

A Drafting Dilemma

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Tuesday, April 12, 2005

Editor's note: Regular columnist Scott Wills is taking a three-week break for his wedding and honeymoon. In the interim, Matthew Vienneau will be filling in on Limited Information.

Welcome back to week two of my stint as guest host! While I could go on about my adventures in Costa Rica last week zipping through the rainforest attached to a thin wire 50 feet above foaming rapids, you're not here for that, you're here to read about **Magic!**

The Qualifiers

Last week I suggested people check out the Top 8 decks from recent Pro Tour London qualifiers. I've got a good six pages of ideas and conclusions but unfortunately I don't have the space to include them this week due to the complexity of the draft choices review. Next week I promise to include charts and statistics that may just change how you draft!

The Draft

It was late at night and you had foolishly begun an online draft while not at your mental best. The first pack of a *Champions-Champions-Betrayers* Booster Draft was full of good cards and you were forced choose just one card from the following options:





The forums were alive with discussion as more than a hundred people offered the reasoning behind their draft choice. Some of it was very insightful and I encourage everyone who wants to learn more about drafting to read what was said, in particular the comments by MT_Gunn who made multiple posts explaining the various aspects of this decision.

What makes this pack so interesting is the large number of quality cards to select from, and what sort of signals that sends to your downstream neighbour (the player on your left). You always prefer that the players to your left not share colours with you as you don't want them taking the best cards out of the second round of packs before you can get your hands on them. The larger the buffer between

you and the next player playing one of your colours, the better. The worst-case scenarios are having a player beside you playing the exact same colour combination or having three players in a row playing the same colour.

It's also important to realize that signalling isn't everything. You don't want to continually pass better cards to your neighbours just to avoid fighting with them for a colour. And some cards are good enough that it's worth fighting for them.

Before you can worry about signalling, however, you need to have a good grasp of what cards are never playable, occasionally playable and always playable. Within the always playable group you also need to be able to distinguish which cards are first picks (rarely available after the first three packs) and which cards can be picked up later. Picking the second or third best card in a colour will send a very confusing signal. Various set reviews and online articles are helpful in determining the value of cards as well as your own experience.

Note that at different times, different cards fluctuate in value. If you have no removal, Reciprocate may become more important. If you have no three-drops, Kami of the Hunt may turn into a "must-have." But since this is the first pick of the first pack, we don't have to think about such things yet.

Never Playable – *Quiet Purity, Ragged Veins, Student of Elements*

Quiet Purity is a card that should never make your main deck unless you've passed half a dozen Hondens and Cage of Hands and want to be ready for them in the first game. You only have three chances in a draft to first-pick whatever card you want from a pack and it just isn't worth it to select a card that should start in your sideboard and may never be played.

Ragged Veins is very similar. While useful in decks based around Kitsune Mystic or as a sideboard card against decks filled with Kami of Old Stone and Traproot Kamis, these are very specialized situations and not worthy of a first pick. Your first pick should be one of the best cards in your deck, a card that will automatically see play if you end up in that colour.

Either of those two cards can be passed because they'll definitely come back around, especially with three much better black and white cards in the pack.

Student of Elements is a "trick" card – a card that looks like it has potential but really shouldn't ever see play. While flipping up Tobita, Master of Winds is very, very good, only three cards in the block will actually allow you to do that – Lifted by Clouds, Phantom Wings or Guardian of Solitude. Lifted by Clouds is unplayable and the other two are deck-dependent as most quality blue creatures already fly. The even more critical factor is that Student of Elements by itself is a horrible card – a 1/1 creature for 1U. Playing one bad card (the Student) in hopes of triggering a very good card (Tobita) can sometimes be worth it, but playing a bad card and another bad or marginal card is too expensive a price to pay.

