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*"And with the draw I made the Top 8! The world at my feet, fame and power mine for the taking. It was the grandest of days..."*

*As he trailed off the ancient graybeard realized that his audience had quietly slipped away and fled for the exits. Mumbling about ungrateful hooligans with short attention spans and no appreciation for their elders, he settled back into his chair and began to doze...he knew they'd be back.*

## An Introduction

I know, I know, most of you were keen to return to 1996 and Pro Tour Atlanta but there's been a small change in plans. The homework question from last week ended up giving me several thousand words of analysis and commentary, so instead of overwhelming you with a twenty-page thesis in only my second week, I'm going to save the rest of Atlanta until later and do a bit of strategy.

Before we get started, it seems I need to introduce myself. I thought that after ten years of high-level play, some recent articles for this very site, and a couple of reasonable finishes back in the day, that I needed no introduction, but apparently that's just my pesky ego talking and to some of the newer readers I'm just a whacked-out loon with no "cred". Sure, I may not have my own pro-player card, but I've been beaten by at least half the people that do!

I used to be good at **Magic**. I used to be *really* good. Until about 1997. And then I picked it up again in 2000-2001 before disappearing into obscurity and falling off the Pro Tour (though I recently reappeared on the Hall of Fame ballot, where I got two votes). I've been invited to over thirty Pro Tours with one Top 8 and a bunch of Top 32 finishes, and I've made four Grand Prix Top 8s and but a single Nationals Top 8 (Canadian). I was invited to both the Sydney and the Cape Town Invitationals... as a reporter (and those tournament report are under lock and key) and I covered a Grand Prix in Kyoto as well as the Asia-Pacific Championships in Malaysia. I've written dozens of articles about **Magic** for all the major sites as well as some paper magazines. I was originally known for writing extremely long and scathing tournament reports and this eye for perfection eventually got me invited to visit Seattle for a weekend of meetings a few years ago on how to improve **Magic**, an experience I cherish to this day. I became a level two judge so that I could understand both sides and improve my game, but have since let it lapse to a level one because I don't make it out to real life tournaments very often anymore.

I'm notorious for making critical play errors at crucial moments though I suspect that is only because I'm more willing than most to admit to it. While I once possessed a confident cockiness, there's nothing like repeated poor finishes to add a touch of misunderstood self-deprecation to one's tone. Over the past year I've been writing a bunch of theoretical articles that read like encyclopedia entries so recently I'm working on acquiring an "attitude" to keep things fresh and controversial. You have to appeal to the kids or you lose your audience, I learned that from Madonna.

My plans for the column? Well, I'm only here for two weeks before we start doing the end of year "best of" articles so I can't say I'm really going to have a chance to put my stamp on things. The role of "pompous reminiscing windbag" didn't seem to go over too well last week so I guess I'll have to leave that to Flores. I do view this as more of a seminar situation than instructional as there's way too much to learn for me to include it all and often other people bring up viewpoints that I've rarely

considered. As such, I'm an enthusiastic supporter of people sharing their opinions and suggest anyone who is really interested in Limited strategy take a gander at the forums and test your theories against the collective critiques of your fellow posters.

Speaking of the message boards...

## The Homework

Last week I wanted everyone to work out the correct mana for a sample deck. The answers were often very detailed and well thought out and I really appreciate the dozens of people who went to that effort to respond in either the forums or by email.

I found it amusing to see various people either criticize the deck for being absolutely horrible ("I'd commit suicide if I had drafted that deck") or comment that it must be a draft deck because it was so amazing ("two Stinkweed Imps and two Brainspoils, it can't be a sealed deck!") Apparently everyone has different expectations when it comes to "good" decks.

In actuality, it was my Two-Headed Giant deck from the worldwide Two-Headed Giant events of two weekends ago. As a result it's designed to ignore the early game and concentrate on building up to a big finish as you have 40 life and frequent ground stalls. Extra points to all the posters that realized there was something weird about the deck and commented that it likely wouldn't do so well in a draft.

Conveniently, despite being intended for a non-typical format, the deck happened to feature just about every aspect of working out mana ratios that one could possibly imagine. Even I didn't realize how complex the problem was until I started reading through the various answers and possibilities and realized that over 30 different answers were provided! While some of them were a bit crazier than others (some people really want to play their splash colours in the first few turns), most were relatively reasonable. You want to know where the skill comes into limited deck building? It starts right here!

