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Finally, a themeless week! That's an odd thing for me to say. Usually I prefer constructing and writing on theme weeks. The theme provides a foundation; a starting point. Without one, I often flounder around as my brain drowns me in a flood of ideas, each one as random as the next.

This time out, however, I had a clear direction. I was eager to sink my teeth into *Eighth Edition*. "But Mark," you say (and I hope that's you and not the voices in my head again), "you've written three columns about *Eighth Edition* already!" True, but those were preview columns. This week's decks have two important differences. One, they're not all about the same card. How many Hunted Wumpus decks do you need at once? (Apparently one more, as I got a truckload of email on the Wumpus-Stifle combo that I neglected to include. For the three of you out there who didn't drop me a line, here's the skinny on the fatties: Stifle makes Hunted Wumpus and Tempting Wurm very happy critters.) Two, I could actually playtest these decks on **Magic Online** now that *Eighth Edition* is up, which makes a huge difference to me. As far as developing the decks is concerned, being able to play them takes them from stage 1 (pure theory) to stage 2 (capable of winning games). Plus, these decks are now real to me. I've been down in the muddy trenches with them, fought with them on the front lines, and crawled back out to tell the heroic tale. So this week, I thought I'd describe the deck creation process a bit and detail how playtesting (even a little) changed these decks for the better.

With absolutely no restrictions on me, I grabbed an *Eighth Edition* card list and read it repeatedly, skimming the card names hoping combos would jump out at me. Combos often lead to decks, though they frequently lead to rather different decks than the ones I had been imagining. The quick note I scribbled to myself that led to this week's first deck was "Blinding Angel/Unquestioned Authority," but the deck took on a life of its own after that.

"Blinding Angel

/ Unquestioned Authority"

Blinding Angel was always a cool card, but it suffered when Flametongue Kavu showed up and made its way into every single deck anyone, anywhere, ever bothered to play. With 4-damage tongue lashings nearly a guarantee, 4-toughness creatures for 5 mana didn't seem like a good choice for the cornerstone of your deck. But now the Angel is back, and Mr. Undercosted is nowhere to be found. You'll take over a game against a creature deck if you can consistently attack with Blinding Angel. You don't want it to be blocked, so that's where Unquestioned Authority comes in. You don't want it to be the victim of Aether Burst or Dark Banishing, so that's where Steely Resolve comes in. With those two on the board (noting that, unless you want to feel really dumb — trust me — the Authority has to come out *before* the Resolve), the Angel is nearly impervious. Only a few subtle cards (like Chainer's Edict) and a few unsubtle cards (like Wrath of God) can deal with it.

I started to mold the deck into shape by adding Sylvan Safekeepers (to further protect the Angel) and a Nomad Mythmaker (to reclaim Unquestioned Authority, if necessary). Then, since I was already planning to set Steely Resolve to "Angel," I started throwing more Angels in. It doesn't take too many Angels to realize you may have a mana curve problem. But why pay for Akroma and Silver Seraph when you can pop them out with Animal Magnetism?

That's where the focus of the deck started to bend around to the left. I liked the Animal Magnetism idea, but that meant the Safekeepers and Mythmakers had to go, or I'd be paying 5 mana for a Magnetically induced 1/1 or 2/2. The Seraph didn't make it in either; I never really wanted to cast it,

and the odds that it would be the chosen creature during a Magnetism flip were ridiculous. Animal Magnetism suddenly became the centerpiece of the deck. It's not a card you can casually include; you've got to build around it. Werebears sauntered in at that point. The mana acceleration is necessary, and when they're picked from a Magnetism (as they often will be, with the precious Angels making frustrating swan dives into your graveyard), they'll be 4/4 beaters. Mystic Enforcer and Genesis also reap the benefits of Animal Magnetism's graveyard-stuffing power. An initial decklist complete, it was time to test.

How did playing affect the deck's development? After a couple of games, I reduced the number of Steely Resolves, and since that's the only tribal card, some expensive Angels were cut as well. The most important thing I learned is that the deck needs time. It's got to set up its mana, then it's got to set up its creatures, so Moment's Peace entered the mix as a very important stalling tactic. Here's what the deck looks like now.

