

Azorius and the Fundamentals of Magic Strategy

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U/W control is perhaps the oldest true strategy in **Magic**. What do I mean by this? There are certain cards or combinations of elements of the game that seem scripted by designers or are obviously complementary in their redundancy that any player or aspiring Johnny will notice for a potential deck theme. I often write about how Kird Ape was the first "combination" that sparked my interest in deck design... It was obvious even to a novice like I was in 1994 that Kird Ape went with basic Forest (I mean, it said so right on the text box); other cards like Magical Hack needed something to aim at (Karma seemed a fine one, but there were several potential candidates). At the same time, there were cards like Stone Rain and Ice Storm (and Sinkhole when you factored in all the Bayous and so forth) that obviously worked well together, whispering "redundancy." Black Vise was great in every deck... but really shined along with the land destruction.



U/W control, properly implemented, was something different. I had heard whispers of "creatureless" decks, and had tried to build burn decks with four copies of Lightning Bolt, Disintegrate, Fireball, and - once I could get my hands on some - Chain Lightning... But those decks had their own issues. While my friends' Terrors sat dead in their hands, creating a sort of card advantage for me, these "cheesy" burn decks were vulnerable to running out of steam, and once my friends figured out what I was up to, they started to cheese me right back with Circle of Protection: Red (also mono-burn decks are terrible in group games, where running out leaves you with your pants down against more than one hostile). The then-new notion of U/W control had many of the advantages of my creatureless burn decks, but with its focus on "card advantage" specifically, was less likely to run out of steam... Especially at a time when that was a new idea to many players (who were primarily concerned with peeling whatever the tops of their decks decided to give them). Credited to Brian Weissman, the earliest published U/W control played on multiple themes: card advantage, threat invalidation, a focus on defense, and a pseudo-creatureless endgame. This is a version from April 1996:

The Deck, Brian Weissman (circa April 1996)



Main Deck

60 cards

4 City of Brass	1 Amnesia
4 Island	1 Ancestral Recall
1 Library of Alexandria	1 Black Lotus
3 Plains	1 Braingeyser
3 Strip Mine	2 Counterspell
4 Tundra	1 Demonic Tutor
2 Volcanic Island	4 Disenchant

Sideboard

2 Blood Moon
2 Circle of Protection: Red
1 Disrupting Scepter
2 Divine Offering
1 Feldon's Cane
1 Fireball
1 Ivory Tower
1 Jayemdae Tome

21 lands	2 Disrupting Scepter	1 Moat
	1 Jayemdae Tome	2 Red Elemental Blast
	4 Mana Drain	1 Tormod's Crypt
2 Serra Angel	1 Mirror Universe	
	2 Moat	15 sideboard cards
2 creatures	1 Mox Emerald	
	1 Mox Jet	
	1 Mox Pearl	
	1 Mox Ruby	
	1 Mox Sapphire	
	1 Recall	
	2 Red Elemental Blast	
	1 Regrowth	
	1 Sol Ring	
	4 Swords to Plowshares	
	1 Time Walk	
	1 Timetwister	
	<hr/>	
	37 other spells	

Just a note before we proceed: This is a Type I deck (what we call Vintage today). Before the advent of the Pro Tour, many pundits did not think there *was* strategy applicable to Type II (what we call Standard) *at all*. Today we know that to be untrue.

If you've never seen a deck like The Deck in action, it works like this:

The Deck is fundamentally passive. A decade ago, most players focused on their Kird Apes and Lightning Bolts, or Dark Rituals into Hypnotic Specter. By stark contrast, Weissman's deck runs only two Serra Angels as its primary win conditions. Segmenting the potential kill to such a narrow part of the deck allowed Brian to spend his slots on cards that would keep him alive.

Moat is the defensive workhorse of The Deck. Weissman would hide behind it, essentially immune to the efforts of any non-flying threats, which would give him time to work down the opponent's hand with Amnesia (formerly Mind Twist), and eventually soft-lock the game down with Disrupting Scepter.




