

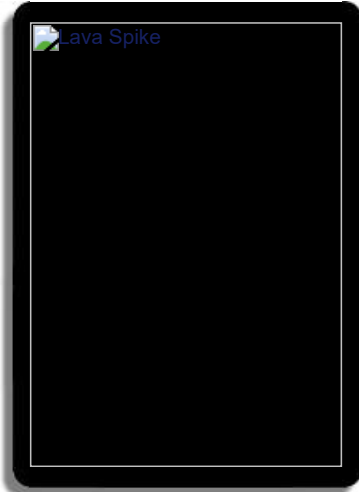
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Why All the Negativity?

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Latest Developments
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Let's begin by looking at three cards:



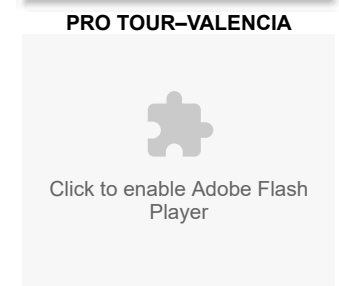
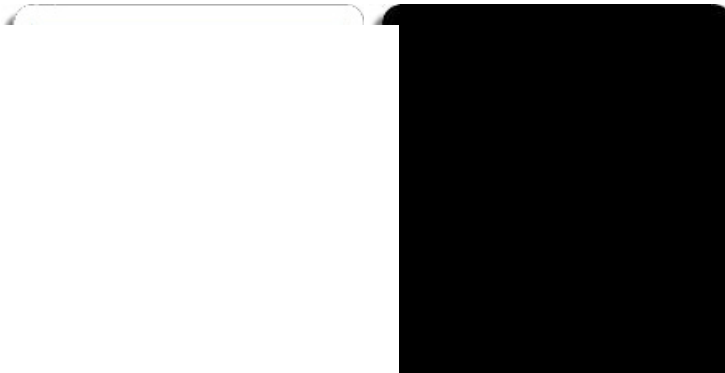
You all know which of those three is the most powerful (*Char*), and most of you probably have matching answers about which of the remaining two is more powerful than the other (*Lava Spike*).

But you're a savvy bunch as **Magic** players go; after all, you tune in each week to read about how cards are developed, something a great majority of **Magic**'s players neither care to read about nor probably even know occurs. Let's try to look at those three cards through the eyes of the player who isn't so savvy, isn't so plugged in – someone who isn't aware of what cards are good in a tournament sense, measured in things like "flexibility" and "efficiency," but rather just wants to put cards in his deck that he *likes*.

Of those three cards, I'll say with a high degree of certainty that *Lava Axe* ranks the highest among that group. It's simple, straightforward, fun to cast, and takes a whopping *fourth* of an opponent's life total away in one stroke. Call those players "n00bs" if you like, but many players stay at that level of thinking for years and years, and they're very important to the growth and health of the game. After the *Axe*, they probably prefer the *Spike*, and definitely like playing the two of them together. *Char* likely comes in third, as it deals damage to the one playing it, which is not something they look for in cards they want to play with – even if it has the extra flexibility of hitting creatures. If they want that flexibility, they'll play *Lightning Blast*.

You would, too, if cost was irrelevant. While cost isn't irrelevant to this audience, the difference between 2 and 3 is likely not worth having their cards do negative things to them when they play them. Sure, at some point they'll learn that *Char* is considered by serious players to be a top-notch card, either from a price guide or word of mouth, and they may choose to believe it, choose not to believe it, or eventually come to learn why it's true. But in the absence of that knowledge, *Char* is not a sought-after card by a big portion of the **Magic** audience.

So if, at that level, cost doesn't have as much impact on card choice as the contents of the text box does, which of the following cards would we expect members of that audience to choose?





How about from these three?




Or from these two?



Better yet, in how many of those cases would those players be *wrong* for wanting to play with the creatures with no drawbacks?

Why Drawbacks?

Why do we put drawbacks on cards at all? For two major reasons, both of which were present in the game from the very beginning: to give cards more flavor and/or impact, and to make them harder to "solve." (We will sometimes tack a drawback onto a card for power balancing reasons, like *Dauthi Slayer's* "must attack" clause, or to illustrate differences in the color pie, like *Spineless Thug's* "can't block" ability vs. *Grizzly Bears* ability to block at its leisure, but those are less frequent and less relevant to the discussion.)

