

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

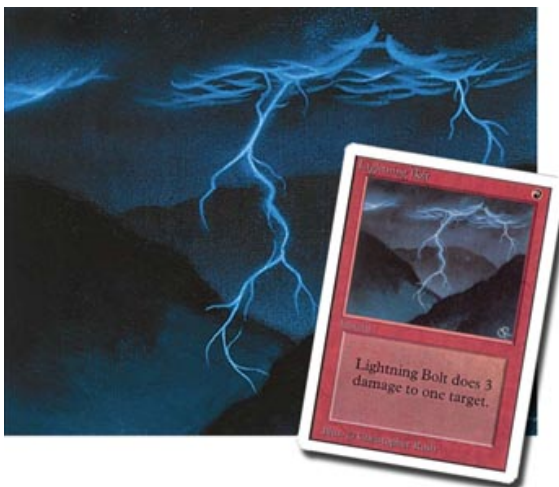
# Tap One Mountain

Ben Bleiweiss  
*Uncommon Knowledge*  
 Wednesday, February 27, 2002



In the beginning there was **Lightning Bolt**, and it was good.

**Lightning Bolt** represents one-fifth of the boon cycle from *Alpha/Beta/Unlimited*. The boons are spells which give their caster three of a resource for one mana. They include **Ancestral Recall** (3 cards), **Healing Salve** (3 life), **Giant Growth** (3 power/toughness), **Dark Ritual** (3 mana), and the Bolt (3 damage). Slowly, the boons have disappeared from **Magic** sets. It started with the blue, continued to the red, and finished (for the time being) with the black. Each of the boons exemplifies an integral flavor from each of its colors. Blue still loves drawing cards. White will always find a way to prevent damage or gain life. Green continues to make its creatures larger and larger. Black gives up resources for quick, easy gains even to this day. And red, the topic of this week's article, still loves to burn things to a cinder with direct damage.



*The standard against which all other burn cards are (unfairly) measured.*

Of course, this begs the question: what exactly is a burn spell? Does a burn spell have to be able to damage a player, or can it be allowed to target only creatures? Is there anything other than a semantic difference between direct damage and burn? Are all burn spells removal?

Well to answer my own questions, let's classify the spells in this article into four levels of **ness**. They are:

- ☺: The utility spell. These are cards that definitely fit into red's theme of chaos and anarchy, but don't really fit into the later three categories. (examples: **Mana Clash**, **Laccolith Rig**)
- ☹☹: The removal spell. These are dainty solutions to everyday problems won't really let you fry anything to a crisp, but they reliably kill things. (examples: **Vertigo**, **Tremor**)
- ☹☹☹: The direct damage spell. Now we're talking red! Whether used to assault a player or reduce a creature to ash, these are the pin-point accuracy spells which red mages have come to know and love. (examples: **Engulfing Flames**, **Singe**)
- ☹☹☹☹: BURN BABY BURN! These spells disregard all welfare on the caster's side, and go straight for the life total. Whether you're sacrificing creatures, lands, cards, or life, you're getting the desired result: opponent flambé. (examples: **Reckless Abandon**, **Firestorm**)

So **Lightning Bolt** came first (☹☹☹). It's sleek, it's powerful, and it's a staple of red. For a whole ☹ mana, you get 3 damage aimed anywhere you want, no questions asked. *Alpha* may have introduced another ☹ casting cost pseudo-burn spell known as **Earthbind** (definitely utility), but let's look back at **Magic** history for a moment. **Earthbind** could deal with **Serra Angel** in conjunction with **Lightning Bolt**. But what I like to do to get the "feel" of certain cards is to imagine how they would act out were the game really happening. Take these two scenarios:

**A:** Giant roots made of stone shoot from the ground, assailing the **Serra Angel** and pulling her down to the earth. Then, a sudden **Lightning Bolt** strikes from the sky, killing the poor thing.

**B:** The forces of chaos and fire shoot **Lightning Bolts** (plural) at the **Serra Angel**, frying her to a crisp. Then the goblins came out and had **Serra Angel** BBQ for brunch.

See? Red players don't want to be concerned with whether a creature flies or not in order to affect wicked damage; they simply want to introduce a quantity of fiery death onto all those who oppose their might.

Modern day red began with a deck known as Sligh (or Geeba).

