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Keyword Play

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 Making Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

One of the goals of *Future Sight* was to signal areas that we wanted to take the game. As the Head Designer for **Magic** (and less so the Lead Designer of *Future Sight*), this meant I had to figure out where exactly we wanted to go so that I could make sure to layer hints throughout the set. In addition, though, it meant that I had to examine some of the agendas that I was hoping to press forward during my reign as Head Designer.

When I first got this job, I took inventory and began noting what things I felt needed to change. And remember that change needs to happen slowly over time, which is why I didn't try to make every change I thought up happen overnight. Also, just because I thought it up didn't automatically mean it was a good idea; part of effecting change is running your ideas through the group for feedback.

If *Future Sight* was going to map out the future then it had to reflect some of the changes I was hoping to implement. Today's column is about one series of changes. I am going to walk you through what the problem was and then show you what solution I came to and how exactly (with the actual documents I used) I convinced the rest of R&D to agree to my proposal. I promise that by the end of the column, you should have a better understanding of why we did a few of the things we did in *Future Sight*. (If you paid attention to last week's teaser or this week's column title, you should have a bit of a clue of the topic at hand.)



There's Trouble My Friends

Before I get to the solution let me begin with the problem. To explain my problem, I will begin with a metaphor. I went to school in Boston. It's a wonderful city (and contradicting Spinal Tap, quite the college town). I spent an enjoyable four years there while acquiring my higher education. There are many great things I can say about Boston. Ease of driving, though, is not one of them. Yes, the city has amazing public transportation. Why? Because it has to. Driving through Boston is kind of like trying to go place to place through hedge mazes. Every street is narrow and one way with the most baffling sense of traffic flow I've ever seen.

One day in one of my college classes, I was complaining about this fact when a fellow student overheard what I was saying and approached me. He asked me if I ever stopped to think why the streets were so baffling in their layout. I agreed that I had not. He then enlightened me. Boston was older than the automobile. When the city was originally planned, no one gave the automobile a second thought because it didn't exist yet. The streets were retroactively added, which is why they didn't seem to make sense.

What does any of this have to do with **Magic**? Quite a bit. Because, you see, **Magic** is the lovely city of Boston. And modern design is the car. When Richard Garfield originally created **Magic** he had no way of knowing all of the innovations that would later come and thus, he didn't plan for most of them. Much of the work R&D has done over the last fourteen years is to learn from our experience and carefully retrofit the game to accommodate the qualities we've come to realize we need. I think most of the important innovations R&D has made during this time have been this retrofitting, be it *Sixth Edition* rules (including the all-important stack), relevance to Limited play, templating, block structure and design, or numerous other things that have helped the game mature.

Which brings us to the problem at hand: creature keywords. Creature keywords are an important resource to a **Magic** designer. And for this conversation, I'm talking about evergreen creature keywords, that is ones we use all the time, basically in every set. Creature keywords are important to design for a number of reasons. Let me walk through the major ones:

1) Keywords conserve word space. One of the factors that limits design is the amount of text that fits into the text box. When you can communicate an entire sentence in one word, that's often the difference between fitting the ability on the card and not fitting it. One of the reasons, for instance, that I was so happy to add the lifelink keyword was that I have had to remove the ability on a handful of cards because the length of the necessary grafting of text didn't fit.

2) Keywords conserve mindspace. I've talked before in this column about the mental process known as "chunking." Human beings are able to remember more if they can condense multiple ideas down to a single concept. This is, for example, how mnemonics work. Keywords have the same function. Knowing that a creature cannot be blocked by black creatures, cannot be targeted by black spells or permanents, and has all damage from black sources reduced to 0 is a lot easier when you can just remember that it has "protection from black."

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3) Keywords increase elegance. A creature with just keywords for text (what R&D refers to as a French vanilla creature) feels light and simple, yet still has all the strategic complexity for gameplay. This is important because there is an overall complexity weight that we need to aim the sets for. What this means is that the more vanilla and French vanilla creatures we have in a set, the more freedom we have to add complexity elsewhere in the set.

4) Keywords don't pull focus. If a card has new and confusing text, we are very hesitant to put more text on the card which might add to the confusion. Creature keywords are simple and easily graspable, thus allowing us to spice up these cards without adding to the perceived complexity.

