

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Tortured Existence

Adrian Sullivan
Single-Card Strategies
Wednesday, June 8, 2005



Whenever you strike out and attempt something new, it can be a bumpy road. Sometimes the new thing will take the world by storm – take the iPod as a great example. Other times it will flop. Sometimes even these flops are pretty grand, though; Lewis and Clark never did find their water-only route to the Pacific, but they gave back plenty of value from their journey.

One of the reasons that I initially introduced the idea of a Reader's Challenge to the Single-Card Strategies column was a question of my audience. You readers are a pretty diverse lot. There are people out there who want to see quirky applications of cards, people looking for practical applications of cards, people looking for a laugh, people looking for a combo, people looking for an edge in their home game, or just people looking for food for thought. Most of us will not strictly be a Johnny, Timmy, or Spike.

I've been writing gaming articles for nearly ten years, initially for the game formerly known as Jyhad, and later for **Magic**. Getting decklists from readers has been one of the constants from the very beginning. By the time I wrote my second Single-Card Strategies article, I had received a *ton* of decklists from readers, and many of them had incredibly cool or innovative ideas. I just had to put them *somewhere*, and so the Reader Challenge (usually once every two months or so) was born. Some people really seem to have a knack for sending in the cool decklists – I've featured Denmark's Christian Moeller-Holst's decks several times now.

This time around, I've mixed up the Challenge so that it is the readers and their decklists that will make up the bulk of what goes into the article. The idea is to see what the Readers can come up with on their own, without anyone telling them beforehand what to look for. I'll let you decide which style of Challenge you prefer at the end of this article.

The longest journey begins with a single step

A few months ago, I was looking for a card topic for an upcoming article. One of the hard things about this column is that it focuses on a single card every week. This means you have to have enough to say about that card to make it worth an article. It also means that you generally can't write about a card that has been heavily covered already. Sometimes it is easy to get too close to the question of "What should I write about?" and not explore a card that really deserves close scrutiny. Abe Sargent's enthusiastic suggestion to use **Tortured Existence** was a lot like someone suggesting a favorite meal you hadn't had in a while. Thanks, Abe.

The Survival Connection – the lovers, the dreamers, and Squee

Tall.kid.with.glasses was the first to point out (mere moments after the first article went live) the connection between **Survival of the Fittest** and **Tortured Existence**. In a lot of ways, these two cards are the exact same card from different ends of the spectrum – the grave and the library. Obviously **Survival of the Fittest** is the more powerful card, since you start with a full library and a graveyard takes work to fill up, but the mere fact that they are basically working for the same effect is a big deal. **Survival** is one of the most powerful cards we've had in the game, and even if **Tortured Existence** is a "smaller" version, it's still got kick.

Survival is a great way to fill up your graveyard with creatures. If you get one creature in your hand, you can fill up your graveyard with whichever creatures are most suited to the situation. With **Tortured Existence**, anything that you've already found to be useful you can pull back to mess with your opponent once again. Tey Junyuan's Peasant **Magic** deck takes this selection angle to the utmost extreme, replacing **Survival** with **Worldly Tutor** and **Commune with Nature**. Either way, the idea is the same: if I have a creature and it was a problem, well, it will probably be a problem for the opponent the second time around too.

With or without **Survival**, a deck that is interested in discarding creatures often finds itself going to **Squee**. Discarding **Squee** usually feels like cheating. It's not like discarding it at all. Tall.kid.with.glasses's deck takes the **Tortured/Survival/Squee** angle and decides that it can also use a **Solitary Confinement**. With a **Squee** to fuel it, this is clearly an easy decision, and you should pretty much be able to get by reusing any of your creature cards.



WHAT IS MAGIC?
CLICK HERE!

TENTH EDITION PREVIEW

Windborn Muse

Creature — Spirit

Flying (This creature can't be blocked except by creatures with flying or reach.)
Creatures can't attack you unless their controller pays 2 for each creature he or she controls that's attacking you.

"Her voice is justice, clear and relentless."
—Abramo, angelic avenger

11 Days Until Magic Game Day!
-discuss-

San Diego Video Coverage

GLEEMAX

FIND OUT MORE!

