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Force of Will

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 Limited Information
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"The [Pro Tour](#) was won by 'the Sliver plan,' in pretty devastating fashion. In [Geneva](#), Mike Hron was steadfastly drafting black pretty much all weekend when everyone else felt it was pretty poor. In [Prague](#), Osawa was very clearly set on his red-green plan, splashing black for [Golgari Rotwurm](#) and little else, not just in the Top 8 draft, but throughout the Swiss. I know that for a good while of [Champions](#) block you were one of the bigger advocates of the [Dampen Thought](#) archetype (and variations thereon).

Bearing this in mind, what would you say are the relative merits and pitfalls of sitting down to a draft with a strong plan (be it colour preferences or something more specific) before even looking at your boosters? Is the extra practice with a specific plan worth the potential train wreck if the cards don't pan out to allow it?"

This was an excellent question that Tim Willoughby, of coverage fame, posed to me last week. It linked hand in hand with my thoughts about what I had intended to write about. So much so, in fact, that I have deleted my initial introduction and used his email instead! Maybe because it reminds me so much of the essay questions I used to have to answer...

Brought back into light by the newest PT winners forcing Slivers, this is a draft theory of great depth. On the surface, it seems like it is an all-or-bust play. Given that so much of drafting hinges on your subjective reaction to the drafter on your right, the obvious conclusion is that forcing will only work if it does not conflict with the dominant player to your right; if he is in the colours, or theme, and you are forcing, then you are, seemingly, doomed. This analysis is the simplest theory to apply to the various strategies of forcing. It will, taking into account slightly more complex factors, show you whether or not forcing a particular idea is something you might be interested in.

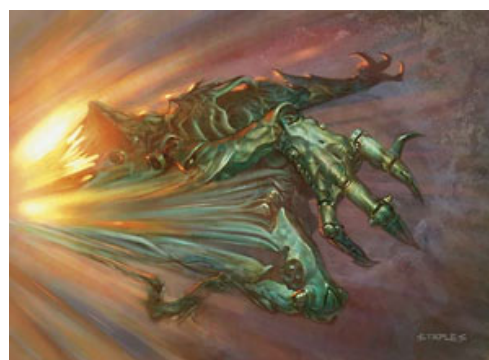
The easiest example to look at is forcing a particular colour, as Hron did in Pro Tour–Geneva and, more famously, Zvi Mowshowitz's PT–Nice T-shirt proclaiming his gambit of drafting white. There must, it should be reasoned, be two reasons as to why you would want to force a colour—either that it is simply too powerful and therefore negative EV (expected value) to not draft it or, rather, that the colour is so underdrafted that it will always be positive EV to draft it.

No format springs to mind for the first example, as the colours have never been so imbalanced. The closest instance there has been in *Odyssey / Torment / Judgment*, when black was heavily weighted in *Torment*, meaning that it might have been in your interest to cut black in the first pack so you could reap the rewards in the second booster. The downside of this strategy was that there was nothing to stop a player downstream from you from either opening a very powerful black card in the first pack, and then clinging to black, or one to just, due to it being so powerful, dip into the colour without having gone to the same extreme as you.

If a colour is simply too good, and so deep, then it might be possible to force it. This only works if it is also good throughout the draft, because if the guy on your right is also drafting the colour then you will have completely cut it off for the second pack, ensuring you plenty of goodies, but when the third pack comes around, the colour will still have to be deep enough so that you are happy with a deck full of the second best card in that colour in each pack. If this is the case throughout the draft, then it might be worthwhile to consider forcing.

The other alternative has far more potential to be an effective technique if there is a very good chance that you will be the only player drafting a colour on the table, or, that if there is another drafter, he or she is far enough away from you that the colour feed is still strong enough to warrant you wanting it. Once more, it is very unlikely that R&D will make a colour so weak that it will be practically undraftable, so it is reasonable to theorize that a colour will never be not worth drafting; and yet many players come to this conclusion every new draft format.

