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Thursday, January 01, 2004

I enjoy theme weeks. As Mark Rosewater frequently writes, structure enables creativity. When I have a theme to focus on, my path is clear and my thoughts are focused: How can I subvert the theme? Card Drawing Week was a reasonably wide-open topic, so I was able to take a few different angles on it. The first deck is by far my favorite, as it uses card drawing as a weapon. The last deck is also my favorite. Heck, all my decks are my favorite. They're now "Online Extended-legal" rather than "Standard legal," but they're just as much fun. Enjoy!

Ah, the mighty mechanic of card drawing. When I read Aaron's email telling me that was the theme for this week, the first question that popped into my head was, "I wonder if I have any Tater Tots left?" Hey, I was hungry. But never fear, dear reader: I did indeed have Tater Tots.

Once I sated my desire for overprocessed potato nuggets, I turned my attention to the matter at hand. Card drawing, it turns out, is good. You can trust me on this because I read it online somewhere. There's this theory called card advantage, which states that if you have more cards, you have the advantage. Or something. Uh-oh, I feel a story digression coming on — and here it goes: Way, way back, sometime after *Legends* but before *Ice Age*, I would occasionally play in unsanctioned Constructed tournaments at my college. I had a single deck back then, an 81-card green-black proto-reanimator deck that used Bazaar of Baghdad and Animate Dead to bring out the monsters. It wasn't very good. I was not sophisticated about **Magic** theory, but I did notice a trend in my games: Whenever I had my Library of Alexandria in my opening hand, I won. It was that simple. I didn't draw any deep conclusions about the power of card advantage; I just enjoyed drawing twice as many cards for the entire game.

So, as stated, card drawing is good. More cards means more resources means more options and more action. But since I'm a needlessly subversive person, I felt compelled to devise a deck this week where card drawing is fatal. I would stuff so many cards into my opponent that my hardest task would be to shield myself from the flying bits after the explosion.

TOO MUCH IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN NOT ENOUGH

The best way to use card drawing as a weapon back in the Olden Days™ was to whip out the Black Vise. Then Miser's Cage, Iron Maiden, Viseling, and Dark Suspicions all came and went. There's no Standard-legal card nowadays that deals damage for having a full hand . . . but there is one that metes out punishment of a different sort: Dreamborn Muse. Force your opponent to draw more cards than could ever possibly be necessary and the Muse will convert a full hand into an empty library.

Now we get to the fun part of card-drawing week: the card-drawing cards. First up is the veteran of the group, Howling Mine. How much would you expect to pay for the ability to double everyone's draws for the rest of the game? \$29.95? \$19.95? No, it's available for the low, low, cost of 2 mana! And it's so easy to use! The Mine fills your opponent's hand faster than he or she can empty it while making sure you find the answers you need.

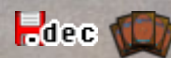
The next spell is also amazingly cheap because it provides eight cards for only 4 mana. It's a little mixed up, though, since seven of those cards go to the wrong person. Wheel and Deal has limited uses, and this deck is one of them: It reassigns another ninth of your opponent's deck, keeps his or her hand full, and removes anything particularly pesky you may have just bounced. Speaking of limited uses, there's Pedantic Learning. One of the worst card-drawing cards ever printed, if it's not

useful in this deck (your Muses will be milling away your library too, though in a much more controlled manner), then it'll never be useful. Sadly, it'll never be useful, but I stubbornly included one anyway. Finally comes Deep Analysis, which has two bonuses that make it especially useful here. 1) It's targeted, so unlike spells like Concentrate, you can use Deep Analysis to give your opponent cards, and 2) It has flashback, so any copies you mill away with a Muse can still be played.



