

Expert advice on drafting *Ninth Edition*. Early Thoughts on *Ninth Edition*

Matthew Vienneau

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Every two years a new core set is released and it's always an exciting break from the complexities of the Expert-level blocks. With fewer combat tricks, no morphs or ninjas gumming up combat, no 4/4 Myr Enforcers or Werebears hitting play on the third turn and a lot fewer calculations (be it thresholds, creature types or artifact counts), for long-time players such as myself the core set brings back memories of earlier days playing **Magic**. You summon creatures, you attack, and you hope you draw your big bombs. *Ninth Edition* is no exception, but just because it's not as complex doesn't mean that it's easy or that advantages can't be found. I'm going to use the first half of this article to talk about the differences between drafting *Ninth Edition* versus the expansion blocks. I'll also touch on some of the changes from *Eighth* to *Ninth* and what they mean as well as a few quick drafting tips.



Another way that *Ninth Edition* brings back memories is in the number of re-prints from the older sets. Some of the older cards in *Ninth* haven't been in print since before Booster Draft was invented, while other old favourites have been hiding in the back of binders for up to a decade. To make sure no other graybeards have a leg up on you, I've drawn on my decade of draft experience to also write up a quick description of the pros and cons of some of the more interesting older cards.

***Ninth Edition* versus Expansion Blocks**

The differences between drafting *Ninth Edition* versus earlier sets can be summed up in a single sentence:

"I choose to draw first in *Ninth Edition* Drafts."

It's still early, and I may come to regret this statement, but my experience so far has shown that *Ninth Edition* is slow enough that the extra card gained to help smooth your mana and win the inevitable late-game top-decking battles is worth getting hit for a few extra points in the beginning. There are very few quality aggressive two-drops and those that exist are vanilla creatures or have drawbacks so they have little late game potential as opposed to the Kamis of Ancient Law and Shivan Zombies of Kamigawa or Invasion block). Despite the removal of all walls from the core set, the ranks of the defensive early drops are numerous, with Skyhunter Prowler, Lumengrid Warden, Bottle Gnomes, Drudge Skeleton, Sanctum Guard and Horned Turtle leading the way for Giant Spider, Foot

Soldiers, Dream Prowler, Blessed Orator, Dancing Scimitar, Azure Drake and Kami of Old Stone to follow.



Don't think that no walls means no defense

With no “saboteurs” (creatures with abilities that trigger by attacking the opponent) such as ninjas or morphs, you can also afford to let early creatures through knowing that all you’re risking is a bit of damage, not a banish, discard or bounce effect that may cripple your game. A lack of finishers outside of Panic Attack, Blaze and maybe Elvish Bard means you can often sit safely at 6 to 10 life allowing you to take those early hits. The significant lack of mana-smoothing mechanics or themes such as Cycling, Morph and Artifacts (which don’t require specific colours of mana), and no cantrips outside of Sleight of Hand, means that an additional card on your first turn may be critical to not missing land drops and getting the right colours in time. While a weak-mana environment tends to favour fast decks, *Ninth Edition* is so defensive that it doesn’t outweigh the benefits of making sure your three and four mana business spells come out on the appropriate turns.

Knowing that we can survive playing second is only half the argument for drawing first. The other half is all about the advantage of drawing the extra card. Expansion blocks are designed to be self-contained and each set is tuned to play with other sets from the block so there are lots of synergies and interactions between the cards that give a fairly basic card such as Kami of the Hunt the ability to over-achieve with the help of various Spirit and Arcane triggers. A 2/2 for three mana that can occasionally be pumped to 3/3 is hardly a Trained Armodon, but if it triggers a Kami of the Waning Moon allowing another creature to hit for three and then gets brought back to life through Soulshift, we suddenly have synergy and maybe the Armadon isn’t as favoured.

Core sets, on the other hand, are an amalgam of various blocks that may have been designed a decade apart so they tend to lose this synergy. There are five spirits in *Ninth Edition* but with no spirit

triggers or soulshift it ends up being irrelevant. Core sets also have a lot of vanilla creatures that limit the number of options available in any situation. Cruel Deceiver and Soratami Rainshaper provide a much larger number of possible scenarios than Foul Imp and Wind Drake. As a result, *the opportunities to gain card advantage through superior play or synergies from superior drafting are much fewer.* What does this mean? It means that because the playing field is a bit more level for new players and the games tend to go fairly long, **it's more important than ever before to draw more cards than your opponent.**

Drawing more cards means blue has a natural advantage in *Ninth Edition* drafts. If the game goes long enough that blue can take advantage of its *nine different cards* that draw additional cards or allow you to discard extra lands for cards then it will be very difficult to defeat. In contrast, the remaining four colours have less than half that many pure card-drawers combined and many are either rare (Slate of Ancestry), situational (Execute) or both (Phyrexian Arena and Greater Good).



In slow formats card advantage is king, if you can get it.

