

Mike Flores

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Writing this lone episode of Into the Aether for Swap Week was a surprisingly difficult prospect for me. About what should I write? How can I differentiate from Swimming With Sharks? From Benny's usual column? What if his readers hate me (more than my readers hate me)?

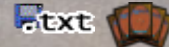
At the end of the day, I am a competitive (tournament) **Magic** player and writer mostly interested in deck design, theory, and playtesting, so I decided to approach Swap Week from that perspective, if from the hazy mists of the digital realm. Luckily, I play a lot of **Magic Online**, so everything sort of fell into place.

I would say that 90% of my **Magic Online** time is spent on pickup games in the Tournament Practice Room. Of the six or so different techniques I use for playtesting, this is the most fun. Doctor Michael Pustilnik, Ph.D became a multiple Grand Prix, Pro Tour, and Masters Champion by testing primarily via pickup games with whoever was around at Neutral Ground, playing whatever decks they brought with them (as opposed to using rigorous techniques or Extremes in Metagaming, despite the fact that Justin Polin was his primary playtest partner for some time), so I've come to justify my copious Tournament Practice Room play with MikeyP's open approach in mind. Recently, I've had more and more success with the modified Pat Sullivan Gruul Deck Wins deck originally posted as Zoo Update (believe it or not) in Two Basic Rules: This One's for Deck Designers. Given the fairly laid back environment, focusing on fun, of the Tournament Practice Room, I've always had a reasonable amount of success... but never to the extent of the Gruul Deck Wins.

I don't play in a whole lot of **Magic Online's** Sanctioned Tournaments, but given the batting percentage of the deck, I decided to give it a whirl in the 8-Man Queues.

Here's the version I've been playing since Pro Tour Honolulu.

Gruul Deck Wins



Main Deck

60 cards

22 Mountain
22 lands
4 Frenzied Goblin
2 Frostling
4 Giant Solifuge
4 Gruul Guildmage
4 Hearth Kami
4 Scorched Rusalka
22 creatures

4 Char
4 Flames of the Blood Hand
4 Shock
4 Volcanic Hammer
16 other spells

Sideboard

3 Blood Moon
1 Orcish Artillery
3 Shattering Spree
4 Threaten
4 Umezawa's Jitte
15 sideboard cards

After writing *Two Basic Rules: This One's for Deck Designers*, I sort of stepped away from the then-Zoo Update, trying a lot of different decks and eventually hitting on the initial shell for the URzaTron deck that Osyp Lebedowicz and company played in Hawaii. A week before the Pro Tour, Osyp's NFC teammate John Fiorillo (most recently of the Grand Prix Richmond Top 8) showed up at a Neutral Ground Mock Tournament with the Gruul Deck Wins from the original article. To everyone's surprise, the deck blew through everything, ultimately finishing 12-1 in games, albeit in the hands of three different pilots as the evening hours passed.



Since Hawaii, I borrowed a couple of elements from Mark Herberholz's winning beatdown deck, which I think improved the deck greatly. The most important, originally suggested by Jon Becker, was the swap of Zo-Zu the Punisher for Flames of the Blood Hand. My concept of how to play the deck never really included *not* tapping out for creatures on turn 3. Therefore it never occurred to me that holding back to pre-empt a Faith's Fetters or Loxodon Hierarch might be a good thing, especially if I already had two drops down; after all, I was celebrating any game that I could lead on Zo-Zu that early. The second change was to swap the numbers on Frostling versus Scorched Rusalka. Scorched Rusalka was one of the main cards that allowed Mark to escape the downside of Faith's Fetters... Clearly a deck with *even worse* creatures could benefit from the stifling technique reminiscent of Disciple of the Vault.

Bella Jane 1 - michaelj 0

I jumped into my first queue of the day as soon as my daughter started her nap time. I conceded about fifteen minutes later. *Wah, Wah, I Need More Bottle*. Shrug. I was behind on the board, but I had a Jitte with four counters, a Threaten, a couple of points to chump... and he had a Hunted Wumpus but no untapped blockers, so the outcome wasn't 100% clear. Oh well.

Gruul Deck Gets Lucky (and Wins, and Wins)

So I began the next queue about ten minutes after my 0-1 in the first.

Brian Schneider was what Plato was thinking of when he came up with the concept of forms: Brian is the form of the Good Man. Formerly one of the most talented deck designers ever to grace the game, he has spent the last several years as Lead Developer at Research and Design up in Renton, Washington. After not seeing my friend since maybe three Grand Prix Philadelphias ago, I got to catch up with bschneid in Honolulu. One of the many things we talked about was the incentive to play Mono-Red versus Green/Red beatdown in Standard. Brian said one of his fellows in R&D could not see playing Mono-Red over Green/Red (especially after Heezy's win), but that he could. I wasn't sure whether Mono-Red would be good enough in the land of 2/3 and 3/3 monsters, but had been having a lot of luck with the deck. In any case, my first round of this queue illustrated one possible incentive.

