

Mark Gottlieb

Thursday, October 21, 2004

The nice thing about a public forum like this is that it's a public forum. I control the wordspace in my virtual neck of the woods, and I can use it how I see fit. As long as it's about **Magic**, that is. So today I'm going to take the time to take advantage of my freedom of the press and make some long overdue apologies. That are very **Magic**-related.

To Freddy: My bad, dude. It's totally my fault. I was in a rush, I wasn't paying attention to punctuation, and when I'm writing a note about how much I'd appreciate "that man's laughter," I ought to know enough to take my time. You thought you were doing me a solid, and that resonates with me. He wasn't even my favorite cousin, so no big. I'm thinking of you, and I'll see you in 8 to 12. Oh, and, um, Foul Familiar is, um, neat.

To Mrs. Henderson: I've got to come clean. It's been burdening me for years, tormenting my dreams, making me tremble with guilt every time I see a long division problem. It was all a lie: The dog didn't really eat my homework. He licked all the whipped cream off it, but he didn't even take a bite out of the paper. I had to eat it myself. In my mind, I've been the metaphorical dog that my non-metaphorical dog couldn't be. Er... which reminds me of what's-his-name, Konda's pooch, Isotoner.

To Bethany: This is pretty personal, and everyone's reading this, so I'm going to have to be a bit roundabout. I think you'll understand what I'm saying. I'm sorry about the kumquat razzmatazz. If I had known your mother was vivisecting the gyroscopic bratwurst, I never would have left my ptarmigan in the joboba. It's too late to fix things between us, but take comfort in the knowledge that my flagella horticulture days are over. And that two of The Offspring's nine albums share names with artifact destruction spells.

To G-Snap: I was wrong, you were right. They *can* reattach ears. Rabid Wombat rocks!

Apology Excepted

I'm glad that's over with. It was weighing on my soul, y'know?

Last week was Spirit Week here in websiteland. While I was cruising the archives looking for (and finding) obscure Spirits to make a deck around, I came across Foul Familiar. I liked it. Rather, I should say that I liked it now. Back in the days of *Ice Age*, I wasn't fond of the little critter. It only had 1 toughness, it couldn't block at all, and the ability seemed worthless. I could pay life to return it to my hand? *Pay life?* Why, so I could just play it again? It was already on the table! What I didn't understand in 1995 were the nuances of putting combat damage on the stack and then bouncing the familiarly foul Foul Familiar to my hand, or of replaying the same Spirit over and over to continually reap the benefits of my "spiritcraft" triggers. Those things just never occurred to me. I suppose it's a mark of my maturity as a player that I appreciate those aspects of the game now.

(Yet another bonus to reading my column: Here's a lightning-fast intelligence test! If you've already started writing me an email to me to tell me that "the stack" and "spiritcraft" didn't exist in 1995, well, let's just say that you didn't pass.)

I didn't get to Foul Familiar last week, but it stuck around long enough for me to chat it up now. Oddly, I didn't think of Blinking Spirit (a much more famous *Ice Age* Spirit with a self-bounce ability) until this week. The deck practically builds itself, though. Just use all the black and white *Champions*

of *Kamigawa* creatures that have a “whenever you play a Spirit or Arcane spell” ability, and we're done! Right? Maybe not. There are four white *Champions* creatures with a “spiritcraft” ability. They each cost exactly five mana. Sure, some are 4W and some are 3WW, but they lend themselves to neither a diverse nor a cheap mana curve. The black creatures fare better, as they provide Kami of the Waning Moon and the excellent Thief of Hope. But it was when I dipped into artifacts that the deck really took shape.

What's in artifacts? Jade Idol. This goes along with not only bouncy Blinky and Fouly, but Hikari (sorry, that's Hikari, Twilight Guardian), which popped up during my white “spiritcraft” search. What these cards have in common is that they can all duck Wrath of God. The deck's bouncing Spirits keep the Idol turned on and keep Thief of Hope busy while either attacking with abandon or (in Blinking Spirit's case) blocking forever. Your opponent may have to overextend to break through, and that's when you sweep the board... except for your creatures that hid in your hand, the removed from game zone, or in statue form.

Crafty Spirits

Casual Spirit deck

Top of the Morning

Adrian Sullivan's column this week is about the many uses of Sensei's Divining Top. It's a testament to the robustness of this annoying little card (as well as a testament to my luckiness) that he didn't exhaust all of them. I have a Top deck that exploits an additional trick brought to my attention by N.K.S that Adrian didn't use at all. So while it could have looked as though Adrian and I don't communicate about what we'll each be writing about or, worse, that I just copied his ideas, it instead looks as though we cooperatively collaborated so my column dovetails nicely with his. Let's just say that's what happened.

