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Six and Two-Thirds

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Welcome to Rakkos week! I'm a big fan of this guild and Red/Black in general. The ability to blow stuff up is a natural fan favorite, but Rakkos archetypes excel in other areas as well. Since RGD is on the way out, it seemed silly to concentrate solely on *Dissension* offerings. So instead, we'll start off with some particular Rakkos cards and see how they relate into the larger themes of Limited and R/B. Included in this examination is a never-before-seen card. Why are we showing this card? Is it in *Time Spiral*? Is the mystery torturous? Welcome to Rakkos week!

Wrecking Ball: The splashiest *modus operandi* of Rakkos-types are cards like this, applications of destruction. Red and black are known as the "removal" colors, and with spells like this, that label certainly holds true. **Wrecking Ball** is highly efficient, highly effective removal spell, and should be drafted as such. Should your colors and mana curve support it, I prefer **Wrecking Ball** over both Seals, just because instant-speed kill can be so devastating. However, Rakkos has another common removal spell in-color and on theme: **Cackling Flames**. The choice between **Cackling Flames** and **Wrecking Ball** comes up a lot and is pretty close, but I'll generally take the Flames more often than not. Why is damage-based removal better than omni-kill?



Both Flames and **Wrecking Ball** have expanded targeting beyond mere creatures. Flames can go directly to a player while **Wrecking Ball** can be aimed at a land. I enjoy the ability to be able to finish off a player with direct damage, should my creature-based offense not be able to finish the job. The discussion on burn is down below though. For now, let's ask ourselves how often you'll actually want to pop a land with a **Wrecking Ball**. From [the tempo article](#) way back when, my thoughts on pure land destruction are pretty evident. Still, there's nothing wrong with a little refresher.

The question is pretty simple: when would you want to destroy one of their lands? The answer is equally simple: when they'll need that land to win and/or stay alive. Your plays in Limited revolve around defusing those two agendas, just as they're trying to do the same to you. The real issue is whether a lost land is more effective at achieving those ends than a dead creature. It turns out to be a very rare occurrence. Your **Wrecking Ball** is ideal at removing blockers or attackers, a commodity worth far more than a potential, temporary suppression. An ideal turn in a draft or sealed game either has you adding a threat or removing one of theirs. The creature killing mode does this, while the land killing mode does not. The concern isn't whether that lost land will slow them down; odds are it will. The real issue is whether you'll be able to take advantage of that lapse in speed with some pressure of your own. Keep in mind that you've chosen to spend your turn removing mere potential, rather than putting something concrete into play. It doesn't matter at all if they can't play any cards when you don't have anything useful to do either. **Demolishing** a bounce land or **Utopia Sprawled** land appears useful, but you're really just buying yourself a day pass; a smidgen of tempo. If you can't use that window to take great, sweeping chunks out of their life total, you're better off making sure they can't do the same to you.

Way back in straight *Ravnica*, I was piloting an above average Boros deck. In the third game of the match, I was forced to take a couple of mulligans and was land shy for quite some time. My Golgari opponent cast a **Thoughtpicker Witch** and a **Fists of Ironwood** to try to take advantage of my condition. He was a bit short on lands too, but his three points of power certainly compensated. Yet instead of just continuing to attack for three a turn, he chose to start sacrificing saprolings, to negate my land draws. This was a wonderful deal for me. Sure I was doing some discarding, but by the end my opponent had sacrificed every creature in play just to prevent me drawing lands for a few turns. Under absolutely no pressure, and now up some card advantage besides, I soon drew out of the mana troubles and went on to win the game and match. If the saprolings had been on their way to the graveyard, or had he additional creatures to continue an attack, his sacrifice move would have made more sense. As it was, he traded his certain advantage for a temporary one. Usually that's a bad deal. The land option on **Wrecking Ball** is a trap for the greedy. Why Flames over Wrecking? I consider both cards pure removal, except sometimes Cackling goes into player-burn mode. That kind of flexibility, a genuine choice, is what tips the scales.

Hellhole Rats: This card, like its colleague Fall, share a trait beyond their Rakkosian origins - they hate an opponent to have lands in hand. With a grip full of genuine spells and creatures, these cards shine. The potential of nailing a valuable card, with a bonus, makes both of these cards rather strong in R/B decks (and in the case of Fall, Rise doesn't hurt either). I like the **Hellhole Rats** quite a bit. It always does something useful, and if you time it well, it can do far more.

