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The Craft of Sideboarding

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Swimming With Sharks
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When I started getting more serious about **Magic**, probably around 1995, I played out of an awesome little store called Mr. Cards & Comics in Lyndhurst, OH. Though the store would produce a number of Pro Tour players (most notably R&D's Worth Wollpert) and early Internet contributors, before the rules of engagement were solidified, we, like most local groups, worked out our own generally wrong-headed philosophies. The one that really sticks out in my mind a Deckade later is "Sideboards are for the weak; your main deck should really be able to stand on its own."

I'm afraid that many players approach the *notion* of sideboards and sideboarding from a similarly askew perspective. While there is nothing *precisely* wrong with the idea that you would want to play a singularly potent main deck, or that you might want to aspire to strong main deck matchups, not paying proper attention to your sideboard, and what exactly makes it – or *can make* it – such a uniquely significant tool, will only hurt your chances in competition (assuming the opponents are not similarly handicapping themselves). The goal of this article is to talk about some basic perspectives for sideboarding using expert-level strategy, technique, and design examples. Though this article ended up quite long, it is by no means exhaustive; I will probably visit Wish sideboards, which have different and related complexities, when we are closer to an Extended PTQ season.



Before we move forward with good or great sideboarding strategies, it is probably worthwhile to talk about Really Bad Sideboards and the common pitfalls of weak and sub-optimal ones. The "Classic" Really Bad sideboard will just run a collection of color hosers – for example, *Karma* for black decks, a couple of *Blasts*, and two each of *Circle of Protection: Black, Blue, Green, Red, and White*. The reason such sideboards are so bad is that they show almost no understanding of what makes one's own deck tick, and where the chinks in its armor might be. Sideboards like the Classic Really Bad show essentially no understanding, appreciation, or *respect* for the angles of attack the opponent might bring to the table, or what capabilities he might have against certain kinds of cards. Can you really believe that the same Circles – in the same numbers – are going to be equally effective against the reach of red decks versus the unique attacks of *any other color*? Is a damage-preventing enchantment really the right way to fight green or white versus black?

Perhaps more amateurish is the idea that the Classic Bad Sideboard had of running exactly two Circles of each color... Is it possible that you have the same number of inefficient cards to remove against *both* a burning beatdown Red Deck *and* a Blue Control deck? There is a thick stripe at even the most basic level of competitive play separating the best from the rest, and on the latter side stand the folks who have no clue which of their cards are ineffective, or at least inappropriate, in a given matchup.

In order to avoid some common pitfalls, keep some of these questions in mind. They're not exhaustive, but they're a good place to start.

1. Am I maintaining the core synergies of my deck, or at least enough of a plan (if even a different plan) such that I can still win? *A common mistake when sideboarding with control decks is to bring in so much fast early game removal that the deck can no longer command initiative in the endgame.*
2. Am I introducing a permanent type that actually makes the opponent's deck better? *For example, you are playing a "no [non-land] permanents" control deck Game One and add a Circle of Protection that simply "turns on" the Mortify your conservative opponent was loath to remove even though it sat useless in his hand at the end of Game One.*
3. What if I'm wrong? Can I still win? *This happens more than you might suspect. It might currently be happening to you and you don't even know it!*

This poses the question: What exactly do I want from my sideboard?

Generally speaking, we ask of our sideboard cards one or more of three things:

1. Card advantage
2. Time
3. Strategy Suppression

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Card advantage seems obvious, but it can be measured in many different ways. Oftentimes the card advantage is virtual (sideboard cards representing naked one-for-ones but replacing otherwise blank deck slots, or ostensibly sub-optimal countermeasures that replace lonely targets for specific types of spot removal). In certain brute force sideboards, we ask our four-mana sorceries to destroy all the Islands, or all the Plains, or all the artifacts (or non-land artifacts), or all the non-basic lands... Here "card advantage" really is obvious, trading a single sideboarded spell for many of the opponent's mana sources.



The notion of time is harder to grasp. Some of the most effective sideboard cards are hard to pigeonhole. **Repeal** is a good example... It is more expensive than whatever it is "answering," and that "answer" is many times hardly an actual answer at all; most players consider **Repeal** an inefficient main deck card, if they will consider it playable in an opening sixty at all. Yet in context –say 'Vore siding **Repeal** in against Zoo – that overcosted instant serves multiple purposes. Surely **Repeal** "buys" time... It may just be picking up a **Watchwolf** that has already struck for three, but because it does so during the end step, that **Watchwolf** is blanked for the next turn. Time is key because Zoo is strongest early. As the game progresses, if 'Vore can start controlling the board, specifically Zoo's mana flow, it can win quickly in the end turns. Thus, the manipulation of time – stealing the opponent's initiative, if only for a couple of turns – becomes strategic because maybe he can't win once the **Magnivores** come online. As for card advantage? Patrick Sullivan has often said that certain beatdown decks – for example Standard Boros – are so tight on mana that, thanks to **Repeal**, "the guy is essentially dead anyway if it's not attacking..." Worse yet, the opponent has drawn a card.

