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Printer Friendly

Making Magic Monday, August 12, 2002

Codename of the Game



Mark Rosewater

Mmmm... Guacamole and Bacon...

At fancy restaurants, in between courses, the server brings you a small bowl of sorbet. The sorbet is meant to be a light treat with which to cleanse your palate before the next course. I'd like for you think of today's column as a sorbet column. Over last few weeks, I've covered mostly "big issues" in my column. This week, I thought it would be fun to examine a small issue, something noncontroversial (or so I believe) that might show all of you a different facet of life behind the R&D curtain. Set codenames aren't crucial to how **Magic** is made, but they are an interesting oddity worthy of today's column.

Speaking in Codenames

So, why do we have set codenames? What purpose do they serve? I'm glad you asked! Well, first and foremost, we need codenames because R&D simply works further ahead than any other section of the company (including the group that names the expansions). So we need a way to refer to a particular set; thus, the need for codenames.

But why are our codenames silly? Back in the day, codenames were the design team's attempt at a decent name. This was so much the case that Wizards of the Coast never bothered to change the codenames before the sets were released. Now that's okay when you call a set *Arabian Nights* or *Ice Age*. But eventually, you end up with a set named *The Dark*. This isn't meant as a slight to that expansion. Plenty of cool cards, including **Ball Lightning** and **Preacher**, came from *The Dark*. My issue is with the name itself.



Early in development, playtest cards show the set's codename as opposed to its eventual real name.

Besides some basic grammatical issues (yes, proper English would be "the *The Dark* set"), the name just isn't particularly flavorful. Coming this fall to a store near you . . . *The Dark*. (oooh) What's it about? Well, um, it's in Dominaria and it's very . . . dark (oooh). Things are hard to see. Scary things. In the dark (oooh).

The problem with codenames, or any name for that matter, is that they grow on you. Things that sound utterly ridiculous when you first hear them sound okay by the six or seven hundredth time. Thus, to ensure that R&D wouldn't get too attached to our codenames, we came up with a rule that said codenames had to be so silly that we would never actually name products after them. That way, everyone involved would know from day one that the name was going to change.

As we've gone along, we've added new rules for our codenames. (Yes, even our codenames have rules.) I'll hit the new innovations as I work through the history of **Magic** codenames. Enjoy your tour!

Pre-Alliances Codenames

All the codenames before *Alliances* were essentially the names the products ended up with. Moving on.

Alliances Codename: "Quack"

As I explained in a previous column, early codenames were named after Macintosh sound files. That way, when an R&D member clicked open the set folder, the computer (back then they were all Macs) would make a sound. Silly? Of course, but then that was our criterion.

Mirage Codename: "Sosumi"

In original design (which incidentally started before the release of Alpha), *Mirage* was called "Menagerie." But once it got to Wizards, R&D chose another Macintosh sound file name. I mentioned this fact in an earlier column and got the following nugget from a reader:

"Also, Sosumi is called that because in the early days, Apple got in trouble with Apple Records (the Beatles) and an agreement was signed stating that Apple Computers would never try to get into the recording business. When Apple packaged free microphones with the computers, one programmer, recognizing possible litigation from Apple Records as a result of giving [away] microphones, called the sound Sosumi or "so sue me."—zeph

Visions Codename: "Mirage Jr."

To be honest, this set didn't really have a codename because the real name was established very close to the start of development (we don't do it that early anymore). For the small blink of time in which the set had a codename, we called it Mirage Jr. It's important to note that Menagerie was big enough that it got split into two sets, *Mirage* and *Visions*.

Weatherlight Codename: "Mochalatte"

This is the set at which time R&D decided that Macintosh sound file names had run their course (be aware that many other **Magic**-related products also had sound file codenames). The *Weatherlight* design team decided to name this set after a fictional coffee drink. I think this has something to do with the fact that some of the design meetings were held at a nearby Starbucks.

Tempest Codename: "Bogavhati"



The card *Bogavhati* lent *Tempest* its codename, and that name was eventually worked into the card *Vhati il-Dal*.

hits with it on Google. *Tempest* was also the first set to have an in-joke about its codename in the set. That card was, of course, *Vhati il-Dal*.

No codename has confused people more than this one. In *Tempest* design, we had a strong poison theme. One of the cards submitted by Mike Elliott was a land named Bogavhati. It had a goofy activated ability that let you make your creatures "poisonous" with the drawback of returning them to your hand. When I asked Mike about the name, he told me that it was from Indian (India as opposed to American Indian) mythology. Bogavhati was a land of poisoned snakes. This name seemed perfect for a set about poison (or so we thought at the time), so I made it the set codename. The spelling, by the way, is my own, so don't expect to see any non-**Magic**

Stronghold Codename: "Rachimulot"

Here's a trivia question that will someday make its way onto "Question Mark" (a daily trivia column I do on sideboard.com): What **Magic** expansion's codename was a reference to another trading

card game? Rachimulot is a card in the **Dungeons & Dragons** trading card game, **Spellfire**. During *Stronghold* design, **Spellfire** cards came out that were illustrated with photos. Rachimulot had a photo of some decidedly unscary beast—a rubber rat by a drain. R&D found this so funny that we made it the *Stronghold* codename.

