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Some commentators talk about "the metagame" in the same breath that they use for words like the *environment* or a *format*. Sadly, *metagame* is not a string of syllables so lightly used. The metagame is more than just an understanding of what archetypes to expect at the next Standard tournament or the ability to predict what sideboard cards your most hated opponent will bring in after dropping the first duel of a match. Certain players forget that like any other, the metagame *is itself a game*; they need to be reminded that it is there to be played, rather than simply observed or analyzed. After this article, hopefully you won't be counting yourself part of that ignorant herd.

US Nationals 1995

The first time I encountered the notion of the metagame was while studying Mark Justice's deck from US Nationals 1995. Justice, a probable inductee in the first class of the **Magic** Pro Tour Hall of Fame, was the game's first true pro and in the mid-90's was widely considered the best player on the planet. Justice scored a Top 8 at the first Pro Tour with an innovative deck of his own design, featuring Stormbind, Elkin Bottle, and Eron the Relentless, but already had a highly respectable resume prior to that historic tournament; before he "sold out" and lost in the finals of the 1996 World Championships with Necropotence to Tom Champheng's white weenie deck. Mark won the 1995 US National Championships with a deck featuring Whirling Dervish and Lifeforce *both in the main deck*.



Justice, World Championships '96

"Why does he have those cards in his main deck?" I asked my friend Al Tran. Ten years ago, studying the listings in George Baxter's book pre-Dojo, I was as interested in developing good Standard decks for Regionals as I am today, but had at the time never played in a DCI sanctioned event.

"At that level... All the pros... They're all playing the metagame," he replied.

Oh. *Ooh*. The metagame. *The game outside the game*. I nodded in assent.

Justice was crowned after Nationals 1995 as the Master of the Metagame. In those days, players were not forced to play the same decks that they played in the Swiss portion of the tournament in the elimination rounds. All but two of the players who made Top 8 in 1995 did so with basic Swamps in their decks; most of them decided to dance with the girls what brung them, and Justice, figuring this would be the case, rode Johtull Wurm and the main-deck Black hate to the National Championship.

As you can tell from this early story, the metagame is not just the available decks in the format. The environment, the decks that show up for a specific tournament, takes place outside of you and what deck you choose. You and the deck you bring may contribute to the format as a whole, but that doesn't mean you're playing the metagame. Knowing that Tooth and Nail players now bring Sensei's Divining Top and Kodama's Reach to the table, when at Champs they might have brought neither, just means that you are avidly reading the Internet. Playing the metagame is about what you *do* with that knowledge.

Now in today's Standard (or more relevantly, the Standard of three weeks from now) WotC R&D doesn't let us show up for Regionals with Whirling Dervish in our decks for the expected Black mages; our choices have to be a little more subtle.

Just for the sake of example, let's cast ourselves in the role of an aggressive Red Deck player. How does our knowledge of the format influence our choices in deck design?

Artifacts

Three of the four most dangerous artifacts in Standard cost one mana. We'll get to that fourth one in a minute, but for the time being, three one-drops will give us plenty to think about.

Coming through last summer, Aether Vial showed itself to be maybe *the* best one mana artifact in the format. A defining card of Ravager Affinity, Aether Vial went on to dominate Extended in Life, Cephalid Breakfast, Goblins, and other decks. All of that said, our knowledge of the metagame tells us that, as good as Aether Vial is, it has largely fallen out of favor. Where a few months ago you could expect to play against Aether Vial every other round, post-bannings Standard seems to be missing Aether Vials in even the decks where it would be perfect (I'm looking at you, White Weenie). The point is, you may identify this one, but probably don't have to worry about it.

After Aether Vial came Sensei's Divining Top. It took a little while for this one mana artifact to catch on – and many of the game's top minds still don't like the card – but you can bet that, if you want to make it to the Top 4 of your Regionals, you'll have to be ready to face Sensei's Divining Top.



In some ways, Sensei's Divining Top is a Red Deck's best friend. It's a non-interactive card, meaning that as much as the Top allows your opponent to massage his library, there aren't a lot of things you can do about the card... And why would you want to? The average deck that runs the Top is just sinking mana every turn, slowing itself down. The decks that you have to worry about are the ones that use Sensei's Divining Top to set up a specific set of cards, not just to set up the tops of their libraries. For most decks, you can play your game and let the opponent fool around with his deck Mirri's Guile style; for those few that matter, dealing with those key cards seems a lot more important than dealing with the Top itself.

