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Deck Doctor: Sasaya My Dreams (Part 1 of 2)

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Building on a Budget
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Welcome back to Building on a Budget! In this week's column, we're going to take a look at a deck submitted to me for deck doctoring. Here's the deck:

Sasaya 1.0 dec

Main Deck
60 cards

20 Forest	3 Azusa, Lost but Seeking	4 Blaze
19 Mountain	4 Sasaya, Orochi Ascendant	4 Howling Mine
39 lands	7 creatures	4 Spellbook
		2 Time of Need
		14 other spells



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Update on Rain Delay

"My real name is Johnathan Y. But I go by the online name Major Domo :). I really wanted to make this deck work, because Sasaya seems to have so much potential for creating massive amounts of mana. I didn't want to let it go to waste! It's overlooked by a great deal of **Magic** players, and I thought to myself, "I have a few tickets to spare, why not give it a shot?" While I was originally impressed with its capabilities, I can't figure out at this time how to give it a better chance with today's decks."



I tried this deck out for a game, and lost badly. In the case of this particular build, I didn't need to play more practice games – there were some fundamental flaws in the deck design. This is not to admonish MajorDomo – his heart is in the right place. It is also important, as a deckbuilder, to understand *why* a deck doesn't work. It isn't simply enough to gut a deck without knowing the reason it did not click.

Let's run this deck through my [five basics of deckbuilding](#):

Rule #1: Fix Your Mana Base

Let's take a look at the mana in Major Domo's build of this deck. There are thirty-nine lands in the deck. Many would dismiss this as being way too many lands. However, in a deck that needs to get seven lands in hand to function, is it really the wrong number of lands to run?

The answer is yes. If two out of every three cards in your deck is a basic land, you are not going to draw many spells each game. Sure, you will always have the mana to cast the spells you draw, but they will be so few and far between that you will likely be overrun by your opponent.

Remember, basic lands in-and-of themselves do nothing. If you play a deck with sixty basic lands, you'll lose to any opponent who has a deck with a purpose. There are only twenty-one spells in the deck, and only eight of them are directly relevant to winning: four Sasaya and four Blaze. Moreover, they are redundant – if you draw two Blazes or two Sasayas in a game, they will be less effective, as they each have a single purpose: flip Sasaya or finish the opponent with Blaze.

Moreover, Sasaya wants you to play as many copies of the same land type as possible. If you're splitting your lands 50/50 between Mountains and Forests, you are defeating the purpose of Sasaya. If you have eight lands in play with a flipped Sasaya, you'd rather have seven Forests and a Mountain (49 + 1 = 50 mana) than four Forests and four Mountains (16 + 16 = 32).

There are only four Red spells in the deck (the Blazes), and nine Green spells (Sasaya, Azusa, and Time of Need). This means there is probably less need for Mountains than for Forests.

The Problems: Too many lands. Too even an amount of each land.

The Solutions: Reduce the number of lands in the deck. Shift the color balance in the favor of one land type (Forest).



Rule #2: Keep Close to 60 Cards

No problems here! Remember, the closer you are to sixty cards, the better your odds are of drawing any given card during a game. This is especially important for a combo deck like this, where you won't win games without flipping Sasaya and drawing **Blaze**. **Time of Need** helps act as additional chances to draw Sasaya in this deck, which is good.

Rule #3: Focus Your Goals, But Don't Be a Slave To Your Theme

In order to focus your goals, you have to know what your goals are. What does this deck hope to do during the course of the game? How does it win?

In the case of Major Domo's build, the goal is to flip Sasaya, allowing you to **Blaze** your opponent for a large amount of damage. The deck gets to that state by drawing extra cards (**Howling Mine**), putting a **Spellbook** into play (to allow you to get past seven cards – remember, if you have seven lands in hand and flip Sasaya, you're still holding a hand with no action cards), and using Azusa post-flip to put extra lands into play for the quick **Blaze**.

The goals are definitely admirable, but the problem comes in being a slave to your theme. Let's take a look at each of the cards in this deck.

