

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

The Deck Stops Here

Quentin Martin
Limited Information
Tuesday, May 29, 2007



Welcome to Decking Week. Before I delve into the Limited ramifications of this seldom-used tactic, I wish to rant about it a little first. Decking somebody is often frowned upon as something sordid and unethical. Real men beat their opponent to death by reducing their life total from 20 to 0. In much the same way that infinite life decks are scorned, so are those that deck people. If someone were to pull off a win thanks to a **Coalition Victory**, it would be celebrated, yet when somebody fails to draw a card, their death is almost an embarrassment.

There seem to be two types base attitudes people have towards games. Without getting into a Timmy /Johnny / Spike definitions, there are the people who play the game because it is fun, because that's what they think games are; and then there are those who see the game as a system of rules that point towards a victory condition and analyse what the best way to maximise their chance of winning is. For some reason, this analytical aspect of the game is also frowned upon. It is cold, and goes beyond the framework of "fun." I don't think the latter viewpoint is necessarily more competitive in nature, but people often claim that this attitude is not in the spirit of the game.

When people learn **Magic** for the first time, they are told that how they win is by killing the opponent. Some tutors will flippantly mention something like, "Oh, and if they run out of cards in their library too, but that never happens, so don't worry about it. Now, your **Grizzly Bears** here, they..." However, **Magic** has two base loss conditions—going to zero life and drawing a non-existent card. **Magic** is a game, so it should not matter how you win, as long as you do so. Heh, I guess there's the inner Spike in me—I just want to win.

The problem as I see it as to why decking is such a taboo, is because the majority of cards that R&D prints focus on the life goal. This means that the battle that rages during a game is essentially over life. When somebody starts to win due to decking, it is often something their opponent can do nothing about, because there are few cards that are inherently playable that fight decking, and so the player sits there helplessly whilst their library dwindles out of existence. It is this helplessness, the lack of a two-way interaction, that has given decking its reputation (much like most combo decks, where one play sits there forlorn whilst the other massages his deck until he declares his victory).

The problem is that there is less interaction inherent in decking. It is all about the library. Rather than making creatures that can then be killed or blocked on the way to reducing life, all you can do is flip cards into a graveyard or force them to draw. Sure, you can gain life or shuffle cards back into your library, but everyone knows the best form of defence is to attack. I've been trying to think what R&D could do to make decking more of an option. I thought of a decking block, where all the colours aimed to deck and where the largest creature in the format was a 2/2, so it was easier to deck someone than beat them up.

Can you imagine how boring it would be? This turn I mill five of your cards, next turn you replace four and mill six of mine. It would be the same if R&D only printed burn spells and spells that gained you life. Maybe, a little like the Dimir Guild of old, they could print a block where lots of creatures and spells had residual mill effects. Lots of creatures could have come into play abilities like "put the top four cards of target library into its controller's graveyard," "Shuffle three creatures in a graveyard back into their controller's library," or "Search target player's library for a sorcery card and remove it from the game." A new form of scry could be used on spells that put the redundant cards in the graveyard rather than on the bottom of the library. The options are innumerable, and although they might have to be edited to stop reanimation decks getting out of control, there is a kernel of design here... but I digress.

Decking has always been far more feasible and far more likely to occur in Limited rather than Constructed because our decks have twenty fewer cards. However, decking in Constructed, by its very nature, is more focused, whereas in Limited, it tends to happen as an afterthought. There have been a few formats where it was a feasible Draft strategy but, generally, decking only occurs in games that go awry.

The first format where it was truly possible to win through milling alone was *Champions of Kamigawa*. By drafting enough arcane spells, combined with **Dampen Thought**, it was possible to build a creatureless Draft deck. Many people were involved in the archetype's discovery, and I was



PRODUCTS

Tenth Edition Future Sight
All Magic products

RULES

Core Game
Basic Rulebook
Comprehensive Rules
All Magic Rules

MESSAGE BOARDS

Magic The Gathering Community
All Magic message boards
magicthegathering.com
forum
Rules Q&A forum
Magic Online announcements

