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Standard: Now and Then

Aaron Forsythe
Latest Developments
Friday, May 26, 2006



Whenever a big Standard tournament like Regionals happens, I can't wait to see all the new decklists, as are most fans of the format. Of course, most people are trying to get an accurate read of what the metagame will look like going forward, but I'm interested in how R&D did with their own internal metagame a year ago.

Below I'm going to compare seven decks that finished highly (second or better) in Regionals this year with their vague analogues from the R&D labs—the "Future Future League"—of a year ago, when Guildpact and Dissension were in development.

A reminder about what we try to do as developers: The FFL wants to understand future metagames in a general sense. We want to know what colors are powerful and which are weak, how many cards each set looks to be contributing to the environment, and what we'll need to push in future sets to shake things up or balance them out. To that end, we build and play tons and tons of decks, of which the seven I chose are but a small sampling.

We generally come close to what ends up really happening a year later once the cards hit the streets. For example, we knew that Zoo and Gruul beats would be defining decks, but we never made a great "Steam Vents" deck at all—we couldn't tweak the numbers quite right, and didn't try the Urzatron in two-color builds. We had "Ghost Husk" pegged as a major player for the Orzhov, but couldn't get our **Early Harvest** combo decks to be consistent enough. In every case, *the decks that you took to Regionals were better than the decks we had internally*, so I wouldn't look to this column for much in the way of "tech" - instead look at it as a glimpse into the world of development. We walk a fine line—know too little, and the environment could be a train wreck; know too much and it feels hyper-engineered and "pre-built."

I'll present the "real" deck first, and then follow it up with R&D's decklist pasted exactly as it appeared in our email folder where we collect competitive deck ideas during development. Our decklists are full of playtest names and shorthand, but they'll give you an accurate view of how we communicate with one another. I'll follow up each R&D deck with some notes explaining our card choices and how our decks influenced how cards were printed.

1) Ghost Husk

Brett Blackman
2nd Place - Pennsylvania - Philadelphia

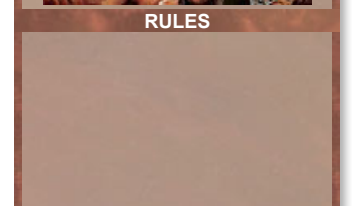
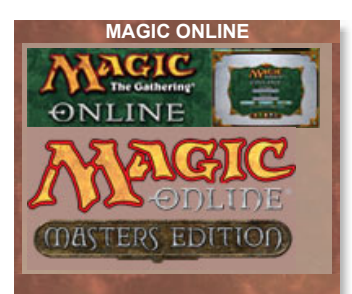
Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 Swamp 5 Plains 2 Orzhov Basilica 4 Caves of Koilos 4 Godless Shrine 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse 1 Eiganjo Castle <hr/> <p>23 lands</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails 3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda 2 Kami of Ancient Law 4 Nantuko Husk 3 Ghost Council of Orzhova 4 Dark Confidant 4 Plagued Rusalka 4 Orzhov Pontiff <hr/> <p>25 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Mortify 4 Castigate 4 Promise of Bunrei <hr/> <p>12 other spells</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Mindslicer 2 Pithing Needle 3 Cranial Extraction 2 Wrath of God 2 Grave Pact 4 Shining Shoal <hr/> <p>15 sideboard cards</p>

"Ghost Husk"—Orzhov decks featuring **Nantuko Husk** and **Promise of Bunrei**—were the big stars of Regionals. Many pundits call it the best deck because it is resilient, has good threat diversity, and can win out of nowhere.

Internally, our version of the deck was very good, winning a couple small tournaments. The following list features **Soul Warden** as the one-drop of choice (over Isamaru) simply because the card is more "combo-riffic."



