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# Feeling the Draft

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Making Magic  
Monday, March 14, 2005



Welcome to Draft Week! This week we'll be talking about one of the most fun ways to play **Magic** – drafting! But before I jump into this week's column I wanted to make a quick comment about last week's column. From time to time I'll write a column that evokes a strong emotional response from my readers. Last week's article ("[Topical Blend #1 – To Err Is Human](#)") was one such column. I got an amazing amount of responses, almost all of them positive and quite a number of them very personal. Thank you. Last week's column was obviously a very personal one for me and I'm happy that it evoked the response that it did. I will be doing a Topical Blend #2 but not until later this year.

But enough with my love life, let's talk about drafting. And since I write the **Magic** design column, I guess I should use my column today to ask the age-old question - How do you design cards for draft? Which I guess leads to the question – *Do you design cards for draft? Which leads to – If you do, do different types of drafts require different types of cards? Which ultimately forces the question – What kind of cards lend themselves better to drafts? Which forces a hand-raising by the question – Will the questions ever stop? For the love of trading card games, can't the questions stop?!*

## Avoiding the Draft

It's time to let you in on a little secret. Designers don't tend to design cards specifically for drafts. This isn't because we don't think drafts are important or worthy of design, but rather that the natural process of design tends to create cards that work well for drafts without us having to actually spend a great deal of time focusing on it. With that in mind, for this column I thought that I'd walk you through the elements of all card sets that lend themselves to drafting. For each, I'll explain why we do them, how they impact drafting, and how we occasionally tweak cards to make them a little more draft friendly.

## Themes

Design tends to move from big to small so I figured that would be a logical order to look at how general design lends itself towards drafting. As such, I'm beginning with the theme. Ever since *Invasion* block, **Magic** design has woven a theme into every block. Themes do a number of interesting things for the block. A theme gives a block flavor, an identity, a focus, and a reason to explore niche design areas that might go otherwise unexplored. (I spent another column called "[Lions, Tigers and Bears](#)" talking about why R&D does themes if you'd like to read more on this topic.) Most importantly, (well important for this column anyway) themes aid in making draft more interesting.

Why is that? Because themes shift the environment. Drafting is not about just looking at individual card quality. It is about understanding how the cards interrelate. It's the themes that change this card interaction from year to year. As an example, let's look at how the themes of the last five blocks impacted draft:

**Invasion Block** – *Invasion* was all about color. It had multi-color cards. It had cards that were optimized by playing more than one color. It had a much higher percentage of color fixing cards that made it easier to play additional colors. In short, *Invasion* Block pushed you to play as many colors as you could. This broke a key paradigm in draft – the idea that draft was typically about drafting two-color decks. All of a sudden, three-color, four-color and even five-color decks were realistic options. This had a huge impact on card evaluation. If a card was good enough, players could find a way to play it regardless of its color.



**Odyssey Block** – *Odyssey* was all about the graveyard. Its key mechanics revolved around the graveyard. It took the idea of card advantage and turned it on its ear. All of a sudden, getting cards into your graveyard had value. So much so that playing cards that lose cards from your hand (to get them into the graveyard) was often a benefit. This broke a different drafting paradigm – the idea that cards needed to net you card advantage. Cards that would seem worthless in most drafting environments suddenly became first picks.



**Onslaught Block** – *Onslaught* was about tribal (aka creature races). The block took a seemingly insignificant part of creatures and turned up its importance. All of a sudden, a creature's type, something you often might not even have noticed, would influence you to draft a card. This block broke the paradigm of what elements of a card mattered. In addition, it drove home the power of drafting a [linear](#) theme. When a theme specifically calls out a certain subset of the cards, drafters are encouraged to draft accordingly.



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**Mirrodin Block** – *Mirrodin* was about artifacts. Artifacts are colorless. This changed everything. Normally, color defines a draft. But when half the cards don't have color, the paradigm shifts yet again. *Mirrodin* taught the drafters the importance of understanding archetypes. Sure many of the cards could go into any deck, but *should* they. *Mirrodin* block taught drafters that they had to take factors other than color in mind when defining what fit in their deck.



