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Deck Doctor: Izzet Pinball (Part 1 of 2)

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Building on a Budget
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Welcome back to Building on a Budget! This week and next, I will be playing deck doctor to one of the decks submitted in my forums. This is not the only deck I will doctor – over the coming weeks, I'll be mixing in other decks from the forums of [my Grand Spree article](#).

This week's deck comes from regular column reader (and frequent forum poster) [Yesterdays fate](#). His deck was an interesting R/U deck based around [Curiosity](#), [Dwarven Patrol](#), [Quicksilver Dagger](#), and [Niv-Mizzet](#). Here's what he said about the deck in the forums:

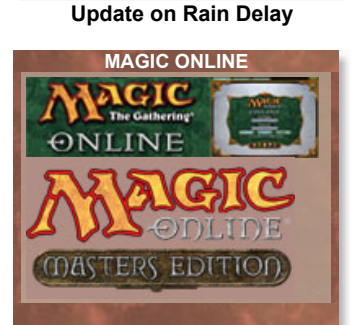
"This is a new version of a deck I made several years back. The basic concept of the deck is to ping away at your opponent's life with cards like [Gelectrode](#) and a [Quicksilver Dagger](#) enchanted [Dwarven Patrol](#). Cards like [Twiddle](#) can suddenly turn from "Tap or untap target permanent" to "Deal 2 damage to target player and draw 2 cards".

The other combo in the deck is Niv-Mizzet, and [Curiosity](#). Which should, in most cases, win you the game. Especially if you have an instant speed draw in hand.

The deck is over 60 cards, but with purpose. The old version of this deck could go through half of its 90 card library in just two or three turns once it started off the combo with [Dwarven Patrol](#).

I know the deck could use some work; this is an untested version as...I don't have the cards online TO test it. But, anyone that does, please, feel free to try the deck out and see what modifications need to be done to it. I really think the deck has two possible paths to go down: The Niv-Mizzet combo, or the [Gelectrode/Dwarven Patrol](#) theme.

And finally, the name of the deck is Pinball because once the deck gets going, that what it feels like you're playing a game of. You're sending a ball at your opponent's life points and keep on bouncing it back at him as long as you can keep the momentum going. Corny; yes. Genius; you betcha!



Pinball v1.0

Main Deck
80 cards

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| 14 Island 3 Izzet Boilerworks 9 Mountain <hr/> 26 lands | 3 Dwarven Patrol 4 Gelectrode 2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind 3 Razorfin Hunter <hr/> 12 creatures | 3 Compulsive Research 2 Curiosity 4 Dream's Grip 1 Ensnaring Bridge 2 Kraken's Eye 2 Memory Lapse 2 Obsessive Search 4 Opt 3 Psionic Gift 3 Quicksilver Dagger 2 Remand 2 Reminisce 2 Rewind 2 Rites of Refusal 4 Toils of Night and Day 1 Trade Routes 3 Twiddle <hr/> 42 other spells |
|--|---|--|

Well Yesterdays fate, I like the gist of your deck. It wins points for style and flair, and has an auto-win combo built in with Niv-Mizzet plus [Curiosity](#). However, there are some problems in the build of the deck. Not to worry – they are fixable! Before surgery begins, just a couple of guidelines:

1. I am not a licensed medical doctor. If your deck needs a heart transplant, I am certainly not qualified for the surgery.
2. If I'm using your deck in a deck doctor column, it means that I think your deck has some good ideas. In fact, more than some good ideas – it had a lot of good ideas. They just might not be executed with absolute precision. Not to worry, we're all friends here! Please don't take any of my advice negatively – it is intended to be constructive, and to help you improve your deck building skills, and your deck.
3. Seriously, I do not have a medical degree. Careful with that axe, Eugene!

Last week, I wrote a column that contained [five basic tips for deckbuilding](#). To review, these tips were:

1. Fix your mana base.
2. Keep close to 60 cards.
3. Focus your goals, but don't be a slave to your theme.
4. Have a curve.
5. Enchant Creature cards are not your friends.

How does the Pinball deck do under these criterion?

Fix Your Mana Base

Pinball contains twenty-six lands (fourteen Island, nine Mountain, and three **Izzet Boilerworks**), and sixty-four non-mana producing spells. This only a 32.5% mana base. Roughly only one out of every three cards drawn will be a land. If the deck is planning on winning with Niv-Mizzet, it needs more lands. I'd usually recommend twenty-three to twenty-four lands in a deck that requires a decent amount of mana to function properly. Twenty-four lands is closer to a 40% mana base for a sixty card deck, and so that's about where we'll end up.

