MAGIC The Gathering® Old School

DECK TYPES AND STRATEGIES

By

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Introduction

While a vast number of different card combinations can form a deck, there are much fewer valid strategic approaches to winning a game. It is a deck's chosen strategic approach that motivates its design. Decks that share approaches share many of the same fundamental elements and can be classified together for practical purposes. For example, a given deck might be good against all or most decks that win primarily by attacking with creatures, but weak against all or most decks that win (essentially) by establishing a dominant board position, even if those decks use different cards entirely. We can design a deck to be robust not just against some general field, but against several types of decks. If a deck is already performing well against one entire type, we can try to improve its strategic approach against another type.

In this article the basic deck archetypes are explained. The article is a consolidation and structuring of parts from various articles previously published as well as adding illustrations and comments by the author. Where text parts have been included from previously published articles, credit should go to the writers of the original articles. Sources used to consolidate this article can be seen at the end of the document.

No matter what deck strategy you want to pursue, what cards you want to play or how you are building your deck - there are primarily three aspects you can make your Magic game about:

> **A) Dealing damage.**
> **B) Creating attrition - while building resource advantage**
> **C) Exploiting a specific resource / combo.**

No matter what aspect you are building toward, it is likely one of these three aspects that will be the focus in your deck. These three aspects are also characterizing the three classic deck archetypes in Old school Magic.

> **The three archetype decks are:**
> "**Aggro**" – fast threats and dealing continuous damage
> "**Control**" – wearing down or weakening opponent while building resource advantage
> "**Combo**" – Combine cards into a powerful effect/state that wins the game

Throughout the years, where Magic has continued to develop other key deck type has emerged called "Midrange", "Tempo" and "Prison". These are often mentioned also being deck Archetypes. This page maintains the three original classis Deck Archetypes and position the "Midrange", "Tempo" and "Prison" deck types as a "Hybrid Decks".

"Tempo" and "Midrange" between the "Control" and "Aggro" archetype decks and "Prison" between "Control" and "Combo" archetype decks"

The three archetype decks
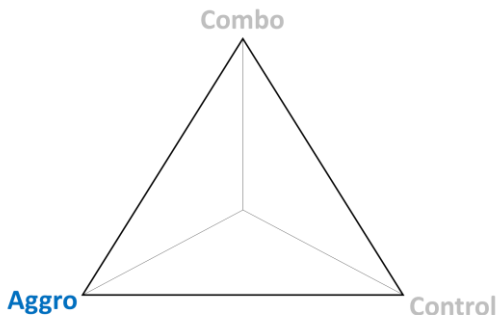
"AGGRO" DECK ARCHETYPE
(Make the game all about dealing damage)

The defining characteristic of "Aggro" decks is, that the strategic approach it primarily focuses on - is fighting the opponent's life total.

The name being short for 'aggressive' - "Aggro"" decks are designed for high damage output and blistering speed to end games before an opponent can execute their plan. The further you push a deck toward dealing damage to an opponent, the more aggressive it becomes.

The decks often sacrifice powerful effects and long-term strategy for simple, repeatable threats that need immediate answers. "Aggro" decks can sometimes dip into disruptive strategies or even combo elements to pull off a quick win

Playing "Aggro" has some nice advantages. For instance, you can often close a game out before an opponent can mount a proper defense, meaning an opponent may die before he or she ever gets a chance to draw or cast the majority of the cards they are holding.

"Aggro" decks are often single-colored, which can come out of budgetary concerns, and function best, a.k.a. quickest, when they don't run into color issues when casting threats.

There is a reason red is synonymous with "Aggro": Red is highly adept at "dealing damage," which makes it an ideal base for "Aggro" shell. Its "burn" spells double as interaction with potential threats and blockers, as well as direct damage to an opponent's life total.

Not only are red "Aggro" decks naturally suited at dealing both direct and indirect damage, they are easily built for consistent speed through reliable mana production. It's hard to get "color screwed" with a deck that plays 20 Mountains.

"Aggro" decks primarily focus on devoting most resources to pushing damage through but can include a small selection of cards dedicated to disruption, permission, or removal. Decks that devote a significant portion of slots to non-"Aggro" cards fall into the "Tempo" archetype (explained later).

Other colors can also provide effective "Aggro" decks despite having lesser access to direct damage. For the other colors , there are two primary ways to beat down opponents, and both are effective: "Run Them Over" or "Go Wide".

These are highly dependent on creature combat and aggressive attacks (also called 'beatdown' decks). The aim is to develop an advantage in the early game before the opponent gets started. Usually, these decks have a low mana curve and try to overwhelm the opponent before they can build any board presence or stabilize. This is generally accomplished using efficiently costed creatures to close out games, ideally casting at least one threat each turn.

A Green-Blue Weenie Creature deck, is an example of a deck, that pressures hard with small aggressive creatures backed up with buff enchantments and instants (like Unstable mutation, giant growth and Beserk) that transforms the creatures into big powerful beaters with trample. Green-Blue Berserk is effective at *running people over.*

A mono-white Weenie creature deck, is another example of a "Aggro" deck, diverges from the red deck formula. The greatest strength of this type of deck is the ability to *go wide* by presenting numerous smaller threats. This makes it difficult for an opponent to block all creature damage every turn or deal with everything before it's too late.

The key to all "Aggro" decks - right from the first land deployment - is to focus is on presenting and maintaining pressure every turn from turn one to end the game.

Example "Aggro" decks:
- UG Mutation Berserk
- RW Pink Weenie
- Mono Red Burn
- Mono White Weenie
- Mono Red Goblin
- Mono Black "Aggro"
- Mono Green "Aggro"
- Mone Red Paul Sligh
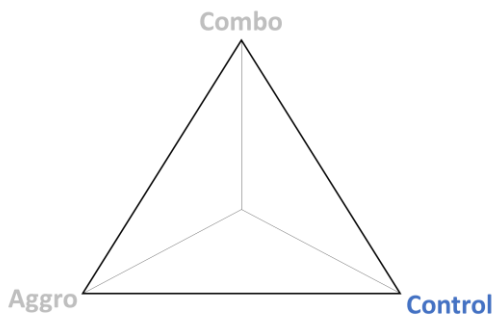
"CONTROL" DECK ARCHETYPE
(Make the game about attrition and resources)

> *"Control" decks are defined by putting emphasis on resources and attrition-based strategy. While there are many types of "Control" deck, all focus on creating resource-based advantage that is leveraged through attrition-based advantage.*

The most common strategy is answering opposing threats, running the opponent out of threats or cards, and coming over the top with whatever is left over.

"Control" decks avoid the short game racing and attempt to slow the game down to last longer by executing their attrition plan. As the game progresses, "Control" decks can take advantage of their slower, more powerful, cards

Playing against control decks can be frustrating as you may be spending the majority of the game being obstructed and playing on your opponent's terms. Control decks are also referred to as "Permission" decks as you often have to be "granted permission" to cast a spell, use a cards ability or attack with a creature – or you might face a counter spell, removal spell, tapping effect etc.

Blue and white is often the strongest colors for Control/Permission decks. The combination of powerful white removal cards (attrition) paired with blue's natural talent for drawing cards (building card advantage) and countering spells (permission) is quite effective. This strategic approach is especially strong against some "linear" (see later) decks that are mainly built to focus on own play with few answers.

Building card advantage is important aspect of "Control" decks. Old School has some efficient card draw engines in the form of Ancestral Recall, Braingeyser, Timetwister, Wheel of Fortune, Jayemdae Tome, Jalum Tome and Winds of Change (technically the two latter is not draw engines, but rather recycles cards).

Old School does also have significant mana acceleration that is also frequent cards in a "Control" deck in the form of Black Lotus, the five Mox, Sol Ring, Mana Vault, Fellwar Stone, Dark Ritual, and various other cards that can help build a fast man resource advantage

It's false to assume that "Control" decks are only re-active and defensive. One of the most classic control-counter moves is proactive, and also attrition-based: Cast Mana drain to counter + cast Mind Twist or brain Geyser in your following round = opponent has nothing left in his/her hand or you have several additional cards in advantage.

The primary strength of "Control" decks is their ability to counter or disrupt opponents spells, devalue the opponent's cards and gain card advantage. The decks do this in four ways:

1) Answering threats at a reduced cost. Given the opportunity, "Control" decks can gain card advantage by answering multiple threats with one spell ("clearing"/"wiping" the board), stopping expensive threats with cheaper spells, and drawing multiple cards or forcing the opponent to discard multiple cards with one spell.
2) Not playing threats to be answered. By playing few proactive spells of their own, "Control" decks gain virtual card advantage by reducing the usefulness of opposing removal cards.
3) Disrupting synergies. Even if "Control" decks cannot deal with all threats directly, they can leave out whichever ones stand poorly on their own. (e.g., an enchantment which gives a bonus to creatures will never need attention if all enemy creatures are quickly neutralized).
4) Dragging the game out and/or exhausting the opponent's resources until the game stabilizes in favor of the "Control" deck player. An opponent's faster cards and cheaper creatures will become less effective over time.

Brian Weismann's "The Deck" is the most famous "Control" deck in old school Magic.

Example "Control" decks:
- The Deck
- Karma-Tomb
- The Beast
- Mono Blue Permission

Combo

Aggro   Control
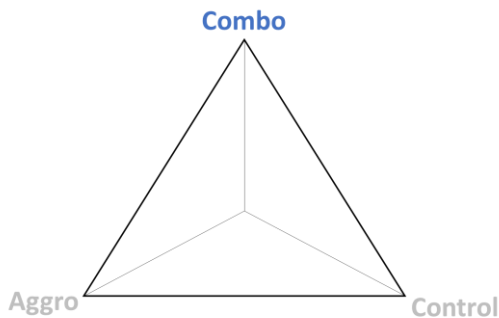
"COMBO" DECK ARCHETYPE
(Make the game about "something else")

Combo decks are defined by using the interaction of two or more cards (a "combination") to create a powerful effect that either wins the game immediately or creates a situation that subsequently leads to a win. Many combo decks are not strictly limited to a two-card combo. Rather, combo decks tend to be synergy   decks designed to exploit certain cards or resources.

Combo decks value consistency, decent speed, and resilience:
- The deck should be reliable enough to produce the combo on a regular basis
- The deck should be able to use the combo fast enough to win before the opponent, and
- The deck should be able to withstand disruption and still win.

Of the three major deck archetypes, Combo is the most difficult to clearly define because it is very broad and encompasses many things covering a diverse range of interactions. Combo decks want to make the game about something specific: one card, a synergy between specific cards, or a type of interaction that creates a profound and powerful effect in the game—often leading to a instant one turn win. However, one thing can be said in general: "Combo" decks rarely win by creature attack. Although there are exceptions it is most frequently based on a non-creature win condition

In old school there are some draw engines (same as mentioned under "Control" archetype section) and a few tutor cards that can search your library in order to help draw or fetch the card(s) needed to fuel the combo. There are relatively limited strong combo finishers compared to modern formats – but there are some that also are powerful. Some of the strongest combo's in old school are:

- Dreams Deck: Underworld Dreams plus any strong draw spell (Howling Mine, Winds of Change, Brain geyser, Ancestral recall or Winds of Change)

- Power Monolith: Power Artifact combined with Basalt Monolith to generate infinite mana and using any X burn or draw spell (Fireball, Disintegrate, or Brain geyser).

- Mirror-Ball: Fireball and Mirror Universe-based combo. This is basically anything that can deplete your life total, while allowing you to cast Mirror Universe, (optionally) protect it, and cycle through your deck in the process. Sylvan Library and Channel are excellent cards for these purposes.

