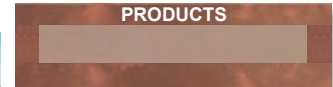


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The X Files

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Making Magic
Monday, July 23, 2007



PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Welcome to X Week! In honor of the release of *Tenth Edition*, Scott Johns has come up with an ambiguous yet apropos theme week. (By the way, I was touched how many of you worried after [my sign-off last week](#) that I was bold enough to have a column about pornography on the company website.) X Week is about whatever each columnist wants it to be about. As I starting thinking about what I wanted to say about X I realized I had a number of different things to talk about. Staying in theme, and being as Roman as possible, I've chosen to talk about X tidbits. I hope my X stories hit the spot (or at least mark it).



Tidbit I – A Numbers Game

Let's start with some trivia.

Given the five monocolored frames, the gold multicolor frame and the artifact frame, order the frames from the frame that has the most X spells (defined as a spell that has X in its mana cost) to the one that has the least.

Click [here](#) to see the answer.

- 1) Red, with 42
- 2) Blue and black, tied with 27
- 4) Green, with 20
- 5) Artifacts, with 15
- 6) White, with 9
- 7) Multicolor, with 6

Okay, now using the same seven frames, order the frames from highest to lowest with XX in its mana cost.

Click [here](#) to see the answer.

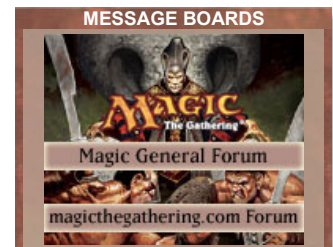
- 1) Red, with 3
- 2) Blue & artifacts, tied with 2
- 4) White, with 1
- 5) Black, green and multicolor, with 0

Tidbit II – Initially Yours

While thinking about X, I started thinking about what X, the letter, means to me—as a card designer, that is. The day I start writing a pirate-themed column, I'll talk about what X has to do with treasure maps. But barring the scarce Pirate creature type, there's not much buccaneering in my day to day. Which brings us back to X. What does X, once again the letter, mean to a designer? A number of things. That's when I started thinking about what any letter means to R&D, and I realized how many of them have a **Magic** design/development connotation. Without further ado, here is what each letter means to **Magic** R&D. Some of them will be familiar to you, but some of them may not be.

Letter	R&D Use
A	Used in card codes to represent an artifact frame. ("What does RA02 do?")
B	1) Used in card codes to represent a black frame. ("UB04 is a hole.") 2) Used to represent the color black. ("I need a B enchantment.") 3) Used to represent a black mana symbol. ("I think that instant should just cost B.")
C	1) Used in card codes to represent the rarity of common. ("We need a simple card for CW05.") 2) Used to represent a colored but not specified mana symbol, most often when talking about a cycle. ("The mana costs for this cycle of creatures will all be 2C.")
D	Used to represent a second non-specified colored mana paired with the first. ("The mana costs of this multicolored cycle are 1CD.") It is R&D convention when needing a second letter to represent another but different item to go with the next letter in the alphabet.
E	1) Used to represent a third non-specified colored mana paired with two others. ("This three-color multicolor cycle will each have a mana cost of CDE.") 2) Used to represent a mechanic in <i>Mirrodin</i> that got cut during design. R&D likes it and we plan to find a home for it someday. (In fact, it's shown up in at least one other design.)
F	No current R&D use.
G	1) Used in card codes to represent a green frame. ("RG02 is awesome.")

