

The Flavor of Tribals

Why the best flavor is sometimes as invisible as possible.

Doug Beyer

Let's get right down to it. What's the flavor of the tribal type? This: Nothin'.

Not a thing. It's empty of flavor content, as empty as a period at the end of a sentence.

Now, don't get me wrong. Tribal cards are oozing with flavor! But the tribal type itself is just a placeholder, a piece of punctuation that does its job and, ideally, fades away.

See, the tribal card type's purpose is to disappear. Its job, flavorfully, is to not be there at all. Mark Gottlieb had told us that serious problems would arise in the rules of **Magic** if we did this:

Instant — Goblin

(See [Aaron Forsythe's feature article](#) for more on why this was so.) So we knew it was important to come up with a good word that came as close as possible to that while making sense of the flavor of the type.

[Something] Instant — Goblin

Since I was (and am) Mister Word Guy for **Magic** (the guy who rounds up names and flavor text from a team of writers each set, the guy who names keywords, and various other stuff I'll talk about someday), I was on a mission to come up with a good word for this thing.

The Quest for a Word

"Tribal" was proposed very early on. But it's informative to think about the fact that it could have been otherwise. It could have been a noun, for example—all the other card types (artifact, creature, enchantment, land, instant, planeswalker, sorcery) are nouns, and, as Mark Gottlieb pointed out, nouns are handy to talk about and refer to.

For example, the type could have been called "kin":

Kin Instant — Goblin

"Kin" made a lot of sense to me with *Lorwyn* coming up, since kithkin and flamekin were on the way. Races all share a kind of kinship, including their spells. And as a bonus, it's a short word, which is always a handy feature for cards meant to have two types and a subtype (such as K-I-N E-N-C-H-A-N-T-M-E-N-T — E-L-E-M-E-N-T-A-L, to think of a potentially long one).

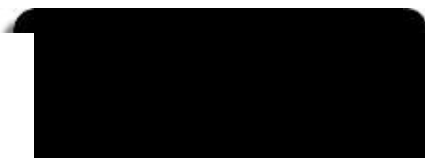
But the "kin" type wasn't doing what we wanted. "Kin" wasn't supposed to be the important thing on the type line: the "Goblin" bit was. Introducing "kin" made you wonder what the heck was going on way more than the appearance of a creature type after that dash. It kept bugging me that the creature type was no longer the star of the show.

But still, I tried coming up with a word that captured what these things were. I tried "heritage":

Heritage Instant — Goblin

That had a kind of ring to it. Heritage sorceries, heritage enchantments... they're magics infused with the heritage of a creature type. The word was kind of long, but to my mind, exotic and cool. "Counter target heritage." "Search your library for a heritage card, reveal it, and then... celebrate it during some sort of weekend street festival." Huzzah!

But there were still problems. First off, it again drew the spotlight away from the creature type. Second, despite the fact that we were working on the tribal card type for *Lorwyn's* sake, the first opportunity anyone would have to actually see a tribal would be this:





Bound in Silence was going into *Future Sight* as we were working on the tribal issue. This was a suboptimal way to be introduced to the type, to put it lightly. There's so much going on here—Aura is already a subtype, so mixing two types, tribal and enchantment, plus two subtypes, Aura and Rebel, was already going to be a shock to the system. Plus, the fact that the creature type is "Rebel" instead of something flavorful and grokkable like "Elf" was going to make it even harder to figure out.

With all that in mind, "Heritage Enchantment—Rebel Aura" was making me a little queasy. What about just "tribe," the noun form of the word?

Tribe Instant — Goblin

"Tribe" is a noun, so it would be easier to refer to. It makes sense in the flavor, in a way; this thing is both an instant and a tribe. I argued for "tribe" for a long time. But it still doesn't quite disappear in the way we wanted it to. In fact it has some flavor dissonance with the rest of the card—it sort of leads you toward things that aren't true.

"Tribe" and Flavor Dissonance

Here's a hypothetical card, totally possible in the rules if "tribe" is a card type.

Tribekill
1B
Instant
Destroy target tribe.

