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Tying together tribal themes

"Making Magic" is a design column and this week is knee-deep in design talk. Several weeks ago, I had a column where I talked about where the tribal theme came from ("[Tribal's in Your Court](#)"). This week I'm going to talk about how the tribal theme was designed.

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Design Up Ahead

So, let's put ourselves in the designers' shoes. We know we're going to be doing a tribal theme. We need to design cards where creature type matters. What can we do? The key to design is to find a vein of creative space and mine it. The best way to do this is to methodically go through different aspects and see what other ideas can be mined from them. For this exercise, let's start by examining the mechanic that led to the tribal theme in the first place: the Mistforms (called "Mimics" in design).

Type #1 – Cards That Allow Creatures To Change Their Creature Type

We begin, of course, with the Mistforms themselves. First, the ones that can change their own creature type:

- Mistform Dreamer
- Mistform Shrieker
- Mistform Skyreaver
- Mistform Stalker
- Mistform Wall

As I said in my tribal article, this mechanic (designed by Mike Elliott) plays into a common blue theme, the ability to change things. This led to a repeat of an old creature that has a limited ability to change its creature type:

- Clone

For years, R&D was told not to make copy cards due to rules issues. But in recent years, the copy rules had been cleaned up allowing us to dip our toe into the water again. A repeat of **Clone**, the most basic copy card, seemed appropriate for a set that revolved around creature types. Once we have creatures that can change their own creature type we start looking at making creatures that can change other creatures' types:

- Imagecrafter
- Mistform Mutant

Then we have non-creature cards that change creature type:

- Mistform Mask
- Standardize
- Trickery Charm


 Search


This, of course, led to a card that could only change creatures to a single locked type:

- **Shade's Breath**

One of the flavors of black over the years is that black likes to bring others over to the dark side. In the past, cards like **Darkest Hour** (*Urza's Saga*) or **Defiling Tears** (*Invasion*) have turned creatures black. Turning them into Shades seemed like the logical progression.

In shifting color altering abilities to creature type altering abilities, it only made sense to look at **Sleight of Mind**:

- **Artificial Evolution**

The most interesting thing about Artificial Evolution is that I had been trying for years to get this card into **Magic**. Foiled at ever attempt, I finally gave up and put into *Unglued 2*. When that set was put on hiatus, I wasn't sure the card would ever see print. But then along comes *Onslaught* and all of a sudden, a creature type hack seemed a little less crazy. For those keeping count, this is the thirteenth *Unglued 2* card to make its way to tournament **Magic**. (The previous twelve: the five **split cards**, the five **Djinn**s from *Invasion*, **Barrin's Unmaking**, and **Atogatog**.)



Type #2 – Cards That Grant All Creatures of One Type an Ability

Now that we mined the new mechanic, I like to continue our design search by looking to the past. Whenever I want to explore new territory, I always like to look and see what's been done in this area before. The first set of cards with a tribal theme that jump to mind are the Lords. You know, **Goblin King**, **Lord of Atlantis**, **Elvish Champion**, etc. These cards, almost always creatures, grant an ability or abilities to a particular creature type. Let's start there.

First thing is to just make a straight-forward Lord:

- **Aven Brigadier**

Onslaught only has one. And even it had a little twist in that it functioned as a Lord to two creature types and as an über-Lord to a particular creature combination. This is one of many cards that played into our recent use of double creature types. Next, we have lords that grant all creatures of a certain type a triggered ability:

- **Cabal Slaver**
- **Rotlung Reanimator**

Cabal Slaver is interesting in that it promotes the creation of a two-colored deck, as Goblins (with one exception) appear in red. Finally, we have a creature that indirectly grants an ability to a creature type:

- **Daunting Defender**

The Defender is a little weird as it doesn't technically grant the ability to the creatures but for all intense and purposes having this creature in play makes your Clerics better.

Now we move the ability to enchantments:

- **Mobilization**

The twist to this "Lord" enchantment is that it can also create the creature type it enhances. The next obvious twist is to create "Lord" enchantments that allow the person who plays the spell to choose which creature type they want to affect:

- **Cover of Darkness**
- **Shared Triumph**



- **Steely Resolve**

The reason the customizable “Lord” enchantments are so popular with the designers is that they fit into numerous race decks. A Goblin Lord only goes into a Goblin deck. **Shared Triumph** can go into any deck with enough white mana to support it. The next variant is a customizable enchantment that allows you to hurt a particular race:

- **Circle of Solace**

Why does R&D make cards that hose the theme they're trying to push? The idea behind these cards is that they are safety valves. If the theme grows too powerful, we've provided cards to keep the theme in check. If not, cards like this are low power enough that they shouldn't see tournament play.

