

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Equipment To Be

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
 Monday, August 22, 2005



Welcome to Equipment Week! This week we'll be exploring the oh-so-popular (and occasionally oh-so-broken) artifact subtype that's been sweeping the globe since *Mirrodin's* debut. And as "Making **Magic**" is the design column, it seems only natural that I write an article about the design of equipment. I was the lead designer of *Mirrodin* after all. This should be easy.

What? [I already did it?](#) Man, is Scott reading my old columns to find theme week topics? What's next time, [Girls and Magic Design Mistakes Week](#)? Perhaps [Diary of a Common Artifact Week](#)? How about [Correspondence With a Zombie Week](#)? Come to think of it, I don't think we've done a [Fifty Fifty Word Links of A Fifty Word Article Week](#) yet. You know what, bring it on Scott! Bring it on!

In fact, I'm not backing down from this. You know what this week is? [Show Scott I'm Not Intimidated Week!](#) He wants to have Equipment Week once a month; I can handle that. I can mix up **Magic** design and equipment ten times from Sunday. Or more adequately ten times from Monday. You know what, that's exactly what today's column is going to be. Ten different takes on **Magic** design and equipment. It will be a hint at all the columns that could come from talking about the intersection of **Magic** design and equipment. And I'm only stopping at ten because, well, ten's a nice round number.

Scott, this is for you.

Ready? Here we go.

Topic #1 – The Quest to Make a Better Creature Enchantment

In the beginning there was **Holy Armor**. Okay, and **Unholy Armor** (which may or may not have had a five pointed upside down star in it). By the way, have you ever looked at the guy on **Unholy Strength**? What is he doing? Waking up from a nap? You didn't notice it in Alpha because the pentagram drew you're eye, but once that was "accidentally" left off the art,

there was nothing else to look at.

In fact, one of my favorite *Unglued II* cards was called **White Out** (which turned out to be a problem as there's already a card called **Whiteout** in *Ice Age* – the set got put on hiatus before I solved the issue but I was thinking about calling it **Correctional Fluid**) and made fun of this very fact. And, you know, the whole "lose the pentagram" thing.

Sorry, tangent spam. Anyway, in the beginning there was the creature enchantment and it was good. Okay, maybe not good. Bad actually. Horrible really. Perhaps horrible is a bit much. But they were bad (okay, not **Control Magic**). The major problem with creature enchantments is, well, that they have to enchant creatures. This makes them very vulnerable to the "two for one" problem. When you enchant a creature, you allow your opponent to use his creature destruction to get rid of two of your cards (or more if you can't resist the urge to keep enchanting the same creature).

But here's the kooky part. As bad as creature enchantments are strategically, many players seemed to love them. For example, I used to do what is called "deck doctor" at conventions where I would look at random people's decks and tell them how they could improve them. One of my tips: you want to have more creatures than creature enchantments. This tip came from the fact that a lot of novice players cannot resist the allure of building the better creature. That is, putting out a creature and repeatedly enchanting it until it turns into something awesome.

So R&D had this little dilemma. Creature enchantments were popular but sucked. What was a research and development team to do? Why "fix" it, of course. If the world can build a better mousetrap, why couldn't R&D build a better creature enchantment? And thus began R&D's long obsession with improving the creature enchantment. Some noble attempts:

- Make the effect big enough to be worth getting "two for one"d ([Serra's Embrace](#))
- Make the enchantment a cantrip ([Krovikan Fetish](#))
- Make the enchantment playable at instant speed ([Tiger Claws](#))
- Make the enchantment come back ([Rancor](#))




PRODUCTS

Dissension	Guildpact
All Magic products	



RULES

Core Game
 Basic Rulebook
 Comprehensive Rules
 All Magic Rules

MESSAGE BOARDS

 All Magic message boards
 magicthegathering.com
 forum
 Rules Q&A forum
Magic Online announcements

MAGIC ONLINE

	
Download Now!	Check server status
Magic Online Academy	Magic Online FAQ

NOVELS

Dissension
 Ravnica Cycle, Book III
 by Cory Herndon
 More fiction at [Inside Wizards](#)



Have the enchantment... oh wait, that's in *Ravnica*, never mind
 Allow the enchantment to return to hand (Shackles)
 Make the enchanted creature untargetable (Spectral Cloak)
 Make both the enchantment and the enchanted creature untargetable (Diplomatic Immunity)



When the idea of equipment came up in *Mirrodin* design, the real question wasn't should we do them but rather how can we make equipment circumvent the creature enchantment "two for one" issue. And the answer turned out to be rather simple. Don't let the "two for one" happen. Why does an equipment have to be destroyed just because the creature using it is? When an equipped creature is destroyed, the equipment isn't destroyed. It falls to the ground. I've seen enough movies to know that that's how it happens. (How else could the protagonist pick it up to use it later?) Yes, the defining moment of equipment's design was "avoid the two for one".

Topic #2 – How are Equipment and Local Enchantments Different?

