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My Heartless Hide

Bennie Smith
Into the Aether
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Fire, Wherefore Art Thou?

This week was the first time I've been tapped as an "in-theme" columnist. As a theme, "Fire Week" is pretty wide open (which Scott Johns really stressed with us). [Anthony Alongi](#) quickly called dibs on Trumpism "You're fired!" so I wracked my brain for a suitable thematic element to include in the chronicles of my journey here on *Magic Online*. My first thought was to try and contact Dan Paskins, he who has inherited Dave Price's old mantle of Red Mage Extraordinaire. I was curious whether Dan might play MTGO, and if he did, what heinous red decks had he concocted for the various online formats? I've never had the pleasure of exchanging emails with Dan, but I thought I knew someone who could hook me up. Unfortunately, the person I sent the email to (he who shall remain nameless but may or may not also be featured on this site today) never bothered to reply to me. *shakes fist*

So Dan, if you're listening—I tried to slip you in on Fire Week, my man! Sorry it didn't work out as planned.

Without a real Red mage to blaze the way, I was on my own. Since I've been playing 2 Headed Giant and thoroughly enjoying myself, I naturally wondered "What would a burn deck look like in 2HG?" The format presents some interesting challenges, not least of which is the fact that you've got to effectively burn out two players together instead of one at a time. When slinging good burn spells, 20 life is a very attainable goal, but 40 life is another story entirely.

Then I remembered, in my second column [New Directions](#), [Avatar Central](#) and [SsssnakesSI](#), we talked about how MTGO developers "fixed" **Heartless Hidetsugu**, who was otherwise downright abusive in 2 Headed Giant. While he doesn't tap to auto win games anymore, he does still shave your opponents' life totals in half with each tap (along with your own). 40 to 20 to 10... ah, now we have much more reasonable life totals, no?

Me being me—and not a true Fire Mage (else I'd quickly add Furnaces of Rath into the deck and laugh maniacally)—I naturally started thinking of ways to break the symmetry of Hidetsugu. **Spirit Link** jumped to mind, but I didn't necessarily want to start dealing in painlands if I were otherwise already going to be dealing damage to myself (and I was already thinking about adding another card to the deck, a very old favorite...). I ended up using two artifacts instead; the awesome but slow **Loxodon Warhammer**... and the incredibly annoying **Sun Droplet**.

On MTGO, **Sun Droplet** has the unfortunate property of triggering during each player's upkeep regardless of whether there are any counters to remove in exchange for life. Everyone of course immediately left-clicks on the first trigger and auto-yields to it, but forcing them to do that—on top of the fact that slugging through a **Sun Droplet** with anything less than a large, constant life assault is tough to do—and you get one annoying little two-drop artifact. Casual games shouldn't be agony... but in the end I decided that it worked too well in the deck to ignore. Especially since I was going to play...

Orcish Artillery! Just savor that incredible flavor text and walk with me a minute down memory lane. I believe the year was 1996, the year Necro started really becoming a menace. I had just started to dabble with competitive decks, and after leaving behind my **Psychic Venom**/**Mole Worms** and **Force of Nature**/**Spirit Link**/**Armageddon** decks, I started having success with a heady blend of crappy red creatures, burn and utility spells. Borrowing heavily from the Book of Geeba (Sligh), the deck I cooked up contained two of my all-time favorite cards: **Orcish Artillery** and **Death Spark**.

At any rate, **Orcish Artillery** demanded **Sun Droplet** as backup in 2 Headed Giant. Tap to deal 2 damage, take 3 damage, and three other upkeeps around the board to recoup your loss. Get two Droplets out and you're coming out ahead.

