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Making Magic Monday, November 18, 2002

Beast of Show

Consolidating creature types



Mark Rosewater

Welcome to Beast Week! This week we'll be discussing the biggest creature type to be featured in *Onslaught*. I thought I'd use the beast theme to address an issue that has caused much discussion over the years. The issue? The consolidation of creature types.

Beast of the Beast

Let me start by giving you all a little history about R&D's view of the creature type. In the beginning, Richard Garfield made Alpha. (**Magic's** version of "And God said let there be light.") In the early days, creature types were all about flavor. They were treated much like flavor text. As such, creature types were chosen by their ability to enhance the card's flavor.

That doesn't mean creature types had no mechanical importance. Richard did put cards like **Goblin King** and **Lord of Atlantis** in Alpha, but their role was relatively minor. The best example of this was the fact that Alpha had two Goblins and only one Merfolk. I should point out though that at the time the "four of each card" rule did not exist; you could make a deck with 15 Islands, 15 **Merfolk of the Pearl Trident**, and 10 **Lord of Atlantis** and it would be pretty good.

Flash forward several years. Little by little, R&D began seeing the mechanic value of the creature type. The designers started finding more and more ways to make use of it. Then in *Exodus*, I made a card designed to try to make race decks more competitive, a little card known as **Coat of Arms**. As is often the case, the card was designed solely as a fluffy rare that would appeal to what I believed was a very narrow part of the audience. But something interesting happened--the card became very popular. That section of the audience wasn't so narrow. The card was so well-received that we later put it into *Seventh Edition* where it became the second best-selling card on the secondary market behind **Birds of Paradise**. This was one of the things that made R&D sit up and say, "Hmm, maybe a block based on creature types would go over well."



Why Less Is More

So what does this all have to do with consolidation of creature types? Well, the shift from flavor to mechanics made R&D reevaluate how creature types should be handled. Treating them as flavor pushed us to widen the number of creature types. That practice is very noticeable in early **Magic** as there were creature types (such as Leper and Marid) that appeared once never to be seen again.

But treating creature types as a mechanic caused an opposite result. If you want the cards to have relevance mechanically, you need to lower their number. Why? Let's take a moment to talk about the Birds (without the bees). Back in the day, each Bird got its own creature type. **Osai Vultures** were Vultures. **Zephyr Falcon** was a Falcon. **Whippoorwill** was a Whippoorwill (a bird shown in mid-flight that didn't have flying; one of our shining moments). **Silver Erne** was an Erne. Not even an Eagle, an Erne--which is defined, by the way, as a "long-winged sea eagle."

During *Homelands*, the designers wanted to create a Bird lord, but there was a problem. Every Bird had its own creature type. *Homelands* even introduced a new type, the Albatross. Now, they toyed with the idea of creating **Soraya the Falconer**, Vulturer, Whippoorwiller, Erner, and Albatrosser but the title didn't fit on the card. And the text "All Falcons, Vultures, Whippoorwills, Ernes, and Albatrosses get +1/+1" seemed clunky. Plus, they knew R&D were going to create more Birds in the future. So, the *Homelands* designers made a Falcon lord--not all that exciting as at the time there were only two Falcons in existence (**Zephyr Falcon** and **Mesa Falcon**). And unlike Alpha, this time there was a "four of each card" rule.

So R&D started examining their policy. How could we group cards together that thematically seemed tied? Well, the simplest answer was to condense the creature types. Instead of Falcon, Vulture, Whippoorwill, Erne, Albatross and a host of other bird types, why don't we just have the creature type Bird? This mechanically would allow us to create cards that affected Birds as a group.

Ch-Ch-Changes

It's important whenever you think of a change that you examine both what you gain as well as what you lose. The gain in this case is mechanic consistency. The designers now have a much greater ability to make cards that interact with creature types. And the cards they do make have more relevance as they interact with more cards. Take **Soraya the Falconer** as an example. When she came out, players who wanted to make a Falcon deck had very few choices. With only two Falcons, how could you not include four copies of each? Now that Soraya has been errataed to give Birds +1/+1, players have a world of possibilities.*



Going strictly by the printed wordings, the above card pairs do not interact. But according to the Oracle wordings, they do.

Now let's take a look at the downside. First is the loss of flavor. A good example of what could be lost is the card **Abu Ja'far** from *Arabian Nights*. Abu's card power destroys any creature that destroys him. Why? Because he's a Leper. How do we know that? Because his creature type is Leper. His card didn't have room for flavor text, so his being a leper could only be relayed in his title or his creature type. Of course, he could have been called "Abu Ja'far, Leper" or "Leper Ja'far" or "Aged Leper," but the fact that the title has to carry this information would limit the ability of the Creative Text team to give him a cool name.



Second is the danger of over-condensing. In our zeal to condense creature types, we have occasionally gone too far. A good example of this is **Cavern Harpy**. (I chose this card as an example as it being a Beast was fundamental to its role in the current Extended **Aluren** deck, one of those little "mistakes" that ends up mattering.) Because we don't make all that many harpies (only three so far – **Screeching Harpy**, **Molting Harpy**, and **Cavern Harpy**), we chose to put it into one of our larger categories – Beasts. The problem with making harpies Beasts is that it doesn't quite seem right. When you hear Beasts, you think of large, feral animals. Big behemoths that hunt prey and roam the landside. Not shrill half-women-half-birds that annoy you to death. Condensing cards occasional will lead you to matches that don't quite fit.

