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Ask Wizards - January, 2007

Ask Wizards
Monday, January 1, 2007

Do you have a question about **Magic: The Gathering** or *Wizards of the Coast*? Send it, along with your name and location, to us via this [email form](#). We'll post a new question and answer each day.

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January 31, 2007

Q: Shivan Meteor...13 damage... ..why?
--Jason Huntsville, TX, USA

A: From **Devin Low**, Planar Chaos Lead Developer:

Good question, Jason. 3 answers:

1) A suspend burn spell was killed in Time Spiral, and the Planar Chaos developers had to fill a hole to match the art you know now as Shivan Meteor. We had people who work in the department design cards, and the PLC development team picked the one that seemed coolest and matched the art best. In this case, the art is an absurdly enormous fireball just demolishing this tiny terrified dude, like blasting him out of his mind.

13 seems pretty appropriate for the sheer size of this devastating blast. Another submission for the hole to match the art that we really liked was "3RRR, Sorcery. Shivan Meteor does 64399753 damage to target Ice Fisherman."

2) 13 is a hilarious amount of damage to deal. 13!!

3) What's the biggest creature in the block you could possibly want to kill with a burn spell? Yup, take it, Krosan Cloudscraeper! Time to die.

January 30, 2007

Q: Q: I've noticed that a lot of times, Alpha and Beta are not italicized in writing as other regular sets such as Time Spiral. Why are these two particularly different?
--Katherine Fremont, CA

A: From **Del Laugel**, Senior **Magic** Editor:

Kathrine,

The answer to your question can be found in the **Magic** Style Guide, a rather bulky document maintained by **Magic** lead editors over the years. Here's an excerpt from the "Product Names" section:

Product names with release dates

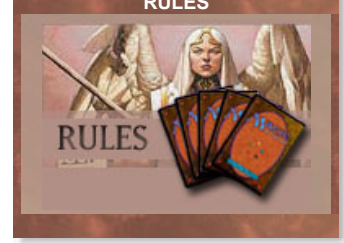
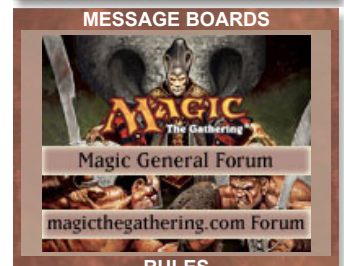
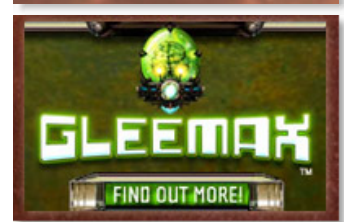
Core sets (A.K.A. advanced-level sets)
 Limited Edition, includes Alpha (8/1993) and Beta (10/1993)
 Unlimited Edition (12/1993)
 Revised Edition (4/1994)
 Fourth Edition (4/1995)
 Fifth Edition (3/1997)
 Sixth Edition (4/1999), known as *Classic* (Sixth Edition) at its release
 Seventh Edition (4/2001)
 Eighth Edition (7/2003)
 Ninth Edition (7/2005)
 Tenth Edition (7/2007)

That shows that Alpha and Beta aren't italicized, but it doesn't explain why. For more information, we need to turn to the "Treatment of Specific Terms" section:

Alpha Not italicized because it was never a product sold under that name. Note that Alpha is considered a set, not an edition.

Beta Not italicized because it was never a product sold under that name. Note that Beta is considered a set, not an edition.

Limited Edition Refers to the Alpha and Beta sets together; not italicized because it was never a product sold under that name.



And there's the problem. *Unlimited Edition* was the first set name that actually appeared on packaging. Alpha and Beta started as unofficial terms but were later adopted into the language of the game.

