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## The Scroll

A Bi-Weekly Magic Newsletter

Issue 11

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(by all means, if you aren't a Magic player, let us know and we'll happily remove you from the list of recipients)

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Spotlight on Direct Damage (by David Norman)

Direct Damage, the bane of the thinking Magic player. Well, it isn't that bad, since there is wisdom in using a tactic that works so well. It is just embarrassing that it works so easily.

First, let's talk about what makes it work. The key word here, to use a Baxterism, is "utility". Direct Damaging cards are primarily useful since they can both easily kill creatures (the primary way of dealing damage), AND can easily kill a player. Worse, the utility cuts both ways. When you are getting blasted by a direct damager, and you are low on life (like, below 9), there's almost nothing in a typical deck that can help you. Another creature won't help. The otherwise awesome "Disenchant" certainly won't do the trick. Even the "too powerful" Mind Twist does no good when you are low on life. In short, not only are direct damage cards of high utility for the player using them, the average deck is composed of cards of low utility against direct damage.

So, let's talk about how to make Direct Damage not work. Cop: Red is high on the list of cards that help, but it has two drawbacks: first, a Disenchant/Traquil Domain/Boomerang on the end of your turn will set OP up to deal a massive fireball on you, and second, you still have to protect your creatures. Once you get the circle out, OP will just use his damage to blast your creatures one at a time until he gets a method for removing the Cop. So now you load up your deck with "protection from Red" creatures, and hope you manage to get both Cop and Creature out quickly or else you'll be in trouble. This is borderline feasible, but only if you're playing White. Let's be a little more subtle.

The way to deal with direct damage is to get to the heart of the matter: life. Gaining life is an excellent counter to direct damage. Leaving the many obvious choices in White behind, consider using even the simple Fountain of Youth--just three uses (and this isn't hard to accomplish) will "counter" one Bolt applied to your forehead. Elixir of Vitality is a plausible choice as well--again, it counters a Bolt, and might even counter a nifty Fireball. Before I get blasted for

offering up these "goofy" cards, consider that fact that a 40 Bolt, 20 Mountain deck will win less than 50% of the time against a 36 Bolt, 4 Iron Star, 20 Mountain deck. Life is this critical. Drain Life is the best of such spells, as it deals damage while granting the oh-so-important life.

Unfortunately, all these life-gaining methods are most viable when OP is low on mana (4 or less). As the mana accumulates even a bit, the X spells go on-line for crushing damage. That 20 life you start with is your built-in defense against direct damage. If OP is only hitting for 3 points per spell, he'll need to "waste" 7 cards on you (instead of on your creatures) to win. If he gets up to a realistic 6 mana, he only needs but 4 "X" spells to score (at 5 points apiece) to win. Adding just a few life tilts the odds more in your favor. Shutting down his mana supply, via Winter Orb, Infernal Darkness, Stasis, or by crushing a few selective lands, will go a long way to keep him from hurting you badly enough to win.

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#### Card to Watch for ... Coercion

So many people whine about how "WotC is trying to kill Discard Decks" that it turns my stomach. When I see all the newer discard stuff around, my belly starts spinning like the inside of a clothes dryer.

For the same casting cost of Stupor, Coercion gets rid of Stupor's drawback: the Sand Golems. Sure, you don't make OP lose two cards, but you get the ability to go through his hand and pick the very card you'd like to be rid of. This is a tournament card.

Remember what, more than anything else, makes a tournament card is how hard it is for OP to interfere with it. Hence, most blue counterspells are tournament cards (probably a greater percentage of Blue cards make tournaments than any other color)--only another Blue player can reliably stop a counterspell. Direct Damage is hardhardhard to interfere with. Strip Mine was utterly unstoppable, and tourney deck mandatory thereby, at least when its legal.

Its the same deal with Coercion. There's nothing short of a counterspell (and, this gets rid of a card, part of the idea of Coercion anyway--can't wait until Bogardan starts fashioning counterspells!) that anyone will be able to do to stop this horror. Well, you can empty your hand as fast as possible, but this is a level of vulnerability that most players don't enjoy.

In any event, look to see this, and, if you play Black, consider swapping out the Stupors for the Coercions, especially after you see OP reach for his sideboard.

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#### A Question.... What Happens you cast Scars of the Veteran on a Mishra's Factory?

Well, assuming there's damage to prevent, the damage (up to 7) is prevented by the Scars, and, at the end of the turn, Mishra gets a 0/+1 token for every point prevented. A good response to Scars of the Veteran is to damage the creature again before the tokens get put on.

