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Hello again, and welcome once more to Limited Information. After asking for some questions from last week's article I found myself with several interesting ones in my Inbox. While the *Champions-Betrayers-Saviors* format will still be taking up the bulk of the articles for the next few weeks I'd still like to try something different from time to time and while I have often used reader's questions as inspiration for entire articles in the past I've never really put myself in a position to answer specific questions.

At the moment I do feel like a lot has been written about the CSB draft format and so I want to examine other more general areas of drafting and the limited game over the coming months. Several of the reader questions I received will help me do that, while some of the other questions are more specific. Hopefully there will be something for everyone here, and when you're done with the article please take a moment in the message boards to discuss what you think of using this kind of approach occasionally.

The power of the green Shinen

Marc Faletti wrote:

"So you finally came around on Shinen of Life's Roar, huh? Way to slip that into the list of good green commons without drawing attention to your initial gaffe in undervaluing a wicked finisher. I think a brief mention on how you mis-evaluated it and what made you come around might be useful."

While I definitely hadn't intended to 'slip' anything past any reader, I'll be the first to admit I drastically under-valued this little guy when the set first came out. But then, I think most people did, perhaps even everyone. If you took a poll of a thousand **Magic** players on *Betrayers* release day and asked "Which is better, Elder Pine of Jukai, or Shinen of Life's Roar" then I'm pretty sure you would have got over 995 people saying Elder Pine. Nowadays that opinion has changed for some as many people rate the Shinen over the Elder Pine. That's part of what I love about this game though – it's sometimes nearly impossible to determine the power level of a card in an abstract setting. It's not until you've played it a few times that you realise how this one piece fits into the jigsaw puzzle that makes up each format.

So what makes the green Shinen so good?

First off, he's a two-drop Spirit in a set with few two-drops. Yes he's a 1/2 but so are the Zuberans and they're mostly playable. He gives you something to do on turn two, and that's a turn that gets over-looked more often now that the format has slowed down.

Secondly, he's removal. But more importantly than that, he's **green removal**. Removal is often key in any limited game, you all know this. By himself the Shinen will happily kill off Soratami Mirror-Guards and the like. With the aid of a Kodama's Might or Inner Calm, Outer Strength he can kill off



most creatures and sometimes even get a quick two-for-one. If you drop the Shinen on turn two and your opponent makes two guys that don't attack right away then you can Inner Calm for +4/+4 and probably kill them both without losing the Shinen. This makes him very powerful, especially in the colour of no removal spells.

Thirdly, he can completely change the way your opponent plays the game. If your two-drop is a Shinen and your opponent's two-drop is a Split-Tail Miko, or their one-drop was a Kami of False Hope and they have no two-drop, you immediately gain an obvious advantage. Sometimes you get to kill off an early 1/1 for free; sometimes you force a creature to stay in your opponent's hand.

Finally, he ends games. Sometimes he does this when you just Serpent Skin him up on turn three; other times he'll win games as he allows you to Alpha Strike and get all your biggest guys through unblocked. This is far more relevant now than it was before *Betrayer's* was released, simply because the format has slowed down so much. Until players started playing with the set and learned that the format had slowed significantly, the power of the Shinen couldn't accurately be determined. The green decks now have more time to get their bigger guys into play. The Shinen allows those big creatures to get right up into your opponent's face. Without the slow down of the format, the Shinen would still be solid, but not as great as he is now. Predicting that slow down without extensive draft experience was very difficult and was probably the main reason why I, along with most everyone else, undervalued the Shinen of Life's Roar initially I think.

All of those reasons are why the Shinen is rated so highly by players right now, and that's before you even get to the channel ability or just how easy he is to bring back thanks to soulshift.

Forgetting the uncommons?

Another reader who signed off only as Danny wrote:

"Obviously its good to analyse commons and rares, but uncommons seem to always be left out. Please could you go through the best uncommons in Kamigawa?"

