

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Lost in the Tempest

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Many people wrote last week correctly guessing (from my Shakespeare quote) that this would be *Tempest* Week here at MagicTheGathering.com. Others expressed concern about me quitting **Magic**. Well, I'm happy to report that it's the former and not the latter—for now (more on this later).

Ah, *Tempest*. Those were the days when people couldn't block (thanks to shadow), spells were used infinite times (thanks to buyback), and people put 2/2 haste, trample, first strike, flying, regenerating, pumpable on the front and back end, sacrificial lambs to draw you a card or make your opponent discard a card into play with a little help from their friends (the Slivers pumping up Mr. **Metallic Sliver**).

As more and more sets get released, the valuation on different cards changes. Some cards become better when aided by a new mechanic, while others become worse. For instance, **Gaea's Blessing** really put a crimp in **Millstone**-style decks for a long time, while the creation of **Donate** made **Illusions of Grandeur** a tier-one tournament card when it had been complete fodder beforehand.

This week's column doesn't look at necessarily the best or worst cards in *Tempest*. What I'm going to explore are four different types of cards: those which were overlooked but deserve a second glance, those which were initially undervalued but now have found their homes thanks to later sets, those which were considered amazing back in the day but never really lived up to the hype, and those which had their power levels tweaked JUST a touch in a future set to bring them from "could-have-been" to "tournament winner."

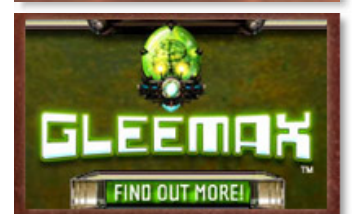
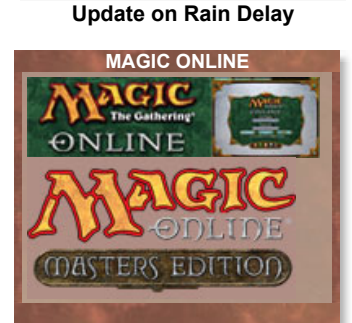
CATEGORY ONE: TAKING A SECOND LOOK

A lot of times there are powerful cards that are overlooked and overshadowed by even more powerful cards from the same set. Buyback and shadow were two really exemplary mechanics on the power gauge, as were environment-altering cards such as **Cursed Scroll**, **Tradewind Rider**, **Living Death**, and **Humility**. The next level of cards are the workhorse cards—you wouldn't necessarily build a deck around them, but they are solid additions to already existing decks. Here are eight cards from *Tempest* that didn't see a whole lot of tournament play back in the day, but maybe deserve a second glance in the present.

1. **Altar of Dementia**: The Altar saw some play in *Tempest* block constructed as an alternate win method for **Living Death** decks. Simply sacrifice all your creatures to the Altar to mill yourself, then **Living Death** a ton of creatures into play. This will give you usually enough power in creatures to mill out your opponent's entire deck in one fell swoop. However, due to **Gaea's Blessing** this strategy never really caught on outside of TBC (*Tempest* Block Constructed). In fact, **Recurring Nightmare** and **Survival of the Fittest** killed the Altar's chances at the big time as well, as **Living Death** was quickly phased out of decks. Plus, back then games were played under older rules. You could not have your creature deal combat damage and then sacrifice it to mill cards. With this being allowed under current rules, perhaps the Altar is a little better than before.



2. **Blood Frenzy**: This one I'm very surprised has never seen tournament play. Under current rules (Here we go again! You'll see this one a lot.) You can stack combat damage, and then cast **Blood Frenzy** to kill an attacking or blocking creature. This gives red a very cheap and versatile two-mana creature kill spell to



deal with anything from a meddlesome blocking Wall to an attacking reanimated **Phantom Nishoba**, without taking an extra damage or risking its own creatures!

