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Ask Wizards - March, 2007

Ask Wizards
Thursday, March 1, 2007

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.

March 30, 2007

Q: I've noticed that over the last while, you seem to have been shortening the "Ask Wizards" Question of the Day on the main page and then showing it in its entirety on the "Ask Wizards" page. Is there any particular reason why you've decided to do this?

--Dave, Sligo, Ireland

A: From **Scott Johns**, [magicthegathering.com](#) site manager:

Dave, I can't remember how the original [magicthegathering.com](#) Ask Wizards worked on the front page (back before we merged it with the other Magic content sites Wizards ran, like *The Sideboard*) but I can tell you that it's worked this way since the current site came into existence about three years ago. However, I'm guessing that you didn't always notice it because we don't always do it. Many questions that get picked are relatively short, so they work fine on the front page. However, every now and then we get something like this:

Q: I have a question: Why do cards refer to themselves by full name and not by "this"? I think it would be much clearer and would make a rule unnecessary. For example, "Your opponents can't play nonland cards with the same name as a card removed from the game with **Circu, Dimir Lobotomist**" means that if you play another **Circu, Dimir Lobotomist** (say, with **Mirror Gallery**, he would also prevent opponents from playing cards removed with the previous one. That is, if there weren't that rule that said otherwise. If it just said, "Your opponents can't play nonland cards with the same name as a card removed from the game with this," it could not be interpreted otherwise. The rule could be removed, and the text would be a lot shorter (leaving more room for flavor text). Why don't you use "this" instead?

--Jurgen
Antwerp, Belgium

Depending on which incarnation of the site we're talking about, something that big either wouldn't fit in the box, or would stretch the bottom of the site so far down as to look silly. For the front page, people are mostly just browsing anyway, so we often shorten long questions to something more digestible. Case in point above, we probably ran the front page teaser of that one as something more like: "Why do cards refer to themselves by full name and not by 'this'?" Once you go the actual Ask Wizards page, where room isn't an issue, we do our best to maintain the original question sent by the reader.

March 29, 2007

Q: I have noticed that some employees, such as columnists, can compete in DCI Sanctioned Tournaments, whereas others, such as a designer, cannot. What are all of the jobs that you can have at Wizards and still play in DCI Tournaments?

--Kyle, Odessa, TX, USA

A: From **Scott Larabee**, DCI Program Manager:

Hi Kyle.

Most [magicthegathering.com](#) columnists are not employees of Wizards of the Coast. They are contractors. All Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro corporate employees and immediate family members are prohibited from playing in DCI Sanctioned tournaments.

Additionally, other individuals' participation in events is restricted or disallowed:

- Former Wizards of the Coast and Hasbro corporate employees are ineligible to play in DCI-sanctioned tournaments until thirty days after their last day of employment. Former corporate employees may not play in prerelease events until 6 months after their last day of employment with Wizards of the Coast or Hasbro.
- Employees of companies responsible for organized play in a region are ineligible to play in DCI-sanctioned tournaments, as are certain employees of companies identified by the DCI as strategic business partners.
- Playtesters, reviewers, and other business partners with significant knowledge of a card set may not play in Prerelease tournaments for that card set. Columnists for [magicthegathering.com](#) are normally only given 1 or 2 cards to preview (not the complete set), and are therefore allowed to play in Prerelease events.



March 28, 2007



Q: What is your philosophy about putting vanilla creatures in Expert-level expansions?



--Andrew

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

Hi Andrew,

People in R&D often say, "We should do more vanilla creatures in expert-level sets." And they've got a good point. Vanilla creatures in expert-level sets do a lot of great things: They make gameboards easier to understand because they don't have a lot of complicated abilities. They're a refreshing change of pace after a bunch of texty cards. And you get to write a lot of flavor text on them. Obviously doing too many vanilla creatures would be boring, and no one is suggesting that.

I believe the best way to do more vanilla creatures is to find ones that have all those advantages and can also be interesting for other reasons outside the text box. A great example is *Time Spiral's Venser's Sliver*. The text box is vanilla, simple, and refreshing, but it still has a lot of value to gameplay in that it's a sliver, and it steals all your opponent's slivers' abilities while giving nothing back. A vanilla rebel would have the same qualities, because what it "does" is hidden in the type line. Another example is *Isamaru, Hound of Konda*, whose supertype and awesome numbers are what's interesting. Another is *Watchwolf*, where the mana cost and awesome numbers are interesting. We also do vanilla creatures with never-before-printed numbers sometimes. In short, any way we can make creatures with no game text that have something interesting outside the text box, that's a great time to do vanilla creatures.