5) Keywords add consistency. When something has to be keyworded, it has to be done the same on every card. The big advantage of this is that it forces the designers and developers to pick the best way to do something and stick with it. This was probably the most exciting thing to me about deathtouch. The "basilisk ability" has existed since Alpha, yet there aren't more than five creatures with the ability that work the same. This is very problematic because it makes it impossible for players to know what the card does. By keywording the ability, we force the consistency (which is vital to a game that is constantly expanding its rules base) and thus allow players to better anticipate how new cards will work.



This is just the tip of the iceberg as far as design is concerned. Keywords are a fundamental tool. The biggest problem with keywords is that for a resource this crucial to design the rules that surround them were kind of just randomly put together. What I mean by that is that Richard never sat down to figure how best to allocate keywords based on color pie. He just put them where they "felt" right. And for the last fourteen years, the keywords have just kind of existed where they fell. As you'll see in a moment, this has caused design all sorts of headaches.

Fixing a Hole Where the Rain Gets In

Many times I explain why design decisions are made by walking you through the philosophy behind the decisions. Today, I'm getting a little more practical. I'm going to show you how the system as created was causing the designers a lot of headaches-not philosophical headaches, but practical "get the job done" headaches.

To explain, I'm going to use two documents I created when I was trying to explain the problem to the rest of R&D. I'll be jumping in through these documents to explain the larger issues at hand.

Creature Keywords

Current Keywords

Defender:	WHITE, BLUE, green, red, black
Double Strike:	WHITE, RED
Fear:	BLACK
First Strike:	WHITE, RED, black
Flash:	WHITE, GREEN
Flying:	BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, red, green
Haste:	RED, black
Landwalk:	GREEN, BLACK, RED, blue
Protection:	WHITE, black, red, green
Regeneration:	GREEN, BLACK
Trample:	GREEN, black, red, blue
Vigilance:	WHITE

I started by finding all the keywords that we used on a regular basis. I then looked at cards in Standard to see what colors the abilities were used on. If the color is in ALL CAPS that means it appeared on a substantial proportion of the cards that had the ability. Lower case meant that one or two cards used the ability. Flash (you may play this creature any time you could play an instant) has been upgraded to evergreen status.

Color Breakdown

White:	Double strike, First Strike, Flash, Flying, Protection, Vigilance
Blue:	Flying
Black:	Fear, Flying, Regeneration, Landwalk
Red:	Double strike, First Strike, Haste, Landwalk
Green:	Flash, Landwalk, Regeneration, Trample

For each color, I then listed the keyword abilities that were capped above. This should be the first glimpse of the problem I'm talking about. White has access to six keywords. Blue has access to one. And not even a unique one at that. Black also has problems. Yes, it has four keywords, but three of them are basically just variations on evasion and the fourth is an activated ability, which causes its own set of problems.

Please note before I continue that I am not talking about blue's overall power level. In that area, blue's doing just fine. If anything, we're always working to keep blue from being too good. No, I'm talking about the ability in blue to design simple French vanilla creatures. In this area and this area alone, blue is in a bad way, by far the worst of any color.

To demonstrate let me walk you through a very common design assignment. We've made a cycle of creatures with some connected ability. To keep the focus on that ability yet differentiate the creatures, we decide to add a keyword to each creature. As always we're forced to start in blue. Blue gets flying. Why? Because that's all it has. Yes, I could mix it up by giving it islandwalk, or possibly "CARDNAME is unblockable" if I can wiggle a bit with the keyword restriction. Not that any of this matters much as all my available choices are evasion. Next I turn to black. Flying is out as I used it in blue. **Fear** and landwalk aren't great choices because blue already has evasion. That leaves regeneration. But regeneration is messy as it requires a mana activation and that might make it feel too different from the other cards. But I have no other choices so I either stick with a second evasion or use regeneration.

Next I turn to green. Flash doesn't tend to work well in this kind of cycle as it reads differently than the other keywords. **Forestwalk** is evasion and I've already beaten that ability to a pulp. **Regeneration** has the same trouble it has in black, and possibly I used it in black, which means it's hard to use here. That leaves me with trample. This is why 90% of the time, green in this situation gets trample. Next I turn to red. Double strike is very powerful and is thus hard to use often and feels out of place in common. **Mountainwalk** is yet more evasion. That leaves first strike and haste. First strike is also available in white, so I need to check what white's doing. Skipping the things I have to skip I'm down to first strike, protection and vigilance. The place where I usually mix it up is in red and white as it's the only place I have any real options available.

