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City Planning, Part III

Mark Rosewater
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Previously on "Making Magic"

Tasked with the design of the second multi-colored themed block, the *Ravnica* design team sets out to create something other than *Invasion II*. Instead of focusing on an environment that pushes players toward playing as many colors as they can, the *Ravnica* design team chooses to focus on the ten two-color combinations. As part of this plan, they decide to put aside ally and enemy considerations for the block. This leads to the idea of a guild model where each of the two-color combinations is given a strong identity, both in flavor and mechanics.

Along the way the team creates the hybrid card, using a new type of mana that allows either (or both) of two different colors to be used to pay for it. The idea is discarded though when playtesting shows that the mechanic becomes complicated when mixed with traditional multi-color cards. But the hybrid mechanic isn't exactly down for the count just yet.

Meanwhile, trying to find a way to focus on the guild model, the design team makes a bold choice. Rather than put all the guilds in the first set, they choose to space them out over the block, allowing each guild a chance to shine. This means the guilds are being doled out in a 4-3-3 pattern with *Ravnica* focusing on the following four guilds: the Dimir (Blue/Black), the Selesnya (Green/White), the Golgari (Black/Green) and the Boros (Red/White). All that's left is finding a way to make the mechanics reflect the flavor of each guild.

Tea for Two (Colored Pairs That Is)

Several weeks ago, I had a [State of Design](#) column. In it, I promised three things. One, I would institute block design. That is, I would start having the blocks designed as a single entity rather than continuations of one another. Hopefully, the 4-3-3 division is proof that I'm living up to my word. Second, I promised I would increase design between blocks to improve how the blocks interact with one another. The multi-color set makes this an easier task as two-color play is a pretty open-ended theme. Third, I promised to better integrate design and creative. This is the one that's important for this column.

My master plan for integrating design and creative was to get the two to work together earlier in the process. The idea was if I could get the two teams to talk to one another during the earliest stages of creation, the two teams could use each other as inspiration for decisions. Let's take *Ravnica* as an example. It all started with the design team going to the Creative Team with the following goal: we wanted to make a block with a multi-color theme that was different from *Invasion*; our leading idea was a world in which the ten two-color pairs lived equally without the ally and enemy relationships affecting things. (Yeah, yeah, I know I said this above, but I figured some percentage of you skipped over the "previously" text.)

The Creative Team took that idea and fleshed out the idea of the guilds. That is, a world where ten clans of creatures live with each clan embodying the essence of one of the ten two-color combinations. The idea was to create a world that essentially had ten colors instead of the normal five. As a color pie guru, I was fascinated by this idea. I've spent a lot of time thinking about how each of the colors interacts with the other colors. I knew the topic was meaty and capable of being dissected. In addition, I knew from both surveys and personal feedback that the many of the players like the color pie and are interested in learning more about it. It was all coming together.

I explained [last week](#) why we decided to do the 4-3-3 split and how we chose which guilds to put into which set. Once that was done it was time to start designing the four *Ravnica* guilds. The key to the design was the flavor. Each guild was supposed to represent the essence of that two-color combination. Mechanics had as much responsibility as any other creative element of the card to capture the essence of the guild, not just in philosophy but in the feel of how the guild functions. The odd thing about this task was that it was both very difficult and very easy. It was difficult in that it required the designers to think of the design in a very different way. It was easy because it provided the team with clear-cut targets to aim for.

The purpose of this column is to walk through the decisions for each guild. Note that for each guild we had the following concerns: Each guild needed its own mechanic. Each guild needed its own style of play. And each guild had to have its own unique way of winning. Easy, right?

Also, remember that each color had to be used in four different guilds. This meant that the designers had to figure out for each guild what combinations of a color's abilities made sense. If all the green guilds, for example, used the same elements of green, it would be much harder to give the guilds definition.

The following is the chronological order in which I feel the design team "got" the guild in question.

Selesnya


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Dissension *Guildpact*
All Magic products



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Basic Rulebook
Comprehensive Rules
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NOVELS

Dissension
Ravnica Cycle, Book III
by Cory Herndon
More fiction at *Inside Wizards*

I'm not sure why Green/White was the easiest guild to design for in *Ravnica*. I think perhaps because it was crystal clear how it wanted to play. Green and white are the community colors. They are the two colors that put the needs of the group ahead of the needs of the individual. As such, their combined strength rests in the power of the group. (I'm glossing over a lot of the fine details now, but I promise there will more on this in future articles.) Selesnya is the guild that wins not with quality (although it does have some mighty fine cards) but with quantity. It wins by overwhelming the opponent.



