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Friday, June 03, 2005

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**F**irst, I'd say no news is good news. If you haven't read this quarter's Banned and Restricted announcement, you're not missing much.

We didn't ban, restrict, or unrestrict a single card this time around. Pro Tour—Philadelphia had lots of people on the edges of their seats (including a few here in R&D) regarding the power level of Umezawa's Jitte, but the data is in and it is very beatable (although the fact that it was as worrisome as it has been duly noted; I don't think we'll be making Equipment quite so game-changing and cheap any time in the near future). Standard is fleshing out nicely after the last set of bannings; there are actually *multiple* top decks, there is still room to innovate, and *Saviors* should add just enough goodies to make Regionals really interesting. Extended is about to rotate, which may or may not create a new set of problems—we're taking a wait-and-see approach to that format. Legacy hasn't shown any serious problems, and Vintage has opened up briefly following the neutering of Trinisphere decks.

What we did end up changing this time around, however, was a handful of *Magic Online* Vanguard avatars. Events using that format were unbalanced heavily in favor of Elvish Champion. To compensate, we made it (and another) worse, and a few better. At the end of this column, Vanguard guru Paul Sottosanti will go over the changes in detail.

## On to Fire Week...

We writers were given a sort of blank slate with regards to Fire Week—all we knew was the title and that we were free to come up with whatever we wanted as long as it felt like it fit the theme. Some topics I tossed around:

- An in-depth look at some of the people that have been fired from Wizards of the Coast (and why).
- Fire and the color white: What's the deal with Rapid Fire, Fire and Brimstone, Cease-Fire, Myojin of Cleansing Fire, Honden of Cleansing Fire, and Angelfire Crusader?
- *Remember the Alaborn*: Gunplay and *Portal Second Age*.



Sanity prevailed, however, and I decided that at some point people would want to hear about direct damage. Had Rosewater not had the day off on Monday, I could probably point you to a 5,000 word manifesto on the tricks and traps of designing such cards, but instead you'll have to deal with me and my sterile explanations.

## The Big D

*Rule number 1: No X at common.*

In Alpha, both Fireball and its less-heralded brother Disintegrate were common. This was not a bad decision for the time, as it quickly introduced the concept and power of X-spells to the entire audience. But as the game evolved, it became clear that having cards like those in the common slots was a mistake.

The obvious reason is for limited play. If any of you had the awesome experience of playing *Fourth Edition* limited, you'll remember that many of the games went like this:

- Set up defenses with multiple copies of Carnivorous Plant, Wall of Ice, Wall of Swords, Wall of Bone, etc.
- Deal approximately 8 damage to your opponent with Shanodin Dryads, Lost Soul, Pestilence, and/or Rod of Ruin.
- Deal the remaining 12 with Fireball or Disintegrate.

Granted, that is the worst-case scenario for displaying how gamebreaking X-spells can be in limited. But the truth remains—no one likes it when a majority of the games end with someone getting “Torched out.” It’s so anticlimactic... the games were usually interesting up until that point, and suddenly they’re over. Even worse is when you’re at 15 and your opponent goes, “Land, Fireball you for 7.” You know what’s coming.

The most recent and egregious offender in my mind is *Tempest’s* Rolling Thunder. It killed your opponent in half the games, and killed all of his creatures in the other half. I qualified for my first Pro Tour on the back of that card, which should tell you how good it is. It was the ultimate in unfair swinginess.



Since then, all of our red X-spells that could hit players have been at least uncommon. It’s nice to have that feeling of setting up the game-ending burn spell once in a while, but it has no place at common.

The second (and more minor) reason is that we’ve tried to cut back on X-spells at common in general. We don’t do them at common at all in the Core Set any more (even Enrage and Stream of Life are uncommon now), and even though we haven’t really cut back on them at common in expansions (Condescend, Stir the Grave, and Consume Spirit are a few examples of recent common X), there are people here that believe we should avoid them where possible because they are potentially confusing to newer players. I wouldn’t worry much on that point, though—I have yet to see a card moved up from common in development for this reason.

