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# Skulls and Crossbones

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There are five colors in **Magic**, and that fact forms the base of the intricate structure of this game we love. Every color has two enemies and two allies. Some of these rivalries have been stressed more than others: for instance, there are more protection from black creatures in **Magic** than protection from any other color. A majority of the most powerful color-specific hosers in the history of the game have either been black or aimed against black. There is a good reason for this.

Black has the best discard spells. Black has the best recursion creatures. Black has the best mana accelerator, the best reanimation, the best reusable card-drawing, the best single-creature kill, and the best tutors. Black has a huge number of undercosted creatures, good direct damage spells, land destruction, and some gigantic monstrous creatures. About the only thing black can't do on its own is destroy artifacts and enchantments—and even occasionally a card like *Gate to Phyrexia* or *Quagmire Druid* will slip through and fill this weakness.

This article, if you have not already guessed, examines black. One of my first observations upon receiving the spoiler list for *Torment* (and please, don't ask me to send you spoilers! I've signed a contract giving Mark permission to repossess my cats if any eyes other than my own take a peek.) was that there seemed to be an inordinate amount of black cards. A further count confirmed that there were indeed more cards in black than in any other color. Not only were there quantity, but also quality as well—the cards in *Torment* were actually powered up a bit compared to some non-*Torment* counterparts!

So this week I'm going to take a walk through memory lane with the color that single-handedly qualified me for the pro tour twice. Let's you and I together examine the five most powerful Magic sets ever produced, from the standpoint of black.

A few notes before I begin... Not everyone will agree with my assessments herein, and that's fine. Please, I encourage all feedback and commentary, and it can be sent to [uncommonknowledge@wizards.com](mailto:uncommonknowledge@wizards.com). It was difficult for me to narrow down the top five, especially given that 25 expansion sets have been printed for **Magic: The Gathering** (including *Torment*). Difficulty arose deciding the criteria for ranking each and every group of cards, but I decided on the following rules:

1. Expansion sets only are up for consideration. This means all editions of the basic set from *Alpha* through *Seventh Edition* are all out of consideration. *Torment*, which would easily break into the top 5 list, likewise will be excluded, since it has not yet been made tournament legal.
2. Reprints within an edition (such as *Dark Ritual* appearing in several sets) were given a little less weight, but were still considered.
3. Gold cards are excluded. This was a tough decision, but this list is about black cards, cards that you play with the swamps only. I acknowledge that this gives a huge disadvantage to a set like *Apocalypse*, but where do you draw the line? Lands that interact only with black (such as *Lake of the Dead*) were considered.
4. Cards were given heavier weight if they defined entire deck types, even if those decks weren't mono-black. For instance, *Recurring Nightmare* is a very important card, but it is almost always used in conjunction with another color.
5. More weight was given for cards in constructed play than for limited play, as they have more of a lasting impression in constructed than in limited (Sealed Deck, Booster Draft, Rochester Draft). In addition, cards will be used for years in constructed formats, where as the "limited" lifespan of a card is just that: limited.
6. More weight was given for cards that were used in sanctioned tournaments than in casual play. I understand that cards like *Subversion* and *Syphon Soul* are amazing in group games, but they didn't have as much impact in competitive environments.

Ok, enough rules-making. On to the lists!

## NUMBER 5: LEGENDS

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Why: Black works on many levels. It can be played aggressively with smaller creatures, or aggressively with larger creatures. Black can play control via superior discard and creature kill spells. *Legends* provided some of the greatest spells in the latter category ever to grace this color. While some sets added one or two game-breaking cards to black's arsenal, *Legends* contains no less than five cards which have been used as the kill card in control style decks. As if this weren't enough, this set also introduces black card-drawing in exchange for life (*Greed*), a couple of decent weenie creatures (*Vampire Bats* and *Cyclopean Mummy*), and some multi-player favorites (*All Hallow's Eve*, *Hell's Caretaker*, and *Syphon Soul*).

#### The Big Five of Number Five (in order of importance):

- 5) **Chains of Mephistopheles**: Many players succeeded in building decks around this card in Type 1, based on the principle of decking their opponents through milling effects and cards that forced them to draw extra cards (like *Howling Mine*).
- 4) **Evil Eye of Orms-By-Gore**: A generally unblockable beast, the Eye saw considerable Type 2 play in early 2000 as a replacement for *Nether Spirit* in blue/black control decks. While many people began running remove-from-game effects (such as *Scorching Lava*) to deal with the Spirit, they could not easily kill the 3/6 Evil Eye. That it also blocked 5 power creatures with ease and survives *Flametongue Kavu* were bonuses.
- 3) **Fallen Angel**: Heir to the throne of *Sengir Vampire*, the Angel worked best in black/green decks which utilized *Living Death* and green sacrificial creatures (such as *Spike Feeder*) to constantly keep the opponent off balance. While the larger Sengir won games on his own, the more versatile Fallen Angel ate many of her friends to victory.
- 2) **Nether Void**: An amazing soft-lock card, this Enchant World ended the game against a mana shy opponent. Many a game ended on a first turn play of land + *Black Lotus*/*Dark Ritual* to cast a *Nether Void*, leaving the player's opponent to stare at a hand full of now 3 casting cost Moxes. An early *Juzam Djinn* or *Black Vise* followed by a turn-4 *Nether Void* could still spell doom, as without mana acceleration, answers to those threats were now three turns further away.
- 1) **The Abyss**: Hands down the best reusable creature kill spell ever. The most fondly remembered Type 1 deck ever (named, appropriately enough, "The Deck") eventually turned to *The Abyss* to control the board. Decks featuring artifact creatures backed by *The Abyss* would keep opposing creatures clear from the board, while attacking with their own. Unlike its predecessor (*Drop of Honey*), *The Abyss* stays around until removed through other means, can be worked around more easily to save your own creatures, and could be used at any time to leave a soft creature-kill lock on the board.