N.K.S discovered that having two Divining Tops could be quite a boon. I always thought a second Top was redundantly redundant, and in most cases it is. But not if you build around it. Here's the situation: You use the tap ability of one Top to draw a card and then plant it on top of your library. You use the tap ability of the other Top to draw a card (that first Top) and now *it* goes to the top of your library. Play the Top that's now in your hand. Tap it to draw a card... and you should see where this is going. This is, of course, useless. Unless you have a Forgotten Ancient in play, which has suddenly gained the ability “X: Put X +1/+1 counters on Forgotten Ancient. Play this ability only any time you could play a sorcery.” Arcbound Crusher also gains X +1/+1 tokens. Leonin Elder gains X life. Vedalken Archmage draws X cards. Lumengrid Sentinel taps X creatures. And you only have to pay X once for all these affects because they each trigger each time you play one of your super-bouncy Tops.

It gets better. Want to go infinite?

How big is Arcbound Crusher now? Another fine use N.K.S suggests for the Top-o-Matic is storm spells. Ping-pong your two Tops back and forth for a while, then cast Brain Freeze or Tendrils of Agony.

A different Top trick (this time using just one) is that you can stack its tap abilities to draw a bunch of cards if you have any untap effects. Tap your Top to put its card-drawing ability on the stack. Before that resolves, untap your Top and tap it again. Do it as many times as you can muster via Aphetto Alchemist, Clock of Omens, whatever. When you finally start to let the stack resolve, the first Top ability has you draw a card and put the Top on top of your library. The second Top ability has you draw a card and put the Top on top of your lib—what? You can't? Well, just draw the card then. All the rest of the abilities have you draw a card while the “Top on top” part simply fails. (This works in the

same way Goblin Cannon lets you activate it 20 times. You can only fulfill the sacrifice instruction the first time the ability resolves, but all of the rest of the activations still deal damage.)

N.K.S sent me a Tribal Wars Wizard deck that used his dual-Top action along with Trinket Mage (to fetch them) and Lumengrid Warden and Vedalken Archmage (to exploit them). I'm pretty much going to leave the ***Magic Online*** casual formats in the more than capable hands of JMS and Nate Heiss, so I made an Online Extended deck instead.

To the Top

Online Extended Sensei's Divining Top deck

Doomsday

Today's last deck is a Shared Fate-Leveler deck from Boris Zinshteyn. I get sent Shared Fate decks all the time, and I never post them. I don't like the card. I've seen the Shared Fate-with-no-victory-conditions deck way too often, and it bores me. It doesn't have the panache, the verve, the élan, the other fancy words that I usually strive for in a deck. The thought of a Shared Fate mirror match, where neither deck has any victory conditions at all, seems so horribly unpleasant I don't want to contemplate it. And I've seen the Shared Fate-Leveler combo a million times by now, so it's old news to me. That could be because I've already written about it. In fact, I was one of the first people to ever come up with the combo, posting it back on October 2 of last year, right around the time Leveler (and the rest of *Mirrodin*) was released. No one ever checks the archives. Back to my whiny point: I don't post Shared Fate-Leveler decks.

But Boris has a different approach.

Boris takes two cards—two popular cards (no, I'm not talking about either Shared Fate or Leveler)—and uses them in such a subversive, unintended, *wrong* manner that is nothing short of genius. His real combo is Cranial Extraction + Relentless Rats. He stuffs his deck full of at least 20 Relentless Rats, then uses Cranial Extraction on *himself* to remove them all! He's left with a lean, mean, much smaller and more focused deck. After that, it doesn't much matter what the victory condition is. He chose Shared Fate and Leveler, but he also noted that you can use anything else. (Well, maybe not Battle of Wits.)

Rat Extraction

Online Extended Shared Fate deck

That's the exact deck. I'm tempted to pull out the Lobotomies and Gifts Ungivens and just add more Rats! The neat part about the deck is that if it sees an opportunity to win by going Rat beatdown, it can. OK, the really neat part about the deck is pulling off the neo-Doomsday. I have no idea how good this is in actual practice. But I do know how crazy it is (I'm a bit of an expert), and it scores off the charts.

Until next week, have fun with gyroscopic bratwurst.

Mark

And coming next week... an attack by Captain Obvious's twin brother!

To send Mark your goofy decks and original combos, click the snazzy new email link below. Mark can't provide personalized deck help. Please send rules questions (including questions about stuff Mark says but you don't believe) to John Carter.

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