While it's difficult for other colours to compete in the long game, it's not impossible. Black mages need to make generous use of their discard spells to either gain pure card advantage (Mind Rot) or quality advantage (Coercion, Blackmail). Nekrataal and Gravedigger are other valuable alternatives with an immediate affect on the board as well as card count. Red mages need to use mass or repeated kill such as Orcish Artillery, Anaba Shaman or Pyroclasm to keep up. Green mages have to achieve favourable trades of two smaller creatures (or more) for their bigger ones. White...well white has a bit of trouble with card advantage in *Ninth Edition*. Without many methods of drawing cards or attaining two-for-one exchanges, white has to rely on holding off multiple cards with a Ballista Squad or attaining incremental card quality improvements by perpetually tapping the best creature with Master Decoy. Aven Cloudchaser and Gift of Estates are the only two non-rare cards that can provide immediate advantage and both are situational.

Because of the importance of card advantage, every opportunity to get a two for one should be looked for even if it's as unlikely as Anarchist bringing back Rampant Growth. Many such opportunities are in the sideboard - Viridian Shaman and Needle Storm as well as the various colour hosers such as Slay or Flashfires should all gain you at least a single card when they resolve. It also means that a second look should be taken at Auras where you risk losing two cards to a single Pacifism, Volcanic Hammer or Time Ebb. Putting Unholy Strength on a Glory Seeker may seem really cool when you're

hitting for four damage on turn three, but when it trades for a Hill Giant or Trained Armodon a turn or two later you're already behind in the long game.

Speaking of the long game, as indicated earlier, in *Ninth Edition* draft you're much more likely to get there. In triple *Champions* draft you could easily die with the 7-mana Konda, Lord of Eiganjo in your hand but in slower *Ninth Edition* drafts the 7-mana Rootbreaker Wurm is just the first step towards slapping down a Scaled Wurm or Tidal Kraken. Aladdin's Ring, Plague Wind and Flame Wave are all potentially devastating late game bombs that you should be able to play in at least half of your games. This means that random dorks such as Venerable Monk or Grizzly Bears, while helpful in surviving the first few turns, will often be outclassed by bigger creatures and threats once your opponent has five or six mana in play, and will likely become irrelevant as the bigger bombs arrive (though as we'll see in a moment, you can't leave them out altogether).

Between surviving the early game and playing your late game bombs lies the top-decking battles of the mid-game where the ground stalls and whoever can draw their trump cards can steal victory. Most decks have 3-5 key (generally uncommon or rare) threats such as Confiscate, Ancient Silverback, Gluttonous Zombie or Serra Angel that can quickly win the game if an answer isn't found. You need to draw as many cards as possible during these times to not only increase your chances of drawing threats but also of finding answers. Unlike most expansion sets, *Ninth Edition* has few uses for excess mana in the late game and almost no way of turning excess lands into spells. There are no Hematite Golems, entwine options or even replayable spells such as Molting Skin and Haru-Onna that turn extra land into a benefit – most *Ninth Edition* spells require no mana investments after they are initially played except for the odd Looming Shade or Sandstone Warrior. And with only the uncommon Thought Courier to replace Genjus or Soratami Cloudskaters in exchanging lands for spells or creatures, if you're not properly prepared *Ninth Edition* battles will often come down to who draws fewer lands.

As an example, I recently played Flame Wave to destroy three of an opponent's fliers and unbelievably still lost as I drew three more lands than he did and was thus down a card overall in the game as he quickly replaced his missing creatures while I did nothing but play lands eight through ten. This demonstrates another rule of top-decking – you want lots of creatures in your deck. Coercion, Mana Leak and Mending Hands are all reasonable cards but they rarely have an immediate impact on what's in play. In *Ninth Edition* drafts it is more important than usual to make sure you have a good number of creatures so you'll need to judge your non-creature spells with an extra critical eye – fancy decks with only ten creatures, unless they're blue decks with lots of card-drawing, are unlikely to get very far. You don't want to be losing to a top-decked Goblin Chariot on an empty board as you sit holding Angelic Blessing and Threaten. If you face the choice of random dorks as your 12th through 15th creatures or random non-creature spells, go with the creatures.

To summarize: Absolute card advantage is critical as there are few opportunities to attain advantages in-game through synergy or superior play. This provides blue decks with an inherent advantage that needs to be carefully considered when drafting the other colours, including various sideboard options. The games also typically go long so you can draft expensive bombs that might have been avoided in expansion blocks. In long games, with no way to benefit from drawing extra lands, the only solution is to increase cards drawn overall and make sure you have enough creatures to survive top-decking battles. Aggressive decks have a difficult time with no saboteurs, lots of defensive creatures and few

finishers, though the lack of mana-fixers favours additional random wins from mana-screwed opponents.

When combined, all of this brings me back to my original statement – it's better to draw first. By drawing first you immediately have card advantage no matter what colour you're playing. With such a defensive environment, that benefit, combined with the improved mana possibilities, is worth the disadvantages of going second.

Differences Between *Eighth* and *Ninth Edition*

Colour Hosers

One of the changes that really caught my eye was the removal of the green, blue and white Circles of Protection. I think it's a great idea and appreciate the additional range of uncommon white cards that can now be main-decked. It gives more options in drafting now that it isn't as critical to pick up enchantment removal, something I used to try and have available in case I started seeing COPs even if it was only as a splash. Of course, heavy black or red decks will still need to keep alert to any COPs that might pass by though black has a few workarounds with Highway Robbers and Soul Feast.

