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# Commitment Issues, Part 1

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 Limited Information  
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"Oh baby, I really love the way things are going. If you could just put a few more creatures into play, I think you would win my heart *and* the game."

"Honey, I would of course do anything for you, but, um, I already have 84 points of power in play. It seems kind of excessive to summon even more. Oh what the heck, anything for my sweet pea."

*tap tap tap, cast cast cast...*

"Thanks dear, I can tell you really care. Now, tee hee, I'm going to have to play this **Savage Twister** card here, and wipe everything off the map. Love ya!"

...  
 ...  
 ...  
 ...

"I want to see other people."



has this ever happened to you? Not the conversation, that's just weird. No, I mean the losing all of ones' creatures to some big spell. I'm willing to bet everyone reading this has been the victim of a mass destruction effect at some point in their Limited career. Whether it's the **Savage Twister** mentioned above, or **Volcanic Wind**, **Plague Wind**, or even just the gold standard **Wrath of God**, these multi-kill cards are some of the most powerful cards available.

Why are these spells so good? Well, play a little draft or sealed and you'll realize soon enough: creatures are the lifeblood of Limited. Creatures are your victory condition and your shield. 98% of the time, your wins will come from combat damage. Their necessity to the realms of Limited mean it's in your opponent's best interest to excise creatures from play.

Sadly, there are a lot of ways for our pets to perish. Combat is grisly enough, but the cruel demagogues of Wizards of the Coast have actually created *spells* to killify your cherished army. I'll be honest here, losing a creature to the mystic arts is a wound that doesn't ever completely heal. My only advice is to not give your creatures nicknames. It makes the loss a touch easier to handle.

Even seeing a creature fall to a **Terror**, while tragic, is not the end of the world. Your opponent gets a draw step and they use that new card to bury one of yours. *Your* fresh draw step could reveal an even better monster, or a destructive maneuver of your own.

A card for a card, that's the equity of **Magic**. At the 1:1 level, finesse and drafting quality come into play. Eking out tiny advantages, relying on aggression, bluffs, and guile to win a game, that's **Magic** for the thinking player! Alas, then someone rips a **Shower of Coals** and all your carefully laid plans are so much soot.

There are a lot of reasons multi-kill spells are so strong. The first is that they're often raw card advantage, exchanging one of your draw steps for 2+ of theirs. The second is that this card advantage is very *effective* card advantage. Creatures are the heart of Limited games, and removing multiples of these from play leads to very big changes in the landscape. The third reason these spells are so strong is that they actually punish good play! It's completely correct logic to exploit weaknesses in your opponent's board and try to end the game as soon as possible. Unfortunately, taking this idea too far is known as over-committing, and one timely **Wave of Reckoning** eliminates all your chances in one swoop. When you've over-extended, you're vulnerable in a very big way. That said, not taking advantages of the chinks in their armor gives them time to shore those holes up. Is there a middle ground? Sure, and we're going to go over some ways to protect you from the multi-kill cards. Then, because fair's fair, we'll going to go over some ways to maximize your own massacre-makers.

## Don't get greedy!

In our lovebird example above, one person had an excessive amount of creatures in play, yet continued to lay more. Short a game of overkill ante, there is no reason to continue playing creatures past a certain point. There are no extra points for utterly blowing a player out of the water.

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It's not that complicated. Playing three more lethal creatures or thirty gives you the exact same win, except option B leaves you ridiculously more vulnerable. Greed in **Magic**, and at this point I'm talking about the card as well as the sin, is not good. When there's no reason to play a creature, don't play it! At the very least, you'll have some hidden cards in hand for the next game. If your opponent does play some Wrath effect, you can recover and still be in the fray. Nothing is more demoralizing than to lose everything in play while holding an empty hand.

Your protection, your zone of safety, comes from recognizing the Wrath-or-Die (WOD) point. This is the phase where your opponent *needs* to kill multiple creatures in one turn in order to live. After you hit the WOD point, you can stop laying creatures and let nature take its course. My general rule of thumb is, you've reached WOD when you have 2-3 creatures in play that must be stopped at once. This is especially true when you have diverse threats, like a pinger combined with an evasive creature.

For example, if you have a **Rakdos Ickspitter**, **Demon's Jester**, and **Sewerreg** in play to their two life, mono-black board: stop. You're done playing creatures; you've reached the WOD point. Force them into heroic measures with what you have in play. If they somehow manage to survive your current crop of guys, you can refresh with a new batch. At this point though, playing extra creatures won't change your likelihood of winning, it will just make a more devastating **Hex**.



The WOD spot is essentially gifting them a multi-kill spell in hand. After all, they need it or you win anyway. So you put that card in their hand. Literally envision them revealing a **Kindle the Carnage**, then play around it by not committing more forces. If your x-ray vision is correct, you salve the blow to your army. If your imagination is wrong, you win anyway. When I'm in a Limited game, I'm playing to set my board up to put them at the WOD point, if possible. Once you force them to have a powerful and unlikely card, then can survive that card anyway, your chances look pretty good.

