

Mark Gottlieb

Thursday, October 14, 2004

So it's Spirit Week, huh? So many cheesy jokes come to mind. Well, I'd best jump right into them...

I object to the whole notion of Spirit Week. I don't think that alcohol has any place on our website... whaaaaaa? Have I misinterpreted the relevant definition of "spirit"? Oh, how silly of me.

Time for a pep rally, folks! Wear your colors with pride! Go, [insert the name of your high school's dopey team name—mine was the "Cutters," which didn't have anything to do with cutting class, really, but was supposed to be some kind of ship], go! If this is the Thursday of Spirit Week, the Homecoming Dance must be tomorrow followed up by the big football game. Why, golly jeebers, I hope Sensei Golden-Tail will save me a foxtrot!



Do you want to get in contact with the spirit world? I can help you contact your departed loved ones. I've been blessed with the Gift ever since I had a near-broke experience. That traumatic event awakened me to the fact that I really, really like money a lot, and since that time I've been able to communicate vaguely with your friends and family on the Other Side. Wait, something is coming through now! I've been contacted... by someone that you (yes, you) love... and miss. It's a person you never got a chance to say goodbye to. I'm getting an initial of J... or M... or a letter—yes, yes, this person's initial is definitely a letter. It's someone you knew when you were younger, or more recently. The message is faint. Something about loving you... and something else... something about a check... your check. About how writing a check to... someone... someone who happens to be a mystical conduit... would, via mysteries of the spirit realm I can't ever hope to understand, directly lead to their peace and happiness. In fact, the bigger the check, the more peace they'll get. Upwards of \$500 gets you the Afterlife Peace Guarantee, my ironclad promise that the spirit of your loved one will never need to resort to haunting a couple of nice parents with a quiet yet troubled kid that have just moved into an old, gothic mansion.

Clouding the Issue

And then there are the Spirits we actually care about. First up are a tight little clique of Spirits that have a quirky little history in **Magic**. Previously glimpsed on the *Tempest* Master Decoy and the *Fifth Edition* Flight, the Zebras... huh? Not Zebras? Zuberas? What the heck is a Zuberera?



Although I can't tell you what a Zuberu is, my best (sarcastic) guess is that it's Japanese for "lemming." When one of these jumps off a cliff, the rest of them want to follow. Mechanically tied to the Shrines, these little critters can dissuade attacking in the early game (does anyone really want to run headfirst into a discard effect?) and can stack up for huge swings late in the game.

Sergey wrote in to suggest a Zuberu-Death Cloud deck that I thought was pretty keen. When an effect like Death Cloud or Devouring Greed causes you to sacrifice a bunch of Zuberu at once, they each see all their buddies heading to the graveyard, and you get the maximum benefit from each one. Sergey's example was when he offered two Dripping-Tongue Zuberu and a Floating Dream Zuberu with a Devouring Greed. That let him Drain Life for 8, draw three cards, and get six 1/1 Spirit tokens—which he parlayed into a Devouring Greed for 14 the next turn. And then there's the big spell. Any time you can sac a Zuberu horde that includes the blue and/or green ones to a Death Cloud, you'll have cards in hand and/or creatures on the table after the Cloud clears. Since your opponent should have just lost lands, cards, creatures, and life, you'll be in awfully good shape the rest of the way.

I changed a few cards from the deck Sergey suggested. I added Long-Forgotten Gohei because Glorious Anthem is often a good thing in weenie decks. The Gohei nearly doubles the size of each Zuberu! I also added Soulless Revivals because they make a neat little loop with Hana Kami. If Hana Kami is in your graveyard, you can fish it back out with Soulless Revival. Replay Hana Kami, then, when it's about to die, sacrifice it to regrow Soulless Revival, which can refetch the Hana Kami. If you've got a Thief of Hope in play, that's a fun loop to continue. And when you start splicing one Soulless Revival onto another, your hand starts to get fatter from the undead creatures clawing their way out of your graveyard.

Zu TV Tour

Main Deck

60 cards

1 City of Brass	4 Ashen-Skin Zuberu	4 Death Cloud
10 Forest	4 Dripping-Tongue Zuberu	4 Devouring Greed
2 Island	4 Floating-Dream Zuberu	4 Kodama's Reach
1 Salt Marsh	3 Hana Kami	4 Long-Forgotten Gohei
10 Swamp	2 Thief of Hope	3 Soulless Revival
24 lands	17 creatures	19 other spells

Introducing the The Unspeakable

One of my most common requests over the past week was to build a The Unspeakable deck. But I don't think you really need me to figure out a combo that will get The Unspeakable directly into play.

What I find much more interesting is a combo that Tobias Aberg and Ryan (just plain old Ryan) both suggested. They noted that Petals of Insight, while sometimes being a card-drawing spell, can also be construed as this:

Petals of Insight



Sorcery


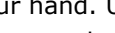
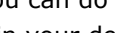
Look at the top three cards of your library and put them on the bottom of your library in any order.

Buyback 0

Anything with buyback 0, even if it doesn't actually do anything, is potentially abusable. Ryan suggested an infinite mana combo. Play Petals of Insight with a spliced Psychic Puppetry targeting a land so overloaded with Dawn's Reflections and Fertile Grounds that it produces more than 6 mana. You untap that land, both the Petals and the Puppetry return to your hand, you tap the land for mana, and repeat. You gain mana with each iteration, and eventually, when you have enough, you start splicing Reweave onto Petals of Insight too. You force your opponent to put into play, then sacrifice, every permanent in his deck. He'll be left with nothing in play and only instants and sorceries in his deck, which will make it pretty hard for him to win from there. (Be careful not to mana burn!) That's a pretty neat plan. But it has no Spirits, and this is Spirit Week. On to Tobias's plan.