I'm not so happy with the inclusion of Flashfires and Boiling Seas. Each of these hosers is so crushingly effective that as a white or blue player I've considered taking them first pick just to make sure I never have to face them in a draft. Excellent splash cards, you can often destroy three lands with these as early as turn five and it's almost always impossible to recover. Be very aware of these two cards.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are Baleful Stare and Withering Gaze. These are essentially unplayable unless you're desperate for card drawers (which, playing blue, you should not be). Your average pull should be about two cards which makes them a Counsel of Soratami that is less effective in the late game when top-decking is most critical. Let your red and green opponents hate-draft them – it won't make a difference.

Anaconda and River Bear are notable in that as 3/3 creatures for four mana they're reasonable cards without their colour-hosing ability and thus can be played main deck. While more vulnerable than the mirror-dominating Bog Wraith, each of these guys makes for excellent help against their target colours, giving evasion to a colour traditionally lacking in that area.

There is little to say about Slay and Execute – they're too narrow to be in your maindeck or to be drafted too highly but they're so good that they should always be sideboarded.

Equipment

It is "Equipment Week" here at magicthegathering.com but with only two pieces of equipment in *Ninth Edition* (and Loxodon Warhammer is rare) it was a little difficult to write an entire article about them. Unlike their original *Mirrodin* block, artifact destruction is rarely main-decked and often can't

even be found in the sideboard of *Ninth Edition* draft (or sealed!) decks. This makes equipment even more powerful as every bad creature of yours exchanges with better creatures of theirs, giving you a huge quality advantage. You'll only need to lose to the Morningstar once before you start grabbing off-colour Shatters or Naturalizes for your future sideboards.

Quick Drafting Tips

How Much Card-Drawing Is Enough?

Blue decks want no more than two or three card-drawing spells as once you get one you'll increase your chance of getting another, but you don't want to have all card drawing and no action, especially early on. If you already have Treasure Trove and Counsel of the Soratami then the value of Sift or Tidings dramatically decreases. All other colours want as much card-advantage as they can find, though you may want to pass on the third Kavu Climber or Phyrexian Gargantua should such an unlikely opportunity occur.

Should you start Naturalize?

There are three common enchantments to worry about – Dehydrate, Pacifism and Treetop Bracers. Only the Bracers are a threat that needs to be dealt with immediately, the others are reactive spells that are often not as immediately deadly. All three are creature enchantments that can also be disrupted with kill or bounce spells. The uncommon enchantments such as Confiscate, Treasure Trove and Blanchwood Armor are a bit more intimidating but there aren't that many of them. Uncommon artifacts are also fairly scarce, especially non-creature artifacts that have no other answer such as Icy Manipulator or Rod of Ruin. Thus the chance of having a target for Naturalize is fairly low and it's probably not worth starting, especially if you suspect that there are a lot of red or black players at the table. But it's a good idea to have one in the sideboard as many rare artifacts and enchantments such as Worship or Loxodon Warhammer can be extremely difficult to defeat.

1-mana Removal

With so few activated abilities on the creatures, the early turns are often limited to one spell a turn with little to do with any extra mana. This makes cheap spells and abilities such as Shock, Giant Growth, Master Decoy, and even Mending Hands especially good. While they've never been considered anything but great spells (except maybe Mending Hands), *Ninth Edition* draft in particular rewards the ability to make two plays at once in the first couple of turns, especially with most decks sporting higher mana curves to take advantage of the longer games. Whether aggressive or defensive, being able to remove a creature and play a creature in the same turn can't help but improve your situation.

1-toughness Creatures

In *Eighth Edition* we had Nausea and Tremor and both were extremely helpful in defeating the swarms of obnoxious 1-toughness creatures such as Deepwood Ghoul, Dusk Imp, Sabretooth Tiger, Canyon

Wildcat, Angelic Page, Coral Eel and Spiketail Hatchling, all of which did not make it to *Ninth Edition*. While many of these were replaced, most notably with Razortooth Rats, Pegasus Charger and Thought Courier, there are still fewer 1-toughness creatures overall. This means Anaba Shaman and Crossbow Infantry have dropped in value and Festering Goblin isn't going to be as good as you remember him from *Onslaught*.

Drafting Red

There aren't too many quality red commons as they mostly consist of 2-power creatures for three or less mana. Even among the uncommons there are a few too many Goblin Balloon Brigades, Whip Sergeants and Anarchists and not enough Pyroclasm or Blazes. The number of bomb rares is roughly comparable with other colours but overall red is pretty shallow. This means you should only draft red if you open a bomb or as a splash colour for a few quick removal spells such as Volcanic Hammer or Pyroclasm. Attacking with grizzly bears and gray ogres won't get you far after the first four or five turns unless you have a Rathi Dragon to back them up.

Drafting Blue

Survive to the long game. Play as many defensive creatures as you can so that the board stabilizes and you can either fly in for the win or start drawing lots of extra cards. Unsummon has been replaced by the much slower Time Ebb, making things a bit more difficult, but not much else has changed. Consider starting 18 lands as you have the best chance of recovering from a land glut and you never want to miss an early land drop. Quicksand is your friend as you don't want to lock up the board and lose to Razortooth Rats.



