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# Planeswalk on the Wild Side, Part II

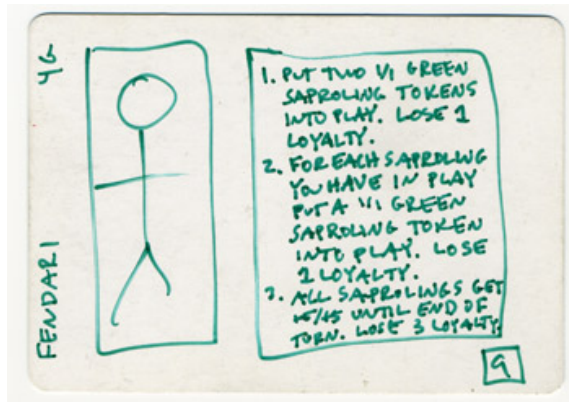
Mark Rosewater  
 Making Magic  
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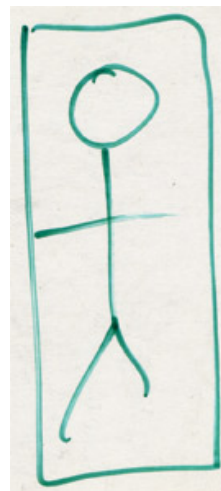
Previously in Making Magic...

Matt Cavotta is put on the Future Sight design team, where he finds a way to connect a desire of the creative team (making planeswalkers more relevant to the game) with one of the design team (hint at new places for **Magic** to go in its future) by suggesting the creation of a planeswalker card type. The idea isn't embraced at first, but Matt holds strong, finally convincing me to take the idea seriously. I create a planeswalker design team (consisting of Matt, myself, Mark Gottlieb, and Brandon Bozzi) who comes up with a version of planeswalkers that get very mixed reactions from the R&D. The planeswalker cards are pulled from Future Sight and I am instructed to fix them. We'll find a home for them, I am told, when we make something that everyone likes. (For more detail, feel free to read [Part I](#).)

So, our story begins here:



This is one of the playtest cards from when I mocked up decks to show off the initial planeswalker design team's version of planeswalkers. This is the card that bumped **Tarmogoyf** from the set. This playtest card, incidentally, is a Rosewater original. I'm sure it will be auctioned off at Sotherby's one of these days. You can tell it's mine as it has many telltale signs of my art style. See?



It's subtle. My original work was with crayon, while for the playtest cards I worked with permanent markers. I'm really enjoying the creative stretch in the new medium. (Curse you Jarvis, why won't you return my calls?!) The reason the cards are oriented sideways is that at the time I thought it might be a neat way to present them that would buy us more space for text. (It turns out that this doesn't work on actual cards. No chance of me becoming the **Magic** art director anytime soon.)

For those that don't remember from last week, here's how this version of planeswalkers worked: You paid the planeswalker's mana cost and put it into play. Then, at the beginning of your upkeep, you had an effect. The first

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effect to go off is 1, then 2, then 3, then back to 1 and so on. Most effects cause a change in loyalty (almost always down in this version).

A number of R&D members dubbed these planeswalkers "robotic" as they didn't allow the player any say in what they did (well, other than when you chose to summon them). Ironically, the "robotic" feel was done on purpose as the original design team was trying to make the planeswalkers feel more independent. This wasn't yet another thing you were controlling; more of someone who came and helped but followed his or her own agenda. While fine in theory, in practice it was making for a lot of dumb planeswalker moments. Something had to change.

## Take Two

Once the planeswalkers were officially kicked out of *Future Sight*, we did with them what we do to any cool idea that we need more time to flesh out: we put them into the next set. In this case, the next set was *Lorwyn*. Rather than build a new planeswalker team, I decided it was best to just make use of the *Lorwyn* design team. That team was led by Aaron Forsythe. It was his first time leading the design of a large set. I was on the team for two reasons. First, these days I seem to be on every design team and second, it was Aaron's first large set. I was there to help guide him and act as his safety net. Interestingly enough, *Lorwyn* design started with Aaron being my direct report (meaning I was his boss) and *Lorwyn* development ended with Aaron being my boss. You might say a lot happened during *Lorwyn* design and development.



The next person on the team was Paul Sottosanti. Paul had done well on the design team for *Planar Chaos* so he was asked to work on another design team. This worked out so well that Paul ended up becoming the lead designer on *Morningtide*, but that story will have to wait until *Morningtide* previews in January. The last three designers all participated for part of *Lorwyn* design but none was there for the entire time: Brady Dommeruth, creative director and **Magic** world builder, who was put onto the team to help interweave the mechanics with the creative for the set; Nate Heiss, a designer that normally works on non-**Magic** games but one with an extensive background in **Magic** (not to mention a [former columnist](#) for this very site), and Andrew Finch, then head of new games, who wanted to get more familiar with the **Magic** design process. While Brady, Nate, and Andrew all chipped in their comments to the larger planeswalker conversation, to the best of my memory, the essential second planeswalker design team was Aaron, Paul, and myself.

