

Champions: Pre-release Impressions Search

Scott Wills

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Although these Limited Information articles hit the streets on a Monday they're always submitted the week before so as I type this I've just returned from my first experience of seeing *Champions of Kamigawa* in action. Obviously I'll be covering the new set extensively over the coming months as it makes up a completely new format for limited events and there are many new cards and mechanics that warrant discussion. It's still too early at this stage to give detailed impressions but I'm going to start off this week by just giving you some feedback on the set from my experiences at the pre-release.

I find my first impressions from playing with a set often stand true throughout that sets life. I have to confess to disliking the Morph mechanic a lot when I first experienced it and *Onslaught's* bomb-laden block wasn't one of my favourites from recent years. *Mirrodin's* initial impact was very favourable with me as there were always a lot of playable cards to chose from in sealed and draft and it made getting deck-building correct really tough a lot of the time. Having plenty of artifacts did mean you could get away with a shaky mana base though and it's nice to return to a world of coloured cards with *Champions*.

My initial impressions of *Champions* is favourable. There are no doubt a lot of powerful legends in the set – the five Dragon Legends all being amongst the best of these – but it still didn't feel like these decided too many games. The overall power level of the set seems to be comparatively low as I took part in a couple of drafts where there really were no playable picks in a pack that still had seven or eight cards left in it. Many draft decks I looked through at the pre-release had several sketchy cards in them but that could just be down to people's card evaluations being a little off at this stage.

There are other aspects of the set I'm going to run through now and I'll highlight some cards that I saw being effective last weekend.

Tempo and aggression

I've seen a couple of comments so far stating that this set a bit slow but I definitely didn't find that to be the case at the pre-release. I saw several games decided by very fast starts and often expensive late-game creatures were stranded in a player's hand as they struggled to deal with a quick creature rush.

Bushido especially is an ability that can discourage blocking as opposing three-drops without Bushido will almost always lose a battle to a three-drop that does have the ability tacked on. A second turn 2/2 or 2/1 followed up with a Bushido guy and a removal spell can cause a lot of damage if the opposing player has even a slightly slow start.

There are several other common creatures that can make blocking decisions difficult including things like Kami of Fire's Roar, Kabuto Moth, Brutal and Feral Deceiver, and Kami of the Hunt. As well this there are several common spells like Uncontrollable Anger, Indomitable Will and



Serpent Skin that not only punish an incorrect block but also leave you with an even nastier threat on the table after the fact.

The result of this means that fast, aggressive decks will probably rise to the top when people start getting used to the set. Early on it seems like okay cards such as Vine Kami and Kami of Lunacy and so on will be playable but I think in draft many of these cards may well turn out to be too slow.

Lands and your mana

The problem with having aggressive decks that have many early drops is that you often might be tempted to skimp on the land count a little as you have lots of cards that function from just two or three lands. On the other hand, this appears to be a format that can definitely hurt you if you miss a crucial land drop at an inopportune moment. *Mirrodin* block was pretty slow and you could often recover from a missed land-drop or two but with the increased speed here I think that's less true now.

Seventeen lands will be the norm most of the time I think. If you do have a mana curve that features numerous four and five casting cost spells then I think eighteen lands may well be the way to go just so you make that fourth and fifth turn land-drop with a bit more consistency. If you miss them then you may well be too far behind an opponent who is able to play out multiple creatures in their first four turns.

I think two colours will usually be the aim in this format in sealed and draft but there are a couple of excellent green cards that will allow easy splashing of one or perhaps even two colours. Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach are both great additions to any green deck as they both accelerate your mana and provide you with colour fixing at the same time. Kodama's Reach is definitely one of the higher green picks and casting just one of these should basically sort out your mana for the rest of the game. There are several powerful cards that can be easily splashed and playing three colours might also give you a chance to benefit from the cumulative effects of the different Legendary Shrines that may well get passed round fairly late in draft.

Green has enough mana fixers that you'll often be able to get away with 16 lands when playing that colour but one of it's best commons – Moss Kami – means you won't want to go any lower than that.

Be afraid



Another change to this format is that Fear is once again a good ability to have. There isn't a single artifact creature in the set and as a result anything with Fear will be unblockable much more of the time. Painwracker Oni is often a truly brutal uncommon because of this but it's the common Nezumi Cutthroat that should be getting most of the attention. This little guy is an exceptional little creature and is comparable to Neurok Spy but for a mana less. More than one pre-release match was decided by a second and third turn Cutthroat and unless you are black or have the appropriate removal spells there's pretty much no way you can ever expect to race that start. The Cutthroat is easily the best black common creature and is one of the best common creatures in the set. It'll probably be drafted below most of the removal spells but he should still be a high pick for any deck with a black component.

Dance of Shadows is a good finisher in any aggressive deck as it often allows your three small creatures to deal ten damage straight to your opponent's dome. It needs to be in your sideboard when facing opposing black decks or when your deck doesn't need it but it's definitely one card that was being under-rated at the pre-release as it just ended games that other cards wouldn't have been able to.

Arcane and Splice

Arcane is definitely a sub-type you want to be paying attention to as you build a sealed deck or take part in a draft. There are obvious connections to the cards that have the Splice onto Arcane ability but there are lots of others like Kami of the Hunt, Kami of the Painted Road and Teller of Tales that can have a nice impact on the game if you're able to fire off an Arcane spell at the appropriate moment. A simple card like Reach Through Mists can actually turn out to be a fairly high draft pick in this format as a result of this.

The other bonus to having cheap Arcane spells in your deck is obviously the Splice mechanic. I saw one nice draft deck take out the first three opposing creatures with multiple copies of Reach Through Mists and a single Glacial Ray. A couple of cantrip kills like this can quickly put you far ahead in a game and the benefits of the Splice mechanic shouldn't be over-looked when you're building your deck.

There are few ways to gain card advantage in most limited formats and this one is no exception. The Splice mechanic is a nice one as there are quite a few different cards in the set that are worth having even without the addition of Splice.

Soulshift and Spirits

Another source of card advantage in this set is the Soulshift mechanic. This one is only present on the black, white and green cards (blue and red creatures are clearly soulless) but most of the commons that have this ability are worth playing. Vine Kami is a little over-costed in my opinion and I'd try to avoid playing with him but the others such as Scuttling Death and Burr Grafter are definitely worth playing as they're reasonable creatures in their own right even before the addition of Soulshift. Paying attention to your Spirit count as you're drafting is important when you're drafting one of the three Spirit colours as you can make things very difficult for your opponent if you can chain a couple of Soulshift creatures together in the mid-late game.



The focus on the Spirit creature type is obvious as it has many other game interactions beyond the Soulshift mechanic. There are plenty of reasonable creatures like Earthshaker and Innocence Kami that have great abilities when you have a spare Spirit creature to cast. Knowing what interactions you have and how important Spirits are to your deck will help you make the right choices in drafting and deck-building.

The other focus on Spirit comes from cards that work against them. I really like Hisoka's Defiance in this format as it can counter a lot of creatures as well as stopping a nasty Spliced Arcane spell. Right now I also value Rend Spirit a little higher than Rend Flesh as the split is about even between Spirit and non-Spirit creatures but a few of the nastier ones like Moss Kami are Spirits and I think people may have a greater inclination to play Spirits because of the numerous interactions with them.

That covers my initial thoughts. Over the coming weeks I'll be going over some of these topics in depth and discussing the colours and the best limited cards in the set. Stay tuned!

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