**Champions of Kamigawa Block** – *Champions of Kamigawa* was about flavor. Japanese flavor if you want to be specific. But from a drafting perspective, *Kamigawa* was more about synergy. When flavor takes center stage, the interconnection between similar things becomes important. The spirit world, for instance, tended to play better with itself. If you started to care about splice, you'd better pay attention to Arcane. And if you care about Arcane, you'd best care about the Arcane triggers. The same triggers that trigger off of spirits. Which work very well with spiritcraft. *Kamigawa* took the entire paradigm of cards having a constant power level and turned it on its side.



As you can see, in each case the theme shifted the draft metagame into a very unique place. Things that never before mattered started to matter. And things that always mattered might not matter so much. Certain archetypes were dashed while others sprung forth anew. The theme keeps drafters on their toes.

## Mechanics

Themes are all about synergy and focus. Mechanics tend to be more about the nuts and bolts of the game. Here are several major areas that R&D always thinks about when creating mechanics:

**Mana Ratios** – It is said that a man's greatest weakness is his greatest strength pushed too far. Such is the case with **Magic** and mana. I have said that when Richard created **Magic** he combined three genius ideas. First was the concept of a trading card game. Second was the idea of a color wheel. And third was the land-based mana system. The genius of the mana system is how it allows the game to slowly build over the course of the game to create rhythm and tempo. The downside is that its variability allows for some frustrating games due to mana screw. R&D understands this, so we always try to build in ways to help players lessen mana screw. Most often this is through mechanics. Here are the most common:

**Allows You To Get To Mana When You Need It** – The poster child of this is cycling (From *Urza's Saga* and *Onslaught* blocks). It lets you search for land when you're desperate and acts as a spell if you're not.

**Gives You Something To Do Cheaply** – A good example of this is morph. All morph cards (from *Onslaught* block) double as colorless Grey Ogres. Often this is enough to help you out until more mana shows up.

**Lets You Do Something With Extra Lands** – A good representative of this is spellshapers (from *Mercadian Masques* block). Because they allow you to essentially turn extra cards into spells, they make it easier for a player to play a higher concentration with land without getting mana flooded.

**Something To Do With Extra Mana** – An example of this would be entwine (from *Mirrodin* block). Another way to allow players to play a higher concentration of land is to give them things they can do with that mana later in the game.

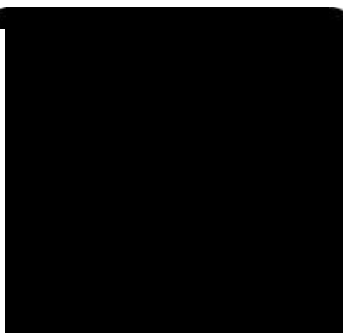


What makes drafting one of the most skill testing formats is that it gives the player a great amount of control over what kind of elements their deck will have. As mana ratio is so crucial to a deck's success, it has a big impact on how good drafters draft. Each of the above examples had a major influence on how the respective drafts worked. Morph creatures, as an example, very much influenced how cards were valued in *Onslaught* because players knew that in a pinch they could pick up creatures from any color. If you're not paying attention to how the mana ratios work in the particular block you're drafting, you not being serious about the draft.

**Speed** – Another important facet that drafters have to clue in on is how fast a particular environment is. Every block's metagame revolves around a certain drop (another word for cards with a certain converted mana cost, IE "two drops", "three drops", etc). That is, the game gets defined by the cards of a certain cost. The biggest influence in how this number gets defined is the mechanics. Here are some things to look at:

**Overcosted or Undercosted** – In general most mechanics do one of two things. Either they give you added bonus for added cost or they give you added bonus for a drawback but at a reduced cost. Kicker (from *Invasion* block) and splice (from *Champions of Kamigawa* block) are good examples of the former while fading (from *Invasion* block) and echo (from *Urza's Saga* block) are good examples of the latter. The former slows the environment down as it raises the average cost of a spell while the latter works in the other direction.

**Towards or Away From Stalemate** – Limited play is all about creatures. This means that for each mechanic you have to figure out whether the mechanic pushes the game



towards a creature stall or away from it. An example of the former is buyback (from *Tempest* block) as it encourages players to prolong the game to get to higher amounts of land. An example of the latter is shadow (also from the *Tempest* block – interesting tension, huh?) as it allows creatures to break through the stalemate and deal damage.