Keep Close to 60 Cards

The deck runs 80 cards, which is twenty too many. There are only two Niv-Mizzet in the deck, which means that on average, you'll see Niv-Mizzet once every forty cards. In a sixty card deck, that number is reduced to once every thirty cards. If you upped the Niv-Mizzet count to four, it'd be one every fifteen cards. The same goes for the other key cards in the deck (**Quicksilver Dagger**, **Curiosity**, **Gelectrode**). We'll need to trim twenty cards from the deck to meet this rule.

Focus on Your Goals, but Don't be a Slave to your Theme

What is the goal of the deck? To get **Curiosity** on Niv-Mizzet, with the secondary goals of getting **Curiosity** on **Gelectrode**, or **Quicksilver Dagger** on **Gelectrode** or **Dwarven Patrol**. This is where we can cut a lot of the fat from the deck – which cards don't fit this theme? **Ensnaring Bridge** (which doesn't work well in a deck that wants to draw a handful of cards), **Kraken's Eye** (which just sits there and gains minimal life each game), and **Rites of Refusal** (again, this deck wants to be building up cards, not discarding them) spring out as immediate sore thumbs.

In addition, **Hermetic Study** seems out of place in the deck. This would fall under the “Don't be a slave to your theme.” What is the creature base? Three **Dwarven Patrol**, Two Niv-Mizzet, four **Gelectrode**, and three **Razorfin Hunter** – nine of the twelve of which already have some form of built-in **Hermetic Study**. The pinging subtheme is strong in this deck, but the Studies are overkill – three enchantments for three creatures in the deck. They can go as well.

Have a curve

The deck passes this test – there are fifteen one-mana spells, fifteen two-mana spells, and twenty three-drop spells, with **Rewind** and Niv-Mizzet being the only spells four or above. This tip will be important once we cut twenty cards – we want to make sure that we don't end up cutting, say, all fifteen one-cost spells, and five of the two-drop spells.

Enchant Creature Cards Are Not Your Friend

This deck has twelve creatures, and eight enchant creature cards, creating a three to two ratio. With only twelve creatures in eighty cards, it's very likely that you will open the game with enchant creature cards, but no creatures to enchant! Granted, many of the enchant creature cards in this deck break the “Don't play with Enchant Creature Cards” rule. **Curiosity** is key to the deck's main combo (Niv-Mizzet + **Curiosity**). If you draw a card while **Curiosity** is on Niv-Mizzet, you can have Niv-Mizzet deal a damage to your opponent. This triggers **Curiosity**, which lets you draw a card, which again triggers Niv-Mizzet. You can deal as much damage to your opponent as you have cards left in your library). **Curiosity** and **Quicksilver Dagger** also help you draw cards, so they replace themselves and negate, to some degree, the card disadvantage inherent in Enchant Creature cards.

I played out a handful of games with the full eighty-card deck, just to get a feel for how it performed. This gave me exposure to many of the one- and two-of cards in the deck, so I could see which should stay and which should go. After all, there *are* twenty cards that need to come out of the deck – and probably others that need to be swapped from the remaining sixty as testing shows necessary.

Game #1: Mayhem (WB/U Wizards)

I open the game with a Mountain and an Island, and drop a quick **Razorfin Hunter**. I don't have any lands past those two though, as Mayhem begins dropping Morph creatures. I have multiple **Twiddles** and **Dream's Grip**, and am able to kill the morphs (both of which were **Voidmage Prodigy**) by shooting them twice each with the same Hunter.



After five turns, I get my third land and drop **Gelectrode**. He reaches six mana a turn later, and attempts to cast **Planar Portal**, which I **Memory Lapse**, shooting him twice with **Gelectrode**. The Portal is **Rites of Refusal** the next turn, but a second **Planar Portal** hits the table thereafter. Thankfully, he concedes the game after activating the Portal – it seemed as if he did not have a way to deal with multiple pingers on the board at once.

Record: 1-0

The mana problems began almost immediately. **Twiddle** and **Dream's Grip** are what kept me in the game (otherwise I'd have been run over by his **Prodigies**, which could have countered my **Gelectrode**), though the **Rites of Refusal** could have easily have been a two-cost Counterspell with less of a drawback – say, **Counterspell**, **Mana Leak**, **Remand**, or **Memory Lapse**.

Game #2: Shadowman (Angels)

I have to mulligan my opening hand, and stick with a second draw of three Islands. Shadowman mulligans four times (going down to three cards), but we both end up discarding with a few turns. I finally draw a Mountain on turn 6, and drop **Gelectrode**. It becomes Curious the following turn, and is followed by a second **Gelectrode**.

