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Fat: A Retrospective

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Latest Developments
Friday, March 30, 2007



Fatty Week has been fascinating from my perspective, as a number of other articles have already laid the groundwork for what I want to talk about. Mark's [psychographic piece](#) was excellent – I really like which creatures he chose for each player type – but it isn't one of the relevant ones. No, instead may I direct you to the works of Mr. [Mike Flores](#) and Mr. [The Ferrett](#). Both made lists, both talked about the playability of "fat" creatures in specific formats. Then, as a saucy bonus, The Ferrett threw in a database query that shows the most-played big creatures across all tournament formats.

If you merely glance at the charts, subheads, card images, and decklists presented in those articles (and in Mark's too, for that matter), you'll see some recurring trends: Lots of *Onslaught*-block cards. Lots of Kamigawa-block cards. Lots of *Mirrodin*-block cards. A decent number of *Time Spiral*, *Ravnica*, and *Invasion* cards.

Fatties have gotten better over the years – way better. And I don't want to be accused of "power creep" here, but rather of "power correction." Big creatures have been weaker historically than their smaller counterparts, and also weaker than cheap spells. I have said this before, but if you understand how power in Magic works, then you realize just how much better *Counterspell*, *Swords to Plowshares*, and *Demonic Tutor* are than *Personal Incarnation*, *Mahamoti Djinn*, and *Force of Nature*.

Big creatures have been weaker historically than their smaller counterparts.

In the game's earliest days, big creatures faced a fork in the road and headed, sadly, down the wrong path. We've been trying to compensate for that decision for many years now. Here's my take on it...


Alpha Bits

Richard Garfield, in all his infinite wisdom, came up with two distinct varieties of "fatty" in the very first card set the game ever had (I'll stick with Mark and Mike's "5/3 or greater" definition of fatty.) Behold:



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On one side, creatures that are merely very large and are all upside. *Shivan Dragon* flies, it has firebreathing, and is 5/5 for six mana, no strings attached. On the other side are the kinds of cards I was talking about [two weeks ago](#) – creatures with flavorful drawbacks. If you wanted to harness *Force of Nature*, it was going to cost you  each turn. Similarly, *Lord of the Pit* demanded a creature.

The size and stats of the latter two *almost* hold up, even today. I have seen *Mahamoti Djinn* played in several tournaments as recently as 2001, and *Shivan Dragon* rears its head about once a year in a random successful Champs, Regionals, or Nationals deck. The ones with the drawbacks tend to not show up at all.

The Curse of the Djinni

After Alpha, Richard designed *Arabian Nights*, and the fat creatures of that world were Djinnns and Efreet. As Richard was a very top-down designer, he wanted the impulsive, petulant, and hard-to-control genies to all have drawbacks.



Many of the Djinnns and Efreet in the set were quite good; the drawbacks were used to allow their mana costs and stats to be at the sweet spots where most of the commonly used "answer" cards wouldn't stop them.

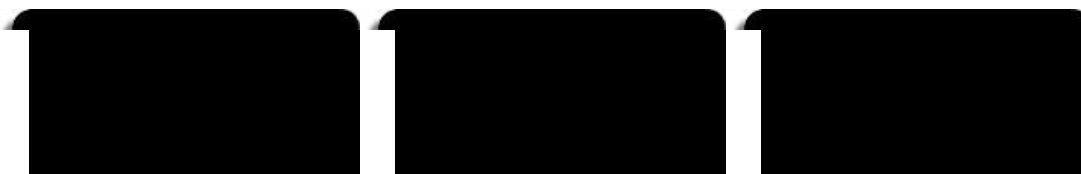
But the use of drawbacks on all of that set's marquee fatties, combined with the drawback cards from Alpha, suggested a pattern that was followed far too much in the coming years: Big creatures required drawbacks to be fair.

The "fatties" from *Antiquities* (all three of them):



Those cards are not powerful. Big? Sure. Splashy? I suppose. But worth the drawbacks? No. There was a line of thinking prevalent at the time among the designers and developers that big creatures in and of themselves were *really, really powerful* and had to be kept in check with substantial drawbacks. Although *Shivan* and *Mahamoti* were being reprinted in subsequent Core Sets, they were treated as special and no cards like them were made for a long, long time. Let's keep looking.

Here are the fattest non-legendary creatures from *Legends*:



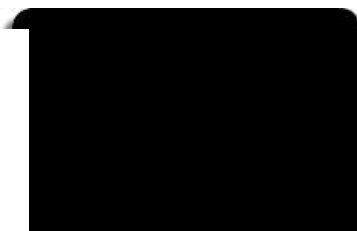


Six huge guys, none of which had flying, five of which had massive drawbacks. Hats off to the *Legends* team for making the green one – **Craw Giant** – have nothing but upside, even if you had to pay an arm and a leg for it. (For being such a groundbreaking card at the time, we immortalized **Craw Giant** with a slot in the *Time Spiral* "timeshifted" cards.)

