

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

# Back to the Rak (Part 1 of 2)

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*Building on a Budget*  
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Back in August and September of last year, I did a three part evolution of the Rakdos Bloodsport theme deck. For reference, you can find [part one here](#), [part two here](#), and [part three here](#). Part three was an evolution of the Rakdos deck towards a more controllish build, and featured my infamous experiment with doing a backwards-evolution. (I started at the end and explained my way to the beginning of the article. It's all quite confusing in retrospect, and it's an experiment I'll never try again.)

Well, there were a lot of great black and red cards printed in *Time Spiral* that I thought would be perfect for the Rakdos deck. My last iteration of the deck finished 10-6, which is all right, but not terrific. There were a lot of good ideas in the deck, but there weren't necessarily the cards to support the theme. For reference, here's the deck as we last saw it:

• Building on a Budget is dedicated to making decks that cost 30 tickets or less on Magic Online. Weekly deck testing is done using Magic Online.

• This week's format? Standard. This includes *9th Edition*, *Ravnica*, *Guildpact*, *Dissension*, *Coldsnap*, and *Time Spiral*.

• This is part one of two of the revisit to the Rakdos deck. The goal of this evolution is to make a deck that can compete at Friday Night Magic... on a budget!

## Rakdos Control

atxt

**Main Deck**  
60 cards

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| 9 Mountain<br>10 Swamp<br>3 Rakdos Carnarium<br><br>22 lands | 4 Jagged Poppet<br>4 Rakdos Guildmage<br>4 Rakdos Pit Dragon<br><br>12 creatures | 3 Bottled Cloister<br>3 Loxodon Warhammer<br>3 Seal of Doom<br>3 Seal of Fire<br>4 Coldsteel Heart<br>3 Delirium Skeins<br>3 Hit // Run<br>4 Rakdos Signet<br><br>26 other spells |
|--|--|---|

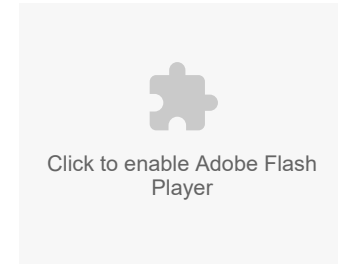
The guild mechanic for Rakdos is hellbent – empty your hand and your spells/creatures get an added bonus. The drawback of this mechanic is that an empty hand means fewer options – if you have no cards in hand, there are no surprises. Your opponent can react to perfect information on the board and can plan accordingly. While this is not so much a problem with a game-ending *Demonfire* against a control player, it does leave cards like *Demon's Jester* and *Slaughterhouse Bouncer* as relatively underpowered.

In my build of the Rakdos deck above, I designed the deck to best circumvent the drawbacks of the hellbent mechanic while trying to play to its strengths. This was achieved in four ways:

1. Play with permanents that have repeatable effects. *Enfeeblement* gives a creature -2/-2, but as a one-shot effect. *Last Gasp* gives a creature -3/-3, at instant speed, but only once. *Rakdos Guildmage* can turn any card in your hand into an *Enfeeblement*, and it can do this as long as you have four mana and a card in hand. Once *Rakdos Guildmage* hits the board, he stays there until he is removed. Though his effect won't be a surprise, it can be used multiple times. To add gravy to the train, you can also make 2/1 hasty goblins, beat for two, and enable hellbent through his discard ability!
2. Force your opponent to play with hellbent. That is, make them discard their hand as well! *Jagged Poppet* has a very respectable 3/4 body for three mana, making it comparable in size to *Burning-Tree Shaman* and *Phyrexian Ironfoot*. As a "drawback," you need to discard a card for each damage *Jagged Poppet* takes. This is not a drawback once you already have an empty hand though. And with an empty hand, *Jagged Poppet* turns into the wickedest *Abyssal Specter* you've ever seen! If you have no cards in hand, and you hit your opponent with *Jagged Poppet*, they're in turn likely to have no cards in hand. The same goes for *Delirium Skeins* – often you could cast it as your last card in hand, and get three cards out of their hand for the price of only one.
3. Play with permanents that mimic spells-in-hand. The two most prominent examples of this are *Seal of Fire* and *Seal of Doom*. The only difference between *Seal of Fire* and *Shock* is that *Seal of Fire* sits in the bank (on the board) in advance, whereas *Shock* comes out of the hand. Both cost one red mana, both deal two



