

# Black Oozes with Magic's Creepy Crawlers

## The October 31

Ben Bleiweiss

Monday, October 27, 2003



- [Ben Bleiweiss Archive](#)

The October Thirty-One - By Ben Bleiweiss

People have differing definitions of the concept of scary. Some are creeped out by slash fests like the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies, or *Friday the 13th*. Others get their chills from more subtle spook fests such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* or M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs*. I tend to fall into the latter of these two camps of people. It might be initially jarring to see someone torn to shreds in any number of creative ways, but after the tenth or eleventh time Freddy dices up some scantily clad teen, the power of that horror loses some of its vigor. On the other hand, good atmosphere combined with unexpected twists in a fright film creates a much more lasting impression. There are only two deaths in all of *Psycho*, but one of them (the Shower scene) remains an indelible part of the public psyche some forty years after the film's initial release.

So what's all this talk about fear and what does it have to do with **Magic**?



Halloween (or as we like to call it, All Hallows' Eve) falls on October 31st. If Valentine's Day is about love and Memorial Day is about remembrance, then Halloween is about scares. **Magic** is first and foremost an intellectual game, but if the cards were just slabs of text with no artwork or themes

then **Magic** would just be generic strategy card game. This article isn't about game mechanics, and contains absolutely zero insight into strategy. It's about the intangibles that many people often overlook about **Magic**: The Flavor.

"But Ben", you might e-mail, "**Magic** isn't scary. It's got squirrels and *Unglued* and [Brown Ouphe](#)." I call shenanigans. If you think there aren't some truly spooky elements to **Magic**, then you (like many, many others) have not fully taken a look at the efforts that both the artists and creative team have put into creating a fully realized **Magic** card. Today we'll take a chilling look at some of the more morbid and macabre cards. And which color better to focus on than Black, the color that contains the best of creepy and crawly in **Magic**.

And with that... I give you the thirty one most frightening Black cards in all of **Magic**... otherwise known as...

## The October 31

### 1 [Abomination](#) - *Legends* (Artwork)

Abomination is a nearly shapeless mass of pink flesh. It retains vaguely humanoid features (you can see hints of an ear, and a nose bridge). This adds to its grotesque visage, since its flesh has been melted back in a permanent sneer around its mouth.



### [Abyssal Horror](#) - *Urza's Saga* (Flavor Text)

*It has no face of its own - it wears that of its latest victim.*

This is a being so foul that after it slays you, it skins the very flesh off of your face, and then adopts it for its own visage.

### 3 [Bellowing Fiend](#) - *Tempest* (Artwork)

Bellowing Fiend conjures up images of Cthulian horror, the tentacled beast whose very image causes insanity. The Fiend bellows a chorus of the damned from its demonic mouths, which emerge in multiples from nearly every open space on its head.

### 4 [Bog Imp](#) - *Seventh Edition* (Artwork)

Unlike previous incarnations of [Bog Imp](#), the Carl Critchlow version from seventh edition

interprets Bog Imp as a malevolent winged familiar which emerges from the shadows fully intent on causing harm.

**5 Braids, Cabal Minion** - *Odyssey* (Artwork)

Everything about Braids is pretty unsettling. From her purple lipstick/nail polish which matches her wide-open eyes, or her braided hair, to that sinister, maniacal grin she wears, everything about the dementia summoner screams 'do not follow this woman.' Braids would, in fact, make a great Halloween costume.

**6 Brood of Cockroaches** - *Visions* (Concept)

A lot of **Magic** cards portray a scene in action - meaning that a certain event is forever caught in midstream, with no definite beginning or end. This is a powerful tool of artwork, because any time you look at a particular piece of art, nothing is going to ever change. For instance, the man asleep on the bed in Brood of Cockroaches is forever going to have thousands of vermin creeping quickly up the side of his resting place, their antennae brushing up against his resting arm at the edge of his mattress. Whenever you pick up a Brood of Cockroaches, the victim will never have gotten away from the creeping horde of insects. He'll always be right there, eternally on the verge of being woken by a nightmare.



**Buried Alive** - *Odyssey* (Concept)

The point of view on this card is amazing. It's of someone (something?) being thrown into a makeshift grave, its hands already worn from trying to dig its way out. Formless, faceless men stand above the hole, covering up the victim one shovel full of dirt at a time. This piece conjures of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado."

**8 Carnophage** - *Exodus* (Artwork)

Most zombies are in a state of decay, but still have most of their flesh intact. Carnophage has literally been turned inside out, with wet sinew covering a frame of sharp teeth and bones.