And Andrew from the Ukraine also said:

"Recently I've come to a situation when a rookee asked me about rares and uncommons which are playable in draft.

He said that the only cards that are being discussed by players (including myself) are commons, thus he does not know much if an uncommon or rare that he opens in a pack is better than some good commons or is it worse."

It'd be possible to do an entire article on the good uncommons in the sets because there are a lot. But to help out players who haven't had a lot of experience with the format I'll give a quick rundown on the uncommons I'd take over the best commons in each set:

Champions:

White: Nagao, Bound by Honor is about equal to Kabuto Moth. Candles' Glow is worse than either but better than the commons in most circumstances.

Blue: Sire of the Storm, Soratami Mirror-Mage, Soratami Savant and Honden of Seeing Winds should be taken over all the commons in most situations. Eerie Procession shoots up massively if you have a Glacial Ray, and probably jumps ahead of all the commons too in that situation.

Black: Hideous Laughter is better than all the commons, and Thief of Hope too really. Thief is close to Befoul but in general I prefer Thief. Honden of Night's Reach is very powerful with Saviors in the mix, and Gutwrencher Oni is probably better than any of the black common creatures, but still worse than

Befoul.

Red: Honden of Infinite Rage gets picked over any common. Blind with Anger is comparable to Glacial Ray, often better, with Hanabi Blast close behind. Earthshaker would be next and then Pain Kami comes just under Yamabushi's Flame for me.

Green: Strength of Cedars is the best by far here, but there are lots of good four drops like Sosuke, Son of Seshiro, Rootrunner and Kashi-Tribe Reaver. I'd take these over most of the commons, except Sakura-Tribe Elder.

Betrayers:

White: Tallowisp can be amazing in the right deck, but it's rare you'd want it over Waxmane Baku. I'd take the Baku over Faithful Squire and Genju of the Fields almost every time but those latter two cards are better than Moonlit Strider for most decks.

Blue: Jetting Glasskite is amazing as an uncommon and miles better than it's Shimmering brethren. Genju of the Falls beats out the commons as well, and Callow Jushi will too if you have the appropriate number of Spiritcraft triggers.

Black: A lot of great cards here. None better than Horobi's Whisper though. Throat Slitter is better than Okiba-Gang Shinobi, but Eradicate, Ogre Marauder and Three Tragedies all trail the Shinobi slightly.

Red: Not as much good stuff in red. Nothing as good as Torrent of Stone, but Cunning Bandit and Ogre Recluse beat out the rest of the commons. Genju of the Spires is solid too, but not as good as the green or blue versions.

Green: More great selections here. Genju of the Cedars tops them all for me but Forked-Branch Garami and Budoka Pupil are close and all of those are a lot better than any of the commons. Unchecked Growth still beats out Gnarled Mass in most decks as well.

Saviors:

White: Charge Across the Araba wins the battle of best uncommon in the set quite easily. It's much better than any common. Hand of Cruelty and Descendant of Kiyomaro are better than Moonwing Moth as long as you aren't desperate for a flyer. Hail of Arrows and Eiganjo Free-Riders have looked better than they've played for me lately, but it's still early days. I think I'd want a Moth over these most of the time though. Hail can sometimes be devastating but sometimes it's just so expensive to kill anything with it.

Blue: Oboro Envoy is in the top three uncommons in the set. If you untap with it in play you shouldn't lose really. Kiri-Onna has been great for me and Overwhelming Instinct has won several games in this slower format. I'd take Kiri-Onna over Shinen of Flight's Wings, but Overwhelming Instinct would rank just below the Shinen for me.

Black: Exile into Darkness is the best of the black uncommons for me, but Kiku's Shadow is great removal too. Both are better than Kagemaro's Clutch. I'd take the Clutch over Hand of Cruelty and Razorjaw Oni but those two cards are better than the rest of the commons in the majority of decks.

