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Monday, January 31, 2005

I hope you all had fun at the *Betrayers* pre-releases last weekend. To kick off my coverage of the new set I'm going to be running through some observations that I've made from my experiences at the pre-release and doing some drafts this last week. I'm separating them out into 'Hits' and 'Misses' as I'll be discussing some cards that over-performed and some that didn't turn out to be as good as I thought. We'll go more in depth as the weeks progress as well as doing some "Which card do you draft" articles once everyone's had a chance to get more familiar with the cards. The new set is already being tested for *Magic Online* so you won't have too long to wait before you can start drafting with it there.

Anyway, on with the show!

Ninjas – Hit!



It seemed to me that everyone really enjoyed the flavour of Ninjas. Most people I talked to felt that R&D really seemed to capture the idea of them with the Ninjutsu mechanic. It helps that the mechanic is a pretty decent one for limited too. There are four common Ninjas – two in blue and two in black – but it's Ninja of the Deep Hours and Okiba-Gang Shinobi that really stand out. The Okiba-Gang Shinobi particularly impressed me as it would often hit on turn four where the loss of two cards was far more devastating to the opponent than the loss of tempo you received by returning a creature to your hand. On top of that the opponent would then have to make sure to leave a blocker or two back just to avoid having their hand stripped completely of cards. Once their hand was empty the Okiba-Gang Shinobi still hits

pretty hard or can trade for the vast majority of common creatures that might have hit the table before its arrival.

Let's not even get started on the more powerful uncommon and rare Ninjas. Higure and Ink-Eyes are both extremely powerful and even one hit from a Throat Slitter is going to hurt. All these cards will be very high picks in the weeks to come.

In Ninja-heavy decks it can be worth playing a few cards that help your Ninjas get through that extra time. I'm not talking about playing terrible cards but things like Phantom Wings, Toils of Night and Day and Veil of Secrecy are all cards that might not make the cut sometimes, but that can become very useful if you have a Ninja or two hanging around. A good example of this is a play I saw in a draft just yesterday. There were two Ninjas in play on one side of the board: an Okiba-Gang Shinobi and a Mistblade Shinobi. The opposing player attacked with one guy, and leaving one blocker and then cast a second blocker after combat leaving him with one card in hand. The Ninja player cast Toils of Night and Day tapping both blockers and then swung in with both Ninjas. Stacking the abilities correctly, he was able to bounce the best creature to his opponent's hand, and then make his opponent discard his last card along with the creature he just bounced!

Shuriken – Hit!

Now this piece of equipment is a hit in terms of power, and in terms of flavour. In some decks it's pretty much useless and yet in others it's about as powerful a piece of equipment as you could hope to open. More than one player was utterly destroyed by the simple play of "Turn two Skullsnatcher" followed by "Turn three Shuriken, Equip, kill your guy", which can be a tough way to go. It will certainly make you want to consider snagging those Wear Aways and Terashi's Grasps for your sideboard. The Shuriken will be an almost automatic first pick in draft if you're blue-black and even if you're playing just one of those colours you'll probably want to draft it highly as the common Ninjas are fairly playable in their own right so you would expect to pick some up anyway.

Baku – (Mostly) Miss!

This is a cycle of five cards that appear in the common slots of each colour. The white Baku is very solid. It's a bit small as a 2/2 for three mana, but it's a Spirit and so useful as a Soulshift target. It also comes down early, and accumulates counters over the course of the game. It's flexible in that you can use the counters slowly to counteract a single nasty creature for several turns or you can use them all up to tap all of your opponent's creatures for an all-out attack which will hopefully win the game for you. Blademane Baku is also decent as it too comes out early and accumulates counters quickly. It only needs a couple of counters on it before it threatens to take a big chunk of your opponent's life total and it's also able to trade with creatures much bigger than itself. The other three Baku leave a lot to be desired though. The black one has the most powerful ability but it's very slow and because it doesn't come into play until turn five usually, you'll often find you've had to cast some of your Spirits and Arcane cards just to have survived to that point. As a meagre 2/1 for five mana Skullmane Baku is terrible when you can't get significant use from his ability. The blue and green Bakus are equally weak with below average stats and abilities that don't do very much. With only two of the five Bakus being playable I have to score these guys as a miss collectively.



