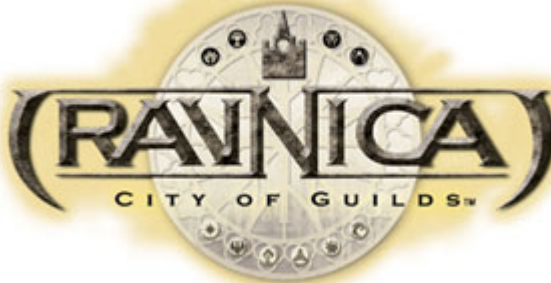


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Tuesday, September 27, 2005

Well there are certainly no prizes for guessing the subject of today's column! *Ravnica* has finally hit and I hope you all had good fun at the pre-releases this past weekend. I was able to get to the London pre-release and got a 32 player sealed deck and three drafts under my belt, which was a nice taster for the new set.



First impressions are very favourable; I enjoyed playing with this set more than any others in recent memory. Indeed, nobody I spoke to had a bad word to say about the set as a result of his or her pre-release experiences. Maybe it's just the re-introduction of shiny gold cards that got everyone excited but I believe it goes beyond that. Many of the gold – aka guild – cards are a lot more powerful than their mono-coloured cousins. Cards like Golgari Rotwurm, Seeds of Strength, and Skyknight Legionnaire are all more powerful than we would expect from similarly costed mono-coloured commons and that theme continues into the uncommons as well. Sunhome Enforcer, Moroi and Drooling Grootion all felt like they were at the sort of power level you'd typically see only on rares.

The end result of this is that it didn't feel to me like too many games were resolved solely on the strength of one player opening better rares than the other. In sealed most players had access to a number of powerful cards, and it was the rest of the deck, and their ability to deal with such cards that made the difference. Yes there are some powerful rares in the set but in general they didn't seem to make as big a difference as I remember them doing in other sets.


Sealed vs. Draft

My initial impression of sealed deck play is that it's a very different animal to the draft play we might expect from the set. Of course this is always the case, but it seemed even truer here. I saw nobody playing a two-colour sealed deck, although I'm sure such a thing might be possible. The inclusion of common artifact and land-based colour-fixers made splashing a third colour very easy for many card pools and there was always a benefit to be gained.



Green also seemed to be a very popular colour in sealed. This is partly because it functions as one of the colours in two of the most popular guilds, and also because it's generally solid in and of itself. There are many great cards in green and with two excellent mana fixers in Farseek and Civic Wayfinder many decks could easily gain access to a third, and sometimes even fourth colour.

With many decks having access to several colours, as well as the various Guild cards, deck building was usually quite complicated. Most players I spoke to said they experienced this and I think this will add some skill to sealed deck play in general. I managed to 4-0 my pre-release flight partly on the strength of a couple of rares (I was fortunate enough to have access to both Hour of Reckoning and Glare of Subdual). The rest of the deck was mediocre though and I was forced to stretch to four colours to fill out the deck. The only colour I didn't play was blue, and I needed *** for the Hour of

Reckoning in addition to  for another card and access to red and black too. However, I had two common dual-lands, and four different Signets (such as Golgari Signet) as well as a Civic Wayfinder and a Farseek to support this. With access to so many different fixers, constructing a stable mana-base was particularly complicated. I was eventually able to play a Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree and only run 16 lands in total but still never really experience colour problems due to the large quantities of mana fixing available.

Multi-colour-green sealed decks will surely be common throughout the coming months. When you do have access to multiple colours the number of cards you can consider for inclusion increases dramatically which then makes the deck building process more skilful.

Draft play seemed to be a lot more focused on the various guild colours. In my experience so far it's simply not possible to draft enough playable cards if you aren't drafting at least one of the guilds. The four options available appear to vary considerably in sheer power terms but that might simply be because one combination is much easier to draft than others. I'll talk about how the colours and guilds shape up shortly.

The addition of the guild dual-lands and guild Signets amongst the commons meant that you could easily draft a splash colour if you wanted to. Due to these commons only ever providing guild mana though, it's far easier to splash across a second guild than an otherwise unrelated colour. Splashing blue into your green-black deck is much easier than splashing red for example.

The Guilds



As I already stated, green looked to be very popular in sealed deck. I think it has the quality commons and mana fixers to make that fairly standard over the coming months.