### PRO TOUR-VALENCIA



### Update on Rain Delay



damage to target creature or player, and both can be used at instant speed (again, **Seal of Fire** from the board, and **Shock** from the hand). Both have strengths and weaknesses. If you don't otherwise have a spell to play on turn one, **Seal of Fire** might be advantageous over **Shock**, because you can invest the mana when you don't need to worry about wasting it, whereas you always need to leave one mana open to cast **Shock** until it's actually cast. However, you can't **Naturalize Shock**. On the other hand, you can't **Mind Rot Seal of Fire** out of somebody's hand once it's on the board. But I digress – the point is, in the instance of emptying your hand to enable hellbent, **Seal of Fire** is clearly a better choice over **Shock**. Ditto **Seal of Doom** over **Dark Banishing**.

4. Play cards that temporarily enable hellbent or circumvent its drawbacks. In short, **Bottled Cloister** allows you to have your hand empty on your opponent's turn, allowing you to enable hellbent on defense (**Jagged Poppet** can safely block, **Rakdos Pit Dragon** has double strike) while drawing extra cards on offense.

The number one card I wanted to add to the Rakdos deck was **Shadow Guildmage**. One of the big problems with the Rakdos Control deck was a lack of a good one-drops. **Shadow Guildmage** is perfect for this deck – he's repeatable board control and can easily deal with all sorts of nasty early drops, such as **Llanowar Elves**, **Birds of Paradise**, and the such. For the cost of one life, **Shadow Guildmage** turns **Seal of Fire** into Seal of Lightning Bolt. He also provides a way to deal damage without attacking, which is key in a world that is now populated by **Desert and Quicksand**.

When I reviewed my build of Rakdos Control, I looked for design weaknesses. The one that immediately jumped out at me was the inclusion of **Rakdos Carnarium**. If I'm playing a deck that wants to empty its hand, why am I playing a land that, if I draw it, will always leave me with a card in hand? If I hold it, I have the Carnarium in hand. If I play it, I have whatever land I bounced in hand. This is not good for enabling hellbent.

If there was one spell that I was unhappy with the first time around with this deck, it was **Delirium Skeins**. While it does allow for some sick draws involving **Rakdos Pit Dragon** and **Jagged Poppet**, half the time it either sat in my hand or caused me to lose as many cards as my opponent. In addition, it does nothing if you've already knocked out your opponent's hand, and it does nothing to catch you up if you're already behind in board position. In short, I felt it was too narrow and did not provide enough oomph for the oompah-loompah.

Last week, I cut out **Phyrexian Totem** from my **Booby Trapped!** deck. I didn't clearly explain the reasoning for this, prompting the following question from forum member Trowel:

"Ben says:

'I'm still not terribly happy with the deck. While **Phyrexian Totem** is nice in theory, it's best when your opponent has no cards in hand. This isn't a dedicated discard deck (which is where **Phyrexian Totem** most likely belongs).'

But I don't see what the **Phyrexian Totem** has to do with discard, or your opponent's hand size at all. It seems to me that the totem would play best with removal to keep them from blocking it and causing you to sacrifice permanents. The **Phyrexian Totem** would therefore be much better with **Damnation** than it would be with **Mindstab** or **Wit's End**. Did he mean to say **The Rack?**"

To which forum member Vyolynce responded:

"Have you ever activated a **Phyrexian Totem** while your opponent had cards in hand and red (or sometimes black) mana untapped?"

That's what he means by this. Creatures on the board are a known quantity and can be planned around. The cards in your opponent's hand usually are/can not, and instant-speed burn is bad news for the controller of a **Phyrexian Negator** – especially if that burn is enough to kill the Horror, like **Lightning Axe**. (EDIT: Also, pump spells or unexpected flash creatures are likewise bad news.)"