**Synergy or No** – Some mechanics have a built-in synergy that causes their power to grow faster as more of it gets played. Other mechanics without this built-in synergy tend to keep the power level constant. A good example of the former is affinity (from *Mirrodin* block). Affinity cards (especially artifacts) tend to feed upon themselves, making each affinity card more powerful than the one that came before it. An example of the latter is imprint (also from *Mirrodin* block). A second imprint card is seldom helped by the existence of the first one. The former mechanic speeds things up while the latter tends to slow them down.



Understanding the speed of the environment has huge implications in drafting. It lets you know what kind of strategies are most effective. It lets you know what converted mana costs to favor. And most importantly it helps you map out the kind of game you'll be playing.

**Tempo** – A quick caveat before I begin this section, let me stress that I believe the word "tempo" is used by different writers to mean different things in **Magic**. What follows is what I believe "tempo" means, and the way I use it as a designer.

Many players confuse tempo with speed. And while the two are related, they are very different entities. Speed is about, well, speed. It's about how long the game is going to be played. Will the game on average be over on turn four or on turn twelve? Tempo is about the ebb and flow of advantage between the two players, and so it takes more into account than just the length of the game. Tempo cares about what facets of the game are going to determine the winner, and the rhythm of how that struggle evolves over the course of the duel.

This means that speed focuses on things like mana cost and damage while tempo focuses on what factors control of the game will turn on. As an example, let's take a look at a golden oldie, *Ice Age* block. *Ice Age* was a very slow expansion. It didn't have a lot of aggressive creatures or spells. As such, games took a while to resolve. The speed was slow. But for purposes of tempo, the focal point of the game was the limited number of creatures with evasion. Limited games tend to focus on creatures and slow games tend to always lead to a creature stall. This means that slow games tend to focus on creature evasion because it is the most common way to break through creature stalemate. *Ice Age* in particular was extra low on creatures with evasion. This meant that players had to pay special attention to keeping their evasion creatures alive. This, for example, made defensive spells that protected creatures more valuable than normal. And as such, tempo was dictated by players' abilities to stay ahead in the war of evasive creatures. Tempo was set by players' ability to play evasive creatures or remove their opponent's evasive creatures. Thus for *Ice Age*, the speed was slow but the tempo was very fluid as there are numerous cards that affect the removal and protection of creatures.

Players need to understand speed to see what kind of clock they are playing under. They need to understand tempo because it defines what elements are important to winning in that environment. That said, mechanics have a big influence on the tempo of the environment. It plays out in several ways:

**What Element Of The Game Does The Mechanic Care About** – Threshold, for instance, cared about the graveyard. Achieving threshold had such a big effect that it drove the tempo of the games. Players were forced to always consider not just how many cards were in the graveyard but how many cards could potentially be in the graveyard. It was this tension that drove much of the tempo in *Odyssey* block.

**How Cheap Is The Mechanic** – Tempo is very much about measuring threats. The cheaper the mechanics in the set, the faster the threats become and the more fluid the tempo. Slower mechanics create a slower build-up that normally brings a more plotting tempo.

**How Does The Mechanic Interact With Other Mechanics** – With the advent of the theme, block mechanics have become more synergistic. Understanding this synergy is key to measuring tempo. Just as synergy builds up speed, it also causes the tempo to shift more easily.

To win a game, you have to understand what the pieces are that really matter. Focus on those pieces and you increase your chance of winning.



## Individual Cards

Finally, we get to the cards themselves. There are a number of cards whose power increases specifically in a draft environment. Let's take a look:

**Self Referential** – These are cards that get stronger the more of them you have. A good example of this would be *Tempest's* *Kindle* or *Accumulated Knowledge* from *Nemesis*. The power level of both cards just keeps going up the more copies you draft. In general, these cards are strongest for draft when they show up in the first set in a block. The reason for this is simple. Early in the block's existence, players draft from three packs of the first set. This greatly increases the chances of seeing the card. This doesn't mean that these cards can't show up later, but when they do they have to be common to ever matter consistently and even then, they'll never match the punch of showing up in the first set.

**Cross Referential** – This refers to a card that refers to another specific card or cards. A good example of this would be *Urza's Power Plant*, *Urza's Mine* and *Urza's Tower* (aka "the Urzatron"). This is like the first group except for the fact that the cards draw their strength from interconnecting with another card or cards. Like the first category, these types of cards prefer to be in the first set.

