

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Single Card Strategies Takes a Bow

Adrian Sullivan
Single-Card Strategies
Wednesday, August 17, 2005



And so we come to the final Single Card Strategies article. What I want to leave you with is something that is most suited to my own strengths as a writer. I think it comes as no surprise to many of you that there is a strong casual element to this column's readership. Many casual players take a great amount of interest in finding a card to bend to their will and surprise, beat, or show off to their friends. I think the closest I come to being this kind of player and deckbuilder in **Magic** is with my penchant for creating and playing rogue decks. In another recent column, I already briefly mentioned why I was chosen by Scott Johns to write this column. He had seen me create so many rogue decks in a short amount of time, he believed that it would allow me to bridge that gap between the competitive player who wanted insight into building cards around a deck and that casual player hungry for a special zing in their fun. While I have tried to do something about appealing to both kinds of readers (and those in between), at heart, I'm always trying to make what I know, the competitive deck, even if I'm supposed to be making a casual one.

With all of that in mind, I'm using this last column to explore a bit of how one goes about looking at a card and deciding when it deserves to be focused on, whether it can sneak in for a nice supporting role, and how to go about making it go as far as it can.

Power corrupts...

Zvi has always talked about how he prefers to not fight fair. If you're going to play a deck in a game that is all about breaking the rules of the game, you want to break them as much as possible if you plan on winning. Now, I'm not talking about underhanded shadiness, I'm talking about doing things that are simply unfair in terms of power level. Take this deck, a classic, from Jamie Wakefield:

Jamie Wakefield

60 cards

3 Wasteland	4 Llanowar Elves	4 Creeping Mold
3 Gaea's Cradle	4 Fyndhorn Elves	4 Natural Order
16 Forest	3 Elvish Lyrist	3 Overrun
22 land	4 Wall of Roots	
	3 Uktabi Orangutan	11 other spells
	4 Spike Feeder	
	2 Spike Weaver	
	3 Verdant Force	
	27 creatures	

He wrote [one of the best tournament reports](#) of all time about it. What does it do to not fight fairly? It spends and changes a random little green creature into a **Verdant Force**. **Tooth and Nail** does something very similar, exchanging a lot of mana for a pair of creatures being put directly into play. **Umezawa's Jitte** can change the entire dynamic of attacking and blocking. **Sensei's Divining Top** changes the quality of the cards that you draw.

Not everything is powerful all by itself. Not everything is an **Ancestral Recall**. Sometimes you have to massage the card a little bit to make it work.

Making it work

There are a ton of things that can hold back an effect. Let's hit them.

Mana: Obviously, if something is expensive, you're going to have to figure out a way to pay for it. Building up unfair amounts of mana usually comes from one of four sources: creatures that create mana (Birds and

WHAT IS MAGIC?
CLICK HERE!

Two-Headed Giant
Worldwide Tournaments

Magic Wallpapers
for your cell phone

PRODUCTS

Ravnica: City of Guilds **Core Set**

All Magic products

RULES

Core Game
Basic Rulebook
Comprehensive Rules
All Magic Rules

MESSAGE BOARDS

All Magic message boards
magicthegathering.com forum
Rules Q&A forum
Magic Online announcements

MAGIC ONLINE

Download Now! Check server status

Magic Online Academy Magic Online FAQ

NOVELS

Ravnica: City of Guilds
Ravnica Cycle, Book I
by Cory Herndon

More fiction at LEGENDODOLOGY

Elves), artifacts that create mana (Talismans, **Gilded Lotus**, etc.), things that enhance land (like **Heartbeat of Spring**), or putting mana into play (**Sakura-Tribe Elder**, **Nature's Lore**, and plenty of others).

They all have their strengths and weaknesses. A deck that might want creatures for some other purpose (like a **Cabal Therapy** or a **Nantuko Husk**) is going to prefer the Birds and Elves approach. A deck punishing land-drops with **Zo-Zu the Punisher** is not going to be all that excited about running **Sakura-Tribe Elder** or exploiting **Exploration**. Decks that plan on destroying mass amounts of land with **Armageddon** don't tend to like stripping land from their deck, but decks that take out a more limited number of lands on all sides (say if they are using **Wildfire**) might not mind it so much. Plan on running many creature sweeping spells, and you might not be so excited about using creatures.

The key for your deck running the expensive spell is to try to figure out what else your deck is going to be doing other than casting the expensive spell, and then fit your mana to it.