The key to any redesign is to start by figuring out what did and didn't work with the first design. Aaron, Paul and I built decks using the original planeswalkers and played a bunch with them. What we needed to figure out was what pieces were working. That is, what elements of the original design gave the cards a planeswalker feel? What pieces helped make the cards feel unique? What about the cards was fun? And then the reverse of each of the above questions: what needed to go?

After playing with the cards for a while, the team came to some consensus on what we liked and didn't like:

### Liked:

#### Having a mana cost

As I said last week, we needed a way to make sure that effects of a certain color are only available to players playing that color. Mana cost is by far the simplest and easiest way to do this. I know there were a number of people in the threads that liked the idea that Matt hinted at in his first email of having planeswalkers that pop into play if certain conditions were met. The problem with these kinds of cards is that 1) they are very limited from a design perspective; as we were designing a new card type, it was very important that we set up something that we felt we could do again and again; 2) they greatly limit what decks can play them; we really like that different green decks, for instance, can all play Garruk, and 3) it would force them all to be reactive, meaning that the design would force planeswalkers to come into play after you had made something else happen. The planeswalkers wouldn't be making the thing happen but responding to it. Anyway, this was a nonnegotiable going into the first design team. Nothing changed for the second one.



#### Being a permanent

While this seems obvious, one of the common responses we heard from people when we started pitching the idea was to create a card type much like Vanguard. (For those that don't know what I'm talking about, check [this](#) out.) We flavored some of the original (paper) Vanguard cards as planeswalkers, so I understand where people are coming from. The reason that we shied away from Vanguard was that we wanted to have cards that were part of the game, not cards that superceded it before the game even began. What I mean is we wanted planeswalkers, like all other card types, to be something you chose to put into your deck not something thrust upon you. And remember, Vanguard is not the kind of thing that only some people can play. In the end, like having a mana cost, being a permanent was something that started mandatory and stayed mandatory.

#### Having various effects of which one happened per turn

Of all the mechanical flavors we tried to capture the sense of planeswalkers, nothing worked better than giving them multiple effects. Just as you, a planeswalker, have multiple options so too was it important that the planeswalkers weren't one-trick ponies. This was also important as they created something unlike past card types. Many cards create an effect every turn but with few exceptions they tend to create the same effect turn

after turn. Having the effects change made the card feel more as if there was some intelligence behind it. The reason we limited the effects to one per turn was to allow us to create larger effects. Note that while we liked having various effects this didn't mean we felt the robotic cycling through the abilities was the right way to go. We just knew that we wanted to keep the larger sense of a planeswalker capable of casting multiple spells.

### **Having a loyalty number which various effects would drive up or down**

Another thing we liked about the effects was that using them had an impact on the planeswalker. The fact that this momentum most often led downwards also meant that we were building in answers to the planeswalkers within themselves. This is important as we didn't think the game could handle having an entire other resource that forced players to have to put specific cards in their deck solely for dealing with it.

### **Allowing creatures to attack the planeswalker to lower loyalty**

For the same reason, we really liked the ability for the opponent to answer a planeswalker by attacking it with creatures. As most **Magic** decks have creatures, this meant that the majority of decks would have some answers to the planeswalkers built-in. The reason we felt so strongly about this is that **Magic** is just a better game when there is strong interaction between the players. In addition, we felt that an important way to make planeswalkers feel on par with players was to allow them access to things that up until then only players had. One such thing was the ability to be attacked by creatures.

### **Allowing an opponent to redirect damage from a player to his planeswalker**

This rule started out for the same reason as the one I just stated. How do you make a planeswalker feel on par with players? Let the opponent damage it directly with spells. As I mentioned last week, we toyed with allowing any spell that targeted a player to be able to target a planeswalker but abandoned the idea when it was clear that there were too many cards that the rules wouldn't know what to do if they targeted a planeswalker. Mark Gottlieb came up with this workaround during the first design team and no one saw a reason to change it. Actually, that's not completely true. Multiple times during the design (and later the development) different people suggested simply allowing all damage to be redirected meaning that the creatures didn't have to attack the planeswalker directly. This got shot down for two reasons: First, we liked that the creatures could attack the planeswalkers for all the reasons listed above. And second, if any damage could get redirected it became much harder for a player to defend their planeswalker.

