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# Pox

Adrian Sullivan · *Single-Card Strategies*  
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I remember when *Ice Age* first came out. I was sitting with my friend Brad at a sandwich shop and we were putting the new cards into our decks. Brad was mad (a bit) that they had made his beloved *Icy Manipulator* an uncommon again. I was really excited that they had made *Polar Kraken*. It was a new time for **Magic**. He and I had both put in money to buy several boxes of *Arabian Nights* when it came out (oh, if only I had [held onto them!](#)) and now we were both in on *Ice Age*.

If you haven't read it yet, don't miss [Skaff's feature article](#) this week on what sets *Ice Age* apart. By being designed as a "stand-alone" set, *Ice Age* launched the modern era of **Magic** design. The cards weren't just sitting in a vacuum; they were designed with thought as to how they would enter into the world of tournament play. *Ice Age* brought me into tournament play, and one card in particular got me to the point where I wasn't just excited by how big a card like *Polar Kraken* was. No, instead, one card got me to actually go about building full-fledged decks.



Good ol' Pox. Nothin' beats Pox.

Strictly speaking, of course, this isn't true. But it's fun to say.

It was a great time to be playing **Magic**. My first constructed PTQ was with a Pox deck. Inspired by German **Magic** player Martin Huemmerich's early work on *Pox*, I built a Pox deck. He formed an e-mail list devoted exclusively to Pox decks and a slew of people from around the world joined it to work on *Pox*. (Incidentally, this incident would inspire me to form my own mailing list, Cabal Rogue, as a think-tank on deck-building. I'd love to go into more detail on that, but Scott Johns pays me to write about cards like *Pox*, not people like [Mike Flores](#). Then again, maybe it's something I can work into a future article if there's interest.) I never qualified for the Pro Tour with my Pox deck, but someone on the mailing list claimed that they did... I suppose I'm not likely to ever know.

I do know that *Pox* got me going. It started me heading places. It got me excited. And here are three reasons why. (Three, you'll find out, is an important number for *Pox*.)

## Reasons that Pox Rocks, #1: You're probably the only one on the high-wire with a staff

When you're playing a Pox deck, you kick all sense of balance out of the game that you're in. If everyone playing is like a stable table with 4 legs, the Pox player is the table cackling in the corner cutting off a leg or two from *everyone*. I'm going to make a bold statement. There are few cards that have ever been printed that are as downright disruptive to a game as a Pox.

You get to be the lucky ducky that knows a Pox is coming. You get to be the one who built their deck to survive a Pox. Whether you play in a casual group or in tournaments, you're most likely to be prepared. Only the players that come with a staff to balance themselves out for a post-Pox world are likely to be doing okay once it resolves. You are one of those players. Are they?

## Reasons that Pox Rocks, #2: Math is hard (even when you're good at it)

It's true. Hell, even Teen Talk Barbie says so. You wouldn't think the math of Pox would be so tricky. Everyone loses one-third of their resources (rounded up). For the most part, in all honesty, it isn't that hard to figure out for most people. The problem lies in being able to get around the Rounded Thirds. Let's make a little table!

| A Number | That Number, POXED! |
|----------|---------------------|
| 0        | 0                   |
| 1        | 0                   |
| 2        | 1                   |
| 3        | 2                   |
| 4        | 2                   |
| 5        | 3                   |
| 6        | 4                   |
| 7        | 4                   |
| 15       | 10                  |
| 16       | 10                  |
| 17       | 11                  |
| 18       | 12                  |
| 19       | 12                  |
| 20       | 13                  |

Pox hits life, creatures, land, and cards in hand. They need to be at a multiple of three – only by keeping all of those numbers divisible by three do they avoid being hit even harder by the Pox than is necessary. Keeping all of that balanced is hard. The more “Threes” you have, the better.

## Reasons that Pox Rocks, #3: It Hurts the Dirty, Dirty Necropotence Lovers

If the people you play with let you play Pox, they'll probably let *someone* (some *evil* someone) play Necro. Everyone who's anyone seems to love Necropotence. Not me. I grudgingly respect the card, but I don't sleep with 4 of them under my pillow like Randy Buehler. (I'm just kidding, folks. He doesn't really sleep with Necropotences under his pillow. I think.) Necro, as everyone knows, is a ridiculously powerful card drawer. And Pox loves to just mess with it.

