
The Scroll

A Bi-Weekly Magic Newsletter

Issue 10

(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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Enough bureaucratic stuff, get to the contents already!

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Spotlight on Visions Lands (by David Norman)

Every set has a special set of lands for it, and it looks like Visions almost matches Homelands for "worst special lands".

Each basic land type gets a "return" land, where you if you play, say, Everglades, you have to return an untapped basic swamp to your hand or bury the Everglades. These return lands come into play tapped, and when they do get around to untapping, they provide one mana of the appropriate color (in the case of Everglades, Black) and an additional colorless mana. Same idea for Coral Atoll, Dormant Volcano, Jungle Basin, and Karoo.

At first glance, this doesn't look so bad--after all, you don't lose a card like with the Alliances lands, and the extra mana could be useful. But, what happens when you get only return lands in the draw? You're totally screwed. When you do get around to drawing a swamp, you have to play it, then wait until your next turn to play the Everglades (and you can't use the swamp before you return it to your hand--which will make you discard!), then wait another turn before you can use the Everglades. Its hard enough to come back from a mana stall as it is, these cards in your deck will only make a bad situation worse. Hmm, Everglades provides extra mana, but will hurt you in a stall. Anybody see the contradiction here? If you have mana, the Everglades won't be necessary, and if you don't have mana, the Everglades will probably be the final coffin nail. This was the kind of problem that made Mana Batteries so useless--if you have enough mana to cast them, they won't help much, and, on a similar note, I bet the same will hold for Sisay's Ring.

Luckily, the other special lands have something to say for them. Ok, Griffon Canyon is as shallow as a potato chip, but Undiscovered Paradise is a pretty good substitute for City of Brass (since using 2 Cities of Brass at a time is about as much fun as using two Paradises)--someone somewhere will try to combine this with Sheltered Valley for real joy. Quicksand is the hot, hot, card. Old timers will remember how useful Desert was, and Quicksand's -1/-2 to attacking

nonflying creatures is good enough to put it into nigh any deck. Mercifully, you have to sacrifice the Quicksand to get this effect, but this is not a bad deal. The fact that Quicksand also provides colorless mana means that "fliers only" (or Jolrael's Centaur) may be the way to go in Type II for quite some time to come.

Card to Watch for ... Wand of Denial (by Lee Maurici)

Hmmm, the Wand has a 2 mana casting cost, and requires no mana to generate its effect. That makes it a contender right away.

That effect is horrific--as bad as the Cap, and worse than the Totem: "T: Look at the top card of target player's library. If that card is a nonland card, you may pay 2 life to put it into that player's graveyard." This means that as soon as you play the Wand, you get a good chance of getting a return on your card. If OP tries to disenchant it, you can expect to gain a 1/6 card advantage over him--that's (roughly) what the top card on OP's library is worth, before you look at it. OP loses his disenchant, you lose the Wand, and maybe a really nifty card hits the GY without OP smacking you with it first.

All by itself, this is on the friendly side of mediocre, but there's a handful of other cards that combine well. Millstone tops the list (with Helm of Obedience close behind)--put these two together, and you'll force OP to draw mostly land. This is a suprisingly brutal effect for only two mana (and, possibly 2 life). If you play all those "non-targetable" creatures, you'll just use this effect to prevent OP from getting creatures. If OP's deck is 1/3 creatures, this means you can expect to lose 2/3 a life every turn. Let's see here, this will kill you in 30 turns, so if your deck can't beat OP after you've made him draw mostly land for this long, then you need to rework your deck. Of course, use of the many life-gaining tools that are around can extend this for quite some time, and there's plenty of short-term "bury top card in library" cards (eg, Ray of Erasure or the much more horrifying Foreshadow from Visions) that can work while you're waiting for a Millstone or Helm to come along.

A Question.... What Happens When a Dream Warrior Blocks a Flanker?

This is a nice "Chicken or the Egg" problem. The Dream Warrior, as soon as it is declared as a blocker, phases out, along with whatever it blocked. If its chosen to block a flanker, its gets a -1/-1 counter, which will generally kill a 1/1 creature. But, does a phased out, 0/0 creature die?

