

Evaluating aggressive drafting strategies for *Betrayers* Have We Been Betrayed? Drafting Aggression in *Betrayers of Kamigawa*





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Back in December I wrote a fairly lengthy article demonstrating how aggression and tempo dominated the *Champions of Kamigawa* draft environment. The lack of effective removal and quality defensive creatures mixed with numerous finishers and efficient early attackers made for fast starts and even faster finishes if either player wasn't properly prepared. Having finally found an appropriate limited arena for playing normally inferior 2/2 bears, I contentedly cleaned up in the online draft rooms for several months. But as the *Betrayers of Kamigawa* release approached a small voice in the back of my head started wondering, "is it going to end? Will the new set revert back to walls and regenerators and big creatures with lots of kill? Will I have to start drafting [Kami of Lunacy](#) again?" Needless to say, as *Betrayers* preview week began here at [magicthegathering.com](#) in early February I was eagerly checking out the new cards for some sort of hint of what was to come. The first card to be [revealed](#) was [Higure, The Still Wind](#), a 3/4 blue ninja that could be gotten out on turn four! That seemed like a good omen. The [next preview](#) was [Fumiko the Lowblood](#), the kind of samurai any aggressive player would want on their team. She in fact defines aggression by becoming more powerful when attacking as well as denying opponents the chance to leave blockers back. And then on Thursday of preview week I read Mark Gottlieb's preview "[Shopping for Pants](#)." A 1/3 creature for   that searches out enchantments? That doesn't scream "red zone". [Tallowisp](#) not only buys the control player more time; it helps them gain card advantage! And as everyone knows, Wizards likes to design in cycles so there are probably cheap defensive creatures in every colour – perhaps a 1/3 for   that gives haste or something similar. Should everyone begin practicing his or her 18-land shuffle? I wanted to find out so I thought I would take my *Champions* analysis and apply it to *Betrayers* and see what it would tell us. By examining the various environmental factors that support or defeat aggressive decks, we should get a good idea of where we stand. It may help to quickly review my [original article](#) if you need a refresher. As with most limited articles I'm going to concentrate on the uncommons and commons as they more consistently define an environment. With the [increase in the size](#) of the expansions in the last two blocks, you'll be opening eight of fifty-five possible rares in *Betrayers* versus sixteen of eighty-eight possible rares in *Champions*. In any given draft there is actually less chance of getting a specific rare



from the new set. While it may pay off to draft lots of creature enchantments in triple *Championsdraft* hoping to get [Kitsune Mystic](#), drafting all the Foxes to offer to the [Patron of Kitsune](#) in *Betrayers* is not such a good idea.

Analyzing Aggression in *Betrayers of Kamigawa*

Efficient Removal

The bane of the aggressive deck is efficient low-cost removal. Removal comes in many forms:

1) Point removal such as [Shock](#), [Pacifism](#) or [Terror](#)

If your creatures have more than one point of power then you're in good shape as [Frostling](#) and [First Volley](#) are the only cheap common point kill spells. Unfortunately that will likely be enough against many aggressive early drops – it is very discouraging to have a [Cruel Deceiver](#) and [Skullsnatcher](#) held off by a single [Frostling](#). But on the plus side, [First Volley](#) is definitely no [Glacial Ray](#). In the more expensive three-slot there is [Horobi's Whisper](#) which will handle almost any creature but will likely require most of your opponent's early mana to do so thus giving you another attack with your remaining creatures. If splicing the Whisper becomes an option then the game has gone too long and you better look to your finishers quickly.

Surprisingly, white comes out on top when it comes to uncommon point kill with [Terashi's Verdict](#). While situational, it is extremely unlikely that someone will win without attacking. In the bounce department there is only the sub-par [Phantom Wings](#), which isn't generally a main-deck kind of card outside of ninja-heavy decks.

