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Equip of the Iceberg



Designing arms and armor

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Last week, I explored the origin of the imprint mechanic. This week I'll be taking a look at how Equipment came to be. If you haven't read Paul Barclay's [article on how Equipment works](#), I heartily recommend reading it before you continue my article. (As always, I'll wait.) And then just before the article ends, I'll let you see a rare piece of Equipment that will show you how powerful Equipment can become. You could jump ahead now if you have no patience, but I recommend you enjoy it as a find dessert to my lovely entrée of a column.

Artifact of My Youth

To understand where Equipment came from, we need to start by going back to *Invasion*. During the design of *Invasion*, the designers (Bill Rose, Mike Elliott, and myself) realized that we had stumbled onto something cool—a block theme. We began thinking about what other kinds of themes we could have. At some point very early on, I said, “You know what would be cool? An artifact block.”



I'm an old timer who remembers when *Antiquities* came out. And back in the day, the set did not have the grandest of entrances. When *Antiquities* was first released, many considered it a flop. **Magic**, you see, didn't have that many artifacts, so a set dedicated to them (and remember that every card other than **Strip Mine** and the Urzatron—**Urza's Mine**, **Urza's Power Plant**, and **Urza's Tower**—had the word “artifact” appear somewhere on the card) was treated with a bit of skepticism.

I, on the other hand, loved the set. I loved, loved loved it. Up until *Tempest* came out (and remember that was the first set I was the lead designer on, so I might have been a tad biased), *Antiquities* was my favorite set. I've always had a soft spot for artifacts. In fact, for the longest time, I had a deck called simply “The Machine” which was a offbeat combo artifact deck that had probably forty-plus engines between all the cards. Every time a new set would come out, I'd toss in any cool new artifacts and tweak the deck.

So, the idea of an artifact set excited me greatly. But we knew we didn't want to do it on the heels of *Invasion*, so we planned it for three years out. I made it very clear that I wanted to lead the set. No one in R&D had my passion for artifacts. So, I was careful with my assignments to be free when *Mirrodin* (then “Bacon” of Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato) approached for design. But what does any of this have to do with the creation of Equipment? I'm getting there.

Team Building

So yada, yada, yada... I'm made the lead of the *Mirrodin* design team. And let me tell you I was given an amazing team. Let me quickly run you by the team roster:

Mark Rosewater (lead) – What can I say about Mark that I don't already devote two thousand plus words a week? Well, he's a strong designer but not all that humble and a little too excited to write about himself in the third person. If you want to know more about Mark, feel free to read the "[Making Magic](#)" archive.

Past design experience: *Tempest* (lead), *Stronghold*, *Exodus*, *Unglued* (lead), *Urza's Saga*, *Urza's Legacy*, *Urza's Destiny*, *Mercadian Masques*, *Invasion*, *Planeshift*, *Odyssey* (lead), *Judgment*

Mike Elliott – It's a shame that I have to even explain who Mike is. You see, Mike has had more impact on **Magic** design in the last eight years than just about anyone, yet no one seems to know who he is. *Slivers*, *shadow*, *echo*, *Rebels*, *gating*, *amplify*... Mike's work is all over the place. In addition, Mike has hands in the design of just about every trading card game Wizards puts out. Mike's two greatest strengths in design are creating mechanics and then fleshing them out (taking one card and turning it into forty).

Mike and I playfully argue about who has designed the most **Magic** cards (If you're curious, I'm #1 and he's number #2. He'll say otherwise but who are you going to believe?) But Mike doesn't tend to hog the spotlight (like some people writing this column) so he isn't quite as well known. But if you play **Magic**, you've felt his presence and you've definitely played his cards. Mike brought a great deal of experience to the *Mirrodin* team and helped rein in other team members when they went a little off the deep end.

Past design experience: *Weatherlight*, *Tempest*, *Stronghold* (lead), *Exodus* (lead), *Urza's Saga* (lead), *Urza's Legacy* (lead), *Mercadian Masques* (lead), *Nemesis* (lead), *Invasion*, *Planeshift* (lead), *Onslaught* (lead), *Legions* (lead)

Brian Tinsman – I keep toting Brian as the "young up-and-comer", but he's been designing for over three years, so I'd better get a new descriptor. Brian reminds me a lot of me way back when. He has a raw enthusiasm that is exciting to watch. Whenever you tell him he can't do something, he always goes, "Why not?" and then tries to do it anyway.

