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Up, Up and Away

Welcome to Flying Week



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic
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Welcome to Flying Week. This week we'll be examining the most basic keyword creature ability. You'll see decks built around fliers, hear about strategy involving fliers and, of course, read an examination of flying design. So, let's not waste any time and get right to it.

So how was flying designed? Well, as legend has it, Richard Garfield was in his study late one night trying to figure out how to improve **Magic** when a bat flew in through the window. Inspired by the bat... Wait a minute, that wasn't Richard Garfield, that was Bruce Wayne. But seriously, I asked Richard how flying came to being and his story was less serious than the Batman one (something about early **Magic** having creatures that "continuously jumped").

Examining the Obvious

So, how do I write a design column about an ability whose origin seems so obvious? My answer came to me from the most unlikely of places: a book on creative thinking called "A Whack on the Side of the Head" (by Dr. Roger von Oech). Okay, I guess that isn't the most unlikely of places and no, I don't make any money off copies being sold. I'm just a huge fan of the creative thought process and "Whack" is the best book ever written on the topic (in my humble opinion).

Anyway, one of the creative exercises in the book is to examine something that is the status quo and try to figure out how it came to be. Why are the three pieces of silverware knife, fork and spoon? Why is red stop, yellow slow down and green go on a stoplight? Why is a manhole cover round? By examining basic concepts, you start to discover the reasons behind the choices. Many of which you might never have thought of if you hadn't directly confronted the topic. Today, I thought I would do that with flying.

Why does **Magic** have flying? To understand this, we need to break the general question down into sub-questions. What need in the game does flying fulfill? Why was flying better than other options available? How has its existence affected the game? All good questions that I will answer in my column today.

What need in the game does flying fulfill?

At its heart, **Magic** is a game about creatures. Yes, there's other types of cards. And yes, there are decks that don't use creatures. But when you look down deep into the core of the game, it's very clear that **Magic** encourages players to use creatures. They are, for example, the most efficient form of damage in the game. In addition, **Magic** is about conflict and nothing captures the flavor better than two creatures battling. And probably most important, creatures tend to be the coolest cards. Yeah a **Fireball** is cool, but it's no dragon.



Magic is about creatures. And creature combat has one gaping flaw. **Magic's** natural state tends to move the game toward stalemate. Each turn, players add more and more creatures to the playing area. Because defense has the advantage over offense (mostly because defense has the ability to react to offense), the game tends gravitate towards a state where attacking is impractical.

This is a problem. The game is about creatures, but the natural state of the game moves you towards a point where no one can afford to attack. Luckily, Richard Garfield is a very smart man. Richard realized that the game needed ways to help break through a stalemate. In fact, all of the keyword creature abilities in *Alpha* (banding, first strike, flying, landwalk, regeneration, and trample) were different ways to help break up stalemates.

The most important solution though rested in evasion. Creatures needed a way to attack even when there were numerous blockers.

The simple answer was to have certain creatures that could only be blocked by a subset of other creatures. That way, when the creature face-off bogged down, there was a second level of creature combat that would allow the game to continue.



Why was flying better than the other options available?

The game fundamentally needed evasion. What attributes of flying made it the best choice? First, and probably most importantly, it's flavorful. This has two completely different functions. One, fantasy is filled with flying creatures. So having the idea of flight intertwined with a mechanic tightens the game creatively. Second, flight is so evocative that it does most of the job of helping players understand what it does. Whenever I'm teaching the mechanic to new players, flying always gets the "I get it" nod as it does exactly what everyone expects it to do.

Flying's second big advantage is that it does its thing without isolating itself from the other cards. Even though fliers reduce interaction on the attack, they have the same utility as any other creature when blocking. The best example of why this is important is the mechanic shadow from *Tempest*. Shadow is just like flying but without the interactive element. Thus, in games with shadow, creatures are segregated into two camps that never come in conflict. This leads to less interactivity and ultimately a less fun play experience.

Flying's third advantage is its simplicity. Flying has a very important void to fill, meaning that it needs to exist on a substantial amount of cards. The simpler the mechanic, the easier it is to spread the keyword far and wide.

How has its existence affected the game?

