

Products
Gameplay
Rules
Help
Learn to Play
Fun Stuff

Daily Articles



Wed, Aug 13

Blue is Dead!
Long live blue!
by Brian David-Marshall

Tue, Aug 12

Water-Logged
Blue's power in multiplayer formats
by Anthony Alongi

Mon, Aug 11

True Blue
All brains, no brawn
by Mark Rosewater

Sat, Aug 9

Saturday School #38
Drop a forest to pay for a madnesed Wurm?
by Rune Horvik

Fri, Aug 8

Live from Berlin
Randy checks in from the World Chapiionships
by Randy Buehler

Thu, Aug 7

The Joy of Decks
Ways to use and abuse Eighth Edition
by Mark Gottlieb

 Search

Home > TCGs > Magic > MagicTheGathering.Com > Columns

Printer Friendly 

Making Magic Monday, January 13, 2003

Phage Against the Machine



Mark Rosewater

One Legend and 20 asides

hello, and welcome to this week's "Making Magic."

Aside #1

For some reason, my love of asides seems to have gone a little crazier than usual. Perhaps it's due to my two-week vacation where I had no place to make asides. Anyway, this article is chock full of asides (twenty in all). I felt it was only fair to warn you.

I had a nice break (my last column before the winter break was written before I left), and I'm excited to dive into year two of **MagicTheGathering.com**.

Aside #2

Upon my return, I was surprised to discover how much mail I received regarding a repeated column. ("[When Cards Go Bad](#)," my explanation of why R&D makes bad cards -- it was repeated three weeks ago.) I was a little disappointed that no one resent me an old reply from the first time the column appeared. Interestingly enough, the major theme of the mail was the exact same theme I received last time we printed the column: "I understand why there are bad cards. But why do you have to make them rare?"

The overwhelming response I received the first time the article appeared prompted me to write an article called "[Rare, but Well Done](#)," which explained how cards are chosen to be rare. If you haven't read this column and are interested in why certain cards are rare, I recommend you take a look.

But enough with the past, let's talk about the future.

The Phage of Reason

In a few weeks' time, the *Legions* set will be released. In it will be a very cool card based on the character Phage. For those of you who don't read the novels, Phage is the corrupted version of **Jeska**, **Kamahl**'s sister. It's also important to understand that Phage is one of two big villains in the *Onslaught* block. So we knew we needed something that would stand out.

Now, last week I promised "a creature that does something never before done in the **Magic** game." I guess it's time I delivered on my promise:





Aside #3

Before I explain how the card came to be, let me quickly address "what's new" about the card. In my "Insider Trading" column in January 2003 issue of *Sideboard Magazine*, I mentioned that a card exists in the *Legions* set with Phage's drawback. After my teaser last week, a number of you thought that this week's card would have that drawback (and you're right) and that the drawback was the new thing (and now you're wrong).

Cards that make you lose the game if condition X happens are as old as the **Magic** game itself. Alpha introduced **Lich** that made you lose the game if it was ever destroyed. The *Mirage* set introduced two different cards that allowed you to lose the game. **Forbidden Crypt** shifted the "lose if you cannot draw a card" condition from the library to the graveyard. And **Final Fortune** gave you a one-turn boost before it caused you to lose. (**Final Fortune**, incidentally, would later be reprinted in the *Portal* and *Portal Three Kingdoms* sets as **Last Chance** and **Warrior's Oath**, respectively). The *Odyssey* set added **Nefarious Lich** that had the same drawback as its predecessor. The *Torment* set then added **Transcendence** that changed the life rule from "lose if 0 or less" to "lose if 20 or more".

There have even been a few cards that force the opponent to lose the game. The most famous of those have been creatures with poison (**Pit Scorpion**, **Marsh Viper**, Poison-Snake tokens from **Serpent Generator**, **Swamp Mosquito**, **Crypt Cobra**, **Sabertooth Cobra**, and **Suq'Ata Assassin**). These creatures give poison counters to the opponent. If your opponent ever has ten or more poison counters, he or she loses the game. Also, technically, **Amulet of Quoz** can force the opponent to lose the game.