Let's take a look at the different aspects to consider:

## Poor Deck Design

While I didn't expect it, many readers reached outside of the problem and wanted to improve the deck by removing either the Hunted Troll or the Root-Kin Ally. If I had thought people would go so far, I would have provided additional "alternates" to fill the slots, but I only expected people to remove a single colour. I think adding a Gulgari Brownscale and Carrion Howler to your options makes the problem more interesting, but unfortunately I missed the opportunity.

Hunted Troll generated a lot of hate, and I think it was well deserved. Including this guy in our deck was definitely a mistake and every time we drew him we refused to play him and counted it as a late mulligan. Much like many of the forum posters, we got caught up in visions of making him trample and otherwise making really cool plays and it just never turns out the way you hope. He should definitely be tossed for the Mortipede if you stick with four colours. He's a bit too easy to chump, you don't want to waste your kill on free flying tokens, and even if you have flying blockers, you'd rather be attacking with them than staying at home. The tokens can chump the Troll by themselves and still come in for six extra damage. Playing an 8/4 that says "tap for four turns and take 6 damage" is not a bargain at 🍀🍀🍀. People may protest that you have lots of answers in the Stinkweed Imps and Mortipede(s), but then you're trying to play a combo deck where one piece of the combo is useless without the other. Unless the combo is game-winning, that plan is a mistake, and the Troll/Imp combo is not a quick game-winner.



Some people picked on Root-Kin Ally and they likely had a good reason to if they were thinking about draft decks. My experiences with him always been favourable (except when my opponent is using it) but that is mostly in the slower sealed environments where creatures tend to build up and wait for something big that can press through. I think I've been overestimating it in draft as a result and will definitely think twice before next picking him, especially in a non-Selesnya deck.

One forum participant vigorously defended taking out Primordial Sage and I just can't agree with that. Any creature that says "draw cards for free" on it should always be played and while a 4/5 for six certainly isn't a beating, it will hold it's own. It makes every other creature a cantrip – like you had an entire deck of Striped Bears and Carrier Pigeons! (Yes, that was sarcasm, the Sage is very good)

Unfortunately, despite wanting to remove the Troll in hindsight, at the time that was the card we kept in so I'm going to stick with it. I now understand Mark Rosewater's frustration when people come up with answers he hasn't thought of when running "Question Mark" at big events as it's a bit frustrating for everyone.

## Colour Selection:

A lot of people took issue with playing four colours, especially the more astute ones who managed to slog through Atlanta report and see where I dismiss it as a poor strategy that I would never use. It's fair to say that four colours is not likely an optimal strategy outside of Two-Headed Giant, and even then I only reluctantly agreed because team events are a bit more relaxed and jovial. While *Ravnica*, like *Invasion*, has a lot of mana-fixers that help support four or five colours, you need more than one multicolour fixer to really make it happen. A Birds, Farseek and Civic Wayfinder is a hearty invitation to experiment with extra colours as you can fetch whatever you need at the time. A Signet and Elves of Deep Shadow says, "I hope I draw these with the right spells" and since you can't be assured of that, you're risking too much.

Splashing blue for Moroi gives you a powerful evasion creature with a seemingly minor drawback. If you can play it early then it is a very short clock for your opponent. The problem with splashing, however, is that you can't guarantee early plays. In fact, you can almost guarantee *not* playing the Moroi until the late game. By the late game, the minor drawback becomes a potentially devastating risk that you can't afford. While it worked out just fine in Two-Headed Giant where we started with 40 life and evasion is king, unless we're desperate, this tempo-oriented card just doesn't fit as a splash in a slow controlling deck, despite the convenience of the on-colour Signet.

The white splash is interesting as while there is only one "pure" white card in Selesnya Evangel, the Vitu-Ghazi isn't very exciting without white mana available. But that minor difference is significant – the Vitu-Ghazi will never sit unplayable in your hand because you have no white mana and so you avoid the worse-case scenario of useless cards and should think of this as splashing "1.5"



white cards. It's similar to Sunforger that way – it's better with the appropriate activation mana, but still reasonable without it.

Unlike the Moroi, extra token creatures have great synergy with a half-dozen cards in the deck (Dimir House Guard, Drooling Grootion, Elvish Skysweeper, Golgari Rotworm, Root-Kin Ally and Thoughtpicker Witch) not to mention their innate usefulness as chump blockers or an attacking swarm. That's a lot of benefit from either "white" card. A couple of people seemed to think the Evangel had to be played on turn two to be really effective, but I don't think that's true. The sooner you get her out the better, but except for the House Guard, you likely won't be looking for tokens until later in the game and can afford to wait a bit.

