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Sealed With a Kiss

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 Limited Information
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This is a nice time to be a fan of Sealed Deck. *Dissension* just got released on *Magic Online*, and all the release events that entails are underway. In addition, Pro Tour--Kobe PTQ season just started, with all the RGD sealed deck that entails. With those fun, starter cracking events in the immediate future, now seems like a good time to begin exploring the nuances of sealed deck.

Sealed is often compared to draft in an unfavorable light. A lot of people seem to think that Sealed is the kiddy version of drafting, and after a certain point sealed decks make themselves. There may have been times in the past where that was true, but these days sealed deck can be at least as difficult as draft. Draft gives a player quite a bit of control, to force a strategy or alter one at will. Sealed deck doesn't allow you the option of playing a strategy you feel is strongest or safest. The sealed player's responsibility is to find the best deck within the marble, so to speak. Like all Limited formats these days, that requires a keen understanding of synergies and environmental factors. Certainly some sealed decks appear to build themselves, but that's also true of draft. The real challenge of Sealed, and the common one, is to make the difficult choices, of again managing power and consistency.

With *Ravnica* block in particular, that struggle reaches new heights. There are pretty, golden reasons to play anything and everything. The only drawback to playing everything is losing before you get your chance. Figuring out how a deck wins and loses, in the context of a card pool and an environment, is the only way to consistently achieve success in Sealed.

Let's go over a *Dissension* release league deck. This card pool consists of one *Ravnica* tournament pack and three *Dissension* boosters. Here's the base we have to work with:



White	Blue	Black	Red	Green
1 Bathe in Light 1 Caregiver 1 Divebomber Griffin 1 Faith's Fetters 1 Light of Sanction 1 Nightguard Patrol 1 Suppression Field 1 Votary of the Conclave 1 Wojek Siren 2 Aurora Eidolon 1 Brace for Impact 1 Carom 2 Celestial Ancient 1 Soulsworn Jury 1 Valor Made Real	1 Compulsive Research 1 Convolute 1 Copy Enchantment 1 Drake Familiar 1 Drift of Phantasms 1 Mnemonic Nexus 1 Muddle the Mixture 1 Tidewater Minion 1 Enigma Eidolon 1 Ocular Halo 1 Silkwing Scout 1 Spell Snare 1 Vision Skeins	1 Carrion Howler 1 Last Gasp 1 Necromantic Thirst 1 Nightmare Void 1 Stinkweed Imp 1 Thoughtpicker Witch 1 Delirium Skeins 1 Drekvac 1 Enemy of the Guildpact 1 Entropic Eidolon 1 Macabre Waltz 1 Nettle Curse 1 Nihilistic Glee 1 Vesper Ghoul	1 Coalhauler Swine 1 Galvanic Arc 1 Goblin Fire Fiend 1 Ordrun Commando 1 Sparkmage Apprentice 1 Viashino Fangtail 1 Cackling Flames 1 Gnat Alley Creeper 2 Kill-Suit Cultist 1 Ogre Gatecrasher 1 Utvara Scalper	1 Civic Wayfinder 1 Dryad's Caress 1 Fists of Ironwood 1 Sundering Vitae 1 Thrive 1 Transluminant 1 Patagia Viper 1 Simic Initiate 1 Simic Ragworm
Artifact	Multicolor	Hybrid	Split	Land
1 Peregrine Mask 2 Rakkos Signet 1 Skullmead Cauldron	1 Boros Swiftblade 1 Firemane Angel 1 Perplex 1 Putrefy 1 Seeds of Strength 1 Selesnya Evangel 1 Assault Zeppelin 1 Azorius First-Wing 1 Gobhobler Rats 1 Plaxcaster Frogling 1 Rakkos Ickspitter	1 Centaur Safeguard 1 Gaze of the Gorgon 1 Riot Spikes 1 Shielding Plax 1 Simic Guildmage	1 Hit // Run	1 Dimir Aqueduct 1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree 1 Azorius Chancery 1 Rakkos Carnarium 6 Forest 6 Island 6 Mountain 6 Plains 6 Swamp

That's a lot of cards to work with, so let's organize a bit. The first thing I do when crafting a Sealed is to sort the cards by color. This gives me a chance to look over everything I've opened, as well as give me an easier time of deck construction when the inclusion/exclusion process actually starts.

