

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



In The Cards

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Making Magic
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Welcome to the first *Dissension* Post-Preview Week! This is the week where we continue talking about *Dissension* but in a far less coy way, as all the cards are now public. (Really, [they're right here if you haven't seem them.](#)) Last week I hinted that I might not talk about design. It turns out that I'm still planning to do that (or not do that as the case may be), but two weeks from now. That means that this week I'm doing nothing but talking about design. In fact, if you don't like design talk (and if so, what are you doing reading the design column?), I'd leave now.

Today I'm going to go through *Dissension* and share some design stories on cards that strike my fancy. There will be no real rhyme or reason to anything other than my whim. I'm just sharing random stories/insights/observations. To quote Fat Albert "if you stick around, you might just learn something." (I think I just pre-referenced – my term for making a cultural reference before the time of the person you're talking/writing to – most of my audience. Hey, hey hey!)

Azorius Herald / Court Hussar / Crypt Champion / Patagia Viper / Plaxmanta / Squealing Devil

Back during *Ravnica*, I talked in my column a bit about how evolution would work in this block. I said that there would be some ten-card cycles that would shift with each set. These six cards are part of one of those cycles, what is known as "enhanced" cards. The idea behind "enhanced" cards is that they are cards with kicker-like effects that are triggered by spending a certain color mana when the spells are played.

In *Ravnica*, the "enhanced" spells were all instants and sorceries. In *Guildpact*, they were all creatures that gained comes into play effects when enhanced. As *Guildpact* varied the cycle from *Ravnica*, that meant *Dissension* was on the hook to tweak the cycle yet again. I got the idea for these cards as I was looking at the *Guildpact* "enhanced" spells. The middle set had a creature that allowed you to "kick" into an additional spell (technically a comes into play effect, but it feels like a spell). What if *Dissension* did the exact opposite? What if *Dissension* had its cycle be spells that allowed you to "kick" into creatures.

I thought about doing this by having the "enhanced" effect making tokens, but it turned out to be unnecessarily wordy. After a little fiddling, the obvious answer came to the forefront. I needed to make these cards as creatures with a comes-into-play effect that sacrificed them if you didn't "kick" it. What this meant was that we were free to make creatures that are completely out of place in the color they're in.

My favorite part of these cards is the "what the...!" response they seem to generate the first time people see them. A red creature with Fear or a black creature with double strike or a white unblockable creature tend to raise a few eyebrows.



Blessing of the Nephilim

As a designer I have no shame borrowing from previous cards I've designed. This card was inspired whole cloth from another card I designed that's come out in the last few years. Any guesses? The answer is the card *Wordmail* from *Unhinged*. It too is an aura for * that grants +1/+1 for each of something determined by the card. (*Wordmail* looks for words in the enchanted creature's name.) This card plays into a small theme that you'll find in *Dissension*: cards that reward you for playing multicolor cards

Delirium Skeins / Vision Skeins

One of the interesting discoveries in *Dissension* was that the Azorius and Rakdos are, philosophically speaking, almost direct opposites. The Azorius define themselves by their responsibilities while the Rakdos shun responsibility in every way possible. During design I realized that these two guilds had an interesting contrast. The Azorius try to keep a handful of cards while the Rakdos want to empty their hand quickly. The Azorius like to share their fortune, while the Rakdos like to share their pain.

Which leads us to these two cards. The *Delirium Skeins* was a very early card that resulted from the hellbent mechanic. The fact that Rakdos is willing to throw away its own cards meant that we could make a card that was

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balanced for everyone else, but quite powerful in the Rakdos guild. For a while **Vision Skeins** was three cards per person, but it ended up being a little too good and a little too not common in flavor.

Dovescape

I'm often asked how I come up with crazy cards like **Dovescape**. The answer is I have no idea. From time to time, I like to brainstorm weird rare cards and every once in a while I stumble across something like **Dovescape**. I think the idea behind this card was inspired by **Opalescence**. That card, from *Urza's Destiny* (my only solo design) turns all enchantments into creatures. **Dovescape** just took the idea to the next step. What if I could turn all my spells into creatures? How they became doves, I have no idea.