The answer, according to two Arena judges around here, is YES. Triggered effects happen outside of the "time stream", which makes them even faster than interrupts--this is why a Boomeranged Skulking Ghost gets buried--the triggered effect happens faster than the Boomerang can resolve.

There is some recourse for argument here, since, we have two effects happening simultaneously (and "simultaneously" is a rare and undesirable event for non-damaging effects in Magic), and when there's confusion about the order of effects, the player whose turn it is gets to decide. Hence, the blocking player would like to have everything phases out first, making the "-1/-1" effect void if you consider phased things not in play. But, it appears that phased objects are still part of the game, to judge by the new Visions cards that can bring phased out permanents back into phase.

By all means, check with your judge if you plan to use Dream Warriors, there's plenty of room for confusion on this one.

Deck of the Fortnight... The Classic Merfolk Deck (by Fant 4@aol.com, with a request to tune it up).

We've all either played or been on the business end of a "Merfolk" deck before. They even experienced a surge in popularity when Fallen Empires came out. Below is a "typical" Merfolk deck, with some notation. Cards are given in "card/card" format. What is after the slash is the "new and improved" deck, and what is before the slash is the "old and ok" deck. Explanation for the changes is given below. When similar cards aren't in the new deck, this is indicated with, say, "Lion's Eye Diamond/Remove" (in this case, the Diamond was considered a card which should be removed with no equivalent substitute). As the base deck was type 1.5 legal (or, rather, "Old Type II"), we've kept to that set of rules.

Lands: 20 islands/23 Islands

Creatures: 4 Lord of Atlantis, 3 Merfolk of the Pearl Trident/4 Merfolk of the Pearl Trident, 2 River Merfolk/4 River Merfolk, 1 Sea Scyler/Remove, 2 Segovian Leviathans/Remove, 1 Vodalian Knight/Remove, 4 Vodalian Soldiers/Remove, 1 Merfolk Raiders, 1 Svyelunite Priest/Remove, 1 Wall of Air/Remove.

Add the Following Creatures: 4 Benthic Explorers, 4 Zephyr Falcons.

Enchantments: 4 Sunken City/ 2 Sunken City, 4 Control Magic/2 Control Magic, 4 Phantasmal Terrain/3 Mind Bends, 1 Puppet Master/Remove
1 Illusion of Grandeur/Remove, 1 Fishliver Oil/Remove

Add the Following Enchantments: 2 Floods, 3 Unstable Mutations

Artifacts: none

Non-Permanents: 4 Counterspell, 1 Dream Cache/remove

61 cards/60 cards

Side Board: 3 Sea Sprites, 3 Cerulean Wyvern/2 Mind Harness, 1 Deflection/Remove
2 Wrath of Merit Lage/Remove, 2 Lifetap/Remove, 4 Blue Elemental Blast.

Add the Following to the sideboard: 2 Lodestone Baubles, 4 Energy Flux.

Looking over the changes, there's evidently good reason for Merfolk decks being so uncommon right now--the last few expansions have added little to the theme--with FE gone, Merfolk decks probably aren't even viable in Type II. But, lets talk about the changes.

First off, we added more mana--1/3 mana is just too low in a deck with upkeep spells and stuff that costs 4 to cast. We moved things up to just a tad under 40%, with the Benthic Explorers also around for some extra mana if need be.

If the only way a deck can win is via creatures, then, just like mana, it is a mistake to have less than 1/3 of the deck be creatures. In this case, the old deck had 20 creatures, the bare minimum. We've pumped things up to 21 creatures, not so big a pump until you look at the changes.

