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Now With Added Flavor



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Welcome to the first week of *Champions of Kamigawa* previews. The time has begun to lift the veil on this fall's new large expansion. And, of course, to preview the first card of the set. Which I will.

Champions of Kamigawa

Eventually. Now I can't keep you from scanning down and reading it right now, but if I've managed to convince you to read this far, I ask (as always) to wait until the article gets there naturally. The card will be much more interesting in context.

So the first column on *Champions of Kamigawa*. Where should I start? Oh, I know, the Borg. Just stay with me. Now, for those two or three of you out there that are unfamiliar with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, let me fill you in on a little history. The original *Star Trek* series aired in the 1960's. Then in the 1980's, Paramount decided to re-launch the franchise on television (buoyed by the success of a series of films). In *Star Trek*, the classic villains of the Federation were the Klingons. But in fine *Star Trek* tradition, the former enemies would become friends (well, sort of) symbolized by the fact that a Klingon (okay, a Klingon raised by humans, for my fellow nerds out there) was the ship's security officer Worf (yes he didn't start as the security officer but how good of an idea was Tasha Yar anyway? – Maybe she was worth it just for “Yesterday's Enterprise”).

This meant that the writers on *Next Generation* had to come up with a new villain for the Enterprise's crew. They decided to take a very different path for their villain. They created a race that functioned as a single entity. A race with no individualism. (Perhaps the Borg are white?) The Borg sought to learn about and assimilate all life. (Okay maybe also blue and black.) It was a race that the Federation couldn't reason with. And, the Borg had one other very interesting property. As a collective, they were able to learn and react at blinding speed. This meant that any attack used by the Federation was analyzed and nullified as soon as it was used. This meant that when the Enterprise fought the Borg, they had to make each attack unique. The same trick could never be used more than once.

Lovely history of *Star Trek* villains. What does this have to do with *Champions of Kamigawa*? Have I ever not gotten there? Have I ever gone off on a tangent and just never circled the wagons back to the trail? (I have thought about it, but the writer in me wouldn't allow it.) I bring up the Borg to point out an important comparison. Do you know what else is like fighting the Borg? Designing **Magic** sets. You see, each set we pull a new trick out of our bag. But once you've seen the trick, it isn't really a trick any more. Each set we have to find a new way to entertain you. Each “attack” has to be unique. (Wait a minute. Did I just compare all of **Magic's** player base to the Borg? Join in next week when I explain why you're like the Sith.) Which brings us to *Champions of Kamigawa*. (Finally.)

Flavor of the Week Year

One day eighteen months or so ago, Bill Rose, **Magic's** Head Designer (yes, I understand that I now have the title, but we work over a year ahead, so when *Champions* was first being created, Bill was still in charge of **Magic** design) was facing this very issue. How would *Champions of Kamigawa* (then called *Earth* – followed by *Wind* and *Fire*) hit the public in a way that no **Magic** set had before? And that's when Bill started thinking up a different kind of “attack”.

Beginning with the *Invasion* block, the **Magic** design teams started using themes as a tool to build sets around. While the themes varied from year to year, they pretty much had a similar approach. Pick some mechanical aspect of the game and then make the chosen aspect matter. *Invasion* was about multi-color and, as such, encouraged players to play as many colors as possible. Color, you see, mattered. Next came the *Odyssey* block that lived and breathed the graveyard. In this block, players had to be very aware of what was in their graveyard. Because, of course, the graveyard mattered. Then was the Onslaught block where tribal mattered followed by *Mirrodin* where artifacts mattered.

The themes, thought Bill, were becoming a little staid. How could he build a theme that didn't just cry out "Play <blank>"? And then it hit Bill. Why did the theme have to be mechanical? What if we took a page from the very first expansion, *Arabian Nights*, and build a set around a flavorful real world environment? Except, rather than simply copy the environment verbatim, we would use the real world as a means to jump off and created our own inspired world. The question would be what world? And how would we make it our own?