But there has never been a definitive game ender. Poison, by design, requires many hits. **Amulet of Quoz** can win the game only if your opponent has no cards left in his or her library to ante (and if this is the case, your opponent's going to lose during his or her next draw step anyway). **Phage the Untouchable** ends the game in one fell swoop. She damages you and you lose. That's never been done before.

In this week's column, I thought it would be fun to explore how **Phage the Untouchable** came to be.

The Phage of Discovery

So, how did Phage come to be? In the past I've told numerous stories about how the story guys tell R&D that we need to make a Legend, and the designers sit down and design a card around the creature. Well, that's not how Phage was made. In fact, Phage wasn't originally designed to be Phage. In the beginning it was called Super Basilisk.

You see, from time to time, R&D focuses its creative energy on different areas of the game. During the time of *Onslaught* design, the various R&D designers spent some time thinking about "big" creatures. (The reason "big" is in quotes is because we were talking about creatures that make a

big impact, not necessarily just creatures that are large in size.) We wanted creatures that would make the average player would say "wow" when he or she saw them for the first time.

I was trying to come up with some "big" creatures. So I began thinking about interesting effects that could be combined with a creature dealing combat damage to a player. Because I was thinking "big," I had to ask myself, "What is the biggest effect I can make?"

Aside #4

As I'm a big fan of creative thought, let me quickly explain the thought process behind creative thinking. One of the biggest obstacles to creative thought is the thinker's self-imposed restrictions. This happens all the time in design. Many times I've caught myself thinking, "We can't do that. We just don't do that."

So, I like to challenge myself by thinking without restrictions. And sometimes (as was the case with Phage) the outrageous idea actually turns out to be doable.

Back to the story. So I said to myself, "You have no restrictions. What is the largest effect you can have when a creature damages a player?" The answer was, of course, you win the game. But I didn't like the flavor. Why do I win the game when my creature damages you? Then it hit me. Rather than winning, what if the opponent lost? This had a lot of flavor. My creature is so deadly, that a single bite can kill you.

Aside #5

While it might seem like "you lose the game" is the same as "I win the game," it's actually not. In multiplayer games, for example, it works very differently.

The idea seemed really cool, but dangerous. I had come this far, though, so I thought I'd finish fleshing out the card. The more I thought about the card, the more I realized that it would be lame if it could be stopped by, say, a large wall. This thing is deadly enough to take out a wizard (player); it sure as hell should be able to take out random creatures. So I added on the Basilisk ability.

Aside #6

If this is a super Basilisk, why is it black? Isn't the Basilisk a green ability? Well, yes and no. The Basilisk ability (defined as a creature who destroys anything it fights/damages) first appeared in green in Alpha with **Thicket Basilisk** and **Cockatrice**.

Aside #7 (Yes, an aside in an aside)

I always thought it was interesting that the **Cockatrice** costs the same as the Basilisk, has the same power and toughness, has the same ability, yet has flying. This phenomenon can also be seen in **Hill Giant** and **Roc of Kher Ridges**. The running R&D joke when asked about this discrepancy is to say, "Yeah, but the Basilisk is **Hurricane-proof**."

The Basilisk ability appeared in black for the first time on the *Legends* card **Infernal Medusa**. Since that time, the ability has shown up in green and black, although more green cards than black. In the latest rounds of "pie" discussions (for more information on "pie" discussions, see ["Of Polls and Pies"](#) by Randy Buehler), R&D decided that the Basilisk ability made more sense flavorwise in black than in green (touch me and die is just more black) but decided to keep the ability in both green and black. The only change is that it will start appearing in more black cards than green.



Phage owes part of her existence to the little-known Infernal Medusa.

