



A Nightmare To Remember

Evolution of the Garfield stranglers

Mark Rosewater

Since I spent my time last week introducing the site, I thought I'd start this column introducing myself. (If you already know this stuff, talk amongst yourselves – here's a topic: Who would win in a fight between Urza and squadron of Phyrexian-enhanced beebles?)

My name is Mark Rosewater. I have one of the coolest jobs in the world. I make **Magic** cards. Technically I'm a "senior designer in the Research & Development department at Wizards of the Coast," but who's kidding who? I make **Magic** cards for a living. I have worked here for six years and was doing freelance work for Wizards for a year and a half before that. I have designed at least one card for every **Magic** expansion from *Alliances* forward and was the lead designer for *Tempest*, *Unglued*, *Urza's Destiny*, and *Odyssey*. I am also currently the lead designer for the large expansion for the fall of 2003, code-named "Bacon" (and followed by its expansions "Lettuce" and "Tomato").

I am married to a wonderful woman named Lora and have a cute twenty-one-month-old daughter named Rachel. Before working at Wizards I worked in Hollywood as a TV writer and, yes, the rumors are true: I used to be on the writing staff of "Roseanne." (The one where she meets Wayne Newton - I wrote that.)

Every week I will be writing this column to give you all an insight into the **Magic** design process. Randy Buehler will be talking about **Magic** development every Friday. What's the difference between design and development? For the long answer, read our columns every week. The short answer is this: There are two distinct jobs in creating **Magic** cards. The first job is the one where people sit around thinking "what can we do?" Those people, the designers, are thinking outside the box, trying to break boundaries and expand the game. Their job is to make the game fun. The second job is the one where people sit around thinking "what *can't* we do?" Those people, the developers, spend all their time making sure things are balanced and costed properly so that the "fun" cards don't destroy the game. Their job is to make the game fair.

The reason these two jobs are separated is because they often work at odds with one another. A designer restricted by development concerns creates bland cards. A developer embracing design ideals allows degenerate environments. Neither is good for the game, so R&D has wisely chosen to separate the two roles. This column is an insight into the first group while "Latest Developments," Randy's Friday column, is an insight into the second. The two columns in combination will give you a good sense of how **Magic** is made.

Whew! We've made it through my intro. Anyway, welcome to Nightmare Week here at MagictheGathering.com. Here's how this works. About twice a month, we pick a theme and toss it at all our columnists to see what cool stuff they can come up with. This week the theme is nightmares, one of the new mechanics from *Torment*.

Nightmares are creatures with the following ability: When a nightmare comes into play, a player (most often your opponent) loses some resource (such as life, creatures in play, cards in hand, etc.). When the nightmare leaves play, that player gets the resource back. To the right is a sample card.

By the way, Anthony Longi, Tuesday's columnist, doesn't know I'm showing you this card, so shhhhh! Don't tell him.

Since I'm the "design guy," I thought I would use this column to take you all on a little journey into the world of R&D. Nightmare mechanic, come on down! This is your life!

GENESIS OF A MECHANIC

The nightmare mechanic started as a glimmer of an idea in the mind of an up-and-coming young game designer named Richard Garfield. In case Richard's name is not familiar, here's his **Magic** bio:

He made **Magic**!

Not resting on his laurels, Richard has been responsible for numerous more recent mechanics in **Magic** including buyback (from the *Tempest* expansion), cycling (*Urza's Saga*) and threshold (*Odyssey*). I had the honor to work with Richard on the design of *Tempest* so I was happy to bring him aboard when he said he was interested in working on *Odyssey*.

Early in any design process, I encourage all the members of the team to submit any random card ideas they've created. On April 3, 2000, Richard sent me a file simply entitled "Magic Design Scrapbook – RG." In it, Richard listed a number of cards he had been working on over the previous few weeks. In the list was a series of cards which slowly morphed their way into the original nightmare mechanic (then called strangling). The cards were listed in the order he created them, so let me walk you through the evolution of the relevant cards.

