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# Kith and Kin

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Mark Rosewater is in Germany this week for the [Magic Invitational](#). The good news is that he still sent in his article as normal... the bad news is that he didn't have access to the theme week schedule, and accidentally wrote his article on an upcoming theme! Rather than try to scramble for a replacement column at the last minute, we decided to just give you a preview of the upcoming Kithkin Week, when Mark will no doubt deliver an in-depth column on planeswalkers. Enjoy!

Welcome to Kithkin Week! This is our first *Lorwyn* tribe theme week (and yes, there will be more of them -- although beware that we've already had Goblin and Merfolk weeks). We thought we'd start small. Okay, that's it for the short jokes. I tapped myself out for [Dwarf Week](#), and really enough with the small talk (no really, that was the last one). So what am I going to talk about? Well, the Kithkin represent a very common problem we face in design so I thought for today's column I would examine this issue and explain how we deal with it. In addition, I'll touch upon a few of the other design challenges presented by Kithkin.

## Race Relations

The design of every set has its particular issues to work out. For a tribal set like *Lorwyn*, one of the focal points of design is figuring out how each tribe is going to work. Here were the basic issues we had with each tribe.

**Goblins** – The goblins defined the last tribal block (*Onslaught*—and yes, one day I'll explain why I don't consider *Champions of Kamigawa* a tribal block, just not today). We needed to find a way to do them again in a way that didn't make the block feel like it was just regurgitating *Onslaught*. On top of that, goblins got so ridiculous during Constructed formats around and shortly after *Onslaught* block that many players had (and still have) a bad association with goblins. We wanted to recapture goblins in such a way that it gave them a new identity that players could embrace again. (Quick aside: so why did we do goblins again? This question seems quite popular on the boards. Even after the *Onslaught* onslaught of Goblins, our market research shows that goblins are the third most popular creature type behind dragons and angels, neither of which really work well as a tribal race. We did them again because our research showed players wanted them again.)

**Elves** – Elves had a lot of the same issues that Goblins have as they too showed up in *Onslaught* at a power level high enough for Constructed.

**Giants** – How do you make a race of creatures that starts at four mana and gets more expensive from there? Add to that problem the fact that traditionally in fantasy giants are isolationists and you have some flavor issues to work through when the point of a tribal theme is to play a lot of the same creature type in the same deck.

**Merfolk** – We brought back the fishfolk by popular demand, but that meant we had a lot to live up to. And the age-old blue beatdown variety didn't make much sense in the modern color pie. How could we give them their own feel that stayed true to their flavor but worked mechanically?

**Faeries** – While **Magic** has had faeries since day one, they've never really had a collective flavor. In addition, due to flavor, they all had to be small fliers, which meant we had some things to work out.

**Elementals** – We'd never done humanoid elementals before. Oh yeah, and this race was two different things in the world's flavor hanging out under the same creature type. How was that all going to work out?

**Treefolk** – This tribe's sole mechanical link has historically been that their toughness tended to be high than their power. And like the giants, this race was also basically just big creatures.

**Shapeshifters** – How do you define something that's linked by always being something else?

And with all these issues, the tribe I was most worried about was the kithkin. Why? Because they break a taboo that I've been very sensitive about.

## Taboo Who

Several years ago, I wrote an article talking about [an axis of design](#) whose extremes I called linear and modular. Linear cards are cards that beg to be played with other cards. A card that says "All blue instants cost 1 less to play," for example, has to be played with blue instants. Modular cards are ones that don't require specific other cards to play. A card that says "Target player gains 4 life" doesn't really force you to play any other particular card. (Click the link above if you would like to hear these concepts spelled out in greater depth.)

Tribal as a theme is, by definition, very linear. A card that boosts Goblins tells you to put it in a deck full of Goblins. While linear cards are comforting in that they help suggests deck ideas they also have the problems of

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limiting deck choices. A card that has to be played with a small subset of cards can be restrictive to deckbuilding. For example, a Goat lord wouldn't give you a lot of options because there just aren't that many goats. Yes, changelings are Goats, but still.

Quick aside: When we made *Goatnapper*, I stressed that it was crucial for the joke to play out to have one Goat in *Lorwyn*. And I don't mean a changeling. I wanted an actual Goat, a card with the word "Goat" on its card type line. What do goatnappers steal? Why, this one Goat. Unlike most environments, by the way, this one actually supports goats. Goats show up in names, in art. If any set was ripe with goats it was *Lorwyn*. Other members of R&D thought the joke was funnier if there were no goats and players would be initially perplexed because the card had nothing to steal. I fought and fought for a goat. Just one rare creature, I begged. It didn't even have to be on a good card. It got to the point where members of R&D didn't want people to bring up goats because they knew they'd have to listen to my goat tirade. So what happens? The set comes out and I've gotten numerous letters yelling at me because there are no (non-changeling) goats in the set. R&D hopes the letters will stop soon because they are tired of hearing me scream, "We couldn't have one bleeping goat?!"

The point I was getting at before was that if you want to make linear mechanics friendly to deckbuilding (that is the open-endedness of the deckbuilding and not the simplicity) you need to make them backwards-compatible. That is, you need to match your linear mechanics with things that exist back through the history of the game. For example, if you make a linear "Elf matters" card, you still have a lot of flexibility because there have been so many Elf cards throughout *Magic's* first fourteen years.

