

Limited guru Noah Weil joins magicthegathering.com for a two-article series that explores the keys to drafting *Ravnica* + *Guildpact* successfully, along with scenarios to try at home.

New Guilds, New Draft Strategies

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Hello everyone. Almost a couple months ago now, Scott Johns asked me to write a couple of articles on *Ravnica/Ravnica/Guildpact* drafting for those rabid Limited Information fans, with the idea of using the larger feature article space so we could go more in-depth and work on some reader-interactivity ideas. With *Guildpact* just released on *Magic Online*, and this being one of the toughest formats of all time, we knew this would be a great time to talk about drafting the new format with *Guildpact* in the mix. So, this is the first of a two part series on the format and something of an experiment in the process. This week is a discussion of mana

in *Ravnica/Ravnica/Guildpact* draft decks ("RRG"), as well as overall guild impressions and some reader exercises. Next week will be the result of those scenarios, as well as some discussion on



specific *Guildpact* cards and archetypes.

Noah playing Sol Malka at Grand Prix Tampa, '02

As for me, I'm a guy who's been playing for over a decade. I'm a big **Magic** fan in general and quite

ravenous about draft. I've played almost 20 Pro Tours in my time, with some decent finishes. What the magicthegathering.com guys and I will be trying with this set of articles is to see what we can do if we take a two-article set of feature article slots and see what we can do with that much space. For those that have played in the sealed PTQ season, you know *Ravnica* plus *Guildpact* is a head-scratching format. There are just so many options. With all the possibilities available to a player, sealed decks are almost always three colors, with four or even five being quite reasonable. Draft often seems to go in a similar way. Yes, you can go two colors and sometimes that's the right call. But for every draft deck that looks like triple-*Ravnica*, you'll have a pile of cards that literally looks like you're drafting a sealed deck. An interesting format indeed.

Before we get started, I'm going to back up a bit. To really examine how adding *Guildpact* changes the format, let's first look at what we lose. Drafting all-*Ravnica* ("RRR") meant working with the initial four guilds. Despite being merely 40% of the possible two-color combinations, straight *Ravnica* still had

quite a number of potential archetypes, although strategies did fall into camps roughly analogous to the initial four. These are:

Boros (Red/White): The Boros deck is almost always two colors, and comes in two versions, speedy and controlling. While a controlling Boros deck can be strong, the cards in the set most easily (and most often) support an aggressive strategy. In fact Boros is, and probably will end up being, the fastest of all the guilds in the block. It's because of this speed that the Boros decks so rarely branch into another color. Who wants to muck around with weird mana? Play lots of inexpensive creatures and just keep swinging.

Selesnya (Green/White): While this can also be a fast deck, especially with Convoke, Selesnya decks are usually slower than Boros. However, their creatures are much bigger. A few small creatures quickly tap to help a monstrous Siege Wurm or Guardian of Whitu-Ghazi into play. Selesnya decks often add a touch of black, usually for a Last Gasp-type card. G/W decks in general lack answers to opposing creatures. Since having Green in the deck also enables all kinds of multi-color action, why not?

Golgari (Green/Black): Golgari decks are about continuous large monsters and lots of removal. Dredge is a prime draft mechanic; there are only so many Shambling Shells and Greater Mossgods an opponent can deal with. Golgari decks often branch into White for some Selesnya cards. Selesnya Evangel works very well with Golgari staples like Thoughtpicker Witch and Golgari Rotworm. Once again, playing Green gives you the option to add these strategies.



Dimir (Black/Blue): Dimir, like Boros, also comes in two flavors: controlling and aggressive. The aggressive deck is full of small creatures and lots of evasion. Some Dimir Infiltrators, Dimir House Guards, and Halcyon Glaze make a fine Dimir aggro deck. The controlling version has lots of walls and usually wins by milling the opponent. Vedalken Entrancers and Lurking Informants are the key cards here. Dimir mill is probably the best overall *Ravnica* archetype, if the packs cooperate. However, it's a pretty awful deck when the cards don't come through.

Beyond those four staples, unusual combinations exist. It's rare that a crazy rainbow deck is your best bet, but it can happen. I've found staying on target with the four guilds in RRR creates the most consistent decks, although there has been the occasional...aberration.