**Sligh circa 1996**  
 Jay Schneider

Main Deck	Sideboard
4 Strip Mine	1 Shatter
	1 Shatter

WHAT IS MAGIC?  
 CLICK HERE!

PRODUCTS

PRO TOUR-VALENCIA  
  
 Click to enable Adobe Flash Player  
 Update on Rain Delay

MAGIC ONLINE  
  
 FIND OUT MORE!



GLEEMAX  
 FIND OUT MORE!

MESSAGE BOARDS  
  
 Magic General Forum  
 magicthegathering.com Forum

RULES

4 Mishra's Factory	1 Detonate	1 Detonate
2 Dwarven Ruins	4 Lightning Bolt	1 Fireball
13 Mountain	4 Incinerate	1 Meekstone
	1 Fireball	1 Zuran Orb
2 Dragon Whelp	1 Immolation	3 Active Volcano
2 Brothers of Fire	1 Black Vise	2 Serrated Arrows
2 Orcish Artillery		1 An-Zerrin Ruins
2 Orcish Cannoneers		4 Manabarbs
4 Ironclaw Orcs		
3 Dwarven Lieutenant		
2 Orcish Librarian		
2 Dwarven Trader		
2 Goblins of the Flarg		
4 Brass Man		

Originally, these constructions used reasonably costed creatures in conjunction with removal spells to burst through enemy defenses. Creatures such as **Orcish Artillery** and **Brothers of Fire** combined with direct damage spells like **Incinerate** and **Lightning Bolt** to clear the way for **Ironclaw Orcs** and **Ball Lightnings**. Over time, the deck became more and more mana efficient, trading utility for pure speed. The Artillery became **Cursed Scrolls**, and **Ironclaw Orcs** became **Jackal Pups**. But still, the cornerstone of the deck was the direct damage spell.

So in the  slot for burn, red mages didn't have many options pre-modern day **Magic** (for my purposes, this era began with **Mirage** and the advent of block sets). You had **Lightning Bolt**, **Chain Lightning**, and the goblin-bound **Goblin Grenade**. **Alliances** added the reusable **Death Spark** (which saw play in goblin decks), but most burn/direct damage spells of note were either higher casting cost (**Incinerate** made its debut in *Ice Age*) or  spells. To confound matters further, Wizards threw in a bunch of specialty and coin-flipping cards such as **Mana Clash**, **Chaos Charm**, and **Vertigo**, none of which really could set the opponent on fire.

**Mirage** block didn't really change the status quo. The overpowered **Firestorm** eventually became a staple -- in **Necropotence** decks, Reanimator Decks, and 4-color blue decks featuring **Tradewind Rider**. Red burn decks simply didn't have enough cards to throw away to **Firestorm** effectively, since each of their draws already were keyed to damage the opponent, and they ran light on land. **Visions** gave Sligh its most important card of all (**Fireblast**), but still most red decks had to rely on higher casting cost removal spells, especially after **Lightning Bolt** rotated out of the main set with *Fifth Edition*.



*Tempest* block gave red mages a little too much ammunition for one mana.

other time in **Magic** history! To whitt (and remember, Type 2 is the most recent two blocks plus the base set at the time).

Ye Olde Days: **Lightning Bolt**, **Chain Lightning**, **Goblin Grenade**

*Mirage* block Type 2: **Lightning Bolt**, **Firestorm**

*Tempest* block Type 2: **Firestorm**, **Mogg Frenzy**, **Searing Touch**, **Shock**

*Urza's* block Type 2: **Mogg Frenzy**, **Searing Touch**, **Shock**, **Reckless Abandon**

*Masques* block Type 2: **Reckless Abandon**, **Shock**, **Kris Mage**, **Seal of Fire**

*Invasion* block Type 2: **Kris Mage**, **Shock**, **Seal of Fire**, **Assault/Battery**, **Strafe**

*Odyssey* (present) Type 2: **Shock**, **Assault/Battery**, **Strafe**, **Engulfing Flames**, **Firebolt**, **Fiery Temper**, **Grim Lavamancer**, **Sonic Seizure**

Take another look at that list. Players constantly bemoan the loss of **Lightning Bolt**. "But it deals 3 damage! **Shock** only deals 2!", they say. Great, but now you can run a deck with literally 32 **Lightning Bolt** variants at ONCE in Type 2 -- previously you were limited to at most 16 at any given time. Let's look at some of these compared to **Lightning Bolt**:

**Shock**: It's **Lightning Bolt**, but one less damage.

**Assault/Battery**: It's sorcery speed, deals one less damage, but can also make a 3/3 creature.

Enter the *Tempest* block. If **Fireblast** gave red decks a competitive chance, then *Tempest* and *Stronghold* threw a whole tank of butane onto the bonfire.