Basically I was ahead one game and he got stuck on Skarrg the other two games. In the one game I was ahead (Game Two) I was on 9 and sent all my guys with the kill on board for the next turn, Threaten in hand, and Rusalka in play even. On his turn, he had a Kird Ape, a Scab-Clan Mauler and one card in hand (a mystery). So assuming - as this was game two - that he was Heezy's deck, I put

him on Char or no. He sent both creatures... and knocked me to -3 with a Might of Oaks. "One main."

The other two games one or both of us flew to Paris, both of us hit our drops, but while I was happy with my Mountain drops, he was less so with his land situation. The Rage Pits was his second land in both game one and game three, and his Kird Apes were either 1/1 or he was stuck with the wrong color balance of lands and spells.

1-0

Second Round I got "savagely lucky." Basically I got a free win in game 1 and in the second he bashed me into the ground mercilessly in what was essentially a free win himself. I was already behind and wondering what to do about his x/3 creatures... when he played the Jitte. Like that was necessary!



In the third, he had a Loxodon Hierarch to my Rusalka and Guildmage. That kind of sucked, but I answered with Jitte. Before it did any damage, he dropped the first Faith's Fetters on it. I had the plan to block with a Guildmage and then Shock his Hierarch (like that would be exciting), but he had yet another Faith's Fetters for my 2/2 blocker. I came *this close* to hitting the "concede" button, but decided to give it a turn or two.

I ripped Blood Moon.

After finally executing on my "block and Shock" plan, I hit him for two or three a couple more times with my pathetic Red men and *he* scooped. Thanks Blood Moon! I like the random Orcish Artillery, and side it in a surprising number of games, but that Blood Moon really saved my bacon.

A "real" (that is G/R rather than Mono-Red) Gruul Deck or three-color Zoo is probably the worst matchup for Gruul Deck Wins. Basically they have the same incentives, but their creatures are all twice as big, if not three times as tough. Kird Ape is public enemy number one; you are fine sending a Volcanic Hammer at Watchwolf or Scab-Clan Mauler, but it's a little painful blowing that removal card on his one-drop, especially when you know the bigger guys are coming.

2-0

Last round I was rewarded with Gifts Ungiven. I decided to give that reward back by keeping a one-land hand because it had two one-drops, Frenzied Goblin and Scorched Rusalka. I sent my Goblin into his Hana Kami, and was surprised when he traded (maybe I shouldn't have been). I missed my second land drop, but still felt okay with my 1/1 Spirit. I hit land drops after turn 2, so everything seemed fine, especially as I was gripping a lot of fire.

The key turn was his fifth, when he played Gifts Ungiven at the end of my turn, flipping over Loxodon Hierarch, Death Denied, Soulless Revival, and Miren, the Moaning Well. I wasn't giving him Loxodon Hierarch, so the question was which Raise Dead he was going to get. Death Denied would be a two-for-one with Hana Kami, but as I planned to give him Miren, it was certain that he would have enough mana for Soulless Revival into Loxodon. Basically I needed an untap to win, so I gave him Death Denied, hoping he didn't have a second Hierarch.

Everything went according to plan: He Denied for both creatures but didn't have the mana for Loxodon Hierarch, and I had three untapped for Flames of the Blood Hand (i.e. minus eight) the next turn. It was enough.



In Game 2, he illustrated how a board control deck like Gifts can potentially beat Gruul Deck Wins. On the play, he just accelerated Sakura-Tribe Elder into Loxodon Hierarch before I had three mana for Flames (I missed my third drop anyway). He had a second Hierarch and I didn't really want to play through it, so we were on to Game 3.

In the last one, he didn't draw any Hierarchs, so it was pretty easy to beat early, chump a bit, and then burn him out.


3-0, 3-1 overall for this deck.

I felt pretty good about Gruul Deck Wins, but Given that three of my last four matches were against Stomping Ground, I didn't think it was necessarily the smartest deck to play in the next queues. I had been talking to the World Champ in Honolulu, and he informed me that the Japanese card valuation had Loxodon Hierarch as the #1 card in Standard

(mine was Sakura-Tribe Elder). I decided that Mori is pretty bright at the old **Magic: The Gathering**, and that Hierarch might be a good call given all the Gruul.

Metagame Shift?

