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Deconstructing Stasis

Brian David-Marshall
Deconstructing Famous Decks
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Wow. It's been a long time. This was the column I first wrote for this site – or any site for that matter other than the occasional promo piece for a Neutral Ground/Your Move Games Grudge Match. The column appeared every three or four weeks back in the very early days of magicthegathering.com. I would feature a classic deck list and then update it with modern cards. For this updated version of the column – and with the induction ceremony at Worlds looming later this week -- I chose a deck with a Hall of Fame pedigree.

Tommi Hovi - Turbo Stasis

1996 Finnish Nationals

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Land Cap 4 Adarkar Wastes 18 Island <hr/> <p>26 lands</p> <hr/> <p>0 creatures</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Stasis 2 Kismet 4 Howling Mine 4 Boomerang 4 Counterspell 3 Power Sink 2 Disenchant 1 Swords to Plowshares 1 Balance 1 Zuran Orb 1 Ivory Tower 1 Feldon's Cane 1 Black Vise 2 Land Tax 2 Despotic Scepter 1 Recall <hr/> <p>34 other spells</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Circle of Protection: Red 4 Wall of Air 2 Mana Short 1 Feldon's Cane 1 Kismet 1 Disenchant 1 Yotian Soldier 2 Swords to Plowshares <hr/> <p>15 sideboard cards</p>

When this deck hit the tournament scene it seemingly came out of nowhere. It was one of the first netdeck phenomenons I can recall. When a then-unknown Tommi Hovi got invited to Worlds on the back of this deck it created a buzz on the usenet boards that were the sole source of **Magic** tech at the time.

In the wake of the first-ever Pro Tour (at New York), the mana-hungry Necro decks employed by Leon Lindback and Graham Tatomer had become the template for Type II everywhere. The first wave of Necro-based decks relied on pump knights and **Drain Life** to finish off an opponent and **Stasis** was the perfect foil for that deck. **Howling Mines** offered no advantage to an opponent who was skipping their draw step anyway.

It may not seem remarkable to a modern player to whom a term such as "Stasis-lock" is instantly understood but at the time it was akin to a player setting the tournament scene on fire using a deck built around **One With Nothing**. **Stasis** went from "crap rare" to front page trade binder material after Arto Hiltunen – one of the deck's shapers – outlined the design process for the deck and talked about Hovi's success with it.

Apparently the original deck was designed by Esa Ristisuo from Turko, Finland in the early spring of 1996. His version of the deck featured **Serra Angels** and was created for a Finnish tournament series known as the Nudel-Cup. He made at least one Top 8 with the deck. Hiltunen claimed that Ristisuo had the element of surprise on his side since the deck looked like a harmless pile of rarely played cards.

Hovi and Hiltunen put the deck up on the lift and tinkered around with the engine. They dropped the **Serra Angels** and added **Despotic Scepters** – which allowed you to destroy your **Stasis** at the end of your opponent's turn, which in turn allowed you to untap all of your own mana for whatever shenanigans were needed, often including yet another **Stasis** to keep things locked down. The deck



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Hovi, at Worlds '01

went on to make more Nudel-Cup Top 8's but it sounds like the local metagame began to move away from Necro and toward goblin weenie decks with **Red Elemental Blasts** and straight-up permission decks – match-ups which are not favorable for the **Stasis** deck – most likely in an effort to combat what was then a local infestation of **Stasis** decks.

Hovi continued to tinker with the deck despite only modest success at the Nudel-Cup series. He added **Mana Short** – another unplayed rare at the time – to fight his way through permission decks. The inclusion of **Wall of Air** further fortified the deck's position against Necro players. The card was solid against both **Hypnotic Specter** and pump knights. **Wall of Air** may seem like an odd choice but according to Hiltunen he had to start sideboarding

Terror in his Necro deck just to deal with them – he also added **Infernal Darkness** as a black 'Disenchant' for the **Stasis** itself.

So how did the deck actually work?

- 4 **Stasis**
- 2 **Kismet**
- 4 **Howling Mine**

This was the core of the deck. Ideally, the deck wanted to get set up with one of each of these cards in play facing a tapped out opponent. With **Kismet** in play the **Stasis** represented a position they could never recover from provided that the **Stasis** player continued to trot out blue sources to upkeep the blue enchantment. **Kismet** would often prompt the concession. If the **Stasis** player could not upkeep the enchantment it was disastrous since they would not get to untap on the turn that happened – they would still skip their untap phase that turn before they reached the fateful upkeep step.

