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Birth of a Notion



Mark Rosewater

The two-timing nature of landcycling

Daily Articles

My column last week taught me two important things. One, more people like [Trogdor](#) than I would have guessed and two, when you hide the [preview of the card](#), you get a few nasty letters. So this week, let me start off by showing the preview card. Here you go:

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I assume your eyes are drawn to the new keyword: plainscycling. That's good because today I'm going to walk you through the life and times of this new mechanic. Before we move on, let's take a visit to the *Scourge* [Orb of Insight](#). For those unfamiliar with this little toy, it's a **MagicTheGathering.com** original that lets you see how many times any word exists on cards in *Scourge* (not counting flavor text).

According to the Orb (and believe me, you can trust the Orb), there are two cards with plainscycling, two with forestcycling, and one each of islandcycling, swampcycling, and mountaintcycling. What the Orb won't tell you is that one of these cards is possibly the best card in the set. Is it **Noble Templar**? No. But that doesn't mean the **Noble Templar** doesn't have a story to tell. So sit right back, and I'll tell you a tale. A tale of a fateful trip.

One Token over the Line

The story for me begins in an early meeting of "Bacon" design. (Bacon was the codename for this year's fall expansion, *Mirrodin*). Not *Scourge* design, mind you, Bacon design. You see, I wasn't on the *Scourge* design team. Although Brian Tinsman was. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was early in design, so I had asked the members of the team (Brian, Mike Elliott, Tyler Bielman, and myself) to come in with mechanics they liked. Brian had a neat idea. In an attempt to create a series of cards that helped with mana problems, Brian made some spells that could be discarded to put a land token into play. These land tokens would count as the land drop for the turn and would produce one colorless mana.

While land tokens seemed novel (Brian is definitely an "out of the box" type of designer), they presented a number of problems. There were confusion issues (all **Magic** tokens up until now have been creatures), rules concerns (how do you have a token coming into play count as a land being played), and templating concerns (the rules for tokens are woven into the rules for the game because players can't read tokens).

With land tokens ruled out, the team considered the idea of simply turning the cards upside down and stating that the card would represent a colorless land. But there was morph. **Magic** had defined what a face-down card was. While there is some chance we might do something different in the future, we weren't going to do it in a Standard environment that overlapped with the *Onslaught* block and morph. Back to the drawing board.

It took several iterations, but the team finally ended up with a mechanic we liked. And is this how landcycling came to be? No. The *Mirrodin* design team didn't come up with it. The *Scourge* team did. Huh?

Double Your Pleasure

You see, Brian Tinsman was on two design teams at once, *Mirrodin* and *Scourge*. (Due to the extra time needed for the large expansion, there are occasional design overlaps.) Around the same time he came to the *Mirrodin* team he also approached other members of the *Scourge* team (Worth Wollpert and Bill Rose) with the same idea. All this is fine. Brian's fatal flaw is that he didn't tell either team that he had pitched the mechanic to the other team.

This means that for several months, the two teams were independently working on the same idea. I found the entire incident to be quite enlightening as the two teams went down very different paths. The *Scourge* team also dismissed the land token idea. But they liked the idea of the card becoming a land, so they began thinking about how the card could work without a token. Then it hit them. How about **Rampant Growth**?

The idea was quite simple. The card "became" a land by searching the library for it and putting it into play. While elegant, this idea caused a few problems. First, land searching is a green ability. In addition, the *Visions* card **Tithe** gives white a history of searching for plains. What if the team followed **Tithe's** lead and allowed each color to get only the appropriate type of land? It would be a little bit of a bleed, but the cards seemed flavorful enough that it seemed acceptable. (Also, note that the two colors where the ability was in flavor got two copies while the other colors got one.)

The second problem occurred when the knowledge of the dual designing came to light. How did that happen? Let me present a re-creation of said event.

The Location: Bacon (a.k.a. *Mirrodin*) design meeting

Mark, Brian, Mike, and Tyler are going over the Bacon card file.

Tyler: I'm beginning to like this mechanic. I think it plays well.

Brian: Yeah, in *Scourge*, we did something very different.

Mark: What did you just say?

Brian: That it plays differently in *Scourge*?

Mark: The mechanic that we've spent the last two months on plays differently in *Scourge*?

Brian: Yeah.

Mark: Okay, I'm just going to go out on a limb here and ask the question on everyone's mind. Why is *Scourge* playing with this mechanic?

Brian: It's not this exact mechanic. It's just based on the same idea. You guys have actually gone in very different directions.

Mark: Brian, how can I put this delicately? Is your mechanic seeing other design teams?

Brian: If you count *Scourge*, yeah.

Mark: If I count *Scourge*? If *Scourge* counts? If the only other set in design counts, then yeah, we've been duplicating work for two months.

Brian: Is that a problem?

Mark: Have you ever seen *Dr. Strangelove*?

Brian: A long time ago.



When you cycle the *Templar*, you get a plains instead of a random card from the top of your library.

Mark: In it, the Americans learn about something called the "Doomsday Device" that was built by the Russians. The device is designed to blow up the world if Russia is ever attacked. Dr. Strangelove, the title character, a scientist, is asked his opinion about the Doomsday Device. His response, "An excellent idea, IF YOU TOLD SOMEONE ABOUT IT!"

Brian: So maybe I should have told you I gave the idea to *Scourge*?

Mark: Yeah, maybe.

Goodbye *Mirrodin*, Hello *Scourge*

So, I went to the *Scourge* design team and asked them if they needed the mechanic. They said yes, so the mechanic was pulled out of the *Mirrodin* design. (Truth be told, the *Mirrodin* set was flush with mechanics.)

When I got a chance to see the version for the *Scourge* set I had a similar response to a number of other R&D members. "I like it," I said. "It reminds me a lot of cycling. Too bad cycling's already in the set."

Most of my problem-solving skills come from my writing days. You see, this dilemma happens quite often in fictional writing. There exist two things that each seem plausible but seem too similar to both work. The answer in writing is to tie the two events together. (Both the protagonist and antagonist have to be injured in an explosion? Make it the same explosion.) What this meant for the *Scourge* set was that the new mechanic had to be inched closer to cycling. The team embraced this idea and changed the mechanic to landcycling. It was now a twist on cycling. This means that it interacted with everything that interacts with cycling. When you use the plainscycling ability on **Noble Templar**, for example, you get to flicker something out of play with **Astral Slide**.

The one other shift between the two design teams was that the *Scourge* set moved toward creatures while our mechanic worked better with spells (although we had one or two creatures). You'll notice that I haven't really explained what the *Mirrodin* team did with the mechanic. There's a reason for that. We liked what we did, and we feel we could use it in the future. Not in the same environment as landcycling, but some length of time after it has left Standard. You see, having two different design teams work on the same idea created two different mechanics. One you get now. And the other? We'll get to it. I don't know when, but it's sitting in our bin of good ideas to dust off in a few years.




And that is the story of landcycling.

Join me next week when I explore how sometimes in design bigger is better.

Until then, may your ideas "see other people."

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