If you don't draw the "combo" you have essentially thrown away one or more cards. It's not enough to just have one Ghostly Wings, you need to have at least two ways in your deck to make the Student fly (and three is better). And there's still no guarantee you'll draw the Student before using the Wings on something else or having the Guardian killed. The only time Student of Elements shouldn't be in the sideboard is if the game is going to go long and result in ground stall so that you'll have time to get the combo and suddenly use it to win. This doesn't happen even close to often enough to make this a first pick.

Occasionally Playable – *Soul of Magma, Ember-Fist Zubera, Counsel of the Soratami*

These are cards you don't want to play if you don't have to though they fit well in specialized decks. While it's certainly not the end of the world to play these cards, you'll know your deck is good if you can keep these guys in the sideboard. Soul of Magma is too expensive and too small – it is rarely as good as Frostwielder yet costs one more mana. For five mana you can easily get bigger creatures with a greater affect on the game – I'd much rather face a Soul of Magma than a Frost Ogre. If you have space in your 5-slot then it's okay, but I hope I never do.

Ember-Fist Zuberia is very popular and can definitely be justified in decks that can sacrifice it for some sort of advantage or as an early blocker against fast decks. But now that Betrayers is out, the fast decks aren't hitting as hard and the creatures are a bit bigger so the one point of damage often goes to waste.

Counsel of the Soratami would be very good in most formats, such as *8th Edition* where it compares favourably to Inspiration. But in the *Kamigawa* Block, there always seems to be better card drawers available – such as Petals of Insight, Honden of Seeing Winds, Jushi Apprentice, Soratami Seer and Azami, to name a few. You often lack creatures, not spells, in a blue deck and it's not even arcane so it tends to get cut if things are going well.

Always Playable (Late Picks) – *Kami of the Hunt, Burr Grafter, Gibbering Kami, Mothrider Samurai*

Each of these creatures is a very solid card that anyone should be happy to have in their deck. But they're not the types of cards that make your heart race or put a goofy smile on your face. Spending four mana for only two points of power and toughness is reasonable but not amazing, even with the extra abilities. These cards will not likely win you the game by themselves.

The Kami of the Hunt is one mana cheaper but lacks a really dominant ability. When you're tapped out it's a very mundane 2/2 for three mana, and even when you have the spirits (or better yet, instant arcane spells) it's not a bomb, just "good." One significant advantage of the Kami is that it only costs three mana in a colour that lacks creatures at that price. But it's a bit too early in the draft to start filling holes, though it's good to always keep it in mind.

A general rule for measuring the strength of a card is to think of a comparably costed spell that was significantly better. If one exists, then this probably isn't a tier-one kind of card (though anyone comparing Reach Through Mists to Ancestral Recall is probably taking things too far). Mothrider Samurai is no Nagao and Kami of the Hunt often struggles to be a Gnarled Mass. Nantuko Disciple from *8th Edition* is an "early pick" version of Burr Grafter while Abyssal Specter demonstrates the top end for 4-mana black fliers.

Always Playable (Early Picks) – *Kabuto Moth, Nezumi Cutthroat, He Who Hungers, Kashi-Tribe Reaver, Reciprocate*

Here's where people start arguing. Is Reciprocate better than Kabuto Moth? Would you rather pick He Who Hungers or Nezumi Cutthroat? How can Kashi-Tribe Reaver possibly be in the same company as the Moth?

There are two things we need to determine – which cards are best overall, and which cards are best in each available colour (in case we need to pick an inferior colour for signaling reasons).

The Kashi-Tribe Reaver is the only green card among our early picks. It's difficult to kill, has an appropriate power and can't be continually chump-blocked due to its snakebite ability. It doesn't have the impact of the Moth or the speed of the Cutthroat, but it's a very efficient and hard-to-deal-with creature. Being green makes it less desirable because green is not a flexible colour, so it generally ranks below the Cutthroat and Moth.

