

4 Splinter Twin
1 Disrupting Shoal
2 Pact of Negation
4 Scalding Tarn
3 Misty Rainforest
4 Cascade Bluffs
3 Steam Vents
1 Breeding Pool
5 Island
3 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Blood Moon
2 Ancient Grudge
2 Dismember
2 Engineered Explosives
2 Lightning Bolt
2 Spellskite
1 Vendilion Clique
1 Deprive

Combo - *Deceiver Exarch/Pestermite + Splinter Twin/Kiki-Jiki*

Weakness - *Killing Deceiver Exarch before all hell breaks loose, such as responding to Splinter Twin with removal. In addition, the deck has to successfully attack, albeit once. Because of that, it can be subject to effects that break up combat.*

This U/R combo deck, by Samuele Estratti, won the inaugural Modern Pro Tour.

Weird Cards - *Unlike many of the other decks featured in this chapter, Estratti's Exarch Twin doesn't have a lot of weird cards... Maybe Kiki-Jiki, Mirror-Breaker? In this deck, he actually has a lot of work to do!*

Redundancies - *We're closing Traditional Combo on this deck to highlight its redundancy. Though Deceiver Exarch is the best target (when attacking for infinite, it matters very little that it has one power, although four toughness can keep Lightning Bolt away), Estratti could also substitute Pestermite. Though Splinter Twin is the faster kill, Kiki-Jiki, Mirror-Breaker could suffice for the other half, being continually untapped by the copy made.*

Estratti's Twin then, is a study in two-card combo redundancy. Both halves of the combo can be interchanged!

That said, there's another combo hidden. Can you see it in the sidebar? That's right: Basic Island + Blood Moon! That was the combination that had me piloting the same strategy that tournament. Estratti could exploit certain opponents' mana bases and really screw them over with Blood Moon, but because his own mana base was relatively uncomplicated, he could still operate under the same conditions.

Wargate

Masashi Oiso 68th World Championships 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Preordain
4 Prismatic Omen
4 Mana Leak
4 Rampant Growth
3 Explore
1 Negate
4 Cultivate
4 Cryptic Command
3 Scapeshift
4 Wargate

4 Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle
4 Flooded Grove
4 Misty Rainforest
1 Murmuring Bosk
1 Scalding Tarn
1 Verdant Catacombs
4 Forest
4 Island
1 Mountain
1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Great Sable Stag
3 Wurmcoil Engine
3 Kitchen Finks
2 Jace, the Mind Sculptor
2 Firespout
1 Qasali Pridemage

Combo - *Prismatic Omen + Scapeshift turns six land into 72 damage*

Weakness - *Enchantment removal and land destruction could both be problems; Leyline of Sanctity, Shadow of Doubt, Aven Mindcensor, and Aggro-Control as an archetype*

Oiso's deck is just one of many relatively big-format implementations on the Scapeshift concept. Rather than use many "bad" Mountains, Oiso turns the "one card-combo" of Scapeshift into a two-card combo with Prismatic Omen.

Wargate gives you kind of a bad (if more flexible) Rampant Growth, but at five mana, it is one of the few cards that can find an enchantment on demand. Prismatic Omen, which can turn everything into Mountains, turbo-charges Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle (note how Valakut itself becomes a Mountain!).

Notice how Oiso's deck has a sum total of one basic Mountain.



If you play Scapeshift with six or more lands and Prismatic Omen in play, you can Scapeshift and get any number of different land combinations, as long as they involve Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle. One Valakut, the Molten Pinnacle and five non-Valakut lands may or may not kill your opponent, but four copies of Valakut and any two other lands will consistently deal three to four times your opponent's life total.



Oiso's strategy started out as a Traditional Combo deck, but could devolve into a midrange deck after sideboarding — something almost like The Rock, with its Chinese menu of pretty good midrange creatures, progressive card advantage, and desire to block and trade. You'll notice that Masashi still played a kind of "Titan" in Wurmcoil Engine, where his desire to play defensive redundancy with Kitchen Finks trumped the unambiguous synergy between a Standard Primeval Titan and the Valakut combo.

VIABILITY RATING – 6

Traditional Combo decks tend to pop up very frequently in Modern and older formats, and are a little less common in Standard. Like I said at the top, chances are you can already identify a two- or three-card combination. While most of the decks discussed here in Traditional Combo have weaknesses, none of them can really fizzle.

A potentially more challenging look at combinations awaits in the penultimate chapter... Storm Combo!

DECK #15: STORM COMBO

The year: 2007

The place: New York, New York

The occasion: The Magic: The Gathering World Championships

The Pro Tour had returned to the place of its birth.

Robert P. Maher, Jr — Bob to his friends, “The Great One” to his admirers, and the Dark Confidant to fans of Ravnica: City of Guilds — had deigned to make one of his infrequent returns to competitive play. Bob has long had a nasty habit of showing up for big events after long — often years-long — absences, only to put up unbelievable results. The first time he “retired” was during the last century. A midwest resident, Bob found himself qualified for a local Pro Tour... and won it. He has since made numerous, if terse, one-of comebacks to win the Invitational (eventually giving birth to Dark Confidant), the Masters Series (Tinkering over Gabriel Nassif’s Enchantress) and even finishing second in the Vintage World Championships (losing in the finals to nothing short of fellow Player of the Year Owen Turtenwald).

In 2007, Bob was celebrating his induction to the Magic: The Gathering Pro Tour Hall of Fame, and playing in the accompanying World Championships.

This one wasn’t going as well as some of Maher’s other returns, but he liked his third-format Legacy deck, and decided to stick it out. Across the table in one of the closing rounds, his opponent, going first, had quite the decision to make. Bob had unleashed a flurry of Rituals, crushing him quickly in game 1.

Lorwyn was the then-new set, and the challenger could play a first-turn Gaddock Teeg.

But he could *also* run a different two-drop. Yes.

Yes — *we’re doing this* — he thought. *I am going to hit Bob Maher... with Bob Maher.*

And so his Mox made a first-turn Dark Confidant!



A dozen or so 1/1 Goblin tokens emptied out of the warrens, and Bob smiled. “But hey, at least you’re going to get to draw an extra card.”

That opponent — the one who could easily have locked The Great One out of his game on the first turn — really should have run out Gaddock Teeg, doncha think? Inside of two attack phases, he learned an expensive lesson as to why so many top pros choose Storm Combo. *You don’t mess with Storm Combo*. A clear-cut case of The Danger of Cool Things.

And Bob?

On his Hall of Fame celebration weekend? Cool / casual last day X-1, with this:

Two-Land Belcher

Bob Maher, Jr. 109th World Championships 2007 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

4 Tinder Wall	3 Empty the Warrens
4 Simian Spirit Guide	4 Goblin Charbelcher
4 Elvish Spirit Guide	4 Lion’s Eye Diamond
3 Street Wraith	4 Lotus Petal
4 Dark Ritual	4 Chrome Mox
4 Rite of Flame	4 Land Grant
4 Desperate Ritual	1 Bayou
4 Burning Wish	1 Taiga
4 Seething Song	

SIDEBOARD

4 Tormod’s Crypt
 4 Pyroblast
 1 Channel the Suns
 1 Gamble
 1 Empty the Warrens
 1 Cave-In
 1 Duress
 1 Tendrils of Agony
 1 Unmask

Though an actual Storm kill is only the “Plan B” for Belcher, it is nevertheless a great example of Storm Combo.

Storm Combo is one of four macro archetype decks that comprise the Combo family, along with Big Spell, Traditional Combo, and the Lava Spike deck.

Storm Combo decks generally:

- Win by “going off” — which is to say, accelerating to a point of critical mass by chaining spells together, one after another
- Don’t require specific spells (and often do not require a specific sequence of spells) to win, needing quantity of action, not quality
- Make up about half of the mind-space players generally think about regarding “combo decks,” though they don’t particularly resemble the other half (Traditional Combo) in actual execution

Depending on the format, Storm Combo may share specific cards with Traditional Combo — but their games usually have a very different texture. A Traditional Combo deck just has to draw and play two or three specific cards in concert to wrap up the game. “Ho hum, end of your turn Deceiver Exarch, tap your untapped land; untap, Splinter Twin / I win.”

This section will include:

- Two-Land Belcher
- Dragonstorm
- Elves!
- Pros-Bloom
- Academy
- U/R Storm (Modern)

Consider, by contrast, the hoops that Bob might have to go through to win with his Goblin Charbelcher deck. On the first turn he might reveal a hand of:

- Tinder Wall
- Rite of Flame
- Desperate Ritual
- Seething Song
- Burning Wish
- Goblin Charbelcher

... to cast Land Grant.

Presuming the Land Grant resolved, he would probably get the Bayou to cast Tinder Wall, sacrifice the Tinder Wall for RR to cast Rite of Flame putting RRR in his mana pool. Up that to RRRR with Desperate Ritual, then RRRRRR with Seething Song.



RRRRRR is unfortunately one mana shy of casting and activating his namesake Goblin Charbelcher — so Bob would probably go down to RRRR with a Burning Wish to grab the fourth Empty the Warrens hiding out in his sideboard, passing the turn with 14 Goblins in play.

Now, this is a pretty clear-cut implementation of the storm mechanic itself. Do you see how it doesn't particularly matter what order Bob played most of his spells (past the Land Grant for color-specific Tinder Wall) or even what he did at the end of the chain?

If we just substitute a Lotus Petal or Elvish Spirit Guide for the Burning Wish, Bob instead has RRRRRRG available on turn 1, which is exactly enough to lay down Goblin Charbelcher and point it at the opponent. Barring a very unlucky early Taiga reveal (there is only one land in Bob's remaining 52 cards), his opponent is dead to a Charbelcher activation, rather than “merely” on a two-turn clock from Goblin tokens.

It's bad times for the other guy, either way.

So in contrast to Traditional Combo, Storm Combo pushes up against a critical mass of *something*... but that something can be relatively non-specific, as can the sequence in which individual

spells are cast. Storm Combo decks thrive on redundancy. As you probably noticed looking at his Two-Land Belcher, Bob's deck was mostly fast net mana — Elvish Spirit Guide, Simian Spirit Guide, Chrome Mox, and Lotus Petal all give you one mana for zero mana. Rite of Flame and Desperate Ritual give you plus-one mana (but they cost mana). Dark Ritual and Seething Song give you net plus-two mana, but are much more difficult to cast (being black instead of red, and costing three mana instead of a much lower 0-2 in this two-land deck, respectively).

Bob's deck just wanted to make mana, Mana, MANA! and then explode into a single big effect. Unlike Big Spell decks, what effect that was didn't particularly matter.

Kill Cards - *Goblin Charbelcher, Empty the Warrens, Burning Wish*

Weakness - *Playing 11 kill cards and 49 cards that make mana doesn't really give you a lot of room to do anything besides try to kill people on turn one or two. If they do literally anything that stops you, you are stopped.*

With seven mana, Bob could kill you in one shot with his Goblin Charbelcher; with four, he could make some number of Goblins and kill you in two or three swings. At six mana, he could Wish up an Empty or a Tendrils.

You might have noticed that all of Bob's disparate finishers cost four or more mana, and he had no way in his deck or sideboard to kill that uncast Gaddock Teeg. Storm Combo decks are chock full of these cards that build to a specific point (again, here, mostly net-mana producers) and might only play one or two interactive cards; maybe a bounce spell to get a Witchbane Orb out of the way, or a cheap creature removal spell to eliminate a pesky Hate Bear. Bob's deck played none of those, of course.

Now World Championships 2007 was the proving ground for **a different Storm Combo deck** in the Standard format, and long-time readers probably already know the punchline — Yours Truly made the finals of the World Championships with Mono-Red Dragonstorm.

Mono-Red Dragonstorm

Patrick Chapin 2nd World Championships 2007 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Bogardan Hellkite	4 Pyromancer's Swath
4 Lotus Bloom	4 Dragonstorm
4 Rift Bolt	4 Fungal Reaches
4 Rite of Flame	4 Molten Slagheap
4 Shock	4 Spinnerock Knoll
4 Incinerate	12 Snow-Covered Mountain
4 Grapeshot	

SIDEBOARD

4 Dodecapod
 2 Wheel of Fate
 2 Ignite Memories
 2 Ingot Chewer
 2 Martyr of Ashes
 1 Pithing Needle
 1 Akroma, Angel of Fury
 1 Wild Ricochet

Mono-Red Dragonstorm was the rare Clean Break; the deck of the tournament, hands-down, with a ridiculous Day 1 win percentage. It put both myself and Yellow Hat Gabriel Nassif into the Top 8. I beat Gab in the Top 4 due primarily to superlative moral fortitude, strategy, sideboarding superiority, and winning the die roll (but that was far less important than my fortitude / strategy / sideboarding / general awesomeness).

This deck took existing tools (burn and the storm mechanic, specifically Dragonstorm) and took them to the literal *Next Level*.

Of course, the deck could make the obvious Big Mana play. Something silly like:

Turn 1: Rite of Flame → Rite of Flame → Rite of Flame → Rite of Flame → Dragonstorm

Which would produce a Storm count for more Dragons than we actually played, and *still* have a card left over. I would get four copies of Bogardan Hellkite and deal twenty damage on the spot. The storm mechanic, pure and simple. A variation on the same might *just* give me a fast Bogardan Hellkite, which would put the opponent at fifteen, and hopefully put him on a two-attack clock provided I drew any burn spells.

Kill Cards - *Dragonstorm, Bogardan Hellkite*

Weakness - *Discard with a fast clock*



As with Two-Land Belcher, net-mana production might be interchangeable. I could use Lotus Bloom for RRR (and a storm tick the turn it came in), or go the other way, finishing with Grapeshot instead of Dragons or Dragonstorm. That's a case where Pyromancer's Swath really helped, simultaneously increasing my Storm count and the lethality of burn spells (including a huge bonus to every Grapeshot) on the critical turn.



What made this deck truly Next Level was the hybridization of Storm and burn spells, not just for Pyromancer's Swath and Grapeshot, but specifically the use of Spinerock Knoll. Let's say you play a Spinerock Knoll on the first turn, and get lucky enough to hide a Dragonstorm under it. You then suspend two copies of Rift Bolt on the second turn, untap to deal six to the opponent, play your third land, Tarfire (eight total damage) and activate the Knoll to reveal a soon-to-be lethal Dragonstorm.

You have essentially transformed burn spells into a kind of weird combination of actual damage sources (still burn spells) *and* a proxy for fast mana! This hybridization gave us many different lines of play, all powerful.

You could do the same thing — but hide Pyromancer's Swath instead, deal the first few, flip up a Swath, and then go crazy lethal with an accelerated Grapeshot. Or you could use Rite of Flame and Lotus Bloom to jack up mana without particular attention to Storm count to just play multiple Pyromancer's Swaths to make a small number of Incinerates and Tarfires go bonkers (and kind of “off-label” lethal).

Elves!

Luis Scott-Vargas 1st Pro Tour Berlin 2008 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wirewood Symbiote
4 Birchlore Rangers
4 Elves of Deep Shadow
4 Heritage Druid
4 Llanowar Elves
4 Nettle Sentinel
4 Elvish Visionary
2 Viridian Shaman
1 Eternal Witness

1 Regal Force
4 Summoner's Pact
4 Glimpse of Nature
3 Weird Harvest
1 Grapeshot
4 Gilt-Leaf Palace
2 Overgrown Tomb
1 Pendelhaven
9 Snow-covered Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Thoughtseize
4 Umezawa's Jitte
2 Viridian Shaman
2 Thorn of Amethyst
1 Mycoloth
1 Nullmage Shepherd
1 Pendelhaven

Kill Cards - *Grapeshot*

Weakness - *Permission + sweepers, such as Faeries with Engineered Explosives, Night of Soul's Betrayal*

Luis Scott-Vargas's breakout Pro Tour win was — surprise surprise — also with a Storm Combo deck. In one of the most lopsided Pro Tour Top 8s of all time, with something like six Elves decks in the Top 8, Luis piloted our version... which was, quite luckily, the fastest version of Elves at the tournament.

Part of that speed came from compromises. Weird Harvest is symmetrical, which can be a problem in a room where everyone can go for the same combo pieces that you do (unless you plan to win on the spot). Part of that was the actual storm card kill. Luis's

Grapeshot had an upper limit in the low double-digits — but other Elves players were doing things like gaining nearly infinite life by going into Essence Warden loops or attacking with 999/999 Mirror Entity-powered former 1/1s.

But being a half-turn faster with his black splash for Elves of Deep Shadow and Gilt-Leaf Palace touch, Luis could kill them on a turn when they still only had twenty.

Ideally, you would lead off with a Glimpse of Nature (though that was not technically required). It would give you a ton of card advantage and a ton of margin, of course. With Glimpse online, you'd draw a card for every creature you played, and your creatures were largely 1/1 Elves that tapped for mana.

The super-important Elves were Nettle Sentinel, Heritage Druid, Birchlore Rangers.



Though Llanowar Elves and Elves of Deep Shadow are 1/1 Elves for G that tap for mana, Heritage Druid creates a situation where you're no longer strictly subject to your Elves being summoning sick. With Heritage Druid in play, you can tap three Elves for GGG, and Nettle Sentinel untaps when a new Elf comes into play.

Having just one Heritage Druid and one Nettle Sentinel is enough to get the engine purring. Imagine you have these two Elves and one other, and tap for GGG. You start with a Glimpse of Nature (leaving you with GG), play a new Elf (leaving you with G), and another (back down to nil), but have untapped the Nettle Sentinel

so you can go back up to GGG. Remember, you're drawing a card with each Elf, which should help you keep casting more and more Elves (and drawing more and more Elves... I mean cards).

Eventually, when you have two Nettle Sentinels in play, you can tap for GGG *and* untap both Sentinels with every Elf, which allows you to produce tons and tons of mana and draw your entire deck. Remember, it doesn't really matter which combination of Elves you play or in what order. All that's important is reaching a critical mass of total action.

Birchlore Rangers is a redundancy (if an inferior one) for Heritage Druid, but it lets you make any color, which is important for the R in Grapeshot (for when you eventually win) or to cast Thoughtseize in a pinch.

What might not be immediately obvious — but is a key distinction against Traditional Combo decks — is that Storm Combo decks can fizzle. LSV could play a Glimpse of Nature, get his Heritage Druid-and-Nettle Sentinel game going... and then topdeck a bunch of Forests. Done. That's all she wrote.

While drawing into non-wins remains an issue with Storm Combo decks even today, it was a much bigger deal with some historical exemplars of the archetype.

The first Storm Combo deck won a Pro Tour many years before the storm mechanic was even a glimmer in Mark Rosewater's eye.

Pros-Bloom

Mike Long 1st Pro Tour Paris 1997 (Mirage Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Vampiric Tutor
1 Emerald Charm
4 Squandered Resources
4 Impulse
2 Memory Lapse
4 Infernal Contract
1 Three Wishes
1 Elven Cache
4 Natural Balance

4 Cadaverous Bloom
4 Prosperity
1 Power Sink
1 Drain Life
4 Undiscovered Paradise
3 Bad River
7 Forest
6 Swamp
5 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Elephant Grass
3 Emerald Charm
3 City of Solitude
2 Wall of Roots
1 Memory Lapse
1 Power Sink
1 Elven Cache

This first Storm Combo deck was a more complex, less obvious, and certainly less consistent way of doing things than we have today. That said, it was much faster than the majority of its contemporary competitors, and — as the first massively successful competitive combo — taught players many things about deck design and the possibilities of Magic.

Kill Cards - *Drain Life*

Weakness - *Discard backing a fast clock, permission combined with enchantment removal*

An optimal draw for Mike's deck might be to play a Squandered Resources on turn 2, then untap, play a land, tap for three, sacrifice all three, and cast Natural Balance. This would put five lands into play, which would further give him access to up to ten additional mana.



What Mike did with the two spare mana prior to sacrificing the first set of lands was up to him... may I suggest an Impulse to find another Natural Balance or Cadaverous Bloom?

Once Cadaverous Bloom was in play, the deck could discard cards to produce mana, which would in turn allow it to power up sometimes large Prosperities.

The Pros-Bloom deck's essential genius was the reverse of Necropotence. Necropotence allows you to turn life total into cards; Cadaverous Bloom allows you to turn cards into mana (which, again, allows you to turn them into further cards). The secret at its core? Infernal Contract.

It's important to note that at the time of Pro Tour Paris 1997, players did not lose to having zero life until the end of a phase, so you could keep paying half of zero to cast many Contracts.

Infernal Contract cost BBB, but drew you four cards. Cards which you could, in theory, discard forBBBBBBBB. But more importantly, it could draw you into a truly explosive card like Prosperity. The advantage of Infernal Contract (on top of it just being cool to stay alive at zero) was that it only cost black mana. The most important resource to manage while going after the tools you needed to set up was the conservation of blue mana.

As a pro, Pros-Bloom could win as early as turn 3. As a con, it was among the Storm Combo decks most likely to fizzle, ever. There were a relatively limited number of cards to keep up your velocity — yet unlike many Storm Combo decks, you needed specific cards that had to be played in specific sequences (and only one real way to win).

The deck had a surprising amount of interactive play. For instance you could play a naked Natural Balance against a Control player with a lot of lands in play... and it could just be a bunch of Stone Rains.

In very long games, you could *just* resolve Cadaverous Bloom while getting a lot of other cards answered; and sometimes you could draw games by slamming both mages with Prosperity simultaneously... to death!

The one maindecked Emerald Charm is a good example of solo anti-foil cards played in Storm Combo decks. Mirage was actually one of the few big sets of the era that *didn't* feature Circle of Protection: Black, but cards like Hall of Gemstone could prevent Bloom from going off, and Forsaken Wastes could make it impossible for Bloom to win. Dealing with big enchantments like these — even as maindeck corner cases — was worth it to Mike, helping him to win incremental first games with little deck construction cost.



One of the best Pro Tour decks ever — and again, one of the most influential — was CMU Academy.

Erik Lauer, the Mad Genius of Magic (and now a pivotal member of the Magic Development team), made the one Top 8 of his individual career with one of the fastest and most powerful decks in Pro Tour history.

CMU Academy

Erik Lauer 7th Pro Tour Rome 1998 (Extended)

MAINDECK

3 Vampiric Tutor	4 Mox Diamond
4 Impulse	4 Mana Vault
3 Abeyance	3 Scroll Rack
2 Counterspell	4 Wasteland
4 Windfall	4 Tolarian Academy
4 Time Spiral	3 City of Brass
1 Mind Over Matter	4 Underground Sea
1 Stroke of Genius	3 Volcanic Island
2 Urza's Bauble	3 Tundra
4 Lotus Petal	

SIDEBOARD

4 Chill
3 Pyroblast
2 Hydroblast
1 Perish
1 City of Solitude
1 Gloom
1 Abeyance
1 Capsize
1 Gorilla Shaman

The day Tolarian Academy was spoiled, CMU master deckbuilder Andrew Cuneo started making fast artifact mana decks that could play and start beating down with accelerated Mahamoti Djinn. Of course, it wasn't long until we replaced those with Time Spirals and Windfalls.

Kill Cards - *Stroke of Genius*

Weakness - *Permission backing a fast clock, other combo decks with more permission, such as High Tide with Counterspells and Force of Wills*

Academy decks could win on the first turn. Imagine how explosive a hand like this might be...

Lotus Petal → Lotus Petal → Mox Diamond (discarding a Volcanic Island) → Tap the Mox Diamond for a Mana Vault → Tolarian Academy → Windfall!



You have four artifacts in play and can tap for UUUU, tap the Mana Vault for 3, have four mana left... *and draw seven cards!*

The bet is that you'll be able to use Mind Over Matter and Time Spiral to thoroughly abuse the mana engine that is Tolarian Academy and draw, produce net mana, and eventually Stroke of Genius the opponent to death.

The Next Level element of this Storm Combo deck was the inclusion of Vampiric Tutor via the black splash. Tommi Hovi won Pro Tour Rome with what was, by all reports, an inferior Academy deck based on Intuition. Vampiric Tutor is not only a generally superior card to Intuition (one mana versus three mana), but in a deck like Academy it's particularly Next Level! Lauer & Co. could play only one copy of Mind Over Matter, one Stroke of Genius, and so forth, instead of being tied to playing three copies of key combo pieces in order to find them with Intuition.

Further, it allowed for the so-called "CMU sideboard" of primarily one-ofs; Erik could Tutor for the one Gloom against WW / Jank, the one Perish against green creature decks, and so on.

Of course, it wasn't just in Extended that Tolarian Academy led to degeneracy. That year, I took a Standard Tolarian Academy combo deck to a Michigan State Championship title:

Academy

Patrick Chapin 1st Michigan State Championship 1998 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Brainstorm
3 Twiddle
4 Intuition
4 Windfall
1 Rescind
4 Time Spiral
3 Mind Over Matter
3 Stroke of Genius
4 Lotus Petal
4 Mox Diamond

4 Mana Vault
2 Voltaic Key
1 Scroll Rack
4 Tolarian Academy
4 Remote Isle
4 Blasted Landscape
2 City of Brass
1 Ancient Tomb
4 Island

SIDEBOARD

1 Fireball
4 Hydroblast
3 Hurkyl's Recall
4 Pyroblast
3 Circle of Protection: Red



Kill Cards - *Stroke of Genius*

Weakness - *By far the most broken Standard deck of all time with no meaningful counterplay, plenty of turn 1 kills and without anything resembling a Force of Will to pretend to allow interaction, Academy was only halted by half of the cards in the deck getting banned*

While many of the card choices are powered down a bit, the core engine remains, and was still completely busted (perhaps more so, as there were no Force of Wills in Standard). I easily crushed the Swiss, eventually facing a mirror match in the finals.

I was fresh off winning my semifinal round against an opponent playing mono-red that led with turn 1 Goblin Cadet on the play, with Meltdown in hand ready to sweep my side of the table on the second turn...

A second turn he never got.

My finals opponent killed me on *turn 1* of our first game.

Yikes!

