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Sharing the Wealth

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Bad cards. Mark Rosewater recently explained [why they exist](#). Among his insights is the fact that some people enjoy trying to make bad cards good (or at least, not as bad). To quote Maro:

“One of the joys of **Magic** is discovering the card that everyone else has dismissed. In order to allow rogue deck builders to do this, R&D has to create some ‘good’ cards that seem ‘bad.’”

Indeed. It comes as no surprise to anyone who has read my articles here that I’m one of *those people*. I love taking a card that everyone considers abjectly useless and making it a feature card in my decks. If the card is a rare, all the better. And if I can somehow make a deck that cannot survive without FOUR copies, I am in heaven.

Sometimes the result is The New Deck, using things like [Necropotence](#) or [Oath of Druids](#). More often, the result is The Rogue Deck – a deck using [Complex Automaton](#) that no one loves but me. Oddly, I enjoy both results.

Why, exactly, I am obsessed with bad cards is probably too complex a psychological issue to fully explore here. Suffice to say, creating decks around a bad card has something to do with why I always cheer the underdog and why I love puzzles. It has something to do with ego, too.

Many Thursdays, I will feature cards that other people consider bad because I just don’t know any better. Other times – like today – I will make a special effort to choose a card others abhor in order to really unpack what building around bad cards entails.

Enter: [Nantuko Shrine](#). No, not [Nantuko Shade](#). [Nantuko Shrine](#).

Why does Nantuko Shrine suck? Why don’t popular decks use it, and why has its value fallen to something like one U.S. dollar in the singles market? After all, it can produce creatures for virtually nothing, right? Isn’t that good?

Not to get too theoretical here, but Nantuko Shrine’s lowly status is primarily because it is a *symmetrically constructive* card. In other words, the Shrine gives some extra resource (in this case, creatures) to both you AND your opponent “equally.”

(What? [Magic Colony](#) made a [Nantuko Shrine](#) deck? Bah! Amateurs!)

You generally want to pack your deck with cards that either a) help you, b) hurt your opponent or c) both. But symmetrical cards are in almost every expansion and are often used. In Type 2, just look at [Balancing Act](#); [Braids](#), [Cabal Minion](#); [Earthquake](#); [Hurricane](#); [Innocent Blood](#); [Global Ruin](#); [Mindlicer](#); [Mutilate](#); [Obliterate](#); [Wildfire](#); and [Wrath of God](#). Those cards have the same effect on me as they do on my opponent. However, each has a *destructive* effect that takes away resources. If you can somehow ensure that the effect hurts your opponent worse than it hurts you, then you are usually closer to winning the game. As a result, that type of card sees plenty of play in Type 2.



Symmetrically constructive cards – those that boost both my opponent’s and my resources equally – show up far less often in good decks. The easy ones to use are “Lords” like [Lord of Atlantis](#) and [Chainer, Dementia Master](#). Usually, though, few players can rationalize giving an opponent extra ANYTHING, be it lands, mana, cards, creatures, or creature-bonuses. Free stuff sucks.

My goal in building around symmetrically constructive cards is similar to building around their destructive cousins: Find cards that ensure the effect helps me more (read: a LOT more) than my opponent, then use that advantage to pound him senseless.

In the case of [Nantuko Shrine](#), that means:

- Making more squirrels than my opponent
- Making my squirrels much better than my opponent’s
- Using my squirrels in a way my opponent can’t
- Making my opponent wish she didn’t have squirrels in the first place

If I can do more than one of the above, all the better. The trick... oh, wait, this is important...

THE TRICK is to *tie my win condition* to whatever strategies of the above I choose. Otherwise, my support cards start getting better than my feature card. After all, my feature card – [Nantuko Shrine](#) – is bad. The only way I can justify its place in the deck (other than masochism) is to make its role *vital* to how the deck works.

Final Wrap-up

[Top 8 Video Archives](#)



If I can take my bad card out of the deck and make the deck better, I haven't successfully built around a bad card.

I'll explore the four strategies for Nantuko Shrine a little more fully to really drive this point home.

MAKE MORE SQUIRRELS

So, let's see... whenever anyone plays a spell, that person gets squirrels as long as extra copies of the spell exist in graveyards. Assuming I want squirrels (and who doesn't want squirrels?) and that my opponent isn't playing a deck with one copy of each spell, two ideas come to mind:

First, I can use four of every card and load up my graveyard. In Extended, cards like **Intuition** make this easy. In Type 2, I can try cards like **Buried Alive**, **Cephalid Illusionist**, **Entomb**, **Fact or Fiction**, **Millikin**, and **Traumatize** (on myself) while avoiding cards like **Anurid Scavenger** or **Bearscape**.



