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Making Magic Monday, February 4, 2002

Here's Looking at You, Squid



Mark Rosewater

Move over, merfolk

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Welcome to Cephalid Week here at MagicTheGathering.com. Before I start talking about our aquatic, tentacled friends, I wanted to make a quick comment about last week's column (on why R&D makes "bad" cards). I was happily surprised by the volume and overall friendly tone of all the responses I received. One of the major reasons I started "Making Magic" was to create a forum where I could explain R&D's thought process on many key issues to all of you. I plan on tackling a few more thorny issues in the months to come, so stay tuned. Next up, incidentally, (based on many responses in the bulletin board thread and in my inbox) will be how we choose which cards are rare. Please be aware that I work several weeks ahead, so don't expect to see this article until late February.

Also, if you have an issue that you feel needs addressing, please write me at makingmagic@wizards.com. I can't address every topic (I do only have one column per week) but I will try to touch upon the things that the majority of readers feel are important.

Back to cephalids. In my column this week, I thought I'd touch upon how cephalids came to be. I'm not talking about how cephalids got made. I'm talking about why we had to create them in the first place. Yes, I'm going to explain where all the merfolk went.

A quick warning before I begin. Last week's column was rather serious. Now, while I enjoy seriousness as much as the next guy, don't expect all my columns to be so solemn. Take this week's column as an example. I'm writing about cephalids: not the most serious of topics. If you keep reading, be aware I will be drifting into my sillier side (remember I used to write sit-coms for a living). That said, on with the squids!

THE PERFECT BRAINSTORM

Flashback to February of 2000. The *Odyssey* design team had just been formed. We were sitting in my living room (we often like to do design meetings offsite – corporate settings don't lend themselves to creativity) snacking on chips and pretzels, thinking of what cool things we could do. For fun we started bandying around many of the wackier ideas that have been floating around R&D: a sixth color, a new card type, a new take on poison, etc. I like to have design teams discuss these kinds of things because you never know what interesting new ideas they might stir up.

One of the rules to brainstorming is to not be too critical. Many good ideas start with the craziest of suggestions, so it's important that no idea be ignored. At one point, an interesting floated into my head, so I decided to stand up and present it to the group. "Okay," I began, "I've got something. It's a little radical, so you'll need to think about it for a few moments before commenting. Imagine the day of *Odyssey's* release, little Timmy goes to the store to gets a bunch of booster packs. He rips them open in fit of crazed gamer excitement. And what does he see...?"

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“Dwarves! Nothing but dwarves! Every card – a dwarf. Dwarven artifacts, dwarven lands, dwarven spells, dwarven enchantments and, of course, lots and lots of dwarves. Imagine! Dwarves as far as the eye could see!”



There was a moment of silence. I was then pummeled by various snack foods. As I sat back down, I said softly, “I miss dwarves.”

Now I’m sure at this point, you are all saying, “What does any of this have to do with cephalids? Or merfolk for that matter?” Patience, my dear reader, patience.

IT’S ALL MONS’S FAULT

My little dwarven frenzy led the team to a discussion of what happened to dwarves. Where had all the dwarves gone? The answer was the goblins – the cute, bumbling, dumb-as-a-brick, highly accident-prone but quite fertile goblins. How were the much-loved goblins to blame? Well, goblins and dwarves fill a similar void – small red creatures. Now, in an average set, we don’t have all that many small red creatures, so whenever we make a small red guy we have to choose between goblins and dwarves (and lizards and wizards and various other creature types).

More often than not, we choose to make the small red guy a goblin. Why? Well, because the goblins have a better PR agent than the dwarves. Goblins are cute and silly. They’re fun. Everybody loves goblins. Dwarves? They have a less focused public image. They’re short. They have beards. They like digging. They seem to have some hatred of non-basic land. It’s all very vague.

So when push comes to shove, the goblins tend to squeeze out the dwarves. How could the dwarves have their day? The answer was obvious. We had to get rid of the goblins. With the goblins out of the way, the dwarves would be sitting pretty.

I think it was Pablo Picasso that said, “Every act of creation begins with an act of destruction.” My crazed enthusiasm was spreading to the rest of the team. The pro-dwarf mentality quickly turned anti-goblin. There would be no goblins in the *Odyssey* block. But why stop there? Every color it turned out had a creature type with special privilege. Down with the elite! Up with the working class! Elves... gone! Soldiers... gone! Zombies... gone! Merfolk... you got it, gone!

When the dust cleared, the design team looked at what we just had done. Red obviously was fine as the dwarves could fill in for the goblins. But what of the other colors? In green, the answer seemed obvious: the druids. Like the dwarves, the druids had long lived in their more popular brethren’s shadow. White had the clerics. Black had the minions. But what about blue? Well, blue had wizards, we thought. Maybe *Odyssey* would be the wizards’ chance to shine.

AN OASIS OF SERIOUSNESS

In this desert of silliness, a short oasis of seriousness:

Design has the job of creating new things. Part of creating new things is clearing space for them. This means that each year we have to take some standard element of the game and remove it. **Magic’s** lifeblood rests on R&D’s ability to constantly shift the game. As such, from time to time some element of **Magic** that you like might disappear. But, that also means that in time, those elements will most likely return. For example, last week in “Ask Wizards,” I revealed that some of the missing creature types (such as elves) will be back as soon as *Onslaught*.

