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Ask Wizards - July, 2006

Ask Wizards
Monday, July 3, 2006

Do you have a question about **Magic: The Gathering** or *Wizards of the Coast*? Send it, along with your name and location, to us via this [email form](#). We'll post a new question and answer each day.

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July 31, 2006

Q: Is there a certain order the following things happen in when making new cards?

- The illustration.
- The effect.
- The name.
- The detail.
- The rareness of the card.

Thanks!

--Muhaimin

A: From **Aaron Forsythe**, Magic R&D:

The normal process works like this: Design creates a card that has what they consider to be a "real" cost, text box, rarity, and (where applicable) power and toughness, although card text (the "mechanic") is usually the first thing down on paper. The card has a name, but it is usually something overly descriptive or intentionally goofy like "Ripple Shock" or "Mr. Underhill." From there, development has free reign to change any of that information as the set gets worked on. Once development has made their first few rounds of changes to the cards, the art is commissioned. Once the rest of the team has seen both the art and the card text, work begins on the names and flavor text.

So the normal order is:

- Mechanic/Abilities
- Cost/Rarity/Power and Toughness
- Art
- Name/Flavor Text

Sometimes we do things in a different order, however, such as when there is a spare piece of art lying around that we feel the need to use on a card (**Ferropede** from *Fifth Dawn* was such a card). Or sometimes we have a name we want to use (like "**Lovisa Coldeyes**" from *Coldsnap*) and design the entire card around it. But those are rare cases.

July 28, 2006

Q: In the art for **Mishra's Bauble** there appears to be a familiar mask in the bauble's center, like the one used as the *Apocalypse* expansion symbol (also found on **Ascendant Evincar** as kneeguards). Was this done on purpose to hint at the fact that Mishra was backed by Phyrexia?

--Jeff
Renton, WA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, Magic creative director:

That's no hint, Jeff! Readers of the **Magic** novels can tell you that Phyrexia was lurking behind the scenes from the earliest stages of the Brothers' War, particularly the priests of Gix. From the beginning Mishra used Phyrexian machines to wage war against his brother Urza. But slowly, over time, Phyrexia exerted influence over Mishra, quietly scheming. In the end, Urza faced not his brother, but a Phyrexian construct made to look like Mishra. Later, Phyrexia taunted the planeswalker Urza with imitations and visions of his lost brother, and in fact Mishra's final fate is unknown.

July 27, 2006

Q: So what does blue actually do now, aside from splash into decks here and there for counterspells? Over the last few years you have changed the color pie, redistributing a huge amount of blue's classic abilities to the other colors. Even card draw can be accomplished by the other colors nowadays, so what does blue do that will allow it to stand on its own?

--William
USA



A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

William,

I don't think blue is hurting from a color pie standpoint. Besides counterspells, here are some other abilities that blue has access to:

- Bounce (such as **Boomerang**)
- Card drawing (such as **Counsel of the Soratami**)
- The "Magpie" ability (such as **Thieving Magpie**)
- Card filtering (such as **Sift**)
- "Looting" (such as **Thought Courier**)
- Permanent stealing (such as **Confiscate**)
- Milling (such as **Traumatize**)
- Looking at opponent's hand (such as **Telepathy**)
- Copying things (such as **Clone**)
- Tapping and untapping permanents (such as **Puppeteer**)
- Keeping things from untapping (such as **Exhaustion**)
- Unblockability (such as **Dream Prowler**)
- Granting flying (such as **Levitation**)
- Changing text (such as **Mind Bend**)

And that's just abilities found in *Ninth Edition*! Yes, we've taken some stuff away from blue over the last few years, but we left far more than we removed.

July 26, 2006



Q: Can you tell us about the Jester from *Ice Age* block? Why are his mask, cap and now scepter magical artifacts? I don't remember any reference to any jester in the *Ice Age* novels.

