

The lead designer shares some stories

The Creation of *Scourge*

Brian Tinsman, R&D game designer

Monday, May 19, 2003



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I'll start at the beginning. My name is Brian Tinsman, and I was a typical casual **Magic** player five years ago. One day I found myself sitting in graduate business school daydreaming about **Magic** cards. Soon afterward, I landed a job at Wizards of the Coast in the Market Research department. There, I conducted hundreds of hours of consumer tests, watching kids try to learn the rules to trading card games through a see-through mirror. As time went on, I got to know people in R&D, transferred to that department, and began submitting card ideas. After submitting three or four hundred card ideas, Bill Rose and Mark Rosewater began to help me improve my design skills until I got the chance to work on an actual set design. Things went well enough that I got to lead my own set soon afterward.

Fast forward to about a year ago and put yourself in my shoes for a moment: For the first time ever, you have real creative freedom in leading the design of a **Magic** set. On your team are the talented Worth Wollpert and Bill Rose. The **Magic** team is looking to you for vision and guidance. The *Scourge* set releases on the heels of the extremely cool *Onslaught* and *Legions* sets with their "tribal" and morph themes and it's up to you to somehow follow up these sets with something fresh and interesting.



What would you do?

Here's what I did.

The first step was to begin design meetings. The team started out meeting twice a week at the local restaurant where R&D likes to hang out. It's infinitely better to have a meeting at a lively restaurant than an energy-draining office building. But one day, disaster struck. Midway through the design process, the new bartender came up to us and said, "Are you guys talking about **Magic** cards? I love **Magic**!" As soon as he left, we cursed our bad luck since it meant we could no longer use that

place for meetings. Civilian bartenders have no idea what we're talking about, but we wouldn't want a player to overhear any of our cards and leak them.

The first thing you decide when designing a new set is what it's going to be about. Every set needs a unique identity so it will stand out in people's minds. What kind of theme would fit the end of the *Onslaught* block? We talked about doing a combat-focused theme, with abilities that encouraged attacking with lots of creatures, but that concept never really caught on with Bill or Worth. We also talked about doing a spell-heavy set to balance out all the *Legions* creatures, but it turned out that a creature-light set just wasn't that interesting.



I have a reputation in R&D for breaking rules. If there's a type of card we've never done before, a rule we've never messed with, or other virgin territory to be ruthlessly exploited, I'm immediately drawn to it. As we began the *Scourge* design, it occurred to me that we had never mucked around much with the mix of creature size on a broad scale. Often I've seen good players scoff dismissively at seven-mana spells. I wanted to turn the tables on those players by making it the right decision to play those huge spells. Average mana costs in decks usually don't change very much from block to block. What if we could bump the average way up for a while? Big stuff is cool. Good

big stuff is even cooler. At last it seemed like we had a theme everyone could get excited about.

To make big spells matter, you need an environment in which games last a while. Each player needs time to build the mana base necessary for the huge monsters to come stomping out. Actually, I've often felt like reasonably long games are the most fun to play. Games that last twelve to fifteen turns usually have more interesting plays and more dramatic moments of excitement than games that last five turns. When a game lasts longer, there also are more opportunities for each player to choose between correct and incorrect play decisions. This means that, other factors being equal, longer games depend less on luck and more on skill.

This fit in beautifully with the previous two sets, which were intentionally light on discard, countering, and creature removal. As design progressed, we found lots of *Scourge* cards that helped make big stuff better. Here are a few of my favorite cards that support this theme.



Upwelling

I created this card when I stumbled across rule 300.4 in the [Magic Comprehensive Rules](#) and thought, "Hey, I found a rule we've never broken before!" [Upwelling](#) (or "Bottomless Mana Pool," as it was known in development,) allows you to hoard all of your unused mana every turn. After a few turns, you can have 20 mana sitting around in your pool just waiting for a [Dragon Tyrant](#) or a [Blaze](#). Just make sure someone doesn't destroy the enchantment before you spend it all or you're in for some serious mana burn.



