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THE DECK THAT COULD NOT WIN

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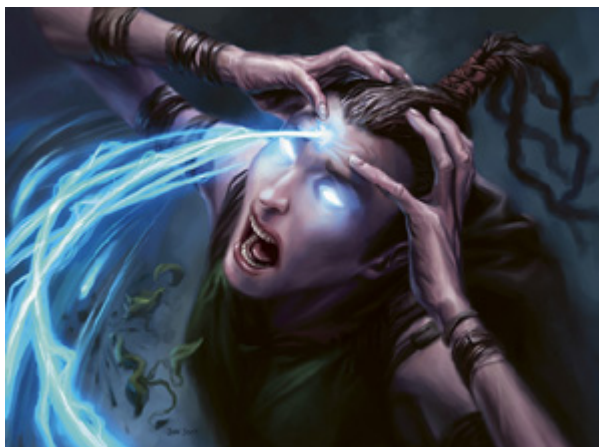
By The Ferrett

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(Note: If you're attending GenCon this year, don't miss the announcement at the end of the article.)

Magic articles are almost always written about wonderful decks. By the time someone gets around to writing about Their Amazing Deck, they're doing it because they're pretty sure it's a good one.



It makes sense. Nobody likes writing about failure. It's painful to discuss why every assumption you made was flat-out wrong. So unless you're developing a deck for the purposes of the article (like Mister [Ben Bleiweiss](#)), you only hear about a deck once it's been proven to be *actually good*.

And that's a shame, since we can often learn more from a deck's failure than we can from its success. Discussing how a deck collapsed underneath you can help you to understand what pitfalls you must avoid in the future. I have decks that work, but it's time to look at a deck that didn't.

Today, I'll look at a deck that I was all excited about when it was roaming about merrily in theoryland. But it did *terribly* in real life.

The Origins of the Win-Less Deck

The idea for the Deck of Defeat came when I had just ordered a bunch of Wrath effects from my company, StarCityGames.com. I had a fresh set of [Akroma's Vengeances](#), always good in multiplayer, and I had a new pair of [Decree of Pain](#), which I wanted to take for a spin.

Why not a black-white deck?

There's the seed of an idea: throw in a lot of global removal to exhaust the weaker players at my table (who routinely overextend and wind up topdecking), and basically stall until I can fire off a backbreaking [Decree of Pain](#) to draw a zillion cards and card advantage everyone to death.

What other global removal spells are there? Well, there's the classic [Wrath of God](#), and [Rout](#)—a forgotten, sometimes-instant-speed Wrath that's saved my bacon on more than one occasion. Let's throw 'em all in.

Now with all of that removal, I'll need some spot removal to keep myself alive, and some enchantment removal just to supplement the [Akroma's Vengeances](#), and some guys who are hard to kill. What cards do we choose?

Before we go any further, however, you should know that, like [past deck experiments](#), this is a real-life deck—which is to say that I assembled it out of parts of whatever I had. In an ideal world, we'd all have four copies each of [Swords to Plowshares](#) and [Damnation](#) hanging about—but most of my Swords were in another deck, and I own no [Damnation](#)s. Thus, we're going to have a deck that has some gaps, filled in by other cards I *do* own.

So I did what I usually do, which is to flip through my "good cards" box and pull out the cards I think will work... and as mentioned, I had some new cards I wanted to experiment with. I'd ordered a couple of copies of [Last Laugh](#) because people told me it was good, but I'd never seen it in action—let's try that out! With all of the destruction, it could be awesome.

Oh, and what's this in my binder? [Death Grasp](#)? They're *awesome*; they're like more inefficient [Corrupts](#), but [Corrupt](#) is such a potent card that even a shadow of it is worth putting in.



With these cards as the skeleton, it's time to look for the gaps in the strategy... and "mana" is going to be a real issue with this deck, since right now as it currently stands it revolves around very expensive spells—[Decree of Pain](#), [Akroma's Vengeance](#), [Rout](#), and [Death Grasp](#) require lots of fuel to fire. We're going to need as much mana as possible, so that involves Ravnica bouncelands, and we're going to have to go to at least twenty-five lands.

The other issue is "winning." Aside from [Death Grasp](#), we have no victory condition—and more importantly, we have no creatures. Lacking both defense and offense is bad, so it's time to choose.

So what's flexible enough? Well, green is heavily played at our tables, so [Spectral Lynx](#) will work (and it's in the binder!), and four copies of [Kami of Ancient Law](#) provides early defense and enchantment removal (as well as a way to trigger [Last Laugh](#) in a pinch, assuming there's another enchantment to hit).

What else? Hmm. [Phyrexian Rager](#) is a nice early drop that gets me more cards at a reasonable price, and I don't mind throwing them away. And, of course, we can always use some Angels—how about [Blinding Angel](#) and [Akroma, Angel of Wrath](#)?

Oh, and there are a lot of critters I can choose from. Let's try 'em all and see what works!

Time to take this for a spin. Here's the deck.