MAGIC ONLINE

Magic The Gathering ONLINE
Download Now!
Magic Online III Launch Info

NOVELS

Future Sight
Time Spiral Cycle, Book III
by Scott McGough and John Delaney



lucky enough to draft a good version in the last draft of GP–Paris. Unfortunately, I fell afoul of the deck's nemesis—**Humble Budoka** coupled with a **Kodama of the North Tree**—and finished a regrettable eleventh. Here's the deck in all of its glory:

Dampen Thought		Grand Prix–Paris		40 cards	
13 Island				1 Long-Forgotten Gohei	
5 Plains	0 creatures			1 Candles' Glow	
18 land				2 Ethereal Haze	
				2 Consuming Vortex	
				3 Counsel of the Soratami	
				3 Dampen Thought	
				1 Hisoka's Defiance	
				2 Peer Through Depths	
				2 Psychic Puppetry	
				4 Reach Through Mists	
				1 Sift Through Sands	
				22 other spells	

The deck worked beautifully as every component did exactly what the deck needed. **Reach Through Mists** and the rest of the Unspeakable cycle dug through the deck towards the **Dampen Thoughts**, whilst also providing a back upon which to splice. **Ethereal Haze**, **Candles' Glow**, **Psychic Puppetry**, and the two bounce arcane spells kept the player alive whilst the milling continued. There was always a turning point in the game where you realised that you were no longer milling as a side effect of staying alive but, rather, your **Dampen Thought** was winning faster than your opponent's creatures had any hope to.

This deck was the first of its kind and may well be the last. This is one of many examples of an archetype that can be forced during the draft. There have been very few occasions where it has ever been possible to force solely a decking strategy, but a block later Wizards brought us the Dimir Guild in *Ravnica* block. This was the first time, to my knowledge, that R&D actively strove to give us the option to deck our opponents as a strategy that could be found amongst the commons. Here is Julien Goron's deck from GP–Hasselt, a great example of the Dimir Archetype:

Dimir Mill		Grand Prix–Hasselt		40 cards	
10 Island	3 Drift of Phantasms	1 Flight of Fancy			
7 Swamp	1 Snapping Drake	3 Induce Paranoia			
17 land	1 Tattered Drake	1 Peel from Reality			
	2 Tidewater Minion	1 Stasis Cell			
	2 Vedalken Dismissers	1 Clinging Darkness			
	3 Vedalken Entrancer	1 Darkblast			
	1 Stinkweed Imp	1 Disembowel			
	13 creatures	1 Psychic Drain			
		10 other spells			

Ravnica provided several milling cards. As well as the uncommon **Psychic Drain**, this deck featured two key commons—**Induce Paranoia** and the chart-topping **Vedalken Entrancer**. Once more, this deck features the key aspects of a successful mill deck. It has plenty of early defence, in fact almost the entire deck is defensive in nature, from the **Drift of Phantasms** and **Stinkweed Imps** to the **Tidewater Minions** and **Vedalken Dismissers**. Whereas the **Dampen Thought** deck needed all the card draw to dig for its key spell, this deck has a more solid defence that, once reached, can be defended my counterspells until a mill element is drawn.

It may be a long time before a new format presents us with a hardcore decking archetype, but if it does, be sure to draft it with these things in mind: a solid early defence, card draw to dig you to your win conditions, counterspells to deal with whatever might ruin your day and removal to creatures that your men cannot deal with. **Dampen Thought** sometimes had the added bonus of being creatureless, making many of your opponent's draws redundant. Also, by not needing to punch through a wall of defenders, when you draft you need not waste picks on **Falter** effects or combat tricks. It should also be noted that it is entirely possible for these decks to win through damage. Goron could easily win off his Drakes and if the **Dampen Thought** had a single **Teller of Tales** in it, it might have won that way also.

Both of these formats had decks that could win specifically through milling. Most decks, however, do not have this luxury. If they win through decking, it is only as a side effect. Either the game has drawn to a

standstill with neither deck truly having the advantage, or you have drawn your one mill element, say a **Millstone**, and now intend to use it to win. However it starts, you have to pick up on the switch as soon as possible, to maximise the chance of pulling a decking off. You might still be forcing through a single point a turn, but your opponent might have too high a life total for that point to matter, or, irrelevant of what you draw, decking might either prove faster or more effective.

