



MAGICTHEGATHERING.COM

ARTICLES

Related links

Read other articles

TOURNAMENTS

MAGIC ONLINE

Article Search

Combo Platter

Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
Monday, September 27, 2004



Welcome to Combo Week! This week we'll be exploring one of the cooler aspects of the trading card game – the chemical reaction when two or more cards come together to create something greater than the sums of their parts. And since this is the design column, it makes perfect sense for me to talk about the design of famous combos. There's just one teensy problem. We don't design combos.

The game of **Magic** has millions, perhaps billions, maybe even trillions, possibly quadrillions, who are we kidding – some number so large that it would mentally cripple any human who could truly comprehend it – of combos. (Be aware that the quality level varies greatly – there are scores of combos of the **Great Defender** / **Creature Bond** / **Fissure** quality.) How can R&D not have designed any?

Matchmaking

The answer to this question rests in how design works. You see, when creating a card, we don't design it to interact with any one other card. Rather, we design it to interact with *many* other cards. **Magic** is a modular game. This means that it's crucial that as many cards combine as possible. Let me use Legos as a metaphor. Legos wouldn't be the defining brand it is right now if each piece only fit one or two other pieces. What makes Legos Legos is that each piece fits with every other piece. It is the ultimate modular play system. **Magic** works much the same way. The game would quickly become boring if each card only worked with a small handful of other cards. Thus, it is up to the designers to make cards as open-ended as possible.

This means that it's inefficient to design cards to specifically work with other cards. Rather, we try to create effects that we know interact with key elements of the game, things that will apply to multiple other cards. That said, we do create linear cards (for more on this terminology, see "[Come Together](#)") that push you towards a particular type of card. **Goblin King**, for instance, does encourage you to combine the card with goblins.

But this is Combo Week, so explaining why we don't specifically design combos isn't going to cut it. Instead I've decided to let you in on a deep dark secret. We do in fact design combos. But not as often as many of you think. The combos I'm talking about are a series of cards, what I call sets, that are clearly designed to be played together. And not in a larger group sense like slivers or shrines. I'm talking about a group of cards that, by design, require you to play all of them to get the desired effect. So without further ado, here are the R&D designed combos:

Urza's Mine / Urza's Power Plant / Urza's Tower (*Antiquities*)

This first combo came about because the designers of *Antiquities* (Skaff Elias, Jim Lin, Joel Mick, Chris Page, and Dave Petty) wanted to find a way to allow the players to be able to play some of the more expensive cards in the set. Because most of these items were artifacts (*Antiquities* had an artifact theme long before *Mirrodin*), the team decided that the mana producer would produce colorless mana. In addition, the team decided that they wanted this card to be a land.

The challenge presented to the team was finding a way to make a land that produced additional mana but didn't unbalance the game. The innovation was to make not one land but three. Each of them would be a weak land (producing a single colorless mana) until all three got into play, at which point the lands would become very powerful. Spreading the ability across three lands accomplished several tasks. First, it guaranteed the extra mana wouldn't come too early.



Second, it created a built-in timing mechanism. And third, it did so in an innovative, fun, and very flavorful way.

It's interesting to note that the Urzatron (as the three lands are often called) remains a popular combo. With the addition of [Sylvan Scrying](#) and [Reap and Sow](#) from *Mirrodin*, the cards have even seen extensive tournament play in the [Tooth and Nail deck](#).

Rohgahh of Kher Keep / Kobolds of Kher Keep (Legends)

Legends decided to try the [Goblin King](#) trick in a way that involved just a single card. I'll be honest, I'm not a fan of this combo. If it was up to me, Rohgahh would have boosted all kobolds. I wish I could explain why the designers of *Legends* (Steve Conard and Robin Herbert) choose to only let the [Kobolds of Kher Keep](#) benefit, but I can't. My best guess was that it was a flavor thing. I mean, he's not called Rohgahh of Crookshank.

