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# Shadowmoor than Meets The Eye, Part III

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Making Magic  
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*Previously in "Making Magic": Mark tried to make the hybrid mechanic a major part of Ravnica block. Didn't happen. Mark tried to make the hybrid mechanic a major part of Time Spiral block. Didn't happen. So when an opportunity came along for which the hybrid mechanic seemed like a perfect fit, Mark leapt at the chance. But his job with the Shadowmoor block was far from done.*

I have talked numerous times about how I wanted the two mini-blocks (*Lorwyn* and *Shadowmoor*) to fit together. They had to have their own identities yet feel connected. They had to have unique themes yet be synergistic. They essentially had to make sense both in isolation and together. This led to the idea of having the two blocks being mirror images of one another. *Lorwyn* would be the happy-go-lucky sunny world and *Shadowmoor* would be the dark, creepy underbelly world. Brady's shorthand during early design was "forest by day" and "forest by night". I used to refer to it as the bright side of fairy tales and the dark side. (By the way, it is quite interesting to read the darker versions of some of the more classic fairy tales—they are very different.)

I bring this up because the last two columns I've been talking about how the hybrid mechanic and the "color matters" theme was created. While this element helped shape the set and created synergy between the two blocks it did very little to set up the contrast between the two worlds. Yes, the color-shifting of the tribes helped play up the feel of a great change, but it didn't really hammer home that *Shadowmoor* was the dark side of *Lorwyn*. Today's column explains how we wove this element into the design. And yes, I have a preview card, but as with the last two weeks, I'll show it when the time is right.

## Mirror Mirror

Let me begin by stressing that the heaviest lifting for setting the contrast between *Lorwyn* and *Shadowmoor* was done by the creative team. The art, the names, the flavor text, the card conceiving, the world building, they all come together to help define the contrast beautifully. That doesn't mean design was off the hook. I think the most successful blocks are those in which all the pieces are working together. If we wanted to properly sell the idea of a contrast between the two blocks, design had to do its part.



The contrast of the bright and sunny world and its dark and creepy doppelganger was established early. This meant that design was on the hook for creating some contrast. As I explained last week, the idea of using block themes that could be supported without rules text in the "other" block resulted in the tribal/"color matters" themes. This led to the idea of shifting the tribal colors between the two blocks. Once again, this demonstrated a shift more than a contrast. What design wanted was a few things that could help establish how the two blocks were mechanically opposed. I wasn't sure what that was going to be but I assumed that we'd figure it out along the way.

A quick aside about a popular misconception about design. While design has to have some framework, you almost never start design knowing all your answers. Yes, you need to have some kind of direction and a goal or two, but good design, like any good art, needs to find itself along the way. To do this you have to trust in the system and believe that you will find answers. This is essentially a huge leap of faith as searching for something that you don't empirically know exists is kind of scary. It is my firm belief though that it is this leap of creative faith that empowers a designer to find his or her answers. Nothing improves performance like necessity. (Mother Necessity, where would we be?—another in a long line of pop culture references that shows my age.)

What all this means is that we started *Lorwyn* design knowing the light/dark contrast of the two blocks but with no specific contrasts mechanically planned out. Interestingly enough, the biggest mechanic contrast, the use of -1/-1 counters, started as an idea for *Lorwyn* block.

## -1/-1 and Only

As I explained in [my first Lorwyn preview article](#), we started our design by figuring out what creature types we wanted to support. This led the creative team toward the idea of using Celtic mythology as an inspiration, which in turn caused Brady (Dommermuth, **Magic's** creative manager and world builder) to suggest the addition of a few tribes (faeries, giants and treefolk). This all means that early in design we knew we were creating a happy/sunny world for the first block.