Now, I know that Eric “Dinosaur” Taylor would love to disagree with me on the effectiveness of Pox against Necro, but he's quite wrong. Necropotence is powerful for several reasons, but one of the reasons it is so good is very simple: essentially, every card that they have is worth a single life point, and every life they have can be a card.

Pox hits them pretty much everywhere.

Pretend we have our plucky Necro player in a late game. They've sucked some of your life with cards like **Corrupt**. They have 15 life after drawing a full hand up to 7, and say they have out 6 land and a creature. I could create a much more devastating scenario, but I'll leave it there, with two Threes. Suddenly, they're down to 10 life (like losing 5 potential cards), they discard 3 cards (exactly like losing 3 life for them), they lose 2 lands and a creature (like losing 3 *more* life). A Necro player is used to having resources. They build their deck to take advantage of it. You, the clever **Pox** player, are used to being resource-poor. You're built for it. On their next turn, I bet they'll play a land and a spell (and have at most 2 cards in their hand). At that point, they'll have to go to 5 life to fill up their goods. With even the tiniest bit of a push, you can make them fall over. Hard.



## So, Pox rocks. Now what? I need a balancing staff or something?

The real trick with making a Pox deck work is to be balancing your resources. There's a bunch of really good ways to do this. Here are some of my favorites:

### *Baubles*

**Conjurer's Bauble**, **Urza's Bauble**, **Chromatic Sphere** and **Barbed Sextant**, **Lodestone Bauble**, **Phyrexian Furnace** and **Scrabbling Claws**, any of the Spellbombs. All of these cards cost, at most, almost no mana. They all effectively store up a card in your hand on the table, making it easier to get your hand to a Three, leaving a good balance for your cards in hand. When you're ready, "pop" the bauble to get the card back.



### *Alternate Mana*

**Pox** doesn't do anything to **Talisman of Indulgence** (or any other Talisman), nor does it do anything to **Charcoal Diamond** (nor any other Diamond). By getting some of your mana invested in Artifacts, you can dodge losing some of your mana and have plenty around for after the **Pox**. Using cards like **Chrome Mox** or **Mox Diamond** might use up an extra card, but when you're doing **Pox** math looking for a Three, it might not matter all that much.

### *Cursed Scroll*

If there's one card that rewards you for not having cards, it's **Cursed Scroll**. So long as you keep up three mana, you have a reasonable reusable damage source that should be able to keep all of the smallest creatures from sticking around. If they are out of small creatures, teach them a lesson by smacking their face with it.

### *It's a trick, get an axe!*

Some creatures just don't stay dead. If they're your creatures, so much the better. **Ashen Ghoul** and **Nether Shadow** can come back if enough creatures have gone to your grave from wherever, and with your opponent's lower life total they can be a big threat. **Nether Spirit** is a bit slower and more controlling, but it should also be much easier to have come back. Either way, keep the creatures coming.

### *Bring out your dead!*

Reanimation is another thing to do with these dead guys. You know that you're going to be discarding cards, you know that you could be losing creatures, and your opponent will do the same thing (if they have them). If anything is a reasonable creature, you can reanimate it at a discounted rate.

Andy Wolf's deck did this to qualify him for the Pro Tour Los Angeles way back in 1998. He would place in the Top 8 at that tournament, but he qualified by casting **Dance of the Dead** repeatedly on **Triskelion**. Besides his own **Triskelion**, he brought back **Jolrael's Centaur**, **Wildfire Emissary**, **Air Elemental**, **Lhurgoyf**, **Spectral Bears**, and **Mogg Fanatic** on his way to victory. I would later hear of this deck referred to as Wolf-Pack Pox, but [his report](#) does a good job of talking about all kinds of stuff that he reanimated.

