

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Before and After

Mark Rosewater
Making Magic
Monday, October 8, 2007



Welcome to Tribal Week! The theme? The card type? All of the above. Yes, this week's about everything, and I mean everything, tribal. That said, let's talk about *Lorwyn*. The release of a new set is always an exciting time for players. It's also an exciting time for designers but for slightly different reasons. You all want to see what we've done, while we want to see what you think of what we've done. For *Lorwyn* this has been an interesting experience. Today I'm going to walk you through some of my thoughts about all of your thoughts. (If you ever wondered how an internet article differs from a magazine article, here's a shining example.)

In particular, I want to focus on the following phenomenon I noticed with *Lorwyn*: Before the Prerelease (a.k.a. before anyone could play with the cards), there were numerous posts and articles by players who were worried about certain aspects of the set. After the Prerelease, the message seemed to be, "Oh, I was worried about [thing X], but now that I've played it I actually think it's going to work out well." I want to examine why this happened and what the issues were and talk a little more about how design and development had addressed them.



One last caveat before I jump into the thick of the article. Many readers have commented that I seem to focus more on the negative comments made about a set than I do on the positive ones. This is true. Why? Because defending design choices makes for better reading than me repeating praise. This isn't to say that the praise isn't appreciated and desired. (So please don't stop.) It just doesn't lead to as much compelling content. What praise does do is help shape our criticisms about a set, letting us know what things we did that worked. Things that work are used again later. Even more importantly, it helps form our ongoing design philosophies about what players do and don't like.

Also, I (as well as the rest of R&D) understand that the vocal majority of the internet is itself a minority. I only need to compare my daily email to the threads and articles of the day to see the contrast. My focus on this aspect today is not meant to imply that this message was the dominant one we received on the set (It wasn't; the player reaction to *Lorwyn* has been overwhelmingly positive), but rather it is the one that has most piqued our interest as we are constantly striving to improve our processes, and negative criticism often shines the brightest lights into trouble areas.

The Trouble My Friends

As I've explained numerous times, I'm a crazed lurker on the internet when it comes to **Magic**. I'll read just about anything if it involves our customers talking about what they do and don't like about the game. This trait is only heightened just before a set comes out, especially once previews begin. In addition, one of the side effects of **magicthegathering.com**, and *Making Magic* in particular, is that we've really educated our players as to how we make the game. This means that the comments about the new set are very intricate. It's not just "I like this" or "I don't like this." If someone does or doesn't like something, they will drill into the design to explain what particularly they do or don't like.

Here's the quirky part. Design and development are constantly trying to keep the players on their toes by not simply resting on what we've done before. We make twists and turns at ever step to try and keep our audience from knowing what exactly we're up to. We innovate and take the game into new areas that the players have most likely never bothered to think about. So when we show new things, the players evaluate the ideas based on past knowledge of the game. Sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't. With *Lorwyn*, it felt like we zagged quite a number of times when people thought we were going to zig. And in a vacuum, the zig didn't make any sense.

What I want to do today is examine a number of aspects of the set that seemed to push one way before the Prerelease and then the other way after. Then I can spend some time explaining why design and development made the choices we did.

The Tribal Theme

We love data here at Wizards of the Coast. We want to know as much about our customers as we can. We want to know what you like and dislike. And not just what you say you like and dislike. We want to know exactly what we did that worked and what we did that didn't. We want to know what ideas excite you. We want to know what themes interest you. We want to know what makes you shell out your hard-earned money and buy a booster pack. We have many ways to collect this data. We can see what you read on our web site. We can see what tournaments you attend. We can see what expansions you buy. There is no end to the information available for our consumption.

Why do I bring this up? Because many of our decisions are based on this data. One such decision was to return to the tribal theme. Why? To paraphrase Sally Field, because you like it, you really, really like it. Other than multicolor, tribal is the most popular theme we've ever done. Because of this I wasn't prepared for the undercurrent of tribal hate that ran through the boards and in some articles on other **Magic** web sites. (Once again, I should stress it wasn't the

PRODUCTS

MAGIC ONLINE V3 BETA
Thursday 10/11
4pm - 7pm PST
Draft for Free!