2) Recurring removal such as [Sparksmith](#), [Auriok Transfixer](#) or [Prodigal Sorcerer](#)

Wizards seems very reluctant to print non-situational recurring removal effects recently, perhaps due to the dominance of [Sparksmith](#), and *Betrayers* is no different. [Waxmane Baku](#) is probably the most powerful and popular creature with recurring removal but even then it has restrictions and is better suited to aggressive play. [Skullmane Baku](#) is slow and vulnerable and often starves for ki counters as better spirits are played first. The [Matsu-Tribe Sniper](#) is very effective at holding down fliers and is the bane of blue decks everywhere both aggressively and defensively. [Throat Slitter](#) and [Mistblade Shinobi](#) often seems like recurring removal but only when used with some sort of consistent evasion, and the mere threat can often deter attacking.

[Shuriken](#), on the other hand, is the very definition of recurring removal and is available to all colours. While it obviously dominates in decks filled with ninjas, not all players realize that for with two mana and two creatures (one with a toughness greater than 2), you can keep the [Shuriken](#) on your side after using it. Equip a second creature, activate it in response targeting an opponent's creature, and then once the new creature is equipped, activate it again and target your own creature with toughness



greater than 2. Since you control the creature that was last dealt damage by the [Shuriken](#), you retain control of it. It's not quick and taps two guys, but if the game goes long it can be very effective.

3) 2-for-1 creatures such as [Shock Troops](#), [Nekrataal](#) or [Man-O'-War](#)

As expected, there are no new [Flametonque Kavus](#) seeing print. [Frostling](#), at half the size of [Shock Troops](#) for one quarter the price (and a spirit too!) is the only viable creature. [Pus Kami](#) can also 2-for-1 but it costs seven mana for a 3/3 and an additional black mana to activate. Any creature that makes [Deathcurse Ogre](#) look efficient should not be seeing play.

4) Mass removal such as [Wrath of God](#), [Mutilate](#) or [Flamebreak](#)

The six mana [Wrath of God](#) equivalent that has been a staple of every block has finally made an appearance in [Final Judgement](#) and it even stops soulshift. But it's rare and you can't worry about rare cards. There is also the situational [Ronin Cliffriдер](#) but that's hardly enough to keep you from over-extending your board. Wizards has indicated that they want to encourage creatures and creature interaction and as such there has been a general decline in mass removal since *Onslaught* with [Akroma's Vengeance](#), [Bane of the Living](#) and [Starstorm](#). It appears that the world of Kamigawa is *still* extremely creature friendly.

Combat Tricks

With such a shortage of removal, combat tricks become much more relevant. I originally thought that combat tricks were of equal value to both aggressive and defensive players but I think I was bit hasty in that conclusion. Since defensive decks generally need to tap out early to play their more expensive creatures they rarely can afford to keep the mana open for combat tricks, especially high-priced ones. Leaving a Plains untapped for [Blessed Breath](#) may be possible but leaving 2

available for an [Unchecked Growth](#) will be an obvious tell that something is up. The aggressor, on the other hand, will always have their mana up though they don't really want to spend their entire turn on tricks either, which is why [Serpent Skin](#) isn't such a high pick.

That being said, *Betrayers* is flush with combat tricks compared to the first expansion sets of other blocks, but that is more for the lack of tricks in those sets than because they are particularly numerous. Tricks are almost always green or white and *Betrayers* is no different with [Roar of the Jukai](#), [Unchecked Growth](#), [Hundred-Talon Strike](#) and [Mending Hands](#). Tricks that pump up power or toughness are generally better than those that prevent damage which is why [Mending Hands](#) is a marginal card you'd rather not be playing. [Roar of the Jukai](#) is a very interesting card from both a design and tempo perspective. It will sit totally useless in your hand if you're on the defensive so you have to be absolutely certain you'll always be the aggressor. But when it does get used it can be devastating, though it can never serve as a finisher. It's even arcane, though you don't want to pay the splice cost unless absolutely necessary.



Black does have one trick in [Blessing of Leeches](#) but it's expensive and has an unhealthy drawback. Against the right deck it can be formidable, but you don't want to be drawing it late or against someone with [Cage of Hands](#) or [Mystic Restraints](#).

In theory the existence of Ninja also makes tricks better as there tends to be more creature interaction. But with Ninja in the two colours with lots of evasion and almost no tricks it doesn't seem to have that much of an effect.

