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The release of a new set is always exciting for me. As someone who is mostly interested in decks and deck design, new cards -- and in the case of *Betrayers of Kamigawa*, key reprints -- really get my creative juices flowing. The beginning is also the best time to share new ideas and new interactions, maybe revisit old applications of similar cards... before they've been trampled by the next Tooth and Nail or made obsolete by the discovery of the next Aether Vial.

Now some cards are going to jump out at you as obviously great. Yukora, the Prisoner, for instance, is about as good a Juzam Djinn reprint as we will probably ever see. In a dedicated control deck, Yukora may be even better than the original, and in many decks, this Legendary Demon Spirit will probably have no downside besides the Legend Rule itself. From the perspective of this column, though, I am going to try to hit on cards you might not have thought of as obviously great for constructed. Hopefully I will dig up some good ideas for attacking the metagame or present some decent ideas for decks down the line.

1. Sowing Salt

I want to start with this reprint from *Urza's Destiny*. Unlike some of the rest of the "Lobotomy" sorceries in Sowing Salt's cycle, this red card never really got its due the first time around. Eradicate was a key Lin Sivvi killer, Scour and Quash were timed perfectly for fighting Replenish decks, and Splinter got played just because Uktabi Orangutan left Standard at the right time, but Sowing Salt itself never made its mark in the same way.

This time around, I think that Sowing Salt will be the best of the group. Think about the most obviously good card in the cycle given the current Affinity-dominated constructed formats, Splinter. Now think of its most powerful targets. Splinter is never going to hit an Arcbound Ravager, and can't even really prevent a Ravager from getting big (or even sharing the wealth) when it gets played. As Splinter costs four mana, it is unlikely to match up well against the far faster Aether Vial, and worst of all for its resume, Splinter has to compete in Standard with Oxidize, Naturalize, Viridian Shaman, and even Deconstruct. You can even make an argument that Creeping Mold at the same mana cost is a better choice!

But what about Sowing Salt? Sowing Salt is in position to single-handedly create a huge shift in the metagame. One of the top Standard decks right now is Tooth and Nail. Tooth and Nail's goal is to set up either a set of Urza's Mine, Urza's Power Plant, and Urza's Tower or multiple Cloudposts so that it can play Tooth and Nail with Entwine to grab two huge threats and likely win the game with them. But what happens when you throw Sowing Salt into the mix? Sowing Salt will seriously disrupt the Urza's land combination and completely destroy a Cloudpost engine. A cagey Tooth and Nail player can overcome even multiple Molten Rains, but even one Sowing Salt is another story entirely. If it hits a specialty land, Sowing Salt will make casting Tooth and Nail difficult, if not impossible, over the course of a relevant time window.



Moreover, modern mono-Red Decks like Michael Strunk's Florida State Champion or reigning Player of the Year Gabriel Nassif's Ponza play Demolish. In a mono-Red Deck, Sowing Salt is not much more difficult to cast than Demolish, and while it lacks a certain level of flexibility, the card's strength in certain matchups will probably justify it in this style of deck.

Almost every Standard deck has non-basic lands, from Blinkmoth Nexus to dual lands, so Sowing Salt is unlikely to be a "dead" card. That said, I imagine it will only be a "2-of" in the main deck, with additional copies possible in the sideboard for specifically vulnerable opponents.

2. Iwamori of the Open Fist




With most sharks probably jumping for joy at Yukora, the Prisoner, it is entirely possible that the "other" 5/5 for four, Iwamori of the Open Fist, will be overlooked (at least at first). While probably not as good as Yukora against removal -- he's not a Spirit and he's not black, so he's easier to kill in constructed -- Iwamori will likely acquit himself as the more flexible card.

You see, Yukora is no good in a swarm deck. You can play him in a deck with a bunch of Ogres or you can play him as a finisher, and that's about it unless you want to hand the wrong opponents a free Wrath of God. Iwamori, on the other hand, has a pretty small downside. Imagine if he allowed the opponent to put *any* creature in his hand into play: now *that* might be a bad drawback.