When we look at this deck we need to figure out how we're going to win. We don't really have a lot of fliers or evasion and milling certainly isn't an option, so we'll need to generate some sort of massive card or ground advantage that lets us finish our opponents. Being able to kill a creature every turn with the Grootion, or control each of your opponent's draws with the Witch, or even pump the Ally into something huge are all possible paths to victory. And they all require a token-generating engine. I think removing the white from this deck is a mistake.

## Non-Land Mana Sources

### Elves of Deep Shadow

Should the Elves be played? Everyone seemed to throw the Elves in without thinking about it, despite only have 6 or 7 green sources, and the two people that didn't include them didn't give an explanation. Once you're stuck holding the Elves with two Swamps and Vitu-Ghazi in play, you'll have a better understanding of why the Elves aren't an auto-include, even when playing black. I am generally uncomfortable playing any coloured mana-fixer if less than half my mana sources provide that colour. Or more specifically, I want to make sure I have eight first turn green sources at the bare minimum before I toss the Elves in to the mix. There's no point to having acceleration that you can't play (see below where we discuss the Sanctuaries for additional hindrances) and once you've played all the lands in your hand, the Elves actually slow you down when trying to get that fifth or sixth mana active.

On the other hand, this deck greatly benefits from having additional creatures. Not only do 1-toughness creatures have a high survival rate in *Ravnica* due to the lack of pingers, there are more than half a dozen ways to benefit from having an extra creature when drawn late (the same benefits as the tokens plus Primordial Sage) and you're desperate for an early game where even a 1/1 blocker may stop a hungry Mortipede if tapping to play giant blockers.

I think in the four-colour versions of this deck, the Elves are a mistake as you just can't fit enough green sources, except perhaps in Two-Headed Giant where you have time to find what you need. In three-colour decks it depends on what else you're trying to squeeze in – we'll have to see how we break down our remaining mana sources before we can decide. One strategy used by several respondents was to go heavy on the green to allow yourself to play the Elves which then reduces how many Swamps you need to play thus making room for the extra green. It is that kind of holistic approach that demonstrates true skill at deckbuilding.

### Birds of Paradise



The one card that was an auto-include for every solution was the Birds of Paradise. The Birds suffer from the same shortcomings as the Elves (plus they can't attack) but the access to all colours of mana makes them worth playing even if you sink to seven green mana sources. The Birds are not a splash card (you laugh, but I see it happening all the time), but they're such a fantastic mana-fixer that you can stretch the rules a bit to get them in. You also get envious looks from your peers that you opened such a valuable card, I'd play it with six green sources if it was foil. (I kid)



### Dimir Signet

When I built this deck I played with four colours, so there was no question on whether to include the Signet or not as any colourless mana-fixer that gives you two of your colours is always playable. But if you remove the blue you face an interesting quandary that I admit, I'm still not 100% sure of the answer to. I think in a deck with very few early drops, the ability to accelerate your mana is welcome, even if it only assists one of your primary colours. In essence, it's like playing a Charcoal Diamond and I don't think many people would argue against doing that (as opposed to trying to fit in the Boros Signet if we removed the white cards). You suffer a bit if you need the additional mana immediately (similar to playing come-into-play tapped lands), but more often than not it will be a quick boost to the four or five mana level where we're keeping all our business spells. The Signet should stay.



### Non-Basic Lands

#### Svogthos, the Restless Tomb

My first instinct is to always include lands that have other abilities as any untapped land is a wasted resource so I'm always trying to work in other ways to make use of them. My second instinct is to remove any land that doesn't produce coloured mana when I'm playing three colours as I'm all about consistent decks. The question then becomes, is Svogthos powerful enough to overcome the mess it will make of your mana base?

Chris Greene made an excellent point in email that with two Imps and a Shambling Shell, you've got an excellent opportunity to pump up your Plant Zombie with lots of dredging. But my experience, shared by many others, is that while Svogthos can randomly be good once in a while, it's rarely something to fear. In a four-colour deck where you're likely trying to fit in the Vitu-Ghazi, you don't want to go near a second land that only produces colourless mana. In a three-colour deck without the

white, you're still playing with fire, especially if you stick to 17 or less lands. The problem with going to 18 lands is that you're now looking at 20 or more mana sources and I always cap my mana sources at 19 – half a deck of mana sources is a recipe for flooding, especially with so few ways to make use of anything beyond the first six.



### Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree

While many of the arguments against Svogthos also apply to Vitu-Ghazi, the critical difference is the power level of the cards. Much like Birds trumps Elves, the City-Tree's ability to generate those juicy game-winning saprolings forces us to find room to fit it in. If we're willing to splash for Selesnya Evangel, it's only slightly more difficult to also include the Vitu-Ghazi and double the effect. It means we'll definitely be playing 17 lands as not only do we need to guarantee our colours, we now have a late-game mana sink if we draw too many.



