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Dissension Design Documented

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Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

This is the 227th installment of "Making Magic" here on magicthegathering.com. Of the previous 226, all but one of them was penned by the stalwart Mark Rosewater. The one he didn't write was part of an article-swap gimmick that some say was forced upon him at gunpoint by the sinister Scott Johns. Well, the wheels have totally fallen off. Apparently anyone can write this column now!

The truth is, as *Dissension's* release neared, I suggested to Mark that he and I switch columns one week. After all, I was the set's lead designer; he was but one of three other team members. On the other hand, he was on the actual development team whereas I was merely an off-screen contributor.

Now that I'm here in this hallowed Monday slot, what to talk about? Certainly not design philosophy. My head's not that clear, my thought processes not that organized. How do I design cards? "Shoot from the hip. Do what feels good. Denny Crane."

No, instead I'll just present my design handoff document that I presented to the *Dissension* development team, augmented with reflective annotation. It's so much easier to write these columns when the bulk of the material was written beforehand (it certainly worked for my recent feature article).

Without further ado, here is the *Dissension* (then "Delete") handoff document from one year ago.

DELETE

A Tale of Love and Terror on the High Seas

by Aaron Forsythe, Brandon Bozzi, Mark L. Gottlieb, and Mark Rosewater

For some weird reason, absurd non sequitur subtitles amuse me to no end. Sadly, I don't think anyone else thought this was funny at all.

Set Size: 180 cards (60 common, 60 uncommon, 60 rare). This is 15 cards larger than previous small sets.

- This change was made to maintain the size of the three guilds and afford room for some additional "compelling content" without making the set feel too "squeezed."
- This change was approved by the Brand Strategy Council and has been updated in the set specs.

Guildpact had a hell of a time fitting everything it wanted into 160 cards; in fact, the three guilds in that set were "shorted" a rare in the number crunch. That probably bothered me more than it should have, but I didn't want it do happen again in *Dissension*. Additionally, the team knew we needed something bigger and bolder than, say, the Nephilim to cap off the block, and whatever it was would eat up card slots. These fifteen slots ended up going to the Eidolon cycle at common and the two cycles of split cards at uncommon and rare.

Guild Size: Each of the three guilds contains:

- 16 multicolored cards (4C / 5U / 7R, with each guild having one hybrid card per rarity). This is the same number as the RAV guilds, which is one more than the GPT guilds;
- Three lands;
- Two artifacts (a Signet and a rare);
- Two off-color-activated commons;
- Two off-color "enhanced" uncommons;

In *Ravnica*, all eight cards with off-color activations (*Transluminant*, *Tattered Drake*) were common (including the loosely connected *Elves of Deep Shadow*), but the "enhanced spells" were split 5/3 between uncommon (*Flash Conscriptio*n) and common (*Induce Paranoia*). *Guildpact* was even weirder, with five "enhanced" creatures at common (*Gruul Scrapper*, *Ogre Savant*) and only one at uncommon (*Revenant Patriarch*), whereas the off-color activations were split evenly between common (*Torch Drake*) and uncommon (*Shadow Lance*). For *Dissension*, I opted for a more unified approach, with all six of one at common and all six of the other at uncommon. It stayed that way.

- Some number of keyworded mono-colored cards.
- Two of the multicolored rares are the guild legends; the larger of the two has "CCDD" in its mana cost, and the smaller encourages playing with multicolored spells/creatures by referring to both of the guild's colors (just as in RAV and GPT).

Note that the relationship between the "CCDD" legend and the color-helping legend is not one of leader to lieutenant, although it happened to fall that way for the first two sets of the block. No, the relationship is simply "big expensive monster" to "smaller humanoid," with the only real exception being *Ulasht* in the *Gruul* guild, where

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both legends are essentially monsters. Grand Arbiter Augustin IV and Momir Vig, Simic Visionary are both paruns of their guilds, even though they are not the bigger, more expensive legends.

The Guilds and Their Keywords

Azorius (White/Blue)

- The “High Judges,” this guild strives for control through inaction.
- Bureaucratic style attempts to drag things to a halt.
- Style of play generally wants to be very controlling (defenders, counters, damage prevention, etc.). Unlike UB or BW, however, WU has spectacular “win conditions” that try to end the game quickly once control has been established.

We had cards like **Morphling** and **Iridescent Angel** in mind with the “spectacular win condition” thing, but that really didn't pan out. Azorius' big finishers don't particularly stand out from those of the other guilds.

- Flying is prevalent.
- Main creature types are Vedalken, Human, Spirit, Sphinx.

Brainwave: Brainwave [X] (*At the beginning of your upkeep you may reveal this from your hand and pay [X]*)—[Effect.]

- Brainwave is an ability on cards that you play from your hand during your upkeep, without actually spending the card.
- The ability plays into the “control through inaction” vibe of the guild, as they try to win without casting spells.
- It still needs to be worked out if this ability is triggered or activated once per turn.

We talked about having forecast cards trigger from a non-public zone (your hand), but the rules really didn't like that. So now they are all activated abilities that can be played once per turn.

