

Transcendence

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Single-Card Strategies
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There are a lot of cards that fundamentally change the way that things work in a game. Night of Souls' Betrayal, for example, changes the lay of the land - every creature being a wee bit tinier (even if it is only a small, small amount like -1/-1) *really* does completely change the way that the game goes. When it comes to making decks with creatures, most people really do include a bunch of one toughness critters because they don't cost much. A card like Pyrostatic Pillar or Storm Cauldron can also completely change the tone of how the game gets played. Today's card is one of those environment-shifting cards in a different way.



Life means death

Like Vedalken Orrery or Mirari's Wake, Transcendence's effect is one-way, only working its magic on you. You might get the card right away, or you might need to reread the card to get exactly what it does. Essentially, Transcendence turns your life upside down - anytime you would get hurt, instead you are healed. Zero life doesn't kill you, and twenty life means death. Those last three words say it all, "Life means death". It is not a full reversal, though.

Yes, life means death, but only in one sense: gain enough life and you lose the game. Any damage you take after the enchantment comes into play is instantly translated into life gain (still doing the job that damage wants to do by bringing you closer to losing the game). So, one thing it does is undo all of the work that the offending opponent has done thus far.

Even without including any other cards to help it out, if played properly Transcendence can be pretty effective against the aggressive decks. Canceling out all of the damage that they've managed to take care of up until this point in the game is a pretty effective way of nixing any aggressive deck doing its job well. The simplest way to think about (and to play) Transcendence is to realize you are playing a thinking-person's version of Chicken. You might not be racing towards that cliff, but you are trying to decide just how far to go before you pull out. Wait too long and the game really will be over. Pull out too soon, and playing the Transcendence is just a big waste of time. To really play it right, what you need to do is get as close to that cliff's edge as possible, and stop just short of it, your opponent either eating your dust or flying over the cliff. The key is to anticipate whether or not the next turn will be enough to kill you, and stop just short of that.

Strange bedfellows

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A few years back, my friends and I were making decks for Standard. Because I'm me, we already had a bunch of decks packing a lot of heat, and most of these decks had decided to include Sulfuric Vortex in the sideboard. It was a pretty new card at the time and it accomplished a lot - Mirari's Wake decks, for example, could really stave off a lot of damage with even the smallest amount of life gain, especially if they copied it with Mirari. Sulfuric Vortex would nip that in the bud.

Of course, once you realize other people are going to figure out this same thing, you start wondering what you can do to stop them from wrecking you with Sulfuric Vortex. Oh, you could run Disenchant or other cards of that ilk, but you run into a problem. As King of Beatdown Dave Price would say, "There are no wrong threats, only wrong answers". Disenchant is an answer, and drawing it when you instead needed to kill a Goblin could lose you the game. Transcendence would be a threat.

Like any other time, you could play the Chicken game with Transcendence, plopping it down close to the edge of death and undo all of the Red deck's work. However, if you play it *after* a Vortex hits play, ladies and gentleman, you've just won the game.

Red has notoriously few ways to kill an enchantment. Transcendence turns any pain into (life)gain, and makes 20 life the point when you lose the game. Sulfuric Vortex refuses to let you gain life. The net result is that you can no longer die from damage. Without being able to gain life, you'll never be able to reach twenty. Whether you use the Transcendence to gain immunity to all of their damage or use it to simply reset the damage they have already done to you, you are running a threat, not an answer.

In a funny way, this combo with Sulfuric Vortex can easily evoke the image of another red card, Form of the Dragon. You might think that Form of the Dragon is the perfect card to pair with Transcendence, but unfortunately this is far from the case. At the end of every turn, your life total "becomes" 5. If your life is already lower than 5, you gain life the regular old way. If your life is higher than 5, sorry folks, but the judges all tell me some bad news: any change in life is still considered life gain or life loss, so losing that life becomes gaining it. If you were at 7 life, when Form of the Dragon tells you to become 5 (losing 2), you actually gain it and become 9. At the end of the next player's turn it happens again, and the "combo" of Form of the Dragon/Transcendence turns into a fast-track way to lose the game. The Red Enchantment you *really* want with your Transcendence cost three mana and is called Sulfuric Vortex. (PS: the same thing is true of Forsaken Wastes.)