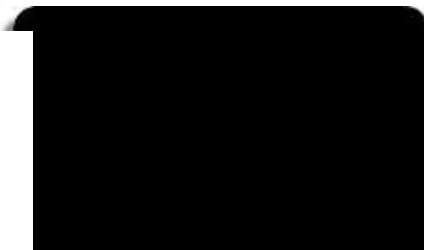
This destroys "tribes" the same way that **Shatter** destroys artifacts; it can destroy a "tribe enchantment" just like **Shatter** can destroy an artifact creature or artifact land. As long as you understand that "tribe" is the technical name of a card type, then you play Tribekill correctly. But to my mind, the flavor of it is very misleading. Tribekill looks like it should mean, "Choose a creature type. Destroy all target creatures that share that type"—something akin to **Engineered Plague** or **Tsabo's Decree**.

Now, we chose not to make cards like Tribekill that refer to the tribal type. The type is only there so we could put creature types on noncreatures; the goal was to make creature types matter in new places.

But Tribekill illustrates what I mean by "flavor dissonance." **Magic** players already talk about tribes in casual terms—it has a prior meaning to us, and we mean *creatures*. The elf tribe. The barbarian tribe. We already have intuitions about that term, so when "tribe" suddenly means "the card type that isn't a creature and never shows up on its own but shares the list of all subtypes that the creature card type has" instead of "the set of all creatures with a given creature type," your language gets mixed up, and the fun and flavor of **Magic** start conflicting with the actual rules. This is bad. This is "flavor dissonance."

Now of course, the word "tribal" has prior meaning, too. But if we were ever to refer to a tribal in rules text (which we already did, sort of, on **Tarmogoyf**), the mere fact that it's an adjective would make it stick out, and actually make it clearer that the card doesn't mean a bunch of creatures.

Tribalkill
1B
Instant
Destroy target tribal.



Less grammatical. But also far less misleading.

A Long Journey Back to the Start

In the end, we came back around to "tribal." We settled on "tribal" because it looks like it is doing nothing. It sort of wears a disguise, allowing it to hide in plain sight: tribal masquerades as a supertype, like "legendary." Or it masquerades as a piece of flavor that doesn't really have to be there.

MAN 1: Hello, my good man! Might I inquire, what kind of instants are Goblins?

MAN 2: Why, *tribal* instants, of course!

MAN 1: Of course! Naturally! How silly of me. Now then, if it isn't too much trouble... **Tarfire** you?

MAN 2: Two points of boggart-hurled flaming tar to the dome, right-o! (*Adjusts a d20.*)

Despite tribal being a full-fledged type and not a supertype, we chose to let it look like a supertype or just a flavor word, because 99% of the time (*Tarmogoyf* aside), it acts like it doesn't matter. If you think of it as a supertype, you'll probably be close enough to right—there is no such card as Tribalkill (*Tarmogoyf* aside). If you think of it as a word of flavor or a kind of reminder text, you'll probably be close enough to right (*Tarmogoyf* aside). The rules mesh with your intuition (*Tarmogoyf* aside), and that's the best kind of rules to have.

The Flavor of Tribal... Cards

Tribal magic in the *flavor* sense has been around since **Magic** first began. For example:



That skull on a pike was a symbolic banner of orcish valor, a spell to unite orcs under a common sense of rage in battle. (An oriflamme is a Medieval royal banner.)

Here's a question: Should **Orcish Oriflamme** be errata'ed to "Tribal Enchantment — Orc"? On the one hand, it's clearly a type of orcish magic. On the other, the fact that it's called "Orcish" anything is all flavor—it doesn't do anything mechanically to Orcs in particular, and could certainly provide a symbolic banner of battle-valor to your army of elves, say (which is how I used it all the time, back in the day).

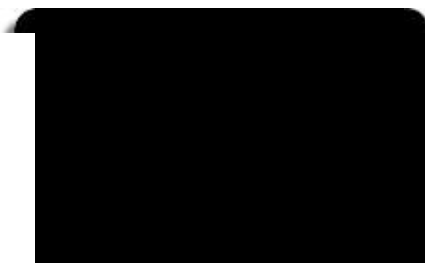




What about **Elvish Fury**? The name clearly indicates that it's elvish magic. It's not tribal in the mechanic—it doesn't create or affect Elf tokens, for example, and you wouldn't have to have any Elves in your deck for this spell to be effective. Again, you can grant some **Elvish Fury** to a Zombie or a Goat or whatever, and it works just fine. But from a pure flavor standpoint, is **Elvish Fury** an elf spell? Heck yes. It's magic that elves use to whip their predatory instincts into a savage rage, and then co-opted by planeswalkers for use in zombie- or goat-involving circumstances, as they see fit. So there are definitely flavor grounds for this card having the tribal type and the Elf subtype. But this and the **Oriflamme** are making my eyebrow arch—and that happens when I suspect trouble. Let's look at other examples, and see if my eyebrow stays up there.