### Selesnya Sanctuary

Do you play 0, 1, or 2?

Almost everyone ignored the Selesnya question either by going all in with both or not playing white at all. But Godot hit the nail on the head and I'm going to quote him here:

*"Everyone agrees the birds and the elves go in, but some suggest six Forests, or in some cases, five. The deck really needs to reliably cast elves and birds on turn one when they are in the opening hand, and I think you need at least seven Forests for that.*

*I feel like the lack of synergy between the Selesnya Sanctuaries and the mana critters is a big part of the intended "trick" of this scenario. It's rough when one solution to the tricky mana is a liability for another solution to the tricky mana..."*

A lot of people pointed out the apparent synergy of no early drops and two Sanctuaries but I think they're missing an important aspect of the Sanctuaries. As someone who has been forced to discard due to the Guild lands many a time when drawing first, I find an early play critical to getting the most out of these lands. "Land, Land, Sanctuary, discard a card" is not how you want to start your game and that is nothing compared to trying to get those Birds and Elves into play. Swamp, Sanctuary, discard a card, turn three Bird is hardly an accelerated opening even if you do have access to all four colours by turn four.

My rule so far has been to never play more than one guild land and I've been playing in the much slower sealed environments. Either it impedes my mana development early when I have spells to play, or I am frequently forced to discard because I'm playing second (and presuming you win at least one game every match, you'll be playing second more than half the time). And if I've been holding on to my splash spell(s) waiting desperately for the right mana, having to sit there an extra turn as my land untaps is nothing but frustrating.



The perfect deck for me has exactly one Guild land so the second Sanctuary stays in the sideboard.

## Basic Lands

Things got very interesting when people chose how many of each basic land to play. The range of green mana sources was 7-10, black mana sources from as low as 4 to no more than 9. But some people went with more black sources than green while others tried to fit in three Islands or both Sanctuaries as well as three more Plains! It appears that there are many varying opinions on proper mana balances.

When determining how many of each type of basic lands to play, there are dozens of things to consider, especially in a deck with as many options as this one. In general, however, you always start with the same three questions:

### 1) How many cards of each colour?

The addition of hybrid cards makes this question more difficult to answer than ever before, but that can be saved for a different day. Counting the gold cards as both black and green, playing the Birds and Signet and replacing the Moroi with Mortipede, we have the following:

14 black cards  
11 green cards  
1 white card

But that doesn't tell the whole picture as some cards are much more mana-intensive than others and it leaves out the Vitu-Ghazi activation cost. Thus we go to the second question...

### 2) How mana symbols of each colour?

Using my trusty *Magic Online* "Stats" button I can see that there are 17 black mana symbols, 14 green mana symbols and still 1 white mana symbol. This answer isn't much different from the first question, meaning that there aren't any unduly onerous requirements for any particular colour. If we

had found 14 black mana and 20 green then it would mean we're working with a lot of double-green spells and would have to adjust accordingly.

Hiroshi Hyde went a step farther in an email and listed out all the mana requirements of the different abilities so you don't end up with only one Swamp when you need to play black spells *and* activate the Groodian or the Rotwurm. This can get a bit tricky as while you want to include the activation costs of the Groodian and the Rotwurm, it's not likely that you'll be transmuting the House Guard or the Brainspoils often enough to worry about having extra Swamps.

With the addition of reasonably likely activated ability costs, you're looking at 19 black mana, 19 green mana and 2 white mana symbols. Between the extra activated abilities and trying to get those Birds out early, we may need to add in an extra Forest. But let's check our third question before we rush to any judgements.

### **3) What do we need early in the game?**

We may have 14 black cards but if 12 of them cost four mana or more then it's not really critical that we slap down a Swamp on the first turn. Early drops tend to get exponentially worse the longer the game goes, especially acceleration and aggressive cards. A Thoughtpicker Witch on turn four isn't the end of the world, but it's not as good as slapping it down on the first turn and coming in for a few extra points early on without disrupting your fourth turn play. And that's a much more flexible card than Frenzied Goblin or Courier Hawk. A consistent turn four Frenzied Goblin indicates a serious flaw in deck construction.

When considering early spells you need to put a lot more weight on creatures than removal or utility spells. Being able to play Last Gasp or Gather Courage in the first two turns isn't that important though having access to removal can be critical if you're colour-screwed and just need to survive until you draw a few lands. I don't have any hard and fast rules in this respect, I just eyeball the deck and try and work out how I want my early turns to proceed.

