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The Bigger, the Better

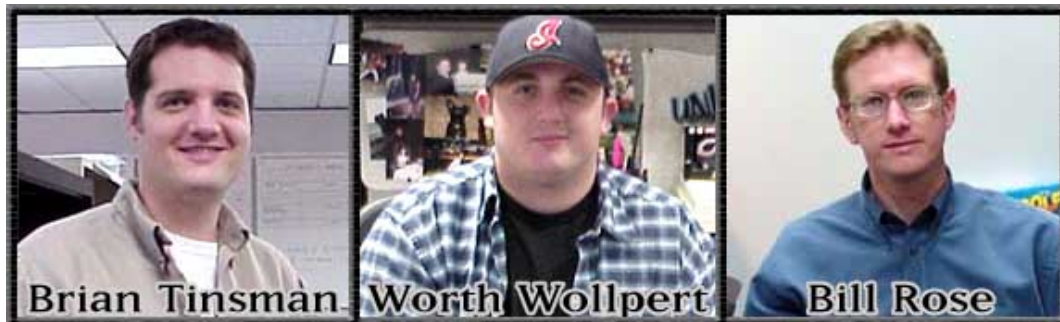
Scourge brings the big guns to the party



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to Size Matters Week! This week we'll be talking about the other major theme (the first being Dragons—you were paying attention two weeks ago, right?) of the *Scourge* set: the use of the converted mana cost as a mechanical tool. In this column, I am going to talk about how "size matters" and use it to demonstrate how we create a certain type of theme in **Magic** expansions.

The Scourge of R&D



Before I begin talking about the *Scourge* set's theme, I'd like to first introduce you to the three members of the *Scourge* design team. The team lead was Brian Tinsman. Now, I've been hyping Brian in my column for over a year now as the "next big thing" in **Magic** design. I think *Scourge* will be the set that moves him from rookie status to veteran. Brian approaches design from a very different vantage point, and I think cards like **Form of the Dragon**, **Upwelling**, and **Brain Freeze** (Brian designed the storm mechanic) will show that R&D has added a new heavy hitter to the R&D team. (What's Brain Freeze? Keep an eye out for it...)

The second team member was Worth Wollpert. Worth is one of a number of R&D members plucked from the Pro Tour. What sets Worth apart from the other **Magic** designers is that he was not initially hired to work on **Magic**; Worth was brought in to work on our numerous sports card games. While Worth still handles those, R&D has realized that not using Worth on **Magic** teams was simply silly. Worth has been on numerous **Magic** development teams, but the *Scourge* set was his first time on a design team. Cards like **Eternal Dragon**, **Siege-Gang Commander**, and **Undead Warchief** (Worth designed the Warchief cycle) show off what Worth is capable of. (I know, I know... you'll see them soon... promise!)

The final member of the team is none other than Bill Rose, R&D vice president and long-time lead **Magic** designer. Interestingly, Bill was the team member that contributed the least to the *Scourge* set. (Although, please don't read this as his input wasn't valuable.) As the *Scourge* design team was a relatively inexperienced team, Bill was around to keep an eye on things. As it turns out, the team came through with flying colors, so Bill was able to sit back and participate as just "another member of the team." Some of Bill's cards include [Decree of Silence](#), [Hunting Pack](#), and [Mischievous Quonar](#).

As the previews have demonstrated and will continue to demonstrate, the *Scourge* team did an excellent job creating an interesting, fun, and very memorable set. As we say in R&D, the bar has been raised.

Themes Familiar

One of the challenges of creating a **Magic** expansion is choosing one or more themes to explore. There are many different types of themes, but today I want to discuss what I'll call the "reorientation" theme. The idea behind a reorientation theme is to make the players think about the game in a new light by focusing on some aspect of the game that is not currently relevant.



The *Onslaught* set, for example, did this with its "creature type matters" theme. Before the *Onslaught* set, creature types were primarily a flavor aspect of the card. *Onslaught* reoriented the environment by making this aspect of the cards suddenly matter. Because part of **Magic's** identity is an ever-evolving environment, these reorientation themes play an important role.

Which brings us to *Scourge*. The *Scourge* design team realized quickly that they wanted to create a unique identity for the set. As *Scourge* was the third set in the block, it had more room for flexibility. The team came to the conclusion that they wanted to look for a reorientation theme. So they started by talking about what aspects of the game were currently underused. At some point early on, they stumbled upon the "size matters" theme.

You see, the *Onslaught* set had created an environment that was hospitable to larger creatures. Items that traditionally hurt large creatures (efficient counterspells, cheap creature removal, mass land destruction, and so on) had all been kept away. *Legions*, being an all-creature set, helped build on this goal. Evidence of this could be seen at the Block Constructed decks played at Pro Tour–Venice earlier this year. The top eight was filled with giant creatures like **Akroma**, **Silvos**, and **Rorix**. My favorite quote of the weekend came from pro player Brian Kibler during the commentary of the finals: "I love this environment. Even the Goblin decks play Dragons."

Large and In Charge

The *Scourge* team realized they had a golden opportunity to build on this rich foundation. The question was how could they make cards with high converted mana costs good? They came up with several answers:

- Cards use converted mana costs to set their effect—The idea behind these cards is that the size of their effect is dictated by the permanent you have in play with the highest converted mana cost. An example of this card would be **Cabal Conditioning**, my preview card for today:



The nice thing about these spells is that they always have some functionality, but they greatly reward the playing of expensive permanents.

- Creature enchantments return to play for expensive creatures—These cards are creature enchantments that automatically pop into play from the graveyard onto any big creature (of converted mana cost of six or more). An example of this, called **Dragon Breath**, was previewed by Mark Gottlieb in his column several weeks ago. Like the last group of cards, these creature enchantments have a general use that improves if you use expensive

creatures.

- Miscellaneous bonuses—The *Scourge* contains cards that improve with the playing of expensive spells. Some increase in power while others only function if the card is expensive enough.

In addition, the team felt that the *Scourge* set could do a few more things to make larger spells more playable.

- Cycling and landcycling—Cycling and its first cousin, landcycling, both allow you to put large spells into your deck without the risk normally associated with playing expensive spells. If you get one into your hand early, you can simply cycle it away. **Noble Templar** is a perfect example.
- Giant cycling spells with large cycling effects—*Scourge* offers a new twist on cycling cards with a bunch of superexpensive cards with medium- and large-sized cycling effects. As Randy [discussed](#) last Friday, [Decree of Silence](#) has such an effect.
- Bigger, badder effects—How do you get players to play expensive spells? Make them good enough to warrant the risk of playing them. The *Scourge* set has a number of aggressively priced spells with large effects.
- Cool effects—Even if they aren't top-tier tournament decks, expensive cards with unique cool effects will also get played. **Form of the Dragon** is the poster child for this type of card.


The end result of all these mechanics is that the *Onslaught* block with the *Scourge* set makes you change your behavior when evaluating expensive cards. I think the ripples of this effect will be felt throughout Limited and Block Constructed and possibly even in Standard and beyond.

Join me next week when I explore a shift in R&D philosophy.

Until then, may you tap out on turn ten.

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