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To Affinity And Beyond



Mark explains design conservation

Mark Rosewater · *Making Magic*
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Welcome to the third and final week of *Darksteel* previews. Hopefully this weekend you'll have a chance to [attend a prerelease](#) and get a chance to experience *Darksteel* first hand. (If you're unfamiliar with what a prerelease tournament is, Brian David-Marshall wrote [a great overview article](#) that you'll want to take a look at.)

While I will, of course, be previewing a card, I also wanted to use my column this week to explore an important part of **Magic** design: design conservation. And as the title probably gave away, I'm going to use affinity to explain it. I touched upon this issue in a column a year and a half ago ("[Cycling Cycling](#)"), but I felt the topic was worthy of an entire column.

Saving Grace

So, what exactly do I mean by design conservation? Well, you see, the job of R&D is to constantly provide all of you with a great game. Not just for one year. Not for five years. But for a long, long time. As such, we have spent a great deal of time thinking about how we expect the game to evolve over time. Pretty early on we figured out that while **Magic** is a very deep game from a design standpoint, it is not bottomless. If we never allowed ourselves to repeat a card, for example, we'd eventually run out of cards. And way before that, we'd run out of simple, elegant cards.



So, very early in **Magic's** history, R&D started making use of the repeat. While we made sure that each expansion had a large majority of new cards, we allowed ourselves to reprint old cards that fit well with the set. *Mirrodin*, for instance, dusted off such old timers as **Yotian Soldier**, **Bottle Gnomes** and **Brown Ouphe**. Pretty quickly, R&D realized that just reprinting individual cards wasn't enough. We would also need to reprint entire mechanics. Early mechanics such as cumulative upkeep, cantrips and enchant worlds quickly found homes in newer sets.

The next big leap for R&D was the understanding that we would have to come back to mechanics. Once we accepted this, we realized that we needed to be careful when and how we mined new mechanics. What do I mean? R&D sees new mechanics as a resource. Upon discovering one, we start exploring it. The first thing we ask is "Is it fun? Would players enjoy this mechanic?"

If a mechanic isn't going to play well, nothing else really matters. Usually though, it's hard to tell how well a mechanic will play until you get a chance to playtest it. The next thing we look at is the size of the mechanic. How big is it? Some mechanics are tiny. Perhaps they can fit on a few cards or possibly a cycle. Others are immense. They can go on tens or maybe even hundreds of cards.

Finally, we start looking at subtler issues. What kind of a mechanic is it? What themes does it lend itself to? What other mechanics would have synergy with it? Exploring a new mechanic, especially one of a larger size, can take months (and sometimes even years).

Which brings us full circle back to design conservation. If R&D knows that we want to bring mechanics back, then it's in our interest to understand how much of the mechanic is needed for

a particular expansion or block. We should then use no less or, more importantly, no more than is necessary. To get a better grasp of what I mean let's take a look at affinity.

The Affinity Gauntlet

During *Onslaught* design I was trying to come up with some new mechanics for the set. Rather than create a mechanic that added something to the card, I was interested in finding something that took something away. As I thought more about it, I realized that the idea seemed familiar. So, I went back and started looking at some old *Tempest* design files.

As a quick aside, the *Tempest* design team was Richard Garfield, Mike Elliott, Charlie Catino and myself. This was the first design set for Mike and I, and the first for Richard in numerous years (since *Arabian Nights*). As such, we were chock full of ideas. So much so, that our design file ended up with over twenty mechanics. Often when I'm stuck for an idea I visit the *Tempest* slush pile to see if I can find a new scrap to jumpstart an idea.

When I checked out the old file I found that my memory had served me well. In it, Mike had come up with a mechanic that allowed a spell to have a built in way to reduce its own mana cost. (I'd tell you what it is, but I'm sure we'll use Mike's original version some day.) The mechanic seemed close to what I was looking for, so I took it and tweaked it to fit *Onslaught*. But *Onslaught* didn't need it so it got dumped into a file in our database for unused mechanics.



