

# Sample Variance

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 Limited Information  
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Welcome back to Limited Information. No Giant info this week, but under the auspices of Quentin Martin, this column has covered the subject before [here](#) and [here](#). The discussion is out there if you're interested. But that's not the plan today.

Instead we're going to talk about one my favoritest gamer subjects: variants. In my view, the capacity of a game to be tweaked is paramount to its quality. Having so many knobs to turn, to play up different skills or even the playing field, is a fun exercise in its own right, much less playing the new game itself.

**Magic** lends itself to this extraordinarily well. The game is complex, with plenty of moving parts. [Here](#) and [here](#) are all the official ways to play **Magic**. Great. But what if instead we drafted with four packs instead of three, or got to play two lands a turn, or started at 30 life, or played attack-left multiplayer? Congratulations, we've created variants.

Many, many **Magic** variants have been devised and executed over the years. In fact, every "official" manner of playing was at one point a tweak to whatever rules happened to be current at the time. Booster Draft, Two-Headed Giant... all these staples today, big experiments once upon a time. King Developer Devin Low wrote [a pair of articles](#) about Draft variants because, well, they're fun. Luckily for us tournament-going crowd, Limited variants also have a tendency to strengthen one's mainstream game. This makes sense; playing **Magic** in any capacity is worth a few experience points. But variants in particular offer some potent bonuses for frequent tournament attendees. Besides a welcome break from the occasional tedium of testing the same format over and over again, variants let you break out of your routine and try out cards and strategies that wouldn't likely come together in "normal" circumstances.



Below are a number of variants I've played many times over the years, as well as a brand new one. Each comes with a description of the mechanics involved, some benefits for trying it out, potential pitfalls, and finally how the variant rates in the grand pantheon. Enjoy!

## Zen

**How to play:** Get yourself a tournament pack of any big set expansion. Open, shuffle, play. For the first game at least, do not look at the deck!

**What works:** Zen, as the name implies, asks only for acceptance of what you have. There is no chance of failure in deck building, because the loving oompa-loompas at Carta Mundi have built the deck for you. In addition you get to recapture that thrill of the unknown. Playing a game in the raw, a.k.a. with a deck you've never seen before, is more than a little exciting. Did you open a powerful rare? No one will know until you draw it. Do they have a sick little enchantment in their deck? You've got forty-five shots at a **Disenchant**.

Of course all this adds some dimension to your Limited practice; a common theme of most variants. Standard fifteenth-pick cards *will* get played in Zen, 'cause that's what you got. What, you're just going to skip playing **Bog Hoodlums** because it never made the grade in Draft or Sealed? Nope, you're going to run it out there and hope you win the clash. Zen forces you to play with fresh cards, and that's okay. Your mana base works, technically, but it's not pretty. You've got the right quantity of lands, but the balance is completely out of whack. Again, being immersed in a situation you avoid in your normal Limited affairs is not a bad thing. Stretch those under-used muscles once in a while. We've played a lot of Zen as practice fodder before Sealed tournaments, and as long as it wasn't the *exclusive* modus, the gains were genuine. Try injecting a little Zen into your next Sealed playtest sessions and see what happens.

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RULES

Finally, a huge boon to Zen is its incredible portability. Starters come shrink-wrapped and are eminently pocket sized. Considering nothing gets discarded, Zen is the perfect game in cars, buses, airplanes, or restaurants. Give it a shot next time you and a **Magic** buddy are going to be in close quarters for a while.

**What doesn't:** Deck building and drafting are designed as exercises of skill, so that the skillful player is not so dependent on the luck of the random product. Zen of course removes that part of the equation. There are some starters out there that simply outclass the opposition. Similar to card quality problems, mana concerns can go from either nonexistent to a fun challenge to the destruction of the entire deck. This is a mirror to real life of course, but again you have less control on the outcome. Finally, there is a risk that your card valuations get out of whack, when a killer card in Zen is basically trash in any serious Limited exercise. **Blockbuster**, I'm looking at you. If you are playing Zen as a practice tool, and I recommend it, just make sure to get some real-world practice in too.