Fortunately, I killed him *turn 1* of game 2.

Even!

Unfortunately, he got to go first in game 3.

He played his Academy turn 1 and began "going off." Thankfully, he couldn't kill me, but had to pass the turn with a ton of artifact mana. Unable to play an Academy (remember, we were under the old legend rule, where mine would just be sacrificed), I settled for a Mox and a land.

He began comboing off again, but I responded to his Time Spiral with a sideboarded Hurkyl's Recall!

Having lost his artifacts, he was set back, but still managed to put a few more down before passing the turn.

I played out more artifact mana and a Wasteland, but passed the turn again, without destroying his Academy.



He started comboing off again. First a Windfall, then another Time Spiral...

...Which prompted another Hurkyl's Recall from me.

On my turn, I was now free to Wasteland his Academy and play my own. If I had used it on the previous turn, he could have just played another. Very few people used Hurkyl's Recall in their Academy decks — but it was so good in Vintage, I knew it would pay off here.

Just one more turn later, and I was crowned the 1998 Michigan State Champ!

Storm Combo persists today — not just in big formats like Legacy (where it's not uncommon to see games end via Empty the Warrens or Tendrils) but in Pro Tour formats as well.

The great Jon Finkel played a U/R Storm Combo deck in every Modern event he could — Pro Tour Philadelphia 2011, the 2011 World Championships, and Pro Tour Seattle 2012 — until Wizards eventually dismantled his deck through a series of bans. Preordain? Ponder? Rite of Flame? It wasn't until Seething Song was banned that it looked like the end might finally be near.

The lynchpin of Jon's most recent Storm Combo deck was Goblin Electromancer.

U/R Storm

Jon Finkel 22nd Pro Tour Return to Ravnica 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Goblin Electromancer
4 Serum Visions
4 Sleight of Hand
4 Gitaxian Probe
4 Desperate Ritual
4 Pyretic Ritual
4 Manamorphose
3 Grapeshot
3 Desperate Ravings

3 Pyromancer Ascension
4 Seething Song
3 Past in Flames
4 Scalding Tarn
3 Misty Rainforest
3 Shivan Reef
2 Steam Vents
3 Island
1 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Lightning Bolt
3 Pyromancer's Swath
3 Shatterstorm
3 Empty the Warrens
1 Grapeshot
1 Pyromancer Ascension

Goblin Electromancer is a weirdo creature inclusion in a deck of otherwise instants and sorceries. Playing a two-mana bear in a deck like this poses an interesting dilemma for the opponent. Do you kill it? It's just a bear, right? Interestingly, Jon was able to win some games where he had been crippled by hate cards just by attacking with Goblins... but that's not their strategic purpose. Goblin Electromancer lets you net mana with Manamorphose and build up tons of storm count by burning through your library with Desperate Ravings and company.

Kill Cards - *Grapeshot*

Weakness - *Discard backing a fast clock, aggressive strategies using locking components like Ethersworn Canonist or Rule of Law*

VIABILITY RATING – 2

This is definitely primarily a “Modern-and-up” type of deck, as Wizards goes to great lengths to avoid printing the critical mass of mana accelerants needed to fuel decks like this, and storm cards are supposedly long gone. Of course, they already reprinted storm once, so you never know...

We’ve put a fair amount of emphasis on the contrast between Storm Combo decks and Traditional Combo... but you may have noticed that there’s actually a prevailing crossover between Storm Combo and burn spells (especially when you consider a deck like Mono-Red Dragonstorm, which is explicitly full of Tarfires and Incinerates). Storm Combo actually looks and feels a great deal more like a deck that we don't necessarily think of as “combo” (because it doesn't necessarily raise the hackles of the icky combo feeling), which is the Lava Spike deck. The next chapter brings our sixteen macro archetypes full circle, bridging Storm Combo and deck #1, Red Aggro. Like Storm Combo, the Lava Spike deck is about chaining together many cards towards a specific point (generally the opponent's life total) — and as you know, the Lava Spike deck simply *looks* like a Red Deck.



DECK #16: THE LAVA SPIKE DECK

The Lava Spike deck is one of four macro archetype decks that comprise the Combo family, along with Big Spell, Traditional Combo, and Storm Combo.

Combo decks have a wider range of strategies than other archetypes, ranging anywhere from Midrange to Control. Lava Spike decks? They're the beatdown combo.

Like all combo decks, the Lava Spike deck can play a non-interactive game. If you do nothing, it will kill you, and generally quickly. The way Combo decks kill you will often be at odds with the interactive cards you came to the tournament and planned to defend yourself with. That sword cuts both ways, however; as they increase in focus, Combo decks tend to lessen their ability to interact with *you*, usually resorting to racing to solve their problems. The degree to which they can be disrupted varies wildly from format to format and archetype to archetype.

The Lava Spike deck closes the loop, bringing us all the way back around to Red Aggro — an archetype it shares many cards with. While its mother may be Red Aggro, its father is definitely Storm Combo, an archetype that it shares much functionality with. The Lava Spike deck rides much more closely to The Philosophy of Fire than Red Aggro. While its burn spells can technically interact with the opponent's cards (specifically creatures), meaningful interaction is generally costly and painful.

The Lava Spike deck doesn't particularly care what the opponent is doing; its goal is to aim burn spells at the face.

Lava Spike decks generally:

- Embody the purest of burn decks, only using creatures that function as burn spells for their purposes
- Are among the most consistent of decks, presenting a turn 4 kill in most games (sometimes a turn slower, if built in an underpowered format)
- Don't have much room to maneuver beyond racing, aside from occasional hate cards that attempt to win on their own, such as Blood Moon, Ensaring Bridge, or Pyrostatic Pillar

**THE LAVA SPIKE DECK
DOESN'T CARE WHAT
THE OPPONENT IS
DOING; ITS GOAL IS
TO AIM BURN SPELLS
AT THE FACE**

RESTATEMENT OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF FIRE

The Philosophy of Fire is a concept originally put forward by deck designer Adrian Sullivan during Urza's Block Constructed. Perceiving a critical mass of burn spells available (some of which could do substantial damage, like Scent of Cinder), Sullivan realized that a new method of "counting" in Magic was possible. So he created a tool set around that observation.

What if we call a card not just "a card," but two life? If every card is two life, and we start with seven cards, and our opponent starts with twenty life... How many cards do we need to draw in order to reduce him from twenty to zero?

Sullivan called the card Shock the baseline unit. Literally, you need "ten Shocks" to kill the opponent. Reasonably-costed cards that deal more than two damage are above the curve (a Lightning Bolt is 1.5 Shocks for the same price). In the language of The Philosophy of Fire, a Flame Javelin is like a more proactive red Divination, costing three red mana for two red cards (since a red card is worth two life).

When we look at our cards like this — playing against this paradigm specifically — then the nature of the game, our notion of racing, changes substantially. What if we looked at our opening hand to see two Mountains and five Lightning Bolts? We have the tools to go:

Turn 1: Mountain → Lightning Bolt (seventeen Life)

Turn 2: Mountain → Lightning Bolt → Lightning Bolt (eleven Life)

Turn 3: Lightning Bolt → Lightning Bolt (five Life)

If we draw a Fireblast and our opponent deals himself a single point of damage from his lands, he's already dead!

Of course, there are all kinds of additional things we might want to think about. The most obvious is probably "How do I work up an opening hand that has five Lightning Bolts in a world where I can only play four Lightning Bolts?"

Is a Lava Spike "worse" than a Lightning Bolt? Indubitably.



How about a Spark Elemental? Is that worse than a Lightning Bolt? Not only is it worse than a Bolt, but it's *even worse* than a Lava Spike! A Spark Elemental is a Lightning Bolt that *you can block!*

But when we're playing using the Philosophy of Fire and strategically picking our cards to do exactly a particular thing, then *all* the cards can be reduced to: one mana (R), for three damage. We need only seven of these to overachieve against our opponent's life total.

While the Philosophy of Fire establishes a baseline of two damage per card, we still need to make up for the third of our deck that's composed of Mountains (which, generally, don't deal any damage).

This section will include:

- Lava Spike
- Sanity Grinding

THE LAVA SPIKE DECK VS. RED AGGRO SPECIFICALLY

The Lava Spike deck is not a particularly important archetype, and it's certainly less influential than its close neighbor Red Aggro. In fact, it is — more than maybe any other macro archetype, except opposite neighbor Storm Combo — reliant on specific card availabilities and redundancies to *exist*, let alone thrive. As such, while Red Aggro can be found in almost every format, the Lava Spike deck is most commonly found in Extended, Modern, and Legacy formats, where red mages can exploit a critical mass of cheap burn spells (and, subtly, their opponents' mana bases) for free damage and free wins.

The operational difference between the two is closely tied with card economy. The Lava Spike deck is not really built with card-for-card exchanges as a core value; as has been stated already, card-for-creature trades can be painful, and *forced* card-for-card exchanges can lead to uphill battles. For example, if an opponent Duresses your Char, that isn't just a one-for-one — that discard spell cost you a Philosophy of Fire two-for-one. Unlike its close neighbor Storm Combo, the Lava Spike deck dislikes one-for-one permission exchanges.



The Lava Spike deck can frustrate opponents who don't have the specific tools to interact with it (permission, discard, or — horror of horrors! — life gain). However, left unchecked, it's hard to argue with a fundamental lack of recurring efficiency relative to any creature. A lowly Ironclaw Orcs is like a Shock every turn! Then again, most decks can deal with a sub-vanilla 2/2.

Speaking of life gain, just as decks that play on The Philosophy of Fire have a special sort of card economy they work from, they can potentially fall victim to life gain strategies. A rebounding Pulse of the Fields might as well be a Mind Twist for the Lava Spike deck.

Gerrard's Verdict is a good example of a card that the Lava Spike deck hates. Two-for-one discard is fundamentally strong against a deck that needs to lace together a certain number of equivalently-effective two-point packets of damage... and whatever life gain the opponent packs can make for even more contextually-driven card economy.

The Lava Spike deck suffers from quite a few hurdles. It isn't great at meaningful interaction. Actually, it *suffers* when forced to interact. Heck, when we're talking about a deck that leads off with Spark Elemental, we can't be talking about a powerhouse of Jace, the Mind Sculptor-esque quality impact.

And yet...

There are incredible tools here that you can exploit, both as a player and deckbuilder. When Brian Kibler surprised Jon Finkel in the Top 4 of Pro Tour Dark Ascension, his Wolf Run Ramp deck (a Big Spell Combo deck with one foot in Midrange) morphed in the moment to non-interactive Red Aggro. Its Galvanic Blasts — there as an Assault/Battery-like defense against Delver of Secrets — came alive just in the same way that his Inkmoth Nexus did to smash Finkel in the face for four. Context — and knowledge — gave Kibler the opportunity to seize opportunity.

You'll see that the Lava Spike deck is largely successful by riding context. It can be a metagame deck. The Lava Spike deck is rarely the most powerful option — but knowing its secrets can, at the right times, make it exactly the deck you *need*.



Each of the previous archetypes has listed key cards or combinations, as well as individual weaknesses. Lava Spike decks are the most homogenous of all decks, with no key cards or combos. They strive to be 40 Lightning Bolts and 20 Mountains; nothing more, nothing less.

They may be the most consistent decks in the game, but they're still addled with a number of weaknesses — and while common in powered formats, they're rarely the best strategy. Weaknesses include life gain (since they can gain life more efficiently than your burn can go to the dome), fast combo decks (which may be able to kill faster than the burn deck is realistically capable of), and creatures backed up by meaningful interaction (cheaper counters, discard, etc).

HONORABLE MENTION:

Lava Spike

Masashi Inoue 1st Provincial Championship Nara-ken, Japan 2004 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Spark Elemental	3 Glacial Ray
4 Slith Firewalker	2 Pulse of the Forge
3 Zo-Zu the Punisher	3 Ensnaring Bridge
4 Lava Spike	4 Chrome Mox
3 Electrostatic Bolt	4 Great Furnace
4 Shrapnel Blast	3 Blinkmoth Nexus
4 Volcanic Hammer	11 Mountain
4 Magma Jet	

SIDEBOARD

4 Molten Rain
3 Detonate
3 Damping Matrix
2 Blood Moon
2 Flamebreak
1 Ensnaring Bridge

Inoue's deck is included largely for completeness's sake. It is, in fact, an early Lava Spike/Spark Elemental deck, and a predecessor to Extended and Modern Lava Spike decks. While it's technically a cheap spell/redundant burn deck, the fact that it was a Standard deck (implying a smaller card pool) compromises how closely it might resemble future lists.

Inoue's deck was substantially more interactive than most other Lava Spike decks. While decks of the Combo family tend to be pace-setters, and necessarily "play the beatdown," Inoue's deck ran Electrostatic Bolt (a burn card that could *only* burn creatures) to efficiently deal with Arcbound Ravager and Myr Enforcer... and also ran Ensnaring Bridge!



"Burning Bridge" decks touch on The Lock or board control strategies; it just so happens that this iteration of a lock kills the opponent with burn cards. Dropping your hand with Ensnaring Bridge in play can legitimately lock many beatdown decks out of the game. When your cards are largely one-mana burn spells, it becomes easy to drop your hand while presenting the opponent with a different dimension of difficult-to-interact-with cards.

Lava Spike

Jon Finkel 158th World Championships 2008 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Mogg Fanatic	4 Rift Bolt
4 Spark Elemental	4 Sulfuric Vortex
4 Keldon Marauders	3 Flames of the Bloodhand
4 Lava Spike	4 Blinkmoth Nexus
4 Incinerate	4 Great Furnace
4 Magma Jet	1 Darksteel Citadel
4 Shrapnel Blast	12 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Ensnaring Bridge
4 Pyrostatic Pillar
4 Smash to Smithereens
3 Firespout

Turn 1: Wooded Foothills (nineteen Life) → Steam Vents (seventeen Life) → Kird Ape

Turn 2: Windswept Heath (sixteen Life) → Overgrown Tomb (fourteen Life) → Dark Confidant

Fourteen, you say?

In 2008, the average Extended aggro deck would frequently start at 14 life... *and its favorite two-drop was Dark Confidant!*

It was into this world that Jon Finkel brought the above "traditional" iteration of the Lava Spike deck. Simply, the Lava Spike deck is weaker in terms of card quality than a 5-Color Zoo deck (a form of Red Aggro), but you *really* don't want to be Red Aggro heads-up against the Lava Spike deck. Sure, you have a Tarmogoyf; Jon is going to put his Mogg Fanatic in front of it, block, and ping you for one *anyway*. You're going to take a ton from your mana base (reducing Jon's two-point spell requirement to a paltry seven). And if you're *really* unlucky, he's truly going to insult your Lightning Helix with Sulfuric Vortex.



Jon's deck is about as "Lava Spike" a deck as Lava Spike decks get. Almost all super-cheap two- and three-point burn spells, precious little interaction. It is creature-thin (if not creature-less), but of its creatures, only Mogg Fanatic can even attack more than once. Keldon Marauders is a quintessential Lava Spike deck card; it deals five damage when left unchecked, and drops 60% in its ability to burn your face any time the opponent can make you interact.

And yet, the presence of these kinds of creatures is actually quite annoying for most players. Do you really want to trade a card with a Spark Elemental or a Keldon Marauders? It's going to the graveyard anyway! Even when you do something to it, the Keldon Marauders is going to deal some damage.

Sulfuric Vortex and Flames of the Blood Hand can lock out exactly the kinds of cards that the Lava Spike deck hates so much, so Jon was willing to pay a premium for them. For reference:



R/G Beats

Adam Prosak 27th Grand Prix Los Angeles 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl	2 Mutavault
4 Kird Ape	4 Wooded Foothills
4 Mogg Fanatic	3 Windswept Heath
4 Tarmogoyf	4 Bloodstained Mire
4 Keldon Marauders	3 Stomping Ground
4 Seal of Fire	1 Sacred Foundry
4 Lightning Helix	1 Temple Garden
4 Incinerate	3 Mountain
4 Molten Rain	1 Forest
2 Pulse of the Forge	

SIDEBOARD

4 Blood Moon
3 Greater Gargadon
3 Tin Street Hooligan
2 Magus of the Moon
2 Ancient Grudge
1 Pulse of the Forge

In 2009, a bit after Finkel's World Championships performance helped make Lava Spikes and Spark Elementals look legitimate, Adam Prosak built this deck as a response.

While it looks quite a bit more like the decks we saw in the Red Aggro section, Prosak's *actual* goal was to upgrade Spark Elemental to Wild Nacatl and Kird Ape... and Lightning Helix kind of came along for the ride.

While not a major look at any macro archetype, Prosak's deck was an important bridge from the days of the pure Lava Spike deck to the progression of Naya Aggro decks (once again, moving away from the five-color Dark Confidant model) that Tomoharu Saito received great acclaim for.

Lava Spike

Patrick Sullivan 5th StarCityGames.com Open Series Los Angeles 2011 (Legacy)

MAINDECK

4 Goblin Guide	4 Flame Rift
4 Grim Lavamancer	4 Rift Bolt
3 Figure of Destiny	4 Fireblast
4 Lava Spike	4 Bloodstained Mire
4 Lightning Bolt	4 Scalding Tarn
4 Chain Lightning	4 Wooded Foothills
4 Price of Progress	9 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Pyroblast
4 Red Elemental Blast
4 Searing Blaze
3 Smash to Smithereens

Red mage extraordinaire Patrick Sullivan brought the Lava Spike deck all the way to the Top 8 of a StarCityGames.com Legacy Open back in 2011. Legacy gave “The Rainmaker” the unique opportunity to replace Spark Elemental (a.k.a. “the Lava Spike that needs to hit”) with the far more flexible Chain Lightning.

PSulli considered the creatures a necessity for what he was trying to do. Yes, a Figure of Destiny or Grim Lavamancer is good enough that it can legitimately draw removal — but the problem is that in Legacy, the opposing Combo decks can be faster *and* have blue cards lacing them together. You might need a couple of hits with a Goblin Guide to get enough damage in to make the rest of the cards fast enough... even when they include four-damage packets like Fireblast and Flame Rift.

Searing Blaze and Smash to Smithereens are of particular efficiency in the Lava Spike deck. You’d actually rather deal three damage than do almost anything else, so a Searing Blaze or Smash to Smithereens — in context — is probably more effective (and certainly faster) than drawing a card!



STRENGTHS

The Lava Spike deck is both highly predictable and thickly populated with eminently castable spells. You look at your opening hand and you know what its capabilities are, which is a far different experience than a Midrange Control deck, which might be holding all the wrong answers or even a Thoughtseize (which can be of dubious value against, say, the Lava Spike deck).

Most of the Lava Spike deck's cards are cheap, and tend to be all the same color.

Everyone has a life total — not everyone can defend it directly.

Because the Lava Spike deck is so focused on one thing (burning the face), its decision trees are much less complicated than those of its cousin Red Aggro.

WEAKNESSES

The Lava Spike deck tends to play relatively low-powered spells. Lightning Bolt itself is great when you can play it... but the Lightning Bolt analogues can be of wildly varying quality. Even if the deck doesn't want flexibility, flexibility and options are ultimately strengths.

The focus that makes the Lava Spike deck easier to pilot than Red Aggro robs it of some options that could be valuable for other decks and in other contexts.

OPPORTUNITIES

The Lava Spike deck has always been a deck of opportunity. It has been literally at its best in times when opponents started at 14 life from their mana bases, giving the deck essentially three free cards for purposes of The Philosophy of Fire. Control decks and the cards they play exist on a spectrum, and the more cards the opponent devotes to creature elimination (with creatures being a generally existing but non-emphasized portion of the Lava Spike deck's cards), the better for this non-interactive burn strategy.

THREATS

If you want to beat the Lava Spike deck, you can. The deck thrives when opponents deal six to themselves in the first two turns, but it's stressed when handling stronger, more powerful, or more flexible cards. If the opponent forces you to interact — especially to interact in specific and undesirable ways — you are in trouble.

For example, what if the opponent goes “Kor Firewalker, Kitchen Finks, Loxodon Hierarch.” What are you supposed to do?

Lava Spike

Andy Burden 1st PTQ 2012 (Modern)

MAINDECK

4 Goblin Guide	3 Shard Volley
4 Grim Lavamancer	4 Searing Blaze
4 Dark Confidant	2 Flames of the Blood Hand
4 Bump in the Night	4 Scalding Tarn
3 Burst Lightning	4 Arid Mesa
4 Lava Spike	4 Blackcleave Cliffs
4 Lightning Bolt	2 Blood Crypt
4 Rift Bolt	6 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Inquisition of Kozilek
4 Shattering Spree
4 Torpor Orb
3 Ensnaring Bridge

Andy Burden won a Lexington, KY PTQ with this updated and hybridized Modern Bump in the Night deck. Bump in the Night actually solves quite a few problems that the Lava Spike deck traditionally has. Loss of life is substantially superior to dealing damage. Plus, Bump in the Night is basically some extra card advantage thanks to its flashback.

While by this point Spark Elemental finally got the cut (and really, it was outmoded by Goblin Guide long before, as we had seen in Patrick Sullivan's 2011 Legacy deck), Burden managed to cobble together Shard Volley as a further inferior Lightning Bolt.

Bump in the Night is, of course, a black card rather than red. The addition of black makes Dark Confidant an obvious include at the two, and with such a low curve of mostly one-mana spells, Dark Confidant's downside is quite mitigated.



Sanity Grinding

Albertus Law 7th Singapore National Championship 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Plumeveil	4 Cryptic Command
4 Jace Beleren	4 Sleep
3 Broken Ambitions	4 Time Warp
4 Twincast	4 Shelldock Isle
4 Dream Fracture	21 Island
4 Sanity Grinding	

SIDEBOARD

4 Wall of Frost
4 Flashfreeze
3 Oona, Queen of the Fae
3 Vendilion Clique
1 Traumatize

A deck like Sanity Grinding reminds us that The Philosophy of Fire can be applied in other ways to win, not just life total.

Albertus Law used Sanity Grinding + Twincast like a stack of Incinerates and Fireblasts. This deck may have been even more difficult to interact with than a burn-oriented Philosophy of Fire deck... I mean, everyone has a library, right? They lose when they can't draw a card, right?

But again, Law's deck is easy to beat if you really want to beat it. Magic's always had cards like Gaea's Blessing and Elixir of Immortality. But those cards haven't always necessarily been popular options — and perhaps for good reason.

VIABILITY RATING - 3

The Lava Spike deck is the classic "burn" deck, seeking to win games by landing a critical number of individual (generally non-reuseable) packets directly at the opponent, rather than more conventional routes such as attacking, escalating card advantage, or specific combinations of spells. It's usually more of a Modern or Legacy strategy, where it's always playable (though rarely tier 1). Assembling a critical mass of burn spells is rare in Standard, but not impossible.



THE TEN BEST DECKBUILDERS OF ALL TIME:

A WALK THROUGH METAGAME MASTERS

How much of Constructed Magic is in-game decision making? How much is mindset and focus? How much is knowledge of interactions and gamestates? How much is deck selection?

How much is deck design?

There is no question that these areas overlap a great deal and it can be very difficult to isolate specific skill sets. Additionally, people who tend to be good in one area are far more likely to be good in others. Still, the list of the ten best deckbuilders of all time is not the same as the list of the ten best players of all time. There are some who have an extra degree of creativity, expertise, or strategy that goes even beyond their own in-game play ability.

By studying those who succeed at what we want to do, we can often find ways to build on their success that we aren't even aware of on a conscious level. It's not that we seek to copy them, but rather by experimenting with thinking the way they do, we can see more of what they see. Deckbuilding is truly a "standing on the shoulders of giants" activity.

Who are the best deckbuilders? To answer this question, I asked a panel of some of the game's greatest deckbuilders, as well as some experts who've have had first-hand experience with many of the greats. The panel:



Randy Buehler

The 1998 Rookie of the Year, and Pro Tour Chicago 1997 Champion, Hall of Famer Randy Buehler cut short his playing career featuring one of the strongest average finishes of all time to help make the game at Wizards of the Coast, which included a stint as Head of Development in R&D.



Jon Finkel

With fourteen Pro Tour Top 8s, including three wins, a World Championship title, a National Title, a Masters' title, and a number of Grand Prix wins, Hall of Famer Jon Finkel is unquestionably one of the two strongest players of all time.



Michael Flores

One of the godfathers of Magic strategy writing, Michael Flores is also one of the most prolific deckbuilders of all time, having designed countless successful decks for Grand Prix, National Championships, Pro Tours, and World Championships.



Mark Herberholz

A one-time best player in the US, Mark Herberholz is not only a Pro Tour champion with four Pro Tour Top 8s, he is also widely regarded as one of the best deckbuilders of all time.



Zac Hill

A long-time writer, community builder, and voice in the game, Zac Hill left the Pro Circuit to spend a few years in Wizards of the Coast R&D — but not before Top 8ing his final Pro Tour, Pro Tour Honolulu 2009.



Scott Johns

Five-time Pro Tour Top 8 competitor and Vintage Pro Tour champion (Dallas 1996), Scott Johns left the game to join Wizards of the Coast, where he has been a major contributor to the official Wizards webpage, Sideboard.com.



Frank Karsten

Hall of Famer Frank Karsten is an accomplished player (three Pro Tour Top 8s), an accomplished Magic strategy writer (primarily at StarCityGames.com and Sideboard.com), and an accomplished deckbuilder (being one of the game's top deckbuilders for years, despite being known for his Limited game).



Darwin Kastle

With eight Pro Tour Top 8s, Hall of Famer Darwin Kastle's Pro Tour resume is rivaled by very few players in the games history. He was also a pillar of one of the most successful Magic teams of all time, YMG.



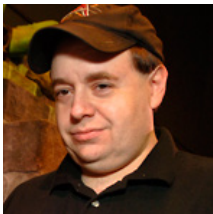
Brian Kibler

*Two-time Pro Tour champion, Hall of Famer Brian Kibler is one of the strongest players in the game today, having had four of his five Pro Tour Top 8s since his return to the game in 2009. He's also a co-designer of the popular deckbuilding game, **Ascension: Chronicle of the Godslayer**.*



Ted Knutson

Former StarCityGames.com editor and columnist and DailyMTG.com contributor, Ted Knutson has long been a powerful and well-respected voice in the community.



