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Epic Struggles

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Making Magic
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Welcome to the first week of *Saviors of Kamigawa* Previews! I knew I had a cool card to preview today, so I wracked my brain for the best way to introduce it. I finally concluded that the card did a better job of introducing itself than I ever could. I even contemplated stopping there. You know, have the entire article just be the card itself. But then I remembered that I get myself in trouble when I go too high concept, so I decided to take some time today explaining a bit about the *Saviors of Kamigawa* design team, the creation of the epic mechanic and even a little bit about the challenges of designing the third set in a block. (And for all you high school kids out there taking English, see, thesis paragraphs actually have real world applications.)

The Saviors of Saviors

A few years back I decided that as the design columnist it was my duty to introduce each of the design teams. And I don't plan to stop now, so here's the design team for *Saviors of Kamigawa*:

Brian Tinsman

When I first started writing this column, I kept hyping Brian as the "up-and-comer". Then the mantle was passed on to Aaron Forsythe. And today, I'm going to pass the baton to another *Saviors* team member. But back to Brian. Brian is no longer the fresh, young designer. And don't worry, he's not a stale, old designer yet. He's what we call in the biz a veteran. This is Brian's fourth time leading a design team (previously he led *Judgment*, *Scourge*, and *Champions of Kamigawa*). Brian has become a little bit of a third set specialist. For those that didn't read my preview of sets to come last week ("[Today and Tomorrow](#)"), I'll mention that Brian is currently leading the design of the 2006 fall expansion codenamed *Snap* (followed by *Crackle* and *Pop*). But enough about *Snap* until it gets its own preview week.



As a designer, Brian is known for his love of top down design and "out of the box" ideas. As today's preview card hopefully demonstrates, you'll be seeing some of this in *Saviors*. Brian also likes creating the third set such that they build on the existing themes while also tapping into an entire new theme that has synergy with the old themes. (More on that theme in next week's column.) Brian's also a bit of a rebel and so if you study *Saviors* closely you'll notice a bit of convention breaking. (Especially in the cycles.)

What I'm really trying to get at is that Brian has reached all that potential that I kept claiming he had. He definitely puts his stamp on any project he involves himself on. And *Saviors* is no exception. But Brian didn't accomplish this task all by himself. *Saviors* had a design team that, while mostly new blood, really came together to shake things up.

Brian Schneider

I assume most of my readers know that I'm in charge of **Magic** design (you know, since I remind you every week), but lesser known is the man in charge of **Magic** development. That man is Brian Schneider. So what is he doing on a design team? One, it's good to have developers on design teams to let them understand the design process. And two, the man can design. The most interesting thing about Brian's design is that he doesn't design the kind of cards you'd expect from him if you knew him. In person, Brian is very shy and reserved. But in design, he comes up with some offbeat stuff.



Brian previously worked on the design of *Darksteel*. And with one design team under his belt, Brian was tied as the second most senior man on the team.

Brandon Bozzi

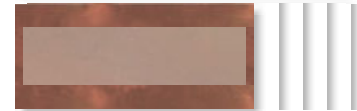
He was tied with Brandon. I give Brian the edge as Brandon's one other design had been *Unhinged*, a very untraditional design project. While Brian came from development, Brandon was from the Creative Team. For the last several years, Brandon has been responsible for names and flavor text (that responsibility was passed during *Ravnica* to Matt Cavotta). As such, Brandon approached the design with a very different viewpoint.



In addition, Brandon's strength as a designer seems to be pulling interesting groups of people together to do group design. During *Unhinged*, it was Brandon that collected himself, Schneider and Tyler Bielman together to run the brainstorming session that led to the ass theme. Brandon is an interesting designer in that he helps pull potential out of other designers.

Devin Low

Devin was the rookie of the bunch. While dipping his toe into development, *Saviors* was his first foray into **Magic** design. Remember the "up-and-coming" baton I mentioned above? Devin is the recipient. Devin is still finding



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himself as a designer (he later worked on *Guildpact* and is currently on *Snap*), but I am always excited to see what kind of stuff he can come up with.