This is spot-on, and my apologies for not explaining it more clearly. There are several decks, most of them red, where it can be an absolute disaster to activate **Phyrexian Totem** while an opponent has cards in hand. The last thing I want is to attempt to swing in with the Totem on turn four only to be met by a **Lightning Helix** or **Char**. **Phyrexian Totem** is best used in a deck that can either empty an opponent's hand or that can draw out removal spells early with other threats. While the Mishra deck was not this deck (no discard, no threats before Totem or the four-drop Mishra), the Rakdos deck is a lot more suited for the Negator – lots of early drops to aim burn and removal at (**Jagged Poppet**, **Rakdos Guildmage**, **Shadow Guildmage**), and the ability to force discard (**Jagged Poppet**). In addition, it serves the purpose of putting a something on the board early, which puts it into categories #1 and #3 above – permanents that mimic spells, and repeatable effects.

With the addition of **Phyrexian Totem** to the deck, I ended up with 12 mana-acceleration artifacts in the deck. This is too many, so I took out **Coldsteel Heart** to make room for **Phyrexian Totem**.

In the end, here's what I ended up with:



## Back to the Rak #1



### Main Deck 60 cards

9 Mountain  
12 Swamp

21 lands

4 Shadow Guildmage  
4 Jagged Poppet  
4 Rakdos Guildmage  
4 Rakdos Pit Dragon

16 creatures

3 Bottled Cloister  
3 Loxodon Warhammer  
3 Seal of Doom  
3 Seal of Fire  
3 Hit // Run  
4 Phyrexian Totem  
4 Rakdos Signet

23 other spells

Out: 4 Coldsteel Heart, 3 Delirium Skeins, 3 Rakdos Carnarium  
In: 4 Shadow Guildmage, 4 Phyrexian Totem, 2 Swamp

### Game 1: Dedre (U/R Izzet)

He plays first-turn *Sage of Epityr*, leading him into a third-turn *Izzet Signet*. I play *Rakdos Guildmage* on turn two, follow it with a twin and a *Seal of Fire* on turn three, and then keep all of his creatures off the board. The two Guildmages go all the way to victory.

Record: 1-0

### Game 2: Office (R/U/B Control)

I get down *Rakdos Guildmage*, and he *Last Gasp*s it. I drop *Rakdos Signet* and *Phyrexian Totem* and hit for five on the following turn. He drops *Izzet Chronarch*, getting back his *Last Gasp*. I cast *Hit/Run* (he takes five from his *Chronarch*) and then beat him with the Totem again, dropping him to five. He concedes.

Record: 2-0

### Game 3: Erathsmedor (Boros Aggro)

He drops turn-one *Savannah Lions* and then turn-three *Paladin en-Vec*. Cripes! To make matters worse, he puts *Pentarch Ward* on his *Savannah Lions*, naming black. I get a quick *Rakdos Guildmage* and follow it with *Shadow Guildmage* and *Rakdos Signet*. He swings in a couple of times and drops *Serra Avenger*. *Seal of Doom* takes care of the flyer, and then a 2/1 Goblin, courtesy of my *Rakdos Guildmage*, dispatches the attacking *Savannah Lions*. I'm still at a precarious eight life facing down *Paladin en-Vec*, but I turn the tides by drawing and playing *Loxodon Warhammer* and equipping it to my *Rakdos Guildmage*, bringing me back to a more comfortable 13 life.

He drops *Searing Meditation* and *Thundersong Trumpeter*, and follows it a turn later with *Angel's Feather* and *Savannah Lions*. He uses the Meditation to kill my *Rakdos Guildmage*. I answer with *Jagged Poppet* and use another *Seal of Doom* to kill his Trumpeter and *Shadow Guildmage* to kill his *Savannah Lions*. The Poppet decides to wear *Loxodon Hammerpants* and busts through for four trample damage over Erathsmedor's *Paladin en-Vec*, knocking *Blinding Angel*, *Blinding Angel*, and *Pentarch Paladin* out of his hand. The shame of being stuck on four mana! From this point onwards, I have complete control of the game, and *Phyrexian Totem* helps speed up the victory.

Record: 3-0

### Game 4: AForgottenTome (U/G Combo)

He casts double *Locket of Yesterdays*, *Whispers of the Muse*, *Exhaustion*, and *Walk the Eons*. I drop first- and second-turn *Shadow Guildmage*, follow them with *Phyrexian Totem*, and begin beating him for seven a turn. He gets no answers and succumbs quickly to my creatures.