Breathstealer / Feral Shadow / Urborg Panther / Spirit of the Night (Mirage)

This combo came about because the *Mirage* designers (Bill Rose, Joel Mick, Charlie Catino, Howard Kahlenberg, Don Felice, and Elliott Segal) were interested in trying to find alternate costs for creatures. Wouldn't it be cool if there was a big creature that could be played without paying mana? After examining several different ways of doing this, the team settled upon sacrificing creatures. And thus was born the Spirit of the Nightstalker trio. (The name was shortened because Spirit of the Nightstalker didn't fit on the card.)

I wanted to take a moment to point out one of the subtler elements of these cards' design:

Name	Mana Cost	Power/Toughness
Breathstealer	2	2/2
Feral Shadow	2	2/1
Urborg Panther	2	2/2
Spirit of the Night	6	6/5

The flavor of the cards is that the three creatures form together to make the [Spirit of the Night](#). To reflect this, the designers made the [Spirit of the Night](#)'s mana cost, power and toughness the combined total of the three cards you sacrifice to summon it.

The popularity (among the casual set) of these four cards demonstrated to R&D that there is a subsection of player that enjoys the occasional combo set.

Kyscu Drake / Spitting Drake / Viashivan Dragon (Visions)

The same designers that designed *Mirage* also designed *Visions*. In fact, at one point the two were merged together into a big set codenamed *Menagerie*. This combo is really just a follow-up to the [Spirit of the Night](#) Combo. It requires one less card but one more color.

The two other pieces of trivia deal with two of the three names. Kyscu came from an inside R&D joke. Red and green historically had bad fliers. We thought it would be funny to name a mountain range as their home called the Kyscu mountains (Kyscu is an anagram of "sucky").

Viashivan is a combination of two other **Magic** words – Viashino (the race of lizard people) and Shivan (meaning from Shiv like a certain dragon we all know). The idea was that the Viashivan was part lizard, part dragon.

Kookus / Keeper of Kookus (Visions)

Here's another *Visions* combo special. This combo is more one-sided as [Keeper of Kookus](#) doesn't really need [Kookus](#) as much as vice versa. But as the two cards clearly communicate to the player that they should be played together I included them here.

These cards were top-down design cards. The designers liked the idea of a red djinn that was out of hand if not properly controlled. (Without his keeper, he attacks you and the opponent each turn.) **Keeper of Kookus** was then given an activated protection from red ability to explain how the wee little goblin can control the mighty djinn.

Pardic Firecat / Flame Burst & Diligent Farmhand / Muscle Burst (Odyssey)

This combo is interesting as one part of it is a repeat. **Flame Burst** was originally printed in *Tempest* as **Kindle**. When the *Odyssey* designers (Mike Donais, Richard Garfield, William Jockusch, Henry Stern, and myself) realized that the block's main theme would be the graveyard, we looked for repeats that fit the theme. We realized the **Kindle** mechanic had more potential (it has also been used on **Accumulated Knowledge** in *Nemesis*) and decided to make a cycle of **Kindle** cards. But to add a little something extra, we decided to make a card that would enhance the kindle mechanic without itself being a kindle card. In the end, we chose to do this twice with two creatures, one red and one green.



Dark Suppliant / Scion of Darkness (Legions)

This is the first time R&D decided to revisit the **Spirit of the Night** combo (not counting **Viashivan Dragon**), but as you will see, not the last. The *Legions* design team (Mike Elliott and Mike Donais) decided to make the acquisition of the “big guy” easier by not being so specific what creature had to be sacrificed (they simply had to be clerics).

Sword of Kaldra / Shield of Kaldra / Helm of Kaldra (Mirrodin / Darksteel / Fifth Dawn)

This combo set came about because the *Mirrodin* design team (Tyler Bielman, Mike Elliott, Brian Tinsman and myself) was trying to think of cool things to do with equipment. One day, Tyler submitted the following three cards:

Sword of Jayd

5

Legendary Artifact Equipment- Weapon

Equipped creature gains +6/+0.

