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Three Quickies, Three Cards: A Planar Chaos Preview

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Swimming With Sharks
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I.

My friend Brian David-Marshall recently found himself on the wrong side of a ten-beer bet with Scott McCord. I don't really understand the details myself, as **Magic: The Gathering** is my game rather than some competition involving bats and pitchers (cricket maybe?). Even if I could describe the basis for their wagering, this is a **Magic** site and you've probably already lost interest. The important things are 1) BDM was down ten brews that he didn't want to pay up on, and 2) he bet on the Metropolitans, and was damned from the outset (should have known better, especially being a lifetime New Yorker).

So Brian, creative and devious as he is, with an inside track even more *inside* than most, summoned all his forbidden knowledge as the Pro Tour Historian to create a snare whose tendrils would play directly and specifically into the quirks and foibles of the otherwise clever McCord.

"Double or nothing?"

Intrigued.

"I bet that you will regularly first pick a green card in *Planar Chaos* draft."

The hideous cackling laughter of, um, Skeletor. "Done."

If you don't know anything about Scott McCord, let me give you the crash course quickie. Scott was a highly capable gravy-train Pro for some years, with multiple Grand Prix Top 8 finishes, a Top 4 at Pro Tour – Boston with team Slay, Pillage, Gerard, and an appearance in the team Masters series a year earlier with team Slay, Pillage, Massacre. His early mentor was Brian Weissman himself, so Scott has particular ideas about **Magic** that are foundational, fundamental, and – for him – essentially immutable. Though he made a conscious decision to quit playing **Magic** at the highest levels a few years back, nobody quits forever, and, like many of the former New York-area elite (now professionals and adults), Scott squirmed and dribbled back into playing for fun with friends, if not regular tournament competition. Scott remains fierce and opinionated – and fiercely opinionated – and still enjoys draft. Today, Scott is (once again) one of the most successful players at Neutral Ground, using strange and oblique technologies that elicit head scratches, confusion, or ill-placed derision from lesser magicians.

For example, Scott was first picking **Counsel of the Soratami** in *Kamigawa*, and routinely elects to go second. As is probably obvious, he loves a card in hand, and the color blue more; Scott generally abhors, or at least scoffs at, green. Did you just get shipped a second-pick **Spectral Force**? Look to your right: If Scott is there, it's possible he just took a **Think Twice...** 8/8 for five? Bah! There's no way he would have let a **Fathom Seer** pass.

Without violating his NDA or anything, what kind of knowledge would BDM have had to have to try to reverse his ten-beer deficit in this way? Check out [this](#):

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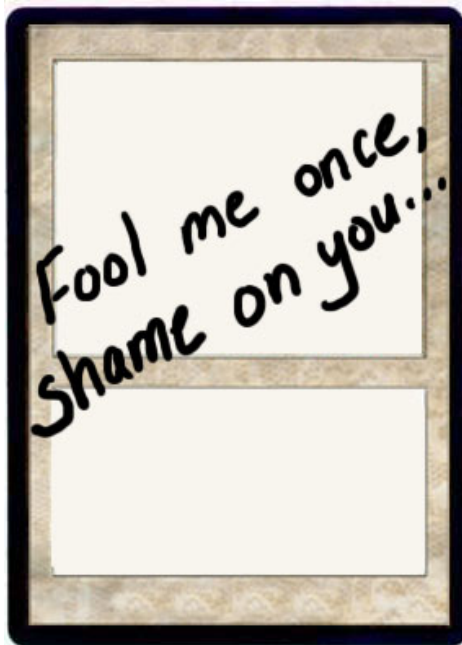
You're not getting off that easy.

II.

As **Magic** R&D has been defining and re-defining the color pie, tweaking the power level of Constructed – especially Standard – **Magic**, green has slowly been picking up powerful effects from other colors. Was **Naturalize** first? For a long time, **Disenchant** was the most successful card in Constructed **Magic**. In the same set, green got **Krosan Tusker** – a very green look at the "Fact or Fiction" school, and probably better in the abstract than tournament staples like **Compulsive Research** and **Thirst for Knowledge** – as well as **Hystrodon**, an early look at the green **Ophidian**. Today, green has an option even better than the original **Ophidian**. In *Mirrodin* Block, you could make the argument that **Oxidize** was the green analogue – yet functionally superior – to **Swords to Plowshares**.

Was and is green creeping, doppelganger-like, into the skin of the legendary maverick Brian Weissman?

Is [this card](#) the next step?



III.

The other day BDM and I were talking about Groundshaker. The original **red Ball Lightning** was a fearsome threat, to be sure, but we weren't certain about a green reprint.

"What are you supposed to do? First-turn Elves, second-turn this thing... Bash for six... Is that even good?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean in red, six damage is a lot. Like if you ever got hit by a **Genju of the Spires**, let alone a **Ball Lightning**, you were basically dead, right? When you start at 14, it's pretty easy for them to finish you off with any beatdown and a couple of burn spells... But green doesn't *have* any burn spells. It just seems like you'd run out of cards."

"Well, maybe if you could refill..."

"Refill? Like your hand...?"

What the!?!

Okay, okay already. No tricks this go around. Third time's the Dawn Charm. Click [here](#).



Planar Chaos describes a world where **Wrath of God** is black, Akroma is red, and apparently, **Concentrate** – like **Ball Lightning** – is green.

