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Simic Engineering

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Latest Developments
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Here we were, playing Two-Headed Giant in the old games library that used to serve as headquarters for the **Magic** creative team. Each of us had a deck comprised of one of each card from a particular *Ravnica* block guild, lands, and enough non-guilded cards to bring the total to 60. Across the table sat Brandon Bozzi with Dimir cards and Matt Cavotta with Selesnya. I was wielding Azorius and my teammate, the distinguished Mark Rosewater, was controlling the Simic Combine.

My mana, I recall, came out quite poorly. I was stuck on two Plains and a Prahv, and trying to hole up behind a lone **Soulsworn Jury**. Mark, on the other hand, had developed beautifully, drawing both his Signet and the **Simic Growth Chamber**, and was deploying an array of weird mutants with amazing super powers.

Cavotta and Bozzi had us on the ropes early, thanks mostly to my mana troubles. **Dimir Infiltrator**, **Belltower Sphinx**, and a horde of spare Saprolings were chipping away at our life total, and we were having trouble stemming the bleeding... until the Frogling showed up.

Ah, **Plaxcaster Frogling**. At the time we were playing this particular game—smack in the middle of *Dissension* development—the activation cost of the Frogling's ability was a paltry 1. The 3/3 hit the table, followed closely by **Experiment Kraj**, then **Cytoplast Manipulator**. At this point I had nothing in play other than land, yet Brandon could only stare glumly at his hand full of **Brainspoil**, **Ribbons of Night**, and other sinister removal spells. Slowly but surely, all of his and Matt's creatures started trickling over to Mark's area of the board. **Selesnya Guildmage**... **Tolsimir Wolfblood**... the **Belltower Sphinx**...

We won, but we weren't particularly happy about it. I did next to nothing, and it was essentially a single card of Mark's that invalidated most of what Brandon and Matt drew, leaving them no option but to sit and watch as Mark stole all of their creatures.

Sure, it was a combination of the Frogling's untargetability granting, Kraj's liberal distribution of counters, and the Manipulator's reusable theft mechanic that ultimately did our foes in, but the Frogling had to be implicated as the chief culprit. After all, it was the card that single-handedly thwarted any interactivity in the game by making half the cards Brandon drew essentially blank.

Multiple people that played in that game—if not all four of us—voiced our dissatisfaction with the power level of the Frogling to *Dissension* lead developer Matt Place, and within a day its activation was upped to 2.

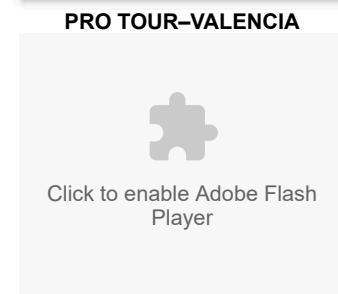
Such are the decisions that are made each and every day in R&D. What cards should be made stronger so that key concepts and abilities are represented in Constructed environments, and which should be weakened because they threaten to be "wet blankets" in casual and Limited play? No one likes having a casual game "ruined" by a card that says, "Ha ha, you can't stop what I'm doing for the rest of the game." Nor do they want to be forced to play **Wrath of God** or other "outs" against overpowered cards like our playtest Frogling in order to impose a bit of give-and-take back into the game. But at the same time, we as developers knew we wanted the Simic creatures to be a force to be reckoned on the tournament scene, that untargetability was perhaps the hallmark overlap between the two colors, and that targeted removal was running rampant in Standard. We had to walk a fine line.

Developing the Simic guild presented many, many problems like this. Their design philosophy was very simple—"the best creatures"—but Standard was rife with awesome creatures already. "Best" is subjective, but it usually boils down to some combination of efficiency and/or resilience. In pre-*Dissension* Standard, the former—**Kird Ape**, **Watchwolf**, **Dark Confidant**—and the latter—**Kamigawa Dragons**, **Meloku**, **Ghost Council**—were already out in full force... a tough spot to be in when you suddenly want to debut the guild that supposedly has *even better creatures than those*. We knew we couldn't trump some of the top end stuff, so we had to settle for making niche creatures that looked impressive on their own, and probably could combine with others of their ilk to become very impressive.

