



Secrets of the Secret Guild

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Latest Developments
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House Dimir—the blue-black guild—presented some hard questions to the *Ravnica* development team. Were we seriously going to promote "milling" at such a high level? Was transmute too crazy of an idea to print? How could we make the guild feel like traditional blue-black without creating another *Psychatog*-style deck?

Bringing Down the House... of Cards

Design pegged the Dimir as the "library" guild, meaning it both manipulated its own deck for a benefit, and tinkered with its opponents' maliciously. Flavorwise, the guild was to be the most discreet of the four in the set, which loosely translates into some kind of strategy that should be able to win covertly—without attacking. When you combine library manipulation with trying to win without attacking, all arrows point to milling as one of Dimir's key tactics.



But was that okay?

We had just come off of Kamigawa block, where the splice mechanic allowed *Dampen Thought* to deplete players' libraries surprisingly quickly, so it wasn't exactly "new." The design dedicated quite a few cards to it, so in Limited it was possible to get a mish-mash of cards that wasn't quite good enough at milling and wasn't quite good enough at winning via damage either. And in general, winning via milling can be kind of a drag, as what you're doing doesn't interact with most of what's on the table; it's like you and your opponent are playing different games.

The arguments for doing milling at a higher level were that (a) some segment of players really like trying to win via milling, (b) adding another tension to Limited was tempting, and (c) it really did define the guild as different. It took a great deal of massaging to get the level in the right place. As was mentioned in Card of the Day, *Glimpse the Unthinkable* began life as a common, but too many drafts were ending in five or six turns to milling, so it was bumped up to uncommon, and then bumped up again to rare. *Vedalken Entrancer* milled three cards per activation at one point, but it was lowered back to two. A mana activation was added to *Thoughtpicker Witch*. *Duskmantle* went from milling two cards for 1♣♣ to one card for 1♣♣.

As we came closer to nailing down the correct power zone for milling, we had to add in some countermeasures. After all, the Golgari mechanic, dredge, played right into milling's hands. *Junktroller*, which was submitted mainly as an answer to dredge, used to simply remove cards in the graveyard from the game. His printed incarnation still answers dredge, but also can buy a few turns against milling strategies. Similarly, *Mnemonic Nexus* was added as a potential answer to both dredge and milling.

My personal goal as a designer was to have milling be one of several viable strategies for Dimir, and as a developer I'm pleased that we accomplished it. While the guild can win in that way, there are several more tools in its arsenal, including evasive aggressive creatures, and a few things for more traditional control. But if the initial player reactions to cards like *Glimpse the Unthinkable* and *Circu*, *Dimir Lobotomist* have shown us anything, it is that milling has a huge fan base!

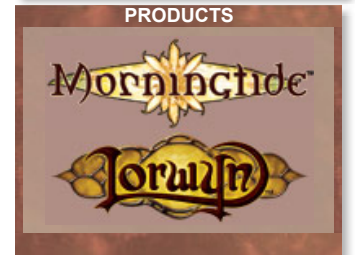
A World Full of Tutors

As the designer of transmute, I submitted the mechanic full well believing that there was a way to balance these cards such that constructed **Magic** would not be overrun with tutors, yet the cards would still have interesting applications. The problem was convincing the rest of the development team that was true.

Development has a natural distrust of tutors in general. They do two things we consider to be somewhat detrimental to gameplay—one, they speed up the ability to piece together game-winning combos, and two, they make games play very similarly because key cards can always be repeatedly searched for.

Many of the developers outright disliked transmute and felt we'd never be able to print it at an acceptable power level. (Lead developer Brain Schneider went so far as to ask me if we had designed any other mechanics for the Dimir guild, as he had no interest in using transmute. We hadn't.)

I covered most of this material in my [preview column](#) on *Perplex*, and you all know how the story ends anyway. The ability to transmute was changed from playable as an instant to playable only as a sorcery, and the mechanic



survived. So far, it has been showing up at a nice level in constructed. The **Heartbeat of Spring** combo decks are using some of the cards that transmute for three mana spells, and **Battle of Wits** decks have been enabled with a lot of help from transmute.

Fun Fact: There is only one five-mana spell in *Ravnica* with transmute (**Brainspoil**) on purpose. We knew **Battle of Wits** would benefit greatly from such cards, so we only made one, and made it not blue.

To me, transmute is the perfect mechanic to use in a block like *Ravnica*. It only makes sense in two colors, it's too scary to do on more than a handful of cards, and it doesn't need to be continued or tweaked as the block progresses.

