



## Sealed Away

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*Limited Information*  
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In this column, there will be a greater focus on drafting than on Sealed Deck. There are many reasons for this, the primary being that drafting is more skill intensive (and more fun). There are more options: a higher degree of flux and then the fact that, once drafted, you still have to build your deck. Even though you should know how your deck will be built whilst drafting, a lot of people will have to assess their drafted pool much like that of a Sealed pool. There is the added fact that in most tournaments, you have to work your way through the Sealed portion before you can participate in the juicy Draft segment.



There are many skills needed for the correct construction of a Sealed pool. The first is card assessment. It is important to know the strength of every card, how they differ objectively and how the constraints of your pool alter their relevant strength. This is something that can only really be gained through play and discussion.

The second most important skill is knowing how to balance power with consistency. This equilibrium changes from player to player. Some of the best players in the game advocate both sides of the argument. I'm talking about, essentially, the mana base. You have the option of running either a two-colour deck with several poor cards, or a deck running a third colour as a splash for two or three cards, or, as a last resort, running a three-colour deck with a mana base reminiscent of 6-6-6. This has varied from format to format depending on the available fixers, but has still stayed mainly true throughout. You will win games through the power of your third colour and you will lose games through colour screw. It is a delicate balance.

If I were to advocate a path it would be to stay as true to consistency as possible whilst keeping the power level as high as possible. As a rule of thumb, if you splash three cards with a single coloured mana in their cost, you should have at least three or four sources of that colour available to you in your deck. One card needs two sources and four cards need five; any more than this and you are no longer splashing. Bear in mind that you usually want eight sources of each of your main colours (if there are lots of heavy repeatable pump effects or color-intensive mana costs like *Shade of Trokair*, *Eron the Relentless*, or *Phthisis*, you will want even more); this means that if you are splashing three cards your mana base will be 8-8-3, which is at least one too many lands. This will mean that you are adding power (splashing), but forced to sacrifice consistency (mana base). Tread the line carefully.

There are various steps to go through upon opening your pool. The first is to separate the chaff. Chaff is easily defined as the cards you will never play. Card evaluation is subjective but there are some cards that are so bad that even the majority of players can come to the same conclusion. I'm talking about the *Firefight Mages* and *Feldon's Canes* of sets—cards that strive their hardest to do nothing at all. Several of these are cards that R&D refer to as 'skill-testers.'

I will be using a straightforward Sealed Deck pool to make following the theory a little easier. Here is the pool that we will be working with:

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**Time Spiral-Planar Chaos Sealed Deck Pool**

74 cards

1 <a href="#">Dreadship Reef</a>	1 <a href="#">Basal Sliver</a>	1 <a href="#">Ancient Grudge</a>
1 land	1 <a href="#">Basalt Gargoyle</a>	1 <a href="#">Assassinate</a>

1 <u>Battering Sliver</u>	1 <u>Call to the Netherworld</u>
1 <u>Blightspeaker</u>	1 <u>Cancel</u>
1 <u>Bogardan Rager</u>	1 <u>Clockspinning</u>
1 <u>Calciderm</u>	1 <u>Dust Corona</u>
1 <u>Castle Raptors</u>	1 <u>Erratic Mutation</u>
1 <u>Cautery Sliver</u>	1 <u>Feldon's Cane</u>
1 <u>Citanul Woodreaders</u>	1 <u>Fool's Demise</u>
1 <u>D'Avenant Archer</u>	1 <u>Grapeshot</u>
1 <u>Deadly Grub</u>	1 <u>Krosan Grip</u>
1 <u>Deadwood Treefolk</u>	1 <u>Mana Tithe</u>
1 <u>Drifter il-Dal</u>	1 <u>Mantle of Leadership</u>
1 <u>Drudge Reavers</u>	1 <u>Midnight Charm</u>
1 <u>Faceless Butcher</u>	1 <u>Mindstab</u>
1 <u>Firefright Mage</u>	1 <u>Mystical Teachings</u>
1 <u>Flickering Spirit</u>	1 <u>Pentarch Ward</u>
1 <u>Ghostflame Sliver</u>	1 <u>Piracy Charm</u>
1 <u>Goblin Skycutter</u>	1 <u>Prismatic Lens</u>
1 <u>Gorgon Recluse</u>	1 <u>Reality Acid</u>
1 <u>Gustcloak Cavalier</u>	1 <u>Smallpox</u>
1 <u>Havenwood Wurm</u>	1 <u>Spellshift</u>
1 <u>Hunting Moa</u>	1 <u>Vampiric Link</u>
1 <u>Nantuko Shaman</u>	1 <u>Word of Seizing</u>
1 <u>Needlepeak Spider</u>	1 <u>Wurmcalling</u>
1 <u>Pallid Mycoderm</u>	
1 <u>Penumbra Spider</u>	25 other spells
1 <u>Phantom Wurm</u>	
1 <u>Rathi Trapper</u>	
1 <u>Reckless Wurm</u>	
1 <u>Reflex Sliver</u>	
1 <u>Revered Dead</u>	
1 <u>Sage of Epityr</u>	
1 <u>Saltfield Recluse</u>	
1 <u>Skirk Shaman</u>	
1 <u>Slipstream Serpent</u>	
1 <u>Sulfur Elemental</u>	
1 <u>Synchronous Sliver</u>	
1 <u>Tectonic Fiend</u>	
1 <u>Thallid Germinator</u>	
1 <u>Torchling</u>	
1 <u>Two-Headed Sliver</u>	
1 <u>Uktabi Drake</u>	
1 <u>Vesuvan Shapeshifter</u>	
1 <u>Vhati il-Dal</u>	
1 <u>Whitemane Lion</u>	
1 <u>Wormwood Dryad</u>	
1 <u>Zealot il-Vec</u>	