### Final Grade



A+

A+. Zen is fun, practical, portable, and incredibly low-maintenance for what you get in return. It should be a staple in any Limited player's suite.

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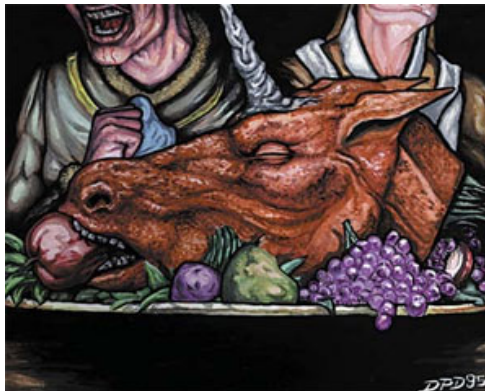
## Rotisserie Draft

**How to play:** This format has been covered numerous times over the years, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Yet it deserves this brief mention because it's another stalwart variant that exercises different skills while still providing loads of fun.

Once more, Rotisserie draft replaces all sealed product with the entire contents of a set (or a block, or whatever. Wait, *Lorwyn / Morningtide* Rotisserie? Hmm...). Like Rochester drafts of old (below), players go down the line taking whatever card they want from the 300+ on the table, with player 8 getting two, and then back around the other way.

**What works:** This is hands-down the best teacher of signaling out there. As in all drafts, sometimes you need to force your colors and sometimes you need to abandon. This applies to normal Booster Draft of course, but with booster you may make mistakes with hidden (limited?) information. Neither of those exists here, which gives the drafter very clear direction on how to operate (which isn't to say it's particularly simple to execute).

Somewhat similarly, the drafter needs to make predictions on what other people are going to take for their decks. "Tabling" a card in a pack, when a card you want comes back to you in pick 9 or 10, is *hugely* important in a normal draft. It's more of an art than a science, but Rotisserie plays up the potential in the extreme. Can you determine what other people at the table are trying to accomplish, and what cards they're going to prioritize? Once the easy stuff like **Nameless Inversion** and



**Galepowder Mage** get the pick up, how long can you dawdle on **Stinkdrinker Daredevil** or **Vivid Meadow**? It's a game of well-seasoned chicken, and the rewards are palpable.

Finally as someone up there said, Rotisserie Draft gives you exposure to rares of a saturation that you would not get anywhere else. The average number of rares one plays with in Draft is ~3.1, in Sealed it's ~5.05, and in Rotisserie it's 10. These are great lessons, especially for a synergistic block like *Lorwyn*, where knowing precisely how well **Nath of the Gilt-Leaf** or **Wanderwine Prophets** play in their respective tribes is wonderful info. Sure if you draft enough you'll eventually have exposure to everything but A: that's a lot of drafts, and B: even seeing the rares doesn't mean you want to take them at the time. Rotisserie Draft offers precision and efficiency.

**What doesn't:** There is a decent cost overlay involved. It's more than your average draft (the first time), but the bigger issue is that it's generally centered on one person. Sure you could set up some *crazy system* for *insane people* where everyone's responsible for 1/8 of the set in total, but more likely someone redeemed a set on **Magic Online** or has the cards lying around somewhere and offers use for the group. Friendly, but sometimes there are logistical concerns.

More troubling, Rotisserie Draft is technically a solvable format. The "correct" first pick leads to the "correct" second pick, and so on. Whether people actually put in the time for all these algorithms is another issue, but perfect information does create the concern. More likely, there are simply diminishing returns to the process. The lack of randomness offers benefits, but there are drawbacks as well. Luckily, new sets come out all the time...

## Verdict



10/10. Getting an entire set laid out already conveys all kinds of benefits, much less plumbing the nooks and crannies for unusual situations and rare rare-combinations. Diminishing returns notwithstanding, these are always fun the first time, and there's also the potential of messing around with the older sets.

## Stipulation Draft

**How to play:** Your normal 8-person draft, with only the tiniest of modifications. Eight modifications, to be precise. Each drafter has a restriction, or stipulation, or geas if you want to be flavorful, that dictates what the person must or must not draft. Before the packs are opened, everyone writes down possible stipulations and throws them in a hat. Each player picks one at random, and drafting hilarity ensues. Examples of possible stipulations are in the sidebar.

