
The Scroll

A Bi-Weekly Magic Newsletter

Issue 2

(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 Tutors

Way back when Type I was king, Demonic Tutor was in nigh every deck--for two mana, getting any card you want is a good deal. Mirage has introduced three limited tutors, and while they cost but one mana, you don't get to put the card into your hand, which means that casting one of these tutors is, in some sense, throwing away a card. Heck, the card you are looking for could be the very next one anyway (its already happened to me once). Ice Age's Vexing Arcanix allows one to easily offset this little drawback (and Ray of Erasure really hammers an opponent using Tutors), but let's see what these tutors are capable of on their own. Enlightened Tutor is arguably the best of the three, since it lets you go for artifacts (i.e., Zuran Orb, which is worth paying the "extra card" to get, since it lets you get use out of

your extra lands) or Enchantments (such as the game-winning Land Tax, which quickly pays for itself in extra cards in hand). When these game-bending cards are no longer legal, Enlightened Tutor is unlikely to remain the best. Enchantments are no longer as hard to be rid of as they used to be, since now, finally, Green has several enchantment killing spells, making White no longer the sole color that quickly can deal with an enchantment. Artifacts have likewise become less reliable in Type II, with both massive and effective artifact destroyers now available in Red and Green (Builder's Bane and Seeds of Innocence); however, the big artifact destroyers are Sorceries, so if the Enlightened Tutor gets you the artifact, you could get at least one turn of use out of it--more if you go for a card like Winter Orb when your opponent is "tapped out". Mystical Tutor is Blue's tutor, and this one is a major threat. Using this Tutor for Balance is a great deal, since when you cast Balance, the card you "wasted" to get Balance is just one more card your opponent will have to discard! Using Mystical Tutor for Counterspells is not a good idea, since you'll almost never get 2 cards worth of use out of countering one spell, especially when your opponent knows you have a counterspell. Still, holding the Tutor until you know whether you need the gamewinning Fireball, Balance, or even an Incinerate is a great deal--wasting a card to win the game is not wasting a card at all! Green, as usual, gets the weakest of the type, if the type of card isn't a creature. Green's Worldly Tutor lets you get a creature. Creatures are the most fragile cards in the game, and there are numerous cards capable of destroying even the most "untouchable" creature. Hence, Tutoring for a creature is very, very risky--you're blowing two cards for something an opponent can easily nullify with one. If you're going to use this card, try not to cast Tutor until your opponent has no cards in hand, and then go for a difficult to target/destroy creature (regenerator, Willow, etc.). In this way, you'll have some assurance of getting several turns' use out of your creature before it inevitably makes it way to the graveyard.

Card to Watch for ... Reparations

If everyone would stop screaming and yelling about the wonderful Celestial Dawn (which whitewashes your deck--big deal, what happens if your Dawns get Capped?), perhaps people would notice the awesome value of Reparations: draw a card every time you or a creature you love (i.e., control) gets targeted. HOLY CARD WAR WINNERS! You've played your creature deck against a direct damage deck before, right? Lay a Lion, BLAM! Lion is bolted. Lay a White Knight, POW! Knight is incinerated. Lay a Yotian Soldier SMACK Soldier gets shattered or, god forbid, detonated. Lay an Ivory Gargoyle POP! Gargoyle gets Disintegrated. Or, play a creatureless deck against a direct damage player. Lay an Island, ZAP take three damage, etc, etc, etc! How on earth will a direct damage player keep up with you once you play this card? Note carefully: there is no mana cost to get that extra card. Look at every hot card: Zuran Orb, Black Vice, Winter Orb, and even Black

Lotus, and you'll see a trend of game-winning effects being generated for little or no mana. Reparations will kick butt, big time. Here's the best combo: Reparations and a creature deck. Much like "Zuran Orb and a deck with land" and "Black Vice and an opponent who starts with 7 cards", Reparations is a very reliable enchantment that fundamentally belongs in every deck that can support white and blue.

Deck of the Fortnight... Blue/Green?????