Of course, *Legends* did allow big creatures to be printed with no drawbacks written in their text boxes; instead they were saddled with ridiculous mana costs and a new flavorful creature type that is actually a drawback in disguise.



The Dark had only one fatty, which speaks for itself:





Fallen Empires had four. The first two had significant drawbacks. The third, *Deep Spawn*, had a minor drawback that less-experienced players freak out about more than is warranted, making it the closest to drawback-free we've seen outside of green. The last is another all-upside green creature, this time with only three green mana symbols in its cost – a generous step down from *Craw Giant*'s four.



So here we are, many sets in to the game's life, and still nothing close to *Mahamoti Djinn* or *Shivan Dragon*. What was going on? Why couldn't *Lord of the Pit* and *Force of Nature* have become the exception instead of the rule?

Part of me knows that the developers still believed those cards to be above the acceptable power curve of the time; another part of me speculates that the designers felt that the game already had a Dragon (and an Angel and a Vampire, etc.) so there was no point in designing another one, instead they tried making more "interesting" flavorful cards that all came saddled with drawbacks.

Crawling Toward the Modern Age

Ice Age kicked off our modern three-set-block structure, but did little to advance the cause of the fatty. I know I'm showing off a lot of card images, but the visual is very important here. Check out all of *Ice Age*'s fatties:

Polar Kraken 8000

Summon Kraken

Trample
Cumulative Upkeep: Sacrifice a land.
Comes into play tapped.
"It was big. Really, really, big. No, bigger than that. It was big!"
—Arna Kemurid, Skyknight

Illus. Mark Tedin 11/11

Chaos Lord 4000

Summon Lord

First strike
Chaos Lord can attack the first turn it comes into play on a side, except the turn it first comes into play. During your upkeep, count the number of permanents. If that number is even, target opponent gains control of Chaos Lord.

Illus. Brian Snoddy 7/7

Scaled Wurm 7000

Summon Wurm

"Flourishing during the Ice Age, these Wurms were the bane of all Kjeldorans. Their great size and ferocity made them the subject of countless nightmares—they embodied the worst of the Ice Age."
—Kjeldor, Ice Civilization

Illus. Daniel Gelon 7/6

Illusionary Wall 4000

Summon Wall

Flying, first strike
Cumulative Upkeep: 4
"Let them see what is not there and feel what does not touch them. When they no longer trust their senses, that is the time to strike."
—Gerda Agesdotter, Archmage of the Unseen

Illus. Mark Pyrif 7/4

Johtull Wurm 5000

Summon Wurm

For each blocking creature assigned to Johtull Wurm beyond the first, Johtull Wurm gets -2/-1 until end of turn.
"To bring her down we must be on all sides at once—leave one avenue open and we'll all be dead."
—Taaveti of Kestakes, Elvish Hunter

Illus. Daniel Gelon 6/6

Infernal Denizen 7000

Summon Infernal Denizen

During your upkeep, sacrifice two swamps. If you cannot, tap Infernal Denizen, and target opponent may gain control of target creature of his or her choice you control. The opponent loses control of that creature if Infernal Denizen leaves play. ♣: Gain control of target creature. Loss control of that creature if Infernal Denizen leaves play.

Illus. Deeg Tucker 5/7

Sibilant Spirit 5000

Summon Spirit

Flying
Whenever Sibilant Spirit is declared as an attacker, defending player may draw a card.
"Relax. I'm sure it's just a snake hissing."
—Avram Garrison, Leader of the Knights of Stromgald

Illus. Ron Spencer 5/6

Shambling Strider 4000

Summon Strider

♣♣: +1/-1 until end of turn
Freyllis forbid that any stranger should wander into the Striders' territory.

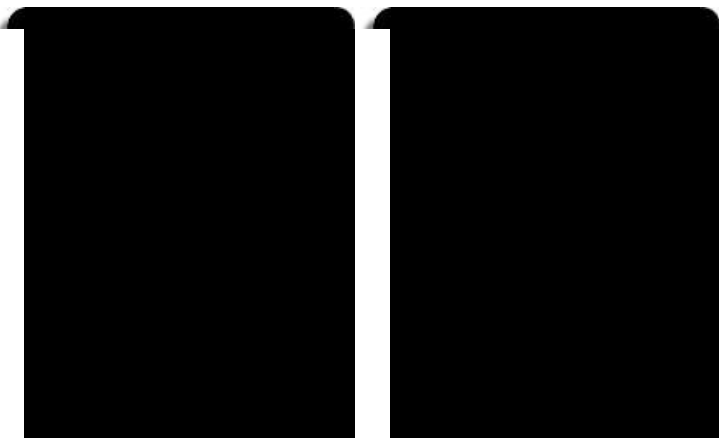
Illus. Douglas Shuler 5/5

Minion of Leshrac 4000

Summon Demon

Protection from black
During your upkeep, sacrifice a creature or Minion of Leshrac deals 5 damage to you. If Minion of Leshrac deals damage to you in this way, tap it. You cannot sacrifice Minion of Leshrac to itself.
♣: Destroy target creature or land.

