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Midas Touch

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Making Magic
 Monday, November 14, 2005



As *Ravnica* is a gold block and "Making Magic" is a design column, it seemed inevitable that sometime this block I'd write a column about designing multi-color cards. And who am I to fight the inevitable? I'm a pacifist at heart. I don't even like fighting. Especially fights where I'm guaranteed to lose. And the inevitable? He'd kick my... well, this is a family column (okay, that's not exactly true – although anyone who has a family where every member plays drop me a line) so let's just say I'd lose badly. But enough of me getting pummeled by an intangible concept, let's get on with the topic of the day – designing multi-color cards.

Let me start by stating that today's column is focusing on the design of what I call traditional multi-color cards. That is, cards that have two different colored mana symbols in their mana cost and come in a lovely gold frame. There are other examples of multi-color cards (hybrid cards, split cards, a *Shyft* that's chosen a "combination of colors", a card that's been targeted by a hyper *Prismatic Lace*, etc.). I'm not talking about them today. (C'mon, you know we're going to do Hybrid Week eventually. We got twenty-five theme weeks a year. We're going to do everything eventually. I'm not looking forward to staying on topic during *Eager Cadet Week*.)

Color Me Impressed

I guess the best place to begin is with what is required of a traditional multi-colored card. Here we go.

1. The card has to make sense for all the colors in its mana cost. If, for instance, the card is black and red, then the card must feel both black and red.

That's it. One restriction. How hard could that be? As one of the two designers that was on both *Invasion* and *Ravnica* (the two multi-color large sets – Mike Elliott is the other one for those trivia buffs out there), let me say pretty hard. But not impossible. So what makes it so hard? Let me list the ways:

1. Feeling both black and red (I'll continue using my example from above) means that the card cannot feel just black or just red. If you could swap all of one mana symbol to the other in the mana cost of a multi-colored card and have the card work, then you don't have an actual multi-color card. You just have a mono-colored card dressing up. (And yes, R&D has made this mistake plenty of times – I expect the boards to have fun pointing out past mistakes.)
2. As I've explained numerous times, elegance is very key to card design. Having to fit two different things in a text box fights against being elegant. It can be done of course but it's harder than a mono-color card that only has to commit to one particular thing.
3. The vein of design space is much scarcer than normal. Plus, each time we focus on multi-color we use up more and more of this limited resource.
4. As I've explained multiple times, multiple elements on a card have to exist in conjunction with one another. That is, if two things are on a card, they have to have some relationship with one another. Two completely isolated abilities that have no synergy (or anti-synergy) is poor design. Multi-color cards by definition (with a few exceptions that I'll get to in a moment) have to have multiple elements that must work together. In general this is harder to design than cards with just one ability. And this problem comes up for just about every multi-color card.
5. Each color has a philosophy. And as *Ravnica* shows, each color pair has a philosophy that stays true to both of the mono-color philosophies. Making two masters happy is never easier than making one happy.
6. Design strives to have as few words as possible in the text box. Multi-color with all its constraint fights against this desire.
7. You have to have two different mana symbols. This restriction makes it hard to fill in the low end of the mana curve. In fact, one of the great advances of the hybrid mechanic is that it allows a one-drop multi-color creature for the first time in the game's history. (And yes, *Prismatic Lace* is a one-drop spell that can make other things multi-colored. Doesn't count.)



As you can see, multi-color design isn't easy. Luckily, I hold on to this wacky notion that restrictions breed creativity. This makes multi-color cards a breeding pit for some rather creative ideas. (Note that this pool is what led to stuff like split cards and hybrid cards.)

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So how does one overcome all the obstacles and make something cool? There are several ways. Let's look at them one by one.

#1 – The "Chinese Menu" Method

This is the most basic multi-color design. Take one from column A and one from column B. Cards designed this way have two distinct abilities and/or effects. As I stated above, these two abilities need to have some relation to one another (they're synergistic, they create interesting tension, they combine to do something that neither color does by itself, they combine together into a useful utility card, etc.) Good examples of this kind of design from *Ravnica* would be [Consult the Necrosages](#), [Lightning Helix](#), [Putrefy](#), [Skynight Legionnaire](#), [Sunhome Enforcer](#), and [Selesnya Sagittars](#) (and to all the spider lovers out there – your voice has been heard).