Mana Sources: 10 Islands, 9 Forests, 1 Strip Mine

4 Nature's Lores.

Creatures:

4 Deadly Insects
4 Erhnam Djinns
4 Fyndhorn Elves
2 Jolrael's Centaurs
1 Killer Bees
1 Lhurgoyf
1 Thicket Basilisk

Enchantments:

2 Sylvan Libraries

Artifacts:

2 Icy Manipulators
1 Zuran Orb

Non-Permanents:

1 Boomerang
2 Counterspell
1 Dissipate
4 Enervates
1 Force of Will
2 Tropical Storms
1 Power Sink
1 Recall
1 Stunted Growth
1 Tranquilities
1 Winter Blast

(no sideboard, this deck is for amusement purposes only)

Some colors work well together, and some, well, don't. Blue/Green is, in the opinion of most, one of the latter--after all, neither color is so hot with artifacts, and casting good creatures (Green's strongpoint) goes poorly with saving mana for counterspells (Blue's raison d'etre). The point of this deck is

to show that the two can go together effectively. The basic idea of this deck is to cast untouchable creatures (the centaurs and the insects), and protect them, with counterspells, from those few spells that can hurt them--and note how much easier it is to do this with Dissipate or Counterspell (for two or three mana) than Powersink! Counterspells are the only protection this deck has against many things. Once something unfortunate is out (like Ivory Gargoyle), Icy Manipulators are the second line of defense, so protect these with counterspells if you can; Tranquility stops the one thing the Icy's don't. A pair of Tropical Storms (which make Hurricane obsolete) and a Winter Blast give this deck marginal protection against those early Hypnotic Spectres (among other fliers). Finally, Boomerang is the last ditch defense--Boomerang the threat into OP's hand, and counter it if he tries to cast it again. That's it for what little defense this deck has, so let's talk about offense.

Erhnam Djinn is a bargain--there are few creatures for 4, or even 5, mana that can block it, much less kill it, so try to cast him first (when you won't have enough mana to cast a creature and protect it via a counterspell), and hopefully draw out the inevitable Swords to Plowshares. The Elves serve a similar purpose, hopefully drawing off a few Lightning Bolts--if they don't, they make a fine attacker, or a source of extra mana. The Deadly Insects will win almost as many games for you as Erhnam, if you can just keep them alive--and this deck has the secret. Attack with the insects, and hope OP blocks them. After blocking is declared, tap the defender down via an Icy or (SURPRISE!) the little used Enervate--tapped defenders don't deal damage, so you'll have used a cantrip (Enervate) to destroy OP's creature, i.e., used 0 of your cards to kill one of his. I'm not saying you can rely on this, and it doesn't matter, just the threat of Enervate might let the creatures attack (so, be sure to keep at least 2 mana open for the attack, and cast any spells you need to afterwards) without blocking them, and he most likely won't attack you if you keep the Insects back--this stalemate favors you, since eventually you'll draw an Icy or an Enervate. The Killer Bees are mostly bait, but they do provide some defense against fliers. The Basilisk is nearly as unblockable as the Insects, until your opponent draws a creature large enough to block it--and by this time, you might well have an Enervate in hand, eh? The Lhurgoyf lets you be nonchalant about losing Deadly Insects to a Goblin Raider or something. Once you've lost a few untouchable creatures in combat (which generally means OP has lost a few as well), the Lhurgoyf becomes a fearsome creature. Finally, Winter Blast gives you a chance to win a creature deadlock, tapping down all his creatures to let your guys attack unmolested. Even if OP manages to repeatedly smash your untouchables, cast Recall to get them back--unless OP is playing with 4 Earthquakes and 4 Pyroclasms or something, this "second wave" will generally be his undoing.

There's a few other tricks up this deck's sleeve. With all the fast mana, you might get to cast Stunted Growth on your opponent early on, forcing him to lose three draws; this is devastating. Later, an opponent might hold his cards, hoping to cast them when you are too low on mana to counter him. Again, the Stunted Growth will give you a three turn advantage. This card might

well leave Type II with the rest of Ice Age soon, so get some play out of it before it goes. Another fun trick is with Sylvan Library. It gives a great boost the turn after you cast it, but, eventually, you get two cards you just don't want sitting on top of your deck. Nature's Lore gives you an extra forest, but, if you have enough mana, consider holding the Lore, and using it when the extra cards from Sylvan Library aren't doing you any good--this lets you get the big boost from the Library over and over again (alternatively, you can use Thawing Glaciers for similar effect).