- **Sasaya**: Essential to the deck, and the central theme.
- **Blaze**: As good a finisher with Sasaya as any.
- **Spellbook**: Used to go past seven cards in hand. However, it is also useless on its own, bad when drawn in multiples, and does not help you get to seven lands/draw Sasaya/**Blaze**.
- **Howling Mine**: Used to draw extra cards. With so few spells in the deck, chances are you will help your opponent to kill you faster, more often than you will accelerate into your combo. Like **Spellbook**, useless on its own.
- **Azusa, Lost but Seeking**: Used to play extra lands after Sasaya is flipped. However, if you flip Sasaya, either you have the **Blaze** (and likely will win), or you don't have a win condition (in which case Azusa will act only as a 1/2 creature). Before you flip Sasaya, you don't really want to play three lands a turn from your hand, making Azusa actually counterproductive to the deck's theme!
- **Time of Need**: Acts as Sasayas #5 and 6. Considering you need Sasaya to win, these serve a central purpose. You can also grab Azusa in a pinch.

One of the problems with the deck is that many of the cards that help you get to the point of having seven lands in hand are useless when isolated on their own. **Howling Mine**, **Spellbook**, and Azusa do not really serve a function unless everything falls just in the right place, and **Spellbook** and Azusa, when in play early, don't do anything to help you draw the rest of the cards you need to win.

When you're playing a combo deck, you want each of the cards to either directly contribute to the combo, or to directly contribute towards getting your combo off. [Let's take a look at my Grand Spree deck](#):

Grand Spree		
Main Deck 60 cards		
4 Great Furnace	3 Hearth Kami	4 Guardian Idol
8 Island	4 Neurok Transmuter	4 Izzet Signet
7 Mountain		3 March of the Machines
4 Seat of the Synod	7 creatures	4 Mycosynth Lattice
23 lands		3 Remand
		4 Shattering Spree
		4 Thirst for Knowledge
		4 Thoughtcast
		30 other spells

Combo Pieces: **Neurok Transmuter**, **March of the Machines**, **Hearth Kami**, **Shattering Spree**, **Mycosynth Lattice**

Mana Acceleration: **Izzet Signet**, **Guardian Idol**

Card Drawing: **Thirst for Knowledge**, **Thoughtcast**, **Remand**

Lands: Eight artifact lands to help with **Thoughtcast**, the rest lands to cast my spells.

Note that every card in the deck helps either build to the combo, or helps buy time to get the combo going. (Lattice + Spree or Lattice + **March of the Machines**) **Neurok Transmuter** plus **Shattering Spree** equals threats dealt with. **Neurok Transmuter** plus **Hearth Kami** equals threats dealt with. **Guardian Idol** can act as a blocker or attacker. **Hearth Kami** and **Neurok Transmuter**, while both combo pieces, can also attack and block. **Remand** gets me a card further in the deck, plus delays a potentially destructive spell, buying time. All in all, the pieces all build on one another.



The Problems: Too many cards that do nothing on their own. Not enough cards that further the deck's main goal of drawing Sasaya plus seven lands plus **Blaze**. Too many cards that are useless when drawn in multiples.

The Solutions: Take out cards that do nothing on their own. Add in cards that help you draw lands, Sasaya, or **Blaze**. Diversify some of the elements of the deck so cards drawn in multiples are useful, or so that cards will not be drawn in multiples.

Rule #4: Have a Curve

This isn't a problem with Major Domo's deck, because no spell costs more than three (except, of course, the game-ending **Blaze**). This is because there are so few spells in the deck, that you will always be able to cast what you draw. You just won't be drawing many spells to cast!

The Problem: Not enough spells in the deck to have a curve.

The Solution: Add more spells to the deck, but be mindful of their mana cost.

Rule #5: Enchant Creature Cards Are Not Your Friends!

This goes doubly so when over half the creatures in your deck become enchantments themselves, which would kill any enchant creature cards you put on them. Let's try to avoid having any self-affecting enchant creature cards in any build of this deck, for that reason.

To summarize, I needed to remove lands from the deck, while keeping the vast majority of them Forests. I needed to add more spells to the deck, but make sure that the deck had a decent mana curve. I wanted to focus the cards that I added on the goal of flipping Sasaya and then killing my opponent with a large **Blaze**, and I wanted to remove cards that were redundant in multiples, or that did not do anything on their own.

