A beginner's guide to Ashes: Reborn

Originally published at **https://beckism.com/2021/04/a-beginners-guide-to-ashes-reborn/** on **April 28, 2021**; archived Jan. 9, 2023

So you're interested in playing Ashes Reborn: Rise of the Phoenixborn, but feeling nervous because it seems daunting? Never fear! Ashes is one of those great games that's easy to learn but hard to master, and although becoming an excellent player is mainly a matter of experience, I can at least provide some general pointers so that you have a better idea about why experienced players make the choices they do.

This article will not cover the rules or how to play the game. Rodney Smith's Watch It Played is hands-down the quickest way to learn Ashes (and if you prefer reading…well, that's what Ashes' excellent rulebook is for!).

What should I buy?

Everyone asks this, so let's get it out of the way. In Ashes Reborn, you only have one constraint: dice (many expansions require dice that are not included in the Master Set). Every Ashes product comes with a full playset of every card, and there are no repeat cards between products (which means that if you buy one copy of everything, you'll have everything you need). First, you need the Master Set for the rules, tokens, and first four dice types. If you enjoy the game, you should get the "deluxe" expansions (Laws of Lions, Song of Soaksend, and soon Breaker of Fate) so you have the final three dice types. After that, you can buy any small box expansion that looks interesting to you.

If you aren't sure if you'll like the game, pick up the Master Set (lots of gameplay to be had there, and it will give you a good feel for which dice types do the things you enjoy). If you're sure you'll like the game, but aren't quite ready to drop a couple hundred dollars on it, get the Master Set and the deluxe expansions.

Once you have those, some good next steps are the single-dice small-box expansions (Children of Blackcloud, Frostdale Giants, Roaring Rose, and Duchess of Deception). A lot of people recommend King of Titans, as well, because it has a lot of solid cards for building decks. And dinosaurs. Who

doesn’t like dinosaurs?

Beyond that, there’s no wrong answers. Buy decks that use dice types you enjoy. Buy decks whose Phoenixborn look awesome. Buy all of them in a single go, because you’re going to end up there anyway…

Do I need extra sets of dice?

No.

No, seriously, I really think I need extra sets of dice

Even if two players are building out of the same collection of cards, you probably will never need extra dice (you’re much more likely to be fighting over cards). If you really, really, really want to play your Snakes in Silver deck against your Frostdale Giants deck, you can easily proxy whatever D6 dice you have lying around for the five Natural die you’re short (sides 1 & 2 are Basic; sides 3-5 are class; side 6 is power).

If you’re regularly running four player drafts out of your collection, you might want extras, I guess. Or if you just really like dice.

Playing the game

Alright, so you’ve bought every Ashes Reborn product under the sun, including a bunch of extra dice despite my advice, and now you’re wondering how to actually win because you’ve discovered that when you and your opponent are trading a whole bunch of really small turns back and forth sequencing matters *a lot*. And for some reason their plans all seem to be coming to fruition while yours burn down around your ears.

I can’t tell you how to know what to do and when to do it (it’s way too situational; you’ll need to play the game to get a feel for that stuff). But I can provide a few guiding principles so you can at least make more informed decisions and start building good habits.

Meditation leads to power

New players are often *very* leery of meditating off the top of their deck. It just feels awful to flip that top card over and see a Molten Gold or something that you know could have *actively helped you win* and is now sitting useless in your discard.

Here’s the thing, though: assuming you play all five cards in your hand every round (not guaranteed), the game would have to last **six rounds** before you’d played every single card in your deck. Many Ashes Reborn games will end in rounds three to four. That means that in a typical game, 10-15 cards in your deck will *never see play*.

If almost half of your deck will make no impact on the match anyway, then meditation is not discarding cards that you could have played. It is instead allowing you to play what you need to win at the cost of advancing the point at which you’ll take fatigue damage downwards from the top of round 7.

As a result, the vast majority of the time you should decide exactly what dice you need to adjust to play the cards in your hand or spellboard, and meditate exactly that many cards off the top of your deck regardless of what it places in your discard pile. Unless a card is in your hand, it’s effectively blank because it has no impact on the game, so don’t worry about meditating off the top of your deck!