Back to normal

While Transcendence is working its magic it is busy driving your life total higher and higher. As you approach 20 once again, you approach the time of your death. Get rid of that Transcendence, however, and everything is back to normal.

Now you're really playing Blackjack (albeit going for 19). Similar to before, you'll get the most out of Transcendence if you dance as close to that 19 without actually going over. When you get close, now is the time to get rid of Transcendence.

Blue is one of the truly natural pairings here. You'll be likely to want to relay your Transcendence later on, as your life total dwindles again, so bounce is perfect. There is always reusable bounce like Tradewind Rider and friends, but these cards might not be as reliable since they are on the table and your opponent knows you can do it. Boomerang is a great obvious choice here, as is Echoing Truth, if only because they can also be used to great effect on your opponent's stuff. One of the best choices, though, is Chain of Vapor. Not only can you bounce your own Transcendence for a single Blue mana, but if you're really hungry to bounce something else, you can do that at the same time, all for only a single land.



Enlightenment need not be permanent

Blue could always sacrifice it to a Read the Runes, but if you're looking for a color that is about sacrifice, it's really time to look to Black. While Blue has a ton of bounce cards that might make you be able to recast Transcendence, Black is jam-packed full of cards that might let you get some use out of sacrificing your Transcendence. Braids, as always, comes to mind, as does Greater Harvester. Reprocess is another great option, but the most powerful Black sacrificing card to use with Transcendence I'm going to cover is in the next section.

Red is often about sacrifice, but generally in a more reckless and less focused sense. In addition, with red you're generally talking about sacking land, or creatures, or artifacts. For enchantment sacrifice, about the most useful spell you're going to find yourself with access to is [Crack the Earth](#). With a bunch of work (say an [Opalescence](#) and a [Neurok Transmuter](#)), you can do things like feed your [Transcendence](#) to an [Atog](#) or [Shrapnel Blast](#), but that seems like a bit too much effort, don't you think? For a lot less effort, you can still feed it to [Shimatsu the Bloodcloaked](#) – throw in some of that mana you used to cast the [Transcendence](#) in the first place, and you'll be pretty likely to have a large Legendary Demon Spirit smacking your opponent around.

White and Green have a bit more going for them when you're thinking of getting rid of [Transcendence](#). Both can run cards like [Naturalize](#) or [Disenchant](#), cards which double nicely as potential disruption for your opponent's cards. Combine the two colors and run an [Aura Mutation](#) to pop out six 1/1s when the time is right. In the right deck, you can even use it as food for an [Auratog](#) or an [Endless Wurm](#). White does have one leg up on Green: a [Cataclysm](#) will reduce each player to only one land, artifact, and enchantment card; if you have another enchantment on hand, you can say bye-bye to a [Transcendence](#) that has outlived its usefulness and severely disrupt your opponent at the same time.

Even artifacts can get into the game. [Smokestack](#) can nibble it away. [Claws of Gix](#) is the real gem here though. It is cheap to activate and free to cast, making it a *great* insurance policy against losing to too much life as you take damage. The lifegain from [Claws of Gix](#) is the effect of the sacrifice, so there's no need to worry that it will kill you if you sacrifice the [Transcendence](#). In addition, the ability to sacrifice anything at anytime for only a single mana makes it easy to run a card like [Academy Rector](#), which not only can be an intimidating potential blocker, but can sacrifice to a Claw to get a [Transcendence](#) in a pinch.

A personalized life management system

Gaining life isn't the only way to think about managing your life. With a [Transcendence](#) out, the only direction your life can go is up: regular life gain is still life gain, and any life loss mystically becomes life gain. By careful management of when you play [Transcendence](#) and when you get rid of one, you can move your life total up and down depending on whatever is best in the moment.

Other than a card like [Claws of Gix](#), life gain really isn't that exciting in a [Transcendence](#) deck. As soon as you lay a [Transcendence](#), damage or life loss becomes “life gain” until you sacrifice it, making dedicated life gain seem a bit useless. Clever management of life loss is where it is going to be at.

You can always keep it simple with cards that simply deal damage. [Earthquake](#) and [Hurricane](#) can do this trick, but better is something that keeps on kicking. [Plague Spitter](#) is a great card for this, providing a body to swing in with as well. [Orcish Artillery](#) and [Orcish Cannoneers](#) are maybe a bit out of date if you want to be super competitive, but I'd feel wrong if I didn't include them for nostalgia purposes at least. Red is especially good at giving cards that will hurt everyone, so finding appropriate cards in that color is a breeze.