Generally speaking, there are two types of discard classifications: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative ones are precision effects, used like pre-emptive removal. Cards like **Castigate**, **Coercion**, or **Mind Warp** fit into this category. The other half are cards that are interested in getting a quantity of cards out of a person's hand, its caster hoping but not guaranteed to snatch something good. Cards like **Mind Rot** or **Fugue** fit this category. It's difficult to say which version is better. Each has certain advantages against types of decks, while being worse

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against others. The precision stuff is great against a fragile build or one with a particularly troublesome late game card. Mass-discard *can* be disruptive, but the general lack of board impact is an issue. There's also the fact that you're trading one of your cards for their two worst, which often means unneeded lands. This is a risk not seen in a card like **Distress**, where if they have only lands in hand, you're already happy. Unfortunately for **Mind Rot**, it's actually card *disadvantage* if you use a card to eliminate two blanks out of their hand, especially if those pointless lands buffered the hit from a more potent spell. Also, your own deck may deny you good discard applications. If you, through board position, leave them with uncastables (your **Privileged Position** versus their removal, your **Rakdos Ickspitter** versus their **Wild Cantors**), then your discard served only to waste everyone's time. Discard is effective when it gets cards they'll actually want to cast; a surprisingly short window. There's really a sweet spot for mass discard spells, somewhere after you've cast your threats and before everyone is playing off the top of their decks.



The recent crop of discard effects do come packed with extra effects to make them playable outside of their ideal zone, which is why **Shrieking Grottesque** is far better than **Mind Rot**, even though presumably they're both a 2-for-1. **Consult the Necrosages** does double duty, **Strands** makes a creature clingy, etc. These are nice traits, because **Ravnica** block's bounce lands make discard a riskier proposition. Any turn they play **Simic Growth Chamber** is a turn you're really rolling the dice when casting a Fall. Generally, knowing when to cast a discard spell is pretty easy - when they stop playing lands, when your discard effect equals the number of cards they have left, and so on. What's more relevant is which type of discard you want to include in your deck.

Qualitative (Precision) discard is best against decks with powerful cards and not a whole lot of pressure - i.e. a lot of sealed decks, or drafts gone bad. I love **Castigate** and **Nightmare Void** in sealed decks, since many builds only feature 1-3 bomby cards to go along with 20 mediocre. On the flip side, quantitative discard works best against decks with efficient mana curves and/or overarching better spells than yours. A lot of draft decks could be described this way, and those are the kinds of decks you'll need a leg up on.

Finally, a word on the hyper-aggressive. These are the decks that either won't have a hand or won't care about their hand by the time you get discard online. These are the kinds of decks that do such swift damage, they would happily lose two cards in hand to deal four more points. Against these decks, feel free to take out anything that doesn't kill an attacker or block.

Bond of Agony: Ever hear that Limited games were decided by who had the most X spells? Back in **Lava Burst/Rolling Thunder** days, that was often true. Nowadays, the wins *do* go to whoever draws more **Demonfire**. Luckily, that scenario doesn't happen too often. Instead, we're given the intriguing **Bond of Agony** for more common X-spell applications. The Bond, like **Demonfire**, deals X damage straight to the head of an opponent. Unfortunately, the similarities end there. While **Demonfire** can be directed to single target, **Bond of Agony** simply aims itself at every player. Worse (for you anyway), the caster suffers the loss of life before everyone else. If you're wondering, effects that prevent or redirect damage can *not* be used to counter this loss of life. Shucks.



Player-only burn spells have an uncommon role in Limited games. On the surface they appear weak, with their lack of board impact and inherent card disadvantage and whatnot. Yet they also win the unwinnable games; essentially circumventing standard combat-based wins. That kind of effect is pretty dangerous for an opponent, but it's also risky to you. A burn spell does absolutely nothing without a lot of backup; there's no reward for dealing 0-19 points of damage before succumbing yourself. The reason combat is so effective for winning games is because creatures are efficient and represent repetitive sources of damage. Burn is a one shot-deal, and **Flame Jet** doesn't block. Is it worth including these cards, foregoing a slot that could be a creature, just to get a chance to burn someone out of the game? The answer, of course, is "it depends."

There are two main advantages to the burning cards. The first is that they're your secret. You're the only one who knows that you're holding the **Lava Axe** or **Searing Flesh**, so you're the one who has the insight on true math. Most of the better players love to trade life points for card advantage. They'll block a 2/2 with their 3/3, letting your 3/3 come through for damage. This is often the correct play, but if they knew you had a **Sizzle** in hand, perhaps it would go differently. When you start a game with a **Lava Axe** or **Fireblast**, you can mentally put them at 20-X life. Now you're playing an opponent who would appear to be rather reckless with his life total, assuming his life pad is accurate. The sucker! Burn in hand lets you make seemingly poor plays to win a game later, dramatically. In this subterfuge, playing the burn spell should be your very final move.

