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# Fresh Cardboard in the Morning

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*"You smell that? Do you smell that? Fresh cardboard, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that. I love the smell of fresh cardboard in the morning."*

How was your weekend? Did you like it? I love Prerelease weekend. You get to see all the new cards, some of which you've seen in previews. There are new mechanics, creature types and themes. You look at your card pool and the first thing you have to do is read every card, then you have to do the usual sealed shenanigans. You have to evaluate not only the power of every individual card, but then the strength of each colour as a whole and then the various brand new interactions and combos with other colours. And finally, you have to trim your deck down to around twenty-three nonland cards and, once your finished working out what your land ratio is, you are finally finished. Then you get to play against other people's new cards, most of which you haven't seen. You have to run into most combat tricks and rares at least once before you learn to take them into account.

I've received plenty of emails in the past few weeks asking me how one goes about appraising a new format. Others, who were not around during *Onslaught* block, have inquired as to how to go about playing a tribal format. I've covered how to examine cards both individually and within the context of their block in past articles. We often talk about how cards differ in strength within each colour combination. You will also often see cards such as Slivers in uncertain places within pick orders because their strength depends entirely on the context of the format and the deck they are being drafted. Tribal formats are a combination of both of these aspects. But before I dip into the complexities of *Lorwyn* and the various tribes that come with it, what's the best way to examine a new Limited format? How do you go about becoming good as fast as possible and pushing every edge you can get?

## Learn the Cards

The first thing you have to do is familiarize yourself with the cards. Pore through [Gatherer](#) and the [sortable spoiler](#) at all the new beauties. It often helps to sort them by colour and print them out, as it is then both easier to read and to play around with. It pays to know the text of every card, and be sure to check exact text, not just an approximation. To start with, it is cute to know the uncommons and rares, but this is Limited—we care about commons.

## Learn Every Trick

Once you've learnt all of the cards, the next thing to do is to focus on all of the tricks. I'm talking every instant, every piece of removal, every pump spell, every flash creature, every haste creature, any morphs if they exist, and every powerful card (like *Phthisis* in *Time Spiral*). Focus on the commons, but make sure you know what all the rarer cards are capable of, especially anything that falls under the awesome umbrella of mass removal. Cards like *Exile* are very easy to spot and play around if you know they exist, but back at the *Odyssey* Prerelease, players were running into *Second Thoughts* like there was no tomorrow. These cards are more important to know because they're the ones you have to factor in whilst thinking. Permanents sit there in front of you and tend not to need too much forethought.

## Collect the Commons

What I advise you to do, and what I have done this past weekend, is to collect one of each common in the set. This is not as hard as it sounds as there are always piles of cards left lying around after drafts and most people, friends especially, won't begrudge you a few commons. Now read all the cards again, familiarise yourself with all of the pictures, and see if there's anything they do that you missed when you read them over your computer screen.

Now it's time to sort the chaff. This uses every card evaluation skill you have learnt, and often you will discard a common that is more powerful than it seems at first glance, or include on in the good stuff that does not deserve to be amongst such prestigious company. Once this selection process has been finished take a step back and start analysing the data in front of you. What are we looking for?

First, let's examine the creatures. How big are they? Are there lots of one-toughness guys susceptible to ping? Is the curve inherently fast or slow? Does one particular drop only have one good contender or is it completely

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Illustration of a merrow creature and cards.



empty? How many evasion creatures are there? How many guys can block fliers? Which creatures are really good and which will often get cut?

The answers to these questions will help summarise each colour. The good creatures are the questions you will be asking your opponent; they're the guys that you will want to have. How the curve looks is one of the most important things. If the colour has a very low curve then it is likely to be drafted aggressively, so early walls and late game creatures become worth a little less and the best two- and three-drops truly shine. If it is slow and missing on good early drops then they become even more important.

Next up we have the spells. The ones you look at first are the removal and combat tricks. It is important to note the range of the removal by how it is limited—can it only kill guys in combat, does it kill non-[things], can anything deal 4 or more damage, etc. Same for combat tricks—the bigger the better, the cheaper the better. What do the other spells have to offer? For green, this will normally be colour fix and acceleration, for blue, it will tend to be card draw, and the other colours tend to get random bad spells.

Search within a colour's commons for sources of card advantage. It is here that the strength of the colour will tend to lie, except red and black whose strength will always tend to be in their removal. Even the removal colours will need to generate card advantage somewhere, even if it is the form of some of their removal—**Subterranean Shambler** and **Ichor Slick**, for example. Almost all decks, unless horrifically tempo orientated, will need to generate card advantage somehow. It is the **Nantuko Shamans** and **Whitemane Lions** that make you win, not the **Kitsune Blademasters**.

