

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



ITA with SWK

*Bennie Smith
 Into the Aether
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For me, **Magic** moments have always been most satisfying when shared with friends. Whether it's playing casually up at the local game shop, or getting up at some unreasonable time and road tripping to Regionals, it's your friends that add something special to the games. They're there to share your highs and they're there to help you laugh away the lows.

My hometown of Richmond, Virginia has spawned a few **Magic** pros. Likely the most notable so far was Kyle Rose (who would probably insist he's actually from Chester but don't be fooled—Chester is a spoke in the hub of Greater Richmond). I never really knew Kyle well enough to get any special pleasure from his success; it wasn't until Kevin Davis qualified for Pro Tour Lin-Sivvi that I got to experience the thrill of following the online coverage to see how a friend was doing and who he was facing. Kevin was there with me when I won State Champs in '99, and I remember stopping after a funeral in time to see the finals at the PTQ and watch Kevin decimate his White Weenie-wielding opponent with his Necro deck. Sadly, Kevin dropped out of playing **Magic** not long after. We miss you round the way, bud.



Rose, at PT Barcelona '01

Recently, I got to experience another local **Magic** friend making some noise on the Pro Tour scene—young Chris McDaniel, aka "Star Wars Kid" or SWK. I remember first meeting Chris up at my local game shop, playing the Star Wars CCG. The Star Wars game never really called to me because it looked like there was just simply way too much going on—I remember looking over and the entire table would be chock full of cards, many of them all looking alike, some spaceship against a black star field. SWK never seemed to have any trouble keeping track of everything... so it was no surprise that he gravitated to combo decks when he made the leap over to **Magic**. SWK was the player that first struck fear in my heart when resolving a *Mirari's Wake*, both in tournament and casual play. In my ode to group game politics, [The Legend of Chuck](#) (over at Star City), SWK plays a key role with said enchantment.

Fast forward several years later, and it's not surprising SWK snares a cool \$13K not least of all on the back of the enchanting heir to *Wake*, *Heartbeat of Spring*. It's been a blast watching the video coverage playback and seeing SWK on the Sunday stage, with the big name players, and Randy and Mike dissecting his deck and game play. That's—like—one of my homeboys up there on the stage! Very cool.



SWK (left) making his Top 8 debut at PTLA

I knew that Chris had spent a lot of time playing **Magic Online** for the past year, so I thought we could pick his brain about his big win and how **Magic Online** has helped with his rise to the spotlight, particularly now that the paper Extended format matches up with **Magic Online**.

ITA: Congrats on your Top 4 pro tour performance! How does it feel that everyone who wants to play combo in Extended will most likely be playing your deck?

SWK: It's pretty cool. To be fair I copied the exact list from Tim Aten a few minutes before the tournament. I had been playing a deck that was very much like it, but there were a few differences that ended up affecting my performance quite a bit.

ITA: Like what?

SWK: I already had the *Tribe Elders* in there but was unsure whether to use *Rampant Growth* or *Wild Growth*. Adding *Rampant* ensures a turn 2 *Heartbeat* but is just so much worse against red decks with land destruction or in longer games where the deck thinning and the ability to get blue mana becomes important. I had more copies of *Deep Analysis* and less *Fact or Fiction* but that was mainly due to the cost of Facts on MTGO, I also had 3 *Gifts* main and one in the board to wish for, this is just worse than playing four main, it is almost always better to fetch a *Fact or Fiction* with *Wish* as opposed to *Gifts Ungiven*. *Gifts* is the more powerful card, but you really want to draw it naturally and not have to wish for it.

ITA: Why did you decide to play that deck?

SWK: I have been playing *Desire* in every format for as long as I could, however it is funny because I promised myself I would never again play a *Mind's Desire* deck in a sanctioned tournament after I scrubbed out of two

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NOVELS

Dissension
 Ravnica Cycle, Book III
 by Cory Herndon

different tournaments and formats in the same week about 2 years ago. I guess it's a good thing I went with instinct over reason this time.

ITA: I think I heard somewhere that your deck originated as a Singleton online deck?

SWK: Yeah, when *Champions of Kamigawa* first came out I had just gotten into Singleton on [MTGO] and just for laughs I decided to try and build a *Mind's Desire* deck when every card was restricted. It surprised me a lot because it just kept on winning, and the card *Gifts Ungiven* really shocked me. It proved to be a one-card combo every time I drew it. Ever since then I've been trying to play Gifts in every format I could, Vintage, Extended, Block, and Standard. This is the current list I am playing, although I am quite sure that there are several cards that do not belong.