#### A brief aside on rarity:

What's that you're saying? Most of these power sweepers are of a rare stripe? It's like, totally impossible for them to be in a draft deck, much less ripped off the top, right? Sure, very true, except...it happens. What does rarity matter if they need it to have it or they die? You can use gold and silver symbols as a buffer if you wish, but neglecting the possibility entirely is rather naïve. Especially consider the possibility of them having one of these sweepy bombs in the later rounds of a tournament, since those are the types of cards that can thrust people into high records. If I had the choice, I would go for a win rather than playing around an unlikely card, all else being equal. But when you have the option to play around a wrath effect whilst *still* playing to win, you certainly should consider the play. If it makes you feel better, yes it was very unlikely they topdecked that foil **Pernicious Deed**. Good luck next tournament!

#### End aside

Recognizing the possibility of a big kill spell isn't just about forcing them to have a powerful spell. Sometimes, there are *no* cards that can save them, and sometimes your opponent seems to be inducing a WOD himself.

## Read the signs.

There are two ways to figure out a big kill spell is possible, your opponent and your environment. For your opponent, there will be signals he's trying to entice you into his destructive plans. A bunch of mana in play and a bunch of cards in hand screams "trap" to the wary player. Sometimes an opponent will start griping about your incalculable creature advantage, or your overwhelming masculinity. That's when I start being concerned for my creatures' chances of survival. Most quality players wouldn't detail their weak position, unless they're trying to raise your confidence for some reason. Your opponent could be a whiner of course, but then you'll win anyway. Satisfyingly so, I might add.

In a normal game, the WOD point is going come after a big struggle or severe mana troubles, if it comes at all. If/when WOD seems to come especially easily, than feel free to be suspicious. It's alright; again, if you're wrong, you've won anyway.

Environmental concerns are a little more subtle. Simply put, there's no need to be scared or play around cards that don't actually exist. *Ravnica* block has a *ton* of cards that can kill multiple creatures in one shot, at every color and commonality. On the other hand, a lot of those cards have rather restrictive costs or scenarios where they're useable. Most sets don't have as many as *Ravnica* block. For example, *9th Edition* has a total of 13, and they include such hits as **Death Pits of Rath** and **Silkclash Spider**, cards that don't often do something sweeping the turn they come into play. Furthermore, only four of those cards require a single colored mana in their casting cost (**Needle Storm**, **Shard Phoenix**, **Pyroclasm**, and **Natural Affinity**). What that means is that if they have only Forests and Islands in play, the best they can do is kill your fliers or drop a Mountain and do two damage to your creatures. **Wrath of God** costs double-white, **Bloodfire Colossus** and **Flame Wave** costs triple-Red, etc. For you, that means feel free to drop as many ground creatures with three+ toughness as you want. Something is sure to get in at least once before even the possibility of a Wrath card rears its swiny head.

Now how about *Ravnica* block? The multi-hued nature of the sets makes it a bit more difficult. Here's a rather simplistic *Ravnica* block scenario:

Your opponent has in play two Islands, two Mountains, and two Plains with no creatures in play and no cards in hand. He is at four life.

In play, you have a **Greater Mossdog** and **Centaur Safeguard**, two Mountains, two Plains, an Island and a Forest, and are at 7 life.



Your hand is the following:

Transluminant  
 Ink-Treader Nephilim  
 Greater Forgeling  
 Wild Cantor  
 2 Veteran Armorer



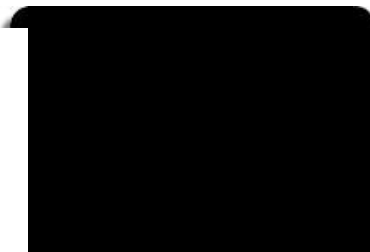
Which of these cards, if any, should you play this turn and why? [Click here to see.](#)

Answer: **Greater Forgeling** and **Wild Cantor** are the cards you should play this turn. At the mana your opponent has available, there are ten cards your opponent can play that can destroy multiple creatures. They are:

Thunderheads  
 Ends  
 Flash Conscription  
 Cleansing Beam  
 Flame Fusillade  
 Pyromatics  
 Rain of Embers  
 Brightflame  
 Razia's Purification  
 Electrolyze

Rain of Embers, Pyromatics, Flame Fusillade, and Cleansing Beam don't do enough damage. Electrolyze won't either, assuming you don't use the Forgeling's ability (and then he would have to draw a relevant card *off* the Electrolyze). Razia's Purification we can disregard, I hope. Thunderheads and Ends knock out two, but we'll have two attackers left over. Flash Conscription similarly only gets rid of two, and the lifegain effect won't kick in until after the opponent is already dead.