--Erin
Scottsdale, AZ

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** creative director:

As far as I know, Erin, **Jester's Cap**, Mask, and Scepter don't refer to a particular jester. The cards were named just for their (at the time) unprecedented ability to play with your opponents' stuff. I guess we missed the opportunity to create a legendary jester for King Darien's court in *Coldsnap*! (For the record, if you ever see mention of an *Ice Age* jester named Zamboni, I can authoritatively confirm that no such character ever existed.)

July 25, 2006



Q: I was looking at the *Kamigawa* forests, and noticed that when I lined them up a certain way, they formed a continuous picture, a panoramic. I checked all the other basic land cards I could, and found that all the *Kamigawa* cards were panoramas, as well as some of the basic lands from *Mirage* and *Urza*. Is there any deep thought process behind having all the basic lands either pulled from one picture or be individual?

--Zachary
Modesto, CA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** creative director:

Zachary, over the years we've realized that the illustrations on our basic lands are perhaps the most important illustrations we produce. The basic lands are in front of players more than any other card, and they can more strongly define a sense of place than any other card. So when it comes time to concept the basic lands for a new setting, we take great care and effort to get them right. We want players to be wowed by a new setting's basic lands, and we have a few ways to try to make players sit up and really take notice of them. The panorama layout, splitting a long painting of terrain across the four basic land cards of a given type, is one way of doing this. But as with everything in **Magic**, we want to keep things dynamic, so we don't use that 'trick' too often. Hopefully as **Magic's** future unfolds you'll see lots of other basic-land presentations in our bag of tricks.

July 24, 2006



Q: Hey! In all the hubbub over *Coldsnap*, we never got to find out what its codename is. Or was.

It's not like you can do any fun triplets with it. *Ice Age* didn't have a codename, so I'm told, and *Alliances* was Quack. My guess is it's Chilly Willy, because Chilly Willy is a penguin.

Penguins live in the cold.

--Pugg Fuggly
USA

A: From **Devin Low**, **Magic** R&D:

Dear Pugg Fuggly,

I never thought I'd get away with *that* as a salutation. *Coldsnap's* nickname was Splat, for reasons lost in Terisiare's frozen mists. *Time Spiral's* codenames were Snap, Crackle, and Pop. Splat and Snap sounded pretty similar, and people often said one and meant the other. Then Splat got renamed Coldsnap. So now "Snap" and "Coldsnap" were right next to each other. Geez. We were considering *Time Spiral* as a real set

name at that point, but hadn't gotten it approved yet. So half the time somebody asked "Can you send me your Snap notes?" you'd have to ask "*Time Snap* or *Coldsnap*?" It was actually pretty annoying.

The phrase "Chilly Willy" is being reserved for the "Chilly-Willy-Nilly" block, a 365-165-165 card block slated for release in October 2011. In a twist from normal sealed deck play, look for Grand Prix: Dortmund to feature dual small set "Willy-Nilly" drafts. (Yes, before you bombard the poor Ask Wizards box, I'm definitely kidding!)

July 21, 2006



Q: While I will never complain about iconic, classic pieces of art like Alpha's *Serra Angel* or *Black Lotus*, it's obvious that even an unpopular common from a modern set has far higher production values on its art than the best card from the early days. Why has the quality of the art gone up so drastically over the years?

--Alex

Ontario, Canada

A: From **Jeremy Jarvis, Magic: The Gathering** Art Director:

Oh no you don't, Alex... I'm not stepping in that bear trap! Ha!

Honestly, there are a couple different issues here. Art, its quality, the impact it has... these are all very personal and subjective. Let's not discuss this from when the art is 'better', as that will only lead to an inevitable crossfire of conflicting opinions, but talk about the functionality of the art. It is acquired and conceived a different way today, for a different final result.

In the 'old days', art descriptions were vague suggestions of images (I believe the original "*Lord of the Pit*" was simply commissioned as 'Balrog') and then those images were swapped around, and forced into homes on cards, often arbitrarily (the original "*Twiddle*" art was commissioned for a land, the original "*Birds of Paradise*" sports art also commissioned for a land). Also, art was purchased on site, and placed in cards from time to time. Neither continuity nor the idea of worldbuilding (creating distinctive and unique worlds and settings) would become issues until some time later.

