

Mike Flores

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Perhaps it's because **magicthegathering.com** is about to spiral backwards in time for the last two weeks of the month and I am just warming up. Perhaps it's because just about everybody loved my Sligh article a couple of weeks back -- a rare event for the opinionated Swimming with Sharks crowd, let me tell you. Or perhaps it's because I love watching the evolution of decks, getting into the heads of designers around the world by deconstructing their creations, more than anything else in all the planes of Dominia. So for Puzzle Week, I have no choice but to throw it back one more time and look at how some of the top decks of today rely on the decks of yesteryear for their forms, ideas, and even specific card choices. I think you'll see how the pieces of some of these decks, and the sequences of how they play the game in different phases, fall together like puzzle pieces themselves.



Tooth and Nail

The concept: Accelerate mana and then cast a powerful sorcery to dig two giant monsters out of your deck. Defend yourself early with cards like Electrostatic Bolt or Oblivion Stone, but win the game with a giant threat.

The original:

Gabriel Nassif - PT Kobe Finalist



Main Deck

60 cards

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Blinkmoth Nexus | 2 Mindslaver |
| 4 Cloudpost | 4 Oblivion Stone |
| 16 Forest | 4 Oxidize |
| 3 Stalking Stones | 4 Reaper and Sower |
| 24 lands | 4 Sylvan Scrying |
| | 2 Talisman of Unity |
| | 4 Tooth and Nail |
| 1 Darksteel Colossus | 24 other spells |
| 1 Duplicant | |
| 1 Leonin Abunas | |
| 1 Platinum Angel | |

Sideboard

- 4 Chalice of the Void
- 1 Duplicant
- 1 Mindslaver
- 1 Platinum Angel
- 4 Pulse of the Tangle
- 4 Tel-Jilad Chosen
- 15 sideboard cards

4 Solemn Simulacrum
4 Viridian Shaman

12 creatures

While most of the Tooth and Nail decks that we've looked at over the past couple of months of Standard are based on Urza's Mine, Urza's Power Plant, and Urza's Tower, the original Tooth and Nail laced Cloudposts together with Reap and Sow and Sylvan Scrying. In addition to Tooth and Nail, Nassif's deck could go for a Big Spell with Mindslaver, itself a default win in many matchups.

Before Tooth and Nail, there was...

Secret Force

Mike Turian - Worlds 2001



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Dust Bowl
14 Forest
3 Gaea's Cradle
4 Wasteland

2 Creeping Mold
4 Natural Order

6 other spells

23 lands

4 Elvish Lyrist
4 Fyndhorn Elves
4 Llanowar Elves
3 Masticore
4 Spike Feeder
3 Spike Weaver
3 Uktabi Orangutan
2 Verdant Force
4 Wall of Roots

31 creatures

Sideboard

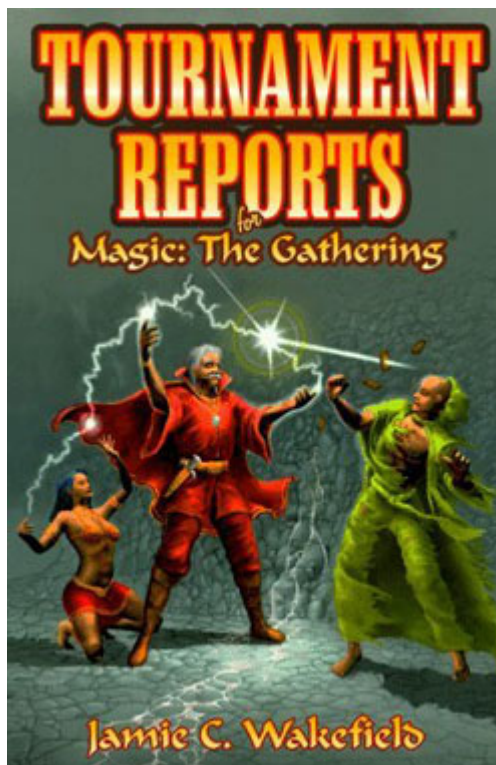
3 Choke
4 Emerald Charm
1 Masticore
1 Penumbra Wurm
4 Powder Keg
1 Spike Weaver
1 Uktabi Orangutan

15 sideboard cards

This version of Secret Force was instrumental in Mike Turian's graduating to the Top 8 of Worlds 2001. Though now retired from competitive play, Mike was once one of the PT's best. His performance with this deck went a long way in giving Secret Force (previously considered a middling PTQ deck at best) credibility at the top levels of PT play. In fact, at the very next Extended Pro Tour, Raphael Gennari followed up on Mike's finish with a Secret Force Top 8 himself. Gennari's deck benefited a great deal from the inclusion of Apocalypse's black-green gold cards, adding Spiritmonger as a Verdant Force-


level threat that the deck could actually cast, as well as Pernicious Deed for supreme anti-weenie defense. If you want to take a look at Genari's hybrid version, [click here](#).