January 29, 2007



Q: Q: Of the 12 storm cards in *Scourge*, 4 of them (*Mind's Desire*, *Brain Freeze*, *Tendrils of Agony*, and *Dragonstorm*) continue to enable dominant and degenerate decks across all tournament formats. In *Time Spiral*, there are 6 storm cards, and 4 of them (*Dragonstorm*, *Empty the Warrens*, *Grapeshot*, and *Ignite Memories*) have begun to appear as kill cards in Standard combo decks. One might conclude from this that storm is an inherently broken mechanic. Do you regret printing the storm mechanic? Or since storm was just reprinted in *Time Spiral*, perhaps the more appropriate question is: Why don't you?

--Dan
Boston, MA

A: From Aaron Forsythe, Magic Head Developer:

Dan,

Storm is a very dangerous mechanic, and the first batch of storm cards released in *Scourge* were a bit too powerful. I do think the mechanic can be fun and interesting if you choose the right effects, however. No one complains about *Sprouting Vines* or *Reaping the Graves* or even *Wing Shards*. To me, storm cards are at their best when they are interesting at two or three copies and not just "wait until this wins the game."

We tried to put most of the *Time Spiral* storm cards in just that spot. *Dragonstorm* is a bit better than we had hoped, mainly because of deckbuilding innovations that made the deck very resilient versus permission. The other cards are showing up a little bit here and there, but that's ideal in my eyes. You *can* build a deck that abuses *Ignite Memories*, but it is in no way the best deck around. I do think combo has a place in the game and should occasionally be a top-tier strategy. If people can play somewhere between 10 and infinite spells in a turn, I think winning the game is reasonable regardless of what card actually seals the deal, whether *Fireball*, *Goblin Bombardment*, or any of the storm cards we've printed.

January 26, 2007



Q: Q: What's the deal with *Fylgja*? The printed card has a mana cost of {W}, and the mana symbol on the card is the "old" white mana symbol even though all the other cards in the *Ice Age* set feature the "modern" white mana symbol. Further, in Gatherer (as of 1/4/07), the *Fylgja* image shows up with a mana cost of {1}{W}{W} (using "modern" mana symbols), even though the clearly correct casting cost of {W} is displayed in the Oracle and Printed Text info boxes to the right! What is the story behind these very weird errors?

--Dave
Urbana, IL

A: From Kelly Digges, Magic Editor:

Dave,

Ideally a question like this would be answered by someone who was there, but in this case the events in question took place over a decade ago, and nobody who was there is available. Senior **Magic** Editor Del Laugel hooked me up with some truly ancient email messages and card files, and I took these primary sources and my two semesters as a history major and set to work piecing together what happened.

I quickly discovered that *Fylgja* was *not* the only card in *Ice Age* to be printed with the "old" white mana symbol; *Prismatic Ward* shares that honor. However, all electronic images, even the printed images in the old **Magic** Encyclopedias show them with the new mana costs. This is despite the fact that, according to sources that provide collectors' info, neither of these cards were ever physically printed with the new mana symbol. And until recently (we'll get there), every image of *Fylgja* bore the wrong cost, again despite the fact that no physical card was ever printed that way. So how did this happen? Settle in, kids, 'cause I am about to tell you more about *Fylgja* than you ever wanted to know.

According to a spreadsheet dated January 1, 1995, eleven *Ice Age* cards were selected for magazine preview cards. In those days, magazine previews were physical promo cards that had to be typeset before the rest of the set in order to get to the magazines. There are only two white cards on the list of previews: *Fylgja* and *Prismatic Ward*.

According to an email message dated January 30, 1995, the magazine previews couldn't be typeset with the new white mana symbol (the reasons are unclear; perhaps it simply wasn't ready yet). The "unhappy decision" was made print *Fylgja* and *Prismatic Ward* in the set with the old mana symbols. Having all the printed copies of a given card match was viewed as more important than consistency within the set.

Okay, so that explains the old mana symbols, but how did the electronic images get the new mana symbols? And how did *Fylgja* wind up with the wrong mana cost?

Though most of the design card files are grouped together in large documents, *Fylgja* appears alone in an undated card file at a cost of 1WW, which seems to have been its original mana cost. Perhaps it was left out of a larger file?

An email message dated January 3, 1995 contains comments on a large number of *Ice Age* cards, and the entry for *Fylgja* reads: "Weren't we chopping the casting cost of this one?" It would seem they did just that: *Fylgja* was printed at a cost of *. And there the story might have ended....