The deck ended up gellin' (like a felon) into this lineup:

2HG Burn

60 cards



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NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon

1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	4 Orcish Artillery	1 Goblin Charbelcher
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Grim Lavamancer	4 Loxodon Warhammer
19 Mountain	4 Steel Wall	4 Sun Droplet
24 land	4 Hearth Kami	4 Talon of Pain
	4 Heartless Hidetsugu	3 Genju of the Spires
	20 creatures	16 other spells

Talon of Pain seemed like a great addition to the deck, with Lavamancers, Artillery and Mr. Hide himself feeding it counters. **Steel Wall** was a late addition to the deck, an effort to improve my mana curve and give me some protection from early ground pounders, with the thought that standing back and allowing me to tap my creatures when it was optimal is a good thing. A word of warning though to anyone who wants to try out this deck: you may very well get mocked for playing **Steel Wall**. Don't ask me how I know this...

So how did it work out? Not bad... but not exactly as I envisioned. Of course, elaborate or overly romantic plans typically don't come together very often in **Magic**. My first match had one of my opponents bail on us after the first five turns or so, which was a bit jarring as it's the first time that's happened to me. We reboot another game and this time play it out.



As you can see, on our side of the table not a whole lot going on other than my double Artillery, double **Sun Droplet** action. My opponent is playing Clerics, which ends up being the aggressor at the table. Even though saniac across from him has a boosted-up **Lone Wolf** going to town, the clerics prevent a bunch of damage and other white weenies keep the pressure on.



My partner then draws **Breakthrough**, which gives him threshold, supercharges his two **Divine Sacraments** and supersedes his white weenies. I'm standing cute on three mana. Luckily my partner's deck is running like clockwork. Next game... is with none other than Anthony Alongi! Despite the poor showing of our team-up last time, he's still willing to play with me (even after I clue him into the nature of my deck).

Of course, how am I going to handle Anthony's Infernal Clock of Doooooom? I take a deep breath, keep my left hand hovered over the F2 and F4 keys and vow to use my time wisely.



My turn 1 Lavamancer is met with my opponent's turn 2 **Silver Knight**. Oof! Lucky for me, I chose to run **Steel Walls** which keep the nasty protection from red fellow off me long enough for Anthony to blow up 2 casting-cost cards and under with a **Pernicious Deed** (his opponent had numerous artifacts that got swept up too).

I actually draw into Mr. Hide this game, but when my opponent **Reciprocates** an attacking **Blinkmoth Nexus**, I end up stuck at four mana for most of the game.



By the time we win this match, I've accumulated ¾ of the uncastable Heartless legendary ogre shamans in my hand. No complaints, we won the match (in no small part due to Anthony's wacky Wormfang/187 creature deck), but after a couple of games I'm still not sure how effective Mr. Hide is as a featured card in a 2HG "burn" deck. So I toss the question out to you all—got any good 2HG "Fire" decks you care to share? Shoot it to me in email or on the forums!

I would like to take a quick moment to apologize to Inferno of the Mind. In last week's column, it was insinuated that he had colluded with his partner in a game against Anthony and I without telling us beforehand that their decks were designed together. It actually hadn't occurred to me that was what might have been going on until Anthony brought up his suspicions (he being a veteran of the format), but they both denied it and I have subsequently been contacted by several acquaintances of Inferno—and Inferno himself—who assure me this wasn't the case. I tend to believe them.

I'll leave behind 2 Headed Giant for now, but I have to say that the format is extremely fun and is one of the most popular types of games available in the Multiplayer room. Most of the games seem to be wide open to any and all comers, most of the players are friendly, and I am constantly being pleasantly surprised by the choices of cards people use. Additionally, there is *lots* of area to explore here, as many cards you've probably gotten use to have a much different effect when there are so many players in the game. For those of you thinking about trying out the format, [IntoTheAether Goes Giant Hunting](#) (JM-S, Jan/2005) has a good overview of 2 Headed Giant. I do notice though that Jay made the same mistake as I did, suggesting that you can only ever attack your opponent directly ahead of you in 2HG. That is actually the default, but the person who organizes the game can switch that off when he sets it up and make it a free-for-all. Since most players will likely expect the default attacking option, if you want to make it otherwise it would be nice to indicate that in the description of your table format.

Musical Interlude...