Third is the largest issue here in R&D: condensing creature types creates a "disconnect" with the past. A good example of this is the card **Longbow Archers**. For *Sixth*



importantly, we realized that pushing the mechanics onto more cards, increased the overall flavor of the game. **Magic** is more fun with goblin and elf decks running around. Thus, we sacrificed some flavor of individual cards to increase the overall flavor of the game.

The Sticky Wicket

Although R&D is all on the same page with condensing creature types (although the level of condensing varies from person to person), there is still one issue that has split R&D.

What do we do with old cards that have not been condensed that we want to reprint? What do we do with a Falcon that isn't a Bird, a Tiger that isn't a Cat or a Priest that isn't a Cleric?

R&D loves delving into **Magic's** past. It's fun to reprint an old card with its old name. Unfortunately, when we do, we create inconsistencies between the old and new versions. Some of this is pretty innocuous. New cards have modern templates that functionally have the same effect as the old cards. But other issues would cause a functional change. Creature types (especially in the age of *Onslaught*) are one of these things.

The reason I'm bringing this up is that R&D is truly split on this issue and whenever we run across things such as this, we like to get an opinion from the players. So today I am going to have a poll to get a sense of what you think. Be aware that I'm not asking you to decide this issue. The point of the poll is for R&D to get a sense of how all of you feel. The public response will be one of many factors we use when we decide this issue. I'm purposefully not going to tell you what side I favor because I don't want to taint the poll.

The question is this: **When we repeat an old card, should we keep the original creature type or should we change it to the creature type we would use if we were printing it today?** For example, if we reprinted *Clergy of the Holy Nimbus*, should we reprint it as a Priest or update it and reprint it as a Cleric? I'll run down the arguments in favor of each option.

Pro-Cleric – Making it a Cleric simply makes it more interactive with the rest of modern day **Magic**. Being a Cleric means something; being a Priest does not. Not changing it would cause complications because casual players would want to treat it like a Cleric. It doesn't make any sense for *Engineered Plague* to kill *Soltari Priest* but not *Clergy of the Holy Nimbus*. R&D chose to condense the creature types because they believed it made the game better. The same reasons should hold true for "fixing" reprinted cards.

Pro-Priest – **Magic** is already a complex game; we don't need to have yet another card that doesn't do what it says. Players will be forced to know text that isn't listed on original version of the card. For this very reason, R&D has a strict errata policy that stresses that changing old cards should only be done when absolutely necessary. In addition, one of the values of reprinting cards is to let older players who have the earlier version use them. If the cards don't sync up, using old

Edition, we changed the creature type of the card from Archer to Soldier in our attempt to condense types. At Pro Tour Chicago '00, a pro player had two *Visions Longbow Archers* in play. His opponent played a *Tsabo's Decree*, picked up the *Longbow Archers*, looked at the creature type line, and chose for the spell to destroy "Archers." The other player then informed him that the *Longbow Archers* were no longer Archers; they had been changed to Soldier, and *Tsabo's Decree* didn't destroy them.** This story demonstrates the problem that comes from making changes. Next year **Magic** will celebrate its tenth anniversary. Each change we make in the present causes problems with the cards from the past.


R&D spent a great deal of time examining the above issues. Condensing the creature types was not done without a great deal of thought. In the end, what pushed us towards condensing them was the idea that players liked mechanics that revolve around creature types. The current popularity of *Onslaught* only reinforces this idea. More



Same name, same art, different type. According to the rules, they are both Soldiers.

cards will create play problems (such as the [Longbow Archers](#) incident listed above). Having another Cleric for your Cleric deck is not worth the confusion.

So, what do all of you think:

When an older creature is reprinted, what should be done with the creature type? 

Keep the original creature type.

Change it to the creature type you would use if you were printing it today.

I don't care about this issue. Do what you want.

That's all I got for today. Join me next week when I explain how you – yes, you, don't look behind you – can impact the game of **Magic**.


Until then, may your birds of a feather flock together.

Mark Rosewater

*: [Soraya the Falconer](#) now affects Birds. But what are Birds? All Falcons have been changed to Bird, as have [Carrier Pigeons](#). [Wild Aesthir](#) has been made a Bird, but [Aesthir Glider](#) has not. [Silver Erne](#), [Giant Albatross](#), and [Whippoorwill](#) all retain their old, oddball types. [Osai Vultures](#) stays as Vulture, but [Wake of Vultures](#) has been changed to Bird. And [Circling Vultures](#) always was a Bird. [Roc of Kher Ridges](#) is a Roc, but [Roc Hatchling](#) is a Bird. It's ugly. Wait, isn't this Beast Week? --Aaron

**: That is how the story happened; a table judge ruled in favor of the [Longbow Archers](#) player, which was a mistake. Further discussion with the head judge and tournament manager revealed that had the [Tsabo's Decree](#) player appealed the ruling, he would have been allowed to name the correct creature type, and the Archers player probably would have received a warning for unsportsmanlike conduct for trying to "rules-cheese" his opponent. Do not think that it is okay to win games because of errata minutiae. But it still goes to show what changing types can lead to. --Aaron

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