Power, Toughness, and the Flavor Thereof

Doug Beyer
Taste the Magic
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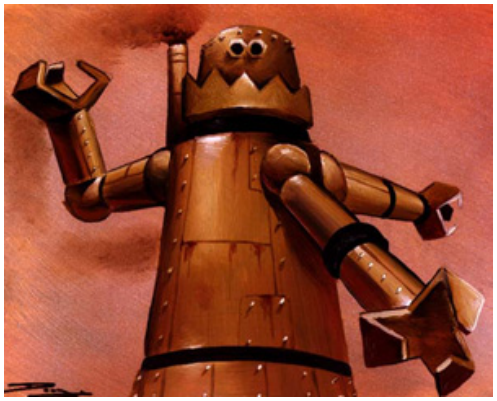
Put X +1/+1 counters (heads) on Hydra. Each point of damage Hydra suffers destroys one head unless is spent. During upkeep, new heads may be grown for apiece.

Adorable. There wasn't such a thing as "templating" back in Alpha, **Magic**'s first set—the wording of each card was hand-spun and delightfully idiosyncratic, like a flavorful love poem directly from Richard Garfield. Actually, in Alpha, the printed wording of Rock Hydra didn't even say and . It said R and RRR. So huggable!

Nowadays every **Magic** card has to predictably interact with ten thousand or so of its multiverse-spanning fellows, so there's no loose talk about "heads" and whether or not new ones may be grown during various upkeeps. Cards are worded in precise language to make sure that, when you combine two obscure cards created by design teams full of people who didn't even work at Wizards during the same decade, *you still know what happens*.

But incredibly, given all those intervening years and all those changes to templating policy, the flavor of +1/+1 counters hasn't changed all that much. Hell yes, those things are heads. It's a freaking hydra and it can grow back lost heads because that is what hydras *do*. I don't care if they're pennies or beads or numbers on a six-sider, they are *my hydra's snaky, writhing, bile-spitting heads* and unless your name is Hercules you'd better be-frickin'-ware.



Triskelion, on the other hand, doesn't regrow its +1/+1 counters. It winds down like a robot from a 1950s sci-fi B-movie, its metallic voice growing dull and distorted as it fires off giant hunks of itself at its master's enemies. A 1/1 Triskelion is a sad artifact creature no longer capable of performing its intended function, a spent bazooka wishing it had a Simic Guildmage around to graft in another round of rockets.

Form is Function When You're a Spike...

The +1/+1 counter is a powerful flavor tool for establishing not only the feel of functional parts of a creature, but also the relationship of that function to the creature's size. When Spike Weaver spins an entangling silk net to "Fog" the board for a turn, it uses up a bit of the creature's essence, reducing its size, strength, and overall efficacy. Sure, a Spike Colony could come along and donate some O-negative (spikes are universal donors) to restore that efficacy, but unless it does, the Weaver is going to Fog and Fog until it dies, having no base power and toughness left over after those +1/+1s that fuel its ability.

0/0 creatures are especially fascinating to me, from a flavor perspective. Spikes—like Grave-Trolls, most clockwork creatures, phantom creatures, and certain Goos—are defined entirely by their +1/+1 counters. They don't have a 1/1 framework left over after you use up all their abilities. There's a kind of sadness there, but also a purity of function that has to be admired.

No, you don't get to ride Workhorse anymore after it donates {4} to your spellcasting cause. Its every part serves a function of storing mana. I think that's kind of awesome. The fact that the artificer made it shaped like a bipedal copper horse is just as important as the four glowing studs in its belly—and the proof is that when the mana is gone, the horse is too.

...Or Certain *Morningtide* Elementals

The same goes for some of the greater elementals in *Morningtide*. As you recall, on the plane of Lorwyn, hopes and dreams (and fears and nightmares) have just as much reality as the leaves on the trees and the stones in the riverbed. Dreams are some of the building-blocks that make up Lorwyn the same way metal makes up Mirrodin and fire makes up a Pardic Firecat. The elementals of Lorwyn are creatures composed of dream itself, weird and surreal entities that come and go as they please.

So it make sense that these elementals' power and toughness is fully contained in their functional +1/+1 counters. A Fertilid, for example, is an elemental of natural growth and fertility. It has an ability that lets you use part of it up in order to Rampant Growth up a land into your collection—but after that, it doesn't do anything else. It's an elemental of Rampant Growthing, you might say—its essence is entirely contained in its ability. Wring some fertility out of it twice, and there's nothing left. It's a slightly smaller Fertilid, and then it's gone. I think that fits the flavor of elementals rather well.

