

5-28-2015

Merfolk Primer

By John Taylor

First of all, I'd like to start out by stating that I'm going to try my best to view each matchup as objectively as possible. That said, I've played more Modern than most and nearly all of my playtesting has been with Merfolk (though I started playing modern with a sweet RG Aggro brew that eventually turned into Naya Zoo) and I feel like I understand Modern more than most, which gives me a significant edge versus most players not interested in keeping up with the format. Take each of these views of the matchups with a grain of salt, and keep in mind that practice with the deck is more important than any amount of reading, and grind as many games as possible with Merfolk before taking it to any big tournament. Without any more ado, here is the list I've arrived at after quite a bit of testing for the Columbus Invitational.

The list

Creatures:

4x Cursecatcher
4x Silvergill Adept
4x Master of the Pearl Trident
4x Lord of Atlantis
2x Phantasmal Image
2x Tidebinder Mage
4x Merrow Reejerey
3x Master of Waves

Instant:

3x Vapor Snag
2x Spell Pierce

Enchantments:

4x Spreading Seas

Artifacts:

4x Aether Vial

Lands:

4x Mutavault
1x Cavern of Souls
1x Minamo, School at Waters Edge
1x Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
13x Island

Sideboard:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Swan Song

1x Dismember

2x Monastery Siege

2x Spellskite

2x Tidebinder Mage

3x Hurkyl's Recall

1 Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

First, I'll go over some of the card choices, and what influenced my decision to include them in the deck. I'll skip over the obvious cards like Cursecatcher, Silvergill Adept, and the 2 drop lords.

2x Phantasmal Image

This is often the worst card in your deck, and is your go to cut if in doubt when boarding. That said, it's significantly better game one against every deck when they aren't overloading on removal, and copying a master of waves is often game winning. It's main deck Twin hate that can do just about anything (including copying your opponent's eidolon of the great revel when you have a vial out). This is clearly not an effect you want to overload on as looking at it with a silvergill in hand or just no creatures on the board is demoralizing, but I feel like the pros outweigh the cons.

2x Tidebinder Mage

I've seriously considered changing this card to spellskite, but I feel that spellskite is better after your opponent is maxing out on removal. I also want 4 of these in the 75, as I fully expect Abzan and Burn to be prevalent, with the splash damage against zoo and all in twin (lavamancer) being significant, and I couldn't see using 4 spots in the board for tidebinder mages. Even in the matchups where this card is bad, the card isn't THAT bad. It's always a 2/2 merfolk for 2, even when the text isn't relevant. Of course, this card is going to be boarded out fairly often, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's bad main deck.

4x Merrow Reejeray

This is the somewhat controversial lord. This card is extremely impressive when curving out, and is significantly better than the 2 mana lords in non-blue matchups. Three mana is certainly an issue, but having some number of three drops is necessary, and I'm not a huge fan of cutting Merfolk to try and be controlling with Kira/Siege. Game one I try to stay as aggressive as possible, while maintaining enough interaction to punish twin.

3x Master of Waves

I've tried every possible amount of Master of Waves (tried zero in a Collected Company list) and this is the number I've settled on. This card is just bonkers, in the red matchups it usually spells game over for your opponent. Not only that, but this card is very good against Jund/Junk as well, dodging everything except path/pulse/pact. I don't hate running 2 or 4 but you always want to draw one and getting more than one stuck in your hand when running 20 lands is rough. I feel like running any less than 2 is certainly a mistake (unless in a Collected Company shell) and that this card is one of the reasons to play Merfolk.

3x Vapor Snag

There's generally room for 3 "removal" spells in Merfolk. I don't hate some number of dismember in the main, but I've not found it to be necessary. In the Invitational metagame, you can always expect the cheap decks to be in abundance, as not everyone who gets the invite is going to have access to a modern deck. This means that Burn is going to be one of the big decks in the room, and running dismember in the main is a surefire way to lose to that deck. That being said, your options aren't great, but the upside of losing no life and being able to save your own creatures against control is good enough for me.