MAGIC ONLINE

MAGIC The Gathering ONLINE

MESSAGE BOARDS

Magic General Forum
magicthegathering.com Forum

RULES

RULES

majority opinion.) The major thrust of these complaints was that tribal wasn't fun because R&D was "building our decks for us."

Here's the funny part. We heard this message during *Onslaught*. It was quieter back then, but as R&D keeps its ear to the ground, we were aware of the sentiment. So when we set out to design *Lorwyn*, we specifically made sure to broaden out how we handled the tribal theme. That is, from the beginning we set out to craft a tribal block in such a way that it gave players more choices while still staying true to the linear quality of the theme. To use a barbering metaphor, we spiffed up the set by layering our theme. This gave each tribe more dimension than they had in *Onslaught*.

Probably the biggest decision we made was to stretch out the colors for each tribe including moving into a color that the race had never (or almost never) been in before. I made a point of this in my second preview article ([Lorwyn at All Costs](#)), but I think that I didn't do enough of a job explaining why it was so important.

Quick aside: One of these days I'll dedicate an entire column on innovation, but I just want to stress this point before we continue. Many internet posters harp on R&D about the innovation in each set. Whenever we do anything that has any precedent in the game, the item in question is deemed not innovative by some. Let me just be blunt. That's crazy! The game is fourteen years old. We've had over forty expansions. We've made over nine thousand unique cards. And that's just counting what we've published. Finding a truly original idea that cannot be traced or connected to any former idea is a rarity. Yes, we do it occasionally (the planeswalkers are about as new as any idea could be), but it is the exception, not the rule.

What makes today's **Magic** designs innovative is not the raw ideas but the execution. The juxtaposition. The synergy. What makes *Lorwyn* stand out in my mind is not that any idea is overwhelmingly original (although once again, planeswalkers) but that all the different pieces from various places were put together in a way that creates an environment unlike anything that has ever been seen before. When I say *Lorwyn* is to *Onslaught* as *Ravnica* is to *Invasion*, it is because I feel that the texturing that we've added to tribal has the same level of jump of sophistication as *Ravnica* had tackling multicolor.

Which brings me back to the execution of color in the set. When I explained in my preview article that one of the big innovations of the set was to bleed tribes out to a second color, my response thread was filled with posts that basically said, "That's your innovation? *Planar Chaos* just did that."

Reading these comments made me realize that I had done a poor job of explaining the relevance of stretching the colors. Yes, we were bleeding creature types from a flavor perspective, but that was only a necessary by-product of putting races that had only ever been in one color into two. You can't put Goblins or Elves or Merfolk into a second color without bleeding. But the bleeding itself isn't the point (as it had been in *Planar Chaos*). The reason that pushing every tribe to two-plus colors is so important is that it moves tribal from a parallel design to a criss-cross design.

Let me explain. In *Onslaught*, if you became interested in Goblins (whether drafting in Limited or deckbuilding in Constructed), it only begat more goblins. Goblins were red and red was Goblins. There wasn't any force to pull you in other directions. (That's not completely true, as there were some classes stretching between races, but that's a discussion for a different column.) Each tribe existed in its own world without much intersection. In *Lorwyn*, if you start looking at red Goblins, you can be pulled in different directions. Other red cards can pull you into Elementals or Giants. Black goblins can pull you into an entire new color. Once there, you start getting tempted by Elves and Faeries.



By going to two colors, we've turned tribal from a monocolored experience to a multicolored one. I mean this both literally and figuratively. Literally, the tribes each now have more color options. This also means that we've shaken up how particular tribes work as we've added new tools to every deck. Figuratively, we've created an environment where tribes, like colors, can be mixed and played together. A Goblin / Elf deck is now viable where it never was before. In short, we added some modularity to a linear theme.

I think a lot of the pre-Prerelease confusion was that players were looking at *Lorwyn* with the tribal lens of *Onslaught*. Tribes were looked at in isolation because that is how we treated them last time we tackled the theme. *Lorwyn* is a

whole new world. (And the block, by the way, has just begun—we have a few twists yet to come.)