Singleton Desire by SWK			txt	
Singleton Combo Deck				
60 cards				
1 Flooded Strand	1 Diligent Farmhand	1 All Suns' Dawn		
9 Forest	1 Eternal Witness	1 Compulsive Research		
8 Island	1 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Concentrate		
3 Plains	1 Solemn Simulacrum	1 Decree of Justice		
1 Swamp	1 Sunscape Familiar	1 Deep Analysis		
1 Windswept Heath		1 Early Harvest		
	5 creatures	1 Explosive Vegetation		
23 land		1 Fact or Fiction		
		1 Far Wanderings		
		1 Farseek		
		1 Future Sight		
		1 Gifts Ungiven		
		1 Harrow		
		1 Heartbeat of Spring		
		1 Kodama's Reach		
		1 Mind's Desire		
		1 Mirari's Wake		
		1 Nostalgic Dreams		
		1 Opportunity		
		1 Peer Through Depths		
		1 Rampant Growth		
		1 Recollect		
		1 Restock		
		1 Revive		
		1 Rude Awakening		
		1 Sensei's Divining Top		
		1 Telling Time		
		1 Temporal Fissure		
		1 Tendrils of Agony		
		1 Tidings		
		1 Vernal Bloom		
		1 Wayfarer's Bauble		
		32 other spells		

ITA: Since your PTLA deck has nothing newer than some key cards from *Champions*, I assume you've probably had this deck built on *Magic Online* for some time?

SWK: Yeah, I've had a U/G Gifts/Desire list on MTGO since *Champions* made its online debut.

ITA: Did you try any cards from *Ravnica*, or did you just go with what you knew was good as it was?

SWK: I didn't try any *Ravnica* cards because nothing really fit from the new set. None of the new lands were U/G, not that they would be played anyway because *Early Harvest* only untaps basic lands. *Recollect* could have a case made for it but I never played *Eternal Witness* purely because he cost 3 mana, the one-mana difference makes both cards inferior to *Revive*. *Transmute* is a little slow for Extended and really bad against *Cabal Therapy* and the draw spells are just worse than *Fact or Fiction* and *Gifts Ungiven*.

ITA: I remember first meeting you, you were into the Star Wars TCG. How long ago was that? What drew you into playing *Magic*?

SWK: That was about 7 or 8 years ago. I started playing *Magic* when the Star Wars regulars were out of town for a tournament and me and a friend each bought starter decks of *Prophecy* to play against the *Magic* players at the shop.

ITA: How long have you been playing MTGO?

SWK: I played on Beta quite a bit but once that ended, I mean how stupid would you have to be to pay for virtual cards? But I came to my senses during *Onslaught* and haven't looked back since. Since I started playing online my game has improved tremendously.

ITA: What formats do you play? What's your favorite?

SWK: I play mostly limited and Singleton except when I need to prepare for an upcoming tournament then I suck it up and trade for all the cards I need to test. Singleton is by far my favorite format.

ITA: How often do you play on MTGO as opposed to playing paper **Magic**?

SWK: I play MTGO a few days a week and since I have started college I've been lucky to play paper **Magic** once a month.

ITA: What do you like about **Magic Online**? Has it helped improve your game?

SWK: I like how no matter what time it is you can find a game, no matter what the format is. The games go much faster without having to shuffle and the computer taking care of all rules. My game has improved exponentially since I've started playing **Magic Online** regularly. Just by the sheer amount of games you can play in a short amount of time you get better, even if your opponent happens to be bad. You can always learn something about whatever format you are playing.

ITA: What do you not like about **Magic Online**?

SWK: The scarcity of older cards, it is very hard to build a deck for basically any format older than Standard. That is why I like Singleton so much, if I need an expensive card, at least I will only need one copy!

ITA: How did you build your online collection?

SWK: I drafted, a lot. For the longest time I was slugging it out in the 4-3-2-2's just trying to not lose too much money, eventually I started winning more and more. Suddenly I had enough cards to trade for a *Mirrodin* Block Constructed deck online. Soon enough all my practicing with that one type of deck paid off with a 9th place finish at GP New Jersey. Now with only being able to afford a Desire deck in Extended it has paid off once again with a 4th place finish at PT Los Angeles! I guess not being able to get the expensive cards and limiting me to only being able to play one type of deck for a format has been a good thing. Practice makes perfect.