- 4 **Boomerang**
- 2 **Disenchant**
- 2 **Despotic Scepter**
- 1 **Zuran Orb**
- 2 **Land Tax**

That's where the **Howling Mine** stepped in. The cards that **Howling Mine** offered to the opponent were meaningless in the late game since they were denied any mana to exploit them. Meanwhile, the **Stasis** player was digging through the deck and finding lands, **Boomerangs**, or **Despotic Scepters** that would allow him to reset their mana without giving the opponent a window to wriggle out from.

Assuming the **Stasis** player had at least two free mana to work with he could **Boomerang** the **Stasis** during an opponent's end of turn, untap all his lands, and replay the **Stasis**. With a second copy of the enchantment in hand they could instead **Disenchant** it at end of turn if needed or eat it with **Despotic Scepter**.

Of course, **Zuran Orb** and **Land Tax** would also do the job quite nicely. Plus, the life gain from the Orb helped the **Stasis** player recover from early beatings. Other cards that helped you weather the early game/stay alive included:

- 4 **Counterspell**
- 3 **Power Sink**
- 1 **Swords to Plowshares**
- 1 **Balance**
- 1 **Ivory Tower**

Counterspell played a rare second fiddle to **Power Sink** in this deck as the X-spell allowed you to not only counter a key spell but to tap your opponent out in the process. Under the old interrupt rules a player could not even cast another instant in response to **Power Sink** – only another interrupt would do the trick. Plus, **Power Sink** emptied that player's mana pool so they could not float any either. If a player had two **Disenchants** for a **Howling Mine** and had the first one countered with **Power Sink** there would be no opportunity for them to cast the second one before their lands were tapped to attempt to pay for the **Power Sink** and their mana pool emptied. Call it the original Split Second.

So how did the deck win?

- 1 **Feldon's Cane**
- 1 **Black Vise**
- 1 **Recall**



Getting rid of **Stasis** was rarely the tough part... for the **Stasis** player.





Choose your poison. All three cards were restricted at the time (yes, there were restricted cards in Type 2 [yes, Standard was called Type 2 back then]) but each served as a win condition in the deck. The **Recall** basically was a copy of any of your key cards that were in the graveyard. With **Howling Mines** spitting out gobs of cards there was ample fodder to get back whatever was needed in any given situation. The Vise was a quick death with an opponent's hand clogged with uncastable cards. Few lands needed to be found to feed the **Stasis** before the Vise would squeeze the last life points out of a foe. **Feldon's Cane** on the other hand – even with the boost from the **Howling Mines** – was anything but a quick death. It meant that you would have to win by running your opponent out of cards – an agonizing process for both players.

The prospect of going through that process and hoping that somehow the deck would fizzle – and knowing that it would not – was often enough to drive many a player to merely concede once the lock had been established. Knowing this, Hovi would often side out all his kill cards in sideboarded games for additional control elements, counting on his opponent to concede if he demonstrated the lock.

After Tommi's turn at Finish Nationals the deck became a worldwide phenomenon. Matt Place pops up in those early usenet posts, and ended up posting a Top 8 finish at U.S. Nats that year with the deck as did Mike Long. Necro decks adapted – as they always did – to become less reliant on mana intensive cards like the pump knights and **Drain Life**. Savvy Necro players added red to their decks for efficient burn spells and the **Stasis**-hating **Red Elemental Blasts** from their sideboards.

The deck has never been as dominant as it was for that brief window leading up through Worlds that year. Fittingly, Tommi used an Alliances-enhanced version of that deck to make the first Top 8 of his Hall of Fame career at Worlds that year.



From there Matt Place would go on to win a Pro Tour and later become a developer with Wizards of the Coast R&D

Tommi Hovi		
Worlds 1996		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	60 cards	
3 Adarkar Wastes	4 Arcane Denial	1 Black Vise
2 City of Brass	1 Balance	2 Circle of Protection: Black
2 Land Cap	4 Boomerang	2 Circle of Protection: Red
2 River Delta	3 Despot's Scepter	1 Feldon's Cane
3 Underground River	4 Force of Will	2 Hydroblast
12 Island	4 Howling Mine	1 Lodestone Bauble
24 lands	1 Ivory Tower	2 Mana Short
	2 Kismet	1 Hurkyl's Recall
	1 Land Tax	3 Wall of Air
0 creatures	4 Lim-Dul's Vault	15 sideboard cards
	2 Recall	
	1 Soldevi Digger	
	4 Stasis	
	1 Zuran Orb	
	36 other spells	

Over the intervening seasons the deck would pop up in one form or another. There have been versions that would set up the lock with boughtback **Capsizes**, paid for the upkeep with **Squandered Resources**, or even **Gushed** back their Islands. In 2000, Tony Dobson won a Masters Gateway with a tweaked version of Gary Wise's deck but could not get past Ben Rubin's **Tradewind Riders** in the second round of the main event – one round further than Gary advanced with his build.

