

Shuffle Busted: A Competitive Ashes Primer

Originally published at <https://theshufflebus.com/shuffle-busted-a-competitive-ashes-primer/> by **ShuffleBusNeil**; archived Jan. 9, 2023.

(Maintainer's note: several of the cards referenced in this article have undergone errata changes since the initial writing, but the images displayed reflect the current printing. If something in the article doesn't make sense, it might be due to the article referring to the older version of the card.

Cards that have been changed can be found [here](#).)

A Phoenix Rises Again

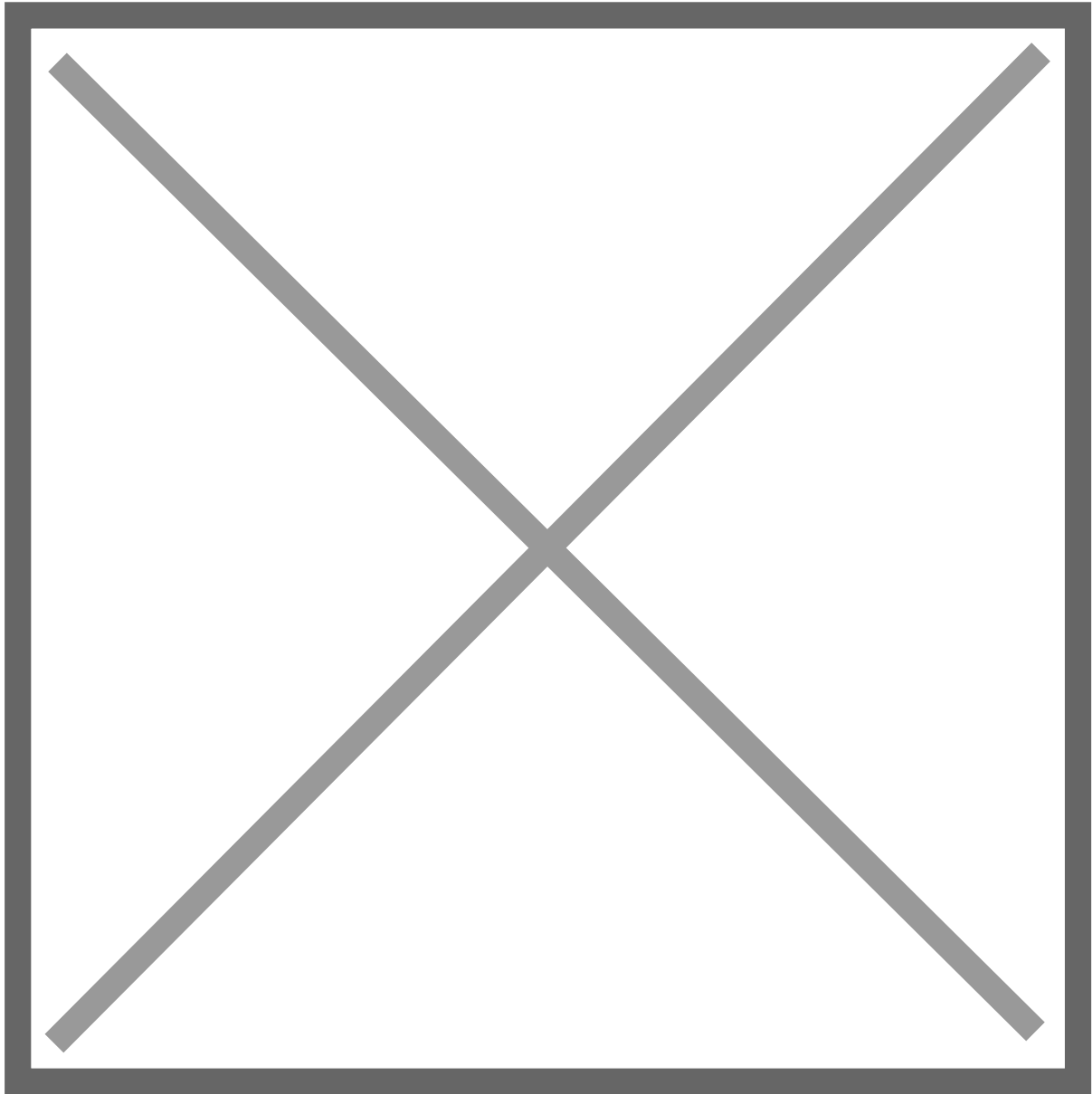
After 1,000 years of waiting the rebirth of the Phoenix is upon. Back in 2015 Plaid Hat Games produced the Ashes: Rise of the Phoenixborn expandable game system. Then, in 2019, the game went out of print after 16 expansions. This isn't a bad run for a game of this type, but if you're reading this you know in the year 2021 the firebird has come out of its hole and didn't see a shadow so we are getting the shiny, new, and rebooted Ashes:Reborn. This primer is to help you get into competitive Ashes Reborn play.