Ruud Warmenhoven and Kamiel Cornelissen had a great game in GP–Stockholm that lasted for ages. Throughout, Kamiel had been digging through his deck with a **Greenseeker**, ensuring him a much higher quality of cards. However, both players had locked up the game, and even though Ruud could force through a point a turn, it left him exposed to a possible counter attack if Kamiel held a combination of powerful tricks. Realising that this game probably would not go to the usual damage finish, Ruud elected to deck Kamiel. Note that there was nothing he used to mill Kamiel, he simply had more cards left in his library. He chose not to play the **Plague Sliver** in his hand, because the single damage a turn might be enough for Kamiel to overwhelm him. Had Ruud missed the turning point from lethal damage to decking, he would have made the **Plague Sliver** earlier and lost because of it.



There are several card drawing cards around like **Ancestral Visions** and **Careful Consideration** that target a player. When you draw these in the late game, you will often automatically target yourself to pull ahead on the board to win. Often enough though, if the game has dragged on long enough so you only have ten or so cards left in your library, it might well be the case that you do not have enough good spells left to break through the current board state or, if you don't draw your power spells real soon, they will be too late. Instead, it might be better to sandbag them for later, to use on your opponent to deck him. He will be unaware that you are holding them and might reduce his library further to get ahead, and you will catch him unawares for a spicy win.

The only true milling card in the current format is **Whetwheel**. I played this simply because it was a morph in a white-blue deck in Stockholm, but when I drew it in a long game against my opponent's **Pyrohemia**, it was the only card I could have won with. This card will get played because it morphs rather than because it mills, but there are often matchups where milling is perfectly viable. These tend to be long, drawn out control matches or games where neither deck is good enough to punch through a win or where both decks are very similar and not too fast. The skill lies in what you do when you draw the **Whetwheel**.

When you draw it, assess its impact upon the game. Is it the type of game where milling will be the victory condition? If no, then make your morph and continue beating. If it is, then you have to maximise the chances of you being alive long enough to win this way. The moment you decide to win through decking, keeping your life total as high as possible becomes priority number one. Stop attacking unless you think you can get a better trade than you would on your opponent's turn (preferably before you commit the **Whetwheel** to the board). You no longer need to burn your removal on breaking through your opponent's defences, but in shoring up yours.

It should be pretty simple to calculate how many turns your opponent has left to kill you, factoring in whether or not you draw more land or the need to cast other spells to stay alive. When you have the over/under on the clock, you simply need to work out how to stay alive that long. Chump blocking will certainly feature into your calculations. It is very unlikely your opponent will be running a **Disenchant** effect, so you can reliably count on having the amount of time you calculated, taking into account factors like **Strength in Numbers**, **Riddle of Lightning** and **Fortify**. If you can't win through the **Whetwheel** or through any other means, it is still profitable to mill the cards away so you see more of your rival's deck.



Two-Headed Giant is a format where the implications of decking truly manifest. You only need to deck one of the players, and it is often pretty obvious which mage will draw more cards than the other (normally the blue player, although there are some arguments for green in this block, especially taking **Rampant Growth** effects into account). You may have less time to play with, with the reduced life total, but it is still an efficient path to victory. Again, defensive decks are key to the strategy. It seems to me that **Whetwheel** has the potential to be a bomb, but I feel that the reduced starting life total has drastically cut its potential. Look to deck opponents in future formats.

Before I bring this article to a close, I wish to make a further rant to all those players who advocate playing 41 card decks. Not only is it statistically unwise (no further reasons will be here given), but it will not stop you from being decked. Sure, theoretically it might do, but not only is the game unlikely to resolve in a decking race in the first place, but both you and your opponent will be playing cards that reduce the size of your decks' whilst you play. It will, incredibly rarely, be correct to add an additional card in some matchups, but this will only be as a sideboarding option. If your opponent is using an actual mill effect, then the extra card will have no effect at all, and if it is otherwise so, then you are more likely to have lost the game through not drawing your bombs as a result of the extra card than it will help stop you from getting decked.

Thanks again to all those who helped make **Dampen Thought** what it was, because it provided me with endless pleasure whilst drafting online. If anyone needs to trade for 129 **Eye of Nowheres**, you know where to come.

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.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Quentin Martin](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