In draft things were a little different but green still appeared to be on top initially. Although I only played in three drafts myself I spent a lot of time talking to other players about their own experiences too. Many of the top draft decks featured green, with both black-green and green-white being represented. Indeed my own experience with a green-white draft deck was very favourable, and I was able to draft that combination with a lot of success.

There are great commons in both of those colours and it certainly wasn't difficult to find enough playable cards, even though green is shared amongst both Selesnya and Golgari drafters. Indeed the Selesnya guild cards all seem particularly strong with Seeds of Strength, Selesnya Evangel and Guardian

of Vitu-Ghazi all being powerful commons in that colour combination.

The other guilds have their own share of power too, but Woodwraith Strangler, Rally the Righteous and Perplex are weaker than the worst of the green-white cards.

The Golgari guild (black-green) seemed to be up there in terms of power as it too has a couple of solid commons as well as having access to the many black removal spells. Brainspoil, Clinging Darkness, Disembowel, Last Gasp and Stinkweed Imp are all present amongst the commons and are all capable of playing the removal role. You'll be sharing these cards with Dimir drafters though so you won't often end up with the quantity of removal you might otherwise anticipate getting.

Outside of the black removal there aren't too many amazing creatures amongst the commons so you might struggle if you're in a draft with a lot of black drafters.

The two colours that likely won't be over-drafted are red and blue, as they're the two colours that only make up part of one guild rather than two. If you take an example draft where you might have two players each drafting one of the four guilds you have four black drafters (two Dimir, two Golgari), four green drafters (two Golgari, two Selesnya), four white drafters (two Selesnya, two Boros) but only two drafters each for both red (Boros) and blue (Dimir). I haven't really established yet how this will affect drafts but it might make it easier on the Boros and Dimir drafters as they don't have to share one of their colours with drafters who are taking different guilds.

My initial impressions of these last two guilds are that they are weaker than Golgari and Selesnya overall. This is only a first impression though and it might simply be that Dimir and Boros are just harder to draft than the other guilds. Looking through the commons in blue and red, they do seem to be significantly weaker than the other colours. This may simply have been necessary to balance them out because fewer players will typically draft them, but time will tell whether they are actually weaker as they initially appear to be.

Boros clearly has to be the aggressor in any game and I think it will need to be drafted that way. It needs a plentiful supply of early drops and ideally a way to get some late game damage through. Skyknight Legionnaire is the best guild common for the deck it seems and if that follows up a one-drop and a two-drop then an opponent will quickly run out of time. The Selesnya guild in particular seems very adept at stalling the ground so the Legionnaire will be particularly important in that match-up.

I suspect the Dimir Guild will be much trickier to master. A lot of its cards have a clear focus on decking as a route to victory, while others suggest evasion as the primary way to win. A lot of early Dimir draft decks seemed split between this, and the lack of focus on either perhaps weakened them. It may be possible to draft two different Dimir decks with those different objectives but I suspect one route will be preferable to the other. I did make the final of one draft with a Dimir deck and won all four games en route to the final by decking my opponent so I believe that will be a viable strategy over the coming months.



The Mechanics

From my experience so far Convoke is the winner here. Before playing with the set I heard a lot of players saying that they thought it might be a weak ability; you're tapping your creatures every turn after all, and not attacking with them. Playing the Selesnya guild in draft though showed that not to be the case. There are a lot of excellent commons that have, or help, Convoke, and it isn't tricky to get a draft deck full of them. A second turn Fists of Ironwood (on an opponent's creature if you have to) leads into a third turn Scatter the Seeds which can give a fourth turn Siege Wurm or Guardian of Vitu-Ghazi. You certainly haven't been Overwhelmed at that point and you already have a total of nine or ten power's worth of creatures in play so good luck to any opponent trying to race you. Even when you don't get the perfect draw you can often crank out Siege Wurms and Conclave Equenauts ahead of their normal schedule. Many of the Convoke creatures can become significantly under-costed with the help of a simple Scatter the Seeds on turn four. Late game or stall situations can soon see Selesnya Evangel or Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree Overwhelming an opponent.

