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## Q&A to Zvi

Brian David-Marshall  
The Week That Was  
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As we head into the few remaining weeks before Pro Tour-Philadelphia, the Pro community is faced with an unusual and unprecedented situation. While they huddle in small -- and in one notable case, very large -- clandestine groups around the world to unlock the secrets of *Kamigawa* Block Constructed, one of the best Block Constructed minds of all time is doing the same thing in a semi-public forum.

Zvi Mowshowitz retired from competitive **Magic** in order to pursue an opportunity developing a card game based on Cyberpunk. The job took him out of his native New York surroundings and plopped him in the middle of Colorado. While the game was not a huge success, the experience seems to have done wonders for Zvi, who looks completely transformed. Gone are the clunky glasses and the extra pounds. The glasses have been replaced by more streamlined (even stylish) frames -- and are those highlights in his hair? The trademark laugh is still there, although it seems softened by an increased sense of self-awareness, and so is the sharp mind that allowed him and Scott Johns to arrive at The Solution for Pro Tour-Tokyo.



A latter-day Zvi, from 2004 U.S. Nationals.

While the rest of the world came to Tokyo packing red-green and red-black decks, Zvi cruised through the field with a blue-white deck that could barely lose to a red deck. His opponent in the finals was a young Japanese player who also chose to go against the grain of the format and played a non-red deck. That player was the man to whom Zvi recently passed the mantle of "best deck designer" -- Tsuyoshi Fujita.

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### Zvi Mowshowitz

Winner -- Pro Tour-Tokyo 2001 - The Solution

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
4 Coastal Tower 10 Island 10 Plains <hr/> 24 lands  4 Crimson Acolyte 4 Galina's Knight 4 Meddling Mage 4 Stormscape Apprentice 4 Voice of All <hr/> 20 creatures	4 Absorb 4 Exclude 4 Fact or Fiction 4 Repulse <hr/> 16 other spells  2 Aura Blast 3 Crusading Knight 4 Disrupt 3 Gainsay 3 Pure Reflection <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

### Tsuyoshi Fujita

Finalist -- Pro Tour-Tokyo 2001 - Blue-black Control

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
11 Island 4 Salt Marsh 9 Swamp <hr/> 24 lands  2 Phyrexian Scuta 4 Ravenous Rats 2 Urborg Shambler	4 Addle 4 Exclude 4 Fact or Fiction 3 Prohibit 3 Recoil 2 Repulse 2 Spite/Malice 4 Undermine 2 Yawgmoth's Agenda <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

While Zvi no longer pursues the Pro Tour full time, he has returned to the game as a full-time writer. He writes multiple columns each week about theory, card analysis, and -- most recently -- taking us inside the process of preparing for a Block Constructed season. Zvi has been tackling the Block Constructed format and holding nothing back. It is unprecedented to have a former Pro Tour winner still very much a part of the game (but not playing) without them being in the employ of Wizards' R&D. It is even more unusual to have that person dissecting a Pro Tour format as if he were still playing for anyone who cares to observe. In my mind, it is quite the monkey wrench being thrown in the works.

I was pleasantly surprised to run into Zvi this past weekend at a London PTQ. I asked him to take the time to do an interview for my column and to share some of his thoughts on the format with the [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) readership, and to discover more about someone who has been on all sides of this game -- from Junior Pro Tour competitor to Pro Tour Champion to one of the most influential voices in the game, going all the way back to those halcyon days of usenet groups and the Magic Dojo. You can even throw "game designer" into the mix.

**BDM:** How long have you been playing **Magic**?

**Zvi:** I began playing just after the release of the *Legends* expansion, and I've been playing ever since.

**BDM:** How did you get involved with playing the game?

**Zvi:** I saw others playing it in the student union and at camp and asked them about the game. They showed it to me, and when I got home a friend and I got some starters and played with each other for months before I started looking for other opponents.

**BDM:** How long have you been writing about **Magic** and how did you get involved in that? Do you remember the first **Magic** article you wrote and what was it about?



Zvi during his run to victory at PT-Tokyo 2000-01

**Zvi:** I got involved by accident at the time of the release of Stronghold. I sent an e-mail to my team, which at that point was The Legion. It was called 'degeneracy' and included two decklists for potential builds of a Mulch/Scroll Rack deck and a Pox deck. When I hit reply-all I didn't realize that I was also sending it to Frank Kusumoto. Frank ran The Dojo, which at the time was the place on the internet for **Magic** strategy, and he asked if he could post [my e-mail](#). I said sure, and the reception was good. When I invented the Dream Halls deck I called "TurboZvi," I [wrote an article](#) describing the deck and [its development](#), which Frank put on the front page in big bold letters. I've been writing ever since.

