

Aaron Forsythe
Friday, January 07, 2005

This past year was my very first full one as a member of **Magic** Research & Development, and what a year it was. Granted, I knew my way around the department by the time I started--I had played in the Future Future League and chimed in with random design and development thoughts long before I actually started the position--but there were plenty of opportunities for me to learn. Here's a quick recap of 2004 from my eyes here in R&D.

Earth's Formation

About this time last year, the set we called "Earth"--now known as *Champions of Kamigawa*--was finishing up development. The lifespan of the set inside the company to this point had been a tumultuous one. Many people--myself included--were unsure we'd be able to pull off a Japanese-themed set well, especially one that was going to use the overall look and feel of the cards as the major theme as opposed to some widespread mechanic-based hook, like the tribal theme in *Onslaught* or the pervasiveness of artifacts in *Mirrodin*.

Luckily my pessimism was due mostly to my lack of exposure to what would be the final names and art--my decks all featured blank cards with names like "Planar Samurai" and "Trampling Tree." As the finished artwork started showing up in our card database, along with the evocative card titles our expert creative team cooked up, my eyes really opened to how potentially cool this set could be--and how wrong I was for doubting its potential. I have learned to trust my coworkers, that's for sure! Of course, I'd have to wait a few months before the cards were made public.



The Deal with Darksteel

The order of the day for the players early in 2004 was *Darksteel*, home of the sinister Skullclamp and Arcbound Ravager. We knew going in that those two cards were going to be nasty business in constructed play; unfortunately one was a big mistake and one was, well, perhaps a lapse in judgment.



As an aside, a lot of new talented people joined TCG R&D in 2004. Former PT winner Matt Place and my former Team CMU compadre Paul Sottosanti were hired on full time after their contract positions were up. Matt is now a fixture of **Magic** development, and Paul splits his time between **Magic** and our other games like Duel Masters and Neopets. Mike Turian, another Pro Tour Champion, is now working the contract position and has proven invaluable in playtesting the upcoming *Ravnica* set. John Carter of Saturday School fame took on the mantle of **Magic** Rules Manager when Paul Barclay decided to try his hand in our New Business division. Plus we added a designer to the non-**Magic** division by the name of Ryan Miller. We're growing, and I expect years of fantastic stuff from that group.

The point is that during *Darksteel* development in 2003, none of the above people were working here, nor was I, nor was designer/developer Devin Low. Stuff was missed, including Skullclamp, but it's easy to see that we learned a lesson and have taken steps to ensure that we don't do that again. The 'Clamp goes down in history as the first card we've had to ban in Standard in years.

The good news is that the set went over well. Cards like Darksteel Colossus and Sundering Titan put fatties into constructed, and new interesting artifacts like Trinisphere, Serum Powder, and Panoptic Mirror got deckbuilders' juices flowing. Arcbound, indestructible, Pulses, and Echoing cards all found homes in tournament decks, and even land affinity had a big impact on limited.

A Mighty Wind, and Starting Fires

Back in-house, the development for "Wind"—the soon-to-be-released set now called *Betrayers of Kamigawa*—began, headed up by Henry Stern. The big discussions about the set revolved around how the new exciting class of creatures--ninja--would work exactly. Let me be the first to say the team did a bang-up job; be sure to check back on this site starting on Monday for card previews!



At this time, design for Fire—now know as *Saviors of Kamigawa*—began under the leadership of Brian Tinsman (the lead designer for *Champions*).

The other big news for me at the beginning of 2004 was that I was handed the "Latest Developments" column by Randy Buehler. Randy had written this column since the inception of this website, but an increasing workload necessitated him passing the torch to me. I hope I haven't disappointed!

Nine Lives

In a strange twist of scheduling, I was not put on any of the official design or development teams for the entire *Kamigawa* block, but that doesn't mean I wasn't busy. The main project that took up most of my time early in the year was the design and development of the next edition of the Core Set, *Ninth Edition*.