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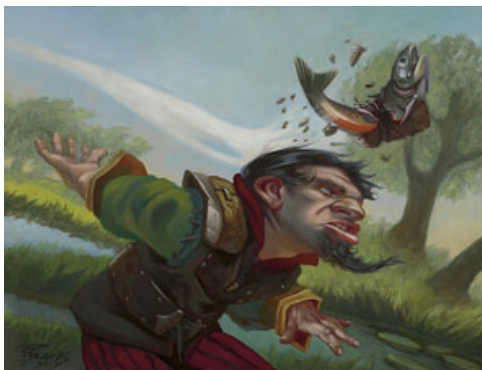
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The idea behind this world was that the darker side of things were merely mischievous rather than being deadly. Sure, the "evil" creatures might tie you to a tree or throw objects at you, but since you were (almost) always going to be able to walk away from conflicts, nothing in this world was truly life threatening. How could we convey this in a **Magic** set? You know, something that's filled with creature destruction and direct damage spells. The *Lorwyn* design team (myself, Aaron Forysthe, Paul Sottosanti, Brady Dommermuth, Nate Heiss, and Andrew Finch) decided to start by seeing if we could make this set a kinder, gentler set. Perhaps there wasn't as much outright creature *destruction* in the set. Maybe *Lorwyn* could have more spells that inconvenienced creatures rather than outright killing them.



The question is, how exactly does a card maim a creature rather than kill it? We explored a whole bunch of different ideas. We made cards that stopped the creature without actually killing it. We made cards that removed the creature for some duration of time. We tried everything we could think of that didn't outright kill them. Then one day, Paul Sottosanti suggested using -1/-1 counters. Wasn't that the proper analogy to hurting but not killing something? If a 3/3 had enough injuries that it permanently became a 2/2, wouldn't that express that it had been "messed" with? There we go, damaged but not killed.

This led to the following discussion:

**Paul:** What if *Lorwyn* only used -1/-1 counters? There wouldn't be any confusion with +1/+1 counters.

**Me:** I don't know.

**Paul:** It'll be great.

**Me:** There is some design space. Okay, if we do this, it means we have to commit. I don't want to bring back -1/-1 counters to just make a few cards. Making this -1/-1 world means we need to pull out all the stops and really take advantage of the -1/-1 counters. We have to make -1/-1 counters intrinsic to the environment.

**Paul:** Okay by me.

So *Lorwyn* became the "kinder, gentler" set that merely maimed. And since I said that we had to commit to -1/-1 counters if we were going to use them, I strongly urged Aaron (as the set's lead designer) to find a mechanic that used -1/-1 counters. For those of you that want to know why I brought -1/-1 counters back when we had banned them for so long, I *am* going to explain, just not today. I'm saving that little nugget for -1/-1 Counter Week. (Come on, you had to see that one coming.)

## Counter Examples

From time to time in design, the lead designer will give everyone on the team homework. Almost always the assignment involves designing cards. During one design meeting, Aaron asked everyone to make mechanics that used -1/-1 counters. This homework assignment led to the creation of both wither *and* persist.

I'll begin with the story of wither. (It's my story so it's one I know pretty well; which incidentally is why I so often tell stories about things I designed. Those are the stories I know. When I tell the designs of other people's work, I want to make sure to get it right and that is often hard when I'm up late at night writing in my den. That said, I do try to tell other designer's design stories as much as I can.) Our story begins with me sitting on the couch in R&D (well, the one that used to be in R&D; someone stole it—if whoever took our couch is reading this—give us back our treasure, I mean, couch—if you got that joke by the way, say hello to your kids for me) thinking about how to make use of -1/-1 counters. Because *Lorwyn* was tribal I knew we needed creature-based mechanics, so I figured I might as well start there.



I liked the idea of using -1/-1 counters to create victory through attrition. Things didn't die outright but slowly got worn down. The best way to do this I thought was through conflict. What if certain creatures gave other creatures -1/-1 counters when they fought them? I called the idea curse. You see, the creatures were cursed and anyone who got near them suffered the curse. Here was my early take on the mechanic:

**Block-Me-Not**

2R

Creature - Giant Warrior

4/4

Curse 1

Here's how it worked. If Block-Me-Not attacked and wasn't blocked, it would deal 4 damage to the defending player. If Block-Me-Not was blocked (or in the reverse example did the blocking), then Block-Me-Not would put one -1/-1 counter on the other creature. As you can see, the earliest version of the mechanic had two separate stats—the creature's power and its curse number.