A lot of people see equipment as colorless creature enchantments. While there is a similarity and one was inspired by the other, the two do have some distinct differences:

Local Enchantment	Equipment
Requires colored mana	Can use colorless mana
Can enchant any type of permanent	Just enchants creatures
Can enchant opponent's stuff	Can only enchant your own stuff
Doesn't use tap as a cost for abilities	Uses tap as a cost for abilities
Vulnerable to enchantment destruction	Vulnerable to artifact destruction
Can only be used on one creature	Can be used on multiple creatures
Creative represents items composed of magical energy	Creative represents items composed of natural elements
Never had a card of its subtype banned	On first name basis with the DCI

So yes the two have a lot in common, but they are in no way [twins](#).

Topic #3 – How Many Equipment Cards Are Inspired By Real Objects?

One of the common questions I get about equipment is how are they designed. Because so many of them are based on actual items, players have wondered which comes first, the chicken or the egg. The answer is... um, which one is the flavor? Chicken has more flavor, I guess, but when people want to put down how bland a meat is they tend to say "tastes like chicken". Anyway, for equipment flavor leads mechanics way more than mechanics leads flavor.



Equipment is one of the most popular card types for [top down design](#). In fact, when we first started creating equipment in *Mirrodin* design we began by figuring out what equipment we wanted to have. Only then did we find ways to sync the mechanics up. *Viridian Longbow*, for instance, started as a card simply known as Crossbow. The team had played enough [D&D](#) to know the value of a crossbow. We knew from the start that the card would have to allow the equipped creature to deal damage most likely with a tap activation. From that jumping off point the rest of the card came easily.

This means that the vast majority of our equipment is made with some real world equivalent in mind. Especially in *Kamigawa* block where the Creative Team was very particular about staying true to the Japanese flavor. But what about iconic items from myth and legend? Have they ever been the inspiration for a card? Why yes they have. More often than you might think. But usually once we put our **Magic** spin on the idea it's harder for those not involved in the process to tell where the idea started. Now if only they'd let me print my Ultimate Nullifier (comic book reference for those of you that might not know of the item that defeated Galactus). I'm serious by the way. And no, we wouldn't call it Ultimate Nullifier. (By the way, the cool part of this design is that anyone familiar with the object can come up with its design. Which would be cool, right?)

Topic #4 – The "Voltron Effect"



In the first topic I explained the phenomenon that surrounds the popularity of creature enchantments. Players just seem to enjoy building their own monster out of random parts (hmm, perhaps this should have been called the “Frankenstein Effect”). As is the case with R&D, we cannot observe something without the overwhelming urge to name it. During *Mirrodin* design as we realized that equipment was going to allow us to create an environment where this kind of behavior was not only acceptable but much of the time strategically sound. We dubbed the phenomenon the “Voltron Effect”.

“Voltron” is a Japanese import cartoon about a giant robot that can break apart into five lion shaped pieces. Which are then piloted by our heroes. (Hey, I don’t write this stuff.) Putting the various equipment pieces onto the creature was kind of like the building of Voltron that happens at least once every episode when the five lions come

together to make the title character.

The interesting thing about this is that in *Mirrodin* limited we succeeded in making experienced Spikes act like novice Timmys. And you know what, it was fun because Timmies understand how to have a good time. The important lesson of this exercise is how important it is to make the players do something that is at its core already fun.

Topic #5 – Is Equipment Magic or Mundane?

Are all **Magic** cards magical? Does the mundane (aka non-magical) get to show up on cards? Can a sword just be a sword or must it be a magical sword? The answer is that the mundane is allowed in the game but is kept to a minimum. After all, isn’t a magical sword just cooler than a sword?

This is where artifacts come into play. You see, colored cards are defined by the mana used to play them and as such are intertwined with magical energy. That leaves only two cards types capable of representing the mundane: artifacts and land, the latter not being too much help as lands are restricted to representing places.

The key to doing cards that represent mundane objects is to skew them towards common. At common a non-magical sword seems cool enough. At rare, not so much. The rare artifacts feel like they want to be unique and special. Non-magical items just don’t seem as special. In a world where magic is prevalent, that is. There are exceptions to this rule, but in general the less unique something is the less it wants to be rare and magical.

Topic #6 – How Do You Figure Out Equip Costs?

The short answer is we don’t, that’s development’s job. But from a design standpoint, the two knobs allow design to create a number of different cards. Let’s examine the different choices:

Low cost, low equip – These are cards with simple and small utility effects. Not overly powerful but useful in many different scenarios.

Low cost, high equip – These are cards with a strong effect that we want to ensure will show up mid-game. In addition, focusing the cost in the activation ensures that the card will move around less. These cards are more likely to be committed to a single creature.

High cost, low equip – These cards have a potent effect that R&D doesn’t want to see enter the early game, but does want to see get used on a multitude of creatures.

High cost, High equip – These are the big guns. These cards are going to dominate the game. Thus the costing both keeps them out of the early game and pushes them away from being used on too many different creatures.