While this deck is a touch slow, it has enough fast mana and unstoppable creatures that it can beat any deck, and sometimes even do it 2 out of 3. Go for it!

Question ...

Suppose I have a Phantasmal Fiend, and I pump it up to 0/9 via various effects. Can I cast Swords to Plowshares on it, and in response to my casting, swap its power/toughness so that I gain 9 life when the Swords resolves?

The answer here is, "It depends". In 4th edition rules, a 0 toughness creature won't die/go to the graveyard until all effects resolve, hence the Plowshares will work fine. Under 5th edition, this move won't work, since damage resolves with EACH EFFECT. This means that once the power/toughness swap, the creature will have taken damage (none yet, i.e., 0) which is as much as its toughness (0), so it gets buried, so the Swords will fizzle. This is a big difference, since now you can cast a Lightning Bolt in response to a player casting "Red Ward" on a creature, and the damage from the Bolt will resolve before the Ward. I guess WOTC thought Red was having too tough a time killing creatures.

Thanks to Center, WOTC's CIS netrep, for his help on this; he can be found in Compuserve's PBM games forum.

Got Questions? Reply to this e-mail address, and we'll see what we can do.

Tidbits of Wisdom ... A Commentary on Degeneracy (by Rick Moscatello)

By Degeneracy, I'm talking about multiples of cards in a deck, not the latest magazine from Larry Flynt publications. First, let's examine why people use degeneracy in their deck designs:

1) Speed. By limiting a deck to few colors (or mostly one color), a deck gains an extreme speed advantage. Pillage is a fine example of a card that is much "faster" in a mono-Red deck, since a player is nearly assured of being able to cast it on turn 3. The

Necropotence decks are very typically mostly black, so that a player can both easily capitalize on Dark Rituals and be certain of being able to cast every card he draws (and painfully pays 1 life for). In addition, such decks are less vulnerable to the common strategy of land destruction--OP can only prevent spellcasting by destroying all your land, whereas in a multicolor deck he might well just target the lands that produce a certain color.

2) Reliability. By using multiples of each card, a player has great assurance that his deck will perform in a certain way almost every time he plays it. In a major tournament, a deck can easily go through 20 or more hands, and multiple cards of the same type allows the "god combo" (i.e., the strategy that lets it win) to come up with consistency. The multiples also provide some protection against interference from OP, since he might stop the first gamewinning card you play, and the second as well, but maybe the third will be his demise. The other method of getting reliability, small deck size, has well been deleted by the 60 card minimum, but note how many tournament players are FANATICAL about sticking to exactly 60 cards, despite many calculations that show the probabilities of most "interesting" events happening in, say, a 61 card deck are only different by about one half of one percent (i.e., will make a difference once every 200 hands or so).

Note how both of these advantages are uniformly considered critical in successful tournament deck design.

That's the why, here's the how decks can be degenerate:

A) Creature degeneracy. The most common form, any deck that relies on creatures for the killing blow MUST have great multiples of them if it wants to win reliably. Along with reliability comes speed; it is pointless to have 4 Leviathans in a deck. Typically, creature degeneracy occurs with creatures that cost 3 mana or less, and/or have T as part of any activation effect. Once you get to 4+ mana cost creatures, you run the very severe risk of getting multiples on the draw, and this can be fatal. For example, if you get 2 Serra Angels on the draw, this means 25% of your starting hand will be useless for at least the first 5 turns of the game (and more if your opponent draws land destruction of any sort)--this is not the sort of thing you want to encourage, as it subtracts from the reliability of the deck. Creatures with non-tapping fast effects don't need to be in multiples in your deck to have an effect, since once you cast them, you can generate whatever effect you need (from the Black Mana in the Initiates of the Ebon Hand to the massive small artifact destruction of the Gorilla Shaman)--but note how these aren't directly damaging (i.e., game-winning) effects. Moreover, having 4 of a creature (say, 4 Prodigal Sorcerers), but no other creatures, isn't enough; such decks should have OTHER creatures, to hopefully catch what could be a substantial supply of creature-killing spells in OP's hand. More subtle is creature type degeneracy, such as having only creatures with toughness more than 3, or only Protection from Black, or only First Strike, and so on. This latter type of degeneracy is harder to achieve, but is devastating against certain decks (i.e., isn't reliable, but still can be worthwhile).