You should be able to see why a card like this one would appeal to Scott. He might willingly avoid an expressly powerful singular threat like **Spectral Force** in exchange for cleaning up all the blue – and, theoretically, a better deck – down the river, but regardless of the shape and color of its mana symbols, **Harmonize** is as (traditionally) blue as draft cards come. In Limited, **Harmonize** actually creates an interesting tension. Usually blue card drawing is good in Limited because it increases the consistency of a deck and helps a player to hit land drops as he progresses with what tend to be small evasion creatures. However, in *Time Spiral*, a big question is "Can you deal with the green fat?" What happens now that blue-style effects will be powering out Baloths? How significant will green's ability to force out card drawing more quickly affect the synergies?

In Constructed, **Harmonize** is a curious card that has some existing pedigree, due to the positioning of predecessor **Concentrate**. **Concentrate** was played as a four-of in Osyp Lebedowicz's Top 8 **Psychatog** deck at Pro Tour – Osaka in 2002. Probable 2007 Hall of Fame inductee Kai Budde would later recommend a **Psychatog** deck with two **Concentrates** for Regionals 2003; this second deck is particularly significant because this was an era when **Psychatog** players could pick from **Compulsion**, **Deep Analysis**, **Shadowmage Infiltrator**, **Standstill**, various **Looters**, and many other options to draw extra cards. That **Concentrate** was deemed good enough by the then-best player in the world in the face of such competition is telling... **Harmonize** – at least as far as I know – will not have such steep competition for that it is doing in its (new) color.

For reference:

Osyp Lebedowicz – U/B Psychatog	
Pro Tour – Osaka 2002, Top 8	
Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard

4 Darkwater Catacombs	4 Aether Burst	3 Ghastly Demise
12 Island	4 Chainer's Edict	2 Gloomdrifter
7 Swamp	4 Circular Logic	2 Innocent Blood
23 lands	4 Concentrate	3 Skeletal Scrying
	2 Obsessive Search	1 Upheaval
	4 Peek	4 Zombie Infestation
4 Psychatog	4 Predict	15 sideboard cards
2 Shadowmage Infiltrator	3 Syncopate	
6 creatures	2 Upheaval	
	31 other spells	

Kai Budde – U/B Psychatog		
Regionals, 2003		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
2 Darkwater Catacombs	4 Circular Logic	1 Alter Reality
9 Island	3 Compulsion	1 Chain of Vapor
3 Lonely Sandbar	2 Concentrate	2 Chainer's Edict
4 Polluted Delta	4 Counterspell	1 Compulsion
4 Swamp	2 Cunning Wish	1 Deep Analysis
4 Underground River	3 Deep Analysis	4 Duress
26 lands	4 Force Spike	1 Ghastly Demise
	3 Innocent Blood	1 Mana Short
3 Psychatog	4 Smother	1 Opportunity
3 creatures	2 Upheaval	1 Persecute
	31 other spells	1 Psychatog
		15 sideboard cards

For certain green is bleeding into blue's territory with Harmonize, but the question of whether it bleeds far enough to use card drawing as blue traditionally has doesn't even have to come up. You see, card drawing has changed its role in Standard to a great degree due to the alterations in the color pie and the removal of **Counterspell**. Look at a deck like This Girl, the Brian Kowal-designed U/R/W Angel hybrid I used to win the New York State Championship in 2006:

Mike Flores – This Girl		
New York State Champion, 2006		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
1 Adarkar Wastes	2 Azorius Signet	3 Fortune Thief
3 Boros Garrison	2 Boros Signet	4 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV
4 Flagstones of Trokair	4 Compulsive Research	4 Mana Leak
4 Hallowed Fountain	1 Confiscate	4 Repeal
2 Island	4 Demonfire	15 sideboard cards
1 Izzet Boilerworks	4 Lightning Helix	
2 Plains	4 Wrath of God	
4 Sacred Foundry	21 other spells	
2 Steam Vents		
23 lands		
4 Court Hussar		
4 Firemane Angel		
4 Lightning Angel		
4 Serra Avenger		
16 creatures		

Blue is in this main for its superior selection capabilities, *not* to counter spells... I didn't even play the otherwise ubiquitous **Remand!**

You can make an argument that from a non-permission "blue" basis, green is (or at least *can be*) better than blue. The reason is that green has the best early game mana acceleration in modern **Magic**. **Ophidian** was close to unbreakable in 1997, but **Birds of Paradise**, **Llanowar Elves**, and even **Boreal Druid** can power **Ohran Viper** out on turn two. Most every control deck since **Ravnica** became established has been playing four, six, or even more Signets... Green can play Signets, too, but instead fix with the at least arguably superior **Farseek**, **Rampant Growth**, and **Into the North**. These cards give a similar level of acceleration, but also thin the green deck of mana and shuffle it.

What about the "burn" aspect of green in *Planar Chaos*? Groundshaker started our exploration of these themes, and is joined in Standard by **Giant Solifuge**, Timbermare, and maybe more. When **Ball Lightning** was big in Standard, it was essentially a burn card rather than a legitimate creature. Like most burn cards, **Ball Lightning** was a short-term packet of damage with a lot of impact, but did not block... or even stick around through to the next turn. In recent years, dedicated burn decks have only reached the top tiers of competition with the help of **Sensei's Divining Top** to regulate the draws of sufficient burn and sufficient mana to play that burn. With Harmonize in green to help keep a deck going as it "spends" **Ball Lightnings** and 5/5 **Blinding Beams** with probable short term expiration dates, it is entirely possible that this new element will help enable a very different archetype for offensive Mono-Green.

It's a strange world out there, and getting stranger by the minute.

Next week: Mid-season Extended

*Mike has been a leading voice in the game's strategy for as long as there has been a **Magic Internet**. He is the former editor of *The Magic Dojo* and a sometime Pro player. *Michael J. Flores: Deckade*, is a compilation of Mike's first ten years of strategy and theory (i.e. before he joined **magicthegathering.com**), and is available at <http://www.top8magic.com>.*



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