# Archetypal strategies in Ashes: Reborn

Originally published at **https://beckism.com/2021/04/archetypal-strategies-in-ashes-reborn/** on **April 8, 2021**; archived Jan. 9, 2023.

*Some folks on the Ashes Community Discord (join here) were recently talking about how the game needs its own terminology to describe common deck archetypes. I love developing terminology. You can do the math. (I'd have posted this on Ashes.live, but I haven't re-implemented the posts functionality…so here we are.)*

*Please note that this article assumes familiarity with Ashes cards and gameplay. If you are new to the game, you should probably start with the Watch It Played video or similar.*

# Conceptualizing deck strategies in Ashes Reborn

A lot of people like to use terms like "burn", "mill", and "swing" to describe decks in Ashes, but because of Ashes' unique structure these terms often fail to capture what actually makes a given Ashes deck unique.

Let's take a look at some of the core strategies that make up Ashes decks, and how they map onto the common, Magic: the Gathering-based terminology that most people use to describe archetypes!

# What's your win condition?

The most common question raised when a user posts a deck for feedback is "What's your win con?" This is kind of a misleading question in Ashes, because there's only one actual win condition: dealing lethal damage to your opponent's Phoenixborn.

What is *meant* by this question is "what is your primary source of damage?", and in Ashes there are three broad categories:

1. **Attack damage** (this comes in several flavors, which we'll explore in a bit)
2. **Direct damage** from spells and abilities (commonly referred to as "burn")
3. **Fatigue damage** dealt at the top of the round when they have to draw and have no cards in their deck (commonly referred to as "mill" damage, after an archetype in Magic that used a card called Millstone to discard cards from the opponent's deck)

Thanks to the widespread use of terms like "burn" and "mill", players often assume that the sources of damage above are deck archetypes. There's certainly nothing wrong with trying to do something quirky like make a deck that deals the vast majority of its damage directly through spells and abilities, of course, but it is far more common for decks in Ashes to rely on multiple sources of damage.

This is because in Ashes, the battlefield is omnipresent.

# How do you manage the battlefield?

In many competitive card battle games, you have two basic resources: whatever you spend to play cards, and the cards themselves. One or both typically relies on luck of the draw, which means in those games, you can attack the units your opponent plays, or discard those units from their hand, or discard/destroy the resources they use to summon those units, even if you don't really want to play units yourself. In Ashes, both players always have access to 10 dice per round, and thanks to the First Five and Ready Spells that summon units you can guarantee permanent access to battlefield presence.

It's still possible to mess with your opponent—you can force them to discard cards, spin down their dice, exhaust their spellboard cards, etc.—but if they want to play units, there's not really a lot you can do to fully stop that. And since units are an easy source of damage (through attacking) and simultaneously a strong defense (through blocking), they most likely *will* be playing units.

This means that after figuring out what your primary source of damage is, you need to figure out how you're going to manage the battlefield. Because it takes two people to battle, there are two sides to this question. For your own battlefield you can:

- **Refill:** play units, then when they die play them again (e.g. using a Ready Spell or Ceremonial dice power recursion). This strategy can range from playing a single copy of a spellbook so that you always have one copy of a particular conjuration each round, to running multiple copies so that you can ramp up production in later rounds.
- **Refresh:** there are two ways to refresh your battlefield: you can play cards that remove exhaustion from your units (allowing a single threat to act twice in a round), or play cards that *destroy* your units so that you can replace them with something else. It might seem a little weird to group these seemingly disparate actions into a single strategy, but they boil down to the same thing: you spend some resources to leverage the same battlefield slot more than once in a round.
- **Recover:** sink more resources into units that are difficult to kill in hopes of building up advantage when they survive to the next round. Units meant to recover are often the

"knights" (a "knight" in Ashes is a unit that costs one power die, one class die, and one basic die; referred to as knights because a lot of them are actual knights: Hammer Knight, Celestial Knight, Holy Knight, etc.), or units paired with strong defensive alterations like Root Armor.

And the main things you can do to your opponent's battlefield are:

- **Clear:** kill their stuff. Area of effect (AOE) spells like Nature's Wrath and Meteor can wipe entire boards. Units with the Alert skill can kill multiple attackers each round.
- **Clog:** why play more units when you can just clog up your opponent's battlefield? The most common clog strategy relies on exhausting your opponent's units (Kneel, Blood Chains, etc.), although chump blocking attackers with units that are much cheaper is arguably a clogging strategy, as well.

How you want to manage the battlefield influences what cards you'll want to include in your deck, and it is the combination of primary damage source and battlefield management strategies that defines the various archetypes you're most likely to run across in Ashes. However, before we can get into that we need to break down "damage from attacking", because there are several primary ways to deal attack damage.

