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The Magnificence of Kicker

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Latest Developments
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I have no quarrels with kicker, no real bones to pick, no sighing lament about how difficult it is to develop, or how it ended up more or less powerful in tournaments than we'd hoped, or how it leads to some sort of game state that some or all of the design and/or development teams don't like.

Kicker is a great mechanic.

It represents everything a player would want in a mechanic-late game power without sacrificing early game flexibility. There's a modest amount of tension for those that like to perfect their technical play-"Should I play this **Pincer Spider** now so I can block, or hold out for land number six so that I can get the +1/+1 counter?" Players that don't enjoy complex decisions can eschew the **Pincer Spiders** and go right for things like **Skizzik** and **Thornscape Battlemage**-cards with affordable kickers that are almost always correct to hold out for. And then there are cards like **Urza's Rage** where you just can't go wrong whichever way you cast it.

From a developer standpoint, there's even more to love. The mechanic can do just about anything-it is not limited to a uniform effect like cycling or transmute, or repeating the same effect like buyback, flashback, and replicate, or cost reduction like affinity, convoke, and suspend. The cards have a fixed upside, which lets R&D rest easy as we know what the maximum potential of each card is and can balance all parts of it by adjusting numbers. The limiting factor on how good a kicker card can be in a particular game is mana, which means things are far less likely to go haywire with the mechanic as opposed to something like storm or dredge, both of which generate crazy effects for essentially free.

I loved kicker cards as a player, and I love them as a developer. End of story.

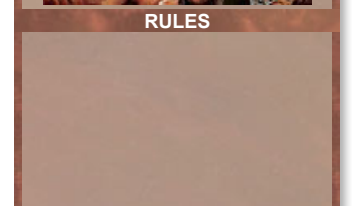
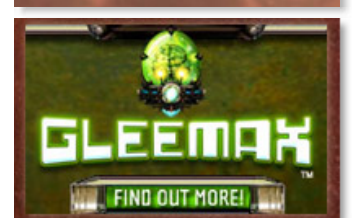
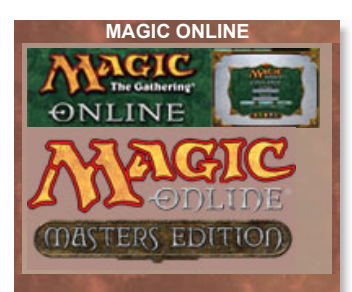
Okay, that's not necessarily true. There is a "but..." The mechanic is, in some ways, too broad. Mark Rosewater touched on that problem in [his article Monday](#), and I have felt the sting of kicker's broadness time and again in design and development meetings. "Okay, we should change this so that you get the effect if you spend an extra 2," someone inevitably proposes. "Yeah, but that would just be kicker," is the most likely reply, "Why wouldn't we just call it kicker?" at which point someone bangs his head against the wall and curses the existence of kicker.

There is some merit to an argument that says kicker should just be a part of the game and used everywhere. The mechanic is simple, popular, and broadly applicable. But the truth is that we are okay slicing up what kicker does a little bit and giving pieces of it new names. We're not trying to do a sales job by saying that a subset of kicker is a new mechanic-we actually think it's beneficial for cards that behave similarly to have a unifying keyword unique to them as opposed to just lumping everything together under the "kicker" umbrella. By doing so, we keep the design focused, give the set some identity, and make talking about a subset of cards much easier.

Here are a few examples of cards that could have been templated with kicker. I make no claims as to the properness of the templates therein, and I'm aware that some of these cards are not functionally identical to their original versions in corner cases.



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Buyback predated kicker to be sure, but it is without a doubt a subset of it. When kicker debuted in *Invasion*, we could have redone all the old buyback cards to have kicker, or we could have made new kicker cards that emulated buyback's functionality. Fortunately we did neither, as buyback has an identity all its own, even if it is just a narrow kicker variant.



Amplify resembles kicker on its surface-if you pay an additional "cost," you get an additional benefit-but the two mechanics play differently enough that it would be a real downgrade to just made all the amplify cards with kicker. The biggest difference is that you can amplify no matter how the creature comes into play-via normal playing, [Zombify](#), [Astral Slide](#), you name it. That is a luxury we could afford on a mechanic that goes only on permanent cards, unlike kicker which can go on every spell type.



Entwine is another obvious subset of kicker but again, we all benefit from the descriptor. If I say "kicker card," you might think of anything from [Jilt](#) to [Kavu Titan](#) to [Molten Disaster](#). But if I say "entwine," you know that I'm talking about a modal instant or sorcery with the added ability to choose both modes for an additional payment.



Replicate is kicker with a few twists. One, you can pay it more than once, and two, the effect it generates happens when you play the spell, not upon the spell's resolution. Those two differences are ample reason to make replicate its own keyword.

Those four examples might not feel like all that much mechanical overlap, but the truth is that we've seen several mechanics too close to kicker that just never saw the light of day.

Off on a bit of a tangent, and while I'm in a retemplating mood, I want to show which **Magic** mechanic is the one that encompasses the most other mechanics' design space, including kicker and most of the kicker offshoots. The culprit? Split cards. Any card that has two distinct effects could have been done as a split card. Modal spells, enhanced spells, kicker, cycling, transmute, you name it. Split cards is the broadest mechanic in the game. Lucky for us, they have enough rules baggage and text-length issues that we aren't tempted to do them very often at all. Instead, we do them only when we want to make cards that have more-or-less unrelated effects that are (usually) different colors.

