

Adrian Sullivan
Wednesday, July 20, 2005

Sometimes our first try at something can be a bit off. I think of my own first try at making the Kiki-Jiki deck from this year's State Championship tournament. There were a ton of flaws that needed hashing out, and tons of inefficient card choices. I remember my Pain Kamis and my struggle to fit in Intruder Alarms. So we try again. Sometimes on the second try we get farther away from where we should go, and sometimes we get closer - my second draft of Kiki-Jiki included Sensei's Divining Top solely as a way to find the Intruder Alarm (there aren't all that much in the way of enchantment tutors in green and red in Standard).

The first time I noticed Exile Into Darkness was when I glanced at the spoiler. I was looking for elim spells, and I pondered it before discarding the idea. "Too expensive," I thought. I would later play around a bit with one of my favorite deckbuilding collaborator's newest deck; Ben Dempsey had been working on control, and he had concluded Exile Into Darkness was awesome. I trust Ben, but had a few bad games with the deck, again concluding that Exile was just too expensive.

"But it's kinda fun," I thought, and I started working on a little somethin-somethin for this week that included it.



Kinda fun

One of the things about including "fun" elements in decks is that by their nature they tend to not think all that much about the opponent.

Mostly they are about just doing your own thing, and satisfying something in yourself. Stasis players, for example, weren't usually playing "fun" decks, and if they were, they were usually playing Bay Falcon and Skyshroud Falcon joining their Serra Angel.

Exile Into Darkness doesn't have much of that kind of self-reflectiveness to it. How can it? It is, after all, an alternative to a Chainer's Edict or Smother. If it had Arcane, there would be so many triggers to imagine (I personally like Soilshaper - the trigger will resolve first, so you can have land destruction with buyback once they run out of creatures), but it doesn't have Arcane...

There is a little bit in it to go with, though. Creating creatures for your opponent does have a nice ring to it, for example.

Against a deck out of creatures (or simply not running them), you do have a nice bit of reusable elimination. A Karn is good enough on its own, but with Exile, you can slowly take out any of their cheaper artifacts by animating them and using the Exile. Against those decks that have more expensive creatures, tossing in a Grave Pact can do some wonders. If they are holding back their big creatures while presumably waiting for a way to answer the Pact, start Exiling your own creatures - they still have to sack their own big, mean men to satisfy the Pact!

Killing your own men on purpose can sometimes be great in other ways.

Play it with Death's Head Buzzard as a mini-sweep spell. Kill your own Wirewood Herald to get the best Elf for that moment. Set off a Blazing Effigy chain. You might not be able to kill an Academy Rector with Exile Into Darkness, but if you need your own cheap guys dead and your opponent won't do it for you, you can always point the Exile Into Darkness at your own creatures.

Exile Into Darkness can also be used to great effect as a card-drawing engine like Squee. Exile returns to your hand for free (so long as you satisfy its conditions). Feed it (or multiple Exiles) to a Compulsion for a massive card draw engine, or to a Pyromancy (if you're lucky enough to keep hitting it). Once you get Exile returning to your hand, you do have quite a hefty Squee alternate. Feed Exile Into Darkness to Waterfront Bouncer or Kris Mage. If discarding a card is the cost, Exile can pay it.

The plus side of all of these methods is that Exile Into Darkness can always mop up on any cheaper creatures they lay, just like what it was designed for.

A card like Exile Into Darkness is a bit more suited to interaction than it is to making cute tricks come out of it. I'm not quite sure what I was thinking when I discounted Exile Into Darkness the first time. As a five mana spell, yes the cost is an issue, but it comes packed with cheap recursion in return. Hammer of Bogardan may have the benefit of only costing 3 mana that first time, but the subsequent times it does cost 8 mana, even if you can split up the costs. Exile Into Darkness only costs five and it can be incredibly easy to get multiple uses from it.



Recurring it

All it takes to get the Exile back into your hand is having more cards than your opponent. In multiplayer games, the exact text matters: "each opponent" is a lot harder than a single opponent, but all of the concepts in this section remain the same.

Exile is, let's face it, an expensive removal spell. This needs addressing, but the fact remains that you are spending a lot of mana on it. Expensive spells tend to keep your hand size up, by their very nature. Let's assume that you need a little help, and the answer is simple: card drawing.

Card drawing is a great thing to have in a deck anyway. Night's Whisper, Jushi Apprentice, and all of the rest of the good card draw spells don't need to be helping out an Exile Into Darkness to be good, they are good all by themselves. When you cast Concentrate, you aren't usually going to be thinking "ah, now I can get back that Exile Into Darkness", you'll be celebrating that you just drew three cards.

The side benefit, though, isn't something to scorn.

A lot of the Blue methods to search for Exile Into Darkness might end up throwing the card into the grave. Fact or Fiction, Murmurs From Beyond, and Gifts Ungiven can all result in an Exile Into Darkness in the grave. The fact that they all are likely to also include two cards in your hand also

means that the "in the grave" phrase won't apply to Exile Into Darkness for all that long.

And one thing about Exile Into Darkness: once you get the Exile going, it fuels itself and seems to just keep coming back...

The Prison lesson

Chris Cade is widely attributed with the development of the Prison deck. This deck was a White-based control deck that would run massive amounts of board control. One of the big things that it used to gain control was the combination of Icy Manipulator with a



Combos like this can make life miserable for opposing creatures. To get past the Icy

Manipulator, you'd be required to extend out with extra creatures, leaving you vulnerable to mass elimination. This concept wasn't introduced by Prison decks, but it was refined by them.