Record: 4-0

### Game 5: Jshubert5478 (???)

He triple mulligans, gets stuck on two *Mountains*, and dies to double *Rakdos Guildmage* beats.

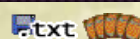
Record: 5-0

I decide to make a change to the deck, on the heels of a 5-0 record. With the addition of *Phyrexian Totem*, I've started to have a glut of high-cost cards in my hand. It costs three mana to activate the Totem each turn, which makes it harder to cast/equip *Loxodon Warhammer*, drop *Rakdos Pit Dragon*, or activate *Rakdos Guildmage*. Most of all, though, I keep getting stuck with *Hit/Run* in my hand. *Hit/Run* was great against *Izzet Chronarch*, but it is less impressive against *Savannah Lions*, creatureless combo decks, and decks that run artifacts that can be sacrificed in place of creatures.



I decide to yank *Hit/Run* in favor of another removal spell – *Rift Bolt*. Although both cost three mana, *Rift Bolt* can be suspended for a mere one, allowing it to get out of my hand at a discounted cost – a two mana discount at the cost of one turn. Also, *Rift Bolt* is burn that can be aimed at my opponent's head to finish them off. *Hit/Run* could potentially do the same, but it was also a dead card against decks that were nearly creatureless.

## Back to the Rak #2



### Main Deck 60 cards

|            |                     |                     |
|------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 9 Mountain | 4 Shadow Guildmage  | 3 Bottled Cloister  |
| 12 Swamp   | 4 Jagged Poppet     | 3 Loxodon Warhammer |
| 21 lands   | 4 Rakdos Guildmage  | 3 Seal of Doom      |
|            | 4 Rakdos Pit Dragon | 3 Seal of Fire      |
|            | 16 creatures        | 4 Phyrexian Totem   |
|            |                     | 4 Rakdos Signet     |
|            |                     | 3 Rift Bolt         |
|            |                     | 23 other spells     |

Out: 3 Hit/Run  
In: 3 Rift Bolt

#### Game 6: Aael24 (B/G/W Grave Pact)

I drop an early Rakdos Guildmage and Phyrexian Totem, and he drops Twilight Drover. I cast Seal of Fire to kill his 1/1 and then swing in for seven. He casts Hell's Caretaker, and I just swing through it for another seven. He dies on the next attack.

Record: 6-0

#### Game 7: SUPEOPLES (R/U Gargadon)

We fight back and forth, with him suspending double Greater Gargadon and using Sulfurous Blast to kill my entire team. I have double Rift Bolt, and the Sulfurous Blast brings him low enough that these two burn spells kill him. As a caveat, he could have sacrificed literally all his permanents to bring both of his Gargadons into play to kill me the turn before I killed him, but he missed that play. I also could have played him when the Rift Bolts were Hit/Run, and that would have been happy fun time with his Gargadons. Do the Hit/Runs need to come back in?

Record: 7-0

#### Game 8: GravespwnGoddess (W/B/U PDC)

She gets Castigate, and takes Loxodon Warhammer out of my hand. I cast turn 3 Bottled Cloister, in order to dodge any further discard that might come my way. I proceed to drop triple Rakdos Signet, triple Phyrexian Totem, and triple Jagged Poppet, and smash face with them all over the screen. Her Ravenous Rats and further Castigates (in hand) are useless against my Bottled Cloister, and Guardian of the Guildpact doesn't do good work against 3/4 gold guys.

Record: 8-0

#### Game 9: Magas Tatio (R/G Aggro)

Magas drops three Primal Forceimages over the course of this match. I kill two of them with Seal of Fire and Rakdos Guildmage, but he burns my creatures right back and gets Greater Gargadon onto the board sans any answers on my side. I fail to draw Seal of Doom or enough early threats to challenge him, and I die to his huge fatty.

Record: 8-1

#### Game 10: Alakazam7 (Mono Black Control)

I drop turn-one Seal of Fire, which goes to hit Lurking Informant on turn two. My draw consists of pure mana acceleration, including two Rakdos Signet and two Phyrexian Totem. Unlike Coldsteel Heart, Phyrexian Totem swings for five damage. Two of them swing for ten. This is how turns five and six look, ending the game quickly.