Below is a pile of split cards that are meant to mirror other cards that use other mechanics. I hope you'll agree that, while we could use split cards more often for a variety of other purposes, these mockups have a repetitiveness and a general lack of elegance that warrants us maintaining the status quo—coming up with new keywords for every subset of effects that we can.

<p>Call of One Elephant 2</p>  <p>Sorcery</p> <p>Put a 3/3 green Elephant creature token into play.</p> <p>Illus. Ben Thompson © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 7/7</p>	<p>Call of the herd 3</p>  <p>Sorcery</p> <p>Put a 3/3 green Elephant creature token into play, then remove Call of the Herd from the game. You may play Call of the Herd only from your graveyard.</p> <p>Illus. Carl Critchlow © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 7/7</p>
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<p>Cap 1</p>  <p>Instant</p> <p>Return target permanent to its owner's hand.</p> <p>Illus. Tom Wänerstrand © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 3/7</p>	<p>Size 4</p>  <p>Instant</p> <p>Return target permanent to its owner's hand. Put this card into its owner's hand as it resolves.</p> <p>Illus. Tom Wänerstrand © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 3/7</p>
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<p>Collect Parts</p>  <p>Sorcery</p> <p>Return target creature card from your graveyard to your hand.</p> <p>Illus. Arnie Swekel © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 4/7</p>	<p>Stitch Together</p>  <p>Sorcery</p> <p>Play Stitch Together only if seven or more cards are in your graveyard. Return target creature card from your graveyard to play.</p> <p>Illus. Arnie Swekel © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 4/7</p>
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<p>Decree of Justice x x 2 **</p>  <p>Sorcery</p> <p>Put X 4/4 white Angel creature tokens with flying into play.</p> <p>Illus. Adam Ritz © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 1/7</p>	<p>Decree of Smaller Justice x 2 *</p>  <p>Instant</p> <p>Decree of Smaller Justice can't be countered.</p> <p>Put X 1/1 white Soldier creature tokens into play.</p> <p>Draw a card.</p> <p>Illus. Ron Spencer © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 1/7</p>
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<p>Early-Evening Ninja 3</p>  <p>Creature — Human Ninja *</p> <p>Whenever Early-Evening Ninja deals combat damage to a player, you may draw a card.</p> <p>Dan Scott © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 1/8</p> <p>2/2</p>	<p>Ninja of the Deep Hours 1</p>  <p>Creature — Human Ninja *</p> <p>Flash (You may play this spell anytime you could play an instant.)</p> <p>As an additional cost to play Ninja of the Deep Hours, return an unblocked attacking creature you control to its owner's hand.</p> <p>Ninja of the Deep Hours comes into play tapped and attacking.</p> <p>Whenever Ninja of the Deep Hours deals combat damage to a player, you may draw a card.</p> <p>Dan Scott © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 1/8</p> <p>2/2</p>
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<p>Hussar's Glance 2</p>  <p>Sorcery</p> <p>Look at the top three cards of your library, then put one of them into your hand and the rest on the bottom of your library in any order.</p> <p>Ron Spears © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 4/8</p>	<p>Court Hussar 1 * 1</p>  <p>Creature — Vedalken Knight *</p> <p>Vigilance</p> <p>When Court Hussar comes into play, look at the top three cards of your library, then put one of them into your hand and the rest on the bottom of your library in any order.</p> <p>Ron Spears © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 4/8</p> <p>1/3</p>
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<p>Tolaria West</p>  <p>Land ☆</p> <p>Tolaria West comes into play tapped.</p> <p>☞: Add ♠ to your mana pool.</p> <p><small>© 2007 Wizards of the Coast 8/8</small></p>	<p>Tolarian Tutor 1 ♠ ♣</p>  <p>Sorcery ☆</p> <p>Tolarian Tutor can't be countered. Search your library for a card with converted mana cost 0, reveal it, put it into your hand, then shuffle your library.</p> <p><small>© 2007 Wizards of the Coast 8/8</small></p>
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<p>Tooth or Nail 5 ♣ ♣</p>  <p>Sorcery ☆</p> <p>Choose one — Search your library for up to two creature cards, reveal them, put them into your hand, then shuffle your library; or put up to two creature cards from your hand into play.</p> <p><small>Greg Hildebrandt © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 5/8</small></p>	<p>Tooth and Nail 7 ♣ ♣</p>  <p>Sorcery ☆</p> <p>Search your library for up to two creature cards, reveal them, put them into your hand, then shuffle your library. Then put up to two creature cards from your hand into play.</p> <p><small>Greg Hildebrandt © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 5/8</small></p>
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<p>Twilight's Beck 4 ♣ ♣</p>  <p>Sorcery ☆</p> <p>Each player returns all creature cards from his or her graveyard to play.</p> <p><small>Illus. Mark Romanoski © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 5/7</small></p>	<p>Twilight's Call 6 ♣ ♣</p>  <p>Instant ☆</p> <p>Each player returns all creature cards from his or her graveyard to play.</p> <p><small>Illus. Mark Romanoski © 2007 Wizards of the Coast 5/7</small></p>
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Last Week's Poll:

Which of the following cards elicits the most groans in your casual games?		
Akroma, Angel of Wrath	3659	29.0%
Kokusho, the Evening Star	3538	28.1%
Darksteel Colossus	2616	20.8%
Platinum Angel	1875	14.9%
Simic Sky Swallower	913	7.2%
Total	12601	100.0%

This Week's Poll:

Which part of magicthegathering.com do you read most regularly?

- Feature articles
- Daily articles
- Ask Wizards
- Card of the Day
- Magic Arcana**
- Tournament coverage

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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