To play into this, the designers had to look at each color and see what it had to offer to this plan of attack. Let's start with green. Green is the creature color so it obviously has a lot of efficiently costed creatures all along the mana curve. In addition, green is king of making creatures. That is, green is better at token making than any other color (especially the 1/1 token). Finally, green is the best color at building mana. This allows it the ability to get bigger creatures out faster than the other colors.

Now let's examine what white has to add to the picture. First, white is good at enhancing the group. It has a lot of spells that boost your whole team. Second, white is good at protecting your creatures, allowing you to help offset the inherent risk in building up a large creature base. Third, white has defensive spells that allow you to stall the game while you're building up your army.

Put these two parts together and you get a guild that is good at building an army, enhancing that army and protecting that army. The guild isn't after the fast win (although that will occasionally happen as the small creatures spill out), but rather building up for the mid to late game win.



All that remained was finding a mechanic that played into this philosophy. And as Aaron explained in [his column two weeks ago](#), it happened very indirectly. Although I'm explaining the guilds in a particular order, the design team was working on all of them at the same time. One day, Richard (Garfield, if you missed my bio of the design team members [two weeks ago](#)) came in with a mechanic for the Boros (Red/White) that he called battlecast.

The idea was simple. The Boros liked getting into fights, thus it liked combat tricks. By allowing players to pay off some of the mana cost by tapping creatures, it allowed you to surprise your opponent in the middle of combat. The team liked it but something wasn't quite right. For starters, the mechanic tended to work much better defensively than offensively, which wasn't very Red/White. Second, it required a lot of creatures to become powerful. And third, the combat trick limitation kept the spell from doing what the mechanic wanted, to let a player play spells much sooner than they traditionally could.

This was all obvious in the very first meeting that Richard suggested the mechanic. So much so, that when he asked what we thought, I replied, "I like it Richard. I like it a lot. Just one thing. It's not Red/White. It's Green/White."

The Selesnya Conclave already wanted to play a lot of creatures. And it already had a growth theme to help get its spells played as soon as possible. The mechanic made so much sense in Green/White. But the name battlecast didn't make any sense, so it was changed to crittercast. And, of course, later changed to convoke (as in to play a spell, the verb form of convocation). Selesnya was complete.

Golgari

Once we had Green/White figured out, our thoughts moved to the two guilds that overlapped, the Boros and the Golgari. We had already figured out how green and white were going to work for Selesnya. The next question was there any overlap between how green and/or white would work in the other guild in the set. The Golgari won out as the intersection between black and green was very clear.

Black and green are tied together by the natural order of life and death. The guild's interest in this cycle, tied with the two colors' strong tie to the graveyard, make the guild king of recursion. The Golgari find ways to keep reusing its resources, wearing down the opponent's defenses. How many times can they get rid of the same threat?



Once again, we start by looking at what each color has to offer to the guild. Since we've already spent time looking over green, let's start there. Green has a strong growth theme that was used in Green/White to overwhelm the enemy. But in Black/Green the growth is used as a way to wear down the opponent's resources. In Green/White, the growth is protected so that it can grow unhindered, only being used as an aggressive weapon at the very end of the game. In Black/Green, the growth is used as a weapon from turn one. The creatures that green spits out are thrown immediately at the opponent. In addition, green uses its growth as a way to keep buffing the creatures it already has. This is where the design team discovered a strength of green that is traditionally used in lesser numbers: the creation of +1/+1 counters. If token production is green growing horizontally, then +1/+1 counters is green growing vertically.

Black, meanwhile, proves to be a perfect foil for green's growth. While white protects green's hordes, black has very different ideas. To black, a lot of creatures means more fodder for its spells. Black enjoys sacrificing its own creatures for effect, a great match when paired with a color that spits out lots of little creatures. In addition, black is a very destructive color that can use its spells to attack the same pressure points that green's horde is already threatening.

But wait, the best part comes where black and green find common ground: graveyard recursion. Black and green are the two colors that bring things from the graveyard back. Tie this into its aggressive wear-them-down strategy and you get a force to be reckoned with.



