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Making Magic Monday, June 9, 2003

Top Down and Goal



Mark Rosewater

Some nontraditional card design

Daily Articles



Welcome to Top-Down Week! This week we'll be discussing... well, you know. Okay, I guess this is the point where I explain both what "top-down" means. The term "top-down" is a phrase we use in R&D to describe a certain type of design. In order to make it easier to understand, I'll start by explaining what top-down *isn't*.

Wed, Aug 13

By Any Other Name

Blue is Dead!
Long live blue!
by Brian David-Marshall

Normally when you design a card, you start with the mechanic. Then the designer adds some basic flavor to explain what the card is doing. Later a creative text person comes up with an actual card concept, occasionally influenced by the designer's basic idea.


Tue, Aug 12

Water-Logged
Blue's power in multiplayer formats
by Anthony Alongi

To give you a clearer idea of how this works, lets walk through an example. Let's say I design the following card:

Mon, Aug 11

True Blue
All brains, no brawn
by Mark Rosewater

 Instant
CARDNAME deals 4 damage to target creature or 2 damage to target player.

Sat, Aug 9

Saturday School #38
Drop a forest to pay for a madnesed Wurm?
by Rune Horvik

The genesis of the card is a mechanical one. I want to create a direct damage spell that can hit creatures or players but is more efficient when hitting creatures. Once I create the card, I name it. Not all designers name their cards, but R&D tries to put design names on cards so we are able to reference it. ("You know what card I enjoyed playing with? The red one. The direct damage one. You know, the one that does more damage to creatures.") The name is only a placeholder, so I don't want to waste too much time on it as I want to get on to designing the next card.

Fri, Aug 8

Live from Berlin
Randy checks in from the World Chapiionships
by Randy Buehler

Thu, Aug 7

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



The Multiverse database: Where cards are born.

Because design names are done quickly, my names tend to fall into one of a few categories. (Note: these are my naming conventions; each designer has his or her own.)

1. I make the name an allusion to a previously spell that did something similar. Sample for this card: Shock Blast (as it's a cross between Shock and Lightning Blast).
2. I make the name something that simply says what the card does. Sample for this card: Variety Bolt (it has two different functions).
3. I make the name something involving commonly-used words for its color. Sample for this card: Magma Shot.
4. I make the name a pun or a cultural reference that is connected to the card's ability. (This is the same naming convention I use for my column titles.) Sample for this card: Shock the Monkey (an 80's pop song by Peter Gabriel).
5. I make the name an inside joke. Sample for this card: Wollpert's Bane (if, for example, Worth Wollpert had mentioned that he didn't like this card).
6. Finally, if I come up with an actual name that I think might really work for the card, I use that. While the majority of my design names aren't used, I do have a few such as Call of the

 Search

Herd or **Telepathy** that make it all the way through. This particular card is a tough one because the name should reflect the fact that it's more useful against creatures. As this is hard to reference, it will probably be really subtle. My quick attempt for this card: Ionize (the breaking down of ions; the idea being that the creatures having been brought through the aether have a residual static charge that makes this process more harmful to them – like I said, the concept is often very subtle.).

So, as you can see the flavor is often very secondary in the design process. But this isn't always the case.

You're the Top Down

Sometimes, the designer begins with flavor. Occasionally we get an idea for a cool spell. Not a mechanic, mind you, but a neat concept. When this happens we build the card around the flavor molding mechanics to fit the concept. This is what's known as "top-down" design.

Top-down design is a lot harder than it looks. In this column I'm going to walk you through a top-down design to demonstrate the many pitfalls it entails. As *Scourge* has just come out, I thought it might be fun to use a *Scourge* card for the demonstration. The card is **Frozen Solid**. (I did a similar thing with **Form of the Dragon** in my "Insider Trading" column in next month's *Sideboard Magazine*. Check it out.)

The designer of **Frozen Solid** was Brian Tinsman, the lead designer of *Scourge*. The card began with a simple concept. "You know," Brian said one day, "We have all sorts of heat attacks: fire, lava, magma, heat rays. Why don't we have any cold attacks? Where're the ice blasts?"

With that thought in mind, Brian set out to make an Ice Blast... and encountered the first pitfall.