Drafting Green

Craw Wurm and its larger cousins

Draft huge creatures. Play them. Attack. Repeat. This is the secret of green and all that's changed is that the creatures are bigger and better than ever before. While you don't want to be staring at three giant Wurms in your opening hand, there are few things more deflating for an opponent than finally dealing with a Craw Wurm only to see one of its larger cousins the following turn. Combine the shifting of regeneration to uncommon, the subsequent loss of three common regenerators, and the return of trample, and everything starts to look pretty sweet for the big green creatures. This is good as with Overgrowth replacing Fertile Ground only Rampant Growth remains to assist in splashing other colours – so it appears that 4-colour and 5-colour decks are out of the picture for the next few years as it's unlikely you'll be able to draft more than one or two pain lands.

Drafting Black

To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what to do with black yet. Black has a host of over-priced 2/2s for four mana and 3/3s for five mana and only one non-rare creature will survive a fight with a Hill Giant. This is not a good situation. There are two common and 2-3 uncommon kills spells and you'll need as many as you can get as there is only one non-rare flier so you're vulnerable in the air but your creatures aren't that big so you can also have trouble on the ground. Ambition's Cost is gone so you really need to work those Gravediggers to get extra cards. Discard is your best way of getting card advantage but in the late game it will mostly hit lands and be useless. Gluttonous Zombie and Razortooth Rats provide excellent evasion outside of the mirror but you have to survive long enough to use them. Your best spell is Dark Banishing, which everyone else will potentially take as a splash, while everything else requires a heavy black commitment so you have to commit fairly early. Mix over-priced creatures with your early drop Foul Imps and Serpent Warriors hitting you for damage and it quickly becomes apparent that if there's one colour that may not make it to the long game it's black.

Drafting White

White has a mix of early creatures and fliers with a bunch of 1/1 creatures such as Samite Healer and Infantry Veteran that make combat difficult. Therefore you want to get an aggressive start and try and keep it going as long as possible with aggressive tappers and tricks and then finish them off with fliers. Alternatively you can ignore the smaller creatures and build a purely defensive deck that wins through the air or with rares such as Worship, Blinding Angel or Wrath of God. You're going to have trouble with 4/4 creatures and higher so Master Decoy and Pacifism are your MVPs.

Older Cards

As some of you may not have been around back when they last saw Limited play, here are some short insights into a few of the more interesting re-prints that have made their first appearance in many years. In particular I'm going to comment on the bad cards for this format as I feel too many new players get excited about cards that they should perhaps be leaving for the other drafters. Forgive an old man if I make any mistakes – in some cases I have literally not played with these cards in nine or ten years.

Common

Fishliver Oil (*Arabian Nights/Chronicles*) – In a complicated blue-white mirror match where the board gets locked up and Sea Monsters and Aven Flocks are holding everyone off, this could be the card that breaks it wide open. But that's it. Combining this with Sea's Claim maindeck to create an unblockable creature is not a good decision as it costs you too many cards for too little an effect.

Sift (*Stronghold*) – Essentially it's draw three cards, discard a land. You net the same number of cards as the cheaper Counsel of the Soratami but your card quality improves significantly as you don't *have* to discard one of the three cards you drew (any card in hand will do). There is a lot of competition in the 4-mana slot in blue decks so I'd probably go with the Counsel if forced to make a choice.

Time Ebb (*Tempest*) – Unlike other bounce spells outside of Repulse, Time Ebb will always at least attain card parity. This is important as it means you can use it on turn three to buy time without worrying about losing card advantage. There is a small loss of relative card quality as your opponent's next card will definitely be a spell, but the tempo gains are often worth it.

Elvish Berserker (*Exodus*) – A lot of people are big fans of 1/1 creatures for one mana and they really shouldn't be, especially when they're poor cousins to Devoted Retainers who at least gain the bonus on defence as well. The Berserker is not good. That it gets +1/+1 for *each* creature blocking it is irrelevant as no one blocks a 1/1 with more than one creature, especially now that Lure is gone.

Natural Spring (*Tempest*) – Studies show that players love life gain but it still doesn't cut it in Limited. For five mana you should always be able to find a creature that can prevent (and cause) more than 8 damage so unless you're losing to Blaze, leave it to the side.

Overgrowth (*Stronghold*) – At three mana Overgrowth is too expensive to work as a mana source for the purposes of taking a mulligan and it can set you back quite a bit as your first play if you don't follow it up with a solid six-casting cost creature on turn 4. Not recommended unless you have multiple 6, 7 and 8-casting cost creatures and if that happens, what are you going to do for the first five turns when you don't draw the Overgrowth?

Rootwalla (*Tempest*) – Nothing has changed since *Tempest* block where these guys were very popular for almost always getting through unblocked in the early game and becoming consistent 4/4 powerhouses later on. If you plan on tapping out every turn then these guys are Gray Ogres but that's still a reasonable deal since they can still usually swing in unblocked first. Are they better than Trained Armodon in *Ninth Edition*? Absolutely. They're critical for getting through all the 1/4 and 2/4 blockers even if you don't always pump them up.

