

Making Combinations Work

Forgotten Lore: Cluster Decks

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Introduction from the Editor

One of the most recognized names during **Magic's** early days, Beth Moursund was once described as "an official keeper of **Magic** rules" and was sometimes nicknamed the "Mother of Rules". In addition to her role as **Magic** rules guru, "Bethmo" was also one of the game's most important early writers, having written several books and many popular articles.

In the first [Forgotten Lore article](#) I chose to feature one of my favorite Rob Hahn articles. *Mind Over Magic* is the kind of advice piece that stands the test of time with little to no awkwardness. For this second *Forgotten Lore* article, I've decided to swing the pendulum all the way to the other side, featuring an article that is rife with antiquated references that may seem quaint by today's standards. But don't be fooled, there is just as much to be learned here. While decks built around something like [Basilisk/Lure](#) sound cute by today's standards (and in fact, some of the rules mentioned don't even apply anymore!), the *underlying principles* of this article hold just as strongly as they did back then. As we all continue our exploration of the combo-rich expansion *Fifth Dawn*, I think you'll find the ideas presented in "Cluster Decks" just as useful as I did when I read this article for the first time nine years ago.

- Scott Johns, [magicthegathering.com](#) Content Editor

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You played in a tournament last week, and got soundly thrashed by a player with a really cool card combination. So you went home and put the same two cards into your deck, then tested it on a few friends. But somehow, you never seemed to draw both of the cards at the same time – or, if you did, it was too late for them to do any good. Was your opponent at the tournament just lucky, or was it something else?

Every experienced **Magic** player knows that there are many two-card or three-card combinations which are devastating if you can get them into play. But if you have only one of each card in your deck, the chances of drawing all the parts of the combination before the duel ends are slim. Even if you use four of each card, the chances of drawing the ones you need are too low to depend on – especially if your opponent is playing a speed deck. This is why decks which rely upon a single combination do not generally fare well; they are spectacular when the right cards come up, but flop the rest of the time.



On the other hand, "kitchen sink" decks – those built by just picking a color or two and throwing in whichever cards of that color look interesting – will almost always lose to decks with more focus, and often to one of those two-card or three-card combinations which are difficult to get into play. How do those decks work? In many cases, the answer becomes clear when you watch the same deck over several games. In almost every game, the player gets out a good card combination... but the combination may be different every time. This kind of deck is what I call a "cluster" deck.

The goal of a cluster deck is to end up with cards which complement each other and form useful combinations *every* time the deck is played, not just after a lucky shuffle. Combinations of permanents (creatures, enchantments, artifacts and lands) are generally best, since once you get them into play you can continue to use them over and over again. That's not to say that you shouldn't include single-use spells in any of your combinations; they can be fun, and some of them are very deadly. But you'll find that they tend to work better as a sideline or extra surprise, rather than as the focus around which to build an entire deck.

A cluster deck should never contain cards which work at cross-purposes. It's easy to see that putting either [Gloom](#) (white spells and white enchantments cost an additional three mana to use) or [Karma](#) (during each player's upkeep, deals 1 damage for each swamp that player controls) in your black-and-white deck is likely to hurt you as much or more than your opponent, and putting [Tranquility](#) (destroy all enchantments) in a deck that makes heavy use of enchantments probably is not a good idea. But some conflicts are less obvious. For example, consider a typical "weenie deck," a deck designed to put a lot of small creatures into play. If your creatures are black or white, adding [Bad Moon](#) (all black creatures get +1/+1) or [Crusade](#) (all white creatures get +1/+1) to such a deck works well, since these cards make small creatures more formidable. Alternatively a [Meekstone](#) (no creatures with power greater than 2 untap during their controllers' untap phase) is a good addition to such a deck, since it won't affect your own creatures but will affect any large creatures your opponent puts out. But if you play with both of these in the same deck, you're apt to find yourself with a bunch of untappable creatures, as the [Bad Moons](#) or [Crusades](#) raise the power of your creatures, making them susceptible to [Meekstone](#).



One way to build a cluster deck is to begin with a pair or trio of cards which form a great combination, and put in as many of them as you have, or as many as your deck-building rules allow. (Many players follow the Duelists' Convocation's tournament deck rules, which limit a deck to no more than four of each card except basic lands.) Then, for each card in the combination, look for other cards which form a different powerful combination with that card. Compare each card that you consider adding with each of the others you have already chosen and think about whether it will help or hurt if you happen to draw them together. The first few selections will guide and shape the rest, since each new card must be compared with all of the earlier additions. Limit your deck to two colors, or three at the most, so that you'll have a good chance of drawing the right lands to cast the spells you choose.