PRODUCTS

Tenth Edition Future Sight

Tenth Edition Future Sight
All Magic products

RULES

Magic Core Game
Basic Rulebook
Comprehensive Rules
All Magic Rules

MESSAGE BOARDS

Magic All Magic message boards
magicthegathering.com forum

Rules Q&A forum
Magic Online announcements

MAGIC ONLINE

Download Now!
Magic Online III Launch Info

A Tortured Survival deck by Tall.kid.with.glasses

62 cards

NOVELS



Future Sight
Time Spiral Cycle, Book III
by Scott McGough and John Delaney

- 4 Wooded Foothills
- 4 Bayou
- 4 Scrubland
- 4 Forest
- 2 Swamp
- 2 Plains

20 land

- 4 Squee, Goblin Nabob
- 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
- 4 Birds of Paradise
- 4 Wall of Blossoms
- 1 Monk Realist
- 1 Monk Idealist
- 1 Uktabi Orangutan
- 1 Kagemaro, First to Suffer

20 creatures

- 4 Tortured Existence
- 4 Survival of the Fittest
- 3 Solitary Confinement
- 1 Pernicious Deed
- 3 Enlightened Tutor
- 4 Duress
- 3 Cabal Therapy

22 other spells

Tey Junyuan's Peasant Magic Tortured Existence Deck

60 cards

- 1 Plains
- 8 Forest
- 7 Swamp
- 2 Mountain
- 2 Island

20 land

- 1 Cabal Interrogator
- 1 Death's-Head Buzzard
- 4 Blood Celebrant
- 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
- 1 Kami of Ancient Law
- 1 Spore Frog
- 1 Ghitu Slinger
- 1 Waterfront Bouncer
- 1 Thought Courier
- 1 Bloodfire Dwarf
- 1 Matsu-Tribe Sniper
- 1 Thrull Surgeon
- 1 Keldon Vandals
- 1 Sparksmith
- 1 Blastoderm
- 1 Faceless Butcher
- 1 Yavimaya Granger
- 1 Master Decoy

24 creatures

- 4 Worldly Tutor
- 4 Commune with Nature
- 4 Reclaim
- 4 Tortured Existence

16 other spells

More on Squee

Squee popped up in decklist after decklist. This isn't a surprise. With a Challenge that already requires that you discard a creature, Squee is a natural choice. Squee changes the nature of almost any deck he is in. Plenty of cards suddenly become far more powerful if a Squee can be around manning the pumps for them. Aside from discarding him, other general graveyard filling gets a huge boost as well. Take one example, offered up by Minnesota's Zac Wendler:

Basically, this deck uses Squee and **Tortured Existence** to recur any creature it feels like recurring, usually put into the graveyard by **Sneak Attack** or **Gamble**. Believe it or not, this is a highly efficient way to burn through enemies, even in a multiplayer game.

Tortured Existence + **Sneak Attack** + **Squee, Goblin Nabob** = Mucho fun.

Here's a decklist of mine; it's Extended legal, and is a lot of fun to play, though it's not really fast enough to keep up with the likes of **Aluren** and **Desire**. For those of us that love Reanimator and Sneak decks, it's a little slice of heaven.



Slice of Heaven by Zac Wendler

63 cards

- 4 Sulfurous Springs
- 3 City of Brass
- 6 Swamp
- 7 Mountain

20 land

- 4 Laquatus's Champion
- 4 Squee, Goblin Nabob
- 4 Kokusho, the Evening Star
- 4 Flametongue Kavu
- 4 Rukh Egg
- 4 Eternal Witness

- 4 Gamble
- 4 Vampiric Tutor
- 4 Tortured Existence
- 4 Sneak Attack
- 3 Chrome Mox

19 other spells

Eric Markowicz's deck is a little bit more unfocused than this, but it brings up the idea of a **Sneak Attack** essentially ending the game. As soon as you use that big creature with **Sneak Attack**, any creature can become that big creature again thanks to **Tortured Existence**. Eli Rose sent in essentially a very similar deck that used **Slumbering Tora** instead of **Sneak Attack**, but the idea is simple: end the game quickly.