In order to force a colour effectively, the colour in question must be conceived as being bad by 75% of the draft table—odds which you can tilt in your favour by taking it early and thus denying the reactive drafters an option of dipping into it. Another aspect often overlooked when you are forcing is that



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you will almost certainly be playing another colour. From extensive practice, you will know which colours pair favourably with the forced colour, but in the end it is most likely that, unless you are committed to draft a certain colour combination, you will pair it with the colour flowing most freely from your right. In this case, the aspect of you forcing might have a secondary aspect on the draft (with the player on your left getting the other colour/colours that you are being fed later than he should), such that after a while, even if you are being cut in your forced colour, it won't be a complete train wreck because you will be saved by your "support" colour.

Driving through the Nevada desert, Steppenwolf classically playing on the radio, I found that an idea that has been fermenting in the back of my mind for a while has leapt to the forefront of my mind. Much of my philosophy research dealt with identifying extremes and, more often than not, reducing them to the conclusion that they are actually far from being as extreme as they were initially portrayed. The thought in question is that forcing a particular colour, unless you are not acting optimally or the format is completely screwed up, is simply the result of having a high propensity for a particular colour. So high, in fact, that your bias causes you to favour any strength in it over any other colour. Given this definition of it, it no longer seems to be such a radical theory, but rather a predisposition caused by experience in the format that suggests that it is in your interest to draft this way.

Forcing simply becomes not a deliberate attempt to end up a specific colour, but rather the application of card evaluation such that you value the cards of the specific colour higher than those of the others so that you will, more often than not, end up in the desired colour. When defined as this, it becomes not a rogue strategy, but a brilliant use of subjective card re-evaluation and then an application of reactive drafting, rather than in conflict of it, as it first appears.

There is an example in evolution theory that I want to bring up. It has been a while since I studied it, so forgive me if I get it slightly wrong. There is a hypothetical race of birds that resolve any decision, be it over food or a mate, by fighting. Now, there are two dominant character traits—the fighter and the coward. The fighter always fights at these conflicts, whilst the coward always runs away. However, these birds are all hemophilic, meaning that if they injure themselves during a conflict, they will certainly die. We can now suppose what kind of fights will occur. Two fighters can meet, almost certainly injuring themselves and dying as a result. Two cowards can fight, both running away, possibly splitting the object for the fight when they realise they do not wish to actually fight over it. The third option is when a fighter fights a coward; the fighter will win the object and the coward will have to find its food or mate elsewhere.



After centuries of breeding, it is likely that the fighter birds will become next to extinct as they will continually not survive long enough to procreate, whereas the cowards never injure themselves and live long and prosper. Here we can see that natural selection has ensured that the optimal social make up is one of purely pacifistic birds. This I liken to a draft environment of reactive drafters. Now this is an extreme as colour preferences, bad drafters, and the presence of people who do force entail that we are never left with such a mono-state.

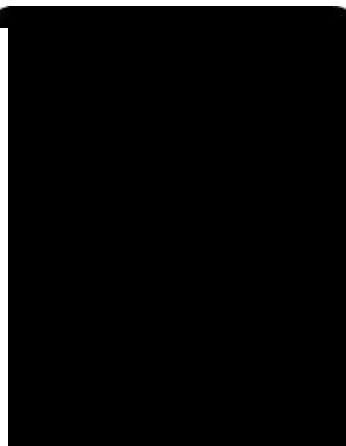
However, when a colour is so universally despised, the example of the purely pacifistic birds becomes more applicable. It is not too hard to see that in a race of complete pacifists, a rogue fighter (possibly born as the result of a freak dormant gene pairing) will dominate. It will win every fight it enters in, and in turn will prosper, reintroducing the fighter characteristic back into the gene pool. As proven earlier, the fighter will thrive, until it comes across other fighters, when it dwindles down to near extinction again. The rogue fighter in the minority is the drafter who forces. He is successful because the norm has become so passive that his aggressive strategy, focussing on a social niche, succeeds where before, in a naturally stable environment (the example of the birds becomes stable, but as an extreme, a rarity when compared to **Magic**—plus, in reality, it is likely that a non-hemophilic fighter would mutate and evolve), he would not have. This example brings us nicely to the dilemma about what happens when two or more drafters force the same strategy at a table.