**What works:** First off, Stipulation Draft is *hilarious*. The agony of a drafter who can't... take... the... perfect... card is terribly fun. Observers of stip drafts (in my experience, only Cube Draft outranks the audience draw) will be rolling in the aisles as some exceptionally good card is passed down the line, each previous drafter being unable to take it for whatever reason. As an example, the first Stipulation Draft I ever did was in *Invasion* block. A **Kavu Chameleon** went 8th or something silly like that, as one person needed two-power creatures, one needed rares, one couldn't take uncommons, etc. The audience, those that weren't in on the metagame, were flabbergasted about how downright awful this table of drafters were.

### Sample Stipulations

- Each creature must have two or less power
- Can only draft cards A-M
- Can only draft cards N-Z
- Must play nine rares
- Must play six enchantments
- Must play with hand faceup
- Cannot play any card on your opponent's turn
- Cannot draft uncommons
- Can only draft odd-numbered collector numbered cards
- Can only draft even-numbered collector numbered cards
- Must draft four-color no-green
- Only even-costed cards
- Only odd-costed cards
- Must mana burn for one at the end of your opponent's turn, if possible
- Must play mono-color
- Block-specific, e.g. nine changelings or half artifacts, etc.

What works here, more than anything else, is variety and fun. This particular variant does not stretch **Magic** muscles worth stretching in any meaningful sense. Rather, it's an opportunity to see things that don't arise in other venues, share some laughs, and generally get a chuckle at absurd situations. Stipulation Draft is simply a fun variant, and that's more than a little okay. Frankly I'd rather have one extra-fun variant in the repertoire than multiple practical-but-dull.

**What doesn't:** You don't learn much more than you would doing a normal draft, and since you're shredding through any pretense of synergy, probably less. There's also the danger of underpowered or overpowered stipulations cast upon you. I recommend each stipulation getting approval before going into the hat, but even then something's going to end particularly well / badly. A lot of stipulations are based on the honor system, so if people in your group are sketchy, it could be frustrating. Also, speaking from personal experience here, stipulation drafts seem to go hand in hand with hangovers.

### Celestial Rating



Grand Star. Stipulation is the epitome of a fun Draft variant, where each experience is different and everyone is having a good time. I wouldn't use it to test for the latest Grand Prix, but rather as an enjoyable break from the rigors of Spikey behavior. Every time a group of friends are together with packs and looking for something to spice up the experience, I recommend a Stipulation Draft.

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## Hypotheticals

**How to play:** First pick first pack, do you take **Thundercloud Shaman** or **Briarhorn**? **Kaervek's Torch** or **Hammer of Bogardan**? If you have an Elf deck with double **Gilt-Leaf Ambush: Elvish Warrior**, **Winnower Patrol**, or **Reins of the Vinestead**? Why? Hey, guess what, we just played Hypotheticals!

As some of you know, I'm currently in law school. "Hypos" is a very popular game with these law professors. There will be some case, for example the liability of a man who didn't lock his gun up and his son's friend comes over and gets hurt. The student will go over the legal doctrine (the rule) involved, then the prof will change the facts to see if that rule still applies, like if a housekeeper under the employ of the father left the gun safe open, or the weapon was safely locked up, but the son's friend was the daughter of some famous safecracker, etc. It's plenty of fun, unless the profs are actually calling on you. Although that doesn't quite parallel **Magic** ("First pick first pack **Thundercloud Shaman** or **Briarhorn**, but the **Thundercloud Shaman** has been drinking"), you can always change the cards in the pack or the cards so far drafted to make it more interesting.



**What works:** True story: I was in a car with three other competitors driving from Minnesota to Iowa for a Pro Tour Qualifier. The route is precisely as dull as it sounds, and it was 2 a.m. the Saturday of (we were fans of all-nighters back then. Youth!) I was dead tired so I grab space and try to get some shuteye. As I'm curling up as much as possible, the two in front start up a discussion, nominally about the value of one card over another. I immediately perk up. It was the oddest thing; not only did I want to join the discussion, but I was no longer even tired. I joined in the conversation, almost completely refreshed. But we'll talk more about that in a few weeks.

