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Flipping Out



Mark Rosewater · Making Magic Monday, September 20, 2004

Last Saturday, many of you went to the *Champions of Kamigawa* prerelease and opened a card that looked something like this:



Today I'm going to explain what exactly these cards are and how they came into being. So let's start with the former:

What Exactly Are These Cards?

These new cards are what are known as heroes (casually referred to in R&D as the "flip cards"). Now, I could try to explain in my own words what that means or how they work within the rules, but that has proven dangerous in the last few weeks (did I mention that when you use a splice ability the card remains in your hand?), so instead I will refer you to the *Champions of Kamigawa* FAQ:

Flip Cards

The *Champions of Kamigawa* set contains ten "heroes" that are easily recognizable by their unique card frame:

- Akki Lavarunner --> Tok-Tok Volcano Born
- Budoka Gardener --> Dokai, Weaver of Life
- Bushi Tenderfoot --> Kenzo the Hardhearted
- Initiate of Blood --> Goka the Unjust
- Jushi Apprentice --> Tomoya the Revealer
- Kitsune Mystic --> Autumn-Tail, Kitsune Sage
- Nezumi Graverobber --> Nighteyes the Desecrator
- Nezumi Shortfang --> Stabwhisker the Odious
- Orochi Eggwatcher --> Shidako, Broodmistress
- Student of Elements --> Tobita, Master of Winds

You ignore the information on the bottom half of the card until the creature in play "flips" when certain heroic conditions are met. When you flip a hero, you turn it upside down and play with the other half of the card. All of the flipped versions are legendary creatures and have powerful abilities.

Nezumi Graverobber

{1}{B}

Creature -- Rat Rogue

2/1

{1}{B}: Remove target card in an opponent's graveyard from the game. If no cards are in that graveyard, flip Nezumi Graverobber.

+++++

Nighteyes the Desecrator

Legendary Creature -- Rat Wizard

4/2

{4}{B}: Put target creature card in a graveyard into play under your control.

The official rules for flip cards are as follows:

508. Flip Cards

508.1. Flip cards, such as the "heroes" from the Champions of Kamigawa set, have a two-part card frame on a single card. The text that appears right side up on the card defines the card's normal characteristics. Additional alternative characteristics appear upside down on the card. The back of a flip card is the normal _Magic: The Gathering_(R) card back.

508.1a The top half of a flip card contains the card's normal name, text box, type line, power, and toughness. The text box usually contains an ability that causes the permanent to "flip" if certain conditions are met.

508.1b The bottom half of a flip card contains an alternative name, text box, type line, power, and toughness. These characteristics are used only if the permanent is in play and only if the permanent has been flipped.

508.1c A flip card's color, mana cost, expansion symbol, illustration credit, and legal text don't change if the permanent has been flipped. Also, any changes to it by external effects will still apply.

508.2. In every zone other than the in-play zone, and also in the in-play zone before the permanent flips, a flip card has only the normal characteristics of the permanent. Once the flip permanent in the in-play zone has been flipped, the normal name, text box, type line, power, and toughness of the flip permanent don't apply and the alternative versions of those characteristics apply instead.

Example: The "heroes" in the Champions of Kamigawa set are flip cards whose alternative versions are legendary but whose base versions are not. An effect that says "search your library for a legendary card" won't find a hero. An effect that says "legendary creatures get +2/+2" affects a hero in play only if the creature has been flipped.

508.3. If you control a flip permanent, you must ensure that it's clear at all times whether the permanent has flipped or not, both when it's untapped and when it's tapped. Common methods for distinguishing between flipped and unflipped permanents include using coins or dice to mark flipped objects.

508.4. Flipping a permanent is a one-way process. Once a permanent has been flipped, it's impossible to flip the permanent back again. However, if a flipped permanent leaves play, it forgets its previous existence.

* Only the characteristics name, type, subtype, supertype, rules text, abilities, power, and toughness are affected by flipping a permanent. The mana cost and expansion symbol are printed on only one side each but apply to the permanent regardless of whether it has been flipped.

* When you flip a permanent, any counters or other effects remain on it. So if a creature with 1/1 printed on the normal side and 2/3 printed on the flipped side has a +1/+1 counter on it, it changes from a 2/2 to a 3/4.

* Flipping a flip permanent a second time has no effect. To "flip" a permanent means to change it from the top half to the bottom half, not to change it from one side to the other.

* When one of the Champions of Kamigawa flip creatures flips, it becomes legendary. If another legendary permanent with the same name is in play, all of them will be put into their owners' graveyards.

* If you're asked to name a card, you can name either side of a flip card. However, the card only has its normal name unless it's in play and has flipped.

* If you copy a flipped permanent, you get the normal, unflipped version. That copy may flip later if certain conditions are met.

* We recommend that you use some kind of marker (such as bead, coin, or card sleeve) to identify whether or not a flip card has flipped.

