

Discover how *Guildpact* is simultaneously more *similar* to its big set parent than any other second set, and more *completely different*.

Designing *Guildpact*

Devin Low

Monday, February 06, 2006

- 
- 



- [Devin Low Archive](#)

Hello everyone! As one of the diabolical designers behind *Guildpact*, I'm excited to give you an inside look at how the Orzhov, the Gruul, and the Izzet came to be. But first, let me introduce myself. My name is Devin Low, and I started playing **Magic** back in 1993, paying \$2.50 for packs of Alpha and opening up Mox Emerald (boring), Ancestral Recall (yawn), and Gaea's Liege (Exciting!!). I terrorized my friends' kitchen tables with kooky decks like Orcish Artillery/COP: Red/Chaoslace/Dwarven Song, and the always devastating Merfolk Assassin/War Barge/Boomerang.



I played casually for years, until one day some college friends said the words "Tempest pre-release" and "booster draft". Soon after, I started saying the words "Seething Anger my Soltari Trooper with buyback, Seething Anger him without buyback, hit you for 8, Fling him at you for 8!" Improving with practice, I started winning PTQ's, and I played three Pro Tours in the year 2000 before going to grad school. After graduation, I was hired by Wizards R&D, working on the Development teams for *Fifth Dawn*, *Betrayers of Kamigawa*, *Coldsnap*, "Snap," and "Crackle," while working on the Design teams for *Saviors of Kamigawa*, *Guildpact*, *Coldsnap*, "Snap," and "Pop." I've also designed between four and fourteen cards in each set I wasn't on since *Fifth Dawn*, dueled my way through 32 months of the Future Future League, and built at least one theme deck for 8 of the last 9 sets. Sunforger is my favorite card I've made. Now on to *Guildpact*!

Ah, the glorious days of *Guildpact* design. Dreaming up a bunch of Cyclops, Hydras, and Ghostly Councils, then giving them nasty tricks to bash each other senseless – what could be better? *Guildpact* set two new all-time records for modern small set design. In a bizarre paradox, the two records are exact opposites: *Guildpact* is simultaneously more *similar* to its big set parent than any other second set, and more *completely different*. What the? How the? Has the world gone insane?

To be more specific: *Ravnica* sets up *Guildpact* more tightly in *structure* than any other second set in **Magic**. But *Guildpact* drops *Ravnica's* keywords like a bad habit, completely abandoning big set keywords Dredge, Radiance, Convoke, and Transmute in a way that *Urza's Legacy*, *Planeshift*, and *Betrayers of Kamigawa* would never have dared. So *Guildpact's mechanics* are more completely different from its parent set than any second set we've ever printed.

Ravnica Block has the most comprehensive, overarching block design in **Magic's** history. This careful structure, planned across all three sets during *Ravnica* design, laid some valuable foundations on which to build. We knew from the beginning that the Gruul, the Orzhov, and the Izzet guilds each needed a Guild Leader Legend, an "Each color matters" Henchman Legend, a Guildmage, a guild artifact, a common hybrid, a rare hybrid, monocolored spells "enhanced" by another color, monocolored permanents with off-color activations, a signet, a karoo, an uncommon guild land, a dual land, and its own keyword, to say the very minimum.

Start with Flavor then Add the Meal

So if the Ravnica Block Plan's structure is a bunch of blanks on a page, how do you fill them? The *Guildpact* design team featured Lead Designer Mike "Joey Bishop" Elliott, Aaron "Frank Sinatra" Forsythe, Brian "Sammy Davis Jr." Schneider and myself, Devin "Dean Martin" Low. We kicked off *Guildpact* design by inviting **Magic** Creative Director Brady Dommermuth to present a run-down on the 3 guilds' flavor so we could design to match it. In older sets like *Prophecy*, the cards were designed in a flavor-vacuum, with all creative elements like names, card concepts and art postponed until after design. Another huge advantage of *Ravnica's* entire-block-planning model is it allowed the Creative team to whirl up an entire personality and storyline for the R/G, W/B, and U/R guilds before we designers had lifted a pencil. This allowed us to integrate the guilds' flavor with mechanics throughout our designs. In their comments to me, that integration seems to be what many players enjoy most about the block so far.