3. **Ertai's Meddling**: Way back in my second column ("[Here and Gone](#)"), I spoke briefly about **Ertai's Meddling**. This counterspell delays the inevitable for X turns, allowing you to search for answers in the meantime. Don't want your team of Merfolk to face the **Wrath of God**? Meddling the white spell for enough turns to swing in with your fish and win. Don't think **Rancor** should go on that **Pouncing Jaguar**? With **Ertai's Meddling**, you can delay the enchantment for a turn, and then bounce the offending creature. **Rancor** is countered when it tries to resolve, since its original target no longer exists.
4. **Mongrel Pack**: Wow, how close is this guy to playable? Four power for four mana, and a decent special ability. While **Mongrel Pack** isn't as good as the above four, it still deserves more of a look than it ever got in the past. Look at the resemblance this card has to **Symbiotic Beast** from *Onslaught*—both give you four 1/1 green creatures upon graveyard entry, though the Pack only triggers if it dies during combat. This essentially kept it from ever being tournament worthy—it was too easy to simply hit him with a burn spell outside of combat, wrecking his fragile one-toughness posterior. In today's environment filled with blue/green **Opposition** decks, black/green **Braids** decks, and less removal than in the past, would this creature have found a main-deck home? Maybe not, but it would have been good enough to try out at least once.
5. **Pallimud**: Cards which depend on your opponent's game state can be very good (think **Land Tax** or **Black Vise**) or very bad (think **Bulwark** or **Dark Suspicions**). **Pallimud** falls somewhere in the middle. For only three mana, you get a creature with power equal to the number of tapped lands your opponent controls. This discourages your opponent from playing spells on his own turn. It also contains a natural play-around, as your foul enemy can choose to simply not cast spells on his turn, using mana instead to power up instants and fast effects after your attack phase. This makes it especially weak against reactive decks, though it's one of the few cards which rewards casting spells before your attack against counter-heavy decks.
6. **Phyrexian Grimoire**: A distant ancestor of the divvy mechanic explored in *Invasion*, the Grimoire affords you the potential for massive card advantage by recycling spells (and lands) previously played in the game. Will your opponent return **Lightning Bolt** or **Incinerate** to your hand? How about **Ancestral Recall** or the **Library of Alexandria** he destroyed? Will you get **Roar of the Wurm** or **Wonder** back in your hand? Wait, forget I mentioned that last one. Move along, nothing to see here.
7. **Rootwalla**: **Basking Rootwalla** shines due to the madness mechanic, which often makes it free to play. Even so, it can pump to a very respectable 3/3 every turn for 1. **Rootwalla**, the original, came into play as a 2/2 for three mana, and could go large to 4/4 once each turn for the same two mana. While it won't hang tough against creatures like **Wild Mongrel** or **Ravenous Baloth**, it can be used to fill a respectable three-slot in many casual green decks.
8. **Starke of Rath**: Another card made better by the current timing rules. Block with Starke, put damage on the stack, then destroy away! Your opponent will gain control of a dying Starke, and you'll have removed their biggest threat from the board. Not bad for 1.

CATEGORY TWO: BAD THEN, GOOD NOW

Sometimes cards just aren't good when they are initially released. As years go by and hundreds of spells are added to **Magic's** vast pool of resources, these cards find homes in decks that just simply couldn't have existed back in the day. Here are four cards which didn't make huge waves with *Tempest*, but have since gone on to bigger and better things.

1. **Aluren**: When you talk about enchantments that made huge waves in the environment back during the *Tempest* block, you speak of **Survival of the Fittest**, **Recurring Nightmare**, **Awakening**, **Dream Halls**, and **Humility**. This is because there weren't many creatures with 'comes-into-play' effects that existed around the time of *Tempest*. Sure, you had the odd **Nekrataal** or **Man-o'-War**, but that mechanic hadn't been very explored. Enter *Urza's* block. Suddenly, comes-into-play creatures could be aggressively costed, but be saddled with the echo mechanic to keep their power levels in line. Enter *Invasion* block. With the advent of **Cavern Harpy**, **Aluren** decks gained a way to repeatedly bounce a creature at the cost of one life a turn. Suddenly, **Raven Familiar** + **Cavern Harpy** became free card drawing as long as you had life to pay to bounce the Harpy. Add in **Soul Warden** to the mix, and you've got yourself a deck to make Top Eight at Pro Tour - Houston.