Angel Retentive

Standard-legal Blinding Angel deck

"Grave Pact

/ Lord of the Undead"

Another combo I wrote down isn't actually a combo. When I made a note of "Grave Pact/Lord of the Undead," it was with the understanding that the third part of that equation was a dying Zombie. Grave Pact + a Zombie headed to the graveyard is an Edict effect. Lord of the Undead + a Zombie headed to the graveyard is a chance to put that Zombie back into your hand.

So how do we get Zombies into the graveyard to set off Grave Pact? It's surprisingly easy! As corpses, they have quite an affinity for bedding down in the wormy soil. Carrion Feeder'll do it. Nantuko Husk'll do it. Corpse Harvester'll do it. The Harvester costs mana and requires it to tap, but the reward is that you get a replacement Zombie in the process. There are also a few fantastic cycling Zombies, which suits Lord of the Undead just fine. Gempalm Polluter and Twisted Abomination can lead to recursive cycling fun, and they can beat down in the late game. Undead Gladiator leads to recursive cycling fun on its own, but it's a lot easier with the Lord out. The other thing the Lord does is to pump up all Zombies, a trait complemented by the pumpitude of Undead Warchief. Paying B for a 4/3 Festering Goblin is not too shabby.

What did playtesting teach me? Entrails Feaster had to go. The deck doesn't bump off opposing creatures fast enough for the Feaster to feast, and raiding your own graveyard undercuts your Soulless Ones and Lords of the Undead. The Gravespawn Sovereign and Infernal Caretaker weren't worth the space either. And at this point, I used my extraordinary powers of observation to deduce that Phyrexian Plaguelord is not, and never was, a Zombie. To compensate, this is when I added the Nantuko Husks, as well as increasing the number of Corpse Harvesters.

Lord of the Undead Dance

Standard-legal Zombie deck

Hey, I know there are Zombie decks running around tournaments right now. They don't bother me, so I don't bother them. I make no claim that this deck is any better than they are. The Zombies you use in your living room depends solely on which ones you think are the most fun.

"Call of the Wild

/ Primitive Etchings?"

My final deck began with a combo that doesn't even work! I dubiously wrote down "Call of the Wild/Primitive Etchings?" It was just a thought; a synapse misfiring. It didn't seem quite right, but I had to look up both cards for exact wordings. As it turns out, they don't interact with each other at all — they even fight against each other! Each works only if the top card of your library is a creature, they do different things with that card. I thought Bloodline Shaman might help, but that's a third separate prong! Again, for it to work, the top card of your library must be a creature, but the Shaman puts that card into your hand — you don't draw it — so it's an anti-combo with Primitive Etchings.

However . . . each of those interacts nicely with cards that let you know what the top card of your library is. Cards like Future Sight. Some 2GG enchantments alongside a 2UUU enchantment? Sure, why not! But as well as those cards work with Future Sight (which works just fine on its own, thank you), they work even better with cards that let you rearrange the top of your library. And they work best of all with *creatures* that let you rearrange the top of your library. So welcome Sage Owl, Sage Aven, and Aven Fateshaper. It's wonderful to Call out the Fateshaper, then set up the next batch of cards for maximum Call effectiveness.

Somehow Maro slipped into the deck. The more cards you get into play from the top of your library, the more cards you won't be playing from your hand. And both Primitive Etchings and Krosan Tusker can put two cards into your hand at once. This is a weird deck: It's far too slow to be beatdown, it has nearly no control, and though it has combo pieces, it doesn't ever "go off." It wins purely through massive amounts of long-term card advantage.

Playtesting this deck caused some changes and taught me a surprising thing. The Birds' comes-into-play effects were enough library manipulation, so I cut all four Information Dealers. They were replaced by a full set of Aether Bursts (one of my staple cards) because having no ability to deal with your opponent's cards is a bad idea unless you're blazingly fast. This deck? *Not* blazingly fast. While dueling an Elf deck, I realized that I could neither remove nor outrace a Wellwisher, so I had to retool. (Not that Aether Burst works as a Wellwisher solution, but it does patch a gaping hole.) The odd thing I learned is that it's sometimes valuable to intentionally guess wrong with Bloodline Shaman and Call of the Wild! They'll clear out the top card of your library if it's unplayable via Future Sight, or they'll help you speed through a glut of useless cards (usually late-game lands) that you know is on top of your deck thanks to one of your prophetic Birds.

Primitive Call

Standard-legal Future Sight deck

Until next week, have fun building decks.

Mark

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