Suddenly a whole wealth of one casting cost spells became available to the red mage: **Shock** finally gave an adequate replacement for **Lightning Bolt**, **Mogg Frenzy** and **Jackal Pup** became the ultimate in one-drops, and **Cursed Scroll** (though an artifact, it is most often associated with Sligh decks) turned the weakness exhibited by the deck in the *Firestorm* example into a benefit: unload your hand full of burn onto your opponent, and then finish them off with a reusable source of direct damage!

Let's take a short step back. I mention that **Shock** became a suitable replacement for **Lightning Bolt**, and it's the truth. By no means am I proclaiming that they are equal in power (**Lightning Bolt** does an extra damage at no extra cost), but **Shock** does get the job done in most cases. What many people don't realize is that there are more GOOD choices for one casting cost burn and direct damage spells now than at any

**Strafe:** It's sorcery speed, can't hit players, and can't hit red creatures.

**Fiery Temper:** It's Lightning Bolt, but only when discarded.


**Sonic Seizure:** It's Lightning Bolt that costs you a card.

But this is where  direct damage spells diverge from the **Lightning Bolt** formula. The new breed can do things that **Lightning Bolt** could never dream of, such as:

**Engulfing Flames:** Hit two creatures, keep creatures from regenerating.


**Firebolt:** Hit two creatures, kill a four toughness creature, be cast after you are forced to discard it.



**Grim Lavamancer:** Attack for one, be activated multiple times.

And let's not forget the synergy inherent in these cards. **Fiery Temper** combines especially well with **Sonic Seizure**. **Firebolt** and **Engulfing Flames** don't care if they are discarded to the Seizure either, since they will make a return visit. **Grim Lavamancer** scoops up any of the above mentioned cards, and runs them through the recycler. Admittedly, red's -



*Newer sets have brought cheap burn back to the forefront.*

cost creature base is nowhere near as good as the days of *Tempest* block, but the burn and support spells in the  slot are the best that they've ever been in the entire history of the game, period.

Enough gushing about . You red mages would rather go out there and unleash destruction and fire at this point, rather than sit here and listen to me give an essay about how versatile and satisfying  casting cost direct damage spells have gotten over the years. So by all means, step away from the computer, and good luck dealing 20 damage to the dome!

Next week: What do *Ali Baba*, *Aladdin*, and *Mishra's Workshop* have in common?

Direct Damage for 			
<i>Alpha</i>	Lightning Bolt Earthbind	<i>Exodus</i>	Dizzying Gaze
<i>Legends</i>	Chain Lightning Storm World	<i>Urza's Saga</i>	Shower of Sparks
<i>The Dark</i>	Mana Clash	<i>Urza's Legacy</i>	Last-Ditch Effort
<i>Fallen Empires</i>	Goblin Grenade	<i>Urza's Destiny</i>	Incendiary Landslide Reckless Abandon
<i>Ice Age</i>	Vertigo	<i>Mercadian Masques</i>	Kris Mage Tremor
<i>Homelands</i>	Winter Sky	<i>Nemesis</i>	Laccolith Rig Laccolith Whelp Seal of Fire
<i>Alliances</i>	Death Spark	<i>Prophecy</i>	Inflame
<i>Mirage</i>	Chaos Charm	<i>Invasion</i>	Assault/Battery
<i>Visions</i>	Tremor Goblin Swine-Rider	<i>Planeshift</i>	Singe Strafe
<i>Weatherlight</i>	Firestorm	<i>Apocalypse</i>	Bloodfire Dwarf
<i>Tempest</i>	Searing Touch Mogg Fanatic Shadowstorm	<i>Odyssey</i>	Blazing Salvo Engulfing Flames Firebolt
<i>Stronghold</i>	Shock	<i>Torment</i>	Crackling Club Fiery Temper Grim Lavamancer Sonic Seizure

Ben may be reached at [uncommonknowledge@wizards.com](mailto: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.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Ben Bleiweiss](#) archive

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