When the **Magic** Encyclopedia was put together, however, the original printer files were either not available or not usable, and the cards were retypeset from card files and printed straight to the Encyclopedia working file. Not only did this mean that **Fylgja** and **Prismatic Ward** wound up in the Encyclopedia with the new mana symbols, but apparently the typesetters had the wrong **Fylgja** file - perhaps the file I have with only **Fylgja** in it? - with the original mana cost.

When Gatherer was programmed, the Encyclopedia was the best compendium of card images available, and it was reasonably (and necessarily) assumed that the Encyclopedia card images were correct. The mana symbol isn't really distinguishable at that resolution (though it's easy to see in the Encyclopedia itself), but the wrong mana cost on **Fylgja** has always been quite evident to the tiny subset of people who actually look up **Fylgja** on Gatherer. And that's where things stood for many years...

But this bizarre story has a happy ending! Overhearing Del and me discussing this question, editor Mike Mikaelian created a new image of **Fylgja** with the correct mana cost by seamlessly pasting in the upper right corner of an *Ice Age* card that costs **★**. Granted, it's the new mana symbol rather than the old, but at that resolution it's pretty hard to tell. I sent that image to the Gatherer team, and they plugged it in.

And that's the story of how, after more than a decade with the wrong mana cost everywhere but on the actual card, **Fylgja** finally got fixed.

January 25, 2007



Q: A friend of mine noticed some time ago that, while most angels are in white (and black), in fact every color is represented among this creature type, except Green. While I figured that this probably has to do with green being the color of nature and earth, and angels are not notoriously known for their connection to earthly matters, my friend maintains that a (partly) green Angel wouldn't be an impossibility. So the question is, are green Angels outlawed by definition or is there yet hope?

--Peter

Leiden, The Netherlands

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

Peter,

I count only six angels without white mana in their costs, Peter: **Copper-Leaf Angel**, **Platinum Angel**, **Akroma, Angel of Fury** (because *Planar Chaos* gets to bend the rules), and three black-aligned angels (because we can't resist doing the occasional "fallen" angel). Is a mono-green angel out of the question? Probably. But a multicolored angel with both white and green in its mana cost? Maybe someday. Part of the problem is that there just aren't very many big flyers with green in their costs. And when they do turn up, they're often in cycles of legendary dragons! .

January 24, 2007



Q: What exactly went into the decision to exclude the phasing mechanic from the *Time Spiral* block? It's a mechanic which has obvious time implications and was, if I recall, the favorite style of **Magic** of a young upstart named Teferi back in the good ol' days of the *Mirage* block. Personally, I just think so many cool ideas and card synergy could be created by introducing phasing to a set that contains cards that focus on time, for instance the lockdown of the untap step that **Brine Elemental** can create. Maybe I'm just living in the past, but I know Teferi would never forget his!

--Ryan

Boston, MA

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

Ryan,

You are correct that the phasing mechanic would fit in perfectly in *Time Spiral* from a flavor perspective. The problem is that R&D isn't very fond of the mechanic. It is lengthy to write out (and under modern guidelines we'd have to write it out on every card) and somewhat non-intuitive, and it doesn't have enough play value, in our opinion, to be worth it. Modern-day flickering technology mimics are favorite aspect of phasing, the ability to remove things from the game temporarily as a means of protecting them. I explained this all to Teferi, and while he was a little crushed, he understood.

January 23, 2007



Q: What are the differences between the releases of sets in the United States and foreign countries? Are prereleases held? Are the release dates the same?

--Sy

Atlanta, GA

A: From **Scott Larabee**, DCI Program Manager:

Each country has its own method of dealing with the release of new sets. Some run Prereleases ahead of the release date, some run Release events on the weekend the product is released, and some countries do both. Barring national holidays and such, releases are typically on the same day worldwide.