## Cross-Colour Synergy

Now that you've worked your way through each colour, having culled the deficient cards and fully appraised the remaining cards, you will now have a good idea of each colour's strengths and weaknesses and will be beginning to formulate which colours are the strongest and which aren't as strong. Now it is time to compare each colour to the other four and see which match best and, for the worst matches, how to salvage the most power out of the dregs. A good example of this is if you pair white and black in *Time Spiral* Block Draft, you want to pick as many good, large men as possible and force Rebels to play to the colour combination's few strengths.

One of the biggest synergies in *Lorwyn* will be creature types, but I will discuss how to evaluate this later on. For now, we will be looking at what the additional of a different colour brings to the selected colour, what holes it fills, what potential it brings and to see what problems the two united colours now face.

The easiest thing to look at is, once again, the creatures. Here you need to ask yourself the same questions, except you have twice as many guys to look at. Try to visualise the perfect curve and what it would consist of. You will see that some creatures are in higher demand than others due to curve irregularities. Some creatures will combo well together and if these themes are strong enough, they might be the reason for trying to unite these colours whilst drafting. It should also be clear which is the stronger strategy in this combination, be it aggression or defence, and you will see how various creatures' importance changes because of this.

Once the creatures are dealt with, it is once more time to turn your attention to the rest of the spells. Does the colour combination have an abundance or drought of removal? Of card advantage? Of combat tricks? Do certain cards work particularly well in this archetype, like **Lavamancer's Skill** in *Onslaught* block? Does a spell interact particularly well with creatures of the other colour, meaning that the only niche it will fit is this combination, creating an incentive to draft it? And finally, does the new colour fill the holes the first colour had, be they removal, evasion or card advantage?

Repeat this process for every single colour combination. It seems like a huge task at first, but it doesn't take long and you will soon have a great understanding of the look each colour combination should have and an idea of how to rate cards whilst drafting. There are only ten different two-colour combinations anyway. Doing it with real cards lined up in front of you makes it easier to do and drives the lesson home further.

## The Input of Others

After you've done all of this, you should have a pretty good idea of what is going on the new format. Playing can only improve upon these theories, and the biggest thing that I think you can do to improve your Limited game, and your initial insight into a set, is to talk to other people. It helps if these people are as good as, if not better than, you, as their insights will be more valuable to you as a learning player. Throughout this whole process I like to have as many people whom I respect along for the ride. Their input is invaluable. They will set you right when you severely underrate a card, or help counter your arguments if you are a little too enthusiastic about something. They will help play the devil's advocate or at least present viewpoints that differ from your own. They may be wrong or, heaven forbid, you might be; these errors might only be evinced by thorough play, but just the expression of differing points of view is refreshing, invigorating and cathartic.

It is not just at this stage that the opinions of others are especially helpful, as they always are. When you print off the list in the first place, you will probably take it with you to the [Release Events](#) or to subsequent tournaments. In the hours it takes to drive with teammates to events and PTQs, it never hurts to have a printout of the Limited environment or latest decks to discuss to both while away the journey and give you all a deeper insight to the



format. Many great revelations come from an extended discussion about how certain cards or colours interact. Never fear to address the opinion of a friend or of a revered person; even if you initially disagree, file it away and examine it from other angles, even if they are still wrong and you are still right, there will probably be something to learn from the viewpoint they took.

## The Non-Commons

Finally, once you have a good grasp of how all the pieces of the common puzzle fit together, it is time to venture onto the uncommons and rares. It is worth a rudimentary knowledge of these whilst you were fitting together the colours, as there might be some uncommons you can expect to pick up late in a particular archetype or that if opened might suggest you go a particular way.

These cards tend to be more powerful than the commons, so it is equally important to remember the effects of all the tricks here too. I will soon be dipping into the tribal aspect of the format, and it is the uncommons and rares that tend to play the biggest part. It is the strength of a tribal non-common that you pick it high enough and early enough so that you get into a specific tribe to pick up the good cards in it.

## Tribal

As I write this I haven't seen all of *Lorwyn* yet, so everything is still supposition. It will pay to know how deep the races are and in which colours they overlap. Kithkin are white-green, Giants are red-white, Merfolk are white-blue, Faeries are blue-black, Goblins are red-black and Elves are black-green. Treefolk branch over white, green, and black and are probably both too unfocussed and too expensive to be delved into as a hardcore Limited deck, much as I suspect Giants will be, as there is a limit to how many expensive cards you can play. Now that we have identified the races, what are we to do with them?