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| Wolf-Pack Pox      |              |                        |
|--------------------|--------------|------------------------|
| 61 cards           |              |                        |
| 14 Swamp           | 4 Triskelion | 4 Pox                  |
| 4 Wasteland        | 3 Blood Pet  | 4 Dance of the Dead    |
| 4 Mishra's Factory |              | 4 Hymn to Tourach      |
| 2 Sheltered Valley | 7 creatures  | 4 Funeral Charm        |
| 24 land            |              | 3 Spinning Darkness    |
|                    |              | 3 Cursed Scroll        |
|                    |              | 3 Demonic Consultation |
|                    |              | 3 Charcoal Diamond     |
|                    |              | 2 The Rack             |
|                    |              | 30 other spells        |

Andy, if you're reading this, I just want you to know this is one of my favorites decks of all time. No kidding.

*When is a door not a door? When it's ajar.*

And when is a creature not a creature? When it's a land (or something else). Andy's deck makes use of that trick... lands like **Blinkmoth Nexus**, **Mishra's Factory**, and **Spawning Pool** serve a dual purpose: not only are they able to just be lands (and dodge the creature loss-effect), but they can also turn into creatures when you want them and die *instead of your really good creature*. That's a neat trick.

Other cards that do a similar job are **Chimeric Idol** and **Guardian Idol**. There are plenty of other examples, but these are two of the best. Since they only play creatures part-time, you get to decide when they're on the job.

*This is your life...*


You'll lose life to **Pox**. It can't be avoided. It can, however, be dealt with. The first person I saw talk about one of my favorite **Pox** life gain cards was Martin Huemmerich. His bright idea was **Sheltered Valley** (one of the many great card choices in Andy Wolf's deck). Essentially, you know you're going to be losing life and have few lands in play. Take advantage of the slow life gain of the Valley.

Other good cards here are **Spinning Darkness** and **Vicious Hunger**. Both are cheap and kill a creature while raising your life total. That is always good. **Zuran Orb** (if it's legal) works too. Reduce your land count to a Three of some sort, and then follow with the **Pox**. Sadly, the life you gain will be hurt a bit more by the **Pox**, but it's still better than simply losing it. They'll also have a low life, but I'll get to that in just a bit...

## Wasn't there something about chopping off their table legs?

**Pox** is a hugely disruptive spell. Usually all it takes is just the tiniest of nudges in one direction and you can completely knock something out of commission. Just take your pick of the major resources that get messed with by **Pox**.

### Cards

 This is the biggest, bestest target to hit. Hand disruption doesn't do a thing to the table, but the **Pox** does take a chunk out of that. By wiping out their choices, it can be really hard for them to recover. Cards that get card advantage (like **Hymn to Tourach** or **Stupor**) are great here. If people have been setting up to stay at a Three, a little hand destruction is going to do wonders keeping them off of their game.

Cards like **Funeral Charm** and **Necrogen Spellbomb** add in even more fun. Your opponent is likely to be down on cards in the first place. If you get them down to no cards, you can simply get rid of their newly drawn card right in the draw step.

*What a low life!*

Life is one of the more dangerous aspects of **Pox**, for both players. You can expect that **Pox** games are going to have both players with very low life totals. Take advantage of them with burn spells. Any burn spell will do, but something like a **Shrapnel Blast**, for example, can be ridiculously scary after an opponent has lost one-third of their life. Hopefully, you'll have a Talisman or a Mox lying around to throw to it.

One of the cards that makes the best use out of the loss of both life and cards in a **Pox** deck is **The Rack**. Simply put, **The Rack** and **Pox** together are a *monster*. As a continual source of damage that rewards you for getting rid of your opponent's cards, every **Hymn to Tourach** or **Funeral Charm** can be the equivalent of a **Lightning Bolt** to their head. At times, they are so stuck that they *have* to hold onto cards in their hand in an attempt to keep their head above water, and they no longer sit on a Three, making your next **Pox** all the meaner.

Being quick about it is a big deal. **The Rack** is quick and consistent. Remember, the opponent can always burn you back as well. **Pox** means low life, so distract their burn with a creature or two if possible. It might seem like a great idea to go creatureless, but you don't really get a big advantage out of it. All of their "dead" creature kill cards can simply be discarded to your **Pox**. All of the "live" player kill cards can simply go to your dome (if you don't have any creatures). Give them a lightning rod to throw stuff at.