**9 Contagion** - *Alliances* (Concept)

From the artwork and name of the card, one can assume that the cat in question was the source of the Contagion in this fort/town. Many features of this card lend to the aura of spookiness - first off, it's a black cat, which is a mythical harbinger of bad luck. Its eyes

are glowing bright yellow with no pupils - hinting that this cat is supernatural, or perhaps not a cat at all? How long has the town been like this, with bodies strewn across the floor as such? And what kind of disease has this cat brought that causes all flesh to melt from the bone so quickly?

10

**Cruel Edict** - *Portal 2* (Flavor Text)

*"Such a fragile organ, the brain." - Tojira, swamp queen*

A good example of suggestive flavor text. Judging from the artwork, Tojira is subtly taunting the helpless victim who has been bound to the pole. Why would Tojira say what she has spoken? It would reason that she is about to inflict damage upon the mind of her helpless adversary. Will she use **Magic** to erase portions of his brain? Will she bludgeon him with a club until his skull has fracture and gray matter oozes from his braincase? We never know, because the card only hints that she will harm his mind. This leaves the action mid-stream, so that whatever horrors are in store for the man are left solely up to the viewer's imagination.

11

**Darkling Stalker** - *Tempest* (Concept)

I love the concept of a half-naked barbarian, who appears to be slowly and attentively prowling across a well-lit dungeon, about to be devoured by a hellish creation which has taken the form of his own shadow and is poised to strike.

12

**Disease Carriers** - *Urza's Destiny* (Flavor Text)

*"Rath is a disease all its inhabitants carry."*

Rath isn't just a plane or a place. It's a germ which festers inside each and every living (and undead) being that resides within, eating away at their souls with every passing moment of time.

13



**Ebon Praetor** - *Fallen Empires* (Concept)

A giant mutated rabbit and a monkey-imp are dragging a blue-hued monster before a gas-masked praetor, who sits high on a pedestal writing a long list of the damned at the gates of a town engulfed in flames. This scene suggests a very portrait of hell itself, where an unsuspecting innocent has been dragged in front of a magistrate of the abyss and will soon be doomed to an eternity in this accursed village.

14

**Extinction** - *Tempest* (Flavor Text)

*"I once had an entire race killed just to listen to the rattling of their dried bones as I waded*

through them." - Volrath

One can only imagine what other atrocities Volrath has committed if, on a whim, he committed genocide against an entire culture just to take a stroll through their desecrated remains.

15

**Fetid Horror** - Ice Age (Flavor Text)

"Of the six who went down the Uuserk Trail to scout ahead, one returned. She clawed at her eyes and nostrils and sobbed with horror. I was curious about what she saw, but we chose another path." - Scout Eketet, final journal

The last part of this flavor text does it for me - Scout Eketet chose to take a different route than the one which rendered the initial scout incoherent with horror, and this caused his demise (his final journal). What evil could have been more ghastly than the one that was avoided to begin with?

16

**Grim Feast** - Mirage (Concept)

The monk-like figure is dressed all in white, except for stains of blood which run down the front of his shirt. He's eating the arm of...something. It's definitely not human, but it appears to have tried to crawl through a window to murder the monk (witness the knife in its remaining hand). Is the Monk trapped in this place, mad with hunger, assailed constantly by the legions of the damned? Does he have to eat the flesh of zombies in order to stay alive himself? The image suggests something a lot more than just a bald man committing cannibalism. It suggests a formerly pious man of the cloth driven insane by circumstances beyond his control.

17

**Hellfire** - Legends (Art)

This beautiful painting has a demon literally roasting the flesh off of his adversaries in an inferno of flame. To have an idea of just how hot these flames are, the one knight has been vaporized while in mid-swing with his sword, which still remains firmly in his grasp as his skeleton falls to the ground.

18

**Infernal Contract** - Mirage (Concept)

Infernal Contract portrays a man who has bartered away his soul for fleeting moments of power. Archaic runes adorn his before and after picture, with his youthful vigor giving way to the decay of his form. "But I signed nothing!" he cries, as his skin sags and droops off his bones, his face becoming unnaturally wrinkled and leathery in a mere instant. Taraneh has bartered his soul for power, and has lost everything.

19



**Lich** - *Alpha* (Artwork)

The classic portrait of evil in **Magic**. A lich is an undead mage who has been reanimated, but unlike skeletons and zombies, the lich retains all memories and intellect of its previous life. The lich portrayed here is poised to send a spell right at its intended victim.

