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Smokestack



Adrian Sullivan · *Single-Card Strategies*
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One of my favorite things about writing the [Single Card Strategies](#) column is to revisit some of my very favorite moments in deckbuilding. [Last week](#), when I talked about [Pox](#), it was a special treat just to be able to mention Andrew Wolf's Pox deck. His deck is easily one of my favorite decks ever, even with all of its rough edges. (He and I talked on the phone about it and laughed at ourselves for all of the terrible choices we made as deckbuilders back then.)



Andrew Wolf, US Nationals '02

Most of the time, I make decks with an eye on tournament play, and there are a lot of inherent limitations on creativity when it comes to making those decks. If you play in Block Constructed, say *Odyssey Block Constructed*, for example, it's quite hard to make a deck that doesn't include one of the following cards: [Wild Mongrel](#), [Psychatog](#), [Mutilate](#), or [Mirari's Wake](#). So it goes that many, many decks get sent to Deck Limbo, tossed into File 13 with rarely any hope that they'll see the light of day again. Plenty of great cards never have their potential realized, because they may have only been good for a week, or they may have only been good if something else didn't happen to exist.



Smokestack was one of those cards I kept plugging away at. I even got to play a Smokestack deck once in a tournament, a whopping 10 person event in Milwaukee's classic small-town Magic shop, the VGC. I did okay, beating up on two former Wisconsin State Champions, Rob Castro and Jake Welch, in the process. (I'm only bragging about that because it's fun to rub in the sweet taste of victory on former State Champs who are past their glory days).

Making people lose hope. The cards that make people lose hope are the ones most likely to get me excited. As someone relentlessly loses cards to a **Smokestack**, they really do start to get frustrated. If you'd like, every turn they'll lose yet more permanents than the turn before. A quick note for those of you who don't realize this about **Smokestack**: you aren't *required* to add an extra counter every turn. Keeping track of the proper pace of the **Smokestack** is a good skill to acquire. Here are the best general ways to abuse the card.

Lots of extra permanents

One of the first, best ways to have a **Smokestack** be truly great is to have a lot of extra permanents running around. A **Smokestack**, left unattended, will remove a lot of permanents. Essentially, you both are going to lose the same amount of permanents, but your opponent is going to lose them *first*. If you simply have a lot of things on the table, this can make sacking things not seem nearly as symmetrical. It's almost as if you and your opponent both go to the same swank club, pay the entrance fee at the door, but you're the only one left with money for drinks!

One of the best ways to get a bunch of permanents is to have a good card drawing engine and cheap spells. There are a ton of ways to accomplish this feat. Of course, with *Mirrodin* Block cards out right now, it is easy to start talking about Affinity cards and combining them with say a **Future Sight** or a **Vedalken Archmage** for card draw. This is a really good way to throw a bunch of stuff into play, certainly, but it begs the question, why lock them out? You have free 4/4s and stuff. Why not just smash their face?

A better way to get the card drawing going is something like **Necropotence** or Enchantresses (with **Argothian Enchantress** being top notch here). Both of these decks can have a ton of good, cheap spells that will make it easy to get permanents into play. Enchantress decks easily win here, though, when it comes to a side-by-side comparison. Each of the permanents that an Enchantress deck is likely to drop are going to be quite cheap, and easy to sacrifice. Also, Enchantress decks go well with cards like **Exploration**. **Exploration** makes it easy to have a bunch of extra permanents (land) so long as you have the cards to back it up.

Lots of permanents doesn't make the **Smokestack** any less costly in a literal sense to your side of the board, but it does mean that you really don't care that much about paying the cost. Your opponent isn't likely to have that luxury.

Sweeping up (or locking down) the board

This, in a lot of ways, is almost a corollary to the "have more permanents" point. Here, the idea is to sweep up the things that are already in play, giving your opponent less choices about what to sacrifice when it comes to their turn. Another variant on this is locking down the permanents that they have

already in play.

A lot of people usually love to say at this point "That's why I love **Tanglewire** with **Smokestack**! It's a combo!" Well, they are both individually powerful cards, but they are *not* a combo. Essentially, they both put their disruptive abilities on the stack. However, whichever one is the most potent is going to be the only one that your opponent notices on their turn. If you have more tokens on **Tanglewire**, your opponent won't be any further disrupted by it – they can just sacrifice their tapped permanents. Better examples of cards that lock up the board that are actually relevant are cards like **Opposition**, **Propaganda**, or **Icy Manipulator**.

Propaganda encourages your opponent to sacrifice their creatures, as they are likely to quickly lose the land it takes to make any useful attack occur. Against a creature deck, this is pretty nice. **Propaganda** is nothing compared to locking down directly - **Icy Manipulator** and **Opposition** are effectively the same thing, just with different impacts. **Opposition**, of course, is the powerhouse here. After they've sacked their permanents, a useful permanent that they have left can be tapped for every creature you have. Oftentimes, this can lead the opponent to quickly having no game left at all.