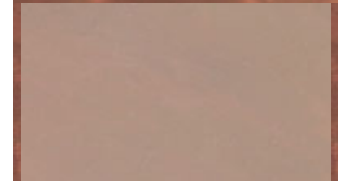
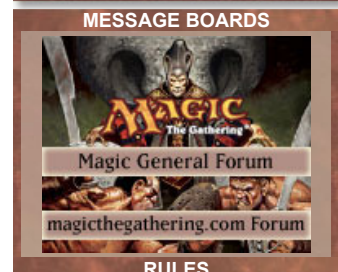
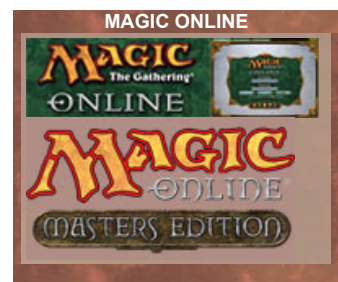
The Green/Blue rank-and-file do a great job of being splashy and offering powerful new abilities without redrawing the baseline of what makes a creature good. **Assault Zeppelin** is a house. **Trygon Predator** is an extremely efficient answer to artifacts and enchantments. **Omnibian** has a crazy effect that is hard to gauge immediately.



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Plaxmanta is a fantastic trick. Patagia Viper offers up a fabulous power-to-mana ratio, and a bit of evasion. And Experiment Kraj slices, dices, and juliennes.

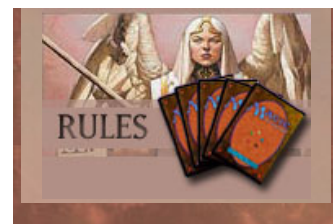
But what creatures should make the guild hum when all the marbles are on the line? What Simic creatures should raise the Green/Blue banner on the tournament tables, trying to compete with the Loxodon Hierarchs, Burning-Tree Shamans, and Keigas of the world?

Sporeback Troll

AF 4/29: Now a 3-mana 2/2, was 5-mana 3/3.
MP 7/20: Reduced cost and activation by 1 each.
MP 9/8: Cost up from 1G to 3G.

This fellow was handed off from design as a $\{2\}$ 2/2 that could regenerate grafted creatures for $\{2\}$, and development immediately made him *better*, lopping a mana off of both the mana cost and the activation cost. As a $\{1\}$ 2/2, this card was a holy terror. No other creature deck could ever get through on the ground, and it was quite possible to keep sufficient mana untapped to allow key creatures to survive Wildfire and Savage Twister as well as be unaffected by things like Lightning Helix and Mortify.

In Limited he was even more of an issue, which usually translates to frustrating experiences for casual players. Several folks in the department fought to keep him at his high power level, but in the end his mana cost was swapped with that of Aquastrand Spider.



Coiling Oracle

BB 4/26: I'm not sure if I love this card or hate it. The win-win is weird to me.
AF 5/19: GU is not about winning vs. losing. Just winning.
NH 6/9: This guy reminds me of rampant snake (minus color fixing) - do we want another year of that?
MT 6/28: That is for sure. This guy is uber-powered. A cheap way to bounce him would put him even more over the top.
AF 7/1: Land should CIPtapped.
AF 7/22: Or not. He's fun as is.

The Oracle was printed just as it came in from design, which isn't to say there weren't moments of doubt about the card. If you got lucky on the flips, you could get some very explosive starts, but the randomness was a bit jarring. We discussed mitigating it a bit by having the land come into play tapped, but everyone always had such a great time when they played the card, pleading for land in the early turns and bomb spells in the mid- to late-game, that we decided to leave it alone. Matt Place once called it "the perfect Magic card," as it provides this tiny yet relevant moment of suspense every time it hits the table.

I'm glad we left it alone; in our online *Dissension* surveys, the Oracle scored 4th-best in the "fun to play" category behind three rares... it was the top-scoring common in that category by far.