Today those very ideas are some of our loftiest goals. To create a new and exciting setting, filled with creatures, people and locales that resonate as fantasy, but are unique enough to be specific to **Magic**. That has pushed us to find a stable of artists who are appropriate for each given set and setting, so we can commission art that is representative of the card and its mechanical needs, or at the very least not misleading or arbitrary. Along those lines, we now write card concepts and art descriptions that imply engaging visuals, but never at the expense of continuity or clarity. I think it is clear how these two different sets of processes and priorities would lead to different end results, and I am sincerely glad to hear your affirmation that the results are good.

July 20, 2006



Q: Hey I was just wondering if you were going to post those lunch break videos of past R&D members. I remember that it was said that they were going to be up in the video section for download. Just wondering.

--Phil

USA

A: From **Greg Collins, magicthegathering.com** event coverage producer:

Hi Phil,

The videos from the Pro Tour-Charleston lunch programming were posted on the webcast launch page after the event was finished, but hadn't made it to the video archive page until your question came along. Sorry about that – of the many things that happen when trying to put a bow on the finished coverage page, it slipped through the cracks. For those webcast fans out there, here are the two pages you definitely need to bookmark to make sure you catch all the coverage:

- [Webcast launch page](#): This is where you'll find the links to launch the live webcast and card viewer during the Pro Tour, and links to the archived webcast from the most current event.
- [Video archive](#): If you missed any part of the webcast, you'll be able to find archived video links here. These usually show up a day or two after the Pro Tour. This page includes links all the way back to the 2003-04 season.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, the next Pro Tour webcast will be coming from Pro Tour-Kobe on October 21 at 9:45 p.m. ET, when you'll get to see the Pros draft *Time Spiral*.

July 19, 2006



Q: Over the years, I've seen many different token cards, from Squirrels, to Bears, to Goblins. I have yet to see any token cards of the last couple of sets, like Snakes or Saprolings. Will Wizards be making these token cards, and will they be available to the public?

--RJ

Cheyenne, WY

A: From **Nate Heiss, R&D Associate Developer**:

RJ,

We released announced a [Marit Lage token](#) for *Dark Depths*, which you can get by attending one of the [Coldsnap release events](#) this weekend. That aside though, we aren't doing tokens as rewards currently. Instead, they have been replaced by the ultra cool promo textless cards like *Fireball* and *Mana Leak*, which

have been extremely popular with the players. Like everything else in **Magic** though, who knows what the future may bring. We certainly enjoy making token cards and are looking into the possibility of returning to them down the road.

July 18, 2006



Q: **Karplusan Strider** seems like a good card, but is there a design or flavor reason why it doesn't have actual protection from blue and black instead?

--Kirk
Glenside, PA

A: From **Randy Buehler**, Director of **Magic** R&D:

The reason it doesn't have protection from blue and black is that we wanted to give ourselves the option of putting it into a Core Set some day. "Protection" is actually a fairly complicated ability as it does four different things. Sure, expert players already know how it works but whenever we design a card that we think might be a nice, clean, simple, "Nth" Edition card we have to think about new players. We put the occasional creature with protection into the Core Set, but it's usually at rare and it always has (fairly long) reminder text designed to explain how protection works. For an uncommon whose point is to show off the friendly-enemy color flavor of **Magic**, we thought it would be much better to give it a wording that does a bit less but does exactly what it says it does and doesn't require any reminder text.

July 17, 2006



Q: I was wondering how do the sizes of the art on the cards that you receive from artists vary in size? What is the largest piece of art and the smallest piece of art that you have received from artists to turn into cards?