Changelings

The turning point of *Lorwyn* design for me was the realization for the need of changelings. (And yes, I swear that I'll get to this story when Changeling Week finally gets here.) I called them "tribal grease" in a previous column, but I'll go further. Changelings, in my not-so-humble opinion, are the key ingredient that makes *Lorwyn's* tribal design work. So imagine my surprise when their premiere (preview-wise) was met with complaints about how we've made *Mistform Ultimus* less special just to make janky cards.

Quick aside for a rant: It kills me as a designer whenever people get mad because I take a beloved card and make more cards like it. Where am I supposed to get inspiration from? Cards you hate? I don't get the argument that "You're making [card X] less special." Isn't imitation the sincerest form of flattery? One of the ways I know a card is great is because we keep going back and designing more variants of it. Just imagine all the things that wouldn't be a staple of the game if we had just stopped after the first one—vigilance, haste, off-color activations, dragons, angels, permanent stealing, tutoring. The list goes on and on. And this isn't even getting into the issue that finding virgin design space keeps getting harder. If something is good, in time we're going back to that well. Guaranteed! Whew, just had to get that off my chest.

I think the changeling issue was a similar one to the color stretching. In *Onslaught*, you seldom thought about combining two tribes. (Yes, there was some Elf / Beast synergy.) Thus, each card was thought of only in the context of its own tribe's deck. Because of this, I think that players didn't know how to think of changelings. So they didn't. But when they started playing with them, players started to see their value because they just kept mattering.

Changelings are so valuable because they make four different tribal things happen:

#1) They help you get to critical mass. One of the biggest problems in a tribal environment is getting enough creatures to make your deck work. Changelings are valuable because they allow players to fill out whatever tribe they're playing. This helps out numbers in Sealed and allows more mono-tribe potential in draft.

#2) They allow tribal to provide more reliable answers. One of my favorite early moments in *Lorwyn* is figuring out that you can use your Harbinger to go get your changeling spell (quite often a kill spell—it's no mistake that a lot of changeling spells are answers to creatures). This adds a much needed consistency to gameplay.

#3) They make every tribal interaction matter. In *Onslaught* block, you might play a 4/3/2 like *Spurred Wolverine* because you needed the body, but you had no expectation that its tribal interaction would ever happen. But with changelings, every tribal interaction has potential, even if the only other Giant in the deck is your *Woodland Changeling*. In addition, phrases like "non-Elf" and "non-Elemental" really start to matter.

#4) They allow for cross-pollination of tribal effects. Here's the most subtle but in many ways coolest effect of changelings. They allow two tribal effects from different tribes to interact with one another. Normally, a card that boosts my faeries doesn't interact with a card that boosts my elves. But I play a changeling, and all of a sudden I have one creature with both bonuses.

I'm glad that changelings have so quickly turned around their reputation. And for those who haven't yet played Limited with *Lorwyn*, let be the first to stress—play with your changelings.

Clash

When this mechanic was first designed (by Head Developer and [Latest Developments](#) columnist Devin Low), I was really worried about it because I felt it looked horrible, but Devin said that I had to play it. And so I did. And it was fun. But I knew down deep that this was a mechanic that wasn't going to produce many good first impressions (and by the way, I feel that sets should have some of those—it's way better than things that look awesome but aren't fun when you play them).

I was correct. Out of the gate clash was probably the mechanic that got the most bad press. Here's the irony. The thing it was most attacked for was for "adding randomness to the game." Why is that ironic? Because it doesn't. In fact, the mechanic as a whole reduces randomness.

So what's going on? It turns out that the biggest innovation of clash is that it sneakily has a deck-smoothing element. The more clashing that goes on, the less mana-screw everyone has in the early game and the less mana flooding goes on late game. In short, games with clash play better. We managed to do that *and* add an element of suspense into the game. You have to admit that you didn't see that one coming.

From a pure design standpoint, clash is, in my mind, one of the biggest successes in that it took two elements that are normally in contrast with one another—randomness and consistency—and found a way to make them play nicely together. Hats off, Devin. Awesome job! By the way, if you've been avoiding clash cards because of the randomness concern, please give them a spin. They create great dramatic moments, and you'll get less mana screwed. What more could you ask for?