Erik Lauer

By the time Erik Lauer went to go join Wizards of the Coast R&D, where he has led final design on countless Magic expansions, he was already universally regarded as one of the greatest deckbuilders of all time.



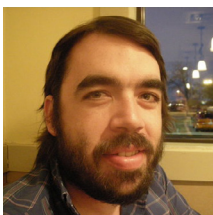
Osyp Lebedowicz

Pro Tour champion Osyp Lebedowicz is widely regarded as a master deckbuilder, a skill that helped propel him to three Constructed Pro Tour Top 8s.



Mike Long

One of the original pioneers of constructed Magic, four-time Pro Tour Top 8 competitor and Pro Tour Paris 1997 champion Mike Long was one of the most influential minds in deckbuilding in the early nineties.



Billy Moreno

Another deckbuilder of great reknown, Billy Moreno is a Pro Tour Top 8 competitor himself, designer of the strongest Grand Prix deck of all time (Counterbalance/Flash-Hulk), and a member of Wizards of the Coast R&D.



Gabriel Nassif

One of the greatest players of all time, Hall of Famer Gabriel Nassif is a nine-time Pro Tour Top 8 competitor with two wins. He's on the short list of greatest Constructed players of all time, and universally regarded as one of the greatest deckbuilders of all time.



Matt Place

Pro Tour Mainz champion Matt Place was one of the first generation of great deckbuilders in the nineties, with a Pro Tour career that he cut short to dedicate himself full-time to game design (including years at Wizards of the Coast as a lead designer of numerous Magic sets).



Ben Rubin

With four Pro Tour Top 8s before his 18th birthday, Hall of Famer Ben Rubin was not only one the greatest child prodigies the game has ever known, he is also one of the game's all time greats on the deckbuilding front.



Steve Sadin

Grand Prix Columbus champion Steve Sadin was a world class player — but has gone on to be more well-known for his contributions to the game both as a writer and editor (including at StarCityGames.com), as well as becoming a leading voice in coverage of major Magic tournaments.



Tomoharu Saito

Five-time Pro Tour Top 8 competitor Tomoharu Saito is one of the most well-known beatdown deckbuilders of all time. He's recently returned to the Pro circuit, where he's already one of the most influential designers for shaping metagames.



Brian Schneider

Widely considered to be the best deckbuilders on the planet in his day, Brian Schneider has designed countless major tournament-winning decks. He may have done much more had he not spent so many years as a lead developer in Wizards R&D.



Jay Schneider

One of the game's purest theorists, Jay Schneider built numerous winning decklists — but is best known for his concept of the mana curve and for designing the original Sligh deck.



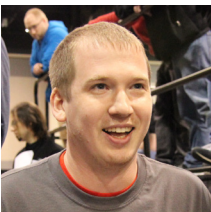
Luis Scott-Vargas

One of the ten strongest players in the game's history, Luis Scott-Vargas is not just a Pro Tour champion with five Pro Tour Top 8s and the highest lifetime Pro Tour win percentage in Magic history. As a writer and captain of Channel Fireball, he's also one of the most influential voices in the community and one of the game's greatest ambassadors.



Adrian Sullivan

Another godfather of Magic strategy, many of the concepts we use to talk about Magic strategy were originally devised in Adrian Sullivan's mind (most notably the Philosophy of Fire). He's also one of the longest-running Magic writers, writing continually starting from 18 years ago all the way up to today.



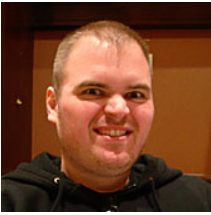
Patrick Sullivan

Another of the all time great red mages, Patrick Sullivan is a long-time columnist, game designer, commentator, and three-time Grand Prix Top 8 competitor.



Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa

With nine Pro Tour Top 8s including a win at Pro Tour San Juan 2010, Hall of Famer Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa is widely regarded as one of the five best players of all time, in addition to being one of the most respected Magic strategy writers.



Gabe Walls

World Championship 2003 Top 8 competitor, Gabe Walls is a respected player, deckbuilder, teamdrafter, and poker player. He has drafted against most of the all-time greats, gauging their games first hand.



Guillaume Wafo-Tapa

Quite possibly the most prolific control player in the game's history, four-time Pro Tour Top 8 competitor and Pro Tour Yokohama 2007 champion, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa has defined numerous formats by perfecting his blue decks.



Zvi Mowshowitz

Hall of Famer Zvi Mowshowitz is not only a four-time Pro Tour Top 8 competitor and Pro Tour Tokyo 2001 champion, he's also universally acclaimed as one of the greatest deckbuilders and Magic strategy writers in the game's history.

Each panel member was instructed to:

"Please select the ten greatest deckbuilders of all time, by whatever metrics you consider appropriate. Please do not include yourself or myself, if either of us would have made your ballot."

Out of the millions of players to ever build decks, these players have been selected by their peers as the greatest the game has seen. We would do well to study each of these players, and ask ourselves how we can emulate their success, as well as how we can build on what they did. As we review a few of the best decks ever built by each of the players on our countdown, we'll see what we can learn from them to improve our own deckbuilding.

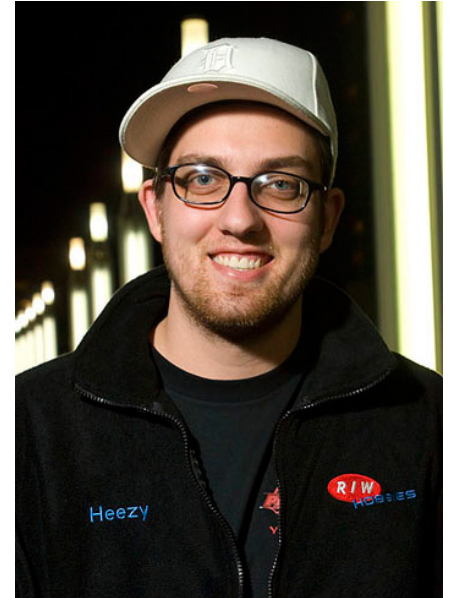
T9

MARK HERBERHOLZ

Mark Herberholz, a.k.a. “Heezy,” is well known for his larger-than-life personality and dominating the US Magic scene between 2005-2007. Heezy has one of the strongest all-around games ever, Top 8ing both Limited and Constructed Pro Tours (including a win), as well as building successful aggro decks, combo decks, *and* control decks. He also happens to be one of my longest-running teammates, and a player who’s alternated between being the student and being the master in our testing sessions.

Having just moved back to the US at the beginning of 2013, Herberholz is about to take the Magic world by storm once again. As for us, well, his style can teach us a number of valuable lessons about becoming well-rounded deckbuilders.

This first Herberholz concoction is the deck Mark is probably most famous for: “Heezy Street” is a R/G aggro deck built in an era when few played that color combination — and those who did usually used few of the same cards Heezy did. Pro Tour Honolulu 2006 was Standard with Guildpact as the most recent set. Popular strategies of the era were heavily influenced by the recently-printed Steam Vents and Godless Shrine — including U/R Tron, U/R Howling Mine/Sudden Impact, U/R Magnivore, B/W discard decks, B/W Promise of Brunei token aggro, and B/W Tallowisp decks. Additionally, Heartbeat of Spring combo was a big factor.



Note: A small capital T by a deckbuilder's name denotes a tie with another (or several other) deckbuilder(s)

“Herberholz is probably one of the best deckbuilders when it comes to aggressive strategies. His R/G deck from Honolulu was a perfect example of that.”

-Osyp Lebedowicz

The third new dual land from Guildpact, Stomping Grounds, was generally reserved for R/G/W Zoo decks. Those who did play straight R/G generally used Rumbling Slum, Shock, Volcanic Hammer, Gruul Guildmage, Sakura-Tribe Elder, Llanowar Elves, and a maindecked Umezawa's Jitte.

That event, Mark was part of a beachhouse testing group that was primarily focused on a B/G/W midrange deck. Mark wasn't satisfied with the beachhouse deck and decided to go rogue, though he credits much of his success for that event to his testing

group for figuring out what other people would be up to, so that he could then get one step ahead of that. Here's Heezy's Pro Tour-winning R/G deck:

Heezy Street

Mark Herberholz 1st Pro Tour Honolulu 2006 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Kird Ape
4 Scorched Rusalka
3 Frenzied Goblin
4 Scab-Clan Mauler
4 Dryad Sophisticate
4 Burning-Tree Shaman
4 Giant Solifuge
4 Char

3 Flames of the Blood Hand
3 Moldervine Cloak
2 Skarrg, the Rage Pits
4 Stomping Ground
4 Karplusan Forest
7 Mountain
6 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Blood Moon
4 Umezawa's Jitte
2 Naturalize
2 Rumbling Slum
2 Tin Street Hooligan
1 Flames of the Blood Hand

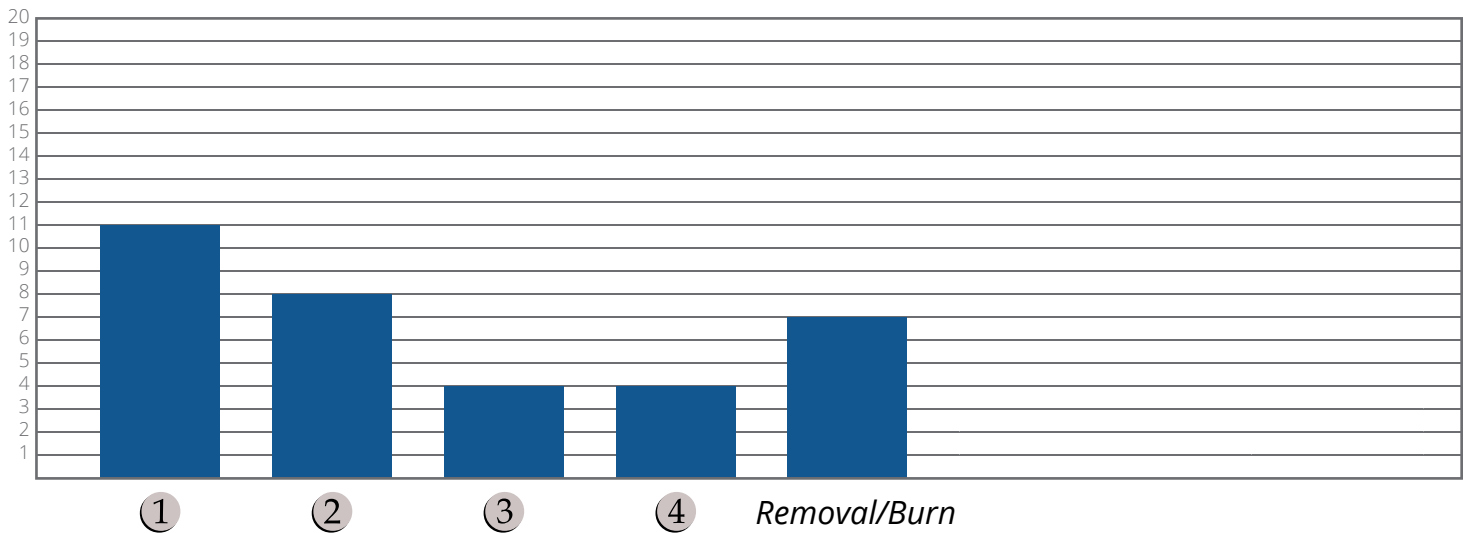
The big breakthrough was completely scrapping "accepted wisdom" about R/G and starting from scratch. Instead of using the nine "best" R/G cards, Mark used the cards that he thought would be best against the decks his beach house teammates thought would be popular. Mark found Jitte to be good only against creature decks, but Moldervine Cloak was good against everyone. Mark boldly cut the removal that everyone else played, replacing the "obvious" with Flames of the Blood Hand.



Flames was hardly on anyone's radar, since it couldn't actually hit creatures. However, it was just about the best answer to Loxodon Hierarch and Faith's Fetters' life gain. The lack of removal was partially made up for by Frenzied Goblin preventing blocking (a far more efficient solution to Loxodon Hierarch than Shocks), and Scorched Rusalka provided additional reach.

Traditional R/G would have massive problems with a Wrath of God followed by a Faith's Fetters on the post-Wrath Rumbling Slum. When Mark made the switch to the then-underrated Giant Solifuge, he caught a number of opponents with few answers. Another popular hate card at the time, Pyroclasm, wasn't particularly good against Mark, since he had Kird Apes, Scab-Clan Maulers, Burning-Tree Shamans, and Moldervine Cloaks. Eventually, opponents would trade their Pyroclasm for a single Dryad Sophisticate — which Mark would immediately make them regret with the Solifuge.

The sheer volume of deckbuilding lessons to be learned from Heezy Street Gruul is shocking. For instance, despite starting from the ground up and using tons of nontraditional card choices, Heezy stuck to a very basic and pure mana curve.



"An amazing tuner, and very willing to come up with new ideas outside the box. Think of his use of Punishing Fire, and the turbo life gain deck that took [Gabriel Nassif] to Top 4 at World Championships."

-Ben Rubin

Pro Tour Honolulu was actually Heezy's second Constructed Top 8 (and his third total). The year before, he developed arguably the best Kamigawa Block Gifts Ungiven deck, which he piloted to a 7th place finish at Pro Tour Philadelphia 2005.

A properly-built Gifts deck is always a thing of beauty, and the following version built for Kamigawa Block is no exception. Juggling so many colors in a format without good mana-fixing options, Heezy's deck made it seem easy. He set things up so that he wouldn't need blue or white mana until he had been able to cast at least one accelerant, meaning that the mana here isn't as demanding as it first appears. Despite the one-ofs and two-ofs that go along with any Gifts deck, Mark stayed disciplined and used the max number on "the good cards", like Sakura-Tribe Elder, Kodama's Reach, Gifts Ungiven, and Sensei's Divining Top.



Four-Color Gifts

Mark Herberholz 7th Pro Tour Philadelphia 2005 (Kamigawa Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

1 Hana Kami	2 Hideous Laughter
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	2 Cranial Extraction
1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	3 Final Judgment
1 Kokusho, the Evening Star	3 Sickening Shoal
4 Sensei's Divining Top	3 Tendo Ice Bridge
1 Ethereal Haze	1 Tranquil Garden
2 Soulless Revival	1 Waterveil Cavern
2 Wear Away	1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
4 Kodama's Reach	10 Forest
1 Horobi's Whisper	5 Swamp
1 Eerie Procession	2 Plains
4 Gifts Ungiven	1 Island

SIDEBOARD

3 Nezumi Graverobber
3 Nezumi Shortfang
2 Kodama of the North Tree
1 Hideous Laughter
1 Horobi's Whisper
1 Keiga, the Tide Star
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Yosei, the Morning Star
1 Cranial Extraction
1 Psychic Spear

Unlike most Gifts players, Mark used far fewer creatures maindeck, instead setting up the Ethereal Haze + Hana Kami + Soulless Revival "lock." Additionally, he used multiple copies of cards that most players used only one-of — cards like Wear Away, Soulless Revival, Cranial Extraction, and Hideous Laughter. This was so that he could Gifts for Hana Kami, Soulless Revival, Eerie Procession, and whatever he really wanted (for instance, Ethereal Haze or Cranial Extraction).



Probably the greatest piece of technology Mark developed for this event was the “transformational” sideboard he used. While he was not the first to sideboard tons of creatures, the mix he chose was particularly brilliant. To begin with, game 1 was often about Cranial Extraction wars, which Mark was better set up to do in game 1. With Soulless Revival and Hana Kami, he would be able to start recurring Extractions every turn. Because Mark started with so many fewer creatures than most people used, most players would board out much of their removal and try to fight him on the Cranial Extraction level, often going for even more extreme positions than Mark had started in. Because Mark correctly anticipated that everyone would do this, he went the total opposite direction, boarding away from his Combo-Control deck towards a Tap-Out/Midrange deck full of bomb creatures.

“Herberholz is the quintessence of the ‘gap’ designer, filling format inefficiencies with victories rather than seeking out the most broken possible thing (a la Mowshowitz) or simply pushing a concept. Of these ten, Herberholz is probably the most underrated, but also the most flexible, capable of making both the best gap-beatdown or best gap-control regardless of format.”

-Michael Flores

Six of Heezy's eleven sideboard creatures cost only two, letting him get them down fast and start gaining an advantage before opponents had time to set up their game plan. Then, to close out the game, Mark had Meloku, Keiga, Yosei, and a couple Kodama of the North Trees to compliment his Kokusho and Ink-Eyes.

Why so many different legends? Mark knew he was going to be Cranial Extracted over and over, starting as early as turn 3! Even with just four different legends, he would be at risk of running out of victory conditions against a dedicated Cranial Extraction plan. Gifts loves one-ofs anyway!

Teachings

Mark Herberholz 3rd Pro Tour Yokohama 2007 (Time Spiral Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

2 Aeon Chronicler
1 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
2 Draining Whelk
1 Extirpate
1 Pull from Eternity
1 Disenchant
1 Temporal Isolation
4 Cancel
2 Sudden Death
4 Damnation
3 Careful Consideration
3 Mystical Teachings

2 Tendrils of Corruption
1 Teferi's Moat
4 Prismatic Lens
2 Urza's Factory
2 Calciform Pools
4 Dreadship Reef
4 Terramorphic Expanse
3 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth
8 Island
3 Swamp
1 Plains
1 Haunting Hymn

SIDEBOARD

2 Detritivore
2 Extirpate
2 Magus of the Tabernacle
2 Tendrils of Corruption
1 Careful Consideration
1 Dismal Failure
1 Mountain
1 Mystical Teachings
1 Pull from Eternity
1 Teferi's Moat
1 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth

Mark's most recent Top 8 was at the Time Spiral Block Constructed Pro Tour, and I had the pleasure of testing with Mark for before the event. This is the Teachings list that Mark rode to a third-place finish.

It's a rare deckbuilder who excels at *both* Tutor-based control deck design (like Gifts and Teachings) and streamlined aggro (like Heezy Street). Besides, you have to respect the first man to Top 8 a Pro Tour with four copies of Cancel (along with Guillaume Wafo-Tapa and Kazuya Mitamura).

The one-of's should be no surprise, due to Mystical Teachings — but there's no shortage of spice in this brew. The miser's Teferi's Moat reminds us of the value of singletons that attack from a different angle than the rest of your deck. Additionally, it saves Mark a sideboard spot in a list that very much is built to be a 75-card deck. Maindeck Extirpate? Disenchant? Haunting Hymn? Mark even maindecked Pull from Eternity to win the Aeon Chronicler wars! Mark knew that Careful Consideration could pick

up the slack from drawing dead cards in the wrong matchups, and pushed it harder than anyone (using more than twice as many one-of's than even Wafo-Tapa).

Many of the specific pieces of technology in Heezy's Teachings list were not unknown, such as Tendrils + Urborg, but the exact symphony of technology Mark used helps display one of his greatest deckbuilding strengths: he rarely gets sucked into doing things that are "too cute," but is also willing to pursue wild and crazy lines that seem super-specialized.

Mark is one of the best at reading the format and correctly anticipating what everyone else will do. With this knowledge, he's able to develop the exact perfect sequence to counteract his opponents' plans. For instance, he may be planning on Teachings for Teferi to win blue mirrors, using Cancels and Sudden Death to beat Teferi, using Chronicler and Detritivore to beat Cancel and Sudden Death, using Teachings for Pull from Eternity to beat Chronicler and Detritivore, and using Extirpate to fight Teachings.

There are other interesting features to observe from Mark's build. For instance, Mark identified that mana advantage from storage lands were instrumental in winning the blue mirrors (both against Teachings and Vesuvan Shapeshifter/Brine Elemental decks). As such, while few dared to play more than four storage lands, Heezy used six. Mark also correctly anticipated that mono-red and R/G aggro were better than people realized, so he gave himself Teferi's Moats and Magus of the Tabernacles, as well as the maximum number of Damnations and Tendrils of Corruption after boarding.

All these little elements of precision add up to a good clean list. Mark doesn't always try to break it. Sometimes, you don't have a broken deck, you just have the best tuned and positioned deck you can.

As of the writing of *Next Level Deckbuilding*, Mark has been away from Pro Tour play for a couple years, focusing on work. However, his impact is still being felt on the competitive scene. In fact, despite being unable to attend himself, Mark designed the deck that earned David Sharfman and Pat Cox Top 8s at Pro Tour Nagoya in 2011, with David winning the tournament.



Puresteel White

David Sharfman 1st Pro Tour Nagoya 2011 (Scars of Mirrodin Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Memnite	4 Hero of Bladehold
4 Vault Skirge	2 Dispatch
4 Glint Hawk	4 Sword of War and Peace
4 Flayer Husk	1 Mox Opal
4 Mortarpod	4 Inkmoth Nexus
2 Leonin Relic-Warder	19 Plains
4 Puresteel Paladin	

SIDEBOARD

3 Kemba, Kha Regent
 3 Mirran Crusader
 2 Dismember
 2 Leonin Relic-Warder
 2 Revoke Existence
 2 White Sun's Zenith
 1 Plains

The most popular deck for the Scars Block Constructed Pro Tour was mono-white Tempered Steel. It had some vulnerabilities to artifact removal, but was generally quite strong and aggressive.

Mark's Puresteel Paladin build actually has a tremendous amount of resiliency to artifact hate compared to those Tempered Steel lists. No matter how much artifact hate opponents may have in their hand, a single unchecked Paladin or Hero of Bladehold can be game-winning. Meanwhile, Sword of War and Peace made every creature a potentially lethal threat, combining especially well with Vault Skirge. All the little edges add to up to more than the sum of their parts, such as leading with turn 1 Vault Skirge + Memnite, turn 2 Puresteel Paladin, turn 3 Sword of War and Peace — which draws a card for free, then equips to Vault Skirge for free, and gains a boatload of life!

Mark has had far more successful decks than we have room to discuss here — though I would be remiss if I didn't remind you just how instrumental he has been to the success of both Gabriel Nassif and myself. He was one-third of the Mono-Red Dragonstorm design that carried Nassif and I to the Top 4 of the 2007 World Championships, as well as being the lead designer of the Martyr-Tron deck that helped Nassif reach the Top 4 the year before. While Nassif and I were having success building decks before we worked with Mark, there's no question that he has taught us both more than almost anyone about the craft. When I returned to the tournament scene in 2007, it was Heezy who whipped me into shape and helped me unlock more of my full potential.



T9

MICHAEL FLORES

There has not exactly been a shortage said about prolific theorist and deckbuilder, Michael Flores, and for good reason. I'll spare you the in-depth biography, but suffice it to say that Flores has been a voice in Magic strategy for fifteen years. His history spans from what is widely considered the best Magic article of all time, *"Who's the Beatdown?"*, to today, including designing the most popular pre-banning Exarch-Twin deck.

You can tell Flores is saying controversial things: his lips are moving. The other half of the time, he's brewing. This is a man who builds a *lot* of decks. Flores has developed so many pivotal strategies over the years, we can't possibly but scrape the surface today.

"A volume shooter, but he can certainly heat up. In case you haven't heard, he was the man behind Napster."

-Mark Herberholz

Up first, we have Flores's most famous deck, the oft-referenced Napster.

Napster

Jon Finkel 1st US Nationals 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Skittering Skirge	2 Unmask
2 Phyrexian Negator	4 Vicious Hunger
2 Skittering Horror	4 Yawgmoth's Will
1 Stromgald Cabal	1 Persecute
1 Thrashing Wumpus	1 Massacre
4 Dark Ritual	1 Eradicate
4 Vampiric Tutor	2 Dust Bowl
4 Duress	4 Rishadan Port
1 Engineered Plague	2 Spawning Pool
1 Perish	15 Swamp
1 Stupor	

SIDEBOARD

2 Engineered Plague
 2 Rapid Decay
 2 Phyrexian Negator
 1 Phyrexian Processor
 1 Powder Keg
 1 Thran Lens
 1 Stromgald Cabal
 1 Eradicate
 1 Massacre
 1 Perish
 1 Stupor
 1 Unmask



What kind of a deck is Napster anyway? From one angle, it looks like a Suicide Black deck... but from another angle, it appears to be Mono-Black Control. In reality, it was actually a hybrid deck, though back then people didn't really think about it that way. It had two powerful but distinct lines of play. The first was that of a sort of Mono-Black Control, a.k.a. a Non-Blue Control Deck. Yes, Dark Ritual lets you come out aggressively sometimes — but that was just an overpowered card, and not what the deck was built around. You could play spell after spell, then cast one of your four Yawgmoth's Wills to gain massive card advantage. Just imagine if today's Mono-Black Control decks had Dark Rituals and Yawgmoth's Wills! Getting to play Standard with four copies of each of several cards that were banned or restricted in other formats is always fun.

The other line of play was that of a Vampiric Tutor deck. If you ever cast Vampiric Tutor (aside from its nemesis, Grim Monolith decks), you tended to gain a game-winning advantage immediately. Stromgald Cabal beat Replenish, Engineered Plague and Perish beat Elves, Massacre beat White Weenie, and so on.

In fact, the most powerful line was chaining the two halves together. For instance, you could play an attrition game, burning Vampiric for Yawgmoth's Will, and then play Vampiric Tutor out of the graveyard to get your next Yawgmoth's Will. The much-maligned Vicious Hunger was a surprisingly effective source of life to fuel the Vampiric Tutors (as well as occasionally shoot down turn 1 Phyrexian Negators).

Kamigawa Block was especially successful for the Floresian school of deckbuilding. Flores brought Tap-Out Control to the modern era, an archetype that had previously only been seen in formats where Force of Will was legal, but is now standard operating procedure. The primary theory that Flores developed in that era was that you can tap out to play a Meloku, Keiga, or other comparable threat, since nothing your opponent does while you're tapped out is going to be as good as what you just did anyway.