Wow, as I write this I have Rhapsody Radio playing on my computer, and Heather Nova's *Widescreen* just came on. What a great tune! Where has this gal been all my life?

League Deck – Week 3 Booster



Even I can recognize the quality of this pack! **Blinding Powder**, a second **Kami of False Hope**, **Torrent of Stone**, **Fumiko the Lowblood**, **Takenuma Bleeder** and **Sakura-Tribe Springcaller** are all solid additions. How does this change my deck options? Here's my card pool now:

BLACK

- 1 Blood Speaker
- 2 Call for Blood
- 1 Crawling Filth
- 1 Deathcurse Ogre
- 1 Devouring Greed
- 1 Distress
- 1 Gibbering Kami
- 1 Horobi's Whisper
- 1 Kyoki, Sanity's Eclipse
- 1 Midnight Covenant
- 1 Nezumi Cutthroat
- 2 Nezumi Shadow-Watcher
- 1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi
- 1 Rend Spirit
- 1 Seizan, Perverter of Truth
- 1 Stir the Grave
- 1 Swallowing Plague
- 2 Takenuma Bleeder
- 1 Throat Slitter

RED

- 1 Akki Avalanchers
- 1 Akki Blizzard-Herder
- 1 Aura Barbs
- 1 Battle-Mad Ronin
- 1 Blademane Baku
- 1 Crack the Earth
- 1 Devouring Rage
- 1 Flames of the Blood Hand
- 1 Frostling
- 1 Fumiko the Lowblood
- 1 Goblin Cohort
- 1 Initiate of Blood
- 1 Ire of Kaminari
- 1 Kami of Fire's Roar
- 1 Kumano's Blessing
- 1 Lava Spike
- 1 Ore Gorger
- 1 Pain Kami
- 1 Shinka Gatekeeper
- 1 Torrent of Stone
- 1 Uncontrollable Anger
- 1 Unnatural Speed

BLUE

- 1 Phantom Wings
- 1 Aura of Dominion
- 1 Consuming Vortex
- 1 Eye of Nowhere
- 1 Floodbringer
- 1 Hisoka's Defiance
- 1 Jetting Glasskite
- 1 Minamo's Meddling
- 1 Peer Through Depths
- 1 Psychic Puppetry
- 2 Quillmane Baku
- 1 Ribbons of the Reikai
- 1 River Kaijin
- 1 Shimmering Glasskite
- 1 Soratami Seer
- 1 Teardrop Kami
- 1 Thoughtbind
- 1 Veil of Secrecy

WHITE

- 1 Call to Glory
- 1 Honden of Cleansing Fire
- 1 Hundred-Talon Strike
- 1 Indebted Samurai
- 2 Kami of False Hope
- 1 Kami of Tattered Shoji
- 1 Kami of the Honored Dead
- 1 Kami of the Painted Road
- 1 Kitsune Blademaster
- 1 Nagao, Bound by Honor
- 1 Silent-Chant Zubera
- 1 Silverstorm Samurai
- 1 Takeno's Cavalry
- 1 Terashi's Cry
- 2 Terashi's Grasp
- 1 Waxmane Baku

GREEN

- 2 Splinter
- 1 Burr Grafter
- 1 Child of Thorns
- 1 Dosan the Falling Leaf
- 1 Enshrined Memories
- 1 Harbinger of Spring
- 1 Iwamori of the Open Fist
- 1 Jukai Messenger
- 1 Kodama's Reach
- 1 Order of the Sacred Bell
- 1 Orochi Ranger
- 2 Petalmane Baku
- 1 Roar of Jukai
- 1 Sakura-Tribe Elder
- 1 Sakura-Tribe Springcaller
- 1 Scaled Hulk
- 1 Sosuke's Summons
- 2 Uproot

