

Mark Gottlieb
Tuesday, May 03, 2005

Over the past week or so, I've gotten a number of relatively personal inquiries via email and *Magic Online* chat. And so it has taken root at last. From the day I embarked on this heady enterprise, this literary endeavor, it was really only a matter of time. I knew, ever since my first museum exhibit at the age of 10, that I would be stalked by the grim specter of celebrity until the day I stopped short and it stumbled awkwardly into me.

The funny thing is that Tom and I were just chatting about this last Wednesday. I was getting some tips on what was to come—I'm not yet at the level where every scurrilous rumor about my dating life is blown out of proportion in the tabloids. I'm not at lawsuit level. But it'll come. Celebrity is a one-way friendship with tens of thousands (me) or tens of billions (Tom) of people. We put so much of ourselves out for display in our Internet columns or our blockbuster movies that average people—you know, like you—think you know us. The Cruiser was even lamenting about how this two-bit blogger wannabe had publicly touted that the two of them were friends, even going so far as to fabricate conversations they had had and invent lame nicknames for him. The lengths some people will go to!

But I understand, and I'm willing to accept my fate. Fame itself is the price of fame. And it's not like I haven't been courting it. I wish I could let my immense charisma take all the credit, but that wouldn't be honest—and the last thing I'd ever want to do is mislead my readers. The tantalizing tidbits of my personality that I make public have been focus group-tested to within an inch of their lives. And while Mark Gottlieb is, in fact, a real person and *not* a composite sketch of incongruous traits cobbled together into a curmudgeonly/cuddly/psychotic character, I do have to thank my script doctor, my intern, the eager beavers in the collegiate writing workshop that Wizards of the Coast funds, and Tim Hunt—my best friend and publicist—for making it appear that I'm really writing this.

A rare peek behind the curtain. Consider yourselves lucky!

Inquiring Minds

And what were those questions that I've been getting asked? I'm glad you asked about what I've been getting asked. The most relevant topics:

What did I think of the Hitchhiker's movie? Nothing yet. I haven't seen it. You'd think I'd be first in line to the theaters, but I'm really not much of a moviegoer. I strongly considered seeing it on opening weekend, but then decided to hold off until my trip to San Francisco this upcoming weekend so I can see it with my brother.

You said you play Starcraft—are you the Agrajag on Battle.net? No. The guys here in R&D get together a couple of times a week for 3-on-3 or 4-on-4 games with each other. When I play in those LAN games, I use the name Agrajag. However, since I'm very, very bad, I don't play on Battle.net. Other video game screen names I've used in the past decade or so are Charles Martel, Charlemagne, Napoleon, and Raskolnikov. Analyze *that*.

Do I really not eat meat, drink alcohol, or drink caffeine? Yup. The first two are very conscious choices. The last is because I don't happen to like coffee, tea, or carbonated beverages. I'd get into the reasons behind my vegetarian and teetotaling lifestyle, but that would be getting way too political for this website and I have a reasonably good handle by now on what makes the powers that be

uncomfortable. (Writing about what makes the powers that be uncomfortable is, in fact, making them very uncomfortable.)

What kind of music do I listen to? This was tied into the previous question; Henry wondered if my particular habits of abstention plus my Seattleite status meant that I was into the hardcore music scene. Without actually saying so by name, he was specifically asking if I was into straight-edge, a “poison-free” punk movement that stresses an alcohol-free, drug-free, promiscuous sex-free, vegan lifestyle. The answer is no, punk music isn't my thing, so Henry won't be seeing me pop up at any sXe shows. But if he were in the nosebleed seats of Key Arena last week, he would have seen me at the U2 concert (a near-religious experience), which makes me four-for-four on U2 tours since ZooTV.



Other concerts he could have seen me at: Radiohead (four times), Blues Traveler (three), Pink Floyd (two), Dire Straits (one), Beck (one)... the first Blues Traveler show is a bit of a cheat, since that was at Woodstock '95, but they were one of the best acts of that whole weekend of great acts. I had no idea who they were going in, and John Popper's mad harmonica skillz blew me away.

Have I considered writing a novel? Dude, another year of these columns and I'm going to bundle them together, excise all the **Magic** decks, and publish it under the title *Chatter on the Squawkbox*. It'll be a fractured post-postmodern take on existence, sanity, and the blurry line that separates them. It'll be a rumination on the essence of communication—if a man talks in a forest but there's no audience to hear him, does he make a sound? It'll be a psychological character study of a man trapped in his own era of self-indulgent self-analysis and the guilt and denial that are its inevitable byproducts. It'll be a bestseller.