Once we've explored permanents with the “Lord” ability, we move to spells and abilities:

- **Goblin Pyromancer**
- **Psychic Trance**

Normally, R&D doesn't create cards like this because they would be very narrow. But when we focus the environment on creature types, these cards start becoming playable, especially in limited. (I listed **Goblin Pyromancer** here because its tribal effect functions like a sorcery.) Just like enchantments, the obvious tweak is to create customizable spells and abilities:

- **Defensive Maneuvers**
- **Aphetto Dredging**
- **Patriarch's Bidding**
- **Peer Pressure**
- **Tribal Unity**
- **Riptide Chronologist**

The next leap is a little more complex. We have customizable effects on both permanents and spells. What if we created a permanent that set the affected creature type along with a sacrifice effect that functioned like a tribal instant? The result:

- **Crown of Ascension**
- **Crown of Awe**
- **Crown of Fury**
- **Crown of Suspicion**
- **Crown of Vigor**

The crowns were an ingenious idea. (Created in development incidentally.) We wanted to have tribal creature enchantments. To do that, we had to find a way to take advantage of some element that is fundamental about creature enchantments. Well, creature enchantments sit on creatures. This is a neat way to customize a card. I believe the earliest version of the card granted an ability to the creature and all creatures of its type. Development changed it to have a standing effect that could be granted to others of the same creature type at instant speed. The final tweak, was to create an instant that had a fluid customizability:

- **Endemic Plague**

This card is interesting because it encourages a player to build a deck with either a variety of creature types or with creatures that can change their creature type (see **Mistforms** above).



Type #3 – Cards That Use Creatures of a Certain Race as a Resource

This grouping of tribal cards flows very naturally from the Lords. In the Odyssey block, we created a cycle of a new type of Lord: **Master Apothecary**; **Patron Wizard**; **Zombie Trailblazer**; **Dwarven**

Bloodboiler; and **Seton, Krosan Protector**. Rather than granting creatures of a certain type an ability, it allowed the “new lord” the ability to use that creature as a resource.

In fact, the earliest version of **Patron Wizard**, the first card I made in this cycle, was worded as followed: "All Wizards gain 'C': Counter target spell unless its controller pays 1." Pretty early in design we came to the conclusion that it would be better to have the tapping be a cost of the Lord. It made it seem more different from a traditional Lord and it avoided the summoning sickness confusion.

Because the “new lords” appeared in the *Odyssey* block, the designers looked for a few tweaks:

- **Aphetto Grifter**
- **Birchlore Rangers**
- **Catapult Squad**
- **Gangrenous Goliath**
- **Shieldmage Elder**
- **Spurred Wolverine**

The first tweak was to increase the effects but require the tapping of multiple creatures. Like the “Lord” enchantments from above, this too proved customizable:

- **Cryptic Gateway**

For flavor reasons (the cards made much more sense when tied to a certain race), only one customizable card of this mechanic was made. The next step was to super-size the mechanic:

- **Ancestor's Prophet**
- **Catapult Master**
- **Gravespawn Sovereign**
- **Skirk Fire Marshal**
- **Supreme Inquisitor**
- **Voice of the Woods**



One of the questions I've gotten about this “cycle” is why there weren't versions created for all eight races we chose to push. The reason is simple: We wanted each race to have a slightly different feel. To achieve this, the development team took steps to make sure that each mechanic was spread unevenly to ensure that no two creature types would have the same mix.

The next tweak is to take the creature type as resource a step further. Instead of just tapping a creature type, what if you sacrificed it? This idea is not completely new. **Goblin Chirurgeon** from *Fallen Empires*, for instance, used Goblin sacrifice as a cost. This allowed us to create the following:

- **Airdrop Condor**
- **Cabal Archon**
- **Goblin Sledder**
- **Ravenous Baloth**
- **Skirk Prospector**
- **Voidmage Prodigy**
- **Wall of Mulch**

Many of these cards didn't start out in this category. Both **Ravenous Baloth** and **Wall of Mulch**, for example, were designed simply as cards that sacrificed themselves for their effects. In an attempt to raise the level of tribal cards in the environment, the development team changed the sacrifice to allow any of that card's creature type to be sacrificed. This way, you could still sacrifice **Ravenous Baloth** for 4 life or **Wall of Mulch** to draw a card, but you had many more tribal-friendly options.

The other interesting story is **Voidmage Prodigy**. Kai Budde's original submission from winning last year's **Magic Invitational** was:



Wisdrafter's Will



Enchantment

Opponents play with their hands revealed.