"Flores is like a worse version of Kibler, but occasionally comes up with some gems."

-Jon Finkel, who won the US National Championship with Napster



The most famous of these was Jushi Blue, which would go on to become the most popular archetype of the 2005 World Championships:

Jushi Blue

Mike Flores 2nd New York State Championship 2005 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Jushi Apprentice
3 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
3 Keiga, the Tide Star
4 Remand
4 Boomerang
4 Mana Leak
4 Hinder
4 Threads of Disloyalty
2 Rewind
3 Disrupting Shoal

1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
1 Miren, the Moaning Well
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
2 Dimir Aqueduct
4 Quicksand
4 Watery Grave
10 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Drift of Phantasms
4 Execute
3 Cranial Extraction
2 Rewind
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Dimir Aqueduct

This was Tap-Out Control executed clean and proficiently. There was no shortage of good countermagic in those days, so don't let the nature of Flores's deck fool you. Tap-Out decks can use counterspells, a trend we see even today. If you're just buying yourself time to play your Gideons, Baneslayers, Consecrated Sphinxes, and Sun Titans, you don't actually need to "take control" the old-fashioned way. For instance, why do you need to counter a turn 5 Goblin Guide when you just tapped out for one of these bombs?

"Mike may have a million ideas a minute, but you need people like that on any team. He wasn't the best tester, and fine-tuning strategies wasn't his strong suit... but when it came to the big idea, Mike was one of the best. Napster is probably his most famous deck, but there have been countless decks that Mike has designed that have helped many people win tournaments as small as PTQs to as large as World Championships."

-Osyp Lebedowicz

Jushi Blue uses Remands, Mana Leaks, Hinders, Rewinds, Disrupting Shoals, and even Boomerangs for basically one purpose: to buy time. Each one is sort of a mini Time Walk, bringing you one turn closer to that critical moment when you can start tapping out for potentially game-winning threats every turn.

While Jushi Blue received the most mainstream attention, you have to remember: those were different times. Back then, there were only a fraction of the high-profile Standard tournaments that we see today, so the metagame would not evolve and become hyper-netdecked to the degree that we see today. In fact, Jushi Blue was eventually outclassed by U/G Critical Mass — and even later, we eventually saw what was likely the best Tap-Out deck of the era, a strategy that, if it had been played out on the StarCityGames.com Open circuit today, would likely have been remembered very differently in the history books. That deck is White Wafo-Tapa.

Somewhat like the various KarstenBot decks, this deck was not actually built by its namesake, but by Michael Flores. White Wafo-Tapa's name was an homage to the then slightly under-the-radar control deckbuilding master, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa. The “White” aspect of the name was due to Flores changing the support color of the deck that inspired this one, a U/R control deck built by Wafo-Tapa.



White Wafo-Tapa

Mike Flores Standard 2006 (Standard)

MAINDECK

3 Keiga, the Tide Star
1 Yosei, the Morning Star
4 Spellsnare
4 Remand
4 Mana Leak
3 Boomerang
4 Hinder
4 Compulsive Research
4 Wrath of God
3 Tidings
1 Debtors' Knell

1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
1 Miren, the Moaning Well
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
2 Ghost Quarter
4 Adarkar Wastes
4 Azorius Chancery
2 Ghost Quarter
4 Hallowed Fountain
6 Island
1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Azorius Guildmage
4 Condemn
4 Faith's Fetters
2 Ghost Quarter
1 Boomerang

This is basically just the same Jushi Blue deck, but with Compulsive Research instead of Jushi Apprentice, Tidings instead of Meloku, Wrath of God instead of Threads of Disloyalty, and Spell Snare instead of Rewind and Disrupting Shoal. Additionally, it featured a Debtor's Knell, a Yosei, and a Miren the Moaning Well for an additional end game lock down.

Naya Lightsaber

Andre Coimbra 1st World Championships 2009 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Noble Hierarch
4 Wild Nacatl
1 Scute Mob
4 Woolly Thoctar
4 Bloodbraid Elf
4 Ranger of Eos
4 Baneslayer Angel
3 Ajani Vengeant
4 Lightning Bolt

4 Path to Exile
1 Oran-Rief, the Vastwood
4 Arid Mesa
4 Rootbound Crag
4 Sunpetal Grove
4 Forest
4 Plains
3 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Celestial Purge
4 Great Sable Stag
4 Goblin Ruinblaster
2 Burst Lightning
1 Ajani Vengeant

Naya Lightsaber wasn't built to be the best deck ever — it was meant to be the best deck for one weekend. Slowing the deck down just a notch allowed the Naya deck to play a very Jund-like game, with Ranger of Eos replacing Bituminous Blast as the compliment to Bloodbraid Elf. Cheap removal, card advantage, and tons of extremely hard-hitting threats added up to a formula that was later the inspiration for the Boss Naya deck that Tom Ross, Luis Scott-Vargas, PVDDR, and others used at Pro Tour San Diego to unveil Stoneforge Mystic.



Many of the best deckbuilders of all time are among the game's greatest players of all time. Often, the best way to show people what a deck is capable of is to win with it yourself. Flores is the exception to the rule. Though he's often the butt of jokes regarding his lack of Pro Tour success, Flores has always been much more of a theorist than an actual tournament player. It's a testament to just how good a deckbuilder he is that his peers put him in the top ten best deckbuilders of all time despite never Top 8ing himself. Flores's specialty may be designing PTQ- and States-winning strategies — but he has designed numerous Pro Tour-winning decks, always piloted by others who know and respect him enough to run his creations primarily on pedigree.

8

ROB DOUGHERTY

One of the founding members of Team YMG (Your Move Games), Hall of Famer Rob Dougherty is primarily focused on running tournaments these days. But he still shows up and puts up good numbers at events. Most recently, he actually developed the *other* successful Puresteel Paladin deck in Nagoya, finishing 20th.

Rob's period of greatest dominance was without a doubt, the peak of the YMG years. During this era, Rob, Darwin Kastle, David Humphreys, Justin Gary, a young Paul Reitzl, and others formed one of the greatest deckbuilding teams the game has ever seen. They actually had a reputation for consistently designing *multiple* decks that were better than anything anyone else had — which sometimes led to amusing tournament situations where they each played different decks, but each achieved great success.

"The combination of Humphreys/Kastle/Dougherty always came up with some very strong decks. Often, they would go to the Pro Tour with everybody playing a different deck, as they couldn't figure out which was best."

-Alan Comer

Rob actually competed in the first Pro Tour back in early 1996, making him one of the very few players who has been around since the very beginning. It wasn't until another Pro Tour in New York, three years later, that Rob first broke through to Sunday.

Remember, not every master was a master their first year on the Pro Tour. Part of what separated Dougherty from the rest was his continual striving towards perfection. He has never been content to rest on his laurels after a successful deck. His honest, fearless self-evaluation forced him to continue to improve.

The first Dougherty deck we are going to take a look at is the strategy that both Dougherty and teammate David Humphreys (who actually cracked the top twenty deckbuilders list himself) Top 8ed with, Rob's unusual "Utility Belt" take on Tinker/Academy. Utility Belt was so jam-packed with technology that it is hard to appreciate it all on once glance. This list was multiple *generations* ahead of most of the Tinker/Academy decks people used!



Utility Belt

Rob Dougherty 5th Pro Tour New York 1999 (Urza's Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

3 Goblin Welder	4 Grim Monolith
2 Wall of Junk	4 Tinker
1 Ticking Gnomes	3 Arc Lightning
1 Raven Familiar	1 Phyrexian Processor
4 Avalanche Riders	1 Lifeline
1 Karn, Silver Golem	1 Citanul Flute
1 Crater Hellion	4 Tolarian Academy
2 Phyrexian Colossus	12 Mountain
4 Claws of Gix	7 Island
4 Voltaic Key	

SIDEBOARD

4 Arcane Laboratory
3 Viashino Heretic
2 Steam Blast
1 Crater Hellion
1 Goblin Welder
1 Phyrexian Processor
1 Rack and Ruin
1 Arc Lightning
1 Whetstone

To begin with, Rob used significantly more creatures than any of the other Academy decks. At the time, industry standard was two Crater Hellions and a Phyrexian Colossus. Utility Belt actually featured fifteen (!) creatures, including the Goblin Welders that almost no one else understood how to use yet. Rob knew that everyone knew how good Tinker was... so he took it a step further. Goblin Welder could sit in play and threaten to undo almost any Tinker, not to mention providing a layer of backup in case his own artifacts were countered or destroyed.

"From Dec 2000 to Nov 2002, Rob was easily the most dominant Constructed force on the planet. There were five Constructed Pro Tours in that time span, and Rob made Top 8 of three of them (Osaka, Houston, Chicago) and built the deck that put two of his teammates in a fourth (New Orleans)."

-Osyp Lebedowicz

Rob also realized just how important Tolarian Academy was to the format. In fact, he suspected that most of the people who succeeded without Academy would be fueled by Gaea's Cradle. In reaction to this, Rob's deck featured four Avalanche Riders, as well as Citanul Flute to search them up and Lifeline to recurse them.



Ticking Gnomes seems unassuming, but was actually quite brilliant on multiple levels. First of all, just as a body, it was an excellent size to help hold off Mono-Green's assault. Then, its ability to ping gave Rob the advantage in Goblin Welder battles (for those few who actually figured *that* technology out). Additionally, Ticking Gnomes provided a much-needed solution to the Weatherseed Faeries that were such a popular sideboard card against U/R decks of that era.

The Arcane Laboratories in the sideboard were a precaution that few took advantage of. Rob had anticipated combo decks like Zvi's Top 8 Zero Effect Fluctuator deck, and the Snap-Cradle build that a second-to-last round stolen deck left yours truly in 11th with. Rob's sideboard correctly anticipated the extremes of the format, as well as having a greater ability to morph into a hate deck against the two most popular strategies (Viashino Heretics against Tinker, and Steam Blast/Hellion against Mono-Green), and *still* found room for new dimensions like Whetstone to open up unexpected angles of attack.

Sometimes formats call for new, uninvented strategies — like Citanul Flute/Goblin Welder. Other times, the right angle of attack is to find the best version of a popular archetype. Pro Tour Chicago 2001 was one such tournament, where Rob developed (and Top 8ed) with his take on the Fires of Yavimaya strategy. Another such tournament was Pro Tour Osaka, where Rob finished third with what was one of the two popular archetypes (U/G variants being the other).



Mono-Black

Rob Dougherty 3rd Pro Tour Osaka 2002 (Odyssey Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 4 Nantuko Shade | 4 Mutilate |
| 2 Shambling Swarm | 1 Haunting Echoes |
| 2 Stalking Bloodsucker | 4 Mind Sludge |
| 3 Innocent Blood | 1 Skeletal Scrying |
| 4 Chainer's Edict | 3 Cabal Coffers |
| 4 Rancid Earth | 25 Swamp |
| 4 Diabolic Tutor | |

SIDEBOARD

- 4 Braids, Cabal Minion
- 4 Faceless Butcher
- 3 Mesmeric Fiend
- 2 Ghastly Demise
- 2 Skeletal Scrying

Four Mind Sludges? Four maindeck Rancid Earths? Four Diabolic Tutors? Only one Skeletal Scrying? You don't arrive at these numbers by accident. Featuring more removal than most Mono-Black decks, using Shambling Swarms and Rancid Earth to deal with Squirrel's Nest, Rob's build was better equipped to combat U/G than most.

Additionally, he realized a couple of big fliers would be very helpful for going over the top of blue and green creatures (which did not yet have access to Wonder). Most people had Laquatus's Champion in this slot, but Rob wanted a flier. He initially eyed Sengir Vampire, but ended up adopting teammate Paul Rietzl's suggestion of Stalking Bloodsucker because of the natural curve of turn 4 Mutilate followed by turn 5 Cabal Coffers for the turn 5 Bloodsucker.

As for other Mono-Black decks, Rob realized that being the first guy to Mind Sludge was the most important part of the match up. With four Mind Sludges, four Diabolic Tutors, and four Rancid Earths to stall their Mind Sludge for a turn (as well as to neutralize their Cabal Coffers), Rob fought to get whatever edge he could in the razor-tight mirror.

This is a classic example of focusing on what matters in deckbuilding. We hear that players should focus on the game all the time in game play, but master deckbuilders use this as a guiding principle in design. What decides the matchup? How can you do that as much as possible and decrease the chances of your opponent doing it?

"I'm not sure about the inner workings of this team, but their 1-2-3 finish in Houston with three different decks is no less impressive."

-Luis Scott-Vargas

Pro Tour Houston 2002 was a particularly memorable example of YMG's deckbuilding dominance, due to Justin Gary (Gary Oath), Darwin Kastle (The Rock), and Dougherty (Reanimator) taking the top 3 spots after testing together. Each decided to run a different brew.



At the time, Reanimator decks tended to be U/B, so the idea of stripping it down to just a single color was a major breakthrough. This deck has proven to be among the more influential decks in the game's history.

For instance, even today we see Entomb-based Reanimator decks in Legacy using five or six fatties, primarily as one-ofs. It may seem obvious now, but at the time many people questioned Rob: "If Verdant Force is the best, why would you not just play more Verdant Forces? After all, if you cast Last Rites, you want the best fatty possible to discard, right?" Rob helped pioneer the idea of using Entomb as a tutor engine and filling your deck with an assortment of "bullet" fatties.



Benzo

Rob Dougherty 2nd Pro Tour Houston 2002 (Extended)

MAINDECK

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 Nether Spirit | 4 Duress |
| 2 Faceless Butcher | 4 Entomb |
| 1 Stronghold Taskmaster | 4 Reanimate |
| 1 Visara the Dreadful | 4 Vampiric Tutor |
| 1 Phantom Nishoba | 4 Exhume |
| 1 Symbiotic Wurm | 4 Last Rites |
| 1 Petradon | 4 City of Traitors |
| 1 Verdant Force | 19 Swamp |
| 4 Cabal Therapy | |

SIDEBOARD

- 4 Diabolic Edict
- 3 Phyrexian Negator
- 2 Engineered Plague
- 2 Faceless Butcher
- 2 Planar Void
- 1 Urborg Shambler
- 1 Woodripper

City of Traitors looks a little strange on the surface, since it helps cast relatively few cards in the deck. Imagine this line of play:

Turn 1: Swamp → Duress or Cabal Therapy

Turn 2: City of Traitors → Last Rites (discard all but one).

Now your opponent is almost surely defenseless, making the Reanimate or Exhume you kept as your last card almost surely game! The sideboard took especially good advantage of the City of Traitors that almost no one had, powering out Engineered Plagues, Phyrexian Negators, and Faceless Butchers.

The incredible redundancy is part of what makes this deck so special. Four Entombs, four Last Rites, and four Vampiric Tutors (as well as backdoor routes like Cabal Therapy on yourself) ensured no shortage of ways to get monsters in the graveyard. Four Reanimates, four Exhumes, and four Vampiric Tutors ensure plenty of ways to bring them back.

The maindeck had a subtle depth, almost like a Teachings deck or a Gifts deck. For instance, Entomb for Nether Spirit allowed for action when one had too many Entombs but not enough reanimation spells. Entomb for Nether Spirit also provided another threat against counterspell decks. Often, they would give up on trying to fight over the Entombs and just focus on the Reanimates and Exhumes. Nether Shadow could punish someone under these circumstances, or just provide a layer of defense against Edicts.

Rob has been around since the beginning, and he continues to be a force in the community — working as a deckbuilder, a player, and an organizer. Quite frankly, he's likely to be actively involved in the game for the rest of his life, and the game is better for it. There's no question that a great deal of Rob's success was largely enhanced as a result of one of the greatest deckbuilding teams of all time, YMG... and it was Rob who assembled that team.



7

ALAN COMER

Hall of Famer Alan Comer is known for his exciting and unusual strategies... but most people don't realize just how strong of a Limited player Comer was. Despite playing only six years before being recruited to work for Wizards of the Coast, Alan still managed to accumulate five Top 8s, four of which were in Limited events.

Comer's saga is a fascinating one. On the one hand, he was an absolutely world-class player and drafter. However, few (if any) players of his caliber have actually played as many decks in competitive play that are just too far out there. It's tempting to suggest that perhaps Comer would have done even better had he been more willing to play mainstream strategies. But this argument is easily trumped by pointing out just how many times Comer permanently changed the way people build decks.

Some people care most about winning in the short run. That was never Alan. Comer's genius was so great that mere "best" versions of decks were boring to him. If he went a month without designing a revolutionary new archetype, he felt like he was slacking. Few deckbuilders in the game's history have had as many "big" and "different" ideas for deck design. Alan Comer and Erik Lauer are the two men who inspire me most when it comes to thinking about deckbuilding outside the box — and if there was an award for such a thing, it might have to go to Comer, as the only time that man has ever been *in* the box has been when he finds a new breakthrough that succeeds and the box forms around him which he immediately escapes.

"A crazy idea man in the mold of Lauer, Comer is responsible for many of the macro deck concepts used by advanced designers, notably cantrips as facilitation for lowered land counts in blue decks. A pioneer of library manipulation, biasing resources, and, at the end of the day... honor in game play."

—Michael Flores



This first list is one of the most important in Magic's history, as it fundamentally changed the way we think about deck design. Turbo Xerox got its name because of how fast exact copies appeared throughout California. It spread like wildfire partially because of the novel and intriguing concepts at its core... and partially because of its complete lack of rares! Remember, at the time the Internet was nothing like today and information didn't spread quickly — yet Turbo Xerox was such a radical departure from existing theory, it quickly became the topic everywhere.

Turbo Xerox

Alan Comer Southern California Regionals 1997 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Suq'ata Firewalker	4 Memory Lapse
4 Man-o'-War	4 Foreshadow
4 Waterspout Djinn	3 Dissipate
4 Portent	1 Dream Tides
4 Impulse	4 Force of Will
4 Counterspell	17 Islands
4 Power Sink	

SIDEBOARD

4 Hydroblast
4 Dandân
3 Knight of the Mists
2 Sleight of Mind
1 Dissipate
1 Dream Tides

In the early days of Magic, bad players would teach each other to play twenty lands in their sixty-card decks. Early on, it became a sign of a "good" player to play 23 or more lands. When people couldn't figure out how to beat Turbo Xerox, Alan laid his deck out and revealed his secret. Despite having three- and four-drops, he was playing just seventeen land!

That's right: Alan Comer actually invented the technique of fixing your mana with the use of cheap cantrips. This is actually the fundamental strategy the Legacy format is built on! Comer realized that even with just seventeen Islands and four Portents, he had about an 85% chance of having two Islands by turn 2 on the play (and almost 90% on the draw).

Once he assembled two Islands, he had Impulse and Foreshadow to help find three and four. Of course, there were some games where Comer would keep a one-land hand on the draw and not get there by turn 2. In times like these, Force of Will acted as a poor man's Time Walk, buying him the time he needed.





If it sounds like this is a lot of work just to get three Islands by the third turn, it is — but it's not without a payoff. Once Comer made that initial investment to assemble three Islands by turn 3, he had a major advantage over every other deck he would face. People with 23 lands in their deck draw land 38% of the time. Turbo Xerox draws a land just 28% of the time. This means that more than one out of four times that you would draw a land that you don't need, you instead draw a spell (which is further compounded by Comer's cantrips accelerating your draws in future turns, such as the aforementioned Portent + Foreshadow combo).

Players already had theories about how to use Rampant Growth and Fellwar Stone as part of their mana bases. Comer showed the world that cantrips could be relied on to fuel decks with far lower land counts than previously thought possible. This is exactly the type of major breakthrough that is only possible when you can escape the box of "what you have to do."

Up next, we have another important Alan Comer creation that wasn't around during a major tournament but helped lay the groundwork for decks we see even today... the first successful, true "Reanimator" deck in Magic!

Sure, people had used Animate Dead in their discard decks before... but it wasn't until Godzilla (or Comer-zilla, as we would affectionately refer to it) that the game got its first taste of a tournament deck dedicated to discarding a fatty and reanimating it.

Godzilla

Alan Comer Regionals 1997 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Merfolk Traders	4 Necromancy
4 Hidden Horror	2 Living Death
2 Sliver Queen	4 City of Brass
3 Shivan Dragon	4 Gemstone Mine
2 Necrosavant	2 Undiscovered Paradise
4 Verdant Force	2 Reflecting Pool
4 Dark Ritual	3 Underground River
4 Firestorm	3 Sulfurous Springs
4 Mana Leak	1 Swamp
4 Animate Dead	1 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Pyroblast
2 Hydroblast
4 Dread of Night
2 Disenchant
2 Tranquil Domain
1 Extinction

With no tutors, redundancy was far more important; hence the eleven fatties of only four types. It is remarkable to think how far we've come since those days. Necrosavant was selected because of his self-reanimating ability. As for the other three...

The three biggest, baddest creatures you could imagine being in play in those days were *literally* Verdant Force, Sliver Queen, and Shivan Dragon! Because those creatures are nowhere near the Ionas and Terastodons we have today, you'd often need multiple creatures in order to win a game. Hidden Horror helped in this department, as did Living Death and Necrosavant.

While Turbo Xerox may have been the first step towards cantrip-based low-land-counts, it is surely MiracleGro that Comer is most famous for. Not only did he incorporate Winter Orb into an ultra-low-land aggro deck, he also stripped the mana base down even further, playing an unprecedented ten lands!

"MiracleGro was just that good."

-Mark Herberholz, on why Comer is auto-in for top ten all-time



MiracleGro

Alan Comer 9th Grand Prix Las Vegas 2002 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Lord of Atlantis	4 Winter Orb
4 Merfolk Looter	3 Foil
4 Quirion Dryad	4 Force of Will
3 Gaea's Skyfolk	4 Gush
4 Brainstorm	4 Land Grant
4 Sleight of Hand	4 Tropical Island
4 Curiosity	6 Island
4 Daze	

SIDEBOARD

4 Submerge
4 Chill
3 Emerald Charm
2 Misdirection
2 Boomerang

"Alan was special for being able to just shrug off convention and come up with some completely crazy homebrews, and then make them perform. Alan has to be one of the most successful players of all time in terms of performance with decks that possibly not one other person in the event was playing. As our team systems got more sophisticated that stopped happening as much... but he was as individual as they came, AND managed to do well."

"He was also an astute tuner. When I saw a really crazy, interesting, obscure PTQ-winning list from Eastern Europe one day while working on Mindripper updates, I sent the list to Alan with a note that I hadn't even played the thing, but thought it looked very promising for GP Vegas. I felt like maybe it needed something. I think it was maybe ten minutes before an email came back saying, 'Winter Orb has to go in here, right? Wouldn't that be the whole point? It's so obvious that it's like somebody was trying to hide it with this list.' A quick playtest and MiracleGro was born. Admittedly, Alan had a big thing for Worb, but it's a good example of how well he often could zero in on key things."

-Scott Johns

When calculating mana ratios for these decks, it's important to calculate your success rate at each objective. Normal decks may just need three lands by turn 3 — but as we saw, Turbo Xerox couldn't count Portent until you already had an Island, and couldn't count Impulse and Foreshadow until you already had two. Here, Turbo Xerox doesn't mind counting Land Grant out the gate, but you can't count Brainstorm and Sleight of Hand until you have the first land. What are your odds of drawing one (or a Land Grant) in the opener? It doesn't matter if you're on the play or draw, as you're not really keeping a seven-card no-land hand, or a Land Grant hand, most of the time. Odds of success? 86%.

With nothing in the entire deck costing more than two, and 19 spells that can be played without paying mana for them, MiracleGro really didn't ever have to draw more than two lands.

MiracleGro didn't just utilize the lowest land counts for non-combo decks ever — it also showcased the Quiron Dryad for the first time.



The use of cantrips to power it up caught players by surprise and changed how people evaluate creatures. Additionally, this was the first big breakthrough for Gush, in what would eventually lead to the banning of Gush in Legacy, as well as providing the foundation Yours Truly would build on to win the Type 1 Championship in 2002, *as well as* providing the inspiration for Brian Kibler and Ben Rubin's absolute monster, Sickestever.dec (or SuperGro, which basically added white and removed Merfolk).

It's impossible to do justice to the man's brilliance without paying proper due to the sheer volume of cutting-edge strategies he invented. For instance, take a look at this wacky deck he piloted in Pro Tour Hollywood 2008 after returning to the Pro circuit, now that he had moved to another (non-Wizards) job.

Elf Combo

Alan Comer Pro Tour Hollywood 2008 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Llanowar Elves	4 Elvish Promenade
4 Boreal Druid	4 Hunting Triad
4 Heritage Druid	3 Roar of the Crowd
4 Bramblewood Paragon	4 Gemstone Mine
2 Wren's Run Vanquisher	1 Mosswort Bridge
4 Imperious Perfect	1 Pendelhaven
1 Rune Snag	4 Grove of the Burnwillows
4 Gilt-Leaf Ambush	4 Yavimaya Coast
4 Distant Melody	4 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Elvish Eulogist
 4 Guttural Response
 3 Rune Snag
 2 Wren's Run Vanquisher
 1 Masked Admirers
 1 Primal Command

Doesn't seem that strange, right? Well, remember this was a season *before* Pro Tour Berlin, when Heritage Druid caught everyone by surprise! Pro Tour Hollywood was before Nettle Sentinel was even printed! Alan Comer is one of the most creative idea men in the game's history. His style is so far out of the box that most wouldn't be comfortable with it, but there are countless lessons to learn from him. He revolutionized how we build mana bases, how we think about deckbuilding, and how we think about synergies in Magic. Comer was king of asking "What could be?"

6

BRIAN KIBLER

Hall of Famer Brian Kibler is well-known for many things; his love of fatties (particularly Dragons), his nearly maniacal confidence, his extensive tournament success, and of course his winning smile. In addition to all of this, Kibler is well-known for being one of the greatest deckbuilders of all time.

