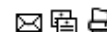




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Serum Powder

*Adrian Sullivan · Single-Card Strategies
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Every time a set comes out, we see spoilers on them. "You get to do *what?*" was one of the first things I thought when I saw Serum Powder (in that version of the spoiler, it was a colorless land I think).



When I found out that **Serum Powder** was the card for my first theme week assignment, I cheated a little bit by beginning the article far ahead of time. After all, when you use **Serum Powder** you get to cheat a little. You get to mulligan again, but "forget" to draw one less. I've mistakenly done that in PTQs before and had to call over a judge to penalize me more than once over the years. With **Serum Powder**, I needed the head start - **Serum Powder** really only does one thing. But what can you get away with by doing it?


Serum Powder isn't one of those cards that you can call "broken". It breaks the rules of the game, certainly, but it is neither overpowered nor undercosted. Taking that "free" Mulligan isn't exactly free. TINSTAFL still applies ("There is no such thing as free lunch".) Tossing seven cards out of the game isn't something to sneeze at. It also hurts the card that it costs three mana. If it had a little more oomph there would certainly be some big buzz around the card. But that doesn't mean that the card doesn't have a home.

Special Bonus Section for Drafting or Sealed Deck

Let's start by taking a short look at what the card can do in limited, as a fun bonus. It would seem at first glance that the **Serum Powder** would have almost no place at all in a sealed deck or draft. When you are running 40 cards, throwing 7 of them out of the game can make things a little scary. Zvi Mowshowitz wrote a really excellent analysis of why (other than simply increasing

the possible because of land. If we throw out a bad hand, we usually throw it out because we have too much too little, but once that hand is thrown out of the game the rest of our deck is going to become in the exact opposite direction. Throwing away a one-land hand, our new deck is likely to be a 33 card deck with 16ish land. A five-land hand skews things the other way.

But can we work with that?

In every limited environment, we usually get a shot at least one really good card. At the same time we can end up with a deck that is, on the whole, full of some bad cards. Not every deck is full of gold. Maybe you have that deck that just needs a bit more luck than normal if it can hope to win. 

This is where you should look to **Serum Powder**. In limited, it can be like a Hail Mary pass: you just try to maximize that maximum return. If it works out for the best, it could work out great. So, what kind of deck are we talking about here?

This isn't the first time that I've invoked the Nick Little Gambit in an article. I first heard of the Nick Little Gambit at a PTQ in Chicago. As the story goes, Nick had managed to draft a terrible, terrible deck. It had a couple of good cards, but mostly was just garbage. Nick shrugged and dropped in about 14 land and all of his weenies. With a bit of luck, he'd draw enough land to cast everything, and if he did get that luck, hopefully his deck would pull him through to a win because he wouldn't draw much land from there on in (because, well, there wasn't much to draw in the first place).

Serum Powder is perfect for such a deck. If you get it in your opening hand and it is mana-light, you'll be likely to draw an almost normal amount of land in the next draw. If you draw the **Serum Powder** as the game progresses, it's not so bad since it does give you a teeny bit more mana. It's not overwhelming, but it is reasonable.

More Room for Play - Constructed

It's in constructed that we get to let ourselves go a little bit more and figure out what **Serum Powder** is truly capable of. Here we get to run a full set of 4, so this will certainly impact things a lot more. Let's list our assets before we storm this castle:

- **Serum Powder** helps us look for a single card.
- **Serum Powder** accelerates us to 5 mana.
- **Serum Powder** removes cards from the game for us. (Is that an asset?)

Hmm. It's not much. We don't even have a wheelbarrow.

One of the ideas that has been mulling around in my head for a long time now has been trying to do something with **Arc Slogger**. He's so big and so tough, and his ability is really cool. When you run a 60-card deck, you can't really activate him all that often. I had dreams of untapping the turn after I cast him and activating him 6 times. Of course, that would mean you couldn't play 60 cards. And as we all know, playing more than 60 cards means that we're cutting our chances at getting any individual card.

However, the **Serum Powder** helps get around that. My dreams *can* come true! But, truth be told, that dream could use a little bit more to give it the oomph it needs... What else can make use of our assets?

I spent some time looking over 5 casting cost cards for an answer before it hit me smack-dab in the face: **Mirari**! A couple of years ago I helped design the ever-fun Burning Wish-Mirari deck When Sorceries Attack! (the decklist of which can be found in [an article by Brian Kibler](#)) and besides being fun, it seems like it would really fit in here. Let's fill in the blanks!

