
The Scroll

A Bi-Weekly Magic Newsletter

Issue 12

(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 Tokens by David Norman

Token creatures have a bad rap in Magic, probably because they first entered general use in Fallen Empires, the only set that was overproduced AND overmaligned.

Most people don't use tokens since, at 1/1 (the typical token power/toughness), they aren't likely to kill anyone or anything. This is a shame, since the value of tokens isn't in their ability to directly kill OP as it is in their ability to gain card advantage over OP. If OP is forced to waste a card on a token, and you got multiple tokens out of a card, you'll come out ahead. Thus, only cards which can generate more than one token have any chance of making a serious deck--even Errand of Duty, a card which creates a banding token instantly, isn't worthwhile, since it is just too hard to counter/kill an OP card with it.

Victory through card advantage is a long-term strategy--an extra four cards on the first turn isn't nearly as powerful as on the tenth (I've seen several new Necro players lay down the 'potence early enough to kill themselves with it), but, this can be taken too far. Thallids serve as a good example. They grant a free token every three turns, if they survive. Three turns after you cast a Thallid you get one measly token. This, of course, sucks--only Fungal Bloom can make a Thallid deck a killer. Cards which create 0/1 Tokens don't make the tournament scene much (eg, Breeding Pit, Carrion)--such cards only work in a "sacrifice" deck, and, as such decks are relying on a three card combo (something to sacrifice to, something to sacrifice, and something to create sacrifices), and a fragile one at that (since at least two of the previous tend to be creatures), they have no chance of tournament greatness. Tokens need to come into play in numbers and quickly.

Finally, WotC has been making Token cards that are worthwhile. Goblin Scouts cost just a bit too much (5 mana, two of which was red) to be worthwhile--a 5 doublemana spell can get you a 4/4 creature, after all, which is usually as good as 3 mountainwalking tokens. If Icatian Town (4 White Tokens for 5 mana) didn't rock the Magic world, this one won't either. But, Waiting in the Weeds works--once you get to 5 mana, you get 2 tokens out of it, and this number jumps quickly after that, especially if your deck is heavy in forests. Just like artifacts that generate effect for no mana, "X" spells, and Waiting qualifies, are always a consideration, since there is no limit to their power. Fireball is in many more decks than Pyrotechnics.

Cards that stay in play and generate tokens are probably the best. Even though Kjeldoran Outpost only grants one a turn, and costs two mana to use (this is just as much as Breeding Pit!), its an awesome card, since it makes kill-capable tokens fast enough to win games. The Hive can win many a game, especially if OP isn't using land destruction. The Sacred Mesa is probably better than the Hive, although the mandatory upkeep can be an easy downfall.

Snake Basket is WotC's first "mass token" generator, but I'm told this awesome card is in the ol' card spotlight this issue, so I'll let Rick sing the praises of that one.

Tokens probably will never dominate the tournament scene, but they'll always be around. To stop them, be sure your deck has mass destruction (Wrath of God, Earthquake, or the versatile albeit lethargic Nevinyrral's Disk), if not enchantment destruction (for the occasional Sacred Mesa or Breeding Pit), or expect to lose a few games to a swarm.

Card to Watch for ... Snake Basket

Let's see here, the casting cost is 4 mana, which means its at least possible for this to be a tournament card. Hmm, an X in the activation cost, that's a plus, too, although "play this ability as a Sorcery" is a drawback. Perhaps Peace Talks, or whatever people use to protect Nev Disks, will work to counter this penalty--waiting a turn will increase the effect greatly.

WHAT A MONGO EFFECT! Tokens usually come into play rather slowly, but this just blows the doors off everything else. X 1/1 Green Snake Tokens--is this the first artifact that creates tokens of a specific color? This is just one more bonus, since that means you're getting non-artifacts from your artifact, thereby offering protection from artifact hosing, and color-hosing if the rest of your deck has no Green.

"But they are only measly 1/1 tokens. They'll get killed by anything." sayeth the token hater. So what, just use the Basket when you have 6 more mana than OP has creatures (eg, if OP has 1 creature, use the Basket when you have 7 mana). Even if he blocks and kills a token every turn, it won't matter, since he'll take 6 damage on one turn, 5 on the next, then 4, then 3, then 2, at which point you've dealt 20 points, which could kill him. The only way he'll break out of this cycle is to bring in another creature (but, you could just as easily draw creature control), kill you (use a token as a blocker in this case), or use mass destruction (which risks killing his own creature--you'll get card advantage). How many cards put OP up against the wall this quickly? Heh, how many cards in Type II?

This is scary indeed, and it is not clear exactly which drugs WotC was taking when it released this doozie. Watch out!

A Question.... Can I tap an attacking creature just as OP declares it as an attacker, preventing the attack?

