

Why it works, then and now

Deconstructing Suicide Black

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"Suicide Black" is the name given to a wide range of mono-black fast creature decks that try to win as quickly as possible. The term "suicide" refers to the deck's single-minded purpose of killing the opponent in the minimum number of turns without any back-up plan or concern for card advantage in the late game.

Suicide Black decks have been around forever because many of the deck's hallmark components -- [Dark Ritual](#), [Bad Moon](#), [Unholy Strength](#) -- were part of the very first edition of **Magic**. The deck evolved as new sets were released, but it has always had four main components: fast creatures, fast mana, disruption, and creature enhancers.

The original fast black creatures were [Erg Raiders](#), [Hypnotic Specter](#), and [Juzam Djinn](#), joined later by "pump knights" from *Ice Age* and *Fallen Empires*. [Dark Ritual](#) filled the fast mana requirement for years. The disruption facet has taken many forms -- from [Strip Mine](#) and [Sinkhole](#) to [Hymn to Tourach](#) and [Mind Twist](#) -- but the goal of those cards has always been to prevent your opponent from implementing his deck's strategies long enough for you to finish him off.

The creature enhancer portion of the deck is what changed the most over time. For a long time, [Bad Moon](#) and [Unholy Strength](#) were the "no-brainers;" every fast black deck packed four of each. But when *Exodus* was released in 1998, things changed...

He Hate Me

When I was a kid, my mother would always tell me that "hatred" was too strong of a word. She preferred the phrase "intense dislike." Clearly my mom never played **Magic** or she would have known that [Hatred](#) was one of the most feared decks of its day. The deck was based around the card it took its name from, [Hatred](#)...

You know, [Hatred](#)?...*Exodus* rare?...Five mana...? If not, it's over to the right.

Now you remember that ugly mug. You probably remember winning -- or thinking you were winning -- until your opponent gleefully slid that card across the table and killed you. You remember the look on your face.

What made this deck so fearsome? Since black is on everyone's minds with the advent of *Torment*, let's take a look at one of the most successful incarnations of the [Hatred](#) deck from a few years ago. This deck was played in an Extended Grand Prix by a well-known **Magic** writer more widely known as the "King of Beatdown."

Hatred

Main Deck

16 [Swamp](#)
4 [City of Traitors](#)
4 [Carnophage](#)
4 [Dauthi Horror](#)
4 [Dauthi Slayer](#)
4 [Phyrexian Negator](#)

[Ritual](#)
4 [Demonic Consultation](#)
4 [Duress](#)
3 [Hatred](#)
1 [Kaervek's Spite](#)
4 [Sarcomancy](#)
1 [Spinning Darkness](#)
3 [Unmask](#)

Sideboard

4 [Dark](#)
3 [Cursed](#)
[Scroll](#)
4 [Masticore](#)
2 [Null Rod](#)
3 [Perish](#)
3 [Sphere of Resistance](#)

Dave has always been drawn to very aggressive decks with cheap, efficient creatures, and this deck had them in spades. I asked him why he chose Hatred. "It was a lot of fun to play," Dave laughed. "I like aggressive decks. It was a beatdown deck that also had a really good combo built into it so it could instantly kill you. But if that failed you could always cast a first-turn 5/5 trampler and kill them that way. It was very versatile in that regard."

The only deck Dave remembers expecting having to face coming into the tournament was the popular one based around [Oath of Druids](#). "At the time there wasn't a lot of [Necro/Donate](#), which became big after Seattle. There were some of those decks there and I had a reasonable chance against it." Ironically, Dave beat a Sligh deck in the quarterfinals. Sligh is a very fast red deck with efficient creatures and abundant burn -- a combination that is bad news for Hatred decks in general. Dave credits the [Masticores](#) from the sideboard for evening up what looks like a lopsided match-up on paper.

He went on to lose to an [Oath of Druids](#) deck in the semi-finals. Looking back on it, Dave feels he could have won that match had he played the second turn of the deciding game differently. Seven hand-destruction spells gave him the turns he needed against the creature-punishing Oath. "The discard was essential. I had [Duress](#) and [Unmask](#) in the deck. They were very important. You really didn't want Oath of Druids to resolve. Then you had a really hard time winning. But also to make sure they didn't have counter-magic for your [Hatred](#) or to make sure your creatures reached play," Dave explained.

Let's analyze the different components of this deck figure out what makes it tick.