ITA: I remember for a while you were simply one of the better local players, but recently you've been making quite a splash on the Pro scene! What would you say are the keys to taking your game to a higher level?

SWK: **Magic Online** has been a huge boost to my game, being able to play whenever I want has helped develop my skill. Also getting to know people to be able to test with and get decks from. Most notably would be the testing before Pro Tour Philadelphia as a member of Taking Back Sunday, Gadiel, John Pelcak, Tim Aten, Adam Chambers, Don Smith, Pacifico, Biiiiiiiig Oooootz just to name a few. All working together to come up with the deck Gadiel would eventually use to win the PT. I couldn't imagine that a few months later Tim Aten would be giving me a list that I'd top 4 a Pro Tour with!



ITA: How tough has it been to balance keeping your game crisp with keeping up with college?

SWK: It has been very difficult, the Internet connection at VCU is atrocious, and it is literally impossible to access **Magic Online** from my dorm room. The only place I can play is in the student commons and even there the connection is erratic. So I haven't been able to play **Magic** very much at all, in real life or online. Luckily I had played a lot over the summer, which was able to keep me sharp enough for LA.

ITA: I know you love combo, and your Heartbeat deck from Extended seemed like a natural deck for you to play. Looking at some of the other decks in the format, what would you be interested in trying out?

SWK: I love control as well, the Tog and Scepter-Chant decks all seem awesome. I guess I just don't like bothering to attack with creatures. If I have to attack, I'd rather only do it once or twice per game I guess.

ITA: Now that *Ravnica* has been released online, any cards you are interested in trying to add to your collection?

SWK: The new dual lands since they are obviously going to be necessary to build most any deck from now on. Most of the other cards that interest me are common or uncommon though, so hopefully it won't be too hard to get everything I want. **Recollect** is at the top of the list probably, then there are cards like **Compulsive Research**, **Telling Time**, **Drift of Phantasms** along with most of the other Transmute cards, **Remand**, **Putrefy**, **Farseek**, the Guildmages, and **Frenzied Goblin**. Obviously any commons or uncommons that lend themselves to combo or control decks :D

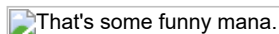
ITA: What do you think about *Mirage* coming to MTGO? Any particular cards from that set you're looking forward to building decks with?

SWK: I think it's awesome, especially if it leads to other, older sets being added online. *Mirage* has quite a few cards that lend themselves particularly well to combo decks, which is always a good thing.

Behind the Curtain: Tales from Programming *Ravnica*, Part 2

[Rachel Reynolds](#) talked to us [last week](#) about the challenges of programming *Eye of the Storm*. This week continues with the stories about the challenges and fun behind programming *Ravnica: City of Guilds*.

RachelR: "One of the most amusing things about programming *Ravnica* was getting the split mana symbols to work. Actually, it was more what the cards looked like before I did any work on them. I really had no clue how the game would handle the split mana symbols before I did any work on them. I was just hoping that when I started parsing *Ravnica* cards I would be able to compile the server code and run a client that didn't crash without having to do any work to make split mana symbols work first (for each set in the *Champions* block, there were cards I had to program before I was able to get code to compile that parsed the set). It turns out that the system handled them much more elegantly than I was expecting. There were no real problems that forced me to handle split mana symbols before anything else. The hybrid cards just looked, well, a little funny before we had programmed in how they should look. The client tried to recognize the mana costs and come up with symbols for them, and ended up using the WOTC logo, smiley face, and a couple different colorless symbols (for 16 and 11 mana, I think)."



The Itch to Draft

Saturday my daughter went to a birthday party but little brother Aaron was not invited and got to stay at home with Dad. He's three and didn't think it was fair his sister got to go somewhere and he didn't, so I ended up taking him out for a ride. Somehow we ended up at the local game shop, Shardz. My intention was just to pop by, Happy Meal in tow, let Aaron eat some lunch and absorb the gamer atmosphere. Three's not too young is it?



Josh, Tony H., Tony V., and Star Wars Kid – fresh from the PT – are there. "Just in time to draft!" exclaims Josh, but I have to decline. I know Aaron won't want to sit still for long, but I do get to watch *Ravnica* get drafted for the first time, and observe some of the first games in between chasing down Aaron and preventing him from triggering Extinction Level Events on some of the miniatures board games going on.