•, Sacrifice Wisdrafter's Will: Draw a card.

••, Sacrifice Wisdrafter's Will: Counter target spell.

One of the challenges of R&D has with the Invitational card is to maintain the spirit of the original while keeping the card balanced and synergistic with the current block. Randy and I talked with Kai about the advantages of making the card a creature. Many past Invitational winners have talked about the fun of beating down an opponent with their cards. Also, creatures are far easier to make iconic and the Invitational winner's card is important enough that we want to make it as iconic as possible.

Some of Kai's friends had said the same thing, so Kai agreed to let us convert the card into a creature. Instead of merely, making the creature sacrifice itself to counter a spell, we used the same trick we used on [Ravenous Baloth](#) and [Wall of Mulch](#).

Finally in this category, we applied the sacrifice cost to a customizable card:

- [Doom Cannon](#)

The funny thing about [Doom Cannon](#) (called Creature Catapult in design) is that the card is about four years old. I originally designed the card for *Urza's Saga*, and it's been hanging out in limbo ever since.

Type #4 – Cards That Count the Number of Creatures of a Particular Type

The next card that provided a great deal of inspiration was [Priest of Titania](#). The beauty of this card is that it gets stronger as more creatures of its type come into play. The team started by putting [Priest of Titania](#) in the set and then building a cycle around it:

- [Battlefied Medic](#)
- [Information Dealer](#)
- [Shepherd of Rot](#)
- [Sparksmith](#)
- [Wellwisher](#)

Hmm, you might be saying, what happened to [Priest of Titania](#)? Randy discussed it in a [recent column](#) but the short answer is [Priest of Titania](#) was simply too good in an environment that stressed tribal decks. The next step was to create creatures that were enhanced in a way other than a tap effect:

- [Goblin Piledriver](#)
- [Shaleskin Bruiser](#)

We kept the attacking boosts to red and green as it made the most sense in those two colors. Once you boost power on attack, the next logical place to look is boosting of power *and* toughness. In *Odyssey*, we had a card called [Squirrel Mob](#) that got bigger for each squirrel in play. In *Onslaught*, we took that idea to the next logical conclusion:

- [Doubtless One](#)
- [Heedless One](#)
- [Nameless One](#)
- [Reckless One](#)
- [Soulless One](#)

Rather than have a creature grow based on a certain creature type, these creatures were defined completely by the creature types. The interesting story with this cycle is that in design each creature was given a different keyword mechanic. [Soulless One](#) originally had some black ability (regeneration, I believe), but the development thought it would be cooler if its extra ability was that it counted zombies in play and in the graveyard.

Once we had [Priest of Titania](#) creatures, it seemed natural to have [Priest of Titania](#) spells: ([Wirewood Pride](#), for example was called "Giant Growth of Titania" in design.)



- Airborne Aid
- Feeding Frenzy
- Ixidor's Will
- Profane Prayers
- Thunder of Hooves
- Unified Strike
- Wirewood Pride

The one-shot spells then led to permanents that trigger a tribal effect:

- Aether Charge
- Elvish Guidance
- Mana Echoes
- Wirewood Savage

It's interesting to note that **Elvish Guidance** got created because we wanted to find some way to get the **Priest of Titalia's** effect into the set.

Type #5 – Cards That Target a Specific Creature Type

The next area to explore is cards that have effects that only work on certain creature types. Once again, this idea is an old one. **Goblin Wizard** in *The Dark*, for example, had the ability to grant target Goblin protection from white. We start with the straight-forward creatures with mono or poly activated abilities:

- Aphetto Vulture
- Boneknitter
- Elvish Pathcutter
- Goblin Taskmaster
- Grassland Crusader
- Krosan Groundshaker
- Snarling Undorak

Like **Ravenous Baloth** and **Wall of Mulch**, many of these creatures started as creatures whose abilities affected only themselves. By adding the tribal aspect, the cards became both more versatile and more powerful. **Boneknitter**, it's interesting to note, started in design as a card that regenerated all Zombies. Unfortunately this proved confusing to play as you had to track the regenerative shield on each Zombie in play. Changing the ability to target Zombie still encouraged a Zombie deck without the memorization issues.

One final note about **Aphetto Vulture**. When it goes to the graveyard, you are allowed to use its ability to affect itself. Yes, this means that the **Aphetto Vulture** will never go away permanently unless you let it. Feel free to print up this article if and carry it around in case your opponent doesn't believe you. When the problem arises, have him read this next paragraph:

Hello. My name is Mark Rosewater. Besides being a senior designer in Magic R&D, I'm a Level IV judge. I know you don't believe your opponent. But you know what? He (or she) is absolutely in the right. One hundred percent. Aphetto Vulture can do that. No, really. Swear to God. If my mother wasn't still alive, I would swear on her grave. What the hell, I'll swear on her grave sometime in the distant future. It works. It actually works. Now get back to play and find some way to deal with that damn Vulture.