- Time Vault Decks: Time Vault (if playing as unrestricted) combined with Animate Artifact and Instill Energy. strong combo – but it is a three-card combo. Time Vault can also be combined with 4 Twiddle cards (Twiddle-Valut).

- Tax-Edge: Lands Edge combined with Land Tax allows the player to draw a lot of lands fast that can be used to kill the opponent with massive damage in a few rounds.

- Channel-Fireball: The most classic two-card combo is brought into early Magic by Bertrand Lestrée in his game-changing Zoo deck. But since Channel is restricted (and has been since 1994) this combo is difficult to rely on. It also has the additional downside of opening its caster up to be killed by a well-timed Lightning Bolt. Another unfortunate situation – assuming an opponent has a counter of some type, the opponent allows Channel to resolve, but counters the Fireball, leaving the caster of the combo at a dangerously low life total.

Example Combo decks:
- Dreams
- Power Monolith
- Twiddle-Vault
- Mirror-Ball
- Tax-Edge
- Eureka
- Lich Mirror
- Cloaked Ali
- Karma Tomb
- All Hallows Eve reanimator
- Robot-coffins
- Fork Recursion
- Candle Flare
- Enchantress

Other "Hybrid" deck types
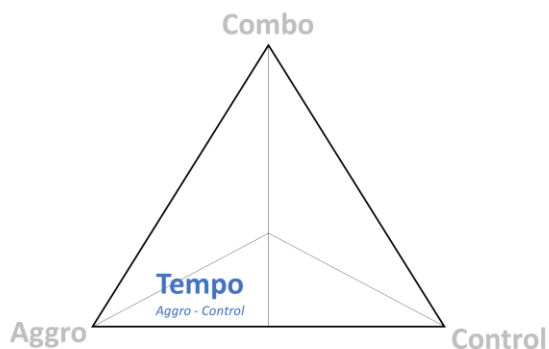
TEMPO *"AGGRO-CONTROL" DECK*

> *"Tempo" is another name for the "Aggro"-"Control" hybrid. It aims to cast quick threats with the intent to overwhelm before the opponent can develop an advantageous board state. The "Control" elements are often found in the form of burn (direct damage) or removal spells, as they not only wipe the board of opposing blockers, but can be dually used to close out the game.*

These decks attempt to deploy quick threats while protecting them with light "permission" and disruption long enough to win. These are frequently referred to as "Tempo" strategies (hence the name of this hybrid deck), as they are built with a sense of timing. "Tempo" players look to "Control" the game early and take advantage of a strong board state. Where pure "Control" decks look to out class players with more quality in the later stages of the game, Tempo looks to keep opponents off balance from the very start.

In short this hybrid archetype borrows the creature element from "Aggro" deck archetype and the disruption element from "Control" deck Archetype

The origin that defined this deck type was the W/G "Zoo deck" that Bertrand Lestrée played in the 1996 Pro Tour finale. Much like "Aggro" strategies, formats that allow the inclusion of un-restricted Strip Mines and use of Fallen Empires cards empowers a "Tempo" deck win percentage over "Control" and "Combo" decks. Well-known cards from Fallen Empires series that can fuel this deck type are: Hymn to Tourach, High Tide, Goblin Grenade, Order of Leitbur and Order of the Ebon Hand

Example Tempo decks:
- WRU Lion-Dib Burn
- Lestrée Zoo
- UR Counter-Burn
- UW Alban Lauter
- GR Erhnam-Burn'em
- GWU Erhnam-on Ice
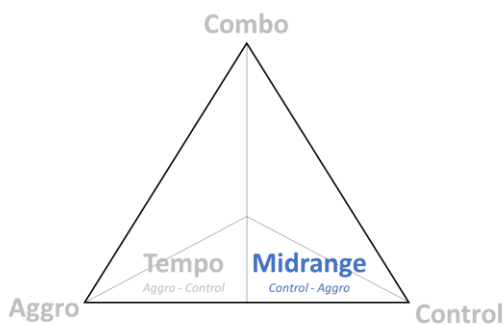
MIDRANGE *"CONTROL-AGGRO" DECK*

> *A typical "Midrange" deck has an early game plan of mana ramp and control, but begins to play threats once it reaches four to six mana. A "Midrange" deck will often seek to play a reactive, attrition-based game against "Aggro" decks and a more proactive, tempo-based game against "Control" decks. This is referred to as "going bigger" than "Aggro" and "getting in under "Control".*

The hallmark of a "Midrange" deck, at least for Old School, are creatures that have converted mana costs of four or higher. "Midrange" can have the advantage over traditional "Aggro" strategies because all of the creatures are simply larger than those in the "Aggro" deck. Popular midrange creatures in 93/94 format show up in the form of efficient spells like Erhnam Djinn, Juzám Djinn, and Serra Angel, but include the ranks of Mahamoti Djinn, Force of Nature, or even larger summons. These threats are what this deck type is trying to maximize. You cannot play a "Midrange" deck without excellent "fatties".

"Midrange" decks drive relatively high mana curves. They contain spells for the early game that lead into cards included for the midgame. There's also relatively good incentive to play 'scaling' cards like Fireball that get better and better as the game progresses.

Because of their high curves, midrange decks must reserve a healthy amount of deck slots to mana to effectively play their spells.

Like "Aggro", midrange decks attempt to win largely through repeated use of the attack step. But unlike "Aggro", midrange decks put on little early pressure with permanent-based threats and also finds one way or another to defend themselves, especially against "Aggro" decks. Here you'll often find dedicated board control elements not unlike what you'd expect in a "Control" deck. You will often find land destruction to buy more time in this deck type.

One midrange strategy is to quickly accelerate mana or otherwise get a huge threatening fatty into play. Large creatures need to attack, and if you can get a large creature into play earlier, logic follows that you'll get additional attacks in, which equals more damage, which equals deader opponents. Due to this these decks often uses mana acceleration cards like Llanowar Elves and Birds of Paradise to help generating early mana

Many creatures in a midrange deck are potent enough to kill an opponent by themselves. One strategy a midrange deck can employ is to play just one large threat, then force the opponent to deal with that threat or die. Usually, the threat is either neutralized or matched in board presence. If the opponent committed lots of resources to the board, this becomes a great opportunity for the Midrange deck to equalize the table with a reset button such as Nevinyrral's Disk, "Balance" or "Armageddon".

This strategy when executed correctly is one of the very best against "Aggro" decks. The "Aggro" player is constantly wrecked by the dilemma of attacking through a large blocker or being decimated by a reset button. In addition, a large creature can quickly finish off a crippled "Aggro" player and prevent them from top-decking a lucky streak of threats or burn. Often "Control" decks in tournaments will sideboard into this kind of strategy to have a better matchup against "Aggro" decks.

Example Midrange decks:
- RUB Troll-Disco
- GW Erhnam-geddon
- BG Machine Head
- UW Skies
- Atog Smash
- 4C Composition A
- UW Robots
- BW Dead Guy Ale

Combo

Prison
Control - Combo

Tempo
Aggro - Control

Midrange
Control - Aggro

Aggro
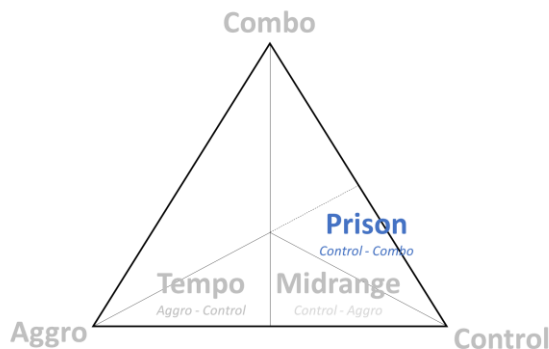
Control

PRISON *"CONTROL-COMBO" DECK*

> *A Common type of "Control"-"Combo" is "Prison decks" which has given name to this hybrid deck type that aims for full control through resource denial via a "Combo". Concepts for this type of decks are often relatively simple but extremely powerful. This deck type is defined by oppressive cards that slow down the game and deny players of resources or prevent a player from advancing the game state.*

The very first Magic World Championship 1994 deck, in the hands of Zak Dolan, featured foundational prison elements. Even today, many refer to his deck as "Stasis Control," despite the deck featured only a pair of "Stasis"

What distinguish "Prison" decks from land destruction strategies more broadly is that they do not rely on single-use spells to achieve that end, removing lands one-for-one with "Stone Rain" and "Sinkholes". Rather, they use clever combinations and more devious tactics to produce the same effect.

For a deck type that WotC previously has vocalized intending not to promote (they favor creature combat), it is incredible just how many cards the early old school sets provided to make this deck type viable. Notably, the "Legend" card series contains a significant amount of non-creature prison cards for a single non-core set.

Staple cards in "Prison" decks are Nether Void, Gloom, In the Eye of Chaos, The Tabernacle at Pendrell Vale, Land Equilibrium, Mana Vortex, Meekstone, Ankh of Mishra, Balance, Winter Orb, Icy Manipulator, Relic Barrier, Kismet, Stasis, Strip Mine, Sinkhole, Armageddon, and some others.

Winter Orb is one of the most efficient ways to tie up an opponent's mana base. But it suffers from the fact that it affects both players. The most obvious way to overcome this obstacle is to use Icy Manipulator or Relic Barrier to tap Winter Orb on your opponent's end step, so that Winter Orb leaves your mana undisturbed. This makes Winter Orb effectively one-sided. Meanwhile, Icy Manipulator can also be used to tap down opponent's lands or mana on their upkeep, such that they have a very difficult time breaking free of the lock.

A similar approach is possible with Stasis. Like Winter Orb, Stasis is frustratingly symmetrical. As with Relic Barrier and Icy Manipulator in relation to Winter Orb, Kismet and Time Elemental are two common tactics to break Stasis's inherent symmetry. Kismet and Stasis create something of a virtual hard lock, since every permanent enters play tapped, and Stasis makes it impossible to untap. Time Elemental allows the Stasis player

to bounce Stasis on the opponent's end step in much the same manner as tapping Winter Orb in the opponent's end step allows its controller to untap all of their lands.

