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Discard Tricks

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Welcome to Discard Week! This week we'll be talking about the dark side of card advantage. And as this is the design column, I feel kind of obliged to talk about how to design discard cards. (Call it a personal weakness.) This isn't a topic for the squeamish, but if you're ready to see how mental disruption works, read on.

Pick a Discard, Any Discard

Okay, you've sat down to do some design work and you decide its time to make some discard spells. What things do you need to worry about?

#1 – Choose the Dark Path

While the color pie divvies up the mechanics, there are actually few mechanics in **Magic** that are the domain of just one color. Discard is one of them. (It's a black ability for those first time readers out there. Welcome to **Magic**.) That means if you're creating a card with a discard ability, you're most likely making a black card. That said, a clever designer can actually sneak discard-like effects into most of the other colors.

Blue – The trick here is to do a filter effect (that is an effect that involves drawing and discarding cards) that can target any player. Then put the discard part first. To have a real discard effect, you'll need to have the card drawing be less than the card discard. More often than not though, a blue filter effect will have the draw be equal to or larger than the discard. But even an even exchange with the discard coming first can have a card quality discard effect (that is it forces players to exchange cards they've been saving for random cards making the player lose overall card quality). Blue also has *Wheel of Fortune/Winds of Change/Time Twister* type effects that force a swapping of the hand. These could also be thought of as card quality discard effects. (The *Winds of Change* type being stronger than the ones that refill the hand.) It is a little bit of stretch, but I'm trying to find any inkling of discard.

White – The key here is to play off of white's taxing ability. White can ask for anything when taxing so having the players suffer a loss unless they choose to discard is acceptable. Note that white will never be able to force the discard (except situationally) as the opponent could always choose to not pay the tax and suffer the penalty. White also has access to *Balance* type effects, so hypothetically it could make a card that causes some form of universal discard.

Red – During *Odyssey* block, red dabbled in discard using the punisher style of card ("Do X or take a certain amount of damage"). In theory, red might be able to make a card that damages the opponent based on cards in hand with an out that lets the opponent discard cards. The key to doing this kind of card would be making it feel like a "I lit your stuff on fire, drop it" kind of feel rather than a white taxing effect. Red also has some access to *Wheel of Fortune* type effects so like blue it can have limited card quality discard effects.

Artifacts – Okay, not actually a color, but I wanted to point out that artifacts already have carte blanche to do discard effects (a la *Disrupting Scepter*).

Green – This is the tricky one. I guess green could force opponents to put creature cards from their hand into play, but not exactly what I'd call very effective discard effect. I just guess green least likes messing with other player's minds. I'm sure a few of you at this point are saying, "What about *Stunted Growth*?" That was a green discard spell, but R&D has since decided that it isn't a green ability. (To quote Aaron Forsythe: "If you make your opponent put one card from their hand on top of their library, it's black. Two cards? Still black. Three cards? Oh, that's green.")

Now that we've gotten the fringe stuff out of the way, let's get back to the topic. Making discard spells? Turn to black. Black is kind of messing with people's minds. (Quite literally, by the way.)

#2 – Pick Your Type

The next step is figuring out what kind of discard spell you want to make. Let's walk through the major choices:



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Standard Discard – (sample: **Mind Rot**) I play an instant or sorcery (mostly a sorcery but we'll get to that in a bit). You discard one or more cards of your choice. Pretty straight forward and the staple of the discard spells.

Random Discard – (sample: **Hymn to Tourach**) I play an instant or sorcery. You discard one or more cards at random. This style of discard has fallen out of favor in R&D. While we still make them every once in a while, they're rather rare. Why? Because experience showed us that random discard tended to really annoy players. Players actually preferred losing a card of their opponent's choice than losing one to the whim of fate. The opponent might mess up, but you can't fool fate. (Well maybe for a little while, but as the "Twilight Zone" has taught us, never for very long.) Anyway, R&D realized that it annoyed players so we consciously chose to dial it back.