Of course, all 4 Lords of Atlantis are in the deck--wouldn't be a Merfolk deck without them. We've added another basic merfolk--this deck is hoping to deal a quick victory through overwhelming creatures (as dangerous as that is), so cheap creatures should at least have a chance of being in abundance. River Merfolk are highly underrated--they have the 2 power which is the minimum in a game-winning creature, and they have a possible Mountainwalk ability which can be quite useful. The Sea Scryer is gone--this deck needs colorless mana about as much as it needs a Lord of the Pit, and the Scryer serves no other purpose. Segovian Leviathans likewise make little sense--they aren't Merfolk, are perfect size for Lightning Bolts, and, for 5 mana, Air Elemental would be twice as useful. They leave, to make room for cheaper, faster, better, stuff. The Vodalian Knights look good, but they can't attack unless OP has Islands, which means they are unreliable, unless Phantasmal Terrain is out; in all, just not worth it. We're leaving the Merfolk Raiders in, even though phasing is a crummy drawback. This deck needs a few tough creatures, and the Raiders barely qualify (although they probably won't survive tuning). The Svyelunite Priest is a goner--this power is useless. Sure, you can use it during your upkeep, but OP can target the creature in response to your declaration of use of the power. The Priest is a fine bookmark, an ok card to use as a proxy for something else, and poor toilet paper. It is not a card for a Magic deck. The Wall of Air likewise has to go--yep, this deck could use a good blocker, and has little defense against an air attack. But, the whole point of the deck is to create unblockable creatures and attack with them--adding one defensive card won't help enough on defense to matter, and one more offensive card might be enough to finish off OP before he gets his good stuff into play. We've added Benthic Explorers--the toughest Merfolk around--and Zephyr Falcons. The latter give a token amount of air defense, and allow for the simultaneous attack/defense that can win close games.

Like most Blue-intensive decks, this one is enchantment heavy. Sunken Cities are nice, but that upkeep can be more trouble than it is worth, we had to cut down to two, although this is arguable. Control Magic is a great enchantment, but it only works if OP is using creatures, costs a fairly hefty 4 mana to cast, and most good decks are comprised of creatures that aren't Controllable anyway. One important card to always include when you use Control Magic is Felwar Stones--the Stones give you the ability to use OP's mana, which in the case of many creatures (Pump knights, regenerators), greatly

enhances their value. This deck uses the somewhat more vulnerable Benthic Explorers; if you are going to play with this deck, consider taking out a few islands and adding Stones, just to determine if the initial lethargy of the Stones is worth the speed and use they grant on later turns. The next enchantment we rid ourselves of is Phantasmal Terrain--completely useless when Zuran Orb was around, all the sacrificing and land-returning that is possible nowadays still make this a questionable card. Mind Bend is the replacement--not only will it allow you to give all your creatures the appropriate walk when you cast it on your Lord, it also will protect you from the one lunatic on the planet who uses COP: Blue. Puppet Master is a nifty enchantment, but this deck just doesn't have the time to screw with this sort of thing, and has too many creatures to worry about protecting them with this enchantment. Illusions of Grandeur is another fun card, but, again, with only one in the deck, getting it will just be a matter of luck, and this deck can't afford to put 4 of these in here. Out it goes. Fishliver Oil served little purpose in a deck that had mostly Islandwalkers already. Poof. We've added two enchantments--the frighteningly powerful Flood, which both takes out blockers and prevents attackers, and is as mandatory for mono-blue decks as Control Magic.

Unstable Mutation is a creature enchantment, so let's talk about how to use it. Most people won't use it, since if OP takes out a creature that has been Mutated, he gets a 2 for 1 card advantage. But, you'll find it's a good card if used properly. You have to cast it before the attack, so you can get a return on it immediately. So, the only way to guarantee a good return is to cast it when OP is tapped out. This should be easy enough to accomplish, at least in the early game. Make things better for yourself by not putting it on the first creature you have in play (survival chance of first creature played is nil). Make things perfect by putting it on a Zephyr Falcon--now you get to attack AND block with it, and that's getting good use out of the enchantment.

Now we come to the nonpermanents, and all we have here is the classic Counterspell (Mind Bend has more of a permanent effect). Save it for OP's "clear the board" stuff like Tranquility and Wrath of God. This deck will do alright trading card for a card, but anything else just won't do. Dream Cache is gone--this is a fast deck that just can't waste a turn on setting up the library--heck, I've yet to build a deck that can reliably afford to waste a turn with Dream Cache.