--Michael

A: From **Jeremy Jarvis**, **Magic: The Gathering** Art Director:

Hi Michael,

We don't dictate the image sizes to artists, so the answer is as broad as our pool of artists. As far as all-time records, man, that is nigh unanswerable, as we don't even have scans of some of the very earliest art work, much less detailed records of media and size. I can give you some impressive numbers though:

Mike Sutfin has worked as small as 3 inches wide for images to be used on a split card (**Odds // Ends**), and Donato Giancola has produced oil paintings for the game as large as 18 inches by 22 inches (**Cartographer** and **Shivan Dragon**). rk post's **Jeska**, **Warrior Adept** weighed in at 20 inches by 24 inches and his **Avatar of Woe** art is a whopping 18 inches by 40 inches!

At the end of the day, as long as the illustration is painted to the correct proportions for a card and meets our expectations for level of finish, the artists can paint at whatever size they see fit.

Some dudes paint from the shoulder, some dudes paint from the wrist :)

July 14, 2006



Q: Are there any design qualities that are used to distinguish the "Hellkite" dragons from the regular dragons?

--AJ
Lynchburg, VA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** creative director:

"Hellkite" is simply a word we use for really powerful, really angry dragons, A.J. There's no hard rule for what qualifies a dragon to be a hellkite, although so far all of them are either 6/6 or cost 7 mana or more to play.

July 13, 2006



Q: Time and time again I see Mark Gottlieb being referred to as a supervillain. I'm fine with that. But if Mark Rosewater is Mark Gottlieb's archnemesis, why doesn't Mark R. do something to thwart Mark G.'s evilness once and for all?

--Stephen
Vancouver, BC

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

Stephen,

Why doesn't Superman just grab Lex Luthor and crush his skull? Why doesn't Batman drop the Joker off a tall building? Why doesn't Spider-Man web the Green Goblin to a railroad track? Because, you see, that's not the way heroes work. We're a moral lot and we take the whole "don't kill" thing rather seriously. (For comic fans, I guess Wonder Woman didn't get the memo.) Instead, I've chosen to punish him in my own way. I keep creating cards that don't actually work within the confines of the rules. I then put them in sets and get all the other R&D members excited about the cards. And then, only then, do I make sure Gottlieb is asked to "make them work". Each minute he spends trying to accomplish this task is one less minute he has available for evil. Not perfect, but the best I can do and stay true to the hero credo.

July 12, 2006



Q: Come on now, tell the truth. The names and art got mixed up on some *Dissension* cards didn't they?

Plaxmanta looks nothing like a plax nor a manta but very much like a predatory blue blob known throughout the land as the ferocious Trygon.

And then, very suspiciously, **Trygon Predator** happens to look exactly like a MANTA ray full of plax magic!

This is only one of the more obvious ones! Someone switched art and you're not talking. Well we're on to you so spill it!

Thanks for making the greatest game in the world.

A true fan,

--Mike
Rohnert Park, CA

A: From **Matt Cavotta**, **Magic** Creative Writer:

Mike,

It appears as though you're on to something here. The **Trygon Predator** does look more like a manta than the **Plaxmanta**. But, there is more here than meets the eye (unless, of course, the eye knows the various genus names of the Sting Ray.) "Trygon," is actually the word for the genus of common sting rays. I like using words like this because, at first glance, they look like nifty fantasy monster names, but upon scrutiny they actually turn out to make some sense and build our brains.

On the flip side, the "plax" part of **Plaxmanta** doesn't mean anything here on planet Earth. But it does mean something way out there on the city-plane of Ravnica. "Plax" can be found mingling with the biology of the **Plaxmanta**, blasting forth from the **Plaxcaster Frogling**, and encasing the Simic in **Shielding Plax**. Plax is a biomantic repelling agent that keeps one safe from magical or physical contact. If you look at these three cards, you'll see that they all employ Plax's shielding powers. If you really prod at Vig, he'd probably tell you that they spliced in a little plax when breeding their **Simic Sky Swallowers**.

So, to sum it all up, both **Trygon Predator** and **Plaxmanta** are appropriately named. The only thing that caught us by surprise a bit is that the Plax"manta" final art did not appear as manta as we expected. Still, the name has a nice sound to it so we rolled with it.