After you have selected a number of other cards which work well with your core combination, flesh out the deck with other cards that complement the general theme and fill in your deck's gaps. If you have some favorite, useful-in-any-deck cards that fit the color scheme, or cards that increase your chances of drawing a key card or that let you retrieve key cards from the graveyard, you may want to add those, too. And of course you need mana. Start by putting in one mana-producing land for each two spells; you'll adjust this ratio later.

Aim for a deck that's fairly close to the minimum deck size, since this will increase the odds of drawing the key cards. (The minimum deck size allowed by the **Magic** rules is forty cards, but most tournaments have a sixty-card minimum.)



A Classic Cluster Deck: **Thicket Basilisk** and **Lure**

Confused? Let's try an example. First we pick a pair of cards. We'll start with **Lure**, a green creature enchantment which forces all creatures that can to block the creature enchanted by **Lure**, and **Thicket**

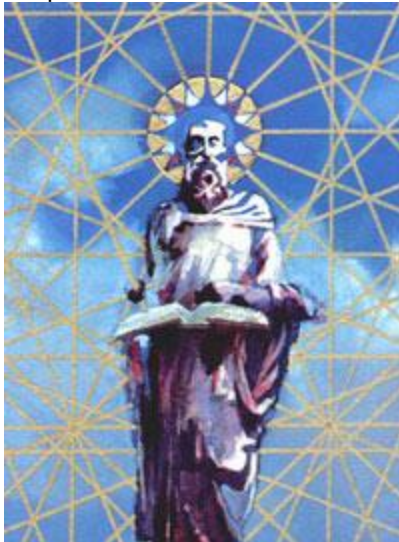
Basilisk, a green 2/4 creature which causes all creatures that it blocks or which block it to be destroyed at the end of combat. This classic combination is often called a "creature sweeper" since it destroys all your opponent's non-wall creatures which are able to block. When playing this deck, the basic strategy is to use a creature enchanted with Lure, ideally the Basilisk, to draw away all of the opponent's blockers (preferably destroying those creatures with the Basilisk's "gaze of destruction") and to then deal damage to your opponent with your other, unblocked attacking creatures.

We'll start our deck with several of each of these two cards. Our next step is to examine each card to determine which other cards will work well with it in the overall strategy of the deck. First, Lure. If we don't get a Basilisk in our draw, what other cards would combine well with Lure? The first thing that might come to mind is Cockatrice, another green 2/4 creature which also causes creatures that it blocks or which block it to be destroyed. But since a Cockatrice flies, casting a Lure on it isn't nearly as effective – since only creatures with flying can block a Cockatrice, this combination only forces flying creatures to block. So we'll save the Cockatrice for a different deck, and look for other things that could use Lure effectively.

Thumbing through our cards some more, we notice that the enchantment Venom also causes creatures blocking or blocked by the creature it enchants to be destroyed. That sounds like a good fit! And it's green, matching the color of our cards so far. Having added some Venoms to the pile, we now need some creatures on which to cast Lure and Venom. Creatures which can regenerate would be good, since an attacker enchanted with Lure will usually take a lot of damage. Searching our collection for creatures with built-in regeneration, we find Clay Statue, Drudge Skeletons, Ghost Ship, Uthden Troll, and Will-O'-the-Wisp. (We also find a couple of walls...but putting Lure on a Wall is nearly worthless.) We also spot Uncle Istvan, a creature which reduces the damage done to it by creatures to 0—an ability that is almost as useful as regeneration for coping with combat damage. Uncle Istvan and two of the other creatures with regeneration are black, so we decide to go with a two-color deck using green and black. There's nothing particularly special about this choice; picking some other creatures at this step – Ghost Ship or Uthden Troll, for example – would produce an entirely different deck. There are enough **Magic: the Gathering** cards in print that no player could consider every single possible combination. So just pick something that you like and build from there. If you decide later that you've painted yourself into a corner, you can always go back and change your mind.



