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Michael Turian has some sage advice for those building a creature deck that wants to commit a lot of creatures to the table and worrying about how to beat Wrath of God. That advice?

Don't. Build the deck as if Wrath doesn't exist. Deal with it over the board.

That's far from universally true, but it is far more true than it would seem at first glance. Wrath is such an effective weapon against some creature strategies that letting yourself alter your deck to try and beat it is throwing good slots in your deck away. This is especially true, given the fact that in most games you won't have to face Wrath of God. Even if they do pack four copies, they're not that big a favorite to have one early in the game. However, once you know that your opponent is playing Wrath of God or other mass removal spells there's no avoiding the need to modify your play. I've talked about how to play with cards like Wrath of God and Pyroclasm but after someone here at Wizards noted that he thought it would be a good topic, I decided to write about how to play against them.



Beware of Phantoms

Before you start adjusting your play, make sure there's a reason to be adjusting. Not every White deck has Wrath of God, not every deck that plays it has four copies, and not every deck where Pyroclasm would make sense runs Pyroclasm. The same is true for every other mass removal spell. Often players are surprised when they get to the Top 8 of a Pro Tour and find that the deck they thought was a nightmare for them actually only has two or three copies of the spells that threaten to put the matchup out of reach. You need to be realistic; don't automatically assume the worst. Still, sometimes it is obvious what your opponent is up to, and in some formats they'll even have cards that function as their fifth, eighth or even more such spells.

What Can You Beat?

At its heart, the decision on what to do about spells like Wrath is going to come down to what gives you the best chance to win. In general, there is a probability that they have any given number of copies of the spell you're worried about. Each number leads to a different type of game. Ideally you'd calculate your probability of winning under each scenario, calculate the probability of each scenario taking place, and then figure out what the right approach is. I say that a lot in various forms because that's the essence of how to figure out what to do in **Magic**. However, such a calculation would be impossible. The best you can do is approximate.

Each game, you need to figure out which plan you want to be on. For now, I'm going to assume the card in question is Wrath of God.

Game Plan 0: You Can't Beat Wrath



Sometimes there's nothing you can do about it. This is almost never absolute, because Wrath stops you from winning rather than causing you to lose. As long as the kill isn't on the table, how do you know what he'll do next? For all you know, that was the only spell he'll ever draw. Ten lands and turns later, you've recovered and finished him off. When you say that you can't beat Wrath, what you're saying is that Wrath would put you in a position where you are at an extreme disadvantage. You've lost your tempo advantage, your opponent has gained card advantage and you can't mount a second offensive capable of winning the game against the expected level of resistance. All you can do now is hope that your opponents' draw aside from that Wrath of God is abysmal.

The reason you follow this path is if you have no practical way to give yourself a good chance to beat the Wrath. If you don't leave yourself vulnerable, you'll only give him more time to find a Wrath, and if he finds one you'll probably lose anyway.

You also probably give him a much better chance to survive without one. In these situations, your plan is to act as if the card Wrath of God was not in your opponents' hand. You won't ignore its existence. Instead, you'll commit everything you can to the table in an attempt to win as fast as possible and give your opponent less time to draw Wrath of God (or sometimes the mana to cast it).

If the Wrath does come, you'll do what you can to give yourself a chance to steal the win. Some thought can still be given to what to do in this scenario. The key is to ask yourself when you've got so big an advantage that only Wrath can stop you. Once that happens, there's no need to commit even

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more resources to the table. Even if you don't think it will let you beat a Wrath all that often, it never hurts to see if you can pick up something for nothing. This idea of "forcing the Wrath" will come up again later.

Game Plan 1: Beating Wrath with Burn

There are several basic approaches to dealing with Wrath. Option one is to burn them out afterwards. In this theory, creatures exist to do early damage. You understand that your creatures are unlikely to be able to win you the game on their own. Instead, they're around to soften up your opponent and then distract him, his spells, and his creatures while you find a way to finish him off. Commit whatever you have to in order to get in the damage you need to put him in what you consider your deck's range, and don't worry too much about what looks like abysmal card disadvantage as long as the game is on track and your opponent's life total is going down.

Game Plan 2: Going Through the Wrath with Tempo

This is one of the best ways for decks that seem highly vulnerable to beat a Wrath. In this case, your goal is to force them to Wrath before they're ready, especially if their plan is to back it up with counters. For example, at Grand Prix: Atlanta I was playing a Goblin deck with several ways to deal with Wrath. I could use Cabal Therapy to take Wrath out of their hand or Burning Wish to get Cabal Therapy, but I also had the ability to force a Wrath and go straight through it. Here's how that works:

You commit enough creatures to the board early that they know they have no choice but to Wrath. In the case of Atlanta, this generally meant Goblin Piledriver - he makes damage add up fast. Once you've convinced them to burn their Wrath, you put down a second set of creatures while they're tapped out. The plan is to kill them with those men, so you're playing out men with the goal of maintaining the best possible second strike that still lets you force them to pull the trigger. If there's a third wave, so much the better, but you should consider yourself in good shape if you can handle one. Even if you have another primary plan, you should always look for a chance to make this work, often even when it involves damaging your chances of pulling off an alternate approach.

