

Ninth Time's a Charm: Part 1 Search

Aaron Forsythe
Friday, August 05, 2005

Hey, hey! *Ninth Edition* is on the shelves and that makes me *happy*! The set was designed by Brian Schneider and myself, and developed by the two of us plus Matt Place, Elaine Chase, and Henry Stern. Whenever I look through the set I smile; I can remember the discussions around just about every card we included, and the set really reflects a lot of my own personal attitudes towards **Magic**—a great respect and love for the past, a dash of unpredictability, and an understanding of the difficulties that new players face when they first try our great game.

I have a lot of things I want to touch on regarding this set, and the best way I could come up with was to ask myself a series of questions. This week's article—the first half—will cover what we did to make *Ninth Edition* better for new players, and two weeks from now I'll finish up by discussing what we did to improve the set for enfranchised players.

Enjoy!

What guidelines were you given when making *Ninth*?

Not many. It had to be 350 cards, it had to contain all of the stuff generated by "Selecting *Ninth Edition*," and it had to have all ten pain lands (I talked about that two weeks ago). Randy Buehler, who had worked a lot on *Eighth Edition*, suggested that we continue to improve on the nostalgic elements that *Eighth* focused on, and that we shouldn't be afraid to change a lot of cards if we wanted to. Of course, we had to make sure it was better as a teaching tool than the Core Sets that came before it as well.

Brian, as **Magic's** lead developer, made it clear that the overall constructed power-level of *Ninth* should be in the same ballpark as *Eighth*, although we agreed that the pain lands wouldn't count towards that power-level. More on that in the next installment.

The thing I like best about how Core Sets have been handled recently (*Eighth* and *Ninth* specifically) is that the overall goal doesn't seem to be the slow creation of the perfect 350 cards that we would never have to touch again. Instead, change is (and should be) expected. If two cards would both serve the same role, consider swapping one for the other between Core Sets. If an older card would make players happier than a newer, blander card, by all means use the old one.

That element of change helped shape one of my own personal guidelines regarding the set—introduce a substantial number of cards that have never appeared (a) in the current card frame and/or (b) on **Magic Online**. Hello, Zodiac Monkey! Again, more on this topic in the second half.

What did you do to improve *Ninth* as a teaching tool?

The one thing that has been talked about the most is the "Aura" change, which I call the Gottlieb Aura Initiative. While it was met with some skepticism initially here in R&D, it was absolutely the right call. There are a lot of things "wrong" with **Magic** that have been there since the beginning, and we're often hesitant to change them because, even though the changes would make **Magic** a better game down the line, we don't want to rock the boat of our existing player base too much. Lately we've gotten better at making changes without making waves (legend rule change, defender change, and so on), so when Mark proposed what looked like an elegant fix to a real set of problems, I personally felt like the change was a no-brainer. Now all cards have the same information on their type line and, more importantly, players' introduction to creature enchantments will include the concept that they are targeted spells.

One mistake R&D made in the past regarding the Core Set's teaching capabilities was the removal of the trample and protection keywords. Prior to *Sixth Edition*, those mechanics were deemed unusable

because they were too complicated for new players. Of course, this decision was made prior to the introduction of reminder text on *all* keywords in Core Sets in *Eighth Edition*. And, because trample and protection were still being used in expert-level sets—with no reminder text—new players were still being baffled by them, just later on in their play experience. What I believe to be the correct answer is to both *expose* new players to the mechanics and at the same time *explain* what they do as simply as possible.

Of course, this plan hinges on our editors' ability to write good reminder text for these abilities, and they did an excellent job.

Do those wordings cover all the possible corner-cases involving those mechanics? No. They don't have to. What they do is give new players the information they need to play, and when they run into a situation they can't work through themselves, I hope they'll talk to a friend, store owner, judge, Customer Service, or Saturday School.

Can there be such a thing as "too many" keywords in the Core Set? I imagine so, but that number can be a lot higher now that everything has reminder text, as there is no real need to memorize what any of the keywords mean right away.

Why does "regenerate" have reminder text now?