Turbo Zvi		
	<b>Main Deck</b>	<b>Sideboard</b>
	60 cards	
4 Ancient Tomb	4 Ancestral Memories	4 Abeyance
4 Crystal Vein	1 Counterspell	4 Adarkar Wastes
9 Island	4 Dream Halls	1 Dismiss
4 Svyelunite Temple	3 Gaea's Blessing	4 Hydroblast
21 lands	1 Impulse	1 Inspiration
	1 Inspiration	1 Lobotomy
	4 Intuition	15 sideboard cards
	1 Lobotomy	
0 creatures	4 Lotus Petal	
	4 Mana Severance	
	4 Meditate	
	4 Memory Lapse	
	4 Sift	
	39 other spells	

**BDM:** What space does the game currently occupy in your life?

**Zvi:** I think of the game as a pleasant diversion and part-time job. **Magic** is always throwing new puzzles at us, and it's great to be able to tackle them, share my answers and get paid for it. When I feel like taking a break from other things, I fire up Apprentice, Microsoft Word, Trillian or all three. **Magic** also gives me a group of friends from around the world that may well outlast my playing the game.

**BDM:** Why are you no longer actively pursuing the Pro Tour gravy train?

**Zvi:** The Pro Tour is very much an all-or-nothing proposition. You are rewarded at every step for living, thinking and breathing **Magic**. The big rewards are at the top, not just at each tournament but overall. On the train, you can skip over PTQ formats and prepare for Pro Tours, borrow the cards you need, build up PT-centered teams of top players. There are byes at every Grand Prix. At the end of the year you get a payout, which makes GPs worth more than double what they pay in cash. Once I decided that I no longer enjoyed doing all the travel, work and preparation involved in that, I knew I had a choice to make. I was either in or out, and I chose out.

**BDM:** What do you hope to accomplish with your current additions to the Block Constructed debate? Would you want to be qualified for Pro Tour-Philadelphia?

**Zvi:** The standard joke here is "most of my **Magic** friends are American, so at this point public information can only help them." Like all jokes it has some truth to it, but it's not the reason. I hope to show my readers both a lot of ideas and useful analysis from this year's block and how to work on block in general. My writing has always had an undertone of trying to teach men to fish rather than just handing them one. Of course, the main answer is that I enjoy working on and writing about block, especially when it is new and fresh, and doing it this early gives me a giant canvas to help paint.

**BDM:** Are you playing this format at all, or is all of your work theoretical?

**Zvi:** One of the things I developed over time was the ability to get reliable conclusions without playing more games than necessary, but games are not something you can skip. I intentionally chose not to interact with other players early on so that I wouldn't be inclined to copy other people's thoughts, but once that period was over I played enough to get a good feel for the matchups I feel are most important. Still, don't kid yourself: If I was going to play in the event I'd need a ton more games to be ready.

**BDM:** I think it is very interesting to have one of the top three Block Constructed players/deck designers sitting on the sidelines for a Block Pro Tour event but still drawing up plays. Have you received any flack from some of the players who are actively working on the format because they are playing in the event?

**Zvi:** No, and that's a bit odd to me. I expected some. Perhaps it's true that those who would complain know that they're in a position where public information can only help them. There are only a small number of people who 'should' be upset, because they're on the best teams that benefit from keeping everything in the dark. Maybe they think that I won't be doing enough work to do that much damage to them. They could be right. They also might know that they can't change my decision so why complain.

**BDM:** What is the key to building a deck for a Block Constructed format? How do you approach a new format and what do you look for?

**Zvi:** Jon Finkel has the universal 'what's the key?' answer to almost everything in **Magic**: Focus only on what matters. They key is knowing what matters. In Block, the key is doing what the format lets you do, and remembering that everyone else has to do the same. A handful of strategies in Block will be able to use the few cards that stand out and make decks that tower over everything else, especially without the second expansion. Think of the past: **Tolarian Academy** and **Gaea's Cradle**, Goblins and Slide, Madness and Black Control, Rebels and Rising Waters, Affinity and Big Red. The decks that take advantage of what Wizards 'pushes' in the block will be on top, and by looking carefully at what is out there you can identify the two or three decks that have the power and the one or two others that have good enough matchups against them to compete. Then test knowing that only those decks matter.

**BDM:** Can you give [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) readers a preview of how the format is shaping up, in your experience? What are the forces at play in the format?

**Zvi:** Jitte or not Jitte? That is the question. There are a lot of players backing white decks because they can get the most from Jitte, but I think that such decks suffer when other decks are built correctly. A complete list of decks that seem possible at this point would be White Weenie, Sligh-Style Red, Snakes, BGu Legends, Arcane Splice, Hana Kami/Soulless Revival in various forms, with a few other possibilities like the Hondens that seem like they will fall short. I'd say the smart money should be on the Snakes and Soulless Revival, with Splice in third.