48 creatures

Ignoring the unplayables, we can start to examine what the pool has to offer. In each block there are various themes, and it is often easiest to examine these right from the beginning. In this block, the most prolific themes are Slivers and Thallids. Luckily for us, this pool only contains seven slivers and none of them bestow the others with an ability powerful enough to warrant running them exclusively on their right to be played as Slivers. If the pool contained multiples of the Slivers with good effects, then it might justify playing them for more reasons than the power of the card alone. Battering Sliver, Cautery Sliver, and to a lesser extent Synchronous Sliver can be played by themselves as they are powerful enough individually; in contrast, Two-Headed Sliver and Reflex Sliver are not good enough to cut the mustard. There is only one Thallid present, so no need to delve there any further.

The next step is to examine how the pool's mana base will look like. What cards do you have that will help play a third colour? This currently includes Prismatic Lens, the storage lands, Terramorphic Expanse, and the green fixers like Gemhide Sliver and Search for Tomorrow. Knowing this in advance of colour examination will help you assess how viable a splash will be. Our pool only contains a Prismatic Lens and a Dreadship Reef, drastically limiting our options.

Hand in hand with looking at the fixers is analysing the gold cards. Gold cards, by their very nature, are powerful, and you will often try hard to accommodate them in your deck if compliable with the rest of your pool. These also include cards like Momentary Blink, Strangling Soot and Hedge Troll, which

really want the support colour to be played. Knowing how forcefully the pool will suggest you pair certain colours is something you want to be thinking about when you go through each colour separately, as these are the combinations you will try first.

The main trap that many players fall into is overvaluing green. They see a Greenseeker and a Search for Tomorrow to go with a Prismatic Lens, and they use green as their base colour to splash their two good colours. The trap they have fallen into is playing green for its mana-fixing rather than any power it might have. Often, the colour by itself is not reason enough to play it—they play it to support the mana of a three-colour deck when playing the two colours by themselves, rounding the edges off with filler cards, is far better. Be wary of this.

There is one more particular thing that suggests the alliance of two colours and that is a cross-colour combo. This falls under maximising the potential of your Sealed, teaming Dream Stalker up with a Firemaw Kavu or Herd Gnarr with an Empty the Warrens. Spotting card interactions like this, and then assessing their power impact is something, that unfortunately, only comes with play experience, but the ability to recognise them can often be done here, during the vital stage of deck construction.

Once you have removed all the unplayables from your selection and given the pool a basic overview, it is time to turn your attention to each colour individually. While looking at a colour, you should assess its strengths and weaknesses—what draws you to it? What is wrong with it? How good is the curve and where is it lacking drops? Is it deep enough to be a main colour or a splash? You should once again sieve the weak from the strong. Some cards are obviously filler whilst others are the cards that draw you to a particular colour. If a colour only contains two or three very powerful cards, then it will normally be relegated to a splash, assuming the cards are not double coloured mana cards like Enslave, which, although incredibly powerful, cannot be splashed.