Example Prison decks:
- Stasis
- Nether Void
- Living Plane
- Field of Dreams
- Mono White Prison

Summary – the triangle
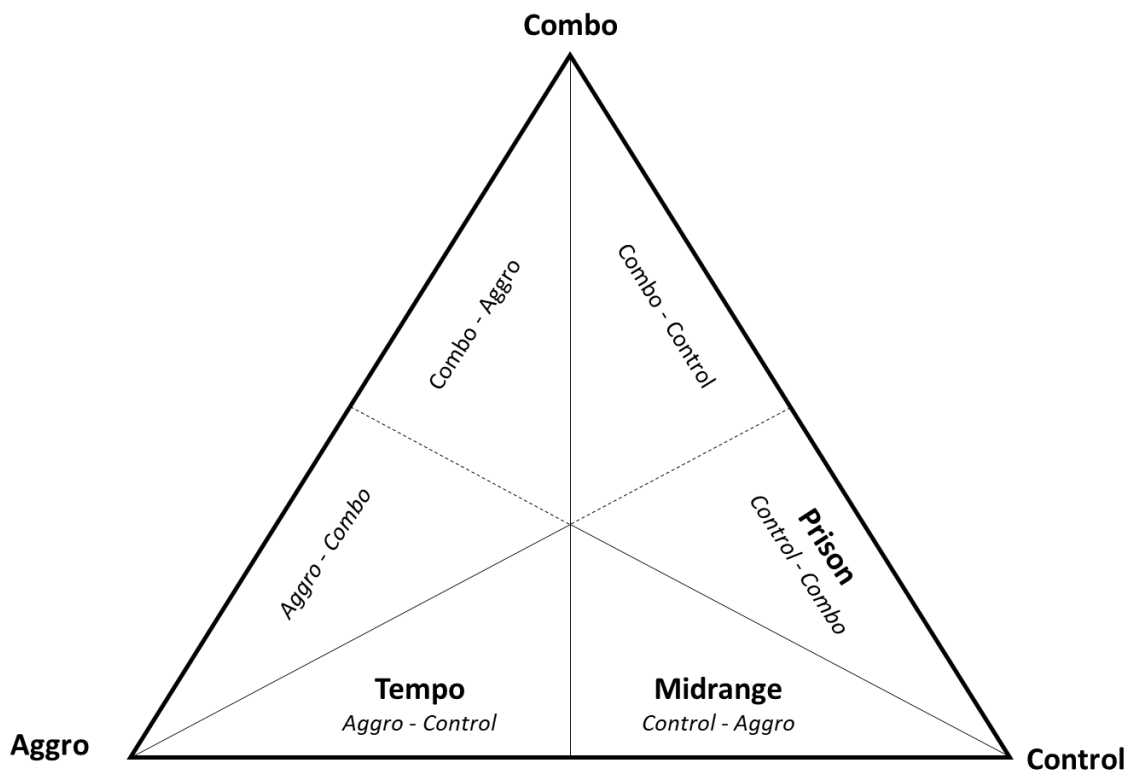
The above mentioned decks can be summarized into below illustration showing the three classic deck archetypes: "Combo", ""Aggro"" and ""Control"" plus the three well-known hybrid deck types: "Tempo", "Midrange" and "Prison"

As it can be seen from the illustration there are other hybrid deck types which are a combination of two of the three archetype decks.

They are more rarely seen and not as clearly defined as "Tempo", "Midrange" and "Prison" decks. These hybrids are not covered in this article.

Archetype decks - interaction and timing

The different deck archetypes have advantages and disadvantages against each other. This has also been built into the magic game as a part of WoTC design philosophy. As a rule of thumb in old-school magic these can be summarized into following:
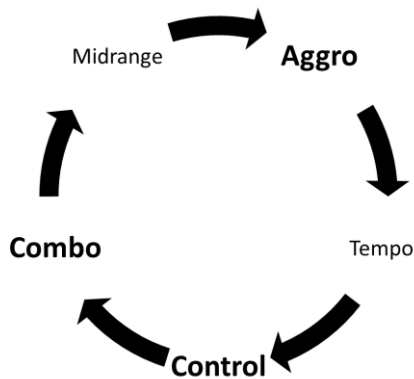
➢ "Aggro" is advantaged over "Tempo
➢ "Tempo" is advantaged over "Control"
➢ "Control" is advantaged over "Combo"
➢ "Combo" is advantaged over "Midrange"
➢ "Midrange" is advantaged over "Aggro"

Each of these deck types would ideally occupy an equal share of a given meta (Meta is the expression for the types of deck represented in a tournament). "Aggro" refers most specifically to the fastest creature decks built to punish slow

starts, ponderous "Control" decks

While somewhat similar in nature similar pure "Aggro" decks can outrun or overwhelm tempo decks due to higher speed and even more repletion and tempo decks still relying on drawing specific build in answers

Midrange decks in this definition are slower creature-based decks who trump the speed of fast "Aggro" with better quality from their somewhat more expensive spells.

"Combo" are conceptually similar as noted above. A "midrange" deck often doesn't have the sheer speed to stop "combo" decks from either casting a huge spell or "going off" with the combo.

"Control" decks can counter or otherwise answer the combo decks provide while winning the long game.

"Tempo" decks can also stop the single threat Combo offer while focusing on winning faster.

This is from a general strategic perspective. In practice as there will be several single games that will contradict this as luck and player decisions during the game can significantly influence the outcome

This colorful graph shows the three major deck archetypes: Combo, "Aggro", and "Control". The X-axis represents time, which in Magic is measured by how many turns have passed. The Y-axis represents an archetype's power level – how strong it is or how equipped it is to be "winning the game" on that turn (comparatively speaking).
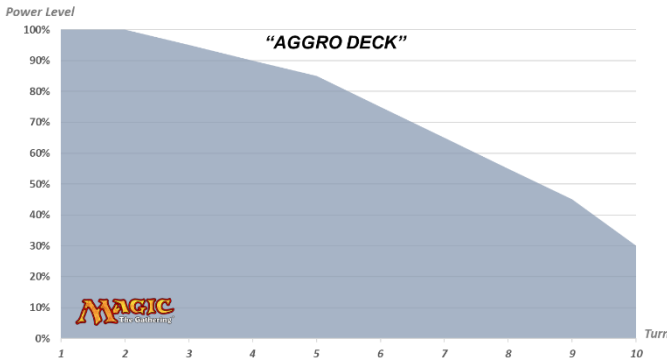
"AGGRO DECK"

Looking at the "Aggro" archetype, we see that it begins the strongest and dramatically decreases with each passing turn before tapering off. One of the strongest turn one for "Aggro" archetype deck is Taiga land + Kird Ape from a Zoo deck, representing the 100% spike that "Aggro" often aims for.

The increasingly downward power level shows decks chance to top-deck one of the many creature threats or a burn spell to win when the game lasts past turn five or so.
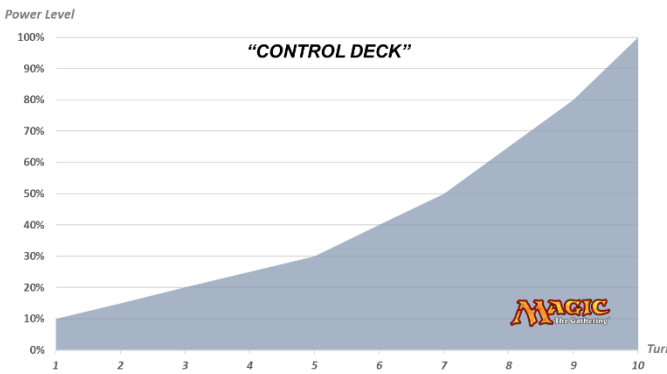
"CONTROL DECK"

The "Control" archetype begins very low in power level but gradually increases with each passing turn. After enough turns has passed (typically 6+), the deck has likely assembled enough resources and answers to contain all the opponent's threats to emerge victorious. The kill is inevitable even if the opponent still has not officially lost yet on turn ten. An example here is a blue-white deck that is holding more counter spells than the opponent has threats left in his deck and is cranking out 2/2 Assembly-Workers with Urza's Factory.

"COMBO DECK"
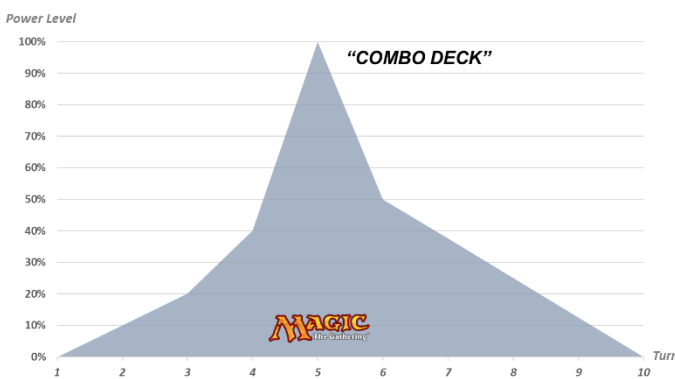
The Combo archetype begins weak and ends weak, but it has a gigantic one-turn spike of game-winning power that normally determines right then and there if it wins or loses. Exactly when the deck "combo-off" will vary from game to game depending on cards drawn. It can be in the first half of the game, last half. So, in average it will be around midgame as reflected in the illustration.
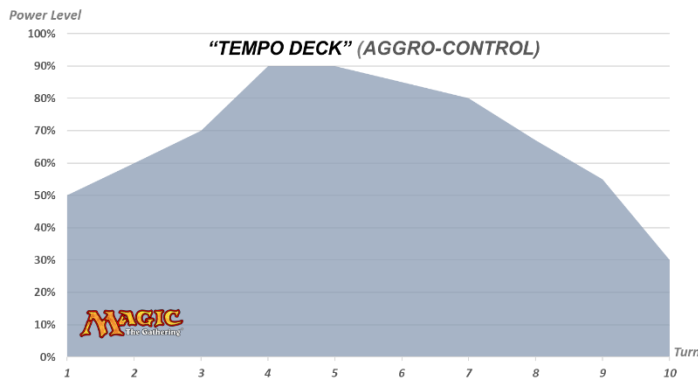
The "Tempo" (Aggro-Control) hybrid deck type is somewhat a blend and does have a more smoothed out profile. It has a power curve that's different from the rest – it begins the game somewhere in the middle and gets stronger, but after some number of turns it normally tapers off again.
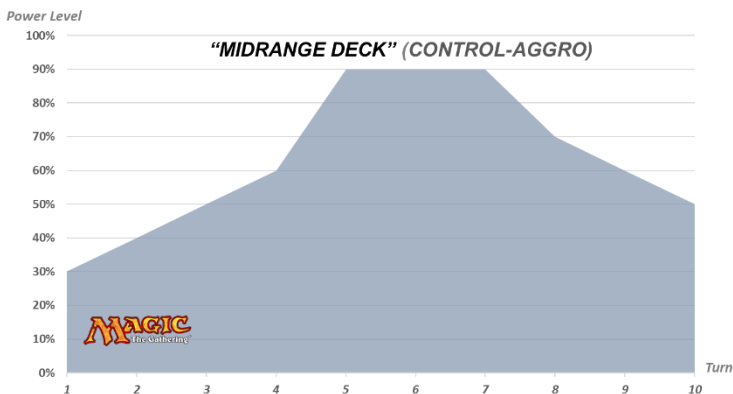
The "Midrange" (Control-Aggro) hybrid deck type is somewhat also a blend and does also have a more smoothed out profile. It begins the game building up then firing off a short series of potent threats, represented by a rising curve into a plateau.

It can be seen from the figure that "Tempo" decks and "Midrange" decks have same more distributed power level throughout the game. However, the "Midrange" deck power curve is the "Tempo" deck power curve completely backwards.

Deck strategies

For easier overview you can summarize the characteristics of a deck type into some fundamental strategic play style focuses describing *"how to play"* and some fundamental strategic card focuses describing *"How to win"* for each of the three archetype decks and the three hybrid deck types. This is not quantitative science but a way to illustrate and score the fundamental different nature of the deck types.

Play Style Strategy

This is six inbuild elements of the archetype decks that also defines the

"how to play" for the player.

Linear - Executes own game plan without necessary interaction with an opponent.

Non-Linear - Executes strategies according to opponents play with a high amount of interaction.

Fair - Transfers card advantage into board state, pressure, and tempo. All cards have a potential of trading 1 for 1 (e.g. fair trading).

Unfair - Does not transfer card advantage into board state, and do not cause pressure or create tempo. Mostly improvises its own game plan using utility cards and trying to trade in their favor.

Early Game - Provides pressure against an opponent and sets a clock. Benefits from playing their cards fast before an opponent has a chance to stabilize and execute their game plan.

Late Game - Attempts to survive to the late game to play powerful cards and synergies for maximum value.

Card Strategy

> This is six characteristics that defines the nature of the specific cards that is needed in the deck to fuel the deck archetype and can also describe the
>
> *“how to win”* strategy

Threats *versus* **Answers** - A Threat is a card that can win the game if left unchecked, sometimes it includes the idea of smaller threats that combine to form a bigger threat. An Answer is a card that deals with or removes a threat. There are no wrong threats, only wrong answers.