Almost all strategies suffer when they are not the only one applying their angle to the draft. It is possible for two people colour forcing black to be on a table, but it will not work if they are sat near each other. Colour is flexible in this way. Alternative strategies almost always fall apart if they are not alone in their fashion. If the Sliver kids had run afoul of another Sliver team, they would have almost certainly stumbled and fallen. The reason for this is these archetypes focus on cards that are not valued highly by regular drafts and thus go far later than normal picks, enabling you to shape your archetype from any seat.

So far we've looked almost exclusively at forcing a particular colour, but there are many other types of forcing out there. You can force a colour combination—which drastically reduces your flexibility because you lose the option of reactively drafting your secondary colour—or an archetype. Archetypes vary in extremity from Bastien Perez's Pro Tour–Kobe red-green **Empty the Warrens / Herd Gnarr** strategy, which simply focused on taking undervalued cards with a high level of synergy, to (and I apologise for how often I use it but it is the extreme of Limited) the cohesive **Dampen Thought** archetype, where almost every card was a late pick.

All types of forcing can only succeed if the cards they hope to play are undervalued by regular drafters. Perez's deck worked because he picked the **Empty the Warrens** as a first-pick card whereas most players were happy to let it go sixth, meaning he consistently wound up with enough to sculpt his entire draft around them.

Imagine right now if there was an amazing archetype made up by combining **Mindlash Sliver**, **Dash Hopes**, and **Putrid Cyclops**. They are all



fifteenth pick cards in their respective sets so you could expect to pick up all that are opened. Assuming this combination was somehow powerful and lead to an unstoppable deck, you would have an incredible draft strategy at your fingertips.

This is why **Dampen Thought** worked. Most bizarre archetypes like this work because they are virtually impossible to thwart, unless someone else is also drafting them. None of the other drafters can waste their early picks hating your cards because they need to pick up their own, and even if they start cutting your wheel cards, you will still have had many picks. Chris Lachmann and Jacob Van Lunen succeeded because they used their early picks to take the highly valued removal and the Slivers that were too good to table, and their late picks snapping up the bad Slivers. However, even if people starting taking the dross Slivers away from them, which obviously happened, they still had the option to pick them the first time around if they needed them that badly. This inevitability is why these archetypes succeed.

There is one more type of forcing that I wish to look at. It is very narrow in its application but I feel it is still worth mentioning in passing. In almost every draft you play, the goal is to go undefeated and 3-0. At Pro Tours, if you 2-1 every draft you will finish in the top 40! With this in mind, fellow magicthegathering.com columnist Frank Karsten decided to force white-blue at both Worlds and PT-Geneva. We had done a lot of practice drafts and come to the conclusion that although it doesn't often pull off all the wins, white-blue almost always finished 2-1, and Frank felt this was good enough to force.

The reason it is possible to force white-blue in *Time Spiral* Block Draft is that between the colours there are a huge amount of playables. Cards like **D'Avenant Healer**, **Jedit's Dragons**, **Merfolk Thaumaturgist**, **Aquamorph Entity** and **Blind Phantasm** are all very late picks but are all perfectly playable. As long as he managed to fill each quota, Frank would end up with a deck that was solid. Sometimes he would be in a great seat for the colours and he would pull out the extra win, but even when he wasn't, the synergy of all the mediocre cards would come together ensuring that he would at least win more than he lost.

To conclude, forcing is sometimes a strategy you will want to apply, but it is seldom that it happens or that it is correct to do so. To force, you need to have extensive practice with the archetype, because you have to relearn individual card values as almost everything will change to mould the strategy. You also need to be fairly certain that you are the only one partaking in a particular tactic, or at least be able to recognise when there is somebody else (Slivers dry up early or weak cards that you expected to wheel don't come back). If someone else is drafting the same, or if the packs just don't comply, you have to know when to abandon your plan and adopt a new one. Often it will centre around a late but crucial pick that is easy to miss. If you do have to ditch the plan, you need to have the flexibility dive into something else and recognise what type of cards you will need—most forced archetypes have fallback options for when things go wrong. And as a final word, I am not an advocate of forcing because I believe it is far more likely for it to go wrong than work out, but good luck in trying.

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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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