It is normally best to start with the colours that felt the weakest while you double checked your pool, so you can add them to the ever-building unplayable pile. Our weakest colour seems to be black, so let's take a closer look:



In the picture, the cards above are the more powerful cards, whilst those below are those that are there simply there to provide enough playables. I'll discuss Vhati i/-Dal a little later, but other than him, there are very few compelling reasons to play the colour. The only real removal the colour has to offer is Assassinate, which is clunky at best. With no creatures of more than two power worth considering, there is very little going for black. Blightspeaker makes you look at the pool for available Rebels, and there are two more in white but, as we shall see, both of these colours are weak and we have no real desire to pair them. Nothing in this colour except for Vhati shouts 'Play me!' It is easy to leave black by the wayside.

Notice how straight away I looked for the powerful cards—the cards that are the reason why I am playing a colour. It is the power and potential of a colour that deem its usefulness. Nobody expects the powerful cards. The chief qualities possessed by such cards are bombs—mass removal effects or huge creatures... bombs and removal... removal and bombs... The chief qualities are removal and bombs... and card advantage. These are the three key factors which determine whether cards are good after their subjective value contrasting to other cards in the set. And evasion... I'll come in again.

If a colour does not contain many cards with these qualities then the only reason to play it would be depth. Often, a pool's good colours will be lacking in creatures in a way that cannot be compensated by running lots of borderline cards. In this case, other colours rich in playables even if they are only average creatures will become an attractive option. An average sealed deck runs somewhere between twelve and nineteen creatures. If you cannot field enough men in your strong colours, it might be necessary to turn elsewhere.



White has similar problems to those black possessed. There are only really four cards that draw you to it and none of them are particularly awesome. They're not bombs or possessive of any ridiculous effect or card advantageous. The filler cards are also plainly average, providing a few additional bodies but nothing of substance. Cheque please.



Next up comes blue. This colour is light in playables; it has few creatures and few efficient spells. What it does possess is an incredibly powerful bomb in the form of Vesuvan Shapeshifter. This is a textbook example of a colour that cries out for splashing. Although the Shapeshifter might have two coloured mana in its cost, due to its ability to morph it can effectively be played for  $\{4\}$ , rendering it eminently splashable. The other cards that are also worth considering are Erratic Mutation (removal are the most often splashed cards) and, if the deck is either light on playables or light on creatures, Slipstream Serpent. The rest can be easily dismissed.



Now we're talking. Red has depth. It has eleven playables that we would not begrudge a maindeck slot. We have a bomb in the form of Torchling, removal (if a little weak) in the form of Grapeshot, a bunch of able bodies, and a potentially game-winning trick in Word of Seizing (mostly used to gain control of an attacking creature which then trades with another attacker, netting you a two for one). The Tectonic Fiend is weaker than both the other six-drops red has to offer, so will probably not see play. It is likely that neither of the gold Slivers will make the deck as we have already ascertained that both black and white are colours lacking in strength, so let us hope that green provides us with a solid enough base for a deck.



As most of you will have worked out after your first perusal of the pool, the green is very solid. All it contains is creatures, but this is seldom a down side thanks to the new attributes the colour wheel has felt spinning its way. The only card advantage our pool possesses is present here thanks to Nantuko Shaman, Citanul Woodreaders, and Deadwood Treefolk. Though overrated by most players, Wurmcalling is still a very powerful card even if it just cast as a fancy-looking Durkwood Boars.

Havenwood and Phantom Wurm provide some average fatties to round off the team. Still more on Vhati later...

After breaking down each colour separately, we have come to the conclusion that only two of them possess enough power and depth to really be played as the main colours. It is often the case that there will be no clear distinction between the colours, which will result in pairing all of the likely combinations together and assessing what strengths the various options provide. Handily for us, as this is an explanatory primer, our pool is simple enough to move straight to the refining stages.



Here we have, in the top row, twenty of the cards most likely to make our maindeck. Now we have a curve worth looking at. We need to examine the shortcomings that these colours have. First off, a simple examination of the curve will show us that we are light on two and four drops whilst overly heavy on six drops. We cannot do too much in about the early game, but we can add the Needlepeak Spider in place of the Phantom Wurm (the most inferior of the six drops) to help adjust the other discrepancies.

