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Making Magic
Monday, July 8, 2002

Zen and the Art of Cycle Maintenance



Mark Rosewater

The aesthetics of cycles

Welcome to cycle week! And not only will all the columnists be talking about cycles but the entire theme itself will be a cycle. Ooh.

Five of a Kind

I guess I should start by explaining what exactly a cycle is. A cycle is a series of cards that are tied together mechanically. The cards are most often tied together through flavor (names, flavor text, and/or art), but that isn't required. The most common type of cycle, what I'll call the "traditional" cycle, is composed of five cards, one of each color. Examples of traditional cycles in recent sets would be the Wishes ([Golden Wish](#), [Cunning Wish](#), [Death Wish](#), [Burning Wish](#), [Living Wish](#)) from *Judgment* or the Bursts ([Life Burst](#), [Aether Burst](#), [Mind Burst](#), [Flame Burst](#), [Muscle Burst](#)) from *Odyssey*.

Normally, cycles are all within the same rarity within the same set, but not always. The original "boons" ([Healing Salve](#), [Ancestral Recall](#), [Dark Ritual](#), [Lightning Bolt](#), [Giant Growth](#)) from Alpha, for example, broke rarity, while the "alternative win" enchantments ([Test of Endurance](#), [Battle of Wits](#), [Mortal Combat](#), [Chance Encounter](#), [Epic Struggle](#)) were not all in the same set. Sometimes, R&D will even spread a cycle over more than one block. The first Atog cycle ([Auratog](#), [Chronatog](#), [Necratog](#), [Atog](#), [Foratog](#)) was spread out over five various expansions. And the [mega-mega land cycle](#) ([Kor Haven](#), [Teferi's Isle](#), [Volrath's Stronghold](#), [Keldon Necropolis](#), [Yavimaya Hollow](#)) was spread out over five blocks.



The most famous of all cycles, the Alpha "boons" were an attempt to define the colors. Blue was defined as insanely powerful, and white was defined as timid. Ten years later, we're still working on that.

The second most common cycle, what I'll call a "colorless" cycle, appears in lands and artifacts. These cycles are also five cards but appear either as five lands or five artifacts. Each land or artifact is then connected to one (and sometimes more than one) of the five colors. Recent examples of colorless cycles would be the Eggs ([Skycould Egg](#), [Darkwater Egg](#), [Shadowblood Egg](#), [Mossfire Egg](#), [Sungrass Egg](#)) and the Pits ([Nomad Stadium](#), [Cephalid Coliseum](#), [Cabal Pit](#), [Barbarian Ring](#), [Centaur Garden](#)), both from *Odyssey*.

Third is the "multi-color" cycle. A multi-color cycle is five multi-color cards, either each with one of the five ally color combinations or each with one of the five enemy color combinations. (Yes, there are also occasional three-color cycles, and perhaps one day a four-color cycle) Recent examples would be the multi-color atogs ([Phanatog](#), [Psychatog](#), [Sarcatog](#), [Lithatog](#), [Thaumatog](#)) from

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Odyssey, and the multi-color "bears" (*Galina's Knight*, *Vodalian Zombie*, *Shivan Zombie*, *Yavimaya Barbarian*, *Llanowar Knight*) from *Invasion*.

Fourth is the "mono-color" cycle. A mono-color cycle is five cards of the same color that each reference a different one of the five colors. The most famous example of this type of cycle is the *Circles of Protection* from the basic set.

Less is More

As with any element of **Magic**, there are always exceptions. While most cycles have five cards, not all do. So how does a four-card cycle happen? Believe it or not, there are several ways. The most common four-card cycle occurs when one color is involved in all four cards while each of the other colors is involved in just one. A good example would be the Tainted Lands (*Tainted Field*, *Tainted Isle*, *Tainted Peak*, *Tainted Wood*) from *Torment*. Since each land involves having a swamp there was no need for a black version.