You probably know that long before Gennari or Turian shuffled up their Forests, Secret Force was innovated by a famous **Magic** writer by the name of Jamie Wakefield. While Secret Force looks like a deck that is all about popping a Natural Order to find Verdant Force, sometimes credited as The Best Fatty Ever Printed (tm), the deck could do a lot more in the early game. Just as Tooth and Nail can defend itself with Solemn Simulacrum or win the game outright with Mindslaver, Secret Force could control the board with Spike Weaver or even Spike Feeder. Against the popular Ophidian decks of the time, Spike Feeder could pass counters around the various small creatures in the deck to win any fight, or force damage through superior blockers with deceptively tiny 1/1 creatures. One of the great things about Secret Force was that, much like Tooth and Nail in the face of Ravager Affinity, it was an underpowered and even clunky deck when compared with some of the top flight opposition of its era(s). Wakefield had to overcome decks like Forbidian, High Tide, and Slivers -- all packing Force of Will -- and Gennari had to beat Trix with the Illusions of Grandeur + Donate combination. Luckily, he had Druid Lyryst on his squad.



Ravager Affinity...

One of many very good builds:

Mike Clair		txt 
Main Deck	Sideboard	
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 AEther Vial	4 Furnace Dragon
2 Darksteel Citadel	4 Chromatic Sphere	2 Moriok Rigger
2 Glimmervoid	3 Cranial Plating	4 Seething Song
4 Great Furnace	4 Electrostatic Bolt	3 Shrapnel Blast
4 Seat of the Synod	4 Thoughtcast	2 Terror
4 Vault of Whispers	_____	15 sideboard cards
_____	19 other spells	
20 lands		
4 Arcbound Ravager		
4 Arcbound Worker		
2 Atog		
4 Disciple of the Vault		
4 Frogmite		
3 Myr Enforcer		

21 creatures

We have talked about Ravager Affinity almost every week since I picked up this column, and we're not likely to stop until either something big is banned or *Mirrodin* Block rotates out of Standard. The core of the deck is so strong that Clair played not a single card that wasn't available in *Mirrodin* Block when porting his deck to Standard, while Pierre Canali ported the deck all the way to an EXTENDED PT win.

But what is the predecessor to this deck? On what deck's shoulders does the mighty Affinity mechanic stand? Is it Tinker? Tinker and Affinity are both explosive artifact decks, right?

Alan Comer



Main Deck

60 cards

3 Ancient Tomb
4 City of Traitors
2 Dust Bowl
12 Island

21 lands

4 Masticore
2 Phyrexian Colossus

6 creatures

1 Arcane Denial
3 Crumbling Sanctuary
1 Cursed Scroll
4 Grim Monolith
3 Mana Leak
4 Mana Vault
1 Null Brooch
4 Phyrexian Processor
4 Thran Dynamo
4 Tinker
4 Voltaic Key

33 other spells

Sideboard

3 Annul
2 Back to Basics
1 Caltrops
1 Crumbling Sanctuary
2 Disrupting Scepter
1 Mana Leak
3 Null Brooch
1 Phyrexian Furnace
1 Thran Foundry

15 sideboard cards

These decks don't really have a lot in common. They both have seven drop artifact creatures, but while Alan has the Ancient Tombs and Grim Monoliths to force his Colossus down, Clair doesn't even have to tap mana for his. Mike's deck is essentially a speed beatdown deck and Alan's is essentially a powerhouse CounterSliver deck with a control sideboard. I would even argue that modern Ravager Affinity has more in common with Suicide Black with Cursed Scrolls than it does with the ostensibly more obvious Tinker.