While Caw-Blade itself involved a much larger group, including Brad Nelson and the Channel Fireball guys (and it was enough of a common idea that many other players developed it simultaneously), the version that Kibler worked on proved the strongest, which is a constant refrain from the people who have tested with him. Kibler doesn't always try to invent new archetypes, but he also doesn't steer away from them. He just builds what seems good to him, and his judgment and creativity do the rest.

The first Kibler deck we'll cover is one that's particularly near and dear to Kibler for a variety of reasons: this is the list that carried to Kibler to his lone Top 8 back before he was reconstructed as an unbeatable cyborg Magic-winning machine. Additionally, it involved Kibler putting Armadillo Cloak on Rith the Awakener.

"In the early 2000s, Kibler made it his quest to break the barrier set by Lauer and grow into the title of Greatest Deck Designer of All Time. He acquired the most impressive set of bullets of that era — but in my estimation, he never got there. It was only after nearly a decade away from the game that this eventual Hall of Famer helped design the greatest sustained Standard deck of all time, creating Caw-Blade in 2010-2011."

—Michael Flores

You have to realize: Kibler is a small child, with a *giant* Timmy inside.

Kibler's a Spike, no question — but he's also truly a Timmy on the inside. This isn't because he plays lots of fatties; remember, Zvi Top 8ed this event with Blastoderm and Two-Headed Dragon, after all. A pure Spike will play whatever. What makes Kibler a Timmy is that he *loves* it. He *fantasizes* about attacking with giant monsters. We'll be sitting at a Grand Prix talking about possible



decks, and one of Kibler's contributions is also imagining how big of an attack phase we could reasonably get. You think he takes out the Kird Apes and adds Baneslayer Angels because he's a normal, sane person who *doesn't* have an addiction to fatties?

The Red Zone

Brian Kibler 3rd Pro Tour Chicago 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise	2 Rith, the Awakener
4 Llanowar Elves	3 Wax // Wane
4 River Boa	4 Armageddon
4 Chimeric Idol	4 Rishadan Port
3 Jade Leech	4 City of Brass
4 Blastoderm	4 Brushland
4 Ancient Hydra	4 Karplusan Forest
3 Jade Leech	8 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Armadillo Cloak
3 Tsabo's Decree
3 Kavu Chameleon
2 Flashfires
2 Simoon
1 Obliterate

This deck existed in a primarily two-deck format. Basically, the entire field was either R/G or Rebels. In fact, Jon Finkel, Rob Dougherty, Michael Pustilnik, and Zvi Mowshowitz all Top 8ed with R/G Fires decks, and Hall of Famers Kai Budde and Kamiel Cornelissen Top 8ed with different Rebel decks. The lone other rogue deck was Jay Elarar with mono-blue Rising Waters.

As a side note, with six Hall of Famers in the Top 8, this is widely regarded as one of the absolute best of all time.

Kibler was the only Armageddon deck among them — which brings us to an important point. Kibler's deck actually had a surprising amount of hate, but what about when you played against non-Fires/Rebels decks? Armageddon was a very powerful plan in and of itself. You could drop basically any fatty, then Armageddon — and even if you had mediocre cards in your hand, you were in great shape. When you build a deck to prey on a narrow metagame, it's nice to have an overpowered card to crutch on in other matchups.

Armageddon was also Kibler's primary plan against Rebels. In addition to his mana producers, he could just stick a larger creature, then 'Geddon. Without lands to fuel the Rebel chain, Kibler wouldn't actually have to care about the Rebels at all.

Add to this a sideboard full of surprise Tsabo's Decrees and Flashfires to totally take advantages of decks full of Rebels and Plains, and we are talking about a very hateful man. Tsabo's Decree powered by four Birds of Paradise and four City of Brass?

Nice!



As for Fires, Kibler made use of four maindeck Wax // Wane. Wax // Wane could destroy either Fires of Yavimaya or the Saproling Burst that they relied so heavily on. It was never a dead card, since Kibler could also get at least a mediocre Giant Growth out of it. It could even let him do little unexpected plays, like break a Rising Waters lock such as against Jay Elarar's mono-blue Rising Waters deck.

Ancient Hydra is an unusual choice, but the ability to spray mana dorks proved super-effective against Fires decks. In fact, one of Kibler's laments was that he *only* had two Simoons in his sideboard — a card with a similar functionality that was even better at this job.

The other big innovation was cutting all of the burn for more monsters. While Fires decks would often feature cards like Urza's Rage or Rhystic Lightning in addition to their Fires of Yavimaya, Kibler's build was nothing but monsters, Wax // Wane, and Armageddon. A hybrid of Kibler's love for the fatties and for identifying weaknesses in a metagame, this deck reminds us that we don't have to completely wash our hands of our natural style.

It's easy to become a slave to our own biases — but those biases are the foundation for our inspiration. Bleaching our soul completely would be a monumental mistake. You don't have to abandon your style to succeed at deckbuilding! You just need to be able to step outside of it when the times call for it.

"When it comes to unique strategies, Kibler was one of the best. Kibler would often brew some original decks with his partner-in-crime Ben Rubin, but I think he was really at his best when he took an existing strategy and just vastly improved it. The three best examples I can think of with this is his MiracleGro deck from Grand Prix Houston, where he basically just took Alan Comer's deck and added another color to improve the mirror match and combat the expected hate. His Fires deck from Pro Tour Chicago was a perfect example of taking the most dominant deck at the time and changing it slightly so you could dominate the mirror without losing much against the rest of the field. And his Pro Tour-winning Zoo deck that added the Punishing Fire engine was simply a genius innovation that impacted the metagame for a long time after his win."

—Osyp Lebedowicz

Hall of Famer Ben Rubin, who finished 11th in the vote, goes hand-in-hand with Brian Kibler as the two had been lifelong testing partners before Rubin's untimely disappearance to The Island. Throughout much of Kibler's career, it would be impossible to separate the accomplishments of the two; Rubin taught Kibler so much of what he knows, and they always helped each other to a degree that there was no one person leading many of their decks. While Kibler has returned as one of the best players in the world, Rubin was one of the true greats years ago. The player Finkel wanted to play against least, Rubin was a prodigy and a Pro Tour monster.

Rubin Zoo

Brian Kibler 1st Pro Tour Austin 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl	2 Treetop Village
3 Noble Hierarch	4 Grove of the Burnwillows
3 Qasali Pridemage	4 Misty Rainforest
4 Tarmogoyf	4 Arid Mesa
4 Knight of the Reliquary	2 Marsh Flats
3 Baneslayer Angel	2 Stomping Ground
1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant	1 Temple Garden
4 Path to Exile	1 Sacred Foundry
4 Lightning Bolt	1 Forest
4 Punishing Fire	1 Plains
2 Lightning Helix	1 Mountain
1 Ghost Quarter	

SIDEBOARD

4 Meddling Mage
3 Ancient Grudge
3 Blood Moon
3 Ghost Quarter
1 Hallowed Fountain
1 Kataki, War's Wage

This is Kibler and Rubin's most famous collaboration, which Kibler piloted to a Pro Tour victory in Austin in 2009. For that Pro Tour, Heezy, Nassif, and I tested with Kibler and Rubin and had been playing Punishing Fires in most of our decks. Rubin was primarily playing Tribal Flames-style Zoo decks. Kibler was very interested in Baneslayer Angel. Paul Rietzl was primarily interested in Arcbound Ravagers. Rubin was more than happy to play the role of Zoo against our control decks, and at first our Punishing Fires were proving fairly effective against him. Once he added Punishing Fires himself, the tides turned...

Kibler suggested actually trying Baneslayers in the Zoo deck, since it was already slowing down and picking up a great endgame from Punishing Fires. After spending a couple days primarily working on the deck with Michael Jacob and Matt Sperling, they arrived at the Rubin Zoo deck that posted one of the best records of this era.

"Brian Kibler has made a lot of great decks, some of them played in famous circumstances (Red Zone, Doran), some less so. I was around for most of them."

-Ben Rubin, smiling



They figured that Zoo was the best strategy, so they wanted to be a Zoo that beat other Zoos. The way they did this was take out the worst small creature (Kird Ape) and replace it with the best creature against other Zoos (Baneslayer Angel), which was made possible by using Knight of the Reliquary in ways that most Zoo decks couldn't take advantage of.

While Knight was often a 4/4 that became a 6/6 for other people, here he was also a mana source to fuel early Angels, as well as a “tutor” for either Grove of the Burnwillow or Ghost Quarter to stop other people's Groves (or Dark Depths). These Groves combined with Punishing Fire to give them inevitability, letting them go long against people in way that Zoo generally is not able to.



The sideboard full of hate addresses the weakness to soft combos this strategy saddles them with. Additionally, the ability to tutor up Treetop Villages provided much-needed additional beatdown for a deck with so much removal.

While Kibler benefited greatly from his collaborations with Rubin, he's also enjoyed great success in recent years with less direct involvement from Ben. Here is the so-called Treehouse deck that Kibler and Brad Nelson built for Pro Tour Amsterdam.

Treehouse

Brian Kibler 6th Pro Tour Amsterdam 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Treefolk Harbinger
3 Loam Lion
4 Tarmogoyf
4 Putrid Leech
4 Doran, the Siege Tower
4 Knight of the Reliquary
1 Chameleon Colossus
1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
4 Thoughtseize
3 Duress

1 Nameless Inversion
4 Maelstrom Pulse
4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Misty Rainforest
4 Murmuring Bosk
3 Reflecting Pool
3 Treetop Village
1 Twilight Mire
3 Forest
1 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

3 Leyline of the Void
3 Rule of Law
2 Reveillark
2 Slaughter Pact
2 Zealous Persecution
1 Basilisk Collar
1 Bojuka Bog
1 Elspeth, Knight-Errant

This Doran deck followed Kibler's classic formula of playing just a few more fatties than the next guy. They realized early on that the metagame primarily revolved around creature decks, combo decks, and Punishing Fires decks. Having narrowed the format down to a few types of strategies, they were able to devise a strategy that elegantly attacked each. The discard was obviously the first line of defense against combo decks, but the Treefolk Harbingers were also an important player. The turn 1 Harbinger, turn 2 Harbinger + Treetop, turn 3 Doran line of play was a natural twenty points of damage by turn 4 — and all you needed in your opening hand was a Treetop, two other lands, and a Harbinger!

The anti-Punishing Fires plan involved taking out every single creature that died to it. Noble Hierachs? Birds of Paradise? Gaddock Teegs? Ethersworn Canonists? Tidehollow Scullers? Qasali Pridemages? Brad and Kibler wanted Punishing Fires to have no good targets.

As for the creature decks, we used a favorite technique of Kibler's: fight creatures with *bigger* creatures! Notice that we aren't talking about more expensive creatures — just bigger ones. This is a great example of taking an existing archetype and redesigning it from the ground up. Brian was looking at what the format demanded, not just what the best cards were.

Valakut

Brian Kibler 1st Pro Tour Dark Ascension 2012 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Birds of Paradise
 4 Huntmaster of the Fells
 3 Solemn Simulacrum
 1 Thrun, the Last Troll
 1 Acidic Slime
 2 Inferno Titan
 4 Primeval Titan
 4 Galvanic Blast
 4 Rampant Growth
 1 Whipflare

4 Slagstorm
 2 Green Sun's Zenith
 4 Sphere of the Suns
 2 Kessig Wolf Run
 4 Inkmoth Nexus
 4 Copperline Gorge
 4 Rootbound Crag
 6 Mountain
 5 Forest

SIDEBOARD

2 Ancient Grudge
 2 Beast Within
 2 Combust
 2 Karn Liberated
 2 Naturalize
 2 Thrun, the Last Troll
 1 Garruk, Primal Hunter
 1 Whipflare
 1 Autumn's Veil

Finally, we close on Brian's second(!) Pro Tour-winning deck, the R/G Valakut deck he used to win the 2012 Pro Tour Hawaii. Brian had actually designed a R/G Aggro deck that he wanted to play in the event, but seeing the rest of Team Channel Fireball decide to play Valakut (his worst matchup), he decided to switch and just focus on helping them tune the list.

While this list was very much the product of an ensemble cast, it does speak to Brian's range. He certainly has a preference for green midrange decks, but when he believes the format demands it, he is willing to play anything from U/W Control to Combo-Ramp.

5

TOMOHARU SAITO

Number five on our countdown is one-time Japanese superstar Tomoharu Saito. Saito is a consummate beatdown player, with all but three of his twenty best finishes involving aggro decks (the other three were Elf Combo and Hypergenesis twice). Counterspells? Sure, Saito's played counterspells a couple times. He won a Legacy Grand Prix with Merfolk (which was still a very aggressive deck), and he's sideboarded Negate in his Zoo decks. Saito plays counterspells the way Mike Turian plays counterspells... as Time Walks, so he can beat down even harder!

There is no denying that Saito has been mired with controversy over the years. In late 2010, he received an eighteen-month ban for unsportsmanlike conduct and stalling, the result of an accumulation of offenses. In addition, Saito lost all of his qualifications and had his near induction into the Hall of Fame revoked. While serving his suspension, Saito continued to attend GPs, trading and hanging out. He has an undying love for the game, and now that he's served his suspension, he's returned to the tournament scene. After a Top 4 finish at the 2013 Grand Prix Sydney, he's requalified for the Pro Tour. So he's had to start over — but Saito's never been afraid of a challenge before.

Of course, there's also no denying that Saito is one of the game's strongest players and one of the greatest beatdown tuners of all time. Looking at Saito's decks, there are some interesting lessons to be learned. For instance, sometimes the greatest deckbuilding decisions are what not to play. We begin our look at Saito's decks by starting with his Pro Tour Charleston-winning Ravnica Unified Team Constructed deck.

Examining Saito's list reveals a little bit about the thought process that can go into building aggro decks for underpowered formats. Ravnica was also quite strange because of the mana requirements of the powerful cards. Because of a desire to split the powerful cards between three decks, there was strong incentive for players to play three colors. Making a true beatdown deck under these conditions proved very challenging, and many teams ended up just using a two-color aggro deck, leaving even more powerful cards on the bench. Saito managed to find a way to beat down and play three colors.



Dark Boros

Tomoharu Saito 1st Pro Tour Charleston 2005 (Team Ravnica Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Dark Confidant	4 Demonfire
4 Rakdos Guildmage	2 Boros Signet
4 Skyknight Legionnaire	2 Boros Garrison
4 Lyzolda, the Blood Witch	4 Godless Shrine
4 Giant Solifuge	4 Blood Crypt
3 Seal of Fire	4 Sacred Foundry
4 Lightning Helix	5 Swamp
4 Hit // Run	4 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Char
4 Sunhome Enforcer
3 Rise // Fall
2 Orzhov Pontiff
1 Seal of Fire
1 Skeletal Vampire

His solution? A combination of being mid-speed and hitting from different and unexpected angles. Most of Saito's creatures are powerful threats that each need to be dealt with. The one exception to this, the Skyknight Legionnaire, had both haste and evasion, meaning it functioned much like a burn spell. Saito knew that most of his opponents were likely to be fairly slow and have to spend three or more mana to answer each of his threats. By making each creature one that opponents would have to respond to, Saito could dictate the tempo of the game and accumulate a stockpile of burn to finish people off after sneaking in a few hits.



This was the first (and, as of 2013, only) Team Constructed Pro Tour, and in this event each team of three had to play with no more than four copies of a card. To understand the deckbuilding that went into Saito's list, we must also examine those of his teammates Tomohiro Kaji and Shouta Yasooka.

BUG Control

Tomohiro Kaji 1st Pro Tour Charleston 2005 (Team Ravnica Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Carven Caryatid	2 Clutch of the Undercity
3 Moroi	2 Twisted Justice
3 Skeletal Vampire	3 Simic Signet
3 Simic Sky Swallower	4 Breeding Pool
4 Farseek	4 Overgrown Tomb
4 Voidslime	3 Golgari Rot Farm
3 Putrefy	5 Island
4 Rolling Spoil	4 Forest
2 Mimeofacture	3 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Bound // Determined
4 Ribbons of Night
3 Last Gasp
2 Muse Vessel
1 Leyline of Singularity
1 Simic Growth Chamber

It's hard to fully grasp just how clever this configuration of decks is without remembering the context — and specifically, without remembering Loxodon Hierarch. Loxodon Hierarch was one of the most-hyped cards in that era, and just about every other team in the event had a “Loxodon Hierarch deck” — i.e., a deck with both green and white in it to play this power card.

As a result of Saito's willingness to abandon this sacred cow, his team was able to assemble an unusual combination of decks unlike any other team's. A basic element of this format (and block) meant that not all the good cards could get played. There were just too many great gold cards and no five-color enablers, meaning each team would have to bench some. To step away from what many considered the most obvious card? *Incredibly* disciplined.



Solar Flare

Shota Yasooka 1st Pro Tour Charleston 2005 (Team Ravnica Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Court Hussar	1 Debtors' Knell
3 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV	1 Overrule
3 Angel of Despair	4 Dimir Signet
4 Remand	1 Prahv, Spires of Order
4 Trial // Error	3 Azorius Chancery
4 Compulsive Research	4 Hallowed Fountain
3 Mortify	4 Watery Grave
2 Convolute	4 Swamp
3 Swift Silence	4 Plains
1 Twisted Justice	3 Island

SIDEBOARD

3 Spell Snare
2 Wit's End
2 Faith's Fetters
2 Orzhov Pontiff
2 Keening Banshee
2 Muse Vessel
1 Moonlight Bargain
1 Nightmare Void

Here we also see the fluidity that separates good beatdown deckbuilders from great ones. Just as we saw Kibler and Rubin's Punishing Fires Zoo deck do, Saito's Dark Boros could adopt the role of control deck against other aggro decks. Cheap removal, card advantage, and some mid-sized creatures allow Saito to take a new form and adapt to the opponent.

We see this lesson time and time again: many truly great beatdown decks can transform into a bigger version of the mirror.

"If you want an incredibly well-tuned control deck, well, don't look to Saito. If you want the best beatdown deck in the room, he's definitely your man. All his decks are meticulously tested, and all have the little touches that you know come as a result of untold hours of testing. The Perish/Nature's Ruin split (to get around Meddling Mage/ Cabal Therapy) in his U/B Merfolk deck, the Terastodon/Oblivion Ring synergy in his Hypergenesis deck (a rare departure from beatdown), and the back-to-back wins with Zoo in 2009 are all good examples. Saito always had one of the best decks at every tournament, even if they weren't particularly flashy."

-Luis Scott-Vargas

Up next, we have another Block Constructed beatdown deck of Saito's. He is truly a master of finding the optimal beatdown deck for underpowered formats. So often, players will make the mistake of building very obvious, surface-level aggro decks in block. Because of the far lower card quality than other formats, this has a more drastic effect on the quality of suboptimal builds. Then, people rely on results they get from testing against these suboptimal builds and come to conclusions like "mono-red sucks" or "White Weenie is the best beatdown deck." In that format, in the days leading up to the event, Magic Online results seemed to suggest that White Weenie was the best — a trend that did not reflect real world results in any meaningful way.

Once again, we see from Saito a streamlined, clean execution of a simple idea. The format may be slow and underpowered, but the principles of mana curves still apply. Sure, he doesn't have access to Wild Nacatls, Kird Apes, and Tarmogoyfs, so the curve needs to go a little higher — but it's still there. Here's the list Saito took to a fourth-place finish:

R/g Aggro

Tomoharu Saito 4th Pro Tour Yokohama 2006 (Time Spiral Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Magus of the Scroll	4 Rift Bolt
4 Blood Knight	4 Stormbind
4 Mogg War Marshal	2 Pendelhaven
4 Sulfur Elemental	4 Terramorphic Expanse
4 Timbermare	15 Mountain
3 Assault // Battery	4 Forest
4 Fiery Temper	

SIDEBOARD

4 Browbeat
4 Dead // Gone
4 Wildfire Emissary
3 Utopia Vow

The format's lack of dual lands made almost everyone give up on multi-colored aggro decks. Dreadship Reef and Prismatic Lens were thought to be the only manafixing in town. Saito's solution? First of all, Terramorphic Expanse can be made to work as a dual land, especially since there weren't a lot of one-drops Saito wanted to play anyway (meaning he could count it as a one-drop on his curve). Next, he just brute-forced it and played 25 lands in a deck whose curve would normally call for 23. A pair of Pendelhavens gave him a little more utility out of his lands than others, plus he had the full four Stormbinds, letting him cash his inevitable mana flood into more Shocks.

This list is actually subtle in its brilliance; on the surface, it appears to be just a random collection of creatures and burn. Yet let us consider the context: this was another format that was basically driven by U/B/x Teachings and Mono-White Aggro, with a few R/G midrange decks and Mono-Red aggro decks floating around. While some players prefer wide-open formats where you can play anything, many top deckbuilders find they get the biggest edge in narrow formats, which allow them to fine-tune their decks to defeat "what's popular."



Take a look at how Saito's creatures do against against White Weenie. Magus of the Scroll can pick a creature off every turn, going long. Blood Knight has protection from white. Sulfur Elemental kills Soltari Priest (and many others). Mogg War Marshal provides lots of extra blockers. Assault // Battery doubles as much-needed cheap removal. Timbermare is the odd man out, but we see the sideboard already has this in mind, with Wildfire Emissary replacing him at the four-spot.

Even looking at what Saito *didn't* play — namely Greater Gargadon, a card that was in most other red decks — we see the foresight on Saito's part. He anticipated that most everyone would have Temporal Isolation or Teferi or Snapback. Gargadon didn't provide the defense he needed against White Weenie, and Teachings ensured that the U/B players would rarely fear the card, so Saito left them out. He did recognize the Gargadon's strength in the mirror, however, but figured others would be expecting them out of him — so he didn't bother sideboarding them. Instead, he used the much-maligned Utopia Vow to neutralize the advantage gained by his opponent's Gargadon.

"Maybe it's more about deck tweaking than deckbuilding, but I've been amazed by Tomoharu's ability to always come up with the perfectly tuned list. Time and again after a tournament, I would think 'I shouldn't have played this card ... I should have played that one ...' Rarely would I have played the exact same 75, if I could change things. But when I looked at Tomoharu's decklists, they always looked perfect for the event, down to the last card."

-Guillaume Wafo-Tapa

Finally, we come to the progression of Zoo decks that helped elevate Saito to a household name. Saito didn't invent Zoo any more than Gerry Thompson invented Faeries, Dark Depths, or Caw-Blade; he just took what he considered to be the best general strategy in the format, and tuned it week in and week out. After finished Top 16 at Grand Prix Hanover, Saito went on to win back-to-back Grand Prix with Naya Zoo decks, which he would take to 17th at the World Championships. Here is that progression, starting with his redesign in Singapore (after being displeased with his Hanover list):



Naya

Tomoharu Saito 1st Grand Prix Singapore 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl
4 Kird Ape
4 Mogg Fanatic
1 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
3 Gaddock Teeg
4 Tarmogoyf
4 Woolly Thoctar
4 Path to Exile
3 Seal of Fire
4 Lightning Helix
2 Incinerate

2 Umezawa's Jitte
4 Wooded Foothills
4 Windswept Heath
4 Bloodstained Mire
3 Stomping Ground
2 Sacred Foundry
1 Temple Garden
1 Forest
1 Mountain
1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Pyrostatic Pillar
3 Volcanic Fallout
3 Oblivion Ring
3 Ranger of Eos
1 Rule of Law
1 Ancient Grudge

Watch for the evolution in strategy from week to week. The first list was built to be as fast and consistent as possible, aiming to defeat Elf decks. After winning the Grand Prix with the most streamlined version, he anticipated a ton of people would be copying him (which they did), as well as people switching to decks that weren't vulnerable to his huge supply of removal (such as decks armed with Kitchen Finks).

His response?



Saito took out a lot of the removal and replaced it with more threats, including Ranger of Eos. More Jitte action and using Knight of the Reliquary instead of Woolly Thoctar gave Saito

even more “big game” against aggro decks. Cutting all this removal would lower his Elves matchup, so he traded in his Teegs for Canonists — which also punished Storm players that had just been testing against last week's version. Additionally, sideboarding Fire Whip let him attack from an angle that Elves players would never suspect.

Super Naya Zoo

Tomoharu Saito 1st Grand Prix Kobe 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl
4 Kird Ape
4 Mogg Fanatic
4 Tarmogoyf
4 Ethersworn Canonist
3 Knight of the Reliquary
3 Ranger of Eos
4 Path to Exile
4 Lightning Helix
3 Umezawa's Jitte
2 Treetop Village

4 Windswept Heath
4 Wooded Foothills
4 Bloodstained Mire
1 Flooded Strand
2 Sacred Foundry
2 Stomping Ground
1 Temple Garden
1 Forest
1 Mountain
1 Plains

SIDEBOARD

3 Fire Whip
3 Gaddock Teeg
2 Rule of Law
2 Oblivion Ring
2 Elspeth, Knight-Errant
1 Ranger of Eos
1 Ancient Grudge
1 Choke

Zoo

Tomoharu Saito 17th World Championships 2009 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Wild Nacatl
4 Noble Hierarch
4 Tarmogoyf
4 Knight of Reliquary
4 Baneslayer Angel
4 Lightning Bolt
4 Path to Exile
3 Lightning Helix
4 Bant Charm
2 Umezawa's Jitte
1 Treetop Village

4 Misty Rainforest
4 Scalding Tarn
4 Arid Mesa
2 Temple Garden
2 Stomping Ground
1 Sacred Foundry
1 Hallowed Fountain
1 Steam Vents
1 Forest
1 Plains
1 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Meddling Mage
4 Negate
4 Ravenous Trap
3 Tormod's Crypt

Later, at the World Championships, Saito continued the evolution by adopting several pieces of technology from Rubin Zoo. Eventual World Champion Andre Coimbra also piloted Saito's build, using the Baneslayer/Noble Hierarch package while skipping the Punishing Fires element that they anticipated everyone had already prepared for.

