

Mike Flores

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My first memories of **Magic** deck design all involve summoning Kird Ape (the white-bordered one from Revised); longtime readers will probably remember that I liked Kird Ape so much, included it so automatically, that it took me a while to figure out that I was only supposed to play the recent *Ninth Edition* reprint in decks that had Forest. This was a pretty easy place to start because back in Revised, Kird Ape – like the mighty Lightning Bolt – was a common. Even twelve years ago, I liked the aggressive costs, and my most frequent play partners did too, figured out quickly that they could just destroy me with Blue Elemental Blast.

Once I started to play outside my own tiny circle of three or four friends, though, I found more and more ways to... well... lose. In those early years of my naïveté, flying creatures, especially ones with four (or more) toughness and other special abilities, had their way with me and my little monkeys and there wasn't much I could do about it. Among the dangerous air forces of 1994 were icons of **Magic**, creatures as famous – and as included in *Ninth Edition* – as my Kird Apes, equals and opposites: Serra Angel and Sengir Vampire.

Serra Angel, sword of faith in hand, was something special. Sengir Vampire didn't often acquire any +1/+1 counters, and as effective as Air Elemental was at leaping over Kird Ape and Craw Wurm, she didn't do anything outstanding (not by comparison, anyway); in any case, the Red Elemental Blasts in my 75 card decks put the cloudy Blue girl down like a dog, no worries, no worries. Serra, though... She attacked, she blocked, she killed my Kird Ape *and* drew a Lightning Bolt (and sometimes didn't even die). After being bashed by her, I learned to like Serra Angel so much I jumped at the chance to trade a Savannah for my first! (Who needs Savannah? Why not just play basics?) Once I started to get my hands on more cards, I toyed with playing more “complicated” (elegant?) strategies. It seemed obvious to me that if Serra Angel was good on turn 5, she would be even better on turn 3, so I paired my Angel with Dark Ritual; a 4/4 flyer on turn *one* was even more exciting... So even though the creepy Nosferatu wasn't *as* sexy as Serra, I put four copies of Sengir Vampire in the deck as well.




I'm fairly sure I wasn't the only one.

That simple combination, playing the iconic Serra Angel *via* the iconic Dark Ritual seemed so *obvious* to me. This is how you do it! You bring about a beautiful creature, carved from mana and marble... but you do so by way of the foulest of rituals, borrowing Black mana. If you think about it thematically, such a summoning seems almost perverse... Some local virgin probably had to die in the cauldrons of Sandra Everingham's shrouded witch in order for me to get my winged blonde after all... But isn't that essentially the banner of the Orzhov? The veneer of their syndicate is much different than the workings going on behind it. They have a destination, or an object, or a façade, but much like the expression of pure White mana born of a wash of Black, looking at such doesn't tell you one whit about how the Orzhov got there. They've got this Church... but they don't really believe in anything (deals excepted).

Just as my B/W Serra/Sengir deck (and yours, or your older brother's) had what passed for synergy 12 years ago, so did many of the attempted tournament decks to come out of the excitement surrounding the burgeoning Pro Tour. Players in many geographic locations all attempted the fabled Necropotence/Healing Salve combination, for instance. They were willing to jank up their mana bases – take City of Brass points in many cases – to replicate what they thought was the effect of Blue's best of boons (“If I play Healing Salve, gain three life, *and then* set aside three cards, isn't that the same as the best card in the history of **Magic?**”). Forget about the fact that they just didn't understand how Necropotence worked... These players were trying to find synergy between apparent opposites, drawing the strengths of one color (life gain) to offset the liabilities of the other (life total) to simulate the boon that fell between Healing Salve and the ubiquitous Dark Ritual: Ancestral Recall.

Year in and year out, there have been many B/W decks. When Gerrard's Wisdom showed itself to be great in U/W control variants, Northeast players like John Chinnock tried that card in Steel Necro. No, it wasn't much better than the old Healing Salve decks, certainly didn't help the uber-consistent Steel Necro deck, but you have to admit, hand-dependent Wisdom fueling life gain to draw cards, which has a geometric effect on the *next* Wisdom's life gain sure is exciting!

