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Last week I talked about beatdown decks and why you might want to draft them and the things you should think about when you did. I got a few emails asking me to do the same for control decks and I thought this was as good a time as any to go through the topic, especially with the beatdown theories still fresh from last week.

Control decks have been popular right since the very dawn of **Magic**. Even in Alpha there were many cards that supported constructed control decks – staples like Counterspell, Wrath of God and the Circles of Protection for example. Over the years control strategies have appeared in almost every constructed format and they're often the most popular type of decks for experienced players. If you believe you have a lot of skill playing the game you tend to want to play longer games to give yourself more opportunity to gain an advantage over your opponent. Control decks are typically harder to play though and it's much easier to make a bad decision when playing a control deck instead of a beatdown deck.

In limited control decks use many of the same theories as their constructed counterparts but there are significant differences as well. There are many constructed control deck theories that do not translate well to limited for various reasons and as this is "**Limited** Information" it shouldn't take you too long to figure out which formats I'll be talking about!

## Control in Limited

Beatdown decks care about only one thing: reducing your life total to zero. Control decks don't care too much about your life total at the start of the game, they instead seek to neutralise your threats and gain advantage in other areas. Whereas beatdown decks don't typically care too much about card advantage, control decks often use it to establish an advantage over their opponent.

Control decks are often trickier to draft than beatdown decks simply because they need a lot of different answers to the threats a beatdown deck can produce. They need to be able to answer ground based attackers, both the quick and fast ones, and the bigger slower ones too. They also need answers to any evasion creatures - typically Fear and Flying based - an opponent might have. They should also have a way of neutralising other permanent damage sources such as cards like Frostwielder or Honden of Infinite Rage. The longer you're trying to make the game go, the more important it will be for your deck to be able to handle a wide variety of threats.

***The first thing to think about when thinking about playing a control deck in limited is how you are going to go about establishing that control.***

There are numerous cards that they can use to help establish an advantage but when they have done that they also need to be able to exploit that advantage too. It's all very well spending time and effort in halting an opponent's attack but if you can't win the game after doing that then you can either lose to a top-decked finisher that you have no answer to, or simply die to decking if your opponents are able to deal with the few threats you do create. Decking is a rare thing but it does happen from time to time and it's something to be aware of if you're the control player.

The first thing to think about when thinking about playing a control deck in limited is how you are going to go about establishing that control. The route you choose will vary greatly depending upon the colours you are playing. Most typical control decks are blue-white but you can get some black-red decks that play as control decks or some green-based decks that function in that way too.

The blue-white decks and the base green decks both try to wrestle the control of the board simply by playing better creatures than an opponent. The green decks do this by playing bigger creatures than the opponent's and the blue-white decks by playing defensive creatures that never really plan on attacking, instead simply preventing an opponent's guys from attacking.

Both of these decks can struggle with evasive creatures but the green decks typically have more trouble than the blue-white ones here. Green has creatures like Venerable Kumo that can jump in the way of opposing flyers, but it lacks any sort of answer to something as simple as a Nezumi Cutthroat. The blue-white decks typically have few answers to a Cutthroat but they do usually have some removal spells such as Cage of Hands or Mystic Restraints that can take the Cutthroat out of the equation. Once a stable board position has been established these decks will seek to gain card advantage and then use that to overpower the opponent, or simply win via more powerful late game creatures than the opponent has.

Black-red decks on the other hand usually try to establish control with solid creatures and a higher number of removal spells to take out all of the better creatures your opponent might play. The theory here is that if you can kill all of your opponent's best creatures, your own creatures should be able to win any battle with what's left. This sort of deck can also try to establish some superiority over its opponent through various card advantage methods. Soulshift is often utilised, with Scuttling Death and Gibbering Kami being big cards for that type of deck. Alternatively, spice can be focused with cards like Horobi's Whisper and Torrent of Stone being able to take out more than one opposing creature in long games, and Soulless Revival helping win the creature war.

## Mana Curve



Your mana curve in control match-ups is almost as important as it is in the beatdown ones. You still need those early drops to slow down the beatdown decks but if you have other ways of regaining tempo later on then it's not as crucial that you always have that second turn play.