Not Another Dr. Teeth

When looking back at old blue-black constructed archetypes for inspiration during development, we noticed that the decks had a startling lack of creatures. Granted, R&D is not in the business of making people play creatures in constructed at the expense of other strategies, but the concept of a *guild* hints at some combination of creatures. What would a blue-black *guild* deck want to look like? Certainly not twenty counterspells, twenty removal spells, fifteen card-drawing spells, and two or three copies of some horrifically overpowered creature like **Morphling**, **Meloku**, or **Psychatog**. We've been down that path too many times before. We're still *on* that path in Extended.

So we tried to find a few creatures that felt blue and black and make them worth looking at. **Dimir Cutpurse** began life as a 1/1 for the same mana cost as it has now. Over time, he crept up to 2/1 and then to 2/2.

Moroii was submitted as the following card:

```
UZ03_CON
Creepy Drake
4UB
Creature - Drake
4/4
Flying
Pay 4 life: Return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.
```

While that fellow would be a beast in Limited, its role in constructed would probably have been exactly what we didn't want—a hard-to-kill finisher for use in a control deck. So instead, we opted for the far more aggressive four-mana version.

So can you play blue-black control in Standard? Sure. *Ravnica* didn't add much to this strategy since all the pieces were basically already there between Kamigawa and *Ninth Edition*. Here's a sample decklist from States that illustrates that point:



Michael Lew		2nd Place - Oregon States 2005	
Main Deck 61 cards		Sideboard	
8 Island	4 Boomerang	2 Cranial Extraction	
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	2 Disrupting Shoal	2 Dimir Cutpurse	
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Hinder	3 Execute	
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	2 Last Gasp	2 Exile into Darkness	
3 Quicksand	4 Mana Leak	2 Hideous Laughter	
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	2 Pithing Needle	2 Muddle the Mixture	
3 Swamp	3 Rewind	2 Persecute	
4 Underground River	4 Threads of Disloyalty		
2 Watery Grave			
	25 other spells		15 sideboard cards
24 lands			
3 Azami, Lady of Scrolls			
2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni			
4 Jushi Apprentice			
3 Meloku the Clouded Mirror			
12 creatures			

The Dimir guild chips in basically nothing to this deck—why add power if the deck is already powerful?

What Dimir did enable, however, were completely different flavors of blue-black decks, such as the following:

Jim Dyke

3rd Place - New Hampshire Champs 2005

Main Deck 60 cards

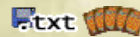
2 Duskmantle, House of Shadow	4 Glimpse the Unthinkable
7 Island	4 Hideous Laughter
7 Swamp	4 Last Gasp
4 Underground River	3 Mana Leak
4 Watery Grave	3 Muddle the Mixture
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24 lands	4 Peer Through Depths
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0 creatures	4 Rend Flesh
2 Telling Time	
4 Traumatize	
4 Twincast	
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36 other spells	

Sideboard

3 Boseiju, Who Shelters All	
4 Hinder	
1 Muddle the Mixture	
3 Persecute	
4 Rewind	
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15 sideboard cards	

Lee Steht - Blue Bob

4th Place - Florida Champs 2005



Main Deck 60 cards

3 Island	4 Cruel Edict
12 Swamp	4 Last Gasp
4 Underground River	2 Sickening Shoal
4 Watery Grave	4 Umezawa's Jitte
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23 lands	14 other spells

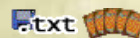
4 Dark Confidant	
4 Dimir Cutpurse	
2 Dimir Guildmage	
3 Dimir Infiltrator	
4 Hypnotic Specter	
1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni	
3 Moroi	
2 Nezumi Shortfang	
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23 creatures	

Sideboard

3 Distress	
4 Execute	
1 Hideous Laughter	
3 Pithing Needle	
4 Slay	
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15 sideboard cards	

Darrel Moore

8th Place - South Dakota Champs 2005



Main Deck 61 cards

1 Duskmantle, House of Shadow	3 Compulsive Research	
6 Island	3 Cruel Edict	
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Gifts Ungiven	
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Goryo's Vengeance	
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	3 Last Gasp	
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	3 Reach Through Mists	
5 Swamp	3 Vigor Mortis	
2 Underground River	4 Zombify	
4 Watery Grave	<hr/>	
22 lands	27 other spells	

2 Blazing Archon	
1 Kagemaro, First to Suffer	
1 Kira, Great Glass-Spinner	
3 Kokusho, the Evening Star	
1 Kuro, Pitlord	
1 Mindleech Mass	
2 Razia, Boros Archangel	
1 The Unspeakable	
<hr/>	
12 creatures	

Sideboard

2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All	
4 Cranial Extraction	
1 Kagemaro, First to Suffer	
2 Keiga, the Tide Star	
1 Kokusho, the Evening Star	
2 Night of Souls' Betrayal	
3 Persecute	
<hr/>	
15 sideboard cards	

If you are a fan of blue-black (and there are many of you out there... that was the most-played color combination in a poll I ran a while back), you should be riding high right now. Blue-black 'Tog decks are the top dogs in Extended right now, and there are many viable flavors of the color combination in Standard.