Speed *versus* **Endurance** - Does your deck have to win fast, or does it have to survive the game long enough to stabilize and close out?

Repetition *versus* **Essential** - Does your deck have a lot of cards that basically do the same thing, or does it rely on a few important key pieces to function?

These characteristics and elements can for each deck type be plotted into six lines that combined illustrates in a simple visual way where and how the nature of the different deck types differ from each other. It also provides a quick simple overview that can be used as general strategic guide for a player

AGGRO

Strategic Card focus

Threats ★————————————————— Answers

Speed ★————————————————— Endurance

Repetition ★————————————————— Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan ★————————————————— Non-Linear interaction

Fair Trading ★————————————————— Unfair trading

Early Game ★————————————————— Late Game
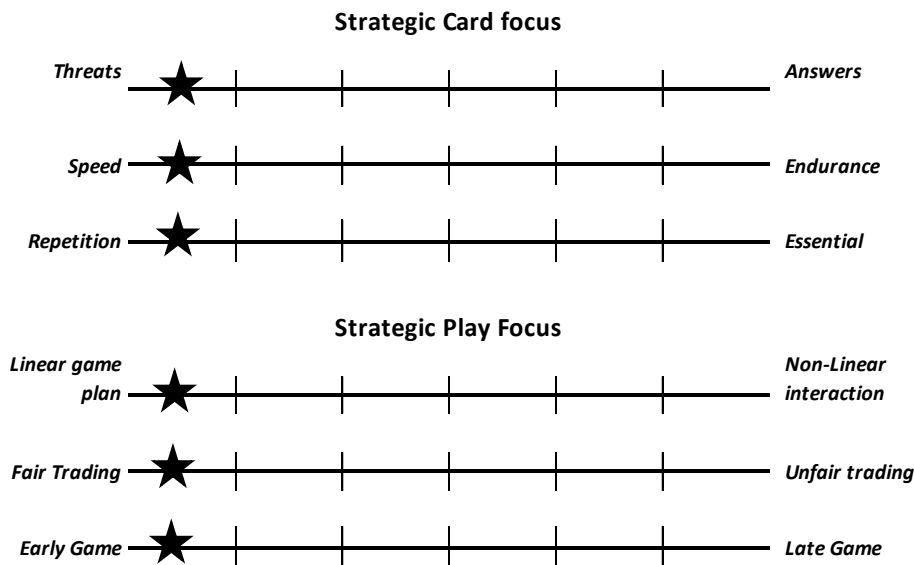
"Aggro" decks follow a linear strategy that is focused on own play and every card is a threat, and every threat does the same thing: deal damage.

"Aggro" decks try to beat out the opponent in early game relying on speed before opponent can fight back, and generally, have very little late game if the opponent is able to stabilize.

The have plenty of repetitive cards filling out same role and does not suffer from disruption of specific pieces.

CONTROL

Strategic Card focus

Threats ————————————★—— Answers

Speed ————————————★—— Endurance

Repetition ——★———————————— Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan ————————————★—— Non-Linear interaction

Fair Trading ————★———————— Unfair trading

Early Game ————————————★—— Late Game
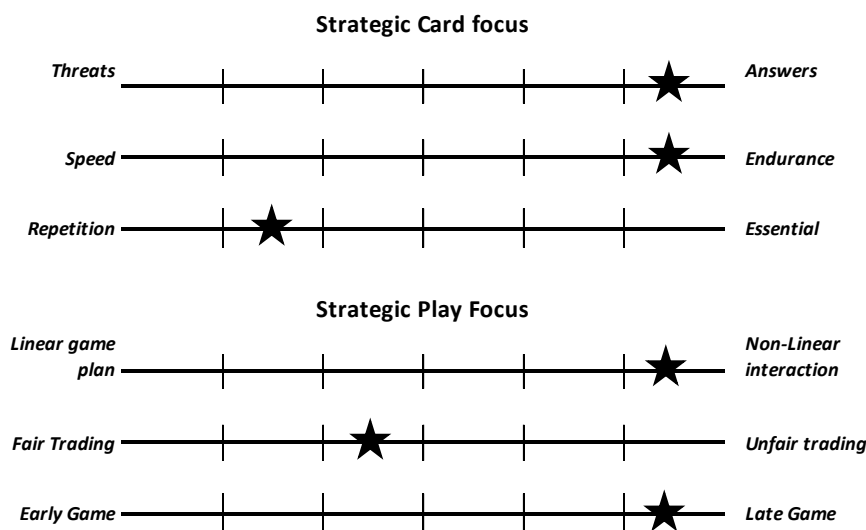
"Control" decks do normally not run any early game threats and rely on plenty of removal and counter spell answers to keep opponent in control while building mana and card advantage.

The deck has a high interaction with opponent and follows a non-linear strategy that is very much influenced by opponents plays that need to be dealt with.

After disrupting or exhausting opponents play through early to midgame - the deck stabilizes the game and start taking the upper hand and goes for a late game win

"Tempo" decks are a more defensive version" Aggro" decks which trades the number of repetitive threats for more answers, resulting in reduced speed, but gains improved interaction during mid game.

TEMPO *Aggro-Control*

Strategic Card focus

Threats ————————★———————— *Answers*

Speed ———★———————————— *Endurance*

Repetition ———★———————————— *Essential*

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan ————————★———————— *Non-Linear interaction*

Fair Trading ————————★———————— *Unfair trading*

Early Game ———★———————————— *Late Game*
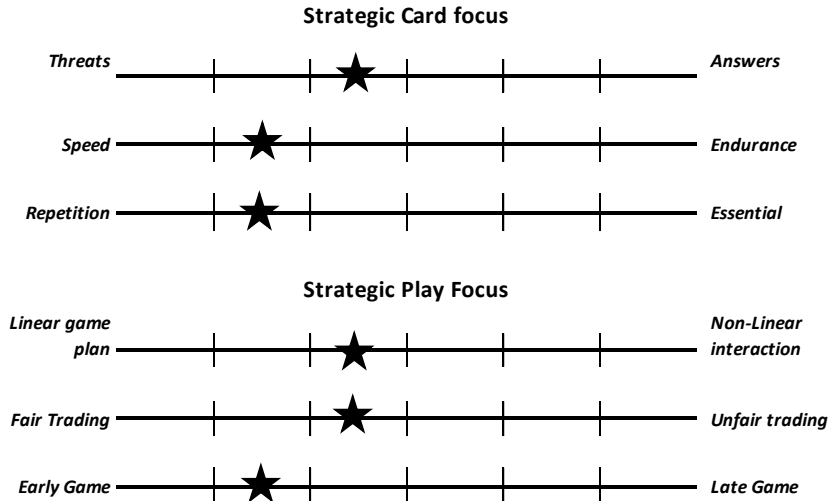
"Tempo" decks try to answer as much as they can but are only able to hold off the opponent for just long enough to finish them off.

"Tempo" decks are still early game oriented however not as much as "Aggro" decks. Similar to "Aggro" decks they have several repetitive cards filling out same role and does not suffer from disruption of specific

pieces.

MIDRANGE *Control-Aggro*

Strategic Card focus

Threats ———————————★——— *Answers*

Speed ———————————★——— *Endurance*

Repetition ————★——————————— *Essential*

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan ———————————★——— *Non-Linear interaction*

Fair Trading ————★——————————— *Unfair trading*

Early Game ———————————★——— *Late Game*

"Midrange" Decks are a more aggressive version of "Control" decks that trades the number of answers for additional threats.

Each threat in a midrange deck is usually a big bumpy problematic card.

The deck needs a bit more time than "Tempo" decks as often packing larger creatures,

but eventually, you will draw into enough of them to overwhelm the opponent.

"Midrange" decks are faster than "Control" decks but slower than "Tempo" decks and therefore typically mid game oriented.

COMBO

Strategic Card focus

Threats ⭐ Answers

Speed ⭐ Endurance

Repetition ⭐ Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan ⭐ Non-Linear interaction

Fair Trading ⭐ Unfair trading

Early Game ⭐ Late Game

"Combo" decks follow a very linear strategy that is focused on own play, but opposite "Aggro" decks they are not on a clock to necessarily win early game.

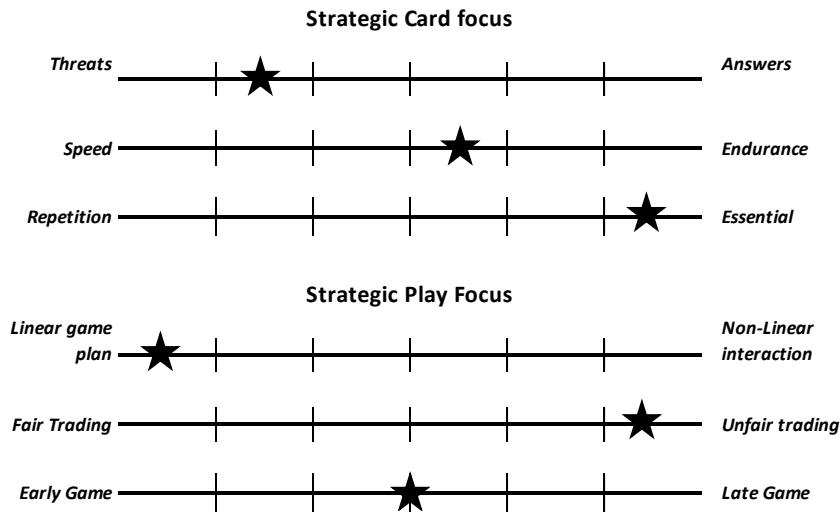However, the decks threat from the start is that it can combo-kill in any one turn. The deck relies heavily on specific essential cards and will suffer from disruption of specific pieces.

It can both combo off in early game as well as in mid- or late game and as a result it will be "mid-game" in average over several games.

PRISON *Control-Combo*

Strategic Card focus

Threats ⭐ Answers

Speed ⭐ Endurance

Repetition ⭐ Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan ⭐ Non-Linear interaction

Fair Trading ⭐ Unfair trading

Early Game ⭐ Late Game
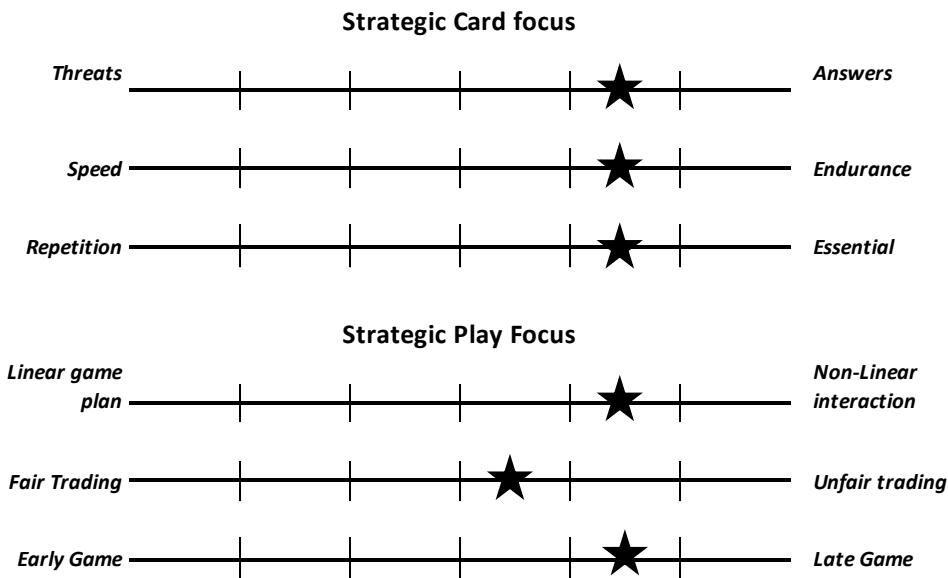
"Prison" decks are a specific type of "control" deck that reduce number of answers in favor of including a threat that relies on a specific combo

The difference from "Combo" decks are that instead of establishing an "instant win" combo-kill, "Prison" decks establish an ongoing locking or control condition that

significantly limits the opponent's ability to play (usually by a combo). Typically locks prevents the opponent from attacking, doing damage, casting spells or tapping into resources or lands.