Jitte pulls you towards the weenie strategies while the green mana pulls you in the opposite direction. Snakes gets both, and even better green mana than everyone else, which is one of the reasons -- along with Sosuke's Summons -- that it is so strong. The legends and **Time of Need** pull those not concentrating on Jitte toward the same few creatures: **Kodama of the North Tree**, **Meloku**, the **Clouded Mirror** and **Kokusho**, the **Evening Star** with the mana fixing letting everyone find the color. Splice engines are the other big way to get an edge.

**BDM:** How important is it to have multiple sets of eyes working on a format? What do you consider to be the ideal team size and what are the key components to a successful team?

**Zvi:** I've found that no matter what size the group, and this doesn't just apply to **Magic**, two people end up doing most of the work. One set of eyes isn't enough, because people miss things. Teams often miss things too, even in formats this small and even with the best. When I did my best work, I found we figured out almost everything there was to know but always missed one important thing that we had to correct for on site. Often it was something most other teams had, but they missed other things. A second person gives you an opponent, a second point of view, someone to argue with and bounce ideas off. It's also good to have a few other people around to perform a reality check, pick up the things that fall through the cracks and give you more opposition. I couldn't solve a format by myself, not well enough to try and win a PT, but give me Scott Johns or Justin Gary and I'll take on the world.



Zvi hoists his trophy from GP-New Orleans 2002-03



**BDM:** *TOGIT has teamed up with the Dutch players, and seemingly every North American qualified player with a Frenchman and a couple of South Americans for good measure, for the expressed purpose of not letting the Japanese win this Pro Tour. Thoughts? Predictions?*

**Zvi:** I don't like TOGIT's chances with this setup. I think they have a chance to win, but that's because they bring amazing talent to the table. When you combine the Dutch with the TOGIT players and throw in every free agent you can find, you're getting not just numbers but many of those that matter. With a short PT and more public info thanks to articles and **Magic Online**, it would be hard for them not to be in it at the end. However, their team is far, far too big. You simply can't use that many people efficiently even if all of them are good enough to contribute and all of them are motivated. They would be far better served by comparing what they have at the end of the process than by all working together from the start, not only because such a large group makes working as a unit all but impossible but because it also makes leaks inevitable. The chance of a leak goes up with the square of the number of people involved.

**BDM:** *What about the Japanese? You recently passed on the mantle of "Best Deck Designer" to Tsuyoshi Fujita (although I think Gabriel Nassif had hijacked that claim while you weren't looking). What has allowed the Japanese to become such successful deck builders?*

**Zvi:** Nassif has a strong case, I won't deny it, but I knew it wasn't mine anymore. The Japanese have a lot of great things going for them. They have a dedication that I think the rest of the world lacks. We used to have it, but we don't anymore. Over time they've developed the skills to go with that dedication. They've also always had the ability to keep an open mind and look for things that no one else even considers. When I see a deck I didn't expect, most of the time it's something that I thought of and decided wasn't good enough. Sometimes I'm right and they fail, sometimes they're right because I missed something or misjudged the metagame. When the Japanese show me something I didn't expect, often it's something I never even considered. Even if a deck never quite makes it, if you find the concepts others miss you're ahead of the game.



*From one Block expert to another (from PT-New York 2001-02)*

**BDM:** *Do you think this format will be completely mined by the time the Pro Tour rolls around? Can there be any surprises?*

**Zvi:** It's hard to get everything. You can get almost everything with hard work, but it's very hard to get everything even weeks into a PTQ season. I think that most good teams will know all the basics, but this PT will be decided by the last few cards, sideboard strategies and who can outplay who.

**BDM:** *Speaking of surprises... What were you doing at a PTQ? Is there a comeback in your future?*

**Zvi:** Yes, there's a comeback in my future, but not to the Pro Tour -- I'm coming back to New York City! I was at the PTQ to say hello to old friends, have good times and perhaps find a roommate. In the end I found myself a studio on the Upper West Side. Denver was a great opportunity, as it gave me the chance to develop a CCG of my own. Alas, that didn't work out. I think I gave them a great game on a shoestring budget of both manpower and money, but the company ran out of cash to keep going. It's great to be back in New York, it's the city I love and it is where I belong even if you wouldn't believe the rent I'm about to pay. I'll also be going back to Columbia University to take some classes and perhaps graduate school. Perhaps 20 years from now I'll be a famous Economics professor and we'll all be thanking Wizards for not letting me waste my research and development talents on a card game. Maybe the Mets will make the playoffs. Who knows what the future will bring?

## Firestarter: Handicapping the Grand Prix

Finally! An event is on the horizon. It feels like forever since Grand Prix-Leipzig and even longer since I got to cover one. There are two events this weekend, one in Lisbon and the other in Detroit. Anyone want to make any guesses toward the attendance of these two events? How about potential Top 8 fields? Remember, don't put too much stock in the Dutch doing well in Lisbon since so many of them are going to be in Detroit!

*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is **Top8Magic.com**, the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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