

AN ODE TO WAR OF THE SPARK

INTRO

Hi everyone! I'm GlosuU, a Limited MTG enthusiast. I'm not the best player in the world by any stretch, but I did qualify for the AC4, the AC5 and PT Amsterdam recently, so I do consider myself a decent player. On the 19th of March War of the Spark (WAR) is coming back as a flashback format to be drafted in Premier Draft on MTGA. I have been drafting since MTGA Open Beta, i.e. since GRN was the most recent set, and to this day WAR remains my favorite draft format of all time. In this article I want to explain WHY War of the Spark is my favorite draft format, so I go in depth on how the mechanics and the gameplay function and why they're so appealing to me. Disclaimer: the purpose of this article is to praise WAR as a draft format, NOT necessarily to tell you the best strategies in WAR and how to spike wins, but I'm sure that some of what I say can help you do so, especially if you haven't played the set before.

March 2024 Flashback update

In March 2024 I did 15 WAR drafts and enjoyed them quite a bit, but sadly the set is starting to show its age I believe. It was the beginning of the FIRE philosophy for WotC so they started to introduce some insane cards, but at the same time it still had anchors from the past with vanilla creatures, which stand out like a sore thumb these days. Burning Prophet is a sick 2-drop in R, whereas Goblin Assailant is a vanilla 2/2. No deck wants Assailant over Prophet, which is quite disappointing, and this is just one of several examples in this set. Besides, because of the flashback nature, many newcomers didn't fully understand the set, and the Grixis colors were way too open almost always, which really hampered the set's replayability. I tried hard to trophy with G and W decks, but only succeeded once, whereas the Grixis decks were easy mode. All of that said, the gameplay and planeswalkers are still awesome in my opinion, so if you have the chance to play WAR in the future, absolutely go for it!

My 17L tier list

If tier lists are your thing, I have no problem sharing mine with you:

https://www.17lands.com/tier_list/20f8d865261f45acab4823f2fa20860d

WAR of the Spark setting

I won't comment on the flavor and lore of the set. It's quite bland if you ask me. But... the trailer is awesome. I have to link it. It brings me chills even after all these years. I love that cover of Linkin Park's song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5W9t62t10I>

MECHANICS

I. Planeswalkers

If you read through the lore (can't blame you if you skipped it), you'll understand that planeswalkers feature heavily in this set. There is guaranteed one planeswalker per pack, and there are a bunch of them distributed through the uncommon, rare and mythic rarities. So... planeswalkers, planeswalkers, planeswalkers! They're everywhere! Now, bear with me, because I agree with the people who say that MTG got worse when planeswalkers were introduced as a card type (I'm an MTG player, I like to be negative). So, how come the set that is full of 'em is also my favorite set? Dissonance much, GlosuU? Well, there's an important caveat: most of the planeswalkers until WAR were the stereotypical mythic bombs that easily created insurmountable value and flipped games around, and to make matters worse, most of the removal back then couldn't target planeswalkers. In WAR, they FINALLY designed planeswalkers more reasonably (barring exceptions): uncommon planeswalkers only have minus abilities, rare planeswalkers have plus and minus abilities but no ultimate, and only mythic planeswalkers are like the planeswalkers of old, with plus, minus and ultimate abilities. Also, planeswalkers in this set have static, passive abilities. Many people hate them because it's difficult to keep track of them, but I love them! Be sure to hover on planeswalkers on the battlefield to remember their passive abilities in game. Once you have them in mind, you can appreciate how much nuance they add to gameplay, and they make planeswalkers feel like enchantments that can be attacked.

That last sentence from the previous paragraph is key: planeswalkers can be attacked!! The obvious comparison to planeswalkers are the recently introduced battles from MOM, and while I get to that comparison in a second, to me the planeswalkers from MOM feel more like enchantments that can be attacked. More specifically: sagas that can be interrupted if you attack them! Sagas were omnipresent in NEO, and while many like NEO, I personally disliked that format quite a bit, because soooo much stuff was a 2-for-1 and the sagas provided so. Much. Value. When the opponent dropped a Boseiju Reaches Skyward, you could feel the dread creeping up your spine, hopeless to that 3-for-1 with the giant Reach creature coming in just two turns (and you know that the Boseiju player always had Tamiyo's safekeeping at the ready for when you tried to interact with the giant Reach creature!). But... what if you could attack Boseiju Reaches Skyward? What if you could attack these obnoxious enchantments from sets past?