The We In Team

Bill began by building an *Earth* design team:

Brian Tinsman (lead)

I first talked about Brian when I reviewed the *Judgment* design team. Back then I was talking about how I felt he was the big up-and-coming designer in R&D. Now that he's upped and come, Brian has begun finding his own voice as a designer. Brian is a big fan of the visceral response. He likes his designs to have an emotional impact with the player. He wants the players to crack open packs, look at the cards, and just say "Cool" to themselves.



As such, Brian is the most "top down" (aka flavor driven) designer in R&D. So who better to put in charge of a flavor themed set? While Brian had run design teams for small sets (*Judgment* & *Scourge*), this is the first time he would lead a large expansion. And as Brian would learn, the large sets (which by their nature dictate the entire block) are a much different animal.

Bill Rose

This was a pretty radical idea. So Bill felt it was a good idea to keep close to the project. In addition, Bill hadn't been on the design team of a large set since *Invasion* (on which he was the lead). Besides, the design sounded like fun.

For those of you that might not know who Bill Rose is, he's the current VP of R&D and former Head **Magic** Designer. Farther back than that, Bill was one of the original playtesters that helped make **Magic**. Along the way Bill had his hand in the design of almost every set since *Mirage*.



Mike Elliott

It's odd how much influence Mike has had on **Magic** design comparative to how many people recognize his name. Mike has been on more design teams than anyone in R&D. In addition, he's been on more large set design teams than anyone in R&D (Mike has been on the design of every large set since *Tempest* with the sole exception of *Odyssey*.) So when a design team wants a heavy hitter, Mike's your man.



Brady Dommermuth



If you're going to design a set based on flavor, it wouldn't hurt to have a member of the Creative Team on the design team. Now, Brady had never been on a **Magic** design team, but *Earth* seemed like a perfect fit.

The Real World



The team's first assignment was to figure out what real world source to use as inspiration. And so they looked at every Earth based mythology they could think of. Different worlds were rejected for different reasons. Some (like Greek and Roman) seemed too similar to standard **Magic** fare. Others (such as Arabian, Norse, and certain African mythologies) were ruled out as we had done sets in the past that already touched upon the culture. A third grouping (such as Native American and Incan) proved to be a little too distant from some of the needs of a basic **Magic** set such as the ability to use some staple races. In the end, the winner was Japan. It was very flavorful, was unlike anything we'd done thematically, and was

close enough to traditional **Magic** to make the set adaptable for our needs.

But choosing the proper world was only the beginning. Once the team chose the real world influence, the research began. The Creative Team is responsible for creating the world each year. The limitations are only those that the team sticks upon themselves to craft an interesting world. But for *Earth*, this meant the team was subject to creating a world that flowed from the essence of an existing culture. World building had to be intertwined with careful study of the Japanese culture. A big help was consultation with Wizards employees and contractors that work with the Japanese market.

At this point, very little in the way of mechanics had been worked out. The team wanted to first get a sense of the world and then have the mechanics flow from it. The design team used this time to examine what previous mechanics lent themselves well to flavor. After weeks of examination, it became clear that one mechanic stood heads and tails above the rest as a flavor-based vehicle – legends!

Legends In Our Own Time

But there was a problem. R&D had always had an issue with the legend rule. Most of R&D believed that it increased the luck factor of the game and as such were shy to push too many legends (especially inexpensive ones) into tournament play. But then we got a suggestion for a new legend rule from the most unlikely of places. And we liked it. (For more on the history of the new legend rule, check out Aaron Forysthe's "Latest Developments" column next week.)

The answer was simple, make legends a major focus of the set and use the focus as an impetus to introduce the new legend rule. And so we did. Before I go any further, I guess I should tell you the new rule. From *Champions of Kamigawa* on, here's how legendary creatures (they're no longer creature type legends but the supertype legendary) work in Magic:

420.5e If two or more permanents with the same name have the supertype legendary, all are put into their owners' graveyards. This is called the "legend rule." If only one of those permanents is legendary, this rule doesn't apply.

This means that a legend is no longer dead in your hand if your opponent beats you to getting it out. The second legend now neutralizes the first one.



