

A Lesson in Symmetry

Search

Mike Flores

Thursday, April 07, 2005

*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*
-William Blake

One of the things that Scott Johns asked me to do with this column, especially when we are off-format (i.e. not poring over Extended Top 8 deck lists every week) is to delve into the more theoretical aspects of **Magic**. Most of you are probably familiar with at least basic **Magic** theory. For example, you probably know that Hymn to Tourach (or descendents Stupor, Unburden, and Waking Nightmare) generate *card advantage*. That is, each of these cards spends just one sorcery in exchange for removing two cards out of the opponent's hand.

Card advantage is any process by which a player obtains effectively more cards than his opponent, for instance by *Ancestral Recalling*, netting three cards for one, or by playing *Ensnaring Bridge* so that single card nullifies several creatures.
-Eric Taylor



The Tiger is Dragonmaster Brian Kibler's most favoritist animal.

Though different theorists will disagree as to how we may exactly *count* card advantage, the concept itself is easy to understand. If I spend just one card to get more than one out of you, I'll be ahead, and over time, you shouldn't have much left to fight back. Similarly, if I draw lots of extra cards (for instance, one *Concentrate* from my hand trades for three new cards), I'll have a greater volume of cards with which to brawl even one-for-one; once again, he who has more cards will win, while Mr. Have Not will not have the "W" next to his name come game's end.

What is more difficult to understand is that group of cards with especially sweeping effects that affects *both* players, often in an identical fashion.

When I started playing **Magic** more than 10 years ago, I found these two cards to be very puzzling. Why would I want to play a card like *Wrath of God*? Wouldn't that card kill all of *my* creatures too?


My friend Jeff Wu quickly explained to me that maybe I could play a "creature-less" deck (a novelty I had not yet explored) and not have to worry about losing creatures (how to win the game was another question entirely).

Armageddon was more problematic. I mean every deck, *every single deck*, in the history of **Magic** relies on land. Blowing up all the lands -- including all of your own lands, don't forget -- is not something to be taken lightly. Slowly I started to understand that maybe if I had something in play when the Armageddon resolved (hopefully something bigger than what my opponent had, if he had anything at all) the Armageddon would help to seal the game. Though it wasn't fleshed out very well, both of these notions -- not having any creatures in play when I cast a *Wrath of God* and having a

hopefully sizable creature in play when I resolved Armageddon -- served as building blocks for my understanding of *symmetry*.

Though Armageddon hasn't been present in the Core Set for some years, Wrath of God remains one of the most important symmetrical cards. Calling it symmetrical is a bit of a misnomer, though, because most competitive decks that play Wrath of God are, if not creature-less, creature *light* and don't suffer much ill because their own threats are destroyed. Wrath of God is a pretty simple example because you can either hold back your creatures while the opponent plays out a couple – giving you the opportunity to generate card advantage with a two-for-one or so – or just bias your list in such a way that Wrath of God doesn't affect you at all, even if you are planning to use it as a one-for-one.

Here is an old-school Wrath of God deck that also happens to be a landmark of tournament **Magic**:

| Michael Loconto from Pro Tour 1 | |  |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Main Deck | Sideboard | |
| 62 cards | | |
| 4 Adarkar Wastes | 1 Balance | 2 Aeolipile |
| 4 Island | 2 Control Magic | 2 Circle of Protection: Red |
| 4 Mishra's Factory | 4 Counterspell | 1 Control Magic |
| 7 Plains | 1 Deflection | 1 Divine Offering |
| 1 Ruins of Trokair | 4 Disenchant | 2 Hydroblast |
| 1 Strip Mine | 1 Feldon's Cane | 1 Jester's Cap |
| 2 Svyelunite Temple | 2 Fountain of Youth | 2 Sea Sprite |
| 1 Wizards' School | 2 Hallowed Ground | 2 Serrated Arrows |
| | 2 Icy Manipulator | 2 Steal Artifact |
| 24 lands | 1 Ivory Tower | 15 sideboard cards |
| | 1 Jayemdae Tome | |
| 2 Blinking Spirit | 2 Land Tax | |
| 2 creatures | 3 Millstone | |
| | 1 Recall | |
| | 4 Swords to Plowshares | |
| | 4 Wrath of God | |
| | 1 Zuran Orb | |
| | 36 other spells | |