The biggest offender is Tooth and Nail. Armed with this realization, and the knowledge that Tooth and Nail is generally based around cards like Urza's Tower and Urza's Power Plant, knowing that you will have to play against a card that is remarkably difficult to destroy with even instant speed artifact removal might tell you to run Molten Rain. What's that? Molten Rain against Sensei's Divining Top? That's right! The opponent is probably using his Top to set up a set of Urza's lands so that he can entwine Tooth and Nail or bust out a 10 mana Mindslaver. By attacking his lands with Molten Rain, you not only stunt the opponent's development – simultaneously making him look pretty silly for sinking all that mana turn after turn – but forward your own aggressive deck's attack plan by hitting for an extra two. If this doesn't make sense, look back to your understanding of the format as you work to play the metagame: it doesn't take a great mind to try to Demolish a Sensei's Divining Top; in fact, that path is likely doomed to failure. Getting better at analysis is about focusing on what matters, and in Standard, what matters is much more likely to be what the Top is after than the Top itself.

Most recently, the one mana artifact family has welcomed this little number into its midst:



Some pundits have actually said out loud (virtually of course) that Pithing Needle is the card White Weenie has been looking for to shut down Arc-Slogger. Now no one is going to make the argument that a 4/5 for five mana is particularly efficient, but when it takes the other guy's vaunted Pithing Needle, too? Not so shabby. Pithing Needle can disrupt any of the creatures with special abilities in your deck and can also turn off answers like Oblivion Stone. Before you choose to run an extra Kumano, Master Yamabushi or fight Circles with Oblivion Stone, just remember this mana efficient spoiler can turn your high-end cards into Sealed Deck chaff.

Black

What are they going to make you do, really? I mean come on, they're Black, you're a Red Deck. Their goal is to reduce their life points with cards like Night's Whisper or Phyrexian Arena... which is just about the same thing you've got in mind. They communicate the desire for you to clear your hand, you gladly respond with a flurry of instants. Rarely have two colors gotten along so well together.

Blue

Even though we've already talked about Artifacts, the scariest Blue card is actually an Artifact these days. Vedalken Shackles is the card that single-handedly validates the existence of the Blue Control deck. If you've ever seen Blue go up against White Weenie, you know that the match-up can be a mess as the White creatures switch teams over and over... Is it best for the White mage to keep crashing in, losing maybe two cards at a time, or hold back, developing his creature base but ultimately sliding in the face of Blue's superior resource development?

As the Red Deck advocate, you don't really have to worry about this. Like your friend the Green player, you have an ideal two-drop for taking care of Vedalken Shackles. Brother to Viridian Zealot, the aggressive Red Deck brings the pain with Hearth Kami. 2/1 creatures for two mana are great openers, sliding under the Counterspell wall and getting damage in before Blue's powerful midgame comes online, ruining the Vedalken Shackles plan along the way. Viridian Zealot and Hearth Kami are nothing



less than ideal for destroying Vedalken Shackles in a method that is not easily countered (I mean who plays Squelch?).

Regardless of the color you play, you've got to be ready to handle Vedalken Shackles. Mono-Blue has been sliding recently, and the newest crop of *Saviors of Kamigawa*-enabled decks seem to be leaving Blue in the dust, but that just makes it *more* important to not lose to Vedalken Shackles. This blue-tinted Artifact is the best creature sanction in the format, mana efficient and remarkably powerful. When we talk about building a deck to not get wrecked by the commonly played cards in the format, *this is what we're talking about*. Hearth Kami may actually be the best two drop in Standard right now for its ability to win this fight, erase Sword of Fire and Ice's Protection from Red ability without dedicating additional slots to a deck, and ultimately keeping the powerful Umezawa's Jitte offline.

Green

Now the *actual* best two drop in Standard probably has something to say about Hearth Kami's elbowing its way into the top spot. No, I'm not talking about Viridian Zealot, a card with equal statistics for the same converted mana cost (and a more flexible ability for potentially lower activation cost), but the ubiquitous Sakura-Tribe Elder.