Red: Ghost-Lit Raider rounds out the top three uncommons in the set, and it's much better than any common. The two best red commons – Barrel Down Sokenzan and Spiraling Embers – rate above the rest of the uncommons though.



Green: The depth of the green commons is duplicated here. I'd rank Ghost-Lit Nourisher above the others but Molting Skin, Haru-Onna, Stampeding Serow and Kami of the Tended Garden are all equal to, or better than, the commons. Green really scores high on all counts in this set.

Real-Life Tactics

This question came from Eric Boivin:

"Hi Scott. Indeed between now and the release of 9th edition there will be quite a downtime. But the time could be right to talk about a topic never touched before, and I had an idea: techniques for when you're drafting in real life. What you do with your picks, what's the right way to browse through the pack, how you can react to other players behaviour. I'm a MTGO player and I would like to give a physical draft a try, and some tips would be interesting."

There are a few different elements to this, and each have their own relevance to how your draft progresses. First of all I'll discuss what you should think about while drafting.

The most important difference between real-life drafts and **Magic Online** drafts is that in a real-life booster draft you do not get to look at your picks while each round of packs is being drafted. Only when each set of packs has been completely drafted (for example, all of the *Champions* picks in a *Champions/Betrayers/Saviors* draft) do you have some time to look through your choices before you open your next booster. If you're used to playing on **Magic Online** where you get to see all of your picks, all of the time, this can be a bit of a shock. While you're drafting you need to keep in mind the best cards you've already picked, and the colours those cards are. The 'filler' cards you don't need to worry about as much, but you should try to remember your best 4-5 cards from the first pack as you'll need to base future colour choices around those.



After the first round of packs (The *Champions* packs in this format) has been drafted you'll usually have a minute to review your picks. When I do this I immediately move anything unplayable to the back of the group and forget about them. I'll then look at what's left and sort it by 'spells vs. creatures' and then by mana curve. This gives an overall idea of what you need to be on the lookout for in the next pack. You'll know whether you need creatures or spells, and whether you should focus more on high or low casting cost cards to balance out your deck.

You'll then have to draft the second set of packs (*Betrayers*) with this in mind. After you've done that, you get another minute to review things so you can confirm your colours and review your creature count, mana curve, and anything else that might be relevant like possible splash colours or Spiritcraft triggers. Once that's done it's on to the third pack (*Saviors*) to complete the drafting.

Now that's what you personally should look out for with regard to your own draft and it's a lot of information. It's a lot harder to make the right pick from the 34th pick of the draft when you don't get to look at all of the other 33 cards you have already drafted. That's part of the skill in booster draft though, and that's why so many players enjoy it.

Once you think you have all of that sorted, you can also pay attention to the body language of the players around you. While you obviously can't look at the cards other players are drafting, you can certainly pick up 'tells' that can give you some information. If the player on your right opens a pack and immediately selects a pick without much thought, then it's obvious there's something great there

for him that doesn't require much thought. If you then get passed that pack with some good commons in it but with one common missing it's likely they chose a Glacial Ray for example. Likewise if you have a pack that has a tough choice of two cards – say a Yamabushi's Flame or a Kabuto Moth as the clear best cards – then you make your choice and then pass that pack to your left. If the player on your left makes his pick quickly then it's a safe bet they took the other best card whereas if they spend time thinking about it, it might be because they don't like the colour combination drafting the other 'best' card might put them in. If you know the weak colour combinations this could give you a hint as to their colours.

Another thing to pay attention to is a player near you who seems particularly excited or annoyed by a pick. If you're drafting white-blue through pack one, and then you get passed a third pick Horobi's Whisper coming the other direction in *Betrayers*, be aware of what happens when you pass that as a fourth pick to the next player. Some players will noticeably perk up and be happy, others might slouch down and shake their head. If it's the former they're clearly drafting black, if it's the latter they might well be regretfully passing that Whisper on to the next player. Once again, both of these reactions can give you feedback on that player's draft.

