

Zvi Mowshowitz
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The plan for this week was to assemble a group of situations that involved playing against what you either suspected or outright knew was a mass removal spell, whether it was Wrath of God, Pyroclasm, Earthquake, Pernicious Deed or anything else. For each, I would then explain how I'd go about deciding how to go about trying to deal with the situation, choosing an approach and how to implement it. Unfortunately, while I got plenty of feedback on the article, I didn't get what I was looking for. For that reason, I'm going to postpone the example article until I can assemble enough good examples. Please send in game situations where you're worried about what choice to make in the face of an opponents' removal. Instead, our topic this week will address a card I noticed came up in a frighteningly large number of responses.

That card was Ghostway. One player went so far as to call this an oversight. The bulk of the responses also seemed to be thinking of this question as a deckbuilding exercise. I've written columns in the past that dealt primarily with deck construction, but this one is called The Play's The Thing. It deals with what happens once you sit down to play your match, not with building your deck. The two are related, of course. You build your deck thinking about what you'll do when you sit down to play, and playing teaches you how to build your deck. In a way this week I'm dealing with an area very close to deck construction in the guise of showing how certain types of cards play, but I don't think you can have one without the other.

At first glance, Ghostway seems like a great solution to Wrath of God. You save all of your creatures and they lose all of theirs. That certainly seems like a good result, but when it was first mentioned I had to look it up with Gatherer. I realized I had not given a second thought to Ghostway. When we were picking preview cards for *Guildpact*, I don't think that anyone considered it, and I have yet to see it put into a deck in the FFL.



In Limited, I would heartily agree with the suggestion. When your options are limited and mass removal would be devastating, Ghostway is an excellent solution, but the context here is Constructed. Within that context, why didn't I even consider Ghostway worth thinking about?

Questions and Answers

David Price was once known as the King of Beatdown, and one of his most famous lines helps explain his love of going on the offensive: "There are wrong answers, but there are no wrong threats." When I play a creature and attack with it, you have to do something about it. When you draw a removal spell, that lets you answer my threat but it doesn't force me to respond. If I didn't have a vulnerable creature for you to kill, you could be stuck with a dead card, or you could be caught behind on tempo or with counters when I already have my threats on the table. Any number of things can go wrong. Which player would you rather be?

Things are not that easy, and Wrath of God is a great example of an answer that can make some threats look wrong. When I cast a Wrath and take out three cards, that's a big win for me, and if you

needed to play all three creatures at once, then in a very important sense they were wrong threats. They could still have succeeded – in that sense, they were not wrong – but they were not efficient. Decks with removal can also accomplish the same goal by buying time to get to the cards they think will win them the game.

The Answer to an Answer is an Answer

The problem with Ghostway is that you are turning things around in exactly the wrong way. Ghostway is an answer to a question posed to your deck in the form of a removal spell, and that makes it an answer. The fact that it is answering not a question but an answer to your question makes it twice the answer. For Ghostway to work, you need to have a threat, he needs to have an answer and then you can use it to answer his answer. If either of those steps doesn't take place then you're stuck with a card that is not useful.



The second strike against Ghostway is that you need to stay untapped in order to use it. When you're playing a deck that has enough creatures to warrant protecting them, keeping three mana available while deploying your men is not easy. Keeping mana for Ghostway is a lot like keeping mana for Hinder. The only difference is that Hinder is a general answer that can counter most spells while Ghostway is a specialized answer that only answers a select group of spells.

The third strike is that most of the time Ghostway can only hope to trade with your opponent's spell. If I cast Wrath and you cast Ghostway, what have I lost? I've lost the Wrath, but I have not lost a card and I've only spent one mana more than you did. That's hardly a nightmare scenario. I may well lose this game as a result, because Wrath was my most important spell, but I'm not being rewarded for taking those risks I've already talked about. When I use a card like Ghostway I need to be rewarded when I get it to work. In this case, those rewards are not easy to get. You can get them in complex creature combats or other scenarios, but such scenarios are not common in Constructed.

Of course, you could also look at Ghostway as granting all the same card advantage that your opponent gets from Wrath of God, since it prevents that Wrath from taking effect. You can make a good case that once his Wrath is rendered useless, he is most likely toast. I can see Ghostway being a sideboard card for certain specialized decks that have a particular fear of mass removal, can actually spare the mana (the two don't often go together, but it does happen), and don't have access to better options in their colors. It would be easy to rattle off game after game where the Hinder player wins and the Ghostway player loses horribly, but the main way to achieve the opposite without lots of combat is to have the Ghostway player not try to use it!

