

CZ453: CARDS WE KEEP TRYING TO CRACK

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Today we are digging a little deeper into a concept that impacts our format a lot - taking seemingly ordinary cards and mechanics, and turning them into something Magical. Commander is the perfect format to take cards no one ever thought of and combining them in ways that make your opponents go "Wow!". But it doesn't always work out, so let's look into it, and try to understand why. BUT BEFORE WE GET INTO IT...

****CHANNEL FIREBALL ** **ULTRAPRO #1****

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****PATREON: CHRISTOPHER LAMB****

2) MAIN TOPIC: **CARDS WE KEEP TRYING TO CRACK**

*Cracking the code on a card is like opening a present for yourself, and then using that present to make a sizeable difference at the Commander table. Whether you're a combo maker, a brewer, Timmy or Spike, the idea of breaking a card is core to almost everyone's experience in Commander in some form or another. It's closely tied to winning, but doesn't necessarily need to have that as its main goal. Let's talk about **CRACKING CARDS**.*

FIRST, LINGO.

BUST. CRACK. BREAK. BROKEN. EXPLOIT.

- There are a lot of ways to talk about breaking cards! What's your favorite?
 - Busted / It's busted / Bust it wide open (Reckoner Bankbusta!)
 - Crack the case / Crack the code / Cracked
 - Break the card / Break the Rules / Break expectation
 - Exploit / Use / Manipulate / Abuse (these words get increasingly negative sounding, but because we're talking about cards, it lets us explore the depths of our linguistics)

NEXT, DEFINITION.

*What does it mean!? Cracking a card means conceptually trying to surpass what the game expects, break and bend the rules, surprise and astound our playgroups, just **MAKE SOMETHING WORK**, etc.*

- Using a card(s) to break the *rules* of Commander
 - Shadowborn Apostles; Dragon's Approach; Persistent Petitioners
- Using a card(s) to change or get around the rules of the game
 - Cheating of mana costs (Kaalia; Mizzix of the Izmagnus)
 - Playing other players' decks (Gonti, Lord of Luxury; Etali, Primal Storm; Stolen Strategy)
 - Legendaries! (Mirror-Gallery / Mirror Box)
 - BUTTS: (Doran the Siege Tower; Arcades, the Strategist)
 - Alternate Win Cons: (Laboratory Maniac; Felidar Sovereign)
- Combining card(s) to create unique / powerful / unusual circumstances / Getting around downsides
 - Phage the Untouchable + Torpor Orb / Command Beacon / etc.
 - Tahngarth, First Mate + Sword Of series (you control the Swords still, so you get the effects)
 - Mishra, Artificer's Prodigy + Possibility Storm or Planar Chaos / Praetor's Grasp
- Taking a regular / bad card or mechanic and finding a way to make it busted / better
 - Ajani's Chosen + Enchanted Evening or Life and Limb + Sporemound
 - Biovisionary + Infinite Reflection
 - Ancient Runes + Mycosynth Lattice

CARDS THAT CRACK THEMSELVES

The idea of a "combo" requires multiple cards... most of the time. There are plenty of cards in Magic's history that are cracked in and of themselves. These don't fit our criteria for cards we typically want to crack, such as:

- "All-In-One" Commanders - Urza, Lord High Artificer; Chulane, Teller of Tales; Korvold, Fae-Cursed King
 - *Read the cards* - purely by themselves, each of these Commanders has everything you need to "get going". Their abilities *self-synergize*.
 - Is it any surprise each of these Commanders are at the #1 or #2 Commander on EDHRec in their color identities?
- "All-In-One" Cards - Smothering Tithe; Dockside Extortionist; Jeska's Will
 - These cards barely require anything except themselves to be extremely powerful
- "Tutors" - Demonic Tutor; etc.
 - If you can find a card that cracks itself, a tutor counts as one.

CARDS THAT DON'T CRACK THEMSELVES

This is pretty much every other card in the history of Magic. Some are closer to being crackable than others. Try to think of it as "how many steps to get to the result we want?"

- "One-Step"
 - Godo, Bandit Warlord - play him, then equip Helm of the Host
 - The Great Henge / Zendikar Resurgent- cast a Creature
- "Two-Steps"
 - Tatsunari, Toad Rider - play him, play an enchantment, begin draining effects

- Emiel, the Blessed - play Emiel, have / play a creature, flicker it
- “Multiple-Steps”
 - Thousand-Year Storm - play it, storm off with rituals / cheap spells, then a payoff card
 - Almost all of the Sagas - they’re actual steps!

OUR SIMPLE CRITERIA

When we started asking ourselves the question about which cards we keep trying to crack, from the exploration above, we have some pretty simple qualifiers:

- They can’t crack themselves / (thus) require more than a single step
- They’re usually tied to our playstyles / personal interests
- They’re good / fun in Commander

Ok! Looks like we’re ready to dive into some cards we keep trying to crack... but first!

MIDROLL BREAK

We’ve done enough talking about the methodology, let’s get into some of the cards we keep trying to crack (successfully or not!)