Coldsnap's Krovikan Scoundrel is a simple vanilla   2/1 with no game text, no relevant creature type, and nothing particularly interesting about him, and he's strictly worse than tons of other cards in nearby sets. He was in *Coldsnap* to be a 2-power 2-mana mediocre black creature that attacked and blocked. I find him pretty boring, and I believe a lot of other players at all skill levels do too. I now believe he was a mistake to print. If he was at least a Knight, then he would have a role in the set as a creature that could be reanimated by *Haakon, Stromgald Scourge*. That would have been a better way to do a vanilla common black creature in that set.

Here are two ways we put almost-vanillas into sets:

- Creatures with comes-into-play abilities, like *Viridian Shaman*, have cool abilities, but once they're in play they're easy-to-understand vanilla creatures that just fight and have no other abilities.
- Creatures whose only game text is standard keyword abilities like *Snapping Drake*, *Nightguard Patrol*, *Vulshok Berserker*, and *Rushwood Dryad* are essentially vanilla as far as player understanding is concerned. We call them "French vanilla." Expect to see us do more creatures of this nature in the future.

March 27, 2007




Q: Why were *Necratog* and *Foratog* printed in such a way that they break the rules of cycles?

--Joey, New Orleans, LA, USA

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

Joey,

Necratog and *Foratog* are part of what we call a mega-cycle. A mega-cycle is a five-card cycle (usually one of each color) that appears one per set for five consecutive sets. Note that the atog cycle started with the red *Atog* already existing, and the mega-cycle was four cards that finished off the cycle. The atog mega-cycle picked up in *Mirage* with *Foratog* and ended in *Tempest* with *Auratog*. Bonus trivia: They all have pun-filled flavor text written by yours truly.

Foratog breaks the cycle in that its pump ability costs mana in addition to a sacrifice. In design its activation cost was "Sacrifice an untapped *Forest*," but giving the ability a cost of  – so that you generally had to tap a *Forest* to use it – was deemed to be the cleaner way of expressing that functionality. If we had it to do over again, I would advocate using "Sacrifice an untapped *Forest*" in order to mirror the other atogs. *Necratog* and *Foratog* also differ from the other atogs in the mega-cycle in their mana costs, which were presumably raised for balance reasons.

March 26, 2007



Q: I was wondering, why was *Volcano Hellion* given the creature type Hellion when the other three Hellions were given the creature type Beast?

-- Richard, Nashville, TN, USA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic Creative Director**:

After some consideration, Richard, we decided that Hellions are unique enough and cool enough to warrant their own creature type. If and when other Hellions are produced or reprinted, they'll get the Hellion type as well.

March 23, 2007



Q: Why are playtest cards always seen on top of another Magic card? Is this how they are printed, or are they cardboard cards taped to another card?

--Thomas, Las Vegas, NV, USA

A: From **Alexis Janson**, **Magic Design Intern**:

It's funny you should ask that, because I just finished "stickering" about 750 playtest cards. It's not my favorite way to spend a morning, but someone has to do it – now I know why R&D needed more interns!

All of our card sets are entered in a large database known as Multiverse – you may have read about it in some of Mark Rosewater's articles. One of the nice features of Multiverse is the ability to print playtest stickers. When a Magic set is far enough along that we want to start playtesting Sealed, we print out pages and pages of stickers. They're really just large labels – similar to what you might use for address or filing labels. Then we begin the fun process of sticking them, one by one, onto existing Magic cards.

This process gives us playtest cards that handle like normal Magic cards, and can be mixed with normal Magic land, but still have all the relevant information on them. It's interesting how we use different methods for Limited and Constructed playtesting – Constructed playtest cards are blanks with a few words scrawled on them. I can't imagine trying to build a Sealed deck using a bunch of cards with only names and casting costs on them – and yet it works perfectly fine for Constructed testing, where you're familiar with all the cards in your deck.



For more information about playtest cards, check out Aaron Forsythe's [article](#) on the topic.

March 22, 2007

Q: How do you guys come up with the different week-long themes at [magicthegathering.com](#) (eg. the excellent "What if?" Week)? Are they pre-planned or does someone choose them on a regular basis?
--Ryan, Whyalla, South Australia, Australia

A: From **Scott Johns**, site manager of [magicthegathering.com](#)

Hi Ryan,

Kelly assigned this one to me because, as the site manager for [Magicthegathering.com](#), I'm the one that schedules things like theme weeks and feature articles. Whenever possible I try to schedule them well in advance. My experience has been that for both of those elements, giving writers plenty of time to think about how they want to tackle a theme (or feature article) tends to give us the best results. So, on average, I tend to schedule theme weeks at least a month or two in advance. For example, currently we have all the theme weeks planned through May 28 with one hole that we're still deciding.