Record: 9-1

The deck is humming along a lot better than the last time around, but I still see room for improvement. For one, I want more offense. This deck is at the point of aggro/control or tempo at this point. Most of my creatures serve a double feature – Shadow Guildmage and Rakdos Guildmage for creature removal, Jagged Poppet for hand removal, and Phyrexian Totem as mana acceleration. The only exception is Rakdos Pit Dragon, which you'll notice is conspicuously absent from any of the game logs above. It's not for lack of trying – I think I drew two Rakdos Pit Dragons in those ten games, and it was irrelevant both times. Although my inclination is to cut it from the deck at this point, I don't want to excise it wholesale without getting a chance to, you know, cast it first.

On the other hand, I'm not happy with Seal of Doom. The main purpose of Seal of Doom is to kill large creatures that burn can't kill easily, but there haven't been many of those at all over the past few weeks in the casual room. Greater Gargadon is the main one that I've faced, but since the Gargadon doesn't have trample, it can be played around judiciously. Serra Avenger dies to Rift Bolt or to Seal of Fire plus Shadow Guildmage. Basically, I feel that Seal of Doom has been an underachiever.

In the place of the three Seal of Doom and one of the Rakdos Pit Dragon, I decide to add in a couple of Time Spiral rares/timeshifted cards. Jaya Ballard, Task Mage is a natural addition to this deck. In short, it's a discard outlet, direct damage outlet, and board sweeper, all rolled into one sweet-looking 2/2 body. Jaya is just a natural fit in the Rakdos deck, because she is in the same mold as Shadow and Rakdos Guildmages – a creature that can stay on the board and kill other creatures.

Less obvious is my other addition – Void. Void is one of my pet favorite cards from yesteryear – a board sweeper and discard spell rolled into one. There were games when I used to cast Void and take out six-for-one, and other games where it was just a one-for-one. Either way, Void can deal with virtually any threat on the board (Akroma? No problem – just name eight!), and sits at the top of my curve. If I drop Shadow Guildmage, Rakdos Guildmage, and Jagged Poppet, and my opponent answers with a four-drop, I can easily Void away that Loxodon Hierarchy and/or Lightning Angel, along with those Faith's Fetters that are in my opponent's hand. I'm not



100% sure that **Void** will work in this deck, but it's been good in the past, and I'm willing to give it a chance to shine.

| Back to the Rak #3           |                           |                     |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Main Deck</b><br>60 cards |                           |                     |
| 9 Mountain                   | 4 Shadow Guildmage        | 3 Bottled Cloister  |
| 12 Swamp                     | 4 Jagged Poppet           | 3 Loxodon Warhammer |
| 21 lands                     | 2 Jaya Ballard, Task Mage | 3 Seal of Fire      |
|                              | 4 Rakdos Guildmage        | 2 Void              |
|                              | 3 Rakdos Pit Dragon       | 4 Phyrexian Totem   |
|                              | 17 creatures              | 4 Rakdos Signet     |
|                              |                           | 3 Rift Bolt         |
|                              |                           | 22 other spells     |

Out: 3 Seal of Doom, 1 Rakdos Pit Dragon  
In: 2 Void, 2 Jaya Ballard, Task Mage

#### Game 11: Shadowburst (Orzhov)

I drop **Rakdos Guildmage**, but it only gets one swing before it meets with **Keening Banshee**. Shadowburst also drops **Blind Hunter**, and I kill them both with **Seal of Fire**. I drop **Shadow Guildmage**, and he plays **Ghost Council of Orzhova**. I attempt to take out his legend with **Shadow Guildmage** and **Rift Bolt**, but he has **Momentary Blink** to save his 4/4! I drop **Bottled Cloister** and **Rakdos Pit Dragon** to stall his attack, but when I try to swing with the Pit Dragon on the ground (without hellbent), he blocks it with the Ghost Council, stacks damage, and **Momentary Blinks** again! However, I'm drawing two cards a turn to his one at this point, and the **Shadow Guildmage** is joined by **Jaya Ballard** and **Phyrexian Totem**. I cast **Void** for four, and it takes out his Ghost Council on the board, plus one he was holding in hand (remember, it's legendary!). **Void** also lets me see that he has no answers to **Phyrexian Totem** right then and there, so I swing in over the course of a couple of turns for the win.  
Record: 10-1