## **Disliked:**

### **Having no control over what the planeswalker was going to do**

It is my belief that this is the number one reason the "robotic" planeswalkers were perceived so badly by R&D. The only decision you had when using planeswalkers was when to play them. (Okay, I guess you did get to decide when your creature blocked for them.) In addition, it was very frustrating watching them do stupid or worthless things. Planeswalkers were supposed to convey a sense of power, not of powerlessness. This brings to head an important debate, one we had numerous times. Does allowing a player to make choices for a planeswalker take away from the sense of autonomy? The answer we found was yes, but only a little. We felt that the added flexibility and thus the resulting increase of strategic gameplay more than made up for it.



### **Having no way to help keep the planeswalker around**

Another frustrating part of the planeswalkers was that while your opponent had ways to speed up their demise, you had very little ability to slow it down. The more we examined this the more we realized that it created a much bigger problem. If we limited what a planeswalker could do by using its loyalty as a cost rather than having a preset order, then the only way to force planeswalkers to build up to some larger effect (and this was another quality we liked about the original design) was to allow the planeswalkers the ability to build up loyalty. Otherwise, they could do their big effect the first chance they had to use an ability. Kind of anti-climatic. As you'll see, this issue will drive a lot of the changes.

## **New and Improved**

Once the team looked over all of our likes and our dislikes, we realized that we weren't that far off. The original planeswalkers had a general feel that we liked and was rather innovative in how it worked. There were two major sticking points (see above) so we focused on how to address them.

Feedback had made it clear that having a preset order to the effects was unattractive. What could we do if the effects weren't in a set order? There was two ways to do this. The effects could occur randomly or could be chosen by the planeswalker's controller. Random was a poor choice, as market research has driven home the point that tournament players do not like random effects. (To them, it makes the game feel less skillful.) As we wanted the planeswalkers to show up in all aspects of the game, including tournament play, this path seemed dubious at best.

This left us with the idea that the planeswalker's controller chooses what effect happens each turn. As I talked about above, this rubbed some people the wrong way, myself included, because it made the planeswalkers feel more like something you control rather than something that is on par with you. But the more we studied our options the more we realized that we didn't have a lot of choice. Allowing the player to have options simply made

for better gameplay. It guaranteed that the planeswalkers didn't act stupidly. And that, we found, was quite important to making the planeswalkers likable.

All right, the three abilities were no longer preset. At the beginning of each upkeep (yes, at this point it was still a beginning-of-upkeep trigger), the player was allowed to pick whichever effect they wanted. But we didn't always want the players to have access to any effect. We liked in the old version how the cards would seem to work towards a goal. To do this, we had to find a way to keep certain abilities unusable until future turns. This meant that we had to reexamine how we were using loyalty. The original version had loyalty gains and losses happen as part of the effect. This meant though that any planeswalker could use any ability because they weren't required to have all the loyalty an effect might deduct from them.



The key to this was to change loyalty loss (or gain) from an effect of the ability to a cost. This way if a planeswalker didn't have enough loyalty there would be abilities he or she would be unable to use. This would allow planeswalkers to build up to a larger effect. Note though that this wasn't the only way we pulled off this trick. Another common way was to have effects that fed upon previous effects. Take Fendari from above. Giving all Saprolings +5/+5 is a big effect, but it doesn't mean much until you have a number of Saprolings.

Having abilities to build up to also meant that we had to start creating abilities that gained the planeswalker loyalty. While the original white planeswalker did this (although I should point out that even it went down 1 loyalty each cycle—I misstated this last week), it wasn't something fully embraced until this design team.

With these basic changes in mind (player choice on what ability gets used, loyalty as a cost, and more loyalty generating abilities) the team made five new cards. I'm going to show them to you and walk you through what we were thinking. For those that care, since the original planeswalkers all had Italian names we thought it would be humorous to give these Greek ones (well, as interpreted by Shakespeare). Get it, Greek and Roman. Yeah, we're nerds if you hadn't figured that one out yet. Here are the initial cards turned in by the second planeswalker design team:

#### **Theseus the White**

3WW

Planeswalker - Theseus

9

- +0) Until the beginning of your next turn, opponents' permanents come into play tapped.
- 2) Tap target creature. Creatures don't untap during their controllers' next untap steps.
- 4) Destroy all tapped creatures.