Torture/Sneak by Eric Markowicz

60 cards

10 Swamp	4 Pitchstone Wall	4 Sneak Attack
12 Mountain	4 Krosan Cloudscrapper	4 Tortured Existence
22 land	4 Colossus of Sardia	4 Pandemonium
	4 Devouring Strossus	4 Denizen of the Deep
	4 Draco	2 Vampiric Tutor
	20 creatures	18 other spells

A dash of salt – Astral Slide and Spirit Cairn

Astral Slide and **Spirit Cairn** were both popular subjects among readers as well. **Tortured Existence** could guarantee any of the cycling creatures you might draw could be brought back to your hand, feeding an **Astral Slide**. **Spirit Cairn's** trigger (on any discard) makes each and every activation of **Tortured Existence** a potential 1/1 flier for only one White mana. Kenneth took this angle to make a Black/White control deck with some interesting potential.

TorturedAstralCarn.dec by Kenneth

60 cards

3 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Ravenous Rats	4 Tortured Existence
7 Swamp	4 Undead Gladiator	4 Night's Whisper
4 Barren Moor	2 Chittering Rats	4 Vindicate
3 Secluded Steppe	2 Twisted Abomination	4 Astral Slide
4 Plains	4 Eternal Dragon	4 Spirit Cairn
3 City of Brass	16 creatures	20 other spells
24 land		

I agree with Kenneth that this deck isn't incredibly powerful, but it does show great integration of the white cards. **Tortured Existence** already can trigger the **Spirit Cairn**, but triggering an **Astral Slide** with Cycling has the added bonus of triggering **Spirit Cairn** as well. In a mid- to late-game situation Astral Rats can completely lock a player out of the game. If you tossed in a few **Krovikan Horrors** you stop being an Extended deck, but you do get the ability to have your own pseudo-Squee.

Soulshift

A completely different approach to the problem of creatures in hand is Soulshift. While a Squee or **Krovikan Horror** can keep your hand full of creatures, Jake Anderson's solution is going for a Soulshift chain.

Whenever you reach the bottom of the Soulshift chain, pitch the little guy to **Tortured Existence** for the biggest Soulshift guy and start the whole thing over again. **Thief of Hope** is a little champ in this deck.

The Little Champ by Jake Anderson

60 cards

18 Swamp	4 Wicked Akuba	3 Tortured Existence
18 land	4 Thief of Hope	4 Echoing Decay
	3 Gibbering Kami	3 Do or Die
	3 Scuttling Death	4 Death Cloud
	14 creatures	3 Guardian Idol
		3 Talisman of Indulgence
		2 Thran Dynamo
		3 Mox Diamond
		3 Chrome Mox

Personally, I would fit in a few more Soulshift creatures, but the deck is mono-black. Try including **Kami of Empty Graves** or **He Who Hungers**. Branching out into other colors might be the best bet, though. **Elder Pine of Jukai**, **Rootrunner**, and **Promised Kannushi** are all excellent choices.

Tortured Existence and Kirin

Russel Lunt's use of **Tortured Existence** to power-up his **Celestial Kirin** to the appropriate casting cost is particularly ingenious. One of the big problems with the Kirin (which are an otherwise impressively powerful cycle of creatures) is that they trigger at a very specific number. As a game draws out, you might no longer be able to have effective ways to trigger the appropriate number with your Kirin. **Tortured Existence** all but guarantees you the ability to do so.

