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The Times That Bind

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 Limited Information
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"Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess."
 -Oscar Wilde

Early on when I started this column, I did an article on the [Simic](#). It ended with a "choose the card to draft" poll. It was a close call, and the decision generated a lot of debate on the boards. Someone made the point that they would take Card A (uncommon) over Card B (common), because they would be more likely to get a copy of Card B later on. Someone else retorted that if one copy of Card B is good, two copies are better, and the debate took a new direction.

It was a really fascinating discussion, and brought up some of the very subtle and convoluted points in drafting. The concept of multiples in a draft, and how values change based on the *quantity* of a card you have, is one of the higher aspects of, and completely exclusive to, Limited play. In Constructed your choice of how many to run ranges from 0-4, and within that range each value is carefully calculated. The difference between zero cards in a Standard deck and one card is pronounced, just like the difference between two cards and four. But that decision is made way before the tournament starts, and has its own set of criteria. Limited is a whole nother ball of wax. In Draft, adding multiples of a card to a deck is within your purview. Sometimes. It gets complicated.

These kinds of ideas are always prevalent in my mind when I'm drafting. They're tough, mercurial concepts, which is why this week is more of an overview than the final word. Why bring this topic up now? At the moment *Time Spiral* is on the shelves, the first set of its block. After *Planar Chaos* and *Future Sight* roll in, opportunities for picking up multiples of a specific *Time Spiral* card are reduced (less packs, less chances). Right now, while the drafts are TS/TS/TS, a player can maximize their chances of adding multiples of a particular card to their deck. This is quite relevant to the discerning drafter. As we'll soon see, a card's quality *changes* based on the amount you have, of it and cards similar.



In Limited, you've got to make snap decisions on what an individual card will add to a deck, and what taking that pick will mean for the rest of the draft. It's a constantly evolving process, made even more exciting by the imposed time limits. There's no space for figures and spreadsheets when you're at the drafting table, so it behooves a player to get some knowledge under their belt before the actual event begins. To make this process easier, people craft and read archetype breakdowns, top 10 evaluations, and so on. These are popular devices, because they allow a person to break down all these abstract values into chunked bits of data. Assuming rankings et al are correct, it does help in determining values in a vacuum. The complicated stuff doesn't come from evaluating how good a single card is, although we all know people struggle with that. The tricky part, and that's the subject for today, is determining not just how good a card should be, but how good it actually *will be* when combined with everything else. To start chipping away at this concept, this week will be dedicated to examining how a card's quality changes based on its quantity. Sound fun? I hope so. We've got graphs!

To kick this off I'm going to identify a few categories of cards, specifically tied to Draft. These rankings can translate to Sealed, but without the need of making adaptations on the fly, they're not as important to incorporate. These categories are:

1. Cards that get better the more you have
2. Cards that stay the same no matter how many copies you have
3. Cards that get worse the more you have

There's a fourth "hybrid" category, but we'll get to that down the road.

Cards that get better the more you have

These are cards that start off in one place, but by their intrinsic synergy become better the more you take. The ripple spells from *Coldsnap* are easy examples of this. [Surging X](#) starts off either fine (Flame) or poor (Dementia). But start adding multiples upon multiples, and soon any ripple card looks broken in half. "Deal 2" just isn't as exciting as "kill your board and slam you for 8." There were always cards that were better than a surging card by itself but would lose that placing around the fifth or sixth copy. [Surging Sentinels](#)' first copy was depressing; the eighth was poetry in motion.