However, now there's another set to deal with, and three more guilds. They are:

Gruul (Red/Green)

Izzet (Red/Blue)

Orzhov (Black/White)

These new guilds change things a lot; so much so that there are two schools of thought regarding their inclusion in your draft deck. The first is living in a state of blissful ignorance. These people believe *Guildpact* cards and colors changes things *so much* that it's best to just finish your deck in the first two packs. This idea isn't completely worthless; draft four Vedalken Entrancers as your first four picks and you can probably pull off an excellent mill deck, short a pack or no. Maybe you could add a Douse in Gloom or Train of Thought to the final version, but you're basically conceding *Guildpact* picks. Again, under certain circumstances this can be viable, but generally speaking, the head in the sand move is not a winner. The most likely instance of this being correct is when the entire table is working together, staying out of each other's way. That's a function of the people you play with. On **Magic Online**, I wouldn't count on it.

Let's assume your likely strategy will be to actually play with the new set. At the very least, it's certainly more interesting. Luckily, it turns out *Guildpact* cards are both fun and powerful. Definitely a good addition to a draft deck, even though they're an oh-so tough fit. Which brings us to the next point: figuring out exactly how to play all those colors.

The first and simplest enabler for your 3+ color deck turns out to be far and away the best. Awesome cycle, thy name is Karoos/double lands/bounce lands/whatever. These guys (let's just call them bounce lands for simplicity's sake) are great. Sooo great. The bounce lands are some of the most subtly powerful cards ever designed for Limited. The benefits these innocuous-seeming cards provide are many, and with *Guildpact*, their stock goes up even higher. These lands are being grabbed late, and that's really surprising. Bounce lands should definitely not be present in a pack past 6-7th. There are times when a bounce land should be your first pick! These beauties simply offer too much value for the serious drafter to ignore.

Their first benefit is rather obvious: they make multiple colors. When a three color deck is the norm, a land that counts as both your main color and your splash is pretty darn appealing. Similarly, the bounce land that fits both of your main colors lets you play extra basics for your splash; in effect enhancing every color. For example, a G/W/r deck could have a Boros Garrison and a Mountain that provides red mana, or a Selesnya Sanctuary and two mountains. Either way, you have the same overall quantity of colored mana.



Beyond that, they let you cheat on your land counts. If you haven't heard the news, Gruul Turf taps for two mana. How many actual lands would you play in your deck if every land tapped for double? 10? 12? Since the Mana Flare block hasn't been released yet, we have to settle for only a portion of our decks having the built in Heartbeat effect. Savvy players are recognizing this and using double lands to play less overall lands. This in turn allows them to play more business cards. By drafting a bounce land or two early, you in effect get your draft pick back, since you then get to include an extra spell in the place of a (now) unneeded land. The best part is, not only do you get to play less land, you often end up with more mana. 16 lands that include two bounce makes more than 17 regular ol' basics. That means that not only are you playing more cards that do stuff, you can add more expensive cards that do even more stuff! Get used to picking up the bounce lands high, because the

best players at your table are not going to let many go past them. After you get used to playing with them, try a deck without. Honestly, you're going to feel naked in the snow.



After those gems, the next best fixers are the green cards like Elves of Deep Shadow and Silhana Starfletcher. Cards like these are appealing because they have an effect at any stage of the game. However, their usage and appeal are so obvious that you simply won't see a Civic Wayfinder or Farseek go very late these days. Playing Green right now is a safe choice, but it does not necessarily lead to a powerful deck, especially since it's probably the most drafted color. Civic Wayfinder is by far the best of the bunch, and is a reasonable first pick for a lot of different strategies. Just avoid the unpleasant "splashing for fixers" maneuver.

Next down the list are the Signets. These cards are nice for being able to access your side colors immediately, as opposed to coming into play tapped like special lands. They're fine accelerants and every deck would enjoy having 1-3 for color balance and a tighter curve. However, they are by no means perfect. For one, they take up an actual spell slot in your deck, unlike a land that does the same thing. Enough Signets can let you cheat on mana somewhat, but you still need the two mana to get started. In addition, Signets can be kind of vulnerable. Seed Spark and now Tin Street Hooligan make them more risky, which hinders your ability to shave lands. Again, they're fine cards and nearly every deck can benefit from some, but be wary of over-reliance and/or playing too many.

