

Brian's Bag o' Mail

Deconstructing Your Letters

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One of the most gratifying aspects of writing the [Deconstructing Famous Decks](#) series here at [MagicTheGathering.com](#) is the mail I get from readers. Whether it's criticism, an encouraging word, a rules clarification or question, or -- best of all -- a way to improve a deck I've written about, I try to respond to all of my letters. Today, I am going to share some of the letters I've received since this column's inception. (Yes, in other words, it's the inevitable mailbag column, which all writers should be entitled to every 20,000 words.)

Feedback on My First, Err, Second Article

The first article I wrote featured [Dave Price's "Hatred" deck](#) from Grand Prix - Seattle. Here's what some of you had to say about that piece . . .

. . .

. . .

Hmmm . . . apparently nothing. I actually didn't get any letters regarding that one. There was no direct contact information listed in the article. So, readers could send emails to Aaron, but unless he forwarded it to me, I wouldn't see it. Either there was nothing to forward or Aaron was helping to build my confidence.

["Deconstructing Ponza"](#) was the first piece I did that generated any reader response. Many of the letters offered a different cocktail of land destruction and quite a few of them urged me to broaden the mana base of the deck to include green for a Lhurgoyf of a different color . . .

Doug Whittaker writes:

Your article "Deconstructing Ponza" was well written and well thought out. I liked how you broke down Chris Benafel's Ponza deck. I



remember modifying it and winning a local tournament with it.

However, I believe that your deck idea could use some improvement. My friend and I had a concept kind of like this a while ago. We have been testing it on **Magic** Online. Overall, they are still Ponza decks -- Burn, LD, and a Big, Nasty critter. However, the creature we picked -- though still a Lhurgoyf -- was different: [Terravore](#).

Now, the [Terravore](#)'s power/toughness are based on the number of lands in a graveyard.

Both [Devastating Dreams](#) and [Wildfire](#) each send lands to a player's graveyard first, then deal damage. Therefore, the [Terravore](#) will not only survive, but will still be the largest creature on the board, even if it is only a 1/1 before you cast the spell.

Dear Doug,

I do love the [Terravore](#).

Unfortunately, he didn't fit into the mold I was trying to create . . . a monored (more or less) land-destruction deck. There have been green-red land-destruction decks in the past, but I'm hard pressed to recall one that has had the same success as Ponza's single-color mana base. Ponza's consistent draws would certainly diminish if there were scenarios that left you waiting for a second mountain to cast [Pillage](#) despite having three lands in play. If you are looking for a good land-destruction deck that takes advantage of [Terravore](#), allow me to recommend "Balancing Tings."

Balancing Tings



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Ancient Spring	4 Balancing Act
3 Archaeological Dig	4 Chromatic Sphere
4 Geothermal Crevice	3 Fact or Fiction
4 Irrigation Ditch	4 Fire // Ice
3 Seafloor Debris	3 Obliterate
2 Sulfur Vent	3 Orim's Chant
4 Timberland Ruins	3 Syncopate
4 Tinder Farm	

28 lands

4 Nimble Mongoose
4 Terravore

8 creatures

24 other spells



Pen Pals in Prison

My next article dealt with [George Baxter's green-white "Prison" deck](#). The deck that I built in an attempt to emulate Baxter's deck was a recursive "[Orim's Chant](#)" deck. I received some nice feedback on what I thought was an interesting deck design, but the strongest feedback came from the Chicago area when I made a comparison between being drawn to decks that don't win the whole shebang and being a Mets fan. Frank Pedota writes:

You're a Mets fan.

Oh boo hoo!

You've at least gone to the World Series and won it in 1986.

Try being a Cubs fan. We haven't won a World Series since 1908 and haven't been to one since 1945. There's also the Amazing Mets (read that in a taunting voice) who stole a World Series from the '69 Cubs. So, when you say you're a Mets fan, I have no sympathy for the deprived fan of the New York Mets. Oh, how you've suffered! Oh, how many sad and heart-breaking collapses your team has gone through. Oh, what a long two-year hiatus the Mets have taken from the World Series. You know what? When you say things like that, remember that there are fans of the Red Sox and the Cubs who have



had World Series championships taken away from them in the last thirty-five years by your beloved Mets.

Dear Frank,

So how about that [Psychatog](#) deck?
Jeff Fenstermaker writes:



I enjoyed your article on green-white Prison. In your brief rundown of match ups I became curious as to how the deck deals with [Upheaval](#). Granted it is a sorcery, so Chant keeps it from being cast. However, either the [Psychatog](#) decks or green-blue decks are often packing [Mana Short](#) in their sideboards to ensure they can tap you out, then untap and cast Upheaval. Mana Short in response to my Chanting them can likely spell game over for green-white. What are your thoughts on this?