Watching them draft *Ravnica*... got me itchy. Itchy to draft online.

I can hear some of you moaning already. My bad drafting skills are legendary, I know, so if you want to bail now I understand. Before you go though, I will say I think I've gotten better. I made it to the finals of an 8-man with a pretty good deck, but in case my draft deck offends your eyes, I also got the winning decklist too.

Here's what I played and my sideboard:

Main Deck 40 cards		Sideboard
6 Forest	1 Faith's Fetters	1 Swamp
6 Plains	1 Gaze of the Gorgon	1 Goblin Spelunkers
3 Swamp	1 Golgari Germination	1 Boros Guildmage
2 Golgari Rot Farm	2 Last Gasp	2 Caregiver
17 land	1 Scatter the Seeds	1 Conclave's Blessing
	1 Seeds of Strength	1 Dromad Purebred
1 Benevolent Ancestor	7 other spells	1 Dryad's Caress
1 Civic Wayfinder		1 Fists of Ironwood
1 Conclave Equenaut		1 Incite Hysteria
2 Elvish Skysweeper		1 Ivy Dancer
1 Golgari Guildmage		1 Leave No Trace
2 Selesnya Evangel		1 Nightguard Patrol
1 Shambling Shell		1 Peregrine Mask
1 Siege Wurm		1 Shred Memory
3 Stinkweed Imp		2 Strands of Undeath
1 Thoughtpicker Witch		1 Sundering Vitae
1 Transluminant		2 Torpid Moloch
1 Trophy Hunter		1 Zephyr Spirit
16 creatures		21 sideboard cards

Even though my black is a tad heavier, I leaned a bit more on white mana because most of my white cards are better early game. The mana seemed to work fine for me, but I know I was skirting disaster going three colors. I was particularly happy with the *Selesnya Evangel* and *Elvish Skysweeper* combination (two of each!) that teamed up a few times to wreak havoc on my opponent's flying army. The big flaw I felt the deck had was a distinct lack of finishers, with the exception of one *Siege Wurm*. Most all of my creatures are small, and my finals opponent snoogms and his Boros pingers exploited that weakness. We had two pretty good games, both of which had me start pretty well and then him turning the game around with his creature control elements. In the last game, I was having a tough time punching through, and got him to one life but finally ran out of time on the clock. Afterwards I asked snoogms to share his deck and tell us a little bit about himself.

"My name is Gisli Svanbergsson, I'm 21 years old. I have played on MTGO for about 2 years and my name there is snoogms. Played a lot before, but now I am just playing when I have free time. I live in a small city called

Mosfellsbær in Iceland. I think I have played **Magic** for like 8 years or so.

"Yes I have drafted *Ravnica* pretty much, I like *Ravnica* so much, it just has so much to offer over *Mirrodin* sets and also *Kamigawa* sets. I like drafting Boros very much, and I think it has much more to offer you than the other guilds. It gives some great flyers, it's aggressive and has so much great removal. I played in the *Ravnica* prerelease here in Iceland, got 4th there. Then I went to Grand Prix Nottingham, can't say that was some great results there, went 4-3-1.

"Thx again for the games m8, looking forward to play with you some time;)"

snoogms - 8-Person Draft *Winner* 

RAV-RAV-RAV Online Draft
40 cards

8 Mountain	1 Boros Recruit	1 Boros Signet
7 Plains	2 Courier Hawk	1 Fiery Conclusion
1 Boros Garrison	1 Sell-Sword Brute	2 Galvanic Arc
16 land	1 Thundersong Trumpeter	1 Sunforger
	1 Goblin Spelunkers	1 Dogpile
	2 Skyknight Legionnaire	1 Cleansing Beam
	1 Twilight Drover	1 Flash Conscription
	1 Ordrun Commando	8 other spells
	1 Screeching Griffin	
	1 Sunhome Enforcer	
	1 Viashino Fangtail	
	1 Wojek Embermage	
	1 Auratouched Mage	
	1 Conclave Equenaut	
	16 creatures	

*Bennie Smith has been playing **Magic** since Arabian Nights, and writing about it nearly as long. Several of his early musings appeared on the Magic Dojo, and from there he became a featured writer for Star City Games and a Contributing Editor for Scrye Magazine before he started writing for magicthegathering.com. While a casual gamer at heart, Bennie also thoroughly enjoys the competitive side of **Magic** and won the Virginia State Championship in 1999.*



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