

Extremes in Metagaming for Regional Search 06

Mike Flores

Thursday, May 18, 2006

Invocation:

"I do have this little tidbit to offer those who wish to win tournaments: play the percentages. Don't worry about beating the best deck at the tournament you are going to. Chances are significantly less than 25% that any particular deck is making it to the finals, numbers overpower skill every time. If there is an army of land destruction decks there, and one of the best editions of the Deck you've seen (lets say it's Brian himself), don't worry about beating Brian. Chances are excellent that he'll get unlucky and eliminated. Worry about beating the land destruction decks instead."

-Sam "Garry" Handelman, c/o "Schools of Magic" version 5.4, April 10, 1996

Introduction:

The current Standard metagame contains perhaps 20 viable decks... Team Orzhov alone features Ghost Husk, Ghost Dad, Hand in Hand, "Orzhov Descent," and various hybrids... before you even leave the aggressors for the decks with (or without!) Dimir House Guard into Wrath of God (not to mention closely associated "Beach House" Loxodon hybrids and variants). As for the Stomping Ground decks, you have true Heezy Street, sub-optimal lists with Shock, Llanowar Elves, or Rumbling Slum, and all flavors of Zoo, from 20/20/20 decks like Fujita's "Zoo Pants" (Golgari Grave-Troll much?) to transformative Glare of Subdual sideboards like Billy Moreno's. Speaking of Glare decks, you have the World Championship decks, the hybrid pre-sideboarded Greater Good decks, and the PTQ Ghazi-Chord deck, which is basically a World Championships deck with no transformative sideboard but cramming Shining Shoal (a.k.a. the nuts) down your craw main (nice Yosei). As for Blue and Blue/Red decks, there are lots of *kinds* of those as well. Some people have insisted the return of Jushi Blue is a reasonable one for the current format, while others prefer their control flavored via Guillaume Wafo-Tapa; there is great dissent among the Steam Vents players, with decks ranging from the tempo control and permission of the aforementioned Wafo-Tapa to the proactive tempo control of Vore, both of which are at a right angle to IzzeTron (or URzaTron) (or Tron-Wildfire)... and don't even get me started on Annex-Wildfire!



Missing from the above opening paragraph are any and all new Azorius, Rakdos, Simic, or Azorius-, Rakdos-, or Simic-hybridized or "improved" decks and archetypes, old R/W Champs decks like Boros or Fungus Fires, any and all decks featuring the card "Gifts Ungiven" (and there are probably three or more distinct viable builds without leaving a single basic framework of three or four colors)... and that "Heartbeat of Spring" thing. To wit, twenty distinct decks is likely an estimate shy of the mark.

What does this mean? Even The Fanatic can't test every matchup to satisfaction!

For a format like this one, there is no reward in drilling to the smallest detail. Familiarity with the format and understanding the distinct nuances of the opponent's version may give you pleasure and satisfaction, but efficient evaluation for a one tournament window need not come from exhaustive trials against every version of every color combination *with* every version of every color combination. As with some previous formats, the *only* play, I think, is to cheat playtesting, and attack various clusters of decks without actually fighting every distinct deck at the granular level.

My technique this time around is to focus on the most extreme – and hopefully *best* – decks, with those decks being representative of their color combinations *from the perspective* of the deck(s) I am interested in playing. For example, when I say further down not to test against Rakdos, it is not because I don't think B/R *can* be good... It is because if I test Rakdos, it will be from *my* side, rather than with the expectation of seeing a Blood Crypt on the other side of the table.

Methodology:

I am going to group decks in clusters of some like-minded element (usually mana source) and talk about which version(s) I bothered to test against. Again, you can't actually test every version of every deck in a metagame as diverse as this one... The goal is see how your deck does against the ones that make your engine burn hottest, so that you understand the kinds of board positions that come up more than the numbers on a specific matchup. For example if you plan to play seven or even nine rounds of Regionals, that is maybe 1/3 or 1/2 of the decks you *could* have tested. It's more important to understand why things work the way they do and what cards are good in your deck than to know the numbers on some arcane matchup that will never come up.