Design naturally bends around the things that matter. As flying is very fundamental to creature interaction, the game has adapted to its existence. So much so that each color has its relationship with flying worked into the color wheel:

Blue - Blue is the top flying color. Blue has more flying creatures than any other color (both in number and percentages) including numerous fliers at common. Blue is also the color that most often grants flying both with spells and permanents. Finally, blue is the color that tends to reward creatures that have flying.

White - White is number two at flying. While it doesn't have blue's volume of fliers, white tends to get more constructed fliers. This is due to the fact that white is both good at flying and at creatures (especially small ones) while blue is best at flying but worst at creatures.

White always has multiple fliers at common several of which are costed aggressively.

Black - Black is middle of the road on flying. It's number three in terms of number of fliers and it always has at least one common flier.

Red - Red is rather weak at flying. Other than dragons, red's fliers pretty much suck. Red doesn't always have a common flier but when it does it only has one and it's almost always sub-standard. Red has a little anti-flying flavor with cards that particularly hurt flying creatures.

Green - Green is bottom of the barrel when it comes to fliers. It has very few creatures that fly and almost always none at common. And the few fliers green gets are always weak as green has to pay crazy amounts of mana to get a flier. But what green lacks in flying synergy, it makes up for in flying hate. Green is the number one color in hurting fliers. Beside a bevy of spells, green has the ability to block fliers that almost always shows up on at least one common card per set.



As you can see, flying has become engrained into **Magic** design.

To The Air

And that, simply put, is why flying came to be. Too often the splashy mechanics get all the attention, so it's nice to have the opportunity to take a look at one of the most elegant mechanics created for the game.

Join me next week when I celebrate my 100th column (and coincidentally, **MagictheGathering.com's** one hundredth week).

Until then, may you know the joy of flying over the horde for the win.

Mark Rosewater

But wait. The column isn't over yet.

The Mistakes from "Make No Mistake" (aka Last Week's Column)

So did you find all XX mistakes? XX? Didn't I say 20? Hey, I said I was tricky. This article created a large amount of mail pointing out my mistakes (a scary number, by the way, that seemed oblivious to the fact that I put them in on purpose).

Below are all the things I consider to be mistakes. I do make a few points where something was pointed out that I feel wasn't a mistake but falls in the gray area. In addition, I am only counting objective writing mistakes and not subjective writing choices. So, yes I start sentences with conjunctions and end them with prepositions, but I do so on purpose as I try to take a conversational tone in my articles.

With that said, here are the mistakes:

Total Number of Mistakes: 38

Introduction (4 mistakes)

- The attribution on the opening quotation spells Churchill incorrectly (as Churchhill).
- The attribution to Churchill is wrong. Who said it? I did.
- In the first paragraph "going you're way" should be "going your way".
- I claim there are 20 mistakes. That itself is a mistake as there are 38 (well, at least 38 that I meant).

#1 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - *Homelands* (1 mistake)

- *Homelands* (and my full-time employment at Wizards) came out in the fall of '95 not '94.

#2 - Biggest Mistake - Card Development - *Urza's Saga* (4 mistakes)

- The graphic shows a broken beaker which is *Urza's Destiny's* expansion symbol not *Urza's Saga's*.
- Extended with *Urza's Saga* was played at PT Rome not PT Paris.
- Entirety is misspelled as "entirity".
- Henry Stern was not hired after *Urza's Saga*. He was hired years before during the end of the development of the *Mirage block*.

#3 - Biggest Mistake - Mechanics - Too Strong - *Urza's Saga's Free Mechanic* (3 mistakes)

- In "I was try to create a simple replacements", "replacement" should have been singular
- *Tolarian Winds* was not a "free" spell.
- The verb in the phrase "The free mechanic... are spells" should have been singular ("The free mechanic is a series of spells") and not plural.

NOTE #1: The parenthetical phrase in the first sentence was ambiguous: "(Cards that cost a card but essentially not mana)". I was referring to "replacement" and not "cantrip". I don't consider this a mistake but rather poor writing on my part.

NOTE #2: I define the free spells as "spells found in the *Urza's Saga* block that when played untap a number of lands equal to the spell's converted mana cost". Technically, free spells untap lands upon resolution not when played. I don't consider this a mistake as I was talking in the vernacular and not trying to give a strict rules explanation. Had this appeared in "Saturday School" (a rules column) I think this would have been a mistake, but not here.

