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Come Together



Mirrodin's shift in the synergy of mechanics

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Probably my favorite metaphor of **Magic** is that of a pendulum (you know, the metal point on a rope over a sand pit) constantly swinging in an ever-changing pattern. Design's job is to keep pushing the pendulum in new directions knowing that every aspect will eventually come back to center. Why do I bring up the pendulum metaphor (yet again)? Because today I'm going to discuss a different type of shift. One that is subtle yet key to **Magic** design. The reason I'm talking about it today is that this shift is no more apparent than the move from *Onslaught* block to the *Mirrodin* block.



Give Piece a Chance

The aspect of design I'm referring to is that of synergy. Or in simpler terms, how cards relate to one another. You see, trading card games are very much about the interrelation of various cards. This means that designers have to be very conscious of how cards are going to connect. Synergy, like any aspect of design, falls along a spectrum. In today's column I plan to introduce that spectrum, explain the extremes and talk about how they create different types of sets.

Linear Design

The first extreme is linear design. In a linear design, cards are designed to clump together in obvious groups. They have a very narrow but focused synergy. When you look at the set, it becomes quickly apparent what cards belong together. *Onslaught* block is an example of a very linear set. The tribal spine of the design forces players to naturally connect cards that share, take advantage of or affect a particular creature type. Linear designs tend to be filled with linear mechanics. Linear mechanics force players to build decks around a single aspect of the cards.

To better demonstrate, let's take a look at the key mechanics from the *Onslaught* block:

- **Tribal** – As stated above, tribal is a pure linear mechanic. Goblin cards beget more goblin cards. Elves require elves. Each tribal card dictates that your deck have many more like it.
- **Morph** – Morph thrives on mystery. A key part of the mechanic's power is that it strips away your opponent's knowledge of the board. Each morph creature has the potential to be any morph creature. This means, though, that the mechanic demands that you play with additional morph creatures. Very linear.



- **Cycling** – Cycling is not particularly linear. Playing one cycling card does not encourage the use of any more cycling cards. The one exception to this is the cycle of cycling trigger cards (such as *Astral Slide* or *Lightning Rift*). These

cards do encourage you to stockpile cycling cards and thus have a linear aspect.

- **Slivers** – The power of slivers is that each one makes the collective group stronger. Thus, to get the benefit of the slivers' abilities, you want to play with as many slivers as possible. Another strong linear mechanic.
- **Amplify** – This mechanic is very clearly linear. Each amplify card makes a player want to play with numerous cards that share a creature type.
- **Provoke** – This mechanic is not at all linear in that any one provoke card does not force a player to put any other creatures with provoke in their deck.
- **Double strike** – Also non-linear.
- **Size Matters** – These cards reward you for playing expensive cards. Thus, the set pushes players to play with a higher percentage of expensive spells than normal. This mechanic is linear.
- **Storm** – This mechanic might as well be called “Size matters in the other direction, too.” Storm wants a lot of little cards. Thus, it too is primarily linear.
- **Dragons** – This is just a focused tribal theme. As such it is very linear.

As you can see, the vast majority of *Onslaught* block mechanics skew towards the linear end of the spectrum. Now, let's hop to the other end.

Modular Design

Modular designs are open ended. The best metaphor for a modular design is bunch of Legos. Each individual piece can fit with many other individual pieces. The idea is “here's a box of Legos, what can you build with it?”

Unlike linear design, modular designs are much harder to grasp at first glance. The connections are not so obvious. *Mirrodin* is very much a modular design. It was created to allow pieces to have much wider synergy. Modular designs make use of modular mechanics. Modular mechanics are designed to maximize their use with other cards and do not tend to force players to have to play with a lot of a certain type of card. Let's take a look at *Mirrodin's* mechanics:

- **Imprint** – By design, imprint is wide open. **Soul Foundry**, for example, combos with over 3000 **Magic** cards (all the creatures). Imprint is about as modular as mechanics get.
- **Equipment** – Like Imprint, Equipment is very open ended with how and with what it can be used. Unlike imprint though, there are cards (such as some of **white's creatures**) that encourage a deck to play with many equipment. Still, equipment is more modular than linear.
- **Entwine** – The extra utility of entwine cards increases the potential for interaction. In addition, the mechanic does not create excessive synergy among itself. Playing one entwine card does not necessarily make you want to play more. That said, this mechanic falls more in the middle of the spectrum as it is not strongly linear or modular.
- **Affinity** – This card demonstrates how linear and modular designs move along a singular axis. Affinity by its nature is very linear. A card with affinity wants the player to play with many of that style of card. But as the size of the subgroup increases, the mechanic takes on a more modular feel. Affinity for artifacts in *Mirrodin*, for instance, feels much less linear than something like goblins would feel because half of the cards in the set are artifacts. In addition, artifacts are much more modular by nature (its much easier to stick a random artifact in any deck) thus affinity for artifacts has a less constricted feeling. Sure you want a lot of artifacts, but the avenue open to how to do this is a much greater path than say a deck full of goblins would be.
- **Artifact Land** – This is a good example of a subtler modular mechanic. The cards simply have a general utility that combines in different ways with different cards.





Mirrodin cards tend to open doors instead of shutting them.

The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly

Each style of design has its pros and cons. Linear designs are more straight-forward and comforting. When you open a linear design, you know pretty fast what you're trying to do. In addition, linear designs play into a common need for game players (and people in general) to group things together. The biggest negative to linear designs is that they have a "R&D is spoon-feeding us decks" feel that often ruffles feathers.

The strength of modular designs is that they create a much deeper field for exploration. Because the options are so open-ended, the decision tree is quite large. This is also modular design's greatest weakness. It can be very intimidating. *Mirrodin* sealed, for example, is daunting when you first start playing because you have so many more options than normal.

In addition, modular designs have one other big drawback. They are much harder for R&D to develop. A set like *Onslaught* is pretty simple to test. How is the goblin deck? The beast deck? Etc. But *Mirrodin* is a completely different animal. The increased avenues of exploration put extra stress on R&D's limited resources of time and manpower.

Why does R&D vacillate between the extremes? Because different players tend to gravitate to different styles of synergy. Most Timmy's (see my column "[Timmy, Johnny, and Spike](#)" if this terminology confuses you) and more casual players like the comfort of linear design. Most Johnny's and more advanced players tend to gravitate toward the complexity of modular designs. As with any aspect of the game, it is R&D's job to try and make sure the game (over time) hits all of the different groups.

Also, it's important to remember that all sets have aspects of both types of synergy. Every set will have individual cards that pull players down each path. In design, it's never a question of which type of synergy but rather what percentages each will have.

Look in the *Mirrodin*

Mirrodin has a very skewed percentage. While there are some linear components (you can already see the myr deck slowly coming together), the set is much more weighted towards modular design. Possibly the most weighted a set has ever been. How did this happen? I believe the answer is threefold:

1. **The flavor of artifacts** – Historically artifacts have always been more open-ended in design. I believe this comes from their utilitarian, tool-oriented flavor. Artifacts are objects a wizard uses to help aid him or her in battle. Thus, designers want to give them basic tool-like functions.

2. **The colorlessness of artifacts** – The fact that artifacts don't require colored mana to play means that they are much more adaptable than any other type of permanent (save land). This adaptability greatly increases their combo potential and thus their modularity.
3. **The desire to move in a different direction than the *Onslaught* block** – The role of the designer as I said above is to keep pushing the pendulum in a different direction. This means when the pendulum is at one extreme, the designers need to push it back towards center. Trying to pull away from the flavor of the *Onslaught* block, the *Mirrodin* design team began embracing a more modular design.

One of my hopes of explaining *Mirrodin's* modularity is to give you all a chance to better observe it. One of the reasons I wanted to start writing a design column is that the designers do all sorts of neat things that get glossed over by many of the players. By taking time to point it out, I hope that I can help some of you appreciate some of the subtler elements of the set.

Anyway, that's all I got for today (Under 2000 words? Am I feeling okay). I hope this column will give you a different vantage point to look at design. As I hope my column demonstrates, design has many, many facets. I promise in future weeks to show you some more nooks and crannies.

Join me next week when I take you on a little mind exercise.

Until then, may your card A find its card B.

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