Dredge was also a successful limited mechanic for me. Many of the commons with Dredge aren't too threatening but sometimes just getting back that Mossdog or Shambling Shell every turn can be enough. At the very least you'll know you can draw a spell if you really feel you need one in any given turn. The uncommons and rares can be very nasty though, and I saw games swung on the back of both Golgari Grave-Troll and Moldervine Cloak as those cards came back two more times in the games they featured in.



Radiance was useful on several occasions but it can be ineffective in some situations as it does affect all creatures in play. This means that sometimes your Bathe in Light will save an opponent's creature too and sometimes your Cleansing Beam will take out one or two of your own guys as well. The Radiance cards are solid but the ability is potentially very powerful and so is restricted to minor effects. Some of the commons can be very useful all the same. Incite Hysteria frequently stops all opposing creatures from blocking for a turn which is great in Boros decks. Wojek Siren can benefit Selsnya decks considerably when they have a horde of 1/1 Saprolings on their side.

The only mechanic that didn't see a lot of play was Transmute. This feels like more of a constructed mechanic than a limited one. The more powerful cards in the set tend to cost a little more mana and it's much harder to find suitable cards that Transmute into them. In the right circumstances Transmute can be very powerful. If you open a Plague Boiler or Necroplasm then you may well want to play some Transmute cards just so you can fetch either of those at the opportune moment.

The power of the Transmute cards are obviously very dependent upon the rest of your deck but there aren't many cards that will Transmute into your powerful five and six mana late game spells.

Mana in Ravnica

I'd like to start by addressing the common dual-lands assigned to each Guild (Boros Garrison, Dimir Aqueduct, Golgari Rot Farm and Selesnya Sanctuary). There's no doubt that these lands can assist you in fixing your coloured mana but there is a significant tempo loss involved when playing them. As they come into play tapped you lose one mana the turn that you play these. If you're forced to use them as your land drop in the early turns of the game this could hurt your ability to cast the spell you wanted on that turn. The early turns of the game are the most crucial so this is a disadvantage that should not be overlooked. The colour-fixing element is important though and I think many sealed decks and draft decks will want to play these lands for that reason alone.



There is an additional factor to bear in mind with these lands. Each land taps for two mana, which means they actually increase the amount of mana your deck is capable of producing. If you have stalled on four lands but still have access to one of the common Guild lands then you can still generate five mana once you have your lands untapped. There were a couple of games I played where I stalled on two lands but had access to a Guild land which then allowed me to generate three mana and cast a Civic Wayfinder and stay in the game. Without the Guild land I would've been in a lot more trouble.

The net effect of this is that the common Guild lands will likely allow players to cheat a little on land counts. If you can play 16 lands in total while including two of the appropriate guild land then not only are your coloured mana requirements helped, but the lands in your deck are also capable of generating 18 mana in total. While this isn't the same as actually running 18 lands – sometimes you'll draw a shortage of lands and **not** have access to a Guild land for example – it still gives you access to more mana than 16 basic lands would in the same deck. I think the inclusion of these lands in limited decks will be a talking point for some time to come yet. Some decks, like a typical Boros deck, might not want to suffer the tempo loss. Other decks might be able to cope with the tempo loss or just rate the benefits of a lower land count and better coloured mana ahead of it.

The other set of cards to consider is the inclusion of the four common Signets.



These obviously provide solid mana acceleration as they allow four mana spells on turn three, and they again help fix your coloured mana requirements. They do cost you a card but they'll still be fighting for a place in a lot of limited decks when they help generate on-colour mana. The inclusion of the Signets also makes you want to cheat on land count a little as you want to include them in your deck but also need to make sure you don't get mana flooded.

The final point here is the inclusion of both Farseek and Civic Wayfinder amongst the green commons. Both cards are excellent mana fixers with one providing fixing & acceleration and the other also providing fixing & acceleration. Just as five-colour green was popular in Invasion I think it highly likely we'll see a return of that archetype, or at least something close to it with *Ravnica*.

The guild lands and the signets also aid the addition of splash colours, even more so of two colour splashes. If you get two Dimir Aqueducts and a Dimir Signet it's quite possible to splash both blue and black cards on the strength of those three mana sources alone.

I'll be tackling the various guilds, the cards in them, and the strategies they appear to require in more depth over the next week or two. In the mean time I'd encourage you to share any pre-release stories in the forums linked below. I'd be especially interested to read about any specific cards or deck types that players thought were being over-rated or under-rated at the pre-release or just your general impressions of the new set.

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