That was my own personal crusade. My previous job as editor of this very website gave me a unique perspective into the minds' of our players. And part of what I learned was that lots and lots of people don't understand how regeneration works. Some think regeneration lets you put long-dead creatures back into play. Some think you can regenerate from counterspells. From sacrificing. From remove from game. Many don't realize that successful regeneration taps the creature. Many more don't know it removes it from combat. And there is little agreement on what happens to counters and enchantments on a creature that is regenerated.

My realization was, "How could they possibly know?" The word "regenerate" has been tossed onto cards for years as if it was one of the most simple concepts in the game, along the lines of "attack" and "graveyard." The truth is that the mechanic is so complicated and wonky that we would never greenlight it today, but it has been grandfathered into the fabric of the game, and it does fill a nice niche. (I know, some of you are shouting, "Read the rulebook!" The beauty of this game is that the rules are supposed to be *on the cards*. Everything on a card that isn't easily understood could be considered a mistake on our part.) I shopped emails from readers around to other members of R&D just to illustrate how poorly understood regeneration was, and eventually I convinced enough people that something had to be done. If we couldn't come up with clear enough reminder text, the ability would be removed from the Core Set!

Editing presented us with several options, some long and some short, and the one we settled on was:

That sums it up well. Regeneration was saved!

My initial impression on our three new reminder texts (regeneration, trample, and protection) is that they are going to work fantastically well. How do I know? I've read message board posts—many from so-called **Magic** veterans—regarding the new reminder text along the lines of, "Has regeneration always worked that way?" and "When did they change the trample rules?" Perfect. Absolutely perfect!

Drudge Skeletons has reminder text, ok, so why is it uncommon now?

Because it is TOO POWERFUL! But seriously, folks...

Even though I think the Core Set can handle a decent number of keywords as a whole, we want to minimize which of them appear on commons. While we want new players to experience and learn all of what **Magic** has to offer, we can do our part to control the pace.

Flying, landwalk, enchant [blank], haste, fear, first strike, and vigilance seem like plenty to have appear at common. Now that regeneration has been singled out as the complicated beast that it is, it gets to appear only at uncommon and rare, along with the other newcomers trample and equip. As protection is only on a single card, it is only at rare in this set, although I could imagine it appearing at uncommon in future Core Sets.

Yes, Drudge Skeletons was common for over a decade (as was the green Aura Regeneration), but now that their mechanic is "uncommon-only," they've been "promoted." We could have tried to replace them with a more "uncommon-feeling" regeneration card, but seeing as they will be some players' first glimpse of the mechanic, we wanted to use the simplest, most iconic cards possible.

Don't worry—all of these keywords will still be used on commons in expert-level sets.

Were there any other things deemed too "complex" for common?

Yes, several. Cards that have variables like "X" or "*" do not appear at common. We didn't like the idea of having a modal spell at common, so we created Mending Hands as a replacement for Healing Salve.

The biggest change we made for this set was removing all instances of the word "sacrifice" from common. It wasn't a huge effort; we just had to pull Coastal Hornclaw and Shock Troops, and promote new cards like Nantuko Husk and Cruel Edict to uncommon. We essentially lumped "sacrifice" in with trample and regenerate as words we didn't want to expose new players to immediately. Sacrifice might even be more complicated than the others because there is no reminder text for it. We imagine that most people will understand what it means just from reading the cards, but it doesn't hurt to hold back on it a little.

There are quite a few other things in the set that, like protection, only appear at rare, just to give new players a taste of the game's depth. They include: tokens (Rukh Egg, Verdant Force), counters (Sengir Vampire), reference to the upkeep step (Battle of Wits, Phyrexian Arena, and more), and removing cards from the game (Jester's Cap).

Speaking of keywords, where are the defenders?

Good question, Aaron. Walls have always been a part of the Core Set, and defender is a keyword that we are going to use in just about every set from here on out, so we definitely want new players to be comfortable with it. We were just caught with our pants down for this particular edition.

Ninth was being put together as the whole "Defender vs. Wall" debate was in full swing. We weren't really sure which way the argument was going to end up... Are Walls taboo from now on? Would Wall of Air be allowable if we gave it the defender ability? So we tried to build the set without them just to be safe. And you know what? In my opinion you hardly miss them. We managed to give "Wall-like" creatures to the colors that need them, like Standing Troops, Skyhunter Prowler, and Kami of Old Stone in white and Dream Prowler, Horned Turtle, and Sea Monster in blue. Dancing Scimitar also does a wonderful impression of a Wall most of the time.

