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Making Magic Monday, September 16, 2002

Cycling Cycling



Mark Rosewater

Why R&D brings back old mechanics

Last week, I talked about morph. This week I'll touch upon the other keyword mechanic for *Onslaught*, cycling. (Next week, I'll be moving on to the set's major theme.) But since you all probably know what cycling is, as it appeared in the *Urza's Saga* block, (if not, click [here](#)) I thought I'd instead focus on why we chose to bring it back. Even broader, why would R&D bring back old mechanics? I'm glad you asked.

There are numerous reasons. Here they are in no particular order:

#1 – Nostalgia

In the beginning, players frowned upon repeats. Why would they want a copy of a card that they already owned? But with time, repeats took on a new twist. They became windows into the past. Old timers could rip open a new pack to find an old friend.

Mechanics are no different than individual cards. Players have associations with them and getting a chance to revisit them is fun. Be aware that such behavior isn't something new. R&D has been revisited old mechanics for years (pitch cards, cantrips, the "Kindle" mechanic, the "Lobotomy" mechanic, the "Gravedigger" mechanic, etc.) Cycling isn't even the first mechanic with a keyword to be returned to the game. Cumulative upkeep gets that honor.



Cycling, not seen since the Urza block, returns in Onslaught.

R&D spent a great deal of time discussing whether or not it was too soon to bring cycling back. After much debate, it was actually the pitch cards that pushed us to do it. The pitch cards had first appeared in *Alliances* in the spring of 1996. They were then revisited in *Mercadian Masques* in the fall of 1999. Cycling first appeared in *Urza's Saga* in the fall of 1998. It last appeared in *Urza's Destiny* in the spring of 1999. If pitch cards could return three and a half years later, why not cycling?

#2 – Exposing New Players

To old players, repeats are nostalgia. To new players, they're new mechanics. Our research shows that the average **Magic** player plays for two-and-a-half to three years. That means any mechanic that's older than three years has not been played by a majority of the current players.

#3 – New Twists

While both of the above reasons are true, it was this reason that first prompted us to look at bringing back cycling. R&D had always been fond of the cycling mechanic. We knew someday

that we'd bring it back. But to bring it back this soon, we'd need a few twists. And *Onslaught* delivers.

For starters, we've finally made the change that every player has been clamoring for since they first saw cycling back in the *Urza's Saga* block. "The mechanic's cool, but for the love of god, could we see something that cycles for something other than 2?"

Since you all asked so nicely, *Onslaught* is full of cards with other mana costs, some even colored. Next, we decided to create some cycling cards that have effects when cycled in addition to drawing the card. For flavor reasons, these effects are smaller versions of what you would get if you played the card normally.

The card I'm previewing is one such card. **Krosan Tusker** is a giant green Beast with cycling -- but when you cycle it, you get to search your library for a basic land. Note that this is not a spell, so it cannot be countered by conventional means. Because it can't be countered, some members of R&D have labeled the Tusker the "three mana uncounterable green **Inspiration**." Sounds powerful, but at its heart it's just a cycling card.

Third, we made some cards we refer to in R&D as cycling triggers. These are permanents that have an effect that is triggered by a card cycling. These three twists allow us to take cycling in some new and interesting directions.

#4 – Interaction with Other Mechanics

The other cool thing about bringing a mechanic back is that it has the opportunity to commingle with a completely new set of mechanics. Take cycling for example. The last time cycling was here, it was rubbing shoulders with mechanics like buyback, shadow, echo, and pitch cards. This time, it gets to interact with flashback, threshold, morph and... (okay, you'll have to wait for Bacon for the complete list).

The different interactions allow the designers the opportunities to explore new facets of the mechanics. Cycling for example has a very good synergy with threshold. In **Standard** you might cycle a card simply to put the seventh card in your graveyard. In addition, mechanics that exist together in a block allow us to create cards that overlap the mechanics. *Onslaught*, for instance, has cycling cards that interact with morph.

#5 – Conservation of Design Space

This final category is the most complex but for the long-term health of the game, probably the most important. The designers have a daunting task on their hands. Every set, we have to innovate. We have to find new ways to "break the rules" of the game. Luckily for us, Richard Garfield created a rich, deep, very complex game. **Magic** is filled with nooks and crannies that allow the designers to explore all sorts of facets. But even **Magic** has its limits.

My point here is not to scare you. We've only tapped a small amount of **Magic's** potential. There are still years and years (and years) of new material. But R&D is in this for the long haul. Our goal is not to simply make a good game for five years, or ten years, or even twenty. Our goal is make **Magic** a classic that survives long after we're all gone.

In order to accomplish this, R&D has to conserve its resources. In fact, just thinking of mechanics as a resource is very important. Let's take cycling as our example. Cycling (then called sliding) was created by Richard Garfield during *Tempest* design. It wasn't even a major mechanic appearing on just a handful of cards. But *Tempest* was awash with new mechanics (the initial design had about twenty), so we chose to save some for future sets. A year later during *Urza's Saga* design, we looked into our box of spare mechanics and pulled out echo (also from *Tempest* design) and cycling.

During *Urza's Saga* design, we toyed around with different cycling costs but realized that the mechanic was rich enough that only a single fixed cost (which obviously turned out to be 2) was necessary. We understood that the mechanic had more potential, but we only used as much as we needed and saved the rest for a later day.





The above story reflects two important elements R&D uses in conservation. First, don't put more into a set than a set needs. Part of the fun of **Magic** is exploring new environments. But if the environment is too cluttered, it lacks a strong identity and certain elements will be overlooked by the players. The best analogy I can come up with is Chanukah/Christmas presents (I live in a two-faith household). My daughter loves getting presents, but there's a point where she's getting too much. Eventually, adding another present doesn't increase her enjoyment and simply gets lost in the clutter.

Second, R&D needs to properly figure out how many cards a mechanic can fill, and then evolve the mechanic only to the point necessary. Just because we can do something

Cycling and threshold: two great tastes that taste great together.

doesn't mean we should do it immediately. It's better for us to fully explore an aspect of a mechanic before we introduce new tweaks. Cycling's return in *Onslaught* reveals the bonus of this kind of patience.

Spin Cycle

In short, R&D sees mechanics as a reusable resource that we can use to enhance the game. When the designers sit down to create a new set, we look at all the resources available to us. New ideas and old ideas are all paints they we can use to create our new canvas. If something from the past fits into what we are doing we will take the opportunity to use it.

This doesn't mean we won't keep innovating. I hope morph is proof than R&D is still trying to constantly push the envelope. But at the same time, we are not shunning our past. During **Magic's** first nine years, many great mechanics have been created. We would be fools not to revisit many of them (but not all – hey, not every idea's a winner).

And when we do bring back old mechanics, we will always explore new ways to play with them. We'll find new twists and new interactions. Cycling's back. Have fun!

Join me next week, when I explain what "tribal" means and find out why Spike might be playing a goblin deck.

Until then, may you cycle your land for a colored mana.

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