

Building with Multiplayer in Min Search

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It was known as the Noah Melnick memorial grand melee. Noah, the undisputed master of the grand melee, had been missing in action around Neutral Ground in New York City for several months, so we decided to hold an event in his honor. Hearing about it, he reappeared out of hiding. Armed with a list of about twenty extra banned cards and a healthy amount of competition, we all set out to build our decks. I came to the table with about one hundred and twenty cards. This was back when going infinite was hard.

I started out with a Birds of Paradise on turn one, a Howling Mine on turn two and a Mana Flare on turn three. Soon a Library of Alexandria followed, along with additional Mines and more Flares. The four players in range of me couldn't have been happier. Alex Shvartsman was trying to kill one of them after taking down his first victim with a first turn Juzam Djinn and some backup, but it's tough to kill someone who draws four cards a turn and taps his lands for three or even more mana. He was also the only one in the zone that had any counters, so I said to him: "All I ask in return for all these extra cards and extra mana is that you not interfere on my next turn. I won't go after you until everyone else is dead."

He agreed. Braingeyser and Eureka followed. I played out, among other things...

- An infinite mana combination involving the Mana Flares, Crown of the Ages, Candelabra of Tawnos and Lapis Lazuli Talisman (whether it works now or not, it did then).
- Circle of Despair and a token generator
- Deathgrip and/or Lifeforce set to all five colors
- Brothers of Fire with Spirit Link and Spectral Cloak
- Soldevi Digger and Oath of Lim-Dul, just in case I needed anything back

You in range? You're dead. On your upkeep, kill you. On your upkeep, kill you. Kill you. Kill you. One guy asked me what color the damage was, I said red, and he tried to use his Circle of Protection. Rather than argue, I just said "do it again." He got the message. Eighteen people died, until I ran into a Goblin Tinkerer. Yes, I said Goblin Tinkerer. He killed my Candelabra of Tawnos, severing me from my infinite combination, and I couldn't get it back until my turn. The entire table gathered around to watch Noah take his turn. If he could go off now, and he was drawing cards off of three copies of Verduran Enchantress, he would be able to kill me along with the rest of the table. If he failed, he would die on his next upkeep the same way as everyone else. He couldn't quite do it, and I finished off the table. We played a few more of those after that with progressively more and more (future) banned cards to try and stop outrageous card and mana engines. Once I killed myself with Fastbond and Sylvan Library to prevent the player who had gone off from killing me first, earning me the bounty on my own head. Finally we tried some Anaconda starter drafts, but it wasn't the same.

With this week in mind, I have to point out that I am what I am. That's what happens when you try to play casual formats and put people like me into them. A lot of fun is had (my kind of fun!), and then a



lot of people die. Read on at your own risk, because when I come into your world you come into mine. Beware of red pills!

When you build a deck for multiplayer **Magic**, especially games where there are more than two sides, you face a very different world than you do when you build one for a duel. Suddenly you have to consider all sorts of different factors, and that's what I'm going to explore today. You can talk all you like about bizarre formats and obscure rules and group dynamics, but at some point each of us has to sit down and build a deck. You can't netdeck when you're playing multiplayer, and if you do I don't blame the other players for ganging up and killing you on sight. What kind of fun is that?

So here is what I learned during the years I played multiplayer. There isn't much written for those of us who want to enjoy our multiplayer games but are incapable of not playing the spike and maximizing everything they can. We have our own set of problems. I was clearly one of the best players, and these are the strategies I used to get my advantage and the time I needed to use it.

Don't Hurt Him, Help You

It may seem obvious to you, but I've seen a lot of multiplayer decks that clearly don't understand this principle. In a duel, killing a creature is a fine thing to do with a card. I lost a card and you lost a card. In multiplayer **Magic**, that's a terrible idea. I lose a card and you lose a card, which leaves those other guys over there with more cards than we have. Sometimes you have to kill things, but it is best to keep this to a minimum. Even in those cases, it is best to do this with global effects: If you have to kill things, kill a lot of things.

