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You Want Answers?

Aaron Forsythe
Latest Developments
Friday, June 9, 2006



I'm having a heck of a week, friends. Not only is the big set I'm designing ("Peanut") beginning to enter development, but I've recently received a promotion that I'll get in to at some later point...

For this article, however, I have ten reader questions about the development of *Dissension* and the *Ravnica* block. Let's get started:

1) Power creep?

First, since this is the first time I write an email to a member of R&D, I would like to congratulate the great job you have and keep doing with Magic. I write this letter since once more you hint at power creep in your column. In particular, when referring to the "normal" green creature, whose power you are in process of increasing. Now I would just like to ask you that you think very hard on these issues. Power creep is a game-destroyer, and it becomes a clock signaling the fall of a game the moment it exists. I believe Magic already has such a clock, since slowly but surely cards are becoming increasingly more powerful and efficient. Still, thanks to the careful work conducted by R&D, this clock ticks very slowly; I advise not to speed it up. Today, a four-mana 4/4 becomes the norm for green creatures, and a 5/4 for four mana becomes the new benchmark for efficiency. Tomorrow, it will be the norm. It is a very dangerous downward spiral, and you don't have to take a dive into it. So I end this letter by asking that you reconsider these issues very, very carefully.

Thanks for reading,
David Baptista

I'm fully aware of the consequence of power-creep within a game system, and it is something that we constantly talk about in R&D. I'm not sure how to take your comment that **Magic** is continually creeping—yes, the power level of the game as a whole goes up every time a card is printed, simply because we can't *unprint* anything, but I do think we've done a good job of keeping sets and blocks within an acceptable band of power over the years, while at the same time making sure each new set and block offer cards that are appealing to play with. For instance, the power of cheap creatures is not higher now than it was in the *Mirage-Tempest* era, the power of mana acceleration is certainly way weaker than it was in the days of Alpha or Urza's block, card drawing is off-peak, as are combo cards, and today's "hard counters" look weak when compared to even those from the *Mercadian Masques* and *Invasion* era.

That said, some things are at their all-time high right now, including life gaining cards and mid-range (4-6 mana) creatures. Rorix, *Arc-Slogger*, Meloku, Ghost Council, *Loxodon Hierarch*, and Kokusho are all relatively recent cards that are more or less the cream of the crop of their category historically. In making all of these delicious fatties, we here in R&D have called into question the basic costing curve of green, the so-called "creature color." We want to redraw the line in a place where we think it makes sense going forward, and 2GG 4/4 with an ability falls on that line. If red can get a card like *Lowland Giant* (at least theoretically), then green should get something better for the same cost. It's not creep for creep's sake, and it was done with a keen eye towards the future. Green should have the most efficient mid-range creatures.

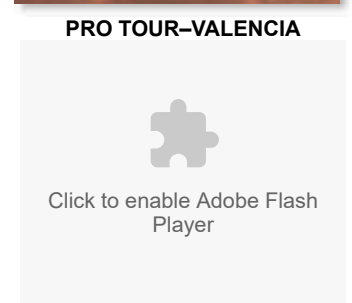


2) Block monster?

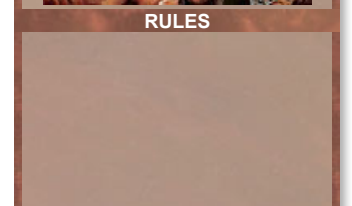
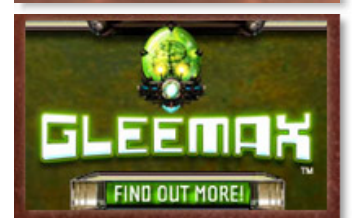
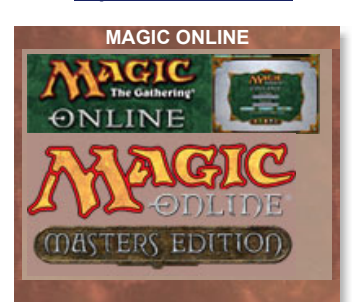
When designing the Ravnica block, were you not worried about the "block monster" problem seen in earlier blocks; where one deck dominates standard and block, taking little from the other sets, when the Ravnica block was essentially 10+ separate, self-contained decks?