Don't know what a Suicide Black is? Here is a version that scored Top 4 at the 1999 Ohio Valley Regionals, put together by Brian Schneider and tuned by Worth Wollpert:

Suicide Black - Regionals 1999;



Main Deck

Sideboard

75 cards

0 sideboard cards

3 City of Traitors
15 Swamp
4 Wasteland

22 lands

4 Blood Pet
4 Carnophage
4 Dauthi Horror
4 Dauthi Slayer
3 Skittering Skirge

19 creatures

4 Cursed Scroll
4 Dark Ritual
4 Diabolic Edict
4 Duress
4 Engineered Plague
3 Hatred
3 Persecute
4 Sarcomancy
4 Winter Orb

34 other spells

While Ravager Affinity might PLAY like a Suicide Black deck that "always gets the Ritual", subbing the punch of Hatred with Arcbound Ravager and the last points of Cursed Scroll with Disciple of the Vault, from an ancestral construction standpoint, Ravager, in my opinion, has a lot more in common with PT Venice Champion Osyp Lebedowicz's Astral Slide!

Osyp Lebedowicz



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Forgotten Cave
9 Mountains
10 Plains
4 Secluded Steppe

27 lands

2 Daru Sanctifier
4 Exalted Angel
2 Gempalm Incinerator
2 Jareth, Leonine Titan

10 creatures

4 Akroma's Blessing
4 Akroma's Vengeance
4 Astral Slide
4 Lightning Rift
3 Renewed Faith
4 Starstorm

23 other spells

Sideboard

2 Akroma, Angel of Wrath
4 Avarax
3 Demystify
3 Disciple of Grace
2 Gempalm Incinerator
1 Oblation

15 sideboard cards

How can this be? An Astral Slide deck seems like the complete opposite of a Ravager Affinity deck. One deck is all about defense, cycling, and life gain, while the other deck is about aggressive drops, dealing huge packets of damage, and then finishing with one of three bombs. One deck's creatures specialize in blocking, while the other deck's creatures specialize in attacking. One deck has enchantments, the other artifacts. So how are they at all similar?

Well, we've never really had a deck with QUITE the oomph that Affinity packs. While Arcbound Ravager isn't unbeatable by any means, he is on a team whose powers are so tightly woven, they start from the very lands that the deck plays. There's your first similarity. Like Affinity, Slide has specialized lands that drive its mechanics.



Mechanics? Now there's an operative word!

Affinity is all about the Affinity for Artifacts mechanic. By playing artifact lands and other free artifacts like Chrome Mox, Ornithopter, Paradise Mantle, and Welding Jar in some builds, to just playing strong CHEAP artifacts in order to create a critical mass of passable artifacts, Affinity is able to cheat by paying nothing for 2/2s and little more for 3/2 flyers or 4/4 ground-pounders. This is the third time that Chromatic Sphere (or Barbed Sextant) has been legal. The last time, it produced colored mana for a deck that had all five basic land types; this time, it is playing center court in a deck with almost no colored spells, but that gets a lot of utility out of a cheap, one mana place holder: the more artifacts the better.

Similarly, Astral Slide is centered around cycling. It prevents mana screw by cycling into lands; it prevents mana flood by cycling away excess lands. It draws its defensive bombs by drawing into them with cycling; later, after Eternal Dragon appeared, it could cycle forever and ever. Once Lightning Rift or Astral Slide hit play, the cycling even did something special!

Environmentally, Affinity and Astral Slide also have a lot in common. They are both essentially Block Constructed decks that went a long way, stepping out of their assigned 2- or 3-set formats to make an impact in the wider field, at the highest levels. Both decks rely heavily on specialty lands to enable their themes, as well as mechanics-driven second-string players to keep them competitive when their key permanents aren't in play.

That said, you can pick any number of other decks to play Ravager's grandpa. Though not on the same level as Affinity, you can make a case for Rebels, Mercenaries, Roshambo, or certainly any of the *Onslaught* Block Tribal decks. The key to these decks is that certain clusters of cards are set aside in a block, ready to be played together, whereas with other, less mechanic-driven decks, cards are pulled from several sets, many times in non-intuitive combinations.

Mono-Blue Control

Though we have been discussing Kris Goding's version of Mono-Blue Control, I am going to break from Champs pedigree and post my own version just for Puzzle Week. Here is the deck that I used to place a disappointing 10th at the Columbus Last Chance Qualifier. I humbly think it's the top version of the archetype currently, at least in terms of the main deck.