In Black, there are a ton of other cards that cost you a bit of life besides the [Plague Spitter](#). A [Phyrexian Scuta](#) also provides a big body for a little life investment. A bit better, though, are some of the card drawing spells. Everything from [Phyrexian Arena](#) to Seizan to [Skeletal Scrying](#) to the all-powerful [Necropotence](#) provide a way to turn your life into cards. The “Necro Hut”, [Sylvan Library](#), gets a mention here as an honorary Black card.

Don't forget the simplest of methods here: land. Pain lands and simple mana burn can be used to both drop your life or raise it once [Transcendence](#) is out. [City of Brass](#) is especially good in almost any deck with this card.

One really neat little trick is to simply mess with how [Transcendence](#) changes life totals. It does this as a triggered ability (the keywords to look for here are “when”, “whenever” and “at”), and that means this is something that can be [Stifled](#). If you are going to take a slew of damage while you have the [Transcendence](#) out, you can [Stifle](#) it from being turned into life gain. As Ben Dempsey proved in [Grand Prix Boston](#), [Stifle](#) is useful all by itself, but when you're [Stifling](#) something of your own that you can plan for, it can be even more useful.

Other neat little tricks



All you need is a little careful planning.

Stifle isn't the only card that makes for a neat trick with Transcendence. Here are some others:

Donate

Play the control game and don't really do anything to try to kill your opponent. Just try to stay alive. Lay the Transcendence to help you stick around long enough to Donate the Transcendence to your opponent. If they're like most people, they'll probably have between 16 and 20 life. Even the smallest push should knock them down.

Well of Lost Dreams

So, damage is life gain, huh? Combine these two cards and you have the equivalent of a super-powered Farsight Mask. Instead of one card for every *source* that damages you, what about one card for every *point* of damage you take? Just make sure you have the mana to pay for each card you're getting...

Lich

Let's go old-school. Here's the current Oracle text: "As Lich comes into play, your life total becomes 0. You don't lose the game for having 0 or less life. If you would gain life, draw that many cards instead. Whenever you're dealt damage, sacrifice that many permanents. When Lich leaves play, you lose the game." A lot of text, to be sure. What does it mean, though? Whenever you take damage, you lose the life for that damage, but the life gain that Transcendence would normally compensate you with turns into free card drawing. Just make sure that you don't lose too many permanents to your Lich! (Sadly, a Nefarious Lich replaces your damage, so it doesn't work like the original Lich does here.)

Wrapping Up

Here's a fun casual deck that makes use of a lot of the ideas I've talked about in this article. It's a Red/White deck that uses mutual damage to help keep the Transcendence in check.

Transcendence

61 cards

4 <u>Ruins of Trokair</u>	4 <u>Academy Rector</u>	4 <u>Transcendence</u>
8 <u>Plains</u>	4 creatures	4 <u>Earthquake</u>
4 <u>Mountain</u>		4 <u>Seal of Fire</u>
3 <u>City of Brass</u>		3 <u>Wrath of God</u>
1 <u>Tendo Ice Bridge</u>		2 <u>Claws of Gix</u>
4 <u>Battlefield Forge</u>		1 <u>Sacred Ground</u>
24 land		1 <u>Sulfuric Vortex</u>
		1 <u>Furnace of Rath</u>
		1 <u>Rune of Protection: Red</u>
		2 <u>Seal of Cleansing</u>
		3 <u>Price of Progress</u>
		4 <u>Chain of Plasma</u>
		1 <u>Pyrostatic Pillar</u>
		2 <u>Sensei's Divining Top</u>
		33 other spells

This deck has a lot of ability to keep control of the table. Burn can do the double duty of killing your own Rector as well. Including Sulfuric Vortex gives the deck the ability to lock out any deck that can't remove enchantments or deck you. Much of the rest of the deck is simply good tutor targets for the Rector and cards that can do a lot of damage to everyone. Your deck should be equipped to handle this damage when it lays a Transcendence and then removes it, but many opponents will not have that luxury.

Thanks everyone, and have a great rest of your week!



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