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**Daily Articles**



**Making Magic** Monday, April 28, 2003

# Dragon Racing



Mark Rosewater

## Hidden within: the first *Scourge* preview

Welcome to the beginning of the *Scourge* previews (which will continue for the next three weeks). And, welcome to Dragon Week! How can these two coexist? Well, let's just say the "tribal" theme continues in the *Scourge* set in a big way. A big firebreathing way to be exact.

Yes, one of the major themes of the *Scourge* set is dragons. (It's not the only major theme, but, hey, we have to save something for the next two weeks.) So, today I thought it would be interesting to talk about how Dragons are designed. And, as a special bonus, I'll show off one of the new *Scourge* Dragons. Sound good?

**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 madressed Wurm?  
by Rune Horvik

**Fri, Aug 8**

**Live from Berlin**  
Randy checks in from the World Championships  
by Randy Buehler

**Thu, Aug 7**

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

 Search

## Stop Dragon My Heart Around

To understand how dragons are designed, I would like to start from the beginning. Imagine you are Richard Garfield and you're designing Alpha. You want to create a Dragon. What color do you put it in? Mechanically, it wants to be in a color with big flying creatures. Blue is the flying color, and it does have big fliers.

Aside: I promise not to overdo asides in this column, but I want to quickly jump in to clarify a confusion that stemmed from a misunderstanding of [one of Randy's articles](#). Blue has always been, and still is, the flying color. R&D's decision many months ago to push more white fliers into Constructed was not a change from color philosophy but an acknowledgement that white is the second best flying color; a good creature color should have a larger number of tournament fliers than blue, the number one flying color but worst creature color. Blue is still the color that grants flying (with activated abilities, as well as enchantments and spells) and blue still has a higher percentage of fliers than any other color. Thus, blue remains the flying color.



*Two-Headed Dragon burns both peasants and countryside.*

The problem is that dragons don't feel all that blue. Blue is a more passive, intellectual color. That's not the kind of dragons you want. You want wild, vicious dragons with flames for breath. That sounds red. But red, along with green, is supposed to be bad at flying. And even the fliers that red does get aren't supposed to be priced aggressively, as red is bad at flying. See the problem? Dragons fit red flavorwise but not mechanically.

So, what did Richard do? He stuck them where they made the most sense flavorwise. Flash forward a couple of years. Around the time of the *Mirage* set (the beginning of the Silver Age of the **Magic** game), the new collection of R&D guys (Mike Elliott, William Jockusch, Bill Rose, and me) decided to start charting out the creature curves. The idea was to use math to show what each color could get at various costs.

Dragons caused all kinds of problems. The price of flying was very expensive for red because red is, by color definition, bad at flying. But many of the Dragons we had printed were pretty good. (What fun would the game be if all Dragons had to suck?) That's when Bill came up with the "Dragon bonus." The idea was simple. The mere act of being a Dragon in red knocked off a couple mana. For example, let's say you have a 4/4 flying Elemental with firebreathing. It should cost somewhere around  $5\text{ } \color{red}{\text{R}}$ . But turn it into a Dragon and all of a sudden you get to lose two mana. Why? Because being a Dragon is a "bonus." A little devious I grant you, but, hey, who better to game a system than a bunch of gamers?

The "Dragon bonus" explains why red seldom has good fliers that aren't Dragons. So why don't we just make every large flier in red a Dragon? Despite what the movie *Reign of Fire* might lead you to believe, Dragons are pretty scarce animals (although not so much in the *Scourge* set). They don't show up in great number because they are supposed to be few and far between in the multiverse of Dominia.

## What a Dragon

We're now back to present day. Let's say I need to make a Dragon for the set I'm working on. How do I do that? First, let's lay down the ground rules. (Ah, more rules. Always a guarantee for at least three or so posts in the column thread on the message boards.) Dragons are creatures; they're big (3/3 or greater); and they fly.

For the rule breakers out there, yes, we've broken each of these rules. We often do dragon-related cards that aren't Dragons (such as **Dragon Blood** from the *Urza's Saga* set). We occasionally do small Dragons themed as baby dragons (such as **Dragon Whelp**). And we do make Dragons that don't fly. They are most often in green and we call them Wurms. (And for the purists out there, both **Canopy Dragon** and **Mist Dragon** from the *Mirage* set have only activated flying.) With that said, our Dragons are big flying creatures.

More often than not they're red, but we've made Dragons over the years in every color. But, once again, these are exceptions to the rules. Iconically, Dragons belong in red. When we get to Red Week, I'll explain how they embody an important part of red's character.

So, now we have a big flying red creature. What next? Well, we like Dragons to be aggressive. This means that we like to give them abilities that encourage a player to attack with them. Once again, there are exceptions, but the most common Dragon abilities encourage the Dragon's controller to turn it sideways.