The only exception is if you expect the game to go long (or if you are reasonably sure you’re facing a deck that’s got a lot of discard from deck effects—colloquially known as “mill”—or cards that spin your dice down). However, you’ll be able to recognize those decks with experience. It’s much easier to think about whether you should meditate and choose not to when you’re a more experienced player than it is to overcome the hesitance or habit of *not* meditating. Meditate early. Meditate often. You’ll need those side actions later in the round to do things that will actually help you win.

Know your win condition

The only way you win in Ashes is to deal lethal damage to your opponent’s Phoenixborn. Knowing *how* the particular deck you are playing plans to do this is arguably the most important part of playing the game, whether you are playing preconstructed decks or fully custom constructed decks, because it will strongly inform the choices you make in-game.

For instance, let’s say you’re playing your first game with Aradel vs. Maeoni (a very common match-up). Just looking at the deck-lists, you can see that Aradel has a large battlefield, low life, and lots of cheap, small units. This means that her deck is trying to swing around her opponent’s threats by summoning more units than they can block, and you’re likely going to need to play very aggressively to try and end the game before her low starting life becomes a problem.

Maeoni, on the other hand, has high life, a small battlefield she can’t even fill, units that have no attack whatsoever (but a Silver Snake that will get more and more dangerous the longer it is alive), and a card that allows her to attack with a single unit without being blocked (Hypnotize). Just from that, you can figure that she’s going to need to stall the early game, try to clear as much of her opponent’s battlefield as she can, and then swing past her opponent’s threats with a giant snake for the win.

Identifying the win condition for a deck that you have not built can be very tricky (particularly when the deck is built by a higher level Ashes player). My best advice is to familiarize yourself with the common archeyptes in Ashes, and then look for cards that only have a single copy (particularly Ready Spells). That will usually allow you to guess the deck's typical First Five, which is often a strong indicator of the strategy it is likely to use (you ask yourself: "how would this collection of units or card effects allow me to gain long-term advantage and win?").

Identify your opponent's win condition

Knowing your own win condition will help a lot for picking a good First Five. However, you also need to determine what your opponent's win condition is so that you can adjust your tactics, if necessary. This is often why players in the first round of a game will slowly trickle out their ready spells and units without necessarily doing anything with them; they're hoping that they'll be able to get a read on their opponent's strategy so they can accurately evaluate whether their default approach is smart or suicide.

In the example pairing above, for instance, summoning an early Gilder can be a very important play for Maeoni against some opponents, because it can guard an attack against her Snake. However, versus Aradel, she actually wants to wait to summon the Gilder until Aradel has played one of her single life units so that the damage dealt when summoning a Gilder can kill a unit and feed the Silver Snake. Similarly, the Maeoni player will likely want to use Open Memories to dig up a second copy of either Empower or Summon Gilder rather than another Summon Silver Snake because they need those cards to clear Aradel's units (whereas in other matchups they might want to get a token on the Snake right away when they summon it so that it can defend itself and doesn't take as long to build up its attack).

There's no hard and fast rule here, but a good general idea in the first round is to wait to attack or actively try to destroy your opponent's threats until you've seen 3-4 of their cards. Of course, the more experience you gain (or the more familiar you are with your opponent's deck or preferred playstyle), the more you'll be able to ignore this because you'll be able to more accurately judge what they are doing based on less in-game information.

Why a particular deck wins

Generally speaking, if you have two decks that are well balanced compared to each other piloted by two players of a similar skill level, the player who wins will:

- Deal more damage for less dice
- And/or make better use of card effects and unit abilities

This can be difficult to grok for people coming from other card games, because Ashes doesn't have an economic engine the way other dueling card games typically do (so building or disrupting an economy is much less a thing in this game). Both players have exactly 10 dice to spend, card draw is often a niche effect instead of being game-defining (due to non-random first rounds, and not

being able to play extra cards because you've run out of dice), and with Ready Spells that summon units board presence is easy to guarantee. As a result, it's pretty common for new players to be good at building or piloting a deck to achieve a specific win condition, but to struggle when their opponent successfully disrupts their plans.

