

Plus a recap of Magic at E-3 The Future of Reminder Text

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- [Randy Buehler, Director of Magic R&D Archive](#)

A couple of weeks ago at [E-3](#), Wizards of the Coast gave away a [promotional card](#) that has generated quite a bit of buzz:



I think this oversized [Two-Headed Dragon](#) looks awesome (and I'm glad you guys voted it into the set [last summer](#)). One thing a bunch of people have commented on about this card is the flying reminder text. I've been saving up material for an article about reminder text and now seems like the perfect time to clarify our position on the subject.

Broadening Magic's Horizons

Before I get into that, though, I'll tell you what we were doing at E-3 in the first place. "E-3" is short for "Electronic Entertainment Exposition" and every year it is *the* place for computer game developers to show off their newest offerings. There were two different **Magic: The Gathering** titles on display there this year, and we're proud of both of them. Most of you already know all about [Magic Online](#), but you may still be interested to hear that we're rolling out [version 2.0](#) this summer in conjunction with the *Eighth Edition* release. It'll be a free download for anyone who wants it and if you already play **Magic Online** then it will just look like an extra-large update to you. The biggest changes in version 2.0 include an overhaul of the trading system and a revamp of the entire newbie experience, especially the tutorials. We're quite happy with the way *Magic Online's* first year has gone, but at the same time we figure the more new players we can bring into the **Magic** fold, the better, so we're taking this opportunity to clean up various aspects of the program and make it easier to learn. You can click [here](#) if you want to read more about Magic Online at E-3, and you can click [here](#) to read more about what's coming.

The other game we were showing off at E-3 is [Magic: The Gathering – Battlegrounds](#). **Battlegrounds** is a real-time strategy fighting game developed for the Xbox, and it's coming out this fall. I haven't seen the single-player quest mode yet, but it does sound like they're working up a good one. What I have seen is the player-versus-player part of the game and it looks great. I know there have been several **Magic** video games over the years and I know they have all pretty much sucked. I also know I'm probably biased on the subject, but this one actually looks good to me. You're a wizard who runs around the screen and picks up mana crystals; you then spend that mana to cast spells and summon monsters that attack your opponent. All the creatures and spells are actual **Magic** cards and the whole game is a pretty faithful translation of the **Magic** experience into video-game form. The software developers showed their game to R&D several times and even scrapped their initial design because they wanted to make sure they got things right. The game will be on Xbox *Live*, and rumor has it that Microsoft itself is excited about the possibilities for competitions with this game.

Simple Reminders

Anyway, enough about E-3; the real point of this article is to talk about reminder text. The short version is this: Yes, we're going to put reminder text on all the *Eighth Edition* cards that have flying. We're also going to have reminder text for first strike and every other keyword that appears in the set. However, this does not mean that we're adding any more reminder text to cards in expert-level sets. In fact, the more observant among you may have noticed that we've actually been doing less reminder text in expert-level sets in recent years and that's because of a change we made to our reminder text policy a couple of years ago.



If you go back and look at cards from the *Invasion* block, you'll notice that there was lots of reminder text. Kicker, of course, had reminder text because that was a brand new mechanic and we needed to explain what it does. However, cards with any kind of landwalk also had reminder text, as did Walls and cards with haste. Meanwhile, creatures with trample or protection (which are obviously more complicated abilities) didn't have any reminder text, nor did creatures with flying. The whole situation seemed a bit inconsistent and nobody was happy with it.

When it came time to finalize the wordings on *Odyssey* cards, the templating team decided to first take a step back and examine our reminder text policy. We quickly realized that there are two basic kinds of reminder text. The first and most obvious kind of reminder text is basically just a translation of a keyword. R&D likes to link cards by having them share a keyword (click [here](#) to read Mark Rosewater's recent article on this subject), but we still have to teach people what the keyword means. Our strategy for doing this is to put the rules into reminder text. This way, the first couple of times you see a new keyword, you can read the reminder text to figure out how it works. Then once you know how to play the new ability, you can just skip over the italicized text when you read the card. The second broad class of reminder text appears on cards that we judge are likely to confuse a significant number of players. On the *Apocalypse* card [Ice Cave](#), for example, we thought a lot of people would think "mana cost" meant the same thing as "converted mana cost" so we included some reminder text to clarify the situation. Other good examples of this class of "clarifying" reminder text can be found on the cards [Blood Oath](#), [Alloy Golem](#), [Exiled Doomsayer](#), [Riptide Mangler](#), and [Mistform Ultimus](#).

This second class of reminder text is pretty easy to form a policy for. Whenever we judge that the rules for a card are not sufficiently clear to most players from the card text, and we can improve the situation with reminder text, then we add it. Some of these situations come up on a regular basis. We've learned that players are often surprised when a spell or ability causes control of something to change for the rest of the game so we add reminder text to all of these cards; we've also learned that lots of players get confused about when to pay the mana for [Propaganda](#)-like taxing effects, such as [Whipgrass Entangler](#)'s, so those cards always get reminder text now, too. And then there are those cards with unique quirks, like [Charmed Pendant](#), [Upwelling](#), and [Coat of Arms](#).