How do we choose them? The first consideration is if we have any special promotions or new set releases. Any time a new set releases most of the site will focus on the cards on that set at least somewhat, since exploring new cards is such a big part of what makes **Magic** fun. So the first theme week or two after a new set is when you're most likely to see a theme based on a mechanic, creature type, or other distinctive feature related to the new set. Also, there are many different megacycles going on at any given time, so those need to get worked in. (Examples would be the color weeks, guild weeks, card type weeks, and many more.)

As a set gets better known we tend to use the theme weeks to explore other areas. So, once we're well into a set's release, that's where you're more likely to see a less set-centered theme like "Combo Week." Lastly, every so often we try to mix in particularly creative themes that will potentially change the site completely. Themes like this help keep the site fresh and unpredictable, and make it much more interesting for the writers as well.

One of the tricky parts of setting the theme schedule is how much it affects the site. For any given theme week, roughly half the site or more will explore that theme, so it's important to get a good balance for the audience. We certainly can't please everybody every time on that front, so much like **Magic** itself does, we do our best to mix things up so that over time everybody is getting some percentage of themes that they love. Theme weeks like "The Past Returns Week" and "What If?" Week tend to be pretty polarizing. Many readers *really* loved them and wrote in repeatedly to say how much they appreciated the idea. But some people *really didn't* like either or both of them as well, so there's a balance. In the case of both of those examples, the positive feedback we got far outweighed the negative, so as an occasional kind of thing they worked out well.

So what goes into choosing a theme week? First off, it's important that at least one column each day be able to cover the theme, because any time we have a day that doesn't have a column on-theme that week tends to feel weaker than others. (Some particularly deep themes can support the whole site running with it, but usually it's somewhere around one column per day.) Fortunately, as I mentioned in a previous Ask Wizards, we lay out the column schedule so that it's usually pretty easy to fit any given theme into at least one column each day. After that, there's the question of what we've already covered, what we still want to cover, and particularly how deep or narrow a potential theme is. Narrow themes are those that only have a very limited number of angles you can approach them from. They are fine if used sparingly, but a run of narrow themes all in a row tends to be unsatisfying. So, I do my best to offset narrow themes like "Suspend Week" (which only has so many angles you can try) with much deeper themes like "What If?" Week.

Now, all that said, it's not just me in the process. I often give other people a chance to come up with a theme. Every few months I've been giving different writers a chance to pick one theme of their choice, which is where we've gotten themes as recent as "Bluff Week" (a theme Noah really wanted to speak out on) and as far back as "Mulligan Week" (a theme BDM proposed). From there I often consult with our editor Kelly Digges, as well as the R&D writers on the site since they're such a central part of most theme weeks. Mark Rosewater in

particular has helped out several times with fun theme weeks. (He's a pretty creative guy; you may have heard.)

Finally, sometimes theme weeks come the other way around. Rather than starting with a general concept, sometimes somebody comes to me with a specific article they want to do that I realize might lend itself well to a full theme week. Rosewater knew for some time that he wanted to do [some kind of "timeshifted" article](#) for *Planar Chaos* that would address how something like Arabian Nights or Alpha might have been handled if we had a [Magicthegathering.com](#) back in those days. Originally he proposed the entire site run on that theme. While working coverage for Worlds in Paris, Kelly and I spent some time going over the idea. Rosewater's article sounded great, but the problem was that I felt the theme didn't really feel deep enough for the entire site to run with all week. Over a late-night noodle dinner just outside our hotel after a particularly long day of coverage, a conversation with Kelly helped me figure out that the coolest part of Mark's idea was the "What if?" underneath it, which is exactly what *Planar Chaos* is all about. Expanding it that way and letting each of the columnists handle their own "What if?" turned out to be a great way to keep the underlying idea Mark had while translating it to something the whole site could run with.

March 21, 2007



Q: How do you choose what card will be the card of the day?
--Nick

A: From **Kelly Digges**, editor of [magicthegathering.com](#)

I don't know whether you've noticed it or not, but we try hard to give each week of Card of the Day a "hook" or uniting factor (similar to but distinct from the web site's weekly themes). There's a small but dedicated group of posters on [the forums](#) who work to guess the theme as early in the week as possible. Part of the fun of doing Card of the Day is seeing what they come up with. Hi guys!

I start by selecting the hook, either on my own or by brainstorming with someone else. On theme weeks it's often related to the web site theme (echo creatures for echo week was an easy one), but on off-weeks we do whatever comes to mind, ranging from the obvious to the obscure (cards with "new" in their name at New Years, for instance, including Wormfang Newt and Stonewood Invoker).