**20** **Lobotomy** - *Tempest* (Concept)

Gaze upon the look of horror on this man's face. His mouth is opened in an eternal scream. Machines pry down his eyelids, and force him to look upwards at the blade which lowers down towards his skull. A light marks the spot where his scalp will be pierced, the knife boring first through bone and then pulpy gray matter. And forever will the man be there, waiting in horror, as both he and we cannot turn away.

**21** **Maggot Therapy** - *Mercadian Masques* (Concept)

It's unclear whether this man's arms have been turned into a writhing mass of maggots, or if they are merely covering his arms - but either way having a horde of teeming, writhing pupae burrowing away at your flesh cannot be the most pleasant of sensations.

**22** **Mind Maggots** - *Exodus* (Artwork)

Of all the artwork in **Magic**, this one has always made me squirm uncomfortably. Worm-like creatures are emerging from this person's ear, bringing with them a wet trail of brain tissue and mucous. I'd prefer not to dwell on this card.

**23** **Mind Ravel** - *Ice Age* (Artwork)

All you can see is a mage's semi-clenched hand, causing his victim's entire muscle structure to unravel. Whether it is metaphoric or physical, the image is unsettling.

Chainer **24** **Mutilate** - *Torment* (Artwork) has used his magic to warp the very physical structures of his very photo-realistic victims. One lady's hands have melded to her melted face as she screams. Men in the background have had limbs elongated at random. The person in the blue seems to be in particular pain, his neck unable to hold the weight of his head as he clutches to keep his windpipe from snapping in two.

**25** **Phyrexian Denouncer** / **Phyrexian Defiler** / **Phyrexian Plaque Lord** / **Engineered Plague** - *Urza's Legacy* (Concept)

*"The first stage of the illness: rash and nausea."*

*"The second stage of the illness: high fever and severe infectiousness."*

*"The third stage of the illness: muscle aches and persistent cough."*

*"The final stage of the illness: delirium, convulsions, and death." - Phyrexian progress notes.*

*"The admixture of bitterwort in the viral brew has produced most favorable results." - Phyrexian progress notes.*

What is most chilling about this sequence of flavor text from *Urza's Legacy* is how dispassionate the Phyrexians seem about their task of creating a plague. It's all business, without a hint of human compassion or feeling.

26



**Organ Grinder** - *Torment* (Artwork)

Organ Grinder's artwork had to be toned down because it was too gruesome. One can only imagine what that looked like, since this zombie is committing unspeakable deeds of desecration against his poor victim.

27

**Sengir Vampire** - *Torment* (Artwork)

"Empires rise and fall, but evil is eternal."

The flagship black creature in **Magic** gets a makeover in *Torment*. Unlike the original artwork, this reinterpretation gets a half-body shot, revealing bloodied claws and wild hair. Even more unsettling perhaps is its garb, which appears to be that of a high level aristocrat involved in a passion play. Blood dribbles from the corner of the vampire's mouth, ruining the collar of his shirt.

28

**Soul Collector** - *Scourge* (Concept)

Another vampire, but it's in direct contrast to **Sengir Vampire**. Whereas Sengir was ferocious and bloody, the **Soul Collector** is a sleek dominatrix who holds the chains which bind the faceless souls of her victims to her control. It's a very effective image, as every one of the men in the chain has a bloated body, suggesting that these are not their physical forms, but a representation of their astral forms. They are all hunched over in submission.

29

**Spirit of the Night** - *Mirage* (Artwork)

There is only one **Spirit of the Night**, and it appears to be a manifestation of pure nightmare. Its form is ever-shifting, its claws made of nightmare and darkness. One eye spirals in madness, the other glows with a dull yellow flame. Fangs appear from its mouth, sharply tuned and jutting out horribly.

30



**Torture** - Fifth Edition (Concept)

This piece is much like Lobotomy. The man has been marked like a butcher would mark a piece of meat being prepared for quartering. Different symbols adorn his body, in anticipation of what is to come. The card is named *Torture*, so one can only imagine what kind of scene will follow once the markings have been completed - and judging from the artwork, they are near done.

31

**Underworld Dreams** - Eighth Edition (Concept)

What would the dreams of the underworld appear to be? Bats emerging from the shadows, manifesting with no eyes and sharp teeth? Formless eyeballs growing from a mockery of a tree, gazing ever upwards towards the dreamers above? When a concept of horror dreams of horrors, what does it see?

And there you have it! The October 31. Hope you've enjoyed this stroll down Black's ghastly past.

---

Ben may be reached at [bleiweiss1@cox.net](mailto:bleiweiss1@cox.net).