*Rule number 2: Watch redundancy.*



While it’s nice to have simple, powerful cards always available in the Core Set, their existence does put a strain on design in expert-level sets. For example, it would be nice to have a four-mana white Wrath of God variant available in Block Constructed sometimes, but the existence of Wrath in the Core Set limits our ability to do so. Unless we put the actual card Wrath of God into an expansion, we risk putting too many good Wrath-effects into Standard. So instead, we make the newer Wraths cost more (usually around six mana), or put them into colors other than white (such as

Starstorm or Mutilate).

Direct damage spells have the same issues. It would be nice to put a solid two-mana three-damage burn spell into an expansion set, but it would combine with Volcanic Hammer in Standard to quite possibly put “burn” at an unhealthy level. As a result, there hasn’t been another three-for-two burn spell printed aside from Chain of Plasma (which has enough drawbacks not to count), and Incinerate years ago.

Shock puts similar pressure on design of two-damage-for-one-mana burn spells, although we’re more willing to make redundant “Shocks” such as Seal of Fire, Assault/Battery, and Firebolt, as having

access to eight Shocks isn't as powerful as eight Hammers. Even so, there have been several blocks (including *Kamigawa*) where there is no true Shock variant.

Instead, what we can do is make loads of two-damage-for-two-mana spells (like *Glacial Ray*, *Magma Jet*, *Scorching Lava*, *Flame Burst*, *Guerrilla Tactics*, and *Parch*), and three-damage-for-three-mana spells (like *Yamabushi's Flame*, *Carbonize*, *Barbed Lightning*, and *Urza's Rage*). It's not to say these cards won't show up in Constructed—in fact, many of them have—it's just that they don't lend much to the strategy of straight burn.

So if Shock or Volcanic Hammer one day disappears from the Core Set (or any other staple card for that matter), don't assume we are doing it just to weaken a color or strategy. Chances are we just want to reallocate that power elsewhere, like to a new card in an expert-level expansion.

## Individual Card Notes

To close, here are a few development notes on individual direct damage cards in Standard:

**Magma Jet** —I did an entire column on this card here.

**Pulse of the Forge** —I did an entire column on the *Darksteel* Pulses here. In retrospect, R&D has ended up not liking the way *Pulse of the Forge* and *Pulse of the Fields* encourage players to mana burn themselves, as it is a cheap and cheesy way to win. Don't expect too many more cards that encourage mana burn from us in the future.

**Fireball** —When it was decided that this card was coming back in *Darksteel*, the templating team went into a tizzy. *Fireball* is one of the most difficult to understand cards of all time... but the name and image of the card are so iconic that we wanted to give it another try. The card was reprinted in the *Beatdown* boxed set with a mana cost of  $X Y$  and the rules text of “*Fireball* deals X damage divided evenly, rounded down, among Y plus one target creatures and/or players.” No one wanted to see “Y” in the mana cost of a card in a “real” Magic set, so everyone set out to find the “perfect” wording for *Fireball*. There was an entire white board full of suggestions at one point, and the eventual winner was “*Fireball* deals X damage divided evenly, rounded down, among any number of target creatures and/or players. As an additional cost to play *Fireball*, pay {1} for each target beyond the first.”



**Hanabi Blast** —Called “Bungee Shock” in playtesting, this card bounced around from design file to design file before finally finding a home in *Champions of Kamigawa*. The card's designer? Richard Garfield.

**Ire of Kaminari** —We underestimated the potential power of this card initially; it cost only  $2$  during the initial stages of development! Both Brian Schneider and Alan Comer made deadly decks that abused the card, though, and its cost was raised to the more reasonable (but still effective)  $3$ .

