

**Aaron's design diary takes you inside one of the most highly anticipated sets in Magic history!**

## **Design Diary: *Dissension***

Aaron Forsythe

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- [Aaron Forsythe Archive](#)

*Dissension* marks R&D member Aaron Forsythe's debut as lead designer for a set. Aaron wrote an article for *InQuest* that was essentially a quick diary of his experience designing the set. The original was over 3,000 words, but the version that made it to print ended up being about half that size due to a combination of what the magazine could print (and fit) and what Wizards could give out before the set was out.

Now that *Dissension* is fully public, we thought this was a great opportunity to print the original. Those who read the *InQuest* article will find considerably more detail here, and those who missed the original article will get a second chance at Aaron's inside look at designing one of the most highly anticipated **Magic** sets in history. For those that would like to read the original, copies of *InQuest Gamer* #133 (pictured right) should be available at your local magazine vendor as you read this. (While you're there, don't miss *InQuest*'s awesome first look at Wizards of the Coast's major new release for 2006: [Dreamblade!](#))  
- Scott Johns, Producer for [magicthegathering.com](#)



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**T**he following is a diary of my first design lead—the third set of the Ravnica block, codenamed "Delete" (as in Control-Alt-Delete). You'll know it as *Dissension*, but for now, have a look at the process that brought this fine set into being.

### **January 17, 2005**

The team convenes! "Delete" design is officially underway. This marks my first-ever design lead, and my squad looks to be a competent one, consisting of the famously



brilliant Mark Rosewater, the lead designer of **Magic**; Mark Gottlieb, resident rules expert and wacky idea man; and Brandon Bozzi, knower of all things creative.

Being part of a very structured block, "Delete" gets a few things for free right off the bat, specifically three awesome dual lands. Sounds like a great set already! Additionally we know we need some guildmages, guildhalls, guild artifacts, guild recipes for meatloaf, and so on.

We'd be dealing with three very different guilds in this set—the white-blue Azorius Senate, who are the bureaucratic high judges of the world; the reckless black-red Cult of Rakdos, a crazy group of sadists that live simply to destroy; and the bioengineers of the Simic Combine, who are out to improve nature through science. Brandon debriefed us on the guilds' philosophies—because novels had been written for the earlier sets that referenced our three guilds, we're beholden to some creative constraints right off the bat. But that doesn't bother me—some of the best designs spring forth from restrictions.

## January 19

Today we discussed what we call the "third set problem." In the past, we felt the need to throw players curveballs in the third sets of blocks because we anticipated some of them getting bored with the block's settings or mechanics or both by the time the third sets rolled around. Those curve balls have typically been subthemes that were very loosely connected to the rest of the block. For instance, the "converted mana cost matters" and "dragon" themes in *Scourge*, the "sunburst/five-color" theme in *Fifth Dawn*,

and the "hand size matters" theme in *Saviors of Kamigawa*. The main problem is that these subthemes generally feel "tacked on," and don't necessarily play very well in the context of a block's other two sets, mainly because the designers of the third sets had to fend for themselves, as no thought was usually put into how the third set of any given block should look when the first set of that block was being put together. Often nothing exciting was saved for set three, and the people working on them had to scrap to find any new twist on the block's themes (I know first hand—*Fifth Dawn* was the first set I did design work on).

Rosewater was convinced that "Delete" would suffer no such fate, as it had more in common with *Apocalypse*—generally considered the most successful of all recent third sets—than it did with *Scourge* or *Saviors*. *Apocalypse* was thought to work well because it did not simply contain "more of the same"; instead, it delivered entirely new material than what was present in *Invasion* and *Planeshift*. Because of *Ravnica* block's guild model, "Delete" would by default not be delivering "more of the same"—no more dredge, convoke, haunt, etc.—but instead would have new mechanics and color combination so players wouldn't be bored with it before they even tried it.

