

Conditional Hammers

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Although I didn't get to venture to Japan to see Pro Tour – Kobe live, I had the pleasure of following along online. The streaming video of the Top 8 was very entertaining, and if you haven't taken time to watch any of it, I recommend doing so here.

As I was watching the games, I was keeping an eye out for interesting *Darksteel* cards to discuss in this week's column, since the decks and the block format would still be on everyone's minds. What cards showed up that weren't really expected (sorry, Arcbound Ravager and Skullclamp), yet had interesting development stories behind them? I needed look no farther than the champ's deck itself, for Masashiro Kuroda's burn-heavy "Anan Go" deck relied heavily on the reusable power of Pulse of the Forge.

The Conditional Hammers

The red Pulse wasn't the only one of the five to make the Top 8. Gabriel Nassif's "TwelvePost" deck sideboarded four copies of Pulse of the Tangle. The green Pulse was also a staple card in many of the mono-green decks that finished well at the event. Additionally, Pulse of the Fields and Pulse of the Dross were played last weekend as well, so it's clear that this cycle will be a big part of future constructed play involving *Darksteel*.



So where did they come from?

The following batch of cards is from the *Darksteel* (then "Lettuce") file from a little over a year ago, early in the dev cycle.

RW04_LET

Mucho Life

WW

Instant

Gain 4 life.

If you have less than 8 life, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand instead of putting it into a graveyard.

UB04_LET

Mind Squeeze

2BB

Sorcery

Target player reveals three cards from his or her hand. Choose one of those cards and that player discards it.

If that player has three or more cards in hand, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand instead of putting it into a graveyard.

UR05_LET

Artifact Grinder

2RR

Instant

Destroy target artifact. If that artifact's controller controls three or more artifacts, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand instead of putting it into the graveyard.

UR99_LET

And Again

4RR

Instant

CARDNAME deals 3 damage to target player. If that player has 10 or more life, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

UG04_LET

More Land

GG

Sorcery

Search your library for a basic land card, reveal that card, and put the card into your hand. Then shuffle your library.

If you control three or fewer lands, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand instead of putting it into its owner's graveyard.

RG04_LET

And Another

4GG

Sorcery

Put a 5/5 green NAME creature token into play.

If you control four or fewer creatures, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand instead of putting it into a graveyard.

While these cards all have a similar mechanic, they lack the symmetry of a cycle. There is no blue one. They cost anywhere from 2 to 6 mana. The conditions for their reuse varied. Some were uncommon, others rare. But there was a mechanic there that the team liked. They started calling these cards "Conditional hammers," after Hammer of Bogardan, a famous sorcery that could be returned to its owner's hand for repeated use. Whereas the original Hammer could come back from the graveyard many turns after it was first played, these new Conditional Hammers needed specific requirements to be met immediately in order to come back.

The team decided to shape this ragtag assortment into something more coherent. They ditched Artifact Grinder and More Land, and invented a blue one as well that was a reusable Catalog. All five were moved to rare, and their mana costs were synched up.



So in March of last year, the cards look like this (with some comments included*):

RW04_LET

Mucho Life

1WW

Instant

You gain 3 life. Then if you have less life than an opponent, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

WW 12/3: This card is cool! Power level issues, but the mechanic is neat.

PC 12/5: Agreed

Bill 1/30: The get back spells should be double mana.

HS 2/6 Changed condition of return to match new theme for conditional hammers
BT 2/11: I think the conditional hammers are cool enough to keyword, do more of, and hang a set on.
DL 2/17: Note that the self-replacement effect isn't necessary for this template. (Buyback was weird.) If the conditional hammers wind up looking like this one, then the template could look like this:
You gain 3 life.
KEYWORD - If you have less life than an opponent, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.
Wouldn't it be wild to have a keyword with no reminder text? :)
HS 2/24 Team doesn't think we need another keyword
DL 2/25: Could go with "if you are the player with the least life" if you want.

Brian and Del didn't get their wish of having the mechanic "keyworded," but there is no denying that the Pulses are a very important and visible part of the set.

RG04_LET
And Another
1GG
Sorcery
Put a 3/3 green NAME creature token into play. Then if you control fewer creatures than an opponent, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.
TB 2/18: As noted in today's playtest, this is a grrrrrrr8 catch-up mechanic. I would love to position them all as catch-up cards when possible.
HS 2/18 currently, they are

As Tyler noted, the new Conditional Hammer model was made to be a "catch-up mechanic," meaning that each one was reusable as long as you were the one trailing in the resource mentioned.

RU06_LET
[The More You Know]
1UU
Instant
Draw two cards, then discard a card from your hand. Then if an opponent has more cards in hand than you, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

The blue one didn't change from this point forward.

RB03_LET
Mind Squeeze
1BB
Sorcery
Target player reveals his or her hand. Choose a card from it. That player discards that card. Then if that player has more cards in hand than you, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

Note that the black one was originally a variation on Blackmail (called "Mind Pinch" in R&D), but at this point was changed to a variation on Coercion. You chose which card your opponent discarded.

RR05_LET
And Again
1RR
Instant
CARDNAME deals 3 damage to target player. Then if that player has more life than you, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

Checking the Pulse

The cycle was in place in close to its final form as early as July. That left several months for tweaking, as well as addressing other issues, so I'll look at each card separately from here out.