Godless Shrine

Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
4 Caves of Koilos	3 Castigate	1 Castigate
1 Eiganjo Castle	3 Mortify	3 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails
4 Godless Shrine	3 Pithing Needle	3 Last Gasp
4 Orzhov Basilica	4 Promise of Bunrei	3 Mindslicer
3 Plains	13 other spells	1 Orzhov Pontiff
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse		4 Shining Shoal
5 Swamp		15 sideboard cards
<hr/>		
22 lands		
<hr/>		
4 Dark Confidant		
3 Ghost Council of Orzhova		
4 Isamaru, Hound of Konda		
3 Kami of Ancient Law		
4 Nantuko Husk		
3 Orzhov Pontiff		
4 Plagued Rusalka		
<hr/>		
25 creatures		


Though this deck started with Michael Diezel in Honolulu and passed through the hands of the Road Warrior before becoming a PTQ mainstay, it was the vocal Osyp Lebedowicz who helped make Ghost Husk a nigh-ubiquitous powerhouse in late Charleston Qualifier tournaments. Ghost Husk is my B/W playtest test deck of choice for the following reasons:

1. It is maximally disruptive. Ghost Dad has Kami of Ancient Law and Hand in Hand has Castigate, but Ghost Husk has *both, as well as* Pithing Needle in the main. If you want to test the limits of a deck's capability to develop its own position while under pressure, there is no more vigorous sparring partner than this one among B/W decks in the format.
2. It is the fastest, most powerful, version of B/W. The stats bear this one out pretty clearly: The B/W that can come over for a lethal strike out of nowhere is the scariest one. Ghost Husk breaks Wrath of God decks with Promise of Bunrei and laughs off opposing forces with Orzhov Pontiff tricks. The best players say that running this deck is a puzzle, like assembling a perfect attack with Ravager Affinity. Unlike most other versions of B/W aggro, Ghost Husk starts the beats on turn 1 with Isamaru, Hound of Konda.

Notes:

Your opponent's version of B/W tends to matter most either when you are playing directly into the archetype or by what degree you can ignore its cards. In the abstract, all the mainstream Stomping Ground decks are at a general disadvantage against all the creature-based Godless Shrine decks whereas the Steam Vents decks are generally ahead, so the differences from archetype to archetype are not that significant most of the time. As the beatdown, you scoop the hardest to Ghost Dad with its annoying 1/3 two-drop and myriad Shoals, but you are generally not looking for a Godless Shrine matchup, so it's not like you're celebrating if the opponent is Hands and Jittes or anything; either way, it is important to know where your bad matchups lie, and for juggernaut Heezy Street, Ghost Dad is the silver bullet. By contrast, now that Ghost Dad is known (as opposed to the Pro Tour, where champions were asking Ben Goodman if he were the kid with the Shoals), it is the easiest of the B/W decks to beat for certain types of control and combination.

Stomping Ground

Heezy Street 

	Main Deck <i>60 cards</i>	Sideboard
	4 Char 3 Flames of the Blood Hand 3 Moldervine Cloak <hr/> 10 other spells	4 Blood Moon 1 Flames of the Blood Hand 2 Naturalize 2 Rumbling Slum 2 Tin Street Hooligan 4 Umezawa's Jitte
6 Forest 4 Karplusan Forest 7 Mountain 2 Skarrg, the Rage Pits 4 Stomping Ground <hr/> 23 lands		<hr/> 15 sideboard cards
4 Burning-Tree Shaman 4 Dryad Sophisticate 3 Frenzied Goblin 4 Giant Solifuge		

4 Kird Ape
4 Scab-Clan Mauler
4 Scorched Rusalka

27 creatures

I chose the first, best, version of the deck for my playtest opponent. The defining feature of Mark's deck against other G/R builds you might see can be summed up like this:

1. No Llanowar Elves, et al.
2. No Rumbling Slum main.

Instead he has Scorched Rusalka and Giant Solifuge. Why is this significant? Mark's deck was built not just to exploit the natural advantages of the Gruul, but to beat the decks that are - or at least *were* - designed to beat his sort of deck. His Rusalkas fight Faith's Fetters and make Wrath of God painful (as opposed to Llanowar Elves, which is just another dead body). Rumbling Slum is just a big, fat, Fetters target, whereas Giant Solifuge dodges Fetters, Putrefy, Mortify, and other popular spot removal spells; it is also superb in a post-Wrath situation.



