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Grave Pact



Adrian Sullivan · Single-Card Strategies
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When I was in Philadelphia I walked by the most ridiculous game of **Magic** I've seen in some time. I can't remember all of the off-duty judges in the game, but I do remember John Carter and Sheldon Menery laughing a bit as someone activated a **Soul Foundry** with **Dominating Ligid** imprinted on it, someone else sacrificed a **Tornado Elemental** to one of the incredibly complicated spells on the table, causing the **Tornado Elemental** to pop up on yet another judge's side of the table (thank to an **Endless Whispers**), only to have them sacrifice it yet again to some other weird rare card. And then everyone sacrificed a creature, and then passed around their creatures again thanks to that **Endless Whispers**.

"Why did you all sacrifice a creature?" I asked.

"Oh, well, he has a **Grave Pact** out." Sheldon replied.

"What? Where?"

Sheldon laughed and pointed to the *8th Edition* **Grave Pact**, which I hadn't recognized. "Did you guys make these decks just to be incredibly complicated?" I asked. "You judges must be a glutton for punishment."

"Something like that," said someone. Still, though, looking at the **Grave Pact** got my brain churning over memories.



A good first impression

The first time that I saw **Grave Pact**, I knew it was something exciting. *Tempest* Block was the format of the time, and fighting over resources could be a really big deal. I don't remember if it was Jacob "Danger" Janoska or Brian "World Wanderer" Kowal that finally put it to good use in a deck, but I know that all three of us pounced on it like starving dogs. It initially found its home in a Recurring Nightmare/Survival of the Fittest deck.


That Rec/Sur deck had all of the good traits that a good Grave Pact deck needs (even if it only ran one copy). It ran creatures, obviously, but it also expected them to die. As an added bonus, many of the creatures that it ran came with the added bonus of doing something before it died in the first place. In the best case scenario, I remember an **Uktabi Orangutan** taking out an artifact, blocking and killing a creature, and then finishing off some other creature when it perished thanks to the **Grave Pact**. Even if your opponent doesn't let you do this much, it's still capable of allowing this kind of cruelty to happen.

Items to consider when signing onto the Pact

How do I know what is expendable?

Any creature is expendable if your opponent has a creature out, but there are a ton of useful creatures that are also a wee bit more expendable in some fashion. Sometimes these are cards that can sacrifice themselves, hopefully to some useful effect, like a **Skirk Prospector** or a **Cabal Archon**. At other times, you're sacrificing a creature and getting something more out of it. Take that **Cabal Archon** – if you have out a **Rotlung Reanimator**, for example, you have the ability to turn any Cleric into a triple-punch: stealing four life, making a creature, and with the **Grave Pact** out, making your opponent sacrifice a creature.

But what if my opponent isn't running many or any creatures?

Well, if they aren't running any creatures, you'll have to work a bit harder to make the **Grave Pact** do what you'd like it to do. For the most part, though, most decks are running some kind of creature. Take the decks that kill with **Psychatog** or **Morphling**, for example. Both of these creatures can be quite hard to kill, depending on your deck, and can be quite deadly. With a **Grave Pact** out, you can have an abundance of extra potential creature kill. Even a **Birds of Paradise** and a completely empty hand can stave off the attack of a hard to kill creature. Anything difficult is fair game; whether it is untargettable or indestructible, the **Grave Pact** doesn't care. In the eyes of **Grave Pact**, all creatures are created equal, whether they are a **Darksteel Colossus** or an **Elvish Pioneer**. 

Well, I still care if my opponent doesn't have creatures!

This is a bit trickier, and requires a bit of dedication. The only thing you can really do is be prepared to give them some creatures. Simply giving them creatures with a **Forbidden Orchard** isn't that exciting, though. What you're going to want to do is turn their other resources into creatures that they are forced, then, to sacrifice when you lose yours.

The useful word on **Grave Pact** is “whenever”. “Whenever” is a magical word that signals a trigger is happening. Triggers can be responded to. For the most part, creatureless decks have something in common: they run abundant mass removal. After they've cast a **Wrath of God** or **Hideous Laughter** to mess up your plans, a bunch of your creatures will die and place **Grave Pact** triggers on the stack. At this point, try out a **Natural Affinity** – you could cast it in response to the mass removal and Armageddon everyone, but why not just have it hit your opponent as a one-way mass land-kill?