Here's the first round of changes I made:

Out: 15 Mountain, 4 **Spellbook**, 2 Azusa

In: 1 **Time of Need**, 4 **Seek the Horizon**, 4 **Carven Caryatid**, 4 **Civic Wayfinder**, 1 **Stream of Life**, 3 **Walking Archive**, 3 **Savage Twister**, 1 **Selesnya Guildmage**

Sasaya 2.0		
Main Deck 60 cards		
20 Forest	1 Azusa, Lost but Seeking	4 Blaze
4 Mountain	4 Carven Caryatid	4 Howling Mine
24 lands	4 Civic Wayfinder	3 Savage Twister
	4 Sasaya, Orochi Ascendant	4 Seek the Horizon
	1 Selesnya Guildmage	1 Stream of Life
	3 Walking Archive	3 Time of Need
	17 creatures	19 other spells

Before I get into the explanations for the changes made above, let me take a moment to address the high number of rares in this deck. This deck has twelve rares (the highest number I've included in a deck for a while), and the total cost of the first version of this deck comes to around twenty tickets (Three tickets for **Howling Mines**, one ticket for Azusa, half a ticket for the other rares). The upper range of cost I've allowed myself in this column is thirty tickets (remember, all builds are by **Magic Online** prices), so this deck, while pricier than a few others in past weeks, is still well within a budget range.

To fix the mana base, I took out fifteen Mountains. This leaves the deck with twenty-four lands, twenty of which are Forests. Green is the color of searching for specific lands, so having any arbitrary number of off-color lands would be feasible if there is enough search in the deck. There are many cards in Standard which serve this purpose, but I wanted Green cards that put lands directly into your hand, instead of into play.

I might need a Mountain later in the game, but I also might need an extra land in my hand to flip Sasaya. If I drew **Sakura-Tribe Elder** or **Rampant Growth** late in the game, they would do nothing to help the overall goal of the deck (flipping Sasaya and blowing up my opponent with **Blaze**). In fact, those cards would hurt the deck, because the more lands I thinned from the deck, the less chance I had of drawing a full hand of seven lands.

To that effect, I decided to go with **Seek the Horizon** and **Civic Wayfinder** as my ways to search out Mountains. **Civic Wayfinder** comes down early enough to help smooth out my draw each game. If I drop a Wayfinder on the third turn, I'm guaranteed of at least having a fourth land drop that game. **Seek the Horizon**, on the other hand, can provide lands number five, six, and seven all at once, allowing me to flip Sasaya more easily. With **Seek the Horizon**, I can more easily plan a critical turn 7. With seven lands on the board, I can both cast **Seek the Horizon** for lands five, six, and seven, and then drop Sasaya. Once I can cast both at the same time, my opponent A) cannot kill Sasaya as a creature, and B) I can flip Sasaya on the same turn that I have seven lands in hand, while still holding on to non-land spells at the end of turn when it's time to discard for having over



seven cards total in hand. This means I'm shooting for a turn 8 kill, but one that will happen reliably.

Carven Caryatid and **Savage Twister** will work as creature control for the early game. They both buy me time to get to turn 7, with the Caryatid having the added bonus of drawing me a card in the process. The single **Selesnya Guildmage** can act as an early blocker (either itself, or Saproling tokens it makes), or as an alternate finisher to **Blaze** once Sasaya is flipped (you can make quite a few Saproling tokens with 50+ Green mana).

I added one **Time of Need**, because the deck probably can't win without flipping Sasaya. I also left in a single copy of Azusa, because I didn't want **Time of Need** to be a dead card if I already had a Sasaya in hand, plus I wanted to be able to have an alternate scenario to the **Seek the Horizon/Sasaya** flip where I drew over eight cards with **Howling Mine**, and then dropped Sasaya, flipped it, and got Azusa on line the same turn.

Last, I added three **Walking Archives** to the deck. I already had four **Howling Mines**, and this gave me seven ways to draw extra cards each turn, without spending mana. The **Stream of Life** added another X spell to the deck, and this one was capable of being cast without any Mountains.

Playtesting

To cut a long story short, I end up going 3-3 with this build of the deck. Two of my losses came to milling decks, and one to an Owling Mine variant (my deck definitely had problems fighting through **Ebony Owl Netsuke**). My wins came against mono-Red burn, Red/White burn, and Black/White control. In both my wins and my losses, a couple of problems with the deck became apparent.