- Brainwave can go on any card type.
- Brainwave effects are most often smaller versions of the spell's effect. Some have effects that combo with the spell's effect. In rare cases, the abilities are only tangentially related for interesting game play decisions.
- Brainwave is naturally hard to fight against. We try to solve this by making the tension of using the brainwave card very relevant, and by upping the level of discard available.

The discard was really, really powerful initially—**Brain Pry** cost 4, **Delirium Skeins** only 1, and **Wit's End** 4. Nutty. As forecast was scaled down, so was the discard to more “fair” levels.

Rakdos (Black/Red)

- The “Thrill-killers,” this guild is bent on mindless destruction just for fun. Other guilds manipulate them to do their bidding.
- Crazy reckless play style, even more so than GR and RW.
- They like to blow any and everything up. Land, creatures, artifacts, hands, life totals, even themselves.
- Main creature types are Demon, Goblin, Rat, Zombie.

Hellbent: Hellbent (*If you have no cards in hand*)—[Effect].

- Hellbent is a characteristic-setting ability that functions similarly to threshold.

Yes, hellbent was designed as an actual keyword and not an ability word. How it turned out was way, way out of the jurisdiction of design. Had hellbent been the first ability word people ever saw (instead of sweep or channel), I imagine the concept would have gone over better. In any event, get used to ability words as they are here to stay.

- Hellbent plays into the reckless “pants-down” style of the guild.
- Hellbent can go on any card type.
- Instants and sorceries check for hellbent status on resolution. Permanents are turned “on” and “off” as the number of cards in your hand varies.
- Hellbent should almost always be a positive ability, and usually is a magnification of the card's base functionality. Sometimes hellbent adds additional functionality.
- The hellbent ability of a card should never have more targets than the regular ability.
- The amount of enabling is set to “medium” right now in the file. Ideally the guild wants to win quickly, but hellbent never works if it gets stuck with too much land or too many expensive cards. Some ways to discard your own cards seem appropriate.
- Instant-speed bounce wrecks hellbent, so it is low in the file.
- The main challenge with hellbent is giving it the right cards so that there are interesting decisions to make while your hand is empty.

I'm happy with how this all worked out. If you play the Rakdos theme deck, you'll see that even with an empty hand there are decisions to be made. Cards like the **Seals**, **Ragamuffyn**, **Lyzolda**, and **Nihilistic Glee** all accomplish this goal.



Simic (Green/Blue)

- The “Bioengineers,” this guild’s mission statement is to improve upon nature.
- They are very creature-based, and should feature the “best” creatures in the block.
- “Best” doesn’t necessarily mean “most powerful;” but through some combination of efficiency, utility, and adaptability, GU’s creatures should feel special.

Considering how good we’ve been making creatures lately, it was a bit ambitious to claim that Simic’s would feel like the “best.” Hopefully some of it still comes through.

- Their style of play is to unleash a constant stream of hard-to-kill monsters.
- Card-drawing is a subtheme, as it is a traditional Blue/Green overlap.
- Main creature types are Elves, Snakes, and Mutants.

Mutato: Mutato [N] (*CARDNAME comes into play with [N] +1/+1 counter on it. Whenever another creature comes into play, you may move a +1/+1 counter from CARDNAME onto that creature.*)

- Mutato represents both a static and a triggered ability.
- It fits the “adaptability” flavor of the guild; the creatures you want to be bigger can be, and creatures can “share” abilities.
- Mutato can only go on creatures (with one notable exception).



That notable exception, detailed later, didn’t survive.

- Most creatures with mutato have a second ability (usually activated) that affects creatures with +1/+1 counters on them.

For a brief moment in design we toyed with the abilities affecting only other graft creatures as opposed to any creature with counters on it. *Lame!*

- All mutato creatures are base 1/1. They are not 0/0 because we want to incentivize players to leave them in play for their abilities as opposed to just using them as sources of counters. The 1/1 body also distances them from Spikes.

Development changed them to 0/0’s, mostly to increase play decisions and to decrease difficulty in evaluating graft creatures’ power and toughness on the fly. A good change.

- In the case of those with activated abilities—the blue or green creatures each have  or  in the activation cost. The multicolored creatures have colorless activations.

This small bit of structure didn’t last, which is fine because it was really trivial.

- Once a mutato creature gives away all its counters, it can’t use its second ability on itself.

Now that they are all 0/0, this will almost never come up, but is still possible to have a **Helium Squirter** with no counters in play kept alive by a **Veteran Armorer**. And no, it can’t give itself flying.

- For support, we have a few cards that add counters to creatures, and a few ways to return used up creatures to your hand.

Other Features

1) This set marks the return of the Split Card.

- There are ten split cards, five common and five uncommon.
- The split cards are gold on both halves and share the middle color (GW // WU).
- The only way to get even color distribution and maintain the middle color was to do five allied/allied pairs and five enemy/enemy pairs. The latter are at rare.

Some players claim this breaks the structure of “there are no enemy colors in Ravnica.” I suppose it does to a degree that doesn’t matter and will be generally imperceptible. We had to divide them up somehow, and this made the most sense in the larger context of the game. Note that the enemy split cards aren’t necessarily more powerful than the allies just because they are rare; the biggest point of differentiation is that the rares are more complicated.