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Examining the contents, I see a few interesting possibilities. Double **Celestial Ancient** is appealing, if we have enough enchantments to support them. The **Firemane Angel** is also great, and will go well with the Ancients, in the sense that multiple large fliers go well with winning. It seems like Red and Black have some nice removal options, and the best mana fixing. Green has a lot of nice multicolored options, as does Blue. Looking at the pool in its entirety, it seems that every color has a lot to offer. It's not really surprising when you involve strong sets like *Ravnica* and *Dissension*, and open an extra booster as well.

This is too many cards to easily work with, so now begins the culling phase. Once again going over every card, I start making a pile of cards that I will not be playing with under 95% to 100% of the circumstances. I'm pretty liberal here, and the cut cards aren't gone for good. For now, we're just trying to identify the colors and combinations that deserve our attention. After that initial whittling we're down to:



23 cards removed

That's a bit better. Looking at what passed the initial inspection, it's clear that Red and Black are our weakest colors. The mono-colored cards we kept were pretty generous, and aside from the removal spells, there are no creatures to draw us into the color as the source of an army. The R/B gold cards are fine, but few in quantity, and none look amazing as a splash. Remember that splash cards need to have a lot of merit in the late game, as that's the time you're most likely to draw the splashed card and the splashed mana. These Rakdos specials don't qualify, but the mono-colored Red and Black removal spells do. Let's get rid of the mediocre Red and Black creature base, as well as their unreliable non-removal spells. Cutting those out lets us see Blue has some stinkers as well, so I think it's time to lose those weak ones as well.

That's much better, but there are still over twenty cards left to go. Now we can better identify our strengths. It's clear that White and Green are going to be major players in the final build. They have excellent creatures and a lot of inherent synergy. On the flip side, Red and Black have excellent splashed cards, and with those Signets and a **Rakdos Carnarium**, a lot of ways to cast them. Green and White are notoriously bad at removal, but since we'll be playing at least one of the colors that makes up for it, we get to fill that hole. Indeed, since our removal is so plentiful, we can cut the sketchy counterspells and combat tricks.

Out: **Convolute**, **Muddle the Mixture**, **Spell Snare**, **Seeds of Strength**, **Gaze of the Gorgon**, **Thrive**, and **Brace for Impact**. **Bathe in Light** is a particularly good combat trick and **Carom** doubles as cheap removal so they remain in, for now. I think at this point it's clear that heavy Red and heavy Blue won't make the final build, so out go the double colored casting costs of those colors. After this round, we're left with:



Getting a lot closer now, only 10-12 cards left to remove. Now it's time to start looking at internal-deck strategies.

Those **Celestial Ancients** look very appealing. A 3/3 flier for five in Sealed is already excellent, and it seems we have a lot of quality enchantments to play this time around. Four "comes-into-play" auras and a **Copy**

Enchantment to double up. In addition, **Riot Spikes** and **Ocular Halo** are pretty useful, and the **Simic Guildmage** makes the whole concoction hum. I mean, Auras *and* +1/+1 counters? What more could you want?

It looks like our deck is going to turn into a controlling, comboish build. Staying alive through defense and judicious removal so our excellent creatures and combos come into play. Now that we have a strategy, let's see which of the remaining cards don't fit the grand plan.

Bathe in Light and **Aurora Eidolon** have to hit the bench. Both are best suited as aggressive cards. 2/2s for four aren't particularly high in the defense department, and **Bathe in Light** could actually hurt us with our Aura theme.

In addition, **Nightguard Patrol** has got to go. It's a fine card in the abstract, but let's consider our environment. Three **Dissension** boosters means extra chances of them having **Rakdos Ickspitter** and **Riot Spikes**. Admittedly, this becomes less true in this season's standard RGD sealed, but that's no reason to ignore our current environmental concerns. Sealed players need to be able to lose a card for reasons outside of power levels, or past experiences. It's possible no one will be playing either **Ickspitter** or **Riot Spikes**, I suppose, but that's not a risk I want to take right now. Out it goes.

Now we're entering the home stretch, it's time to start looking at mana curve issues. I like to sort my remaining card pool by mana costs, as shown here:



Not a bad curve actually, some early drops and not very top heavy. I think it's clear here that are saturation point is at the three mana zone, so some of those cards need to be cut. **Stinkweed Imp** can be tossed now. It fits our defensive theme, but as a splash card it loses some appeal at holding off an early rush. That **Hit // Run** looks a little out of place too. Note we do have **Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree**, **Selesnya Evangel**, **Fists of Ironwood**, and **Patagia Viper**, so the Run half is no joke, but that Run isn't strong enough to play for the card. Hit is worth a slot on its own, and frankly it wouldn't be that hard to cast. With the Signets and the bounce land, having Red or Black often means having both. Still, Hit isn't overwhelmingly better than **Galvanic Arc** or **Last Gasp**. In addition, unlike those two cards, Hit doesn't negatively interact with **Faith's Fetters**. It's a close call, but I think it's got to hit the bench, because cards still have to be lost.