61 Spells

- 4 **Serum Powder**
- 4 **Arc Slogger**
- 4 **Mirari**



3 Lightning Surge

4 Blistering Firecat

27 Other Cards (fill in the blanks... I like Land Destruction and Burn here myself.)

39 Land

4 Barbarian Ring

4 Shivan Gorge

4 Ghitu Encampment

4 Wasteland

23 Mountain

Wish Sideboard:

1 Hammer of Bogardan

1 Wildfire

4 Spitting Earth

1 Lightning Surge

1 Decree of Annihilation

1 Flashfires

1 Slice and Dice

1 Meltdown

3 Browbeat

1 Molten Rain

There is a lot of fun stuff going on here. Naturally, it is hard for me to avoid using some Land Destruction effects. I can already feel Michael J. Flores and Randy Buehler having a little laugh over this. I just look at those cards and especially like how they interact with the **Mirari**.

After spending a bunch of time looking at this deck, I realized that it was pretty interesting, and also could manage to do a bunch of damage any turn that it got to get the **Arc Slogger** in play. It had fun interactions with **Mirari** and **Burning Wish**. It blew up lands. And, even if it didn't get any of the cards that initially inspired the build, it could still do a lot of damage to someone's head. That is *always* a fun thing.

One other thing that occurred to me as I worked on the deck is that there actually have been times when people have attempted to play a serious deck that ran a few more than 60 cards. When William Jensen ran [his Battle of Wits deck](#), I think he was serious about winning with it. (He's probably the only one that will ever really know.) Interestingly, the **Serum Powder** can really help:

- Draw one important card...
- Cast one important 5 mana card...
- And suddenly make its drawback seem meaningless! I guess the deck is now 237 cards!

Drop out a couple of mana-sources and toss in your **Serum Powders**. Chromatic on **Magic Online**, here I come! I think that when you look at it, it's pretty obvious that there definitely should be 4 **Serum Powder** if you were to remake this deck.

This leads to the simplest use of **Serum Powder**: sometimes you have something really exciting that you want to pull off, but it isn't exactly the easiest of combos to assemble. You can use any combo, really. It could be **Nefarious Lich**, **Overgrown Estates**, **Summer Bloom**, **Sickening Dreams**. It could be **Darksteel Reactor** with **Power Conduit** and **Coretapper**. In fact, since those are quite new cards, let's start with that as an example.



William Jensen, GP Milwaukee 2002, with his super-sized Battle of Wits deck...

The thing about a Darksteel Reactor deck is that it is simple. You want to get 20 counters on the Reactor to win the game. The big problem with that is that it is going to take forever. **Coretapper** can help things out a bit, and so could a **Power Conduit** as long as you had some counters somewhere else to put on it. So really, you do have to get a couple of pieces going at least.

- 4 Darksteel Reactor
- 4 Coretapper
- 4 Power Conduit
- 4 Serum Powder
- 4 Fabricate

And then maybe some other counter-makers:

Aether Vial

Arcbound Crusher

Spawning Pit (Ooh, I like this one a lot, actually)

Spincrusher

Chalice of the Void (Sure, you can't counter spells that are already being played, but once you figure out what they are playing, you can monkey with the Chalice to make it hard on their deck...)

The same principles can be used for any kind of combo deck that runs a lot of pieces. This illustrates that Serum Powder works best, I think, when you are actually going to be able to make good use of the ramp-up in mana to 5, letting you take advantage of both aspects of the card. (But you can certainly just run it cold as well.)

The Readers Respond, What People Want

There was certainly a huge amount of mail in my inbox after I asked readers what they wanted to see in this article series. I do want to thank everyone that took the time to write to me. I have been getting back to some of you that had some more particular questions or comments, but I've been getting a lot of mail, so I do apologize in advance if I don't get back to someone right away. Unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to get back to everyone, but I will try to get back to most of you.

Before I get into what everyone wants, I do want to thank all of the readers who wrote in to comment on a big idea I missed with Eater of Days. I have to say I got a smile when the first person that pointed out what I missed was my friend and collaborator Sol Malka. I'll paraphrase his e-mail to knock out the colorful language and get right to the heart of the idea many of you had that I missed:

“The first time that I saw the card, my idea was to have a deck be ‘On your turn, sucks to be you’.

Basically, with Tangle Wire, Braids, and Smokestack, or even cards like Bottomless Pit and Necrogen Mists, you can make it pretty unpleasant to be taking your turn.”

Personally, I liked how Sol *actually* wrote his comments, but this is a family website of sorts, and I don't think that Scott would let me get away with that. Thanks to everyone else who also pointed out this idea.

Is a card's rarity important? Is exploring a 'good' card useful or not?

For the most part, most readers didn't seem to care one way or another. There was definitely a lot of interest in not keeping all of the cards covered rare. Mostly, people just wanted the card covered to be interesting enough to cover. Similarly, people didn't care whether or not a card was 'good' (as many of you pointed out, good is in the eye of the beholder), they just didn't want the card to be obvious.

There were some people who held decidedly different opinions on this, and they tended to view both rarity as important and 'good' cards as cards that shouldn't be covered. I will generally be trying to keep in mind the diverse opinions of my readers here and change it up now and again. Overall, my focus is going to be on cards that I think there can be some kind of discussion on.

How important are decklists to you?