To add that extra oomph, I gave the creature first strike so that it would kill off creatures before most creatures could damage it. (The development team would later remove this and add the anti-reanimator drawback.) Because I wanted the Basilisk ability to matter, I chose to make the creature medium sized (either 4/4 or 5/5, I don't remember) rather than giant. The reason this is from memory is that I sent the original creature off in an email that I no longer have. So, to the best of my memory, here's the earliest version:

Super Basilisk



Creature -- Basilisk

5/5

First strike

Whenever CARDNAME deals damage to a creature, that creature is destroyed.

Whenever CARDNAME deals damage to a player, that player loses.

Phage of Enlightenment

So, how did Super Basilisk end up as **Phage the Untouchable**? Well, I had Super Basilisk. So, I asked myself, "Can we actually do this?"

Aside #8

For those who care, I do literally talk to myself. And I even answer back. I'll have whole conversations. Eccentric, creative guy or nutty loon? You decide.

The conversation went something like this:

Me: Can we actually do this?

Other Me: I don't know. They lose the game?

Me: Yeah, but the creature has to hit them.

Other Me: They lose the game?

Me: It's a bit radical. But why not?

Other Me: One more time. They lose the freakin' game?!

Me: Outside the box please.

Other Me: I'm sick and tired of that expression. You know what's radical? Thinking in the box. You know why? 'Cause no one's looking there.

Me: Tangent.

Other Me: We've had our fun. Let's move on.

Me: No. We can do this.

Other Me: For those that came in late . . .

Me: If you say "lose the game" one more time, I'm going to smack you. Actually, that would hurt. I'll severely berate you.

Other Me: Ooh, not a severe berating.

Me: Let's just take the idea to Bill. See what Bill thinks.

Other Me: If Bill doesn't like it, are you going to severely berate him?

Me: Enough with the severe berating. The idea's cool, right?

Other Me: Oh, it's cool, but so is a direct damage spell that does infinite damage. That doesn't mean we should do it.

Me: (doing Homer Simpson's drool) Mmm, infinite damage.

Aside #9

A lot of you may wonder why I have dialogues so often in my column. And also, are any of them real? Let me start by saying that my background is writing theater and television.

Aside #10

I've been ridiculed on more than one site for mentioning my Roseanne writing gig too much. Just curious, have I?

Do I mention my Roseanne writing gig too often?

- Yes, we get it. Move on.
- No, we are fascinated by your illustrious past.
- No, but try to restrict it to times when it's actually relevant to what you're talking about.
- No, I like my designers to have a healthy ego.

- The cow eats Froot Loops at midnight.
- No, but could you try to bias this poll a little less?

Submit my Vote

This means I have some experience writing dialogue. And I enjoy it. So, the reason there's a lot of dialogues is that I like 'em, I think I'm good at writing 'em, I think they're most often funny, and hey, it's my column. How real are they? You know those re-enactments on shows like Hard Copy? Yeah, not as real as those. But the sentiment is usually true. Usually.

So, I took my idea to Bill.

The conversation went something like this:

Me: So what do you think?

Bill: I like it.

(Hey, they can't all be winners.)

So we wrote it up on the white board in Bill's office.

Aside #11

Bill Rose is the head of R&D.

Aside #12

For some reason, people keep thinking I'm the head of R&D. I constantly deny it, but the rumor never seems to go away. My theory is that more people know my name than any other R&D guy (save maybe Randy), so they assume that the name they know must be in charge.

Aside #13

For the longest time, people thought Richard Garfield ran R&D. Same theory. We used to joke about how Richard ran R&D with an iron fist. Especially funny if you ever met Richard.

Aside #14

This doesn't get talked about much, but Richard is a very sweet guy. I think I would have respect for anyone who made the **Magic** game, as I believe it's the greatest game ever created, but I more than respect Richard. I genuinely like him. He's a good person. I don't know if any of this matters to the majority of you as you will never meet him, but I think it's nice for you all to know that the creator of the **Magic** game is a good guy.

It was a great honor the day the iron fist was passed down to me.

I'm flattered really, but once again, I feel a need to state: I'm not the guy in charge. Maybe someday.