A Brand New Game

If you are an original ashes player you will see some fundamental changes to the rules and many drastically different wordings on your favorite cards. Most of the new iterations have wildly different effects than the original printings. But don't be discouraged, all of the changes to the cards and rules are positive. The game is quicker, less grindy, and overall more fun. This might sound like an opinion from someone that has played less than 10 games of the original. Well it is. But I'm also right, we'll go into more detail later. An extra bonus for the owners of the original printing is the upgrade kit for Reborn that you can purchase to just replace the things that changed and you can still use most of the set you already have. So go out and buy or preorder it (We are not a sponsor and do not benefit from your purchase).

Competitive Ashes?

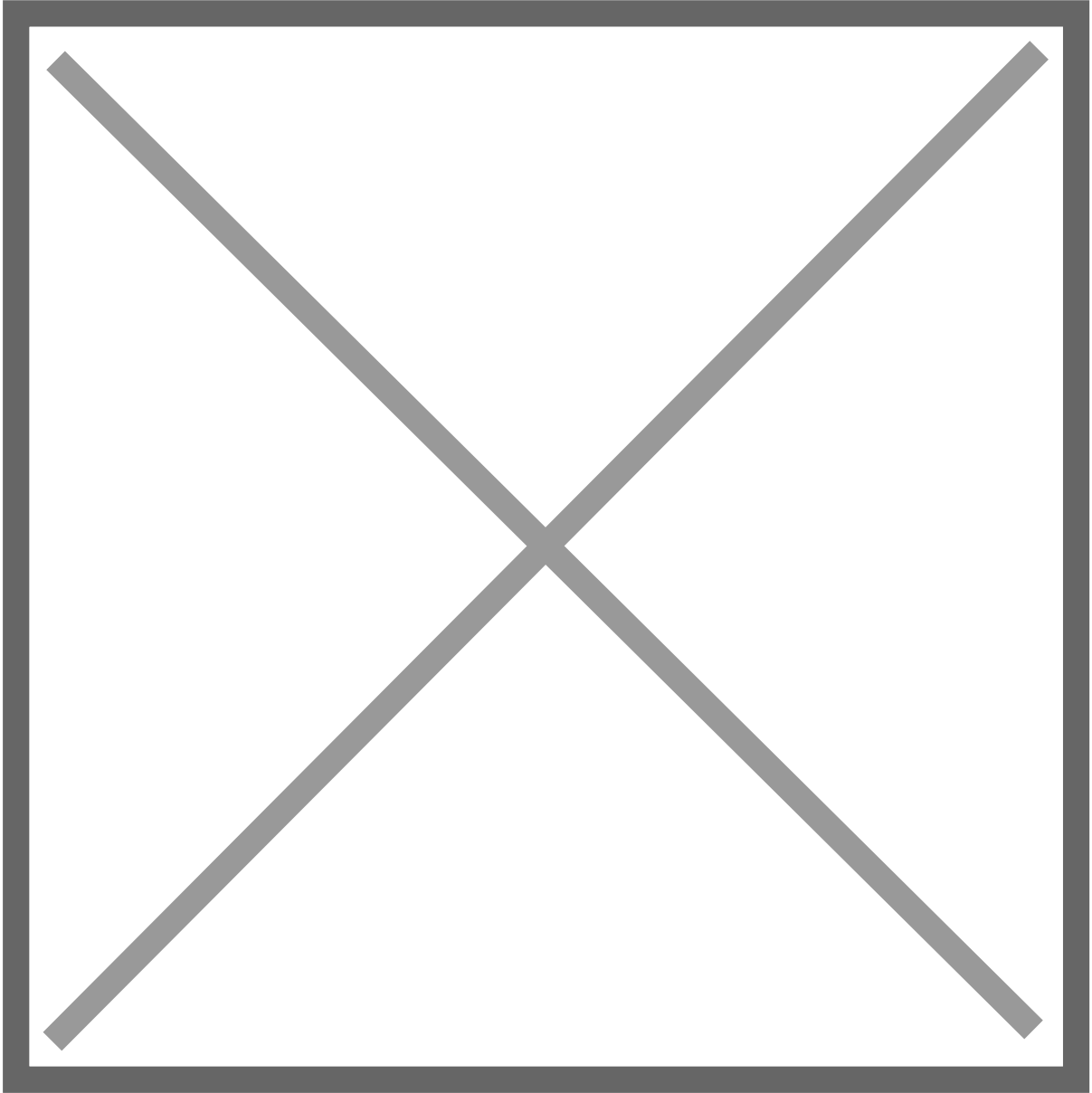
This article is assuming you want some insight into competitive Ashes: Reborn. For the last 6 months the Shuffle Bus has been driving through Ashes country and I have learned a lot. Ashes has a lot of differences from the average competitive card game when it comes to general theory. The biggest difference I see is that resources and resource management are almost the polar opposite of how most dueling card games function.