Force of Nature from Alpha has a horrible, nasty-looking line of text on it: "You must pay  during upkeep or *Force of Nature* does 8 damage to you." Eight damage? Yow! Yet the card was beloved from day one. The drawback made the

card feel more realistic, as if you were actually trying to harness some mythic monster that resisted bending to your will. And, not insignificantly, the drawback could be mitigated with a mana payment.

Phantasmal Forces, a 3 4/1 flier with an upkeep of 1, also appeared in Alpha. There is some plausible flavor justification for the drawback – the illusory flock must be maintained via constant concentration – but it certainly feels very “mechanical” by today’s standards, and I can’t say for sure whether flavor dictated mechanics on this card or vice versa. Let’s assume for a moment that it is there for mechanical reasons. The drawback poses the following question: “You can get this into play a turn sooner than **Air Elemental**, but at the cost of investing mana each turn for as long as it remains in play... Is it worth it to you?”

Some players – most likely the majority of my audience – like puzzling out if it is in fact worth it to get the flier out earlier, but a large number of players will reject that card initially.

Start affecting life totals with drawbacks directly and the effect is even greater; it took months and months for players to realize that cards like **Orcish Artillery**, **Juzam Djinn**, and **City of Brass** were actually *good*; I’m sure you can recall having similar epiphanies or convincing friends of those truths. Many players still don’t see it, and want nothing to do with those cards.

Drawbacks as Mechanics

New keywords are put into sets to help give the sets identity and to provide talking points for players. In general, a vast majority of our keywords are what I call “upside mechanics.” Continuing our look through the eyes of the less serious players, we have two kinds of upside:

The “all upside” mechanic. If you so choose, you can get the full effect of your card every time you play it. Bushido, kicker, and storm are “all upside.”

The “tension upside” mechanic. You have to choose which use you want to get out of your card. Cycling, transmute, suspend, and channel are “tension upside.”

The very best mechanics are the “all upside” ones that have some amount of tension built in, as they provide the game play experience that each segment of the audience is looking for. Kicker is the perfect example – the less savvy player always holds the card until his can play it to full effect, and the more analytical player can weigh risk vs. reward for playing the card in all of its various forms.

Many casual players can’t see the benefit of most of our tension mechanics (“Why would I ever cycle my 4/4? Isn’t a 4/4 good?”). Even morph, which is more all-upside than tension, although admittedly difficult to classify, doesn’t resonate with all our players. (Overheard by another R&D member: Kid staring at morph creature says, “Why would I ever want to play my 5/4 as a 2/2?”)

So what hope do drawback mechanics have with that group? Not much, really.

We do drawback mechanics for the other group, the enfranchised group, the segment of players who appreciate the fact that we challenge them with new puzzles every time we make cards. Games are won and lost on decisions revolving around these drawbacks – should I pay cumulative upkeep on my **Earthen Goo** one more time, should I play the **Vug Lizard** on turn three or wait until my hand is empty, should I play my second **Sandbar Crocodile** while the first one is phased in or phased out? All very interesting decisions that keep the skill in the game and change from block to block.

But how do those mechanics do as “talking points,” things to pique the casual players’ interest in the set? What if you and a friend had the following conversation:

“Did you hear there’s a new **Magic** set out?” “Cool! Any new mechanics?”
“Yeah, there’s one where you have to pay for your creature twice or it dies!”

Feel free to replace that last bit with “your creature dies in three turns automatically,” “you have to spend more and more mana each turn to keep your creatures,” or “your creatures are only in play half the turns” and let me know which set sounds the most awesome.

What’s missing from all those explanations is “there are a bunch of creatures that are *really cheap but...*” Adding that phrase makes it much more palatable to us, the type of gamer that appreciates a challenge. But man, do those mechanics seem so depressing to that other group, so contrary to everything they hope a mechanic should be.

There was a run of drawback keywords in **Magic**’s mid years as the post-Garfield regime of designers got their feet under them and explored what the game was capable of. Cumulative upkeep appeared in Ice Age, phasing in Mirage, and echo was ready to go for Tempest initially (read [Mark’s article](#) for the full story). Then there was a several year break, with none appearing until fading in Nemesis, at which point they fell out of favor again.

The Current Crop

As a designer or developer, I had never been part of a discussion of the merits of a new drawback-only keyword as they simply weren’t being proposed. The closest was **Ravnica**’s radiance which, in practice, often creates awkward play experiences wherein the cards would be more powerful *without* the mechanic, but on paper looks like upside.