Sidenote about **Shadow Guildmage**: The point of damage you take from **Shadow Guildmage**'s ping ability is part of the effect, and not part of the cost. This is because it is past the colon on the card's text – text before the colon is the cost, and text after the colon is the effect. This means that if you shoot a creature with **Shadow Guildmage** and that creature is gone before the ability from your Guildmage resolves, you do not take damage from the Guildmage! This was relevant in the above match, because I made sure to use **Rift Bolt** on his Ghost Council before shooting it with the Guildmage. When he cast **Momentary Blink**, this removed the Ghost Council from the game, countering my **Shadow Guildmage**'s ability. Once that ability was countered, I didn't take a point of damage for the activation!

#### Game 12: GrayOne (U/W/R Angels)

GrayOne is running a red, white, and blue Angel deck with **Demonfire**, **Electrolyze**, **Lightning Angel**, **Compulsive Research**, **Lightning Helix**, **Akroma**, **Angel of Wrath**, and a ton of dual lands. I get smashed all over the place, and initially I'm pretty sore about playing against this deck in the casual room. However, I continue to talk to GrayOne after the match for a while, and it turns out that he's a nice guy running basically a home-brewed Angel deck that just resembles other red/blue/white Angel decks that typically do well at higher-level tournaments. Either way, I suggest he take his deck to the competitive room, as it's really close to other tournament-level Angel decks I've seen.  
Record: 10-2

#### Game 13: Nobaddreams (U/B/R)

I get turn-four **Rakdos Pit Dragon**, and turn-four **Jagged Poppet**. He has nothing but lands, and concedes.  
Record: 11-2

#### Game 14: Bonsai (Mono-B Aggro)

He gets **Nether Traitor** and **Trespasser il-Vec**. I get **Shadow Guildmage** and **Rakdos Guildmage**. He swings into my board, and I use **Rakdos Guildmage** to make a 2/1 goblin to block his **Trespasser**. He kills it the following turn with **Sudden Death**, and I use **Shadow Guildmage** to kill off his **Nether Traitor**. I get **Phyrexian Totem**, and it swings for ten before he gets **Nantuko Husk** onto the board. It is followed a turn later by **Mourning Thrull**. At the end of his turn, I kill the Thrull with **Shadow Guildmage**. He brings back his **Nether Traitor**. I cast **Rift Bolt** on his Husk on my turn, to which he responds by sacrificing his **Nether Traitor**. **Shadow Guildmage** deals the last damage to kill his Husk, and this allows me to clear off his blockers again. **Jagged Poppet** hits the board, and the Poppet and Totem clear out his life total on the following turn.  
Record: 12-2



Through these last two matches, I'd still been talking to GrayOne, and I'd been doing some thinking. I'd only lost to two decks so far, and both of them were on the competitive end of the spectrum. If I was doing this well against casual decks, and my most challenging matches were against more competitive fare, what was I doing in the casual room? With this in mind, I made a resolution – this deck wasn't going to be played in the casual room anymore. It was time to take it to the tournament practice room. With my resolve in hand, it was off to the land of best two-out-of-three matches, to prove my meddle with a sideboard and the hopes of building an FNM-worthy Standard Rakdos deck, on a budget.

## Afterword

For a few weeks, I started posting a list of budget cards that were good buys in the Magic Online buyer and seller rooms. However, the publication of these lists were causing the prices of these cards to jump significantly, as people started to headhunt them! This caused a bit of a chicken and egg situation – I would point out a good budget buy, and the price would jump to the level where it was no longer a good budget buy! While I envisioned the list of good budget cards as a way to give people a good choice of budget cards to fill out their toolboxes with, I'm worried that pointing out bargains is only inflating the prices of bargain cards. This leads me to this week's poll:

**Should I continue to do a set-by-set breakdown of Magic Online's bargain budget cards?**

- Yes, I really liked that feature and would like to see it continue.
- No, because I really didn't like that feature in this column.
- No, because while I appreciate it, it's driving up prices of cards on Magic Online.

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by [StarCityGames.com](http://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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