Brian's game plan was, at its core, different than that of everyone else in the community. Rather than trying to win, all he wanted to do was *not lose*... The theory went that as long as he didn't lose, given the fact that he was drawing extra cards and knocking out the opponent's cards, he would *eventually* find a way to win as a matter of course. Trade, trade, answer that... All of a sudden you are dead in five swings of a Serra.

Remember the earlier mention of creatureless decks? Weissman's use of two Serra Angels was very deliberate. Other players, like Adam Maysonet, bent U/W into a *completely* creatureless direction...

Maysonet won entirely by Jester's Cap deck exhaustion. As difficult as it was to play creatures into Weissman's Moat, battling Maysonet's deck was an exercise in frustration. He would 'Cap out the

most relevant cards... and then loop the Cap back in, over and over, until the opponent conceded (usually with no ways to win). By contrast, Weissman's *actually playing creatures* – if only a few – presented a unique problem for his opponents. Would they sideboard out all the creature elimination? If the answer were *yes*, then the Angels would have free rein; Weissman could play one if he were in trouble and it could both attack and defend him even before the Scepter lock had been established with no great fear of being removed. If the answer were *no*, then the opponent's deck would be likely to run inefficiently; he would be drawing creature kill that had few if any targets, cards that Weissman's deck was designed to clear before ever risking one of his iconic death maidens.


The Weissman strategy caught on in the **Magic** community like wildfire. People love to be “different,” and players in general were drawn to the idea of piloting a deck with a coherent, if difficult, game plan rather than a hodgepodge of nakedly synergistic cards (“theme decks”), or even specific (and generally erratic) early combination decks. In fact, the first Pro Tour was won by a Standard version of Weissman's deck that ported its philosophies, focus on defense, and low number of creatures to a smaller set format.

U/W Control - Michael Loconto		
Main Deck		Sideboard
	62 cards	
4 Adarkar Wastes	1 Balance	2 Aeolipile
4 Island	2 Control Magic	2 Circle of Protection: Red
4 Mishra's Factory	4 Counterspell	1 Control Magic
7 Plains	1 Deflection	1 Divine Offering
1 Ruins of Trokair	4 Disenchant	2 Hydroblast
1 Strip Mine	1 Feldon's Cane	1 Jester's Cap
2 Svyelunite Temple	2 Fountain of Youth	2 Sea Sprite
1 Wizards' School	2 Hallowed Ground	2 Serrated Arrows
	2 Icy Manipulator	2 Steal Artifact
24 lands	1 Ivory Tower	
	1 Jayemdae Tome	15 sideboard cards
	2 Land Tax	
2 Blinking Spirit	3 Millstone	
	1 Recall	
2 creatures	4 Swords to Plowshares	
	4 Wrath of God	
	1 Zuran Orb	
	36 other spells	

The U/W decks of ancient days – both Weissman's and Loconto's and the ones that came immediately after – had a powerful fundamental synergy: Blue cards could counter threats and White cards could remove anything that got through; in the case of Weissman's deck especially, Blue cards could protect his permanents (Brian's optimal board position included a Disrupting Scepter, Moat, Serra Angel, and two Mana Drains in hand). In a pinch, the White cards could help gain life against burn decks, too, or otherwise build on a deck's inherent margins. The distinguishing thing about this strategy was that, like land destruction, it was frustrating to play against. No one likes to feel like his cards don't matter, and the U/W players specialized in making people feel that way. They would typically do nothing but

answer the opponent's cards – often at a profit – and try to win only after he established an overwhelming cardboard advantage via Disrupting Scepter, Jayemdae Tome, or Millstone.

One of the solutions that R&D came up with the *last* time a specifically multicolored Block was in print ended up as U/W's next and only other Pro Tour victory, a deck called, ironically, *The Solution*.