After those solid choices, your options diminish. Terrarion is an acceptable card, but it's not a mana source and certainly not reliable. Wild Cantor has occasional influence as an early beater with the potential for acceleration, but Wild Cantor itself is not useful solely as mana source. A turn two kicked Scab-Clan Mauler is nice, a turn 3 Indentured Oaf that gets Last Gasp is less so.

Your final option is just to play some lands of each color, proportional to your needs and hope your draws cooperate. Everyone remembers the guy who always has domain on turn 5. Hopefully your deck will be a little less luck-dependent. While playing three colors is common, whenever possible try to avoid the dreaded 6-6-6 scenario, AKA three even color requirements. The best RRG decks splash one, maybe two guilds, in addition to their main color combination. Your litmus test for determining if your mana base is correct is to show all your mana sources to a friend. They should be able to look at those cards and correctly determine what your deck's needs actually are. If there's a disagreement, discuss it with them. Keep doing this exercise and you (and your friends) will be able to peg your color requirements every time.

All this discussion on mana might seem excessive, but it really is critical. Perfect mana won't guarantee a strong deck, but a flawed mana base means not casting anything at all. This has always been true in **Magic** of course. However it's this format where, way more than usual, the rewards and punishments for a shaky mana base are so prevalent. Put in the time to get used to the crazy new

multi-multi-guild world; you'll see the results. Don't forget, express sympathy to the lazy opponents who tried to get lucky as you move on to the next round. It's just the polite thing to do.

After figuring out how to enable your spells, the next step is deciding on what to cast. Still assuming you want to actually play with the new set, here is what I believe to be the rankings of the guilds in *Guildpact* so far.

1. Izzet (Red/Blue)
2. Gruul (Red/Green)
3. Orzhov (White/Black)

Izzet is far and away the strongest combination in *Guildpact*. Why? Well for one, Replicate is the perfect limited mechanic. In the early game, your needs are small so all you require is that small effect. Pyromatics that Daggerclaw Imp on turn 3, easy peezy. Later in the game, you get the opportunity for some disgusting turns. Giving your army flight and +1/+0, or just drawing four cards, is a good way to win the game in any kind of parity situation.



Beyond the quality Replicate spells, Izzet is full of good tempo and removal cards. The comes-into-play guys are great with bounce effects like Repeal and Ogre Savant. The Izzet deck even gets Wee Dragonauts, a defensive card that can keep you alive long enough to get your engines on line. (They're also good for the final few points.) While Izzet-based decks are still vulnerable to early rushes or very large creatures, it's still the guild with the most raw power, as well as consistency. People do know this, which makes the guild heavily drafted. However, if you can pull off a quality R/U/x deck then you're in great shape. The best Izzet-based deck is often the best deck at the table.

It's the next ranking that may have people scratching their heads, but as it turns out, the Orzhov are just not that good, for reasons that are a little more subtle than simply power levels. One major factor is that Black/White has the highest number of completely unplayable and mostly unplayable commons. Cry of Contrition, Benediction of Moons, and Skyrider Trainee are all worse than the bad cards of the other guilds, like Crystal Seer or Skarrgan Pit-Skulk. Restless Bones, Lionheart Maverick...; the list is pretty depressing. Take that into account along with the popularity of Black and White combinations from *Ravnica*. Orzhov is the only guild that allows you to draft it along-side any *Ravnica* guild without going past three colors. Add all these factors up and you can see why the pickings get slim *very* fast.

The other reason Orzhov is poor is because it's sloooooow. The problem then is that your third color can't help you out. Splashing for early drops is pretty poor math in general, which gives dedicated B/W decks a real issue. The Orzhov player has to choose between poor mana or an extreme vulnerability to an aggressive opponent. Neither option is particularly



attractive. People wanting to include B/W cards in their draft should just focus on a different main combination, and splash the Black or White mana as needed. Blind Hunter looks good in Selesnya decks, and Pillory of the Sleepless is great in Dimir aggro.

