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A Cycling Built For Two



The past and future of this popular mechanic

Mark Rosewater · *Making Magic*
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Welcome to Cycling Week. I say that with a little apprehension as we had a Cycling Sub-theme Week during our *Onslaught* preview weeks back in September of 2002. I wrote an article about cycling called "[Cycling Cycling](#)". Could I write a completely different article about cycling? Then I went back and read my old article. And you know what? While it's a pretty good article, it's not really about cycling. It's about reusing old mechanics. Meaning that I haven't really written my definitive cycling column. Until now that is.

Did You Know?

I'm going to begin my column with a few trivia questions about cycling. See how you do:

1. What was the first set to have cycling?
2. What was the first set to have cycling in its design?
3. Who designed cycling?
4. What was cycling originally called?
5. How did cycling originally work?
6. What were the first cards designed with cycling?
7. What was the second set to have cycling?
8. What was the second block to have cycling?
9. What was the second set to have cycling in its design?
10. Did *Urza's Saga* block originally have any cards with cycling costs other than 2?
11. What was the cycling tweak in *Urza's Destiny*?
12. Why was cycling brought back in *Onslaught*?
13. How were the cycling variants in *Onslaught* designed?

Before this column is over you will know the answer to all of these questions. You will have more knowledge about cycling than humans were ever meant to have. Please, use this power for good.

What was the first set to have cycling?

Urza's Saga was the first set to have cycling. One of the rules of a good trivia question is to always start out with an easy question to lull the players into a false sense of security. *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, for example, does an excellent job of this. As a quick aside, one of the \$250,000 questions on the original show was "what is the collective term for rhinos?" See, **Magic** is informative and potentially profitable.

What was the first set to have cycling in its design?

The other trick to good trivia is to throw a tough question in early enough that players learn to be afraid.



Remember, good trivia – lull then scare. Lull then scare. Now, traditionally, you don't scare the players this quickly, but I needed to get to the meat of the article. Where did cycling come from?

The answer, as is the answer to many more of these kinds of questions, is *Tempest*. You see, *Tempest* was my first design. It was Mike Elliott's first design. And it was Richard Garfield's first design since *Arabian Nights*. (The fourth member, by the way, was a man named Charlie Catino for those trivia buffs out there.) Between us, the three of us have probably designed about three fourths of the **Magic** cards in existence. So, imagine what happened on the first set we all worked together at a time where all of us had years of ideas that had built up. A creative explosion is what happened.

The average large set, for instance, is normally handed over with between four and six mechanics (note I'm not just referring to keyword mechanics but all mechanics). When *Tempest* was handed over from design, how many mechanics did it have? Twenty-two. You heard me. Twenty-two! This, by the way, is a sign of it being my first set as a lead designer. Good design involves narrowing down your design to four to six good mechanics. I was green and didn't quite understand the need to self weed. As such, I put every mechanic I thought was good into the design. Turns out I liked twenty-two of them.

Who designed cycling?

I assume most of you guessed me. It is my column after all. But you'd be wrong. Another quick aside into my communication background. But don't worry, I promise it'll connect back. If you wish to work in television you spend a great deal of time in college studying television. One of the most powerful effects of television is its ability to fool the public. And the most powerful means of doing this are very subtle. The one I wanted to talk about today is an effect I called "environment by representation" (there probably is some fancy sounding term that I forgot, so I just made up an expression).

The idea behind "environment by representation" is that people learn about the world not just through direct means but also by subconsciously looking at how often things appear on television. The most famous example of this is crime. On television, ninety percent of all crimes are felonies while ten percent are misdemeanors. But in real life, the opposite is true. There are nine misdemeanors for each felony. But because TV shows it the other way around, the public has this perception of the world being much more dangerous than it really is.

So why do I bring this up in a **Magic** column? Because I want to dispel a similar effect in my column. When I talk about design I am much more likely to talk about my own designs. Why? Because I know everything about my designs. I have all the old files and I'm able to tell very complete stories. My designs make the most compelling stories. Thus, when all of you read about **Magic** design you get this subtle message that I design ninety percent of the cards. Which I don't. In reality the number fluctuates between five and fifty percent depending on how involved I am in the set. I also tend to design more of the newer mechanics as that is a key part of my role as one of the more experienced designers.