Now as the Red Deck, how do you feel about Sakura-Tribe Elder? We've already talked about playing cards like Molten Rain to fight against the net capability of Sensei's Divining Top... and one of the main reasons that Sensei's Divining Top is any good is the existence of mana-searching shuffle effects, headlined by Sakura-Tribe Elder. Rampant Growth would be bad enough in a fight between mana acceleration and land destruction, their symmetrical effect being a mana cheaper and all, but attached to a 1/1 body, Sakura-Tribe Elder makes for a particularly annoying threat.



Alongside Sakura-Tribe Elder is one of the best creatures *at all* in Standard, Eternal Witness. Regardless of what the Witness is recouping – it's often just a Sakura-Tribe Elder, given the creature-heavy Green listings – the Witness is a 2/1 body attached to that Regrowth.

Now the reason we are pointing out Sakura-Tribe Elder and Eternal Witness is that they are great cards for chump blocking – or even trading – with Red Decks. Eternal Witness trades with your Hearth Kami, and played at the wrong time, either of these cards makes Slith Firewalker look pretty bad. Over time, 1/1 and 2/1 creatures can slow down even the best threat in the current environment – Arc-Slogger – just because that big basher doesn't have trample.

Probably the best solution to the cheap and powerful x/1 drops from the Red Deck perspective is Vulshok Sorcerer. Far from a universally played card in even the Standard creature decks, Vulshok Sorcerer makes sure your Slith Firewalkers keep growing and your Hearth Kamis avoid trades without spending additional cards. If you get in with a Genju of the Spires even once that is often game; Vulshok Sorcerer's mana free removal effect is highly synergistic with the Genju... because that Enchant Land requires a 3-4 land commitment to get a swing in, you just might not have the mana for a Magma Jet and an attack the same turn, even if you've got the relevant card.

Red

The reason Star Wars Kid played the aggressive, high mana, deck that he did in the LCQ rather than the burn heavy deck that Osyp Lebedowicz ran in the invitational (see Throwing Down the Gauntlet)

was his belief that fast starts, exemplified by Chrome Mox acceleration, won the mirror. The Kuroda-style burn decks have all the marbles when it comes to card advantage and resource escalation; so in order to win, the fast decks have to seize the early game initiative, declare themselves in the threat role, in order to win.

One of the things that we learned way back in *Invasion* Block testing for PT Tokyo is that when two decks have the exact same long game, card advantage matters less than who got the faster start. I was surprised that the B/R deck with Shivan Zombie beatdown was beating the B/R deck with all the creature removal and long game card advantage; the control deck would invariably take out every threat and stabilize on about 10 life... and then lose game after game as the beatdown deck went into top deck mode. But if you think about it, that makes sense. The beatdown deck hits for the first two on turn three; going first, that two points might go uncontested as the control deck has to answer with an Urza's Rage, saving Scorching Lava or Terminate for bigger threats (or maybe just not having a faster response). As the decks engage in a war of attrition, 2-4 points might be a big deal as both players go for a Pyre Zombie long game; moreover, the control deck has to spend its burn on the beatdown deck's creatures whereas the beatdown deck can spend its burn on the control player himself.



The modern Red Deck faux mirror is not dissimilar... but also not identical. The beatdown Red Deck doesn't have the *exact* same long game as the burn deck this time; rather than a duel of Pyre Zombies, the Arc-Slogger high ends are not symmetrical. Though they may seem that way, in truth, the burn deck's long game is significantly better. For one thing, the beatdown deck has to think about how many cards it goes through with Arc-Slogger; the burn deck actually *wants* to exhaust its library, genuinely setting up a saucy bottom with Magma Jet or going into a Beacon of Destruction infinite game. Moreover, *reach* is an important element; if the burn deck contains the beatdown deck's primary attack, the burn deck has less opportunity to deal non-combat damage.

So what does this mean?

Well if you are situating yourself as the beatdown Red Deck, you have to make your early game mana as consistent as possible. If you are going to beat the slower Red Deck with the better long game, you had better stake yourself an awfully good first couple of turns. Contrast the "original" French Red deck, Benjamin Claudel's list from Limousin Auvergn Regional with Star Wars Kid's deck.