The Commentary

As I did in my previous two guild week articles, here are some spicy Multiverse comments from the development of the Dimir cards.

Twisted Justice began life as a four-mana rare with transmute. It was kinda silly.

bs 8/17: a beating.
ps 9/27: this card is dumb. also, it could be more interesting if the mechanic makes them want to sacrifice a big guy, while the idea of edicting makes them want to sacrifice a small guy. right now they're both pointing in the same direction.
bs 9/29: upped in cost
MT 10/6: Even at 6 mana this card is really good even without transmute.
AF 11/9: "Really" good? Maybe "kinda" good.
MT 11/9: Yeah it hasn't been nearly as good considering how dumb it was at 4 mana.
MP 11/29: Swapped to UC for Pull into the Undercity.
bs 1/4: cut transmute, moved to common.
AF 1/6: We could move this back to UC, move altered shadow guy to C. This could get transmute again and the Eidolon go back to 7cc 3/3.
DAL 1/18: Common seems wrong here - it's usually about 3-for-1. Would like to move to UC and 1/3 shadow guy to C.
Carter 10/17: Removed the unnecessary "You" and made creatures possessive.
Del 1/6: Added "you" back in. This is a special case where the change of person means that a little reminder is helpful. We've done this before, but I don't remember the card just now.



Psychic Drain (also once a rare) had some flavor issues. Why was this a blue-black card? Luckily the card name (thank you Creative Team!) solved everything.

BB 9/15: This card seems BW or BG to me. Milling (B) plus life gain (W/G). Someone help me understand why it's UB.
AF 9/24: I'm casting Drain Life on your deck.
bs 10/27: put back in. gold cards will not get killed for split cards.
DAL 11/5: I'm not sure that random.magic player will "get" the flavor of what is going on with this card. Could ask some people in brand.
AF 11/9: Not sure it comes through.
bs 1/21: the common moves from rare to uncommon.



Dimir Doppelganger was the card I mention a few weeks ago designed by Mark Gottlieb that later gave him fits as the rules manager. Take that!

bs 10/26: added shapeshifter.
MP 10/28: hmm, should it be your graveyard or any graveyard?
DAL 11/5: One set after the shapeshifter who clones something and gains the ability "Mana: Return this to owner's hand"?
AF 11/9: Rules won't handle this guy easily.
bs 11/16: we'll need new shapeshifter designs.
Carter 11/24: Seems fine. "This ability" has been used before, and keying data off removed cards as been. Players should easily intuit the right answer.
RB 12/1: Don't count on being able to do this until John talks to Paul and finds out why Paul used to kill stuff like this ...
bs 12/9: this should be the guild enabler.
bs 12/13: took off legend.
bs 12/17: reduced cost by 1.



Bloodletter Quill was a card we kept making better and better. I don't think most players understand how good this card actually is...

MP 11/29: Could cost 3. Could become guilded by adding "1UB: remove a death counter". Would also want to make adding counters part of the effect instead of the cost.
 RB 12/1: I am very happy with the overall feel of the guilded rares. Does this really need to be 4 base cost and 1UB, though? If I'm in blue and black shouldn't I get more than a 1-mana discount on Jayemdae Tome?
 MP 12/2: I think this card is much more appealing when blue/black can use it without ever losing life.
 RB 12/20: Agree with Matt -- move the counter to the cost of the first ability. (That stack trick is no torture chamber)
 bs 1/4: upped in power. not excited about this change. this card must get tested.
 MT 1/4: So now this card is a super tome if you know how the rules work? Reminds me of an easier Torture Chamber.
 Del 1/7: If you want, you can eliminate the stack trick by adding "Play this ability only any time you could play a sorcery" to the ability that removes counters.
 bs 1/20: we decided to add 2 to the "counter" activation cost.
 Del 2/3: Another way to avoid the stack trick would be to make the cost include "Pay life equal to the number of blood counters on CARDNAME." I don't care one way or the other, but you should see all the options. :)
 Del 3/28: Dev changes activation cost of second ability from 1UB.



Last Week's Poll

What was your initial impression of the idea of <i>Coldsnap</i> ?		
Awesome	2010	43.9%
Pretty cool	1415	30.9%
Whatever	726	15.9%
I really don't like it	229	5.0%
I don't like it	197	4.3%
Total	4577	100.0%

Great! I'm excited about it, too. It's a wacky idea, but certainly a refreshing change from our normal block model. And those of us that actually remember *Ice Age* will have a ball.

This Week's Poll

Which is the better draft format in general?

Big set / big set / big set
 Big set / small set 1 / small set 2
 Neither
 I don't draft

*Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.*



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