

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Completely From Scratch

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Building on a Budget
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Jim and Bob were coming to the close of their hard-fought, back-and-forth battle between mages. Jim was down to only 2 life, with four lands in play. Bob, at 7 life himself, threatened with a Blood Knight. Jim untapped and drew *Dread Return*. "Oh man, the only creature in my graveyard is *Akroma, Angel of Wrath!*" he exclaimed. "If I reanimated her, that would leave you at 1 life. Good game!"

Jim and Bob were coming to the close of their hard-fought, back-and-forth battle between mages. Jim was down to only 2 life, with four lands in play. Bob, at 7 life himself, threatened with a Blood Knight. Jim untapped and drew *Vigor Mortis*. Excited, he went to tap his lands. He had an *Overgrown Tomb*, a *Swamp*, and two *Plains*. "Oh man, why can't I tap any of my lands for green and get *Akroma, Angel of Wrath* out of my graveyard with a +1/+1 counter to win the game?", he exclaimed. "I can only swing for 6. Good game!"



Jim and Bob were coming to the close of their hard-fought, back-and-forth battle between mages. Jim was down to only 2 life, with four lands in play. Bob, at 7 life himself, threatened with a Blood Knight. Jim untapped and drew *Resurrection*. Excited, he went to tap his lands. He had an *Overgrown Tomb*, a *Swamp*, and two *Plains*. "Man, I'm glad that I decided to play with *Akroma, Angel of Fury*," he beamed. "If I had played *Akroma, Angel of Wrath*, I wouldn't have been able to block your Knight next turn!"

Magic is a game of choices. I'm not just talking about "should-I-or-shouldn't-I-attack" choices, but small, seemingly throwaway choices that can have deep, profound impacts during gameplay. This is one of the aspects of **Magic** that makes it a great game—you are not set forth on one prescribed path, and luck has less of an impact on the game than one might think.

There are thousands of cards to choose from when building a deck, and assuming you want the tightest fit possible, you only get to have sixty cards in that deck. Not only that, but you can play up to four copies of most cards, which means you can get away with a deck that only runs fifteen different unique cards (or fewer, with basic lands accounted for) if you'd like. Considering that there are 1,872 different non-basic land cards available in Standard alone right now (plus ten basics—five snow and five nonsnow), it's a daunting task to make any deck from scratch.

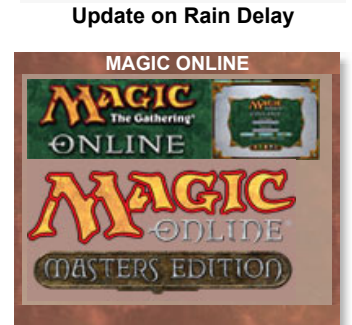
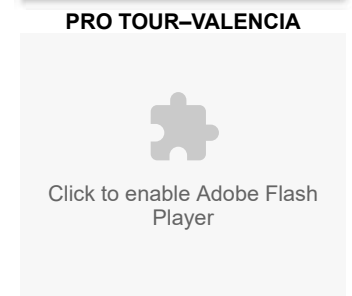
Imagine for a second that you haven't been playing **Magic** for a couple of years—or maybe that you're a first time player. Imagine further that you're given a pile of 7,488 cards (four of each Standard-legal card) and a box of basic lands and are told to build a good, solid sixty-card deck. Can you imagine how long it would take to get through all of the cards, much less find a configuration of sixty cards that would work well together? How would someone even *start* such a feat?

Step One: Read The Cards (Know What is Available)

This might seem like a no-brainer, but it's a step I go through each and every time I'm starting a deck from scratch. There are several great online card lists—the ones I most commonly use are [Gatherer](#), the [StarCityGames.com Magic Spoiler Generator](#), and the [Crystal Keep Magic Products Index](#). Each of these pages have their strong points—Gatherer is best for bringing up full lists of cards, whereas the Star City spoiler is best for nailing down specific cards or types of cards. Either way, taking a look at all the cards available for use is a great way to come up with ideas for a new deck (Hey, I haven't seen that card in a while!), find cards that fit into an existing deck idea (That would work *great* in my *Millstone* deck!), or find solutions to problems your deck is facing (So that's how my white deck can deal with Black Knight!).