**Referential To A Group** – These are like the first two groupings except the cards are affected by a larger group of cards. A good example of this is the slivers from *Tempest* block. To draft slivers, you didn't need to get too many of any one sliver but rather a large collection of a number of slivers. Unlike the first two groups, these cards fare a little better in second and third sets as they are a larger pool of them to draft from. These first three groups are the ones R&D most often looks at when we feel a need to tweak cards for the sake of draft. The reason for this is that the cards have the largest power swing as they grow significantly stronger in number. The most common trick R&D will use if it wants to goose draft a little is to lower the commonality of these cards. In *Tempest*, for example, we very consciously made common slivers and we knew it would play out interestingly in drafts.

**Theme Specific** – These are cards that play into a set's particular theme. A good example would be a card that cares about artifacts in *Mirrodin* block. *Shatter*, for instance, has a much higher draft value in *Mirrodin* than it would in just about any other block.

**Theme Powered** – This is similar to the last category except that its power level is related to how many cards of a theme you draft. An example of this would be any card with affinity from artifacts (from *Mirrodin* block). The more artifacts you draft, the stronger the card becomes.

**Theme Enabling** – These are cards that allow you to more easily play the theme cards in question. A good example of this would be land fixing in *Invasion* block. Drafting these cards unto themselves does nothing for you, but it changes the draft value of other cards because it makes it easier to play them.

**Archetypal** – This last category is the hardest to spot but pays off with the highest dividends. Card power varies greatly depending upon what other cards exist to interact with it. The key to successful drafting is understanding card value to your specific deck. These cards are ones that shine specifically in your deck based on how it comes together as a whole. The best of these type are ones that shine only in your deck meaning that you will have access to them deep into the draft.

This is why the designers don't have to work so hard creating cards for drafts. So many cards become very relevant in drafts because of the nature of drafts themselves. Cards that care about number or combination or theme or archetype all play into draft's strengths. The ability to recognize the value of these cards is what separates the good drafters from the mediocre ones.

## White Water Drafting

**Magic** is a very complex game. Drafting **Magic** takes that complexity to a whole new level. Trying to figure out on the fly what your doing and how your deck is evolving not just against the environment itself but against the other players you're drafting against is a daunting task. But a rewarding one. Hopefully, if you've never drafted, today's column will entice you to give it a try. And if you already draft perhaps this column will give you yet a few more things to think about next time you're drafting. Either way, I hope this column has been one of illumination. I know it had me thinking more about the concepts I touched upon as I wrote it.

Join me next week when I tackle a topic from the A-List (but without any nutty B-List mixed in). And yes, you need not fear that all the good topics are going to disappear into the vapor.

Until then, draft.

Mark Rosewater

## Welcome Matt, Bonus Feature

In a column I wrote during the *Betrayers of Kamigawa* previews ("[Ninja and Pirates and Myrs... Oh My!](#)") I introduced the **Magic** Creative Team and had the following to say about Matt Cavotta:

### Matt Cavotta

Matt is our newest hire. And yes, he is [the Magic artist](#) of the same name if you're curious. He is



taking over the name and flavor text responsibilities from Brandon. Matt got the job after winning out from almost six hundred applicants (the current record holder for a Wizards job application). Matt's creative exercise (something asked for from the majority of the applicants) was done up as a [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) drafting article where all the cards in question were about his life. Matt has only been with Wizards for several months but he's fit in wonderfully. And with his mix of strong verbal and visual skills, I have great expectations.



This led to a number of readers writing in asking to see Matt's Creative Exercise. And well, as it's Draft Week and I always like to add little extras to my column when I can, I thought it would be cool to show you what Matt did. (Don't worry, I got Matt's okay.)

Before I show it to you, here's what I asked for. I told each of the applicants that they had one side of an 8 1/2 x 11 piece of paper to demonstrate why they wanted and were a good candidate for the **Magic** Creative Writing position. I told them that I was looking for creativity (and really how else can you tell someone is creative other by having them demonstrate their creativity?). But not just random creativity. They had to show that they could be creative within the confines of the task set to them. For this exercise, I needed to see why I should hire them (a lot of the candidates sent me very creative exercises that did nothing to explain to me why they were the right person for the job).

Anyway, Matt blew me away with his creative exercise. But why talk about it when I can just show it to you? So without any further ado, [Matt Cavotta's creative exercise](#).

Pretty cool huh?



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