On the following turn, I put **Quicksilver Dagger** on **Gelectrode #2**, and shoot Shadowman for two cards. I cast **Twiddle** targeting one of my **Gelectrodes**, untap them both on the trigger for casting an instant, shoot Shadowman for two more cards, untap the **Gelectrode** from the **Twiddle** itself, and shoot him for a fifth card. On the following turn, I chain a series of **Twiddles**, **Toils of Night and Day**, and **Rewind** (on my own spell to trigger the **Gelectrodes** untapping) and shoot him down to zero.

Record: 2-0

Even though I'm undefeated at this point, a lot of it is dumb luck – my first opponent didn't have a way to deal with two one-toughness creatures, and the second opponent mulliganed to three and couldn't find a land by the time the game was over. I definitely appreciated the power of the tap/untap cards in this deck. On paper, **Twiddle** and **Dream's Grip** and **Toils of Night and Day** look bad, since they are a one-shot effect with minimal impact on the game. As Yesterdays fate said in his forum post, **Twiddle** can often represent two damage and two cards with this deck.

Game #3: *Name Withheld* (Fully Powered **Tooth and Nail**)

I ended up getting crushed this game, as my opponent had the multiple-Pro Tour and Grand Prix Top 8 deck known as **Tooth and Nail**. Trouble is, my playtesting is done in the casual decks room, and here I am facing down a deck that's won hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of prizes worldwide over the past three years.

I politely asked my opponent if he thought that he might be better served playing the deck in the tournament practice room. He says no, because he thinks the deck isn't tournament viable. I point out to him that the deck had a recent Top 8 finish at the Extended Grand Prix in Charlotte this year, and he says that he knows that, but he just thinks that the deck is slow.

Guys and gals, I'll be straight with you. It's an extremely slippery slope when you start trying to differentiate which decks belong in the tournament practice room, and which belong in the casual decks room of **Magic Online**. Some people think that any deck with **Umezawa's Jitte** should not be in the casual room. Others disdain decks that have land destruction or countermagic, saying that such strategies are not built for casual fun.

I don't like drawing those sorts of distinctions, because to each their own – I don't mind facing a deck with a lot of Counterspells, because it makes me play all that much harder when I need to play around countermagic. Likewise, if my deck rolls over and dies to a couple of **Stone Rains**, chances are my curve is a little too high and that is valuable information to know. I find **Jitte** frustrating to deal with from time to time, but I've overcome facing that piece of equipment with past decks (and in fact, I welcomed facing **Jittes** when I was playing **Grand Spree!**)

Where I draw my personal line is when people knowingly play decks that have finished in the Top 8 of Pro Tours and Grand Prix in the casual deck room. What purpose is there to playing the decks casually? Those decks have been proven to win in the most competitive of environments. If you're looking to get practice with the deck, go to the tournament practice room – that room has the words "Tournament" and "Practice" in it – a perfect place to familiarize yourself with said deck.

If you're looking to just crush opponent after opponent, you're doing yourself a disservice. Your wins will be hollow, since you A) won't be challenged, and B) probably won't learn anything about your deck either. In fact, you're conditioning yourself for the easy win, so when you have to face more serious competition with more serious decks, you *will* lose. They were playing against other tournament players. You were out shooting fish in a fish pond.

(Please note that I am not saying that no casual decks can beat a tournament deck. I'm also not saying that players in the tournament room are innately better players than the ones in the casual room. I am saying that if you bring a gun to a knife fight, chances are you're going to win without much effort. Also note that these opinions are mine, and not those of Wizards of the Coast.)



Warning: Playing Pro Tour and Grand Prix Top 8 decks in the Casual Room may cause pain and suffering.

Record: 2-1

Game #4: KwiKwi (B/G Husk)

This game, I drew one creature, seven untap spells, and three Curiosity/**Quicksilver Dagger**. He kills my creature the turn it hits play. Though I stall the game for several turns with **Twiddle**, **Dream's Grip** and **Toils of Night and Day**, statistics finally catch up with me and I never really mount any offense to speak of.

Record: 2-2

As predicted, the deck definitely had mana and/or consistency problems every game. It was time to cut those twenty cards out of the deck.

Out:

2 **Kraken's Eye**: These don't really serve a purpose in this deck. Sure, they can gain you in the range of four to five life over the course of a game, but they serve no other purpose. Let me pose a scenario: Your opponent casts a second turn **Watchwolf**. You can either have **Kraken's Eye** or **Volcanic Hammer** on turn 2. Which will more often net you more life over the course of the game? The answer is the **Volcanic Hammer**.

