

Products
Gameplay
Rules
Help
Learn to Play
Fun Stuff

Daily Articles



Fri, Oct 3

[Artifacts and Color](#)
The debate over Mirrodin's colorific artifacts
by Randy Buehler

Thu, Oct 2

[Ornery Ornithopters](#)
And other living hunks of metal
by Mark Gottlieb

Wed, Oct 1

[Grid Marks](#)
Rebuilding a Steel Necro Frankenstein
by Brian David-Marshall

Tue, Sep 30

[Rise of the Colorful Machines](#)
"Chuck" pumps iron
by Anthony Alongi

Mon, Sep 29

[Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto](#)
"The problem's plain to see..."
by Mark Rosewater

Sat, Sep 27

[Saturday School #45](#)
All Mirrodin All The Time
by Rune Horvik

 Search

Making Magic Monday, January 20, 2003

Lions and Tigers and Bears



Mark Rosewater

Oh my! An all-creature set!

Welcome to *Tribal Week #2: This Time It's Personal!* The *Onslaught* block has a tribal theme, but *Legions*, it seems, goes to 11. (If you don't get that joke, you must immediately go out and rent *Spinal Tap*. I'll go on record as calling it the best mock rockumentary ever committed to celluloid. Go ahead, I'll wait.) *Legions*, you see, is an all creature set.



That means every card is a creature.

This column is dedicated to the key question: Why'd we do it? To answer, I need to answer two other questions. Why does R&D use themes? And why do we use super-themes (my term for gimmicks like the all-creature *Legions* or the black heavy *Torment*)?

Why Does R&D Use Themes?

Note that these reasons are in no particular order.

Reason #1 - They Make the Set Memorable

Legions is the twenty-eighth **Magic** expansion. Twenty-eighth! That's a lot of sets. If each set was just a mix of random cards, they would all blur together. That's why the designers work to give each set an identity. This is where themes come in. Themes are the designer's glue.

Once the designers have a theme, they can build around it. Let's take *Invasion* as an example. The designers, myself included, started the design by deciding that we wanted to focus on multicolor cards. From that we started looking at various mechanics for synergy with multi-color cards. Kicker stood out, as an example, because we could create pseudo-multicolored cards by having off-color kicker costs. Split cards also were attractive as they had a multicolor aspect. As we added layers to the design, we kept focused on our multi-color goal. The end result is that *Invasion* has a very distinctive (and memorable) feel.

Reason #2 - They Allow Radical Environmental Shifts

One of **Magic's** greatest strengths is that it's always changing. Strategies that worked yesterday might not work tomorrow. This keeps the game fresh and allows an endless stream of new discoveries. From a design standpoint, this can be daunting. How do you constantly keep the game fresh? The answer is that we keep shifting the focus of the game. *Invasion* cared about multicolor; *Odyssey* cared about the graveyard; *Onslaught* cared about creature type; Bacon (the 2003 fall standalone) will care about... (Well, you'll have to wait for that one.) The point is that we make each environment different by changing what we make the player care about.

And how do the designers focus the set? You got it, with themes. Themes allow us the opportunity to make certain aspects matter mechanically. Let's use *Odyssey* for this example. Flashback and threshold were chosen as they both focused on the graveyard. Once this focus existed, we were free to make cards that played with this synergy. For instance, cards with a discard cost became more powerful as the ability to get cards in your graveyard was now occasionally a positive attribute.

Reason #3 - They Increase Design Space

As I described in “[Tribal’s In Your Court](#)” (my column on the tribal theme in *Onslaught*), *Onslaught* was very influenced by the creation of the Mistforms (creatures with a built-in ability to change their own creature type). The Mistforms are very interesting cards, but they are only interesting in context. Let’s say we put the Mistforms in another set, such as *Invasion*. They wouldn’t be very interesting. Why? Well, what does it matter that a creature can change its creature type in *Invasion*? There just aren’t that many cards in *Invasion* that care about creature type.

