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The Amazing Race/Class

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Making Magic
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hello everyone. I hope all of you that went to the Prerelease had a great time. Did you play with reinforce? Was it good? I thought so. Anyway, it's what I call limbo week. That is it's the week after previews are over but before the set is out. Limbo week is always a non-theme week. I obviously am going to talk about *Morningtide* but I don't have a preview card or a theme to push me in any direction meaning I am at the mercy of whatever my subconscious feels like talking about. (If that doesn't scare you, you just haven't read enough of my columns to capture my mental state.)

Luckily, my subconscious got stuck on a paragraph from my first *Morningtide* preview article [Class Is in Session](#):

Actually, our story starts many years before the *Lorwyn* design team ever met. It begins during the design of *Mirrodin*. You see, it was concurrent with *Mirrodin*'s design that the creative team managed to convince R&D that the race/class system needed to be adopted. Before that time, creatures had one creature type. Sometimes it was a race and sometimes it was a class. Suffice to say things were a bit messy. The race/class system was designed to help align **Magic** with just about every other fantasy-based game in existence. The only quirky thing for me (I was one of the R&D folk fighting hardest to adopt the race/class model) was that we were starting it the block after *Onslaught*—you know, the tribal block. But as often happens, things don't always line up a neatly as they should and *Onslaught* block missed out on race/class design technology. Well, I said to myself, at least we'll be able to make use of it next time we do a tribal block.

During my preview I wanted to explain how we ended up with the "class matters" theme of *Morningtide*. In doing so, I quickly sped through all the events that led up to it. Along the way, I wrote this paragraph where I summed up how race/class came to be. When I reread this (trying to get some inspiration for today's column), I thought to myself: man, did I skim over a very interesting story from R&D's past. You see, race/class wasn't one of those things where one guy had an idea and everyone else went "brilliant, let's do it!" No, it was a bit of a struggle, and for some very unobvious reasons. That's when it hit me. The story of the race/class system's origin is a cool one. It's related to *Morningtide*. It's chock full of behind-the-scenes intrigue. It's got conflict. And I was right in the thick of it. Ding! Ding! Ding! It looks like we have a topic, boys and girls.

Race/Class Relations

One of the classes I took in college was about adapting real life events to a script. How do you turn reality into entertainment? The answer is that you have to stay true to the essence of your story but at the same time be willing to see it through a dramatic lens. The story of the race/class idea's acceptance takes place over many months, but if I had to choose a climatic moment in the struggle I'd have to pick the Tuesday afternoon at the weekly **Magic** Meeting where the creative team officially pitched the idea to the rest of **Magic** R&D, what the creative team often calls "The Pit" (a.k.a. the bulk of the core designers and developers).

Remember that this meeting took place during *Mirrodin* design, which puts it somewhere in early 2003. At the time Randy Buehler was the head developer for **Magic** and the creative team reported to him. Randy would shortly become the director of **Magic** and about a year and a half later I would get promoted to head designer and have the creative team report to me (several years later that ended and now they report to a lovely man named Jake Theis). The creative team at the time was Brady Dommermuth, Brandon Bozzi, and Jeremy Cranford (Brady is the only one of the three still on the **Magic** creative team).

The designers and developers were mostly a different group from the ones we have today save myself. Aaron Forsythe was still running [magictgathering.com](#). Devin Low was six months away from his big break. Matt Place and Mike Turian were still pro players. Erik Lauer had dropped off the **Magic** radar doing something that didn't involve playing **Magic**. Pretty much everyone that constitutes today's design and development wasn't yet there. Brian Schneider was there. Mike Elliott was there. Tyler Bielman was there. Brian Tinsman was there. (Brian, by the way, is back at Wizards leading design for new business, still occasionally doing **Magic** design work—he was on the "Doughnut" design team for example.)

Anyway, the creative team was very excited about adopting a race/class system. The Pit, on the other hand, wasn't so keen on the idea. They weren't so much against it as they didn't see the need for the change. The point

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of the meeting was this. Randy as the manager of the creative team wanted to respect the wishes of his team. At the same time, as head developer he wanted to make sure that the developers (and designers) were willing to sign off on the idea. Creature types are the one thing in the game that overlap the creative and the mechanical making it an extra tricky item as no one team has complete control over it.

The designers and developers were all over the board on the issue. Many hadn't really made up their mind as they hadn't heard all the issues. Some were mostly against it because they didn't like what they felt it was going to do to the game. Finally, there was one person from the Pit very much in favor. In fact, this person had done quite a bit to set the wheels in motion that had led to the race/class discussion in the first place. That person was, of course, me.