Game Plan 3: Going Through Wrath with Exhaustion

This plan involves minimizing the impact of Wrath by not letting your opponent get too much card advantage from it. If you can afford to play one creature at a time, or only one more than your opponent, then Wrath is just another removal spell. It's still good against you, but he'll have to burn his best card for not too much impact. Eventually he'll run out of ways to deal with your creatures and that will be the game. This is the most basic way to deal with Wrath, which I first learned as the "paced development of weenies" strategy, but you need to be careful.



The danger here lies in sacrificing too much to this plan. Playing only one creature, or even two creatures, can open you up to other answers. Chances are he has long term sources of card advantage and often other advantages as well, and you're giving him time. If you're not forcing him to play the Wrath, it will be around to restrain your movement and act as a safety valve for him. If it was never there, you're letting him off the hook. Are you sure you're going to win this war?

In general, you should only proceed slowly in two situations. Situation one is that you feel confident that this plan will succeed in the long term: Your opponent does not have inevitability (a term that refers to who will win a long game) as long as you don't play into his removal. If he has inevitability (meaning that if nothing much happens for a while, it favors him) then you're playing into his hands. The other reason is if you gain no advantage from walking into Wrath and therefore can play slowly. This is most likely to come into play when your opponent has a fistful of both cards and mana. Right now, you have little chance of successfully keeping multiple creatures on the table and exhaustion of his removal is your only practical hope of winning. You have no choice but to take it slow.

Game Plan 4: Minimize Wrath's Effects

Ghost Council is great for dealing with a card like Wrath of God, because as long as you save mana it can't be killed by Wrath of God unless it is alone. Often you'll wait until turn 5 to play it so you can protect it, even though removal still kills one of your men either way. Teysa will give tokens in the event of a Wrath. Haunt effects will trigger, making haunt creatures stronger dead than alive. By sculpting your resources properly, you can create a situation where Wrath doesn't even do that much damage to you. However, this generally requires you to prepare the plan during deck construction even more than the other plans do.

Game Plan 5: Don't Let Them Cast It

There are always the old standbys. Using counters, discard, land destruction or other denial strategies, you can try to prevent Wrath from being cast. Often Wrath is by far the most



likely way for you to lose the game, so you can go pretty far out of your way to stop it from happening. If you get the chance to pull this off, go for it, but like option four you have to be careful that you're not sacrificing too much.



How do you choose among and move between these plans? Once I have reason to believe that I have a Wrath problem, I usually let the hand I have this game determine what I want to do, but I keep my deck in mind at all times. The most important thing is to give yourself a practical way to win the game. For example, suppose you're attacking with Gruul Guildmage and have Repeal in your hand. Should you tap your four lands to do an extra two damage? That comes down to whether you feel that your current damage per turn gives you an acceptable chance to win the game. If it isn't enough, you need to try and do the extra damage even if you risk a devastating Wrath, say from him catching Birds and Elves along with the Guildmage. Again, what you're doing is trying to figure out whether what you gain in one scenario is worth what you lose in another.

Making sure you're doing enough to be happy with your progress is a good way to make sure that you accomplish that.

Ask yourself what makes each player happy. You want to make yourself happy and your opponent unhappy, which are usually mirrors of each other but do not have to be. If you're letting him be happy is him casting his removal, you need to make sure that you're not over committing to the board. If you're letting him be happy by not casting his removal, then you're probably holding back too much.

Finding Out

When in doubt, it's better to cast enough creatures that your opponent would Wrath than to hold back just enough that he won't. The reason for this is information. If you don't force the Wrath, you'll never know if he has it. If you do force it and it doesn't come, then you know you have him. At this point, it often is correct to dramatically overextend because you're not giving your opponent much of a window to find an answer.

Lesser Removal Spells

In some matchups, their Pyroclasm is big enough to be a Wrath or so close to one that it can be treated the same way. In that case, you follow the same rules, keeping in mind that Pyroclasm costs two mana and that it is generally less valued. That means that you can force it out of their hand far easier than you can with a Wrath, so act accordingly. He probably doesn't know exactly how vulnerable you are or are not, so he can't be confident that he's sitting on a trump card. If you have the tools to punish him for waiting, taking it slow makes sense, while if he does have a trump card, you probably want to force his removal.

Next Time: Examples

I've given a general outline of ways to think about these situations. Now we have a background available, but examples are still best. My goal for next week is to deal with a lot of situations that involve whether to (or how to) defend yourself against likely mass removal. If you have a good one (or two!) send them to me this week. I'll assemble them for next week.