Evolution Vat

This is one of those cards that went through a lot of tweaking in design. We started with a simple idea: This was going to be the Simic-related artifact. This meant it had to have one basic effect and then a second effect that required blue and green mana. The base card was actually a leftover from *Fifth Dawn*. I loved the idea of crossing a **Dragon Blood** with an **Icy Manipulator**. It created an interesting tension and allowed the card to be used in two different ways. The problem was that *Mirrodin* had both **Dragon Blood** and **Icy Manipulator**, so the card got shelved.

While we were looking for artifacts in *Dissension* design, I dusted the old card off. Because we needed it to be a guild artifact, we started looking for ways to find a second color-affiliated activated ability. To solve this problem, I approached it from the creative side. What would this artifact be for the Simic? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it would have to be some kind of experimentation chamber. If that were the case, couldn't the blue/green activation help you in improving the creature? After all, "improving upon nature" is the Simic way.

The idea to double the counters didn't come right away, but once I stumbled upon it, I knew I had my answer. For those of you that are unaware, one of my secret goals is to see how much I can raise the occurrence of the word "double" in **Magic**. As the creator of **Doubling Season**, **Doubling Cube**, **Beacon of Immortality**, **Solarion** and more cards with double strike than you can shake a stick at, I feel I'm doing good work



Fertile Imagination

One of the big concerns with forecast (the Azorius keyword mechanic) was that there didn't exist many answers to it. To counter this, the *Dissension* design team decided to make the conscious effort to give each of the other guilds some tools to help combat it. Rakdos had it easy, as discard is the most effective weapon against cards that live in their owner's hands. You'll even note that many of the discard spells specifically allow you to go after particular spells.

The trick was how to allow blue/green to also have answers. That is what inspired this card. The idea was, how could I punish my opponent if I know of a particular card (or more) in his hand? The card ended up making tokens, as it needed to create some effect that made sense in green.

Ghost Quarter

I have the lovely distinction of being the designer of second highest amount of banned & restricted cards (and I'm slowly catching up to Richard). One of those cards is **Wasteland**. I designed it in *Tempest* as a fixed **Strip Mine**. **Ghost Quarter** is a fixed **Wasteland** (which makes it a fixed, fixed **Strip Mine**). The idea behind it was that I wanted to create a land that dealt with problem lands without setting the land's controller back on land. I'm not sure if this is going to see any tournament play (and that depends a lot on how many specific lands exist that people want to hose), but I'm very proud of its design.

Ignorant Bliss

As the Rakdos (B/R) had the hellbent keyword, the design team spent a lot of time finding hellbent enablers. Most of them entailed cards that allowed you to discard cards. I was eager though to find other ways to help hellbent. This led to the creation of this card. What if, I thought, we made a card that could temporarily help hellbent. What if we could make **One with Nothing** for just a single turn? My original version was this card without the cantrip for ♣. It became quickly apparent that the card needed the cantrip.

The other interesting design point that this card emphasizes is the value of focused designs. This card would never have been made in a vacuum. Unto itself it's kind of pointless, but in a set all about getting an empty hand it becomes a quirky, potentially useful card. I often talk about the values of themes. This is a big one. It allows us to make cards that



otherwise would never see the light of day. As the guy in charge of keeping a steady churn of design, things like this are of utmost importance to me.

Isperia the Inscrutable

One of my favorite parts of design is hole filling. This happens during development when the development team kills cards and needs replacements. Late hole filling comes with all sorts of interesting challenges. For example, the development team scrapped the original card, but the art had been commissioned. It was a W/U sphinx. I took it upon myself to find a mechanic that fit the Azorius flavor and the sphinx flavor. This is what I came up with.

The idea I was playing with was that Sphinxes are creatures of knowledge. (That's why they love their riddles so.) This mechanic requires you to either know or deduce something. If you do, you get a pleasant payoff. In addition, the card helps you gather more information to use on future turns.