First, the white one:

RB 3/25: We need to decide the multi-player functionality for this cycle -- I think something like "if you have the least life" is what we want

HS 3/26 I wonder about that. Sometimes I think we fubar up our templates to accommodate multiplayer, when they would just take care of themselves. i.e., "If you have less life than your opponent", reads MUCH better to me than "If you have less life than an opponent"

Multi-player aficionados will be glad to know that the templating team decided to keep their best interests in mind, and sided against both Randy's and Henry's suggestions. The final wording on the white Pulse contained the phrase, "if an opponent has more life than you," which means that even if you have the second-highest life total out of 10 players, you get the Pulse back. The green and blue ones work the same way, with only the two targeted ones (black and red) checking against one specific player.

The white Pulse was also changed from 3 life to 4, mostly to mirror changes in the red one. Here are some select comments from the direct-damage entry to the cycle:

RB 3/25: I have not found myself interested or excited by this cycle so far.

CC 3/26: The black one is interesting in constructed (and maybe limited) and the green one is interesting in limited. Not sure this is enough. Not sure whether it would be more interesting if the costs & effects were smaller or bigger.

HS 3/26 straight out disagree with RB, I find these cards VERY interesting to think about, in limited and constructed.

Henry looks to be right here, as the Pulses have proven to be very interesting in practice, making for some very tricky play decisions. Of course, it looks like Charlie was on to something as well. In order to make more of the cycle attractive, the red and white one were both upped from 3 to 4, which has turned out to be a massive improvement.

So what happened to the black one? Why did it get worse? Comments reveal:

WW 3/15: This card is very very good. Especially with Chrome Mox and other artifact mana/going first.

Bill 3/18: Original card had reveal only 3 cards. That would stop some of the quick mana screw.

CC 3/26: I don't think Worth was talking about mana screw as much as generally high power level - this card often is played 2-3-4 times. Bill's fix could work, but we might need to actually go even further (and simpler) and make this 'Target player discards a card from their hand'.

HS team agrees that this or pox variant needs to change, changing this for now, but if we weaken pox we may want to change this back

RB 4/2: new choose and discard version could cost less than 1BB

HS 4/2 cycle...

I can recall playing against this card in its "Coercion" form and Worth is dead on—it was infuriatingly good. A Chrome Mox and a two-mana creature on turn one followed by three Coercions on the following turns was way too difficult for many decks to deal with. To compensate, the card was over-weakened to:

[Mind Squeeze]

1BB

Sorcery

Target player chooses and discards a card. Then if that player has more cards in hand than you, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

Those of you that think the printed version of Pulse of the Dross is a little weak should take a close look at the above incarnation. Stin-ky! Of course, before it was all said and done, the card went full circle and returned to being a Blackmail variation.

As for the green one, it didn't really change functionality very much after March, but there was an interesting exchange regarding what type of creature the card should produce:

MR (4/28/03): I'm not a fan of 3/3 beasts. While I don't mind mixing up what we call different size tokens, I don't like making the same creature type in various sizes.
HS 4/30 Well this would have been elephants, but creative has said "No more elephants" so we are stuck with beasts.

(You may recall Brady Dommermuth's Ask Wizards answer about non-magical creatures in **Magic**.) In defense of the creative team, even if Elephants were still "ok" for use as tokens, the elephants in this block are white and sentient, hardly a good match for the tokens created by this card.

Final Touches

The cards were given a cycle of names that tied into the many suns of Mirrodin: White Sun's Warmth, Blue Sun's Light, Black Sun's Chill, Red Sun's Fire, Green Sun's Absence. The art for four of the five incorporates rays from the various suns affecting the inhabitants of Mirrodin in various ways; the green art is meant to show a beast looking skyward, with no sun to be found.



The lack of a green sun in the storyline made that first set of names slightly awkward, so they were eventually changed to incorporate various locations on Mirrodin itself—the Razor Fields, Lumengrid, the Mephidross Swamp, the Great Furnace, and the Tangle. (*Fifth Dawn* is where the word "sun" will be showing up in card names again.)

That's the story of the Pulse cycle. So the next time your opponent mana burns during your second main phase, feel free to reflect fondly on all the decisions that went into the card that is about to kill you.

Last Week's Poll

When you play Magic, what mulligan rule do you follow?		
The official tournament rule.	7058	62.0%
House rules (your own made-up version).	1979	17.4%
The old all-land/no-land rule.	1580	13.9%
The 0-, 1-, 6-, or 7-land rule ("Big Deck" or "5-color" mulligan).	555	4.9%
We never mulligan.	218	1.9%
Total	11390	100.0%

I asked this question because I read in a gaming magazine that Serum Powder was going to be poorly received because something like 90% of **Magic** players used a "gentleman's mulligan" when they played. I guess our audience just isn't representative enough!

This Week's Poll

Time for me to take the "pulse" of my readers...

Do you enjoy reading about the development of cards?

- Yes. I enjoy the behind-the-scenes look at the development process.
- Sort of. It's nice once in a while.
- No. This aspect of the game's creation does not excite me.

Submit

Aaron may be reached at latestdevelopments@wizards.com.

*: Here's a key to the initials on the Multiverse comments in this article:

Bill: Bill Rose, *Darksteel* lead designer.

BT: Brian Tinsman, designer.

CC: Charlie Catino, *Darksteel* developer.

DL: Del Laugel, **Magic** lead editor.

HS: Henry Stern, *Darksteel* lead developer.

MR: Mark Rosewater, *Darksteel* designer.

PC: Pat Chapin, developer/playtester.

RB: Randy Buehler, **Magic** lead developer.

TB: Tyler Bielman, *Darksteel* designer and developer.

WW: Worth Wollpert, developer.

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