One fifth of the *Apocalypse* set seemed tailor made for B/W, with amazing cards like Gerrard's Verdict and Vindicate first inspiring B/W decks... but ultimately contributing to some of the most fearsome *Blue* builds in recent memory. Ironically, the “pure” B/W decks in the abstract had little force during *Invasion* Block, and only got less viable a year later with the printing of Psychatog. The *Apocalypse* cards had already left Standard when my favorite B/W deck of recent years, roguish as his eventual Twelvepost, appeared in the Top 8 of the 2003 European Championships: Gabriel Nassif's Decree.dec:

Gabriel Nassif			
Main Deck		Sideboard	
60 cards			
1 Barren Moor	2 Akroma's Vengeance	3 Chastise	
12 Plains	4 Cabal Therapy	2 Circle of Protection: Red	
1 Secluded Steppe	4 Chainer's Edict	3 Disenchant	
10 Swamp	4 Decree of Justice	3 Engineered Plague	
24 lands	4 Decree of Pain	1 Haunting Echoes	
	4 Duress	3 Persecute	
	1 Haunting Echoes	15 sideboard cards	
	4 Renewed Faith		
2 Eternal Dragon	3 Skeletal Scrying		
2 Undead Gladiator	4 Wrath of God		
4 creatures	32 other spells		

This deck was just so *different*. At the time, there was nothing like it. It wasn't Blue... but it drew a ton of cards: Everything cycled! Nassif's numbers look a little off in hindsight, but that doesn't change how well he could tune any random hand with Undead Gladiator. Playing against beatdown? The Gladiator would keep him from ever missing a land drop. Playing against Psychatog? He could twist his hand into a stack of nothing but Duress and Cabal Therapy, waiting for a single unreal defense,



tearing Psychatog and Upheaval from the opponent's hand in a war of mana, one turn before the lethal attack.

The "best deck" – or at least the "it" deck – of the day was probably Goblin Bidding, and though it isn't obvious, this deck did a good job of defending against that foe. Decree of Pain at instant speed was a perfect foil to Patriarch's Bidding (assuming there wasn't a lethal Goblin Sharpshooter in play, of course), and Nassif's sideboard was more than a little prepared for the archetype anyway.


If you look at the "attitude" of the Nassif Decree deck, it is easy to again see the beginning underpinnings of the Orzhov. The Black disruption is all very pushy. Just look at that *name*, "Duress." In legal terms, Duress is a forcible restraint or restriction, or a compulsion by threat. You can almost see the thugs cornering the poor opposing gamer in some street corner, taking his combo piece and lunch money at knifepoint.

Really the deck is very proto-organized crime. You have Duress and Cabal Therapy bossing the little guy around, meanwhile the "legitimate" branches of the deck are making these proclamations – let's call them *Decrees* – in both colors. From a game rather than flavor standpoint, the synergies between Black and White – life gain versus life payment – are again at play. The realization of every aborted Healing Salve or Gerrard's Wisdom fueling Necropotence, Gabriel's deck cycled its many Renewed Faiths to find, *and pay for*, one of the three Skeletal Scryings. This was a deck of what Zvi calls "incremental card advantage." Don't try to get in an attrition war with Decree.dec. If you are the beatdown, there are few mistakes more lethal. If you are the control, you can't wait around against his heavy – and cheap – disruptive elements, either. Reminiscent of modern Orzhov decks, Nassif's was the kind that lost only to a brute or superior force, Blazes going over the top of Shrieking Grotesques or battles waged on battlefields not of the B/W's choosing.

As for me? I was bought by the Orzhov some years ago, before I knew these shadow agents had a name. Brian Kowal convinced me in 1999 that overpowered decks could be beaten if forced to interact... and something broke in my primary wiring. Ever since I've been trying to disrupt the other guy's hand instead of playing a bomb myself, fencing in the shadows rather than crashing through the Red Zone like the lovable Gruul. If I'm the Orzhov, I'll err on the side of a slow deck with Wrath of God and a long game plan of plinking away one point at a time rather than run a focused offense around Bob Maher and Bill Cosby... Please, please, learn from my shortcomings.

In the current Standard environment, you have many opportunities to exploit the proactive Orzhov cards effectively. Here are some of the most common offenses B/W can run:

Focus over Power:

Ben Goodman - Ghost Dad 		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
4 Caves of Koilos	1 Indomitable Will	2 Blessed Breath
1 Eiganjo Castle	3 Pillory of the Sleepless	3 Cranial Extraction
4 Godless Shrine	4 Shining Shoal	1 Enfeeblement
		1 Kami of Ancient Law

6 Plains
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
6 Swamp
1 Tomb of Urami

23 lands

4 Dark Confidant
4 Ghost Council of Orzhova
3 Kami of Ancient Law
3 Plagued Rusalka
4 Tallowisp
2 Teysa, Orzhov Scion
4 Thief of Hope

24 creatures

4 Sickening Shoal
1 Strands of Undeath
13 other spells

1 Miren, the Moaning Well
2 Persecute
1 Pillory of the Sleepless
2 Pithing Needle
2 Umezawa's Jitte

15 sideboard cards

Most of you have seen this deck already. It is a Top 32 build from Pro Tour--Honolulu and reportedly the most popular deck in the MTGO 8-Man queues. "Ghost Dad" was built on the idea that Shoals are cool, and that triggering Tallowisp is profitable. It is a top-down deck that focuses its efforts on breaking Tallowisp where other decks have more even or consistent elements.