In the earliest version, what would eventually become wither only showed up in three colors: black, red and green. To help differentiate them here's how we broke it down:

**Black:** curse higher than power (i.e. a 2/2 with Curse 4)

**Red:** power higher than curse (i.e. a 4/4 with Curse 2)

**Green:** power equal to curse (i.e. a 3/3 with Curse 3)

This way each color with the mechanic would have its own feel. We gave curse higher than power to black as it definitely has the most "mess with me and die" feel. We gave power higher than curse to red as red liked having the cheap big guys with downside as it had the mechanical means to remove any blockers. Green got the power equal to curse as it had the highest range of printable stats at lower rarities.

Before I continue wither's story, let's hop over to persist. While I was busy trying to find a new combat mechanic, Nate Heiss took -1/-1 counters in a completely different direction. Nate's inspiration was finding ways to make the -1/-1 counter itself have mechanical relevance. The problem was putting a -1/-1 counter on a creature was such a huge downside. (Well, *your* creature at least.) What could you offer to make doing such a thing feel worthwhile? The answer was: saving the creature. Most players, Nate realized, would be willing to put a -1/-1 counter on their creature if the alternative was it dying.

In addition, using the -1/-1 counter as a means to mark what has and hasn't been saved from death allowed the keyword to be used just once. Well, unless you find a way to remove the counter—but hey, allowing fun things like that is what makes for great **Magic** moments. It was a very clean and clever design. I'll be up front that I wasn't wowed by it at first. I kept thinking of it as a bad regeneration variant, which is interesting since I'm now such a big fan of it. Anyway, none of that mattered at the time because Aaron included all the mechanics that had any following in the file. That meant wither and persist (plus a few others) all got put into *Lorwyn*. And then, the axe fell.

## Negative Opinions

The more we played with the -1/-1 counters the more we saw the design space they created. As I stated in my column during [+1/+1 Week](#), I felt like +1/+1 counters were able to do 90% of what -1/-1 counters could do. What *Lorwyn* taught me was how interesting that remaining 10% was. But...

Everyday my wife Lora and I drive in together along with our twins because they go to daycare that's in the same building as Wizards. (Check out my column "[80,000 Words](#)" to see my photo tour of our building.) One of our routines is that we read an advice columnist every day named Carolyn Hax—the column's called "Tell Me About It"—who incidentally gives very good advice. A running joke of ours is how most letters start with a positive paragraph about how wonderful someone is and then there always comes a "but". From that point on the letter goes downhill.

**Dear Caroline,**

I've been seeing this mechanic that I swore off years ago. The more time we spend together the more I see how playful it is. There's this depth that I hadn't experienced before. It's really opened my eyes to this untapped potential, but... it just doesn't convey a sense of lightheartedness that the block needs. Putting -1/-1 counters on things doesn't feel less violent, it feels *more* violent. It feels like torture (and I mean the actual act of causing pain as opposed to the card from *Homelands*, although I guess that is also a relevant connection). It feels dark and menacing not frolic-y and fun.

**- Confused in Tribal Land**

**Dear Confused,**

Embrace your inner darkness. Acknowledge that you too have a dark side. From what I can read between the lines though I feel like that dark side hasn't made itself evident. Just wait though and I know it will come. When it does I feel like you and your mechanic can be together again.

And like that, -1/-1 counters were shipped off to *Shadowmoor* block.

## Back In Black

One of the advantages of working on blocks later in the year is that you get to come to the design with ideas already stored up. Even though *Shadowmoor* was a large set and the first in its block, my design team (myself, Devin Low, Mark Gottlieb, Ken Troop and Sean Fletcher) started with the -1/-1 theme already established. In the meantime, by the way, knowing that the -1/-1 theme was coming, *Lorwyn*, and especially *Morningtide*, ramped up the +1/+1 counters mattering. Even better than that we had actual mechanics already created and playtested.