# What's your plan of attack?

There are several flavors of attack damage that you can use for your win con:

- **Swing around** (often referred to as "swinging wide"): if you have more unexhausted units than your opponent, they can't block them all. Wide strategies typically focus on spamming out large numbers of low cost units, but can also be seen in smaller battlefields (as long as you have a consistent way to clog or clear your opponent's units such that you shrink their effective battlefield value smaller than yours).
- **Swing through:** by leveraging units that can swing multiple times (either multiple times per round because they don't exhaust, or due to refresh effects; or that survive more than one round), you can build up an incremental advantage over your opponent until they die by a thousand cuts or you are able to push through lethal damage in a chunk (often at the top of a round). A very common inclusion for swinging through strategies are cards that have Overkill like Cerasaurus Mount or Power Through (which deals direct damage when you kill an opponent's unit; this sort of complementary damage accelerant is a great example of how to supplement your main plan of attack).
- **Swing past:** who cares how many units your opponent has if none of them are allowed to block yours because you have an ability that disallows blocking? Most folks refer to this as "bypass".
- **Stall:** sometimes you don't want to swing at all! If your deck has a longer-term strategy, you may need units that can efficiently delay or destroy your opponent's threats (often

with a secondary benefit, like discarding cards from their deck on death). This isn't a win con, per se, but it's often a legitimate strategy for the first round or two as you try to draw into the cards your deck needs to stabilize. As a secondary strategy, it's also an important way to shore up other attack strategies (e.g. decks that swing through or swing past often need to protect key units using Unit Guards or healing, both of which are stalling strategies).

People often like to refer to "swinging wide" vs. "swinging tall" (lots of small units vs. one really big unit), but I personally find those less useful categories because they don't really capture how you plan to deal damage (e.g. a tall strategy could be a One Punch deck where you try to deal lethal damage in a single, unblockable chunk or it could be focused on swinging through medium sized chunks of damage consistently by killing off their battlefield; and which strategy you are using influences which other cards you are going to need much more than whether the deck is "tall," "wide," or somewhere in between).

# When do you want to win?

**Please note:** this topic is arguably related to higher-level deck-building, because it's more about responding to potential threats in your meta rather than crafting a cohesive strategy for your own deck. However, even if you don't worry about it when initially building a deck, you'll probably want to have some familiarity with the topic when it comes time to revise your deck after playing it.

A final component to consider when evaluating archetypal strategies in Ashes is *when* your deck aims to win. This is a tricky topic, however, because it can shift depending on match-up, which means that it usually influences your secondary sources of damage rather than your primary win condition. This is something you consider during deck-building, but decide at the table.

Cards can either accelerate or decelerate the end game, depending on whether they increase or decrease a Phoenixborn's effective life total. Generally speaking, you want to accelerate the end game for your opponent, and decelerate the end game for yourself (note: this means your Phoenixborn's base life total is a consideration! E.g. a low life Phoenixborn might need to win quickly, or have support for decelerating their end game):

- **Accelerate:** there are two ways you can accelerate the end game: deal direct damage to your opponent's Phoenixborn, or discard cards from their deck (either directly, or by doing something like spinning down their dice so they have to meditate). Fatigue damage is unavoidable, and if they are suffering fatigue damage it means their available resources are drastically constrained compared to a normal turn, both of which are good for you. A lot of people ignore "mill" damage because they are playing a "swing" deck, but when swing decks stall out on battlefield fatigue damage can be a very effective closer.
- **Decelerate:** conversely, you can decelerate the game for yourself by healing your Phoenixborn or using dice fixing (to prevent needing to discard cards when meditating).

For instance, if you are trying to **swing through** and you come up against an opponent that is *also* swinging through, how will you ensure you come out ahead? Depending on what dice types you are

running, you could **accelerate** their end game through **direct damage** or units that have abilities that discard from their deck, or **decelerate** the game for yourself by including healing or dice fixing.

One last thing that's important to consider when thinking about when you want to win: accelerating and decelerating the end game are relative between you and your opponent and *not* necessarily tied to the overall length of the game! If you expect that you'll need to deal with decks that **stall** you on battlefield and deal **direct damage**, for instance, you might want to include tools to **decelerate** your end game through healing to ensure that you survive long enough to push damage through on the battlefield (even though your deck otherwise tries to aggressively **swing past** lethal damage by the third or fourth round).

# What's your (arche)type?

Ashes is an unusual game. The First Five rule, coupled with the ability to meditate spellboard cards, means that you can start with one strategy, then pivot into another or include multiple potential strategies for different expected opponents.

However, decks still do tend to fall into natural archetypes because if you generalize your deck too much you risk being unable to push damage through quickly enough.

Additionally, many of the best units in Ashes serve multiple purposes because they both serve as a threat (or defense) on the battlefield, and have an ability that affects the game in a different way (e.g. direct damage, discarding cards from deck to accelerate the end game and fatigue damage, etc.).