I suppose now seems like a good time to examine the mana base. We're not mincing words here, as a five-color deck, this is going to require some fine tuning. I think with the two Signets and three bounce lands this deck could be a 15-lander, but I'm hesitant. **Vitu-Ghazi** wants lots of mana to use, as does **Simic Guildmage**, **Plaxcaster Frogling**, and possibly even the **Firemane Angel**. In addition, **Compulsive Research** gives us a place to put extra land cards. The power is there, but it doesn't come cheap. So on the assumption we're running 16 lands, we need to get down to 24 maindeck cards. At the moment, we're at 31 cards, so 7 more have to go.

Next on the chopping block is **Divebomber Griffin** and **Centaur Safeguard**. Both cards are fine for this deck, but they're still quite vulnerable. Safeguard has all the liabilities of the one toughness creatures discussed before. The lifegain helps somewhat, but card disadvantage is still card disadvantage. The Griffin too has very low toughness for its casting cost. The potential for card advantage for nice, but one **Seal of Fire** is a real blow to our tempo.

Next to go are **Carom** and **Riot Spikes**. The Spikes are nice and effective against a variety of threats, in addition to pumping our fliers and boosting the Ancients. Still, it's in a splash color and we've just taken strides to cut into our vulnerability to things **Riot Spikes** can kill. It fits the deck fine, other cards just fit better. **Carom** is in the same boat. I'm not sure this deck is actually getting into combat that often, and the mana seems to be better used for other things. A great card with a great effect, just no place at this time.

Three more cards left and things are getting a lot tougher. We have six enchantments right now and fifteen creatures. I don't think we can cut into our threats too much yet, so I'd like to discard a Defender. Between **Soulsworn Jury** and **Drift of Phantasms**, it's a very close decision. Both are effective blockers and both have late game appeal. Ultimately I went with pitching the Jury, again for wanting to use the untapped mana to do other things. In addition, **Drift** blocks some common Azorius and Simic creatures, again, guilds we'll expect to see more of in this particular environment.

Now an enchantment has to be discarded. The two weakest enchantments are **Fists of Ironwood** and **Shielding Plax**. At this time, with this deck, I'm leaning towards discarding **Fists**. The trample or two 1/1s just don't seem as effective as a card drawing spell, especially with **Simic Guildmage** interaction. This is a rare decision; 90% of the time I'd lean the other way. Again though, deck and environmental concerns.

25 cards left and we still want to play 16 lands and 40 cards total. It seems we're at the limit of cutables. I feel like we'd be discarding too many threats or removal spells at this point. The options are cutting a Signet, a land, or going up to 41 cards. Let's look at that last idea in more detail.

There have been times in the past I've played 41 card Limited decks, and those even did alright. I could say the difference between 41 and 40 is small, and it'd be true. But I'd be doing a disservice if I said 41 was a superior choice to 40 99% of the time.

Our deck's cards are not all equal. I'd like to draw certain cards with greater frequency than others. In addition, I'd like to draw the mana to cast those cards. Playing more than the minimum required simply dilutes these possibilities. Not by a lot certainly, but every game played reinforces that statistical shearing force. There are times when decks come down to decking wars, and in that instance going above 40 cards has occasional merit. For game one, I'd want a sleek, reliable deck every time. Things are not so dire with this build to break that rule.

So what's left is a Signet or a land. I don't want to do either; we need both. So, alas, it looks like it's time to cut a splashed card. Of the removal cards, **Last Gasp** narrowly edges out **Cackling Flames** as the better card. This is solely by virtue of the **Dimir Aqueduct**, and therefore one extra chance to cast **Last Gasp** - the burn spell is lost.