Under the old legends rule, luck was too much of an issue

The design team expressed their interest in legends as an interesting flavor mechanic to the Creative Team (and remember there was already an overlap with Brady). This gave the Creative Team a challenge. How can you create a world filled with legends? (The design team planned, and as you will see executed, to make the *Kamigawa* block have the heaviest concentration of legends ever.) What if a great event forced the heroes to the forefront? Perhaps some kind of war.

But **Magic** has seen a number of wars. How could we create one that felt very Japanese? The answer rested with the spirits. You see, Japanese mythology has a very heavy spirit world component. What if the war wasn't between two races but between all the races and the spirit world? That sounded interesting.

That's The Spirit

As the Creative Team fleshed out the spirit/humanoid conflict, the design team started exploring how to make mechanics that captured the essence of a spirit war. What if, for instance, the spirits had their own kind of magic? What if the spirits themselves had different properties from normal creatures? And what if the humanoids had their own means to combat the spirits?

At each step, the design team looked for inspiration from the world itself. And an interesting thing happened. Something started to matter, but it wasn't quite as cut and dry as the previous themed sets. *Champions of Kamigawa* definitely influenced certain aspects of the game, but with a connection like nothing we've done before. Because the connection was based on the world and the world was like nothing that anyone had ever seen.



This seems like a good place for an aside paragraph about the goals of the *Kamigawa* block. The idea behind this block was not to emulate a real world culture but to use it as a stepping stone to create an original **Magic** world. As you look through the cards, the set will seem new, but the overall look and feel is still **Magic** at its core. We didn't take **Magic** to Japan, rather we took Japan to **Magic**. I feel quite confident as you see what we've done that you'll see this as another exciting new world just like Mirrodin or Rath or Phyrexia.

In future weeks, I'll get into the details of the mechanics and how each was crafted. The point of this week is to explain how different their overall genesis was.

Stop Dragon My Heart Around

Which leads us to the very first preview card. When the design team settled on a heavy legends theme, it became clear very quickly that we needed a cycle of legendary dragons. (After all, we'd only done it twice before in *Legends* and *Invasion*.) But Brady pointed out that dragons in Japanese mythology were very much spirits. If we were planning to support a spirit war flavor, the dragons had to be on the spirits' side. So the design team checked in with editing with the following innocent question: Does "Legendary Creature – Dragon Spirit" fit on the card type line?

We didn't take Magic to Japan, rather we took Japan to Magic.

Once they found out the answer was "yes", the team started thinking up a cool mechanic for the dragon cycle. So they asked themselves the following question: what do players want to do with dragons? The answer was easy – they want to attack with them. But both *Legends* and *Invasion's* legendary dragon cycles were based upon (or in the case of *Legends* touched upon) effects that happened when the creature dealt damage.



So the design team tried a different question: what do players like least when they're playing a dragon? The answer also seemed obvious – paying all that mana to get the creature out and watching it get killed by a two mana spell. How could the team counter this negative? Perhaps by making the creatures harder to kill? No, that was already being used by another cycle (simply called “the gods” in design). And then came an inventive idea. What if destroying the dragons triggered a good ability. What if losing the dragon was as much a threat to the opponent as the dragon? What if playing it put the opponent in a lose/lose situation?

The team liked the idea. They decided to make 5/5 flying dragons with a “when this card is put into the graveyard from play” trigger. A good trigger. A very good one. Many of the colors came easy, but white proved the most difficult. You see, white has been going through some changes as R&D fiddled with the color pie to balance all the colors. What if the dragon could do something devastating in some of white's new pie domain? And so was born Yosei, the Morning Star:



As you can see, the card ended up quite potent.

Bursting With Flavor

In the weeks ahead, I'll take you on some journeys of what this new exploration has led to mechanically. But for today, I hope I've enlightened you on how this block is going to be a little different. Stay tuned. The fun is just beginning.

Join me next week as I introduce the candy that is arcane.

Until then, may your exploration take you down some paths you didn't know existed.

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