It's important to keep these goals in mind, though, because juggling the concern of dealing more damage for less dice and making better use of effects/abilities directly informs your decisions both during deck construction and during the game.

If that seems frustratingly abstract, it's because it's a very difficult topic to illustrate outside of specific examples. For now, it's best to keep in mind that killing your opponent's units is often a secondary consideration (because it doesn't advance your win condition; only damaging the Phoenixborn will do that). However, if you can kill your opponent's units for less dice than they spent on them—or do so before they are able to compound their investment across multiple rounds—then that *does* advance your win condition, because the gain in efficiency typically leads to long-term advantage.

When and what should I attack?

So much about Ashes is about sequencing and timing, and one of the biggest head-aches for new players is figuring out when and what they should attack. This choice is complex, situational, and very difficult to simplify into generic principles. A lot of really good players just have a good "feel" for it, and probably can't describe exactly *why* they make the choices they do, outside of describing their reasoning in specific situations.

However, this choice usually boils down to choosing between actively pursuing your deck's win condition vs. disrupting your opponent's deck by dealing more damage with less dice.

As an example, consider the Aradel vs. Maeoni precon example. The Maeoni player summons a Silver Snake, which costs her two dice and comes into play with no attack. The Aradel player now has a dilemma: they can try to destroy the Snake, but thanks to its 4 health it will likely cost them at least 3 dice (1 for Aradel's Water Blast ability to deal 2 damage; 2 for a couple 1 attack units); and quite possibly more, because the Maeoni player can disrupt their plans (by guarding with their Phoenixborn or Gilder; killing units before they can attack with the ping damage from Summon Gilder or the Natural dice power; etc.). That being the case, an alternative would be to avoid spending resources on the Snake early and try to sneak some damage past or kill the Gilder while establishing a board presence in hopes of dealing with the Snake once the Maeoni player has sunk more dice into buffing it up. After all, if a Mist Spirit attacks in two rounds, then it gets you two damage for one die instead of one damage for one die.

As ever, sequencing here will be key: if the Aradel player can wait until the Snake has 2-3 counters, then drop a Massive Growth on a Blue Jaguar and hit the Snake directly without a Gilder getting in the way, it's history (and they've spent 4 dice vs. the Maeoni player potentially spending 4-5 at the high end, depending on how they got the counters on). If the Snake gets big enough, though, a Massive Growth unit might just get killed instantly with Maeoni's Command Strike ability. The key

point is that unless you're able to kill a unit without spending more dice than your opponent spent to play it (or has since invested in improving it), you might want to take your licks from it and focus on pursuing your core strategy (in Aradel's case, swinging around the edges of her opponent's battlefield with a lot of small units).

Compound the value of your dice

It may seem strange to use spells or attacks to remove your opponent's units if they can just play them again in the next round, but there's a very simple reason you want your units to survive and your opponents' to get destroyed: whenever a unit survives to attack or counter in a subsequent round, the controller of that unit has compounded the value of their dice investment. For instance, if you play a Hammer Knight and attack with it, you've dealt 3-4 damage for three dice (depending on whether it deals damage with its ability). If it survives until the next round to attack again, you've dealt 6-8 damage for three dice.

This is something that you have to factor into your decisions over what and when to attack. If you expect your opponent to kill your unit before the next round no matter what, it might be worth using it to try and deal damage to their Phoenixborn instead of trying to force the damage onto a unit (since only damage on the Phoenixborn ultimately matters). Alternately, you might have a free shot at their Phoenixborn (e.g. if all their stuff is exhausted), but attack a unit instead to ensure that they cannot compound the value of the unit in the next round. This is highly situational and something you'll need to get a feel for through actual play, but balancing the conflicting concerns of keeping your units alive to fight multiple rounds, killing your opponent's units before they can act twice, and actually dealing damage to their Phoenixborn is a key skill for winning in Ashes Reborn.

Building decks

Deck-building in Ashes can be daunting, because you can include literally any card in any deck as long as you include the dice to play them (aside from Phoenixborn uniques). And how do you decide how many dice to use? Aaaaaaargh…*head explodes*.

