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## Building Blocks

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*Making Magic*  
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On Friday, March 7, the following image appeared on the front page. (For those of you that know what I'm talking about, bear with me for a paragraph or two.)



If you clicked it, it opened another window. Before I show you what that window looked like, I want to mention that this is a preview of *Shadowmoor*. If you are trying to avoid seeing anything about the upcoming set, I suggest you go read the [feature article](#) or some other part of the website and come back next week.

Everyone remaining ready to see what "opening" the *Shadowmoor* booster revealed? (That is all of you that haven't yet already seen what's inside.) Click [here](#).

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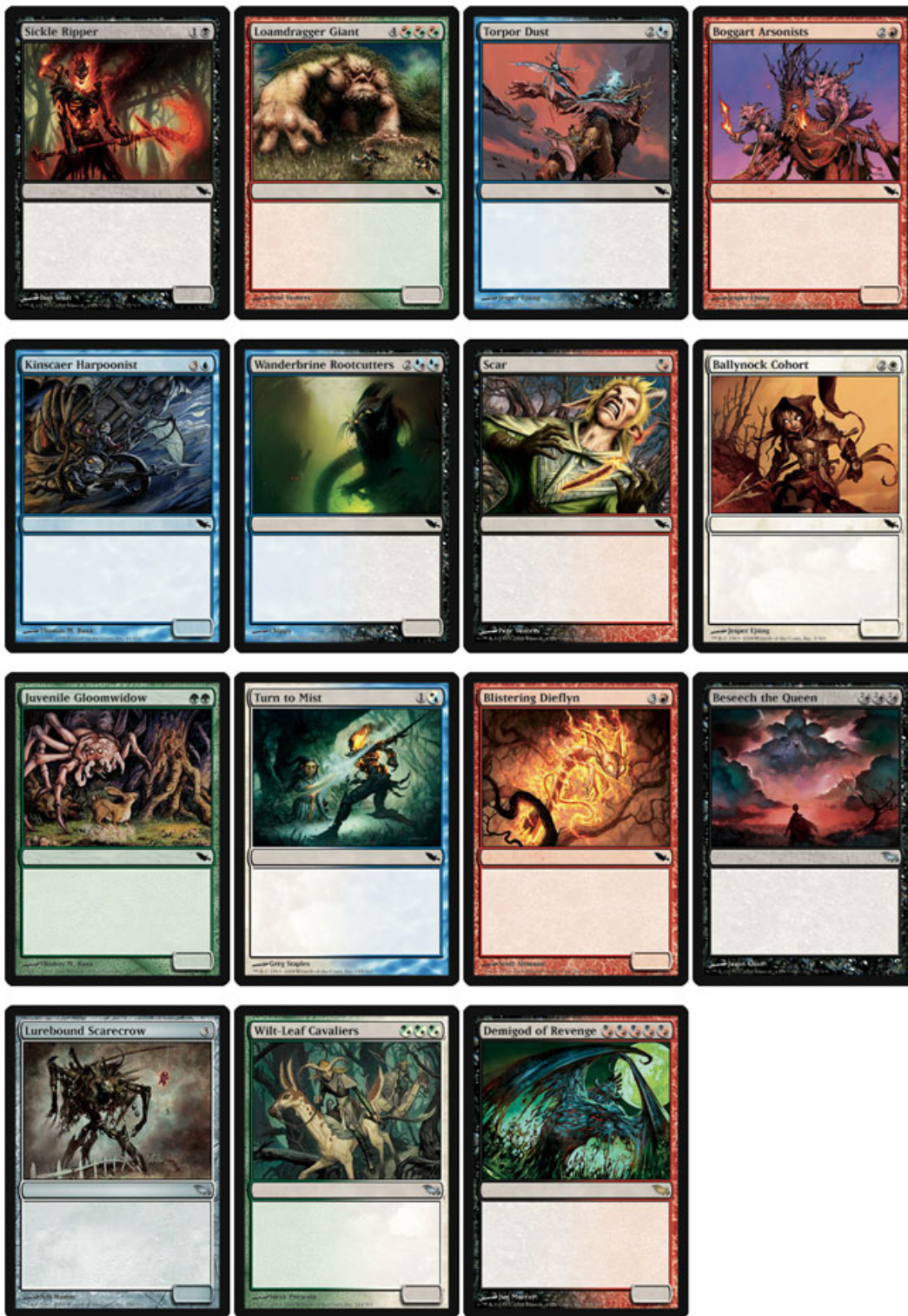
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The reason I'm showing this in my column today is twofold. First, I know that there are many readers who didn't figure out the "Easter egg." (Believe or not, not everyone clicks on everything they run across on the Internet.) Second, there were a few questions raised that I wanted to address. Note that my goal here is not to just give away all the answers. Previews are still many weeks away and I want to let everyone have their fun guessing at what they think the pack reveals and what each card might do. But a few conversations have gone a bit astray so I want to make a few comments about what can be taken as a given by the pack.