BLACK-WHITE WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION



DECKLIST

STATS**SAMPLE HAND**SORT BY: Overview ▼***Creature (17)***

1 Mortivore
 1 Glory
 1 Desolation Angel
 1 Marauding Knight
 4 Phyrexian Rager
 4 Kami of Ancient Law
 1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath
 2 Blinding Angel
 2 Spectral Lynx

Sorcery (11)

1 Rout
 3 Wrath of God
 2 Decree of Pain
 3 Akroma's Vengeance
 2 Death Grasp

Instant (7)

1 Tsabo's Decree
 2 Swords to Plowshares
 4 Tithe

Enchantment (4)

2 Last Laugh
 2 Ghostly Prison

Land (25)

1 Caves of Koilos
 4 Orzhov Basilica
 11 Plains
 9 Swamp

64 Cards

I played this deck in about six chaos games, and won only one of them. It lost pretty badly the rest of the time, and that was by a fluke accident – I literally drew *every one* of the twenty-five lands in the deck in a game that went extra-long thanks to [Desolation Angel](#), leaving me with nothing but gas.

Here's how the deck usually played:

- It played a few low-threat dorks in the early game, warding attention elsewhere while I built up my mana. That was good.
- When someone finally looked at my sideways, I uncorked a global removal spell and began to take control of the board, using [Death Grasp](#) and such to keep people down and keep me in the game. (Given that I kept resetting the board, the games went long, allowing me to draw many more cards.) That was good.
- Eventually, people ganged up on me, eroding my defenses and eventually plowing me under. Not so good.

The interesting thing is that people *feared* the deck. Some folks seemed surprised when I told them, after Game 5, that it had never won a game. This deck had done so

much they felt sure it must have won at some point... But no, it really hadn't. It was 0-fer-5.

Why?

1. Lack of Synergy



I've said before that my deck design is lacking in synergy, and here it is for all to see—I'm playing [Akroma's Vengeance](#) and [Ghostly Prison](#) and [Last Laugh](#). That means that if I draw one of my marquee spells, I have a good chance at killing my enchantment-based defense against anyone who recovers. Can you tell this is a kitchen sink deck, made of whatever I had about the house?

You *can*? Oh bother.

Plus, in a deck designed to play multiple global removal spells, the *creatures* don't work with the *strategy*. If the whole goal is to repeatedly clear the board, I should either have creatures that can bounce back from that or guys who can mop up afterwards.

What do I have to mop up with? One [Mortivore](#), which is an awesome choice *if I draw it*, and the only Akroma I have, and [Desolation Angel](#). Then, we have a bunch of two- and three-power dorks. Not exactly the Cleanup Squadron; each of them requires *at least* seven turns to kill another player, giving them plenty of time to rebuild or kill my guy... which is exactly what happened. Repeatedly.

But what about recurring creatures? Of those, we have none, making the global removal spells hurt me as much as it hurts my opponents. (And given that [Dredge](#) and Reanimator run heavy in my area, it may hurt me *more*.)

As I said, this is a real-life deck, and I didn't have access to four-of [Mortivore](#) and Akroma... but I probably should have gotten them before I made this deck (or not

made the deck at all without them), since four Morties would be an excellent follow-up to a sweeping [Wrath of God](#), and Akroma after a [Decree of Pain](#) is pretty hard to recover from. There should have been more of an accentuation on finishers, and less on early defense—after all, assuming I get the land, I can Wrath at will as early as turn four, which slows people down considerably.

Likewise, this is white and black, so there's little excuse for me not to have something that brings my biggest guys back from the dead, even if it's as clunky as [Zombify](#). Recursion should have been built into this deck from day one, and it just wasn't.

(I should add that [Marauding Knight](#) is usually a fine choice for multiplayer, but in at least three games not one person played [Plains](#). That's unusual, and makes it very overpriced. That's the risk you take, though.)

2) *Lack of Focus*



Sixty-four cards means, "I didn't know what to cut." But as the deck designer, it's your job to *make* those cuts for the sake of efficiency. Realistically, this should have been a sixty-card deck with twenty-four lands, but I didn't have the heart to trim it.

But if I had trimmed it, I would have said, "You know, maybe the [Last Laughs](#) don't need to be there." Which they don't. I have no life gain outside of [Death Grasp*](#) and am likely to endure some early beatings once everyone realizes that I'm going to take their guys away, so the chances of me surviving my own Laugh are reasonably slim.

This is not the deck you're looking for.

Cutting down to sixty cards means that you really have to analyze every card to see whether it fits. We all fall in love with cards, and that sixty-card limit is a hard breakup... but it's necessary. If I'd really thought about what needed to be in there, I might have rethought the whole strategy from the get-go.

That would have been good.

3) Lack of Political Consideration

I've talked about "What decks say" before, and this deck said, "If you intend to win via creatures, you'd better kill me." And you know what my friends said? They said, "Apology accepted, Captain Needa."

If you're going to make a deck that gets in the way of everyone's strategy, you'd better be prepared when they gang up on you. This deck wasn't prepared. Even a [Wall of Glare](#) would have helped, but the deck should have packed *something* aside from a measly [Ghostly Prison](#) or two to prepare for the inevitable.