Weapon of Choice


We'll start with the card from which the deck derives its name. [Hatred](#) allowed you to kill your opponent by trading X life for +X/+0 to target creature. Imagine [Channel](#) + [Howl from Beyond](#).

Seemingly expensive at five mana, Hatred's cost was softened by explosive mana from [Dark Ritual](#) and [City of Traitors](#), allowing the combo to theoretically kill on the second turn. An ideal hand would be the following: Turn-one, drop a Swamp and a 2/2 creature. On the next turn drop a [City of Traitors](#), remove a black card from your hand to pay the alternate cost for [Unmask](#), nullifying any card that would obstruct your path to victory... and then, during your attack step, cast [Hatred](#) with a [Dark Ritual](#) and eighteen life to deal twenty damage to your stunned opponent.





Twenty creatures (counting the [Sarcomancy](#)) and eight banned cards are at the heart of [Hatred](#):

The Zombies



Eight of the creatures are code-named "[Jackal Pups](#)" -- two-power creatures for a single mana. [Carnophage](#) is a 2/2 zombie for a single  that -- inevitably -- has a drawback. During your upkeep you may pay one life or your Carnophage becomes tapped.

Your other zombies are not creature spells but enchantments. [Sarcomancy](#) also costs a single , and when it comes into play you put a 2/2 zombie token into play as well. The drawback? If there are no zombies in play during your upkeep, Sarcomancy deals a point of damage to you. One zombie token will satisfy multiple Sarcomancies, as will a [Carnophage](#). Go zombies!

The Dauthi

Another eight creatures have shadow, rendering them unblockable by all but a small percentage of creatures. The [Dauthi Horror](#) is a 2/1 for   that actually has an upside, even if it is a narrow one. In addition to being unblockable to creatures without shadow, the Horror could not be blocked by white creatures -- which is one of the only two other colors with shadow creatures! The slightly more durable [Dauthi Slayer](#) (a 2/2 for   that must attack each turn if able) is also used, even though the deck packs four copies of [City of Traitors](#) which produce colorless mana, potentially preventing you from casting the Slayer on turn two.

The Man!

Last but not least was the [Phyrexian Negator](#), a 5/5 trampling monster for  . His drawback? For each point of damage dealt to him you must sacrifice a permanent. There was great synergy here with the [Sarcomancy](#). By sacrificing the enchantment you gave up nothing. You still had your 2/2 token and as a result the first point dealt to the Negator is essentially "free with a Sarcomancy in play."

The Banned Cards



[Dark Ritual](#) and [Demonic Consultation](#) were banned partially due to the success of the [Necro/Donate](#), deck but proponents of Hatred's frequent turn-two kills must feel somewhat responsible for the bannings as well. While the pesky [Donate](#) deck has survived even the banning of [Necropotence](#) with continued success and, at times, dominance, the [Hatred](#) deck has never recovered from the loss of those eight key cards.

[Dark Ritual](#) provided an obscenely fast start; three 2/2 creatures, a 5/5 trampler, or a [Duress](#) followed by the most appropriate spells in your hand with the remaining mana are all not only possible but likely first-turn plays. A handful of players have tried to play the deck since [Dark Ritual](#) was banned in Extended. They offset the loss of the Ritual by adding land to the deck: [Lake of the Dead](#). The Lake


could accelerate you to an early Hatred but it did nothing on the first crucial turns leaving the deck a shadow -- no pun intended -- of its former self.


The other four banned cards were, of course, [Demonic Consultation](#). For a single black mana you could find your next land drop, dig for a [Hatred](#) to finish off a helpless opponent or find the sideboard card you desperately needed to win the second or third game -- all at instant speed. While not as crippling to the deck as the loss of the "three-mana first turn," the loss of this powerful tutor completed the neutering of this once vicious animal.

The Hand Destruction

I discussed [Duress](#) and [Unmask](#) briefly but they merit more space here. At a single , [Duress](#) allows you to look at your opponent's hand and make him discard a non-land, non-creature of your choice. Not only does it take a key card from your opponent's hand, but it provides you valuable information for deciding when to cast Hatred. Do they have a counter? An [Incinerate](#)? Or were they bluffing? [Duress](#) gives you the answers you must have when using your life total to power your spells. You may be thinking about [Hatred](#)'s five mana cost. True, this deck won't have six mana most of the time to back up the Hatred with a [Duress](#). That's where [Unmask](#) comes in. A  sorcery, [Unmask](#) has an alternate cost that allows you to remove a black card in your hand from the game instead. Like [Duress](#), you can look at your opponent's hand and make them discard a card that is not a land. Unlike [Duress](#), that card can be a creature. [Unmask](#) can be a devastating follow-up to [Duress](#), punishing a land-heavy opponent. It also allows you to use all of your mana to cast Hatred safely with the knowledge that it will resolve (and you'll win the game).