The most successful sideboards may run cards that individually buy or steal time, or wrest bulk cards, but in concert with one another – or as part of an overall coherent plan – suppress the opponent's strategy entirely. Over the past couple of weeks we have looked at how permission spells are used differently by different, ostensibly similar, decks. When permission comes out of the sideboard of some beatdown decks, it is not there merely to answer threats – and it doesn't *want* to be answering threats in general – but to *resolve* them and win the game.

For all these reasons, *sideboard cards are typically and necessarily more powerful than main deck cards*. Most main decks are either narrowly focused blunt instruments with the blinders on, capable of doing only one thing (let alone doing anything well) or they represent some kind of compromise based on some notion geared to tackle a varied field. Sideboard cards, at their best, represent both focus and attention to variety. When they do one thing, they do it for less mana than we would typically ask of a maindeck card; conversely, their ability to spring into different directions manifests during the selection process, each efficient tool geared towards a specific job.

Color-Specific or Strategy-Specific Sideboarding

When I first got into tournament **Magic**, the color-specific sideboard card was akin to the *obvious* sideboard card, and even a few years in, future Grand Prix Top 8 players might be heard naysaying the viability of, say U/R Control in Extended simply because it exposed itself to "either sort of Blasts." The first tournament finals I ever reached involved a Red **Orcish Spy** + **Millstone** / Land Destruction deck (I could keep the opponent from drawing lands, or alternately drawing spells) whose 'board was all Red **Elemental Blasts** and **Pyroblasts** and a couple of **Flashfires** and **Shatters**. Today's players have fewer color- and strategy-specific tools to play, but in principle, the pitfalls to bad sideboarding remain.

Sometimes playing an overload of Red **Elemental Blasts** yields strategic harmony (we will see that later with Mark Gordon's Goblin 'board). Just playing a ton of them in a **Millstone** / Land Destruction deck didn't. At the time, I had some notion of trading cards, and realizing that Blasts traded very efficiently (they do). The problem is that individual color- and strategy-specific sideboard card swaps in and of themselves rarely do anything, or at least anything unique. That is, if you are losing when you trade cards one-for-one in game one, there is no reason to believe that you will suddenly win when you can trade different cards one-for-one in game two.

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That said, there is nothing wrong with color- or strategy-specific sideboard *cards*. It's certainly efficient to trade one mana and a card for any amount of mana one or greater and a card on the opponent's turn, and it is really important to be able to **Shatter** some artifact or other at instant speed in some formats and matchups. The criticism of this style of sideboarding generally comes from fundamental

inelegance or hodgepodge execution, the same reason there is a difference between spilt pudding and a Jackson Pollock, despite the fact that, superficially, they might have much in common visually. As such, you will see heavy color- and strategy-specific sideboarding occur when a player has no idea when or why he would want which cards, if *these* cards. The inept strategy- and color-specific sideboard will be notoriously inefficient in that the player will often be unable to utilize the bulk of his sideboard cards without mangling his core strategies, and may approach matchups with no idea what to sideboard *out* to make room for his voluminous hosers.

"Why do you have **Shatter**?"

"To blow up artifacts."

"Which ones?"

"I don't know... **Zuran Orb**?"

"Forget about the fact that you kill with **Millstone**... Doesn't everyone play **Zuran Orb** in the main?"

"I guess so."

"Then wouldn't you want to sideboard in **Shatter** in every matchup?"

"I guess so."

"What does that tell you about your deck design?"



These cards typically come in two flavors, the fast and efficient instants (**Oxidize** or **Red Elemental Blast**) and the slower but massively powerful self-contained card advantage effects (**Energy Flux** and **Boiling Seas**). Sometimes the fast effects are better and sometimes the more dramatic effects are appropriate. The conditions brought to bear on these are the same as with any cards... Fast instants are by nature easier to resolve against resistance (especially decks with some blue component) than ponderous bombs; many times fast one-for-ones don't yield enough firepower to turn around bad matchups. Sometimes the only way you will win is if you have **Oxidize** to either nix blue mana so that you can resolve **Energy Flux** or to keep you alive against the Ravager he can still pay for despite **Energy Flux** (that is, you need both).



A really good example comes from the Top 8 of Pro Tour Columbus 2004, when Osyp Lebedowicz commented that **Oxidize** was an insufficient sideboard card for Madness against Pierre Canali's deck because no matter how fast **Oxidize** was, the nature of Affinity was to be faster (it didn't, after all, hold Affinity back in *Block*, let alone Extended). **Energy Flux**, on the other hand, could be a serious problem because it was also relatively fast, and could punish the explosive – yet often land-tight – Ravager Affinity decks.

Instead of brute force and large numbers, which can be simply unnecessary in reasonable or even matchups, the best way to establish or hold a lead may in fact be the strategic use of color- or strategy-specific sideboard cards, "aimed" expressly at the correct point in the opponent's strategy. It is important to note that because

color- and strategy-specific sideboarding is the most common style to fall prey to pitfalls *a la* the Classic Really Bad, when pulling one of these levers, you should pay special attention to that "What if I am wrong?" point up above.

I recently discussed a Rakdos beatdown / burn deck that was posting awesome numbers against updated Solar Flare, even when that dominating archetype got a quick **Akroma, Angel of Wrath** (a creature notorious for her Protection from Black *and* Protection from Red). One commentator asked why I didn't play a card like **Cruel Edict** in my sideboard. That poster simply ignored that Rakdos was beating Solar Flare *in the face of* a fast Akroma with tons of burn cards to the face. If Rakdos were to bring in a card specifically to fight a White permanent in Solar Flare, it would be much more likely to fail if it aimed for Akroma than, say, **Circle of Protection: Red**, a card that may or may not show up, but one that would easily trump the Rakdos "burn you" plan.

