

# Creatures? Why Bother?

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Scott Wills

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**B**efore I get into the topic for this week's column I'm going to talk about last week's for a few paragraphs. It generated quite a few e-mails and message board posts (as I thought it might) and most of them were in the same vein albeit with one minor difference. The average post or e-mail looked something like:

*"The best pick isn't Scuttling Death, it's clearly Honden of Cleansing Fire"*

All very nice, except the next one looked like:

*"The best pick isn't Scuttling Death, it's clearly Sakura-Tribe Elder"*

And the next:

*"The best pick isn't Scuttling Death, it's clearly Blood Rites"*

And the next:

*"The best pick isn't Scuttling Death, it's clearly Mystic Restraint"*

I'm sure you get the picture by now!

As far as I can tell, Scuttling Death is easily one of the most under-rated commons in the format right now. Not because it's really powerful, but because it's a lot more powerful than people *think* it is. Even if you ignore all of the colour-signalling reasons Scuttling Death is still very close to being the most powerful card in the pack. Blood Rites is ahead of it and Blademaster is at a similar power level but Scuttling Death is definitely ahead of both Sakura-Tribe Elder and the Honden.

Scuttling Death is basically the equivalent of Annihilate from *Invasion*. It's a five mana black spell that can kill a creature and generate card advantage. In some ways it's worse; it isn't an instant, and you have to be in a position to block the creature you kill, although you can sometimes take down one of the blue flyers instead. In other ways though, it's better; you can sometimes kill two creatures, it can kill black creatures and it "draws" you a useful spell more often than Annihilate might have. It also happens to function as a four-power attacker, which is great for its cost.



*Probably still better than you think it is...for now.*

Chad Ellis, whose opinions I respect highly, commented on the message board:

*"I have a definite bias here towards flexibility and against expensive spells early in the draft...Scuttling Death is a good card but it's not so*

*hard to pick up that you need to first-pick one, IMO."*

Now I don't disagree with either of those comments. This format is about tempo and your bias should be towards cheap spells, but let's look at the common black creatures that are playable:

Wicked Akuba, Nezumi Cutthroat, Cruel Deceiver, Nezumi Ronin, Villainous Ogre, Kami of the Waning Moon, Gibbering Kami, Scuttling Death.

(Cursed Ronin and Ashen Zuberu also make the cut sometimes.)

The important thing to note is that it's very easy to pick up two-drops and three-drops in black but there's nothing that replaces Scuttling Death. Indeed, many of those two-drops will go 'round late as the black removal spells get drafted over them. If you don't take a Scuttling Death when you see one there is no guarantee you'll get another passed to you. Just because you *might* get a powerful card later on doesn't mean you should pass up on the chance of getting multiples.

As I said, the only other card in the pack that beats Scuttling Death in terms of power is Blood Rites; Sakura-Tribe Elder and Honden of Cleansing Fire are significantly worse picks than Rites or Death. The problem I have with Blood Rites is that it has a double-coloured casting cost, which makes it unsplashable, as well as being in one of the shallowest and most over-drafted colours. I stand by last week's choice and I think if you draft Scuttling Death in spirit-focused decks more highly you'll see just how powerful it really is.

If I haven't convinced you by now I'm not going to, so I won't try any further. Instead let's move on with today's topic.

## Going Creatureless

For the last month or so a new limited archetype has been floating around the **Magic** world, and it's only recently showed its head at recent GP events in Yokohama and Paris. I've seen it played on **Magic Online** a few times and have drafted it myself as well. The deck has been developed by, and shared amongst, several of the English **Magic** players I chat with and many have drafted it with a lot of success. Brian talked a little bit about this archetype in his column last week but I'll be going into quite a bit more depth than he had a chance to.