January 22, 2007



Q: In reading the *Planar Chaos* preview by Mark Rosewater, I noticed a slightly recurring trend. It seems that

every time MaRo proposes a new set, he is met by opposition rather than acceptance. Now, I've been playing **Magic** seriously since *Kamigawa*, and I have to say, *Ravnica* and *Time Spiral* have absolutely blown me away. Shouldn't the Design team specialists listen to Mark sooner, rather than later?

--Luke
Clinton, SC

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

Luke,

There are several points to this answer:

1. Not everything I say is met with resistance. Many things I say are accepted off the bat.
2. It's Development's job to question Design. We argue about things because it's our way to figure out if something has any holes in it. Notice how many of the things that I've suggested actually made it to print.
3. When I write my column, I'm trying to make it entertaining. This means that I tend to push my stories in directions that make a good story. Fighting my crazy idea through resistance is a good storyline so I tend to play up the times it happens. I also tend to skip the stories where I come up with an idea that gets shot down and never goes anywhere.
4. I think that this "R&D should listen to Mark" suggestion is a strong one. I'd suggest it, but I'd probably get some resistance.

January 19, 2007



Q: Just wondered, how is it in flavour terms that Illusions can inflict physical harm? Something like an **Errant Ephemeron** can cause massive damage – but how, if it's only an illusion?

--Sam
Leeds, UK

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

Your question reminds me of a random magazine article title that has stuck with me for twenty-odd years: "Illusions Can Kill If Used With Skill, But Fake Healing Is Only a Feeling." Or maybe it was in the text of an article, not the title. Anyway, to your question: Yes, you've detected that "illusion" functions a little oddly in **Magic**. Most creatures with the Illusion type don't look illusory in any way – they look fully real and tangible. Somewhere along the line, probably as a result of the way illustrations were turning out, "illusion" started to mean "magically created illusion, or really weird blue aligned creature, likely of a magical (rather than natural) origin." In other words, they hurt you the same way any "natural," flesh-and-blood creature would; they have some kind of material form, even if only briefly, that can inflict very nonillusory harm.

January 18, 2007





Q: Why do we tap clockwise rather than anti-clockwise? Is it just arbitrary?

--Tom
London, England

A: From **Mike Turian**, **Magic** R&D:

Hey Tom,

There is no official rule about which way to tap **Magic** cards. Originally there was no symbol to indicate "tap." For instance, the Alpha through Unlimited **Prodigal Sorcerer** reads "Tap to do 1 damage to any target." In Revised, the "crooked T" symbol was introduced and **Prodigal Sorcerer** became "T: Do 1 damage to any target."

In Fourth Edition the "crooked T" was replaced and the art designer came up with the international  symbol. As I understand it the  is a clockwise arrow because it looked more natural as clockwise. A counterclockwise arrow on the left side of the card wasn't as appealing.

I remember playing when my opponent would use beads to indicate tapped status of their cards, primarily as a way to reduce wear. In fact, while doing the research to answer your question I discovered that Mark Rosewater was originally a "beady." The bead trend was short-lived in **Magic** as card sleeves were developed to protect individual cards. Just as I have known people to play all of their permanents upside-down or with their lands in front of their spells, it is mainly convention that keeps people turning their cards clockwise.

January 17, 2007



Q: Seeing as *Time Spiral* was meant to be a throwback set, and therefore a lot of the mechanics of the cards closely related to the flavor of their mechanics and the flavor of the cards before them, were there more top-down cards in *Time Spiral* than in other sets?

--James
Philadelphia, PA

A: From **Devin Low**, **Magic** R&D:

Hey James,

The short answer is yes! In many cases the design team started with a flavor concept, then built the mechanics of the card "top-down" from the flavor.

The longer answer is also yes... and no! One great example of *Time Spiral's* top-down design is its coterie of legends. On the *Time Spiral* design team, we first said "Let's do a lot of legends of old **Magic** characters mentioned in old cardnames and flavor text that have never had cards before." We selected Endrek Sahr, progenitor of *Fallen Empires'* Thrulls, and someone top-down designed a mechanic for him based on the storyline of Endrek Sahr breeding hordes of Thrulls that eventually got out of control and killed him. Most of the legends were designed in this "top-down" manner.

