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# Keyword to the Wise



Mark Rosewater

## The recent increase of "named" mechanics

One of the advantages of putting your theme in the title is that the reader knows what to expect before they even click to the column. Obviously, that means this week I'm talking about keywords. For those unfamiliar with the term, a keyword is a word or series of words used as shorthand to represent a mechanic. Examples of keywords would be flying, first strike, flashback, and morph. Starting with the *Onslaught* set, R&D has had a shift in philosophy concerning keywords. I was hoping to use my column today to explain the reasons behind the shift.

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## I Want Some More

Before I explain why we changed what we changed, I guess I should start with what we changed. For those paying attention, the answer is pretty obvious. *Odyssey* block, for example, had the following keywords:

- flashback
- madness
- threshold

*Invasion* block from the previous year had these keywords: (okay, keyword)

- kicker

*Onslaught* block, on the other hand, has the following keywords:

- amplify
- cycling
- double strike
- fear (Yeah, this one's a little cheesy, but technically it was introduced as a keyword in the *Onslaught* set)
- landcycling
- morph
- provoke
- storm

Notice the subtle shift?

Okay, so what's going on? Why have keywords more than doubled between the *Odyssey* block and the *Onslaught* block? The answer is, as always, a complex one. But hey, that's never stopped me before. Here are the major reasons for the shift:

## Reason #1 -- A Change in How We Think About Keywords

I might as well start with the most important reason. The biggest change in philosophy has to do with how R&D looks at mechanics. For a long time, R&D thought about mechanics as a limited resource. To use a metaphor, design space was treated like a diamond mine. With each diamond



(mechanic) we removed, we were a step closer to having an empty mine. As such, we had to be very careful about how fast we were extracting diamonds from the mine.

But this way of thinking is fundamentally flawed. Why? Because it doesn't adequately reflect how mechanics work. Let's say I design a cool mechanic that plays well and that the players enjoy. Under the old way of thinking after it's used once, I discard it. But that's simply crazy. Why throw away a perfectly good mechanic?

Remember that we look at the game in a big picture sense. We aren't just concerned about next year but about five years from now and ten years from now and fifty years from now. Because of this, we've begun thinking about our resources in a very different way. Mechanics are a reusable resource, not an expendable one. If we want to keep the **Magic** game fresh for the long haul, we have to be able to reuse our good mechanics.

Cycling is the best example of this new philosophy. Cycling was introduced in the *Urza's Saga* set. Four years later, we needed a mechanic to flesh out the *Onslaught* set, and it became clear that cycling was a perfect fit. So, we brought it back. We played around with it some. We introduced a few new twists, but it shows that old mechanics can be useful in newer sets.

This doesn't mean that every mechanic is going to come back every four years. Cycling was actually an aberration in that it came back quicker than we expected. But the lesson was an important one: R&D doesn't need to reinvent the wheel when a perfectly good wheel is sitting out in the garage.

This brings us back to keywords. What does this shift have to do with the increase of keywords? Once R&D recognized that keywords were a reusable resource, we felt much freer in using them.

## Reason #2 -- A Greater Comfort with Keywords

At the same time the above change was happening, another discussion was going on. How many keywords can the game support at any one time? I've mentioned in my articles about R&D that we have a tendency to discuss certain topics for years. This was one such topic. The long-time worry had always been that too many keywords would add unnecessary complication. Each new addition was essentially another vocabulary word that a new player had to learn. But in the last few years, R&D has come to see keywords as a means of simplifying the game for new players.

How did such a change happen? First, R&D started having more respect for reminder text. After watching numerous playtests, R&D realized that reminder text had an almost magical property. It was a useful tool for those that needed the guidance but was easily glossed over by those that didn't. The text was essentially "visible" only to those who needed it (or those who liked to complain about it -- see aside below). This meant that adding reminder text greatly reduced the amount of text. Morph, for example becomes one word rather than twenty two.

A quick aside to those of you that like to deride reminder text ("Who doesn't know Walls can't attack?"). While many people like to point to reminder text as an example of Wizards "dumbing down" the game, in truth the exact opposite is true. By having the resources of reminder text handy to help novices navigate through their early games (in a nice easy-to-ignore italic font, no less), R&D has been able to take numerous steps to complicate the game. Once again: Existence of reminder text = Complication of **Magic**. Just something to keep in mind.

Second, we realized that keywords could condense multiple ideas into a single concept. Let's take protection as an example. Protection is really four different abilities, but the keyword turns them all into a single conglomerate. Morph is another example in which two distinct abilities are blended into one overall concept. Be aware that this works only when the different ideas blend well together either through flavor or game play. But when it works, the keyword allows a much easier grasp of comprehension.



Third, it ties cards together, making the mechanic easier to learn. If each incident of a mechanic is spelled out, a player has to make the connection between the two cards on his or her own. If both cards use the same keyword, then the player immediately realizes that the second card they see works similar to the first card he or she learned.

In short, keywords help beginners without handicapping R&D's abilities to make cards for the rest of the players.

### Reason #3 -- Increase of Design Space

Another hidden benefit of keywords is that it opens up an interesting area of design space. By keywording a mechanic (and thus giving it a shorthand word), you allow the designers to create cards that interact with that mechanic. As an example, lets look at *Onslaught* cards that exist only because cycling is keyworded:

- Astral Slide
- Choking Tethers
- Complicate
- Death Pulse
- Dirge of Dread
- Fleeting Aven
- Invigorating Boon
- Krosan Tusker
- Lightning Rift
- Primal Boost
- Renewed Faith
- Slice and Dice
- Solar Blast
- Sunfire Balm
- Withering Hex

And this is just one keyword in one set.

### Reason #4 -- Use of Language

Another big advantage of keywords is that they add universal terminology to the game. The **Magic** game is more than just playing the game. A big part of the **Magic** experience is the community that has built up around the game. Players like to share stories and strategies with each other. To do this, they need to have a shared vocabulary.

Keywords help create this vocabulary because it allows all the players to use the same word to mean the same thing. In the past when we've had mechanics that aren't connected by a word, we've seen pockets of players each come up with their own word causing confusion in the greater community.



This might not sound too important at first glance, but trust me as someone who has spent a lot of his life studying language, it matters a great deal.

### Reason #5 -- You Like Them, You Really Like Them

The final factor that pushed us toward upping the number of keywords was the belief that the audience would simply enjoy having more of them. The solid message we received over the last few years was that R&D could ratchet up the overall complexity level of the game. So as part of our goal to separate the complexity level of the core set from the expert-level expansions, we chose to inch the former down and the latter up. Thus, the core set becomes an easier stepping-

stone into the game, and the expansions can have a little of the extra oomph that players have been asking for.

## All Together Now

When R&D added all the above together, we came to the conclusion that we were underusing keywords. Keywords had the neat effect of making the game easier for beginners to understand while adding a level of strategic complexity for advanced players. It seemed the best of both worlds. And as a bonus, it added design space and created a universal vocabulary. Plus, our new philosophy of seeing mechanics as a reusable resource lessened our fears of us "using up" all the good mechanics. And that in a large nutshell is why the *Onslaught* block turned up the dial on the number of acceptable keywords.

Join me next week when I turn my attention to the good little Soldiers of **Magic**.


Until then, may you enjoy the extra oomph.

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