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Friday, March 26, 2004

I wanted to write a frivolous column for Cycling Week. One where I sang the praises of Choking Tethers in Cowardice decks, for example. Seriously, with Cowardice out Tethers is either : bounce four guys, or it's Repulse for one mana cheaper. Add Neurok Transmuter and a bunch of Triskelions, and you're halfway to a deck. (A bunch of Triskelions will make any deck better in my opinion.)

Alas, I'm not one of the "fun-having" guys on this site; people come here looking for R&D inside info. Granted, I'm not the perpetual bearer of ill news the Dan Myers is, but I'm no Mark something-or-other either. So no frivolous column for me.

Instead, I'll try to talk about the development of cycling cards in some sort of meaningful way, even though most of the work on *Onslaught* was being done while I was still going through orientation for my first job, which, as you know, was not in R&D. Fear not; I'll cobble something together.

Those Darn Wizards

I was playing in the FFL back then, and I remember our metagame vaguely for *7E/Odyssey* block/"Manny" ("Manny" was the codename for *Onslaught*.) Mono-black Control and Madness were the big decks from the previous block, and tribal decks were showing up using Manny cards. Beasts with Contested Cliffs and Ravenous Baloth were good. Goblins were decent; elves were decent. And Wizards were a real powerhouse.

That's right, the oft-maligned Wizard tribe. Many of the good wizard cards came from *Odyssey* block—Hapless Researcher was a great 1-drop, and Patron Wizard and Shadowmage Infiltrator were the deck's backbone. Kai Budde's Invitational



Invitational winners Jon Finkel and Kai Budde, PT Chicago '03

card—Voidmage Prodigy—was the perfect two-mana creature for the deck, and with some Smothers, Boomerangs, and Future Sights, the deck could develop its board on the first few turns, get lots of card advantage in the midgame, and the put the opponent in a hard lock wherein he couldn't get another spell to resolve.

If you play a deck like that outside of a real constructed environment—like, say, at a casual get-together with your friends or in the casual room on *Magic Online*—you'll see how powerful it can be against unprepared opponents.

Our Local Metagame

Switching gears for a second...

Ah, the internet. Without it, how would we live our lives? Who would tell us what to do? When my wife was pregnant with our baby, she'd spend an hour a day reading various "baby" sites for little tips. And she'd read them out loud to me, "It says, 'I highly recommend a body pillow. This will enable you to support your legs and your growing belly!'" And I'd respond, "Thanks, Internet!"

Magic players have been saying, “Thanks, Internet!” for a few years now. That’s the nature of the proverbial beast. As things get popular and the Internet penetrates more and more households, information spreads like wildfire.

There used to be lots of local or regional metagames in **Magic** back in the mid '90's. A card that was worth \$2 in Washington, DC might be worth \$8 in Boston because it was in everyone's decks in Boston and no one's in DC. When players from the two cities met, it would be an eye-opening experience for both parties as new tech was unleashed.

These days, everyone knows what goes in Ravager Affinity.

Somewhat unfortunately for us here in R&D, we still have a local metagame—one that is separated from the rest of the world by time as opposed to distance. So sometimes our world evolves in a different way than the now-homogenous real world does.

Back on the Cycle

In our first months with *Onslaught*, there was no cycling deck per se, and our metagame developed for a while without one. Most of the problem was that the cards didn't exist in their current forms, and really weren't worth playing at that time. Lightning Rift and Astral Slide, for example, were created a while after design was finished. It's easy to see how a Wizard deck might exist in such an environment.

As time went on in *Onslaught* development, attention was paid to some of the important cycling cards. Akroma's Vengeance was increased from 3** to 4**, and the line “They cannot be regenerated” was removed. Lightning Rift started going into decks, and was changed from its first insane incarnation (0 to play, 0-mana triggered ability) to the less insane 2 to play, to the current 1 with a 1-mana trigger payment. Starstorm—mostly used as an Earthquake variant in our Beast decks—went from X up to X.

But a couple of the cards never went through the wringer like they probably should have. Astral Slide is a glaring example—even when the set was released, our red-white cycling deck was using Spirit Cairn as the other way to abuse cycling (along with Rift). Our deck was creatureless and packed with Wrath-effects, so an effect like Astral Slide's never really seemed necessary. Had we played a deck that more closely resembled the current Standard version, we probably would have added a trigger payment similar to Lightning Rift's onto it. The “freeness” of the ability is what makes it so devastating and hard to play against.

The other card that didn't quite get the attention it deserved was Slice and Dice. The card was designed to be the stereotypical bomb red uncommon for limited, in the same lineage as Volcanic Winds and Breath of Darigaaz. With a three-mana cycling cost, we never really gave it the nod in any of our constructed decks until we had moved on to *Legions* and *Scourge* development.

By the time development for the block was winding up, we realized that the red-white cycling deck was really good (even with Spirit Cairn!) and that this block had contributed too many “Wrath” effects to it. The Wizard deck was dead in the water before it even got going, and many other tribal decks suffered because of the power of cycling. (The big loser may have been Voidmage Prodigy... We honestly thought it was going to be a great card for a very viable tribe!)

Speaking to the set's key developers about it now—almost two years later—the consensus seems to be that Slice and Dice was the big mistake. Astral Slide has proven to be a really neat card with lots of possibilities; the power of Vengeance, Rift, and Starstorm was understood when the set went to press; but Slice and Dice was merely redundant overkill that really punishes the main theme of the *Onslaught* block—little creature decks.

Life Goes On



Most of the time, R&D's "local metagame" is a damn good prediction of what the real world will be like, and the environment is defined by our successes. But once in a while, a card slips through the cracks, and our universes diverge a little bit. Slice and Dice was one such card. We take the good with the bad around here, though, and that's what keeps us motivated!

Last Week's Poll

Have you ever Booster or Rochester drafted?		
Yes, booster drafts.	4779	46.3%
No, I've never drafted.	2725	26.4%
Yes, both booster and Rochester.	2708	26.2%
Yes, Rochester drafts.	108	1.0%
Total	10320	100.0%

Seventy-five percent of you have drafted! Wow, that's higher than we expected, actually. Scott Wills' audience, who should be more limited-savvy, clocked in with 85% having booster drafted. What can I say, draft is a hell of a format!

This Week's Poll

Which card do you wish we never printed?

- Astral Slide
- Lightning Rift
- Akroma's Vengeance
- Starstorm
- Slice and Dice
- Exalted Angel
- Eternal Dragon
- Decree of Justice
- None - all these cards are fine!

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