2x Spell Pierce

This is pretty cut and dry for me. I've tried running remand and mana leak, but unless you are playing Aether vial on one every game, your just losing too much tempo trying to hold these situational counter spells. I'm not saying that spell pierce isn't situational, but I am saying that holding up 1 mana is SO much easier than holding up 2 in a 20 land deck. I realize that this is one of the controversial cards in the Merfolk community, but I stand solidly on the side of spell pierce.

4x Spreading Seas

Abzan is the second most played deck? Treasure cruise is no longer in the format? Time for the oldie but goody to be back in the main. If you want to cut spreading seas you need to up your land count, there is no other option. Right now the card is good, but if twin becomes too dominant I could see some number of this being cut.

Ok, now that that's over with, let's get on to the matchups and sideboard guide for each of these. I will write specifically what to bring in and out against each matchup referring specifically to my list. I will also try to mention any potential sideboard cards not currently found in my board that are good against each matchup.

UR all-in-Twin/Tempo Twin

This matchup is probably the worst of the twin matchups, with main deck Grim Lavamancer and Dispel being pretty rough. The matchup is still in Merfolks favor, but less so than any other Twin strategy. I realize that Master of Waves is good against Twin, but against this version specifically, you need to cut down on your curve as much as possible while maintaining a semblance of a clock. Making room for Tidebinder against Grim Lavamancer is also a necessity. If they board into control on the draw, don't get fooled and cut your hate for game 3. Always make a show of boarding against twin decks, no matter if you intend to bring in cards or not.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Swan Song

1x Dismember

2x Tidebinder Mage

2x Spellskite

Out:

4x Spreading Seas

2x Phantasmal Image

2x Merrow Reejeray

1x Master of Waves

TarmoTwin

Get hype. This matchup is great and a reason to play Merfolk. The best deck in the format is cutting its combo to play TARMOGOYF? That card Merfolk has been dealing with for years now? Absolutely get some practice against this deck though. Even though it's a pretty good matchup for Merfolk, remember that it's still a variant of the best deck in the room hands down, and it can win against anything.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

1x Dismember

2x Tidebinder Mage

2x Spellskite

Out:

4x Spreading Seas

2x Phantasmal Image

1x Merrow Reejerey

Grixis Twin

Another good matchup for folk, with this version being slightly worse for us than Tarmotwin. Access to black removal spells for Master of Waves is annoying, even though you're looking at maybe 2 ways to kill Master of Waves in the deck, they are still there and something to be wary of. Keep in mind Slaughter Pact, Murderous Cut, and Disfigure after board.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

1x Dismember

2x Spellskite

1x Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

Out:

4x Spreading Seas

2x Phantasmal Image

Abzan Midrange

This matchup is a ton of fun and slightly favorable for Merfolk. It's hard to be much over 50/50 against this deck, but I think the matchup is fine for folk, both before and after board. Always take out Aether Vial against BG variants (this includes Sultai control, as they like to board out counter magic against you) as the games tend to go super grindy. Don't overextend into a Damnation and make them use removal on cards not named Master of Waves. Any time you can get your opponent to Path or Pulse a Tidebinder is a win. Basically, try to cut anything that isn't a good top deck.

In:

1x Dismember
2x Monastery Siege
2x Tidebinder Mage
2x Spellskite
1x Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

Out:

2x Phantasmal Image
4x Aether Vial
2x Cursecatcher

Jund Midrange

This matchup is similar to Abzan, but slightly better for Merfolk. This deck has (usually) no answers to Master of Waves in the main, and maybe 1 or 2 in the board. Play to grind the game out; Spreading Seas the man lands and don't go for the mana screw unless you know they have missed a land drop. Very rarely do you get to kill a BGx opponent with the spreading seas plan. Phantasmal Image is better in this matchup as Master of Waves is so much better.