THE CARDS WE KEEP TRYING TO CRACK

Tatsunari, Toad Rider (Jimmy) - ever since building this on Game Knights, I’ve wanted to find ways to go infinite and crack the Keimi token.

- Careful wording by WotC - “ Whenever you cast an enchantment spell, if you don't control a creature named Keimi, create Keimi” and on Keimi: “Whenever you cast an enchantment spell...”
- Sacrifice Outlets for Keimi give you the ability to sac and re-cast enchantments to create another Creature
 - Payoffs: Blasting Station; Death Match; Cream of the Crop; Intruder Alarm; Path of Discovery; Season of Growth
- MUTATE on Keimi means you can make multiple versions of it to get around the text!
 - Insatiable Hemophage; Brokkos, Apex of Forever; Boneyard Lurker
- Why it’s tough: people see a combo being formed, they will start to pick away at it. Enchantment board wipes really wreck ya. Cards like Heroic Intervention are a must-play.

Abundance - This card doesn’t see a ton of play, but there are more and more ways to use its unique text to get some cool effects.

- Sylvan Library - Obviously very powerful because each draw gets replaced. Archmage Ascension has an amazing synergy here too.
- Cultivator Colossus is the most recent example
- Why it’s tough: a 4-mana enchantment is sometimes awkward to land and start using, especially if it requires cards like Cultivator Colossus to go off. Is it better in a mono-Green/ramp deck? Can you build a deck around an enchantment or have a Commander that it fits perfectly?

Tahngarth, First Mate - this card doesn't see much play, but the idea of messing with combats of others and handing Tahngarth over just seems like so much fun!

- Make him very invincible (Darksteel Plate)
- Make him very untargetable (Lightning Greaves)
- Get the benefits from him attacking (Sword of series, on-hit)
 - Because you still control the equipment when Tahngarth is swinging, you get the on-hit triggers. Mask of Memory, Rogue's Gloves, budget options as well.
 - Goad other creatures? Goad tribal!?
- Why it's tough: Combat matters decks and especially Voltron ones are always easily disrupted by Instant speed removal / board wipes. Building things in your deck to stop those means you're taking away from other parts of the deck to make it stronger / more viable. A tough balance, but with all the Goad stuff out now, maybe a chance for attacking-based and equipment based decks to rise again?

Maze of Ith - this land can go into every single deck, and because of the complexity of the combat step, there are always new and interesting ways to use it (similar to Reconnaissance)

- Argothian Elder / Krosan Restorer - untap Maze and go infinite with mana!
- Untap your own creatures? Get an attack trigger before blocks? (Isshin) - messing with how combat usually works is a lot of fun, especially since attacking can be very difficult in multiplayer.
- It can be a major political tool if you're able to stop another player from dying. The politics behind a maze are crackable, too.
- Why it's tough: well, it's not actually that tough. It doesn't take up a land slot though, so make sure you don't fall into that trap! Being conditional can be a challenge, but the power of the effect counterbalances that.

Menace / Deathtouch Tribal - (Jimmy) Been trying to make Menace / Deathtouch tribal a thing for awhile now, and WotC has been printing better and better cards with these abilities.

- Kediss + Falthis as a potential Commander pairing (seems made for this type of deck) or Zagras, Thief of Heartbeats
- Deathtouch tribal:
 - Hooded Blightfang and Saryth, the Viper's Fang
- Menace Tribal:
 - Elder Brain! (Read the card) - this is maybe the win-con that a Menace deck finally needs.
 - Vorrac Battlehorns and similar effects makes your Menace creatures actually unblockable
- Giving Deathtouch to menace creatures makes blocking that much more difficult for opponents since they're 100% losing their stuff. Profitable trades are unlikely.
- Why it's tough: Menace / Deathtouch is an evergreen mechanic, so the directions you can go with it are innumerable. Are you trying to make creatures hit with Quietus Spike? Use pingers

with Deathtouch? Go wide? Tall? Maybe there is a world where these decks work alongside Goad Tribal / forced combat decks.

The Hunted Dragon / Horror / Lammasu / Phantasm / Troll - these cards all give your OPPONENT's a huge advantage while you get an undercosted creature yourself. In the scope of Commander they're very intriguing, but is that enough to actually make it work?

- Hunted
- The concept is similar to Zedruu but Zedruu is so much easier to crack since you can pass out permanents that are bad for the controller. It's more subtle, but how can you make these tokens from Hunted Dragon bad for your opponents?

Bramble Sovereign - (Jamie) Seems like a really powerful card and doubling up on Creatures is always good right?! Also, you can even use it on your OPPONENT's creatures if it's advantageous

- Nice combo with Ghired, Conclave Exile - turn your best creatures into Tokens and then populate them!
- Potential to go infinite with cards like Great Whale!
- Good with flicker decks since it cares about ETBs and not needing to be Cast.
- Why it's tough: nontoken creatures only means you can't keep going with the creatures you create with the Bramble Sovereign. It costs 4 mana to cast, 2 mana to activate, AND requires you have a creature to do it with. Removal on this creature *really* stings. And we haven't found it be extremely worth it to use on opponents because... well it can create a huge disadvantage for you too! (maybe you're running stax / Propaganda effects so their creatures can't hurt you as bad?)