The only dangerous one is **Brightflame**, killing off multiple creatures and gaining him enough life to survive and draw who knows what. **Brightflame** is the reason the two Armorer are the wrong play. If Opponent played **Brightflame** on **Centaur Safeguard**, you would sacrifice Cantor in response. You'd burn for one, and he'd gain 4 life. His eight life wouldn't be enough to handle your nine points of power, and the game is yours. Playing **Ink-Treader Nephilim** is insane, opening yourself up to all kinds of vulnerabilities, including outright losing to **Char**. Playing Forgeling + Cantor locks your creatures swinging for lethal damage. In this situation, your opponent has only one card he can play to win the game. [Click here](#) to see what it is:





The above example may have been obvious, but that kind of analysis will do you well when the end game draws near. What's interesting to note is how much adding a single card to his hand increases your opponent's options significantly. With one more card, your opponent has Plains + **Hour of Reckoning** or Forest + **Savage Twister** or something of the like. There are so many options that it would be tough to play around them all, and it's *rarely* correct to try. Still, awareness can't hurt, should the unlikely instance arise. This was admittedly an example with very narrow parameters. Next week, we'll be going into environmental concerns a bit more specifically.

For now though, let's look at things from the other direction. Should you open or draft one of these multi-kill effects, what's the best way to use them? While powerful, these cards' usage is not automatic.

## Trade life for cards.

The essence of these sweepers' power is allowing their caster all kinds of effective card advantage. Although occasionally necessary, it's unfortunate to make **Winds of Rath** a mere one for one.

As stated above, the 1:1 principle is the standard in draft and sealed. One new card drawn a turn, enough mana for one play a turn; all these plays negating an opposing player's singlet stroke. Every turn, a play and counter-play. Your wrath effects undo all these previous creatures at the cost of one of your cards and some life points. Every turn you take an attack, you lose more life but you allow them more opportunity to lose more creatures. Sadly, a lot of players remain blithely unaware of the WOD point. The longer you wait to cast the sweeper, the more wide-ranging your effect will be. In this way, the **Savage Twister** player has his or her own **Necropotence**. Remember **Necro**? Limited gives a player all kinds of opportunities to trade life for cards, and it's quite often the strongest move available. Of course, the caveat to that is...

## Don't get greedy!

Card advantage is nice, when you're alive to use it. After a certain point, your opponent should be at least vaguely aware something is amiss. Every turn you don't play your Wrath gives them more opportunity to play more creatures true, but it also makes you more vulnerable to burn effects and growth tricks. Don't be concerned waiting for the perfect time to drop your bomb. If you have an opportunity to make a nice dent in their offense, and you have something left over in your hand to exploit an empty board, just go for it. Every turn you give them gives them another chance to draw **Muddle the Mixture** or **Bathe in Light**. Play for card quality, but don't ruin yourself along the way.

## Disguise your intent.

Back in *Mirrodin*, **Barter in Blood** was a potent card to be aware of. While quite vicious when the caster had zero creatures in play, it wasn't a card particularly difficult to envision. For one, it was an uncommon and therefore more prevalent than a rare would be. For another, it always looked pretty odd when a player had **♣♣♣** in play and chose not to cast a single creature. Savvy players would maintain one creature in play, waiting for either the **Barter in Blood** or the Black player to cast a creature of his own. Either way, Barter would become a 1:1 instead of the more damaging 2:1.

My favorite play with **Barter in Blood** was to *not* lay the fourth land, thereby feigning mana troubles. Four mana in play screamed Barter - three mana was just a poorly executed mulligan decision. This was effective for two reasons. The first was people seemed to have more trouble imagining a four casting cost sorcery with only three lands in play. The second was that opponents, smelling weakness, would lead with their most powerful creatures, to exploit those mana issues. The fourth land would drop and Barter would get card advantage, and quality card advantage at that.

Disguising your Wrath capabilities is a very powerful move in Limited. Playing **Hour of Reckoning** off hybrid creatures is one way. Not playing the second colored half of **Savage Twister** or **Culling Sun** is another. Playing creatures that can protect themselves, like **Sporeback Troll** or **Dimir House Guard**, disguises your multi-creature killing imminence. You can also start chump blocking with throwaway creatures. This gives you the double benefit of appearing to be scared about your fleeting life points (egging them on to commit more to the board) and actually protecting those life points for post-Wrath shenanigans.

Every play that can generate card advantage is dangerous in Limited, and multi-kill spells particularly so. While they're often game-altering, major swing effects, neither their presence nor their casting needs to guarantee the end of the fight. If you can dilute their impact against your deck, their tiny chance of survival becomes non-existent. Similarly, if you can maximize their effectiveness for your own ends, your opponent's chances may also drop to nil. Cards don't play themselves, but with a little forethought and awareness, you can make sure these particular power moves do the opposite of what your opponent was hoping for.

Next week, to continue the theme of environmental awareness, we'll be going over every single card in Rav block that can kill more than one creature in a single turn. It's quite a list, I assure you. Until then, good luck and thanks for reading.

-Noah Weil



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