Dice

In Ashes both players begin their turn with all 10 dice available; never more, never less. This alters or down-right removes some staple strategies from other games. “Ramp” decks that try to amass more or faster resources and go over the top of their opponent don’t exist because I can’t get more than you fast or slow. Likewise, resource denial strategies that stunt growth or remove existing resources your opponent uses to play their cards could only exist if there were effects in the game that removed dice. We used to have both dice recursion for ramp and dice removal in Ashes 1.0

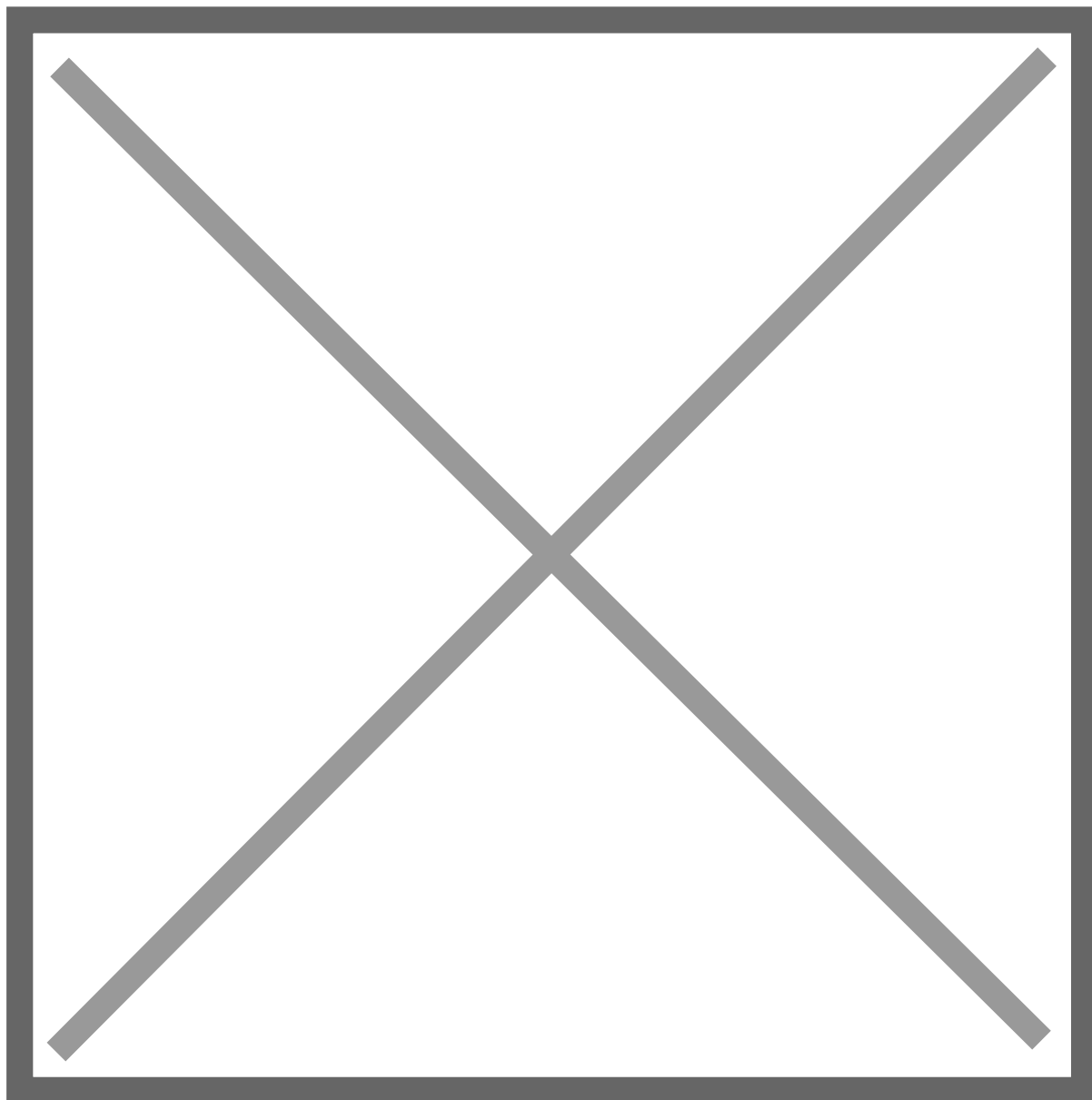
but they were too powerful or un-fun and have been removed from the Reborn pool. I don't think the lack of these effects is inherently good or bad, it's just how the game plays now and Reborn is great (see previous paragraph). We'll talk about the archetypes the constant dice affects differently later.