One of the best examples of a deck that deftly uses color- and strategy-specific sideboard cards is Jon Finkel's 2000 US National Championship deck, Napster:

Jon Finkel Napster 2000 U.S. Nationals		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
2 Dust Bowl	4 Dark Ritual	2 Engineered Plague
4 Rishadan Port	4 Duress	1 Eradicate
2 Spawning Pool	1 Engineered Plague	1 Massacre
15 Swamp	1 Eradicate	1 Perish
23 lands	1 Massacre	2 Phyrexian Negator
	1 Perish	1 Phyrexian Processor
	1 Persecute	1 Powder Keg
2 Phyrexian Negator	1 Stupor	2 Rapid Decay
2 Skittering Horror	2 Unmask	1 Stromgald Cabal

3 Skittering Skirge	4 Vampiric Tutor	1 Stupor
1 Stromgald Cabal	4 Vicious Hunger	1 Thran Lens
1 Thrashing Wumpus	4 Yawgmoth's Will	1 Unmask
9 creatures	28 other spells	15 sideboard cards

Napster ran **Massacre for Rebels**, **Engineered Plague** for Elves, **Perish** for StOmPy, **Rapid Decay** for Academy Rector and **Replenish**, and **Thran Lens** for **Circle of Protection: Black**; its **Powder Keg** was indiscriminate in its murder of Squirrel Tokens (nice echo), Goblins, **Grim Monoliths** and opposing **Powder Kegs**, and **Rings of Gix**. The choices in this sideboard were highly strategic, as a single resolution or use of one of the powerful sideboard cards, set up by **Vampiric Tutor**, would often generate enough tempo for a 5/5 or **Thrashing Wumpus** to win the game before the opponent could recover. A **Stromgald Cabal** in the right matchup would force an opposing player to hit *eight* mana before even attempting multiple white spells, and by then Napster was sure to have a **Duress** to foul the chain.

The reason this sideboard was so perfect was that the **Vampiric Tutor** engine allowed Jon to weave highly specific answer cards of terrible momentum into his deck with a minimum of core strategy disruption. Moreover, the deck never needed any of the cards, specifically, to *win* (except, maybe, **Thran Lens**). Yes, **Perish** would commonly take out three creatures at a time, and certainly it was hard to ramp to **Plow Under** mana with **Engineered Plague** in play, but no matter how good the color- and strategy-specific cards were, they were rarely in charge of completing Napster's heavy lifting... They were just there to make an already powerful deck's job look easy, not to get the job itself done.

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Anticipation

This brings us to the idea of anticipation, or siding against the opponent's sideboarded strategy.

Odd as it may seem, you will find some players siding in cards that address types of permanents that are not even found maindeck, or removing maindeck cards that helped win the first game! The reason is that these players are – hopefully correctly – playing to beat the opponent's *game two*, rather than game one, configuration. Why is he bringing in **Disenchant** when the only potential target in game one was **Azorius Signet**? Because he can't beat **Circle of Protection: Red** otherwise.

If Rakdos were to bring in a card specifically to fight a White permanent in Solar Flare, it would be much more likely to fail if it aimed for Akroma than, say, Circle of Protection: Red.

This style of sideboarding is wild with variation, and highly (and obviously) format-specific, and sometimes even local metagame-specific. When done best, Anticipation shows the prepared player thinking out of the box, if not thinking circles around the established metagame.

Look at Gerard Fabiano's sideboard from the Top 8 of Grand Prix – Mexico City:

Gerard Fabiano – Critical Mass		
Grand Prix – Mexico City Top 8		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
10 Forest	4 Hinder	2 Consuming Vortex
7 Island	3 Hisoka's Defiance	2 Gnarled Mass
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Kodama's Reach	1 Hisoka's Defiance
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Sensei's Divining Top	4 Jushi Apprentice
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	4 Umezawa's Jitte	1 Overwhelming Intellect
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	19 other spells	2 Rending Vines
2 Tendo Ice Bridge		3 Threads of Disloyalty
23 lands		15 sideboard cards
2 Isao, Enlightened Bushi		
4 Keiga, the Tide Star		
4 Kodama of the North Tree		
4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
18 creatures		

Critical Mass was the favorite in both the **Kamigawa** Block Mono-Blue Control matchup *and* the dominant **Gifts Ungiven** matchup, for related, but ultimately different, reasons.

Critical Mass played essentially the same game plan as Mono-Blue – counters and fatties to win – but was much more efficient because it held the mana breaker on **Sakura-Tribe Elder** and **Kodama's Reach** where Mono-Blue

had do-nothing card draw like **Azami, Lady of Scrolls**. These *seemed* good but in fact just dug blue into a mana commitment hole such that it could never beat a North Tree. In the early game, Critical Mass could swing with anything, and especially with the help of **Umezawa's Jitte**, force the opponent – who might have had **Jushi Apprentice** going, mind you – to commit mana on his own turn. Winning a **Hinder** or **Hisoka's Defiance** war was academic with the mana advantage, given that Blue had to initiate the fight in order to recover. At that point it was usually quite simple for the U/G deck to resolve a Legendary trump and win with either that or the tempo advantage it had to begin with.

