



MAGICTHEGATHERING.COM

ARTICLES

Related links

Read other articles

TOURNAMENTS

MAGIC ONLINE

Article Search

Culling Scales



Adrian Sullivan · Single-Card Strategies
Wednesday, April 7, 2004

Theme weeks are a special little animal. Every once and a while, Scott Johns sends out an edict to his galley of writers and we work hard to make him happy. "Cycling!" he cries out, or "Flying!" Of course, every now and again, we try to sneak something past him. Brian David-Marshall's clever use of Spiders for flying is my favorite one, but it's a time honored tradition to stage these little rebellions and say, wide-eyed, "Oh, but I thought that would count!"

Well, okay, most of that happened before Scott joined the site, but the point stands. This week Scott yelled out something a little different than in previous times. "Mirrodin's Hidden Gems!" At first, I looked at the artwork for various cards, trying to figure out if I wanted to use any pictures that had gems hidden in the background. Then, I started thinking in earnest about the cards that I might want to use. Unfortunately, all of my fellow writers got dibs on them before I could figure out what I wanted to write about. Finally, I looked at the *Mirrodin* card list again. One card jumped out at me.

I had [already examined one card](#) that I attempted to make use of for Kobe. *Talon of Pain* was one of those cards that didn't quite make it over the ocean with me. Now that I'm back again I've been thinking about the cards that I might want to play at Regionals, and one that constantly returns to my head is *Culling Scales*

At the heart of Culling Scales

When we first look at a card, we need to explore what it does on a fundamental level. *Culling Scales*, for example, slowly breaks everything small on the table, and eventually will break itself. If both players have a million life, the *Culling Scales* will churn away, turn after turn, nibbling at the smallest of permanents.

Since the card was printed, I've tried again and again to make use of this card. I've always been a fan of control cards that help to establish card advantage. If you take a similar card like *Oblivion Stone*, you do get this incredibly powerful effect. The problem, however, is that you also have to keep spending mana on it for it to be effective.

Culling Scales can blow up any non-land too (depending on casting cost, of course). The difference for the Scales is that it is free and it takes longer. *Culling Scales* doesn't care about what it eats, either. It only eats the smallest portions, and if that means it is going to take a bite out of your portions, well, it doesn't care. This means that generally you're going to have to avoid running the cheap permanents yourself.



So how do we make the best use of this card?

The ol' 'Can't Be Broken' Trick and the ol' 'Bomb' Trick

Culling Scales keeps nibbling everything on the table until it nibbles itself. However, there is an important thing to remember. *Culling Scales* is always required to destroy the smallest thing on

the table, and if something doesn't let it, it doesn't do anything. In simpler terms, if it *can't* break the smallest thing, **Culling Scales** just pouts.

So, one of the first ways to mess with the math is to run things like Spellbombs and **Chromatic Sphere**. At some point, you might find yourself with a **Culling Scales** that is getting dangerously close to destroying itself or some other permanent you don't want to lose and it doesn't have anything on the other side of the table to nibble. Maybe you don't want to lose the Scales or whatever else you do have out on the table. What to do? If you drop a Spellbomb of any kind on the table (I've always been partial to Aether and Pyrite, myself), on your next upkeep the **Culling Scales** is likely to target the one casting cost Bomb. After you've targeted it, sacrifice the Spellbomb to draw a card or for its effect. The Scales won't retarget to another permanent, and you've bought yourself another turn with it. Against some decks (like those pesky Elves or Goblins), this means that for another turn they can't drop any of their little dudes unless they don't mind the Scales chewing on them. The thing about the "Bomb Trick" is that you don't have to have it be a Spellbomb for this to work, it can be anything that you can sacrifice. If you're running with older cards, **Spike Feeder** will do you just fine, for example.