Cards

The other resource in the game is cards. Like most games card advantage is a good thing. But there are a few caveats to that statement. Because both players draw to a full hand of 5 every round, drawing more cards than your opponent isn't strictly good. It is usually good, but only when you can actually deploy the important threats and answers from your hand. If we were playing Magic and I drew more cards than you, I would win a majority of the time because I am generating a big differential in resources. But if I draw more than you in Ashes and at the end of the round you just refill to 5 while I only draw 1 the differential is gone. So if you can draw and play more cards

than your opponent you will probably win. The other consideration to take into account regarding drawing is the number of cards left in your pile. It is very possible to deck yourself in a game with a 30 card pile and you draw 5 every round. For the most part this is not something I take into account when deciding to make a play, draw a card, or mill a card off the pile. Obviously don't do it if it will kill you, but mostly the games seem to be fast enough you should take advantage of the size of your pile as a resource.



Life and Deck Size

The last 2 resources I try to take advantage of in every game of Ashes are my life total and pile size. Like I just said, any cards you can use for some advantage from your pile you should usually take advantage of. The most common example is the meditate side action, just mill yourself. Unless you know for a fact that a card in your hand or spell board is useless for the remainder of

the game, just mill yourself to meditate. You can use your Phoenixborn's life total in a similar fashion. Use your Phoenixborn's guard when you can every round unless it's going to kill you. The only point of life that really matters is the last one. Taking 3 is almost universally better than losing a card in play. I say almost because there will be times when you need to be careful playing around with numbers that can kill you. Use your best judgement based on specific game situations, like don't go to 3 when your opponent has access to double natural power.

Archetypes? What Archetypes?

Now that we are all experts on the basics of resources, I will use "resources" to describe general advantages in more than one category and call out the specific resources by name. Let's get back to those archetypes mentioned earlier. The dice situation also changes how different decks look in Ashes. Before Ashes if you asked me to define deck archetypes I would use a spectrum from aggro to control, leaving the middle to be an ill-defined pile of what I'll call midrange.