As a designer I want the tools to mix things up. The status quo not only kept me from shaking things up, it often kept me from even finding solutions at all. Yes, I usually was able to solve problems like this by being creative but man, I shouldn't have to work so hard to do something I do almost every set.



White/Blue	
Blue/Black	
Black/Red	
Red/Green	
Green/White	Flash
White/Black	
Blue/Red	
Black/Green	Regeneration, Landwalk
Red/White	Double Strike, First Strike
Green/Blue	

I included this chart because at times in design (most often when multicolor is involved) it's important to find intersection between colors. Having overlapping keywords is valuable. As you can see the status quo was not much help as there was almost no overlap.

When I first talked with Randy Buehler (during *Future Sight*, Randy was still the Director of **Magic** R&D; the position is now filled by Aaron Forsythe) he suggested that I look at all of the base creature abilities (things we use all the time) we might ever decide to keyword. The discussion we had was where was the line of how many evergreen creature keywords was acceptable. The group all felt that the number was higher than what we had but we were not far away from the limit. My job was to research what abilities existed that we could keyword and then put them in what I felt was their order of importance. Below is my list. Let's walk through them one by one.

Things That Could Be Keyworded (in my order of preference)

Spirit Link: WHITE

We've been talking about keywording this ability forever. It was definitely the one on everybody's short list, partially because we use it every set and partially because it is a little unwieldy wordwise. After doing all my research it stayed on top of the list.

Basilisk: BLACK, GREEN

This was the ability that I didn't go into my research realizing how high I would prioritize it. First, it was an ability that we use pretty often. Second, its template was all over the place (as I said before, we haven't printed more than five cards with the same template). Keywording it would force us to make a choice and stick with it. Third, we used this ability in another one of our games, **DuelMasters**, and the deathtouch ability is a staple ability that has proved very good for the game. I believed the ability was being underused and keywording it would mean it would show up more.

Untargetable: GREEN, BLUE

The reason I listed this one so highly was two things. One, I thought we could use the word "untargetable" meaning that it wouldn't count as a new vocabulary word (players already have to learn what "target" as a verb means). Two, it was a blue ability and we really needed those.

Unblockable: BLUE

Unblockable has the same two reasons as untargetable had.

Reach: WHITE

I didn't feel the "Web" ability was necessary to keyword as the text it replaced was so short and it wasn't the kind of keyword that worked all that well in the places that keywording it would help us. (For example, I doubt I would put reach on the green creature in the cycle above.) But Rules Manager Mark Gottlieb realized that keywording it would solve a long-standing problem about who can block what (Creatures that can block fliers versus creatures that can only be blocked as if they were fliers).

New Rampage: GREEN
Lure: GREEN
Can't block: BLACK
Must attack: RED
Sengir: BLACK

These last five were abilities that could be keyworded but weren't ones I personally felt needed to be. I included them in case someone else felt a need to argue their keyword status.

List of Other Repeatable Creature Abilities (all with activation costs)

Firebreathing (C: +1/+0)
Toughness pumping (C: +0/+1)
Shade (C:+1/+1)
Rangestrike (T: Deal damage to attackers and blockers)
Wyluli (T: Target creature gets +1/+1)
Decoy (C,T: Tap target creature)
Samite (T: prevent N)
Draw (T: draw a card)
Looter (T: Draw and discard)
Self Bounce (C: Return to hand)
Twiddle (T: Tap or untap)
Untap (C: Untap this creature)
Tim (T: Deal 1)
Flowstone (C: +1/-1)
Panic (C: target creature cannot block mez0)
Druid (T: untap land)
Rootwalla (C: +N/+N until end of turn; use once)

Next I listed abilities that were used often but that would be awkward to keyword as they all had activation costs.

The second part of my master keyword plan was to take any keyword that was only used in one color and choose a secondary color. The idea of a secondary color for a keyword was that it would be used less often, usually at higher rarities than the primary color. In addition, a keyword in a secondary color wouldn't get the ability for the same cost as the primary color. The secondary color thus would have access but without the many advantages given the primary color. This would allow us to keep the current color pie flavor while still freeing up design.