Brian is exciting to have on a team because he is a ball of energy. He always attacks problems in very untraditional ways and comes up with cards that few designers would ever think of. Brian would always keep me honest forcing me to explain each decision of how to focus the team's efforts. And he added in a dose of fun that can found throughout the set.

Past design experience: *Judgment* (co-lead), *Scourge* (lead)

Tyler Bielman – Tyler runs the R&D group in charge of new products. But he wanted to try his hand at designing, so I offered him a place on the team. Tyler is a very flavor oriented designer (he and I had spent a great deal of time fleshing out the philosophies of the color wheel) and thus brought a very unique approach to the team.

Tyler loved coming up with cool artifacts and then designing mechanics to fit the flavor (known as Top-Down design, see "[Top Down and Goal](#)"). In addition, Tyler and I spent a great deal of time talking about the philosophies of artifacts. This is important as you will see in a moment.

Past design experience: None

The Forging of Equipment

One of the issues that Tyler and I have spent a great deal of time debating is the role of enchantments versus artifacts. As I've mentioned in this column before, enchantments and artifacts are very close mechanically. Most enchantments can be done as artifacts and vice versa. As such, Tyler and I (as well as the entire creative team) spent a great deal of time trying to clarify the difference between the two.

One of the most important differences had to do with flavor. Enchantments are the product of magic. Artifacts are physical objects. Enchantments when substantial are physically composed of magical energy. Artifacts, while often imbued with magic, are composed of real world components. One of the offshoots of the philosophy is that it changed how we looked at creature enchantments. In the past, we allowed creature enchantments to represent physical objects. But under the new system, we had to draw much cleaner lines.

What this means is that creature enchantments can only be physical things if the physical item is comprised completely of magic. For example, a *Sword of Flame* is okay as it's a magical item created out of red mana and fire. But a longsword is not. While this was good for differentiating enchantments and artifacts it left a whole bunch of cool items sitting out in the cold. Giving a sword to a goblin is fun. Surely there must be a place in **Magic** for that.

Flash forward to *Mirrodin*. As we began talking about the set, it became clear that physical weapons and such made perfect sense as artifacts. But what about items you wished to use to equip your creatures? There had been some clunky attempts at this flavor with cards like *Tawnos's Weaponry* and *Flying Carpet*, but nothing that we were happy with. (The old template was wordy, confusing and was very limited in the kinds of effects you could use it on.) But surely there was a way to make Equipment work. The *Mirrodin* team picked up the gauntlet (pun intended as always) to create a new artifact subtype – Equipment.

Slow and Steady

It was pretty clear from the get-go that Equipment would have similarities to creature enchantments. So that's where we started. The very first Equipment were simply artifacts which functioned identically to creature enchantments. (As a general rule in design, it's best to start out with the simplest version and add complication as the need arises. The reason for this is that in the end we want the simplest idea that works, so ramping up in complexity works better than ramping down.) The initial Equipment even had the card type line "Equip Creature." We quickly had to change this as it was brought to our attention that the word "artifact" had to appear in the card type line.

The cards were flavorful and easy to use, but they weren't very exciting. So the *Mirrodin* team tried to jazz them up with subtypes. Creatures were made more flavorful with subtypes, so why not artifacts? So Tyler and I sat down with a **Dungeons & Dragons** book of equipment and made an exhaustive list of all the variations we could find. In the end we discovered that the artifacts fell into five major categories:

1. **Weapons** – These were cards representing traditional items you would use to fight with. Weapons had to have either work in combat or boost a creature's stats or abilities. Note that magical items like wands, staves and scrolls do not belong in this category.
2. **Armor** – These were any kind of items that you wore on your body. This category really should have been Clothing, but Armor sounded better. Armor had to boost a creature's defense or grant him or her abilities that had some defensive nature.
3. **Runes** – These were any items involving words or symbols. Books and scrolls were the most common members of this group.
4. **Potions** – These were any disposable items (mostly edible) that provided a temporary boon. Potions need to change the equipped creature in some temporary way.
5. **Items** – This was the catch-all category that held anything not covered by the other four. Wands, staves, orbs, etc. all fell into this group.