Richard Garfield



Mike Elliott

Flash forward to a year later. I'm now leading the *Mirrodin* design team. And I'm looking for mechanics that encouraged artifacts. And then it hit me. I could just change the mechanic so it cared about artifacts. The team liked it so we put it into the set. After playing with it for a short while, we realized that the flavor was wrong. Not every color cared about artifacts. In fact some, like green, actively hated them. So, the team decided to try to branch out affinity. For a short while each color had its own affinity condition (rather than just checking for artifacts). Then we started to get creative, giving each color multiple affinity conditions.

And to be honest, things got a little nutty. Here's my favorite attempt at a wacky affinity condition:

Refill



Sorcery

Affinity for cards in your hand

Draw cards until you have a hand of seven cards.

I still have no idea if this card is amazing or horrible. My favorite trick with it was to get a hand of seven cards and then play the spell for 7. Once the spell was on the stack but before it resolved, you discarded all seven cards for some positive effect (like making your *Wild Mongrel* bigger) and then got to draw seven new cards.

Anyway, the point is that we explored many facets of affinity. And we found numerous interesting uses. So many, in fact, that we realized that the mechanic was bigger than *Mirrodin* could properly plumb. This meant that we needed to use design conservation. We needed to figure out what section of affinity was enough. Affinity from artifacts made the most sense in an artifact block, so the team tried focusing the mechanic down to just the one condition. And you know what? It was pretty interesting all by its lonesome. We realized that *Mirrodin* didn't need any affinity other than affinity for artifacts. (We also came to the conclusion that it was okay to limit it to blue and artifacts – although *Darksteel* does break this limitation.)

But that didn't mean the rest of the block couldn't have a little more fun with affinity. In fact, this is where the *Darksteel* preview card comes from. During our exploration period in *Mirrodin* design, I was trying to come up with affinity conditions that worked well on artifacts. At the same time, I was trying to find ways to subtly weave color into artifacts. (The team realized early on that the set needed to have artifacts that pulled towards different colors to help keep limited from exploding the players' brains.) So I began thinking of affinity conditions that related to color. I examined color permanents, colored spells in hand, but in the end, the most interesting idea was basic land.

And so, I made a cycle of golems, each of which tied to a different basic land. I then designed each golem so that he had abilities attached to the color that correlated to the appropriate land.

The idea being that if you had the proper basic land, you should be able to get a creature with that ability cheaply. The preview for today is the “black” card in that cycle:



The cool thing about this affinity condition is that each land essentially contributed two mana towards the cost. In the Dross Golem's case, the creature could be played for three colored mana if its controller had three swamps in play. As you will see when you play the cards with affinity for a particular basic land (and yes, there's a cycle of them), they lead you down a different path than cards with affinity from artifacts.

“I’ll Be Back”

One of the toughest tasks of being a designer is giving the people what they need, not always what they want. (You see, the Rolling Stones were much wiser than you knew.) So, yes, there are many neat things that can be done with affinity. And yes, we have a good idea what many of them are. Will all of them be done this block? No. Will a majority be done? No. Will some be done? Yes.

The good news is that affinity has proven itself to be an interesting and popular mechanic. This means it will come back (and I predict closer to the cycling end of the spectrum than the snow-covered land end). And next time it will do some cool things we won't do this time around.

One of the ongoing themes of this column is that R&D is in this for the long haul. The good news is that this means if you enjoy where the game is right now, you should enjoy it for many, many years to come. The bad news is that for some things (like affinity for _____), you'll just have to wait. I promise, we'll make the wait worth while.

Join me next week when I... man, I don't even know if I can properly tease this one. Join me for the most offbeat column I have ever written. And as longtime readers know, that bar ain't all that low.

Until then may you dream of affinity for Rebecca Guay illustrated cards.

Mark Rosewater

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