***Exodus* Codename: "Gorgonzola"**

Beginning with this set, R&D started toying around with picking codenames solely by how funny they sounded. Also, I think this name might have been yet another poke at **Spellfire**; we kept joking about how we needed to make a "cheesy" expansion.

***Urza's Saga* Codename: "Armadillo"**

This was the first codename not created by R&D. The **Magic** Brand team was talking about some future set and made up a name because it didn't have one yet. R&D has since cracked down on this and is now the current keeper of the codenames. (This is probably just a matter of us caring more than anyone else.) I believe the name Armadillo continued the silly sounding theme. This set has the second in-joke card about a codename: Note that the art for **Hibernation** contains, yes, armadillos.

***Urza's Legacy* Codename: "Guacamole"**

When we first came up with the idea of using amusing-sounding names, I wanted to use "guacamole" because it's my favorite silly sounding word. (Ironically, I do not actually like guacamole itself.) It took three sets before it actually became a codename.

***Urza's Destiny* Codename: "Chimichanga"**

Last week I talked about *Arabian Nights* design innovations. Now we come to the first great innovation in codenames: linking codenames together. Now, don't get me wrong—Chimichanga is also a silly sounding word. But it matched the theme of the previous set, Mexican food. This innovation would lead to a complete restructuring of codenames.

***Mercadian Masques, Nemesis, and Prophecy* Codenames: "Archimedes," "Euripides," and "Dionysius"**

The Masques block was the beginning of codenames themed for an entire block. Why Greek names? While R&D was coming up with silly names, my girlfriend (now my wife) Lora suggested the word Archimedes. Because we knew we needed a theme, we chose to follow up with two other Greek names. The reason that Greek names won out over another theme was that R&D thought it funny not only to have odd-sounding names that were themed, but also to choose words that the rest of the company would have trouble spelling.

***Invasion, Planeshift, and Apocalypse* Codenames: "Beijing," "Hong Kong," and "Shanghai"**

Yes, *Invasion* block codenames were cities with Chinese names. I believe this theme was picked by Mike Elliott because it fit our recent hard-to-spell kick. The original choices were actually so complicated that we had to change them.

***Odyssey, Torment, and Judgment* Codenames: "Argon," "Boron," and "Carbon"**

The *Odyssey* block was the **Magic** Brand team's reaction to our hard-to-spell theme. They wanted simple-sounding names that were also easy

to spell. In addition, they came up with the second big codename innovation: picking names that had a set order. Thus, the names began with "A," "B," and "C"—in alphabetical order. Why elements? I have no idea. But, hey, who says science never sees use later in life?

Onslaught, Legions, and 2003 Spring Expansion **Codenames: "Manny," "Moe," and "Jack"**

R&D found the "A"- "B"- "C" thing a little annoying, so they decided instead to pick sets of three names that had a preset order. For *Onslaught* block, Bill Rose (the head of R&D) selected the three spokescharacters from an auto parts store named Pep Boys: Manny, Moe, and Jack. While this fit the set order, it proved to have one huge flaw: Half of R&D didn't grow up near a Pep Boys, so they didn't know what order the three went in.



Odyssey was codenamed Argon, and was followed by Boron and Carbon.

2003 Fall Expansion, 2004 Winter Expansion, and 2004 Spring Expansion **Codenames: "Bacon," "Lettuce," and "Tomato"**

I am the lead designer of Bacon. Next month, the set will be handed over to development (led by Randy Buehler). Lettuce design starts soon. This block is the first with codenames that *everyone* knows the order of.

2004 Fall Expansion, 2005 Winter Expansion, and 2005 Spring Expansion **Codenames: "Earth," "Wind," and "Fire"**

Believe it or not, this block is already in early design. It was almost codenamed Blood, Sweat, and Tears, but we decided we didn't want back-to-back large expansions with codenames both starting with "B."


2005 Fall Expansion, 2006 Winter Expansion, and 2006 Spring Expansion

This block has not yet been codenamed, but the leading contenders are "Huey," "Dewey," and "Louie."

And those are all the codenames up to today. I hope you've enjoyed your sorbet. Join me in seven days for your next course when I talk about designing cards that don't require mana (and I don't mean lands).

Until then, may you have as much fun at your job as I do at mine.

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