First, was a set of white creatures:

Lifeman



Creature – Aide

1/1

Gain 4 life when Lifeman comes into play. Lose 4 life when Lifeman leaves play.

Lifeknight



Creature – Knight

2/2

Gain 6 life when Lifeknight comes into play. Lose 6 life when Lifeknight leaves play.

First strike.

Lifeangel



Creature – Angel

4/4



Gain 12 life when Lifeangel comes into play. Lose 12 life when Lifeangel leaves play.

The life creatures had a simple flavor: They brought temporary strength to their summoner. These cards were most likely influenced mechanically by some earlier cards in blue such as [Illusions of Grandeur](#) from *Ice Age*. These illusion-themed spells granted their summoner a temporary bonus as long as the illusion kept hold.

THE BLACK REFLECTIONS

The next evolution requires a little info about Richard. You see, Richard is a big fan of "mirrored" spells – that is, two spells that are reflections of one another. (Examples from *Alpha* – what one could call Richard's best set – are [White Knight/Black Knight](#), [Blue Elemental Blast/Red Elemental Blast](#), [Deathgrip/Lifeforce](#), etc.) As such, Richard came up with a way to mirror this ability in black:

Deathman



Creature – Aide

2/2

Lose 4 life when Deathman comes into play. Gain 4 life when Deathman leaves play.

Deathknight



Creature – Knight

3/3

Lose 6 life when Deathknight comes into play. Gain 6 life when Deathknight leaves play.

First strike.

Deathangel



Creature – Angel

6/5

Lose 12 life when Deathangel comes into play. Gain 12 life when Deathangel leaves play.

From there, Richard came up with another tweak. What if the black creatures forced your *opponent* to lose something instead of you? This thought process led to the next two cards:

Strangleman



Creature – Aide

1/1

Opponent loses 2 life when Strangleman comes into play. Opponent gains 2 life when Strangleman leaves play.

Strangleknight



Creature – Knight

2/2

Opponent loses 3 life when Strangleknight comes into play. Opponent gains 3 life when Strangleknight leaves play.

First strike.

Richard and the *Odyssey* design team quickly came to the conclusion that the strangling mechanic was the most interesting.

As a quick side note, I would like to point out that the design process often works like this. Many printed cards and mechanics evolve from earlier rougher ideas. Sometimes the worst cards are stepping stones to the best ideas.

The *Odyssey* design team set about creating a number of cards for the design file. At first we created a common creature, an uncommon creature, and a rare creature. We later added a second common creature with flying. In creating the strangling creatures, we did three things. First, we synced up the life loss with the creature's power. This was done partly for flavor and partly to make it easier for players to remember the life loss. Second, we smoothed out the life losses so they ranged from 2 to 8. And third, the design team changed the creatures' mana costs as Richard's original costing proved way too low.

Here are the creatures as they were turned in during *Odyssey* design (back when the set was still known as "Argon"):



The more we played with the cards, the more the team enjoyed the nightmare mechanic. So much so, the team began designing cards to expand upon it. If life strangling was interesting, why not strangle other things like creatures or cards in hand?

The original plan was to do life strangling in *Odyssey*, and then creature and hand strangling in *Torment*. Various other types of strangling were to go into *Judgment*. But then *Odyssey* went to development.

FINDING A HOME

It turned out that the *Odyssey* team had bitten off a little more than it could chew, and had stuffed the set with too many mechanics. During the weeding-out process, the nightmare mechanic was removed. In *Torment* design, the set's lead designer, Bill Rose, thought the nightmares would be a perfect mechanic for the black-heavy set. He took all the design team's card ideas, plus a number of his own, and put them into the *Torment* design. And thus, all of you get to enjoy the nightmare mechanic.

That's all for this column. Stay tuned to the site all this week as each columnist takes their whack at the nightmares. There will be a few more card previews as well as a number of cool nightmare tricks you can learn.

Next week: Why *Torment* turned black and the long awaited details on how all of you can make a**Magic** card.

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.