Against **Gifts Ungiven**, Critical Mass wasn't a *perfect* counterspell deck, but it generally had enough counters to stop the few threats Gifts could present in a reasonable window.

While **Umezawa's Jitte** was a defining card of the format, it did not shine in either controlling matchup. The swap of Jitte at two for **Jushi at two** was therefore unbelievable. In the Mono-Blue matchup, **Jushi** on the other side meant that Critical Mass *really* was just a better version of the mirror... There was nothing Mono-Blue could do that Critical Mass couldn't do better because of its early game mana advantage, with any incremental counters rendered meaningless in the short term by the U/G deck's mana advantage and blanked in the long term by the inability to deal with resolved threats fed, again, by the mana advantage. In the Gifts matchup, an unchecked **Jushi** simply ensured that Critical Mass, with its shuffling and *Tops* and twelve Tier 1 threats, would be able to answer and answer and win any long term attrition fight.

The genius in anticipation was that, specifically in the Mono-Blue matchup, the following vicious cycle seemed inevitable:

1. The Mono-Blue deck, seeing no appropriate **Threads of Disloyalty** targets, would remove **Threads of Disloyalty** even as **Jushi Apprentice** (a trump rather than "even" card given U/G's mana advantage) was coming in.
2. The Critical Mass deck would not only have its own Apprentices, but bring in *its own* **Threads of Disloyalty** for the *opponent's* Apprentices. These **Threads** were sure to resolve in the early game as the blue deck would be tapped... for, sadly, **Jushi Apprentice**.



Essentially, Critical Mass, which already had the advantage on mana, suddenly had a commensurate card advantage engine that the Blue deck could not really answer *and* a highly efficient way to neutralize and even exploit the Blue deck's only prayer to win (card advantage in the pre-Legendary threats stage of the game). Was there interplay? Of course! But as one deck held all the trumps and had equal or better footing in literally every aspect of the game, the duels tended to fall the same way.

Transformative Sideboarding

Back at Mr. Cards & Comics in the mid-1990s, there was a small group of players who considered themselves adherents of Adam Maysonet rather than Brian Weissman for Type I. The difference in glacial base-U/W strategies was that Weissman would win with **Disrupting Scepter** clearing the way for **Serra Angel** whereas Maysonet would exhaust the opponent's win conditions over time with **Jester's Cap**. The reasoning of these players was that the Maysonet strategy was "more pure" than Weissman's, which was sullied by Summon.

Ten years and more of **Magic** theory have taught me one thing: There is no abstract "purity," and even if there is, following it will not help you win more at, or understand, the game of **Magic**.

If the Maysonet strategy had an advantage over the Weissman strategy, it was in virtual card advantage. That is, the opponent's **Swords to Plowshares** was blank. It was not a function of some normative purity but the same mathematics that feeds every element of interactive **Magic** that lent its strength. Narrow and ultimately inflexible thinking like this is the same Swiss-cheese reasoning that can't see how Goblins is a control deck or how a reasonable implementation of Zoo principles might be Mono-Red. Such rigid and ultimately limiting thought will trap a player in a loop of never-ending mediocrity... where he will in all likelihood fall prey to the transformative sideboard.

Jon Finkel		
Pro Tour – Chicago 1997, Extended		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
1 Flood Plain	3 Armageddon	1 Aura of Silence
4 Mishra's Factory	3 Aura of Silence	1 Disenchant
2 Plateau	4 Counterspell	3 Erhnam Djinn
3 Savannah	2 Gaea's Blessing	1 Gaea's Blessing
4 Tundra	2 Gerrard's Wisdom	2 Gerrard's Wisdom
2 Undiscovered Paradise	1 Icy Manipulator	1 Hurkyl's Recall
1 Volcanic Island	4 Marble Diamond	2 Pyroblast
	1 Pyroclasm	1 Red Elemental Blast
17 lands	3 Serrated Arrows	3 Wildfire Emissary
	3 Sky Diamond	
	2 Swords to Plowshares	15 sideboard cards

0 creatures	2 Sylvan Library
	4 Tithe
	3 Winter Orb
	3 Wrath of God
	43 other spells

Though probably the most famous of the transformative sideboards, Jon's 1997 deck wasn't even that dramatic. Maindeck he won with **Mishra's Factory** and **Gaea's Blessing** recursion. When the opponent had all his **Disenchants** in for the **Icy Manipulators** and all his **Swords to Plowshares** and **Wrath of God** to make room... Jon would pound him to death with four drops.

The transformative sideboard works almost the *exact same way* as the "pure" no creatures (or no permanents) main deck. In the first game, the opponent has the wrong kinds of answers. He is locked by artifacts but has a fist full of **Terrors**. In the second game, he has all the wrong answers. Answers that might have been worthwhile in the first game fall against these unanticipated 2/4 and 4/5 giants.