If you kill the **Watchwolf** immediately, you save yourself taking multiple hits from the creature. Heck, even if you save yourself one hit, that's the same effect as if you had cast **Kraken's Eye**, and then cast three more Blue spells. **Volcanic Hammer** will proactively gain you life by making the best defense a good offense. **Kraken's Eye** is dependant on the number of Blue spells you have.

Volcanic Hammer is a lot more versatile than **Kraken's Eye** in general. **Kraken's Eye** has no use other than to sit there and gain life. **Volcanic Hammer** can kill an opposing creature, damage the opponent for three, of combine with any number of Tims in the deck to kill larger creatures.

Life gain, in general, is a poor strategy unless it A) serves an ulterior purpose – IE, **Consume Spirit/Thief of Hope** both allow you to gain life while simultaneously damaging your opponent, or B) comes in massive doses – IE: **Gerrard's Wisdom/Presence of the Wise** in a **Howling Mine** deck, or **Pulse of the Fields** that can be reused multiple times a game. If you cast **Sacred Nectar**, and your opponent casts **Watchwolf**, he's going to come out ahead eventually – he has a 3/3 creature that can swing every turn, while you've used a card to gain a one-time, four-life swing.

Ensnaring Bridge: I drew this card once, against the Black/Green deck, and I couldn't get enough cards out of my hand to make it work. This deck relies on getting **Curiosity** and/or **Quicksilver Dagger** on a creature to draw multiple cards, so having a card which relies on having an empty hand seems counterintuitive. Plus, getting rid of **Ensnaring Bridge** frees up a portion of budget for this deck. Goodbye semi-higher dollar rare!

2 **Rites of Refusal**: There are much better two-mana counterspells available in Extended – **Counterspell**, **Mana Leak**, **Memory Lapse**, **Remand**, **Muddle the Mixture**, **Prohibit** – along with X-spells **Syncopate** and **Condescend**. **Rites of Refusal** creates card disadvantage, because at the least you're losing two cards to counter one card. Compare this to **Mana Leak**, which has the same effect through the first card discarded. All of the above choices fit into a budget build, so if we decide this deck wants to run countermagic, we have plenty of choices to rotate in.

3 **Psionic Gift**: See rule number three, above. There's no need for the Gift in a deck where almost all of the creatures naturally come with **Psionic Gift**.

1 **Trade Routes**: Another rare that doesn't seem to contribute to forwarding the deck's goal. I never reached the point where I was hurting for cards – just times that I was hurting specifically for lands, creatures or spells. For instance, I had nearly a full grip the **Nantuko Husk** match, but I lacked any creatures to enchant.

2 **Obsessive Search**: I like **Opt**, because it gives me the choice of drawing a different card if I don't like the top one on my library. **Obsessive Search** doesn't give me this option, and really only comboed with **Rites of Refusal**.

1 **Rewind**: I liked having the one **Rewind** in game two, but I used it to counter my own spell, purely as a trigger for **Gelectrode**. I decide to leave it in the deck as a one-of, since this deck can draw through half its cards easily, once it gets going.

1 **Reminisce**: There were two copies in the deck originally, and I considered dropping both. However, I can see where this card is useful in this deck as a one-of – if your opponent gains any appreciable amount of life, you might end up decking yourself before you end up killing them. If this is the case, the one **Reminisce** is the right number – you *will* draw it if the game comes to a potential decking situation.

2 **Memory Lapse**: I like **Remand** better than **Memory Lapse**, because I'm trying to get to my combo, not keep my opponent from getting to theirs. **Remand** gets me a card further into my deck. **Memory Lapse** sets my opponent back a draw (they don't lose a draw, but they have to draw the same card again, meaning they don't see anything new the following turn).

3 **Twiddle**: I'm cutting out 25% of the cards in the deck, which leaves me with eleven untap spells in sixty cards. I think that eleven is overkill, and so **Twiddle** is the odd man out. **Dream's Grip** is essentially **Twiddle** with an



improvement, and **Toils of Night and Day** allows me to have more versatility – it is an improved entwined **Dream's Grip** (an entwined **Dream's Grip** and untap one permanent and tap another. **Toils of Night and Day** can either tap or untap both).

1 Island, 1 Mountain: Note that I'm only cutting two lands, even though I'm removing a total of twenty cards. This leaves me with twenty-four lands, which is a good amount for this deck. **Izzet Boilerworks** helps the land situation, since I can end up playing the same two lands three times, without losing mana development (say, Island, then Boilerworks, and then the same Island).

