

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



The Wrath of the Punisher

Ben Bleiweiss
Uncommon Knowledge
Wednesday, May 8, 2002



In Randy's [article](#) two Fridays ago, he explained that red is the color of passion, emotion, and rage. But let's not fool ourselves, when you have a mechanic like the Punisher mechanic, you don't want your color to sound like it's sharing feelings at a group hug session. No my friends, the Punisher mechanic is red, and red shouts. And what it shouts is, "Give me what I want or I'll punch you in the face!" Doesn't matter if it's three points of damage, a [Hymn to Tourach](#), or this week's [Judgment](#) card, [Breaking Point](#).



God Frowns

[Breaking Point](#) melds together the Punisher mechanic and [Wrath of God](#). Ordinarily, red wouldn't be given an effect that outright destroys all creatures in play, since the color finds its roots in dealing damage. Look at [Wildfire](#) or [Inferno](#) if you want a more typical red board-clearing card. And sure, there are a lot of people playing Red these days, but haven't we all missed [BURN!](#)? I'm talking the scorch-your-eyebrows-off, take-20-to-the-dome, turn-your-opponent-into-a-crisp-type [BURN!](#) One of the traditional weakness of a [BURN!](#) deck comes from the decision of whether to kill creatures or send damage to the opponent's head. A few cards fill both needs, like [Earthquake](#), but most require trading a win mechanism in exchange for not losing. For instance, a [Lightning Bolt](#) used to kill a [Dragon Whelp](#) (foreshadowing here, folks) can't be used to deal three damage to the opponent.

What does [Breaking Point](#) say to this?

"I'm gonna kill all your creatures or you're gonna get punched in the face!"

And what a mighty wallop indeed! Six damage weighs in at the heaviest of all the Punisher cards, at nearly a full third of your opponent's life total. If you're packing a library full of [BURN!](#)

and direct damage, where's the choice? Does your opponent take six damage, making this three casting cost sorcery the most efficient burn spell in you deck? Or do they allow one very undercosted sorcery to decimate his entire team of creatures?

Breaking the Curve

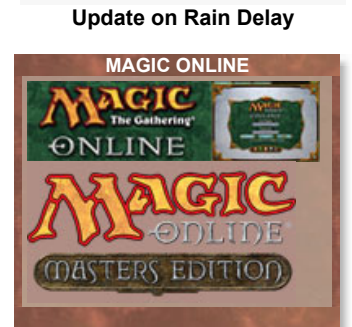
In most mono-red decks, including [Sligh](#), the casting cost of cards are the most essential part of winning. [Fireblast](#) would be nearly useless in these decks if it didn't effectively cost zero. [Mogg Fanatic](#), [Jackal Pup](#), [Orcish Conscripts](#), and [Shock](#) trade one mana for two damage. [Price of Progress](#) can take out an opponent in and of itself, for a paltry two mana. Traditionally in such decks, there's been one mainstay of the three casting cost slot. Many have argued whether it's a creature or a burn spell, but undeniably one of the red hallmark cards is [Ball Lightning](#). For three mana, you get six points of damage. Does this sound familiar? [Breaking Point](#) fits into that exact curve, offering 6 damage for 1 2 2.

Now please, and I disclaim the above sentence, [Breaking Point](#) is NOT [Ball Lightning](#). It's not even functionally identical. [Ball Lightning](#) attacks, [Breaking Point](#) defends. [Ball Lightning](#) is a creature, [Breaking Point](#) is a sorcery. [Ball Lightning](#) really enjoys it when your opponent has no creatures in play or stalled on two lands. [Breaking Point](#) is useless against a creatureless deck or players that haven't committed anything to the board. But undeniably, each of them offer a potential two damage for each mana invested, a much better return than on, say, a [Ghitu Fire](#) or a [Fireball](#).

The Origins of the Punisher

Frank Castle's parents' family was murdered in Central Park... oh wait, that's the wrong Punisher. The real Punisher mechanic came from, of all places, an Alpha edition ante card. The original [Demonic Attorney](#) offered your opponent a choice: ante an additional card or concede the game. That doesn't seem very red though, does it? In fact, it's rather dainty.