4) Lack of Fetching

I'm in two of the most tutorrific colors and I don't have *any* of them? Come on, fellas. A [Vampiric Tutor](#) might hurt a bit, but given the clunky land curve here even a Diabolic would do.

Especially given that you'll need to follow up big-time removal spells with backbreaking creatures, not having a way to fetch something on demand hurts. Heck, with a curve like this, this deck could have afforded to pay full price for [Bringer of the Black Dawn](#)—and perhaps should have.

How Do You Fix It?

Well, let's look at what's *right* about the deck. It's very controlling, allowing you to clear the board repeatedly, and building to a [Decree of Pain](#) is pretty nasty. It was excellent at exhausting my opponents; the problem was that I couldn't win the topdecking war that followed (or any war, if my opponents were savvy enough to stockpile cards). And I always had enough land (if anything, I got landflooded *way* too often).

Plus, the nice thing about it is that if you can lay some early defense, sometimes other people will get into border wars and make them easy pickings. The problem is that you must be ready to prey upon them.

(That said, there are a lot of ways to go with the deck – you could turn it into a green-black dredge deck to accent the "reusability" aspect of it all, or you could try to focus this into a real [Last Laugh](#)-abusing deck. Let's try to keep to the original concept, though.)

BLACK-WHITE WMDS, TAKE 2



DECKLIST

STATS

SAMPLE HAND

SORT BY: Overview ▼

Creature (14)

4 Mortivore
 2 Akroma, Angel of Wrath
 3 Wall of Souls
 3 Kami of Ancient Law
 1 Avatar of Woe
 1 Bringer of the Black Dawn

Sorcery (15)

4 Death Grasp
 1 Diabolic Tutor
 1 Rout
 3 Wrath of God
 2 Decree of Pain
 4 Akroma's Vengeance

Instant (8)

4 Tithe
 2 Swords to Plowshares
 1 Vampiric Tutor
 1 Tsabo's Decree

Land (23)

1 Caves of Koilos
 4 Orzhov Basilica
 10 Plains
 8 Swamp

60 Cards

Now that's a much better deck, though I still argue whether it's the optimal build. It's far better designed to withstand the onslaught of both the early and the late game—[Wall of Souls](#) is a great two-drop, turning people away from you in terror—and we have no enchantments to interfere with our boosted [Vengeance](#) count (so we can cycle them away if we have to).

The twenty-three land count is a little light for such a controllish deck, but the Basilicae and the Tithes are a nice combo, allowing you to get a lot of land very quickly as you "fall behind" on land count.



Now you have definite finishers—[Mortivores](#), Akromae, and some random Avatars and Bringers you can get at the right time. It's all still very expensive, of course, and you don't want to keep a land-light hand, but it's *better*.

Is it good? I don't think so; this still looks a little shaky. The core concept—"A black-white deck with global removal and large men"—isn't really synergetic, and as such this deck may have to hit the dumpster. There's no shame in that; not every deck can be made to work, after all. And this version features no recursion at all, which makes every lost card a resource that has vanished forever.

An argument could be made for four-of [Kokusho, the Evening Star](#), which would make this deck immeasurably stronger, but I'm *sick* of Kokusho. Still, I can't deny he'd be better than the Avatar or the Bringer, and probably at least two of the [Mortivores](#). (And if you add Kokusho, you *definitely* want to add recursion.)

Or you could do what my friend Josh did and mutate this deck into black-white [Astral Slide](#), featuring [Akroma's Vengeance](#) and [Angel of Despair](#) to starve your opponents of resources. There are a lot of ways to go, most of which take this away from the original idea.

I'm sure you folks will have ideas in the forums as to how to turn this also-ran into a winner! That's the glory of many minds; someone always goes, "Hey, did you think of putting Card X in?" and I go, "Lordy, I forgot about that card, it'd be *awesome* here!" So go to.

But remember, there's only so far you can venture away from a deck idea before it becomes something else; that is the core concept behind deck drift. That's not a bad thing; let it flow.

Let your good decks win.

A Gratuitous, but Rather Cool, Plug



GenCon is, hands down, my favorite convention in the *whole world*. Where else can I play my favorite **D&D** world, *Planescape*? Where else can I get my fill of Call of Cthulhu roleplaying? And where else can I find **Magic** tourneys on command, so close to a hotel room that I enjoy?

Alas, due to travel restrictions, I cannot attend GenCon this year... but if you can, there's a tournament that sounds pretty awesome coming right up: it's [Grand Melee](#). That's right, everyone who shows up at the tournament plays *each other*.

It's attack to the left only, with a spell range of one (meaning that your [Wrath of God](#) wipes out your creatures, and the creatures of the guy to the right and to the left of you, but everyone else is untouched). Multiple turns will be taking place concurrently, with a marker to show who's on-deck... And the last man standing wins.

I'm generally not a fan of restricted attack zones (I like chaos), but this should be pretty darned cool. The more people who show up the better, and the winner has a real story to take home. All for only \$15.00, a Standard deck, and a Saturday night! What do you have to lose?

* And a one-time emergency [Swords to Plowshares](#) on a rather large [Mortivore](#), which was the play that won me my single game. [\[back\]](#)

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