2. **Auratog**: Atog was played in **Balance/The Rack** decks back in the day. **Necratog** found a home in **Ertai's Familiar** decks during **Mirage** block. Don't even get me started on the various incarnations of **Psychatog** decks running rampant. One other Atog found a home in a serious deck, albeit years after its initial release. **Auratog** became one of the kill cards of choice in Enchantress decks, with the addition of **Argothian Enchantress** and **Rancor** as a recurring enchantment. **Auratog**, which gains +2/+2 each time you sacrifice **Rancor**, became a perfect choice for a deck which could put out all three, and then draw a card and give a creature +2/+2 repeatedly for a measly ♠ .
3. **Harrow**: Five-color decks weren't the rage at all until **Invasion** block, with its copious quantities of dual lands and mana fixers. Suddenly **Harrow** went from second-string deck thinner to first-rate domain enabler. Need a fourth and fifth land type to power up **Legacy Weapon** or **Allied Strategies**? Let **Harrow** fulfill two of your needs at once, without giving up any card economy.
4. **Reanimate**: Reanimator decks have always existed throughout the history of **Magic**, but they didn't get really nasty until the introduction of **Entomb** in **Odyssey**. **Reanimate**, which served as a sideboard card in the **Rec/Sur** on **Rec/Sur** mirror match during **Tempest** block, suddenly became the main enabler for the two card **Entomb/Reanimate** engine which could spring out **Verdant Force** and **Spirit of the Night** as early as turn one given the aid of a **Mox Diamond**.

CATEGORY THREE: DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE!

Utopia Tree. **Jester's Mask**. **Mobilization**. Some cards just jump out from a spoiler list when a set is first released, and start climbing up and up in value backed by massive hype. However, sometimes these cards just don't play as well as they look. This section takes a quick look at five cards from **Tempest** that were part of the great hype machine, but never lived up to their reps.

1. **Dirtcowl Wurm**: People believed that the Wurm would finally replace **Erhnam Djinn** as the creature of choice for **Armageddon** decks, since after a 'geddon your opponent would have to play lands to grow the Wurm. Unfortunately, the extra mana on the casting cost coupled with the smaller body (3/4 versus 4/5 on the Erhnam) made this guy virtually unplayable in constructed.
2. **Dregs of Sorrow**: Formerly known as "XB4" because of its unique mana cost, Dregs was hyped up by **The Duelist** which proclaimed it the most broken of broken removal spells ever printed by Wizards. Killing X creatures and drawing X cards looks amazing on paper, but the other four mana, especially given the speed of the **Tempest** environment, made for a spell which saw no play at all outside of drafts and casual gaming. And even in draft, many players took a speedy shadow creature over an overcosted removal spell.
3. **Eladamri's Vineyard**: Even to this day, players are trying to get this symmetrical (it helps both players equally) card to work. At Pro Tour - Houston, one player dropped it on the first turn, only to have his opponent play multiple **Goblin Piledrivers** which attacked for lethal damage on turn 3. Thanks for the free mana! The Vineyard can cut both ways, and the ideal of "maybe they won't be able to use green mana and will mana burn" rarely comes true.
4. **Recycle**: "The green **Necro**"—that's how players touted this six mana enchantment. Of course, the same players kept trying and trying to get **Recycle** to work against discard—one **Stupor** and it was game over. They ran **Ghost Town** and other such suboptimal cards to try to get **Recycle** to work, but it never did. It wouldn't be until a year or so later when a six casting cost enchantment would truly make people forget about **Necropotence**. Hint: Think **Urza's Destiny**.
5. **Time Warp**: Granted, of all the cards on the list, this is the one which has actually seen the most tournament play. However, many players touted this as the second coming of the Power Nine. On paper, this looks like an exact reprint of **Time Walk**. In reality, three extra mana makes **Time Walk** a very marginal card indeed.