Historically, Ashes players have reused a lot of terminology from Magic: the Gathering. Here is how those terms map to the strategies above:

- **Swing:** swing decks typically **clear** their opponent's battlefield by **refilling** or **replacing** attackers (and often by packing removal spells). They usually **swing around** or **swing through**, depending on the Phoenixborn (e.g. Aradel is more likely to swing around; Odette is more likely to swing through). The timing for winning with these decks varies a lot; a well-constructed swing deck vs. a deck without sufficient battlefield support can win as early as the top of the second round. When two well-matched swing decks face one another, though, the game can go quite long, with both players jockeying for position.
- **Bypass:** while it is possible to have a bypass swing deck (typically a deck that tries to **swing through** in conjunction with something like Frostback Bear that **swings past**), pure bypass decks tend to focus on creating a single huge threat that can't be blocked, and dealing all of their damage in a couple chunks. The quintessential example is Silver Snakes with Hypnotize (which **clears** and **stalls** until the Snake is large enough to **swing past**). These decks tend to try to close the game out within the third or fourth round, although depending on luck and matchup they can end things faster or grind on longer.

- **Burn:** pure burn decks are not really a thing in Ashes Reborn, to the best of my knowledge. Burn is typically used to **accelerate** and close out games regardless of archetype. Typically, burn decks attempt to **stall**, often with a mixture of **clog** and **clear** through defensive units and spells, then win by playing (and possibly recurring) **direct damage**.
- **Mill:** when most players mention “mill” what they mean are decks that **stall** and use a combination of **clear** and **clogging** to manage their opponent’s attacking threats while simultaneously leaning heavily on effects that accelerate fatigue damage and the end game (this typically involves directly discarding cards from the opponent’s deck, spinning down their dice so they are forced to meditate cards off their deck themselves, or both). It is also entirely possible to leverage “mill” cards within a deck that is focused on **swinging through**, though; in the aforementioned longer games between two well-balanced swing decks, fatigue damage is often a deciding factor so milling serves to **accelerate** the end game.
- **Control:** this isn’t a distinct archetype in Ashes, per se; instead control cards are the ones that mess with your opponent’s plan. Using the above terminology, spells that focus on **clearing**, **clogging**, or **stalling** are typically control cards. A control deck is one that usually tries to gain incremental advantages over an opponent to win the long game (and as such is often conflated with mill decks, although it’s a perfectly valid strategy for decks that want to **swing through**, as well). Something that players sometimes miss is that the **recover** strategy is often a control strategy (because you have to manage your opponent’s threats to ensure your threats are able to gain repeat value round-to-round).

One last distinction that can be useful when thinking about decks is whether they are **aggressive** or **defensive**. An aggressive deck will try to push as much damage through as fast as possible, whereas a defensive deck will try to accrue incremental advantages over a longer game. Sometimes having defensive tools in an otherwise aggressive deck (or vice versa) is an important method for managing different matchups (although knowing when that’s necessary is something you’ll gain through play experience).

# But what about the combos?!

You may have noticed that a particular archetype from other card games is not present above: the combo deck.

Never fear! Building around a specific combination of cards is a time-honored tradition in Ashes (even if many of these decks end up lovingly consigned to the “jank” category of fun concepts that don’t work consistently enough to be competitive). There are two types of combos in Ashes:

- **Explosive:** this is what people typically think of as “combos” when coming from other card games. It’s a specific combination of cards that offers sudden, high value with considerable setup. You will rarely see these in competitive Ashes because they are very easy to disrupt if your opponent knows what to expect (you typically have to play all the component pieces across several turns or else luck into the right cards in hand at the right

time, giving your opponent lots of time to shut the combo down or making it difficult to execute the combo after the first turn).
- **Engine:** this is far and away the most common type of combo in Ashes, and is typically what you should try to build your deck around if you love combos. A value engine is a combination of cards that give repeated long-term value.

An example of an **explosive combo** is Mind Fog Owl (2 attack unit which can't be blocked unless all other attacking units are blocked), Shadow Hound (3 attack, 1 life), Accelerate (grants 2 extra side actions), Secret Door (makes 1 life unit unblockable for a side action), and Exhortation (adds two unit's attack values for a side action). This pushes through 10 unblockable damage, but is very easy to disrupt (your opponent could kill either unit before the combo went off, or make you discard a card from hand, or exhaust one of the two Ready Spells necessary to summon your units, etc.).

An example of a **combo engine** would be Hunt Master (which spends a status token to buff other units for the turn) and Time Hopper (which places a status token on another unit when it comes into play). This offers repeatable value that compounds the longer the game goes (and the longer the Hunt Master survives), which is much easier to set up and protect.

