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# The Cult of Transcendence

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 House of Cards  
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

After [Deck Challenge II](#), several people wrote me to ask, "Hey buddy, you mind passing along the decklists from those two **Transcendence** decks sent in? I won't tell anyone you showed them to me. Honest".\*



Those pleas struck me as odd; it just hadn't occurred to me that a **Transcendence** subculture (the Cult of **Transcendence**?) might exist beneath **Magic's** otherwise upstanding exterior. Yet the interest about those two mysterious unsigned **Transcendence** submissions was hard to ignore. The very fact that someone had *tried* a **Transcendence** deck seemed to peak a lot of curiosity.

Uh oh, time for another "bad" rare article. Someone help me... during Lifegain Week, I dedicate today to decks built around **Transcendence**.

## BAD OR BRILLIANT?

The funny thing about **Transcendence** is that few people really want to call it a "bad" rare. It is such a completely weird idea for a card that it just seems like it should be cool. If you're like me, you almost... see... something... that just... might... and POOF! It doesn't work, and back to the drawing board you go. Most people, I think, believe that **Transcendence** is really broken beyond belief and we collectively just haven't figured out how. Yet.

Indeed, I'm not sure anyone is complaining about **Transcendence** in terms of ability. The idea that all life you lose -- damage or otherwise -- actually turns into life you gain is difficult to ignore. Since you actually gain *twice* what you would have lost, near-immortality seems just out of reach.

However, I have yet to actually play against a **Transcendence** deck, much less see one win a Pro Tour. So for the sake of argument, I will say that **Transcendence** is actually a "bad" rare. As best as I can figure, here are three reasons for its overall disuse:

### 1) Weird

As I mentioned, the card is bizarre. My mind begins inward spirals when thinking how I might use it without losing horribly. Most people undoubtedly give up before their brains implode, preventing a lot of active testing with **Transcendence**.

### 2) Expensive

③\*\*\* is a pretty hefty cost for any card, even one that changes the rules of the game. The \*\*\* is particularly troublesome since it relegates **Transcendence** to heavily white decks. This color restriction means that lots of otherwise cool ideas turn out inconsistent because of an intractable mana base.

### 3) Dangerous

Since you automatically lose when reaching 20 life with **Transcendence** on the table, playing it means opening yourself up to -- Whoops! -- accidentally killing yourself. Unless you always hold a **Disenchant** (more on that later), you run the risk of gaining too much life too quickly with an inability to "shut off" **Transcendence** when needed. This risk is often not worth dedicating a deck to it.

Expensive, dangerous weirdness aside, here are some ways I can think to begin building around the polarity-reversing power of **Transcendence**. Most of the decks are "combo" decks, meaning they use a few cards to set up an imminent win condition once the pieces are in place. Keep in mind that combo decks, probably more than any other kind of deck, require heavy playtesting to build correctly. As always, consider this a discussion to poke you in the brain more than anything else.

## THE DONATE RULE

I'm surprised it has taken three "bad" rares to mention The **Donate** Rule. Simply put, if you find yourself with a permanent that has an extreme case of either the "weird" or "dangerous" disadvantage (preferably both), one of your first thoughts should be: What happens if I **Donate** it to my opponent? If the card contains the phrase "lose the game" in the text box, The **Donate** Rule should also kick into effect.

### Final Wrap-up

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Lich, Nefarious Lich, Forbidden Crypt, Cephalid Vandal, Lord of the Pit, Oath of Lim-Dul... these are all examples of The Donate Rule put to use. Although not all cards worthy of Donate are "bad" per se, Donate has a way of making silly rares a lot less silly.

Consider what happens to Transcendence when you Donate it. If your opponent hasn't taken damage yet, she loses when Donate resolves. Simple enough. If, for some reason, she has less than 20 life, a harmless spell like Life Burst, Armistice, or Alabaster Potion should bump her into losing range.

That's right: When Donate meets Transcendence, Alabaster Potion might be your kill card.



## COMBOS OLD AND NEW

In Randy's [first](#) and [fourth](#) articles on this site, he discussed quite a few tricks you can pull with Transcendence. Forsaken Wastes is probably the scariest, since with the Wastes and Transcendence on the table at the same time, you will never go above 20 life and never lose below 0. For you Extended enthusiasts, use this little two-card combo while you can since Mirage will rotate out of the format [in November](#).

As Randy described, it is the combination with Nefarious Lich that caused R&D to change the way Transcendence works. Interestingly, the two costly enchantments still do some interesting things together. If you lose life you still trigger Transcendence to gain twice as much back, which then triggers Nefarious Lich to make you draw cards. Confused yet? How's this: With Phyxian Arena, Transcendence, and Nefarious Lich on the table, you draw four cards per turn. If you choose to take mana burn at any time, you draw an additional two cards per point of mana burn without really losing any life at all. Heck, when Foul Imp comes into play you draw four cards. It's all pretty freaky.

The trick with Transcendence and Nefarious Lich is threefold. First, you need to have enough cards in your graveyard such that when you actually do take damage, you can feed the Lich. Second, you need to protect both enchantments -- if Nefarious Lich dies so do you, and the two are only potent in combination with each other.

Third, you need to find a way to use all of those cards. In Type 2 your options are fairly limited: Seismic Assault has a prohibitive cost, Stalking Bloodsucker and Spirit Cairn are probably too slow. My advice: Zombie Infestation.