The real issue is, what happens to these tokens when Mishra turns into a land? Nothing, they stay right there. Modifying tokens are the hardest things in the world to be rid of, short of some built-in effect. Once a card accumulates tokens, it generally keeps them until it leaves play, however briefly. So, the Mishra keeps the tokens, and becomes a particularly tough hill. However, if it leaves play and then returns (say, by Enduring Renewal), then the tokens don't come back.

Inherent in all this is, once an effect has been successfully resolved, there are usually only case-specific methods of "undoing" the effect. So, an Ice Floe can tap an attacking Mishra (since its a creature), but, even after the Mishra reverts to a land, it will stay tapped until the Ice Floe untaps--the effect has been successfully generated, and only the built-in method of untapping the Ice Floe (or, of course, removing it from play) can undo it. This is more intuitive with damage; a creature snuffed by a Bolt doesn't come back into play when, a few turns later, an Energy Storm (that reduces damage dealt by spells to 0) comes into play.

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#### Deck of the Fortnight....Can't Touch This.

Lands: 12 Forests, 10 Mountains, 2 Mountain Valleys, 1 Thawing Glaciers

Creatures: 3 Autumn Willows, 4 Jolrael's Centaurs, 4 Deadly Insects.

(what? You don't have a stack of Willows? Try Worldly Tutor or a device to give you extra cards every turn instead)

Enchantments: None

Artifacts: 3 Amber Prisons, 3 Fire Diamonds, 2 Moss Diamonds  
(Prisons tough to get hold of? Try "Shrink", a nifty way to help out your untouchable creatures)

Non-Permanents: 1 Builder's Bane, 4 Disintegrates, 4 Fireballs, 4 Incinerates, 2 Lighting Bolts, 1 Tranquility.

Keeping with this issue's spotlight, we have a direct damage oriented deck. The basic idea is to fry every creature that comes out, then bring out an untouchable creature which can't be stopped except by a creature (which is hard pressed to survive this deck) or global destruction.

The first subtle trick is built into this deck--all of the creatures are non-targetable. The average tourney deck contains 4 (or more) cards that target only creatures (eg, Swords to Plowshares, Dark Banishing, Pacifism, Control Magic), and such decks will have several "wasted" cards when playing Can't Touch This.

The next subtlety is also built-in. Look at the mana percentage. Half of this deck is geared towards mana, so this is a deck that rarely, rarely, stalls--even with all the high casting cost creatures in it. With 8 "X" spells, a mana splurge, combined with but one or two hits from an untouchable, will generally be a gamewinner.

The Amber Prisons add to the misery this deck can cause, as well as give more justification for the heavy mana percentage. Don't be so quick to blast OP's creatures when you're ready to cast a Prison. Tie the creature down with the Prison, force OP to summon another creature, then trash them both with a Fireball. Poor OP will need to summon THREE more creatures in order to get a reliable blocker (see below!), and by that time you might have another Fireball, if not also enough mana to fry him directly. Who says direct damage is a tactic for morons?

The Amber Prisons likewise perform this service with annoying artifacts, at least while you're waiting for a Builder's Bane. Note also that the Prisons can be used to take down two potential blockers. Just use it at the end of OP's turn, and again on your turn--this is even better than the Icy, since the second creature will stay tapped on OP's turn (so two blockers get tapped turn after turn, instead of 2 every other turn with the Icy).

In short, this is a good deck to play to see just how a too-high mana percentage is hardly a fatal error--most certainly less fatal than too low. Play against this deck to get a feel for what makes direct damage work--lots of mana and the ability to deal with creatures are the two most overlooked positive aspects of Direct Damage--NEITHER OF THESE ARE ADDRESSED BY USING COP:RED. Only a deck that can reliably attack these features can reliably win against Direct Damage. (This is what makes Armageddon/Ernham popular--Red has a tough time killing Ernie with 4 mana, which is all it takes to summon Ernie, which means Ernie will survive at least one turn. Armageddon makes it really hard to get much more than 4 mana in any event.)

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Tidbits of Wisdom ... Some Notes On Overrated Cards by Rick Moscatello

People always freak out when a new set comes out, and sometimes, quite arbitrarily, assume some cards are awesome despite anything common sense might have to say. Here's a few of the more recent ones:

Relentless Assault. This just mystifies me. Ideally, this works best when you have two creatures in play and able to attack (hah!), AND OP has no defense. Then you'll deal around 7 points of damage more than you would otherwise, and doing this much requires some luck. Sure, this was a publicised card, but, is this really a good deal? You are unlikely to cast this until the fourth turn of the game, and that would require some more luck to be viable at that point. Let's compare this to Fireball. A fourth turn Fireball deals probably 3 points of damage, has a chance of taking out two creatures, and, if it is used to take out creatures, it has the added bonus of "preventing" the damage those creatures would have caused if they had been allowed to survive, AND the Fireball will clear the way for any attackers you might have. How, exactly, is this not as good a deal as Relentless Assault? Fireball just gets better as the game progresses. Even Final Fortune is a better play, since you'll get another card and an extra chance to use your mana--most useful when you consider many of the best creatures are "pumpable", especially in Red.