Before I get into the Golgari mechanic, let me explain an interesting quirk of Ravnica design. The set needed four keyword mechanics. The team had five designers (one of which, Tyler Bielman, was more on the team to add in flavor). Each of the four mechanics was designed by a different member of the team. This doesn't usually happen because although we don't talk about this aspect of design much, most of the time on a design team, a few members design the majority of the cards. This isn't a flaw. Not everyone on the team needs to be a powerhouse designer in terms of bulk. Design teams have many different needs and as long as the team has one or two people that can spit out card after card, the team does okay. The point I'm trying to make here is that the *Ravnica* design team had no fat. It was a lean, card-designing machine. The fact that each mechanic was

designed by a different designer shows off this facet. Anyway, Richard came through for Selesnya. The Golgari ended up resting on my shoulders.

I put this guild second as everything above was figured out relatively early in design. The mechanic though was the last to be finalized of all the mechanics. Now, we knew we wanted a recursive mechanic that played around with the graveyard. The problem was how exactly to do it. For some reason I was the designer most focused on this task. So every once in a while I would come in with my latest take on the mechanic. We would play it and then usually it turned out to be, well, in R&D slang "bah-roken". Yes, recursive mechanics somehow seem naturally broken. Something to do with the marriage of card advantage and card utility.

One day, I came in with a mechanic I called Reclaim. The idea was simple. Cards with Reclaim could be drawn directly out of the graveyard. You had to give up your draw to do it. This kept the mechanic from being strictly card advantage. And the self-milling? Oh, that came later.

Yes, Reclaim as it was handed off from design to development allowed its controller to give up a draw to draw the card out of the graveyard. No other cost. I thought we could make the cards weak enough that this ability could be balanced. I was wrong. But hey, isn't that what development is all about? The development team, led by Brian Schneider, quickly figured out that free recursion was scary. There had to be some cost. But mana didn't seem right. That's when the team stumbled upon the idea of self-milling. Wouldn't it be cool if the recursive guild's mechanic fed into itself? By getting back a card you increase the chance of putting other cards into the graveyard that you could also get back.

As I'm sure Aaron will talk about in one of his columns, this balance proved to be quite a challenge to development with the self-milling numbers being tweaked upwards. And, of course, near the end Reclaim became Dredge. I heartily recommend not passing judgment on it until you play it because it is a very quirky mechanic that is much stronger than it might first appear.

Boros

Once we had green handled, we turned our attention back to white, and by extension to the Boros. When we first chose the guilds for each block, we knew that we wanted to have various tempos in each set. Green/White wasn't winning quickly. Black/Green, although faster than Green/White, wasn't too speedy. And Black/Blue, while we were still figuring it out, we knew wasn't going to break any land speed records. That left us with Red/White to be the speedy guild. The idea was simple. Take the red from traditional Sligh decks and have it hitched with the white of White Weenie.

Let's start in white. Well, white has cheap creatures with good combat abilities. And it has spells to buff and protect those creatures. Red also has fast little guys. And let's not forget its ability to blow obstacles up. All this added up to a guild that wanted to be fast, aggressive and liked getting into fights. This part was easy. But what kind of mechanic plays into it?



The answer for this problem came from Mike Elliott. We started by examining combat mechanics. The problem was that all of them seemed too limiting. What happens when Red/White wasn't in combat? The key, Mike felt, was finding a mechanic that worked well in combat but had other ramifications. That's when he came up with the idea that Red/White was the guild of unity. Red/White story-wise, for example, was the city's army. It was one of the guilds whose creatures weren't seeking to be different from one another. This inspired Mike with the idea of a mechanic that affected not just one creature but anything that had a similarity with that creature. He called the idea Radiant.

The initial version of the mechanic was only used on spells that targeted creatures and then hit every creature that shared a color, creature type or converted mana cost with the targeted creature. While this might sound simple in concept, it proved very complicated in actual play. For example, let's say you target a blue/white aven. The spell affects the following: all white creatures, all blue creatures, all multi-color creatures with either white or blue, all birds, all soldiers, and all creatures with the same converted mana cost. And remember that this is a different set of creatures for each creature you could target. As Tyler said after one playtest, "I was going to play my radiant spell, but I didn't because I just couldn't figure out what was going to happen."

So the design team decided to cut the least flavorful aspect, the converted mana cost. The development team would later cut creature type. Color, it was decided, was enough. Plus it was a multi-color set so having a little

“color matters” made sense. (Radiant was later changed to Radiance as it felt like it worked better as a noun.)

Speaking of radiance, my preview card for today is a little glimpse at what kinds of things this mechanic can do. Click [here](#) for the preview.