**#1 – This pack was selected to be representative of *Shadowmoor*.** This means a couple of things:

1. The amount of hybrid cards in the pack is roughly indicative of the percentage of hybrid cards in the set. Yes, the hybrid cards do make up a large percentage of *Shadowmoor*. (More on this below.) For the percentage junkies out there, when matching the set's hybrid percentage we didn't count Beseech the Queen. I'm not going to explain why right now, but suffice to say that 7 out of 15 is a very accurate percentage of hybrid's presence in the set.
2. The absence of traditional multicolor cards (a.k.a. "gold cards") does indicate that while this is a hybrid set, it is not a "gold" set.

3. The complete absence of enemy-color hybrid cards does indicate that the hybrid cards in *Shadowmoor* are allied-colored.
4. The creative choices highlighted in the pack are representative of the creative choices made in the set, meaning that these cards are not examples of single exceptions in *Shadowmoor*. If you see it here, you will see similar flavor choices elsewhere.

**#2 – The mana symbols on Beseech the Queen are half a  and half a .** Yes, this is a new twist on hybrid. (And in other ways it isn't at all—but more on that during Beseech the Queen Week.) No, I'm not going to tell you how it works (although common sense should help). How does one figure out the converted mana cost of it and other cards like it (yes, there's more)? Don't worry, it's written on the card.

...Okay, okay, it's six. You can stop the email bombing now.

**#3 – None of the fifteen shown cards have anything to do with "Q."** Last July, I [gave a hint about something](#) that appears in *Shadowmoor*. Yes, the item in question did make it to print. No, no one yet (that I've read anyway) has guessed what Q is. This preview booster isn't going to help you. I will give you one more clue, though: the mechanic fits in thematically with the *Shadowmoor* block. Hybrid mana, by the way, already had a letter, H (which stands for a basic hybrid cost—"All the cards in the cycle cost 2HH.").



**#4 – Let flavor be your guide.** I have been honestly shocked by how much you all have figured out about mechanics solely from the creative elements of the cards. (And trust me, no one at Wizards has won more bets than I have based on the player base figuring something out.) I have on more than one occasion seen people guess the text of the card exactly.

Exactly, word for word, with nothing to go off of but name, mana cost, art, and frame. Props to both our creative team and all of you!

**#5 – "You Like Me, You Really Like Me" (or more historically accurately "I Can't Deny The Fact That You Like Me, Right Now You Like Me").** Like a proud poppa, I've been gushing about this set for months, so I can't tell you how excited it's been for me to see the positive reception that this promo pack has received. Let me just end this section by saying that I believe when you get to see the text on the cards you'll be just as excited. (By the way, there's all sorts of cool stuff *not* in the pack.)

## Pack Mentality

Over five hundred words in and I haven't even gotten to the crux of today's column. One of the comments that came up numerous times on the boards and in my email is people saying how they were surprised by hybrid mostly because we had just done it two years ago. Why did we bring hybrid back so quickly? In thinking about my answer I realized it touched upon an interesting aspect of set / block design that I haven't talked about yet (and with three hundred and twenty-five columns that's saying something). And I will, after one more diversion.

Making Magic is a behind-the-scenes column so I like, as much as possible, to take you behind the scenes. The origin of the promo pack was very interesting so I thought I'd take a paragraph or nine to explain how it came together. As the previews have evolved on [magcithegathering.com](#), we've come to do something we've dubbed a "Week Zero preview." The original idea stemmed back to *Mirrodin* block when we decided it might be cool to hype the upcoming preview weeks by showing off the basic land (and thus the metal world of *Mirrodin*) the week before. We dubbed it a "Week Zero preview" because it happened the week before the first Preview Week.

Then before *Ravnica* previews, we thought it would be cool (oh, and props for this idea go to Scott Johns for thinking of it and Monty Ashley for helping convince the Brand team it was a good idea) to show one preview card before previews officially began. The card was, of course, [Temple Garden](#).



Suffice to say it went over well. This in turn led us to come up with other ways to do the "Week Zero preview." Probably the most famous to date was the *Planar Chaos* preview where the following graphic just popped up over the site one day (click the image to start the animation):

**BUILDING ON A BUDGET** Today  
 **The Evolution of Fractured Crusading Sliver Fungus (Part 1 of 3)**  
Ben Bleiweiss  
Ben presents a *Time Spiral* theme deck  
evolution.

**MAKING MAGIC** Today  
 **Name Dropping**  
Mark Rosewater  
The origins of *Time Spirals*' legendary creatures - plus a few who didn't make it.

**MAGIC ACADEMY** Sat, Nov 11  
 **The Art of the Block**  
Ted Knutson  
Guidelines for when and how to block attacking creatures.