Why did the keywords need a secondary color? Because creature keywords were too valuable a tool to limit their use. By extending them, we would give design more flexibility and options. What is the strike against it? It breaks the status quo and, to be fair, change for the sake of change is often not a good thing. My major argument, though is that the status quo was arbitrary. First strike and regeneration, for example, got to be in two colors not by any design but just because that's how the cards fell in 1993. **Magic** design is hard. To do the best job we can, I felt it was important to free up whatever tools we could without causing too much stress to the system. Stretching the necessary creature keywords to a second color felt like an appropriate end towards this goal.

For each keyword with one color, I listed options for the secondary color (with my options bolded).

Keywords In One Color Secondary Color Options (My choice bolded)

Fear: BLACK RED?

As I've said before, fear is the keyword I would most likely unkeyword if I was forced to remove one. My decision was only further strengthened when I did this exercise. No color makes sense as a secondary color for fear because the keyword is the only one directly tied into a specific color. Note that this is the only one where I both put a question mark after the secondary color choice and there is no bolded option. Also note below in my "New Color Breakdowns" that I didn't even feel confident enough to list it a paragraph later in the same paper.

Haste: RED **BLACK**, GREEN

The secondary choice for haste is a toughie. Both black and green have dabbled in haste over the years. The reason I leaned toward recommending black was twofold. First, black needed more new creature keywords than green. Once again, like blue, this isn't about overall power level (also like blue, black traditionally has always fared quite well in overall power level) but design space in creating keyworded creatures. Second, in looking for a secondary color an important factor was how differently the keyword could be used in the new color. Green seemed to have more overlap with red in the kinds of haste creatures it could make than black did. Plus, black had access to flying, which red and green both lack in small creatures and/or low rarities.

I know that the last paragraph is bound to ruffle the feathers of green lovers. There have been a lot of articles written lately about how R&D needs to improve green creatures. Giving haste to green clearly could have been one way to help with this problem. How could I ignore this need of green in my decision? The answer is that my priorities are different than those of the players in this particular scenario. As the Head Designer, I was not looking for ways to adjust overall power level between the colors. I was finding ways to maximize design space. Putting haste in black simply let me design more unique cards. There are numerous ways to address power level concerns. There are far fewer ways to stretch design space. Thus, the latter has to be my priority. This doesn't mean that I don't sympathize with what the green lovers are saying. This just wasn't the place to address that issue.

For fans of haste in green, I do have a little good news. This very issue reraised the topic of haste in green. and R&D decided that green did have some need for haste. Our solution was to grant green tertiary status. Tertiary status means that it's acceptable to occasionally give green haste but very rarely and only where flavor strongly fits. An another example of a tertiary status would be first strike in black. We do it infrequently, but from time to time we make a knight in black that wants to have a combat feel and we give it first strike. Another important aspect of a tertiary status is that the ability is not defined in that color. Haste, for instance, isn't a green thing. If we were designing an enchantment that granted haste to all creatures we wouldn't put it in green (yes, Concordant Crossroads isn't allowable in the modern-day color pie). If we were designing a multicolor card, we couldn't make haste the thing that the green half is giving the card. Tertiary status allows the exception but doesn't make it an organic part of the color.



Protection: WHITE **BLUE**, GREEN

On some level, every color has dabbled in protection from color. The goal here was to find a color that we could notch up the use of protection. I chose blue over green because blue needed it more.

Trample: GREEN **RED**, BLACK

Red seemed like the obvious choice for three reasons. One, the flavor fits red well. Two, the ability seemed useful in how red creatures are designed. And three, I really wanted a mechanic to overlap red and green.

Vigilance: WHITE **BLUE**, GREEN

This was the hardest color to choose. At the time, I was going to put vigilance secondarily in blue as blue needed it more. Plus, blue actually has a history in early **Magic** of using vigilance. (Okay, okay, green did have Rabid Wombat.) As you will see, this suggestion will change.

Spirit Link: WHITE **BLACK**

These last two abilities were ones I was hoping would be keyworded. Putting lifelink in black was pretty obvious as we've been toying with it for years and as historians will point out, the ability started in black (on *Arabian Night's* El-Hajjâj). Plus, when you really stop to think about the flavor of the mechanic, you question more why it's white at all than why it's also black.