DESIGN UP AHEAD

We flash to six months later, August 2000. By this time the design team had a much better grasp of what *Odyssey* was going to be about: milling. That meant we were going to have a lot of graveyard interaction, including two nifty new mechanics called “salvage” and “threshold.” (“Salvage” would later become flashback while the name “threshold” just seemed to stick.)

Our master “creature plan” began causing a few problems. First, let’s talk about black. *Odyssey* was going to be a set all about the graveyard. Creatures returning from the graveyard. Creatures eating the graveyard. Creatures interacting in all sorts of cool ways with the graveyard. And during this graveyard-a-go-go, we were planning to have the zombies sit it out. We were left with two choices. We could either figure out why the minions were so graveyard conscious (“Yes master. If you say I must obtain a fresh new brain and then consume it, I guess I shouldn’t question your motives.”) Or just let the zombies have their fun. (“Brains! Brains!”) Obviously, the zombies won out.

In white, we realized that the clerics couldn’t hold the fort, so to speak. White has both an offensive and defensive aspect. While the clerics work well with the defensive half, the offensive half wasn’t as good a fit. So, we decided to come up with a new creature type to fill in the soldier void. After consulting the author of the novel (to get a better sense of the story), we decided on the creature type **nomad**. Technically, speaking nomad was not a new creature type (red cards like **Avalanche Riders** have used nomad for years) but it was new to white. We felt it did a good job of giving *Odyssey* the post-apocalyptic (or post-*Apocalypse*) sense we were looking for on Otaria (the continent *Odyssey* takes place on).

As I’m sure many of you who have seen *Odyssey* (which I’m hoping is all of you) might be aware, the soldier creature type also found its way back into the set. Here’s how: In our quest to push new creature types, we decided to create a new flying race in white and blue. There has been talk about creating a race of bird creatures for years, thus the aven were finally born. Influenced by the **Cat Warriors**, I thought it would be cool to make the aven creature type Bird Warriors. I felt it would be neat to keep making different humanoid animal races all with Warrior in their creature type line. Then one day we could make a warrior lord. But it was pointed out to me in development that **Magic** is filled with humanoid animal races (like the Viashino) that don’t have warrior in their title. Thus, development decided to change the aven to **Bird Soldiers** as it better reflected their flavor.

Green and red didn’t have too many problems, as the **dwarves** and **druids** served their function adequately. The only real problem was that red and green needed a creature type to fit the larger creatures (3/3 and bigger) often found in the two colors. After a little discussion, we decided upon another seldom-used creature type – the **centaur**.

FINALLY, ACTUAL MENTION OF THE CEPHALIDS

Finally, we arrive at blue. But everything was fine in blue. We had wizards. Everyone loves the wizards. Heck, isn’t **Magic** all about wizards? One small problem. The first draft of the novel came in and the major bad guys in the book were merfolk.

We had already given in on the zombies and deep in our heart we knew that the soldiers were somehow going to claw their way back. It was time to draw the line. I called a meeting with Jess Lebow, a nice guy from a department called Book Publishing. Jess is in charge of the **Magic** line of books, and has the not-so-easy task of syncing up all the books with the card sets. As books and card sets have very different needs, it can be quite challenging.

At the meeting were various people from R&D, Creative Text (the guys in charge of the names, flavor text and card concepts), Art, and Book Publishing. I sat at one end of the table while Jess sat at the other. What follows is my memory of the conversation. I should stress that this is in no way a reflection of what was actually said but rather a shorter, spiffier version of what I remember. That said, here’s how the meeting went:

Me: Sorry, there are no merfolk on Otaria.

Jess: I’ve read the first draft. Trust me, there are merfolk.

Me: But there can’t be merfolk. The set has no merfolk.

Jess: Then put some in.

Me: The whole point is that we’re specifically not doing merfolk. That’s hard to do when we print merfolk. Can’t the villains just be human? Perhaps wizards?

Jess: They live under water.

Me: Water-breathing wizards? They have magical gills or something.

Jess: Yes, a race of humanoid creatures with magical gills that live below the sea. I like it. Perhaps we could call them merfolk.

Me: How about a race of creatures that live underwater and use magic but don’t look like merfolk?

Jess: What would they look like?

Me: I don’t know. Squid.

And thus, the cephalids were born.

See, I told you I'd get here. You just have to have faith.

While my column ends here, the story doesn't. After all the above rigamarole, the main villain of the *Odyssey* block, **Ambassador Laquatus**, still ended up a merfolk, although he's the only one in the entire block. (Hmm, is that the first hint about *Judgment*?)



"Your kind ain't welcome around here!"

So as you see, **Magic** design is strange and circuitous creature. It starts with a speech about dwarves and ends with a bunch of squid. But that's the kind of insight I hope to bring you here in "Making Magic." Hey, every week can't be about the big issues.


Join me next week when I relive the making of my favorite mechanic.

Until then, may you topdeck the card you need the turn you need and not a turn later.

Sincerely,

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

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