Miscellaneous

Spinning Darkness is another card with an alternate cost. You can pay either  (unlikely) or remove the top three black cards from your graveyard to deal three damage to target non-black creature and gain three life. This single maindeck removal spell not only eliminated a potential blocker, but in a damage race, where both players are attacking all out each turn, the three life could easily grant you the extra turn needed to kill your opponent.

[Kaervek's Spite](#) is a difficult card for a lot of people to understand. In addition to its  mana cost, you must sacrifice all of your permanents and discard your hand, all just to cause your opponent to lose five life. The key words there are "lose" and "life." Some situations arise wherein you are unable to deal any more damage to your opponent -- he plays a Circle of Protection: Black, he has killed all of your creatures, or he has played [Worship](#). Provided you have already dealt enough damage to get him to 5 or lower, you can seal the deal with this backbreaker. [Duress/Unmask](#) work nicely with this card and are recommended!

The Land

When you look at successful decks, you will notice that most have at least 24 land, some as many as 28. Why, then, does this deck use only 20? There are a number of reasons, starting with the low mana costs of its spells: eight creatures that come out on turn one, four more on turn two, and another eight on turn three. The other is the explosiveness of your mana. The "missing" lands are more than

ably replaced by [Dark Rituals](#). With a Dark Ritual, you can cast all 20 of your creatures on turn one, and in many cases more than one creature before your opponent has even drawn a card. [City of Traitors](#) taps for two colorless but you must sacrifice it when you play another land. Whether you are powering up a Hatred or putting a Negator into play on turn two against an opponent playing Islands, the City gives you the fast mana you need to out-speed your opponent.

Updating a Classic

Recently, I had a chance to play in an *Odyssey/Torment* sealed deck match against a friend. I was at a seemingly impossible-to-kill 45 life. My opponent cast [Demoralize](#) and responded to it by casting [Rites of Initiation](#) discarding six cards. He had seven creatures in play and was able to deal more than fifty points of damage. I died... and then I began to wonder if it was possible to create a "Hatred" deck using only *Odyssey* and *Torment* cards.

Creating a deck with the same texture as the Hatred deck out of that limited card pool is no small task. None of the cards available to us are going to provide the same combination of explosiveness and versatility that could be found in Dave Price's deck. With that in mind I present to you:



Intense Dislike

Or: A Deck Only My Mother Could Love

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 12 Swamp | 4 Bloodcurdler | 4 Rites of Initiation |
| 4 Shadowblood Ridge | 4 Boneshard Slasher | 3 Skeletal Scrying |
| 4 Tainted Peak | 4 Mesmeric Fiend | 3 Tainted Pact |
| 2 Bog Wreckage | 4 Dusk Imp | 4 Chainer's Edict |
| | 4 Nantuko Shade | |
| | 4 Faceless Butcher | |



When building the deck, it was unclear if black was actually the color that currently embodies the spirit of old-school "Suicide Black," oddly enough. I seriously considered trying to make this deck mono-red but I ran out of creatures after [Mad Dog](#), [Ember Beast](#), and [Grim Lavamancer](#). I also didn't like the deck's chances against a [Psychatog](#) and I really wanted to duplicate the evasion from the original deck. Normally this would lead me towards blue but most of the efficient fliers ([Thought Nibbler](#), [Thought Eater](#), [Thought Devourer](#)) punish you by depleting your hand size, definitely working against a kill card that relies on the number of cards in hand. Not to mention blue/red makes for very difficult mana in opposite colors. The same principles worked against white's cheap evasion creatures. You could argue that the Hatred deck I am looking for is mono-green with [Overrun](#) and I would be hard pressed to make a counter-argument based on card quality. I would argue that [Overrun](#) does not do as good a job duplicating the texture of [Hatred](#) as [Rites of Initiation](#), nor do the other cards fit into the mold of the deck I am trying to build. By building a base-black deck splashing red for the Rites (and maybe some sideboard cards) we are able to recreate most of the elements from our model. Black it is. Let's go through my card choices in each category:

Creatures

I know that a lot of you reading this are wondering why I didn't bring [Carrion Rats](#) north with the rest of the team. After all, they are a classic "Jackal Pup" in both power/toughness and converted mana cost. I just don't like their drawback and wanted to have another set of fliers that could always deal their damage, hence the rarely-amazing [Dusk Imp](#), [Bloodcurdler](#) and [Boneshard Slasher](#) are both 1/1 fliers for two mana that get bigger at threshold, albeit with drawbacks. The [Bloodcurdler](#) gains +1/+1 but obligates you to remove two cards from your graveyard at the end of the turn (but it also mills one at the beginning of your upkeep), while the Slasher gains +2/+2 but dies when targeted. I can live with all of those drawbacks -- even the three mana cost of the Dusk Imp -- in order to have something akin to Dave Price's shadow creatures.

[Nantuko Shade](#) fills the rather impressive shoes of the [Phyrexian Negator](#). The Shade is the best black creature in a long time. With almost every land in your deck producing black mana this guy is [The Abyss](#) on legs, eating creatures on offense and defense.

[Mesmeric Fiend](#) and [Faceless Butcher](#) are more like spells than creatures. The Fiend is a [Duress](#) that gets to attack once in a while. More often than not you will cast him when you are in a position to win and want to check that the coast is clear of any tricks that would torpedo your chances. The [Faceless Butcher](#) is the most expensive spell in your deck but he provides additional removal and his three toughness will make him hard to kill in this environment.

Spells

[Rites of Initiation](#) is your kill card in the deck. If you don't like math, don't play with this card. Multiply the cards in hand minus the Rites itself times the number of unblocked creatures you have. Add the unblocked creatures' power plus any bonuses they may gain if you achieve threshold. If that number is greater than your opponent's life total you will probably win. Don't forget to try and hold back Mesmeric Fiend as a Duress on the turn you think you can accomplish all this. Another important thing to remember is that the discard for Rites will be random. It does not make sense to hold back cards since you can't guarantee that any specific ones will still be in your hand after your attack step.

[Chainer's Edict](#) is great in this deck since every unblocked creature you have is another multiple you add in the equation above. Even removing their worst creature will often be the difference between your victory and their untap step. If people in your playgroup copy the popular [Psychatog](#) and [Mystic Enforcer](#) decks, this card is even better as it will often kill their best and only creature.

[Tainted Pact](#) is an excellent card that is just starting to get the attention it deserves in both Constructed and Limited play. It feels remarkably similar to [Demonic Consultation](#) and it is at its most powerful when you are stuck on two lands or when looking for a red mana source. The diversity of lands in this deck will allow you to dig deeper than if you were playing with only Swamps.

[Skeletal Scrying](#) allows you to pay X life, pay X life, and remove X cards from your graveyard in exchange for drawing X cards. I love this card! Often X will only be two or three, but when those cards are discarded to a [Rites of Initiation](#), that can add up to significant damage depending on the number of creatures you have in play. Since both Scrying and the Rites are instants, you can hide lethal damage from your opponent even if they suspect you are playing with Rites.

Land

The classic Suicide Black decks all used fast mana, but without [Dark Ritual](#), it just isn't worth it. [Cabal Ritual](#) doesn't cut the mustard, especially in a deck that needs to rely on cards in hand to kill its opponent. With no one- or three-mana spells, it does nothing for you on turn two and doesn't do much for you other than turn three when it would let you cast two creatures. This deck can simply not afford that kind of card disadvantage. Instead I played more land and more library manipulation. Imagine the following scenario: Your opponent has just tapped out to cast his second [Mystic Enforcer](#). The first one has been smashing you for six a turn and you are at eight. You have four black fliers on the table, two [Bloodcurdlers](#) and two [Dusk Imps](#). You have two cards in hand: a [Skeletal Scrying](#) and a [Rites of Initiation](#). You have four [Swamps](#) and a [Bog Wreckage](#) in play and you have five cards in your graveyard. Your opponent (who has been snickering at your Dusk Imps) is at a confident fifteen. You attack with everything and he blocks an Imp. You cast the Scrying for three cards, sacrifice the Wreckage for red mana and dump your hand. Three unblocked creatures equals nine damage to add to your base power of four plus the extra point each of your Bloodcurdlers gain for reaching threshold. Add it up and it comes to exactly fifteen. Now imagine the look on your opponent's face.

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