Unblockable: BLUE **RED**

This was here mostly because I wanted to have an overlapping blue/red keyword. Also, I thought we could just use the word "unblockable," which to me didn't even count against the keyword max. If you're wondering why I

felt red was the next best color for unblockable, it's because red is the color that gets "target creature cannot block this creature." In fact, there's a long-standing R&D joke about the following two cards.

Guys Are Sneaky

???

Enchantment

Creatures can't be blocked.

Guys Are Panicked

???

Enchantment

Creatures can't block.

The first enchantment is blue and the second is red. They do the exact same thing, yet each one is perfectly in flavor mechanically and creatively. This is why I felt unblockable could be red.

I ended my proposal by showing what the new world order would look like:

New Color Breakdown

White	Double strike, First Strike, Flash, Flying, Protection, Reach, Vigilance
Blue	Flying, Protection/Vigilance, Unblockable, Untargetability
Black	Basilisk, Fear, Flying, Haste, Spirit Link, Regeneration
Red	Double strike, First Strike, Haste, Trample
Green	Basilisk, Flash, Landwalk, Reach, Regeneration, Trample, Untargetability
White/Blue	Vigilance, Protection
Blue/Black	Flying?
Black/Red	Haste
Red/Green	Trample
Green/White	Flash, Reach
White/Black	Spirit Link
Blue/Red	Unblockable
Black/Green	Regeneration, Baslisk
Red/White	Double Strike, First Strike
Green/Blue	Flash, Untargetability

The R&D team that I pitched this to (I call the group "The Illuminati," but it's real name is something like the **Magic** R&D Advisory Panel; it's made up of all the senior people in R&D working on **Magic**) wanted a formal proposal. Below, with some more commentary, is the actual proposal I submitted:

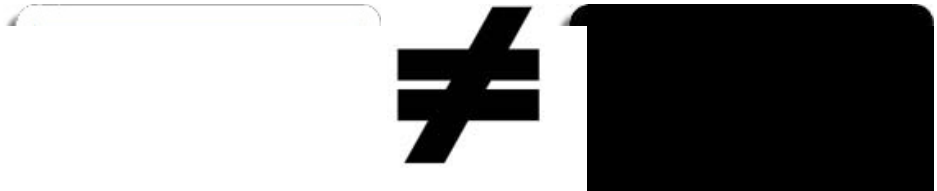
Mark's Proposal

In order to better enable design, increase ability to do "French vanilla" creatures, even out the creature keyword resource among the colors, and gain a variety of miscellaneous other smaller bonuses, I propose the following changes:

#1 - Keyword Several Creature Abilities

Here are, in order, the abilities I would like keyword. I am not recommending the names, and the actual templating will have to be decided.

Spirit Link ("Whenever this creature deals damage, you gain that much life.")





Before I submitted this proposal I spent some time talking with various R&D folk about how exactly this keyword should work. It was at this point that Mark Gottlieb pointed out that what we wanted to do was not **Spirit Link** but what appeared on **Mourning Thrull**. **Spirit Link** gives the life to the controller of **Spirit Link**. For example, let's compare **Mourning Thrull** with a **Spirit Linked Suntail Hawk**. If your opponent steals **Mourning Thrull**, he or she gets the life, but if they take the **Spirit Linked Suntail Hawk**, you still do. This is why we didn't call the ability "spirit link." Note for both this and deathtouch we didn't define the damage as combat damage because we felt they would play better that way. (Yeah, we made the opposite choice for poisonous, but that's a topic for another block.)

Basilisk ("Whenever this creature deals damage to a creature, destroy that creature.")

Ironically, I chose a template (okay, a rough template) for this card that only existed on two cards in the history of **Magic**, but I felt it was important that the destruction be tied to the damage. I understand the flavor reasons behind Thicket Basilisk's "block me and be stoned" version but I didn't think it was the one that would play best. (For instance, I think it's important that something like damage prevention or protection can save your creature from deathtouch.) This version of the template is also the reason that Creative steered away from a name like "basilisk."

Untargetable ("Cannot be the target of spells and abilities.")