Illus. L.A. Williams 5/5





Eleven cards, nine with drawbacks. Two green commons that were allowed to just be "big"... and they had manageable mana costs. I like seeing that.

As for the rest, most were actively terrible (**Goblin Mutant** followed the broken **Goblin Lackey** into battle now and again, making him the winner of the bunch). I find **Sibilant Spirit** to be the worst offender of all, as it basically says on it in capital letters: "THIS IS A CRAPPY MAHAMOTI." I remember being extremely disappointed in the card when I opened it in packs 12 years ago, and I still strongly dislike it to this day. That drawback could be interesting on a creature, don't get me wrong, but that creature would have to be *massively* undercosted, not one colored mana off from a card concurrently seeing print.

Homelands had but one non-legendary fatty, **Marjhan**, which is somewhere between **Leviathan** and **Deep Spawn** on the Crappy Sea Monster scale.



There were a couple of exciting fat black legends in the set – **Baron Sengir** and **Ihsan's Shade** – that saw a tremendous amount of play at the time (the Baron in casual, Ihsan in tournaments). But how long would it take for a good non-legendary fatty to exist in a color other than green?

Alliances' non-legendary fatties: (Still no winner.)



Real Fatties? It Must Be a Mirage!

Mirage had its share of typical fatties-with-drawbacks. You can click on [Benthic Djinn](#), [Phyrexian Dreadnought](#), [Sunweb](#), or [Sandbar Crocodile](#) if you want verification. The set even had the one green all-upside guy in [Crash of Rhinos](#), which I remember being beloved at the time (even if he is outclassed 100% by [Avatar of Might](#) nowadays). But the set had a revolutionary element as well – fatties that weren't green, weren't legendary, and didn't do awful things to you. Check these out:



Sure, they both cost a very "safe" nine mana, but I'll take it! Dragons are back!

I'm going to credit current VP of R&D Bill Rose with helping make this paradigm shift occur. Bill, the lead designer of *Mirage*, is a huge Dragon fan, Timmy advocate, and proponent of splashy-but-simple cards. *Mirage* features not only the first non-green, non-legendary, drawback-free fatties, but also a cycle of 4/4 Dragons that also have no drawbacks of any kind attached. The door was open, now how much were they willing to step through it?

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

When *Visions* came out in early 1997, it contained a couple more all-upside fatties that players embraced and saw a good amount of play:



But a month later, the *Fifth Edition* Core Set was released, and [Mahamoti Djinn](#), along with [Serra Angel](#) and [Sengir Vampire](#), were missing from the set, pulled because they were "too powerful."

It seems crazy in retrospect, but the designers and developers at the time felt those cards ate up too much design space – they were unwilling to make cards better than them, and didn't think players would like cards worse than them as long as they were in print. So the plan was to pull them then re-draw the power-level lines significantly lower with respect to middle-to-large-sized flying creatures. One of my developers, Erik Lauer, recently pointed out to me just how misguided this tactic was, as they took out the Angel and the Vampire only to replace them with "Pump Knights" – [Order of the White Shield](#) and [Knight of Stromgald](#), two of the most efficient two-mana creatures in the game. Blazing speed was okay, but good mid-ranged creatures were somehow taboo.

The crime was compounded in *Sixth Edition*; none of the fliers taken out in *Fifth* returned, and [Shivan Dragon](#) was also yanked from the Core Set. Madness!

The years of *Fifth* and *Sixth Editions* were hit-and-miss when it came to new, good fatties appearing in expansions. Designers understood drawbacks better and made cards like [Rathi Dragon](#), [Crater Hellion](#), and [Phyrexian Negator](#) that

were still quite good in spite of their negatives. Green got more and more all-upside fatties, like [Ancient Silverback](#), [Thorn Elemental](#), and the famed [Verdant Force](#), and other colors got into the act here and there as well, with cards like [Shivan Hellkite](#), [Tidal Kraken](#), and [Avatar of Woe](#).

But big creatures were not all they could be, even yet. Luckily, the game was about to turn a corner...