Macabre Waltz

The existence of hellbent made me re-examine a number of things. One was making more use of discard as an additional cost (although technically it's not an additional cost on this card). If you look through *Dissension*, you'll see that there is more than average. This is one of those cards. In the case of this card, I added it onto an effect with card advantage to even out the card loss.

Magewright's Stone

Part of a column like this is to show little insights into the design. This card's design was interesting in that it had a Gordian Knot answer. (I've talked about the Gordian Knot before; it's a tale about a man who solves a complex knot riddle by chopping the knot in half with his sword.) I wanted to make an artifact that could be used to untap creatures with tap effects so you could use them again. My early versions of this card kept failing, as playtesters were using the cards to untap creatures for blocking purposes. But then I hit upon the answer - the artifact's effect only worked on creatures with a tap in their activation. The lesson with this card is that sometimes the answer is a simple as just writing what you want on the card.

Muse Vessel

One of the recurring themes of this column is the design team's quest to create hellbent enablers. *Muse Vessel* is another such card. It started as a simple artifact that could force discard - the idea being that sometimes you might use it on yourself. The rest of the design team didn't like it, because they felt that spending mana to force yourself to discard was too high a cost. That was when I hit upon the idea of allowing you to play the spell you removed. This way if you used it on yourself to get to hellbent, you still had access to your spells. And if you used it on an opponent, it became sort of a *Word of Command* variant.

Ocular Halo

The design team was responsible for finishing out a number of ten card cycles. One was the off-color activation cycle (twenty cards in all, as we had to have each guild work both directions). The key to designing these cards is to find two abilities, one in each color, that are both interesting by themselves but combine to good effect. The challenge for *Dissension* was that we didn't want to repeat any of the effects used on previous off-color activation cards. As fourteen of the twenty (with twenty-eight effects) had already been done, this made our task a lot more difficult than you might think at first blush. In the end, I was excited by the idea of mixing an aura that granted a tap effect along with a Vigilance effect.

Odds & Ends

One of the challenges of writing a design column is remembering how different cards got designed. Last week I previewed Odds & Ends. In the article I explained how the two halves came to be designed. It turns out I was way off base on Odds. The creator of the card, our own Mark Gottlieb, emailed me with the story behind the cards real design:

I actually designed the card for *Guildpact*. When the *Wheel of Fortune* was killed, it opened up a rare Izzet hole. I submitted the Odds mechanic for that (I can't find my submission, so I don't know what I called it), but Nate's *Cerebral Vortex* design was taken instead. I was disappointed, because I loved this design. At some point in one of the many rounds of *Dissension* split card design, I realized I could give this card another shot, and I put it on Error (half of a *Trial/Error* design I submitted). The spell was liked, but the pairing wasn't. (In my submission, Trial was , and that didn't work. Although the Simic would be inclined to run a clinical trial, the name Trial in *Ravnica* could only be on an Azorius spell.) So the card was again nixed. However, the spell had been popular in playtests, so Aaron brought it back as part of *Odds/Ends* when we needed a new card. The spell fit better with that name than it did with Error anyway!

Let me offer a public “Sorry Mark”. Just because he’s my arch-nemesis doesn’t mean I don’t want him to get proper design credit. Don’t worry though; my job as Head Designer tortures him in his job of Rules Manager each and every day.

Rakdos the Defiler

I’m only responsible for one word on this card, but I’m mighty proud of it: non-Demon. When we were going through the designs, Aaron mentioned that he didn’t like that the card allowed you to sacrifice Rakdos to himself when things started getting out of control. That’s not the Rakdos way. As a fix, I suggested adding “non-Demon” before “permanents”. Everyone had a good laugh. Then I said, “No, really.”



Research & Development

This card almost had a different name. Matt Cavotta, as the word guy, always runs his final names by a number of people including the **Magic** Brand team. The then Brand Manager, a lovely woman named Wendy Wallace, said no to the name. (The current **Magic** Brand Manager, by the way, is none other than former R&D member – Elaine Chase.) I was sent to Brand to meet with Wendy to find out the problem with the name. The conversation went something like this. (The actual chain of events took place over many weeks, but for the sake of dramatic license and a punchy story, I’ve condensed it down to a single conversation.)