[Final Wrap-up](#)
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Wilt-Free Zone – FFL – Aaron Forsythe

4 Jack Spicer
4 Soul Warden
4 Bob
4 Hand of Cruelty
1 Trent
4 Pontiff
4 Husk
3 Ghost Council

4 Jitte
4 City of Kids

1 Eiganjo
1 Shizo
4 Caves
4 WB2
6 Plains
8 Swamp

SB
4 Castigate
3 Terashi's Grasp
2 Shortfang
2 Seize the Soul
2 Darkblast
2 Moratorium Stone



What's going on with that decklist:

1. "Wilt-Free Zone" refers to the fact that this is an Orzhov deck without **Mortify**. The playtest names of **Putrefy** and **Mortify** were "Wither" and "Wilt" respectively, and this deck oddly didn't pack the latter. I believe my earlier attempts at this deck had Wilts instead of Jittes, as I figured I could handle opposing Jittes with all my sacrifice outlets. I ended up relenting and playing Jittes anyway. It's interesting to note that the real-world version of Ghost Husk played Mortifies but no Jittes.
2. All the *Guildpact* Rusalkas had playtest names taken from the kids cartoon Xiaolin Showdown; Jack Spicer is **Plagued Rusalka**.
3. Everyone should know that "Bob" is **Dark Confidant**, named after Bob Maher, Jr. Bob's mana cost was changed from **2** to **1** so that decks like this one would be enabled.
4. "Trent" is **Teysa, Orzhov Scion**. Her design name was "Trent, Goth Executioner." I had no idea at the time that I was designing the card that was meant to be the *Guildpact* novel protagonist, which is why her abilities aren't a great match for her character.
5. **Orzhov Pontiff** was an interesting card in development. It took us a long time to come up with an ability we liked for it (his art was commissioned based on a previous ability that wouldn't fit on a card). We eventually came up with a **1** that had haunt and did *both* of the Pontiff's current abilities instead of being modal. He got taken down a couple notches and still ended up being a powerful card.
6. The Ghost Council used to cost zero mana to activate. He was really dumb. The funny thing is that we left him that way for a long time.
7. I had several versions of this deck that featured multiple copies of **Belfry Spirit**. Hence, the Spirit's mana cost was increased from **2** to **3**. As you can imagine, he was ridiculous at four mana.
8. "City of Kids" is shorthand for **Promise of Bunrei**'s playtest name—"City of Lost Children." The City was one of development's pet cards; we expected it to show up a lot in Standard. Until recently, it never really delivered. And yes, I had to find out the hard way that creative and/or templating made the tokens colorless. That's why there's only one Teysa left in the deck.
9. "WB2" is shorthand for "white-black dual land that costs me two life," otherwise known as **Godless Shrine**. It is not **Orzhov Basilica**.
10. **Grave-Shell Scarab**, **Firemane Angel**, **Soulless Revival**, and **Life from the Loam** were all very heavily played internally, hence the **Moratorium Stones** in the 'board.



Some call her... Trent.

2) Zoo

Caleb Parry 1st Place - Oregon - Portland	
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Main Deck 58 cards		Sideboard
4 Stomping Ground	4 Char	2 Giant Solifuge
1 Forest	4 Lightning Helix	3 Loxodon Hierarch
4 Temple Garden	3 Umezawa's Jitte	3 Giant Growth
1 Karplusan Forest	2 Bathe in Light	1 Bathe in Light
4 Battlefield Forge	3 Seal of Fire	1 Kami of Ancient Law
4 Sacred Foundry		3 Flames of the Blood Hand
2 Plains	16 other spells	
1 Eiganjo Castle		13 sideboard cards
1 Brushland		
22 lands		
3 Burning-Tree Shaman		
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda		
4 Kird Ape		
3 Savannah Lions		
4 Watchwolf		
3 Kami of Ancient Law		
20 creatures		

Zoo, popularized by Craig Jones at PT--Honolulu, seems to have outlasted "Heezy Street" (Gruul) as the beatdown deck of choice. With a fabulous suite of burn spells and a horde of super-efficient creatures, the deck can win blazingly fast.

Internally, lead developer Brian Schneider first put forth the idea that RGW beatdown had to be insane with *Guildpact*, even if the deck's mana did 14 damage to its controller. Paul Sottosanti built the "touchstone" version that we all used to bounce our other decks off of. If a deck couldn't hang with RGW, it probably wasn't a "real" deck.