**Beacon of Destruction** —Swimming With Sharks columnist Mike Flores has recently designed a burn deck that runs multiple copies of this card, and I'm happy to see it showing up in Constructed. My initial design of the card was this:

```
Eternal Combustion
4RR
Sorcery
CARDNAME deals 5 damage to each of up to two target creatures and/or players.
Then shuffle CARDNAME into your library.
```

That was a little too wordy for development's tastes however, so at the end of *Fifth Dawn* design we changed it to what it is now—five mana for five damage. Development fretted over the card, feeling it lacked the splash of the other four Beacons. Several replacements were auditioned, including:

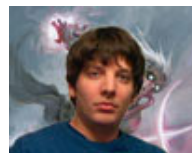
- Beacon of Wheel of Fortune
- Beacon of Inferno
- Form of the Phoenix—Target creature gets +3/+3 and gains flying until end of turn. Sacrifice that creature at end of turn. If you do, the creature deals 4 damage to each creature without flying. Shuffle [CARDNAME] into its owner's library.

Those all had their own sets of problems, and in the end, the team resigned themselves to use the simple direct damage spell. I always liked that version, personally, as every player—no matter how new or jaded—can appreciate a great burn card.

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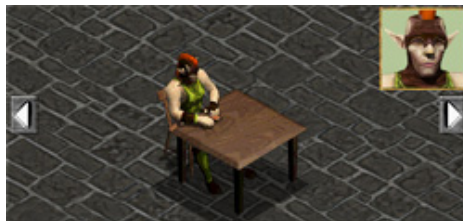
## Paul's Vanguard Corner

From the beginning of the Vanguard process, we knew that we needed to have the ability to tweak the hand sizes and life totals of the avatars. There simply wasn't enough time to thoroughly test the format, because as fun as Vanguard is, it isn't as high of a priority as, say, *Guildpact*. That said, it's not our goal to endlessly tinker with the format; we just want to get it to a place where there are a number of diverse strategies that are viable. To that end we've decreased the power of two of the avatars and increased the power of three others. (If you're not familiar with the Vanguard abilities on *Magic Online*, the Vanguard FAQ has a complete explanation of what we're talking about, as well a chart showing all the avatars available and what abilities they grant.)



### Elvish Champion – 7 cards, 15 life (from 8, 21)

During playtesting, we thought that the early game power of the Elvish Champion would be offset by the long term power of the other avatars. Unfortunately, the Vanguard format turned out to be fast enough that this wasn't the case, and Elvish Champion ended up dominating many tournaments. The new stats should bring it into line with the other avatars and give aggressive decks a place in the format.



### Seshiro the Anointed – 7 cards, 19 life (from 7, 25)

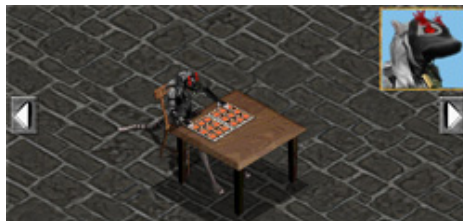
There are a number of combo decks involving Seshiro that can kill quickly and consistently. With Elvish Champion's reign coming to an end, there was a risk that Seshiro would simply rise up and take its place. A lower life total will make games more interesting by giving these decks less time to assemble their pieces.

### Goblin Warchief – 7 cards, 22 life (from 7, 17)

Goblin Warchief suffered from the dilemma of a low life total combined with an ability that makes you want to neglect defense and simply attack. The extra staying power should make it better able to compete.

### Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni – 6 cards, 17 life (from 6, 13)

Ink-Eyes, despite being a foil to all of the combo decks, hasn't been seeing any play due to its rather low stats. The change will give it a couple more activations of the secondary ability and should breathe some life into the avatar.



### Arcbound Overseer – 7 cards, 23 life (from 6, 23)

This is an interesting avatar that hasn't seen much play due to the low hand size. An extra card should allow it to compete on more even footing.

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## Last Week's Poll:

Which of the <i>Kamigawa</i> block prerelease tournaments did you attend?		
None	5517	39.9%
All three	3148	22.7%
<i>Saviors</i> only	1225	8.8%
<i>Champions</i> only	1003	7.2%
<i>Champions</i> and <i>Betrayers</i>	932	6.7%
<i>Betrayers</i> and <i>Saviors</i>	786	5.7%
<i>Champions</i> and <i>Saviors</i>	704	5.1%
<i>Betrayers</i> only	528	3.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>13843</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

## This Week's Poll:

**Have you ever had cards stolen?**

Yes

No

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