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Since there is no theme this week on the website, I figured I'd talk about something else with a theme: theme decks. You know, those decks that come out with every set and have funny little names like "Master Blaster" and "Wicked Big." One question that shows up in my mailbox every now and then is, "Why are the theme decks so bad?!"

What are you talking about?

You don't think turn-1 Spark Elemental, turn-2 Tangle Asp is very good? Do you even know how to *play* this game?

If you have any amount of deckbuilding or card evaluation prowess, you've surely noticed that the theme decks we sell for each set are not built to be competitive with the decks that experienced players build. Why is that? Why aren't they somewhat tournament-quality? Or, why aren't they examples of good deck building? R&D is a bunch of smart people; why can't we piece together better decks?

Good Deckbuilding?

I'll answer those questions in no particular order. First, in their own way, theme decks *are* examples of good deck building. New players (and I was one of them once) either invent or are taught some really sketchy ideas about mana ratios and color balance. Early on, people are tempted to run decks with 33% mana sources, when after a few hundred games it becomes apparent that 40% is a better starting point. Our theme decks, regardless of how weak any individual cards are, have what we call "good mana," and that is a lesson that many people could stand to benefit from.

The other way that the theme decks work from a deckbuilding angle is that they tend to adhere to a theme. Sometimes that theme is strictly a keyword plus support cards (like the "Sunburst" deck), but other times the theme is less obvious. The "Special Forces" deck from *Fifth Dawn*, for instance, has no common keyword or mechanic running through it, but instead features a creature set that is half for attacking and half for blocking, plus spells and equipment to alter their sizes. Adhering to a theme may seem simple, frivolous, or both to players that have been building their own decks for years, but to a player whose M.O. is to "shuffle all my black and red cards together," the idea of a deck that "does something" is a big step.

Why are Some of the Cards Bad?

The idea of a deck that 'does something' is a big step.

Picking out "bad cards"—or rather cards that are less effective than other alternatives—is a skill, and one that we want to encourage in players. If we had already done the weeding out for them, it would be difficult for players to learn on their own. There's already plenty of deck copying going on in the community; it can't hurt to encourage some experimentation on the lower end of the spectrum.

Plus, power level isn't always a concern for players that like theme decks. Vanquish might not be a powerful card in the grand scheme of things, but for some players it may be exactly what they're looking for. We tend to cram the theme decks full of all manner of cards, to allow players to audition them for themselves. How will you know you don't like Viridian Lorebearers until you've played with them a few times? If we decreed that they were bad and never put them in the theme deck, who would that benefit? (Heck, they aren't *that* bad, actually.) There are a few mana Myr in the "Special Forces" deck; are they something you'd want more of? Less of? With just a few there already, you can make those decisions yourself.

Magic is a game of exploration. You get to determine what you like and don't like, and what you consider powerful or weak in your own environment. We had enough fun making all the cards; we'll let you enjoy making good decks.

Why Aren't They Competitive?

With what? Tier-one Standard decks? Friday Night **Magic** decks? The multi-player free-for-all every Wednesday night at Ronnie's in Fargo, ND?

First things first, we have a rarity scheme to stick to, which automatically puts theme decks at a disadvantage to decks that don't have such a restriction. Second, as you can see, competitive is a relative term. We want the decks to be competitive with one other thing: the other theme decks from that set. As for getting them "up to speed" for organized play, that's up to you.

Anecdotally, I've heard stories of theme decks dominating in casual play, especially among groups that don't have large card pools. If they were much better than they are now, they could prove frustrating to less intense playgroups.

What are They For?

Theme decks do two things for us. One, they let people coming into the game try out a new set for a small investment. If you only have ten bucks to spend on cards every set, you could do a lot worse than a theme deck.

Two, they let us show off our new themes and mechanics. If you had your doubts about the *Legions* Slivers or the Sunburst mechanic, a few games with the relevant theme deck would show you that those cards pack quite a punch.

Theme decks do those things, plus allow players the freedom of exploration and customization, which is just about all you could ask for from one little box of cards. (The most amazing example of theme deck evolution has to be Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar's "Blog Elemental" on StarCityGames.com. If everyone used theme decks the way he did, the universe would be a more fun place to live.)

My Favorite Theme Decks

In closing, here are my five favorite theme decks of all time (in reverse order):

5) Trounce-O-Matic (*Odyssey*)

This is the one theme deck that my wife could consistently beat me with. It has all the tools for some serious butt-whoopin': Wild Mongrels, Werebears, Cephalid Looters, and Overrun.

4) Spectrum (*Invasion*)

Spectrum is the deck I played in the Wizards Online Invitational last year and, man, was it fun. It has lots of card advantage (Exclude, Probe), fat monsters (Zanam Djinn, Sabertooth Nishoba), and the next best thing to Armageddon, Global Ruin. On top of that, it was five colors, something I can rarely pass up.

3) Sunburst (*Fifth Dawn*)

Speaking of five colors, the sunburst mechanic was the first mechanic I ever created, so this deck will always have a place in my heart. Dropping a 5/5 flier on the third turn is always good times.

2) Nuts & Bolts (*Fifth Dawn*)

Lots of people in R&D make theme decks (we certainly aren't looking for credit). This was the first one I ever made, and I did it before I started in R&D (while I was still editing this website), so again,

this one feels special to me. Plus it contains a card that is banned in Standard and Block, which is good for a laugh.

1) The Sparkler (*Stronghold*)

I purchased this deck back in my pre-professional days, and it really opened my eyes. Only three creatures, two of which were walls? How could this thing win? I was amazed by it, and I honestly credit this deck with a little bit of my development as a player and deckbuilder.

Old Poll Results

From last week...

What is your favorite constructed tournament format?		
Standard	3414	34.4%
Extended	2028	20.4%
Block Constructed	1894	19.1%
Type 1	1839	18.5%
Type 1.5	756	7.6%
Total	9931	100.0%

That's why we call it "Standard, " I suppose.

From two weeks ago...

How do you pronounce 2G?		
"One green and two colorless."	3986	28.3%
"Two green."	3140	22.3%
"Two colorless and a green."	2723	19.3%
"A green and two."	1048	7.4%
"Two green."	1015	7.2%
Something that uses the word "three."	955	6.8%
None of the above.	627	4.4%
"Two-gee."	377	2.7%
"Green two."	208	1.5%
"Gee-two"	30	0.2%
Total	14109	100.0%

If you haven't heard yet, in R&D we say "two-gee," which is the most economical way of conveying the information. I doubt that will ever catch on outside these walls, however, based on these poll results.

And finally, updated numbers from the "functionally identical reprints" poll...

I view functionally identical reprints in expansions (meaning old cards with new names) as:		
A necessary evil.	3175	40.1%
A very cool thing.	2532	32.0%
Something I wish you'd stop doing.	2215	28.0%
Total	7922	100.0%

This Week's Poll

How many theme decks have you purchased (ever), both paper and online? 012-34-10I buy one or more every set.

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