July 11, 2006



Q: You've introduced the R&D- teams for *Planar Chaos* (<http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/arcana/1073>) but up to now have failed to do so for *Time Spiral* (<http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/arcana/1031>). Can you bring us up to date?

--Hunter

A: From **Devin Low**, **Magic** R&D:

Hey Hunter,

Your citing of URL's makes your claim undeniable - you're right! Here are the *Time Spiral* credits, and a finer crew of scurvy seadogs I can't imagine....is that a subtle clue that *Time Spiral* is 100% top-to-bottom pirate-themed?! Only Time will tell....

Design Team: Brian Tinsman (lead), Aaron Forsythe, Devin Low, and Mark Rosewater

Development Team: Brian Schneider (lead), Michael Donais, Aaron Forsythe, Devin Low, and Matt Place

July 10, 2006



Q: Something that has intrigued me about the older cards was that the card frame on the old cards has changed slightly over every set. Like, if you take an Alpha black card, and an *Ice Age* black card, and a *The Dark* black card, they all have different hues and brightness to them. Then in *Mirage*, the Text Boxes were widened, seemingly randomly. Was there a reason for all these tiny changes?

--R.J.

Jasper, ON, Canada

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** creative director:

The answer is pretty boring, Jasper. The text box was widened and the power/toughness numbers made a little clearer in *Fifth Edition* for reasons lost to time (most likely just to improve legibility and how text flowed in the box). The "different hues and brightness" phenomenon you describe came from a wide variety of printing issues: different printing companies with differing methods, inconsistencies in card stock and/or ink, weather conditions that cause ink to dry differently, and so on. Very few printing companies worldwide can meet Wizards' rigorous demands for cards, and over the years, both Wizards and those printing companies have gotten steadily better at quality control and cross-set consistency, thanks in part to improved methods and more fully developed digital tools.

July 7, 2006




Q: Writers on the site have talked a lot about the processes of design and development, as well as the transition between the two. However, these stories always begin after a theme and direction for the block have already been decided. What is the nature of that process? Who makes those decisions? How far in advance are they made? How much is specified before design even gets hold of the file?

--Kelly
Champaign, IL

A: From **Mark Rosewater, Magic** Head Designer:

Kelly,

Choosing the theme and direction of a block is fundamentally the job of the Head Designer (which currently is me). That said, once I have a direction I'm interested in, I have to get approval from all the key people working on **Magic**. The theme can come from many places. Sometimes we revisit popular themes of the past. When we do this we have to make sure that we've waited an appropriate amount of time between uses of the theme. Sometimes we have a collection of mechanics that link together in an interesting way. Sometimes we stumble upon a new theme that we feel would resonate with the players. The important thing is that we all come to an agreement on the theme and basic direction before we start the actual design. As to how far in advance we make these decisions, it varies greatly, but we have had themes as early as many years ahead.


July 6, 2006 

Q: *Coldsnap* is coming out soon, and Mark Rosewater was covering the 10 guilds of Ravnica. So far he has only done 9. I was wondering when Rakdos Week will be?

--Benjamin
USA

A: From **Scott Johns, magicthegathering.com** Producer:

Hi Benjamin. I made a reference to this in the message board thread to Noah Weil's article last week, but for those that missed it (and we got a lot of email on this as *Coldsnap* got closer), Rakdos Week is scheduled for the week of August 14. Given the way the scheduling worked out, we couldn't run Rakdos Week before *Coldsnap* without running it right after one of the other guild weeks, and we really didn't want to have back-to-back guild weeks. So, we pushed it back to August, which gives *Coldsnap* enough time to grab up two theme weeks of its own. That Rakdos Week is coming out of pattern from the rest of the guild weeks shouldn't come as a surprise though -- if there's any guild that's not going to follow the rules it's surely those guys!

July 5, 2006 

Q: What exactly is a Nephilim? All five of them look different and I cannot decide what one actually looks like.