With two expensive tricks and only one reasonable cheap trick, it appears that combat favours the aggressor in *Betrayers of Kamigawa*.

Creature Quality

There is no point in trying to draft an aggressive deck if the aggressive creatures aren't there to draft. And even if they're available, they won't be as effective there are lots of defensive options available to your opponent.

1) Availability of Efficient Aggressive Creatures



[Goblin Cohort](#) opens up the 1-slot in a whole new way. A common 2/2 for one mana with a reasonable drawback is extremely aggressive and with an appropriately built deck can have an opponent half-dead before they play their first creature. The remaining one-mana creatures are the more traditional 1/1 creatures but both [Frostling](#) and [Child of Thorns](#) have quality aggressive abilities that make them must-includes in almost every deck. [Teardrop Kami](#) and even [Bile Urchin](#) can also see play though you'd probably prefer they didn't.

At the 2-slot we have [Skullsnatcher](#), [Akki Raider](#) and [Loam Dweller](#) and two of them are uncommon. But the abilities of the first two hardly match those of the 2-drops in *Champions* such as [Hearth Kami](#) and [Wicked Akuba](#). [Blademane Baku](#) is also very reasonable and can be a real threat once the counters build up though it normally ends up trading for a more expensive creature. An honourable mention goes to the rare [Ishi-Ishi](#), [Akki Crackshot](#) as there is rarely a more annoying creature to have

on the board when you are the defensive player as it is often an unstoppable two damage every other turn or so.

Relative to the large number of 3-drops in *Champions*, the *Betrayers* 3-slot is surprisingly empty. But the ones that do exist are aggressive. [Shinka Gatekeeper](#) is almost useless defensively while [Ogre Marauder](#) is nearly unstoppable on the attack. Both [Gnarled Mass](#) and [Takenuma Bleeder](#) bring significant power and toughness to the table at a reasonable price. And [Waxmane Baku](#) has raised a buzz not so much for being a generic 2/2 for three mana, but for the very aggressive tapping ability that can quickly end games. Playing a second Waxmane on turn four is often an auto-win if you're holding a few additional spirits or arcane.

At the high end we have [Scourge of the Numai](#) (4/4) and [Ogre Recluse](#) (5/4!), each for four mana. While losing two life a turn can be a significant issue for the defensive player, the aggressive player should find it irrelevant. And [Ogre Recluse](#) may occasionally find itself tapped in the beginning of combat phase, but more often than not it will be coming in for five. These two creatures are models of aggression – beneficial for attackers, not so good for defenders.

The five flip cards make for excellent aggressive creatures if they can be flipped. The black, green and red one work as finishers, the blue one maintains board control and the white one evades and provides favourable combat situations, the main issue being that many of the most aggressive creatures aren't spirits so it can be difficult to trigger them.

It appears that efficient aggressive creatures exist, but they are more spread along the mana curve. More specifically, the higher end creatures are getting better while the lower end is dropping in quality.

2) Efficient High Toughness Creatures



The defining numbers for high toughness creatures are toughness of 3 for two mana or less and 4 for four mana or less. And a bit of power helps too.

Despite my earlier worry of a cycle of cheap defensive creatures for two mana, it appears the cycle was limited to just two – [Kaijin of the Vanishing](#) touch (0/3) and [Tallowisp](#) (1/3). [Loam Dweller](#) is in

the same cycle but at 2/2 but is an extremely aggressive creature. There is also the extremely effective and common [Traproot Kami](#) for only a single green mana. Luckily the Kaijin and Traproot have 0 power so attacking creatures will survive combat, but against the Kaijin they will survive back in your hand, which is definitely a tempo setback. The Traproot even hinders evasion by blocking fliers and in the late game can grow to sufficient size that no creature can get by it. Relative to *Champions*, with absolutely no cheap defensive creatures, *Betrayers* is not looking so good in this category.

In the mid-level range of creatures, *Champions* only had four creatures with a toughness of four and *Betrayers* matches that despite the set being just over half the size. At the low end are the 1/4s with [Moonlit Strider](#) and [Soratami Mindsweeper](#) (also a flier). From there you move to [Sakura-Tribe Springcaller](#) (2/4) and [Indebted Samurai](#) (which only has a toughness of 3 but it is effectively 4 in combat). [Scourge of Numai](#) and [Ogre Recluse](#) are so good that they come with drawbacks and as mentioned earlier these drawbacks make them weak on defense.