This is an important value of themes. There is a great area of design space of narrow cards that only make sense in a particular environment. So when the designers focus on one aspect of the game, we open up a healthy vein of cards that otherwise wouldn’t be interesting.

Reason #4 – They Make the Set More Aesthetic

In my column “[Zen and the Art of Cycle Maintenance](#),” I talked about the importance of aesthetics. (If this topic at all interests you, I go into much greater detail in the column.) Aesthetics is the study/philosophy of the creation and appreciation of beauty. One of the tenets of aesthetics is that people are affected by qualities that they may not be consciously aware of.

What does this have to do with design? Everything. The goal of a designer is to create not just individual cards but an overall package. To accomplish this, we need to use all the tools available to us. As I’ve talked about in other columns, structure is very important. Equally important though is theme. To demonstrate the connection of structure and theme, let me use the metaphor of building a house. Structure is the architecture. This is very important as having the house not fall down is at the top of most people’s “things I want in a house” list.

The theme is the decoration: the paint, the wallpaper, the carpet, etc. The decoration takes the architecture and ties it all together. The front of a house, for instance, has numerous features, but by painting it one color, many facets become one blended whole. This is what themes do for structure. It’s subtle and often under the radar, but its one of the key things that makes a set “feel” right.

Reason #5 – Increases Vertical Variety

I guess I need to begin by defining what I mean by “vertical variety.” There are two types of variety in **Magic**, what I call horizontal variety and vertical variety. Horizontal variety is wide but shallow. It refers to having a lot of different types of mechanics at the cost of not focusing on any one. Alpha would be a good example of a set with horizontal variety. Vertical variety is narrow but very deep. It takes one facet and explores it in depth. *Onslaught* and *Invasion* are recent examples of sets with vertical variety. One of the strength of themes is that they greatly increase vertical variety.

This begs the question, why favor vertical variety over horizontal variety? The answer is a complex one. First, I should stress that we favor vertical variety over horizontal variety within a particular set. Looking at **Magic** as a whole, we stress horizontal variety. In English, what this means is that we have found the best results by focusing on topics from set to set but radically changing topics between sets. This way, each individual set is deep vertically, but the game long term is wide horizontally. *Invasion* is about multi-color. *Odyssey* is about the graveyard. *Onslaught* is about creatures. But there might be a new archetype that takes cards from each of the three blocks. Thus each set is rich and **Magic** as a whole is rich.

Second, vertical variety enhances deck building and makes new ideas easier to introduce. Let me explain using creature types. Imagine that we make a new creature type called Garrggghs. (I’m thinking red.) There are two ways for us to introduce them, the vertical method and the horizontal method. The vertical method lends itself to introducing them in a set where they are many in number. (The most recent example of this would be the Avens or Cephalids.) The horizontal method is to include a few each set for a long period of time.

The vertical method allows players to build a decent deck relatively quickly. The horizontal method takes years for the same deck to appear. The vertical method is beneficial to new players as what they need exists in recent product. The horizontal method requires players to have access to cards over a long period of time. The vertical method makes it easier to tie together creatively as they exist in the same world. The horizontal method requires the justification of creatures over many different worlds. This is not to say that we never do horizontal integration (because we do), but its rewards are only seen over a long period of time.



Reason #6 – Helps the Design and Development Team Have Focus

This is one of those very important behind the scenes reasons. One of the challenges of designing and developing a set is to prioritize what's important. Having a theme helps give you a leg up on creating this hierarchy. *Onslaught*, for instance, was the creature set. Knowing this made the set much easier to craft in design and balance in development.

Now that we've seen why R&D uses themes, let us examine the next question.

Why Does R&D Use Super-Themes?

Once again, I'm using "super-theme" to mean any big-picture gimmick we use to give a set an extra special feel. Examples of recent super themes are the all-creature *Legions* expansion and the heavy-black *Torment* expansion. These answers are in no particular order.

#1 – People Like Gimmicks

Let's start with the obvious one. We do it because you all like it. If you didn't like it, we wouldn't do it.