In this case, we want to get the Birds out as soon as we draw them and we wouldn't mind having access to the Fists in case we need some early blockers. By turn three we want a black mana up and it may even be helpful a turn or two earlier. A slight emphasis on Forests over Swamps is the result.

In the end we're looking at a roughly even balance of green and black mana sources even though we have three more black spells than green ones as we have a lot of green activated abilities and we're keen to get a Forest in play on the first two turns.

### **The Final Build**

The most popular solution, chosen by at least three people (though with 30+ different answers it's hardly conclusive) was as follows:

Replace Hunted Troll with Mortipede  
7 Forests  
5 Swamps  
1 Island  
2 Selesnya Sanctuary  
1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City Tree  
1 Elves of Deep Shadow  
1 Birds of Paradise  
1 Dimir Signet

I believe the actual four-colour build we used was:

- 6 Forests
- 6 Swamps
- 1 Island
- 1 Plains
- 1 Selesnya Sanctuary
- 1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City Tree
- 1 Elves of Deep Shadow
- 1 Birds of Paradise
- 1 Dimir Signet

But we took a lot of risks and were playing the much slower Two-Headed Giant format with an extra mulligan that allowed us to sneak by with just 16 lands. For a sealed or draft event, if I was determined to play four colours, I believe I would go with the more popular build but replace a Sanctuary with a Plains and perhaps the Elves with a Swamp. I'm willing to go down to 16 lands and risk only having one in my opening hand, but not with coloured mana-fixers and a CIP tapped land. However, if you don't feel the deck is good enough to win the draft (and it does look a bit rough), it's certainly an option to play a bit riskier and hope it's your day to shine.

When it comes to three-colour builds, I think I prefer the following:

- 7 Forests
- 7 Swamps
- 1 Plains
- 1 Selesnya Sanctuary
- 1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City Tree
- 1 Birds of Paradise
- 1 Dimir Signet

This time I've cut the Elves because I really don't want to go with 16 lands and I refuse to play 20 mana sources (41 cards is just out of the question). Any other creature is better than the elves in the 21st slot, but I prefer the surety of a solid basic land in the 17th position. An argument could certainly be made to replace the Signet with the Elves. The Elves are harder to play, a bit more vulnerable and can get a bit painful if you rely on them, but they're much more useful in the late game. I think that if we make it to the late game we're doing okay with 15 creatures as well as two saproling generators so I'd rather have consistency.

## **Different Formats**

As most people surmised, this is a really bad draft deck that will likely lose before it can bring the expensive spells to bear. Most people would remove the fourth colour for drafting and some suggested going down to two. I think three is optimal but you want to find a cheaper replacement for that Hunted Troll and maybe the Root-Kin Ally.

Even in sealed deck I'm reluctant to play four colours without several multi-colour fixers. This deck is playable in sealed but with as many 3-drops as 5 and 6-drops, you're just asking for a quick beating. You may want to keep the fourth colour in hopes of lucking out every few games with an early Moroi, but I suspect you'll end up taking a lot of hits while holding unplayable cards and looking forward to playing a 3/3 on turn six. Not a happy place.

Almost no one liked the deck as a 2-Headed Giant deck, which I find amusing as my team went 7-0 with this deck and its blue-white (splash red) companion as is detailed in the forums here. My partner and I were in dispute on whether to include both the white and the blue, much like everyone else. I was against playing four colours, but he insisted that we'd be able to pull it off and if we didn't, it was just a fun tournament! So we tried and succeeded. You really do have a lot of extra time and the lack

of early game isn't so bad with two guys bringing out defence. Two-Headed Giant is all about maximizing your big threats no matter how difficult it may be to get them out and that's what this deck does well.

## Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed our lengthy sojourn in the world of selecting mana sources, it certainly turned out a lot more extensive than I first expected. For those of you with drastically different builds, particularly ones with three or more blue sources or four or more white sources, you may want to quickly review my article from last April that covered splashing as I suspect you're going a bit heavy on the mana splash. Many thanks again to all the readers who wrote to me or in the message boards and spent valuable time outlining their solutions and why they went the way they did. Keep in mind that no one solution is absolutely perfect as there may be other factors relating to your position in the tournament as well as your particular play style.

Next week is a busy week for me so we'll likely return to Atlanta for the second half of the tournament report. Unfortunately I won't be attending the World Championships or the Hall of Fame Induction ceremony (maybe next year!) but I encourage everyone to read the coverage and see how the best of the best draft *Ravnica*. I'm also planning on re-entering the world of constructed **Magic** this coming weekend so if anyone has any super amazing Extended tech I'd be more than happy to listen!

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