Archangel. Hey, a 5/5 Flyer that doesn't tap to attack sounds good. Consider Serra Angel, a 4/4 with the same abilities, costing 5 mana instead of 7. If OP can't deal with the Serra in 5 turns, he's toast. If OP can't deal with Archangel in 4, he toast--a one turn improvement. But, to get that extra 2 mana, a 40% mana deck will wait an average of 5 extra turns--1/4

of an average Type II game. I'll take Serra any day. One really doesn't need power beyond 4 (especially when Ernham Djinn goes away), and should be reluctant to pay much for it.

Celestial Dawn. Another case of cluelessness for Rick. Yeah, sure, it turns everything in your deck White, but it only works like this when its in play. It needs two White to cast, so your deck needs to be pretty White strong anyhow. And, you'll need backup in case the Dawn is not in play. Now that you've blown maybe 6 cards that do nothing but make sure you'll get the colors you need (or turn everything White) in a sane amount of time, you'll find your deck doesn't do much else. Just use Thawing Glaciers and a little discretion--you'll go much further.

Sacred Mesa. Unlike the other cards, this one isn't a total waste, but it still isn't that hot, by a longshot. You're nuts if you cast this with only 5 mana--you're using 3 for the spell, and two to create a Pegasus (created in OP's discard phase, of course). If OP has ANY "fast effect" means of creature removal, that Pegasus has no chance of survival. Since you can't use the Mesa in your upkeep until you sacrifice a Pegasus to it, you've blown 5 mana and a card, and OP probably spent less than 5 mana to blast the Pegasus--you might not lose the card war, but your efficiency will certainly lag. This means you pretty much have to wait until you have 7 mana to cast this--7 mana so you can get a 1/1 creature to attack with next turn, and you'll have 3 the next if you decide not to cast that card you just drew. I'd drather have Waiting in the Weeds--four 1/1 tokens immediately, or, better yet, Snake Basket (this card is a sleeper so far)--7 tokens next turn. Even Kjeldoran Outpost looks better, albeit slower, as its tokens can keep you alive until you get enough mana to summon something awesome.

Lord of Tresserhorn. Why is this card worth more than Gargantuan Gorilla? I have yet to see anybody successfully attack with the Lord--the requirements, especially giving OP 2 friggin' cards, make it almost impossible to summon him and keep him alive. One Incinerate, combined with any blocker, and the Lord pops off to the ash bin. At least the Gorilla might not be stopped by a lone regenerating defender, and, even if this is the case, the Gorilla lets you pick off other creatures one by one. In no way am I saying the Gorilla is a great card, just better than the Lord.

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Trade Zone and Marketplace. I pop down to my local hobby shop, to check out the prices on the new cards. My god, Wand of Denial isn't \$20! Chronatog selling for \$8? I can think of alot more decks that can use a Wand, and only one deck that uses the Chornatog. Bone Mask selling for \$4 is a bit hard to swallow too--I consistently use the Mask to prevent 5 or more damage, and being hard to damage is almost as good as the life gain from Zuran Orb. People fear using it because they don't want to run out of cards; if you use it to prevent the thirty damage it takes to run out of cards, you'd be dead without it. Well, its a good thing I don't set prices. Hmmm, far too many people are elated to see me sit down to trade. Maybe I am off base!

Magic rule@aol.com selling mint condition 4th edition set.

Ninja1999@aol.com has NM Arabian Nights Pyramid (Looking for Trades, no money bids, mostly new stuff) .

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Oh, is the humiliation more than we can bear? After learning that almost nobody likes attached files, last issue's Scroll was too long, and forcibly attached. The horror, the horror.

A few comments from 75051.2630@compuserve.com, aka "The Big T":

1. What you say about the Visions lands is generally true, but I have seen them prove quite useful in the Mirage/Visions constructed format for Arena league. In an environment where extreme speed is not common, these lands can work. They guarantee that you will have a land to lay the next round without suffering a mana penalty. Moreover, they're a great help against discard. As an example, I played one mono-red deck with my discard deck, and his early playing of two Mountain Valleys saved him from Pauper's Cage death while giving him enough mana to mess with me. I'll agree that they probably shouldn't be used in numbers

greater than two per deck (which is also what I've always thought about the Alliances lands) but they can be more useful than you might first think (I, too, thought they were a waste at first!).