Other card combinations undoubtedly exist. Donate, Forsaken Wastes, and Nefarious Lich are the only ones my wee little brain can handle at the moment. Everything else, I'm afraid, requires a timely Disenchant.

## LOVE YOUR DISENCHANT

With a Disenchant in hand, the Transcendence world is your oyster. You no longer need worry about that pesky "I lose at 20 life" rule if you possess some way to kill your own enchantment while your massive lifegain is on the stack. Randy mentions the combination of Transcendence, Martyr's Tomb, and Disenchant, which can net you a ton of life.



Recently someone emailed me (apologies for not remembering who) the idea of Soulgorger Orgg and Transcendence. Let's say you are at 15 life with Transcendence on the table when you play the Orgg. You normally would lose 14 life, but you get to gain 28 back for your troubles. While the 28 life sits on the stack, a Disenchant kills Transcendence to avoid losing. Finally, you happily watch your 6/6 trampler wreak havoc as you hide behind a total of now 29 life.

These kind of tricks are too numerous to even begin to explore. Suffice it to say, they ALL require a Disenchant effect. Thus to use them, you need to pack your deck full of instant-speed enchantment removal. Cheap removal like Emerald Charm is good. "Free" removal that sits on the table like Seal of Cleansing or Nullmage Advocate is better.

Repeatable, instant-speed removal like Phantatog or -- my personal favorite -- Faith Healer is best of all.

## THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Of course you can also take the radical approach of using Transcendence as it was designed to be used -- as a way to switch the rules of the game in order to prolong your life. Sometimes a card, for all of its mind-bending oddity, asks for a straightforward use.

The plan here is simple: Build your resources and take your opponent's best shot. When you get near zero life, drop Transcendence and start climbing back to 20. Then, when you get near 20 life, get rid of your Transcendence and have your opponent start all over again. This strategy requires you to not lose in the first 6

turns before **Transcendence** hits the table, and it also follows the same need for a **Disenchant** effect as above. When the plan works, however, it can be awfully frustrating for an opponent.

Not many decks can take full advantage of **Transcendence** in this way. My best guess is a slow deck that can *eventually* beat almost any deck given enough time is your best bet. Maybe Mono-White Control can rise from the ashes to use **Transcendence** and maybe not; I leave you to decide.

Below are some early attempts at **Transcendence** decks following some of the logic above. Mostly my head hurts now with all of this life-going-down-life-going-up business. Hopefully I've given you at least some places to start tinkering with your own maniacal creations. And if you need any aspirin, let me know.

Next Week: A song from me to you.

-j


## Transcend!

(November Extended) 

**Main Deck**  
60 cards

<p>4 Adarkar Wastes</p> <p>4 Coastal Tower</p> <p>10 Island</p> <p>7 Plains</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>25 lands</p>	<p>0 creatures</p>	<p>4 Opt</p> <p>4 Life Burst</p> <p>4 Counterspell</p> <p>4 Donate</p> <p>4 Transcendence</p> <p>3 Seal of Cleansing</p> <p>3 Absorb</p> <p>3 Fact or Fiction</p> <p>2 Enlightened Tutor</p> <p>2 Mystical Tutor</p> <p>1 Propaganda</p> <p>1 Capsize</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>35 other spells</p>
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## Lose-Gain-Draw

(Standard) 

**Main Deck**  
60 cards

<p>4 Caves of Koilos</p> <p>4 City of Brass</p> <p>4 Tainted Field</p> <p>2 Brushland</p> <p>11 Swamp</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>25 lands</p>	<p>0 creatures</p>	<p>4 Duress</p> <p>4 Cabal Ritual</p> <p>4 Zombie Infestation</p> <p>4 Sterling Grove</p> <p>4 Phyrexian Arena</p> <p>4 Vindicate</p> <p>4 Nefarious Lich</p> <p>4 Transcendence</p> <p>3 Ensnaring Bridge</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>35 other spells</p>
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## Genesis 1:1

(Standard) 

<b>Main Deck</b> 60 cards		<b>Sideboard</b>
<p>4 Brushland</p> <p>4 Elfhame Palace</p> <p>2 Sungrass Prairie</p> <p>15 Plains</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>25 lands</p> <p>4 Resilient Wanderer</p> <p>4 Genesis</p> <p>2 Anurid Brushhopper</p> <p>2 Commander Eesha</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>12 creatures</p>	<p>4 Marble Diamond</p> <p>4 Aura Blast</p> <p>4 Living Wish</p> <p>4 Wrath of God</p> <p>4 Transcendence</p> <p>2 Vengeful Dreams</p> <p>1 Rout</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>23 other spells</p>	<p>4 Circle of Protection: Red</p> <p>4 Mystic Enforcer</p> <p>2 Nantuko Monastery</p> <p>1 Nullmage Advocate</p> <p>1 Stern Judge</p> <p>1 Anurid Brushhopper</p> <p>1 Glory</p> <p>1 Sabertooth Nishoba</p> <hr style="width: 100%;"/> <p>15 sideboard cards</p>

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\*: I should note that no one got extra decks from me after the Deck Challenge, primarily because the submissions now exist only as hardcopies deep in the bowels of my home.

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