Note: When I say that a specific focus is emphasized over power, I am not saying that Ghost Dad doesn't have *any* powerful cards, merely that it doesn't really have powerful cards in the abstract that other Orzhov creature decks don't *also* have; in order to accommodate the Tallowisp engine, it has to compromise unconditionally adopted cards like Mortify and Faith's Fetters for the potential card advantage of Pillory of the Sleepless in the course of its design.

Ghost Dad is one of the best decks you can possibly play against Red-based beatdown. It has the edge against Heezy Street and Gruul Deck Wins, and conditionally has the edge over Zoo, depending on the opponent's build. In a format like Team Standard, where you can expect each team to field one Gruul/Heezy/Zoo deck, Ghost Dad should have the advantage about 1/3 of the time against any random opponent. As such, given the right matchups, Ghost Dad can be extremely effective. It was one third of last week's Grand Prix winning configuration, and at the PTQ I played in, most of the teams that had mediocre finishes still had a Ghost Dad player who went 6-1 or thereabouts.

However, unlike most of the other successful B/W decks, Ghost Dad can force interaction only if the opponent is willing to play on the same field of battle. For example, it is great at holding down creatures with Pillory of the Sleepless, but against Heartbeat of Spring combo, its main out is the one Strands of Undeath and the hope that a single Kami of Ancient Law will be enough.

Disruption over Utility:





Main Deck

60 cards

- 4 Caves of Koilos
- 1 Eiganjo Castle
- 4 Godless Shrine
- 5 Plains
- 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
- 8 Swamp

23 lands

- 4 Dark Confidant
- 2 Ghost Council of Orzhova
- 2 Hand of Cruelty
- 4 Hypnotic Specter
- 3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
- 1 Kami of Ancient Law
- 4 Ravenous Rats
- 3 Savannah Lions
- 4 Shrieking Grottesque

27 creatures

- 2 Faith's Fetters
 - 4 Mortify
 - 4 Umezawa's Jitte
-
- 10 other spells

Sideboard

- 4 Castigate
- 1 Kami of Ancient Law
- 3 Last Gasp
- 2 Manriki-Gusari
- 1 Nokrataal
- 2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi
- 2 Otherworldly Journey

15 sideboard cards

In the abstract, we don't expect pure beatdown decks to play a lot of general (sometimes "dead weight") utility cards. When asked how he planned to beat Circle of Protection: Red, King of Beatdown Dave Price used to laugh and say "I'll kill them before they draw it, or at least before it matters." More often than not, Dave was right.

Of the current Orzhov configurations I am discussing here, Ruud's is the most singularly offensive. In the idiom of 1995, it would have been called a "Handelman School" deck. Almost his drops are quick (this is the only deck without Teysa in the group), and all his cards make sense in a straightforward fashion. You look at Mortify, at Jitte, at Faith's Fetters – certainly at Savannah Lions – and you know not just what they do, but why. Ruud's deck de-emphasized Ghost Council not because it is a bad card (most people consider it the single best card in most Orzhov attack decks) but because of its Legendary status and position on the curve.

So what's wrong with this deck?

There is nothing *specifically* wrong with Ruud's build... Certainly in the abstract his eight maindeck discard creatures and full load of Castigates in the board make it a disruptive powerhouse... It's just that he can't destroy an artifact anywhere in that 75, and that lack of utility cost Ruud in the Honolulu Quarterfinals. What is the only artifact that a deck like this would really hate to see on turn 2? What card undoes all the Shrieking Grottesques and Ravenous Rats in the world while fueling the opponent's combo engine? It might not matter in the wider post-PT Honolulu world, but the answer is Howling Mine.

Diversity over Specialization:

Olivier Ruel – Hand in Hand



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Caves of Koilos
1 Eiganjo Castle
4 Godless Shrine
4 Orzhov Basilica
2 Plains
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
6 Swamp

22 lands

4 Dark Confidant
4 Ghost Council of Orzhova
3 Hand of Cruelty
2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi
2 Paladin en-Vec
4 Plagued Rusalka
4 Ravenous Rats
2 Shrieking Grottesque
3 Teysa, Orzhov Scion

28 creatures

4 Castigate
3 Mortify
3 Umezawa's Jitte
10 other spells

Sideboard

2 Cranial Extraction
1 Descendant of Kiyomaro
2 Distress
2 Orzhov Pontiff
2 Phyrexian Arena
2 Seize the Soul
2 Slay
2 Terashi's Grasp

15 sideboard cards




Olivier's deck does many things, and a reasonable amount of things *well*. Mechanically though, Hand in Hand does not do anything that any of the other decks can't do to any particular degree. Like Goodman, Oli has Plagued Rusalka to control another player's Maher advantage, and like Ruud, he has a ton of discard. Unlike every other deck in the group, he has Orzhov Basilica to make his Ghost Council drop more consistent... and then there are all those Knights (Samurai as it were).