Plaxcaster Frogling

MP 4/18: Neat.
AF 4/25: Made a little smaller, uncommon.
MP 5/31: Activation from 1 to GU.
AF 6/5: I hope this gets revisited when it comes time to talk about constructed, as he is a great blue-green answer to Banishing World, and he'd probably bring a slew of other Mutato guys with him into constructed.
bs 7/12: we should do an overall cmc pass on this set...
MP 8/11: Activation cost of 2 may be better.
MP 8/17: Activation upped by 1.
MP 8/18: Activation back down to 2, now only protects from instants and sorceries.
MP 8/19: Back to protecting from spells and abilities.

I already discussed this guy's fate, but it was actually a pretty agonizing process. Our desire to make this card as good as it could be was at odds with how much it dominated the games in which it was good. As you can read, we tried a host of tweaks on his ability, changing the activation cost from $\{1\}$ to $\{2\}$ back to $\{1\}$ and then $\{2\}$, and having it alternately only make creatures untargetable by instants and sorceries as opposed to by everything.

I was a little worried when, at the Prerelease, a couple players expressed opinions that they thought the Frogling was "stupid" in an overpowered way, but initial glances at Regionals Top 8 decklists show him to be in a pretty good place, giving Green/Blue creature decks a bit of backbone in an environment that is packed with removal.

Cytoplast Root-kin

MP 7/20: Now gives counters to creatures that already have them, instead of mutants.
AF 7/22: Should there be a card that refers to "mutants" somewhere?
MP 7/27: Moved from gold rare to green rare.
MP 8/7: Both abilities now only work with your creatures.

This guy was meant to serve two roles—an efficient fatty, and a build-around card for a deck sporting lots of +1/+1 counters. Originally he was two colors, but was shifted, more or less intact, to just green.

His size to cost ratio is appealing, in line with **Ravenous Baloth** and **Kodama of the South Tree**. Those numbers may seem generous, but we've been rethinking the green creature curve lately, and I believe four-mana 4/4 should be about average for green, which is the "creature color" after all. Sure, the Baloth's stats helped make him very playable—dare I say great—but South Tree never really showed up in Standard. So it's not like 4/4 for four is automatically awesome.

As a build-around card, he makes more sense in one color as well. His spot on the curve gives you time to play out other creatures with counters, then rewarding them all with some addition +1 lovin'. **Vinelasher Kudzu** and the Frogling are the obvious candidates for consideration, but any creature with graft or bloodthirst, or random stuff like **Necroplasm** or **Shambling Shell** can be fun, too.



Simic Sky Swallower

AF 5/9: Backup Monger.
AF 5/19: Whatever happens, this should be the Royal Badass of Timmy/Spike cards.
MT 5/22: Make it 6 mana then. No king costs 7.
NH 6/9: Agree with Mike. Let the king have his way. Another ability would be cool too.
DAL 7/7: A little weird that it's just flying North Tree. That said, it is cool and makes me want to own it and play it. Overall thumbs up.
MP 9/2: Now a 6/6 (was a 5/5).

The big daddy. In design, one thing I knew I wanted Simic to have was "the ultimate prize," a creature so imposing that any player of any skill level would recognize it as a force to be reckoned with. I wanted to make another **Spiritmonger**—except I didn't want that moment of realization that "it's not as good as it looks." I wanted the real deal.

Simic Sky Swallower was actually the second attempt at such a creature—the backup in case the first one didn't work out. The first didn't fly and had a complicated combat ability, and it just didn't resonate with playtesters. So the Swallower, with his three simple abilities, moved into the set.

There was a fair amount of discussion about how "healthy" this guy would be for the game. Normally creatures that are untargetable can be "solved" by other means. **Blurred Mongoose**, for instance, is not a fan of **Nightscape Familiar**, and **Kodama of the North Tree** can't stand up in a fight against a protected **Ghost Council of Orzhova**. But there's no great way to stop the SSS, especially once we upped his size above that of the **Kamigawa Dragons**. No one plays **Stinkweed Imp**, so the list of the Swallower's natural predators is essentially nonexistent.

