

Mike Flores

Thursday, February 02, 2006

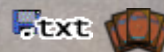
**M**y Freshman English teacher in high school used to say that the smartest person in the room doesn't necessarily know everything (because no one really knows everything); he knows the right place to look for his answers. Competitive **Magic** works in much the same way. The best deck designers aren't necessarily fonts of unending good ideas; they aren't necessarily creative in the sense that they never stop making "new" things. Many times, these designers have the ability to contextualize tried and true ideas to new formats, identify what the right cards are to replace or obsolete lost ones are, based on an understanding of the game's fundamentals against what has become available. They know the right places to start asking questions.



Last week we looked at a number of base-G/R decks that were played by past and present **magicthegathering.com** front men over a span of several years and different formats. While the decks we looked at had at least two colors in common, the decks themselves played far afield of one another. We saw tiny creatures and big bombs. We saw burn, card drawing, and land destruction. Today, we are going to revisit some of those old decks and see if the Gruul have any cards that can make them interesting or relevant again.

## Meta-Weenie - Regionals 1997

Scott Johns



### Main Deck

61 cards

11 Forest  
3 Karplusan Forest  
2 Mountain  
2 Mountain Valley  
2 Undiscovered Paradise

20 lands

4 Ghazban Ogre  
3 Granger Guildmage  
3 Jolrael's Centaur  
2 Karoo Meerkat  
2 Lhurgoyf  
4 Llanowar Elves

4 Giant Growth  
4 Incinerate  
2 Kaervek's Torch

10 other spells

### Sideboard

2 Dwarven Miner  
3 Emerald Charm  
2 Hall of Gemstone  
1 Karoo Meerkat  
1 Lhurgoyf  
4 Pyroblast  
2 Uktabi Orangutan

15 sideboard cards

4 River Boa  
2 Uktabi Orangutan  
3 Whirling Dervish  
4 Yavimaya Ants

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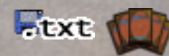
31 creatures

I am in a camp that says that decks are not defined by the alleged ideas behind them, but by the unique elements that set them apart. One mistake that middling testers make when evaluating matchups - often disappointed come tournament time - is to clump like decks together without identifying the unique elements and card choices that can change matchups, especially via unanticipated interactions.

Meta-Weenie is differentiated from the other G/R decks by thusly:

- Low mana count of 20 lands
- High number of creatures with a low curve of 11/9/5/6
- Light reach elements
- Almost no dedicated utility

## Meta-Weenie Update



### Main Deck

60 cards

8 Forest	4 Dryad Sophisticate	2 Char
4 Karplusan Forest	4 Elves of Deep Shadow	4 Shock
2 Mountain	4 Kird Ape	4 Umezawa's Jitte
2 Skarrg, the Rage Pits	4 Llanowar Elves	<hr/>
4 Stomping Ground	4 Rumbling Slum	10 other spells
<hr/>	4 Scab-Clan Mauler	
20 lands	2 Viridian Shaman	
	4 Wood Elves	
	<hr/>	
	30 creatures	

This deck carries about the same amount of reach as Scott's 1997 version; this time Giant Growth has to take a back seat to Umezawa's Jitte, but the rest of the deck is a pretty straightforward implementation. I know that this deck has no Black costs main, but any kind of mana Elf is better than Sakura-Tribe Elder in pure beatdown (heresy, I know... kill your darlings), and even given the point, this deck can hit Wood Elves into Rumbling Slum much more quickly. In any case, I want to increase the frequency that I can play the weaker version of Watchwolf as a 3/3... and that means getting in there for a second turn attack with whatever one-drop you've drawn, Elf or no. Dryad

Sophisticate is my favorite Green card in Guildpact. Basically everyone has non-basic lands these days, so it is essentially a 2/1 unblockable creature.