Randy says I hate Combo Decks, but I think the next segment will show that is not true. Basically, I looked at Antonino DeRosa's team's B/W deck and the "House" B/G/W and combined the two.

Antonino De Rosa		f.txt 	
Main Deck		Sideboard	
60 cards			
4 Caves of Koilos	1 Cranial Extraction	1 Boseiju, Who Shelters All	
4 Godless Shrine	2 Debtors' Knell	1 Cranial Extraction	
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	3 Faith's Fetters	4 Descendant of Kiyomaro	
3 Orzhov Basilica	1 Ivory Mask	1 Eradicate	
1 Orzhova, the Church of Deals	3 Last Gasp	1 Last Gasp	
5 Plains	4 Mortify	1 Persecute	
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	1 Nightmare Void	1 Scour	
5 Swamp	4 Orzhov Signet	2 Terashi's Grasp	
	2 Persecute	3 Weathered Wayfarer	
24 lands	4 Phyrexian Arena	15 sideboard cards	
	4 Wrath of God		
3 Dimir House Guard	29 other spells		
2 Kokusho, the Evening Star			
2 Yosei, the Morning Star			
7 creatures			

Main Deck

60 cards

- 2 Godless Shrine
- 1 Orzhov Basilica
- 4 Overgrown Tomb
- 4 Plains
- 1 Selesnya Sanctuary
- 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
- 3 Swamp
- 4 Temple Garden
- 3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree

23 lands

- 2 Angel of Despair
- 2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
- 4 Loxodon Hierarch

8 creatures

- 4 Castigate
- 4 Cranial Extraction
- 3 Faith's Fetters
- 3 Mortify
- 4 Orzhov Signet
- 4 Phyrexian Arena
- 3 Putrefy
- 4 Wrath of God

29 other spells

Sideboard

- 1 Eradicate
- 4 Last Gasp
- 2 Naturalize
- 3 Nezumi Shortfang
- 2 Night of Souls' Betrayal
- 1 Peace of Mind
- 2 Pithing Needle

15 sideboard cards

When I heard that the House had Ink-Eyes instead of Yosei, I just kind of assumed they had Dimir House Guard. I mean there is nothing - okay, *little* - sweeter than the third turn House Guard eliciting a chuckle from the other guy, only to transform Fear-style into the Servant of Oni a turn later. No one respects the House Guard.

Here's the list I cobbled together to answer the perceived metagame shift:

Combo Deck

Main Deck

60 cards

- 4 Godless Shrine
- 4 Orzhov Basilica
- 1 Orzhova, the Church of Deals
- 3 Plains
- 2 Selesnya Sanctuary
- 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
- 1 Swamp
- 4 Temple Garden
- 3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree

- 1 Cranial Extraction
- 1 Eradicate
- 3 Faith's Fetters
- 1 Ivory Mask
- 2 Mortify
- 1 Nightmare Void
- 4 Orzhov Signet
- 4 Phyrexian Arena
- 4 Putrefy
- 4 Wrath of God

Sideboard

- 1 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
- 2 Cranial Extraction
- 1 Faith's Fetters
- 2 Mortify
- 2 Naturalize
- 1 Persecute
- 2 Scour
- 4 Weathered Wayfarer

15 sideboard cards

23 lands

25 other spells

2 Angel of Despair
4 Dimir House Guard
2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
4 Loxodon Hierarch

12 creatures

My first queue I opened on a 1-0 versus I think Heezy Street or Zoo, and then dropped a match to Ghost Dad. The loss to Ghost Dad was pretty disappointing, if easily explained. In the key game I did this idiotic thing... I'm not really sure what it was. I had seven mana; he had guys in play, but they were pretty meaningless. I had Phyrexian Arena working already and was essentially ahead, so I decided to House Guard into a Loxodon Hierarch and show him what a real creature looked like. I either did that or Transmuted into a Scour for some meaningless (long game) enchantment like Pillory of the Sleepless. Kai Budde used to say that decks with a lot of Tutors just give you the opportunity to screw up more, and I proved the old man right.

Whichever horrible play it was (I'm still blocking it out), it was wrong. Before I even passed the turn, I realized I probably should have asked myself "Hey, what is the only card in his deck that matters?" and just Extracted Ghost Council of Orzhova for the win... Instead he just peeled Ghost Council and worked me over like he had a sock full of oranges.

1-1

I color screwed to an 0-1 to what looked like Hand in Hand (my fault for playing three colors, four colorless lands, and six Karoos), but finished on a high note.

That Has Soulshift!?!