Though he devoted only six sideboard slots of his fifteen to the swap, Jon's transformative sideboard in 1997 was particularly well done. Notice that he selected, in **Wildfire Emissary**, a creature that could resist **Swords to Plowshares** if the opponent chose to keep that in, and that both **Erhnam Djinn** and **Wildfire Emissary** lived through a single **Lightning Bolt** (an opponent with red removal would be much less likely to remove his elimination, which could go to Jon's head, than an opponent with white removal); when constructing a transformative sideboard, look to ape excellence like the Machine's all-time favorite deck.

It is not always easy to figure out when you should play a transformative sideboard, because especially when you devote a lot of space to the strategy, you are necessarily eschewing all the "regular" advantages a sideboard can give you for an entire tournament. There will be no efficiency swaps, no ability to destroy heretofore inviolate permanent types, and no sweeping all the other fellow's lands under the rug. If you go this direction, you had better be getting more of an advantage from your projected ability to deny the opponent interaction than you might normally be able to reap from profitably interacting with his cards via your extra fifteen.

The transformative sideboard is probably best accomplished in a deck like Jon's Prison, which features a focused strategy that can be disrupted by the proper sideboard. At Pro Tour – Honolulu earlier this year, Max Bracht opted to go creatures when he thought the opponent would attack his single-minded **Heartbeat of Spring** combination, devoting ten of his fifteen slots to creatures, and one more to creature-friendly **Umezawa's Jitte**. At the 2006 U.S. Nationals, Steve Sadin opted to "always swap in 15" with his **Enduring Ideal** deck against B/W creatures, regardless of Hand in Hand, Ghost Dad, or Ghost Husk build, even though he had a strong matchup with every variety... Steve just had no interest in dealing with an overload of **Cranial Extraction**, **Mortify**, and **Kami of Ancient Law** or in figuring out what the opponent was going to do or how many cards he was bringing in. This was an interesting position, because he was a heavy favorite in the first game and didn't actually need additional margin to win the matchup.

Sideboarding as Paradigm Shift

Sometimes the meaning behind a sideboard strategy goes beyond the obvious swaps between main deck and sideboard cards, even when we can point to selections and changes and give them different names. When executed with specific attention to tempo, a deck can actually shift its position along the metagame clock in order to become predator in a matchup or metagame where it was previously prey.

Consider the true People's Champion, Mark Gordon, and his deck from Grand Prix Kansas City 1999:

Mark Gordon		
Grand Prix – Kansas City, 1999		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		

18 Mountain	3 Cursed Scroll	3 Anarchy
18 lands	4 Fireblast	4 Price of Progress
4 Ball Lightning	3 Goblin Grenade	4 Pyroblast
4 Goblin Lackey	4 Incinerate	4 Red Elemental Blast
4 Jackal Pup	4 Lightning Bolt	15 sideboard cards
4 Mogg Fanatic	18 other spells	
4 Mogg Flunkies		
4 Raging Goblin		
24 creatures		

In a Top 8 that featured Grand Wazir Randy Buehler and Chris Pikula on metagame Forbidian decks, Jon Finkel with the mighty High Tide, Lan D. Ho playing CounterSliver, and Bob Maher with his *Oath of Druids* debut, it was Gordon's simple – and comparatively "not broken" – Goblin deck that ended up in first place.

Conventional wisdom states that a good combo deck will best a straightforward beatdown deck on basis of speed. *High Tide*, one of the game's most dominating combo decks, had a faster kill turn and could stop either the first turn *Jackal Pup* or the (proposed) game-ending *Fireblast* with *Force of Will*. Goblins had "bad" cards like *Cursed Scroll* that would never be online in time, and its *best* draw was within spitting distance of *High Tide*'s merely *average* kill.

So how did Gordon do it?



Obviously he brought in the full eight-pack of Blasts, but even though they showed up like a sort of crimson gang, these didn't play with the mindless brute force or undirected generality criticized earlier. Certainly, Gordon could trade one-for-one with any card in the *High Tide* deck, strategically or not, but that naked capability was not the core strength of his eight Blast sideboard. Instead, these cards gave Mark the capability to play any number of roles, flexibly, to trump *High Tide* and Forbidian via tactics and tempo.

I don't know that Goblins was going to get very far if it hung back to play Draw-Go, even with eight optimal Counterspells (*High Tide* still had *more* counters, more card advantage with *Thawing Glaciers*, and all the breakers to steal mana, ramp mana, and refill). However, Mark could create a short term lead in the first couple of turns, and unlike a maindeck Red Deck, actually *protect* its tempo, CounterSliver style (nothing was stopping Goblins from taking an early lead in more than 50% of game one games... It's just that *High Tide* would take a single massive turn about one turn before red could go nova). Mark couldn't run with all the advantages that *High Tide* could present, but he could certainly point eight Blasts at, say, all *High Tide*'s card drawing, or plan to levy each and every Blast fed to him by providence and *Time Spiral*, singularly, at the (proposed) lethal *Stroke of Genius*: pull one leg out of the tripod that is combo, and the whole contraption topples. Perhaps most ironic is how Gordon could play his permission like *High Tide* played its *Force of Wills*. Rather than using its respectable suite to control the board like a Draw-Go deck, *High Tide* mostly just forced in the combo thanks to *Force of Will*... Similarly, there was a lot of "floating 🍀" prior to sacrificing the last two Mountains for the *Fireblast* kill in Gordon's sideboarded games.

