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## A Fond Farewell

Ben Bleiweiss  
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In last week's article, I claimed that *Invasion* was my favorite block for constructed play in the entire history of **Magic**. There are a plethora of themes, ideas and innovations packed into its six hundred and sixteen cards (subtracting the twenty basic lands). However, *Onslaught* lurks just around the corner and will soon replace the *Invasion* block (*Invasion*, *Planeshift*, and *Apocalypse*) in the Standard format. While the new set will bring its own flavor to the game, this week I'm going to take a look at what made the *Invasion* block so very special.

### FIVE COLORS OF MAGIC

Previous to the release of *Invasion*, decks using spells from all five colors of **Magic** were relegated mostly to novelty status. In any given format at any given time, there just weren't enough mana fixers or enough incentive to play with five types of mana. Wizards shook up this premise by dedicating a block to multi-colored spells, mana fixers, and spells which gained bonuses depending on how many types of basic lands you had in play (referred to as the Domain spells). How exactly did each of these factors contribute to the success of this block?

### RETURN OF GOLD CARDS

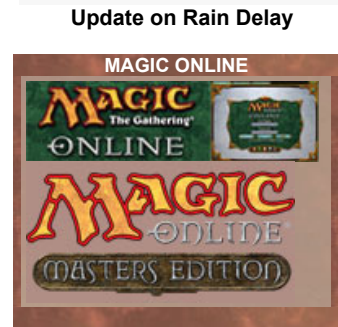
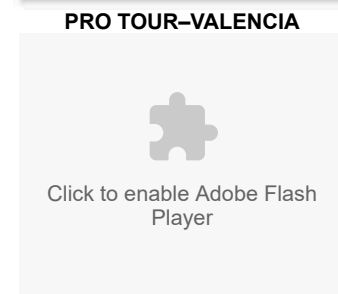
A total of 138 cards from the block require more than one color of mana to play (66 from *Invasion*, 35 from *Planeshift*, and 37 from *Apocalypse*), nearly enough to fill their own expansion set. This far exceeds the number of gold cards in any previous block. In fact, there were a grand total of 159 gold cards in all of **Magic** previous to this block, with none of them appearing since *Stronghold's* Slivers.

Players absolutely adore gold cards. I'm not a mind reader, but I know that I enjoy them because they allow certain colors to combine their powers so that the sum of the parts is greater than their individual components. Combine *Armor of Thorns*, *Primal Frenzy*, and *Spirit Link*, and you've got a crazy  $\{1\}{\color{red}C}{\color{green}C}{\color{blue}C}$  spell which can't be played on black creatures. *Armadillo Cloak* reduces that cost by  $\{C\}$ , and can snugly fit on a *Plague Spitter*. Tired of the black mana constraint attached to *Drain Life*? By changing the generic mana in the cost to a  $\{C\}$ , you can use the damaging power of black combined with the healing power of white for a truly restriction-free *Death Grasp*. Or how about combining the oft-maligned *Lightning Blast* with the much-missed *Impulse* to make *Prophetic Bolt*, a powerful burn spell which pays dividends?



Even more impressive were the five Dragon Legends from *Invasion*: *Crosis*, *Darigaaz*, *Dromar*, *Rith*, and *Treva*. These were not your *Elder Dragon Legends* from the *Legends* expansion, which were clunky eight-mana beasts with high upkeep costs and—for the most part—marginal special abilities. These new models cost a sleek six mana for six points of power and toughness in the air. In addition, they could destroy a hand, char a life total, clear the board, summon an army, or save your life respectively. Moreover, each dragon was so powerful that they each had their own *Lairs*, *Charms*, and *Attendants*.

The block also quadrupled the number of cards existing in **Magic** which cost  $\{C\}{\color{red}C}{\color{green}C}{\color{blue}C}$  to cast. Previously *Sliver Queen* stood alone, but *Coalition Victory* (more on that card later), *Cromat*, and *Last Stand* joined this exclusive club.



## MANA FIXING



Part of the challenge of deck building comes from the struggle of deciding how much space to devote to mana production. Even trickier is the task of balancing color production. How many lands in a red/green deck need to produce green mana? How many should produce red? Is it worth it to play *City of Brass* in a two color deck?