The deck combines all this card drawing with a healthy supply of bounce spells (most of which bounce multiple permanents) to keep the board threat-free while the Mines, Wheel and Deals, and Muses do their work. Interestingly, while I was playtesting today's third deck online, I was squashed by a fellow named Relentless, who was playing a blue-black version of this deck! (And I think I'm so smart.) Relentless's version featured Ambassador Laquatus, a nice touch I hadn't thought of, and used black for tutoring and creature control. The tutoring was especially handy since Relentless is working on trading for more Muses and Ambassadors to complete the deck. Creativity trumps card supply — nice.

Perchance to Dream



Main Deck

60 cards

19 Island
 4 Lonely Sandbar

 23 lands

1 Arcanis the Omnipotent
 4 Dreamborn Muse
 1 Temporal Adept

 6 creatures

4 Aether Burst
 4 Boomerang
 3 Churning Eddy
 4 Deep Analysis
 3 Essence Fracture
 4 Howling Mine
 1 Pedantic Learning
 4 Turbulent Dreams
 4 Wheel and Deal

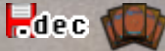
31 other spells

FIGHTING CHANCE

Let's look at a more traditional card-drawing deck now: one that puts cards into *your* hand. Blue has clearly always been the powerhouse card-drawing color, from Ancestral Recall to Stroke of Genius to Fact or Fiction. But *Onslaught* has strengthened green's card-drawing capabilities. Wirewood Savage, Wall of Mulch, Krosan Tusker, and Hystrodon are all highly playable — perhaps tournament worthy — cards, but the one that caught my eye this week was Overwhelming Instinct. It rewards attacking with cards. There's another card that also rewards attacking with cards, and that's Keep Watch. They seem to complement each other, so I did the thing that I do: I built a deck.

That deck failed big time. I figured that as I kept drawing cards, I'd get more and more land and could play bigger and bigger things. I had some cheap creatures, starting with Chatter of the Squirrel, and ramped up to Beast Attack and Primoc Escapee, which supported my Wirewood Savages. Since I planned to be sending my creatures in on suicide missions, I included lots of cards that gave me more creatures when they died, like Wirewood Herald and Symbiotic Elf. The deck was way too slow. I learned that I couldn't tie up my mana by playing large creatures and still expect to play my card-drawing cards. I also learned that after sending in a wave of weenies to die, I had to replace them not with *bigger* creatures, but with *more* creatures.

Take two, after more tuning, turned out to be successful. The plan is to drop creatures, send them in even if some will get picked off, and drop even more creatures. This is pedal-to-the-metal aggro that won't run out of steam. The critters'll keep on comin'.

Call for Backup *Lite!* 

Main Deck
60 cards

12 Forest	4 Basking Rootwalla	4 Aether Burst
7 Island	2 Llanowar Elves	4 Chatter of the Squirrel
2 Lonely Sandbar	3 Nimble Mongoose	2 Elephant Guide
1 Tranquil Thicket	2 Sage Owl	2 Giant Growth
22 lands	2 Thought Eater	4 Keep Watch
	1 Werebear	4 Overwhelming Instinct
	2 Wild Mongrel	2 Squirrel Nest
	16 creatures	22 other spells

FEATHERED FRIENDS

I'm no speciesist. I'm not prejudiced against platypuses because they're platypuses or chinchillas because they're chinchillas. I believe in the whole Noah's Ark rainbow. But if you asked me what the most studious, research-minded race on Dominaria was, "bird" would not be my first guess. I'd probably have gone with, oh, I don't know, people. I've known people for most of my life, and they're generally more into the whole reading thing than parakeets and cockatoos are. In **Magic** terms, wizards. Nope. Not cephalids either. Birds.



Draw a card, draw a card, draw a card... Who knew birds were so smart?