Fertilid art by Wayne Reynolds

This brings us to the flavor of those two numbers in the lower right-hand corner of creature cards. Power and toughness characterize a creature's combat potential first and foremost, but note that the most intuitive way to think of power and toughness is in terms of the creature's *size*. You don't ask, "What are the offensive capabilities of that drake, my good man, and as a follow-up question, what would its corresponding measure of defensive prowess be?" Because you're not a boxing handicapper, or a biomechanics analyst. You're a planeswalker with an enemy-controlled drake flying right at him. You ask, "How big is that thing?" It's quite natural to think of a drake with a slightly larger sum of power and toughness as a *bigger creature* than one with a slightly smaller one.

Which leads us to a crucial aspect of **Magic's** flavor, especially relevant when it comes to power and toughness: card concepting.

Concepting Power and Toughness

One of the most incredible—yet sometimes messy—things about **magicthegathering.com** is the level of access you guys get to the behind-the-scenes of **Magic**. Readers of this site know way more about the game and how it's made than non-readers. I'll admit that that doesn't always help us—there are times when looking in on the creation of **Magic** is like going onto the floor of the sausage factory; the job gets done, but it isn't always pretty. I think flavor in particular can be hurt by this revelatory process—getting you guys back-stage passes to the creation of worlds is awesome, and an appropriate reward for your fandom. But it can also break the illusion of realism that is crucial to the fun of **Magic** flavor. When the cards stop being windows into strange, independently existing worlds and start being the pieces of cardboard that those guys in Washington state make, we've done

something wrong. Long story short, if you find that your flavor enjoyment is being negatively impacted by the behind-the-scenes stuff in this column, please let me know.

Oh, and—look away for a couple of sections.

There's one gigantic reason that power and toughness corresponds so well to creature size, or rather one kajillion little reasons: It's because *we make them correspond*. Creature cards with high power and toughness get concepted as large monsters. We could do it otherwise, but (except for the exceptions, when we either goof or are following some other rule of thumb), we don't.

Mark Rosewater once said that card concepting might be the hardest job in R&D. Card concepting is that process that generates art descriptions, like this one for Vintara Elephant:

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Color: Green creature
Location: Forest
Action: Show a massive, elephantine
jungle creature with crystal yoke and
helmet.
Focus: On the elephant
Mood: Armored for battle
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One of the reasons it's so hard is that the concepter (usually Brady Dommermuth, these days) faces the constant struggle to line up power and toughness with creature size. How many 3/3 green creatures have been concepted as elephants? A lot. The first time you saw a 3/3 green elephant (say, War Mammoth), you probably didn't think of 3/3 as being necessarily the power and toughness of an elephant-sized creature. But after Wild Elephant, and Trained Armodon, and Crazed Armodon, and Rogue Elephant, and Trumpeting Armodon, and Call of the Herd tokens, and Elephant Guide tokens—you get the feeling that there's an intended pattern here. You *know* how big an elephant is, and you *know* that things smaller than elephants—ogres, say, or bears, or people—have lower powers and toughnesses.

Sum It Up

Big whoop, you might say. Go on, say it. But it takes work *every single time* to keep that correspondence consistent. While a set is being developed, the details of cards, especially power and toughness, change all the time. Sometimes those changes don't make a huge difference; a kithkin could well change from 1/1 to 2/1 without anyone in creative freaking out. 2/1 is well within the acceptable range for a humanoid, particularly one with a fighting background like a soldier or knight. But other times, those changes go past a certain threshold. Think of a creature's overall size as the sum of its power and toughness. If that sum goes past five or so, then you're in Huge Monster territory. You're in elephant territory—Hill Giant territory (also, Giant Spider and Giant Cockroach territory). In order for elephants and Hill Giants to feel huge, things with lower P/T-sums than those things have to be concepted as small. And if they're concepted as small creatures (when kithkin art has been commissioned for a card, for example), their power and toughness sums have to stay under that 3/2 or 2/3 limit, or art has to get swapped around.

Legendary creatures, and cards concepted as groups of small creatures, are exempt from this rule. And there are certainly times when there are development changes that happen too late to adapt to them. But other than those exceptions and/or unfortunate goofs and compromises, we try our darnedest to keep that P/T-to-size correspondence alive.