Of everything in my proposal here's one of the things that changed the most. I had intended the word to be "untargetable." I had included it on this list because I felt like it added a usable keyword without really adding yet another keyword to learn. The problem with "untargetable" was that it's an adjective, and keywords really like being nouns. "Creatures with untargetable" is grammatically awkward, yet is the wording we would have had to use. My biggest regret with shroud was that it wasn't created in such a way that we could use the keyword when talking about variations of the mechanic.

Reach ("Can block as though it had flying.")
I am not recommending this ability be keyworded for design reasons, but it has come up that Rules is very interested in this ability being keyworded.

As I say above, reach was on this list not for design reasons but for rules ones. But I figure design causes Rules enough headaches that I should occasionally throw them a bone.

Before I move on I guess I should address what happened to "unblockable." Gottlieb said it couldn't be done (it was technical and I honestly don't remember why) and no one thought saving two words (the phrase is now "CARDNAME is unblockable") was worth the hassle.

#2 - Grant Secondary Status to Certain Keywords in New Colors

Haste	Add secondary in black.
Protection	Add secondary in blue (blue gets protection from things other than color).
Spirit Link	Add secondary in black.
Trample	Add secondary in red.
Vigilance	Add secondary in green.

My final proposal had two shifts. First, Aaron convinced me that vigilance in green had more benefits than in blue as adding it to blue didn't make any cards that white couldn't already make. Blue had fliers and low power/high toughness guys. Giving vigilance to green allowed it to be used on fat creatures that green specializes in but that white tends to avoid. My second change was a subtle one. I decided that while I thought it was okay to put protection secondarily in blue, I needed something to make it feel different from white. When I looked through old blue cards with protection I realized that blue has a history of having protection from things other than color. This seemed like a flavorful way to add protection to blue while still keeping white king of protection.

#3 - Shift Status of Certain Keywords

Flash: Shift from a green/white primary ability to a green/white/blue

primary ability. I think this is the one ability that can be supported primary in three colors.

Untargetable: Shift ability from primary green, secondary blue to equal in both (such as first strike in white/red). Both can do plain untargetable but green also gets "untargetable by opponents' spells and abilities" while blue gets activated untargetable and auras that grant it.

This section is what I'll call the "blue still needs help" section. Blue had gained protection, but it still needed more creature keywords. Putting flash in blue made sense as blue had a lot of instant effects that blue creatures wanted as comes into play effects. Also, blue has had a history of making tokens at instant speed as surprise blockers. (Okay they usually went away at end of turn.)

With shroud it was more a matter of allowing blue to use the keyword straight up. As I explain in the proposal in the old world, blue got shroud only as an activated ability or with auras.

Here is how the world will look if the proposal is accepted:

White	Double strike, First Strike, Flash, Flying, Protection, Vigilance
Blue	Flash, Flying, Islandwalk, Protection, Untargetable
Black	Basilisk, Fear, Flying, Haste, Spirit Link, Swampwalk, Regeneration
Red	Double strike, First Strike, Haste, Mountainwalk, Trample
Green	Basilisk, Flash, Forestwalk, Regeneration, Trample, Untargetable, Vigilance
White/Blue	Flash, Protection
Blue/Black	Flying?
Black/Red	Haste
Red/Green	Trample
Green/White	Flash, Vigilance
White/Black	Spirit Link
Blue/Red	Currently None
Black/Green	Regeneration, Basilisk
Red/White	Double Strike, First Strike
Green/Blue	Flash, Untargetable

My proposal was accepted as submitted (with a few tweaks like green tertiary status for haste), so what you see above is how **Magic** is proceeding forward. I'm pretty sure that we're done keywording base evergreen abilities. Something might get upgraded to evergreen, as double strike and flash did, but I don't anticipate you seeing us keyword an existing ability any time soon.

Changes for the Better

The good news (and I've already seen this in sets that we've designed but that haven't gotten to all of you yet) is that this change is having a wonderful effect on design. It's opened up design space and allowed us to make some new things with some old abilities. *Tenth Edition* will use some of the new keywords but I think you'll have to wait for *Lorwyn* Block to get the real impact of these changes.

I know there was a bunch of questions about why we added the new keywords. I hope my column today has explained our reasoning and perhaps given you a glimpse into some of the craftsmanship that goes into designing **Magic** cards. As always, I'd love to hear feedback.

Join me next week for an enchanted column.

Until then, may you reroute the roads of your own Boston.

Mark Rosewater

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