



Making Magic

Monday, May 13, 2002

Through the Riftstone

The birth of an incarnation



Mark Rosewater

"If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."
-- Obi-Wan Kenobi, *Star Wars: Episode IV A New Hope*

Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones opens this weekend and my **Magic** column has an actual connection to *Star Wars*. Ah, the Force is strong with me. What am I talking about? Patience, my dear reader.

Oh, to hell with patience. Welcome to Graveyard Week. This week we'll be exploring a various *Judgment* cards that interact with the graveyard, including a new mechanic that gets a little tombstone on every card. Creatures more powerful dead than alive. Creatures known in design as the Jedi.

A quick aside. While most of my design work is done on **Magic**, I was proud to work with Richard Garfield (and Robert Gutschera and Skaff Elias) on the design of the new [Star Wars trading card game](#). The game just came out a few weeks ago and is a nice change of pace if you're looking for a second trading card game to supplement **Magic**. Many R&D people have been going to the company store to pick up their own boxes. While not quite as strategic as **Magic**, it does have a strong visceral element that makes it a blast to play (and hey, rolling dice is just plain fun). If you have any affinity for *Star Wars*, (I'm assuming that as a reader of my column you already like trading card games) I highly recommend you check it out. Anyway, back to the incarnations.

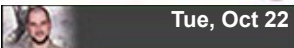
A pair of Jedi.

For those unfamiliar with the incarnations, they are creatures that grant all your other creatures a special ability when they are in your graveyard. As an example, here is the card **Valor** from *Judgment*.

Grave Matters

Several weeks ago I talked about the *Judgment* design dream team of Richard Garfield, Bill Rose, Brian Tinsman and myself. So, of course, the designer of the incarnations is none other than Mike Elliott. As I said before, Mike is one of the most prolific **Magic** designers. And the incarnations owe their existence to a mechanic Mike designed two years ago.

Mike came up with the idea of enchantments that existed in the graveyard instead of in play. Such cards were not vulnerable to enchantment destruction, only graveyard removal. When played, the cards would go directly to the graveyard. Mike pitched the idea to Bill Rose (the head of R&D) and



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Bill didn't like it. First, they required the players to pay attention to the graveyard. At the time, that wasn't something players had to think about and Bill was afraid that it would force players to pay too much attention to something that most of the time wouldn't matter. Second, as there was next to no graveyard removal two years ago, these cards would be virtually immune to destruction. And so, Mike put the mechanic away.

One of the things that isn't well known is how many mechanics get created that never go anywhere. Most of the time I talk about mechanics that make it to print so one might get the illusion that most ideas eventually see the light of day. This simply isn't so. The creative process creates far more duds than successes. For every mechanic you see, some thirty or so mechanics have been locked away in some database.



I'm often asked what it takes to be a good **Magic** designer. Yes, it takes creativity and thinking outside the box. Yes, it takes a keen understanding of what makes the game tick. But most importantly when push comes to shove, the most important ability of a designer is the ability to pump out cards. Almost anyone who plays **Magic** has the potential to create a card. But a designer needs to be able to make thousands of cards each year.

Be aware that I'm not talking about a thousand quality cards. Many of the cards I come up with, for example, suck. Or they don't work within the rules. Or they break a part of the game that shouldn't be broken. Or they're boring. Or they're not right for the current environment. The point is that designers spend a great deal of time creating cards and mechanics that never go anywhere.

They're Not Dead Yet

But sometimes, mechanics find a way to reappear. When last we left the pre-incarnations, Mike had abandoned them. But one day, he came up with a neat new twist. Instead of being cards that simply worked in the graveyard, what if they were permanents that had a use in play, but also had an ability when they went to the graveyard? Note that at this point Mike was calling the ability "residual" and the ability appeared on creatures, enchantments, and land.

Here are a few examples of these early cards:

Residual Painmaster

1B

Creature – Zombie

3/3

At the beginning of each turn, if CARDNAME is in your graveyard, lose 1 life.

Residual Horror

4B

Creature – Zombie

3/3

At the beginning of each turn, if CARDNAME is in your graveyard, target player lose 1 life.

Residual Forest

Land

CARDNAME comes into play tapped.

T: Add G to your mana pool.

If CARDNAME is in your graveyard, all your lands gain "T: Add one mana of any color to your mana pool."

So Mike went back to Bill to pitch this new twist. And... Bill didn't like it. Back to the scrap heap.

They're Getting Better

A year went by and *Odyssey* design started. *Odyssey*, it turned out, was all about the graveyard. Mike remembered about the residual cards and dug the mechanics back out. This time he had a new twist. What if the cards were creatures with abilities that they granted to other creatures when they died? This is the point where Mike thought of the Obi-Wan Kenobi quote and named them "Jedi."


Once again, Mike went back to Bill. And this time, Bill liked them. *Odyssey* already had players watching the graveyard, so that was no longer a negative. And the creature twist seemed a much more natural fit. Thus were born the incarnations.

Join me next week when I defend simplicity in **Magic**. (You all have a week to gather your rotten eggs.)

Until then, may all your **Magic** games lead to the perfect opportunities for a *Star Wars* quote.

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