Choice Discard – (sample: **Coercion**) I play an instant or sorcery, look at your hand, and choose which card you discard. Often times there are restrictions on this choice most often "non-land". As a general rule of thumb, we tend to avoid allowing players to force land discard on anything that can be played during the first few turns. It lines up with the same philosophy that keeps us from pushing land destruction. Not getting to play the game just isn't fun.

Blind Discard – (sample **Cabal Therapy**) I play an instant or sorcery spell and choose some criteria that affects what you have to discard. These spells have a wider scope of effect. I could miss and get nothing or I could get lucky and hit multiple cards. Because these type of cards allow deduction on the part of the caster, it feels more skill testing than random.

Specter Discard – (sample: **Hypnotic Specter**) I play a creature. Whenever that creature deals combat damage to you one of the above effects happens.

Scepter Discard – (sample **Disrupting Scepter**) I play a permanent that can activate each turn, usually involving a mana cost, to do one of the above effects.

Coming and/or Going Discard – (sample: **Ravenous Rats**) I play a permanent, usually a creature, that causes a discard when it comes into and/or leaves play.

Trigger Discard – (sample: **Bottomless Pit**) I play a permanent that causes one of the above discard effects to trigger whenever situation X happens.

There are a few fringe cards, but this hits the most common discard designs.

#3 – Slow Going

Now we hit upon another one of R&D's little rules: Discard happens at sorcery speed. Yes, there are a few exceptions to this rule (such as **Funeral Charm**), but it's only a few cards out of the hundred plus that have been made. The reasoning behind this is that discard is already annoying. Being able to force a player to discard before he or she has had any chance to play the card just seems too mean, even for black. Also note that the few exceptions always occur on one-shot effects. If you have a repeatable ability to cause discard you always do it at a sorcery speed.

This means that when making a discard spell, always make it a sorcery unless it can only function as an instant. And even then examine whether the card needs to be made if it can only be an instant. If the ability appears as an activated ability it has to have the fun "play this ability only any time you could play a sorcery" (or whatever the latest version is – templating, run away!) text.

#4 - Know Your Place

As it turns out, there are two different types of discard spells. They line up with the two basic uses of discard: theme and utility.

- **Discard as a Theme**

The idea here is that discard can function as a win condition (in that it can control the game to the point where any small thing can win) and as such is able to carry a theme for a deck. Cards that play into this style of play are working towards the larger goal of decimating the opponent's hand, and usually then punishing them for having no cards. These cards are meant to be pieces of a larger machine. The discard effect is designed to be cumulative so that the cards keep threatening this one aspect of the game.

This style of discard card tends to focus less on quality than on quantity. Their end goal is making the opponent discard all their cards so they are less picky about individual discards. In addition, these cards tend to grow in strength the more discard cards that exist in the deck. The more pressure put onto destroying the hand, the better these cards get.

- **Discard as a Utility**

The idea here is that discard is a good mechanic for proactively dealing with threats. This strategy cares nothing of quantity, only quality. These discard spells are being used as an answer to the opponent's biggest threats. As such, this style of discard cards tends to give the player more control of what gets discarded.



Because these discard cards are being proactive, they also tend to be cheaper. They most often see play in the first several turns of the game as players are jockeying in the early game. In addition, they are designed such that they do not need the support of many other discard cards.

When designing discard spells, it helps to know which of the two camps the card is aiming for. And be aware that there is crossover between the two. Also, be aware that utility cards often show up in themed discard decks while theme discard cards seldom show up in small numbers in other decks.

As far as R&D is concerned, it is the theme discard cards that cause the most unhappiness as discard decks are one of the scary three (land destruction, permission and discard) that tend to keep people from playing the game and thus tend to annoy players at a much higher level than other decks. R&D has made a conscious effort to keep the three decks from being too strong. (Although I should note that we do push these decks to fringe levels every once in a blue moon.)

Utility discard cards, on the other hand, do not necessarily promote the discard decks unto themselves (although they are used if enough resources for the discard deck exists). Because of this R&D tends to be more aggressive in costing these types of discard cards.

#5 – Make It Interesting

The final piece of advice I can give is to talk a little about what separates good discard cards from bad ones. I believe it breaks down to several factors:

Choices – The best discard cards create interesting choices. Sometimes for you and sometimes for your opponent. This is yet another reason we've drifted away from random discard as it takes away the ability to make choices. Good choices for you mean that you have interesting decisions to make about how you're proactively affecting the game. By removing what card will you maximize your chances?

