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The Baby and the Bathwater



Welcome to Banding Week!

Mark Rosewater · *Making Magic*
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Welcome to Banding Week! Yes, you heard me correctly. This week is dedicated to a keyword mechanic that R&D stopped using over five years ago. Why? Because **MagictheGathering.com** is not just about the present and future, it is also about the past. And as one of my column's ongoing themes is about how the past shapes the future (it's right up there with how the color wheel is the core of **Magic** and why creativity craves structure) this seemed like a great week to talk about why R&D abandons things, such as banding.

Back in July of 2002, I wrote a column entitled "[When Bad Things Happen To Good Cards](#)" where I explained why R&D takes things away such as **Llanowar Elves**. Today's column is a little different. Today I'm going to talk about abandoning things that R&D has no intention of ever bringing back. (And yes, feel free to read that as an implied promise that someday the Elves will return to **Magic**.) And since it's Banding Week, I thought I'd use banding for any relevant examples.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

During Alpha, Richard Garfield was trying to find different ways to help keep the game from bogging down into creature stalemate (for more of this, see "[Up, Up and Away](#)"). One flavorful idea he liked was the idea that multiple creatures could band together into a small team. This way, an enemy choosing to fight any one of the creatures would have to fight the entire team. As Alpha design was very much driven by flavor, Richard combined two different related mechanics (one handling banding offensively and the other handling it defensively) together under a single keyword – banding.

Flash forward to the summer of 1995. Before I came to work for Wizards of the Coast, I did a number of freelance projects for them. One such project was working at the 1995 **Magic** World Championships. As a judge, I had the opportunity to answer a large number of rules questions. The most popular one was essentially "How does banding work?" These were the top players in the world and even they were confused by banding.

Flash forward another year. I was now working in R&D. In fact, the core of the **Magic** development team was new hires (Bill Rose, William Jockusch, Mike Elliott, and myself). As such, we were trying to look at the game with a fresh eye. Now R&D had been aware for a while that the majority of the **Magic** playing populace didn't really understand banding. The first move was to remove banding from the basic set (along with protection and trample). But that didn't prove effective enough. So R&D decided to pull the keyword from the game.

This created a lot of grumbling from the fans of banding. Something that they enjoyed was simply gone. Couldn't a game as complex and varied as **Magic** find room for a slightly more complicated (and flavorful) mechanic? Why did it have to get the ax? While the answer might be a few years late, here are the reasons R&D permanently removes mechanics (and other stuff) from the game?

#1 – It Was An Experiment That Failed

The first reason is a blunt one. Some ideas simply don't work out for one reason or another. Now, that isn't to say we shouldn't have tried them. **Magic** design is very much about experimentation. R&D may think something will work in the real metagame, but we have no way to know until we release it. I'm not talking about power level. I'm talking about if a mechanic is popular, if it's fun to play, if it combines well with other aspects of the game, if it's net effect on **Magic** is positive.

Design as I've said numerous times is not a science. How do the designers know if something works? We put it out for all of you to play and then we watch your reaction. Just as you are discovering the new cards, so are we discovering how they play out in "the real world". And this is 100% the right course of action on our behalf. If we only made mechanics whose reaction we knew, **Magic** would become a very boring game.

But in order for us to experiment, we have to have the ability to remove ideas that we don't feel work. And remember that any mechanic will have its fans. That means whenever we kill an idea, we're making someone unhappy. But we feel the net gain to the gain is worth the small bit of unhappiness from a minority of the players.

Now banding might feel a bit different because it was one of the original keyword mechanics. But it's not. Richard was experimenting with Alpha just as any designer experiments with a current set. The fact that only one keyword from Alpha has been killed is a sign of how strong Richard's original game was.