Zvi Mowshowitz		
W/U - PT Tokyo 2001		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
4 Coastal Tower	4 Absorb	2 Aura Blast
10 Island	4 Exclude	3 Crusading Knight
10 Plains	4 Fact or Fiction	4 Disrupt
24 lands	4 Repulse	3 Gainsay
	16 other spells	3 Pure Reflection
		15 sideboard cards
4 Crimson Acolyte		
4 Galina's Knight		
4 Meddling Mage		
4 Stormscape Apprentice		
4 Voice of All		
20 creatures		

Notice how, rather than playing all reactive spells, Zvi had mostly proactive two-mana creatures in his deck. Zvi retained many of the trappings of the U/W fortress past – he played Absorb as a hard counter, two anti-creature instants, as well as the mighty Fact or Fiction (mayhap the finest Jayemdae Tome every printed) – but his deck was mostly about playing permanents and using them to control the board. This attitude is not unlike Weissman's original (who played Moat and so forth rather than trying to counter everything like some *Mono-Blue* control decks), but is differentiated by the fact that Zvi's key permanents *were all creatures*. This was better and worse for the U/W mage. On one hand, he had a potentially faster clock, what with being able to go offensive on turn 2 or 3, but on the other hand, his permanents were much more vulnerable to removal. When you are controlling creatures with a Moat, there is much less chance that your enchantment will be removed by, say, a B/R beatdown deck than when you are trying to do essentially the same thing with Stormscape Apprentice.

As we introduced above, Brian Weissman's The Deck was in many ways the mark of the beginnings of real **Magic** strategy – certainly *Internet Magic* strategy – so the decks Brian had to beat were much less sophisticated than most modern opponents (despite the fact that the opponent might be packing, say, Ancestral Recall, Time Walk, and Black Lotus); ditto on Loconto: When "loco" Mike won, the most dangerous combination of cards he had to deal with was Erhnam Djinn + Armageddon... For these early magicians, there was no Illusions of Grandeur + Donate, no Enduring Renewal + Goblin Bombardment + Shield Sphere, and certainly no Heartbeat of Spring + Early and Weird Harvests. They mostly had to kill dudes who summoned dudes.

In contrast, Zvi's deck, which is less of a true control deck, actually has better tools to deal with combinations. Now no one is saying that in his *Block Pro Tour* win that Mr. The Play's The Thing had to rumble with top shelf combination decks, but he potentially had the tools. Meddling Mage, for example, is a perfect anti-combination weapon. It's essentially a walking *Duress* for all the copies of a particular named card, and, as a little beater, Meddling Mage puts the opponent on a clock, helping to win before the combination deck's powerful card drawing or engine cards allow it to overwhelm Chris Pikula and a few counters.

I think that this progression is what brings us to the tournament Azorius today.



Initially I wasn't that high on the Azorius Guildmage. I was wrong.

In recent weeks, I've spent a lot of time talking about how great the Heartbeat of Spring deck is in Team Standard. With two more wins this week (out of two reporting PTQs) and 7/8 of reporting Top 4 teams fielding a copy of the deck, Heartbeat continues to be the most impressive Team Trios archetype by a mile...

Heartbeat hates an Azorius Guildmage.

Heartbeat wins entirely on the strength of its counter-proof Transmute cards... See any conflicts with Azorius Guildmage's activated ability? One Guildmage and a little open mana will be hell on a Heartbeat player... You can claim "Savage Twister" or even "Boomerang" all you want... But the singleton copies of those cards are awfully hard to find without successfully moving a Muddle the Mixture, and Little Miss Azorius counters all the Transmute cards a Heartbeat player can present, with a huge profit in card advantage.

With Azorius Guildmage as a sort of Meddling Mage for the *Ravnica* Block – one that can profitably shut down Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree, in fact – I think that by Regionals we may have seen the last of the dirty combo deck in the current Standard (the Rakdos don't like it much, either). With a front[wo]man like this one, I think that the Azorius, with their Grand Arbiter and superb forecast activated abilities like Pride of the Clouds and Sky Hussar, the Azorius are poised to supplant Godless Shrine in popularity with their beautiful – and much holier – Hallowed Fountains... Not by Regionals, mind you, but by the end of the summer? The Azorius take the long view, so quite possibly.

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