If you like building around a particular set of card interactions, you'll want to ask yourself, "What strategies will allow this combo to help me win?" Combos, particularly **combo engines**, often require more time to stabilize and start to generate value so you might want to consider tools for **stalling** or **clogging** to shut down your opponent's bigger threats. Alternatively, it can be very easy when building out an **explosive combo** to go overboard and end up with a deck that doesn't do anything *except* execute the combo (which often means you are guaranteed to lose once your opponent knows what to expect). In that case you'll want to be sure to include some cards that advance one of the win conditions outlined above, or else use the combo only against people who you believe aren't expecting it, or are not building to prevent it.

# So how do you use these ideas?

Personally, I find these concepts most useful for evaluating how one of my own decks is likely to perform, because once I identify my primary strategy it becomes a lot easier to determine whether cards are supporting that strategy or not. It can also make comparing cards easier, because while I might have two cards that support my primary win condition, if one of them *also* supports my secondary goals then that's probably the more valuable card for this deck.

For instance, if I'm building a Maeoni deck and I know I want to use Grave Knight, then I already know that I am probably aiming to **swing through** my opponent's units (because that's one of the things that Grave Knight does best; it forces your opponent into blocking when they don't want to, and tosses some **direct damage** over the top). I also know that Grave Knight's relatively low health (for a knight) means that it will probably die every round. That means I'm going to need

cards that **refill** my battlefield, and since I'm already trying to force my opponent into unfavorable trades I likely am looking at spells and units that aim to **clear** my opponent's stuff.

That jives fairly well with Maeoni, because her ability is a built-in clearing option and her small battlefield means that unless I'm very confident that I'll be able to push through lethal damage quickly, a **clogging** strategy on my part could badly misfire if my opponent's units have a chance to **recover**. I'll likely need some way to push through extra damage just in case my battlefield gets **stalled**, as well, so a bit of **direct damage** wouldn't be out of place (this also compliments Overkill on the Grave Knight, which is a source of direct damage that only functions if I am swinging through).

With those broad strokes out of the way, I have a basis for evaluating other cards to include, which can help lead to a more cohesive, functional deck.

Of course, just having cards that support a central strategy isn't enough, but it's often the first big step toward building a competitive deck. Once you have a central strategy, you can start evaluating cards based on their value compared to their cost, decide if you need to lean towards higher damage threats or spread the damage out, decide whether your utility spells should protect your units or threaten your opponent's units, etc.

If you have a particular meta deck that has been plaguing you, evaluating what strategy it is using can also help when coming up with a counter (e.g. they like to stall and clog? You could look into refreshing your battlefield and perhaps try a strategy that swings past).

# Narrow your options

Building decks in Ashes can be daunting, because there are so many possible cards you can include. By thinking about the core strategy behind your deck, you can narrow down the dice types and cards that will be most useful while simultaneously crafting a deck that is more focused and thus more likely to win. Having a feeling for the various strategies can also help evaluate your deck's strengths and weaknesses before bringing it to the table.

Ultimately, however, no amount of thinking about a deck can replace putting it to the test in an actual game. These strategies provide a starting point, but finding the right balance of cards for you requires seeing what works and what doesn't in an actual match. Particularly when it comes to choosing how many of each card to include or how heavily you need to lean into a particular strategy, nothing beats hands-on experience. I highly recommend checking out the Ashes community online if you lack a regular local play partner (the Ashes community in general is absurdly welcoming, regardless of your skill level). You can find players on Discord, or asynchronously through Reddit, BoardGameGeek, and Facebook.

Most importantly, though: have fun!

# Summary

This article ended up being a lot longer than I anticipated. **tl;dr:**

# Primary sources of damage

- **Attack damage** (most prevalent win condition)
  - **Swing around** (go wide around blockers)
  - **Swing through** (efficiently destroy blockers, then hit face)
  - **Swing past** (bypass blockers)
  - **Stall** (defend to buy time so you can set up other strategies)

- **Direct damage** (“burn”; typically a secondary source of damage)
- **Fatigue damage** (“mill”; typically a secondary source of damage)

# Battlefield management

Your battlefield:

- **Refill** (just keep pushing out expendable units from spellboard and/or recursion)
- **Refresh** (unexhaust or destroy own units to reuse battlefield slots)
- **Recover** (incremental gains from units that survive more than 1 round)

Your opponent’s battlefield:

- **Clear** (kill their stuff)
- **Clog** (exhaust their stuff)

# Shifting the end game

- **Accelerate** (deal damage to opponent, or discard cards from their deck)
- **Decelerate** (heal damage from yourself, or fix dice instead of meditating)

# Combos

- **Explosive** (sudden, high value; very easy to disrupt)
- **Engine** (ongoing, repeat value from a specific card interaction)

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Revision #2
Created 2023-01-09 20:25:38 UTC by Skaak
Updated 2024-08-20 02:18:51 UTC by Skaak