Once I've got a hook I'm happy with and a list of cards that adhere to it, I sit down with someone in R&D to generate trivia, stories, and weird facts about each of the cards on the list. I then type up a blurb for each card incorporating those tidbits of information. Ideally, the blurbs won't relate directly to the hook – that makes guessing it more fun!

March 20, 2007



Q: Maybe this time the question will be asked BEFORE you move into another position, Elaine Chase. So, doing you a favor: What the heck does brand do anyway? Hopefully you didn't hold your breath TOO long...
--Max, New York, NY, USA

A: From **Elaine Chase**, Senior Brand Manager for **Magic**:

I guess my subliminal cries for attention really did work, because a whole bunch of readers were kind enough to humor me with the question.



And amazingly enough, I'm still here!

Brand's main function is to run the "business" of **Magic**. We make sure that all the different departments in Wizards work toward the same goals. For instance, if we had some consumer insight that the marsupials are an underserved market for **Magic**, we'd task R&D with making sure we had a product that delivered what marsupials were looking for, work with sales to establish venues of distribution into places where marsupials shop, guide our advertising team to create ads that speak to marsupials, get OP to run marsupial-friendly events, and so on. All of this helps ensure that **Magic** is a coherent brand with a unified vision instead of hundreds of people doing hundreds of different things. We also take care of stuff like determining how much product to print, forecasting business performance, managing the marketing budget, and working with the international offices and licensing partners.

If this kind of thing sounds interesting to you, we happen to have an opening for an Assistant Brand Manager (as Mark Rosewater mentioned in his article last week). Check out the job listing [here](#)!

March 19, 2007



Q: I have two **City of Ass** in play. I tap one for red mana, one for white. I then play a **Boros Swiftblade**, leaving  and  in my mana pool. Can I then play a **Boros Recruit**? (I know this is a rules question, but it is very obscure and I cannot find the answer anywhere.)
--Josh, Gaithersburg, MD, USA

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

Josh,
Little known fact – although the Rules Manager (whoever fulfills the role, currently Mark Gottlieb) and I are by nature mortal enemies, I happen to be the official *Un*-Rules Manager. That is, I'm in charge of all rulings that are *Un*-related.

How in the world did this happen? Well, the real Rules Managers don't want to have anything to do with silver-bordered world. I, on the other hand, find it fascinating. (Plus as the designer of all *Un*-sets I feel some responsibility to the players.) I actually volunteered for the position. As everyone else took a step back when I took a step forward, I got the job.

With that out of the way, what's the answer? Can you do this? I don't know how other Rules Managers make decisions, but here's my yardstick: Does it make sense, seem cool, and not throw a major monkey wrench in any other *Un*-rulings? If the answer is yes, then I put my thumbs up and say, "Go for it!"

So yes, Josh, you may do this. The *Un*-Rules Manager officially says it's okay. (And cool! Good find!)

March 16, 2007



Q: I was looking at some rather famous cards the other day, known as power 9 cards. And I was wondering, are there different power levels for the cards in standard? For instance, what power level is Teferi, power 5, 6, 7 or even higher?

--Lyubomir, Varna, Bulgaria

A: From **Noah Weil, Magic R&D:**

Hi Lyubomir, thanks for the question! The Power Nine you're referring to are nine very famous, very strong cards from Alpha. They are:

Black Lotus
Mox Emerald
Mox Sapphire
Mox Ruby
Mox Pearl
Mox Jet
Timetwister
Time Walk
Ancestral Recall

Interestingly, the term "Power Nine" is actually a bit of a misnomer, as these are not the nine most powerful cards in Alpha. Balance, for example, is almost certainly more powerful than Timetwister. The reason **Timetwister** makes the list and **Balance** does not is that **Balance** was subsequently reprinted in Revised and Fourth Edition, whereas none of the Power Nine cards ever made it past Unlimited.

Nowadays for Standard, we don't have a term for a collection like this, both because cards are much more accessible and because they are less overpowered. Instead, the developers will go through the set and assign point levels to each card.

Constructed pointing is a separate process from Limited pointing, which you may have read about on the site. R&D developer Erik Lauer recently revised the Constructed pointing scheme, which now gives cards a numeric value from 0-9. Under this system, a card like Memory Jar is a 9, which defines it as vastly overpowered and a mistake to print. Incidentally, 9 being the top end of this scale and having cards called the "Power Nine" is just a coincidence, although most of the Power Nine would in fact be around the 9 level.

Regarding your question, **Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir** scored a 4.5 on this scale. That puts Teferi on the level of powerful but not overwhelming; currently a very accurate evaluation. You may wonder why R&D points cards at all. The goals are varied, but one reason is to make sure all the colors have access to strong spells. If the pointing is skewing heavily towards one color, cards may get moved around to balance things out. The process is imperfect, but thanks to the Power Nine we have learned to create sets without a preponderance of power in blue and/or artifacts.