Dimir


Dimir is the sneaky guild. They're the ones that try to make everyone think they're powerless because it will be all that much easier to subvert the other nine guilds. From a design standpoint, sneaky is hard. What does it even really mean to be sneaky? After thinking it over, the design team decided that sneaky in mechanic terms meant indirect. Black/Blue beats your opponent in a way that makes them say, “Hey, how did I lose?”

The more we studied black and blue the more we realized that the two colors overlapped in all the areas that Dimir seemed to be interested in. First, blue and black are both good at card advantage. Blue does it through drawing cards while black does it mostly through forcing the opponent to lose cards (most often through discard). Blue helped card utility by sifting through your library. Black hurt your opponent's card utility by messing with what they're about to draw. Blue removed threats through countermagic. Black removed threats by destroying them.



Finally, just as black and green intersect in the graveyard, blue and black intersect in the library. These are the two colors that tutor most effectively. These are the two colors that twist your own library. And these are the two colors that mess with your opponent's library. Blue erodes the opponent's library through indiscriminate milling while black tends to dip inside it and rot it away from the inside with **Cranial Extraction**-style effects.

It was this last discovery that led us to give Dimir its own victory condition – deck exhaustion. The game does have a second way to win built into it. When your opponent cannot draw a card, they lose. How apropos for Black/Blue to mentally cripple your opponent.

The keyword came from Aaron Forsythe. Very early in design actually. It just took us a long time to build the guild around it. Transmute, as Aaron called it (and, okay, as everyone else will call it too), played into Dimir's attachment to the library and its ability to “outthink” the opponent by having the tools it needs when it needs them. The biggest change to transmute came in the mana cost for the mechanic. We always knew we needed the appropriate color in the cost as we wanted to make sure decks that played these cards had access to the right colors, but design's early guesses as to the cost (in design all transmute costs were 2C, where C is the color of the card, or  on multi-color cards) proved significantly undercosted. Development, as always, helped clear up this problem. (More on this in Aaron's most recent article, [Perplexing Choices](#).)

Fab Four

And that is how the four guilds of *Ravnica* came to get designed. Thanks for joining me for this three-week foray into the design of what I believe is the start of a new age of **Magic**. (Don't worry, I might talk about *Ravnica* design in one or two, or twelve, more columns).

Join me next week, when... what? I didn't talk about the hybrid mechanic? How did it get back in the set? Hey Mark, remember the cliffhanger from two weeks ago that you didn't address last week? Yeah, that. How about a little closure? Okay, that seems only fair.

Buy Low, Sell Hybrid

So last we saw hybrid, it was the victim of not playing nicely with traditional multi-color (I say "traditional" as hybrid cards are multi-colored as well). Having a set with a significant amount of both hybrid and traditional multi-color cards proved too many choices to track, so the design team chose to jettison the hybrid mechanic (after all, it's hard to do a multi-color block without traditional multi-color cards).

But I liked how hybrid interacted with traditional multi-colored cards in constructed. So I decided to put them into the block that followed *Ravnica* (codenamed *Snap*, as in *Snap, Crackle, Pop*). I moved all the records from the one set to the other in our database and I began figuring out how the next block would make use of the hybrid cards (you know, blending in with *Snap*'s theme of... woops, I don't think I'm supposed to mention that just yet).

As this is going on, design comes to an end and the set is handed off to development. As they are working on the set, it becomes clear that the set is missing something. Normally, every set tries hard to do something in design that hasn't been seen before, something fresh. What was fresh in *Ravnica*? Well, the block structure was unique, but it wasn't the kind of thing that people were going to notice opening just a pack or two. Brian, the lead developer, asked me if I had anything innovative for the set. I said, "We had innovative. We had to take it out."

That's when Brian made a very simple proposal. Could we bring it back if we kept it to a small amount? That way, it wouldn't get too confusing because players would never get more than one or two. This, combined with the block planning that had the guilds rotate in slowly over time, made sense. A slower build-up mixed with a greatly reduced presence just might work. And thus, hybrid was brought back (with just three cards per guild: a common, an uncommon, and a rare).

Okay, this time I'm really wrapping things up. I hope you all enjoyed my in-depth look at *Ravnica* design.

Join me next week when, well, when I talk even more about designing *Ravnica*. I have the design column. And I was lead designer of the set. And the set rocks. What more do you want from me?

Until then, may you find a way to work you "hybrid" "back into your set".

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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