**GREAT DESIGNER SEARCH** Fri, Nov 10  
 **The Great Designer Search Episode #3 - "Picture This"**  
Mark Rosewater  
The first three candidates are eliminated and the first look at the second design challenge

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Anyway, the idea of a "Week Zero preview" is always on our brains, which leads us into the story of the promo pack preview. At first blush, the "Week Zero preview" for *Shadowmoor* seemed obvious. Show a hybrid card. While we have tons of cool hybrid cards in the set, my problem was that I didn't think one card could convey the message we wanted: That hybrid was coming back. No *really* coming back! I wanted to convey the volume of what we were doing. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there was no way one card could ever deliver the message.

So I started down a different path. What could we show I wondered that *could* convey that message? We could show a whole pack, I thought. That would convey the volume of hybrid. But we couldn't show an entire pack. Fifteen cards are just too much to preview this early. This led me to asking is there a way to show an entire pack without really showing an entire pack. This led me to have a flashback.

In the early days (1993 and 1994), Wizards used to do this thing where they'd show cards in their ads that had names and art but in a blank card frame. This was done to give a hint at the flavor without revealing what exactly the cards did. I always liked that technique and have been saying for years that we should do it again. Now you can see the "chocolate meets peanut butter" moment that was about to collide in my head. The blank card frame was the perfect answer to the pack problem. They conveyed much of the stuff I wanted to convey—the volume of hybrid, the dark environment, the many flavor shifts from *Lorwyn*, etc.—without giving everything away.

With my idea in hand (or more accurately in head), I went to do what I always do when I get a wacky idea: I pitch it. As this was for the web, I pitched it to Scott Johns and Kelly Digges. And they liked it. A lot! Their only suggestion was to add in the mana costs. I hadn't thought they were necessary as the frame conveyed hybrid but Scott rightfully pointed out that the showing the mana cost gave a much better idea of what kinds of things we were doing with hybrid. It also allowed us to do things like show off Besech the Queen. Plus, hybrid mana symbols just look cool, and a big part of the preview was creating a cool looking "pack."

Scott and Kelly then took the idea to the **Magic** Brand Team and they liked it. A lot! So the next thing I know I'm in a meeting where we're trying to figure out what fifteen cards to show. And then came the cool idea—courtesy of Scott Johns—of having an "Easter egg" inside the "Easter egg." We were allowed to show off one card during the "Week Zero preview." Why not show off an awesome rare hybrid card? You know, if and only if you moused over it. For those that didn't see the preview pack or just missed this nested "Easter egg," here it is with all its lovely text:



And that is how our promo pack preview (say that ten times fast) came to be.

## Finding a Good Mechanic

Let's get back to the topic at hand. Why is hybrid coming back so soon? To answer this question I have to talk a bit about how mechanics work. I have numerous times in my column talked about various spectrums that exist in design (everything from the [linear / modular spectrum](#) to the [Vorthos / Melvin spectrum](#)). Today I am going to introduce a new spectrum that I will call the function / form spectrum. (Why not the form / function spectrum? Because form follows function.) In brief, this spectrum is all about the role the mechanic plays in fleshing out the set or block. Let me begin by examining the ends of each spectrum.

**The function end** – The function end of the spectrum is all about utility. It's about making the set work. The mechanics on this end of the spectrum have to carry the heavy load of the design. They are the glue that holds the set or block together. In *Lorwyn* block, the mechanic farthest on the function side was changeling. I've told the story of how when the set got handed over from design to development my one piece of advice to Devin (Low, the head developer of *Lorwyn* and weekly columnist of [Latest Developments](#)) was "don't mess with changeling" because it was the piece that the entire design revolved around. Changeling allowed us to focus on more tribes because, as it counted for every tribe, it lifted every tribe up to reach the necessary saturation point. Function mechanics don't need to be pretty or exciting unto themselves. They can be, mind you. My point is that they don't need to be. Their role is not looking pretty but making the set play well.



**The form end** – The form end of the spectrum is all about splash. It's about making the set feel sexy. The mechanics on this end of the spectrum have to carry the heavy load of making the set exciting. They are the sizzle that revs up the players about the set or block. In *Lorwyn*, the mechanic furthest on the form side was the planeswalkers. If you take a step back to look at the set as a whole you can see that they're not all that interwoven into the structure of the set. Yes, we made sure to have answers to planeswalkers in the set but beyond that there is not a lot of synergy between the bulk of *Lorwyn* and the planeswalkers. I should note that being on the form end doesn't require a lack of synergy. Split cards definitely filled the form role in *Invasion*, but they were as integrated as any mechanic into the design.