Three-Deuce – FFL – Paul Sottosanti

```

4 Kird Ape
4 Isamaru
4 RG 3/3
4 WG 3/3
4 Jitte
2 Baloth
2 Kids
4 Stone Rain
4 Char
4 Shambling City
4 RG Land
4 WG Land
4 RW Land
1 R Legend Land
1 G Legend Land
1 W Legend Land
3 WG Pain
2 RW Pain
4 RG Pain
---
3 Position
4 Creeping Mold
2 Naturalize
3 Pink Bolt
3 Terrarion

```

What's going on with that decklist:

1. "RG 3/3" and "WG 3/3" are **Scab-Clan Mauler** and **Watchwolf**, obv.
2. "Baloth" is **Loxodon Hierarch**, also obv. Note that most of these cards had real names by this point, but we generally take the path of least effort when writing decklists.
3. "Kids" is, again, **Promise of Bunrei** (I told you we liked it), and "Stone Rain" is, well, **Stone Rain**. Paul's version wasn't as burn-heavy as the successful real-world Zoo builds; instead, it was more of a fast, disruptive, three-color beatdown deck. ("Three-Deuce" was the name of a popular RGW Extended deck that packed efficient creatures and disruptive elements.)
4. "Shambling City" was going to be the name of **Rumbling Slum** until someone reminded Matt Cavotta that there was already a card named **Shambling Shell** in the block. The Slums only lasted a week or so in the deck before they were replaced with the faster "Christmas Ants," now known as **Giant Solifuge**.
5. Why no **Burning-Tree Shaman**? Simple... it didn't exist yet. We created the Shaman relatively late in *Guildpact* development as a foil to some of *Kamigawa's* annoying hallmarks—**Sensei's Divining Top**, **Umezawa's Jitte**, and Meloku. Later versions of this deck contained the Shaman.
6. In the sideboard you'll see "Position" and "Pink Bolt." The former is **Glare of Subdual**—it has the name "Position" because it wasn't quite "Opposition." The latter is **Lightning Helix**, given this cute moniker because, well, red and white make pink.

7. The **Terrarions** in the board are part of the “I’m scared of **Blood Moon**” package that Paul devised. The **Creeping Molds** can up the number of LD spells to eight; we loved playing Karoos in the FFL and Paul frequently made us pay for it.

3) Graft

Michael S Catopano		1st Place - New Jersey - Edison	
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard	
4 Breeding Pool	4 Remand	4 Spell Snare	
4 Yavimaya Coast	4 Mana Leak	3 Plaxmanta	
2 Simic Growth Chamber	3 Umezawa's Jitte	3 Pithing Needle	
1 Novijen, Heart of Progress	2 Voidslime	2 Voidslime	
6 Forest		3 Naturalize	
5 Island	13 other spells		
22 lands		15 sideboard cards	
4 Llanowar Elves			
4 Vinelasher Kudzu			
4 Wood Elves			
4 Cytoplast Root-Kin			
4 Plaxcaster Frogling			
3 Kodama of the North Tree			
2 Keiga, the Tide Star			
25 creatures			

Some people call this deck “Critical Mass,” but because the (Gnarled) Mass has been removed for the new hotness—**Plaxcaster Frogling**—I’ll stick to the simpler moniker “Graft.”

Internally, we had doubts as to whether or not Simic creature decks would be competitive in *Dissension* Standard, as we figured **Wrath of God** was a great answer to every damage source the deck could muster. Of course, with ten counterspells to keep Wrath at bay, the deck turned out to be pretty darned good. Out versions were a little lighter on the counters... unless you’re talking +1/+1 counters...

Doubling Graft – FFL – Nate Heiss

- 4 BOP
- 4 Wood snake
- 4 Troll
- 4 Plaxcaster
- 4 Shambler
- 4 Scatter the Seeds
- 4 Acorn Couatl
- 4 Double Trouble
- 4 Cytoshaping
- 3 Instant 2/2 Kicker-untargetable-man
- 4 U/G Karoo
- 4 Tropical
- 8 Forest
- 5 Island

What’s going on with that decklist:

1. “Wood Snake” was the design name for **Coiling Oracle**. It was a wanna-be **Sakura-Tribe Elder** (which was “Rampant Snake” here in development) with the size and stats of **Wood Sage**, a little-known card from *Tempest*.
2. There are twelve graft creatures here—four **Plaxcaster Frogling**, four **Cytoplast Root-Kin** (which was “Cytospawn Shambler”), and four **Sporeback Troll**. Say what? Ah, the Troll. The Troll originally cost just 1♣, and at that cost, Nate was willing to put him in the “best two-mana creatures of all time” category. Combined with the Frogling, you could set up a board position where your creatures couldn’t die in combat, and they couldn’t be targeted outside of combat. (Frogling had an activation of 1 instead of 2 initially, which was incredibly frustrating to face.) We came to our senses eventually and swapped the costs on the Troll and **Aquastrand Spider**.
3. Other playtest names: “Acorn Couatl” was **Patagia Viper**, “Double Trouble” was **Doubling Season**, and “Instant 2/2 Kicker-untargetable-man” was **Plaxmanta**. “Tropical” is short for **Tropical Island**, which is what we called **Breeding Pool**.



4. **Cytophage**, at various points in its life, was (a) two mana, and (b) uncommon. Its power made us change the former, and Mark Gottlieb made us change the latter, as the card presented too many rules problems to be considered simple, regardless of how easy to read the text was. In Nate's deck it plays a lot like **Terminate**—when you 'Shape an opponent's guy into a graft creature, it becomes a 0/0 and dies.
5. Wait a second... Where are the Jittes? The Melokus? Heck, the **Yavimaya Coasts**? This is a block deck, built to test graft in the most un-diluted environment possible. This gives us a good sense of how powerful the deck and mechanic are going into the next block.

A.K.A Acorn Couatl

4) Dovescape

Nick Eisel		
2nd Place - Pennsylvania - Pittsburgh		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
4 Temple Garden 4 Breeding Pool 3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree 2 Selesnya Sanctuary 1 Simic Growth Chamber 3 Forest 2 Plains 1 Island 1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers 1 Eiganjo Castle 1 Brushland 23 lands 4 Wood Elves 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder 4 Birds of Paradise 4 Loxodon Hierarch 3 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV 1 Simic Sky Swallower 1 Indrik Stomphowler 2 Patron of the Kitsune 3 Selesnya Guildmage 26 creatures	3 Shining Shoal 1 Glare of Subdual 1 Congregation at Dawn 2 Dovescape 4 Supply // Demand 11 other spells	3 Faith's Fetters 1 Viridian Shaman 1 Shining Shoal 1 Dovescape 1 Glare of Subdual 1 Congregation at Dawn 2 Kodama of the North Tree 3 Yosei, the Morning Star 1 Arashi, the Sky Asunder 1 Silkflash Spider 15 sideboard cards

I love Nick's deck. Nick had a keen eye for Constructed back when we'd play against each other in tournaments around Pittsburgh (*Tempest / Urza's Saga* days), but in recent years he's shifted his attention almost totally to Limited play. So I don't know if he's the inventor of this wacky masterpiece, but it wouldn't surprise me if he was.

Grand Arbiter Augustin IV and **Dovescape** are two cards that most people had a hard time nailing down. Was there a deck for them to go into? Do they spawn their own decks? Even here in R&D we could never quite find good homes for these cards, although we knew they were both very powerful. I'm glad that Nick found some place to feature both of them that looks like it works very well.

The following deck doesn't have all that much to do with Nick's deck, but it is an interesting concoction that was built to put **Dovescape** through the wringer. It actually did fairly well for me.

Spells Alive! – FFL – Aaron Forsythe

- 4 Spells Alive!
- 4 GW Guildmage
- 4 Baloth
- 4 Pontiff
- 4 BoP
- 4 Chord of Calling
- 1 Tolsimir
- 4 Mortify
- 2 Trophy Hunter
- 1 Nullmage Shepherd
- 4 Scatter
- Land

What's going on with this decklist:



1. This is another block deck.
2. "Spells Alive!", a.k.a. **Dovescape**, was five mana for a period of time. Many decks just scooped to the card, and those types of effects should be expensive.
3. The goal here was to break the symmetry of **Dovescape** in as many ways as possible. Blue didn't offer many ways to do that, so I went with green and black instead. **Tolsimir** and **Selesnya Guildmage** can make my doves bigger, and **Pontiff** and **Trophy Hunter** can kill my opponents'.
4. **Chord of Calling** is ridiculous with **Dovescape** in play... you can pay X mana+creatures to get X+3 more doves.
5. The "Land" included multiple copies of **Vitu-Ghazi**.