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	2) Used to represent the color green. ("Design a G creature.") 3) Used to represent a green mana symbol. ("That can activate for G.")
H	Used to represent unspecified hybrid mana. ("The guildmage cycle cost HH.")
I	Favorite pronoun of mine. (Okay, no proper R&D use.)
J	No current R&D use.
K	No current R&D use.
L	Used in card codes to represent a land frame. ("We can improve upon RL01.")
M	Used to represent an as yet unchosen mana cost; most publicly seen in You Make the Card when I listed mechanics without costs. ("This artifact will activate for M,T.")
N	Used to represent an as yet unnamed number. ("It's a counterspell so it should cost NUU.")
O	Used to represent a second as yet unnamed number. ("The creature's first activation will be NR and the second will be OR.")
P	No current R&D use.
Q	Used to represent something new coming in Jelly. Chosen by its creator (Mark Gottlieb) because the letter that would have been most obvious was already used.
R	1) Used in card codes to represent the rarity of rare. ("RW06 is pretty complicated.") 2) Used in card codes to represent a red frame. ("I think UR02 is broken.") 3) Used to represent the color red. ("We're looking for a R aura.") 4) Used to represent a red mana symbol. ("Of course, Pirate's Bolt is going to cost RRR.")
S	Used to represent snow mana. ("Diamond Faerie has an activation of 1S.")
T	Used to represent a tap symbol. ("That creature needs a T in its activation.")
U	1) Used in card codes to represent the rarity of uncommon. ("UB10 sucks.") 2) Used in card codes to represent a blue frame. ("We should cycle CU01.") 3) Used to represent the color blue. ("Can we find a U Johnny enchantment?") 4) Used to represent a blue mana symbol. ("We can do better than 2UU; how about UUU?")
V	No current R&D use
W	1) Used in card codes to represent a white frame. ("What is the card concept for UW04?") 2) Used to represent the color white. ("We need a small W creature.") 3) Used to represent a white mana symbol. ("Everyone loves a 2/2 for W.")
X	1) Used to represent a variable determined by the player. ("Target creature gets +X/+0, where X is its power.") 2) Used to represent a spell that has a variable in its cost. ("The set needs a red X spell.") 3) Used in card codes to represent a split card frame. ("UX01 has two records in Multiverse.")
Y	Used to represent a second variable. (The <i>Beatdown Box Set Fireball</i> costs XYR)
Z	1) Used in card codes to represent a gold frame. (We couldn't do UZ03 in monocolour.) 2) Used to represent a third variable. ("The Ultimate Nightmare of Wizards of the Coast® Customer Service costs XYZRR.")

Tidbit III – If You Build It

I've often explained that I'm a Johnny. While I talk about it in context of how I play, it also has an impact in how I design. Quite often I find myself designing a card because I create a little challenge for myself. One such challenge was the idea of designing an artifact that simply cost X . I don't know why the idea entertained me so, but it was on the short list of things I wanted to do when I first got to Wizards.

I got my first chance during the development of *Mirage*. Whenever we'd create a hole, I'd design cards to try and fill it. Well, one day we got a hole for an artifact creature. I was determined to find a way to make one that costs X .



Here's what I came up with. It was an okay first attempt but I felt the entire taxing to attack thing was a little clunky. So a little over a year later I made this:



My solution was to give the card defender (well, back then it was "make it a Wall"). It's interesting to note that the first version cannot block and the second version cannot attack.

Meanwhile, I got interested in the idea of making a creature that was X/X where X was in its cost. In fact, my goal was to make an X spell that was a creature. What color could have a XC spell that made an X/X creature? Green. So during *Tempest* (actually a set before *Shifting Wall*) I made a card I called Creatureball. It would later be named "Kralikin," and then "Krakilin" when everyone pronounced it wrong.



But *Tempest* development said ♣♣ was too aggressive and it got changed to the version above. Luckily, I've learned the value of time. I tried again in *Odyssey* and this time development was less afraid. You might know the card as *Ivy Elemental*.



Just a little insight in how an idea can branch off to create different cards.

Tidbit IV – Six Education

In case you happened to miss it, last week in Chris Millar's House of Cards column, he announced the Auction of the People deck requirements for this year's **Magic** Invitational. I'll give you a quick rundown but you're really going to want to [read the article](#) if you want the complete rundown. This year's decks are Alphabet Decks. Each deck is required to have twenty-six unique cards (not counting basic lands) starting with each letter of the English alphabet.

The pinch point of the deck construction is, of course, the letter X. Here's what you get to work with:



Yes, six cards. (There are 285 cards that have an X in their title, for the trivia buffs out there.) One artifact and five creatures. No white or blue cards. The two you probably don't recognize are both from *Portal Three Kingdoms*. And yes, all six of the above cards are legal for the Auction. I'm hoping all six manage to make it into the final seventeen decks.

Tidbit V – One Is Silver

So what is my favorite X spell? There are a lot of cards I could pick but when I looked through the list I found my choice was guided by emotion. It wasn't a card I created but rather one that I played. I've talked numerous times about my weenie blue-green deck that I played for over a year. The X card in question was in that deck. What was it?