In:

1x Dismember
2x Monastery Siege
2x Tidebinder Mage
2x Spellskite
1x Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

Out:

4x Aether Vial
4x Cursecatcher

Sultai Control

This matchup is kind-of unique in that your board games are so significantly better than game one. Sultai is preboarded against you with main deck Damnation and billions of removal spells. They like to board out their counter magic for more removal spells and rely on Thragtusk and manlands to kill you. Ashiok can be an issue if they run any. Same with Jace, Architect of thought, as he makes it hard to pressure without extending into wrath. Also, every kill spell in the deck kills Master of Waves.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Monastery Siege

2x Spellskite

1x Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

Out:

4x Aether Vial

2x Phantasmal Image

1x Master of Waves

Burn

Overall a pretty solid matchup. Not significantly in Merfolks favor, but the main deck can be tuned to be fine against them, with the board being very good. Clogging up the ground early is the main plan. Don't be afraid to Vapor Snag a Guide to avoid some early damage, as your deck easily outclasses them the later the game goes. Do your best to play around Searing Blaze (and Searing Blood after board). Master of Waves reads "Win the game if Health \geq 10". Try to turn the corner as quickly as possible. Aether Vial into Phantasmal Image your Eidolon is also usually game winning.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Monastery Siege

2x Spellskite

2x Tidebinder mage

Out:

4x Spreading Seas

4x Merrow Reejeray

Affinity

The reason NOT to play Merfolk. This matchup is horrendous, and very nearly unwinnable. Sometimes it makes you want to cut the hate altogether and dodge it. Sadly, I think Affinity will be around in some capacity at the Invitational, and I do think it's worthwhile to have a board for them. Phantasmal Image is fine as a flying blocker, or a Merrow Reejerey when going for the combo. Basically, the way to win this matchup is to have your opponent draw bad. Other than that, you need a strong lord draw with 1 or 2 Vapor Snags.

In:

2x Spellskite

1x Dismember

1x Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

3x Hurkyl's Recall

Out:

2x Spreading Seas

3x Master of Waves

2x Spell Pierce

Naya Zoo (1-drop zoo), Zooicide, and Tribal Zoo

Merfolk is favored here, though less so that against regular big zoo. Tidebinder mage in the main is absolutely insane, and they only have path for Master of waves. Spreading seas can easily screw them early give you the time to build up a board. Again, Merfolk is the better deck late game, just try to live as long as possible.

In:

1x Dismember

2x Tidebinder Mage

Out:

1x Master of Waves

2x Spell Pierce

Big Zoo

This matchup can be very interesting. If you get a strong lord draw, the match should be in the bag. Look out for Bonfire of the Damned, as it's almost always game winning for your opponent.

In:

1x Dismember

2x Tidebinder Mage

1x Kira, Great Glass-Spinner

Out:

4x Cursecatcher

Boggles

A very poor matchup to say the least. Our interaction (besides Spell Pierce) game one is nonexistent. Hope to have a heavy lord draw and for them to whiff on the daybreak coronet. If you build up a large board you can hold them off and draw the spreading seas for the win.

In:

2x Spellskite

2x Spell Pierce

Out:

3x Vapor Snag

1x Tidebinder Mage

Infect

A much better matchup than boggles, though they are much quicker generally. Vapor Snag is usually strong, as well as Spell Pierce. Never tap out and hard bluff the whole game. Tidebinder Mage is very good against Hierarch and Glistener Elf, so don't make the mistake of cutting them. Spreading seas is also very good against Inkmoth Nexus. Lower your curve and don't give them time to let the chip shots add up.

In:

2x Spellskite

2x Spell Pierce

1x Dismember

2x Tidebinder Mage

Out:

3x Master of Waves

2x Phantasmal Image

1x Merrow Reejerey

Collected Company Elves

This matchup, on the surface at least, is pretty terrible. Their lack of interaction can be their undoing though. A well timed Vapor Snag, or Spell Piercing their CoCo, can be very strong. Build up your board and hope the Spreading Seas is good enough. Tapping mana dorks with Tidebinder Mage can be crippling as well.