Aggro

An aggro deck being one that wins by pressuring an opponent's resources early and fast, in most cases specifically pressuring the life total of an opponent. It wins by getting threats in before an opponent because those threats are cheaper/more efficient or by playing threats that bypass normal defensive strategies. In Ashes you are never really in a position to go under your opponent. If you play an efficient small unit I can take my turn to just play a bigger one. Because of the dice parity there isn't going to be a situation where you can play something I can't match right out of the gate. In fact, in most cases, the more aggressive deck wants to take most of its aggressive actions later in the round to get the best attacks for its units. Aggro decks in ashes still use efficiency and still try to apply early pressure, but due to the nature of the dice they can just play the same size units the mid-range and control decks can and will. The aggro decks in Ashes do follow the second trait in that they trend towards the units that are difficult to defend. Starting with units that are difficult to block like Frostback Bear. Or by deploying many units because they are cheap or units that make additional units. When you end up with a wider board than your opponent they simply can't block them all. Lastly, direct damage to the opponent falls into this category.

Control

On the other end of the spectrum, I would have defined a control deck as one that wins through card advantage and inevitability. The Ashes control deck takes a much more traditional look. You beat your opponent by answering their threats with answers that gain you a resource advantage. And you win the game after having stabilized the board and gained enough advantage to go on the offensive. In other games this would usually look like killing your opponent's threats and putting them on a low number of cards in hand that you don't have access to answers for. This won't usually be the case in Ashes because as I described above, we will just both refill to 5 and usually both have ready spells to activate. So the Ashes control deck will gain a resource advantage more

often by playing answers that cost less dice than the thing they kill. Or by playing a threat that requires more dice or cards for the opponent to answer. We'll go into some specific examples later.

Mid-Range

So in general I've found that due to how the dice and card parity changes these archetypes almost every Ashes deck falls into the mid-range category where we trade resources from a common starting point every round and a very large advantage is rarely accumulated on either side. As an aside to this, what I would call a combo deck emerged among the community and in the Ashes International League. Through a combination of specific cards you are able to attack your opponent with a very large Shining Hydra and essentially kill them round one. This deck is aggressive but I still call it a combo deck not an aggro deck because it does one thing. If it gets to do its thing it will win, if it doesn't then it will lose. The powers that be have decided that is powerful enough that the cards Shining Hydra and Massive Growth have been pretty much universally restricted from a player's first 5 or from being played at all in the first round. I know this topic could be a whole separate article, and I did [here](#), but in general I think that deck doesn't do anything except force players to have 2 answers for a large unit in their pile and make them think about the decision to put them in their first 5. If you have strong feelings about it, please join our [discord](#) and @ me. I'd love to debate it.

Enough Theory Already!

So after all that long winded theory let's talk about some more specific examples of what decks and cards are actually good in the Reborn meta. Starting with the Phoenixborn, there are 16 and some of them are great and some, well, not so great. At a competitive level I would really only play (in no particular order) Brennen, Coal, Harold, Odette, Rin, and Xander. All of them have a very powerful ability and loyalty card. Again I'm sure this is a huge debate. Obviously there are a number that are still playable and can be competitive: Aradel, James, Jessa, Leo, Noah, and probably others based on what kind of meta you are going into, My issue with them is that either their ability or loyalty card is lackluster in some or all situations. And I'm not saying you can't play any of the others, just that they are low power level. If you go to First Five Friday and want to play your casual Vikki deck, you are a man or woman after my own heart. Poor Vikki really got the axe in Reborn and now can only be one of the greatest of all time and my future wife.

As far as cards go I'm going to be using my favorite metaphor for how good they are and how they function and it's almost on theme with the bus. There are 2 types of cards: cards that make gas and cards that need gas. Cards that make gas are cards that generate a resource advantage all by themselves. Obviously cards that need gas are the opposite, they do something when you spend resources. In general, cards that make gas are great at competitive levels in all games. Card's that need gas are good sometimes, but not always.