Click [here](#).





My deck was a speed beatdown weenie deck. What was I to do when my opponent put out a big fat blocker? Sideboard in **Venarian Gold** and spend 1 or 2 to essentially destroy it. You see, I usually only needed one or two turns to defeat my opponent, and temporarily removing the threat most often did the job.

I'll be honest that **Venarian Gold** was never MVP of the deck. Heck, it was never MVP of the sideboard, but I always did enjoy watching the reaction of players when I sidelined their big creature with a card that they had to read when I played it.

So **Venarian Gold**, I salute you. Now get some rest.

Tidbit VI – I Don't Get It

One of the goals of this column is to show all the different ways I'm able to look at X. This tidbit talks about an aspect of X that few players think about. At Wizards X is the number one item on an interesting list. What is it? Why, things about the game that confuse players as determined by the questions sent to Wizards of the Coast's Customer Service (yes, of Ultimate Nightmare fame).

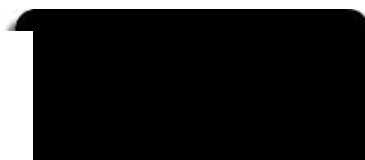
It appears that nothing seems to baffle the average player like having an X in the mana cost or rules text. Want to really throw the masses in a tizzy? Use X. I've actually witnessed multiple customer service guys cuss out The *Ice Age* card **Meteor Shower**.



What impact does this have on design? It has caused me to rethink how often and at what rarity to do X spells. Personally, I don't like to see X spells at common. (Yes, it occasionally happens, but never because I'm pushing for it.) It's also made me write off any mechanic (with a few exceptions) that would require the use of Y. (And Z? Right out!) Also, I'm particularly skittish about spells that use X where X isn't defined by the mana cost. Finally, I've been a vocal supporter of just using X less in templates. Instead of saying "X where X is blah," I like saying "do 1 for each blah."

Tidbit VII – Nightmare Scenario

Here is one of the wackiest X spells I've ever designed. (Not to mention Y spells and Z spells.)





So how'd this card come about? Believe it or not, with the title. I liked the idea of having a card title so long that it had to run up the side of the card. So I began coming up with what I thought were funny long names. The one that spoke to me was The Ultimate Nightmare of Wizards of the Coast® Customer Service.

This meant that I needed to come up with a card that would parody the kinds of cards that get Customer Service in an uproar. I knew that X spells were their bane (see Tidbit VI), so I decided it needed to be an X spell. No, an XX spell. No, no, no. Worse than that. An XY spell. As this was comedy, I couldn't stop there. No, I had to stretch to an XYZ spell.

But I wasn't done yet. What else caused Customer Service headaches? Misprints. Back in the day when we had a lot more misprints, Customer Service was constantly being called about them. What better way to cause confusion than to change the frame? Since the Un-sets don't balance color, it just so happened that we had less blue cards than any other, so I made the frame blue as a way to up the number of "blue" cards.

The final piece to the design was to convince Customer Service to let me put their phone number in the reminder text. I didn't think they were going to let me but I figured it couldn't hurt to ask. So I went to the person in charge of Customer Service and they thought it was a hilarious idea. They saw the card as an excellent way to educate the players about the existence of the Customer Service department.

And thus a Nightmare was born.

Tidbit VIII – Gimme Five

Time for another trivia question. Okay, in the history of **Magic** design, there has only ever been one five-card cycle (that is, a cycle that shows up one in each color all at the same rarity with some consistent mechanical execution) in which all five cards have an X in their mana cost. Name that cycle.

Click [here](#) for the answer.





The answer is the Shoals from *Betrayers of Kamigawa*. Ironically, these cards were often played without any X being spent (well, in mana at least).

Tidbit IX – Looking Into the Void

So, (then future) Hall of Famer Gary Wise flies to Cape Town, South Africa to play in the **Magic** Invitational. He turns in the following card as his submission for his prize if he wins:

Artifact of Doom

2

Artifact

As Artifact of Doom comes into play, choose a number. Spells with a converted mana cost of the chosen number cannot be played.

