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Life and Death

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Making Magic
Monday, October 24, 2005



Welcome to Golgari Week! As I explained two weeks ago ([during Selesnya Week](#)), [magicthegathering.com](#) is planning ten theme weeks during Ravnica block dedicated to the color combinations of the ten guilds. For each of these theme weeks I am planning columns examining the philosophy of the interactions of the two colors. (This is a follow-up to a series of articles I did on the individual color philosophies – click here for [white](#), [blue](#), [black](#), [red](#), and [green](#).) Today is, of course, black/green.



As I explained in my Selesnya column, I'm not going to be talking about the Golgari in particular (check out Matt Cavotta's "Taste the Magic" column Wednesday for that) but rather I'm going to explain the philosophy of the color pie intersection. To start, let's take a look at the questions I plan to examine during each of the guild weeks:

- What do the two colors have in common?
- How do the two colors differ? What is the guild's internal conflict?
- What does the guild care about? What is its end goal? What means does the guild use to achieve these ends?
- What does the guild despise? What negatively drives the guild?
- What is the color's greatest strength and biggest weakness?

Now that I've explained what I'm going to do, I guess it's time to do it.

What do the two colors have in common?



Last time I examined an ally color pair. This week I'm looking at my first enemy color pair. The commonality of two enemy colors is a little more of a challenge. The key is examining the conflict between the two because these are the two colors that put value on that particular conflict. Take green and black, for example. (I mean, it is Golgari week after all.) Their conflict is a fundamental one, the conflict of life and death.

Green is focused on growth. It promotes the life force of nature. It wants things to evolve and prosper. Black, on the other hand, isn't about building things up. Black is about breaking things down. Black, in its focus on the individual, seeks power by destroying that which stands in its way. To achieve this goal, black, in its unflinching willingness to harness whatever force will advance his quest for power, latches on to the awesome power of death and decay.

How could two colors working at such opposite ends have anything in common? First, as I said above, they both turn to the same primal forces. As such, they are the two colors that have an appreciation for the cycle of life. And they are the two colors that most take advantage of abusing this cycle. Green and black, for instance, are the two colors most adept at manipulating the graveyard and taking advantage of its resources. They are also the two colors that use their link with the graveyard to make use

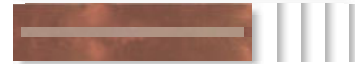
of recursion, consistently reusing their threats.

Second, these two colors share a resiliency to withstand the forces of death. This is why regeneration is found in these two colors. In addition, these are the two colors that most easily build themselves up over time. The best example of this is the +1/+1 counter. No other color pair makes more use of the +1/+1 counter than these two colors, most often using it as a means to represent their ability to strengthen themselves through adversity.

As you will see as we examine the enemy color pairs, it is interesting how enemies, while diametrically opposed, act in a very similar fashion.

How do the two colors differ? What is the guild's internal conflict?

If ally pairs shine in their commonality, enemy pairs take their spotlight in their difference. Green and black attack their respective goals from the opposite side of the spectrum. Green builds. Black destroys. Green is symbiotic. Black is parasitic. Green's motives are global and far-reaching. Black's motives are completely selfish. Green wishes to keep the status quo. Black wants to warp the world to its favor.



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Last time I talked about how green/white shared a common goal but differed in the way they chose to accomplish that goal. Black/green is torn not by the means it tries to accomplish the goal but more so by the very nature of the goal itself. Black/green fights for the larger community and for itself. It wants life to thrive but in a way that benefits its own advancements.

Black/green's conflict is that it wants two different things. It fights to try to accomplish these two different tasks through singular action. In fact, it is this desire to marry two divergent goals that gives the color combination its focus.

What does the guild care about? What is its end goal? What means does the guild use to achieve these ends?

So what exactly is this goal? To understand it, let's take a look at the two goals of each color. Black seeks power. Black wants the world to conform to its own selfish needs. Green seeks growth. It wants to allow nature to evolve unhindered. How do these two goals merge? Simple, by taking a black outlook of the forces of green. Black understands that there are many aspects of nature. If you want nature to succeed in its growth, you have to be selective in the parts of it you nurture.



The strongest elements of nature are those that are the most ruthless, be it a weed, a fungus or a plague. If nature is to fight back against the forces that oppose it, it doesn't have the luxury of subtlety or gentleness. To succeed nature has to get down and dirty, unleashing the most virulent weapons at its disposal. In addition, nature has to come to grips with one of the most primal forces at its fingertips, death. Nature can kill very easily. Don't be scared of it. Embrace it.

Finally, black/green realizes that nature's secret weapon is its ability to recover from harm. If you recognize death as but a piece of the bigger picture, you realize that nothing can ultimately stop you. Sure, things can slow you down temporarily, but combine growth with death and you start creating an unstoppable army.