If you have been watching any of our content, or honestly just existing in the Reborn community, you know that River Skald is the greatest thing since sliced bread. This guy is a gas machine. Is he an efficient unit? Yes. Is he card advantage? Yes. Is he an answer to cards that cost way more than he does? Yes. Is he good in aggro? Yes. Is he good in control? Does he keep me warm at night? Yes. This card does it all and is my pick for number one best card in the Reborn pool. If you are playing Ashes you will see this card being played, preferably by you because otherwise you are likely getting blown out. He's not going to win you the game by himself, but he is going to generate a huge resource advantage regardless of what mode you play him in. Bonus points for anyone that plays him just to draw a card. Playing him and not killing something usually means you are crushing your opponent. He also has that added advantage of not really being the kind of card you can prepare for other than just make informed plays with the thought in mind that your opponent could have one. Because even if you have the Golden Veil ability it's probably better for you than if you didn't have the Veil, but you still got 2-for-1' by a 2 dice unit.

Ok, enough about our lord and master Skald, some other good cards you will consistently see in competitive play are the good summon books. All the books make gas by definition, always being an X-for-1 where X is the number of times you activate the book in a game. But because your opponent will likely also have books, you want your X-for-1's to beat theirs. The best ones in my opinion are (in no particular order):

Top Tier Summons

Summon Frostback Bear
Frostback Bear

A very efficient guy, 3 dice the first time, then 2 forever after. At 2 dice he's an insane rate.

Summon Emperor Lion
Emperor Lion

Maybe this is hubris because I don't know how many people are playing this besides myself, but recurrable 3/3 that plays Law of Domination has seemed very good to me. Less good against very wide, but still a lot of advantage for a book.

Summon Fallen
Fallen

I would write an entire article about my second favorite card in the game. 1/1s may seem little, but what if I make them by the bundle for 1 dice? Go ahead and read it if you haven't, it doesn't exhaust? IT DOESN'T EXHAUST.

Summon Gilder
Gilder

This one is less universally good because of its dual color cost, but if you are in the market for a bunch of Archornauts, unit guards, or status counters he does the trick on the cheap.

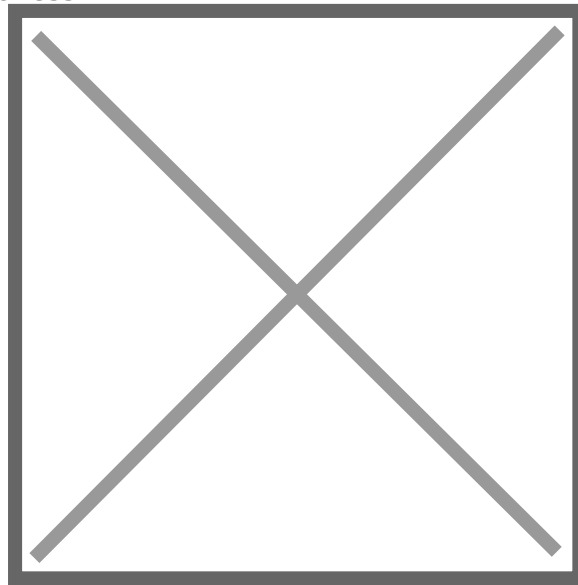
Summon Light Bringer
Light Bringer

This is a weird one, it makes as much gas any 1/1 book makes but if you apply some gas it does some crazy things. Setting yourself up to where your opponent has awkward attacks generates some advantage. Setting yourself up where your opponent has no good attacks generates a ton of advantage. That set up requires work, but it's worth it.

Summon Three Eyed Owl
Three Eyed Owl

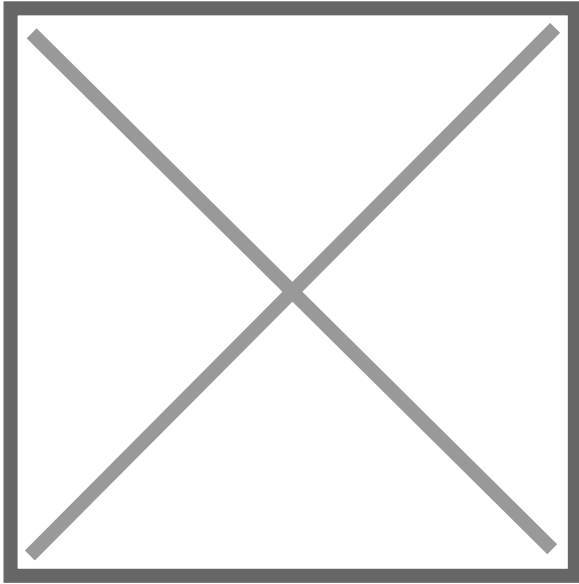
Another strange one. Most players, myself included will overlook this at first. But it becomes apparent very quickly that if they dont kill it, it becomes a 2X-for-1. That's a lot of math in your favor. Most times they will kill it, but it probably cost them more than the 1 dice you made your owl with so you are still winning on the exchange.