March 15, 2007



Q: Blue being one of my favorite colors, **Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir** has easily become one of my favorite cards. While reading his legal text, I noticed that Teferi had two artists: D. Alexander Gregory & Jeremy Jarvis. How was Teferi drawn/created? And how are other cards that have been worked on by two artists created?

--Lloyd, Los Angeles, CA, USA

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

Hi Lloyd,

Being friends in "civilian life," D. Alex and I had been look for a project to work together on for sometime. Teferi had some challenges that made him a potentially appealing choice for a joint venture. He would need strong characterization, good design (costume, etc.) to communicate his status as a fallen planeswalker and needed to walk the line of still being identifiable as Teferi and taken to a new place, a new time and in a new setting. D. Alex and I talked about it and petitioned (then) Art Director Jeremy Cranford to allow us to work together on this particular card. D. Alex drew the piece, worked through the tonal tweaks that the Creative Team needed (making sure to still portray Teferi as a powerful, recognizable and formidable mage, but no longer possessed of a planeswalker's godlike power). I then printed the line drawing onto the heavy watercolor paper that I choose to work on and painted it, making sure to stay true to D. Alex's design and drawing and really push for the mood and atmosphere of the bleak scene and Teferi's defiance within it.

When other artists work together on a single image, the process is up to them, so long as quality and schedule don't suffer. It can be as linear as one drawing and one painting, or it can be a complex process of back-and-forth through the entire process.

March 14, 2007



Q: Simply put, why was red the only color in *Planar Chaos* to receive split cards?

----Rick, AL USA

A: **Paul Sottosanti, Planar Chaos design team:**

Hey Rick,

It comes from the fact that, in *Planar Chaos* design, Red's focus was on impulsive decisions and short-term thinking. This led us to design a vertical cycle of spells with reasonably high mana costs that allowed you to pay a "rush" (smaller) cost to get a much weaker version of the same spell. It didn't take long for the team to realize that these spells would be best represented as mono-colored split cards, which fit well into the alternate reality theme.

Some of that vision lived through development, as seen in a card like [Boom//Bust](#), where one half is clearly a weaker version of the other. [Dead//Gone](#) and [Rough//Tumble](#), on the other hand, offer two different methods of solving the same problem (i.e. one or more enemy creatures).

Interestingly, the theme of short-term thinking is also what led to red being able to bounce opposing creatures in *Planar Chaos*, since that is a temporary solution to something that red has traditionally been able to answer permanently.

March 13, 2007



Q: Who chooses which question is going to be shown on Ask Wizards? Why is it chosen? For being the best question? According to what exactly?

--Fernando, Lima, Peru

A: From Kelly Digges, editor of [magicthegathering.com](#):

First things first: The shadowy figure responsible for selecting the lucky few questions to be answered, and assigning the appropriate "wizards" to answer them, is none other than yours truly, Kelly R. Digges. I go through several hundred questions each week, tag the ones that look promising, and assign them in batches to people around Wizards of the Coast who have the know-how to answer them. As you may have noticed, occasionally one such person is me.

I choose any given question (and assign it to a given person) chiefly because I think I'll be able to get a relevant, satisfying answer that illuminates either trivia or policy concerning the game. The best questions are insightful, thoughtful, and clearly stated, asking questions that can't be answered anywhere else. They're also generally things that we haven't addressed in a previous Ask Wizards or elsewhere on the site, and often they are questions that we've received several times over. Not every question (or answer) can be a home run, but I try hard to make sure that every answer is interesting and educational to somebody.

Before joining the company I had always wondered, like you, how the whole Ask Wizards process works, so I suppose it's only poetic justice that I should end up as the guy in the hot seat. Finding good questions and answers is not as easy as it looks!

Now, that might ring false to you. We receive a *lot* of Ask Wizards questions. A lot. How hard can it be to pull out five of them per week?

Unfortunately, many of the questions we get fall outside the charter of Ask Wizards. We can't answer questions about the contents of upcoming sets, for instance (hopefully that's not a big surprise). Further, we can't help with defective product or Organized Play issues, and we just don't have the resources to answer rules questions. Our [customer service page](#) is a great place to go if you have questions about rules, products, or tournaments. For additional rules help, check out our [rules center](#) and [set FAQs](#). You can get information about upcoming events at our [Tournament Center](#) and input from other players about all sorts of things on our [message boards](#).

The best Ask Wizards questions ask *why* or *how* something about Magic is the way it is. If you've been wondering why all the split cards in Planar Chaos are red, or how Magic art is created, or what the heck the Brand department does, chances are you're not the only one. Ask Wizards has a voracious appetite, and we can't answer it if you don't ask it. Keep 'em coming!