Helping yourself, on the other hand, is even better than it would be in a duel. When you draw an extra card, you have an extra card on each of your opponents. Build yourself up at every chance. The best part of this plan in most groups I've seen is that it is also great for your diplomatic relations. People hate it when you go after their cards and life, but giving yourself more of either is far less troubling. If they were smart enough to realize that this is a grave threat to their prospects, why aren't they doing the same thing? Fools! (Ok, maybe Anthony's whole condescending thing doesn't come easily to me.)

In the extreme you use cards like Battle of Wits to outright win the game, but if you're not facing truly unarmed opponents they're going to make that illegal. In the end, you'll have to make everyone else lose the game rather than winning it on your own. Of course, if let you play any card that says "you win the game" on it, that's exactly what you should do – even if the card is Coalition Victory or Mortal Combat. People might even think it was cool, and leave you an opening to do it again. They also might yell at you. Oh well. You're here to win, right?

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Even Better: Help Everyone

When you're playing casually and your opponent plays Howling Mine or Heartbeat of Spring, you cheer. More cards and mana for everyone!

When you're playing tournament **Magic** and someone plays Howling Mine or Heartbeat of Spring, you kill it. Those cards need to die. Sure, the extra resources are nice, but your opponent is playing those cards for a reason and presumably he came to that fight armed for it. If you let him have those extra resources, that will allow him to execute his strategy. Don't let him! That attitude is hard to take in a

multiplayer game, so use these gifts to earn yourself goodwill while promoting your game more than others can benefit. Make sure you're taking full advantage.

To Infinity... and Beyond!

The ultimate in helping yourself is going infinite. When you do this, you don't care how many people come after you – you've got them all beat. Infinite combinations are not created equal. One issue that doesn't come up as much anymore is what happens once the engine is in play. The bare bones ones will kill everyone in range (which in many formats is everyone) at sorcery speed. The solid ones will do that at instant speed at any time they want, and they'll do it with lots of backup. The difference is only important when players come into range of each other during the game, which means they're the same as long as the group is reasonably small (depending on what kind of format you're playing of course). As long as you can kill everyone at once, any infinite combo will do the trick. Then all you have to do is find a weapon you can reliably deploy. (Politics? Combo decks? Hey, nobody said I was Anthony!)

Choosing Your Weapon

If you're playing Extended or a format that's even older than that then you have a world of choices. If you're playing Standard and going off once at sorcery speed is enough for you, right now there's really only one choice: Izzet Guildmage, Desperate Ritual and Lava Spike for infinite damage to all other players. There are alternatives, such as Freed from the Real + Sachi + Orochi Leafcaller. That would be a far better choice for a game where players aren't in range of the whole table, since the trick remains in play, but it is otherwise a harder combination to pull off and a harder one to hide. Hiding is important. If your opponents all know that you're sitting on a time bomb that will kill them all, as noted earlier the only logical course of action for them is to kill you as soon as possible. That would never do.

Building the Deck

Now that we know what the combination is, we can get a good idea of what the deck needs to look like. There's no need for a permanent setup in this example, so we'll be going with a finely tuned sixty card machine. Just because you're playing for fun or with a group doesn't give you an excuse to get lazy and claim that you're invoking the "power of primes." It's certainly no reason to build a hundred and twenty card monstrosity... or is it? The advantage of a huge deck in groups that use them regularly is that it lulls your opponents into a false sense of security. You're just one of the guys. When you show up with sixty cards to a group like that, it means that you're out for blood. Others will think: Whose blood would I rather see spilled right about now?

That's why your first job is to make your creation look like everyone else's. As long as you have plausible deniability, you need to pretend that you're not about to go postal on all of your friends all at once. If everyone else brings efficient, finely tuned machines then it is your duty to do the same. If they act like they're going to be there for a while and bring decks with a hundred fifty cards, follow suit. If they seem to have some pretty random cards, it couldn't hurt to have a few of your own. You're actually better off as the deck sizes expand. You might get slower and less reliable, but you'll have more time and be stronger when you're finally ready.