#2 – It Creates Excitement

One of the designers' jobs is to make sets that players want to buy. One way to do that is make sets that are fun to play. (This is the number one method by the way.) Once you've done that though, you look for additional things that make players happy. One such thing is surprise. Players like being surprised. Super-themes surprise players.

The reason for this goes to the heart of what makes **Magic** tick. **Magic** is a living, breathing game. It constantly evolves and reinvents itself. One of the great joys of the game is that it's never the same game twice. By the time one's mastered it (which in itself is probably impossible), the game has changed into something different. In addition, **Magic** has a reputation for taking twists and turns players didn't expect. Super themes are merely doing this on a grand scale.

#3 – It's Helps Focus Design

If it's true for normal themes, it's doubly so for super-themes. When designing *Legions*, for example, the designers knew up front to stop worrying about artifacts, enchantments, instants, lands and sorceries.

#4 – It Allows Us To Break New Rules

Magic is the game that "breaks its own rules." And over the last ten years, we've made cards that have broken pretty much every rule the game has (okay, not all of them, but give us time). Super themes let us break rules on a higher level. Rather than just focusing on things individual cards can't do, we get to do things expansions don't do. And trust me, this is an area ripe for interesting experiments.

#5 – It Takes The Game In New Directions

Another of **Magic**'s strengths is that it rewards creativity. Most games at the highest level reward raw memorization over mental flexibility. Not **Magic**. Super-themes allow us to throw huge curveballs at the players. You understand how to draft? Okay, what if the cards force you into multiple colors? What if certain colors exist in greater number? What if some element of the card that didn't matter yesterday suddenly matters? Super-themes keep players on their toes.

Now that I've explained super-themes, let's get to the question at hand.

Why Is *Legions* All Creatures?

To explain this question, I'm going to walk you through R&D's thought process. Unlike the previous answers, these are in a particular order and each begets the next.

#1 – We Believe We Should Do Super-Themes



For all the reasons listed above, R&D is behind doing super-themes.



#2 – Super-Themes Can't Be Forced

One of the problems with super-themes is that they require a delicate touch. We can't just plop one down randomly. We have to be very careful in picking where they go.

#3 – We Create Super-Themes Faster Than We Can Use Them

Between the combination of this gentle touch plus the necessary rarity (if we do them too often, they stop becoming special), R&D creates a surplus of super-themes.

#4 – We Came Up With The All Creature Set Theme

The all creature theme is an idea we've talked about for years. But there never seemed to be a good place for it. So we put it in the "spare super-theme" bin.

#5 – *Onslaught* Block Became The Tribal Block

Flash forward to *Onslaught*. We start making creature type matter. This, of course, forces us to make creatures matter more than normal.

#6 – If Not Now, When? (AKA When Tribal Block Met The All-Creature Super-Theme)

At this point, we have the basic formula plot for a romantic comedy. The tribal block and the all-creature super-theme are destined to meet. At first they don't like each other. They get on one another's nerves. But then some outside influence forces them together for some duration of time. Hatred blooms into love. Just as they finally recognize this love, a new influence (introduced in the first act if the writer was doing his job) threatens to pull them apart. But their love prevails and we end with a romantic kiss with a hint of more risqué activity to come.


Themes Like Old Times

That's the long answer. The short answer is it was destiny. And that is why *Legions* is the all creature set.

Join me next week when I explore virgin territory with an article that couldn't be done anywhere but on-line.

Until then, may your tribal block meet your all-creature theme as wacky hijinks ensue.

Mark Rosewater

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

MagicTheGathering.com Recent Content

- Wallpaper of the Week: Silver Myr *Fri, Oct 3*
- Artifacts and Color *Fri, Oct 3*
- You Make the Card 2 - Step 13 *Fri, Oct 3*
- Sketches: Goblin Clearcutter *Thu, Oct 2*
- Ornery Ornithopters *Thu, Oct 2*
- Ask Wizards - October, 2003 *Wed, Oct 1*
- Card of the Day - October, 2003 *Wed, Oct 1*

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](#)