

Origins of the Banned and Restricted Lists

The Leader of the Banned

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I had a deck that could win in one turn about 90 percent of the time," recalls founder and former Wizards of the Coast President Peter Adkison, recalling the early days of **Magic**. "It had Black Lotus, blue Moxes, Time Walks, Ancestral Recalls, Timetwisters, and Juggernauts. Dave Howell ran a 'tournament' where any deck was allowed, and several people showed up with one-turn killer decks. The winner was the deck that could do its one-turn kill the most times in a row." The winner, Adkison says, achieved this goal some 80 times.

This sort of high-powered, unstoppable deck was a potential source of frustration for tournament players back in early 1994. From the very beginning, **Magic** tournaments had operated under the loose umbrella of a simple banned list, one that covered all the ante cards. But when Steve Bishop of the Duelists Convocation proposed a new direction for bans and limits based on these sorts of decks (initially, according to original **Magic** developer Skaff Elias of Wizards R&D, Bishop suggested a limit on the number of each type of card in any deck), the topic became one requiring immediate resolution.

"We knew a lot more about **Magic** in the beginning than people thought we did," says **Magic** designer Richard Garfield. "Many people saw broken cards like Plague Rats and Ornithopter—neither of which were broken—and thought they had surpassed us in deck design talent. 'How could they miss this?' and 'This card is soooo broken' were common comments in those days." (He notes that this is not necessarily the case now; these days, he says, R&D "learns valuable things from the outside world with regard to card power" within days of a set's release.)

Back in 1993, Garfield and the R&D team thought this reaction was great—they loved the idea that everyone was "a master of **Magic** in their own little universe where their favorite cards were 'broken.'" This didn't change the fact, of course, that there really *were* broken cards and decks like the 40-Lightning Bolt Special that simply weren't fun for others to play against. In the earliest days of **Magic**, minimum deck size was 40 cards, with no "four-of" card limit. The team was more or less content to let these decks exist, however, for a couple of reasons.

"First," explains Garfield, "we viewed the game as a 'limited environment game,' anticipating that hardcore groups would buy maybe five decks and be maybe twenty people large. This was wrong in two ways—people bought more cards, and the groups were much more networked than other games'. Play groups were less isolated, so the effective environment was much more filled with cards." This, Garfield admits, made a big difference, because "while a Black Lotus may be broken, having one in a twenty-person playgroup is hardly a disaster."

The second reason the game had broken and imbalanced cards, Garfield believes, was because "I expected playgroups to moderate themselves. This is the way it always is in hobby games—no one played by all of a game's rules, and every playgroup tweaked it to meet their own group's tastes." Therefore, Garfield reasoned, if a playgroup contained a player using a 40-Lightning Bolt deck, its novelty would wear out and then be weeded out by the others in the group who no longer wanted to play against it. Again, the rapidly widening overlap of playgroups made such weeding almost impossible, and some common guidelines for deck construction were clearly becoming a necessity.

"Richard didn't like Steve Bishop's idea of limiting the number of each type in a deck," remembers Elias, "because it killed many deck types, like Plague Rats. There was no reason to limit Plague Rats—or most other cards, for that matter. We were going to have a separate list of restricted cards, each with different numbers, but eventually it was decided that the simplest thing was to have a general limit of four of a particular card per deck and to move the deck size up to 60 cards from 40." These decisions, he notes, were essentially compromises between Steve Bishop's position and Richard Garfield's, "although they ended up being closer to Steve's view in principle."

"I had a lot of reservations about deck limitations," Garfield admits, echoing Elias's recollections about Plague Rat decks, and adding that Goblin King and Lord of Atlantis decks were also problematic. He notes, however, that in time, he recognized that some of his original concerns could be addressed by simply making many types of Goblins, Merfolk, or Rats to make deck types that had been destroyed in the short run viable again in the long run. "More important," he adds, "everyone disagreed about what was broken. A Terror that killed a Shivan Dragon was broken. A Counterspell that countered a Wrath of God was broken. A Circle of Protection that shut down a red deck was broken. In short, any card that countered anyone's plan, and any card that made the game not fit a particular player's preconception about what the game was about, was broken." Some play environments were even already imposed their own restrictions—only one of an artifact and no Fireballs, Garfield notes, was one of the wackier ones.

Ultimately, he says, the most important environment-balancing fix was the Standard (or Type 2) deck construction limitation. "If cards are only around for a couple of years," he points out, "broken decks can be found and exploited, and then put in the past. This is a lot of fun, and a part of the game I didn't want to see fall by the wayside. Banning would be used very, very conservatively because we wanted players to find solutions to their deck problems themselves rather than coming whining to daddy each time someone beat them in a way they didn't like."