- The cards were designed to match their names. Each name is a common two-part phrase, and Creative has tacitly signed off on using the names in the file as final.

The fact that Creative signed off on them wasn’t exactly true, and I had to do some scrambling to get card names that everyone was happy with.

- The card types match on both halves of each card (Instant // Instant and Sorcery // Sorcery). This isn’t necessary per the rules, but there was no good reason not to do it.
- These split cards have more splashy abilities than the simple utility provided by the Invasion block ones.



2) There is a “gold-matters” theme in this set.

- We wanted a subtheme that would be backwards-compatible with the rest of the block as opposed to self-contained.
- There are a cycle of common creatures called “Prismoids.” They are 3C 2/2’s with an activated ability for “C, Sac.” They each also have the triggered ability of regrowing themselves whenever you play a gold spell. The idea is to reward players for playing gold and hybrid cards, and for making them feel better about having 3- and 4-color Limited decks.



Eidolons, obv.

- Several of the split cards refer to gold cards.
- There are other cards sprinkled throughout the set that refer to gold cards. Most are beneficial, but a little less than a third are “anti-gold,” meaning they work well against multicolored cards. These are not a major attempt to hose the block theme, but rather a simple extension of design space. (We aren’t going to put anti-gold cards in a block *without* gold.)
- There is a mirrored pair of creatures in white and black, one with protection from multicolored, the other with protection from monocolored.

3) There is a rare cycle called the “Entities.”

- These are five creatures that cost X1CC. When they come into play, they act like mini-Skyship Weatherlights for particular card types. They get bigger the more cards you remove from your library with them.
- You can pay mana to retrieve cards you removed with them, and they get smaller.
- Each one has a single keyword ability.

This cycle didn’t make it. They had a few problems that were difficult to solve, but the biggest reason they were cut was that the set didn’t need another cycle. Art was actually commissioned for the white one; that piece ended up on **Celestial Ancient**.

4) Like GPT, two of the six off-color-activated commons are Auras, and the other four are creatures. We would have liked six creatures, but blue is so crunched and had too many other creature requirements.

The two Auras were **Ocular Halo** and **Nettling Curse**. The lack of mono-blue cards in the set forced us to make one of the blue ones an enchantment, so we made a second enchantment to keep the first from feeling out of place.

5) The new “twist” on the “enhanced” cards is that you are paying for a sorcery, and you get a creature as the free bonus if you paid the correct color of mana. For instance, for 2★ you can gain 4 life, but if you spend 4★ to play it you also get a 2/1 unblockable creature.

Sneaky Soldier

2★

Creature – Human Soldier

2/1

CARDNAME is unblockable.

When CARDNAME comes into play, gain 4 life.

When CARDNAME comes into play, sacrifice it unless you spent U to play it.

- The CIP ability is in the card’s main color. The creature is in the kicker color. This leads to some weird-looking cards, like a blue 4/4 trampler or a green 2/2 flier. (I like weird.)

The blue 4/4 didn’t survive. **Plaxmanta** was created in development.

- We went this route to help with the “predictability problem” this set will have on the heels of GPT.
- These cards may be difficult to parse at first, but all six work the same.
- They are tough to balance... you want the spell to be somewhat reasonable on its own, and not completely insane once you toss in a creature “for free.”



You get a bad deal if you play these cards without being able to enhance them, but they all still have some effect on the game in a pinch.

6) The three uncommon “guildhalls” feature the guild keyword mechanics.

- We went this route to help with the “predictability problem” this set will have on the heels of GPT.
- This tweak is probably unnecessary, but it makes for some neat cards and a nifty surprise.

It was so unnecessary that it didn’t happen. All the current guildhalls were created in development.

7) The enchantment theme so prevalent in RAV and GPT is underplayed in DEL.

- The “gold matters” theme takes up most of that space.
- There are still over 10 enchant creatures in the file—many at common—but no cycles.
- There are still several cards that interact with Auras in the file.

8) We opted for uncommon artifacts. (GPT has none.)

- Who doesn't love artifacts?

The artifacts are another benefit of adding 15 cards to the set. We had room for stuff like this.

9) The file contains records numbered "86."

- These were cards that were cut for space, and are decent candidates for hole-filling.

That's it! Designing my first set was a challenge for sure, but the real reward was seeing the set go through development with any massive changes. I've seen sets get serious facelifts, and I was both happy and relieved that *Dissension* wasn't one of them.

I also take some amount of pride in individual cards that I made that ended up printed exactly as submitted, including *Coiling Oracle*, *Avatar of Discord*, *Pillar of the Paruns*, *Rakdos Pit Dragon*, *Trygon Predator*, *Azorius First-Wing*, *Taste for Mayhem*, *Protean Hulk*, and many others. I know designers aren't supposed to care *too* much about costs and Constructed playability, but I like knowing that I can make cards that are exciting, powerful, and fair all at once.

We now return to your regularly scheduled Rosewater column...

*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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