B) Artifact degeneracy. Having Nevinyrral's Disk, but no other artifacts, is good example of what happens if you don't use artifact degeneracy, but insist on using artifacts. Since the Disk destroys artifacts, you might not put any other artifacts in your deck (since you wisely want to avoid losing your own cards to its effect). But, since it comes into play tapped, your opponent has an opportunity to destroy it, and since you have no other artifacts, he has no other use for his artifact smashers, so the disk has very little chance of survival (of course, you could wait for OP to empty his hand before playing the Disk, but if you aren't using Hymn to Tourach or something, this may never happen). The moral is, if you're going to play artifacts, either use a few of the ones which can't be stopped before they generate their effect (eg, Zuran Orb, Jester's Cap, Aelopile), or multiples of ones which can (eg, Artifact creatures). One must be even more careful of the mana cost, since many artifacts (Jayemdae Tome) require both heavy mana to cast and heavy mana to activate, making multiples early in the game merely dead weight in your hand (which, in turn, can lead to a dead wizard)--and it goes without saying that you should avoid casting artifacts until you have enough mana to cast and ACTIVATE it in the same turn (this is somewhat situational, of course).

C) Enchantment degeneracy. This is harder to accomplish than other types, since many enchantments (Flood, Enduring Renewal, Inheritance) do not have cumulative effect, giving rise to the unpleasant possibility of getting multiples in the initial draw. Nonetheless, if a deck wishes to win with enchantments, multiples of the same enchantment AND other enchantments are still advised. This was illustrated in last issue's Black Weenie deck, which featured Bad Moons, Unholy Strengths, Phyrexian Boons, AND the gamewinning Infernal Darkness (this card, and Stench of Evil, really devastate all the Celestial Dawn munchkins I've seen lately); The Darkness is the important card, the others are just bait (but still useful)--even when a player wisens up and saves his enchantment killer for Darkness alone, plenty of hand destruction cards were around to make sure Darkness could overtake the field.

D) Theme degeneracy. Not a tournament strategy, usually. Theme degenerate decks tend to consist of all cards of one type (eg, Goblins, or Griffins, or Gorillas--the theme doesn't necessarily have to start with a G, though). Only with much tuning can a theme deck be even of marginal tournament quality, and even then, "tap to destroy target creature whose name starts with a G" type cards can be an undoing of sufficient magnitude to make the theme deck void. Constructing decks is all about exploiting the good cards, which generally has little to do with the words on the upper left of the card ("Mox" being an exception).

E) (Low) Mana degeneracy. By constructing an entire deck composed of cards of a certain casting cost or less (typically 3 or 4), a player gets a nice advantage, since he can simply stop laying lands after a certain point in the game. If the deck is of extreme low mana degeneracy (say, only two cards that cost more than 2 mana), a player can even reduce the mana percentage in his deck with little risk of a stall. Naturally such decks tend to rely on land-destruction as a side strategy at the very least, and the restriction of Strip Mine and Balance has made

this technique difficult to pull off reliably--although at all times you should consider just how many high mana cards (costing 5 or more) you are putting in your deck.

Naturally, degeneracy is something to be exploited by aggressive decks, which seek to win quickly and reliably, and are willing to be undone (or at least compromised) by one or two obscure strategies. Defensive decks (eg, Millstone decks) can ill afford to possess this weakness, and engage in a Variety that provides much general protection, but I'll save this for another time.

Got a Tidbit of Wisdom or Counter-Argument? Let us know!

Rick (IQRick) runs the InQuest Magic Trivia Game in the InQuest special events chat room, Thursday Nights, 10 EST. Tune in there and win to get a starter deck in a random CCG.

Trade/Combat Zone and Marketplace

Here's a trading tip: never let people know you are looking for a card. I let people know I was looking for a Lion's Eye Diamond (I needed a bookmark, ok?), and when I found someone with 4 of them, for god's sake, he would only trade it to me for a Celestial Dawn. No way, I'd sooner use a Black Lotus for toilet paper. I finally found someone who didn't know I was looking, and he gave me a reasonable deal (Emberwilde Djinn for it).

Any submissions or replies become the sole property of Books Electric Publishing.

Feedback

Thanks to all who wrote back with positive things to say--with all the SPAM being liberally shucked out by CyberPromotions, we were worried that this might not fly.

Until next time!

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