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Not Exactly Common

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Uncommon Knowledge
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R&D has performed miraculous feats of engineering in the past few blocks. Sets have become more balanced, limited play more dynamic, and cards so overpowered they need to be banned in standard haven't been seen since the *Urza* Block. This week though we're going to delve into the dark ages of **Magic**, when cards weren't as stringently tested as they are today, and sometimes Wizards printed some common cards that had a bit more in 'common' with most rares! This week we're going to look at my picks for top ten commons that *shouldn't* have been common.

10) Atog (*Antiquities*)

The original Atog started off an entire mega-cycle of atogs that spanned several blocks, and still touches even the most current of blocks in modern **Magic**. However, in that time there has been a grand total of one common atog: **Atog** himself! Sacrificing resources to gain an advantage became an uncommon and rare phenomenon, whether it was lands, turns, cards in graveyard, cards in hand, enchantments, or even other atogs!

On top of this, **Atog** was reprinted in *Revised* as a common. For those who do not know, literally every card in *Antiquities* either was an artifact or dealt with an artifact, excepting *Strip Mine* and the "Urza Lands". This meant that there were plenty of common artifacts for **Atog** to chomp on. But *Revised* contained not a single common artifact, which meant that many new players were opening up **Atog** in the common slot and didn't have a single artifact to feed him! Luckily, when **Atog** saw the light of day again in *Fifth Edition*, he finally moved to the uncommon slot where he belonged.



9) Wyluli Wolf (*Arabian Nights*)

Common cards are the building blocks of each color. They are usually simple effects that often have powerful results. **Wyluli Wolf** fits this perfectly, with an elegantly succinct "Target creatures gets +1/+1 until end of turn". Each color really has themes for their creatures, and **Wyluli Wolf** would be perfect as a white creature, not a green one! Compare the Wolf to *Angelic Page* or *Vigilant Sentry* which are white common creatures in the theme of 'people working together for a greater good'. This isn't to say that green creatures shouldn't boost each other up: they do that all the time, but the green theme lies more in symbiotic relationships, where one creature will 'feed' another one instead of 'helping' them. Compare *Spike Feeder* or *Ironshell Beetle*, which are more in flavor for green. Accordingly, when **Wyluli Wolf** was rotated into the base set, it became a rare.

8) Ashes to Ashes (*The Dark*)

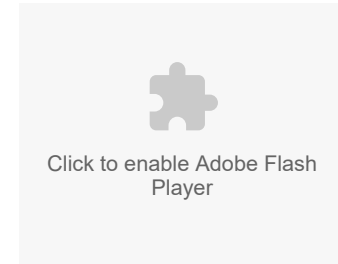
Not only do colors have flavors, but they also have rules (as Mark will tell you time and again). One of black's rules is that black cannot deal easily with black creatures. Sure, rules are meant to be broken, but not this easily! While *The Dark* had a strong theme of the colors turning traitor on themselves, *Ashes to Ashes* took it a step to far. Not only could you target black creatures, but you could target *two* at once, and remove them from the game! This prevented reanimation (one of black's strengths), and garnered card advantage all at once. When this sorcery made it into *Fourth* and *Fifth Edition*, it fell directly into the uncommon slot.

7) Phantasmal Fiend (*Alliances*)

It wasn't so much the concept behind this phantasm that made it such a troublesome common, but it was the math. You could change the power and toughness with the blue ability easily enough, but then what happened when you started mucking around with the black pump effect? Remember, once the blue ability was engaged, all power and toughness



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enhancing effect were swapped -- meaning that you could end up with a really nasty stack that involved multiple triggerings of the blue AND black abilities, making it a veritable college-level mathematics exam just to figure out the size of your Fiend. **Aquamoeba** did it much more simply, by switching the power and the toughness and removing the 'effects that affect one affect the other instead' line.

6) Norritt (*Ice Age*)

Another hallmark of common cards is that they shouldn't have one-point type. Ok, maybe I'm exaggerating a little bit in the case of **Norritt**, but not by much. This creature combines a limited effect -- akin to **Jandor's Saddlebags** -- with **Nettling Imp's** taunting power (which traditionally has been an uncommon and rare effect), causing it to need way too many lines of rules text for a common. So not only does this card say too much for a common, but also it has an ability which doesn't even fit into the common slot.

5) Remove

Enchantments (*Legends*)

So let me get this straight: you "remove" all enchantments you control, and all enchant creatures you control. Then, if it's during your opponents attack phase (not your own!), you remove their enchantments too. Then, you return yours to your hand, and theirs are destroyed.

Ouch. My brain hurts.

So what exactly does "remove" mean? Since the card specifically states that you "destroy" theirs later, and you "return yours to hand" as well, what is one to do when instructed to "remove" enchantments? Do they sit in your hand? Do they go out of game?

So I consulted the [Oracle](#).

Return all enchantments you own and control to your hand. Destroy all enchantments you don't own and control that are enchanting permanents you control. If Remove Enchantments is played during combat, destroy all enchantments enchanting attacking creatures.

Ok, hands up if this seems a bit too complex for a common. If your hand isn't up, you're a liar. This card, even when cleaned up by the Oracle, does three things at once (returns enchantments, destroys your enchant creatures, and destroys enchantments on attacking creatures), while throwing in conditional timing to boot. Definitely not the hallmark of a common card.