The other appeal to burn is also that of a finisher, doing the last few points to a stabilized opponent. There are a lot of cards in this vein; cards that allow you to finish your plans after the offense has faltered. **Falter** is one, or **Scorched Rusalka**, or **Predatory Focus** or **Poisonbelly Ogre**. There are a bunch of cards that are designed to sneak in extra points when possible, or finish things up in one finishing blow. Their validity in a deck depends on exactly how fast a deck wants to end a game, but in the right build, they shine. The fact that there's *usually* only

one deck at a table that enjoys having these kinds of spells is very good for that deck - the cards you want will go late.

So back to our **Bond of Agony**... Rakdos builds are decks that can start fast and end short, so that's an advantage to Bond. Wait though, Hellbent was designed to overcome running out of gas. **Bond of Agony** has negative synergy in general with Rakdos; an X spell that only has a small window for play means it will be sticking in your hand for a while. No Hellbent for you. If you can guarantee **Bond of Agony** will only reside at the top of your deck, we can talk, but give a player that ability and he'll probably miss more than just a **Bond of Agony**. Finally, and this is a real sticking point, Bond does the damage to you first. I respect the founders not wishing an easy route to garnering draws, but suffering that life loss first narrows its range of application even further. In a racing situation, a **Lava Axe** can completely turn the tables. Not so with Bond, who not only needs an opponent at low life, but requires you to be at a higher one. That's just a few too many ducks that need to be in a row. Don't fret about leaving this one on the bench.

Pain Magnification: What an enchantment! Not only are you dealing decisive amounts of damage, but you're making them discard too. Talk about hitting them high and low! Speaking of, it's time to unveil a brand new card. [Click here to see:](#)



I know it looks amazing, but consider: If they have **Misdirection**, you've just lost the *game* (and drawn a card). Fair and balanced.

The silly part of this card isn't the name or casting cost, but that dumb little cantrip effect tacked on at the end. Who in the world cares about recovering the cost of a card if your opponent is dead? There are no bonus points for particularly decisive wins. You get the exact same score whether they're at zero life the turn before they'd kill you or whether they end on negative forty, permanent-free.

Pain Magnification actually does nothing. By the time the discard effect becomes a nuisance, you've already signed the match slip and are working on picking up lunch. This is what's called a "win more" card, also known in the industry as "pointless." If there are situations where you're dealing three damage a shot, then you're already in great shape. This card, besides clearly being sub-optimal when you're getting beaten down, also has no merit in a winning situation or parity situation. If you're dealing this damage because they have mana troubles, then you've merely altered their discard option from the end step to your combat phase. If it's because you've killed or outranked all their creatures, then this card certainly won't help you maintain that situation. If you're in a racing situation where you're trading points back and forth, then a card with zero board influence will be the last card you want to see. Basically, in any situation where this card would trigger, you'd rather it be something else. That's a troubling characteristic.

Pain Magnification is merely the latest in a long line of "win more" cards. **Final Punishment**, **Epic Struggle**, **Magnify**, **Petrified Wood-Kin**, **Earthlink**... the archives are full of cards that only look good when you're already winning. These are, at best, unreliable for Limited play. A rather big sin for a player looking for consistent performance.

Now I'm not trying to bag on Pain Mag too badly. It's flavorful, and it's always a pleasant surprise to see The Predator on a **Magic** card. It's just not a Limited superstar. But just to show there are no hard feelings, here's the ultimate PM combo. Constructed information!



Macabre Waltz: This has been a consistently strong performer in my decks. Considering how late these go, that's a rare sentiment. It's a phenomenal topdeck in the late game. At that point, your best creatures are either dead or winning you the game. If it's the former, then you have good reason to bring them back for another go. If they were so formidable as to require destruction the first time, why not make them do it again? I also value this card much higher in any deck with **Stinkweed Imp**, **Darkblast**, or any good amount of Dredge really. Dredging just a few times lets you cherry-pick the best creatures in your deck out of your grave. Waltz plus Dredge: 5 certainly gives you a higher chance of finding those beasties than praying for good topdecks. You'll even have your dredged card to pitch to the Waltz after!