Among the white cards, Kabuto Moth is generally accepted to be the better card. Reciprocate is a one-for-one card exchange where your opponent's creature hits you first. Spending five life to remove Moss Kami from the game really hurts. The single-mana casting cost is great for tempo but it's also reactive, making it less useful than other removal spells against such things as Nezumi Graverobber or Innocence Kami.

Kabuto Moth, on the other hand, makes all aspects of combat difficult unless your opponent's creatures are much, much larger. As was said in the forums, it's like playing Indomitable Will every turn! Your creatures deal more damage, are harder to kill and the mere threat of Moth activation often allows you to get through un-blocked. The Moth negates almost all of the red kill spells and can block most fliers and survive. The Moth is reasonably costed at three mana, has flying, a toughness greater than one (not so vulnerable) and the ability costs nothing to activate (which is extremely important). The Moth is likely the best common in the set next to Glacial Ray; something that I have to admit, I didn't realize until just recently, likely due to white being so overdrafted that it's difficult to win even with a Moth because your deck is so thin.

The black decision is difficult. The early tempo and late-game evasion of the Cutthroat makes it very effective but it's also extremely vulnerable and sub-par against other black decks. Its value has also dropped with the availability of Frostling and First Volley in *Betrayers*. He Who Hungers is a bit slow at five mana -- if it were a 3/2 flier for four mana there would be no question, and even 3/3 for five mana would get me more interested. The sacrificing spirits ability rarely comes into play after the first few turns as opponents won't have many cards in hand that are worth sacrificing board position to get at (you can only use the ability as a sorcery). Soulshift 4 is much rarer than Soulshift 3 but this is only really significant when combined with green and its numerous four-mana spirits. But it is a flier, and black lacks quality fliers.

It comes down to personal preference and style of play. My brain says take the Cutthroat, my gut tells me He Who Hungers and as many people will gleefully tell you, I rarely listen to my brain. Note also that He Who Hungers is a rare card and this is an online draft, so even if we don't take it, it will likely go higher than it should just because of rarity. It's critical to always consider your environment when making draft decisions as you'll see below under "The Risks of Signaling."

Signaling

Having decided which cards are worth picking and among them, which are the best in each colour, we now have to look beyond the immediate pack and determine what signals we are sending with each pick. Do we take the best card overall (likely the Moth) or will everyone downstream end up in white so it's better to take a card in another colour?

The first thing to notice is that there are no good blue or red cards in this pack. Does this mean we should take a blue or red card because we know that the next eight picks will be black, white or green so we'll have the colour all to ourselves? Definitely not. Remember, signaling isn't so important that it's worth sacrificing an always playable early pick for an occasionally playable card. While you definitely want to make blue or red your second colour, that's already being signaled in this pack so you want to take advantage of the many good cards in this pack to improve your deck. With your second and subsequent picks, you can decide whether blue or red is available and how best to indicate that downstream.

So that leaves us with black, white or green. Let's go through each card and see if we can guess what the subsequent picks out of the pack will be based on the signals we send with our pick:

Our Pick: Kabuto Moth

- 2) Any
- 3) Any
- 4) Any

With a common card having been picked (the Moth) and a Nezumi Cutthroat still available, the next draft of this pack will likely see that black is open, especially with so many good black cards available. Of course, with two white cards remaining they may well think you took Glacial Ray or Teller of Tales and grab the Reciprocate so they don't have to fight for black with the people next to them, or even the Reaver to stay out of trouble altogether. The next two players face the same dilemma so we're left with very little to go on. Best case is the two black cards are taken followed by a green card; the worst case is two white cards followed by a black one. That's a pretty wide range of options and tells us nothing.

Our Pick: Nezumi Cutthroat

- 2) Moth or He Who Hungers
- 3) Moth (if available) or any of He Who Hungers, Reciprocate or Kashi-Tribe-Reaver
- 4) Any

By taking a common card you have clearly indicated that you're not playing white because there is no better white common than the Moth. However, player two may still take He Who Hungers so they don't have to fight for white downstream. There's always a risk that when passing along a problem pick, the next player may do the same.