What is important is that your early plays will do a good job at stalling the ground while still perhaps allowing you to establish some sort of advantage. Probably the best two-drops for a blue-white control deck in the current format are cards like Floating-Dream Zubera, Minamo Scrollkeeper and Inner-Chamber Guard. These cards allow you to stall typical opposing ground-based creatures very quickly. Cards like the Zubera can trade for early Skullsnatchers and Hearth Kamis while still helping you gain some card advantage. Cards like Minamo Scrollkeeper and Inner-Chamber Guard can prevent opposing creatures from attacking at all in the early game, simply because they won't have the power/toughness levels

needed to even trade for those cards.

This is one area where blue-white control decks can often gain advantage early in a match. The fact is that toughness is a lot cheaper to get than power; you only need to look at creatures like Wind Drake against Wall of Air to see that. If you can trade some sort of disadvantage on your early drops for

extra points of power – just like the Scrollkeeper and Inner-Chamber Guard do – then you have some creatures that perform an early defensive role superbly.

There are however obvious drawbacks to running these sorts of creatures. While they are excellent against opposing beatdown decks they're terrible against opposing control decks and they can be dead draws in the late game once control has been established, as they'll never help actually win the game. This is the price the control decks pay though.

In black-red control decks a lot of the time the 'early drops' will be cheap removal spells that can deal with early opposing creatures. Cards like Frostling and First Volley are often used here. In general, black-red control decks have fewer creatures and as a result they want all of their creatures to be of a high quality. You won't normally see Skullsnatchers getting played in control decks for example.

The better mid-game creatures are those that can both help slow down the combat phase and later on still be useful on offence or for some other reason. One of my favourite cards for this in blue-white is Mothrider Samurai. If he comes down on turn four he can often force opposing two and three-drops to stay at home as they can't punch through his effectively 3/3 body. It'll also trade for the vast majority of opposing four-drops as well if you need it too. However, once control has been established it functions as a solid flyer that can be used on offense too. A less recent example of this type of creature was Mystic Zealot from *Odyssey*. Early in the game this functioned as an efficient blocker, and then later on, once the game had progressed and Threshold was established, it became a very potent attacker too. These types of cards are great for any control deck so you should keep an eye out for them.



A lot of the mid-cost cards are also about stalling. In blue-white cards like River Kaijin and Moonlit Strider still serve only one purpose: to hold off opposing attackers. These cards are often still quite decent in multiples, as your opponent could easily attack a Wicked Akuba and Villainous Ogre into one of these guys, as a single Strider wouldn't be able to take either of the opposing creatures out. However, if you had two 1/4 creatures in play your opponent is faced with the potential of a double-block which would kill one of their guys at no cost to you. A lot of the time this is what creating the ground stall is all about. It's not about having a higher number of creatures, or even better creatures, it's just about establishing a position where it's just not possible for your opponent to attack without losing some creatures while causing minimal damage to you.

*Watch for creatures that can play offense **and** defense well.*

It's at the four and five mana slots that you would normally expect the heavy-hitters to appear. These are the creatures that will normally come down once control is hopefully established somewhat, and you'd really like to see Teller of Tales, Shinen of Flight's Wings here. It's typically your late game creatures that will be your route to victory but if you run some cheaper flyers too then that's fine. In an ideal world you'd like your late-game cards to be true bombs like Uyo, Keiga or Hikari but that obviously depends on you getting lucky when opening the packs up.

## Life as a Resource

The main reason why the mana curve isn't as important in control decks as compared to beatdown is quite simply because control decks have another resource they can utilise: their life total.

In the beatdown vs. control match-up it's almost always the control deck that will be the one losing life early in the match. This is fine, and to be expected. The control deck however can use its life total as a resource in allowing it time to establish control. Early blocking decisions may well be made based on life total decisions. If the control deck makes a Callous Deceiver as a blocker on turn three, only to find an opponent attacking with both an Orochi Ranger and a Kami of the Hunt, the control player would obviously suspect a combat trick like Serpent Skin perhaps. At that point in time the control player has a few options. If they have something that could be used in response – such as a Consuming Vortex – they may want to take the damage and negate the opposing trick on the subsequent turn. If they have another way of dealing with the combat trick – even by simply following up with a Kami of Old Stone for example – they might wish to risk blocking in case the opponent simply has a Kodama's Might instead. In that situation they simply trade the combat trick for the blocker and control decks are usually happy to make such one-for-one trades in the belief that their superior late game cards and other sources of card advantage will win out in the long run.

