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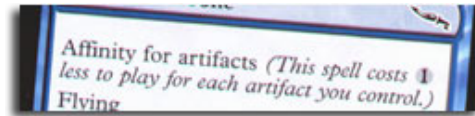
Affinity... it just won't go away!

We here in R&D have been paying close attention to the "metagame dances" that have been going on in the Block Constructed and Standard tournaments around the world lately, and we've been nicely surprised with what we've seen. In Standard, various National Championships have been won by everything from mono-red land destruction to blue-white control to Obliterate/March of the Machines to Tooth and Nail. In the Block PTQ's and Grand Prix, we've seen the rise of Crystal Witness, blue-white Shackles, and black-green Death Cloud decks. So there is certainly plenty of room for innovation.

But casting a fearsome shadow over both formats is the Dynamic Duo of Arcbound Ravager and Disciple of the Vault and their so-called "Affinity Deck."

Where's the Power?

Most tournament players are in agreement that this "Affinity Deck" is the most powerful choice in either format. Top players have gone so far as to say that "the affinity mechanic is too powerful." Is that true?



Most good affinity decks play only three (maybe four) different affinity cards:

- Thoughtcast (draw 2 cards for 4)
- Frogmite (2/2 for 0)
- And some combination of Myr Enforcer (4/4 for 0-2 mana) or Somber Hoverguard (3/2 flier for 4)

Understanding that each of these require certain conditions to be true in order for their costs to be reduced that much, none of those cards seem particularly devastating on their own. Even in tandem, that handful of cards does not seem that difficult for other decks to handle. So why is affinity seen as so overpowered?

The Real Culprits?

Affinity decks can leave players battered and bruised in their wake—even players that thought they were prepared to handle them. After losing to affinity, the cards most often complained about are:

- Disciple of the Vault
- Arcbound Ravager
- Cranial Plating
- Shrapnel Blast

None of them has affinity, yet I'd consider each of them more powerful than any one affinity card on the list above, and as a group they are more powerful than the affinity cards as a group. So is affinity proper the real problem with the "Affinity Deck?"

The Real Culprits!

Hidden at the root of the problem are six cards that don't *sometimes* cost 0, they *always* cost zero... because they aren't spells--just check their reminder text.

Seat of the Synod, Darksteel Citadel, and the rest of the artifact lands are the fuel that powers every card previously listed in this article. They each tap for one mana, but they generate far more than that. Some Internet writers claim they are all "Ancient Tombs" (a land that taps for 2 mana and is currently banned in Extended), since they each shave 2 mana off the cost of affinity cards. But that's just where their power starts.



Seat of the Synod, art by John Avon

Cards like Arcbound Ravager and, to a lesser extent, Atog, thrive in a world where even the lands themselves are artifacts. In the best tournament decks, Ravager basically reads, "Sacrifice a *permanent*: Put a +1/+1 counter on Arcbound Ravager." By effectively doubling the amount of resources you have available to feed these cards, you effectively double their power. Cranial Plating is another fine example, playing like it says: "Equipped creature gets +1/+0 for each *permanent* you control."

Disciple of the Vault inherits its success from the Ravager, and Shrapnel Blast's effective power level is also driven up by the presence of artifact lands since your additional "sacrifice" is rarely a sacrifice at all.

The Fix?

Would these cards (and by inference, the "Affinity Deck") be any good if there were no artifact lands? Not a chance. Every one of those cards listed above would be safe, if not just outright bad.

Back when the rumors of Skullclamp's banning were beginning to circulate, some players were saying that some or all of the artifact lands were the cards that should get the axe, as without them, Affinity just won't work. The suggestion may have been scoffed at by other players, but the theory was very sound. The lands were--and are--the subtle culprits behind most of *Mirrodin* block's power imbalance. Just as that little devil Wild Mongrel upped the playability of a slew of madness and flashback cards, Seat of the Synod interacts favorably with every card in current Affinity decks.

In recent discussions with other developers, I put forth the idea that six artifact lands were too many (seven, if you include the sometimes-artifact Blinkmoth Nexus). I postulated that had we printed only three--say Darksteel Citadel, Mirrodin's Core as an artifact land, and Blinkmoth Nexus as an artifact land--the idea of affinity would have remained intact without there being the threat of too many other cards becoming overpowered.

Most of the other developers agreed with me.

In a Perfect World...

But many of them also said that printing only three artifact lands would have been a huge mistake (and I agree). The lands give an identity to *Mirrodin* as a new world. They are a wonderfully cool idea, and they allow players to do something that was formerly next-to-impossible without the aid of the Power Nine: play a deck entirely composed of artifacts. Their effect on limited play, both sealed-deck building and draft, is very interesting and worthy of their inclusion in the set alone. They are a fabulous fusion of design, rules interaction, and templating, and in their own way are just as important to *Mirrodin* as Platinum Angel, Chrome Mox, and Mindslaver.

So knowing that we were going to include five artifact lands in the big set--with more to come--what should we have done with other cards?

Knowing what we know now, Director of **Magic** R&D Randy Buehler has a list that includes:

- Raising the cost of Shrapnel Blast to 2, or lowering the damage to 4, or both
- Not printing Cranial Plating at all if it had to cost 2 and 1 (or 3) to equip
- Reevaluating the Arcbound Ravager/Disciple of the Vault interaction and possibly weakening one of those cards (probably the Disciple, although its power wasn't evident in *Mirrodin*-only testing. If Disciple went to press with its current stats, Ravager, in retrospect, could have stayed at 3.)



He also said there were other minor things we could have changed, like making Myr Enforcer cost 8 instead of 7, but that there'd really be no need to go that deep. It's okay that some cards are possibly undercosted, we just need to be careful.

From my point of view, we knew we were taking risks with Shrapnel Blast and Arcbound Ravager, and I can live with that. Disciple of the Vault really annoys me because its effect is so hard to avoid, even with a handful of creature-removal spells, so I'd probably do something to make that card a lot worse. I just wish we knew ahead of time how the rest of the block was going to shake out from a Constructed standpoint. And Cranial Plating has proven to be a nightmare. We felt that every "Nim" card up to that point in the block was so poor in constructed that a "Nim equipment" wouldn't be too bad. But the low cost of all the cards in that cycle was a poor match for the potentially high payoff associated with it in a deck sporting all

artifact lands. We tested it in Ravager Affinity after we discovered Skullclamp, and the Plating wasn't fitting with Clamp around. But now that Clamp is gone, the Plating has really reared its ugly head.

So the next time you hear someone say, "The affinity mechanic is too powerful," remember that power can come from even the most innocent-looking places.

This Week's Poll

What card would you *most* like to weaken if you could?

- Frogmite
- Myr Enforcer
- Thoughtcast
- Arcbound Ravager
- Disciple of the Vault
- Shrapnel Blast
- Cranial Plating
- One or more Artifact Lands
- None

Last Week's Poll

The first time you saw it, did scry feel weird to you on a red card?		
No	4587	69.2%
Yes	2037	30.8%
Total	6624	100.0%