Hopefully, this will explain who the heroes are. Now let's get to the next question.

How Did They Come Into Being?

This one is the much more interesting question. Well, at least for a design column. How exactly did the flip cards come into being? The answer is, as usual, a complex one.

Night and Day

As with all mechanics in the *Kamigawa* Block, things began with the story. The design team (Brian Tinsman, Bill Rose, Mike Elliott and Brady Dommermuth) started their design by exploring existing Japanese mythology. For those interested, the team lists the following as their greatest influences:

- the films of Hayao Miyazaki, especially *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*
- the *Onimusha* video-game series
- the *Ninja Scroll* anime
- the *Inu Yasha* anime

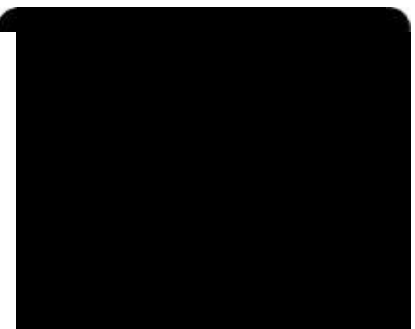
It quickly became apparent that a common theme of Japanese mythology was transformation. To capture the flavor of the environment, the block needed to have one or more mechanics that had a transformational element. In addition, the team realized that a lot of Japanese mythology involved the idea of a spirit world, that all things in the mortal world had a parallel spirit in another world. This too they felt was important to represent. And in good designer tradition, they decided to combine the two together.

The earliest mechanic was dubbed Day/Night. The idea behind it was that the game would have two states, the Day state that represented the mortal world and the Night state that represented the spirit world. Certain creatures would gain a bonus during Day while others would gain one during Night. It was decided that the normal game state would be Day, as Day represented the world as we know it. And then some trigger would turn the game state to Night where all the Night effects would happen.

In simple design terms, this played like threshold (in that it was a global change that affected everything) with a few key differences. One, the trigger to reach the new state would be something other than getting cards in your graveyard. Two, the change would affect all players.

A Hard Day/Night

The design team was easily able to design cards that changed with the transition from Day to Night. The real problem was figuring out how the toggle from Day to Night, and back to Day, would happen. At first, the team considered just having the state naturally go back and forth, one turn Day, one turn Night, etc. . The team was reminded of the homarid mechanic from *Fallen Empires* where the game state kept rotating based on the "state of the tides". After playing a little, they agreed that following a set pattern was often confusing to track and was just too predictable.



This prompted more discussions. The team realized that the key to the transition rested in the Night state. Rather than having triggers that toggled things back and forth, they needed to have a single trigger that made it Night, but only for a certain duration. The game would naturally keep returning to Day.

The first trigger the team tried was discarding land. Whenever a player discarded a land, he or she could turn the environment from Day to Night until the end of the turn. Playtesting showed several flaws with this trigger. First, it became too easy to get to Night meaning that the bonuses would have to be very minor to be balanced. Day/Night wasn't worth doing if there wasn't large enough change to evoke strong flavor. Second, the transition depended upon adding a meta-rule to the game, one that would be meaningless outside of this block. The more the team thought about this, the more they realized that the change had to come from the cards.



Interestingly, it was at this point that the team first came up with the idea of the two-faced card. The team was meeting at a local coffee house when they stumbled upon the idea of a visual way to represent the transformation. Brady came back after that meeting and started drawing different ways the two-faced cards could be represented. While the two-faced layout was a huge gain to Day/Night, it didn't solve the fundamental problem.

A quick side note, during *Unglued 2* design, I created a card called Heads Up/Tailspin. It was an enchantment with two sides. Each upkeep, the card's controller flipped a coin and then flipped up the relevant side. Heads Up was a positive enchantment while Tailspin was negative. I don't believe this card had any influence on this mechanic though as I never had an opportunity to show it to anyone because the set got put on hiatus.



This team's next experiment was to create special lands that when played triggered Night. This led to spells that when played triggered the transformation to Night. In each case, the following turn would return the state of the game to Day. These cards played better than any previous version but had the huge downside that they required the players to have to have the trigger

cards in their deck. The team was stumped. Luckily, they weren't the only ones working on the problem.

Experiment In Progress

During the summer of 2003, Brian Schneider came up with an interesting idea. Often in R&D, design groups are put together to work on specific areas of design (such as color hosers or non-basic lands). What if he put a group together that didn't have a single goal but just tackled odds and ends? He chose to call it the Experimental Design Group. The one other radical thing Brian tried was to create the group out of people that weren't full-time designers. The idea behind this was to keep the group from being led by simply following the more experienced designers. The group would be raw but Brian hoped it could come up with areas that the normal designers hadn't thought of.