Once we had our five sub-types, we began flavoring each one mechanically. Potions, for example, were all Equipment that granted the equipped creature a slight ability, but could be sacrificed to temporarily change the creature in a much bigger way. Runes were similar except they were used to effect things other than the equipped creature. Thus, Equipment with a *Giant Growth* effect was a potion and a *Shock* was a scroll.



Preliminary Equipment designs that laid the groundwork for the mechanic.

All of the armor was given a defensive flavor and had the ability to return itself to your hand for some amount of mana. This allowed you to save the Equipment from destruction and to move it from one creature to another, albeit expensively and slowly. (Later on we changed it so that Equipment returned to your hand when they went to the graveyard from play.) We saved the best for weapons. Weapons could... Wait a minute. I can't tell you what weapons did. You see, we liked it so much we used it later in the block. So, you need to be patient for the weapon mechanic but I'll tell you it when it gets released.

The common ground of all the Equipment was that we wanted to make it have more utility and be less vulnerable to the two-for-ones that plague creature enchantments. (By “two-for-one” I mean times when your opponent uses one of his cards to destroy two of your cards. For example, when the creature is destroyed the creature enchantment on it is also destroyed.) But in the end, they just weren't exciting enough.

Getting the Drop

Early in the process, Brian said, "You know what would be cool? What if when a creature died, the Equipment fell off?"

And for months we ignored him. But Brian never gave up. Eventually, Mike Elliott started chiming in. Soon random developers chimed in (The developers always play the set ahead of time to give input and learn about the new mechanics.) It became clear that we needed something different, so we gave it a try.

The first problem we ran into was what does it mean for an artifact to fall off. We began by looking at **licids** (creatures from the *Tempest* block that went back and forth between being creatures and creature enchantments). While licids were very cool, the rules team's official stance on them is “They don't exist.”

The conversation went something like this: (with the normal dramatic license)

Me: Paul, can I ask you a question?

Paul: Sure.

Me: We're thinking of doing a mechanic something like licids. I'm curious for your input.

Paul: Licids?

Me: Yeah.

Paul: I don't think I understand what you're talking about.

Me: The licids. The creatures from *Tempest* block. You know, **Stinging Licid**, **Nuturing Licid**...

Paul: Sorry. Doesn't ring a bell.

Me: So, it's okay if we make new licids?

Paul looks around and then pins me to the wall.

Paul: Don't make me hurt you.

Me: Okay, maybe we'll do it another way.

We now had the restriction that Equipment couldn't change card type (or subtype). That meant that we had to work “falling off” into the card. The insight came with the idea of an equip cost. Rather than play the Equipment directly onto a creature, we could have all Equipment played like all other artifacts and then have an additional cost to “give” the Equipment to a creature. This had two big benefits. First, it explained what “falling off” meant and second it gave development two knobs to tweak for balancing purposes.

In the earliest version of Equipment, cards could be equipped an instant speed. The problem with this was that the correct play was to not equip any creature so that you could keep your options open for last-minute equipping in the middle of combat or in response to an opponent's spell. We knew Equipment wasn't going to be fun if players were strategically encouraged to not play them on creatures. That is why we changed equipping to sorcery speed.

Also, early on we had Equipment that designed to be put onto the opponent's creatures (we had an Equipment **Control Magic**, for example). These were killed because the flavor just seemed all wrong. (“Hey you, goblin. Uh, put on this magic helmet. Yeah, I know you're attacking me, but look, shiny helmet. Shiny!”)

And Now For Something Completely Different

Once we knew how the Equipment was going to work, it was time for the real designing to begin. In design, form has to follow function. That is, good design finds ways to use the mechanic to do things that could only be done with that mechanic. With Equipment, that meant finding ways to do things that only Equipment could do (and obviously things creature enchantments could not). Today's preview card is one such piece of Equipment. Did you forget I'm previewing a card? (If so, thanks for not skipping ahead.) The fact that Equipment falls off when a creature is destroyed is fundamental to the way the card works.

What do I mean? Well, they say a picture is worth a thousand words. Here you go:



Not your run-of-the-mill broadsword. As you can see, the *Mirrodin* design (and development) team had fun finding cool ways to use this new card sub-type. I hope you enjoy Equipment as much as we enjoyed making it.

Join me next week, when I preview a card possibly cooler than Soul Foundry (and no, it's not another imprint card). If your jaw doesn't drop, you've simply lost the ability to be surprised. And it's got a very cool origin story to boot.

Until then, may you know the thrill of giving your goblin a sword.

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