[Genju of the Cedars](#) and [Fields](#) are both very efficient at 2/5 and 4/4 for three mana but keeping that mana available in the early game is rarely an option without impeding board development. [Callow Jushi](#) and [Faithful Squire](#) are both 3/4 when flipped but that generally can't be counted on until at least two turns after they're put into play making them an investment on turn three that may be too costly to afford.

Though it's rare, a special mention has to go to [Opal Eye, Konda's Yojimbo](#). It's a 1/4 with bushido 1 for only three mana that can prevent lots of damage. Opal Eye is the card an aggressive player least wants to see as it will require an answer immediately or else the game is lost.

Overall, defensive creatures are back in this expansion. In comparison *Darksteel*, the previous first expansion set, only had [Spincrusher](#) in the cheap range, [Nim Abomination](#) (hardly defensive) in the middle, and [Karstoderm](#) and [Vulshok War Boar](#) at the high end though affinity always makes it difficult to exactly define creature costs.

3) Large Creatures



Efficient large creatures make efficient small creatures a lot less useful. In *Champions* I noted that there was no efficient 5 casting cost creature and in particular, the green 4/4 for five mana, a staple for many, many years, was missing.

Well, it's been found.

[Fork-Branched Garamai](#) is a very imposing creature to have to get around and even if you succeed in taking it down, two creatures will often rise up and take its place. This is similar to [Genju of the Cedars](#), another 4/4 that keeps coming back no matter how many times you kill it.

But why spend five mana for a 4/4 when you can only spend four? [Scourge of Numai](#) and [Ogre Recluse](#) are both extremely cheap though again, not the best defensively. But their mere existence indicates that larger creatures will be making trouble – you don't want to find out on turn four that suddenly you're the defender not the aggressor. Similarly [Frost Ogre](#) is holding a very big club though with only three toughness he's apparently a bit vulnerable around the ankles.

Slightly smaller are [Takenuma Bleeder](#) and [Gnarled Mass](#), 3/3 creatures for three mana as well as the various flip cards, though once again, they aren't always reliable.

And the rares are finally living up to legendary status by being really, really big with eight to ten rare creatures of giant size, though surprisingly they're mostly in black not green.

Both [Iwamori](#) and [Yukora](#) are 5/5s for four mana though they do come with potentially significant drawbacks – [Yukora](#) should almost always be warming the bench against blue mages.

In essence, big creatures are going to be a problem. This means that evasion and finishers are at an even higher premium as are [banishing type effects](#) and the powerful [Torrent of Stone](#).

4) Healers

An additional set of creatures to watch for is healers. Hardly worthy of mention in *Champions* with the over-priced [Kitsune Healer](#) as the only example, efficient recurring damage prevention can go a long way to defeating aggression as it messes with evasion, tricks and combat in general. Betrayers has the [Split-Tail Miko](#) and [Kitsune Palliator](#) providing aid to the wounded and both are quite playable. While the one white mana activation cost of the Miko keeps it from being *too* good, preventing two damage at a time is an incredibly powerful ability that has never been seen before on a two-mana creature. The Palliator is another interesting design as its effects are more equal, but overall it prolongs games and favours the defender.

So from a creature perspective, it looks like aggression is going to have a rough time of it. While possibilities exist, most of the defensive holes in *Champions* look like they're getting patched up. The one saving grace is that many of the good defensive creatures are also good aggressive creatures so you'll be evenly matched. Every [Gnarled Mass](#) you draft is one less you have to fight through!

Aggressive Tone

The tone of an environment can often be determined by looking at the mechanics, themes and cycles of the set or block. Shadow is an aggressive mechanic, Buyback is not. Blocks with lots of cheap counterspells or expensive creatures are not aggressive. Historically, most environments are defensive or neutral.