***Apocalypse was thought to work well because it did not simply contain "more of the same"...***

I find that sentiment encouraging, but at the same time I've been stockpiling cards for a subtheme that I think will complement the entire block as opposed to trying to turn it on its ear. I call it "gold matters," and it is simply a collection of spells and creatures that reward or punish players for using multicolored cards. [Muddle the Mixture](#) in *Ravnica* used to counter multicolored spells, but I said, "Let's save that." [Streetbreaker Wurm](#) from "Alt" used to have protection from multicolored (and be

six mana), but I said, "Let's save that." I also had the "Alt" team push off a cycle of Spirits that regrow themselves whenever you play a multicolored spell. What I like about this theme is that it plays into cards you already have access to and gives them new value. But even though I don't really anticipate the traditional "third set" problem with "Delete," this little subtheme is probably not enough "juice" for the set on its own.

## January 21

Rosewater had a great idea today—bring back split cards, except make both halves gold so as to fit our multicolored matters theme. We have been avoiding reusing tricks from *Invasion* in this block because we want to differentiate the two in players' minds, but now that we're near the end of *Ravnica* world it might be okay to bend the rules a little.

The team liked the idea, as the split cards would fill the role the Nephilim and Leylines tried to fill in "Alt"—something wild and unexpected. I discussed split cards with Matt Place, the man slated to be the lead developer for "Delete." If Matt believes one thing, it's that we shouldn't be afraid to reuse ideas that players really like, and he believes split cards fall squarely in that camp. Sounds like a go to me!

## January 24

The team started talking mechanics today. It didn't take long for us to agree on directions for each guild to go.

Because white-blue wants to promote *inaction*, we want to try a mechanic that works from your hand. We're calling it "brainwave," and the flavor justification is that the spells are so powerful that merely thinking about them generates an effect.

Brainwave—[cost], reveal CARDNAME from your hand: Do X. Play this ability only during [time], and only once each turn.

We're not sure when we want you to be able to use them—your upkeep, and opponent's upkeep, combat, maybe a mix? Rosewater wants me to talk to rules manager John Carter to see if this ability can be triggered instead of activated, but there are doubts as to whether we can make cards hidden in your hand trigger.

Black-red is supposed to be the fun-loving destructive guild, so we came up with a mechanic that rewards you for destroying your opponent's stuff.

Thrillkill N—Do X. (*At the beginning of your upkeep, if any opponent controls N or fewer permanents, do the thrillkill effect.*)

The mechanic has quite a few variables, but it should be interesting to work with.

Because blue-green wants to have good creatures and be able to alter its creatures, we figured something with +1/+1 counters would be in order, especially since we could engineer it to work well with Gruul and Golgari cards. Our first attempt:

Mutato-2, Remove a +1/+1 counter from CARDNAME: Put a +1/+1 counter on another target creature. That creature gains [ability] until end of turn.

So they'd play like souped-up *Stronghold Spikes*, granting abilities like flying and trample to other creatures in addition to donating +1/+1 counters. "Mutato," by the way, is a word Gottlieb culled from an old X-Files episode. Of the three, this is the mechanic that I feel could be improved the most.



*This cheap beast goes crazy once your hand empties, and his "drawback" can help you get there.*

## January 28

After talking about the thrillkill mechanic more, we decided it sucked. You'd have to be counting the number of permanents on your opponent's side of the table every single turn, and the mechanic really promotes only one kind of deck—land destruction, which isn't fun for anyone. So we scrapped it. Good riddance.

Looking back at historical mechanics, we determined that the type of mechanic that the *Ravnica* block was missing was one like threshold, where your creatures and spells all got better if a certain game state was achieved. I suggested having an empty hand as the requisite state, as it captured the reckless damn-the-future attitude of the Cult of Rakdos. The team was quickly on board, and thus was born the mechanic I like to call "hellbent." It creates a nice juxtaposition between white-blue, which likes to have a full hand, and black-red, which likes to have an empty one. One with Nothing for the win!

## January 31

Because I want to fit ten split cards into the set on top of all the requisite guild stuff and the multicolored matters theme, I talked Randy Buehler, director of **Magic** R&D, into letting me increase the set size by fifteen cards over "Alt." It was an easier fight than I had anticipated, as in it wasn't a fight at all. He just took me on my word that it was the right thing to do. Cool beans.

## February 9

We talked about potential reprints to tie into the hellbent theme of playing without a hand. *Weatherlight's* [Circling Vultures](#) was considered, as was making a red version of [Elvish Spirit Guide](#). The idea I liked best, though, was bringing back [Seal of Fire](#) and [Seal of Doom](#) from *Nemesis*. They let you empty your hand, but still give you reactive options. Perfect.