For a long time, deck building devolved to mono- and two-color decks. Part of the problem came from the lack of good mana fixers: cards which allow you to produce, or gain access to, multiple colors of mana. The development team on this block went for broke. They decided that they'd throw so many mana fixers into the environment that it'd be possible and reasonable to play any color combination all the way up to a full-fledged five color deck.

Just take a look at this list of cards devoted to fixing mana from this block:

- Artifacts (15): The five *Attendants*, the five *Cameos*, *Chromatic Sphere*, *Lotus Guardian*, *Phyrexian Lens*, *Mana Cylix*, *Star Compass*
- Lands (24): The five comes-into-play tapped allied dual lands, the five common sacrifice lands, the five *Dragon Lair*s, the five enemy pain lands, *Archaeological Dig*, *Forsaken City*, *Meteor Crater*, *Terminal Moraine*
- Gold (1): *Frenzied Tilling*
- Green (16): *Elfhome Sanctuary*, *Fertile Ground*, *Harrow*, *Nomadic Elf*, *Pulse of Llanowar*, *Quirion Elves*, *Quirion Sentinel*, *Quirion Trailblazer*, *Scouting Trek*, *Utopia Tree*, *Multani's Harmony*, *Primal Growth*, *Quirion Explorer*, *Gaea's Balance*, *Lay of the Land*, *Urborg Elf*
- Blue (5): *Dream Thrush*, *Phantasmal Terrain*, *Sea Snidd*, *Ceta Disciple*, *Reef Shaman*
- Red (3): *Slimy Kavv*, *Kavv Recluse*, *Tundra Kavv*
- White (2): *False Dawn*, *Helionaut*
- Black (1): *Necra Disciple*

That's a lot of mana fixing going on! Because of an overabundance of these types of cards, people attacked deck building in Standard and Block Constructed with a new vigor. During the Invasion Block Constructed Qualifier season, there were no less than eleven commonly played viable deck types, everything from black-green-white to blue-white-red to five-color Domain. Compare that to the four or five deck types in Odyssey Block Constructed that showed up at Worlds; the main limiting factor in deck building for OBC is the lack of multi-colored lands, sticking most people with two color decks. And in the case of decks that have non-allied colors such as blue/green, even then the mana bases are shaky.

## THE DOMAIN

If gold cards and mana fixers didn't encourage people to play multiple colors, the Domain mechanic did. Domain cards become more powerful for each basic land type you have in play. Since Domain decks wanted to have one of each land type in play, they became among the first five color decks in **Magic** which were taken seriously. The *Tempest* card *Propaganda* kept creatures from attacking, but a single *Collective Restraint* could effectively act as two and half *Propagandas*. *Allied Strategies* provided efficient card drawing, *Evasive Action* made *Mana Leak* look like *Force Spike*, and *Planar Despair* saw play as a pre-*Torment* *Mutilate*.

Not only were the Domain cards themselves effective, but also the non-Domain five-color cards which were enabled by a deck touting all five colors of mana reliably. *Legacy Weapon* hands down is the best removal spell ever—if you have the mana to power it. What effect could be better than removing any permanent from the game, and being able to do it more than once a turn, mana permitting? *Global Ruin* acted not only as a playable replacement for *Armageddon*, but also as the best non-basic land hoser since *Back to Basics*.



## ALTERNATE WIN CONDITIONS

Tying to the Domain mechanic was the introduction of the first non-ante instant-win card. Hot on the heels of *Nemesis*'s effectively "fading" *Celestial Convergence*, *Coalition Victory* was **Magic**'s first foray into a card which simply won you the game when cast. The condition was relatively hard to achieve (one of each basic land type and each color permanent in play), and the eight mana, five colored cost of the spell (3 \* 1 \* 1 \* 1 \* 1) prohibitively expensive. While in itself it might seem a novelty, it opened the doors for a full cycle of such cards in the next block (and the potential for future alternate win conditions).