While this team was short on experience, it more than made up for it with spunk. ("This team has moxie, kid. Moxie.") They tackled the design like a team that had been working together for years. In fact, this team is responsible for one of the major mechanics for *Snap*. They stumbled upon it during the design for *Saviors* and realized they had something bigger than a third set mechanic.

Besides designing mechanics for other sets, they also did a bang up job of designing mechanics for *Saviors*. One of which is the epic mechanic. (Can you tell I took Segues 101?)

An Epic Story



Now that I've gotten the design team out of the way, let's get to the meat and potatoes of this column – the epic mechanic. For starters, I can tell you that the epic mechanic is a single rare cycle (meaning there are five of them, one in each color). Each one works the same. Once you play the spell, it will repeat itself at the start of your upkeep every turn. The drawback? It's the last spell you'll ever play in the game. Because once you play it you are no longer allowed to play every spell. Don't worry though, the epic spells were designed to have a lot of game. As *Enduring Ideal* demonstrates, the gameplay isn't over once the spell is played. In many ways, the game is just beginning.

So where did the epic spells come from? The answer is not what you might expect. Where did epic spells come from?

Legends. Or rather I guess I should say legendary creatures. You see, for those of you that don't bother to look at your rares, the *Kamigawa* block has a little legendary theme. (Oh, that's why all the rare creatures are legendary.) And while we started with creatures, other card types jumped into the fray. Legendary artifacts and lands started appearing. Even legendary enchantments made their premiere. All this made the *Saviors* design team ask an important question: where are the legendary instants and sorceries?

Brian Tinsman seemed compelled to crack the riddle of the legendary spells. The problems though were plentiful. Legendary permanents made sense. What does it mean for an instant or sorcery to be legendary? At first they explored the idea that only one could be on the stack at any one time. The idea turned out to be just as lame as it sounds. Next, they tried making the spells only playable once per game. The first incarnation could only be played if no copies of the card were in any graveyard. Second, they tried having the card remove all copies of itself from the library when played. Nothing was working.

The problem the team realized was that legendary meant two different things. Mechanically it was an object that couldn't exist in any number greater than one. But creatively, it represented a person, item or place of great historical context. The first definition seemed out of reach, but the team still thought there was hope for the second. So they scrapped the idea of the legendary label and instead decided to create a series of spells that felt like they were legendary in spirit.

What does it mean for an instant or sorcery to be legendary?

It was this idea that led them down the path to spells that stopped all other spells. A spell so mighty that it would always be the last spell you played. But a spell had to be pretty powerful to have this kind of handicap. They experimented with effects but realized that the spells needed something more. This led to the idea that the spells would keep going off every turn. The player would be giving up playing all other spells to get a guaranteed (and free) spell every turn. The team liked it. It felt special and was definitely venturing into virgin design territory. Only one problem remained. What would these spells do?

This is not as easy as it might seem at first glance. Here are a number of things the spells had to do:

- the spell had to have an interesting effect; something this grandiose couldn't just do some bland effect that gets done every set
- the spell had to have play value; that is, it needed to do something that created interesting game situations turn after turn
- the spell had to allow the caster to win without guaranteeing victory; this is a very gentle balance; the team had to make effects that would lead to winning but not instantly win
- the spell had to be worth its cost; not being able to play spells is a huge drawback; the spell's effects had to measure up
- the spell had to allow the player ways to interact with it; just because you're done playing spells doesn't mean there's nothing left to do; there's activated abilities, creatures that can attack and possibly even new keywords that get around the restriction

Yes, the epic spells were an epic challenge. Interestingly enough, *Enduring Ideal* was one of the first effects the team came up with. You'll have to wait for *Saviors* to see the other four.