Engines and Fuel: There are going to be cards that need to be fed something. It can be cards, mana, land, or whatever else you might have lying around as a resource. Big effects come at a cost of some sort, and a lot of these costs are the same.

Take the cost of extra cards being used up. Immediately, if you are discarding cards, there are recursion effects to look at. Perhaps you can feed a **Shard Phoenix** or a **Squee** to a discard effect. Maybe that **Artificer's Intuition** could use a **Myr Servitor** or four. If you have an effect that could be sending your cards to your graveyard, you should check to see whether or not you can get those cards back. **Groundskeeper**, **Exile Into Darkness**, **Hammer of Bogardan**, and **Eternal Dragon** are just a few of the things you can use that will just keep being able to come back for later.

Other times, you'll want to think about simply creating an abundance of fuel for something to feed on. **Necropotence** generally fed on life, and with a couple of "Suicide" exceptions, most **Necropotence** players built their decks with gaining life in mind. Obviously, an **Atog** (or his big brother **Megatog**) exists better in a world with more artifacts, just as a **Deranged Hermit** is a great thing to put out there if you have a hungry **Lord of the Pit** to feed. That **Artificer's Intuition** is going to need an abundance of artifacts in your deck just to make sure that that recursion you want to build with the Servitors is easy to come up with. Whatever the case, keep an eye out for ways to shore up those extra needs beyond just the casting cost.

Chances: Sometimes you just don't get a chance to use your spell. Take **Imaginary Pet**. A 4/4 creature for just two mana seems like a great deal, especially for Blue. Unfortunately, the Pet wants to pop back to your hand a lot. If you have reasons to believe the Pet would be good in your deck, you should have other cards that might allow the Pet the chance to come out and play. A card like **Last Rites** can easily empty both players' hands of almost anything relevant, making a Pet dropped afterwards quite a problem. Fast mana can make a hand empty quickly. Whatever the reason or method, you don't want to mess up your chances of making the Pet good by including a ton of expensive spells that might gum up your hand and force the Pet back into it.

Take **Nether Void**. Generally speaking, you don't want to just drop this card onto the table at any time. You want to fight like Zvi wants to fight: unfair. Your opponent should be cringing when you cast your Single Card. To make a **Nether Void** unfair, you want to have the edge on the table before you plop it down. The rest of your deck should reflect that and try to make that lucky situation all that more likely.

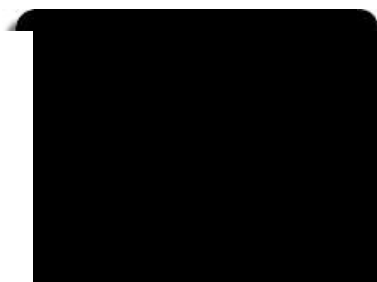
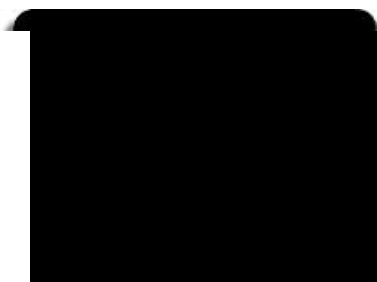


Conjunction

One of the things that many players love to see is combinations of cards creating wildly spectacular effects. Sometimes if they are too good, we get a little sick of seeing them. Most players I know were desperately tired of "**Balance/Zuran Orb**" back in the day, and there will be plenty of other lesser effects that might be good enough to be so staple in tournaments that players playing For Fun would see it as bland and overused. What most of these people want is to be the one showing the flash.

To create splashy effects in conjunction, it is similar to the approach used in thinking about **Nether Void**. With **Nether Void**, you'd be looking for cards that would help you create an imbalanced situation (if only for a moment) to drop the **Nether Void** into for great effect. With other cards, what you want to do is keep your eyes open for some key phrases.

"Instead": This one is a doozy. Here, a **Magic** card is breaking the rules by telling you you shouldn't bother doing things the way you normally would, but instead replace it with another thing. This is a great way to escape potential costs. Take the classic combination of **Sylvan Library/Abundance**.





With either one you had a decent library manipulator, but combined, **Abundance's** "Instead" clause means that you didn't "draw" any cards that Sylvan would require you to put back. There are only 255 cards that have "Instead" on them right now, but don't worry, they'll make more.

"Put into play": This is a **Cheatyface** ability if I ever heard one. Nearly every put into play ability basically boils down to doing one of two things: cheating on putting land into play (very powerful) or cheating on the casting cost of a permanent. Either way, you can often find ways to exploit this one.