To start with, it might be best to try and go as deep as possible into a tribal archetype, to see how powerful they are when you really go all-in. If it's not that amazing, as I suspect might be the case (I think this set will hopefully be balanced enough so that non-tribal decks can beat tribal decks but it will be close), then the best thing to do will be to draft with tribal / colour combinations in mind and do the best you can when combined with the signals coming from your right. On the flip side, there may well be too much synergy within some of the tribes to be able to safely forsake them without giving up too much power. Changelings will probably be very strong picks as they will benefit every tribal card you have. These don't seem like the most revealing statements, so let's examine how best to ascertain the specifics.

Obviously, doing lots of drafts will show us the way, but as I write this the set is not out, so all I can do is theorise. Take the big pile of commons again and sort the spells into their tribes, with a special pile for changelings to see which colours they are the most prolific in and thus most likely to aid any potential theme. Look to see how the races are spread across colours to see which colour combination benefit the most. As you did before, analyse the curve of each species to see which cards will be higher valued and to see how fast each tribe is. Assess the strengths of each archetype to see which spells you will need to shore up the defects and which you will want to amplify their assets.

Past experience, mainly from *Onslaught* block, shows us that the more themed your deck is, the more powerful it will be, even if it is just a few cards that are individually strong enough to play that get better when they come out together, much like the smattering of Slivers many deck in *Time Spiral* ended up containing. Spirits and Snakes in Kamigawa Block also reinforced this theme, so I think I would start experimenting with the tribes than trying to find a kinky draft angle (although I can assure you I will do this as soon as possible).

## Precarious Predictions

This is about as far as theory will take me, so I will leave you with a stab at the dark at the top few commons the set has to offer, in order. Now, I do this knowing it will be wrong, but I do it to see how wrong blind stab ends up being. So here we go:

### 1) Mulldrifter

It looks like I'm going to be drafting blue again. This is the most powerful common I can recall seeing. Three-for-ones are normally only ever reserved for rares or bomb uncommons. This bad boy is common. I am simply speechless...

### 2) Æthersnipe

This is my bold, all-in choice. I think that it might be the case that the rest of the cards I list will be better, but I already love this guy. He's also blue. **Vedalken Dismissal** was a sleeper card a while back, and although this doesn't put the card on top, he does leave a big 4/4 body behind. I think he's going to be awesome.



### 3) Oblivion Ring

Hey, **Oubliette!** This card goes one step better than its *Masters Edition* reprint equivalent and **Vindicates** everything. A quick glance through the set shows that there are only a couple of enchantment removal spells that can justifiably be played main deck and one of those is white anyway. So I don't think this will die too often. I think it will stay around, and its ability to kill anything makes it a must have. This card may go down if three-point removal is good enough.

### 4) Lash Out

**Incinerate** has always been amazing in Limited, and it never needed to target players to earn its prominence. This card will sometimes do both. Cheap and efficient removal. I have yet to analyse the set to see what the "magic number" is for creature kill that will determine the strengths of individual cards (this is why **Errant Ephemeron** was so good: because it dodges almost everything), but this card does everything you ever wanted a common to do. This started on my list as number two but has been slowly bumped down as I flick through the spoiler and see some must-kill commons with four on the butt. Only deeper analysis and play will confirm whether three or four will be the elusive number.



### 5) Eyeblight's Ending

**Dark Banishing** has always been good, and whoever wanted to waste it killing an Elf? This card, as well as **Oblivion Ring**, might wind up being better than **Lash Out** if there are enough four-toughness creatures.

### 6) Nameless Inversion

A slightly more flexible **Last Gasp**. Brilliant. Not sure how often you will use the obliteration of creature types or use the card as a pump, but I know it will occur, and I love having so much flexibility on what probably started as a simple card.

Looks like I made it to a Top 6. Only time will tell how accurate it winds up being. We all know how good cards like **Tarfire**, **Cloudcrown Oak**, **Moonglove Extract**, and **Warren Pilferers** will be, but I have my eyes on a couple of cards that I suspect will be more powerful than they first seem. **Nath's Elite** and **Mournwheel** are the commons I will label as sleepers for now. To round things off, I think one of the most dominating cards at the pre-release will be **Oakgnarl Warrior**. He seems perfect for Sealed and I have a feeling that he will become a pet favourite of mine because he gets the job done.

That's all for now. I wonder how these predictions will work out, and I look forward to bringing you more on *Lorwyn* in the upcoming weeks.

Q

*Widely considered one of the world's foremost Limited competitors, Quentin Martin has four Limited Grand Prix Top 8s and a Top 8 at Pro Tour-Prague 2006. Between his **Magic** expertise and a background in philosophy, it's no surprise Quentin is well known for his strategic insight and theories on the game.*



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