Well, no. Declaration of attackers, and declaration of blockers, are special events. Before OP declares his attackers, he should say something to the effect of "I'm about to declare my attackers". This is your opportunity to tap a creature you don't want attacking. After he declares the creature an attacker, your Icy won't help much--you can still tap, say, a Serra Angel, after its been declared an attacker, but such tapping will have no effect on attacker damage dealing (but note: a tapped defender doesn't deal damage).

Similarly, before your creature is declared a blocker, OP has the opportunity to smash/tap it somehow. For example, you can't activate a Mishra and declare it a blocker before OP gets a chance to stomp it back into the ground.

Deck of the Fortnight....A Yo-Yo Deck

Lands: 13 Forests, 6 Islands, 1 Thawing Glaciers

Creatures: 1 Clockwork Beast, 4 Erhnam Djinn, 3 Llanowar Elves, 4 Man-o'-Wars, 2 Quirion Elves, 3 Shield Spheres, 3 Shrieking Drakes, 2 Storm Elementals, 2 Tetravuses (Tetravi?), 3 Triskelions, 4 Walls of Roots.

(lotsa rares here, but none of these, 'cept maybe the Beast, is hard to trade for)

Enchantments: None

Artifacts: 2 Dragon Masks, 4 Fellwar Stones

Non-Permanents: 2 Rampant Growths, 1 Recall

This fortnight features another Blue/Green deck, and just like the previous, Malignant Growth, deck, this one is "slightly below tournament level". Nonetheless, there's more than a few tricks going on here, and a fistful of the new cards are used. Let's see what we can learn:

There's two types of degeneracy going on with this deck. The first is the obvious creature degeneracy--there's 31 creatures in this deck, which guarantees something will come into play sooner rather than later. The other degeneracy is one which isn't exploited very much, but which has merit nonetheless: "permanent" degeneracy. Of the 60 cards in this deck, FIFTY-NINE of them will put a permanent into play. Of course this means the deck has little defense, but it also means it will be hard to defend against.

So, let's look at them critters. It isn't possible to build a strong creature deck with Green in it without the Herman's Djinn (Erhnam, for the anagrammatically impaired). Getting two of these in the draw is enough to win a game against most non-tournament decks. Just as some clown pays 4 mana to put a 2/2 Chimera into play, you're putting a 4/5 bad boy that whumps it into the ground. Anyway, these guys are your initial offense, though they team up with your walls if you need lots of ground defense (albeit the ol' forestwalk can be a drawback sometimes). Once we hit 6 mana, the big artifacts come "on-line". The Clockwork Beast can deal a crushing amount of damage, the Triskelion gives targetable direct damage, and the Tetravus gives an overwhelming air attack. Finally, the Storm Elemental provides all the air defense you could want--the ability to tap any flying creature (well, any except "protection from Blue" creatures) makes the Elemental a force to be feared. The other creatures are all part of the yo-yo theme (even the mana producers).

Shrieking Drake looks like a crummy creature--that one mana casting cost initially appears meaningless, since you'll need another creature in play to really summon it (although you could combine it with Crystal Rod as a decent life-gaining tool--just keep returning the Drake to your hand and recasting it, and activate the Rod repeatedly, to send OP into a hissy fit of notable proportions; dippy, but something to consider for another deck, and certainly better than the Juju Bauble, which has about the same effect for the same cost, but with cumulative upkeep and a hideous drawback). Anyway, for this deck, the Drake combines with the Triskelion nicely, allowing you to summon the Triskelion, deal 3 damage with it, then summon the Drake, putting the Triskelion back into your hand. Then resummon the Triskelion. Do this with the Tetravus (albeit more slowly, perhaps too slowly) and you'll create a batch of 1/1 fliers. Do it with the Clockwork Beast (or other creature you're attacking with), then resummon it to get the "Serra Angel" effect (i.e., the creature will attack, but then be resummoned into play untapped, so it can block). Do this with your Shield Sphere/Wall of Roots if they are looking a bit weak. The Man-o'-War works the same way, although you can also use it to keep OP off balance--a worthy goal when he's trying to get a collection of creatures in play big enough to stop Herman (don't forget you can use the Drake on the Man if you need to put OP's creatures back in his hand). The Dragon Mask serves as a re-usable, slower, Drake which will also pump up the creature as well.

Of course, all of this requires mana--the Mask/Triskelion combo would require 9 generic mana to be useable turn after turn, and this is not much easier than the 8 mana (5 Red) required to use the Hammer of Bogardan every turn--but note how the effect is slightly better. At first glance, this deck looks mana shy, weighing in with only 19 lands. But, 4 Fellwar Stones, 4 Walls of Roots, and 5 Elves puts the mana percentage over 50%, and the Thawing Glaciers and Rampant Growth will get you all the mana you need, if you get enough time--and time is what the walls, usually sucky cards for a deck, will bring you (especially if OP makes the mistake of slowly trying to bash down your Shield Spheres). You'll note that there is a shortage of Islands in the deck; most of the blue spells aren't needed quickly anyway, so this deck goes Green heavy (to support all the Green cards) in an effort to prevent a splurge of Blue mana initially.