Any one of these lists would merely be an incredibly well-tuned deck that was the perfect build for that day. That he was able to change and evolve his strategy from week to week, always correctly anticipating what level everyone else would be at, and then go exactly one step further is arguably Saito's greatest strength as a deckbuilder.

All too often it can be very tempting to look deeper and deeper into the format's future and out-think yourself. Think of it like Rock-Paper-Scissors. If you know they like shooting Rock, you shoot Paper. If they know you know this, they may shoot Scissors. If you know they know you know this, you might shoot Rock yourself. The key is identifying what level your opponent will be on, and go to *only* the next one. If you go to the level after that, you might give everyone too much credit and walk into a room full of Rocks armed with Scissors.

Many of Saito's greatest successes came at the hands of decks that he didn't lead the design of — but another of Saito's strengths is that he can also identify when other people found something that he didn't. He used them freely, without being married to his own ideas. For instance, Saito won a Grand Prix with a Demigod Red deck that he got from Michael Jacob, after MJ won the US National Championship in 2008. He didn't even know MJ at the time, but wrote to him about it, as he was impressed and it was very much his style. Saito certainly didn't invent the Merfolk deck he won Grand Prix Columbus with in 2012. He just studied the format, identified the strategy that he felt was best suited for the week, and tuned it based on his experiences.

4

ERIK LAUER

"He never felt restricted by what other players were playing and made the game his own personal playground. He advanced game knowledge just by being himself, by doing what he loved to do — seeing potential in places others don't think to look. He found so many compelling strategies, combinations... and really opened my eyes to how much opportunity there is to play in this world, and to how many good ideas get overlooked. Easily the best I worked with; grateful to have known him."

-Brian Schneider

While the voting that took place did not involve ranking the deckbuilders in order, Lauer received the most written-in notes stating that the panel member considered him the best of all time.

While Lauer was near-universally selected by the older panel members, some of the newer members might not have been as familiar with his work. This is because most of it took place before the Internet kept good records of such things, or perhaps it's the years and years of work he's done behind the closed doors of Wizards of the Coast R&D.

Erik Lauer has contributed *such* an overwhelming amount, it's tricky to figure out where to begin. One his most famous roles is as a member of Team CMU, where I had the honor to work alongside him, as well as Mike Turian, Randy Buehler, Aaron Forsythe, Brian Schneider, Andrew Cuneo, and more. Many days were spent hanging out at the "O," a french fry restaurant on CMU's campus. We'd discuss ideas, laugh, and have the sorts of conversations that help you realize why you're smarter as a result of them. Erik would say he benefited from the company he kept, but there's no question we were all much better for it.

Lauer is responsible for so many deckbuilding techniques that we take for granted today, I can't possibly do justice to his work. However, an effort must be made, so let's start with Lauer's greatest love: Necropotence.



This first list is the Necropotence deck that Randy Buehler won his first Pro Tour with, helping catapult him to the limelight. Long weekends of tournament play can be very challenging for Lauer, who suffers from a number of physical ailments. As a result, much of his best work led to others taking trophies for him (often Randy). Still, Lauer was always a team player, and seeing the success his ideas brought his friends was a constant source of satisfaction.

Lauerpotence

Randy Buehler 1st Pro Tour Chicago 1997 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Knight of Stromgald	4 Necropotence
4 Order of the Ebon Hand	4 Drain Life
1 Ishan's Shade	2 Bad River
4 Demonic Consultation	3 Gemstone Mine
4 Lightning Bolt	3 Lake of the Dead
2 Firestorm	4 Scrubland
3 Disenchant	4 Badlands
4 Hymn to Tourach	8 Swamp
2 Incinerate	

SIDEBOARD

3 Honorable Passage
 3 Pyroblast
 3 Terror
 2 Mind Warp
 2 Circle of Protection: Black
 1 Disenchant
 1 Firestorm

This was hardly Lauer's first Necrodeck, nor would it be his last. Lauer loved (and loves) Necropotence like I love Jace, the Mind Sculptor. He was at the cutting edge of Necrodecks, always pushing more and more of them, long before most people realized just how good the card was.

A funny thing about Necro; even after people finally accepted that it really was so amazing, everyone forgot about Necro after a rotation or a new format was announced. Necropotence was even reprinted — and with the support looking miserable, almost no one would touch it. No matter the format, no matter the rotation, when Necropotence was legal, Lauer was always working on Necrodecks. He would make other decks as well, no question, but we could always tell where his heart was.

There was a very proud moment for me, back at Regionals 1997: the moment I won Lauer's respect. I didn't really know Erik at the time and was just some punk sixteen-year-old kid, but I showed up with a Necrodeck in an era when Fireblast had just



been printed, Winter Orb was popular, and black was widely regarded as unplayable. I was playing Black Knights, Icequakes, Stupors, Serrated Arrows, Nevinyrral's Disks, Drain Life, and other extensively mediocre cards — but they were the best the format offered, a format where not even Lauer dared play a Necro deck.

He and I squared off in a later round, Lauer armed with a U/W Control deck. I managed to defeat him, as his strategy was very weak against Necro. I still remember him smiling, telling me that my deck was his favorite.

I didn't realize it at the time, but much of what I had built my deck was based on discussions with Eric Taylor. Eric had studied Lauer's work extensively, and shared the information with me. I must have looked pretty silly explaining to Lauer some of the choices made in my Necrodeck, which were really just choices he had pioneered. Still, Lauer just smiled and nodded.

What makes this list Lauerpotence? Probably the fact that it won the most money. While Randy and Lauer weren't the only ones to bring Necrodecks to Pro Tour Chicago, most players stuck to Mono-Black. Which no Dark Ritual, no Hypnotic Specter, and having to contend with Winter Orbs, Land Taxes, and more, it was a hostile time to say the least. Disenchants helped fight this hate, and the combination of Firestorm and Necropotence was a major breakthrough. Even if you didn't have a Firestorm, you could Necro especially hard to find one (or a Demonic Consultation), then discard as many extra cards as you needed to Firestorm, rather than have to discard down for hand size.



Take a moment to consider the brilliance of that interaction. For every life you pay, you get a card (for *no* additional mana) and for every card you discard, you get to add a target and deal another damage to each one (for no additional mana). You even get selection, since you could Necro for twelve and keep the seven best! When you can pay twelve life to deal five damage to four different creatures, your opponent, and draw twelve cards (then discard five), it's no wonder that Randy absolutely demolished that Pro Tour.

There were not a lot of good options for life gain in those days, so Drain Life was basically as good as it gets. Without Dark Ritual, how could we make Drain Life big enough to impress? Why, Lake of the Dead! With no Wasteland to fear yet, Lauer had found a source of renewable Dark Rituals that most had overlooked. Yes, you lost a land, but gaining three extra life meant being able to draw three extra cards (which easily replaced the lost Swamp).

With regards to Demonic Consultation, Lauer was an early and vocal advocate of using four. Today, it's easy to imagine playing four copies of such a card... but this was not always so. The fear of killing yourself outright from a bad Consultation gave people an unnatural aversion to the card. After all, they wouldn't really want to Consult three times in the same game, would they? Lauer's theory was that you either have a Necropotence or you don't. If you don't, there is nothing you want more, and Consult was by far the best way to find one. If you do, then you still might want a Consult to find a Dark Ritual to cast it earlier, a Drain Life to draw more cards, or a solution to some problem on the board. Even if you really don't need anything, then you can just discard the Consultation by paying one life to draw one extra card. And if you really don't need anything, then you have no problems, right?

Whenever a new kind of card is printed that's very powerful but doesn't stack well, always remember the lesson of Necropotence and Consultation. At first, people didn't play four Necros (since the second one doesn't really do anything). Then, they only played three Consultations. Even today, we see this happen time and time again. Even as recently as Pro Tour Paris, in 2011, we saw players playing fewer than four Stoneforge Mystics in their Stoneforge Mystic deck (since they didn't want to run out of equipment to find).



"The Mad Genius of Magic. Most major archetypes and technology innovations, from tapping out with big blue fatties to running four copies of Demonic Consultation in Necropotence, are ultimately attributable to Lauer. Quite simply, he's the most innovative and impressive idea man in the history of Magic; he's currently breaking cards before we see them as a Magic developer."

-Michael Flores

Lauer's Infernalator Ice Age/Alliances deck was among my favorite of his Necrodecks. While Dark Ritual, Necropotence, Demonic Consultation, Knight of Stromgald, and Contagion were no surprise, filling out the rest of a Necrodeck in Block was no easy task.

Lauer's solution? He used Legions of Lim-Dul, Lim-Dul's Cohorts, and the *slightly* less embarrassing Abyssal Specter.

What was the common theme? They were all 2/3. The format's premier removal spell was Pyroclasm, so Lauer made sure none of his creatures besides his Knights would die to it (which could dodge Swords to Plowshares themselves). Icequake gave him disruption to fight the popular Kjeldoran Outposts and Thawing Glaciers. Infernal Darkness provided very powerful disruption to make up for his lack of discard. Finally, Lake of the Dead fueled massive Soul Burns to keep Necro and Darkness going.



Lauer has probably built more of the best decks than anyone else in the game's history, if only because he's been in R&D for so long; after all, he does get a year or more head start. I'm eternally grateful for the work Lauer is doing there. We'll never know just how many Caw-Blades were cut off before they ever had a chance to rear their ugly head. After all, there are millions of us and just a handful of them. The fact that they're able to do such a good job of making sure the metagame doesn't get too out of hand is truly remarkable.

Another concept that Erik helped pioneer was the idea of Draw-Go. Andrew Cuneo was the original creator of the Draw-Go archetype, but Erik Lauer took it to the extreme. Whereas Cuneo had a few Mahamoti Djinn's, Lauer kept pushing until the deck was down to just a single creature. Our next deck is the most famous of Lauer's Draw-Go decks.

The deck's name was Draw-Go because all you did was draw, then say "go." This deck didn't just change the way we build decks — it changed the way Wizards makes counterspells. You want to know why counterspells aren't as good as they used to be? Because of this deck. People don't mind their creatures getting Doom Bladed, but they *hate* having them countered.

This deck helps demonstrate the problem with letting blue have too many playable counterspells. Cancel, Negate, Mana Leak, Deprive? Sure, they're all fine cards, but they don't make 'em like they used to. This deck broke an element of the game.

Draw-Go

Randy Buehler World Championships 1999 (Standard)

MAINDECK

1 Rainbow Efreet
4 Force Spike
4 Whispers of the Muse
4 Impulse
4 Counterspell
3 Mana Leak
1 Memory Lapse

2 Dissipate
3 Forbid
4 Dismiss
4 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Quicksand
4 Stalking Stones
18 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Sea Sprite
4 Hydroblast
4 Wasteland
2 Capsize
1 Grindstone

This deck is why we can't have nice things.

Breaking down Draw-Go is pretty easy; you counter everything they do. For such an influential deck, there really isn't a lot of strategy to it. Probably my favorite part is that the counterspells have actually been selected in a mana curve — a revolutionary idea from a control deck's perspective. Additionally, the use of 26 lands and four Whispers of the Muse helped ensure that you could keep hitting your land drops when other people would try to save up threats and not play all their spells out into your counters.

"Erik Lauer, like Zvi, many good decks. Always had something cool."

-Alan Comer

While Lauer liked his Necrodecks and Control decks, he has also always had an eye for busted combo decks. Here's the Academy Deck that carried Lauer to a Top 8 finish at Pro Tour Rome in 1998.

CMU Academy

Erik Lauer 7th Pro Tour Rome 1998 (Extended)

MAINDECK

3 Vampiric Tutor	4 Lotus Petal
4 Impulse	4 Mox Diamond
3 Abeyance	4 Mana Vault
2 Counterspell	3 Scroll Rack 4 Wasteland
4 Windfall	4 Tolarian Academy
4 Time Spiral	3 City of Brass
1 Mind Over Matter	4 Underground Sea
1 Stroke of Genius	3 Volcanic Island
2 Urza's Bauble	3 Tundra

SIDEBOARD

4 Chill
3 Pyroblast
2 Hydroblast
1 Perish
1 City of Solitude
1 Gloom
1 Abeyance
1 Capsize
1 Gorilla Shaman

Pro Tour Rome is looked back on as the most broken Pro Tour format of all time. While Academy decks were everywhere, Lauer's build is widely regarded as the best for a variety of reasons (with only Brian Hacker's Gustha's Scepter/Yawgmoth's Will build as a challenger).

Vampiric Tutor (which most builds did not have) opened up so many lines unavailable to others. It provided a consistent Tutor to find your Academy or your card drawers. Scroll Rack and cantrips let you find cards immediately, and you only had to use one copy of cards that most people had to use multiple copies of, such as Stroke of Genius and Mind Over Matter.

Once you “went off,” winning became academic — so once again, we see Lauer's love of absolute minimalist victory conditions. Aside from two Counterspells, *literally* every other card in CMU Academy makes mana or manipulates the library. This is among the purest combo decks the game has seen succeed at the highest levels, including Storm decks of all formats, and half of all the Vintage decks created in the past decade.

While Lauer may have built the best broken deck at the most broken Pro Tour, he also built the only deck to ever be so good that it prompted an emergency ban the week after the tournament. Ironically, it was neither Lauer nor Buehler (who also Top 4ed) that won the event, but Kai Budde with High Tide. Still, Wizards realized just how massive a breakdown of the game Lauer had discovered and actually banned Memory Jar the very next week.

Broken Jar

Erik Lauer 4th Grand Prix Vienna 1999 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Lion's Eye Diamond	4 Tinker
4 Lotus Petal	2 Yawgmoth's Will
4 Mox Diamond	1 Megrim
4 Mana Vault	4 Memory Jar
4 Brainstorm	2 Gemstone Mine
4 Dark Ritual	3 Ancient Tomb
4 Vampiric Tutor	4 City of Brass
1 Mystical Tutor	4 Underground Sea
4 Defense Grid	3 Underground River

SIDEBOARD

2 Sand Golem
 1 Yawgmoth's Will
 1 Abeyance
 1 Disenchant
 2 Pyroblast
 4 Force of Will
 1 Mystical Tutor
 1 Perish
 1 Gloom
 1 Chill

This deck is the culmination of all of the worst mistakes Wizards made in Urza's Saga and Legacy. It was the actual nightmare scenario come to life, where the game just ends on the first turn in every game. All you would do is make mana and draw cards, cycling through your whole deck. You then put down a Defense Grid to ensure you're safe, and a single Megrim puts your opponent out of his misery.



While it's unlikely that Wizards will ever mess up this big again, there's much to be learned by studying this deck and asking ourselves if we are taking our ideas to the extreme. Magic is a game of extremes. So often, if doing something to an eight is good, a nine would be even better. When we lay out our latest brew, we should ask ourselves: "What does this deck do? How could it do that to an even greater degree?"

We haven't even touched on Tap-Out Blue (which Lauer basically invented, and Flores used as the foundation for his Jushi Blue and Critical Mass decks), which actually even involves Thought Lash. One of the coolest Lauer decks ever, Thought Lash was a 150-card work of art. Mono-Blue and featuring tons of library manipulation, fliers, and randomly good blue spells, it featured Thought Lash — which at the time was game over for most aggro decks (which were most of the format). Normally, Thought Lash's cumulative upkeep would prohibit it from seeing serious play — but Lauer's build was the original Battle of Wits deck, before Battle of Wits!

3

Tsuyoshi Fujita

Fujita is probably the deckbuilder on this list that readers will be least familiar with, despite being one of the best and most influential. This is basically just a product of him being both Japanese and from the days of old.

Still, on the Pro circuit, his reputation goes without saying, and he was the first Japanese player inducted into the Hall of Fame. So often I'll hear people discussing great deckbuilders — but when they come to Japan, they just say, "whoever builds the Japanese decks."

Tomoharu Saito has already appeared on our list, and Katsuhiro Mori, Akira Asahara, Shouta Yasooka, and the late Itaru Ishida all make the top 30. Kenji Tsumura, Masashi Oiso, Yuuya Watanabe, Tsuyoshi Ikeda, and Shuuhei Nakamura are among Japan's greatest players, with a combined 1684 Pro Points between the five of them.

"A Japanese leader, Tsuyoshi is known as a great deckbuilder. Of course that's true, but I want to say that it's not a talent — just effort. When he was a pro player, he played Magic all day long. He could probably guess at some matchups' results without testing, because he is good... But he's never done that. He always tries to figure it out by playing. When I ask him "How do I get better a deckbuilding?" his answer is that "Just play it. The data doesn't lie." He's the best deckbuilder and also the hardest worker."

-Kenji Tsumura

Every single one of these players will tell you the same thing: Fujita is the original Japanese Magic superstar, and their greatest deckbuilder. If a Japanese list is dominating and no one knows where it is from, there's a good chance it came from Fujita.

Tsuyoshi is best known for his aggressive decks, but he's actually an extremely versatile deckbuilder who has achieved major success with just about every archetype.



This is the U/B Control list that Fujita eventually reached the finals of Pro Tour Tokyo 2001 with (before dropping to Zvi's The Solution). This deck and tournament was particularly important, as it was the first time a Japanese player had reached the Top 8 of a Pro Tour!

That's right; just ten years ago, Japan was completely off the radar. It wasn't even considered to be among the top 5 countries in the world for Magic. With this deck, Fujita made history and began the Japanese revolution that would go on to dominate Magic between 2005-2009.

U/B Control

Tsuyoshi Fujita 2nd Pro Tour Tokyo 2001 (Invasion Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Ravenous Rats	2 Repulse
2 Phyrexian Scuta	4 Fact of Faction
2 Urborg Shambler	2 Spite // Malice
4 Addle	2 Yawgmoth's Agenda
3 Prohibit	4 Salt Marsh
4 Undermine	11 Island
4 Exclude	9 Swamp
3 Recoil	

SIDEBOARD

4 Gainsay
4 Nightscape Familiar
2 Phyrexian Scuta
2 Spinal Embrace
2 Urborg Shambler
1 Yawgmoth's Agenda

Card advantage, disruption, control: this deck is a great example of how to make a control deck in a format that doesn't appear to lend itself to one. Sometimes you don't have access to all the tools you'd need to truly take control of a game. In situations like that, sometimes just doing powerful and efficient things is the best plan. Other times, you just drop a Juzam Djinn (or Phyrexian Scuta) and start cracking skulls!

"Fujita is on this list simply because he's so good at building aggressive decks. His decks always seem so simple, but you can tell there's a lot of thought behind every card choice."

-Osyp Lebedowicz



Fujita has done well with so many different decks, ranging from Red Deck Wins to Counter-Sliver to Astral Slide and more, so picking which Fujita decks to feature is a bit tricky. Here's one of the most important, as it was Fujita that popularized the addition of Patriarch's Bidding in Goblins.

Goblin Bidding

Tsuyoshi Fujita 1st Grand Prix Bangkok 2003 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Skirk Prospector	2 Siege-Gang Commander
4 Goblin Sledder	4 Firebolt
4 Goblin Piledriver	3 Patriarch's Bidding
4 Sparksmith	4 Bloodstained Mire
4 Goblin Warchief	4 Sulfurous Springs
4 Goblin Matron	1 Shadowblood Ridge
3 Goblin Sharpshooter	12 Mountain
1 Gempalm Incinerator	2 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

4 Sulfuric Vortex
 3 Smother
 2 Flaring Pain
 1 Gempalm Incinerator
 1 Patriarch's Bidding
 1 Shadowblood Ridge
 1 Siege-Gang Commander
 1 Stabilizer
 1 Coffin Purge

While this deck may appear simple on the surface, you have to remember the genius that goes along with thinking of adding Patriarch's Bidding in the first place!

"Fujita was innovative and daring. I liked that he really pushed the whole 'fetchland into duals' mechanic in his Boros deck as soon as the Ravnica lands were released, and now it's pretty much standard."

-Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa

Another of Fujita's most influential beatdown decks was his Boros deck, which pioneered the concept of playing more fetchlands than fetchable lands.



Boros Deck Wins

Tsuyoshi Fujita 5th Pro Tour Los Angeles 2005 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Savannah Lions	1 Pulse of the Forge
4 Grim Lavamancer	1 Eiganjo Castle
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda	1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep
4 Goblin Legionnaire	4 Wooded Foothills
3 Kataki, War's Wage	4 Bloodstained Mire
4 Firebolt	4 Sacred Foundry
4 Lava Dart	2 Windswept Heath
4 Lightning Helix	4 Mountain
4 Molten Rain	1 Plains
4 Pillage	

SIDEBOARD

4 Purge
3 Blood Moon
3 Flametongue Kavu
3 Fledgling Dragon
2 Umezawa's Jitte

It's easy nowadays to take for granted that you don't need ten lands to fetch to play ten fetchlands (after all, when do you need ten lands in play with this deck?). Still, until someone thinks of it for the first time, it's as though the idea doesn't even exist. Fujita's not just a tuner of aggro decks, but a designer of new ones in formats where they don't yet exist. To master even a single discipline (such as Wafo-Tapa has with control) is quite an accomplishment. Fujita may be considered an absolute master of beatdown, but he's also among the game's best in other disciplines.



Additionally, he was an idea man who blazed bold new trails with choices that most would consider crazy... at least until he demonstrated their effectiveness. Then they became the status quo.

"Tsyuoshi Fujita took the reins of greatest deck designer in the world following Nassif, and was probably the greatest beatdown / burn deck designer of all time. With the same tools available to everyone else, Fujita could make a red combo deck that was faster than contemporary blue counterparts and red beatdown decks that were simply 40% more efficient than anyone else's in the room. Fujita was Comer-esque in his willingness to play what more conservative players considered "too little" land, often looking to a long view of "I lose this matchup if I don't get lucky anyway" — which is kind of awesome, if you think about it."

-Michael Flores

What about combo decks? Fujita's made some sweet ones! He's not a slave to original decks; he's succeeded with such boring fare as NecroDonate, and has also designed crazy combo decks that would make Alan Comer blush. Here is one of the most fun:

Sneaky Go

Tsuyoshi Fujita 7th Grand Prix Seattle 2005 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Rorix Bladewing
2 Crater Hellion
3 Symbiotic Wurm
1 Serra Avatar
4 Dragon Tyrant
4 Gamble
4 Desperate Ritual
4 Seething Song
4 Sneak Attack

4 Through the Breach
4 Blazing Shoal
4 Chrome Mox
3 City of Traitors
3 Crystal Vein
4 Dwarven Ruins
4 Sandstone Needle
4 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Defense Grid
4 Pyrostatic Pillar
3 Serra Avatar
2 Final Fortune
1 Cave-In
1 Duplicant

That's right; this isn't just a notebook sketch. Fujita actually Top 8ed that Grand Prix with this beauty! To say that no one was expecting this Sneak Attack would be an understatement. This was among the first, if not *the* first, All-In-Red decks, making use of red Rituals in a way that no one had previously (but now everyone uses them). The use of Blazing Shoal, Through the Breach, and Sneak Attack provided a variety of ways to take advantage of the plethora of Dragons in Fujita's deck — though sometimes he'd just Ritual them out and bash.



This list is a perfect example of the rewards that can come from letting go of the fear that our ideas are stupid. Does this idea look stupid? Keep in mind, this is the fully-tuned version. Just imagine how awful the first draft must have looked! It would be easy for Fujita to get discouraged, especially if he was surrounded by negative people... but fortunately, he knew better and focused on positive energy. Not every idea is brilliant — and frankly, most won't work out. But the people who go around speaking ill of every new card, every combo, and every idea? They're *not* going to be the ones people remember tomorrow.

There are a lot of truly great Magic players for a lot of reasons... but people generally forget how quickly tournament accomplishments are forgotten. Ideas last much longer, and have a much greater impact (even if most people don't realize who had the idea in the first place). It isn't about getting the credit for those ideas — it's about making the game a better and more interesting place as a result of them.

To the great benefit of the Magic community, Fujita has returned to the Pro Tour scene, and in a big way. He finished fifth at Pro Tour Nagoya, in 2011. Here's his Fujita's Four-Color Tezzeret deck:

4cTezzeret

Tsuyoshi Fujita 5th Pro Tour Nagoya 2011 (Scars of Mirrodin Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

1 Hex Parasite
3 Trinket Mage
4 Oxidda Scrapmelter
3 Consecrated Sphinx
4 Tezzeret, Agent of Bolas
3 Galvanic Blast
2 Gremlin Mine
1 Horizon Spellbomb
3 Ratchet Bomb
2 Go for the Throat
2 Beast Within

3 Black Sun's Zenith
4 Mycosynth Wellspring
3 Sphere of the Suns
4 Blackcleave Cliffs
4 Copperline Gorge
4 Darkslick Shores
4 Island
3 Swamp
2 Forest
1 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

3 Entomber Exarch
2 Shatter
2 Stoic Rebuttal
2 Thrun, the Last Troll
1 Go for the Throat
1 Beast Within
1 Despise
1 Gremlin Mine
1 Hex Parasite
1 Karn Liberated

A man after my own heart! When there are more different types of threats than you can possibly react to, the ideal solution often involves taking a more proactive role.

What is my answer to X? Kill my opponent, so I don't have to worry about it!



Additionally, control decks with a lot of card draw often take advantage of two-of and three-of cards far more frequently. Having the right kind of options is crucial, and if you need a lot of different types of solutions, then you can't just play four of each of them. Fujita didn't have access to nice things like Preordain, so he had to rely on the brute force of Tezzeret and Consecrated Sphinx to draw him enough cards to find the answers that he needed.

Another feature to be gleaned from Fujita's list is his usage of different types of effects that do similar things, but overlap in different ways. For instance, Gremlin Mine, Galvanic Blast, Go for the Throat, and Ratchet Bomb are all cheap removal spells — but they all have different specific applications. Sometimes they'll be interchangeable, but having a variety means you are less likely to get caught with all Go for the Throats against Tempered Steel, or a fist full of Gremlin Mines against Puresteel Paladin.

With a mana base I can truly appreciate, we're reminded that sometimes you really can be greedy. We've seen two- and three-color mana bases for so long, many players forget that you don't actually need Reflecting Pool and Vivid Creek-level mana fixing to play four or more colors. There is a cost, but sometimes the rewards are enough to be worth it.