Once, Twice, Three Times a Set

There's not too much more to say about the epic mechanic, so I thought I'd take a little detour to talk about one of the biggest challenges of *Saviors of Kamigawa*, what I'll call the "third set identity crisis". For those of you out there that have done any reading on childcare (which I'm guessing is a minority), you've probably run across the birth order effect. The idea behind it is that birth order has a huge impact on a child's development. Being the first

child, for example, is a very different experience than being the baby or being a middle child. Why do I bring this up? (Not to talk about childcare, I promise. Hmm, great design mistakes as seen through parenting snafus? Nah.) Because I think set order has a lot to do with expansion identity.

The first set is always shiny and new. It introduces the theme(s) for the year as well as the block mechanics. The second set gets to expand upon the work of the first set makes all the obvious twists (and some of the less obvious ones) on the mechanics. But the third set has a bit of an identity crisis. It can't just expand on the themes. The second set did that. But it's still part of the block so it has a certain responsibility to keep the feel of the first two sets. In the end, the set has to always find a new twist to add into the block that feels like an extension of the earlier themes but still feels new. This was the challenge of the *Saviors* design team.



How did they solve it? What theme did they choose? That sounds like a wonderful topic for next week when I introduce another cool *Saviors* card and dig a little deeper into what you can expect *Saviors* to add to the *Kamigawa* experience.

But Wait

I can't end today's column without addressing a few loose ends from last week's column. First, I asked all of you to select the codenames for the 2008-2009 block. Here's how you voted:

Pick one:		
Rock / Paper / Scissors	2686	22.6%
Lock / Stock / Barrel	1604	13.5%
Beg / Borrow / Steal	1441	12.1%
Friends / Romans / Countrymen	1384	11.6%
Hook / Line / Sinker	1299	10.9%
Alvin / Simon / Theodore	932	7.8%
Lights / Camera / Action	841	7.1%
Breakfast/Lunch/Dinner	673	5.7%
Shake / Rattle / Roll	615	5.2%
Animal / Vegetable / Mineral	421	3.5%
Total	11896	100.0%

As you can see Rock / Paper / Scissors won by a healthy margin. (And Animal /Vegetable /Mineral was in need of some loving.) This means the 2008-2009 block is the Rock, Paper, Scissors Block or the Rock Block for short.

The interesting thing was that along with the votes, I got e-mailed (and addressed on bulletin boards) with hundreds of other triplets. One of which (suggested by numerous people) was so cool, so geeky, that R&D couldn't believe we didn't think to include it on the list. And thus, we've decided to just use it as the name for the 2009-2010 block. So without any further ado, I present the 2009-2010 Block Codenames – Live / Long / Prosper.

This means if someone tomorrow asks you what the codename is for the Spring expansion of 2010, you can answer it. Scary, huh?

Finally, I asked a second question to see how old I really am. Marshall / Will / Holly is a reference to a television show from my youth entitled "Land of the Lost". Here's how many of you knew that (or at least thought you knew):

Do you know what Marshall / Will / Holly is referring to?		
No	5993	84.6%
Yes	1091	15.4%
Total	7084	100.0%

It's interesting that a number of people who claimed to know the reference didn't actually get it from knowing the show but rather knew other pop culture references that made allusion to it. The two most popular being *The Family Guy* (Peter sings the theme song in one episode) and the movie *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (Will Ferrell plays a character, an actual marshal no less, named Marshal Willenholly). If you don't know the reference don't feel bad. Only two other people in all of R&D knew it. This is how you face your own mortality. Watching as less and less people around you get your pop references. ("Breakfast, Launch, I said LUNCH, NOT LAUNCH!!")

And thus ends my weekly column. Join me next week for Maro on Maro (Hey isn't that every week – in comedy we don't call it "repeating a joke", it's called a "running gag".)

Until then, may you know the joy of being unable to play spells.

Mark Rosewater

Mark Rosewater is Head Magic Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of Magic design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving Magic, he likes to

spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.



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