Another quick aside. We introduced the "+1/+1 and -1/-1 cancel each other out" rule during *Time Spiral*. We did it at the time because we knew it would feel very natural as *Time Spiral* had both +1/+1 and -1/-1 counters in it. But the most important reason we actually decided to make the rule was because of *Lorwyn* and *Shadowmoor*, not *Time Spiral* (although to be fair it was a good thing for *Time Spiral*). We knew that having the two-miniblocks butting up against one another with opposite counters might cause some confusion. Along the way we discovered that the



rule added a whole bunch of new tricks to the game. (Reinforce, meet Persist.) This, of course, leads to the question "Why would we consciously create the confusion of having +1/+1 and -1/-1 counters show up in the same Block Constructed/Standard environment?" Come -1/-1 Week, I will explain why.

Back to wither. I had enjoyed how wither was playing in the *Lorwyn* playtests so I put it right into *Shadowmoor*. While it still played well it had one particular problem. To explain, let me show you two other playtest cards: (remember that wither was called curse)

**Silent But Deadly Zombie**

1B  
Creature - Zombie  
1/1  
Curse 3

**Rob Zombie**

2B  
Creature - Zombie  
2/2  
Curse 3

Here's how wither technically worked at the time: If a creature with wither got into combat with another creature, it could choose to substitute damage to a creature by putting N -1/-1 counters on that creature where N is its wither number. Let's run through a few scenarios.

**Scenario #1**

Rob Zombie attacks and is blocked by a 3/3 **Hill Giant**. Instead of dealing 2 damage to the **Hill Giant**, Rob Zombie's wither ability instead puts three -1/-1 counters on the **Hill Giant**, reducing it to 0/0 and destroying it.

**Scenario #2**

Rob Zombie attacks and is blocked by two 2/2 **Grizzly Bears**. Assume that Rob Zombie's controller has it deal 1 damage to each Grizzly Bear, the wither ability prevents the damage to each creature and in its place puts three -1/-1 counters on each Grizzly Bear, reducing each to -1/-1 and destroying them.

**Scenario #3**

Silent But Deadly Zombie attacks and is blocked by two 2/2 **Grizzly Bears**. The Zombie deals 1 damage to one of the **Grizzly Bears**. The wither ability prevents the damage to that Grizzly Bear and in its place puts three -1/-1 counters reducing the one Grizzly Bear to -1/-1 and destroying it. The other Grizzly Bear is unharmed and survives.

I talk all the time about how important it is to design mechanics to meet expectations. While Scenario #1 is fine, I feel that both Scenario #2 and #3 don't go the way players would assume. In scenario #2, somehow six -1/-1 counters get created even though the creature has wither 3. In scenario #3, one Grizzly Bear walks away unharmed even though the attacker had three -1/-1 counters and it only took two to destroy the first Bear. We would do playtests and people not on the design team would constantly mess up how wither worked. So when expectations don't meet the mechanic, you have to make the mechanic meet the expectations. (It's sort of a Mohamed/mountain thing.)

Here's what we wanted to have happen: A wither 3 creature gets into a fight, three -1/-1 counters end up getting generated. Mark Gottlieb and I spent a great deal of time talking about how to make the mechanic work. Then one day while we are talking, I say that I regret that the wither damage isn't actually damage. Mark's eyes light up. What if it was? He then explains that we could make the -1/-1 granting an effect of the damage. To do that though we would have to line up the power and the wither number, or more accurately, wither would have to lose the number. It took me about a minute to process what Mark had said. Once my brain had wrapped around it, I said, "Let's do it."

It was apparent pretty quickly that it solved all sorts of intuition issues. By making wither a type of damage we allowed numerous interactions to work naturally. Preventing damage, for instance, stopped -1/-1 counters. **Giant Growing** a creature with wither added them.

One of the things that people outside the process don't realize is how much time it takes to get ideas to their simplest execution. Wither seems like the most obvious way to execute this mechanic but that comes from having the luxury of seeing it done this way the first time you see it. The paper clip is obvious once you see a paper clip. The guy who came up with the idea though had a much harder task. That's how I feel about wither. I'm really proud of where the mechanic ended up, more so because I know the long journey we took to get there.