## CANTRIPS

Drawing cards generally helps you win games, since you are constantly replenishing your hand with more resources (cards) while still casting spells. At the very least, it can be said that the more cards you draw each



game, the more options you have. Cantrips--cards that replace themselves--were introduced as a mechanic in *Ice Age* (although the first true Cantrip was *Jeweled Bird* in *Arabian Nights*) and were updated to include an immediate draw in *Weatherlight*. While the previous two blocks had ignored this mechanic entirely (Urza's block replaced it with Cycling), it returned with a vengeance in *Invasion* block. Previously marginal cards were given new facelifts by adding a mana or two, plus a Cantrip effect. Other spells which would have been too weak on their own were made playable by adding the simple line "draw a card."

Take *Repulse*. For years people have maligned that while *Unsummon*'s effect is useful, it's not worth the loss of a card. Suddenly, for just a couple of mana more, players got an *Unsummon* which replaced itself. *Exclude* added just a single generic mana to the cost of *Remove Soul*, but that one mana was more than an equitable deal for drawing a card.

Several other Cantrips saw extensive sideboard play. *Aura Blast*, *Bind*, *Confound*, *Cremate*, *Disrupt*, *Hobble*, *Jungle Barrier*, *Slay*, and *Tsabo's Web* all saw play; almost none of them would have been playable without the "draw a card" effect.

## SPLIT CARDS

The most played split card, *Fire/Ice*, was a Cantrip. Born from a concept for "Unglued 2," split cards [barely ended up seeing print](#). They play a bit like the *Mirage* and *Visions charms* (and the *Planeshift Dragon Charms*), except that each of the choices on the card has a separate mana cost. It helps that almost all of the twenty effects on the ten split cards are playable and reasonably costed.

## KICKER

Even more than Domain, the main block mechanic was Kicker. Kicker allows you to cast play spells in one of two modes: normal and "souped up." *Kavu Titan* might come into play as a "Grizzly Bear" on turn two, or as a humungous 5/5 trampler for just three mana more. *Probe* goes from "Dream Cache" to tremendous card advantage, *Rushing River* doubles its effect for the cost of a single land, and *Orim's Thunder* and *Dismantling Blow* add insult and injury to artifact and enchantment destruction when kicked.

There were the two double Kicker cycle of creatures, the Battlemages and the Volvers. All of the Battlemages were "Gray Ogres" (2/2's for three mana) without kicker, but they all contained the option of two allied color Kicker costs. A kicked *Thornscape Battlemage* might take out a *Chimeric Idol* and a *Flametongue Kavu*. A kicked *Thunderscape Battlemage* destroys *Collective Restraint* plus your opponent's hand. As for the Volvers, they came in three different sizes (1/1, 2/2 and 3/3), but shared common Kicker abilities (based on the color of the Kicker cost) varied by the number of +1/+1 counters each could get. The most popular of the five easily was *Rakavolver*, which approximated a 5/5 *Spirit Linked Dragon* when fully kicked.

## COLOR WARS

Never before in Magic history did the actual color of cards matter so much as in *Invasion* block. Each of the Dragon Legends relied on naming colors, as did *Addle* and *Wash Out*. Many creatures changed their colors (the foremost being *Spiritmonger*), while others changed colors for other creatures (*Tidal Visionary*). *Spirit of Resistance* and *Coalition Victory* relied on having cards of all five colors in play, while spells like *Spreading Plague* encouraged diversification of colors. *Voice of All* combined the previous five *Voices* into one neat package.

## SKILL TESTERS

*Pernicious Deed*. *Addle*. *Void*. *Meddling Mage*. *Voice of All*. Those cards all share a common theme of being skill testers: spells and creatures which require a choice when being cast/used that goes beyond the ordinary decisions made with most spells. When you sit down to play a new opponent, what do you do with a *Meddling Mage* in your opening hand? Do you cast it on turn two, and hope to name a spell that might be in their deck based on the one/two lands they've played so far? Do you hold it until later when you might see a previous copy of a card that you'd like to stop from hitting a second time? If you foresee playing against *Meddling Mage*, do you add two *Dismantling Blows* and two *Aura Blasts* to your deck instead of four of one, in case you are paranoid about the creature from stopping your enchantment destruction outright?

