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Tokens of My Affection



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Wasps, elephants, squirrels, and bears

Welcome to Token Week! This week we'll be exploring the many creatures of **Magic** that aren't represented by cards. (Okay, okay, we have started making token cards, but you get my point.)

The Complexity of Simplicity

But before we jump into this week's theme, I want to address a few comments I had from my article last week on [simplicity](#). First, I got an overwhelming amount of response, much of it quite positive. The feedback on my articles (good or bad) is always appreciated. So to all of you that took the time to write in, thanks. Second, I think I scared a few people with my comment that we're only going to print cards whose abilities fit on the card. While this is mostly true, there are a few caveats:

1. A certain number of basic keyword abilities ([flying](#), [first strike](#), [trample](#), [protection](#), etc.) are supported regardless of how long their text would be if it appeared on a card. So don't worry, we have no plans on losing any of them.
2. The key to whether or not a mechanic is useable has to do with whether or not we believe the average player will understand how to use the basic ability from reading the reminder text. This means a mechanic like madness, which is actually quite complex, is okay because we feel confident that we can convey the essence of the rules on the card. (Although don't expect mechanics as complex as madness every expansion.) We do not expect the average player to know all the corner cases of each mechanic, just the basic utility.
3. Every once in a while we will do something new like the split cards that don't have reminder text. These kind of cards need to have some visual element that reinforces what the card does. Split cards, for example, convey visually the "two cards in one" concept. Note that these exceptions are rather rare, but they will continue to exist.

Third, I received numerous posts from people who were fans of different examples I gave ([banding](#), [phasing](#), [Castle](#), etc.) which have since been removed from the game. I do understand how much many of you love some of these aspects. In some cases we are trying to find new ways to capture a similar flavor. For instance, in the last few blocks we have started experimenting with many [Flicker](#)-type abilities that capture much of the flavor of phasing. I should stress that we are not looking to completely replace these old mechanics, but find new, cleaner ways to capture pieces of their essence. I believe a number of people misunderstood my comment on R&D's replacement of banding. The numerous mechanics I named were not meant to directly replace banding but to give white a certain over-all feel that banding contributed to.

Please be aware that we do not remove things from the game without doing a lot of research. When I say banding and phasing are misunderstood by a huge percentage of the player base, it's because that's what all our research showed. To quote Elaine Chase, R&D and **Magic** Rules Team member, "99% of the people that think they understand banding or phasing don't completely understand them. They're that complicated."

The Glass Menagerie

But enough of last week's topic, let's get onto this week's topic: token creatures. Let me start by stressing that I love token creatures. Love 'em. Why? For many reasons I guess. As a designer, I

love their flexibility. (More on that in a second.) As a gamer, I have a long history of positive interactions with token creatures. And, well, they're just cool.

My first interaction with token creatures goes all the way back to Alpha. What newer players may not realize about alpha was that unlike today, a new player did not have the advantage of learning from experienced players because everyone was new. **Magic** in 1993 was a world of novices. One of the side effects of this was that strange cards -- by modern standards -- were popular. As an example, both **Clockwork Beast** and **Vesuvan Doppelganger** were highly sought after.

I should interject that I can only talk about Southern California as **Magic** back then was very localized. The Internet was in its infancy and technology spread very, very slowly. But of all the cards, the one that was the most popular, the one that players heard only rumors of, *the* card that you had to open in a pack because no sane person would trade it away was... **The Hive**. Yes, **The Hive**. It created a creature -- flying, no less -- every turn. How could you possibly beat that?

It's also important to realize that back then there were no spoilers. To stay true to Richard's original vision, Wizards of the Coast kept the contents of the cards secret. Players would learn of new cards only by seeing them (either opening them up or paying against them) or by hearing about them as a rumor. In fact, the man who taught me to play **Magic** instructed me to spread my cards far apart from one another because there was a rare artifact that punished players for playing their cards too close together. He had seen it only once and it destroyed him. (The card, for those confused, is **Chaos Orb**.)

So, one day I'm ripping open my daily booster pack (when Beta came out I bought a few boxes -- you had to, as they disappeared in one day -- and was savoring the cards one pack a day) and, low and behold, my rare was **The Hive**. You have to understand that I had never seen **The Hive** before. I had heard about **The Hive**. I mean, who hadn't? Horror stories were told about **The Hive**. Few who had seen it lived to tell the tale. And I had just open one. Man, was I happy. That was my introduction to token creatures.



Flex Appeal

Let me take my gamer hat off and put my designer hat on. Why are token creatures cool to a designer? If you don't know the answer, you flunk the reading comprehension portion of this column as I mentioned it earlier: flexibility. Token creatures allow a designer a whole new world of possibilities. Why? Because it separates creatures from cards.

So what does that mean? Traditionally, a creature is tied to a card. If you want to get it into play, you have play out of your hand. Or out of your graveyard or library. But the card has to be somewhere for you to move it into play. Token creatures say, "Enough of that nonsense. You want a creature. You can have a creature any time you want."