#4 - Biggest Mistake - Mechanics - Too Weak - *Band with Others* (1 mistake)

- The ability is "bands with others" not "band with others".

#5 - Biggest Mistake - Mechanics - Too Confusing in the Rules - *Licids* (1 mistake)

- *Licids* become a "local enchantment" not a "local effect".

#6 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Overpowered - *Yawgmoth's Will* (3 mistakes)

- The first line has a grammatical mistake: "but that a card as insanely powerful as *Yawgmoth's Will*" should read "but because a card as insanely as *Yawgmoth's Will*".
- The link for Regrowth takes you to *Reclaim* and not Regrowth.
- The last line has the phrase "Something's has". Either the "'s" or the "has" should be there. Not both.

#7 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Underpowered - *Sorrow's Path* (2 mistakes)

- Under the current Oracle wording, *Sorrow's Path* does not deal damage to the opponent if you tap the card with some other spell or effect. (Although note that it used to work that way.) It was pointed out to me that this trick could work if you *Donated* the card to them and them forced them to tap it with *Mindslaver*.
- "I feel its important" should be "I feel that it's important".

#8 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Poorest Fix - *Tinker* (0 mistakes) NO MISTAKES

#9 - Biggest Mistake - Card Design - Rules Problems - *Humility* (1 mistake)

- The robot on *Lost In Space* that says "Danger Will Robinson! Danger!" is not Robby the Robot. He is merely known as Robot. Robby the Robot is from the science fiction movie *Forbidden Planet*.

#10 - Biggest Mistake - Card Mix in Packaging - *Legends* (1 mistake)

- In the last sentence, "its important to remember" should have been "it's important to remember".

#11 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Functionality - *Tempest Circles of Protection* (2 mistakes)

- There are six Circles of Protection in *Tempest* not five. (The graphic showed six but the text said five.)
- The art on *Circle of Protection: Red* is flipped horizontally. I consider this to be the hardest mistake to find in the entire article.

#12 - ??? (1 mistake)

- There's no #12. The numbering skips from 11 to 13.

#13 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Representing Flying - Whipporwill (4 mistakes)

- Whippoorwill is misspelled as Whippoorwill.
- Whippoorwill is also misspelled as Whipporwill.
- In the card pictured in the article, Whippoorwill is misspelled yet again in the title as Whipporwill. (That one made me feel extra sneaky.)
- Whippoorwill is an uncommon, not a rare. (In The Dark, U2's are considered uncommon while U1's are considered rares.)

#14 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Misunderstanding the Card's Title - Hyalopterous Lemure (1 mistake)

- While the [Urza's Mine](#) story is true, the artist was Anson Maddocks and not Mark Tedin.

#15 - Biggest Mistake - Art - Misreading the Card's Title - Alchor's Tomb (2 mistakes)

- The line "One such character" implies that the previous sentence was talking about characters which it wasn't.
- Peter Adkinson is misspelled as Adkison.

#16 - Biggest Mistake - Templating - Dead Ringers (1 mistake)

- [Dead Ringers](#) is from [Apocalypse](#) not [Planehstift](#) thus the [Apocalypse](#) development team is the proper team to reference.

#17 - Biggest Mistake - Line Breaks - Book Burning (0 mistakes) NO MISTAKES

#18 - Biggest Mistake - New Card Frames - The Artifact Border (1 mistake)

- Randy's column was two Friday's ago not three.

#19 - Biggest Mistake - On The Pro Tour - Terry Borer's "Do You Have Any Fast Effects?" (2 mistakes)

- Darwin Kastle is an American not a Canadian.
- Tom Wylie was the head judge at PT Atlanta not Charlie Catino

#20 - Biggest Mistake - My Column - Using Kamahl and Phage (2 mistakes)

- My Phage column was called "Phage Against the Machine" and not "Phage of Enlightenment".
- In the article I refer to the red [Kamahl](#) (Pit Fighter), but the link goes to the green one (Fist of Krosa).

Farewell (1 mistake)

- The sign-off is incorrect. I always sign off with "Until then" not "Until next time". Mark Gottlieb uses "Until next time".

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