A few years later, this card shows up:



So what happened? How did Gary Wise get his card printed when he didn't win? The answer is quite simple. He made an interesting card. An interesting artifact, no less. When I was designing *Mirrodin* and was looking for cool artifacts, I remembered the card. While we promise to make your card if you win, we've never promised to not make it if you don't.

There were still a few issues with Gary's card. I believe the words "insanely powerful" might have been flung around. But I really liked the idea of a card that locked out a certain cost. The thing I liked least about Gary's card though was how it hosed expensive spells just as easily as cheap ones. What I really wanted was an artifact that excelled at shutting off moxes in Vintage but didn't keep Timmy from playing his dragon at Friday Night **Magic**.

I began by costing the artifact at X. This allowed the type of scaling cost that I wanted. Unfortunately, playtesting showed that X was too good. Well, if one X didn't do the job, what about two? Yeah, I knew XX was a confusion maker but this was a rare card and I felt like it was worth it as it would allow us to print the card. More playtesting showed that XX, while still good, wasn't too good and thus one of the few XX spells was born.

Tidbit X – Still On The Island

I'll end today on the piece that has been most requested from me since *Tenth Edition* previews began. (Click [here](#) if you have no idea what's going on.)

Narrator: Through nine expansions 285 cards had been whittled down to 24. With *Tenth Edition*, the game was starting to get interesting.

[CLICK HERE TO SEE WHO'S IN.](#)
[CLICK HERE TO SEE WHO'S OUT.](#)

IN

Air Elemental
Bog Wraith
Drudge Skeletons
Fear
Giant Growth
Giant Spider
Goblin King
Grizzly Bears
Howling Mine
Nightmare
Orcish Artillery
Regeneration
Rod of Ruin
Samite Healer
Scathe Zombies
Wrath of God

OUT

Circle of Protection: Red
Disrupting Scepter
Flight
Raise Dead
Shatter
Stone Rain
Stream of Life
Verduran Enchantress

Stream of Life: Okay, I'll honest. I didn't see that coming. I mean, I always thought everyone loved life gain.

Giant Growth: Sure I thought I was going to make the cut. But then so did **Counterspell** and **Disenchant**. No one's safe in this game. I've seen tournament play. That's more than enough to buy you a little time at Exile Island.

Air Elemental: I turn around and **Flight** has a tear in its eye. Being the only two blue cards left, we bonded. Not that I needed **Flight**. You know, I get along fine without him, but nonetheless I'm going to miss the little guy.

Stone Rain: Rain of Tears? Rain of Tears?!

Scathe Zombies: I have no idea why I'm still here. It's not like 2C 2/2 vanillas are in vogue any more. I can only assume someone in R&D has an irrational attachment to me.

Nightmare: Eight more down, baby! Just fifteen to go.

Fear: You know what the others should fear? Me! Wait, did I already use that joke?

Verduran Enchantress: I'm not sure how I even made it this far, but it was fun while it lasted.

Wrath of God: The way I see it, we still have some chaff to work through. Like **Regeneration**. How's that still here?

Stone Rain: My rules text is just three words. And I'm a sorcery. You can't get any more elegant than that!

Shatter: I was quite upset when I found out. I was sure I was safe. It's kind of ironic... The news shattered me.

Grizzly Bears: If you asked me ten years ago, I thought I was living on borrowed time. It was clear that R&D were willing to obsolete me so I had no sense of security. But as the years have rolled by it's become obvious that I have my own little guardian angel (obviously not Guardian Angel, as that card got booted ages ago).

Disrupting Scepter: I think my downfall was my art. How much awe can I instill when the best way to use me is to bludgeon your opponent on the back of the head?

Regeneration: For the love of Pete, will someone just vote me off? I promise not to activate myself.

Drudge Skeletons: I'm looking forward to the end game. Sticking around is what I do best.

Stone Rain: I've been in more sets than most these jerks. All the *Portal* sets. Numerous expert expansions. How's it over? What did I do?

Narrator: And thus 24 becomes 16. Every color still has a contender, although blue is down to one with white and red each having only two. Join us next base set to see who falls next.

X Marks The Spot

One last thing X can be—a cross. As in, I cross you off my list because I'm done with you. I'll X myself out and see you all next week.

Join me then when I go from X to why.

Until then, may you always find new vantage points.

Mark Rosewater

*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time*

with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.



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