Benjamin Claudel		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
3 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Chrome Mox	4 Defense Grid
15 Mountain	2 Demolish	3 Oblivion Stone
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	3 Genju of the Spires	3 Pyroclasm
19 lands	4 Magma Jet	1 Shatter
	3 Molten Rain	4 Sowing Salt
	3 Seething Song	15 sideboard cards

3 Arc-Slogger
4 Hearth Kami
2 Kumano, Master Yamabushi
4 Slith Firewalker
4 Vulshok Sorcerer

17 creatures

3 Stone Rain
2 Volcanic Hammer

24 other spells

Chris "StrWrsKid" McDaniel - Qualified



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
18 Mountain

22 lands

4 Arc-Slogger
4 Hearth Kami
1 Kumano, Master Yamabushi
4 Slith Firewalker

13 creatures

4 Chrome Mox
3 Genju of the Spires
4 Magma Jet
4 Molten Rain
1 Pulse of the Forge
4 Seething Song
3 Stone Rain
2 Volcanic Hammer

25 other spells

Sideboard

3 Boil
3 Duplicant
3 Flamebreak
1 Goblin Charbelcher
3 Oblivion Stone
2 Sowing Salt

15 sideboard cards

Everyone I know and work with on decks loved Claudel's deck; if it got going, it almost always won. The issue was that getting going. With only 19 lands, Claudel's deck could sometimes putter... So to solve this problem, Star Wars Kid cut Vulshok Sorcerer, a painful choice in my opinion (see the Green section, above), but at the same time cemented his mana. At 22 land, SWK's deck has fully 50% mana sources. Because it has to generally imprint a threat with Chrome Mox and sometimes "discards" Seething Song to go Balduvian Barbarians with Arc-Slogger, SWK's deck often has to play with its pants down, all in, nothing held back; worse, it can get into situations where it is topping either irrelevant cards or more mana, which are sometimes the same thing... But its consistency in hitting with a crucial threat in the early game is increased. If you've ever been avalanched by a turn one Slith Firewalker or stared down a turn two Arc-Slogger without a Terror in your hand, you know just how deadly the early turns can be.

White

Red's main goals in life are dealing damage and setting things on fire; White's main goals in life are preventing damage and/or rubbing soothing balms onto Red-irritated diaper rashes. If you contrast two *Eighth Edition* commons, Healing Salve and Shock, or perhaps two *Betrayers of Kamigawa* rares, Shining Shoal and Blazing Shoal, you can get a good idea of how the power of these abilities breaks down at any given mana cost. For one mana I can swipe two life but you can gain three; at zero

mana and a pitch, we can both deal X damage... but I need a creature to stick whereas you get to prevent X damage along the way in addition. How equitable.

White has a wide array of cards to ruin Red's day at seemingly every drop. Flashfires is nice, and we've already committed to playing Molten Rain, but White has Sacred Ground, a card that counters a handful of Molten Rains, and at a cheaper cost. Red has all kinds of lovely burn cards but White has Sanctimony, at, again, typically a cheaper cost to counter, again, a handful of burn spells. Red has versatile and aggressive two drops like Hearth Kami; White has two drops designed solely to ruin Red's day like Auriok Champion. How equitable.


But of all the cards ever to ruin a Red Mage's day, none has stymied more players through the years than this two mana pile of Colos dung:



Circle of Protection: Red is to Red mages in a format with White players what Vedalken Shackles is to any random creature deck. As an answer it is not insurmountable... but it is the card of cards that you *have* to be able to answer if you don't want to get randomly wrecked. In today's Standard, there are many cards that you can use to fight the Circle. Oblivion Stone is good because it has a wide number of applications, not the least of which is creature. I personally like Culling Scales because of its persistence during wars of resource escalation. Most recently, Pithing Needle has emerged as the most mana efficient answer to date. The downside of the Needle is that the opponent has a chance to destroy it himself, which brings Circle of Protection: Red back online... and don't forget that if your plan is Oblivion Stone, the other guy's Pithing Needle just might be your worst nightmare. *Stupid Circles.*

The Solution?

