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OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Posted in **Latest Developments** on December 20, 2002



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The *Tempest* set includes what I think is the worst **Magic** mechanic ever: shadow.

When asked to name their least-favorite mechanic, a lot of my Pro Tour–player friends will answer “the free mechanic.” That’s a pretty reasonable answer as cards like [Time Spiral](#) and [Frantic Search](#) had arguably the most deleterious impact on tournament-level **Magic** of any mechanic ever. But I think the free mechanic could have been fixed: It could have just given you a set amount of mana during the resolution, and that number could have been tuned such that the cards weren’t broken. Shadow, on the other hand, is fundamentally flawed (in my opinion), and here’s why.

What makes **Magic** a good game is the interaction between the players. Shadow takes away a big chunk of that interaction, especially in Constructed. Before the shadow mechanic was created, reasonably sized creatures were played at tournaments—[Erhnam Djinn](#) was a house and [Serra Angel](#) got its fair share of play. [Ihsan's Shade](#) hit the table alongside [Wildfire Emissary](#) and even [Mahamoti Djinn](#). One of the reasons these creatures saw play was that they were able to block on the turn they hit the table. A player had to spend his or her whole turn summoning a big monster that couldn’t attack right away. That was okay, though, because it got to block on that first turn, and then on that player’s next turn, he or she could attack with it *plus* do something else.

None of those amazing creatures can block creatures with shadow. Most of the time in Constructed, shadow was really just about avoiding blockers. While it’s true that [Soltari Priest](#) can’t block [Erhnam Djinn](#), “CARDNAME can’t be blocked” is a useful ability to have, especially on weenie creatures (which all the shadow creatures were), but the shadow mechanic was costed as though it were a drawback or perhaps neutral. For the two years that *Tempest* was legal in Standard tournaments, there

wasn't a whole lot of blocking going on—I think that's a large part of the reason that big creatures virtually went extinct.

Even if shadow hadn't been given out “for free” by the developers who were pricing the cards, I still think there would have been a problem. Even if only a few shadow cards had been priced at a level that made them good enough to play in Constructed, the mechanic would have undermined the viability of big creatures. But if none of them were good enough to play in tournaments, a lot of players would have complained that the mechanic sucked. And what's the point of making a mechanic for which all the cards suck? So, either no one will like the mechanic because all the cards suck or else a fundamental part of what makes the game fun will be lost . . . sounds like a fundamentally flawed mechanic to me.

I think the game would have been far better off if Wizards R&D had gone down the “make all the cards suck in Constructed tournaments” route. To begin with, the cards could still have been interesting in Limited—in fact, they probably would have been more interesting since, as things turned out, *all* the *Tempest* shadow creatures were amazing cards, drafted highly and almost always played. I find it's more interesting/challenging/fun when the cards in a mechanic are more spread out in power-level so that you have to figure out which ones are actually good and make tough decisions about how good they are, when you should draft/play them, and so on.

Better still, if shadow creatures hadn't made an appearance in Constructed, then the development team working on *Urza's Saga* a year later wouldn't have been put into the position of figuring out how to compete with the super-speeded-up environment *Tempest* created. Granted, it wasn't just the shadow weenies that sped up the game—cards like [Jackal Pup](#), [Mogg Fanatic](#), [Wasteland](#), and [Cursed Scroll](#) probably had an even bigger impact, but shadow contributed. In particular, shadow drove away the fat creatures that could have really punished people for playing with cards like [Jackal Pup](#). When you can block against only one of the three kinds of weenie decks, you need a new plan. Like combo.

The fast-paced *Tempest* environment meant that control was very difficult to play, and shadow meant that fatties were very difficult to play, so what was *Urza's Saga* supposed to contribute to the game? Well it turned out that the way to compete with *Tempest* was even less healthy than *Tempest* . . .

Don't get me wrong. Like a lot of people, I have fond memories of *Tempest*-era **Magic**; however, I believe that *Tempest* was fundamentally inflationary. It was fun because the cards in it were just better than any of the cards that had been printed since Alpha, but you just can't maintain that kind of fun. If you want **Magic** to be around for years and years to come (as I do), then you've got to pick a power-level for the game

that can be maintained for the long run. That means that each new block has to contribute about the same number of playable cards to Standard as the one it replaces. As *Tempest* started the inflationary spiral that (eventually) taught us all these lessons, I hold it, at least partially, responsible for *Urza's Saga*.

Tempest played too fast, and shadow was half the problem.

The good news is that R&D is constantly studying past sets and looking for lessons to learn. In this case, R&D learned that it had to back down on the power-level to make the game more maintainable. The *Mercadian Masques* block might have been a bit of an over correction, but R&D needed to jolt things back down to a reasonable level so that everything could reboot with *Invasion*. In the *Invasion* block and the blocks since then, R&D has been trying to emphasize different aspects of the game, while keeping the game's overall power-level constant.

The lessons learned from shadow are constantly being applied to new cards. Blocking is an important part of the game, and the game is less fun when no one is attacking with enormous monsters. Dragons (and other assorted fatties) are just more fun to win with than most other cards. R&D just wants to keep conditions safe for them, so they'll come out and play.

Mechanics that encourage players to interact with each other are better than mechanics that prevent people from interacting with each other.

Results from last week's poll:

Should we have printed one or more blue Goblins?

Yes	2456	29.3%
No	4829	57.5%
Not sure	535	6.4%
Don't care	575	6.8%
Total	8395	100.0%

I'm always a bit nervous when I come out strongly in favor of one side of a debate and then ask a poll question to see if you agree with me. Because what do I do if you don't? Anyway, I'm glad the majority of voters agree with me that creature type Goblin isn't something that should just be spread all over the **Magic** color wheel. And yes, of course I know that [Razorfin Hunter](#) is technically a blue Goblin . . . most of you read me correctly as saying that it wouldn't count as a blue Goblin unless the only colored mana you needed to play it was blue.

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