Working With Specialized Answers

When I talked about all the ways to deal with Wrath of God, I placed emphasis on the fact that in each game you would choose from several different paths. One game you might go for the win and hope they don't have it, knowing you have no good alternatives. In the next game, you might play only one or two creatures at a time. In the third game, you might have cards that prevent Wrath from being fully effective. That is the ideal.

The problem comes when you play a card like Ghostway. Ghostway is an answer to an answer, and even if they have other removal as well, Ghostway is a specialized answer. Ghostway won't kill your opponent and you can't use it if your opponent doesn't give you the chance. Whenever you play a game of **Magic**, you're drawing a random assortment of the cards in your deck, so every card that

might not advance your strategy is a potential tragedy and Ghostway has a lot of ways (including seeing more than one copy of the card) to fail to help your cause.

Once you draw it, the goal is to use it. If you play in such a way that you can't use Ghostway at the right time, the card will go to waste. That means from the beginning you need to have a vision for how the game is going to develop. The moment you look at an opening hand like this one:



Plains, Plains, Plains, Samurai of the Pale Curtain, Leonin Skyhunter, Isamaru, Hound of Konda, Ghostway

You need to be thinking about your plan, even if for the first two turns you don't need to make a decision about a long term plan, since any sane plan will involve playing two men. However, on turn 3 you already have a decision to make if your opponent is going to have enough mana to play a mass removal spell. If you play the third creature, you've left yourself exposed. Consider what happens if you leave the board looking like this:



Your side: 3 Plains (two tapped), Isamaru, Hound of Konda (tapped), Leonin Skyhunter (tapped), Samurai of the Pale Curtain,
Your hand: 2 Ghostway, Plains, Samurai of the Pale Curtain
Your life: 20

His side: 1 Island, 1 Plains, Adarkar Wastes
His hand: 6 cards
His life: 14

You can only put two points of pressure back down on the table if he has the Wrath, despite this being exactly the point at which you want to put on maximum pressure. Yet, this type of deck is essentially the best case scenario for Ghostway that doesn't involve using it to trigger comes into play effects (no, I didn't forget about them). You get cheap casting costs and your mana doesn't give you access to better options.

Now that you've got Ghostway in your hand, your goal is to get good use out of it. That means two things. First, you have to prevent your opponent from playing his removal when you do not want him to. The time most likely to draw a Wrath is the first time your opponent has 2*** available, so on that turn you have two choices: You can commit so little to the table that you don't mind Wrath or are confident that Wrath won't come even if your opponent has the option, or you can be ready for him. This would be a much better situation to be in:



Your side: 3 Plains, Isamaru, Hound of Konda (tapped), 2 Savannah Lions (tapped)
Your hand: 2 Ghostway, Plains, Samurai of the Pale Curtain
Your life: 20

His side: 1 Island, 1 Plains, 1 Adarkar Wastes
His hand: 6 cards
His life: 14

In this case, you've given up pressure in the form of the Samurai of the Pale Curtain in your hand and anything you would have drawn in place of Ghostway, but you're ready for Wrath. However, note the problem. You are effectively playing for your opponent to have either a removal-based answer or no answer at all. If next turn he taps his four mana and plays Celestial Kirin, you're miserable. If he plays Ghostly Prison, you're miserable. If he uses his mana to draw extra cards, he's still on a relatively fast clock, but it does not bode well. Things get even worse if he knows your game plan, because he can read your actions as representing exactly what you have. Each turn, he gets to ask you a question. Either you give up three mana or expose yourself, and he might well be happy with

both options. For these reasons, you need to induce your opponent to play into your answers, anticipating how he will react to your plays.

You have little choice in the matter. If you try to play the normal game, you've got a lot less to work with and can easily get stuck with no action. Note also that these games let your mana curve survive the intrusions of adding a reactive card. Often such a card will cause you to miss your early drops, and that goes double if it effectively forces you to repeat the one and two slots on your curve on turns 4 and 5.

Much better is to be in a situation like this one:



Your side: 2 Plains, Adarkar Wastes, Isamaru, Hound of Konda (tapped), Leonin Skyhunter (tapped)
Your hand: 2 Mana Leak, Plains, 2 Samurai of the Pale Curtain
Your life: 20

His side: 1 Island, 1 Plains, Adarkar Wastes
His hand: 6 cards
His life: 14

Note what you've accomplished by switching to a counterspell. This turn, you can stay untapped knowing that whatever your opponent does, you can choose to interfere if it is bad for you. Next turn you can play another creature and save backup, because the new spell is cheaper. The lesson of this contrast is a close cousin of the one that Flores was trying to teach last week: Good decks play good cards, as do good players. Good cards are efficient and often have multiple uses. They are unlikely to get stuck in your hand doing nothing, because they work against a variety of spells from a variety of opponents.

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