## NUMBER 4: URZA'S SAGA

Why: Without a doubt, *Urza's Saga* was the single greatest moment for black in limited play. Hands down the most powerful mono-colored draft deck ever came from drafting black-only with 3 packs of *Saga*, fuelled by the overabundance of common removal, mixed with game-breaking rares and uncommons. Moreover, many cards became only more powerful in mono-black (such as *Corrupt* and *Looming Shade*), discouraging the black drafter from even trying to go a second color. Black only got progressively weaker in draft by adding in packs of *Urza's Legacy* and *Urza's Destiny*, but for those of us who remember, it didn't get any better for black than in *Saga*. It didn't hurt that a number of these cards – such as *Duress*, *Corrupt*, and the overpowered *Yawgmoth's Will* – became tournament staples in constructed as well.

First Picks (cards you would be happy to take first pick if you were drafting): *Abyssal Horror*, *Befoul*, *Corrupt*, *Dark Hatchling*, *Diabolic Servitude*, *Eastern Paladin*, *Expunge*, *Lurking Evil*, *Order of Yawgmoth*, *Persecute*, *Pestilence*, *Vampiric Embrace*, *Vile Requiem*, *Western Paladin*, *Witch Engine*, *Yawgmoth's Will*.

Above-Average Picks (cards which make the meat of the deck and would always be played): *Crazed Skirge*, *Despondency*, *Discordant Dirge*, *Duress*, *Flesh Reaver*, *Hollow Dogs*, *Ill-Gotten Gains*, *Looming Shade*, *Parasitic Bond*, *Phyrexian Ghoul*, *Priest of Gix*, *Ravenous Skirge*, *Reprocess*, *Sanguine Guard*, *Sicken*, *Skirge Familiar*, *Skittering Skirge*, *Spined Fluke*, *Vebulid*, *Victimize*, *Phyrexian Tower*.

There were also about 10 more "filler" cards that would more often than not get played.

Nineteen of the twenty-one black commons were playable in limited, as were 13 of the 19 uncommons, and 14 of the 18 rares (including *Phyrexian Tower*). Also note that some of the draft-unplayable cards were used in



**Thrull Surgeon:** A recurrable **Coercion** that could attack for one.

#### Enchantments of Note:

**Oath of Ghouls:** One of the best black anti-control measures ever. It allowed you to throw your creatures straight into counterspells, since likely you were going to have more creatures in the graveyard and get them right back.

**Recurring Nightmare:** Half of the Rec/Sur engine, and one of the most powerful recursion spells ever, even on its own.

#### Instants of Note:

**Culling the Weak:** Saw some play as a 5th and 6th Dark Ritual in Hatred decks.

**Hatred:** One of the most important and defining Black spells ever. It allowed 3rd turn kills, which happened with alarming frequency given Dark Ritual, **Lake of the Dead**, **Demonic Consultation**, and **Vampiric Tutor** combined with several one and two casting cost creatures.

**Necrologia:** One of the first attempts at making **Necropotence** a little less powerful, but it still traded life for card en-masse.

**Slaughter:** One of the only reusable spot-removal spells ever, and a complete game-breaker in limited.

constructed. These include **Contamination**, **Exhume**, and **Planar Void**.

## NUMBER 3: EXODUS

Why: *Exodus* contained a number of cards that defined black archetypes. Black Weenie suddenly became "Suicide Black" with the introduction of **Hatred**, ironically referring to the risk involved in casting **Hatred** itself. An entirely new powerhouse came into being, known as the Rec/Sur deck. Named after the **Survival of the Fittest/Recurring Nightmare** engine, the deck dominated block constructed, and single-handedly forced the errata of several creatures that untapped lands when they come into play (**Great Whale** being the most notable).

#### Creatures of Note:

**Carnophage:** One of the best one casting cost weenies ever.



## NUMBER 2: TEMPEST



Why: Take everything said about the above sets, and combine them into one fighting force. *Tempest* gave black an amazing array of small creatures, some of the best control cards ever printed for the color, spot-on graveyard manipulation, and a new archetype.

