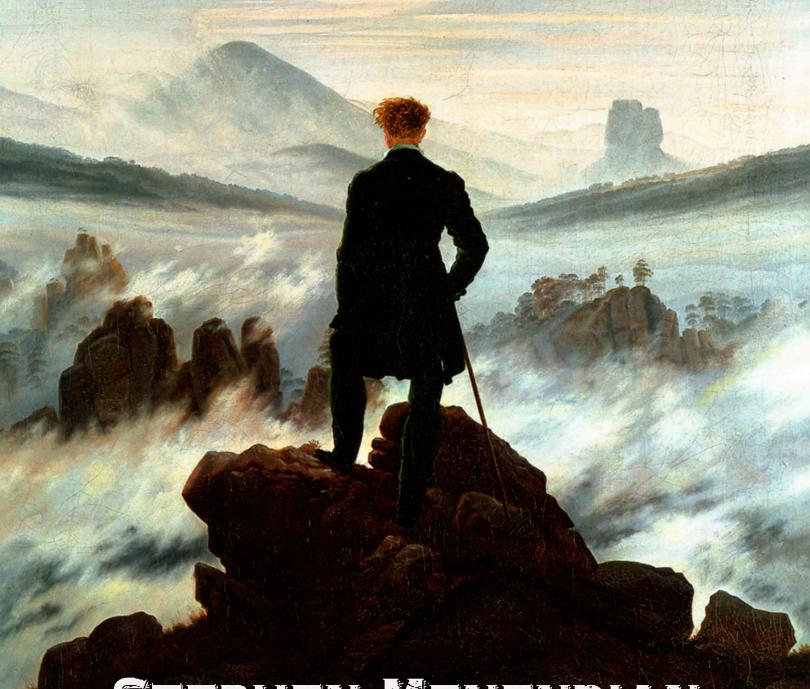# Understanding Gush
## Strategies and Tactics

## Stephen Menendian

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### 3rd Edition

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Cover Image: Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer by Caspar David Friedrich

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# *Chapter 1: Understanding Gush*

Gush is a naturally difficult card to play well, involving many simultaneous considerations. It is often played at the wrong time, in the wrong sequence, or the wrong lands are returned to hand or tapped for the wrong color of mana. Given the number of variables involved in playing Gush, more often than not, it is played incorrectly. Gush is a surprisingly subtle card that requires precise timing and careful execution.

Too few players understand how to maximize the value of Gush in deck design and construction, let alone use Gush well in game play. This is a by-product of a shallow and superficial understanding of Gush. Plainly, Gush is a source of card advantage. It draws two cards, a 2-for-1 spell. For many players, this is the extent of their understanding of the benefits Gush provides. Gush, however, is much more than a draw spell.

This chapter will cast light upon the underappreciated and subtle benefits of Gush. It will describe four distinct forms of advantage made available by Gush, and will illustrate, in general terms, how to achieve them. In doing so, this chapter explains how Gush influences deck construction, mana base design and development, and spell selection. The following chapter builds on these ideas with clear rules for play and usage.

There are two critical impediments to learning how to play Gush well and designing decks that maximize the value of Gush. The first is simple inexperience. Few Magic players have experience playing Gush in any format. Remarkably, Gush has not been legal in any other sanctioned paper format in over a decade, and Gush has been alternating on and off the Restricted List in Vintage for most of the last. Most active players in the format have little experience with Gush decks, or comparatively greater expertise with non-Gush decks.

Inexperienced Gush players are more likely to pursue suboptimal lines of play or miscue, resulting in poor performance. This becomes a vicious cycle. Inexperience undermines confidence in one's ability to successfully play a card, and poor performance inhibits skill development by dissuading players from testing Gush or using it in tournament competition.

The second and more serious impediment to success with Gush is misapplication of principles acquired with other archetypes or in other contexts. Many of the skills developed elsewhere in the Vintage format or in Magic more broadly do not apply to Gush decks. Of course, many of the tactics featured in Gush decks are common to the

*Turn 1:*
Player 1: Mox, Land, Dark Confidant
Player 2: Land

*Turn 2:*
Player 1: (+ 1 card from Dark Confidant), Land
Player 2: Land

*Turn 3:*
Player 1: (+1 card from Dark Confidant), Land
Player 2: Gush, Land

At this particular juncture, Player 1 has drawn two additional cards off of Dark Confidant. If Gush resolves, Player 2 will enjoy the same card advantage, except they will also get another land drop out of the deal (assuming they did not have another land already in hand *and* did not draw another land off of Gush), creating mana advantage and virtual card advantage.