At GP Paris this weekend Quentin Martin was the benefactor of this development as he'd heard about the deck and managed to draft the following version of it:

### Quentin Martin's Dampen Thought deck

**Main Deck**  
40 cards

13 Island	_____	1 Candles' Glow
5 Plains	0 creatures	2 Consuming Vortex
_____		3 Counsel of the Soratami
18 lands		3 Dampen Thought
		2 Ethereal Haze
		1 Hisoka's Defiance
		1 Long-Forgotten Gohei
		2 Peer Through Depths

- 2 Psychic Puppetry
- 4 Reach Through Mists
- 1 Sift Through Sands

22 other spells

Yes, that's right, **zero** creatures.

It should be fairly obvious as to just how this deck wins as there's only one card in the deck that does so, and that is Dampen Thought.

Quite simply, all this deck does is stall, draw cards, and mill your opponent. Out of all the decks in the format this is obviously the one that abuses the Splice mechanic more than most. In Quentin's deck above 17 of his 22 spells are Arcane and three of those that aren't are the Counsels, which are there simply to assist in drawing into more Arcane spells.

Winning via decking your opponent (they lose when they try to draw a card but have no cards left in their library) used to be a frequent kill method in the Standard environment.

Indeed, the act of putting your opponent's cards into their graveyard from their library is called 'Milling' from the card that originally started it all back in *Antiquities*, the "Stone Doughnut":



The way the deck wins is simply by splicing Dampen Thought onto the other Arcane spells multiple times until your opponent runs out of library. This might sound difficult but with a 40 card deck you'll usually only have to play Dampen Thought 6-7 times. A 7 card hand, followed by 7-9 turns of **Magic** takes care of 14-16 cards in the library so you just need to mill for 24-26 or so. Sometimes this can be even less if your opponent casts Kodama's Reach, Counsel of the Soratami or something similar.

Finding enough Arcane cards to Splice Dampen Thought onto would be difficult in most decks but this archetype plays a lot of the Arcane cards that draw cards so it doesn't normally run out of targets. The only real difficulty comes from not dying in those 7-9 turns, and that's where the help of some of the white cards comes in. Ethereal Haze is excellent as it buys you a whole turn and is a one mana Arcane spell that you can Splice things onto cheaply. Candles' Glow is one of the best cards you can get as it prevents six damage effectively and can be re-used again and again due to its Splice ability. It's also an Arcane card itself so it can be used as a Splice target if you are desperate.

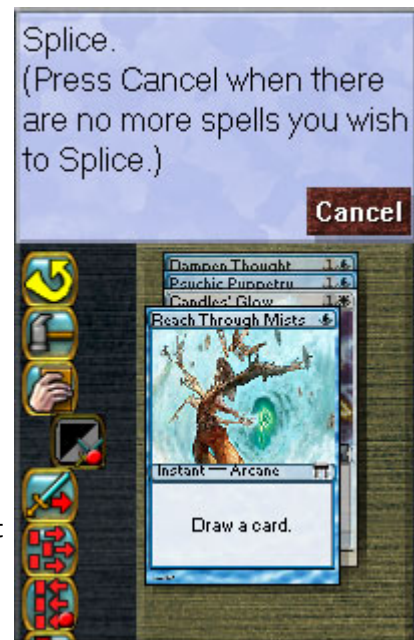
Psychic Puppetry is another card that functions as reusable damage prevention as it can tap down an opponent's creature before they can attack with it. With a very cheap Splice cost of just one blue mana you can often Splice this into your other spells turn after turn and save yourself a lot of damage in the long run.

Surviving for 7-9 turns sounds like a lot but it really isn't. Most games of limited **Magic** don't feature attacking creatures until turn three at the earliest and you don't start to take a lot of damage until five or six. With the combination of the blue tap and bounce effects and white's damage prevention it's not always as difficult to survive as you might think.

Once you get to turn six or seven your turns you'll often find yourself casting "Reach Through Mists, Splicing Dampen Thought, Splicing Psychic Puppetry, Splicing Candles' Glow" during your opponent's turn. There aren't many decks that can still deal damage to you through that onslaught.

The true benefit of this deck however is that you want all of the cards that no-one else ever touches. Peer Through Depths is basically unplayable in most decks that feature just three or four targets for it but when you have twenty or more it pretty much hits every time and as a two mana Arcane cantrip that almost always draws you into another Arcane card it's excellent.