The first truly ridiculous use of **Smokestack** that I remember ever seeing made use of this idea. Teenage Milwaukee **Magic** player Jon (or Angry Jon, as he was sometimes called) made a fantastic "Enchantress Prison" deck for *Urza's* Block Constructed. Using a ton of cheap enchantments, **Deranged Hermit**, **Opposition**, and **Smokestack**, the deck could completely lock out most opponents quite quickly. Far more disruptive than any other Enchantress deck I had



ever seen, Angry Jon's deck was quite impressive.

When I started working on the deck myself, I added in some more "sweep up" cards. In that case, I used **Sunder**, but I could have used **Armageddon** or **Cataclysm** if I hadn't been interested in keeping the deck legal for *Urza's Block*. The idea of knocking out all the land is quite simple: without the luxury of having land to sacrifice, the **Smokestack** can destroy all kinds of incredibly useful permanents that your opponent actually spent the time casting. **Sunder** is especially great here. Put the mana in your pool during your upkeep, sacrifice a few of the lands, and then bounce *all* land back up to everyone's hand. After you drop a land during your main phase (or more land if you have **Exploration** out), watch your opponent squirm as they lose a whole bunch of "real" permanents. They'll be under a hard choice

on that turn: do they lay a land to probably just lose it to the **Smokestack**, or do they wait it out, and hope you'll sacrifice your own **Smokestack** to itself?

Cards you want to sack

There aren't many of these, but they do exist. Pretty much every card with the phrase "When *this* card is put into a graveyard from play" is a good place to start. Losing a **Rukh Egg** is not so painful, nor is losing a **Yavimaya Elder**. To truly start getting something potent look at **Academy Rector** – sacrificing him can let you go get a card like **Future Sight** into play!

If you run a card like **Vedalken Shackles** or **Old Man of the Sea**, sacrificing your opponent's creature is a great deal. On the next turn, steal another creature to sacrifice and give them even less choices for what to lose.

On a less exciting note, one of the nice things about **Smokestack** is how it makes every useless permanent in your deck have a purpose: kindling. If you are the kind of person who like to run **Circle of Protection** in your main deck, now you're not stuck with a *completely* dead card if you aren't playing against the right color. Of course, your opponent gets the same luxury, but you're the one that knows ahead of time and can plan accordingly.



Chucky cards – they never seem to die



Here is the beginning of sneakiness. If you've got a card that just doesn't want to go to the graveyard, it is going to make really good friends with **Smokestack**. **Nether Spirit** is an excellent example. Having a **Smokestack** and a **Nether Spirit** in play together is *incredibly* unfair if you can live any length of time. On the first turn you get a **Smokestack** token you won't have lost a permanent if you stack it right. Your opponent loses 1 permanent. On the next turn, you lose a **Nether Spirit** (and get it back), and your opponent loses 2 permanents, and then you lose a **Nether Spirit** and a single permanent. Over the course of 4 turns, your opponent could have lost a whopping 10 (1+2+3+4) permanents, and you'll have lost 3 (0+0+1+2).

The math works out exactly the same for cards like **Rancor** or (better yet) **Despondency**. The problem with



these cards is that they cost mana to keep going, and they also require useful targets. They also need to *successfully* get onto something in order to come back to your hand when they are sacrificed. A well-timed **Lightning Bolt** can get in the way of that happening... There is, of course, the added advantage of more easily getting multiple cards of this type going. **Nether Spirits** don't like to travel in packs.

The fail-safe switch

Another great way to break the synergy of **Smokestack** is to strategically break the **Smokestack** itself. Before it gets to your own turn, getting rid of a **Smokestack** means you won't have to suffer the losses that your opponent just did. This can be especially important once a **Smokestack** has gotten up to a large number of counters.

This can be accomplished in any number of ways. The most blunt way is to simply **Disenchant** it. Of course, this isn't nearly as fun as a lot of other options. By actually destroying the **Smokestack**, you're down two cards, and are partway losing out on the whole point of getting rid of the **Smokestack** in the first place. Better is to bounce it. **Boomerang**, **Echoing Truth**, **Rescue**, and **Vedalken Mastermind** are some of the better choices here. They are better, essentially, because they are cheap.

Another great way is to change the **Smokestack** into something else. **Goblin Welder** is an amazing card because it can do just that. Christian Luhrs used a deck based around just this idea for an early [Extended Masters event](#).

Christian Luhrs		
60 cards		
4 Ancient Tomb	4 Goblin Welder	4 Grim Monolith
4 City of Traitors	4 Masticore	4 Mind Stone
12 Mountain	8 creatures	4 Phyrexian Furnace
20 land		4 Smokestack
		4 Sphere of Resistance
		4 Tangle Wire
		4 Tsabo's Web
		4 Urza's Bauble
		32 other spells

Here, he can change the **Smokestack** into any number of great cards if it gets to be too much of a bother. The fantastic thing is that he can also bring it back into the mix if it becomes useful. I'm grinning right now just thinking of all the great things the Welder can do, even without **Smokestacks** around!