4) Quirion Ranger (*Visions*)

The common slot houses some of the most used and powerful spells in **Magic**: **Disenchant**, **Lightning Bolt**, **Dark Ritual**, **Wild Mongrel**, and **Capsize** just to throw out a small list. And this is going to be a bold claim I'm about to make, but out of every powerful common card ever printed in the history of **Magic**, **Quirion Ranger** was the most ill-fit to be a common. In his day, this elf single-handedly ruined two strategies (**Stasis** and land destruction) by being able to untap creatures and save forests. His "drawback" (returning a land) more often than not was used as an advantage to get an extra mana on the board (for instance, if you were stalled at two lands, you could tap them both, return a forest to your hand to untap a creature, then replay it to have three mana), much less to return a card to your hand for **Firestorm** or **Maro**. The Ranger had amazing synergy with mana creatures, or any other creature which required a tap to use, and was often used to abuse **Tradewind Rider** and **Granger Guildmage**. All this, plus it only cost one mana to cast, and was an elf!

In general, **Quirion Ranger** looked like a simple card (untap a creature), but ended up being able to perform tricks so much beyond its humble origins at that I would not hesitate to say that if it were printed today, it would be a rare, much less an uncommon.

3) Red X-Spells (*Alpha, Beta, Unlimited, Revised, Fourth Edition, Fifth Edition, Ice Age, Mirage, Tempest*)

"I was about to lose, but I topdecked the Torch and won." That phrase was repeated year after year at sealed deck tournaments and booster drafts across the world. Granted, the actual card might be **Fireball**, **Disintegrate**, **Lava Burst**, or **Rolling Thunder**, but the namesake for all X-spells drawn off the top of the deck for the win will always be **Kaervek's Torch** from *Mirage*. The problem with common red X-spells (at least, the ones that can deal damage to players) is that they tend to go 'outside' the draft strategy. Basically, most players would first pick an X-spell over any other card available in the draft pool, rares included. There were arguably only two cards better than **Kaervek's Torch** in *Mirage* draft (**Hammer of Bogardan** and **Sacred Mesa** leap readily to mind), and that invalidates a lot of draft strategy. Plus, a well-played game can be ended by a late X-spell for 7-10 damage, taking some of the skill out of the format. By the time *Urza Block* rolled around, R&D had rightfully booted

common red X-spells which could damage players to the uncommon and rare slots, leaving variants such as **Heat Ray** as their replacement.



2) Empyrial Armor (*Weatherlight*)

A [few weeks ago](#), I ranked **Empyrial Armor** as the number three most powerful creature enchantment of all time. So why does it make the list here and **Rancor** (which was rated #1) does not? It's time for a history lesson.

If you've drafted *Odyssey* block at all, either at a store or at a tournament or using **Magic Online**, you've noticed that there were some changes once *Torment* was introduced. Most notably, since *Torment* is the black set, drafters have begun skewing their picks towards black early, with an eye on the last pack. *Judgment* redresses this a bit, by weakening the last pack of black, and strengthening the white and green. This allows people a bit of pre-planning in order to know what colors they should vie for in later packs, since they know that certain colors are most abundant and powerful in different packs.

What's this have to do with **Empyrial Armor**? Hold your horses, I'm getting to that.

Imagine now an environment where all of the colors are nearly perfectly balanced for draft. You've got your *Mirage*, and your *Visions*, and then suddenly the third set of the block is released: *Weatherlight*. Now, imagine again that your

draft games go at a relatively decent pace, with a lot of creatures that fit the curve (meaning you have them in ascending casting costs so you can tap out to cast creatures every turn), and a lot of the games come down to outplaying your opponent with combat tricks (and/or burning them out with **Kaervek's Torch**, see above). Imagine now that *Weatherlight* brings as card which allows consistent fifth-turn kills when drawn, and is virtually impossible to deal with once on the table.

Is it rare? No.

Is it uncommon? No.

For the love of god, **Empyrial Armor** was a common! Players began drafting their decks from pack one (*Mirage*) with the hopes of opening up or being passed (though almost no one was foolish enough to pass this card) an Armor in the third pack. Semi-weak cards such as **Freewind Falcon** started going early so they could be enchanted and attack on the third turn. You were either drafting to get the Armor or drafting to beat the Armor, but it was the card that defined an *entire* block of draft. Obviously, no common should have that sort of influence over the game (just by sheer volume of appearance), and thankfully no common has since.



1) Balduvian Shaman and Snowfall (*Ice Age*)

What an "un-ubiquitous" pair: the epitome of a common gone wrong, and its bastard stepchild. Welcome to **Balduvian Shaman**-land, where the world's most narrow common comes to play. Yes, you open up your pack of *Ice Age*, and what stares back from the first common slot? Why a 1/1 blue creature for one mana, with a lot of text. And what does this text say? He can change the color of white enchantments (remember, only enchantments, and only if they are white), but this causes you to have to pay extra mana to keep them around, eventually causing them to vanish for good. So let's recap: White, enchantment, "sleight", cumulative upkeep, common. Not good.

It gets just as bad on **Snowfall**, and enchantment which has a cumulative upkeep itself, and can be used to pay the cumulative upkeep on other cards with cumulative upkeeps. However, if you have snow covered lands (remember, these were the lands that were basic lands but weren't quite basic lands), you had the choice(!) of producing extra mana in order to pay the cumulative upkeeps (only) of cards with cumulative upkeep.

To this day, only the very, very dedicated have tried to make this card work, considering it basically works in conjunction with only a dozen or so cards in the entirety of **Magic**, most of which were uncommons and rares. Take **Atog** from above but make it a card which really has no realistic use, and you've got **Snowfall**, one of the two *Ice Age* cards which were so narrow that they were readily unusable and practically available. Or something.

Next week: Back to the Hallmark Creatures series, as we examine red, white, and artifact creatures, and delve into the reader mailbag for some responses to [part one!](#)

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