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I think the best Swimming With Sharks pieces I did in 2005 were all in the off-season. The column spends a good chunk of the year highlighting PTQ trends and talking about specific decks as they rise and fall over the course of a format. I think that the column does a great job of keeping the audience -- you guys -- abreast of what is going on... but the articles I liked writing the most were the basic strategy and theory articles like this one and UB Trippin'.

Correctly playing your own deck is a difficult enough task. Tim McKenna used to say that it was almost okay that Affinity was the best deck because it was so difficult to play perfectly. Every little decision of which land to play down, whether or not to add a counter to AEther Vial, and how many creatures to send into the Red Zone could make a world of difference in terms of card counts and damage resolved.

The sad part was that a player running Affinity making only 60 percent correct decisions would usually win anyway, and make his opponent look helpless in the process. The task of playing your own deck can make for difficult strategy and tactics even when you are very familiar with your cards and a matchup.

For example, I lost a match just this past weekend because I destroyed my opponent with triple Cabal Therapy and triple Duress in the first two turns of games two and three. It seemed nice to put my very good opponent on no spells so early, but I didn't have any pressure and he just topped an Intuition to dig himself out of the discard and recover in the midgame . . . I could have held that valuable disruption to execute on a more meaningful turn six or eight, but instead ate a Mana Short and Corpse Dance respectively.




Before this, there was . . . this.

Today's article is not about how to play your own deck, or at least not necessarily. Though it can be of use in decks with significant direct damage components, the goal is actually to give you the tools to play better **Magic against** a variety of foes. To that end, one of the most important tools that you can incorporate into your strategic game is the concept of *Reach*.

Put simply, Reach is the ability of a deck to beat you outside of conventional creature combat. Typically we think of Reach in terms of red direct damage spells, or at least supplemental artifacts like Cursed Scroll. Think about how different it is to play against two aggressive beatdown decks with fast starts when one has Reach and one doesn't.

These two decks made the final tables of Block Pro Tours in consecutive years:

Dave Price		
Main Deck		Sideboard

60 cards

16 Mountain
4 Wasteland

20 lands

4 Canyon Wildcat
4 Fireslinger
4 Jackal Pup
4 Mogg Conscripts
4 Mogg Fanatic
4 Mogg Raider
2 Rathi Dragon

26 creatures

4 Cursed Scroll
4 Giant Strength
4 Kindle
2 Scalding Tongs

14 other spells

1 Apocalypse
2 Jinxed Idol
1 Rathi Dragon
2 Scalding Tongs
4 Shatter
4 Stone Rain
1 Torture Chamber

15 sideboard cards

Christian Lührs



Main Deck

60 cards

14 Forest
4 Gaea's Cradle
2 Treetop Village

20 lands

4 Albino Troll
2 Elvish Herder
4 Elvish Lyryst
4 Pouncing Jaguar
4 Titania's Chosen
4 Wild Dogs

22 creatures

4 Crop Rotation
4 Hidden Stag
2 Might of Oaks
4 Rancor
4 Symbiosis

18 other spells

Sideboard

4 Hidden Guerrillas
4 Hidden Predators
3 Hush
2 Phyrexian Processor
2 Treetop Village

15 sideboard cards

Both of these decks have aggressive drops . . . 2/1 and 2/2 creatures for just one mana each (and in Dave's deck, those aren't even the best one-drops). Lührs supplements his beatdown with arguably the most powerful offensive creature enchantment ever, Rancor, while Dave has to settle for the vastly inferior Giant Strength. Christian's deck has Crop Rotation and Gaea's Cradle, access to four copies of the best of the *Urza's Legacy* man lands, and powerful spoilers like Phyrexian Processor that

some decks just can't stop . . . Ultimately, though, I think it is more difficult to play against Dave's deck.

While both Christian's StOmPy deck and Dave's Deadguy Red have strong creatures and the potential to do a lot of damage, you just can't discount the fact that Price's PT winner has Cursed Scroll, Kindle, and to a lesser extent, Scalding Tongues where Christian has Symbiosis and Might of Oaks. Even if Lührs can come in for an extra four or even seven damage with his instants, Dave doesn't need a creature threat in play at all to beat you with his red and artifact Reach.

What does this mean?

When you are playing a deck with strong creature sanction such as Wrath of God, Akroma's Vengeance or Pernicious Deed, it is not generally difficult to beat creature decks without Reach. The best example is from Standard a couple of years ago. Jeff Cunningham aggressively touted Blue-green Madness as the best deck in Standard, and it probably *was* the best aggressive deck. When Blue-green Madness went up against decks like Psychatog with eight or so main-deck anti-creature elements or more saliently monoblack control, the informed opponent could play in such a way that he got extra cards . . . just like a Necropotence deck.



Say you are on four life and the opponent with two cards in hand is attacking with an Aquamoeba. You have a Nantuko Shade but not enough mana available to pump it to 5/4. Do you block?