Tree Monkey (*Portal Second Age*) – This guy only trades with three fliers – Bog Imp, Suntail Hawk and Goblin Balloon Brigade and those aren't exactly cards you should be scared of. That being said, if you are losing to fliers and have multiple pump spells or creature damage prevention, he might make it in from the bench to help hold the air until your big guys can take over on the ground.

Treetop Bracers (*Nemesis*) – It's Flight for twice the cost and only when attacking (with +1/+1 thrown in) but green is willing to pay that price as a 7/5 flying Craw Wurm is difficult for any deck to handle. An excellent example of green evasion, every deck probably wants at least one of these.

Sandstone Warrior (*Tempest*) – Very difficult to block, the primary disadvantage is that it only hits for 1 damage in the early turns when you need your mana for other things. But once you have three mountains on the board not much can stop this guy. First Strike is something you never really want to spend a card to get but you always appreciate having it along for the ride.

Angelic Blessing (*Exodus*) – “Jump with Pump”, Angelic Blessing is never expected but the sorcery speed means that it mostly functions as a white Lava Axe. If you're playing with big green creatures it can be the finisher white-green decks need, and if you can't find an actual Lava Axe you can try it in fast white-red, otherwise it's probably best on the side.

Pegasus Charger (*Urza's Saga*) – A cheaper Razorfoot Griffin is a welcome replacement – the Pegasus is surprisingly good. Not only can it shut down early gray ogres and grizzly bears in a way that Wind Drakes can only dream of, x/1s aren't as vulnerable as they used to be so this guy can often lock up the air, especially when teamed with a white helper such as Crossbow Veteran.

Uncommon

Cruel Edict (*Portal Second Age*) – The sorcery version of Diabolic Edict is playable but not quite as good as it first appears. Unless it is played early it normally kills an irrelevant little guy that was already being held off by bigger creatures. In black-white or black-blue decks with Pacifism or Dehydrate it can be totally useless so don't hesitate to play it whenever the mana is available.

Horror of Horrors (*Legends*) – While not a card you want to see in your opening hand, Horror of Horrors dominates the late game. Regenerating black creatures, especially with no mana required, are the most difficult to kill creatures in **Magic** that aren't Indestructible. The trouble is finding space in a black deck filled with over-priced creatures when you also want to squeeze in one more discard spell. As one of the few ways to use late game lands, you should try and fit it in. And if you're desperate and losing to a Bog Wraith or Anaconda, you can always sacrifice all your lands and block – boy will they be surprised!

Phyrexian Gargantua (*Apocalypse*) – This guy hasn't been gone for that long but I'm such a big fan I just had to mention him. Not only is he the biggest non-rare black creature, he always comes with two extra cards – an unparalleled gift in a world where card advantage is king. The loss of two life is a small price to pay and you rarely have to worry about paying it twice as not too many opponents will bounce him back to your hand. A “happy to have it” first pick.

Dream Prowler (*Stronghold*) – For an extra blue mana we get a Horned Turtle with an additional point of toughness and the ability to ping an opponent for one if the board locks up and we don't need him on defence. With the 4cc slot already so busy for blue decks, this guy is someone you don't mind playing as the 5-toughness can make a difference, but you don't get excited by it. If you have ways of

pumping his power such as Enrage or Blanchwood Armor then his value obviously increases but the best combos with this guy were Nantuko Disciple and Curiosity and they've both left the set.

Tidings (Starter 1999) – A cheaper Opportunity that isn't an instant and can't target your opponent. While you can no longer deck an opponent at the last moment, I welcome the cheaper price and slower speed as it isn't that often that I need to keep my mana open until the end of my opponent's turn. This should always make your deck.

Elvish Bard (*Alliances*) – Back in the day this guy was an amazing way to break open the notorious ground stalls of *Ice Age/Alliances* sealed deck. Now he's a bit overpriced relative to what else green can get for five mana but he does add a lot of complications to the opponent's attack step and if you can slap a Blanchwood Armor on him you can wipe out every creature as it hits play. You may never see the Royal Assassin or Puppeteer stuck in your opponent's hand, but I assure you the Bard's song is driving him nuts.

Groundskeeper (*Mercadian Masques*) – *Mercadian Masques* was extremely stingy with card advantage as most activated abilities required that you to discard a card, making Groundskeeper an excellent pick in that block. *Ninth Edition* doesn't have quite the same number of opportunities outside of blue decks with Thought Courier, Trade Routes and Sift. Both Greater Good and Peace of Mind also provide combos but I suspect gaining three life a turn isn't worth two cards and three mana. Draft him for your blue-green deck, but realize that he'll most likely make it back around the table.

King Cheetah (*Visions*) – The problem with the Cheetah is that there are very few quality 1-power creatures seeing play and those that do aren't likely to be attacking you on turn four so there's little opportunity for gaining card advantage by playing him at instant speed. The Cheetah mostly wants to pounce on an errant Ballista Squad or Master Decoy but is often happy to settle for swinging with a surprise three points to win a race. I'd much rather have an Anaconda, River Bear or Giant Spider.