Ethereal Haze is another card that is great for you but terrible for everyone else. The Haze along with cards like Psychic Puppetry, Sift Through Sands and Reach Through Mists all go very late in a draft and these are all key cards for this archetype. Being able to draft your high picks when everyone else is scrabbling around trying to find something playable for their eleventh pick puts you at a significant advantage.



## When and how to draft it

It should go without saying that this isn't an archetype that you can force early on. It's pretty much impossible to win unless you actually have Dampen Thought. You can play a blue-red version instead of the blue-white that also attempts to abuse the Splice ability via Glacial Ray. With this deck you can technically win by casting Glacial Ray at your opponent's head 10 times but that's much, much harder to do than milling them six or seven times, especially as you might not be able to rely on the white stall cards.

There are 88 uncommons in *Champions of Kamigawa* and in any given draft 72 uncommons will be opened (each pack will have 3, each player will open 3 packs and there are 8 drafters so  $3 \times 3 \times 8 = 72$ ). That might sound like you'll see Dampens a lot of the time but if you do the math (and I didn't, fellow brit Mark Wraith confirmed it for me), due to the possibility of duplicates, there'll be a Dampen Thought in a given draft only a little over 55% of the time. That figure means you can't rely on seeing a Dampen Thought in a draft and as a result you can only really set about drafting this deck if you see a Dampen Thought within the first few picks of a draft.

If you open Dampen Thought in pack two it's still not too late to move into the archetype because you do often get a lot of late picks that are good for you. However at that point, if the packs open badly you still might struggle to get enough playables. The last time I moved into this archetype from the first pick of pack two my next three picks were from packs that contained zero blue or white spells of any description so be prepared for that to happen if you change archetype mid-draft.

If you do see the Dampen Thought in the first few packs though you're good to go. It's worth paying attention to your early picks and noting the cards you might want to pick up when the pack comes back around to you. I've hate-drafted a second pick Distress on one occasion simply because I knew the Peer Through Depths that I really wanted would come back 'round as a ninth pick.

Other articles around the net have claimed you have to have at least two, and preferably three Dampen Thoughts to make this work, but that just isn't the case. If you only get one Dampen Thought then there are several other things you can draft to make the deck work. Most obvious is Eerie Processions which you can use to fetch your Dampen Thought. The second thing is a Glacial Ray as this card more than any of the others will allow you to take out opposing creatures and buy a lot of time to search for your Dampen Thought. If you're playing against a black-red deck you might find that the Glacial Ray is able to kill every creature they play! Peer Through Depths is a very efficient search card for this deck and if you don't have multiple Dampens you just play a lot of Peers instead. If you can cast two Peers in the first three turns of the game you will have seen half your deck and so have about a 50/50 chance of finding a lone Dampen Thought already. I'm not suggesting that running a single Dampen Thought is a good idea but if you draft the deck and can't find a second copy then you have to have alternatives.



It's difficult to give a suitable listing for the picks in this archetype as lots of them are dependant on what you have already. You don't want too many Ethereal Hazes for example, but you do want to have two or three. Initially your top ten picks for this deck would look something like this:

1. Dampen Thought
2. Eerie Procession
3. Candles' Glow
4. Ethereal Haze
5. Glacial Ray
6. Peer Through Depths
7. Consuming Vortex
8. Psychic Puppetry
9. Reach Through Mists
10. Sift Through Sands

Dampen Thought is the card that makes the deck so it's obviously first.

Candles' Glow, Ethereal Haze, Glacial Ray, Consuming Vortex and Psychic Puppetry all basically do the same job – they stop you dying. Whether it's through preventing damage, killing the creature or just stopping it attacking, it's this suite of five cards that help you stay alive long enough to win. They are all Arcane cards in their own right and



four of the five can be Spliced onto Arcane as well, although you frequently won't have time to pay Consuming Vortex's Splice cost. Glacial Ray is very powerful in this deck but the fact that it's a red card can be a big drawback. This deck needs a lot of blue mana as you'll often be casting things like Reach Through Mists and Sift Through Sands and be looking to Splice blue cards onto them. If you draft Rays you'll probably still need access to three colours, which can hurt both of the splash colours as well as your ability to Splice everything you want. When you get it working though, Glacial Ray is far better than the other options as it removes most creatures permanently. If you get Glacial Ray running early in a match you can sometimes leave your opponent creatureless after killing their first three or four guys, at which point you have plenty of time to go about milling them to death.