However, the character of Endrek Sahr was devised by **Magic's** Creative team in the old days of *Fallen Empires* to explain where the Thrulls came from, as a race of creatures that were sacrificed to provide a variety of gameplay effects. And as far as I know, those Thrulls were all designed "bottom-up" in *Fallen Empires*, starting with flavorless mechanics, then having the Creative team add flavor, names, concepts, and art. So from the original thrulls' flavor-free mechanics, we built "bottom-up" to make the character of Endrek Sahr during *Fallen Empires*, then designed "top-down" from that character to make the mechanics for the card Endrek Sahr, Master Breeder. A ton of *Time Spiral's* cards went through this process, and are actually "bottom-up-top-down."

January 16, 2006



Q: How intelligent are the dragons of the **Magic** world? I mean, the legendary ones all seem pretty intelligent (or the most intelligent thing in the world, as one case may be). But with the non-legendary ones, you very rarely get a sense that they're anything other than huge, slaving beasts. The only non-legendary dragon that has his own quote is the **Dragon Mage**, and he's also the only one with an occupation (Wizard), so he's obviously one of the bright ones. **Exalted Dragon** seems intelligent enough to revel in/capitalize on the worship of his followers. But are the smart ones considered aberrant? Are dragons particularly smart in some planes and downright mindless in others?

--Paul

Philadelphia, PA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

It's really hard to generalize about dragons in **Magic**, Paul, because over **Magic's** 13+ year history, we've been a little undisciplined about what dragons are, what colors they belong in, and so on. Here's what I'd *like* to be true, and what we currently aim for.

There are basically two kinds of dragons: the ones that are sentient and self-willed, and the ones that aren't. The former are almost always legendary and often multicolored (and usually in cycles of five). They represent ancient beings of immense power and complex motivations. The latter, the nonsentient kind, are the utmost embodiments of red mana – they are capricious, impulsive, and relentlessly destructive. There are several dragons outside of this model: **Quicksilver Dragon**, **Exalted Dragon**, **Alabaster Dragon**, the cycle of **Mirage** dragons, and a handful of artifact dragons (plus **Eternal Dragon**, which was conceived as the repentant ghost of a dragon). But going forward I'm hoping we can make more sense of dragons and their role in **Magic** – while leaving room for the occasional exception, of course.

January 12, 2007



Q: I've noticed that the ending suffix of spells "pertaining to the elf race" has changed over time. Cards have been printed with both "elven" and "elvish", and the terms seem to be used interchangeably. For example, **Elven Warhounds** and **Elvish Fury** both came out in *Tempest*.

--Matthew

Chicago, IL

A: From **Doug Beyer**, flavor text writer:

Hi Matthew,

Good question. There have been three policies, sort of, for the usage of "elven" and "elvish" on **Magic** cards. You might think of them as having defined three eras.

The Unenlightened (aka "Devil-May-Care") Era

In the earliest days, there wasn't really a policy at all. "Elven" and "elvish" were indeed used interchangeably. **Elven Riders** from *Legends* stood side-by-side with Alpha's **Elvish Archers**. Why one and not the other? No reason other than the personal preference of the designers and editors at the time. It was chaos, I tell you. Cats and dogs living together. Mass hysteria. Clearly there was need for a policy.

The Dual (aka "Elvenish") Era

Beginning around *Fallen Empires* and continuing through sometime before *Onslaught*, both words were used for particular purposes. The word "elven" was used to describe anything that was produced, used or manufactured by elves, such as **Elven Fortress** or **Elven Warhounds**. "Elvish" was used to describe an elven person or something derived directly from an elf, such as **Elvish Berserker** or, if you squint, **Elvish Fury**. See also the flavor text of cards like **Argothian Elder** -- the language of elves is almost universally described as "elvish." But then again, see the Fifth Edition **Wall of Brambles**. Sigh.