Continue this sequence, and examine how the Gush engine and the Dark Confidant engine compare beyond the third turn. Assuming Gush resolved, and the mana generated from lands returned to hand with Gush were used to play other spells.

*Turn 4:*
Player 1: (+1 card from Dark Confidant), Land
Player 2: Land

*Turn 5:*
Player 1: (+1 card from Dark Confidant), Land
Player 2: Second Gush, Land

At this point, after playing the second Gush, Player 2 is roughly even with Player 1 in terms of card advantage. As the table below illustrates, both players have drawn the same number of additional cards despite the fact that the Gush pilot waited to play Gush until Turns 3 and 5.

*Table 2.2: Cards Drawn by Dark Confidant vs. Gush by Turn*

| Turn | Dark Confidant Pilot Cards Drawn | Gush Pilot Cards Drawn |
|---|---|---|
| **Turn 1** | + 0 | +0 |
| **Turn 2** | + 1 | +0 |
| **Turn 3** | + 1 | +2 (Gush 1) |
| **Turn 4** | + 1 | +0 |
| **Turn 5** | + 1 | +2 (Gush 2) |
| **Total Cards Drawn** | + 4 | +4 |

## *Table 3.1: GushBond Trajectory*

| Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 4 | Step 5 |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Fastbond | Gushes | Yawgmoth's Will | Replay Gushes | Finisher |

The centrality of Yawgmoth's Will to the GushBond engine, illustrated by the table above, has as much to do with the *mana* advantage as the overwhelming card advantage. Yawgmoth's Will is well regarded as a devastating play largely on account of the enormous card advantage it generates. With Fastbond and Gush, Yawgmoth's Will's mana production is equally important. Yawgmoth's Will amplifies the mana production capacity of Fastbond and Gush beyond what they can accomplish alone.

If, through an incredible stroke of luck, you are able to chain together all four Gushes with Fastbond in a continuous sequence, without any expenditure of additional resources to find them, you can generate no more than eight additional mana from lands returned to hand. To illustrate this, consider this unlikely, but illustrative, opening hand:



*Underground Sea, Tropical Island, Fastbond, Gush, Gush, Gush, Gush*

Assuming your opponent is unable to stop any of your spells and you can play them otherwise unimpeded, the two original lands can be replayed four times, generating eight mana. Granted, more mana is likely to be drawn from the library in the process, but there is a ceiling to the quantity of mana and cards that can be generated from the interaction of Gush and Fastbond alone: eight cards and eight mana. This should be enough resources to win the game, but this extreme hypothetical illustrates the best case scenario, not the usual case.

Although it is not unusual to draw a Gush or two with an opening hand Fastbond, it is unlikely that additional Gushes are either already in hand or drawn naturally with the previous Gushes. It is more likely the case that further Gushes must be sought out,

*Underground Sea, Tropical Island, Gush, Fastbond, Mystical Tutor, Brainstorm, Force of Will*

It is Turn 1, and you are on the play.

*Step 1:* Play Tropical Island, and tap it to cast Fastbond (Storm 1).

*Step 2:* Play Underground Sea (-1 life, 19), and tap it to add U mana, then return Tropical Island and Underground Sea to hand to cast Gush (Storm 2), drawing Polluted Delta and Regrowth.



*Step 3:* Play Tropical Island (-1 life, 18) and Underground Sea (-1 life, 17), and tap to add G and U mana, and then cast Regrowth (Storm 3) targeting Gush in the graveyard (still floating U from Step 2).



*Step 4:* Return Tropical Island and Underground Sea to hand to cast Gush (Storm 4), drawing Misty Rainforest and Preordain.



*Step 5:* Cast Preordain (Storm 5) using the floating U mana, seeing Merchant Scroll and Mox Sapphire. Draw Merchant Scroll off Preordain.

*Step 6:* Play Tropical Island (-1 life, 16) and Underground Sea (-1 life, 15), and tap to add

*Island, Flooded Strand, Young Pyromancer, Lighting Bolt, Monastery Mentor, Mental Misstep, Gush*

Which dual land should you fetch on turn two with Flooded Strand?

The tension introduced with this opening hand is that you have two mana sources, only one of which can fetch a dual land that can produce the red or white mana needed to cast spells in hand, but not both. Maximizing your ability to play spells in hand would weigh towards using the Flooded Strand to find a Volcanic Island rather than a Tundra. This would permit you to cast both Young Pyromancer and Lightning Bolt, as opposed to just Mentor. While that is probably the correct play, the situation is not as simple as mere arithmetic. Not all spells are equal.  It's possible, if not likely, that the Mentor is a strategically more significant play.

