

Shortfang the Odious

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Wednesday, September 08, 2004

There are many reasons I like this card:



The first reason that I like this card is that it serves, functionally, like another card that I quite like:



Cabal Interrogator is a great card to play against control decks, especially blue-white and green-white control decks with little or no discreet creature elimination. It just so happens that blue-white and green-white control decks of this type are among the most successful decks being played today; that Cabal Interrogator is so exciting against them and that of the core blue-white and green-white cards, the only *really* irreplaceable card rotating out while *Champions of Kamigawa* takes the place of *Onslaught* Block is Akroma's Vengeance, bodes well for Nezumi Shortfang.

The reason a card like Nezumi Shortfang is so effective against control decks with white-based removal is his cost. Playing first, you can drop a Nezumi Shortfang on turn two and neither a blue-white or green-white deck will typically have any response but to frown. Playing second, a blue-white player's only answers would be *Condescend* or *Mana Leak*, but only if he has two untapped mana on turn two (because he didn't main phase *Serum Visions* or anything), at least one of which makes blue mana. Against either deck, once the Rat Rogue comes down, you are looking at a minimum of two turns where the opponent is pretty helpless against your utility creature.

The white player's first option is typically going to be *Wrath of God* on turn four, and even then only if he makes perfect drops for four turns and draws the *Wrath*. If he doesn't have the *Wrath*, you should be able to force him to discard for several turns while he's generally unable to do anything about it. A Cabal Interrogator has the added bonus of being able to really strip down the opponent's hand, *Duress*-style, turn after turn. Many times that means that even if he has the *Wrath*, you can spend a little extra mana to take it away prior to turn four, basically winning the game with the Interrogator alone.

Nezumi Shortfang doesn't have the same kind of discard selection going into turn four, but if you play him on turn two, you are going to do a *lot* of damage to a white-based deck's ability to win the game, every time. A card putting pressure on the opponent's precious cards in hand this early is going to force him to make plays that he might not necessarily want to make, extend his threats without adequate protection or positional setup, and totally invalidate any kind of a permission plan. At his best, Nezumi Shortfang will disrupt not only the opponent's hand, but if he is trying to "hide" something, it will screw with the flow of his land drops as well. Note that a more expensive creature would not have the same kind of effect, even if attached to a bigger body.

Another reason I like Nezumi Shortfang is his rattiness. He's so rodentriffic. When I first looked at him, I thought that I was working with a variation on



rather than



Ravenous Rats actually has a very warm place in my heart. In 1999, competing in my first **Magic** National Championships, I removed the ubiquitous Duress from my mono-black beatdown deck and played Ravenous Rats instead. Ravenous Rats was a deceptively powerful disruptive card, like Nezumi Shortfang. He was a 1/1 for 1♠, like Nezumi Shortfang. He did not have the same kind of disruptive potential as Duress (which I moved to my sideboard), but he had this quality of getting the job done that Duress did not. You see, at the time, some of the best decks were either creature based, or their spells were very Duress-resistant, or both. Like against a Survival of the Fittest deck, either you successfully Duressed their Survival of the Fittest on turn one, or you were going to lose to it if it ever hit play (probably on turn two); similarly, against a mono-red burn deck, Duress was pretty weak because you could try to Duress an opponent with just a Shock in his hand and he would just Shock you anyway. Worse yet, if the opponent played Cursed Scroll, you could just end up speeding up his burn development by playing Duress, rather than taking away his burn.



Ravenous Rats, on the other hand lightly disrupted the opponent's stuff. Was he the best creature ever against Jackal Pup? No way. Jackal Pup cost half the mana and had twice the power of Ravenous Rats. But he sure got in the way of Jackal Pup. Nezumi Shortfang is the same kind of guy. He's not the best scrapper in the dojo but he gets in the way and can take a card or two on the way out. Nezumi Shortfang may be optimal against a board control deck without spot removal, but he can at least slow down the beats against a small creature rush deck. You would be surprised at how many games a good shark can steal by putting little speed bumps in the way of his opponent's focused rush.

That said, this Rat Rogue is also great with other Rats.

When you drop Nezumi Shortfang on turn two, all of your subsequent Rats become that much more painful for your opponent. Instead of knocking out just one card per turn or getting just a little card advantage from either a Nezumi Shortfang activation or a resolved Chittering Rats, you start taking turns with double two-for-ones. Because these roguish rodents are mucking up the ground at the same time, rat redundancy can simultaneously reduce the opponent's options (by hammering his hand) and complicate his decisions on the board.

Of course pounding down the rats and activating Nezumi Shortfang is going to inevitably lead to:



I really like Stabwhisker the Odious for his synergy.

A few years ago there was a dreaded deck called "Pox". Pox played (surprise surprise) Pox as well as Hymn to Tourach and Demonic Consultation. These cards together would ruin the opponent's hand

and put him in a position where he would die quickly. Why would he die quickly? Well, the Pox player might be beating him up with Steel Golem or Mishra's Factory, might be showing him cards with Cursed Scroll, but the really scary element was The Rack.