Summon Winged Lioness



Another personal love of mine. Stalk is close to the best ability on units and you get a 2 dice 2/2 with stalk.

Ancestor Spirit



Shadow Spirit

Salamander Monk

Salamander Monk Spirit

These I pretty much consider to be the same, good in go wide category that want very cheap book activations to supplement their army. Monk having the additional benefit of laughing at your opponent's guilt link.

Summon Vampire Bat Swarm
Vampire Bat Swarm

I put this one on the list simply because I saw it absolutely work my fellow bus driver Jesse in one of his matches on the stream. It is an expensive rate for a 2/1, but when it's good, it's hard to beat.

Top Tier Ready Spells

Books obviously aren't the only ready spells in the game and similarly they pretty much all make gas. You will see a variety of them at any level of play but there aren't very many that will change play patterns in a meaningful way. They are mostly utility activations. Some common ones are dice fixers (magic syphon, changing winds, etc.), some are small draw engines (augury, chant of worship, etc.) and some are small pingers (frostbite, small sacrifice, etc.) Some unique ones to watch out for are:

Guilt Link

A major problem card for decks that function mostly with only 1 real threat at a time, but it's easily answered if you see it coming. See Salamander Monk above.

Law of Domination

I should probably put this with the action spells because most of what it does is just once, but it is a good removal spell. Play around it like Guilt Link, especially if they have an Emperor Lion book.

Law of Assurance

Law of Grace

Law of Sight

Other Laws - If these are good against you and your opponent plays them you are in trouble, luckily they are very narrow so it's hard to stick one very good. Just keep them in mind if they wreck you and your opponent has Divine dice and/or has an Emperor Lion book.

Abundance

This looks symmetrical, but it is not. If your opponent is playing this card they are going to make better use out of this 90% of the time. There's not a lot you can do about that outside of trying to keep your deck total high so as to not get decked. But if you see this early, expect your opponent to be trying to win in a different way.

Dark Presence

If your opponent has a Dark Presence they are going to try to cheat you out when you can't block. It's on board so you should see it coming, but it's definitely a way to lose if you get caught by it.

Top Tier Action Spells

The ready spells really put a lot of pressure on the single use cards in the game to be very good in order to compete. I'm going to be glossing over essentially all action spells as I think they all be categorized into removal spells, card advantage, and unexhausts. Removal spells are kill spells for units (fester, to shadows, etc.). Card advantage spells put new cards in your hand (expand energy, new ideas, etc.). And the rest unexhaust your units to use again (adrenaline rush, refresh, etc.)

Molten Gold

The only action you really need to play around is Molten Gold, so try not to go to 3 if you can avoid it when your opponent has multiple nature dice.

Top Tier Reaction Spells

The reaction spells are the ones you really need to play around. Some are easy and telegraphed, some are not. Luckily on your turn you can see exactly what dice faces your opponent has and plan accordingly. It's a good idea to just know all the reactions, but these are the ones I think are the most impactful.

Golden Veil

If your opponent is showing charm power, be wary of your removal spells. There are very few times you break even with dice when you get Veiled and you definitely are losing in tempo when you spend and action and they don't.

Summon Sleeping Widows

This one is more difficult to play around because sometimes you have to kill a guy or the opponent will kill their own guy just to play it. If you suspect widows, just try to make them spend their ceremonial dice before you use your kill spells if possible.

Final Cry

This one is also hard for the same reasons as widows with the additional defense of trying to keep your life total high. It can't kill you unless you're at 2.

Sympathy Pain

This one is interesting because you have a lot of control on when your opponent can play it. It doesn't feel good to not attack with your guys, but if you are at 2, then you should wait until you can possibly get in for lethal so they die before they can pain you.