New drawback keywords, no, but as we got on our nostalgia kick with **Coldsnap** and the Time Spiral block, bringing back old drawback keywords didn’t seem like much of an issue. They were, after all, part of **Magic**’s past, and we were reinventing and celebrating all of it.



We did realize that cumulative upkeep was underwhelming in the sets it appeared in initially, and we tried our damndest to make it seem more interesting somehow in *Coldsnap*. Looking back, it doesn't surprise me that the only cumulative upkeep card from that set to catch on is **Jötun Grunt** – the one where you aren't actually taxing your own resources turn after turn in any traditional sense. No one wants to pay increasing amounts of resources each turn for anything! What fun is that?

Bringing back echo in Time Spiral seemed innocuous at first – after all, the mechanic graced some endearing cards in the Urza block. But those cards (*Avalanche Riders*, *Deranged Hermit*, *Crater Hellion*, *Bone Shredder*, etc.) were endearing *in spite* of the echo, not because of it. I imagine the words, “I love that this thing has echo” have never been uttered. But we brought it back anyway as part of the nostalgic suite of Time Spiral reruns.

A month or so ago, we got a big batch of market research back regarding player perception of Time Spiral. The set did very well as a whole, with “timeshifted” cards coming in as the highlight in most players’ eyes. What caught my interest was the listing of each keyword and major theme in the set along with an “approval rating” based on a score given to each mechanic by each player in the study. Of all the stuff we brought back, including pretty boring stuff like flanking and contentious stuff like shadow, echo came in dead last by a mile. That statistic made me sit up and wonder aloud, “Yeah... why *would* people like this?” Luckily echo appeared on only a very small fraction of the cards and was not something we were trying to use to hype the set.

Planar Chaos didn't do the mechanic any favors, either. Now instead of just paying the mana cost again, you often have to pay significantly more the second time. I really hope game play benefits, because I'm sure perception suffers. To complicate things, Planar Chaos's “new” keyword offering is vanishing, a reworked version of another strictly negative keyword. Could I go back in time, I'd probably take one of those two out of the set. Hindsight is 20/20!

Moving Forward

I'm constantly surprised by how much I continue to learn about the game and its players each day that I work here, and I've been involved with **Magic** for well over a decade now. Whereas I was ambivalent to negative keywords a year ago, I think they are a pretty bad idea in general now. Players have expectations of keywords, and I would like to try to deliver on them. I want each new thing we add to wow you, or at the very least make you happy to toss it into your deck.

Do drawbacks have their place in the game? Absolutely! I love the challenges that go into evaluating and playing with cards like *Waterspout Djinn*, *Hunted Troll*, *Phyrexian Arena*, and *Balduvian Horde*. Those cards are what make this game great for people of all skill levels. But it can be overdone at the expense of the more casual crowd, and I don't think we benefit from trying to disguise a drawback as a feature that attempts to drive interest in the set. Let the actual good things in the set do that.

Even without many – or any – drawbacks written on cards, each new release would provide plenty of challenges and puzzles for every segment of our audience. As developer Matt Place said to me, “We shouldn't forget just how interesting **Giant Growth** can make a board full of 2/2s and 3/3s.” I hope to keep all the depth without making mechanics that make players feel bad.

Did I ever tell you the story of how I missed Day 2 at a Pro Tour by forgetting to pay echo on a *Winding Wurm*? We'll save that one for next week...

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Last Week's Poll

Which of these nonfiction Magic books would you be most interested in purchasing?		
A narrative history of the game, featuring never-before-told, behind-the-scenes looks at Magic	2978	36.5%
A 15-year retrospective of Magic art and artists, showcasing the many planes of Magic's past	2697	33.1%
An almanac of quizzes, trivia, debates, polls, and puzzles from Magic's history	1262	15.5%
None of these	1222	15.0%
Total	8159	100.0%

I've always been a fan of **Magic** books, and I hope we can get the ball rolling on one or more of these products in the coming year.

February 23rd Poll

Black-bordered Tenth Edition...		
Yay!	16042	88.3%
Boo!	2117	11.7%
Total	18159	100.0%

Whoever said “Boo,” raise your hand. *GET HIM!!!*



This Week's Poll

Which card with a drawback did you have the hardest time accepting as "good"?

- Orcish Artillery
- City of Brass
- Juzam Djinn
- Phyrexian Arena
- Armageddon
- Char
- Lord of the Pit
- Force of Nature
- Balance
- None of the above

If anyone has any good "drawback" stories, drop me a line. I'd love to hear them.

*Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.*



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