Being able to pay attention to the drafters either side of you while **still** giving your own draft the focus it deserves is very difficult and not something you will do successfully until you get comfortable with real-life drafting. It is however an aspect of drafting that the best players in the world have as an advantage over everyone else and it's something you can work on.

Planning your game

John Albanes posed this very interesting question:

"What's your opinion on holding back a 1-drop spirit (say, Kami of False Hope) on turn one in order to trigger spirit effects later on in the game, i.e., if you have Waxmane Baku in your starting hand as well? I'm sure the answer would change depending on your opponent's deck type, but in general, is getting a couple points of damage through better than getting an extra tap effect later on? (And, yes, there is a 2-drop in your opening hand--let's say the deck is a U/W skies deck.) Thanks for your time, as I've come across this situation many times, and have always played out the 1-drop on turn one, but was never sure whether it was the correct play."

Let's take a sample hand just to think about the implications of this simple question:



If you're on the play here, playing the Kami out on turn one will probably generate an additional point or two of damage. Holding it back until later will get an extra use from the Waxmane Baku assuming of course it doesn't die immediately. This extra tap will almost certainly either allow an extra two damage by tapping a blocker, or prevent at least two damage by tapping a would-be attacker. In

general it would probably be best to hold it back here as you can fit it into your expected mana curve on turn four, and the Spiritcraft trigger will probably be worth more than the extra damage.

However, that's not even close to the end of the story. What if your deck has a high number of four-drops? If you skip playing the Kami on turn one you might want to play Nagao, Kami of Old Stone, or any one of a number of potential top-decks on turn four. Then maybe you want to play Shinen of Flight's Wings on turn five. Having the Kami in play early on lets you safely make all sorts of different blocking choices that would otherwise be too risky in this situation. If you failed to get the Kami into play then you might subsequently have to let a Kami of the Hunt through unblocked because you don't want to trade your Shinen for it. If the Kami were in play you could happily block and negate any potential trick by using the Kami's ability. What then if you let the Kami of the Hunt through unblocked and this allows your opponent to Ninjutsu out an Okiba-Gang Shinobi! A far-fetched example this maybe, but there are many such knock-on effects from not playing the Kami out when you have the opportunity to do so.

Also, what if you had a Ninja of the Deep Hours in your deck? Sure there's only about a 3% chance of top-decking it on turn two but how much does that chance have an impact on what your first turn play should be? Does the potential presence of the Ninja on turn two mean you should definitely play out the Kami or not? That question I do not have a definite answer for, but I personally would be much more likely to play the Kami on turn one if I had a Ninja or two in my deck.

Consider also a deck that perhaps contained a Secretkeeper and a Descendant of Kiyomaro in it. In this situation is it perhaps better to keep the extra card in your hand in case you draw one of those cards? Here I'd be more inclined to hold the Kami back if I knew I had cards in my deck that benefited from that.

There are lots of other cards that might affect this decision. If the deck was running Charge Across the Araba there is a case for getting an extra creature in play sooner. If one of your four-drops is Eiganjo Free-Riders then clearly there's another reason for playing the Kami out sooner rather than later. However if you have a Faithful Squire or Kiri-Onna in the deck you might also want to consider holding it back to generate an additional cheap Spiritcraft trigger for those cards as well as the Waxmane Baku.

As you can see even a question like this, which seems simple on the face of it, has a huge number of facets to explore. It's one of those classic questions with an "it depends" answer, but judging how highly to weigh the various considerations is completely down to your own intuition. By spending a bit of time exploring all the possibilities on a hypothetical situation like this one you can only improve that intuition.

Wrapping Up

Hopefully there's been something interesting here for the novice players and the more experienced ones too. Whether or not I do another reader Q & A will very much depend on how much you guys are interested in seeing specific questions like these answered. I'm always looking to expand the topics this column can cover and while I don't anticipate every new style of column will meet with approval I'll be interested to see how useful you all found this one. Discuss your thoughts on the message boards and we'll see what people think.