## February 14

Happy Valentine's Day! We discussed options for how we wanted to handle the "enhanced" spells in this set. *Ravnica* did instants and sorceries (like [Ribbons of Night](#)) that had kicker-like enhancements. "Alt" did creatures (like [Ogre Savant](#)) with comes-into-play effects as the enhancements. We needed a twist of our own. Rosewater suggested spells with enhancements that allowed them to be creatures. Gottlieb, a former editor with vast rules knowledge, was quick to point out that these would be creature cards with conditional sacrifice effects that might be hard to understand, but they would be doable. We mocked some up:

```
[Sneaky Soldier]
2W
Creature - Human Soldier
2/2
CARDNAME is unblockable.
When CARDNAME comes into play, gain 6 life.
When CARDNAME comes into play, sacrifice it unless U was spent to play it.
```

So the comes-into-play effect was in-color (life gain is white), and the creature was the off-color part (unblockable is blue). They looked kinda cool, but the questions loomed: Would development like them? Would playtesters understand them?

## February 23

Crap. We were making such great headway on the split cards. Gottlieb—our resident wordsmith—had generated a huge list of potential names: everything from Above // Beyond, Aches // Pains, and Armed // Dangerous to Track // Field and Wild // Woolly. We laid out how we wanted to do the color pairs—one allied and one enemy pair per card, like GW // WB, and then chose several potential names for each card before designing as many abilities as we could to match those names. It was only after sifting through several hundred potential abilities and trying to assign the best ones to each card that I realized our initial plan *didn't work!* By having one enemy and one allied pair per card and by mandating that the center color be shared, we were only making cards for half of the three-color

combinations, whereas we wanted one for each of the ten. We had two cards for the green-black-white trio (GW // WB and BG // GW) but nothing for green-white-blue. It just didn't work out right.

So I had to throw out most of this week's work and reexamine how to make these cards work right. The correct answer ends up being five allied-allied pairs at uncommon, and five enemy-enemy pairs at rare. The allied-enemy pairs didn't give us the diversity we wanted. Back to the drawing board. Note to self: Try to get a "[Research // Development](#)" card made.



*This efficient beast is the "mutato king," making all his counter-bearing friends even better.*

## March 4

We did some preliminary playtesting and mutato proved to be a beating, both from a power-level perspective and in how much it complicated the game. Every attack and block became a huge equation involving various counters moving around and abilities being granted. It caused some major mental meltdown.

We had to figure out a way to simplify what the mechanic was doing, most likely by taking away some of the ability to move counters around at any time. The best suggestion was having the counters be movable only when a new creature came into play, and letting the mutato creatures have the power to "graft" abilities onto any creature with a +1/+1 counter. For example:

[Wing Grafter]

3UU

Creature - Bird Mutant

1/1

Mutato 2 (This creature comes into play with two +1/+1 counters. Whenever another creature comes into play, you may move a +1/+1 counter from this creature onto it.)

1U: Target creature with a +1/+1 counter on it gains flying until end of turn.

It still has that great build-your-own-monster feel, but gameplay is much more fluid. We decided that having them all be 1/1 as opposed to 0/0 was good for two reasons: one, it makes them feel less like Spikes; and two, it would keep them in play once their counters had been used up so that their ability-granting would still be relevant.

## March 14

On the plane back from Pro Tour—Atlanta, rules manager John Carter looked over what we had so far and cleaned up some of the wording. He all but insisted that brainwave had to be an activated ability as opposed to triggered, and I had pretty much resigned myself to that fact already. For simplicity's sake, we limited brainwave to being activated during your own upkeep, creating nice gameplay tension regarding how you should spend your mana.

The good news was that everything we were attempting to do mechanically in the set worked in the rules for the most part, at least according to John.

## March 18

Getting the split cards together has been a real chore, but the end result has been enjoyable. I often cherry-picked pieces of each designer's submissions and combined them with my own, putting my "Bound" with Brandon's "Determined," my "Trial" with Gottlieb's "Error." I'm ending up with cards that are a lot more complex than what was in *Invasion* block, but at the same time are a lot more sexy as well.