This deck came with a sideboard, so we work on that as well. Sea Sprites are awesome--expect the White equivalent in Visions to be seen from time to time. I've seen a second turn Sprite win the game on more than one occasion. The Wyverns are nice, but too friggin' expensive, and too vulnerable to Incinerate, a common card in a deck with Green creatures. Mind Harness is better--enhances the enchantment degeneracy, can give you a big creature for little mana, and will also help against a Red deck, which the Wyverns won't. Deflection is a toughie, and quite good against direct damage. But, if OP lives long enough to hit you with big fireballs, he's also gonna live long enough to summon creatures bigger than your Merfolk--in short, Deflection won't save you in enough games to be relied on. Wrath of Marit Lage is just too narrow--only against Red creatures, and then only really works on those in play when the spell is cast. Lifetap is a nice card, but, a few life won't be nearly as useful as taking OP's big green creature and smacking him with it. Blue Elemental Blast is important--this deck is terrified of Earthquake, Pyroclasm, and Lightning Bolt stuff. Even Flare can be troublesome.

Added to the sideboard are Lodestone Baubles (heck, they make good 61st and 62nd cards)--land destruction is uncommon, and this deck doesn't need much mana, but these things can save your bacon when you're in trouble. If land destruction isn't popular in your area, go with more Mind Harnesses. Finally, Energy Flux is added. This deck has no defense against artifacts, and the Flux will just devastate an artifact player. Try not to lay the Flux down until OP has 2 artifacts in play (especially the ubiquitous Diamonds--don't forget, he can't use the mana from the Diamond until he pays the upkeep from the Flux), which will give him the choice of burying an artifact (wise choice) or being mana screwed for a few turns (usually fatal).

The Merfolk deck can be a dangerous deck, but will lose reliably if the game goes longer than 15 turns. Still, it can provide you with many fun, quick, wins.

Tidbits of Wisdom ... Some Notes On Hypocrisy by Rick Moscatello

I can hardly look at myself in the mirror. Way back when Type II was a new thing, and cards from The Dark were legal, I loved type II. I hated playing against Type I decks, having to deal with Juzam Djinns or 6 point Mind Twists on the first turn every fifth game, watching Relic Barriers, Jade Statues, and Lotuses run roughshod over my decks every time, and, in short, getting creamed because I didn't want to blow \$30 on a full set of moxes (heh, it was a LONG time ago--anybody else remember when \$5 was a heck of a lot of money to spend on a single card?).

Anyway, I hated listening to people whine about how they hated Type II, since they couldn't use their cards (i.e., all the power OOPs) in it. I thought little of them--most Type I decks consist of the same 30 cards, over and over again, and many of those cards were "broken" in the sense that not only was there no decision about whether to put them in the deck or not, a player using them had a strong advantage over someone who wasn't using them. Well, "strong" is misleading.

Each such card confers maybe a 1% advantage, almost not worth complaining about, but a deck with 30 such cards creates an imbalance that can only be countered with luck.

So, I liked Type II, it leveled the playing field, and when I won a Type II tourney, it was because I had the better deck, and not because half the field just didn't have the cards to be competitive. Yes, some people will assert that it is possible to build a Type II deck that can compete against certain Type I decks, but, obviously, decks made from a wider selection of cards must be more powerful.

Now comes the hypocrisy.

I don't like Type II as much as I used to. I may well damn myself for all eternity for saying it, the day I was born might be sucked into a black void and forgotten by history, but, I LIKE TO BE ABLE TO USE MY CARDS. In my defense, though, let me state that Type II no longer serves its purpose for me. When the choice was between Type I and Type II, the latter was my choice, because playing in Type I was like playing DOOM in "god-mode"--good for laughs, but nothing to be proud of. But, all those broken cards are historical curiosities, and the "new" broken cards--remember, every time DC throws out a card as being too powerful, some other card takes its place (usually it is a card that counters the "too powerful" card, such as Land Tax's ability to offset Hymn and Mind Twist)--Swords to Plowshares, Order of Leitbur, Order of the Ebon Hand, and Ernham Djinn, to name a few, just aren't as dominating as the old, and none of these cards are difficult to get.