This design is very basic but when done correctly can make some compelling cards. Note that the two abilities can be combined to feel like one ability (such as [Lightning Helix](#) or [Putrefy](#)). The biggest pitfalls are:

- The two abilities have no interesting relation to one another.
- The two abilities overlap too much (i.e. putting first strike with regeneration)
- One or both of the abilities already exist in the other color (i.e. having the red half of a Boros card be double strike)

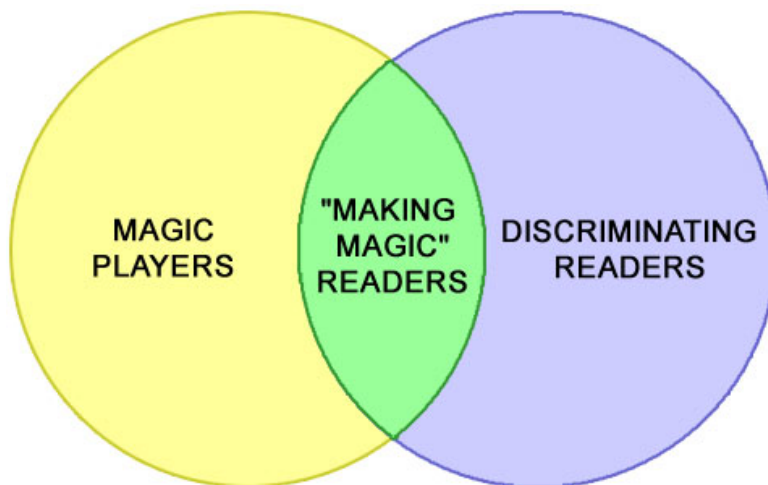


The other big strike against the "Chinese menu" design is that too much of it feels inelegant. The design is rather blunt and if you overuse it, you create the feeling that you just didn't try very hard. For this reason, design tries very hard to limit the number of these.

But when these cards succeed, they really shine. My personal all-time favorite (and a contender for my best traditional multi-color design of all time) in this category was the card [Recoil](#) from *Invasion*. What I love about the card is that it takes two basic abilities from the appropriate colors (blue and black) and combines them to do something that neither color can do on its own.

#2 – The "Venn Diagram" Method

This is one of the exceptions I listed above. How do you make a multi-color card that only has one ability? Use an ability that both colors have access to. A Venn Diagram for those that fell asleep in math class is a chart that shows two different classifications and demonstrates how they overlap. An example:



The big question is: how does using an ability found in both colors make an interesting multi-color card? The answer is that it has to do something better than either color would get alone. That could mean that the spell is cheaper than it would normally be. It could mean that the spell has some effect that is better than the mono-colored version. The key is that the card with both colors trumps any mono-colored card that does the same thing. Examples of this type of design from *Ravnica* are [Boros Swiftblade](#), [Glimpse the Unthinkable](#), [Seeds of Strength](#), and [Watchwolf](#).

The coolest part of this category is that it really plays up the similarity between the two colors. White gets efficient cheap creatures. Green gets efficient cheap creatures. Shouldn't green/white get the most efficient two drop (in terms of raw power and toughness) of all time? Another common way to make the card better is to allow the two colors to combine their ability taking away the restriction that the other color has. The best example of this is [Terminate](#) from *Planeshift*. Black is good at destroying creatures but it has the pesky non-black issue. Red is good at destroying creatures but its stymied by creature's with high toughness. But if the two work together then they can offset the other's weakness.

This design space for this category is probably the most limited of any of the categories as it is limited by the amount of overlap between the two colors. It's not the richest vein, yet during each design for multi-color we find a few more cards that we can stick in this box.

#3 – The "Roll Call" Method

These cards get their multi-color feel from, well, being blunt. A good example of this would be the legendary creature cycle in rare (okay, there's two... not the guild leader one) – *Agrus Kos, Wojek Veteran*; *Circu, Dimir Lobotomist*; *Savra, Queen of the Golgari*; and *Tolsimir Wolfblood*. How does each of these cards let you know they're multi-color? By putting the colors in the text box. (Note that appropriate basic land types works just fine as well.)