Man oh man was it hard to get out from under The Rack. It was a nightmare when the opponent had multiple copies (which he could easily set up with Demonic Consultation, whenever he wasn't finding a second Hymn to Tourach, which he usually was). The problem was that the opponent would demolish your hand. Already you would be in a terrible spot to stop his artifact creatures because, well, if you had no cards in hand, none of them could be Swords to Plowshares, now could they? But on top of that you had The Rack, which is almost impossible to get out from under when the opponent is busy killing you. If you have no hand it kills you; if you have no hand you probably don't have a very good way to build one up; if you hold back cards in hand to stop The Rack, he's just going to kill you with his guys, or more insultingly, make you discard them anyway.

Like I said, it was terrible in every way.

I don't like Stabwhisker the Odious because he works like The Rack. I like Stabwhisker the Odious because he works like TWO COPIES of The Rack. One copy of The Rack for three life is bad enough, but attach it to a 3/3 body, and your discard is doing double damage.

By himself, Nezumi Shortfang can win many games. Unlike Cabal Interrogator, because Nezumi Shortfang works as an instant, he could theoretically keep the opponent locked at zero cards indefinitely, playing as an answer on every draw step. While this is a great position to be in, it's no guarantee for victory -- at least not against another shark. Stabwhisker the Odious on the other hand doesn't mess around. He does his little backflip and makes an immediate impression on the board. If the opponent has a creature that was bigger than Nezumi's conservative 1/1, there is no guarantee he can push around Stabwhisker. If he doesn't, Mr. the Odious is just going to end him with 6 a turn or so, straight to the face.

Now, that's not to say there aren't challenges involved with this plan. Once Nezumi flips into Stabwhisker, he no longer has the ability to force discards. And if you have one Nezumi and one Stabwhisker out, and you use the Nezumi to make your opponent discard his only card, you'll suddenly have two Stabwhiskers, which (because of the new Legend rule) will mean you'll have no Stabwhiskers at all. So you do have to be a little careful, but that's only fair when you're dealing with an effect as powerful as this.

I really like Nezumi Shortfang. I like his similarity to other cards that have proven themselves in battle. I like his ratty flavor and synergy with his fellow vermin. I like his flipping over to do battle as a Legendary Rat Shaman with a bite like Ball Lightning and a butt like the two next best rats stapled together.

But none of those is why I *really* like Nezumi Shortfang.

When I first met my Wednesday co-columnist Adrian Sullivan six or seven years ago, I found him to be an eccentric of the first degree. You see, among Adrian's myriad unique trappings as a **Magic** personality -- and there are many, let me tell you -- the most potent is his playing of cards upside-down. Not upside-down like a Morph or a Mental **Magic** land... Adrian reverses the orientations of his



cards such that the *opponent* can properly read them and they are upside-down to him. He is about the only person I know who plays out his board like this.



I have seen innumerable hapless mages trying to reverse Adrian's cards so that they can get their own bearings, return to what is usual for them... but Adrian -- quite justifiably -- turns his cards back around, stating that he can organize his space and his cards on the table any way he likes, thank you very much. He is showing distinct tapped vs. untapped cards, library, graveyard, and so on, so everything should be more or less on the up and up. It's just a courtesy to his opponent, so that he understands what cards are doing what. That's it.

You would not believe the scratched heads and long faces this comparatively innocuous technique has accumulated over the years. The opponents think sluggishly, as though Nezumi Shortfang himself were working them over with his Disrupting Scepter-like bonking to the skull, as they motion from confused turn to more confused turn. It's sad really, and so ineffective is the typical opponent that Adrian has been known to play games of solitaire or even sketch out the next week's episode of Single

Card Strategies as the opponent vainly scratches his way through the topsy-turvy turn.

One particularly lamentable case involved the great **Magic** strategy columnist Eric Taylor in mortal battle with Adrian. Eric tried to play his cards upside-down *right back*, to sort of turn the waters around on this collision of sharks... but it was to no avail. Poor Eric became confused by even his own cards, and was forced to right them in the middle of the game just to get his bearings on half the board. And this man is quite a bright guy, mentor to the incomparable Pat Chapin, and even a Grand Prix Champion!

But now, with cards like Nezumi Shortfang, I think that the many helpless victims of The Corrupter's **Magic** mojo will finally be vindicated. Finally, Adrian may be forced to play his cards like everyone else, if only to avoid confusion. Nezumi Shortfang will take away all the opponent's cards in hand, but with those cards, he will take the gauze from their eyes. With cards all oriented properly -- as they would almost have to be -- these tortured souls will finally be able to figure out what is going on with those once backwards bits of cardboard. Of course they won't have any cards in hand and fewer options still, but that's hardly Adrian's problem, and certainly not Nezumi's.

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