U/W Control		
Zvi Mowshowitz and Scott Johns		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Absorb	1 Disenchant
4 Coastal Tower	4 Accumulated Knowledge	2 Gainsay
8 Island	4 Counterspell	2 Juntu Stakes
7 Plains	3 Dismantling Blow	1 Last Breath

23 lands	4 Fact or Fiction	3 Mageta the Lion
	2 Last Breath	4 Mahamoti Djinn
	3 Millstone	2 Rout
0 creatures	4 Opt	
	2 Story Circle	15 sideboard cards
	3 Tsabo's Web	
	4 Wrath of God	
	37 other spells	

Two weeks ago, we outlined some of the main philosophical differences between Draw-Go or "True Control" and "tap out" monolithic blue decks that don't seek to actually lock down all aspects of the game but instead to snap tables with the weight of their fatties. We looked at how builds with ostensibly similar card suites could play very different strategic plans. In the main, Zvi and Scott ran a very "True Control" deck with lots of reactive elements and a partywaist **Millstone** kill fed by Dismantling their own **Tsabo's Webs** and abusing **Fact or Fiction**. In sideboarded games, though, they were all attrition, using their instants to get to the point where they could just tap out for **Mahamoti Djinn**. The sideboard plan was like a giant stop sign, wresting tempo so that the U/W mages could create a late game advantage with their card draw. It worked, believe it or not, because, well, Blastoderm was a miniscule 5/5 to Fat Moti's big 5/6.

Overload

Overload strategies stack the extra fifteen with like cards, generally a class of cards that are not found in the main deck, with the express purpose of dominating *something*. This kind of strategy is most often associated with a full creature transformative sideboard, but there is no reason why it cannot be applied to other approaches (discard for combo, artifact destruction against Affinity, and so on).

Consider this potential post-*Time Spiral* rebuild of KarstenBot BabyKiller:

Post-Time Spiral KarstenBot BabyKiller		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
1 Arctic Flats	4 Assault // Battery	2 Avalanche Riders
4 Highland Weald	4 Call of the Herd	4 Cryoclash
1 Mouth of Ronom	3 Demonfire	1 Stalking Yeti
4 Scrying Sheets	4 Into the North	4 Stone Rain
7 Snow-Covered Forest	4 Skred	4 Wreak Havoc
6 Snow-Covered Mountain	19 other spells	15 sideboard cards
23 lands		
4 Boreal Druid		
4 Llanowar Elves		
4 Ohran Viper		
2 Stalking Yeti		
4 Thornscape Battlemage		
18 creatures		

For this version I decided to go with the old school G/R cards main deck and relegate *all* the land destruction – not just the **Wreak Havocs** you may have read about in [Frank's column](#) – to the sideboard. This deck is generally ahead of creature decks, but generally behind juggernauts like Solar Flare in the main, where it concedes basically every metric in interactive **Magic** (card draw, power level, size of threats, appropriateness of interactive removal elements, all of it). In game two, though, KarstenBot BabyKiller can start blowing up lands from turn two and bring the full might of the Forests *and* the Mountains down on that unlucky **Orzhov Basilica**.

It should be obvious that playing against this deck sideboarded, where it is a disruption superstar that can seriously ruin the day of anyone who kept a land-light draw – and certainly hold a lead – is a different trial than fighting it main deck, where 2/2 creatures for three or even five mana and a variety of 3/3 creatures for four mana are the standard. Transformative? Yes. Paradigm-changing? Yes. The uniquely defining element, though, is how focused the deck becomes on the new strategy of mana denial.

As with any mana denial strategy, the goal is to attack a single square on the Solar Flare chessboard, theorizing that success there will create a domino cascade of virtual card advantage. Expensive sevens and eights and color-intensive fours lie stuck. In the best of times, nothing gets cast from the other side, but KarstenBot will settle for just keeping Akroma off the table by pinning all the Black. Is there card advantage? It is ephemeral and fake and *there*. Is there time advantage? There might *only* be time advantage. Does switching into LD suppress the opponent's overall strategy? Like **Remand**, it does nothing over



the long haul, but provided that the mana denial is working at even a minimum clip, keeping Akroma off the table for as long as possible is all BabyKiller cares about. It can't, with any number of **Skreds**, actually murder *that* babe.



One thing to note about overloads in general, whether as massive shifts out of the sideboard or the main deck focus of a deck, is that while there are definitely better and worse, more and less effective, members of the team (**Cryoclash** is alternately the most devastating and least useful land destruction spell; **Wreak Havoc** is actually better against some Blue decks because it can't be stopped in its relentless hunt for **Azorius Chancery**), the sheer volume of like cards makes all copies better when they are drawn together, down to the point that they are no longer doing anything because they have completely eliminated some resource or other (lands, hand, and so forth). For example, **Cry of Contrition** and **Blackmail** are poor discard spells in the abstract despite being one mana. However, *after* and thanks to a relentless string of **Ravenous Rats** and kicked **Shrieking Grotosques**, **Blackmail** is actually *better* than **Duress** and **Cabal Therapy** assuming the opponent's grip has been softened up down to three cards. In this sense, it is not simply justifiable but perfectly reasonable to run multiple sub-optimal cards so long as they Voltron together like good little communists. What kind of crazy person pays eight mana over two turns for **Demolish** + **Gray Ogre**? Yet **Avalanche Riders** is a contributing member of a relentless cadre of LD overload, and has been a featured component of numerous mid-range tempo control strategies (Sped Red, Angry Hermit, Son of Hermit), reprising his Standard viability in decks like the KarstenBot BabyKiller update.