Playing the Race/Class Card

Let me back up. From the earliest days of playing **Magic**, I had always been a big fan of creature types. I'm one of those guys who freaked out when **Merfolk Assassin** got printed in *The Dark* because it would give my Merfolk deck its second Merfolk. When I got to Wizards, I was probably the most responsible for adding "CARDNAME counts as [insert creature type here]" into rules text. I was one of the biggest proponents for getting rid of that stupid restriction and just putting multiple creature types on the creature type line. I was the major proponent for doing a tribal block. And I was the one, when given the chance, who pushed the envelope for creature types.

That opportunity was *Odyssey* block. The current creative team had recently left Wizards and Bill Rose was in the process of hiring a new team, so he asked me if I would be willing to oversee flavor for *Odyssey*. This meant I was responsible, and the final word, on all names, flavor text, and creature types (barring mechanical need for them to be something specific—such as Sliver). The reason Bill asked me was that I had been very involved in flavor both by being a member of many naming and flavor text teams and for my involvement with the beginning of the *Weatherlight* Saga. One of my goals when I gained this responsibility was to look for ways that we could expand what we were doing. I experimented with different types of names (okay, **Need for Speed** may not have been a success), different types of flavor text ("I want a banana this big" ranked at both at the top and at the bottom of flavor text lists according to our godbook studies) and, of course, different ways to approach the creature type line.

My biggest push in this area was the aven. Rather than just making them creature type Bird, I decided to try and play up their humanoid qualities by making them all Bird Soldiers. (Some would later become Bird Wizards.) Likewise, I made all the nantuko creatures Insect Druids. In fact, I looked for as many ways possible to put multiple creature types on a single card, be it a **Zombie Assassin**, Dwarf **Berserker** or Centaur Druid. By the time *Onslaught* rolled around, I was no longer in charge of creature types but I was very involved in the design and made sure that multiple creature types became mechanically relevant and thus kept my hand in the creature type mix.

My point of this aside was that I was already doing on the sly what the creative team was officially proposing so, of course, I was all over trying to help make the change permanent. The meeting was set up as such. The creative team and I were strongly in favor of the change. Randy, I believe, leaned in favor of the idea mostly because he felt that the creative team had the right to make the call and that their reasoning was solid, but clearly was willing to be swayed the other way if enough designers and developers put up a fuss. About half the remaining members of the meeting were neutral ready to be swayed by the meeting. The last half were against the change although the resistance went from slight to strong.

The key was that the creative team needed to swing about half the room to their side by the meeting's end to close the deal. As I said above, I believe half the room came in against the idea. This meant that they had to persuade every undecided vote in the room with their pitch. The slightest slip-up would most likely doom race/class.

Race/Class against the Clock

The creative team understood the importance of this meeting. As such, they put together a power point presentation that explained why the team wanted to make the change, why they believed it was the right idea and what both the pros and cons were of the change. What followed was one of the most interesting **Magic** meetings I've ever attended. To capture the essence of what happened, I've decided to go point by point (first the pros and then the cons) and bring up what each side had to say on the issue.

Pro #1 – It Adds Flavor to the Game

The creative team started with their strongest argument. Race/class simply and cleanly adds flavor to the game. The other side argued that the extra flavor came with a cost and that the creatures with their name, art and flavor text already had enough flavor.



Pro #2 – Lines Up with Other Fantasy Games

The argument here was that game players had expectations when they came to fantasy and that there was little reason not to line up with expectations in this case. The counterargument was that **Magic** wanted to differentiate itself from other fantasy games and thus things like this helped reinforce this difference.

Pro #3 – Makes More Sense Cosmologically

It didn't make much sense that some creatures that were conceived as soldiers counted as Soldiers while others didn't. Inconsistency, argued the creative team, makes for worse flavor. The other side argued that **Magic** is full of such inconsistencies, what I'll call the "How can an animated land fit into a coffin?" argument.

Pro #4 – Increases Creature Type Interaction

This is the point where they looked at me and said, "Go ahead Mark." I then explained how race/class would open up all sorts of interesting design space. The counterargument went like this: "I too am a designer and I don't believe it creates any new design space." I would now like to take a moment and just say, "See? You were wrong." That felt great. We can move on now.

Pro #5 – Forces the Human Creature Type into the Game

One of the quirkiest things about creature types up until that point was that humans never got to count on the creature type line. Make no mistake, lots of humans existed, the game just wasn't allowed to make it matter. The creative team disliked this for multiple reasons. First, it was horribly inconsistent. Why could you make goblins extinct but not humans? Why did **Coat of Arms** help every race except humans? Second, because races and classes were mostly put onto different cards, almost every card that was a class by default was human as it couldn't have another creature type and only humans didn't have one. The creative team hoped that by forcing Human into **Magic** that it would create pressure to decrease the number of humans in the game.