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3. Sorry, I think you're very wrong about the formats. You sound disillusioned with MTG. I don't agree at all with your assessment that T2 is, basically, a kiddie format. I once felt like you did, but I feel now that the very recent T2 scene is about as dynamic and exciting when it comes to deck construction and competitive play as tournament MTG has been since the very early days. You can take the cynical view that cycling out sets is just a money-making gimmick on WOTC's part or you can adapt the view that I have, that cycling out sets is necessary to keep the tournament scene from stagnating - which it was showing signs of doing before Jan. 1st. The recent explosion in deck creativity can be heavily attributed to one thing: the cycling out of IA forced T2 Necro to die. Now, indications are that even the retro T2 Nov. '96 format being used in PQs is \*much\* less heavily weighted than before... Another big transition will happen in May when 5th edition becomes legal and (if WOTC stays to schedule) again in July when Alliances goes out - please note, that's exactly one year from the time it went in and still more than 4-1/2 months away. This, I believe, is what DC originally intended. I think if DC had gotten this cycling better established from the get-go there'd be fewer complaints. As for T1.5? Not necessarily true, although I do concede that dual lands usually give an edge. Strong, effective T1.5 decks can be made without them, though - The "Big T"

I don't know about the Visions lands helping with discard stuff. This seems to be a good case of "Flashfires" syndrome. That's where you use a card, like Flashfires, that saves your bacon big time in one game and its mostly due to the particular situation (OP had alot of plains, say). You then play that card all the time hoping to get a repeat. But, hey, time will tell. After all, people told me the FE sac lands were lousy, but I put them in every deck until the very last microsecond they were legal. Arena around here is dead--WotC's forevertaking to tabulate the scores, combined with the awesome power of red/green in the format, sapped much of the interest in Arena in this area.

Ok, I was extreme in calling T2 a kiddie league. I apologize. Maybe I'll like T2 more when STP, Armageddon, and Ernham finally go bye-bye. Even though I haven't played against an Ernham/Armageddon deck in months, I still find these particular cards to be unbalancing with this card mix (anybody use Nettling Djinn instead of Ernie? Afterlife instead of STP? <nothing> instead of Armageddon?) Disillusioned? I don't think that's the right word, Magic is just a game, I just find the current "rules" a bit unfavorable for imaginative play, just as if the rules for Monopoly were changed so that at the beginning of each game, players tossed a coin, and the winner was the only one who started with money. Sure, the guy without money might win, but I find it likely he's at a disadvantage before the first die roll. I find nothing cynical in saying that WotC is trying to sell cards. I'd be flat out astonished if making money by selling cards wasn't their primary goal.

Yep, you don't need dual lands to make a good type 1.5 deck, but decks are made better by including them. What would you think of an Olympic running event where half the runners started "just a few" meters ahead of everyone else? It isn't even possible for everyone to have these cards in a tournament. A deck with 1 Savannah Lion and 59 Plains is quite capable of beating the most powerful Type I(diot) deck. The issue with me is not, nor has it ever been, that a deck without power Oops cannot beat a deck with them. The issues are first, there's no thought to putting the Oops in (i.e., the strategy component in minimalized), and second, they confer an ADVANTAGE, no matter how infinitesimal, that cannot be matched any other way (tell me how a Type II deck can compete if OP plays a Land Equilibrium before the Type II even draws a card!). My friends play hand/land destruction in Type I for this purpose--only Moxes and the like can reliably compete with these strategies, so immediately they know they'll crush more than half the decks there. I understand that the goal of a tourney is to mash OP, but this kind of "sportsmanship" is beyond me.

The tournament scene was stagnating? I disagree that Necro was the cause. Faithful readers know my scapegoat is the Zuran Orb. Heavens, <insert hot card here>/Zuran Orb/You Lose were just too common in Zuran Orb formats (guilty many times myself), and the strategies that were nullified by the Zorb were legion. I would have liked more opportunity to play WITH Ice Age, but without the Orb, and WITH the pain lands, but without the dual lands. As it is, I'll never know if Dwarven Armory or Sunstone (as well as a dozen others that give you some use out of your extra lands) were good cards for a tournament deck. I certainly don't want to try it in Type 1.5, where too many powerful cards make subtle, long term, strategies something of a mistake.

Still, thanks for taking me to task. Its easy to get too arrogant, to judge by all the pompous goons I've dealt with, and I sure don't want to join them--Rick Moscatello

Until next time!

Our sincere thanks to AOL, CompuServe, InQuest Magazine, Tulane University, and the New Orleans Magic club for their help in preparing this.