Draw, Go		
Randy Buehler - 1998 World Championships Standard Deck		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	60 cards	
18 Island	4 Counterspell	2 Capsize
4 Quicksand	4 Dismiss	1 Grindstone
4 Stalking Stones	2 Dissipate	4 Hydroblast
26 lands	3 Forbid	4 Sea Sprite
	4 Force Spike	4 Wasteland
	4 Impulse	15 sideboard cards
1 Rainbow Efreet	3 Mana Leak	
1 creatures	1 Memory Lapse	
	4 Nevinyrral's Disk	
	4 Whispers of the Muse	
	33 other spells	

An interesting sideboard that bordered on overload was Randy Buehler's 1998 World Championships deck. Check out that sideboard: Though this was a Standard deck rather than Mark Gordon's Extended deck, Randy went for the same rabbit, an eight-pack of cheap color-hosing plays. We can't *really* call it an overload with just half his sideboard devoted to hating Red Decks, but Randy played as many cards as he could. Notice how this was not actually a transformative or paradigm changing plan like Gordon's, despite the superficial similarity on the numbers. Randy's was a pure Draw-Go deck, and **Hydroblast** was, in matchup, just the best possible Counterspell, backing up **Force Spike**. **Sea Sprite** was a deliberate strategy suppression element, blanking all the early 1/1 and 2/1 (and depending on the rules at the time, maybe even 6/1) creatures the Red Deck might present, buying time as we discussed at the top of the page. **Sea Sprite** was just better than anything he could run main, and a far better blocker at the time – both faster and more durable – than either **Rainbow Efreet** or the then-staple **Steel Golem**.

Efficiency Swaps

While Randy's sideboard smells like an overload, it is arguably just a fine, and not very extreme, example of efficiency trading. His 1998 Draw-Go sideboard featured cards that were philosophically similar, and perhaps strategically richer, than his main deck cards... But they were still doing more-or-less the same thing.

I'd go so far as to say that *most* sideboarding actually works like this, with a player trying to figure out what cards from his 'board are just *better* (read: not terrible) in a matchup than some cards from his main (say B/W Bats exchanging **Hour of Reckoning** for the cheaper **Culling Sun** against another token deck). You will find this in especially unexpected matchups or matchups that are similar – but not identical – to what you anticipated (I've had many tournaments, for instance, where my proposed sideboard against "beatdown" was **March of the Machines** or **Execute**, and I ended up against Red Decks or StOmPy or Elf variants).

There are, of course, extreme examples where some main deck cards are just flat-out awful and you never want to see them in a matchup.



Kuroda-Style Red

Josh Ravitz, 2005 U.S. Nationals Top 8



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
15 Mountain
1 Swamp
4 Tendo Ice Bridge

24 lands

4 Arc-Slogger
4 Solemn Simulacrum

8 creatures

3 Beacon of Destruction
4 Magma Jet
4 Molten Rain
4 Pulse of the Forge
4 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Shrapnel Blast
1 Sowing Salt
4 Wayfarer's Bauble

28 other spells

Sideboard

3 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
3 Cranial Extraction
4 Culling Scales
4 Fireball
1 Sowing Salt

15 sideboard cards

Josh's deck from the Top 8 of last year's US National Championships had a soft matchup with blue decks... to put it mildly. Because Kuroda-style Red had no **Chrome Moxes**, and no **Sliith Firewalkers**, and ultimately few singular threats and no tempo, the blue matchup was basically unwinnable in the main. It was particularly bad that the blue decks often ran **Bribery** starting to fight **Tooth and Nail**. On balance, this was a deck design opportunity.

The baseline assumption was that the opponent would either keep in or max out on **Bribery**, and certainly leave in his **Vedalken Shackles**; usually he would also be bringing in **Spectral Shift** to protect his Islands from some **3 2**. If Josh removed all his creatures, clunky as it may have seemed, he was generating virtual card advantage. The fact remained that he would still have to kill the opponent, and without even his miniscule four- and five-drop pressure. The solution was to bring in **Boseiju, Who Shelters All** and **Fireball** and burn blue out with uncounterable sorceries. Despite consistently dropping game one to basic Island, the strategy proved nigh-unbeatable until the actual Top 8 of US Nationals, when Neil Reeves out-teched everyone by dropping **Uyo, Silent Prophet** and "going guys" himself.

Strategy Superiority

The absolute best sideboards work to suppress or trump the strategies of any opposing decks. It is one thing to be able to put up your dukes with **Pyroblast** or end a fight with **Perish** or even present the opponent with a series of uncounterable burn cards, but it's really something when the opponent's deck is everywhere firing... and it doesn't matter. Kuroda-Style Red went a long way in blanking blue's interactive cards, but the point was that they either did nothing (**Spectral Shift**), got nothing (**Bribery**), or were stuck in hand (any permission spell). What about when the opponent actually draws his sideboard cards, actually plays them (with time on the clock), and loses anyway?