Vehicles.deck - with Shorikai and Kotori, Pilot Prodigy, Vehicles are showing to be more promising than ever. Is it finally crackable!?

- Josh played a Shorikai deck on Game Knights, but with very few vehicles.
- Mechtitan Core exists - this is the coolest thing ever (to Jimmy) but so easily removed in Commander. Is it worth it!? (and what happens if someone Stifles the trigger)
- Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty added a TON of new toys (Cyberdrive Awakener; Katsumasa, the Animator; Imposter Mech; Reckoner Bankbuster)
- Why it's tough: Vehicles by themselves are not creatures. Turning them into creatures makes them feel like each card is actually taking up 1.5-2 card slots in your deck. As a result, your deck can often have completely miserable draws if you only see one half of the deck. Balancing Vehicles out seems tough, but maybe the route is to have more ways to **animate** them, like Katsumasa or Rise and Shine.

Mutate to Remove Legendary - (Jake) Clone decks are really fun, but often players limit themselves to strategies that require something to remove legendary like, Sakashima of a Thousand Face, Spark Double, Helm of the Host.

- If you mutate on top of your commander, it removes the Legendary supertype opening up plain ol copy spells like Clone, Phantasmal Image and Fated Infatuation

- What commanders benefit from being copied the most? Omnath, Locus of Creation, Ramos, Dragon Engine, Alela, Artful Provocateur, Tuvasa Sunlit
- Why it's tough: The mutate package needed to make it work is substantial. This means the commander needs to be able to do work with only its abilities. Omnath, Locus of Creation is great because the landfall strategy is so simple to cater to.

Commanders that Aren't Commanders - In a singleton format, it's easy to write off nonlegendary cards as viable strategies to build around. With enough focus, it's possible to use a card in your 99 that isn't in your command zone like it's a commander. Your whole strategy is based on that one card. We'll refer to these as non-commanders.

- Lots of different types of Non-Commanders. Some that just don't fit color identities can be super fun to build around. Josh's 5C Nekusar or Jake's 4C Brudiclad.
- Non-Commanders that aren't legendary creatures. Spike Feeder Jim's The Ozolith deck, Manson's Helm of the Host deck or his Villainous Wealth deck.
- Non-Commander I'm still trying to crack: Electrostatic Pummeler. How much energy does it really need? Who is the commander? I loved the deck in standard back in the day, but can I build a whole deck around it?
- Why it's tough: You almost have to include a tutor package in the deck which can be expensive and take up a lot of slots in the deck. Also, if it gets removed, does the deck still function? If it doesn't you need added protection and redundancy.
- Major upside: Non-Commanders are what cracking cards is all about. We want to surprise our opponents with something they've never seen before. A lot of times, your non-commander

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

Roon of the Hidden Realm + Stifle abilities - We dedicated an entire episode to this! With the way that Commander die triggers work, Roon + a Stifle ability creates the ability to essentially hide a Commander away forever. Episode link in the show notes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UiqKca11Zk>

Reincarnation + New Commander Exile rules - Speaking of Commander die triggers, cards like Reincarnation now are able to target your Commander (after a boardwipe / removal), you can have the Commander die, still have the delayed trigger go on the stack, and return your Commander to the Command Zone and a creature back from your graveyard.

Selvala, Explorer Returned -

"If you activate Selvala's ability while casting a spell, and you discover you can't produce enough mana to pay that spell's costs, the spell is reversed. The spell returns to whatever zone you were casting it from. You may reverse other mana abilities you activated while casting the spell, but Selvala's ability can't be reversed. Whatever mana that ability produced will be in your mana pool and each player will have drawn a card." With Panglacial Wurm... you know what, I'd rather not.

Split Cards - used to be considered differently Mana Value wise -

709.4. In every zone except the stack, the characteristics of a split card are those of its two halves combined. This is a change from previous rules. You could use Cascade into a card like Valki / Tibalt to find a low Mana Value spell (Valki) and cast it as the other side (Tibalt)

3) **TO THE LISTENERS:**

What are some cards you have tried to break!? What's your style / methodology? Have you succeeded? Failed? Also, have you actually cracked any of the cards we've mentioned?

****CHANNEL FIREBALL-OUT #2** **ULTRA PRO #1****

4) **THE END STEP:**

Something cool outside the world of Magic.

5) CLEAN-UP STEP

Big thanks to our amazing team here at The Command Zone! **Damen Lenz, Shauna Gilles, Arthur Meadowcroft, Ashlen Rose, Ladee Danger, Manson Leung, Craig Blanchette, Josh Murphy, Jake Boss, Patrick Nan, Jordan Pridgen, Sam Waldow, Gaurav Gulati, Truc Thai, Jamie Block, Mitch Trafford, and Evan Limberger.**

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