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Socratic Deckbuilding

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 Limited Information
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Welcome back to Limited Information. This week is going to be a mite different than the original plan. The initial subject was a continuation of racing strategies from the *Time Spiral* perspective. That topic is still in the works, but it isn't quite ready for publication.

So instead, this week will be focusing on something especially relevant to the beginning of a new format. To ease into the subject matter and provide some extra relevance for the PTQ-attending audience, let's begin with a *Time Spiral* sealed pool.

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Time Spiral Sealed

Main Deck
75 cards

1 Molten Slagheap 1 Urza's Factory 2 lands	1 Amrou Scout 1 Basal Sliver 1 Basalt Gargoyle 1 Bogardan Rager 1 Brine Elemental 2 Children of Korlis 1 Cloudchaser Kestrel 1 Coal Stoker 1 Dralnu, Lich Lord 1 Dream Stalker 1 Drudge Reavers 1 Durkwood Baloth 1 Duskrider Peregrine 1 Errant Ephemeron 1 Fury Sliver 1 Gemhide Sliver 1 Ghost Ship 1 Goblin Skycutter 1 Greenseeker 1 Havenwood Wurm 1 Herd Gnarr 1 Ironclaw Buzzardiers 1 Ixidron 1 Kaervek the Merciless 1 Nightshade Assassin 1 Pit Keeper 1 Sage of Epityr 1 Scarwood Treefolk 1 Shadow Sliver 1 Slipstream Serpent 1 Thallid Germinator 1 Trespasser il-Vec 1 Urborg Syphon-Mage 1 Venser's Sliver 1 Viscid Lemures 1 Wormwood Dryad 1 Zealot il-Vec 38 creatures	1 Aether Web 1 Cancel 1 Disenchant 1 Dread Return 1 Fallen Ideal 1 Fiery Justice 1 Gaze of Justice 1 Ghitu Firebreathing 1 Grapeshot 1 Ground Rift 1 Krosan Grip 2 Lightning Axe 1 Mindstab 1 Molder 1 Momentary Blink 1 Ophidian Eye 1 Orcish Cannonade 1 Pull from Eternity 1 Restore Balance 1 Return to Dust 1 Smallpox 1 Snapback 1 Strangling Soot 1 Stupor 2 Sulfurous Blast 1 Temporal Eddy 1 Tendrils of Corruption 1 Thrill of the Hunt 1 Traitor's Clutch 1 Undying Rage 1 Unstable Mutation 1 Wipe Away 1 Word of Seizing 35 other spells
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Take all the time you want figuring out the build, because we're not ready to discuss it yet. First, I want to talk about a topic that comes up every time a new set is released to the limited-playing community: specifically, how this new set changes the *tenor* of the game.

See, Wizards of the Coast (praise be) releases a new set approximately every four months. On the surface, a new set simply equates to new cards and new mechanics to play around with. That's true enough, but not the whole truth. Besides the new mechanics et al, the correct way to build and play your decks is altered by the environment as a whole. Previous strategies and styles move and shift based on how all these new cards interact with each other. To put it another way, techniques that worked well with an old set might play very badly with the new cards, or vice versa. Determining the New World Order for a particular block has a lot of benefit to the competitive player, as illustrated by this true story.

Once upon a time, my good friend Dale Taylor was playing in his first *Urza's Saga* draft. He was a staunch fan of the preceding *Tempest* block, having effectively mastered the intricacies of shadow and buyback as well as the extraordinary complexity of *Rolling Thunder* ("Wrath of God targeting you"). Sadly for the fans, *Tempest's* time had ended. Now *Urza's Saga* was the drafters' choice. DT, true competitor that he was, rose to the challenge and sat down to draft *Saga* for the very first time.

Dale ended up with a highly aggressive, nearly mono-red deck featuring a large selection of cheap and aggressive Goblins. Dale was quite proud of his deck, thinking that in Rath-land, this deck would be tier one. Brimming with confidence, Dale sat down across his first opponent. Dale's opening hand was along the line of three lands and four two-power Goblins; basically perfect. Dale was all set to unload a stream of Red beats when his opponent calmly tapped two mana to play *Acridian*.