Wizards included an entire mechanic devoted to being a skill tester, the divvy mechanic. Appearing only in *Invasion* and limited to only six cards in four colors (green being the absent color), these spells descended directly from the Alpha enchantment *Raging River* (and in fact, *Stand or Fall* updates the River to modern day *Magic*). In every instance of these spells, piles are made with cards and then opponents much chose which pile they will keep and which they will not. With *Do or Die*, it's creatures in play. With *Fact or Fiction*, it's cards



drawn. The skill testing comes twofold, first in separating the piles correctly, and then in choosing the correct pile once separated!

## GATING

*Planeshift* added the gating mechanic to the block. These are cards which return other cards to your hand as part of their effect. The most well known is *Shivan Wurm*, which returns as red or green creature to your hand when it comes into play. Some of the creatures were costed very aggressively in hopes of having them see play, but gating came at a time when R&D made a push to make blue bounce spells more viable than they had been in the past (in addition to *Repulse* and *Wash Out*, we also had *Rushing River* and *Jilt*, and later *Aether Burst* in *Odyssey*). This stifled the growth of gating-based decks, since if you couldn't return an appropriate creature at the time of casting, you'd have to return the gating creature itself.

Not only creatures had gating. *Natural Emergence* gated a red or green enchantment, while the five Dragon Lair cards were effectively gating lands. *Arctic Merfolk* stood alone as the sole gating card which had gating as a cost (meaning it couldn't be responded to) as opposed to an effect (which could be responded to), and was also the only mono-chromatic gating card of the lot.

## THE APOCALYPSE THREE

*Apocalypse* reminds me of the fairy tale about Goldilocks and the Three Bears. In that fable, there was always a small, medium, and big version of all possessions that the little intruder would muck with. Similarly, *Apocalypse* gave each color a set of three cards which went small, medium, and large as well.

Green obtained the Penumbra creatures, which ranged from the 2/1 *Bobcat* to the 3/3 *Kavu*, and finally ended with the trampling 6/6 *Wurm*.



Red started small with the Tremor-like *Bloodfire Dwarf*, moved to the Pyroclasm-causing *Bloodfire Kavu*, and concluded the set with the monstrous *Bloodfire Colossus*, which contained an *Inferno* within.

Black decided to start drawing cards in exchange for life. *Phyrexian Rager* netted one life for one card and a 2/2 body, while the *Gargantuan* gave two cards for two life and a 4/4 body. *Phyrexian Arena* finished this off with an enchantment which gave you a self-contained *Howling Mine* for a life a turn.

Blue's mechanic wasn't as strong, the Whirlpool mechanic. Mimicking *Winds of Change*, these creatures cashed in your hand for hopes of a better draw. The *Rider* was a 1/1, while the *Drake* was a 2/2 flyer and the *Warrior* was a 2/2 ground creature whose ability could affect your opponent.

Only white didn't follow the pattern of small/medium/large. However, the Flagbearer mechanic was easily the most inventive of the five. Any spell which is able to target a Flagbearer in play MUST target a Flagbearer. They effectively act as decoys to protect both your other creatures and yourself. The other four colors adhered to a

common/uncommon/rare pattern for their three cards, while the two Flagbearer creatures (*Standard Bearer* and *Coalition Honor Guard*) were both commons, while the enchantment *Coalition Flag* was an uncommon.

## SYMMETRY

Mark wrote an excellent article about [aesthetics and Magic](#). I followed this up with a look at all the [cycles in Magic](#). From a completely technical standpoint, the construction of this block stands as a thing of beauty. Themes between colors are reiterated over and over in various cycles. *Invasion* and *Apocalypse* bookended the block with allied colors giving way to enemy colors. What began with the *Apprentices* and "protection-from" gold creatures (such as *Llanowar Knight*) ended with *Disciples* and "ability-enabled" gold creatures (Such as *Goblin Legionnaire*).

## THE GOOD

All of the above were part of the good. There were certain other aspects that went to make this block better than any other in my mind. In no particular order:

- The reprints. While not all reprints are created equal, Wizards really hit the nail on the head with this block. *Fertile Ground* and *Harrow* were given the chance to shine that they never really had in *Urza's Saga* and *Tempest* (they were good, but not the all-stars like they were here). Fans welcomed back *Lobotomy* and *Simoon* in the

gold section, while **Ravenous Rats**, **Soul Burn**, and **Disrupt** all saw heavy play over the past two years.