OTHER

- 1 Blinding Powder
- 1 Konda's Banner
- 1 Tranquil Garden

Many of you who are limited specialists have been losing your minds over some of my deckbuilding decisions so far. I've been upfront in the fact that sealed deck is my weakest format, and I've been sharing the choices I've made so far in order to take you on my journey as I try and figure out a good build. Good news! Suffering through my bad builds ended with last week's column. This week, my friend and Pro Tour competitor Ken Krouner has offered his advice on this particular card pool! Ken was on the Pro Tour gravy train for over a year. His accomplishments in that time include 8th place at Worlds 2002, 9th place at US Nationals 2002, and top 4 of GP Los Angeles. He writes quite frequently about limited formats over at Starcitygames.com, and here's how he'd build a deck from my card pool:

IntoTheAether League Deck

40 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9 Plains 9 Swamp 18 land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Gibbering Kami 1 Kyoki, Sanity's Eclipse 1 Nezumi Cutthroat 1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi 1 Seizan, Perverter of Truth 2 Takenuma Bleeder 1 Throat Slitter 1 Indebted Samurai 2 Kami of False Hope 1 Kami of Tattered Shoji 1 Kami of the Honored Dead 1 Kitsune Blademaster 1 Nagao, Bound by Honor 1 Waxmane Baku 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Horobi's Whisper 1 Rend Spirit 1 Swallowing Plague 1 Honden of Cleansing Fire 1 Hundred-Talon Strike 1 Blinding Powder 6 other spells
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Ken adds: *I think that black/white is by far the best color combination in the format. It has a great mid and late game, and has the tools to survive the early game. So look this over and let me know what questions you have :)*

Well, since trying this build I got my first real victory in the league. It definitely felt like it had more gas than my other builds.



As you can see, I actually did indeed ninjutsu **Okiba-Gang Shinobi** into play, so for those of you incredulous I was not playing this kid, know that I am now a believer. I even got to sneak out a **Throat Slitter** in another game.

I also posted the card pool to the [Leagues and Sealed deck forums](#) as mentioned in last week's Tips and Tricks. I got a proposal for [a different build](#) from neonangel, along with a really good analysis of my colors and cards. Here's the deck he recommended I try:

IntoTheAether League Deck

40 cards

<p>9 Swamp</p> <p>8 Mountain</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>17 land</p>	<p>1 Nezumi Shadow-Watcher</p> <p>1 Nezumi Cutthroat</p> <p>2 Takenuma Bleeder</p> <p>1 Gibbering Kami</p> <p>1 Blood Speaker</p> <p>1 Throat Slitter</p> <p>1 Seizan, Perverter of Truth</p> <p>1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi</p> <p>1 Kyoki, Sanity's Eclipse</p> <p>1 Akki Avalanchers</p> <p>1 Goblin Cohort</p> <p>1 Frostling</p> <p>1 Blademane Baku</p> <p>1 Pain Kami</p> <p>1 Shinka Gatekeeper</p> <p>1 Fumiko the Lowblood</p> <p>1 Initiate of Blood</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>18 creatures</p>	<p>1 Rend Spirit</p> <p>1 Horobi's Whisper</p> <p>1 Swallowing Plague</p> <p>1 Torrent of Stone</p> <p>1 Blinding Powder</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>5 other spells</p>
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Tips & Tricks

In last week's forums, pierrebai posted this about league play:

One trick to avoid being matched with top tie-breaker playing opponents is to let the "waiting for player" window up for at most 30 seconds. The system only matches you with a tie-breaker if you waited a while. Breaking the wait and restarting it reduces greatly the probability of a bad match-up.

There have been a lot of people who've expressed concern with League play suffering from "broken deck sharks" looking for tie-breaker games and feeding on other league players who pop in to play at odd times of the day or night. If you're concerned about that, this tip works nicely and I'd highly recommend giving it a try.

*Bennie Smith has been playing **Magic** since Arabian Nights, and writing about it nearly as long. Several of his early musings appeared on the Magic Dojo, and from there he became a featured writer for Star City Games and a Contributing Editor for Scrye Magazine before he started writing for [magicthegathering.com](#). While a casual gamer at heart, Bennie also thoroughly enjoys the competitive side of **Magic** and won the Virginia State Championship in 1999.*



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