"Additional": Usually this implies an additional cost. Here, we are thinking a bit in reverse of the previous two reasons. The logic goes like this: if they wanted it to cost more, maybe we can get a bargain on that "additional" cost. Losing things that we *want* to lose, losing things that will come back, or anything else that makes this additional cost unimportant can sometimes cause much more powerful effects. Take **Diabolic Edict** on an **Academy Rector** for one simple example.

"Untap": This is a dangerous, dangerous phrase. If something is letting you untap something, it might just be too good, at some point. No one was all that scared of the lowly **Twiddle**, and then one day it started untapping **Tolarian Academy** or **Gilded Lotus**. Some things are only meant to be done once in a turn, and if you are doing them more than once, it can be scary.

Any of the major triggers ("if", "when", "whenever") are also worth noting, but they are so numerous that they can almost be overwhelming to attempt to notice them all. When you are looking at cards and card lists, take an extra moment to check these out, if only to make note of them just in case. Those extra moments might just give you a "Eureka!" moment later on when you make a spontaneous connection between two cards.

The Frying Pan and the Fire

Giving your opponent bad choices is another great way to exploit cards. When we are playing without any knowledge of what the opponent has, we often find ourselves with choices to make that are difficult. Putting your opponent in that crunch space where they might not even realize how bad their choices are is a great place to be.

Take the card **Icy Manipulator**. A single **Icy Manipulator** can take out a creature, encouraging the opponent to play more creatures. When you hit them with a **Wrath of God**, it is easy to expect to get a two-for-one or better. Your Wrath anticipates their need to extend to overcome an Icy, and whatever they decide, they will be hurt for it.

My own personal favorite from my history was with my Jungle Book deck way back in the day. I would drop **Mana Flare**. My opponent could either use all of that mana or hold back and not play as much. If I followed up the next turn with **Jokulhaups** they would be angry for playing out their spells. If I just continued to develop with the mana instead, they would be mad for *not* playing out their spells.

The lesson: if you know a card could create a certain kind of behavior in your opponent, look for ways to exploit that behavior.



The Environment

Sometimes things are simply decided by the environment you are in. No matter what you are playing in, you have to respect the environment. If you play in a tournament area, you can expect most of the players to be playing the latest and greatest off of the net. If you play in a casual playgroup, you come to learn that player #1 over there doesn't particularly like politicking, and that player #2 has a penchant for mono-colored decks. No matter what you might *want* to play, you have to realize when the deck you'd like simply can't survive there.

This can be as simple as a room full of life gain players. If you walk into a group game with a burn deck, aside from the challenge of burning out multiple people without using so much sweep you piss everyone off and they kill you, you don't *also* want to be dealing with a player that uses **Honorable Passage** and a ton of other anti-burn spells in his regular playing deck. If your deck dies to White Weenie, don't play it in White Weenie heavy environments (like Indiana is reputable for).

As great as a lot of cards and combos are, they simply can't survive in a world where they have to face a lot of incidental hate. You can do your best to minimize this problem by playing decks that are far less reliant on a single card, but then, aren't we getting away a bit from the whole idea of a Single Card Strategy?

A final Wrap Up...

First of all, I want to thank Scott for giving me this column in the first place. It's my third time working with Scott, and I very much appreciated the opportunity. Secondly, I want to thank a lot of the folks here in Madison and elsewhere that have given me plenty of small stories to share in this column, and have given me feedback on ideas. Some of the best stuff comes when you bounce it off of people, and I know that my many conversations with people like Brian Kowal, Ben Dempsey, and the inimitable "Box" Klein have made writing this column all the more fun.

And, of course, I can't mention everyone, but I'd like to thank everyone that participated in the Challenges that I've held for the last year and a half. People like Christian Möeller-Holst and krizc really left quite an impression, but there were many others who submitted decklists for literally every challenge. For them and the other hundreds of submissions to each of the Challenges, thank you.

I wish everyone heading off to GenCon a fantastic time. Be sure to check out everything going on, but I'd like to give a little shout out to everyone playing at 5-color's World Championship there. I wish I could attend (playing with 250+ card decks is the most common way for me to play casually), but I'm hoping that someone from Madison will take home the crown yet again. But heck, it's an open event, any one of you could take it down if you have it in you too.

Have a great one. It's been fun.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Adrian Sullivan](#) archive

[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITE MAP](#) [PRODUCT LIBRARY](#)



© 1995-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)