When our intrepid editor Scott Johns was just returning to **Magic** back in 1999, he spied a match I played at Bob Maher's PT Chicago. In this match, I played a four mana green creature with just that conjectural drawback . . . against a beatdown mono-Red Deck. My opponent spent an Incinerate, a Fireblast, and two precious lands to kill my Hunted Wumpus, so I played Demonic Consultation for another. The second 6/6 Beast did him in in two turns when I played two Funeral Charms for the final four points of combat damage. I made Day Two of that Extended Pro Tour with said "Junk" deck (which was designed by my Wednesday neighbor Adrian Sullivan).

Now think about your average opponent's average hand. How likely is it for any random opponent to be holding a Legendary Creature? What if you are (additionally) the black mage, with cards like Distress or Waking Nightmare instead of Funeral Charm? You can pretty much ensure that he won't be putting any nasty response cards into play. Iwamori's downside is pretty low, all things considered, and you can play in such a way that it rarely if ever comes up, if you wish.

One thing to note: Iwamori doesn't actually give your opponent any card advantage. He just potentially gives the opponent a short term burst of mana. While this can give you a hard time in some games, I still think that Iwamori of the Open Fist will be joining the fine company of Blastoderm, Jade Leech, and Phantom Centaur as a staple 5/x creature for .

3. Goryo's Vengeance

Once upon a time there was a troublesome white instant called Waylay. While Waylay started off as just a very good limited combat trick, as when the card was designed, there was no such thing as *Sixth Edition* Rules (the "Classic" rules we use today). Once Classic rules started stacking spells, the wording on the original Waylay allowed players to play three 2/2 creatures during the opponent's end step (after all "at end of turn" effects had been put on the stack), start their own turns with said

creatures in play, and therefore have access to a sort of "White Lightning" Ball Lightning effect (six damage for three mana). In combination with Crusade, this made for a powerful loophole threat that was very effective at US Nationals 1999, placing multiple competitors in the money, including eventual Champion Kyle Rose. Goryo's Vengeance has similar wording.

Think about it like this: Say you have a great creature, like one of the 5/5 beaters we've discussed so far, Iwamori of the Open Fist or Yukora, the Prisoner. Say your opponent kills your creature, either in combat or via removal. The ability to produce a 5/5 blocker during combat once won a Standard Pro Tour at THREE MANA (Justin Schneider play Tidal Wave in Dallas); imagine the potential of a reusable version of the card at two. Like Waylay, this card can translate to an offensive threat such that you can use it at the end of his turn and have a 5/5 attacker ready and beating the next attack!



There are tons of ways to get around the "remove from game" downside to this card. You can have a method to sacrifice the creature at the ready, select specifically creatures that can sacrifice itself, or just win with one unexpected strike with one of many available huge threats. Goryo's Vengeance strikes me as the kind of card that a deck can be built around, or a strong anti-answer spell that will really punish removal-heavy opponents. It is even a renewable resource via the Splice mechanic, allowing you to pair card advantage with speed and surprise.

4. Loam Dweller



Loam Dweller seems like a small -- but awesome -- card to me. It's not flashy like Oyobi, Who Split the Heavens, but will fit perfectly into any of several decks that try to get card advantage via Spirit and Arcane cards. For States last year, we saw both beatdown and control try Hearth Kami, and many more B/G, U/G, and G/R decks accelerated their mana with Kodama's Reach.

One of the things I've always liked about Kodama's Reach is that it always ensures your next land drop. But what if you already have a land in hand? Loam Dweller turns Kodama's Reach into Explosive Vegetation! At FOUR mana, Explosive Vegetation was a format-defining card that nearly won Pro Tour Venice. It was the kind of card that set up Silvos on turn four, made Akroma playable in constructed, and allowed for Form of the Dragon and Future Sight in the same deck. Explosive Vegetation took the extra mana out of Akroma's Vengeance, let some players play all five colors, and others kill with Biorhythm. With Loam Dweller, that same effect costs a meager three.

Unlike a conditional enchantment like Exploration, Loam Dweller is attached to an efficient body. Even when you aren't powering out Spirit and Arcane cards, Loam Dweller is a 2/2 for two mana, capable to getting the beats on or trading with the opponent's bears. But at his best? Loam Dweller will have your Dragon Spirit out a turn or two early (and put an extra land into play while he's at it). Perhaps in combination with the flip Dolphins (see below), this card might create a genuine incentive for G/R to move away from narrow but efficient answers like Electrostatic Bolt and Oxidize to their potentially

more abusable Arcane equivalents, Wear Away and Glacial Ray; his ability makes the already saucy Meloku, Clouded Mirror of Victory that much better over a long game.