In short, Type II has changed. It used to be the level playing field that any competitor desires, but now it is merely a beginner's league, which I acknowledge still has value. The real issue is cards are getting rotated out too fast for realistic enjoyment. Sure, I've had my fill of FE pump knights, but I haven't even begun to seriously experiment with Alliances, and just how many months/weeks/days are left until its "gone"?

Still, hypocrisy rests easy not with me.

And that isn't even the worst of it. Type 1.5 tournaments are just as much a "competition" at Type I. Just as most players in a Type I tournament can't have the cards to put together a deck that isn't handicapped against the "Power OOPs" (There's only 30,000 Black Lotuses printed. Anybody think less than 30,000 people play Magic?), the same is happening in Type 1.5. Before every such tourney, players wander around, plaintively wailing "Any dual lands to trade?", "Any Mana Drains?", and so on, and when its time for the tournament to start, the players that didn't make the trades find themselves playing in the tournament at a handicap. I take as much pleasure in beating a player who has no dual lands as I would beating Boris Spatsky at chess, where I started with 3 extra queens and he had to keep a live hornet's nest in his mouth at all times. In short, most Type 1.5 tournaments don't fit my description of competition.

I know the DC listens to players' concerns, weighs the options carefully, and does whatever it pleases regardless, but, if I had a suggestion, I'd get them to rework this whole Type X stuff (not that this would be a precedent!). Make a specific beginner's type (much like current Type II, call it "Type Beginner/Most recent basic set"--I'm also sick of trying to keep track of what is in each type!), make a type where cards can be used for a sane length of time (2 years, maybe?--this is "Old Type II", and I'd call it "Type 2 years Old", subject to restricting the occasional WotC mistake), and keep Type I (but call it "Type Bonehead", for all the cards that require no thought to putting in a deck).

My humblest apologies, the only tidbit of wisdom here is "Don't buy much of any expansion set unless you want to put it away after 9 months or so", but a guy can rant sometimes, right? How is it elsewhere? Around here, Type II just isn't getting a draw, but Type 1.5 is reasonably popular--alot more limited and unlimited was shipped here than elsewhere in the country, just as a certain part of Arizona got most of the Legends. Well, at least WOTC finally got their distribution sanitized.

Trade Zone and Marketplace

Jhereg999 has a complete set of each "set/expansion" from Dark forward for sale. Prices are negotiable, but he would like to get close to low Scrye/Inquest.

Kungmingx is looking for 3 Mana Drains, 2 Psionic Blasts, and 4 Angelic Voices (preferably Chronicles as they are cheaper).

DED127@aol.com has a set of Alliances that he would like to trade for larger OOPs.

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Well, the results are in, and pretty much everyone feels that the current format is great. Thanks. Those of you who don't like to read The Scroll online should be aware that (in AOL) you can activate "Flashsessions" to download your unread mail for later reading.

New (and generously unnamed) editor last week, and it kinda showed. We made a contest out of who could spot the most errors in the deck of the fortnight. The winner is below:

From: jrbrown@wellsford.com (Jon Brown)

- 1) Deck contents ("DC") includes Wall of Wood, narrative ("N") includes Wall of Roots.
- 2) Everywhere you say Stormbind (a red/green spell uncastable with this deck unless you get a lucky Quirion Elf) you meant to say Storm Seeker. In one place you even say "Stormbringer" (Elric's sword).
- 3) DC says Miser's Cage, N says Pauper's Cage.
- 4) You must have 5 cards to take damage from Miser's Cage, not 4.

Way to go, Jon! Gods, the number of people who screamed at us for using Stormbind in this deck was frightening. A few people realized we meant Storm Seeker, but just as many thought it was a stupid card to put in the deck (and it sure would be, with so little red mana), and a few people were upset at putting a non-type II legal card in it. We'll be hitting the type II format next issue, maybe even going up to two or more decks (gotta say something about the latest Arena format).

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.