

December Bannings, or Lack Thereof Search

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Friday, December 03, 2004

I suppose by now that everyone has read the December B&R announcement and seen the news, or lack thereof: We didn't ban anything in Standard.

That decision was not easy. I suppose there is some amount of irony in the fact that the decision-making process leading up to this point was the most intense, drawn-out, and involved of any banning discussion I have ever seen in my years here at Wizards, and somehow we decided the best plan of action was to do nothing.

And I can say honestly that doing nothing was correct.

After States, people here at Wizards in R&D and Organized Play heard the low grumblings about the Ravager Affinity deck and began crunching a bunch of numbers regarding its supposed dominance. Our next step was to figure out what we would ban should we deem bannings to be necessary. Most people involved in the DCI felt that one or more of the "marquee" Ravager Affinity cards--Disciple of the Vault, Arcbound Ravager, and Cranial Plating--should be singled out. That list was quickly expanded to include Aether Vial and



Thoughtcast for consideration. I, on the other hand, was the front man for the faction that felt the five colored artifact lands (Vault of Whispers, et al), were the real culprits and deserved to get the axe. For what it's worth, both sides' arguments had problems.

You may recall that pre-*Darksteel*, Broodstar Affinity was considered by many players to be the best deck in Standard, and that deck didn't contain Disciple, Ravager, or Plating. What that means to me is that the problem lies deep within the mechanic, not just with a card or three on the surface. There's no way for us to be sure that if we banned some or all of the "marquee" Ravager Affinity cards that other cards wouldn't just spring up and take their places. Shrapnel Blast isn't even showing up anymore, nor is Ornithopter, and AtoG and Moriok Rigger are always begging for playing time. Or the deck could go back to the Broodstar counterspell version, which would benefit from recent additions like Qumulox and Pentad Prism. While neither of these "from-the-ashes" versions of Affinity would be nearly as powerful as the current deck, there is a reasonable chance that either could be the best deck in Standard even still. What happens in that world? We ban some cards, which inherently makes people mad, and we don't even change the format that much. We aren't happy, players aren't happy, and no one wins. (You may recall a similar thing happening in Extended years ago when Tolarian Academy and Mind over Matter were banned and Time Spiral and Stroke of Genius were not. High Tide combo decks that did almost the exact same thing as the old Academy decks ruled the format.) Anyone who has walked away from Standard due to the prominence of Affinity would not be lured back by the presence of a still-dominant, if slightly weaker, Affinity. Even the chance that our bannings might accomplish virtually nothing scared me to no end, which led me to push for the banning of the artifact lands.

There can be no doubt that banning the five colored artifact lands would rid the world of Affinity. Of course, Ironworks would go away as well. Big Red decks could still play *Darksteel* Citadels and Talismans to support Shrapnel Blast, and most other decks could loosen up on the artifact hate. It's kind of fun to imagine a world where there are no artifact lands, and what kinds of decks would exist in that metagame. Of course, this speaks more to the fact that maybe we shouldn't have printed the artifact lands than the need to ban them, because, let's face it, banning cards sucks.

Many of us in R&D fiddle around on **Magic Online** in our spare time, playing casual decks or competitive Standard just for fun and to interact with the player base. Of course, being online means you get messaged a lot with people wanting to speak their minds or pry information from us. And when casual players—and even some in the serious rooms—start asking questions like “When are you going to ban Kiki-Jiki?” or “Are you banning Eternal Witness soon?” (someone actually asked if Sakura-Tribe Elder was getting banned.)—you start to realize that people have the wrong idea about banning cards.

First of all, there will always be “best cards” and “best decks.” Banning doesn't do anything to change that statement, it just changes what that statement refers to. Second, **Magic**--especially small formats like Standard and Block Constructed--is not about banning cards. We like to avoid having to solve problems by banning cards, as that leads to a culture of fear. We certainly don't want people to start believing that all the good cards they own are in the crosshairs of the DCI. With that in mind, can you imagine the weird backlash that would happen if we banned artifact lands? Most players that aren't into the tournament scene would have no idea at all why we did this. Tree of Tales is banned?! It's one of the most powerful cards ever?! Are you kidding me?! While it would certainly solve the problem on the top end, it would alienate and confuse people elsewhere.

Like I said, this discussion was simply about what we would ban if we decided something needed banned. Luckily, the other half of the discussion came to a close and essentially let us off the hook.