Dear Jeff,

I've got nothing. [Mana Short](#) is bad news for this deck.
Florian Scheltens writes:

*I am fairly new to actually playing **Magic**, although I have had some experience with it from computer games. I think your article about "Prison" decks is very good, although I don't understand everything.*

I do however have one question: What precisely is decking?

Dear Florian,

That's a very good question and probably one I should have addressed in the original article in more detail. Decking is a common victory condition of the "Prison" archetype. When a player has to draw a card and can't because his entire library is empty, that player loses the game. That's called being

decked. [Millstone](#), [Grindstone](#), and even [Ambassador Laquatus](#) are all cards that players have relied on to deplete their opponents' libraries to achieve victory -- sometimes without dealing a single point of damage.

Postcards from the Edge of Griffin Canyon

My next article was something of a departure from past installments. Instead of dissecting a great deck from the past I took a look at an interesting deck that never was. The "[Griffin Canyon](#)" deck generated more mail than all of my previous columns combined. Most of the letters read something like the following.



Karl Kovaciny writes:

That was an amazing article. I did a double take when I saw that deck list with 4 [Griffin Canyon](#), 0 Griffins. So cool to kill with [Griffin Canyon](#), and I like the way you protect the combo with [Crop Rotation](#) and [Teferi's Response](#) instead of "fill out with 20 counterspells."

People seemed genuinely tickled by the piece and more than a few wanted to know where I came up with the deck. That answer can be found in response to the next letter.

Scott Landis writes:

I was just wondering if your initial concept for this deck came from anyone in the

Philadelphia area, as Adam Dale and I came up with it a couple of years ago, and told it to some people . . .

Dear Scott,

When I was playtesting for some Extended season, our mutual friend Jon Becker told me about the combo you guys had developed. I was fascinated by the combo, and Jon and I built the list that I used in the article. I would love to see the list you and Adam built to compare notes.

Hasty Replies

Judging from the sheer number of responses I got, "[Deconstructing Fires](#)" certainly struck




a cord with the most readers. There were endless emails debating the merits of [Rites of Spring](#) vs. [Rites of Initiation](#), [Barbarian Bully](#) vs. [Patchwork Gnomes](#), and even one that pitted the Bully against [Rites of Spring](#). But there was one email in particular that I wanted to address. I receive one just like it every time I post an article, and it showcases a dilemma that all deckbuilders must contend with -- access and availability to high-end rares.

Brandon Tulloch writes:

I read your article "Deconstructing Fires" from the magicthegathering.com site and I really like the "Angry Mongrel" deck. I was wondering what you think would be a good replacement for the Calls since they are extremely hard to get (no store around here sells them for less than \$30 each). I really like the way the deck functions so if you come up with something that could take the place of the Calls I would appreciate if you send the idea(s) along.

Dear Brandon,

When I decide to try a deck out, I rarely put it together immediately. Instead, I playtest it first using one of two methods. The first involves many commons and a magic marker. I proxy the deck using cards that closely reflect the color and mana cost of the cards I want to use. If I was going to proxy [Intuition](#) I might use a [Saprazzan Raider](#) or another  mana cost common that is unlikely to see the inside of a Constructed deck.



But more often than not, I use a method called deck mapping. You can find a detailed explanation about how to use this method at www.neutralground.net/Forums/ForumItem.asp?NewsID=803. Personally, I use a deck of cards called a Wizard deck from US Games. It's just like a traditional fifty-two-card deck of playing cards but with two extra sets of four cards -- jesters and wizards -- which gives you a tidy 60 cards with which to playtest a variety of decks quickly and cheaply. It also gets you out of that nasty habit of playing sixty-one-card decks! Only when I've fully tested a deck and am satisfied with it do I attempt to cull the cards for it from my highly organized (ha!) collection of cards. It is very unusual for me to actually buy single cards.

Instead I rely on Limited format events like Booster Drafts and Sealed Decks for my base supply of cards. From there, I usually trade for or borrow the cards I need to complete a deck.

Eventually, I replaced [Call of the Herd](#) with [Roar of the Wurm](#) and/or [Grizzly Fate](#) -- both uncommons. I actually only owned two [Call of the Herd](#) myself and could not dig up two more for a tournament I wanted to play in. I replaced them with [Roar of the Wurm](#) and was so happy with the 6/6s that I never bothered to trade for the other two Calls (although I would eventually acquire them through drafting). Sometimes being forced to look for cheaper alternatives to high-end rares will lead you to some exciting deck developments -- necessity being the mother of invention and all that.