Tobias suggested a very similar thing. He also mentioned Petals of Insight. His deck included Psychic Puppetry, too, although he didn't suggest using them together. When you splice Puppetry, if you untap an enchantment-laden land or a Gilded Lotus, you've actually gained mana by splicing it—if you can set it up, it's a blue (and better) Desperate Ritual. Tobias's deck used the Puppetry this way to enable the three Arcane spells that fetch out The Unspeakable while Soilshaper and Thief of Hope worked their spiritcraft mojo. Then he tacked on another combo that wasn't part of his deck... and this one got my attention.



Imprint Petals and Channel the Suns on the Helix. Play a second Petals. The Helix triggers, you play Channel, and you get . When Petals resolves, ship the cards to the bottom of your library and return Petals to your hand. Use the  in your mana pool to play Petals again, and you get  again. You can do this forever. Doing it forever doesn't particularly help you... unless you have Brain Freeze in your deck (and you *will* find it and have the mana to play it with this plan) or you have Thief of Hope in play. Drain for a million, one point at a time. Since Thief of Hope *is* a Spirit, this plan gets the nod. (I'm also a sucker for a cross-block combo.)

I could use both of the above plans in my deck. Instead, since my public demands it, I'm going to stick with the Helix plan and dedicate some room to a few blue Arcane instants that will help me search through my deck looking for (and maybe even discarding, to help set up the Helix) my combo pieces. And if they bring their big blue friend (voiced by Robin Williams, I believe) with them, so much the better.



Main Deck

60 cards

- | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 3 City of Brass | 1 The Unspeakable | 4 Channel the Suns |
| 1 Forest | 4 Thief of Hope | 4 Consuming Vortex |
| 15 Island | _____ | 3 Long-Forgotten Gohei |
| 3 Mirrodin's Core | 5 creatures | 4 Peer Through Depths |
| 2 Salt Marsh | _____ | 4 Petals of Insight |
| _____ | _____ | 4 Reach Through Mists |
| 24 lands | _____ | 4 Sift Through Sands |
| _____ | _____ | 4 Spellweaver Helix |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | 31 other spells |

Snakes Aren't the Only Sibilant Creatures

And now we head into the wayback machine. There were Spirits around long before *Kamigawa*, of course. While perusing the list, two caught my eye for their, um, synergy. Filling your opponent's hand with cards usually isn't a good thing, but Sibilant Spirit can do that (if your opponent cooperates), which will make your Entropic Specter (which is inexplicably a Spirit, *not* a Specter, as Mark Rosewater discussed on Monday) huge. This got me thinking: How does Sibilant Spirit's drawback get neutralized? How can I get to a situation where my opponent *declines* the card draw?

Dreamborn Muse, another Spirit, can punish my opponent for having a full hand. But if I've got a 5/6 flyer and, hopefully, another that's 6/6 or 7/7 or so, then milling doesn't seem like a top priority to me. No, I figure that Entropic Specter is on the right track. There are other cards along these lines: Multani, Maro-Sorcerer. Storm Seeker. Underworld Dreams. Viseling and its Black Visey ilk, including Dark Suspicions. They all turn cards in my opponent's hand into damage to his head.



A less direct way is for me to benefit from the full grip across the table. Assuming I can keep my hand relatively empty (which I want to do to maximize Dark Suspicions damage), then Oath of Scholars and Pulse of the Grid will pay off for me.

That still leaves two questions: How do I empty my hand, and how do I keep my opponent's hand full? Two of the best methods for ditching cards are Psychatog and Zombie Infestation. Those can flush out my entire hand at once like Drano on a clogged bowel. As for forcing cards into my opponent's hands (which becomes subversively fun, in a bizarro twist on how most **Magic** games play out, as soon as your opponent realizes he doesn't want them), Howling Mine is the classic standby. Seizan, Perverter of Truth is a Spirit (ring the theme bell!) that'll do it, as will Malignant Growth and

Nullmage Advocate. As an added bonus, two of those are painful as well as brainful. Soldevi Sentry offers your opponent the same dare as Sibilant Spirit. Standstill is interesting in this deck—early on, you want your opponent to break it so you get the cards; later on, you'll break it yourself to give your Specters +3/+3 and ramp up the Dark Suspicions. And Arcane Lab can create a bottleneck on the card outflow line even as the card inflow line is turned up to full blast. Ever seen a brain explode?

It's a Draw 

Main Deck
60 cards

1 Grand Coliseum	4 Entropic Specter	2 Arcane Laboratory
4 Island	1 Multani, Maro-Sorcerer	3 Dark Suspicions
3 Llanowar Wastes	1 Nullmage Advocate	4 Howling Mine
2 Polluted Delta	2 Psychatog	1 Malignant Growth
8 Swamp	1 Seizan, Perverter of Truth	2 Oath of Scholars
1 Tainted Isle	3 Sibilant Spirit	1 Pulse of the Grid
1 Tainted Wood	2 Soldevi Sentry	3 Standstill
3 Underground River	3 Viseling	1 Storm Seeker
<hr/>		1 Underworld Dreams
23 lands	17 creatures	2 Zombie Infestation
<hr/>		20 other spells

That deck is, obviously, a hodge-podge. It should be streamlined—more 4-ofs, less 1-ofs—but for now it serves as an idea cache. I don't know which cards in which combinations work out the best, so they're all in there for you to adapt however you see fit.

Until next week, have fun with Spirits.

Mark

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