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Standard is really not a bad format. Affinity is the best deck, and the most played deck, but that happens often in Constructed. What matters is that there are decks that use each of the five colors that can be built to handle Affinity. Look at our archive of Top 8 decks from States. You have options, and many of them actually include cards from *Champions of Kamigawa*. I've heard from many seasoned players that Affinity is beatable, you just have to put some effort into it. Ravager Affinity took months to perfect; I expect that over a similar period of time a newer generation of decks will shape up into real powerhouses.

Is the book closed on the issue? Not at all. While leaving the format alone was correct this time, we'll be weighing tournament data, examining decklists, and gauging player satisfaction once again three months from now, which would be before US Regionals.

Being a part of the **Magic** Internet community, I spend some time each day reading other **Magic** sites as well as various message boards. The last thing I want to do with regards to Standard is address a couple misconceptions I've seen floating around

Wizards didn't ban anything because we don't want to admit we made a mistake. False. Banning things is not the way to admit to making a mistake. Sending yours truly out on stage to get tomatoes thrown at me is how we admit mistakes these days. No bones about it, there are lots of development mistakes present in the Affinity deck. Either printing the lands was a mistake, or printing the other cards once we knew the lands were in place was a mistake. If we had to do it over, something would change.

The thing is, banning some number of cards doesn't necessarily fix anything, but it does give us an opportunity to make even more mistakes.

An environment where people have to play artifact removal main deck is bad. False. We're coming off a block that's power is contained almost solely in artifacts. For years, creature removal cards have been staples in the environment. No one blinks when a format “forces” you to play Swords to Plowshares, or Diabolic Edict, or Flametongue Kavu, or Wrath of God. It seems natural, since **Magic** is usually “about” creatures. Well, on the heels of *Mirrodin*, **Magic** is now about artifacts. We wanted it that way. Shaking things up is good, and as the format changes, the nature of reactive cards changes as well.

Moving on to other formats... Extended and Legacy both dodged the ban-hammer this time around. Extended seems to be a diverse and vibrant format, and Legacy is still a little young to be judged (although initial indications are that the banned list isn't too terribly far off from what it needs to be in the long run).

Online, Prismatic was the only format to change. The dreaded Skullclamp gets added to yet another banned list, as every good deck was running four plus four Trinket Mages to go find them, and getting one in play often meant you'd win the game. Joining the Clamp are two powerful tutoring effects, Bringer of the Black Dawn and Gifts Ungiven. Both cards are at a power level for library manipulation that is too high for the format.

That leaves good ol' Vintage. We made a small change to the B&R list there, unrestricting Stroke of Genius. We had taken Braingeyser off the list last time to test the waters, and when it continued to not be played, we felt it was fine to take Stroke off as well. Nothing new was restricted, but we are keeping an eye on about a dozen cards.

Like I did with Standard, I want to address a couple points I'd read elsewhere on the 'Net:

Other cards needed to be unrestricted in Vintage. I don't think "need" is the right word. If the card isn't good enough to be played, then it doesn't really matter if it's on the list or not. If it is good enough to be played, then perhaps it deserves its status. We do want to clean the list up, but there's no harm done in doing it slowly. The reintroduction of Doomsday shook the format up, and we want to be able to watch each card pretty closely, and not re-flood the environment with once-broken cards. There is still a lot of innovation going on in the format; it doesn't need extra powerful cards unrestricted to be interesting.

Mishra's Workshop needed to be restricted in Vintage. This statement is pretty close to being true. If trends continue, something will have to be done about the unholy trio of Workshop, Trinisphere, and Crucible of Worlds. We're not there yet, and perhaps we never will be, but if current trends continue we will have to react. Again, I don't want people living in fear that the DCI is after their favorite cards, but I also don't want players to think we aren't aware of one of the biggest hot-button issues in the format.

Last Article's Poll:

Do you plan on playing in <i>Unhinged</i> release events this weekend?		
No	5116	58.7%
Yes	3602	41.3%
Total	8718	100.0%

This Week's Poll:

What were you expecting to happen in Standard with regards to bannings?

- No bannings.
- Ban just Disciple or just Ravager.
- Ban multiple spells from Ravager Affinity.
- Ban multiple Affinity cards plus cards from other decks.
- Ban artifact lands.
- Other.



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