The third player should definitely take the Moth if available, though he may also worry about passing two good white cards. But it's likely that the two players in front of him aren't playing white and that's more important. If the Moth were picked, there are two common cards missing that are better than the two uncommons and the rare. That means it probably wasn't green so the Reaver is safe to pick, but the black and white cards are sufficiently good that they might be taken as well. The fourth player faces the same decision. As you can see, signaling isn't always a precise art.

Our Pick: Reciprocate

- 2) Moth or black card
- 3) Moth (if available) or black card or Mothrider Samurai
- 4) Any

By taking the Reciprocate you're taking a worse white card and still risk the next two players playing white. Player two may take the Moth (assuming the next two players will take the black cards), and then player three may take the Samurai with the same assumption. More than likely the Moth will go second and one of the black cards will go third. By the fourth pack everything is wide open, although the remaining black card is likely to be selected.

Our Pick: Kashi-Tribe Reaver

- 2) black or white card
- 3) black or white card
- 4) black or white card

With so many good white and black cards it's hard to imagine any of the next three players taking a different colour spell unless they opened or were passed something excellent in green. This gives you an excellent buffer in the second pack while also putting the next few players in conflict which may force them to switch colours and waste their early pick.

In addition (and this also applies to the Reciprocate pick), many players have access to the *Champions* uncommon print run (remember, we're playing online) so by taking an uncommon you may well tell the player next to you exactly what you took, which can be a significant advantage. Unfortunately this only works for the uncommons as the common print run is a bit more difficult to use and not as reliable.

Our Pick: He Who Hungers

- 2) Moth or Cutthroat
- 3) Moth or Cutthroat
- 4) Reaver or Reciprocate

By taking a rare card, you have given no indication what colour you've picked though many players would be surprised if it were black or white, given how many black and white cards are still in the pack. The Moth and the Cutthroat are both generally better than the Reaver -- especially with people trying to avoid green -- so they both should be selected first. By the fourth pick, the Reaver is looking as good as taking Reciprocate, and leaving the Samurai risks being interpreted as a signal to the fifth player to go into white.

The Risks of Signaling

In all the scenarios but the first one, it is possible for the Reaver to be picked immediately just so the player can avoid the tangle of black and white cards. The assumption we're using is that players are trying to avoid green and that the Cutthroat, Moth and potentially He Who Hungers are better cards.

It is exactly that sort of assumption that makes much of this sort of analysis difficult. All of this theorizing assumes that every player is objective and has correct card valuations. But in reality, many players prefer one colour or archetype to another or have irrational card preferences. Some ignore signals altogether, some incorrectly interpret them, others are rare-drafting or refuse to play damage prevention or love Zubera or whatever. While I've included all this discussion as an example of what to be looking for and what to consider, the signaling situation for this particular pack can be summed up as follows:

- If I take the Reaver, I know the next three players are unlikely to be playing green.
- If I take a black or white card, it is very likely I will share a colour with one if not two of the next three players or four players.

So does that mean you should take the Reaver? Not always. The comparative power of the cards needs to be determined. If you feel the Moth, Cutthroat or legendary spirit are sufficiently better than playing green and the Reaver that it's worth sharing black or white in pack two, you should do it. Signaling is a tool that can be very helpful with certain packs but it's never something you should sacrifice your draft to accomplish.

I checked with some local pros and former pros to see what their take on this pack was and they all agreed – Kabuto Moth was the card to take despite the signalling issues. A common sentiment that was shared in email and on the forums – “Kabuto Moth is so good I don't care if the guy beside me takes white!”

So what did the readers decide?