A bit less exciting, but still quite effective is using **Claws of Gix**. The card is incredibly cheap to cast, and is a good permanent way to destroy the **Smokestack** on your opponent's turn. In addition, **Claws of Gix** can be used as a mini-life gain engine in combination with your "Chucky" cards like **Despondency** or **Rancor**.



Christian Luhrs, GP Prague '03

Two specific cards to abuse with Smokestack

There are a bunch of individual cards that can be used to great effect with the **Smokestack**, but here are my two favorite:

Dismantle – Okay, it is slow. But it can be quite neat. If you **Dismantle** your own **Smokestack**, those tokens can be put to use on any artifact creature that you might have, or any artifact that uses charge tokens. **Dismantle** a **Smokestack** and put some tokens on **Lightning Coils** for a small army of 3/1s. Make a **Pentavus** or **Triskellion** have more options. Or, just make your **Mishra's Factory** or **Blinkmoth Nexus** bigger. Personally, one of my biggest favorites here is going to be **Mindless Automaton**. Turn those soot counters into cards!

Upheaval – Sure, it's a lot of mana, but wow is this combo a beating. Put a bunch of mana in your pool, cast **Upheaval** and put your **Smokestack** back into play (any other cards in play is just gravy). Now your opponent is basically stuck unless they can drop a bunch of permanents at one time. You aren't *required* to put a token on **Smokestack**, so if they don't drop a land, don't put one on the **Smokestack** and just develop your board. If they *do* put out a land, on your own turn, up the token count on **Smokestack**, make them lose their land, and keep them locked out of the game. If they have the cheap spells to get out of it, you're still ahead on the race!

Wrapping up

Overall, **Smokestack** is one of my favorite cards in a long time. I even spent time working on an Extended deck for one of the Pro Tour Kobe Qualifier season. In the end, I did qualify with an Isochron Scepter / Orim's Chant deck, but here is the deck I *almost* tried to qualify with:

Nether-Deed-Stack		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
1 Phyrexian Tower	4 Duress	3 Vicious Hunger
2 Dust Bowl	4 Cabal Therapy	3 Perish
1 Forest	4 Entomb	1 Coffin Purge
1 Llanowar Wastes	4 Vampiric Tutor	3 Interdict
12 Swamp	4 Pernicious Deed	1 Ray of Revelation
4 Tainted Wood	4 Call of the Herd	2 Naturalize
4 Treetop Village	1 Roar of the Wurm	1 Smokestack
25 land	1 Moment's Peace	1 Contamination
1 Nether Spirit	1 Subversion	15 sideboard cards
1 creature	2 Smokestack	
	2 Scrying Glass	
	1 Ensnaring Bridge	
	1 Engineered Plague	
	1 Contamination	
	34 other spells	

The deck plays quite admirably versus control decks like Psychatog. Many of the control games would end on turn 2 with a **Scrying Glass**. The Glass and the huge amount of discard totally rip people up, setting up a **Smokestack** or **Contamination** lock pretty quickly. Testing against Sligh was incredibly rewarding. It was *very* hard for them to win a game.

There are only 2 **Smokestacks** (though there was one in the board) because you could easily tutor for them, and Extended is so fast you don't want one to be sitting in your hand unless you can power it out. Of course, the deck has lost access to **Entomb** since that card was banned, so the easy ability to get a **Nether Spirit** going is now gone. One potential, if silly, solution is to run 3 to 4 **Nether Spirits**, and run one or more **Scrabbling Claws** to Tutor for. Now, if you get an extra **Nether Spirit**, just target yourself with the Claws and remove it from the graveyard. Without **Entomb** running 1 **Roar of the Wurm** and **Moment's Peace** doesn't make a lot of sense, so you can toss those cards to the curb.

The deck is a lot of fun. It strips your opponent of resources either literally or virtually, and when the game is in a situation of parity, takes over with **Contamination/Smokestack/Subversion/Flashback** (depending on the matchup). The deck uses the "more permanents" idea with Flashback cards, "sweeps the board" with **Pernicious Deed**, has **Nether Spirit** as a "Chucky", and also gets the Deed to double as a "fail-safe switch". If any of you do put it together, I'm sure you'll have a blast with it like I did.

Before I close the article, one final note about last week's article. Many of you wrote in to ask about the table in that article. One column was entitled "A number" and another "That number, Poxed". The "That number, Poxed" column is what *remains* after a Pox. I had thought that that was clear, but so many people wrote in to mention it, I felt compelled to respond. My second 1.5 **Chrome Mox** error somehow slipped through from sheer sloppiness. I was copying an old Extended decklist I had lying around and changed **Mox Diamond** to **Chrome Mox**. All apologies for that one.

Have a great rest of your week!



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