We also lack removal – this is something that we cannot do much about, without looking to splash another colour. To splash we have two options, black or blue. For black, we finally get to turn our attention to Vhati il-Dal. He is very powerful, but our deck doesn't really want to splash another guy, albeit an incredibly powerful one. Unfortunately, all the colour has to offer besides Vhati is an Assassinate, which is hardly something you finally want to topdeck your Swamp for only to be unable to kill their untapped Castle Raptors that is ruining your day. To summarise, when you finally draw the missing piece of your splash, be it the land or the spell itself, you want it to have an immediate effect on the game, this is one of the reasons why it is seldom correct to splash creatures and why the spells that are chosen are ones that do something straight away. Luckily for us, blue provides us with one such type of removal and, more importantly, a very powerful bomb—the Shapeshifter. If we are to splash a colour, it will be blue.

In order to see whether it is worth splashing, we should look at what our mana base should look like. The easiest way to do this is to look at how many coloured symbols of each type there are in the deck. There are fourteen red mana and approximately sixteen green, which is a lot. This is mainly due to the double-coloured spells such as Skirk Shaman and Uktabi Drake. This would suggest that we run between eight and nine basic lands of each type. If we run eight Mountains and eight Forests, this will leave us with two slots. They could be either one more of each, two Islands or, if we just splash the Shapeshifter, an Island and another Forest.

It should be noted that our deck is fairly clunky, featuring lots of creatures and several five and six drops. It is important for a deck with lots of creatures to never miss a land drop so that it can curve out well, because it has few tricks with which to regain the tempo if it falls behind. In most formats the correct amount of land is seventeen or eighteen. I normally advocate for running as little land as can be reasonably justified as I would rather draw out of a screw will plenty of gas in my hand than stumble painfully onwards through a flood. However, this deck needs its lands, so we shall go with eighteen. When factoring how many lands to play, it is roughly correct to assign each additional mana source, such as a Prismatic Lens or Search for Tomorrow, the value of half a land. This would mean that this deck would be running 18.5 sources, with the Prismatic Lens also helping both our main colours out as well as adding another source for the splash, should we want it.



It would seem that we are able to play both the Erratic Mutation and the Vesuvan Shapeshifter in the deck as there is enough space to play two Islands, which handily brings the playables up to twenty-two, working perfectly with the eighteen land we would like to play. These cards are far more powerful than our on-colour alternatives, as they are simply more expensive and clunky creatures. Splashing blue also maximises our abuse of the bombs in our pool, meaning we can play Torchling, Word of Seizing, Wurm Calling, and Vesuvan

Shapeshifter. It should be noted that we wound up playing these rares not because they are rare or because they are our bombs, but because when combined with the other cards in their colours, they justified playing the colour.

Here is the final result of our effort. Once more, feel free to vent your opinions and thoughts in the forums—that's what they are there for.

### Time Spiral-Planar Chaos Sealed Deck

40 cards

8 <u>Mountain</u>	1 <u>Goblin Skycutter</u>	1 <u>Prismatic Lens</u>
8 <u>Forest</u>	1 <u>Basalt Gargoyle</u>	1 <u>Wurmcalling</u>
2 <u>Island</u>	1 <u>Hunting Moa</u>	1 <u>Grapeshot</u>
_____	1 <u>Skirk Shaman</u>	1 <u>Erratic Mutation</u>
18 land	1 <u>Sulfur Elemental</u>	1 <u>Word of Seizing</u>
	1 <u>Thallid Germinator</u>	
	1 <u>Wormwood Dryad</u>	5 other spells
	1 <u>Vesuvan Shapeshifter</u>	
	1 <u>Penumbra Spider</u>	
	1 <u>Nantuko Shaman</u>	
	1 <u>Uktabi Drake</u>	
	1 <u>Needlepeak Spider</u>	
	1 <u>Reckless Wurm</u>	
	1 <u>Torchling</u>	
	1 <u>Bogardan Rager</u>	
	1 <u>Deadwood Treefolk</u>	
	1 <u>Citanul Woodreaders</u>	
	_____	
	17 creatures	



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*Widely considered one of the world's foremost Limited competitors, Quentin Martin has four Limited Grand Prix Top 8s and a Top 8 at Pro Tour–Prague 2006. Between his **Magic** expertise and a background in philosophy, it's no surprise Quentin is well known for his strategic insight and theories on the game.*

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