The core of the group was Brian Schneider, Aaron Fosythe, Mark Gottlieb, Devin Low and Brian Tinsman. (Other R&D members such as Paul Barclay and Henry Stern would join meetings from time to time.) Their first project: tackle the Day/Night mechanic.

The team spent many hours trying every possible way to trigger the game state. And nothing worked. Each version would bring its own problems. Either the game was too swifty, not allowing us to create the kind of transformations we wanted, or the game state was so tenuous that it made the player bend over backwards to play Day/Night. After weeks of playtesting, the team deemed the mechanic undoable.

Don't Act So Flip

This is the part where I join the story. As I explained above, I had played around with the idea of a flip card during *Unglued 2*, so I was entertained by trying to make the idea work in "real" **Magic**. After looking at the work of the Experimental Design Team, I agreed that the Day/Night transformation seemed problematic. I stressed that the Day/Night mechanic wasn't married to the flip cards. And the flip cards were the coolest part of the design. In addition, the two elements the design team wanted, a feeling of transformation and the idea of having parallel mortals and spirits, could still be done with the flip cards. What would be lost is the idea of the entire world transforming. And the story from the creative side was already moving in a different direction.

The flip cards were the coolest part of the design.

My idea was to have flip cards that each had their own individual flip trigger built into their card. Each flipper would flip themselves and not have any impact on the other flippers. To get a more global feeling, I assigned each color its own flip trigger. This way, if you were playing a mono-colored deck and you triggered the condition, all your flippers of the proper color would all flip at once.

The blue creatures, for example, flipped whenever you played a spell. The green creatures flipped when you played a land. The red creatures flipped whenever they dealt damage to an opponent. And black creatures flipped whenever a creature was put into the graveyard. (There was no white as I made two two-color decks to play against each other for demo purposes.) The idea behind mixing up the triggers was that each color would have a different feel. Blue and black, for instance, had flips that could happen on the opponent's turn. Blue and green had flips that their opponent had no control over. Red, and to a lesser extent, black had flips that we could cost more aggressively.

My one other contribution was the idea of using the term "flip" as part of the template. Because space was so valuable (both sides had its own text box), I suggested just saying that the cards flipped. I figured it would save a lot of space and be pretty intuitive.

Playtesting showed that my flip-triggers created interesting game decisions but didn't solve the complication problem. It was just too confusing remembering which state each creature was in. If this were a tag team wrestling match, this would be the part where I tag back to the Experimental Design Team.

"I'm Only Going One Way"

While all this was going on, Randy Buehler, as Director of R&D Magic, was keeping his eye on *Earth* design. Randy understood that the flip cards had great potential, but he also realized that

we hadn't put our finger on it yet. Randy was the one most focusing on removing the confusion from the transformation. Day/Night had done a good job of making it easy to remember what state the creatures were in, but everyone involved realized that it wasn't working.

Randy liked the idea of cards having their own trigger but wanted to find a way to do such without making the tracking of the changes too overwhelming. The Experimental Design Team was given the puzzle. In design, one of the maxims is "Less Is More" meaning that design strives to accomplish as much as it can with as little as it can. As designers add complexity to a card, they more often than not make it less fun to play. This idea led to a very important breakthrough. Why did the creatures have to be able to change back and forth? How about a one-way transformation?

The one-way transformation solved most of Randy's confusion issues. Players didn't have to remember which state the creature was in, simply whether or not the creature had transformed. But one problem still remained. The cards needed some oomph. There was something missing.

King Richard

One of the interesting things about design is how different facets intersect. The *Champions of Kamigawa* design team realized early in design that legends were a good fit for the set both flavor-wise and mechanically. (And as Aaron described in his column two weeks ago, "[Legendary Rules Changes](#)", R&D also realized it was a perfect time to revamp the legend mechanic.) Once legends, or should I say legendary creatures, became part of the block's theme, all the designers started thinking about how to add some new wrinkles to the age old mechanic.

I, for example, took the opportunity to design some cards that played into the theme in new ways. [Brothers Yamazaki](#) allowed you to have two of the same legendary creatures in play at the same time. [Isamaru, Hound of Konda](#) explored the design space of cheap legendary creatures that the new legend rule opened up. (In addition, it allowed me to demonstrate that it was possible to make a vanilla legend that would excite some players.)

Meanwhile, the oldest **Magic** designer of all (in terms of how many years he'd been designing – both Bill Rose and Mike Elliott are older than Richard), Richard Garfield, started thinking about cool things you could do with legendary creatures. One day, he casually mentioned to Randy the idea of creatures that could gain legendary status by achieving some feat. Instantly, Randy realized we had the final piece. The gaining of legendary status explained the one-way transformation and added great flavor to the flip cards.

And that, my faithful readers, is how the heroes came to be.

Join me next week when I see if I can bring some cards together.

Until then, may you know the joy of becoming a legend.

Mark Rosewater



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