Second, and the flipside of the above idea, is to destroy my opponent's graveyard. **Carrion Rats**, **Cremate**, **Haunting Echoes**, and other cool black cards kill graveyards while cards like **Liquify**, **Syncopate**, and **Treva's Charm** ensure that cards never make it to the graveyard in the first place. Now no matter how many squirrels I get, *you* get none. Booya.

MAKE BETTER SQUIRRELS

Of course, as a backup plan I can always make my critters bigger or tougher than my opponent's. **Glorious Anthem** is the most obvious and permanent option. Other things like **Centaur Chieftain** and **Overrun** can... um... run over opposing squirrels. Heck, even a simple **Knighthood** almost negates opposing squirrels. These solutions don't prevent an opponent from having squirrels, it just means mine stick around longer.

PUT SQUIRRELS TO WORK

For argument's sake, let's say my opponent has a few squirrels and I have a few squirrels. Sounds pretty even. If, however, I also have a **Devouring Strossus** on the table, then my little Strossus-snacks look a lot more useful than the squirrels quivering helplessly on the other side of the table. And aha! I can sacrifice my squirrels to look for cards using **Diabolic Intent** or for mana with **Phyrexian Altar**. And *you*, my squirrel-laden opponent? You can't, can ya? CAN YA?!?!?!?

MAKE SQUIRRELS STRESSFUL

Probably the trickiest of the tricky tricks, it is sometimes possible to make my opponent rue having squirrels at all. Silly cards like **Blessed Reversal** can conceivably gain me loads of life. **Beast of Burden** gets positively beastly. **Searing Rays**, played in a deck with single copies of cards and some **Millstone**-like effect, can really sear a squirrel-heavy opponent. As with all of these ideas, using sets before **Invasion** (hello **Avatar of Might**, come on in) makes the prospects even juicier.

And, lo! What **Nantuko Shrine** produces are s-q-u-i-r-r-e-l-s. Thus a simple **Squirrel Mob** (and a trampling, flying, or unblockable Squirrel Mob to boot), might have my opponent thinking twice about playing that third **Obsessive Search**.

So you see? Sometimes a bad card is only bad in a deck that doesn't use its badness for good and sometimes a bad card is still bad but fun to use for its good badness. It's all very clear.

Nantuko Shrine stands aside such winners as Aven Shrine, Kavu Lair, Overabundance, New Frontiers, Pure Reflection, and Unifying Theory (to name a few) as a card just begging to share the wealth. But loads of other kinds of bad cards exist. In the future, you can bet that I'll explore other bad cards and how they might be made less bad.

For now, though, sit in your Shrine. Finds ways other than those I've listed below and unleash massive squirrel armies onto the table.

And if you do: You will know, deep in your heart of hearts, that you and I share something in common. Because you will know, O Lover of Nantuko, that you are one of *those people* too.

Next week: Little red men! Swamps! And exclamations galore!

-j



The key is finding ways to break the parity of symmetrical cards.

No Squirrel for You!

4 Llanowar Wastes
10 Forest
6 Swamp

4 Carrion Rats
4 Diligent Farmhand
4 Crypt Creeper
4 Wild Mongrel
4 Gravegouger
4 Centaur Chieftain

4 Cremate
4 Muscle Burst
4 Nantuko Shrine
4 Nature's Resurgence

Public Library

4 Yavimaya Coast
10 Forest
10 Island

4 Cephalid Illusionist
4 Cephalid Vandal
4 Werebear
4 Terravore

4 Syncopate
4 Aether Burst
4 Ground Seal
4 Pedantic Learning
4 Nantuko Shrine

Ye Blessed Shrine

4 Brushland
14 Forest
6 Plains

4 Basking Rootwalla
4 Birds of Paradise
4 Wild Mongrel
4 Blessed Orator
4 Centaur Chieftain

4 Insist
4 Rites of Spring
4 Glorious Anthem
4 Nantuko Shrine

B.F.M. (Big Furry Mob)

4 Yavimaya Coast
14 Forest
4 Island

4 Birds of Paradise
4 Squirrel Mob
2 Beast of Burden

4 Chatter of the Squirrel
4 Sylvan Might
4 Tolarian Winds

- 4 Nantuko Shrine
- 4 Squirrel Nest
- 4 Acorn Harvest
- 4 Fact or Fiction

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