Due to this the deck still needs a high level of interaction with opponents play for optimal timing of the "lock". Similar to "Combo" decks, the deck relies somewhat on essential cards and can suffer from disruption of specific pieces.

Deck matchups - similar deck types

Despite the fundamental different nature of the deck types it might often not be that evident how to play against the opponent in order to win. This situation most often occurs in a match with two similar deck types.

> *Unless the decks are really symmetrical (i.e. a true 1:1 Mirror match),*
> *one of the decks has to play the role of the "Aggressor" to optimize chance of winning,*
> *and the other deck has to play the role of "Controller" to optimize chance of winning.*

This can be a difficult strategic dilemma for a player to answer if for example both players are playing aggressive decks and players have limited or no information about the opponent's deck.

If no information is available, the first game will have to reveal or at least guide a player into what role he or she should take to optimize the chance of winning the second game.

If information is available about the opponent's deck (often the case in top 8 finales). There are some factors a player can look at to figure out what role to play in the match.

> ### 1. What deck has more damage?
> The deck with the most creatures or direct damage usually must be the "Aggro" deck.
>
> ### 2. Who has more removal?
> The deck with the most removal usually he must be the "Control" deck.
>
> ### 3. Who has more permission and card drawing?
> The deck with most permission and card drawing engines almost always must be the "Control" deck.

If you are the "Aggressor", you must kill your opponent faster than he can kill you. If you are the "Controller", you must weather the early beatdown and get into a position where you can gain card advantage.

Misassignment of a player's role will often results in game loss.

Sideboard Strategy

While a lot of focus in this article has been on the main deck type the strategic importance of the sideboard should also be addressed.

> Two key questions for a player regardless of the deck type being played are
>
> **how to structure the sideboard?** and **what to sideboard in and out?**

The importance of the sideboard is often underestimated by players and sometimes also the "last part of the package" being put into place without spending to much time on considering the strategic implications for the deck being played.

To illustrate the potential impact of a sideboard, consider the following two aspects:

A) Sideboard influence on deck build
15 cards do not seem to be a lot in order to impose a significant impact on a given 60 card deck build. However, from the case study done by Frank Karsten published in the article "How Many Lands Do You Need to Consistently Hit Your Land Drops?" from May 2017, it can be deducted that across the different deck archetypes the lands/mana sources typically are:

> **Aggro decks**: 21-23 lands/mana sources -> ~38 other cards in deck build
>
> **Midrange decks**: 24-25 lands/mana sources -> ~35 other cards in deck build
>
> **Control decks**: 26-27 lands/mana sources -> ~33 other cards in deck build

Assuming that side boarding is done on a 1:1 card ratio (see later in article) and that mana base is not impacted, you can perceive the lands and mana sources as a typically fixed base in the main deck.

The implication of this is that the 15-card sideboard in reality can impact and/or transform 40% of an Aggro deck build, 43% of a Midrange deck build and 45% of a Control deck build. So, for Control decks and other mana intensive decks the sideboard typically can alter close to half of the deck build.

B) Sideboard influence of a match

A sometimes-overlooked aspect is that a match often will consist of three games in total. Based on the Danish DOOM online tournament from March, April and May

2020 – 43% of the played matches resulted in three games in order to find a winner. In more competitive tournaments with even more experienced/professional players this number would likely increase as there will not be "easy win" matches due to significant differences in skill level and significantly less misplays.

In a MTG match, only the first game is with the fixed main deck – the two other games will be with impact from post side-boarding of both players in the match. Essentially in a 3-game match – 2/3 of the match will be affected by sideboards.

This is also the key argument for when a new deck build is tested:

> *always test the deck with the sideboard being part of the testing* and to evaluate BOTH the main deck build as well as the sideboard build.

How to Structure the sideboard?

1. **The "Elephant Method"**
   It can be quite difficult to identify and select the perfect 15 cards for a sideboard. One way to start the process is to employ the "elephant method". Legendary deck builder and Pro Tour Hall of Famer Zvi Mowshowitz explains the elephant method as:

   > *"Writing out ideal realistic lists for all matchups and then trying to make the unique cards in those lists add up to 75 cards. Then and first then deciding on the specific 60 for the main deck and the specific 15 for the sideboard."*

   When you employ the elephant method, you're thinking of your deck as a complete 75-card unit. You consider what you'd like your deck to look like after sideboarding in each of the deck type matchups you expect to face—you make sure you have the exact number of cards to bring in and take out for each deck type matchup—and you construct your deck and sideboard accordingly. In short, you look at the main deck and sideboard as one big picture, and your sideboard is as important to the big picture as your main deck is.

   Steps in the Elephant method:
   1) Write out a number of realistic 60-card *post-sideboard configurations* that you'd like to have in all major deck type matchups.
   2) Then try to make the unique cards in those lists add up to 75.
   3) Then split the chosen 75 cards into a 60 starting main deck cards and 15 sideboard cards.

So instead of thinking of what you want in your main deck and what you want in your sideboard, think about what your post-board configurations should look like against each deck type match up, and use that knowledge to fine-tune your 75.

At the final step, you then split those 75 cards into 60 card main deck cards and 15 sideboard cards. This deck building approach comes with the benefit, that it ensures that the total 75-unit card build contains no more than 15 void or "dead cards" against all the evaluated matchups

2. Maintains main deck balance and replace on 1:1 ratio

Fixed sideboard plans are perhaps overrated, as you always have to make small adjustments depending on the specifics of a player's opponent's deck. But it is valuable to draw up these plans while in the process of building the sideboard, as it helps having the right number of cards for every matchup.

> *The best strategy is normally to match the number of cuts in the main deck with the number of additions from the sideboard.*

This is in order to maintain the main decks in-built balance – e.g between creatures and supporting cards, colors and mana sources as well as mana curve balance in general.

3. Maximizing match win percentage against the meta game field

Maximizing match win percentage against the "meta" in a tournament is a much better strategy than optimizing towards making every matchup (or at least as many matchups as possible) favorable.

To illustrate this with a "win-probability" example, let's assume a player expects only two deck types in the metagame field: *Aggro* and *Midrange*.
Both take half of the field, and the aggro-Midrange matchup is 50-50. The player has built a Control deck, with a main deck (before side boarding) that is expected to have 40% match win percentage against Aggro decks, but 60% against Midrange decks.

The Sideboard in this example consist only of 3 cards, and you have the option between either building the sideboard with:
Sideboard option A) 2 City in a Bottle and 1 Hurricane *or*
Sideboard option B) 2 Wrath of Good and 1 Shatterstorm.

If the player builds the sideboard based on **Option A,** then the player expects no material impact on the Aggro deck matchup win percentage *(stays at 40%).* But the

player expects to be able to increase the matchup win percentage against the Midrange deck types in the metagame to 70%.

On the other hand, If the player builds the sideboard based on **Option B**, then the player expects no material impact on the Midrange deck matchup win percentage *(stays at 60%).* But the player expects to be able to improve the matchup win percentage against the Aggro deck types in the metagame to *70%.*

Example 1

	Aggro (Weenie, Burn, Atog)	Midrange (Bantam-geddon, Esper Skies etc.)	Total Players /decks	Overall expected win percentage across the meta game field
The expected Meta Game	**50%**	**50%**	**60**	
Players **Control** deck's expected win chance against specific decktype matchup *(main deck pre sideboarding)*:	40%	60%		**50%**
Players **Control** deck's expected win chance against specific decktype matchup *(deck post sideboarding)*:				
Sideboard options and **expected impact on win percentage**				
A) 2 City in a Bottle, 1 Hurricane	40%	70%		
B) 2 Wrath of God, 1 shatterstorm	70%	60%		
Calculation of overall expected impact on win percentage against expected meta game field:				
Sideboard option **A)**	*20%*	*35%*		**55%**
Sideboard option **B)**	*35%*	*30%*		**65%**

In this case looking at the expected composition of the metagame deck types with 50% of the field being "Aggro" decks and 50% of the field being "Midrange" decks, the correct cards to include in the sideboard is **option B**. This is because the win chance improvement against "Aggro" decks from Sideboard option B, would also yield the highest expected overall match win percentage *(half of 70% plus half of 60% = 65%)* <u>against the metagame field as a whole</u>.

In the example 2 below, we know assume that the players expectation to the composition of the metagame was inaccurate. When the tournament started it turned out, that in the actual composition of the metagame field "Aggro" decks *only took up 30%* of the metagame field and "Midrange" decks *accounted for 70%* of the played decks in the field. Even in this case the **Sideboard option B** would still yield a slightly higher expected overall match win percentage *(30% of 70% plus 70% of 60% = 63*%) <u>against the metagame field as a whole</u>

Example 2

	Aggro (Weenie, Burn, Atog)	Midrange (Bantam-geddon, Esper Skies etc.)	Total Players /decks	Overall expected win percentage across the meta game field
The expected Meta Game	**30%**	**70%**	**60**	
Players **Control** deck's expected win chance against specific decktype matchup (*main deck pre sideboarding*):				**54%**
	40%	60%		
Players **Control** deck's expected win chance against specific decktype matchup (*deck post sideboarding*):				
Sideboard options and **expected impact on win percentage**				
A) 2 City in a Bottle, 1 Hurricance	40%	70%		
B) 2 Wrath of God, 1 shatterstorm	70%	60%		
Calculation of overall expected impact on win percentage against expected meta game field:				
Sideboard option **A)**	*12%*	*49%*		**61%**
Sideboard option **B)**	*21%*	*42%*		**63%**

This example is of course theoretical, but from a probability perspective it very well by win percentages, illustrates the value of a player being able to guess the composition of the metagame and to establish the sideboard according to this expectation.

> *A Player should always build the sideboard with focus on where the main deck can improve its weaknesses **the most** against the expected overall metagame composition….*
> *…. rather than focusing on cards that tries to improve weaknesses against specific deck type matchups.*

4. Building a transformative sideboard

In short, a transformative sideboard is when you bring in several sideboard cards to radically change your deck type, overall strategy and how it plays. In relation to the Deck archetype strategies including the hybrid type decks – such a sideboard can play a particularly strong role.
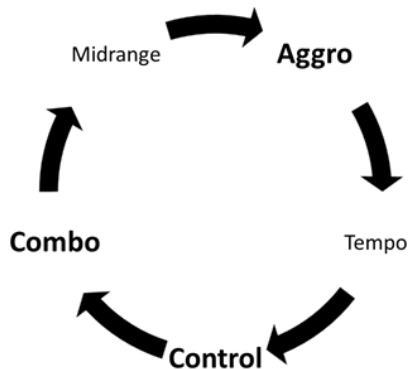
Gaining Strategic advantage:
Recalling the general strategic advantage and disadvantage based on the nature of the deck types, a sideboard that can transform a main deck from e.g. Midrange -> Aggro or Aggro -> Tempo can support gaining advantage over e.g a Control deck.