The Contemporary (aka "Elvish is King") Era

These distinctions and corner cases were later seen as pretty dumb. A "rite" is elven, but "fury" is elvish? Beginning with approximately *Onslaught* (during a big, tribal revival of elfkind), "elven" was retired and everything is now called "elvish," whether it's an elf person, an elf-created spell effect, an elf-forged sword or a house party attended by elves.

Note that *Elven Riders* was reprinted in *Onslaught* alongside *Elvish Warrior* and other "elvish" names. I believe that was just an exception for the sake of the reprint and not a change in the policy. These days it's all "elvish," all the time. Thanks for your question!

January 11, 2007



Q: How did Sebastian Thaler win Rookie of the Year for 2006 when he had a Grand Prix Top 8 in Vienna in 2004? I thought you had to have zero lifetime Pro Points to be eligible for Rookie of the Year.

--Robert

A: From **Randy Buehler**, Director of **Magic R&D**:

Your rookie season is defined to be the first season in which you play a Pro Tour. Sebastian didn't officially "turn pro" until last season. That has been true for the Rookie of the Year award for a while (mostly because we didn't want to screw somebody who qualified for their first PT via a GP during the previous calendar year). Interestingly, the whole rule about amateur status (which affects eligibility for the Junior Super Series and the amateur prizes at Grand Prix) has now been synched up with this philosophy. You are now considered an amateur until you play in your first Pro Tour.

January 10, 2007



Q: In the art of the *Unhinged* card named _____, the shapeshifter is holding a set of IDs. I was wondering, do the IDs correspond to actual **Magic** cards? And if so, what are they?

--Glynn

Adelaide, SA, Australia

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

Glynn,

All the IDs correspond to **Magic** characters. From top to bottom:

Tahngarth
Phage
Gerrard
Kamahl
Akroma

I believe the green guy at the very bottom is supposed to be Slobad, Goblin Tinkerer, based on the art description.

Unhinged is chock full of these kinds of art Easter Eggs. I heartily encourage other readers to write in asking about more.

January 9, 2007



Q: I was wondering if the Wizards crew is ever surprised after a release about what cards have become popular. Are there any cards that you guys thought would be so-so but became extremely popular? Also have there been cards that you guys thought would be a hit, but the players just seem to use them?

--Bradly

San Diego, CA

A: From **Matt Place**, **Magic** R&D:

Hi Bradly,

We absolutely are surprised by the reaction to many cards we print. The biggest surprises for many of us were *Glimpse the Unthinkable* and *Circu, Dimir Lobotomist*. I personally worried that milling would be too annoying and we shouldn't push the theme. Aaron disagreed, and so we kept the milling cards at a reasonably high level. I was stunned to see the HUGE popularity of these two cards upon release.

On the flip side, *Rakdos Pit Dragon* had people in development worried that it was too powerful to see print. We went ahead and printed it without reducing the power level, which some developers felt was a mistake. Turns out we were way off on that one!

January 8, 2007



Q: Out of curiosity: What are **Magic** cards really made of? Often I am met with, "Why do you waste money on these pieces of cardboard?" or "You're buying paper!". Things just don't add up, it's not paper, it's not cardboard, what is it? I must know!

--Alex

Norwalk, CT

A: From **Jane Flohrschutz**, **Stephanie Sharp**, and **Gretchen Tapp**, Wizards of the Coast Production Team:

You can tell your friends that it's very special paper with an extra special filling. A **Magic** card is made up of three separate parts, two sheets of paper and a mysterious center layer (and we can't tell you what the center layer is made of so don't ask). The paper stock that we use is made of specific materials specially created for Wizards of the Coast products. All areas of production are controlled – how the paper is made, how it is stored and shipped, even how long the paper has to wait after it comes off the trucks before it can be printed, in order to have the paper acclimate properly. At all times the paper is under very tight quality controls from when it is made to when it is in the players' hands.

January 5, 2007



Q: "The more I read about the flavor of black, the less I understand the reason behind the limitations on cards like **Fear** and **Terror**. Black, in its search for power for itself, epitomizes willingness to harm those similar to oneself. It seems that, more than any other color, black things should promote infighting with other black things (perhaps white things should be likely to have protection from white/unblockability by white creatures/inability to target white creatures with negative spells, promoting harmony within the group). Is there a justification for this odd twist of the color pie, or is it just the sort of thing one has to expect when early stabs at color restrictions result in oft-reprinted abilities which are sometimes out of flavor?"