And that was that. The 2/4 completely shut down Dale's deck, and Dale got overran by *Cradle Guards* and *Blanchwood Treefolk*. Next round, DT was smashed by *Pestilence*. Then he got creamed by a pair of *Congregate*. At this point, Dale was laughingly waving the white flag. He realized that however good his deck would have played in the previous block, it was garbage in this one.

Had Dale known how much the environment had shifted, I'm sure he would have drafted far differently. In fact he did learn these intricacies and went on to do extremely well for the entire *Urza's* season. That one draft, though...

This week's column is dedicated to determining the right questions to ask to figure out a brand new environment. While this week will be focused on *Time Spiral*, the questions here are applicable whenever a new set comes onto the scene. This kind of investigative process is *excellent* for getting a head start on mastering the format. Certainly you can draft and play lots of sealed and grind out knowledge about how games naturally progress. That's an expensive road to take when experiences combined with discussion and logic will put you firmly in the right direction. For major tournaments like Pro Tour Qualifiers and Grand Prix, this kind of forethought could add serious numbers to your win column.

The point here is examining how things have changed since the new set came in. There are certainly some fundamental constants in limited, like the qualities of efficient removal and large fliers. Those are cards that are likely to remain at high value no matter what their expansion symbol may be. Those constants are not the focus today. This time is about a sampling of questions that will have very different answers depending on which set you happen to be playing with.



Question 1: How many mana sources should these decks be playing?

What it means: This is a strict look at "average" land counts. Adding in alternate sources should give you a good idea of a baseline for your limited decks, an important piece of information.

How to determine: Mana questions are some of the most fundamental and tricky puzzles in limited. The answer comes from figuring out a lot of smaller scenarios. Are spells in the format particularly strong? How badly is mana screw punished? Is there a place to put extra mana? Is land destruction a viable strategy? Most limited decks have a "flash point," a mana level they're required to get to in order to function. Depending on the set, that number could be two, three, or four. Knowing the flash point goes far in determining appropriate mana quantity.

Why it's important: Aside from the occasional Elf, things that aren't mana sources in a deck are your threats and removal; the business spells. Squeezing as much power into a deck as possible is great, but that's balanced by necessitating the mana to actually cast the spells. Mana screw is bad, as is mana flood. Finding the sweet spot maximizes your chances of a good draw. How many games in a tournament can you give up to mana troubles? Opponents make things tough enough already.

Question 2: Is this an aggressive or controlling format?

What it means: This question asks how quickly games are over, how soon creatures will hit play, and how much inexpensive removal and card advantage is available.

How to determine: How expensive are the common removal spells? How many “bears” are available to each color? How many cards at 4cc or less have more toughness than power? How many sources of card advantage are there? How many common evasion creatures exist? When you watch other people playing this set (you are watching other people play, right?), do you see a lot of creature stalls and stalemates? For that matter, what kind of ways are there to break a stalemate? *Onslaught* was high on creatures, but it also had **Choking Tethers**, **Dirge of Dread**, and Invokers as stalemate breakers, and they did a very good job. *Odyssey* didn't have as much evasion or stall-breakers or cheap removal, so it was considered a more controlling environment. Base sets are slower still, with the threat of stalemates very common.

Why it's important: How fast an environment is directly affects the evaluations of many cards. The slower an environment is, the more playable higher casting-costed cards become. If you're dead before you ever reach seven mana, cards take on a whole new dimension. By extension, if things are very slow and nothing gets going until turns 3-5, cheap defenders become unnecessary. How soon you need to play creatures, how important card advantage is; these are all intrinsically tied to knowing the tendencies of its limited decks. As *Ninth Edition* draft is a fairly slow format, two-power, two-mana-cost creatures are almost worthless. Everyone has cheap defenses, which makes things slow, which makes (scarce) card advantage cards like **Sift** very powerful. The Rath cycle also contained **Sift**, but it was much faster. It also had buyback as a route to card advantage. Thus the very same card was quite a bit worse in *Tempest*.



