


Aaron Forsythe
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Birth of a Dream

So there we were, eating at Plataforma. Late spring, 1997. It was me, Mike Turian, and Mike Flores at one end of the table, several members of Team Deadguy at the other--Dave Price, shrouded behind a cloud of smoke and stacks of empty beer glasses, was still stewing over his loss to the infamous Mike Long in the finals of the first-ever North American Grand Prix--and a whole random assortment of gamers in between. We were eating meat and talking about how fun Magic was. We all generally agreed that it was good times, but then a low, quiet voice chimed in and disagreed.

As-yet-unknown Dutch phenom Bram Snepvangers  had tagged along--he was in town visiting family or some such--and the first words he said were, "Magic is not silly enough for me."

We all took pause and considered his grim words. Was the game too serious? It just might be. We ate the rest of the meal in silence.

Worth Wollpert emailed Wizards big-wig Skaff Elias later that night and told him of Bram's depressing sentiment. Skaff said he'd look into things.

From what I understand, Worth's email set off a firestorm behind the scenes in Wizards R&D. They had been planning to release a non-tournament legal set between the upcoming *Rath* and *Urza's* blocks, but the one that was being designed at the time was based on the theme of medieval agriculture. R&D had been spending too much time playing Civilization and Settlers of Catan, and decided to make a "new way to play Magic" that didn't involve much killing and spell casting, but focused instead on growing grain and cattle and trying to keep the peasants fed. Blue had cards like Rainstorm and Irrigate, and red kept it's destructive and chaotic themes alive with cards like Gopher Pack and Barn Burning. Skaff informed Bill Rose and Joel Mick that players were looking for something fun, and so they scrapped the agriculture set and eventually settled on the "wacky set" that was to be designed by Mark Rosewater. (Read Mark's design column here.)

Offsite Development

In Mark's article, he notes that he was the design team "[a]nd the development team." While it's true that he was the only developer in house to work on the project (the development of *Urza's Saga* was going on at the same time... supposedly that took up a lot of people's time), Skaff and Bill Rose had privately arranged for Worth and I, along with pro players Matt Place and Brian Schneider, to develop the set as contractors off site. (No, the irony that all four of us later ended up in R&D is not lost on me.) I'm not sure Mark knew about this, but he had to wonder why the file changed, I imagine.

We received the card file in January of 1997, and all met for a weekend at Worth's house to go over it. Unfortunately, a new computer game called Starcraft had just released, so our attention was not fully on the "Wacky Set" as it was called then.

In between video games we found a few cards we didn't like and removed them altogether. One of the first casualties was a card called "Checkmate":

Checkmate

2WB

Sorcery

Each player selects 16 creature cards from his or her deck and arranges them in the starting

positions on a chessboard. Play a game of chess with the cards using their power and toughness to determine who wins in a "capture" situation. Then shuffle the cards back into their owners' libraries, and the winner of the game draws 4 cards.

The card was not that fun to play because Schneider kept choosing Phyrexian Dreadnaught as his king and no one could ever capture it. We tried assigning the creatures at random, but we'd end up with Sorceress Queens as Bishops and Black Knights as Rooks, and no one could tell what was going on.

Another card that we caught--but just barely--was Gravedigger's Scorn:

Gravedigger's Scorn

1BB

Sorcery

Hit each opponent with a shovel.



We had theorized that the card didn't affect the board at all when you played it, so it wasn't worth the loss of card advantage. Matt threw it in a draft deck on a whim late on Sunday, though, and let me tell you... one crack on the noggin with the old spade and you won't be worrying about card advantage for the rest of the evening. I still have the resulting x-ray hanging in my den.

If you ever wondered why the colors aren't balanced in *Unglued*, it's because we'd kill cards like those and never bother to replace them. Starcraft is that fun.

We didn't just remove cards, but changed some as well. Clay Pigeon used to require that you threw the card in the air and shot it with a rubber band, but we didn't have any rubber bands so we changed it. The Knight of the Hokey Pokey originally required that you do the dance in the nude, but when Worth's parents walked in unannounced to find their son shaking his rump in the buff chanting, "You can't kill it, you can't kill it!" we felt shamed, and a sudden urge to tone the card down a bit.

And Brian insisted that we lower B.F.M.'s stats from 100/100 to 99/99 for power level concerns.

We woke up late on Monday from our Ashnod's Coupon-induced stupors and sent the file back to Wizards. We didn't really know if we did a good job, but we did have a good time playing with the cards and that's all that mattered. Bill Rose looked at what we had done and chuckled, saying that we should stick to our day jobs. Funny, that. What day jobs?

All Kidding Aside...

Considering *Unglued* was basically a one-man affair, I must say it worked out amazingly well. As for the upcoming *Unhinged*, let's just say that Mark had some help this time, and having help can only, well, help. Help!

This Week's Poll

What is your favorite constructed tournament format?

- Block Constructed
- Standard
- Extended
- Type 1.5
- Type 1

Submit

Last Week's Poll:

Due to some technical problems, we didn't run the following poll last week:

How do you pronounce 🟢🟢?

- "Two and a green."
- "A green and two."
- "Two-gee."
- "Gee-two"
- "Two green."
- "Green two."
- "One green and two colorless."
- "Two colorless and a green."
- Something that uses the word "three."
- None of the above.

The Poll From Two Weeks Ago:

Due to the same technical problems, many people were unable to vote in the following poll from two weeks ago:

I view *functionally identical reprints* in expansions (meaning old cards with new names) as:

- A very cool thing.
- A necessary evil.
- Something I wish you'd stop doing.