And while the Banned list began as a way to eliminate ante cards from the game, eventually a few other cards were put on it, "though not many," says Skaff Elias. "It took a long time, and those cards were selected because even one of them made the game somewhat random."

Generally speaking, players accepted these lists because "it was widely recognized that there was a problem," Elias says. "It was getting to the point that constructed was unplayable. No one liked the lists, but so many people knew they had to be there that they carried through."

Mirror Universe, Regrowth, and Mind Twist: Just a few of the casualties of the early Banned and Restricted List.

Nonetheless, Richard Garfield recalls it as "a bitter pill to swallow, telling people that they couldn't compete with these cards they had purchased. It was something we were loathe to do—and, in fact, the Restricted List was just a halfway measure for that painful job. The creation of the Standard format was a way to do this restriction much more fairly. All card are banned after two years—predictably—is a better method of banning than banning cards you specifically spent your hard-earned cash and traded your rares away to obtain."

At first, Elias says, the idea of the lists was so painful for the R&D members designing the cardsets that they made strong efforts to have no cards put on the list at all. "At the same time," he adds, "the lists gave R&D the leeway to create card that would be 'broken' in Type 1 or Extended yet fine in Type 2. Without the lists, some cards might not have been created because of their effect on the Type 1 environment."

So, what motivated the DC and the **Magic** designers and developers to put certain cards on either the Banned or Restricted List? By the time the *The Dark* set was released, these lists had been updated and revised a few times, with some cards coming and going in extremely short periods of time because of public reaction to them or surprises uses for them (Dingus Egg came and went in short order, for instance). Garfield and Elias recall the reasoning behind most of those early cards, however. Some of the more permanent residents of those early lists...*

RESTRICTED

Ali from Cairo

Skaff Elias: "Basically, Steve [Bishop] thought this was broken and had the potential for making games too long. He didn't like that it forced deck diversity—you needed a way to kill creatures in your deck if your opponent was playing with Ali."

Richard Garfield: "The thing is that people would play these crazy narrow decks like all Knights, Angels, and Crusades, and after Ali hit the table, they were done. Heaven forbid that they play a Swords to Plowshares or play another color with a little more direct damage."

Ancestral Recall

Skaff Elias: "One of the cards we knew was broken before we printed the game."

Richard Garfield: "Yes, this card was really broken. I remember during the very earliest playtests people making these killer big creature decks (proving big creatures were broken), killer medium creature decks (proving medium creatures were broken), and killer weenie decks (proving little creatures were broken). Soon, I connected the dots and saw the common element in these was not the creatures at all but the Ancestral Recall support.

Balance

Richard Garfield: "Very good Balance decks existed, taking advantage of the fact that it didn't hit artifacts, so you could get enormous advantage with artifact superiority."

Skaff Elias: "This card is plenty good even without the artifact trick. It's an example of a card that is too good but took longer for player to see than other cards because on the surface, it's 'fair.'"

Berserk

Richard Garfield: "You could get some very big attacks with Berserk, which doubled the attacking creatures' power. R&D is very careful these days with doubling cards."

Skaff Elias: "In fact, eventually we stopped making doubling cards. This card probably wasn't broken, given all the other cards that truly were, but it needed to be put on the list once the truly broken stuff was taken care of."

Black Lotus

Richard Garfield: "Fast mana is always a boon and prone to making the game end too quickly—and it doesn't get much faster than Black Lotus. Of course, many people wasted their Lotuses dreadfully, like the fellow who took advantage of his to drop three Walls of Wood on turn one!"

Braingeyser

Skaff Elias: "This card was interesting in that many people thought it wasn't broken; some still think that. It's one of the weaker card-drawing cards on the list."

Richard Garfield: "Card advantage in general was underpriced in the first set."

Candelabra of Tawnos

Skaff Elias: "This card, especially when combined with the Urza's lands, was quite a mana generator. It wasn't one of the more powerful cards on the list, but it definitely hurt our ability create more powerful lands."

Channel

Richard Garfield: "Everyone felt clever when they found Channel/Fireball, which was one of the reasons the combo was there. It was a nice combo, but you had to be very careful with it; a Counterspell or Lightning Bolt could ruin your day. Even a Healing Salve was bad news!"

Skaff Elias: "Yet Channel made games too random and too fast. It gave even a bad player a fair chance at winning, especially given the early mana that we used to have in the game."

Chaos Orb

Skaff Elias: "Mainly banned because of rules problems. How fast could I rearrange my cards? Was the defending player allowed to have his hands on the table? And so on. Just a pain, and it really needed to be banned, so it rapidly moved to that list instead. So many rules were required just to handle this card."

Copy Artifact

Skaff Elias: "It helped people get around the restrictions—just look at the number of artifacts on the Restricted List. Copy Artifact is obviously not as good as Demonic Tutor, but the idea is the same."