Making interesting decisions for your opponent means giving them hard choices about what they want to give up (yes, good discard means making your opponent suffer – you're playing black after all). If your spell keeps these interesting decisions from happening then it tends to be a less interesting card. Can I give an example? Sure. Imagine this card:

Big Man Down



Sorcery

Target player reveals his or her hand and discards the card in their hand with the highest converted mana cost. You choose if there are more than one cards tied.

While on the surface it might seem cool, it does exactly what I'm saying not to do. It removes almost all the choices from the game. Lets say I play it turn one. My opponent discards the card he was many turns away from playing. It's not super beneficial for me. For all practical purposes I forced him to discard a random card but with almost no chance of it impacting the game within the next few turns. In addition, there was no "thoughtful" moment of game play. There was no chance were either I or my opponent had to think through anything. There was no maximizing. No minimizing. No one was forced to anticipate the pace of the game or what plays were most probable. In short, the card did nothing to stimulate the players. And that, my faithful readers, is just bad design.

Impact – Not only should the spell be interesting when played. It needs to have a ripple effect that has an honest to goodness effect on the game. Another problem with Big Man Down is that it does something that often might have zero impact on the game. To examine this, let's take a look at a similar spell:

Little Man Down



Sorcery

Target player reveals his or her hand and discards the non-land card in their hand with the lowest converted mana cost. You choose if there are more than one cards tied.

A quick aside: note that Little Man Down forced me to add a "nonland" rider as it fits the criteria of an early game spell that could mana hose the opponent. Big Man Down didn't need the rider as the only time it could force the discard of a land is when the opponent's hand is nothing but land at which point it's not really causing much of a mana problem.

Both Big Man Down and Little Man Down suffer from the "no choice" problem. But Big Man Down suffers from a second problem – what I'll call the "low impact" problem. Let's assume two games, the first where I played Big Man Down turn one and the second where I played Little Man Down turn one. In the Big Man Down game, the spell might have zero impact. The spell that my opponent threw away might never have been able to be played. But Little Man Down should almost always have an impact. Barring freaky draws, Little Man Down is taking away a card that my opponent can probably play in the next few turns.

It's always important to think about what kind of impact a spell is going to have. Especially with discard. And extra especially with utility discard.

Fun – This last criteria is less concrete but in many ways the most important part of a discard design. As I've already explained, discard spells by their very nature are "unfun" as they prevent things from happening. This makes it even more important that you create discard cards that have "fun" value. So how do you make a discard card fun? Here's the easiest way – make it a game! Think of every spell as its own little mini game. Then looking at it in isolation, ask yourself, was it fun? Let's look at a few discard spells and rank their fun, shall we?

Hymn to Tourach – I play a spell. You randomly lose two cards. Not fun. (The caveat to this being that some players find randomness itself fun as there's an aspect of unpredicatability.)

Mind Rot – I play a card. You discard a card. Not all that much more fun. Figuring out what card is least needed has a little bit of play, but not too

much.

Blackmail – I play a card. You're forced to show me three cards. I choose to make you to discard one of the chosen cards. Definitely more fun. Both you and I each have decisions to make and our decisions affect one another. Plus the card has a little game that surrounds me choosing to play it. Do I wait until you have three spells or do I risk it earlier hoping I catch you with more good things than you can hide?

Cabal Therapy – I play the card and guess what you have. You discard what I name if you have it. Plenty of fun. Come on, the card's design was even based on a card game (Go Fish). There's some deduction and a bit of instinct. There might even be some good old fashioned cross-your-fingers guessing.

As you can see, fun plays an important role of separating “Ugg!” from “Hmm”.

The point of this section is to point out that there is plenty of room in design to optimize a discard spell. There is actually such a thing as good and bad discard spell designs.



Discard Games

That's all I got for today. I hope this column helped illuminate a few items you might not have considered before.

Join me next week when I talk about outside influences.

Until then, may you enjoy having your mind wiped clean.

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