Design snobs out there might not like the lack of subtlety in this type of design but I would respond to that with the wise words of Ms. Jaya Ballard: "Some have said there is no subtlety to destruction. You know what? They're dead."

Okay, you have to change the word "destruction" to "card design" and "dead" to "not employed by a company that produces trading card games". The point (other than how much I love my tangents and obscure **Magic** references) is that while **Magic** design suffers if there is no subtlety, it also is important to have some designs that slap the player (metaphorically only) in the face. I've been in numerous R&D meetings where I'm asked "Isn't this card a little too obvious?" to which I always reply "Are you familiar with the works of Jaya Ballard?"

That said, this category, like Category #1, has the issue of seeming unpleasant in too great a number. A little bit is fun. Too much feels lazy. If you've been following along, you'll notice that the first and third category are self-restricting while the second category is self-limiting. Yet another reason multi-color design is so tricky.



#4 – The "Shared Hobby" Method

While these cards aren't completely a *Ravnica* creation (this was done more with flavor back in the day), this block has made more use of the category than any previous set. The idea here is that by assigning things to the color combinations, such as specific keywords in *Ravnica* block, we make things that are by definition multi-colored. For example, as *convoked* is a Selesnya guild keyword, it feels very natural on a green/white card. This is another place where we can get away with just having one thing because the one thing is defined as being of both colors. Clever, huh? Examples from *Ravnica* are any of the multi-color cards that had a guild keyword – such as *Autochthon Wurm*, *Perplex*, *Rally the Righteous*, and *Shambling Shell*.

I think this category, of all the ones I'm listing today, has the greatest potential for future multi-colored cards. But it requires a larger meta-design as abilities cannot just be deemed a "two-color thing" on the fly. As with *Ravnica* block, it has to be interwoven into the larger set/block design. Luckily, this is the direction we are moving towards with **Magic** design so I think the future looks bright for this category.

#5 - The "Shiny and New" Method

To explain this category let me start with a little story about something called the Gordian Knot. As legend has it, a king (named Gordius – although some versions claim the king is Midas – just trying to tie back into the title wherever I can) created an intricate puzzle by putting a cart in the center of his court that was secured by an insanely elaborate Turkish knot. The person who could solve the puzzle and free the cart was destined to rule all of Asia. Many tried and failed until one day a young man known as Alexander (you might know him best with "the Great" attached) entered the court. He solved the riddle of the Gordian Knot. How did he do it? By slicing it in half with his sword.

So what does this have to do with **Magic**? Or the design of multi-color cards? Everything, because it's this category that takes Alexander's approach to the Gordian Knot. How do you design a multi-color card that feels like a multi-color card? Just design an ability that's never been used before. As it hasn't been designated to color yet, it is by definition a multi-color ability as that is the first time it shows up. I should point out that the new ability still has to feel right in the color it's put into. Examples from *Ravnica* include: *Bloodbond March*, *Chorus of the Conclave*, *Gleancrawler*, *Mindleech Mass*, *Phytohydra*, and *Searing Meditation*.



The biggest limitation of this category is that it's very hard to come up with things we've never done before. Even some of my examples only innovate in part of the mechanic. But when you can do it, it works like a charm.

Shooting For the Gold

Hopefully, my little foray today into the world of multi-color design has let you have a better understanding of what kind of issues design has to face whenever we create multi-colored cards. Perhaps the realization of how difficult they are to make (make well at least) will help you appreciate them even more.

Join me next week when I get short with you.

Until then, may you enjoy the challenge of your own Gordian Knots.

Mark Rosewater

But Wait There's More...

It's time for Topical Blend #2 (if you don't know what I'm talking about, take a peek at [Topical Blend #1](#)). To do this I need some topics, both **Magic** related and non-**Magic** related. I will let you all vote for one of each in an upcoming week and then I'll write an article where I blend the two together. Think of this as the writing equivalent of Houdini escaping out of a straight jacket while locked in a box loaded with weights dumped into the ocean. But hey, this is how I get my kicks.

I'm curious to see what you all come up with.

*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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