From the big beaters standpoint, Giant Solifuge would have made a cleaner transition into the Yavimaya Ants spot, but Rumbling Slum is so much better, and so much more synergistic with Scab-Clan Mauler, that ignoring it would be criminal even at the Alpha test stage. As for utility, this suggested list carries the exact same number of artifact smashing monkeys -- if it loses the Guildmages -- that Scott's did; although a new cycle of Guildmages have become available, I think our G/R "rush" update is better served by leaning on Umezawa's ubiquitous game ruiner than on Gruul Guildmage (although you can certainly make a case that he is better than Scab-Clan Mauler in the abstract).

## "Our" Fires - PT Chicago 2000

Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
1 Dust Bowl	4 Assault/Battery	3 Earthquake
11 Forest	4 Chimeric Idol	3 Flashfires
4 Karplusan Forest	1 Earthquake	4 Kavu Chameleon
5 Mountain	4 Fires of Yavimaya	1 Obliterate
4 Rishadan Port	4 Saproling Burst	2 Reverent Silence
<hr/>		2 Tangle
25 lands	17 other spells	15 sideboard cards
4 Birds of Paradise		
4 Blastoderm		
3 Jade Leech		
4 Llanowar Elves		
3 Two-Headed Dragon		
<hr/>		
18 creatures		

There were many Fires of Yavimaya decks that came to PT Chicago 2000, but the Mowshowitz/Burn/Johns version had a number of unique elements that set it apart from the ubiquitous lesser versions.

- High mana count of 25 lands (plus see below)
- High number of huge creatures (Jade Leech and Two-Headed Dragon in addition to the staples)

- No matter how good they are, *no River Boas*
- Essentially no dedicated direct damage

## "Our" Fires Update

**Main Deck**  
*60 cards*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 Forest</li> <li>4 Karplusan Forest</li> <li>4 Mountain</li> <li>1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers</li> <li>1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep</li> <li>4 Skarrg, the Rage Pits</li> <li>4 Stomping Ground</li> </ul> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>25 lands</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 Arashi, the Sky Asunder</li> <li>4 Birds of Paradise</li> <li>4 Burning-Tree Shaman</li> <li>2 Iwamori of the Open Fist</li> <li>3 Kodama of the North Tree</li> <li>4 Llanowar Elves</li> <li>4 Rumbling Slum</li> <li>2 Skarrgan Firebird</li> <li>4 Wood Elves</li> </ul> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>30 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Savage Twister</li> <li>4 Umezawa's Jitte</li> </ul> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>5 other spells</p>
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The Fires archetype is kind of an odd deck to update given the fact that it was so fundamentally grounded in the available synergy between Fires of Yavimaya and *Nemesis* Fading. We can still carry the basic philosophies of "Our" Fires to a fatty deck, and I differentiated those like this:

1. No two-drops, no matter how good they look on paper... This deck is a big creature *smasher*, not a dancing queen.
2. Acceleration straight to three and four or more. Unlike the first deck, I added Burning-Tree Shaman in addition to Wood Elves. I know the combination of Umezawa's Jitte and Burning-Tree Shaman is underwhelming at the very least, but Jitte is too good to ignore, and shores up this deck's lack of an Assault/Battery slot. People play Grim Lavamancer next to Fledgling Dragon all the time and it is right - and even great - there, don't forget.
3. Scott's Savage Twister: We don't have Earthquake any more, but we certainly have huge guys that can survive a sweeper for 3 or 4 long enough for a follow up Alpha Strike.
4. Something to do with all that mana. "Our" Fires used Dust Bowl as its "extra land sink," and this deck can dump stray mana into moving around the Jitte, pumping creatures with the colorless-producing Skarrg, or recurring Skarrgan Firebird.

## Angry Hermit - 2000 U.S. Regionals and Nationals

## Aaron Forsythe

**Main Deck**

60 cards

11 Forest  
2 Gaea's Cradle  
4 Karplusan Forest  
2 Mountain  
3 Rishadan Port  
3 Treetop Village

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25 lands

4 Avalanche Riders  
4 Birds of Paradise  
4 Deranged Hermit  
3 Llanowar Elves  
3 Masticore  
2 Rofellos, Llanowar Emissary  
3 Uktabi Orangutan  
3 Yavimaya Elder