Flip cards – Hit!

The five new flip cards are another cycle that runs through all the colours. These also rely on Spiritcraft triggers to flip them but these guys are much more impressive than their common cousins. Indeed, every card in this group seemed extremely powerful when I've seen them played. Even if you just ignore their abilities they become very large creatures for their initial casting cost once they've flipped. Three mana for a 3/4 white flyer is an amazing deal for example.

The abilities of these guys have really been pushed to the edge as they're all very powerful. The green and red ones are arguably the best but they're all worthwhile. The green one can end games very quickly as his trample ability means those additional +2/+2 effects always have a way of getting past an opposing chump blocker.

I had the red one – Cunning Bandit - at my pre-release and it was exceptional all day long. There were several games where just the threat of its activation prevented an opponent from attacking. One good example of this is when I had Cunning Bandit flipped into Azamuki, Treachery Incarnate with two Ki counters on him. My only other creature was a 2/3 Kami of Fire's Roar. My opponent had out a 3/3 and a couple of 2/2s. In this position he couldn't attack with just the 3/3 as I could steal both of his 2/2s, and double block with them, which would kill one of them and his 3/3 at the same time. He also couldn't really attack with all of his creatures as I could block a 2/2 with the Kami to kill it and either let the others through or just borrow the 3/3 during combat if I didn't want to take the damage



from it. After a few turns of this standoff my opponent was kind enough to make an Ember-Fist Zubera and a Dripping-Tongue Zubera. I stole both of these and sacrificed them along with Azamuki to Devouring Greed for the win!

Getting two counters on these guys really isn't very difficult at all and you even have the option to accumulate more before flipping them if you want to. Although their casting costs can be a little awkward on turn three they're all very powerful and definitely worth the effort.

Hundred-Talon Strike – Miss!

This is one card that looked like a very nice combat trick when I looked through the card-lists before the pre-release, especially with the Splice ability and it being an Arcane card too. I've played with it a fair bit now and it's been far less impressive than the other white tricks like Indomitable Will or

Blessed Breath. First of all it's obviously only useful in combat; Will can save your guy from a burn spell and Breath can stop just about anything but Hundred-Talon Strike has neither of those things going for it., In addition to that, unlike Will and Breath, you have to cast Hundred-Talon Strike before any damage is dealt. With Will and Breath you can wait until after damage is on the stack before using them and that way you'll never really lose any card advantage. If your opponent has a removal spell that they use in response you'll still have dealt damage to (and hopefully killed) their creature so it's a simple two-for-two trade. If they have a removal spell in response to Hundred-Talon Strike however you lose your creature and the Strike itself while your opponent's creature still lives to tell the tale. Hundred-Talon Strike isn't a terrible card by any means and it's better if you have other cards you might want to Splice onto it like Soulless Revival or Glacial Ray, but overall I can see this one sitting in my sideboard a lot of the time.

One-drops – Hit!

As far as small sets go this one has to have the highest number of playable one casting cost creatures that I can remember. Red especially has two excellent one-drops in Frostling and Goblin Cohort. In draft especially, the aggressive red decks get a huge boost from the presence of a first turn 2/2 monster. Goblin Cohort can deal a lot of damage in the first few turns of the game and even when he's not able to attack there are no restrictions on him for blocking. Along with Frostling, and cards like Blademane Baku you will see the fast red decks being capable of dealing a lot of damage over the first few turns of the game.

There are good cards in other colours too. Child of Thorns is great and both Teardrop Kami and Bile Urchin are playable if you want to get your Ninja of the Deep Hours attacking on the second turn. Most of these are Spirits too which means you have Soulshift implications to consider as well. I'm not a big fan of Traproot Kami but it's worth noting that it counts all Forests in play, not just yours, which can make it a good card in any green mirror match where it can easily get to a 0/6 or bigger for just one mana.



Takenuma Bleeder & Gnarled Mass – Hit!

At the common level it's very rare to get a 3/3 for just three mana so getting two in one set is very nice. Both of these creatures are very solid commons that you'll be happy to play over the coming weeks. They hold off opposing two-drops when they come down on turn three, and they hit pretty hard when they attack too. Although the Bleeder has a slight drawback, it is pretty minor really as you don't normally mind trading one life for three damage. The Bleeder is probably my favourite of the two simple because its casting cost is easier on your mana and it's in a colour which really benefits from having a tough third turn creature to follow up the many powerful two-drops like Nezumi Cutthroat and Wicked Akuba.