The answer is probably not. What is he going to do to you, really? Put you on one? It's pretty unlikely that you will be in a worse position the next turn with one life (against one or two creatures with a potentially huge Nantuko Shade) than you are with no blocker at all and four life. You might not necessarily be *better* off in terms of net creature counts, but you should have more options. If you block, you lose your Nantuko Shade. Worse yet, the opponent might be able to run some cheats with damage on the stack to save his Aquamoeba. Since he is Madness, you can expect that he is discarding either garbage or something he doesn't want in his hand anyway, so by *not* blocking, you could have just traded three life for the life of your Nantuko Shade.

Now you probably wouldn't even consider not blocking if the opponent were blue-red. With you on one, any number of cards will end the game.

Now going back to our green and red Block decks, you would make the same decision in either case. Lührs could beat you with Might of Oaks if you didn't try to block and Price would beat you with one of his burn cards. But when playing against Reach-free Lührs, you get to make all kinds of better decisions on your own turn.

Say you are playing a control deck; it has instant-speed sanction like Counterspell, creature elimination, but also sorcery-speed card drawing. Against Christian's deck, you can fearlessly kill his clock and tap out for extra cards on as little as one life. He doesn't have any haste, so even if he

drops a threat, it isn't necessarily going to screw you in the short term, whereas you will have more options moving forward.

You wouldn't necessarily make the same play against Dave's deck. On one life, especially if you were holding a counter, you would have to think very carefully about whether or not you wanted to give him the opportunity to kill you while you were tapped out; it can be even more complicated against other red decks, especially those with haste creatures such as Ball Lightning or Viashino Sandstalker. Now I'm not saying that it isn't *right* to tap out, especially if you put Dave on not having a burn card, but the decision is much more difficult.

You are probably already characterizing the kinds of decks you see where the appreciation of Reach is most useful. In addition to StOmPy and Blue-green Madness, there is White Weenie, and to a lesser extent, Suicide Black and even Reanimator (at least when they use that one Sickening Dreams to dump Akroma on turn two). When you play against decks like these, you have a greater degree of freedom in your decision making. Unlike against opponents like Goblins or Red Deck Wins, you can make plays that improve your board position, trading life total for cards in play or even cards in hand. You can liberally milk your mass removal for more of the opponent's threats or take time out to pick up a couple of extras off the top.

I have found that the biggest problem I have when I learn a new theory is to overuse it, or more realistically, misapply it. Just because you know you can go low in life total against certain opponents doesn't mean that you necessarily *should*. Reach or no, people play Wild Mongrel for a reason -- *he's pretty good*. When you stop respecting the opponent's conventional offense altogether, you end up getting beaten to death with cards like Daru Spiritualist and Genesis.



From the flipside, various decks that we don't traditionally think of as having access to red spells have tried to incorporate Reach elements into their offensive repertoires in one way or another. The most prominent is Wonder in Blue-green Madness (or even Psychatog). While Wonder doesn't address all the elements of Reach we have talked about today, it does remove arguably the most important method players have of preventing creature damage, namely putting a guy in front of an oncoming threat.

Don't forget that Disciple of the Vault was not an automatic inclusion in Standard Affinity until last Spring's *Mirrodin* Block Pro Tour-Kobe, and that the winning Extended deck at Pro Tour-Columbus did not play with Fling. These were cards that Affinity players learned to include over time to supplement the deck's already breakneck offense; highly vulnerable to creature elimination and disruption in general, the best aggressive deck of all time got to its lofty position by learning

to race powerful control elements like Akroma's Vengeance or Pernicious Deed and win games even when its creature offense was wanting.

Green players have added cards such as Hurricane to their decks purely as finishers, and Dave Price famously played two Squallmongers in his StOmPy deck's "fatty" slot. Squallmonger wasn't anywhere

near as efficient as the rest of his deck, but it could not only end the game like a Hurricane . . . it could do so *even if the opponent had stolen it with a Treachery!*

In honor of discard week, I am closing with the deck former Online and Enjoying It columnist (and eventual Pro Tour Top 8 competitor) Chad Ellis used to win his first PTQ:

Diesel Pox		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	<i>60 cards</i>	
4 Mishra's Factory	3 Cursed Scroll	3 Diabolic Edict
16 Swamp	4 Dark Ritual	2 Dystopia
3 Wasteland	3 Demonic Consultation	2 Forsaken Wastes
-----	4 Duress	2 Gloom
23 lands	3 Funeral Charm	3 Spinning Darkness
	4 Hymn to Tourach	3 Tormod's Crypt
3 Steel Golem	3 Pox	-----
-----	3 The Rack	15 sideboard cards
3 creatures	4 Urza's Bauble	
	3 Yawgmoth's Will	

	34 other spells	

Pox decks were some of the most difficult opponents to beat, especially if you weren't base-red or blue. Look at how Chad's deck combines discard with Reach -- besides the obvious theme card Pox (which itself combines those two elements), The Rack was a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" threat that could really *rack* up the damage. For especially other black decks, The Rack was problematic because if it hit play, they couldn't play out their hands . . . but if they didn't, they would just get wrecked worse by Hymn to Tourach, Duress, and Pox.

Functionally speaking, Reach is often only about the last couple of points of damage. But in a game like **Magic**, where it doesn't matter by *how much* you win or lose, just *that* you aren't the guy on zero, those last couple of life points are exactly what you have to manage against an aggressive opponent. Hopefully this introduction will help you do just that the next time you see first-turn Savannah Lions.