Wheel of Misfortune

As I have described numerous times, the color wheel is fundamental to the flavor of the game, both in imagery and mechanics. The color wheel helps each color have its own unique identity and it keeps the game from degenerating into mono-color madness. The downside of having such a spelled-out flavor is that certain ideas don't easily fit. The Ice Blast was one such card.

You see, mechanically direct damage is red. Oh, black has a little (i.e. **Drain Life**). And green has a little (i.e. **Hurricane**). Even white has some (i.e. **Heavy Ballista**). But blue... blue isn't supposed to deal direct damage (and before I get deluged with mail, yes, blue has had some direct damage spells, such as **Psionic Blast**, but nothing we'd print today). Heck, we've even moved the "Tim" ability off to red. Blue is the passive, controlling color. It doesn't smack the opponent in the face.

But cold and ice have always been in blue's domain. Temperature is a key part of the flavor of the red/blue conflict. Heat plays into red's passionate drive of emotions where cold reflects blue's aloof reliance on the intellectual. Red is the color of fire, blue the color of water. Thus, flavorwise, ice is the realm of blue.

There's Gold In Them Thar Cards

So how do we connect a red mechanic with a blue flavor? Well, we have a couple of options. First, we could consider a multicolored card. Ice Blast is the perfect opportunity to do a blue/red card. This would allow us access to all the pieces we need:

Ice Blast



Instant

Tap target creature. CARDNAME deals 3 damage to it.

But *Scourge* originally didn't have any multicolored cards, so the gold option wasn't available.

Ach! Hans, Run!

The next obvious place to go is setting. If the entire world is made of snow and ice (much as the setting for *Ice Age* was), then it's much easier to make a red card with an icy flavor:

Icicle Barrage



Instant

CARDNAME deals 4 damage to target creature or 2 damage to target creature.

Hey, it's a Scandinavian Shock the Monkey. But we aren't in Nordic country in *Scourge*, so this plan doesn't work either.

Fighting a Cold

This leads us to the third option. We need to tweak the mechanic to fit into the color the flavor fits in. This incidentally is the route Brian chose.

So the concept behind Ice Blast is that it's an aggressive cold weapon that can be used to destroy creatures. To solve this problem, Brian had to figure out how to create an in-flavor blue creature destruction spell. And not just any card. The spell had to have a feel of a cold-based spell.

Brian's solution was to go back to the original concept. The wizard casts a cold spell to destroy a creature. What would actually happen? Well, the cold spell would freeze the creature solid. It would essentially be destroyed because it could no longer move. Then, as any action movie with a vat full of liquid nitrogen demonstrates, the creature would be shattered into a million pieces when anything hit it.

Brian took this extension and attached mechanic components. If a creature is frozen, couldn't that mean it's tapped and it doesn't untap? Blue has done a number of blue creature enchantments in this vein (*Thirst*, *Dehydration*, etc.). While the flavor of the most of these cards comes from extracting water from the creature, the flavor of being frozen works equally well.

Now, comes the tricky part. How do we reflect the shattering into a million pieces? Well, what if the card was destroyed if damaged? This would reflect the flavor quite well. The problem is that blue normally doesn't do creature destruction.



To Go Where No Spell Has Gone Before

This problem leads us to one of the special rules of top-down design. Cards need to match the proper flavor in their entirety. Not every piece has to be in flavor, just the whole. So, the overall concept of freezing a creature, locking it down and making it extra fragile to damage does feel blue. Blue isn't directly destroying the creature, but rather removing it as a threat and enabling a spell of another color to finish it off. All that feels blue.

The larger flavor is all that matters with top-down design. If the elements combine to make a flavorful card that fits in a color, R&D allows individual components to sneak by. This is why *Form of the Dragon* has a "Moat" effect, why *Day of the Dragons* makes red creatures, and why *Frozen Solid* allows blue to (indirectly) destroy a creature.

Top-Down for the Count

Brian and the *Scourge* design team made an extra effort to put more top down designs into the set (more on this as the week continues). Player reaction to many of these cards (with *Form of the Dragon* getting special props) has shown R&D that you would like to see even more top-down design. I wanted to end this column by letting you know that we've heard you and the designers are planning to make an extra effort to design more top-down cards.


The people have spoken and R&D is adapting to accommodate.

Join me next week when I fill you in on some recent hijinks here in R&D.

Until then, may you have more "that's cool" moments when you crack open a booster.

Mark Rosewater

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