For each planeswalker we were given a description by the creative team. The white planeswalker revolved around justice. We knew we wanted to build up to something and nothing in white felt more like justice than **Wrath of God**. But building up to destroying all creatures seemed kind of lame. What if we built up to a one-way **Wrath**? Also, during this design we tried very hard to make all the abilities chain together. That is, using the first helped you with the second and using the second helped you with the third. If you used the +0 ability (imitating **Kismet**) then you caused things to come into play tapped. Which meant when you used the -2 ability you got to keep tapped anything that was already tapped. Note that this ability fed into itself as you could, over numerous turns, lock down a number of creatures as each previously tapped creature stayed locked down. All of this played into the -4 ability, which allowed the one-way **Wrath of God**. It's also interesting to note that the numbers were situated such that using the second ability even once kept you from being able to **Wrath** twice.

#### **Lysander the Blue**

3UU

Planeswalker - Lysander

8

- +1) Draw a card.
- 6) Search your library for a card, put it into your hand, then shuffle your library.
- 8) Look at target opponent's library. You may play a nonplaneswalker card from it without paying that card's mana cost.

The creative write-up on this planeswalker stressed that his magic was good at affecting memory. This card has less build-up and is more tied by theme. All three abilities interact with the library (which represents the memory, if you're up on your **Magic** metaphors). The +1 ability was created to allow you to build up and thus do the later abilities more than once.

#### **Hermia the Black**

3BB

Planeswalker - Hermia

6

- +2) Each player discards a card.
- 1) Each player sacrifices a creature.
- 10) Return all creature cards in your graveyard to play.

The idea for this card was simple. You were building up to a large effect. Getting there, you did effects that hurt you short term but could be completely undone if you get to the big ability. (Hint: discard creature cards.) Note

that this and the green planeswalker stayed very true to their original versions. This was probably due to the fact that I really liked how the two of them worked and pushed to keep them essentially the same.

#### **Hippolyta the Red**

3RR

Planeswalker - Hippolyta

7

+2) CARDNAME deals 1 damage to target player.

-X): CARDNAME deals X damage to target creature.

-11) Target opponent sacrifices five lands. CARDNAME deals 5 damage to that opponent and each creature he or she controls.

Planeswalker

This planeswalker was on the destructive side. Plus I was a big believer that the initial planeswalkers needed to stay true to their color. Yes, later planeswalkers could stray more, but I wanted the first ones out of the gate to really reinforce their slice of the color pie. It's interesting to note how much this card changed during development to ultimately end up very close to this early version.

#### **Oberon the Green**

3GG

Planeswalker - Oberon

10

+0) Put a 2/2 green Bear creature token into play.

-2) For each Bear in play, put a 2/2 green Bear creature token into play.

-6) Each Bear gets +4/+4 and gains trample until end of turn.

Planeswalker

I tried so hard to get a doubling effect on the green's planeswalker. And it stayed there for much of the development of these cards. In the end, the effect lost out partially due to power but even more so to the fact that the first two abilities were too close and it was rather easy to know which one you wanted to use. Note that we didn't feel we needed to give this card a positive loyalty ability because its big effect required work to set up.

As you can see, other than the white planeswalker, traces of these original cards all show up in the final versions.

## The Tweak That Was

The above cards were what design handed off. Every change made from that point on was made in development. I'm going to leave those stories for [Devin Low](#) to tell, but I thought I'd quickly run through the major changes so you can see what tweaks were made by development.

**#1 – The ability changed from being an upkeep trigger to being an ability that could be used once per turn anytime you could play a sorcery.** This is probably the biggest change. It was suggested, I've been told, by Nate Heiss. This change helped make the cards more relevant as they were now able to have an impact the turn they came into play.

**#2 – All the planeswalkers were given a positive loyalty ability.** The development team felt it was important that the player had the ability to strengthen his planeswalker just as his opponent had the ability to beat it down. In addition, it allowed them to build toward the next point.



**#3 – All planeswalkers were given an Ultimate (a.k.a. a third "kickass" ability).** While the versions above all have a stronger third ability, the development team decided to notch it up a bit.

**#4 – All planeswalkers got a "Plan B."** The design team seemed more focused on each planeswalker having one interconnected plan. The development team decided that it would be nice if each planeswalker had two different routes to victory. This would allow them to have more variety in play as players would have options how to use them.

So am I happy how the planeswalkers ended up? Yes, very much so. It was nice to see how all the time and attention they received from both design and development led us down a path which created something I think is worthy of the lofty goals which had been put before us. We were only going to do planeswalkers if they one, added value to the game, and two, lived up to the hype of being a new card type. I feel the planeswalkers firmly accomplished both objectives.

That's all I have to say about them for now. I am quite eager for the thread and my email to find out what all of you think about the planeswalkers. I like them. Do you? If so, why? If not, why not? The data you can give me is very valuable because we're going to have to design more of them and getting a sense of where they excel or have room for improvement will definitely influence future design.

Join me next week when I talk about mutant ninja turtles.

Until then, may your loyalty run deep.

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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