I know there are Simic mages out there preparing for Regionals. I think you as a class should test aggressively against Heezy Street. I like me a counter-Mass (as you probably know) more than most... but I've had a lot of problems with this deck. Even Jitte advantage is not that significant against Moldervine Cloak [on a Dryad Sophisticate]. I know Pat Chapin has (independently) faced the same challenges with his U/G beatdown decks, so solutions to Moldervine Cloak should definitely be something that should be taken into account when working on a Simic deck. Note that variously Disenchanting the Moldervine Cloak is pretty pointless if you can't contain the Dryad (Dredge much?) and bouncing the Sophisticate - even at the cost of the Cloak short term - is just forestalling the inevitable if no trump strategy surfaces, and quickly (*it is* Tempo Week).

I consider Mark's deck the best of the Stomping Ground archetypes, but that said, playing against Heezy Street and playing against Zoo are two very different animals. The conventional wisdom says that Mark's deck is better against creatures (he wins fights and has fewer painlands), and that Zoo decks are better against control (the creatures are only responsible for the opening salvo). Rather than recommend Craig Jones's or Billy Moreno's Zoo decks, I am listing Tsuyoshi Fujita's for testing:

Tsuyoshi Fujita



Main Deck

60 cards

1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree
4 Battlefield Forge
4 Char
4 Flames of the Blood Hand

Sideboard

2 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree
2 Golgari Grave-troll
2 Kami of Ancient Law

1 Brushland
2 Karplusan Forest
4 Sacred Foundry
4 Stomping Ground
4 Temple Garden

20 lands

4 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
4 Frenzied Goblin
4 Kird Ape
4 Savannah Lions
4 Watchwolf

20 creatures

4 Lightning Helix
4 Shock
4 Volcanic Hammer

20 other spells

1 Leave no Trace
4 Loxodon Hierarch
1 Otherworldly Journey
1 Rathi Dragon
2 Umezawa's Jitte

15 sideboard cards

Tsuyoshi didn't do particularly well with his own deck in Honolulu, but the goal of this style of playtesting is to hit the extremes of deck matchups in order to understand the kinds of situations that can conceivably come up with the assumption that if you can handle those, matchups that "fall between" the extremes will be even more manageable. Tsuyoshi's deck is unique in its 20/20/20 configuration: twenty creatures, twenty lands, twenty burn spells, making it basically the most burn heavy of the aggressive decks in the metagame. In the same way that I suggested testing against Ghost Husk rather than, say, Ghost *Dad* because it most strenuously tests the ability of a deck to interact, Zoo Pants - with its tremendous burn suite - will most strenuously test the ability of a deck to win a game where it has already stabilized against the opening offensive salvo. The chief differentiating point between Zoo Pants and Heezy Street is its *reach*, or ability to win outside conventional creature combat (running similarly aggressive creatures and some of the same anti-life gain capabilities as Heezy Street, Zoo Pants packs three times Mark's burn).

Steam Vents

Going into Pro Tour--Honolulu I thought Steam Vents were the bee's knees. All the most interesting decks, from AnnexWildfire, to updated versions of Jushi Blue with Red rather than Black splashes, to the URzaTron deck that we finally settled on, packed four copies of the *Guildpact* chase rare. Godless Shrine was ultimately the most popular dual land of the Pro Tour, and B/W decks have only gotten more popular in both Team Trios and **Magic Online** 8-man tournaments since then... But U/R decks remain not just viable, but among the most challenging opponents to beat.