Looks like we're at our maindeck, but there's another step. Now we have to go through all the discarded, sideboard cards and see if there's anything that deserves a second look. And indeed, an early cut looks a lot more promising: **Drake Familiar**. We have an enchantment theme in general, and for most of them, we sure like putting them into play a second time. It would be a bold inclusion though. It's an inherent combo card, and it seems unnecessary to utilize to actually win. As in, once those enchantments are in play and running, we should already be in good shape. There's also that irritating single toughness issue. The only card I could see to replace it with would be **Simic Ragworm** or **Drift of Phantasms**. While **Drake Familiar** does play into our core strategies, those two cards just do the job better, by keeping us alive as credible blockers. **Drake Familiar** might have a place as a sideboard card against certain decks, but for game one, I like the consistent build we've established.

Finally, the mana. Bounce lands are automatic, as is **Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree**. That leaves 12 spots to cover. The big question is, Mountain or no? The **Wayfinder** and **Silkwing Scout** offer a way to search for it, but I believe the answer is no. Three sources for two red cards is enough. It probably means we'll never buy back **Firemane Angel**, but I think any other price is too high for our early game requirements. Green gets emphasis for its mana fixing capabilities, and White gets lessened for its late game cards. The final build:

Dissension Release League 		
Main Deck 40 cards		Sideboard
1 Azorius Chancery	1 Compulsive Research	2 Aurora Eidolon
1 Dimir Aqueduct	1 Copy Enchantment	1 Bathe in Light
6 Forest	1 Faith's Fetters	1 Boros Swiftblade
3 Island	1 Galvanic Arc	1 Brace for Impact
3 Plains	1 Last Gasp	1 Cackling Flames
1 Rakdos Carnarium	1 Ocular Halo	1 Caregiver
1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree	1 Putrefy	1 Carom
16 lands	2 Rakdos Signet	1 Carrion Howler
	1 Shielding Plax	1 Centaur Safeguard
	10 other spells	1 Coalhauler Swine
1 Assault Zeppelin		1 Convolute
1 Azorius First-Wing		1 Delirium Skeins
2 Celestial Ancient		1 Divebomber Griffin
1 Civic Wayfinder		1 Drake Familiar
1 Drift of Phantasms		1 Drekvac
1 Firemane Angel		1 Dryad's Caress
1 Patagia Viper		1 Enemy of the Guildpact
1 Plaxcaster Frogling		1 Enigma Eidolon
1 Selesnya Evangel		1 Entropic Eidolon
1 Silkwing Scout		1 Fists of Ironwood
1 Simic Guildmage		1 Gaze of the Gorgon
1 Simic Ragworm		1 Gnat Alley Creeper
1 Transluminant		1 Gobhobbler Rats
14 creatures		1 Goblin Fire Fiend
		1 Hit/Run
		3 Island
		2 Kill-Suit Cultist
		1 Light of Sanction
		1 Macabre Waltz

1 Mnemonic Nexus	
6 Mountain	
1 Muddle the Mixture	
1 Necromantic Thirst	
1 Nettling Curse	
1 Nightguard Patrol	
1 Nightmare Void	
1 Nihilistic Glee	
1 Ogre Gatecrasher	
1 Ordrun Commando	
1 Peregrine Mask	
1 Perplex	
3 Plains	
1 Rakdos Ickspitter	
1 Riot Spikes	
1 Seeds of Strength	
1 Simic Initiate	
1 Skullmead Cauldron	
1 Soulsworn Jury	
1 Sparkmage Apprentice	
1 Spell Snare	
1 Stinkweed Imp	
1 Sundering Vitae	
1 Suppression Field	
6 Swamp	
1 Thoughtpicker Witch	
1 Thrive	
1 Tidewater Minion	
1 Utvara Scalper	
1 Valor Made Real	
1 Vesper Ghoul	
1 Viashino Fangtail	
1 Vision Skeins	
1 Votary of the Conclave	
1 Wojek Siren	
80 sideboard cards	

Finally, I think it's time to take the deck out for a spin. First round was against Marcus a.k.a. Mufasa_BT.

In the first game I had mana issues, and got run over by high quality Simic/Azorius cards, ending in a **Simic Sky Swallower** beating.

Game 2 I decided to draw first, and Marcus mulliganed to five. He again got out SSS, but he was too far down on cards. I got out the combo of **Celestial Ancient** + **Patagia Viper** + an aura, and that was enough to swing past.

Game 3 we both got our mana together, and Marcus again got out **Simic Sky Swallower**. This time I had the answer. From a previous **Faith's Fetters** on Marcus' **Sky Hussar**, I transmuted **Drift of Phantasms** for **Copy Enchantment**. Duplicating the Fetters, **Copy Enchantment** fit snugly on **Simic Sky Swallower**. It was good enough to win the match.