1. **Howling Mine** and **Walking Archive** both did not work well. Towards the last couple of games, I'd have either **Howling Mine** or **Walking Archive** in my hand, and I'd hold them back because every time I cast one, I gave my opponent too many weapons to kill me. My deck wants to combo off on the seventh turn. The last thing I want to do is give the Mono-Red burn deck twice as many cards to kill me with before I get my combo off. The biggest problem with both **Howling Mine** and **Walking Archive** are that they are symmetrical effects. They often help my opponent as much (or more) than they help me, and I don't have many cards in my deck that can take advantage of an extra card a turn. In fact, the only purpose of these two cards is to get extra lands into my hand to flip Sasaya, and there are other cards more suited for this measure.
2. My curve isn't that great. I have a lot of low-cost drops, but between three mana and seven mana (when I want to drop Sasaya plus **Seek the Horizon** both at once), I don't have much to do. This ties into the problem above – if I'm drawing two-to-three cards a turn, I should be able to cast multiple spells a turn. Instead, I usually ended up with more **Howling Mines/Archives** in hand, multiple **Blazes**, multiple Sasayas, or a ton of three-drops that could only be cast one-per-turn until turn 6.

In short, the deck was too inconsistent. I was either winning or I wasn't – which might seem like an obvious statement for all decks – but there wasn't a fight in each game. I got my combo, or I didn't get my combo, and none of the cards in my deck really helped me fight through to enable the combo to go off. The deck was fundamentally flawed, and I needed to revamp my engine.

In the end, I decided I wanted to add in cards which allowed me to draw extra lands, in place of the **Howling Mine/Walking Archive** engine. Since I was taking multiple rares out of the deck, I would be free to add in a few rares. A couple of cards that immediately came to mind were **Life from the Loam** and **Journeyer's Kite**. The Kite acts as a **Jayemdae Tome**, except for lands. This would be perfect for me trying to get up to seven lands in hand, especially since I could go over seven cards if I was using it to draw on my opponent's turn.

Life from the Loam also would allow me to get seven cards in hand. It also enabled me to cast a fourth-turn **Seek the Horizon**, discard a bunch of lands, and then reclaim them for flipping Sasaya. With **Life from the Loam**, my target kill could be on turn 6 (cast **Seek the Horizon** on turn 4, discard three lands, cast **Life from the Loam** on turn 5, drop Sasaya, flip Sasaya, cast **Blaze** the next turn) instead of turn 8. Shaving two turns off of the kill is not insignificant, and would add potency to the deck.

Last, I added in **Sensei's Divining Tops** to the deck. These were in place of the Azusa (which was a holdover from the original build, and not all that useful for the reasons outlined at the beginning of the article), one **Civic Wayfinder** (too many three-drops), and one of the **Howling Mines**. The Top works well with **Journeyer's Kite**, the dredge effect of **Life from the Loam**, the shuffle effect of **Civic Wayfinder**, the shuffle effect of **Seek the Horizon**, and the shuffle effect of **Time of Need**. In short, **Sensei's Divining Top** would allow me to see a new set of cards every turn, which is crucial when you're trying to put together specific pieces of a combo deck.



Sasaya 3.0 H.dec

Main Deck

60 cards

20 Forest
4 Mountain

24 lands

4 Carven Caryatid
3 Civic Wayfinder
4 Sasaya, Orochi Ascendant
1 Selesnya Guildmage

12 creatures

4 Blaze
3 Journeyer's Kite
3 Life from the Loam
3 Savage Twister
4 Seek the Horizon
3 Sensei's Divining Top
1 Stream of Life
3 Time of Need

24 other spells

Out: 4 Howling Mine, 3 Walking Archive, 1 Azusa, 1 Civic Wayfinder
In: 3 Life from the Loam, 3 Journeyer's Kite, 3 Sensei's Divining Top

How did the rebuild of the Sasaya deck do with the new engine? Much better than the first... but not without even more changes being made to the deck. Tune in next week, as I discuss further what did and did not work in the deck, and bring you detailed game logs illustrating these points!

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*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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