

Products

 Gameplay

 Rules

 Help

 Learn to Play

 Fun Stuff

English

 Español

 Deutsch

Mon, Jun 30

[You Make The Card, Too](#)
 The "almost" mechanics
 by Mark Rosewater

Sat, Jun 28

[Saturday School #34](#)
 Stifling rumors about
 countering the draw
 by Rune Horvik

Fri, Jun 27

[Instants and Sorceries](#)
 The fine balance of game play
 by Randy Buehler

Search

Making Magic Monday, September 23, 2002

Tribal's in Your Court



Mark Rosewater

Deutsch | English | Español

Mistform creatures and "race matters"

Welcome to Tribal Week! This week we'll be talking about *Onslaught's* major theme. *Invasion* block was about multi-color. *Odyssey* block was about graveyard interaction. *Onslaught* is about creature races. So what exactly does "tribal" mean? Tribal refers to any spell or land that references a particular creature race (or allows you to select a particular race). Examples of tribal cards from the past would be [Goblin King](#), [Priest of Titania](#), and [Engineered Plague](#). In the design and development of *Onslaught*, we nicknamed these cards "race matters" because, well, they make creature race matter.

How did the tribal theme come to be? What affect did it have on the design of *Onslaught*? And why have we chosen to focus on it? I'll answer all these questions and even preview a new *Onslaught* card, so keep on reading.

Mist Me, Mist Me

The tribal theme started with a small cycle of blue cards in *Onslaught* design, then called the mimics:

Little Mimic

Creature - RACE2
 1/1
 ①: CARDNAME is the type of your choice until end of turn.

Small Mimic

Creature - RACE2
 2/2
 ①: CARDNAME is the type of your choice until end of turn.

Medium Mimic

Creature -
 0/4
 ①: CARDNAME is the type of your choice until end of turn.

Big Flying Mimic

Creature -
 4/4
 Flying
 ①: CARDNAME is the type of your choice until end of turn.

Mimic Maker

Creature - RACE2
 1/1
 X, : X target creatures become the creature type of your choice until end of turn.



Some mid-development versions of the "mimics."

Mike Elliott, the lead designer of *Onslaught*, was trying to find a small mechanic for blue. Blue has long had a flavor of creatures that are able to change some aspect of themselves. This began way back in Alpha with cards like *Vesuvan Doppelganger* that could change its shape every turn. This trend continued up until *Invasion* where we had cards like *Tidal Visionary* that could change its color. If shape and color were okay, why not creature type thought Mike. And thus, the mimics were born.

The mimics would later be called mistform creatures. In fact, one of the mistform creatures, *Mistform Wall*, is my preview card for today. It might not look all the amazing, but wait until you see what it can do in *Onslaught*. As you will see, in *Onslaught* race matters.

Talking the Talk

Now you have to understand that design is not done in a cave. The designers are constantly showing off their work to other designers and developers. Quite often, a designer is a little too close to the set to see some of the bigger issues, so it helps to show the latest file to others for feedback. In addition, the design team will playtest their cards and often invite other R&D members to join in.

So Mike showed off the latest version of the file and got a strong reaction from R&D. For purposes of encapsulation and entertainment, I will condense the give and take between R&D and the *Onslaught* Design team (Mike Elliott and Mike Donais) in the form of witty banter:

Design Team: What do you think?

R&D: We liked the mimics.

Design Team: That's good. How about...

R&D: More mimics. We like the mimics.

Design Team: Okay, we could do more with the mimics. But did you see...

R&D: You know, what the mimics could use? More "race matters" cards. We think it's cool that they can change creature type but it just doesn't matter enough yet. We want more "race matters" cards.

Design Team: That's good to hear. We'll turn up the volume of the "race matters" cards. Now, did you...

R&D: "Race matters" is sort of clunky. Perhaps we need a snappy word for "race matters". Ooh, "tribal" sounds cool.

Design Team: Okay, we got the note: "More tribal cards". Will do. Okay, anything else. Guys? Hello?

A MONTH LATER

Design Team: What do you think?

R&D: Ooh, more tribal cards.

Design Team: Yes, just like you asked. Now what do you think...

R&D: Not enough though. Needs more.

Design Team: Okay, we'll add more. Did you talk a look at...

R&D: The tribal cards are cool though. Definitely more tribal cards.

Design Team: Okay.

A MONTH LATER

Design Team: What do you think?

R&D: Ooh, shiny goblin deck. Uh, good. But more tribal cards.