That said, getting into deck construction is actually really easy. Here's how:

1. Play at least one game with every preconstructed deck in the Master Set
2. Pick your favorite deck, and ask yourself: which cards were useless or underperforming when I played this deck? Which cards from the other decks would have allowed me to win (or win more)?
3. Swap the bad cards out and the good cards in, and play again. As you continue to test the deck, you can tweak the number of cards and maybe add or remove dice. You'll be surprised how quickly you get a feel for what this deck does well, and what kinds of cards it needs to do it better.

But who am I kidding? No one wants to do the hard work of learning through experience! So here's some quick tips that guide more experienced players as they build decks.

Your spellboard should be odd

If you include **one** copy of a spellboard card, it means you plan to include it in your First Five (could mean you always include it, or you sometimes include it based on what you expect your opponent to be running).

If you include **three** copies of a spellboard card, it means that you want to draw into it (whether or not you plan to First Five it).

If you include **two** copies of a spellboard card, it means that you're virtually guaranteed to meditate one of them off the top of your deck when you most need it, and in many games you'll never see it before the third or fourth round when it doesn't do you a lick of good.

Ready spells are costed on the assumption that you will get value on them across multiple rounds, so rather than wasting a slot on a second copy of a Ready Spell, you would be better off including an Action Spell or Ally that will make a difference regardless of when you draw it.

Keep your spellboard odd.

The meaning behind the numbers for non-spellboard cards

For cards that *aren't* Ready Spells, you can include one, two, or three copies as you like. Here's what those numbers mean:

Like Ready Spells, **one** copy of a card means you plan to First Five it. It's very common for decks to build around a standard First Three or First Four and have 1-2 flex cards. For instance, if I'm running Ceremonial dice, I might include one copy of Choke on the off chance that I run across a Phoenixborn whose ability is going to cause me grief or is repeatable (like Odette Diamondcrest, Coal Roarkwin, or Rimea Careworn). I might also include one copy of Fester if I see a dice spread that likely means I'll be facing threats that cost three dice (like Natural plus Divine). I probably will never First Five both of those cards in the same game, but they're there when I need them.

Two copies of a card means that you want to see it at least once every couple games, and you don't want to break down in tears if you meditate it off the top of your deck. For me, these are often cards with high impact but that might be situational. For instance, if I'm using Divine dice I might include two copies of Meteor because that really wrecks decks that rely on lots of small units, but it's not something I necessarily want to play more than once per game.

Three copies of a card means that you want to see at least one copy every single game, and you wouldn't mind seeing it more frequently. These are typically the cards that are central to your strategy, and having three copies both means that you're more likely to draw into them and that if you meditate one off the top of your deck you can feel confident that you are still likely to find another copy later.

Start with your First Five

If you're having trouble coming up with a deck, start with your First Five. What are five cards that you strongly want to play together (or what are five cards with really interesting synergy)? What is the win condition those cards will push you toward? Once you know those two things, fleshing out your deck with cards that support that win condition or thwart decks that you think your deck will have trouble against is a lot easier.

I recommend looking for cards that work well together in your First Five. (An alternative is to look for cards that are highly efficient, but those are often harder to spot for a new player.) For instance, maybe you really love the idea of Secret Door. So in that case, you're going to need units with high attack and a life value of 1. Frost Fang, Summon Shadow Hound, Shadow Guard, and Stormwind Sniper all fulfill that requirement. Pick your favorite and look for which cards you'll need to keep them alive, recur them, or grow them into even worse threats before using Secret Door.

(You may have noticed that these are the two ways decks commonly win; often times starting with what you want to do—"I want to deal more damage for less dice" or "I want my cards to do something cool that's more than the sum of their parts"—is a good way to focus your deck down and reduce the number of cards you need to worry about trying to include.)

Another perfectly valid choice would be to pick a Phoenixborn you really like, and then look for cards that compliment them. For instance, Echo Greystorm has a mid-size battlefield and manipulates exhaustion, clogging your opponent's battlefield. What cards might help him to do that even better? What cards can capitalize on units being temporarily exhausted?