Nikolas Nygaard



Main Deck

60 cards

7 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
7 Mountain
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds

4 Compulsive Research
4 Demolish
4 Eye of Nowhere
1 Genju of the Spires
3 Mana Leak

Sideboard

2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
1 Mana Leak
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Pyroclasm
4 Remand

4 Shivan Reef
4 Steam Vents

24 lands

3 Magnivore

3 creatures

3 Pyroclasm
4 Sleight of Hand
4 Stone Rain
3 Tidings
3 Wildfire

33 other spells

3 Shock
3 Volcanic Hammer

15 sideboard cards

I consider Nikolas Nygaard's version of Vore to be the best of the U/R decks in the current Standard. Vore is a frustrating opponent because when it is on its game, Vore tests the opponent's ability to play without optimal resource availability. More than that, it can be a strong choice to play because players complain constantly about getting manscrewed and this deck exacerbates those kinds of bad draws like no other option in the format. Generally speaking, Vore is behind against the first tier of aggressive decks, but remains a strong litmus test deck even if you approach Regionals with the assumption that you are going to be ahead. Vore is a good place to establish a baseline for your skills... If you consistently fail to beat Vore with beatdown in testing, it either means your playtest partner should definitely be playing Vore this weekend or that you need more practice (or a better deck).

Guillaume Wafo-tapa - Counter Mizzet



Main Deck

60 cards

10 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Miren, the Moaning Well
3 Mountain
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep
4 Shivan Reef
4 Steam Vents

24 lands

2 Keiga, the Tide Star
2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind

4 creatures

3 Boomerang
2 Confiscate
4 Electrolyze
4 Hinder
3 Mana Leak
4 Remand
4 Repeal
4 Rewind
4 Tidings

32 other spells

Sideboard


1 Blood Moon
4 Giant Solifuge
1 Pithing Needle
4 Pyroclasm
3 Shattering Spree
2 Threads of Disloyalty

15 sideboard cards

My personal opinion is that Blue's best game plan in the current Standard is to use permission -- especially the really good cards like Remand -- to manage the opponent's tempo the first couple of turns while drawing cards and setting up its mana, and then tap out for a monolithic threat. Wafo-Tapa is a good playtest deck precisely because it is instead a true permission deck, chock full of counters, and devoted to a different fundamental plan than any of the other decks listed here.

Notes:

Pierre Canali said that he never lost a game where he hit four land; he therefore suggested adding one. Many players have moved away from Niv-Mizzet for Meloku and other more traditional threats. The former is something you might consider if you want to run Wafo-Tapa yourself, the latter something that you can toggle in order to get a more accurate read on the pulse of the metagame.

Kamiel Cornelissen			
Main Deck	Sideboard		
61 cards			
4 Adarkar Wastes	2 Boros Signet	4 Descendant of Kiyomaro	
2 Boros Garrison	4 Compulsive Research	1 Ivory Mask	
6 Island	3 Faith's Fetters	4 Jushi Apprentice	
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	2 Gifts Ungiven	2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	
5 Plains	4 Hinder	1 Pithing Needle	
2 Sacred Foundry	2 Izzet Signet	1 Shard Phoenix	
4 Steam Vents	4 Lightning Helix	1 Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang	
<hr/>		1 Twincast	
24 lands	4 Mana Leak	<hr/>	
	1 Rewind	15 sideboard cards	
	4 Wrath of God		
	2 Zur's Weirding		
4 Firemane Angel	<hr/>		
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	32 other spells		
<hr/>			
5 creatures			

I've actually found this deck to be inconsistent since Pro Tour--Honolulu, though it has its fans in the Team PTQ set. For a long tournament like Regionals, Kamiel's deck is probably not a good choice because it tends to pack it in to decks with disruption and Cranial Extraction, but it is still a superb test deck for a couple of reasons. 1) It might show up, albeit in smaller numbers than, say, all the B/W aggro decks put together, and 2) It does something different - and quite well - from all the other Decks to Beat. Not only does Kamiel's have a stronger permissions suite than Vore, but the deck also gains a ton of life. The Gifts Ungiven splits are really difficult against this deck if you are beatdown. Though many decks have problems with Zur's Weirding (it can be an automatic loss for Vore and to a lesser extent Heartbeat), Firemane Control is comparatively weak *against* control decks... Certainly it won't have the same volume of free wins that it does against disruption-free beatdown decks.