In the end, black/green embraces green's desire for growth with black's willingness to do whatever it takes to succeed. Black/green is unafraid of harnessing the darkest forces nature has to offer. Combined with the ability to regrow itself, black/green has an army that won't stop until it is victorious.

What does the guild despise? What negatively drives the guild?

To understand what an enemy pair despises, we need to look at the other enemies of each color and see what they have in common. Black's other enemy is white while green's other enemy is blue. What is the overlap between blue and white? A desire for a sense of order and purpose. White and blue seek to control the world through strict laws and rules. Black/green doesn't want that. It doesn't want outside forces upsetting the natural order. No, only it gets to harness the primal forces of nature.

Black/green hates any desire to confine or restrain nature. As such, it uses its deadly arsenal to attack civilization. It breaks down any type of order that it feels is self-imposed. Black/green doesn't sit around waiting for threats to attack it. Rather it takes the offensive, slowly eroding the forces that will cause it harm.

What is the color's greatest strength and biggest weakness?



Black/green's greatest strength is that it's virtually unstoppable. Its threats cannot be vanquished. Sure, you can destroy pieces of it, but others will always return to take its place. Like a weed or a virus, black/green constantly searches for new ways to continue spreading, adapting whenever necessary.

Black/green's greatest weakness is its lack of control. The very qualities that make it so hard to contain also make it almost impossible to mastermind. The plague that is unleashed takes on a life of its own. This means that often black/green doesn't always accomplish what it sets out to get done. Sure, it gets in the ballpark, but the lack of pinpoint control keeps black/green from having the finesse of many of the other color combinations.

Grow For Me

During each color combination column, I plan to spend a section looking at some misunderstood facet of the *Ravnica* guild that goes with that color combination. For black/green I thought I'd address confusion about the difference between the growth used in the Selesnya guild and that used in the Golgari guild. In white/green growth is a manifestation of a group's overall power. Growth comes from expanding one's creature base. Growth in black/green is not about the group but the individual. Black/green's growth is more about watching a single creature get more powerful over time.

Mechanically, the easiest way to think about this is that white/green makes strong use of token creatures while black/green is much more focused on +1/+1 counters. White/green grows horizontally. Black/green grows vertically. White/green grows the army. Black/green grows the monster. This, for example, is why the Golgari don't have a spell that trades life for creatures. (Not that it's a bad spell and I guarantee one day you'll see it.) Black/green overwhelms the opponent not by attacking with a swarm of different creatures but rather the same creatures again and again. Like white/green, the build-up can be slow, but when the process is finished black/green ends up with a number of very scary cards.

The Plague Unleashed

And now comes the fun (and controversial) part where I give examples from pop culture of the guild.

Poison Ivy – This is one of Batman's villains. She is an eco-terrorist that believes that mankind is detrimental to nature. As such, she uses nature to strike back at mankind. Her favorite weapon is poison (she's immune to poison for those that care). Her motives are a little less greedy than the average villain yet still follow a very selfish desire on her part. Mess with nature and she'll see to it that nature messes with you, most often killing you if she has her way.

Venom – This is one of Spider-man's main villains. He is an alien symbiote that attached itself to a human host. Both the alien symbiote and the human host hate Spider-man. Venom is very feral in nature, taking on many animalistic properties. At the same time, he is very self-centered, particularly in his hatred of Spider-man. Venom is vicious yet flexible. He is ruthless while also being tenacious. No matter what Spider-man throws at him, Venom keeps on with his almost mindless quest to destroy Spider-man. Venom is a force of nature bent on destruction.

Villain from "The Twelve Monkeys" – SPOILER – IF YOU HAVEN'T SEEN THE FILM "TWELVE MONKEYS", STOP. GO SEE IT. IT'S VERY GOOD. COME BACK ONCE YOU'VE SEEN IT BECAUSE I WOULD HATE TO SPOIL THE MOVIE – Okay, everyone reading this part has seen the movie? Good. We can continue. The villain in the film purposefully exposes the world to a deadly plague. His motivation is never spelled out exactly but it appears, to me at least, that his actions are very purposeful. He is doing it not out of vengeance but rather for some agenda. I think he believes what he is doing is necessary. That the plague has a need to be released. If I'm correct, this is quite black/green.

Militant Environmentalist – I'm talking about the people that go around killing people in order to keep them from killing animals or destroying swaths of nature. I'm including this group because I want to demonstrate that not every black/green group is an out and out villain. While I think this group is somewhat misguided (I never got killing as a means to prevent killing), it is clear that their goals are more about preserving nature than gaining power. (For those that care, this is more of an example of green using black's means than black using green's means.)

Weed Wacking

And thus we come to an end of guild theme column #2. Hopefully, this has given you a better sense of what the Golgari and company are all about.

Join me next week for a look back at two years of making **Magic**.

Until then, may you let leash a plague of your own.

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*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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