Recurring Powderkeg by Russel Lunt

60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Brushland 4 Llanowar Wastes 7 Forest 3 Plains 3 Swamp 1 Island <hr/> <p>22 land</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder 3 Thief of Hope (3) 3 Dripping-Tongue Zuberera (2) 2 Celestial Kirin (4) 2 Kokusho, the Evening Star (6) 1 Ashen-Skin Zuberera (2) 1 Kiri-Onna (5) 1 Ghost-Lit Redeemer (1) 1 Squee, Goblin Nabob 1 Eternal Witness <hr/> <p>19 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Tortured Existence 4 Sterling Grove 4 Vindicate 4 Buried Alive 2 Kodama's Reach 1 All Sun's Dawn <hr/> <p>19 other spells</p>
--	---	--

While I might tweak the deck a little (**Sterling Grove**?), the basic concept is really quite clever. Russel's commentary on the deck is spot on: "If one can keep **Tortured Existence** in play, then the **Powder Keg** style recursion can begin, along with the sub-themes of recurring the man with Channel (for 4 life a pop), or setting up loops with **Thief of Hope** (with its soulshift 2 ability) and the Zubereras." Nice!

Confessor, Buried Alive, and Incarnations

Let's start with this Black/White deck from Andy Chen, and then get into it more.

Andy Chen

60 cards

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Caves of Koilos 11 Swamp 10 Plains <hr/> <p>24 land</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Confessor 2 Squee, Goblin Nabob 2 Karmic Guide 1 Doomed Necromancer 1 Devout Witness 1 Faceless Butcher 1 Bone Shredder 1 Nezumi Graverobber 1 Masticore 1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath 1 Desecration Elemental 1 Silver Seraph 1 Glory 1 Valor <hr/> <p>19 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Tortured Existence 4 Buried Alive 3 Cabal Therapy 3 Star Compass 3 Spirit Cairn <hr/> <p>17 other spells</p>
--	--	---

Andy writes:

The first notable engine is the use of **Tortured Existence** with **Confessor** and **Spirit Cairn**. For every ♠ spent, you are able to gain 1 life cycling through 2 creatures between your graveyard and hand, or alternatively, make 1 flying spirit at a cost of ♠♠. This can serve as a method of surviving the early game, or simply as the win condition with an army of 1/1 flyers.

The second strategy is to use **Buried Alive** to fetch your toolbox of creatures. The first **Buried Alive** you cast will mostly likely fetch the

2 Squeezes and 1 extra creature, so that you'll have 2 creature cards to discard every turn. Once this base has been established, you can set up a reanimation combo using **Karmic Guide** to return a fatty you placed in the graveyard to play. You can then neglect to pay the echo cost on the Guide so as to be able to retrieve it again with **Tortured Existence**.

Andy's use of **Confessor** is a great example of yet another card that you can take advantage of simply because of your ability to expect to be able to discard. In a pinch, just having a **Confessor** and Existence on the table at the same time can afford you a great deal of breathing room.

Buried Alive's mention as a tutor engine is also very relevant. By having access to potent creatures in your graveyard, a **Tortured Existence** can become increasingly similar to a **Survival of the Fittest**. Andy's deck includes a **Valor** and a **Glory** as potential tutor targets for the **Buried Alive**, but any of the Incarnations are fair game, especially **Genesis**.

More Traumatizing than being Buried Alive

Buried Alive is a precise way of filling your graveyard. **Traumatize** is a bit more like a sledgehammer. The big benefit of a card like **Traumatize** in filling the graveyard is that it is pretty darn good at it without risking decking death. Aaron Weiner's deck could use a bit of trimming down and a bunch more land, but it does showcase the idea pretty well.



Aaron Weiner

60 cards

<p>1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse</p> <p>4 Polluted Delta</p> <p>6 Swamp</p> <p>5 Island</p> <hr/> <p>16 land</p>	<p>4 Avatar of Woe</p> <p>4 Abyssal Horror</p> <p>4 Blood Pet</p> <p>4 Hapless Researcher</p> <p>4 Apprentice Necromancer</p> <p>4 Doomed Necromancer</p> <p>3 Blood Celebrant</p> <p>2 Balthor the Defiled</p> <p>2 Keldon Vandals</p> <p>2 Dark Hatchling</p> <p>1 Croxis, the Purger</p> <p>1 Ancient Hydra</p> <hr/> <p>35 creatures</p>	<p>2 Magma Giant</p> <p>4 Tortured Existence</p> <p>3 Traumatize</p> <hr/> <p>9 other spells</p>
--	--	--

Balthor and the pair of Necromancers can be used to get any of the big things back out quickly, but if you have the mana, a **Tortured Existence** plays out almost like a tutor. Even on fairly low mana, you can expect to be able to toss down an **Avatar of Woe** for the low, low price of $\{1\}$ and $\{1\}$ most of the time, leaving you plenty of mana to play other cards.