With the help of concept illustrations, Brady explained that the Izzet were mad scientists, continually re-engineering their own spells to create ever bigger, crazier, and more explosive effects. The Gruul were restless barbarians, inspired by the rage of battle, who pillaged a city block to dust, then moved on. The Orzhov were a sinister cult of merchant priests for whom power was the only true religion.

So all we needed to do was just fill in the spaces of the structure, using abilities that fit the two colors' mechanics and fit the guild's creative flavor, right? Not so fast, grasshopper! Let's start by reviewing some classic *Guildpact* cards:

Screeching Panic Master

2R

Creature - Goblin

3/1

Polyguy - *(You may cast this spell's mana cost any number of times.)*

When Screeching Panic Master comes into play, for each time you paid its mana cost, target creature can't block.

Titania's Double Boon

6G

Sorcery

Paincast Reduction 3 - *(If an opponent took damage this turn, this spell costs 3 less.)*

Put two +1/+1 counters on each creature you control.

Prejudicial Judiciary

1WB

Creature - Human Cleric

3/2

Prejudice - *(When this creature comes into play, choose a color.)*

Whenever an opponent plays a spell of that color, he or she loses 1 life.

Whenever Prejudicial Judiciary blocks or becomes blocked by a creature of that color, it gets +2/+2 until end of turn.

Easy Come, Easy Go

4WB

Enchantment

Bought & Sold - Whenever a creature comes into play under your control, gain 1 life.

Whenever a creature comes into play under an opponent's control, you may destroy that creature. If you do, lose life equal to its converted mana cost.

Ah yes, these cards show the – wait, what? None of these cards are even *in Guildpact*? None of these keywords exist? Hmm, on second thought I do believe you're right. These non-existent cards show concepts we briefly considered during *Guildpact* design. If we'd only had two weeks to design the set, we might have gotten about this far. Fortunately, with the benefit of time, a little argument, and a *lot* of meetings, we discovered significant design flaws with each of the above cards, teaching us specific lessons about the set and helping lead us towards the elegant, sexy beast the *real Guildpact* turned out to be.

Izzet Evolution: From "Polyguys" to Replicate

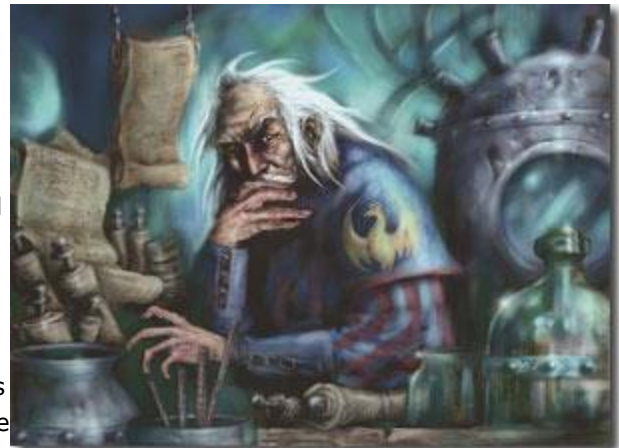


The idea for a mechanic of playing a spell's cost multiple times to fork it has been floating around the department since *Invasion Design*, seven years ago. When I first arrived at R&D in June 2003, I was often dismayed when a cool mechanic was removed from a set during design or development – “But it's so cool!” I lamented, “If we don't do it now, we may never print it!” Over time I've learned patience is definitely the way to go – the cool mechanic you hold off for later will be way cooler when it also fits well into the *context* of what a **Magic** set is trying to accomplish, rather than

standing on its own. The Izzet flavor of half-mad mages designing their own spells, tinkering endlessly to make them ever bigger and krakathoomier, fits *perfectly* with this mechanic of making a spell as big as you want it, pumping in more and more mana for amplitastic effects.

This keyword worked flavorwise, but our early implementations had serious flaws. Our first designs contained instants, sorceries, and CIP guys like the Screeching Panic Master above. We even talked about how to do Polycast enchantments. But the more we talked about the “comes into play” (CIP) Polycasts and the more we played with them, the more wrong they felt. When I pay three times for a Polycast sorcery, I get three copies of it – why don't I get three copies of my Polycast *guy*? Paying the mana cost of a Polycast guy the second and third time felt like a huge rip-off. You got just the CIP effect for your second payment, compared to getting the CIP effect *and a guy* for your first payment. This difference also made them really hard to cost attractively. To make it attractive to Polycast the CIP ability, you really want to cost the guy at one or two mana. But reasonably-sized guys with CIP effects usually need to cost three or more. And if the guy is just a 1/1 body, and you're mostly paying for the CIP effect, then why bring the guy at all? In short, the “Polyguys” seemed interesting at first, but turned out to be a big mess. They needed to go.