We decided to throw caution to the wind and print it, noting the extreme circumstance of being the third set of a gold block, in an enemy-colored guild centered around building the most awesome creatures imaginable. Such a situation was unlikely to present itself ever again.

In casual play, I imagine this card will occupy the same "love-hate" space as **Platinum Angel**, **Darksteel Colossus**, and **Mindslaver**—you love it when it's on your side, but think it's the dumbest card ever when your opponent plays it.

Any Questions?

Coldsnap previews are coming up quickly, and I'd like to do a Q&A column on **Dissension**—or all of **Ravnica** block—development. Send any questions on the block you may have to me using the email link at the bottom of the page, and I'll try to answer them next week!

Quick Note on the Bannings

All the "paper" formats are in fine shape and didn't need to be tinkered with. As for online stuff...

Prismatic was due for a set of bannings. We let people play around with the **Mirage** tutors for a while, but they have more than proven how good they are and now need to be retired. Joining them on the bench are **Congregation at Dawn** and **Merchant Scroll**, two more tutors that have been seeing increased play as of late. We will continue to exercise judgment with tutors in the format as more and more are released.

Here's what I wrote originally concerning the switching of Tribal Wars to Standard:

The big change was the switching of Tribal Wars to the Standard card pool. That was the best solution we had for a format that was increasingly deviating from the "spirit" of its initial conception. Several good things happen with this change: (1) We lose the decks based on *Tooth and Nail*, *Isochron Scepter*, and *Lion's Eye Diamond*, which are less about tribal and more about preying on the fact that other people's decks are tribal; (2) We lose the oppressive *Onslaught Goblins*, *Elves*, and *Zombies*, which were fun for a while but had outlived their welcome; and (3) We get to guarantee that the format won't stagnate again. As sets come and go, various tribes will be more or less feasible, and new block will have an actual impact on what is being played, as opposed to feebly trying to unseat the eternal powerhouses.

This change was made to re-inject some fun into the format and allow creative deckbuilding—rather than metagaming—to be the driving force behind what tribes are showing up.

Let me make it very clear that we have rethought our stance in light of public reaction. We are going to keep "Classic Tribal" as a format, and add "Standard Tribal" as yet another alternative; all Tribal tournaments will be run using the latter format going forward. Look for the DCI announcement to be revised sometime on June 2. (And *Umezawa's Jitte* will be banned from both versions of Tribal Wars; its removal from the Banned List was an oversight.)

The DCI is in uncharted waters when it comes to managing "casual" formats; after all, that body's job is to make sure that *tournament* environments are fair. To that end, I'm positive that something had to be done about the Tribal tournament environ, and my above comments hold true on that. We always have to assume that prize-driven Spikes will exploit any and every rule, card interaction, and format deficiency to win, and that has to be addressed whenever it pops up. What the DCI doesn't have a great read on is how well casual players self-regulate within their own circles. And honestly, how could we? It really isn't our domain. But, at the same time, we have to recommend how to operate the various *Magic Online* formats so as to maximize player enjoyment.

That's where you, the public, come in. You spoke and we heard. Your Specter and Volver and Sliver decks will never be without a format to call their own.

Last Week's Poll:

Which of the following OP programs do you enjoy the most?		
Prereleases	3051	46.2%
Friday Night Magic	1247	18.9%
Pro Tour Qualifiers	550	8.3%
Grand Prix	430	6.5%
Regionals	412	6.2%
None of the above	408	6.2%
Release Events	325	4.9%
Champs	186	2.8%
Total	6609	100.0%

With awesome new champs cards as part of each events' prizes, I hope to see this program rise in popularity. Don't forget—Limited Champs in North America (*Ravnica* block sealed deck) [are on June 24!](#)

This Week's Poll:

How do you feel about the revised Tribal Wars announcement?	
<input type="radio"/> Good idea.	<input type="button" value="Submit my Vote"/>
<input type="radio"/> Bad idea.	
<input type="radio"/> Don't care.	

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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