Every time I begin a new deck for this column, I jot down cards and ideas for future decks after going through the list of available cards. Yes, this means that I've looked at the Standard cardpool hundreds of times over the past year, but I want to make sure that I'm not missing any cards that might be perfect for this (or future) decks. 1,872 cards is a lot to keep track of, and it's a great idea to give your mind a refresher course before cracking a new pile of sixty cards.

Step Two: Figure Out Your Focus (Make a List)





Deadwood Treefolk	Blazing Archon
Edge of Autumn	Calcidern
Evolution Charm	Chronomantic Escape
Fa'adiyah Seer	Condemn
Golgari Grave-Troll	(?)Epochrasite(?)
Greater Good	Faith's Fetters
Greenseeker	Icy Manipulator
Harmonize	Jotun Grunt
Life from the Loam	Mistmeadow Skulk
Maro	Peace of Mind
Jolrael, Empress of Beasts	Resurrection
Llanowar Elves	(?)Sacred Mesa(?)
Llanowar Mentor	Saltblast
Magus of the Library	Serrated Arrows
Mire Boa	(?)Story Circle(?)
Moldervine Cloak	Sunlance
Mwonvuli Acid-Moss	Temporal Isolation
(?)Ohran Viper(?)	
Reclaim/Recollect	(?)Bridge from Below(?)
Search for Tomorrow	(?)Crime // Punishment(?)
(?)Tarmogoyf(?)	Darkblast
Wall of Roots	(?)Debtors' Knell(?)
	Dread Return
Glare of Subdual	Golgari Thug
Harmonic Sliver	Imp's Mischief
(?)Loxodon Hierarch(?)	Last Gasp
Congregation at Dawn	Mortify
Mystic Enforcer	Mortivore
(?)Saffi Eriksdotter(?)	Nether Traitor
Selesnya Guildmage	Nightmare Void
Watchwolf	Dimir House Guard
	Orzhov Pontiff
	(?)Persecute(?)
	Pillory of the Sleepless
	Plagued Rusalka
	Putrefy
	(?)Shimian Specter(?)
	Stinkweed Imp
	Street Wraith
	Stronghold Rats
	(?)Tombstalker(?)
	Twisted Abomination
	Vulturous Zombie
	Zombify
	Yixlid Jailer (DO NOT WANT!)

Teneb, the Harvester
 (?)Angel of Despair(?)
 (?)Avatar of Woe(?)
 (?)Bitter Ordeal(?)

Selesnya/Golgari/Orzhov Signet
 Selesnya/Golgari/Orzhov Bounceland
 Arctic Flats
 (?)Brushland / Llanowar Wastes / Caves of Koilos(?)
 (?)Horizon Canopy(?)
 Dakmor Salvage
 Saltcrusted Steppe
 (?)Scrying Sheets(?)

After taking a look through cards, making notes, and seeing cool cards that you'd like to build around, the next step is to decide your theme. For the list included above, I decided I wanted to build a dredge deck. As I went through the list of cards in Standard, I searched three times—the first time for only green cards, the second time for only white, artifact, and land cards, and the third time for black cards.

I asked myself, "What can you do with dredge?" when I first started the list. Dredge has two main uses—putting a large number of cards into your graveyard in one shot, and returning a specific card from your graveyard to your hand for repeat usage. This led to a few more questions:

- "What can I do with a graveyard full of cards?"
- "How do I get the dredge card into my graveyard to start dredging?"
- "What do I do with the dredge card itself once it's returned to hand?"
- "Which are the best dredge cards to use to begin with?"
- "How do I use dredge as a way to win the game?"

As I went through the list of available cards, I wrote down every card that I passed that might be useful in a dredge deck. For instance, **Deadwood Treefolk** can act as a **Summoner's Pact** if half of my deck is in the graveyard—while **Edge of Autumn** is a manaless way to draw a card (or enable dredge).

Step Three: Learn (Experience and Reading)

Last week, I faced up against a deck that abused **Life from the Loam** with **Stormbind**. While I didn't necessarily want to copy that engine, one thing I noted in that match was that my opponent always seemed to have a full grip of cards, because of Life From the Loam. This means that I could potentially take a dredge deck in the direction of using **Life from the Loam** to fill my hand, enabling cards like **Maro**, **Magus of the Library** or **Jolrael**, **Empress of Beasts** to their fullest potential.