Question 3: How long do creatures with one toughness live?

What it means: You're playing limited, so you're going to need creatures. Of the variety of creatures available to you, those with one toughness are the most vulnerable, sometimes incredibly so. (**Zero-toughness creatures** tend to be more resilient. Go figure.) Are these tiny-bottomed creatures a liability?

How to determine: There are two points here: how required are we to use these kinds of creatures, and how many cards *specifically* kill them? Let's figure this out with *Ravnica*. Triple *Ravnica* had a fairly high concentration of one toughness creatures at 36. Now of those, some had inherent protection (**Phytohydra**), some had inherent boosting (**Twilight Drover**, **Necroplasm**), some had positive death effects (**Shambling Shell**, **Surveilling Sprite**) and some had positive comes-into-play effects (**Sparkmage Apprentice**, **Spawnbroker**). However, a great many popular creatures simply lived or died by their effect on combat, like **Mortipede** or **Centaur Safeguard**. You may note that these kinds of creatures are more commonly found at common. As for vulnerability, I count 10 cards that destroy standard one-toughness creatures with a bonus left over. If that doesn't sound like much, consider that these are only cards that kill multiples at once or leave something behind. How many 2-for-1s can a limited deck take and still be in the game? If you add in cards that were merely really good against creatures with a single point of toughness, like **Clinging Darkness**, you begin to see their intrinsic vulnerability.

Why it's important: Every set is going to have creatures with one toughness and cards that go after creatures with one toughness. However, the ratio will definitely be different in each set. If you're in a draft and seeing that your creatures are all small in the backside, and you're in a format where that's a Bad Thing, turn the ship around. Those 2-for-1 cards aren't nearly as powerful if they aren't actually killing more than one creature at a time. You just have to know what's out there. This question, like all the others, is a game of environmental awareness.

One toughness killers with a bonus in Ravnica:
Seed Spark
Darkblast
Surveilling Sprite
Flame Fusillade
Rain of Embers
Sparkmage Apprentice
Wojek Embermage
Rolling Spoil
Scatter the Seeds
Viashino Fangtail

Question 4: Is this a **Disenchant** environment?



What it means: By **Disenchant**, I refer to the iconic effect, not necessarily the card (ironic...). Is this a format where, should you have access to **Sundering Vitae/Molder/Altar's Light**, you'd be wise to play it main? If so, how hard should you try?

How to evaluate: Are there very solid artifacts or enchantments at common? Every set has incredibly powerful rare cards of that type, but those aren't relevant. It's the cards you'll expect to see over and over again, and that are powerful when you do, that matter here. Especially relevant are a prevalence of late game artifacts (i.e. non-mana producing ones) and/or a good common enchantment in each color.

Why it's important: So it's turn seven and you're on the ropes. It's not a serious disparity, all you need is a creature or a land to turn the game around. Basically, there's no card you *can't* draw to swing the game back. You untap, grab the top card and it's...blank. There's nothing there! Bad beat, game over.

Or...

They've played that popular artifact creature *again*. It's a dangerous one, so you'll have to use a piece of good removal on it. Their next guy, that Dragon? He's a killer.

The difference between a deck with a dead card or a deck with an extra piece of removal is quite large. The answer doesn't have to be based on fear, just on a little time spent talking with comrades and observing games – and some quality **Gatherer** time.

This is really just a sampling of things you can figure out. Should you play first or should you draw first? How important is tempo? What are the best colors, the best archetypes? What we have so far is a good starting point,

so let's bring it back to the set du jour. *Time Spiral* is a far different animal than the blocks preceding it, so however well you handled those sets, a new challenge awaits. Luckily, we have a sealed deck to delve into for information. It's been a while since that statistics course, but I think I recall that a random sampling of one was a good representative of the whole. Hopefully this practice deck will give some insight into *Time Spiral* limited. At the very least, it's a good place to start. Here's the deck again.