In summary, the following cards were removed:

2 **Kraken's Eye**, 1 **Ensnaring Bridge**, 2 **Rites of Refusal**, 3 **Psionic Gift**, 1 **Trade Routes**, 2 **Obsessive Search**, 1 **Rewind**, 1 **Reminisce**, 2 **Memory Lapse**, 3 **Twiddle**, 1 **Island**, 1 **Mountain**



| Pinball v2.0 | | | Main Deck 60 cards | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| 13 Island | 3 Dwarven Patrol | 3 Compulsive Research | 3 Compulsive Research | | |
| 3 Izzet Boilerworks | 4 Gelectrode | 2 Curiosity | 2 Curiosity | | |
| 8 Mountain | 2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind | 4 Dream's Grip | 4 Dream's Grip | | |
| 24 lands | 3 Razorfin Hunter | 4 Opt | 4 Opt | | |
| | 12 creatures | 3 Quicksilver Dagger | 3 Quicksilver Dagger | | |
| | | 2 Remand | 2 Remand | | |
| | | 1 Reminisce | 1 Reminisce | | |
| | | 1 Rewind | 1 Rewind | | |
| | | 4 Toils of Night and Day | 4 Toils of Night and Day | | |
| | | 24 other spells | | | |

Game #5: Kiarra (B/W Control)

Kiarra plays an early **Phyrexian Arena**, and casts multiple **Life Burst** and **Beacon of Immortality** to put his life total into the stratosphere. I keep in this game though, as I get down multiple pingers, and keep his life total in the forties. He casts **Wrath of God**, and I cast **Niv-Mizzet**, put **Curiosity** on it, and cast **Opt** to start doing damage.

Here's an important tip for playing this deck: Remember that **Curiosity** is an optional draw. I bring him down to single-digits with the **Niv-Mizzet/Curiosity** combo, but end up with no cards left in my deck. I could have stopped with one card left, but I made a mental error – I thought that the **Remand** in my hand was **Memory Lapse**, which would have enabled me to cast **Toils of Night and Day** during my upkeep, **Memory Lapsed** it, drawn **Toils** again, and then cast **Reminisce** to give me enough cards to mop up with **Niv-Mizzet**. However, because I didn't stop with one card left, I ended up decking myself.

In other words, I lose because I didn't stop one card earlier. Chalk this one up to play error.

Record: 2-3

I want to make a couple of quick changes to the deck. Leaving in **Toils of Night and Day** instead of **Twiddle** was a mistake. This deck plays very mana-tight in the early game, and I'd rather have a sequence that goes turn 3 **Gelectrode**/turn 4 **Curiosity**/multiple **Twiddles/Dream's Grip** than one that only gets off one **Toils**.

Twiddle and **Dream's Grip** also play mana acceleration when combined with **Izzet Boilerworks**. I had a situation come up where I had five lands on the board (including a **Boilerworks**) with **Niv-Mizzet** in hand. I tapped all five lands for mana, used a Blue to cast **Twiddle** on the **Boilerworks**, and then cast **Niv-Mizzet**. **Toils of Night and Day** cannot net me mana, unless I have two **Boilerworks** in play – much more unlikely when I only play three copies.

I also bring in two more **Curiosity**, instead of the **Rewind** and an **Opt**. If I'm going to be playing a deck based around **Curiosity**, I want four **Curiosity**.

Out: 4 **Toils of Night and Day**, 1 **Opt**, 1 **Rewind**

In: 4 **Twiddle**, 2 **Curiosity**

| Pinball v3.0 | | | Main Deck 60 cards | | |
|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|--|
| 13 Island | 3 Dwarven Patrol | 3 Compulsive Research | 3 Compulsive Research | | |
| 3 Izzet Boilerworks | 4 Gelectrode | 4 Curiosity | 4 Curiosity | | |
| 8 Mountain | | 4 Dream's Grip | 4 Dream's Grip | | |

| | | |
|--------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 24 lands | 2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind | 3 Opt |
| | 3 Razorfin Hunter | 3 Quicksilver Dagger |
| | | 2 Remand |
| 12 creatures | | 1 Reminisce |
| | | 4 Twiddle |
| | | 24 other spells |

I have good feeling about this deck so far – it is definitely capable of winning, but it's still rough around the edges. Using my five guidelines for deckbuilding, I've shaped it into a more focused beast – it now has a better mana base and more of a focus. And yet, there is so much more that can be done with Pinball. Tune in next week as I move the deck from prep into full-blown surgery.

(Special thanks to Yesterdays fate for submitting this deck to the forums and allowing me the chance to play with it on **Magic Online!**)

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



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