Notice how Loconto is basically never going to lose a creature to his own Wrath of God. He has Blinking Spirit, but that guy is the poster child for not dying to Wrath of God and really doesn't count. We can say that Loconto has *broken the symmetry* of Wrath of God because even though the card itself is symmetrical, its use in this deck is designed to adversely affect only one player... and that player isn't Michael.

In modern Standard, one of the most important symmetrical effects is Death Cloud. Even when Affinity ruled States, Death Cloud decks proved highly successful.

Main Deck*60 cards*

1 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
 12 Forest
 10 Swamp

 23 lands

4 Eternal Witness
 4 Kokusho, the Evening Star
 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

 12 creatures

4 Barter in Blood
 3 Death Cloud
 4 Echoing Decay
 4 Kodama's Reach
 4 Oxidize
 4 Plow Under
 2 Sylvan Scrying

25 other spells

Sideboard

1 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
 1 Death Cloud
 4 Naturalize
 3 Persecute
 2 Rude Awakening
 4 Viridian Shaman

 15 sideboard cards

Main Deck*60 cards*

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
 17 Swamp

 22 lands

3 Chittering Rats
 3 Horobi, Death's Wail
 4 Kokusho, the Evening Star
 4 Solemn Simulacrum

 14 creatures

4 Chrome Mox
 2 Consume Spirit
 3 Death Cloud
 3 Distress
 2 Lose Hope
 4 Phyrexian Arena
 3 Rend Flesh
 3 Wayfarer's Bauble

24 other spells

Sideboard

1 Chittering Rats
 4 Cranial Extraction
 2 Dark Banishing
 1 Distress
 3 Hideous Laughter
 4 Relic Barrier

 15 sideboard cards

Death Cloud is one of the trickiest cards to count in terms of symmetry and card advantage. The reason is that it actually rotates around four different elements:

- Life: Each player loses x life.
- Cards in Hand: Each player discards x cards.

- Creatures: Each player sacrifices x creatures.
- Lands: Each player sacrifices x lands.

Intuitively, it seems like you just can't win with Death Cloud. You should always be sacrificing the same number elements as your opponent... *plus* you have to spend the Death Cloud itself and a boatload of mana. With Armageddon, you can have fewer lands in play than your opponent, or just have a big Erhnam Djinn in play so that it doesn't matter if you lost an extra land. Not so with Death Cloud... It's pretty difficult to end up with a legitimate threat in play after playing this card, even if you do manage to nuke all the mana.

The trick in breaking the symmetry of Death Cloud is to bias your numbers in such a way that you wreck the opponent as badly as possible... but avoid as many of the adverse effects of Death Cloud as possible yourself. The easiest way seems to be to play out as much mana as possible from your hand while having few (if any) creatures in play.

Look at Joshua Claytor's version. Claytor doesn't play very many creatures. Of his 12, Sakura-Tribe Elder ramps up his mana count when it goes to the grave and Kokusho, the Evening Star has a very cooperative "Fireball" synergy with an especially large Death Cloud that forces its sacrifice. From the creature standpoint, Claytor may be nuking two or more of the opponent's creatures while losing essentially no creatures himself. By having fewer creatures in play than his opponent, Joshua breaks the symmetry of this element of Death Cloud: the card affects his opponent's creatures much more significantly than his own.



In terms of cards in hand, Claytor's deck is very good at turning its hand into board position. It doesn't have any true card drawing, and can play exhaustion **Magic** in the early game while ramping up mana with Kodama's Reach.