We spent a lot of time talking about what Blue and Red shared, and one interesting mirror was Blue's love of instants and Red's sometimes overlooked love of sorceries (Anarchist, Magnivore, etc.). We put those elements together with the frail physical bodies sported by most mad scientists. We decided that the Izzet need to combine their Blue and Red desires to emphasize the power of instants and sorceries in all kinds of ways, de-emphasizing creatures. Combined with the “Polyguy” problems, we decided that Polycast should go just on Instants and Sorceries, where it was playing just the role we hoped. Towards the end, some guy who acts like Dean Martin insisted that we add a mana cost to the Replicate keyword so that we could use it again in the future, with replicate costs different from the spell's mana cost.



Gruul: We put the Grrr in Swinger baby, Yeah!



In the Ravnica block plan, each set was assigned a particularly *angry* guild that was mechanically aggressive. In *Ravnica*, it was the W/R Boros Legion, in *Guildpact* the R/G Gruul, and in *Dissension* the **XX XXXXXX** (Hrm, let's just say that *Dissension's* angry guild probably has Red in it!). Flavorwise, the Gruul drew inspiration from the fury of the charge, the thrill of clashing claws, and ecstasy of victory. To match this flavor, Schneider proposed a mechanic that made spells cheaper if you had damaged your opponent this turn. This led us to create and playtest some cards like Titania's Double Boon above. The "fun scenario" of the

mechanic was the experience of making a slightly sketchy attack just to connect for some damage, then playing a Paincast spell for cheap with an awesome effect.

Like early Polycast, this Paincast keyword was a good fit flavorwise, but our first implementation had big problems. First, if your army wasn't getting through for damage, then a Paincast spell like Titania's Double Boon just sat in your hand doing *nothing*, waiting around for you to get to seven lands or get through for damage, and helping you with neither one. This was incredibly frustrating. Since our job is to help people to have *fun*, not to *ruin their afternoons*, this was a deal breaker.

The second problem was that if you already *had* enough lands to pay the full mana cost, then turning on the Paincast ability did nothing at all! You'd be like "Okay, take two damage. Now tap four of my seven lands to play the Boon for *cheap*! How do you like me now?! Now with my *other* three untapped lands, I'll just... um... frown and say go." This experience sucked too.

In refining the mechanic across design meetings, our goal was to preserve the "fun scenario" above and eliminate the two problems. We wanted you to be able to cast the spell to do *something* even if you hadn't hit them and didn't have tons of lands out. And we wanted you to be *rewarded* for hitting them, even if you did have tons of lands out. The solution was to flip the mechanic on its ear. Instead giving you a cheaper mana cost when you hit the opponent, we decided to just give you more enormous effects. This switcheroo eliminated both the unfun scenarios, and left the "fun scenario" of getting awesome power for a low mana cost intact. Now *that's* delicious design.

That still left us with spells like "3R, Sorcery, Pyrotechnics for 2. PAINCAST: Pyrotechnics for 5 instead." But the more we thought about how cool it was to have the Izzet keyword be only on instants and sorceries, the cooler it sounded to have the Gruul keyword be only on creatures. Our team had kind of a lot of geniuses on it, and I'm sure one of the other gentlemen came up with this cool "all-creature" idea. I've always loved White Knight/Black Knight mirrors in **Magic**, and the "All spells vs. All creatures" symmetry between U/R's Replicate and R/G's Bloodthirst really appeals to me. Both Izzet and Gruul are Red-based, but each draws on a different side of Red's powers. It makes a lot of sense to me that the classic Blue/Red decks pull more towards Red's instant/sorcery side with decks like Counter-Hammer (of Bogardan), while classic Red/Green strategies emphasize creatures attacking, with guys like Skizzik and the incredible, edible Orgg.