Other more specific **advantages** of a transformative sideboard:

A) **Surprise element:** A good example of how powerful the surprise element can be in the second game is a creature-less Combo deck that sideboard out its combo element and replaced it with fast creatures from the sideboard in a matchup against a Control Deck. The likely result is that most opponents would bring in cards answers against the combo, that now becomes redundant cards *(making opponents deck relatively weaker)* and in addition side boarded out the creature removal cards *(Making the Combo deck relatively stronger)*

B) **Mirror Matches:** Specially in mirror matches a transformative sideboard can be the key to get the upper hand. For example, in a Aggro deck versus Aggro deck mirror match, if one of the players can transforms the deck more into a Midrange deck, this can gain him or her an advantage.

C) **Fighting hate cards:** Transformational sideboards can give a player several new strategies that can work around an opponent's hate cards. Example of this could be side boarding in artifact creatures against The Abyss or replacing Serendib Efreets and Erhnam Djinns with Serra Angels and Savannah Lions against City in a bottle.

D) **Fixing really bad matchups**: If a combo deck has no chance against a control deck with twelve counterspells, the player could sideboard into an more aggressive deck and instead try to beat down the opponent's Control deck to turn the tides in the matchup

Despite the advantages of a Transformative sideboard, there are **disadvantages** as well:

A) **Takes up much space in Sideboard:** One problem with transformative sideboard is how many sideboard slots that gets occupied. Most transformative sideboards typically eat up at least 10 of the cards in the sideboard, if not more. This means that a player cannot include many other answers and threats against specific decks or specific cards. Essentially this means that a player must believe in that the transformational sideboard will be used by the player frequently, or at least the majority of the matches.

B) **The surprise advantage is often temporary**. Often the transformative sideboard can be a "one-trick pony". If the opponent expects it, he or she can sideboard in ways that will make the transformative sideboard less efficient. If there is a game three in a match, then this will always be the case in the last game. The opponent will go back to his or her sideboard and adjust as much as possible.

With normally at least 10 cards dedicated to the transformation – a player does not have as nearly as many options and side boarding flexibility. As such the sideboarding strategy for a player will often be a bit binary: "Do the player bring in the full package or not?"

Additionally in tournaments with "Swiss" rounds or group play before final rounds, rumors about a player's transformative deck can be shared in advance of a game. Also, in tournaments where deck pictures of the top decks for the final rounds are revealed in advance, the strategic advantage will also decline significantly.

> *The best deck type to have a transformative sideboard*
> *is normally a Combo deck.*

Combo decks traditionally have good game one matchups. But once the answers and hate cards come in, life for a Combo Deck becomes a much harder. Here a Player can sidestep that entirely with a transformational sideboard. Additionally, the loss of "free" sideboard spots hurts combo decks less than other decks. Quite often, a player cannot effectively sideboard more than a few cards before it dilutes the combo strategy, so having a large chunk of cards that can swap straight in and out often can work out fine.

Another great time to have a transformative sideboard is when a deck is heavily favored against most decks in the metagame but has one or two bad matchups that transforming will fix. If that is what is needed close the competitive gap, a transformational sideboard can be the answer.

In general, for most deck types and builds - most of the time a transformative sideboard is not the best choice. But for specific deck builds and if applied timely the effect can be massive – often resulting in some quick wins.

What to Sideboard in / out?

1. **General Side boarding considerations**
   A) As both players are normally using the possibility to do side boarding after the first game, it is important to remember following:

   > *Never sideboard in response to opponents' main deck just played against – but rather in anticipation of the opponent's deck AFTER side boarding.*

   B) Generally, you can divide the cards in your sideboard into three types – that can be considered brought into your main deck from your sideboard:

   1) Threats and answers that *target specific cards* in opponent's deck. Examples of this could be Disenchant/Tranquility against Moat, Blood Moon, Abyss *or* Shatter/Crumble/Shatterstorm against Winter Orb, Icy Manipulator, Triskelion

   2) Threats and answers that *targets opponents deck type in general*. Examples of this could be City in a Bottle, Circles of protection or hate cards like Karma, Gloom or Tsunami.

   3) Threats and answers that *transforms your main deck into a new deck type or changes the strategy of the deck*. This is described in the previous chapter.

   C) Do not over sideboard. If it seems that your main deck already has a significant advantage over the opponent's deck based on the first match – be cautious not to change to much. In addition, you should not sideboard in additional cards that do the same as the key cards that gives the advantage. Just adding more of the same will not yield the same incremental value as including answers/threats to opponent's expected sideboarding.

2. **Add value cards and answers – Remove cards that cut synergies**
   It can be tough to figure out which cards to board in and out for various matchups. Certain hate cards, such as Karma, Gloom, Shatterstorm, City in a Bottle etc. have obvious uses and does not require a lot of consideration, but other cards can require more evaluation.

   If in doubt following strategic advice can be helpful:

   > *Prioritize adding answers and value-generating cards from the sideboard and cut synergy or easily answered cards from the main deck.*

The reason for this, is that a player will usually face more interactive cards and efficient answers from the opponent after side boarding. Opponent will usually have brought in removal spells to target the players main strategy or key cards in the played deck type. As a result, after sideboard a player is often better off with cards that can stand on their own or that generate resource advantage and cutting cards that fully relies on other cards to function, cards whose main task is to enable other cards, and cards that are easily answered by opposing sideboard cards.

This is also why Combo archetype decks can benefit from a sideboard that can transform the deck type - taking out the Combo element and adding in stand-alone cards to pursue a completely different strategy.

In practice it always depends on the specifics of the deck matchup, and a player should always try to keep the core balance of the deck and the mana curve intact.

3. **Adjust side boarding depending being on play/ on draw**
   The nature of a matchup also depends on who is on the play and who is on the draw. This has impact on what should be side boarded in or out. This is even more pronounced in mirror matches with same deck types.

On the Draw

When you are on the draw, you are behind in the tempo and damage race from the start. But you do have an extra card to work with. As a result, you *can often safely cut a land and remove a few cheap threats*.

Meanwhile, you should add efficient answers and cards that helps you to catch-up and allow you to steal back tempo. Midrange decks with higher-toughness creatures are normally better in catching up in a beatdown game than for example a pure Aggro deck.
In a mirror match between two Aggro decks. The Aggro deck on the draw could try to sideboard in cards that moves the deck a bit more towards a Tempo (Aggro-Control) deck or that can normally succeed with unfair trade-offs (e.g Swords to Plowshares, Lightning Bolt etc.)

On the Play

When you're on the play, *you can often safely add a land if you have one in your sideboard*, but more importantly, you are in a prime position to capitalize on opposing stumbles. If your opponent draws several lands, artifact mana resources or slow cards, a faster mana curve with additional threats can sometimes steal a win. After all, you get to deploy your cards a turn ahead of them. But at the same time, you're down a card, which means a strategy filled with 1-for-1 answers and reactive cards won't be as effective. Instead, the *focus for cards to sideboard in should be on additional threats and aggressive cards*.

In a mirror match between two Control decks. The Control deck on the draw could try to sideboard in cards that moves the deck a bit more towards a Midrange (Control-Aggro) deck that can play additional threats - even more ideally earlier in the game (e.g Mishra's factory, Hypnotic Specter, Su-Chi, etc.)

Final words

I hope some of the content of this illustrated article has been valuable reading for getting an overview of some of the key strategic elements of Magic the Gathering.

Enclosed in Appendix 1-3 are one page overview of figures that can be printed out.
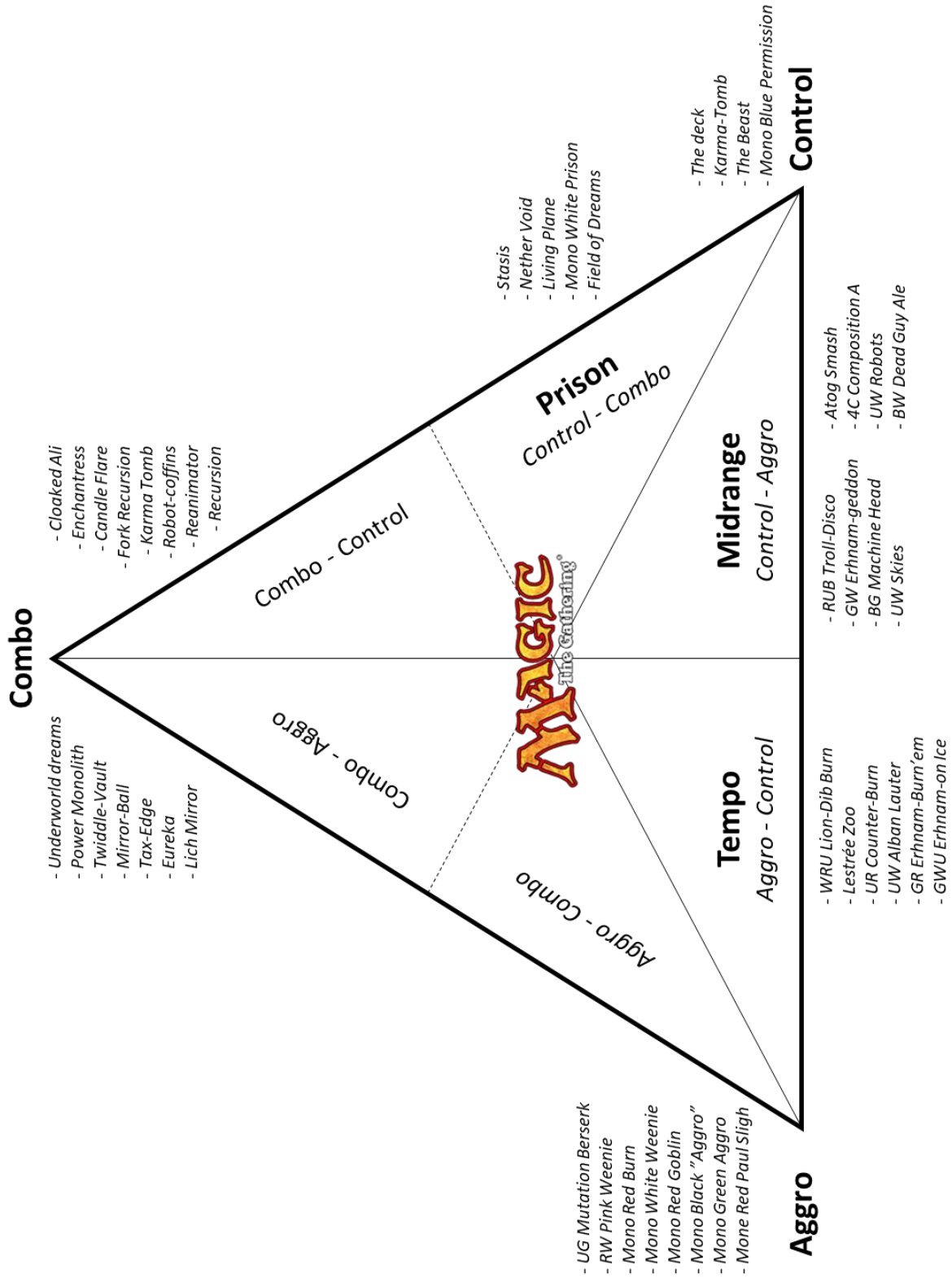
Appendix 4 examples of three different decks within each archetype have been included. Decks and comments have been taken from the Swedish MTG old School site wak-wak.se and all credits for this section goes the the author of this site.

Appendix 4 is the list of sources used to various extent to structure and consolidate this article.