Egging on the Ents

But I can't excise the **Magic** decks if there aren't any, so let's get down to business. Frequent contributor Travis Martin has been working his tail off constructing comboriffic decks recently. Whenever anyone sends me anything via the email link at the bottom of each column, it winds up in a Yahoo! account. If that anything contains a goofy yet playable (or even—gasp!—powerful) deck that I like, or even just the idea for such a deck, I shunt it over to a “Cool Decks” folder. Then when I need some ideas, I browse the folder. There's lots of stuff in there, and I was surprised how much of it Travis created.

One of his recent decks sprang from a desire to work with Natural Emergence. But turning your own lands into creatures and attacking with them is so mundane. He preferred turning his opponent's lands into creatures, then making his opponent attack him with them... right into a trap. It's a long way to go for an Armageddon, but it's a plan of attack I've never seen before.

The heart of the deck is Nature's Revolt and Fumiko the Lowblood. Seedborn Muse makes sure your lands are untapped and waiting to block, while Knighthood gives them a distinct advantage over your opponent's lands. Sterling Grove finds and/or protects the Nature's Revolt. Harrow is an interesting choice when Kodama's Reach is arguably superior, but instants are good in a deck with Seedborn Muse—and I was glad I kept them in the deck when an opponent tried to Eradicate one of my animated Forests. Sometimes sacrificing your own permanents saves your hide.

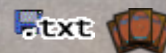
I made some adaptations to the deck, mostly to replace Awakening because I wanted to play the deck online. Travis had the Grand Melee in there as a backup Fumiko; I added Natural Affinity as a

backup Nature's Revolt. I also tossed in a couple of singleton enchantments to take advantage of Sterling Grove, as well as Sterling Grove's counterpart—the *Invasion* block  spell that can fetch the *creature* part of the combo, Eladamri's Call.

Of course, there's a stunning flaw in this grand plan. Once the lands are animated, and Fumiko is in place, and your lands are bigger and first strikier and damage preventionier and ever-so-ready to block, your opponent can just tap his lands for mana in his main phase instead of attacking with them. They only attack if able, and if they're tapped, they're unable to attack. This may incur mana burn, or it may not. The bright side is that if your opponent does do this, there won't be much left to stand in the way of your full-bore attack next turn. (And for what it's worth, Natural Affinity during your opponent's beginning of combat step while you have Fumiko out is good times.)



When Lands Attack You



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Battlefield Forge	4 Fumiko the Lowblood	1 Artifact Mutation
2 Brushland	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	2 Aura Mutation
2 Elfhome Palace	4 Seedborn Muse	2 Eladamri's Call
7 Forest		1 Grand Melee
2 Karplusan Forest	12 creatures	4 Harrow
1 Krosan Verge		3 Knighthood
4 Mountain		1 Lashknife Barrier
2 Plains		1 Mirari's Wake
2 Shivan Oasis		1 Natural Affinity
		4 Nature's Revolt
		3 Sterling Grove
		1 Worship
24 lands		24 other spells

Martinizing

For Travis's next deck, I'm going to set up a little puzzle for you. Imagine you're sitting across the table from someone who has in play a bunch of black and white mana, Obsidian Acolyte, Endless Whispers, Night Dealings, and Earnest Fellowship. What's the missing card? What must the deck be built around? What will spell your certain doom as soon as it sees play?

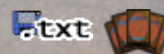
If you answered Crypt Rats, you are way too smart.

The main combo here is Crypt Rats and Earnest Fellowship, which, it turns out, equals Pestilence. Since Crypt Rats now won't harm itself, you can use its ability with impunity, as long as you can afford to take the damage yourself. Slap a Pariah on the Rats, and now all the damage that it deals to itself is prevented *and* all the damage it would deal to you it instead deals to itself and is prevented. Obsidian Acolyte can do the job of Earnest Fellowship, and Distorting Lens gives you total control over who has protection from what. Endless Whispers gives you whatever Crypt Rats gnawed to death, and Worship keeps you alive and very hard to kill.