If the byline of what you're reading right now wasn't clear enough, I'm a guy who enjoys communication. The exchange of ideas, so that each person benefits, expands their view... very exciting! Luckily for most readers, I've

found **Magic** players to be of a similar breed, at least when it comes to the game. **Magic** is a wholly contextual experience, and what's correct one pack may be comically wrong the next. Under the guise of hypotheticals, people exchange scenarios both ones they were involved in and ones they are concerned about becoming involved in, looking for some meta-rules on how to handle such a situation in the future.

Like a **Fact or Fiction** split, you know you've got a good one when your subject has to think long and hard. It's not *just* whatever two cards you happen to matchup next to each other, it's about a simple-seeming question opening more and more roads of debate. *Why* is one card superior to the other? What has to happen for the other card to win out? What if instead of X it was X+1, or Y? There's no reliance on product here, it's simply a group of people having a vigorous debate on their **Magic** philosophies. And that's pretty darn fun.

**What doesn't:** Realistically, these kinds of games are only as enjoyable and useful as the company you keep. One danger is trying to debate with people who convert too early, as opposed to those defending their position. What's the point if the person who speaks loudest always wins? Worse, someone may actually go backwards and not trust their instincts in situation X, and simply rote respond at a real life scenario. The worst of all is when someone is berated and/or insulted for talking about their pick, rather than being engaged in a respectful discussion. The goal of hypotheticals isn't to *win*, it's to stretch your mind by purposefully talking about your inclinations and why. The very act of conversation is its own reward. Hypotheticals has a key role in my tournament regimen... but we'll get to that in a few weeks too.

### Debate Quotient Level



5 Rosewaters. I thought Zen was portable, but this! It strengthens your analytic skills and your debate skills, and potentially gives you a new perspective on difficult situations. You get to talk about **Magic** with people who play **Magic**! What more are you looking for?

## Winchester

**How to play:** So my buddy Brian Wong, of [Double Vision](#) fame, comes up one time and says he wants to make a new format. He really liked Winston Draft (an excellent variant, detailed [here](#) and [here](#)), but wanted to combine Winston with the outdated Rochester draft (a format where each booster is laid face up one at a time, like a smaller Rotisserie draft. [Info here](#)). This was an interesting challenge. How do you combine the face-down of Winston with the face-up of Rochester, while keeping it fun and reasonable for two players? Well...



- Take six boosters, opens them and shuffle everything together.
- Someone is chosen to go first and begins their turn by laying out four cards from the pile, three face-up and one face-down.
- That player then takes one of the four cards from the pile, leaving three. The second player takes two cards, and the first player takes the one remaining.
- Switch off who picks first for each batch.
- Once per draft per player, on whoever's turn it is to go first, after the cards are laid out they can either invoke the Gun or the Reload.
- Gun: the four cards are discarded, and the other player gets a face-down card from the top of the deck.
- Reload: Two more cards are added to the initial four, one face-up and once face-down. The other player chooses two of the six cards first, then the remaining four go to the one who called the Reload.
- Take your drafted cards, build as normal, and play.

**What works:** I've played Winchester exactly one time, and it was pretty fun. A decent mix of strategy and surprise. It's another opportunity to play with underused cards, practice signaling, and so on. If you're looking for a new two-player Draft format, you're good to go.

**What doesn't:** Hard to say, being such a new format and all. It's fun, but I don't think it's superior to Winston draft. Quite likely it needs some adjusting and tweaking to make it more enjoyable, but that's part of the fun of variants. It's something different, and that has value.

### Tentative Rating



Three thumbs up (tentatively). It's fun with the potential for more. Good enough for inclusion in the Big Book of Variants.