--Oli Curl

Ravnica block contains ten guilds, ten themes, ten mechanics. But it doesn't contain ten fully-formed competitive Standard decks... on purpose. Each guild brings a varying amount of its "major focus" to the table in Standard, letting other sets and blocks share the fun. Gruul is perhaps the most fully formed; just toss in some *Kird Apes* and *Karplusan Forests* and you're ready to beat down. On the other end of the spectrum is Izzet, which offers *Electrolyze* and *Steam Vents* and little else to today's best Blue/Red decks. (Actually, something like *Dimir* may be at the low end, contributing next to nothing at all at the moment.) In the middle is something like *Selesnya* or

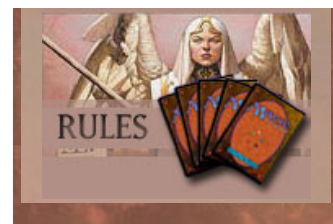


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Orzhov; their most successful decks incorporate awesome *Kamigawa* and Core Set cards into themes laid out in the *Ravnica* block.

Our goal was to make building a *Ravnica* based deck simple for those who want simple (throw a bunch of Simic cards together and go!), but also have enough interchangeable parts and flexible mana options available to the creative players so that entirely new decks or wacky twists on traditional strategies would arise. Not a “block monster” problem at all!



3) Not a legend?

Aaron,

*You guys are doing an awesome job!!! I'm having more fun with **Magic** than I ever have, and that's saying a lot!*

*The **Simic Sky Swallower** is an awesome card. But not **Legendary**? That surprises me.*

Anyway, thank you and please keep up the good work. Take care.

Stan Churchill
Naples, FL



We couldn't make **Legendary** creatures willy-nilly in this block—each guild had very specific requirements on what its main characters were. Simic, as you now know, needed cards for an **Elf Biomancer** and an **Experimental Ooze**. Once we designed those cards, any other Simic creatures we made, including the SSS, had to be non-**Legendary**.

As I mentioned in my Simic article, this card was created in the mold of **Spiritmonger**—an impressive fatty that would wow tournament goers and casual players alike. In order to be as attractive as possible, avoiding the “**Legendary**” drawback seemed like a good idea.

4) Kraj baby pictures?

*I was wondering what **Experiment Kraj** looked like when it came over from design and what were the thoughts on this card?*
--adam

Kraj looked similar to his modern self at the end of design, but he had one additional ability:

```
[Experiment #247C]
2GGUU
Legendary Creature - Mutant Ooze
4/6
As long as another creature with a +1/+1 counter on it has flying,
CARDNAME has flying. The same is true for fear, first strike, double
strike, landwalk, protection, trample, and vigilance.
CARDNAME has all activated abilities of other creatures with +1/+1
counters on them.
T: Put a +1/+1 counter on target creature.
```

As you can see, it had kind of a “**Concerted Effort**” ability in addition to the activation-copying. That ability was cut mainly because it was impossible to track what abilities Kraj had as the game progressed. Additionally, he was playing far too aggressively for a so-called “fun” card, as he would often become a 5/7 flier with some sort of protection ability and just attack, attack, attack. On top of that, the existence of **Concerted Effort** in the block meant that Kraj's ability just wasn't all that novel. In the end, I'm glad it was taken away, allowing Kraj to be the awesome “Johnny” card that I always hoped he'd be.

5) The joys of flipping?

*Hoping you can either publish this for question of the day, or just respond back to me. But I'm mystified by the development of **Stitch in Time**. I was doing *Ravnica* block draft last night, and got a foil **Stitch in Time**. It was in my colors, foil, and seemed fun. Why not play it!? And I believe you guys like the “coin toss” mechanic as well? Makes for fun and interesting play. The problem is that no one ever uses it. Even in limited! Well, I decided to go against the conventional wisdom and used it and realized why people don't. Question: If you lose the flip, why can you not at the very least get a cantrip out of it?? People don't want to take a 50% chance of getting NADA out of a card and wasted mana. Giving a cantrip if you lose the coin toss seems very fair and reasonable. Why wasn't it designed that way? Seems like you have really doomed a card that is fun and should see more play, because of no cantrip in case of lost flip. Hope you can reply.*

Thanks, Darren

Three things about **Stitch in Time**:

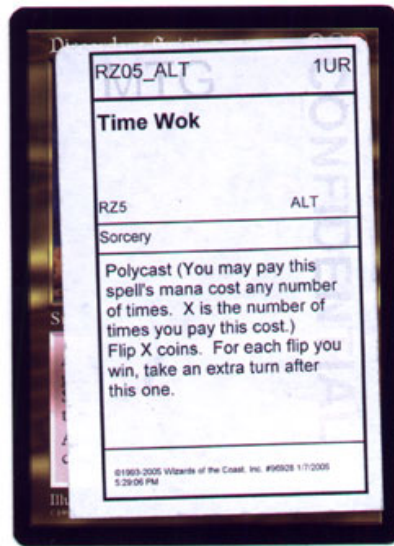
a) Here's the design version:

[Time Wok]
 1UR
 Sorcery
 Flip a coin. If you win the flip, take an extra turn after this one. Polycast

"Polycast" is, of course, replicate. Yes, you could play many copies of this spell and yes, it was absurd. I don't think simply removing the coin flip was the *best* solution for "fixing" the card, but it certainly was a solution.

b) Just because a card isn't used in tournaments or in Limited doesn't mean it isn't used at all. I'm sure there are casual players that try to abuse this card with stuff like *Djinn Illuminatus*, *Krark's Thumb*, or *Izzet Chronarch*. At least that's how I sleep at night.

c) Personally, I love random outcomes in **Magic**, but not those of the "Succeed/Fail" variety. I prefer things like *Dark Confidant*, *Coiling Oracle*, *Kindle the Carnage*, and even *Odds // Ends*—cards where you aren't exactly sure what's going to happen, but you have a reasonable idea. Most of these cards have outcomes that range from "Win" to "Not Quite Win," with the occasional "Lose" thrown in when times get desperate. Spending mana and a card for literally nothing is a bad feeling, even if you are aware of the possibility when you play it. I wouldn't expect to see too many more cards like this in the future.



6) Poison guild?

One of your stated goals for the Ravnica block was to give each guild a different route to victory. You've weenies, big guys, spells, bleeders, and even a decking guild. So, why isn't there a poison guild?
 --Wade Trupke

To channel Mark Rosewater, "Who wants doughnuts?" Er, "Poison will be back some day, I guar-on-tee it!"

I do agree with Mark that we'll refresh the poison mechanic someday and make it work better than it ever did before, but *Ravnica* was simply not the place for that comeback. Were we to reintroduce poison, we'd probably do it as one of the guilds' keywords, and we intentionally stayed away from reusing old keywords for any of the guilds (to prevent fans of any particular color combination from feeling cheated). And there's no way we would have done it in addition to a guild's keyword, seeing as (a) there are only so many cards per guild to execute each theme, and (b) with ten keywords in the block already, there wasn't "space" for another concept like poison that would invariably need reminder text and rules support.

7) Enhanced enhancements...

*Cards like *Court Hussar* and *Azorius Herald* have (what I currently regard as) the best "alternate use" mechanic I've seen yet. I wondered why that functionality hadn't been used throughout Ravnica Block? *Drake Familiar* doesn't count...*

*With regard to the same thing though, *Patagia Viper* didn't feel "right" to me. Green, even with Blue involved, doesn't seem like the kind of colour to summon something for its effect, but not give it what it needs to "survive" afterwards. All the other colours are fairly notorious for their indifference to the individual creature, but not green. Did anyone else notice this, or am I just being over-fussy?*

*But thanks for a superb set!
 All the best
 --Oliver Barker*

I'm glad you like the *Dissension* enhanced creatures. I also think they are very cool, although I can't decide if I like them better than the original *Ravnica* enhanced spells. *Ribbons of Night*, *Rolling Spoil*, *Seed Spark*, and *Boros Fury-Shield* are great cards. The short answer to your question is that we didn't think of them until *Dissension* design! When making *Ravnica*, we knew the later sets would evolve some of the cycles present in the first set, but we didn't know exactly how until we sat down and did it.