Mono-Blue Control		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Annul	2 Bribery
18 Island	3 Condescend	2 Duplicant
		4 March of the Machines

4 Stalking Stones	4 Echoing Truth	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
26 lands	4 Hinder	2 Oblivion Stone
1 Keiga, the Tide Star	2 Inspiration	4 Temporal Adept
1 creatures	4 Mana Leak	15 sideboard cards
	4 Relic Barrier	
	4 Thirst for Knowledge	
	4 Vedalken Shackles	
	33 other spells	

I think that Meloku the Clouded Mirror might be better main than Keiga, the Tide Star, though I'd also be willing to play a fourth Condescend in that slot. In practice, I've never killed an opponent with a creature I actually summoned myself, but in testing, tapping out for Keiga has been really important when playing against all the power green decks as well as Ravager Affinity.

The unique features of this deck are 8 man lands and an otherwise low finisher count, as well as the use of Inspiration as the secondary card drawing engine. Four copies of Thirst for Knowledge are not enough to stay ahead in the current Standard, and Gifts Ungiven just doesn't work in a slot-redundant deck like this one. I chose four Thirst for Knowledge and two copies of Inspiration purely due to mana costs; 3 and 3 or 2 and 4 are probably fine, especially if you are increasingly likely to face another blue deck.

Before this deck, there was...

CMU Blue - Worlds 1998		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	<i>60 cards</i>	
18 Island	4 Counterspell	2 Capsize
4 Quicksand	4 Dismiss	1 Grindstone
4 Stalking Stones	2 Dissipate	4 Hydroblast
26 lands	3 Forbid	4 Sea Sprite
1 Rainbow Efreet	4 Force Spike	4 Wasteland
1 creatures	4 Impulse	15 sideboard cards
	3 Mana Leak	
	1 Memory Lapse	
	4 Nevinyrral's Disk	
	4 Whispers of the Muse	
	33 other spells	

Buehler Blue - Worlds 1999		
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Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Faerie Conclave	4 Counterspell	4 Annul
16 Island	4 Dismiss	1 Capsize
4 Stalking Stones	4 Forbid	3 Chill
4 Wasteland	4 Mana Leak	3 Legacy's Allure
<hr/>	1 Miscalculation	1 Masticore
28 lands	4 Powder Keg	2 Maze of Shadows
	4 Treachery	1 Stroke of Genius
	4 Whispers of the Muse	<hr/>
3 Masticore		15 sideboard cards
<hr/>		
3 creatures	29 other spells	

Notice any similarities? My deck draws heavily from both of these Randy Buehler-piloted designs. The biggest import has to be the playing a ton of counters and even more lands. From the 1998 deck, I played a lone finisher, from the 1999 deck, I played a full compliment of legal man lands. Where one deck had four Treacheries, I played four Vedalken Shackles, and where Randy had four Powder Kegs to slow the beats, I played four copies of Relic Barrier main.



Randy gets in some gunslinging time

Why Relic Barrier? Think about what the default beatdown deck is: it's Ravager Affinity. In the universe of today's Standard, G/R and U/G are CONTROL decks with expensive, Tinker-esque finishing elements. Relic Barrier disrupts Affinity just as Powder Keg would have mopped up the one-drop Cursed Scrolls, Jackal Pups, and Mogg Fanatics of Deadguy Red. It goes a longer way in defending blue than the slow Oblivion Stone while at the same time making Thirst for Knowledge twice as good.

As a deck designer, I find that my greatest tool is the old history book. When tuning the last cards of a new build, I often look back to see how the designers who came before answered specific questions. How many creatures do I need? How much land? What kinds of decks was this guy up against when he decided on that specific number of main deck Legacy's Allures? While you may not know the precise answer every time by studying an old deck list, the process will often help give you clarity about your own deck, as well as a rule of thumb on how the deck will run, before you shuffle up the first card.

"As a deck designer, I find that my greatest tool is the old history book."

Wait a minute? Isn't this Puzzle Week?

It sure is! All along this article we've looked at evolutionary predecessors to top decks that were built or played by retired Pro Tour players with something in common. Now even though the mono-blue deck I posted talks about drawing inspiration from two Worlds decks played by Randy Buehler, the old school influence doesn't end there, with that great player. The question is, who is the OTHER godfather of this mono-blue, what does he have in common with at least five credited deck designers mentioned in this article, and what UNIQUE inspiration did his deck contribute?

I've given you a ton of hints in this article, whether or not you saw them. And believe me, Adrian Sullivan probably knew the answer to this question without any of those hints. You want to innovate the next Necro combo? Do your homework and know what has come before. Bonus points if you are the first person to post the relevant deck list in the forums. Need another hint? It's not Mike Guptil.

See you (with the answer) in the New Year!

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