To illustrate this tension more clearly, consider an example where the math is more indeterminate. Consider this opening hand:



*Mox Sapphire, Polluted Delta, Underground Sea, Red Elemental Blast, Force of Will, Mental Misstep, Trygon Predator*

# *Chapter 10: Matchups & Sideboarding*

We now turn to matchup analysis and sideboarding strategies. This chapter will set out a theory of sideboarding, explaining the reasons for developing a sideboard and a sideboard plan, a few broad parameters and advice to bear in mind, and then turn to 5 broad matchup categories: Workshop strategies, blue control decks, storm combo decks, Dredge, and disruptive aggro and aggro-control strategies. We'll examine the dynamics of each matchup, a comprehensive list of tactics to address them, and real world sideboarding sample plans for each matchup.

## *A Theory of Sideboarding*

In constructed Magic, sideboard games constitute a majority of game play, by virtue of matches being best-of-3 games (or best-of-5 games). Having a carefully constructed sideboard and a well-formulated sideboard plan is essential to tournament success. For such an important topic, there is a remarkable paucity of serious guidance and theory on sideboarding strategies.

To begin, we must understand the need for sideboarding. Most players intuit why, but a theoretical discussion will help frame the discussion that follows. There is not a singular reason for developing a sideboard plan, but rather a host of reasons. To understand these reasons and the differences between them, we first need a model for thinking about matchups.

Although there are an infinite variety of ways to conceptualize matchups, two basic models dominate popular discourse. The first takes the view that most decks have favorable and unfavorable matchups. Borrowing from the natural sciences, in this model some decks are natural prey for certain strategies and other decks are natural predators. Natural predators exploit their prey's weaknesses either by design or through the structure of the metagame. For example, Dredge strategies are generally regarded as strategically weak to speedy combo decks because of their relatively fast clocks. Storm and Goblin Charbelcher combo decks not only have a faster clock, but Dredge's disruption is generally too slow to prevent the combo deck from winning first or accomplishing their strategic objectives. The disruption used by a particular strategy plays a critical role in determining predator-prey relationships. This is most obvious when a strategy relies on an element that naturally but inadvertently attacks another strategy directly. For example, Two-Card monte is a Workshop-based strategy that uses Leyline of the Void main deck as part of a combo with Helm of Obedience. One can easily imagine how this would pose problems for a Dredge-based strategy. Similarly, Oath of Druids strategies are better against creature-heavy decks than creatureless decks for the same principle.

# Appendix: Doomsday Scenarios

## Introduction

Resolving Doomsday is one of the most important skills tested in piloting a Doomsday deck. Unfortunately for Doomsday pilots, it may also be one of the most skill intensive plays in Vintage, if not the wider game of Magic. It entails not only selecting five cards from your library and graveyard, but also determining their position in a new library. There is probably no other card that offers as many possibilities and requires as many considerations in a single play. Moreover, the consequences of error are brutal. A slight miscalculation with Doomsday might well result in defeat.

Guidance on resolving Doomsday merits chapter-length treatment. I have reserved this vital but generally neglected topic for the Appendix because it is not applicable to non-Doomsday pilots. Given the importance of the subject, it is notable how little treatment this subject has been given among the Vintage commentariat.

Given the overwhelming complexity of the subject, it may be nothing short of hubris to attempt to offer a comprehensive or systemic framework for constructing Doomsday stacks. The complexity of Doomsday scenarios arises from the innumerable variables that inform optimal stack construction. Not only are the possibilities for constructing a library virtually limitless, but so are the number of relevant variables, including life totals, available mana, cards in hand, board state, and possible counter-tactics. This complexity is magnified by the fact that each of these variables interact, but must be evaluated holistically in a single decision matrix. For example, having a few points of additional life might reduce your mana requirements for winning the game or improve your capacity to address counter-tactics. These considerations must be factored together despite arising along different dimensions of game play. In short, almost everything is relevant in the process of constructing Doomsday stacks, but the result must be a single, well-considered decision.

Nonetheless, in this Appendix we will systematically analyze general principles and parameters for designing Doomsday stacks, review key variables, and examine a spectrum of Doomsday stacks and variants.

## General Principles

### Doomsday's Function

This book presented a unique conceptual model that ties deck design and in-game decision-making together into a cohesive framework by organizing deck components into categories that relate to game play and progression. Within this framework,