As far as *Patagia Viper*, I think you're trying to say that it feels weird for the baby Snakes to be left out on their own if you play the spell for just Green, and the mommy shows up if you play the Blue part, when green is the color of "the group." To be honest, that level of thought didn't go into the card. It was simply, "Blue = flyer, Green = some tokens" with little attention given to how the concept might play out. Hopefully you'll forgive us that and enjoy the card for what it offers mechanically. And, hey, it's a flying Snake, which has to be worth something in the flavor department.

8) Guild basic lands?

I was strolling through eBay the other day and saw a Dimir Island. I once said in my playgroup that it would've been cool if every color would have a basic land associated with a guild it was in (so for White that would be a Boros, Orzhov, Selesnya, and Azorius Plains).

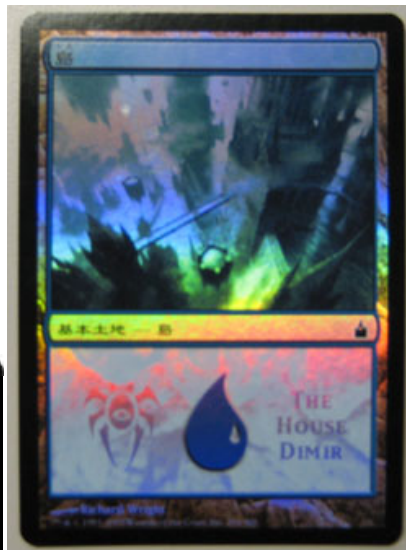
Seeing this Dimir Island, I started wondering about whether or not it was actually done like I imagined. Is it? I kinda can identify the basic lands within a guild, but is this story fact or fiction?

*With kind regards,
Stijn Lamers, Holland*

PS If this is true, could you give away the answer? :-)

The lands you are talking about were made for a Japanese organized play program—they are foil basic lands with guild symbols embedded in the underprinting. But the basic lands themselves were not commissioned to reflect any guild allegiances.

At the beginning of design, once we knew we wanted to have ten guilds, we talked about how perfectly it worked out that there would be four pictures for each basic land and each color was part of four guilds, but in the end we didn't end up executing them that way. The creative team felt that the three nonbasic lands each guild had was enough room to show off their locations, and that the basic lands were better used to show where the unguilded rank and file live. But there are hints of guild influence even in the unguilded architecture, which is why the guild symbol basic lands seems to make sense.



9) Half splits?

When developing the split cards...

Did you attempt to make any half-cards good enough to run by themselves (i.e. in a two-colour deck)? This seems to oppose what I thought was the original idea, that added flexibility drops the power level. (Illusion sucks, Reality sucks, Illusion and Reality: meh).



*Did you often use the split cards in decks in the FF league with the intention of only using one half?
--John Koziar*

The *Dissension* split cards were approached completely differently than the *Invasion* cards were. *Invasion* was all about utility, even if it meant that individual halves were weaker than other existing cards. Assault, for example, is a sorcery Shock, and Wax is a weaker Giant Growth. *Dissension's* are all about powerful new effects that were designed to match both the cards' colors and names. That said, they were made to be evocative first, and make sense together second.

So yes, we did play one half of certain split cards in decks in the FFL. You would never play Assault unless you could play green, opting for Shock instead. But Punishment is a unique effect, and it is certainly justifiable to play it on its own. Of course, with the abundant mana fixing in the format, it's easy to splash for Crime...

10) The Tron...

*What sort of Ravnica development test decks did you test the Urzatron in? Do you still regret letting the 'tron into 9th Edition?
--Hamish*

Honestly, we didn't test the Urza lands in anything in *Ravnica* block. The Izzet (and lately Simic) Urzatron decks that have popped up in Standard are all new to us. Do I still regret putting them in *Ninth* after they were so dominant in *Eighth Edition* Standard? A little, yeah. Their novelty wore off fast, and nothing is as cool the third and fourth year that it's in an environment.

That's it for this week, folks. I have more questions, including a whole slew of them from Matthew Lubich, that I'll answer in two weeks.

Last Week's Poll

How do you feel about the revised Tribal Wars announcement?		
Don't care.	3189	51.1%
Good idea.	2586	41.5%
Bad idea.	463	7.4%
Total	6238	100.0%

This Week's Poll

Have you ever cheated in a game of Magic??

Yes, when I was playing with friends.

Yes, during a tournament.

Yes, both with friends and at tournaments.

Never.

*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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