I played a few more games with the deck. The power was quite extreme; a single trigger of **Celestial Ancient** was usually game. However, that itself was pretty rare. Besides the difficulty of actually casting an Ancient, I needed all the other auras to stay alive, whilst the deck put everything together. It turned out the strategy was flawed and the deck had bitten off more than it could chew. In the beginning the Ancients made sense with all the other quality White cards, but as they kept getting cut, the rare fliers ended up being a very large percentage of the total White cards. For spells with ** in the casting cost, that was too much to ask for. Back to the drawing board.

Red and Black still had to be part of the final equation. The spells were cheap and powerful, and it was the only color with Signet support. Green and Blue too needed inclusion; they had all the creature force. With renewed focus, here was the new and improved *Dissension* league deck:

Dissension Release League New		
Main Deck 40 cards		Sideboard
1 Azorius Chancery	1 Cackling Flames	2 Aurora Eidolon
1 Dimir Aqueduct	1 Compulsive Research	1 Azorius First-Wing
6 Forest	1 Copy Enchantment	1 Bathe in Light
3 Island	1 Fists of Ironwood	1 Boros Swiftblade
3 Mountain	1 Galvanic Arc	1 Brace for Impact
1 Rakdos Carnarium	1 Gaze of the Gorgon	1 Caregiver
1 Swamp	1 Hit/Run	1 Carom
16 lands	1 Last Gasp	1 Carrion Howler
	1 Putrefy	2 Celestial Ancient
	2 Rakdos Signet	1 Centaur Safeguard
1 Assault Zeppelin	11 other spells	1 Coalhauler Swine
		1 Convolute

1 Civic Wayfinder
 1 Drift of Phantasms
 1 Ogre Gatecrasher
 1 Patagia Viper
 1 Plaxcaster Frogling
 1 Rakdos Ickspitter
 1 Silkwing Scout
 1 Simic Guildmage
 1 Simic Ragworm
 1 Sparkmage Apprentice
 1 Transluminant
 1 Viashino Fangtail

13 creatures

1 Delirium Skeins
 1 Divebomber Griffin
 1 Drake Familiar
 1 Drekvac
 1 Dryad's Caress
 1 Enemy of the Guildpact
 1 Enigma Eidolon
 1 Entropic Eidolon
 1 Faith's Fetters
 1 Firemane Angel
 1 Gnat Alley Creeper
 1 Gobhobblers Rats
 1 Goblin Fire Fiend
 3 Island
 2 Kill-Suit Cultist
 1 Light of Sanction
 1 Macabre Waltz
 1 Mnemonic Nexus
 3 Mountain
 1 Muddle the Mixture
 1 Necromantic Thirst
 1 Nettling Curse
 1 Nightguard Patrol
 1 Nightmare Void
 1 Nihilistic Glee
 1 Ocular Halo
 1 Ordrun Commando
 1 Peregrine Mask
 1 Perplex
 6 Plains
 1 Riot Spikes
 1 Seeds of Strength
 1 Selesnya Evangel
 1 Shielding Plax
 1 Simic Initiate
 1 Skullmead Cauldron
 1 Soulsworn Jury
 1 Spell Snare
 1 Stinkweed Imp
 1 Sundering Vitae
 1 Suppression Field
 5 Swamp
 1 Thoughtpicker Witch
 1 Thrive
 1 Tidewater Minion
 1 Utvara Scalper
 1 Valor Made Real
 1 Vesper Ghoul
 1 Vision Skeins
 1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree
 1 Votary of the Conclave
 1 Wojek Siren

80 sideboard cards

This deck has a tighter curve, easier mana requirements and a comparable amount of removal. White is totally gone, and everything else is single colored, with the exception of **Viashino Fangtail**. Now we have the pingers to take care of other peoples' mistakes regarding single toughness creatures in this particular environment.

As you can see here, sealed deck is no simple task. Good ideas can turn bad quite quickly, and usually we're not able to change the deck after we made the final submission. Pay attention to the interplay of your cards, your mana, and the environment and things should go pretty well. Don't worry PTQ players, RGD decks will be covered soon enough. For the **Magic Online** players out there, try to get some game time with all the *Dissension* fun. Come by next week where we go over the poll results, hear from some top pros on their pick, and talk about *everyone's* favorite angel. Thanks for reading.

-Noah Weil



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