Personally I LOVE that planeswalkers can be attacked! That makes them have a very low floor together with a very low ceiling. Consider one of my favorite planeswalkers of the set: Davriel, Rogue Shadowmage. The card ranges from a D- (2B: Opponent discards a card, you gain 2 life) to a B- or more (2B: opponent discards 2-3 cards, maybe opponent loses 4-6 life). If you want Davriel to be a B-, you have to put in work, defend him and make sure you can squeeze the value out of him. And if you put in work, opponent's Davriel will be a D- or a dead card in hand. To me that's music to my ears, I love cards ranging in power level depending on game play and board states. Compare that to The Long Reach of Night from NEO, a card that plays similarly, but is an uninteractive 3-for-1. I know which kind of card I enjoy most!



Another controversial example is Ashiok, Dream Render. If you can mill 20 cards of your opponent and then bring Ashiok back with Aid the Fallen, your opponent is going to hate you forever. But, it can also be a stone cold F that doesn't affect the board, which your opponent can ignore sometimes even. Almost all planeswalkers play in a similar pattern, with a low floor and a high ceiling, and that's what makes them fun to me.

Alright, time to compare planeswalkers with MOM battles. I loved MOM, but the main reason why it's not in contention for my favorite draft format is that I was very disappointed with the battles. I was so hyped to relive the awesome gameplay of attacking into WAR planeswalkers and leveraging board presence, but it turned out that the vast majority of battles were actually traps, cards that gave you too little upfront and even when flipping them, the juice was often not

worth the squeeze. There were exceptions, like always (hello Invasion of Amonkhet), and WotC will probably push them more the next time we see them, but there also was a subtle but intrinsic difference of gameplay between WAR planeswalkers and MOM battles: who tapped out to play them. As the aggressor, you usually would tap out to play a battle, then send the team to try to flip it. But, since you were tapped out, the opponent could then wreck you with Ephara's Dispersal or other dirty tricks. And if you couldn't flip a battle immediately, that usually spelled disaster for you. With planeswalkers that's different: the defender taps out to put them on the battlefield and hopes to hold. Now the opponent has mana up in their turn to, for example, remove a key blocker before sending the team, or play a haste creature to attack the planeswalker, or put +1/+1 counters on your creatures and make profitable attacks... Even playing your planeswalker to match theirs is possible! The difference in gameplay is stark for me, and while my winrate in WAR went up when I understood how to build around and play planeswalkers, my winrate in MOM went up when I simply didn't play battles. One final note: uncommon planeswalkers are hybrid pipped instead of gold pipped like MOM battles, making them slottable in many more decks. I wonder if MOM battles would have been higher picks if you could play them in more decks (probably not by much, since they were in general traps as I said).

II. Amass Zombies

Amass is one of my favorite mechanics ever, and it debuted in WAR. We saw it recently in LTR, it was pretty good over there (hello Dunland Crebain), but it definitely felt more vanilla and it ended up paling in comparison to the Ring (to be fair, the Ring tempting is the best Limited mechanic up to date, that is not a fair comparison). Amass in WAR feels much better. Like planeswalkers, this mechanic also rewards careful gameplay and sequencing. 80% of the time it's better to get an extra body than to put counters on your existing body, so you're looking forward to sac your Amass token or trade it before playing more Amass spells. Sometimes, though, that 20% of the time, putting extra counters on the army can be super relevant to enable attacks, and also hasty damage is hasty, especially in a set with planeswalkers. Decisions and intricate gameplay, I personally love it! WAR already had Preening Champion and Rally at the Hornburg before those cards were cool:

Aven Eternal

2



Creature — Zombie Bird Warrior



Flying

When Aven Eternal enters the battlefield, amass 1. *(Put a +1/+1 counter on an Army you control. If you don't control one, create a 0/0 black Zombie Army creature token first.)*

"I've never seen the firemane angels so anxious."
—Tajic

2/2

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But... There's a big difference if you stack them: instead of getting guaranteed bodies like you would with stacked Champions or Rallies, you just get a bigger zombie token, so while still great, these WAR commons are a bit below those other oppressive commons. It's also why for example Deceive the Messenger had diminishing returns in LTR: -3 attack combat trick + 1/1 body for single U is amazing on rate, but putting a counter on a 1/1 instead of creating another body makes the card much less appealing.