One obstacle is that the **Magic** lead developer is not a big fan of us having split cards in the set at all—he doesn't think we need them. There's a real chance they may get yanked later on down the road. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

## March 23

After reviewing several designs, we decided on the legend and artifact abilities we wanted to use, and we have a couple of doozies. Our design for the demon Rakdos makes each player sacrifice half of his non-Demon permanents—how's that for an ability that's never been seen before! And our Simic guild champion—a monstrosity we're calling Experiment #247C—copies all the abilities of other creatures with counters on them.

## March 28

We needed a twist on the uncommon "guildhall" lands. *Ravnica's* all just had tap-activated abilities (like [Vitu-Ghazi, the City Tree](#)), and "Alt" is pursuing having theirs all sacrifice for an effect. So we needed a third way to do them, and opted to have each of them use the guild keyword. So the Azorius one has a brainwave ability, the Simic one has mutato 1, and the Rakdos one can be activated to kill creatures once you're hellbent.



*Forecast (formerly "brainwave") lets you channel the essence of a card while leaving it in your hand.*

## April 18

The "devign" phase has started (where development starts suggesting changes, but design is still in charge of the set), and the rest of the department is up in arms over brainwave. Other designers (not on the team) claim we've tried a mechanic like it in the past and failed. Developers worry about them being annoying and hard to stop (counterspells don't help) and leading to repetitive games where the same thing is happening turn after turn.

I stick to my guns, claiming the flavor of the mechanic fits the guild so well that we should feel obligated to try balancing it, and that we can do things to balance out its presence in the environment such as upping the amount of discard available. I fear for the mechanic's future.

## April 27

Playtests have allowed us to tighten up our themes and add cards to support them. The set is coming together nicely.

An issue has arisen regarding our split cards, though. The creative team has issues with some of the names we chose. Of course, because the names drove the designs, changing the names would mean we'd need all new cards. But they're adamant.

They don't like using past tense on card names, so "Lost // Found" is out unless we want to change it "Lose // Find", which sounds like a bad idea. They also don't like the idea of a spell named "Above" because it's too lame, so "Above // Beyond" has to go as well. "[Supply // Demand](#)" and "[Research // Development](#)" are on their hit list as well because they are derived from modern-day terminology, but I dig my heels in because I think the designs we have for those are so good that any issues with

anachronistic turns-of-phrase will be overlooked. I make other changes to accommodate them, shifting "Trial // Error" to a card where Trial can be white-blue, as the word goes well with the Azorius "judging" philosophy.

After all my shifting and redesigning (for the third time), I end up with a UR // RW card called "Odds // Ends," a name creative dislikes for being too goofy. I like goofy in small doses, so I leave it alone. It amuses me greatly.

## May 13

The deadline for handing over the set looms. I was told to trim the fat from the file before I hand it off, or they'd do it for me. It was definitely a somber meeting. This was, after all, the first design I'd ever led. I was so caught up in making "clever" cards that I ignored the need for clean and straightforward for the purposes of balance. I chalk it up to growing pains.

## May 20

Hand-off day. Because the team had more or less disbanded to pursue other projects, I spent the last week making changes to the file myself, both to address development's complexity concerns and to improve gameplay based on recent playtesting results. I came up with a few winners in the last minutes of design, including a rare red hellbent creature called Hot Roc that becomes a double striking firebreather once your hand empties. I respond well to pressure, I suppose.

Well, my work has finished on the set, so now I can only wait and watch as it goes through the rigorous development process. Where did I screw up? Will all of our main concepts survive? Will my favorite cards make it through alive? The journey is just beginning...

*Once those "other guys" took over, I was pleasantly surprised at how much of the set's essence remained intact. Sure, some changes were made, but all-in-all the finished product looks remarkably like what design handed off.*

*Here's a rundown of the big changes made in development.*

- *Brainwave became "forecast" and somehow survived development amidst heavy opposition. It was cut down to nine cards as a compromise, making it the smallest mechanic in the block.*
- *Mutato became "graft," and the creatures all went from being base 1/1 to base 0/0 just for ease of calculating their size on the fly.*
- *Once Guildpact abandoned the idea of having its guildhalls function differently than Ravnica's, Dissension's were redesigned to fit.*

*The set was a blast to make and is a fitting conclusion to one of the most awesome blocks in recent memory. I hope you enjoy playing with it as much as we did making it!*