

Combos? What Combos?

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I can't believe Garfield put Lure and Thicket Basilisk in the same set. It's like he's trying to build our decks for us. Ahem.

If you haven't yet, go back and read Mark Rosewater's Monday column "Combo Platter." It sets up what I'm going to talk about nicely.

Mark is right--and I speak from experience--that designers do not make cards that are meant to be played with specific other cards all that often, and those that do are generally pretty clearly marked, like Pious Kitsune and Eight-and-a-Half-Tails. Even cards like those, however, are not worthless on their own. A lone Pious Kitsune is at least better than Silent Attendant from *Urza's Saga*, and 8.5 Tails is like a combo in and of himself (what with his two synergistic abilities and all). We like things to be somewhat open-ended.

What we do like to design is "themes," wherein we emphasize certain aspects of the game more than normal, but still try to maintain enough open-endedness that the end result is not decks that feel "pre-built." Themes are not combos--Goblin Warchief interacts with different Goblins in interesting ways, and how you choose to abuse him is up to you. Believe me, it is much more fun watching you people come up with crazy new deck ideas than it is watching you play stuff similar to whatever we happened to build in development.

What Development Finds Out

So even though design doesn't seed sets with narrow two-card combos, it is the job of development to look for hidden combos and try to determine how powerful they are. We build decks around some of the dumbest things--a particularly horrid Student of Elements deck I had to play against springs to mind--but, hey, that is our job.

Many times we find nasty stuff and head it off at the pass. Krark-Clan Ironworks used to cost 3 mana until we were Brain Freezing people for 800 cards on turn 3. We upped it to four mana and found that the *Mirrodin* block's high amount of artifact hate was enough to keep it in check. Of course, we lucked out with that change, since the real degenerate combo with that card--Ironworks plus Myr Incubator--was one we hadn't found in our playtesting.

Looking Back

Playtesting wasn't always as rigorous here in R&D as it is now. Mike Flores talked about some of the most famous combos of all time in his Wednesday column, "The First and Last." So what did old-school R&D know about those?



Mike Long, *US Nationals '02*

Pro player Mike Long, the man forever linked to the Pros Bloom combo, firmly believes that the people that designed and developed the *Mirage* block purposely planted all the necessary pieces of that convoluted combo--Prosperity, Cadaverous Bloom, Squandered Resources, Natural Balance, etc.--throughout the block as a challenge to players to see if they'd find the deck. Well, Mike's wrong. Those cards were all created simply as open-ended cards--along with many contemporaries like Grim Feast and Psychic Vortex--without full

understanding of what each of them was capable of. The end result was something amazing to behold, and testimony to creative deckbuilding.

Donate, from the Trix deck, was similar in that it was understood that the card was weird and narrow, but that's about it; it was printed with a "What's the worst that could happen?" attitude, and the worst basically did happen, as the deck became so dominant that several cards had to be banned in Extended on its behalf.

These days we try our best to identify weird niche cards that could be parts of devastating combos and break them ourselves. Like I said about Ironworks, sometimes we do catch problems. Other times, the combos we make are good, but not so good that we can't print the cards.

Your Perceptions of Us

So now I find myself in a quandary. What should I tell you about our combos? If I explain all the combos we found using cards from *Champions of Kamigawa* and how we tested them, what good would come of that? Many of you would feel cheated from reading my words, as they might rob you of any sense of discovery you would get from stumbling on the combo yourself. Had you already found one of them, and I told you that we tested it extensively and that it wasn't very good, you might give up on the deck and feel bitterness that I ruined your fun, or at the very least spoiled the surprise deck you were going to unleash on your pals this weekend. Either that, or the cries of, "See?! I knew you were building our decks for us!" would start anew. And if I posted what we thought were our best combos, and something blatantly obviously powerful was missing from the list (which I doubt, but we did print Skullclamp after all), we'd look bad. Again, what good could come of that?

Were I still a player, I wouldn't want the people that made the cards telling me all the combos I'm supposed to be playing with. Personally, I like to maintain at least the illusion of my own free will, and too much knowledge ahead of time would make me feel like I was walking a predetermined path as I built decks. Here in R&D we do that enough without themes; you really don't want me telling you too much else this early in the game. That's why we let our non-employee writers like Anthony, Mike, BDM, and Bennie explore the cards and write about potential decks—they're generally seeing the set the same way the rest of you are, with no inside information. Mark Gottlieb is the only exception, and that's probably because (a) his decks are so horrible—did I say "horrible?" I meant "interesting."—that their impact on potential metagames is negligible, and (b) he actually got the gig before he got his job as a developer.

I am still slightly tortured by the existence of the Beacon of Creation/Blasting Station/Fecundity deck that started popping up in Standard late last season. Why? Because I may have let the cat out of the bag on that one. In my article about why Skullclamp was being banned, I mentioned that three-card combo offhand because (a) it was the basis of the deck that tipped us off in-house that Skullclamp was a problem, and (b) I figured that without the Clamp around, the deck couldn't possibly be good. So imagine my surprise when it started showing up in Top 8's a few weeks later. While the likeliest explanation is that several players were had already discovered the deck completely on their own, the possibility that I was altering the metagame by telling people what to play in my column leaves me feeling uneasy. Giving away "deck tech" is not my job--I want to leave creativity to the players.



I suppose I want to leave you with whatever perception of R&D you had coming in. Many of you think that we test every card into the ground and that the world is a safe and stable place no matter what. Any deck that you build has already been built and scrutinized by us. On the other hand, some of you think we wouldn't know a broken combo if it hit us in the face, and that new **Magic** sets are rife with opportunities to make us eat our hats and look foolish. There are benefits to both viewpoints, and the

reality is actually between the two somewhere (skewed heavily towards the "safe" with just a dash of "unsure" just to keep things exciting in my opinion).

So again, if you were hoping for me to give you a few juicy combos, you're out of luck. Find 'em yourself; it's more fun that way.

Broken Mirrors

Since every article on the site this week is talking about Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker and Intruder Alarm, I might as well chime in. Yes, R&D was aware of this combo. Yes, we built several decks featuring it. No, I will not tell you what was in them, and no, I will not tell you how good we determined them to be. Shuffle up.

Now wasn't that fulfilling?

I didn't think so.

This Week's Poll:

What kind of combos do you enjoy most?

- Degenerate combos that win the game quickly.
- Goofy combo decks that use about nineteen different cards to execute some goofy trick.
- Cute two-card interactions that can go in a variety of decks.
- No combos please; I prefer the attack phase.
- No combos please; I prefer the Counterspells and the Wraths.

Last Week's Poll:

Many people complained that I didn't provide adequate subdivisions of choices that would allow them to mark that they played four rounds, then hung out at the food court, and then took their Level 2 Judge test. No big deal--my goal was basically just to see how many of your went at all.

Did you attend the Prerelease?		
Yes, to play.	5246	49.5%
No.	4860	45.9%
Yes, to judge.	249	2.3%
Yes, to hang out.	243	2.3%
Total	10598	100.0%

Attendance was up across the board--this was the biggest Prerelease weekend ever! Long live **Magic!**