Madness – the best Myr Servitor ever

Madness is a natural pairing with **Tortured Existence**. Discarding a **Basking Rootwalla** to **Tortured Existence** essentially gives you a free creature back in your hand and a **Basking Rootwalla** on the table. Antonio Sanchez Puente took this idea as his initial inspiration and ran with it.

Well, let's brainstorm a little about **Tortured Existence**.

- **Tortured Existence** + **Basking Rootwalla** = return a creature almost free
- **Tortured Existence** + 2 **Basking Rootwalla** + **Phyrexian Altar** +
 - **Caller of the Claw** = infinite bears
 - **Pandemonium** = victory
 - **Fecundity** = infinite cards
 - **Genesis Chamber** = infinite creatures or infinite mana
- Instead of 2 **Basking Rootwalla** you can use **Myr Moonvessel** + **Myr Retriever**

Hum, this starts to look like a deck:

Tortured Rootwalla by Antonio Sanchez Puente

60 cards

<p>1 Phyrexian Tower</p> <p>4 City of Brass</p> <p>2 Bloodstained Mire</p>	<p>4 Basking Rootwalla</p> <p>4 Myr Retriever</p> <p>3 Myr Moonvessel</p>	<p>4 Tortured Existence</p> <p>3 Phyrexian Altar</p> <p>2 Pandemonium</p>
--	---	---

8 Forest	4 Birds of Paradise	4 Fecundity
1 Mountain	2 Caller of the Claw	3 Fireball
4 Swamp		4 Genesis Chamber
	17 creatures	3 Tainted Pact
20 land		23 other spells

At the very worst, **Tortured Existence** and **Basking Rootwalla** is the best **Myr Servitor** ever.

More of a good thing

Sometimes you don't really need to do anything tricky or funky. You just want more of a good thing. Fabio B's **Zombie** deck might want to bring back a **Graveborn Muse** for the card advantage or a **Festering Goblin** for the defense. At the very end of the game, though, sometimes you just want to use a **Gempalm Polluter** a few times to finish your opponents. Here is his deck.

Fabio B		
60 cards		
4 Unholy Grotto	4 Gempalm Polluter	4 Tortured Existence
4 Peat Bog	4 Graveborn Muse	4 Zombie Infestation
12 Swamp	4 Festering Goblin	4 Vampiric Tutor
	4 Twisted Abomination	4 Plunge into Darkness
20 land	4 Carrion Feeder	2 Umezawa's Jitte
	20 creatures	2 Sword of Light and Shadow
		20 other spells

Revisiting Breakfast and a couple of other noteworthy cards

A long, long time ago, Paul Barclay made waves with his incredibly complex combo-deck "[Full English Breakfast](#)". Tuomas Vanhanen revisits the idea.

Essentially, **Volrath's Shapeshifter** makes use of one of the best features of **Tortured Existence**: the ability to reorder the graveyard. First let's look at his Extended Legal reworking.

Full English Breakfast (by way of Finland) by Tumoas Vanhanen		
60 cards		
4 City of Brass	4 Volrath's Shapeshifter	2 Mox Diamond
4 Underground River	1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath	3 Tortured Existence
4 Flooded Strand	1 Phage the Untouchable	4 Vampiric Tutor
2 Plains	1 Eternal Dragon	4 Compulsion
7 Island	1 Kira, Great Glass-Spinner	13 other spells
3 Swamp	1 Evil Eye of Orms-by-Gore	
24 land	1 Radiant's Dragoons	
	1 Bone Shredder	
	1 Morphling	
	1 Twisted Abomination	
	1 Shoreline Ranger	
	1 Gravedigger	
	1 Arcanis the Omnipotent	
	1 Visara the Dreadful	
	2 Godo, Bandit Warlord	
	2 Raven Familiar	
	2 Squee, Goblin Nabob	
	23 creatures	

Since the discard of the **Tortured Existence** is a cost and **Volrath's Shapeshifter** always has the statistics of the top card of your graveyard, you can accomplish some pretty crazy feats with the two cards in play. Tuomas's version was but one of many, but I thought his was especially fun. Israel Sioson's version includes two other angles on **Tortured Existence** that are pretty important.