5. The Dolphin Cycle

I don't know what R&D's name for this cycle is, but seeing as this is Swimming with *Sharks*, I figure we'll call the flippers Dolphins. I can see all five being playable in constructed deck, and a couple of them will help enable Arcane mechanic decks (again, probably alongside cards like Loam Dweller).

Budoka Pupil was the first to catch my eye, but I think Cunning Bandit might be the best of the lot for constructed. Though the most fragile with only two toughness even after he's flipped, Cunning Bandit is also one of the most likely Dolphins to get through unblocked, just because of the color he is in. That said, five power is a formidable number -- ultimately Dragon class -- and the Red spirits are tailor made for clearing a path. Drop Cunning Bandit on turn three and follow up with Frostling, Hearth Kami, or Glacial Ray, and the non-red opponent will quickly find himself without defense. Even though his ki counter ability isn't paired with the common elements of untapping the target creature or temporarily bestowing haste, it still a step ahead of the rest of the squads'. Cunning Bandit can create difficult attack positions and even abuse bombs: just think about what this card can do against a Tooth and Nail player's Darksteel Colossus, Platinum Angel, or Sundering Titan and the Shrapnel Blast already in your hand.



In second place has to be Faithful Squire. While Faithful Squire acquires a decent ki counter ability, he additionally starts out flying, which one-ups the rest. There is already a new school of Standard White Weenie that focuses on cards like Suntail Hawk and Lantern Kami as aggressive flyers. Faithful Squire can fit right in, especially as Lantern Kami is a Spirit, and that the deck can potentially play any number of defensive Arcane cards.

Bonus: Goblin Cohort

Talk about really not splashy cards that can potentially find a home in good constructed decks! The week before I saw *Betrayers of Kamigawa*, I was actually tinkering around with Mogg Conscripts for *Extended* beatdown. Goblin Cohort has the potential to be a great attacker piggybacking both creatures-as-removal cards that can clear the way or joining haste attackers like Viashino Sandstalker. While not *quite* on the level of Isamaru, Hound of Konda, Goblin Cohort will end up doing a lot of damage over the next two years, paying homage to Jackal Pup with every second-turn swing.

Finally, here is one card that initially excited me, but doesn't look to be ready for prime time tournament play:

Disrupting Shoal initially had me overjoyed, then cautiously guarded, then made me kind of grimace. I got the "Force of Will" alternate mana cost part immediately, but assumed, like Syncopate and Condescend from recent blocks, that this card was based on Power Sink. If it were based on Power Sink, Disrupting Shoal would be nearly as good as Force of Will, and better in many situations. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), it is based on Spell Blast.

Spell Blast is among the worst counters in the history of **Magic**. I believe in the decade-plus of the game's existence, it has appeared in exactly one tier one deck, all the way back at Pro Tour I.



Essentially, for permission decks to work properly, counters have to be cheaper than whatever it is they are countering (which is why Force of Will is so awesome, even though you have to pitch a spell). Power Sink is significantly better than Spell Blast because if you force the opponent to tap, the theory is he can't follow up with a second threat; Spell Blast, on the other hand, always guarantees the opponent is spending less mana than you are in one-for-one trades, so you will inevitably fall behind.

I think Disrupting Shoal will therefore not be played very much as a hard-cast; it might be worse via alternate mana cost. Think about the Standard deck wherein, as its opponent, you most want to counter a threat. What seven mana card will you pitch to stop your opponent's third turn Myr Enforcer? And what about his turn one Aether Vial? Do you even play one mana blue cards? What if you kept a marginal mana hand only because it included a Serum Visions?

As I said, this card ended up disappointing, but I'm not sure that Standard would be a better place with Force of Will.

You'll notice that this list didn't include any creatures with the Ninjutsu mechanic. I can't promise anything, but next week just might be an appropriate time for The Hi-Yah! Redux.

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