A second way to create a four-card cycle is to make four multi-color cards in which each of four colors is shared with the fifth. An example of this would be the multi-color counterspell cycle (*Absorb*, *Undermine*, *Suffocating Blast*, *Mystic Snake*) from the *Invasion* block. Finally, a four-card cycle can be made in two colors by doing a "doubled mirror" effect (for more on this, see below). The best example of this would be the elementals (*Air Elemental*, *Earth Elemental*, *Fire Elemental*, *Water Elemental*) from Alpha.

A three-card cycle is rare but can be created by running three cards in a single color through each of the three rarities. Usually when this is done, the effect grows in scope as it goes up in rarity. Recent examples would be the brain eaters (*Thought Nibbler*, *Thought Eater*, *Thought Devourer*) from *Odyssey* and the Penumbra creatures (*Penumbra Bobcat*, *Penumbra Kavu*, *Penumbra Wurm*) from *Apocalypse*.

A two-card cycle is created by doing what we refer to as a "mirror". A mirror is two cards, usually in opposite colors, that have an effect that mirror (thus the name) one another. Classic examples of mirrored cards would be *White Knight/Black Knight*, *Blue Elemental Blast/Red Elemental Blast*, and *Deathgrip/Lifeforce*, all from Alpha. (Can you tell that Richard loves mirrors?) Allied cards can mirror if the two have some similar but flopped effect. The best example of this would be *Earthquake* and *Hurricane*. Mirrors can even exist within the same color doing a similar but slightly different effect. The most common example of this kind of mirror would be color hosers (For example, *Slay* from *Planeshift* and *Execute* from *Odyssey*).



Not all cycles are five cards. Here are examples of two-, three-, and four-card cycles.

Now that we all know what cycles are, it's time to ask the all-important question: what purpose do they serve? The answer is, as usual, rather complex. (Would you expect anything less?) Here's what cycles do:

Create Aesthetics

I attended the College of Communication at Boston University. (You know before I moved to Hollywood and got a job writing on *Roseanne* - sorry, I'm supposedly obligated to squeeze that in once a month.) My major was broadcast and film (aka TV and movies). The best part about studying media is that partaking of entertainment is studying. I watched *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Dynasty*, *Dallas*, and *Hart to Hart* for an assignment (on how rich people are presented on television), I had to write a paper on *Repo Man* (talking about its role as a cult film), and I was required for one class to read *TV Guide*. All in all, lots of fun.

The reason I bring this up is that from I was often required to take classes that I might not have otherwise chosen. One such class was called "Aesthetics". The idea behind the class was that we, as future entertainment producers, had a responsibility to understand the role of art and beauty in media. Much of the class was spent looking at traditional forms of art and understanding what general principles guided the concept of beauty.

The class turned out to be one of my favorites of my four years of college. It taught me a few very important lessons that have a strong impact on my **Magic** design.

Lesson #1 - Beauty isn't subjective.

The first thing we learned in the class is that beauty is very *objective*. There are certain qualities hardwired into the human brain that make some traits more attractive than others. That isn't to say that there isn't some variance from person to person, because there obviously is, but aesthetics can be studied as a science.

Lesson #2 - People sense what they do not consciously notice.

This lesson is probably the most valuable one I learned. The idea behind it is that many of the things that determine the aesthetics of an item are not things that are conscious to the observer. What that means is that following all of the rules is important even if it's not immediately noticeable by the player. The overall effect will be.

Lesson #3 - Beauty is in the details.

This is an extension of the last point. The overall beauty of an object is determined by many smaller elements. This lesson tells us that when designing cards, we need to pay great attention to the little things because *en masse* they will do much to affect the players' response when they see it.

Lesson #4 - Structure is beauty.

Humans like structure. A lot. So much so that their definition of beauty has a lot to do with how structured an item is. Many people are shocked by how many rules exist for design. But these rules exist for a very important reason. Their existence makes the product more attractive.

Lesson #5 - Balance is crucial.