Gruul is definitely the wild card option in RRG; a lot of potential for strength or disaster. It's a combination that supports splashing well, both *as* Gruul and *with* Gruul. If you need creatures, throw some Streetbreaker Wurms in that G/X/r. If you need removal, play a Disembowel in R/G/b. It's a fair guild, but since what it provides can work with anything, it creates a lot of effective decks.

With all that being said, archetype rankings and even individual card rankings are highly subjective and situation dependent. In my personal experience, I try to get decks with Red or Blue in them because that's been effective for my drafts. If those colors are severely overdrafted in your area, Golgari or Selesnya may be the way to go. To me, drafting is so fun because it's very rare there's an exactly correct strategy. With this block more than ever, there are just a lot of options. The task of the drafter isn't to take the best cards, it's to pick the cards that gives him or her the best deck.

For this final part of part one, I'd like to hear from the readers on the following scenarios. Keep in mind for all these picks, your choices do not happen in a vacuum. Every card you take directly affects the decks of the people around you. Try the questions out, see where you end up, and then post your answers to the boards and see how you compare to the other readers. Next week I'll be back to go over the results and finish up the article. Until then, happy drafting!

- Noah Weil

Scenario #1

Pack 1, Pick 1. There are a number of cards here that are viable. Besides deciding on your pick, figure out what combinations go with that pick, what the person next to you is likely to take, and what combinations their pick goes with.

Which card do you first-pick? Hammerfist Giant, Devouring Light, Ethereal Usher, Sunhome, Fortress of the Legion, Gather Courage, Benevolent Ancestor, Thundersong Trumpeter, Ordrunn Commando, Faith's Fetters, Dryad's Caress, Dromad Purebred, Dizzy Spell, Shambling Shell, Transluminant Snapping Drake



Scenario #2

Pack 2, Pick 1. This pack determines which direction you want to take your deck. Again, reflect just not on what your deck is doing with this pick, but what the person on your right could do as well.

Your deck to this point:

Scenario #2 - Your deck so far
Which card do you pick for your deck?
 Hour of Reckoning
 Frenzied Goblin
 Undercity Shade
 Telling Time
 Bramble Elemental
 Galvanic Arc
 Woodwraith
 Strangler
 Snapping Drake
 Selesnya
 Evangel
 Scatter the Seeds
 Vedalken Entrancer
 Screeching Griffin
 Terrarion
 War-Torch
 Goblin
 Zephyr Spirit



Scenario #3

Pack 3, Pick 3. Well look at that, your Orzhov tendencies have been rewarded. First pick Angel of Despair, second pick Ghost Council of Orzhova! Looking at the booster for pick 3, it's pretty obvious no one is taking W/B. The question is, what's the best card for your deck?

Scenario #3 - Your deck so far
Which card do you pick for your deck?
 Ghor-Clan Bloodscale
 Nivix, Aerie of the Firemind
 Bloodscale Prowler
 Ghost Warden
 Pillory of the Sleepless
 Withstand
 Douse in Gloom
 Gruul Signet
 Absolver Thrull
 Restless Bones
 Petrahydrox
 Skyrider Trainee
 Runeboggle



Scenario #4

For the final exercise, a simple task. Determine the number of lands this draft deck should have, what those lands should be, and whether to play an extra Scab-Clan

Mauler and/or Terrarion. Your options are below.

Scenario #4 - Your deck so far

+ Terrarion

++ Scab-Clan Mauler

Which configuration do you use for your deck?6 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Swamp, 1 Island, 4 bounce lands (16 land)7 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Swamp, 1 Island, 3 bounce lands (16 land)5 Forest, 5 Mountain, 2 Island, 4 bounce lands (16 land)6 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Island, 4 bounce lands +Terrarion (15 land)5 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Island, 1 Swamp, 4 bounce lands + Terrarion (15 land)6 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Island, 1 Swamp, 3 bounce lands + Terrarion (15 land)5 Forest, 3 Mountain, 1 Island, 1 Swamp, 4 bounce lands + Terrarion and Scab-Clan Mauler (14 land)5 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Island, 4 bounce lands + Terrarion and Scab-Clan Mauler (14 land)5 Forest, 4 Mountain, 1 Island, 1 Swamp, 3 bounce lands + Terrarion and Scab-Clan Mauler (14 land)