Evoke



I talked a bit about this [last week](#). The hit this mechanic took was exactly what I predicted last week. Having an ability that kills my creature doesn't at first glance seem good, but once you play with it you start to understand that what you're really doing is turning your creature into a spell. The coming into play and dying is just a needed convention to get the card to work within the rules. (As you'll see in *Morningtide*, though, we did find some ways to turn that "bug" into a feature.) Also, it was a sneaky way to get more creatures into the tribal set.

Yes, another mechanic that plays much better than it looks. Not exactly the theme we set out with in design, but definitely one that managed to rear its head during previews. But wait, there's more.

Champion

Here's one that caught me by surprise. We specifically designed the champion mechanic to offset the two-for-one problem, yet many of the forum posters seemed to focus on the one situation we didn't get rid of. You see, if you only have one creature in play (or just one card that is the creature type your champion cares about) and you play a champion card, your opponent can destroy the creature you plan to champion while the comes-into-play effect is on the stack. So yes, you can be two-for-one'd. It just doesn't happen a lot.

I'll digress to talk about an interesting phenomenon I've noticed. I've dubbed it "Shock panic." For example, during the first You Make the Card (which ended up making the card *Forgotten Ancient*) we gave the audience several choices for the cost and body. R&D felt that the best choice (from a Spike power perspective) was 0/1 for 1GG . But the audience chose 0/3 for 3G . Why? Because it wouldn't die to a *Shock*. The whole point of *Forgotten Ancient* was to get the creature out and have it grow into some giant monstrosity. Players didn't want their opponent taking it out before they could get it there. Ironically, in doing so, they weakened the card. I bring this up because whenever we try to figure out how players are going to evaluate a card we have to take into account what "bad things" could happen if their opponent responds with the wrong card at the wrong time.

So what happened at the Prerelease? Players started to understand how strong many of the champion creatures are. Yes, there is a potential window of vulnerability, but that window is small and can be mitigated, and if you can get past it, you can have a pretty awesome creature. Add to that the endless number of Johnny-style tricks that the champion mechanic enables, and you have some fun for the whole family.



The Tribal Type

One of the harsh realities of **Magic** design is that the rules cannot be ignored. This means that there are times when good designs have to live with some compromise. In [his feature this week](#), Aaron outlines why the designers felt so strongly about having tribal noncreature spells in the set. He also talks about the sacrifices that had to be made to do it, the biggest of which, in my opinion, was the making of tribal into a card type. If we wanted tribal (and the set really does—it is another important way that *Lorwyn* tackles the tribal theme differently than *Onslaught*), this is the price we had to pay. (At least this is what Gottlieb swears; my belief is that he was paid off by *Tarmogoyf*.)

The problem is that this isn't something we can expect most players to know. So when we premiered the mechanic (in *Future Sight*), we got a lot of resistance, especially because most of the bonuses of the tribal card type were not apparent from a single card. Thus, when tribal showed up in *Lorwyn* previews, the complaints began. Yes, tribal "feels" like a supertype.

What changed at the Prerelease is that players finally got to see the value of having tribal spells. Using your *Boggart Harbinger* to get a *Tarfire* feels pretty awesome. With the focus on the gameplay, players seemed much more willing to live with the new card type.

Planeswalkers

This was probably our best success pre-Prerelease and, one could argue, post-Prerelease as well. Many of the mechanics played better than they looked. Planeswalkers had the mighty task as playing as *well* as they looked. Luckily, R&D knew the importance of them, and we put our time in design and development-wise (another story I promise is coming). By the way, if you crack one of these in Limited, you might want to play it.

All the Mechanics that Are Fit to Print

I hope today gave you a little insight into the difference between the perception a mechanic has before and after it gets played. As you can see, it is frustrating for us when something we've carefully crafted gets dismissed by players two seconds into reading the card. Luckily, players are always eager to try out the new thing, which means emphasizing play value over perception doesn't tend to burn us all that badly in the long term.

That's all I have for today. If you haven't had a chance to try out *Lorwyn* in a Limited capacity, I highly urge you to try it. If the internet reaction is to be believed: "It's more fun than I expected."

Join me next week when I recap the last hundred weeks.

Until then, may you know the joy of harbingering for your changeling spell.

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.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Mark Rosewater](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