2

GABRIEL NASSIF

When I was a kid, I remember wondering what it must have been like to play baseball on the same team with Ted Williams. At this point, I think I have a pretty good idea.

Gabriel Nassif is not only one of the greatest deckbuilders of all time, he's also one of the greatest *players* of all time. I have had the privilege of working closely with Gab for a number of years, and we've become close friends.

Nassif has been a part of a number of the greatest collaborations in the game's history, as he has a way of bringing out the best in those he works with. His longest and most consistent partnership was, of course, with Mark Herberholz. On occasion Nassif has received some credit for decks that Mark was a larger player in, such as Martyr-Tron, though Mark would be quick to point out that it goes both ways, such as Mark's Top 8 with Nassif's mono-blue Faeries list at Grand Prix Los Angeles 2009. Still, at the end of the day, both would tell you that their decks are interwoven with each other, and so separating them completely isn't really fair.



"Nassif quietly broke Extended during Berlin 2008, and the deck he made (Mono-Blue Faeries) completely dominated the season afterwards. His Tooth and Nail deck in Kobe and the Martyr of Sands deck in Paris (with assistance from Mark Herberholz) are other examples of his insane deckbuilding skill... as is the fact that he won Player of the Year in 2004 despite Nicolai Herzog winning two Pro Tours. Of course, I would also be remiss if I didn't mention the Nassif/Chapin Five-Color deck that he used to crush my dreams in Kyoto (game 4 was one of the best games of Magic I've ever played). Nassif is a lock for the Top 10, and likely makes it pretty high on the list to boot."

-Luis Scott-Vargas

Though Heezy and Nassif have been consummate testing partners, they haven't always played the same decks. Heezy likes a good control deck, but has more of a taste for the beatdown, whereas Nassif is more drawn to aggro-control, running control more often than beatdown.

One area where they both agree, however, is that they both absolutely *love* a good combo deck. Nassif has helped develop quite a number of sweet combo decks over the years — finding the best unfair combo deck has helped lend Nassif the reputation of being a guy that when he says “I broke it,” might actually mean he broke it.

Here’s one of the most broken combo decks Nassif was a part of:

Severance/Belcher

Gabriel Nassif 2nd Pro Tour New Orleans 2003 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Brainstorm
4 Force Spike
4 Mystical Tutor
4 Grim Monolith
4 Mana Severance
4 Tinker
1 Rushing River
4 Goblin Charbelcher
1 Gilded Lotus
1 Mindslaver

2 Talisman of Dominance
3 Talisman of Progress
2 Voltaic Key
2 Chrome Mox
4 Ancient Tomb
4 City of Traitors
4 Island
4 Polluted Delta
4 Rishadan Port

SIDEBOARD

4 Chill
3 Annul
3 Quicksilver Dragon
2 Deep Analysis
1 Ensnaring Bridge
1 Chain of Vapor
1 Platinum Angel

First, some context. This was the Tinker Pro Tour. Just as Survival of the Fittest led a to metagame dominated by the Rock-Paper-Scissors of “Beatdown Survival”-“Control Survival”-“Combo Survival” and was eventually banned, Tinker decks of all varieties dominated New Orleans. The Top 8 of the Tinker Pro Tour featured three Severance/Belcher Tinker (Combo), three Upheaval/Masticore Tinker (Control), one Welder/Metalworker Tinker (Beatdown), and just one non-Tinker deck, Psychatog.

All three were lightning-fast artifact decks revolving around Tinker, but where they went from there differed wildly.

While the list Nassif and Franck Canu developed did not abuse Tinker to its utmost, it *did* seek to prey on a Tinker-heavy metagame. Force Spike as the counterspell of choice was absolutely brilliant. While the other two builds to Top 8 splashed black for Duress and Vampiric Tutor, Nassif focused on making his list as consistent as possible, stripping the list down to mono-blue

(a technique Nassif has used on a number of occasions). Nassif correctly anticipated that almost everyone would build their decks to either win or to stop someone from winning as fast as possible. Force Spike became a one-mana counterspell, especially given how many of his opponents he caught by surprise. When others eventually heard about it, they were left wasting a turn, waiting to pay for the Spike that may or may not be there.



The use of the Mana Severance + Goblin Charbelcher combo let Nassif race the other Tinker decks that merely searched up a Bosh, Iron Golem or Phyrexian Colossus. Mystical Tutor effectively found either half of the combo, as it could search up either Mana Severance or Tinker — though Nassif would often just race to Mindslaver people as fast as possible (where he often used their Tinker as a way to get rid of their artifacts).

Many people were captivated by just how many sweet bullets you could play in your deck to Tinker up. While this can work, all that flexibility comes with a cost. Nassif, always one to look for ways to make decks more consistent, stripped his Tinker targets down to just a Mindslaver and a Gilded Lotus, aside from the Belcher. If he needed mana, Gilded Lotus did the trick. If he had Mana Severance, he fetched Belcher and ended it. If he didn't have Severance, he Slavered them to buy himself time. Platinum Angel and Ensnaring Bridge provided additional targets after sideboarding, locking people out completely.

If we take just one lesson away from Nassif's Belcher deck, it's this: be diligent in asking if there's an even more minimal, consistent version we could take.

Without commentary, here are a couple of other famous combo decks that Nassif played a role in, including Mono-Red Dragonstorm with Mark Herberholz and yours truly.

Enchantress

Gabriel Nassif 5th Yokohama Masters Series 2003 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Argothian Enchantress	1 Trade Routes
4 Wall of Blossoms	4 Frantic Search
2 Cloud of Faeries	4 Enchantress's Presence
1 Yavimaya Enchantress	3 Words of Wind
4 Wild Growth	2 Serra's Sanctum
4 Seal of Removal	4 Yavimaya Coast
3 Exploration	10 Forest
4 Fertile Ground	6 Island

SIDEBOARD

3 Deep Analysis
3 Ray of Revelation
3 Gainsay
2 Masticore
2 Yavimaya Enchantress
1 Bind
1 Worship

"This pick should be obvious. While Nassif steals some credit for my decks (grins), he was still responsible for Tooth and Nail in Kobe, Tinker/Charbelcher in New Orleans, and Faeries/Wizards in Berlin. The Mono-Blue Fae deck may not have finished in the Top 8 of that tournament, but it completely warped the format. He always has something new and fresh in an environment, and he has been doing it forever."

-Mark Herberholz

TwelvePost

Gabriel Nassif 2nd Pro Tour Kobe 2004 (Mirrodin Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Viridian Shaman	4 Reap and Sow
4 Solemn Simulacrum	2 Mindslaver
1 Leonin Abunas	4 Tooth and Nail
1 Duplicant	2 Talisman of Unity
1 Platinum Angel	1 Blinkmoth Nexus
1 Darksteel Colossus	3 Stalking Stones
4 Oxidize	4 Cloudpost
4 Sylvan Scrying	16 Forest
4 Oblivion Stone	

SIDEBOARD

4 Chalice of the Void
4 Pulse of the Tangle
4 Tel-Jilad Chosen
1 Duplicant
1 Mindslaver
1 Platinum Angel

"Nassif was arguably the first player to have it all, and all at the same time. The best player in the world after the height of Kai Budde, Nassif was simultaneously the game's then-greatest deck designer. He racked up an impressive number of consecutive Constructed Top 8 appearances on Pro Tours, along with a Player of the Year title and infinite additional laurels."

-Michael Flores

Mono-Red Dragonstorm

Gabriel Nassif 3rd 2007 World Championships (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Bogardan Hellkite	4 Pyromancer's Swath
4 Lotus Bloom	4 Dragonstorm
4 Rift Bolt	4 Fungal Reaches
4 Rite of Flame	4 Molten Slagheap
4 Shock	4 Spinnerock Knoll
4 Incinerate	12 Snow-Covered Mountain
4 Grapeshot	

SIDEBOARD

4 Dodecapod
2 Ignite Memories
2 Ingot Chewer
2 Martyr of Ashes
2 Wheel of Fate
1 Akroma, Angel of Fury
1 Pithing Needle
1 Wild Ricochet

While Nassif has been no stranger to combo decks, he's often most drawn to aggro-control decks. One of the best archetypes that Nassif invented was that of Mono-Blue Faeries. Pro Tour Berlin is best known for the emergence of Elf Combo, fueled by Glimpse of Nature. While most Faeries players were stuck in the mindset of U/B Faeries (which mirrored the Standard Faeries lists), Nassif and Wafo-Tapa developed a new style: Mono-Blue.

Once again, we see a classic case of being willing to "kill your darlings." Few players could conceive of playing Faeries without Bitterblossom. Wafo and Nassif realized that Riptide Laboratory was an even better engine to power their strategy with, and led to a more consistent mana base.

They correctly anticipated Zoo and Elves as the two most popular decks. Those quick, heavy-pressure games were not the matchups where you wanted Bitterblossom. "Do we need to play two colors?"



Mono-Blue Faeries

Gabriel Nassif Top 32 Pro Tour Berlin 2008 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Spellstutter Sprite	3 Threads of Disloyalty
3 Vendilion Clique	3 Vedalken Shackles
2 Venser, Shaper Savant	3 Repeal
4 Spell Snare	3 Chrome Mox
4 Stifle	3 Mutavault
3 Mana Leak	3 Riptide Laboratory
3 Umezawa's Jitte	3 Seat of the Synod
4 Thirst for Knowledge	12 Island

SIDEBOARD

3 Flashfreeze
3 Negate
2 Annul
2 Engineered Explosives
2 Sower of Temptation
2 Glen Elendra Archmage
1 Hurkyl's Recall

Without a pilot in the Top 8, the Faeries archetype stayed a little under the radar. The Top 16 actually contained quite a number of Faeries decks that just missed a chance to sneak into the Top 8 and beat up on their best matchup — Elves. Those decks were primarily U/B, though.

It wasn't until a couple months later that Nassif totally turned the Extended format on its ear. Here is the updated Mono-Blue Faeries list that proved to be the most successful archetype of the 2008 World Championships.

Mono-Blue Faeries

Gabriel Nassif 297th World Championships 2008 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Spellstutter Sprite	3 Repeal
3 Vendilion Clique	3 Chrome Mox
2 Venser, Shaper Savant	1 Academy Ruins
4 Spell Snare	3 Riptide Laboratory
4 Mana Leak	4 Mutavault
3 Umezawa's Jitte	1 Breeding Pool
4 Thirst For Knowledge	1 Hallowed Fountain
2 Vedalken Shackles	1 Steam Vents
2 Threads of Disloyalty	1 River of Tears
1 Cryptic Command	10 Island
3 Engineered Explosives	

SIDEBOARD

2 Glen Elendra Archmage
2 Threads of Disloyalty
2 Annul
2 Flashfreeze
2 Negate
2 Jace Beleren
1 Engineered Explosives
1 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
1 Academy Ruins

Despite the more colorful mana base, this is still an extremely stripped-down, minimalist build. One of the cleverest innovations was the use of Breeding Pool, Hallowed Fountain, Steam Vents, and River of Tears to help fuel Engineered Explosives. Nassif decided that he needed Trinket Mage to be able to access the Explosives to help against Zoo and Elves. While Explosives for one are fine, he really wanted to be able to do it for at least two, if he needed to.

Stifle was also very popular at that event, so Nassif wanted to avoid using fetchlands to find a shockland or two (the technique that most people used). By using one of each color, Nassif would never have to risk getting Stifled — but he could also make his Explosives larger. This seems simple, but it was a new idea, and sometimes the best ideas are the simplest.

As always with Nassif's aggro-control decks, we see a very different deck when we look at the deck from the perspective of how to fight aggro. Note how he's willing to trade one-for-one, uses high-tempo plays, and gets ahead with Explosives, then Jitte, then eventually closes out the game with Lab. Then look at how he fights combo decks by putting a clock on them with so many counterspells that they can't go off, then using Riptide Laboratory to gain an extra layer of protection with Spellstutters and Vendillions. Being able to build three-dimensional decks takes practice, but it's a vital component of good aggro-control decks.

White Weenie

Paul Rietzl 1st Pro Tour Amsterdam 2010 (Extended)

MAINDECK

4 Figure of Destiny
4 Steppe Lynx
4 Student of Warfare
4 Knight of the White Orchid
4 Ethersworn Canonist
2 Ranger of Eos
4 Brave the Elements
2 Mana Tithe

1 Path to Exile
4 Honor of the Pure
4 Spectral Procession
4 Arid Mesa
4 Marsh Flats
4 Flagstones of Trokair
1 Horizon Canopy
10 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Relic of Progenitus
3 Burrenton Forge-Tender
3 Path to Exile
2 Rule of Law
1 Angel's Grace
1 Celestial Purge
1 Lapse of Certainty

While Nassif may like playing blue best, he's no slave to the Islands. The most recent event that he "solved" was Pro Tour Amsterdam. His solution? Put Steppe Lynx in Paul Rietzl's hands!

Nassif's White Weenie list isn't fancy, but it *is* consistent — not just consistent in draws, but consistent with Nassif's minimalist approach. Nassif correctly read the metagame as being just a little too combo and anti-combo. No one was expecting White Weenie, so the combination of anti-combo (speed, backed with a smattering of disruption) and anti-anti-combo (tons of threats, resiliency, tempo plays like Brave the Elements) caught the format off-guard. White Weenie proved a one-weekend deck, as it went on to fail completely in the season that followed; but Nassif didn't build it for a season. Like Mono-Red Dragonstorm, like Grixis Tezzeret, it was just the right deck on the right day.

Looking back over the past several years, Cruel Control, U/W Control, Tezzeret, a number of the best decks I have worked on have benefited greatly from Nassif's input — and I can attest to just how much those around him benefit from his perspective.

Thank you, Gab.

1

ZVI MOWSHOWITZ

Hall of Famer Zvi Mowshowitz is a legend in so many areas of the game it's almost comical. When you ask people about the best players in the game's history, Zvi's name comes up. When you ask about the best writers in the game's history? Again Zvi. Deckbuilding? No name comes up more.

Zvi is bold and innovative, like Comer and Lauer, but with a batting average that makes him seem like a deck tuner. The thing is, the decks he is "tuning" are decks that didn't exist before him. It isn't just that a current incarnation didn't exist, like Boros or U/W Control. He creates new archetypes *multiple times a year*.

To say that Zvi's contributions to Magic theory can't fit in a single article is an understatement. To begin to wrap our minds around Zvi's body of work, we have to begin with a cover-to-cover read of his *My Files*, a collection of articles of his that paint a picture of his approach to the game.

If you asked him, Zvi would tell you that Zero Effect, the Fluctuator deck he took to a third-place finish at the 1999 Pro Tour New York would be among his favorites.

In a format dominated by U/R Tinker-Wildfire decks and Mono-Green Aggro, Zvi sidestepped the format completely with an unlikely "combo" deck that few would be able to figure out *during* their match against Zvi. While the format contained a number of busted cards, it wasn't nearly as fast a format as you might guess. As a result, Zvi's turn 4 kills were significantly faster than what most of the format was capable of. Fluctuator seems a little strange in here, at first. After all, most of your lands enter the battlefield tapped. Plus, over half of your cards don't cycle. What's going on?



The key is to consider what the deck looks like once you have a Fluctuator on the battlefield. To begin with, you obviously don't draw lands for your turn anymore. Additionally, all of your other card drawing is magnified. Frantic Search sees an average of 1.7 spells, instead of 1.2. Every Opportunity, every Stroke, they find you that much higher a concentration of Grim Monoliths, Voltaic Keys, Frantic Searches, and Stroke of Geniuses.

Zero Effect

Zvi Mowshowitz 3rd Pro Tour New York 1999 (Urza's Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Cloud of Faeries
1 Palinchron
4 Voltaic Key
3 Thran Turbine
4 Fluctuator
4 Grim Monolith
3 Lingering Mirage
4 Frantic Search
2 Rescind
1 Yawgmoth's Will

2 Opportunity
4 Stroke of Genius
4 Tolarian Academy
4 Blasted Landscape
4 Polluted Mire
4 Remote Isle
3 Drifting Meadow
3 Smoldering Crater
2 Island

SIDEBOARD

4 Hibernation
2 Island
2 Miscalculation
2 Rescind
2 Turnabout
1 Opportunity
1 Power Sink
1 Yawgmoth's Will

Another brilliant element of Zero Effect was the Thran Turbine that actually served as a backup Fluctuator of sorts. This solved the major hurdle with most Fluctuator decks: how do you win without a Fluctuator? Additionally, Zvi's list played more answers to opposing Academies than most, though it could start going off *despite* his opponent having the Academy (which many Academy decks struggled with under the old legend rules. Then, once it got going, Lingering Mirage or Rescind would let him turn the tables.

"#1: Zvi Mowshowitz. Consistently produced extremely good decks. In my mind, nobody else on this list came close."

-Alan Comer

This is a classic example of Zvi asking, “What is the best mana in the format?” His answer? Tolarian Academy + Grim Monolith + Voltaic Key.

His next question? How can I do that the best and most?

Not all of Zvi's decks have been as crazy or shocking. The 2000 Pro Tour Chicago was dominated by Rebels and Fires of Yavimaya decks. Zvi determined that Fires really was the best deck. This was his build, as he explained in his seven-part My Fires series — articles as detailed as they are infamous.

My Fires

Zvi Mowshowitz 7th Pro Tour Chicago 2000 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise
4 Llanowar Elves
3 Jade Leech
4 Blastoderm
3 Two-Headed Dragon
4 Assault // Battery
4 Chimeric Idol
4 Fires of Yavimaya

4 Saproling Burst
1 Earthquake
2 Dust Bowl
4 Rishadan Port
4 Karplusan Forest
10 Forest
5 Mountain

SIDEBOARD

4 Kavu Chameleon
3 Earthquake
3 Flashfires
2 Tangle
2 Reverent Silence
1 Obliterate

As you can see, this list isn't crazy — it's just the product of extensive tuning. Two-Headed Dragon? Zvi tried *all* the fatties. Assault // Battery? Zvi wanted to kill an early Birds of Paradise or Ramosian Sergeant, but he also didn't want to get stuck without a threat later in the game.

“I think Zvi approaches deckbuilding in a way most people don't: by identifying the main questions in the metagame and then trying to come up with answers for the questions, instead of just randomly brewing.”

-Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa

Was Zvi capable of coming up with other decks? No question; however, he isn't a slave to innovation. If the best deck he comes up with is mostly mainstream, so be it. He identifies what a format calls for, then produces the best version of that... even if that's not exactly “a secret.”

While we'd be remiss to not mention the notorious My Fires list, we're probably going to glean even more from Zvi's next big finish. The Invasion block metagame was dominated by R/G aggro and various U/B/R control decks. This was Zvi's solution to the format:

The Solution

Zvi Mowshowitz 1st Pro Tour Tokyo 2001 (Invasion Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Stormscape Apprentice	4 Exclude
4 Crimson Acolyte	4 Repulse
4 Galina's Knight	4 Fact or Fiction
4 Meddling Mage	4 Coastal Tower
4 Voice of All	10 Island
4 Absorb	10 Plains

SIDEBOARD

4 Disrupt
3 Crusading Knight
3 Gainsay
3 Pure Reflection
2 Aura Blast

Here, we see consistency where others had ambitious mana bases. We see a massive quantity of protection from red creatures, letting him attack the format in an unusual way that even those most targeted by it were not prepared for. Some opponents would have only one out to a Crimson Acolyte in their deck. Zvi could stick a Meddling Mage on that card, then protect it with the Acolyte, beginning to completely lock an opponent out before slowly eating away at them with a Voice of All.

An aggro-control deck in a format where people didn't even realize aggro-control decks were *possible*, The Solution wasn't broken, nor would it maintain its success if played for an entire season. It just happened to be the solution for that weekend.

In this modern age of Faeries and Caw-Blade, it's easy to take aggro-control decks for granted. Something to remember, however, was that in those days of yore the concept of an Aggro-Control deck hadn't even been fleshed out. People called the archetype "Counter-Sliver," since the only aggro-control decks at the time were generally CounterSliver. Zvi's vision to expand what a Counter-Sliver deck could be has helped paved the way for an entire branch of deckbuilding.



Okay, we'll jump to modern days in just a bit — but first, here are a couple more of Zvi's "crazy" decks that helped expand our ideas of what is possible. Zvi doesn't just create decks; he creates *archetypes*. Even to this day, there's no man whose decks are used as the blueprint for new decks as often as Zvi.

"Zvi Mowshowitz: dominated during a similar time as Jon Finkel, and came up with a lot of great ideas... even if he used to be a little too stubborn with them. Sees the game very differently than a lot of people, and is able to work his way through 'what's really going on here' in ways that almost no one can - and with such thoroughness that he almost always played very quickly and was able to explain his thought process later. Bargain, Turboland, Mono-Green... these could have been fringe ideas, but Zvi could dig into what really made these ideas viable (even sometimes dominant in his hands, and others who could think on his level)."

-Ben Rubin

Dream Halls (aka Turbo-Zvi)

Zvi Mowshowitz Test Deck TheDojo.com 1998 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Memory Lapse	1 Lobotomy
4 Mana Severance	4 Dream Halls
3 Gaea's Blessing	4 Ancestral Memories
1 Impulse	4 Lotus Petal
1 Counterspell	4 Ancient Tomb
4 Meditate	4 Crystal Vein
4 Sift	4 Svyelunite Temple
4 Intuition	9 Island
1 Inspiration	

SIDEBOARD

4 Abeyance
 4 Adarkar Wastes
 1 Dismiss
 4 Hydroblast
 1 Inspiration
 1 Lobotomy

Zvi Bargain

Zvi Mowshowitz 7th US National Championship 1999 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Mox Diamond
4 Voltaic Key
4 Dark Ritual
4 Vampiric Tutor
4 Grim Monolith
4 Scroll Rack
3 Show and Tell
1 Intuition
1 Yawgmoth's Will
3 Delusions of Mediocrity

3 Turnabout
4 Yawgmoth's Bargain
1 Blaze
4 City of Traitors
3 Crystal Vein
4 City of Brass
4 Underground River
2 Rootwater Depths
3 Swamp

SIDEBOARD

1 Adarkar Wastes
1 Boil
1 Chill
3 Defense Grid
2 Disenchant
2 Dread of Night
1 Energy Field
1 Light of Day
1 Lobotomy
1 Masticore
1 Perish

Turboland

Zvi Mowshowitz 1st Grand Prix New Orleans 2003 (Extended)

MAINDECK

1 Battlefield Scrounger
4 Exploration
4 Accumulated Knowledge
4 Counterspell
4 Oath of Druids
3 Moment's Peace
2 Krosan Reclamation
2 Scroll Rack
4 Horn of Greed

2 Intuition
1 Capsize
3 Time Warp
2 Gush
1 Treetop Village
4 Yavimaya Coast
14 Island
5 Forest

SIDEBOARD

3 Deep Analysis
3 Ravenous Baloth
2 Powder Keg
1 Dust Bowl
1 Gainsay
1 Intuition
1 Capsize
1 Misdirection
1 Naturalize
1 Thwart

While Zvi's activity has fluctuated throughout the years, he's demonstrated that his ability has never wavered and as of this printing, in 2013, he is a core member of Team SCG, being part of think tank that has produced a lot of Pro Tour Top 8s recently. This most recent comeback began in early 2010, when he took advantage of his permanent invite from the Hall of Fame to show up a couple of times, completely revolutionizing the format each time.

First, at Pro Tour San Diego, Zvi and his team at the time, Team Mythic, unveiled a very different style of Bant deck:

Mythic

Zvi Mowshowitz Pro Tour San Diego 2010 (Standard)

MAINDECK

4 Birds of Paradise	4 Celestial Colonnade
4 Noble Hierarch	3 Stirring Wildwood
4 Lotus Cobra	1 Sejiri Steppe
4 Knight of the Reliquary	2 Sunpetal Grove
4 Rhox War Monk	4 Misty Rainforest
3 Rafiq of the Many	4 Verdant Catacombs
4 Baneslayer Angel	6 Forest
1 Thornling	2 Island
2 Rampaging Baloths	1 Plains
3 Finest Hour	

SIDEBOARD

4 Mind Control
3 Negate
3 Bant Charm
2 Jace, the Mind Sculptor
2 Admonition Angel
1 Day of Judgment

Mythic wasn't special because of its strength... although it was one of the stronger archetypes to emerge from an event otherwise dominated by Jund. Mythic taught us a completely new paradigm to consider mana bases. Don't people cut land from their deck when they play mana creatures like Birds of Paradise? Zvi's deck featured sixteen mana-producing creatures, yet still registered a whopping 27 lands!

By removing all traces of removal or permission, Zvi was able to pack his deck to the brim with threats that could win the game on their own. His strategy? Starting on turn 2, play a potentially game-winning threat every turn until the opponent is dead. Would Zvi get flooded if the game went too long? Possibly — but when his Baneslayers and Rampaging Baloths do the work of multiple cards, he can make up for the implied card disadvantage.

Additionally, seven manlands meant that this flood actually just translated into even more threats. Despite featuring forty-three mana sources, Mythic actually has thirty-three creatures that can attack for damage!

This deck laid the groundwork for so many strategies that it was arguably the most influential deck of the year. It taught the world how to use Lotus Cobra (play *more* land, not less; use off-color fetchlands, and use them to cast good, solid four-, five-, and six-mana threats, rather than hoping for Magical Christmas Land scenarios). It started a fad that would last for the better part of the year of playing zero to three non-permanents in aggressive decks. It provided the skeleton for the Sovereigns of Lost Alara + Eldrazi Conscription decks that would come later that year.

Amusingly (to some), it did all this while featuring 49 rares and mythics, among the 53 maindeck cards besides basic land. In some ways, this deck should serve as a reality check to Wizards R&D: you can't just make rares and mythics better than the other cards.