Because of how different groups shift, it's hard to tell how to build the deck without knowing more details. Here are some good examples of this deck, designed for a Standard duel by Ben Snyder:

Serious Fun



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Island
6 Mountain
4 Quicksand
4 Shivan Reef
4 Steam Vents

22 lands

4 Hunted Dragon
4 Izzet Guildmage
8 creatures

4 Char
4 Desperate Ritual
1 Invoke the Firemind
3 Izzet Signet
4 Lava Spike
4 Leyline of Singularity
3 Pyroclasm
4 Seething Song
3 Shattering Spree

30 other spells

Serious Fun



Main Deck

60 cards

5 Island
2 Mountain
4 Sacred Foundry
3 Shivan Reef
4 Steam Vents
4 Tendo Ice Bridge

22 lands

4 Izzet Guildmage
4 Wee Dragonauts
8 creatures

4 Char
4 Desperate Ritual
4 Electrolyze
4 Lava Spike
4 Lightning Helix
4 Seething Song
3 Sleight of Hand
3 Volcanic Hammer

30 other spells

The first version is clearly a far better starting point than the second for multiplayer. By pretending that you're after Hunted Dragon fun you can begin the process of distracting your opponents from your true evil purpose. You also have a lot more leverage with the other players.

There's just one problem.

The Next Game

It's a great trick, but can you do it more than once? It can be tough. Everyone will be on notice now. The advantage of a big group is that you sit next to different people each time, and the bribes you give them can generally keep them happy until it is too late. With a group of five or six, that's not going to work for long. There are a lot of arguments you can make. One is that it is fair to send one person after you,

The first thing most people are going to do is tell you to stop ruining their fun by doing things that are

but not more than one, or in general that you're not the only ***so good at winning the game.*** person threatening to win the game. But the truth is, this sort of thing is funny once, or once per combo. After that, you'll need to work out a compromise.

The first thing most people are going to do is tell you to stop ruining their fun by doing things that are so good at winning the game. That means you'll need to choose something less effective but still good enough. Instead of going infinite, go finite but large. Or is that too a flawed approach? What you're going to need to do is... handicap yourself.

My favorite personal example of this came from the classic board game *Diplomacy*. I was at summer camp, and a group of us would play regularly. The problem was that I had a far superior tactical grasp of the game than even the other established players. That gave me a huge advantage, but the name of the game was *Diplomacy*: If the others all teamed up on me, I had no chance. After losing to multiple 6-on-1 alliances, I realized I needed to find a way to rebalance things.

My solution was: In a game about making deals and lying, I wouldn't lie. I made the following rule for the table: I would keep my word, to the letter, to everyone. If at any time any player caught me going back on my word in any given game, I would face an alliance of all the remaining players. Once your infinite combination is on the stack, your friends have a perfect right to start going after your engine. The trick is making sure that by the time they realize what you're doing, it is too late for them to object.

Similarly, I believe that the best way to deal with this problem in the long term is to cripple yourself with restrictions that allow you to use your competitive nature to its fullest and still have fun. You can have a list of banned cards, a minimum number of cards in your deck, thematic restrictions, you name it. Make your living off of obscure spiders, pitifully slow cockroaches and overpriced gorillas. Keep the plankton coming – if others value them they become the cornerstones in any best player strategy. Don't forget to bring along plenty of pigeons and make sure to feed the fish until you're ready to release the hounds.

If that doesn't work, may I suggest rattling some snakes... on a plane?

The Games After That

And, after all that, remember why you're there – having fun with your friends. As Anthony loves to point out, if these kinds of decks get old with your group, have other decks ready to go. Many groups won't have much problem with the occasional fiery dramatic combo win, just make sure you have other decks ready for when it gets to be too much. Keep playing, keep having fun – that's the whole point!

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