5) Owl

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
10 Island	4 Remand	4 Threads of Disloyalty
2 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	4 Ebony Owl Netsuke	4 Mana Leak
4 Steam Vents	2 Evacuation	1 Evacuation
4 Shivan Reef	4 Howling Mine	2 Magnivore
2 Adarkar Wastes	4 Sleight of Hand	4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
22 lands	4 Eye of Nowhere	
	4 Boomerang	15 sideboard cards
	4 Exhaustion	
3 Kami of the Crescent Moon	3 Sudden Impact	
2 Walking Archive	33 other spells	
5 creatures		

When I first saw "Owl" posted on a message board somewhere prior to Honolulu, I showed it to my coworkers and our reactions were generally the same: "This is really a deck?"

Internally, the closest we came was a goofy **Howling Mine** Burn deck tossed together by Nate Heiss. It had the capability to catch other decks off guard, but I don't think we ever expected something like it to actually burst onto an unsuspecting metagame. I'm tempted to say we missed this deck internally, but to Nate's credit, I'll only call it a half-miss.

Howling Butt – FFL – Nate Heiss

```

1 10 at 10
4 Lava Spike
4 Gaze of Adamaro
4 Frostling
3 Adamaro
4 Flames of the Blood Hand
3 Kami of the Crescent Moon
4 Cerebral Vortex
4 Glacial Ray
4 Volcanic Hammer
4 Howling Mine
4 Volcanic Island
4 U/R Painland
1 Mikokoro
3 Island
9 Mountain
60

SB
4 Pyroclasm
4 Pithing Needle
3 Blood Moon
4 Geddon

```

What's going on with this deck:

1. "Howling Butt" refers to **Kami of the Crescent Moon**, affectionately known as "The Butt."
2. This deck is clearly more focused on burn as opposed to full-hand tricks. After all, it doesn't even have **Ebony Owl Netsuke**, a card we didn't put much stock in for constructed play.
3. "10 at 10" is **Hidetsugu's Second Rite**. That Nate is full of wacky surprises.
4. "Volcanic Island" is a nickname for **Steam Vents**, and "Geddon" in the sideboard is **Thoughts of Ruin**.
5. This deck was built to test **Cerebral Vortex** during **Guildpact** development. The Vortex was a late add to the set when we had to kill a **Wheel of Fortune** variant.

6) Skies

Robert Cuvelier		
1st Place - Florida - Orlando		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Adarkar Wastes	3 Remand	4 Condemn
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	3 Glorious Anthem	4 Mana Leak
4 Hallowed Fountain	3 Umezawa's Jitte	2 Azorius Guildmage
1 Eiganjo Castle		1 Azorius Herald
8 Plains	9 other spells	4 Ghostway
4 Island		
22 lands		15 sideboard cards
4 Pride of the Clouds		
3 Ninja of the Deep Hours		
4 Azorius First-Wing		
4 Suntail Hawk		
4 Lantern Kami		
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda		
2 Leonin Skyhunter		
2 Azorius Guildmage		
3 Azorius Herald		
29 creatures		

I'm really happy that this deck showed up. We figured Blue-White control would exist simply by virtue of us printing **Hallowed Fountain**, but we wanted to push another class of Azorius cards as well. Because the colors are 1-2 in flying, we figured a flying creature theme might work well. Looks like it did.

