

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Hymns and Lizards

Ben Bleiweiss
 Uncommon Knowledge
 Wednesday, January 23, 2002



The other day, I thought to myself, "Ben, you have Anthony and Jay writing great articles about playing the game of **Magic** creatively. You have Mark and Randy turning in terrific columns about the **Magic** development and card-making process. Besides getting an inside scoop on some new cards, why would people want to read my articles?" And that was a good question, because my sphere of knowledge presented here comes primarily from the past. But as all good historians tell you (and please excuse my paraphrasing here), "You must learn from the past or be doomed to repeat it". And, "It's good to know your roots." Also, "More than one mage was driven insane by the sound of the **Millstone** relentlessly grinding away."



No, seriously, what you'll find in this column is more than just a trip down memory lane. With all the different cards in **Magic**, it can be easy to forget a few here and there. Moreover, there are no two cards that are exactly alike in this game. Subtle differences will often spell the difference between winning and losing, and knowing the specific roles of seemingly identical or similar cards is essential. Sure, **Pyroblast** and **Red Elemental Blast** may appear to be the same card with a different name, but one of them can target non-blue spells (the **Pyroblast**) while the other cannot. So with a **Pyroblast**, you can target a **Serra Angel**, then **Sleight of Mind** the **Pyroblast** to read "white," killing her. You can't do that with a **Red Elemental Blast**.

Even creatures that seem functionally identical are slightly different. **Drudge Skeletons**, **Restless Dead**, **Unworthy Dead**, and **Walking Dead** are all 1/1 creatures for 1 that regenerate for 1. The **Walking Dead** aren't skeletons, however, allowing them to survive an **Engineered Plague** that would kill the other three. Moreover, you'd have to get four **Meddling Mages** on the table to keep all of these black creatures from getting into play, since each of them has a distinctly different name. While these differences may seem insignificant, they are essential in the eyes of the game mechanics. Being able to come here every week and see exactly what options and permutations exist out there for a specific type of card or purpose (or even historical context) will help you keep your mind open for finding that ONE card you need to achieve your goals. Otherwise, trying to think of every **Magic** card off the top of your head will drive you crazy!

And speaking of going crazy, this week is all about madness at Magicthegathering.com. Here at Uncommon Knowledge, I'm going to explore the roots of madness's underlying theme from *Alpha* to *Torment*. As you may already know, madness is an ability that allows you to pay an alternate casting cost to a spell (the madness cost) when you would otherwise discard the card. One such example is **Basking Rootwalla**, an amazing creature in its own right. A direct descendant of **Rootwalla** (which saw successful tournament play at the *Tempest* Block Pro Tour – Los Angeles), this little guy fits comfortably into the "Stompy" curve even without his madness ability. Basically, you get a creature which you can drop on turn one as a 1/1 and pump up to 3/3 the very next turn! Even if you don't pump him immediately, the threat of pumping him on the attack will most certainly keep your opponent from blocking with his early creatures.

What happens, though, when you take this already good creature and let him come into play for free? That's right, with his madness cost of a big whopping zero, any time you are forced to discard this little guy, you can instead put him straight into play. Most green decks try to get their one-drop mana producing creatures into play before their non-mana producing counterparts; suddenly, black mages are faced with the prospect of a truly frightening curve: their opponent plays a first turn **Llanowar Elves** or **Birds of Paradise**, and then HOPES he is hit by a **Gerrard's Verdict** on turn two so he can drop down one (or two) **Basking Rootwallas** before his first attack! Suddenly the green mage is ahead on permanents, has a potential 3/3 creature on the board, and has not even slowed down his mana production. We won't even go into what happens when you follow a turn-two **Wild Mongrel** with a free (effectively) 3/3 creature.

The madness mechanic was partially designed to punish discard spells, and it does an admirable job. In the entire history of **Magic**, there have been only a handful of cards that aimed for that same goal. In fact, there are more madness cards in *Torment* than cards designed to punish discard strategies in the entire history of **Magic** put together! And moreover, the madness cards in *Torment* are in general very reasonably costed without their madness abilities, and utterly undercosted with them.

THE CULPRITS

It all began, as most good **Magic** stories begin, with *Alpha*. **Hypnotic Specter** and **Mind Twist** (not to mention **Balance** and **Disrupting Scepter**) needed a foil, and it came in the form of **Library of Leng**. The Library later saw some play in trying to stop **Necropotence** decks, but never really met with much success. Even though you got

WHAT IS MAGIC?
 CLICK HERE!

GLEEMAX
 FIND OUT MORE!