**The Small Creatures:** Shadow creatures proved to be a little too powerful for both limited and constructed play, and herein lies some of the best of the bunch. The **Dauthi Horror** and **Dauthi Slayer** are fixtures even to this day in Extended Suicide Black decks. The **Dauthi Marauder** and **Dauthi Mercenary** saw block, Type 2, and heavy limited play. Add mainstays **Blood Pet** and **Sarcomancy**, mix a dash of **Pit Imp**, and you have some of the best creatures ever printed for black on this side of three mana.

**The Large Creatures:** **Kezzerdrix** owned the board at its casting cost, providing a formidable first-striking body against any opposing creatures. **Gravedigger**, originally printed in *Portal*, made his first appearance in *Tempest* and has been a mainstay of black ever

since. But the most played higher-casting cost creature was another shadow creature, **Dauthi Mindripper**, due to its ability to wreck opponents' hands.

**The Reanimation:** **Coffin Queen**, **Corpse Dance**, and **Reanimate** have all been used in tournament-winning decks. Of these, **Reanimate** still remains a tournament favorite, helping several decks place in the top 16 of the recent Pro Tour - New Orleans. **Corpse Dance** allowed players to repeatedly use creatures which were able to be sacrificed (such as **Bottle Gnomes** or **Stronghold Assassin**) turn after turn. **Coffin Queen** saw a decent amount of play in the Rec/Sur decks discussed above. In fact, it became essential to winning the mirror match to have a **Coffin Queen** so you could grab creatures out of your opponent's graveyard and remove them from the game!

**The Control:** Black has always been known for targeted removal, but *Tempest* was all about breaking that rule. Although *Dark Banishing* make an appearance here, the only other significant card which even mentions the word "target" would be *Diabolic Edict*, ironically the most used one-for-one solution to untargetable creatures.

*Extinction* provided another way to deal with untouchable creatures, and additionally cremated creature-themed decks (such as Sliver and Elf decks). The true massacre came in the form of the two color hosers printed in the uncommon slot: *Perish* and *Dread of Night*. Both to this day are mainstays of black sideboards, with *Perish* making it into the main decks of several decks in green-heavy environments. Many a green mage has cursed R&D for printing *Perish* in the first place, and most went bald with frustration when it was later reprinted in *Sixth Edition*.

**Oh, and last but certainly not least:** Thought I forgot a card in control? Nope, *Living Death* gets its own category, just as it spawned several deck archetypes. Most often abused in conjunction with green (sacrificial creatures, *Hermit Druid*, *Survival of the Fittest*), it duplicated the effect of *Wrath of God* early game, and provided a very amazing reanimation effect for late game. Useable as a control, offensive or combo card, *Living Death* remains a favorite card in the hearts of many a dark mage.

## NUMBER 1: ICE AGE



Why: Let's get this one out of the way: *Necropotence* is the best black card ever printed. Many will argue that *Mind Twist* wins a game in one fell swoop, or *Dark Ritual* allows you to get such a jump on your opponent that they don't know what hit them. Forget all that. *Necropotence* has won more **formats** than any other card in **Magic** history. There's a reason it's restricted in Type 1 and banned in Extended: using one single card to draw multiple cards at a shot wins games. Whether being employed to win a Pro Tour, a Grand Prix, dozens (if not hundreds) of Pro Tour Qualifiers, and countless smaller tournaments, no other card in **Magic** spans as many years of use and variety of deck archetypes as "the skull."

And lest we forget... Wasn't there another ☠☠☠ casting cost card in *Ice Age* that people built decks around in multiple formats? Oh yes, that would be *Pox*. Often combined with *Megrim*, *The Rack*, and efficient creatures (most famously *Steel Golem*), *Pox* crippled hand size, life totals, creatures on board, and land count all at once. Ask any die-hard *Pox* player what his favorite number is, and invariably the answer will be four: the magic number to take out a full half of everything your opponent controls.

Hmm, isn't there more?: *Demonic Consultation* took a while to catch on, but it was soon discovered to be one of the most powerful tutoring cards ever, and was thusly banned from Extended play. *Ashen Ghoul* remains to this day as a staple in graveyard recursion decks. *Abyssal Specter* replaced *Hypnotic Specter* as the staple creature in discard decks. *Stromgald Cabal* saw considerable sideboard duty as an anti-white measure, and his cousin *Knight of Stromgald* saw even more play main-deck. *Dark Banishing* appeared for the first time in *Ice Age*, giving black an easy solution for artifact creatures. Other cards which saw play included *Foul Familiar*, *Icequake*, *Dance of the Dead*, *Infernal Darkness*, *Mind Warp*, and *Stench of Evil*.

If you enjoy tapping Swamps to cast your spells, delirious happiness awaits you with the release of *Torment*. Until then, remember that numerous sets in the past have contained powerful spells and fantastic creatures that use that familiar skull-shaped mana symbol in the upper right hand corner. While I hesitate to call black the color of evil, many a player has met a grisly fate trying to fight a battle against the formidable forces called forth by the shadowed mage.

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*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with Magic: The Gathering for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of Magic, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing Magic, writing about Magic, or thinking about Magic, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with Magic cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



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