It takes a keen mix of anticipation and sifting paradigms, a dash of transformation, all ultimately suppressing or flat-out exceeding the opponent's strategy to pull that off! The implementations are rare, but when they work, they hit with the power of a thousand exploding suns.

Troll and Nail

Terry Soh, 2005 Magic Invitational



Main Deck

60 cards

10 Forest
4 Urza's Mine
4 Urza's Power Plant
4 Urza's Tower

22 lands

2 Duplicant
4 Eternal Witness
1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
2 Sundering Titan

13 creatures

4 Kodama's Reach
3 Mindslaver
3 Oblivion Stone
1 Plow Under
3 Reap and Sow
4 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Sylvan Scrying
3 Tooth and Nail

25 other spells

Sideboard

2 Iwamori of the Open Fist
2 Molder Slug
3 Plow Under
2 Razormane Masticore
4 Troll Ascetic
2 Vine Trellis

15 sideboard cards

This is the version of **Tooth and Nail** that Terry Soh used to win the 2005 **Magic** Invitational. Anticipating that his opponents would sideboard in **Cranial Extraction**, Terry played a variety of alternate victory conditions in his sideboard, de-emphasizing the card (and obvious target) **Tooth and Nail**. In fact, he survived **Cranial Extraction** hits from both Ruel and Budde on his way to posting 4-0 / 8-0 with the deck (including the Invitational finals). What is most remarkable is that his opponents figured out that Terry had sided out **Tooth and Nail** and actually named the *correct* cards (with Kai nabbing the **Plow Under** that was in Terry's hand) and never managed the strategic interactions necessary to win. Instead they fell to his only incremental four-of, a humble, unkillable, 3/2.

Plugging Holes

We started the techniques with what was once the default most common sideboard strategy (filling your sideboard with color-hosers and methods of specific permanent or strategy destruction); we will finish with what is probably the most common method of determining at least the first couple of cards of most sideboards today.



Proposed White Control – 2004 Standard		
Antonino De Rosa		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
4 Cloudpost	4 Akroma's Vengeance	3 Astral Slide
13 Plains	4 Decree of Justice	3 Circle of Protection: Red
4 Secluded Steppe	2 Gilded Light	1 Exalted Angel
4 Temple of the False God	4 Mindslaver	1 Gilded Light
25 lands	4 Renewed Faith	4 Sacred Ground
		3 Wing Shards

4 Eternal Dragon	2 Tower of Fortunes	15 sideboard cards
3 Exalted Angel	4 Wrath of God	
4 Weathered Wayfarer	24 other spells	
11 creatures		

What do you notice about this sideboard? Ant played three **Exalted Angels** starting... and had the fourth in the 'board! He said that it always came in, but justified what seemed like a massive inefficiency (if it always comes in, why is it not main deck with the other three?) in that he would take out a different card in each of the various matchups.

The fact of the matter is, few main decks are perfect, so everybody does the exact same thing. See?

Batman – Ravnica Block Constructed		
Mike Flores, Pro Tour – Charleston, 2006		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
3 Godless Shrine	3 Hour of Reckoning	4 Castigate
4 Orzhov Basilica	4 Last Gasp	3 Culling Sun
8 Plains	4 Mortify	2 Debtors' Knell
9 Swamp	4 Orzhov Signet	2 Muse Vessel
24 lands	15 other spells	2 Orzhov Pontiff
		2 Woebringer Demon
		15 sideboard cards
2 Belfry Spirit		
4 Blind Hunter		
4 Ghost Council of Orzhova		
2 Gleancrawler		
2 Orzhov Pontiff		
4 Skeletal Vampire		
3 Teysa, Orzhov Scion		
21 creatures		

I knew I wanted to play four **Orzhov Pontiffs** in Charleston, but I wasn't sure what kind of decks I was going to play against in my seat (A). So I made the safest possible decision, at least as far as decisions you know to be incorrect can be called safe, and ran two main and two in the side. Generally speaking, playing a lot of twos in the main is a sign of indecisive deck design... It is generally better to play four copies of all the best cards, tuning numbers based on curve rather than not knowing when or if a particular three mana 1/1 is going to do anything. When you don't know which cards are the best, or when you aren't sure what decks the opponents will be playing, you end up with two copies of critical spells. This is why "plugging holes" is such a common practice today: Our decks aren't perfect, so we use our sideboards to correct our deck construction errors in game two.



This can ultimately be the lens that we use to look at all sideboarding, by the way. If our decks were perfect, we really could approach Constructed **Magic** like the Form, the proposed utopian decks, from Mr. Cards & Comics in the 1990s... But our decks aren't perfect. We have loose matchups that we want to tighten up with one or two more efficient cards. There are problem permanents that we sometimes want to deal with or destroy. There are nightmare matchups that we can only beat via radical transformation. Sometimes we just messed up, if only to the tune of two cards, and we need all our Pontiffs – or we want to get rid of the two we started.

*Mike has been a leading voice in the game's strategy for as long as there has been a **Magic Internet**. He is the former editor of *The Magic Dojo* and a sometime Pro player. *Michael J. Flores: Deckade*, is a compilation of Mike's first ten years of strategy and theory (i.e. before he joined **magicthegathering.com**), and is available at <http://www.top8magic.com>.*



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