--Kelsey, Rochester USA

A: From **Mark Rosewater**, **Magic** Head Designer:

"Kelsey,

"The reason that **Terror** does not destroy black creatures has nothing to do with black's unwillingness to harm fellow black creatures. (In contrast, when we use "non-white" in white we are going for this flavor.) Black has trouble destroying black creatures because of their nature. Lets take **Terror** as the example. The idea behind the card is that you are scaring a creature to death. Black creatures just don't scare that easily. (Or artifact creatures for that matter.) Black's inability to destroy black creatures is treated by R&D designwise (and black flavorwise) as a weakness of black. Black would love to be able to efficiently destroy other black creatures. That it can't is a great frustration. The best black mages learn how to work around the limitation. (Hello -1/-1 counters.)"

January 4, 2007



Q: I've noticed that across **Magic's** storied style history, the serial comma has flowed in and out of use. What is the current style guide's preference?

--Ed

Washington DC

A: From **Kelly Digges**, **Magic** Editor:

Ed,

As the newest **Magic** editor and a zealous supporter of the serial comma, I couldn't help myself from tackling this question.

For those of you who think we're talking about a punctuation mark from Alpha-Bits, the serial comma (also known as the "Oxford comma") is the comma before the "and" in phrases like "one thing, another thing, and some third thing." Most authorities (including the *Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*, which guides our editorial choices) call for the serial comma, but some (chiefly British) sources omit it ("one thing, another thing and a great corking heap of ambiguity").

(Ooh, it hurt just to type that!)

To answer your actual question: Our current policy is to use the serial comma exclusively in both flavor text and rules text, as seen on cards such as **Advanced Hoverguard** and **Mystical Teachings**. Don't bet on that changing anytime... well, ever.

However, you got me wondering about the storied history you're talking about, so I asked around about the twisted tale of the serial comma. Strangely, it turned out that nobody could think of any time we didn't use it, although a few did mutter darkly about "the ellipsis wars," whatever that means....

A quick survey of **Nevinyrral's Disk** throughout the ages (capping off with its eponymous Magus) shows that **Magic's** commitment to the serial comma has been consistent, whether it's destroying "creatures, enchantments, and artifacts," as in Alpha through Fourth Edition, or "artifacts, creatures, and enchantments," as in Fifth Edition and on **Magus of the Disk**.

There might be a few exceptions floating around out there on isolated cards (I couldn't find any), but let me assure you now that these were aberrations and oversights even in their own time. Why, you could even say that the serial comma is as much a part of **Magic** as the **color pie** and the **tap symbol**.

January 3, 2007



Q: It can mutate and rift, it can surge and become tainted, it can snap and storm, and you can even pack it into a spellbomb. So I guess my question is: What exactly is "Æther" (and what is its correct pronunciation)?

--Derrick

Grundy, VA

A: From **Brady Dommermuth**, **Magic** Creative Director:

As I said in an earlier Ask Wizards response, "æther is the stuff between planes. In the **Magic** multiverse, when a creature is summoned, it materializes from (is 'pulled through') the æther." Here's a little more information about this extraplanar stuff:

- "Æther" is Latin for the modern word "ether," whose cosmological (rather than chemical) meaning is the basis for **Magic's** æther.
- The word "ethereal" is the adjectival form of "ether," but whereas we use "æther" to refer to the stuff between planes, we use "ethereal" to mean simply "intangible" or "celestial" (its standard English meanings).
- Older planeswalkers like Teferi refer to the æther somewhat poetically as "the Blind Eternities." Only planeswalkers and beings of godlike power can enter this "space." Little is known about its physics, including whether it has any.

"Æther" is pronounced "EE-ther," with a long e and an unvoiced "th" sound (like the one in "lethal," not the voiced sound in "whether").