*Okay, so if they do have creatures, sacking my **Mogg Fanatic** will totally get 'em, right?*

Not exactly. Sacrificing a **Mogg Fanatic** or sacking a creature to **Phyrexian Plaguelord** can be awesome when you don't have the **Grave Pact** out, but unlike with the **Wrath of God** trick from up above, here the stack works against you. When you sacrifice the Fanatic, before the ability resolves, they get to sacrifice their creature to the **Grave Pact**. If you were going to try to kill something, they can just sacrifice that creature before your Fanatic-ping resolves.

There are other ways to compound your sacrifices into more effects. Using a card like **Innocent Blood**, you can get double duty out of their losses. Mike Flores [recently looked at](#) a new card, **Promise of Bunrei**. With **Promise** and **Grave Pact** in play, any sacrifice is going to give you a huge advantage as well as arm you with a whole slew of new little guys that are each willing to take a hit for the team. One other simple way to get more out of lost creatures is to drop a second (or third) **Grave Pact**. When your opponents are staring down the barrel of a pair of **Grave Pacts** with a couple of potential sacrifice outlets, even if they have a huge numerical advantage they are going to find themselves in trouble.

So this stack stuff seems to come into play here. What other stack tricks should I pay attention to?

As I mentioned with the **Wrath of God/Natural Affinity** trick, there is a tiny delay between the **Wrath of God** resolving and the **Grave Pact** trigger resolving. You can definitely use this to your advantage. Take a board situation like this: You have out a **Phyrexian Plaguelord** and a few

random rats. They have out a tapped **Elvish Piper**, more other elves than you have rats, and a pair of big guys (say a **Bosh** and a **Sundering Titan**). One **Hideous Laughter** will first wipe away both of your little guys, and *then* trigger the **Grave Pact**, cleaning house on the bigger creatures on the table.



Even better is a card like **Living Death**. Wipe the board clean of everything that's alive, and bring back everything that is dead. Of course, the **Grave Pact** in play won't trigger until the **Living Death** has brought everything back. Whatever creatures your opponent may have coming back, they still have to deal with all of the losses you've been subjected to from the **Living Death**.

One other clever trick is to have some tool for repeat sacrificing. Using a **Corpse Dance**, bringing back a **Bottle Gnomes** to block something, sacrificing it for life, and then forcing them to lose a creature is something that can be done again and again. At least until you run out of mana. **Recurring Nightmare** and other cards can pull off the same kind of thing, but without the ability to do it as an instant, you can't use it to monkey with the works at an awkward time for your opponent.

One non-stack trick involves collaborative deckbuilding for group games. If your teammates aren't running creatures at all, but you are packed full of creatures, you can make the card completely asymmetrical for your games. Whenever you lose a creature, everyone loses a creature. If, however, your teammates never have anything to lose, the only people that can truly lose out are your opponents.

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Wrapping Up

For your consideration, a monoblack Online-Extended Grave Pact deck.

Grave Pact		
Online-Extended		
60 cards		
20 Swamp	4 Ravenous Rats	4 Grave Pact
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Nezumi Shortfang	4 Cabal Therapy
3 Gods' Eye, Gate to the Reikai	2 Balthor the Defiled	4 Duress
	2 Marrow-Gnawer	4 Talisman of Indulgence
	3 Phyrexian Plaguelord	
	2 Patron of the Nezumi	16 other spells
24 land	3 Braids, Cabal Minion	
	20 creatures	

This deck uses **Ravenous Rats** and **Nezumi Shortfang** to get ahead in cards and also to make the other discard that much more potent. While there aren't many rats, **Marrow-Gnawer** doesn't need much to create a sacrifice engine for the **Grave Pact**. **Phyrexian Plaguelord** and **Braids** are both potentially able to be used for **Grave Pact** triggers, and also help give the deck a bit more oomph if you haven't drawn the **Grave Pact**.

There are some other random details about the deck that make it different. **Balthor** doesn't trigger the Pact when you sacrifice it, but it does bring back any of the creatures you've lost along the way to have another go at it. The three **Gods' Eye** were put in as another thing to feed to the **Braids**, and the **Patron of the Nezumi** is bound to be good if people are losing their permanents to either a **Braids**, a **Grave Pact**, or a **Phyrexian Plaguelord**.