Likewise, I discounted several dredge cards outright when making my list—cards like **Golgari Brownscale**. I know from experience—in Draft, in Constructed, and in playing against it—that it is not a very strong dredge enabler compared to other options available.

I also read up on **Magic** a ton each day. There are several great content-based web sites that publish strategy articles, along with any number of **Magic** forums where decks and deck construction are discussed. Just at a glance, did you know that there are hundreds of decks available for your perusal right now at the [Magic Regionals results page](#)? These decks contain a lot of great ideas that can be expanded on, tweaked, or changed entirely based on one card or one particular combo.



Step Four: Make Cuts (A Different Deck)

Back to my original list of dredge cards. The reason I wanted to put white cards into the deck was to take advantage of dredge plus threshold—i.e., making a 6/6 **Mystic Enforcer** on the third or fourth turn. This led me to find other cards that work well with dredge (**Resurrection**, **Peace of Mind**, **Jötun Grunts**), and tons of cards which could buy time during a game (**Chronomantic Escape**, **Mistmeadow Skulk**, **Sunlance**). However, a dredge deck is about finding a use for dredge—not so much controlling my opponent's board position.

Sunlance plus **Temporal Isolation** plus **Chronomantic Escape** plus **Condemn** plus **Icy Manipulator** plus **Serrated Arrows** might make a great basis for a control deck, but they don't really fit into the dredge build. There are already dozens of other cards for the deck, so why shoehorn in cards that will just confuse the theme or list? Don't be afraid to make the hard cuts. By the same token, don't discount them entirely—just for this deck! I've started another list for a mono-white control deck, and that deck is likely to show up in Building on a Budget within the next few weeks.

Step Five: The Budget (30 Tickets or Bust)

This column has few rules, but there is one steadfast rule: all decks must cost 30 tickets or less using **Magic Online** prices. Some cards might fluctuate in value over time (**Aeon Chronicler** cost half a ticket when I used it a couple of months back; they cost 5-6 tickets each now!), but at the time of building, this is a cement-solid ceiling. Some cards cost upwards of ten or so tickets, so it's pretty much impossible to try to fit them into a budget deck and make that deck work. You'll notice that several cards on my initial list had question marks before and after their names—that is because I was doubtful about whether those cards would be able to be used in a budget deck. The only way to find out: hit the buyers and sellers rooms in **Magic Online**!

I did just that, and here were the prices I found on the cards in question:

Ohran Viper: 10 Tickets
Tarmogoyf: 12 Tickets
Loxodon Hierarch: 4 Tickets
Saffi Eriksdotter: 1 Ticket
Epochrasite: 4 Tickets
Sacred Mesa: 1 Ticket
Story Circle: 1 Ticket
Bridge from Below: 5 Tickets
Crime // Punishment: 2 Tickets
Debtors' Knell: 2.5 Tickets
Persecute: 3 Tickets
Shimian Specter: 4 Tickets
Tombstalker: 3 Tickets
Angel of Despair: 4 Tickets
Avatar of Woe: 1.5 Tickets
Bitter Ordeal: 1.5 Tickets
Brushland: 3 Tickets
Llanowar Wastes: 4 Tickets
Caves of Koilos: 5 Tickets
Horizon Canopy: 6 Tickets
Scrying Sheets: 4 Tickets

This eliminated **Ohran Viper** and **Tarmogoyf** entirely, and cast doubt on several other possibilities—unless I wanted to build around something like **Bridge from Below**, and have the rest of the deck be mostly commons and uncommons.

Step Six: The Nuances (60 Card Limit)

Take a look back at the opening for this article. There were tons of little details that could have changed the outcome of the game. If Jim had been playing a different mix of lands, he might have been able to play **Vigor Mortis** for the win. Maybe he would or wouldn't have been able to play any mix between **Dread Return**, **Vigor Mortis**, **Resurrection**, and **Zombify**. Maybe he could have had any one of hundreds of different creatures in his graveyard to reanimate—**Blazing Archon**, **Avatar of Woe**, **Epochrasite**—the list is only limited by what Jim decided to include or not include in his deck.