- **Tsabo's Decree**, originally designed as a hoser for Rebels, ended up seeing a considerable amount of play for a six casting cost instant. Thematically it's a really cool card as well, improving **Extinction** to tournament-worthy status.
- **Tangle** made a Fog spell playable for the first time since **Constant Mists**.
- **Fires of Yavimaya** finally broke the "everybody gains haste" mechanic into the mainstream. **Concordant Crossroads** and **Fervor** stood on the cusp of this achievement for a long time, but **Fires** finally became a main-deckable haste solution, thanks in part to **Saproling Burst**.
- **Urza's Rage** gave blue mages fits. It killed their early creatures without chance of retribution, and then killed the mages themselves with a late game uncounterable ten to the head. **Kavu Chameleon** and **Obliterate** also played off the "uncounterable" mechanic.
- **Dodecapod** gave discard decks a serious threat to worry about. Can you afford to cast **Gerrard's Verdict** on turn two when your opponent might drop ten power worth of creatures as a result? Much better than the previous **Sand Golem**, especially when you consider that four mana for a 3/3 is par for the course.
- **Quirion Dryad** pleasantly surprised people by becoming a powerhouse in Extended straight from the mind of Wizards' own Alan Comer. **Miracle Grow** (and later **Super Grow**) decks dominated an entire Extended season once introduced, and the Dryad inspired the upcoming Mr. Babycakes.
- The **Familiars** in **Planeshift** gave life and form to the **Medallions** from **Tempest**. All of them ended up seeing play in one format or another, with **Nightscape Familiar** becoming a lynchpin to the success of the current **Psychatog** deck.
- Finally, who could go without making a mention of **Spiritmonger**, the creature which broke the curve? For five mana, you get a 6/6, regenerating, growing, color changing beast with absolutely no drawbacks. When people look back at the history of the power curve of creatures in **Magic**, **Spiritmonger** will be remembered as the creature which most broke the curve from this block.



## THE BAD

There's a single bad point to this block as far as I'm concerned, and it's **Viashino Warrior**. Actually, it's **Flametongue Kavu**, the Warrior who decided to take steroids and become a **Ghitu Slinger** on absolute crack. This creature hurt deckbuilding more than any other card in the past two years, since every deck has to consider the very real possibility of having its creatures taken out by a 4/2 removal spell. If you weren't playing him, likely you were playing against him. **Psychatog** decks started splashing red for Flametongue. **Squirrel/Opposition** decks started splashing red for Flametongue. It seemed that by the end, every deck that could run Flametongue found a way to run Flametongue. Consider that the return of **Erhnam Djinn** met not with enthusiasm for the return of the once-great creature, but with enthusiasm for a creature being printed which could finally survive **Flametongue Kavu** (**Serra Angel** and **Sengir Vampire** being two who could not).

## THE UGLY



These are a few cards in the block that could have been so much more, but just never really caught on. **Winnow** seemed like a great sidebar card to break open mirror matches, but was eclipsed by the more permanent **Unnatural Selection**. **Gaea's Herald** threatened to make green a powerhouse against blue, but slipped through the cracks due to the aforementioned preponderance of blue bounce. **Strafe** came the closest but not close enough to reprinting **Lightning Bolt**. **Draco** seemed like a natural to fit into Domain decks, since often you'd end up with a six casting cost 9/9 flyer with no upkeep—but he just never quite worked out since block decks contended with too many artifact removal spells (**Dismantling Blow** and **Orim's Thunder** among the tops) while Standard decks used Domain cards as an engine for an infinite **Ghitu Fire** deck.

And even Randy would agree with me now (as I asked him at Grand Prix-Dallas nearly two years ago) that it wouldn't have hurt too badly to make **Tidal Visionary** and **Vodalian Hypnotist** into merfolk instead of wizards.

## COMING UP

That about concludes my farewell to the **Invasion** block. There's one week left in my "Make Your Own Column" [contest](#). I've gotten a lot of really good entries so far, but no decision will be made until after the **Onslaught** previews begin.

Speaking of which...

Next week: Would you rather beat blue, or beat blue at its own game?

Ben may be reached at [bleiweiss1@cox.net](mailto:bleiweiss1@cox.net).

Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by [StarCityGames.com](http://StarCityGames.com), where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.



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