Alloy Golem, *Blood Oath*, and *Upwelling* all have unique reminder text that helps clarify the rules.

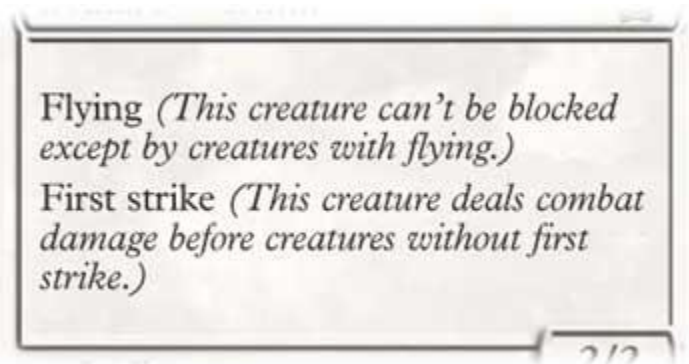
Key Keywords

That brings us back to the first class – keyword reminder text. New keywords are easy – everyone needs to learn how to play with them so they clearly need reminder text. However, how are players supposed to learn about the staple keywords that we use in every block? The situation in *Invasion* was schizophrenic in part because "haste" was still a relatively new keyword, but did we really want to put reminder text on every creature with haste for the rest of time?

No... no, we didn't. That was the starting point that most of us agreed on, and when we started thinking about how people were supposed to learn the meaning of "haste," we all felt that was part of the role that Nth Edition should play. ("Nth Edition" is R&D shorthand for "whichever edition of the core set is current at any given time.") Nth Edition is supposed to be simpler than our other sets because it's the one that we point new players to. The idea is that new players can cut their teeth on the Core Set, learn the basics of the game, and then graduate up to the sets with new cards.

So new players should learn about haste from *Seventh Edition* cards like *Raging Goblin*, we reasoned, and that meant that by the time they saw an *Odyssey* card they should already know what haste does. Thus we wouldn't need to clutter up any *Odyssey* cards with reminder text for the game's simplest abilities. The same logic applied to *landwalk* – it's in the *Seventh Edition* set (complete with reminder text) so we didn't feel we needed it in expert-level sets any more.

Once we worked out this basic understanding, there were a couple of obvious questions to deal with. What about flying and first strike? In theory, these keywords are taught by the Core Set, but they didn't have any reminder text there. We decided that they should – in fact, we decided that every keyword in the core set should have reminder text. At the same time, though, we decided that none of the recurring keywords needed reminder text in expert-level sets.



The Eighth Edition *Razorfoot Griffin* showcases lots of new reminder text.

Those of you who complain about being burdened with too much reminder have actually been reaping the benefits of our new policy for a couple of years now. We are no longer doing reminder text for recurring keywords in expert-level sets, and we haven't done any since *Apocalypse*. (Look at *Lightning*

[Angel](#). Then look at [Kamahl, Pit Fighter](#). See the difference?) In fact, we're going to drop the reminder text for "[fear](#)" as soon as the *Mirrodin* block rolls around. Once a keyword has been around for a year, we figure most of you have had time to learn it and only new players will need that reminder text after the first year. Thus the *Eighth Edition* creatures with fear will have reminder text, just like the creatures with flying or first strike, but none of that reminder text will appear on *Mirrodin* cards.



Breaking Down Walls

Another obvious question is, "What about Walls?" The creature type Wall is very similar to a keyword and the same reminder text appears on every card with this type. On the one hand our policy seems to imply that we should drop the reminder text for Walls. Players would learn that Walls can't attack when they play with the Core Set cards, and by the time they start buying expert-level sets, they should have that down pat. On the other hand, however, if we did drop that reminder text then there would be nothing at all in the text box to indicate that the creature had an ability (albeit a drawback). Many of our Walls are named "Wall of [Something]," but we didn't want to require the naming team to use that convention on every single one of them. So we were afraid that people could just miss the fact that a creature was a Wall if we didn't have something in the text box pointing it out to them. (I've heard many stories of [Carnivorous Plant](#) attacking back in the day.) We briefly considered changing Wall into a keyword instead of a creature type, but in the end we decided to continue using the Wall reminder text that we already had. Thus that reminder text isn't there to remind people how Walls work – instead it's there just to point out to players that the creature they are looking at is in fact a Wall and doesn't follow the same rules as other creatures.

Similar logic would seem to apply to Legends. Legend is also a creature type that carries along with it certain game-affecting rules, and so it would be nice if there was something in the text box to point this out. However, since the Legend rule doesn't actually do anything until the *second* identical Legend comes into play, we decided that it wasn't worth it to add anything to the text box. The situations where the Legend rule affects game play simply don't come up often enough to justify reminder text. Besides, R&D loves to cram the text boxes of Legends full of other cool stuff.

Anyway, that's the story behind the reminder text that appears on [Two-Headed Dragon](#). Since the *Eighth Edition* Core Set is designed to be the set that new players start out with, every keyword in the set will have reminder text. However, this policy is more or less balanced out by our decision not to put reminder text in other sets for keywords that have been around for more than a year. Enjoy the [Eighth Edition Rollout](#).

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