Exile Into Darkness runs very much the same way. Look at any of the successful aggressive decks out there (a quick trip to the Tournament Center should help you find some), and you'll notice the same thing again and again. They run almost exclusively cheap creatures. Cheap creatures tend to fall to Exile Into Darkness. Sure there are the few exceptions: a Blistering Firecat, an Arrogant Wurm, or a Myr Enforcer, but generally these are the vast minority in terms of simple numbers.

When your opponent is playing against Exile, they are going to have to extend to get past it. Even if you are just casting Exile every turn, if they don't extend, it will kill all of their attackers. So, after they do so, why not just kill everything?

Kagemaro, Wrath of God, Starstorm. All of these cards can just wipe up the table. Now your opponent is in a rough spot. If you have an Exile Into Darkness, they can't simply start back in with a small number of threats. They either have to wait until a big creature comes along to dodge the Exile, or they are going to have to lay multiple threats in one turn once again. This slowing down of the pace of the game is great. The traditional defense against a card like Wrath of God is to pace your threats and save some back. Exile Into Darkness doesn't make this strategy all that hot.

The GP Minneapolis Lesson - Special bonus laptop-dying section

Looking at the semifinal match between Alex Lieberman (playing a Gifts Ungiven control deck) and Dustin Marquis (playing White Weenie), both games would be a "textbook" example of this prison-inspired strategy if Exile Into Darkness had been around long enough to have textbooks written about it.

In the first game, Alex uses the Exile to stop the bleeding a little bit, and helps it out with a Sickening Shoal. Anything left worth worrying about would be able to be swept aside by the Kagemaro, and Dustin was left in a sticky situation, eventually just laying potential blockers trying to buy time (for what?) and having Exile Into Darkness take out everything in the meantime.



Alex Lieberman

The second game shows the other half of it all. After the board is swept up by double Hideous Laughter, Alex is sitting on 2 life, but his opponent has no creatures in play. Dustin drops two Hand of Honor, but Exile takes out one and a Sakura-Tribe Elder blocks the other, which is replaced by a Samurai of the Pale Curtain. On the following turn, the Exile comes back and takes out another creature and another blocker joins the defense. One turn later, the Exile comes back and Dustin is out of creatures, and essentially out of the game. White Weenie, beware.

Other things of note

The Exile/sweep factor is important to take note of from both sides.

Exile before a sweep can help you survive long enough to be able to find a sweep spell, and it can also psychologically encourage overextending. Exile after a sweep can mop up whatever is left. A good combo.

The recursive nature of the card is self-sustaining. Once you have more cards in your hand to get it back the first time, it tends to come back all the time. Getting more cards in your hand generally comes from either card drawing spells (good in their own right), or simply because an opposing beatdown deck usually has a smaller hand by its very nature.

This leaves us a few big points, the first of which is mana. This is expensive stuff. You need to be able to actually get to the mana to be able to make Exile Into Darkness useful. It is not useful to be stuck at 5 mana and only cast Exile Into Darkness the rest of the game. By the time you actually get around to killing every creature your opponent plays, you'll probably be at negative 15 life or something like that.

The Block Gifts Ungiven decks using the card have copious amounts of mana. Between Kodama's Reach and Sakura-Tribe Elder, they can reasonably expect to cast the spell on turn 4. Later on, they can cast spells like Exile Into Darkness and follow up with Kodama of the North Tree or Ink-Eyes.

Whether you simply use a lot of acceleration or a lot of mana, the fact is you'll need to get it going. Mana is important to any deck, but especially important to a deck that uses recursion. Shard Phoenix and Hammer of Bogardan players are already well aware of the costs of the card.

Exile Into Darkness also requires strange numbers in different situations. Take the Gifts Ungiven decks. Because they can run a search for the card, running any more than one copy seems like it might be a bit superfluous. Drawing a second copy of Exile Into Darkness would just mean that you are wasting it unless you have ten mana to spare. At the same time, decks that can't search for it as easily (or can't keep a large enough hand size to guarantee recursion) will definitely want to run a few more of them. Four is probably too many for any deck that doesn't also run Battle of Wits, but in the right kind of control deck, I wouldn't be at all surprised by three copies.

Wrapping Up

I think there are a lot of interesting implications to the card Exile Into Darkness, and really none of them are flashy. Exile is a sensible card, rather like a wool jacket instead of a fur coat, and I'm going

to try to approach this deck with that same sensibility in mind. Back in the day, people used to joke about Black/White control as a Salt and Pepper deck (none of them seemed to work until *Onslaught* came out), and after joking with Phil Leggate about Salt'n'Peppa this weekend, the name just popped to mind.



A Nationals Salt'n'Peppa Prototype



Main Deck

60 cards

1 Eiganjo Castle	3 Kagemaro, First to Suffer	4 Chrome Mox
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	4 Nezumi Shortfang	4 Consume Spirit
3 Mirrodin's Core	3 Yukora, the Prisoner	3 Cranial Extraction
7 Plains		3 Exile into Darkness
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	10 creatures	4 Guardian Idol
5 Swamp		4 Night's Whisper
2 Tendo Ice Bridge		4 Pithing Needle
		4 Wrath of God
20 lands		30 other spells

The deck is only a prototype for an actual Nationals deck - food for thought, really. What it tries to do is include several controlling cards that could be useful against a variety of opponents. The Shortfang can help make the Exile Into Darkness much more likely to come back. Wrath of God and Kagemaro supply ample sweeping effects, and Consume Spirit joins Exile Into Darkness as point and click removal, as well as giving the deck a touch of lifegain (the White Maro might be playable as well). Of course, the deck needs a bit more to help it against the more controlling decks, so Cranial Extraction and Pithing Needle are there to help out the Shortfang in terms of disruption.

I only have a few weeks left here at the site, so if you have ideas you'd like to see here make sure to send me an email. I look forward to seeing your ideas.

And, as always, have a great rest of the week.