"Not enough can be said [about Zvi] I don't know how much you ever got to see him in action during the build/test/predict type phases, but he was an absolute beast at finding so many strong decks, and seemingly as quickly as he could write them."

-Scott Johns

Just a couple months later, Zvi's Team Mythic found another metagame to catch off-guard at Pro Tour San Juan. The format was full of U/W Control, Eldrazi Green, Mono-Red, Boros, and Vampires, with RUG being the other big success story of the format. And once again, we see Zvi hitting the format from an angle it doesn't expect.

Again we see an innovative mana base letting Zvi's team do things that others couldn't. Here, we see a potent combination of acceleration, ways to use those accelerators as bodies (not just for mana), and lands that function as spells. So many people get stuck in the trap of only building decks that look like decks people have played before; Zvi has never been bound by such restrictions. Here, we see the fusing of token-based strategies, Eldrazi Green's mana base, and the structure of the previous year's World Championships "also-ran," Monument Green.



Monument Green

Zvi Mowshowitz Pro Tour San Juan 2010 (Zendikar Block Constructed)

MAINDECK

4 Arbor Elf
4 Joraga Treespeaker
4 Lotus Cobra
4 Nest Invader
1 River Boa
4 Vengevine
4 Kozilek's Predator
4 Wolfbriar Elemental

3 Beastmaster Ascension
4 Eldrazi Monument
1 Dread Statuary
4 Khalni Garden
4 Misty Rainforest
2 Verdant Catacombs
13 Forest

SIDEBOARD

4 Leatherback Baloth
3 Tajuru Preserver
2 Gigantiform
2 Naturalize
2 River Boa
1 Beastmaster Ascension
1 Forest

How do you build a deck like this? Zvi asked himself what was the best card that no one was playing with; his answer was Vengevine. This suggested to him that there should be a Vengevine deck, and that no one had yet discovered it.



If you're working a new format and want to try blazing some new ground, remember to ask yourself this same question. There are often more good cards in a format than are being used. Not every card will find a good home, and not every card's day is today. While some cards are obvious, somebody has to be the first to figure out how to use each of the less obvious ones. As every great deckbuilder will tell you, most brews don't work out. When you strike gold, however, the feeling is indescribable.

This concludes our examination of the top ten deckbuilders of all time. However, I recommend not stopping here. The chapter that follows contains the full list of the top thirty deckbuilders of all time, as selected by the above-mentioned committee.

Want to master deckbuilding? How well versed are you in the groundwork that has already been laid for you?

Want to succeed at something? Study those who that succeed at it.

Want to be a master deckbuilder? The most important ingredient is focused time spent building decks (and playing Magic). Part of that is getting the most value out of the time you spend. One very powerful way to do that is to study the works of the masters on this list and seek to learn something from each of them.

I recommend reading through this list and making a note of any players you're not familiar with. Then take a few minutes and do some research of your own on those players and their decks. The more of these players you study, the more techniques and good perspectives you will have in your arsenal.

ALL-TIME DECKBUILDERS 11-30

The question of “Who are the best deckbuilders in the world?” is a popular one... and one that’s rarely really answered. After all, deckbuilding can be a thankless job. From Paul Sligh winning with Jay Schneider’s deck up to today, so many fans only remember the names of the people who made the Top 8 and have no idea who actually built the deck.

When I surveyed the many great deckbuilders and historians I did for this list in the summer of 2011 I knew a lot of voices would be heavily influenced by current events, while others would cling hard to history. The product wasn’t intended to be a definitive listing, but rather to highlight and pay homage to some of the masters we can learn from.

I have a feeling if I asked that same question next year the results might not be the exact same, as the “current” favorites have changed (while the all time greats would likely hold their positions). For instance, the 2013 Player of the Year, Josh Utter-Leyton, would likely garner more votes, as he has been a dominate deckbuilder for a number of years now.

The top ten deckbuilders’ greatest works were detailed in the previous section. However, Magic’s been blessed by quite a number of incredible minds who’ve had an impact on our understanding of deckbuilding. I’d like to take a minute and say a couple words about the next twenty vote-getters.

11 BEN RUBIN



More than a couple of the top 10 deckbuilders consider it a crime that BR didn’t crack the top ten... and I suspect if we were to poll another panel, he *would* find his way in. One of the risks of polling people from different eras is that not everyone always knows who did what in each partnership — and BR’s partner in crime, Brian Kibler, is currently active and on top of the world. Both players are all-time elite deckbuilders (and Hall of Famers), but Brian is the first to say it: BR taught him everything he knows.

Ben’s designs include Rubin Zoo, Dancing Gnomes (Tempest Block), SuperGro, W/G Rebels, and Domain (Invasion Block).

12 **GUILLAUME WAFO-TAPA**



Wafo-Tapa is probably the most prolific control player of the modern era, and personally on my top ten list. He's just recently returned to the game and I suspect he'll shoot straight back to the top. He's made countless tournament-winning control decks, including Teachings, Dralnu, many Faeries decks (including many without Bitterblossom), and countless U/B, U/W, U/R, and 5-Color Control decks.

13 **GERRY THOMPSON**



One of the greatest decktuners in the history of the game, GerryT has made a career out of finding the best strategy anyone has come up with in a format, and then making it better. He's also one of the best strategy writers in the game today, actually teaching people how to build decks rather than just handing them lists. He might be most famous for Thepths (merging Dark Depths combo with Thopter Sword), but he's built the best deck of the week more times than we can count, with absolutely no deck style being off-limits. His successful decks have included updated versions of Caw-Blade, Delver, Faeries, Teachings, Loam, Reanimator, Dredgevine, Next Level Blue, Landstill, Jund, Valakut, Esper Spirits, and more. I have a feeling, when all is said and done, GerryT will end up in even more top ten all-time lists.

14 **BRIAN SCHNEIDER**



Another deck designer who's surely only missed the top ten as a result of newer players not being familiar with his work. In fact, many of the top ten deckbuilders consider Brian to be in the top five. He was an early pioneer of a number of Magic concepts we take for granted today, helping design decks ranging from Hatred to Mono-Blue Control. He brewed plenty of strange combo decks, and early aggro-control decks like the R/W/U "Tongo Nation" deck that had arguably the best performance at Pro Tour Chicago in 1997.

The primary reason Brian's not better known for his deckbuilding is because he took a job in Wizards R&D, where he was a lead developer for a number of years. Keep in mind that being lead developer involves building countless decks before anyone else. His job was to make the game better by finding decks so good, they shouldn't even be printed.

15 **KAI BUDDÉ**



While it's likely that Kai's high position on this list is influenced by his tournament dominance (one that's likely to never be matched), it's still important to note that Kai really was a truly great deck designer and still is, as evidenced by his contributions to the successful Bant Hexproof deck.

It's difficult to know for sure which decks Kai built and which decks he merely played at an unparalleled level... but even the decks he didn't lead the design of benefited greatly from his wisdom and perspective. See, deckbuilding is not something you do in a vacuum. While Kai benefited greatly from the great minds around him, they benefited possibly even more as a result of every conversation, every game, every deck worked on with one of the greatest Magic minds the game has ever known.

Still, Kai would never let this list be published without crediting Hall of Famer Dirk Baberowski's direction, his longtime teammate and principle playtest partner. Kai is most famous for versions of High Tide, Donate-Illusions, Mono-Brown Wildfire, Rebels, Affinity, Domain, Oath, and Bant Hexproof.

16 David Humpherys



Yet another world-class deckbuilder who is only out of the limelight as a result of working for Wizards, and he's head of development there! Humpherys was one-third of the YMG Hall of Fame trio (along with Rob Dougherty and Darwin Kastle), who were one of the fiercest deckbuilding teams of all time. Like all teams, they were aided by a powerful crew of teammates, including possible future Hall of Famers Paul Rietzl and Justin Gary.

Humpherys' most famous decks include Reanimator, Psychatog, Recur-Great Whale, Esper Desolation Angel (Invasion Block), U/G Quiet Speculation, and the Utility Belt (Tinker/Wildfire/Citanul Flute in Urza Block).

T 17 Jon Finkel



Like Kai, Jon's place on this list is at least partially a function of his being one of the two all time greatest players. Like Kai, Jon really is a world-class deck designer, often taking the position of partnering with great deckbuilders like Michael Flores, Zvi Mowshowitz, Dave Price, Brian Kibler, and Sam Black (who's building a case to appear on this list someday) to build the decks he would use to dominate tournaments.

As a guy who has known Jon since we were kids and has benefited tremendously from his insights, I have to tell you... there's never been a player with a mind for the game like Jon, and every deckbuilder who has worked with him understood Magic better as a result. What's possibly even more fascinating is that Jon is a "Limited specialist" who just happens to be so good at Magic that he's one of the greatest Constructed players of all time without it even being his primary format!

Jon's succeeded with more decks than we could possibly count, but is probably best known for Forbidian, Tinker, Esper Spirits, Storm, Mono-Red, Prison, Fires, and Napster.

Note: A small capital T by a deckbuilder's name denotes a tie with another (or several other) deckbuilder(s)

T17 Katsuhiko Mori



Tied for 17th, we have the 2005 World Champion, Katsuhiko Mori, who actually went on to Top 8 each of the next two World Championships as well, always armed with a deck of his own creation. His career also includes a Masters Series win and four Grand Prix wins...

...but is not without some amount of controversy, as Katsuhiko was banned for an excessive accumulation of warnings. He's since returned to the game, obtaining that third Pro Tour Top 8 and winning the Japanese National Championships in 2010 (his second time as champion, his fourth time on the national team).

He's best known for U/R Dragonstorm, G/W Ghazi-Glare, B/G Elves, Red Deck Wins, TarmoRock, U/W Tron, Psychatog, and a variety of good stuff decks like R/W/U Super Friends.

19 Mike Long



Surely the most controversial name on this list, love him or hate him, Mike Long is without a doubt one of the greatest deckbuilders the game has ever known.

Quite frankly, there's not a chance in the world that Mike Long isn't actually in the top ten deckbuilders. His absence from the list is certainly a combination of being unpopular with some players and the allegations of cheating that have surrounded him.

Long is that rare deckbuilder who didn't just build one, two, or ten great decks — he pioneered many of the schools of Magic we know today. He was probably the best deckbuilder in the world during the years before the Pro Tour. He was the first player to win (or Top 8) a Pro Tour with a combo deck!

Remember, for many years, the term “combo deck” was not exactly a flattering one; combo decks were ridiculed as being overly complicated, too fancy, and unreliable. He was among the first to play only a single kill card, to realize the true power of cards like Merchant Scroll and Impulse, and to fully harness the power of fetchlands and shocklands to make five-color aggro decks.

Some of Long’s most famous decks include ProsBloom, Long.dec (Burning Wish + Yawgmoth’s Will), Keeper, Domain Zoo, U/G/W Madness, Ponza, and Turbo-Stasis.

T20

Adrian Sullivan



The “Corrupter” is one of the oldest school old-school players in the game. Adrian Sullivan is one of the godfathers of Magic theory, and even players as old-school as Michael Flores consider Adrian to be the primary original influence in their understanding of deckbuilding. In fact, much of the language we use today to describe Magic theory was created or influenced by Adrian’s writings.

Adrian’s involvement in deckbuilding is basically as old as the game itself, though he’s traditionally always been more interested in the “game” of deckbuilding than high-level play. Adrian is more interested in the language, in the physics of Magic, than any one finish. He’s also one of the original Magic writers. He helped invent the Magic article, which includes work on the original Magic Dojo — with Magic articles spanning three decades.

Adrian is well-known for his eccentric concoctions (and contributions to decks) that go on to shape deckbuilding theory — decks like Baron Harkonnen (U/G Control) and Dred Panda Roberts (the first deck to use Necropotence with the intention of Necroing for seventeen to set up a combo). He’s equally well-known for his love of red decks, ranging from Ponza to Sligh and Demigod Red to Red Deck Wins.

T20 Osyp Lebedowicz



Tied at 20th, we have one of the most vibrant personalities on the Pro Tour of the 2000s. Osyp has recently returned to the game and is sure to bring his unique blend of humor, Salsa dancing, and razor-sharp technology to the table. A Pro Tour champion, Osyp managed three Pro Tour Top 8s and four Grand Prix Top 8s during a six-year stretch where he was able to commit a large amount of time to his love of the game. In his time, he was one of the top Americans in the game. He is known for Astral Slide, Vial-Affinity, U/R Tron, Psychatog, B/W Husk, and Goblins.

22 Luis Scott-Vargas



Like Kai and Finkel, Luis is one of the all-time greats and is partially propped up on the list as a result of his in-game ability. A great deckbuilder, Luis would be the first to point credit towards the playtest team he assembled: Team Channel Fireball, one of the most successful Magic teams and Luis's brainchild.

Channel Fireball's success is certainly an ensemble performance, with Josh Utter-Leyton, Eric Froehlich, and Brian Kibler leading deck design, with valuable contributions over the years from Martin Juza, Paulo Vito Damo Da Rosa, David Ochoa, Ben Stark, Shuhei Nakamura, Brad Nelson, Tom Ross, Matt Nass, and more.

Luis used to play control decks — like the Arcanis, the Omnipotent/Chord of Calling deck he won the US National Championship with in 2007. However, after a brief combo phase (which included a Pro Tour win with Elves, as well as Storm, Swans, and more), he mostly plays Jund and White Weenie variants these days, including Tempered Steel (in multiple formats) and B/W Tokens.

T23 Shouta Yasooka

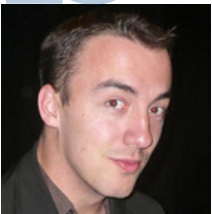


Shouta Yasooka is on the short list for best deckbuilders in the world as of the writing of this book. Shouta has a reputation for consistently going 9-1 or better in the Constructed portion of Pro Tours, then going 2-4 or 3-3 in Limited; it's a format he doesn't care much for, and often skips practicing. Still, he's won one!

A former Player of the Year, probably the only thing keeping Shouta out of the Hall of Fame is his lack of multiple Pro Tour Top 8s as a result of being basically a Constructed player only. These consistent 9-1 finishes in constructed have helped propel him to half a dozen Top 16s and another half-a-dozen Top 32s.

Shouta has a preference for eccentric blue control decks — most famously Tezzeret, which he made *nine* different successful versions of. Many of his decks defy naming conventions, combining elements most deckbuilders never think to combine. Æther Vial in control? Pulse of the Fields in a Gifts Rock deck that uses Yosei, the Morning Star? He's also had success with decks as varied as Boros, Faeries, and Jund.

T23 Olivier Ruel



Another Hall of Famer, Olivier has the record for most Grand Prix Top 8s (27!) as well as five Pro Tour Top 8s.

Much of his success can be attributed to his ability to always be at the forefront of Magic deckbuilding trends. He's been a part of a number of very successful Magic collaborations over the years, helping spearhead the golden era of French Magic. His deckbuilding partners over the years have included Gabriel Nassif, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, Manuel Bucher, Raphael Levy, and his brother, Hall of Famer Antoine Ruel. He was also one of the few European players to successfully

network with the Japanese players during Japan's reign on top of the Magic world from 2005-2009.

Olivier is best known for Elf Combo, Tooth and Nail, Sway the Stars, B/W Hand in Hand, Burning Wish Goblins, Goblin-Bidding, Mono-Black Control, and Quick 'n' Toast.

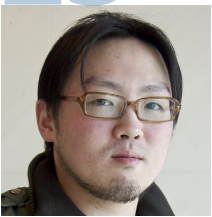
T23 **Brad Nelson**



The 2010 Player of the Year, Brad Nelson would be the first to suggest that his appearance on this list was surely influenced by just how incredible of a year he'd had, much of which was fueled by his deckbuilding savvy. Still, he's a young guy with a lot of career in front of him. He's hungry to prove himself after being the second-fastest player to get to 100 lifetime Pro Points.

He's known for Jund, U/W Control, Doran, Naya, and Caw-Blade, often featuring unusual card choices in popular archetypes. He has reemerged as a top deckbuilder in 2012-2013, including work on Craterhoof Reanimator, Junk Aristocrats, and Bant Control.

T23 **Itaru Ishida**



Fourth on the all-time Grand Prix Top 8 list with seventeen placings, the late Itaru Ishida was a soft spoken, old-school Japanese Pro who slipped under the radar for some younger non-Japanese crowds.

More than one of the voters polled for this top ten list gave an honorable mention to "whoever builds the Japanese decks." While that honor certainly can't go to just one man, Ishida is one of the few who could lay claim to such a title. He was one of the fathers of the Japanese Constructed scene that led to Japan's dominance between 2005-2009.

Some of Ishida's best-known decks are Raka Control (Invasion Block), Psychatog, Dredgeatog, Stormbind, and Wild Zombies (an Extended deck featuring Hermit Druid, Buried Alive, Krovikian Horror, Squee, Ashen Ghoul, Wild Mongrel, Zombie Infestation, and Firestorm).

Tragically, Ishida passed away in January of 2013.

T23

Akira Asahara



Speaking of “who builds the Japanese decks,” Akira Asahara is well-known for being a very rogue deckbuilder with a laundry list of unusual deck designs like Enduring Ideal, Heartbeat Combo, Balancing Act, Greater Good, and Battle of Wits.

In addition to these decks, Akira has also built successful versions of a few more mainstream archetypes, including Faeries, U/B Control, and Solar Flare.

T28

Jay Schneider



Jay Schneider, who is mentioned numerous times throughout *Next Level Deckbuilding*. He is not only a master deckbuilder but the father of the concept of a mana curve. In addition to creating one of the most important ideas in all of deckbuilding, he simultaneously introduced the concept of using creatures with board control abilities to generate virtual card advantage.

Amusingly, this technology was discarded from Sligh decks, but moved on to become a regular part of Magic deck construction. This helped lay the groundwork for the invention of midrange as a strategy.

Jay is best known for Sligh (Geeba), but also designed a wide range of rogue decks including Mono-Black Braids, Bant Threshold (w/ Tolarian Winds), Elf and Nail, Frog in a Blender (R/G Aggro), U/B/R Psychatog/Madness, Sushi Snack (Ambassador Laquatus/Time Stretch/Millikin Combo), and G/W Auratog.

T28 Matt Place



While anyone from the early days of Magic is familiar with this Pro Tour champion's brilliant deckbuilding abilities, perhaps his greatest legacy is that of game design. As a leading member of R&D he was one of the driving forces in Magic's renaissance, helping design the New World Order philosophy for Magic (which helped clean up Magic's rules and focused Magic design towards much more enjoyable sets), M10, Duels of the Planeswalkers, and many, many Magic sets, including fan favorite Rise of the Eldrazi.

He's best known for Turbo-Stasis, Five-Color Green, some early incarnations of The Deck (the original control deck), and all sorts of decks from before there was a Pro Tour. He designed everything from control to good stuff to midrange before people even knew those were concepts. On top of all this, he is Magic cultural guru Dan Burdick's big brother.

T28 Darwin Kastle



Darwin Kastle has been in eight Pro Tour Top 8s — a resume rivaled only by Jon Finkel, Kai Budde, Gabriel Nassif, and Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa. He was a founding member of YMG, one of the most dangerous deckbuilding teams of all time (alongside fellow Hall of Famers and top thirty deckbuilders, Rob Dougherty and David Humpherys). Some of Darwin's most famous decks include Reanimator, The Rock, The Claw (Onslaught Block R/G Ramp), and Living Death.

T28 **Billy Moreno**



Yet another great deck designer turned R&D member, Billy's probably best known for the Flash-Hulk deck he designed and Steve Sadin used to win Grand Prix Columbus 2007 with. Combining Flash-Hulk with Counterbalance-Top, it's arguably the most powerful Grand Prix or Pro Tour deck of all time.

Never afraid of a rogue brew, Billy's also known for BUG Madness (which he Top 8ed Pro Tour Los Angeles 2005 with), as well as Zoo, Elves, Vampires, Enchantress, Fecundity Goblins, and Spread 'Em (cascade land destruction).

CONCLUSION

“Where do I go from here?”

We’ve learned about the art of deckbuilding — including how to develop decks from scratch, how to use the four perspectives for deckbuilding, how to build a sideboard, how to evaluate new cards, and a host of tools for building successful decks.

We’ve learned about the science of deckbuilding — including probabilities, templating, mana bases and mana curves, proper use of removal and threats, and the sixteen major deck archetypes in Magic.

We’ve taken what we’ve learned and applied it to the greatest masters of deckbuilding the game has ever known. We have asked ourselves, “Why did they make the deckbuilding decisions they made?” Each time we encountered a decision we didn’t understand, we researched it and dug for the answers. The very act of knowing to do this (and how to do it) already moves us a tier above most. We might not always agree with the choices the masters make, but we are committed to understanding them.

Study the greats and we’ll *think* like the greats.

“Where do I go from here?”

It’s time to brew! Apply what you’ve read here, experiment, get feedback from others, and listen to the feedback you’re getting. Then reflect on everything you’re learning and adjust accordingly. *Next Level Deckbuilding* is set up to be referenced easily — so whenever you encounter a tough decision, problem you don’t immediately see an answer to, go back and revisit that section.

To truly level up as a deckbuilder, you have to apply what you’ve learned here and what you learn each time you try a new brew. Honestly assessing each deck and your deckbuilding strengths and weaknesses are critical skills on the road to deckbuilding mastery.

If you want to become a master deckbuilder, you're going to need all the information and strategy you can soak up. Discuss deckbuilding with any of your interested friends — and expand your circle of friends, looking for others that share your passion. Listening to others doesn't mean always agreeing. Remember, if you're a slave to imitation, you're limiting how good you can get. This concept is explained in more depth in [Information Cascades in Magic](#).

Of course, the other half of Information Cascades also applies. If you're just brewing nothing but rogue decks, you're missing out on valuable skills and lessons... and you're also missing out on when the best strategies really are known. Balancing imitation and innovation is the yin and the yang of deckbuilding.

Read articles on every site that interests you. Participate in forum discussions. Twitter and Facebook are great tools for networking with Magic players. Magic isn't really a solo sport any more — and if you want the best chances of winning, you're going to want the latest info, a support network of friends, other deckbuilders to learn from, and people to bounce your new decks off of.

Make sure to return to *Next Level Deckbuilding* after a little real-world experience. The material you learn in Magic strategy writing can help you level up in the real world — and when you level up, it can bring with it a new perspective that unlocks more meaning in material you've already read. An article or book we haven't read in years can contain lessons we weren't ready for at the time. It can be fairly comical, sometimes — almost as if words and sentences were added that couldn't possibly have been there the last time! Also, now that you've completed this pass through *Next Level Deckbuilding*, go back and reread *Next Level Magic*. Of course, if you haven't read *Next Level Magic* yet, do that!

Build more decklists and play more Magic! Carry a pen and notebook with you everywhere you go, and whenever you have an idea, jot it down! It doesn't have to be a full decklist — just write whatever comes to mind. Coming up with more decklists is crucial, but you also need to play as much Magic as you can. All the theory in the world is no substitute for real-world experience. When ideas work or don't work, we want to understand why.

Finally, one of the best ways to increase your mastery of deckbuilding is by sharing what you know with another. The more of the material covered here you can articulate to others, the more you'll understand at an instinctual level, and have it inform your decisions.

"Where do I go from here?"

It's time for real-world experiences! It's time to apply what we've learned here. Want to have your name listed among the all time greats? Believe in yourself, love deckbuilding, and relentlessly pursue perfection.

Now it's time to brew.

Patrick Chapin
"The Innovator"



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

As soon as *Next Level Magic* was released back in June of 2009, it was clear I'd struck a chord in the Magic community. There are countless Magic websites, but there had been relatively little in the way of books about Magic. Immediately, people began asking what would come next. The subject I was asked about the most?

Deckbuilding.

Deckbuilding in Magic is a subject so rich, no mere article (or series of articles) could ever cover the extent of it. In fact, the only way I knew to do justice to it was to enlist the aid of dozens of the game's greatest minds, getting their perspectives and taking their feedback. I want to thank the many brilliant minds making up the "Greatest Deckbuilders of All Time" panel for their opinions, their perspectives, and their quotes about the game's all time greats.

Randy Buehler
Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa
Jon Finkel
Michael Flores
Mark Herberholz
Zac Hill
Scott Johns
Frank Karsten
Darwin Kastle
Brian Kibler
Ted Knutson
Erik Lauer
Osyp Lebedowicz
Mike Long

Billy Moreno
Zvi Mowshowitz
Gabriel Nassif
Matt Place
Steve Sadin
Tomoharu Saito
Brian Schneider
Jay Schneider
Luis Scott-Vargas
Adrian Sullivan
Patrick Sullivan
Gabe Walls
Guillaume Wafo-Tapa

Every one of these gentlemen has had an impact on the game, and I'm extremely grateful for their time and contributions — both to *Next Level Deckbuilding* and to the game as a whole. Bios for each can be found in the introduction to "The Ten Greatest Deckbuilders of All Time" section.

I also want to give special thanks to Michael Flores, one of the greatest deckbuilders of all time. Michael Flores has been one of the biggest influences in my Magic writing career, helping me get my start at StarCityGames.com back in 2006. He continues to

share his knowledge and wisdom to this day, providing valuable contributions and perspectives on the sixteen archetypes of Magic. There's no one in the game that knows those archetypes better than Flores.

Major thanks to Ferrett Steinmetz, one of the all-time great Magic writers and editors. Despite both of us having a lot of real-world commitments on our plates, he made the time to not only edit *Next Level Deckbuilding* but to contribute his thoughts and ideas on what sections should be added and how to make it the best it could possibly be.

Finally, I'd like to thank the following people who have helped make *Next Level Deckbuilding* a reality:

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My parents, Wendy and Mark Chapin

For being the best parents anyone could ever hope for and for supporting my Magic playing, even when it seemed like an unrealistic dream.

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Wizards of the Coast

For making the greatest game in the world, and continuing to make it better and better.

Everyone who voted me into the Magic: the Gathering Hall of Fame

This is the greatest achievement of my life. It's the event I'm most proud of. It means the world to me.

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