Ley Druid (*Fifth Edition*) – Another 3-mana mana enhancer, the Ley Druid is a trap for new players. With no lands in the set that have non-mana tapping abilities, the Ley Druid combos only with Overgrowth to generate absolutely huge amounts of mana. Unless a majority of your deck requires at least two coloured mana this guy is worse than Overgrowth and we already know I'm not a fan of Overgrowth. You can fake out beginner players who attack thinking you're tapped out, but that's about the extent of the Ley Druid tricks that come to mind.

Needle Storm (*Tempest*) – This card is what Web will never be: a permanent mass-kill solution to those pesky fliers. Green is often starving for card advantage opportunities so the chance to remove hated fliers and pick up a card or two makes this an excellent addition to any green sideboard. It should be useful against almost half the decks out there so if you feel flying is a vulnerability of your deck, don't hesitate to start this little gem.

Rootbreaker Wurm (*Tempest*) – The big problem with huge green creatures is that they're always getting chump-blocked and you get killed by fliers while eating all the ground troops. Not anymore! A 6/6 trampler is something no one likes to deal with and seven mana is not an impossible price to pay.

You don't want too many but keep a *Craw Wurm* in the sideboard before you leave out one of these guys.

Web (Fourth Edition) – Formerly a rare, *Web* is too limited to have seen play in any format and has thankfully been reduced to Uncommon. If you're desperate it can be an irritating sideboard card but you always want to try and find something better.

Flame Wave (Stronghold) – This is one of the rarest of all cards, red or otherwise, in that it's a mass-kill spell that only affects your opponent's creatures. As such it's priced accordingly but even at seven mana it's still a bargain if you're heavy enough in red. My earlier story notwithstanding, few opponents can survive losing all of their team and taking four to the head. And unlike *Wrath of God* or *Pyroclasm*, there's no need to hold back creatures or otherwise signal that you're holding it. You need at least nine mountains in your deck to effectively do the *Wave* otherwise it will likely still be in your hand as the game ends, but the thrill of seeing all your opponent's blockers disappear makes it all worth it.

Goblin Balloon Brigade (Fourth Edition) – Providing comic relief more than an actual threat, the *Brigade* should stay at home as a 1/1 evasion creature just won't do enough unless you also have a *Goblin King* whereupon you should still be able to find better cards because remember, the *King* isn't always in the building.

Ballista Squad (Mercadian Masques) – This guy is amazing. When he's active every attack or block costs your opponent a creature. A bit mana-intensive, especially on defence, few creatures dominate combat like the *Squad* and he's one of the few creatures that can buy lots of time when you're mana-flooded.

Gift of Estates (Portal) – Having played very little *Portal* sealed, I admit I haven't seen this card in action yet. But from a purely theoretical viewpoint there's not much to dislike about it. It is one of a handful of solutions to early mana troubles, it benefits the player that goes second, and it draws three cards (*even if they're lands*). Granted, it may sit in your opening hand for a while if you're going first but if you're listening to this article that won't be happening very often, right?

Soul Warden (Exodus) – I've never been a big fan of *Soul Warden* as it's essentially just a *Stream of Life* that can chump block. Without any token generators such as *The Hive* or *Honden of Life's Web* there are few ways to really take advantage of the ability beyond playing her as soon as possible and hoping to trade with a *Lightning Elemental*.

Quicksand (Visions) – One-mana colourless instant kill spells are always useful, just don't get confused and count this as a land. If you're playing *Quicksand* you should normally be playing 18 lands. And keep in mind that if a large creature is attacking you can often weaken it in the *Quicksand* and finish it with a blocker without losing a creature.

Rare

Hell's Caretaker (*Legends/Chronicles*) – As a *Legend* rare that was at one time very valuable, I hadn't had the opportunity to draft with or against a Hell's Caretaker prior to this month. As my opponent endlessly cycled Highway Robber, Sanctum Guardian and Cloudchaser Eagle to kill me, keep his Caretaker alive and gain card advantage, I quickly understood the many benefits of playing with the evil janitor. With fifteen creatures in the set enjoying positive “comes into play” triggers, the Caretaker should have no problem making himself useful.

Hypnotic Specter (*Fourth Edition*) – A throwback to when discard was random and thus extremely frustrating, I realized very little has changed as I was getting beaten over the head with this all-to-efficient creature recently. Creatures that see Constructed play are almost always good in Limited and this guy spent years causing trouble in Constructed. A first-pick kind of card.

Will-o'-the-Wisp (*Fourth Edition*) – While the 0 power may lead you to believe it's ineffective, it's the flying that really makes the difference. As a black flier, the only creatures getting by the Will-o'-the-Wisp without Swampwalk are Phantom Warrior, Dream Prowler and Tidal Kraken. A very effective way of buying time to play out those inefficient Hollow Dogs and Highway Robbers.

Yawgmoth Demon (*Antiquities/Chronicles*) – Anyone who can take down dragons without getting hurt is worth trying to fit into a deck but it's just not going to happen. With no common artifacts and only half a dozen useful uncommon ones, the odds of getting enough into play are so slim that this guy should be drafted purely for the rarity.