Note that this general overview is how design looks at these kinds of costing issues. The actual number isn’t as relevant as an understanding of how the two numbers interact. Design doesn’t set exact numbers (well, we do put numbers on the cards but we know they are merely starting numbers for development to work with) but it does set the tone for the card. If you want a card to act a certain way, it’s important you design pieces for it that push the card in the desired direction.

Topic #7 – How Did Equipment Get Its Name?

So there we were in the middle of *Mirrodin* design when it hit us that we wanted to make a card subtype out of local artifacts. But what to call them? Here’s a little dialogue I had with myself:

I: Okay, we need a name for this new card subtype.

Me: What is it?

I: They’re artifacts that function like creature enchantments.

Me: What do they represent creatively?



I: Pieces of equipment. Swords, armor, wands. That kind of stuff.

Me: Then I got it.

I: Yes.

Me: Equipment.

I: Just because I used the word equipment doesn't make it the best word.

Me: Yes, it actually does.

I: There are other words for this kind of thing.

Me: Name one.

I: Objects.

Me: Yeah, that's really giving equipment a run for its money.

I: Things?

Me: What's so wrong with equipment? It says what it is.

I: But isn't it a little on the nose?

Me: What does that mean? It's too correct a term to actually use? It too perfectly captures the meaning we want?

I: So you think we should call it equipment?

Me: Hello? Is someone is this conversation with me?

I: Being that I'm you? No.

Me: Just go with equipment.

I: Okay, since you asked so nicely. And, you know, because you're me and will do it anyway.

Yes, equipment started life as equipment. In fact, *Mirrodin* has the distinction of having all four of its keywords from design (affinity, entwine, equipment and imprint) end up as the final name for the mechanic. Four for four. Not too shabby.

Topic #8 – The Problem Area



Two of the most broken cards in recent years are pieces of equipment. So how did that happen? No creature enchantment has ever defined an environment. (Yeah, yeah I know that's not completely true, but close enough.) What makes equipment so different?

Two major things. First is colorlessness. The fact that any piece of equipment can be used on any card regardless of color is huge. One of the most important properties of the color pie is that it segregates the "good stuff". But artifacts throw this safety net to the wind. A good artifact has the luxury of going in just about any deck. A good creature enchantment might not see play simply because it doesn't have the right cards to support it. A good piece of equipment almost never has this problem.

Second is repeatability. By nature of their design, equipment is almost the exact opposite of creature enchantments. Not only are pieces of equipment not normally vulnerable to being two-for-one'd, but they also have the ability to enhance multiple cards over the course of the game. In many ways, equipment allows you to "one-for-two" your

opponent, often with the "two" actually being "three" or "four" or "five".

Does this mean we should stop doing equipment? Heavens no. It just means that we have to have a better understanding of the inherent advantages of the subtype when we create new cards. So will *Guildpact* (the middle set of *Ravnica* block) have the broken equipment that will define the environment? No. No it won't. (And you know I have to be sure about this, because I might get quoted a few times if I'm wrong.)

Topic #9 – Why Equipment Seems to Be Going Down in Number

I've gotten a series of letters inquiring about why the number of equipment cards have shrunk over time. The reason? *Mirrodin* was the artifact block. As such it broke the rules about how prevalent equipment was going to be. Sets since *Mirrodin* have slowly been shifting **Magic** back to normal (well at least in the how artifacts are treated). This means less artifacts and thus less equipment.

R&D is still planning to support equipment as an ongoing rule (note how two equipment cards even made it into *Ninth Edition*), but the change of environment has shifted downwards. They'll be there, but there will just be a few less. Well, that is until we find a new plane made of metal. (Hmmm.)

Topic #10 – Does the Rise of Equipment Spell the Doom of Auras (Specifically Creature Enchantments)?

One of the concerns I've heard about equipment was that it was designed to replace creature enchantments. This is one hundred percent false. While the lessons of creature enchantments clearly affected the design of equipment, the artifact subtype was never introduced as a replacement. Creature enchantments (and auras in general) are cool. Maybe they're not the most competitive card type, but that doesn't mean R&D's given up the fight. As I hinted above, *Ravnica* continues the fight with a simple idea by none other than Richard Garfield.

Creature enchantments have different functionality than equipment (as listed above). They allow different kinds of designs. They offer a different type of flavor. And most importantly, people like them. They really, really like them. And as it's our job to give the people what they want (actually, it's to make the game enjoyable – sometimes you all ask for things that you might later regret), creature enchantments aren't going anywhere. Besides, R&D loves a good challenge.

I'd start more topics but I have to save something for the next Equipment Week. I hope all of you (Scott included) have enjoyed this week's little foray into **Magic** design and equipment.

Join me next week when I... I'm not even going to give you a hint other than to say you'll be very sorry if you miss it. That is if you care anything about the future of **Magic** design. That's all.

Until then, may you not let "the man" keep you down.

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.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2006 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