We hope that by the time *Tenth Edition* comes out we will have made enough defenders in expert-level sets that we can use in the Core Set, or we may actually pick out a few old Walls that make some amount of sense creatively and reincorporate those. "Defender" will be a staple Core Set keyword in the future for sure.

There are an awful lot of vanilla creatures in this set...

Oh yes. 1/1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4, 1/7, 2/1, 2/2, 2/3, 2/4, 3/2, 3/3, 4/2, 4/3, 5/4, 6/4, 7/6, plus 6/6 and 7/7 in the Core Game. And that's not counting those with a single keyword like "flying."

One of the best ways to teach people the differences between the colors is *with no words at all*. Line up two similarly-sized or -costed vanillas from different colors and you'll start to learn something.

Grizzly Bears vs. Scathe Zombies. Balduvian Barbarians vs. Trained Armodon. Savannah Lions vs. Goblin Piker. Giant Cockroach vs. Kami of Old Stone. That's a lot of stuff from essentially nothing! My favorite lesson that players get to learn (and then later un-learn... a wonderful rite of passage) is that *bigger is better*! You think your Craw Wurm is awesome? Check out my Scaled Wurm! We've all been there. As a bonus, most of these cards play well and really exemplify what the color is trying to do. (Fugitive Wizard, you are excused.)

What is the philosophy regarding color hosers in this set?

Ugh. The color hoser issue really bridges the gap between making the set a teaching tool and making it a tool for experienced players to use in Standard. Color hosers really help to emphasize which colors are allies and which are enemies, and those relationships can really draw new players into the world. To make those relationships as evident as we could, we made all the hosers into uncommon "pairs" that players will quickly recognize as being related: Flashfires and Boiling Seas, Slay and Execute, and so on.

This condensing process also allowed us to get rid of three of the five Circles of Protection in white. While all the CoPs did help to define white as the defensive color, they really muddled the picture of white's allies and enemies. And they ate up valuable card slots that the other colors were occupying with more creatures and spells. We still managed to give white more anti-color stuff than the other colors by including Paladin en-Vec and the more generic Story Circle (and by cutting Eastern and Western Paladin from black, which for some reason had twice as many hosers as the other colors in *Eighth Edition*).

Of course, hosers need to occupy specific "sweet spots" in constructed, where they are not too devastating (like Compost and Karma), yet not too weak (like Anaconda, unfortunately). In *Seventh* and *Eighth Editions* we erred on the side of too strong. This time I believe we erred on the other side (only Flashfires and Circle of Protection: Red have seen any reasonable amount of play recently of the ten hosers in the set). We keep promising ourselves that we'll invent "the perfect hoser pairs" someday. Until then, maybe Withering Gaze will save you.

Were all the creature type changes made with new players in mind?

Partly. We did want to change them into things that enfranchised players could accept, but we wanted to create a sense of continuity throughout the game. So when a player (new or otherwise) sees a Leonin in *Mirrodin*, it's a Cat, and when he sees Savannah Lions or King Cheetah in the Core Set, they're Cats, too—not Lions and Cheetahs. We want the world to make sense (or as much sense as it can, given that it's a modular card game). Similarly, everyone and their mother kind of expects that Elvish Champion would be an Elf—that's just another in the long line of grandfathered mistakes that we're finally willing to fix. Changes like these might annoy some older players, but they weren't made lightly, and we as a rule try to manage the game as if we expect it to be around forever, in which case twelve years of Savannah Lions being a Lion and Goblin King being a Lord will seem like a drop in the bucket.

That's all for this installment... tune in two weeks from now as I dive into what we did to make this set a better experience for long-time **Magic** players.

Last Time's Poll:

Are there cards that you absolutely cannot stand losing to?		
Yes	7817	74.1%
No	2739	25.9%
Total	10556	100.0%

Wow, did I get a lot of responses to this one in my Inbox and on the boards. There's enough fuel for at least one whole article at some point. It is interesting to note that the top two perpetrators from *Eighth Edition* were given the axe for *Ninth* for just such reasons—they had worn out their welcome.

This Week's Poll:

Is Mark Gottlieb *really* the new Magic Rules Manager? Yes No I'm not sure

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

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