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26 creatures

4 Arc Lightning  
2 Creeping Mold  
3 Plow Under

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9 other spells

Aaron Forsythe



**Main Deck**

60 cards

11 Forest  
2 Gaea's Cradle  
4 Karplusan Forest  
2 Mountain  
4 Rishadan Port  
2 Treetop Village

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25 lands

4 Avalanche Riders  
4 Birds of Paradise  
4 Deranged Hermit  
4 Llanowar Elves  
3 Masticore  
2 Rofellos, Llanowar Emissary  
3 Skyshroud Poacher  
3 Yavimaya Elder

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27 creatures

**Sideboard**

2 Ancient Hydra  
4 Blastoderm  
2 Boil  
1 Masticore  
1 Splinter  
3 Thran Foundry  
2 Uktabi Orangutan

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15 sideboard cards

We could modify the 2000 Regionals deck to a mana control deck with Wreak Havoc and Creeping Mold, but I fear that would not a competitive deck make in today's Standard featuring Life from the Loam and Sakura-Tribe Elder as two (or more) for ones. Instead I want to focus on the *transition* from version to version and the addition of the recurring search element to the deck. In many ways, Fires of Yavimaya was the fulfillment of the promise that Angry Hermit made the summer before - boosting Blastoderm to lethal territory - we can focus on that same essential link the other direction and add deck manipulation to our Alpha fatty deck.

## Main Deck

60 cards

5 Forest	1 Arashi, the Sky Asunder	2 Confiscate
2 Island	2 Godo, Bandit Warlord	4 Electrolyze
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Keiga, the Tide Star	2 Farseek
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	4 Sensei's Divining Top
1 Mountain	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	4 Wood Elves	4 Umezawa's Jitte
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers		17 other spells
4 Steam Vents	19 creatures	
4 Stomping Ground		
4 Tendo Ice Bridge		
<hr/>		
24 lands		

### What's With All The Blue!?!

If you are going to run an update, you might as well *run an update* ! The cool thing about the last couple of blocks is that mana is much more free flowing than in elder years. Just think about what the chase rares in *Ravnica* and *Guildpact* are. Gaea's Cradle, check. Rishadan Port, check. Treetop Village, check. Dust Bowl, check. Tolarian Academy... checked off. Urza's Block and Masques Block had more than their fair share of powerhouse mana sources... but Aaron had not one playable dual between the two blocks. If you embrace the *mana and bombs* (plus deck manipulation!) philosophy, there is no better direction to go than to embrace the possibilities that the current Standard blocks can provide. To make a long story short, I decided that even if I were preserving the *spirit* of the Forsythe deck, I didn't necessarily want to buy into its format-defined limitations.

You probably know I love this kind of Green/Blue deck already, but what really sent me in the direction was Confiscate.

Confiscate is getting tons of random play in different decks... and is basically a big and expensive two-for-one... just like Plow Under. I felt the card philosophically matched Aaron's "playing off the top" design strategy, and the rest of the cards just fell into place.





Godo and the mana accelerators come together as the Poacher/Hermit engine of years past (even if Meloku is essentially the deck's five mana 1/1 producing machine), and Electrolyze is the almost perfect Arc Lightning substitute. Aaron had a full complement of Birds and Elves *as well as* his power mana in Rofellos and Yavimaya Elder, but I think that this kind of deck is better served with a Top/shuffle engine; the existence of Steam Vents (and simultaneous lack of an Island Forest)

necessitated the inclusion of Farseek in the Rofellos slot where I would have liked to lean on Wood Elves.

I didn't go so far as to add actual permission spells, but can say that this deck has the coolest play in all of Standard right now (or loudest, at least). You can swing with Godo wearing Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang *and*, say, Keiga carrying Umezawa's pencil sharpener... and untap Keiga for your second attack with Minamo, School at Water's Edge if you were lucky enough to mise that. Talk about ultra violence! Boom goes the dynamite.