Design Team: More? There's quite a bit now. Couldn't we...

R&D: No, more. Please.

A MONTH LATER

Design Team: What do you think?

R&D: Two words: Mo... ore.



A MONTH LATER

Design Team: What do you think?
(pause) Okay, we'll add more.

A MONTH LATER

Design Team: Captain, she can't take much more of this.
R&D: I like the beast deck.
Design Team: Okay. We'll add more.

A MONTH LATER

Design Team: If we add one more tribal card, the set's going to burst. What do you guys think?

R&D: Wow, the tribal theme's really added a neat layer to the set. You've taken what used to be solely a Timmy & Johnny mechanic and brought it to the level where Spike's going to have to sit up and take notice.

Design Team: So, it's okay?

R&D: Oh no, add more.

And thus, *Onslaught* was steered into its creature race theme.

On a slightly more serious note, I want to point out that despite my comic portrayal, the design team was very interested in exploring the creature race theme. The mistform creatures were the jumping off point, but Mike and Mike did a great job mining what had been a very under-explored vein of **Magic** design.

Themes Like Old Times

This brings up the bigger question: what's so interesting about the creature race theme? The key to any block design is to create a unique environment that an entire year's worth of **Magic** can be crafted around. When player's sit down with the block, you have to put them in a place that's unlike any other set. How do we do that? By forcing the players to pay attention to things that normally do not matter.

For example, in *Odyssey*, discarding a card had a significance that it did not normally have. This meant that cards with a discard cost or even cheap spells played a different role than normal. Creature type plays into this criteria very well because it exists on every creature card (okay, except for some artifact creatures), but normally doesn't matter. If all of a sudden, a set comes along that actually cares about this mostly flavor-driven designation, all sort of cool things happen.

First, cards have a significance solely because of their creature type. Imagine, for example, you open a card that uses goblins very effectively. You are now more encouraged to play goblins. In fact, you may play creatures you normally wouldn't, simply because they're goblins. Drafting *Onslaught* is quite fun because you will find yourself taking cards that you wouldn't have looked at in previous blocks. Second, creature type will now affect play decisions. A good example would be morph creatures. There will be times when you turn a morph card face up, not because of its combat ability, not because of its size, but simply because you need another creature of its type in play. As you will see, making creature type matter will have ripples throughout play, both in limited and constructed.

Creatures of Habit

While I think you'll get a chance to see the impact of the tribal theme in play, I wanted to end my column talking about the impact here on our side of the wall. How did the tribal theme affect design? First, in order to make sure the tribal theme was strong enough in limited, we condensed the number of creature types in the block. The majority of the cards are one of eight creature types: soldier, cleric, bird, wizard, zombie, goblin, beast, and elf. There are a few other races that matter. There are numerous creatures with the creature type mistform (go mimics), but because they can turn into any creature type, they work well with the theme. Also, the prevalent token type for this block will be insects, so that creature type will show up a little more. This doesn't mean



And so was born the multitude of Zombie cards, and Goblin cards, and Soldier cards, and...

that other creature types won't show up (they will), but they will appear in small numbers and are usually restricted to uncommon and rare.



*Mistform creatures even interact with the tournament-level cards like **Ravenous Baloth** and **Mobilization**.*

these in both the *Invasion* and *Odyssey* blocks, so we felt confident enough to up their use in *Onslaught*. The reason double creature types are so crucial is they allow us to raise the percentage of each individual creature type. An Aven (bird soldier), for instance, raises both the number of birds and the number of soldiers.

Third, we put the focus (more than normal) on the creature interactions. If the tribal theme was going to work it had to be because the game focuses on the creatures. While this didn't require too much extra effort in limited (which by nature is more creature focused), it did have an impact on the cards designed for constructed play. This focus will ripple throughout the *Onslaught* block.

So why those eight? They were chosen for a number of reasons. We needed to make sure that all five colors were represented. We needed to make sure that all size creatures were represented. And we wanted to focus on creature types that we knew existed in large enough quantity that it would allow for a wide range of creature theme decks.

Second, we took greater advantage of double creature types. We explored a bit with

The Old College Tribal


As much as I can talk about the impact of the tribal theme, you really need to play the cards to get a sense of how this block will shake things up. The prerelease for *Onslaught* is this weekend. If one is [in your area](#), I highly recommend attending. *Onslaught* is different, but in a very fun way.

Well, that's all for this week. Join me next week when I give my opinion on leaks in **Magic**.

Until then, may you play a substandard goblin simply because he's a goblin.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

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