January 2, 2007



Q: "I'm sure many readers must know this, but what is the difference between the design team, development team, and the creative team that works on each new set?"

--Evan

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

A: From **Paul Sottosanti, Magic R&D:**

"Hi Evan,

"Being a designer myself, I was originally going to write a reply about how designers come up with perfect **Magic** sets and then it's all downhill from there, but I eventually decided to help you out and play it straight instead. Here goes:

"The design team comes up with the initial ideas for the set, including the mechanics, the individual cards, and any overarching concepts for the set. They build the first card file and tweak abilities until they've created as fun and interesting an experience as possible. During design there are often a lot of overly powerful cards, for one simple reason. Everyone likes powerful cards better, and it's much easier to see a card's possibilities when it costs two mana instead of six. I've rarely seen someone walk away from a design playtest without a smile on their face.

"But it's clear that the health of the game would suffer if every card was more powerful than the ones that came before it, and playing against overly powerful cards can get old fast. So to address those issues, the set goes to the development team, who are in charge of taking design's card file and molding it into the form that will eventually find its way onto store shelves around the world. This involves spending countless hours on issues for Limited play like making sure that each color has creatures of varying sizes, a reasonable mana curve at common and uncommon, and no commons that will prove too frustrating to play against over and over again. Then there are the hundreds of games played between constructed decks in the Future Future League, in an attempt to balance the constructed formats and ensure that there will be multiple strategies available to players utilizing the new cards.

"When it comes to the Creative Team, they are in charge of commissioning art work, naming the cards, adding flavor text to those cards that have enough room, and everything else that goes into creating the worlds our game is set in. Their job, while not impacting the actual gameplay as much, is just as important as those of the other two teams, because they shape the feel of the game and make it into something more than just a jumble of numbers and words. Through their work we get to experience rich and diverse worlds like the metal-heavy Mirrodin, the spirit world of Kamigawa, and most recently, the city-covered Ravnica.

"There is also an editing team that deals primarily with templating but also with numerous other issues like cards getting the correct frames, the correct watermarks, correct expansion and mana symbols, and even collector numbers. Once they're done with their work, the set is sent to the printers and soon finds its way into packs, which you then open and (hopefully) enjoy.

"Hope that helped."

January 1, 2007



Q: While I will never complain about iconic, classic pieces of art like Alpha's **Serra Angel** or **Black Lotus**, it's obvious that even an unpopular common from a modern set has far higher production values on its art than the best card from the early days. Why has the quality of the art gone up so drastically over the years?

--Alex

Ontario, Canada

A: From **Jeremy Jarvis, Magic: The Gathering Art Director:**

Oh no you don't, Alex... I'm not stepping in that bear trap! Ha!

Honestly, there are a couple different issues here. Art, its quality, the impact it has... these are all very personal and subjective. Let's not discuss this from when the art is 'better', as that will only lead to an inevitable crossfire of conflicting opinions, but talk about the functionality of the art. It is acquired and conceived a different way today, for a different final result.

In the 'old days', art descriptions were vague suggestions of images (I believe the original "**Lord of the Pit**" was simply commissioned as 'Balrog') and then those images were swapped around, and forced into homes on

cards, often arbitrarily (the original "Twiddle" art was commissioned for a land, the original "Birds of Paradise" sports art also commissioned for a land). Also, art was purchased on site, and placed in cards from time to time. Neither continuity nor the idea of worldbuilding (creating distinctive and unique worlds and settings) would become issues until some time later.

Today those very ideas are some of our loftiest goals. To create a new and exciting setting, filled with creatures, people and locales that resonate as fantasy, but are unique enough to be specific to **Magic**. That has pushed us to find a stable of artists who are appropriate for each given set and setting, so we can commission art that is representative of the card and its mechanical needs, or at the very least not misleading or arbitrary. Along those lines, we now write card concepts and art descriptions that imply engaging visuals, but never at the expense of continuity or clarity. I think it is clear how these two different sets of processes and priorities would lead to different end results, and I am sincerely glad to hear your affirmation that the results are good.



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