Speaking of Kodama's Reach, the goal of this card is to create an imbalance in terms of mana count. In fact, in concert with Plow Under, Claytor's Death Cloud (hopefully the last card in his hand) can Mind Twist the opponent, kill all of his creatures, and destroy all of his land... while leaving Joshua himself with three or more lands. Winning off the top of his deck at that point can't be very difficult, especially if Joshua enters the late game with a three-land advantage while the opponent is struggling to string together land and spells. Note that if the opponent was stuck with cards in hand and Claytor had *only* the Death Cloud (or at least fewer cards than the opponent, or fewer cards than the "x" of the Death Cloud), the hand is a prime place to start turning this symmetrical card into an

opportunity for card advantage.

Thomas Wood's mono-black version takes a different look at Death Cloud, but at the end of the day, has the same philosophy. While Claytor wants to have more lands left over after all is said and done, Wood's deck can accomplish essentially the same goal by playing Chrome Mox and Phyrexian Arena. Despite its short-term drawback, Chrome Mox is very similar to playing an extra land: it puts more mana in play. The goal here is to set up the board such that after Death Cloud resolves, the black mage has mana left over... whether that mana takes the form of an extra land drawn out by a

Kodama's Reach or a Chrome Mox isn't particularly important. Moreover, artifacts and enchantments are two rare types of permanents that Death Cloud does not affect, and Phyrexian Arena is a good card for drawing out of a low-resources position after the Cloud resolves in any case. Think of this as an Armageddon that leaves a couple of lands on your own side... maybe instead of that Erhnam Djinn.

The skills used in building decks that play on symmetrical elements can also be used to defeat those same decks when you are playing against them. Even if your deck relies on cards in hand, land, and creatures, here are a couple small things you can do with the cards you do play that are not directly related to the opponent's symmetrical effects to make the opponent's Death Cloud less attractive.

- *Jockey for position in the land war:* There are many decks that play Sakura-Tribe Elder or Kodama's Reach just because "they are good cards." Having more lands in play, even if it is just by slowing down the opponent's development via Creeping Mold or Plow Under, can take away much of the post-Cloud remainder that these players rely on to win.
- *Hide cards in plain sight:* There are cards such as Conjuror's Bauble, Wayfarer's Bauble, or Sensei's Divining Top that can sit in play, unaffected by Death Cloud. Because recovering resources post-Cloud is so important, these cards serve a dual purpose of dodging the effects of the Death Cloud themselves *and* giving you that extra land or card in hand after the worst has happened. Remember: if you have a Sensei's Divining Top but it is in your hand... that doesn't do you any good against a big Death Cloud.

Back when symmetry was just starting out as an itty-bitty baby theoretical concept, one of the main ways to fight the powerful symmetrical cards was to take away the imbalance that the opponent built into his own deck. It isn't hard to understand that if two White Weenie decks fight and one plays Crusade where the other just has four more good creatures, the Crusade player has no advantage, and may, in fact, have a disadvantage. Similarly, just running Sky Diamond in your control deck a few years ago was often enough to take the oomph out of the opponent's Winter Orb strategy.

When you go up against an opponent who uses powerful effects, including beneficial effects like Howling Mine or Heartbeat of Spring, try to think about what makes that card a worthwhile component of the other guy's deck and fight your battles armed with specifically that in mind. Does he need to draw extra cards? Will his deck function at all without doubled mana? By removing or piggybacking the symmetry-breaking element the opponent uses to win, you may be able to reap the benefits of these effects, or at least avoid the elements that make them so deadly.

Understanding what makes a deck tick will also tell you if you should pick your fight with the symmetrical card itself. A misguided attempt to maximize card advantage often makes a player so gung ho to ride the opponent's free help or punish him via his own cards' downsides that he misses the fact that these are exactly the cards that he uses to win the game. Hopefully this introduction to symmetry will help you make the right decisions down the line.