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## Cube

**How to play:** Cube Draft has also been discussed before, most recently at the [2007 Invitational](#). But to recap, a Cube draft is simply a draft with the strongest cards in the history of **Magic**. Every possible first pick, from **Shriekmaw** to **Rolling Thunder** to **Umezawa's Jitte** to **Balance** to **Ancestral Recall** has a spot in the cube. Each booster is constructed randomly or semi-randomly (using color balance), so each experience is a new one. Draft your [5.0s](#) and play with 'em. Repeat often.

**What works:** Everything. Wow. This is my absolute favorite way to play **Magic**, bar none. No shackles from block balance, or flavor balance, or any number of very good reasons why Wizards of the Coast can't print a set full of 4.8s and above. What we would call today "obscene errors" finds a home in Vintage and Cube. Vintage fans are welcome to it, but for me, nothing comes close to the *purity* of the game that is Cube. You're a wizard casting spells that are absolutely cataclysmic against an opponent doing the same. Each time the deck is different, and each time your power levels are off the charts. The best the game has to offer versus the world.

And the hypotheticals are beyond absurd. **Yawgmoth's Bargain** versus **Mox Ruby** versus **Morphling** versus **Rancor**? Well, why not?

**Best Cube Draft First Pick?**

- Ancestral Recall
- Balance
- Psychatog
- Black Lotus
- Demonfire
- Skullclamp
- Umezawa's Jitte
- Yawgmoth's Will
- Sylvan Library
- Mana Drain
- Masticore
- Sol Ring
- Mind Twist
- Chaos Orb
- Some other card

Submit my Vote

As mentioned above, Cube Draft draws a crowd like nothing else. Much of the contents are practically mythical. Who sees a **Forcefield** activated these days? An audience is a good thing; it builds community and gets people interested in developing their own. People cheering when some improbable tier 1 cards combo up in ways never seen before...everyone wins there.

Former Washingtonian Brett Allen was my introduction to the Cube. Each card was foiled or promoed or signed as much as possible, making his Cube beautiful and very reflective.

The list for the Invitational can be found [here](#).

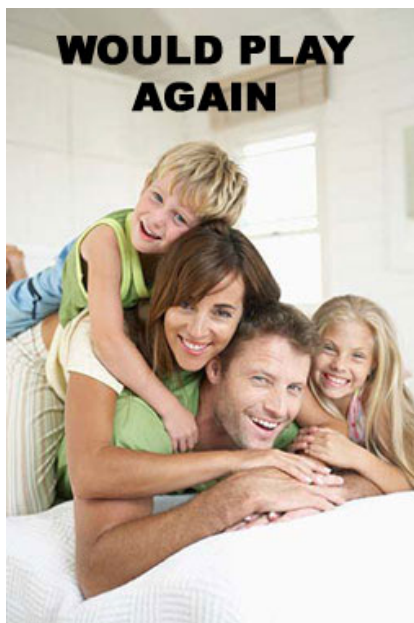
**What doesn't:** Wizards of the Coast has a machine in the basement that can spit out any card in existence, but for most folk getting the truly insane stuff is, well, insane. While Cube doesn't require the Power Nine, or even going beyond the Standard card pool, like Rotisserie draft there is a large initial investment, usually centered on

one person; the so-called Keeper of the Cube. It's not just the price of entry, it's that all cards in the Cube deserve sleeves (for obvious reasons), and therefore Cube cards are a little annoying to transfer back and forth between the Cube and a normal deck. This isn't a deal-breaker, but it is a barrier to entry.

Also, it's unlikely there's truly much strategic gain to Cube Draft. Yes, any game of **Magic**, experience points, etc., but cube scenarios don't translate to real life that often. In a general sense I suppose ("Do I run out this **Empyrial Armor** now or wait till I know it can stick for a turn?"), but really it's a whole 'nother universe. Not only will Cube not help for your next Limited PTQ, its existence will probably distract you from getting serious testing done. Not that anyone feels sorry for you; you get to Cube.



### [Survey Says](#)



Would play again. 'Nuff said.

Do you have a favorite variant, or suggestions on how to improve anything listed above? Share them in the forums. Next week we'll have the last audition article. Thanks to everyone whose given their opinions so far, the talent from the writers has been really excellent. Keep those comments coming and I'll see you in two weeks. Until then, thanks for reading.



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