I enjoy **Magic's** past, and I had a good time combing through old sets looking for interesting cards to include. At the same time, we continued to hone the set's ability as a teaching tool by introducing more perfect simple cards to the set as well. *Ninth* has a tough act to follow in the esoteric *Eighth Edition*, but I think you will be pleasantly surprised with *Ninth* when it comes out later this year.

Control Freaks

The other project that I was involved in that fired up in earnest early last year was the design team for "Control"--next year's block--which has now been officially named *Ravnica: City of Guilds*. The team was an amazing one: Mark Rosewater led it, and it included prolific designer Mike Elliott, Magic creator Richard Garfield, Tyler Bielman, and me. It took us several weeks to finalize the direction we wanted to take with the set, but after the initial hand-wringing it came together nicely. I also had the honor of being the "design representative" on the Control development team, which consists of lead Brian Schneider, Randy Buehler, Henry Stern, Matt Place, and Mark Gottlieb. Development of that set is still going on today, and the set just gets better and better.

Out with the Old, In with the New

As I explained in one of the articles I re-ran over break ("Skullclamp, We Hardly Knew Ye"), the DCI had to ban a card in Standard for the first time in a long while. Skullclamp was yanked from Standard and Block Constructed right as the new set--*Fifth Dawn*--was entering the mix.

It was interesting to watch *Fifth Dawn* hit the streets, as it was the first set I did design work on. The mechanics were a little hit-or-miss; scry proved to be popular and useful, sunburst not so much. Some of the cooler stuff in *Fifth Dawn* was

overshadowed by the mistakes in *Darksteel* (although, to be fair, *Fifth Dawn* had mistakes of its own, like Cranial Plating). The biggest card to hit constructed from the set was easily Eternal Witness, giving green decks of all shapes and sizes much-needed utility and staying power.



The Young Champ

I was able to attend the **Magic** World Championships in San Francisco in September, and it was quite a show. The venue was wonderful and the tournament itself didn't disappoint. Julien Nuijten won it all with a green/white Astral Slide deck, vanquishing publicly enemy number one--Affinity--played by fellow youngster Aeo Paquette. For a full wrap-up of the year in **Magic** Organized Play, check out Brian David-Marshall's two part recap [here](#) and [here](#).



Off the Hinges

As fall came around, we began anticipating the release of our second-ever "wacky" set, *Unhinged*. I had a small hand in the product, designing two cards (Stop That and Collector Protector). Most of my input was in the names and flavor text department. I'm responsible for some of the more punny (Shoe Tree) and off-color (Assquatch) flavor text in the set. I guess I just channeled my inner sixteen-year-old.

When *Unglued* came out years ago, it sold slowly because players didn't know what to make of it. What was it for? Why should I buy it? With years of perspective behind it, we expected *Unhinged* to do much better, and it has!

Alt-ernate Reality

Design for the second set in the *Ravnica* block--codenamed "Alt"--began in the second half of 2004. Because Brandon Bozzi had commitments to other projects, a hole opened up on the team and I was inserted. We--Mike Elliott, Brian Schneider, Devin Low and I--just finished the design this week, and it looks saucy. Hopefully the development team won't carve it up *too* much.