With that said, it's time to get to today's preview card. And yes, it has wither. [Click here](#) to see it.



This card demonstrates both new design space of -1/-1 counters and how it can be used to express flavor. I love how wither ties in thematically with its upkeep effect. The Banshee's cry hurts all those around it and especially those dumb enough to get near it (aka get into a fight with it). An interesting design note is that in early design this card was actually two cards, a 5/5 wither creature and an enchantment that shrunk creatures every turn. I realized by combining them we could create one card that was cooler than either of the two cards separately. (This happens a lot, by the way. Hmm, perhaps I'll do a column one day showing famous examples of this phenomenon.)

Before I move on—one last comment on wither: its reminder text. We're trying harder to write templates more in English and less in **Magicese**. Both the reminder text for wither and the untap symbol are, in my opinion, good steps in this direction. (If you aren't familiar with the untap symbol or its reminder text you'll want to read [Devin's article from Friday](#).)

## The Persistence of Persist

As I said earlier, I wasn't an early fan of persist. As such, I didn't put the mechanic into the early *Shadowmoor* file. Well, that's not *exactly* true. I did like a few of the cards with persist so I just put those ones in, unkeyworded. Then during early development Aaron, the lead developer of *Shadowmoor*, remembered that he had liked it and wanted to bring back the keyword. Design helped make more persist cards and as we played them we started seeing the cool interaction between wither and persist. In short, creatures with persist did not like tangling with creatures with wither. Wither became a neat answer to persist. Wither, unlike persist, was just as vulnerable to normal creature kill. As we played more with persist, everyone (including me) got to like the mechanic more and more. Next thing I knew it had a large presence in the set.

The one other interesting thing to mention about wither and persist is that both provided us keywords with a very valuable trait—they weren't yet locked down to colors. This allowed us some needed flexibility, as finding keywords that sounded appropriate on certain hybrid combinations proved challenging. Having two more keywords to consider really helped out.

## On The Flip Side

While the +1/+1 / -1/-1 contrast was doing excellent work, we weren't quite done. The next step was finding as many ways as we could to create cards that had mechanical contrast. That is, we looked for cards that we could make the opposite of in *Shadowmoor*. How many of you—and yes there were some, I read the boards—realized that *Morningtide's Daily Regimen* was the opposite of *Homelands' Torture*? (Which, yes, is in *Shadowmoor*.) Sometimes this was taking a card and just finding its opposite. Sometimes it was taking a card and twisting it. Sometimes it was taking a legend and reinventing its dark version. *Shadowmoor* is filled with these kinds of cards. I can't give tons of examples because most of the set isn't public yet, but keep your eye out when you [go to the prerelease](#) (hint, hint).

## In the Q

The last big contrast was the inclusion of the untap symbol. As that is worthy of its own column, I'm already well over 3500 words, plus Devin wrote quite a bit about it on Friday from his perspective, I've decided to save that story for another day (in the not too distant future, I promise). I mention it here, though, because it was another piece to the puzzle to help create contrast. (Note how we interwove the tap symbol throughout *Lorwyn* block.) What says contrast more than something that is literally "un" of something that is standard in the game?

## Opposites Attract

As you can see, *Shadowmoor* had a lot of moving pieces. This is the fifth large set I've designed and, due to all the factors I had to deal with (some of which I haven't talked about yet), it was the hardest one. That is probably why I am so proud of how it turned out. I've been crowing about this set for months and I hope when all of you get a chance to play with it you'll see why. I'd love to hear first impressions of the set on the message boards once you've had a chance to shuffle it up.

And with that, my three-parter comes to an end. I hope these columns have given you some idea what we were dealing with as we put this set together. I still have many stories to tell about *Shadowmoor* but luckily I get to write every week so I'm sure I'll find some chances to tell those stories.

Join me next week when I shift from the macro of *Shadowmoor* to the micro.

Until then, may you know the joy of seeing a project of love take its first breath.

Mark Rosewater

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Can't wait for *Shadowmoor*'s release on May 2? Don't miss your first chance to play with *Shadowmoor* cards at the [Prerelease](#) on April 19 and 20!

*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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