Speaking of post-Waltz, it's a real tragedy when you don't have a pitchable card left for **Macabre Waltz** after finding two good creatures to return. One of the more subtle and persistent mistakes I see is people misplaying their lands. Specifically, the quantity of land drops. It's really easy to keep playing lands on turns 1-5. You own cards that require five mana that need a casting. It's the later stages where there's more potential for error. It seems that playing a land every turn you can is often wrong. You lose a free discard to cards like **Macabre Waltz** or **Compulsive Research**. You really lose out on Fall or those **Hellhole Rats**. More than that is losing out on bluffing potential. I've seen players who will play every single land they draw, even on an empty hand. When they suddenly draw a card and pass, the astute opponent will know they've drawn neither a creature nor a land. That information is far too valuable to give away. If I'm playing an opponent like that, I know my **Castigate** is going to tag something, even if they're at Hellbent at the time. Between your occasional need to discard something, and their occasional desire to make you want to discard something, holding a land or two is a wonderful cushion.

But *you* knew that already; you are clearly "with it." Alright smarty pants, are you as adept at knowing when to *continue* playing lands? Despite the ease of this move in the early stages, knowing when to not stop in the late game is a surprisingly involved decision. The choice on whether to play a land when you already have seven+ out depends on what you're playing and what they're playing. There are a lot of turns that are going to involve more mana spent than simply the casting cost of a single card. **Selesnya Guildmage** plus two activations, or **Savage Twister** plus a creature follow up are all maneuvers which require anticipatory addition to maximize. If you suddenly stop playing lands at six, you're going to miss out on potential, and potentially necessary, sequences later on. Our friend **Compulsive Research** falls into this category. While it does enjoy a spare land to pitch to, it also leads to turns where you'll need extra lands in play to use those new cards you've just drawn.

This kind of decision making requires an intimacy with your deck, as well as the ability to foresee your interests down the road. When deciding whether to play an extraneous-seeming land or not, my rule is: *My needs trump theirs*. What I mean by that is that if I need a big **Pyromatics** later on, I'll continue to play the appropriate lands. This is true even if it opens me up to discard and even if I haven't drawn **Pyromatics** yet. Certainly knowledge of their deck can change this. If they have **Razia's Purification** or an inordinate amount of discard, I may hold onto more lands than average. However, if it's a question of what they *might* do and what I *will* need, the sure thing wins out every time. If you need to keep playing lands to be able to cast **Cytospawn Shambler** and activate it, then go for it. Save your worrying when you know you have something to worry about, and save the bluffing for an opponent who cares. When deciding whether or not to play a land card, consider carefully whether you will need that mana later on, and include possible combinations in that thinking. If there is a decent chance you'll need that mana for some purpose, don't be afraid to give up a little potential now for actual impact down the road. Your wins are always better than their mere confusion.

Avatar of Discord: She has lots of impact and is easy on the mana, but oy what a price. I like everything about this card, except for that nagging "Hymn yourself" clause. More broadly, **Avatar of Discord** has a vulnerability to players who've drafted well. By the same token, it's amazing against players you should be able to beat anyway... Like the ones who don't draft removal or fliers. Why play **Avatar of Discord**, opening yourself up to all kinds of trauma, when your natural skill is plenty good enough?

The only snag in that argument is that sometimes you're not good enough. Well, maybe not *you* you, but perhaps your deck. It's a ridiculous commitment, but **Avatar of Discord** does occasionally win games. 5/3 fliers have that capability. If you have a deck that's utter trash, you may need a higher dose of risk to get the job done. Clearly I can't recommend **Avatar of Discord** as an early pick starter, although it does make a fine sideboard card against certain Green decks. But if your deck is lacking oomph, and you need a win, you could do worse. There is again a precedent for this kind of card. **Stitch in Time**, **Final Fortune**, **Deadly Insect**...all cards that are highly unreliable in the standard sense, but do happen to pluck random wins here and there. Opponents usually invent new curse words on the spot, just for losing to "scrub" cards. They'll call you lucky, and in a sense that's true, but more precisely you put yourself in a position to *get* lucky. Despite rumors to the contrary, the best players don't draw their clutch card more often than the less skilled - they simply put themselves in a position to utilize their luck more effectively. By the way, mastering this concept will go a very long way to enhancing your win percentage, and your bank account. There's [a certain famous Lightning Helix](#) that earned its caster a fair bit of money...

That's all the time we have this week. Join us next time where we go over the most extravagant draft format of all time. Thanks for reading.



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