But **Magic** design is created by an entire team of dedicated designers. I am part of that team. And currently I oversee the process, but please don't let my column lead you to the false conclusion that I do a majority of the work.

So, who designed cycling? Richard Garfield.

What was cycling originally called?

In its earliest incarnation, cycling was called "sliding".

How did cycling originally work?

Here's the original template for sliding:

Sliding (*When you draw card, reveal it to all players to put it on the bottom of your library and draw another card at the start of the next turn's upkeep*)

And by "original" I mean the template used in design. The mechanic was cut in development long before real templaters (and trust me, with the sole exception of Bill Rose, none of the designers are good at templating – and I'm below average even for designers) looked at it.

If the “start of the next turn’s upkeep” seems exceptionally weird that’s because that’s the old template for cantrips. Yes, back in *Ice Age*, you didn’t get the cantrip until the start of your next turn’s upkeep. Eventually, R&D came to our sense and changed over to the much simpler “draw a card”.

By the time of *Urza’s Saga* design, we had shifted over to the new cantrip template. The new template forced a mana cost. Putting a free cycling card in your deck is essentially the same as shrinking the deck by one. The one other change was changing where the card went. Originally, a cycled card went to the bottom of the library. We changed it to going to the graveyard as we felt it was easier and it kept decking oneself as an issue in limited.

What were the first cards designed with cycling?

Richard’s earliest cards were all common. He chose effects that already existed but that could often be situational. By having sliding, these cards could be included in a deck that normally might cut them. Here, straight from my files, are the first sliding cards to be included in the *Tempest* design:

cb22

Sliding Dark Ritual



Mana Source

Black

Artist

Sliding (*When you draw card, reveal it to all players to put it on the bottom of your library and draw another card at the start of the next turn’s upkeep*)

Add  to your mana pool.

"For Timmy"

cr06

Sliding Dwarf



Summon Dwarf

Red

Artist

1/1

Sliding (*When you draw card, reveal it to all players to put it on the bottom of your library and draw another card at the start of the next turn’s upkeep*)

Mountainwalk

cr18

Sliding Stone Rain



Sorcery

Red

Artist

Sliding (*When you draw card, reveal it to all players to put it on the bottom of your library and draw another card at the start of the next turn’s upkeep*)

Destroy target land.

cg19

Sliding Wild Growth




Enchant Land

Green

Artist

Sliding (*When you draw card, reveal it to all players to put it on the bottom of your library and draw another card at the start of the next turn’s upkeep*)

Sliding Wild Growth adds  to your mana pool each time enchanted land is tapped for mana.

cg20

Sliding Tranquility



Sorcery

Green

Artist

Sliding (*When you draw card, reveal it to all players to put it on the bottom of your library and draw another card at the start of the next turn’s upkeep*)

Destroy all enchantments.

What was the second set to have cycling?

I'm sure a number of you said *Onslaught*. The correct answer is *Urza's Legacy*. Another important part of a trivia contest – you have to be a bit sneaky.

What was the second block to have cycling?


Onslaught is correct here.

What was the second set to have cycling in its design?


Urza's Saga. Being sneaky again.


Did *Urza's Saga* block originally have any cards with cycling costs other than 2?

Why yes, it did. In *Urza's Legacy* design (Mike Elliot, Henry Stern & myself) we fooled around with non-mana cycling costs. Here are the two cards I found in an early file. Both cards use life payments and both are black:

CB09_GU
Minor Reanimation

Sorcery
Black


Choose target creature card in your graveyard with total casting cost 3 or less and put that creature into play.


Sliding: 2 life
reanimate
sliding
alt slide for mana and probably 


UB04_GU
Black's Sucky Artifact Destruction

Sorcery
Black

Destroy target artifact.
Sliding: 2 life
sliding
alt slide for mana

Then in *Urza's Destiny*, the team (which was just me) tried a cycle of alt cost cycling cards:

Saving Grace

Instant
White
Cycling: Tap two white creatures
Prevent 4 damage to target creature.

Spell Pluck

Interrupt
Blue
Cycling: Return two islands you control to your hand
Counter target spell with a casting cost of 3 or less.