The most popular ability is, of course, **firebreathing**. It's not only aggressive, it's very flavorful. Also popular are creatures with haste and saboteur abilities (in non-R&D speak, those are creatures who have an effect when they damage the opponent). In fact, this reminds me of a story. A development story actually. Believe it or not, I'm occasionally on a development team. "Occasionally" might be a bit strong as the last time I was on a development team was the *Invasion* set. (Okay, technically, I was on the *Eighth Edition* team, but that doesn't really count as real development.) And the *Invasion* set, by the way, is where this story comes from.

I'm sure most of you know the Dragon Legends from the *Invasion* set (**Crosis, the Purger**; **Darigaaz, the Igniter**; **Dromar, the Banisher**; **Rith, the Awakener**; and **Treva, the Renewer**). What you might not know is that the abilities you've all become accustomed to didn't exist until development. You see, the original versions all had an activated ability that responded to the middle color in the mana cost and hosed the two colors opposite that color (that is, the colors not in that Dragon's mana cost). For example, the original **Darigaaz, the Igniter**:

### Shezarin Dragon



Creature -- Dragon Legend

4/4

Flying

$2\text{ } \color{red}{\text{R}}\text{ } \color{green}{\text{G}}\text{ } \color{blue}{\text{B}}\text{ } \color{black}{\text{B}}\text{ } \color{white}{\text{W}}$ : Destroy target island or plains.

The cards had plenty of utility, but something just seemed wrong. Then finally it hit me. These Dragons' main thrusts weren't about attacking. Yeah, yeah, you could attack while blowing up all



your opponents' plains and islands or whatever, but it just didn't seem important enough. Dragons have a loftier purpose than board control. Leave that to puny Wizards or Soldiers. Dragons were made to smash in the opponent's face. If Dragons aren't smashing face, well then they aren't really being Dragons now are they?

These cards needed to make the player feel a need to attack. It had to reward them for attacking. How do you maximize a Dragon? By attacking! Thus, I made the bold suggestion to change the abilities of the Dragon Legends. I said the abilities had to begin with "Whenever CARDNAME (R&D shorthand for the name of the card) deals combat damage to a player . . ." And then something cool had to happen.

Crosis was actually the first one changed as I'd always liked **Nicol Bolas** (one of the original Dragon Legends from the *Legends* set) and thought that a **Persecute** trigger was a nice nod to Nicol. The "choose a color" tied in nicely to the *Invasion* set so we used it on all five triggers. And for those paying attention, the design team also upped the mana cost by one and changed them all from 4/4 to 6/6. The better to smash face with.



## Dressing in Dragon

By this point in the column, I assume a number of you are remembering that I'm supposed to preview a *Scourge* card. A *Scourge* Dragon, no less. "So where is it," you're wondering. The fun part is that I've already previewed it. Huh? The link is up above. I'll explain how to find it in the last paragraph of the column.

You see, I always stick the preview cards at the top of my column. And in the future, I'm sure that's what I'll do. But just once I thought it would be cool if I made people read my column first. (Try it, you'll like it.) When you write a column you have that kind of power. Bwah! Ha! Ha! Ha! (Why is it evil people have a stereotypical laugh when no one else does?)

Before I show you the card, I thought I'd talk a little about how it came into being. You see, during *Scourge* development, the team was trying to beef up the Dragon theme. As such, they had a hole that they wanted to fill with a red Dragon. So I designed what I thought was a really cool card and turned it in.

The development team takes all the suggestions turned in by various designers or development team members and talks about them during one of the development meetings, eventually settling on one to fill the hole. Usually, I find out they used one or more of my cards when I see them in the Multiverse, Wizards' card database.



*Mark is supposed to preview this very card... so where is it?*

A day or two after I turned in the Dragon, I checked the database, and . . . they didn't use my card. You see, I talk a great deal about the cards that I design (this is a design column after all), but I do want to point out that many times, I don't make the card. Someone else does. This is one of those times. (But don't feel bad about the card. The mechanic on it ended up being one of the keyword mechanics in the *Mirrodin* set, so the card didn't exactly go to waste.)

After asking around, I learned that the *Scourge* development team (Brandon Bozzi, Randy Buehler, Mike Elliott, Brian Schneider, and Henry Stern) designed the card. It uses an ability that started in red but has been seen mostly in blue in the last couple of years. But Randy defended the ability by saying, "Hey it's chaotic and random. That seems red to me."

You'll see what I mean momentarily. Let me just end this column by thanking you for reading it all the way through. And you didn't do that just to see the preview card. Right? Okay, the link to the card is in my aside in the words "one of Randy's articles." I hope you like it.

Join me next week when I continue to talk about the *Scourge* set.


Until then, may your Dragons smash face.

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