This was one of the biggest sticking points for the other side. They hated the idea of mentioning humans. Their reasons were all over the place. Some felt like it made the game seem less like fantasy by bringing something more real into it. (The counter to that though was, of course, the point that almost every fantasy story ever told had humans in it.) Some felt like it was fundamentally changing how the game had been set up. Some thought it would bring awkwardness to designs involving Human (and note that to date we've never made a specifically Human-relevant tribal card). They kept talking about we could never put "sacrifice a Human" on a card. Mostly, though, the argument was one of gut: the change didn't feel right.

Pro #6 – Frees Up the Name Line

The argument here was that **Goblin Assassin** had to be called **Goblin Assassin** if we wanted to get across that this was a goblin that kills things for money. If the creature type line could convey this information then the name was freed up to be less descriptive and more evocative. The counter argument was to let the art do this work and not worry about conveying it in the name.



Pro #7 – Helps Avoid Inconsistencies

This argument stated that one of the reasons creature types had up to that point been all over the map was that there wasn't a good structure to help define what was supposed to be what. This had caused a lot of grief as things didn't line up mechanically with things that clearly had a consistent flavor. Cards with almost the same text would show up with radically different types. The other side argued that this was okay. The game didn't need to be so delineated.

Pro #8 – Helps Better Define Relationship between Color and Creature Types

As a corollary to the last reason, this reason talks about how we could use race and class to help reinforce the color wheel better. The creative team (and I) believed strongly that the color wheel is at the heart of the game. The more that we can tie elements of the game to it, the stronger, we believed, we made the game. The other side argued that we put too much credence on the color wheel.

Now we come to the cons.

Con #1 – It's Change

One of the axioms in R&D is that we shouldn't change things just for the sake of changing them. Yes, the game needs to grow and evolve, but it needs to do so out of a necessity. Creature types had worked a certain way for a long time. This shouldn't be messed with if other actions could solve the problem. I'll call this the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" argument. We countered with "it is broken." It needs to change because there are problems with the current system. In addition, we do get a large gain out of it: added flavor and design space.

Con #2 – It Adds Words

Another R&D axiom is that "more words is bad" (I personally don't completely believe this axiom—see my column [Between a Grok and a Hard Place](#) for more on this topic). Every word on a card comes at a cost. The goal of good design and development is to see how many words you can remove to keep a card of similar quality. The counter to this argument was that we felt we were adding significant upgrade for very little words, in most cases one, and one not even in the rules text box.

Con #3 – Space Availability on Creature Type Line Becomes an Issue

The creature type line is not endless. Putting more there will cause problems, especially on legends (or now legendary creatures). The counter is yes, this is an issue but one that can be addressed on a case-by-case issue.

Con #4 – Reduces "Wow" of Double Creature Types

This argument states that having double creature types is something that impresses some players. Doing it more often makes it less special. The counter argument is that if players like something we might want to consider just having more of it.

Con #5 – Forces Erratta

Once you support Assassin as a class, it begs the question why every creature that conceptually is an Assassin, and especially the cards that have the word "assassin" in their name, isn't an assassin. The change, the other side argues pushes you towards needing to do errata and R&D generally acknowledges that too much errata is a bad thing. Our counter to this was "you're right, this is a real cost." We agreed that this argument was the strongest one against making the change.

Con #6 – Forces Human Creature Type into the Game

I'm not sure I can properly express how much some people didn't want to put "Human" on cards. And it wasn't just R&D. I got quite a lot of mail when we introduced "human" to the game. This was an "agree to disagree" category as our side felt it was enough of a positive to make it a pro.

Con #7 – Unresolved Issues Such As Zombie

The last con was really a lot of little issues tied up into one. Zombies, as an example, didn't know what to do in race/class as it sometimes it acted like one and other times another. What do we do with non-humanoids? Do iconics (such as Angels and Dragons) follow race/class? This argument was that all the little issues would add up to be a big issue. The counter was that these issues were mostly solvable, and those that were not weren't deal breakers.

Rat Race/Class

What were the arguments that ended up tipping the scales in favor of race/class? First, most of the room saw that race/class was additive to flavor. Second, we had presented enough evidence of inconsistencies that we were able to stress that the system as was had problems. Third, the success of *Onslaught* block drove home our need to focus more on creature types in the future. And fourth, and most importantly I believe, passion won the day. The creative team felt strongly about the change (we don't have a lot of power point presentations in the Tuesday **Magic** meeting). I, as one of the strongest voices in design, really drove home how important I believed the change was. The other side didn't like the change but they just weren't as much against it as we were for it. The undecided were swayed and race/class became a reality.



I decided to bring this story up today because *Morningtide* is an extension of that passion. The reason we fought so hard for this change was so that we could do things like we're doing in *Lorwyn* block. And seeing it all come to fruition, I'm so glad we won that fight. It's good to win. It's even better to have time on your side and realize you were on the right side.

And that, my faithful readers, is what my subconscious wanted to talk about today.

Join me next week when I talk about fighting the good fight.

Until then, may you look back on the good fights you fought and won.

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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