Now that I've explained the spectrum let me make a few important points about it:

### #1 – The spectrum is not about what the mechanics are but how they are used in a particular set.

Mechanics can be both functional and splashy. In fact, most of the best ones can fill either role. The reason this is a spectrum is that a designer has to figure out how a mechanic is being used because these two ends have some inherent conflicts. First, the function end cares solely about how the mechanic works within the context of the set. It is focused on how the cards work together. The form end cares solely about how exciting the cards are. It is focused on the cards individually. This means that function cards have to bend towards the will of the group. Form cards make the group bend toward them.

Second, function cards have to be able to live and breathe at common. If they want to be in the driver seat of the set's design, they have to be able to show up in the numbers to do so. Form cards push towards rare as that is where the splash of the set has to live. Dependable commons make the set or block play well. Awesome rares make it exciting. Common cards need to be simple and clean. Rare cards want to be evocative and compelling.

Third, function cards can survive with simple creative. Form cards have to drip with flavor. Function cards aren't trying to hog the spotlight so they have the ability to be creatively low key. Form cards, in contrast, live in the spotlight so they don't have the luxury of being plain. The two examples I used from *Lorwyn* demonstrate this perfectly. The changelings are a little on the goofy side. There's no way that the creative could have hinged upon them. Planeswalkers, on the other hand, are some of the most flavorful cards in the set. Books can (and will) be written about them.

Because some mechanics can work in either spectrum, the choice of how to use them dictates what baggage they bring. What does this have to do with hybrid? Quite a bit. I'll get to that in a moment.

**#2 – Cards on one end of the spectrum can help the other end but designers have to know their (being the cards not the designers) place.** What I mean by this is that functional cards can be splashy and form cards can have utility but the designers have to understand what role they are playing and make decisions appropriately. For example, often in design there comes a path where a card can become more flavorful but wordier. The function cards tend to go the simple and clean path while the form cards most often walk the evocative one. The reason the spectrum is so important for designers is that they have to understand what role each mechanic is playing. (Note by the way when I say mechanic I am not just referring to keyword mechanics or to mechanics with ability words but any mechanical element of a set or block.) When designers ignore this spectrum they end up with sets that are unnecessarily complicated or overly restrained. (And yes, I have made both such mistakes in my thirteen years designing **Magic** cards.)

**#3 – Each side needs its mechanics.** If all the mechanics sit in the middle straddling function and form, the set will suffer. It will neither play as tight nor feel as evocative as it needs to. Both extremes play an important role in design and thus each needs to have cards at its beck and call. This means that designers have to understand the role that each mechanic fills. To make things even more complicated, mechanics can fill one role in one set or block and another in a different one. Which brings us back to hybrid.

## Half and Half

When I first created hybrid during *Ravnica* design, it was made as a function mechanic. I didn't create it to be splashy (although I recognized that it was) but rather to fill a void I found in my design. I'm not going to get into the specifics today, but when *Shadowmoor* previews start up I promise to walk you through hybrid's full evolution. My point for today's column was that hybrid was made because of its tremendous function capabilities. But due to a series of circumstances, *Ravnica* used it as a form mechanic. It was there to be splashy and different. Remember the mechanic had been moved out of the set during design and put back in during development because they thought the set needed some sizzle.

Metaphorically speaking, my thoroughbred was gussied up and taken to a pony show. But I knew it could run, so when an opportunity arrived to use it as the backbone function mechanic for a set I jumped at it. Why? Because I knew what I was going to do with it was completely different from how it was used the first time players saw it. I felt confident bringing it back after just two years because the mechanic I was going to use is almost a different creature from what paraded around two years ago.

In *Shadowmoor*, hybrid completely alters the playing field. It isn't window dressing for a "gold" set. It's an environment all its own. Nearly half the set is hybrid. Just stop for a second and imagine what this means for Sealed or Draft. And remember, because hybrid is a function mechanic this time around, the set is built around it. When I said we were exploring a theme we never have before it is because the theme is a hybrid theme (okay, there's a few other themes mixed in too, but we'll get to those eventually). And while yes, the players have seen hybrid cards before, they've never seen a hybrid block. Trust me, as someone who's lived and breathed *Shadowmoor* block for a year, this is not us revisiting some old theme. This is us going into virgin design space and making metaphorical snow angels. This is why I've been so excited about the block. I've had an entire spanking new playground to play in. It's been insanely fun. In five weeks, I get to share it with all of you in full, and previews are just two weeks away.

That's all I got for today. By the way, if you've never visited the [future set speculation forum](#) and you enjoy postulating (or just reading others' postulating), I'd check them out. Plus feel free to share your thoughts in the thread to this column or to my personal email (remember while I'm not able to respond to every letter I do read each and every one). I'd love to hear what all of you think of *Shadowmoor* so far. Have I managed to get you interested in the slightest? If not, what are you made of—stone?!

Join me next week when I check out which doctor is witch.



Until then, may you know the joy of anticipation.

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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