When equipped creature blocks or is blocked by a creature, that creature is removed from the game.

[cardname] can't be the target of spells or abilities.

Shield of Jayd

5

Legendary Artifact Equipment- Armor

Equipped creature gets +0/+6 and can't be the target of spells or abilities.

[cardname] can't be the target of spells or abilities.

Ring of Jayd

5

Legendary Artifact Equipment- Item

Equipped creature gets +4/+4.

[cardname] can't be the target of spells or abilities.

If you control **Sword of Jayd** and **Shield of Jayd**, put a 10/10 white avatar creature token into play and move all artifact equipment cards you control onto it.

If you do the math, you'll notice that Jayd becomes a 20/20 untargetable creature. The *Mirrodin* team tweaked the cards a bit, but kept the general concept of three pieces of equipment that call forth the legend token to wear them. The one other suggestion of the team was to spread the three items across the three sets in the block. This allowed us to build up the trio as new sets

came out. In fact, I'm very proud that **Shield of Kaldra** is the first card in **Magic** to reference a card from a future set.

Blasting Station / Grinding Station / Salvaging Station / Summoning Station (*Fifth Dawn*)

I talked about the design of the stations in my column "[Cog Wild](#)" (which was continued to Aaron's column "[Deus Ex Machina](#)") so there's not much to add here. I will point out though that this combo set (dubbed has one unique quality of all the sets listed here: it's the only one where no card in the set names another card by name in its rules text. I like to see this as an advancement in our combo set technology.



The Great Machine

Peer Through Depths / Reach Through Mists / Sift Through Sands / The Unspeakable (*Champions of Kamigawa*)

And we end with *Champions of Kamigawa*. The designers of *Champions* (Brian Tinsman, Brady Dommermuth, Mike Elliott and Bill Rose) were once again inspired by **Spirit of the Night**, but this time they decided to change the trigger condition to get the "big guy" (and also change the color). Instead of needing three creatures, they thought, what if you needed to cast three spells?

Game, Set, Match

If nothing else, I hope this article shows that R&D doesn't plot out combos as much as players think. I like to use the metaphor that we're tool makers. We make tools for you all to use. And while we have some general idea how you'll use it, we're always pleased when you find some new use for it.

Join me next week when I talk about the big picture.

Until then may you find out what you would do "if you had a hammer".

Mark Rosewater

But Wait There's More

Before I bid you farewell, there were two quick announcements I wanted to make. One involves how to get a job involving **Magic**. The second updates talks about someone who did.

Wizards of the Coast Book Publishing Looking For Magic Authors

If you love **Magic** and love to write, here is a golden opportunity. The Wizards of the Coast Book Publishing group is having an "open call" to find writers for the **Magic** novels. If this at all sounds interesting to you, I strongly urge you to go [here](#) and check out the guidelines for submitting a proposal. Future **Magic** novels will be written by people submitting to this "open call"!

Magic Creative Writer Hired

Many months ago, I informed you that we were posting a job for a **Magic** Creative Writer to join the **Magic** Creative Team. We got 586 applicants, which we've finally whittled down to one. And it's a name some of you will recognize. The person hired for the job is... Matt Cavotta. Yes, the **Magic** artist. (For fans of his work, one of his

stipulations in accepting the job was that he could still illustrate **Magic** cards.)

Matt will be starting in about a month and will be diving head first into the creative work on *Control* (the 2005 large expansion). I'm quite excited to have him join our team. Expect to see (and read) some cool stuff in the fall of 2005.

That's all the extra stuff I got. Go read the rest of the site. See you next week.



Worlds '02, with Anavolver



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[WHAT'S NEW](#) [CORPORATE INFO](#) [WHERE TO BUY](#) [INTERNATIONAL](#) [SUPPORT](#) [SITEMAP](#) [PRODUCTS](#)

[© 1995-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.](#)
[Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.](#)
[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)