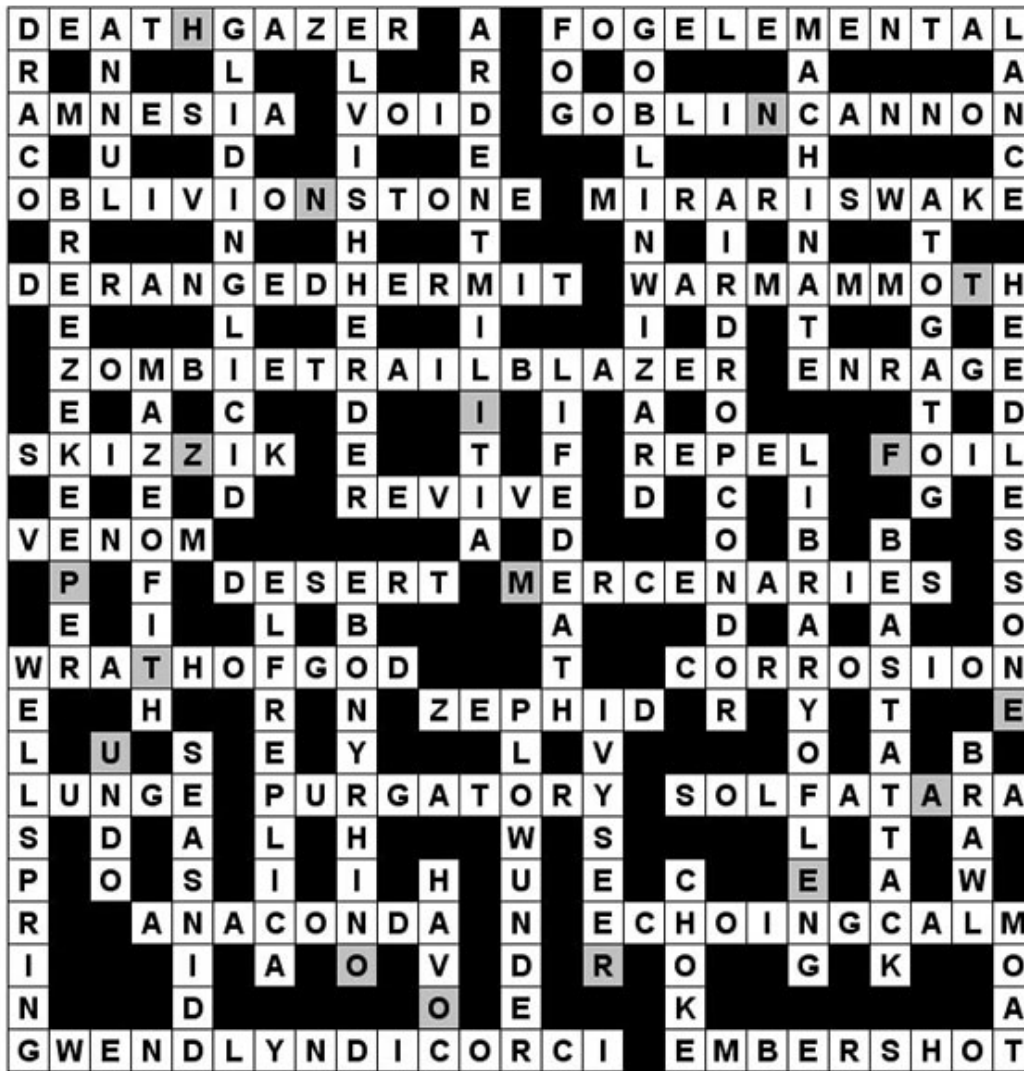
Champions Hits

The world was overrun with Legends and Spirits when *Champions of Kamigawa* went on sale early last fall. The Japan theme was well-received (thanks in large part to the wonderful art and flavor text our creative team put in place)... that'll teach me not to trust my coworkers' intuition! Standard was given cards that, while not powerful enough to dethrone affinity, certainly could compete with it.



And that brings us to the present... 2005. As you can see, my R&D cohorts and I were very busy last year. We added lots of talented people, released some fantastic sets, and laid the groundwork for future successes. I can only hope that this year goes as well. With *Saviors*, *Betrayers*, *Ninth Edition*, and *Ravnica* on the horizon, I suspect it will.

Last Week's Puzzle Answer



PATRON OF THE NEZUMI

This Week's Poll:

What was your favorite Magic release of 2004?

- Darksteel*
- Fifth Dawn*
- Unhinged*
- Champions of Kamigawa*

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