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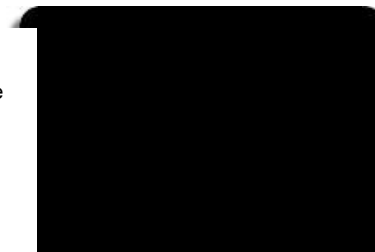
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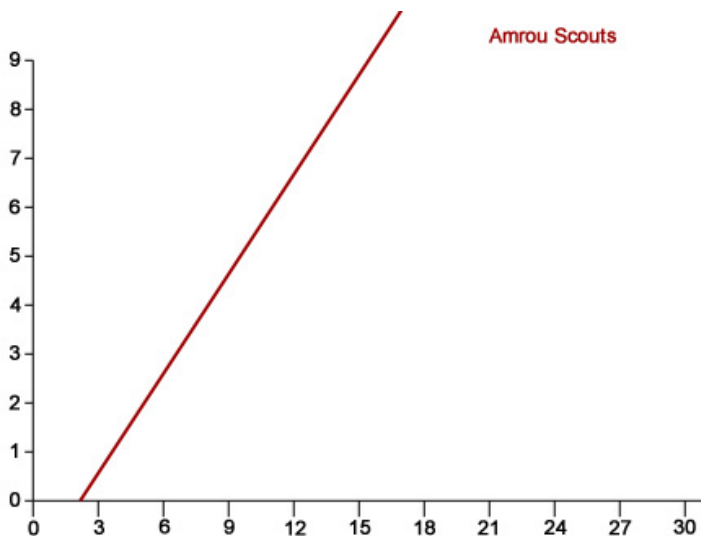
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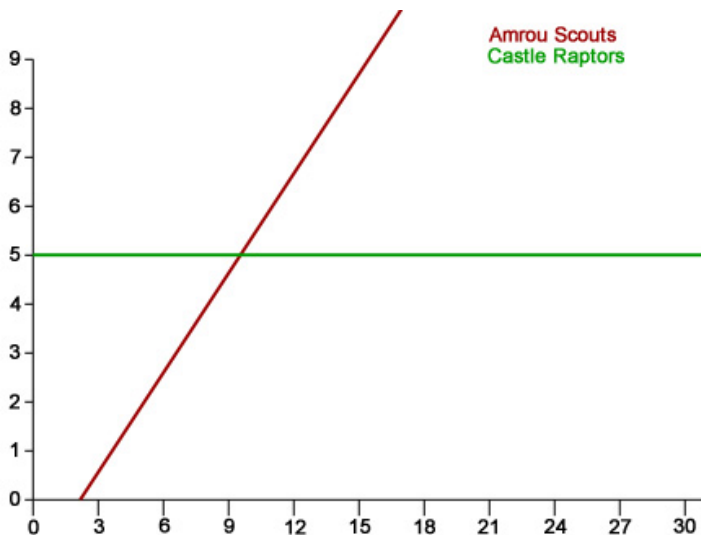
In *Time Spiral*, as in most sets, there are not a lot of cards that fit this category. When there is a predominance of cards of this stripe, things become very swingy. One card that does illustrate this category in *Time Spiral* is **Amrou Scout** and the Rebels. The first Scout all by itself is pretty unimpressive. Two Scouts is a little more interesting, and it goes way up from there. Similarly, the rebels get better in multiples the more helpers you have. **Amrou Seekers** are fine, but when they're likely to be searched out for free, repeatedly, you've got the makings of a powerful deck. Here's a visual of this category:



A note for the mathletes: these visuals are strictly used for conceptualizing and aren't there for reflecting a card's value. I feel I have to say this so I don't get a letter about why the rebels are ranked 8.2 on the graph with four copies, when really they perform like 7.9s.

Now to me, this is kind of interesting but not especially helpful. News flash: rebels get better in multiples! Water is wet! But let's see if we can use this info for a common *Time Spiral* scenario.

Castle Raptors, most people agree, are really excellent. How do they compare to **Amrou Scout**? Let's look at a visual. (Note: for the purposes of this comparison, **Castle Raptors** are presumed to stay at the same value, which isn't precisely true, but bear with me.)



According to this, one Scout is worse than one Raptors, and three Scouts are better than three Raptors. Two Scouts are worth the same as two **Castle Raptors**, which is probably about right. The question to the drafter is simple: faced with these two cards before owning either one, which is the better one to take? According to this math, if you know you're only going to get one copy of either, then the **Castle Raptors** are the way to go. The trouble, sadly, is you don't know that's the only copy you're going to get. You don't know what people are going to pass you...right?

Yes and no. You definitely do not know what people will open and send down the line. You do know if your play group has trends and tendencies in one direction or another. You know if people are so scared or enamored by Rebels that they will take them whenever the opportunity comes up. You will know if most people like red and black, and white will be under-drafted. You'd know that if you send a bunch of good white cards down the line, you may be cut off from the best Rebels in pack two, thereby reducing your chances of seeing multiples. And you definitely know how lucky you need to get to win; how important it is that you win the draft. If you're playing for big prizes, up against opponents you fear and respect, you may want to go for the brass ring and engage in the strategy that potentially gives you the strongest deck if it works. Did I mention there are no easy answers?

Cards that stay the same no matter how many copies you have

This is the category of cards that stay the same quality no matter how many you have. [Click here](#) to see a real-world example that is very consistent:



It was the perfect power-up, except for that horrible keening sound whenever you used it. A reservoir of these looks mighty good versus any stage in Super Mario Bros. 3.