Full English Breakfast (by way of Manila) by Israel Sioson		
60 cards		

2 Island	1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath	4 Brainstorm
4 Polluted Delta	1 Avatar of Woe	4 Duress
8 Swamp	1 Gigapede	3 Intuition
2 Tainted Isle	1 Nullmage Advocate	3 Reanimate
4 Underground River	2 Phage the Untouchable	4 Tortured Existence
	3 Volrath's Shapeshifter	3 Unearth
	4 Withered Wretch	4 Vampiric Tutor
20 land		2 Chrome Mox
	13 creatures	
		27 other spells

First of all, Israel includes **Intuition**, similar in many ways to **Buried Alive** in giving you options for **Tortured Existence**, but better in a few ways. First of all, the card can actually *find* an Existence. In addition, not only is the card an instant, but it gives you the same access to any three creatures you might want that a **Buried Alive** does, but it leaves one of them in your hand.

Reanimation is the other important thing to think about. Much like Eric and Zach's use of **Sneak Attack** or the use of **Elvish Piper** sent to me by the Sky View High School Gaming Club, reanimation in any form works quite well with **Tortured Existence**. **Tortured Existence** is not only an incredibly efficient means of getting a card into your graveyard, but it has the added bonus of having a potentially useful effect to take advantage of. There were lots of submissions that included reanimation in some form (most usually with the excellent **Nezumi Graverobber**), and it is important to keep this element of the card in mind when looking at it.

The Challenge Champion

Well, I have to say the readers did a great job really hitting the elements that make **Tortured Existence** such a noteworthy card. Everyone that participated really deserves a bit of applause. There certainly were a lot of great decks of course (with "Astral Existence" by krizc coming in a close second), but this one actually made me laugh out loud.

Gnawed Thoughts by idiotic_puppy		
60 cards		
4 Llanowar Wastes	4 Throat Slitter	4 Tortured Existence
11 Swamp	2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi	4 Duress
7 Forest	2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	4 Cabal Therapy
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	4 Birds of Paradise	
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Basking Rootwalla	12 other spells
24 land	4 Arrogant Wurm	
	4 Wild Mongrel	
	24 creatures	

I'll let the deck's creator talk about it.

The initial intention is to abuse the madness mechanic of the already proven beaters that are Rootwalla and Wurm. Discard one to retrieve a lost critter and play your madnesed critter all in one. Mongrel helps to make Madness more consistent in the occasion Existence can't join the fun. Since Existence puts us into heavy black I looked for ways for both of these facets to interact. While brainstorming this issue, I just so happened to be channel suffering and there on my TV was my answer in the form of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Master Splinter!!!

Yes, Ninja Rats would make the perfect match. I want to restock on my Madness critters, so bouncing them seems like a great option. The deck wants a little acceleration, so the Birds are a natural addition (not to mention that it's a creature to sac later on to the existence or a flyer to get a ninja by). I filled the deck out with the best disruption Black had to offer, liking the interaction Therapy has with the decks theme.

That's my thought, hope I make it in the article.

Well said, and congrats on your winning decklist.

Wrapping Up

So, there you have it. Our first "Reverse" Reader Challenge. I'd like to close this week's article short and sweet, and leave you with a question.

Which kind of Reader Challenge do you like best?

I prefer [the old format](#), where you cover the card yourself first in an article, and *then* the readers send in their ideas.

Out with the old, in with the new! I prefer when you don't cover the card at all and let the readers have the

first crack at it. Reverse Challenges for me, please.

Either way. It's all the same to me, fella.

Submit my Vote

Have a great rest of your week.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Adrian Sullivan](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