The ramifications of this freedom is pretty substantial. First, we can create permanents that make creatures. This allows us to make artifacts like **The Hive** or enchantments like **Odyssey's Zombie Infestation**. Second, we can make cards that represent more than one creature. Examples of this would be the

The Token Rules

Here are the rules for tokens from the **Magic Comprehensive Rules**:

216. Tokens

216.1. Some spells and abilities put a token creature into play. The token is controlled by whomever put it into play and owned by the controller of the spell or ability that created it. The rules text of the spell or ability may define any number of characteristics for the token. These are the token permanent's initial values. A token doesn't have any characteristics not defined by the spell or ability that created it. A token's creature type is the same as its name. A Goblin creature token, for example, is named Goblin and has the creature subtype Goblin. If a token's name is two words or more, it has the creature subtype for each of those words. For example, a Goblin Scout token is named Goblin Scout and has two creature subtypes: Goblin and Scout. Once a token is in play, changing its name doesn't change its creature type, and vice versa.

216.2. A token is subject to anything that affects

Deranged Hermit and his squirrels (from *Urza's Legacy*) or **Sengir Autocrat** and his serfs (from *Homelands*). Third, we can create cards that replace other cards (or themselves) with a creature. For instance, *Mirage's Afterlife* or *Judgment's Funeral Pyre*. Fourth, we can make sorceries and instants that create creatures. This was crucial in the *Odyssey* block, for example, as it allowed us to make flashback creatures like **Call of the Herd** and **Beast Attack**.

The list goes on and on. Token creatures are a valuable tool to a designer because it frees them up from being locked into a card. I am constantly surprised of the new ways we keep finding to use tokens. Stay tuned as we keep innovating.

Da Rules

Before I wrapped up this week's column, I thought it would be interesting to talk about the rules for token creatures we use in design. My simplicity article revealed that some of you seem upset that rules even exist. The harsh reality is that all creative endeavors have rules. When I was writing for television I was overrun with rules (the show is twenty-two minutes long, the show has three acts, the show must use all the regular characters, etc.). The nice thing about **Magic** is that it's a game about breaking the rules, so any rule below might someday be broken. Nonetheless, I think it's good for you all to know what the rules are. I believe it was Pablo Picasso who said, "You cannot break the rules until you know the rules."

What follows are the major (I'm not going to waste your time with the minor ones) rules we follow with token creatures:

1. For token creatures within a block, all the same color and size must be the same creature type. For example, every block we choose what our 1/1 green creature is going to be. In *Invasion*, they were saprolings. In *Odyssey*, they were squirrels. In *Onslaught*, they'll be... let's just leave it at not saprolings or squirrels. The reason for this rule is consolidation. By making all the *Odyssey* 1/1 tokens squirrels, we were able to make cards, like **Squirrel Mob**, that interact with them. *Odyssey* block was particularly interesting as flashback forced us to make more tokens than normal. Our breakdown for *Odyssey* was:
 - o 1/1 (green) - squirrel
 - o 1/1 (red) - cat
 - o 1/1 flying (white) – spirit (**Battle Screech** was a special exception)
 - o 2/2 (green) - bear
 - o 2/2 (black) - zombie
 - o 3/3 (green) - elephant
 - o 4/4 (green) - beast
 - o 6/6 (green) - wurm
2. All token creatures should have power equaling toughness. This rule exists to help unify the tokens and make it easier to deduce their power and toughness when modified. The major exception to this rule is 0/1 tokens. We make these when we don't want the tokens to be able to deal damage. We break this rule more often than most of the others. Bacon (the 2003 large fall expansion), for example, currently has a very cool card that makes 3/1 tokens.
3. Creature tokens are vanilla creatures. That is, they have no abilities. We do this to minimize what we call "memory issues." The only ongoing exception to this rule is flying and haste. The first because for flavor reasons we want to be able to make creature producers that create fliers (like **The Hive**). **Haste** is okay as it requires very little memory. You attack with the creature as soon it comes into play and then you can forget the ability because, except in corner cases, it doesn't matter again. Of course, even the exception to the rule was broken with **Penumbra Wurm** (the token had trample), so anything is possible.
4. We don't create cards that produce more than one type of token. If a card makes 2/2 token creatures, for instance, that is all it will ever make. The reason we do this is to avoid confusion. In *Judgment* design, we actually experimented with a flashback spell called **Cone of Creatures** that created a 1/1 squirrel, a 2/2 bear, and a 3/3 elephant. But playtesting showed players kept confusing the tokens for one another, so the card was scrapped.
5. Token creatures can't escape their token-ness. That is, tokens must always be tokens. We would not make one, for example, that could leave play and return. (By the rules, token creatures cease to exist if they ever leave play.) A token's vulnerability is a key element of any token.

permanents in general or that affects the token's type or subtype. A token isn't considered a card (even if represented by cards from other games or *Unglued* cards) and isn't subject to any effect that specifically uses the word "card."

216.3. A token in a zone other than the in-play zone ceases to exist. This is a state-based effect. (Note that a token changing zones will set off *triggered abilities* before the token ceases to exist.) Once a token has left play, it can't be returned to play by any means.

And that is all you ever wanted to know about token design but were afraid to ask.


Join me next week when I explore the design of several *Judgment* cards.

Until then, may you swarm you opponent with an army of 1/1 wasps.

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