[Breaking Point](#) says, "Smash your creatures or smash your face!"



Demonic Attorney says, "My good fellow, would you care to trade your soul for a continuation of our sporting event?"

I mean, look at the obvious difference in tone there. They may have functional similarities, but it's all about attitude. You have to imagine a muscle-bound barbarian screaming, "Get the hell out of my way or I'll kill you!" when you play **Breaking Point**. Otherwise you have this:

"I am **Mind Bomb**. If you enjoy doing simple arithmetic you'll see that I've just possibly dealt to you a slight smattering of damage. However, my good chap, I'd be delighted to have you discard up to three cards to prevent some of this damage. Please pardon the inconvenience, though I have taken the liberties of affecting both parties at this gathering. Cheerio!"

Or how about this one, as long as we're picking on blue, the color of control and manipulation, trying to emulate red's pure emotion:

"I am **Giant Albatross**. I am bad luck to kill. Please spank yourself on the buttocks as a penance for killing me, unless you're really really really grief stricken, in which case, go ahead and commit suicide."

And god forbid me from even going into Rhystic cards. Good idea, bad execution.



Demonic Attorney, Mind Bomb, Giant Albatross, and Rhystic Lightning all give your opponent two bad choices, not unlike modern Punisher cards.

The Odyssey Continues

Aaron wanted for me to brainstorm a deck which would show a good way to use **Breaking Point**. I simply couldn't do it. "Oh," you think to yourself, "it's not quite **Wrath of God** and it's not very good in red." I'm happy to report the problem is quite the opposite: it's rather amazing in a straight burn deck, such as one which utilizes **Ensnaring Bridge** to hold off the enemies while massive balls of flame fire down from above. I'm unfortunately limited to talking about a select few **Judgment** cards over these preview weeks, and the deck I came up with, after accounting for basic lands, totaled nearly 40% **Judgment** cards! It was one thing when Randy threw in a mention of **Benevolent Bodyguard**. It's another when my decklist goes like this:

Ha! I slipped in the Type 2 decklist anyhow!		
Ben Bleiweiss		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
18 Mountain	4 Breaking Point	4 Judgment card that totally shuts down CoP: Red
4 Barbarian Ring	4 other Punisher card from Judgment	4 Boil
	4 burn spell from Judgment with flashback AND threshold	3 Flaming Gambit
22 lands	2 replacement for Fireblast in Judgment	2 Obliterate
	2 Burning Wish	1 Disorder
	4 Earthquake	1 Epicenter
0 creatures	4 Ensnaring Bridge	
	4 Firebolt	15 sideboard cards
	2 Ghitu Fire	
	4 Urza's Rage	
	4 Violent Eruption	
	38 other spells	

The Grand Finale

When **Molten Influence**, **Lava Blister**, and **Blazing Salvo** heralded the arrival of the Punisher mechanic in **Odyssey**, people thought to themselves, "Ho hum. Bad **Flash Counter**, bad **Wasteland**, bad **Strafe**." **Torment** livened things up with **Skullscorch**. "Oh ho! This card replicates **Hymn to Tourach**,

yet with giving your opponent a choice of effects. There is potential, but it is not yet great." **Longhorn Firebeast** can be summed up as, "This card can be a **Balduvian Barbarians** or a **Lava Axe**, whichever would be better for you. Your pick." I can't say for sure what happened in *Judgment* development, but one of two things occurred: Either R&D decided to keep ramping up the power level of Punisher cards as a natural progression during the block, or they saw that the *Odyssey* ones weren't getting played in constructed and wanted some Punisher cards which were powerful enough to break through in those formats. Either way, the Punisher cards in *Judgment* deal more damage, have greater effects on the game, and give you more bang for the buck. On the top of this mountain (unfortunate pun intended) stands **Breaking Point**, aptly named for what R&D reached as a halfway point between casual Punisher and tournament Punisher cards.

Ben may be reached at uncommonknowledge@wizards.com.



Punisher cards have gotten more powerful as the *Odyssey* block has progressed.

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

[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](#)