I modified this deck as well, mostly to replace Academy Rector because I wanted to play the deck online. Infected Vermin serves acceptably as Crypt Rats #5 and 6. I like Spirit Link better than Pariah on the Crypt Rats (it does essentially the same job—negating the damage the Rats would deal to you—and while Spirit Link won't let you reroute other damage, I think you come out ahead with it in the long run). I felt Vindicate was too good to leave out, and I also thought the deck could use some tutoring. Adding Diabolic Tutor is easy... but this is a rare opportunity to put Night Dealings to good use. As long as Crypt Rats has protection from black, you might as well choose an X of 1 every time, letting each instance resolve before you put the next one on the stack. That adds up to some theft counters, and with the low and reasonably uniform costs of the spells in the deck, the enchantment might just have a shot here. Heck, it even fits the Rat theme. (Having Night Dealings around is another reason why Spirit Link is a good, if obvious, addition.)



Earnest Rats



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Caves of Koilos	4 Crypt Rats	2 Diabolic Tutor
4 Grand Coliseum	2 Infected Vermin	4 Distorting Lens
2 Plains	4 Obsidian Acolyte	4 Earnest Fellowship
10 Swamp	10 creatures	3 Endless Whispers
4 Tainted Field		2 Night Dealings
		1 Pariah
24 lands		1 Protective Sphere
		2 Spirit Link
		4 Vindicate
		3 Worship
		26 other spells

White + Red = Blue

I've introduced you to my fellow developer Devin Low before. In the R&D Starcraft games I mentioned earlier, Devin always plays Zerg (and favors a strategy wherein he creates a horde of 80



bazillion zerglings that cut a frighteningly fast swath of destruction across the board). Therefore, when I received a deck from a guy named Devin who said his **Magic Online** screen name is zergman2020, I was quite suspicious of interoffice pranksterism. Was I being taken to the cleaners? Were Devin's zerglings attacking my credibility? Or had a parallel universe Devin surfaced? A long-lost twin, perhaps? The metaphysical ramifications were mindboggling.



Eventually convinced that Devin Low didn't invent Devin Sternagle, I checked out his red-white deck that permanently steals all his opponent's creatures. The central combo is Autumn-Tail, Kitsune Sage (the flipped version of Kitsune Mystic); Fractured Loyalty; and Eight-and-a-Half-Tails (though that can be replaced by anything that targets creatures). Slap Fractured Loyalty on one of your opponent's creatures. Target that creature with any effect. You gain control of it. Use Autumn-Tail to move Fractured Loyalty onto a different one of your opponent's creatures. *You keep the creature that you just moved Fractured Loyalty off of*—it doesn't revert back to your opponent's side of the board, and now there's no way for your opponent to simply swipe it back. Deliciously evil.

When you're building up Kitsune Mystic so it'll flip, don't be afraid to put Pacifism on it; once it flips, you can move the Pacifism to where you really want it to go. Putting Fractured Loyalty on it is more dangerous—since the Mystic flips at end of turn, not whenever it has two enchantments on it, you have to be sure your opponent can't target it for the remainder of your turn (or that if he does, you can get it back). It's a risk, but sometimes it's a good risk. When you're using Eight-and-a-Half-Tails to protect your creatures from nasty, opponent-generated effects, be sure to move any white enchantments off of your creatures first. The whole "your Horobi's Whisper is white and my creature has protection from white" trick will make your Spirit Links fall off.

I changed very little from Devin's deck; I adjusted a couple of numbers and added in a couple of Kabuto Moths (a Spirit that can target things) in place of the Ember-Fist Zuberass. Since the Moths can protect your creatures and target your opponent's creatures, they act like backup Eight-and-a-Half-Tails, and since they're Spirits, they'll trigger Tallowisp's ability. The most interesting choice in Devin's deck is Forbidden Orchard, which intentionally gives your opponent some creatures because you're going to want some creatures to steal later.

Fractured Take		
 		
Main Deck		
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Forbidden Orchard	4 Eight-and-a-Half-Tails	3 Ethereal Haze
6 Mountain	2 Kabuto Moth	4 Fractured Loyalty
13 Plains	4 Kitsune Mystic	4 Glacial Ray
23 lands	4 Tallowisp	4 Pacifism
	14 creatures	4 Sensei's Divining Top
		4 Spirit Link
		23 other spells

And now, contrary to the theme of this whole column, I'm going to put a moratorium on sending me new decks for a couple of weeks. *Saviors of Kamigawa* previews start next week, so any decks that don't take *Saviors* into account will be obsolete by the time I'm back to posting reader-created concoctions. So please, hold off on emailing me decks until the set is released, then incorporate the goodies in the new set into your fiendish plans. Although I'm a biased corporate shill that who is not to be trusted under any circumstance, believe me—there are some goodies in there.

Until next week, have fun with celebrity!

Mark

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