Time Spiral Sealed		
Main Deck 75 cards		
1 Molten Slagheap	1 Amrou Scout	1 Aether Web
1 Urza's Factory	1 Basal Sliver	1 Cancel
2 lands	1 Basalt Gargoyle	1 Disenchant
	1 Bogardan Rager	1 Dread Return
	1 Brine Elemental	1 Fallen Ideal
	2 Children of Korlis	1 Fiery Justice
	1 Cloudchaser Kestrel	1 Gaze of Justice
	1 Coal Stoker	1 Ghitu Firebreathing
	1 Dralnu, Lich Lord	1 Grapeshot
	1 Dream Stalker	1 Ground Rift
	1 Drudge Reavers	1 Krosan Grip
	1 Durkwood Baloth	2 Lightning Axe
	1 Duskrider Peregrine	1 Mindstab
	1 Errant Ephemeron	1 Molder
	1 Fury Sliver	1 Momentary Blink
	1 Gemhide Sliver	1 Ophidian Eye
	1 Ghost Ship	1 Orcish Cannonade
	1 Goblin Skycutter	1 Pull from Eternity
	1 Greenseeker	1 Restore Balance
	1 Havenwood Wurm	1 Return to Dust
	1 Herd Gnarr	1 Smallpox
	1 Ironclaw Buzzardiers	1 Snapback
	1 Ixidron	1 Strangling Soot
	1 Kaervek the Merciless	1 Stupor
	1 Nightshade Assassin	2 Sulfurous Blast
	1 Pit Keeper	1 Temporal Eddy
	1 Sage of Epityr	1 Tendrils of Corruption
	1 Scarwood Treefolk	1 Thrill of the Hunt
	1 Shadow Sliver	1 Traitor's Clutch
	1 Slipstream Serpent	1 Undying Rage
	1 Thallid Germinator	1 Unstable Mutation
	1 Trespasser il-Vec	1 Wipe Away
	1 Urborg Syphon-Mage	1 Word of Seizing
	1 Venser's Sliver	
	1 Viscid Lemures	35 other spells
	1 Wormwood Dryad	
	1 Zealot il-Vec	
38 creatures		

Click [here](#) when you're ready to see a finished version.

The first thing we see is that white and green are completely awful. White has 1.75 good creatures and a bunch of *Disenchant*-types. Green has perhaps double the amount of good creatures, and even more *Disenchant*-types. The best card from each is *Fiery Justice*, but that's not strong enough to bend the entire deck around.

Blue is a touch better with some solid fliers, card advantage, and bounce. It still doesn't bring a whole lot to the party. Bounce is only as good as the creatures it's promoting, and blue isn't packing enough. It's not the worst, but compared to red and black, blue is out of its league.

Red and black are clearly where the power lies. A straight-up bomb in *Kaervek the Merciless*, doubles of the incredible *Sulfurous Blast*, and plenty of targeted removal and decent creatures to back it all up. There's actually *too much* removal here; some of it will need to be cut to make room for the creatures. Considering how fragile a lot of these guys are, we shouldn't skimp too much in that category. Here's my final build:

Time Spiral Sealed		
Main Deck 40 cards		Sideboard
1 Molten Slagheap	1 Dread Return	1 Bogardan Rager
8 Mountain	1 Lightning Axe	1 Fallen Ideal
8 Swamp	1 Mindstab	1 Ghitu Firebreathing
1 Urza's Factory	1 Orcish Cannonade	1 Grapeshot
18 lands	1 Strangling Soot	1 Ground Rift
	2 Sulfurous Blast	1 Lightning Axe

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Basal Sliver 1 Basalt Gargoyle 1 Coal Stoker 1 Drudge Reavers 1 Fury Sliver 1 Goblin Skycutter 1 Ironclaw Buzzardiers 1 Kaervek the Merciless 1 Nightshade Assassin 1 Pit Keeper 1 Urborg Syphon-Mage 1 Venser's Sliver 1 Viscid Lemures <p>13 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Tendrils of Corruption 1 Word of Seizing <p>9 other spells</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Smallpox 1 Stupor 1 Traitor's Clutch 1 Trespasser il-Vec 1 Undying Rage <p>11 sideboard cards</p>
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To explain the reasoning of individual card choices, let's look at those four questions from above, tailored for this deck.