Allan Linderup Smed

July 2020

Appendix 1 – Overview of deck types

Control

- Stasis
- Nether Void
- Living Plane
- Mono White Prison
- Field of Dreams

- The deck
- Karma-Tomb
- The Beast
- Mono Blue Permission

Prison
Control - Combo

Combo - Control

Midrange
Control - Aggro

- Atog Smash
- 4C Composition A
- UW Robots
- BW Dead Guy Ale

- RUB Troll-Disco
- GW Erhnam-geddon
- BG Machine Head
- UW Skies

Combo

- Cloaked Ali
- Enchantress
- Candle Flare
- Fork Recursion
- Karma Tomb
- Robot-coffins
- Reanimator
- Recursion

- Underworld dreams
- Power Monolith
- Twiddle-Vault
- Mirror-Ball
- Tax-Edge
- Eureka
- Lich Mirror

Combo - Aggro

Tempo
Aggro - Control

- WRU Lion-Dib Burn
- Lestrée Zoo
- UR Counter-Burn
- UW Alban Lauter
- GR Erhnam-Burn'em
- GWU Erhnam-on Ice

Aggro - Combo

Aggro

- UG Mutation Berserk
- RW Pink Weenie
- Mono Red Burn
- Mono White Weenie
- Mono Red Goblin
- Mono Black "Aggro"
- Mono Green Aggro
- Mone Red Paul Sligh

Appendix 2 – Overview of deck strategies

AGGRO

Strategic Card focus

Threats	★						Answers
Speed	★						Endurance
Repetition	★						Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan	★						Non-Linear interaction
Fair Trading	★						Unfair trading
Early Game	★						Late Game

CONTROL

Strategic Card focus

Threats						★	Answers
Speed						★	Endurance
Repetition		★					Essential

Strategic Play Focus

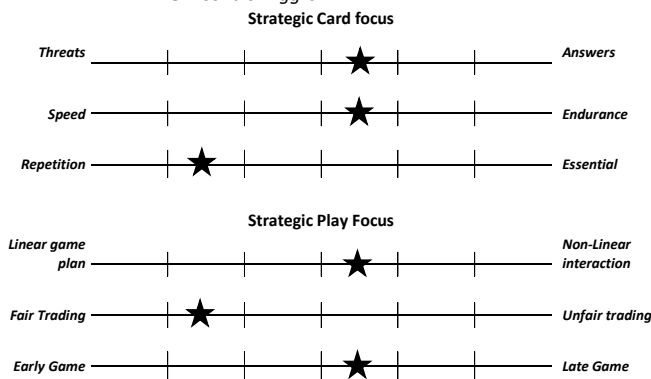| Linear game plan | | | | | ★ | | Non-Linear interaction |
| Fair Trading | | ★ | | | | | Unfair trading |
| Early Game | | | | | ★ | | Late Game |

TEMPO *Aggro-Control*

Strategic Card focus

Threats			★				Answers
Speed		★					Endurance
Repetition		★					Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan			★				Non-Linear interaction
Fair Trading			★				Unfair trading
Early Game		★					Late Game

COMBO

Strategic Card focus

Threats		★					Answers
Speed				★			Endurance
Repetition					★		Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan	★						Non-Linear interaction
Fair Trading					★		Unfair trading
Early Game			★				Late Game

MIDRANGE *Control-Aggro*

Strategic Card focus

Threats				★			Answers
Speed				★			Endurance
Repetition		★					Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan				★			Non-Linear interaction
Fair Trading		★					Unfair trading
Early Game				★			Late Game

PRISON *Control-Combo*

Strategic Card focus

Threats					★		Answers
Speed					★		Endurance
Repetition					★		Essential

Strategic Play Focus

Linear game plan					★		Non-Linear interaction
Fair Trading				★			Unfair trading
Early Game					★		Late Game

Appendix 3 – Overview of Power Level Profile per deck type

Power Level — **"AGGRO DECK"** (Turn)

Power Level — **"CONTROL DECK"** (Turn)

Power Level — **"TEMPO DECK"** *(AGGRO-CONTROL)* (Turn)

Power Level — **"COMBO DECK"** (Turn)

Power Level — **"MIDRANGE DECK"** *(CONTROL-AGGRO)* (Turn)

Appendix 4 – sample classic decks
Source: Directly taken from www.wak-wak.se 93/94 deck types

"AGGRO" DECK ARCHETYPE

Blue-Green Mutation-Berserk

This deck has a simple plan, play a small creature or two, preferably with flying, and then use pump spells to end the opponent in just a few attack steps. The creatures of choice is first of all Scryb Sprite and Flying Men but as eight creatures isn't enough the deck often play Argothian Pixies and sometimes Serendib Efreet.

To make these small creatures able kill as fast as possible the deck uses cards like Pendelhaven, Giant Growth, Unstable Mutation and most importantly Berserk. The deck needs a lot of mana to be able to play all the pump in a single turn and sometimes also have mana for some protection so it's essential to play mana dorks like Birds of Paradise and Llanowar Elves. And one should not forget that even the 0-powered bird can act as an attacker because of all the pump spells.

Other cards that can be used are Psionic Blast for some reach, Avoid Fate for protection and Concordant Crossroads for more speed and as an answer to The Abyss.

And last but not least a fun little fact is that this is the deck that Magic's lead designer Mark Rosewater played at the very first World Championship in 1994

Mono White Weenie

As the name suggests, this is a mono white deck that plays a lot of small creatures. The creatures of choice are often among others White Knight, Savannah Lions and Tundra Wolves. Other cards that usually see play are Swords to Plowshares, Disenchant and of course Crusade. Sometimes you also find power houses like Armageddon and Serra Angel in the deck.

And then we have the sideboard which can be filled with a plethora of great answers to a lot of different strategies. It has Circle of Protections against burn and mono colored decks, City in a Bottle and King Suleiman against some of the most powerful creatures in the format and last but not least it has Divine Offering and Dust to Dust to combat artifact heavy decks.

Mono Red Goblins

Goblins is one of the few viable tribal decks in the format with both a bunch of different goblins and a lord to rule them all. The deck usually looks a lot like the Sligh deck but instead of going for the perfect mana curve you go all in on goblins and a playset of Goblin King. The best red goblins that you always see in these decks are Goblin Balloon Brigade and Goblins of the Flarg. The reason why they are better than the rest is because both of them have evasion of some sort.

Other goblins you can use are Mons Goblin Raiders, Goblin Digging Team and if you want to splash a color you also have access to Scarwood Goblins and Marsh Goblins. Besides the obvious Goblin King you can also use Gauntlet of Might, Goblin Shrine and Goblin Caves to strengthen your goblins.

If you splash green you can also use Pendelhaven to make your goblins more powerful.

TEMPO *"AGGRO-CONTROL"* DECK

Lestrée Zoo

The Zoo deck is one of the most classic decks in magic history and zoo decks are still being played today even in more modern formats. The most famous version of the old school zoo deck is Lestree Zoo which is named after Bertrand Lestree who piloted his zoo deck to the finals in the world's first ever Magic World Championship in 1994.

There are many variants of zoo and here we are going to focus on the versions that focus on the colors red, green and blue.

The main plan for this deck is to play a bunch of mana efficient creatures and then use burn to annihilate your enemy as quickly as possible. The creature base is often made up by Kird Apes, Serendib Efreets and Erhnam Djinns and if you only play those the deck is sometimes called Arabian Aggro. Other usual suspects are Argothian Pixies, Whirling Dervish and Elvish Archers. It's also not uncommon for this deck to play some sort of mana producing creature like Birds of Paradise. Other cards that often see play are of course burn spells like Lightning Bolt, Chain Lightning and Psionic Blast but you can also choose to play Giant Growth and Berserk. Another card that see quite a bit of play is Ice Storm which can help you keep your opponent of balance long enough for your creatures to finish him or her off. It also helps you with troublesome lands like Mishra's Factory and Maze of Ith.

Blue-Red Counter-Burn

UR Burn is one of the top decks in the format and can be built in many different configurations. The foundation of the deck usually consists of 4 Serendib Efreet, 4 Lightning Bolt, 4 Chain Lightning and a couple up Psionic Blasts.

The rest of the deck can either be built to maximize the aggressive side with more burn, Electric Eels and/or Flying Men, or it could be built more as a tempo deck by adding counterspells and some control elements. You can also build the deck with some amount of main deck Blood Moons and Energy Fluxes if you want to be a little hateful.

Black-Red Troll-Disco

The Troll part in the name stands for the powerful Sedge Troll, and Disco stands for the disk with tentacles, Nevinyrral's Disk. The decks game plan is to use the disk to blow up the world, except for your trusty trolls that is. The Trolls instead regenerate to fight another day and continues to beat your opponent senseless while all of his or her stuff has been blown to pieces.

That is the core of this deck, but other than that you can build it quite differently using either classic beaters like Hypnotic Specter or go all in on regenerating creatures like Uthden Troll and Clay Statue. If you want you can also splash blue for more control elements if you don't think the disk is enough.

Erhnam Burn'em

Erhnam Burn'em is a red and green aggro deck that get's its name from the biggest creature in the deck, Erhnam Djinn, and the red part that mostly consists of burn spells. As with many of the decks on this site Erhnam Burn'em can be built in many ways, even without Ernham Djinn if one wants a lower curve.

This deck is also quite popular as it can be very

budget friendly; Taiga are the cheapest dual lands, the burn is also cheap and except for Erhnam Djinn the creatures is also quite cheap.

And talking about creatures, this deck usually plays cards like Kird Ape, Argothian Pixies, Elvish Archers and of course Erhnam Djinn. To complement the creatures, you find the classic burn suite with Lightning Bolt, Chain Lightning and Fireball. If you want you can also throw in a couple of Berserks and maybe Giant Growths.

MIDRANGE *"CONTROL-AGGRO" DECK*

Erhnam-geddon

Erhnam-geddon has been around since back in the days and the game plan goes something like this: start by developing your mana base with Fellwar Stones, Moxen and Birds of Paradise, play a big creature like Erhnam Djinn or Serra Angel and then blow up the world! Or more correctly blow up all the lands with an Armageddon so the opponent will have a hard time answering your threat.

Meanwhile the Moxen, Fellwar Stones and Birds of Paradise keeps you able to continue playing the game even after the Armageddon. You can also add blue for power and some control elements, then the deck sometimes is called Bantam-geddon.

Blue-White Skies
(or "Esper Skies" as it splashes black)

At first glance Blue-White Skies looks a lot like The Deck but there is one big difference and that is that Blue-White Skies usually plays up to four Serra Angel and four Serendib Efreets. What to cut for those eight cards is of course the hard part and the easiest solution is to skip splashing for all the restricted cards. It's also not unusual to cut a couple of books and other slower control cards like "Moat" or if replacing Serendib Efreets with Azure Drakes it can also contain 1-2 Meek Stones.

Apart from that change Blue-White Skies plays the same control package as The Deck, which means playsets of Counterspell, Swords to Plowshares and Disenchant. It splashes black – but usually only for Mind Twist and Demonic Tutor. Because of that, UW Skies is quite the formidable control deck but as it also plays a bunch of big monsters it can quickly change pace and go on the offensive quite well.

Dead Guy Ale

Deadguy Ale is probably the most famous midrange deck in the format and also one of the most resilient. The power of the deck comes from combining great and diverse threats with a plethora of removal for whatever the opponent does. The aggressive part of the deck consists of threats like Juzam Djinn, Hypnotic Specter and Underworld Dreams, often combines with Dark Ritual to deploy them as fast as possible.

The threats are backed up by some of the most efficient removal in the format in the form of Disenchant and Swords to Plowshares. It's also not unusual for the deck to play Sinkholes to attack the opponent on one more angle and sometimes you can see lists

splashing red which gives it access to Lightning Bolt for more removal and Red Elemental Blast for better game against blue decks.