--Brian
Littleton, MA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth, Magic** creative director:

Hi Brian,

The nephilim are unfathomably ancient Ravnican creatures that predate the Guildpact -- in fact, they existed before Ravnica's first building was constructed. Their origins are unknown, and they have little in common with each other besides their strangeness and inscrutability. It's unknown how many nephilim remain on Ravnica. (The word "nephilim" means "fallen ones" or "giants" in Hebrew. In the **Magic** context, however, we played a little fast and loose with the language. Technically, "nephilim" is plural; the singular version of the word would be "naphil" or "naphal.")

July 4, 2006 

[This Ask Wizards originally ran August 29, 2005]

Q: I understand that the writers need a break, and fully believe they should get holidays off, but something's been bugging me. If the columns are written in advance, why don't we miss articles some time after a holiday, instead of on the holiday itself?

--Austin
Williamsburg, VA

A: From **Scott Johns, magicthegathering.com** Producer:

"Actually, the reason I moved us to a schedule that allows for holidays was based on our production schedule here in Online Media. Since writers have a full week for each article, one holiday in the middle doesn't normally really affect them that much. The problem for Online Media here at Wizards of the Coast with publishing on holidays was that the same number of articles had to go up, but we'd have a day less in the office to get all that work done.

"So, for example, let's just hypothetically say that next Monday were some kind of holiday. Let's call it 'Labor Day' for ease of discussion. (Oh, that *is* the case, what a coincidence!) In that case, on Thursday of this week Online Media would be finishing up the site you'd be reading on Friday. On Friday, however, now we'd have to put together all the content you're expecting to see on Monday (Labor Day) *and* Tuesday, since we won't be in the office Monday to prepare the Tuesday material and also get it up on the servers. For those that haven't been involved in a site as content-heavy as **magicthegathering.com** that may not sound so bad, but please believe me when I say that double load was *awful*.

"The joke around the office was that employees hated holidays because of what it did to us the days before, while we rushed to get everything done in time. And though it was always said at least partly in jest, the simple truth is that it's not a good idea to put employees in that kind of situation, particularly if the site's quality may suffer in the process due to an unrealistic workload.

"That said, we do still try to do what we can for holidays. Feature articles are typically done enough in advance that we can publish the feature article anyway, even if it's a holiday, since it's work we've already done anyway. That's a handy thing, since so many holidays tend to fall on Mondays, so the audience still has something to read even if we're not otherwise publishing that day. Additionally, we add in other content when there's a special need. For example, next week is the beginning of *Ravnica* previews, so we'll have a preview article from Mark Rosewater despite the holiday."

July 3, 2006



Q: Since *Coldsnap* signals the completion of another Standard cycle and basically another year of **Magic**, I thought I'd ask this question: After *Coldsnap* is released, how many unique, tournament legal **Magic** cards will have been printed (meaning no *Un-sets*)?

--Kieran
Springfield, OH

A: From **Devin Low, Magic R&D:**

Hi Kieran,

Most "How many **Magic** cards like THIS are there?" questions (and we get a *ton* of them) can be answered by good ol' Gatherer at <http://gatherer.wizards.com>, also accessible by clicking the 'Gatherer' link at the upper-right of magicthegathering.com. At first, your question seemed to prompt my easiest Gatherer search of all time. I typed in nothing, and clicked search! Assuming you include all the **Stone Rains** as a single card called "**Stone Rain**," the answer is 8314. Nice and easy...

However, you also want bar all *Unhinged/Unglued* cards, of which Gatherer informs me there are 221. So the answer is 8314 - 221 = 8093. Nice and easy, assuming by "tournament legal" we're just talking about sets, rather than also singling out individual banned cards like **Contract From Below**...

But, you also want me to include *Coldsnap*...what a tricky, subtle way of trying to sneak top-secret *Coldsnap* information out of me! Well it just might work, Ohioan...It just...might...work. If you add *Coldsnap*, the total number of tournament legal card names becomes 8242...the clever among you may notice that *Coldsnap*'s set size has been announced as **155** cards...yet I only added **149** cards to my total when I added *Coldsnap*...hmm, hey that's weird...why do you think that is?



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