Ice Trap

If you have a 2 health unit it's almost impossible to not get trapped. Just try to play your little guy when they aren't showing nature. It's not as bad as most reactions because it is easy to break even on dice as most 2 health units are cheap and if you get your book trapped you are plus 1 card.

Particle Shield

The moral of this story is that sometimes it's ok to Skald for too much. I have been blown out by this a couple times, so go for the over kill if you suspect shield.

Top Tier Alterations

I am also going to gloss over alterations. In general I hate unit enchantments, just a good way for you to get 2-for-1'd and make a big dice deficit for yourself when your opponent plays a removal spell. There are 2 that are worth mentioning.

Massive Growth

This is restricted because it's cheesy, not because it's good. Just respect it if you have seen one in your opponent's pile from meditate or something because it can cheese you.

Fade Away

This is more on the list because it's one that I would play. Because this is a removal spell, it should probably be listed above.

Top Tier Allies

Finally the meat and potatoes of the Ashes cards, the allies. There are a ton of allies, and many of them are playable and very real threats. For the most part they are better than summons of the same dice cost because they are one shots barring outside effects. But generally, they all kill you by attacking.

Anchornaut

Here's my contradiction, Anchornaut does not attack you. He is a utility guy. As cheap as they come, a small removal tool, and a body to use for blocks or sacrifice effects.

fire-archer

I have lost an embarrassing number of times to the tune of Ceremonial dice power into Fire Archer for the last point of damage. This is similar to Anchornaught as a utility body for blocks and sacrifice effects and it attacks for 1 sometimes too.

Psychic Vampire

Another utility body. Just puts your opponent in a can't attack can't kill it situation some of the time, and the rest of the time you don't feel bad about a 2/1 for 1 dice. High ceiling reasonable floor on this guy.

Grave Knight

Hammer Knight

Master Vampire

Battle Seer

Holy Knight

Sonic Swordsman

The bread and butter of midrange decks. All very efficient allies to fight your opponent and their units. Feel good about playing 1 when you draw it, don't feel bad when you don't. Just very solid threats, so play them if they are in your colors.

Blood Archer

This card almost made it on the list above because I think it's a similar value. I rank this one slightly above them because you always have the play of 3/2 do a damage. This card adds a ton of gas if it lives one turn.

Enchanted Violinist

This is an expensive 1 damage the first time, but they have to remove it because the 2nd activation makes it totally worth it. So you have 2 modes: 1 damage and they discard a card or attack or you get 1 damage then 1 damage next turn plus a card or attack.

Hollow

I love this card. It is both cheap and the closest thing we have to resource denial.

Light Swordsman

This guy rocks, I am a big fan of all units that come into play as a side action so they can attack on the same turn. And Light Swordsman attacks and doesn't take damage back. It's almost like a removal spell for 2 health units.

Raptor Herder Raptor Hatchling

I hate this card, it is on the list because everyone loves it. It is an efficient man with another man attached. Obviously good in some situations, also ignorable sometimes. If you are a wide aggro deck this is one of the best guys. Also good if you have a multitude of sacrifice effects or mounts.

Flash Archer River Skald

Flash Archer is bad. Skald is good, this card will see play. Thank you Skald for making me relevant!

Essence Druid

This is like a combo of a utility unit and a knight. It's costed like a knight and fights good with everything like a knight but also draws you a good card when you play it. This enables a lot of focused nonsense on top of being a great guy. Remember not to attack into it with small while it's not exhausted.

Shadow Guard

This is a very average guy and maybe should be in the reaction section. The reason I mention him is just to add him to the play-around-me when applicable list. He can really screw up an attack.

This is like half of the total number of allies in the pool. And many of the remaining ones are playable and even good. But mostly I think they are redundant to the ones above. But you should

not feel bad about playing a Beast Tamer, Immortal Commander, Stormwind Sniper, etc.

Conclusion

Overall, I love playing Ashes: Reborn. If you are interested feel free to @ me with comments, compliments, complaints, whatever. I hope this primer helps you get started in the world of competitive Ashes Reborn. Please check out and support the community discord, community made content, our current online tournaments, the Ashteki crew, and especially Plaid Hat Games. Get off my bus.

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