Skies – FFL – Brian Schneider

4 Pup
 4 Suntail Hawk
 4 Lantern Kami
 4 2/1 Flier
 4 Leonin Skyhunter
 4 Kami of Ancient Law
 2 U/W Guildmage (Ugh -- should be pro-black Bushido guy)
 2 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails
 4 Umezawa's Jitte
 4 Brainwave */* Flier
 4 2/1 Unblockable gain 4 guy
 4 U/W
 4 U/W2
 4 Tendo Ice Bridge
 1 Eiganjo Castle
 7 Plains

What's going on with this deck:

1. This was one of the first attempts at making Blue/White aggro. Our later versions were much better.
2. Playtest names: "Pup" = Isamaru, "2/1 Flier" = **Mistral Charger**, "Brainwave */* Flier" = **Pride of the Clouds**, "2/1 Unblockable gain 4 guy" = **Azorius Herald**. Brainwave was the original name of forecast.
3. **Pride of the Clouds** was three mana (1*4) for a long time, and its forecast ability was five mana (3*4). In an attempt to make a "hallmark" forecast card, both numbers were reduced.

7) Wildfire

Tommy Ashton		
2nd Place - Maryland - College Park		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Urza's Tower	4 Mana Leak	4 Annex
4 Urza's Power Plant	4 Remand	4 Threads of Disloyalty
4 Urza's Mine	4 Repeal	3 Hinder
4 Steam Vents	3 Pyroclasm	4 Spell Snare
4 Shivan Reef	3 Wildfire	
2 Island	4 Compulsive Research	15 sideboard cards
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	2 Tidings	
23 lands	4 Izzet Signet	

4 Keiga, the Tide Star	2 Dimir Signet
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	2 Demonfire
5 creatures	32 other spells

Wildfire decks were a tough nut for us to crack. Historically, its power level has fluctuated between World Championship winning when it appeared in *Urza's Saga* to complete dud when it returned in *Seventh Edition*. When it came back in *Ninth Edition*, several decks that used it evolved, from Adrian Sullivan's Eminent Domain to Anton Jonsson's early **Magnivore** versions, to recent Urzaton versions like Tommy's here.

In R&D, we messed around with Red/Green **Wildfire** for a long, long, time before Devin Low figured out how key **Annex** was to the deck.

UWR **Annex-Wildfire** – FFL – Devin Low

2 Mark of Eviction
 3 UR Signet
 3 RW Signet
 4 Ghostly Prison
 1 Copy Enchantment
 4 Annex
 4 Faith's Fetters
 2 Gifts Ungiven
 4 Dream Leash
 1 Meloku
 4 Confiscate
 1 Keiga
 1 Yosei
 1 Ryusei
 3 Wildfire
 38 spells

22 lands
 3 RW Karoo
 3 UR Karoo
 3 RW Tapland
 3 UR Tapland
 4 UW Painland
 2 UR Painland
 2 RW Painland
 1 Plains
 1 Island

What's going on with this deck:

1. **Ghostly Prison** was a card we played a ton, yet never caught on all that much in the real world. It works amazingly well in combination with **Wildfire** and **Annex**, but perhaps that's overkill.
2. **Copy Enchantment** works really powerfully with **Dream Leash**; it lets you steal untapped permanents.
3. Most of our **Wildfire** decks were Red/Green with **Rumbling Slums** and **Arashi** in addition to Green acceleration. We certainly never had the Urzatron in a **Wildfire** deck. We did build a version of **Magnivore-Wildfire**, which [you can see here](#).

And there you have it. Not bad guesses on our part...granted, I'm only highlighting the decks that we came close on. There are plenty of decks I could show you that never caught on, and there are plenty of Regionals decks that we didn't predict. But that's all part of the fun!

Last Week's Polls

Do you watch the following Discovery Channel shows?

Show	Yes	%	No	%	Total
Mythbusters	6249	76.9%	1873	23.1%	8122
Monster Garage	1262	22.2%	4421	77.8%	5683
American Chopper	1509	27.1%	4060	72.9%	5569
I Shouldn't Be Alive	774	14.3%	4654	85.7%	5428
Extreme Engineering	1929	29.9%	4522	70.1%	6451

Through a bit of market research, we found out that Discovery Channel was popular within the **Magic**-playing demographic—something we didn't anticipate. We were curious as to what programs on that channel were popular.

This Week's Poll

Which of the following OP programs do you enjoy the most?

- Prereleases
- Release Events
- Champs
- Regionals
- Pro Tour Qualifiers
- Friday Night Magic
- Grand Prix
- None of the above

Submit my Vote

Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.



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