Mind's Desire

We realized late in design that storm fit nicely with the high mana requirements of the set. Other mechanics encourage big spells. Storm encourages big turns. With storm cards you want to hang on to your other spells and wait for the critical moment to play as many spells as possible in one colossal turn. This works especially well with all the cards that help you get lots of mana. [Mind's Desire](#) is a little different from the other storm cards because its effect allows you to play extra cards for no cost, effectively counting double for further storm cards. Development lost some sleep over this one, but in the end they decided to just bump up the mana cost and let it go.



Ancient Ooze

We wanted to make a card that encouraged building a deck with lots of expensive permanents. This card comes with a built-in challenge. "How big can *you* make the Ooze?" In fact, I hereby declare that whoever sets the record for making the World's Largest Ooze shall be officially known by the title "Oozemaster." Give it a try -- you know you want to.



Twisted Abomination

How do you get people to play pricey cards? Give them a way out so they're not stuck with it in their hands if they get into trouble. [Twisted Abomination](#) is a great example of a card that was priced high, not especially overpowered, but still just felt really good in a lot of decks. Early in the game, it helps build your mana base, and later in the game it's a nasty beater. Landcycling means that usually you don't care all that much how high the mana cost is. It's a great way to smooth out mana draws too. Mana screw is a fact of life, but whenever we can reduce it, we do. This card started out as a beefed-up 5/5 [Drudge Skeletons](#) that cost 6 mana, but got changed to a 5/3 in development.



Pyrostatic Pillar

In my casual play days, not that many people in my group used cheap spells. It seemed obvious that expensive spells were just more powerful. Sometimes, I long for those days of innocence. Nowadays, if you play with expensive cards, you get stomped anywhere you turn. You know those players who build tournament decks and then proceed to bash casual players into the ground with them? I hate those guys. This card is for them. Not that it's going to make your casual deck dominate, but if you have a fun deck with a lot of big spells, this card is like a little stiletto up your sleeve.



Form of the Dragon

I don't care what anyone else thinks -- I like to pretend I'm a wizard when I play. Since I've been involved in **Magic** design, I've fought to make flavor a more important part of the game. That means pushing "top-down" card designs. Top-down card design is when we start with the concept first and then create mechanics to match it. [Form of the Dragon](#) is an excellent example of flavor that's so strong it actually overrides design rules. Normally, we would never print a red card that prevented creatures from attacking you -- it's clearly a white ability. But in this case, too bad. You can fly. Cards with flavor this strong don't come along very often, but when they do, they're beautiful. Other top-down designs include [Thundercloud Elemental](#), [Frozen Solid](#), and [Day of the Dragons](#).

As the design phase began to come to an end, we weeded out the clunky card designs and put in a number of Worth's excellent cards, such as [Siege-Gang Commander](#). Worth also contributed the tribal Warchiefs (nicknamed the "minibosses") that each reduce the cost to play a certain type of creature by 1 and help power them up. Randy Buehler provided extensive feedback that was invaluable in

cleaning up the set as well. The *Scourge* set was the first set in which I had real design freedom, but before I sound like it was all me, be assured it was really a group effort of the design and development teams.

Surprisingly, the Dragon theme arose inductively rather than deductively. The development team felt the set needed more support for the tribal mechanics and were looking for a new high profile race to promote. At the same time they noticed all the Dragons in the set. They put two and two together, threw in a few more Dragon-related cards, and suddenly the set had an even stronger theme.

In closing my first article for **MagicTheGathering.com**, I'd like to say that I was a typical fun player not too long ago, and I still feel a strong connection to those typical fun player roots. I really respect and appreciate all the loyal **Magic** fans that like to play the **Magic** game for fun and have allowed it to become the greatest game in the world. I tried to make this set for you. I hope you like it.



Just for kicks, here's a secret bonus card that never made it into the set:

Mongo



Creature -- Goblin Mutant

7/7

Goblincycling  (, *Discard this card from your hand: Search your library for a Goblin card, reveal it, and put it into your hand. Then shuffle your library.*)

Maybe we'll do something like that some day, and you can say you saw it here first!

Send questions and comments to editor@wizards.com.