"Counter-Post": The Next Generation

My most recent article featured [Jon Finkel's "Counter-Post" deck](#). With the recent printing of [Mobilization](#), Jon's classic may become relevant in Standard again and quite a few players asked me how to retool the *Odyssey Block Constructed* (OBC) deck I used for the new Standard. Matthew D. Wood writes:



*Hello, my name is Matt, and I'm somewhat new to playing **Magic**. I understand 99% of the rules, but the deck that I have owned for a long time was either green-red madness or green-blue madness. Pretty easy and simple to play.*

*So, I decided to shamelessly copy your "[Solitary Confinement](#) and [Spirit Cairn](#)" deck. It seems really cool on the website, but I have **no** idea how to play it. I just keep getting ruined by my friends, and I even have the four necessary components out to make the deck go: [Solitary Confinement](#), [Spirit Cairn](#), [Compulsion](#), and draw cards.*

I am wondering if you would share some of the deck's nuances with me. How much mana do you think you should have before you setup the [Solitary Confinement](#)? I consistently have about five or six mana, but I find it very difficult to decide whether or not to pay for a Spirit token after I pulled [Genesis](#) back. That's four mana, which, at best, leaves me only two left. I can't [Circular Logic](#) with that.

Am I starting the [Solitary Confinement](#) lock too early?

Dear Matt,

The simple answer is, probably. Once you engage the lock your life total is more or less meaningless. What this allows you to do is use your life total as a resource -- you can trade life points for board position. You don't have to play the [Solitary Confinement](#) until it's absolutely necessary. This allows you to draw cards, develop your mana, and craft a hand of countermagic to protect your combo. Nils van Kleef writes:

I'm a casual **Magic** player from the Netherlands. I've read your "Confinement-Post" article. I've already built a multiplayer "[Spirit Cairn](#)" deck, but it's too slow to be useful in single player. Once I finished reading your article I thought I might give it a try (it isn't ready just yet), but there's one burning question still on my mind.



In my "Spirit" deck, I used [Mirari's Wake](#) with [Compulsion](#), the Cairn, Looters and [Riftstone Portals](#) to great effect. I could build a huge amount of tokens once I had a Wake, Compulsion, and Cairn on the table and a Riftstone Portal in my graveyard. As multiplayer games tend to last long, I could successfully execute this combo near the end of the game to win.

In your article, there's no mention of [Mirari's Wake](#).

My question is, have you tested or considered using it, and if so, what are your reasons for not including it in the deck? It helped me a great deal: I had a strong army and very good card quality thanks to both abilities of the Wake.

Luke L writes:

I may give your deck a whirl with some changes for [Standard]. What do you think should be changed?

Dear Luke, Nils, and everyone else who wrote in asking about a version for Standard,

There are a number of obvious choices that can be changed from OBC to Standard. The most obvious is upgrading the somewhat expensive [Kirtar's Wrath](#) to the more classic and slimmed down [Wrath of God](#). [Envelop](#) becomes [Counterspell](#), and I think [Solitary Confinement](#) goes away and becomes [Mirari's Wake](#). [Spirit Cairn](#) becomes [Mobilization](#) . . . It might be easier if I just included a rough decklist.

Counter-Post 2K2



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Forest	4 Circular Logic
13 Island	4 Complicate
4 Krosan Verge	4 Compulsion
6 Plains	4 Counterspell
_____	4 Mirari's Wake
27 lands	4 Mobilization
	3 Moment's Peace
2 Mystic Enforcer	4 Wrath of God
_____	_____
2 creatures	31 other spells



I probably should include the new *Onslaught* "fetch" lands in the decklist but I haven't tested it at all, and this mana configuration seems pretty safe to me. This is a very off-the-cuff deck design so please don't hold me to the numbers. I think that you will probably see something like it in the new Standard environment -- by the end of the last OBC season there were quite a few different [Mirari's Wake](#) decks kicking around and I'm sure they will make the leap into the State Championships (a.k.a. the [Magic State/Province/Territory/Island Champs](#)) the first weekend in November.

Please Sir, May I Have Some Spirit Tokens?

Anxovo Naue writes:

First of all I wanna tell you the way you analyze a deck and explain how it works is great, much better than the common analysis I am used to finding on the Net.

But I would like to ask you something about some tokens that appear in your article.

What are those tokens?

Dear Anxovo,

They are 1/1 Spirit tokens from the [DCI Player Rewards program](#). The program rewards players for playing in sanctioned **Magic** tournaments by sending them exclusive premium cards (such as [Wasteland](#)), as well as a series of token cards that pick up on the themes of the current block. The Spirit tokens are among the first they sent out way back during *Invasion* block -- note the *Planeshift* symbol on the card. I guess R&D was expecting [March of Souls](#) to fare a little better than it did.

Thanks to everyone who has written me. I do try to answer every email, although I know I have fallen short of that goal at times. In my next column I hope to take a stab at our esteemed editor's very own Nationals deck from a couple of years back - "Angry Hermit". If Aaron is too modest to oblige, there have been a number of suggestions from readers, and I will try to look at one of those.



As always, I can be reached at brian@fightlikeapes.com with your suggestions, comments, and criticisms.

Brian's *Marvel Comics miniseries*, [The Craptacular B-Sides](#), is in comic stores now.