One thing that Ruel's deck does *differently* than most of the others is to combine the unique Black and White elements (as opposed to the specifically Orzhov elements) effectively. The best example is probably Paladin en-Vec into Okiba-Gang Shinobi. Who blocks Paladin en-Vec? That's right, nobody. He runs past the Gruul, never gets Shocked, and laughs off other B/W decks. He comes in for two... and with damage on the stack, switches for the Ninja. The uniquely White creature

crosses the Red Zone, hits for additional damage that no other creature in the deck could force via a uniquely White combat ability, *and then* the three power follow-up does its work, emphasizing aggression, sneakiness, and disruption – Black to a tee.

The main drawback to Hand in Hand is on the numbers. No deck can do everything, and just trying to do so many discrete tasks within a single deck will wear on the consistency of other elements. Oli has only two Paladins and two Okiba-Gangs to accomplish the feat described in the above paragraph, for instance. He cheats on Jitte, Mortify (one of the main reasons to go B/W), and land (hoping Basilica will pull out the missing drop). Recent versions of Ghost Dad have added as many as three Descendants of Kiyomaro main... Ruel has only one, and it's in his sideboard. That said, Oli's deck can still do *more* things than the others, making it difficult to predict in the context of a real match.

Force over Common Sense:

Michael Diezel - Kamehameha's Grave Pact		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
4 Caves of Koilos	4 Castigate	1 Ghost Council of Orzhova
1 Eiganjo Castle	4 Mortify	3 Grave Pact
4 Godless Shrine	4 Promise of Bunrei	3 Hokori, Dust Drinker
5 Plains		1 Orzhov Pontiff
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	12 other spells	3 Pithing Needle
7 Swamp		4 Shining Shoal
		15 sideboard cards
22 lands		
4 Dark Confidant		
2 Ghost Council of Orzhova		
4 Isamaru, Hound of Konda		
4 Kami of Ancient Law		
3 Nantuko Husk		
3 Orzhov Pontiff		
4 Plagued Rusalka		
2 Savannah Lions		
26 creatures		

Michael Diezel finished 17th at Pro Tour--Honolulu with one of the most exciting decks of the tournament. In many ways, his deck is the realization of all the disparate dreams of Black and White cards, as well as a surprising showcase of unique Orzhov mechanics.

The unique element of Diezel's deck, that special something missing from the others, is a Nantuko Husk engine. Alongside Promise of Bunrei, Nantuko Husk can basically accomplish a lethal strike out of nowhere. Additionally, he has Plagued Rusalka to help break Promise of Bunrei, and Orzhov Pontiff – whose Haunt mechanic again combines with Plagued Rusalka and Nantuko Husk – to create huge swings in game state. Joshua Ravitz has likened the Diezel's engine to Affinity, a puzzle that, when

played correctly, will always yield victory over an inferior opponent. He can sweep the board or overrun. He can come across with one unstoppable threat or clutter the board with a ton of 1/1 creatures... that inexplicably go 2/2 mid-combat. He can use the Rusalka to activate the Promise, and then use the Rusalka and the Promise together to block an entire army, simultaneously removing even a huge creature... and of course he has Ruud's one-drops and Ben's Shining Shoals as well.

Like Ruel's deck, Diezel's has to make hard cuts to accommodate such disparate effects. His is the only Orzhov attack deck in the group without a single Umezawa's Jitte. Like Ruel, he has only 22 lands, but unlike the Road Warrior, doesn't have any Basilicas to fall back on. Diezel's deck is arguably the most powerful in this quartet, and certainly the one most capable of accomplishing jaw-dropping swings in tempo and card advantage – but it is important if you choose to play this deck to understand what you might be giving up. The answer to that is many of the cards most people think are essential to B/W... like the third and fourth Ghost Councils.

Beyond it being Orzhov Week, a familiarity with B/W is important right now because of the current PTQ season. Ben Goodman recently said that “every” team would field a Ghost Council of Orzhova deck. That means that if you are going to play one, it is probably pretty important to get a feeling for what the various decks can do, and in the likely case that you will be playing against them, this knowledge is even more important to have.

Next week we will go hardcore in to the Team Standard season, but for now, check out my Teams Preview and the GP-Madison Coverage.

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