Thieving Magpie leads the way, followed by Aven Fisher. Crookclaw Elder rallies the troops into a book club, and Airborne Aid sweetens the deal. They're all supported by Seaside Haven, the second-best card-drawing land since Library of Alexandria. (Egads!) (Though after the shock wears off, I should tell you that Cephalid Coliseum is the *only* other card-drawing land since *Arabian Nights*.) Your standard array of quality Birds, some utility cards, and Soulcatchers' Aeries fill out the deck. The deck is similar to the previous one in that a bunch of weenies are supported by card drawing to keep your gas tank full. The main difference is that these weenies all have evasion. (You probably won't be activating Crookclaw Elder's "give something flying" ability.) The Haven and the Aerie have a very nice interaction: If you have four Birds in play, sacrificing a 1/1 to the Haven results in a new card and a total of +3/+3 among your remaining air force.

Thieving Birds Lite!




Main Deck
60 cards

<p>9 Island</p> <p>1 Lonely Sandbar</p> <p>10 Plains</p> <p>2 Seaside Haven</p> <p>1 Secluded Steppe</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>23 lands</p>	<p>3 Aven Fisher</p> <p>2 Crookclaw Elder</p> <p>2 Keeneye Aven</p> <p>1 Mystic Familiar</p> <p>2 Sage Owl</p> <p>2 Skywing Aven</p> <p>4 Soulcatcher</p> <p>4 Suntail Hawk</p> <p>3 Thieving Magpie</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>23 creatures</p>	<p>4 Aether Burst</p> <p>3 Airborne Aid</p> <p>1 Battle Screech</p> <p>2 Disenchant</p> <p>4 Soulcatchers' Aerie</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>14 other spells</p>
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Feeling that the Bird deck was a bit too one-dimensional, I actually threw a couple of Doom Cannons in there for a few seconds before realizing that made the deck non-Lite. They'd be an interesting addition.


I'M SICK OF BLUE TOO

We all get it. Blue draws cards the best. But other colors can do it as well. Red has Browbeat and . . . um . . . well, white has Convalescent Care and . . . er . . . but black has options. Oh yes — evil, evil options. Black has always let you have extra cards, but they come for a steep price. Originally it cost ante (Contract from Below), later it cost life (Greed, Necropotence, Infernal Contract). Even the names of black card-drawing spells are ultra-evil.

The newest weapon in black's arsenal is Graveborn Muse, which is merely half as painful as Greed and comes with a 3/3 body to boot. Skeletal Scrying is also a fine option, but all that painful deck digging needs either a speedy victory condition or an offset. Remember Convalescent Care from that last paragraph? White's card drawing comes with extra life! Add in the combo-tastic Words of Worship and you've got yourself a deck. Greed plus Words means   gains you 3 life as many times as you can activate it. (Don't try doing that at 2 life or less, though, since Greed's life payment comes before Words of Worship's life gain.) Greed plus Care means that if you're at 6 or 7 life at the end of your opponent's turn,  nets you a delayed-reaction 1 life and 2 cards. Precariously balancing your life total is one of the most fun aspects of this deck. Here's a graph of my actual life total in an online game against "fisheye" before I eventually won with Akroma and Sickening Dreams.

Graph of actual life totals using 'Greed is Good'

Talk about a roller coaster: up, down, up, down, sometimes scary, sometimes nauseating, always fun.

Greed is Good


Main Deck
60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Cabal Coffers 2 Grand Coliseum 1 Plains 16 Swamp 4 Tainted Field <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>24 lands</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath 2 Angelic Wall 3 Graveborn Muse 1 Guiltfeeder 2 Junk Golem <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>9 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Akroma's Vengeance 3 Chainer's Edict 2 Convalescent Care 2 Corrupt 2 Disenchant 1 Dregs of Sorrow 2 Duress 2 Greed 1 Infernal Contract 2 Marble Diamond 1 Necrologia 2 Sickening Dreams 1 Skeletal Scrying 3 Smother 2 Words of Worship <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>27 other spells</p>
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Well, this week's House of Cards is drawing to a close (ha!), so I'll end here. (Ummm, Rosewater made me do that. Yeah, that's it. He threatened to shave my chinchilla if I didn't include a pun.) Until next week, have fun with card drawing.

--Mark

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