

Honey, I Shrunk the Blue Cards Search

Aaron Forsythe
Friday, May 27, 2005

When I started doing design and development work here in R&D, one of the first documents I was told to peruse was the updated “color pie” summary, an 11-page list of abilities, mechanics, and flavor concepts broken down by color. Many abilities show up in multiple colors, with one called out as the “main color” for that particular word or phrase.

I was a little worried that this thing was going to be the equivalent of the Ten Commandments as far as making **Magic** cards was concerned. Meaning, since the pie document says local lockdown is blue (i.e. Dehydration), that we can't make cards in other colors that have a local lockdown feel. What I have learned in the years since is that the pie document was merely a snapshot of where things were at that particular point in time. Mark Rosewater and former employee Tyler Bielman put a lot of thought into that document, and everything they sketched out made sense at the time. But we as a group have always had the freedom to make continual quality improvements, and already the document is a little out of date.

An Ability Without a Home

One ability that was not listed anywhere in the document is what we most commonly refer to as “Shrink,” named after a green common from Homelands.

This ability—reducing a creature's power only—has showed up in many places over the years. During **Magic's** early years, it was something that showed up primarily on artifacts:

- Staff of Zegon;
- Weakstone;
- Bone Flute;
- and later, Watchdog.

In the middle years, it was shifted to green as a different take on green's ability to Fog:

- Pradesh Gypsies;
- Shrink;
- Fyndhorn Pollen;
- Elven Palisade;
- Briar Patch,
- Krosan Constrictor.

The ability also showed up in black—the color good at giving “minuses”—and that is where it has lived most recently:

- Ghosts of the Damned;
- Hell Swarm;
- Marsh Gas;
- Catacomb Dragon;
- Torment;
- Despondency;
- Greel's Caress;
- Mourning;
- Ana Disciple and Dega Disciple;
- Cabal Trainee.



Just to confuse the issue, it has also showed up on a couple of white cards:

- Ivory Charm;
- and Sword Dancer.

As you can see, we haven't been using the ability that much; the last new card designed that could do it was in *Judgment*, which was about six sets ago. With Sword Dancer in *Eighth Edition* and a green card with the ability printed as late as the *Torment* set, it should be obvious that the ability had no real home.

Finding It a Place to Live

During early design for the *Ravnica: City of Guilds* set, I made a pair of cards that were mirrors of one another—the black one gave target creature $-0/-X$, and the green one gave target creature $-X/-0$. At some point one of my coworkers made the comment that “both of those abilities are black.” Hmm. I suppose he was right.



That got me to thinking... why was Shrink black? I mean, sure, black is the best color at giving things minuses, but why would it ever want to lower a creature's power when it could just lower its toughness—and kill it—instead?

In my mind black shouldn't have the Shrink ability because it could do *better* than Shrink. Why give a creature $-2/-0$ when you could just give it $-2/-2$ instead for about the same cost? (Compare Despondency and Echoing Decay, for example.)

I started looking at how we handled giving creatures “pluses” for inspiration. Green—the best plus color—can give creatures $+X/+X$ pretty easily. White gets a little slice of that, generally by giving very small bonuses, like $+1/+1$. White also gets one half of that ability—the $+0/+X$ toughness bonus. And red is now the “Howl from Beyond” color, and can give $+X/+0$.

So the three permutations of “+X” were divvied up across three colors, yet the three permutations of “-X” were all in one color. I made it my mission to get that changed. It was clear that $-X/-X$ was going to stay black. Black could also keep $-0/-X$ for two reasons—one, it doesn't play that much differently than $-X/-X$; and two, we don't really ever use it (check out Spirit Shackle, Essence Flare, Takklemaggot, and Ironclaw Curse for some very old-school cards that just give minuses to toughness). So the idea was to put Shrink somewhere else.

The Tuesday Meeting

Each Tuesday from 1:30 to 3:00, all the R&D people that work on **Magic** convene in a big conference room upstairs to talk about anything and everything that has come up over the last week. We'll discuss everything from how the Prereleases went to the progress of upcoming sets in design to how we want certain abilities to be worded. Any pending changes to the color pie are also discussed in that meeting.

I raised the point that Shrink should get a home outside of black, and people generally agreed with me. There was much discussion about where it should go, however.

White was ruled out, thankfully, because it can simulate “Shrink” via damage prevention. If our 3/3 creatures collide and I prevent three damage to mine, I essentially gave yours $-3/-0$. Red was ruled out quickly as well because red doesn't make creatures lose power or deal less damage—in fact, that's the opposite of red's philosophy.

It came down to green versus blue, and I honestly expected green to win. But it was pointed out that green is very much about growth—not shrinking—and that it has recently lost the ability to “Fog,” which removes a lot of the flavor justification for minuses to power in that color.

Blue started to win out when it was pointed out that blue lacked any real combat tricks, and that the flavor for blue reducing power could easily be conceived as the target getting confused, slowed, or shapeshifted into something less dangerous. And just like that, Shrink was put into blue.

Immediate Implementation

I went back and altered my *Ravnica* cards (neither of which actually made it out of design), and I expected that set to be the first one to debut Shrink in blue. But lo and behold the *Saviors of Kamigawa* development team had some holes for blue cards, and they implemented the change right away.



Blue now has its combat trick, and it is a potent one. The Envoy is a near-bomb in limited, and the Cage could end up showing up in Constructed.

So for those of you that were confused by seeing that ability in blue cards, there's your explanation. Be assured that you'll be seeing more blue cards like these in the future.

The Other Minuses

So what of the other power and toughness altering combinations? For starters, cards that give -X/-Y (such a Weakness, which gives -2/-1) will remain black. The “Flowstone ability”—+X/-X—floats between black and red and might even show up in green from time to time. The reverse ability—X/+X—is used sparingly (see Pemmin's Aura and Tyrranax for recent examples) and isn't necessarily nailed down anywhere.

Last Week's Poll:

Now that you've had several months to play with the “new Legend rule,” how do you like it?		
Better than the old one.	11814	77.0%
The same/no opinion.	2217	14.5%
Worse than the old one.	1309	8.5%
Total	15340	100.0%

This Week's Poll:

Which of the *Kamigawa* block prerelease tournaments did you attend?

- None
- Champions* only
- Betrayers* only
- Saviors* only
- Champions* and *Betrayers*
- Champions* and *Saviors*
- Betrayers* and *Saviors*
- All three

Submit

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