In *Champions*, one only had to look at bushido and the wide availability of finishers to see that it lent itself to aggressive play. Combined with the lack of walls and cheap regeneration, *Champions* was a

set ripe for attacking creatures. While Wizards won't tell you how to draft, it does provide the tools. So we need to ask, "Does *Betrayers* have aggressive tools?"

1) *Bushido and Samurai*

Champions has a dozen playable common and uncommon creatures with bushido. *Betrayers* has two – [Indebted Samurai](#) and [Ronin Clifffrider](#)– and neither are cheap.

2) *Defender (Walls)*

Champions may have been the first set since *Arabian Nights* to not have a wall in it, but *Betrayers* will not be the second. There are three very efficient walls – [Traproot Kami](#), [Kaijin of the Vanishing Touch](#) and the rare [Opal-Eye, Konda's Yojimbo](#). While none of them have the power of [Wall of Spears](#) to actually kill attackers, they still present an annoyance to the aggressive-minded player who has slapped down a [Kami of Ancient Law](#) and [Waxmane Baku](#) on turns two and three.

3) *Regeneration*

Regeneration is still nowhere to be seen. While the rare [Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni](#) and [Isao, Enlightened Bushi](#) have two-mana regeneration, there is no creature in the common or uncommon slots that will survive a battle unscathed. [Blessing of Leeches](#) is a poor [Serpent Skin](#) that can quickly become too costly, especially for a defensive player. As Wizards has indicated, creature combat and interaction is being encouraged and reducing regeneration is a step in that direction.

4) *Finishers*

[Toils of Night and Day](#) is a bad [Unearthly Blizzard](#) in the wrong colour, and [Unearthly Blizzard](#) wasn't that popular in the first place. Now with one less pack to draft from, Toils may see some play if only to get Ninja through. [Minamo Sightbender](#), a much-improved [Crafty Pathmage](#), is also in blue and very effective. There are very few finishers in *Betrayers*, likely due to the great number of them in *Champions*.

5) *Hand Destruction*



Not quite a resume for beatdown.



The level of hand destruction in a set or block, especially recurring hand destruction, can strongly influence how you build your decks. Sire of Storms won't generate much card advantage if you have to discard it on turn five. The Kamigawa block has a whopping **nine** discard effects that I've played at least once, including three recurring effects in [Nezumi Shortfang](#), [Honden of Night's Reach](#) and the very effective [Okiba-Gang Shinobi](#) from *Betrayers*. Granted Nezumi is rare, and several others shouldn't make the cut for most decks, but no one wants to lose a match to [Waking Nightmare](#). No other block has had so many playable ways of forcing discard, a sign that aggression is the optimal choice.

6) Mana Fixing

One of the many benefits of playing an aggressive deck is the ability to take advantage of an opponent that is having trouble with their mana. Naturally, blocks that have plenty of mana-fixers or mana acceleration are less inclined towards aggression. The dual-lands in *Champions* that remain tapped for an additional turn are very poor mana fixers that cost you time, a resource the defensive player doesn't have. There are also no Myr or Talismans or even Cycling or cheap cantrips (except for [Reach Through Mists](#)) that can turn spells into land. *Betrayers* is the same – mana issues will continue to be a problem for everyone, to the advantage of the aggressive player.

7) Ninjutsu

Ninjutsu is a complicated mechanic to analyze. At first it seems aggressive, as the ninjutsu cost is always lower than the actual cost. But if you're returning a four-mana creature to save one or two mana on casting cost then you're actually losing tempo, especially if the ninja was overpriced to begin with. In theory, the benefit of hitting with the ninja is worth it, but since several of the ninja aren't likely to hit again you have to measure whether the additional mana was worth the effect. And what if you can't activate the ninjutsu ability? It is very demoralizing to pay $2\black$ for a 1/1 that chump blocks.

The black ninja as a group tend to be very efficient creatures or have abilities that make them worth it without the ninjutsu ability. They should all be played whenever possible and are okay even when the

full cost is paid. If given a choice between a black and blue ninja, it's generally better to take the black one.