Always happy to provide you, my faithful reader, with practical hands-on material. Anyway, let's continue.

As always, we made a customizable version:

- Walking Desecration

Next, we made some creatures that have effects that don't go away at end of turn:

- Everlove Courier



- Flamestick Courier
- Frightshroud Courier
- Ghosthelm Courier
- Pearlspear Courier

I believe the precursor to these cards is **Old Man of the Sea** from *Arabian Nights*. To the best of my knowledge, that was the first card that allowed you to tap it for an effect that didn't go away until you chose to untap the creature. Once we covered the creatures, we moved to the spells (see a pattern here?):

- Fever Charm
- Misery Charm
- Piety Charm
- Vitality Charm

Because these effects are very limiting on a one-shot, we only used them on the charms that came with two other effects. The charms, for those unaware, was R&D revisiting a theme first used in *Mirage* and *Visions*. If you wonder where the blue part of this cycle is, I included it in the Mistform section as it does not target a specific creature type.

Finally, we explored this mechanic on another permanent type, land:

- Contested Cliffs
- Daru Encampment
- Goblin Burrows
- Riptide Laboratory
- Seaside Haven
- Starlit Sanctum
- Unholy Grotto
- Wirewood Lodge

The interesting point about the lands is that this is the only cycle in *Onslaught* that hits all eight of the featured creature types.

Type #6 – Cards That Reference Other Creature Types

This category is a bit of a catch-all. Each of these cards mentions a creature type by name. First we have the protection from creature type:

- Fallen Cleric
- Foothill Guide
- Riptide Biologist

This isn't the first time we've done this. **Shoreline Raider** in *Invasion* had protection from Kavuu. Protection from creature type is tricky since the creature has to exist in enough quantity to make the effect matter in limited. In *Onslaught* with its compressed creature types, this didn't prove to be a problem.

Next we have a card that upon destruction, sort of turns into an elf of your choice:

- Wirewood Herald

Then we have a creature that gets better as certain creature types show up:

- Tribal Golem

Unlike most of the tribal things in this set, note that the Golem only cares if you control the specified critter.

From creatures we go to spells:

- Lavamancer's Skill



It's interesting to note that this card started out as an Enchant Wizard. In the end, we decided it was a better card if it could work on anything but gained a bonus if it was used on a Wizard.

Type #7 – Miscellaneous

This last group is truly all over the board. First we have the cards that affect everything but a named creature type:

- **Callous Oppressor**
- **Cruel Revival**
- **Harsh Mercy**

Interestingly, these cards are still tribal enablers. The only difference is that they punish the opponent for not playing a tribal deck.

Next are cards that punish a player for not having either a certain creature type or a certain amount of the same creature type:

- **Elven Riders**
- **Graxiplon**
- **Thoughtbound Primoc**

Elven Riders probably shouldn't be in this list, but it does in a small way punish a player for not playing Walls.

Then we have a card that works better in a tribal deck:

- **Bloodline Shaman**

In design, we often have a theme that drives card creation. In *Onslaught*, that theme was "play a tribal deck." **Bloodline Shaman** does that in spades.

Next we have a card that can be customized to any tribal deck:

- **Riptide Replicator**

This card was inspired by the *Stronghold* card **Volrath's Laboratory**.

Finally, we have a very different kind of tribal card. While most cards pushed you to caring about creature races by making you concentrate on just one. This card makes you want to make a deck of all different creature types:

- **Riptide Shapeshifter**

The interesting story about this card is that originally it just flipped to the next creature card, like **Gamekeeper** or **Oath of Druids** did. During development, I suggested we change it to the current version. I envisioned a deck that was a cross between **Oath** and **Survival of the Fittest**. By building your deck correctly, you could use the Shapeshifter to tutor for the proper creature you needed at the moment.

But Wait; There's More

One of the coolest things about the tribal theme is that it makes every creature matter. Even creatures that don't have any specific tribal mechanics can still affect things because their creature type will impact the tribal cards you are playing. Thus, if I'm counting all the tribal cards, I have to include all of *Onslaught's* creatures (don't worry, I won't list them all here).

Hopefully, this exploration through the tribal design will give you a better insight into the creative mining that goes into card creation. And we're only in the first set of the block, so there's still more innovation to come.


Join me next week when I step out and paint the column green.



Until then, may your Elf deck kick some major butt.

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