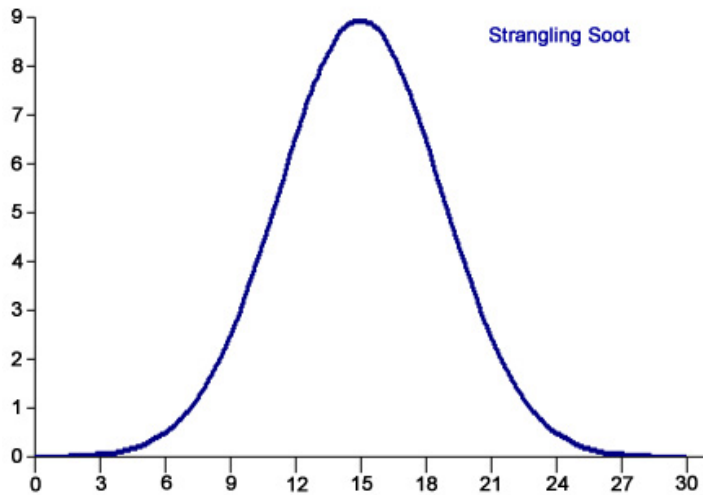
This is a nice trait in a **Magic** card, but it's actually quite rare. Above I said that **Castle Raptors** remains on an even keel no matter how many copies you pick up. That's not strictly accurate. True, more or less of them doesn't affect their capabilities. However, their mana cost is a factor. As a five-mana spell, the presence of more or less affect the relative values of *other* cards.

For example, let's say your first eight picks are all **Castle Raptors**. For pick nine, you have the choice of **Prismatic Lens** or **Verdeloth the Ancient**. In the abstract, Verde is the right pick. But now that you've added eight 5cc spells to your deck, *getting* to five is paramount. Even if you'd rather play Verdeloth one turn over a Raptors (unlikely), you'd still rather just have five mana on turn four and get the flier plan rolling. By contrast, if your first eight picks are one Verdeloth and seven **Castle Raptors**, the **Prismatic Lens** looks better than another Raptors. You could argue that the Raptors are staying the same, it's merely the Lens that's gotten way better. Whatever perspective you take, the end result is that some cards would not be as high picks as they once were based on how many you have.

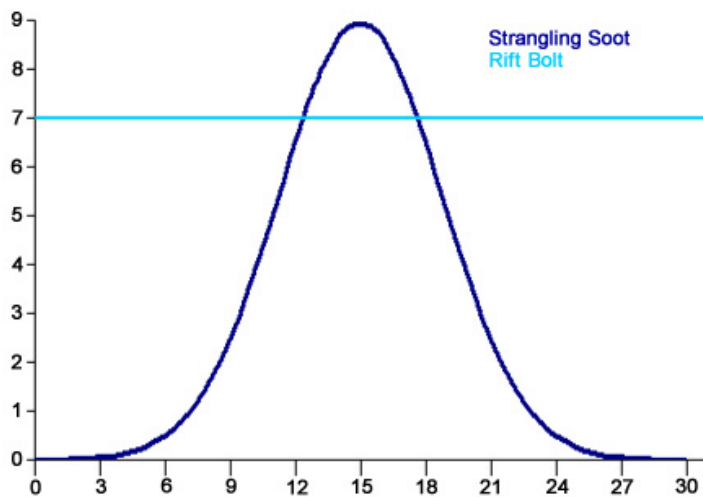


Of course, having more Raptors is better for the purposes of racing. Fliers do get better in multiples, as it invalidates a major source of creature stopping, i.e. blocking. One flier can be raced or removed, two is a little harder, and so on. So **Castle Raptors**, like most spells, fall into the miscellaneous category, where they have fairly fluid evaluations. The point here, and the point of the topic today, is to recognize how having multiples of a card affects your interests in everything else.

Is there a card that really does stay the same based on how many you have? It's a tough call, but **Rift Bolt** probably fits the bill. Whether you have one or twenty-one, they remain very high picks and still play just as well. You may play them *differently* if you have a deck with over twenty **Rift Bolts** than if you have two, but the end result will be the same. By contrast, **Strangling Soot** does get worse after a certain point. **Strangling Soot's** value looks like this:



After a certain number of **Strangling Soot**, say thirteen, they get worse. A deck with twenty-three **Strangling Soot** sounds nice until you get taken out by a **Spitting Slug**. Overlapping **Strangling Soot** and **Rift Bolt** looks like:



In theory it makes **Rift Bolt** a safer pick, because you can play as many as you can grab while you're limited with **Strangling Soot**. In practice you will never get so many **Strangling Soot** that you have to leave some in the sideboard. But there will be times when you will have to leave creature removal that doesn't double as player removal in the sidelines. Most times people take removal so highly that you won't get saturated, but it does happen with some R/B decks. Those players feel weird passing a **Cannonade** for **Mana Skimmer**, but after so many removal spells it's the correct pick. Don't be married to the idea of a "better" card. Again, there are very few cards that remain straight on the level no matter how many of it you have, regardless of what else you've drafted. Identify them if you want, because they are very safe picks, but just know they're a rare breed.