CATEGORY FOUR: RETOOLED AND RELEASED

Some cards just aren't quite good enough but have their hearts in the right places. R&D revisits these cards some years later and gives them a lower mana cost, more powerful effect, or both, and *voilà!*, a tournament-worthy card is born. Here are a few cards that have gotten this sort of makeover.

1. **Abandon Hope** -- **Last Rites**. Essentially the same card, **Last Rites** removes the extra mana cost from **Abandon Hope**, making the only real cost the discard of cards from your hand. Black Reanimator decks used this to their advantage at PT Houston, allowing them to pitch creatures to be reanimated from their hands while coercing their opponents.
2. **Armored Pegasus** -- **Mystic Familiar**. Not that there was anything inherently wrong with the Pegasus, which is perfectly costed for its power and toughness. **Mystic Familiar** added on the threshold mechanic to allow a growth of +1/+1 and protection from black to an already playable card.
3. **Dream Cache** -- **Probe**. Wizards has tried to push cards which don't inherently give you card advantage, but improve the quality of your card draw. **Brainstorm**, **Dream Cache**, and **Catalog** are some examples of these types of cards. **Dream Cache** never really saw play, but **Probe** made up for this by adding a wicked kicker. Suddenly, a very real potential for card advantage arose, while still allowing the player to cast **Probe** as a **Dream Cache** if he needed to smooth things out in the early game.
4. **Extinction** -- **Tsabo's Decree**. I've talked about both of these cards before. **Extinction**, as a sorcery, just affects the board. **Tsabo's Decree**, designed as a hoser for Rebel decks, hits the board, your opponent's hand, and can be played as an instant for just one generic mana more than **Extinction**. That's quite an improvement, and explains why the Decree saw play when **Extinction** did not.

5. **Horned Turtle** -- **Mistform Wall**. It's somewhat debatable that the Wall is inherently better than the Turtle, since it costs a mana to make the Wall able to attack each turn. However, the Mistform creature is considered one of the most important cards to blue for *Onslaught* drafts by many top players. They wouldn't feel ashamed to take the Wall first pick given the tribal nature of the set. **Horned Turtle** is and was filler in a set where it couldn't even block half the creatures that mattered.
6. **Kindle** -- **Flame Burst**. Essentially the same card, **Flame Burst** gets a slight boost from its interaction with **Pardic Firecat**.
7. **Master Decoy** -- **Whipcorder**. Does the morph ability make **Whipcorder** better? Not really. The extra power? It definitely helps. But the main advantage to playing **Whipcorder** (which is seeing play in tournament-level Extended decks right now) over **Master Decoy** is it's status as a Rebel. This allows him to be searched out with **Ramosian Sergeant** for free tapping--and attacking--action.

BONUS SECTION: ANTHONY'S BREAK THIS CARD CONTEST ENTRY!

I was going to submit a "[Break This Card!](#)" entry to Anthony for his **Animal Magnetism** column. I didn't email it in time for consideration, but here it is for your viewing pleasure.



Break This Card Contest: Animal Magnetism		
Dr. U. Knowledge 		
Main Deck 2 cards	Sideboard	
0 Nope. No artifact mana either. No Elves, no Birds, no Dark Ritual. What a crappy deck.	1 Top half of Animal Magnetism	0 We don't need no stinking sideboard, Stimp!
0 lands	1 Bottom half of Animal Magnetism	0 sideboard cards
0 I say thee nay! Who needs to win, anyhow?	2 other spells	
0 creatures		

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*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.*



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