The rest of the cards are just about drawing more cards and casting cheap Arcane spells onto which you can splice useful effects. It should be clear that you need a good balance of these two card types. You'll probably lose if none of your Arcane spells draw cards as you'll run out of targets for your Splice effects. Similarly, if you lack any way of slowing an opponent down you probably will die before you're able to rid your opponent of their library.

Fortunately, due to the fact that there are multiple cards that fill each function and many of these cards get shipped very late, it's usually not too difficult get enough cards to fill both needs.

You may notice there are no creatures in that top ten list. I've seen numerous versions of this deck around the net that have eight or more creatures in and these versions are just terrible. Cards like Kitsune Blademaster and the like have no place in this deck. You only really play creatures if you aren't able to draft enough spells, and even then you really only want the good, tough to kill, defensive creatures like Kami of Old Stone. The more creatures you play the more you dilute the deck and the less chance you have of milling someone out quickly.

Part of the point of this deck is to render a number of your opponent's spells useless. Your opponent will have creature removal and if you can avoid playing creatures all of those cards become dead. I played against one person who played out two creatures and then died with four cards still in his hand. I asked him after the match and he had Kodama's Might, Rend Flesh, Befoul and Hideous Laughter in hand. By playing creatures you just give your opponents a chance to make use of these cards. If you don't get enough Arcane spells to make the deck and you do have to play some creatures then fair enough, don't worry about it too much. The best versions of this deck routinely play 0-3 creatures though.

The one creature I don't mind playing is Teller of Tales. Its ability will often let you tap down an extra attacker during your opponent's attack step and unlike cards like Kitsune Diviner and defensive creatures that you might be playing for blocking purposes it stills functions through opposing Glacial Rays, Cage of Hands and Mystic Restraints.

If you're forced to play non-Arcane spells then card drawers and actual creature removal is fine. Cage of Hands and Mystic Restraints are both acceptable in this deck as they can both give you more time. Restraint is a little expensive but if you're going first you can often cast it on your opponent's third turn creature and prevent upwards of ten damage over the course of the game by doing so.

## **Beating It**

If you're playing against a Dampen Thought deck there are numerous cards that can help you out but unfortunately (or fortunately, if you're the guy doing the milling) most of them are uncommon or rare. Distress is by far the best card as taking the Dampen Thought from their hand will be game over unless they can find another one very quickly.

If you're a blue player yourself then boarding in all your copies of Hisoka's Defiance and Thoughtbind will give you a much better chance in subsequent games. Thoughtbind will still counter a Reach

Through Mists no matter how much mana was spent Splicing additional spells onto it.

Several rares like Uba Mask, Dosan the Falling Leaf and Shell of the Last Kappa can all inflict serious harm on the Dampen Thought deck so make sure you pay attention to any of these cards as potential sidebar targets.

I've seen people board in a bunch of lands to prevent decking but this is usually pretty pointless. If the Dampen Thought deck gets running it can often mill you for 8 a turn and sideboarding in 20 lands will gain you an extra three turns at best. In the mean-time you'll massively impact the average quality of your deck and most likely slow down your kill by a few turns at least at the same time. If you can board in a number of cards without impacting the quality of your deck too much, and also keep your land/spell ratio the same, then that's a much better plan.

Well that concludes my take on Dampen Thought. I hope it's given you some ideas for the next time you open the card in a draft. I've been playing Limited **Magic** for nearly ten years now I think, and in all that time I don't think I've seen a viable creatureless archetype before. It's nice that **Magic** is still able to spring surprises on us after all this time!



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