Given the various themes we've talked about in this article, I'd like to present a version of French Red advocated by my friend Josh Ravitz. Josh's deck, like SWK's, is a variant on Claudel's, but making different compromises:

Josh Ravitz		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
3 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Chrome Mox	3 Duplicant
		3 Oblivion Stone

15 Mountain	3 Genju of the Spires	3 Pyroclasm
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	4 Magma Jet	2 Sowing Salt
<hr/>	4 Molten Rain	4 Zo-Zu the Punisher
19 lands	4 Seething Song	<hr/>
	2 Sowing Salt	15 sideboard cards
	1 Stone Rain	
4 Arc-Slogger	2 Volcanic Hammer	
4 Hearth Kami	<hr/>	
1 Kumano, Master Yamabushi	24 other spells	
4 Slith Firewalker		
4 Vulshok Sorcerer		
<hr/>		
17 creatures		

Josh is one of the most talented burn players I know, and has used the above listing to impressive success on *Magic Online*. You'll note that he has Zo-Zu the Punisher for additional mana acceleration hate, but unlike SWK, chose not to solidify his early game mana as much; that said, he has certain more consistent elements than Claudel's original list, including four copies of both Seething Song and Arc-Slogger, which move the deck in the same direction without going all out with 30 mana sources.

For more explicit choices about playing the metagame, check out Kai Budde and Mark Herberholz's lists from the recent PT Philadelphia:

Kai Budde



Main Deck

60 cards

5 Plains	3 Cranial Extraction
2 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Distress
13 Swamp	4 Final Judgment
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	1 Genju of the Fens
<hr/>	4 Hero's Demise
24 lands	4 Journeyer's Kite
	4 Night of Souls' Betrayal
	3 Sensei's Divining Top
2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	2 Sickening Shoal
3 Yukora, the Prisoner	2 Terashi's Grasp
<hr/>	<hr/>
5 creatures	31 other spells

Sideboard

1 Cranial Extraction
3 Eradicate
1 Genju of the Fens
1 Horobi's Whisper
4 Rend Flesh
2 Sickening Shoal
2 Terashi's Grasp
1 Yukora, the Prisoner
<hr/>
15 sideboard cards

Mark Herberholz



Main Deck

60 cards

10 Forest
 1 Island
 2 Plains
 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
 5 Swamp
 3 Tendo Ice Bridge
 1 Tranquil Garden
 1 Waterveil Cavern

24 lands

1 Hana Kami
 1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
 1 Kokusho, the Evening Star
 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

7 creatures

2 Cranial Extraction
 1 Eerie Procession
 1 Ethereal Haze
 3 Final Judgment
 4 Gifts Ungiven
 2 Hideous Laughter
 1 Horobi's Whisper
 4 Kodama's Reach
 4 Sensei's Divining Top
 3 Sickening Shoal
 2 Soulless Revival
 2 Wear Away

29 other spells

Sideboard

1 Cranial Extraction
 1 Hideous Laughter
 1 Horobi's Whisper
 1 Keiga, the Tide Star
 2 Kodama of the North Tree
 1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
 3 Nezumi Graverobber
 3 Nezumi Shortfang
 1 Psychic Spear
 1 Yosei, the Morning Star

15 sideboard cards

One of the really interesting things about Kai's deck was how different it was from the rest of the field while maintaining a definite awareness of what the other good decks looked like. Similar to the Green players, Kai ran a basic land/Divining Top engine, but went with a W/B control route instead. The defining card? In my opinion, that honor goes to Night of Soul's Betrayal.

Kai knew that his top opponents were going to come at him with Hana Kamis and Sakura-Tribe Elders. Night of Soul's Betrayal goes a long way in turning those creatures off. You can't so much as Rampant Growth with that Legendary Enchantment in play, and forget about recursion. Until he hit Herberholz, Kai tore up each and every Green mage in his path.

But what's special about Mark's listing? Well, there are a couple of things. Unlike his fellow Top 8 competitor Kenji Tsumura, Mark ran Ethereal Haze main. Kenji may have been playing the metagame himself, believing that White Weenie would not be the dominant deck, and he ended up being right. That said, Kenji's decision *not* to play the Haze gave him the only match-up in the quarterfinals where it really mattered. Additionally, Herberholz ran a second Wear Away. This card was instrumental in his defeating Budde; just as Kai knew Night of Soul's Betrayal was a way to maul Green decks, Mark realized that the ability to answer that card was the difference between winning and losing a highly interactive match-up.



At the end of the day, playing the metagame is more than knowing what will show up in other people's decks. It's about making decisions to take advantage of that knowledge. If you are saying to yourself that *you actually make yourself worse* against some opponents by playing the metagame... That's exactly the point! The skill is in figuring out where you need the help and where you can give

up a few percentage points but still win. Put yourself in Mark Justice's shoes and remember: Main deck Lifeforce doesn't really hurt you very much when all your opponents are Black mages.

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