Quite simply, as the control player your life total can be used as a method of regaining tempo. If your cards are a little slower, but more powerful overall, then you can expect to lose some life in the early part of the game, before gaining control of the board later on. Once again a lot of this comes back to tempo which I covered a few weeks back .

### ***As the control player, your life total can be used as a method of regaining tempo.***

The difficulty comes when deciding just how much of your life you can sacrifice in order to gain a tempo advantage, as beatdown decks will often have finishers like Devouring Greed or Dance of Shadows. Sometimes you can play around these by making earlier creature trades but there are other situations where you can't do that, and are forced to leave yourself vulnerable to the possibility and just hope your opponent doesn't have it. Being aware of these


situations and making the correct decisions is part of what makes playing control decks a trickier proposition.

Black-red control decks tend to also use their life as a resource in the first few turns, unless they have the appropriate cheap removal spell to avoid doing so. The difference here is that they'll often try to trade off their creatures to leave a board that is comparatively empty. In this situation they can then use the powerful removal spells these two colours have to take out their opponent's best creatures, thus leaving them with an overall creature advantage as their own best creatures still remain.

This is why you frequently see black-red control mirror matches being decided by soulshift and cards like Soulless Revival or Blood Rites. The player who is able to establish the creature advantage – whether in quality, or simply a numerical advantage – usually comes out the victor.

### **Example decks**

Here are a couple of examples of typical blue-white and black-red control decks:

<b>White-blue control draft deck</b>		
		
<b>Main Deck</b> 40 cards		
8 Island	1 Faithful Squire	1 Cage of Hands
10 Plains	1 Hand of Honor	1 Candles' Glow

18 lands	1 Kabuto Moth	1 Freed from the Real
	1 Kami of Ancient Law	1 Heart of Light
	1 Kami of False Hope	1 Honden of Seeing Winds
	1 Minamo Scrollkeeper	1 Indomitable Will
	2 Moonlit Strider	1 Overwhelming Intellect
	1 Moonwing Moth	
	1 Mothrider Samurai	7 other spells
	1 River Kaijin	
	1 Shimmering Glasskite	
	1 Shinen of Flight's Wings	
	1 Sire of the Storm	
	1 Tallowisp	
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	15 creatures	

The sources of card advantage and control in this deck should be fairly apparent. Both Tallowisp and the Honden provide excellent sources of card advantage with Sire of the Storm and Overwhelming Intellect also coming into play in the late game. It's running a slightly higher land count with 18 lands but it needs that to hit five and six mana consistently. The card advantage that can be gained from these expensive cards will usually outweigh the slight increase in the possibility of mana-flooding.

## Black-red control draft deck



### Main Deck

40 cards

9 Mountain	1 Cunning Bandit	1 Barrel Down Sokenzan
8 Swamp	1 Ember-Fist Zubera	1 Exile into Darkness
	1 Frostling	1 First Volley
17 lands	1 Frostwielder	1 Horobi's Whisper
	1 Ghost-Lit Raider	1 Rend Flesh
	1 He Who Hungers	1 Soulless Revival
	1 Kami of Empty Graves	1 Swallowing Plague
	2 Kuro's Taken	1 Three Tragedies
	1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi	
	1 Ronin Houndmaster	8 other spells
	1 Scuttling Death	
	1 Soul of Magma	
	1 Throat Slitter	
	1 Yuki-Onna	
	<hr/>	
	15 creatures	

This deck has different sources of card advantage but they're still present. Creatures like Frostwielder, Ghost-Lit Raider and Soul of Magma can potentially take out multiple opposing creatures and gain card advantage in the process. Likewise, the few soulshift creatures in the deck work well together.

Finally there's always the possibility to get a few cards ahead of your opponent due to the discard effects or by splicing the Soulless Revival or Horobi's Whisper.

That's it for this week. Now that *Saviors* has gone live on **Magic Online** I'll be back to drafting with it and covering how the new format is shaping up with some example picks and draft walkthroughs over the coming weeks.

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