The blue ninja are a bit trickier mostly because blue evasion creatures are so expensive that it is very costly to return them to hand. And the ninjas are so weak that it is rarely worth it to pay full value for them as they aren't likely to get through for damage. If you can get early creatures down and hitting or somehow generate recurring evasion, the blue ninja are very good, though still not as good as the black ones. [Mistblade Shinobi](#) in particular has a tendency to sit useless in hand and I would hesitate before including two of them. They even prevent damage to an opponent, as they tend to replace creatures with higher power.

In an all-out aggressive deck using cheap creatures that no one wants to block such as [Goblin Cohorts](#), [Battle-Mad Ronin](#) and Zuber, ninja are excellent aggressive cards. Otherwise they don't tend to favour either philosophy.

8) "Flip" Cards

[Hired Muscle](#), [Callow Jushi](#), [Budoka Pupil](#), [Cunning Bandit](#) and [Faithful Squire](#) are another example of cards that challenge the deck-builder. By themselves they are generic 2/2 creatures for three mana with onerous colour requirements, hardly worth including in any deck, let alone an aggressive deck. But if your deck can properly take advantage of their flip condition they become powerful threats capable of taking over a game. As mentioned above, the black, green and red ones work as finishers, the blue one maintains board control and the white one evades and provides favourable combat situations.

In general the flip cards are more aggressive than defensive as some of the abilities (notably fear and taking control of a creature) are best used offensively. But many of the most aggressive creatures aren't spirits so it can be difficult to trigger the flip. As with the ninja, it's important to know your deck and draft them where appropriate.

9) Genju



Again we have a mechanic that is not easily definable in relation to tempo. A 6/1 Mountain for two mana seems like a very aggressive card but if you're activating [Genju of the Spires](#) on turn three then you're not developing your board position. The 6/1 Mountain also trades with almost anything. A [4/4 Forest](#), on the other hand, makes for an excellent finisher as does a [3/2 flying Island](#). Aggressive decks often have a problem in the late game where they have lots of land but nothing to do with it but play increasingly ineffective 2/2 creatures. The Genju allow you to make use of that additional mana. Defensively the Genju suffer in that they're too mana-intensive in the early game. But if you can make it to a point where mana is available, a Genju drastically improves your board position. An important consideration is [Genju of the Fields](#), which can quickly turn around a losing position with a few activations. Not everyone realizes that you can activate the ability multiple times and gain additional life making every combat situation very beneficial. As Genju are very difficult to repeatedly defend against, they are generally aggressive, though as the game progresses this becomes less relevant.

10) Equipment

Except for [Shuriken](#), the uncommon equipment in *Betrayers* ([Blinding Powder](#), [Ronin Warclub](#) and [Shuko](#)) definitely lend themselves to aggression. The equip costs are low and they all make attacking better. [Blinding Powder](#) seems defensive, and it can be very effective that way, but is best used on a creature with high power as it essentially provides infinite toughness. [Ronin Warclub](#) is an excellent way to make small guys bigger, especially in the late game, and [Shuko](#), while perhaps not making the cut in a deck with big creatures, can provide a substantial boost to little guys. [Shuriken](#) in a ninja deck is just good. In an aggressive deck it tends to be too slow and you don't want to be giving your opponent the ability to destroy your creatures by activating it the regular way.

11) Ogres and Demons

A theme that is a bit harder to notice in *Betrayers* is the increase in the number of Ogre and Demon cards. This is important in that not only are ogres and demons in aggressive colours (red and black), but they also tend to be large under-priced creatures with drawbacks, which is good for aggressive

decks. The more ogres and demons there are, the more likely the drawback can be avoided and cheap 5/4 and 5/5 creatures can be sent into the red zone.

Betrayers has five playable common and uncommon ogres and one very frightening demon. *Champions* really only had three ogres you wanted to play maindeck so this aggressive archetype is suddenly much more powerful.

There are mixed signals with respect to the post-*Betrayers* environment. The themes of the block – discard, equipment, mana-fixing and ogres – lend themselves to aggression though the lack of finishers is troubling. The Genju and flip cards are just powerful and don't favour either strategy. The mechanics are starting to drift towards defense. While not as dire a situation as the creature issue, *Betrayers* does seem to be pulling back a bit from aggression, though not so far that it's unusable. Essentially, from a highly favourable position, aggression has now been reduced to merely favourable.