Lotta Diggin'

Sorcery
Black
Cycling: Pay 2 life
Remove up to three target cards from any graveyard.

Land Be-Gone



Sorcery

Red

Cycling: Sacrifice a land

Destroy target land.

Splendor in the Grass



Instant

Cycling: return a creature you control to your hand

Prevent all combat damage to creatures you control.

In both cases, the alternate cycling costs were weeded out during design. Why? Because when you ignore mana, you get yourself in trouble. Now some of you might find it crazy that during the madness that was *Urza's Saga* block we didn't print something out of the fear that it might cause problems, but ironically it's true. Interestingly during *Onslaught* block we went back to look at non-mana cycling costs and came to the same conclusion – Danger Will Robinson! Danger!

Now, some of you might have been wondering about simple mana changes. Didn't anything cost something other than 2? Didn't R&D experiment with alternate mana costs? Not really. We liked the idea that the new mechanic was consistent so players would always know what to expect. In fact, cycling was almost keyworded without a number. Since we wanted to keep the cost consistently at two, we talked about just making the ability always cost two. Luckily, we convinced ourselves that we should keep our options open. Our currently philosophy tries to keep keywords open whenever possible. Threshold, for example, if first printed today would be Threshold – 7.

What was the cycling tweak in *Urza's Destiny*?

Most players don't realize this but there was a twist on cycling in *Urza's Destiny*. But the word cycling didn't appear on the cards, so almost no one realized what I was up to. What was the twist? I called it “cycling from the board”.



The twist was that these cards were permanents that you could “cycle” from play. In each case, it cost you two mana and the card to draw a new card. Just like cycling. The lesson from this mechanic is that designers can be too subtle. If I knew then what I know now, I would have been tempted to give them some keyword with the name “cycling” in it, so players could see the tweak. (I'm not saying I'd do it necessarily, just that I'd be tempted.)

The early *Urza's Destiny* design had quite a number of these “cycling from play” cards. While doing my research for this article (yes, I actually do research – it's not called R&D for nothing) I came across an early file with a large number (19 if you're curious) of them. Here are a few that never saw print that I thought were interesting (along with a few notes about them). Remember that these are from a very early design file.

Peaceful Afterlife



Enchantment

White

No effects are generated when cards are put into the graveyard.
2, Sacrifice CARDNAME: Draw a card.

One of the mechanics of *Urza's Destiny* block was leaves play effects. This worked well with echo and the "cycling from play" cards. This card was designed to hose the leaves play effects. The only problem is it doesn't quite work in the rules. (At least that's what the rules team said at the time.) ((I just asked Paul. It still doesn't work.))

Bounce Field



Enchant Creature

Blue

When CARDNAME is put into any graveyard from play, return target creature to owner's hand.

: Return enchanted creature to owner's hand.

2, Sacrifice CARDNAME: Draw a card.

In retrospect, I think this card is a better design if the blue activated ability was missing. Obviously, I was playing around with cycling from play cards with leaves play abilities. *Urza's Destiny* was turned in with a number of them, but development (who dubbed them "clever cards") cut them down to the few they thought were the best.

Phyrexian Sporespitter



Summon Horror

Black

3/3

When CARDNAME is put into any graveyard from play, all creatures in play get -1/-1 until end of turn.

2, Sacrifice CARDNAME: Draw a card.

This card was a cross between the *Urza's Legacy* Phyrexian creatures and *Invasion's* **Plague Spitter**.

Crazed Soldier



Summon Soldier

Red

3/1

CARDNAME cannot block.

When CARDNAME is put into any graveyard, target creature gets +4/-4. That creature's toughness may not drop below 1.

2, Sacrifice CARDNAME: Draw a card.

I loved the idea of a bloodlusted soldier that gave **Blood Lust** to another creature when it died. The idea being it passed on its emotional charge.

Wild Emus



Summon Beast

Green

3/3

When CARDNAME leaves play, all your creatures get +2/+2 and trample until end of turn.

2, Sacrifice CARDNAME: Draw a card.

This was a rare card. The problem with it is that drawing a card is less interesting when the effect that happens along with it ends the game.