Me: Okay Wendy, so what’s wrong with the name?

Wendy: Research & Development?

Me: Yes.

Wendy: You can’t name a card after a department of Wizards of the Coast.

Me: Look At Me, I’m the DCI. Look At me, I’m R&D. The Ultimate Nightmare of Wizards of the Coast Customer Service. Fascist Art Director. Frazzled Editor.

Wendy: Those are *Un* cards. *Un* cards don’t count.

Me: How about *Web*? We have a *Web* team.

Wendy: The official name of the department is Online Media. We wouldn’t have a card called Online Media.

Me: You do realize that Research & Development is an expression. It’s a phrase outside of Wizards.

Wendy: Yes, but the fact that it’s a department within Wizards makes it off limits. We can’t reference ourselves in our own game.

Me: You do understand that people call me *Maro*.

Wendy: But that name came from the card, not vice versa.

Me: Actually... Let me understand if I understand your issue correctly. You feel it is inappropriate for the game of **Magic** to reference departments within Wizards. You feel it’s unprofessional.

Wendy: That’s my point.

Me: What if the game had precedent of doing this before. What if R&D isn’t the first internal group to be named on a **Magic** card? If I can prove we’ve done it before, would that make it okay?

Wendy: It would have to be a prominent department. It can’t be some nickname used by some tiny group of people ten years ago.

Me: No, I’m talking about a major department that exists today. If I prove that they were referenced in a card name, you’d be okay with Research and Development?

Wendy: I guess. Okay, sure.

Mark: Thanks, Wendy. The card? **Brand**.

Seal of Doom / Seal of Fire

In our quest to find hellbent enablers, we often turned to the past for inspiration. One early influential pair of cards was the red and black Seal from *Nemesis*. Wee talked for a few minutes about how to make new versions of the Seals when Aaron piped in: “Why don’t we just reprint them?”

Simic Guildmage

This guy inspired a lot of debate on the design team. I designed him when I realized that blue and green had a similar ability that mirrored one another. Plus, *Ravnica* block was a set with both aura and +1/+1 counter mini-themes. While everyone on the team liked the card, there was some worry that it wouldn’t live up to the other guildmages in Sealed. I told the team to have faith. The mini-themes are there. It’ll work out. And then in the very first playtest after we made the card, I got it in my Sealed playtest and wrecked everyone I played with it. It’s not always great, but man when the card finds its moment, it sings.

Unliving Psychopath

It’s not often that I design a 0/4 for black. but every once in a while we find a card that feels mighty black, despite the not-so-black power/toughness stats. This is one such card. Plus I do so love my zombie assassins. Ga’Aark, this one’s for you!

Voidslime


Sometimes in design you stumble upon a card that you just cannot believe hasn't been done yet. We've had a few cards that counter activated abilities and numerous cards that countered spells. But we'd never put them on the same card before. "Triggerred abilities" was later added on as we figured, why leave out something we can counter?

Windreaver

Let me answer the question that everyone is wondering. Was this inspired by **Morphling**? Of course it was. Here's how it came about. I was trying to create a White/Blue creature that could be very defensive, yet could also help win the game quickly once you gained control. So I started looking for cards like this that have existed in tournament White/Blue decks. And guess what? **Morphling** came up. Once I saw it, I thought it would be cool to try a version that had two white activations and two blue ones. (The fifth activation just turned into flying.)

I was very careful to choose effects that had some synergy, but didn't just copy **Morphling**. Although if you look closely, you can see how each of the abilities is loosely tied to one of **Morphling**'s abilities.

Wrecking Ball

For starters, I wish we had thought of the name Petrify. Second, this card just cannot cost . I know everyone wants us to do it, but we've learned the long and hard way that making land destruction too aggressive is just bad news. Third, the card is still quite good as is.

What a Card

And that is my look at some of the design of *Dissension*. I hope it proved insightful. If you have any of your own insights, feel free to drop me a line.

Join me next week when I get all Law and Orderly.

Until then, may you have as much fun playing *Dissension* as we had making it.

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*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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