It might seem like **Vigor Mortis**, **Dread Return**, and **Zombify** are basically interchangeable, or are no-brainers to run in certain decks, but which is the best fit for your specific deck? Does this change depending on the other cards you run? Of course it does! Maybe you want to get a +1/+1 counter in your creature (think **Fungal Behemoth**). Maybe you plan on having a lot of creatures in play so you can use the flashback on **Dread Return**. Or perhaps you are barely splashing black, and **Zombify** is your best bet for having a smooth mana base. All three spells have the same main purpose (bringing a creature back from your graveyard directly to play), but each accomplishes the goal in a subtly different way, with subtly (or not-so-subtly) different effects.

Step Seven: The Contest! (You Build on a Budget!)

So here's the challenge: I want you to try your hand at building the best dredge deck possible using the cards on the list below. The rules are as follows:

- 1) You may only use the cards on the list below!
- 2) All decks must cost, at most, 30 tickets using the prices listed below.
- 3) You must explain, in 200 words or less, why you made the card choices you made for that build of the deck.



That's it! Post your build of the dredge deck in the forums of this article, and in two weeks, I will go over the best and most interesting builds, and select one as the starting point for playtesting! Listed in parentheses are the ticket values for each individual card, for the purpose of reaching 30 tickets.

Green:

Deadwood Treefolk (0.1)
 Edge of Autumn (0.1)
 Evolution Charm (0.1)
 Fa'adiyah Seer (0.1)
 Golgari Grave-Troll (1.5)
 Greater Good (1)
 Greenseeker (0.1)
 Harmonize (1.5)
 Life from the Loam (2)
 Maro (0.5)
 Jolrael, Empress of Beasts (0.5)
 Llanowar Elves (0.25)
 Llanowar Mentor (0.25)
 Magus of the Library (1)
 Mire Boa (0.1)
 Moldervine Cloak (0.25)
 Mwonvuli Acid-Moss (0.1)
 Reclaim (0.1)
 Recollect (0.1)
 Search for Tomorrow (0.1)
 Wall of Roots (1.5)

White:

Blazing Archon (0.5)
 Calcidern (0.25)
 Faith's Fetters (0.1)

Black:

Avatar of Woe (1.5)
 Bitter Ordeal (1.5)
 Bridge from Below (5)
 Darkblast (0.1)
 Dimir House Guard (0.1)
 Dread Return (0.5)
 Golgari Thug (0.1)
 Mortivore (0.5)
 Nether Traitor (1)
 Nightmare Void (0.1)
 Persecute (3)
 Plagued Rusalka (0.1)
 Stinkweed Imp (0.1)
 Street Wraith (0.75)
 Stronghold Rats (0.1)
 Tombstalker (3)
 Twisted Abomination (0.5)
 Zombify (0.5)

Gold:

Congregation at Dawn (0.25)
 Crime // Punishment (2)
 Debtors' Knell (2.5)
 Glare of Subdual (2)
 Loxodon Hierarch (4)
 Mortify (0.5)
 Mystic Enforcer (1)

Artifact:

Golgari Signet (0.1)
 Icy Manipulator (0.5)
 Orzhov Signet (0.1)
 Selesnya Signet (0.1)
 Serrated Arrows (2)

Land:

Arctic Flats (0.5)
 Brushland (3)
 Caves of Koilos (5)
 Dakmor Salvage (0.25)
 Forest (free)
 Horizon Canopy (6)
 Island (free)
 Orzhov Basilica (0.1)
 Plains (free)
 Saltcrusted Steppe (0.25)
 Scrying Sheets (4)
 Selesnya Sanctuary (0.1)
 Snow-Covered Forest (0.33)
 Snow-Covered Plains (0.33)
 Snow-Covered Swamp (0.33)
 Swamp (free)

Jötun Grunt (1)
Peace of Mind (0.1)
Resurrection (0.5)
Weathered Wayfarer (0.25)

Pillory of the Sleepless (0.1)
Putrefy (0.5)
Saffi Eriksdotter (1)
Selesnya Guildmage (0.25)
Teneb, the Harvester (1.5)
Vulturous Zombie (0.5)

Good luck!

As for next week?

Which card would you most like to see Ben build a deck around in two weeks?		
Jhoira of the Ghitu - The real Suspended Sentence!	2663	33.3%
Barren Glory - Look ma, no hands!	2456	30.7%
Pyromancer's Swath - Pure 100% Octane Burn!	1641	20.5%
Cloud Key - Combing you out since aught-seven!	1233	15.4%
Total	7993	100.0%

One Jhoira deck, coming right up!

*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, 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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