Overall, the deck could go in a couple of different directions. You could turn it into a straight Rat deck, and easily convert it into Standard. The deck could go toward more of a **Braids** build, and potential include cards like **Rotlung Reanimator**. You could also squeeze in multiple colors. In Green, for example, you could fit in things like **Squirrel Nest**, **Genesis**, or **Birds of Paradise**. Then again, you could just go crazy like those judges in Philly, and include every complicated rare under the sun that you can get your hands on that will just make the **Grave Pact** a real head-

scratcher for all of your opponents. Whatever you do, it's easy to have fun when you have a **Grave Pact** on your side of the table.

Before I go, I'd like to tie things off with some feedback (and, yes, Diving_Griffin, the only use for the card is to have an image for us writers to be cutesy with). It looks as though the results of last week's poll are pretty clear. You like a little bit of commentary on what readers have had to say, but for the most part, you are happy with where it is, give or take. Here are some more exacting numbers, for the mathemagician in you.

In the end of the article wrap-up, do you want to see more reader feedback about the last article, less reader feedback, or about the same?		
About the same. A little bit here and there is okay by me.	1847	48.6%
More feedback. I always like to see a few more ideas!	1235	32.5%
Less feedback. No use beating a dead horse.	717	18.9%
Total	3799	100.0%

As there always is with previews of the new cards, there was a great deal of traffic in both the forums and in my e-mails. While there were truly a ton of really great ideas that were tossed around in both places, two, I think, deserve a bigger spotlight. In the forums, MavrikGandalf was the first to bring up **Ire of Kaminari**, beating out my e-mail box by a wide margin. There is probably a place for an Ire of Kaminari-Cloudhoof Kirin deck in the new Standard, I'd wager. The Kirin makes it very easy to have a much fuller grave, and it is also markedly easier to hit an Ire for 12 or even 16 than it is for 20.

Horobi's Whisper also drummed up a number of e-mails and more than a few mentions in the forums, but the person that expounded about it the most (and mayhaps the best) to me was probably my friend Ben Dempsey. I will paraphrase him:

One of the really interesting ideas with **Horobi's Whisper** was to pair it with **Dampen Thought** so that you can effectively Whisper until you're out of a deck. The problem with this is that you're never really planning on actually using that **Dampen Thought** to deck them, and you still need to both find Thoughts and have something to splice it onto. With a Kirin, you have a kill condition that naturally feeds your graveyard to make the Whisper good.

That Dempsey is a smart man. Not only did he make my favorite Extended deck of last season (the so-called "Temporary Solution"), but he's also a great guy to run into out on the town! Thanks to Ben and to everyone else who had something to say about the Cloudhoof Kirin.

In a couple of weeks, I'm going to try something a bit different. We've had plenty of Reader Challenges, and long-time readers are well aware of how that format works: I write about a card and in the next column, I go over the best decks with that card that you've all made out of the masses of decklists that reach my inbox.

I'd like to try something a little bit different this time. Instead of writing an article on a card and *then* having a deck challenge on it, I'm going to give all of you first crack at the card, without an article from me on it first. So, the next Reader Challenge will be on the card **Tortured Existence**. Send me your best Tortured Existence decklists. I'll spotlight *all* of the best decks that show how to use the card well, and pick my favorite one to show off to all of you as well. Now, one week isn't enough time, of course, and in two weeks I already have my card slot picked out, so three weeks it is! The very latest deadline is June 3rd for your Tortured Existence decks, but the sooner you send something in the more likely your deck is going to be picked. Here are the criteria I'm using to select decks for the article:

- The deck need not be focused on using the card, but it does use it well
- The way the deck uses the card shows off the card
- You include some comments as to why you chose that aspect of the card
- If you do include numerous decks, they show off different things
- Be original! The more interesting the deck is, the more likely it is to get showcased
- The early bird gets the worm – ties go to early submitters



Our newly returned Content Manager (back from [paternity leave](#)) had suggested a change-up like this some time ago, and I thought it would be worth seeing how it went now that he's back. I'll be sure to remind you all in the coming weeks about the upcoming Tortured Existence Challenge, but don't give away too many of your ideas to the other readers unless you want to see their decks up in the column instead of yours!

Have a great rest of the week!



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