March 12, 2007



Q: Is there any rhyme or reason for the ordering of the various weekly columns on [magicthegathering.com](#)? It certainly makes sense to bookend the week with "Making Magic" and "Latest Developments." For the rest, I can come up with some tenuous justifications, but it seems more likely that whatever pattern there is is beyond me.

--Scott, Pasadena, CA, USA

A: From **Scott Johns**, [magicthegathering.com](#) site manager:

Hi Scott,

There is indeed a method to the madness, but since there are several different factors going on it's not surprising that it's tricky to figure out from the outside. I could probably do a whole article on the schedule (I know, does that sound sexy or what?) but to keep it readable here's the cliff's notes version on what I take into account when choosing how the columns line up each day.

Deadline Requirements

If we had to start over from scratch, this would be the first step. Certain columns have a built-in deadline issue because of what they cover. First off, generally speaking, columns on the site come in two days before they go live (or so we hope). Given that, anything that by nature has to deal with the previous weekend pretty much has to come late in the week to allow the writer enough time to cover what just happened. So, columns like Swimming With Sharks (which is often dealing with deck lists from the previous weekend, which he receives Monday) and The Week That Was need to happen as late in the week as possible. Online Tech is about a day quicker, since Karsten sees the lists online over the weekend, so that means his column works okay at

Wednesday or later, but moving it to Monday or Tuesday would almost surely mean his column would have to cover things a whole week later due to lack of lead time. Columns with no tie to the previous weekend (such as Limited Information or Building on a Budget) are thus much more likely to end up earlier in the weekly schedule.

Target Audience

After that, there's the question of who the column is intended for. Each day we have two columns to work with, so between them we want to hit as much of the overall audience as possible. However, many of our columns cross over what people might expect as target groups, so more often than not each given column will have a lot more overlap of audience than you might expect. That said, we wouldn't do something like have Flores and Karsten on the same day, because their audiences are so similar. Notice that Swimming With Sharks, which is spike-centric, is opposite Taste The **Magic**, which I'm pretty sure nobody would describe as spike-centric. A similar split happens on Wednesday between Online Tech and House of Cards. (That's one of the reasons we needed to shuffle a bit when we went from "Into the Aether" (pretty casual), to "Online Tech" (which focuses much more on deck lists and strategies).

Previews and Theme Weeks

Another issue is theme weeks and set previews. Any time either of those is going on, at least one column each day is usually involved. That fits some columns much better than others, so it's critical that we program the schedule so that each day has at least one column that can easily handle card previews for new sets and the typical theme week. A column like Limited Information is much less likely to fit a theme week or get a normal preview card, so we put it opposite a column like Serious Fun that handles theme weeks and card previews all the time.

Other issues

There are other more minor factors that go into the process as well, but if you keep those three above in mind I think the current schedule will make more sense. As an example, using the Tuesday columns I was just talking about, note that with Limited Information on Tuesday, you know for the other column of the day you'd need a non-spike column that doesn't have to deal with the weekend immediately previous and that is able to handle card previews when a new set is out, plus cover most theme weeks. That leaves options like House of Cards or Serious Fun, and rules out columns like The Week That Was.

Whenever a big shuffle is coming, I have a piece of binder paper on my wall with 11 post-its on it, one per column/author. I start with columns I know are unlikely to move (such as the R&D columns) and then keep moving the rest of the post-its around until all of the factors are satisfied. Sometimes that means multiple solutions are possible, but so far there's been a clear "best" option each time.

March 9, 2007



Q: I've been wondering for some time now. In all the Pro Tour events, what does that guy on the laptop sitting by the game do? Is he a judge?
--Devin, Crowley, TX, USA

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

Hi Devin,

That guy is part of the official event coverage staff we bring to all the major events. He's writing a feature match report that recaps all the action, and there's no better place to see every card played and hear what the players say than sitting right next to them. Along with a seated writer, you may have also seen a coverage guy hooked up to a headset wandering around during Top 8 webcasts. That's our sideline reporter, and his job is to check on the matches not currently on camera and convey tidbits and results to Randy Buehler and Brian David-Marshall in the booth.

March 8, 2007



Q: There aren't many of them, and so far their only two jobs are scouts and seekers. They're Kithkins, and I would like to know exactly what they are. The word Kithkin appears in the same spot on the creature type line that Human or Elf would. What differentiates them from other **Magic** "races" and exactly who ARE they?
--Brian, Owensboro, KY, USA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

We haven't told any Big Origin Story for the kithkin, Brian, just as we haven't told an origin story for most of **Magic's** races of creatures. The kithkin are a "near-human" white-aligned race who tend to have a strong sense of community, simplicity, and forthrightness. They are quick, agile, and highly cooperative in battle. Also, they're short, topping out at about 4-1/2 feet tall. It might be easier to talk about what the kithkin are not: They're not dwarves or hobbits. They don't have an unusual fondness for 'pipe-weed' or ale, they don't go barefoot or burst into song more than other races, and they don't take particular pride in their beards or gardens.