Cards that get worse the more you have

This is the category mostly reserved for specialized stuff. [For example:](#)

The Frog Suit was ridiculously narrow. Great underwater, terrible everywhere else. One, maybe two was all you could ever want to have; after that you would never put one on aside from adding challenge to the game.

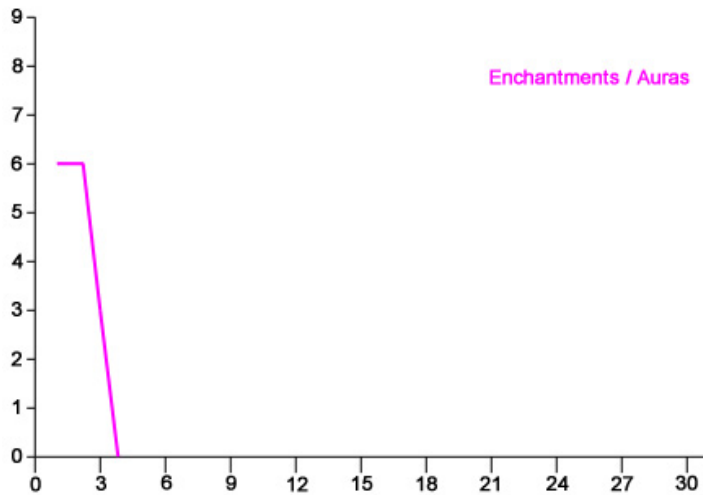


In **Magic**, sideboard cards fit this category to a T. It's nice to have one **Molder** or **Plunder**, but they definitely get worse after a certain number, usually one (and no, turbo-**Plunder** is not a sound strategy). Legends are similar, although due to their rarity it doesn't come up very often. For the sake of discussion, one **Tivadar of Thorn** is solid, two is kind of pushing it, and three would be a big mistake. Keep in mind that for Tivadar especially, he's not designed to die. If there's a creature that can kill one, a second one won't make a difference. So with legends, 1-2 is oftentimes the ideal number unless they're so overwhelmingly strong you don't care about drawing copies (and I'm sure we can all think of examples of *those*).

Another prime example is the Aura. *Guildpact* had a cycle of Auras called the Magemarks, which rewarded you for having multiple enchant creatures in your deck. These cards were a neat little trap for the unwary. On the one hand, they got better the more you worked with. Unfortunately after a certain point, say two, your deck was clogged with enchant creatures with no room left for creatures and/or removal. A classic "all eggs in one basket" syndrome prevented these kinds of cards from really taking off in Limited. Invariably someone would try to draft the Magemark deck, and inevitably they would fail as they were stuck with a missing piece to make the deck hum. Even if they made the ultimate creature, a Peel From Reality or the like would send their development back to the Stone Age. One was okay, but you never wanted a deck's worth.

Now the astute reader may ask at this point, "What's the difference between this category and the bell curve stuff above? Technically, both groups have cards that get better then get worse." In a way that's true, but it's really a superficial relationship. The difference is that cards in this category are *intrinsically self-limiting*, while those cards have their power dependent on what else you've drafted. The reasons that Auras and sideboard cards go late, as opposed to the ones above, is that they're narrow. The more you have, the more likely you are to be stuck with them in hand. As I said, the legends do fall into this category, but as they're generally rares, it just doesn't come up in Limited. If Wizards of the Coast ever releases a set with lots of common legends I'm sure some will be going late, because they inherently reduce in quality the more you have. **Strangling Soot**, by contrast, goes up or down in quality based on *what else* you have. Graphically, these cards look like this:





I know this all seems very technical. A lot of number juggling is based on "feel," and that's just something that requires experience. For now, your goal is to just imagine how many of a card you want to draft, and how taking it now will affect things later. A few points:

- Mana concerns are big. The first card in a particular mana slot is excellent, especially if you have a glut somewhere else. If you're drafting a deck that tends to saturate at a mana spot, then cards of that spot go down in value and cards not in that spot go up.
- Imagine how a hand looks with two of a certain card, or three, or more. Is it a happy image? If not, don't put yourself in a situation where you'll be forced to grab multiples of a card. On the other hand, if multiples do look good then give yourself an opportunity to pick extras up.
- Consider how taking certain numbers of a card affect the tenor of a deck. For example in that **Castle Raptors** example above, the deck's needs shifted from aggro to control. After so many copies of a card, you've changed a deck from draft to combo. Those decks require far different card evaluations.

Top 10 lists do not always reflect *your* interests. They're a good starting point, but the numbers are never canon. Remember, you're not drafting cards, you're drafting a deck.

I hope you've enjoyed this examination into a fundamental aspect of drafting. I use concepts like these when drafting, and especially with walkthroughs. Considering the depth and importance of this topic, it will probably be revisited again. For now, have a good week, and thanks for reading.



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