Imaginary Pet (*Urza's Saga*) – Don't be fooled by the Pet's inability to ever stay in play, its real purpose is to stop people from attacking whenever you have two extra mana. Nothing says “no” to a fast deck better than a 4/4 that no one wants to trade with on the second turn. If in the late game you're able to make him stick then all the better, but his real purpose is to scare away all those pesky goblins and then go toe-to-toe with a Craw Wurm.

Force of Nature (*Fifth Edition*) – He's unstoppable on turn six, but with four green in the casting cost it doesn't happen very often. And whatever you do, don't trust to an elf or other non-land mana source for the upkeep as you'll be a Shock/Naturalize away from massive amounts of damage. Unfortunately COP: Green has made an exit or we could party like it's 1994 and prevent the 8 damage to ourselves, a trick that's now only available using Worship or Story Circle.

Greater Good (*Urza's Saga*) – Greater Good is an excellent way to get rid of excess lands as well as gain card advantage when an opponent finally takes down one of your giant monsters (*or even your mid-sized ones*). It can be difficult getting things set up as you'd much rather play your Order of the Sacred Bell on turn four than Greater Good but by the time the Good makes it into play the Order may have already traded. However, even a single activation on a 6-power creature that is already going to the graveyard makes it all worth it and it can be especially effective against Dehydrations and Pacifisms that were played earlier in the game.

Verdant Force (*Tempest*) – This fat elemental is infamous for his Constructed appearances though much of that has to do with using Natural Order instead of paying the eight-mana casting cost. It may not come out until late, but it'll have quite an impact when it does. Keep in mind that you (*the*

controller) get a 1/1 token on both your turn and your opponent's – there was a lot of confusion when this first came out.

Flowstone Slide (*Nemesis*) – Both mass kill and mass pump, the Slide is a very expensive way of surprising an opponent with a few extra points of damage in a race or wiping out the entire board and dealing with the few remaining regenerators. Unfortunately it's not optimal at either as red has many of the smallest creatures so your pumping options are limited and once you start spending seven mana to clear the board you'd rather have Flame Wave. Mass kill is never unwelcome but at least something like Bloodfire Colossus comes with a 6/6 behind it.

Karplusan Yeti (*Ice Age*) – A dominating force back in *Ice Age*, the Yeti made quick work of the small evasion creatures that posed the biggest threats at the time. The lack of mana cost to the ability makes this a top-quality weenie destroyer and if you can in any way enhance power/toughness you'll own the board. And once the board is clear he can even attack for three! A first pick.

Rathi Dragon (*Tempest*) – Not much to say except “wow”. The sacrifice of lands means it's very risky to throw this down on turn four but sometimes fortune favours the bold. But by six mana most people can afford two lands for a 5/5 flier and hopefully your opponent has already used his opening kill and bounce on your earlier threats.

Shard Phoenix (*Stronghold*) – As a replacement for Hammer of Bogardan, it's an interesting question which is the better Limited card. Red has a lot of small creatures so the Phoenix's ability can often be difficult to use effectively but once it gets going, especially if you have eight mana, it's difficult to lose the game. There is also the trick of using it during upkeep, recovering it and using it again to deal 4 damage to all creatures. Obviously best in decks with high toughness creatures such as red-green, it may end up as just a 2/2 flier that keeps coming back in red-black.

Thundermare (*Weatherlight*) – People see this and think only of the powerful offensive abilities as you tap everything in play and smack your opponent for five damage. The problem is that since you've just tapped all your blockers, if your opponent somehow survives your blitz for five you're wide open to a counter-attack. And at six mana it's not likely that you can bring in extra blockers on the same turn. Thundermare is good when you're winning or trying to get through with those final points of damage, but until then it will often just sit in your hand. Always play it, just don't be surprised if it's not always a bomb, but when is “sometimes a bomb” bad?

Blinking Spirit (*Fifth Edition*) – In days of yore these were very popular in constructed decks around here as they are impossible to kill without discard or counter magic. As Constructed magic got a bit faster the Spirits kind of disappeared (*as they are wont to do*) and by the time they were re-released in *Fifth Edition* they were sitting on the sidelines with other former greats such as Serra Angel and Sengir Vampire. But in Limited they continue to shine as they happily trade or chump block and then come back the next turn as good as new. A bit slow and not really aggressive, they help turn a mana-flood into a benefit and are rarely a disappointment.

Marble Titan (*Tempest*) – With only three white creatures in *Ninth Edition* with a power of three or more, the Marble Titan is of great assistance in keeping all those large green guys on defence while

you peck away through the air with tiny fliers. Excellent also in Blue decks due to the similar lack of large creatures and fear of wurms and Hill Giants, the big risk with the Titan is over-dependency. Being a creature, the Titan is vulnerable to instant removal and bounce suddenly giving your opponent all his or her creatures back. For those that like to live on the edge, you can add insult to injury by playing creature enhancements such as Holy Strength on your opponent's creatures to take them out of the picture though that leaves you a Dark Banishing away from looking really foolish. And remember - the Titan does affect himself, so treat him like a 3/3 wall...I mean, "creature with defender".