March 7, 2007



Q: With most of the legendary cards, it's easy to tell the gender of the character from the art and name; not so easy with the *Planar Chaos* legendary dragons. We assume most dragons to be male, so which ones (if any)

are female? Are the dragon "characters" even created with any particular gender in mind at all?

--Thomas, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

A: From **Doug Beyer**, **Magic** Creative team:

Hi Thomas,

To answer your question, I referred to the very handy *Planar Chaos* Translation Guide. A Translation Guide is a document created by the creative and editing teams for each set. It contains notes on unusual words and proper nouns that appear in that set's card names and flavor text, so that the cards can be accurately translated for **Magic's** printings in other languages. It contains entries like this:

Jodah: Proper name of a powerful archmage from Terisiare.

Or this:

Timbermare: Made up word from "timber" (wood) and "mare" (horse), meaning a wood elemental creature shaped like a horse. Intended to reflect the names of **Nightmare** (9E) and **Thundermare** (9E).

Or this:

Numot: Proper name of a fierce, legendary dragon.

Another function of the Translation Guide is to specify genders. English does not have a lot of strong gender cues built into its grammar, but many other languages do, so it's important that we make clear the genders of the creatures and flavor text characters in a set in case it comes up for translation. Hence there is a "creature genders" tab in the Translation Guide. Yes, we keep track of all this stuff!

As it turns out, **Intet**, the **Dreamer** is female, and the other *Planar Chaos* dragon legends are male. Thanks for your question!

March 6, 2007



Q: How do you select which of the cards in a particular set will be the Prerelease Card?

--Richard, Manila, Philippines

A: From **Aaron Forsythe**, **Magic** Head Developer:

A fine question, Richard, and one that I myself had to ask others around the department once I inherited that responsibility. And in the years that I've been in R&D, the policy has changed somewhat.

The number one current criterion is that we want to find a card that will have appeal to most player types. As prereleases tend to draw casual players of all ages and skill levels out of the woodwork, we really want to give away cards that will resonate with them, which is why we often choose creatures. Ideally the card would also be powerful enough that tournament players could see some potential in it. If players hear what the card is before going to the event, we want them to be excited enough about it to go get it.

Second, we want the card to show off something unique about the set. That usually means a card with a new keyword, like suspend on *Time Spiral's* **Lotus Bloom**, although it could just express the "feel" of the set in some other way, such as hybrid mana on *Dissension's* **Avatar of Discord**. If there are no good candidates that match those two criteria, we'll usually just choose a card from a high-profile cycle, like *Planar Chaos's* **Oros**, the **Avenger**; *Coldsnap's* **Allosaurus Rider**; or *Champions of Kamigawa's* **Ryusei**, the **Falling Star**.

In the past, there was fear that if we gave away a card that was too desirable, it would damage the coolness of that card permanently; after all, why would I be excited to open one in a booster pack when every person I know already has one? So instead of giving away potentially good cards, we chose cards that showed off new themes or keywords and were mildly interesting. See: **Overtaker**, **Rathi Assassin**, **Feral Throwback**, **Fungal Shambler**. I was never a fan of that school of thought, and argued that prerelease cards should be sexy enough to get people in the door. I believe the Kamigawa block was the first to have the prerelease cards chosen from what we considered the marquee cards from the set, with **Ink-Eyes**, **Servant of Oni** being a great example of a total home run. Of course, sometimes we overestimate how cool certain cards are, like **Kiyomaro**, **First to Stand**, but in general we want prerelease cards to be something players are happy to own.

March 5, 2007



Q: I was wondering if creatures of a certain color are aware that they represent that color, or if they are simply categorized as such by their abilities and flavor tendencies. As an example, does the Golgari guild know that it represents green and black, or is it simply a group of people (and strange creatures) that happen to be aligned with the motives that black and green entail?

--Hector, Santa Maria, CA, USA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

The short answer to your question, Hector, is that it depends – it depends on the creature, its level of intelligence, its culture, its plane, and so on. Most sentient creatures who know that mana exists (not as many as you might think) are at least somewhat aware that there are different kinds of mana. They may or may not think of those kinds in terms of five colors, and they may not even have a sense of how many kinds there are. I

think you might also be asking, "Which comes first: the traits and characteristics of a thing or the color of mana with which that thing is associated?" That's a chicken-and-egg question, I think, as complex as nature vs. nurture or issues of free will. I think creatures have some predetermined association with one or more colors of mana, and some creatures have a capacity to change that association.