Tony Dobson		
Stasis		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	60 cards	
23 Island	4 Stasis	2 Turnabout
23 lands	4 Counterspell	4 Masticore
	4 Force of Will	3 Annul
	4 Thwart	

2 Morphling	2 Daze	3 Disrupt
2 creatures	2 Claws of Gix	3 Back to Basics
	2 Boomerang	15 sideboard cards
	4 Powder Keg	
	1 Spellbook	
	4 Impulse	
	4 Gush	
	35 other spells	

The deck always had surprise value and could devastate an unprepared opponent. Burn decks have always kept it somewhat at bay and trotting out **Howling Mine** is always a tricky proposition there. Additionally, losing game one was usually a formula for disaster – when up a game, no one has ever conceded to the inexorable pace of the **Stasis** deck in game two.

Those of you who read Frank Karsten's column [this past week](#) are already aware of my recent attempt to catch people unawares with my take on a modern **Stasis** deck. My version has one-sided **Howling Mines**, kills in two attacks for ten each, and allows you full access to untapped permanents every turn. Of course, it does revolve around playing – at minimum – 12 grey ogres.



Pickles		
By Brian David-Marshall		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
4 Calciform Pools	4 Gigadrowse	4 Temporal Isolation
4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Compulsive Research	4 Willbender
4 Hallowed Fountain	4 Momentary Blink	3 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV
12 Island	4 Remand	4 Sacred Ground
24 lands	4 Boomerang	15 sideboard cards
	4 Mana Leak	
	24 other spells	
4 Brine Elemental		
4 Fathom Seer		
4 Vesuvan Shapeshifter		
12 creatures		

This is more or less what my first pass at the deck looked like. I built the deck after learning about the interaction between the Shapeshifter and creatures with morph triggers and hearing about some Shapeshifter decks that did well at Champs – including one that used **Thelonite Druid** for some Saproling nuttiness.



When you unmorph a Shapeshifter and copy an unmorphed creature that has a trigger the Shapeshifter will trigger it as well. This works really nicely with **Fathom Seer** as the aforementioned one-sided **Howling Mine** and is

basically a one-sided **Stasis** with **Brine Elemental** – hence the Pickles – that you can use every turn thanks to the Shapeshifter letting you flip it back face down every upkeep.

I had been talking about the deck on my Top8Magic.com podcasts and playing it a little online when Gavin Verhey asked if he could tinker with the list and play it in some PEs on MTGO. The result of that tinkering is the Soggy Pickles list that Frank presented last week.

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
3 Adarkar Wastes	3 Gigadrowse	1 Gigadrowse
11 Island	4 Mana Leak	3 Cancel
3 Azorius Chancery	4 Remand	4 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV
3 Calciform Pools	3 Repeal	3 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
4 Hallowed Fountain	4 Azorius Signet	4 Temporal Isolation
24 lands	2 Momentary Blink	15 sideboard cards
	20 other spells	
4 Brine Elemental		
4 Court Hussar		
4 Fathom Seer		
4 Vesuvan Shapeshifter		
16 creatures		

I had a very funny experience with Mike Flores when I was first toying with the deck. He could not imagine the deck could be any good when I described it to him but after winning all afternoon with it on MTGO I wanted him to take for it a test spin. He scoffed, but after the **Golgari Grave-Troll** debacle of 2005 Mike will give all of my crazy ideas at least a fighting chance.

When I got home that evening I looked Mike up on MTGO and sure enough he was playing the deck – with a crowd of like 50 watchers – and winning. The first match I tuned in for had Mike emptying his **Calciform Pools** to **Gigadrowse** a control player's entire board three times over -- the addition of storage lands were Mike's innovation and have been quite excellent. I don't think Mike lost a match with the deck that entire evening.

In the forums for Frank's column last week a reader mentioned that he was happy to see a deck putting crap rares to good use. Funny, that's exactly what I thought over ten years ago when I saw Tommi's deck.

*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is Top8Magic.com, the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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