Bill holds most of his meetings in his office. And in his office is a white board. And Bill likes to use his white board. Where this gets fun is that whenever I'm in Bill's office, I get to try a figure what meeting created different pieces

of the material on Bill's white board. It's not only fun, it's occasionally quite informative.

Phage of Innocence

So how did Super Basilisk go from Bill's white board to being a *Legions* card? At first, it didn't. During design, the design team (Mike Elliott and Mike Donais) designed another card. I don't remember what it did. What didn't it do? Beat the opponent when it hit them.



Bill Rose's white board contains secret information on all upcoming sets and mechanics. (Photo censored by R&D.)

Aside #15

To understand this story, I should quickly explain a little bit about Phage's abilities in the story. Tainted by black magic (Jeska was injured and healed by Braids, see the *Judgment* story line). The result of this change was that Phage killed any living thing she touched.

During development, I saw the card and was disappointed that it didn't really fit the story. Also, it was a major character in the story, and I felt it needed to be more exciting.

Aside #16

This is an interesting topic that comes up all the time in R&D. The Legend mechanic increases the luck factor in the game. If I draw my Legend before you draw yours, you get hosed. This problem was most noticeable during the small window of time that Tolarian Academy was playable. Normally, R&D relegates high-luck cards (such as coin flipping) to lower power levels to keep them from affecting tournament play (we're not keen on the World Championships ending with heads you win, tails you lose). But, there's an entire other group that really enjoys the flavor aspects of the game and likes the Legends. For these players, we want to make the Legends extra cool. So, how do we balance this? It's tricky. Just another R&D conundrum for you all to think about.

And then like a thunderbolt from the sky, it hit me. Phage could be Super Basilisk! The mechanic lined up perfectly. So I typed a little comment in the database:

Aside #17

R&D has a database of cards so that the designers and developers can mark changes and make comments. There are a lot of interesting comments made in the "comment field" of our database. Hmm, perhaps I'll do a column one day -- or maybe Randy will.

I believed Phage should have this mechanic. Now, I wasn't privy to the discussions in the development team, so I can tell you only the responses I got.

First response: "We're happy with the card as is."

Second response: "Some members of the team like it. We're going to talk about it."

Third response: "Yeah, we're doing it."

Aside #18

One of the neat things about development is that you spend a great deal of time discussing different issues. (It's also true of design except the issues are usually a step higher up in concept.) If you're not on the development team, you throw ideas into the group and then hear the outcome. That outcome could have taken minutes or hours of discussion.

And that is how Phage came to be. Have fun with her.

Aside #19

Here's one way. Get a **Volrath's Shapeshifter** in play. Then discard **Rorix Bladewing**. Your **Volrath's Shapeshifter** becomes a **Rorix**. As it has haste, you can attack with it right away. Then after damage is on the stack, discard **Phage the Untouchable** from your hand. Then let the damage resolve. As your creature is now **Phage**, the "opponent loses if damaged by her" text applies and your opponent loses.



Join me next week when I discuss a little rumor that's been floating around about the *Legions* set. (Hint: It's not about sorceries.)

Food for thought: Brian Schneider, R&D's busiest deckbuilder, has killed many people with Phage in the FFL.


Aside #20

I've always been amazed at how much response my little teaser line gets on the message boards. I'm sure this one won't get discussed.

Until then, may you talk to yourself without being mocked (by yourself).

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

Discuss this article on the [message boards](#). 

MagicTheGathering.com Recent Content

- Magic Dossier: Corey Macourek *Wed, Aug 13*
- Blue is Dead! *Wed, Aug 13*
- Water-Logged *Tue, Aug 12*
- Arcana: *Sideboard #48 Tue, Aug 12*
- True Blue *Mon, Aug 11*
- Arcana: 2003 World Championships *Mon, Aug 11*
- Saturday School #38 *Sat, Aug 9*

Full Archive

 [Email to the editor](#)

 [Message Boards](#)

[Full Archive](#)

[Site Credits](#)

[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITEMAP](#) [PRODUCT LIBRARY](#)

© 1995-2003 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)