Amass represents the hordes of eternal zombies from Amonkhet invading Ravnica, so the mechanic is aligned with Grixis, Nicol Bolas' colors. It is one of the reasons why the Grixis colors are the best in the format: Amass spells are usually 2-for-1s if you can create the extra body, and the stapled value pushes the power of Grixis. That's not the only reason why Grixis is dominant, though: their uncommon planeswalkers are on average much better than the Selesnya ones; their removal is better and even the cycle of 6-mana common creatures leans towards Grixis. But, I'll talk about balance later, back to Amass! Even innocuous looking cards like Toll of the Invasion or Honor the God-Pharaoh are really strong because of that extra Amass 1 stapled onto them. Of course, that should come as no surprise to those who played LTR, then you'll know that Torment of Gollum and Quarrel's End were great. Toll of the Invasion is particularly good in a set where decks have a lot of powerful cards, and WAR fits that mold.

One of the reasons why Amass in WAR is much better and more fun than LTR is that there's more strategies available to it: BR looks to sacrifice tons of Amass tokens so that Amassing always provides value, whereas UB is more interested in voltroning up a big Amass token by giving it keywords. Flying is a super good keyword in Limited, as it turns out, so Eternal Skylord is a pretty good card. But even just giving Menace with e.g. Angrath can make a huge difference on a big dummy. In LTR you could barely give keywords to Amass tokens, which I guess was in flavor for the Orcs in Middle Earth: strength in numbers but very dumb creatures. Zombies are more intelligent as it turns out. Finally there's UR, which is interested in non-creature Amass spells, because it triggers UR spell synergies while also affecting the board. So, all Grixis color combinations are interested in Amass, but for different reasons, which is very appealing for drafting and gameplay in my opinion!

Eternal Skylord

4



Creature — Zombie Wizard



When Eternal Skylord enters the battlefield, amass 2. (*Put two +1/+1 counters on an Army you control. If you don't control one, create a 0/0 black Zombie Army creature token first.*)

Zombie tokens you control have flying.

3/3

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III. Proliferate

Proliferate is the other big mechanic of the set and is aligned with the Bant colors, representing Ravnica's resistance. It's not as good as Amass because there's not that much 2-for-1 value attached to it, however it can snowball HARD, so don't underestimate it! We've seen Proliferate more recently in ONE, and it was much, much weaker there. Why? Because in ONE they decided Proliferate should only work with poison and oil counters, which is NOT as fun as working with +1/+1 or -1/-1 counters! No wonder ONE was a flop of a set! Proliferate is much better when it affects board states, and it does so very well in this set. There's a lot of +1/+1 counters running around, and additionally there's Amass tokens and Planeswalkers that also benefit from Proliferate. To me that paints a beautiful picture: all the big mechanics are synergistic with each other!

Although the Grix colors are dominant, GW Proliferate is a good deck if it's open, and you can harness the power of Proliferate with its gold uncommons and all the commons that work towards it. But honestly, just casting a Contentious plan with a Spellgorger Weird out or casting a Bloom Hulk with a Kronch Wrangler out will make you feel warm and fuzzy with Proliferate. And then there's silly cards like Grateful Apparition, Flux Channeler and Evolution Sage that are must-kill threats.



GAMEPLAY

Let's talk a bit about gameplay! If you've been paying attention, you'll understand that this set is deep on intricate gameplay, sequencing and decisions. The mechanics blend to that, but also the presence of planeswalkers means that there's a lot of minigames going on in a single game. The proverb "you won a battle, but you didn't win the war" takes shape here, but with a twist: if you win many battles (minigames) then you're most likely to win the war (the complete game). Can you squeeze value from your planeswalkers while keeping the opposing planeswalkers in

check? Can you snowball harder than your opponent? Can you grind value out of your Amass tokens better than your opponent?