Gnarled Mass does have the whole Spirit thing going for it though and that's significant when you have Soulshift and Spiritcraft considerations. It's probably a little better than Kami of the Hunt despite the awkward double-green casting cost as creatures with two power can't attack into it when you're tapped out.

Scourge of Numai – Miss!

This is one uncommon that I thought would turn out to be very good when I looked through the set. Although its drawback is painful it's easily dealt with and having a 4/4 for just four mana is very good in limited. Looking through the card-list there were lots of Ogres! Takenuma Bleeder, Shinka Gatekeeper and Frost Ogre are all commons that negate the drawback.

However, now that I've had a chance to play with the Scourge a few times I have to say his drawback has just proven to be too severe. Even in a red-black deck with lots of Ogres you still had to keep them alive otherwise you started suffering that two-life per turn hit and that damage soon mounts up. In this format there are numerous small creatures that can chump block without too much loss of card advantage thanks to Soulshift, and if the Scourge of Numai is attacking then he isn't blocking so you also have the option of racing him too. Sometimes you get in a position where you can't really attack as the counter-attack will cause too much damage and then you can only sit there hoping to draw an Ogre whilst your opponent is content to just watch your life drain away.

Horobi's Whisper – Hit!

This is the Glacial Ray of the new set for me. Ignoring the Splice ability for a second, as it stands Horobi's Whisper is obviously a lot better than either Rend Flesh or Rend Spirit. It's Instant speed, it's only three mana, it's an Arcane card, and it kills 80% of the creatures in the format. That package alone makes it a very good removal spell indeed. Having a Splice cost which requires no mana at all is really exceptional and you'll often be able to get at least one additional use out of it over the course of an average game. This will turn out to be a great addition to the Blue based Arcane decks as cards like Sift Through Sands and Reach Through Mists will fill up your graveyard quickly whilst drawing you into your Whispers at the same time. Being effectively free to Splice means you can Splice it to expensive Arcane cards like Pull Under which aren't normally good Splice targets.

Torrent of Stone – Miss!

Along with Horobi's Whisper this is one card that I was quite excited to receive in the pre-release. Four damage to a creature is enough to take out almost all the common creatures in the format. Moss



Kami, Kitsune Riftwalker and Kami of Tattered Shoji are the only exceptions that come to mind immediately. On top of that it can also deal with some of the more unfair rares like Kumano and Meloku. When I looked at it initially the addition of the ability to Splice it for free felt like it would really push the card over the top.

However now that I've had a chance to play with it a little I'm sorry to say that, unlike Horobi's Whisper this one rarely gets Spliced. The problem is that once you've sacrificed two Mountains to pay its Splice cost it can then be quite tricky to find the right mana to actually pay its casting cost so you get that second use out of it. It does happen sometimes but in order for that to happen you need to have six lands, and have three of them be Mountains (unless you can find another way to generate red mana obviously) and have the extra Arcane card that you can splice this onto. I managed to Splice this once at the pre-release and the one time I did that it was to win the game right there; I didn't have the extra Mountain to re-cast it if I'd needed to.

This is obviously a very good card all the same. Four damage for four mana is fine but that's comparable to Lightning Blast from *8th Edition*. The fact that Torrent of Stone can't deal damage directly to your opponent makes it a fair bit weaker and the addition of the Splice ability only barely makes up for it. It's a solid four mana removal spell but it gets a 'Miss!' from me simply because it's nowhere near as exciting as I hoped it would be.

That's almost it for this week. If you're looking for some more Limited articles to read be sure to check out the Pro-Tour Nagoya coverage from this past weekend.

Before I depart, here's a little poll to see how you think *Betrayers* will change the limited environment over the coming months. Remember: its *Limited Magic* here so I want your thoughts based on sealed deck and draft only please!

Which colour do you think has gained the most in Limited from the addition of *Betrayers* of Kamigawa?

- White
- Blue
- Black
- Red
- Green
- None of the above!

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