And how about adding a [Sengir Vampire](#), a black 4/4 creature with flying which gets a +1/+1 counter every time a creature is put in the graveyard the same turn the Vampire damage it? A Vampire with [Lure](#) gets very nasty if your opponent can't kill it right away. Then there's [Rabid Wombat](#), a 0/1 creature which gains +2/+2 for each creature enchantment on it; a Wombat with [Lure](#) and [Venom](#) would be 4/5. The Wombat also has the added benefit that it doesn't tap when it attacks, making the Venom on it doubly useful. Since [Sengir Vampire](#) flies, it has the same problem as [Cockatrice](#) – the [Lure](#) will only attract other flying creatures. But with the Vampire and the Wombat, we're just as happy if they're not blocked, so we might want to use them anyway. We also need some creatures to do damage while the [Lured](#) creature is drawing away the blockers. Green is a good color for that, since its creatures tend to be cheaper to cast than creatures in other colors. Looking through our green creatures, we can't resist the 6/4 [Craw Wurm](#)s. It won't take very many turns with one of those getting through unblocked to finish off an opponent! They require two green mana and four colorless mana, though, making them expensive and difficult to cast; better add some smaller creatures like the 2/2 [Grizzly Bears](#), in case of mana shortage, and maybe some mid-sized creatures as well. Alternatively, [Pit Scorpion](#)s and [Marsh Vipers](#), which both give poison counters to an opponent damaged by them, don't do much damage, but if we can sneak them past the [Lure](#)-distracted defenders, the poison counters will end the game almost as quickly as a [Craw Wurm](#). We now have quite a few cards that combine well with [Lure](#). Now for the other part of our core combination: if we don't draw a [Lure](#), what else would combine well with a [Basilisk](#)? Anything that can stop creatures from dealing combat damage without preventing other effects will let the [Basilisk](#) destroy whatever it is facing and emerge unscathed. (Then, if we did manage to get [Lure](#), so much the better!) [Fog](#) stops all creatures from dealing damage during combat; this is great for the [Basilisk](#), but it doesn't work for this deck concept, since we want our other creatures to be dealing damage. Rescuing the [Basilisk](#) using [Elvish Scout](#), which can be tapped to untap an attacking creature you control, works much better – like [Fog](#), the Scout prevents a creature from dealing damage during combat, but it only affects one of your creatures. [Maze of Ith](#), a land that can be used to untap an attacking creature, is similarly helpful when we use its effects on our [Basilisk](#), and it's also good for defense, since we can use it to affect our opponent's creatures. We'll put in both of those and leave [Fog](#) for another deck. Along the same lines, enchanting the [Basilisk](#) with [Regeneration](#) will let it survive to do its trick again and again; it's definitely worth adding a few copies of [Regeneration](#) to keep alive useful creatures which lack an inherent ability to regenerate, such as the [Sengir Vampire](#).



Now that we have several cards that work well with [Lure](#) or [Thicket](#) [Basilisk](#) or both, we can flesh out the deck with other cards that seem to fit well. There are plenty of choices, with no one "best answer"; even decks built around this same combination can end up quite varied. Rather than finishing this specific deck, we'll just brainstorm a few ideas...after all, it's no fun if everyone builds the same deck! We've got quite a few enchantments in the deck, so a [Verduran Enchantress](#) (controller draws a card when that player successfully casts an enchantment) would help us draw cards faster, and a [Skull of Orm](#) (bring one enchantment card from your graveyard to your hand) could help us recycle enchantments. Speaking of the graveyard, we could discard a high-cost creature and then bring it into play early in the game by using [Animate Dead](#), which also helps us retrieve a dead [Basilisk](#) later in the game. To help us cast high-cost creatures early, we should consider [Llanowar Elves](#) and [Dark Ritual](#), two good sources of fast mana. [Terror](#) lets us take out walls and annoying creatures that make themselves unable to block the [Basilisk](#), as does [Drain Life](#); the

latter can be a devastating blow to our opponent late in the game. [Giant Growth](#) and [Howl from Beyond](#) make small creatures that get through after [Lure](#) draws away all the blockers very deadly. Perhaps we'll add a [Desert Twister](#) to get rid of Circles of Protection without destroying our own enchantments. ([Tranquility](#) would take them out much more easily, but since we're using a lot of enchantments, it doesn't fit this deck well.) [Kormus Bell](#), [Living Lands](#), and [Living Plane](#) let us attack with our own lands and watch our opponent's lands be destroyed as they block our [Lure](#)-enchanted [Basilisk](#). [The Wretched](#) lets us take control of our opponent's blockers instead of destroying them. These are only a few possibilities; you probably have some others in mind already.

Now count the cards you've chosen so far. You should have selected at least forty creatures and other spells. If you have more than fifty, go back and weed out the less essential ones. This may be difficult, but remember that the smaller your deck is, the better chance you'll have of drawing the card you need at any given time. Also, try to keep the number of black or green spells roughly even. It's fine to have a bit more of one color, but avoid having twice as much of one color, as you're more vulnerable to the color-specific spells, and you may have problems getting enough of the right color of mana.

Finally, add the land: one swamp for every two black spells and one forest for every two green spells. You may need to increase the mana-to-spell ratio because many of the cards in this deck have high casting costs, or require two mana of a particular color to cast. If you have [Bayous](#) available (a land which produces either one green or one black mana), you can substitute them for some of the basic land.

With that, you have a first draft of your [Lure-Basilisk](#) deck; it will be a bit awkward and need refining, but it's a good start. And you can use the same process to build a deck around any number of other card combinations. So go pick a combination or two of your own, pull out your cards, and start building a cluster deck that makes card combinations really work.