Wizards of the Coast
 Dream Jobs Open Now

ASK THE PRO

PRODUCTS
 Lorwyn
 TENTH EDITION
 All Magic products

RULES
 RULES

MESSAGE BOARDS
 Magic General Forum
 magicthegathering.com Forum

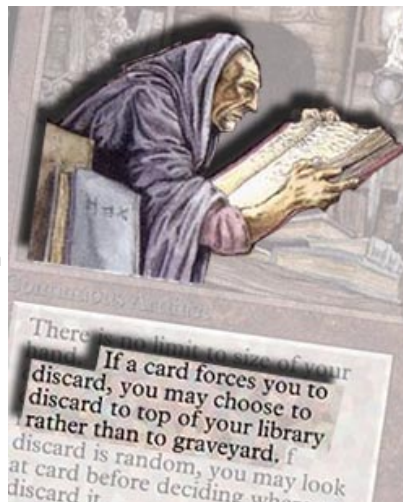
MAGIC ONLINE
 MAGIC The Gathering
 ONLINE
 Download Now!
 Magic Online III Launch Info

the chance to play the card you would have discarded, you still lose card advantage and stop further library advancement, which really becomes sub-optimal when your opponent uses a **Disrupting Scepter** turn after turn to make the prospect of keeping a card (let's say it was a **Counterspell**) useless, since you'd never have it in your hand when you needed it.

In *Legends*, Wizards changed the hosing-discard theme to triggering off the actual discarded card. **Psychic Purge** stood as a singularly ineffective deterrent to discard, since blue really didn't stand to have much to gain by playing this card. Sure, you could discard four of them to a hand-clearing **Balance**, but that wasn't very likely to happen. And chances are if you were playing blue, you weren't in a position to race damage against a tuned black deck designed to destroy your hand; you'd much rather have two cards in hand that could stop a **Hymn to Tourach** (**Force Spike**, for instance) than deal 10 damage and lose 2 cards that would have been marginal otherwise.

Things got a little better and a little worse with *Alliances*. **Guerrilla Tactics** gave red a very usable update to **Psychic Purge**. This time, it had a good mana-to-damage ratio (2 mana for 2 damage), was an instant, and could hit creatures on the discard ability (instead of being limited to players). The Tactics saw a good amount of play, and probably is the best pre-*Torment* discard-fighter that wasn't a creature. On the other end of the spectrum, we had **Gustha's Scepter**. The Scepter has a function that no other card in **Magic** has (to hide a card and get it back again), and was designed to duck discard spells on the first turn. Losing a card by playing the Scepter to begin with didn't really help decks that were trying to keep cards in their hand, and the effect just wasn't useful enough against discard, since you could only save one card at a time. **Gustha's Scepter** didn't see any serious tournament play until years later, where it was part of probably the best deck at Pro Tour - Rome. Instead of using it to punish opponent-originated discard, Brian Hacker piloted a **Tolarian Academy** deck featuring **Gustha's Scepter** with the aim of protecting essential spells from **Lion's Eye Diamonds** and **Time Spirals** of his own.

There have been two creatures prior to *Torment* designed to punish discard spells. **Sand Golem** appeared in *Mirage*, and **Dodecapod** in *Apocalypse*. To cut straight to the chase, **Dodecapod** became the creature that **Sand Golem** could never be. It costs less without the discard-hosing ability, has the same power and toughness, comes into play larger after discard, and comes into play immediately as a replacement effect. The latter point is significant, because **Sand Golem** could be removed from the graveyard after being discarded, and would never hit play. For instance, your opponent could make you discard it with a **Disrupting Scepter**, and then use a **Phyrexian Furnace** to remove it from the game once the Golem's ability triggered. With **Dodecapod**, that never becomes a problem, since it just comes into play instead of making a short stop in the graveyard.



Urza's Saga provided a kind of half creature, half spell discard-fighter in **Metrognome**. When in play, it acted like **The Hive**, cranking out 1/1 tokens. But if you were forced to discard it, it put four 1/1 tokens right into play – quite a clock in the early game. **Metrognome** was occasionally used as a sideboard card when **Duress** and **Stupor** were popular in Standard.

Which brings us to the last two anti-discard cards, **Mangara's Blessing** and **Spiritual Focus**. The only reusable punishers of the bunch, they are also the only ones giving you a positive net result in response to discard. Sure, you get a 5/5 creature with the 'Pod, but you still are down a card. With these two, you not only get to replace the card you lost, but you also gain life. While the Focus might well be the best of

Cards That Punish Discard	
<i>Alpha</i>	Library of Leng
<i>Legends</i>	Psychic Purge
<i>Alliances</i>	Guerrilla Tactics

the bunch, the problem was that there weren't a whole lot of heavy discard-themed decks while the Focus was legal in Standard, so it never saw much play.

And lest I forget, any flashback cards or recurring spells – like [Squee](#), [Goblin Nabob](#) (and any others I mentioned in my [week-one column](#)) fight discard spells just by the nature of their design!

So when you play with your [Basking Rootwallas](#) (and you should!), just remember that they really crown a new breed of card designed to fight discard decks. He comes from a history paved by some failures and some successes, but in his own right may very well be the cream of the crop.

Next Week: Win, Lose, or Draw

	Gustha's Scepter
Mirage	Mangara's Blessing Sand Golem
Urza's Saga	Metrognome
Mercadian Masques	Spiritual Focus
Apocalypse	Dodecapod
Torment	Madness cards

Ben may be reached at uncommonknowledge@wizards.com.

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by [StarCityGames.com](#), where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



[Respond](#) via email



[Ben Bleiweiss](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