While they are generally longer on raw power than the other Steam Vents adherents, the various UrzaTron decks don't really accomplish anything *different* from their cousins with less degenerate mana bases. The main elements to keep in mind are that the 'Tron decks usually focus more on offense (they play more than four dedicated creature slots), and that even though they play control cards, the 'Tron decks are generally more interested in killing you than actually managing your board position (in Honolulu, Osyp would consistently just shrug and cast a Keiga when his opponent did something ostensibly threatening). The main thing to watch out for in a tournament setting is whether or not the opponent plans to cast Wildfire... You can play around it.

Sakura-Tribe Elder



Main Deck

60 cards

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 10 Forest | 1 Boomerang |
| 10 Island | 1 Compulsive Research |
| 1 Mountain | 4 Early Harvest |
| 1 Swamp | 4 Heartbeat of Spring |
| <hr/> | |
| 22 lands | 1 Invoke the Firemind |
| | 4 Kodama's Reach |
| | 4 Muddle the Mixture |
| | 1 Recollect |
| 4 Drift of Phantasms | 4 Remand |
| 1 Maga, Traitor to Mortals | 4 Sensei's Divining Top |
| 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder | 1 Weird Harvest |
| <hr/> | |
| 9 creatures | 29 other spells |

Sideboard

- 3 Iwamori of the Open Fist
- 1 Keiga, the Tide Star
- 2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
- 1 Pyroclasm
- 3 Savage Twister
- 1 Umezawa's Jitte
- 4 Vinelasher Kudzu

15 sideboard cards

The most important deck of the Team PTQ season was without question Heartbeat of Spring. Despite pressure from Azorius Guildmage and all of Team Rakdos out of *Dissension*, I see no reason why it shouldn't be a dominating deck this weekend. Test against it. Beat it. If you can't... You know the rest.

Notes:

The main change that has to be made in Heartbeat is the inclusion of four Voidslime in the sideboard. There were various sideboarding strategies used throughout the PTQ season (and you can check out previous installments of *Swimming With Sharks* for those), but I think that the overall popularity of Heartbeat will demand Vinelasher Kudzu as part of the transformational package, and Voidslime as its companion. Voidslime is quite difficult for Heartbeat to beat because not only is it a hard counter, but it can stop Transmute. Kudzu comes down on turn 2, and with counters - specifically one that can stop Transmute - the strategy seems trump in the mirror, especially if the opponent is still in combo configuration. Additionally, you should be prepared for as many as *three* Savage Twisters starting (believe it!)... Bracht's Heartbeat was designed to win on the Pro Tour, Regionals is a notorious creature-fest.



I tested against Gifts Ungiven variants extensively for both Champs and PT Honolulu, but I think that Greater Gifts specifically has been outmoded for the upcoming one weekend tournament metagame. Given the volume of decks in just this article that demand playtest, I am ignoring it personally (which may be a mistake, I know... See the next section).

New Decks

I'm all about efficiency, so the short answer is "don't bother testing against them." Don't get me wrong, innovation and being a week *ahead* of the metagame is the best advantage you can give yourself in a Constructed tournament, but in terms of testing *against* decks, I don't really see the *Dissension* Guilds as an economic set against which to crash your Weapon of Choice.



Simic is probably the most important of the *Dissension* Guilds for Standard in the short term as it hands Breeding Pool and potentially Simic Growth Chamber to Critical Mass, a deck with Wood Elves and potentially Vinelasher Kudzu (i.e. the tools to break those cards). Azorius helps Kamiel's deck's mana base, but I don't know if it can support an actual new control archetype on its own (at least in the mainstream) for one reason: Dark Confidant. Unless the opponent waltzes his Maher into your Condemn, I really don't see U/W competing in a format with a ton of Castigates and similar toys. Wrath of God is trump... but not against Ghost Council of Orzhova, not necessarily. I like Azorius, but not two-color (at least for now), and not this weekend.

Check out Garry Handelman's quote at the top... Feel free to test new decks that you want to tune for your own play this Saturday, but don't make the mistake of trying to estimate what someone *else's* take on Rakdos is going to be with no baseline. Very likely you will just get it wrong -- even if your own playtest deck is better than the version you end up playing against -- and your testing will have been a wasted effort because it doesn't reflect the deck that *actually shows up*. By the same token there are seven or more builds that *will* show up that present board positions that you know you will have to face, have to beat.

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