This commonsense size correspondence is especially important, because we almost never see a comparative size chart of **Magic** creatures. Strangely enough, although the game is all about creatures doing battle under orders of their planeswalking commanders, there are very few places we get to see creatures actually fighting, or even standing near one another. (Check out these **Magic** Arcanas that show off fat pack murals—that's a great venue for seeing creatures smashing into one another.) Still, we know intuitively that, other things equal, the bigger dude wins. Bigger P/T, bigger monster, better fighter.

Could we *make* 6/6 kithkin and 1/1 baloths? Here is the ugly, sausage-factory truth of it all: Yes, there is nothing stopping us from doing such flavor-awful things. But card after card, opportunity after opportunity, we just don't.

Letter of the Week

This week's letter comes from Kevin, who writes about last week's article, The Mana Bond.

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I enjoyed your article, but I have a few questions. If mana production is
all about the "meaning" of an area, why is colored mana always tied to a
specific type of land? For example, what if something very black-aligned
happens in a forest, like the evil necromancer from the Hobbit setting up
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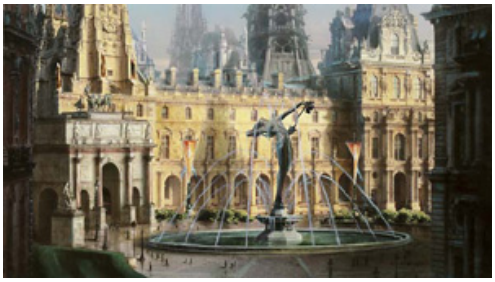
> shop in Murkwood? This is quite clearly a forest, but does it now produce black mana? Do plains always produce white mana regardless of the events that have transpired there? Lawful events can happen anywhere, not just in Big Sky Country.
>
> In your story, the prison is (probably) not built on a swamp, yet it quite clearly acts as a black mana source. So does a location's "meaning" really have a bigger influence than its geographical features?

Excellent questions. In most cases (including all the basic lands across all the planes of the multiverse), a land's geographical features are the determiner of its mana colors. Being important or meaningful causes a land to create mana in the first place, but the nature of that land is still what determines the color of the mana produced there. For example, let's say a steep cliff in a mountain range isn't a mana-producing land. It can gain significance by being important to the natural surroundings—it shelters a group of nesting suntail hawks below it, say—or by being important to people—perhaps the view from the cliff inspires a troupe of green-aligned nature shamans to compose odes to Gaea. But it's still a cliff, an enormous chunk of rock—it doesn't make white mana because its significance lies with hawks or green mana because it was first made important by some nature-lovers. It makes red mana due to being, basically, a mountain.

By extension, the mana colors of many dual lands are also determined by geography. An Underground Sea makes blue and black mana because of it's a big body of water in a dark, gloomy, underground cavity. A Sungrass Prairie provides {G}{W} because it's a mix of grasslands and scrubby trees.



But there are exceptions—times when the conditions of a place's importance not only causes it to resonate with mana, but also fundamentally alters the color alignment of that place. A bubbling fountain, for example, would normally produce blue mana. But a fountain that was honored by the Azorius, whose purpose was instilled with the values of order and honor through years of military ceremonies occurring nearby, and whose structure was architecturally designed to bring an inspiring central element to the quad in front of a courthouse, might produce white mana, too.

This is also how places like the City of Brass or the Grand Coliseum came to be. The City of Brass is a city of a thousand stories, where every kind of person and magic in Rabiah is brought together in a melting-pot environment. The Grand Coliseum, similarly, serves an audience of pit-fight attendees from all walks of life, and with the ruling Cabal looking firmly the other way, anything goes. These places get infused with the resonance from such a diverse array of events and people and attitudes that they overcome the influences of their natural geographic surroundings (which might be white-aligned in both cases, or maybe black in the case of the Coliseum).

In last week's story, a tragic death (and the guards' callous walling-up of the body afterwards, and the gruesome use of the body by the beetles, both of which intensified the tragedy) causes the prison to take on characteristics of a black-aligned location, allowing the apprentice to form just enough of a mana bond to cast a couple handy (and deadly) spells. There could have been many other such cruel and tragic deaths at the prison, as well—it probably would have taken that much to cause the place to generate black mana. This changing is the exception to the rule—normally the local geography of and around the prison would determine the color (or colorlessness) of the mana derivable there, if any (and since they went to the trouble of magically severing the wizards' mana bonds, the prison's proprietors probably didn't expect the prison or the lands around it to be a source of mana at all).

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