Elemental Augury has "Elemental" right in the name. But maybe it's not magic created by creatures with the Elemental subtype, but rather via elemental magic in general. **Dragon Roost** is an enchantment that *makes dragons*. And it's conceived as a dragon location. It sounds like it should have a Dragon subtype, and therefore be fetchable with **Dragonstorm**(!). Making creature tokens feels like it should be an important criterion—it's a noncreature that's bound up with creatures. So then, what about **Dovescape**? Should it be a Tribal Enchantment—Bird because it makes Birds? **Dovescape** isn't really about the birds, it's more about the turning off of noncreature spells... and besides, the Bird tribe doesn't have a type of magic, does it? My eyebrow is staying up there. It's looking difficult to have a consistent set of criteria for applying the tribal type.





What about **Goblin Grenade**? Other than sounding like an artifact (which a lot of red burn spells do...it's an issue), the name definitely points at it being goblin magic. And it's tribal in its mechanic. It specifically mentions Goblins, and does nothing if you have no Goblins to sacrifice to it. In fact, compare it to this:



Fodder Launch was specifically designed to be a nod to **Goblin Grenade**, and *it's* a Tribal Sorcery—Goblin. So what's the deal? Do we errata **Goblin Grenade**? There are serious mechanical implications of doing so, thanks to cards like **Boggart Harbinger** and **Wort, Boggart Auntie**.

Let's just look at a pure example.





Tarfire is a special kind of damage spell all because of its creature type. It's identical to **Shock** in every mechanical sense except that it's a Goblin spell, which makes all the difference in the Vorthosian world. It's goblin magic. In flavor terms, it's the kind of spell that neither elves nor humans nor giants nor zombie wizards can cast. It originates from goblin culture, bound up with their particular view of the world and their relationship with sources of red mana. It's about boggart Aunties passing down magical secrets via oral tradition over generations of magically-gifted boggarts.

Again, planeswalkers can cast it, because that's what planeswalkers do—they traipse around the multiverse and learn to cast the regional or personal magics that they find on their travels. So they're not a counterexample—**Tarfire** is definitely goblin tribal magic.

But **Goblin Grenade** remains a regular old sorcery.

Why No Errata?

This has caused me a lot of Vorthosian soul-searching. I could make some flavor explanation for why only this year's creature-type-matters cards got the tribal type. Maybe there's something special about the plane of Lorwyn that makes tribal magic matter more, that didn't hold true back during *The Dark*, or maybe **Bearscape** and **Centaur Glade** weren't truly forms of tribal magic, or maybe **Goblin Grenade** was secretly instituted by elves as a way to *thin out* the goblins' numbers. (Blasphemy!)

Part of the real answer is that official errata has a cost. First of all, the decision to add the Goblin subtype to older cards would have a serious impact on tournament play with cards like **Boggart Harbinger** and **Boggart Birth Rite**, and those cards were designed and developed with the assumption that only other *Lorwyn*-era cards would have tribal subtypes. Furthermore, as we've said before, intuition matters. If we randomly selected certain cards like **Dragon Roost** and **Mobilization** to have tribal subtypes, then you would have a difficult time remembering which qualified as tribals and which were just subtypeless cards. We just made a large number of changes to creature types in the [Grand Creature Type Update](#), and doing the same for tribals would be very taxing on players' memories. As it is right now, it's very easy to remember what cards are tribals and what aren't—the ones in *Lorwyn* (plus **Bound in Silence**) are, and the rest aren't.

The other part of the answer is—**Magic** is your game. In the comfort of your own play group, you can do what you want. Your living room is Vorthos territory, so play by Vorthos rules and build Vorthos decks there, if your friends will let you. Summon up your **Elvish Fury** with an **Elvish Harbinger**. Put copies of **Dragon Breath** and **Dragon Arch** into play with your **Dragonstorm** (but not **Wee Dragonauts**—they're actually Faeries!). While you're at it, give Whippoorwill flying—I won't tell.

I'll get back to the tribe descriptions next week. For now, enjoy everything tribals do for you in *Lorwyn*.



Missed the Prerelease, or just hungry for more? Check out [Lorwyn Release Events](#) October 12-14 to play with *Lorwyn* cards as soon as they go on sale.

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