"CONTROL" DECK ARCHETYPE

The Deck

This is THE control deck of the format. It's been around since the beginning of the game and was the best deck for many many years. The core of The Deck is blue and white but it splashes the other three colors to get access to all of the formats most powerful and restricted cards. It then combines those powerful cards with the formats most efficient answers in the form of Counterspell, Disenchant and Swords to Plowshares.

Another very important card is Jayemdae Tome which lets The Deck draw the answers it needs to survive. As wincons the deck usually use cards like Mishra's Factory, Serra Angel, Shivan Dragon, Su-Chi or Fireball.

The Beast

The Beast is at it's core quit similar to The Deck, but it has one very big difference in the form of a combo element. First of all The Beast uses the same control package as The Deck in the form of 3 to 4 each of Counterspell, Swords to Plowshares and Disenchant. The Beast also utilizes a big part of the restricted list by splashing all colors, exactly like The Deck. This of course also means that the mana base is exactly as greedy, if not more, because of the higher count of black cards in this deck.

The big difference is that The Beast cuts some of the "non-essential" cards to make room for 4 Guardian Beast and a couple of Transmute Artifact. This changes the decks plan a bit as it can "combo off" either early or to lock up the late game. The plan is simply to survive long enough to be able to set up a "lock" with Guardian Beast and Chaos Orb as that means you can destroy one permanent each turn.

After that, winning should be rudimentary as long as you hit your flips.

Karma-Tomb

Karma Tomb is certainly a deck that will give you bad karma, because it can really be a pain in the a** for you opponent to play against. The main card of the deck is Cyclopean Tomb which is a four mana artifact that slowly can turn your opponent's lands to swamp one at a time by paying two mana in your upkeep. This card is the base of the deck and is used to disrupt your opponent's mana. It also "kills" Mishra's Factory which can help you to buy enough time for the second card, Karma, to do its thing. Karma deals one damage to the opponent in his or her upkeep for every swamp he or she controls, which thanks to Cyclopean Tomb should be enough to kill him or her in no time.

That is pretty much the essential cards of the deck. But what about the rest of the deck you may ask? This archetype is actually not that explored so it's pretty much open for you to brew it as you like but here are a couple of ideas.

One way is to build it as a control deck that uses the above combo as the wincon, pretty much like The Beast but with another combo (then you can call the deck The Tomb). Another way to go is to focus more on the disruption and mana denial plan by playing things like Sinkhole and Evil Presence (which also helps Karma). If you want to be really cute you can also use Magical Hack to change the type of land that gives your opponent bad karma. Of course, then Cyclopean Tomb won't be as good anymore and we're almost talking about another deck. But maybe it could serve as a backup plan against aggressive opponents when Cyclopean Tomb is just too slow.

One type of card that the deck probably always should have is counterspells. As both Cyclopean Tomb and Karma cost four mana and you need them for both of your strategies to work you should have a plan on how to keep them alive. This is especially true with

Cyclopean Tomb as the lands that had been turned to swamps will stepwise go back to normal if removed.

"COMBO" DECK ARCHETYPE

Reanimator

Reanimating fatties is a strategy as old as the game itself; and if something is as old as the game itself of course you can build a deck based on it in 93/94. The game plan is the same as with any other reanimation deck in any other format, you just use different cards. That means that you first of all need a discard outlet to put a creature in your graveyard. Then you also need some cards that let you put creatures from your graveyard onto the battlefield.

The cards that you have at your disposal for the second part of the combo are Animate Dead, Resurrection, All Hallows Eve and to a lesser extent Hell's Caretaker and Reincarnation. To bin your fatties, you can use cards like Jalum Tome, Bazaar of Baghdad and Mind Bomb. Just mix and match as you see fit to make up you deck. When it comes to the big monsters there are some problems as most of the big creatures in this format have horrible downsides. But some examples of creatures that you can use are Nicol Bolas, Chromium and Shivan Dragon.

Another reanimation target is the humongous Colossus of Sardia, but then you also need a plan for how to untap it. A couple of cool and interesting ideas that have been used in the past is getting another one with Transmute Artifact or sacrificing the monster with the card Sacrifice to end the opponent with a big Fireball, or to cast another Colossus of Sardia.

Twiddle-Vault

This deck is a fragile but powerful combo deck that spends its early turns developing its board with Mana Vaults, Sylvan Library and Howling Mine. The plan after that involves getting a Time Vault on the table and as that card is restricted the deck usually plays a couple of Transmute Artifact. When the Time Vault is in play the deck starts to go off by untapping the Time Vault using Twiddle.

Each Twiddle becomes a one mana Time Walk and thanks to Howling Mines and Sylvan Library you usually end up drawing another Twiddle, Regrowth, Recall or actual Time Walk to continue taking turns. While taking all of the turns you also slowly build up your mana to be able to cast a big enough Fireball to end your opponent.

To make the kill a little easier the deck often utilizes Mirror Universe and Sylvan Library to give the opponent a lower life total to Fireball away.

Power-Monolith

This is a combo deck that utilizes a powerful combo which Wizards actually thought was to powerful and therefore tried to stop on many occasions by issuing different erratas.

The combo works by combining Power Artifact with Basalt Monolith. This makes the Monoliths untap cost become one colorless and as it still taps for three colorless you are able to get

infinite mana. This mana is then used to end your opponent with a huge Fireball or sometimes the classic artifact Rocket launcher (but do remember that Rocket Launcher has "summoning sickness").

The rest of the deck can be built in many ways but it usually uses a lot of counterspells to keep you alive and protect the combo. Sometimes the deck is built like a toolbox deck that uses Transmute Artifact to get the right answers or combo pieces like Basalt Monolith and Rocket Launcher.

PRISON *"CONTROL-COMBO" DECK*

Stasis
(This version is Turbo Stasis)

There are a number of historical ways that Stasis has been utilized over the years, but in this build it is used as a forward leaning prison and lock component. This build strips away most of the one-for-one spot removal, in favor of establishing a battlefield favorable for Stasis to stall the board long enough for Black Vise to damage the opponent. This is a deck that could play the Icy Manipulator/Relic Barrier/Howling Mine/Winter Orb package. Howling Mine and Winter Orb were originally printed as "Continuous Artifacts," meaning they would work continuously as long as they were untapped. The Oracle wording of each has been updated over the years to reflect this original intent. Both Icy Manipulator and Relic Barrier can be used to tap your own Winter Orb or Howling Mine.

Kismet is a unique and powerful card from the Legends expansion, which makes all of the opponent's lands, creatures, and artifacts come in to play tapped. This is an important effect, because not only does it slow the opponent down each turn, but when used in conjunction with Stasis, the opponent cannot effectively do anything or add any relevant resources to the board until you can no longer pay for Stasis. All of their permanents will come in to play tapped and will not untap as long as you can manage the upkeep requirement of Stasis.

The kill conditions that synergize best with Howling Mine is Black Vise. Opponents will generally have a decent number of cards in hand if Howling Mines are drawing both players cards, and once you have played a Stasis, any Vises in play will start to tack on damage turn after turn.

This deck plays like a combo-control deck, and you'll be carefully managing your turns and mana to balance between keeping threats off the board, and racing to establish a Stasis soft-lock where you'll be able to damage the opponent, and then hopefully bounce your Stasis on the opponent's end step with Boomerang or Remove Enchantments.

Time Vault is one of the best cards in here, because of how it can interact with Stasis. Normally, if you are unable to continue to pay for Stasis, it will be sacrificed on your next turn during your upkeep, after your untap step, meaning you will likely be tapped out. This will then enable the opponent to untap all of their cards, and do their worst. Time Vault changes this equation, because you can use it to skip a turn while you have Stasis out (and the opponent locked down), and then on your next turn you can let Stasis die (while tapped out), and then tap Time Vault to take another turn. This means you will get to untap on the Time Vault turn, and then go off with more draw spells, removal, or another Stasis. The extra turn(s) you give the opponent can also help in the damage race, especially if you have one or more active Black Vises in play dealing them damage.

Living Plane Deck

This deck is all about mana screwing you opponent completely without even playing a land destruction spell. Instead the game plan revolves around resolving a Living Plane to make all lands creatures. With Living Plane on the table you then start to pick off your opponent's lands, which are now 1/1 creatures, by pinging them to death with a bunch of different cards. One of the most used ways to kill the lands is Tim, or as he's actually called Prodigal Sorcerer. Other good cards are Fireball, Pyrotechnics, Rod of Ruin and if you want to be extra evil, Earthquake.

If you go for Earthquake you should build you deck to be able to operate without lands, that means mana dorks, Fellwar Stone and more. However, remember that the opponent also could use cards like that so it's good to also pack some artifact destruction spells in

your deck. Crumble is probably the top choice here as it's in the main color and because the life doesn't matter much if the opponent won't play another spell for the rest of the game.

If you are a little slow to lock down the opponent it's good to have some removal in the deck. If you play a red version, you can use the same cards that later will kill lands as removal in the early game. You should also think about how you will protect your Living Plane as most cards in your deck will need it to stay around. Either you play blue for counterspells or you could use green's own counterspell, Avoid Fate.

Some other interesting cards are Drop of Honey and Sandstorm. Both are quite good at handling your opponent's lands even if Sandstorm is more of a corner case card. And if you can afford it, The Tabernacle of Pendrell Vale is a fun addition. Last but not least Pendelhaven could also be a really good inclusion as it makes your lands bigger than your opponent's and Instill Energy can make Tim ping twice.

And one more thing, remember that with Living Plane on the battlefield, lands have summoning sickness. So if the opponent doesn't have white mana for his Disenchant he can't just play a Plains and kill your Living Plane. You will have a turn to take care of the pesky land.

Mono White Prison Deck

This is a Mono White Prison deck, that uses Black Vise and Feldon's Cane as kill conditions. Mirror Universe also acts as a pseudo-kill condition, and fringe playables like The Hive can also serve as legitimate paths to victory in this deck. This deck can be built with or without creatures, and the deck above features a creature less main deck, so our opponent will potentially have more dead draws in the main deck. Mishra's Factory is present as a threat to push through damage when the board is locked up. Like a number of other decks we'll feature this month, the package of Icy Manipulator + Relic Barrier + Howling Mine + Winter Orb presents many synergistic options, and affords control and prison elements to any deck that chooses to play them. Howling Mine and Winter Orb were originally printed as "Continuous Artifacts," meaning they would work continuously as long as they were untapped, and over the years the Oracle wording of each has been updated to reflect this original intent. Icy Manipulator and/or Relic Barrier can be used to tap your own Winter Orb or Howling Mine, in order that they would shut off temporarily to

gain a one-sided advantage, so they are each logical inclusions when playing this package of artifacts. The most common scenarios for doing so are to tap your Howling Mine on the opponent's upkeep, before they can draw an extra card, and to tap your Winter Orb(s) during the opponent's end step, so that you can fully untap all of your lands on the next turn

This deck wants to get ahead on board by dumping a bunch of artifacts and enchantments in to play, and then using their recurring advantages to ground the opponent to dust, and hopefully demoralize them on your way to victory. It's always fun when your opponent can be tilted by losing to a mono-colored deck in Old School. Ivory Tower is used to help gain life early, in order to buy yourself more turns, and to capitalize on the opponent's inaction, or inability to play threats on time. Black Vise and Feldon's Cane are two creatureless kill conditions that you don't necessarily want to see until later in the game, once the battlefield has sufficiently frustrated the opponent.

Relic Barrier, Winter Orb, and Icy Manipulator will be used primarily to slow the opponent down, and force them to continue to tap mana to add more threats to the board to try to break through with relevant damage. Wrath of God, Balance, and Dust to Dust help to gain advantage back after the opponent necessarily overcommits.

Appendix 5

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