In:

2x Tidebinder Mage

1x Dismember

2x Spell Pierce

Out:

3x Master of Waves

2x Merrow Reejerey

Collected Company Combo

Pod without pod. Pod used to be a pretty strong matchup for fish, but I'm uncertain as to how good this new version is. It's certainly stronger against Merfolk than Pod was, but how much so? I've only played against it a couple times, and their lack of interaction was usually good for Merfolk, but the early combo potential if we don't draw a snag or spell pierce is certainly frightening. I've only played against this on Modo, and not against the best players out there, so I'm not sure how good or bad this matchup is for fish yet. These CoCo decks have a few fish players wondering if maybe Grafdiggers cage should be in the board. I don't believe they are going to be prevalent enough at the invitational specifically, so I'm going to forgo that specific of a hate card.

In:

1x Dismember

2x Tidebinder Mage

2x Spell Pierce

Out:

3x Master of Waves

2x Merrow Reejerey

Living End

This matchup is always a surprise, and can make our deck look foolish at times. That said, the matchup is pretty strongly in our favor as Cursecatcher, Spell Pierce, and Aether Vial are all-stars.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Swan Song

Out:

3x Master of Waves

1x Vapor Snag

Scapeshift

This matchup is entirely dependent on how much creature hate the Scapeshift deck has in the board. Game one can go our way, as they usually have no maindeck Anger or Pyroclasm. Vapor snag is usually terrible game one, with Spell Pierce not doing much other than countering a Bolt or Remand. On the up side, Merfolk takes no damage from its lands, so they have to use a Bolt to the face, get two damage in with Sakura-Tribe Elder, or just wait till they hit 8 lands. Some Scapeshift decks bring in Inferno Titan out of the board, so try to leave in Tidebinder just in case.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Swan song

2x Spellskite

Out:

2x Phantasmal Image

4x Merrow Reejeray

Grixis Delver

A very good reason to be playing Merfolk at the moment. Kira, Great Glass-Spinner is fantastic out of the board, as well as Spellskite and Spell Pierce. There isn't really much to playing against Grixis Delver. Screwing them on mana is a real strategy with Spreading Seas, as well as just having a Lord Draw. Vapor Snag is an absolute house against the Delve creatures, and Dismember kills them out of the board.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

1x Dismember

2x Spellskite

Out:

2x Phantasmal Image

2x Merrow Reejerey

1x Master of Waves

RG Tron

A fantastic matchup. Spreading Seas absolutely hoses this deck, and your threats quickly get out of Pyroclasm range. Karn doesn't do much if we have any semblance of a board and neither Ugin nor Oblivion Stone can kill a Mutavault.

In:

Out:

U Tron

Another fantastic matchup. Spreading Seas is not quite as good as it would be against RG Tron, but it still puts them back at least a turn on Tron Lands. They have (usually) no wrath besides Oblivion Stone, and rely on counters to keep ahead. Aether Vial is great here, and so is Spell Pierce. They usually side out Mindslaver and bring in something like Platinum Angel to compliment the Wurmcoil Engine plan.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

Out:

1x Master of Waves

1x Vapor Snag

Gifts Tron

This is the “bad” Tron matchup. This deck usually has 3 wraths in the main, on top of 4 Path to Exile, and a Combo Finish. Aether Vial is very strong here, with a lord draw plus Spell Pierce being a necessity. Spreading Seas is less strong here, as the Tron lands are not a necessary piece in their game plan. Remember that Phantasmal Imaging their Iona or Elesh Norn is usually pretty back breaking.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Swan Song

Out:

3x Master of Waves

1x Vapor Snag

UW/UWR Control

This is a very fun matchup, as it tends to go super grindy or end very quickly. The lord draw, as almost always, is very good against these decks, especially if you can back it up with a Spell Pierce. After board Merfolk attacks on a very different angle, which tends to force them into a tempo game, as Merfolk’s board is very impactful.

In:

2x Spell Pierce

2x Spellskite

2x Monastery Siege

Out:

2x Phantasmal Image

2x Tidebinder Mage

1x Vapor Snag

1x Merrow Reejerey

And that concludes this rather long Merfolk primer. I know I didn’t cover some of the lesser known matchups, and I would be happy to answer any questions in the comments.