#2 – It Was Unhealthy For The Game As A Whole

Some mechanics are killed, not because they weren't played or were unpopular but rather because they did something to the environment that R&D felt was unhealthy for the game. The "untap" mechanic from the *Urza's Saga* block, for example, was played in many decks in numerous formats and was very popular among the players but was inherently degenerate (with the sole exception of reactive spells – this is why **Rewind** was allowed in the basic set). It warped the game in a way that made it less interactive and more importantly less fun.



This category is a tough one for players, because it requires thinking about the game long term. And to be honest, this isn't something players are really supposed to think about. **Magic** is meant to be fun. That means that we want you enjoying the present not dwelling on the future. But for R&D, **Magic** is a job (a great job, but a job no less). And it's our job to keep the game long-term as healthy as it can be. To do this, we have to think about what impact each element has on the game.

As such, when we discover problems with the game, we find permanent solutions to keep from repeating these mistakes. Don't worry though. We'll still make plenty of mistakes. We're just trying to make them new mistakes. You see, new mistakes are fun opportunities for exploration. New mistakes are inherent in the designers exploring virgin territory. Old mistakes are just a failure to learn. And if we're not learning, we're simply not doing our job.

#3 – It Was Too Close To Something Else





As R&D experiments, we learn many things. One common lesson is that a new idea is simply too close to an old idea. This isn't to say that both didn't have their merits, but that it doesn't seem prudent to carve out a space long term for the game for both mechanics when they fall so close in design space.

When this happens, we look at both mechanics and figure out the plusses and minuses of each mechanic. A good example of this would be phasing and flickering. Both are means to temporarily remove a permanent from the game with a means to return it. While there are some subtle differences, the two mechanics overlap in the vast amount of their design utility. This meant one had to go.

Phasing's greatest plus is its flavor. It's greatest weakness is its rules. Phasing's rules text, with all its small corner cases, cannot fit on a card. This means that in order to use phasing, new players are forced to a rulebook. Flickering can be written

out on a card. Phasing has numerous inconsistencies (phased cards trigger on "leaves play" effects but not "comes into play" effects), flickering does not. Phasing requires greater memory issues because a card that leaves play does not come back until a future turn. Flickering comes back at the end of the same turn.

In short, phasing is clunkier and more complicated than flickering. As such, R&D has chosen to use flickering and has let phasing go off to the great mechanics graveyard in the sky.

#4 – It Had Too Much Rules Baggage

One of the deep dark secrets of R&D is that some cards in the game don't really work. I'm not at liberty to tell you which ones, but trust me when I say there are cards, from a rules standpoint, that are figuratively stuck together with duct tape and rubber bands. They work well enough for simple game play, but underneath the surface lurks corner case chaos.

We almost always discover these areas of rules murkiness by accident. But when we do, we treat it like you would treat a hole in any structure. You put "CAUTION" tape all around it and you stay away. Thus, some ideas are killed because we know that creating more like them would only make one of these holes bigger.

The one example I can give of this type of card is **Humility**. There are simply too many cards in **Magic** with text that defines what they do to have another card take that text away. This means that the **Humility** mechanic is now off-limits. This isn't to say that designers can't try to find rules-friendly alternatives with a similar flavor, but cards that simply take away other card's text are now verboten.



The lesson here is that while **Magic** is flexible it isn't invulnerable. Even **Magic** has its kryptonite.

Going, Going, Gone

All of these reasons really fall under one big reason. R&D is responsible for **Magic's** health. If for any reason we find that an element of the game makes **Magic** unhealthy (whether its unpopularity, metagame drift, duplication, confusion, or even rules degradation) we'll remove it permanently. In addition, we'll make efforts to find ways to bring benign parts of those unhealthy elements back to the game. In banding's case, R&D has tried very hard to keep white's "my army of little guys can take down your big guy without losing my whole team" flavor, but it has chosen to do it with numerous mechanics rather than use banding.

That's all I got for today, but hopefully I've given you a better idea of how R&D's decisions are reflective of a long-term vision of the game.

Join me next week when I break open yet another mailbag.

Until then, may you enjoy the present without ever having to worry about the future.

Mark Rosewater

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