Righteousness (*Fifth Edition*) – Tricks that only enhance blockers are generally considered too narrow to be of any real use. Even Gallantry saw little play despite being a cantrip. But there are two things that may bring Righteousness back into action – it's casting cost and its whopping +7/+7 bonus. With so many big green creatures coming back, white needs a solution that doesn't cost too many cards. And as I mentioned earlier, 1-mana tricks are especially useful in *Ninth Edition* where everyone has expensive spells so it's difficult to fit two plays into the same turn. Plus, as a rare, no one ever expects it!

Booby Trap (*Tempest*) – With three packs of *Ninth Edition* there's a reasonable chance that a deck will have duplicates of a card thus increasing the chances of the Trap going off. But how will you know which card is a duplicate, especially in the first game? Well, if you're a blue mage you use Time Ebon a creature in play and cackle heinously. Aven Windreader is also effective, making Booby Trap a blue card in all but casting cost. While the chances of either of these combos going off are rare enough that I don't suggest it for serious decks unless you have at least three of the blue cards, the chance to deal 10 damage in a single blow is rare enough in **Magic** that sometimes it may just be worth it.

Jade Statue (*Unlimited*) – The Statue is the only *Ninth Edition* card that was already out of print when I started playing and has never been seen since. As such I was really excited about trying him out in my first couple of *Ninth Edition* drafts. The archaic wording that only allows it to be activated during combat is a bit difficult to get used to – in **Magic Online** you have to make sure your stops are set correctly and you remember to activate him before declaring attackers. Reverting back to just an artifact at the end of combat opens the doors to a variety of mass kill tricks both offensively and defensively. The Statue always survives Wrath of God and Plague Winds from either player and requires red decks to use instant kill if they need to finish it off, which is difficult with the extremely high toughness. While not very effective early on, we already know we're likely to have extra mana in the late game and this is an excellent place to be using it.

Jester's Cap (*Sixth Edition*) – The Cap is a difficult card to judge for Limited. While on one hand new players often get excited about not only looking through their opponent's deck but also removing their three best cards, more experienced players realize that the Cap has no direct affect on the game board and those three best cards may never have been drawn. But in any game of reasonable length there's a good chance that at least one of the three best cards in a deck will be drawn, so it's probably best to look at the Cap as trading for one of your opponent's best cards which is certainly a reasonable deal. Except said opponent never actually drew the card, so you're actually spending six mana and a card to replace his best card with another random card with net card disadvantage to yourself. Confused yet? In the end, it's a pretty expensive way to attain card disadvantage but if after game one you've seen difficult to handle bombs such as Wrath of God, Shard Phoenix or Grave Pact that you

want to remove, especially in multiples, then it makes sense to bring it in, just don't pick the Cap too high and hope your opponent didn't already draw the cards you were hoping to remove.

Storage Matrix (*Urza's Destiny*) – This is a difficult card to make work in Limited as it prevents players from both attacking and playing new spells and there aren't too many ways around it unless you've managed to sneak three Llanowar Elves or an Icy Manipulator into play. The Icy combo is very good when you get it working but I don't generally recommend combos where one of the cards is useless without the other. That being said, if you have an Icy and you're playing a very defensive deck with few tap abilities then the Matrix provides an interesting way of slowing down the board while you get set up for the soft lock – Hall of Fame inductee Alan Comer would no doubt be a big fan of this approach. But generally I'd leave it for the wacky and concentrate on drafting more solid cards.

Thran Golem (*Urza's Destiny*) – It's a Timmy's dream to slap a Spirit Link on this guy and glide through the air for five and unlike the Matrix/Icy combo, this one has a much more realistic chance of happening. There are half a dozen reasonable creature enchantments that make this guy worth playing and another half a dozen not so good ones such as Fear or Flight that you can justify if he's in your deck. Just don't go overboard – you don't want to be holding Fear, Unholy Strength and Webwith no creatures to play them on. Green has the most playable creature enchantments with four while white and black are the next best. Unless you want your Golem to Islandwalk or gain First Strike a second time, I'd stay clear of this guy when playing blue-red and even if it's late in the draft and you don't have too many creature enchantments, a 3/3 for five mana artifact creature isn't the end of the world. Just make sure your opponent doesn't have Confiscate!

Random Thoughts to Discuss in the Forums

I love getting comments and emails so in addition to any critiques or kudos you may have I thought I'd add a couple of topics for discussion – a lively message board is an exciting message board!

1. Why is Sea Monster a "serpent" yet Serpent Warrior a "snake"?
2. If green is the best creature colour, why is Llanowar Behemoth so much worse than Serra Angel, Air Elemental and Sengir Vampire and yet costs the same?
3. In a draft should you take Azure Drake (2/4 for 3U) or Aven Windreader (3/3 for 3UU)? What factors do you consider in the decision?
4. If you're drafting a deck evenly split between red and a second colour, should you take Sandstone Warrior (1/3 First Strike with pump for 2RR) or Hill Giant (3/3 for 3R)?

Thanks for reading and I look forward to hearing from you!

Matthew Vienneau