How many mana sources should this deck be playing? Is this a controlling or aggressive deck?

These are lumped together because the answers are so interdependent. Is this particular deck an aggressive deck? I don't see how it can be considered that way. Its fastest route to victory is some combination of discard + **Dread Return** + **Kaervek**, and even that sequence isn't particularly speedy. This is a deck that clearly wants to stay alive for a while so it can take over with its card advantage plays or late game all-stars. In addition, it has **Lightning Axe**, **Urborg Syphon-Mage**, and **Urza's Factory**, all of which appreciate having extra land available. Those are fairly common cards, and in fact there's a cycle of common Spellshapers. This deck may be more controlling than average, but I'd still say that this is an 18 mana source environment.

How long do creatures with one toughness live?

From this deck, we can see that **Grapeshot** is the only card that outright goes after small toughnesses. It's perfectly includable, but since **Sulfurous Blast** scoops away everything anyway and we have no Suspend, it seemed a bit weak this time. **Grapeshot** is a popular card, as is **Subterranean Shambler**, both of which nail x/1s. There's also **D'Avenant Healer**, **Deathspore Thallid**, **Flowstone Channeler**, and of course, anything with flanking. Moving up the rarity chain, there's **Fledgling Mawcor**, **Clockwork Hydra**, **Pirate Ship**, **Prodigal Sorcerer**, **Desert**, **Serrated Arrows**... seems like quite a fair amount. Creature fortitude is not the forte of the red/black deck, but you can minimize your exposure to all these pinging effects. That's one of the reasons why **Trespasser il-Vec** is not on maindeck patrol. I have no interest in discarding cards for blocking or dealing three points, and it dies too easily anyway. Because this deck is required to play one-toughness creatures, I prefer those with sacrifice effects, comes-into-play effects, or self-preservation abilities. For any **Time Spiral** limited deck, if you're going to be playing these kinds of creatures solely for combat purposes, you're going to need a way to overcome their vulnerability. In this deck's case, more aggressive creatures or madness cards may have brought the **Trespasser** back into the fold. As it is, it's a reasonable cut.



Should this deck be playing Disenchant (literally)?

Of course not. There's no way this deck would benefit from a splash. The mana is quite strained, with double red and double black cards both needed for survival. But if splashing was easier, or our base deck did contain green or white, should we slip in **Disenchant** or **Krosan Grip**?



It's a close call, but I believe the answer is yes. On the artifact side, the only two consistently relevant commons are **Prismatic Lens** and **Venser's Sliver**. The Lens is excellent, but usually by the time you go around to killing it, it's already done its thing. **Venser's Sliver** is another matter. It's a reasonably-costed creature with a bonus alongside other Slivers in play. Most of my sealed decks have been playing this card, and while it's not incredible, it's a legitimate threat. A little higher up in rarity, all five totems are quality cards that are definitely worthy of destruction. While they're uncommon individually, the fact they come as a cycle means you can expect to see one roughly every other round. Considering their rather heavy commitment to activation, killing one at the right time could have serious benefit. On the Enchantment side, white decks will have the awesome **Temporal Isolation**. Black decks should have a **Feebleness** somewhere, green decks could have **Aether Web**, and blue will definitely be packing **Ophidian Eye**. These are the common standouts; going into higher rarities will see even stronger artifacts and enchantments. With all that, **Time Spiral** looks like a place where a **Disenchant** would be put to good use.

This Q&A process is a vital step on getting an edge over the competition. From a combination of experience, research, and logic, you get to figure out the puzzle before the rest of the world. Every time a new set comes out, you get to explore these questions all over again. For now, **Time Spiral** is at the forefront, with PTQs aplenty to test your question answering skills. Try to figure out the nuance of the format now, so that when that Pro Tour or MTGO premiere event rolls around, you won't be stuck wondering. Good luck, and thanks for reading.



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