Which brings us to the taboo in question: don't make linear mechanics non-backwards-compatible. This taboo was what I believe was the biggest strike against Kamigawa Block. The set kept creating cards that benefit other cards only found in that block: splice onto Arcane, Samurai, Ninjas, etc. Which brings us back to kithkin. The problem we had with kithkin was when we chose to make it one of the eight tribes (and remember, design on a large set starts a long time before release) there was only one in existence (*Legends'* Amrou Kithkin) and it was, to be blunt, a pretty bad card.

The problem at hand was how to make kithkin work as a tribe such that they offered enough variety to offer some choices in deckbuilding and not make the kithkin deck be the same deck in every format. Design (and development) tackled this problem in several ways:

#### #1 – Put some Kithkin in *Time Spiral* Block.

One of the biggest advantages of working far ahead is that you can take into account future design when working on earlier sets. Such was the case for *Lorwyn*. We knew that some of the tribes—kithkin, merfolk, and treefolk in particular—didn't have many recent cards, so we made sure to stick a few in during *Time Spiral* Block. This way when *Lorwyn* rolled around we'd give players some access to other cards.

#### #2 – Concentrate Kithkin in a single color.

One of the themes of *Lorwyn* was stretching out races to a second (and occasionally third) color. Normally doing so enhances deckbuilding options because you give decks more choices. The problem with kithkin, though, was that if you stretched out the subtype too much you prevented either color from having many options. White kithkin decks would have their small selection of cards to choose from, and the same for green kithkin decks. For this reason, kithkin were chosen to be the tribe that least bled into the second color. Kithkin was mostly put in white with enough green for splashing the second color (but only splashing; we designed kithkin so that barring major hoop-jumping, they wouldn't be playable in mono-green).

#### #3 – Find ways to supplement (hello, changeling and tribal).

Another way to help kithkin decks was finding yet another way to add more kithkin to choose from. Sure, those cards were also Goats (a.k.a. creatures with changeling), but counting as kithkin was enough to add more choices to the Kithkin deck. Likewise with tribal. By making noncreature Kithkin spells you find yet another way to increase tribal synergy (and by that I mean "tribal" the theme not "tribal" the card type).

#### #4 – Concentrate the power.

Another important trick (and this trick was mostly done by development) was to make the kithkin as a race stick closer to the power curve. By having a higher percentage of cards tournament-viable, we were able to increase choices for deckbuilding.

As you can see, the issue was a tricky one but design (and development) found ways to massage the environment to help kithkin out.



## Next of Kithkin

With all the problems inherent in a mostly non-backwards-compatible tribe, why did we choose kithkin in the first place? Good question. A number of the more important answers:

### #1 – There weren't any other good choices.

We went into *Lorwyn* saying we wanted to focus on races. This meant that we couldn't rely on soldier and cleric like *Onslaught* Block had. For most of **Magic's** history, humans have been the dominant race in white, but for *Lorwyn*, we specifically didn't want to have humans (a lot of R&D—not me by the way—don't like mentioning the word "human" in rules text; there's really no way to do that on a supported tribe in a tribal set). Once the classes and humans are removed there isn't much left. We talked a little bit about the leonin (the lion-like humanoids from *Mirrodin* Block with creature type Cat), but felt that it clashed (and I mean the kind that has nothing doing with flipping up the top card of your library) with the world the creative team was building.

### #2 – They fit the flavor.

Kithkin, on the other hand, fit perfectly. They were a natural extension of the Celtic / fairytale vibe the creative team was going for. In addition, having some human-like creatures was nice for a set devoid of actual humans.

### #3 – We are interested in building new white race tribes.

Black, red, and green are overrun with races. White and blue, not so much. As such, the creative team is always trying to find new choices for the humanoid races of white and blue. Kithkin was one such attempt to try something new for white.

## We've Got The Beatdown

Okay, so we've chosen to do kithkin and for reasons listed above we've made it a primarily white tribe. How'd we choose their tribal identity? It was pretty easy actually. White has two major roles from a mechanical flavor perspective—beatdown and control. White is a bit schizophrenic in that it likes aggressively attacking with small hordes of creatures and defensively curling up into a proverbial ball and stopping anything and everything from hurting it.

White's two major races, based on volume, are kithkin and merfolk. Kithkin are secondary in green while merfolk are primary in blue and secondary in white. Hmm, which is going to be the beatdown race and which one will be the control one? In addition, kithkin by the nature of their flavor want to be pretty small. Finally, kithkin were going to be focused primarily in white. Beatdown decks want to be primarily, if not totally, in one color. The kithkin were going to be the tribe heaviest in a single color. Yes, all signs pointed to beatdown.

Once creative knew that, they were able to weave their aggressive militaristic nature into their flavor. Design, meanwhile, focused their mechanical might into attacking. Kithkin would have a lot of attack triggers or effects that targeted attackers. It would have creatures with low cost and efficient bodies that were designed to attack. It would give the kithkin tools to enhance and protect its army. Kithkin were designed such that if you wanted them to be good you had to attack with them.



## You and What Army

And that is how the kithkin came to be—the long and *short* of it. (Darn, I thought I could make it the rest of the column.) I hope you all have as much fun playing them as we did designing them.

Join me next week when we see what was in the cards for *Lorwyn*.

Until then, may you find yourself at home in the red zone.

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*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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