### Land

Again, losing land is rough. It's not hard to get to 4 land. When you have 3 land, and your opponent has 4 (not too crazy a situation), a **Pox** will place you both back at 2 land. If you follow that disruption up with **Icequake**, **Wasteland**, **Rishadan Port**, or what-have-you, it can be easy to keep someone out of their game.

If you're running mono-black (pretty common for a **Pox** deck), your own color base is already pretty stable. Two color (let alone three color) decks are much more hurt by knocking out land with a **Pox** and some extra land destruction. If they run pain lands or **Onslaught** search lands to fix their colors, **Pox**'s effect on their life won't be something they'll relish either.

### Creatures

**Pox** doesn't let many creatures stay out. Keep them off the table. A card like **Funeral Charm** is great since it lets you kill their creatures if that is a good thing or hurt their hand (when that's better). Similarly, **Contagion** or **Spinning Darkness** have an incredibly cheap cost (free!) for getting rid of creatures that hit the table. **Diabolic Edict** or **Chainer's Edict** can be useful against anything a bit bigger that manages to stay on the table. I've already mentioned **Cursed Scroll**, but a card like **Granite Shard** can run the same trick.

## Wrapping Up

Overall, the cool thing about **Pox** is the sheer number of resources it attacks. Red can do the same trick in attacking a lot of resources, but it has a much more difficult time in doing it. **Devastating Dreams** can be incredibly hard for the person casting it to recover from; **Wildfire** and **Obliterate** (and the like) are incredibly expensive. Black only has to spend three mana and it can do much the same trick.

There is a kind of "new **Pox**" that was just recently printed. It's called **Death Cloud**, and while it is certainly quite a bit more expensive to cast, it is similar enough that many of the same ideas can be used with both decks. As for **Pox**, one of the sad things about the card is that you only have four places you can play it: Type 1, Type 1.5, Ice Age Constructed, and "for fun". For a special bonus, here's the deck I made for Ice/Alliance constructed way back in the day, and a current 1.5 deck. Enjoy.

### "Black Ice" – A deck for Ice/Alliances

61 cards

|                     |                   |                        |
|---------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 2 Kjeldoran Outpost | 4 Krovikan Horror | 4 Pox                  |
| 4 Thawing Glaciers  | 4 Ivory Gargoyle  | 3 Swords to Plowshares |
| 11 Swamp            |                   | 2 Disenchant           |
| 9 Plains            | 8 creatures       | 4 Icequake             |
|                     |                   | 2 Soldevi Digger       |
| 26 land             |                   | 3 Icy Manipulator      |
|                     |                   | 1 Zuran Orb            |
|                     |                   | 4 Jeweled Amulet       |
|                     |                   | 4 Lodestone Bauble     |
|                     |                   | 27 other spells        |

|                      |                 |                     |
|----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| <b>1.5 Pox</b>       |                 |                     |
| 60 cards             |                 |                     |
| 2 Sheltered Valley   | 3 Nether Spirit | 4 Pox               |
| 7 Swamp              |                 | 4 Cursed Scroll     |
| 7 Snow-Covered Swamp | 3 creatures     | 4 The Rack          |
| 4 Wasteland          |                 | 4 Funeral Charm     |
| 4 Mishra's Factory   |                 | 4 Duress            |
|                      |                 | 4 Hymn to Tourach   |
| 24 land              |                 | 3 Tainted Pact      |
|                      |                 | 3 Spinning Darkness |
|                      |                 | 3 Chrome Mox        |
|                      |                 | 33 other spells     |

Sadly, the **Thawing Glaciers** and the **Zuran Orb** are no longer legal for *Ice Age Constructed*, but you do get the added "bonus" of being able to include *Homelands*. Granted, that isn't all that much when it comes to including extra cards, but it is something. The 1.5 deck is about straight brute force. The **Chrome Moxen** are there to speed up the deck and they double (along with **Spinning Darkness**) to get rid of extra **Nether Spirits** that might somehow get into the graveyard. The **Snow-covered Swamps** are in the deck just so that a **Tainted Pact** can be more powerful.

Have a great week everyone.

Adrian Sullivan



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