Last queue of a long and enjoyable day of *Magic Online* tournament play started on another aggro deck (Heezy Street or Zoo again), and then a rematch with Ghost Dad. Game 1 was a nailbiter, one of the closest games I've ever played. I was behind the entire early game, developing but determined to Eradicate this Kami of Ancient Law. I had two Phyrexian Arenas in my hand and decided they were important to resolve. I think he figured something was up himself, and used a Sickening Shoal to "protect" his Kami from Eradicate. A string of Thieves of Hope was extremely annoying, as I had to deal with the same Kamis and Tallowisps over and over again.

Finally I had the board free and clear for my Phyrexian Arenas... but by that point I had all of two life. New. Plan.

I learned from my previous error and immediately Extracted Ghost Council of Orzhova. Even with cards in hand, he was essentially in topdeck mode, as he just didn't have a threat. He didn't have the traditional kind of threat, anyway. The Cranial showed me that he had two Shining Shoals and two Pillories in hand... How was I going to win? I certainly couldn't deploy the Ink-Eyes I had been holding or I would have lost to either card.

It Looked Like Church Of Deals Was Going To Have To Score From 20.

I was plinking away, but as all my lands tapped for different colors (which I had to take time to pick), and I had to pick which mana was going to activate my Signets, even though Orzhova was keeping me in the game, my *game clock* was becoming the enemy. I was eventually able to attrit most of his reactive cards and drop a City-Tree, but even then, the Shoals came to play for a couple of points.

Once they were out, though, I had the chance to try to go for Ink-Eyes, which hit for Kami of Ancient Law. They were enough, but I only had nine minutes left.

I sided in Weathered Wayfarer, knowing I would have to play second, but he opened on Plagued Rusalka! Nevertheless, I had two Wraths and an Orzhov Signet to open, so the second was never really close. I won with only fifteen seconds to spare.

2-0

Last round, I got another free game win when the opponent stalled on mana, but the second game was a hotly contested B/G/W "mirror," with him having more Green for Sakura-Tribe Elder and Grave-Shell Scarab, but my drawing all three City-Trees to control the tempo of the game. He executed brilliantly, playing around all my hand destruction with Sensei's Divining Top, finding new cards with his Dredge Insect, managing my Faith's Fetters with his Karoos, and never letting me draw an extra card with any of my three Phyrexian Arenas. In the end, his expert management of the cards he got wasn't quite enough, and I eked out a second queue with a massive army of tokens.

3-0, 4-2 overall with this deck.

In addition to playing for fun, which is the main reason to play **Magic Online** in my opinion, I was also trying out decks for the upcoming Team Standard PTQ season. Look for a Feature on that topic next week, *in addition to* my usual column Swimming With Sharks.

Thanks for keeping my seat warm, Bennie! Before I give yours back, however, here's Brian Lindley with the next peek at **Magic Online III**.

Magic Online III Preview – Online Store

Hello everyone, its Brian back again to give you another preview of **Magic Online III**. Today, I'll be reviewing one of the less glamorous, but certainly important game features, the Online Store.

If you've seen some of the screenshots of **Magic Online III** floating around the web, you may have noticed something different about the Online Store. That something is the fact that in **Magic Online III**, the Online Store is no longer a separate web page, but is actually integrated directly into the **Magic Online** game client. No longer will you have to go to your web browser to buy some packs or tickets from the store, but instead you can take a short trip to the navigation menu to get direct access to the store right there in the client. By integrating the Online Store, we no longer have to break the user from the game experience to purchase product, which adds another level of convenience to **Magic Online III** that we don't have in the current game.

How does it work?



The design and behavior of the **Magic Online III** store is similar to the current web store, but is no longer a web page. The left section of the store screen features icons and links to product categories, as well as your cart, account settings and redemption. Products can be viewed by type (booster, tourney packs, theme decks, etc.) or by set expansion. Each product has a detailed view that can be accessed from the catalog, just like in the current web store. We've added a panel in the docking station for your cart, so you can always see what items you have in your cart no matter where you are in the game. You can remove or update quantities of products in your cart from the dock panel, as well as link directly to checkout with those items from anywhere in the game.



Video (9.6 MB QT File)

Take a look at the screenshots and video to see the new Online Store in action. By moving the store interface into the game client, we've made it easier and more convenient to browse and purchase product in **Magic Online III**. This also opens up new possibilities for other convenience features for the store, since it is now integrated with the rest of the game.

I hope you enjoyed this week's preview of the **Magic Online III** Store. We're going to be taking a break from the bi-weekly preview schedule for a while, but we will be back with more previews and info as we get closer. We hope you've enjoyed these early looks, and we look forward to bringing you the real thing!

-Brian