How Do You Draft It?

Having read all the evidence for and against aggression in *Betrayers*, you've decided to stick with it. Now what? All the same rules for drafting aggression stay the same, there are just some tweaks that should be made to take into account Betrayer's specific nature.

Now what?

First the general rules of dealing with any new set – what themes will and will not work anymore?

The zuber deck is already dead and with no new zuber in *Betrayers* it certainly won't be making a comeback. There is one less pack of Hondens so that deck is in trouble as well. Aggressive white-red samurai decks have taken a beating and should probably be avoided – [Call to Glory](#) will slink back to the sideboard. [Dampen Thought](#) decks may switch to using [Ire of Kaminari](#) and could benefit from the greater availability of defensive cards, though with only three non-rare blue arcane spells under five mana, it could be tougher to find the right tools.

But ogres are back! There is definitely a benefit to keeping an eye out for ogres and demons in the first pack knowing you'll likely find what you need in the third pack. Just be wary of casting costs as the best demons and ogres tend to be a bit expensive.

Ninjutsu should always be taken into account when drafting black or blue in the first two packs. Evasion should be taken at a premium – [Soratami Mirror-Guard](#) has become an even more valuable pick (and threat) and begins to approach [Teller of Tales](#) in value if ninja are anticipated. Even [Floodbringer](#) is a playable card in a ninja-heavy deck. There are very few consistent sources of evasion in *Betrayers* so if you have nothing that will get a creature through by the time you're looking at blue ninja, you may want to pass them along. You also want to be heavily invested in small creatures – a green/blue ninja deck could be a bit of a challenge. Flip cards will require some math on your part. You'll definitely want around ten spirit and arcane spells to help assure a flip within the first six turns and at least twelve for two of them, fourteen if they're in different colours due to the mana requirements. Three colour decks have to be very wary –

you don't want to splash [Cunning Bandit](#). And make sure you have enough spirits going into the *Betrayers* pack. There are only a few playable non-rare spirits and arcane in black and blue, for example, so if you don't have lots of spirits already it's unlikely that you'll find what you need. Remember that flip cards that don't flip should not be good enough to make your deck so don't waste valuable picks on cards that won't help you.

Genju should be drafted where appropriate and available, though the black and white ones are a bit slow. The biggest concern is playing against them, as you don't want to knock your opponent to four life only to have your hard work reversed. It's an excellent idea to make sure you have at least one sideboard answer to Genju. There are lots of options in *Betrayers* except in black, which will even have trouble knocking Genju out of an opponent's hand since they're so cheap (unless of course an opponent is foolish enough to let their land be [Eradicated](#)). In blue you have [Floodbringer](#) and [Quillmane Baku](#) along with whatever standard bounce might be effective. Green and white each have enchantment removal as well as [Uproot](#), [Rootrunner](#), [Otherworldly Journey](#) and [Reciprocate](#). If desperate, red has [Kumano's Blessing](#) though it is better off trying to use a [Frostwielder](#) or [Yamabushi's Flame](#). The point is that there are lots of not-so-obvious ways to deal with the problem that can be easily overlooked in the frustration of losing to an unstoppable 4/4 Forest.

As noted earlier, there are very few finishers in *Betrayers*. This greatly increases their value in the first two packs. You still don't want to be taking [Kami of the Waning Moon](#) as a third pick in the first pack, but if you're a couple of picks into the second pack and still don't have any way of getting those last points through, it's probably a good time to suck it up. Most finishers are getting picked fairly high these days anyway so if you're left out in the cold you may find that [Unearthly Blizzard](#) is now a bit more playable or even [Terashi's Cry](#) or [Toils of Night and Day](#).

There are lots of not-so-obvious ways to deal with the problem that can be easily overlooked in the frustration of losing to an unstoppable 4/4 Forest.