We were concerned that the new version of Bloodthirst would get repetitive if we just made 11 creatures that randomly got bigger, so we made sure to spice it up with some structure by rarity. I'm particularly proud of the way that every Bloodthirst uncommon has an ability based on its power – a power conveniently increased by Bloodthirst itself. So the uncommon twist on Bloodthirst is that your guy not only gets bigger, but also gets harder to block, gives you more life, pumps your army's power higher, or sacrifices to inflict an even more enormous six-point lightning bolt anywhere you want it. We briefly had these abilities triggering on the number of +1/+1 counters the creature had. But we decided to open up more combo potential by allowing the abilities to interact with any power-pumping at all. I'm not giving any hints on what to do with that, but let's just say that if you tap a Bloodthirsted Rabble-Rouser, then tap a second, four-power Rabble-Rouser before sacrifice your Bloodthirsted Skarrgan Skybreaker... you may reveal a pleasant surprise. And gaining life with Enrage by casting it on Gristleback is amusingly kooky.



Bloodthirst rare called for some unique Bloodthirst twists, with sky's-the-limit Bloodthirst X and a Bloodthirst activated ability each making an appearance. Common, meanwhile, holds the line as refreshingly simple, giant, Bloodthirsty men.

Orzhov – Commerce vs. Prejudice vs. Poltergeists



To find the Orzhov keyword, we did what we did hundreds of times during *Guildpact* design: We looked closely at all the things the two colors share. This is especially enlightening for enemy-color pairs like W/B and U/R, because their philosophical overlap and mechanical overlap have each been examined so rarely compared to the allied color pairs. The flavor of the Orzhov really evoked "The dark side of White," including the dark side of White's righteousness: intolerance. Combining this intolerance with Black's hatred led us to explore keywords focused on prejudice against particular colors. We designed crueler,

Blacker versions of old-school White prejudice cards like Jihad and Call to Arms.

We put together and played with some cards like the Prejudicial Judiciary above, and they created some interesting interactions with gold cards and hybrid cards. But we were concerned from the beginning that the ability would be too swingy against mono-colored decks and too weak against many-colored decks. And we were right on both counts. "Prejudice" also made you feel like some

smarmy older kid had brought his deck of COP: Reds, Warmths, and Sanctimonies to play against your Orcish Artillery deck... and it made you want to yell at that kid until he swapped decks, just like I used to yell at actual Obsessive Color Hoser Kid back in 1993.

Flavorwise, the Orzhov control the commerce of Ravnica, and we also explored some currency-style keywords, as bizarre as that may sound. White and Black are both pretty good at gaining life (especially White) and spending life (especially Black). What if White/Black's mercantile side was reflected by a network of cards that gained life, taxed life, or stole it from others, then spent those life points for various game effects? It's a pretty interesting idea that fits well with the flavor. There's just one big problem with the "Bought & Sold" keyword above – can you spot the problem in the keyword? ...That's right - you found it – what keyword? While "Gaining Life and Paying Life" was an interesting theme, we couldn't find a keyword in it that we liked.



We were also just plain underwhelmed with all the Orzhov keyword mechanics we'd discussed so far, even after months of design meetings. After we'd found the core of Bloodthirst and Replicate so quickly, it was a little disheartening that W/B was proving so difficult. Fortunately, Aaron Forsythe came to the rescue, coming up with an extremely flavorful, tough to understand, unique new gothic keyword called Haunt. We all liked Haunt as soon as he pitched it to us. Like Replicate and Bloodthirst, Haunt went through a lot of versions too, as Aaron discusses in his article "[Haunting Your Dreams](#)," and we ended up very happy with where it came out.

Ravnica to *Guildpact* – Like Father, Like (and Unlike) Son

So there you have it. Although the structure and the flavor of *Guildpact* were both laid out for us, the *Guildpact* design team worked its collective ass off for each guild to design a keyword mechanic, find its flaws, design another, find its flaws, design another, find its flaws, and so forth, until we finally reached a trio of keywords that we're proud of, weaving structure with flavor with fun, combining analysis with inspiration. All before our elite *Guildpact* development team even entered the picture.

I had dreams of telling you all kinds of other *Guildpact* stories: The evolution of the Nephilim; Paul Barclay's innovative idea for the Magemarks; the way that *Guildpact*'s unguilded cards subtly support the Guilds' major themes; and the ways the block's current triple-guilded color trios (WBG, WRG) combine their three guilds' powers to provide something totally new. But time is running out, so I'll say only that we four had a blast working hard to make *Guildpact* awesomely fun for you all, and I hope you all really enjoy playing it!