The "can't be broken" trick works in a similar way. If the thing that the Scales is trying to eat can't be broken, it just won't. My favorite cards for this are **Tel-Jilad Chosen**, **Darksteel Brute**, and **Darksteel Ingot**. For all three of those cards the **Culling Scales** will see them and then just leave them alone. If you have four 3 casting cost cards on the table, you can keep targeting that **Darksteel Ingot** every turn. The Chosen is a bit more complicated. You can't target the Chosen in the first place so for the rest of the game your Scales are going to be able to stick around and go to work on anything your opponent lays down that is cheaper than whatever you have that can't be broke.



Culling Scales to destroy mana

Anyone who knows me knows that I love to destroy mana. It's fun for me to blow up people's lands and **Birds of Paradise**. One of the reasons I so loved the card **Wildfire** is that it killed every mana-creature that an opponent might have and usually dumped all of their lands into the grave too. One of the maddening things about destroying mana these days is how hard it is. There is no **Pillage**. There is only **Stone Rain** and **Molten Rain**. I never really liked mana-kill that couldn't also serve some other useful purpose. The great and wise Elihu Feustel once said (and I paraphrase here), "The problem with Land Destruction is that once your opponent has mana, it's like you never killed a land to begin with." I'm sure he said it much better than that, though.

Right now, there are a ton of things that people are using for mana. They've got their **Birds of Paradise**, their **Vine Trellises**, their Talismans of this, that, and the other, not to mention good old **Chrome Mox**. And **Culling Scales** kills them all.

With just a bare minimum of help (say a **Dwarven Blastminer** or a few Rains on their land), a **Culling Scales** can strip away all of that extra mana and leave them only with the land they are carrying on their backs. Some decks depend pretty heavily on all of their pretty trinkets to get going.

Culling Scales to destroy pretty trinkets

One of my friends, Ben, had built a pretty solid Blue/White control deck. It was made to be a house against creature decks of all sorts. He had Talismans to speed up **Wrath of God**, **Sun Droplets** as a continuous source of lifegain, and **Story Circle** to be generally mean ("Let me tell you a story," said John Shuler. "The story of how YOU LOSE.>"). The deck might have actually been pretty good, but in the end he stopped playing it because I was too in love with **Culling Scales**. I had it in most of my slower decks, and he simply couldn't take losing nearly everything he had.

Culling Scales is custom built to answer all the sneaky decks packing trinkets. In the current tournament scene you can expect to see all manner of people running artifacts and enchantments that are annoying. **Story Circle** and **Circle of Protection**, be gone! **Astral Slide** and **Lightning Rift**, park your bike elsewhere! **Bonesplitter** and **Skullclamp**, to the sporting goods

store! Outside of tournaments, I'm sure that you and I all know how much people like to play tricky cards. The best of these are usually pretty cheap. I'm sure that we all have a friend that is working hard on their **Proteus Staff** deck, their **Crystal Shard** deck, or their Intruder Alarm deck.

For many colors, there simply are few to no other answers to some of these cards. Certainly **Oblivion Stone** can do the same job as a **Culling Scales** in breaking things, but it costs a heck of a lot of mana, especially if you want to keep some of your own things alive. This can be especially useful if you don't need to kill things all that quickly. If you aren't under a ton of pressure, the **Culling Scales** will get to a point where your opponent won't even want to play the cards that help them win. When there are very few things left that the Scales can eat, usually the other person simply doesn't want the Scales there anymore. They are stuck with two choices: wait it out (giving you several turns to do whatever you want) or put it all out there to be eaten. Not a fun place to be.

Overcoming Scales Challenges

The Scales are challenging despite all of the good things that can be said about them. To play with Scales you have to be willing to forego a ton of cards that might be really useful. If you are playing monoblack, for example, **Promise of Power** might not be the greatest of cards to go with **Culling Scales**. Sure, it's still decent, but it's not that exciting to drop a Big Scary Demon™ onto the table on turn 5 if you dropped a **Culling Scales** on Turn 3.