March 2, 2007



Q: I love that every expansion has its own card back, a practice that I've heard goes all the way back to *Arabian Nights*. However, I've only been playing since *Onslaught* Block, and I haven't seen many of the older card backs. Is there somewhere I can go to see all of them? I've always been curious what some of the older ones looked like.

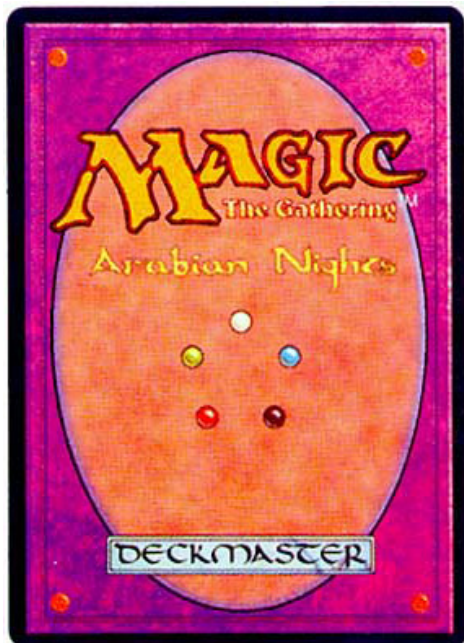
--Tim W.

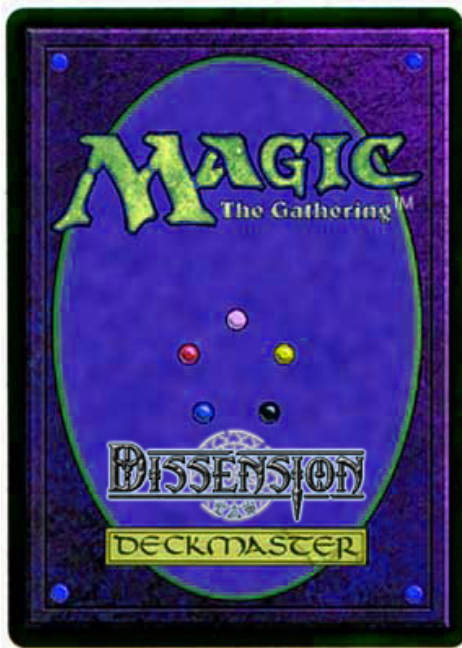
A: From **Scott Johns**, Magic R&D Morale Officer:

Tim,

This is a request we get a lot; with over 40 different card backs and no one place to go to see all of them, collectors and players alike want to see all of them laid out together. It just so happens that you, and all the others who have asked, are in luck! We've been planning a gallery of all the different card backs, which site manager Aaron Forsythe tells me will go up sometime soon.

In the meantime, let me whet your appetite with a few of the images:





It's always interesting to see how our graphics team gives each card back a distinct look and feel while still keeping the fundamentals of the **Magic** card back!

[What is 'What If?' Week?](#)

March 1, 2007



Q: Could you explain the thinking behind the red ninjas in *Betrayers of Kamigawa*? I understand the blue and black ones, but red does not seem so sneaky. What went into the decision to include red ninjas?

--Frank S.

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

To be frank, Frank, credit goes to Creative team lead Mike Turian for this bold flavor choice. I'm sure you've read the countless articles here at magicthegathering.com regarding the tengu (mountain-dwelling humanoid birds), and how Mike felt they were so essential to Japanese folklore that we simply couldn't do a feudal-Japan-inspired block without them. When he first proposed the idea of the tengu being red's main race in the block, I thought he was joking, and the rest of the developers were just as incredulous. But Mike continued to lobby for the tengu, claiming that the flavor payoff would make the color-pie weirdness worthwhile. Given the success and popularity of the tengu, I'd like to say that the development team came around to Mike's way of thinking, but that's not how it happened. In the end, **Magic** Director Mark Gottlieb had to intervene and make a decision, and he decided that Mike's plan was worth trying. So that's the story of how the Kamigawa block got a whole slew of common red flyers.

As for the tengu ninja, Mike told us that Japanese folklore portrayed tengu as master swordsmen and consummate tricksters. Agility, evasion (through flight), the trickster vibe... the stage seemed to be set for red ninjas. I think it was one of the Creative interns – either Kai or Elaine – who first suggested the "Order of Smoke" treatment, with tengu ninja specializing in flashes of fire and smoke for obfuscation. Mike liked the idea, and the development team was looking for a few more red tap-down effects anyway. And the rest, as they say, is history.

[What is 'What If?' Week?](#)



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