You'll have probably heard/read about WAR that board presence is paramount and if there's one thing you should know about the format, that's the one! "Board presence, people!" (quoting Lords of Limited). 1- and 2-drops are extremely important in this format and if you're struggling, play more of them and you will probably do better. Why? Well, how are you going to attack planeswalkers without creatures? How are you defending planeswalkers without creatures? How are you putting +1/+1 counters to proliferate later without creatures to put counters on? You NEED that board presence. Most limited formats nowadays are like that, but some formats really emphasize early board presence: BRO and ONE come to mind, and WAR is definitely there. Now, are all 1- and 2-drops created equal? No! Out of these 3 white commons, which one is the best?



Would you have ever guessed War Screecher without playing the format? Probably not! Pegasus Coursers are usually defensive creatures and W usually wants to be aggressive, but there's a reason why War Screecher is the best 2-drop in W: evasion. Evasion lets you hit walkers more easily, and it's also super good with +1/+1 counters, as you most likely know. Pecking your opponent for 3-4 in the air in the early turns is usually negligible in most formats, but pecking in 3-4 damage to a Davriel, or an Ashiok, or any other early walker makes a world of difference. Remember winning battles to win the war? War Screecher can do that well, and it also provides defense for your own walkers. It's just good in both aggressive and defensive decks. Pouncing Lynx is still acceptable because it wears counters well and can pressure early

walkers, but it's clearly below Screecher, and Martyr you will play because it's a 2-drop, but is waaaaay worse than its counterpart Blightbelly Rat in ONE.

We have established that early board presence is super important and that you should pick cheap creatures highly. Does that mean that the format is an aggro-fest akin to ONE? Not really, otherwise I wouldn't like it so much! If one player plays to the board early and the other doesn't affect the board early, the game is gonna be over very soon. But when both players commit to developing an early board, games can and will go longer. The effect is similar to BRO: when both players play to the board in the early game, grindy games can happen. Because of the presence of planeswalkers and creatures attacking them, life totals for both players are artificially higher. Games will have more turns, and when the dust has settled, the player who has mana sinks, grind engines and raw card advantage can take over. Make sure to have some cards like Spark Reaper, Vivien's Grizzly, Erratic Visionary, Dreadmalkin, Tamiyo's Epiphany, etc because they can make a big difference when the game is at an impasse. The Grixis common 6 drops are also super impactful in the grindy games (Tithebearer Giant, Invading Manticore and Kiora's Dambreaker), I'm happy to put them as top end in decks that are planning to grind out.



Finally, a word on removal. They REALLY pushed removal in this set. Coming from MKM, where removal is mediocre and tricks are king, WAR is the complete opposite: tricks are bad and removal is great. Not only are the removal spells good on rate generally, but they are super important to kill snowbally threats before they spiral out of control (I mentioned a few in this article already). Removal also allows you to leverage board presence and kill a walker before it becomes a NEO saga. All of that said... removal is not enough without creatures! You NEED that board presence! You will feel dumb when you have 3 Jaya's Greetings in hand, no creatures on board and your opponent plays a planeswalker and starts getting value. By the way, do you know which is the best common removal spell? It's not Jaya's Greeting. It's not Ob

Nixilis Cruelty. It's Callous Dismissal. That card is absurd, Man-o-war called, wants its spotlight back!



(SHORT) FORMAT OVERVIEW

I won't go into detail here since there's tons of draft guides out there. But yes, Grixis are the dominant colors in this format. It's unclear which of the Grixis color pairs is the best, although I have a slight preference for BR. WG Proliferate is a good deck when open, as I have mentioned before. Then, I personally like ALL the green decks too. They're not as powerful as the Grixis decks, but they can be built cohesively. BG in particular has two great gold uncommons that