Finally, we come to the one non-permanent in the deck, Recall, which is the perfect card to support any degeneracy style. Sooner or later, OP will realize that he needs to smash those artifact creatures as soon as they come out. Use of the Recall will let you put them back into your hand, and hopefully, he'll be low on artifact/creature destruction the second time around.

One of several concepts I've yet to see addressed in the "Magic literature" (and that latter word is used loosely) is the mana progression.

"Its a speed deck--nothing over two mana" is the kind of thing I've heard alot, and this is close to what I'm talking about, namely, examining the casting cost of cards in your deck to verify that the deck is capable of playing when mana is low. Here's some minimums for you:

If you want to expect to be able to do something on the first turn of the game (when you have 1 mana available), then at least 1 card in 6 should cost 1 mana to cast. Why 6? Well, one of your seven cards is land. That's ten cards.

If you want to do something on the second turn, then at least 1 card in 7 should cost 2 mana (or less) to cast). In a sixty card deck, that's around nine cards.

Using the same argument, you should have eight "3 cost cards", and seven "4 cost cards". Hmm, at this stage, we've accounted for 58 cards. This means that a typical 40% mana deck probably should have around 2 cards that cost 5 or more mana to cast. Think I'm wacky? Go look at a tournament deck. You'll find these percentages I've given are the MINIMUM. A certain Baxter book lists numerous tournament decks. I defy anyone to find a deck in there that violates this progression.

It is amazing the difference adhering to this progression can make for a deck. A deck with it will find itself actively defending itself even when it mana stalls somewhat. A deck without this progression will get creamed every time it stalls, and will often find itself unable to do anything in the first few turns.

Of course, some unimaginative souls are wondering "how do I count X spells?". I tend to count X as one, since this is usually the minimum required to generate an effect, although a case can be made for calling it 0. I'm not giving laws of nature here, just a quite useful guideline. Some cards (eg, Mishra's Factory, Kjeldoran Outpost) count as "0"--many a player has put himself into trouble by factoring these key cards as lands instead of spells.

Trade Zone and Marketplace.

MICRON322@aol.com is having a Magic Auction By Mail. To Join, please E-mail him.

Scazmatic@aol.com is selling his entire collection for a very negotiable \$400. He says it has everything you need to build classic Type II winning decks (i.e., all the good stuff from FE on).

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Copper231 didn't agree with David Norman's comments on Direct Damage last issue:

... you say that fountain of youth is great because "just three uses (and this isn't hard to accomplish) will "counter" one Bolt applied to your forehead." which is quite true, but it takes three turns and six mana, and it will take 5 turns and 10 mana to "counter" a five point fireball. a healing salve or taste of paradise is MUCH more useful. you get more life out of it for your mana, and its all in one turn. while your busy "countering" that bolt, theyll already have shoved another (or one of those previously mentioned 5 point fireballs) your way. <<

Most true, but I was talking about non-white cards. Healing Salve and Taste both require White to use. I still think the Fountain is better than the Salve, at least for gaining life--put them both in your deck and see which one gets you more life.

I agree completely that the Fountain, and not much else either, does little against heavy damaging spells. Against a deck with 15 Bolt type spells, the fountain is OK, since in the four turns it takes OP to draw a Bolt, you could get three life. This just won't work if OP has a few X spells instead of Bolts. It is most important to do something about OP's mana when he is using direct damage.

Here's something to consider for the Taste of Paradise. Let's suppose you cast a 7 point Taste, giving yourself 10 life. That's 9 mana, and in a 40% mana deck, it would take 15.5 turns on average to accumulate this much. Hmm, the Fountain could easily give you 10 life over the course of 15 turns. Very comparable, especially when you consider that,

as the game progresses, the Fountain will continue to give you life, whereas the Taste will most likely sit in your graveyard. Even at 2 mana (the second turn of the game), the Fountain will at least provide 1 life, whereas the Taste would provide 3--when you factor in that you'll only be able to cast Taste on the second turn around 50% of the time (since you'll need exactly one white and one green), this works to an expected life gain of 1.5 life--superior, but only in a white/green deck, and not enough of an advantage to choose those colors for this purpose. In short, at low mana the Taste gives a small advantage, and at high mana, it doesn't give any advantage. Ask yourself, how often do games end before you get 4 mana on the table, and in these cases, how often would an extra 2 life matter anyway?--David (The chance of having a white and a green turn two is actually quite a bit better than 50%, but this is a niggling detail; more importantly, who says you're going to get the Fountain on the draw? If you get it on turn 15, it won't be nearly as good as the Taste! Still, I pack Fountains before Salves and the like--Rick)

Until next time!

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