Cycling Sol Ring

2

Artifact

Artifact

TM: Add 2 to your mana pool.

2, Sacrifice CARDNAME: Draw a card.

I wanted to show you this as proof that I was once insane! Sol Ring is beyond broken. So to fix it I add a mana. And give it a second ability! A good ability, no less. (One that can produce the mana it needs to sacrifice itself and draw the card, no less.) This is a little insight into perhaps why *Urza's Destiny's* power level goes to 11. I swear my development skills (development is more about recognizing power level than design) have improved in the last seven years.

Why was cycling brought back in Onslaught?

The answer is a number of factors. First, it was in the “bin”. What is the “bin” you ask? In recent years R&D has changed its philosophy about how we think of mechanics. In the past, mechanics were thought of as a limited resource. Today, we recognize mechanics as tools. If a mechanic works, we have the luxury of using it again and again. This means whenever we create a new mechanic, we watch to see how well it works and what kind of response it gets from the audience. When everything clicks, that is the mechanic works well and all of you like it, we stick in the “bin”. Any mechanic in the “bin” is fair game for reuse. Cycling proved to be very popular during *Urza's Saga* block and had some functionality R&D especially liked.

Which brings us to the second reason. Cycling, besides being well-liked, does good things for the game. It has the number one quality I look for in a mechanic, elegance. It is simple and thus easy to understand, but has a complexity of strategy that makes it very meaty. That is, players can spend a great deal of time exploring it without getting easily bored.

If that were all cycling offered, it would easily be “bin” material, but it has a second important feature. Several weeks ago (in my column “[Starting Over](#)”), I talked about the importance of **Magic's** mana resource system. While it has many positive attributes it does have one big negative one, mana screw. Games aren't fun if they end before they begin. As such, one of design's goals on every set is to build in a way to help players lessen mana screw. There are numerous ways to do this, allowing us to attack the problem in different ways, but it's something we always make sure to put into each block.

Cycling is one such mechanic. Why? The answer is threefold. First, cycling cards can be cycled away with a low mana draw. This increases your ability to get land when you're mana light. Second, it allows you a way to use your extra lands when your mana heavy. In short, cycling allows players to turn mana into cards. Or more accurately to allow mana to upgrade cards into better cards. As such, this allows players to run a heavier amount of land because cycling will over time help to readjust the skewed mana draw through the card utility of the cycling (or in English, cycling lets the mana from the extra lands you're playing make up for the disadvantages of playing more land). Third, cycling allows common cycling lands to be printed. Cycling lands are the purest example of mana fixing. They're lands when you need mana and other cards when you don't.

The third advantage of cycling was that we had a number of interesting tweaks we were interested in exploring (more on this in the next section). And fourth, it fit well into what *Onslaught* needed. The tribal theme was very creature heavy. As such, we needed a mechanic that worked well on non-creatures (and hey, cycling worked on creatures too). In the end, all these factors lined up for cycling's return.

How were the cycling variants in *Onslaught* designed?

Onslaught introduced three new innovations. One is new cycling costs. This was pretty much a no-brainer, so there isn't much to say. The added flexibility did allow us to upgrade a number of cards (such as the cycling lands).

The second innovation was cards that triggered off a card being cycled. It's interesting to note that we had a number of these cards in the original *Urza's Saga* file. We shelved the idea at the time as we felt we didn't need it. With *Onslaught* though, we dusted off the idea and designed new cards.



The third innovation was cards that had an *additional* effect when cycled. To keep the flavor of cycling (the idea that you're trading away a spell for access to a different spell), I decided that the effect should be a lesser effect of the spell had you chosen to play it. This way you could choose between the full potent effect or a lesser effect that came with a replacement spell.

A little playtesting proved that these three innovations were more than enough to give the returning cycling some oomph. Are there other innovations available to cycling? Of course. What are they? Well, for that you need to wait for cycling's third appearance (and yes, if it's not obvious yet, cycling will return one day.)

Keep It Moving

And that in a mere 3500 words is the hows and whys of cycling. I hope you enjoyed the exploration into this interesting mechanic.

Join me next week when I finally address the 100 questions I asked you all many weeks back in my "[Talk To Me](#)" column.

Until then, may you know the joy of rediscovery.

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