This is connected to the last point. Humans have an innate desire for balance. Their aesthetic senses respond favorably to having things even out. The entire core of **Magic's** flavor, the color wheel, plays directly into this human desire.

Lesson #6 - Things need to connect.

This is also connected to lesson #3. Humans instinctively want to connect things. The following example from the class is the best example of this: Put a random television channel on and turn the sound down. Then put on a random CD. Sit and watch the picture as you listen to the sound. Notice how they start connecting? Why? Because the human brain is hard wired to connect things. That's what it does. The easier the connection, though, the happier the brain is, which gets translated as more aesthetic.

That was a quick crash course through my aesthetics class. What all of this means to **Magic** is that the designers and developers need to spend a great deal of time on the details because it will result in a more aesthetic (a.k.a. "cooler") end product.

So what does this have to do with cycles? Cycles are aesthetic. They're structured; they have balance. They connect things together. Cycles, in short, aesthetically enhance the sets they're in.

Add Flavor

One of the most important elements of **Magic** is the flavor. Now, I understand that some of you could care less about the flavor. The game could be stickered cards for all you care. That's great. I'm glad you play. But another entire group exists that cares greatly about the flavor of the game. There are people that only play one color. There are people that play everything *but* one color. There are people who build decks based only on a theme. There are people who read the **Magic** novels (and enjoy them). For all those people, we need to pay attention to flavor.

That begs the question, why are cycles so important for flavor? Because in **Magic**, the center of flavor is the color wheel. The colors are best defined not in isolation but in contrast with one another. Cycles allow us a perfect opportunity to show such contrasts. Let's take the "alternate win" cycle from the *Odyssey* block. The flavor of those cards is that the color has changed the

battle to create a new victory condition, one that is better suited to each particular color than it is to the other four colors.

White feels it's best at outlasting its opponents. Blue wants to outthink them. Black feels it's best at suffering pain. Red prefers a chaotic setting where the opponent will be unable to cope. Green wants to get just call out a horde of creatures and fight. Each one gives an insight into some aspect of the flavor. By comparing them you learn not just about each color, but how they vary from one another.

Make Everyone Happy

One of the joys of **Magic** is that we keep adding new things to the game. Sometimes we add something so cool, like the Wishes (from *Judgment*), that we want all of you to have your chance to play with it. Cycles allow us to give everyone his or her fair shake. Yes, I understand that not all cards in a cycle are created equal, but over time we try to make sure that each color gets its chance to shine.

Allow Bleeds

Another fun part of **Magic** is that even though we have stringent rules, we allow ourselves to break them every once in a while. The problem with breaking rules though is that we want to make sure the players understand a bleed for what it is--a special exception. Cycles work great in aiding this goal.

Take dragons as an example. Normally dragons are red. But in *Mirage* we thought it might be cool to let the other colors have their opportunity to get dragons. So we created a dragon cycle (**Pearl Dragon**, **Mist Dragon**, **Catacomb Dragon**, **Volcanic Dragon**, **Canopy Dragon**), which let everyone have his fun, but the cycle reminded everyone that it was a special exception.



Some cycles, like the Mirage dragons, let colors dip into each others' territory.

A more recent example of this would be the "pay life" flashback cards (**Spirit Flare**, **Deep Analysis**, **Crippling Fatigue**, **Flash of Defiance**, **Acorn Harvest**) from *Torment*. Normally, only black pays life as a cost. But because *Torment* was the "black set" we thought it might be neat to bleed some black abilities in the other colors to show black's dominance. By doing a cycle we were able to create that flavor in a natural way.

A Cycle Built For You


As you can see I have a lot to say about cycles. Cycles are so important to design, I feel I've only covered the tip of the iceberg. But we're out of time for today. So, the rest will have to wait for another day. Hopefully, this will give you a little better understanding of the important role cycles play.

Join me next week when I talk about **Type 1**. (No really, I'm not kidding.)

Until then, may your favorite color come out on top in the next cycle.

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