## The Zoo - 1996

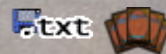
Scott Johns		 	
Main Deck		Sideboard	
60 cards			
3 City of Brass	1 Ancestral Recall	2 Disenchant	
1 Library of Alexandria	1 Balance	1 Gorilla Shaman	
3 Plateau	1 Black Lotus	4 Guerrilla Tactics	
2 Savannah	4 Black Vise	3 Meekstone	
4 Strip Mine	1 Diminishing Returns	4 Whirling Dervish	
2 Taiga	1 Disenchant	1 Zuran Orb	
2 Tropical Island	4 Incinerate		15 sideboard cards
1 Tundra	4 Lightning Bolt		
3 Volcanic Island	1 Mox Pearl		
	1 Mox Ruby		
21 lands	2 Mystical Tutor		
	3 Psionic Blast		
	1 Regrowth		
2 Gorilla Shaman	1 Swords to Plowshares		
4 Kird Ape	1 Time Walk		
4 Savannah Lions	1 Timetwister		
	1 Wheel of Fortune		
10 creatures			
	29 other spells		

I started last week's article more or less chronologically, but kind of had to work myself up to the crazy directions I wanted to take the Gruul. It wouldn't have made sense thematically, to me at least, to start with a deck that was so similar to Meta-Weenie when I planned to twist the deck so radically away from the accepted Gruul.

The main difference between The Zoo and Meta-Weenie is that Scott's 1996 deck had more burn and a dedicated card advantage suite where his 1997 deck had more creatures with just a little burn to back it up. Both decks were offensive and tempo-oriented with attention given to both early game curve and late game heat. My initial idea was to run a deck that focused on one-drops and Ninja of the Deep Hours (I mean who blocks Birds of Paradise on turn 2?) but tuning the mana became next to impossible without diluting the purely offensive focus that The Zoo demanded... I just ended up with a deck like my update to Aaron's, but with less synergy.

Instead, I decided to look at the early and late game attention to tempo and higher burn count for this one. All the other decks in this article have biased Green; this time I wanted to try going Gruul Red:

## Zoo Update (believe it or not)



### Main Deck

60 cards

22 Mountain

22 lands

4 Frenzied Goblin

4 Frostling

4 Giant Solifuge

4 Gruul Guildmage

4 Hearth Kami

2 Scorched Rusalka

4 Zo-Zu the Punisher

26 creatures

4 Char

4 Shock

4 Volcanic Hammer

12 other spells

This deck is largely based on Pat Sullivan's L.A. LCQ deck, but tries to play some of the new Gruul cards. Giant Solifuge is basically a burn card in this kind of a deck, taking the place of Yamabushi's Flame, which often plays worse than both Volcanic Hammer *and* Flames of the Blood Hand. I have a feeling that with a Frenzied Goblin helping him along, Giant Solifuge will connect more than people currently expect. I'd actually like to get more copies of Scorched Rusalka in the deck, but haven't quite figured out what is good and what is not yet.



The most interesting Gruul contribution is that the non-Guild's Guildmage over Boros Guildmage. The Boros version's haste ability was relevant a reasonable amount of the time, but I found that when I was losing with Pat's deck, it was almost always because I was mana flooded. Gruul Guildmage shores up the late game in exactly the right way. Between the Guildmage, Scorched Rusalka, and (essentially) Giant Solifuge, this archetype gains a lot more endgame reach... I just wish I could have fit Scott's original Kird Apes.

If you're wondering where Shinka went, I decided I would rather not have to waste burn on Dryad Sophisticate - even a small percentage of the time - than give Zo-Zu first strike.

Zvi Mowshowitz once said that **Magic** players love it when they read an article and get a fish; this article may have given you a couple, but they haven't been cleaned yet, certainly haven't been sliced up nicely and laid on little beds of wasabi treated rice. The long and the short of it is: "don't be disappointed if you can't copy one of these lists and go straight to the winner's table at your next FNM." Instead of a fish, I wanted to give you a little bit of an insight to my process of fishing. The first

thing I like to do when a new set comes out is draw on my knowledge of old decks, both specifically and philosophically, and see where I can find something that fits into what I already know is a working model. Even when they differ from the Alpha builds by only a land or two, the really good decks only come after hours and hours of elbow grease... Would you believe mouse button clicks?

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