One of the key things to note about *Betrayers* is the excess of quality five casting cost and higher spells. Since you only want four five-to-six casting cost spells in your deck, you have to make sure you don't waste them in the first two packs since they're so readily available in the third one. What this means is that you have to raise the bar on expensive spells in the first two packs. As a 2/3 flier with massive card advantage, [Soratami Seer](#) seems like it should always make the cut (and probably would in other blocks). But it's competing against [Teller of Tales](#), [Sire of the Storm](#), [Petals of Insight](#), [Honden of the Seeing Wind](#) and [Jetting Glasskite](#) and that doesn't even take into account a second colour. And by the third pack colours should be better defined among the drafters so it is more likely that expensive rare spells will make it through. White has a similar problem with [Hundred-Talon Kami](#), [Kami of the Painted Road](#), [Innocence Kami](#), [Kami of the Palace](#), [Kami of the Honored Dead](#), and [Kami of the Tattered Shoji](#) all costing five mana or more – [Silverstorm Samurai](#) should never be seeing play. Red, on the other hand, greatly benefits from this as [Frost Ogre](#) perfectly fills the previously lacking role of high casting cost finisher, not to mention the thrill of slapping down an [Ashen Monstrosity](#) and swinging for seven.



This 3-0 deck is a bit expensive and has excellent end game bombs in [Fumiko](#) and [Yosei](#), hence the defensive [Kami of Old Stone](#) to buy time. In the sideboard there are six playable red and white spells costing five mana or more. Despite only having three spells that expensive maindeck, the excess of 4-drops meant I needed to cut down higher up.

There is also a lack of 3-drops in [Betrayers](#) and that melds perfectly with the excess of 3-drops in [Champions](#). But you have to make sure you're taking advantage of it. Don't pick expensive spells in [Champions](#) in hopes of balancing your curve in the third pack – there are only three common three casting cost creatures in [Betrayers](#) and they're all taken quite early. But you can now safely draft an unbalanced amount of 3-drops in [Champions](#) knowing that it will even out in the third pack.

Conclusion

While it doesn't look like I'll be drafting [Kami of Lunacy](#) any time soon, it does look like it won't be quite as easy to succeed with an aggressive deck. Drafting just one set is always easier than multiple sets because of the consistency and availability. You have more time to recover from mistakes and fill holes as you can generally get your finisher or cheap creatures in the third pack if you want to but now you have to get them early. With a new set in pack three you also have the unknown factor where you may draft ogres only to open and get passed ninja and there's nothing you can do about it.

So not only is the drafting itself harder, drafting aggression is more difficult. The environment is still better than previous blocks for aggressive decks, but not so good as [Champions](#)-only. The ability to draft a synergistic deck with few holes will become incredibly important and determine whether you fail or succeed. Note the various aggressive cards I've mentioned and aim to get as many as possible.

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I suspect what is likely to happen is that big creatures and flyers will become more relevant. Drafting early aggression is still important to maintain balance or establish an early lead, but it will come down to the big creatures later on or fliers with quality ground defense. With only [River Kajin](#) in *Champions*, blue was having a rough time but I expect it to return to prominence. As the aggressive player you need to concentrate on evasion and good follow-up to your early aggression. Take advantage of any hiccups in mana, attack your opponent's hand, and use tricks and equipment to get through cheap defensive creatures.



This 2-1 deck is a mixture of aggression and defense. Early on the [Ronin Houndmaster](#) will often be staying home to block with the [River Kajin](#) but the extra time that buys allows me to win through the air or trigger the two flip cards. Unfortunately the deck is a little too at odds with itself and lost in the finals of the draft as it can't handle late game big creatures.

And if all else fails, you can always switch to a more defensive deck. Sometimes aggressive cards won't come to you and you'll be forced to pick up some defense. If you're getting lots of fliers and kill spells then start taking those [River Kajin](#) and [Kajin of the Vanishing Touch](#) so you can survive long enough to use them. A quality control deck with a good early game is the best option against aggression even if it is a bit frustrating to only be able to attack for one when your opponent misses a land drop.

Thanks for reading – I look forward to hearing from you both in the forums and from the email link below. Good luck!

I'd like to thank everyone who responded to my last article with comments and condolences. I'd also like to apologize as I normally respond to all email but as might be expected, found myself a bit occupied. As the reigning Limited GP Detroit Champion I look forward to defending my title in April and hope that I don't end up losing to my own advice.