Demonic Tutor

Richard Garfield: "This made it too easy to get your broken combos together. It was probably the best search card ever. It was even better in those days, though, because the quality of the card you were searching for was very high. It doesn't really make sense to restrict cards, then let people play with numerous Demonic Tutors."

Falling Star

Richard Garfield: "Same as Chaos Orb. By and large, casual players liked it; serious players didn't."

Feldon's Cane

Skaff Elias: "Actually, it was pretty funny. We intended this to be a bad card—and when it was first put on the list, it was really bad. DCI people thought it was broken when it wasn't. Eventually, though, with the prevalence of Millstone-type decks, the Cane became better and better. The Cane was eventually a necessary card in these decks, and delayed games where the victory condition was running through your library, so it was restricted 'for real.'"

Fork

Skaff Elias: "Same reason as Copy Artifact—it was a way around the restrictions. It was also very confusing rules-wise, but of course, that should have led to its banning, not restricting."

Ivory Tower

Richard Garfield: "Whether or not Ivory Tower was too powerful, it led to very long games, especially if two people who thought it was powerful played one another. I don't *think* it's too powerful today, but in the days of broken card drawing and no play/draw rule, it was often pretty bad."

Library of Alexandria

Richard Garfield: "More broken card drawing. Even more powerful before play/draw."

Maze of Ith

Skaff Elias: "It prevented a creature from attacking; it was much Icy Manipulator. It probably should not have been on the list, but it did slow games down quite a bit."

Mind Twist

Richard Garfield: "Discard has long been hated—especially random discard. This was pretty effective discard also."

Skaff Elias: "It was essentially card advantage that was too good—but destroying your opponent's hand instead of drawing. When you drew extra cards you would win, but your opponent still felt like he was actually playing."

Mirror Universe

Skaff Elias: "It had the effect of delaying some game initially, but eventually—once the timing rules were written—it could kill your opponent. Additionally, it provided defense as well against 'normal' decks. When printed, it wasn't intended to be able to kill. Once that became a possibility, it became the kill of choice for many good decks, and so it was restricted."

Mishra's Workshop

Skaff Elias: "Fast mana—too fast, though lower on the list of broken mana than most."

Mox Emerald/Jet/Pearl/Ruby/Sapphire

Richard Garfield: "Fast mana was largely responsible for the first-turn kills that could have a regular place in any serious game."

Recall

Skaff Elias: "Same as Copy Artifact, essentially—it was but on the list to avoid there being ways to get around restrictions."

Regrowth

Richard Garfield: "This one probably seemed worse than it is, because it was regrowing a broken card."

Sol Ring

Richard Garfield: "More fast mana. This is the weakest of the Moxes and the Lotus."

Sword of the Ages

Skaff Elias: "This probably should never have been on the list!"

Timetwister

Richard Garfield: "More broken card drawing."

Time Walk

Richard Garfield: "Another one of the severely broken blue cards."

Underworld Dreams

Skaff Elias: "Semi-broken with all the card-drawing around like Wheel of Fortune and Timetwister. It probably didn't need to be on the list."

Wheel of Fortune

Richard Garfield: "Some red broken card drawing."

BANNED

The original Banned List consisted of ante cards (Bronze Tablet, Contract from Below, Darkpact, Demonic Attorney, Jeweled Bird, Tempest Efreet). "We played ante leagues, though, for quite a while," Garfield points out. (As a side note, he also says that Jeweled Bird was the "first true cantrip, in my mind, in that the drawing of a card was added to the effect to make it worth playing. Technically, Ancestral Recall is a cantrip, but Jeweled Bird was the first it was done just to make it cheaper.") Other cards on the lists had slightly more colorful histories, as Garfield and Elias recall....

Divine Intervention

Skaff Elias: "The original makers of the list basically didn't like the idea that the game could be automatically drawn. There were other ways to draw the game in the old days, but with so many tournaments being single elimination, they didn't want to take the chance that this card would be good enough to be used as an emergency escape and draw the round. While it's arguable that the

card could ever possibly have been a problem, the concern was for single elim, timed tournaments, not the card's power level."

Shahrazad

Skaff Elias: "The first card put on the list purely for time concerns. Basically people were afraid it had the ability to make rounds virtually all time out."

Time Vault

Skaff Elias: "This card was put on because it could be used to generate an 'infinite loop' for victory. There was a combination of power considerations but also rules considerations. The card was eventually errataed to solve the loop problems, and then taken off the list."

**: Note: The contents of this article do not represent the current Banned and Restricted lists for tournament play. You can find the up-to-date lists [here](#). Send questions and comments to editor@wizards.com.*