Invasion of the Fatties

"Another crusade that I began during Invasion development was to make big creatures actually good enough to play in constructed tournaments. Before I got there, R&D took [Serra Angel](#) out of the core set because she was 'above the curve.' Somehow, she rotated out for being too good despite not being good enough for anyone to play with! As deck builders got better and tournament decks got more and more focused, the big creatures that R&D was printing just weren't making the cut any more. To be fair, R&D recognized that they were losing touch with the cutting edge of deck development and that's why the company went to the Pro Tour to start hiring new developers. So when I argued that [Kavu Titan](#) really wasn't going to get played at 3 mana for a 2/2 or 6 mana for a 5/5 trampler, they listened. Similarly, when I argued that the Dragons wouldn't break anything if they were 6/6's for 6 mana, they went with that change as well. In the years since then, I think the Standard environment has seen many more large monsters stomping across many more tables and I'm pretty happy about that."

--Randy Buehler, ["My First Days"](#)

Randy's hiring at the time *Invasion* was being developed gave fatties a tremendous shot in the arm. The Invasion block really redefined what big creatures were capable of, and it did so in a way that didn't feel like power creep per se, by doing it on gold cards and/or legendary cards like [Rith, the Awakener](#), [Shivan Wurm](#), and [Spiritmonger](#).

Of course, *Seventh Edition* came out almost immediately after *Invasion*, and Randy also had a hand in the grand reinstating of [Serra Angel](#), [Mahamoti Djinn](#), and [Shivan Dragon](#) to the game – something we take for granted now.

In the days since *Invasion* we have been getting better and better at finding the right spots for big creatures to get them into Constructed. Sure, sometimes we'll lean heavily on the "legendary" mechanic to justify power, as with [Onslaught's](#) heavy hitters, [Akroma](#), [Rorix](#), and [Visara](#), and all the top Kamigawa creatures like [Kokusho](#), [Kodama of the North Tree](#), and [Arashi](#). Sometimes we'll justify power with "gold" mana costs, as in the case of [Angel of Despair](#), [Simic Sky Swallower](#), and [Autochthon Wurm](#). Written drawbacks, like those on [Spectral Force](#), [Calciderm](#), and [Hunted Dragon](#) are still part of our arsenal, although we've gotten way better at balancing them to a razor's edge than our counterparts from a decade ago. Of course, sometimes we just want to make a guy that is all upside all the time, no holds barred, and no strings attached, like [Bogardan Hellkite](#), [Plated Slagwurm](#), or [Helldozer](#).

Case in point: *Ravnica* block contains nineteen non-legendary creatures with power/toughness of 5/3 or greater and no drawbacks whatsoever – twice as many as the first ten Magic expansions combined. Throw in all the big legends and the cards with manageable drawbacks, like [Rumbling Slum](#), and it's no wonder that most of Flores's and Ferrett's fatties-of-choice are from the most recent several blocks – that's where all the good ones come from.

And we're not done yet. As Devin Low talked about in his article on green fatties, we're constantly reevaluating what we've done and how we can make it better. Magic should be made of many different elements, of which big creatures are only one – but a very important one indeed.

You know you love attacking with Dragons!

Last Week's Polls

Which of the following "Magic only" creature types is your favorite?		
Sliver	1895	22.3%
Atog	849	10.0%
Saproling	790	9.3%
Lhurgoyf	790	9.3%
Kavu	748	8.8%
Phelddagrif	530	6.2%
Masticore	431	5.1%
Beeble	384	4.5%
Thrull	315	3.7%
Vedalken	266	3.1%
Nephilim	239	2.8%
Zubera	237	2.8%
Volver	168	2.0%
Spike	163	1.9%
Licid	159	1.9%
Homarid	158	1.9%
Cephalid	157	1.8%
Orgg	106	1.2%
Kithkin	69	0.8%
Ouphe	55	0.6%
Total	8509	100.0%

Which of the following "Magic only" creature types is your LEAST favorite?		
Sliver	559	10.6%
Homarid	502	9.6%
Nephilim	466	8.9%
Zubera	449	8.5%
Beeble	442	8.4%
Ouphe	355	6.8%
Orgg	288	5.5%
Phelddagrif	273	5.2%
Atog	247	4.7%
Licid	223	4.2%
Kithkin	216	4.1%
Vedalken	210	4.0%
Volver	209	4.0%
Cephalid	199	3.8%
Saproling	131	2.5%
Thrull	128	2.4%
Kavu	118	2.2%
Spike	91	1.7%
Lhurgoyf	87	1.7%
Masticore	59	1.1%
Total	5252	100.0%

Fascinating... Slivers are the New York Yankees of Magic creatures. Half of you love them, half of you hate them. To me, that's a success – a success we should not revisit all that often, but a success nonetheless. As for Nephilim... not a success.

This Week's Poll

What is your favorite creature's power?

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7+

* (like Maro or Broodstar)

*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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