Which card do you draft?		
Kabuto Moth	3250	29.1%
Nezumi Cutthroat	2102	18.8%
Reciprocate	1326	11.9%
Kashi-Tribe Reaver	1215	10.9%
He Who Hungers	1013	9.1%
Kami of the Hunt	441	3.9%
Mothrider Samurai	409	3.7%

Student of Elements	355	3.2%
Counsel of the Soratami	317	2.8%
Ember-Fist Zuberu	244	2.2%
Ragged Veins	173	1.5%
Soul of Magma	138	1.2%
Burr Grafter	90	0.8%
Gibbering Kami	61	0.5%
Quiet Purity	40	0.4%
Total	11174	100.0%

It's good to see that the majority of readers realize which five cards are the best. It's a bit concerning to see how many people value Reciprocate over the Moth, but I suspect that relates to the more subtle affect of the Moth making it difficult to appreciate. My indecision on He Who Hungers versus Nezumi Cutthroat seems to have been resolved – people prefer the Cutthroat. And the Reaver doesn't get any respect, as everyone likes to pick on the green cards.

What happened in the actual draft? For that, you'll have to come back next week because I don't want to spoil the surprise before you pick from the second pack of the very same draft...

Next Week

It was late at night and you had foolishly begun an online draft while not at your mental best. The first pack of a *Champions-Champions-Betrayers* Booster Draft was full of good cards and after much agonizing you finally picked **one** of the five following cards:

- Kabuto Moth
- Nezumi Cutthroat
- Reciprocate
- Kashi-Tribe Reaver
- He Who Hungers

The next pack is passed and you practically fall out of your chair in shock when you see it!

We're doing something new this week. There are five polls on what to pick from this pack, one for each of the five most popular first picks from last week. You can answer all five or just answer the one that matches your original pick (if it's on the list) or your corrected pick (if after reading the article you want to change your mind). As the forums and emails I received were very helpful while writing this column I'd like to ask everyone to once again explain their pick in the forums or email me directly.

If you picked Kabuto Moth in pack one, what would be your next pick?	If you picked Reciprocate in pack one, what would be your next pick?	If you picked Nezumi Cutthroat in pack one, what would be your next pick?
Uyo, Silent	Uyo, Silent	Uyo, Silent
ProphetJade IdolKami of the Palace FieldsHideous	ProphetJade IdolKami of the Palace FieldsHideous	Silent ProphetJade IdolKami of the Palace FieldsHideous
LaughterGlacial RayKami of Ancient LawJukai	LaughterGlacial RayKami of Ancient LawJukai	LaughterGlacial RayKami of Ancient LawJukai
MessengerEmber-Fist	MessengerEmber-Fist	MessengerEmber-Fist
ZuberuWicked AkubaHumble	ZuberuWicked AkubaHumble	ZuberuWicked AkubaHumble
BudokaHisoka's DefianceSoul of MagmaKami of the Painted RoadDistress	BudokaHisoka's DefianceSoul of MagmaKami of the Painted RoadDistress	BudokaHisoka's DefianceSoul of MagmaKami of the Painted RoadDistress

If you picked He Who Hungers in pack one, what would be your next pick? Uyo, Silent

ProphetJade IdolKami of the Palace FieldsHideous
LaughterGlacial RayKami of Ancient LawJukai
MessengerEmber-Fist Zuberawicked AkubaHumble
BudokaHisoka's DefianceSoul of MagmaKami of
the Painted RoadDistress

If you picked Kashi-Tribe Reaver in pack one, what would be your next pick? Uyo, Silent

ProphetJade IdolKami of the Palace FieldsHideous
LaughterGlacial RayKami of Ancient LawJukai
MessengerEmber-Fist Zuberawicked AkubaHumble
BudokaHisoka's DefianceSoul of MagmaKami of
the Painted RoadDistress

Bonus Question

What card do you think the person to my right picked out of this pack? Email me the answer or post it in the forums!

Make sure to come back next to find out how the draft turned out, whether I listened to the pros' advice and how to dominate the Top 8 of your local qualifier!

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