allow for splashes, so that's enticing. Then let's talk about the elephant in the room: white. And to be specific on which elephant, I mean Loxodon Sargeant. Card is terrible. Yes, white has problems. Its only good deck is WG proliferate. And unlike green, white doesn't pair super well with the Grixis colors. The supposed themes they gave to the W color pairs are weak (WR tricks is pretty bad, WB aristocrats is much worse than RB sacrifice, UW control is... I'll mention that in a bit). It's also conflicted between aggro and control cards. However, I believe white is quite playable, especially if open. It can do Proliferate quite well, so you can synergize that with Amass in another color, for example. Getting Time Wipe or Teferi, Time-Raveler are great reasons to draft UW control (that deck needs that power level). And Oketra is the best of the Eternal gods, also a reason to draft white. I have no problem drafting white if I get those bombs or if it's open and I get plenty of the good cards (Law-Rune Enforcer, Trusted Pegasus, War Screecher, Wanderer's Strike...). And sometimes you also get to draft the Charmed Stray deck, which is a big plus if you ask me! The format is not very friendly to splashing, but Guild Globe is your friend if you're looking to do that. Sometimes you can splash gold planeswalkers like Teferi in a RB deck thanks to Guild Globes and/or Interplanar Beacon.



SAMPLE DRAFTS AND TROPHIES

I usually stop playing when I hit Mythic, but back when WAR was available I loved it so much that I still played it in Mythic. Here are some sample trophy drafts in Mythic, if you'd like to get a taste of the format. (looking at the draft logs, this was also when P1P1 was messed up in draft logs, that was really annoying back in the day). MARCH 2024 UPDATE: added some new trophies to this list, and draft logs are completely clean these days. :)

TROPHY 1: <https://www.17lands.com/deck/42c8b2cc9e914269bb44265bd9fb2593> - Rakdos sacrifice is my favorite archetype of the format, and it's possibly in contention for best archetype, period

TROPHY 2: <https://www.17lands.com/draft/ba49869644ef4edd98f3b1848f6c2dfd> - UR spells featuring Ral and his Outburst

TROPHY 3: <https://www.17lands.com/draft/4b412776f63d41c5874b07615932e96b> - UB splashing Bolas

TROPHY 4: <https://www.17lands.com/draft/88f1dd0cf43e45959c7be19b82c04d5a> - Golgari splashing Domri

TROPHY 5: <https://www.17lands.com/draft/de4df324c8b14841a84387b77c7f9ca3> - Golgari featuring Nissa, a resounding 7-0 (Nissa is possibly the best card in the set)

(ALMOST) TROPHY 6: <https://www.17lands.com/draft/851300c95e6f49c68cf8547196b2ffc5> - A super sweet UW flyers deck splashing Ral's Outburst that barely missed the trophy (opponent in the final's game was left at just 1 life, sadly!!)

And a bonus trophy from MTGO, where GW was wide open and I trophied with the Charmed Stray deck, oh so lovely! Sadly no draft log nor game replays, but the deck is too cool not to share:



Primary Deck



Previous Decks

MAIN DECK (40 cards)

6	Forest	
9	Plains	
4	Charmed Stray	*
2	Law-Rune Enforcer	*
1	War Screecher	1 *
2	Martyr for the Cause	1 *
1	Bond of Flourishing	1
1	Pouncing Lynx	1 *
1	Grateful Apparition	1 *
2	Pollenbright Druid	1
1	Battlefield Promotion	1 *
1	Huatli's Raptor	*
2	Arlinn's Wolf	2
2	Pledge of Unity	1 *
1	Topple the Statue	2 *
1	Trusted Pegasus	2 *
1	Vivien's Grizzly	2
1	Saheeli's Silverwing	4
1	Enforcer Griffin	4 *

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I am SO HYPED for WAR to be finally back! I'm not too scared of 17Lands data putting a dent on how I perceive the format (the same way it happened when ELD came back as a flashback

and we saw how utterly OP MonoU and MonoR were). I mean, we know Grixis are the best colors, and 17Lands will most probably prove that. That's the advantage of unbalanced formats, can't be disappointed by the data! I hope you enjoyed reading this article, send me feedback my way if you'd like, and I hope I have excited you a bit more to play WAR. I know I will be playing it even if I should be focusing all my attention on MKM and Explorer for the AC5, THAT'S how much I love this format!