This means that your permanents will work best if they are a little bit more expensive (generally 3 casting cost or above) unless they can dodge because they are immune to scales. But, you need to be doing *something* in those initial turns. In this case, that means spells.



You just need to buy time...

The best cards to go with Scales are cards that keep you alive. One way to stay alive is to break things. Here, there are plenty of directions to go. Red is always a good direction, since it packs lots of burn. **Volcanic Hammer**, **Shock**, and **Pyrite Spellbomb** are great starting points. Black has **Smother**, **Echoing Decay**, **Vicious Hunger**, and **Dark Banishing**. Blue has some good bounce (especially **Echoing Truth**). White has **Wing Shards**. Green is the odd-kid out here, so you'll have to make do with the **Tel-Jilad Chosen** and blockers that are three casting cost or bigger. Artifact and enchantment kill also work to fight the other parts of a deck. Here, at least, Green gets to bring in the **Viridian Shaman** and **Zealot**, and Red brings **Echoing Ruin** to the table.

Breaking things make the **Culling Scales** work better because it changes the way that your opponent was planning to have everything work out. Often, they are thinking how long their permanents will last, and when you kill an extra permanent, everything they've planned can fall through.

The other way to deal with problems is to, I hate to say it, gain life. Just like **Forgotten Ancient**, **Culling Scales** works best if it has time to do its thing. There are plenty of reasonable life gain effects to work with. I already mentioned **Spike Feeder** as a great way to do the “bomb trick” before, and it is certainly a great option. **Ravenous Baloth** is another fine option even without being able to do the bomb trick. He's a huge blocker and can give back that life when you need it.

Two of my current personal favorites both belong to White. **Renewed Faith** is a very useful lifegain card (since it doesn't have to cost you a card), but the one that really takes the cake is from **Darksteel**. **Pulse of the Fields** is an incredible lifegain card. It gives a hefty boost of life, and can bring the game back out of the danger zone once you've survived the beating you've taken. In a sense, **Pulse of the Fields** makes you like Rocky Balboa – even though you've had everything you can imagine smacked out of you, in the late rounds you're still ready to go to land your own knockout punch.

Wrap-Up and Weekly Feedback

Overall, I have to say I'm overly in love with **Culling Scales**. I expect that I might be heading to Regionals in a few weeks packing a Scale or two in my deck, and by the end of the day, I might be wondering what in the world I was thinking, but such is life.

Last week's poll held a surprising range of opinions on how old the cards in this article series should be. Take a look:

In future Single Card Strategies articles, how far back should I look for cards to review?		
More than Six (Everything Older)	2849	28.5%

Current Cards Only (<i>Mirrodin</i> Block and <i>8th Edition</i>)	1831	18.3%
Last Block (<i>Onslaught</i> Block)	1743	17.4%
Six Blocks (<i>Tempest</i> Block)	990	9.9%
Three Blocks (<i>Invasion</i> Block)	985	9.9%
Two Blocks (<i>Odyssey</i> Block and 7th Edition)	854	8.5%
Five Blocks (<i>Urza's</i> Block)	495	5.0%
Four Blocks (<i>Masques</i> Block)	244	2.4%
Total	9991	100.0%

With this in mind, I think it is safe to say that we'll be dipping into the past from time to time, but it won't be a constant thing.

I've been very pleased with the feedback that everyone gives me on the articles. I'm curious whether you like giving it in the first place.

How often do you like to be able to give feedback?

I want to be able to give feedback every week.

I like to give feedback occasionally.

I rarely give feedback – only when it is something important.

I never give feedback (except this one time).

Thanks. See you next week with [the Forgotten Ancient Challenge!](#)

- Adrian Sullivan
adriansullivan@yahoo.com



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Adrian Sullivan](#) archive

WHAT'S NEW CORPORATE INFO WHERE TO BUY INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT SITEMAP PRODUCTS

© 1995-2004 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
 Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)