With a tentative First Five in hand, your next step is usually to count up how many dice you'll need to play those cards. More than 10? You might want to swap a higher cost card out for something lower cost. Significantly less than 10? You probably want to do the opposite. Part of dealing more damage for less dice includes spending all of your dice every round. (Which isn't to say you can't start a First Five that only uses 8 dice or similar, as long as spending dice powers will directly help your deck. Alternately, if you include card draw in your deck, it might make sense to start with cards that cost fewer dice so that you can afford whatever you draw into.)

Once you have a First Five that costs close to 10 dice, you should take it for a spin! Don't worry about dealing with potential opponent's decks too early; worry about crafting a solid starting place for your own deck. It's usually a lot easier to see where your deck is lacking after you've played a game or two with it, and as you accumulate more experience you'll get a lot better at pre-emptively spotting decks' weak points.

Picking your dice

There are two main things you need to worry about when choosing how many dice of each type to include in your deck:

1. How many and what types of dice do you need to activate your spellboard cards?
2. What is the ratio of dice costs in your deck? (This gives you a rough sense for your likely cost distribution in average draws.)

For instance, if you are a Maeoni player with a slightly-modified deck who is starting out with Summon Silver Snake, Summon Gilder, and Summon Frostback Bear you will need four Natural dice for your first round (one for the Snake, one for Gilder, and two for Frostback Bear). However, on subsequent rounds you will probably only need two (one for Gilder, and one for the Frostback Bear) because Silver Snakes are hard to kill. That means that even if your deck has more Natural cards than other colors, you might not need more than 4-5 Natural dice, since most cards will only require a single Natural cost to play. On the other hand, if you're also running three copies of Frost Fang and Molten Gold, you might want to have 6 Natural dice so that you can be sure you can cast two cards that require 2 Natural dice each.

You can get away with quite a lot fewer dice in a single color in Reborn than you might expect, as long as you can afford the hands of cards you're likely to draw. Choosing dice is more of an art than a science, though, so to some extent you should just pick what feels right and then see if it works in an actual game.

Power faces are discard costs

One thing that new players might be surprised about is that even if every cost for a particular dice type in your deck is a power face, you still don't need any more dice than it takes to play a typical draw of those cards.

This is because you should always assume that power costs require meditation. While you can sometimes lean more heavily into a dice type whose dice power you want to be able to play more often, you should generally just assume that any card with a power face on it has a hidden discard cost, as well.

If a predominance of the cards in your deck are using power symbols, then you might want to give some thought to dice fixing cards like Call Upon The Realms, Magic Syphon, Hidden Power, or Dark Reaping so that you don't kill yourself with fatigue damage.

Where to go from here

Play the game. Seriously, it’s the single best way to improve. Not comfortable with deck construction? Play a few preconstructed matches, and you’ll pretty quickly start to recognize what works and what doesn’t in those decks (and have some ideas about how you could do it better). Having trouble making constructed decks that function the way you think they should, or choosing how many and which type of dice to include? Play a couple games with it, and watch for moments where you’re wishing you had a different dice spread or card in hand.

If you’re having trouble finding partners, I highly recommend checking out the Ashes Community Discord for matchmaking on Tabletop Simulator or Ashteki. At the time of this writing, there is a very active Friday virtual get-together every week called First Five Fridays that’s explicitly targeted at teaching new players the game, preconstructed matches, and casual constructed. Several online tournaments have been running regularly, as well (which is a *great* way to gain experience fast; even if you lose games initially, you’ll have a chance to experience directly how more experienced players build decks and pilot them, which will teach you far quicker than any sage advice I can try to dish out).

I agree: playing with strangers is scary. But Ashes is one of the most uniquely friendly communities I’ve ever participated in. I have literally never had a bad experience playing this game, even when I’m getting stomped into the ground. It’s honestly a little weird.

In any case, I hope some of these ideas help you with playing or constructing decks! Welcome to Ashes Reborn!

Revision #2
Created 2023-01-09 20:20:38 UTC by Skaak
Updated 2023-06-21 20:28:18 UTC by Skaak